

The Value, Practice and Future Prospects of Social Education in Art Museums

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Abstract: In the context of the construction of a lifelong learning system and the promotion of universal aesthetic education, art museums, as important institutions with both public cultural services and social education functions, have increasingly demonstrated their social educational value. This article systematically reviews the theoretical basis of art museum social education, explaining its core connotation from the interdisciplinary perspective of museology, education, and art studies; it deeply analyzes the current practical models of art museum social education worldwide, including exhibition education, public education activities, and digital education, among others; it examines the common challenges faced by art museums in conducting social education, such as uneven resource allocation, limited audience coverage, and an imperfect education effect evaluation system; finally, in line with the development trends of the times, from dimensions such as technological integration, cross-border cooperation, and precise services, it looks forward to the future development direction of art museum social education, aiming to provide theoretical references and practical inspirations for the high-quality development of global art museum social education.

Key words: Art Museum; Social Education; Public Cultural Service; Aesthetic Education; Practice Model

1. Induction

With the rapid development of global society and economy and the continuous improvement of people's spiritual and cultural needs, the concept of "lifelong learning" has taken root in the world [1]. Social education, as an important part of the national education system, is becoming increasingly crucial. Museums, as public cultural spaces for collecting, displaying,

and researching outstanding human artistic achievements, not only undertake the global mission of protecting cultural heritage and disseminating artistic knowledge, but also, with their unique visual resources and immersive experiences, become important carriers for conducting social education. Compared with school education, museum social education has characteristics such as openness, autonomy, and experiential nature [2]. It can break through age, educational background, and occupation restrictions, providing personalized art learning opportunities for different groups, and plays an irreplaceable role in enhancing public artistic literacy, cultivating aesthetic abilities, and promoting social cultural identity. In recent years, the global academic community's attention to museum social education has continued to rise, and related research covers multiple aspects such as theoretical exploration, practical case analysis, and problem solutions [3]. However, the existing research still has a fragmented phenomenon, and the systematic review and forward-looking thinking on museum social education need to be strengthened. Based on this, this article conducts a review around the core issues of museum social education, with the aim of comprehensively presenting the research and practice status of this field and providing directions for future research and practice worldwide.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Core Connotation of Social Education in Art Museums Positive Perception

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

The development of social education in art museums stems from the interdisciplinary integration [4]. The core theoretical support mainly comes from three fields: museology, education, and art studies. From the perspective of museology, the core purpose of "museums serving society and its development" is the

fundamental basis for global art museums to carry out social education. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) clearly states in the “Museum Charter” that museums should strive to “educate, research, and appreciate”, elevating the educational function to an equally important position as collection and research, and becoming the common pursuit of global art museums. With the rise of the “New Museumology” movement worldwide, art museums have generally shifted from the traditional “collection-oriented” model to a “public-oriented” one, paying more attention to interaction with the public and emphasizing the transformation of the value of collections through educational activities, making art resources truly serve the general public. In the field of education, constructivist learning theory and lifelong education theory provide important guidance for global art museum social education. Constructivist learning theory holds that learning is the process of learners actively constructing knowledge meaning, rather than passively accepting information. Both European classical museums and American modern museums create real “learning contexts” for learners through the display of diverse art works and the design of interactive experience projects, guiding the public to interpret art based on their own experiences and achieving the active construction of knowledge. The lifelong education theory emphasizes that education should run throughout one’s life, and art museums, as important nodes in the global lifelong learning network, can meet the thirst of different age groups and learning needs of the public for art knowledge, making up for the deficiencies of school education in art education, and becoming an important supplement to the lifelong education system. From the perspective of art studies, the theory of aesthetic education is the core theoretical core of global art museum social education. Aesthetic education, also known as aesthetic education, aims to cultivate people’s aesthetic sensibility, judgment, and creativity, and enhance their spiritual realm. This goal has commonality in different countries and cultural backgrounds. Art museums use art works as the core medium, guiding the public to appreciate diverse art forms such as paintings, sculptures, and installations, experiencing the formal beauty, emotional beauty, and ideological beauty in art works, thereby achieving the goal of aesthetic education [5]. Whether it is Cai

Yuanpei’s proposition of “replacing religion with aesthetic education” or the concept of “prioritizing aesthetic experience” advocated in the Western art education field, they all lay the theoretical foundation for the value of art museum social education, emphasizing the important role of art in purifying the soul and shaping a healthy personality.

2.2 Core Content

The core content of art museum social education can be defined from four dimensions: educational subject, educational object, educational content, and educational method [6]. And it presents commonalities and diverse expressions globally. In terms of educational subject, the implementation subject of art museum social education is not a single “educator”, but a “diverse subject” composed of curators, education specialists, volunteers, artists, etc. This model is widely applicable in global art museums. Curators plan thematic exhibitions to construct the logic of presenting art knowledge; education specialists design accompanying educational activities, such as guided tours, workshops, etc.; volunteers participate in public services and educational assistance work; artists interact directly with the public through lectures, creation demonstrations, etc., jointly promoting the implementation of educational activities. Different countries only have minor differences in the collaboration mechanism of the subject. In terms of educational object, art museum social education has a “universal” feature, covering all social groups, which is the common pursuit of global art museums. From the age dimension, it includes children, teenagers, adults, and the elderly; from the identity dimension, it covers students, professionals, people with disabilities, low-income groups, etc. For different audiences, global art museums pay attention to designing differentiated educational content and methods. For example, they design interactive art experience activities for children, art appreciation courses that connect with school curricula for teenagers, and accessible educational services such as tactile exhibitions and sign language guided tours for people with disabilities. Only in the details of service provision do they make adjustments based on regional cultural differences. In terms of educational content, the social education of art museums focuses on “art knowledge and aesthetic ability”, covering diverse contents such

as culture, history, and technology. This content framework is consistent globally. Specifically, it includes: art history knowledge, such as the development trajectories of different eras and schools of art; art technique knowledge, such as the creation techniques of painting and sculpture; art appreciation ability, such as the ability to interpret the form, color, and emotions of works; and cultural background knowledge related to art, such as historical events and social trends behind art works. In addition, with the development of the global trend of cross-border integration, art museums generally integrate global themes such as technology, environmental protection, and sustainable development into educational content, expanding the breadth and depth of education, with only the theme emphasis differing due to regional needs. In terms of educational methods, the social education of art museums is characterized by “experiential and interactive”, different from the “classroom lecture” model of traditional school education. This feature is highly unified among global art museums. Specific forms include: exhibition education, providing immersive art experiences through permanent and temporary exhibitions for the public; guided tour services, including manual guided tours, audio-guided tours, AR/VR guided tours, etc., to help the public deeply understand the works; public education activities, such as lectures, forums, workshops, art salons, etc.; digital education, providing online courses and digital exhibitions through official websites, apps, social media, etc.; and cooperative education, collaborating with schools, communities, enterprises, etc., to carry out customized educational projects. Different countries only have differences in the degree of technology application and activity organization forms.

3. The Practical Model of Social Education in Art Museums

In recent years, the global art museum industry has witnessed rapid development [7]. Different regions' art museums have combined their own resources and regional needs to strengthen the construction of social education functions, resulting in a number of representative practical models. In the Asian region, the “digital empowerment” model is exemplified by the Palace Museum (China). The Palace Museum fully utilizes digital technology to transform its collection resources into digital educational

resources and launches projects such as “Digital Palace Museum”, including a digital cultural collection, online exhibitions, and Palace Museum classes. Among them, “Palace Museum Classes” designs courses such as “Calligraphy and Painting in the Palace Museum” and “Mathematics in Palace Architecture” for different age groups of the public. Through videos, animations, and interactive games, global audiences can learn about the culture and art of the Palace Museum without leaving their homes. In addition, the Palace Museum also launches AR guided tours and VR experiences, such as “V Palace Museum”, allowing users to “enter” the unopened areas of the Palace Museum through VR devices, enhancing the fun and immersion of education, and providing important references for art museums in the Asian region's digital education. The “community integration” model is represented by the Shanghai Contemporary Art Museum (China) and the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art (Japan). The Shanghai Contemporary Art Museum focuses on the interaction with surrounding communities and extends its museum educational resources to the community, launching the “Community Art Museum Project”, through which art spaces are set up in the community, community exhibitions are held, and community art workshops are conducted, allowing art to enter residents' lives. The Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art, on the other hand, launches the “Community Art Partnership Project”, organizing artists and community residents to create works, which are simultaneously exhibited in the museum and the community, achieving “art originating from the community and returning to the community”, effectively enhancing the art participation and cultural identity of community residents, becoming a typical model of community education for art museums in the Asian region. In the European and American regions, the “systematic education” model is represented by the Smithsonian Institution (Smithsonian Institution) in the United States. The Smithsonian Institution, with 19 museums and 9 research centers under its umbrella, has formed a systematic layout of social education activities covering all age groups and multiple fields, enjoying extensive influence globally. For children, it launches interactive activities such as “Children's Museum Day” and “Young Scientists”; for

teenagers, it conducts “Teenage Art Workshops” and “Museum Internship Programs”; for adults, it provides “Art Appreciation Courses” and “Lecture Series”; for the elderly, it designs projects such as “Senior Art Salon” and “Memory and Art”. In addition, the Smithsonian Institution has established a complete resource library to provide teaching materials for global teachers and learning resources for students, achieving systematic and regularized education. The “cultural inclusiveness” model is represented by the Tate Modern (Tate Modern) in the United Kingdom and the Centre Pompidou (Centre Pompidou) in France. The Tate Modern focuses on cultural diversity and social inclusiveness, through the launch of “Inclusive Education Projects”, providing art education services for marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities, the disabled, and low-income groups, for example, launching “Tactile Exhibitions”, “Sign Language Guided Tours”, and “Audio Description Services” for the disabled; the Centre Pompidou launches the “Cultural Equality Program”, providing free art courses and exhibition tickets for immigrant groups and disadvantaged groups, promoting the fairness of art education, and becoming a benchmark for cultural inclusiveness education in the European region. The “cross-border integration” model is represented by the Louvre (Musée du Louvre) in France and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, USA. The Louvre has transcended the boundaries of traditional art museums, integrating art with technology, history, fashion and other fields, and conducting cross-disciplinary educational activities. For instance, it collaborates with technology companies to develop the “Louvre VR” project, allowing users to “participate” in the creation process of artworks through VR devices. MoMA, on the other hand, collaborates with technology enterprises, fashion brands and universities to launch projects such as “Art and Innovation Technology Laboratory” and “Art and Fashion Cross-Disciplinary Workshop”, exploring the educational value of cross-field integration, and providing practical experience for global art museums in cross-disciplinary education.

4. Challenges Faced by Art Museum Social Education

4.1 Inequal Distribution of Resources and Regional Development Imbalance

Global art museum social education resources exhibit significant regional distribution imbalances, which are prevalent across different continents and within the same continent among different countries. On one hand, art museums in economically developed regions, such as Western Europe, the eastern part of North America, and the eastern part of Asia, have abundant funds, professional personnel, and rich collection resources, and can carry out high-quality social education activities; while art museums in economically underdeveloped regions, such as parts of Africa and remote areas in central and western Asia, due to insufficient funds and scarce personnel, have limited forms of social education activities, with thin content, and are unable to meet the needs of local publics. On the other hand, there are also resource disparities among different art museums within the same country, with the capital cities and core cities having concentrated resources, while local and grassroots art museums face survival pressures and their social education functions cannot be fully exerted.

4.2 Limited Audience Coverage and Insufficient Precise Services

Although art museums worldwide generally aim for “universalism” in their social education goals, the actual audience still has limitations, and the low participation rate of marginalized groups is a common problem worldwide [8]. Currently, the main audience of art museums is concentrated in high-education, high-income, and art-interested groups, while the participation rate of low-income groups, the elderly, the disabled, and immigrant groups is relatively low. The reasons for this phenomenon mainly include: first, insufficient publicity and promotion, with marginalized groups having insufficient knowledge of the educational activities of art museums, especially more obvious in regions with limited information dissemination channels; second, the educational content and methods lack targeting and fail to meet the needs of marginalized groups, such as the limited use ability of the elderly for digital educational resources, the lack of accessible educational services for the disabled, and the language and cultural barriers faced by immigrant groups; third, the geographical location and opening hours of art museums are not friendly to some groups, such as low-income groups due to high transportation costs and long working hours,

making it difficult for them to participate in art museum activities.

4.3 Incomplete Evaluation System for Educational Effectiveness

At present, art museum social education activities worldwide tend to prioritize “the number of events held,” while assessment of “educational effectiveness” remains inadequate [9]. The lack of a scientific and systematic evaluation system has become a common bottleneck restricting the quality improvement of art museum social education. On one hand, evaluation indicators are simplistic: most art museums rely primarily on quantitative metrics such as participant numbers and event frequency, while lacking effective methods to assess qualitative indicators—including improvements in public art literacy, aesthetic capabilities, and enhanced cultural identity. This makes it difficult to fully measure the actual value of educational activities. On the other hand, the evaluation process is non-standardized: most art museums only collect feedback via simple questionnaires after events conclude, with no pre-event needs assessment or long-term follow-up evaluation post-events. This not only hinders accurate understanding of an activity’s actual impact but also fails to provide a scientific basis for optimizing subsequent initiatives. Some small-scale art museums even lack an evaluation process entirely.

4.4 Shortage of Professional Talents and Lagging Team Building

The implementation of social education programs in art museums requires professional support, including educational experts with knowledge in art history, educational theory and practice, project managers with planning and communication skills, and technical personnel with digital technology application capabilities [3]. However, the global art museum industry generally faces a shortage of professional talents: Firstly, there is a lack of educational experts. Most small and medium-sized art museums have only a few educational staff, unable to meet the demands of numerous educational activities, especially in less developed regions with high staff turnover rates. Secondly, the talent structure is unreasonable. There are more traditional art research talents, but there is a lack of interdisciplinary talents with backgrounds in art, education and technology, unable to meet the

needs of cross-border integration and technological innovation. Thirdly, the talent cultivation mechanism is not perfect. Globally, there is a significant lack of coordination between art museums and universities in talent cultivation. The training opportunities for in-service personnel are very limited, making it difficult for the talent reserves to meet the demands of the times in terms of professional level and innovation ability.

5. Prospects for the Development of Social Education in Art Museums

5.1 Promoting Digital Education Innovation

With the rapid development of technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and big data worldwide, digital technology will become an important driving force for the innovation of social education in art museums [10]. This trend has been widely recognized globally. In the future, art museums can promote technological integration in the following ways: First, develop immersive digital education projects, using VR/AR technology to create “virtual art museums”, allowing global audiences to experience art works from different regions through immersive experiences, such as “entering” the studios of the Renaissance period or ancient Egyptian art sites, observing the process of artistic creation and cultural inheritance; Second, utilize artificial intelligence technology to provide personalized education services, by analyzing users' interest preferences, learning progress, etc., recommending customized educational resources and activities to global users, such as recommending online courses and exhibitions related to France and the United States for users who like Impressionism; Third, build a global digital education platform, integrating educational resources from different countries and types of art museums, achieving cross-border and cross-cultural resource sharing, such as establishing a “Global Art Museum Education Alliance” platform to provide one-stop, multilingual art learning services for the public.

5.2 Expanding Educational Resources and Spaces

Cross-border cooperation and cross-national collaboration will become an important trend in the development of social education in art museums [11]. Through cooperation with

institutions from different fields and countries, it is possible to expand educational resources, expand educational space, and enhance the globalization and diversification level of education. This can be carried out from the following dimensions: First, collaborate with schools to deepen global art education collaboration, promoting the inclusion of museum resources in the education systems of various countries, jointly developing cross-cultural school-based courses and conducting cross-border study tours, achieving organic connection between museum education and school education, such as the joint launch of “Art and Cultural Heritage” cross-border courses by multiple European art museums for use in various countries' primary and secondary schools; Second, collaborate with communities to promote art integration into the lives of global citizens, establishing “museum service points” in different countries' communities, conducting local and international combined community art exhibitions, workshops, etc., allowing art to reach the grassroots level, such as some African art museums collaborating with communities to combine traditional tribal art with modern art, conducting community education activities; Third, collaborate with enterprises to obtain global funds and technical support, such as collaborating with international technology enterprises to develop digital education projects, collaborating with multinational cultural enterprises to launch art derivatives and educational products, enhancing the sustainability of educational activities; Fourth, collaborate with other cultural institutions, such as museums, libraries, theaters, etc. to carry out joint educational activities, achieving resource complementarity, providing diversified cultural education experiences for the public, such as the global museum alliance launching the “Art and History Cross-Border” joint education project to attract public participation from different regions.

5.3 Paying Attention to the Needs of Marginal Groups

To achieve the goal of “global universal art education”, art museums need to pay attention to marginalized groups and provide precise and adaptable educational services, which is a common manifestation of the social responsibility of global art museums [12]. First, strengthen the construction of barrier-free

facilities and services, providing standardized services such as tactile exhibitions, sign language interpretation, audio descriptions for the disabled, while combining the characteristics of disabled groups in different regions to develop adaptive art education projects, such as conducting “Touching Traditional Sculptures” workshops for visually impaired groups in Africa, and “Visual Art and Sign Language Integration” experience activities for hearing-impaired groups in Asia; Second, launch free or low-cost educational activities for low-income groups, immigrants, etc., while optimizing the opening hours of museums, adding weekend and night sessions, reducing participation thresholds, such as some European museums providing free language training and art courses combined for immigrant groups, facilitating their integration into local culture; Thirdly, focus on the needs of the elderly and develop art education programs suitable for the elderly in different regions, such as calligraphy and painting training courses in Asia and classical art appreciation courses in Europe. At the same time, simplify the operation process of digital educational resources and provide multi-language guidance for the elderly to help them bridge the “digital divide” and equally enjoy art educational resources.

5.4 Establish a Scientific Evaluation System for Effectiveness

A scientific evaluation system for educational effectiveness is the key to improving the quality of social education in global art museums [13]. It is necessary to establish an evaluation framework that combines standardization and localization. In the future, art museums need to improve the evaluation system in the following aspects: First, build a diversified evaluation index system, which should include quantitative indicators such as the number of participants and the number of activities, as well as qualitative indicators such as the improvement of public artistic literacy, the enhancement of aesthetic ability, and the strengthening of cultural identity, for example, through cross-border questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and analysis of art works, to evaluate the changes in the art appreciation ability and cultural inclusiveness of the public in different regions; Second, standardize the evaluation process, establish a closed-loop evaluation process of “demand research - activity design - process monitoring -

effect evaluation - feedback optimization”, conduct different regional audience demand research before the activities, monitor the progress in real time during the activities, conduct a comprehensive evaluation after the activities, and optimize subsequent activities based on the evaluation results to ensure the scientificity and coherence of the evaluation; Third, promote the establishment of a global art museum education evaluation alliance, introduce third-party evaluation institutions, formulate standardized evaluation standards and local adjustment mechanisms to ensure the objectivity and professionalism of the evaluation, avoid “self-talking”, and enhance the global recognition and reference value of the evaluation results.

5.5 Strengthen Professional Team Building

Strengthening the construction of professional talent teams is the guarantee for the sustainable development of art museum social education [13]. It is necessary to establish a global talent cultivation and exchange mechanism. First, improve the talent cultivation mechanism, strengthen cooperation between global art museums and universities, and set up related majors or courses in universities to cultivate interdisciplinary talents with abilities in art, education, technology, cross-cultural communication, etc., for example, European art colleges and museums jointly establish the “International Art Museum Education” major to cultivate cross-border education talents; Second, strengthen the training and exchange of global in-service personnel, regularly organize education specialists and curators from different countries to participate in international professional training and hold cross-border experience exchange activities to learn advanced educational concepts and technologies, improve professional levels, for example, the International Museum Association regularly holds the “Innovation in Art Museum Social Education” global forum to provide a platform for talent exchange; Third, establish a global incentive mechanism, through the establishment of international awards, providing cross-border promotion opportunities, etc., to attract and retain outstanding talents, and encourage global volunteers to participate in social education work, build a “professional talent + cross-border volunteer” talent team model, promoting the

global development of art museum social education talents.

6. Conclusion

Art museum social education, as an important part of global public cultural services and lifelong education systems, has irreplaceable value in enhancing the artistic literacy of the general public, promoting the development of global art education, promoting cross-cultural communication and social cultural prosperity. Through the sorting out of the theoretical basis and core connotation of art museum social education and the analysis of the practice models worldwide, we can see that art museum social education has developed from the traditional “exhibition assistance” function to a diversified educational model integrating experience, interaction, cross-border, and cross-national, becoming an important force promoting global cultural inheritance and innovation. However, current global art museum social education still faces common challenges such as uneven resource distribution, limited audience coverage, incomplete evaluation systems, and shortage of professional talents, which require global industry cooperation to address. In the future, global art museums need to adapt to the development trends of the times, strengthen technological integration, and promote digital education innovation; Deepen cross-border cooperation and international collaboration, expand educational resources and space; pay attention to the needs of marginalized groups and provide precise educational services; improve the evaluation system and enhance educational quality; strengthen talent cultivation and exchanges, and build a professional and global team. Only through the joint efforts and coordinated development of global art museums can the social educational function of art museums be fully exerted, and greater contributions be made to promoting global universal art education and building a community of shared future for mankind.

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