Museums as Educational Spaces: Embracing Diversity and Inclusion beyond Walls and Objects

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Embracing Diversity and Inclusion beyond Walls and Objects

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Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction and Problem Statement

What comes to mind when you think of an upcoming visit to a museum? Perhaps your response mirrors that of a child, an opinion that often remains unchanged from childhood to adulthood, as little has been done to challenge or transform it over the years. Rigid school visits, often structured around an overload of information, strict rules, and numerous restrictions, tend to create distanced rather than engaging experiences for students. As Van Campen points out, sensory memories remain active within us and possess the power to mentally transport us to the past, especially when they are linked to a familiar physical environment (Van Campen, 2014, p. 129). Consequently, many people, consciously or subconsciously, choose not to visit museums later in life, as their first encounters were not particularly pleasant. This common association, often linked to boredom, a lack of personal interest, or the feeling of an imposed activity, was a recurring theme I encountered during my experience as a volunteer at the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki. After each educational session, I would ask the children "*What was your initial thought when you entered the museum, and how do you feel now that the visit is over*?"

Many groups responded similarly. They admitted that, at first, they were unenthusiastic about the visit, convinced it would be boring or irrelevant to them. Yet, by the end of the program, these initial perceptions often changed, highlighting the potential of museum spaces when approached with thoughtful engagement strategies. Furthermore, through my visits to museums both in Greece and abroad, I have observed that younger audiences are not substantially represented, as the number of young visitors' remains noticeably limited. Inspired by these insights, I aim through this thesis to explore the accessibility of cultural spaces for children, working to break the cycle of outdated perceptions by implementing appropriate tools and practices. These strategies seek to transform museums into welcoming environments for learning, creative expression, and meaningful interaction.

Some people envision museums as sterile, restrictive spaces filled with rules and limitations, an image that has contributed to the perception that museums are uninviting, especially for younger visitors. Furthermore, objects enclosed in glass cases limit the number of viewers, making it difficult to exchange information about the exhibits (Borun, 2002, p. 258). These long-standing beliefs did not emerge without reason; for many, one-dimensional approaches shaped childhood museum experiences and failed to foster engagement. If this attitude arises from ineffective past practices, we must re-evaluate the educational role of

museums and explore how these spaces can transform into dynamic environments, interactive environments that children actively choose to visit as adults. How often do we see members of a travel group refusing to participate in museum visits, considering them a waste of time and describing them as boring?

By addressing potential negative perceptions held by society, this study ultimately aims to reinforce the educational role of museums and encourage their broader support across all age groups. Within this context, I aim to focus on younger age groups and the responsibility of future generations to create an environment that welcomes every child visiting a museum. The goal is for children to enjoy their time, learn, play, interact with their peers and the exhibits, and ultimately leave enriched, smiling, and eager to return.

By actively inviting children into the museum space, we not only support their cognitive and emotional development but also contribute to the enduring significance of cultural heritage sites. As each generation finds its place within these institutions, they form a chain of preservation and continuity that ensures the sustainability of these cultural spaces over time. A proposed approach to creating an accessible and meaningful environment, as Borun suggests, is designing channels of communication between objects and viewers (Borun, 2002, p. 250). They must bridge the distance by clarifying complex concepts and establishing an open, safe framework for expression and dialogue. If we assign children a mission, they will naturally take on the role of learners and explorers, transitioning from passive observation to active engagement. In this way, a museum visit gains new meaning and purpose. Another key factor in transforming the educational approach of museums is the activation of visitor groups, whether children, children with parents, or students with teachers, by posing thought-provoking questions in advance (Borun, 2002, p. 259). Faced with an abundance of information, visitors must navigate and select what is relevant to them, determining how best to engage with the exhibits to solve the "puzzles" set before them. This process requires carefully structured guidance—first from museum staff, who can shape meaningful learning pathways, and then from educators and accompanying adults, who can facilitate children's exploration and understanding. Another factor hindering the improvement of the museum experience, particularly in past decades, has been the strict and highly personal perspective of the curator, who determines what will reach the audience without necessarily considering their prior knowledge, a knowledge that could be expanded upon or used as a basis for meaningful interaction (Borun, 2002, p. 247). When designers create exhibitions using a one-way, top-down approach visitors may feel like passive recipients rather than active participants in the learning process. To create a more engaging and inclusive experience, museums should explore ways to invite dialogue and encourage visitor-driven discovery, incorporating interactive elements, multi-sensory engagement, and

opportunities for personal interpretation. By acknowledging the diverse backgrounds, interests, and cognitive abilities of their audiences, museums can bridge the gap between expert knowledge and public understanding, making exhibits more accessible and impactful for all visitors, especially children.

1.2 Research Questions and Explanation of Case Study

This research is guided by several key questions: How do museums engage younger audiences and invite them into their spaces? What activities targeted at children will contribute to a better understanding of museum exhibitions, creating a more welcoming environment where children will benefit? How can we make museums accessible to children with disabilities, and what transformations should we pursue in terms of education?

The data required for my research include, primarily, information on when and how museums began to prioritize inclusivity and accessibility for children, as well as a study of their global evolution over time. Humanities & Social Sciences Communications will provide valuable insight into this topic. Beyond this broader perspective, I will examine visitors' attendance and participation rates in educational programs based on the number of participants, the structure and targeted practices of the Summer Camp, as well as the impact it appeared to have on the children (Museum of Cycladic Art, 2024-2025). Finally, by observing activities and analyzing their impact on specific groups within the Museum of Cycladic Art, I gathered critical data to assess how effectively the programs met their initial objectives and the extent to which children engaged and responded to them. By integrating theoretical research with direct observation and participation, this thesis aims to provide insights into how museums can better serve as inclusive and educational spaces for all children, fostering curiosity, creativity, and meaningful learning experiences. Ultimately, my goal is to contribute to a broader discussion on how museums can serve as inclusive learning environments that empower all children to explore, imagine, and connect with the world around them. Museums are not merely spaces for exhibiting artifacts but have the potential to be dynamic environments where children can engage, learn, and develop essential skills.

This thesis explores the impact of museums on children, focusing on how museums can make the experience more engaging for young visitors through modern techniques and activities specifically designed to align with the cognitive and emotional benefits of each age group. The main case study of this thesis is the Museum of Cycladic Art, located in the central district of Kolonaki, Athens. The museum was founded in 1986 by Nicholas and Dolly Goulandris, with the aim of housing and displaying their extensive private collection of Cycladic antiquities. Today, the museum operates under the Nicholas P. Goulandris Foundation, and remains one of Greece's most prominent private cultural institutions. The museum's core collection include 30.000 Cycladic, ancient Greek, Roman and Cypriot

artefacts, testimonies to the civilizations that flourished in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean from the 4th millennium BC to approximately the 6th century AD. In addition to its permanent exhibitions, the Museum of Cycladic Art regularly hosts temporary exhibitions that explore connections between ancient heritage and contemporary artistic expression. These exhibitions often include modern and contemporary art, design, and cross-disciplinary collaborations, positioning the museum at the intersection of archaeology and modern culture providing a dialogue with antiquities from Museum's permanent collections. Educational programming is a key pillar of the museum's mission, with activities specifically designed for children, families, educators, and schools. The institution is widely recognized for its Summer Camp initiatives, thematic workshops, art contests, and its ongoing commitment to promoting cultural awareness through innovative, experience-based learning models. In addition to educational offerings, the museum actively develops and implements programs aimed at underrepresented and underserved communities including refugees, the elderly, and individuals with mobility, sensory, or cognitive impairments. These initiatives reflect a growing awareness of the importance of inclusivity and access in the cultural sector, and highlight the museum's efforts to reach audiences who might otherwise remain excluded from the museum experience.

Before delving into the cognitive and emotional impact that museums can have on younger audiences, it is essential to establish first a suitable and safe framework to ensure that every activity yields positive outcomes. When children feel a sense of trust and familiarity, they gain the freedom to express themselves, ask questions, and experiment with new practices without the fear of failure or ridicule. Only under these conditions, can an activity be effectively carried out to promote the emotional and physical well-being of the students. After analyzing the dominant operational models of museums in Western Europe and the educational approaches they adopt, this study will explore the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens. The research will investigate how and to what extent the museum activities and resources contribute to a deeper understanding of the exhibits while simultaneously fostering key skills in children, such as imagination, creativity, information processing, and expression. Particular attention will be given to how these skills are developed through artistic activities, including painting, sculpture, creative writing, and theater. To address these research questions, my prior participation in the educational programs of the Museum of Cycladic Art, particularly the Summer Camp 2024, will serve as a key reference point. This experience supplemented my investigation by providing firsthand insights into the museum's educational strategies and provided a deeper understanding of how museums engage young audiences and assess the inclusivity and effectiveness of their educational programs

1.3 Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This thesis adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology, drawing on a combination of theoretical analysis, case study exploration, and field observation. The research is grounded in the principles of object-based learning and museum education, while also engaging with concepts from inclusive education and cultural accessibility. The framework of the present study revolves around questions that have emerged from researchers' observations over the years, with a central focus on understanding children's needs within educational settings. One such effort was implemented by the *Laboratory School at the University of Chicago*, which applied the practice of experimental learning through the creation of a community that interacts and collaborates to achieve self-determined goals while responding to the personal needs of its members (Schwartz, 2015, p.4). Furthermore, a key pillar of our study is the contribution of art as a facilitator in the educational process and in enhancing the well-being of all participants. In this context, a notable example is the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) method, a sequential curriculum specifically designed for beginning viewers. The VTS approach focuses on giving students sustained practice in observing and discussing works of art, while shifting the teacher's role from that of an "information provider" to a "discussion facilitator" (Burchenal & Grohe, 2007, p.112).

Initially, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to establish the theoretical framework, encompassing works from museum studies, pedagogy, and social inclusion. The review helped to contextualize the role of museums as educational spaces and to identify gaps in the existing literature, particularly regarding children's learning experiences and the participation of marginalized groups. The primary empirical component of this research is based on active observation and informal documentation of the educational activities conducted during the Summer Camp at the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens (July 2024). The researcher actively participated in the program as an assistant educator and attended the activities for three consecutive days. During this period, detailed field notes were taken concerning the structure, content, and dynamics of the activities, while informal discussions were also held with the museum staff regarding the organization, pedagogical approaches, and overall strategies employed in engaging the children. The data collection focused particularly on aspects of art-based expression, collaborative participation, and emotional engagement between the children, the educators, and the museum objects. The material gathered was subsequently analyzed thematically, aiming to explore how museum-based educational practices can be designed to foster creativity, empathy, and inclusive participation. The methodology was developed within a more interpretive, case-driven approach, incorporating supplementary examples from other museum institutions, such as the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and its inclusive spatial design strategies. The study also

draws on comparative observations and existing evaluations of international educational programs targeting underrepresented groups.

From the early stages of this research, several challenges emerged. One of the primary difficulties involved the limited availability of academic literature specifically addressing the presence and engagement of children in museum environments, let alone the inclusion of children from marginalized groups. This relative scarcity of focused scholarship required a more extensive and selective review across disciplines, combining museum studies, education theory, and social inclusion literature to establish a meaningful framework. Another critical issue relates to the nature of the research subjects. Since the focus is primarily on minors, particular attention had to be paid to the ethical and methodological considerations involved in studying children. This includes adapting the research tools and approaches to be age-appropriate, ensuring the protection of personal data, and securing consent in a way that respects both legal and psychological sensitivities. A further consideration emerged during the data collection phase, when it became clear that the originally intended collaboration with the Museum of Cycladic Art, particularly regarding the distribution of questionnaires, would not be possible due to institutional constraints. This development called for a thoughtful reorientation of the research design. Rather than focusing on primary data collection through visitor surveys, the thesis was refocused on a qualitative analysis of educational practices observed during the Museum's Summer Camp. This shift also provided an opportunity to expand the scope of the study by incorporating comparative material from additional museums, enriching the investigation of inclusive and child-centered approaches in museum education. Another important limitation of the research relates to the socioeconomic composition of the participating children. The sample does not reflect the full spectrum of social and economic backgrounds, which naturally restricts the generalizability of the findings regarding young museum visitors. For instance, during the Summer Camp at the Museum of Cycladic Art, most of the children came from relatively affluent families, many of whom were enrolled in private schools and resided in well-resourced neighborhoods of Athens. These families were not only able to support their children's participation financially, but also demonstrated a level of cultural capital that facilitated engagement with alternative educational experiences. Their involvement in the city's cultural life and awareness of such non-formal learning opportunities positioned them to make the most of the program. As a result, while the observed activities offered valuable insights, they largely reflected the experiences of a privileged subset of the child population. They may not fully represent the perspectives, challenges, or learning dynamics of children from less advantaged backgrounds.

1.4 Literature Review

Starting with the book *Keeping Kids Safe in School and School-Related Spaces* (LeBrun and Kimberly, 2009), we first establish the necessary conditions for creating a fertile environment where children, parents/caregivers, and teachers can interact and work toward collective goals. The book structures itself around three primary themes: threats in school spaces, dangers in cyberspace, and risks in other areas where children spend time. It addresses issues such as playground safety, cyberbullying, online predators, and intrapersonal violence, including self-mutilation and bullying. The authors offer practical suggestions, supported by background information and real-life examples, to help adults create safer spaces for children.

Focusing on Chapter 2 of that book, "Classroom Spaces – Abusive Teachers, Fires, and Bomb Threats," and Chapter 5, "Promoting Safe and Healthy Developing Brains for Learning and Positive Behavior" on pages 25-26, the book outlines six suggested ways that, if followed by an adult within a group of children, will help create a framework of safety and trust. These bonds allow all group members to participate without unnecessary anxiety or fear. Based on these components, we understand that before setting one or multiple educational goals related to knowledge acquisition, every adult involved in the learning process must prioritize the well-being of students. Only when this fundamental goal is achieved can we proceed to the next steps. The authors emphasize the importance of building a school environment centered around trust-based relationships, where children feel free to express themselves while also feeling protected. Additionally, communication between parents and educators is deemed crucial. Strengthening this collaboration would significantly enhance the educational process, as teachers would have a clear understanding of each child's needs from the beginning, and, through continuous feedback, would be informed about the impact of activities both inside the classroom and in extracurricular settings. Moreover, an essential takeaway from this guideline is the need for cooperation between the school and the family environment. Children absorb influences from every microcosm they are a part of or exposed to. A phrase from my years of experience in schools regarding this issue comes to mind: "*It is important to build together; otherwise, the 'structure' will collapse, and we will find ourselves starting from scratch again the next day*." This aligns with the book's statement: "*Families and schools working together*" (LeBrun and Kimberly, 2009, p. 54). Another factor that positively influences a child's upbringing is the proper awareness of parents and educators regarding the different types of intelligence and the recognition that intelligence is multifaceted and dynamic, increasing through environmental and academic inputs. Williams and Lebrun identify eight types of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist (LeBrun and Kimberly, 2009, p. 55-56). A child may have a more developed intelligence that

aligns with artistic aspects, making it more natural for them to learn and retain information through art. For example, they may better absorb and remember historical events taught in the classroom by attending an art exhibition depicting a significant battle.

Moving on to the impact of objects on learning and their role as tools of complementary education, it is worth to refer Leinhardt and Crowley. In Chapter 17, the discussion highlights the idea that we should view objects as reference points that help reorganize existing knowledge while also serving as entry points for integrating new information. Visitors engage with objects not only to expand upon what they already know but also to bring imagined concepts to life and move beyond the ordinary, experiencing something unique and thought-provoking. As Williams and Lebrun argue, "*a child's learning is not limited to the school building.*" From this perspective, museums function as a necessary complement to the educational process rather than merely an alternative means of learning. This process is influenced by multiple factors across all areas and environments in which a child lives and engages. Museums, as spaces of non-formal education, offer unique learning experiences that reinforce and extend school-based knowledge, allowing children to actively interact with content and develop skills that go beyond academics, fostering their personal and social growth as well. In our attempt to investigate whether museums function as learning environments, we can refer to Leinhardt and Crowley, who emphasize that objects can enhance and reshape pre-existing knowledge, but only with the appropriate guidance from parents and educators, as "*artifacts do not speak for themselves*." (Leinhardt et al., 2002, p. 314). These facilitators hold the responsibility of preparing a museum visit, ensuring that children engage with the exhibits through discussion and action, thus clarifying and enriching their understanding. A museum visit can also be highly beneficial for children with atypical development or learning difficulties.

Unlike passive forms of education, museum exhibits function as contextualized objects designed to promote deeper understanding. Within this framework, the family emerges as a dynamic and flexible learning system, well-suited to the museum environment. In this setting, both adults and children become learners, engaging in shared exploration. As highlighted in the book, "*When everyone is involved in it, everyone's participating, the activity is successful*" (Borun, 2002, p. 246).

However, a common challenge in museum education is that exhibits often illustrate or embody concepts rather than actively explaining them. Without a thorough front-end analysis, meaning a consideration of visitors' prior knowledge, perspectives, and expectations, people are likely to interpret exhibitions through the lens of their existing preconceptions. Instead of challenging or expanding their understanding, they may leave with their initial ideas

unchanged or even reinforced (Borun, Massey, & Lutter, 1993). A crucial factor in overcoming this limitation is the promotion of dialogue around exhibits. Engaging in discussions transforms visitors from passive observers into active participants, allowing them to interact not only with objects but also with other members of their group. Conversations sparked by exhibits function as dynamic exchanges where both information and emotions are shared. The effectiveness of this interaction, however, largely depends on exhibition design, which can either facilitate or hinder these exchanges. By incorporating these characteristics, museums can create more inclusive and effective learning environments where families can actively engage with the material.

Another key source that was thoroughly examined is the Family Learning Project, a research initiative carried out through the collaboration of four museums in the Philadelphia area, the Academy of Natural Sciences, The Franklin Institute, The New Jersey State Aquarium, and The Philadelphia Zoo under the Philadelphia/Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative (PISEC). Funded by the National Science Foundation and supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the project sought to understand how families learn in museums and what exhibit characteristics enhance these experiences.

The project unfolded in three key phases. Initially, researchers sought to define and measure family learning by observing families' behaviors at test exhibits. They noted how visitors interacted, asked questions, described what they saw, and related exhibits to their personal experiences. These behaviors were grouped into levels of learning complexity, from simple identification of objects to interpretive thinking and personal application. The second phase focused on identifying exhibit features that support learning among families. Drawing from literature, observations, and focus groups, researchers found that exhibits encouraging multi-user interaction, accessibility, varied interpretations, and engagement through different sensory modalities tended to promote deeper learning. Characteristics such as clear text, relevance to prior knowledge, and physical layout that invites interaction were also emphasized. In the third phase, the team assessed the impact of these redesigned, family-friendly exhibits by integrating specific educational tools across the participating museums ranging from interactive graphics and activity kits to hands-on experimentation stations. Results indicated a significant increase in learning behaviors in these enhanced settings compared to standard exhibit formats. Through this comprehensive process, the study confirmed that families are indeed capable of meaningful learning in museums and that this learning is often most powerful when it emerges through shared engagement with objects. Exhibits serve as conversation starters and memory triggers, fostering reflective dialogue and encouraging personal connections. However, the study also highlighted challenges: many

exhibits merely illustrate concepts without facilitating deep understanding, and without interactive elements, existing misconceptions may persist.

In addition to the design of exhibits, the study explored the influence of gender roles, noting that adult females frequently acted as learning facilitators during family visits, guiding interpretation and engagement. This observation points to the importance of recognizing social dynamics within visiting groups to create learning opportunities more equitable. Ultimately, the Family Learning Project demonstrates that when museums are designed with intentionality and inclusivity, they become fertile environments for collaborative and transformative learning. The emphasis on social interaction, accessibility, and diverse modes of engagement aligns closely with the principles of object-based learning and strengthens the museum's role as a space of educational and cultural connection.

In the chapter titled "*The therapeutic potential of museums as pathways to inclusion*" from the book *Museums, Society, Inequality*, the discussion focuses on museums worldwide that are evolving, recognizing their social roles, and striving to become more accessible to a broader audience. Many cultural institutions now aim to open their doors to all visitors, including marginalized communities. However, traditional museum collaborations with external organizations have often been task-specific, such as designing exhibitions, rather than fostering long-term partnerships and professional exchanges. Museums must establish ongoing interdisciplinary partnerships to support their expanding role in society. One of the most promising aspects of this transformation is the growing recognition of museums' therapeutic potential. Studies have shown that museum visits can provide various psychological and emotional benefits, including learning, self-reflection, restoration, and a sense of belonging to the community. Nevertheless, museums have historically assumed a physically and mentally able visitor base, often neglecting individuals with mental health challenges, disabilities, or those facing social exclusion (Sandell, 2002, p. 70).

The Museums as Therapeutic Agents (MATA) Collaborative, mentioned in the same chapter of the book, is a notable initiative in this field. Established in 1997 in Bloomington, Indiana, the MATA project brought together three museums, social service programs, and mental health professionals to explore how museums could serve as therapeutic spaces. The project developed pilot programs aimed at adults with life-threatening illnesses, seniors with mental health concerns, and individuals with behavioral health issues. Programs ranged from guided museum tours designed to foster self-reflection to outreach initiatives that facilitated reminiscence therapy for older adults. The project demonstrated that structured museum experiences could enhance self-esteem, community integration, and cognitive engagement for

participants, thereby solidifying museums' role as facilitators of social and psychological well-being (Silverman, 2002, p. 71).

The project involved collaboration between three museums at Indiana University, Wylie House (a historic home), the William Hammond Mathers Museum (an anthropological museum), and the Hilltop Garden and Nature Center (a botanical and gardening facility), and multiple social service and mental health programs. These included Positive Link, which provides services for people with AIDS; Elderhouse, a day treatment program for older adults with mental health issues; and Horizons, a program for adults with chronic mental illness (Silverman, 2002, p. 72). The MATA project aimed to systematically develop, document, and study pilot museum programs with explicit therapeutic goals. Funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, receiving a total of USD 80,000 over three years, it focused on three primary groups: adults with life-threatening illnesses and their caregivers, senior adults, and adults with behavioral health issues. Each group participated in specialized programs designed to use museum environments as therapeutic spaces. Some programs incorporated guided museum visits, while others included outreach initiatives, where museum staff brought artifacts and interactive activities to care facilities.

A particularly effective component of the program was the use of social roles within the museum setting. Participants were given opportunities to engage in meaningful roles, such as storytelling contributors, volunteer educators, or hands-on demonstrators. Research indicated that when individuals were assigned a valued social role within the museum environment, their engagement increased, and they experienced greater emotional and cognitive benefits. This supports the broader argument that museums should not only be spaces of learning but also serve as inclusive, socially supportive environments. Around these considerations, the theoretical framework of this thesis is shaped, focusing on what children seek as museum visitors and how art can contribute to the establishment of an environment of creativity, safety, and free expression, an environment that fosters both cognitive development and emotional well-being.

Overall, the MATA project demonstrated that museums could act as agents of social inclusion, helping marginalized individuals reconnect with their communities. By fostering partnerships with mental health professionals, social workers, and educators, museums can expand their reach and provide therapeutic and educational benefits to a wider audience. The initiative sets an important precedent for museums worldwide, advocating for continued research and innovation in the field of museum-based therapy.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis begins by setting a critical theoretical framework that investigates the educational role of museums, with a specific focus on how they engage younger audiences. The first chapter is structured into five distinct sections. It opens with an introduction, followed by an overview of the key challenges and obstacles encountered during the research process. The second section presents the main research questions alongside an initial analysis of the case study, the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens, serving as a reference point for comparison with other museums studied. The third section is dedicated to the methodology applied throughout the research, including the collection and analysis of data drawn from selected museums worldwide. Particular emphasis is placed on the observations and findings from the Cycladic Museum, which operates as the central case study of this thesis. The fourth section offers a concise review of the literature, commenting on selected key articles and book chapters that constitute the academic foundation of this work. This initial review aims to frame the research questions and will be further expanded in subsequent chapters to support the study's arguments and findings. Finally, the fifth section outlines the structure of the thesis, explaining how each chapter contributes to addressing the research aims and objectives.

The second chapter titled "*The Predominant View on Museums*" addresses the prevailing perceptions surrounding museum visits, attitudes often shaped by outdated and traditional approaches of past decades. This chapter explores how such perceptions have contributed to the alienation of younger audiences and emphasizes the urgent need to foster a shift away from these static views. The focus is placed on reimagining the museum environment, both its physical space and conceptual framework, as an inviting, dynamic context that encourages children not only to visit but also to remain engaged, enjoy the offered programs, and develop a genuine desire to return, whether to the same institution or other cultural venues. Specifically, that chapter investigates how many individuals, both adults and children, are systematically excluded or discouraged from engaging with cultural institutions. This exclusion may stem from lack of representation, perceived elitism, or educational barriers. By identifying these obstacles and the underlying causes of disengagement, the thesis aims to explore pathways toward rebuilding trust and relevance between museums and society. This includes the implementation of participatory practices such as hands-on workshops, collaborative activities, and artistic interventions that promote active involvement.

Continuing with the third chapter, titled "*The Contribution of Art in the Museum*", the discussion turns to one of the most powerful allies of education, art, as demonstrated throughout this section. Art is employed as a multifaceted tool within museums, taking the

form of visual arts and theatrical workshops that often align with the thematic content of current exhibitions. Through these practices, objects typically confined within display cases are given new life, entering into a "dialogue" with the visitor. By engaging in contemporary reinterpretations using modern materials and methods, these objects become more accessible and meaningful to younger audiences. A notable example is the recreation of a ritual inspired by the Haida Nation, collaboratively performed by visitors, museum staff, and researchers from both the British Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum (Golding, 2018, p. 239).

Moving on to the fourth chapter, titled "*Summer Camp at the Museum of Cycladic Art – A Five-Day Program*", the thesis presents an in-depth analysis of the educational summer camp. This section outlines the structure of the five-day program, detailing its activities, the methods of implementation, and the overall impact it had on the participating children.

In the fifth chapter, titled "*Evaluating Children's Engagement in Interactive Museum Experiences*", the thesis discusses various methods and tools used to explore children's engagement within museum environments. It examines ways to assess the effectiveness of educational programs, including direct questions addressed to the children, while also identifying the specific needs of different age groups. This approach allows for the design of tailored activities aimed at achieving the best possible educational and experiential outcomes.

Finally, the sixth chapter, titled "*Visibility and Inclusion in Museums*", addresses the imperative for inclusion and visibility of marginalized groups within museum spaces. It examines how individuals from minority backgrounds, such as refugees, people with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged communities, often remain excluded from cultural participation. Using selected examples from both Greek and international museums, including the Museum of Cycladic Art's inclusive initiatives and comparative practices from institutions such as the Stedelijk Museum and the Van Gogh Museum, the chapter discusses how museums can act as agents of social change. It highlights strategies for adopting inclusive educational models that promote equity, accessibility, and emotional well-being.

This thesis concludes with a comprehensive summary of the findings and reflections presented throughout the chapters. The conclusion also revisits the initial research questions, evaluating how the explored case studies, theoretical approaches, and field observations contribute to answering them. Finally, the thesis is completed with the bibliography, which compiles all the academic sources, reports, and references that have supported and informed this research.

Chapter 2

The Predominant View on Museums

Many children are reluctant to visit museums due to various factors, as mentioned earlier. Strict rules, a sterile environment, and an overwhelming amount of information can intimidate and discourage a child from having an enjoyable experience. This raises an important question, which also forms the theoretical framework around which this thesis is structured: What does a group of young children need in order to truly enjoy a museum visit and gain something meaningful from it?

The answer is far from simple and requires collaboration among multiple stakeholders: families, schools, educators, curators, museum staff, and the museum space itself. A crucial first step is for everyone involved to recognize the positive impact a museum visit can have on a child's cognitive and emotional development. If we shift our perspective and stop viewing museum visits as just another extracurricular activity for students and teachers, we can begin to lay the groundwork for a more enriching and inclusive experience. According to Gofinan, Moskowitz, and Mets, younger audiences seek environments that offer engagement and interactivity, rather than spaces where information is imposed on them in a traditional and rigid manner, so far removed from the contemporary ways of thinking and the actual needs of children (Golding, 2018, p. 242). Modern museum visitors, especially the younger generation, are no longer passive receivers of information; instead, they respond to dynamic, participatory experiences that encourage exploration, creativity, and emotional connection. To foster from the stereotypical role of museums, it is essential to inform schools and parents about the benefits of museum visits. Communicating that museums are welcoming spaces for children and actively seek their presence can change the overall

perception of these institutions. This can be achieved through well-trained museum professionals who, in collaboration with schools, prepare engaging presentations about their museum and the experiences children can expect to have there.

However, before educators announce a museum visit to their students, they must conduct thorough research on the exhibits and the overall museum environment. This involves carefully planning the visit: determining key stops, designated activity areas, rest and snack breaks, and ensuring safe access and exit points. Supporting museums that prioritize the experience of young visitors is equally important. By recognizing and endorsing such initiatives, we also encourage other cultural institutions to embrace the inclusion of children in heritage spaces. Making museums more accessible, interactive, and engaging for younger audiences is not just beneficial, it is a necessary step toward fostering a lifelong appreciation for cultural heritage. According to Beane and Pope, who studied the Science Museum of Minnesota, museums can function as objects in themselves (Beane & Pope, p. 326). This perspective views the museum not just as an exhibition space but also as a tool for learning and understanding. The Science Museum of Minnesota focuses on bridging the gap between sciences, often perceived as inaccessible to children, and a hands-on, enjoyable learning process. Furthermore, it is argued that simply displaying an artwork without context does not constitute education, but also illuminating it, both literally and figuratively, does. In other words, providing the necessary interpretation, engagement, and access to knowledge transforms a passive exhibit into an educational experience. This perspective suggests that almost every action within a museum contributes to learning, reinforcing the idea that museums are not just repositories of objects, but dynamic spaces of knowledge, discovery, and inspiration (Dobbs and Eisner, 1987, p. 79).

Research has shown that museum educational programs have a particularly positive impact on teenagers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, girls, and minority groups. These individuals benefit both emotionally and cognitively, as they previously lacked sufficient access to scientific knowledge or an environment that could boost their confidence in the field of science. The museum's *YouthALIVE!* initiative was a program that allowed teenagers, particularly from underrepresented communities, to actively engage in museum activities, providing them with hands-on opportunities to explore science. Through this experience, young participants gained access to scientific objects, exhibits, and research processes, which improved their understanding, self-esteem, and future academic and professional prospects. This approach demonstrates that the inclusion of diverse social groups in museum educational programs is not only desirable but also essential. When designed appropriately, museum visits can significantly contribute to reducing educational inequalities, fostering interest in science, and creating a more inclusive learning environment. In each case,

the museum assumes the role of breaking down stereotypes that have persisted in society for years. By dispelling the belief that the natural sciences are a "male domain," museums create an inclusive space for expression and learning that welcomes everyone (Beane & Pope, p. 328). If this shift is encouraged by cultural institutions and key societal stakeholders, the landscape will continue to evolve. When the educational process becomes truly free from limitations, museums will reflect and reinforce this progress, actively contributing to the disruption of outdated and exclusionary beliefs.

In each case, the museum plays a crucial role in dismantling long-standing societal stereotypes. By challenging the notion that the natural sciences are a "male domain," museums create inclusive spaces for learning and expression that welcome all individuals, regardless of gender, background, or socioeconomic status. As highlighted by Dobbs and Eisner (1987), museum education has historically faced challenges in defining its role and mission. While museums acknowledge the importance of education, they often struggle to integrate it effectively within their institutional framework. However, if cultural institutions and key societal actors actively promote inclusivity, the museum landscape will continue to evolve into one that is more accessible, engaging, and relevant for diverse audiences. Moreover, education within museums should not be perceived as secondary to their collections but as an essential function, that enhances visitors' experiences. Specifically, Dobbs and Eisner (1987) point out that no art museum in the United States is primarily known for its educational role. While education is acknowledged as an essential function, museums are largely recognized for their collections and curatorial work rather than their educational programs (Dobbs & Eisner, 1987, p. 80). This highlights a broader issue: museum education, despite its significance, often remains secondary within the institutional hierarchy, lacking the visibility and status it deserves.

This observation underscores the need for stronger advocacy for museum education and for institutions to actively promote their educational initiatives. If museums wish to become true centers of learning, they must not only display objects but also facilitate meaningful engagement with them. This shift is crucial in making museums more accessible, inclusive, and impactful, particularly for underrepresented groups. As Dobbs and Eisner note, museum education is not merely about presenting objects but about fostering meaningful interactions with them. When educational initiatives become free from outdated limitations, museums will serve as catalysts for social change, challenging exclusionary narratives and ensuring that knowledge is available to all. After World War II, museums shifted their approach to exhibits, moving beyond the sole emphasis on aesthetic beauty to focus on the historical and cultural narratives surrounding objects. This transformation reflected a growing demand from both the scientific community and the public for deeper engagement with

museum collections. As early as the 1980s, the landscape began to shift in alignment with advancements in the theoretical framework of educational practices (Schwartz, 2015, p. 48). Museums started to embrace new pedagogical approaches, moving away from static, one-way knowledge transmission toward more interactive and experiential learning methods. This transformation was influenced by constructivist theories, which emphasized active participation, critical thinking, and engagement rather than passive reception of information. As a result, museums gradually evolved into dynamic learning environments, integrating hands-on activities, storytelling, and interdisciplinary connections to make knowledge more accessible and meaningful for diverse audiences. Visitors were no longer expected to be passive observers but rather active participants in the process of acquiring knowledge. Theodore Low's argument that "*works of art are social documents and that art cannot be solely appreciated for its aesthetic qualities*" reinforces this paradigm shift (Schwartz, 2015, p. 47). His perspective suggests that art should not be viewed in isolation but rather within its historical, cultural, and social context. A painting, a sculpture, or an artifact carries embedded meanings that go beyond visual appeal, it reflects the political, economic, and ideological forces of its time.

This approach aligns with the object-centered learning model, where exhibits are not merely admired but are used as educational tools to provoke discussion, interpretation, and deeper understanding. Museum objects, beyond their material form, function as key facilitators within the educational process. Embedded with historical significance and layered meanings, they offer a dynamic foundation that activates critical thinking and emotional engagement, especially for children and young learners. Objects serve as bridges of understanding, enabling reflective encounters with history and culture, while providing opportunities for learning experiences that transcend traditional teaching methods. These brief moments of insight, sparked through interaction with objects, can become transformative, allowing visitors to re-evaluate identities and social differences. In this way, the museum becomes a vibrant space of learning and personal growth, where objects are not only remnants of the past but active agents of dialogue and change (Golding, 2018, p. 137). Objects displayed in a museum, although seemingly lifeless matter, have the potential to engage in a silent dialogue with visitors, and it is precisely through this lens that they should be presented to all audiences. When curators approach exhibits as polysemic vessels of the past, their educational and emotional value multiplies. These objects are not fixed in meaning; rather, they serve as dynamic activators of perception. Their interpretation shifts based on the visitor's personality, emotional state, and life experiences. As such, they become reflective surfaces, mirroring changes in how we perceive, interpret, and speculate over time. In this way, the museum experience transforms from passive observation into an active process of

discovery, where every object invites multiple readings and new perspectives (Golding, 2018, p. 232). This personalized interaction between viewer and object gradually opens up to a broader spectrum, as the museum setting creates the conditions for the exchange of perspectives. It provides space for dialogue, where visitors are invited to listen to alternative interpretations shaped by diverse beliefs, backgrounds, and emotions. In this way, the museum becomes a site not only for individual reflection but also for collective meaning-making encouraging empathy, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of the multiple narratives that objects can evoke.

Museums today increasingly adopt interactive, interdisciplinary, and narrative-driven methods to present collections, allowing visitors to explore the societal impact of art rather than simply appreciating its form. These innovative ideas will be the focus here, as they have the potential to radically change the public's negative perception of museums, transforming the visit into an immersive learning and exploration experience. It would therefore be highly beneficial for children if interactive touchscreens were installed in museums. These screens would allow young visitors to explore exhibits in a more engaging and accessible way, enabling them to zoom in on details, access multimedia content, watch short educational videos, and participate in interactive quizzes or games related to the artifacts on display. By incorporating touch-based learning, museums can cater to different learning styles, making the experience more inclusive for children who may struggle with traditional text-heavy descriptions. Additionally, interactive screens encourage active participation, transforming museum visits from passive observation into a dynamic and immersive learning experience. Additionally, hands-on activities, such as archaeological dig simulations or art technique workshops, provide a tangible approach to knowledge. Many museums also incorporate gamification elements, such as treasure hunts and quizzes, turning exploration into an exciting challenge. These practices not only support children's well-being by creating the right conditions for an enjoyable museum visit but also enhance their cognitive development. In a treasure hunt, for example, the educator can incorporate riddles and challenges that, in a traditional classroom setting, might seem overly complex or difficult to grasp. Through this engaging process, the perceived difficulty of the information is reduced, taking on a new and more accessible form. The entire experience becomes exciting and enjoyable, as children navigate the game with a sense of adrenaline and emotional involvement. Their motivation to solve the riddles and achieve the game's objectives transforms learning into a dynamic and rewarding challenge, allowing them to experience a sense of accomplishment and victory as they successfully complete the activity. Such installations would help bridge the gap between traditional museum displays and the digital world, making cultural heritage and scientific knowledge more approachable and enjoyable for younger audiences. Regarding the alignment

between a school subject and a museum exhibition, it is suggested that the visit may be more effective when it takes place in the middle of the educational process rather than at the beginning. In this way, we do not expect the museum to "teach everything" to the students, but rather to complement and enrich their prior knowledge (Hooper-Greenhill et al., 2006, p. 39).

Creative ways of integrating art into the educational process yield positive results, as learning becomes more effective while simultaneously providing students with opportunities for self-expression. When art is embedded in education, it fosters creativity, emotional engagement, and deeper understanding, making the learning experience more meaningful and impactful. As Woon explained, she structures the education department around the belief that art possesses an extraordinary transformative power, one that enables individuals to connect with themselves, understand others from diverse backgrounds, and ultimately contribute to change in the world around them (Schwartz, 2015, p. 46). Through artistic expression, students not only absorb knowledge but also develop empathy, critical thinking, and a broader perspective on society, reinforcing the role of art as a catalyst for personal and collective transformation. By acknowledging art as a social document, museums contribute to a more inclusive and educational experience, making cultural heritage relevant to contemporary audiences and ensuring that exhibitions resonate beyond their visual appeal.

In the effort to connect art with education, the Connecting Collections (CC) program emerges, a summer training program for educators aimed at creating a bridge between museum learning and school education. The program, which started in 2000 in collaboration with the Guggenheim and the Whitney Museum of American Art, expanded in 2004 with the participation of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the MoMA. Through interactive workshops, discussions, and experiential activities, educators learn how to integrate museum exhibits into their teaching, emphasizing interdisciplinary, inquiry-based, and object-centered learning. The CC program enhances students' emotional and cognitive engagement, promotes experiential learning, and strengthens collaboration between schools and museums. Through the training of teachers, the program contributes to the development of a more dynamic, participatory, and inclusive learning model, where art ceases to be merely an exhibit and becomes a living tool for knowledge and expression. From this perspective, it is essential to highlight the impact that each educator has on the development of his or her students. The teacher takes on the role of guide and coordinator and automatically assumes responsibility as well. As a result, it is crucial for the teacher to properly prepare the children's visit to the museum to ensure the desired outcomes namely, their cognitive and emotional development in the most enjoyable and well-organized way possible. Once again, the need for collaboration between museums and the school environment is emphasized. Many educators

have expressed the necessity of coordination and their participation in a pre-visit to the museum their class is about to visit. Some teachers have particularly valued museums that offer well-structured visits, either through resource packs that allow for self-guided sessions or through facilitated experiences. Others prefer a more flexible approach but emphasize the importance of pre-visit sessions for teachers. High-quality websites play a crucial role in supplementing (but not replacing) pre-visit information, providing essential resources to help teachers prepare their students for the visit. Additionally, the timing of these sessions must better accommodate teachers' schedules, as many cannot attend sessions at 3:30 p.m. due to school finishing times. Several educators have also noted the decline of pre-visit twilight sessions, which they previously found highly beneficial (Hooper-Greenhill et al., 2006, p. 157-159).

Over the years, efforts have been made to bring about change, recognizing children as active museum visitors with their own expectations, rights, and demands. Gradually, the path to progress is being paved through the adoption of modern educational methods and the proper training of both museum and school staff. Additionally, Doering explores visitor needs in relation to the environment and services that shape and enrich their overall museum experience. The concept emphasizes that a well-designed physical and educational setting not only accommodates visitors but also actively enhances their engagement, making their visit more immersive, enjoyable, and meaningful (Annechini et al., 2020, p. 4). New tools and technologies are being integrated, complementing exhibitions and creating an engaging and immersive experience for students while simultaneously enhancing the learning process. Interactive displays, digital applications, and hands-on activities allow children to connect more deeply with the exhibits, fostering curiosity and critical thinking. As museums evolve into dynamic learning spaces, the collaboration between schools and cultural institutions becomes even more essential. The goal is not only to educate but also to inspire, turning museum visits into transformative experiences that shape young minds and cultivate a lifelong appreciation for art, history, and science. Classifying museums as environments that offer knowledge to visitors, researchers reach the following conclusion: "*Providing children with access to spaces that not only support but also actively enhance their learning experience—fostering development, engagement, and cognitive growth—is undeniably beneficial. Museums should serve as dynamic settings that stimulate curiosity, optimize learning, and inspire exploration, rather than merely acting as passive sources of information*" (Annechini et al., 2020, p. 2). Hence, understanding and responding to visitor needs is crucial in bridging the gap between education and engagement. A well-structured setting encourages repeat visits, deeper exploration, and a stronger sense of connection between visitors and the cultural content being presented.

Chapter 3

The contribution of Art in the Museum

In this chapter, we will discuss the contribution of art in spaces of cultural interest, both in its primary form, as exhibited artworks within a museum or gallery, and through the integration of artistic activities and creative engagement. How can the overall visitor experience be shaped and enhanced through art? What role does art play in stimulating emotions, fostering learning, and creating meaningful interactions within cultural spaces? By examining these aspects, in that chapter we will explore how artistic expression not only enriches the aesthetic and educational value of a visit but also contributes to positive cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes for visitors of all ages.

In art museums, visitors go beyond mere observation, they engage in an internal process of feeling. Viewing an artwork can trigger associations with personal memories, past experiences, and emotions, making the encounter deeply meaningful. For example, consider how we perceive the properties of marble in a sculpture. Reading about its texture, weight, and composition provides us with theoretical knowledge. However, if we are able to approach the exhibit closely or even touch it; our senses become fully activated, allowing for a richer, more immersive understanding of the artwork. This kind of multisensory engagement enhances cognitive processing and makes the experience more profound and memorable.

Yet, emotions can also be stirred simply by looking at an artwork. Personal experiences shape how we interpret and react to visual stimuli. I recall a moment from my visit to the Vatican, where I climbed to the dome of St. Peter's Basilica. "*As I took in the breathtaking painted ceiling, a children's choir sang a Catholic hymn in the main hall below. At that moment, I felt the full grandeur of art and history. Creations that had stood the test of time were revived in the present, evoking a sense of awe and deep emotional connection. It was an experience I will never forget, as I felt completely immersed, open to every sensation, with tears in my eyes*". The power of art to evoke strong emotional and even physical reactions has been well documented. In the 19th century, the French psychiatrist Graziella Magherini studied such responses, inspired by the writer Marie-Henri Beyle (better known by his pseudonym Stendhal). She coined the term "Stendhal Syndrome" or "Florence Syndrome", describing a state in which individuals experience intense physical (palpitations, chest pain) and psychological (anxiety, dizziness) symptoms upon encountering a masterpiece (Palacios-Sánchez et al., 2018, p. 120). This phenomenon highlights the profound psychological impact that art can have. It is not merely an object to be observed but a gateway to deep personal and emotional experiences. Art has the power to transport us, challenge us,

and make us feel deeply connected to history, culture, and the human experience itself. Whether through awe-inspiring frescoes, intimate sculptures, or immersive installations, museums serve as cultural sanctuaries where visitors can explore both the world and themselves.

Reflecting on the evolving role of art in museums, Schwartz notes that since the 1980s, museums have increasingly integrated studio practice with visual arts education[1]. Notable examples of this approach include the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). While the former operates within a more conventional framework, the latter actively seeks to "*break boundaries of museum education*." This distinction highlights the diverse pedagogical strategies adopted by institutions to enhance visitor engagement and learning.

Beyond the emotional aspect, museums also offer structured educational programs that encourage active participation and artistic expression. One notable example is an art education program at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), where teenagers engage in various creative projects that allow them to interact with different artistic mediums in a hands-on and immersive way. At MoMA, students participate in sculpture-making workshops, creating plaster bicycles and designing mini-golf courses, exploring the intersection between sports and sculpture. They also experiment with Surrealist art, using mannequin heads, poetry, and dream-like sculptures to visualize unconscious thoughts and personal interpretations. Another unique activity involves horror-themed set design, where students analyze early horror films and construct eerie settings, such as a kitchen with an unsettling arrangement of objects, including a severed head placed beside a milk carton. Moreover, MoMA's multimedia art program, the "Sight and Sound Lab", encourages students to explore digital media using tools. By integrating sound, image, and video, participants create synesthetic experiences that connect different sensory elements into a unified artistic expression (Schwartz, 2015, p. 49-52).

Accordingly, a notable example of the effective integration of these methods is the Museum of Cycladic Art. As part of the 2024 Summer Camp organized by the museum, I participated in order to observe and collect data that would contribute to addressing my research questions. One particularly impactful activity, both in terms of engagement and in terms of group cohesion, began with a guided visit to the gallery dedicated to the Classical and Hellenistic periods. There, the group gathered in front of a display case exhibiting figurines with masks, specifically the "Satyrs." The session facilitators provided a historical

[1] Schwartz, L. (2015). *Quality Over Quantity: The Benefits of Visual Arts Education in Museums and Schools*, p. 55.

overview of ancient theater, emphasizing the role of actors and the broader cultural and social significance of theatrical performances in antiquity. Following this discussion, participants proceeded to the museum's workshop, where each child was given a flat piece of clay. Utilizing precision tools and pigments, they were encouraged to create their own expressive mask, drawing inspiration from the dramatic features of ancient theatrical figures, in this case, masks of intensified horror or grotesque expressions. Subsequently, the group convened in a dedicated children's space, where they viewed animated film sequences featuring villains. This segment provided a platform for individual reflection, as each participant had the opportunity to articulate their perspective on villainous characters and identify their personal favorite antagonist. The next phase of the activity involved a collaborative dramatization exercise. The children were divided into four subgroups, each guided by a facilitator. Within their groups, they selected a fairy tale or a cinematic scene involving one or more villains and translated it into a physical performance. During the enactment, one group performed at the center of the room while the others observed as an interactive audience. The session continued with a participatory discussion, during which the observing groups attempted to identify the characters portrayed in the performances. These approach shares commonalities with "Jamie Warren's House of Horror," a project in which students designed an eerie theatrical set inspired by avant-garde performers and early horror films. In that initiative, teens engaged in an exploration of the visual language of horror, constructing a hauntingly surreal kitchen space where everyday objects were unsettlingly displaced. Much like the theatrical exercises conducted at the museum, this project emphasized the power of performance and set design in evoking emotional responses, illustrating how immersive, interdisciplinary activities can enhance artistic and cultural literacy (Schwartz, 2015, p. 51-52).

This plethora of exercises not only reinforced narrative comprehension and creative expression but also fostered critical engagement with archetypal villain figures and their thematic implications. By integrating interactive programs, artistic exploration, and emotional engagement, museums cultivate an environment that inspires, educates, and deeply moves visitors. Whether through structured educational initiatives or spontaneous moments of personal reflection, art in museums plays a crucial role in shaping our perceptions, emotions, and intellectual growth. Understanding the multisensory and emotional dimensions of art, museums can further enhance visitor experiences, designing spaces that invite exploration, provoke thought, and create opportunities for profound personal reflection. Through these well-structured and carefully coordinated activities, which are closely aligned with the needs of the group, reveal that each child, regardless of their prior knowledge or artistic background, has the opportunity to explore, engage with, and ultimately participate actively in various

forms of art (Schwartz, 2015, p. 50). According to Burchenal and Grohe, the interpretation, evaluation, and understanding of artistic meanings require the development of students' looking skills, which are cultivated through each individual's personal criteria and experiences (Burchenal & Grohe, 2007, p. 112). Not all children regularly engage in artistic activities, and their participation in the Summer Camp offers them a valuable opportunity to experience the benefits of artistic expression. Additionally, exposure to such experiences may spark newfound interest, potentially leading them to express a desire to incorporate artistic activities into their weekly routine, a decision that could be encouraged and supported within their family environment.

Additionally, another activity was implemented that engaged not only the visitors (members of the Haida Nation), but also the museum staff and researchers from both the British Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum (Golding, 2018, p. 239). Inspired by the Haida Nation's embodied interaction with museum objects, such as dancing with ceremonial masks, praying, singing, and physically engaging with items traditionally kept behind glass, we may envision similar approaches in the context of children's educational activities. When children are encouraged to engage with objects not only visually but also through movement, sound, and storytelling, they are invited into a deeper, more meaningful learning experience. For example, reenacting traditional rituals or cultural customs b replicas, costumes, music, or dance allows young learners to internalize historical and cultural knowledge in a multisensory way. A workshop in which children wear crafted masks and participate in a choreographed dance inspired by a specific cultural tradition could activate their imagination and empathy, helping them to perceive museum artefacts not as static remnants of the past, but as dynamic carriers of human expression, memory, and identity.

Children are exposed to various forms of art, receiving multiple stimuli that engage their senses on multiple levels. All sensory modalities are activated, and the very nature of the activity demands the child's full presence, both physically and mentally. They are encouraged to participate actively, remaining open to listening, acting, and feeling. Students observe artistic creations; learn about their historical and cultural significance, as well as the techniques used in their construction. Equipped with this knowledge, they, in turn, create their own art using contemporary methods and materials. As a result, the museum visit acquires a distinctly experiential character, transforming from a passive viewing experience into an interactive and immersive engagement with art. This process not only fosters enjoyment and creative expression but also significantly enhances the child's cognitive development. Such practices turn the museum space into a stage for interaction, creativity, and communal exploration, emphasizing that educational value lies not only in facts and dates, but also in the shared experiences and emotions evoked by cultural objects. Following this model, the

museum becomes a site where children can learn through doing, feeling, and connecting with objects, with stories, and with each other.

Chapter 4

Summer Camp at the Museum of Cycladic Art – Five-Day Program

The title of the 2024 Summer Camp (held between June 17th and August 2nd) was "Portraits of Ourselves", inspired by the exhibition "Cindy Sherman at Cycladic: Early Works." The program welcomed children aged 6 to 11, organized into small groups of approximately 15 to 20 participants. Each morning at 9:00 a.m., the program coordinator, along with three additional educators, greeted the children at the museum entrance. Following attendance, the group was guided to the designated activity space (Room A), a specially designed room located on the lower level of the museum. Once the children had placed their belongings in the appropriate areas, they gathered in a circle with the educators for the introductory session. This informal opening served as a space for sharing thoughts, news, current topics, personal reflections, and anything the children wished to express. This circle time cultivated a sense of community and set the tone for the day. Afterward, the participants were divided into smaller sub-groups, which remained consistent throughout the entire five-day duration of the program to promote group bonding and continuity.

Day 1 - Who am I?

The first day introduced children to the world of portraiture through photography and painting. The primary focus was the work of American artist Cindy Sherman, whose practice of self-portraiture, assuming different identities, costumes, and roles, offered an imaginative entry point into the theme of self-representation. This first encounter with artistic self-inquiry invited children to explore identity and imagination. Through photography, role-play, and painting, the participants began to shape personal narratives and reflect on how identity can be expressed visually and emotionally, an approach that bridges both contemporary and historical artistic methods in a child-friendly format. Building on the theme of portraiture, the children were also introduced to other influential artists such as Pablo Picasso and Frida Kahlo, exploring how each represented their identity through art. These examples allowed participants to broaden their understanding of self-portraiture across different artistic periods and cultural contexts.

The session included both theoretical and experiential learning. Children gained basic knowledge about photographic techniques and the concept of self-portrayal, before transitioning into hands-on exploration, in the museum's designated workshop space (Room B). There, using props and costume elements, the children engaged in physical and creative experimentation. Through movement, shadow play, and collaborative composition, they formed expressive shapes, narratives, and group arrangements. The educators using a digital

camera, documenting the children's interpretations of self and story through visual expression, captured these spontaneous and performative moments. In addition, to deepen the exploration of identity and self-perception, each child was invited to create a painted self-portrait, using the technique and materials of their own choosing. A screening of selected scenes from the animated films *Moana, Sing,* preceded this creative exercise and *Encanto*. In these stories the protagonists embark on personal journeys to discover or redefine their identities through challenges and transformative experiences. These cinematic references served as accessible and emotionally resonant prompts, helping children to reflect on questions such as "Who am I?" By connecting visual storytelling with their own self-expression, the children were encouraged to translate internal reflections into artistic form, merging imagination with personal narrative.

Through this well-coordinated initiative, children are encouraged to explore the various facets that shape a personality. Beginning with the identification of a hero's supernatural abilities and unique traits, the activity gradually transitions into a more introspective process. Each child is prompted to reflect on what they might have in common with these fictional characters. Heroes are not solely defined by their extraordinary powers. They are also individuals who have friends, make mistakes, laugh, get angry, and play. They possess personal qualities that, although not always obvious, are relatable and can foster meaningful identification. Within this framework, children are invited to share which characteristics they admire in a hero, who they would like to resemble, and which qualities they themselves find challenging to embrace. The group discussion creates a space of mutual exchange, emotional expression, and self-reflection.

This activity proves to be particularly effective for the first day of the program, as it facilitates genuine introductions and encourages the children to recognize shared values and experiences. At the same time, it promotes respect for diversity, laying the foundation for an inclusive and empathetic group dynamic.

Day 2 - How Do I Feel?

The second day of the Summer Camp focused on the theme of emotions on how we experience them, how we express them, and how they can be visually and symbolically represented. Through a combination of observation, discussion, and creative practice, children explored the relationship between emotions and different forms of sensory and natural stimuli. Following the morning welcome and group check-in, the children were guided to the museum's outdoor garden. There, they engaged in a sensory exploration activity, collecting natural materials and textures that they felt corresponded to specific emotional states. This tactile investigation formed the basis for a larger creative exercise back in the workshop

space. Drawing inspiration from selected scenes of animated films such as *Inside Out*, *Frozen*, and *Elemental*, each of which delves into emotional complexity and self-awareness, children reflected on how feelings like fear, joy, or anger might be associated with particular shapes, colors, or natural elements. Could anger be a storm, or joy a ray of sunlight? What does the color of fear look like, and how might excitement feel in your hands? In the workshop, each child received a large sheet of paper and was invited to create a visual representation that combined three expressive elements: an emotion of their choice, a natural element they associated with that emotion (e.g. water, fire, wind, earth), and a specific visual form either a line, a curve, or a combination of both. Through this guided framework, children produced abstract compositions using mixed materials and collage techniques, reflecting their personal interpretations. This exercise encouraged them to connect inner feelings with external forms, cultivating both emotional awareness and artistic decision-making.

I regarded this activity as one of the most meaningful of the entire program, particularly in light of the challenges I observe regarding the recognition and expression of emotions, challenges that are especially apparent within contemporary Greek society. This emotional inarticulateness is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is deeply rooted in broader social and cultural legacies. However, there is growing awareness and willingness among institutions, museums and, perhaps most crucially, the individuals behind these institutions, to take an active role in shifting this dynamic toward a more open and emotionally literate future, both on a personal and collective level. From this perspective, I view the integration of such emotionally focused activities into children's educational experiences not only as hopeful but also as an investment, an investment in fostering empathy, emotional awareness, and healthy social communication from an early age. Transforming complex and often stigmatized emotional topics into experiential, participatory learning practices enables participants to reflect, understand, and begin the process of emotional "movement". However small or profound that may be. This experience was particularly insightful for me, as it was through observing the children, who express themselves more spontaneously, without the internalized restrictions and social conditioning, that often inhibit adults that I was able to witness emotional authenticity in its raw form. The children’s unfiltered reactions and natural engagement underscored the importance of cultivating such emotional freedom early in life, before it is suppressed or reshaped by societal expectations.

In this context, emotions that are often dismissed or labeled as “negative” (such as fear, anger, or sadness) are instead acknowledged, visualized, and given tangible form. Through artistic creation, collaborative expression, and open group reflection, these feelings become shared experiences rather than personal burdens. This collective approach not only

promotes emotional relief and connection but also reinforces the idea that emotional expression is both valid and necessary. Ultimately, such initiatives contribute to shaping emotionally resilient individuals and more empathetic communities.

Day 3 - What Villain Would I Be?

The third day of the Summer Camp was centered around the theme of villainy, both fictional and historical, and the ways in which these characters are represented across different cultures and media. Drawing on the official prompt: "*If I was a villain in a story or a movie, who would I choose to be? What would be my secret power and weapons?*", the day encouraged children to explore identity, imagination, and emotional expression through the lens of antagonistic figures. The session began with a group discussion in which the children were asked to reflect on their favourite villains from fairytales, animated films, and myths. This provided a playful and interactive foundation for the exploration of deeper questions: What defines a "bad guy"? Are villains always evil, or can their stories reveal something more complex? To broaden this perspective, children were shown images of ritual masks from Papua New Guinea, objects traditionally constructed by local tribes to frighten enemies and assert spiritual power. These visuals introduced the cultural and symbolic role of masks in societies where visual expression holds both aesthetic and communicative power. To complement this, selected scenes from *Despicable Me, Bad Boys*, and *How to Train Your Dragon* were screened, offering a familiar and engaging reference point for the children as they considered the motivations and behaviors of animated antagonists.

Following this introduction, the group moved to the museum's permanent collection space to view the figurines of Satyrs (myth[illegible]ischief and revelry) displayed wearing theatrical masks with exaggerated expressions. The educators facilitated a short discussion about ancient Greek theater, the use of masks in performance, and how such figures communicated emotion and identity on stage. The creative component of the day took place in Workshop. There, each child was given a piece of clay and a set of sculpting tools. I[illegible]sed, the children were encouraged to design their ov[illegible] villain

(Figure 1: Kids making Clay Masks. Photograph by Eirini Ioanna Kalathaki, 2024.)

they invented or admired (figure 1). Using vivid colors and expressive features, they explored emotions like anger, fear, and surprise through their creations. Each child was given a thick slab of clay, which proved to be difficult for the younger participants to handle due to its weight and firmness. As assistant educators, we took on the task of softening and molding the clay to make it more manageable, while continuously circulating among the groups to provide practical assistance and support wherever needed. Our presence during the workshop was essential, not only for logistical purposes, but also to encourage and emotionally support the children to persevere in the creative process. What became particularly apparent during this activity was that many children were solely focused on producing a perfect final product. When their clay mask did not resemble the vision they had in mind, they became frustrated and, in some cases, expressed a desire to stop altogether. This tendency toward perfectionism can limit a child's willingness to explore and experiment, especially when an outcome appears initially difficult or unfamiliar. Our aim as facilitators was to help children overcome this mindset, to enjoy the process rather than fixate on the result, and to reconcile themselves with imperfection by embracing the rough, the abstract, or even the "ugly" mask that deviated from conventional notions of beauty or completeness. Artistic creation, after all, is a deeply personal and expressive act. Each piece acquires its identity through the uniqueness of its maker, and that individuality is fully welcomed and celebrated within the space we created.

The day concluded back in Room A, where the children regrouped into their designated teams. Each group selected a story or movie involving a villain and devised a short pantomime to act out. The other groups were invited to observe and guess the villain being portrayed. This collective activity not only reinforced their understanding of character and narrative, but also promoted collaboration, empathy, and performative storytelling. Our group, which consisted of the youngest children, chose to dramatize the well-known fairy tale "The Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf." Three children took on the roles of the pigs and were positioned in different areas of the room, each "building" their house. Another child and I played the roles of the wolves, with a small adaptation to accommodate the group dynamics. One of the other groups presented a scene inspired by "The Incredibles," another reenacted "Despicable Me," while the final group, of the oldest children, staged a playful conflict between Marvel superheroes and their respective villains. Through this dramatization, the children collaborated closely, distributed roles among themselves, and expressed their characters through movement and facial expressions. Each team contributed to the creation of a narrative with a clear beginning, middle, and end, emphasizing teamwork, imagination, and creative interpretation. This activity was not only educational but also deeply enjoyable. We laughed wholeheartedly, communicated through alternative modes of expression, and witnessed the emergence of remarkable acting talents among the children. These spontaneous

moments of play and performance contributed to a joyful, cohesive group dynamic and underscored the power of drama-based learning in museum education.

Through this thematic journey into the realm of villains, children were able to engage critically and creatively with concepts of identity, power, and self-expression, core objectives of the educational philosophy behind the Summer Camp.

Day 4 - Who is standing in front of me?

The fourth day of the Summer Camp focused on interpersonal observation, artistic expression, and spatial awareness through the practice of sketching. Drawing inspiration from the day's central questions: "*If I drew someone, where would I place them? In the museum, the garden, or the workshop? And if someone else drew me, where would I sit?"* These activities emphasized both self-expression and empathetic observation of others. The narrative framework was complemented by references to classic Walt Disney films such as *Peter Pan, Alice in Wonderland, and Snow White*, where whimsical characters and dreamlike settings invite viewers to reconsider perspective and movement.

Following the children's arrival and morning welcome, the educators introduced the basic principles of sketching. The group engaged in exercises aimed at developing visual perception and hand-eye coordination. Each child was initially asked to sketch a human figure in a continuous line without lifting the pencil from the paper. They then practiced shading techniques and, in a playful twist, repeated the drawing exercise using their non-dominant hand. These activities encouraged risk-taking, fine motor skill development, and confidence in artistic experimentation. Next, the children were taken to the museum's garden for a more immersive activity. Divided into pairs, they alternated roles as artist and model. The "artist" decided how the "model" should pose and whether they would hold natural elements such as leaves, branches, or flowers found in the garden. Each sketch was produced in approximately five minutes using the observational techniques learned earlier. On the other hand, this activity presented certain logistical challenges. As we needed to move the group through the museum to reach the outdoor area, it was essential to ensure careful coordination so that the children could walk safely and respectfully without disrupting other visitors. Additionally, our time in the garden was shortened due to the heatwave that affected Athens during that week. Even in the shaded areas we managed to find, the high temperature made it particularly difficult to carry out the activity effectively. As a result, we decided to reduce the time spent outdoors and return sooner to the air-conditioned room.

The children then swapped roles and repeated the exercise. Once the outdoor session was completed, the entire group moved to the museum's workshop space, where they revisited their sketches and brought them to life through color. Each sketch was uniquely

completed using different materials such pastels, watercolors, pigments, and markers emphasizing the diversity of expression and interpretation among the children. The day concluded in Room A with a series of group games designed to reinforce collaboration, physical coordination, and spatial awareness. Activities such as relay races, hoop-based challenges, and balloon games provided moments of laughter and shared enjoyment, while also serving a deeper pedagogical function: cultivating teamwork and helping children navigate space dynamically and respectfully in the presence of others.

Day 5 - Which Superhero Would I Be?

The final day of the Summer Camp was devoted to the theme of superheroes and the broader concepts of responsibility, altruism, and collective well-being. The activities were structured around a series of reflective and creative questions: "*If I were a superhero, who would I be? What would my superpowers be? Who or what would I choose to fight against, and why?"*

The day began with an open group discussion during which the children shared their favorite superheroes and explained what qualities made these characters admirable or inspiring. Following the discussion, the facilitators presented a short multimedia lecture introducing the history and structure of comics and Japanese manga. The presentation included visual examples from well-known comic series and films such as *Asterix*, *Spider-Man, and The Incredibles* to help contextualize the medium and spark inspiration. Building on this input, the children were invited to create their own original comic books. Each particip g of a cover page and a story page, where they would develop a narrative arc featuring a self-invented superhero character. Emphasis was placed on constructing a clear story with a beginning, middle, and end, while also incorporating visual storytelling techniques such as speech bubbles, expressive illustrations, and imaginative scenarios (figure 2). This final activity combined multiple cogniti n, visual expression, symbolic thinking, and emotional engagement. At the same time, it provided a structured opportunity for children to

(Figure 2: Kids making Comics. Photograph by Eirini Ioanna Kalathaki, 2024.)

reflect on personal strengths, ethical choices, and the role of heroes in both fictional and real-world contexts.

Overall, the fifth day of the program celebrated imagination and empowerment, concluding the week with a project that not only encapsulated many of the learning goals of the camp, but also left each child with a tangible representation of their creativity and individual vision.

A particularly noteworthy element of the daily structure was the consistency in both the opening and closing of each day's activities, which always took place in the same space, Room A. This area functioned as a welcoming environment where the children would initially gather for the morning circle, and later return at the end of the day to conclude the session. The space was arranged with cushions, and each child was free to choose a position where they felt most comfortable and secure. This setting fostered a sense of routine, emotional safety, and community within the group. Each afternoon ended with a storytelling session led by the program's coordinator, who narrated a different tale every day, sometimes thematically aligned with the day's activities. For example, on the third day, which focused on villains and "evil" figures, the story featured a terrifying, ill-tempered witch, adding a reflective narrative layer to the day's creative explorations. This moment of winding down served multiple purposes: it helped the children decompress after a stimulating day of artistic engagement, it fostered attentive listening, and it created space for emotional processing through narrative. As the story unfolded, many children chose to lie down, fully immersed in the plot, while participating actively when prompted by the storyteller such as mimicking the sound of a door knock.

Another essential and well-structured element of the daily routine was the two scheduled breaks. The first took place at 11:00 a.m., following the conclusion of the morning activities. During this time, children enjoyed a light snack brought from home, providing them with the necessary energy and an opportunity to briefly relax. The second break, the main lunch break, occurred around 1:00 p.m., allowing the children to eat the meals prepared by their families. Beyond fulfilling the basic need for nourishment, these breaks also served a valuable social function. Children gathered in small or larger groups, often shifting from day to day, and engaged in informal conversations. Sitting together on the floor, we shared stories from their previous afternoon, spoke about their plans for the rest of the day, and deepened their sense of group belonging. The lunch break, being longer in duration, also included free play time after eating. This allowed the children to release excess energy outside the structured framework of the program's scheduled activities. With appropriate supervision and a focus on mutual respect, the children were free to play with balloons, hoops, or even toys

they had brought from home, creating an atmosphere of joyful spontaneity and peer bonding. Additionally, this break time offered a valuable opportunity for the facilitators to prepare the next activity, reflect on the group's progress, and set goals for the remainder of the day. It was a moment of pause that proved essential for both children and staff, a shared space for informal interaction, mutual observation, and quiet preparation. More than just a logistical necessity, breaks became a meaningful interval during which everyone had the chance to recharge and connect on a more personal level, fostering a stronger sense of community within the group.

Following the narration, the group engaged in a brief discussion about the story, sharing individual interpretations and observations. This closing ritual reinforced a sense of belonging and collective reflection. Finally, the children gathered their personal belongings at 3.00 p.m. and, accompanied by the educators, exited the museum to reunite with their parents or guardians waiting outside. The total cost of the five-day session was 120 euros per child, with the option of a four-day booking available for 100 euros.

On the fifth and final day, after the children had completed their comic book creations, we returned to Room A to prepare for the arrival of their families. The program facilitators had arranged an exhibition of the children's artworks from all five days, displayed throughout the room. Photographs were mounted along one wall, sketches and comic strips were presented on another, while the emotional expression paintings were grouped on a third. The clay masks were carefully placed on a large table. After a warm welcome and a brief presentation by the educators outlining the week's activities, each child stood up and presented one or more of their works to the audience. Following the general overview of the program, the lead coordinator would highlight two or three artworks related to a specific theme. The young creator of each piece would then stand up and share the thought process behind their drawing, within the framework of the instructions provided during the activity. After presenting their work, the student received a round of applause from the audience before returning to their seat. Afterwards, each group presented the short sketch they had prepared on the third day, thus actively engaging all the children. At the same time, this performance added an interactive element to the final presentation, as the parents were also invited to participate by guessing the story and identifying the characters. Following the presentations, parents were invited to join their children in a final celebratory moment. A favorite song chosen by the children was played, and everyone danced together to mark the joyful conclusion of this five-day journey. At the end of the event, the artworks were returned to their young creators. Educators provided feedback to parents and guardians, and meaningful conversations unfolded, offering a space for shared reflections and deeper connection through art and the collective care for the children. This culminating event

allowed families to witness the creative journey and personal development of their children, while celebrating the collaborative and expressive environment fostered during the Summer Camp.

The farewell was tinged with bittersweet emotions, as the conclusion of the program signaled the end of a shared experience that would not soon be repeated. However, many children expressed their wish to return to the museum more frequently, inspired not only by the educational activities but also by the welcoming environment, the relationships formed, and the countless smiles and warm embraces exchanged throughout the week. During the week I participated in the program, from July 15th to 19th, the children were very cooperative and quite open to trying and learning new things. Among the group members, there were children with learning difficulties, who collaborated well with the other children, and the activities were successfully completed with everyone's participation. All the children showed a need to build relationships, even within the short duration of the camp. Collaborative work on a task, the safe environment that allows them to ask for help from their peers, and the exchange of knowledge, opinions, and concerns during breaks appear to be among the children's priorities. By fostering the right environment, children are ready to receive new information, reflect, create, and learn. Another observation I made is that many children, especially the younger ones, seek encouragement and acceptance from the coordinators. Specifically, at the end of the day, during the storytelling session, the younger children chose to sit next to the educators and, in complete calm, would lie down and listen to the story.

Chapter 5

Evaluating Children's Engagement in Interactive Museum Experiences

A study titled "Measuring Enjoyment of an Interactive Museum Experience," conducted with two primary school classes in The Hague, Netherlands, demonstrated that the *Smileyometer* method is more effective when used with older children. Younger children tend to select the happiest face by default, regardless of their actual experience, which may lead to less reliable results. Consequently, the *Smileyometer* appears to yield more accurate outcomes for children aged 10 to 12 (Van Dijk et al., 2012, p. 252). Furthermore, another effective research method for older children is the use of questionnaires, particularly those incorporating open-ended questions. These allow for more nuanced responses, as students can articulate their thoughts in their own words. Additionally, providing the option to include sketches or drawings, either as a complementary response or as a standalone answer, enhances the depth of the collected data (Hooper et al., 2006, p. 31). This approach not only caters to different forms of self-expression but also aligns with the multisensory nature of museum experiences, where visual representation plays a crucial role in engagement and understanding.

As part of the broader exploration of children's engagement within educational environments, the project titled '*SENSE: Sensory Explorations of Nature in School Environments*' approached these questions through an experimental and multisensory lens, offering new insights. The project specifically examined the impact and necessity of haptic (tactile) experiences in educational settings. Grounded in the belief that children are "*co-producers of knowledge*", it sought to explore how tactile experiences contribute to learning, emotional expression, and the transformation of school environments into spaces of connection, creativity, and ecological awareness. To examine these questions, the research team implemented a series of three interconnected workshops designed to foster sensory engagement and participatory learning (Colucci et al., 2025, p. 1-3).

In the first workshop, students were invited to explore textures within their schoolyard and collect natural materials such as leaves, bark, and branches. Using clay, they

created imaginative creatures inspired by these materials, beings adapted to their local environment. These activities strongly resonate with those implemented during the Summer Camp at the Museum of Cycladic Art, particularly on the third and fourth days. For example, natural materials such as clay were used in the creation of expressive masks, while twigs, leaves, and flowers collected from the museum garden became part of the sketching activity. In this workshop, children took on both the role of the artist and the model, striking imaginative poses and using the organic elements around them as inspiration. As in the first SENSE workshop, the emphasis was on tactile engagement and environmental interaction, promoting creativity, sensory exploration, and a deeper connection between the children and their surroundings.

The second workshop introduced students to a digital tool, a haptic pen that allowed them to “feel” different textures displayed on a tablet screen. By engaging with this digital interface, students identified various types of tree bark and connected this tactile interaction to scientific inquiry. The experience offered a hybrid approach that merged technology with sensory exploration, supporting the development of new observation and classification skills.

The third workshop took place outdoors, where students conducted direct observations of moss, lichen, and bark in designated plots. Using worksheets and visual tools, they documented their findings, which were in some cases uploaded to the citizen science platform *iSpot*. This process not only cultivated close observation and data collection skills but also invited students to become contributors to wider scientific networks.

Overall, the SENSE project highlights how haptic inquiry can play a transformative role in educational practices. By integrating touch, creativity, and scientific observation, the workshops provided inclusive and immersive learning experiences that redefined the role of the school environment. These practices support the cultivation of environmental awareness, collaboration, and the holistic development of children as active and reflective learners. The use of these experimental approaches to investigate how children respond to new stimuli, whether related to art, nature, or technology, clearly highlights the need for a transformation in educational programming. The three workshops described above appear to have had a positive impact on the participating children. Their engagement through haptic activities contributed not only to knowledge acquisition but also to their emotional and psychological development.

Additionally, during the first workshop, researchers observed that some children struggled to articulate the sensation of certain textures, while others used descriptive terms such as "soft" for greenery and grass, or "hard" for car parks. These insights suggest that tactile exploration offers a powerful pathway for both learning and self-expression,

reinforcing the value of incorporating multisensory methods into museum and school-based education. Moreover, an especially noteworthy observation that emerged through the research was the tendency of children to assign emotional qualities to the tactile materials they encountered, effectively constructing emotional narratives around otherwise inanimate objects. For instance, one young girl shared that touching a sponge "*made her feel safe*", a response that reveals the deeper psychological need some children have to operate within secure environments (Colucci et al., 2025, p. 9). This finding underscores the importance of providing educational spaces and activities that not only stimulate sensory engagement but also offer emotional comfort and reassurance. Additionally, during the second workshop, participants limited the range of their individual observations, as greater emphasis was placed on collective discussion. This allowed them to identify commonalities and compare the differing experiences and perspectives that emerged through tactile engagement. This shift toward shared reflection contributed to a more grounded and accurate understanding of their sensory encounters. Finally, during the third workshop, some boys expressed their surprise at discovering a variety of tree species they had never noticed before, as they were not accustomed to spending time in such outdoor spaces, such as the car park and the edges of the school grounds. Within this safe and trusting environment, fostered by the open yet thoughtfully structured format of the workshops, participants felt free to experiment and explore alternative approaches. One girl, in particular, noticed a plant growing in the school garden, asked for more information about it, and upon learning that it was a type of herb, expressed her desire to taste it (Colucci et al., 2025, p. 11-12).

The research showed that students in Schools 1 and 2 were not familiar with outdoor environments or with the concept of a school coexisting with nature, unlike School 3, where the garden seemed to serve as a supportive and nurturing space. This finding underscores the importance of considering the socio-economic conditions of schools and how these factors affect children's right to access and engage with natural environments. As sensory experiences are enhanced through innovative tools, such as haptic learning methods, children from different backgrounds but with similar developmental needs are able to participate in a shared educational setting. This inclusive approach generates multifaceted benefits, cognitive, social, and emotional, highlighting the importance of equal access to experiential learning regardless of socio-economic context.

Another study conducted with 70 children aged between eight and twelve years old investigated their perceptions of authenticity during a visit to a Dutch natural history museum. The participants were presented with two replicas and two authentic dinosaur fossils, and were asked to evaluate their significance within the museum context. Initially, most children expressed the belief that replicas are "fake" and should not be part of a museum exhibition.

According to the participants, replicas lack value and diminish the quality of the display, which led them to consider such objects unworthy of being exhibited (van Gerven et al., 2018, p. 334). This can be explained by the way children think and experience connections with the past. They are fascinated by the idea of seeing and being exposed to an object, even a tiny fossil, which dates back millions of years. It is through this kind of encounter that children seem to grasp the principle of *contagion*, the notion that objects carry a form of historical essence or continuity. This perceived link helps them better understand the concepts of temporal succession, the passage of time, and the evolution of life (van Gerven et al., 2018, p. 338). Therefore, when addressing younger children, it is essential to acknowledge that authenticity and the interpretation of meaning are not solely based on the materiality or aesthetics of an object. Rather, they are grounded in the emotional and historical "value" that a fragment or artifact may represent. This insight holds particular significance for museum exhibition design and the interpretive strategies applied to engage young audiences in meaningful and age-appropriate ways.

Chapter 6

Visibility and Inclusion in Museums

Within the broader context of global museum development and modernization, a new imperative continues to emerge: the need for acceptance and inclusion of marginalized and minority communities. This includes not only addressing who is represented within exhibitions, but also how museum spaces are designed and experienced by diverse visitors. To what extent, and through which strategies, do museums accommodate individuals with physical or cognitive disabilities, refugees, women, or LGBTQ+ members of society? Although changes in museum practices, both direct and indirect, have been observed since as early as the 1920s and 1930s, often in response to the shifting needs of society, there remains significant room for growth. Inclusion is not a static achievement but an ongoing process, as society itself is a living, evolving organism, continuously redefined by cultural, political, and social transformations. This chapter explores the evolving role of museums as inclusive social spaces, reflecting on both the progress made and the challenges that remain. Drawing from contemporary examples, we will consider how institutions are adapting their narratives, infrastructures, and programming to foster greater equity and visibility for historically excluded voices. Whether through accessible design, inclusive storytelling, or community-driven curation, museums are gradually redefining their role, not merely as preservers of the past, but as agents of present-day social justice and cultural dialogue.

Individuals who live on the margins of society are often unconsciously excluded by social structures that lack the necessary education and awareness surrounding visibility and representation of systematically disadvantaged groups. As a result, these individuals are denied equal opportunities and access to basic rights, despite having the same fundamental needs as others. The desire to connect with one's own history, the right of a child with a mobility impairment to benefit from educational experiences in a museum just like their peers, and the inclusion of refugee children who may not speak the local language, these are not marginal concerns. They should be central to the mission of cultural institutions, which

reflect and shape the values of the society in which they exist. Recognizing what can happen in and because of museums, more and more scholars and practitioners are beginning to position museums not merely as repositories of objects, but as facilitators of meaningful experiences and drivers of positive change for as many people as possible (Silverman, 2002, p. 69). When museums embrace this role, they begin to dismantle the barriers that prevent certain groups from feeling welcome, represented, or empowered within cultural spaces. Thus, the responsibility of museums today goes beyond the curation of collections, it extends to creating environments that actively foster inclusion, promote social equity, and cultivate belonging for all.

Many curators tend to design exhibitions with a strong focus on historical context or technical knowledge related to the objects on display, often overwhelming the visitor with an excess of information. However, Lois H. Silverman emphasizes that emotional response is just as important as cognitive understanding. Emotion is not incidental, in fact, be the primary pathway to therapeutic engagement with cultural heritage. In this view, museum objects, which traditionally hold a central place in exhibitions, possess the power to elicit emotional reactions that can serve as catalysts for memory recall, emotional expression, and even reconciliation with difficult personal experiences. Visitors may confront past events, form new connections, or share personal narratives in a communal setting. In doing so, their experience is transformed into something manageable and meaningful, supporting processes of self-understanding and healing. Silverman specifically highlights that groups such as people with depression, chronic illness, aging individuals, or those facing behavioral health challenges are rarely considered as active participants in museum experiences. Yet, they too seek opportunities to learn, reflect, find restoration, and affirm their identities, especially during moments of vulnerability. For example, in Lois H. Silverman's analysis of therapeutic museum practices, she emphasizes that an object once perceived as distant or historical becomes a mirror to one's inner life, encouraging storytelling, memory work, and emotional healing.

Additionally, In the MATA (Museums as Therapeutic Agents) project, Silverman highlights how visitors were invited to participate as visitors, contributors, or interpreters (Silverman, 2002, p. 71). For instance, terminally ill individuals visiting the Wylie House Museum were treated simply as valued guests, restoring a sense of dignity and normalcy. In another case, elderly participants at the Mathers Museum shared personal stories connected to objects on display, assuming the role of cultural contributors. Moreover, in a third example, individuals with behavioral health challenges served as interpreters and educators, teaching children traditional crafts and gardening practices (Silverman, 2002, p. 72-74). These role-based interactions provided participants with social recognition, purpose, and empowerment,

reducing feelings of isolation and reinforcing their identity as active members of society. At the same time, the museum operates as a space that invites the visitor to be fully present with all their senses. Shielded from the distractions of the outside world, the visitor is encouraged to stand before an object, observe it carefully, sometimes even touch it, and construct their own personal narrative around it. By focusing attention on a specific object or atmosphere, thought becomes more introspective, giving rise to a creative and contemplative process. This sensory immersion aligns seamlessly with mindfulness-based practices, such as yoga and meditation sessions held within museum spaces, where visitors are invited to engage not just intellectually, but emotionally and physically, with the surrounding environment. As noted by De Palma (Golding, 2018, p. 254), these activities do not merely serve promotional purposes; rather, they embrace the contemplative nature of museum environments, offering visitors a multisensory path toward inner balance. The calming aura of museum collections complements yoga's inward focus, encouraging awareness, self-connection, and a deeper appreciation of heritage as a pathway to wholeness.

An exemplary case of this sensory-centered approach is found in a ground-floor gallery at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where a video installation invites visitors into a deeply immersive, contemplative experience[2]. The space is large and intentionally dimly lit, with three video screens mounted on the walls, projecting footage of a group of African singers performing "*Wai*". Rather than organizing the space around rigid viewing positions, the museum has installed large, octagonal, cushioned seating modules that encourage visitors to sit, lie down, or simply rest. A soft carpet covers the floor, inviting participants to ground themselves and relax, physically and mentally, while listening to the resonant soundscape of the performance. This environment breaks away from the traditional expectations of how one should engage with art in a gallery space. There are no strict codes of behavior, no demand to decipher meaning or to interpret the work intellectually. Instead, the installation invites the visitor to be present simply, to experience the moment through sound, stillness, and embodiment. This shift, from passive observation to sensory immersion, creates space for personal interpretation, emotional openness, and mindful engagement. It is an example of how museums can foster inclusive atmospheres not only by who is represented, but also by how people are invited to engage, according to their own physical, emotional, and cognitive realities.

In a similar spirit to the immersive and emotionally resonant installation at the Stedelijk Museum, young visitors (especially children) need spaces within museums that feel warm, welcoming, and safe. The traditional museum setting, often characterized by grand

[2] Buro Stedelijk. (2025, February 21). *Shifting | Spirit | Time*. https://burostedelijk.nl/manifestations/54/

architecture, strict behavioral codes, and passive observation, can create an atmosphere of alienation or even anxiety for children. Recognizing this, the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam has introduced a child-centered activity where children are invited to sit on a large blanket in the gallery space and observe Van Gogh's paintings as if they were lying under a starry night sky (Szekely, 2014, p. 39). This gentle and imaginative setup transforms the museum into a space of contemplation and comfort, allowing children to experience art on their own terms through stillness, story, and shared presence. Importantly, the placement of the fabric on the floor serves not only a physical resting space but also as a softly defined boundary, a spatial cue that guides children without the need for strict behavioral commands or prohibitions. Within this marked area, children feel safe to explore with freedom and presence, rather than fear of reprimand. Instead of being rushed or instructed, they are invited to "be" with the painting, feeling its atmosphere and connecting emotionally, much like the atmosphere encouraged in the cozy room at the Stedelijk.

In the pursuit of accessibility and inclusion, museums across Europe have begun developing innovative strategies that cater to diverse sensory, cognitive, and cultural needs. These approaches reflect a growing awareness that visibility alone is not enough, true inclusion requires active participation and emotional engagement across a wide range of visitor experiences. A notable example is the "Sensoriale" space at the Castello D'Albertis Museum of World Cultures in Genoa. Created as part of the "Museo per tutti" initiative, Sensoriale offers a multisensory experience specifically designed to accommodate visitors with cognitive disabilities and individuals on the autistic spectrum. Using soft lighting, organic materials, cedar wood aromas, ambient soundscapes, and tactile elements arranged in harmonious compositions, the space provide an immersive refuge that fosters inner calm, emotional regulation, and self-exploration. It represents a shift away from object-centered exhibition design toward visitor-centered well-being, redefining the museum as a place for sensory inclusion and therapeutic potential (Golding, 2018, p. 255).

Similarly, the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens has developed *multisensory museum kits* aimed initially at students with visual impairments, which have also been embraced as valuable educational tools for entire classrooms (figure 3). Through these kits, children not only learn about the geography and history of the Cyclades and the famous Cycladic figurines, but also engage directly with authentic materials. Instead of merely being informed that the figurines were crafted from marble, students are encouraged to touch and handle small samples of marble and other stones, thus linking cognitive information with physical sensation. This multisensory engagement deepens understanding, strengthens memory retention, and promotes inclusivity by allowing learners of diverse abilities and backgrounds to meaningfully interact with cultural heritage. The *multisensory kits* are

distributed directly to schools, where teachers assume an active role in implementing the educational activities. Guided by indicative instructions provided by the Museum of Cycladic Art, educators are encouraged to adapt the activities to fit the specific goals, needs, and curriculum of their classroom. This flexible structure empowers teachers to integrate their own knowledge and creativity into the sessions, setting learning objectives that extend beyond factual knowledge to embrace emotional expression and social interaction. Through tactile exploration and multisensory engagement, children are not only introduced to the historical and geographical context of the Cyclades, but also stimulated to express themselves emotionally, developing a deeper, embodied understanding of cultural heritage. At the same time, these activities cultivate a sense of empathy and solidarity, encouraging children to recognize and embrace diversity within their peer group. Thus, the educational process supported by the kits advances three core pillars of museum-based learning: knowledge acquisition, emotional activation, and social connection.

Another minority group that has increasingly drawn the attention of museum professionals in recent years is that of refugees, individuals and communities whose voices have long been underrepresented, if not entirely excluded, from institutional narratives. As part of society, refugees actively seek their place within the cultural sphere, including museums, which are often perceived as guardians of collective memory and identity.

However, for many refugees, particularly in elite or traditionally exclusive museum settings, access to these spaces remains limited. Museums can feel intimidating, foreign, or disconnected from the lived experiences of displaced individuals. A 2015 study in Germany revealed that 70% of newly arrived refugees exhibited trauma-related symptoms, stemming from forced migration, violence, and loss. For such individuals, museums are not neutral spaces. Objects on display can act as powerful emotional triggers, evoking memories of home, loss, or dislocation. For these visitors, an artifact representing their region of origin is not merely a curated object; it is a vessel of profound personal meaning. It may embody their history, cultural identity, familial memory, and even grief. In this sense, the relationship between refugee visitors and museum collections is deeply affective and relational, not simply educational. An exhibition featuring items from Syria, Afghanistan, or Eritrea, for instance, may stir pride in one moment and pain in the next. This emotional proximity poses both a challenge and an opportunity for museums. On the one hand, staff must be trained to recognize emotional vulnerability and avoid retraumatization. On the other hand, when handled sensitively, such encounters can foster healing, belonging, and cross-cultural dialogue. For this reason, it is essential that museum staff be adequately trained and educated in matters related to trauma and mental health. Ideally, among the members of the museum team, there should also be a psychologist who ensures the sensitive presentation of themes

and objects that could act as emotional triggers for visitors. Only in this way can museums become truly safe and caring spaces, places that embrace diversity and promote the psychosocial well-being of all individuals. Community co-curation projects, participatory storytelling initiatives, and trauma-informed exhibition design are just a few approaches that can turn the museum into a site of social inclusion and recognition.

As scholars such as Sandell (2007) and Lynch (2011) have argued, inclusion is not merely about presence but about meaningful engagement ensuring that marginalized individuals can see themselves, their histories, and their futures reflected in public cultural institutions. For refugees in particular, this means transforming the museum into a place that does not merely observe their narratives from a distance, but welcomes them as participants, collaborators, and contributors in shaping collective memory.

All of the above highlights the important strides that museums have made toward opening their spaces to every social group, while taking into account the diverse needs, perceptions, and modes of understanding that characterize their audiences. By embracing a multiplicity of sensory, cognitive, and emotional pathways, museums are progressively redefining themselves as inclusive cultural environments where not every individual, just the privileged few, has the right and opportunity to engage meaningfully with heritage, art, and collective memory. This evolving approach recognizes that cultural participation is not a passive reception of information, but a dynamic, interactive, and deeply personal process. As museums continue to expand their accessibility initiatives and foster more empathetic, participatory experiences, they move closer to fulfilling their essential social mission: to serve as spaces of shared learning, emotional resonance, and equal inclusion for all members of society.

(Figure 3: Museum of Cycladic Art. *Museum kits: Multisensory experience for children with visual impairments*. https://cycladic.gr/mouseioskevi-polyaisthitiki-valitsa/ .)


ΜΟΥ
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ΜΟΥΣΕΙΟ ΚΥΚΛΑΔΙΚΗΣ ΤΕΧΝΗΣ
ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΝΙΚΟΛΑΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΝΤΟΛΛΗΣ ΓΟΥΛΑΝΔΡΗ
ΚΛΕΙΣΕ ΤΑ ΜΑΤΙΑ

Discussion and Analysis

In the previous chapters, it became evident that there is a strong need for the evolution and re-adjustment of current educational practices within cultural institutions. These developments aim at creating a space where every visitor is able to find their place, with children at the very center of attention. As highlighted earlier, it has only been a few decades since children started to be considered seriously within the workforce and audience of museums. The discussion that follows therefore focuses on proposed practices that need to be implemented in order to bring about change and to establish a stable, inclusive world within museums, galleries, and archaeological sites.

A valuable early attempt can be traced shortly after 1896, with the establishment of the *Laboratory School at the University of Chicago*, where experiential exercises were introduced to foster the creation of a community that interacts, collaborates, and communicates, with each member working towards collective goals while responding to individual needs (Schwartz, 2015, p.4). This clearly demonstrates children's innate desire to form groups even before engaging in specific tasks. Such a tendency was also apparent during the Summer Camp at the Cycladic Museum of Athens, as all educators observed and reflected upon this phenomenon.

The inclusion of the individual within a subgroup provides security, support, sharing, trust, and mutual assistance in facing any challenges that may arise. Younger children tended to remain within groups of peers of similar age, while older children were often observed taking on a caring and supportive role toward the younger ones. In certain cases, children around the ages of 11–12 showed a preference for creating bonds with members of the same gender. This was not a consistent pattern, and whenever it was observed, coordinators encouraged the groups to open up and experiment with relationships that involved all participants. Importantly, this was always done without pressure, with full respect for the needs and choices of the children. Within the activities, the guiding principle was collaboration across the whole group, while during the breaks, children were free to develop their own interpersonal connections.

Within this framework, the children were given the freedom to act as they wished, under the parallel supervision of the educators who were always present and ready to intervene whenever necessary. For instance, intervention was needed in cases of conflict, scapegoating of individual members after the group lost in a game, or other situations that required mediation. In addition, the younger children, particularly those between the ages of 5

and 7, consistently sought the gaze and approval of the educators, and it was not uncommon for them to attempt to monopolize adult attention. This manifested either through frequent requests for assistance or through actively seeking a place next to the coordinators. Essentially, they desired to be in close proximity to the adults, both communicatively and physically, ascribing to them a nurturing, caregiving role. The educators, however, were highly trained to establish respectful boundaries while ensuring that the environment remained inclusive and equitable. Their role was to foster a learning space in which all children were regarded as equals, with the same rights and responsibilities, and without any favoritism or preferential treatment toward specific individuals.

Through the Summer Camp experience, it became increasingly clear what priorities children set for themselves: how they define their own space, how they communicate, and how they assert their needs. At this point, it is worth referring to the work of Cynthia Moreno, who in 1997 founded Art Sparks. She essentially designed museum spaces for families in which members could engage with artistic materials, while children would learn about art in ways that encouraged connections with the museum's permanent collection. A study conducted during the first year of Art Sparks found that only about half of the young visitors engaged with the museum's collections either before or after their visit to Art Sparks. Moreno also recorded concerns expressed by parents, namely that "*if they ventured into the permanent collection, the children would be disinterested, or might not behave well*" (Szekely, 2014, p. 35).

What Moreno identified is particularly important: after the excitement of a dynamic and child-centered environment, children often showed less enthusiasm for the rest of the museum. This illustrates the broader challenge of designing inclusive cultural spaces, how can institutions create experiences that simultaneously captivate children's attention while also guiding them toward a deeper appreciation of the museum as a whole? It is not enough to provide isolated "*playground*" environments within museums; rather, cultural institutions need to integrate playful, collaborative, and interactive approaches into their core spaces (Szekely, 2014, p. 36). When children become accustomed to family outings in recreational spaces where they are free to play without strict prohibitions, the traditional model of a museum can feel alien and unwelcoming. For instance, a gallery that forbids speaking, prohibits energetic or rapid movements, and does not allow children to approach or touch the exhibits places young visitors in direct conflict with rules they are unwilling, or even unable, to follow. As a result, their experience often ends in frustration: not only do they fail to enjoy the visit, but they also leave with a sense of having broken multiple prohibitions. This dual

disappointment reinforces the perception of the museum as an exclusionary space, rather than one that embraces and values children as active participants in cultural life.

The case of the Summer Camp at the Cycladic Museum echoes Moreno's insights. Children actively sought group formation, emotional security, and supportive interactions, dynamics that cannot be ignored when shaping educational and cultural programs. If museums and similar institutions truly wish to engage young audiences, they must create frameworks where children's social and emotional priorities are respected, while gradually expanding their engagement with collections, heritage, and artistic experiences. Furthermore, at the Speed Art Museum in the United States, the emphasis on playful engagement has taken concrete form. A card game has been created, a tool for conducting a treasure hunt inside the gallery (Szekely, 2014, p. 37). We can therefore see how play can be incorporated into museum spaces, transforming the entire visitor experience from boring and one-dimensional into something interesting and fun.

In this sense, the challenge is twofold: to meet children where they are, valuing their need for belonging, recognition, and playful exploration, and at the same time to gently guide them into deeper cultural encounters. The responsibility of educators and cultural practitioners lies in balancing these two dimensions, creating bridges rather than separations between child-centered activities and the broader museum. Children consistently demonstrate a desire for group belonging, emotional security, playful interaction, and recognition from adults. When museums fail to accommodate these needs, through rigid prohibitions, silent galleries, and inaccessible exhibits, children often leave with feelings of frustration or alienation. In contrast, initiatives that incorporate collaboration, creativity, and play transform museums from passive sites of observation into active spaces of discovery and connection. Ultimately, the path toward change has begun to emerge through the efforts of many museums to develop new practices that are more inclusive and responsive to the needs of children and families. By integrating play, collaboration, and interactivity, cultural spaces cease to function as rigid and restrictive environments and are instead transformed into vibrant arenas of learning, discovery, and creativity. This shift does not diminish the seriousness or the respect owed to art and cultural heritage; rather, it highlights the potential for children to participate actively, to build relationships, and to develop skills within an environment that embraces them. The challenge now lies in consolidating and expanding these practices so that the museum landscape may truly become a space that belongs to everyone, ensuring that every visitor, regardless of age, feels a genuine sense of belonging.

Another critical issue addressed in the present study concerns the visibility and inclusion of minorities in cultural spaces, and more specifically, of people with disabilities.

Even though we are well into the 21st century, individuals with disabilities continue to face exclusion from many cultural institutions, beginning with something as fundamental as physical access. If a museum has not provided an entrance ramp or an elevator, visitors with mobility impairments are immediately prevented from even crossing the threshold.

Suppose, however, that the necessary infrastructural adaptations have been made, enabling people with disabilities to enter and navigate the exhibition space. The question then arises: to what extent are these visitors able to fully experience the displays? In many cases, objects are placed at heights that render them invisible to individuals using wheelchairs. The same problem is shared by children, since exhibitions are typically designed at an adult's eye level (Szekely, 2014, p.36). This reveals a deeper issue in curatorial practice: the implicit assumption of an "ideal" visitor who is physically able-bodied, cognitively typical, and of adult stature. Such an assumption automatically marginalizes those who do not fit this mold.

The discussion, therefore, must broaden to include not only individuals with mobility challenges, but also people with intellectual disabilities, chronic illnesses, and mental health conditions. In fact, the therapeutic dimension of museums has occasionally been acknowledged in academic literature. Silverman, for instance, argues that museums have the potential to generate therapeutic outcomes, succinctly noting that "*The world of mental health can remind museums of the range of goals that are essential for a healthy society*" (Silverman, 2002, p.75). This perspective situates museums not merely as repositories of objects but as agents of social well-being, capable of fostering resilience, empathy, and a sense of belonging.

Innovative initiatives have also been introduced by the Museum of Cycladic Art through the development of specially designed museum kits aimed at individuals with visual impairments. Through these multisensory tools, visitors are able to engage directly with materials such as marble and wood, the very substances from which many of the museum's exhibits are made. In this way, the museum not only provides an alternative means of access but also redefines the way cultural heritage can be experienced: through touch, texture, and materiality, rather than vision alone. Such practices exemplify how cultural institutions can expand the boundaries of interpretation, offering inclusive pathways that enable all audiences to connect with art and history on their own terms.

In this way, the interaction of individuals with disabilities and illnesses with museums appears to be far more effective, grounded in full awareness of their needs and in respect for human dignity, without excessive efforts to "optimize" or "correct" the individual. A museum visit and the accompanying educational process function best when they run in parallel with visitors' realities, rather than highlighting or stigmatizing the very element that differentiates them from the so-called typical visitor. The overall experience would therefore be improved for all if the central priority were the creation of a safe and welcoming environment, one in

which every visitor feels not only accepted but also assured that they have the genuine choice to participate in any aspect of the museum experience.

A central pillar of this discussion is the vital role of museums. Museums are increasingly approached not merely as repositories of objects, but as spaces and exhibits that function as mediums for interaction with the individual. This is why many institutions now incorporate audiovisual tools, interactive screens, and parallel activities into their programming. A remarkable example of visitor engagement and coordinated attention can be seen at the Stedelijk Museum, where three screens were used to display a performance by a group of African singers performing "*Wai*"[3]. This represents an alternative method for capturing the visitor's full attention without the use of verbal instructions. Individuals fall silent to listen and observe, engaging all of their senses with the unfolding performance, and entering into a state of complete harmony with the space and the other visitors.

[3] Buro Stedelijk. (2025, February 21). *Shifting | Spirit | Time*. https://burostedelijk.nl/manifestations/54/

Conclusion

Following an in-depth exploration of the broader landscape within and around museums, we are now better equipped to recognize and respond to the evolving needs of contemporary society. Museums today are called not only to preserve and exhibit but also to actively include functioning as inclusive, participatory spaces where everyone who wishes to engage with culture, history, and knowledge can find a place.

Guided by the imperative of visibility and representation for vulnerable social groups, such as people with disabilities, refugees, women, and individuals with learning or cognitive challenges, museum institutions are rethinking their structures and experimenting with new, inclusive methods. This reimagining extends beyond spatial and physical adaptations; it reaches into exhibition design, interpretive frameworks, and the development of parallel educational and participatory programs, all aimed at fostering greater public engagement. Among these efforts, particular attention has been given to children, as it is through their early experiences that familiarity with museum environments begins to develop. Acknowledging their natural need to touch, explore, create, and interact, not only with the exhibits but also with their peers and their environment, museum educators are now shaping experiences that provide children with both the safety and freedom necessary for meaningful learning. These experiences are not simply pedagogical in nature, but deeply affective, sensory, and expressive, as evidenced by the initiatives carried out in the various museums mentioned above, and in particular in the case of the Summer Camp.

Within this framework, the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens stands out as a noteworthy example of inclusive practice. In recent years, the institution has expanded its reach and impact, creating tailored programs that invite diverse social groups, from young children and elderly visitors to refugees and individuals with sensory and cognitive impairments, into its spaces. A particularly successful initiative is the museum's Summer Camp, a well-coordinated program that reflects a deep understanding of child-centered learning and inclusive engagement through art, storytelling, movement, and play. This research was also deeply enriched by my personal experience as a participant observer during the Summer Camp activities. Through daily interaction with children, fellow educators, and museum staff, I was able to witness firsthand the transformative potential of museum education when it is grounded in empathy, creativity, and trust. Listening to the children's thoughts, watching them co-create, and reflecting on their emotional responses offered invaluable insights, often far more direct and honest than adult narratives tend to be. Their

spontaneity, joy, and questions served as a constant reminder of why inclusive education matters, and how the museum can become a space where emotional intelligence and curiosity are equally nurtured.

Throughout this thesis, several examples have demonstrated how museums are actively responding to the need for more inclusive and meaningful experiences for their younger visitors. With a long-term goal of cultivating adults who are artistically literate, critically aware, emotionally attuned, and socially engaged, museum professionals and educators are developing educational strategies that nurture these capacities from an early age.

Regarding the central research question, "*How do museums engage younger audiences and invite them into their spaces*?", the answer emerges from diverse practices observed in institutions around the world. These include the implementation of creative, hands-on activities within child-centered programs, combined with close collaboration between museums and educators in designing visits that complement and expand upon the school curriculum. A compelling example is the Summer Camp at the Museum of Cycladic Art, which employed a child-centered and experiential approach. The weekly themes, ranging from "*Who is my hero*?" and "*How do I feel?"* to "*Who do I want to draw*?" provided the framework for artistic expression, collaborative engagement, and emotional exploration through storytelling, sketching, and clay mask-making. The activities were structured to ensure safety, freedom, and space for creativity, thus establishing a secure environment where children could truly feel seen and heard. This emphasis on sensory-based engagement was echoed in research-based initiatives like the SENSE project, where children explored their school environment through haptic activities. These tactile experiments underscored the importance of physical interaction with natural elements and found that children developed emotional connections even with inanimate materials. One student, for example, described a sponge as making her feel "safe", revealing how deeply rooted the need for sensory security is in the early years.

Regarding the second research question, and following our focus on the contribution of art, the findings indicate that activities combining storytelling, movement, theatrical play, and sensory exploration create an environment in which children feel familiar and safe to express themselves. At the same time, such approaches sharpen their ability to grasp more complex concepts through lived experience and the emotional connections formed between people and objects.

As we observed across chapters, museums today are increasingly designing accessible spaces for groups who have long been marginalized, people with disabilities,

refugees, those from low-income backgrounds, or individuals unfamiliar with cultural spaces. The multisensory museum kits from the Cycladic Museum, initially designed for visually impaired children, are now used inclusively in classrooms, benefitting entire learning groups by combining cognitive, emotional, and tactile learning. We also explored, in Chapter 6, the Sensoriale room at the Castello D'Albertis in Genoa offered a tranquil, multisensory experience for visitors with cognitive disabilities and those on the autism spectrum. These examples highlight the growing commitment of institutions to prioritize well-being and emotional connection alongside intellectual engagement.

Regarding accessibility for children with disabilities, the research points toward the necessity of inclusive design at every stage, from spatial arrangements and exhibition interpretation to the development of educational programs. Multisensory kits, such as those sent to schools by the Museum of Cycladic Art, adapted tours, specially designed sensory rooms, and training for museum staff in inclusive practices can transform museums into spaces where every child participates on equal terms, thereby reshaping educational approaches toward equity and empathy. As for the “therapeutic potential”, discussed in Chapter 3, the answer lies not in a medicalized view of treatment, but rather in fostering personal growth and societal inclusion. Art, space, and storytelling serve as pathways for people to reconnect with themselves and others. Our aim is to move away from this stereotypical perception, the underlying societal tendency to 'fix' those who are perceived as different, and to stop viewing them as inherently problematic. Instead, we should recognize that what is often interpreted as a deficiency is, in fact, a reflection of systemic exclusion and a lack of equitable access to cultural participation.

In this light, museums are gradually transitioning from being temples of knowledge to becoming workshops of collective experience and shared meaning. By transforming how exhibitions are designed, how information is conveyed (including through audio-visual tools and activities), and how spaces welcome a diversity of bodies and experiences, museums are moving toward more democratic, empathetic, and truly inclusive futures.

Abstract

Children across the world deserve careful attention, as they are often perceived as the future of our planet. Yet, beyond this viewpoint, which seemingly assigns responsibilities to them, the younger members of society are, first and foremost, individuals who are entitled to equal opportunities. They must have before them a variety of pathways for learning, leisure, and personal development. This social group requires visibility and genuine inclusion within cultural spaces, whether these are museums, galleries, or archaeological sites. Museums, in particular, can and should function as spaces of empowerment, where children are not treated as passive receivers of knowledge but as active participants in a cultural dialogue that enriches both themselves and the institution. Importantly, inclusion cannot be limited to neurotypical children alone. Museum professionals are called to extend their practices to encompass children with disabilities and diverse needs, thereby opening their doors widely to all visitors, without discrimination or exclusion. Inclusive design at every stage, from spatial arrangements and exhibition interpretation to educational programs, is crucial. Such practices may involve the use of multisensory kits, adapted tours, specially designed rooms, and targeted training for museum staff, all of which can transform museums into equitable learning environments. By embracing such measures, institutions can ensure that every child participates on equal terms, reshaping the museum into a space of empathy, accessibility, and shared cultural ownership.

This thesis explores the educational role of cultural institutions and the ways in which it is achieved, drawing on tangible examples of museums that have implemented practices and specially designed activities for children around their permanent and/or temporary exhibitions. It also examines the needs of young audiences, asking how their overall experience can be enhanced not only in terms of the cognitive content provided by exhibitions but also in the emotional and psychological dimensions that deeply influence every visitor. When these dimensions are addressed, museums become not only spaces of knowledge transmission but also environments of emotional resonance and personal growth. An equally important parameter is the inclusion of minority groups such as people with disabilities, individuals with mental health conditions, refugees, women, and LGBTQ+ communities. Contemporary societies must ensure that every member has access to cultural resources and knowledge. This accessibility can only be achieved through deliberate adaptations and thoughtful reconfigurations of existing institutional practices. In this sense,

museums have the potential to act as agents of social justice, offering platforms where diversity is acknowledged, represented, and celebrated.

The Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens serves as a compelling case study of such evolution. By listening to and responding to the demands of society, it has implemented initiatives such as parallel activities, educational events, summer camps, and guided tours that reflect an inclusive approach. These practices demonstrate how a museum can actively engage with diverse audiences and adjust to their needs, thereby positioning itself as a model for other institutions. Ultimately, this thesis argues that the transformation of museums into inclusive and educationally rich environments is not only a cultural responsibility but also a societal imperative, one that ensures equal participation, fosters empathy, and reinforces the universal right of access to heritage and culture.

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