

PROMOTING Visual LITERACY

USING THE MOTHER GOOSE ON THE LOOSE PROGRAM

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Robert S. Martin, past director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), has described museums and libraries as social agencies that provide resources and services that stimulate and support learning throughout the lifetime. Referring to our “emerging understanding of the nature of learning”—that is, its collaborative and social dimension—“and the way learning interacts with other aspects of our environment,” Martin cites “the power of learning academic content through real-world examples, applications, and experiences both inside and outside of schools.”¹ He urges the development of “a seamless infrastructure for learning across all social agencies and organizations that support learning.”² Museum educators, archivists, and librarians serve in this endeavor as “different facets of a single unified profession.”³ As potential collaborators, these professionals can “reshape our practices, learn from each other, and better attend to our users.”⁴

Two Baltimore professionals, a children's librarian and a museum educator, worked together in 2003 in the kind of joint endeavor that Martin envisioned. Betsy Diamant-Cohen, children's programming specialist at Enoch-Pratt Free Library (EPFL), and Dorothy Valakos, then interpretation manager and formerly program specialist for youth and families at the Baltimore Museum of Art, designed and oversaw programs

for the youngest patrons of their respective institutions. They shared the goal of creating optimal learning environments for the very young; their methods were similar as well.

Diamant-Cohen's *Mother Goose on the Loose* (MGOL), a thirty-minute early literacy program for children from birth to age three and their caregivers, has been running weekly at EPFL since 1999. MGOL combines books, language activities, musical instruments, puppets, and movement in a warm, nurturing atmosphere. Interested parents are offered a monthly supplemental session on the various "brain tips" mentioned during the MGOL program.

At the Baltimore Museum of Art, Valakos initiated a series called *Tours and Hands-On for Tots* (THOT) in 2000, enlarging a long-standing but low-profile program. THOT offers three- and four-year-olds beginning museum experiences that are thematically meaningful, experiential, interactive, and fun. Guided by a museum educator or trained docent, children look at and actively respond to selected works of art in the museum galleries, then participate in a related studio art project that reinforces their experience and expands their understanding of art processes and concepts. Here, too, accompanying parents can learn by observation how to use the museum as a resource for engaging their child's curiosity.

Both the museum and library programs exemplify the "contextual model of learning" identified by education researchers Lynne Falk and John Dierking: "free-choice learning that takes place in rich physical environments, filled with many real world objects and connections that help to meaningfully contextualize the presented concepts and ideas."⁵

Visual Literacy

From its inception, Diamant-Cohen and the librarians who presented MGOL had remained open to new ideas and had adapted activities and methods as they saw the need. Diamant-Cohen was intrigued by the connection between emergent language literacy skills and visual literacy skills, and began seeking ways to strengthen the visual literacy component of the program.

Visual literacy can be defined as "learning to look and construct meaning from objects and works of art."⁶ The aesthetic experience is a sensory, affective, and cognitive response generated by the viewer's interaction with a work of art. The viewer can "feel a wide range of emotions . . . joy, sorrow, fear, serenity, despair, pride. Creative expression through music, visual arts, drama, and literature connect us to the feelings and experiences of others . . . a new perspective of the world."⁷ According to child psychiatrist Robert Coles:

Visual literacy ought to be acknowledged as an important part of cultural literacy. Without visual literacy, I think, a person may know how to use a semicolon, or the name of a state capital, or the height of a mountain. But they may not know how to look at that mountain, or seascape, or cityscape, with some kind of intelligence and thought, to look at the world and try to make sense of it, even make sense of something larger than the earth itself.⁸

Young children learn best through multisensory, play-based activities that are socially mediated by adults and peers. They are natural storytellers. The practice of using stories and involving as many senses as possible allows children to actively experience a work of art and is consonant with Howard Gardner's influential *Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. (Gardner believes that there are at least eight different types of intelligence: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Naturalist intelligence is a recent addition. Each individual generally exhibits a blend of several intelligences and has "different cognitive strengths and contrasting cognitive styles."⁹) By structuring situations in which responding to a work of art becomes a dynamic, whole-body experience (and not merely a passive one), educators help young children with a variety of dominant intelligences to make a personal connection to that work of art. And by encouraging children to look closely, to describe in words what they see and feel, and to use art as a springboard to imagination and storytelling, they forge and fortify connections between emerging visual and language literacy.

Tours and Hands-On for Tots

To Valakos, working with children and families at an art museum where visual experience and visual literacy are primary values, these processes and purposes were fundamental. The inquiry-based approach of THOT encourages children to make personal connections with objects in the galleries by drawing on their own lived experiences. For example, they can gain a better understanding of a one-hundred-year-old beaded Lakota (Sioux) cradleboard by comparing it to a present-day molded plastic infant's car seat. How, the tour leader might ask, are they alike and how are they different? THOT are multisensory and highly interactive, incorporating finger plays, rhymes, movement, drawing, dramatic play, and storytelling. They might include such typical activities as lying on the gallery floor and blowing at a Calder mobile to see how it moves, packing an imaginary backpack for a trip

through a nineteenth-century landscape, matching or drawing the vibrant patterns in a group of paintings by Matisse, or looking at a portrait of a Renaissance child-princess and figuring out what kinds of activities she could undertake in her elaborate, jewel-encrusted—and thus highly restrictive—costume (definitely *not* ride a bike or make mud pies!). The tour leaders read storybooks to establish and extend the particular theme of each tour, and the programs culminate in a related hands-on art activity.

This pattern exemplifies the constructivist approach to education in which learners “actively ‘construct’ their own knowledge by testing ideas and concepts based on prior knowledge and experience, applying them to a new situation, and integrating the new knowledge with preexisting intellectual constructs.”¹⁰ As David Carr states, writing about the social dimension of museums and libraries in *The Promise of Cultural Institutions*:

Any cultural institution is educative when it creates situations that invite, support, and expand . . . inquiry without imposing . . . when it offers the user an array of possibilities to experience, then offers a path to useful examples and interpretation of the evidence . . . nurtures and engages.¹¹

Visual Experience Meets Visual Literacy

In consultation with Valakos, whose work at the Baltimore Museum of Art focused on visual experience as a stimulus to learning, Diamant-Cohen set about upgrading the visual literacy component of MGOL. Valakos herself was eager to discover how the museum educator’s approach of facilitating multisensory explorations and forging connections between art and a child’s everyday life could be adapted to a library setting and for a population of infants and toddlers.

Two ideas governed Diamant-Cohen’s efforts: First, to create a positive and meaningful connection between a child and a work of art, the parent or educator must always relate the artwork to something that the young viewer can recognize and understand from his own experience. It is by building on connections to familiar objects and experiences that understanding of art is gained. Second, active, hands-on learning experiences, especially sensory-based ones, in a supportive, nonobtrusive environment, are key to facilitating the developing relationship between the new viewer and the work of art. Babies and toddlers are just beginning to learn to decode pictures. Providing them with opportunities to strengthen their visual acuity by

introducing them to stimulating and intriguing visual images encourages them to become better observers. It helps them not only to learn how to look but to discover the pleasure and variety of visual experience.

Visual Props and Tactile Objects

As Diamant-Cohen translated these ideas into activities, it became obvious that MGOL would require visual props, tactile objects, and other special materials, custom-made and suitable for the very young child. In search of an artist, she called the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) and recruited Carole Schlein, a work-study student and fabric artist who had experience working with flannel, flannel boards, and felt. Schlein was intrigued by the opportunity of designing a new set of visual materials for MGOL storytimes but had no prior background in educational theory or practice. Joining the project, she attended MGOL sessions and then, under the tutelage of Diamant-Cohen and Valakos, embarked on an intensive reading program. Schlein met weekly with Diamant-Cohen, who assigned readings on baby brain development in *The Scientist in the Crib*, on library programs in general in *Children and Libraries: Getting It Right*, and on library programs for babies in *Books, Babies, and Libraries*.¹² Diamant-Cohen also coached her on presentation. Valakos shared some articles about visual literacy and the philosophical underpinnings of museum education. Under their guidance, Schlein researched contemporary methods of art education for early learners. With new understanding, she came to redefine her own task. She, too, would find ways to build connections between the flannel-board pieces that she would create and the children’s experiences, feelings, and ideas. Doing so, she saw, would have the added benefit of modeling ways for parents to look at and talk about art objects with their young children.



Carole Schlein at EPFL's Annual Fairy Tale Festival

Choosing Rhymes

To get the project underway, Diamant-Cohen and Schlein set to work choosing nursery rhymes suitable for representation on the flannel board (see

figure 1). They selected “Cobbler, Cobbler, Mend My Shoe,” for which Schlein crafted a shoe; “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” for which she crafted a lamb; “One, Two, Three, Four, Mary’s at the Cottage



“London Bridge”



A young program participant enjoys watching peas move in and out of the pot during a program in EPFL’s Night Room



Playing “London Bridge” during an EFPL Mother Goose on the Loose program in the Meyerhoff Children’s Garden

Door,” for which she crafted a plate of cherries; “London Bridge Is Falling Down,” for which she crafted a bridge; “I Had a Little Turtle,” for which she crafted a turtle; and “Pease Porridge Hot,” for which she crafted peas. Most of these pieces were silk-screened with acrylic ink on wool or craft felt. Schlein’s sheep was needle-felted (a process of felting wool with a specially designed needle), the plate of cherries was done with free-stitch sewing machine embroidery, and the peas in her pot were interactive, attached to the pot with yarn, enabling them to go in and out easily. All were sewn to a contrasting backing felt. The images came from a variety of sources, including library books and the Internet, but they were rendered in Schlein’s own style. She produced six pieces—approachable, brightly colored, recognizably abstract, and notably baby-friendly. Her turtles smiled and her peas jumped out of a pot of hot pease porridge.

Each piece could be used in several ways and in multiple sessions. Working with her London Bridge piece for the first time, Schlein placed the bridge on the flannel board as she recited the rhyme. At the second session, everyone was invited to recite the rhyme along with her. At the third session, she and a librarian stood and held up their arms to make a bridge. Parents and children were invited to go under the bridge while singing the song.

Parents were enthusiastic. Referring to the game of going under the bridge after seeing the flannel-board piece and singing the song, one parent said:

Activities always reinforce the idea that you are trying to convey—especially for someone who can’t talk yet. The more theatrics and interactivity, the more it helps the child understand the message, whether visual or verbal. Art really opens your brain, both mentally and verbally. It makes the synapses more fluid, and makes you more creative. It makes it easier for you to solve problems or come up with ideas. I think emphasizing creativity is one of the most important things you can teach your children.¹³

Learning by Doing

Some MGOL materials were modified in response to practical considerations and the needs of the program’s extremely young participants. In one session, a fuzzy wool lamb was used for “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” The librarians passed out small squares

The Rhymes	Flannel Board Piece
I’m a little teapot short and stout. Here is my handle, here is my spout. When I get all steamed up, hear me shout, “Just tip me over and pour me out.”	teapot
Cobbler, cobbler, mend my shoe. Have it done by half past two. Stitch it up and stitch it down. Then I’ll give you half a crown.	shoe
Pease porridge hot. Pease porridge cold. Pease porridge in the pot, nine days old. Some like it hot. Some like it cold. Some like it in the pot nine days old.	pot of peas
London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down. London Bridge is falling down, my fair lady. Build it up with silver and gold, silver and gold, silver and gold. Build it up with silver and gold. My fair lady.	bridge
1, 2, 3, 4, Mary’s at the garden door 5, 6, 7, 8, eating cherries off a plate.	plate of cherries

Figure 1: The Nursery Rhymes

of two types of fabric, one soft and one rough. The idea was for parents to rub them on the backs of their babies' hands, encouraging them to consider which square felt more like the soft, fuzzy lamb. However, small pieces of fabric pose a potential choking hazard with this age group. (Also, MGOL is built on the repetition of activities from week to week. Recreating this soft and rough comparison every week wouldn't work as well as simpler activities such as those using colored scarves or bells.) The problem was solved with the fabrication of small tactile elements: For "Mary Had a Little Lamb," a square of furry white fabric was sewn into a durable vinyl frame. This could still facilitate the cognitive connection between an image, an implied texture, and an actual texture; it was too large to swallow when passed around; and it was easy to wash for reuse.

Because she greatly enjoyed her initial stint with EPFL, Schlein chose to continue on as an unpaid intern for a second semester. Eventually she put in 120 hours of work and extended the idea of visual literacy in different directions. Coming on originally as a creator of materials, she eventually took part with the children's librarians in the program activities, to her great personal satisfaction.

Her efforts culminated in an unanticipated but highly rewarding project, an ongoing display of her flannel-board pieces in the library, showcasing her work and promoting the MGOL program for which they had been made. While Schlein herself

designed and curated the display, it was expanded with additional materials and came to highlight a joint venture in visual education of the museum and library. The additional materials included photographs of art objects from the Baltimore Museum of Art collections chosen by Schlein and the authors because they could be related in some way to the flannel-board pieces and nursery rhymes (see figure 2). These were in a variety of media and styles, and included a Baltimore album quilt from the 1800s appliquéd with cherries to match the rhyme about cherries on a plate. Another was an abstract painting of black dots overlaid with green by contemporary Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, which fit nicely with "Pease Porridge Hot."

To invite young viewers to enter into a dialogue about the flannel pieces and art works, Schlein and the authors brainstormed a series of lead questions to include in the display, such as "What do you think is on the other side of London Bridge?" and "Can you find the cherries on this quilt? What other fruits do you see? Which is your favorite to eat?"

In final integrated form, each display consisted of a flannel-board piece, the corresponding nursery rhyme, a photograph of the related art object, and information about the art object. Each section of the display offered a suggested activity that parent and child could do at home, plus an easy-to-understand explanation of how the flannel art was created (see figure 3). Take-home flyers repeating the suggestions

Teapot	Cast House Teapot and Cover c 1745, English Baltimore Museum of Art
Shoe	Vincent Van Gogh <i>A Pair of Shoes</i> Baltimore Museum of Art Oil on canvas, 30cm x 41cm
Pot of peas	Yayoi Kusama <i>No. Green, No. 1</i> 1961 Oil on canvas, 70" x 49-1/8" Baltimore Museum of Art
Bridge	Claude Monet <i>Charing Cross Bridge ("Reflections on the Thames")</i> Oil on canvas, 25-5/8" x 39-1/2" Baltimore Museum of Art

Figure 2: The Reproductions

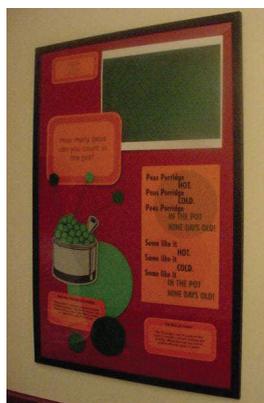
Activities to go with the flannel-board pieces and reproductions

- Use modeling or air dry clay to make a teapot in the shape of something else.
- Design a "Super Shoe" for yourself. What would you add to a regular pair of shoes? Draw your new shoe on a big piece of paper with markers or crayons. Who else can you design a Super Shoe for?
- Use the eraser end of a pencil dipped in paint to create a picture entirely out of dots! What other objects can you find to make different sized dots with?
- Build a crazy bridge with toothpicks and marshmallows! Use the marshmallows to join together the toothpicks. How big can your bridge get before it falls?
- Make a quilt square! Cut out small squares of felt or fabric. What colors do you like? Arrange them in a special pattern and glue them down onto a piece of felt.

Figure 3: The Activities

for related at-home art activities were available next to the exhibit. There also was a biography of Schlein, an advertisement for MGOL, and information about free family passes to the Baltimore Museum of Art that library visitors could check out from their local branch of EPFL.

For as it happened, the installation of the display corresponded with the ninetieth anniversary of the Baltimore Museum of Art and, as part of its celebration, the museum gave EPFL ninety free family passes for distribution throughout the library system.¹⁴ Conceivably, a family with young children could attend MGOL, see a photograph of a the Baltimore Museum of Art object on display with Schlein's pieces, then check out a free pass for the museum and view the original artwork in the galleries. The entire experience, choreographed to stimulate visual literacy, was built on that "seamless infrastructure across institutions" that Martin advocated.¹⁵



"Pease Porridge Hot" on display in the corridor exhibition leading to EPFL's Children's Department.

From the collaborators' point of view, the project was a huge success. The library acquired custom-made materials for MGOL, advertisements for that program, and its new collaboration with the Baltimore Museum of Art. A colorful and charming array of images was installed in the hallway leading to the children's department of the Central Library, enlivening an underutilized area and garnering lots of praise. Its children's librarians gained considerable skill in nurturing visual literacy in the very young.

Schlein had the opportunity to create interactive artwork for use with children, to learn and apply educational theory to children's programming, and to design and curate her own exhibition. The exhibit generated publicity for the museum's new free family passes. For Valakos, it provided a means for testing her ideas for integrating theories of inquiry-based art education into a library program.

Conclusion

Not all public libraries have the advantage of having an art museum and an art college nearby. But

Schlein's Journal

During the time that Schlein was working on her flannel board pieces and observing MGOL programs, she was also keeping a journal. The following are some excerpts:

I had my weekly meeting with Betsy on Friday morning and gave her the completed shoe for "Cobbler, Cobbler, Mend My Shoe" and the plate of cherries for the "1 2 3 4, Mary's at the cottage door, 5 6 7 8, eating cherries off a plate." One of the nicest things about my internship is how open the program is. This isn't an established extension of the Mother Goose on the Loose program yet and there's lots of room for experimentation.

This week I'm working on "Mary had a Little Lamb." What's nice about the felt-y sheep is that it's fun to touch—interactive, inviting . . . I'm playing around with the idea of removable peas in a pot for "Pease Porridge Hot." I think they would have to be attached so they wouldn't get lost . . . maybe there could be a pea for hot, cold, and nine days old and when you said those in the rhyme you'd pull them out of the pot. I think that would be really appealing.

It is the biggest confidence boost in the world to see all of those little eyes looking right at you, mesmerized . . . and the big eyes, too! Leading rhymes feels very comfortable, very fun.

almost all public libraries are in contact with some type of school that has an art department, whether a junior high, high school, or community college. To adapt this program to their circumstances, librarians could try contacting a local secondary school to explore the possibilities with the head of the art department. Talented art students might like to earn community-service hours by designing flannel-board pieces and other interactive visual props such as puppets, tactile aids, puzzles, or masks for children's programs.

Encounters with art can play a decidedly meaningful role in the library setting, opening up new dialogues and experiences for staff and patrons alike. Beginning viewers are storytellers.¹⁶ Even the youngest visitors to art museums use their own arsenal of unique associations to transform

works of art into personal narratives. At MGOL, visual images are used to enhance the experience of hearing and learning nursery rhymes and songs. It seems especially fitting that babies and toddlers who are a few years away from constructing their own stories about works of art are presented with art-based images and accompanying stories; we hope that the inherent connections between art, words, stories, and life will begin to fascinate even the youngest viewers, opening them up to lifelong relationships with art and reading. As one MGOL parent put it, “Once you have been introduced visually, the door is opened and continues to be open throughout your life.”¹⁷ 

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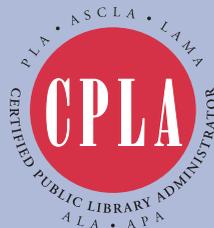
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