

An Inclusive Vision of Community

As an imaginary journey for people of all ancestries, Noah's Ark at the Skirball™ might seem like a bold departure for a culturally specific museum. But in fact, welcoming and honoring all families regardless of religion or ethnicity is at the heart of the Skirball's mission as a Jewish institution.



Visitors gather together in the rainbow gallery, sharing thoughts about how to create a more hopeful world. Photo by Steve Cohn.

Inside Noah's Ark, visitors encounter hundreds of animal sculptures and handcrafted puppets of different sizes, shapes, and colors, created almost entirely from recycled, found, and re-purposed materials. Although the animals are custom-made and often quite sophisticated in design, none are shielded behind glass: they are meant to be touched. Instead of protecting objects from children, Noah's Ark invites children to do the protecting, to help the animals take shelter from the storm.

In shifting the visitor experience from passive to active mode, from mere viewing to hands-on participation, Noah's Ark is similar to many children's museums and family destinations. What is unique is the emphasis on values education and character formation. The diverse menagerie of Noah's Ark serves as a metaphor for human society, encouraging young children to recognize the dignity and significance of each life, to work together for the greater good, to strengthen connections within and among families, to value diversity within

community, to respect and protect minorities, and to advance an abiding notion of hope for the future, symbolized by the rainbow that appears when the storm is over.

The idea of conveying these values to young people, and providing a haven for them, goes back to the original vision of the Skirball Cultural Center and its founding president, Uri D. Herscher. The Skirball has sought from its inception to provide young children and families—especially those from underserved sectors of Los Angeles—with safe gathering spaces and opportunities for meaningful social engagement, cross-cultural exposure, and creative stimulation.

Noah's Ark at the Skirball is a significant experiment in affective, experiential learning and a bold exercise in creative exhibit design. Its inclusive vision of community opens new territory for culturally specific museums, and perhaps for many others.