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Art-Led Approach to Intangible Heritage Education: Wooden Boat Craftsmanship in Ayutthaya

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Abstract

Ayutthaya, historically a vibrant port city, preserves the intangible heritage of wooden boat craftsmanship; however, this tradition faces challenges in its intergenerational transmission in the modern era. As young people's lives become increasingly disconnected from wooden boats, the education system provides limited opportunities for engagement with this heritage. In response, this research investigates approaches for integrating contemporary educational practices with heritage conservation strategies. The study employs participatory, art-led methodologies to foster awareness and cultivate youth engagement in preserving this traditional craft. Conducted with 25 upper primary students from Wat Phanan Choeng School, it involved field visits to Sri Charoen Shipyard, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya's oldest and only remaining shipyard that still employs traditional techniques, along with drawing exercises and questionnaires. Findings indicate that art-led activities effectively mediated students' limited interaction with rivers and boats, fostering curiosity and enhancing appreciation for Ayutthaya's identity as a "City of Water." Recurring elements in their drawings included boats, water, and cultural landmarks, with Krachaeng boats prominently featured. Despite having limited prior familiarity with the shipyard, participants developed a sustained interest in wooden boat craftsmanship and envisioned their role in its future conservation. This study underscores the transformative potential of integrating creative and experiential pedagogies into heritage education, advocating for sustained academic-community partnerships to safeguard the continuity of traditional knowledge and skills.

Keywords: *Intangible Heritage; Wooden Boat Craftsmanship; Ayutthaya; Art-Led Approach; Community Engagement; Heritage Education*

1. Introduction

Ayutthaya, the former capital of Thailand, thrived as an international hub for maritime trade (Breazeale, 1999; Baker, & Phongpaichit, 2017; Krailassuwan, 2019; Champapant, & Momotaro, 2023). Historical records depict it as a riverine island bustling with vessels from various nations and smaller local boats. This vibrant trade fueled the city's prosperity and facilitated the integration of diverse foreign knowledge, skills, and technologies, including expertise in shipbuilding. Ayutthaya underwent a significant boom in shipbuilding. The royal shipyards were established to produce ships not only for domestic use but also for export to international markets (Boonprasert, n.d.).

Two primary types of vessels used for transoceanic travel during this period were the Sampan and the Kampan. The Sampan, predominantly employed by Chinese merchants, and the Kampan (or kapal in ancient Malay language), which originated from Arabian dhows, were initially utilized by Arab merchants and later adopted by European traders. The European Kampan was larger, better equipped, and more heavily armed than its Arabian counterpart. Consequently, European shipbuilding technologies rose to prominence among Southeast Asian states, including Ayutthaya. Advancements in technology eventually rendered Chinese sampans inadequate for oceanic navigation. Similarly, while steam engines replaced the sails of Western Kampans, these vessels were ultimately supplanted by modern giant iron-hulled ocean liners, which rendered both types of wooden ships obsolete.

Despite these changes, wooden boats continue to play a significant role in the daily lives of Thai people, particularly those residing along rivers, including the inhabitants of Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province. Although

water transportation has declined in importance, Ayutthaya continues to maintain a vital role in navigation, shipbuilding, and ship repair. Its geographic position as a water-based city and a transit hub where three rivers converge ensures its continued relevance. Many boats passing through the province are serviced and repaired at local shipyards before continuing their journeys. As a result, Ayutthaya remains a key center for shipbuilding and repair, evidenced by the numerous shipyards still operating in the region.

However, passing down the knowledge of wooden boat building and repair is increasingly challenging due to several interrelated factors. Changes in lifestyles, including a decline in waterway usage, have rendered boat travel less common. Additionally, most skilled craftsmen are elderly, while younger generations show little interest in boatbuilding due to uncompetitive wages. Exacerbating the issue, modern education does not prioritize this traditional knowledge, restricting its transmission primarily to craftsmen's families (Personal communication, January 22, 2023).

This research aims to raise youth awareness of traditional wooden boat craftsmanship, based on the belief that intangible heritage conservation must be integrated into modern education. While cultural heritage is often confined to history lessons, studies suggest that integrating heritage education with experiential, hands-on learning provides a more sustainable approach (Immonen, & Sivula, 2024). Art-based learning activities have been identified as an effective method for bridging the gap between traditional and modern education. Through art, learners can transform intangible knowledge into tangible expressions, fostering engagement in a natural and enjoyable manner (Lovtsova et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2024; Chen, 2024).

This approach aligns with growing academic interest in art-led education as a means of heritage preservation. Over the past two decades, scholarship in this field has developed at the intersection of cultural studies, education, and participatory arts. Foundational theoretical work by Eisner (2002) and Smith (2006) laid the groundwork by emphasizing the cognitive and emotional potential of the arts in learning, and by redefining heritage as a dynamic, community-based process rather than a static object. Eisner's theory of artistic cognition supports the idea that creativity enhances perception and cultural awareness, while Smith's critique of the "Authorized Heritage Discourse" opened space for inclusive, locally grounded approaches. Silverman (2010) and Chatterjee, and Hannan (2016) further advanced the field by positioning museums and object-based learning as key platforms for heritage education, where sensory experiences and emotional engagement enhance cultural understanding.

In more recent years, scholars have turned their attention to practical, community-engaged art practices that empower participants to co-create and transfer cultural knowledge, particularly for intangible heritage such as oral traditions and traditional crafts. Kind, de Cosson, Irwin, and Grauer (2007) illustrate how artist-teacher partnerships create "in-between" spaces where intergenerational learning and creative collaboration strengthen collective identity and agency. Similarly, Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005) present *a/r/tography* as a living, participatory inquiry method that integrates art-making, teaching, and research, fostering deep engagement with community knowledge. Kalay et al., (2008) extend this discourse by integrating digital media and contemporary art into heritage learning, adapting methods to evolving cultural and technological contexts. This progression from theoretical framing to participatory and digital application illustrates how art-led education has become a versatile and impactful tool for preserving both tangible and intangible heritage in the 21st century.

To explore this potential in a specific local context, the present research utilized art-led methods within an actual site of cultural heritage. Art activities were the core method used in this research. The Sri Charoen Shipyard, one of the oldest in Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province and notable for being the only one that continues to repair wooden boats using traditional techniques, generously offered its premises for the activities. The location of this shipyard also holds historical significance, as it was once the site of a Dutch village or VOC trading station during the Ayutthaya period. The target group for these activities consisted of upper primary school students from Wat Phanan Choeng School, located nearby.

The art-led approach was selected over other heritage preservation strategies because it fosters direct, emotional, and creative engagement with intangible heritage-making it especially suitable for younger learners. Unlike conventional strategies such as textual documentation, static exhibitions, or digital archiving, art-based learning transforms traditional knowledge into an active experience. As highlighted in the literature, this method supports intergenerational dialogue, nurtures cultural empathy (Eisner, 2002), and promotes agency and identity-building among participants. Conducted within a living heritage site and through hands-on interaction, the activities enabled students to connect meaningfully with traditional craftsmanship, making the knowledge both

accessible and memorable. This research, therefore, contributes to the growing body of innovative educational models that integrate traditional wisdom with creative pedagogy to ensure the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage.

2. Objectives

- 1) To understand youth perceptions of Ayutthaya as a water-based city and the role of boats in their lives.
- 2) To raise awareness and inspire youth participation in the conservation of wooden boat craftsmanship through art-based activities.
- 3) To bridge the gap between traditional knowledge and modern education by integrating hands-on experiences with community collaboration.
- 4) To explore sustainable strategies for safeguarding and passing on intangible heritage, ensuring its continuity for future generations.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopted an action research approach to explore how art-based learning can raise youth awareness of wooden boat craftsmanship as intangible cultural heritage. The project was conducted in collaboration with the Sri Charoen Shipyard, a historic and operational shipyard in Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province, which provided a real-world environment for the learning activities. The methodology combined field immersion, artistic expression, and mixed-method analysis to capture student perceptions and engagement.

3.1 Participants

The participants consisted of 25 upper primary school students (6 males and 19 females) from Wat Phanan Choeng School, located adjacent to the Sri Charoen Shipyard. Participation in the activity was voluntary. The number of participants was limited by the physical space and safety constraints of the shipyard, which could only accommodate a small group at a time. Wat Phanan Choeng School was selected due to its immediate proximity to the site, making it an ideal first step for piloting community engagement. The researchers prioritized starting with the nearest educational institution to foster a close, sustainable relationship between the school and the shipyard as part of a long-term conservation and learning initiative. Most students had limited prior exposure to boat culture, with varying degrees of familiarity with the shipyard.

3.2 Procedures

The research was structured around a two-part experiential learning process: a hands-on field visit followed by a creative drawing activity. In the first phase, students visited the Sri Charoen Shipyard, where they observed traditional wooden boats up close and examined the details of boat construction and repair. This site-based encounter aimed to provide a sensory and spatial understanding of Ayutthaya's boatbuilding heritage. Following the visit, students participated in a drawing activity on the theme "*Ayutthaya, the City of Water and My Dream Boat*." Each student was given two hours to reflect on their experience and express their perceptions and imagination using A4 paper and colored pencils. This activity provided a tangible medium through which students could process and communicate their understanding of the site and its cultural significance.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

A mixed-method approach, as shown in Figure 1, was employed to assess participants' experiences and perspectives, combining qualitative and quantitative tools: drawing analysis, structured questionnaires, informal interviews, and direct observation.

Drawing analysis was used as a visual method to interpret student perceptions. Inspired by established visual research practices (Havigerová et al., 2021), the analysis identified recurring elements and themes in the drawings, such as representations of boats, water, landscape, and cultural symbols. Frequency counts and thematic categorization helped reveal how students understood and connected with Ayutthaya's identity as a river-based city.

Questionnaires were administered to evaluate students' prior familiarity with the shipyard, previous experiences with boats, and their level of interest in boat-related knowledge. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to highlight general trends.

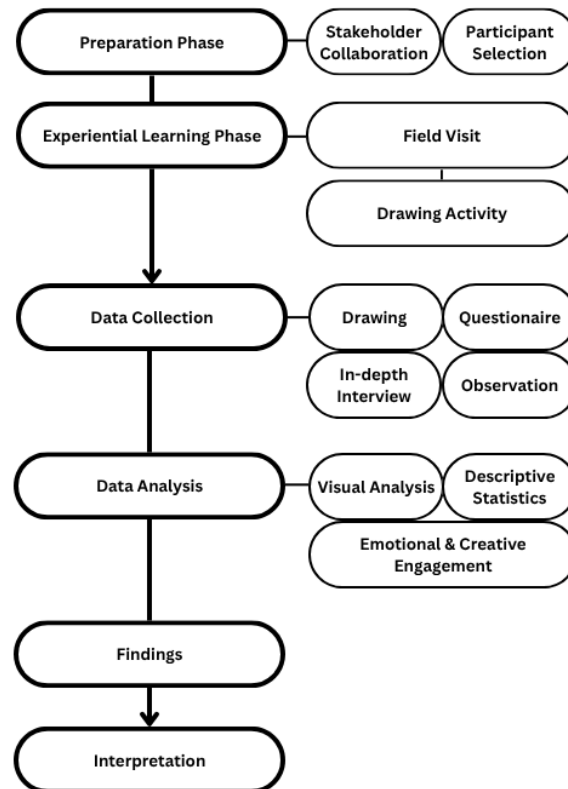


Figure 1 The research process includes a field visit and site-based art activity, followed by multi-method analysis to understand youth perceptions of intangible heritage

Informal interviews conducted during and after the activities allowed students to voice their thoughts and emotional reactions, providing narrative insights that complemented the visual and statistical findings.

Field observations were recorded through notes and photographs, documenting student engagement, curiosity, and behavior during the site visit and drawing session. These observations supported the interpretation of how the experiential setting influenced learning outcomes.

Together, these methods offered a rich, triangulated perspective on how art-led activities can support heritage awareness and intergenerational cultural understanding among youth.

4. Results

By examining the 25 drawings and coding them, six categories of elements were identified: boats, water, sky, community, people, and way of life, as shown in Table 1. A total of 92% of the drawings featured wooden boats floating on water, more than half of which resembled Krachaeng boats (traditional covered boats), most of which are found in the Sri Charoen Shipyard. Further analysis of the boat details revealed that 24% of the drawings included lifebuoys, and 80% showed a relationship between boats and waves, both small and large, in the river.

When analyzing the relationships between the boats and their context, it was found that five drawings depicted only the relationship between the boats and water (see Figure 2). These included both close-up and distant perspectives, most often portraying boats on calm waters viewed from afar, with orange-yellow skies resembling an evening atmosphere. Only one drawing depicted a boat rocking amid large waves in a close-up perspective.

Nineteen drawings illustrated the relationship between boats, water, and structures that reflect Ayutthaya's identity (see Figure 3). These were divided into four groups:

- 1) Group 1: Depictions of boats, rivers, and structures such as stupas and houses, in which the boats appeared as speedboats or sailing boats

- 2) Group 2: Depictions of boats, rivers, and structures such as stupas, houses, and piers, in which the boats resembled Krachaeng boats, the most common type found in the Sri Charoen Shipyard
- 3) Group 3: Depictions of boats, rivers, and structures such as stupas, incorporating everyday activities like boat noodles or fish feeding as part of the scenes
- 4) Group 4: Depictions of boats, rivers, and structures such as stupas and temples, incorporating imaginative elements such as boats with balloons or pirate ships

Only one drawing depicted the student herself standing on a boat with her siblings, while the majority of the drawings do not show anyone standing on the boat.

When considering the results of the questionnaire data, which included five preliminary questions about the Sri Charoen Shipyard and the importance of rivers and boats in the youths' perception, as shown in Table 2, the study found that 80 percent of the participants were not familiar with the Sri Charoen Shipyard, and 72 percent had never visited the area. Those who had visited the area did so on foot, mainly to the Dutch House Museum, located next door. Regarding the question about seeing a large boat up close, 44 percent of participants said they had seen one. However, when asked if they had ever been on a boat, only two people (8 percent) reported having this experience. The final question about the participants' interest in learning about boat building or repair revealed that 84 percent were interested, aligning with the 88 percent who felt that rivers and boats remained important to their lives.

Table 1 Categorization of visual elements

Category	Subcategory	Description	Frequency	Percent
Boats	Types	Wooden boat	23	92
		Steel boat	1	4
		Speedboat	1	4
	Location of boats	On dry dock	1	4
		Floating in the water	24	96
	Boat equipment	Canopy/sunshade	13	52
		Steering wheel	2	8
		Lifebuoy	6	24
		Thai flag	3	12
	Decoration	Fish	1	4
	Imaginary	Boat with wings	1	4
		Balloon boat	1	4
		Pirate ship (influenced by popular Japanese anime, One Piece)	1	4
Water	Waves	Still water	4	16
		Water with slight waves	13	52
		Water with strong waves	7	28
	Fish	Fish swimming in the water	4	16
Sky	Colors	Blue tone	13	52
		Orange tone	7	28
	Components	Sun	13	52
		Clouds	10	40
		Bird	4	16
Community	Structures	Temple	2	8
		Stupa	18	72
		House	5	20
		Pier	1	4
People	Roles	The participants themselves	1	4
		Boat driver	1	4
		Navy sailor	1	4
		Pirate	1	4
Way of life	Activities	Fish feeding	1	4
		Boat noodle	2	8

Table 2 Questionnaire Responses

Question	Answer	Percent
Know the Sri Charoen Shipyard	Yes	20
	No	80
Have been to the Sri Charoen Shipyard	Yes	28
	No	72
Have seen a large boat up close before	Yes	44
	No	54
Interested in learning about boats, boatbuilding, or repair	Yes	84
	No	16
Consider rivers and boats important to themselves and their families	Yes	88
	No	12



Figure 2 Drawings depicting only the relationship between boats and the river



Figure 3 Drawings illustrating the relationship between boats, water, and structures that reflect Ayutthaya's identity

5. Discussion

5.1 Limited Interaction with Cultural Heritage

The drawings of 25 participants revealed six recurring elements: boats, water, sky, community, people, and way of life. These elements reflected the participants' perceptions and understanding of Ayutthaya's sense of place. Ayutthaya's identity was prominently represented by golden or brown stupas, which appeared in more than 18 drawings, while riverside houses were depicted in only five. This pattern suggests that the participants perceive Ayutthaya as a "City of Water" rooted more in its historical context than in the present day. Stupas symbolize Ayutthaya's past, whereas houses represent its modern identity.

Figure 4 shows the only drawing in which the participant depicted herself alongside siblings, while the majority of drawings did not include any figures standing on the boats. When cross-referencing with data from questionnaires and informal interviews, the researchers concluded that the participants' daily lives are relatively disconnected from rivers and boats. Although some students had seen boats passing along the river, only two out of 25 participants had ever ridden a boat as their families' occupations were not related to boats.

Regarding the types of boats depicted, half of the participants illustrated wooden boats resembling Krachaeng boats, consistent in form, style, and details. This likely resulted from their field trip to the Sri Charoen Shipyard, where they observed a variety of Krachaeng boats. Interestingly, lifebuoys appeared in 24% of the drawings, making them the second most frequently depicted element. This detail suggests a focus on safety, likely influenced by modern educational efforts that emphasize lifebuoys as essential for safe boat travel.

Another noteworthy observation was the inclusion of daily activities such as boat noodles and fish feeding, which connected the participants' experiences to the riverine and boat context. These activities highlight the influence of direct experiences on the participants' memory formation and their potential future appreciation of such elements. Conversely, the absence of personal engagement or indirect exposure to rivers and boats in daily life could limit young people's ability to recognize their significance or diminish their motivation to engage in cultural heritage preservation in the future.



Figure 4 The only drawing depicting the participant herself on the boat

5.2 Enhancing Community Engagement Through Educational Activities

While the drawings served as tools to reflect participants' integrated understanding of Ayutthaya's urban context and the boat-related knowledge gained from the short field trip, the questionnaires and informal interviews provided insights into community engagement in cultural heritage conservation.

Data from the questionnaires revealed that more than half of the students attending a school adjacent to the Sri Charoen Shipyard had no prior knowledge of its existence. Over 70% had never entered the shipyard and were unaware of its educational value despite its proximity. This indicates a lack of existing community engagement and collaboration.

However, the organized activity bridged this gap. Students were given the opportunity to closely observe and study the boats, even for a short period, which provided them with a basic understanding of the boats' physical characteristics, as reflected in their drawings. Importantly, this activity inspired students to pursue further learning about boat construction processes. This curiosity extended to scientific questions, such as, "*How do boats float?*"

These findings strengthen the researchers' confidence in the potential of integrating modern educational approaches both artistic and scientific to support the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in tangible ways. Art activities in the early stages serve as more effective tools for raising awareness and inspiring young people, particularly late primary school children, as they encourage the use of imagination to initiate learning and ask concrete questions to deepen their understanding.

5.3 Challenges and Pathways in Integrating Modern Education for Intangible Heritage Conservation

The conservation of intangible cultural heritage requires tangible support from modern education systems and collaboration across various sectors. Establishing a network of cooperation is, therefore, the first crucial step emphasized by this research project. Encouragingly, the project has successfully acted as a mediator, fostering collaboration between the shipyard and the school to take this important initial step. However, this effort is only the beginning. While art-based activities can raise awareness and inspire engagement, their impact may fade over time if not reinforced by sustained initiatives and deeper involvement.

Thus, although art-based activities serve as a valuable and engaging approach to safeguarding intangible heritage, they should be integrated into a broader and more comprehensive strategy. To ensure their long-term sustainability, these initiatives must be supplemented with ongoing education, hands-on learning opportunities, and stronger engagement with elder practitioners. This will provide students with a more holistic understanding of traditional practices and promote lasting cultural conservation.

The Thai National Strategy 2018–2037, particularly its focus on the development and strengthening of human resources during the school age, recognizes that poverty often leads to educational inequality (National Strategy Secretariat Office, 2018). To address this, a new educational management approach emphasizes community participation, encouraging local communities and all sectors of society to engage in education. One strategy for tackling limited access to education due to financial constraints is to promote career-oriented learning, allowing students to develop vocational skills while studying. This helps generate additional income, eases family burdens, and prepares students for future employment.

Currently, many lower secondary schools are increasingly interested in incorporating vocational skills courses, driven by the need to equip students with practical competencies. This has led to the introduction of elective subjects under career and technology learning groups, as well as the establishment of student clubs dedicated to vocational training. Some schools have successfully expanded these initiatives into specialized courses, officially certified by relevant government organizations.

Building on this trend, integrating cultural heritage learning into vocational skills education presents a promising pathway for sustainable heritage conservation. By embedding intangible cultural heritage within modern education systems, heritage preservation can become a dynamic, living practice rather than a relic of the past. This approach ensures that cultural traditions remain relevant in contemporary society, fostering both economic opportunities and cultural continuity for future generations.

While integration into formal education is essential for long-term impact, the versatility of the art-led model also makes it suitable for diverse learning environments and age groups. To test this adaptability, a follow-up activity was conducted with university students and local artists.

5.4 Scalability and Adaptation of the Art-Led Model

The success of the workshop with primary school students at the Sri Charoen Shipyard highlights the potential of art-led, site-based education to foster meaningful engagement with intangible heritage. To assess the model's adaptability and broader application, a follow-up workshop was conducted with university students and local artists. While the target demographic differed, the core objective remained the same: to raise awareness of traditional wooden boat craftsmanship and stimulate intergenerational interest in heritage preservation.

This second activity demonstrated that the art-led model is highly scalable. University students, already equipped with more advanced critical thinking and creative skills, were able to explore deeper interpretations of cultural significance and historical identity through collaborative artworks and reflective dialogue. Artists, on the other hand, brought their own interpretive frameworks and mediums, further diversifying how heritage could be expressed and communicated to the public.

The structure of the model combining field immersion, artistic interpretation, and reflective discussion proved both flexible and effective across age groups and educational backgrounds. This suggests strong potential for replication with other forms of intangible cultural heritage, such as traditional music, culinary practices, festivals, or oral storytelling. Key to the model's adaptability is its emphasis on creative, learner-centered experiences rooted in real-world settings. By allowing participants to interact with cultural spaces, artifacts, or practitioners, and then translate those experiences into creative outputs, the model supports both cognitive and emotional engagement with heritage.

As cultural heritage conservation increasingly calls for bottom-up, participatory approaches, this model offers a practical, low-cost, and emotionally resonant strategy for diverse educational and community contexts. Future applications may benefit from partnering with institutions such as universities, art schools, museums, or local cultural groups to tailor the model for different themes, regions, or age levels.

6. Conclusion

The study explored the perceptions of 25 participants regarding Ayutthaya's identity as a "city of water" and the cultural significance of boats through their drawings, questionnaires, and informal interviews. The drawings revealed six recurring themes: boats, water, sky, community, people, and way of life. Ayutthaya's historical identity was represented through depictions of stupas, while riverside houses were less frequently shown, suggesting that participants associated the image of the water-based city with its historical past rather than with its present-day reality. The drawings highlighted a strong connection to traditional wooden boats, especially Krachaeng boats, and included symbols like lifebuoys, indicating concerns about safety. Some depictions also incorporated activities such as boat noodles and fish feeding, linking the drawings to the participants' experiences.

However, the findings from the questionnaires and interviews indicated that many participants had limited exposure to boats and the local heritage. Most were unaware of the Sri Charoen Shipyard's existence or significance, and over 70% had never visited it, reflecting a lack of community engagement with nearby cultural heritage sites. Despite this, the field activity allowed students to closely observe and learn about the boats, sparking curiosity and a desire to explore boat construction and scientific questions like, "*How do boats float?*"

These insights highlight the potential of integrating both artistic and scientific educational approaches to preserve intangible cultural heritage. While the drawings and activities effectively raised awareness, sustained engagement, and hands-on learning are crucial for fostering a deeper understanding and long-term cultural preservation.

Future research directions stemming from this study can be categorized into three areas:

- 1) Expanding Stakeholder Engagement: Broaden participation to include groups such as secondary and tertiary students, local communities, boat-building and repair entrepreneurs, and businesses utilizing boats. This approach aims to foster collaboration and opportunities for diverse populations to actively contribute to the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage.
- 2) Long-Term Monitoring and Evaluation: Track outcomes and gather long-term feedback on the integration of modern education and intangible cultural heritage education.
- 3) Application of Findings in Environmental Design: Apply research findings to inform the design of physical environments that support and enhance learning experiences related to cultural heritage conservation.

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