CAN WE TRAVEL IN A MUSEUM?!

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Summary

One of my student’s asked me to conduct a tour at the Museum for her pupils from the school Jardim Infantil Pestalozzi in Lisbon. Everything seemed perfectly normal and in accordance with what I have always done. However the children were very young - six years old, which was difficult for me, it would be hard to talk to such small children, fearful of not interesting them. Knowing how important this visit was for the teacher who really wanted to turn it into an interesting experience for her young pupils, and therefore we decided to make that “travel”.

Experience/Reflections

After so many years of doing museum tours, I found myself thinking how was I going to spark their interest even though the combined topic was extremely appealing, “The Travel”, was a fantastic one to realize with our collections. The visit started with everyone talking about what a museum is. Doing exactly what I had done before with older children, that is, comparing the museum with a zoo, where animals coming from different habitats live together, likewise the museum pieces, made for other “realities” and not for being there. We started “travelling”, talking about the different items. I had already forgotten that they were so young because the group was so much alive and everyone wanted to participate.

Viewing an 18th century painting depicting Lisbon before the 1755 earthquake and Saint Francis Xavier’s departure to India, provoked a lively conversation around things that all could identify – the Tagus, Belém Tower... Next to another painting by the same author, showing Goa, a place where he had never been, but that he depicts according to a map he once saw. I asked them which city the painter knew better, Goa or Lisbon? To my astonishment a little boy immediately said: “This is a map. He knew Lisbon much better!” I had asked that question so many times to older children and adults and they always hesitated. I understood
then, that I had, along the years, lost the possibility of working with small children but, awoke to learn and see.

We went on, to India and Japan, discussing lifestyles, eating habits and whatever more. They spoke about their travels, to Indian, Chinese or Japanese restaurants they frequented.

Back to school they took with them a trip through time, a much slower pace than the present in which we live, the idea of the existence of a multiplicity of customs and they tried to paint their world as if they had to show it to others, which they did pleasurably. For me it was a great discovery and it changed my practice. Since then, I learned that it is not so difficult to work with children that young, exactly as it happens with other audiences, uniquely to be able to conduct their talk with the art works, allowing them to feel free to question, and finally drawing the conclusions that they will take away.

Increasing the museum experience can change our way of thinking and living, we only need to be humble and attentive.