



Share this Page:

powered by



This publication is a service of the [Hoosier Heritage Alliance](#)
Connecting to Collections project.



Issue 24, October 2013

Collections as Accessibility Assets

By Kris Johnson, museum accessibility consultant
[Indiana Deaf Heritage Museum](#)

Museum objects connect visitors in meaningful ways to other times in history, different cultures and new ways of thinking about our place in the world. These objects typically achieve this from behind glass or roped barriers, keeping them out of reach from visitors. These objects are meant to be seen but not touched. Collections care textbooks and manuals are filled with all the ways handling objects can cause damage, but museum professionals should reconsider a new value of their collections as tools for creating accessible experiences for people who have visual impairments.

People who are blind or have low vision are the demographic group most underserved by museums because of the highly visual nature of exhibits. The sense of touch compensates heavily for vision loss. To provide equitable access to collections, a museum should establish very clear policies and procedures for allowing visitors with visual impairments to touch objects. This is not to suggest that a visitor should have the green light to handle anything in the museum. Of course, a collections care professional's top priority is protecting objects from damage, but there are successful approaches to using objects to add tactile experiences for people with vision loss.

A growing trend is the development of specialized touch tours which have proven to be extremely popular. Last October, the Penn Museum in Philadelphia launched a new tour of one of their Egyptian galleries. Soon after the scheduled dates were announced, they were booked solid. Objects were selected based on how durable they were, but special attention was paid to selecting artifacts that represented a well-balanced sample of the entire gallery and served to convey the stories and messages presented in the exhibit.

The Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind in Louisville, Ky., takes physical access to its collection very

seriously since many of its visitors are blind or have low vision. The director's approach is to let as many people touch as many things as possible. For common and durable types of objects, he uses open displays with access for any visitor. For rare or fragile objects, display cases are built with sliding glass windows or hinged facades that can be opened for tactile exploration which is only permitted for visitors with visual impairments and under the supervision of a staff member.

Most museum staff will encounter sporadic, individual requests and can make case-by-case decisions based on the visitor's ability. Most people with visual impairments do have the ability to perceive some degree of color, light and shape. Often they only need to stand very close to an object or use a magnifier to see things better and do not need to touch the artifacts. Using a flashlight to illuminate objects is also an effective way to enhance visibility. Don't be afraid to ask what people need, but be prepared to fulfill requests as completely as possible while still keeping the safety of the collection a priority.

Resources

[Art Beyond Sight Touch Tours and Other Tactile Experiences](#)

[The Penn Museum Blog: Touch Tours for the Visually-Impaired](#)

[Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind](#)



This publication from the Indiana Historical Society is a service of the Hoosier Heritage Alliance. This project is made possible by a grant from the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services.

This is a free publication. Anyone may subscribe.

Collections Advisor is provided for the benefit of local historical societies and museums throughout Indiana. It is emailed to a subscriber list maintained by the [Local History Services](#) department of the Indiana Historical Society, 450 W. Ohio St., Indianapolis, IN 46202, (317) 232-1882.