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**MA Curation Practices**  
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Title: **Changing museums - and society - through touch**

Mary Beard sees no reason why visitors to the British Museum shouldn't be able to pat the Rosetta Stone. But what if someone goes beyond a gentle pat? One man was recently convicted of criminal damage because he pulled an object from the wall of the V&A museum, and then smashed it into pieces.

Beard was advocating for more touching in museums as part of a television debate in May (Front Row Late, 2018). The criminal conviction and a warrant for arrest were issued a few days before and reported in *The Telegraph* (Lowe, 2018). Both of these events caught my attention as I've been reading a lot about touch and museums recently, as part of my research into blind and partially sighted people's experience of museums and galleries (I'm also talking to local blind and partially sighted people).

These media stories highlight a particular tension around touch in galleries and museums: the tension between accessibility and conservation, both of which are linked to the sustainability agenda. Sustainability for museums and galleries means looking after collections so that they will be available for future generations. But sustainability also means thinking about the needs of today's generations of visitors, and developing long-term relationships with a range of audiences (Museums Association, 2009). So how can museums best address the needs of those visitors, including blind and partially sighted people, whose connection with objects and works of art is greatly enhanced by being able to touch them? How do curators' decisions about conservation affect their relationships with communities?

Touch tours, touch exhibits and handling sessions aimed at blind and partially sighted people are established practice in museums. V&A Director Tristram Hunt's response to Beard, in the TV debate, was that:

Lots of museums have, quite rightly, touching areas, so that you do have this sense of physicality and a sort of haptic power. But also people who are visually impaired can also sense what it's about (Front Row Late, 2018).

In fact, the banister damaged in the V&A was in their 'touching area' for blind and partially sighted people (although the convicted man is sighted). This fact was used to underscore the scale of the damage, with a spokeswoman for the V&A saying:

It was a particularly important part of the visitor experience for our blind guests... The information sign which accompanied the baluster was also written in braille so that blind visitors could learn more about the piece (Lowe, 2018).

However, the standard of some of these touch tours has been called into question: do they give blind and partially sighted people an equitable experience? Zoe Partington, a partially sighted artist and consultant who works extensively with museums, has said:

If you are a blind or partially sighted person you don't want to arrive somewhere and there are ten items you can touch when there are 44,000 pieces in the collection and every year there are the same ten pieces to touch (2017).

Candlin (2010) is also critical, feeling that these type of tours and handling activities often fail to take into account that touch offers a different way of understanding objects and sculpture than sight. She also writes that when museums set up their touch tours,

... disability was understood as being an impairment or lack that as far as possible needed to be made good through the other senses, and so touching functioned as a substitute, albeit an inadequate one, for sight (Candlin, 2010).

A more sustainable approach would be for galleries and museums to adopt the social model of disability (Barnes, 2012). Developed by disabled people, the social model identifies disability as being caused by barriers in society, largely organised without taking the needs of people with impairments into account (Shape Arts, 2017). In galleries and museums, barriers that people with visual impairments face can include: assumptions about how people engage with art; lack of information and interpretation in accessible formats; inadequate staff training; poor signage; low lighting levels; and not being allowed to touch artworks or replicas. Because the social model locates disability in society's structures and organisation, rather than in individuals, it essentially provides a framework for change. Rather than focusing on a perceived lack or deficit, as Candlin describes above, museums should be thinking about their own organisation, practices and policies, to identify and tackle disabling barriers. This gives opportunities for doing things differently.

Some of these opportunities, in terms of touch in galleries and museums, are offered by technology. Museums are trialling a range of approaches, such as 3D printing (Suess, 2016), printing on 'swell paper' (Sensing Culture Oxford, 2017), providing

scale models (Lucas, 2018), multi-sensory activities (Urist, 2017) and virtual reality (Natividad, 2018). Because this is a rapidly developing area, none of these approaches has become widespread across galleries and museums. Replica objects, tactile models and samples of materials are perhaps most common, but they may be of limited value to blind and partially sighted people, being either too intricate to interpret (Ginley, 2013) or because they fail to give a proper sense of an object, such as the weight, texture or overall impression (Candlin, 2003).

Are replicas, models or samples a satisfactory substitute for being able to touch the real thing? Beard doesn't think so in terms of the Rosetta Stone, where a replica is available - she proposes that this lump of granite could withstand a great deal of touching. Visitors are being denied the opportunity to 'touch the past' (Front Row Late, 2018), to connect with past civilisations and artists.

On the other hand, if developed as interpretation tools, and in partnership with blind and partially sighted people themselves, replicas, models and sample materials can open up collections to blind and partially sighted people - as well as to a wider audience. Visually impaired curators are leading the way in this area. Kojiro Hirose, a blind curator at Japan's National Museum of Ethnography invites visitors to become 'astonished by touch', encouraging gentle and unhurried handling of objects that unlocks your imagination (2013). No-one has damaged any of the touch exhibits at this museum - the destruction in the V&A is an exceptional occurrence. Georgina Kleege, a blind academic who has written about blind and partially sighted people's engagement with art and museums (2018) has developed 'haptic encounters' (Wilson, 2018) where handling objects and materials are accompanied by audio recordings.

Kleege and others (Candlin, 2010; Hetherington, 2000, Pye, 2007) are calling for galleries and museums to re-evaluate touch in museums; re-thinking who is allowed to touch what, and how. While conservation is important, it should not be used as an excuse to restrict access. Touch must be recognised, not as an alternative or substitute for visual perception, but as an equivalent way of understanding, learning about and connecting with works of art and museum objects. While blind and partially sighted people in particular stand to gain from this, it would in fact benefit all visitors and has the potential to attract more people into galleries and museums. Not only that; as Hirose (2013) states: 'Tactile learning will change the museum, and the museum will change society!'

Gill Crawshaw, 14.5.18

<https://sortitout24.wordpress.com/>

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