

Winter 2001

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Thompson, K. (2001). The Benefits of Professional and Youth Art in an Airport Community. *Journal of Aviation/Aerospace Education & Research*, 10(2). Retrieved from <https://commons.erau.edu/jaaer/vol10/iss2/3>

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FORUM

THE BENEFITS OF PROFESSIONAL AND YOUTH ART IN AN AIRPORT COMMUNITY

Kathleen Thompson

Although few would initially consider an airport a community, these sprawling sites of aviation technology do qualify according to the definition in the Wordsworth's Concise English Dictionary. *Community: common possessions or enjoyment: people having common rights: a body of persons in the same locality: leading a common life: a common affinity.* Certainly the thousands that enter daily any major hub share common possessions, rights, a shared locality, and an affinity or need for travel. More than a few frenzied business flyers might admit that their base airport is a more familiar location than their suburban or urban neighborhood.

Art Programs for Airports Have Proliferated

What place does art have in a community of constantly changing members? The last thirty years have seen growth in the role that art plays at major American airports. Atlanta art critic Catherine Fox (Fox, 1996) noted, "These days every airport worth its salt has decked its terminals out with art." Requirements for the construction of federally funded buildings and some city council regulations have mandated that a specific percentage of the cost must be used for public art. This includes the nation's airports. Several examples of regional hub airports illustrate common goals of airport art programs.

Denver International Airport: The DIA Art Program has spent over 7.7 million dollars. Like the rest of the airport, the centerpiece 24 pieces of commissioned art by 37 artists have involved delays, cost overruns and controversy. This program is funded through the Denver Commission on Cultural Affairs' Percent-for-Art-Program which mandates one percent of the construction costs of public buildings are allocated to art. The master plan promised to, "amuse and inspire stressed passengers, humanize the high-tech airport environment, and enrich the hours travelers will spend at the airport," (Hubner, 1995).

Pittsburgh International Airport: Opened in 1992, it has become the nation's third largest airport. Its ambitious art program has focused on a merging of architecture and art. The form of the artworks was dictated by the

function of their locations. Five major "site-generated" works were the first works installed.

Albuquerque International, New Mexico: The Albuquerque International Art Collection was established in 1990 and features arts and crafts by New Mexico artists. Ninety-five works are on permanent display. A self-guided tour brochure helps visitors locate art, which is installed in every area of the airport. "Enjoy the remarkable introduction to the enchanting world of New Mexico," exhorts the brochure text (City of Albuquerque, 1997).

The Barry E. Goldwater Terminal in Phoenix, Arizona: Works celebrate the artist's vision of Phoenix and the surrounding desert. In addition to permanent works, exhibits, featuring the works of Arizona artists, are changed quarterly. The Tucson, Arizona airport's art collection also has a focus on regional artists and art themes.

Similar public art programs are under way in Washington, D. C., San Francisco and Miami, where the Metro Dade County Art in Public Places Program is spending \$20 million on art for their airport over a ten-year period.

Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport

The 1996 International Olympics provided motivation for Atlanta's ambitious airport art program. Opened in 1994, Concourse E covers six levels, 1.6 million square feet, and houses 24 International gates. City officials were keenly aware that the first impression foreign visitors would have

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of Atlanta would occur here. Support of the visual arts has long been perceived as a sign of cultivation and advanced civilization. It was not surprising that the Airport Art Program began in this terminal and would embody Atlanta's aspiration to be considered a world class city. On January 30, 1996, Mayor Bill Campbell described the Airport Art Program as, "the most exciting dimension we have announced in our administration," and predicted that Concourse E would become, "a visual oasis, revealing the richness and diversity of the South," (Hartsfield, 1995).

Rather than focus on Atlanta or Georgia, the art collection represents southeastern artists, a reflection of Atlanta's role as a regional hub in business and travel. Artists selected have national reputations and often employ cutting edge approaches. Thematically the art works are distinctly Southern, "letting visitors know unquestionably that they are in Atlanta", (Hartsfield, 1995). The third floor immigration area's collection of art consists of 32 pieces representing a variety of artists and media. Each of the twenty-four international gates features multiple works of a specific artist. Signs introduce travelers to the background and goals of each artist. In recent years the display of art has been expanded to other locations including lounges, smoking rooms and atrium spaces. Having established good coverage in the international terminal, the art collection has been expanded to include locations in the main terminal. Recent recognition as the busiest airport in the United States means that countless thousands view the collection.

As a counterpoint, a collection of international art works are housed in eighteen display cases. The 23 exhibits are changed annually and showcase works provided by Atlanta's museums. These include the High Museum of Art, Atlanta International Museum of Art and Design, Michael C. Carlos Museum, Atlanta History Center, and the Center for Puppetry Arts. These works welcome international visitors with familiar art and establish that Atlanta's museums are a vital part of the world community.

The City of Atlanta was so pleased with outcomes of professional art on Concourse E that in 1997 the Department of Aviation set aside \$580,000.00 annually from airport revenue funds for additional art at Concourse C, as well as art in the main terminal and other locations. Vogt and his co-director Lamar Reinquest moved their offices from the Bureau of Cultural Affairs to the airport in order to oversee the expansion of art installations.

Common Goals

The Atlanta Art Program and the others described share

three common aspirations. These include educating the traveling public about a city or region, developing positive public relations, and creating a passenger friendly physical environment.

Presenting the history, geography, and culture of an area is a primary concern. Former Atlanta Airport Director, Angela Gittens described this objective in the program's initial publication. "The goal is to showcase the history and culture of Atlanta and the Metropolitan region," (Hartsfield, 1995). A guiding principal was that the art program should help define Atlanta.

Presenting the city or region in a positive light is a close second in terms of priorities. In her public statements Giddens emphasized spreading out a spectacular welcome mat befitting Atlanta's stature as an international Olympic city.

Passenger comfort and pleasure was a third and often mentioned goal. "Perhaps more important, the art program needs to serve as a soothing and enjoyable counterpoint to the typical airport experience. Travelers should feel good about the time they spend in Hartsfield airport," Giddens maintained (Hartsfield, 1995).

The Inclusion of Youth Art at the Atlanta Airport

Where does the art of children and adolescents fit into an airport community? How does the traveling community respond to child art and is this response different from reactions to professional art? What are appropriate goals for the display of youth art? The establishment of two Youth Art Galleries by the Georgia Art Education Association (GAEA) at Hartsfield Airport has produced some new understanding of these issues.

The Georgia Art Education Association became interested in the possibility of an airport exhibit space in 1993 as part of a set of Olympic youth art projects. Among the possible opportunities to spotlight children's art generated by a group brainstorming session was to display art at the airport. In the summer of that year a committee met with airport management to discuss possibilities. A positive response resulted, but actual plans were delayed by a year as the airport management team and the City of Atlanta Bureau of Cultural Affairs negotiated as to who would control and administer the airport art initiatives. By early 1994 the Bureau of Cultural Affairs had taken leadership and began selecting artists for Concourse E. A meeting with program director David Vogt resulted in a promise that youth art would be accorded a place. The pressure of the massive amounts of art needed in Concourse

E by July of 1996 and renovations made to the main terminal made it impossible to establish a youth space before the Olympics.

David was still committed to a youth space and worked to produce the Youth Art Gallery at Terminal T. In July of 1997 the Georgia Art Education Association and the Atlanta Airport Authority opened its' first joint exhibit space dedicated to the exclusive display of art from preschool to high school. The terminal T gallery consists of forty 24 x 26 inch frames. Arranged in two rows the art is viewed by thousands daily. Large signs, at each end introduce travelers to GAEA, NAEA, and their goals for art education. The requirements of an airport gallery are unique including frames that are screwed into the wall for safety.

Success is Swift and Diverse

The strength of the response to this gallery by the traveling public was a surprise to program directors as well as GAEA members who administered the program. Almost immediately passengers began calling or writing affirming notes to the airport authority office. Officials noted and at times talked with travelers who lingered at the space. "Amazing, refreshing, and charming" were accolades heard often.

As director of the gallery I was astonished by the next development. The signage at the gallery gives a phone number for the Bureau of Cultural Affairs. Nowhere does it indicate that student art works can be purchased. Nevertheless after the first exhibit went up I got two surprise calls. A passenger who lived in Arizona was returning from a vacation and saw the Youth Art Gallery. He wanted to purchase three works of student art displayed in the gallery. Using his last three frames to take photos, he had also carefully documented names and schools. Two days later a frequent flyer from Ohio called and wanted to purchase the same three works as well as four other paintings. She too had taken photos of her choices. Currently in the process of redecorating her den, she was inspired by the gallery to make child art the focus of the room. As continuing exhibits are mounted inquiries result in sales from all over Georgia and the United States.

Children are given the option of selling their art. Some chose to keep their works, especially parents of elementary children. For those willing to sell the process of determining a price became a lesson in aesthetics. A ten-year-old at first wanted two thousand dollars. After discussing the art market with her teacher she settled on

fifty dollars. Students must receive their compensation before any works are shipped.

Another surprise call was from a member of the Elgin Illinois Cultural Art Commission. In a letter she stated, "Our commission has considered a youth display from time to time, but did not know how professional it could look until I saw your display." She too took photos. After a phone conversation with Lamar Renford about costs and how the gallery was constructed she called me to ask how to get quality youth art. I suggested she contact the Illinois Department of Education or the city art coordinator in the public school system. This she felt was inadequate due to the number of Catholic, Hebrew and private schools. An art association that represented all sectors was better. I directed her to the Illinois Art Education Association. In a follow up letter she noted, "I wanted to tell you how impressed I was with your presentation and the quality of the art work. Likewise, a gentleman standing next to me was equally impressed."

Other offers materialized. An entrepreneur wanted to create a youth art web site with corporate sponsorship, but we deemed the project too labor intensive and risky. The Education Director at the High Museum of Art requested use of the gallery for a quarter to display child art that resulted from a project they were supervising in the Atlanta City Schools. We traded the use of the gallery for an annual exhibit of high school art at the Woodward Arts Center where the High Museum is located. Previously this venue had not been offered to GAEA. At one point GAEA president Dr. Bruce Little commented, "Nothing about the Hartsfiend Youth Art Gallery would surprise me."

After the success of the T Gallery, David and Lamar identified another site for a youth gallery. In December of 1998 the Youth Art Gallery at Concourse E was opened. This larger gallery consists of seventy-two 26 x 32-inch frames as well as impressive and colorful signs proclaiming "Youth Art". The gallery flows around an eight-sided space that is essentially a cube with the corners chopped off. Visitors to the international terminal may walk around this space as many times as they like.

An aviation company located at the airport was so impressed by both galleries that they sought assistance from the Airport Art Authority and GAEA and developed their own Youth Art Gallery. The Georgia Department of Education requested assistance from the High Museum of Art in order to develop an exhibit space in the meeting room of the state board of education. They were referred to

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GAEA based on expertise developed at Hartsfield. Two years later this collaboration has resulted in two exhibit spaces at the Georgia Department of Education as well as a request for student created murals in other meeting rooms.

While developing the E Gallery David determined that he wanted museum quality lessons based on the art in the airport. These were to be made available to teachers who schedule tours of the airport. David and Lamar conduct tours in which they explain the art in the E Concourse. GAEA members developed two sets of lessons, one for K-5 and another that contained materials for middle school and high school students. Those writing the lessons explained DBAE to David and Lamar and included aesthetics, art criticism, art history, and studio projects. Eight slides are included. The lessons are free to members of the Georgia Art Education Association, and have been shared with other airport art programs

The Role of Youth Art in an Airport Community is Significant

As co-director of the Youth Art Program, David Vogt was asked to describe the reaction of the public to the children's art which he characterized as overwhelming. (Thompson, 1999) "When we install the art people come by and tell us how much they look forward to new shows. We get positive comments from airline officials, city managers, pilots, janitors, and maintenance people" One frequent flyer even described to Vogt how the gallery is the first thing he looks for when he comes up the escalator.

Differences between youth and professional art are another issue, especially in light of the positive response by airport travelers and employees. Vogt believes that youth art is easier for the traveling public to relate to than professional art. "Many of the adult works are difficult to understand and passengers hurry by. They are unfamiliar

with the tenets of art and are intimidated." The children's art produces a direct response and has an instant emotional appeal. There are no barriers. "Everyone has created art as a child or youth. Travelers can understand what is involved," David continued.

Vogt feels he has identified some of the strengths of youth art. He believes that children's art adds a unique element that art from accomplished artists can not. "Youth art is brightly colored and displays a high level of energy. There is both diversity in media and variety in themes. In exhibit spaces as large as ours there is much for passengers to consider and enjoy. Children's art harkens back to a simpler time, childhood." Time spent observing passengers has convinced him that youth art makes people smile. For a tired passenger it brightens their day and lightens their load.

The children and teachers who participate also benefit. Teachers who have had student's art on display will tell you how thrilled children, teens and parents are with the experience. When I take my students to see their art at the airport they beam as they pose for photos. As they examine the environment in which their work is displayed and take in the number of potential viewers in such a facility, students begin to understand the creation of art as an experience that goes beyond personal expression to communication.

The goals and successes of youth art mirror those of adult art programs with an equivalent measure of success. The Hartsfield Youth Art Galleries have educated travelers to the forms and themes of children's art. The public relations benefits to NAEA and GAEA have been significant and lead to other opportunities. The most apparent and important gain may be the joyful response of the public to the children's art and the children's understanding of the interaction between their art and those who view it. □

Assistance Offered

Those who are interested in a similar program may contact the Georgia Art Education Association's Airport Art Program at 85 Nacoma Lane in Blue Ridge, Georgia 30513. David Vogt and Lamar Renquist's address is Airport Art Program, Department of Aviation, P.O. Box 20509, Atlanta, Georgia 30320 (404) 530-4289.

Kathleen Thompson initiated the process of creating two youth art galleries at the Atlanta Airport and has jointly administered the galleries for four years. Management of these spaces is cooperative between Hartsfield's Airport Art Program and the Georgia Art Education Association. She has served on the board of GAEA for many years and received numerous awards from the organization. Dr. Thompson has published in many professional journals in the areas of arts education, dance, and creativity. She is a middle school art teacher who also teaches adjunct at the graduate and undergraduate level.

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