

Art Beyond Sight

Bringing Art & Culture to All

Engaging Visitors through Touch

Creating Meaningful Tactile Experiences for Visitors with Vision Loss

Using **touch** in the museum or cultural environment can be a particularly effective way to connect with visitors who are blind or have low vision. This sheet gives you some tips and suggestions for how you might incorporate tactile experiences to benefit all audiences.

Always remember: TOUCHING is quite different from SEEING!

- Visual experience is immediate, all at once, not physical, and inclusive of space and environmental context.
- Tactile experience is time-based, sequential, specific, and involves direct physical and active engagement.
- Vision can reveal relationships among objects, distance, light and shadow, color and pattern, spatial orientation, and overall form and shape.
- Touch can reveal texture, hardness, temperature, volume, weight, and things hidden from view.

Some Ways to Incorporate Touch in the Museum Environment:

- Touch tours – facilitated tours allowing visitors to touch artwork or other collection objects, as approved by museum curators and conservators, usually for visitors who are blind or have low vision
- Tactile images and graphics
- Maps and models
- Objects and replicas
- Textures and fabric samples
- Tools, utensils, and materials
- NOTE: Handling objects, tactile graphics, and touch tours require additional verbal description or guidance for visitors with vision loss.

Guidelines and Tips for Giving a Touch Tour of Original Artwork

- Things don't always look the way they feel, or feel the way they look! If permitted by your institution, prepare ahead of time by tactilely exploring the object yourself.

- Understand the object's tactile properties, and be able to highlight them through description.
- Practice open communication with your visitor, and be flexible – each visitor and each tour is unique.
- Be open to the preferences of the person you are guiding.
- Always keep in mind the safety of the objects, the environment, and the visitor.
- Partner with your institution's security staff so they know what to expect and can assist you in handling other curious visitors as needed.
- Let your visitor know about pedestals, bases, signage, or other nearby physical features not part of the object.
- If gloves are used, consider non-latex nitrile options, and have multiple sizes available.
- Keep tissues or wipes available for use on hands before or after touching an object. Ensure that object to be touched is cleaned regularly.
- Ask your visitor to remove large rings, dangly bracelets, or items hanging around their neck, and have them roll up or secure draping sleeves.
- Offer to read the label before the visitor begins exploring the object.
- Do not touch anyone without their permission, and when guiding someone's hand use very light pressure.
- Take your time, and enjoy the explorations and discoveries of your visitor.

Guidelines and Tips for Selecting and Using Handling Objects

- Each handling object should have a clear purpose – beware the random!
- The most effective handling objects are surprising, new, or unusual to touch.
- If using replicas, be sure to communicate any differences in material, size, weight, or texture between the replica and the “real thing.”
- Get “hands-on” with the object or tactile image yourself, **before** sharing it with others.
- Share the purpose or intent of the object when you introduce it.
- Most objects will require some accompanying explanation or description.
- Give verbal guidance to direct the visitor's exploration, or ask if they would like you to physically guide their hands.
- Keep wipes or tissues handy for before and/or after touching objects.
- Touching is not just for people who are blind!