

ART EXPERIENCES FOR EVERYONE: OPENING THE DOORS TO THE BLIND AND PEOPLE WITH LOW VISION

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Abstract

Visual Arts are powerful tools for developing the right side of the brain, for healing, for communication, for making life's experiences richer. Museums are natural venues to present these tools to everyone.

Despite the passing of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), there are many museums that either avoid, or cannot fit inclusive programs in their shrinking budgets, unintentionally closing their doors to an often neglected population. Accommodating persons, who are blind or with low vision, are deaf, have cognitive difficulties or use alternate means of walking in a museum setting is the law and is the right thing to do.

Using the recent settlement agreement between the Department of Justice and the International Spy Museum in Washington, DC as a starting point, this paper will describe how the presenter's forty year professional focus on design, access and the law, her personal experience as a museum docent and love of art, her unique ability for creative thinking, and her understanding of the technical aspect of painting has enabled her to create a financially feasible program accommodation for the blind and persons with low vision, that has started inclusive program planning, and is resulting in a rewarding experience for staff, volunteers and guests, as it opens the doors to those people who have been waiting to come in.

1. INTRODUCTION

"We tend to think of art experience in a visual way. We can see all parts of an art object which are facing us at the same time. We see how the parts are related to each other and to the whole. Though we tend to think of art in this spatial way, art also has a temporal aspect. This is most obvious when we view large pieces of sculpture or beautiful buildings. As we walk around the sculpture or through the building, the parts reveal themselves sequentially, as we move. Then the flow of the parts, one into the next, becomes an important part of the art experience. There is both a static spatial, and a flowing, temporal, aspect. For sighted people, the spatial aspect of art seems to dominate the temporal aspect.

For blind people it is the other way around. The art object is experienced as the hands and finger tips move over it, so experiencing tactual art

objects is primarily a temporal, sequential one, and only secondarily spatial." ...Martha Pamperin, Hadley School for the Blind



Figure 1: Hands touching a painting

The author of this paper has always considered her responsibility to create space that will accommodate people and meet their specific needs, listening and watching carefully and hopefully producing an environment that will satisfy its uniqueness with affordable, feasible, functional and safe solutions. An art museum docent (someone who gives tours of exhibitions in museum settings) applies the same criteria as when he projects personal environments.

2. THE LAW AND THE RESOLUTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SPY MUSEUM, WASHINGTON, DC

In the United States we passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. Title III of the five title Act mandates that private entities that are public accommodations such as museums, restaurants, and stores be accessible and offer equal enjoyment of the facilities, goods, services, and programs to everyone. That includes having auxiliary aids and services for effective communication, and removal of any architectural barriers, when readily achievable and financially feasible. Furthermore, any new construction or alteration to any building or facility, including exhibitions, must meet the requirements of the Americans With Disabilities Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG).

As a result, there are museums in the United States trying to introduce programming to meet the spirit of the law. Some have been successful, some partially successful, while some have not even tried. It is the author's belief that if there were really successful, financially feasible ways of creating programs for the blind, more museums will create their own programs to meet the needs of this segment of the public.

Millions of people with disabilities regularly travel, visit museums and eat out with family and friends. The U.S. Census Bureau's 2002 Survey of Income and Program Participation found that there are 51.2 million Americans with disabilities, almost 16 million of who have sensory disabilities (loss of hearing or vision.) Museums and libraries have become interactive and offer multimedia exhibits to add to the enjoyment of their collections and programs. This requires innovated and creative ways of providing effective communication and programming for everyone. Just recently the newly constructed International Spy Museum in Washington DC and the Department of Justice reached an agreement under the ADA. This museum is the only public museum in the US

dedicated to espionage. It offers its exhibits and programs through state of the art audiovisual programs, computer interactive displays, and special effects. By using many creative solutions, the Museum has until June 3, 2010 to increase equal access to its exhibits and programs, as well as to their public spaces and publications, for people who are blind or have low vision

Among the settlement, the Museum has agreed:

For individuals who are blind or have low vision –

- Provide tactile maps of the Museum and floor plan visitors can borrow;
- Provide a qualified audio describer for any requested Museum audiovisual presentations, computer inter-activities, or exhibits;
- Provide a qualified reader to read labels in all exhibitions; and
- Provide a representative sample of objects, models, and/or reproductions of objects to communicate the main themes of the exhibitions for tactile examination, accompanied by audio description.

Accommodations for people, who are deaf or hard of hearing, increased and improve access to public spaces and training for supervisors and managers on the law is also addressed. The entire agreement can be read at <http://www.ada.gov/spymuseum.htm>



Figure 2: The International Spy Museum - Photo © International Spy Museum

3. THE GUIDED VISIT PROGRAMS

In Italy, particularly in the North part, there are many examples of public buildings, including museums and libraries, applying different methods to bring the aesthetic experience to people who have never had sight or had become blind after birth¹. Returning to USA, as a docent at the Muscarelle Museum of Art at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA., the author decided to start programs for the blind and people with low vision. After having studied many USA programs devoted to this field, the author recognized that there were two common denominators: all descriptions had too much detail and each program was very expensive to create and required a lot of work to install.

¹ The author thanks Paola Bucciarelli, an Italian architect specialised in Universal Design and particularly in design for blind people, for technical visits to the museums in Italy and for sharing her experience.

At a conference on UD in Rio de Janeiro, Rebecca McGinnis, special program director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art showed the book that they had just published. Looking at it, the author felt it would be able to be reproduced, in limited quantities, with “puff” paint. (See Fig. 5)



Figure 4: Section Owl Beneath Lotus Flowers – Chinese Art & the Alphabet: a Tactile Experience Metropolitan Museum of Art

Creating a line drawing of the Mona Lisa in puff paint, a program was presented by the author to other docents at the museum of Williamsburg, using it as an example and then repeating it at other docent symposiums. All participants were excited by the idea, but there were no blind audiences tested yet. (Fig 5).



Figure 5: Mona Lisa tactile drawing (Da Vinci) SCR

In 2007, at the National Docent Symposium in Phoenix, Arizona, there were three representatives from the Birmingham Art Museum in Birmingham, Alabama. They described their program. In May of 2008 scheduled between two conferences on the Built Environment in Atlanta and New Orleans, the author attended a scheduled tour for the blind at the Birmingham Museum of Art. There, the author met the innovator of the 20-year-old program, a retired optometrist from New York, and learned that these tours were started for the local Veterans Home for the Blind for this museum, using “puff” paint (See Fig 6).



Figure 6: Madonna and Christ Child with Four Saints, 1310-1315, G. Ducciesque Master, Birmingham Museum of Art

In the Spring of 2008 a tour at the Chrysler Museum, in Norfolk, VA was organized with Marion Saunders, a blind woman who had lost her eyesight in mid-life. One of the four paintings selected for the visit was missing. Marion was seated, with the tactile drawings on her lap, and the guide/author went to find out what happened to it. Explaining that the painting was being cleaned, Marion shrugged telling the guide she didn't care because the painting was on her lap. After two hours of discovering a Mary Cassatt, Renoir, Matisse, and Gauguin, she suggested that the tour should be repeated with a person who was blind from birth. She also asked if another program could be arranged for a group of 25 people who were blind or had low vision at a library in Virginia Beach. The tour was then organized and people attended it, even if unfortunately she was not there to enjoy them. (See fig. 7)



Figure 7: The Family, Mary Cassatt tactile drawing, S. Confino-Rehder

After speaking with the director of the library program, Pamela Brown, it was decided to choose sculpture for a 3-dimensional “docent tour” and women in different mediums as the theme at the Bayside Library Special Services in Virginia Beach. The tour covered the different mediums used, the role women play in their societies, and each participant was allowed to touch the pieces and ask questions (See Fig. 8).



Figure 8: Tactile sculpture tour, Bayside Library, Virginia Beach, VA 1

The response was phenomenal. Some had never been to a museum, some were born blind, and some had low vision. They experienced this tactile exhibit in their own way, asking questions that helped them explore what they were touching. They asked about color, details, and explored the bodies in excitement and awe.

The second tour, with the same group, was with a craft program. Creating thirty tactile canvases of Paul Klee’s *Cat and Bird* the author was able to guide them to discover the painting. A discussion of the artist, the symbols of the cat and bird, the political statements that the painting made created a very fruitful and exciting discussion of the art. It was presented to them with Paul Klee’s Table of Color, and explained how the artist played with color to create collages, without symbols or messages, just for his satisfaction. Then people proceeded to do Tables of Textures, using swatches of fabric, foil, texture papers, etc. (See Figs. 9a, b).



Figure 9a: Tactile tour of Paul Klee “Cat and Bird”

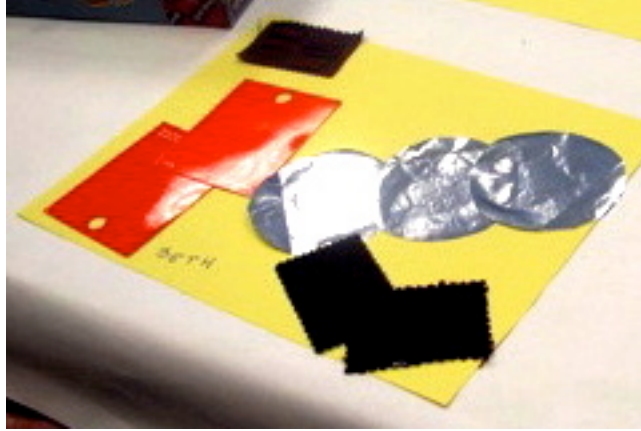


Figure 9b: Table of Textures based on Klee's "Table of Color" Bayside Library, Virginia Beach, VA

When asked by a newspaper reporter covering the program, one of the participants who was 55 years of age and blind from birth was surprised she was able to participate. She has no visual memory. "It was great fun. I really wanted my project to look good."

There was a need to fill. There was an audience that would benefit, and now there is a program that was financially feasible. With the director of the Muscarelle Museum it was decided to have Braille and audio descriptions of texts that the author prepared to accompany tactile images. Now, a more efficient way to create the tactile canvases had to be developed.

4. TRAINING THE DOCENTS

Any project cannot be successful if it is not understood and accepted- It was important to train docents to give tours for the success of this program. Training sessions of 60-90 minutes were created. More than 200 hundred docents in different museums across the state of Virginia have been trained as of the date of this paper.

First, it is explained how one speaks to a visitor who is blind or has low vision. Etiquette guidelines are handed out and reviewed. These guidelines stress the importance of talking directly to the guests, not to their friends, and suggest the importance of asking them if they have ever experienced color and if they were interested in color descriptions. Allowing the guests to ask more questions allows the docent to give more detail. Learning to listen to the cues of the guest who is blind or has low vision is an important part of the tactile experience. This guideline opens discussion and helps to eliminate the fear that exists in people when talking to anyone with a disability.

Secondly, we learn how to look at a painting for composition, for emotion, for senses other than sight. Color can be experienced when you describe it in music, emotion, temperature, and movement. It requires letting go of their formal education as docents and adapting a new way of description. Using the body of a guest, with permission, you can create the stance of the sculpture or subject of the painting, the movement of the

subject while involving the guest in the experience. Using music and sound effects, you can create the stage of the painting you are showing.

After the first two steps, the docent is asked to select a painting that is hanging in the gallery, and with pencil and paper to sketch what they see, quickly, with details only that contribute to the main theme. Experience in drawing is not necessary. They then return to their workspace and the docent traces over the pencil sketch in puff paint to finish creating a tactile drawing. (See Fig. 10)



Figure 10: Girl in a Poppy Field, artist - David Ridgeway Knight, Muscarelle Museum of Art, Williamsburg, VA Docent Mina Hering

Finally, we learn to describe the painting, in no more than five sentences. For example, when describing the painting in Figure 10, after identifying the name and date, medium, artist, and size, we start by saying that:

"We see a lady, walking in large poppy flower field knitting. She is looking at us and is placed in the center of the canvas. Her hair is covered with a kerchief. She is wearing a long skirt and apron. It is daytime."

We can continue to talk about the custom of knitting socks, the historical content of the story and about the artist's message. Of course, the docent has to be prepared to answer the questions that might be asked, as in any tour they give.

People remember gossip, oddities, minute details that are not readily seen in the painting. Docent goals are to achieve a memorable experience not only visiting the museum, but also seeing the painting in more ways than one. Docents are researchers and teachers. They learn all they can about the art they are giving tours on and share it with the people who are taking the tours. Learning to describe differently is a challenge, but when learned becomes another great experience that they can share. Everyone wins.

5. THE PARTICIPATION, PROCESS AND PRODUCT

After these experiences, the author is currently in the process of starting a library of financially feasible books that will be used by museums and libraries. The support team consists of the Bayside Library in Virginia Beach, VA, the Muscarelle Museum in Williamsburg, Virginia, The American Printing House for the Blind in Louisville, Kentucky, and the Eggleston Center, in Norfolk, Virginia.

The author has been given permission to copy any, or all, of the 4000 paintings that the Muscarelle Museum owns and the museum has created a fund that will allow for tax deductible contributions. The library will donate all of the Braille and audio descriptions; the American Printing House for the Blind has made reproduction of the tactile images most financially feasible. The Eggleston Center has given us an unlimited amount of binders to hold all of the sets. All the postage will be free.

We will select a number of original fine art paintings that are examples of the different art periods, create simple line drawings that represent the main theme (See Figs. 5, 7, 10) and then transfer the drawings on special sheets of aluminum foil to make the plates that will be sent to the fabricator to duplicate in a thermoform process. The author will be writing a short description of each painting for Braille description, along with a fuller description for audiotape. A set will consist of one thermoformed sheet of the image, accompanied by a short description in Braille and fuller description on an audiotape and a full color reproduction of the painting, if funds permit. The number of images and sets produced will be determined by the amount of funds collected through donations and the final cost of each set. Additional paintings will be added as more money is received. We are planning to have at least thirty images produced by October 2009, to be introduced during the National Month for Disabilities Awareness.

Art experiences can take place in any environment. This concept is unique, the joint effort is unique, and the program will be far reaching.

6. THE PROGRAM AND THE PROOF

The Bayside Library Special Services

- A. Four tactile art programs for participant in the program for the blind will be planned during the year. Each participant will have a set of each of the paintings discussed. Additional research and reading will be encouraged before each program.
- B. The outreach program will be advertised as soon as the collection is available and is expected to receive many requests from the schools and other libraries the Bayside Library currently serve.
- C. The library will hold a minimum of 35 sets in their library to use and to lend out.

The Muscarelle Museum of Art

- A. Docents will schedule tactile tours on site and as outreach programs as they do for all tours.
- B. Specialized training programs to other museums that show interest may take place. The Museum will have at least 15 sets in their library for their use.
- C. To enhance this Tactile program, volunteer artists will do copies of selected paintings permanently on view, so consumers will actually have hands-on experiences of canvas, paint, texture, along with an audiotape of the painting, or sculpture.
- D. The volumes produced through this project will then be available in a sitting area, so that consumer visits to the Muscarelle will be a full experience.

Both the Library and the Museum can also expand the learning experience by doing a craft that is representative of the painting, if it is appropriate. Training the directors, and the docents and program curator will assist in implementing so everyone involved is informed and familiar with the process. Instructions will accompany each outreach package.

7. EXPECTED OUTCOME/RESULTS

The use of art is a powerful tool for developing the right side of the brain, for healing, for communication, for making life's experiences richer. Talking books and literature written in Braille have opened up the art of literature to people who are blind. This project will enable people to see through touch experience art. It is inexpensive, self-perpetuating program, and adds another source of education and enrichment to a population that is so often excluded. Many museums in this country and abroad have programs for the blind including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Art Beyond Sight, and the Birmingham Art Museum in Alabama. Based on research, there are no museums in Virginia that offer this kind of program, yet.

Feedback from participants will help to the program improvement. It is expected that this program will gain much public recognition in media coverage, and will enhance the lives of many people in the Hampton Roads area we serve, some of whom we may never know. Eventual charges and future funding will allow the library to grow. We expect that once the program starts, we will have more volunteers trained to create the images and that additional funding will become more readily available

This program will be dedicated to the memory of Marion Saunders.

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