On the top floor of the Denver Art Museum, light streams through a skylight onto an oak desk with brass-handled drawers, which Austin, nine, and his six-year-old sister, Rachel, pull open and rifle through.

Rachel finds a cigar box, opens it, and smiles. “Shells,” she says softly, looking at the dried seahorse, starfish, and cowrie collection nesting on white satin lining.

Austin picks up a heavy lead pen, turns it over in his hand, and touches its sharp end. “This is an old quill pen,” he says. “Look, there are the ink bottles.” He dips the tip into an empty glass bottle on a tortoise-shell writing tray.

Another drawer contains laminated bank notes from the late 1800s, and a $3 receipt for “goods” purchased in 1884. Rachel is more interested in a delicately framed photograph of a girl about her age, who she believes sat at the desk long ago. Opening a drawer on the lower right, she comes across a second cigar box. When she lifts the lid, she grins again.

“Butterflies.”

Rachel and her brother are exploring the Western Discovery Library on a quiet Saturday morning. The library is cozy with its fat leather
couches and oak cabinets packed with books and art. Tucked into nooks are two computers that can take children on adventures along the Oregon Trail or through the National Museum of American Art.

On a counter below a bulletin board stuffed with old postcards and photographs, Austin finds a turn-of-the-century stereopticon of polished cherry. Instinctively knowing how to work this elegant precursor to today’s plastic View-Masters®, he slides twin photographs mounted side by side on cardboard into wire holders and peers through the tin eyepiece. The lenses put the photos in motion, transforming the flat sepia world into three dimensions. Recently cut and bundled redwood logs appear to float down the Columbia River. “Man, those are big logs,” Austin says.

The library is a new type of museum gallery. Here, visitors become explorers, finding art and artifacts in the most surprising places. There are few directions on where to go or what to open; curiosity leads the way.

The Denver Art Museum deliberately included family offerings throughout its permanent collections. Whether visitors come on a Sunday with hundreds of others for a special exhibition or on a quiet weekday afternoon, they’ll find do-it-yourself activities that range from a quick puzzle to a lengthy search through the museum’s two Discovery Libraries—and everything in between. Family educational spaces are integrated seamlessly with more traditional gallery areas. In some galleries, children can touch replicas of works from the collections, and children’s books and videos are on hand throughout the building.

“You can count on these family activities any time you visit, any day of the week,” says Melora McDermott-Lewis,
family programs director and master teacher for European and American art. “Many of our programs target peak family times and are only out on weekends and during school breaks, but it’s critical to have things that are always available—to make visits more enjoyable and to consistently signal that adults with kids are important to us. Live programs are wonderful, but they disappear from view after they’re over. We wanted to make a much more permanent statement in our galleries that we welcome families.”

These offerings have evolved through the years. At this point, there is so much variety in the activities that they offer something for everyone. Denver Art Museum galleries have always been and remain quiet places to enjoy art, but they also feel comfortable. Walking into a gallery and noticing a dad and his kids camped out on the floor with a puzzle or a group reading together in a sunny nook, you can’t help but feel this is a place where you’re free to explore at your leisure with kids.

On comment cards available throughout the building, visitors have spontaneously jotted down opinions about programs and activities. Taken as a whole, it’s clear they feel at ease and confident, whether or not they have a strong background in art. One mother wrote, “I wish every adult could experience the Denver Art Museum with a child. How liberating. Instead of just ‘appreciating,’ or worse, trying to out-erudite each other as some adults do, we just enjoyed what was ‘cool!’ We had so much fun.”

Another parent noted, “Wow! This is the most user-friendly art museum I’ve ever been to. Truly, you have reached the elusive goal of bringing art down off a pedestal and into the hands of my 12-year-old son, who didn’t want to come.”

Some activities are continuously available. Eye Spy games have become standard fare on every floor. To help guide families, games are color coded to specific galleries. The
portable, yet sturdy, plastic oblong boards have handles for easy carrying. Five windows with brief clues and detailed photographs of objects guide kids’ search through the gallery.

Although the Eye Spy games appear to be simple, they actually extend beyond seek-and-find games and into the realm of imagination and open-ended conjecture. Some encourage children to make up stories about places within landscapes. Others relate to concepts or symbolism in other cultures. All provide fun ways to encourage closer inspection.

Not only does the game provide a fun way to learn about the collections, it also encourages visitors to take their time, allowing the visitor to really see the artwork. McDermott-Lewis says, “We wanted to get both kids and grownups to slow down and look at details. At first, we only had the game for the American Indian installation. As we developed other games, the notion of focusing on details has remained the same. You walk into this big gallery, but what do you look at? Where do you begin? What do you do? Having a focus helps.”

Visitors have come to expect Eye Spy games. Kids will often go from a game in one gallery to another during a single visit, guided by Seymour, the family programs monkey mascot, who pops up on signs next to Eye Spy locations, urging kids with “Let’s play Eye Spy!” Seymour is a visual marker for kids. Any place they find him, they will also discover something fun to do.

“We created a museum-wide signage initiative based on Seymour marking family activities throughout the building,” McDermott-Lewis says. “Families weren’t always finding our gallery activities. We wanted to make them more obvious.”
Seymour is based on a permanent object in the pre-Columbian gallery. He looks out at kids at Art Stops and gallery activities and from bookshelves stuffed with fairytales and non-fiction reference materials for young people.

In addition to Eye Spy and other kid-friendly activities, families will find puzzles in the museum. In the American Indian gallery are two jigsaw puzzles with colorful, kid-friendly images related to nearby art. One set is on a table in a busy thoroughfare; the other is next to a comfortable reading and video area. Both are suitable for younger kids ages 5-8. Two other puzzles, one with a more complex image and the other in a nine-cube arrangement, are geared toward more advanced players.

“I was very interested in puzzles as a way to help people see more,” says Gretchen DeSciose, who at the time was master teacher for Native arts. “I hadn’t seen anything like them in gallery settings, although I had seen similar items for sale in museum shops.”

A few years after creating the American Indian puzzles, DeSciose, now master teacher for Spanish Colonial and pre-Columbian art, decided to create an entirely different and larger puzzle format for the pre-Columbian area.

Sitting on a short stool, Rachel peers up at a three-foot-high metal replica of a Nasca pot sitting on a custom-designed table in the pre-Columbian gallery. The image on the pot has been turned into a
magnetic puzzle.

Both kids are excited the minute they find this replica sitting near its ancient original—an earthenware vessel of about the same size.

Austin works on the orange whale and Rachel the red one. As they work, they look back and forth between their replica and the original, noting that the three images are identical except for size and color. After finishing their puzzles, they go over to the Nasca jar and read that the creatures are actually whales.

During their inception, these puzzles were pioneering gallery activities. They gave kids something to do with their parents, and they helped everyone notice details that they might have missed otherwise.

But the puzzles are just one of the ways the museum has been innovative in transforming gallery space to welcome visitors and help them feel comfortable to explore on their own. The first steps were basic. During special exhibitions, the education department added a few chairs to tables displaying catalogs and books related to the show.

During the late 1980s reinstallation of the American Indian gallery, the museum took this basic idea much further, dedicating a bright corner as a reading and video nook, complete with couches and chairs. A few feet away from tipis, cradle-boards, and other artifacts, visitors can watch videos or browse through books or...
magazines. The nooks contain a lot of material for those who want to further explore topics they find particularly intriguing as they look around the gallery.

“The idea was to create places that looked so comfortable that people would want to just plop down and use them,” DeSciose says. “You get a change of pace and a chance to relax.”

In creating more engaging family activities, the museum looked to the American library system as an example, according to Patterson Williams, dean of education and master teacher for Asian art. “How can an art museum be more like a library in terms of its effectiveness in serving and enriching the lives of a broader spectrum of people—the individuals in our community? The first step was to enrich the galleries with more choices for visitors in terms of how and what they learn. The second step has been the Discovery Libraries, and the third aspect has been making the museum right for families the way a library works effectively for families. Parents are not just going for their kids’ interests. There is a huge range of intriguing information for adults. The museum is not just a child’s place or an adult’s place. It offers something for everyone.”

In keeping with these ideas, gallery reading and video alcoves have been tended to and nurtured to make them more friendly and comfortable for anyone who wanders by. Handsome carpets have
been added, as well as special offerings such as the table in a corner of the pre-Columbian gallery where replicas of seven ancient artifacts are arranged and bolted down. The objects look exactly like the ones in the gallery. In fact, the seven artworks are all the more powerful because they are so closely tied visually to the originals yet accessible to and touchable by children.

Those who want to learn more can refer to a brochure that illustrates and describes each of the objects on the table. More children’s stories, legends, and non-fiction are stacked along bookshelves positioned at a child’s eye level. Above one of them, Seymour says, “Let’s Read!”

This side of the pre-Columbian nook has been scaled down for children. Six tiny foot-high walnut stools are tucked under a matching rectangular table covered with a forest of picture books. The adult side has at least 75 reference books, as well as dog-eared National Geographic magazines tagged with relevant articles.

From area rugs to furniture and reading materials, each reading and video area is in keeping with the related gallery artwork. The Asian gallery nook, for example, is decorated in sage and salmon hues. Frosted partition windows are designed to resemble folding screens. The nook is packed with more than 100 books for adults and children, as well as videos.
such as The Peach Boy and The Tiger and the Brahmin.

In a recently remodeled nook, visitors can hang their own miniature exhibitions by arranging playing-card sized magnetic images of framed art on a board above a corner table.

In the pre-Columbian gallery and ready for a rest, the kids decide to flop down and watch a video on the ancient Maya, Isabelle in Mexico Visiting the Maya.

On the screen, Isabelle, a six-year-old girl dressed in late twentieth-century attire, walks out of her house in the rainforest and meets an ancient Maya person who takes her on a ride into the past in a dug-out canoe. Upon entering an ancient village, she swings and climbs ropes with wiry kids dressed in huipiles and watches as grownups use vegetation to make everything from arrow shafts to leaf-root thatching.

The gallery is quiet for a long time. It’s late in the day. Toward the end of the video, Rachel says, “What I like about the Maya people is they use everything.”

As the video ends, Austin says, “Maybe sometime in the future, this would be a video about us; we would be the ancient guys.”

These reading nooks were dramatic experiments at one time, and they continue to inspire even more radical thinking about the way people experience art. The Bernadette Berger Discovery Library, with its luxurious and quirky décor, invites visitors to browse through art like patrons would wander through a library.

Wall-to-wall cabinets and cubbies unconventionally mix art of all types. Above the shelves, awash in ambient light, are contemporary sculptures juxtaposed with works from previous centuries.

“When I was creating the room, I was kicking around the idea of doing something along the lines of a cabinet of curiosities—the old collector who had a little bit of everything—as a way of dealing with our very small, but good, antiquities collections,” McDermott-Lewis says. “That idea began to intersect with the

On benches in the Decorative Arts gallery visitors can draw their chair story and leave it for other visitors to see.
whole library notion. And then I started thinking about seeing art in a personal context—thinking about collectors’ homes, where they were living with art. They might have a very eclectic collection.”

McDermott-Lewis started looking through pictures of grand libraries in nineteenth-century British country homes. These private studies had eccentric mixes of furnishings, odd pieces of armor, butterfly and pendant collections, and books crammed into every space.

“We wanted to integrate art,” she says. “There was definitely the idea of being chock full. You look at some of these places, and they’ve got art hanging 16 feet up in the air. There was the notion of drawers, where you could take something out and look. Why do you have to stand in the middle of an open room and look at art? There are so many more enjoyable ways to be with it.”

The Discovery Library was created in part because Lewis Sharp, museum director, dedicated 800 square feet to education. The project was entrusted to McDermott-Lewis, who from the start decided that this centrally located space should not be segregated as a classroom that sat empty half the time.

“I was intrigued with the whole notion
of looking at art in a comfortable, intimate setting,” McDermott-Lewis says. “Could the concept be extended to making the space as comfortable as a living room? At the same time, perhaps the museum’s antiquities collections of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman artifacts could be tucked into the space.”

Visitors of all ages can browse European and American art through computer programs such as *Life in Tudor Times; Picasso: The Man, his Works, the Legend;* and *Castle Explorer.*

Inside another case, a dollhouse features miniature scenes that helped Dutch girls two centuries ago learn about how to keep proper homes. Below, flat rollout drawers hold embroidery samples, tiny oil portraits painted on pendants, and Egyptian jewelry. Nearby magnifying glasses are available for even closer inspection of these miniatures. Inside other drawers are prints by Manet, Dürer, Homer, Whistler, and Miró, among others.

Books are everywhere—scattered on a massive walnut coffee table, piled on a smaller stand, and displayed along library shelves. Inside some of the volumes are pullout tags labeling identical books available at the Denver Public Library.

Inside a wardrobe, also built into the cabinetry, are lavish costumes for visitors to try on. Included in the collection is a velvet hat and ornate peascod vest that look exactly like ones worn by Sir John Ashburnham in his 1593 portrait by Heironimo Custodis in the gallery around the corner.

On comment cards, visitors praise the library for its comforts and welcoming messages.

“Your museum is the most kid-friendly and accessible due to the wonderful Discovery Library. A stroke of genius!” writes one visitor from Pennsylvania. “How can any kid (no matter how old) resist opening drawers, trying on costumes and seeing videos? Congratulations!”

Some express it all in one word:
“Radical!” or “Cool!”

Bill and Bernadette Berger, the library donors, asked McDermott-Lewis to create another one for the Western collection. “It was wonderful to take the Discovery Library notion further,” McDermott-Lewis says. “I concentrated on conveying Western themes. I also felt strongly that I hadn’t pushed ‘doing’ as strongly as I could. In the first Discovery Library, we had great reading. We had great viewing. But there aren’t many other things to do. I wanted more hands-on activities, especially for families, this time around.”

After studying photographs of studios crammed with artifacts, paintings, and other objects gathered by frontiersmen during their explorations, she came up with an arts-and-crafts design for the new room.

“I expanded the Discovery Library ideas of rummaging through drawers and closets,” she says. “The Western Library’s desk partly evolved from this, as well as from the writing and drawing activities we’d been experimenting with in other galleries. I saw a lot of great roll-top desks stuffed with letters and artifacts. I took this whole notion of peeking a step further in this room.”

The space includes touchables for all ages. The story of frontier photography is subtly told throughout the library, from miniature sepia prints on the desk to daguerreotypes, tintypes, and ambrotypes nested in flat drawers below cabinets.

Within an alcove, across from a full-length mirror on the wall, Seymour urges kids to try on some costumes. Hanging on wooden pegs are hand-sewn costumes that replicate those worn by Long Jakes, a Rocky Mountain trapper in Charles Deas’s 1844 painting on display in a nearby gallery. A second outfit includes clothing so closely matching that of a vaquero in the museum’s 1873 James Walker painting that you would think the Hispanic cowboy had just walked out of the canvas and hung his clothes on the wardrobe’s wooden pegs. The fabric and fashion details are followed closely, down to a pillbox hat with a flat brim woven with 50 percent beaver.
fur to become waterproof, just like those worn by the vaqueros.

Nearby pullout labels give parents a sense of the lives of these early Western adventurers. “We need to know what the paintings are about to give them a human context,” says Melanie Groendyke-Freeman, master teacher for Egyptian art. “Traditional books give you facts. But can you imagine being in California, being a vaquero, and it being 90 degrees? You are in full leathers in cactus country. And what would it feel like, with one hand, to reach down and do a quick unbutton of your round silver buttons up to your thighs, so air could get to your silk pantaloons?”

Information and illustrations on study boards help parents tell stories or answer their kids’ questions. “It’s all just really fun, and you learn a lot about the culture,” Groendyke-Freeman says. “In this room, you are an observer, thinker, feeler, explorer. Your experience can be expansive.”

There are no overt explanations or labels. Little plaques that meld into the woodwork encourage visitors to “Please explore!” The receipts, the maps, the costumes, the cameras, old train tickets, and stocks and bonds begin to tell a story, subtly helping visitors discover and connect with Western art and culture. They can do this comfortably, at their own pace. That is key to both Discovery Libraries and other permanent offerings throughout the museum. First discoveries become favorites to return to over and over again, but there is plenty still to be done differently as perspectives and interests change. The activities and programs regularly available to families encompass a wide range of interests and ages, but they are also open-ended enough to encourage repeat visits throughout the years, perhaps nourishing life-long interest in a culture or work of art.
Floors below the glassed-in mummy case, pre-Columbian artifacts, and fine examples of contemporary furniture, the Denver Art Museum has a place where you can draw on chairs with chalk, crawl around like a Nile crocodile, and stack featherweight Maya stones into a tower as high as you can reach.

Set apart from the galleries in a sun-filled space of its own is the Just for Fun Center. And as the name suggests, there’s no agenda here. This place is for playing. Visitors will find chalk, costumes, games, and puzzles all custom-designed and set up at various stations along a curving concourse flooded with light. Wide benches invite visitors to sit down and rest.

“Children are having a different kind of fun than they would in the galleries, but they are still having an experience unique to an art museum,” says Maria Garcia, family programs coordinator, who helped design the center. “Kids can come down and piece together a giant Maya puzzle block by block, or just knock it down. That is something that never in a million years are they going to do in the galleries.”

Inside, near the doors to a sculpture garden, is a mossy, grainy replica of a Maya monument, or stela, that is displayed in the museum’s Pre-Columbian galleries. The eight carved foam stones look ancient,
tumbled in a heap on a rug decorated with rainforest designs. They are like magnets for a child, such as Zachary, six, who can’t resist them. He hefts one over his head as he pieces together a Maya ruler from the lightweight blocks.

As he works, he keeps glancing back at a printed image on the rug. A boy is slipping a final stone into place, saying, “Put the Maya Puzzle Together.” The picture guides Zachary as he moves replica stones half his size. Also printed on the carpet is an image of Seymour, the museum’s family programs mascot. Peeking out from a lush rainforest, the monkey encourages visitors to explore: “You’ll find the real one on the fourth floor.”

The Maya puzzle is one of seven stations inviting families to explore art from the past and present. Activities focus on ancient Egypt, the Maya of Mexico and Guatemala, Japan, Northwest Coast Indian culture, contemporary chair design, and patterns in art. There are magnetic storyboards and tops that can be decorated and spun. There also are designer blocks intended for younger children. The stations are arranged so that families can explore them in any order.

“One of the brilliant things about the family center is that it is extremely simple,” says Patterson Williams, dean of education and master teacher for Asian art. “This is highly interactive but low tech, or no tech. The center is about play, reflection, and imagination. It’s about intuitive learning and family members having a good time together.”

Developed with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts, the center has been open since December 1999. During its first year, visits were almost twice as much as expected, with 9,000 to 10,000 people taking advantage of the program instead of the 5,000 anticipated. The space is popular because it welcomes families and offers a range of activities.
that accommodate many ages, styles, and interests. The center targets children ages six to twelve but accommodates younger or older siblings and adults—there is truly something for everyone. Signs encourage visitors to travel back and forth between the Just for Fun Center and the art galleries.

Banners stand beside each Just for Fun activity and depict a single close-up of a child doing the activity. Words describe the key moment: I Designed It! It’s a Match! It Fits! I’m a Nile Crocodile! They Stick! It Spins! At a glance, families know what to do at each activity.

The center also is advertised in a Free Things for Kids to Do Today brochure, available throughout the museum. The Center is open on weekends, during winter and spring breaks, and every day during the summer, and its activities revolve around four types of play—challenge play where there is a definite outcome or winner, small world play where a child can create or imagine a world, dress up, and art making.

“We really wanted to make sure that families were learning through play and that these four types of play were represented,” Garcia says. “The whole idea of having this space and all the programs is to make families feel comfortable and to encourage repeat visits.”

The variety of activities allows young visitors to express themselves in whatever way they find most natural and comfortable. Some kids prefer to dress up; others like to draw or solve puzzles. Some children love the storytelling and make-believe of small world play. The range of options accommodates different styles and changing interests.

Two separate stations feature art making that allows for creative expression through drawing and design.
One includes child sized chairs coated with chalkboard paint that can be drawn on and designed using changeable backs, arms and magnetic leg adornments. A second art-making station features circular tables stocked with everything needed to create spinning tops, the only activity that can be taken home.

The dress-up station includes costumes based on Egyptian animals. And the “challenge” areas feature a Japanese shell memory game and a Maya 3-D puzzle. At the farthest end of the airy course are two small-world or pretend activities. One station focuses on Northwest Coast Indian art. A second offers blocks and an Eames House of Cards for toddlers and young children. Red, yellow, and blue blocks are scattered on a soft yellow rug printed with the words “Create and Build” and “big, little, over, under, less, more, short, top, bottom.”

Four-year-old Brian, along with his mother and father are finishing a railroad station made from wooden blocks. Construction of the station is hindered only slightly by Brian’s little brother, David, age two. The boys have been building for about half an hour. They are spending their entire visit in the Just For Fun Center, which their mother had seen the year before. This summer, she brought her kids back to give them a taste for making things. She says, “My boys are mechanical. I’ve been wondering how you get mechanical kids to do art.”

As her sons play, other visitors join them—Zachary and his mother. Soon the
three kids are sharing blocks and stacking them into a five-foot-high tower.

“We have spaces for large, physical play and also for small motor play,” Garcia says. “The area also works for parents who want to interact and for those who want to sit and watch.”

Before creating these spaces, the education department devoted a visitor panel to discussions about a family center. They asked those who would ultimately use it what they would like to see. Overwhelmingly, parents stressed that they needed a place in the museum where they could let their guard down, let their kids run free and play, and not worry about them touching things. Jungle gyms weren’t the answer. Clearly and directly, parents said they wanted to feel like they were visiting the art museum.

The original concept, proposed in The Pew Charitable Trusts grant, was to build permanent spaces into all the galleries and scatter activities throughout the museum. Stations or nooks would feature hands-on games, puzzles, and other offerings for families. These new areas would be geared a bit more toward free play and add another dimension to family offerings already in the galleries. There were, however, some drawbacks to the preliminary plan.

“You’d still have to be relatively quiet and controlled,” Williams says. “You’d have to stay within security boundaries and share space with other people. As...
soon as we began to think about these boundaries, these kinds of activities felt curtailed. It was almost like taking something really fun and putting in a lot of rules. Suddenly, it wasn’t fun any more.”

At the same time, families were vocally asking for spaces where their children would be able to roam a bit more freely and let off steam—critical to a great family museum visit.

“This sort of freedom isn’t really possible in the galleries,” Williams says. “It’s not even possible in the museum’s Discovery Library spaces, which are a cross between a traditional gallery and a library. The environment is too fragile. The security needs are too great.”

The museum also needed an instantly recognizable advertisement for families who might be interested in coming for a first visit. The museum’s Family Backpacks are harder to explain to a newcomer, and most families don’t come to the museum just to visit the Kids Corner, which features one activity at a time. Art Stops are generally targeted for conversational interactions rather than learning through play. A special center, designed specifically for families, might justify an entire museum visit, and it would help newcomers get their feet wet.

During these early brainstorming days, Garcia and Melora McDermott-Lewis, master teacher for European and American art and family programs director, started looking at the places families went for leisurely fun outings. They traveled to children’s museums where they watched kids in spaces designed especially for them. They went to toy stores. Staff members read magazines kids love and looked through books on games and puzzles. They recalled games they played as kids and thought about what their own children, nieces, and nephews did for fun.

“We had to go outside our field to find out what kids want,” Garcia says. “We would just watch kids playing. It was very open-ended. We saw felt boards, train tracks. At children’s museums, the thing that struck me was that they are really concerned about the different types of play. We went to children’s museum conferences where they are thinking about families all of the time.”

To start the process Garcia and McDermott-Lewis asked all the education department’s master teachers to come up with at least one or two activities related
to each of the four play categories, drawing on their in-depth understanding of the collections for which they are responsible, as well as their experiences teaching children. Decisions were made based on kid appeal and the overall range of activities. Before committing significant resources, to an activity, master teachers and staff members spent several Saturdays in the museum testing prototypes with families.

Carla Hartman, master teacher for architecture, design and graphics, came up with about twenty possibilities. Perhaps an ornate theater set could be built—an 1800s cabinet that would open to reveal lavish costumes. In another scenario, she envisioned a three-story dollhouse complete with sliding walls, floor panels, and miniature furniture. Under the art-making play category, she described chalkboard chairs—springboards for design.

“I was looking through catalogues, and I saw this chalkboard paint,” Hartman says. “And I suddenly realized we could make a chalkboard chair!”

Hartman’s initial design included separate chair parts that could be screwed or slotted together, but the plan raised questions about safety, costs, and structural details. Instead of abandoning her do-it-yourself concept, she reworked it to include three child-sized stools, each with three slots in the seat where eight different geometric backs and multiple arms can slide. The stools and removable components are covered with special chalkboard paint on which visitors can sketch their own designs.

Chalk was another stumbling block. Some brands were too gritty. Others were so soft they crumbled when people tried to sketch with them or accidentally stepped on them. The harder sticks scratched the paint and barely made a mark. After spending time researching and talking with various vendors, Hartman decided on jumbo-sized chalk that worked on the chairs but didn’t cre-
ate a lot of dust or crumbling debris.

Museum woodworkers built a prototype chair that, when tested, appealed to both children and adults. Carpenters altered the design slightly to strengthen the chairs, rounded edges to make them safer for younger visitors, and created decorative bins to hold removable parts.

Each chair base now sits on its own brightly patterned mat. The mats feature fabric designs to inspire visitors. Also printed on the mats is Seymour, who says, “See the chairs and patterns on the second and sixth floors.”

Consistent with the station’s design theme, every detail has been thought out and integrated into an attractive whole.

At the opposite end of the concourse is an activity where Francesca, ten, is beginning round five of a Japanese shell game with her seven-year-old cousin, Calvin. It hadn’t taken the pair more than a minute to figure out the game, but they had to finish round six before reluctantly agreeing to leave for lunch.

Parents often have to pry their kids away from the shell game. It’s somewhat addictive, partly because it is both simple and different every time. Williams designed the memory game, which is inspired by a traditional shell game played in ancient Japan.

“The sets of shells were often given as a wedding present to a woman,” Williams says. “For any clamshell, there is only one perfect match. We have one of these shells on view in our collection.”

The Just for Fun Center’s Japanese shell game station includes two wooden tables on which clamshells are arranged in a spiral. Printed on the table’s surface are the words, “Play Memory.” The shells’ insides are decorated with varnished photographs of painted herons, delicate branches, bamboo, and rolling waves.
These delicate, natural images are details from Japanese lacquers in the museum’s collection.

The activity evolved over time. A few years ago, Williams made a paper version as an art project for kids during a parent/child workshop. Younger and older players liked the idea, but they wanted to use real clamshells.

“I knew I didn’t want to go out there and cook clams to give each child twelve shells so that he or she could play a real game,” Williams says. “I couldn’t figure out where to take this idea.”

In the meantime, she had asked photographers to take close-ups of the tiniest details on lacquered objects in the Japanese collection. In addition to documenting these artifacts, she was in the process of amassing a visual resource for her live teaching and adult lectures.

“When I got the photographs, I was astonished by the richness of the detail,” she says. “At this point, one of my live-teaching goals became, ‘How can I use these photographs to get kids interested in the details of art in the collections?’

“Suddenly it all came together in my family center project. I decided that the insides of the shells would be decorated with details from the lacquer objects.”

The prototype Japanese shell game included thirty-two sets of shells to be arranged in a spiral on a large circular table. But the first families to try it out struggled over it. The problem wasn’t one of strategy or lack of interest. It was the size of the table and the sheer number of clamshells.

“It was immediately apparent that
small children would actually have to crawl across the table to reach a shell on the other side,” Williams says. “With thirty-two pairs of shells, parents became extremely anxious, as did children, with the length of time it took to get a match. They were frustrated, and I wasn’t even sure if they really knew what was going on. But they were not finding it pleasant.”

At that point, Williams brought out butcher paper and taped over a bunch of the clamshell graphics. That helped, but there were still too many on the table. More paper, more taping, and the number dropped to sixteen pairs. Williams also discovered that if she labeled it “Concentration,” fewer people were drawn to it. When she switched it to “Memory,” people instantly seemed to know how to play.

“After watching families, I also noticed that some of the lacquer details, which looked so different to a trained eye, actually looked very similar to people playing the game,” she says. “As we reduced the numbers of pairs, we also took out ones that visitors found too similar.”

Also as a result of formative testing, the circular table was redesigned so children could place their matches within a wide border around the perimeter. A final alteration came several months later, after the shells began to dry out and crack in Colorado’s arid climate. The shells are now cast in durable resin and they closely resemble their real-life counterparts right down to the delicate ridges along their backs.

“Kids are intrigued by making the visual matches,” Williams says. “But it wasn’t my goal that all visitors play memory. I wanted them to experience some sort of visual delight from the details on the inside.”

On one occasion, a French family approached the station with their eight-year-old daughter, who simply turned over and looked closely at each shell. Every time she flipped one, she’d say, “Oohh, la, la!”

The girl was drawn not to the game, but to the intricate details inside. This attention to esthetics and design sends a direct message that the museum has invested a lot of time, resources, and care into developing programs that address families’ specific needs. Even the solidly built shell table, like the other tables, stools, and benches in the center, conveys the thought and care that went into the creation of the family center. For example, parents can rest on curving wooden benches on one side of the corridor and still see their kids as they roam from one station to another. The center’s tables, stools, and easels have been specially crafted to be sturdy, comfortable, and appropriate for related activities.

During visitor panels, in which education department staff members talked with adults and children about a number of family programs, including the center, parents said they liked the “please touch” nature of the center. One parent said, “I like the fact that the materials are very sturdy, so that whether you have a two-
year-old using them or a ten-year-old, you’re not constantly thinking or saying, ‘Don’t touch that!’

Other adults said the Just For Fun Center was colorful and welcoming, and that it encouraged interactions between adults and children. One mother said her eight-year-old daughter ran right over to the Maya puzzle and had a great time with it because it’s so big and impressive. By its very nature, the puzzle encourages parents and kids to work together. Children often aren’t tall enough to stack the last pieces on top and need help from their adult companions.

Near the Maya stela is the Egyptian dress-up area, set off by a cozy rug and costumes, such as a desert hare, scarlet-headed ibis, and Nile crocodile. Like the other stations, the esthetics and design of everything from the outfits to the solid round tables encourages interaction between family members. In addition, the stations can be taken apart and stored easily, a critical issue in this space. The Just for Fun Center is like a huge puzzle that can be packed away compactly within forty-five minutes into a closet that is 6-by-9-by-10 feet tall so that the concourse is free during the week as a tour entry area when schools are in session.

At the Denver Public Library, librarians give out free museum passes to their own visitors, who can walk to the center through an underground tunnel connecting the museum and the DPL. The unexpected passageway is a great way for first-timers to discover the museum. After a first, playful taste, parents and their children might find it easier to return again and again for more museum explorations.

On Saturdays and Sundays the weekend family programs assistant welcomes visitors and is always ready to talk with them, find more chalk, or answer questions. She roams the museum, keeping an eye on supplies and helping families get acquainted with the stations in the Just

Images of crocodiles, ibises, owls, and hares from the DAM’s Egyptian Mummy Case inspired the costumes in the Egyptian dress-up station.
for Fun Center and other activities throughout the building. Having someone approach the visitor is great. They seem more willing to go and do stuff in the museum than if they just saw a flyer or a sign.

At the onset of the Pew grant, the education department didn’t envision the need for someone such as Hellman, but she has become a critical link between the public and museum staff. In addition to setting up and cleaning after hours and helping visitors, she provides ongoing feedback to the rest of the education department, who rely on such information to refine or create new offerings.

Long-term plans for the center include possibly giving the center a dedicated, always open home. In the meantime, it’s good where it is because it was designed from the start as a collection of consistent and moveable stations that are cost-efficient to maintain. Annually, the department spends about $1,500-$2,000 to repair materials and replenish supplies.

For now, the Just for Fun Center works well as an introduction to the museum or simply as a change of pace. Whether families are returning time and again to explore galleries or making a first foray, the Just for Fun Center can always be a part of a weekend, summer, or vacation outing.
At the Denver Art Museum, two sisters and their grandmother stand a shy but curious distance away from a long table spread with yarn, small woven rugs, glossy laminated photographs, and a carding brush fuzzy with fibers.

They watch Art Stop interpreter Melissa Stoltz twist wool on a drop spindle. Catching the girls’ eyes, Stoltz says, “This is called spinning. Do you want to feel the yarn?”

Nine-year-old Jessica and Meghan, six, come over and tentatively rest a finger on the scratchy strand as Stoltz says, “I’ll let you two try spinning.”

“How do you start?” Jessica asks.

“Sit down on the chair and lean this spindle on your leg. You want this yarn to come off the top. See how it’s twisted?”

Jessica rests the top of the spindle against her thigh and gently spins downward. She holds the thread in her left hand and says, “It’s kind of easy. You just have to pay attention.”

Her grandmother, Bonnie, leans closer. “Can you imagine a Navajo woman doing that?” she asks.

“No, not really,” Jessica says. “It’s kind of hard.”

“They would have to collect the plants. This is a chart,” Stoltz adds, picking up a laminated sheet showing various dried plants and the colored yarns they produce when dyed.
The American Indian gallery is quiet on this Saturday, but visitors constantly drift over, following a bright red stop sign leading them to the Navajo Weaving Art Stop. Standing back a bit, new arrivals watch others trying their hand at the loom, carding a bit of wool, or looking over small rug samples in front of a brightly patterned, contemporary Navajo tapestry. Invariably, an interpreter such as Stoltz will look up, catch their eyes, and in doing so encourage them to come closer.

A simple, “Hi!” or “Would you like to try weaving?” is usually enough to break the ice. When visitors discover that they actually can touch things or try the loom, conversation and questions flow back and forth naturally. Visits usually last about five to ten minutes.

Navajo Weaving is one of seven Art Stops offered by the museum this Saturday. Families also will find American Indian Beadwork, Bronze Sculpture, Egyptian Mummies, Courtyard Horses, Andean Textiles, and Japanese Samurai Arts of Peace and War.

Tucked into permanent galleries on every floor and staffed by paid interpreters are tables spread with hands-on objects. Although twelve Art Stops have been developed, only half are out on any given Saturday or Sunday. In addition to Navajo Weaving and the six other Art Stops available this Saturday, the museum offers Chinese Silk Robes, American Victorian Cabinetry, Santos of New Mexico, Maya Art and Culture, and Western Photography.

Children can visit bronze horse
sculptures in an outside courtyard and then ride the elevator with their families to the sixth floor. Here they will find more activities on bronze sculpture as well as golden fingertips to try on near a Ptolemaic mummy case in the Discovery Library. After a while, that same family can travel 250 years back to the Edo period in Japan to take apart and inspect a replica of a heavy sword of fine and delicate craftsmanship. On another floor, surrounded by intricate beaded examples on display from the Cree, Osage, Crow, Paiute, and numerous other American Indian nations, kids can string large plastic beads onto a loom. When they're done, families can move upstairs to ancient Peru where they can wrap textiles around their shoulders while nestling delicate alpaca fibers in the palms of their hands. There is no order or time limit to their choices or the places they can visit. As they ask questions and explore, families make up their own adventures.

Visitors can try on a Chinese silk jacket or weave on a floor loom near the foot of a contemporary Navajo rug. As they run their hands over fine cloth or work coarse yarn back and forth, visitors get a more intimate sense for permanent objects behind glass that can’t be touched or worn.

“Art Stop visits are supposed to be comfortable interactions that last for a minute or two up to twenty minutes,” says Gretchen DeSciose, who directs the program and is master teacher for pre-Columbian and Spanish colonial art. “They are visitor centered. It’s not a presentation. It’s a dialogue. Art Stops are springboards to help visitors have richer experiences with the collection.”

Originally designed for adult visitors, The Pew Charitable Trusts grant enabled the museum to refocus Art Stops to make them more appealing for families. During the past four years, the program has been refined and evaluated so that both adults and families can have personally rewarding experiences with works of art in the museum.

A few essential ingredients are necessary for effective Art Stops. Not only is it important that the stops encourage interaction between visitors and knowledgeable interpreters, but also that there is some element of surprise, something visitors might not otherwise discover on their own in the galleries. Families must be able to choose which stops to explore and for how long. This is a critical part of a leisurely outing, and it allows visitors to tailor their experiences more closely to their own interests and needs.

Each stop is designed around a topic closely related to the collection and narrowly focused in terms of content so that interpreters can master it in depth. Three to four touchable components are enough to engage but not overwhelm visitors. The stop must appeal to young and old alike, be in a high-traffic area that is easy to find and close to art on view, and have a descriptive title directly related to the experience at hand.
Interpreters are critical to the program’s success. College students recruited from schools in the area make up the majority of the workforce. They must be lively and outgoing, communicate well with a wide range of visitors, be self-starters, have experience working with kids, and be able to adapt to a wide variety of learning styles.

The training period, led by the master teacher of the collection relating to that particular stop, focuses on three areas: objects in the galleries, the contents of each kit, and how to work with all kinds of visitors. Interpreters complete gallery assignments related to content and art within the permanent collection, go through an experiential component as they learn, and create real-life scenarios to anticipate visitors’ needs.

“Art Stops are ideal for stimulating conversations about permanent collections in galleries,” says Patterson Williams, dean of education and master teacher for Asian art. “Temporary exhibitions are just too busy. Visitors need a calm atmosphere to peek, linger, walk away, come back, and perhaps tell a story about the samurai sword their grandfather brought back from Japan. That is what is supposed to happen.”

Touchables lead to conversations. Something as basic as trying on golden fingertips at the Egyptian Mummy Art Stop can trigger a question, which can lead to a friendly exchange. Interpreters are relaxed and conversations seemingly open-ended, but they have gone through extensive training to facilitate learning through a different sort of teaching. Before visitors approach, interpreters read their body language, facial expressions, and interactions with each other. They observe what families are doing and saying as they begin to explore what is on the table.

Each kit includes some rather unusual items, as visitors Andrea, nine, and Amanda, six, will soon discover as they approach the table near the Ptolemaic mummy case. As their father, Arnold, strolls nearby with their youngest sister, Adabelle, the older girls lean over the table, staring mischievously as Rachel Gothberg, interpreter, hands an older boy a mirror to look at himself wearing a fabric replica of the false beard on the nearby mummy case. Almost in mid-sentence, Gothberg glances at her new visitors and

Touchable components engage visitors at the Egyptian Mummies Art Stop.
says, “Hi! How are you?”

They grin and start sniffing little glass vials of flowers and oils. As the boy looks in the mirror, Gothberg asks the two girls, “Do you know where mummies come from?”

“They were all in Egypt,” Andrea says.
“What do you know about Egypt?” Gothberg asks.
“There were lots of pyramids,” Andrea says.

The three of them begin looking at the vials. Andrea picks up an unusual object. “What’s this?”

“A brain hook,” Gothberg says, squishing the slender tool against the side of her nostrils. “They’d stick it up the dead person’s nose like this, scramble the brains up, and let them drain out. They didn’t think the brain did anything. They didn’t think it was important.”

By this time, a mother and her two boys have joined the small group, as is typical of Art Stops. One group of visitors often sends a message to others to come over. The mother looks at Gothberg and laughs, surprised. Andrea makes a face and giggles as the two boys grimace and laugh.


The four kids try on false beards and laugh again at their reflections in the mirror. “You look fabulous,” Gothberg says. “You look like pharaohs!”

Gothberg lures the group over to the mummy case, and they all talk about its elaborately painted collar and hieroglyphs. After a while, Andrea begins to imagine herself as an embalmer stuck in a stuffy smelly room.

The elements of surprise in each stop help visitors connect in their own way at their own pace to just a few of the many objects on display in the museum. But the touchables also send a family friendly message to visitors, intriguing parents and children and helping them experience part of other cultures.

As she was creating the Courtyard Horses Art Stop, Joanne Mendes, adult programs assistant, added four components to encourage family participation. The stop focuses on Deborah Butterfield’s three bronze horse sculptures standing in an enclosed courtyard just outside the doors of the museum’s sunny lower concourse. Children can try to match up colored post-it notes of the horses—Willy, Argus, and Lucky—with the sculptures outside. There are also coloring sheets, a scramble word game, and a Kids Horsing Around booklet that contains five or six games, one of which leads children through various floors in search of horses.

“These are things kids can take and pursue in their own way,” Mendes says. “We also have interpreters on other floors give post-its to people and encourage them to see other horses down in the lower concourse. The kids love to wear them.”
When seven-year-old Sasha and her brother, Schyler, four, along with their mother, Candace, and grandmother, Dolores, wander off the elevator in the museum’s sun-filled lower concourse, they have no idea there are three life-sized horse sculptures just outside in the sunken courtyard.

They have been at the museum all morning, and they are still clearly wrapped up in their own adventure. They tried on costumes in the European Masterpieces special exhibit, visited the Plains Indians gallery, the Western Discovery Library, and then the Victorian Cabinetry Art Stop. Everything starts to seem serendipitous, including Karen Skaff, the interpreter who calls them over with a simple, “Would you like to see some horses?”

Curious, the family trails Karen through double glass doors into the heat. Outside in the enclosed courtyard, they walk over to what first appears to be a confusing arrangement of branches. Schyler crouches down and exclaims, “There’s a spider!”

Everyone bends closer to look at the delicate web shimmering from what looks like driftwood. “What do you think this statue is made from,” Karen asks.

They notice it’s a horse and take a closer look.

Lucky, lying in gravel, is baking in the sun and hot to the touch. Together, they follow Karen to a second horse. Candace and Dolores quietly hang back, letting the kids talk.

Karen asks them to find Willy’s eye. Straining as far as they can reach, they touch a knot on his head. His tail? Legs? No problem, but they are momentarily stumped when Karen asks if he might be moving. Squinting her eyes, Sasha checks Willy out again and slowly shakes her head. Schyler says, “Maybe.”

Looking again, Sasha bends down and pats one leg that looks like it’s about to lift up and take a step.

Books, a video, and other touchable materials help visitors at the Courtyard Horses Art Stop learn more about the bronze sculptures outside.
Stepping back, the kids look for clues that he might be in an imaginary storm. Towering above them, Willy is made from what looks like driftwood polished by some western creek, his twists and knurls strong and firm. It’s his tail—it looks as if it’s swishing!

Everyone goes back inside to the Art Stop table, laid out with books, a video, and other materials to help visitors learn more about the sculptures visible through the tall glass windows. Sasha and Schyler pick up three branches that look exactly like Willy, Argus, and Lucky’s limbs. They are clearly wood, light as a feather. But when Schyler tries to lift the fourth branch, it is so heavy he has to use both hands to get it off the table. It is cold to touch. It is metal. The children begin to understand that the horses outside aren’t made of wood; they are cast in bronze. Schyler shouts to his mother, “Mom! I like horses!”

These elements of surprise are a lot of fun, and they help visitors make connections. The Santos of New Mexico Art Stop now includes a matching game. More explanatory pictures and games related to the permanent collection were added to several stops. The Andean Textiles Art Stop added shoulder wraps to try on and a small llama cut out to take home. When children put the cloth around themselves, they can imagine being an ancient Peruvian high in the chilly mountains where they would have to keep themselves warm with textiles they had woven from the llamas and alpacas native to the region. As they touch and explore, they begin to get an idea about threads, weaving, and how the art in this collection was created.

Not only do these experiences provide technical insights, but also they bring to life people from an ancient world that doesn’t seem so distant any more. It’s easier for visitors to imagine connections between these individuals and themselves as they touch the wool used by ancient Peruvians and look at photographs of the animals from which the fur came. These and other cues give visitors insight into these people and the harsh mountainous
environment where they lived.

“You are sort of immersing yourself,” DeSciose says. “Not all of the stops are focused on the art-making process.”

The Art and Culture of the Maya Art Stop is more about culture than it is about technique. The table is on the fourth floor amid a sea of pre-Columbian artifacts. Like books on a library shelf, the museum’s entire collection of 4,000 pre-Columbian objects is on display. The stop asks visitors to notice only a handful of the artwork, such as a replica chocolate drinking vessel from which ancient Maya people sipped the savory drink. Kids can pick up heavy jade ear spools and hold an obsidian mirror in their hands. There also are books and glyphs on writing.

“We talk about Maya writing,” DeSciose says. “We talk about the importance of chocolate as a commodity. We look at vessels that held chocolate for drinking. We look at imagery on cups. We learn the symbolic meaning of jade. We understand how ceramics were painted, but more importantly, their imagery. The stop goes in a lot of different directions, depending on what people are interested in.”

When they leave, kids can take home Touchables like the Andian shoulder wraps create a connection between visitors and ancient Peruvians.
“Stop signs! Stop signs! We found stop signs!” exclaims Wesley, ten, as he charges around a corner with a pack of boys who nearly careen into the beadwork table. Almost instantly, he spies a loom strung with bright plastic beads. “Can we make this?” he asks, picking it up and looking underneath. “I call doing it first!”

Wesley and his seven-year-old brother, Johnathon, are on the hunt for Art Stops with their friend, Paul, eleven. They are with their mother, Stacey, who had read about the program on the museum’s www.wackykids.org family website and was intrigued enough to make a special trip.

She wanders off, leaving the kids to talk on their own with interpreter Janine Sytsma, who smiles and asks Wesley to thread beads on a needle, matching the already worked pattern on the loom. With sweaty hands, he boldly threads the beads and then hands the needle over to Johnathon and Paul. They have been hanging over Wesley’s shoulder watching, so it’s a piece of cake for them.

“Now you guys are official beaders,” Sytsma says. When Stacey returns to the table to ask how the beading is done, Janine turns to the boys. “You guys can show her!” While Stacey tries it out, Wesley picks up a narrow, delicate loom woven into a diamond pattern with tiny beads. “I would like to do this!” he says. “What kind of thread is it?”

Eventually, the group heads off to look around the gallery. Beading starts to jump out at them because they’ve just experienced it.

“I just say ‘Hi! How are you? Have you ever done any beadwork?’” Sytsma says of her role at the American Indian Beadwork Art Stop. “I kind of give them a cue to come on over. Usually I have a visitor right here, and that attracts others. I try to let them become the teacher, which they really enjoy. “

Interpreters modify their approach according to their visitors’ needs.

“What is good about this beadwork stop is that you can change it for just about any age group,” Sytsma says. “With five to six year olds, I work with numbers. ‘How many more beads do we need?’ Adults usually don’t want to do the beading; they want to look on their own. Often, they come with more applied knowledge. They are more interested in starting a conversation.”

Silas, eleven, stands back while his mother, April, picks up a pair of contemporary sneakers heavy and glinting with dense beading. Solidly embroidered on either side are stylized horses, one of silver and lavender and the other of gold and brown. Two tiny horsehair tassels dangle off each heel. April turns them over, runs her fingers over the intricate pattern, and puts them down. She lifts a pair of children’s moccasins that are almost the same size as the sneakers but at least 120 years older. Moving on to other items, she flips beaded wristlets to find out whether the
stitching has been covered by leather, and then looks at a beaded outfit on the table, glancing up at Sytsma, who says, “Hello.”

April asks, “Is this touchable?” inspecting the outfit. Assured it is, she examines this too. “I do beadwork,” she says, continuing to look closely at other outfits on the table, asking again if she can pick them up. “I was at the Smithsonian Institute,” April says. “They had the tiniest beads. Size twenty-two is pretty much the smallest. These are not quite as small. They might be a size fifteen. There are certain colors from the time period—Cheyenne pink, Sioux blue, other colors. I don’t know them all.”

She talks with Sytsma for a moment before her eyes lead her back to the bead-work. “I was up in Washington. They still get beads—large ones that wash up on shore off old Russian ships. Cobalt-blue colored beads.”

Visitors, both young and old, enjoy the multi-sensory aspects of the stops. At the Japanese Samurai Arts of Peace and War Art Stop in the Asian gallery, visitors can hold and take apart an actual sword right in front of a case displaying a similar weapon from the Edo period. The proximity of the table to the case is a critical part of the stop’s success. This simple formula triggers vivid experiences.

“Originally, the samurai kit started off with a whole bunch of materials, including a lot of mounted, laminated photographs showing every single aspect of samurai culture,” says Williams. “I’ve eliminated a huge number of those things because Art Stops are supposed to be a sensory experience.”

Williams reduced the stop to two swords on a stand, a mask, and an iron ore rock. There’s not much more than that on the table now, but something electric happens when visitors lift the sword from its stand.

Maggie, nine, takes the sword apart with her older companion, Alison. Together they inspect its handle. Putting her nose to the nearby glass case, Maggie discovers a tiny wasp, no bigger than her fingernail, delicately modeled into a similar hilt ornament. She ponders its meaning, “It might be a symbol—a bug of war. It might sting you, and that’s war. It looks like it’s sitting on a little fan, like it’s ready to begin to fly.”
These interactions, pauses, and closer looks can add to visitors’ visual literacy. Art Stops aim to be comfortable and fun, but also to stimulate conversations and personal discovery. Even more knowledgeable visitors can benefit from a casual chat, such as husband and wife, Lex and Mitzi, who spend about ten minutes at the Bronze Sculpture Art Stop. They both have been collecting bronzes for years. After visiting a local foundry, both are intensely curious about the casting process described with touchables and charts at the stop next to Frederick Remington’s 1901 bronze, *The Cheyenne*.

*Lex points to a diagram in a booklet created to illustrate the lost-wax technique. He scrutinizes the illustration of tubes through which molten bronze flows.*

“You mean these deals (tubes) are already on it?” he asks.

*Interpreter Ann Steeno discusses the process in detail. As they talk, Lex picks up resin horse-head examples and their bronze counterparts, which illustrate the way sculptures can be altered after casting. He runs his hand over patina tile samples but never even looks at the spinner game that children adore.*

“We’ve collected bronzes for years from all kinds of people,” Lex says. “I wanted to get a general idea of the lost wax-casting process.”

Steeno and other interpreters can relate to a wide range of visitors in part because of their training and support, which is critical to the program’s success.

The museum maintains a small group of about twenty-five reliable college students highly skilled in visitor interactions and knowledgeable about the Art Stops for which they are responsible. Twelve to fourteen new individuals replenish the program each year. Minimally paid, they are expected to train with master teachers on three separate kits. They are asked, if at all possible, to commit for two years. About 50 percent remain at least that long. Others stay multiple years and train on new topics as they are offered.

After screening transcripts, references, and resumes, DeSciose and Carmen
Ruyle, adult programs coordinator, interview people who are lively, outgoing, and able to communicate well with visitors. They also should like kids.

“It’s not enough for someone to be an art history major,” DeSciose says. “Interpreters need to facilitate learning. It is a different kind of teaching. They have to help people discover on their own.”

Interpreters are more flexible in their interactions in part because, in addition to extensive reading, gallery exercises, practice sessions, and role playing, they also take part in hands-on experiences that help them tell their own stories to visitors, making encounters all the more tailor-made and special.

“We want to give the interpreters real, authoritative experiences that empower them psychologically,” Williams says. “When they tell visitors about their experiences, visitors know that person is special. But interpreters aren’t scholars. They shouldn’t pretend to be. That would add a level of pedantry that would ruin this whole conversational tone and friendliness. We want to give interpreters riffs so they can get visitors experiencing on a sensory, physical level.”

Riffs are as varied as the education department’s master teachers. To reinforce the complexity of Chinese silk production for the Chinese Silk Robe Art Stop, Williams gave interpreters-to-be toothbrushes and asked them to fish out the spidery tough threads coming off silk-worm cocoons she’d dropped into Styrofoam cups of boiling water.

“They will never forget that,” Williams says. “You can read a book about how this is done, but when you try it yourself, you realize it’s pretty darn tough. Then you realize what happens when you twist three of them together, from three different cocoons. Normally, you twist eight threads together to make a single silk thread. So it starts to get a little more real, and interpreters can use this experience when talking to visitors.”

Interpreters for the Egyptian Mummy Art Stop take a trip to look at related artifacts at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. Similarly, interpreters for the Courtyard Horses Art Stop and the Bronze Sculpture Art Stop visit a local foundry.

“A lot of it is on-the-job training with visitors, getting used to fielding a wide range of questions and audiences,” DeSciose says. “Interpreters get really good the first year. The second year, they are just dynamite because they are out there several times a month.”

After working as an interpreter for several months, Karen Houghton started to realize that silence also is important. “Those pauses and silences—when I first started, I felt I had to fill them in, that I had to be telling them things all the time and getting them interested in this or that,” recalls Houghton. “I came to realize that, if they are sitting there just looking at this little book on the table for a minute, that’s fine. And they may just look and not want to talk to me any more after that.”
Another interpreter, Ann Steeno, says she watches families closely to figure out what they might want from an Art Stop experience.

“It’s fun to look at how the parents and children are interacting,” she says. “Kids start teaching their parents, and the parents are amazed. When you see a parent proud and smiling, and a kid happy because his or her parent understands, that’s powerful.”

Interpreters’ friendliness and expertise is critical to the success of Art Stops, but it is only one component. The stations also reflect the master teachers’ understanding of visitors and children, and the collections for which they are responsible. As gifted teachers, they are able to create kits tailored narrowly to one or a few specific objects, through which an entire culture or art-making process can be filtered.

Before master teacher Carla Hartman developed the American Victorian Cabinetry Art Stop, she conducted observations and intercept interviews with about a hundred people who wandered into the Architecture, Design and Graphics gallery. Her evaluations made it clear that many visitors were intrigued with an ornate, Renaissance Revival/Aesthetic cabinet built toward the end of the 19th century, perhaps by the Herter Brothers in New York City. A commanding piece, made from rosewood with brass fittings, wood inlay, gilt, and ormolu, its elaborate carving and intricate inlays of classical figures, foliage, and flowers were perfect for a host of reasons.

“Because of the number of techniques it embraces, the cabinet provides amazing links to the rest of the objects in the gallery,” Hartman says. “This Art Stop is very object oriented, yet it also serves as a beginning point for discussion about the entire gallery.”

Hartman already knew that visitors were fascinated by the amount of detail on the front of the cabinet, which includes four portraits medallions of a cleric. Often they mistook it for painting rather than elaborate marquetry.

“There is one piece of wood that makes up just the four frown lines of the face,” Hartman says. “Once you realize that, you look at it differently. There’s awe.”

But how was she to convey that without a lecture, slides, or a tour? For one, Hartman knew she had to get people to slow down, so they’d really look.

“The problem is that, faced with decorative arts, you are dealing with familiar objects, such as a chair, or a table, or a cabinet,” Hartman says. “Oftentimes, people will register ‘chair.’ Once they’ve done that, they pass on by without really looking to see what’s different.”

To encourage a longer stay, Hartman had custom panels built to demonstrate the stages of marquetry and gilding. Once visitors see a large-scale example of the process, they are naturally amazed by the cabinet’s intricacy and master craftsmanship. The kit also contains binoculars, which magnify delicate details that from afar look like painting.
“Probably the biggest surprise about this Art Stop is how the cabinet opens,” Hartman says. “That’s the prime question people asked during my interviews.

A supporting photograph shows the doors open, which enables visitors to understand yet another dimension of the piece—how mechanics were cleverly, artistically disguised through incredible workmanship. That, in turn, makes it clear that the craftsmen who worked on this piece were lifelong masters at what they did. The Victorian Cabinetry Art Stop naturally reveals these ideas through deliberately researched and planned materials.

In the stop she designed, Mendes primarily wanted visitors to hear the voice of artist Deborah Butterfield, who talks in a nearby video about making and casting her life-sized horses, which the Denver Art Museum commissioned.

Butterfield speaks to onlookers through the screen, explaining her love for horses, and for the children who she knows will climb on them and swing from their metallic bellies. “It’s absolutely wonderful to have the voice of the artist,” Mendes says. “It’s really a fantastic video and the major source of information in terms of developing the stop. Within this museum, there are so few opportunities to have the artist explain what inspires her, how she creates, how she feels about her subject matter.”

The museum’s Art Stop program has evolved since its inception as Art Carts during the early 1990s. Key changes include creating mobile tables and storage areas hidden within actual gallery spaces and hiring a reliable group of individuals to participate consistently for two or more years.

“A lot of things had to fall in place before we could get the Art Stops right,” Williams says. “A decade is not too long for refining such a program. The versions we had earlier weren’t right on target. We had to have the space within gallery walls, the money and support to buy the right high-quality materials. Once the materials were right, we had to share them with visitors and learn how to recruit and train people.”

The program began to take off after the education department decided to recruit a stable, manageable workforce of paid college and graduate students who were reliable, flexible, and easy to train. The newly renamed Art Stops were set up in conspicuous rather than wayside locations. Like navigational beacons, large Voices of artists like Deborah Butterfield, creator of the museum’s bronze horse sculptures, add whole new dimension to the Art Stops. (Deborah Butterfield, Orion, 1988)
red stop signs on stanchions were posted just outside elevator doors to advertise and direct visitors to the tables.

“We knew that people wouldn’t come down to the museum just for the Art Stops,” DeSciose says. “So we wanted a clever way of advertising them within the galleries. They catch visitors’ eyes.”

In 1996, the education department re-evaluated the program again, conducting visitor evaluations that included unobtrusive observation and interviews of visitors who used the stops. Interpreters also asked for more in-depth reading packets, field trips, and other experiential, hands-on training. As a result, titles were reworded to describe stations more succinctly, and hands-on elements were added to kits that needed them.

“Art Stops are visitor centered, people centered, collection centered,” DeSciose says. “Patty uses a phrase I like a lot. She often says that people come and go like cats in the gallery. I figure Art Stops are bowls of milk.”
The www.wackykids.org website sends a little bit of the art world through the internet to kids at home. Using store-bought technology and bold photographs, the education department at the Denver Art Museum created a site that introduces six art and culture topics, including ancient Egypt, Maya rainforest dwellers, Japan’s samurai warriors, Northwest Coast Indian carving, chair design, and Chinese imperial robes.

Aimed at eight to ten year olds, the Wacky Kids website features cool places to explore through fun facts, games, crafts, books, and links. It even includes printable paper and pencil activities to explore the old-fashioned way—at the kitchen table. The whole package is educational but entertaining, encouraging short visits and ongoing, independent exploration. Children’s time in front of the monitor is only a beginning, not an end in itself.

“We wanted to extend kids’ interests in these areas,” says Patterson Williams, dean of education and master teacher for Asian art. “We didn’t care if they used the website but never came to the museum. It’s not to sell the museum. It’s to extend their museum visit into their family life, into their schools and homes.”

The site, linked to the Denver Art Museum and Denver Public Library websites, is structured visually around art of natural interest to children. When it was first conceived in 1999, Wacky Kids was an
experiment. Instead of seeking out sophisticated technology and high-priced web professionals, the education department decided to make its own site with inexpensive, commercially available software. They targeted children who enjoy exploring the Internet, but they didn’t want the site to compete with flashy, complicated computer destinations full of complex imagery. The site currently is well used, but for some kids, it may not have the curb-side appeal of Disney or other popular commercial sites.

Grandparents, parents, and teachers are among those targeted to introduce their kids to using the site. All the DAM’s publications for families mention the availability of the Wacky Kids site.

“We really didn’t want kids just sitting at the computer,” said Gretchen DeSciose, master teacher for pre-Columbian and Spanish colonial art. “We wanted it to be less about a game on the computer and more about fun projects kids could do on a car trip or at home with friends.”

The colorful, straightforward website provides printable activities that travel with kids anywhere. Armed only with scissors, scotch tape, and markers, children can make and decorate their own Maya jewelry or Northwest Coast Indian canoes. They can solve visual crossword puzzles using images from the rainforest or find a hidden animal within a fill-in-the-colors maze.

When Wacky Kids first pops up on the screen, a monkey in a checkered jacket named Seymour encourages children to begin exploring. The site is built around six cultures, each to be explored through two related objects. Each object leads to six fun facts, one paper and pencil game, and one craft-oriented activity. For each culture the site also includes references to at least three related books and at least one Web link.

And that is just what Kareem, age ten, did one afternoon at a friend’s house. After finding the Denver Art Museum’s home page, he clicked on Family Fun, which led him to the family website. The
screen flipped quickly to the Wacky Kids home page, complete with its playful letters and four cartoons of Seymour, the monkey mascot of the DAM’s family programs who is based loosely on a pre-Columbian ceramic object. Below Seymour were four destinations, including Make Stuff, Welcome to the Denver Art Museum, Books and Links, and the one that Kareem found most interesting—Explore Cool Places.

Clicking on the icon, he entered the first of six cool destinations—the World of Japan’s Samurai Warrior. This led him to the next page—close-up images of warriors on a lacquer writing box and a helmet made for a samurai warrior.

“Cool,” Kareem said, as he cruised onward, clicking the helmet to see what would appear next. This brought up Armor for Peaceful Times, showing a photograph of the full suit, which also happens to be permanently displayed in the DAM’s Asian art galleries.

By clicking on any one of six places on the photograph, it is possible to bring up details such as the image of a dragon on the breast-plate of the armor. Kareem quickly read the accompanying text, which in part says, “many Japanese still believe that if you dream about a dragon climbing Japan’s Mount Fuji, success will come to you.”

After a few more clicks, Kareem decided to leave the world of the samurai and check out another topic—Fancy and Fun Chairs, which featured two close-ups of chairs from the DAM’s furniture collection. Intrigued by the contemporary sapphire chair with petals for its legs, seat, and back, Kareem clicked for more details, which in turn brought up six fascinating facts, including one about the chair’s feet.

“Oh, look at the feet,” he said, inspecting its miniature, lime-green, plastic wheels.

Interested enough to return to Seymour’s Make Stuff section, Kareem printed an instruction sheet, complete
with motifs to design an Empire chair, which artisans created 200 years ago in England. Kareem incorporated parts of the design into his own space-age version, embellishing a great deal on what he found on the Wacky Kids site. He spent the next forty-five minutes peacefully drawing chairs of his own. All his chairs had cool wheels like the ones he’d just seen in detail. Then he gave everything to his five-year-old sister, Maisa, who said, “Wow, Kareem, you are a good drawer.”

“I’d say the chairs were the most interesting things I saw,” Kareem said.

Everything Kareem explored at the Wacky Kids site is structured around art from the museum’s permanent collection. Each of the education department’s master teachers culled from their collections two objects, both of which related to a specific cultural topic such as samurai art, chair design, or Northwest Coast Indian carving. Once they narrowed their focus, they came up with six fascinating facts. Each fact would be introduced to children visually as they clicked at various locations on each of the photographed images that popped up on monitors. For example, a female Maya ballplayer statue seems animated once you understand more about the details. Clicking on the noble woman’s face, for example, brings up a close-up portrait that highlights decorative scarification around her mouth.

Out of about 500 objects in the Maya collection, DeSciose selected this athlete for several reasons. The female ballplayer may not be the best example from the museum’s collections, but it is one of the more unusual pieces because it was a woman.

“I knew I wanted to do something on the ball game.” DeSciose said. “I had learned from teaching Maya summer camps that this appealed to a wide variety of kids. Both boys and girls know a lot about contemporary sports, and this made the ball game a natural choice. Sports also help breach the gap between the past and the present. Differences in ancient and modern sports abound, but people then and now have always had to put on kneepads and uniforms and work out to shape up for competitions.”

Close connections to objects in the collection led to use of this female Maya ballplayer in the Maya Rainforest Dwellers section of the website. (Jaina Island Standing Female Ball Player, AD 600-900, Maya)
The statue also is easy to see on a computer monitor. It photographed well, as did the other Maya object DeSciose chose, a Maya pot. Carved baby monkeys scamper over the pot—the rotund body of their mother. “With all the monkeys covering the pot it’s very lively, but there wasn’t a lot I could find out about the pot itself. It was interesting, instead, to use it to explore rainforest animals. I did a lot of research using zoo and animal websites.”

In developing her Books and Links section, DeSciose put together an annotated bibliography, web site, and video list with help from a children’s librarian, who culled materials available at the Denver Public Library.

“I gave her about twenty-five different topics that were related to the Maya, everything from snakes to jaguars, chocolate, parrots, ball games, the rainforest,” DeSciose said. “The librarian searched all those topics.”

To make the web development process work smoothly and efficiently, DeSciose and the other master teachers in the education department followed detailed guidelines. The guidelines streamlined the creation of components for each of the six website topics. In addition, they serve as a resource for subjects added at a later date.

Each of the museum's master teachers has a specialized area of interest related to the collections for which they are responsible, and often the projects and activities they develop diverge in terms of goals and styles. These differences enrich most museum activities, but they need to be tempered for the Wacky Kids site. For navigational purposes alone, it is important that the structure and content of the site is consistent.

Williams and the other master teachers know a lot about teaching and their collections, but designing a Web site from scratch was definitely a new venture. “We were just terrified,” Williams said.

Kelly Campbell, children’s librarian at the Denver Public Library, helped them out. The two institutions, community partners in the Pew grant, cross-fertilize ideas. In the case of the Web, Campbell showed rather than told. She had taken a workshop on how to create a site using commonly available, inexpensive Web software. “She sent us a sample,” Williams said. “We said, ‘She just did that? Overnight? We could do this too!’”

A search from this Maya monkey pot led to an activity sheet with a chain of monkeys that kids could print, cut out, hook together, and take home to decorate rooms, beds, or whatever. (Lidded Bowl in Form of Monkey, 400-100 BC, Maya)
The museum staff looked for models for printable activities in craft books as in crossword puzzles, and games in children’s magazines. After coming up with some basic concepts, the education department enlisted Joan Pacos, a designer long associated with the Denver Art Museum, to design the graphic look and navigational elements of the site. Supplied with photographs of artwork, information, original illustrations and activity sheets from all the master teachers and other museum staff, Pacos began designing the site and laying out the activities. She formatted the graphics so that they could be viewed on most computers without needing to download special plug-ins. Then the formatted graphics went to education department administrative staff members Christine Deal and Jeanne Hendrick to place on the web pages and post to the Internet. Both had attended tutorials and training sessions on Front Page, the software used to create the site.

The domain was to be linked but separate from the Denver Art Museum’s main site, and it needed a distinguishing name that would stay in kids’ minds. Education staff came up with fifty initial titles, narrowed them down to five, and went to the source: children at the museum, who picked Wacky Kids. It sounded entertaining and it stood for World Art and Cultures.

Master teachers and staff members evaluated the site through a three-pronged approach. First, staff members took color printouts of the web pages that showed only two of the six topics available, and tested the degree to which eight to ten year olds understood basic navigational paths, graphic logos, and what they could do at the site. This was a brief, informational first run.

Second, each of the printable activities was tested with school groups. The groups had been called prior to their scheduled museum visit and asked if they would spend a few extra minutes trying to make things from the printouts. This testing proved invaluable, and the projects were revised.

Finally, once four topics were up and running, forty-four children, also eight to ten years old, played with the site. The individual sessions lasted ninety minutes each. Two evaluators from the education staff sat in to observe and interview kids.

One interviewed the child using a script developed for this purpose. The other evaluator took notes, observed, and diagrammed the pathways the kids took through the site.

After they were done exploring, the children were asked what they liked and didn’t like about the site. They also were encouraged to give further suggestions.

Based on the individual interviews and observations, certain stumbling blocks were identified and addressed. To solve one important problem, for example, the site was redesigned so children could easily identify all six visual details.
associated with each object. Now white circles on the image indicate the places that can be magnified.

Selecting activities also has been streamlined so children can instantly see and understand the printable activity choices by adding photos of kids with finished projects. The education department also made printing instructions and activity templates easier by streamlining the download process. Whether it’s a Maya monkey chain, a Northwest coast canoe, or a Samurai face-mask, the change made it easier for kids to get what they need to do the project.

Currently we have about 1200 user sessions on the Wacky Kids site each month compared to 700 when we first opened the site. To boost use further, the education department has promoted the site through several venues, including local schools, community festivals, metro area press releases, and selected national organizations such as the National PTA.

“Our website is designed to supplement our goal of making the Denver Art Museum a family destination,” said Williams. “Now, we have to determine whether the site can be maintained at a modest cost, since it is not as essential as other family services and activities at the museum.”

Costs are measured primarily in staff time spent to maintain it. For now,

After testing the website’s features with kids, it became clear that all the activities needed to be advertised on the site with pictures of kids engaged in the art activities.
Game sheets, like this crossword puzzle, and their corresponding answer sheets are one activity that children can take with them to complete after exploring the website.
MAYA RAINFOREST CROSSWORD
ANSWERS & COLORING SHEET

ACROSS
1. monkey
4. frog
6. ant
8. rain
9. pyramid
11. feather
12. snake
13. toucan

DOWN
2. cloud
3. leaf
5. jaguar
7. crocodile
9. parrot
10. flower
14. vine
15. waterfall
16. bat
Wacky Kids can be assigned to someone in the education department, who will oversee what is to be a static but up-to-date place for computer explorations. Maintenance funding will be minimal, given the site’s simplicity. “We are slowly, slowly trying to expand it,” Williams said. “This is a good beginning.”

Despite its basic format, Wacky Kids reflects the breadth and depth of the master teachers who helped create it. DeSciose said, “All the way from chairs, to Maya ballplayers, to canoes, to Samurai swords, and bentwood boxes, you get a little bit of the world in one site.”
Gel pens, thick black paper, and glue sticks normally are not part of eight-year-old Champaine’s world. Her reality is bounded by the underbelly of Interstate 70, a Purina dog-food factory, and dense, troubled Denver neighborhoods.

At home, she can sketch on lined notebook paper with pencils, but she can’t color because she doesn’t have crayons. Today, however, at the Valdez-Perry Branch of the Denver Public Library, she has plenty of luscious materials to draw a blue, yellow, and pink girl on a die cut that can be folded and glued into a sturdy miniature chair.

“I did this for my best pal, Deanne,” Champaine said. “She is nice with me. She plays the tetherball with me. I’m imagining my friend saying, ‘Good job!’ and, ‘Thank you for giving me the thing you made!’”

Champaine is one of about twenty kids in the after school program at the branch library down the street from her school. Today she is working on a project brought in by a guest—master teacher Carla Hartman from the Denver Art Museum.

Hartman showed up with a single, rolling black suitcase—a portable chest of treasures filled with brilliant gel pens, enough scissors for everyone, glue sticks, fluorescent strips of paper, and petite neon rulers with geometric stencils.

Hartman has packed everything necessary to get kids cutting, drawing, and gluing. Her main goal is for the kids to start thinking about chairs differently and, in the process, to have a great time with
wonderful supplies. Being given part of an afternoon to design is a rare treat. The children are engrossed in what they are doing. Each is making something unique.

“For kids to think of new ways to design and ornament chairs is important to me,” Hartman said. “We start off by looking at pictures of chairs—a type of furniture that they are already familiar with. The twist is that the chairs are very contemporary. Such a surprise opens them up to reconsidering the concept of chair.”

The Denver Art Museum's education department, where Hartman is the master teacher for architecture, design and graphics, set up a community partnership with the Denver Public Library to visit branches in hard-pressed neighborhoods. Between January 2000 and May 2001, five master teachers visited each of six branches five or six times. At each branch they worked with a fairly stable group of about twenty children who regularly attended the after-school program.

A few blocks away from their schools, these libraries are havens where kids can meet friends, enjoy an afternoon snack, do some homework, and meet a variety of guests, ranging from performers to musicians to storytellers. Many of these elementary-school kids won’t ever visit the Denver Art Museum. The building is only a few miles away, but in other ways, it is worlds apart. Recognizing this, the education department decided to bring the museum to them in the form of a master teacher and a single black suitcase.

“Our art projects are about those wonderful experiences that you can have with glue, scissors, and construction paper,” said Patterson Williams, dean of education and master teacher for Asian art. “It’s life-enhancing for kids and adults to have moments when they can play with materials. And then, it’s very important that kids get personal satisfaction and praise and feel accomplished.”

In contrast to school art projects,
branch activities are about open-ended exploration in a light educational structure. Prior to beginning the activity at the Athmar Branch, Hartman led a ten-minute discussion about chairs. She used prompts such as recollections, photos, and examples showing how several kids had completed the chair project.

Sitting next to Champaine, six-year-old Megan draws what many children her age love to make: butterflies, stars, and a boy and a girl. They are friends. “The butterfly is going to be all blue,” Megan said. “The butterfly is named Blueberry. That’s why it is blue.”

Megan cautiously cuts around Blueberry, quite worried that she might slice the tiny insect with her scissors. She is a steady participant, like most of the other children in the after-school program at her branch library. Several times a month, branch librarians invite guests like Hartman to bring in their own activities. Projects range from dance to ventriloquism, to studying snakes, to talks with Boy Scout representatives. Denver Art Museum master teachers are among the favorites of all the guests, said Hillary Davis, former Ross-Burnam Branch librarian.

“The art museum is using everything it possibly can to get children interested,” Davis said. “They are not just coming in and saying, ‘Here is your craft project. Do it.’ They bring in history and multisensory experiences to support the art projects. They are thinking like children; they know what kids want, and they give it to them.”

During the past three years, branch library projects have focused on ancient Egypt, the Maya, Japan, chair design and Northwest Coast Indian culture. With help from The Pew Charitable Trusts grant, the education department has been expanding and refining what was once only an intermittent connection with the branch libraries.

“An individual child didn’t see us more than once,” Williams said. “We

To make the visits to branch libraries easier, all the materials master teachers need to carry out their activities are packed in one suitcase.
wanted to give a more consistent, memorable message about the pleasure of learning about and making art. And we wanted to offer this repeatedly to the same group of children.”

The Denver Public Library’s after-school program was originally offered only at its Montbello Branch in 1994. After the first year, other libraries applied for and received a $50,000 grant from the Denver Post, one of two metropolitan newspapers in the city. The money originally went to eleven libraries, but after a few years, it filtered down to eight branches in lower-income, high-crime areas serving twenty neighborhoods with a high percentage of at-risk children.

Children who qualify for this specific, federally defined designation are educationally and economically disadvantaged. Once targeted, they can attend Head Start and other early childhood programs to boost literacy and give them a better chance of staying in school. The after school library program is offered twice a week, for two hours. There are snacks, special programs, teenage assistants, and formal mentoring from library staff.

“We are adults who listen to them,” Davis said. “We are not their teachers. We try very hard to keep them occupied and give them a place where they can feel comfortable.

The libraries are like home to the kids. They offer stable harbors from lives that can be erratic. The program’s nurtur- ing and consistency pays off. At the Byers Branch, results were immediate and dra- matic. In the year before the Byers Branch adopted the program, neighbor-hood kids vandalized their own library, breaking almost a hundred windows and scrawling graffiti all over its walls and doors. Since the sessions began, there have been no similar incidents.

“The kids who come to our after-school program really are great kids,” Davis said. “On the whole, they have supportive parents. We see their parents. The kids who come to my program are the ones who are trying to find something to join.”

From September 1999 through May 2000 the total number of children attending The Denver Post After School Library Program was 5,487. Ages of children attending were: 20% five to six year olds, 31% seven to eight year olds, 35% nine to ten year olds and 14% eleven to twelve year olds. One third of the children were African American, 4% were Asian, 49% were Hispanic, 1% were Native American, and 13% were White. Boys made up 44% and girls, 56% participants.

At the Athmar Branch, where Roma Smotts works as a circulation clerk, about one third of the thirty-six children who regularly attend the program stay at the library from 3:30 p.m. until after dark, sometimes as late as 9 p.m. She knows cousins, stepsisters, brothers, and sisters who walk from their neighborhood school directly to the library.

“The only sad thing about this program is that the kids who really need it are the kids who don’t want to attend,” Davis said. “I will have a wonderful pro-gram in my meeting room, and just as many kids outside sitting at computers
playing games.”

On the other hand, many of the kids are primed and ready for whatever adventures come through the doors. They absolutely love the art museum visits, Cole Davis said, because they know the master teachers are interested in them. It’s clear their visitors want them to have a great time, and perhaps, to continue learning by checking out a book long after the guest teachers have gone.

“Our children are so hungry for attention,” Davis said. “The art museum gives them that attention and makes learning special. What is so amazing about these children is that their minds are so quick. They absorb so much. Even the little bit of time spent with master teachers helps them realize there is more out there in the world that they might feel safe with.”

Many of the children have touched upon the history of some ancient cultures in school. What they’ve studied comes alive when Melanie Groendyke-Freeman, master teacher for Egyptian art, brings her Cool Collars of the Nile project to the Athmar Branch. From the minute she shows up, it’s clear she’s interested in the kids. She arrives before the children so that everything is ready when they start trickling in at 3:30 p.m. She sits down on a low chair with them and quietly asks about their day. They make collars like those that ancient Egyptians wore to festivities along the Nile long ago. This hands-on activity reinforces anything the kids already know about ancient Egypt from school lessons, television cartoons, or videos.

Through play, they are learning. Equally important is Groendyke-Freeman’s interest in what they are doing. Smotts said the children adore her, simply because she leans close, asks them questions, and listens. She respects them and cares about what they are thinking. In turn, they are even more receptive to what she has to say.

“Sometimes that little tiny taste is just enough to make them pursue a subject,” Davis said. Once in a while, kids check out related books. A few times, an entire family has actually visited the Denver Art Museum. The master teachers’ primary goal is to encourage them to get a taste for other cultures while having fun with basic art projects. During the spring of 2001, projects included Japanese Zodiac Finger Puppets, Mighty Jaguars of the Mayan Rainforest, Cool Collars of the Nile, Chairs from Your Imagination, and Become Your Favorite Animal.

Each educator has learned from trial and error what makes for a successful visit. Being portable and instantly organized is crucial to success. Hartman found out the hard way that it is absolutely critical to be able to roll in and unpack within minutes. During her first branch visit in the spring of 2000, she lugged in hot-glue guns and stacked pieces of foam core for making chairs. She went back out to her car and hauled in a real chalkboard chair on which kids could draw if they finished their project early. On a third trip outside, she dragged in another huge suitcase filled with old newspapers, silver gum
wrappers, and leftover paper—common things kids might find in their own homes. Under her arm were rolled-up posters.

“Needless to say, they were a little confused,” Hartman said. “There was tons of stuff.”

After that trial run, she streamlined her approach, abandoning foam core in favor of clever die-cut paper that children can fold into miniature chairs and decorate with bright pens. She switched to these materials because some instant success was built in. The idea hit her while she was on a plane to France. Nearby, a little girl was drawing with gel pens on black construction paper.

“She was entertained the entire trip,” Hartman said. “I thought, ‘Wow! This is cool!’ I’d seen the gel pens in the stationery store, but never together with the black paper. With the black, there was no way it wouldn’t look good and that would mean the kids would be more likely to keep and treasure this project.” Hartman and others tested various brands to find out which one was most reliable and effective. These simple components made her project elegant, striking, and portable. She also realized she didn’t need the chalkboard chair because children were interested in their projects until the time she was ready to leave.

At the beginning of her branch visits, Hartman sits down with the children and asks about the chairs they sat in that day. She wants to know about furniture relevant to their lives. After they’ve chatted, the kids flip through about two hundred heavily laminated three-by-five cards depicting chairs of all kinds. These images are pre-selected to be as different from the normal concept of a chair as possible. They are wacky, weird, funny, and bright. Skimming through the separate images is much more effective than looking through a book.

After they’ve had a good look, Hartman asks small groups of kids to each pick one card to talk about as a group. By the time they’ve leafed through all the examples, selected one that appeals, and discussed it, they’ve intuitionally internalized a lot about color, form, and function. Even better, they get to hold up their choices to talk about in a group, rather than listening to Hartman discuss
formal design qualities.

“This is all really fun, but it also gets them thinking a bit outside the box,” Hartman said. “If I came in and said, ‘Oh, look at these wacky chairs I have,’ they might look at me as if I were from planet Mars.”

Forced to budget time, Hartman decided that it was best to first talk together in a circle on the floor, and then start the project. “Generally, we spend about ten minutes doing this,” she said. “There are so many fascinating cards. It’s fun, and we get to talk about all sorts of intriguing perceptions. The kids start to sense that they can keep coming up with new ideas. To me, that’s one of the most exciting parts of the visit.”

The discussion deters the kids from copying each other. Even though they are sitting next to their best friends or half-sisters or cousins, everyone usually comes up with something different.

Chair making activities at the branch libraries are rooted in the DAM collections. Children are inspired by a variety of designs, such as this ballerina chair. (Borek Sipek, “Bambi” Armchair, 1983)

Williams, dean of education and master teacher for Asian art, isn’t as interested in sparking in-depth creativity during her branch visits as she is with using storytelling as a springboard to developing curiosity about other cultures. “Being interested in art and culture, for young people, often starts with the things they imagine, the novels and storybooks they read,” she said. “They can imagine being Harry Potter living at Hogwarts School, or traveling to faraway places—maybe even the art museum.”

One of Williams’ branch visit stories involves a boy and two girls in a family, all of whom live in the same neighborhood as the branch library. As Williams nonchalantly mentions Rosa, Darlene, and Harry, the kids in the library
are suddenly riveted. These story children have the same names as one or two of them! What they don’t know is that Williams has phoned in advance to find out some of the kids’ names. In a house that could be just around the corner from theirs, this make-believe family is celebrating a joint birthday with a huge cake and tons of candles. The party is for all three children because they were born on the same day. Calculated to match up with the exact ages of some of the kids in the program, five-year-old Rosa was born in the Japanese year of the rat, eleven-year-old Harry in the year of the horse, and thirteen-year-old Darlene in the year of the dragon.

Making the pretend birthday party all the more special is Uncle Trav, who has just arrived from one of his many adventures around the world. He loves to travel, try new foods, learn other languages, and explore the art of other cultures.

Last year he went to Nigeria and Mexico—countries relevant to many of the children’s lives. His latest adventure was to Japan. With him are packages for the children to unwrap. In the story, when the three kids ask him what is inside the bundles, Williams, as Uncle Trav, slides her glasses to the end of her nose, leans forward, and says, “That’s for me to know and you to find out.” At this point, Williams imitates what Uncle Trav does in the story. She hands out three brightly wrapped presents, promising that if the library kids can help the kids in the story guess what country the gifts are from, the story kids will get to skip a day of school and visit the Denver Art Museum, where they can get as close as anyone in the city to the place where Uncle found his presents.

Each parcel contains something from the actual games, puzzles, or other family activities the children would find if they were to visit the museum. Darlene's present is shells from a Japanese memory game in the museum’s Just for Fun Center. The kids opening Rosa’s gift discover plastic sushi inside a picnic box included in one of the museum’s backpacks. Families can check out and use backpacks like this one to explore galleries with their kids. Harry gets a complete set of twelve brightly painted plaster
zodiac animals. All the gifts are from Japan, and the children delight in guessing right and winning the story kids their trip to the Denver Art Museum.

The next day after a great breakfast of leftover birthday cake, bacon, and eggs, the fictional Rosa, Harry and Darlene pile into a blue Volkswagen bug and head off to the Denver Art Museum, where they see families playing with things exactly like the presents they just got. Uncle Trav hands out one of Harry’s zodiac animals to each of the three children and tells them to go and find art illustrated with their zodiac animal. When the children ask where they should go, Williams again slides down her glasses as Uncle Trav and says, “That’s for me to know and you to find out.”

After each one stumbles upon depictions of his/her zodiac animal in such Japanese art works as the breastplate of a suit of armor, an ancient clay figure and a small sword guard, they return to Uncle Trav, who asks what happened. Williams, leaning forward and sliding her glasses down her nose again, says, “Do you know what Darlene, Rosa, and Harry answered?” All together, the library kids chime in, “That’s for me to know and you to find out!” At this point, Williams hands out free passes to the museum, where the kids will perhaps relive the story and its silliness.

“A tale that asks for physical, emotional, and mental engagement can create memories that enhance learning,” Williams said. She custom designs her stories using techniques from the best children’s books and weaves the art museum’s collections and cultural learning into tall tales that are relevant to the kids in the after-school program.

After half an hour of surprises, unexpected storytelling twists, gifts to unwrap, and mind games to solve, the kids are primed to throw their own imaginations into the art project unpacked from Williams’ suitcase.

Displayed on tables are two examples of finger puppets depicting each Japanese zodiac animal, to make it clear projects don’t have to look alike. Williams helps the kids find out what their own animal is by using a circular wheel that matches up with images of each zodiac animal. In Williams’ story, one zodiac animal, the dragon, speaks in a gruff voice to get the children to notice his presence on the breastplate of a suit of armor. (Suit of Armor, AD 1700s, Japan)
birthdays with the twelve zodiac animals in the Japanese calendar. With construction paper, glue, and scissors, the children make whatever finger puppet they want. The project appeals to the youngest in the class, as well as the teenagers hired by the library to help with the after-school program. Decked out in spiked, knee-high black boots with fourteen buckles, a handsome teenage boy sporting several piercings carefully makes his own puppet and gently slips it onto his fingers.

“If we want our master teachers to be able to help design galleries and make exhibitions more accessible so that the museum works better for kids and families, they have to do more than read books and do visitor evaluation to learn about their audiences,” Williams said. “There is nothing more powerful for staff development than having direct, one-on-one experiences teaching audiences such as kids at risk. It sensitizes the master teachers and reaffirms their commitment to expanded audiences. You go to the branches, and you feel, ‘These kids are so smart, enthusiastic, and creative. We will make an art museum that works for them.’”

Hartman finds the visits invaluable. “I benefit a tremendous amount by getting in touch with children and how they look at and react to design,” she said. “It’s a wonderful centering activity that helps me focus on my missions. Each visit provides me with nuggets that can then be folded into other programs and interpretive materials.”

During a recent visit at the Valdez-Perry Branch, Hartman starts to pack up.

An end-of-the-year party is beginning, complete with specially ordered pizza. Despite the enticement of an unusual snack, many kids draw down to the last minute. Six-year-old Megan has almost finished her design.

“The girl and boy are holding hands,” she says. “They have a balloon and two strings stuck to it, and this is their clubhouse. It looks small because it’s far away. There is a mommy butterfly and a baby butterfly. I made a little tornado, and I have a flower.”

Megan quietly holds up her chair, which she plans to take home and put by her bed. She keeps drawing until the gel pens, stencils, and paper go back into Hartman’s rolling black suitcase.
Making the DAM a family destination meant help from many people. We thank every member of the DAM and DPL staff, trustees and volunteers and give a special thanks to these folks.

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