



12 Things People with Visual Impairments Want Museum Professionals to Know

1. We are not all the same.

People who are blind or have low vision have varying levels and types of sight, and different experiences with vision loss. Like all museum visitors, people who are blind or have low vision have diverse backgrounds, interests, knowledge of art, and learning styles.

“There’s a major difference between someone who is blind from really young or from birth as opposed to someone who had sight for a long time.”

“My vision is deteriorating over time... Having Retinitis Pigmentosa, I see differently at different times — gravel vision, seeing things like I am looking through wax paper. I have double vision. I’m colorblind. My balance is terrible.”

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

2. First impressions count.

A good first experience may lead to a second visit. A bad first experience may be the visitor’s last experience.

3. Vision impairment does not mean loss of interest in the arts.

People who are blind or have low vision may also be professional and amateur artists, art collectors, art lovers and art aficionados. They want to have new insights and create new memories.

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

“I realized I was looking more carefully than I did a few years ago. It was very interesting because I actually got more out of it. I appreciated the details in the art more than I had before.”

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4. Visiting art and cultural institutions is a way to socialize.

This can be a way to spend time with friends and family and to meet new people.

“I love to revisit the same piece over and over again with different people. 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.”

5. Planning a visit to an arts or cultural institution can be time-consuming and often requires advance preparation.

Visitors must access pre-visit information, including accommodations the venue may offer (such as audio tours or Braille), and travel directions so they can plan for transportation.

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

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

6. Consider companions.

- Admission for a sighted guide companion can be cost-prohibitive.
- Crowded spaces can interfere with a service animal’s ability to serve its function.
- Service animals may need to be watered and walked outside during a museum visit.

7. Staff and volunteers set the tone for the experience.

Front-of-house staff plays a key role in providing information and assistance, and helping the visitor feel welcome and valued.

“I want somebody who will say, ‘Hello, may I give you information about this?’ I want someone who is ready to help me. I don’t want to have to feel like I am begging for help or have to wave someone down.”

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“For me, the most important thing in making an art museum experience pleasant and something I’m going to want to do again is basic courtesy and help, nothing fancy or extra. Being able to go and have my dignity as a human being intact during and after the experience is the most important thing.”

8. People want verbal descriptions of works of art and descriptive directional information.

Visitors with visual impairments especially value their gallery experiences with docents and educators when they are skilled in and excited about verbal descriptions and interaction that allows them to engage with the content.

“Everywhere we have ever been, a really good guide can make or break the trip for you.”

9. Security staff needs to be trained and sensitized.

In gallery spaces, museum guards are often perceived as inflexible policy enforcers. Visitors can experience a loss of dignity when reprimanded by security staff members who do not understand the needs of people with disabilities. Staff can and should be trained to tactfully balance the duty to protect the physical safety of museum collections and patrons with the flexibility to accommodate specific needs of visitors with disabilities.

“Sometimes ... I feel like a criminal because I’m getting too close to the art. I don’t want to harm anything; I just want to see it!”

10. Physical design can make people with disabilities feel unsafe.

Architectural features and exhibition design can pose potential hazards that could lead to physical harm.

“[T]ripping up non-standard stairs is very humiliating and it’s dangerous.”

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

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“The exhibit was designed to look a certain way, it was not designed for people. The labeling and the text were 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, to read.”

11. Visitors want multi-sensory options.

This includes tactile exploration, music, movement, reenactment, workshops, and other hands-on activities. Engaging tactile experiences can include touching authentic objects as well as replicas and models. Tactile elements such as models and other gift items related to an exhibition often can be found outside the galleries in the museum shops.

12. Negative experiences can lead to termination of museum memberships and decreased visitation by people with visual impairments along with their families and friends.

In the age of social media, news of a negative experience can spread with the click of a button and have a direct impact on your bottom line.

“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.”