

# Nuts and Bolts

## Inclusive Museum Experiences— A Team Approach

by Rebecca Bradley and Barbara Berry

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Achieving a fully accessible museum environment is a journey.

*There needs to be a bench or chair in every room. People with leg pain or difficulty walking love art too!*

*Beautiful exhibition, but white labels on sides of black stands in center of rooms are almost impossible to read. All 3 of us agreed. First, they are too low. Everyone has to bend down to see them and too often sticking out their butts. Second, almost impossible to read the white letters on black, especially so low and in low lighting. Third, only one person at a time can look at label. Please add labels at eye level.*

*Considering what I have observed to be your demographic, please consider enlarging the font on the description of the art work. I could not read them, even with glasses.*

*Exhibit great except only 2 benches in downstairs rooms. Very difficult for people with knee and back problems. There's lots of room for benches.*

Visitor comments such as these impelled the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (the de Young and Legion of Honor museums) to articulate a mission aimed at insuring that all visitors have the best experience while attending an exhibition. To realize this vision, we believe, the entire institution must be involved in supporting accessibility. Accordingly, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (here referred to as the “Museums”) developed an “Access Programs Vision.” Openly shared and communicated with the public, this vision currently reads:

*Access Programs at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco are designed to create an accessible museum for all visitors. The main goal is to create an accessible museum in such a way that anyone, of any age or ability, can enjoy his or her experience. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco are committed to offering services that make its collections, exhibitions, and programs accessible to all visitors.*

Achieving a fully accessible museum environment is a journey. At the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco we began this journey in the 1970s and are continuing to work to achieve an institutional culture that supports inclusivity. This article describes the steps we have taken along the way to serve all visitors regardless of age or ability better—a team approach, fostering customer service, and professional development—and our future vision.

### Laying the Groundwork

Equity in access for visitors with disabilities has been a priority at the Museums since the 1970s, twenty years before George H. W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act into law in 1990.

The H.O.S.T. Program (Handicapped, Outreach, Seniors, and Touching), now Access Programs, began at the Museums in 1977. Renee Dreyfus, currently Curator in Charge, Ancient Art & Interpretation, initiated the program. Two years later Tish Brown, Accessibility and ADA Coordinator until 2011, was hired to create a welcoming and accessible space for the disability community. Her

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commitment to equity in access was exemplified through her determination to make the Museums’ programs and collections available to all visitors. Brown went above and beyond her required work responsibilities to lay the groundwork for the future of access at the Museums. Among other actions, she ensured that the old de Young auditorium had sufficient wheelchair accessibility for visitors. “We actually removed 30 seats from the auditorium,” Brown said. “That was an interesting exercise in screwdrivers!”<sup>1</sup>

In 1988, under Brown’s guidance, a group of individuals with disabilities or disability-related expertise formed at the Museums. This group, known as the “Access Advisors,” has been integral in all aspects of access at the Museums including exhibition design, staff training, and program development. The group has grown in size from the original 10 members to 16 members and includes individuals with various arts and consulting backgrounds in the disability community as well as representatives from community organizations. In 2008, the Museums’ board recognized the Access Advisors as a supporting organization. The group meets quarterly with the director of education and with other department heads and staff as needed. The Access Advisors continue to work collaboratively with the Museums’ Access Programs Manager as well as cross-departmentally to assure disability access to the museums and compliance with the ADA and other disability rights laws.

Docents have been vital in the success and growth of accessibility at the Museums. In the 1970s, docents initiated “Touch Tours” for visitors who are blind or have

low vision. Touch Tours allow visitors to handle preselected works of sculpture and decorative arts approved by the curatorial staff. This program still exists and is supplemented by the study collection. Housed in the education department, the study collection is comprised of deaccessioned and donated objects that complement the permanent collection and Touch Tours objects. All study collection objects are touchable.

A unique program, Docents for the Deaf, was established in 1970. This partnership between the Museums and DEAF Media (a nonprofit dedicated to advocating for Deaf arts and developing cultural, educational, and professional opportunities for the Deaf community) provided outreach to the Deaf community. Museum docents learned American Sign Language (ASL) alongside a Deaf docent and prepared monthly tours. The program ended in the late 1990s due to scarce resources and the rigorous training required to learn ASL. The Museums continued their partnership with DEAF Media, and their trained guides began to lead tours for the Deaf community in the early 1990s. In 2012, this program became ASL Tours.

### **Building on the Foundation**

As accessible design has evolved into Universal Design, which uses accessibility as a starting point and goes further, the Museums continue to strive for the goal of totally accessible programs and facilities at all levels.<sup>2</sup> In 2012, the part-time accessibility coordinator position became full-time and was later renamed Manager of Access Programs. The shift from a part-time to a full-time position gave accessibility a constant presence at the

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Museums and was critical for relationship building and collaboration. In 2015, a part-time position, Access Programs Assistant, was added. The Museums' culture had historically supported access, but a stronger staff presence allowed Access Programs to develop broader institutional buy-in and create a mindset of access as an institution-wide initiative.

In recent years, the Museums have experienced exponential growth in programming for visitors with disabilities. One of the greatest challenges is keeping access at the forefront during a time of growth and change. Key challenges and strategies for addressing them are described below.

#### ***Navigating the Question "But, do we have a legal obligation?"***

Access Programs fosters a view of access as a customer service instead of the law. When contacted with an accessibility question, staff is encouraged to consider the visitor experience rather than the Museums' legal obligation. With this mindset, staff has had "ah-ha!" moments about providing wheelchairs and large-print labels as a tool to enhance visitor experience even though the Museums are not required to provide either under the ADA.

#### ***Scheduling Training Opportunities***

A new training model includes smaller groups in open conversations about experiences with access, accessible design, and problem solving. Scheduling small group sessions is easier and allows staff to share questions, concerns, and information in an informal and collegial atmosphere.

Access Programs has created educational

and professional development opportunities for other members of the Museums' staff to learn more about access and engage with new trends. Training opportunities include ADA basics, customer service for visitors with disabilities, as well as specific training for docents leading programs and tours. Community partners—the Alzheimer's Association and LightHouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired among them—also provide training.

#### ***Working Collaboratively to Address Accessibility Issues***

Collaboration takes effort, particularly in institutions that have traditionally worked in silos. At every opportunity, Access Programs works to reinforce the point that all staff members are responsible for creating an accessible visitor experience and that it is not the job of any single department.

Access Programs' role in exhibition planning has progressed from an informal role to a formalized role in which staff is now involved throughout the process. This allows potential accessibility issues to be identified and addressed early on, and helps educate other staff about accessibility needs. During this process, Access Programs works to create an open and ongoing dialogue among staff members and across departments. Understanding that change may be incremental versus immediate is critical.

Building cross-departmental relationships allows all staff to understand the role of access at the Museums better and creates a unified view about access and accessible design. With heightened collaboration and awareness, such departments as

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facilities, health and safety, and visitor services are able to alert Access Programs of potential access issues for public programs, private events, or ongoing museum projects. Visitor services works proactively with Access Programs to ensure all visitors, especially visitors who request accommodations, have a positive experience at the Museums.

### Conclusion: Into the Future

The Museums have a long history of focusing on access for visitors with disabilities. And today, access and accessible design remain a priority because accessible design has proved beneficial for everyone.

Using a collaborative approach, the Museums have made great strides in achieving the goal of offering services that make its collections, exhibitions, and programs accessible to all visitors. Staff and docent commitment has allowed the Museums to approach access holistically with a view to what visitors need, rather than what must be done to comply with the law. And while our successes have been considerable, there is still work to be done.

Through the process of writing this article, Access Programs staff came to realize how critical it will be, moving forward, to develop a formal institutional accessibility plan that identifies departmental roles in access, access features, and program goals, as well as a strategic plan for equity in access at the museums. The British Museum's Disability Equity Scheme provides a model for such a plan.<sup>3</sup>

Ideally, within five to seven years, the Museums will have a formalized institution-wide plan that codifies the strong cross-departmental relationships forged over the past 38 years.

As we look to the future, we hope that some of the challenges we have faced—and the solutions we've worked out—will be helpful to our colleagues. The following coda describes the menu of services that we've developed to support accessibility, a step-by-step list of how exhibition accessibility develops, and helpful resources. ✨

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>Marcia Sartwell, ed., *The Accessible Museum* (The American Alliance of Museums, 1992), 125.

<sup>2</sup>Valerie Fletcher, "Museums around the World that Enliven Our Souls: Inclusion through Rich Experience," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 56 no. 3 (2013): 298, doi: 10.1111/cura. 12029.

<sup>3</sup>The British Museum, *Disability Equality Scheme*, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/disability\\_equality\\_scheme.pdf](http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/disability_equality_scheme.pdf).

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## Coda: How to Meet Visitors' Needs

### Supporting Accessibility at the Museums

- The Museums offer a range of services to ensure that their collections, exhibitions, and programs are accessible to all visitors. These services can be enjoyed with friends and family members and many services benefit all visitors. The Museums have

learned that by providing a variety of programs and options, all visitors have a better experience.

- Visitors who are blind or have low vision may request an individual guided tour. Friends and family members can participate in these tours. The tours include three-dimensional objects visitors can

touch, as well as paintings to explore through verbal description. Visitor feedback tells us that while verbal description provides an entry point for connecting with the art, touching objects provides a fuller experience.

- Copies of temporary exhibition labels are available in large print. Brochures or other materials in braille can be provided with advance notice. The Museums have recognized that all visitors, regardless of ability, utilize the large print labels.
- Audio tour players for the permanent collection and temporary exhibitions are free for visitors who are blind or have low-vision. Closed captioning is available for videos in temporary exhibitions. Transcripts of the audio tours are also available. Closed captioning is important in large, noisy galleries so all visitors can easily view videos.
- Visitors who are Deaf may arrange individual or small group tours. The Museums provide two types of services: an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter can be requested free of charge for any private or public tour, and Deaf guides lead tours in ASL in conjunction with temporary exhibitions.
- The Museums provide Assistive Listening Devices (ALD) for visitors with hearing loss, but any visitor can request an ALD. Museum docents use ALDs on tours of crowded exhibitions due to noise levels.
- Artful Discoveries is a monthly program held in the galleries for individuals living with early stage dementia and their care partners. Docents who lead the program have shared with Access Programs staff that they now incorporate engagement strategies used in these tours into all of their tours.
- During temporary exhibitions, Access Days happen once or twice on select Mondays during which the Museums offer tours for visitors with low vision, ASL interpretation, additional seating in the galleries, and other accommodations.
- The Museums provide free private tours that meet specific visitor needs when the tours are arranged two to four weeks ahead of the visit.

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### ***A Step-by-Step Guide: How Exhibition Accessibility Develops***

A detailed look at a temporary exhibition opening in early November illustrates how Access Programs staff is involved in meetings and at various milestones as exhibition planning progresses.

#### **Early February**

Key staff members from various departments attend monthly meetings held by the exhibitions department. Attendees, who vary depending on the exhibition and

its timing, include marketing and public relations, education, graphic design, curatorial, conservation, development, and member and visitor services, and access.

As the curator discusses the upcoming exhibition, Access Programs looks for potential accessibility red flags such as:

- Use of in-gallery technology
- Unique display of objects
- Label placement (depending on the nature of the exhibition)
- Use of videos in the exhibition that would call for captioning

### **August**

Various departments including facilities, health and safety, and Access Programs review the draft floor plan.

Access Programs reviews the plan to determine:

- Dimensions of platforms and object cases
- Shape of platforms. Are there any hard or sharp edges that someone may walk into? Are there trip-and-fall hazards for individuals who are blind or have low vision?
- Placement of platforms and object cases
- Dimensions of doorways and the floor space between walls and platforms. Guidelines exist for wheelchairs and path of travel, but

the Museums offer both standard and bariatric wheelchairs.

The dimensions need to allow space for ease of travel through the exhibition and for emergency evacuations.

- Path of travel

### **September**

Access Programs and health and safety review the final floor plan to determine whether suggested changes or updates were made to the draft floor plan.

Access Programs staff ask for an example of a completed label and submit a request to graphic design for large-print labels to be created in time for the exhibition's public opening. Access Programs looks for these label features:

- 70% contrast between the font color and the background color
- Legibility of font size and style

### **October**

A series of installation meetings takes place from two to four weeks prior to opening. The timeframe depends on the type of exhibition, scheduling, and other exhibition-related issues.

#### ***Pre-installation meeting***

Pertinent staff attends a pre-installation meeting to review a working draft of the exhibition floor plan and to discuss and troubleshoot any access issues prior to the final installation meeting. Access Programs looks for potential red flags such as:

- The height of object cases
- Label placement
- Emergency exit pathways
- Contrast between the floor and platforms
- Light levels

***Installation meeting***

At the installation meeting, Access Programs reviews the final draft of the exhibition floor plan to identify last-minute issues such as:

- Visitor flow
- Placement of benches

***Installation***

At installation, collaboration among Access Programs, health and safety, and visitor services is crucial as their goals overlap. Accessibility issues include:

- Visitor flow and ease of maneuvering mobility devices (wheelchairs, walkers, etc.) through the space
- Egress and emergency evacuation routes including the visibility of emergency exit signage
- Light levels

- Placement of large-print label bins, which are installed just prior to opening

After the galleries have been painted and temporary walls have been installed, our health and safety staff does a walkthrough and alerts Access Programs staff of any issues.

Once the exhibition is installed, Access Programs staff completes a walkthrough with visitor services staff to identify visitor flow and review bench placement. If necessary, the Access Advisors will be invited to walk through the exhibition especially if there are concerns with light levels or in-gallery technology components.

**November**

During the exhibition, Access Programs monitors any access issues that arise. Staff review visitor comment cards and work with appropriate staff to address the issues, and visitor services staff members alert Access Programs when more large-print labels need to be placed in the galleries.

After the exhibition closes, Access Programs staff debrief with front-line staff members about any access issues that arose during the exhibition and discusses lessons learned.



### **Accessibility Resources**

Access Programs staff has found these resources useful and will continue to use them as the Museums work toward fulfilling their long-term accessibility plan.

*Everyone's Welcome: The Americans with Disabilities Act and Museums* (1998)

Details ADA requirements and addresses concerns for visitors with a range of physical and learning disabilities. Chapter 2 outlines a nine-step strategy for achieving ADA compliance. Chapter 3 provides details on accessible facilities and exhibits.

Download document via a link in the abstract.

<http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED437754>

*Section 504 Self-Evaluation Workbook*

Designed to assist NEA grant recipients in evaluating the current state of accessibility of their programs and activities.

<http://arts.gov/open-government/civil-rights-office/section-504-self-evaluation-workbook>

*Design for Accessibility: A Cultural Administrator's Handbook* (2003)

A step-by-step guide of checklists, resources, and examples.

<http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/Design-for-Accessibility.pdf>

*Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design* (1996)

A standards manual for accessible exhibitions, publications, and media.

<http://accessible.si.edu/pdf/Smithsonian%20Guidelines%20for%20accessible%20design.pdf>

*Universal Design and the Museum: Technological Developments* (August 30, 2012)

This Lemelson Center blog post focuses on some of the technological features of accessibility at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

<http://blog.invention.smithsonian.org/2012/08/30/universal-design-and-the-museum-technological-developments/>

NEA Arts issue—Challenging Notions Accessibility + The Arts (Number 1: 2015)

*Touch and See - Accessibility Programs for People with Vision Impairments at the Art Institute of Chicago*

This article illustrates how designing for individuals with disabilities translates into designing for everyone.

[http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/nea\\_arts/FINAL\\_NEA%20Arts\\_1\\_2015.pdf](http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/nea_arts/FINAL_NEA%20Arts_1_2015.pdf)