
THE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM, CANADIAN MUSEUM OF CIVILIZATION

Ottawa, Canada

A Sensory Ethnography

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Several strides away from the Canadian Museum of Civilization's ticket office is the Children's Museum, a profoundly sensorial space that promises memorable learning experiences for its young visitors. As the visitor enters the museum, he approaches the Passport Desk. Here, museumgoers are given passport booklets that give the young globetrotters permission to visit the other exhibits. They can then stamp their passports at each place, including Nigeria, Mexico and Indonesia, and are thus sent on a pre-determined sensory journey.

The visitor first comes across the Theatre, and is drawn in by its energy and liveliness. Upon entering the reconstructed Theatre, the visitor is greeted by authentic Indian dancers, dressed in traditional saris, who are in the midst of answering questions about their culture and heritage. The children's parents ask questions while the children wander around the space restlessly and inattentively, in search for exciting, unfamiliar experiences. Behind the dancers, the children find themselves in the Theatre's dressing room, where fur-trimmed stilettos, cowboy boots, vintage costumes, and feather boas are scattered on every surface. Light bulb mirrors cast shadows over heavy velvet drapes with gold drawstrings, and dressing robes are thrown over a red velour chaise. Visitors are encouraged not only to look at objects in the dressing room, but to touch and experiment with them as well. The disarray of the Theatre sensorially immerses visitors by giving the exhibit a "lived-in" appearance that, in turn, heightens the authentic feel of the space.

After leaving the Theatre, the visitors scurry onto a Pakistani bus parked patiently in an exhibit called Crossroads. Dozens of children hurriedly board and exit the bus, reveling in the vehicle's vibrant colours, textures, and lights. Stacks of plastic valises wait to be brought on board. Vinyl red and green paisley seats squeak as children slide onto them. Gilded metal and vibrant paint attract hoards of travellers in an attempt to recreate an immersive experience for the visitor as he makes his way to the International Village.

The first stop in the International Village is an impressive Nigerian gida, or compound, whose white concrete facade creates the illusion that visitors are entering an authentic home. Once inside, they watch a Nigerian man play drums on a small television screen while trying on Nigerian clothing in front of a mirror. In the backyard of the complex, a giant mortar and pestle provides the visitor with the opportunity to grind corn into a fine powder. Nearby, he can play authentic Nigerian music on a set of congo drums through the mere touch of a button.

The visitor has little difficulty navigating his way through the busy space since the exhibits in the International Village, such as the Mexican casa or the Bedouin camp, are closely situated. The visitor soon finds himself at the Market Bazaar, whose interactive, life-sized exhibits are staggeringly popular amongst the young visitors. Here, interactivity is coupled with landscape to create an intensely dynamic environment. Dozens of children scurry between international market places, such as Mexico's Mercado de Artesania, a French Boulangerie, a Bloemenkraan Haaskraam from the Netherlands, and a Greek Psaragora, as they acquire as many sensory stimuli as possible. In France, young customers pick up varieties of plastic bread and pastries from an assortment of wicker baskets. In the Netherlands, artificial tulips of all colours wait to be purchased in tall, tin buckets, while wooden clogs and wheels of cheese are displayed nearby. In Greece, wagons of mussels are perched beneath seaweed-filled nets while massive, wooden barrels of olive oil and kalamata olives soaked in brine await hungry shoppers. In Mexico, children are overwhelmed by the sheer amount and variety of plastic fruits and vegetables that wait to be stocked, weighed, and purchased. Plastic cauliflowers, potatoes, and melons fly through the air and roll on the ground as children go from one marketplace to the next, bringing fish into the boulangerie and stacking eggplant in the Dutch market stand.

After exiting the Market Bazaar, the visitor realizes that the Children's Museum is not like other museums; it does not house real or genuine artifacts and is instead filled with mock authenticity and reconstructions. Mock authenticity is central to the Secrets in the Sand exhibit, which is located in a massive pyramid at the far end of the Children's Museum. Nearby, a plastic camel attracts countless children as they push and shove in order to mount it before beginning their journey along the Nile. Artificial date trees protrude from mounds of sand, creating a shady oasis around the camel and the pyramid. Upon entering the pharaoh's resting place, visitors come face to face with a burial chamber that houses a sarcophagus. They listen to a boy explain the importance of the afterlife in ancient Egyptian civilization in a video overhead. An antechamber hosts an interactive activity where children match hieroglyphs with letters of the Indo-European alphabet, seemingly thrilled that they have unlocked secrets from the past. They also play backgammon on artificial ebony tables and chairs. Surrounding wall paintings depict everyday activities such as playing the lyre, fishing, and making bread. Although the pyramid itself is reconstructed, the visitors in the Secrets of the Sand exhibit attempt to sense as many new stimuli as possible. However, the pyramid's small display of authentic Egyptian artifacts on loan from the Royal Ontario Museum are altogether ignored; the young visitors are more interested in hands-on experiences than in peering through a glass case at a mummified cat and an alabaster canopic jar.

As the visitor exits the pyramid and passes by a Bedouin camp, where visitors can try on Bedouin clothing and experience their nomadic dwelling style, he reaches the Port of Entry. A massive cargo ship called the Vagabond, painted in vibrant reds, greens, and yellows, is completely overrun by children. The most popular aspect of the ship is a manually controlled crane that allows visitors to hook parcels and crates in order to move them on and off the ship. The interactive nature of the crane provides countless opportunities for children to engage their senses. The visitor then makes his way toward the exit of the museum and passes by an arts and crafts room, where a group of children are in the process of making toy airplanes. He then exits the Children's Museum and is surprised to find himself back in the Canadian Museum of Civilization, amidst countless aboriginal totem poles. The visitor strolls down the hallway, away from the sensory playground.