

Cultural Learning: Two Models

Leslie Bedford and Leslie Swartz



Cultural education falls into two camps, each with a basic goal. One is to learn about another place for its own sake—the more we know the world, the better world citizen we become.

The other is to see the exploration of a foreign culture as a journey in self-understanding. Through understanding the values, arts, and social structures of another culture people begin to take a second look at their assumed ways of doing things and in the process arrive at a new understanding of humanity.

MUSEUMS

Doing exhibits that “explained,” or at least introduced unfamiliar and often exotic cultures to kids, classes, and families was a problem. It was tough creating cross-cultural exhibits that really sung to kids, much less to their teachers and parents. Aside from the excitement and pride at the opening parties for our advisors, staff, and the families who were the subjects of the displays, once they opened these exhibits were a yawn.

Yet we had a string of successful *non-cultural* exhibits to point to: *What’s Inside? Animals and Armor*, *How Movies Move*, *Grandmother’s Attic*, *Big and Little*, *Giant’s Desktop*, *Raceways*, *PlaySpace*, *What If You Couldn’t?*, *Water Play*, *Bubbles*, *Factories*. What made these experiences exciting while the cultural exhibits were just there?

INTRODUCTION

Mike Spock

We also had non-exhibit examples of successful cross-cultural experiences. For example, classroom kits (Japanese Family MATCh Kit,) vacation week programs (Japanese New Year,) access to collections (Japanese Study Storage,) sampling other cultures (Overnights in the Japanese House.) Multicultural learning experiences like these seemed to work and avoided the curse of ho-hum. What was different about these experiences that we failed to capture in our thoughtful, earnest cultural exhibits?

The problem is partly structural. The exhibit medium is inherently impersonal and arms-length. The visitor can be quite alone with her thoughts and the exhibit’s challenges. If she gets stuck, she has to look for help beyond the borders of the solitary exhibit experience—to a parent, to a floor interpreter, to a teacher, to another kid.

By contrast, staff, teacher, or parent using the museum’s programs and learning materials can orchestrate activities or “conversations” with a kid, class, or family in highly social ways. Direct questions can be asked. Misperceptions can be

detected and run to the ground. Speculations can be offered. These iterative and very personal experiences turn out to be a good fit for exploring and beginning to understand both our own and other cultures.

Acknowledging these structural difficulties was a start, but we were unwilling to abandon the rich and necessary field of cross-cultural learning. Some of us thought we might have to walk away from the exhibit medium and concentrate instead on programs, collaborations, and materials in this more interpersonal corner of the museum’s learning agenda.

But there were some tantalizing exceptions of what might have been a dismal string of uninspired cultural exhibits. The differences between unsuccessful and successful cultural exhibits provoked analysis. *The Algonquin Wigwam* and *Japanese House* worked best when staffed and thus became as much richly detailed program venues as conventional exhibits. *Lito the Shoeshine Boy* was a compelling story based on a simple but profound book of photographs, made tangible by displaying replicas of all of Lito’s meager possessions. *Families*, also based on a book or photos illustrated by spoken testimonials of each family’s children, was organized into private reading experience between a child and an adult. *Japanese Fake Foods* was intriguing and funny to both kids and grown-ups. Tetsuo’s Room was technically not an exhibit but came to life as an object theatre. *Teen Tokyo* was a collection of over-the-top experiences with lots of working interactives and media. Currently touring, *Children of Hangzhou* contains deeply developed learning activities that take advantage of every experiential opportunity

without compromising the core agenda of the exhibition. All these examples, because of the determination and creativity of the developers and designers, went beyond our expectations to become true cultural exhibit success stories.

Besides, we just can’t leave the cultural exhibit experience alone. After all, we are a museum! So we have to remind ourselves, at the conception of each project, that taking on these most challenging but necessary cultural exhibits is not for the fainthearted, or the naïve exhibitor. If we are going to move beyond

the programs, materials, and collaborations into this not obvious form of museum communication, we should do it only for good reason and then, turn the task over to the real pros. And we should take care in conceiving and developing the most creative routes to success. Without this conceptual and methodological understanding and extra effort, these cultural exhibits are likely to disappoint.



The interior of the *Japanese House*, with *futon* uncharacteristically left out so museum visitors could see typical Japanese bedding.

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The Children’s Museum was in an ambivalent place: committed to working with ethnic communities (Native American, African American, Asian American) while deeply imbedded in mainstream American culture. But for all the tricky biases that came from the our position within the dominant culture, the museum continued to think it could make a special contribution by developing exciting learning experiences for families, schools, and communities using real stuff from other cultures. —Mike Spock

Part I

**THE PLUM PUDDING MODEL:
THE JAPANESE HOUSE**
Leslie Bedford

Introduction

The years I spent with The Children’s Museum’s Japan Program—one as its developer in 1976 and then, beginning in 1981, thirteen more as its director—changed my life. It transformed me from classroom teacher to museum professional and shaped all of my subsequent work—as senior manager, free-lance exhibition developer and now director of a master’s program for mid-career educators. The depth of the museum’s influence became especially evident while writing my doctoral dissertation several years ago; I understood how my entire professional journey began in Boston.

Just as the story of the founding and growth of The Children’s Museum (TCM) belongs to a particular era and set of ideas, the narrative of the development of the museum’s comprehensive Japan Program reflects its own dynamic convergence of socio-economic, cultural, historical, and personal contexts.

My thirteen years merge into the longer institutional history of Japanese programming that began with the donation of Japanese objects, especially the Friendship

Doll Miss Kyoto in 1927. A subsequent gift of a ten-mat tea house from Boston’s new sister city, Kyoto, Japan, spurred the continuing growth of Japan-related programming. When the museum moved from Jamaica Plain to the Wharf, it replaced the charming one-room tea house, misnamed the “Japanese House,” with a magnificent two-story, Kyoto-style townhouse. Shipped in crates from Japan and then painstakingly rebuilt by a team of Japanese carpenters in the raw warehouse space of the new building, this extraordinary artifact and environment made the Japanese Program a centerpiece of the museum’s expanding presence regionally, nationally and internationally. Nurtured by Japan’s phenomenal growth as an economic power, the newly named Japanese Comprehensive Program Area took off in the 1980s becoming what one trustee later called “a museum within a museum.” It reached its apogee with the opening of a major exhibition called *Teen Tokyo* in 1992. Shortly thereafter, I left the museum but even then I knew I had been in the right place at the right time.

The two main parts of this story with the greatest relevance to current work in museums are: 1) the ways in which the program sought to marry progressive education to museological theory and practice; and 2) the extent to which our relationship to Japan and its ascendance in the global economy shaped the program’s mission and institutional practice. A third major story



Among the several spaces devoted to the Japanese Comprehensive Program Area is an introductory section for changing exhibitions about the house, its architecture and daily life in Japan. This is, for example, where *The Real Art of Japanese Fake Food* was installed.



The venerable Kyoto firm that recreated the Japanese house within the museum included a *machinami*, or streetscape, to frame it and create the sense that one had entered the neighborhood of *Nishijin*, an old weaving district where the house originally stood.

component, addressed by Leslie Swartz in Part 2 of this chapter, is the work done with teachers through the expanding Harvard East Asian Program (HEAP), initially viewed in the museum as a subset of the Japan Program but later emerging as a strong and distinct comprehensive program area reaching into many areas of the Boston community. The results of the HEAP collaboration combined with evolving thinking in the United States—and around the world—about multiculturalism helped reframe the museum’s teaching about East Asia.

Cultural Immersion and Plum Pudding

Mike liked to talk about “plum pudding” as a new exhibit model. Like the classic British dessert chock full of many ingredients, a single exhibit, often known as a “content area,” was composed of many resources in close proximity for easy access to different kinds of learning. In the *Japanese House*, for instance, collections, a workshop room, resource center, reading room and staff offices were assembled together in one place. The goal was to enable the visitor, of any age, interest or level of expertise, to create his or her own connections among them. For years, the museum had developed exhibits and

programs on different topics in tandem often spinning off complementary kits, curricula, and outreach efforts in the process. But the arrival of the house, an artifact of indisputable “museum quality” brought the process to a new level. The *Japanese House* opened in 1980. One year later, with substantial funding from private and public sources in the United States and Japan, in particular through an endowment drive facilitated by museum trustee Yori Oda, the museum created the Comprehensive Japan Program Area. This gorgeous new “plum pudding” occupied an entire museum bay and offered visitors an extraordinary array of experiences and materials for learning about Japan.

Visitors entered the area through a small introductory exhibit, designed to orient them to Japan, Kyoto, the house and how it was built. (In the ’80s, after a museum staff person filed suit against the museum for failing to make the house handicapped accessible, the back third of the intro space was made into a relatively unobtrusive ramped entrance. From the intro space the visitor walked onto a streetscape flanked by the facades of neighboring homes from the *Nishijin* weaving district where the original house had stood for almost 100 years. A window looked into the spacious Japan Study Stor-

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Kyoto carpenters spent four months reassembling the house within the museum using traditional methods and tools.

age, an innovative approach to collections which, when staffed, was open to visitors, and when staff was unavailable, provided constant visual access to the hundreds of collection objects displayed in simple drawers and on wooden scaffolding.

Another window offered visitors a view of additional exhibits. For instance, in keeping with the neighborhood concept, one year it became the storefront of a typical *shokuten* (small eatery) displaying plastic versions of *donburi*, *ramen* and other common dishes on glass shelves. Next to it, a doorway opened into the tiny “reading room” stocked with books and other resources and to adjacent staff offices. Because Mike believed staff should be accessible public resources, the staff office door was half-glass, later to be pasted over by staffers who wanted greater privacy.

Across the street, which ended in a giant photomural of Nishijin, was a door into the Japan Multipurpose Room, the setting for everything from workshops for teachers to fish printing for kids to a farewell party for Miss Kyoto’s return trip to Japan. As additional exhibit space, this room provided a secluded site for the 1988 exhibition of Japanese artists Toshi and Iri Maruki’s drawings for children about the bombing of Hiroshima.

Finally there was the house itself: *Kyo no machiya* (literally a “townhouse from Kyoto”) sometimes abbreviated to *Kyo-machiya* but more often simply known as the Japanese House.

The range and versatility of these spaces enabled the museum, frequently in partnership with the local Japa-

nese Language School PTA and other organizations, to create multifaceted programming for every conceivable audience. The most elaborate was the annual *Oshogatsu*, or Japanese New Year, when every space became an activity center: a display of the traditional New Year’s rice cakes and tangerines in the *tokonoma* (a traditional Japanese style alcove reserved for the display of Japanese wall-scrolls and art objects) of the newly cleaned house; tea ceremony in the tea room; *mochitsuki* (pounding rice cakes) in the multipurpose room; tours of Study Storage; *kendo* (a Japanese martial art), sushi making, puppets, films, and seasonal decorations in every window and corner. Visitors entered this immersion into Japanese life under a canopy of 108 orange metal gates, a local

Landing on your feet in Japan



An orientation for first time visitors

You are invited to the *Kyo-no-machiya*, the Japanese House at the Children’s Museum, for a special introductory course on Japan. The two evening sessions are designed to help business people, tourists and other adults feel comfortable with the language, etiquette and basic values of contemporary Japanese society.

Dates: Mondays, April 11 & 18, 1983 from 7-9:30pm
 Course Fee: \$45 (for two sessions) includes a Japanese meal
 To register: Resource Center, Children’s Museum,
 426-6500, ext. 206

The innovative program *Landing on Your Feet in Japan* was an orientation designed for adult travelers.



The ground floor of the Japanese House includes three rooms, each with *tatami* flooring, separated by paper *shoji* panels and opening ultimately to a small garden with running water. The *tokonoma* holds flower arrangements, scrolls and other objects appropriate to the changing seasons. Early on, staff decided to downplay the serenity seen in these early exhibit photographs and altered the setting to more closely resemble a lively and cluttered family shop and home.

Japanese artist's vision of the orange lacquered *tori* gates at the famous Kyoto shrine of Fushimi Inari.

The authentic environment of the *machiya* allowed us to host orientation sessions for travelers to Japan, seminars for architecture students, and demonstrations of tea ceremony and straw sandal making. But most importantly, every day visitors could take off their shoes and step onto the smoothness of *tatami* floors, slide *fusuma* doors and see how they altered the size of interior spaces, view shifting patterns of light through the translucent *shoji* screens and discover the spare beauty of an enclosed garden. Those lucky enough to go upstairs encountered the ultimate aesthetic experience: the sublime beauty of the tea room with its black cherry *tokobashira* (traditional natural wood alcove pillar) and its marvelous *yukimi-mado* (snow viewing windows). Anyone was

welcome to discover and marvel at the wooden *ofuro* tub and the always enticing toilet, which was both modern but also squat and had a nifty little spray of water with which to wash one's hands.

The *Japanese House* exhibition was total immersion—or as close as we could get to it—in another world. True to the progressive museum theories of the Spock era, staff facilitated visitor learning, employing the bountiful resources and teaching strategies at their command to encourage people to move from beginning learner—how to kneel correctly on *tatami* or use chopsticks—to increasingly sophisticated levels of knowledge of language, architecture, history, and family structure.

In the academic world a long-term conflict exists between “area studies,” such as the in-depth immersion of the Japan Program, and cross-cultural or “comparative studies.” Area studies dominated the 1970s, but over time—especially as the museum embraced the field of multicultural education and focused on the ethnicities of its local communities—the sheer reach and depth of the Japan Program became anachronistic and problematic. “A museum within a museum” no longer fit the institutional mission. And as Japan's role in the world began to decline, the anomaly became more apparent, as Leslie Swartz explains later in this chapter.

Collections of Objects or Hands-on Space?

In retrospect, the arrival of the house also signaled a new self-definition for the museum. Unlike most in our field, The Children's Museum, like its siblings



Visitors to Japan Study Storage can find a wide range of objects such as instruments and dolls, each of which was individually packaged to ensure careful but close observation.

in Brooklyn and Indianapolis, has a major permanent collection dating back to its founding. In the Spock era, and in contrast to most adult museums of the time, these objects served to illustrate ideas: The Children's Museum was about the people, not "the stuff." While not accessioned into the collection (although many of its unique furnishings were) *Kyo no machiya* is as much artifact as exhibition space and thus very different from, for instance, *Playspace* or even *Grandparent's House* or the wigwam. It is completely the "real thing," an authentic example of an increasingly rare and to us unfamiliar type of architecture. As such, its presence raised serious questions. How did we reconcile the goals and hands-on methods of experiential learning with this rare, beautiful and fragile new artifact? And secondly, were we in the business of teaching about contemporary Japan or providing a glimpse into a lifestyle that was, like the *Kyo no machiya*, fast disappearing? Both questions spoke to the core mission and educational philosophy of the museum, and during my time there neither was ever satisfactorily answered, as perhaps they cannot and should not be.

Among the Japan Program staff, answers evolved with experience over time. Records from 1979 and 1980 show staff essentially trying to protect the house from the visitor: the first set of rules evoked the traditional museum's mandate of "no touching." Internal memos detailed the correct way to remove shoes or how to avoid harming the *shoji*. Interpreters were trained to give classic docent-style tours. I witnessed one when I came to interview in 1981 and followed two well-meaning but stunningly under-informed young guides as they led visitors by the nose from room to room. I had after all worked at Jamaica Plain in 1976, ladling out bowls of rice in the original Japanese House and wondered, "What was this nonsense?" One of my first acts as program director was to ban the tours.

But this decision created more problems. Providing culturally correct maintenance was a challenge. *Tatami* became worn with use and had to be recovered or at one point replaced entirely with materials shipped from Japan. *Shoji* tore all the time and if left unfixed simply invited more damage. Periodically—and especially before the new year—all of them were completely repapered. The garden needed tending: plants died, gravel was tossed around, and water leaked into the floor below. Children would climb onto the toilet and break it. *Zabuton* cushions and *futon* covers needed to be replaced. All this was time-consuming and very expensive. The museum created a new, part-time staff position, Keeper of the Japanese House, and wearily approved periodic maintenance budgets.

Interpretation: by Whom and for Whom?

The more interesting question from a museum perspective was the second one that focused on the issue of interpretation. Did *Japan House* teach about contem-

Miss Kyoto



Sent through the contributions of Japanese schoolchildren as a gesture of international friendship in 1927, Miss Miyako Kyoto, above, was the centerpiece of the Japanese Program for many years. In 1985, I couriered her home to Japan for conservation. Print and television journalists met her plane, and ceremonies were held in both Kyoto and Tokyo. Among the more moving moments was the meeting at Kyoto City Hall, above inset, with two elderly women who had attended her goodbye party as children. They presented me with a special *noshi* envelope, (ceremonial origami attached to gifts to express good wishes) and thanked us for taking care of her all these years.

Below, Michael Dukakis, then governor of Massachusetts, his wife Kitty, and Japan's Consul-General Taniguchi visit Miss Kyoto at the museum.



Protocol and Ceremonies



Present at the opening, from left, Masaru Kumagai, Kyoto; Kiyoshi Yasui, head of the firm that built the Japanese House; Yori Oda and Sue Jackson, museum board members; Suzu Oda, mother of Yori; Alford Rudnick, head of the sister city committee; and Karen Anne Zien, curator and founder of the Japan Program.

The opening of the Japanese House, a major cultural event in Boston in 1980, capped a year of festivities throughout the city celebrating the Boston-Kyoto Sister City relationship. In 1990, the museum celebrated *Shukuten*, the tenth anniversary of the installation of the house and the completion of the Oda Sadanobu Japan Program Endowment, named for the father of trustee Yori Oda who worked for many years with Director Mike Spock to secure it.

Such ceremonies—and there were many over the years—presented interesting challenges in cross-cultural work for museum staff, trustees, and local friends. They always involved a great detail of planning and attention to protocol, which we often failed to do sufficiently well.

porary Japan or provide a glimpse into a disappearing lifestyle? This is a complicated story to tell even now.

Important gifts are never free; they carry obligations. And in the case of this magnificent gift, which was jointly paid for by American and Japanese sources, the obligations were much more serious than the museum had anticipated or perhaps ever understood. As a gift from Boston's sister city of Kyoto, *Kyo no machiya* linked us deeply to many individuals and groups there who essentially saw the house as representing Japanese culture in Boston and by extension the United States. They cared deeply about how we treated it, their culture, and themselves. And of course each time we turned to them for help—new *tatami*, a design for handicapped access, and soon the raising of endowment funds—we were tightening the bonds. This relationship created enormous pressures on the staff who were, at least initially, naïve and ignorant of how things work in Japan. They were often unable to see the nurturing of the official relationship as a significant piece of their real work.

As program director, one of my first acts was to hire a full-time, Kyoto-born woman who brought a level of expertise to this work that none of the earlier Japanese-Americans or Japanese volunteers could provide. An artist, trained flower arranger, and educator, she brought polish, elegance and authenticity to her programs that could be quite magical. At the same time, although a program insider, she shared many of the feelings of our Japanese donors and also had to answer to them for the museum's—or my personal—inappropriate behavior. As head of the program and with many good ideas, but at least initially not nearly enough Japanese experience, I often was at sea and unable to sort out what one senior manager had asked early on—only partly tongue in cheek—“Is this Japanese or is it crazy?” The steady stream of courtesy calls and visitors from abroad, of cer-

emonial events and meetings with the Consul-General, of dinners and lunches and gift giving seemed at times to bury us. It took the museum a long time to understand that this too was legitimate work and that we needed to hire someone to pay attention to these duties rather than experience them as interruptions.

The pressures were intense for everyone. In the early days of the Japanese House program, the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Japan was experiencing a new status in the world and the American-Japanese relationship was being reframed, there were endless opportunities for misunderstanding. My predecessor at the museum had lost her job partially because of cross-cultural issues, and everyone who worked on the program at one time or other had to find a balance between their personal lives



Gyotaku was a popular craft that involved inking a dead fish, ideally one with intricate scales, and then transferring the design to paper. Easy and fun, *gyotaku* became part of the activities repertoire of the Japan program.

Hiroshima Exhibit: The Wishing Tree



Artists Iri and Toshi Maruki's powerful drawings from the bombing of Hiroshima were displayed in the Multipurpose Room with two deliberate additions: a sign outside warning parents that the content, though not the art, might be frightening and a "wishing tree," shown left, where visitors could hang their personal hopes for world peace, or just as likely, a puppy, a new bike or parental reconciliation. In conjunction with the exhibit, the artists showed their film, *Hellfire: A Journey from Hiroshima*, and conducted workshops for educators.

H I R O S H I M A
TEACHING ABOUT WAR AND PEACE IN THE CLASSROOM

tion of a foreign culture as a journey in self-understanding. Through understanding the values, arts, and social structures of another culture people begin to take a second look at their assumed ways of doing things and in the process arrive at a new understanding of humanity. I think the generous people who donated the house and continued to visit and care for it were members of the first camp; their goal was to teach Americans about authentic Japanese culture as embodied by this extraordinary artifact. And this was perhaps especially true of those Japanese who lived in the States and had spent many years trying to straddle two cultures. My goal was the second one: to use Japan as a means to personal and cultural exploration. I came to realize years later—and thus left this field—that it wasn't Japan I cared about as much as the journey of discovery. But of course, for the museum, the dichotomy was about more than educational theory and practice. It embraced all the issues of cross-cultural collaboration, the history of the program and our intense relationship with the city of Kyoto, the evolving Japanese-American relationship, and ultimately the interpersonal issues between me and my original staff.

I came to understand how my plans for the exhibition's future were viewed by some of the original supporters when one of the oldest trustees, who had been deeply involved in the arrival of the house, scornfully dismissed my new exhibit plans as being "about blue jeans!"

Teen Tokyo

Thanks to a Fulbright Fellowship and formal leave from the museum, I spent 1986–87 living with my family for the first time not in conservative Kyoto but in the buzzing and increasingly international capital city of Tokyo. I had an entire year to think about the future of the program, to observe how my own two children discovered Japan, and to work on my language skills. This was also the last year Mike was at the museum and when I returned it was to a new director, Ken Brecher, and

with ideas about a new exhibition that would be explicitly about what our two countries had in common—the global youth culture I saw everywhere in Tokyo. With my vastly improved grasp of Japanese, a new network of friends from Tokyo, and the strong support of Brecher, I got to work with new confidence and, shortly thereafter, new staff.

In some respects *Teen Tokyo*, aimed at a core audience of kids between the ages of nine and fifteen, was a more bicultural project than the Japan house and program had been. We hired a cultural translator; she was young, smart, organized, knew the difference between Japanese and "crazy" and kept us on track. There was an in-house Japanese designer as well as Japanese program staff, and we had a Tokyo office working with us to bring in other experts. In retrospect I realize I had learned a lot from those tough earlier years. Not only was my language better but so was my understanding of Japanese ways of working; with people who trusted my leadership, I could see cross-cultural work as collaborative rather than an exhausting tug of war. But also and very importantly, the vision had changed; we were looking for common ground as a way to explore cultural differences and not the other way around.

One section of *Teen Tokyo* really serves to capture this convergence: an object theater called Tetsuo's Room. (Object theater, pioneered by Taizo Miyake at Science North in Ontario, Canada, in the 1980s, uses computer-based technologies to provide a theatrical experience rather like a sound-and-light show.) It was based on the actual living space of a close friend's family in Tokyo. Her children and mine had attended the same nursery school. There were *tatami* mats and a *futon* to sleep on, but there was also a desk and chair, television and computer, toys, books, school uniforms, sports equipment, and so forth. It was the crammed though orderly environment typical of urban middle class Japanese life, the one I had yearned to create in the Japan house. But visitors experienced it from behind a screen. We had

solved the problem of presenting real Japanese home life without costly and constant maintenance concerns but in the process substituted a “minds on” experience created through computer technologies for the “hands-on” exploration of real stuff.

Teen Tokyo, a 3,000-square-foot interactive, media-rich exhibition was very popular and well-reviewed by both Americans and Japanese. To my delight I discovered that the Japanese—including individual donors, corporations and foundations—were eager to support a show about youth culture that highlighted *manga*, *anime*, fashion, Japanese baseball, electronics, and other phenomena with global market appeal. This was the modern Japan they wanted the world to appreciate. Using our new connections in Tokyo—and with planning and implementation funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities—we went to Tokyo many times and were able to raise the \$1 million (a huge amount for the time) needed to develop the exhibition. So, beginning in April 1992 the museum had two big exhibition spaces devoted to Japan with a concomitant doubling of programming, school tours, workshops, interpreter training and the like. To everyone else in the museum and to many visitors, it must have seemed too much, too many resources devoted to one culture. And with this new exhibition on a different floor and at the other end of the building, we had clearly exploded the old “Plum Pudding” model.

While I had loved the five-year process of working on the exhibition, once it was over, I was ready to move on. During my last year at the museum I worked part-time as director of exhibition research and development, a wonderful if short-lived role that enabled me to visit other places, read and think, and share ideas about exhibitions. It proved a natural bridge to my next position in an urban history museum and then later, I now realize, to teaching at Bank Street College of Education.

During my last year in Boston, thinking ahead to the future of the program, I reviewed a file of old resumes and found one from Shoko Kashiyama, a highly educated, personable, and creative young woman who was born in Tokyo and moved to San Francisco in elementary school. Her initial field was classical music but she was also interested in education and had written asking about possible positions with the program. To my amazement and delight a year later, she was available for permanent employment. Completely at home in both America and Japan, Shoko embodied the spirit of *Teen Tokyo* and the new direction of the museum’s cultural programming. I hired her and after she and the other staff threw me a great goodbye party, I left for New York knowing I was leaving the program in very competent hands. Shoko served as head of the Japan Program for several years under the leadership of Lou Casagrande, the museum’s next president. She eventually earned a



With lights and equipment donated from Japan, the Japanese subway was a prominent feature in *Teen Tokyo*. Top right, visitors “ride” on a typical Japanese subway car. In the activity pictured above, visitors stand on footprints on a subway platform as a way to experience how crowded the trains can get.

master’s degree in arts education and moved to New York City. Her successor was an American of Filipino background with several years experience in Japan, which to me signaled the museum’s embrace of the new multi-ethnic, global reality. The program has continued to grow and change in response to new institutional priorities.

In retrospect I realize I had learned a lot from those tough earlier years. Not only was my language better but so was my understanding of Japanese ways of working; with people who trusted my leadership, I could see cross-cultural work as collaborative rather than an exhausting tug of war. But also and very importantly, the vision had changed; we were looking for common ground as a way to explore cultural differences and not the other way around.

Why Japan? | Dottie Merrill & Pat Steuert Look Back

The question always comes up: Why did the Japanese culture become such a focal point of cultural learning at The Children's Museum? The answer: opportunity sparked development, and development led to complexity and controversy.



Odekoza drummer at the 1981 opening of the *Japanese House*. These artists came to town annually to run the Boston Marathon and to perform.

The 1927 gift of the Miss Kyoto Friendship Doll evolved into a museum exhibition in the late 1960s with extensive programming for a range of audiences, from school children to diplomats. For most of the 1970s, every third grade class in Boston visited the museum and learned about the Japanese House. But, in the process of building extraordinary programmatic depth, staff began to face deeper questions about cultural programming in general from both internal and external sources.

In the museum's earliest days, occasional exhibits or programs about the typically popular-among-children cultures—Eskimo, Egyptian, and Zuni Indian—were on the roster. In the mid 1960s, increased programming about Japan was initially favored because the museum wanted to help children learn about a foreign culture, but one that was up-to-date and technologically advanced. Other cultural exhibits at that time were the *Grandmother's Attic*, a look back to Victorian times, and *Native American Culture*, also a primarily historic look at Indian tribes of days gone by. These choices were made based on the plethora of artifacts, resources, and contacts the museum already had in these areas, as well as an intention to counteract stereotypes often portrayed about Native Americans and Asians.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Jamaica Plain, where the museum was located, was changing demographically as were the Boston Public Schools. Like many institutions at the time, The Children's Museum was looking at its audience to see if it fully reflected the city in which it lived. The Boston Public School audience that visited on school field trips was diverse, but otherwise, museum visitors were primarily white from the surrounding towns of Brookline, Newton, and Cambridge. Very few families visited from the Black and Latino neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, the South End, and East Boston.

The museum's Community Services Department sent staff into many neighborhoods to familiarize local residents with the museum and its programs—and to familiarize museum staff with the people in the neighborhoods. In 1974, in preparation for the move to the Wharf, a team of staff and advisors, led by Resource Center Director Jim Zien, developed an Ethnic Discovery curriculum to enable staff from community centers and public schools to get to know more about the nature of ethnicity so

that they could better understand the kids in their rapidly diversifying classrooms. The project team included people from Jewish, Chinese, Puerto Rican, Wampanoag, Southern Black, Italian, Jamaican, Yankee, and Texan backgrounds. Other museum staff gave the curriculum a tryout in after-work sessions. People from all of the museum's divisions learned more about themselves and each other in preparation for work in an increasingly diverse urban environment.

Multicultural developer Nancy Sato presented the six-session *Ethnic Discovery* curriculum to teachers. (See the Chapter 8 Archive for *Ethnic Discovery* activities.) In another multicultural project, Judy Battat, Dottie Merrill, and Sing Hanson, in collaboration with four Greater Boston libraries, gathered resources for teachers and visitors to learn more about Irish, Puerto Rican, Chinese, and Native American cultures. The exhibit



“Studies” with shelving, display and desk functions were part of the traveling library exhibit that brought cultural resources to Massachusetts’ libraries and then to the new museum Resource Center. This East Asian study featured information, typical foods, activities and books about Japan and China.



opened in Jamaica Plain in 1977, and then joined the primary cultural exhibition areas *Northeast Native American* and the *Japanese House* when the Wharf museum opened in 1979. Eventually, the *Meeting Ground* exhibition grew into a more formal Multicultural Program Area.

Not all staff agreed with the idea of a Multicultural Program Area. Some thought that teaching about Japanese and

cases, drawers, and shelving of these library “studies” became the structures and part of the content for the Wharf’s new Resource Center. Throughout the late ’70s, professional seminars helped equip teachers to work effectively with the children in their classrooms from many different cultures. Some of the materials developed in these projects are still being used by teachers and museum staff many decades later.

Meanwhile, one of the criteria for selection of the new museum site was that it be “neutral turf,” accessible and inviting to all families in Boston, a city of well defined and often insular neighborhoods. The Wharf building is technically in South Boston but close enough to downtown that it can be easily reached via public transportation from neighborhoods all around the city. In preparation for the move, the exhibition *Meeting Ground*, developed by Judy Battat and Sylvia Sawin, was designed to welcome and present Boston’s many different ethnic communities through the crafts and stories of the people who lived there. *Meeting Ground* first

Native American culture was enough. On the other hand, some families thought that their representation in the museum was not strong enough. “Where can I show my children their culture?,” parents would ask.

While some staff longed to do more extensive exhibits about African American, Latino, and Chinese cultures, this was not easy because it required considerable funding to provide expertise—particularly, someone to work with a community to define its message—resource materials, and depth in the collection. And, there was always the problem of space and balance among other program areas that now included science, early learning, and a host of other competing content areas.

Toward end of the 1980s, interested staff were still struggling to get funding and visibility for multicultural programs and exhibits and for ethnic representations other than Japanese and Native American, which remained strong and compelling museum components.



Boats wait in the June 1979 morning rain for the first Dragon Boat Race to begin.

Part 2

**CONNECTING ACADEME AND COMMUNITIES:
THE HARVARD EAST ASIAN PROJECT**
Leslie Swartz

The Children's Museum Responds to a Growing Interest in Asian Culture

Until the mid-1970s, Asia was still viewed as exotic, and perhaps even unknowable. The Vietnam War only compounded misconceptions of all things “Asian.” But three momentous shifts brought Asia into sharper focus for Americans. First, following the Vietnam War, large-scale emigration from Southeast Asia brought Hmong, Cambodians, Lao, and Vietnamese to American cities and into American schools. Second, Japan’s rise as an economic giant challenged the U.S. sense of supremacy. Third, monumental political and economic change in China made it possible for the United States and China to “normalize” relations and open the doors to various forms of exchange. Images of Asia in the media started to focus on distinct and separate countries, cultures, economic systems, and histories. Moreover, immigrants from a vast array of Asian countries and cultures moved to Boston, which shifted how The Children’s Museum staff thought about Asia, Asian-Americans, and the purpose of cultural education at the museum.

In 1976, I was teaching courses on American, European, and Chinese history at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School outside of Boston. While completing graduate work in Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan (U of M), I had worked in U of M’s Project on Asian Studies in Education, where I helped to “translate” scholarly research on China into practical curricula for elementary and secondary classrooms. I loved teaching at Lincoln-Sudbury but I wanted to use my academic background more fully. And I was especially interested in finding a China education project in Boston.

During this same year, The Children’s Museum and Harvard University East Asian Studies Center joined in a collaborative effort to expand teaching and learning about East Asia by providing K-12 educators with educational resources and professional development programs on Japan and China. Harvard had been selected by what was then known as the U.S. Office of Education (now the U.S. Department of Education) to serve as a National Resource Center for Asian Studies. In this new role, the center was obligated to allocate dollars to “outreach,” and TCM was selected to be a vehicle for extending Asian Studies into the pre-collegiate curriculum. This was a bold move for Harvard, since other Asian Studies outreach centers were either based in the university or were independent nonprofits whose sole mission was to provide professional development for teachers. To this

Similar to other university Asian Studies outreach centers...the purpose of HEAP is to expand public knowledge, understanding and appreciation of China and Japan and to advocate for the globalization of school curricula. Most outreach centers do this exclusively through professional development for teachers and curriculum development for students. The Harvard East Asian Program at The Children’s Museum is—and always was—different. Unlike other outreach centers, HEAP is a partnership with a museum, and a children’s museum at that.

day, the Harvard East Asian Program (HEAP) funding has remained remarkably consistent, with annual grants to the museum. This longstanding relationship has conferred on the museum an academic legitimacy and credibility among teachers at all levels, and the museum has leveraged this foundational funding to the hilt.

The Harvard funding created a mandate to teach about China, as well as Japan. The museum already had staff with expertise on Japan but none with a similar strength on China. Fortunately, at a conference about Asian Studies in the K-12 curriculum, I met the Harvard Asian Studies administrators and TCM Japan staff member, Karen Weisel Zien. Working with Leslie Bedford, Zien had enriched the collection and developed and managed the *Japanese House* exhibit and program. Together, they were putting together the HEAP collaboration. I offered them my expertise, and they accepted. Working very part time on contract at TCM while still teaching at Lincoln-Sudbury, I became the China specialist for the Harvard East Asian Project.

The HEAP Collaboration: One of a Kind

Similar to other university Asian Studies outreach centers, such as those at the University of Michigan, Columbia, Stanford, and the University of Illinois, the purpose of HEAP is to expand public knowledge, understanding and appreciation of China and Japan and to advocate for the globalization of school curricula. Most



A workshop for teachers on Chinese symbols.

outreach centers do this exclusively though professional development for teachers and curriculum development for students. The Harvard East Asian Program at The Children's Museum is—and always was—different. Unlike other outreach centers, HEAP is a partnership with a museum, and a children's museum at that.

At TCM, learning about Japan and China begins at a very young age when attitudes about differences among people are first formed. The museum's highly engaging exhibits and public programs on China and Japan are the first encounters many young people have with these cultures. The design of these powerful immersive museum experiences was intentional: equipped with rudimentary skills learned at TCM, it was hoped that children and



The markets of Hangzhou, China, served as inspiration for re-creation of Chinese market exhibits at the museum.



EXAMPLES OF HEAP WORKSHOPS

Lessons in Chinese and Japanese

Minorities in China and Japan

Japanese Art and Architecture

Chinese and Japanese Celebrations

Daily Life in 13th Century China

Resources for Teaching about Japan and China

China and Japan in Medieval Times

The Bronze Age of China

(with the Museum of Fine Arts)

From Farm to Factory:

China's Economic Development

The Harvard East Asian Program at the Children's Museum, Boston

Boston teachers, top, explore one of the East Asian curriculum kits and try out some of the activities.

families would be inspired to pursue a lifelong interest in learning about people from cultures different than their own.

The collaboration has always been a brilliant one. All university-based outreach programs face the dual challenge of finding an audience and translating university research/teaching into pre-collegiate educational

practice. TCM has that audience—the museum already worked with teachers and students—but it also has an approach and philosophy of teaching and learning that is very attractive to a broad audience of students and teachers, children, and adults. Through HEAP the museum can apply its pedagogy to learning and teaching about Asia, making the learning fun and inspiring children and adults to want to learn more. From Harvard's point of view, the museum is a great distribution system with an ideal and built-in audience.

Many faculty in the Greater Boston area have worked with the museum. Some have been deeply involved with TCM for years and have made enormous contributions. Harvard University language teacher Yori Oda continues to serve as an honorary museum trustee. Merry White, Boston University anthropology professor, does extensive work with the museum on Japanese society and education. Ezra Vogel, a luminary in Asian Studies and now Harvard Professor of Social Sciences, *Emeritus*, has always been a strong supporter of the museum's work and has no doubt lobbied behind the scenes at Harvard on the museum's behalf. Faculty with children have particularly appreciated TCM's hands-on, object-based approach to learning. Over the years, HEAP has served a remarkably large annual audience of close to 300 teachers through professional development, 1,500 students through school programs, an additional 5,000 students through multimedia kits on China and Japan, and at least 5,000 more people through public programs for families on China and Japan. Extensive work with teachers has provided them with the background knowledge and quality curriculum to expand learning and teaching about China and Japan in their schools.

Curriculum Design: What Do Teachers & Students Need?

The museum's China program started out by offering teacher workshops and recommended curricula, some of which museum staff developed. Beginning in 1978, in my role as HEAP's China specialist, I organized a variety of conferences, workshops, and seminars at the museum. Harvard faculty gave lectures, and TCM staff translated the content into practical, highly engaging school curriculum activities. This is what teachers and students needed—and still need. It was (and is) unrealistic to think that teachers who had received no education about Asia (or many other parts of the world) could listen to some lectures and then feel equipped to impart this wisdom to students in meaningful ways. The model agenda of museum workshops and conferences—mixing in-depth background knowledge with the take-home lessons—began in the late 1970s remains much appreciated to this day. Teachers find workshops intellectually stimulating, highly practical, and personally enjoyable.

Like TCM programs on any topic, the Asian cur-

riculum conveys solid information through authentic activities. Lessons grab kids' attention immediately and draw them into meaningful learning. In one class period on Chinese calligraphy, for example, I could introduce the history and evolution of the Chinese written language, teach students how to write numbers in Chinese, and by the end of class, they would be able to write their phone numbers in Chinese. This simple but powerful experience changed how kids looked at one specific foreign script. Characters that at one time seemed exotic and downright unknowable became accessible, hopefully opening the doors to new ways of thinking about and accessing other and larger cultural differences as well.

The final ingredient that made the HEAP workshops valuable was museum staff's direct personal experiences in two Asian cultures: Leslie Bedford had spent time in Japan and I had visited and studied in China. My first visit to China in 1976 increased my legitimacy as an authority on the country. I was among the first 10,000 Americans to visit China since the reopening of that country in the early 1970s. I visited with the US-China People's Friendship Association, a group highly friendly to China. My first-hand experience, resulting in a collection of slides and cultural artifacts, was easily converted into audiovisual materials for classroom use, which ultimately became part of the curriculum developed in the 1980s. The HEAP curriculum was widely incorporated into many school curricula and remained there until recent state and national curriculum standards and the testing movement created their own mandates.

China and Chinese American Studies

The Harvard East Asian Program at The Children's Museum focused on East Asia, and specifically on Japan and China. In academe, Asian-American studies was thought to be the purview of another department—American studies, or ethnic studies, or sociology. However, TCM was evolving from a regional studies and international point of view to a multicultural one. In 1965, U.S. immigration law changed, resulting in an influx of many new populations, including Chinese. The newly resumed diplomatic ties between the United States and China made family reunification a possibility. As a result, the Chinese-American population of the U.S. and Greater Boston grew exponentially. I started to focus my efforts on curriculum, teacher training, and public programs, all of which combined Chinese and Chinese-American studies and involved collaborative efforts with communities.

In 1979, the Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Association (GBCCA) received an ethnic studies grant from



A Visit to Chinatown, written by Leslie Swartz and illustrated by Sing Hanson, helped a non-Chinese audience explore Chinese American culture in Boston through firsthand experiences.

the U.S. Office of Education to develop, evaluate, and disseminate curricula on Chinese culture. The GBCCA contracted with the museum to serve as educational consultant and distribution system. I became the museum's consultant to this project and over the next couple of years worked intensively with the Chinese-American committee to develop *Echoes of China*, seven curriculum units on Chinese culture. Highly acclaimed as some of the most innovative curricula on China, the *Echoes* units introduced students to topics ranging from daily life in thirteenth century China, to geography, fine and folk arts, architecture, the history of Chinese in America, games, and celebrations.

Developing curriculum with the GBCCA members was a humbling experience. I thought I knew a lot about China, Chinese history and culture, and I had a degree from a good university to prove it. The committee members did not share this view. Further, as products of the traditional Chinese educational system, the committee members only knew the standard pedagogical methods of rote memorization and recitation. I, on the other hand, thought I could take the museum's approach of learning by doing and make valuable contributions that would make their curricula engaging and memorable. We were completely at odds over content and methodology.

I worked with seven different people on the seven different units, editing every word many times over. Through perseverance and growing humility, I gradually convinced them to give experiential learning a try. We discovered that we could make superb curriculum activities out of the games, crafts, and family activities from their own childhoods. The collaborative development

The collaborative development process of *Echoes of China* was a major innovation: Chinese people presented their personal experiences of their culture to the creation of an authentic educational experience with broader and more contemporary application. *Echoes* became a nationally respected curriculum for this reason.

Chinese New Year at The Children's Museum



The Children's Museum is transformed by Chinese New Year decorations for the museum-wide celebration. Activities include making greeting cards using Chinese good luck characters.

process of *Echoes of China* was a major innovation: Chinese people presented their personal experiences of their culture within the context of an authentic educational experience with broader and more contemporary application. *Echoes* became a nationally respected curriculum for this reason.

In the process I gained a far more intimate understanding of Chinese culture than I had ever gotten through formal education. This changed two things: 1) museum staff deepened their understanding of what it meant to be a cultural intermediary; and 2) I broadened my scope from China to Chinese Americans. A cultural intermediary helps to translate original cultural practices, as reported by people of the culture, into a practice that engages kids in formal and informal educational settings. Everything I had learned about China had been from books—until I traveled in China and worked intensively with Chinese people. This was a transformative experience for me and I wanted to share this method of learning. Not everyone will be able to visit China, but the Chinese culture was represented in the many Chinatowns across the United States, including a large one in Boston. So I wrote *A Visit to Chinatown*, a guidebook designed to help non-Chinese people learn how to visit Chinatown. My intention was to propose meaningful personal and cultural experiences through which non-Chinese could learn about Chinese culture as it is lived in America.

This was not without controversy both within the museum and in the community. How could a non-Chinese person teach or write about Chinese culture in an authentic way? Did you have to be Chinese to introduce

Chinese culture? How can non-Chinese learn best about China? No issue of this magnitude was resolved easily—then or now.

Community Engagement through Chinese Festivals

In the late 1970s, the Chinese American population of Boston was small and fairly isolated. Images of Chinese Americans came from Chinatown but many non-Chinese were unsure if they were welcome there, even in the restaurants that were clearly designed to attract non-Chinese. There was little local recognition of Chinese New Year and if people did know about the festivities, they did not know if outsiders were welcome to join in. In 1978, while working with the Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Association, TCM held its first Chinese New Year celebration, which has since blossomed into a museum-wide celebration that engages the Chinese American community. The museum's Chinese New Year celebrations were examples of its intermediary role in action. The museum helped to create a welcoming environment and multiple opportunities in which Chinese and Chinese Americans could come to the museum to share their cultures. As the Chinese American community in Greater Boston expanded, so did the audience for Chinese New Year. Initially, the audience was largely non-Chinese interested in learning about a foreign culture. Some thirty years later, nearly a third of the audience is Chinese American, reflecting the growth of the population as well as its temporal distance from

In 1978, while working with the Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Association, TCM held its first Chinese New Year celebration, which has since blossomed into a museum-wide celebration that engages the Chinese American community. The museum's Chinese New Year celebrations were examples of its intermediary role in action. The museum helped to create a welcoming environment and multiple opportunities in which Chinese and Chinese Americans could come to the museum to share their cultures.



Dragon Boat Festival

Boat design—along with the festival race's competitive spirit—developed considerably over the years. Beginning in 1994 when it was held on Museum Wharf, the Dragon Boat Festival became the largest Asian American festival in New England.

Top to bottom:

The earliest Dragon Boat Festival in Boston featured imaginative, if aerodynamically challenged, dragon heads attached to old Boston Public School long boats.

Martial arts demonstration at the first Dragon Boat Festival in 1979.

An early entry among dragon boats was beautifully decorated but probably not very fast.

In contrast, the channel in front of Museum Wharf in 1994 is a circus of well-trained dragon boat crews ready to race and spectators ready to cheer them on.



immigration. Second-, third- and fourth-generation families now participate in The Children's Museum's Chinese New Year to give their young children a Chinese cultural experience. Culture evolves; in the dead of a Boston winter, this Americanized celebration of Chinese New Year gained authenticity in collaboration with many community performers and partners. "Ownership" of a cultural festival might be shared, and this lesson extended to an entirely original transplant to Boston—the Dragon Boat Festival.

The Dragon Boat Festival

In 1979, Japan program specialist Marcia Iwasaki, multicultural program specialist Nancy Sato, and I were working with different segments of the highly fractionalized Chinese community. I focused on the Taiwan-born, suburban, professional GBCCA. Nancy and Marcia focused on the working-class, southern Chinese families in Chinatown. We wanted to create an opportunity for the various Chinese communities to join in a cultural festival on neutral territory that would deliberately welcome everyone: all Chinese, all Asian-Americans, and all "other."

While doing some (pre-Internet) anthropological research on Chinese celebrations, I discovered the ancient Dragon Boat Festival, a popular public festival dedicated to third century BCE patriot poet Qu Yuan. During the Cultural Revolution (1965-1976) Chairman Mao had banned the Dragon Boat Festival for being feudal and superstitious, but it was still celebrated in Hong Kong and other Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. Nancy, Marcia, and I decided that Boston needed a Dragon Boat Festival, and by dint of dedication and hard work we made it happen.

In 1979 Greater Boston witnessed its first Dragon Boat Festival, held as part of the well-established June Cambridge River Festival on the banks of the Charles River. It was a cold, rainy, unmitigated disaster, but Mar-





Lessons at the Hangzhou's Children's Palace screen, train and promote talented children in the arts and traditional sports. For upwardly mobile families a coveted slot in a training program gives their kids a competitive edge.

cia, Nancy, and I were undaunted. The following year, the Dragon Boat Festival was held at the Hatch Shell on the Esplanade, a well-known riverside venue where the Boston Pops conducted its popular July 4th concert. On that warm and sunny June day, the event was a huge success, drawing thousands of people of all backgrounds. Chinese American community groups from all over Boston participated—by performing, offering arts and crafts workshops, or by helping to organize. The Boston Public Schools lent their four leaky, old long boats, and four different schools decorated them with dragon heads and tails. Spectacular and imaginative, the boats were a sight on the river. Runners and strollers rubbed their eyes, unsure of the dragon mirage on the water. The boats were beautiful—the races were an afterthought. Getting back to the dock without swamping was the only reasonable goal.

Although the Dragon Boat Festival was founded by three museum staff members and was always intended to belong to the community, the museum wanted their contribution to be recognized. Some community members wanted the festival run only by Chinese, and among the three of us, only one could claim any Chinese lineage. Committee members insisted that promotional literature feature Chinese leadership, even if the work was done by non-Chinese. Over the years Chinese community groups rotated in serving as the festival's fiscal agent. After Nancy and Marcia left Boston, and I left the festival, it continued sporadically until 1994, when I jumped back in, taking the museum with me. TCM served as the festival's fiscal agent from 1994 until 2009.

Today, the festival is managed by an independent nonprofit organization, flourishing on its own with a mixed board of leaders. TCM staff is still remembered as

the festival's founders, as is the museum's longstanding role in supporting the festival. The Dragon Boat Festival engendered great good will and visibility for the museum within the Chinese community. The many dispersed Chinese American community groups, serving a now large and diverse Chinese American population, view TCM as a good partner and generous neighbor, and a terrific cultural intermediary.

The Dragon Boat Festival of Boston continues to be an annual event drawing 20,000 spectators and paddlers to the banks of the Charles River. It has become the largest Asian American event in New England. While there are countless dragon boat races in other locations, few are non-commercial cultural festivals. Boston's is not the largest festival by a long shot, but it is the oldest and still considered a model for festivals in other cities.

China Exhibitions from International Exchanges

As China began to open its diplomatic doors, it started forming sister city relationships. The Boston mayor's office was already working with the museum on Kyoto-Boston Sister City exchanges, and perhaps this made it logical for them to seek our assistance in forging a similar relationship with China. In 1982, I served as technical assistant to the Boston delegation, led by then Mayor Kevin White, that traveled to Hangzhou to establish a sister city relationship. Following that trip, I helped organize many sister-city exchanges: sponsored study tours for Boston Public School students; art shows for Hangzhou artists; scholarships for Hangzhou students to Boston colleges; Boston artist residencies in Hangzhou; and trade shows in Boston. In the optimistic

Multicultural Depth: Programs, Celebrations & Resources

Boston has always been a city of immigrants, and in the 1980s the population was evolving again with the influx of new immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and African countries. In 1989, the museum initiated the Multicultural Summer Institutes (MSI) for which Teacher Services Manager Linda Warner designed rich experiences for teachers, most of whom were from the Boston Public Schools. Over a course of two to three weeks for several summers, teachers attended scholarly lectures that expanded their knowledge about cultures present in the Boston area. They engaged in activities designed to get them involved and comfortable with specific cultures. A key program feature, walking tours of Boston neighborhoods, became the highpoint of the institutes. Museum staff worked with neighborhood organizations guiding the teachers through their neighborhoods and offering their own commentary as they walked. In the course of these tours, teachers confronted their attitudes toward the neighborhoods, their teen guides, and the culture.

The program offered lots of opportunities for everyone to reflect on these experiences, sometimes with the guides. The institutes had a major impact on the museum and on the teachers, their curriculum, and, to some extent, on the Boston Public School system.

The museum's multicultural work was cumulative. In the late 1980s TCM received a grant from the Hitachi Foundation to create a multicultural curriculum, which I described as a "multicultural vegi-matic"—slice, dice and be all things about all groups for all people. As we developed the first six titles, I reconnected with a textbook editor who wanted to publish a multicultural series for a publishing company to which she had recently moved. Together, we developed the concept for what became the *Multicultural Celebrations* series, which eventually consisted of eighteen illustrated stories about different families in the United States. The series was unique because each story was written and illustrated by people of the culture. Some titles went through more than twenty revisions before the editor and the author were satisfied. The series, which included teacher guides, audiotapes, and posters, sold more than 500,000 titles primarily to

schools, making it a financial success for the museum.

The *Multicultural Celebration* series was groundbreaking: it offered the first multicultural materials from a mainstream publisher and received numerous awards for content and design. Later, the series would be criticized for reducing cultural differences to foods and festivals and for minimizing prejudice, discrimination, and racism. I thought that teachers and students needed a hook, a way into a culture, and that these materials met the audience where it was. Teachers were comfortable with the stories. *Multicultural Celebrations* addressed sensitive issues in ways that stimulated conversations and presented activities that could be easily shared reflecting the museum's own multicultural curriculum and professional development work all of which invited diverse audiences into conversations. In many formats—from exhibits to programs to festivals to books—the museum tried to serve as a meeting ground to help welcome people from all communities.



Modern Curriculum Press published the *Multicultural Celebrations* series that included illustrated story books, teachers' guides, audiotapes, and posters.

As more Lao and

Hmong people started arriving in the United States and especially in Boston, teachers called the museum's East Asian department asking if we could help them figure out the national origin of their kids based on their last names. Other teachers reported that they had grouped all the Southeast Asia kids together so that they could support each other; a misguided if well-intentioned thought. Cambodians, Lao, Vietnamese, and Hmong were a unitary group only in Western eyes. This presented a new opportunity for TCM to find out about the new families, collaborate with them to share their stories, and offer programs for teachers and museum visitors so that everyone could

learn about their new neighbors. The museum hosted Common Threads, a major conference that focused on Southeast Asia and included speakers, activities, and resources for schools. Conference preparation involved research into the many new Southeast Asian communities from Lowell, Massachusetts, to Pawtucket, Rhode Island—and beyond—and gave staff a solid foundation upon which to build future work with the new immigrants from Southeast Asia.



Museum visitors watch Beijing opera performer Jamie Guan prepare for a Chinese New Year performance.

early days of friendship between the United States and China, exchanges were full of potential. But fundamentally, there was a major disconnect at the city-to-city level: while Hangzhou devoted part of its municipal bureaucracy to fostering international trade and good will, Boston considered international protocol a sideshow and had limited influence over the business sector. After Mayor White, no subsequent Boston mayor treated Hangzhou mayors with the respect and hospitality they expected. Eager, young, and naïve, I was often caught in the middle of this culture clash. However, I did achieve some equity, such as winning an American Association of Museums International Committee (AAM-ICOM) Exchange Award, which funded exchange visits between the Children's Palace in Hangzhou and TCM.

Most major cities in China have what are known as “children's palaces” (this is the literal translation from the Chinese phrase *xiao nian gong*) that screen, train, and promote talented children in arts and traditional sports. They also provide afterschool recreational activities. For upwardly mobile families a coveted slot in a training program gives their kids a competitive edge. In 1983, I spent three months in Hangzhou, and Mr. Xu Zhixiang, the Children's Palace party leader at the time, spent three months in Boston. During this six-month exchange, I worked with Mr. Xu to develop exhibits for TCM about China, the city of Hangzhou, and the Children's Palace, as well as exhibits for the Children's Palace about Boston. The exhibit for The Children's Museum was called *A Market in China*. TCM also created an exhibit for the palace, which included signature TCM exhibit stations, *Bubbles* and *Raceways*, plus photos of Boston. In 1984, when the *Market* exhibit opened in Boston, free markets newly opened in China were the leading

edge of dynamic economic and social change that has since transformed that country. At its core, the *Market* was a typical children's museum exhibit, but with added cultural cues: straw baskets, abacuses, bamboo hats, store and street signs in Chinese, huge woks for cooking, and photographic murals of the real and revolutionary markets popping up all over China at that moment.

The *Market* exhibit, small traveling installations on Chinese folk art from an American collector, and a show of Chinese children's paintings from Beijing came and went in the museum. China existed as a content area through public programs, teacher workshops, and educational resources, but there was no exhibit base on a scale similar to the Japanese House. Chinese and Chinese American friends and visitors to the museum often asked why there was no Chinese house in the museum. African Americans, Latinos, Irish Americans, Italian Americans and people from many other ethnicities also began asking similar questions. Allocating permanent space to one culture sparked representatives from other cultures to ask for the same treatment and museum territory. As TCM devoted more energy to multiculturalism and to building a museum in its new downtown wharf location that reflected the population of Boston, explaining the major presence of the *Japanese House* became harder, especially with Boston's small Japanese population. While it may have been the museum's intention to use the *Japanese House* to teach audiences how to learn about cultures in general, the point was too subtle and the counter questions were becoming too deeply political.

Cultural Exhibits in the Twenty-First Century

To this day, people still ask where “their” culture is represented in a museum exhibit. Serially monogamous cultural exhibitions always draw this question. Changing culture-specific exhibits within a dedicated cultural gallery is one solution, although it is an expensive and time-consuming one. Using “multiculturalism” as a topic provide a better solution in today's world. (the museum's *KidsBridge* exhibit, installed in 1990, is a good example of this approach.) Multiculturalism places less emphasis on the practices and beliefs of a specific cultural group and instead focuses on the interactions among people of different groups.

Skip ahead to the 21st century, where the need for children to develop skills to live in a globally connected world is universally recognized. In the spirit of teaching and learning about similarities and differences, in 2008 the museum created the traveling exhibit *Children*

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of *Hangzhou: Connecting with China* to introduce The Children's Museum visitors to Chinese children in a personal if media-facilitated way. Visitors "meet" four youth through their media diaries and recreated daily life environments, such as urban and rural homes and schools. Beyond museum walls, communication and transportation between China and the U.S. is now fluid, further blurring the divide among Chinese, Chinese Americans, and other Americans in our communities.

Along with the rest of the U.S., the museum and its exhibits and programs are transitioning from regional studies to multicultural to global, all within a few



Going Forward

The effort to increase cultural representation expanded greatly under the leadership of Ken Brecher, the museum's director from 1987 to 1994. Board and staff became more diverse through direct efforts of existing board members and staff. The Multicultural Program, assembled in 1986 and headed by Aylette

Jenness and Joanne Jones-Rizzi and assisted by Fabiana Chu, worked with a multicultural advisory board who advised the museum on programs and exhibitions. Programs included community nights that highlighted ethnic groups, such as Armenians, Greeks, and Arabs, speakers and workshops for teachers, multicultural festivals in the visitor center and day-long staff development retreats focused on multicultural themes. Their work ultimately produced the 1990 exhibition *The Kids' Bridge*, which explored Boston as a city of neighborhoods whose boundaries many children did not cross. The exhibition, which presented the lifestyles of several children from different neighborhoods, dealt frankly with racism and other difficulties young people from different backgrounds experience as well as pride and delight in their ethnicities. The *Kid's Bridge's* changing gallery allowed staff to work with many communities to present their stories. This hugely popular exhibit later traveled to the Smithsonian Institution and to several other children's museums.

In 1988-89, in honor of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the museum, exhibit designer Sing Hanson and exhibit developer Dottie Merrill worked with City Stage Company, Inc., to create *From Time to Time*, a changing exhibition and theater program

decades. The meaning of diversity has broadened as new immigrants from an even broader array of countries continue to change the face of Boston and of the museum audience. China has been "demystified." It is no longer exotic and far away. The Children's Museum and its East Asian staff have been part of this transition, helping children and adults appreciate and understand East Asian cultures as they are lived in Asia and in the United States. The Children's Museum remains ahead of the curve, creating opportunities for children and families to move into new phases of cultural understanding—of not only China and Japan—but of the many other countries around the world from which people stream daily into the Boston community.

that celebrated Boston's diverse families, traditions, and history over the preceding seventy-five years. Over the course of that anniversary year, the family in the exhibition's house changed every three months to reflect four distinct periods in Boston's changing history and demographics. Each family's house was decorated with period artifacts (toys and games, newspapers and magazines, shoes) and family memorabilia; period-appropriate activities (player piano, double bass and jazz music) were set up for visitors. City Stage actors played the parts of different family members and through short participatory vignettes, visitors learned about the family and the events of the time.

The house's residents in the exhibit's first year were the Fitzgeralds, an Irish family (1913), followed by the Jewish Guterman family (1939), the African American Robinson family (1963); and in the final quarter the Cambodian Sok family (1989). To welcome the Sok family, the museum held a magnificent Southeast Asian Folk Arts Festival with the help of funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. The festival spanned a weekend in which Southeast Asian artists and craftsmen performed, demonstrated and talked with visitors—sometimes through interpreters—about their arts. The event was a community icebreaker and became a vehicle for cross-cultural communication.

What began in the '60s as the deeply developed and extraordinarily rich exploration of two cultures through the *Japanese House* and the Native American program taught staff real lessons about cultural learning. That new learning paralleled what was going on in the country and eventually made the topic of cultural learning an even more complex and controversial challenge. Staff members were exceedingly generous in teaching each other what they learned. They didn't always get it right, but they kept making in-roads in a community full of different cultures. They learned how to listen and partner with people from the cultures who were eager to tell their stories in their voices.

—Dottie Merrill, Leslie Swartz and Pat Steuert

