

Frist Art Museum Martin ArtQuest Gallery: Case Study

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Introduction



Figure 1: Frist Art Museum, Nashville, Tennessee. John Schweikert, photographer

The Frist Art Museum (FAM) in Nashville, Tennessee, is home to the 4,000 square foot Martin ArtQuest (MAQ) Gallery. FAM opened in 2001 as a non-collecting institution with a vision to inspire people to see their world in new ways through art and a mission to offer high quality exhibitions with related educational programs and community engagement activities. It was the culmination of almost a decade-long civic dialogue and planning process in the 1990s led by The Frist Foundation that brought the Frist Center for the Visual Arts into being. The institution relied on the

community's input again when its name was changed to the Frist Art Museum in 2018. With an average of 12-15 exhibitions per year, visitors have seen exhibitions from all the continents—except Antarctica—as well as from premier art institutions around the world. Artists of all eras and styles have been presented at the Frist, including international and local artists, college and K-12 students, teaching art faculty, and community artists. These exhibitions also represent a diversity of artistic creativity and mediums: assemblages, cars, decorative arts, fashion, glass, installations, manuscripts, paintings, performances, photography, prints, sculpture, textiles, and videos.

Martin ArtQuest (MAQ), an integral component of the institution since its inception, has been a constant favorite of visitors of all ages. It is seen as a place to explore art, creativity, and imagination. The hands-on, accessible stations provide individuals and small group opportunities to explore a range of art-making media—drawing, printmaking, animation, painting, and sculpture—each using high-quality materials with the support of professional educators. The educational approach to creating MAQ was based on enduring understandings of art, a strong focus on the elements and principles of art, and offering visitors opportunities to look at, talk about, and make art all in response to the changing exhibitions at FAM.

MAQ's location, adjacent to the upper-level galleries, sets the space apart from interactive galleries in other art museums that are often located on lower levels or away from the main galleries. Here, everyone is invited into MAQ to explore, create, and make connections in response to what they have seen and experienced in the nearby adjacent galleries.

MAQ's footprint also extends well beyond the museum. The Frist Art Museum's education team creates companion programming that is available online, including lesson plans and evergreen minute-long art videos that teachers may draw on for their classrooms grouped into four categories: Connect, Create, Explore, and Discover. In collaboration with Nashville Public Television, FAM produced *ArtQuest: Art is All Around You*, which won 2013 and 2014 Emmy® Awards from the Mid-South Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for Children's Programming. These resources and other related home and classroom activities are found online at FristKids.org.

The family audience is an integral part of the Frist Art Museum's 2017-2021 Strategic Plan. Families were part of the four major (but not exclusive) segments of the community identified as a focus during this strategic plan: (1) families and children; (2) museum visitors seeking contemplative and meaningful experiences with art; (3) diverse audiences, especially nontraditional museum visitors and those with special needs; and (4) pedestrian traffic, tourists, and a youthful demographic. The MAQ renovation was a key strategic goal for 2018. In addition, staff was tasked with continuing to seek visitor input on the space, as well as having a regular peer review.



Figure 2: *Art is All Around You* Logo

Also, in 2017, the Frist Art Museum (FAM) board of trustees made an intentional commitment to Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion (DEAI) with the adoption of an official policy to reinforce the institutional commitment to mandates and core values established at the founding. Since then, staff and trustees have pursued the development of an implementation plan and are currently working to deepen the commitment through the creation of a detailed plan with strategies, measurable goals, and a timeline. Frist educators review programs and activities to ensure all the DEAI goals are part of the planning process.

FLING Study Key Takeaways

The FLING study allowed us to understand visitation patterns and see the full family experience—exhibition galleries and MAQ, and sometimes the Café and Gift Shop—in a new light. On average, families in the MUV study split their time evenly between the exhibition galleries and MAQ, with the visit to MAQ following time spent with the exhibitions—the reverse of what staff anticipated¹ Families stressed the importance and the value of interactive galleries in art museums to offer a place that stimulates interesting discussions, a place to understand and love art, and an enjoyable experience for the whole family.² In the Longitudinal Case Study, we also saw commonalities between the museum experience and other family leisure activities. For example: the experiences met the varied interests of family members while reinforcing family values; the experiences were active – not passive; there were opportunities for family conversation; and the spaces sparked creativity, imagination, independent thinking, and self-expression.³

Conversations with case study families revealed the significant value they placed on interactive galleries. They are seen as safe places to relax and unwind while engaging in rich sensory

activities that foster a love and understanding of art. The interactive gallery provided freedom for children—the ability to explore and engage in creative play, together or independently. Older, self-directed children tended to choose their own activity. As one teenager explained, the interactive gallery helped them realize “that I am a creative soul.” Unsurprisingly, the most frequent learning behavior observed was looking at art, followed by explaining, identifying, and evaluating. Smaller trends in learning behaviors were reading, self-reflection, interpreting, describing, inviting, remembering, and confirming.⁴

Understanding the behavioral patterns of families influenced our approach to the complete renovation of the space in 2018 and to ensuring that the new MAQ was both an integrated, as well as a standalone experience for families.

Learning in the 21st Century

At the inception of MAQ, current art educational theory and practice focused on talking about and making art, as well as making meaningful connections. As educational theory evolved, so did museum interactive spaces. Policy makers and education leaders sought new pathways to prepare learners for success in our rapidly changing, information-driven world. The movement to embrace 21st Century Learning skills became a universal, human response to society’s rush toward a tech-integrated social and economic environment and the need to equip learners with flexibility and innovation. With the fostering of primary and critical skills—Creativity, Critical thinking, Communication, and Collaboration (the 4 C’s)—education was retooled to amplify not only the knowledge but the individual learner’s skills necessary for a changing world. As one’s confidence and adaptability are increased, this fosters empowerment and ownership over an individual’s experiences. The concept of “edutainment” manifested in new and exciting ways within informal learning spaces across the United States. Educational experiences were elevated through new venues of exploration like gamification, and physical, tactile experiences were enhanced with opportunities geared toward process rather than product. Additionally, experiential, hands-on learning was garnering new interest from teens and adults in our increasingly screen-dominated world.

FLING’s Motivation, Use, and Value (MUV) study told us that our visitors not only desired to learn artmaking skills but also social skills.⁵ Families became accustomed to museum experiences designed to engage the whole family in enjoyable, meaningful ways. FAM educators began developing new concepts in learning with multiple entry points and multifaceted outcomes. Nearly twenty years after the concept of 21st Century Learning was introduced, it is still valid and evolving, spreading across the world with some seeing a 5th C, “Contributing,” becoming part of the natural progression of the movement.

As MAQ’s new design was developed, the Frist Art Museum’s education team utilized progressive learning models incorporating the 21st Century Framework while continuing to nurture artistic interests and skills across generations and using lessons learned from FLING. The design responds to both the prevalent cultural interest in hands-on learning, and an upsurge in the popularity of shared learning experiences. MAQ’s friendly art educators and volunteers continue to welcome and encourage visitors and guide their exploration of both looking at and creating art, through quality interactions that visitors can enjoy repeatedly, with different results each

time. MAQ participants will continue to “grow up” in the space as they develop their artistic voices and interpret Frist Art Museum exhibitions.

Accepting Change

During the research phase of the 2018 MAQ renovation, we quickly recognized we should not “throw the baby out with the bath water.” MAQ in theory and value was “not broken,” but we needed to identify the space’s strengths and weaknesses, keep components that were successful and beloved, and approach change cautiously, with an eye to the future. We learned through FLING that families use museums to learn about themselves, the world, and one another.⁶

Our forever goal of “meeting the learner where they are” imbued meaning and intent as MAQ’s overall space, individual ArtStations, and activities were reimagined with the contemporary learner in mind. Tiered learning goals that begin with the 4 C’s distill temporary exhibition content into unique low-tech, high-tech, individual, and group experiences. And as it was from the beginning, MAQ facilitators and volunteers continue to ensure positive, visitor-focused encounters with the educational content. Some highlights from the MAQ renovation plan included:

- a bright, open entrance where visitors are greeted;
- full glass doors (replacing solid black ones) that connect MAQ to other education spaces, inviting visitors to move freely between galleries and studios;
- flexible space near the front of the gallery to create and showcase sizable collaborative art projects and community sculptures;
- an LED-lit wall where participants can explore light and color as they create large-scale patterns and designs;
- enlargement of the popular baby and toddler area to allow more participation through both tactile exploration and a reading nook;
- reconfiguration of the large artmaking stations to improve functionality, encourage collaboration, and offer access to high-quality materials;
- expansion of the animation station to accommodate more participants and provide room for collaboration and creativity;
- an innovative transmedia station where visitors’ movements interact with technology and with each other to create imaginative shapes and forms; and
- accessibility to all ArtStations, activities, and areas of the space for visitors of all abilities.

Elevating the Aesthetic

The Martin ArtQuest (MAQ) Gallery’s 2018 renovation project occurred simultaneously with the Frist Art Museum’s (FAM) larger rebranding initiative, transitioning from the Frist Center for the Visual Arts to the Frist Art Museum (FAM). A minimalist aesthetic was universally embraced to simplify communications in print, online, and in environmental design. FAM’s new look was a welcome refresh that felt modern but complemented the museum’s 1933 Art Deco building.

When choosing a design firm, we looked for a team who presented fresh, new ideas about incorporating FAM’s modernized aesthetic. Our concerns were valid— would this approach to design create a *less* welcoming environment? Would a drastic change to the appearance of our space somehow affect its meaning? Would continuing our historic building’s visual story into the MAQ space somehow fall flat with our multigenerational audience? In the end, once the space was realized, visitors of all ages embraced the new design and space.

MARTIN ARTQUEST GALLERY



GALLERY RENDERING
The renovated MAQ will be inherently flexible and adaptable, with an efficient and durable (15-year) framework for future upgrades and enhancements to keep MAQ fresh and inviting.

ARTQUEST MARTIN

THE FRISCH | roto

Figure 3: Martin ArtQuest Rendering by Roto Design Group for 2018 renovation

Overall Design: Minimalism, Safety, Durability, Flexibility

With a nod to our Art Deco roots, the new design successfully married functionality and beauty. In the FLING study, parents regarded both physical and psychological safety as a value of the interactive gallery. A societal trend towards minimalist design in the twenty-teens ushered in associations between clean lines and open space with physical cleanliness and safety. Creating a comfortable space for our visitors meant clear sight lines, bright light, and easy-to-clean surfaces. A minimalist color palette not only provides a backdrop for the people, artwork, and activities in MAQ to be in full focus, but research also told us that it aids in early developmental learning and accessibility. MAQ not only serves individuals and families but also large groups, so durable surfaces are key to the space’s longevity. FAM’s ever-changing exhibition cycle requires great flexibility in the design of the individual ArtStations. The renovation provided an opportunity to create tiered interpretive experiences in new and exciting ways: educators could update graphics, didactics, activities, and manipulatives in varying degrees quickly and easily thanks to the innovative and highly flexible ArtStation design.

While MAQ’s physical footprint stayed the same, the renovation greatly opened up the existing space, expanded its functionality and flexibility, and created clear sight lines. Accessibility for all visitors remained a core commitment in the renovation. To address environmental issues that affect visitors, sound baffling was added to reduce noise, and increased light and contrast to improve visibility throughout the gallery. New technology elements were added to enhance visitors’ participation in activities on multiple levels and encourage them to share their creations with their social media circles.



Figure 4: Martin ArtQuest Gallery Entrance 2018, John Schweikert, photographer

Equity and Access

Education is at the core of the FAM’s mission with a priority on arts access to those 18 years old and younger. Free admission for this group not only removes barriers for school, homeschool, and summer camp visitors, but relieves the cost burden for the everyday family museum visitor. Access to MAQ is no different, with all types of learners using the space on a given day. Special attention was paid to MAQ’s varied use in the redesign and a new space was dedicated to greeting visitors and distributing information. Since the opening of the Frist, an ongoing relationship with the Tennessee Disabilities Coalition (TDC) allowed us to

understand the needs of our visitors with varying abilities. As we approached the final stages of developing the new MAQ, consultants from the TDC advised us on how our updates may be adapted for equitable use. This resulted in the addition of a wheelchair accessible sink, adjustments to the ArtStation design, and a comprehensive look at the presentation of informational didactics and manipulatives.

Representation Matters

The three-museum study from FLING told us that another factor in creating “a safe place” for visitors was fostering a sense of belonging.⁷ Diversity and inclusion efforts have transformed FAM over the past ten years, changing the way we approach exhibition selection, programming, and staffing. In the new MAQ, it was critical for us to extend these efforts to the way we present information to our learners. Reevaluating our presentation methods made us recognize inclusivity was not complex. In reality, it could be found through



Figure 5: Guests at Martin ArtQuest Gallery Animation Station. Tommy Lawson, photographer

simplification and equitable entry points. There is empowerment in self-sufficiency. MAQ didactics were redesigned with images accompanying text to accommodate the not-yet-reader and the non-English reader. Images in didactics and designs for manipulatives were created to celebrate the diversity of MAQ’s visitors, so they may encounter people who look like themselves when exploring MAQ’s activities.



Figure 6: Example of Martin ArtQuest Gallery Activity Didactic

What’s Next?

In 2019, the answer to “What’s next for MAQ?” led to conversations about extending our efforts towards visitors with different abilities. The placement of an occupational therapy student intern in 2019 gave us greater insight on how we could better accommodate learners with dexterity challenges, or limited vision, hearing, and/or mobility. We began developing social stories and creating test spaces for visitors on the Autism spectrum. Educators are excited about implementing this new and exciting research as we look ahead.

Future renovations and changes to the space will respond to changes in our world and social interactions. Families will continue to be the focus of this development, as will the need for visitors of all ages to experience the same creativity, wonder, and excitement in exploring the arts communally and individually.



Figure 7: Example of Martin ArtQuest Gallery Shadow Play Animation Scene

About the Authors

Samantha Andrews, Assistant Director for Experiential Learning, Frist Art Museum, has served the Frist Art Museum in a variety of roles including visitor engagement, volunteer management, and experiential learning. For 20 years she has engaged people of varying ages and abilities, designed museum interactives, developed programs, and created experiential learning opportunities. Andrews has collaborated on two renovations to the Frist Art Museum's interactive space the Martin ArtQuest Gallery. She was the recipient of two Emmy awards for her work on the television series *ArtQuest: Art is All Around You* and developed the related website *FristKids.org*. Andrews has presented at various conferences including SEMC, AAM, and NAEA and was the Regional Director for the Southeast for the American Association of Museum Volunteers, 2009-2012.

Anne Henderson, Director of Education and Engagement at the Frist Art Museum, has over thirty years of museum education experience at large and small institutions. She is the founding director of education and engagement at the Frist Art Museum, Nashville, and was previously at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, and The Meadows Museum, Southern Methodist University, Dallas. She has served on various grant review panels for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and National Endowment for the Arts. She was the project director for an IMLS research grant on family learning in interactive galleries received by the Frist Art Museum in partnership with the Speed Museum, Louisville, and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta. Ms. Henderson currently oversees the education and engagement budget that includes visitor services and programming for adults, youth, families, community partners, and educators through workshops, lectures, multimedia programs, film series, tours, exhibition materials, outreach programs, and the interactive education gallery Martin ArtQuest Gallery.

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ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Luke et. al., 2011(b)
 - ² Luke et. al., 2011(c)
 - ³ Adams & Ancelet, 2011.
 - ⁴ Ibid.
 - ⁵ Luke et. al., 2011(c)
 - ⁶ Adams & Ancelet, 2011; Luke, et. al., 2011(c)
 - ⁷ Ibid.