

## MAKING SPACE FOR UNDER 5S

The Humber Museums Partnership consists of Hull Museums, North Lincolnshire Museums and East Riding Museums. From 2016-19 the partnership was the under 5s lead for Arts Council England's Major Partner Museums; creating programming, curating spaces and building partnerships to embed working with under 5s across our sites. Our sites are: Hull Museums and Ferens Art Gallery, North Lincolnshire Museum and Normanby Hall, and the Treasure House/Beverley Art Gallery and Sewerby Hall in the East Riding. In 2017, Ferens Art Gallery reopened following a refurbishment with a new gallery for under 5s and their families called 'Explore Art'.

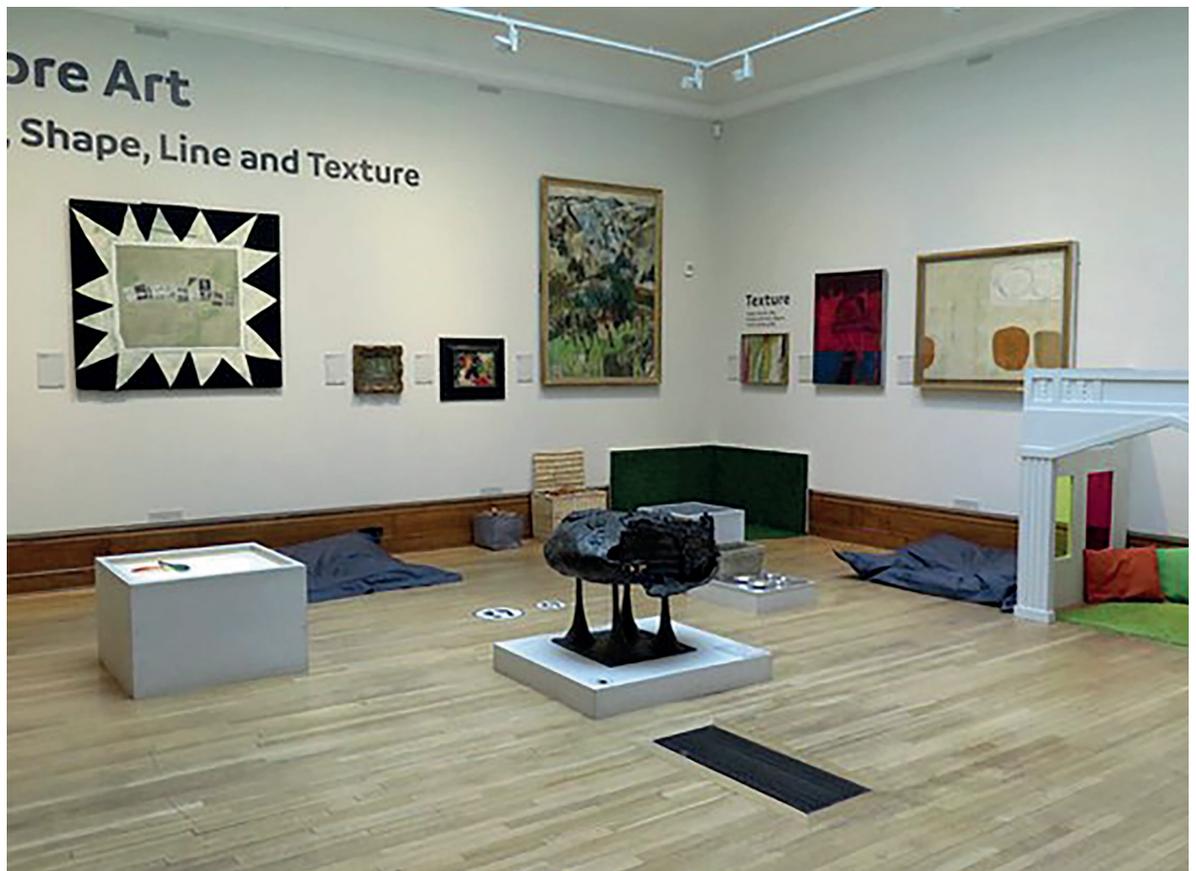
### SUMMARY

'Explore Art' grew out of consultation with families and museum and heritage professionals before the gallery closed for refurbishment. We spoke with families from children's centres, libraries, and our own sites. We also formed a steering group made up of: professionals from teacher/Early Years Practitioner training programmes at the University of Hull and Hull College; a nursery school headteacher; a private nursery manager; representatives from the council early years team and the council disability support service for schools.

There was a strong sense that people, including practitioners, were interested in art but lacked confidence in talking about it. One respondent said 'What if [my child] asked me a question about art? I wouldn't be able to answer it'. Our steering group was keen for us to focus on creative play and draw on the philosophies of Reggio Emilia and Montessori. They fed back the importance of open ended activities and loose parts which could be moved and appropriated for new uses. Families we consulted also wanted somewhere children could play in an active, sensory and creative way and in a way that included the whole family. They were keen for us to include opportunities to build, create, role-play and problem-solve.



# Early Years toolkit



Building on this consultation, 'Explore Art' features original artwork, acting as a springboard from which to explore the whole gallery. The gallery's four sections are inspired by the foundations of art (line, shape, texture and colour) to break down art into familiar concepts for visitors. In consultation with an Early Years (EY) professional focus group, we designed interactive elements to promote key skills such as fine and gross motor skills, communication, imaginative play, creativity and scientific enquiry. For example we included a hut on their suggestion, a space to hide and have quiet time, and a role play picnic area with artificial grass. We designed the hut to echo the gallery architecture. The hut can be used for sharing stories but we also find that children have their picnics in there, which is exactly what the group predicted would happen.

The interpretation of Explore Art is in keeping with that of the whole site, but is also deliberately minimalist with a brief introductory panel, simple labels and vinyl descriptive words to spark conversation. For example in the colour section, each letter of the word colour is a different colour and the words underneath read 'light, dark, bright, dull, pale, vibrant, bold'.

Initially, the gallery had volunteers in the space, but over time this wasn't sustainable every day because volunteers were needed to invigilate other exhibition spaces instead. It is open just as any other room in the gallery, and although it is part of the staff patrol, it isn't separately invigilated. However, the aim of the gallery was independent exploration, so not having invigilators doesn't impact how we intended the space to be used.

## AIMS AND GOALS

### For our organisation

Under 5s were an audience we hadn't actively engaged with before and from 2015-2018 we were awarded MPM funding from the Arts Council to specialise in under 5s engagement. The refurbishment and UK City of Culture status in 2017 also gave us an opportunity to redevelop our existing family gallery for under 5s and their families, in order to help us build up this new audience.

### For our audience

We hoped these new spaces would help welcome families and encourage them to explore further. Explore Art is at the entrance to the building allowing for quick and easy access, and carries on to Gallery 9 which features our most modern pieces. The artworks chosen for Explore Art were predominantly abstract so it flows neatly into that next space. Keeping the same wall colour and interpretation style, we also chose not to put our most popular artwork with families, *The Lion at Home*, in Explore Art, to encourage families to visit the whole gallery.

The opportunities and approaches to engage under 5s creatively are numerous. Drawing on the Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches, we wanted to encourage creativity and a love of art from an early age and encourage intergenerational conversations about art.

## OUTCOMES

### For our organisation

'Explore Art' welcomed more than 109,000 visitors in its first year (Ferens Art Gallery itself had 519,000 visitors in 2017) and changed the demographic of visitors to Ferens Art Gallery. Prams and buggies coming up the ramp to the building is now a regular sight. 'Explore Art' was a key focus of our 2017 national conference 'Freedom to Explore' on best practise in engaging under 5s in museum and gallery spaces. Also in 2017 it was nominated by peers to be included in the Clore 'Space for Learning' project and was highly commended at the Museums & Heritage Awards.

### For our audience

'Explore Art' has made under 5s and their families feel welcome in the gallery and continues to attract regular and new visitors. Many parents have commented that the city centre location is handy because they can use it as a reward when they've got boring jobs done, like going to the shops and post office. In a 2015 survey of families with under 5s, only 77% said they would recommend us, but this went up to 92% when we repeated the survey in 2017.

Feedback from visitors included:

**'Nice to have a place for kids. There wasn't really anything before – just a bit of colouring in.'**

Parent visiting 'Explore Art' with an under five

**'They love it in here. We came here at the weekend. She cried when we had to go home'.**

Parent at Gallery Expedition activity

# Early Years toolkit

'Watching a group engage with the room showed that the design of the room has worked... There was one family I watched who didn't look very confident to start with and you could just see their confidence grow the longer they spent in the room and the more comfortable they became interacting with the resources, the space and each other.'

Early Years Improvement Officer (Member of Working Group)

'Exploring the real pictures was very exciting. My group really wanted to get up close and look for colour as the activity had them engaged.'

Foundation Stage Teacher

## LESSONS LEARNT

The artworks on display were selected by families and our EY professional's focus group from a curator's longlist. One painting had initially been largely ruled out by the focus group and staff because we didn't feel it was striking enough or appealing enough for under 5s, but it was wildly popular with families so it was included. It is a large textured mountain landscape with trees and a hut with a corrugated roof. Families seemed to be drawn in and absorbed by the painting and the atmosphere. This was a lesson in the importance of listening to our audiences.

We initially ran a regular under 5s session in the space, but we found that many families preferred exploring independently, so we focussed our under 5s programming on messier activities in the studio, 'Mini Masterpieces' which are very popular.

We would have preferred to hang the artworks lower to make them more accessible, but due to the activities taking place in the space we decided not to. Many of the paintings weren't glazed, so if you touched them you would be touching paint rather than glass or perspex. The steering group helped us with the idea of putting periscopes and magnifiers in the gallery to make an activity out of finding things in the paintings.



## BUDGET

£10,000

## OUTCOMES

The project was funded through Arts Council MPM funding using the under 5s engagement strand.

## TOP TIP

Consultation was key for this project; both with the public and early years professionals. As a result, the steering group and families we'd consulted felt ownership of the space because they could see evidence of their ideas and advice in the gallery. In particular, members of the steering group continued to partner with us on other projects and became champions for our project.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

<https://humbermuseums.com/under-5s/>

This case study was written by Esther Hallberg,  
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