

Hanna-Liis Kont

CLOSER WITH ART: SUPPORTING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH ART MUSEUM EDUCATION

*Humans are not rational creatures who are also emotional,
rather, we are emotional creatures who are also able to be
rational, sometimes.*

Ed Rodley¹

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I introduce art museum practices that are aimed at supporting social and emotional wellbeing through art. In particular, I analyse a selection of museum lessons for general education schools that have emerged in art museums in Estonia. Based on these examples I argue that when art institutions place their primary focus on wellbeing, they also strengthen people's connections with art in the process.

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¹ Ed Rodley, *Designing for Playful Engagement in Museums. Immersion, Emotion, Narrative, and Gameplay* (London, New York: Routledge, 2025), 57.

Research on the contribution of museums to visitors' social and emotional experiences² and wellbeing³ is not new. Even so, the continued relevance of the topic is demonstrated by numerous dedicated publications, including those looking more specifically at art museums.⁴ It is also signalled by museum organisations that vigorously promote the positive effects museums have on people's wellbeing and which encourage such practices to continue. The NEMO (Network of European Museum Organisations) statement on mental health and wellbeing issued on 29 October 2025 describes the current challenges of increasing social tension and fragmentation in society, stating:

We acknowledge the dedication of museum professionals across Europe who are working alongside mental health practitioners and community partners to embed wellbeing into their institutional missions. /---/ We envision museums as vital components of Europe's civic care systems – places where culture supports mental health, emotional resilience, and social cohesion.⁵

Art museums in Estonia have also increasingly linked their work to wellbeing, especially, though not exclusively, through museum

2 This became an evident focus for several researchers in the 1980s and 1990s, with the emergence of new museology. See, for example: John H. Falk, Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington, D.C.: Whalesback Books, 1992).

3 See, for example: François Matarasso, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts* (Stroud: Comedia 1997), 64. For more recent research, see: Krisztina Lackoi, Maria Patsou, Helen J Chatterjee et al., *Museums for Health and Wellbeing. A Preliminary Report* (London: National Alliance for Museums, Health and Wellbeing, 2016), <https://museumsandwellbeingalliance.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/museums-for-health-and-wellbeing.pdf> (accessed 28/11/2025).

4 See, for example: Mary Ellen Munley, Charles Rossiter, *Art Museums and Well-Being. A Review of Literature* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2015), https://d26jxt5097u8sr.cloudfront.net/file_share/Art%20Museums%20and%20Well-Being.pdf (accessed 28/11/2025); *Art Therapy in Museums and Galleries: Reframing practice*, ed. by Ali Coles, Helen Jury (London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2020); *Museum-Based Art Therapy: A Collaborative Effort with Access, Education, and Public Programs*, ed. by Mitra Reyhani Ghadim, Lauren Daugherty (New York: Routledge, 2021).

5 "NEMO statement on museums, mental health and wellbeing," *The NEMO Executive Board* (Berlin/Horsens, 29/10/2025), https://www.ne-mo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_Statements/NEMO_statement_on_museums__mental_health_and_wellbeing_10-2025.pdf (accessed 04/12/2025).

education.⁶ The aim of this article is to foreground the relevant tendencies and practical approaches applied in such art institutions to fostering social and emotional wellbeing. This is done by introducing a selection of significant examples from art museums from the 2021–2025 period.⁷ The primary research questions are: what developments characterise art museum education related to social and emotional wellbeing in Estonia, and how has art mediation been used in practice to support it? The discussion also touches on the aims, benefits and challenges of such work, as well as future potential.

METHODS AND CASE STUDIES

The article is based on case study analysis and discourse analysis; the research methods are mainly qualitative but also include some quantitative elements. The central case study is the *Close-up and Closer with Art* programme, an art-based museum lesson designed to develop social skills among students in grades 1–4. The programme has been delivered at the Tartu Art Museum (Tartmus) since autumn 2023 (mainly as a 90-minute lesson),⁸ and at the Rüki Gallery in Viljandi since autumn 2025 (as a 60–75-minute lesson).⁹ The lesson consists of the following activities, with some variation at different exhibitions. 1. short introduction to the museum or gallery, and to the exhibition; making agreements with the group on behaviour and collaboration. 2. getting to know the space through prompts such as "the happiest place in the room", "the place that matches my current feeling". 3. a game that involves finding commonalities with other classmates. 4. group work, using a palette and various art

6 The topic is also written about by local practitioners. See, for example: Jelena Tšekulajeva, "Muuseumid ja heaolu. Eesmärgi saavutamine kogukonna kaasamise kaudu," *Muuseum*, 2 (49) (2022), <https://ajakiri.muuseum.ee/muuseumid-ja-heaolu-eesmargi-saavutamine-kogukonna-kaasamise-kaudu/> (accessed 04/12/2025).

7 This framing is determined based on the central case study. Preparatory research for the *Close-up and Closer with Art* lesson started in 2021.

8 The main educator running the lessons in Tartu is Kristel Sibul, as well as occasionally Hanna-Liis Kont and Kadri Toomsalu. "Close-up and Closer with Art", *Tartu Art Museum*, <https://tartmus.ee/en/hariduskeskus/kunstiga-lahedalt-ja-lahedaseks-2/> (accessed 04/12/2025).

9 The educators running the lessons in Viljandi in autumn 2025 were Kristi Kangilaski, Laineli Parrest, and Hanna-Liis Kont. "Close-up and Closer with Art in Viljandi", *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US/haridus/Lessons> (accessed 04/12/2025).



FIG. 1. A CLOSE-UP AND CLOSER WITH ART LESSON AT RÜKI GALLERY, WITH STUDENTS USING THE MAGNETIC ARTIST'S PALETTE. PHOTO: KRISTJAN KIVISTIK, 2025.



FIG. 2. TEACHERS PARTICIPATING ALONGSIDE STUDENTS IN A CLOSE-UP AND CLOSER WITH ART LESSON AT RÜKI GALLERY. PHOTO: KRISTJAN KIVISTIK, 2025.

interpretation exercises (Fig. 1). 5. group presentations of one artwork to the class. 6. final reflections through a yarn-ball exercise (Fig. 2).¹⁰

I also reference the *LOOVHOOV* ('Creative Courtyard') outdoor learning material, which was developed in 2024 as an alternative to *Close-up and Closer with Art* and is run as an outdoor learning lesson at Tartmus (60–90 minutes).¹¹ Both lessons were created by team members from the Creative Connections (*Kunst loob lähedust*) art education platform,¹² namely its education curators Jane Meresmaa-Roos and Sireli Uusmaa as part of the European Capital of Culture Tartu 2024 main programme.¹³ The Creative Connections initiative was born in the context of the Tartu Art Museum but is now an independently run team composed of people from different fields and organisations. I am the manager of the platform and was also the initiator and project manager who developed these lessons. In addition, I have been one of the educators running some of the lessons in Tartu and Viljandi as well as previous lessons in partner schools during a preparatory phase in 2022 and 2023.¹⁴ The fact that I have contributed to the creation of some of the objects of research also affects the methodology, making it partly autoethnographic.

To give a broader context to these lessons and their analysis, the article introduces similar work by the Education Centre at Kumu Art Museum (part of the Art Museum of Estonia) in Tallinn and other art institutions. The main examples from Kumu include lessons related to the exhibitions *Jevgeni Zolotko: The Secret of Adam* (31 May 2024–5 January 2025) and *Anna-Stina Treumund: How to Recognise a Lesbian*

¹⁰ Detailed descriptions are provided in the lesson scripts *Universaalne tund* ('Universal Lesson'), September 2023 (Creative Connections, 2023), and *Rüki galerii universaalne tunnikava* ('Rüki Gallery Universal Lesson Plan'), October 2025 (Creative Connections, 2025), unpublished documents in the possession of the author and educators.

¹¹ The educators running the lessons in Tartu were Kristel Sibul and Hanna-Liis Kont. "Loovhoov outdoor learning lesson", *Tartu Art Museum*, <https://tartmus.ee/en/hariduskeskus/oesoppetund-loovhoov/> (accessed 04/12/2025); "Outdoor learning cards Loovhoov", *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US/haridus#Learning%20materials> (accessed 04/12/2025).

¹² *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US> (accessed 04/12/2025).

¹³ "Creative Connections", *European Capital of Culture Tartu 2024*, <https://tartu2024.ee/en/kunstloob/> (accessed 04/12/2025).

¹⁴ The activities are detailed in the monitoring table: *Kunst loob lähedust seiretabel 2022–2025* (visitor statistics, 2023–2025), provided by Tartu Art Museum (Tartmus), copy in author's possession.

(5 September 2025–11 January 2026).¹⁵ Regarding the former, the focus is on the *Exhibition Tour with an Open Heart* lesson¹⁶ developed by Anu Lüsi (Curator of Art Education Programmes at Kumu) together with mental health and youth work specialists from MTÜ Peaasjad (the Head Matters NGO).¹⁷ Treumund's exhibition is accompanied by a programme called Activism School¹⁸ where the emphasis is on one museum lesson titled *What Do You Want to Stand For?*¹⁹ composed by Frederik Klanberg (Curator of Education and Public Programmes at Kumu).

SOURCES AND STRUCTURE

The research draws from a variety of sources, among them interviews with museum educators and school teachers, feedback forms, email exchanges with educators,²⁰ lesson descriptions,²¹ and statistical data.²² General education school teachers' points of view on *Close-up and Closer with Art* are included based on written responses to feedback forms distributed online via email in winter 2023 (11 answers),²³

15 "Anna-Stina Treumund: How to Recognise a Lesbian?", *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/en/syndmus/anna-stina-treumund-how-to-recognise-a-lesbian/> (accessed 04/12/2025).

16 Sixteen groups participated in the *Exhibition Tour with an Open Heart* lesson. Email correspondence from Eva-Erle Lilleaet to Hanna-Liis Kont, 1 December 2025, in the possession of the correspondents. Approximately three of the groups also participated in the Peaasjad workshop. Email exchange between Anu Lüsi and Hanna-Liis Kont (03/12/2025) in the possession of the correspondents; "Näituse ringkäik avatud südamega koos Peaasi.ee töötoaga", *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/syndmus/naitude-ringkaik-avatud-sudamega-koos-peaasi-ee-tootoaga/> (accessed 04/12/2025).

17 "About us", *Peaasjad*, <https://peaasi.ee/en/meist/> (accessed 04/12/2025).

18 "Aktivismikool, Anna-Stina Treumundi näitusel", *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/aktivismikool/> (accessed 04/12/2025).

19 As of 1 December 2025, 12 groups had participated in the *Exhibition Tour with an Open Heart* lesson. Email exchange with Eva-Erle Lilleaet (01/12/2025); "Mille eest sina seista tahad?", *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/syndmus/mille-eest-sina-seista-tahad/> (accessed 04/12/2025).

20 Email exchange with Eva-Erle Lilleaet (01/12/2025); Email exchange between Anu Lüsi and Hanna-Liis Kont (03/12/2025) in the possession of the correspondents.

21 Lesson descriptions on the websites. "Haridus", *Tartu Art Museum*, <https://tartmus.ee/category/haridushetkel/> (accessed 04/12/2025); "Education", *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US/haridus> (accessed 04/12/2025); "Muuseumitund", *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/muuseumitund/> (accessed 04/12/2025).

22 *Kunst loob lähedust seiretabel 2022–2025*; "Galeriitundide kalender Rükis", *Creative Connections* (2025), in the possession of the author.

23 Eleven answers to the feedback form regarding *Close-up and Closer with Art* from teachers who participated at Tartmus from September to December 2023, collected in December 2023 via Google Forms, answers in the possession of the author. In total, 25 lessons took place at Tartmus during autumn 2023. Statistics courtesy of Tartmus.

summer 2024 (16 answers),²⁴ and autumn 2025 (8 answers)²⁵ and are referenced anonymously. Teachers' views are also taken into account through in-depth and mainly in-person interviews conducted with nine teachers from the Creative Connections platform partner classes held between 2021 and 2023.²⁶ Museum educators' accounts are included through six in-depth interviews conducted either in person or via video calls in the summer and autumn of 2025. The interviewed educators are Meresmaa-Roos, Uusmaa, Kristel Sibul (Curator of Art Education Programmes at Tartmus), Lüsi, Klanberg, and Eva-Erle Lilleaet (Head of the Kumu Education Centre).²⁷ The participants have given their informed consent to take part in the research, they are aware of the study's purpose and their rights, and have voluntarily agreed to contribute. I also rely on my own experience as a project manager, educator and exhibition curator. The analysis of these sources is supported with links to theoretical ideas by museum specialists, such as renowned visitor experience researcher John F. Falk, who argues for realising museums' "unique capacity to enhance societal well-being",²⁸ as well as museum experience designer Ed Rodley's ideas on evoking emotions in museums.²⁹

The structure of the article is based on tracing relevant developments in art museum education, looking at thematic choices, engaging target groups, education strategies related to curating exhibitions, relevant partnerships, and the types of formats used. The second part of the article focuses on art mediation approaches that

24 Sixteen answers to the feedback form regarding *Close-up and Closer with Art* from teachers who participated at Tartmus from January to June 2024, collected in June 2024 via Google Forms, answers in the possession of the author. In total, 60 lessons took place at Tartmus during spring 2024. Statistics courtesy of Tartmus.

25 Eight answers to the feedback form regarding *Close-up and Closer with Art* from teachers who participated at Rükis Gallery in October and November 2025, collected in November 2025 via Google Forms, answers in the possession of the author. In total, 10 lessons took place at the Rükis Gallery during autumn 2025. "Galeriitundide kalender Rükis", *Creative Connections* (2025), in the possession of the author.

26 Interviews with nine partner class teachers from general education schools across southern Estonia (2021–2023); conducted by Hanna-Liis Kont with Paola Cieno, Kristiina Hansen, Sireli Uusmaa, Mae Variksoo and Sigrid Viir. Recordings and written notes in the possession of the author.

27 Interviews with Klanberg, Lilleaet, Lüsi, Meresmaa-Roos, Sibul, and Uusmaa (2025); conducted by Hanna-Liis Kont. Recordings and written notes in the possession of the author.

28 John F. Falk, *The Value of Museums: Enhancing Societal Well-Being* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 196.

29 Rodley, *Designing for Playful Engagement in Museums. Immersion, Emotion, Narrative, and Gameplay*, 56–87.

are aimed at supporting participants' social and emotional wellbeing, such as integrating self-led learning and self-expression, interpreting art through emotions, and engaging teachers in museum lessons.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

One of the key terms used in this article is social and emotional wellbeing. While researchers use many different definitions as well as categories of wellbeing,³⁰ I mainly refer to the joint and rather broad category of social and emotional wellbeing because the practice in museum education in question is closely related to both social and emotional aspects of wellbeing. This joint term is used by several researchers looking at child wellbeing in education contexts, such as Debbie Watson, Carl Emery, and Phil Bayliss,³¹ as well as Mary Cleary.³² Accordingly, my analysis is based on the understanding that wellbeing is subjectively experienced and contextual and so related to the personal perception of emotions, and individual emotional regulation and function in social contexts.³³ Social and emotional wellbeing is generally understood to be dependent on social and emotional learning (SEL),³⁴ which enables one to attain the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities for effective communication.³⁵ Alongside fostering wellbeing, SEL also contributes

30 See: Hanna-Liis Kont, "Kuidas toetab kunst sotsiaal-emotsionaalse pädevuse kujundamist? Lastega perede abil loodud helirännak / How Does Art Support Social and Emotional Learning? A Sound Journey Created with Children and Their Families", *Methis*, 28 (35) (2025), 171–197. Falk also writes about the definitions and categories of wellbeing, referring to personal, intellectual, social, and physical wellbeing. Falk, *The Value of Museums: Enhancing Societal Well-Being*, 35–37, 41–42.

31 Debbie Watson, Carl Emery, et al., *Children's social and emotional wellbeing in schools: A critical perspective* (Bristol: The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2012).

32 Mary Cleary, *CYPSC: Social and Emotional Well-Being. An outline report on social and emotional well-being as it relates to children and young people* (Cork Children and Young People's Services Committee November 2016), https://www.cypsc.ie/_fileupload/Documents/Resources/Cork/Cork-Sweb-18_04_17.pdf (accessed 05/12/2025).

33 See: Watson, Emery, et al., *Children's social and emotional wellbeing in schools: A critical perspective*, 7–8; Anti Kidron, *Praktilise psühholoogia leksikon* (Tallinn: Mondo, 2023), 235.

34 More about SEL: "Fundamentals of SEL", *CASEL*, <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/> (accessed 06/12/2025). These connections have also been critically examined by various researchers. See, for example: *Children's social and emotional wellbeing in schools: A critical perspective*, 60.

35 See, for example: Stephanie M. Jones, Sophie P. Barnes, Rebecca Bailey, Emily J. Doolittle, "Promoting Social and Emotional Competencies in Elementary School", *The Future of Children*, 27 (1) (2017), 49–51, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1144815.pdf> (accessed 06/12/2025); "Mis on sotsiaal-emotsionaalne pädevus?", *Peaasjad*, <https://peaasi.ee/mis-on-sotsiaal-emotsionaalne-padevus/> (accessed 06/12/2025).

to mental health.³⁶ CASEL: The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning highlights five categories of SEL.³⁷ In this research, the analysis touches on attributes related to the following categories: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills. To support the following discussion, I will briefly break these down. Self-awareness includes the ability to recognise one's emotions and values as well as having a "well-grounded sense of confidence".³⁸ Self-management implies emotional regulation and having motivation and agency to reach set goals.³⁹ Social awareness includes being empathetic and accepting of other people's viewpoints, and also "recognizing strengths in others".⁴⁰ Relationship skills involve "maintaining healthy and supportive relationships", including collaboration skills and conflict resolution.⁴¹

LIMITATIONS AND RELEVANCE

While the research binds together ideas from different professional fields from museum studies and art education to psychology, it is primarily framed in the context of museum studies and is based on my main personal expertise as a researcher and practitioner. This also means that the selection of theoretical references is based on sources that have most evidently affected my thinking and work.

Regarding the case studies, it has been possible to gather statements and feedback from educators and teachers, but the most obvious limitation comes from the lack of referenceable written data on feedback from students who have participated in the lessons. This is due to the fact that most feedback methods used in these lessons

36 Jones, "Promoting Social and Emotional Competencies in Elementary School", 49.

37 "Fundamentals of SEL", *CASEL*, <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/> (accessed 06/12/2025); these are also communicated by Peaasjad: "Mis on sotsiaal-emotsionaalne pädevus?", <https://peaasi.ee/mis-on-sotsiaal-emotsionaalne-padevus/> (accessed 06/12/2025).

38 "Self-Awareness", *CASEL*, <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/#self-awareness> (accessed 06/12/2025).

39 "Self-Management", *CASEL*, <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/#self-management> (accessed 06/12/2025).

40 "Social-Awareness", *CASEL*, <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/#social-awareness> (accessed 06/12/2025).

41 "Relationship Skills", *CASEL*, <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/#relationship> (accessed 06/12/2025).

are oral reflections;⁴² it has not been possible to conduct systematic observations or other data collection in the lessons for ethical and practical reasons. Acquiring written informed consent from all the students and their parents to participate in this research was not possible as I have done most of the data collection on my own and have not had the resources to realise such procedures.⁴³ For this reason, this research approaches museum education based on teachers' and educators' reflections and expertise regarding learning processes, rather than students' first-hand reflections. However, some of the quantitative data does also demonstrate the benefits for students, and analysis of existing sources also enables me to show students' probable learning outcomes.

The value of this research lies in its contribution to the professional discourse on art museum education, including the promotion of its links to other professional fields and relationship to wellbeing, as well as bringing new audiences to art exhibitions. The article documents and analyses work that is characteristic to the present time, disseminates recent findings and highlights future potential for such practices.

THEMES EMERGING THROUGH VALUES

The following discussion on art museum education in Estonia is focused on the way museums are working to contribute to various groups' social and emotional wellbeing, especially children and the adults around them. One of the developments is the shifting of focus from predominantly art-centred or art-led topics to a much broader range of themes led by values. This includes more active and direct engagement with a variety of social issues as well as setting related learning goals that are not only based on art.

Museums' turn towards social values has been detected and encouraged for several decades, including by renowned museum professionals and authors related to new museology. For example,

42 Lüsi, interview (20/10/2025). Frederik Klanberg, interview conducted by Hanna-Liis Kont via video call (22/10/2025) recording in the possession of the author. Kumu has also started to gather written feedback from students using QR codes, although this is still in the early stages of testing. Email exchange with Lüsi (03/12/2025).

43 *Estonian Code of Conduct for Research Integrity*, Centre for Ethics, University of Tartu, Estonian Research Council, (Centre for Ethics, University of Tartu: Tartu, 2023), 13.

museum education theorist George E. Hein has emphasised the importance of the museum's social role⁴⁴, and Eliean Hooper-Greenhill has written about valuing museum–audience relationships.⁴⁵ Linking museum activities with values is also not new in Estonia.⁴⁶ Several museums have clearly articulated their main topics and working methods from this perspective for many years. Sireli Uusmaa highlights the Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom,⁴⁷ whose mission is to educate people regarding "... the fragility of freedom, and advocate for justice and the rule of law",⁴⁸ and the Miiamilla Children's Museum, which has focused its efforts on developing children's social skills.⁴⁹ For these museums, placing an emphasis on themes that are clearly connected to social values has been directly linked to their thematic field of activity. In comparison, local art museums have appeared to be more reluctant to go along with this shift, deeming it important to keep the predominant focus on art as the core element of their identity, with most activities growing out of that.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, in recent years there has been an evident increase in art museum projects that have placed their starting point or main focus on social values rather than themes specific to art. Often, these are also related to social and emotional wellbeing, even if this is not exactly articulated. In addition to mentioning wellbeing directly, in many cases emphasis has been put on fostering social skills, mental health, empathy, diversity, emotional awareness and other related values and learning goals. The introduction on the Creative

44 George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998), 9, 12.

45 Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, "Changing Values in the Art Museum: Rethinking Communication and Learning", *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 6 (1) (2000), 9–31.

46 See, for example: Mare Kõiva, "The Contemporary Museum as a Site for Displaying Values", *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics*, 1 (1-2) (2007), 49–62.

47 Sireli Uusmaa, two interviews conducted by Hanna-Liis Kont via video call (23/09/2025, 04/11/2025), recordings in the possession of the author.

48 *Vabamu*, <https://vabamu.ee/en/> (accessed 06/12/2025).

49 Uusmaa, interviews (23/09/2025, 04/11/2025). For example, the Miiamilla Children's Museum developed the first bullying prevention lesson, *Erinev on erinev*, for children in 2013. See: "Laste lood. Erinev on erinev", *Vikerraadio* (09/04/2013), <https://vikerraadio.err.ee/784241/laste-lood-erinev-on-erinev-1> (accessed 03/12/2025).

50 My observation is echoed by Uusmaa: Uusmaa, interview (23/09/2025). In addition, the preference to base activities first and foremost on art has also been mentioned by the director of Kumu, Kadi Polli. Kadi Polli, interview conducted by Hanna Liis Kont (28/10/2020), recording and notes in the possession of the author.

Connections website states that it is a platform that “engages art to support the social and emotional learning of children and adults”⁵¹ through activities that foster self-expression, communication, empathy and the appreciation of differences.⁵² The idea for an art education platform that connects art mediation with social values as its central premise was born in the context of Tartmus and, thus, aptly exemplifies these tendencies. Kumu’s *Activism School* programme is also a relevant example, as it gathers various educational activities under a theme based on values such as self-expression, solidarity and human rights.⁵³

Regarding specific lessons run as part of Creative Connections, social values are mentioned through various learning outcomes. For example, the introduction to the *Close-up and Closer with Art* lesson, which is meant for 1st to 4th grade school groups, states that it focuses on students learning to understand each other better, while the *LOOVHOOV* outdoor learning lesson, which was initially created for elementary schools but is also adaptable for other age groups, including adults, is said to help develop social skills through playful self-expression.⁵⁴ Meresmaa-Roos and Uusmaa, who created both lessons and materials, also took inspiration from the values that are at the heart of the KiVa bullying prevention programme, including accepting differences, making sure no one is left out, seeing caring as a strength, and others.⁵⁵ A connecting thread between these activities and values is the overall aim of increasing participants’ social and emotional wellbeing through art.

The Kumu Education Centre introduces itself through values such as diversity and social sustainability.⁵⁶ This connects to the descriptions of the particular lessons in question. Accordingly,

51 *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US> (accessed 04/12/2025).

52 “About”, *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US/projekt> (accessed 04/12/2025).

53 “Aktivismikool, Anna-Stina Treumundi näitusel”, *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/aktivismikool/> (accessed 04/12/2025).

54 “Lessons”, *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US/haridus#Lessons> (accessed 04/12/2025).

55 Jane Meresmaa-Roos, two interviews conducted by Hanna-Liis Kont via video call (17/06/2025, 26/06/2025), recordings in the possession of the author. Christina Salmivalli, Elisa Poskiparta, Anna Tikka, Virpi Pöyhönen, *Kiusamisvastane programm KiVa. Õpetaja käsiraamat, 1. moodul* (Turu: Turu Ülikool, 2013).

56 “Sustainable Kumu Education Center”, *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/en/sustainable-kumu/sustainable-kumu-education-center/> (accessed 05/12/2025).

the *Exhibition Tour with an Open Heart* for high school groups at the Zolotko exhibition helps develop emotional intelligence, empathy and ability to support one’s mental health,⁵⁷ while the *What Do You Want to Stand For?* programme for the same age group, taking place at the Treumund exhibition, promotes articulating personal values, civic engagement, empathy and critical thinking.⁵⁸ This is not only characteristic of Tartmus and Kumu; similar examples can be found in various other art institutions, such as the Tallinn Art Hall.⁵⁹ Thus, across many art institutions’ education work in Estonia, recent activities and entire programmes can be found that centre on values and goals closely related to social and emotional wellbeing.

In these instances, art still has a large role in the activities, often acting as a supportive medium, tool, trigger or environment for exploring such complex themes. However, Frederik Klanberg, whose practice is influenced by critical pedagogy,⁶⁰ points out that art museum education does not mean that art has to be “the main authority in the room”.⁶¹ Similar standpoints are echoed by Uusmaa and Meresmaa-Roos.⁶² Such views contribute to a shift in the value system in art museum education, as education curators work towards unlocking the wider potential of these institutions. As a consequence, the hierarchies that have long persisted in art museums are starting to lose some of their former relevance, creating more flexibility for mediating art through themes and values that can increase the art museum’s benefit to people’s lives.

57 “Näituse ringkäik avatud südamega koos Peaasi.ee töötoaga”, *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/syndmus/naituse-ringkaik-avatud-sudamega-koos-peaasi-ee-tootoaga/> (accessed 04/12/2025).

58 “Mille eest sina seista tahad?”, *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/syndmus/mille-eest-sina-seista-tahad/> (accessed 04/12/2025).

59 See, for example: “Virtuaalne haridusprogramm Flo Kasearu näitusel “Elust välja lõigatud”, *Tallinn Art Hall*, <https://www.kunstihoone.ee/education/virtuaalne-haridusprogramm-flo-kasearu-naitusel-elust-valja-loigatud/> (accessed 05/12/2025).

60 Critical pedagogy is an education and social theory that critiques oppressive social structures and promotes more democratic ways of teaching. These ideas are often related to the writings of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. See: Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

61 Klanberg, interview (22/10/2025).

62 Uusmaa, interview (23/09/2025); Meresmaa-Roos, interview (26/06/2025).

WIDER REACH AND IMPROVED ACCESS FOR TARGET GROUPS

Another characteristic development in art museum education in Estonia is the wider reach of target groups and community groups who are being engaged in activities by consideration of their specific needs and improved access to art. Examples of this can be found in the practice of both Tartmus⁶³ and Kumu.⁶⁴ Kumu's education team emphasise this evident development in their work with Lilleaed, Lüsi and Klanberg expressing a shared wish to continue improving access by doing more outreach projects in the future.⁶⁵ When it comes to working with children and young people, such changes are also visible, as the aims regarding particular groups of children who museums strive to connect with are becoming more specifically articulated and, thus, also more ambitious in terms of reach.

Creative Connections grew out of a desire to engage more children in art while also contributing to bullying prevention. This led us to set an initial focus on children aged 6–10 as the first years of school are an important time because of the development of new social networks.⁶⁶ The team set out to also reach students who do not visit an art museum regularly in order to increase their access to art. This includes engaging schools that are not only in Tartu, but also in rural areas and smaller towns in southern Estonia through more direct communication with teachers working in these areas and organising training events for them.⁶⁷ From 2022 to 2024 Creative Connections organised activities in 11 partner schools across southern Estonia. The partnership network included schools that differ in size, location (city, small town, countryside) and teaching language, as well as

63 For example, Tartmus has organised exhibition tours in Ukrainian to attract the local Ukrainian community. "Ukrainakeelne tuur näitusel 'Kohalik ilu. Tallinna Juvelitehas'", *Tartu Art Museum*, <https://tartmus.ee/uritus/ukrainakeelne-tuur-naitusel-kohalik-ilu-tallinna-juvelitehas/> (accessed 14/12/2025).

64 Since 2019, Kumu has organised regular Quiet Mornings to meet the needs of "people with sensory hypersensitivity and autism", *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/en/syndmus/quiet-morning-12/>, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/en/accessibility-programmes/#for-visitors-with-autism> (accessed 14/12/2025); email exchange with Lilleaed (01/12/2025).

65 Lilleaed, interview (15/10/2025); Anu Lüsi, interview conducted by Hanna-Liis Kont via video call, (20/10/2025), recording in the possession of the author; Klanberg, interview (22/10/2025).

66 Jones, "Promoting Social and Emotional Competencies in Elementary School", 50.

67 See, for example: "Symposium", *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US/programm#symposium> (accessed 06/12/2025); "Past adult training", *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US/haridus#Adult%20Training> (accessed 06/12/2025).

public and private schools and one school focused on children with special needs.⁶⁸ A total of 12 classes between grades 2 and 5 joined the network. To get to know them and their needs better, we visited these schools, observed their normal lessons, ran art and social skills lessons and organised artists' workshops.⁶⁹ This helped gather input for *Close-up and Closer with Art* and *LOOVHOOV*. It also enabled the students and teachers to create new artworks that were later exhibited at Tartmus.⁷⁰ Going to schools made our activities much more accessible to these children⁷¹ and helped build a collaborative relationship, which was continued by the groups' repeated visits to Tartmus from autumn 2022 until the beginning of 2025. During autumn 2022, out of the total 178 students who visited Tartmus from the partner classes, 163 (92%) stated that they had visited the museum for the first time in their life.⁷² Among the seven partner classes who were from schools outside of Tartu the proportion was even higher at 97%. For those from Tartu it was 81%. The high percentage of first-time visitors signals most children's lack of experience with art museums, especially when they live in small towns and rural areas.

To further widen our reach, in 2025 we extended our activities to additional exhibition venues outside of the main centres. This includes the Narva Art Residency⁷³ to reach school groups from Ida-Viru County and Rüki Gallery in Viljandi to reach school groups from Viljandi County.⁷⁴ In both areas, many children live far from larger cities and have limited options to participate in art museum

68 The full list is available on the Creative Connections website: "Partner schools", <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US> (accessed 06/12/2025).

69 Together with the Creative Connections team members Paola Cieno, Marju Kask, Jane Meresmaa-Roos, Maria Muuk, Kristel Sibul, Mae Variksoo and artists Sigrid Viir and Kristiina Hansen, we ran a total of 24 workshops in 12 partner classes across southern Estonia between 2022 and 2023; *Kunst loob lähedust seiretabel 2022–2025*.

70 See: "Contemporary art exhibition for children", *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US/naitus> (accessed 04/12/2025).

71 Interviews with nine partner class teachers from general education schools across southern Estonia (2021–2023).

72 Data collected by museum educators in autumn 2022, statistics in the possession of the author.

73 "Join a free colouring workshop with your class", *NART*, <https://www.nart.ee/et/tule-klassiga-tasuta-varvusopetuse-tootuppa/> (accessed 06/12/2025);

74 "Lessons. Close-up and Closer with Art in Viljandi", *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US/haridus#Lessons> (accessed 04/12/2025).

education.⁷⁵ In Viljandi, we ran the *Close-up and Closer with Art* lesson and out of the 192 students who participated in the 10 lessons run in autumn 2025, 130 (68%) reported that they were visiting the Rüki Gallery for the first time.⁷⁶ These first-time visits are significant and demonstrate the impact of the activities in overcoming existing barriers and making art exhibitions and museums more accessible to children.⁷⁷ However, bringing about first-time visits also comes with a responsibility to make these visits positive and memorable, as the impression children get can strongly influence their engagement with exhibition venues in the future. Falk highlights this pattern:

People with positive past experiences related to museums are highly likely to choose to engage in future experiences related to museums. Individuals with limited or negative past experiences related to museums are highly unlikely to choose to engage in experiences related to museums.⁷⁸

Most of the teachers who completed the questionnaire in 2025 reported that student feedback was positive. Three mentioned that the students found the experience very different, and one mentioned that the students liked some activities but did not understand what the artworks were. Six teachers wrote that the students liked the lesson or found it exciting.⁷⁹ The interviewed educators also reported, based on oral feedback during lessons, that many students enjoyed the activities.⁸⁰ While the educators' experiences and teachers'

75 People in Ida-Viru County face additional barriers related to language and socio-economic factors as it is an area with a large Russian speaking population. The average participation in culture for people aged 15 and over in Ida-Viru County is the lowest in Estonia at 66.4% (the average in Estonia is 79%). "Kultuuris osalemise uuring", *Statistics Estonia* (10/02/2023), <https://www.stat.ee/et/avasta-statistikat/metoodika-ja-kvaliteet/esms-metaandmed/40422#2-Metaandmete-uuendamise-1> (accessed 06/12/2025).

76 Eight out of the 10 classes that participated were from Viljandi, two were from outside Viljandi. Data collected by educators in October and November 2025, statistics in the possession of the author.

77 Regarding barriers for children living in rural areas, see: Anu Viltrop, "Laskem lapsed muuseumisse", *Estonian Museum Association*, <https://www.muuseum.ee/anu-viltrop-laskem-lapsed-muuseumisse/> (accessed 06/12/2025).

78 Falk, *The Value of Museums: Enhancing Societal Well-Being*, 176.

79 Eight answers to the feedback form, 2025.

80 Kristel Sibul, interview conducted by Hanna-Liis Kont at Tartmus (30/09/2025); recording in the possession of the author; Uusmaa, interview (23/09/2025); Meresmaa-Roos, interview (26/06/2025).

feedback and active participation are encouraging indicators, there is not enough hard evidence to claim whether and to what extent the students found these first experiences positive. This shows the pressing need to improve the methods of gathering and implementing student feedback.

Kumu has also focused on reaching children who might otherwise not have access to the museum. programme was initiated in 2015 in collaboration with the Aitan lapsi (Helping Children) charity fund,⁸¹ supporting museum visits for children facing financial difficulties.⁸² More recently, after the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the Kumu Youth Club's activities, the club organisers reformatted it by turning it into an elective course for high school students.⁸³ This makes it easier for young people to participate, as they can do so during school hours rather than in the evenings.⁸⁴

When it comes to improving access by integrating museum education into general education, another barrier is the inefficient support from the Ministry of Education and Research, and the Ministry of Culture.⁸⁵ In recent months, this was demonstrated by the public debate regarding instructions issued by the Ministry of Education and Research, which restrict schools from collecting money from parents for compulsory student cultural visits.⁸⁶ While the Ministry's wish was to increase equality between families with different financial resources and guarantee free primary education, in practice the restrictive language added confusion and more barriers, resulting in an evident decrease in participation in museum lessons.

81 *Aitan lapsi*, <https://aitanlapsi.ee/> (accessed 6/12/2025).

82 "Aitan lapsi kunsti juurde", *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kunstimuuseum.ekm.ee/aitan-lapsi-kunsti-juurde/> (accessed 4/12/2025).

83 Lilleaard, interview (15/10/2025).

84 Klanberg, interview conducted by Hanna-Liis Kont via video call (22/10/2025); recording in the possession of the author.

85 Uusmaa also highlights the lack of collaboration between the two ministries as a relevant issue impacting museum education in Estonia. Uusmaa, interview (23/09/2025). The Ministry of Culture has a funding programme for students' cultural visits called "Kultuurirahits" but it does not cover the actual needs. See: "Anu Viltrop: me ei saa lubada, et maalapsed kultuurimekadesse ei jõua. Meid on Eestis selleks liiga vähe!", *Estonian Museum Association* (06/04/2026), <https://www.muuseum.ee/anu-viltrop-me-ei-saa-lubada-et-maalapsed-kultuurimekadesse-ei-joua-meid-on-eestis-selleks-liiga-vahe/> (accessed 09/4/2026).

86 See, for example: "Haridusministeerium karmistas reegleid: kool ei tohi mitte mingil juhul nõuda lapsevanematelt annetusi õppetegevuse jaoks", *Delfi* (10/02/2026), <https://www.delfi.ee/artikkel/120435271/haridusministeerium-karmistas-reegleid-kool-ei-tohi-mitte-mingil-juhul-nouda-lapsevanematelt-annetusi-oppetegevuse-jaoks> (accessed 09/4/2026).

This was followed by joint statements by cultural and education organisations asking for clearer instructions.⁸⁷ In April 2026, the Ministry's instructions were clarified, explaining that parents' voluntary contributions to children's cultural visits are still allowed, assuming that all students get to participate equally.⁸⁸ However, this case shows how important it is for such stakeholders to collaborate and support museum education and other forms of cultural education consistently. Otherwise, restrictive administration can hinder or even undo the significant efforts made by museums and other cultural institutions to improve children's access to culture.

EDUCATION STRATEGIES APPLIED WHEN CURATING EXHIBITIONS

Museum efforts to reach more children also influences exhibition programmes. At Tartmus, I collaborated with the Creative Connections team, a group of artists, the abovementioned partner classes and other children to create an international art exhibition of mainly new productions titled *The Secrets of the Leaning Building* (09/08/2024–02/02/2025).⁸⁹ The exhibition was on display throughout the three floors of the museum, as well as in Holm Park in Tartu city centre where two outdoor artworks continue to be exhibited.⁹⁰ In the exhibition's introductory text I wrote that the exhibition aims "to provoke exciting encounters, allowing for the development of self-expression and cooperation."⁹¹ The exhibition team and I set out to contribute to social and emotional wellbeing by enhancing

87 See, for example: "Avalik pöördumine Haridus- ja Teadusministeeriumile kooliõppe mitmekesistamise teemal", *Estonian Museum Association* (28/11/2025), <https://www.muuseum.ee/avalik-poordumine-haridus-ja-teadusministeeriumile-kooliõppe-mitmekesistamise-teemal/> (accessed 09/04/2026); "400 kultuuri- ja haridusasutust soovivad riigilt selgeid juhiseid õppekaikudeks", *ERR* (06/04/2026); <https://www.err.ee/1609987605/400-kultuuri-ja-haridusasutust-soovivad-riigilt-selgeid-juhiseid-õppekaikudeks> (accessed 09/04/2026). The decrease in participation was also evident at the Tartu Art Museum and the Rüki Gallery.

88 "Haridusministri selgitused õppekaikudel ja kultuurisündmustel osalemiseks koolidele", *Ministry of Education and Research* (Facebook page, 07/04/2026), <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1364694865683409&set=a.300364625449777> (accessed 08/04/2026).

89 "Contemporary art exhibition for children", *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US/naitus#contemporary-art-exhibition> (04/12/2025).

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.



FIG. 3. *COLLIDE-OSCOPE* BY WILLIAM FORSYTHE (2009), EXHIBITED AS PART OF THE *SECRETS OF THE LEANING BUILDING* AT TARTU ART MUSEUM. PHOTO: MANA KAASIK, 2025.

relationship skills.⁹² Visitors could add to the display through their own creations, share their views on the kind of art museum that they would like, engage with the spaces in various physical ways and explore multisensory artworks that encouraged collaboration and interaction with other visitors (Fig. 3).⁹³ It was one of the first contemporary art exhibitions of its size in an art museum in Estonia that was made with and for children in particular. The exhibition also received recognition from the local museum sector winning the Exhibition of the Year Award in 2024.⁹⁴

92 In more detail, the aims included: "1. Access and engagement: make contemporary artists' practice more accessible and relatable to children and engage them in the creative process; 2. New resources: create new artworks and learning materials that support the development of children's social skills; 3. Raise awareness: highlight the importance of social skills for overall well-being (including preventing bullying), and the potential art has in the development of social skills." Hanna-Liis Kont, "The Secrets of the Leaning Building: Contemporary Art Exhibition for and with Children", presentation (2024), in the possession of the author.

93 "Contemporary art exhibition for children", *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US/naitus> (accessed 06/12/2025).

94 "Selgusid Muuseumirott 2024 võitjad", *Estonian Museum Association*, <https://www.muuseum.ee/selgusid-muuseumirott-2024-voitjad/> (accessed 06/12/2025).

Soon after this, Kumu also realised a collaborative project with children, reinterpreting works from their collections. This led to the *Tu and Whozzy* project space exhibition (17/10/2025–31/10/2027), curated by Darja Andrejeva (Keeper of the Painting Collection at the Art Museum of Estonia) and Anu Lüsi, which the museum introduces as “Kumu’s first exhibition designed specifically for children”.⁹⁵ The thematic focus and aim also relates to social and emotional wellbeing by fostering self-awareness and social awareness, as according to the introduction it “encourages young visitors to discover how art reflects who we are, helping them to understand themselves and others better.”⁹⁶ The curators have based the selection of exhibited artworks on children’s choices and have also integrated children’s own works in the show.⁹⁷ These examples are not the norm when it comes to how these museums’ exhibitions are typically made and who is given a say in interpreting the artworks. Therefore, there is still vast unused potential for such approaches to be applied more widely.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, they do signal that a different method of curating exhibitions is emerging alongside and in connection with developments in education. This indicates that the rising importance of values such as inclusivity, diversity, equality and community expertise are starting to gain traction as alternatives to the practices typically structured around exhibition curators’ authority and art’s supremacy.⁹⁹

95 “Tu and Whozzy”, *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/en/syndmus/tu-and-whozy/> (accessed 05/12/2025).

96 Ibid.

97 See: Darja Andrejeva and Anu Lüsi interviewed by Kadri Piirimäe: “Kui kunst ja tegevused on suurepärase tasakaalus”, *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum’s blog* (05/12/2025), https://kumublogi.ekm.ee/2025/12/05/kui-kunst-ja-tegevused-on-suureparases-tasakaalus/?fbclid=IwY2xjawOjbaNleHRuA2FlbQlXMQBicmlkETFEcFJqTjk0WG0xTU10YmNrc3J0YwZhcHBfaWQQMjlyMDM5MTc4ODIwMDg5MgABHqb7JCBk3YzU3szZhuZ65DsMg2-NriQfUdHR_8Fxc0-beH1cZVWb2EIXyaLu_aem_l2GwaGXbltGb0Hikxpqqg (accessed 08/12/2025).

98 Lilleaed also highlights this potential in the context of Kumu. Lilleaed, interview (15/10/2025).

99 Kumu’s educators also feel that collaboration with exhibition curators and inclusion in exhibition planning has started to improve, even though hierarchical differences are still evident. Lüsi, interview (20/10/2025), Klanberg, interview (22/10/2025). Lilleaed attributes these changes to the generational change as younger curators are more open to applying collaborative approaches. Lilleaed, interview (15/10/2025).

CROSS-DISCIPLINARY PARTNERSHIPS

The wish to provide content on complex topics related to social and emotional wellbeing and reach more children has also brought about many new partnerships between art museums and professionals from social, health and education sectors. As mentioned, the Creative Connections team is itself a collaboration between people from various fields, including art history and museum studies, pedagogy, creative therapy, community development and more.¹⁰⁰ An important partner for a number of art museums has also been The Bullying-Free School Foundation, who promotes the “bullying prevention programme KiVa in Estonia”.¹⁰¹ In 2019, they collaborated with the Kadriorg Art Museum and Tartmus, which resulted in the *Art Against Bullying* lesson, created by educator Eliis Vaino.¹⁰² Between 2021 and 2024 Kristiina Treial from the Foundation consulted the Creative Connections team during preparatory research for *Close-up and Closer with Art*. This helped bridge the knowledge gaps within our team regarding the bullying prevention methods used in the KiVa programme, as we were looking for new ways to explore related topics in art exhibitions. The shared values and aims regarding bullying prevention and the promotion of wellbeing have contributed to the longevity of the partnership.

Another active partner for art museums has in recent years been the NGO Peaasjad,¹⁰³ which works to increase mental health awareness, focusing especially on children and young people.¹⁰⁴ In 2024, The Art Museum of Estonia realised a collaboration with Peaasjad, which

100 See: “Contacts”, *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US/kontakt> (accessed 06/12/2025).

101 *The Bullying-Free School Foundation*, <https://kiasamisvaba.ee/the-bullying-free-school-foundation-2/> (accessed 06/12/2025).

102 The lesson is still available in both museums and is promoted by Creative Connections. “Kunstiga kiusamise vastu”, *Art Museum of Estonia – Kadriorg Art Museum*, <https://kadrionumuseum.ekm.ee/syndmus/kunstiga-kiusamise-vastu/> (accessed 06/12/2025); “Kunstiga kiusamise vastu”, *Tartu Art Museum*, <https://tartmus.ee/hariduskeskus/kunstiga-kiusamise-vastu-3/> (accessed 06/12/2025). See also: Hanna-Liis Kont. “Kunstiga kiusamise vastu. Kiusuennetustunni eesmärk ja üleschitus Kadrioru kunstimuuseumi ja Tartu Kunstimuuseumi näitel”, *Eesti Rahva Muuseumi aastaraamat*, 62 (2) (2019), 47–72.

103 In 2024, Peaasjad also partnered with The Bullying-Free School Foundation and the Baltic Engagement Center of Information Disorders to create the learning game Stop Bullying – Make Messages Safe on cyberbullying prevention; the game was part of the Secrets of the Learning Building exhibition.

104 “About us”, *Peaasjad*, <https://peaasi.ee/en/meist/> (accessed 06/12/2025).

included mental health training for the museum's staff, a lecture series and an education programme, as well as contributing to the *Exhibition Tour with an Open Heart* lesson in Kumu.¹⁰⁵ According to Lüsü, the lesson started with an exhibition tour run by a museum educator, focused on helping students interpret Zolotko's artworks (90 minutes). The groups could participate in the tour only or in the tour plus a subsequent workshop (30 minutes) carried out by a Peaasjad team member exploring simple ways to support one's mental health when thoughts have got 'tangled'.¹⁰⁶ Lüsü explains that the idea to collaborate with Peaasjad came from the exhibition's existential topics such as life and death and on the requirement to help young people deal with such thoughts.¹⁰⁷ While only a few of the groups participated in the two-hour version of the lesson,¹⁰⁸ the partnership is an example of how to create a safety net or soft landing for students after an emotionally charged experience, including practical tools that contribute to self-awareness and self-management. For their collaboration with the art museum in helping bring mental health topics to the museum's programme, Peaasjad was given the Museum Friend of the Year Award in 2024 by the Estonian Museum Association.¹⁰⁹

In these cases, the main purpose of the partnerships has been to draw on expertise from another discipline to deliver well-designed learning experiences that enhance social and emotional wellbeing. Similar partnerships have also helped reach particular groups of children. The gallery and theme centre Ilon's Wonderland¹¹⁰ started collaborating with the Haapsalu Neurological Rehabilitation Centre to reach children with special needs and provide education programmes

105 "Muuseumisõbra tiitli palvis Eesti Kunstimuuseumi koostööpartner Peaasi.ee", *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/aasta-muuseumisõbra-tiitli-palvis-eesti-kunstimuuseumi-koostööpartner-peaasi-ee/> (accessed 06/12/2025).

106 Email exchange with Lüsü (03/12/2025); Lüsü, interview (20/10/2025).

107 Lüsü, interview (20/10/2025).

108 Email exchange with Lüsü (03/12/2025).

109 "Muuseumisõbra tiitli palvis Eesti Kunstimuuseumi koostööpartner Peaasi.ee", *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/aasta-muuseumisõbra-tiitli-palvis-eesti-kunstimuuseumi-koostööpartner-peaasi-ee/> (accessed 06/12/2025).

110 "Ilon's Wonderland is a gallery and theme centre for children and families based on the works of the world-famous illustrator of children's books – Ilon Wikland." "Ilon's Wonderland", *Foundation of Haapsalu and Läänemaa Museums*, <https://salm.ee/en/ilons-wonderland/> (accessed 06/12/2025).

for them outside of the hospital environment.¹¹¹ According to the gallery's team, the collaboration has helped integrate the lessons into the children's schedule, taking into account their treatment plans and individual needs.¹¹² Therefore, many cross-disciplinary partnerships have evolved between art institutions and unique organisations with particular in-depth knowledge as well as contact with specific groups.

DEEPENING COLLABORATIONS WITH TEACHERS

Some of the most important partners for museums to reach are still general education schools. These partnerships have a long history,¹¹³ but they are also continuing to evolve. The thematic shifts and articulations that are part of contributing to student's wellbeing have helped engage more teachers, not just art teachers or teachers who already appreciate art museums.¹¹⁴ This is explained by Falk, who argues that enhanced wellbeing is ultimately a primary reason why people engage in museums.¹¹⁵ The experience of Creative Connections indicates that developing social skills motivates many teachers who are not otherwise used to taking their students to art museum or gallery lessons.¹¹⁶ As mentioned before, 92% of students from partner classes had never been to Tartmus before this project.¹¹⁷ Five of the partner class teachers also mentioned during first interviews that they had no prior experience visiting art museums with students, even though all of these teachers had visited other cultural venues with their students, such as theatres or other museums.¹¹⁸ Almost all of the interviewed teachers also believe museum visits and other

111 "Haapsalu Neuroloogilise Rehabilitatsioonikeskuse patsientide regulaarsed haridusprogrammid Iloni Imedemaal", Application submitted for the Estonian Annual Museum Awards (2024), courtesy of the director of Ilon's Wonderland, Maarja Kõuts.

112 Ibid.

113 See, for example: Virve Tuubel, *Muuseumi ja kooli koostöömudelid*. Master's Thesis (Tartu: University of Tartu, 2002); Sireli Uusmaa, *Muuseum kui formaalharidust toetav õppekeskkond*. Master's Thesis (Tallinn: University of Tallinn, 2012).

114 *Kunst loob lähedust seiretabel 2022–2025*.

115 Falk, *The Value of Museums: Enhancing Societal Well-Being*, 52–53, 177.

116 Uusmaa, interview (23/09/2025).

117 Data collected by museum educators in autumn 2022.

118 Interviews with nine partner class teachers from general education schools across southern Estonia (2021–2023).

similar outings enhance social skills, and that developing students' social skills is an important part of their work.¹¹⁹ Highlighting the shared value-based aim related to social and emotional wellbeing has, thus, helped encourage many new teachers to include art venues in their teaching agenda.

Educators are also experimenting with more inclusive collaboration strategies with teachers.¹²⁰ An example is the Creative Connections network of partner schools. The establishment of the network started at the end of 2021 and beginning of 2022 with 1–2 hour long conversations with most of the partner class teachers in the form of mainly individual semi-structured interviews that took place either in person or online and were conducted by me and colleagues from the team.¹²¹ These provided a setting in which to meet and introduce the project's idea. These meetings helped gather information about the teachers' prior experiences and attitudes related to art museums, and the challenges regarding developing students' social skills. They also enabled the teachers to share their feedback with us from the start. In my experience, this helped establish partnerships based on open communication and mutual respect. Over the next three years, we regularly gathered and implemented the teachers' ideas.¹²²

The creation of the palette as a central element used in *Close-up* and *Closer with Art* was also developed with the help of teachers. Inspired by the artist's palette, it is a methodical learning tool aimed at supporting the interpretation of artworks in a group. The palette is painted with magnetic paint that students can put magnetic splashes onto in three primary colours with short texts on them. These work as entry points for the groups to collectively interpret various artworks in an exhibition by 'mixing' different coloured exercises: emotions (yellow), ways of looking at art (red), and discussion points (blue).¹²³

119 Ibid.

120 Falk also writes about experimental partnerships between museums and schools, even moving schools into museums, as in the My Primary School Is at the Museum project organised by Kings College, London. Falk, *The Value of Museums: Enhancing Societal Well-Being*, 190.

121 Interviews with nine partner class teachers from general education schools across southern Estonia (2021–2023).

122 Feedback forms 2023, 2024, 2025. Between 2023 and 2024 we also organised three dedicated meetings with teachers where the educators shared their prototypes and teachers gave them feedback; *Kunst loob lähedust seiretabel 2022–2025*.

123 Lesson scripts: "Universaalne tund, sept 2023", "Rüki galerii universaalne tunnikava oktoober 2025".



FIG. 4. TEACHERS TESTING THE FIRST CARDBOARD PROTOTYPE OF THE PALETTE AT TARTU ART MUSEUM. PHOTO: KAIRI LAIAPEA, 2023.

The first prototype was tested together with 16 teachers (six of them partner class teachers) in August 2023. Teachers could try it out in groups, give feedback, and help us come up with wordings for the specific exercises used on the palette as well as improvements to the design (Fig. 4). During the following autumn, the first groups of students, including 10 partner classes, participated in the finalised lessons, after which the teachers were asked for more feedback via an online questionnaire.¹²⁴ We received 11 answers, six from partner class teachers. When asked whether the lesson met the description and their expectations, ten teachers responded affirmatively, while one teacher stated that they did not remember the description. One of the teachers wrote that it did meet the expectations because it was possible to experience the prototype and that it was cool to experience the lesson together. The palette as a tool was described as a dynamic, resourceful, and great tool that supports collaboration and should also

124 Feedback form, 2023.

be used in schools.¹²⁵ Therefore, the level of satisfaction expressed was consistently high. Teachers also helped test and develop *LOOVHOOV* in spring 2024.¹²⁶ Overall, these lessons and materials have been directly improved by the partnership with teachers.¹²⁷ In 2024, 15 out of 16 teachers gave *Close-up and Closer with Art* a score of 5 out of 5 (very satisfied), with one teacher giving it 4 out of 5 (satisfied); in 2025, six out of eight teachers gave it a score of 5 out of 5 and two 4 out of 5. It is likely that the continued high level of teacher satisfaction is also at least partly dependent on their collaborative development.¹²⁸

At the time of writing this article, in autumn 2025, Kumu is also part of an ongoing collaborative project with the Estonian Maritime Museum and the Estonian Museum Association.¹²⁹ According to Klanberg, who is participating, the content for a new museum lesson is being developed together with general education school teachers who work with students speaking languages other than Estonian.¹³⁰ The lesson is dedicated to language learning through art;¹³¹ the structure of the collaboration also includes observations of regular school lessons by museum educators.¹³² Based on my own experience and the educators I interviewed, creating content for museum lessons together with teachers is not a widespread practice in Estonian art museums.¹³³ This is understandable as every collaboration takes time and other resources. Even so, finding new ways to anchor the partnership with teachers in knowledge exchange and mutual respect towards each others' expertise can raise both parties' social awareness

125 Ibid.

126 In March and April 2024, two learning days took place for teachers, one in Põlva School (16 participants, conducted by Meresmaa-Roos, Uusmaa and Kont) and one in TäheTERA private school in Tartu (14 participants, conducted by Meresmaa-Roos), where prototype *LOOVHOOV* outdoor learning cards were tested and developed; *Kunst loob lähedust seiretabel 2022–2025*.

127 Meresmaa-Roos, interview (26/06/2025).

128 Feedback forms, 2024, 2025.

129 Klanberg, interview (22/10/2025); Lüsi, interview (20/10/2025); Lilleaed, interview (15/10/2025).

130 Ibid.

131 CLIL (the Content and Language Integrated Learning method) is being used. Klanberg, interview (22/10/2025).

132 Klanberg, interview (22/10/2025).

133 Lilleaed, interview (15/10/2025); Lüsi, interview (20/10/2025); Sibul, interview (30/09/2025); Meresmaa-Roos, interview (26/06/2025); Klanberg, interview (22/10/2025).

and have a positive impact on deepening existing relationships as well as building new ones.

SUSTAINABLE FORMATS

Education curators' work on developing new approaches and longer-term collaboration is also influenced by the pursuit of more sustainable working methods in museums. This aims to cope with the pressures of limited resources on the one hand and high expectations of the reach and positive benefit of activities on the other. Tartmus does not have a permanent display while Kumu does. Nevertheless, both museums also organise several temporary exhibitions each year and education curators are continually faced with the task of coming up with new learning activities to mediate them. This is time consuming, costly and thus not always the most reasonable approach. Hence, both museums have also developed methods, learning materials or entire lessons that can be adjusted to different exhibitions. This approach can help take some pressure off educators and possibly also help prevent burn-out, supporting the wellbeing of museum staff. Adjustable lessons also mean teachers can develop preferences and return to the same lessons with new students year after year, which is a typical practice for many museums that have permanent displays.¹³⁴

In the case of Tartmus, this has been challenging but also necessary to overcome, as Sibul is the only fulltime employee in the core staff who is focused on education,¹³⁵ while the Creative Connections team is an external partner whose activities and availability rely on project-based funding. While two adjustable lessons had been created before 2023,¹³⁶ to encourage repeated visits emphasis was still on promoting new lessons with every exhibition. The resources provided by Tartu

134 For example, many history teachers are used to attending the University of Tartu Art Museum's lessons on Ancient Greece and Greek mythology with their students. The lessons take place in the permanent display of antique art. See: "Müüt kunstis. Vana-Kreeka jumalad ja kangelased", *University of Tartu Museum*, <https://muuseum.ut.ee/et/sisu/muut-kunstis-vana-kreeka-jumalad-ja-kangelased> (accessed 07/12/2025).

135 As a comparison, there are seven people working at the Kumu Education Centre. Lilleaed, interview (15/10/2025).

136 "Täna räägime kunstist", *Tartu Art Museum*, <https://tartmus.ee/hariduskeskus/tana-raagime-kunstist/> (accessed 07/12/2025); "Kunstiga kiusamise vastu", *Tartu Art Museum*, <https://tartmus.ee/hariduskeskus/kunstiga-kiusamise-vastu-3/> (accessed 07/12/2025).

2024 presented an opportunity to develop new sustainable solutions and broaden the selection of adjustable lessons rather than creating temporary lessons for just one exhibition.¹³⁷ Thus, the starting point that I gave to Meresmaa-Roos and Uusmaa was to come up with solutions that can be adjusted to different art exhibitions. *Close-up* and *Closer with Art* as well as *LOOVHOOV* have been made to be such continuous tools. In practice, *Close-up* and *Closer with Art* has so far been adjusted to four exhibitions in Tartu: *Visual Arts in Tartu in the 1960s*,¹³⁸ *Ilmar Malin: The Glow of Eternity*,¹³⁹ *Karin Luts: Travel Images*,¹⁴⁰ and *Jüri Kask: Blink of an Eye*,¹⁴¹ as well as four exhibitions in Viljandi: Diana Tamane's solo show *Half-Love*,¹⁴² Anna-Liisa Kree's exhibition *Summer Is Just a State of Mind*,¹⁴³ Kristi Kangilaski's exhibition *However It Feels*,¹⁴⁴ and *Köler 200: The Original, the Copy, the Interpretation*.¹⁴⁵ This has confirmed that it can be quickly adjusted to different art exhibitions,¹⁴⁶ thus meeting that goal.

There are, however, exceptions which appeared with *The Secrets of the Leaning Building*, as the lesson does not work well with very multisensory exhibitions that are not focused primarily on visual artworks. As Meresmaa-Roos put it, that particular exhibition did not need this extra layer as it already activated various senses and supported interaction with others. In a way, the same principles that *Close-up* and

137 The need to find more effective solutions that would go beyond single visits was also highlighted in my article in 2019: Kont, "Kunstiga kiusamise vastu. Kiusuennetustunni eesmärk ja ülesehitus Kadrioru kunstimuseumi ja Tartu Kunstimuseumi näitel", 63.

138 "Visual Arts in Tartu in the 1960s", *Tartu Art Museum*, <https://tartmus.ee/en/exhibition/visual-arts-in-tartu-in-the-1960s/> (accessed 07/12/2025).

139 "Ilmar Malin. The Glow of Eternity", *Tartu Art Museum*, <https://tartmus.ee/en/exhibition/exhibition-ilmar-malin-the-glow-of-eternity-2/> (accessed 07/12/2025).

140 "Karin Luts. Travel Images", *Tartu Art Museum*, <https://tartmus.ee/en/exhibition/karin-luts-travel-images/> (accessed 07/12/2025).

141 "Jüri Kask. Blink of an Eye", *Tartu Art Museum*, <https://tartmus.ee/en/exhibition/juri-kask-retrospective/> (accessed 07/12/2025).

142 "Diana Tamane 'Poolarmastus'", *Rüki Gallery*, <https://www.rukigalerii.ee/uudised/diana-tamane-poolarmastus> (accessed 07/12/2025).

143 "Anna-Liisa Kree 'Summer Is Just a State of Mind'", *Rüki Gallery*, <https://www.rukigalerii.ee/news/anna-liisa-kree-summer-is-just-a-state-of-mind> (accessed 07/12/2025).

144 "Kristi Kangilaski 'However It Feels'", *Rüki Gallery*, <https://www.rukigalerii.ee/news/however-it-feels-by-kristi-kangilaski> (accessed 08/4/2026).

145 "Köler 200: The Original, the Copy, the Interpretation", *Rüki Gallery*, <https://www.rukigalerii.ee/news/koler-200> (accessed 08/4/2026).

146 Sibul, interview (30/09/2025); Meresmaa-Roos, interview (26/06/2025).

Closer with Art is based on were made into a spatial experience in that exhibition.¹⁴⁷ Sibul also mentioned that exhibitions with a lot of very small exhibits such as jewellery, and fragile exhibits that are hard to manoeuvre around are not very suitable for the lesson.¹⁴⁸ While these aspects create certain limitations, the exceptions have not hindered the adaptation of the lesson to most exhibitions. Sustainability and accessibility were also the most important preconditions for creating *LOOVHOOV*, taking into account the challenges teachers face when attending art museums, including distance, lack of time, lack of money and limited information.¹⁴⁹ For these reasons, *LOOVHOOV* does not rely on an art exhibition environment but is adjustable to different outdoor spaces such as school playgrounds, parks and public squares, and can also be used independently from museum educators, for example by school teachers, families or other groups.¹⁵⁰

Kumu has also made entire series of adjustable lessons¹⁵¹ as well as elective courses¹⁵² that make it possible to sustain longer and more in-depth relationships with specific students. In addition, they have developed other flexible formats and tools to optimise their work. This includes creating sets of cards such as *Kunstiavaja* ('Art Opener') learning cards with reproductions and open questions, which are usable in different contexts.¹⁵³ Another approach developed by the Kumu Education Centre is called the 4K method. This is also based on open questions and has, according to Lüsü, proven itself an especially suitable method for mediating contemporary art.¹⁵⁴ While these are not made to contribute to social and emotional

147 Meresmaa-Roos, interview (26/06/2025).

148 Sibul, interview (30/09/2025).

149 Interviews with seven partner class teachers from general education schools across southern Estonia (2021–2023); Meresmaa-Roos, interview (26/06/2025).

150 The set is sold in the Tartmus shop and includes instructions on how to use the material. "Outdoor learning cards 'Loovhoov' EST", *Tartu Art Museum*, <https://pood.tartmus.ee/en/product/outdoor-learning-cards-loovhoov-est/> (accessed 06/12/2025).

151 See, for example: "Sari 'Lugusid kunstis'", *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/syndmus/lugusid-kunstis-muuseumitundide-sari/> (accessed 06/12/2025); "Sari 'Täpi seiklused Kumus'", *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/syndmus/sari-tapi-seiklused-kumus/> (accessed 06/12/2025).

152 "Aktivismikool: Sekkumised Kumu kunstimuseumis", course description, courtesy of Frederik Klanberg.

153 Sandra Lääne-Velt, "Kunstiavaja kaardid – abiks keeleõppes kunstitunnini", *Õpetajate Leht*, <https://www.opleht.ee/2022/01/kunstiavaja-kaardid-abiks-keeleoppes-kunstitunnini/> (accessed 6/12/2025).

154 Lüsü, interview (20/10/2025).

wellbeing in particular, they can be used in related contexts to raise participants' confidence in engaging with art as well as encourage self-expression. Investing in such resources also supports Kumu's stated sustainability values. A challenge with all such material is how to keep it in active use as museum staff can change and lived experiences can be forgotten. Strategic partnerships between art museums could help disseminate and share best practices among colleagues more widely and deliberately. Writing about such work is also one of the ways to contribute to this knowledge exchange.

I have discussed five tendencies relevant in art museum education in Estonia, including active engagement with value-based themes related to social and emotional wellbeing, widening the museum's reach through improved access in order to engage more children, applying education strategies when curating exhibitions, deepening and initiating cross-disciplinary partnerships, and increasing the range of sustainable resources. Next, I will take a closer look at particular approaches used to support social and emotional wellbeing in art museum lessons.

SELF-LED ELEMENTS AND SELF-EXPRESSION

When comparing related museum lessons, a number of pertinent approaches emerge that are used in art mediation and are aimed at supporting participants' social and emotional learning and wellbeing. This article does not enable a comprehensive analysis of all the relevant methods.¹⁵⁵ Instead, the selection is based on analysis of the most integral aspects of *Close-up and Closer with Art*, and providing context through adjacent examples.

For *Close-up and Closer with Art*, integrating self-led elements has been an essential approach¹⁵⁶ that aims to give the participating students agency over their own learning experience. This is done in several parts of the lesson,¹⁵⁷ including with the help of the

155 Other methods which could be discussed are particular group work methods, using humour, various types of play activity, physical embodiment and the activation of other senses, although these are not within the scope of this article.

156 Meresmaa-Roos, interview (26/06/2025); Uusmaa, interview (23/09/2025); Sibul, interview (30/09/2025).

157 Self-led elements are included in the following activities: making agreements with the group, getting to know the space individually, the palette exercise in groups, and presenting one artwork to other group members. Opportunities for students to express their own opinions are a part of all lesson elements.

palette, as each group can make their own decisions regarding which artworks from the exhibition they wish to engage with. The decisions are supported by the magnetic splashes with emotions, which the students use as leads to choose the corresponding artworks. Otherwise, the choices and interpretation are left very open to each group. All eight teachers who gave feedback in 2025 stated that the lesson supports self-led learning.¹⁵⁸ This contributes to social and emotional wellbeing through various aspects of learning, including self-awareness and self-management, as having the freedom to make decisions as part of learning can increase students' confidence and motivation to achieve set goals.¹⁵⁹

Importantly, there are no wrong choices in this activity. Instead, differing connections and viewpoints are encouraged by the educators as they help demonstrate the endless possibilities of making meaning through artworks and foster students' creative self-expression, interpretation and collaboration. This is also confirmed by the teachers as 34 out of the 35 who gave written feedback between 2023 and 2025 believe that the lesson helps develop self-expression skills, and all 35 believe it helps develop the ability to analyse artworks and do group work.¹⁶⁰ These aspects of learning relate to social and emotional wellbeing by supporting social awareness (accepting differing views) and relationship skills (collaboration).

Even so, running the lessons with 1st–4th grade students has shown me and other educators that the situation where there is no one clear answer can be rather challenging and different compared to the students' usual experiences of learning.¹⁶¹ Depending on their level of confidence and wider self-awareness, they sometimes need time to adjust to this teaching style¹⁶² and require a lot of encouragement.

158 Feedback form, 2025. In 2023 and 2024 this question was not yet part of the feedback form.

159 For more about the connection between free choice and motivation in learning see: Karen McInnes, "Opportunities for playful expression of wellbeing", *Children's social and emotional wellbeing in schools: A critical perspective*, 149.

160 Feedback forms, 2023, 2024, 2025.

161 Sibul, interview (30/09/2025); Meresmaa-Roos, interview (26/06/2025); Uusmaa, interview (23/09/2025). The challenge that some students face to express themselves is also mentioned by Lusi. Lusi, interview (20/10/2025).

162 Such methods are often referred to as active learning methods. See, for example: Peter Doolittle, Krista Wojdak, Amanda Walters, "Defining Active Learning: A Restricted Systematic Review," *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, 11 (2023), <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/TLI/article/view/76484/56959> (accessed 14/12/2025).

As I mentioned before, the teachers' feedback also suggests this, since three out of eight teachers who gave feedback in 2025 brought up the impression that students thought it was very different from normal school lessons.¹⁶³ Uusmaa and Meresmaa-Roos also point out that the understanding that there are no wrong answers is not typical in general education.¹⁶⁴ Thus, Uusmaa believes museums should especially focus on providing these opportunities and art is a perfect tool in this case.¹⁶⁵ By learning to accept different views, this may also help increase empathy (and wider social awareness) and contribute to relationship skills, including healthy group dynamics.¹⁶⁶ Twenty-five out of the 35 teachers who gave feedback think the lesson contributes to the development of supportive relationships in the class.¹⁶⁷

In the *Exhibition Tour with an Open Heart*, students are also split into groups and invited to take the lead by introducing their own interpretations of artworks to their classmates. Lüsü explains that the aim is to value the students' thoughts and hear them out, not to come up with a coherent story or specific facts:

When they feel that they can share their own thoughts, it's really wonderful, I think they don't get many opportunities to do that. When they know that there's no knowledge check here — they don't have to rely on specific facts but only on what they think, feel and believe — that's completely enough. I think that already gives them confidence and a good feeling, that they really can think, feel and have opinions about anything. And if they take that feeling with them, it becomes much easier to open up in other situations as well.¹⁶⁸

163 Feedback form, 2025; Klanberg also mentioned some students give feedback at the end of the "What Do You Want to Stand For?" lessons that it is very different. Klanberg, interview (22/10/2025).

164 Uusmaa, interview (23/09/2025); Meresmaa-Roos, interview (26/06/2025).

165 Uusmaa, interview (23/09/2025).

166 Ibid; "Social-Awareness", *CASEL*, <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/#social-awareness> (accessed 06/12/2025); "Relationship Skills", *CASEL*, <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/#relationship> (accessed 06/12/2025); Meresmaa-Roos, interview (26/06/2025).

167 Feedback forms, 2023, 2024, 2025.

168 Lüsü, interview (20/10/2025).

Her reference to the students becoming more confident by sharing their true thoughts and feelings brings forth several links to wellbeing, such as fostering self-awareness and self-management.

In the *What Do You Want to Stand For?* lesson students are introduced to Treumund's exhibition through topics such as self-portrait, family relationship, humour, sexuality, BDSM and activism. After this, the students' opinions are sought through a writing exercise that starts with the beginning of the sentence: "I want to stand for...". Each student can complete it from their own perspective.¹⁶⁹ This is another way to encourage self-expression, including the articulation of personal values. According to Klanberg, this also creates situations where the students sometimes express opinions and values that clash with the educator's views.¹⁷⁰ While it is possible to approach these instances through an open discussion, Klanberg feels that the 90-minute lesson does not provide enough time to delve more deeply into the more challenging topics, including the value-based divides that sometimes appear.¹⁷¹ While the accompanying teachers may pick up on this and explore those topics further with the students, this is not guaranteed.¹⁷² In any case, the lesson provides the teachers and students a valuable opportunity to get a new perspective on the group through the lens of individual values, potentially contributing to both self-awareness and social awareness.

INTERPRETING ART THROUGH EMOTIONS

Using emotions to explore artworks is not a new approach in art museum education,¹⁷³ but it is a highly relevant one in the present context as it is used actively as well as in new and playful ways. When coming up with lessons for Creative Connections, Meresmaa-Roos and Uusmaa also decided to use emotions as core elements.

169 Klanberg, interview (22/10/2025).

170 Ibid.

171 This includes gender-based divides which Klanberg has noticed and which is also relevant more broadly in discussions of education and societal trends in Estonia. Ibid. Lüsü and Lilleaed also feel that the short format of one-off lessons often means there is a lack of time to delve more deeply into complex topics. Lüsü, interview (20/10/2025); Lilleaed, interview (15/10/2025).

172 Klanberg, interview (22/10/2025).

173 Rodley also writes that art museum educators have used emotions in their work for a long time to activate reflections on art by having visitors share their emotional state. Rodley, *Designing for Playful Engagement in Museums*, 69.

There are many reasons for this decision. As stated before, social and emotional wellbeing relies on a person's ability to recognise, express and regulate their emotions. Increasing children's emotional intelligence, including the ability to articulate various emotions, is thus incredibly beneficial.¹⁷⁴ Importantly, connecting art with emotions helps make the experience more personal.¹⁷⁵ Both Falk and Rodley also call for emotional evocation in museums, emphasising the link between emotionally rich experiences and making meaningful and memorable connections.¹⁷⁶ Rodley states that "emotional experiences have more lasting impact and are more memorable than purely intellectual ones."¹⁷⁷ Therefore, tapping into our emotions in the art museum can help absorb SEL competencies as well as memorise art-related knowledge. Furthermore, Uusmaa believes that the art museum can function as a relatively neutral setting in which to discuss and normalise the existence of negative emotions, which are often suppressed or deemed as inappropriate in everyday life.¹⁷⁸ This can enhance the ability to regulate one's own emotions as well as increase empathy for the feelings of others.

In *Close-up and Closer with Art* emotions are used as guides throughout the lesson. As described before, this is done through the yellow splashes that have emotions written on them, such as happy, sad, angry, surprised, etc. After selecting the work that matches the emotion best, the group moves on to picking red and blue splashes that help engage further with the same work. The activity prompts interpretations from the perspective of emotion and articulation of choice. The aim is to provide quick and easy encouragement,¹⁷⁹ showing that each person has the ability to engage with almost any artwork if they approach it through the personal perception

174 Meresmaa-Roos, interview (26/06/2025); Uusmaa, interview (23/09/2025); Sibul, interview (30/09/2025).

175 Uusmaa, interview (23/09/2025); Sibul, interview (30/09/2025); Lilleaed, interview (15/10/2025).

176 Falk, *The Value of Museums: Enhancing Societal Well-Being*, 22; Rodley, *Designing for Playful Engagement in Museums*, 56, 69.

177 Rodley, *Designing for Playful Engagement in Museums*, 56.

178 Uusmaa, interviews (23/09/2025, 4/11/2025). The value of accepting all emotions in order to regulate them better is also highlighted in the "All Feelings Are Allowed" lesson series at the Miiamilla Children's Museum: <https://linnamuseum.ee/lastemuuseum-miiamilla/haridus-mm/> (accessed 06/12/2025); Meresmaa-Roos, interview (26/06/2025).

179 Uusmaa, interview (23/09/2025).

of emotions. *LOOVHOOV* works in a similar way, but instead of exploring artworks, emotions are used to notice and interpret visual and other perceptible cues in the outdoor space. In doing so, both lessons also provide space for the participants to share their own emotions together with their classmates and teachers. Based on the gathered feedback, 28 out of 35 teachers think *Close-up and Closer with Art* helps students recognise and express their emotions.¹⁸⁰ While more research is required to determine the students' experiences, one of the aims of the approach is to help create an open atmosphere where the students feel safe enough to express their feelings. Based on my experience, the approach usually helps 1st to 4th grade students open up, although this also depends on the specific group dynamic.

Kumu's education curators have also relied on emotions as access points to art in various lessons, especially when working with the same age group as well as kindergarten groups. Lüsi recalls a recent lesson titled *Reading Faces (Nägude lugemine)* which accompanied the solo exhibition by Enn Põldroos called *Museum of Obsessions*.¹⁸¹ In the lesson, emotion cards with emojis were used to find emotions attached to the various portraits exhibited in the exhibition.¹⁸² However, creating space to deal with emotions has also become relevant in activities aimed at high school students. Educators also emphasise that one of the requirements for running such emotionally charged lessons is for them to be highly empathetic and alert to the group, especially when dealing with particularly challenging or triggering topics. Lüsi and Meresmaa-Roos both stress that this requires the ability to listen and to be open to adjusting the planned activities quickly to a particular group's needs.¹⁸³ Therefore, a high level of social and emotional intelligence is also crucial for museum educators.

TEACHERS' ENGAGEMENT IN MUSEUM LESSONS

The accompanying teachers' role in museum lessons has brought up challenges as well as sparked new ideas. At the primary level of basic

180 Thirty-five answers to the feedback forms, 2023, 2024, 2025.

181 "Nägude lugemine", *Art Museum of Estonia – Kumu Art Museum*, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/syndmus/nagude-lugemine/> (accessed 05/12/2025); Lüsi, interview (20/10/2025).

182 Lüsi, interview (20/10/2025).

183 Ibid.; Meresmaa-Roos, interviews (26/06/2025, 17/06/2025).

school (grades 1–3) students usually spend most of their time with their class teacher. Thus, these teachers can have more knowledge of the specific needs of their students and the dynamic in the class than museum educators, giving them a lot of influence in the group.

For the Creative Connections team, working with the partner classes over a longer period of time helped make several impactful observations regarding how best to work with teachers. We noticed the rich potential of teachers seeing their students participate in activities where they are expressing their emotions and using feelings to interpret artworks. From the first activities in 2022, teachers started sharing feedback that they were able to see their students in a new way. This also emerged in the written feedback to *Close-up and Closer with Art*. Six teachers who gave feedback in 2024 as well as one who answered in 2023 and two who answered in 2025 mentioned that they were positively surprised by the abilities of their students. This was in relation to interpreting artworks, listening to others during the museum lesson and to the courage of specific students, who usually seem shy.¹⁸⁴ In 2024, one of the teachers wrote in the questionnaire's final open comment section:

It was exciting to see how the children opened up and were able to express themselves. It was interesting to notice how brave and creative they are. I can see that it is important to give this interest, courage, and willingness a chance. The museum lesson format is a very good way to do that.¹⁸⁵

Therefore, taking part in museum lessons can give the teachers a new perspective on their students. Lüsü noticed the same in Kumu, saying that some of the teachers who participated in the *Exhibition Tour with an Open Heart* also expressed that they saw their students from a new angle and were surprised by their readiness to share their thoughts.¹⁸⁶ However, this valuable learning can only take place if the teachers actively observe or participate in the lesson allowing their students to express themselves freely.

184 Thirty-five answers to the feedback forms, 2023, 2024, 2025.

185 Sixteen answers to the feedback form, 2024.

186 Lüsü, interview (20/10/2025).

Unfortunately, according to some of the interviewed educators and my own experiences, there are occasional instances where teachers either start correcting their students or distancing themselves from the activities.¹⁸⁷ Understandably, teachers need time to rest and the chance to hand over the responsibility of running a lesson might be one of the motivations to plan a museum visit. However, most of the interviewed museum educators prefer the teachers to be actively engaged in the lessons.¹⁸⁸ Klanberg believes that seeing teachers and educators share their thoughts can encourage the students.¹⁸⁹ To make this expectation clear to the teachers and attune them to the visit, the description of *Close-up and Closer with Art* states that teachers “participate the same way students do.”¹⁹⁰ The educators running the lessons are instructed to encourage the teachers to join all the activities to make sure they get a full experience of the lesson. In my experience, each educator communicates this slightly differently.¹⁹¹ Laineli Parrest, who is one of the educators in Viljandi, uses the beginning of the lesson, when agreements are made with the group about appropriate behaviour in the lesson, to make an agreement with the teachers. Accordingly, the teachers are asked to take on the role of a student for the duration of the lesson. Including the teachers means they are doing group work with the students and collaborating with them on a more equal footing. As SEL is not only relevant for children but also for adults,¹⁹² participating in such lessons creates an opportunity for teachers to develop their relationship skills, social awareness and art interpretation skills.¹⁹³

Another reason to encourage teachers' participation is to make sure they get first-hand experience of the methods used in the lesson as we wish to encourage them to use these experiences in their own

187 Meresmaa-Roos, interview (17/06/2025); Lüsü, interview (20/10/2025); Uusmaa, interview (23/09/2025); Sibul, interview (30/09/2025).

188 Lüsü, interview (20/10/2025); Klanberg, interview (22/10/2025); Meresmaa-Roos, interviews (26/06/2025, 17/06/2025); Uusmaa, interviews (23/09/2025, 4/11/2025).

189 Klanberg, interview (22/10/2025).

190 “Education”, *Creative Connections*, <https://www.kunstloob.ee/en-US/haridus> (04/12/2025).

191 As the manager of the platform, I have had a chance to see most of the Creative Connections educators running *Close-up and Closer with Art*.

192 “Sotsiaal-emotsionaalne pädevus ja õpetaja heaolu”, *Peaasjad*, <https://peaasi.ee/sotsiaal-emotsionaalne-padevus-ja-opetaja-heaolu/> (accessed 06/12/2025).

193 Meresmaa-Roos, interviews (17/06/2025, 26/06/2025).

teaching afterwards. This is relevant as recent research on bullying prevention shows that many teachers in general education schools in Estonia appreciate the positive impact of playful methods used in non-formal education but do not feel confident using them in their own teaching.¹⁹⁴ In 2025, we included a corresponding question in the feedback form, asking if the teachers can or wish to use some of the experienced methods in their teaching or if they had used them already. Seven out of the eight teachers stated that they would like to use some of the methods, mentioning specific examples, such as analysing artworks, finding emotions from images and using the palette. One of the teachers said they often do group work to develop collaboration skills, and another that they have not used any methods yet.¹⁹⁵ All in all, there is not enough data to fully determine the effectiveness of encouraging teachers to participate actively in these lessons. However, the feedback implies that most appreciate the overall experience¹⁹⁶ as well as several of the methods used, and some of them also learned something new about their students' abilities during the lesson, demonstrating a rise in their social awareness.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, there has been an increase in art museum projects in Estonia that focus on fostering social and emotional wellbeing. Looking mainly at the educational work done with general education schools, I have outlined relevant developments. These include: 1. a stronger emphasis on social values, 2. reaching more children through improved access, 3. education strategies influencing exhibition curating, 4. new cross-disciplinary partnerships, 5. museum educators co-creating learning materials with teachers, and 6. investment in sustainable formats. Importantly, the case of *Close-up and Closer with Art* shows that such efforts have brought about many first-time visits to art venues for children. This comes with a significant responsibility for these experiences to be perceived favourably in order to encourage

194 Elisabeth Kendrali, Marleen Allemann, Meeli Murasov, Sandra Haugas, Eve Mägi, *Kiusamist ennetavate ja vähendavate sekkumiste tõhusus ning haridusasutuste kogemused nende rakendamisel* (Tallinn: Mõttekoda Praxis, 2022), https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/documents/2022-10/kiusamisenetuse_uuring_lopparuanne_praxis.pdf (accessed 14/12/2025).

195 Eight answers to the feedback form, 2025.

196 Feedback forms, 2024, 2025.

repeat visits. As a result of the described developments, museums and galleries gain new knowledge and audiences, and students benefit from better access to art and more opportunities to develop their SEL competencies as well as art interpretation skills. In addition, teachers receive assistance in fostering children's as well as their own social and emotional wellbeing and art related competencies. This means that prioritising people's wellbeing-related needs also strengthens their connections with art.

I have also discussed specific approaches used in art mediation and their links to social and emotional wellbeing. Self-led elements and self-expression are recurring approaches to fostering SEL, especially self-awareness and self-management, while also encouraging the practice of art interpretation skills. Interpreting artworks using emotions also remains in active use through new iterations and tools, supporting both SEL competencies and the retention of art-related knowledge. Giving teachers an active role in lessons is becoming a more valued approach. There is not enough data to determine the scope and longevity of the benefits, but initial findings show that engaging alongside students allows teachers to experience the methods first-hand, sparking interest in using these methods in their own teaching. Furthermore, it has enabled some teachers to learn about their students' abilities and emotions, thus strengthening their social awareness.

The potential for future developments includes initiating strategic partnerships between art museums to share education practices across institutions and establish more efficient methods for collecting and utilising students' feedback. Cross-disciplinary partnerships can continue to expand access through more outreach initiatives, while long-term collaborations with schools can further integrate museum education into general education. By embracing the social values and approaches used by many educators, exhibition curators and museum management can help art museums build stronger connections with society and expand their impact.

HANNA-LIIS KONT: CLOSER WITH ART: SUPPORTING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING THROUGH ART MUSEUM EDUCATION

KEYWORDS: ART EDUCATION; MUSEUM EDUCATION; SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING; CHILDREN; TEACHERS; OUTREACH; CO-CREATION

SUMMARY

Wellbeing has, in recent years, become an increasingly emphasised priority for art museums in Estonia. In this article, I introduce art museum practices that are aimed at supporting social and emotional wellbeing, with a particular focus on lessons for general education school groups conducted between 2021 and 2025. Drawing on relevant examples, I argue that when art institutions prioritise wellbeing, they also strengthen people's connections to art.

The article brings forth key developments and approaches in art institutions. The primary research questions are: what developments characterise art museum education related to fostering social and emotional wellbeing in Estonia, and how has art mediation been used in practice to support it? The discussion includes the benefits, challenges and future potential of such work.

The central case study is the *Close-up and Closer with Art* lesson for 1st to 4th grade students, run at the Tartu Art Museum and the Rüki Gallery in Viljandi. Related examples from the Kumu Art Museum and other venues are also introduced. These cases reveal characteristic developments, including a stronger emphasis on social values, improved access to art, cross-disciplinary partnerships, co-creation of learning materials with teachers, and investment in sustainable formats. While focusing on wellbeing has increased first-time visits by children to art venues, it also underscores the responsibility to ensure that the children have positive experiences in order to encourage repeat visits.

Educators have linked art mediation with the promotion of social and emotional wellbeing through a range of approaches, including the integration of self-led elements, the encouragement of self-expression and the use of new tools for interpreting artworks through emotion. Notably, giving teachers an active role in lessons is emerging as a valuable approach, enabling them to gain deeper insight into their students and to diversify their own teaching practices. These examples support social and emotional wellbeing and learning by

fostering self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship skills.

In the future, there is potential to share such educational practices more strategically within and across art institutions, as well as to establish more efficient means for collecting and utilising student feedback. Cross-disciplinary partnerships can continue to support new outreach initiatives, while long-term collaboration can further integrate museum education into general education.

CV

Hanna-Liis Kont is a researcher in the fields of art and museum studies as well as a practicing curator and educator. She is the manager of the Creative Connections (*Kunst loob lähedust*) art education platform. Her projects are driven by the desire to contribute to the social and emotional wellbeing of children and adults through art. She is a PhD student and external lecturer at the Estonian Academy of Arts, Institute of Art and Visual Culture.

