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Welcoming Art Lovers With Disabilities

By TANYA MOHN

ON a recent Friday night, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York held its first public exhibition of original art made in its “Seeing Through Drawing” classes. Participants — all blind or partly sighted — created works inspired by objects in the museum’s collection that were described to them by sighted instructors and that they were also allowed to touch.

In another gallery, a tour in American Sign Language was followed by a reception for deaf visitors. And on select Fridays, new “multisensory stations” invite all guests — including those with a range of disabilities — to experience exhibits through scent, touch, music and verbal imaging, or describing things for people with vision impairment.

“The Met has a long history of accessibility for people with disabilities,” said Rebecca McGinnis, who oversees access and community programs. As early as 1908, the museum provided a “rolling chair” for people with mobility issues, and in 1913 held talks for blind public school children, she said. Today, there are programs for people with disabilities nearly every day.

Such efforts by museums are likely to increase. In 2010, about 56.7 million people, or 18.7 percent of the population, had some level of disability, according to the Census Bureau. And both the number and percentage of disabled Americans are expected to increase in coming years because of the aging of the population, greater longevity and more cases of certain types of learning disabilities, said the Open Doors Organization, a nonprofit group in Chicago serving disabled people.

“Museum designers have used a great deal of imagination, much more than is required by law, and do remarkable things,” said Lex Frieden, a professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston and director of one of the regional centers to help compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

Mr. Frieden, whose spinal cord injury after a traffic crash in 1967 left him a quadriplegic, said museums made commitments to accessibility before the 1990 law and even earlier federal legislation. The Smithsonian Institution has long been a leader in the field; its definitive guidelines to accessible exhibition design are used globally, he said.

Early adaptations to overcome barriers to sight were mirrors on ceilings, video screens at varying heights and lowered pedestals and cases “to a sweet spot of visual field” for all users, including

wheelchair users, said Beth Ziebarth, director of the Smithsonian's accessibility program.

Innovations continue. A new program allows families with children on the autism spectrum and cognitive disabilities to arrive before opening hours and to receive materials in advance to get familiar with the building and exhibits.

In a crowdsourcing effort, the Smithsonian last year began inviting visitors to provide audio descriptions on mobile devices of the nearly 137 million objects in its collection — an example of how measures primarily to help people with disabilities can often benefit the public.

Similarly, when the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston opened its Art of the Americas wing a few years ago, it took a universal approach to its mobile multimedia guide. Hannah Goodwin, the manager of accessibility, said if a person with a vision or hearing disability is visiting the museum with a nondisabled friend, “you use the same devices, with access to the same content.”

In Manhattan, the Whitney recently introduced vlogs — video tour blogs — whose segments are recorded by deaf hosts in American Sign Language. But since they are also captioned in English, they have become popular even among people without hearing impairments.

“It's a brave new world out there” said Larry Goldberg, director of the National Center for Accessible Media, a research and development department at WGBH in Boston. “There is such a range of new technology, and museums are taking advantage of it.”

For example, the Art Institute of Chicago plans to experiment with 3-D printing to reproduce artworks and allow visitors, like those with Alzheimer's disease, to explore the texture, scale and other sensory elements of objects in ways not otherwise possible.

The Guggenheim's mobile app includes closed-captioning for videos; enlarged-text capability, verbal description tours and advanced screen-reader technology that enables full navigation through touch and voiced description of everything on the screen.

Indoor navigational services are coming to museums, Mr. Goldberg said, that are ideal for people with visual impairments. For example, ByteLight software translates location signals from modified LED lights to smartphone apps to help visitors interpret exhibits or navigate within the museum.

The Museum of Science in Boston expects to broaden its testing of ByteLight technology in coming months. “For indoor location awareness technology, it is the most promising,” said Marc Check, the museum's director of information and interactive technology. “Technologies like GPS are effective outside, but much less precise inside.”

The museum is also experimenting with interactive touch-screen technology. It has built a large touch table, like a giant iPad, that will give people with visual and fine motor skill limitations access to content by swiping and gesturing. A prototype, Mr. Check said, is expected to be in place at an exhibit in the next few months.

Smaller museums are offering services for the disabled, too. In the summer the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Fla., joined with local mental health agencies in a program for adults with mental health or substance abuse issues. The North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh recently added nine newly acquired Rodin bronze sculptures to its touch tours. The Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida conducts off-site programs for residents of nursing homes and retirement centers who can't visit the museum.

For exhibitions and performances at museums and other sites, the Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability, at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., advises on things like assisted-listening systems or how to stage sensory-friendly productions. When Eric Lipp, executive director of Open Doors, wanted to improve accessibility at Chicago cultural institutions through its "Inclusive Arts and Culture Program" several years ago, he turned to the exchange.

Since then, the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago has enhanced its services and outreach. Live audio description and American Sign Language interpretation during performances have improved in quality and are offered at more performances. New services have been introduced, like touch tours that allow blind and low-vision guests to go on stage before shows to become familiar with the space.

The Steppenwolf and others "go above and beyond," said Mr. Lipp, who is partly paralyzed. "And they've done it for no other reason except the social benefits."

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