

Beyond Accessibility: Museums and Exhibits Friendly to Visually Impaired and Blind Visitors

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This presentation will discuss accessible venues to include visually impaired and blind persons among visitors at visual arts museums.

For decades art has not been accessible for visually impaired and blind individuals due to conceptual and technical reasons. Conceptually it was unclear to museum managers why would a blind person wish to visit a museum since they have no visual stimulation and ability to appreciate two dimensional art exhibitions set behind glass cases or behind barriers to assure their security with fine print labels which are too small to be read.

It was the Disability Act under different name in different countries that imposed thinking out of the box by museum managers, a move that started the inclusion of blind individuals among museum visitors.

The Disability Act was not enough for the inclusion. It was the birth of new friendly audio technology and the Audio Description movements in various forms that closed the gap and facilitated a meaningful visit at museums in addition to trained guides specializing with art viewers who have special needs among them are visually impaired persons.

In order to provide inclusive access to art, a strategy and specialized technologies for the use of the blind visitors have been developed. This fact contributes in removing physical barriers and offer visual information to blind art lovers.

The movement of Inclusive Design also contributed in adopting sightless patrons as regular visitors in museums. Educational approach with goals to access art to all became a norm in many museums as they notice the impact of large number of elderly/third age group economic effect of museum visitors, many of whom have low vision.

Accessibility arrangements are placed to comfort inclusion and enhance visual appreciation to those with no sight or with limited sight and allowing universal participation in viewing the arts.

In addition education department at museums provide virtual access to their archives, art collection and exhibitions and in actuality practice their mandate to enable everyone to enjoy culture and inspire hidden artistic talents, encourage pro-active dialogue with art.

Some organizations such as ArtbeyondSight took the leadership in opening doors conceptually and

strategically to educate professionals to cater guided tours for visually impaired persons at museums and prepare resources to support such visits.

Audio descriptions, indoor devices, and other accessible technologies, along with exhibit design improvements and better information sharing among cultural and educational institutions, have made these resources increasingly enjoyable and accessible to visitors with vision loss.

However, to enjoy museum visits, visually impaired person should be well trained in Orientation and Mobility in complex environments to overcome physical obstacles and have good wayfinding skills to safely navigate in unfamiliar environments and changing spaces at museums.

The presentation is based on visual PPT with verbal description of its pictorial and graphic subjects to illustrate design and technologies available which support the access of museums to visually impaired visitors.