

FESTIVE PLAY

The V&A is the world's leading museum of art and design, housing a permanent collection of over 2.3 million objects that span over 5,000 years of human creativity. Our mission is to create a world class visitor and learning experience across all V&A sites and collections. The V&A Learning Vision is to fire imagination and foster ingenuity for everyone, everywhere in a fast-changing world.

SUMMARY

Since 2017, the Learning Department have collaborated annually with the Visitor Experience (VE) team to deliver weekday play sessions in December for under 5s. Looking at our existing programme, we identified a need for activities specifically for this age range. Until this point, we did not have an under 5s offer and by working with existing staff rather than external practitioners, we were able to deliver a new programme within our existing budget.

We developed a 30-minute playful, sensory storytelling session using the V&A: The Twelve Days of Christmas picture book, with designs by William Morris. The session was led by two staff members from VE – one who read from the book and the other who was dressed up in character as a partridge. The families were invited to sit on specially made festive round duvets, cushions or a bench in the gallery. There were some Christmas picture books to read and Christmas music was played as families arrived. The session started with a familiar nursery song and a gentle game of peekaboo.



In a large basket were twelve drawstring bags for each day of Christmas – full of sensory items inside for the families to interact with. These included tweeting turtle dove toys; swan sock puppets; toy eggs (for geese a laying) and play feathers (for the French hens). For days nine & twelve, there were different materials and play scarves to link to the dancing ladies and leaping lords, followed by percussion instruments such as egg shakers and bells. The session finished with dancing, singing and playing along to a recorded version of The Twelve Days of Christmas.

Sessions took place in our painting gallery – chosen because it is well-lit, large, colourful and has an electric output for a CD player. It is also a safe gallery for under 5s – all objects are on the walls and placed at good height, plus there are no objects on plinths.

Sessions had space for up to 30 people to ensure the experience was intimate and playful. The places were first come first served and we offered two sessions per day. We were able to accommodate most families but did have to turn some away.

AIMS AND GOALS

For our organisation

In 2016, senior management wanted to put the V&A on the map for anyone wanting to celebrate Christmas in London. Representatives from various departments - Commercial and Digital, Conservation, Curatorial, Visitor Experience and Learning - met monthly from January to plan ideas to animate the galleries and work together to bring the museum to life in December.

For our audience

We worked with our VE team to deliver weekday sessions for families of all ages in 2016, and then specifically for the under 5s audience from 2017. Our other aims for this programme were to:

- provide continuing professional development to VE staff in performance for under 5s
- commission and develop bespoke dry and sensory resources responding to a popular Christmas song and V&A book
- use a book, which is available in the shop, as a focus for workshops and create interest in William Morris galleries at V&A
- experiment working within the gallery spaces with this age group during term-time
- encourage new and repeat visits.

We wanted to:

- fulfill a need for activities during term-time (we had an increasing number of families with under 5s visiting the museum at this time looking for more things to do than what was on offer)
- create a welcoming, creative and intimate environment for under 5s
- provide families with a place to celebrate Christmas time and gain knowledge of V&A collections

Early Years toolkit

- in a gallery space, provide sensory resources and guided play for adults with under 5s
- create an inclusive environment where they feel confident to express themselves and play together
- support the Early Years Foundation Stage framework learning and development – these sessions support development in Expressive Arts and Design, with an emphasis on exploring materials and using their imaginations; singing, music, dance and drama.



OUTCOMES

For our organisation

Visitor figures for the period of the museum wide Christmas programme was up 6% in 2016-17 on 2015-16. In 2017, 281 adults and 229 under-fives took part over 24 sessions. In 2018, 178 adults and 180 under-fives over 18 sessions. In 2019, 191 adults and 197 under-fives over 16 sessions.

As a result of this new programme, we have a unique set of resources that we expect to be able to use for many years to come. The new resources include specially made festive round duvets and 12 drawstring bags for each of the 12 days.

Other outcomes included:

- many families asked where they could buy the book, to continue their experience at home
- other visitors to the gallery were accommodating to the activity in the space
- over three years, we only had one complaint about noise
- the majority of participants were new and some did come more than once.

For our audiences

Families particularly valued the multi-sensory experiences provided through the variety of props and enthusiastic facilitators. The music and dancing were also popular components of the session.

‘This is really great, who made all of these things?’

‘It’s so well thought out.’

‘LOVED it – loved all the sensory toys and dancing.’

Families saw this as a Christmas event for everyone, some brought along grandparents and other relatives; others came in groups with friends. A local children's centre brought a group along in 2018.

LESSONS LEARNT

The first session at 11am was very popular, with more families wanting to attend than could be accommodated. We have therefore decided to move future sessions to larger spaces but still limit numbers to ensure quality for those that attend.

In 2020 monthly early years sessions are taking place instead of a more regular number of sessions just in December. With new themes such as music in the Europe galleries and design in South Asia and Fashion.

Due to high turnover of VE staff and the nature of their shift work, the VE staff sometimes received training but then only had the opportunity to lead one or two sessions, which was not enough for them to reflect on their first experience and try out new techniques. In order to manage the activity more effectively, we are now working with VE towards a more sustainable model. The activities will instead be led by external storytellers with creative support from VE staff. The training will shift from performance skills to managing a session; how to support the storyteller and the audience.

BUDGET

Between 2017-2019 £600 was spent on making, buying and maintaining resources. In 2018 & 2019 an external early years facilitator was employed to deliver storytelling training to VE costing £1,000.

FUNDING

Resource, trainer and learning assistant costs were paid for by the Learning core budget, with staff time for project management and evaluation from the staffing core budget. In 2018 the freelance storytelling trainer cost was split between Learning core budget and VE training budget.

TOP TIP

Working with our VE team enabled us to deliver a new programme at the same time as giving them new opportunities.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Find out more about our family programmes at

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/whatson?type=family>

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/visit-the-va-as-a-family>

Check out the latest V&A Learning Blogs at

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/museum-life/news-learning-department>

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