

Bringing public art to children through picture books

Introduction

Though there is a growing interest in visiting museums in Hong Kong families, visits arranged by schools are likely to be the first and key encounter to museums or other art venues for Hong Kong children (Wong & Piscitelli, 2019). It may be due to the many types of families in a diversified society like Hong Kong; parents' working hours and educational background directly affect their involvement in art appreciation and museum visits.

A previous study on children's learning in museums in Hong Kong revealed that many kindergartens seldom provide children with the opportunity for multi-visits to any museum (Piscitelli, Chak, Wong, Yuen & Ngan, 2008). Other studies reported that it is essential for young children to have sufficient opportunities to look at the authentic artwork and talk about it (Wong & Piscitelli, 2017; Wong & Piscitelli, 2018). Looking and responding to art promotes children's critical and creative thinking (Lye, Garces-Bacsal & Wright, 2017). Children gradually develop their interests and skills in viewing art through multi-visit (Wong & Piscitelli, 2019). However, it was also noted that kindergarten teachers face difficulties planning visits to temporary exhibitions, including insufficient information and relevancy to their school curriculum.

Most kindergartens in Hong Kong run half-day programmes with morning sessions from 9 am to 12 noon and afternoon sessions from 1:30 to 4:30 pm. The scale of operation and the number of classrooms range from two to over ten; the number of students range from 40 to 900 (Education Bureau, 2021). The limited school hours and a large number of students made frequent or multiple museum visits not easy. With the minimal visits to the museum, the teachers tend to maximise the benefits of each visit. It always results in highly overloaded and hurried experiences for children.

In this connection, the research team proposed to lead young children to look at artworks in their local and familiar surroundings, i.e. public art in their neighbourhood (Wong, 2013, 2015). Thus, the children and their teachers could have more time in looking at the artwork. It was hypothesised that when children have more experiences in appreciating and interacting with art, they may benefit more in their museum visits. Both teachers and children were found to be fascinated by exploring public art in their close surroundings; however, teachers expressed their concerns about the limited information provided by the government and references from the local community. In this respect, a set of activity cards was developed and distributed to the teachers and parents of local kindergartens to appreciate select public

artworks (Wong & Chow, 2019). Nonetheless, informal communications with kindergarten personnel revealed that teachers did not fully utilise the activity card set, especially for teachers who had limited knowledge of art.

Reading picture books to children is a common activity in school and at home; teachers and parents do not need to read lots of information or be knowledgeable about art. Noting that picture books could be a feasible way to bring children to art (Wong, Cheung & Chiu, 2021), the research team decided to write a picture book about a public artwork in Hong Kong. Teachers and parents can relax and read the picture book with children; then, they can discuss and explore the artwork through the book. They can choose to visit the public artwork before and/or after reading the picture book and make multi-visit to the artwork and the picture book. Eventually, they would develop a closer relationship with the artwork and their own understanding of the artwork.

The picture book – *Little Floral Pony*

Little Floral Pony is a wordless picture book. It leaves the reader room to think and imagine. *Little Floral Pony* is written about an artwork, namely *Miracle Horse* established in the City Art Square at Shatin, Hong Kong to promote Beijing Olympic Games 2008; as equestrian events were hosted in Shatin, Hong Kong. *Miracle Horse* was created by a Hong Kong artist and designer Freeman Lau. In *Miracle Horse*, Lau represented his memories of the colourful patterns on the jockey's clothes in newspaper and pretend play experience as a cowboy on the dining chairs. He also incorporated elements from *Chairplay*, his most representative creations, into *Miracle Horse*.

The story plot is simple; the character, Chi Yan (子人), finds some blocks and then explores ways to model, experiments with colours and looks for inspirations on patterns. We aim to stimulate children to think about the art-making process when they look at an artwork and appreciate the artist's effort. We also want to illustrate the importance of trial and error and risk-taking in creating art. A wide range of follow-up activities can be done with children, from field trips to making their own pony (2D or 3D).

Responses from readers

We shared four vignettes showing how children aged 2 to 10 responded to the picture book in the video. Vignette 1 was about a mother reading *Little Floral Pony* to her 3-year-old girl

where the 7-year-old sister was so eager to join. Vignette 2 was the sharing by a dad of two boys on the visit to *Miracle Horse* after reading *Little Floral Pony*. In Vignette 3, a 10-year-old girl read aloud *Little Floral Pony* with detailed interpretation and made a drawing spontaneously. Vignette 4 recorded the book reading process by the illustrator of *Little Floral Pony* to three children and their discussion.

Little Floral Pony was printed in early December 2020. Due to COVID-19 school suspension, it has not been widely read yet. Among the reachable readers, mainly kindergarten teachers, reflected that *Little Floral Pony* heightened their awareness of the artwork *Miracle Horse* and projected that their children would enjoy the book and the visit to the artwork. The 7-years-old girl in Vignette 1 showed amazing sensitivity towards visual images. She jumped up declared that it was a chair when her mother tried to end the story by saying that the artwork was a pony. The young siblings in Vignette 2 were excited when they discovered the real size of the artwork. They included their experiences and feelings in the story when they read the book again at home. The 10-years-old girl in Vignette 3 was a museum-goer and book-lover and had seen *Miracle Horse* before. She retold the story with many daily experiences; for example, as a result of online shopping, there were many boxes at home and online searches for inspiration of patterns. She challenged the making process as well. For instance, why the character had to paint the whole pony red before knowing that she did not like it, and green paint could not cover the red. Children in Vignette 4 also queried how the character removed the dots and put lines on the pony. They were surprised to know that the artwork was “real” and concerned about how the “pony” could stay outdoors. These cases demonstrated how the picture book created a desirable platform to further discuss and explore public art with children.

Conclusion

In the presentation, we explained the background and rationale of taking picture books as a medium to introduce public art to young children. We shared our first picture book about a public artwork in Hong Kong. Initial feedback from our readers was encouraging; both adult and young readers enjoyed this story. The story aroused their interest in the artwork. Young readers demonstrated keen observations, raised critical questions and gave surprising solutions in many ways. There is more to explore in bringing public art to children through picture books.

We invite you to create a storyboard about public artwork in your community. You may also make a storyboard based on the slides in which we showed four pieces of public artwork in Hong Kong related to horses.

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