

Sharing the Experience at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

For people with sight, it may be hard to imagine how those who are blind or visually impaired experience a place like the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#). While visiting museums, sighted people are greeted with a stunning array of visual images, from paintings to sculptures to colorful textiles. While people who are blind or visually impaired often experience the world through touch, touching works of art is almost always prohibited in the museum setting. How, then, do people who are visually impaired experience art there? What might that experience be like?

To help answer these questions—and to help demonstrate just how accessible the arts can be—Art-Reach hosted "Share the Experience" at the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#) on Friday, June 11th. The event, a program of Art-Reach's [Independence Starts Here](#) cultural access initiative, encouraged guests—including donors, members, and community leaders—to experience art as people who are blind or visually impaired experience it.

To begin the event, the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#) (PMA) shared a number of tools it provides through its [Accessible Programs](#) to enhance the museum experience for people with visual impairments. These include Braille and raised-line museum maps as well as touchable interpretations of art such as tactile representations, miniature sculptures, and three-dimensional replications of two-dimensional paintings. These tools were on display at the event for guests to touch and experience, with written descriptions to serve as a guide for those who are blind or visually impaired.



A patron touches tactile displays from the museum's Accessible Programs Department.

While such tools help open up the world of art to those with visual impairments, they are only part of what makes visual art accessible to those with disabilities. As Street Thoma, Manager of Accessible Programs at the Museum says, "The most important way to make art accessible is the language that we use to describe things." One key element of art accessibility is audio description.

Audio description allows people who are blind or have low vision to enjoy equal access to art by providing individuals with descriptive information about visual elements. These elements may include the layout of the facility and exhibits, the size of the art, a description of the art's texture and colors, key elements of the art (e.g., a man and a woman are seated at a table), and detailed descriptions of those elements (e.g., what the man is wearing, the woman's facial expression). Audio description also includes an abbreviated version of any descriptive text accompanying the art, such as the name of the artist, the year the art was created, and any key information about the artist or time period. The audio describer's role is to describe what he or she sees without interpretation, allowing listeners to draw their own conclusions.



*(Left) Sarah Nathan, from Art-Reach member Compeer
(Center) Vaughn Stubbs, Form in Art Instructor
(Right) Street Thoma, Manager of Accessible Programs*

At the "Share the Experience" event, audio described tours were available for event attendees. For guests with sight, blindfolds were provided to allow them to experience the art as those who are visually impaired experience it. Sighted guests were encouraged to put on their blindfolds or close their eyes before viewing the art being described, allowing them to rely on the description alone without any visual point of reference. For guests with visual impairments, the tour gave them an opportunity to experience a work of art in the Museum's collection through audio description, and at times give those guests with sight tips for experiencing art in a new way.



Patrons on an Audio Described tour.

After the audio describer presented a description of one of the paintings, guests were asked about their experience. One guest with sight said, "It was captivating to hear her [the audio describer] speak. The way she presented information was very thoughtful." Another sighted guest said, "I enjoyed the way it [the audio description] was presented. It unfolded like a story, and the description was neutral, so it gave you the opportunity to interpret it yourself." One guest who is visually impaired said, "It was almost like I could see it [the painting]," while another commented on the importance of asking clarifying questions during any audio description. "You can't make quick judgments; you have to ask if you can't see the details."



A Form in Art Student addresses patrons about the work she created in the program.

In addition to audio description, guests were treated to an exhibit of works created by students in the Museum's Form in Art program. [Form in Art](#), which began at the museum in 1971, provides people who are legally blind with opportunities to learn more about art and to create their own works. [Form in Art](#) students participate in lectures, art history lessons, and specially designed touch tours of selected Museum works (during which they wear gloves in order to preserve the art). They also participate in studio classes where they create their own sculptures with guidance from their teachers, who are professional artists. Students use a variety of materials in the class, including recycled items, papier-mâché, clay, and vellum, creating a wide range of unique and beautiful pieces. One Form in Art student said, "You think you can't do it [create your own art], but you find a way to do it. You never know where it's going to take you."



A patron touches work produced by Form in Art Students.

For more information about the [Accessible Programs](#) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, including the [Form in Art program](#), call (215) 684-7602 or TTY (215) 684-7600 or e-mail AccessProg@philamuseum.org.

- by Jennifer Oglesbee

Jennifer is a [Special Projects Ambassador](#) in [Art-Reach's Ambassador Program](#)