

Museums and Visitors who Are Blind or Have Low Vision

Key findings and recommendations from a study based on focus groups held across the country by Art Beyond Sight and the Museum of Science, Boston with people who are blind or have low vision

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Museums are not only cultural destinations, but a critical part of our educational infrastructure, and places of social, creative, and therapeutic engagement. As Ford Bell, president of the American Association of Museums, points out: Museums and libraries are the most trusted sources of information in America. As such they have a lot to offer beyond their visual displays; they are valuable resources of information for all visitors, including visitors with low vision or those who are blind. To help museums understand the needs, preferences, and perceived barriers for current and future visitors with vision loss, a joint study was carried out by Art Beyond Sight (ABS, formerly Art Education for the Blind) and the Museum of Science, Boston Research and Evaluation Department (MOS). In 2010, focus groups were conducted at seven major art museums across the country: the Brooklyn Museum; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; the Indianapolis Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the National Gallery of Art; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Seattle Art Museum. This paper is based on what we learned from those focus group discussions.

Ten key findings regarding needs of museum visitors and future museum visitors who are blind or have low vision

1. **There is considerable diversity within the population of museum visitors who are blind or have low vision.** Focus group participants repeatedly expressed – sometimes explicitly through their statements and other times implicitly through their disagreements with one another – that not all individuals who are blind or have low vision are the same. This population includes people with varying levels and types of sight, as well as varying experiences with vision loss. In addition, like all museum visitors, they have diverse backgrounds, interests, knowledge of art, and learning styles. Museum visitors' expectations are affected by their previous positive and negative experiences, and often, for adults with disabilities, by their ability to advocate for themselves.

“I think there’s a major difference between someone who is blind from really young or from birth as opposed to someone who had sight for long enough.”—Brooklyn resident

“My vision is deteriorating over time.... Having Retinitis Pigmentosa, [there’s] all this stuff that I see through – the gravel vision, the wax paper. I have double vision. I’m colorblind. My balance is terrible.”—Partially sighted New Yorker

“I have just recently become legally blind, although I still have some vision. I have in my lifetime visited a lot of art museums as well as science and so forth in the U.S. as well as Italy, France, and Japan.”—Indianapolis resident

- 2. Loss of vision does not equate with loss of interest in art or museums.** Some focus group participants were professional or amateur artists, art collectors, and art aficionados, and art museums offered a way for them to connect with an important part of their identity. For others, museums presented opportunities for spending time with friends and family. For still others, museums facilitated powerful learning experiences, generated new insights, created lasting memories, and provided opportunities for contemplation and immersion. Even those participants who had not been to a museum in a long time stated that they often consider going.

“I am an art connoisseur; I just can’t always see it. I would really like to share more about art with my children.”—Indianapolis resident

“I realized I was looking more carefully than I did a few years ago, and looking at details more carefully because I’m aware of where my holes were....It was very interesting because I actually got more out of it....It was the detail that I appreciated more than I had before.”—Partially sighted New Yorker

- 3. Planning a museum visit is time-consuming and often requires advance preparation.** Focus group participants commented on the efforts they put into planning museums visits, including accessing pre-visit information, getting usable public transportation directions, or arranging for a ride. Many participants call or check online for pre-visit information, such as directions from public transportation stops or drop-off locations, information on current exhibits, accessible programs, and the availability of large-print, Braille, or audio materials. In addition to the efforts of arranging a visit, there were concerns related to crowds in museum galleries, accommodations for guide dogs, and the cost of admission.

“We don’t have the luxury of showing up. If we’re going [to] get anything out of anything, we can’t just say ‘here we are.’”—Seattle resident

“It takes a certain amount of effort to get here, to find the place, and then get back.”—Houston resident

- 4. Visitor-service and front-of-house staff are key in creating a welcoming environment.** Discussions concerning interactions with museum staff members, especially those who deal directly with the public, yielded many emotional stories, both positive and negative. Participants stated that front-of-house staff play a key role in orienting their museum visits; this is the place they turn first for information and assistance. The way visitors are greeted and the information that they are provided about the museum sets the tone of their whole experience and subsequent visits.

“I would just want to know that when I walk in the door, that somebody would say, ‘Hello, can I give you information about this’ – anything, just somebody that would help, be there, that would speak out loud and not [just] wave at me.”
—Seattle resident

“I think for me the most important thing in making an art museum experience pleasant and something I’m going to want to do again is the courtesy and basic human caring and nothing fancy or extra, just basic human courtesy. I think for me that is bigger than all the accessibility things, the large print, the marker at the top of the stair; all that stuff is great, [but] I think being able to go and have my dignity as a human being intact during and after the experience is the most important thing.”—San Francisco resident

- 5. Participants value experiences that include verbal descriptions of artworks and descriptive directional information.** Focus group participants valued their gallery experiences with docents and educators; some enjoyed interpretive and contextual information, some opportunities for dialog, but they noted that not all docents provided the kind of descriptive depictions that would allow visitors with low vision to be properly engaged with the content.

“There is nothing in my opinion that has ever beaten a really good guide and they are really hard to find and a lot of museums don’t have guides. Everywhere that we have even been, a really good guide can make or break, can really make the trip for you.”—Indianapolis resident

- 6. Many negative experiences are connected with an interaction with security staff.** Whether security staff are museum employees or outside contractors, in gallery spaces where they may be the only staff present, museum guards are still seen as carrying out museum’s policy. Some participants see these negative museum encounters in the context of discriminating stereotypes and misconceptions. Certain participants described experiencing a loss of “dignity” in museums or feeling like a “criminal” when reprimanded by museum staff who did not understand their needs.

“Sometimes ... I feel like a criminal because I’m getting too close to the art and the guards go, ‘Oh, she’s five inches from the art!’”—San Francisco museum patron

7. **Exhibition and architectural designs can create barriers for participation.** Participants also described existing architectural and exhibition designs as unsafe, some posing potential hazards that could lead to physical harm.

“[T]ripping up not standardized stairs is very humiliating, it’s dangerous....”—Seattle resident

“I understand the aesthetics, but if you can’t see the door....”—San Francisco resident

“Talk about not designing for people, but for what the exhibit looks like: The labeling and the text was utterly ridiculous. It was so low contrast—gray ink on mauve paper—it was absurd. It was ridiculous, insulting, and it would be difficult for anyone, let alone someone with low vision.”—Partially sighted New Yorker

8. **Highly valued accessible programs offer multi-sensory opportunities**, including tactile exploration, music, movement, reenactment, art workshops and other hands-on activities. Engaging tactile experiences include touching authentic objects as well as replicas and models were appreciated. Some visitors, when unable to have tactile experiences in the galleries, found them in the gift store, by exploring models and gift items related to the exhibit on view.
9. **The social aspect of sharing a museum experience with a companion, a family, or a group was highly meaningful to most participants. Many also valued independent exploration.**

“I love to revisit the same piece over and over again with different people who can describe pieces to me that I don’t necessarily have access to either because I can’t touch or because I can’t really see it. It’s interesting to go one day with an art friend and have her describe a picture, and then three days later go with my husband and have the same piece described... but I would also like to come alone and personally interpret pieces, if I could, because they were accessible.”—San Francisco resident

10. **Negative experiences lead to termination of museum memberships and decreased visitation not only by people with visual impairments, but also by their family and friends.**

“The experience has to be welcoming, a welcoming friendly experience. How many people go to stores where the clerks are rude? If we go places where we are not going to be treated well, that takes a lot to get over.”—San Francisco resident

For museum to become cultural and learning centers for all, including visitors with low vision, it is important to address the needs of this audience and to overcome actual and perceived barriers. Focus group participants not only pointed out challenges and articulated barriers, but also offered potential solutions, many of which were based on

positive experiences at museums that offer accessible programming and have staff who are trained to interact with people with disabilities. Focus group participants also reminded us that changes that make the museum more accessible for visitors who are blind or have low vision may also enhance the experience for all visitors.

Eight critical recommendations for museums and arts agencies

The prospect of creating an overall experience that is accessible for people who are blind or have low vision can feel daunting for museums that are just beginning to reach out to this audience. Here are eight recommendations that are based on the findings of the study and that, for the most part, are not costly to implement.

1. **Provide a variety of programs to accommodate the diverse interests and needs of visitors who are blind or have low vision.** Based on the diversity of needs, vision loss, and learning preferences among visitors with low vision, it is a mistake to build your program or staff training around the experience of just one or two individuals, assuming that they are representative of the population. Docent-led tours, tactile experiences, recorded audio tours, art-making opportunities, large-print and/or Braille brochures are a few of the offerings you might consider.

“Don’t assume experience with one blind person is the same as another. Some need a lot of instructions, some don’t need too much; some need more attention, some don’t need much. Ask if you can give assistance, don’t assume.”—Houston resident

2. **Improve the visit-planning process for patrons with low vision** by making detailed and usable information available through either phone menus or accessible websites. Ensure the accessibility of your website, and include descriptive directional information from public transportation stops and drop-off areas, along with descriptions of the museum building and nearby landmarks, since these help individuals who cannot see building numbers but have some usable sight. Schedule accessible programs when the gallery are not busy and around public transportation schedules, or work with community groups to provide transportation to the museum. If possible, list hours when the museum is likely to be less crowded. Offer reduced ticket prices and/or complementary passes for sighted guides to alleviate participants’ concerns about the cost of a museum visit. Also, review how you promote your new exhibits and programs; many people whose vision prevents them from reading newspapers are computer literate. Compile an email list for mailings; send information to schools and libraries for the blind; advertise with the disability press.
3. **Provide Disability Awareness Training for all staff who interact directly with visitors.** Staff members should be aware of the needs of people with disabilities, whether those staff members are docents, professionals working in the front of

the house, store clerks, café workers, group reservationists, phone operators, or security guards. Such training should include information on the diverse needs of visitors who are blind and have different types of vision loss, communication guidelines that enable clear and respectful interactions, sighted guide techniques, and how to give proper directional and descriptive information.

A Houston resident summarized, “There’s absolutely no substitute for constant training of the museum staff to be sensitive.”

“I think the lesson there is that [security guards are] not bad people, they’re just poorly trained people.”—San Francisco museum lover

4. **Train museum docents and educators in verbal description.** Docents and educators should be able to use verbal description and descriptive language when describing an exhibit or museum space. Include instruction on providing touch tours and tactile experiences with original artifacts, models, and replicas, as well as other multisensory learning opportunities, such as music, movement, art making and hand-on learning.

“[There is a] huge disconnect for people who aren’t visually impaired. It really takes a conscious effort to, to get into that mindset of what [sighted guides/docents] need to describe ... beyond just colors... but the textures, the diameters, that kind of thing....”—Seattle resident

5. **Incorporate technology and universally designed museum and exhibit spaces.** Museums should consider changes or additions to existing design and new exhibit design that would enable clear and safe navigation and wayfinding. These changes, according to the findings of the study, pertain to clear intuitive layouts, good contrast, legible signage, clearly marked entrances and amenities, and sufficient lighting. Provide information about the museum’s physical layout in brochures and audio guides. To enable visitors with vision loss to experience the museum independently, consider offering descriptive audio guides, especially if the visitors are able to identify the exhibit items without visual cues. Research in digital applications and other similar technology-assisted programming for exhibits is an especially rich area for museums to investigate.

“I do get enjoyment out of [audio guides] when the descriptions are good. I have [now] taken two audio tours that included both navigation around the exhibit as well as really great descriptions of the exhibit and it was a very fulfilling experience.”—San Francisco resident

6. **Create organizational change that goes beyond making one particular area accessible.** The need for the overall organization to be accessible and for multiple museum departments to be trained in welcoming visitors with vision loss was implicitly referenced in the range of museum areas participants mentioned as needing improvement.

“To me the museum is more than an hour and a half experience, so if I’m going to come out this way, I’m going to milk it. So yes, cafeteria, gift store, outside grass, hang out spots, all [are] important. I’m just going to luxuriate in the world of art for as long as I can.”—San Francisco museum lover

- 7. Involve the community and end-users in program design and outreach.** The conversations between museum professionals and visitors who are blind or have low vision that were facilitated through these focus groups were an important step in the process of generating more positive museum experiences. Continue the conversation by conducting future studies and providing opportunities for continued feedback as new accommodations or programs are developed, or existing experiences are improved. Look into forming partnerships with local organizations comprised of people with vision loss and/or people that serve this audience effectively. Form an advisory board of local people who are blind or have low vision. Participants indicated that they spread the word about excellent museum programs in their community; they also offered access to local disability-specific newsletters, listservs, radio stations, etc.

“If we’ve had a fabulous experience that’s been welcoming and accessible and enriching, we’re going to go out and tell everybody we know about it....”—Seattle resident

- 8. Create a welcoming environment and engaging learning experiences for ALL.** By making your collection and spaces accessible to people with low vision, you will create a more inclusive and universally engaging environment for all. Visitors who are blind and have low vision spoke against a proposed special access day, saying that they enjoy museum experiences with others. They seek social experiences with sighted and blind visitors, or want to bring their family, friends, and companions, many of whom are sighted or, perhaps, have other disabilities. As participants explained, they may attend the museum with others, but do not necessarily want to be dependent upon their companions during their visit.

Participants’ comments suggest that creating an environment where people who are blind or have low vision feel welcome is an important first step. Museums can offer an environment where these visitors can reaffirm their dignity and create or re-connect with their identity as art lovers, museum patrons, and equal cultural contributors.

Adults who are blind or have low vision talk with family and friends about their museum experiences; when they are excited about their museum visit, they not only urge others to visit the museum, but also become active participants in the museum community. They shop at the gift stores, visit museum cafés, and become museum members, patrons, and volunteers. As Americans live longer, the population of people with low vision is growing. If these current and future museum visitors find themselves welcome at museums, they can become some of the most active and outspoken museum advocates.