

# Tales from Europe

## *Why Are We so Anxious about Children's Exhibition and Program Topics?*

Claudia Haas

**O**n a cold Sunday afternoon in November 2011, a group of eager, five-to-seven-year-old Viennese children followed a museum educator through an exhibition called *Wintertales* in the Kunsthistorische Museum, Austria's National Arts Museum. While the museum educator tried to draw the kids' attention to the ice skaters in one of Brueghel's winter paintings, a sudden restlessness rippled among the children. Their attention was attracted by a painting hanging on the opposite wall. This very disturbing panel showed an injured, barely dressed woman with a small child lying on a snow-covered rock. Three monks were leaning over the woman while a fourth monk was helping a visibly injured man nearby. The children were completely absorbed by the dramatic and alarming painting. Questions came among them: "Is this woman dead? What happened to her? Why is she not properly dressed? Why is there blood in the snow? What are these men doing?" When the museum educator tried to respond, an immediate uproar came from the children's agitated chaperoning parents preventing the educator from answering the children's urgent questions. The parents urged their kids to concentrate on the bland and far less compelling details of the Breughel painting. Their attention forced back to the harmless and comforting winter scene, children were left alone with their curiosity, anxiety and disturbance about what they saw across the room. Avoiding any risk associated with provoking parents, the educator failed to respond to the children's needs and desires to discover the unknown. The "dangerous" topic was successfully avoided, and the harmless, "child-appropriate" program continued.

This short incident raised several interesting questions, including the following:

- Why do children's museum exhibitions and most museum education programs in general avoid "dangerous" content and difficult or complex topics?
- When choosing exhibition topics, do museum staff have the children in mind or their caregivers, teachers and exhibition sponsors?
- Are museums afraid of losing sponsors by offering exhibits or programs about difficult issues?
- Are they fearful of losing visitors if par-



*A visitor to ZOOM's exhibit Escape and Survival rests in a typical refugee camp bed.*

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ents and teachers opt to avoid exhibits or programs about difficult issues?

Looking at the variety of exhibition themes in children's museums worldwide we rarely find topics that deal with the darker sides of life—loss, death, poverty, danger, fear and anxiety—even though children are confronted by these issues everyday. The typical children's museum exhibition topics are frequently inoffensive and comforting with strong connections to the school curriculum, concentrating on science, humanities, art, daily life and environmental issues. By choosing these themes, children's museums create a strong bond with schools and serve as places for out-of-school learning. Concentrating on the positive aspects of all topics and avoiding any dangerous questions serves as a concession to parents and educators who want to provide their children and themselves with a non-controversial museum experience.

But are these safe themes really exciting for children? Do they stimulate their thoughts and emotions? Do they arouse children's curiosity and their desire to learn more about what is in front of them? Finally, does a steady diet of safe topics prepare children for the difficulties and obstacles awaiting them in a more and more challenging, competitive and complex world?

Compared to children's exhibitions, children's books regularly incorporate themes such as death, fear, loneliness, shame and even brutality. Fictitious heroes are frequently orphans or children who have lost one parent. Pippi Longstocking, a heroine for many European children, lives alone in her house with a monkey and a horse—

her mother has died and her father sails the oceans. She is a competent child who masters her life in often hostile surroundings. Harry Potter defends himself against the most atrocious monsters and enemies; he suffers in an unfair school environment with cruel teachers and school mates. Death is an always-present companion through all seven Harry Potter volumes. Another classic example is Alice who experiences danger, horror and anxiety while travelling through and discovering Wonderland. All of these children's books have something in common: they are full of suspense, they stimulate the child's fantasy and emotions, they provoke questions, they make a child tremble and they make him smile, they open secret doors but finally return him to the comforts of home. The heroes are competent survivors and their stories assure children that pain and difficulty exist but can be overcome. All of these books also are enormously popular among children and parents. They are read in schools and they are often found on the bedside tables of adults, as good night stories.

So why do children's museums avoid risks and stay with safe exhibit topics? Why don't they offer more exhibitions about complex themes that look at some of life's problems and show children how to master them? Why do they mostly stick to safe and conservative interpretations of the same old themes—health, water, city, market places and science laboratories—often creating a peaceful but artificial world?

In the history of children's museums only a few have been pioneers in raising difficult and controversial questions. Boston

Children's Museum in the 1970s led the way with two controversial and groundbreaking exhibits for children, *What If You Couldn't...?*, an exhibit about disabilities, and *Endings: An Exhibit on Death and Loss*. In 2003, Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum Junior presented *Paradise and Co.* an exhibit about Iran's Islamic culture, a flashpoint topic following the events of 9/11 and the war in Iran. But controversial children's museum exhibits like these are not the norm.

Although European museums receive more public funding than their U.S. counterparts, which may account for why they may have a slightly easier time presenting exhibitions with risky content, for all museums, audience response is key to long-term viability. Looking closely at recently successful European children's exhibitions one notices a change of paradigm. A growing number of children's museums is offering more complex exhibition topics that deal with death, human migration or the challenges of globalism. They are raising provocative questions in their environmental exhibitions about the scarcity of water or the impact of poverty. Children's reactions to these exhibitions are generally very positive, but the reactions of adults—especially teachers and parents—differ. And the pattern varies from country to country. In one country, museum attendance dropped when a controversial exhibition was presented, but in other countries the reactions among caregivers and parents to similar exhibitions have generally been very positive. This audience variation can be seen by comparing examples in Berlin and Vienna.

In 2006/2007, ZOOM Children's Museum Vienna (Austria) featured an exhibition on worldwide population migration called *Escape and Survival*. The exhibition was developed in collaboration with the non-governmental organization Medecins sans Frontiers (MSF), an international humanitarian aid organization that provides emergency medical assistance to populations in

danger in more than sixty countries. MSF sent its staff to talk about their experiences first hand with children and to assist them in exploring the ZOOM exhibition. As the title suggests, *Escape and Survival* did not avoid difficult and complex issues. It told the story of the 35 million displaced people worldwide fleeing from hunger, war and oppression, losing their homes and often their families in the struggle to survive. But the

fugitive tents and shelters. They learned how to organize access to clean water, how to ration food and what the main medical concerns are among this uprooted population. Children gained a sense of how it feels to live together in cramped spaces and how some people cope with very difficult situations.

According to ZOOM director Elisabeth Menasse, the main concern in presenting the exhibition was how to avoid traumatizing young audiences and in particular how the exhibition content might affect a child who belongs to a refugee family visiting the museum. Menasse involved a children's psychologist in the development process who carefully wrote and edited exhibition text. On the psychologist's recommendation, refugee situations and conditions were simply reported; exhibit text avoided suggesting any direct involvement in their often dire plights by eliminating prompt words like "imagine...". Photos and films were chosen very carefully. Museum staff were trained by MSF staff on how to deal with children who showed reactions of shock or strong disturbance.

By collaborating with experts, information about the refugees' tragedies was clearly presented as were the organizations and people who help refugees to survive and improve their living conditions. This brought a positive aspect into a difficult and painful topic, and visiting MSF staff served as positive role models for the children visiting ZOOM.

Audience response during the exhibition's six-month run was generally positive. *Escape and Survival* attracted visitors who had never come to the museum before. Parents and children were equally fascinated by the content, and according to

Menasse, there were no difficult situations.

Yet, the ZOOM audience does not fully welcome the opportunity to explore all serious topics. When presented with the exhibition *Tell Me Something about Death*, audience numbers dropped drastically during the exhibition's run. Viennese teachers and



*Partnering with Medecin sans Frontiers, ZOOM Children's Museum presented the exhibit Escape and Survival that told the story of the more than 35 million displaced people worldwide. To balance the negative aspects of the story, the exhibit encouraged kids to engage in typical refugee camp activities such as carrying water, constructing tents and cooking in camp kitchens.*

exhibition contained some positive messages as well. Kids learned about how refugees are being helped, taken in by fugitive camps where they are provided with clean water, food, a safe place to rest and medical treatment. In the exhibition children engaged in hands-on experiences, learning how to build



parents apparently decided not to expose their children to such a difficult issue. However, it is worth noting that children visiting the exhibition showed very positive responses to the topic. It seems that in the city of Freud, Viennese adults have a strong aversion to the topic.

Not so for adult audiences in Germany. In 2001, *Tell Me Something about Death* was developed by FEZ Children's Museum as its inaugural exhibit. Located in what was formerly known as East Berlin, Germany, FEZ is situated within a cultural family center and specializes in exhibitions with socially demanding, complex and often explosive topics for children ages six years and older. *Tell Me Something about Death* raised questions like: How do we age? What does death look like? What are the secrets of growth and decay? What is the relationship between time and aging? In the exhibition, kids went on an expedition into the afterworld. They learned how death is dealt with in different cultures. They visited an Egyptian pyramid and met Osiris, the god of death. They also had some fun mixing a life-extending survival drink used by ancient mystics.

In the last ten years this exhibition has been successfully shown in fifteen different cities in Germany as well as at ZOOM in Vienna, Austria. Contrary to the negative response of the Vienna audience, the reaction among audiences in German cities has mostly been positive. According to Claudia Lorenz, director of FEZ Children's Museum, the key to the exhibition's acceptance in Germany, at least among the school group audience, was to invite teachers to see the exhibition beforehand in order to address their concerns, remove their fears and overcome their inhibitions.

Lorenz and Menasse both agree that the challenge in developing exhibitions with difficult themes for children is avoiding triviality while at the same time not being overly complex. Achieving the right content balance of clear and honest information that is not too simple and not too difficult is key. It is also important to have confidence in the abilities and healthy curiosity of children and to be aware that young audiences are competent. And, like all exhibitions—but especially for those about difficult topics—the exhibition has to work for grownups, too. As caregivers, they have to be convinced that even complex themes and issues can be discussed and experienced with children, and the best exhibits will show them how.

According to Lorenz, the design of a potentially difficult exhibition has a strong impact on whether it attracts children, takes away their concerns and fears and enables them to engage with the topic. She proposes a poetic approach to help children digest heavy issues and instill the possibility of resolution and change. Much like children's books, exhibitions should create a certain poetic atmosphere making kids curious but not too anxious. They should include the right balance between the negative and positive aspects of the issues. And perspectives should be offered on how to master difficulties and avoid hopelessness.

Both Lorenz and Menasse are convinced that children's museums should risk offering exhibitions with more challenging topics in order to prepare children for a more complex world but also to help them develop compassion and empathy for one another. In their opinion, children's museums should intensify their collaborations and share their experiences in developing riskier exhibi-

tions. FEZ and ZOOM have recently collaborated with FRieda and FreD Children's Museum in Graz, Austria, and Children's Museum Neu-Ulm (Germany) in developing *Welcome@Hotel Global*, a 2011 MetLife Foundation and ACM Promising Practice Award-winning exhibition about the positive and negative effects of globalism. In addition to sharing the financial risk, the museum collaborative initiates professional dialogue and enables museums to learn from a shared pool of experiences.

By the way, the author of this article revisited the Kunsthistorische Museum and found out that the story of the painting that attracted children's attention and shocked their parents actually had a very positive ending. French painter Louis Hersent's work, *Monks of Mount St. Gotthard* showed a family assaulted by bandits but saved by the compassion of the monks of the St. Gotthard monastery. Pity the whole story has not been told to the children—and their parents.



*Claudia Haas was the founding director of the ZOOM Kindermuseum in Vienna, which opened in 2001; she currently serves on the museum's board. Haas received a Ph.D. in art history from the University of Vienna in 1978 and now works as a museum consultant specializing in planning visitor-friendly museums to attract culturally diverse audiences.*

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