



Meaningful Art and Aesthetic Experiences for Young Children

Angela Eckhoff

Throughout early childhood education, the visual arts should be a consistent and valued component of the daily life of the classroom (Tarr 2008). While most educators of young children offer art activities, guiding children toward understanding and meaningfully engaging in the arts requires more intentional practices. Such intentionality was exemplified by Ms. Lee, a master teacher at the Denver Art Museum, as she guided a visiting class of fifteen 3- and 4-year-olds through an exhibit. Together they explored the traditional arts of peoples indigenous to the Pacific Northwest Coast. Ms. Lee's careful plan centered on engaging the children in three essential elements of early arts education—art viewing, art making, and art appreciation—through a variety of connected aesthetic experiences (Eglinton 2003). Her presentation reflected a comprehensive, holistic approach. Supporting academic, social, and emotional goals of early childhood education, Ms. Lee's gallery and studio approach (described on pages 15 and 16) combined observation, discussion, storytelling, and exploration.

As Ms. Lee leads the children into a gallery of masks, sculptures, and indigenous artifacts, she talks to them about the foundational shapes that the artists used to create images on masks and other artifacts—U-form, split U-form, S-form, and ovoid. Then Ms. Lee gives each child a card with one foundational shape to use as a guide when they later seek out the matching foundational shape in the gallery. They make their way toward a large, colorful, mixed-media mask (*Four-Faced Hamat'sa Mask*, by George Walkus, c. 1938) and pause. Ms. Lee asks the children to talk about their initial impressions.

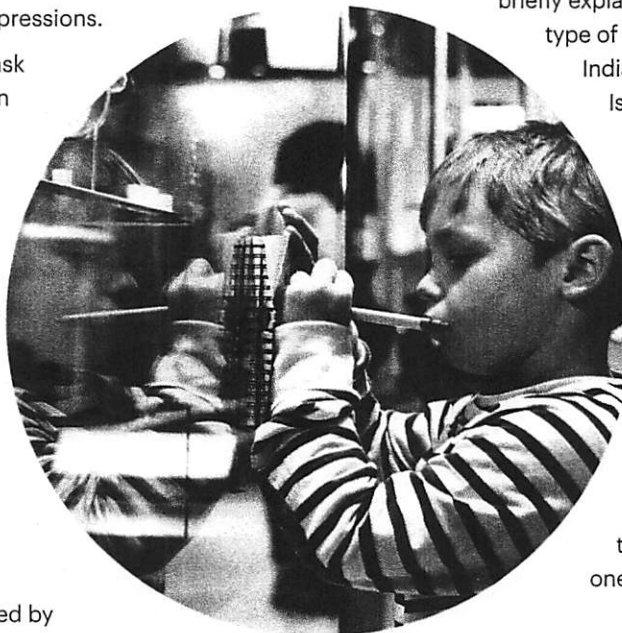
Ava announces, "The mask looks like a bird!" Franklin adds, "Look! There's more than one bird on the mask!" Ms. Lee asks the children to count the number of birds in the mask by focusing on the beaks they see. They easily identify four birds, then quiet down to listen as Ms. Lee talks about the materials that make up the mask.

The children are fascinated by the cedar bark fibers on the top

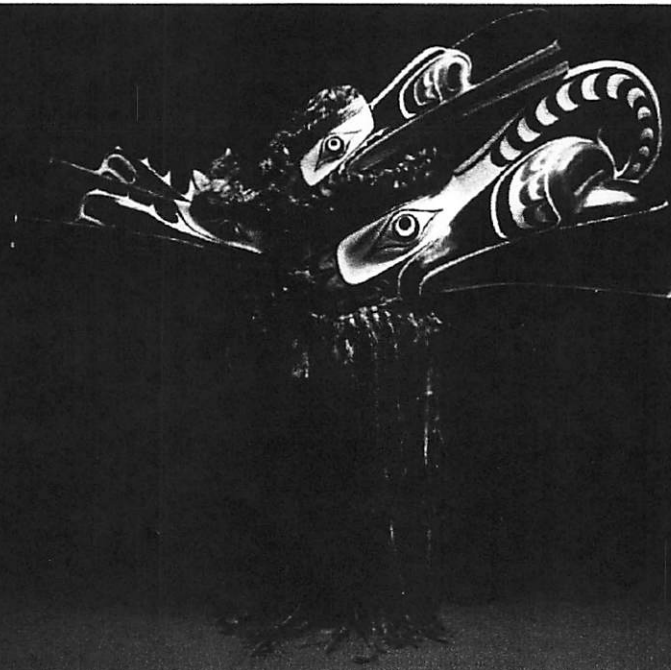
and bottom of the mask. Ms. Lee asks them to think about the long fibers and the reasons they hang down so low. After some initial guesses—"The fibers make it pretty," "The birds like the long fibers"—Ms. Lee provides a hint: "Think about if you wore this mask, where would the fibers reach on your body?" She then asks them to think about why and where someone would wear this mask. The children offered a variety of suggestions including "At a party" and "For dress-up."

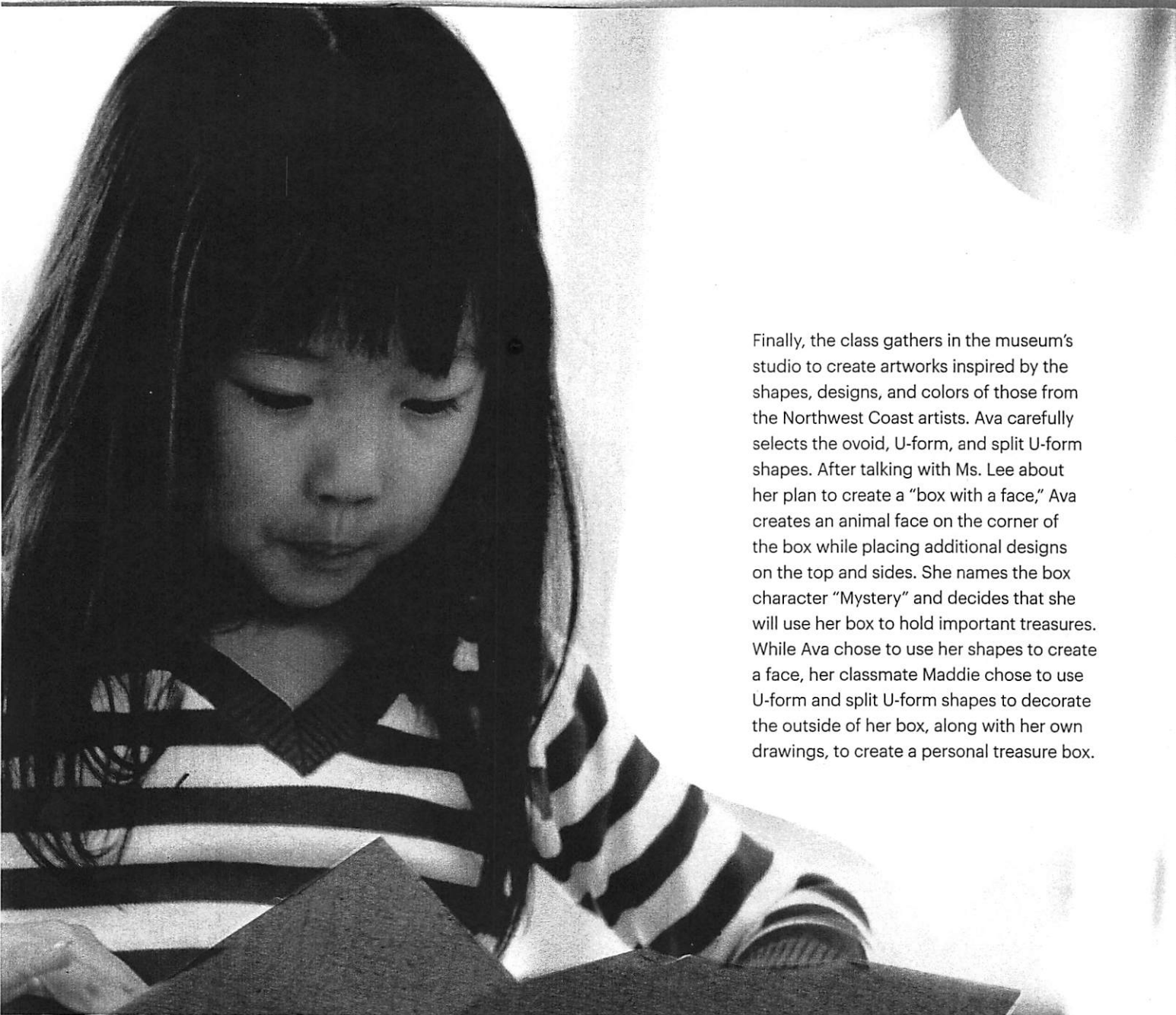
After the children propose several ideas, Ms. Lee briefly explains the historical origins of this type of mask for the Kwakwaka'wakw Indians from Northern Vancouver Island in British Columbia. The mask represents an important character in the tribe's winter ceremonial dances. Ms. Lee then shifts the focus to the shapes, colors, and different media used to construct and decorate the mask. Following their discussion, Ms. Lee encourages the children to consult the foundational shape on the card each holds to help them find a match in one of the artworks in the gallery.

[Continued on p. 16]

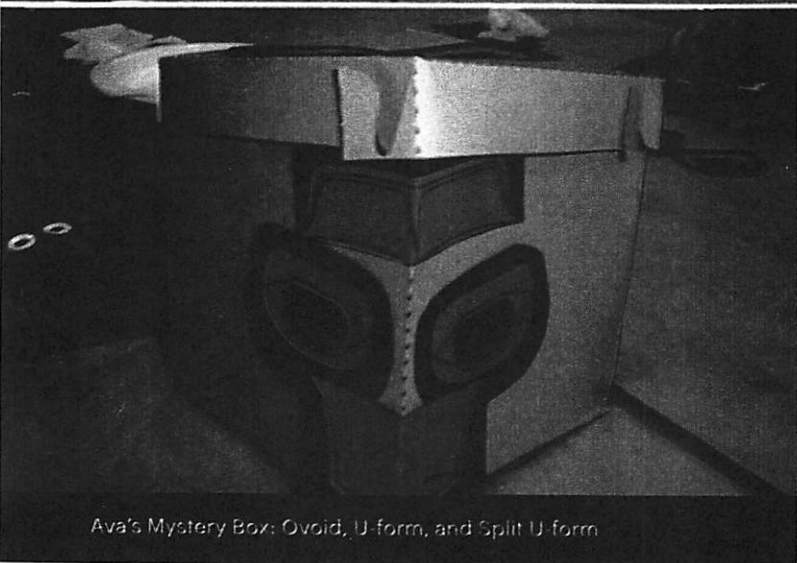


George Walkus, *Four-Faced Hamat'sa Mask*, about 1938, Denver Art Museum Collection: Native Arts acquisition funds, 1948.229





Finally, the class gathers in the museum's studio to create artworks inspired by the shapes, designs, and colors of those from the Northwest Coast artists. Ava carefully selects the ovoid, U-form, and split U-form shapes. After talking with Ms. Lee about her plan to create a "box with a face," Ava creates an animal face on the corner of the box while placing additional designs on the top and sides. She names the box character "Mystery" and decides that she will use her box to hold important treasures. While Ava chose to use her shapes to create a face, her classmate Maddie chose to use U-form and split U-form shapes to decorate the outside of her box, along with her own drawings, to create a personal treasure box.



Ava's Mystery Box: Ovoid, U-form, and Split U-form



Maddie's In-Process Treasure Box: U-form and Split U-form

A holistic approach to arts education

In the gallery, Ms. Lee's pedagogical approach can be described as *sharing*, as she centered her questions and comments on the works of art and the artists to guide the children's observations about the aesthetic qualities and formal components of the works. To further engage the children, Ms. Lee strategically chose artworks that she thought the children would find interesting and created the game-like hunt for foundational shapes.

In the studio, Ms. Lee integrated the art-viewing and art-making experiences, which increased the value of each. The children's aesthetic appreciation for the art they observed and discussed deepened as they created their own artworks inspired by the stories, colors, shapes, and traditions of the Northwest Coast tribes. While Ms. Lee guided the children to use the artists' foundational shapes, she did not have a predetermined project for them to replicate. Ava and Maddie designed their boxes according to their own interests and ideas, and were free to select and use the shapes that they felt expressed their thoughts.

Young children gain deeper understandings of the world of art when teachers give them opportunities to explore and discuss various artworks in conjunction with their own art-making experiences. As children and teachers engage in viewing, making, and appreciating art, they experience the visual arts in a deep, meaningful way that encourages wonder, imagination, expression, and communication.



Guided exploration

In a guided exploration approach to visual arts experiences, a teacher works closely with children to support observing and listening skills, to encourage artistic expression, and to begin developing appreciation for the aesthetic qualities in arts (Bresler 1993). Guided exploration requires careful planning, including creating multiple means of engagement for children. (See "Guided Exploration in Ms. Lee's Teaching.") This lets children learn to incorporate a variety of artistic techniques in their work and appreciate works of art for their history, meaning, style, techniques, and aesthetics.

Guided Exploration in Ms. Lee's Teaching

Guided exploration	Demonstrated in Ms. Lee's teaching
Observing	The children were guided to make careful observations in the gallery through discussions and explorations supported by foundational shape cards.
Listening	Children had many opportunities to listen to Ms. Lee as she shared information using a storytelling approach. They also had opportunities to listen to each other because of the conversational approach Ms. Lee employed.
Communicating through artistic expression	Ms. Lee drew on the gallery experiences later by having the children explore traditional arts of the Northwest Coast in their own artworks.
Appreciating aesthetic qualities	Ms. Lee guided the children's attention to the sensory elements—lines, shapes, colors, and media—used by the artists. She also gave the children time to look, explore, appreciate, and question in the gallery and in the studio.

Viewing art

To ensure that children observe and discuss a great variety of high-quality art, teachers can turn to onsite and virtual museum visits to develop comprehensive, holistic experiences in which children see and are inspired by art from around the globe. Through these experiences, children begin to interpret, negotiate, and construct meaning from visual images.

Careful observation encourages thoughtful reflection that enables children to see beyond their initial impressions and explore new ideas and ways of understanding.

To be meaningful, art viewing cannot be a superficial exercise. Teachers should guide children in careful observations of the choices the artist made in creating the work. Learning to observe is not only critical to understanding art, it is also an important ability that applies to many areas (e.g., good scientists and good friends are both keen observers). Teachers of young children support development of observation skills by talking about a work of art's color, line, texture, and form (Hetland et al. 2013). The practice of careful observation promoted during art-viewing experiences encourages thoughtful reflection that enables children to see beyond their initial impressions and explore new ideas and ways of understanding.

Just as Ms. Lee did, teachers can integrate art-viewing and art-making experiences. By giving children opportunities to make observations about a particular work of art and then apply their discoveries to their own artwork, teachers guide children to engage in meaningful artistic expression.

Making art

Children's drawings and paintings adorn the walls of almost all early childhood classrooms. It is not uncommon to see certain displays repeated in classroom after classroom—handprint butterflies, marble paintings, and string paintings, for instance. While all of these have value, time-honored projects such as these should be understood as craft experiences rather than opportunities for meaningful art making.

The key distinction is that they tend to be teacher directed (with specific instructions) and product oriented. Artistic merit and aesthetic experience tend to be, at best, secondary concerns (Schirrmacher 2002).

Meaningful visual arts experiences are based on the belief that the arts:

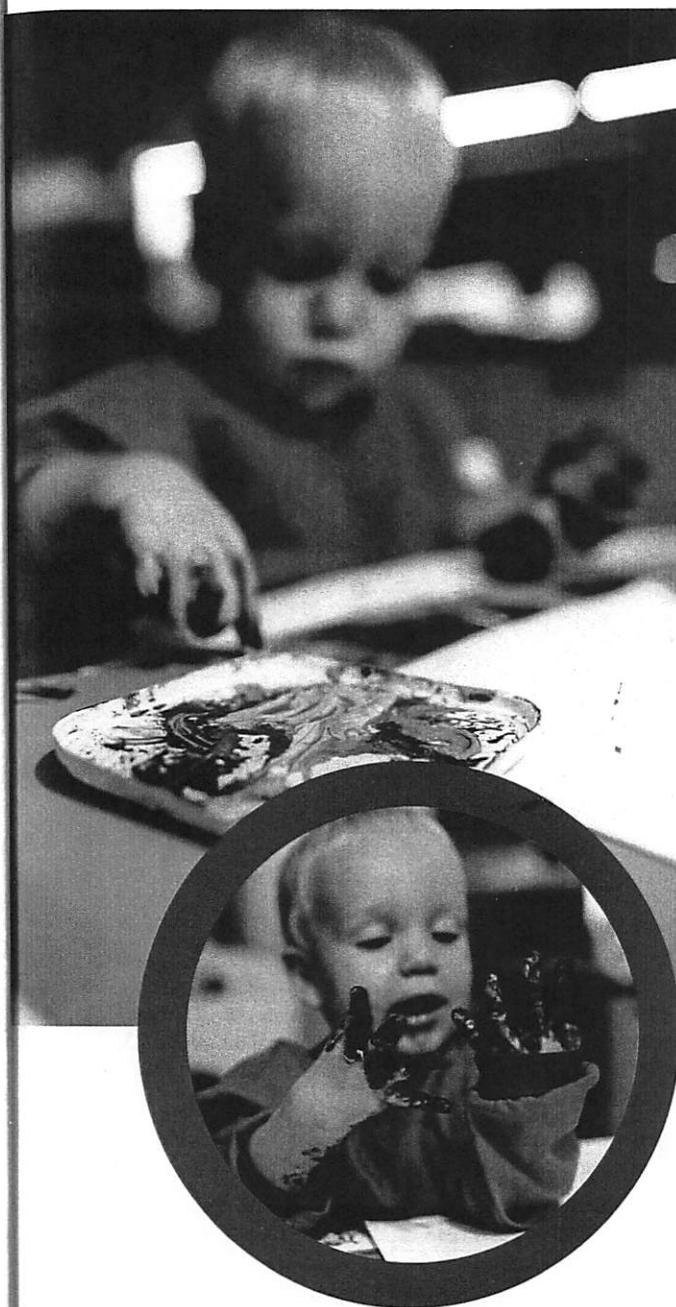
- Support multiple ways of knowing and learning that are inherent in the unique nature of each child
- Empower children to communicate, represent, and express their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions
- Offer opportunities to develop creativity, imagination, and flexible thinking
- Enrich young children's understanding of diverse cultures and provide opportunities for all children to express their cultural heritage (ECAE, n.d.)

Comprehensive early arts education offers plenty of opportunities to engage in art-making experiences in personally meaningful ways—including being inspired by works of art in museums. Learning about—and from—the work of other artists can promote new understandings of oneself as an artist. For example, the Van Gogh museum website (www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en) houses images of several of the artist's works featuring colorful butterflies. Through guided exploration, such works would provoke children's wonder and interest in butterflies, resulting in art making that would undoubtedly surpass handprint butterfly crafts.

Appreciating art

Appreciating art grows from a variety of aesthetic experiences that can be thought of as open-ended opportunities involving art exploration, experimentation, and discovery (Schirrmacher 2002). Aesthetic experiences are individual by nature and require a willingness to freely engage. As such, even though they are essential to art education, they are not curricular components clearly scheduled in a daily classroom agenda. Teachers create environments that support young children's developing aesthetic sensibilities by providing ample opportunity to freely explore works of art and various arts media and materials.

Imagine, for a moment, a toddler engaged in a finger painting experience.



Two-year-old Cameron tentatively puts one finger into the red paint, makes a quick mark on the paper, and pulls his finger off the paper to examine his red fingertip. Next, he puts his red finger into the blue paint, makes a slightly larger mark, and pulls his finger away, seeing that the red paint is now covered by the blue. He repeats this process again and again with increasingly more paint, covering both hands and paper. Slowly, Cameron begins rubbing paint on his arms, noting the cool, smooth feeling as colors

mix before his eyes. He begins experimenting with handprints on the paper and on his legs.

Ms. Yalena, Cameron's teacher, observes the changes happening during his painting experience and talks with him about color, line, and expression. Ms. Yalena points out to Cameron that red paint looks different when blue is added; she also notes his use of heavy and light marks.

Through her willingness to let Cameron explore the paint on the paper and his skin, and through her discussion of his art, Ms. Yalena was deepening Cameron's art making, enabling an aesthetically rich experience. The cycle of exploration, experimentation, and discovery is evident in his interactions with the paints, the paper, and his body. In a manner appropriate for a toddler, Ms. Yalena followed the guided-exploration approach, providing feedback on many qualities of Cameron's work and supporting Cameron's budding aesthetic perception through experimentation and discovery.

From museum to classroom

Teachers of young children can design visual arts experiences in their classrooms that incorporate guided gallery and studio explorations similar to the ones Ms. Lee leads. As virtual galleries are offered by many of the world's museums, teachers can select images that support and connect to student learning in other content areas, including math, science, and social studies. Many visual art museums feature online teacher resources—lesson plans, activity guides, and information on various artworks and artists—based on the works of art in their collections.

Like any learning environment, online museum sites vary considerably in quality. It is important for teachers to preview any site that will be accessible in the classroom to ensure that both the content and approach to interaction is well suited to the children (e.g., for young children, teachers should look for high-quality images with limited text). Many young children enjoy interactive websites that encourage their participation through game play. For example, the Getty Museum's GettyGames website enables children to choose an artwork from the collection to turn into a tile puzzle to solve online. Many museum websites allow children to print images or designs they encounter during their site

Exceptional Museum-Based Websites for Young Children

Each of these websites engages children through games and provides appropriate information about artworks and artists for young students.

- **Tate Britain: Art Detective**
www.tate.org.uk/kids/games-quizzes/art-detective
- **Getty Museum: GettyGames**
www.getty.edu/gettygames/
- **Museum of Modern Art: Destination Modern Art**
www.moma.org/interactives/destination/

- **National Gallery of Art: NGAKids Art Zone**
www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/education/kids.html
- **Smithsonian Institution: Bottlecaps to Brushes**
<http://americanart.si.edu/education/insights/cappy/index.html>
- **The Art Institute of Chicago: Curious Corner**
www.artic.edu/aic/education/CC/



visits. The National Gallery of Art's NGAKids Art Zone encourages children to explore and create a variety of artworks through an interactive design experience. Each piece created on Art Zone can be saved as a digital image or printed. (See "Exceptional Museum-Based Websites for Young Children" for websites that feature artworks from a variety of genres.)

Conclusion

High-quality museum websites have the potential to mitigate long-standing challenges with access and to help teachers provide broad exposure to the visual arts for all students (Eckhoff 2014). Connecting the virtual art-viewing experiences to the children's art-making experiences will promote rich, comprehensive early arts experiences grounded in the history, traditions, and media of the world of art. As children learn about art and artists from around the globe, they will have increased opportunities to understand and relate to other artists' expressive and imaginative selves while they explore and develop these aspects within themselves.

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