Collections + Museums: Communicating Cultural Value

Teacher, Student, and Family Guide

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Museums – and their collections, missions, and activities – are great models for developing educational activities and projects that can enhance classroom learning, student engagement, and community and family involvement at all grade levels and in nearly every subject area.

Allow us help you use this packet and additional ideas to:

- Complement lessons that you are already teaching
- Develop an activated museum/gallery space in your classroom
- Connect museum practice with your art, language arts, history, social/cultural studies, technology, identity, community, or science curricula
- Inspire you to take or send your students to local museums
- Involve parents in their children’s education
- Raise awareness among your class and school about the (often free!) cultural resources in your community

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COVER IMAGES
Top Row: Ceci Mendez, mini correspondence #1, 2008, security envelopes; Button collection, photograph courtesy of Julie Bernson; Tony Feher, Made Possible by the Generous Donation of Potato Chip Bags Economy Class Passengers and Crew Delta Flight 0784 DFW-LGA Palm Sunday 28 MAR 99, 1999, snack bags, staples, and aluminum tape, museum purchase, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA
Bottom Row: Cabinet of Curiosities; Coming of Age exhibition, 2006, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA
Mix and match these activities to explore the value of creating and learning from collections and museums while connecting with your class curricula.

*If you need help choosing or connecting, please contact us – we love the challenge!*

**FAMILY PROJECTS**

*Student Collection Documentation:* Ask students to collaborate with their families to document or create a collection at home through photography, drawing, chart making, writing, etc. The documentation is shared with the class to spark discussion of the varieties of ways that people select, organize, and interpret their collections – and what gives them value. Page 4

*Family Museum Visit:* Students document a family visit to a local museum using the provided *Family Museum Activity Guide* and/or other questions and prompts to expose students and families to the (often free!) cultural resources in their area. Pages 5, 12-13

**BRINGING HOME + COMMUNITY INTO THE CLASSROOM**

*Student Collections Exhibition:* Students can bring in, depending on available classroom space, part or all of their home collection to be displayed in the classroom or common space for a day or longer. Parents – and others in the school or community – can also be invited to a reception and gallery talk given by the students. Pages 4, 5, 7

*Family Museum Visit Fair:* Parents can be invited in to school to share their documentation, discoveries, and questions from their family museum visit alongside their children. Pages 5, 12-13

**CLASSROOM LESSONS**

*Museum in the Classroom:* Use a book, historical period, science unit, cultural group, or other curriculum unit as the inspiration for a classroom exhibition complete with found or made images, objects, and writing that help students engage with, discover, remember, and apply the significant facts and concepts. Pages 4, 5, 7

*Research, Classification, Curating, Labeling:* Use the methods of curators, specialists, and artists to deeply explore objects and themes and discover how context informs interpretation. Pages 4-5, 6-7, 8-9, 10-11

**BRINGING THE CLASSROOM INTO THE COMMUNITY**

*Museum Trips:* Plan a field trip to a museum or cultural institution to create awareness of and familiarity with local resources. In addition to meeting curriculum objectives, students can teach themselves about and become critical explorers of topics of local interest. Pages 5, 12-13

*Representation in the Community:* In a public venue (museum, library, store, bank, gallery, etc.), share a classroom-created exhibition to bring student knowledge of a topic or cause to the community. Page 5
CLASSROOM DISCUSSION: Museums + Collections

What is a Museum?
1. Ask students to list names and types of museums they have visited or heard of, writing responses on the board with space between each.
2. Discuss the various things one might see in each of these places, listing their responses beneath the appropriate museum.
3. Discuss what these places have in common, such as, they are places where:
   - The public can visit to see special things.
   - There are exhibitions and programs.
   - Old and valuable things are preserved and researched.
   - People can learn and be inspired.

What is a Collection?
1. Ask students to create a group definition of the word *collection*.
2. Looking back to the list of things they might see at museums, discuss what category each of these objects falls into, connecting the collections with museum types. For example, an art museum collects art, a natural history museum collects artifacts documenting places and living things, etc.
3. Discuss other places that may not have been suggested, such as:
   - An aquarium collects fish.
   - A botanical garden collects plants.
   - A library collects books.
4. Discuss the importance of collections, why there are museums, and what kinds of museums students would want to see in their community and/or create in the classroom.

Did you know that Massachusetts museums have such surprising collections as toys, armor, motorcycles, shovels, and stamps?

EXTENDED ACTIVITY: Home Collections

What Do You Collect?
Students can document their home collections through photography, drawing, and/or writing, considering the following questions:

- What do you collect?
- Why and how did you choose to start collecting that?
- From where do you get the items in your collection?
- In what ways can your collection be organized?
- What could people learn from your collection?

Students can share their documentation with the class, guided by the above questions.

Further Options:
- Send home a prompt to parents to get involved in their child's documentation.
- Have students follow up by bringing in their collections and setting up an exhibition guided by the themes that emerge from the students' collections and the ways that they have classified and organized them.
- Hold the exhibition in a common space in the school or a public venue and have a reception and gallery talk hosted by the students.
EXTENDED ACTIVITY: Community Collections

What Does Your Community Collect?
What cultural organizations are in your community? Which ones have you been to – and why? What types of organizations found in most communities have collections (such as libraries, historical societies, museums, city/town halls)? Students can research the organizations within their community and discuss and document how their collections, exhibitions, and public access represent the city’s identity, history, and values.

Further Options:
- Contact organizations and make arrangements to view their collections. How do the collections of different community organizations compare?
- Make suggestions to your local organizations of collections or topics that you would like to see there.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

SCIENCE: What is taxonomy? What is classification? How are different types of living things named, categorized, and organized – and why? What can we learn about plants and animals by classifying or comparing them in different ways?

LANGUAGE ARTS: We all have collections in our minds – memories of what we have experienced that can be pulled out and organized into an ‘exhibition’ in our minds at any time. Choose a theme and curate an exhibition of your memories in a written collection of poetry or short stories. Consider what we can learn about you from your selection of memories.

LIBRARY SCIENCES: How are books organized in a library? Who invented the Dewey Decimal System? Talk to your school or local librarian about how this system works and what we can learn from its method of organization.

HISTORY: What are the differences between an art and a history museum? What can art and other primary sources tell us about history and culture? How and why do the organization and labeling of objects and exhibitions in art and history museums differ?

Extended Activity: Create a Museum in the Classroom based on a curriculum topic of your choosing, using materials that students find and create, complete with wall text, labels, an opening reception, and student talk! Contact us for assistance as needed.
MUSEUMS

The earliest museums started as personal collections of curious and acquisitive individuals. These natural, geological, archaeological, religious, or art objects were often stored and displayed in cases that were called *cabinets of curiosity*. An example of one of these cabinets can be seen on the front cover of this packet.

Eventually, people’s collections grew too large for boxes, too large for cabinets, and some too large for individual rooms. Those who did not have as much space as kings and other very wealthy individuals needed to find somewhere to store and display their collections. Some cabinets of curiosity were given to universities to be turned into public museums.

Artworks in early art museums in the late 19th and early 20th century were installed in what is now described as *salon style* – meaning the art was hung floor to ceiling in order to allow visitors the opportunity to view as many works as possible.

**Addison Gallery of American Art**

The Addison - which opened in 1931 with 400 works in its collection - and has grown to over 16,000 objects including drawings, photographs, decorative arts, and ship models along with paintings and sculptures. While some of the collection is always on view in the galleries, most of it is in storage until it goes on display.

When the Addison’s paintings are in storage (below left), they are hung on screens in alphabetical order by the artists’ last names. When they are on display in an exhibition (below right), they may be grouped in endless varieties of ways. An exhibition can be organized to show different types of art – such as paintings, watercolors, and prints – by one particular artist, such as the Winslow Homer example below. Exhibitions might also be arranged around a theme, an artistic process, a time period, a style, or another concept.
ARTISTS

Mark Dion

Some of Mark Dion’s art installations feature reorganized and reclassified objects from museum collections to make apparent the subjectivity of the curator and the history of the institution. He asks viewers to reexamine the decisions made by specialists and museums in order to form a clearer understanding of history, culture, and the natural world.

“I’m not looking for the newest museum, but I’m looking for the oldest that are very much a kind of window into the past in a sense. Your really get an idea of what people thought about the natural world at a particular time – their obsessions, their sensibilities, their biases.” (1)

Tony Feher

Soda bottles and baby food jars, fruit containers and wooden crates, potato chip bags and wire hangers are just a few of the mundane and massively produced materials from our everyday lives that Tony Feher uses to create his sculptures and installations.

His work Made Possible by the Generous Donation of Potato Chip Bags Economy Class Passengers and Crew Delta Flight 0784 DFW-LGA Palm Sunday 28 MAR 99 (pictured on front cover) is constructed from thirty empty bags of potato chips that would have otherwise been thrown away by the airline after the flight. Feher is not only recycling but also creating art from the materials of his everyday experience.

You!

What materials or collection found around your house can be transformed into a sculpture that tells a story, has value, and is artistic? What do the objects in their found state tell us about ourselves? about our community? about our culture? How can you (re)arrange or (re)classify the objects to change or create a narrative?

Extended Activity: Students can create collection-based or found object sculpture at home and then bring them in to create a Museum in the Classroom. Accompanying writing can include labels, wall text, and an exhibition invitation that explains the reasoning behind the materials they used and the connection between their art and any book or curriculum topic of your choosing.

**Discovery Through Comparative Research**

*Classification*, or the act of distributing things into classes or categories of the same type, allows us to better understand an object by seeing to what it is similar and different. While art museum curators sometimes research one particular artwork of interest, they also compare it to other objects by the same artist, from the same time period, or made through a similar process.

**How and why are objects in museums classified?**

While the Addison has 16,000 objects in its collection, some museums - such as the Robert S. Peabody Museum of Archaeology at Phillips Academy and the Museum of Natural History in New York - have a half million or more items in their collections! Each object that enters a museum collection is classified to keep it organized and to understand the context from which it comes and how it might be exhibited.

The Addison classifies, stores, records, and sometimes researches its collection of American art by type - paintings, sculpture, works on paper, photographs, decorative arts, and ship models. Museums with broader collections of art might organize their objects by era (classical, contemporary), historic period (ancient Rome, pre-Columbian), or location or culture (Islamic, Egyptian). Classifications reflect the ways that museums understand and value their collections.

**Where Else do We See Classification?**

*Taxonomy* is the science of finding, describing, classifying, and naming organisms in a hierarchical system. This system allows us to study and identify exactly how related two organisms are. Books in libraries are organized carefully as well through the *Dewey Decimal System* which helps you identify the fiction from the non-fiction from the biographies and the books on art, engineering, frogs, anatomy, etc. Even grocery stores classify foods so that we can easily find and compare products.

**How are museum objects labeled?**

Classification is made visible in the recording and labeling of objects. Many museums now have digital collections (some of which are available online) which have the basic facts about an object - who made it, when, where, from what - and sometimes more detailed information.

When an object is on exhibit, the label lists the standard facts and sometimes also includes interpretative texts by the curator that promote understanding of the object and its connection to others on view.

*A student collector-curator from The Children’s Place/Andover decided to label his rock collection by giving each one a descriptive name and indicating where the rock was found. Through this we can see the similarities and differences between the shapes and colors of the rocks and are given an opportunity to think about the each rock’s relationship to its current and previous environment.*
Writing Labels

Choose an object from your collection and identify as much information as you can about it.

This object was made by ____________________________

It is called _________________________________

It was made in the year __________________________

It is made of _________________________________

This is how big it is ____________________________

This is where/how I obtained it ______________________

It is a type of _______________________________ but it is different from others in this category because ________________________________

I would like to exhibit it alongside ____________________________ so that people notice ____________________________

This is why it is important ____________________________

This is what we can learn from it ____________________________

Through research I discovered that my object ____________________________
**Student Activity: Be the Curator**

**How would you curate an exhibition from the Addison's collection?**
Photocopy and cut out the images from the Addison’s collection of portraits (on the following page) and/or other images from magazines, photographs, newspapers, old books or catalogues, etc. Using this rendering of the one of the Addison’s galleries, experiment with different arrangements of the images to create your own exhibition that has a story or theme.

**How would you curate an exhibition from your own collection in a museum?**
Draw – or arrange pictures of – objects in your own collection to show how you would like to organize them in a museum to tell your story.

**Labels + Wall Text**
Write wall text (2–3 paragraphs of interpretation) and/or object labels for each object (factual details and 2–3 sentences of narrative) that give some insight into your interpretation of the objects while also leaving some discovery up to the viewer. You could also write a poem, narrative, or essay that interprets your display.
Curate an Exhibition

Cut out these images from the Addison’s collection of portraits and/or images from magazines, photographs, old books, etc, and experiment with different arrangements of them using the following layout of one of the Addison’s galleries on the previous page. Consider what you want visitors to your exhibition to know and how you will communicate your ideas through sequencing and juxtapositions.

Write the Labels

Think about how your ideas can be enhanced through labels. The bits of writing that accompany objects in a museum typically give some factual information and two to three sentences of interpretation. The labels are designed to increase the viewer’s understanding of the object — not describe what they can already see.

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Museum Journey
Select a museum in your local area to visit – maybe one that you have never visited before.

Your Mission: See what you can learn about the museum, its collections, and what important or interesting things they are trying to communicate by using the following questions and prompts as a guide.

Before Your Visit: From the internet or other sources, gather information about the types of collections and exhibitions you think you will find there and what you might learn about them.

During Your Visit: Through drawings or photographs, document your journey to and from the museum, and – as permitted – your experience inside the museum.

What is the name of your museum? ______________________________________________________________

Where is it located?___________________________________________________________________________

How far is it from where you live? from your school?________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

List some of the objects that you see in the museum:________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

How are the objects organized? What groupings do you see in each room, in each case, and/or on each wall?

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

Museums have curators who select what goes into the collections and exhibitions, decide how objects are displayed and labeled, and research and publish books and articles.

After exploring all or most of the rooms, select your favorite.

How are the objects in the room organized? Are they arranged in groupings or in a specific order?__________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

Are there things in the room that help you understand what the objects are? where they came from? who made them and why? ________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

Family Museum Activity: Museums + Collections cont.

Draw a map or picture(s) of your favorite room in the museum with some of the objects you see there.

What do you think the museum is trying to tell/show/teach you? Consider: the particular selection and arrangement of objects, the written information, the settings and building(s) that they are displayed in, and anything else that contributes to your understanding of the collections. ___________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

If you could add an object, a collection, or an exhibition to the museum, what would it be and why? _________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________
Christine Jee and her second grade class at the Frost School in Lawrence have embarked on a year-long Classroom Collections Project in September exploring the personal and cultural value of collections and museums. Each student has an opportunity to be the Collector of the Week, bringing in his or her collection to prompt writing, drawing, and creating - and inspiring interdisciplinary curriculum connections.

*Our first collector of the week was Gleanys; she brought in her collection of 26 bouncy balls. Students sorted the balls by color and compared her balls to different planets and even to the swirly toothpaste that we use to brush our teeth. We were able to use the many balls during math, as we counted them by 2s and talked about place value by putting them in groups of tens and ones. Finally, we made up addition word problems since Katarina, Mrs. Jee, and Gleanys all brought in more balls to add to the collection of balls. 26 + 2 + 1 + 1 = 30. At the end of the week, Gleanys worried and said, “I hope they all fit back in here!” as she gathered her objects to put back into her container. (Don’t worry. They did.)*

The students and Mrs. Jee collaboratively document their work and publish periodic newsletters with their photographs and notes from the varied activities. At the end of the year, the class will co-edit and self-publish a book using an online program such as blurb.com or Shutterfly, of which each family will receive a copy.

The students at the Frost School have inspired and been inspired by the work of the Kindergarten Prep students at The Children’s Place in Andover, as well as the 4th graders from the Job Lane School in Bedford, as they each explore ideas about collecting, collections, curating, and museums.

Mrs. Jee shared her stamp collection with students from The Children’s Place who in turn shared the documentation of their own collections they had created with their families.

Julie Bernson’s truck collection is inspiration for writing and drawing.

Jack’s rubber band collection, contributed to by other classes in the school, is explored through the creation of rubber band banjos.

Antonio displays his curated baseball card museum.

Tyler’s rock collection museum inspired by a family trip to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
Online Resources

Browse or search the Addison Gallery’s collection online to find images of your favorite works anytime – or check out the community portfolios for sample themes and ideas:  http://accessaddison.andover.edu

Create custom art galleries and share them online or in the classroom with this learning tool from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: http://educators.mfa.org

Print Resources

Articulates why and how to do Museum in the Classroom projects in order to enhance curriculum and provide many lenses and methodologies for studying a topic and making the students’ work visible.

An article from 1921 in which connections are made between collecting, classifying, and other educational outcomes.

Describes the rise of the museums as they transformed from cabinets of curiosity to centers of civic pride and prestige.

Encourages active observation and documentation of the world around us.

Artists Working from Collections

Mark Dion (b. 1961)
Mark Dion examines the ways in which public institutions and their collections shape our understanding of history, culture, and the natural world by asking viewers to reexamine objects classified by specialists and museums.

Joseph Cornell (1903-1972)
http://www.pem.org/sites/cornell
Joseph Cornell combined collections of commonplace objects – coins, postage stamps, rubber balls maps, and newspaper and magazine clippings – to create his own worlds in collages and shadowboxes.

Song Dong (b. 1966)
http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/961
Song Dong’s installation the Museum of Modern Art of his mother’s collection of every little object and scrap that could be used in another way gives order to her life and history.

Tony Feher (b. 1956)
Tony Feher collects the excess of our everyday lives – plastic and glass bottles, coat hangers, fruit containers, wooden crates, potato chip bags, etc. – and gives the usually discarded items new meaning in his sculpture and installations.

Fred Wilson (b. 1954)
http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/wilson
Wilson rearranges the art and artifacts found in museum collections in order to question how curators shape interpretations and biases of historical truth and influence cultural and artistic value through selection, display, and labels.
These books for students can be used to investigate collecting and museums and to explore art, artists, and objects.

**Picture Books for Young Learners**

When Prudy's extensive collection grows too large, she regroups, does some research, and transforms her collections into The Prudy Museum of Indescribable Wonderment.

When Max's brothers refuse to share their impressive collections of stamps and coins, Max decides to collect words. Addresses multiple aspects of collecting and the importance of organization and arranging.

Celeste notices that the elephants are no longer using the train station, so she suggests that she and Babar turn it into a museum with their art collection and open it to the community. Addresses questions that children often ask about art and museums.

Hannah likes to gather things and sort them by size, shape, and color. She finds a new way to organize her collections by making them into art in order to bring them all into school for display.

Picasso (as a pig) and Matisse (as a bull) develop a friendship, become competitive with each other, and finally become supportive friends. A great book for teaching about artists' styles.

A wordless book about a student who gets lost - literally and figuratively - on a class field trip to an art museum and has a fantastical experience in the museum's map collection. A great prompt for students writing and sharing their own interpretations.

A “pack rat” whose extensive, eclectic collection fills the shelves of an entire room discovers that a collection starts with what is important to the collector – and not necessarily to other people.

Three mice discover a postcard of a portrait painting, look at it from many perspectives, and make their own art in various media inspired by it.

**Books for Older Readers**

An exciting, touching, and sometimes humorous story about a brother and sister who run away from home and hide in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, exploring its art, artifacts, and mysteries.

A bilingual (English and Spanish) collection of 25 poems that prompt readers to reconsider seemingly ordinary objects.