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Where you'll never hear 'don't touch'

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For any other museum, this kind of exhibit would be a nightmare: Children, everywhere, getting up close to works of arts, even touching things.

But for the Waterloo Regional Children's Museum, it's been anything but.

Chagall for Children, an exhibit created in Chicago about 10 years ago, is a one-of-a kind, interactive show for two- to 12-year-olds based on the works of 20th-century painter Marc Chagall. It was a hit when first introduced at the Kohl Children's Museum – which created the exhibit with the Art Institute of Chicago – as a way to introduce kids to famous works of art. It's now at the Waterloo museum until the end of April.

"Famous artists are so separated from children," said Mary Trieschmann, vice-president of programs at Kohl. "They go to an art gallery and they can't get close, they can't touch ... we felt like we could come up with a way to make art accessible to children."

David Marskell, the new executive director of the Waterloo museum, said after the exhibit opened, "one of my first images was a man, a father, on one knee with his child.

"If we can get parents interacting with their kids at an exhibit and also learning, it's a checkmark for us, we've done a great job. The exhibit does that."

Chagall was chosen because his work is whimsical, and he uses objects in his painting that people can relate to – houses, bicycles and animals, said Trieschmann.

"His movements are playful and not so abstract like Picasso that kids can't relate to it, but imaginative enough so that they can," she added. "You couldn't pull this off with every artist."

The exhibit comprises 14 stations showcasing a different work of art – a reproduction, of course – with a related activity. Phones are installed at each one giving children some background on the work.

Even though toddlers will pick up the phones and "pretend they're talking to dada" – not to be confused with Dadaism – it's nonetheless introducing them to a staple of the art museum experience, said Trieschmann.

"The kids love them."

Among the activities:

At the Circus: Children don capes silk-screened with the colours and features of the painting, and play or dance in front of it, watching themselves on a television screen. "It's a way for them to get inside a painting," said Trieschmann, "to add themselves to an existing piece of work," by role-playing.

The Blue House: Children create their own model of a house using this work as inspiration.

The Concert: Children press buttons to play different musical instruments included in the painting. "We want kids to create music and reflect the feeling of the piece," Trieschmann said.

Flowers: Children create their own floral arrangement using artificial flowers.

Green Violinist: Children touch a computer screen to "paint" a picture of their face.

The Waterloo museum has added a few extras – including a map showing where Chagall was born, lived and worked, in relation to Kitchener – as well as a craft station for kids "to create their own masterpiece," Marskell said.

Chagall for Children runs to April 29

at the Waterloo Regional Children's Museum in downtown Kitchener.

Visit www.thechildrensmuseum.ca