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WITH THE KIDS

More than a walk in the art

Quick Culture offers private in-depth trips through LACMA that aim to show off art's fun side.

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

In the middle of a quiet modern art gallery at LACMA, Ellen Greenberg reaches into her tote bag and whips out a huge house painter's brush and offers it to 10-year-old Emilie Margolis.

It's a good way, explains Greenberg, for kids to understand how artist Willem de Kooning — who used a similar brush — created his Impressionistic "Montauk Highway," which was right in front of Emilie.

"Now, you have 20 seconds to paint what you see while driving in a fast car," instructs Greenberg. "Go!"

Emilie swishes the air with big strokes, reaching high and low, stretching and bending to capture her fast-moving imagination. Curious art patrons and security guards watch from afar as Emilie finishes her invisible artwork.

"See?" Greenberg says. "You really put your whole body into your art. That's what De Kooning did. That's why they call him the first 'Action Painter.' "

Emilie, 8-year-old sister Claire and dad Paul are joining Greenberg for a private in-depth trip around the museum that aims to show how joyously fun and yet sophisticated art can be.

Started by Greenberg and partner Charlotte Robinson, Quick Culture for Kids is a one-hour tour of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's many galleries during which kids — and adults — learn history, art appreciation and theory behind paintings, statuary and other museum artifacts.

Not associated with LACMA's education department, Quick Culture takes the art experience one step beyond the museum's school group and short family weekend tours — tours that Greenberg and Robinson know well, considering they are both LACMA docents and have shepherded countless schoolchildren around the museum.

"After a school tour, we had so many adults — parents and teachers — ask us if we offered private tours for children," Greenberg says. "The more we said no, the more we realized we probably need to say yes."

With their interactive tours, Greenberg, a costume and production designer for film, and Robinson, who has a background

in corporate banking, want to take the stuffy attitude out of art. They tailor their outings to any topic and keep their group's size to eight or fewer. (Such groups generally do not "raise any flags," says a LACMA official who was not aware of the Quick Culture tours.)

"No one should be scared of art; looking at art shouldn't be highbrow," Robinson says. "People are often afraid to say they don't understand or voice an opinion about a piece of artwork. You know, if [a piece of art] resonates with you or not. Certainly children instinctively do. We want to encourage and nurture that."

Armed with art knowledge, myriad kid-appropriate questions and a tote full of goodies, the women started their private tours nearly six months ago, mapping out some of their favorite pieces to share with children.

A color wheel, for example, is brought out in front of David Hockney's huge "Mulholland Drive," where Emilie and Claire learn how artists use complementary colors. Greenberg then shows them a picture of the painting without color. "It's very boring," Emilie says, and Claire agrees: "It makes me sad."

At other art stops, palette knives, chisels and tiny replicas of a casting mold and stretched canvas are passed around as tactile aids for the girls to examine.

On their museum trek, the group explores depth perception at Rene Magritte's "The Liberator," marches around Joel Shapiro's happy wooden sculpture "Untitled (Dancing Man)" and discovers how Picasso used a teardrop motif for eyes and nostrils in his "Weeping Woman With Handkerchief."

"I have never seen [my daughters] so alert for so long," says Paul. "At this age group, with their short attention spans, it's hard to keep them engaged. I love the idea of picking just a few pieces and concentrating on them."

At Picasso's "Centaur" sculpture, Paul was amazed that Claire easily saw the wooden black-and-white object as a half-man, half-horse. "I didn't see that at all," he admits. "Children sometimes can get to the heart of the matter quicker than adults."

While most of Greenberg's tour is modern art, she ends her museum walkabout on an ancient note. In another gallery, she introduces the girls to a mummified body and a 21st Dynasty sarcophagus as they get a little lesson in hieroglyphics and Egyptian religion.

"That's Anubis!" exclaims Emilie, happy to connect something from her background with the centuries-old artifact.

Later, the group walks to a series of large Assyrian relief panels found in the palace of King Ashurnasirpal II about 3,000 years ago.

"Tell me what you see here that looks like something we see around us today," Greenberg says. The girls point out sandals, jewelry, curled hair, earrings and round wrist ornamentation that look like watches. Adds Greenberg: "These folks back then weren't so different from us today, are they?"

Then, at the end of the tour, Greenberg shows the girls photos of nearly every piece of artwork they saw. She asks: "If you could, which one would you take home with you today?"

The Hockney wins, hands down.