ACCESSIBLE MUSEUM EDUCATION:

A COLLECTION OF BEST PRACTICES



UNIVERSITY OF TARTU MUSEUM
TURAIDA MUSEUM RESERVE
2026

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INTRODUCTION

'They could have shown me a bit less darkness' – that is what one pupil, aged about 10, wrote on their feedback form after a museum lesson at the Tartu Observatory. Given the nature of this lesson, which was devoted to the starry sky, one might conclude that the planetarium show in a dark room was probably too long for this pupil, or failed to maintain interest sufficiently for them to see the stars and celestial bodies in the darkness, and to get to know and imagine themselves in a world of myths and stories. However, this feedback could just as easily be applied to the museum experiences of many children, young people, or even adults. They look forward to something exciting, interesting, and beautiful. However, all too often, this experience remains invisible to the viewer, shrouded in darkness. Sometimes literally, when the audience is unable to see what is being shown or to understand its meaning. More often, however, due to differences in interests or expectations. Museums are aware of this risk, and with their exhibitions and activities, they strive to increase their visibility and offer enlightening content to as many people as possible. Inevitably, however, we need to keep in mind that all visitors are different, and so are their levels of satisfaction. So, even though 22 children in the class may have been very happy and in high spirits after the museum lesson, it may still have been too much darkness for someone.

This collection draws on the experiences of museums in Estonia and Latvia, focusing on educational activities that have sought to bring as many participants as possible out of this perceived but undesirable darkness.

This collection was made possible thanks to a joint project between the University of Tartu Museum and the Turaida Museum Reserve entitled 'Heritage for All: Educating in Times of Crisis'.

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This collection focuses on the implementation of the principles of inclusive education, based on a broad definition of the term that encompasses all learners (Leijen, 2024: 21). Taking visitors' diverse needs into account when designing services and the physical environment is no longer a novelty in today's museum education; on the contrary, it is a fairly widespread and even expected approach. The definition of a museum, agreed at international level in 2022 following careful consideration, states that a museum is open to the public, accessible, and inclusive (ICOM Estonia, 2022). The handbook on museum education compiled by the German Association for Museum Education and the German Museums Association (translated into Estonian in 2023) emphasises: 'Education and public engagement seek to benefit as many people as possible irrespective of their personal circumstances. 'The goal is to establish a policy of comprehensive inclusion, reflected in the position of the entire museum.' (German Association for Museum Education and German Museums Association, 2023: 19).

Viewed more broadly, the challenges that museum education is facing are no different from those of the education sector at large. Inclusion, lifelong learning, and the development of transferable and socio-emotional skills as well as key competences are key terms that feature in twenty-first-century strategy documents and are increasingly common in everyday practice.

Museums have an important role to play in this regard, as both international and Estonian studies have shown that participation in culture is an effective way of improving social cohesion and improving mental and physical well-being (Uppin, 2026; Fancourt et al., 2026; Greene et al., 2014).

For this reason, accessibility has become one of the key issues in the museum sector today. Accessibility, in turn, has many different dimensions – we can talk about physical, mental, emotional, communicative, and economic access to a museum. With regard to learners, educational researchers have identified three levels of engagement: physical, social, and psychological (Leijen, 2024: 35). Museums can take these factors into account using a variety of methods – at a physical level, both by creating suitable conditions within the museum and by providing clear information on how to get there; there is also a growing trend towards consideration for learners' social and emotional skills and attitudes. As part of the CAST project, which is dedicated to the cultural heritage and community work of Central and Southern Europe, an accessibility assessment framework has been developed which identifies 10 accessibility measures at three different levels: the base level (relating to a specific organisation), the institutional level, and the systemic level (see Figure 1).

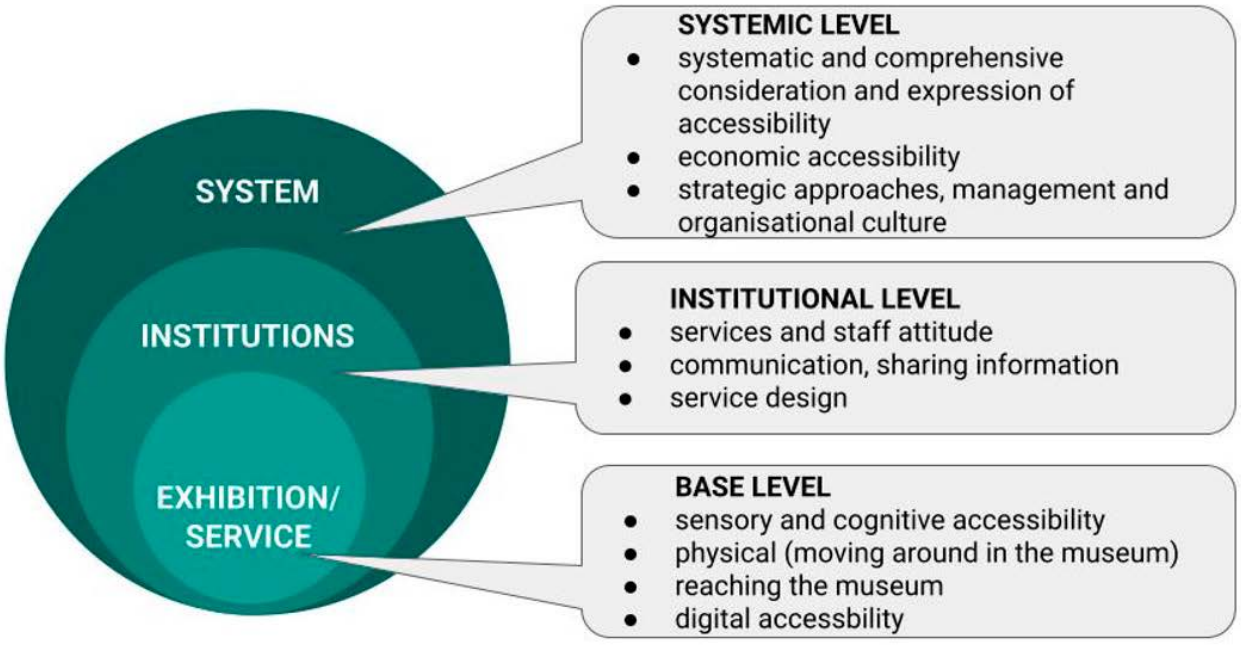


Figure 1. Accessibility criteria on three levels. Figure adapted from the 'Multidimensional Cultural Accessibility Assessment Framework' of the CAST project (CAST, 2026)

At the base level, the focus is primarily on physical accessibility (including both the physical and digital environments and the sensory level) to reach people in the first place. However, the social and psychological inclusion of learners requires conscious efforts at the systemic level, as well as an actively supportive and considerate approach and cooperation.

Meaningful learning and an enjoyable museum experience require accessibility at all levels. The case studies featured in this collection often illustrate how, when addressing one aspect of accessibility, other aspects are immediately brought into play when creating an exhibition or a museum lesson. As stated in the handbook on museum education referred to above, the key factors are taking your target audience into account and working in partnership with them.

This collection brings together 13 stories from museums in Estonia and Latvia, divided into four sections. Within the framework of the CAST project, these examples mostly illustrate base-level practices while also reflecting institutional and systemic approaches and methods, without which many large-scale projects involving multiple stakeholders would not have been possible.

You can read about experiences of **institutional and systemic level approaches** in two articles about Latvia. Laura Dravniece writes about a holistic, museum-wide approach to accessibility based on the example of the Latvian National Museum of Art. As a second example, we present an even more wide-ranging account of the 'Invitation to the Museum' programme – a collaborative initiative between museums, artists, health and social care organisations, and local authorities in the Cēsis region that fosters social cohesion.

We have divided examples of base-level accessibility into three sections.

With regard to sensory and cognitive accessibility, Siret Saar from the Estonian National Museum will explain why and how to provide descriptive captions for exhibitions. Liena Šmukste presents the 'Journey of the Senses' project by the Rainis and Aspazija House in Latvia, which also caters for visitors who need to experience more than their sense of sight alone allows. Another fine example of experiencing the world through different senses is the exhibition Touch at the Latvian National Museum of Literature and Music, the producer of which, Leonarda Ķestere-Kļaviņa, emphasises that, from the very beginning, accessibility was not merely an added bonus, but a fundamental principle in the creation of the exhibition. To conclude this section, we have included in this collection a widely used method that is useful from the perspective of learning about meaning in museum education and enhances cognitive understanding and engagement: the creation of worksheets. Jelena Tšekulajeva introduces the basics of creating worksheets and, using examples from the Kadriorg Art Museum and the Miiamilla Children's Museum, demonstrates how they not only help children acquire and organise knowledge at the museum, but can also support the development of children's social and emotional skills and creativity.

Socio-emotional skills are an area that is receiving increasing attention in education. The third section of our collection is dedicated to **emotional accessibility**. Drawing on the experiences of three Estonian museums, we will explore how museums can support and develop

these skills, which are crucial for children and young people. With its bold, well-thought-out, and genuinely child-centred approach, the Miiamilla Children's Museum has become so beloved and popular that visitors must book in advance to visit. Jane Meresmaa-Roos explains why and how this wonderful environment came to be. Liina Lepik, curator of educational programmes at the Kumu Art Museum, demonstrates how even for children in the more challenging secondary school years, an art exhibition can be used to create a creative and engaging lesson that develops their social and emotional skills in its own unique way. I am pleased to note that, in parallel with our project, the Tartu Toy Museum is developing mental health exercises for museums, and you can read about this in our collection, courtesy of Kadri Toomsalu.

In the fourth and final section of this collection, we return to where we began – collaboration and community engagement, and thereby increasing **social accessibility**. Gunta Zaķīte from the Turaida Museum Reserve introduces readers to the museum's collaboration with 'Cerību spārni', an organisation that offers activities for people with disabilities. Hanna-Liis Kont shares her experiences of working with children in Tartu and explains how this led to the creation of a colourful, creative, and child-centred exhibition *The Secrets of the Leaning Building*, while Maarja Kõuts introduces the systematic and regular collaboration between Ilon's Wonderland in Haapsalu and the Haapsalu Neurological Rehabilitation Centre. Our collection concludes with Elīna Pekšēna's account of the collaboration between the Pauls Stradiņš Medicine History Museum and the Latvian Autism Association, which has garnered both community recognition and approval, as well as a sense of satisfaction for the museum that museum education is moving in the right direction.

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THE LATVIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART ON THE PATH TOWARDS AN ACCESSIBLE CULTURAL VENUE

LAURA DRAVNIECE

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Latvian National Museum of Art

In the operational strategy (2026–2030) of the Latvian National Museum of Art (LNMA), accessibility in its broadest sense is defined as a significant priority, alongside educational work, incorporating clear goals and directions. Today, the museum is no longer only a guardian of cultural heritage – it is an active participant in societal development, creating a space for dialogue, learning, and participation. In recent years, LNMA has purposefully advanced towards a strategic goal – a museum accessible to everyone, strengthening quality of life, lifelong learning, and a sense of belonging. Since mid-2022, accessibility has been integrated into the museum's work through the establishment of the Education and Accessibility Department.

Children's exhibition "Green and Even Greener." 2023. Photo: Kristaps Kalns





Educational session for people with intellectual disabilities. 2024. Photo: Inga Baltā

The aim of the museum's educational work is to provide a high-quality, diverse, inclusive, and accessible range of activities, reaching as wide an audience as possible. Planning and development of programmes are closely linked to improving institutional accessibility in physical, social, and intellectual dimensions.

Addressing accessibility – evaluating the current situation, identifying resources, and developing new solutions – is a gradual and multi-layered process, taking into account limited resources and set priorities. Physical accessibility includes safe entry and movement within museum spaces, as well as assistive tools such as portable chairs and wheelchairs. Informational and content accessibility ensures clear, diverse, and audience-appropriate communication and interpretation. Social accessibility emphasizes participation, inclusion, and a sense of belonging, creating an environment where different groups can not only visit but also actively engage.

This work is based on research, collaboration, and flexibility. Audience needs are systematically analyzed, international and local experience is explored, and solutions are tested and improved in practice. Cooperation with experts and target groups is essential, enabling relevant and meaningful results. For example, easy language texts are developed in consultation with specialists, a visual guide1 has been created with accessibility experts, and tours2 for visitors with visual impairments have been developed by interdisciplinary teams, including testing phases with the target audience.

A key priority has been the development of new materials and educational programmes. Initial short-term goals were achieved using existing resources. Early steps included accessibility descriptions for the building, exhibitions, and events, followed by a visual guide and improved signage system in public spaces. To enhance usability for diverse audiences, including families with children and people with functional impairments, various interpretation formats have been introduced – interactive bags, easy language texts, digital access to content, subtitles, and other supportive tools. Some exhibitions have also featured Braille texts and video-based guides with sign language interpretation.

Social inclusion and participation are supported through educational activities for different groups. Adapted formats and

regular programmes have ensured stable engagement of senior audiences (Senior mornings at the museum), including participation in art therapy activities within project frameworks. In cooperation with specialists, programmes for people with intellectual disabilities have gained positive response, while tours with sign language interpretation continue to attract a growing and loyal audience. The inclusive programme "Come to the Museum" brings together pupils from general and special education institutions, fostering empathy, cooperation, and mutual understanding. Exhibitions created specifically for children, with adapted content, design, and educational programmes, have significantly increased family visits and received wide recognition from audience.

At the same time, this process involves challenges – limited financial and time resources, infrastructure constraints, lack of unified guidelines, and insufficient staff knowledge and experience in accessibility. It requires careful planning, gradual development, continuous learning, consultation, research, and experimentation, as well as attracting knowledge and financial support from external sources. Accessibility is a long-term process involving changes in attitudes, reassessment of priorities, and balanced use of resources. However, it has already strengthened staff competence and confidence in working with diverse audiences, while also expanding the diversity and inclusiveness of museum visitors.



Guided tour for people with visual impairments. 2025. Photo: Estere Rožkalne

MUSEUMS ON PRESCRIPTION IN CĒSIS: WHEN HERITAGE BECOMES CARE

INGA SURGUNE
Latvian Academy of Culture

What happens when a museum visit is not only educational and entertaining, but also healing? In Cēsis Municipality, Latvia, the answer is clear: museums can become places where people feel calmer, stronger, and more connected. The Museums on Prescription programme grew out of the wider Arts on Prescription (AoP) in the Baltic Sea Region 2023–2025 Interreg project. In Cēsis, it brought together museum professionals, health and social care partners, artists, a dedicated link worker, and local decision-makers to create a new form of support for people experiencing mild to moderate mental health difficulties such as stress, anxiety, or depression. Participants were referred through Cēsis Hospital, the Cēsis Social Services Department, and the Rehabilitation Centre Līgatne not to a clinical pathway, but to a cultural journey unfolding across 3 museums and a heritage site in the municipality.





That journey was carefully designed in line with the Arts on Prescription Guide, developed within the project to explain and support the implementation of the AoP Baltic Model – an adaptation of the successful and well-known British AoP model. Another source of inspiration was the Museums on Prescription guide developed by University College London in 2017. 3 mixed groups of 15 participants each, took part in 8 to 10-week programme cycles that included 12 to 16 activities in different locations - Cēsis History and Art Museum, Eduards Veidenbaums Museum "Kalāči", Kārlis Skalbe Memorial Museum "Saulrieti", and Āraiši Lake Castle Archaeological Park. Each cycle offered visual arts, creative writing, music, theatre, and traditional crafts to give participants a variety of creative activities, as the guidelines suggest. All parties involved also agreed that the groups should be diverse: instead of involving e.g. only young people or older adults, it brought together people of different ages and social backgrounds, creating new social connections. Museum educators worked side by side with invited artists, while link worker Baiba Roze helped connect people, institutions, and opportunities.

The emotional impact was profound. One participant shared: "I am so glad I came. It lifted my spirits. Here I felt free and at ease. The experience opened my feelings and helped me communicate more openly. I especially loved painting ceramic clay eggs, and I also learned how people lived in ancient times." Another participant reflected: "In this project, I felt that seniors are not alone. They are not left behind, like the last piece of ice floating alone down a spring river. We found our place. We were included." Perhaps the most moving testimony came from a participant who said: "My life had been like a dark grey room. In this project, it felt as if doors and windows opened and light came in. I stepped out of the grey and into the light. I felt like a human being among other human beings. Everything was wonderful. Thank you." This impact was created not only by designing and facilitating mindful activities that created a safe space, opportunities to connect, and chances to regain peace and confidence, but also by opening museum doors to people who often feel excluded from public life because of loneliness, emotional distress, financial hardship, or fear of unfamiliar environments. As one social care professional observed, many people

in the target group live “in a kind of bubble” and do not usually attend cultural events. Through this project, museums became more accessible, more inviting, and more human for them. There were also concrete life changes: one participant found employment after the project, another became a library user, and many reported feeling more confident, more accepted, and more willing to take part in society. The overall impact of AoP programmes on their participants across the wider project is described in a dedicated study by researchers from Turku University of Applied Sciences.

The programme had positive effects not only on the individual level, but also on sectoral and institutional levels. It not only improved participants’ mental well-being and strengthened social cohesion but also increased the accessibility of cultural institutions and eased pressure on health and social services. In the programme’s pilot-phase summary video, Cēsis Vice Mayor Atis Egliņš-Eglītis described it as a highly successful way to strengthen personal well-being, with ripple effects on employability, social integration, and dignified ageing. Building on this success, the municipality secured a new EU grant to strengthen and scale up the programme in 2026–2029. The ambitious action plan includes the creation of Culture and Health Latvia hub at one of the municipality’s museums, Eduards Veidenbaums Museum Kalāči, that will serve as a capacity-building and networking center for museum and other cultural workers interested in the cross-sector collaboration. Visit us to find out more!



Fotode autor: Gunta Zaķīte

THE INVISIBLE WORLD IN A MUSEUM

Visitor with visual impairment at the Estonian National Museum exhibition

SIRET SAAR

Curator at the Estonian National Museum, completed a training programme in audio description at Tallinn University in 2020 and is certified.

"Let's stop trivialising all this. I'm going to tell you something here, but the truth is that only you can handle yourself, get through it all. A person who doesn't know what it means to be blind is more likely to unintentionally overdo it. Over-positive, over-sympathetic, over-enthusiastic about a written word that does not always match reality. You can't jump over a puddle if you don't know where the puddle is. Can't walk alone in the forest. Can't go to the shop alone to choose and measure clothes. And it's hard to understand. Yes, you too."

So states the blind woman in Rasa Bugavičute-Pēce's novel The Boy Who Saw in the Dark. People do not need useless sympathy, empty words, clichéd exclamations of "all are welcome". They need opportunities; everyone should have access to work, services, education, and culture. Museums and museum staff, as custodians of heritage, can also reduce barriers so that everyone, regardless of age, disability, nationality, etc., can visit museums.

VISITORS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN THE MUSEUM

Under the Museums Act, museums must also take into consideration the needs of people with disabilities. Many museums have made accessibility a priority, including providing audio descriptions for people with visual impairments (the blind and the visually impaired). However, the overall picture could be more active and systematic, as most museums do not provide audio description.

We receive much of our knowledge about the outside world through our sense of sight. For visually impaired people to participate in visual culture beyond the level of sound, audio descriptions have been created to help them experience what is perceived visually.

The new building of the Estonian National Museum was opened in 2016. At that time, accessibility unfortunately meant only that the building had to be wheelchair accessible. The Estonian National Museum started to focus on accessibility more consciously and con-

sistently around 2023. This can certainly be attributed to the fact that society has become more vocal and consistent in talking about accessible culture and providing more training in this area.

WHAT IS AUDIO DESCRIPTION?

One group of visitors with special needs is visually impaired people, who require audio descriptions to access information and enjoy the experience. An audio description is a concise and accurate conveyance of the visual aspects of an experience. An exhibition, a film, a theatre performance, or a song and dance festival is described so that visually impaired people can also experience the visual world.

Audio description has its own rules and practices. Although there is no internationally agreed standard, and the approach varies from country to country, there are some guidelines that the descriptions' authors follow: describe only what is currently visible; do not assume or presume; be as objective and neutral as possible; avoid judgements, vague expressions and excessive synonyms.

Audio description is always done in cooperation with a consultant who is also visually impaired; this ensures that the description is logical and understandable for blind and visually impaired people.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION AT A MUSEUM EXHIBITION

To ensure that visually impaired visitors get the full experience of the exhibition, a good solution is to create a web tour with descriptive narration for listening at home and an audio guide for on-site use. The web tours could remain on the website. Not everyone may be able to visit the exhibition, so people can listen at a time that suits them. Web tours are also suitable for use in school lessons for blind and visually impaired children.

Even if only a web version of the exhibition's descriptive narration is produced, it is important to describe the exhibition space. When a sighted person enters a room they have never been in before, all it takes is a glance or two to get a clear picture of the overall scene. The eye sets the overall size, the placement of objects, the number of people and probably much more.

When a blind person goes to an exhibition, they are happy to listen to a tour with descriptive narration beforehand. This makes it easier for them at the actual exhibition; they can just conjure the right mental image and the space comes to life in their mind's eye. A room's description generally focuses on the details: its size, colours, layout, display cases, seating, the arrangement of objects, and how they are mounted. This is followed by the audio description of the exhibition's sub-themes.

Before compiling an audio description, one must familiarise oneself with the topic. Fact-checking is not to be underestimated; you cannot blindly trust your memory and knowledge because the responsibility is great. It is a good idea to use words and expressions in common language so that everyone can understand. Shorter sentences are preferable, so it is easier for the blind person to follow the description. The audio description's style should be consistent with the material, avoiding slang wherever possible.

CREATING ACCESSIBILITY AT THE ESTONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM'S PERMANENT EXHIBITION ON FINNO-UGRIC PEOPLE

When creating accessibility for visually impaired visitors, solutions must be found to make it more than a listening experience.

The Finno-Ugric permanent exhibition 'Echo of the Urals' is now almost covered with audio descriptions, the section on the Nordic peoples is being finalised, and the Western Finno-Ugric peoples are still to be covered. Here is an example from the 'Echo



Entering the hall of the Permians. Photo: Berta Jänes, 2025
Audio description for photo: group of people in the exhibition hall. A house with a pitched roof in the background.

of the Urals' exhibition hall of the Permians, where we have tried to make the exhibition more accessible for visually impaired visitors.

'Echo of the Urals' is an amazing exhibition that engages all the senses. This way, we can also hear birdsong and snoring in the hall of the Permians, and we can examine objects more closely by touching them, giving us a freer hand in creating accessibility because the experience is not limited to the visual. It is also great that the exhibition has plenty of space to move around as well as ample seating.

PERMI RAHVASTE SAAL. HALL OF THE PERMIANS. TOUR WITH AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Let's enter. Inside, we are greeted by the chirping of lively birds on a spring morning. Every now and then a rooster crows: time to wake up! Let's stop for a moment, touch the tree trunks imitating pine trees. The exhibition hall mostly reflects the life of the Komis: to the left is a forest hut with a hunter and a Komi hut. The Udmurts are introduced by the glass display case on the right, depicting a clothing storehouse. There are five mannequins in the room, one of which, the North Udmurt mannequin in the centre of the room, is on display and can also be examined through touch.

To the left of the entrance is a Komi hut built against the wall. Let's spend a little time outside the hut and then see what is going on inside the house.

The hut is built from logs painted dark grey. Above the window on the eaves, there are two white stylised bird figures in profile made of opal glass, which is believed to create a connection with the spirit world. There is a porch in front of the entrance. The location of the window and door, the height of the porch, the thickness of the logs and the angles of the log wall—everything can be examined by touch.

In front of the building is a bench, with a knapsack made of birch bark placed on it. You can sit down for a while if you wish and take a look at the backpack-like bag with a triangular flap.



With washboard and guide dog. Photo: Berta Jänes, 2025
Description of the photo: a woman with light hair is holding a washboard. Next to her stands Luna, a black guide dog.



Making pies. Photo: Berta Jänes, 2025
Description of the photo: in the foreground is a grey-haired man whisking eggs in a bowl. The man is guided by the woman sitting on his right.

Let's enter the hut. Already at the door, we are greeted by the sounds of home: the fire crackling in the oven, the soft snoring of someone on the hayloft behind it. We can climb up on the stove in the room, sit at the table—anything not in the display case can be explored.

It is a great place to sit together at the table and talk to the guides about food, farm life and much more. The guides will also pass around a selection of artefacts that bring the world of the Komis closer to us: a hunting bag, a bread shovel, wooden dishes, and more.

Let's leave the Komis and enter the Udmurts' world. We stand still in front of the hut wall. The impression of a hut wall has been created with a photo mural and a glass showcase. The bottom and walls of the showcase display examples of the dowry items of a Udmurt bride and groom.

The guides introduce Udmurt wedding customs, while the visitors can touch objects brought along by the guides, such as a wok, to illustrate their story.

The tour has already lasted over an hour. Let's move into the classroom where together we will make shangas, which are a traditional Komi food of open-faced pies filled with mashed potatoes. There is always a lot of chatting going on as we make the pies and wait for them to bake, so feel free to talk about your food preferences, the exhibition, the weather... Enjoy!

1 Bugavičute-Pēce, Rasa. Poiss, kes nägi pimeduses. Mina Ise, 2021.

THE "JOURNEY OF THE SENSES" PROJECT AT THE RAINIS AND ASPAZIJA SUMMER HOUSE

LIENA ŠMUKSTE

Theatre director and Head of Educational Work and Visitor Services at the Latvian National Museum of Literature and Music

The *Journey of the Senses* at the Rainis and Aspazija Summer House was created in 2021 as an innovative cultural and educational programme designed to offer people with visual impairments a meaningful and engaging way to experience the lives and work of two of Latvia's most prominent literary figures, Rainis and Aspazija.

Rainis (1865–1929) and Aspazija (1865–1943) are among the most important figures in Latvian literature and culture. Both were influential poets and playwrights whose work shaped ideas of freedom, identity, and social change in the early 20th century. They were also life partners, and their creative legacy remains central to Latvian cultural heritage.





As the museum's original artefacts cannot be handled, the programme draws instead on the rich literary legacy of Rainis and Aspazija—their poetry, letters, and writings. These texts serve as the foundation for sensory interpretations, translated into tactile objects, soundscapes, and olfactory elements.

The *Journey of the Senses* invites visitors to explore the poets' world with closed eyes and heightened awareness. Each participant is blindfolded, encouraging a deeper sensory engagement and a stronger sense of presence. The experience unfolds across ten carefully designed stations, each revealing a different aspect of the poets' lives, emotions, and creative expression.

Visitors may explore a tactile model of the summer house to understand its spatial layout, trace the poets' facial features

The project is built on the idea that museum content can be perceived beyond sight—through sound, touch, and smell—thus creating a deeply inclusive and emotionally rich cultural experience.

The concept and artistic direction of the project were developed in collaboration with theatre director Liena Šmukste, the pioneer of "sensory theatre" in Latvia. Her approach often involves blindfolding participants to heighten non-visual perception and deepen immersion. She brought together a multidisciplinary creative team, including actress and director Ieva Džindža, sound designer Kārlis Gliks, and scenographer and artist Raimonds Vindulis. Equally important was the contribution of educators from the Strazdumuiža Secondary School – Development Centre in Riga, who work daily with children and young people with visual impairments and provided valuable practical guidance in adapting the programme to its target audience.



through sculptural forms, or handle dried plants from a herbarium. At the scent station, natural aromas evoke the landscapes that inspired their work. One particularly evocative moment is the "Aspazija's coffee" station, where participants immerse their hands in coffee beans while listening to an audio narrative about her daily ritual. As noted by Dace Švīkule, a Latvian researcher of Rainis and Aspazija's life and work: *"After dinner we drank Aspazija's beloved 'kapija'. Rainis was not particularly fond of coffee, as it disturbed his sleep, whereas Aspazija could sleep perfectly well."* This intimate detail highlights the contrasting habits and personalities of the two poets.

At the "sea" station, a coastal atmosphere is recreated through sound and airflow, evoking the sense of openness and movement that frequently inspired their writing. Sound plays a central role throughout the experience: binaural recordings create a three-dimensional auditory environment, where voices and whispers seem to move around the listener, enhancing immersion and emotional impact.

Interactive elements further enrich the journey. Participants form the word "LOVE," listen to affectionate expressions, interpret fragments of letters, and engage in symbolic actions such as combing hair and braiding it—gestures inspired by Rainis's letters to Aspazija.

The experience culminates in a powerful emotional impression, leaving participants with a deeper connection to the poets and a renewed awareness of how perception shapes understanding.

The *Journey of the Senses* stands as a significant example of inclusive cultural practice in Latvia. It not only makes the museum accessible to people with visual impairments but also invites all visitors to reflect on the diversity of human perception. The project was developed in cooperation with the Strazdumuiža Secondary School – Development Centre and supported by the State Culture Capital Foundation programme *"KultūrELPA" (Cultural Space)*.



Fotode autor: Kristīne Madjare

PIESKĀRIENS / TOUCH: DESIGNING ACCESSIBILITY THROUGH INTERACTION

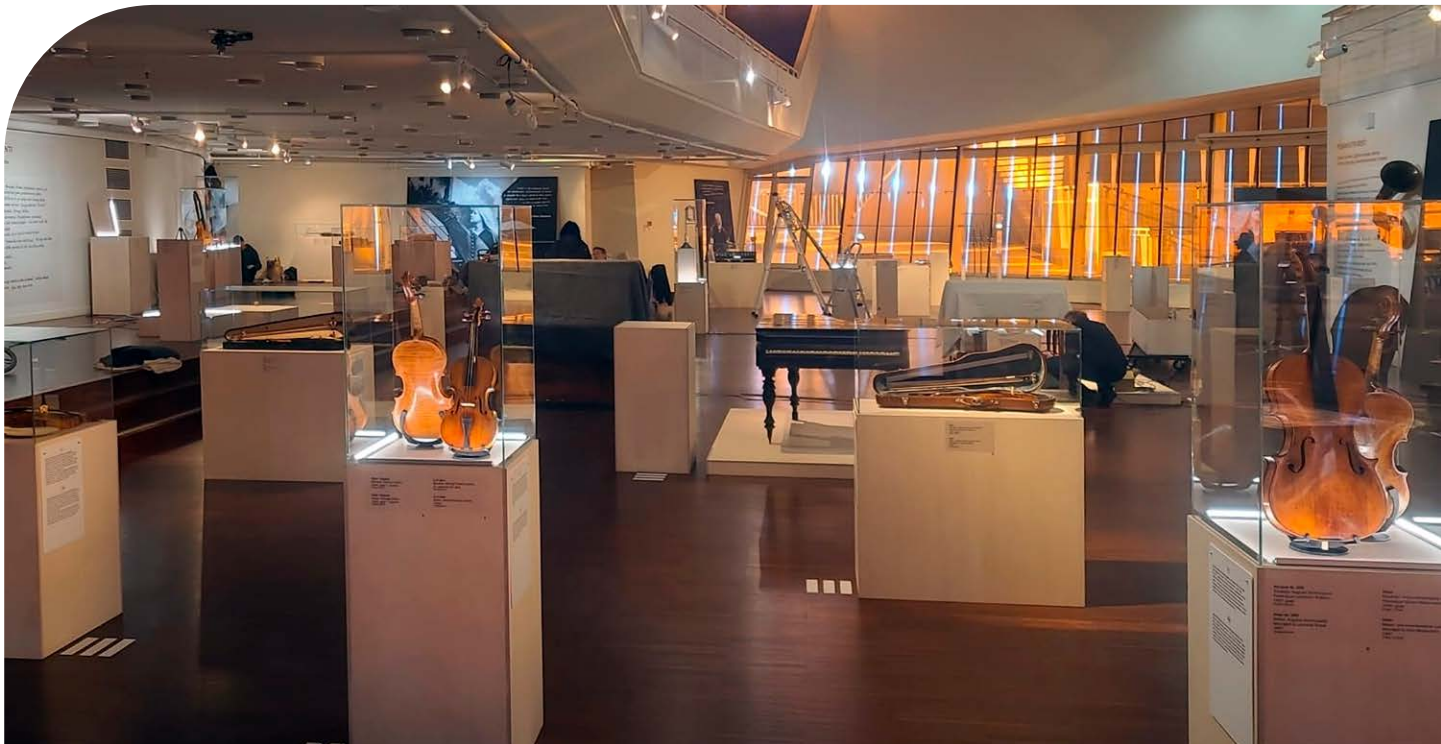
LEONARDA ĶESTERE-KĻAVIŅA

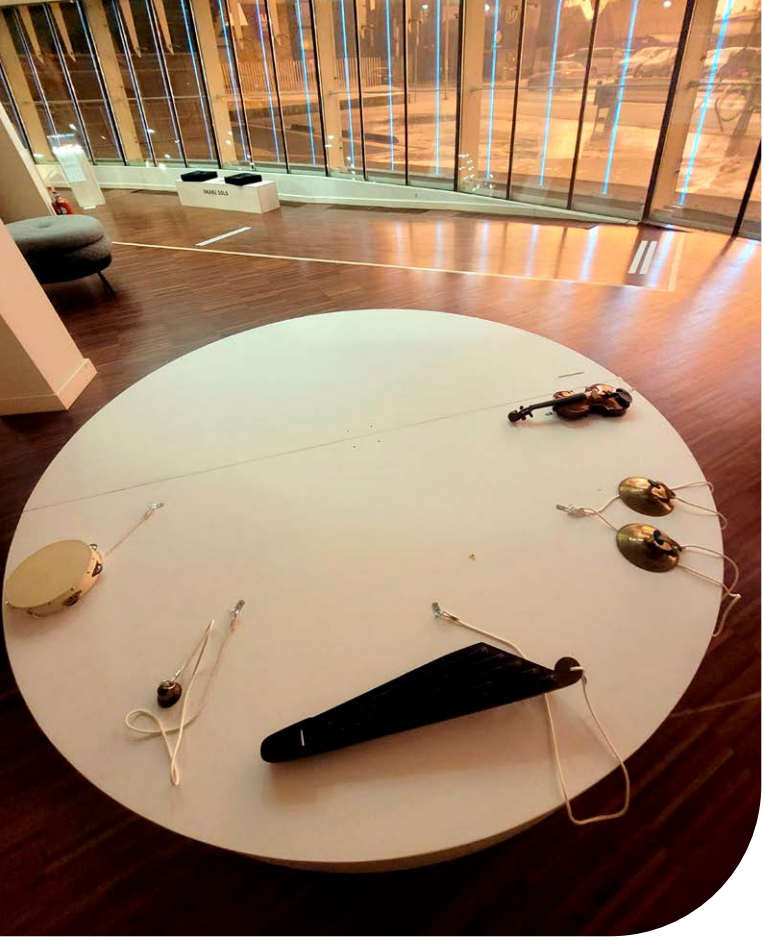
Producer and project manager of the exhibition Pieskāriens/ Touch

The exhibition *Pieskāriens/Touch* was developed by the Latvian National Museum of Literature and Music as part of the museum's centenary programme and was presented in several locations across Latvia in 2024–2025. Its aim was not only to showcase the museum's remarkable collection of musical instruments, but also to rethink how such a collection can be experienced by a broader and more diverse audience.

The exhibition was presented in three venues – the regional concert halls "Lielais dzintars" in Liepāja and "GORS" in Rēzekne, as well as the Latvian Railway History Museum in Riga. This travelling format made it possible to reach audiences in different regions while also testing how a single concept could adapt to diverse exhibition environments.

The exhibition featured more than 50 instruments, ranging from the 18th century to the present day, structured into six thematic groups. Its content combined two main narrative lines – the history of Latvian instrument-making within a European context, and stories about the relationship between instruments and recognised Latvian musicians, supported by audiovisual materials.





From the very beginning, accessibility was not treated as an addition, but as a core principle. The exhibition was designed as a multisensory experience – visitors could not only observe, but also listen and physically engage. At activity stations, it was possible to listen to instrument sounds, interact with sound installations, try the sensory device "Trīsskanis", compare the weight of different instruments (flute, violin, trombone, accordion, double bass), and explore the "Masters' Wall".

An important role in the development of the exhibition was played by students from the Art and Design programme at Riga Technical University Liepāja Academy. Mentored by their lecturers, they developed tactile maps, instrument replicas, and navigation systems, and participated in testing, implementation, and maintenance across all exhibition venues. This experience provided students with practical skills and opened new professional opportunities, while also allowing solutions to be refined through real-life use.

The exhibition included tactile objects and specially selected "touchable" instruments.

However, it quickly became apparent that visitors hesitated to touch. Even when it was permitted, ingrained museum behaviour prevailed – to look, but not to touch. The "Masters' Wall" was supplemented with Braille texts, and other navigation elements created by students were adapted for tactile use. For each of the three venues, individual spatial descriptions and tactile maps were developed.

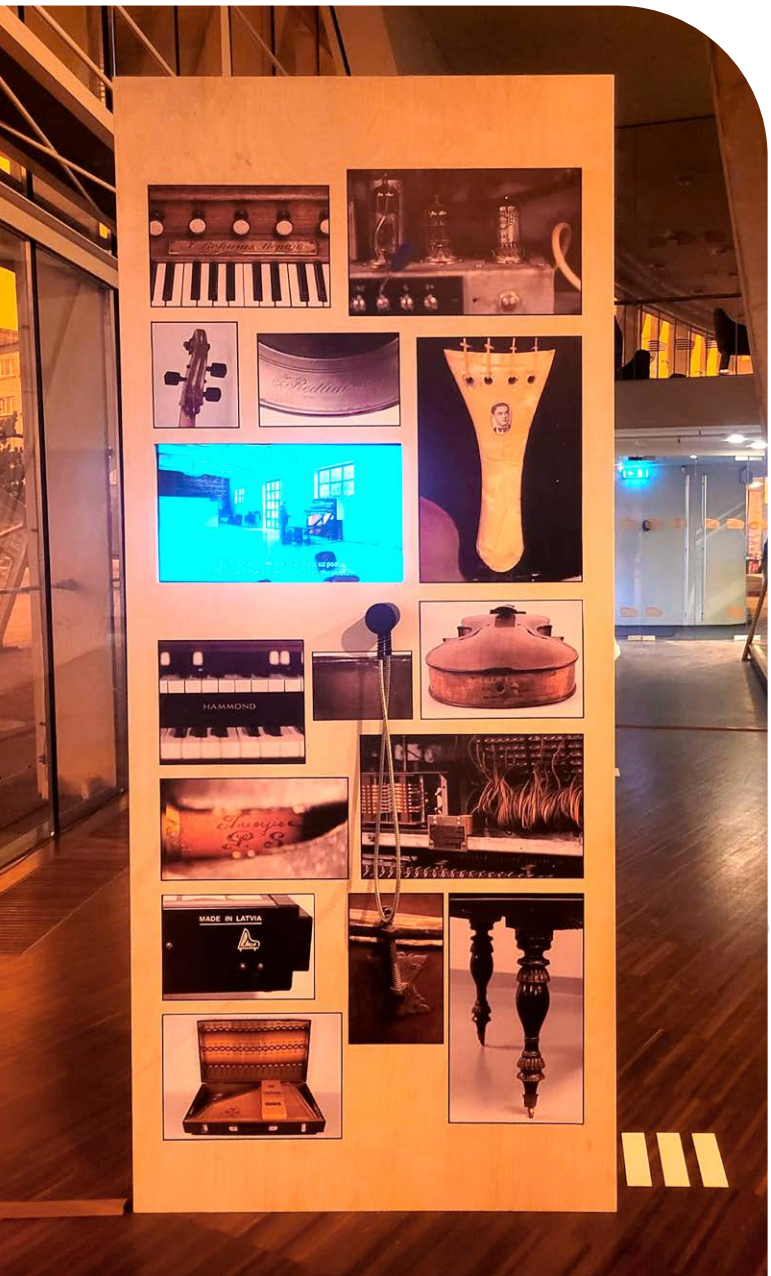
This led to an important design decision. A clear visual communication system was introduced using icons: "touch allowed" and "do not touch". "Do not touch" signs were placed next to collection instruments – for example, an open grand piano with visible keys was particularly tempting to play. Interactive objects, on the other hand, were left without prohibitive signage, marked only with labels indicating that interaction was allowed. It was also observed that QR codes placed on the floor needed to be larger, as smaller formats were not sufficiently visible and therefore less used. This became one of the key insights of the project – interac-



tivity must not only be provided, but clearly communicated.

Throughout the project, accessibility for people with visual impairments was a central focus. The exhibition was developed in collaboration with SocIntegra, Liepāja Blind Society, and Strazdumuiža Secondary School – Development Centre in Riga. These partners helped define real user needs and test solutions in practice.

As a result, the exhibition included information in Braille, audio guides, and integrated tactile navigation. Visitors could orient themselves using tactile maps, floor markings (guiding paths), and relief models of instruments. One of the most effective solutions was the use of "stop points" – textured floor surfaces that can be detected with a mobility cane, indicating objects or transitions in space. Additional contrasting elements and warning markers were also implemented.



The travelling format of the exhibition and free admission significantly expanded its accessibility, reducing both geographical and financial barriers. Additional engagement was fostered through a children's activity booklet and a parallel programme of concerts, discussions, and public events.

The project involved a wide network of partners, including the Municipality of Liepāja, Liepāja Music, Art and Design College, as well as supporters such as the State Culture Capital Foundation, the Ministry of Culture, and BTA Latvia.

In 2025, the exhibition *Pieskāriens* received the Latvian Museum Association Award for "Accessibility Project of the Year", recognising its user-centred approach and practical implementation.

The project also provided valuable experience for the Latvian National Museum of Literature and Music, forming a foundation for future exhibitions, including the new permanent exhibition and the museum's new home at Mārstaļu Street 6 in Riga Old Town, as well as the development of accessibility solutions for the "Song Festival Space" exhibition located at the Mežaparks Great Bandstand in Riga.

Pieskāriens/Touch demonstrates that accessibility is not a separate set of solutions, but a way of structuring the entire visitor experience – from spatial orientation to direct interaction with exhibits. And sometimes, it begins with something very simple, but clearly stated: you are allowed to touch.

Photos: Gunta Zaķīte

MUSEUM WORKSHEET AND SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN`S SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

JELENA TŠEKULAJEVA
Curator of Education, Kadriorg Art Museum

In the glossary of museum education terminology 'Dictionary', the worksheet is defined as follows:

The worksheet is a methodological material for carrying out educational activities and consolidating knowledge in the museum. A worksheet is a piece of learning material on paper or on an electronic device, containing tasks, questions, information, etc., to be used by participants independently or with an instructor. It can also provide guidance for individual or group activities, answering questions, taking notes, creative work, etc.

This definition offers a wide range of approaches to the worksheet. Usually, the worksheet is targeted at a specific audience, structures the experience of visiting a museum or exhibition,



and keeps the focus on a particular topic. Museum worksheets are created for family and individual visitors and are also used in guided museum tours or experience programmes. A worksheet for individual use requires very clear wording and a carefully thought-out design. In a guided programme, some of the explanations can be provided by the instructor, which makes it somewhat easier to create a worksheet.

Does the worksheet always have to be called a 'worksheet'? Depending on the structure and use, the worksheet could be called an activity card, a scavenger hunt, a guide, a set of question and clue cards, a game guide, an observation guide, a concept primer, etc. In a creative but justified approach, the worksheet may be unrecognisable, but in essence it must conform to the definition of the Dictionary.

HOW CAN THE USE OF A WORKSHEET IN A MUSEUM LESSON SUPPORT SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

Staying in a museum environment and the guided discovery of exhibitions is a special and enriching experience for each visitor, which requires the simultaneous performance of several socio-emotional tasks: concentration and attentiveness, especially the use of the sense of sight, behaving in accordance with the museum's conventions while dealing with emerging emotions, respect for other visitors, etc. A guided museum visit experience, such as a museum lesson, can make this challenge interesting and smooth thanks to a maintained sense of security and well thought-out activities based on age-appropriate socio-emotional development.

As a methodological tool, the worksheet can be seen as a strategic approach to support socio-emotional development. A museum educator's role is to combine, in a memorable playful activity, the acquisition of knowledge based on the national curriculum with worksheet tasks that require independent or group work following the instructions and that require empathy, self-regulation, communication skills, and social awareness. Here, we should again recall the creative approach and the various worksheet formats, which can be infinitely developed: an activity card, a guide, a set of question and clue cards, a game guide, etc. Based on the Dictionary's definition, a worksheet can also be, for example, a guide intended for repeated use. The format and dimensions of the worksheet are a matter of choice, and depending on the theme of the museum lesson, it can range from tasks written in print so tiny that it can only be read using a magnifying glass to an A1-sized poster to be completed as a group. An unexpected approach grabs attention and encourages interaction among students.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN CREATING A WORKSHEET

The worksheet can be used as part of a single task in a museum lesson or as a continuous activity from the beginning to the end of the lesson. Either approach is fine, but the choice must depend on the lesson structure and the target audience.

Every museum lesson has a goal. The worksheet, on the other hand, allows you to tailor activities to various roles. For a participant in a museum lesson, the goal of completing the tasks on the worksheet can be, for example, to solve a detective mystery or earn as many points as possible. For the teacher, it can be an opportunity for follow-up activities and a way to assess knowledge back in school. In the context of all these activities, using a worksheet in class can support socio-emotional development. The simplest and most generalised example of this is completing a worksheet and looking for answers as a group.



Worksheets can broadly be divided into two categories:

- a worksheet related to the exhibition display, the so-called 'eye guide', or
- a worksheet to help you repeat and consolidate the theme of the museum lesson or historical or scientific facts and support reflection. It is good museum practice to share knowledge, not control it.

Both the first and the second version can be used individually or in groups, independently or with the help of an instructor. A well-designed museum lesson worksheet gives the instructor the flexibility to decide on the fly which option is best suited for children.

Attention must be paid to the volume of the text and the use of clear language that takes into consideration the target audience of the museum lesson. Well structured text is easier to read. The illustrations or photographs do not need to duplicate the exhibition but support the content and activities.

The design of the worksheet is also important: legible font, enough space (air) between tasks, practicality and convenience of the format, and aesthetics. Before printing, be sure to test the worksheet in several museum lessons, correct and refine the wording or even reduce the number of activities. It is a good idea to have the worksheet reviewed by a language editor. A clearly structured and worded worksheet supports independent thinking and action, while also offering participants a sense of achievement.

EXAMPLES

WORKSHEET FOR THE KADRIORG ART MUSEUM CLASS 'SECRETS OF PORTRAITS' (KINDERGARTEN, GRADES 1 TO 6)

This worksheet is suitable for language learners and children with special needs. The worksheet requires prolonged observation, deeper reflection, and engagement with the portrait. The task is to complete the phrase in first person, which can be

either a single word or a longer multi-part sentence. The worksheet supports the development of empathy.

ACTIVITY CARDS FROM THE KADRIORG ART MUSEUM'S LESSON 'ART AND FEELING BINGO' (GRADES 5 TO 12)

Activity cards are part of a bingo game played in groups. Each group chooses three cards featuring a detail from a work to be found in the exhibition and three tasks. The first task encourages students to take a longer look at the painting, while the following tasks help them discover the emotions in the work. The wheel of emotions, which each group also receives, helps students name their feelings. The group work is followed by a tour of the exhibition, during which students will have the floor. Activity cards encourage students to talk about their emotions through artwork, which maintains a safe atmosphere. At the beginning of the game, it is emphasised that all answers are correct and that everyone is entitled to their own opinion about the feelings depicted. The game develops empathy and social awareness, as well as cooperation skills.



CHILDREN'S MUSEUM MIIAMILLA CREATIVE WORKSHEET FROM THE SERIES OF MUSEUM LESSONS 'ALL EMOTIONS ARE ALLOWED' (KINDERGARTEN, GRADES 1–3)

The series of six museum lessons helps students to better understand, express and cope with emotions. As part of a creative activity, children can paint an emotion from the museum lesson. Each lesson focuses on one key feeling. Through interactive tasks, we practise coping with emotions, learn to listen to our bodies, and notice various sensations. The image on the worksheet is based on drawings created by the children, and at the end of the museum lesson, the children can colour them in however they feel. The creative activity at the end of the lesson supports reflection even for the youngest participants. Children who have completed the series will have a small emotions album of six pictures, which will help them to remember what they learnt about emotions in the museum lesson.

SPACE CREATED BY CHILDREN FOR CHILDREN

JANE MERESMAA-ROOS
Head of the Miiamilla Children's Museum

Children's Museum Miiamilla's permanent exhibition "Children's World Spaces" is a collaboration with children. During the design phase for the exhibit and the space, we gathered input from children aged 3–10 through interviews, drawings and workshops. The ideas gathered gave birth to several of the museum's methodological games, sensory interior design elements, and exhibits on display. The design of the inner world space is based on the children's own drawings. The museum's call for children to send in a picture of their dream room and name their three favourite items was well received. The submitted pictures consistently featured bunk beds, huts, pillow forts, climbing structures and slides. Although at a first glance it seemed that the recurring objects in the room drawings of various children suggested a lack of imagination, according to Tuuli Vellama, a trauma therapist and psychologist involved in the creation of the exhibition, the children drew their own space where they feel safe, both mentally and physically. With the input gathered from the children, we created an environment that supports social-emotional development, with the involvement of an adult supervisor. The drawings reflected the rhythms that are important in children's development, namely,



creativity, free play, activity, sociality, deep concentration, and resting.

So, from nearly two hundred drawings, we were able to deduce what is important for today's children: a space where they can climb and see their surroundings at various heights; a space where they can play and hide; a space where they can create their own little nooks; a space where they can create their own worlds and where play (read: life) is led by the child. "It is through play that children develop their creativity, use their imagination and bring their wildest ideas to life" (White. Why Play Matters, pp. 10–13. A Journey into Children's World Space. A Small Collection of Wisdom for Grown-Ups. Tallinn City Museum. 2024).

The playful graphic design of the museum spaces is also inspired by children's drawings. The free-hand doodles and bold contours in children's pictorial language are recognisable and child-friendly, creating a safe and detailed environment in the toddler's field of vision and activity. This was a key choice in the museum's spatial design: to create a physical environment with the children, where elements that stimulate creativity, support social interaction, encourage concentration, and provide sensory experiences can be found as an added bonus. The placement of the exhibits focuses on the visitor's journey and the rhythms of movement through the space, where the environment reveals itself step by step. This creates time and space to immerse, explore and discover, gently guiding the child's attention, without overwhelming it.

All of this, in turn, supports the young child's mental well-being and plays an important role in the development of emotional awareness. Thus, children's voices and hands have played a large role in the creation of Miiamilla's exhibits, methodical games and spatial design.

MIIAMILLA WISDOM

At the heart of Miiamilla's museum education is the child's first museum experience, which supports natural curiosity and encourages experimentation, enquiry and discovery, regardless of the child's age, ability or special needs. In museum lessons, we focus on developing social and emotional skills, such as empathy, self-expression, cooperation, understanding, and articulating feelings. Learning takes place primarily through creative activities, movement and engaging the senses.

We adapt our museum lessons to the group dynamics and the needs of the children in the group. We do our best to ensure that each child can participate according to their abilities and needs, which fosters a sense of care for one another among the children.

"The ability to notice, name and regulate feelings is not a given, but needs to be learnt and practised to a greater or lesser extent." (Tiisma. Every Emotion is Allowed, pp. 30–34. A Journey into Children's World Space. A Small Collection of Wisdom for Grown-Ups. Tallinn City Museum. 2024).

The 'All Emotions are Allowed' series of museum lessons is a series of six lessons focusing on six key feelings: joy, sadness, surprise, anger, fear, and disgust. Each key feeling is brought to life through an emotional character and costume created based on the children's drawings. These are methodological tools, based on the children's input, which make abstract emotions visible and easier to understand. These characters represent emotions that the child is still learning to notice, name and regulate. This



approach helps them explore more complex feelings in a playful and experiential way.

In the series of lessons, everyone has the opportunity to experience that all feelings are allowed, understandable and sharable. But the most important goal is to learn to feel and name our feelings in addition to understanding how to regulate them so that they do not harm us or others.

The lesson structure is familiar to the groups attending the series, creating a sense of security and a supportive learning environment for the children involved. In each lesson, we will explore the bodily sensations associated with the corresponding emotion using a sensation creature, play through the different ways of coping with the emotion, and discuss how people can experience the same emotion differently, helping children to better understand themselves and others. At the end of each lesson, every child uses a creative worksheet to reflect on their experience and emotions, and to add the words of wisdom gained in lesson to the drawing.

MUSEUM SPACE

Given the nature of a children's museum, its purpose is not just to create a new generation of visitors. It is more important to create a social environment that values humanity in its broadest sense, where empathy and emotional intelligence can develop naturally and where children are encouraged to think, experiment and create.

This is a museum dedicated to children and their first encounter with the museum space—an experience where the child shapes and guides their own journey and the adult follows.

Children's Museum Miiamilla (Tallinn City Museum)
Curators: Sireli Uusmaa and Jane Meresmaa-Roos
Project Manager. Sandra Aleksius
Graphic design: Gertu Kallas
Exposition production: MOTOR

1 Valge, Kätlin. Miks mäng on oluline? Teekond laste maailmaruumi. Väike tundetarkuse kogumik suurtele. Toim. Kadri Toomsalu. Tallinna Linnamuuseum, 2024, lk 10–13.

2 Tiisma, Anna-Liisa. Iga tunne on lubatud. Teekond laste maailmaruumi. Väike tundetarkuse kogumik suurtele. Toim. Kadri Toomsalu. Tallinna Linnamuuseum, 2024, lk 30–34.

CREATING THE SELF IN A MUSEUM LESSON: CONSCIOUSLY SUPPORTING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS THROUGH ART EXPERIENCE

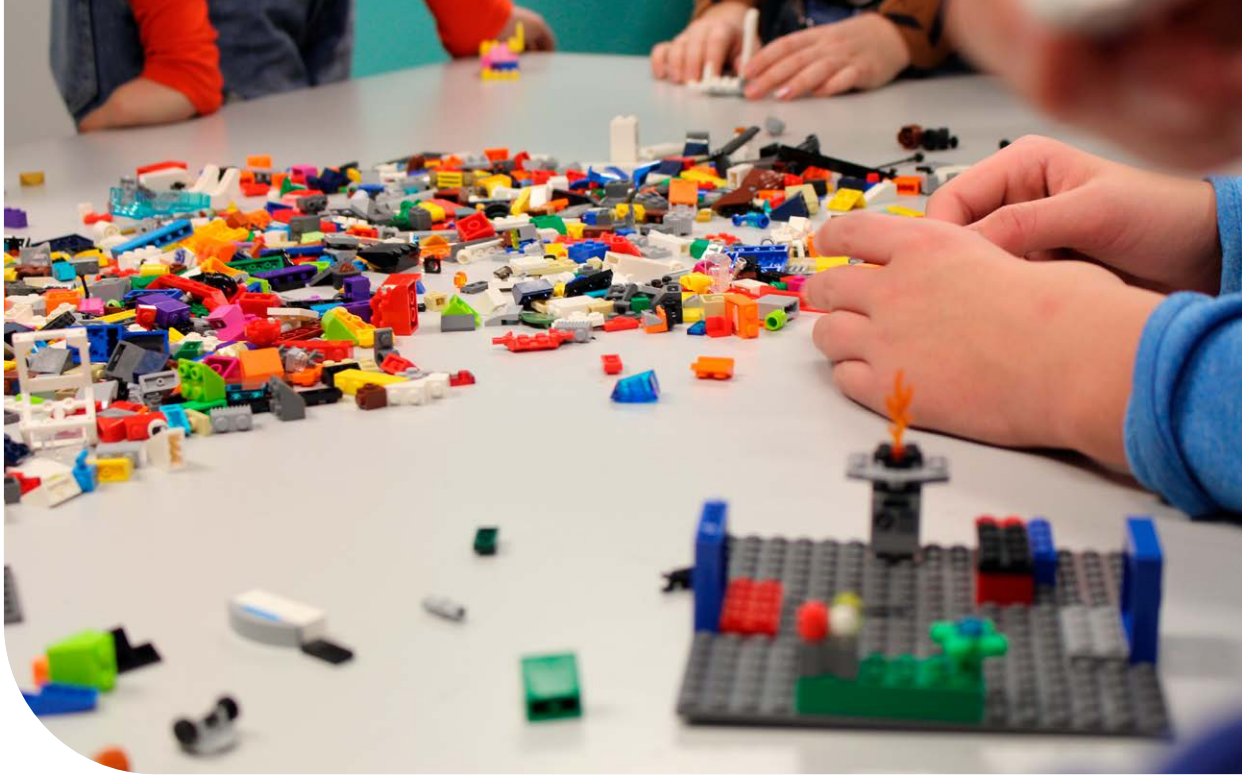
LIINA LEPIK

Curator of Art Education Programmes at Kumu Art Museum

In 2019, Kumu Art Museum opened an exhibition titled 'Creating the Self. Emancipating Woman in Estonian and Finnish Art', which explored the development of female artists' self-awareness and their adaptation to artistic processes. As an educator, this offered the opportunity to bring the theme of self-awareness and adaptation into focus with the young people visiting the museum.

Encouraged by the knowledge that museums are increasingly seen not only as a vehicle for knowledge but also as environments that support people's well-being, and that international research points to museums' potential to contribute to mental health and the development of empathy and social cohesion, the museum lesson 'Self-creation' was born.





The goal of the lesson is to support the development of students' social-emotional skills and prevent the development of complex social patterns, including bullying. The lesson consciously and purposefully focuses on young people's ability to manage their own emotions and behaviour and to form relationships with other people and the surrounding environment.

LEARNING IS BASED ON A SAFE ENVIRONMENT AND SAFE RELATIONSHIPS

The lesson is structured around the knowledge that learning cannot take place without a sense of safety: emotional support and a positive atmosphere are prerequisites for this, both in the classroom and in the museum. Therefore, the first step is to create an environment where every participant's experience is accepted and valued.

The first part of the lesson uses playful and creative exercises to focus on becoming aware of your own needs, articulating them and understanding the needs of others through active listening. The goal is to create a collaborative and safe space to share ideas, both in the museum lesson and more broadly to support better awareness and understanding of peers.

The scenario of the exercise asks students to imagine that they have to move to an unknown planet without knowing anything about its conditions or inhabitants. They can take with them only a home they have created to help them cope and feel safe in their new environment. LEGO bricks are used to build the homes to make their ideas concrete and the abstract needs visible. Experience shows that a constructive and playful approach quickly creates engagement and allows students to share their ideas in a natural way. It is important to justify why such a home is needed, what needs it fulfils, and how it supports the owner's sense of security.

Ideas are shared in pairs, then 'homes' are exchanged and one partner's ideas are introduced to the next partner. This role-switching encourages attentive listening and responsible communication and opens up various perspectives. In this way, the exercise develops into a dialogue that fosters empathy, increases group bonding and creates the conditions for a safe and collaborative learning environment.

AUTONOMY ENSURES MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT

In the next part of the lesson, the focus moves to the exhibition hall, where students take their LEGO homes and work in groups to find a piece of art whose setting would suit them—a place where they and the homes they have created would feel welcome. In this way, the imaginary situation becomes a visual art experience and the 'move' takes place in the setting created by the artist. Finding a suitable environment helps students to notice how our surroundings affect our sense of well-being and opportunities, and encourages them to take responsibility for shaping their own environment. The exercise requires group discussion and joint decision-making, supporting collaborative skills and considering various perspectives.



It is followed by a joint tour, during which each group presents their chosen artwork and explains the reasoning behind their decision. The facilitator keeps the process open and non-judgemental, encouraging students to provide reasoning and listen to each other, and includes short stories about artists and artworks that reveal the needs, choices, roles and opportunities of people from various eras as they grow (into artists) and create their identities. A tour based on the students' preferences supports their autonomy and engagement and also strengthens their connection with the exhibition's themes.

SKILLS DEVELOP BY PRACTISING IN VARIOUS SITUATIONS

In addition to the group work that starts with LEGO bricks and guides the tour, the museum lesson uses several other methods that support better understanding of self and others and foster the development of social relationships. For example, the 'Decision Tunnel' method helps students to grasp the complexity of difficult choices through examples from artists and history and to realise that there is often no single universally right answer. The emotion interpretation stage addresses complex and uncomfortable emotions through artworks, developing students' emotional vocabulary and empathy. In the experiential exercise 'Emotions and Needs Machine', students physically feel how group dynamics change when moving from isolation to cooperation. The lesson ends with an acknowledgement circle, where students acknowledge and

articulate their peers' contributions and positive impact on the shared experience. The conscious practice of positive acknowledgement supports the development of a safe and caring group culture.

LASTING IMPACT

To ensure that the museum lesson has a lasting impact, the class that participates in the 'Self-creation' lesson will not only receive the experience, but also a toolkit of methods to support the diverse needs of the group. The envelopes contain descriptions of the exercises used in the lesson and suggestions for further application, bridging the gap between the museum experience and everyday classroom life. This supports teachers and students in the conscious use of these practices and in the consistent development of socio-emotional skills.

The museum lesson 'Self-creation' will hopefully soon be revitalised at the Kumu permanent exhibition to continue supporting teachers and students in the development of social-emotional competences.

TEACHERS FROM THE MUSEUM LESSON:

6th grade class teacher:

The lesson was a kind of self-expression through art for the 6th grade students. The spark of excitement that arose during the creation of the students' dream houses out of LEGO bricks lasted until the end of the museum visit. The element that at first seemed so removed from painting—the LEGO brick—managed to lead the children to the paintings with interest as they searched for a suitable setting for the house they had created. In small groups, they examined, discussed and compared the paintings. Afterwards, a decision was made, which would be justified later. Their creations were linked to paintings by female Estonian artists. A connection with art was established. When asked for feedback afterwards, the students answered without hesitation that they enjoyed the LEGO bricks most of all, but it was also exciting to move freely through the art gallery and look for 'their own' painting.

Teacher of history and social studies: The icing on the cake was the hands-on activities, which were designed to develop the students' communication and observation skills and offered a good change of pace. By creating their own work, relating it to the artworks in the exhibition, and discussing them with each other, the students engaged with the art, finding themselves immersed in it far more deeply than they realised. As a nice surprise, there were enough exercises to take back to school.

Photos: KUMU Art Museum

WAVES – MENTAL HEALTH EXERCISES FOR MUSEUM LESSONS

KADRI TOOMSALU

Curator of Educational Programmes at the Tartu Toy Museum

In recent years, educators have noticed a significant decline in children's ability to concentrate, cope with their emotions, solve problems, cooperate and communicate, and an unfortunate increase in behavioural difficulties or mental health problems, whether anxiety, withdrawal, depression or other concerns. There are several reasons: in addition to the pandemic that forced us to isolate and the encapsulation of the online world that has long taken hold, children's playtime and interaction is being reduced by the decline in birth rate (fewer families are having more than one child) and the impact of bullying at school and in the cyberspace. It is a vicious cycle: the less time a person spends with other people, the more familiar and comfortable being alone becomes, and the more their confidence and ability to communicate in addition to other social skills developed through interaction diminish. As social interaction declines, emotional skills such as understanding, consideration of feelings, and empathy, which form the foundation of a healthy relationship, also fall behind. As we all know, noticing the problem is the first step, but how do we move forward?

Most of the challenges in this cycle can be solved by changing one simple factor. One of the most effective ways to support children's and teenagers' mental health is to develop social-emotional (or SE) skills. If a child has good communication skills, that is, the ability to listen and empathise and the courage and willingness to express their thoughts, they will find it easier to communicate and therefore be less likely to feel lonely and have depressive thoughts. A good communicator finds it easier to work with others, which also develops the problem-solving and entrepreneurial skills needed in all walks of life. Being able to build and maintain healthy relationships, find solutions and relieve anxiety builds a child's self-esteem and confidence. As demonstrated, all the skills mentioned are the foundation that supports us throughout life, not just during childhood or adolescence. SE skills are closely interlinked, so strengthening one skill can create a good basis for developing others. The responsibility here does not lie solely with the parent, the teacher or the young person themselves. If everything functioned in a normal balanced way, children and young people would acquire the skills necessary for everyday life,

here and there, at home and at school, with adults and friends, online and face-to-face. It still takes the whole village to raise a child, and museums are happy to lend a hand. The Tartu Toy Museum and Leikki, The Museum of Play, have gathered just over a hundred activities to develop SE skills and alleviate anxiety collection xxx. These exercises are intended to reach general education teachers through museum lessons, as are the Kernels™ recommended by peeasi.ee to support the development of SE skills. Most of them can also be played at home with your child. Regularity and consistency are important. As the research on the impact of Kernels™ shows, even 5 to 10 minutes of targeted activity once a week creates change, just like a wave erodes a rock.

The exercises, games and methods, which we will call Waves, have been compiled for the collection and developed for the museum environment by psychologists and play therapists who, together with the authors of Kernels™, emphasise one key to success: before the activity, it is a good idea to explain to the children which skill the game, activity or exercise you are going to do together will develop. It has been proven (Durlak et al., 2010: 45, 294–309) that preparation facilitates the acquisition of the skill being learnt. Examples of where and why the skill might be needed are also helpful—a good subject to discuss at the end of the activity. To conclude, you can ask how the students feel or what they noticed about themselves during the activity. Everyone—especially children and young people—wants to be heard and understood, and this allows them to immediately share their feelings or experiences (which also gives them the opportunity to practise expressing themselves and speaking in front of others).

The activities have been designed to be universal so that they can be used in history museums, architecture museums, as well as road and sports museums. They can be used as a template. The way in which the activity is linked to the theme of your museum or exhibition is a creative way for the facilitator to make the theme more accessible to the participants. In addition, elements or tools may be replaced for the sake of consistency. Because it is not always possible to touch everything or move around freely in a museum, these activities are low-impact, mainly relying on mind and body. Few props are used, and those that are tend to be readily available. However, some games require a spacious or quiet room. When reviewing the activity beforehand, analyse whether the exercise is suitable for the planned space and, if necessary, feel free to adapt it or choose something else that will achieve the same goal.

EXAMPLES OF LINKING THE ACTIVITY TO A MUSEUM ENVIRONMENT

▶ Awareness can be linked to the element used. Is there perhaps a mountain or a sea near the museum, or are they depicted in the exhibition? Leaves and feathers: are there birds in the exhibition, or can the participants be guided to think about the current season? Colours: do the activity in a room with large coloured surfaces or coloured objects.

▶ For music-based activities, use music or sounds from the exhibition, if possible, or choose a song that relates to the theme of the exhibition, the exhibit itself, or the story of a museum object.

▶ In role-playing games, you can personify any inanimate object. Do not underestimate children's imagination!

▶ Try linking movement-based activities to the exhibits or the theme of the exhibition: perhaps you can mimic driving a car, turning a millstone around, or a rainstorm. Again, the only limit is imagination. Almost anything can be translated into movement.

44 If it was real...

5 MIN

EMPATHY | EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE | COMMUNICATION | Yrs 5+

EFFECT

Improves the participants' ability to understand the viewpoint of others, and develops empathy.

NECESSARY TOOLS

A museum exhibit or an item in the classroom, to which human characteristics can be assigned

DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY

During class, the instructor may stop at one or several exhibits and play the game "If it was real…" with the participants. Together, imagine that this item or exhibit is alive – that it has thoughts, emotions, and senses, just like people. The following topics can be discussed with the participants:

If it was real…

- …what could it see right now?
- …what could it hear right now?
- …what could it feel right now (e.g. cold, heat, pain, discomfort, joy, etc.)?
- …what could it be thinking?
- …what mood could it be in?
- …what could we do to cheer it up (even more)?

Finally, discuss together:

- Whether all the people always feel and think in the same way?
- Whether the same situation may cause different emotions in different people?
- What can bring joy to one person, may not necessarily have the same effect on someone else (e.g. a hug may be warm and nice for one person, but uncomfortable for another).

ADAPTATION OPTION

With school-aged children, this exercise may be done as an independent task by printing the questions and asking everyone to answer in writing on a piece of paper. End the exercise with a joint discussion.

SOURCE: Author Cätlin Tuuling

COOPERATION BETWEEN TURAIDA MUSEUM RESERVE AND THE ASSOCIATION "CERĪBU SPĀRNI"

GUNTA ZAĶĪTE

Head of the Communication and Educational Work Department, Turaida Museum Reserve

Turaida Museum Reserve is gradually developing into an accessible and inclusive museum, moving step by step towards its strategic goals. One significant example of this process is its cooperation with the association "Cerību spārni" ("Wings of Hope").

The association "Cerību spārni" was founded in 2003 by a group of parents of children with disabilities. It was established to maintain hope and provide mutual support in everyday life. Over more than twenty-three years, the organisation has significantly expanded its activities. Today, it operates several day-care centres for different age groups, offers rehabilitation programmes, supports people with

Children's exhibition "Green and Even Greener." 2023. Photo: Kristaps Kalns







Educational session for people with intellectual disabilities. 2024. Photo: Inga Baltā

disabilities and their families, develops a wide range of social services, and raises public awareness about the rights of persons with disabilities. The association has also established a social enterprise, "Visi var" ("Everyone Can"), and carries out a variety of initiatives, including a popular souvenir shop where members create items from diverse materials such as candles, embroidery, greeting cards, porcelain and clay ceramics, and more.

The cooperation between Turaida Museum Reserve and the association has developed in several directions. Clients of the association's day centres—young people and adults with various disabilities—have visited the museum reserve and participated in its educational programmes. These programmes are adapted to the needs of specific audiences, taking into account their abilities and levels of understanding. The main principle is to use simple, clear activities and to engage participants in hands-on experiences. For example, in the programme "Step into the World of Folk Songs," some activities are replaced with creative workshops, such as making ancient Livonian clay birds or crafting traditional dolls from hay.

Another educational programme, "Meteņi in Turaida"—a traditional Latvian seasonal celebration marking the approach of spring, with parallels in other European traditions—demonstrated that outdoor activities involving movement and play are also suitable for this audience. Despite winter weather conditions, participants enthusiastically take part in traditional Meteņi activities such as sledding, masking, games, fun competitions, movement-based activities, singing and dancing, as well as enjoying pancakes and other traditional festive foods.

The cooperation has also expanded into other formats. At the end of 2025, the social enterprise "Visi var" participated in a joint project to create large-scale gingerbread pieces for an exhibition displayed in Turaida Church during the Christmas period. The museum reserve also collaborates with the enterprise on practical matters, such as repairing costumes used in educational programmes.



Guided tour for people with visual impairments. 2025. Photo: Estere Rožkalne

An important area of cooperation is the development of new exhibitions at Turaida Castle. As part of this process, texts in Easy Language are being created to ensure accessibility for a wider audience. Museum education specialists are enhancing their knowledge in this field and collaborating with Easy Language experts. To test the clarity and usability of the texts, representatives from the association's group home "Sigulda" were involved in evaluating the exhibition content and providing valuable feedback. During the testing process, complex terms were identified and simplified to improve comprehension.

Easy Language texts help people with different reading abilities better understand information, as well as those learning Latvian as a foreign language.

One of the key strategic goals of Turaida Museum Reserve is to create an accessible, inclusive, and welcoming environment for diverse social groups, and cooperation with the association "Cerību spārni" is an important step towards achieving this goal.

HOW TO INVOLVE CHILDREN IN THE EXHIBITION? TARTU ART MUSEUM EXHIBITION 'THE SECRETS OF THE LEANING BUILDING' ('VILTUSE MAJA SALADUSED')

HANNA-LIIS KONT

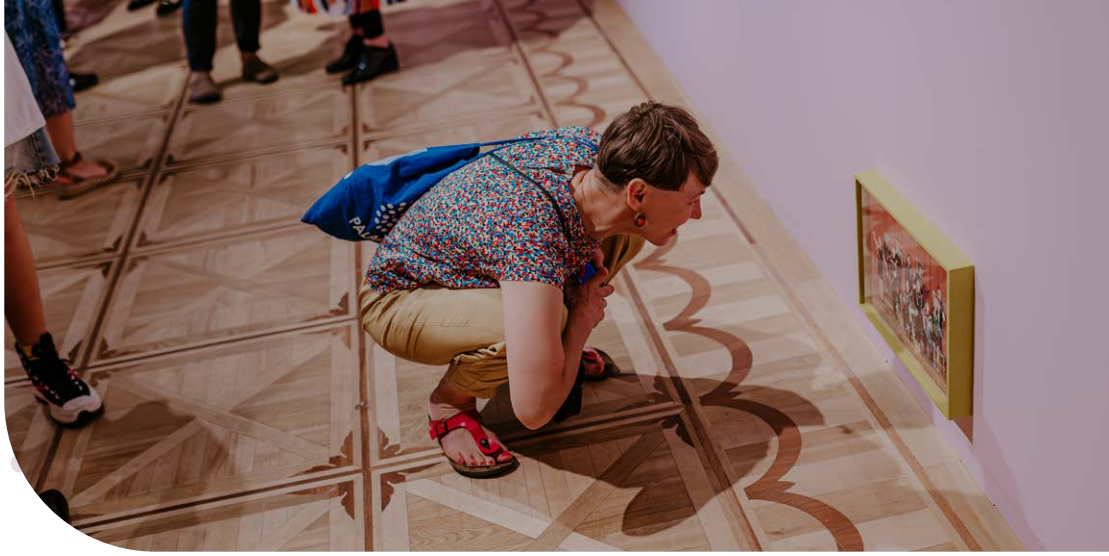
Curator, Junior Researcher

"Your exhibition is also leaning in content. It's like there are different versions of the world in there! And that's what I like the most!"

Piibe, a six-year old visitor[1]

This story focuses on the international contemporary art exhibition 'The Secrets of the Leaning Building', which brought together playful works and environments that support self-expression and interaction. The exhibition took place in the Tartu Art Museum's leaning exhibition hall and in Tartu's urban space[2] from August 2024 to February 2025 and was part of the main programme of Tartu 2024, the European Capital of Culture. 'The Secrets of the Leaning Building' was primarily aimed at children and was a collaboration between children, professional artists and the 'Creative Connections' platform. Between 2021 and 2024, several hundred children from a dozen or so general education schools in Southern Estonia contributed to the exhibition and the creation of new educational programmes. Nearly 20 families with children and 12 artists from Estonia, Canada, Sweden, the United Kingdom and elsewhere also contributed to the creation of works. This resulted in a variety of works, from a sonic journey





to innovative classroom portraits and an installation of colourful emotions. I am the curator of the exhibition and the leader of the platform 'Creative Connections'.[3]

At the heart of the platform's work is the development of children's and adults' socio-emotional competences through the arts. We believe that art can be used to teach self-expression, cooperation, and appreciation of differences, and to develop many other forms of knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable people to communicate effectively. Through art education and exhibitions, we contribute to a healthier and more supportive social environment in our communities. The central aim of the exhibition 'The Secrets of the Leaning Building' was to contribute to the development of social skills by bringing children and adults closer to art.

COURAGE TO START FROM THE OTHER SIDE

The curatorship of 'The Secrets of the Leaning Building' highlighted important successes and lessons learnt about engaging children in the exhibit. The key success came at the beginning of the project, when we set the starting point of the exhibition. We turned the usual process of curating art exhibitions on its head and started at the other end. While the usual approach to developing exhibitions is based on the artists, the works or the theme, in this project, we first started with the target group, who are not yet active visitors of art exhibitions, and their needs. First, we figured out for whom and why we wanted to do this exhibition. The target group consisted of children aged 6–10 years old who were just starting their school year and the adults in their immediate circle (especially teachers and parents).

One of the reasons for this choice was the experience of the Tartu Art Museum, which told us that many children in the region do not have access to contemporary art exhibitions due to various barriers. We also knew that children starting school are forming new social networks and attitudes, so developing social skills at this age is particularly important, as is supporting the prevention of later problems.[4] The formulation of a clear target-group-based starting point provided the values-based focus needed to plan future activities. In setting the objectives of the exhibition and developing new works, we were therefore guided by the needs of the target group. In the context of museums, the principle applied can be summarised as follows: first, the needs of the target group, then the exhibits.

TESTING THE RULES OF THE MUSEUM

The choices made and the lessons learnt from working with children were also important. We decided that we wanted to create mutually beneficial and collaborative participatory experiences,[5] not just formally involve children. In doing so, the imaginative ideas that emerged from the collaboration between children and artists challenged some of the written and unwritten rules typical of (art) museums. We learnt that if

we take children's ideas seriously, consistently focusing on the question of how it can be done rather than whether it can be done, and actively seeking solutions ourselves, many seemingly impossible missions become possible. Reflections from the participating children suggest that bringing their ideas to life created memorable success stories and increased their courage to share their thoughts. Thus, liquid paints, chalk and water found their way into the exhibition hall, new doors and windows were opened in the museum, and schoolchildren became the guides.

Through this cooperation, we learnt the importance of flexibility, that is, the need to constantly adapt the process as we work and not to stick too rigidly to pre-established plans if they do not match the needs of the participants.[6] In addition, it was repeatedly noticed that many adults liked the more playful exhibition created for children. In the case of 'The Secrets of the Leaning Building', we saw how much fun it was for visitors of all ages to have a more active experience of the art exhibition. It was the adults—cultural organisers, artists, museum educators, teachers, parents—who learnt a lot from working with children, both in the preparation of the exhibition and during it. And that is a very good thing, because through them, what they learn can reach other children who did not participate directly.

The approach chosen proved successful in several ways. The profile of visitors to the Tartu Art Museum became much more diverse compared to the same time last year. Between September and November 2024, the number of family tickets increased by 3.7 times, and the number of visits by young children (8-year-olds and younger) by as much as six times.[7] We also collected data indicating that more than half of the children who contributed to the project visited the art museum for the first time in their lives. However, initial visitor experiences are very important in shaping people's future attitudes.[8]

The success of the project is well summarised by the feedback from the Estonian Museum Awards Committee: "The project proves that a new approach, a willingness to take risks, involvement, and a strong sense of mission can create a new level of quality." The exhibition 'The Secrets of the Leaning Building' was awarded the title 'Exhibition of the Year 2024' in the temporary exhibitions category. Based on my experience, I dare say that it is not difficult to find new approaches when the advisory board is made up of fearless 6–10-year-old inventors. However, it is important to treat them as meaningful partners whose ideas, creativity and needs are essential at every step.

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1 Kirjalik tagasiside näitust külastanud kuueaastaselt lasteaialapselt Piibelt näituse kuraatorile, edastatud Facebook Messengeri kaudu 2024. aasta 26. novembril. Sõnumi salvestus teksti autori valduses.

2 Kaks teost on tänaseni kogetavad Tartu kesklinnas Holmi pargis. Lisainfo: https://www.kunstloob.ee/naitus (vaadatud 22 IV 2026).

3 Lisainfo platvormi ja projekti kohta: „Kunst loob lähedust" veebileht: https://www.kunstloob.ee/ (vaadatud 23 IV 2026).

4 Vaata näiteks: Peaasi veebileht. Mis on sotsiaal-emotsionaalne pädevus?: peaasi.ee/mis-on-sotsiaal-emotsionaalne-padevus/ (vaadatud 23 IV 2026).

5 Osalusprotsesside sidumisel vastastikuse kasu tingimusega lähtusime ka järgmisest allikast: McSweeney, Kayte; Kavanagh, Jen. Introduction. – Museum Participation: New Directions for Audience Collaboration. Toim. Kayte McSweeney, Jen Kavanagh. MuseumsEtc, 2016, lk 19–20.

6 Näituse jaoks peredega koostöös valminud helirännaku kohta saab lähemalt lugeda Methise vaimse heaolu ja kunstide erinumbrist: Kont, Hanna-Liis. Kuidas toetab kunst sotsiaal-emotsionaalse pädevuse kujundamist? Lastega perede abil loodud helirännak. Methis, Vol. 28, No. 35, 2025, lk 171–197. Projektiga seotud haridusprogrammide kohta ilmub uurimuslik artikkel Baltic Journal of Art History 2026. aasta järgmises numbris.

NINE STEPS TOWARDS MORE INCLUSIVE MUSEUM EDUCATION:

Creation of regular educational programmes for patients of Haapsalu Neurological Rehabilitation Centre at Ilon's Wonderland

MAARJA KÕUTS

Director of Ilon's Wonderland

Ilon's Wonderland has been collaborating with the Haapsalu Neurological Rehabilitation Centre (HNRC) for over five years, offering children undergoing rehabilitation the opportunity to visit the museum once a week to participate in a special education programme. The health institution and the museum have joined forces to improve the well-being of children with special needs and their carers. I will discuss how we came to this collaboration, what this experience has taught us, what obstacles we have had to overcome, and what has brought us joy. It is best to take a step-by-step approach to big, new plans. The journey to achieve our goals has been gradual, sometimes pausing and even taking a few steps back. Perhaps these ideas will help others who wish to take their museum's educational activities in a similar direction.

STEPS OF PLANNING

Successful journeys start with thorough and well-thought-out plans.

Step 1. We consider who belongs to our main target group.

Families with children are the most important target group of Ilon's Wonderland. At a first glance, the families who visit us can be divided into two groups: local families living in and around Haapsalu, and more distant visitors, who mainly come to visit during their summer holidays. But perhaps our target group is a little broader? Haapsalu is also regularly visited by families with children who did not come here to live or spend their holidays. These families' visits to Haapsalu are linked to a serious concern: their children need rehabilitation. As families with children are our main target group, we naturally wanted to involve them in our activities. How can we provide them with the best visitor experience?



Step 2. We seek advice from colleagues with experience.

We received very good advice and encouragement from our colleague Jane Meresmaa-Roos, who has worked with children with special needs at both the Estonian Art Museum (Kumu) and Tallinn City Museum. Among other things, we asked Jane to introduce us to the project 'Young People with Special Needs in Kumu', through which the Kumu Education Centre created opportunities for young people with special needs to engage with art using active learning methods. The Art Museum's educational programmes were created in cooperation with the social workers and head teachers of the participating care institutions and schools. Activities were designed to match the developmental specificities of the target groups. Learning about the working process of this project helped us to better plan our next steps and anticipate potential problems.

Step 3. We look closely at the specific characteristics and needs of our target group.

In December 2020, I wrote to Kadri Engla, the then director of the HNRC, about our idea of cooperation. We were immediately reassured that our goals aligned. The HNRC is committed to helping patients lead active and fulfilling lives. Activities taking place outside of the hospital give patients the opportunity to test their skills and functional capability. So, it was important to bring the children to the museum.

By spring 2021, we had drafted a preliminary education programme plan, which was approved by the HNRC staff. When developing the education programme, we decided to build on topics and activities that had been used and successfully tested in the past. We tried to make the structure of the existing programme and the activities within it simpler, clearer and more playful, by significantly reducing the amount of information presented by the instructor in a lecture format. We made sure that the lesson was varied and that the programme took place in different rooms to foster interest and attention. We also had to take into account that it took longer than usual to move from one room to another. Getting up the stairs is no easy task for most of the participants.

The hospital's decision to pay €2 per child each visit reassured us that the programme would be sustainable as it would cover the cost of the tools used for crafts during the programme. Participation in the programme is therefore free of charge for the families of hospital patients. We wanted all the children undergoing treatment to have an equal opportunity to visit Ilon's Wonderland. Patients usually stay in hospital for two weeks at a time, and treatment courses may be repeated. Therefore, we have to consider the possibility that the same families may visit us several times in a row.

STEPS OF ACTION

You cannot learn to swim without getting in the water!

Step 4. We get started.

The first programme was successfully completed on 16 June 2021. However, the coronavirus put the project's continuity to the test. There were periods when patients were not allowed to leave the hospital because of the spread of the virus. We maintained patient communication with the HNRC staff and resumed work as soon as conditions allowed.

Today, the programmes are working very well. The hospital lets us know a day in advance how many people are coming and what special needs we should take into account, e.g. what language they speak or whether there are wheelchair users among them. This gives us a little time to plan the activities in detail so that everyone can get the most out of the programme and feel welcome. The size of the groups can vary greatly from week to week. Sometimes there are only two visitors, while on a Wednesday in the summer we have had 30 visitors.

Step 5. We are flexible: we notice, we learn and we react.

All of our six staff members working with the HNRC patients have years of experience in museum education. A diverse and unique target group requires constant adaptability in the preparation and conduction of lessons, a willingness to change planned activities on the fly if necessary, and the courage to experiment and challenge yourself. It has been a continuous process of self-improvement for the staff of Ilon's Wonderland. As the programme is constant and labour-intensive, it is important that all staff are willing to contribute.

For the museum, among other things, this has been a great opportunity to systematically consider its accessibility and see whether the solutions work in real life.

Step 6. We maintain communication with our partner during the project.

The HNRC staff have also visited Ilon's Wonderland. We have conducted the programme with them so that they can pass on information to patients and encourage them to visit the museum. It is great to work together to figure out how to make our services even better for patients and make sure they complement one another. It was this joint meeting that gave us the inspiration to create special child-friendly and eye-catching advertisements for the programme on hospital screens and bulletin boards.

Our good relationship with the hospital has allowed us to create additional joint projects. For example, young people in the museum's curatorial workshop have created a fun activity wall of characters, a game where you search for cat pictures, and an exhibition of reproductions of Ilon Wikland's paintings in the HNRC.

STEPS OF ANALYSIS

It is important to pause sometimes, look back on what we have accomplished and make sure we stay on the right track.

Step 7. We share our experiences with colleagues.

It is certainly important for team members to support each other and not be left alone with work-related problems. The weekly meetings are where we can discuss how our programmes are progressing, who needs what kind of help, and what we need to prepare for upcoming activities.

At a recent meeting, we took the time for a more in-depth analysis and review. Colleagues confirmed that this project has been very important and rewarding for them. They have been able to develop their empathy, communication skills and sense of community. They see that their work creates value.

Step 8. We ask for feedback.

Of course, we have also asked the families of HNRC patients for feedback. The programmes have been very well received. For example, one mother praised the fact that her child started imitating the storytelling in the book after a visit to Ilon's Wonderland. They picked up a book from the hospital's book carousel and started telling a story. Previously, the child had not shown much interest in books.

In addition, we have received feedback from colleagues outside our museum. As part of their coursework for the micro-degree in museum education at Tallinn University, they looked at one of the educational programmes for patients at the HNRC. Their fresh and detailed observations helped us refine the programme and confirmed that we are moving in the right direction.

HNRC IS DELIGHTED WITH OUR COLLABORATION:

"It is rewarding to have neighbours, friends and partners like Ilon's Wonderland. They are like us; they think with their hearts and feel with their brains. They want life to be a little better for everyone: full of opportunities to learn and grow, to learn new things and to create."

Step 9. We take pride in the work that we have done and celebrate.

It is important to take time to pat each other on the back as a team and celebrate a successfully completed project. We did it at the 2024 Estonian Museum of the Year Awards in Tartu.

The positive feedback encouraged us to submit our project in the Museum Education Promoter Award category. We were delighted to receive a nomination from the

jury, which also gave us the opportunity to present our work at the conference.

IN CONCLUSION

Our aim is to provide children with special needs and their families with a meaningful, creative and accessible participatory experience that supports both their well-being and broader community inclusion. This experience serves as a reminder that even small steps can lead to big changes if taken with empathy and a willingness to work together in our hearts.

I am infinitely grateful to my wonderful and brave colleagues, with whom it feels safe to take these steps and continue the journey. We thank the HNRC for their trust, support and smooth cooperation! And a big thank you to the families and children who visit us, whose sincere smiles ensure that nothing stands in our way.

HAAPSALU NEUROLOGICAL REHABILITATION CENTRE[1]

is the most modern rehabilitation centre in the Baltics, built on the foundations of human-centred solutions and a professional approach. The HNRC aims to help people achieve the best possible recovery so that they can return to their daily lives feeling active and content.

The HNRC has three departments dedicated to the implementation of its core activities:

- Spinal Rehabilitation Department

- Neurorehabilitation Department

- Paediatric Rehabilitation and Musculoskeletal Rehabilitation Department

https://www.hnrk.ee/haiglast/

ILON'S WONDERLAND[2]

Ilon's Wonderland is a museum dedicated to the illustrator Ilon Wikland and is part of the Foundation of Haapsalu and Läänemaa Museums. It is a bright and welcoming place brimming with art, books and creativity, where visitors of all ages can be inspired by Ilon Wikland's colourful life and work. There are three floors of playful discovery all year round and a cosy courtyard in the summer. Visits are made memorable by exhibitions, craft workshops, a biographical film, a playroom, and a large selection of books. Established in 2006, the museum houses a unique collection of nearly 900 original works by Ilon Wikland, selected by the artist herself. In addition to the Bullerby children, Karlsson, the Brothers Lionheart, and Lotta on Troublemaker Street, all familiar from Astrid Lindgren's books, visitors can see original illustrations for books by other authors and Wikland's own work.

Ilon Wikland was born in Tartu in 1930. She spent her favourite childhood years growing up in Haapsalu under the care of her grandparents. In 1944, she was forced to flee the war to Sweden. There, she became an artist. In 1953, she joined Rabén&Sjögren, where she became known worldwide as an illustrator of Astrid Lindgren's books.

www.salm.ee

1 Lisainfo veebilehelt https://www.hnrk.ee/haiglast/
2 Lisainfo veebilehelt www.salm.ee

MUSEUM EDUCATION AND AUTISM

ELĪNA PEKŠĒNA

Head of the Education and Public Programs Department, Pauls Stradiņš Medicine History Museum; museum educator

In museum education, inclusion is not always a ready-made method. It is an attitude, and also a willingness to take a step forward. It requires the courage to listen, to change, and to let go of the idea that there is only one correct way to be in a museum.

Change can begin with interest and a single email, answered with a simple "yes". This is how the cooperation between the Pauls Stradiņš Medicine History Museum and the Latvian Autism Association began. What started as interest in museum sessions gradually developed into a broader practice based on a shared understanding: a museum can create an environment in which the child does not have to adapt to the museum, because the museum is able to adapt to the child.

The format of the Children's Research Laboratory was especially well suited to adaptation for families raising a child on the autism spectrum. These sessions were designed specifically for families, and their content encouraged intergenerational participation. Three separate sessions - How Do Humans Breathe?, Where Does Oxygen





Come From? and Why Should We Care for the Environment? - were organised in a specially designed setting shaped around a large-scale interactive textile artwork created by the artists Mareunrol's. It resembled an unusual cabinet of wonders made of fabric.

At first, the textile artwork appeared visually restrained and did not overstimulate children with sensory sensitivities. As the session unfolded, the museum educator gradually brought the textile artwork to life: pockets were opened one by one, embroidered details and pieces of information were revealed, and a tent or a transparent forest landscape slowly emerged. In this way, curiosity was built step by step, inviting children to explore the world with their eyes, their hands, and their imagination.

Each session followed the same structure: an introduction, a creative exploration activity, and reflection in a circle. When adapting the sessions, it was especially important to preserve this structure and repetition in order to support a sense of safety. In all three adapted sessions, the opening remained the same, while individual tasks and instructions were adjusted. More abstract wording was replaced with more concrete questions. Instead of asking, "Imagine what this could be," the museum educator asked, "What do you see here?", "What do you notice?", or "What could this be?" This helped children on the autism spectrum to engage without unnecessary pressure, while still leaving room for curiosity and imagination.

Children took part together with parents, siblings, caregivers, and assistants, and they could follow the session in their own tempo and in their own way. For one child, this meant listening while lying on the floor; for another, sitting slightly apart and drawing. Some children returned again and again to check the pockets of the tapestry, as if making sure that everything was still in its place. Others asked, "May I run a little?", ran a few circles, and then came back to continue. These choices were not seen as disruption, but as forms of participation and self-regulation.

Museum educators familiarised themselves with the basic principles of working with children on the autism spectrum. The most valuable knowledge came through cooperation with the Latvian Autism Association,

which supported the museum both in preparation and in shaping the first groups. A representative of the association was also present in every session. Before each session, the museum educator received brief and respectfully formulated information about each child's needs, including sensory sensitivities, communication difficulties, challenges in sustaining attention, and situations that might lead to emotional overload. This preparation was not about limiting children, but about being ready to meet them as they are.

The results can be measured in numbers, but not only in numbers. In 2024 and 2025, the museum delivered 29 sessions for families raising a child on the autism spectrum, including six outreach sessions in Daugavpils and Kuldiga. In 2024, the Latvian Autism Association presented the museum with a certificate of recognition for creating a supportive and inclusive environment at the conference Good Practice in the Field of Autism. In 2025, the museum received further recognition after being nominated as a Riga cultural venue at the conference Together Towards an Inclusive Culture.

Yet the most meaningful recognition comes from the families themselves. It can be seen during the sessions, as children gradually become familiar with the museum environment, engage more actively, and want to return. Sometimes, at the end of a session, they hug the museum educator. Parents always express deep gratitude. These are the moments that show that the museum's educational work is developing in the right direction.

Photos: Kristīne Madjare

