

The Value of Art Through Touch

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Hi, everyone! My name is Jon Gabry. I am deafblind, and I am presenting to you by reading Braille and using ASL at the same time. I'm also using a sign language interpreter who is using his voice and talking for me. Jordan, my SSP, is using Haptics on my back. Haptics gives me information about how all of you are responding to my presentation.

Today, I'd like to discuss the value of art for deafblind and blind people.

I am a college student. I am a senior at New Jersey City University, and my major is fine art. In this past spring semester, Spring 2018, I took a philosophy of art class. The class was based on theories in art history and focused on the value of art by seeing and hearing.

What bothered me about this class? This class and the book had a focused, limited concept of how to appreciate and value art. I found it very closed minded because the professor looked at only visual and hearing ways to appreciate art. I am a deafblind artist, and I know through my own experience that blind and deafblind people can fully explore art through touch, yet this approach was not a focus in my class.

David Hume and Georg Hegel were two famous art philosophers. They had ideas about the value of art for sighted and hearing people. Hume's ideas were about how art can be defined by value, enjoyment, and pleasure. The problem is that people have different opinions about how to define value, enjoyment and pleasure. Hegel thought a lot about beauty in art, and the history of how art developed. He ranked the arts: the lowest was architecture, then moving up was sculpture, painting, music, and the highest was poetry. Hegel also thought that the only truly beautiful art shows Greek gods or Jesus – perfect life in beautiful colors.

Deafblind and blind people have traditionally had challenges accessing art at museums. A number of researchers have studied this topic. In her research, Fiona Candlin found that art museums didn't have

access for deafblind and blind people. Usually, there is bad lighting and floors. The staff at art museums don't understand the needs of deafblind and blind people. Typically, there is no access to descriptions, such as Braille and large print. Sometimes museums have art classes, but they are often presented at a low level, and this is insulting. For touch tours, the staff often describe the art, and the blind and deafblind may be able to touch part of the art, but often are not allowed to touch and explore the whole piece of the art. The freedom to explore by touch and appreciate the whole piece is important to providing value, enjoyment, and pleasure.

Another researcher, Poria, looked into using sighted guides. Sighted guides can help by describing, but describing doesn't let the person interact with the art. Jansson and Bergamasco found that sometimes using Haptics to draw on person's body helps, but this is really not a good solution because it doesn't let the blind or deafblind person control their own exploration of the art. Another researcher, Ratcliff, wrote that art has aesthetic, financial value, but this is not about money, but for the way art makes you feel.

From my experience and my research, it seems that the following accommodations would be ideal for people who are blind or deafblind:

- Educational programs with guides and access to descriptions in Braille and large print. Why? So blind and deafblind can control their own reading and experiencing – not waiting or depending on others to read to them.
- Programs specially focused on exploring the whole piece of the artwork by touch.
- Self-guided touch tours.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City offers all of these accommodations. As a deafblind artist, I've taken advantage of The Met's *Seeing Through Drawing* program for nearly 10 years. I can also attest to the excitement of the self-guided tour of Egypt, where I've been able to let my hands glide over entire statues.

Another museum that offers terrific accommodations is the University of Pennsylvania's Penn Museum in Philadelphia. Trish Maunder has developed touch tours to explore tactile art in the Egyptian and Italian galleries. I helped Trish develop the tour of Egypt. The tours include

classes for deafblind and blind people to learn the art history through taste, touch and smell.

My Research

My research consisted of interviews and a survey. I interviewed two people who are concerned with art for the blind and deafblind. One is a deafblind artist, Ed Borrone, and the other is a hearing and sighted person, John Olson.

John Olson has a business called 3D PhotoWorks. He is here at this convention. He creates 3D pictures of famous paintings, like the *Mona Lisa* and *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. He thinks about the painting, how to make it into a 3-dimensional piece, and then sends data to a computer to make sculptures that are used as tactile prints. He also puts sensors in the 3D art to activate sensory sound. It takes about three weeks to make one 3D print. When exploring this kind of tactile art, deafblind and blind people can be free and independent in accessing the art, taking their time, and enjoying the experience.

Ed Borrone is a deafblind artist. He has a very little bit of central sight. He works with wood to make sculptures. Sometimes he uses

textures, and sometimes he smooths the wood. He can smell the wood when he's working with it. His favorite piece is a large American flag. People enjoy watching him work with different colors and types of wood. His audience is usually hearing and sighted people who appreciate his artwork.

To find out if other deafblind and blind people shared my ideas about valuing art through touch, I developed a survey in Survey Monkey and posted it on Facebook. I also emailed it to the National Federation of the Blind of New Jersey and the DeafBlind League of NJ. In all, 75 people responded to my survey.

Most responders valued art, but about 10% of deafblind or blind weren't sure if art was valuable to them. Most have art at home. They have different favorite kinds of art and enjoy making art. Most deafblind like painting and tactile art, and most blind like to listen to music.

Blind, deafblind, and sighted and hearing people all enjoy the process of creating their own art. They commented that the creative process gives them power and meaningful expression, and that is a way of interpreting and reacting to the value of art.

The survey data clearly demonstrates that blind and deafblind people appreciate art. They know it expresses and helps to remember shared and personal life experiences. Blind and deafblind also find value in their art. The most valuable art was usually something they made, or a friend or family member made.

In summary, I wanted to show that there are other ways than seeing and hearing to appreciate and value art. I found that most museums do not have accommodations for blind and deafblind people. I also found that deafblind and blind do enjoy art and value art through touch. This is not a right or wrong way to experience art. It is just different than seeing and hearing. I hope museums like The Met and the Penn Museum will continue to encourage blind and deafblind people to enjoy art through touch. I also hope that college and university art programs will open their minds and consider that art can be appreciated in many ways, including touch.

Finally, I encourage you to go to the art room and enjoy tactile art!

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