

A TALE OF TWO VISITS

The children's' exhibition at the National Museum, Stockholm visited by the Get Creative delegates on 8th March and a multiplier event in the United Kingdom on 16th March 2023

The entrances and main corridors at buildings of national importance tend to be functional, huge and fairly bare, dominated perhaps by a statue or mural of a figure of national importance. The National Museum in Stockholm is no exception. Yet behind massive doors in an airlock arrangement there is what may be a unique focus, a permanent gallery for temporary exhibitions dedicated to children. This is directly opposite two child-friendly work room spaces feeling and looking like the well-used, paint-splashed art rooms of a large school.

The current exhibition theme is "Home". The website describes the target audience as youngsters aged from 6 to 11, but the display certainly captivated this grandparent of three score years and ten too!

Moving into the Villa Curiosa, the first impression was breath-taking. There is a panelled hall with its myriad of cupboards followed by the kitchen, a bathroom and more, all so child friendly, and not just because the youngsters were encouraged to touch things, open drawers and doors, and let their curiosity and imaginations run wild. We were assured that nothing had ever been broken through this hands-on approach.

There are multiple points of interest here. The first is that prioritising children has recently become central to the approach of the National Museum and these education facilities are not buried away in a hut out by a carpark. In the U.K. there is an excellent distinct Museum of Childhood at Bethnal Green and various specialist collections such as the National Trust's Children's Country House at Sudbury, but I'm not aware of a parallel and permanent exhibition space dedicated to children's' learning in the National Gallery.

The second observation is that the exhibition we saw was amazing for both its quality and imagination. It would be immensely time-consuming and ultimately unproductive to try to encapsulate what was there in a room-by-room description and analysis. The perceptions of the individual visitor, ideally aged 6 to 11, are the key. However, for the Get Creative team, there was a rewarding link to the modules on the project site.

In common with the project formula for each module, "Love and Family" embraces a wide range of pictures from the national galleries of the four partner contributions. Sweden's picture in this section, "Breakfast Time" (1867) by Hanna Pauli (1864-1940), was painted in the artist's early years.



The focus is a key part of family life, a meal, seen here through a table setting. The Get Creative support materials already suggest several prompts for how this might trigger discussion in the classroom. The Villa Curiosa team have come up with another approach. One of the rooms is decorated with an extravagant wallpaper. A part of “Breakfast Time” has been reproduced with a strong focus on the table itself, framed and wall mounted.



And then the moment of creative genius! A round table set with items virtually identical to those in the painting is positioned in the centre of the room so that the visitor’s eye is drawn to both the 2D image and its 3D replica. The adult Greek, British and Swedish educators were captivated.

A week later on 16th March, I was leading a multiplier event with a group of teachers at North Somercotes Primary School on the Lincolnshire coast. This is an isolated community facing the North Sea, best known for its RAF bombing range and its breeding colony of grey seals, with 2209 births recorded in the 2022 season. The nearest town, Louth is 20 minutes away, the nearest significant provincial galleries are further still in Grimsby and Lincoln. Distance, budget and constraints of time make it impossible for these pupils and their teachers to visit national galleries. In the workshop at North Somercotes, the teachers chose to explore the “Love and Family” module. After looking at the Gainsborough paintings, the Greek “Grandma’s Favourite” and the Italian “Fishermens’ Wives” with its blue sky rarely seen on the North Sea coast I steered them towards “Breakfast Time” and what we had seen in the Villa Curiosa. There was an animated staff response. After the official end of the multiplier, just as I was leaving, there was a lively discussion between four colleagues about how they might make a similar link between 2D and 3D stimuli, and then connect this with a writing task.

References:

The National Museum: <https://www.nationalmuseum.se/en/utställningar/villa-curiosa>

Module: <https://www.getcreativewithart.org/01-love-and-family.html>

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