

Case Study Submission CAGE '05

Case Study: *Young at Art: Fin, Fur and Feather* - an educational exhibition curated for the learning needs of an emerging audience.

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Dates: March 24 - June 19, 2005

Profile of Gallery:

Founded in 1912, The Winnipeg Art Gallery is the oldest civic art gallery in Canada. A prow-shaped Tyndall stone building in downtown Winnipeg, the WAG has eight exhibition spaces and an adjoining studio. The newly renovated vaults contain the over 22,500 works in the permanent collection, including historical, contemporary, photographic and decorative arts. The Gallery is also home to the world's largest collection of contemporary Inuit art.

Guided school and adult tours, studio programs, lectures, film series', concerts, family and multi-arts events address audiences of all ages and fulfill the Gallery's motto, *Involving People in the Visual Arts*.

Goal:

To design an exhibition specifically for a young, emerging audience. Learning theory tells us that learning to understand art is a gradual process. The learner, regardless of age, goes from relating to art at the narrative, story-telling stage to constructing knowledge based on their perceptions and previous experience, to the more advanced analytical and interpretive stages. * An exhibit that attempts to address the many stages in aesthetic development, therefore, must contain work that itself to many levels of understanding, be physically accessible to all learners and be paired with programming for children and for adults that maximizes the learning potential for all viewers.

The Young at Art exhibitions have been held in six of the past eight years and involve collaboration between the Educational and Curatorial Departments. The themes are chosen to be relevant to the experiences of viewers of all ages and to allow for a variety of teaching approaches. This year's theme, *Fin, Fur and Feather*, recognizes the role that animals play in our lives and the connections that we have with the creatures that share our planet. Though most of the works chosen were from the WAG'S permanent collection, two large works, by Winnipeg artist Lynn Richardson were included. These works are interactive, making them attractive to the youngest viewers, with a serious message about economic development and human intervention on the environment and habitation.

The layout for the exhibition has to assume that young viewers are shorter than adults, usually come in groups with their schools, and are active learners. For this reason, the works are hung at a lower viewing level and pedestals were cut down.

Several small sculptures were displayed on a step-like structure, behind a Plexiglas wall that allowed viewers to get very close to the small works while respecting conservation concerns. Walls were painted in bright, attractive colours and an interactive room was built, with a drawing table, reading area with cushions, chairs and books and a magnetized board to hold drawings.

The works themselves were chosen to allow for programming on many different levels and educational objectives. School Programs lists twenty-eight different thematic programs for students from Nursery to Senior Four (Grade 12). Guides were given an overview of the exhibition and discussed the emphasis of each program and some of the works that would be the focus for each program.

Method:

A proposal was submitted to the WAG'S Program Committee for a continuation of the *Young at Art* series, a Permanent Collection exhibition designed for an emerging audience. The rationale for this series had formed the basis of previous exhibitions. The art educator for School Programs, with the assistance of curators in the contemporary, historical, decorative and Inuit art areas, forty-eight works were chosen from the collection. Two works from outside the collection were brought in and assembled by a Winnipeg artist. The *Fin, Fur and Feather* theme was explored for the various educational approaches that could be developed through the works of art and programs were written for Early (nursery to grade 4, Middle (grades 5-8) and Senior Years (grades 9-12).

With the assistance of the preparation department, works were displayed to allow for visual access for young learners and an interactive centre was designed and built. In lieu of an opening, a Family Sunday event was held and three hundred people were in attendance. Two children's authors, a dancer and two visual artists helped children and their parents and grandparents interpret the animal/fish/bird theme in several art forms.

As the exhibition opened the week before the school spring break, and in conjunction with an exhibition of children's art from the studio program entitled *Through the Eyes of a Child*, several hundred visitors viewed the exhibition and used the interactive room. Constant maintenance was needed to keep the magnetic board full of current drawings. Following the spring break, School Programs were scheduled for students of all ages and are ongoing at the time of writing.

Evaluation:

No objective form of evaluation has been used, although written and drawn responses are added daily to the magnetic board. School Programs regularly receives written feedback from students and teachers, though it is still too early for a comprehensive evaluation. Once the *Young at Art* series began, teachers would ask specifically for this exhibition each year and were disappointed in the few years that it was not held.

One recommendation coming out of this project is that educators work closely with curators and conservators in the development of this exhibition. The resulting dialogue results in a better awareness, on the part of all departments, of

the priorities and considerations involved in bringing art and young viewers together.

Resources:

The resources for this project were all in-house. Works from the Permanent Collection were used and the expertise of a number of departments used. Learning theory, particularly the Stages of Aesthetic Development outlined by Abigail Housen (*), formed the criteria for selection of works and the basis of programming.

No outside funding was sought for this exhibition and preparation of the exhibition and space was done by Gallery staff. Sponsorship of Family Sunday covered the cost of hiring artists for the event.