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## Responses of Young Children to Contemporary Art Exhibits: The Role of Artistic Experiences

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### Abstract

This study explores pre-primary children's responses to contemporary art exhibits in a museum setting, the role of previous artistic experiences, and the impact of the art museum visit on children's responses to artworks and making art during classroom practice. The sample included 32 children (16 boys and 16 girls) randomly selected from two classrooms in two nursery public schools in Nicosia, Cyprus. In addition to open-ended interviews, classroom observation notes, and videotape analysis procedures, the artworks of children were used to find out the influences of the visit to the art museum. The findings suggest that children's contact with a range of art forms including contemporary art exhibits in a museum setting is an important part of their educational experiences if appropriate approaches and methods are used.

### Introduction

In order to develop a curriculum that includes critical analysis of works of art (both children's and adult's), it is necessary to understand how children perceive and respond to art objects (e.g., Chapman, 1978; Epstein & Trimis, 2002; Taunton, 1984). The present paper draws attention to the broad theoretical framework of visual arts education, emphasising both the cognitive view of arts, and constructivist theories of learning. In the former instance, theorists have suggested that becoming literate in the visual arts involves the ability to produce and

perceive art (e.g., Davis & Gardner, 1993; Gardner & Perkins, 1989; Gardner, 1993). In the latter instance, theorists have suggested that knowledge is constructed through interaction with objects and people, and the importance of learners' prior experiences, knowledge, interests and motivation in the ongoing development of a personal context. (e.g., Hein, 1998; Jeffrey-Clay, 1998; Adams, Falk, & Dierking, 2003) These views are corroborated by Hohmann & Weikart's (2002) theory of creative representation that refers to the significance of young children's contact with real objects in enhancing their thinking in and about art.

Theory, research, and practice all point to a series of underlying principles characterizing the art making of young children (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Gardner, 1982; Eisner, 2002). Upon which Hohmann & Weikart (2002) elaborate:

1. The role of experience: "*Representation arises from children's experiences with real objects, people and events*" [italics added] (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002, p.312). Children's experience with real objects and the art materials they use to represent them is significant in creative representation.
2. The progression from simple to complex: "*Through manipulation children become increasingly aware of the visual attributes of the objects they are representing*" [italics added] (Epstein & Trimis, 2002, p.43). Visual representations evolve from lines and forms to more detailed and differentiated constructions and compositions.
3. The quality of individuality: Children vary in both their experiences and in the art media they use to represent them.

In observing children working with deferent media, it is apparent that there is a progress from pure exploration to accidental or spontaneous representation and then to intentional representation. Additionally, "*... the mastery of a medium and its tools is reflected in the variety and complexity of their art. At the same time, childrens' increasing ability to hold the attributes of objects and events in mind can be seen in the growing detail that fills their artwork*" [italics added] (Epstein & Trimis, 2002, p. 47). The knowledge of the use of materials is not only considered central in classroom art practices, but also can be closely linked to the "real" art world and encourage young childrens' sense of culture (Trimis & Savva, 2004).

However, while art making activities are rather frequent in schools, opportunities for viewing art appear to be rare. When this does occur, viewing is often limited to slides or reproductions and, in many cases, these are not linked to art making experiences (e.g., Hargreaves, 1983; Epstein & Trimis; 2002; Savva, 2003; Xanthoudaki, 2003). Previous studies show that if adults engage young children in meaningful conversation about artworks, then young children are intellectually capable of observing and reflecting upon their own artworks as well as adult artworks, (e.g., Anderson, Piscitelli, Weier, Everett, & Tayler, 2002; Kerlavage, 1995; Piscitelli, 1988). Researchers have recommended that children will benefit from in depth art experiences that support the development of their artistic understanding both in making and appreciating art (e.g., Cole 1985; Duncum, 1999). In order to support the development of a young child's sense of visual art making and viewing, it is important to discern the types, formats, and curriculum that are appropriate for early childhood education children.

Although there are differences in response across several ages, psychologists have found that familiarity with art and individual experiences (i.e., the use of artistic medium, awareness of art in cultural and historical context) influence individuals' aesthetic development (e.g., Gardner, Winner & Kircher, 1975; Housen, 1987; Lin & Thomas. 2002; Taunton, 1984). More specifically, young childrens' ideas about art - personal preferences and reasons for their preferences, concepts of artistic style, verbal responses - develop through three progressive and sequential stages: 1) the sensorial, 2) the concrete and 3) the expressive (Kerlavage, 1995).

Although most of the research findings provide considerable information regarding children's understanding of art, these studies used reproductions or slides of paintings. Also, much of the research is concerned with responses to two-dimensional pictorial art forms, as opposed to three-dimensional art objects or any other contemporary art forms, using children who are unschooled in art appreciation and do not take into consideration their individual experiences,

Because of the difficulty in providing students experience with original artwork – regardless of medium or genre – in many instances much attention has been given to various educational programs in art museums. One of the main objectives of these programs is to help children become aware of art in their everyday life, at their own level and in their own terms (e.g., Berry, 1998; Durrant, 1996; Lund & Osborne, 1995; Piscitelli, 1988; Piscitelli & Anderson, 2000). Other findings in visual arts education support the claim that experiences with original art works not only enhance childrens' knowledge about art, but also encourage experience and incorporation of stimuli and ideas into their own artistic work (e.g., Tickle, 1996).

Despite evidence of young children's ability to make and appreciate art, there is little systematic research related to their art understanding art preferences. Central to the Cyprus visual arts curriculum for pre- primary schools is art making - which also refers to responding to art - as a way of cultivating young children's appreciation about their own tradition and cultural heritage (see: Ministry of Education and Culture, 2002). Children in Cyprus pre-primary schools appear to have few, if any, art museum experiences. However, if appropriate pedagogical approaches are used,<sup>1</sup> then art museum visits could be an important part of young children's visual arts experiences by allowing children to freely explore materials in depth, approach a range of original art forms, and experiment and construct their own knowledge about art (see: Trimis & Savva, 2004).

The present study examined the responses of young children to art objects in an "authentic" context and in which they were expected to respond and produce art within a constructivist approach. In an interactive environment of learning, young children were provided opportunities to construct personal knowledge about artworks as derived from interactions between the object properties and their own previous experiences and thoughts. These experiences resulted in a deeper understanding of children's preferences towards contemporary exhibits when viewed in an art museum, as well as the impact of these experiences upon the production of art and resultant thinking in and about art.<sup>2</sup>

## **Research Design**

### **The Present Study**

This study reports findings regarding the responses of 5-6 year old children to museum contemporary art exhibits using an open-interview procedure. Differences in understandings and views of children previous experiences in art (inside and outside school), were investigated. Moreover, the impact on children's artworks and interpretations during art classroom practice is also examined as a result of art museum visitation. The study aims to highlight issues related to the responses of young children to artworks in a museum setting to help curriculum planners, art educators and museum educators in designing and implementing museum educational programs. The study occurred in three phases

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<sup>1</sup> This study refers to the in-depth studio approach. This is a method that investigates materials and techniques in depth and adopts a developmental sequence of visual art activities. It has as its polar axis creating and observing art, and considers the child, space in its broad sense (area, place, land, locality, location, village or town) and time (flexibility) in an interactive environment of learning, where the "scaffolding" role of the school-teacher is decisive. Learning takes place in real situations and is not limited to the classroom.

<sup>2</sup> Referred by Epstein and Trimis (2002) as the two basic components of the in-depth studio approach. Thinking in art (doing and making art), and thinking about art (observing and studying art). Thinking in art is always accompanied by questions and experiences that encourage children to think about art.

- Phase 1: Children's first impressions to contemporary exhibits during the tour in the art museum
- Phase 2: Children's responses and preferences to contemporary exhibits during the museum visit.
- Phase 3: Art practices in the classroom after visiting the art museum.

In Phase 1, children, in small groups, walked around the museum and explored the place-space. Within Phase 2, researchers questioned individual children on their responses to artwork selected by each child.

### The Contemporary Art Museum

This research took place in the Nicosia Municipal Arts Center (Cyprus), and was part of a larger research project on museum education. The building is a stone structure converted from an old powerhouse into Cyprus' most avant-garde center for contemporary art. It hosts prestigious exhibitions from home and abroad. Since June 2002, and after a recent renovation, the center houses Pieride's Permanent Collection of Modern Greek Painting and Sculpture.<sup>3</sup> The collection consists of twenty-seven contemporary artworks (13 three-dimensional and 14 three dimensional of different sizes) of Greek and Cypriot visual artists. It includes large and small-scale artworks, representational and abstract paintings, and assemblages and three-dimensional constructions made of found objects as well as natural and man made materials.

#### Participants

Thirty-two children (16 boys and 16 girls) between the ages of five to six were randomly selected from two classrooms in two public nursery schools in Nicosia, Cyprus. Parents were notified about the research and the visit to the museum and gave their permission. According to information from parents and teachers twenty-eight children (87.5%) had never been to art museums or any other historical or science museums (See: Tables 1-2).

**Table 1**  
**Parents' responses to the Questionnaire:**  
**Childrens' previous artistic experiences outside school.**

Childrens' previous artistic experiences (outside school)	Number of children (N=32)	
	Group 1 (N=16)	Group 2 (N=16)
1. Visits to art museums /galleries	2	0
2. Visits to museums (e.g. historical, science)	3	1
3. A person in their family interested in visual arts	3	1
4. Drawing and painting at home	16	16
5. Making 3D artworks-using scrap materials	0	0
6. Talk about their artworks	16	16

<sup>3</sup> Demetrios Pierides is a well-known Cypriot Art Collector. A large part of his collection is housed in the Pierides Museum of Contemporary Greek Art in Athens, Greece.

**Table 2**  
**Teachers' responses to the interview:**  
**Childrens' previous artistic experiences (inside school)**

Childrens' previous artistic experience (inside school)	Group 1 (n=16)				Group 2 (n=16)			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
1. Visits to art museums	√				√			
2. Visits to historical, science museums	√				√			
3. Classroom/school exhibitions		√				√		
4. organising projects emphasising visual arts	√					√		
5. using scrap materials during art classroom practice		√				√		
6. Visits to artists' studios	√					√		
7. children talking about their artworks				√				√

1=never, 2=sometimes, 3=often, 4=usually

### Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated for the present study:

- Research Question 1: What are the responses and preferences of young children to the contemporary art exhibits housed in the museum?
- Research Question 2: Are there any differences in the views of children when previous artistic experiences (making and looking art) are considered ?
- Research Question 3: How did the museum visit impact the responses of children when discussing and creating artwork in the classroom?

### Research Methods

In order to find out preferences of children and how they responded to contemporary art exhibits, an open-ended interview procedure was used. During their visit to the museum children were asked to choose a work of art and consider: 1) Why did they choose the specific art work, 2) Whether they liked it or not and why, 3) What was it about, 4) How was it made and 5) What was it made of. A non-sequenced question strategy was applied. Duncum (1999) supports that this kind of strategy as it offers flexibility to the teacher. Additional methods of data analysis included observational data (i.e. classroom observations, teachers' diaries) videotape analysis, and photographic material. Video was used to record verbal and non-verbal cues as well as children's social interaction in phases 1 and 2 in order to validate the outcomes of the present research (Rosenstein, 2000). Children responded to the presence of the camera and observer in a similar fashion. At the outset of the interview, their behaviour was more self-conscious (e.g. looking at the camera for approximately 6-10 minutes), but then became more natural. Video material was also used to confirm observational notes of the same event (children's impression to works of art in the museum -phase 1 & art classroom practices-phase 3).

Information regarding the previous experiences of children in the visual arts (viewing and making) was collected through interviews with the nursery teachers of both schools, and a questionnaire sent to parents (i.e., making art, talking about art, visiting art museums, visiting other museums, contact with original artworks, contact with visual artists).

## Procedure

Phase 1: In order to record first impressions of children, observation notes were taken during the visit to the museum. A natural, methodical observation and description of their non-verbal reactions accompanied by video recording was used (Patton, 1987).

Phase 2: An open-ended interview was employed with each child. Each child met individually with an interviewer in the exhibition center where the permanent collection was hosted. Children were informed that there were no “right” or “wrong” answers. Responses were tape recorded for subsequent analysis after permission had been obtained from the child and its parents. An observer (separate from the interviewer) kept notes during the interview procedure.

Phase 3: Each group of children was observed during classroom artistic activities for one period, which in Cypriot nursery schools lasts for about 30 minutes. An observer kept notes (verbal and non-verbal responses and activities undertaken by children) during group artistic activities for approximately 20 minutes. Shadowing observational technique was used (by a second observer), accompanied by video recording.

The research questions are not parallel with the three phases of the study (e.g. phase 1 does not match research question 1). Data collected during the three phases were analysed in response to each research question.

## Analysis

Responses were analysed in relationship to the artwork each child selected. Content analysis was used (Berelson, 1952) and the responses of children regarding the artwork they selected were grouped into three qualitative categories (three dimensional constructions, a familiar subject matter, material and colours). For purposes of validation, an experienced educational researcher not affiliated with this study read all the interview transcripts and came to the same categorization, themes, and interpretations as the primary authors. Percentages of responses and examples for each category were then calculated.

Information collected from observations and interviews was used to confirm conclusions about the verbal and non-verbal responses of the children to works of art. In addition, classroom observations notes and the artworks of children were used to find out the influences of the visit to the art museum on children during making art in the classroom.

## Results

**Research Question 1:** What are the responses and preferences of young children to the contemporary art works housed in the museum?

Identification of the artistic preferences of children during the tour as well as during the interview procedure in the museum, revealed the following results:

- a) Most (81 %) of the children preferred three-dimensional constructions rather than paintings.
- b) Most of the children (56.25%) based their preferences on artworks that depicted favourite or familiar to them subject matter.
- c) Ten children (31.25%) referred to material and five children (15.6%) referred to colors as the main reason for selecting an artwork

Three-dimensional constructions:

Twenty-six children (81%) based their preference on the three-dimensional form of the artworks (see: Table 3 & Appendix A).

**Table 3**  
**The preference of children towards**  
**Three-Dimensional artworks exhibited in the contemporary art museum (N=32)**

Artists and Titles of Artworks	Number of boys	Number of girls
Tanimanithes Panayiotis, <i>Cello</i>	3	3
Gatis Lampros <i>Transformations</i>	6	3
Dionisopulos Pavlos <i>Tree</i>	2	2
Makrithes Aggelos <i>Man Bird</i>	2	2
Tzopanalís Manolis <i>The white sacrifice</i>	1	0
George Lapas <i>Artists state is a state a man cannot take</i>	1	0
Total number of children	16	10

**Table 4**  
**The preference of children towards**  
**Two Dimensional artworks exhibited in the contemporary art museum (N =32)**

Artists and Titles of Artworks	Number of boys	Number of girls
Petrides Christos <i>Interior [dining room]</i>	0	2
Nikolaou Nicos <i>Crazy Pamegranate</i>	0	2
Dimitris Pierides <i>Tapestry</i>	1	0
Manusakis Michalis <i>Motherhood</i>	0	1
Total number of children	0	6

Preferences focused upon three-dimensional constructions rather than paintings. The strong preference of children for three dimensional artworks may result from their real experience with space and the art object itself, thus providing them the opportunity to view and actually feel the space, the size, and the form of the art object. The research observer noted that large three-dimensional artworks were seen to have strong attracting power for children (Appendix C). When asked to individually select an artwork and talk about it, children focused on three-dimensional constructions that embedded different artistic elements (see appendix A). Some examples of responses are provided below:

## Example 1

I. Why did you choose this artwork?

C30. It moves ...and look there is a light over there!

I: Do you like it?

C6: Yes. It's the best ...(boy, aged 6, responding to *Transformation* by Gatis Lambros)

## Example 2

I. Why did you choose this artwork?

C15. (Points with her fingers). Because it looks like this (show with her body) and it's so big. Inside there are some leaves and outside is made of glass ...

I. Do you like it?

C15. Yes

I. What do you like?

C15. The way the artist put the leaves

I. How do you think he put the leaves?

C15. He gathered all these papers, and put them inside that glass which is like this (show with her fingers). (girl, aged 6, responding to *Tree* by Dionisopoulos Pavlos)

## Example 3

I. Why did you choose that artwork?

C26. I like the shape and it is so huge...

(girl, aged 6, responding to *Cello*, by Tanimanides Panayiotis)

A high proportion of children (85%) recognized artistic elements such as the size, space, dark and light areas, transparency and movement. They experienced the three-dimensional space of the artwork and the visual effects produced by properties of shape, placement of forms in relation to each other, and the manipulation of media. This finding is consistent with other research in which children in museum settings readily recalled large-scale exhibits, although in this case this phenomenon was associated with kinaesthetic and /or tactile experiences (Anderson et al., 2002). Young children's contact with original contemporary artworks - especially three dimensional constructions - can play a decisive role in enhancing their visual spatial ability,<sup>4</sup> appears to influence the way they approach real space (significant in many contemporary artists' work), and how space is explored by the manipulation of selected media. In this case the experience of seeing three-dimensional works of art and examining the artistic medium used by the artists seemed to offer opportunities to children to understand artistic elements otherwise very difficult to introduce outside the museum environment. Thus, children's views about artworks appears to differ when provided opportunities to approach original art objects and express their preferences in relation to a great variety of artworks, especially on those that are not pictorial.

## A familiar subject matter:

Children responded to various artworks in different ways because of prior interests, experiences and backgrounds. A central theme gleaned from the interviews was the preference for artworks depicting familiar or favourite subject matter. Five children stated that the inclusion of elements such as people, a fish, flowers were reasons for preferring a painting (see Appendix B). Responses such as "I like it because there is a table and a fish", "I can see things that I can understand", "it's a tree and there are some flowers over there", "the fish looks like a real fish" illustrate that

<sup>4</sup> According to Haanstra (1994), visual-spatial ability refers to a broad psychological concept and, as such, is not only the ability to pictorially represent three-dimensional space.



some children define their reasons for choice very clearly and always in terms of the concrete information provided in the artwork (Kerlavage, 1995).

However, when referring to three-dimensional constructions most children provided imaginative responses (see Appendices A & C). For instance, they related the artwork subject matter to real images and experiences:

- It looks like a toy. You can turn it upside down ... you can switch on the light if you want. I want to take it home ... (girl, aged 5 discussing *Transformation* by Gatis Lampros)
- It's a colorful tree...we can look through the magic branches and we can dance around it ... (boy, aged 6 discussing *Tree* by Dionisopoulos Pavlos)
- I have never seen such a guitar...it's so big! (Use her body to show how big it is). I like playing the guitar...I have one at home but it is not so big...Look! You can play with those things. These are magical... (girl, aged, 6, discussing *Cello* by Taminanithes Panayiotis)

In these instances children used their imagination, detached themselves from the tangible world, moved beyond concrete situations, and gave new meanings to objects observed (Duffy, 1998). The power of the three - dimensional constructions to evoke imaginative stories highlight the potential of three-dimensional media to act as protagonists for new thinking. This could provide opportunities for developing children's visual-spatial intelligence, a significant dimension of human intellect (Harris, 2000). The visual arts are strongly embedded in spatial intelligence and centre on abilities such as forming mental models and creating and transforming mental imagery (Wright, 2002). Also, it is widely acknowledged by those supporting the play - based curricula that visual arts enable children to explore experience in visual ways, extend their thinking, and develop their imagination (e.g., Eisner, 1990; Kolbe 1993).

The response of the children to the artwork itself- whether "fine art" or popular art - appear to be significant in constructing their views about art. Recent literature refers to social ways of knowing art and has expanded the concept of art, suggesting, "*our daily interactions involve learning through images and objects that represent knowledge and mediate relationships between creators and viewers*" [italics added](Freedman, 2003, p.89). Although contemporary art forms have crossed many types of boundaries (forms and objects) and become more complex, they also represent icons of our global and contemporary world encouraging the construction of multiple meanings. Differences in individuals' constructions about art are considered significant in how people think and come to know in relation to human and environmental contexts. Similarly, if young children living in contemporary world have a daily contact with objects, images, texts, and other art forms, then they should be provided with opportunities to respond and produce art which is meaningful to them in various contexts.

#### Material-color:

Ten children (31.25%) referred to material as the main reason for selecting an artwork: "*So much colorful paper*", "*The artist put some iron and some glass...and I like it*", "*A man made of wood.. I like his wooden head*". In some cases they didn't recognize the material and asked about it, and in other cases they tried to touch it: "*I prefer this. ...Look it's made of wood and those lines what are they?*" When responding to prompts (i.e., What materials are used by the artist?) several children attempted to find out what kind of materials had been used by the artists and in some cases explain the artistic process behind the artwork:

- I would like to make a cello like this one ...using so much iron but I have to work hard and I don't know how (girl, aged 5, talking about Tanimanithes's Cello)
- Look! I like this...it has wooden wings... I like his wooden wings. The artist put some straws and some clay and made this human bird (boy, aged 6, talking about Markides's Man Bird).
- I: Do you like it?  
C11: I like these things (show the art object)  
I: What things?  
C11: Look it has some coins and some spoons on it...you can play with this. It's the first time seeing such an artwork...I: What it is made of?  
C11: Is it iron or wood? ..... I like the spoons and the coins... But you have to make this huge Cello and then put the coins and the spoons like the artist did (Boy, aged 6, talking about Taminanithes's The Cello).

Observations revealed that almost all children attempted to touch the art objects (see Appendix C). They wanted to feel the materials used by the artists. A boy, six years old commented, *"I want to touch the tree...I want to touch the paper inside the glass... How the artist put it inside?"*

Children seemed to prefer paintings with colors that challenged and pleased their senses as opposed to paintings with dull colors. Five children (15.6%) justified their preferences based on the colors of paintings. For instance, a five year-old girl commenting on Petride's Interior said: *"I like the colors. The artist used so many bright colors"*. After prompting by the interviewer, another six year old girl stated, in reference to Nicolau painting, Crazy pomegranate, *"It is beautiful. These (shows) are lively colors."* These findings are consistent with research on the response of young children towards color when reproductions of paintings were used (Gardner, 1973; Machotka, 1966; Parsons, Johnston and Durham 1978; Taunton, 1984).

In distinction to reproductions, materials, texture, colors, form, and size of an artwork are apparent when one views a "real" work of art. The experience with materials and objects in world are important in enhancing children's creative representational abilities. In a later stage of their development - when children's visual representations become intentional - the visual product could result from a complex combination of the reflected mental image and the material used. Teacher initiatives that involve children in artistic programs can be also crucial. It is essential for visual arts programs undertaken in pre-primary classrooms to use developmentally appropriate approaches by allowing children to construct their own meanings from artworks, instead of providing them with factual information (Durrant, 1996; Savva, 2003).

Overall, the response of children towards contemporary artworks coincide to Housen's (1987) stage of "accountive" responses to model of aesthetic development. However, aesthetic development is multifaceted and multidimensional. The way one thinks and develops in his/her knowledge about art is a complex issue. Lin and Thomas (2002) researched different age group responses to popular graphic art. They assert that the development of aesthetic understanding is branching and multidirectional rather than stage like, and heavily determined by individual interests and experience. This suggests the importance of particular experiences, such as training in using particular medium, skills and techniques or awareness of art in a cultural or historical context. In this sense each experience should be planned and linked carefully with children's knowledge and understanding of the world in which they live.

**Research Question 2:** Are there any differences in the views of children when previous artistic experiences (making and looking art) are considered?

Previous artistic experience:

Information gathered from questionnaires provided to teachers and parents revealed the diverse experiences of children (Tables 1-2).

Children in Group 2 had previous contact with original works of art through visiting an artist's studio and been involved in projects emphasising visual arts during school. However, the children did not experience these events regularly, and engagement occurred within strict boundaries of time. Both groups of children had more experience in drawing and painting than other mediums. In some instances scrap materials as well as clay were used. When scrap materials were used as a medium the children's constructions were often similar. Children in both groups were familiar with talking about their artworks, but had not done so during school time or when visiting museums (see Table 2).

The data collected revealed some interesting points. Researchers and observers noticed that some children in Group 2 linked their visit to museum with their experience in the artist studio. For instance, three children (2 boys aged 6 and 1 girl aged 6) referred to their experience in seeing an artist making a painting and wondered how an artist could make such an enormous tree (referring to Dionisopoulos's Tree), in his studio. One boy aged 5, said "... this is a different exhibition because artists are usually making paintings", and in another case a girl aged five wondered "Why people took the artworks from artists' studio and put them in an art museum?".

Two children also had previously visited art museums with their families, and three children had visited with their parents historical museums. Four of the children (subjects 1, 9, 10, 22) have a person in their family interested in visual arts - an uncle who is a photographer, a cousin who studies visual arts, a mother who paints at home, and a mother who makes crafts (see: Table 1). When compared to other children, none of these children provided different responses when viewing artworks. In two cases (subjects 9 and 10) the children didn't want to talk at all. For instance, Subject 9 (girl, aged 6, who has visited museums with her parents) was very serious, she was looking without touching, did not want to discuss anything and she felt undecided when she was asked to show her preference. However, similar behaviors were noticed to other children with no previous artistic experience.

Although the sample is too small to generalize about the role of previous experiences in children's responses to artworks, it seems clear that specific types of experience, such as the opportunity to see an adult making have been influential. Previous visits to other museums along with family members had no effect on children's responses, possibly because of the lack of positive experiences.

During the initial tour in the museum several children referred to materials used by the artists and expressed their interest in using clay, stones, and paper in their own art making. However, in only two cases did children refer to artistic experiences of using similar materials or the medium itself (such as paper, clay or wood). This may indicate that most children did not have the opportunity to freely explore materials in depth and reflect on the process of making during school based visual arts programs. Painting and drawing are still dominant activities taking place during art lessons in pre-primary schools of Cyprus and contemporary art seemed to be a difficult or non-necessary task for teachers. However, things have changed. Interactions with a range of visual forms are now more common in children's daily lives; they not only respond to these visual forms, but also take part in the creation of them from an early age. If educators want children to be literate in understanding the world in which they live, curriculum should provide opportunities of creation and appreciation of various visual art forms that are meaningful to children.

**Research Question 3:** How did the museum visit impact the responses of children when discussing and creating artwork in the classroom?

Recalling experiences and making art:

Most of the children that participated in the study did not have many experiences in using scrap materials (at home or in school) and had never been in contact with contemporary art exhibits (Tables 1-2). Observation notes from videotaped analysis, photographic material, and teachers' diary reports revealed the recollection of the children upon their experiences at the art museum.

Two children did not participate in art making activities; however, several children described the artworks, which impressed them. In many cases they referred to the material the artist used like "*the wooden man*" "*the bird with wings made of straws*," or to the subject matter of an artwork "*the hanging man*", "*the machine*", "*the tree*" (Appendix A & B). For most children art making was a very exiting activity. Children were provided with scrap materials in some cases similar to those observed in artworks in the art museum (e.g., straws, cardboard, wood, different sizes of empty cartoons, paper). They examined and discussed the way they were used in their everyday life and how artists used them in their artistic work. Twenty-four children constructed three-dimensional artworks (Appendix D), while six children asked for watercolors and oil pastels because they wanted to make a painting (Appendix E). Sixteen children used artworks viewed at the art museum as stimulus; specifically through focusing upon subject matter, materials, or the form of an artwork in the exhibition. Other children made three-dimensional artworks by using similar techniques as those observed in the exhibits in the art museum. Some hung different stripes of clothes and tissue papers, stuck wood on boxes like "the hanging man in the museum" (Appendices A, D, & E). In many cases children tried to join materials together or make the art object movable. For instance, 6 year old boy said: "*I did nothing. I just wanted to know how to join things*".

It was apparent that access to scrap materials enabled children to develop representations of the world in which two-dimensional materials cannot match. This strengthened their spatial awareness (e.g., children involved in problem solving situation about topics such as stability and balance, space inside and around, light and dark areas). The experience of approaching three-dimensional constructions in a museum setting gave them ideas on how to use the materials in their own work. Other children who requested watercolors or oil pastels appeared to be influenced by paintings seen in the art museum (a boy who was influenced by Pieride's Tapestry used oil pastels and colored paper to make a similar in subject drawing, (Appendix E).

Many of the children recalled their experiences gained in the art museum. Children were willing to explore the particular medium, to try out various ways of combining materials, and to permit unconscious processes of play. However, it was found that they needed more time for exploration and problem solving and "*think with and in the materials of an artistic medium*" (Gardner, 1988, p.163). To think skillfully is an "*act for intelligence, thinking well within a medium requires an understanding of the potential possibilities and limits of the material with which one works.... Thinking needs to focus on the organization of what is visual*" (Eisner, 2002, p.80). It could be the case that previous experiences in using similar materials before and after a visit to an art museum has enhanced young children's artistic work and enriched their sense of culture (Trimis & Savva, 2004). It is suggested that in depth exploration of materials encountered in a variety of environments provide opportunities for children not only to experience their characteristics and properties, but also their potential expressiveness and inherent meaning. In this sense, artistic programs emphasizing familiarity and exploration of visual art mediums as well as reflection opportunities on the creative process in a variety of contexts (natural environments, shopping malls, parks, buildings, workshops, museums) enable young children to understand the origins of the materials and their role in their life. This allows children to view art as part of their culture and

apply their previous experiences in the creation and appreciation of a body of artistic work in the context of their everyday life.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

The present study explored how pre-primary school children responded to contemporary exhibits in a museum setting and how this experience was linked to art learning in the classroom. Although the sample (N=32) makes it difficult to generalize, the methodology used provided complex and multiple perspectives of childrens' art museum experiences. The following findings have been revealed through this research:

- a) Most (81%) of the children seemed to prefer constructions and three-dimensional constructions rather than paintings.
- b) Most of the children (56.25%) seemed to base their preferences on artworks that depicted favourite or familiar to them subject matter.
- d) Ten of the children (31.25%) referred to material and five children (15.6%) referred to colors as the main reason for selecting an artwork.
- e) Observation notes revealed that in some cases children recalled previous experiences gained in an artist's studio.
- f) During art making, half of the children used as a stimulus artworks seeing in the art museum.

When considering the responses and artistic creation of the children, evidence suggests that interests of children and their every day habits, and customs are powerful mediators when linked with experiences and the creation of art objects. These findings support the constructivist learning theories stating that personal meaning making can be very influential in visitors' responses and trends in aesthetic development, which states that familiarity with art could play a significant role in understanding art (Housen, 1987; Hein 1998; Silverman, 1995). The provisions of material (artistic medium) during art appreciation practices become significant because they enable children to extend their artistic work and enhance their thinking about art. In order to assist children in identifying and understanding works of art, attention should be focused upon supporting the development of their understanding of how artworks relate to their own experiences, as well as incorporate appropriate activities in making art in order to enhance knowledge about how and under what circumstances artworks are created (i.e., focusing in using and exploring the medium in depth and in a variety of contexts). Learning to look at art is a skill that requires time and effort. Thus, it is suggested that repeated visits to art museums and to other places of cultural interest) should be an important component of art learning (i.e., historical monuments, artists' studios, workshops, religious places, modern and traditional buildings).

Differences related to children's previous artistic experiences were also observed. However, aspects of young children's thinking in and about art appear to be complicated and multifaceted and further research is needed to support these findings. Factors such as the kind of art forms introduced to the children (e.g., traditional art, contemporary art, paintings, drawings, sculpture, popular art, etc.), pedagogical approaches used, as well as individual or school experiences could play a significant role in children's understanding in art. The role of adults also is crucial insofar as the questions asked, activities introduced, and general implementation of programs affects a child's thinking about art. Further research into factors influencing the responses of young children towards "real" art could provide additional information on the role of families in children's artistic understanding. The designing and development of educational programs in Cyprus museums giving opportunities for people (including families), to have access to art in various settings could be a possible proposal. The access and quality of museum

programs is significant as it provides opportunities for visitors to begin fostering the value of the experiences with their children (Zeller, 1987).

Understanding cultural and social differences are crucial in developing children's understanding in art. For instance, programs offering high quality art experiences in an interactive environment - such as those implemented in Reggio Emilia schools in Italy - could have a significant impact on children's artistic development, since they allow children to experience art in a variety of contexts. Similarly, specific visual arts educational programs in Cypriot pre-primary schools could have an impact on children's artistic and cultural understanding. By allowing children opportunities to view and create art in the context of their everyday life could affect their way of thinking and acting.

Because research related to pre primary children's responses to artworks in Cyprus is so limited, further investigations could help ascertain additional facets of what a child is thinking about or interested in, and his /her potential for artistic expression. Research suggests that human beings have an *"instance of genuine developmental sequences", but aesthetic development does not necessarily "follow the progressive pattern of developmental logic. It can be stimulated or restricted and an important factor is education"* [italics added] (Haanstra, 1994, p.118). When opportunities for observing as well as producing art are highlighted, emphasis should be given to where and how learning takes place as well as factors such as the child, environmental contexts (human, cultural, natural), space in its broad sense (area, place, land, locality, location, village or town), and time (flexibility). Each of these is essential in developing visual arts programs (Epstein & Trimis 2002). Provisions for rich opportunities for material exploration, invention, and transformation as well as contact with a range of visual art forms in various places and spaces of cultural interest should be an integral part of educational programs. It is suggested that formal education should introduce young children to the world of art from an early stage by focusing on constructing interactive, cumulative, progressive, and sequential visual art programs integrating theoretical (cultural and critical aspects) with art making activities.

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**Appendix A**

Illustrations of artworks exhibited in the art museum: Childrens' preferences of three-dimensional artworks

Artists and titles of artworks	
 <p>Tanimanithes Panayiotis <i>Cello</i></p>	 <p>Gatis Lampros <i>Transformations</i></p>
 <p>Dionisopulos Pavlos <i>Tree</i></p>	 <p>Makrides Aggelos <i>Man Bird</i></p>
 <p>Tzopanalís Manolis <i>The white sacrifice</i></p>	 <p>George Lapas <i>Artists state is a state of mind</i></p>

## Appendix B

Illustrations of artworks exhibited in the art museum-childrens' preferences of paintings

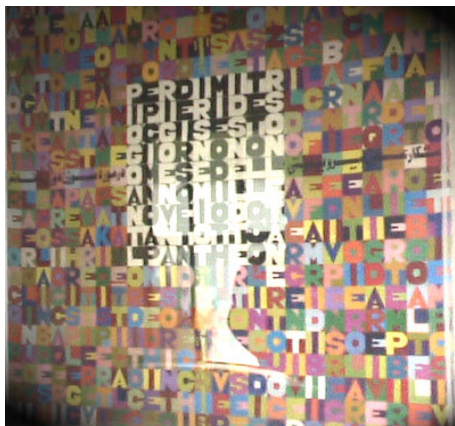
Artists and titles of artworks



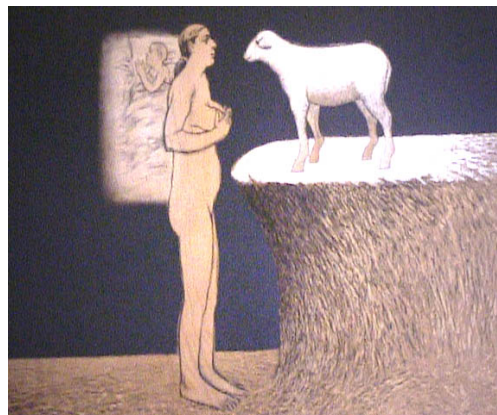
Petrides Christos, *Interior [dining room]*



Nicolaou Nicos, *Crazy Pomegranate*



Petrides Dimitris, *Tapestri*



Manousakis Michalis, *Motherhood*

### Appendix C

Visiting the museum -the fist impressions



## Appendix D

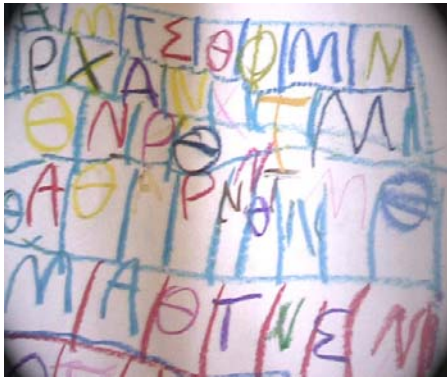
### Childrens' 3-D constructions





Appendix E

Illustrations of children's drawings



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