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ChLA 2019: Abstract

Art Museums and Children's Book Publishing in the 21st Century

The Tate Modern in London is one of the most prominent art museums behind a recent surge in the production of books for children that develop museums' pedagogical outreach. The Tate's catalogue features a stable of accomplished illustrators and a wide-ranging list of titles, including narrative picture books, illustrated biographies, and primers. Other art-book and art-museum publishers already have or will soon wade into the market; in the spring of 2018, Abrams began a partnership with the Metropolitan Museum of Art that complements similar agreements with the Getty in Los Angeles and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Taking publishers' catalogues as its primary texts, this paper surveys the types and subjects of children's books published by art museums in recent years, and argues that this trend reflects art museums' evolving conceptualization of their mission—itsself a response to growing anxiety about museums' role in the cultural life of twenty-first-century America and the United Kingdom. Many art museums have struggled with budgets cuts while also facing criticism for using public resources to serve a narrow elite audience. But by expanding their publishing programs to include children's books, museums can monetize their holdings (in a limited way) while also courting younger audiences as well as more diverse ones. Book sales supplement ticket sales and, more importantly, provide opportunities to partner with public schools and libraries, sharing in their officially democratic and educational missions. I conclude that children's books published by art museums serve as advertisements for art appreciation, art historical knowledge, and—above all—future museum patronage.