

Van Houchez Family

[The Greene Family Learning Gallery] is helpful for me to have when I have a baby. Plus it is good for Andre to explore with other kids there, because he is home with me all day. Andre loves to get out where there are other kids and he plays with the cushy blocks and likes to draw on the boards and it is fun for him to do projects with other kids. – Genevieve Van Houchez

The Van Houchez family made their first visit to the High Museum of Art in 2008, when the children, Celine, Andre, and Jacques were just five, two, and a few months old respectively. After winning a membership to the High Museum through a silent auction, Genevieve says she wanted to take the children to Toddler Thursday to “check it out.” Genevieve recalls discovering the Greene Family Learning Gallery that day and thinking how “convenient” the space was, especially as a place where she could sit and feed her newborn and the older children could play and be creative “on someone else’s table.” She also recalls not visiting the galleries on that occasion or the several visits after, saying that they were mostly “confined to the downstairs and segregated from the actual artwork, which is probably good when you have toddlers.” It is unclear when the Van Houchez family decided to venture into the galleries. However, by the start of this study in 2009, the family was visiting special exhibitions and the permanent galleries fairly regularly.



Van Houchez Family (from top left):
Genevieve, Jean-Francois, Celine, Andre,
and Jacques.

As a stay-at-home mother and homeschooling parent, Genevieve says she usually takes the children to the High Museum during the day, when Jean-Francois is at work. In an interview conducted at the start of the study, Genevieve recalled that Jean-Francois has never been to the High Museum of Art. Perhaps as a result of the study, Jean-Francois started visiting the High Museum with Genevieve and the children and was present on all three visits to the museum made during the study. Of the children, Jean-Francois and Genevieve describe Celine as the “artist.” Genevieve says “Celine loves art and we thought, what a fun way to encourage that and let her see different things and expose her to something with art.” In addition to visiting the High Museum, the Van Houchez family also enjoys shopping, going to playgrounds, visiting zoos and aquariums, boating, doing outdoor activities, watching sports events on TV and at arenas, engaging in neighborhood activities and festivals, having movie nights, and listening to local bands.

For this study, the Van Houchez family visited the Fernbank Museum of Natural History, the Georgia Aquarium, and the Zoo Atlanta for their three like sites. The family visits each of these sites regularly and purchased a membership to the zoo on their final visit.

Visits to the High Museum of Art Galleries

While in the galleries, the Van Houchezes tend to stay together as a family. There appears to be a balance among the group in regards to discussions and decision making about what to do and see. Both parents and children ask and answer questions equally and conversation appears to flow freely. The Van Houchez family also enjoys pointing out works of art to each other, saying things like "did you see this one?" and "come and check this out!" While visiting special exhibitions, the family also enjoys making use of the audio guides and other interpretive devices, such as magnifying glasses and interactive stations like the forgery game. During the visits, Genevieve and Jean-Francois take turns caring for Jacques, the youngest. Most often, Jean-Francois pushes him in the stroller, but sometimes Genevieve takes over the task as well.

Genevieve observed that the Monet exhibit at the High Museum "wasn't heavy" unlike some of the art in the permanent collection. She felt that "with some of the pictures in the permanent collection, to talk about the subject matters with the children is a little bit difficult. It's a lot of violence." When the family viewed the Louvre exhibition, Genevieve observed that her children eagerly anticipated using the headphones as it was new, very adult experience for the children. Genevieve also added:

I told Hailey that I had been to Paris and the Louvre and that it took one day to go through it or it takes a million days to go through it and I was only there for an afternoon so I told her a little bit about what I remembered and we talked about how some of the pieces travel [to other museums like the High] because not everybody can go to Paris.

Visits to the Greene Family Learning Gallery

While in the Greene Family Learning Gallery, the Van Houchez family typically split into smaller groups and then rejoined from time to time. Celine was more likely to go off on her own while Andre tended to stay with Jean-Francois. When the older children wanted to do art-making activities outside the family gallery, Jean-Francois and Genevieve negotiate who would accompany the older children and who would stay with Jacques in the family gallery. When engaging in art-making activities, both parents work closely with the children, spending most of their time supporting the children and answering questions when needed. Sometimes Genevieve and Jean-Francois create their own artworks in tandem with the children, but in most cases they direct their attention to helping the children locate supplies and ensuring they know how to execute the tasks. On a few visits, Genevieve asked the children if they wanted to take additional materials home with them to continue or extend the art projects at home.

Visits to Like Sites

The two older children, Celine and Andre, selected the Fernbank Museum of Natural History and the zoo as places to visit as part of their household reward system for completing chores and other responsibilities. Genevieve explained that once full rewards are achieved the child chooses a place he/she would like to visit. A more logistical reason for visiting the Georgia Aquarium was that Genevieve had annual passes and it was a cold day.

In general, the Van Houchez family tended to stay together as a group during these visits. There were occasions when the two older children ran ahead of the family, usually to manipulate interactive stations or participate in a hands-on activity. However, the family always regrouped fairly quickly and the children continued their engagement with exhibits while participating in conversations with their parents. The discussions and conversations were very much focused on what they were seeing or doing at a particular time. Like the museum visits, there appeared to be a good balance among the group in regards to discussions and decision making about what to do and see. Both parents and children asked and answered questions equally and conversations appeared to flow freely. Great effort was made to include baby Jacques; this was evidenced most clearly with hands-on activities where he was encouraged to participate and learn new words.

The biggest challenge for Genevieve during the visit to the aquarium was the layout of the interactive space. She felt it was difficult to keep her family in view—something she recognized was easy to do at the Greene Family Learning Gallery. In addition, the interactive stations were targeted at different age ranges and that made it difficult to manage the expectations of her children.

In general, Celine enjoyed the like-site spaces because she could touch things whereas at the High Museum of Art she was not able to touch the art, making the experience not as fulfilling for her. During these visits, Celine and Andre asked zoo and aquarium staff/volunteers a lot of questions and the interpretive staff were very attentive and offered thoughtful responses. These positive interactions with staff stayed with Celine and Andre after the visits because their subsequent discussions centered on the theme they'd spoken with the staff about: teeth—both shark's teeth (Georgia Aquarium) and elephant's teeth (Zoo Atlanta).

Motivation & Values

In talking about their motivation for visiting the High Museum of Art and the Greene Family Learning Gallery, Genevieve says that the visits are a way to “open [the children's] horizons to different artworks and artists and perspectives.” In addition, the art museum stimulates interesting discussions and conversations among the family group. Referring to the family gallery specifically, Genevieve noted that the social aspect is valuable because the children have an opportunity to play and explore with other children, something that they have limited opportunities to do while at home with her. She also says that without the family gallery, her visits would be “more challenging and less accommodating,” since the Greene Family Learning Gallery lets them “regroup and do something together” and “provides a space for the children to act out their excitement and touch things.”

When asked what they most liked about their High Museum visits, Celine said she liked doing something different and new. She particularly liked activities where she could make art and enjoyed playing games there. Her mother said:

Celine liked learning about the art and what some of the stuff meant and what the people were doing in the pictures. She liked the painting about hot lava because it wasn't a happy subject matter and it was serious and she learned about an adult

subject matter and it was so vivid and forceful and very deep stuff and I think she liked that.

In addition, both of the older children liked da Vinci's horse because "it was the highlight. We didn't know it was going to be there. It made a big impression on us all."

The parents shared many of the children's favorite parts of the museum visits and were drawn to specific works of art. In addition, Genevieve notes that both she and her husband valued the family day out, saying, "we don't get to go out as a whole family that often." When asked about what her children enjoyed most about their visits, Genevieve suggested that the children enjoyed talking with staff/volunteers, especially during their visits to the aquarium and zoo.

Shared Characteristics—Art Museum & Like Sites

Learning and an opportunity for good family conversations were the key elements that the High Museum of Art and the like sites shared for the Van Houchezes. As Genevieve explained:

These places spark a little more discussion about learning as opposed to other destinations where it's just action, so it is nice to go to a place where we are all learning something together. Both places trigger good discussions and conversations about things you don't come across in your daily life.

In contrast, Genevieve categorized the like-site visits as "live," more child-friendly experiences, and the High Museum as more of a "static" and adult-oriented experience. This was not intended as a criticism but more an observation as to how the spaces work for her family. Genevieve believed that all the venues encouraged learning and facilitated the family's value of having a day out together.

Connections & Effect of Participation in the Study

In general, Celine and Jean-Francois encourage family conversations about where they are going and what they have done and their visits to the High Museum of Art were no exception. On the way to the museum the family typically talked about the exhibition they were going to see while there, with Celine and Jean-Francois filling in details about the artists and where they came from. While on the way to see the da Vinci exhibition, the family talked about two famous da Vinci paintings, *The Last Supper* and the *Mona Lisa*. Celine mentioned that there was a picture of *The Last Supper* at her school.

Similar types of conversations occurred on their way home from the museum or a few days after their visits. After one visit, Celine asked why the paintings were hung so high that she couldn't see them. The parents also encourage their children to compare and contrast their visits to the museum and other sites. In addition, the children often create artwork at home that is influenced by art they see at the museum. As daughter Celine said: "I have this thing that helps you draw and I draw a girl and everywhere you stand it looks at you like the Mona Lisa... I plan to send them as Christmas cards."

Participation in the study resulted in Jean-Francois joining the family on all but one of the six accompanied visits. Everyone enjoyed the opportunity to be together.

VISIT PATTERNS

	High Museum of Art	Like Sites
Average time spent	109 minutes (Entire visit) 20 minutes (Greene Family Learning Gallery)	159 minutes
Timing of visits	The Van Houchez family always visits on Sunday afternoons.	The Van Houchez family like-site visits took place on Mondays from late morning into early afternoon.
Order of visits	On two occasions, the family visited a special exhibition first, followed by the Greene Family Learning Gallery and Second Sunday Funday activities. On one occasion, the family did two Second Sunday Funday art-making activities and then visited a special exhibition; on this visit the family did not enter the Greene Family Learning Gallery.	The whole family was involved in visits one and three; during the second visit the father was not in attendance. Unfortunately on the second visit Jacques broke his leg on a slide.

Snapshot

THREE VISITS TO THE HIGH

Visit 1



July 2009
1 hour and 58 min.
Monet Water Lilies
Richard Misrach: On the Beach

Visit 2



August 2009
1 hour and 15 min.
The Louvre and the Masterpiece

Visit 3



December, 2009
2 hour and 15 min.
Leonardo da Vinci: Hand of Genius

THREE VISITS TO LIKE SITES

Fernbank Museum of Natural History



October 2009
2 hours 31 min.

Georgia Aquarium



January 2009
2 hours 46 min.

Zoo Atlanta



January 2009
2 hours 40 min.