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Blind Persons and Art: Towards a Multisensory and Inclusive Museology

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Abstract

This article focuses on issues related to the accessibility of art—and to cultural heritage more broadly—for people who are blind. The right to know and enjoy beauty is a fundamental human right, yet it is still not fully guaranteed for everyone. Blind individuals perceive through touch, a mode of perception that often clashes with the widespread "do not touch" policy in museums and with a museological approach grounded exclusively in visual perception. In Italy, two blind individuals founded a unique institution: the Museo Tattile Statale Omero (State Tactile Museum Omero) in Ancona, whose core mission is accessibility and inclusion.

Drawing on the museum's extensive experience, this article offers reflections on new ways of engaging with artworks that give back value to the role of touch and explores multisensory perception as a means of renewing museology. These approaches aim to offer both blind and sighted visitors a new aesthetic experience—intimate, engaging, and participatory. The article ends with a presentation of the museum's most recent exhibition, dedicated to the international artist Enzo Cucchi, as a concrete result of Museo Omero's ongoing empirical research and experimentation, and as a paradigmatic example of a fully inclusive, multisensory cultural event.

Keywords: Art, Museums, Accessibility, Inclusion, Tactility, Multisensoriality, Museology

Introduction

The enjoyment of beauty and art, as well as taking part in the cultural life of society, is a right to which all individuals are entitled, with no one excluded—an internationally recognized principle. It is enshrined in key United Nations documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). UNESCO, through its Road Map for Arts Education (2006) and the Seoul Agenda (2010), emphasizes that culture and the arts are essential components of a comprehensive education that fosters the full development of the individual.

The World Health Organization's 2019 Summary Report on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Wellbeing frames health in a social and cultural context, defining it as a state of physical, mental, and social well-being—not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. The report has demonstrated how engagement with the arts and visits to museums can enhance health by stimulating the senses, evoking emotions, promoting cognitive activity, encouraging social interaction, and reducing stress.
The 2022 definition of "museum" by ICOM (International Council of Museums) places explicit emphasis on accessibility and inclusion.

While the 2007 definition referred to museums more generically as "open to the public," the updated version states: "Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability." This represents a clear call to promote equal opportunities and a recognition of diversity as an intrinsic value of the human condition. Further reinforcing these principles, the ICOM definition stresses that museums should encourage "community participation, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and the sharing of knowledge."

Despite these international declarations, museums and cultural initiatives often fail to ensure full access to all audiences, particularly to persons with visual impairments. This situation is well documented across countries through surveys and research. In Italy, for instance, a 2021 ISTAT survey reports a relatively positive situation concerning physical accessibility: 61.6% of museums are equipped with infrastructure to overcome architectural barriers (such as ramps, wedges or slopes, elevators, or lifting platforms), and nearly 7 out of 10 (67.7%) have accessible toilets. However, the situation is significantly worse for other types of disabilities. Fewer than 10% of museums are equipped with tools to support orientation and spatial understanding for blind or visually impaired visitors, such as tactile maps, tactile floor signage, Braille captions, or information panels.

Videos in Italian Sign Language are available in only 4.4% of museums, and maps or routes designed for individuals with verbal communication difficulties in just 1.7%. Even less common is the presence of assistance services or guided tours: only 1 in 10 museums (10.8%) organizes dedicated tours for individuals with cognitive disabilities or provides staff to accompany visitors with visual, cognitive, or communication impairments (10%).

In the case of people who are blind, the possibility of tactile access to collections is still largely neglected. For blind individuals, touch is the principal mode of engaging with reality—they quite literally see with their hands. Denying them tactile access to cultural and artistic heritage means excluding them and depriving them of all the related benefits we have just outlined. Unfortunately, the academic literature on tactile and multisensory access to artworks and cultural heritage remains scarce, and the topic is still rarely addressed. In Italy, the first international conference dedicated to this issue was held in 2004 by a unique museum founded by two blind individuals [1]. For over thirty years, this museum has been working to bring art closer to the blind through touch and multisensory engagement, while also promoting a renewal of museology that benefits everyone: the State Tactile Museum Omero.

The State Tactile Omero Museum

The Museo Omero was founded in 1993 by two blind people, who were tired of being denied the opportunity to access and enjoy art due to the "do not touch" policy enforced in museums and exhibitions. Although the museum was initially created to promote access to art for blind people, it has always presented itself as a barrier-free cultural space where everyone can engage with art not only through sight, but also through touch.

Figure 1: Aldo Grassini and Daniela Bottegoni, founders of the Museo Omero

The museum's philosophy views accessibility not as a form of assistence for disadvantaged individuals, but as a genuine cultural act. Accessibility is understood as a democratic mindset and practice aimed at the civil and cultural advancement of the whole community, one that places the individual at the center and values human diversity. This approach is further guided by the principles of Universal Design, which informs the planning and organization of every project.

The museum is located in the Mole Vanvitelliana of Ancona, a striking eighteenth-century architectural structure by the sea, designed by Luigi Vanvitelli. Its spaces host a rich collection of classical sculptures —from ancient Greece to the nineteenth century— consisting of plaster and resin casts and replicas, a collection of modern and contemporary sculpture featuring original works by prominent artists, a series of architectural models of major monuments throughout history, and a design collection featuring original objects of Italian manufacture.

Special attention is given to communication strategies, diversified to reach a wide audience, and to the quality of the visitor's experience. This experience is supported by trained staff who are able to welcome all visitors and provide a meaningful and engaging encounter with art. Everyone is invited to embark on a multisensory journey through art, discovering the value of touch and enriching their own aesthetic experience.

As a space for experimentation and research, the museum collaborates with universities, participates in international projects, and organizes annual training programs. It offers consultancy and educational support to museums and cultural institutions in developing permanent and temporary accessible exhibitions, as well as inclusive approaches to art education. The inclusive educational activity aimed at schools and families is particularly intense, and specific courses are dedicated to people with disabilities . Here too, tactility and multisensoriality are the basis of the teaching action.

[1]See the education page on the Museo Omero website: https://www.museoomero.it/educazione/

Figura 2: Tactile exploration of contemporary art sculptures

Workshops are organized for researchers and professionals to disseminate the theme of accessibility and tactile enjoyment of art. The museum's staff contributed to the drafting of the national Guidelines for the Elimination of Architectural Barriers (P.E.B.A.) in museums, monumental complexes, and archaeological parks, published in 2018 by the Italian Ministry of Culture. More recently, they collaborated on the publication of two major accessibility manuals in 2024: Design for accessibility and extended enjoyment of cultural heritage and the Communicative accessibility: designing for all [2, 3]. The museum also maintains an ongoing and active collaboration with the italian Ministry of Culture to promote tactile access to art and cultural heritage. The latest initiative in this regard is the newly launched Omero Prize, a national competition aimed at artists for the creation of multisensory and accessible artworks. Over the years, the Museo Omero has helped shed light on the relationship between blind people and art, clearly identifying the main barriers to access and outlining practical and effective solutions.

Multisensoriality for a New Inclusive Museology

The ongoing commitment of the Museo Omero to art accessibility for all types of disabilities—through experimental sessions, interviews, observations, and data collection—has highlighted that the situation of blind people is the most complex. To truly make art accessible to blind individuals, a profound revision of the ways in which cultural offerings are organized is necessary. Certainly, all different disabilities require specific accommodations to ensure full accessibility: the removal of architectural barriers for people with motor disabilities, appropriate communication for deaf individuals, and careful attention to hospitality, communication, and relationships for people with cognitive disabilities.

For people with visual impairments, it is obviously also essential to eliminate certain concrete obstacles that can be defined as "visual barriers." These may result from the lack of adequate visual contrasts, illegible or absent signage, unmarked transparent surfaces, poor lighting, or information conveyed exclusively through the visual channel without accommodations for people with low vision or alternative perceptual means. All of these obstacles can be easily overcome with proper attention. However, there is a barrier—one I also define as "visual" as well as cultural—that is very difficult to dismantle because it requires, as previously mentioned, a significant rethinking of museology and cultural provision. Blind people "see" and therefore know the world, through their hands; consequently, the "do not touch" rule in force in museums and cultural exhibitions is their main "visual" barrier and the primary cause of exclusion .

Some might wonder whether blind people, through tactile perception of an artwork, can truly understand it, evaluate it artistically, and derive aesthetic pleasure. Based on the experience of Museo Omero, we can answer this question positively. Numerous blind visitors attend the museum with great interest and passion for art, and the majority of them experiences joy and emotion in discovering the mysteries and evocative power of art. Moreover, blind individuals have taught us how relevant touch and multisensoriality are in the enjoyment of art, for example in sculpture or architectural monuments—and this applies to everyone, both blind and sighted.

This fundamentally challenges the assumption that the enjoyment of art and cultural heritage is exclusively tied to seeing [4]. It is no coincidence that we often refer to certain artistic languages as "visual arts." While this may be appropriate for painting, it does not fully apply to sculpture and architecture. Without a doubt, architecture involves the entire sensoriality and thus the corporeality of those who experience it, and it is far from being only a spectacle for the eye, as Wölfflin already argued in 1886 [5, 6]. Likewise, in sculpture, the material and tactile qualities have much to communicate to the beholder.

Over the centuries, philosophical and aesthetic debate has often focused on these issues. In 1865, the Prague philosopher Robert Zimmerman (1824–1898) wrote: "Surely there should no longer be—while there still are—wooden and iron barriers preventing the touching of artworks. To run one's fingers over the back of Hercules or the supple limbs of the Venus de Milo or the Barberini Faun should convey to the hand a pleasure comparable only to listening to Bach's impetuous and majestic fugues or Mozart's romantic melodies" [7].

The German psychologist and art historian Rudolf Arnheim (1904–2007), in a short essay titled Perceptual Aspects of Art for the Blind first published in 1990 in the Journal of Aesthetic Education of the University of Illinois, emphasizes that tactile perception of an object activates two extremely dynamic sensory modes, kinesthesia and touch, which together constitute haptic perception. Exploring haptically thus involves activating a dynamic perception that relies on time and movement and facilitates understanding of the structural, spatial, and relational aspects of the artwork. Arnheim writes: "This dynamic perception is not foreign to the sense of vision either, but it is particularly

[2]The expression "I have seen, therefore I know" refers to the Greek verb οἶδα (òida), which is the perfect form of εἶδον (èidon, "to see"). In ancient Greek, this verb does not simply indicate the physical act of seeing, but rather a deep understanding—a knowledge gained through what has been observed. This Platonic idea places sight as the privileged sense of knowledge, elevating it to a noble status and relegating the other senses, especially touch, to a lower position in the hierarchy of sensory values.

compelling when haptic sensations transform simple form into a dramatic encounter that intimately involves the observer's self. Dynamic perception, we should recall, is the true foundation of aesthetic experience" (Arnheim, 1994, p. 167). Furthermore, contemporary art itself increasingly proposes relationships through more engaging and multisensory modes. Many contemporary works and installations invite the audience to interact bodily and to be fully sensorially involved. Yet the revolution against distant contemplation of artwork began long ago. For example, the leader of Italian Futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, proposed a "tactile art" to be experienced exclusively through the hands in his 1921 Manifesto on Tattilismo [8].

Research in this field is still wide open. In 2022, a study by the author on the topic of tactility gave rise to "Tactile Poetry", involving prominent artists such as Lamberto Pignotti and Emilio Isgrò [9]. In 1917, in New York, Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) presented a work titled Sculpture for the Blind. French writer and art collector Henri-Pierre Roché (1879–1959) recounts that the piece was exhibited inside a sack with two holes through which visitors could insert their hands. The work was clearly conceived to be touched and intended by the artist as a "revelation for the hands."

In the same period, precisely in 1913, one of the earliest tactile visit experiences was offered by a museum—the Sunderland Museum in England—where curator John Alfred Charlton Deas organized several tactile visits, initially involving children from the Sunderland Council Blind School, then extending the experience to adult blind visitors [10]. But what are the peculiarities of touch, and what benefits can it offer in the context of art appreciation? The tactile channel offers a wide range of information and sensations unavailable to sight. It is undeniable that our relationship with reality, and consequently with art, undergoes constant impoverishment when the connection relies almost exclusively on vision, neglecting and numbing other senses. We live in the era of "Augmented Reality" but constantly inhabit a "Diminished Reality." To truly enhance our relationship with the world, a new multisensory approach beyond the virtual is necessary.

Regarding the contribution of touch and the aesthetics of tactility, some aspects of reality can only be perceived through this sensory mode, such as an object's texture, temperature, material properties, and surface characteristics. Touch can give voice to objects by producing auditory sensations. Furthermore, tactile perception enables a direct and intimate relationship with the object, activating proprioceptive sensations and engaging the body actively. Finally, the affective aspect—a crucial component of aesthetic experience—finds its fullest expression in tactility and physical contact. To touch a sculpture means to caress it as one would a child or a loved one.

Hence, the education of touch and the senses in general becomes fundamental. This applies to everyone, but especially to blind people. Without this education, as Selma Fraiberg noted, blind individuals risk growing up with "blind hands" [11]. Rudolf Arnheim highlights how our society suffers from "an inability to make proper use of the sense of touch, a society in which many hours spent before the television—and we might add today the computer and smartphone—turn the world into a distant spectacle. The natural intimacy of manipulating things through which humans normally learn is hindered. The education of the blind should therefore be seen in the broader context of the need to re-educate a population severely impaired in sensoriality" (Arnheim, 1994, p. 167).

In the educational context and for learning purposes, sensory education is thus not only important for children with visual and other disabilities. This was well understood by the Italian doctor and educator Maria Montessori over one hundred and twenty years ago, and confirmed by recent neuroscientific research (Regni, Fogassi, 2019). Museum educational offerings should also consider different sensory modalities to inclusively contribute to art education and cultural heritage. Returning to blind individuals, it is clear that good education, starting from preschool, along with opportunities for meaningful museum experiences, are essential conditions to foster motivation and curiosity towards art and to provide the tools necessary to actively participate in the cultural life of society.

For someone who cannot see, teaching unsupported by concrete and tactile elements is ineffective. Conversely, even sighted individuals require sensory supports. Art history manuals, for instance, abound with images supporting the textual descriptions. Starting from tactility, a multisensory cultural offering can be developed, where alongside visual values there are tactile values, as well as sound suggestions and olfactory stimuli—as in the Museo Omero exhibition The Shade can see which will be discussed later. Naturally, by involving multiple senses and touch in particular, the lack of one sense, such as sight, no longer precludes access. Multisensoriality can thus be the key to rethinking museology, making it a protagonist of a democratic, accessible, and therefore universal cultural offering.

Opening the possibility of tactile access to artistic and cultural heritage implies a sort of revolution that needs to be supported and documented through concrete experiences demonstrating its practical feasibility. One of the main obstacles to the use of touch in cultural heritage enjoyment is undoubtedly the issue of conservation and protection. In reality, it is mainly about addressing the matter without prejudice and understanding the different actions and strategies that can be adopted and applied to specific situations. Museo Omero constantly offers knowledge, skills, and concrete examples in this regard.

First and foremost, careful evaluation of artworks is essential, ideally involving the artist if still living, to define which pieces can be safely explored through touch, possibly adopting special measures if necessary. For example, to prevent hands from leaving smudges or organic traces on surfaces, thin latex gloves or gels capable of cleaning and isolating the hands—already used in restoration—can be employed. Of course, this presupposes appropriate organization and training for museum staff, who also have the task of educating and raising public awareness about a new relationship with artistic objects and of guiding sighted and blind visitors during tactile sessions [12].

It is clear that if, after careful evaluation, the risk of artwork deterioration is concrete and real, tactile access will not be permitted. In such cases, copies of the works can be used. However, the use of replicas can also pose problems. One might think that providing blind people with replicas solves the accessibility is-

[3]In 2020, the Museo Omero dedicated an exhibition titled Touching Beauty: Maria Montessori – Bruno Munari to Maria Montessori and the artist and designer Bruno Munari.

sue. This is not the case: every person entering a museum wishes to see original works, not reproductions. The problem worsens when replicas form a separate section of the museum or exhibition, which is often the case even in prestigious institutions. Creating a separate path is not only humiliating but also prevents the shared experience of visiting with others, which is one of the most important aspects of cultural participation.

The tactile path to beauty is therefore possible, and the aesthetic values of tactility are now recognized. Touching art takes on a meaning that was until recently unknown, where the educated and gentle hand transforms the touch into a caress, giving both sighted and blind people feelings of joy and wonder. All of this is practiced at Museo Omero and in its temporary exhibitions, such as the most recent one dedicated to the international artist Enzo Cucchi.

The Shade Can See: a Multisensory and Inclusive Exhibition
The exhibition The Shade can see , dedicated to the international artist Enzo Cucchi, is the latest temporary exhibition promoted by the Museo Omero. The exhibition clearly exemplifies the inclusion philosophy promoted by the museum and represents the design of original and fully accessible cultural events following the principles of Universal Design. The methods of enhancing, communicating, and relating to the artwork, together with the design of an experiential and engaging exhibition environment, represent innovations compared to the traditional museology model, which is almost always exclusively based on the sense of sight.

The artistic project proposes and emphasizes tactility and multisensoriality as tools to rethink the encounter with the artwork. By mutual agreement with the artist, 40 sculptures made with different materials are exhibited, which can be enjoyed through touch by the entire audience. There are also 4 unpublished drawings, naturally translated into high relief for the blind by the museum's expert staff. To fully understand a work, Enzo Cucchi explains, "one must see it only in the dark; because things are preserved in shadow and darkness," and to look at the world, he adds, "one should put their head on the ground, like pumpkins, and their hands on things." Many things are not seen or appreciated by the eyes: they remain in shadow and darkness. It is necessary "to put our hands on them." We have already seen how, through the hands, it is possible to understand the shape of sculpture and gain diverse information and stimuli.

A sculpture has much to tell also through the materials used by the artist, through the texture of surfaces, the geometry of planes, consistency, temperature — all aspects that require a tactile and multisensory approach. It is undeniable that a dialogue with the artwork of this kind, intimate and engaging, is capable of amplifying the affective sentiment that largely passes through the tactile relationship, allowing anyone to live an intense and novel aesthetic experience. Thus, from the needs of blind people arise new perspectives for everyone. But touch, as we have said, needs to be rediscovered and educated. A special dark environment was set up within the exhibition spaces to allow the public to experience something unique. A six-by-three-meter cave, inspired by one of the artist's sculptures, houses three works made of different materials, to be explored exclusively through the hands. It is a kind of initiation path to awaken dormant senses and raise awareness of the potential of our body and sensoriality.

Figure 3: Tthe dark cave and the forest

This preparatory journey supports a multisensory appreciation of the sculptures in the exhibition, with guidance from museum staff, to fully experience the encounter with art. The enhancement of tactile and multisensory values is already expressed and communicated through an original invitation to the exhibition's opening day, held on December 15, 2024. The invitation features a simultaneous visual and tactile image, with text written in high-contrast print and Braille. At the ends of a cord are attached a small skull — a characteristic symbol of the artist's poetic imagery — and a thimble. The latter was chosen by Enzo Cucchi as an additional reference to tactility and manuality.

The space hosting the exhibition is divided into particularly scenic environments, aimed at an inclusive and engaging narration of the artist's poetics. We can define them as theatrical sets, where the leading actors are the artworks, waiting for the audience to bring the show to life. Engagement and active participation are the key words. We have already mentioned the dark cave, called the "Cave of Idols," which characterizes a first theatrical set, together with a grove made up of full-size trees, also inspired by the artist's works. This refers to a primordial, genuine humanity at the beginning of its path, still free from the superstructures and masks that characterize contemporary society.

[4]https://www.archivioenzocucchi.com/enzo-cucchi.html
[5]The exhibition is set up at the Museo Omero from December 15, 2024, to August 31, 2025.

This theme is repeated in a second environment that recalls a country farmyard and rural life, a source of inspiration for Enzo Cucchi, also through the testimonies of his farmer father collected by Brunella Antomarini in an insightful essay titled The Wheat. Giuseppe Cucchi describes a life where the body and senses are at the center of human experience, in symbiosis with the earth, animals, and natural rhythms; a life made of labor, rituals, and collective celebrations capable of creating strong social bonds. Giuseppe Cucchi writes: "You always felt the smells — the smell of rain, grass, earth, plants, and animals. Everything had its own scent. That's why you bonded with people and things, because the smell entered inside you. When you have no smell, like today, you don't bond with anything and you easily free yourself from everyone because everyone smells the same."

The rural world's smells are periodically introduced in the exhibition through the use of plants and various materials, as well as characteristic sounds such as a rooster's crow. The presence of seating and tables in this farmyard space allows visitors to pause and experience the exhibition time in a different and productive way, enhancing pleasure, interpersonal relationships, and opportunities for learning and discovery. Here, visitors can consult various artist catalogs, read some of his poems, and acquire knowledge about the role of tactility in art appreciation. They can also discover the location of other works by the artist in the region through a special visual and tactile map. This promotes knowledge of the relevant territories, in synergy with and involving other local and cultural entities, starting, for example, with the Municipality of Morro d'Alba, the artist's birthplace near Ancona [13].

A third environment reconstructs the artist's studio, the place where the rich and original repertoire of images takes shape. These images do not lend themselves to a single interpretation; on the contrary, they are characterized by polysemy, with references to archaic symbols dwelling in what Jung called the collective unconscious. An interpretive and reflective journey, which the audience is invited to concretize through the creation of their own "Cave of Idols," in the space adjacent to the studio dedicated to manual skills and creativity. The exhibition's communication and narration is diversified and multimodal, making it inclusive and accessible to all audiences.

The important collaboration with RAI, the Italian public broadcaster, has led to the production of a fully accessible informational video about the exhibition, including audio, subtitles, and translation into Italian Sign Language and International Signs. A presentation dedicated to people with complex communication needs was created using Augmentative and Alternative Communication strategies, thanks to collaboration with a specialist. All of this is included in the special catalog alongside Braille texts and raised-relief translations of the drawings on display.

Finally, particular inclusive educational and didactic initiatives and workshops have been designed, aimed at schools, families, and adult audiences, to facilitate moments of socialization, learning, and understanding of the use of tactility in art appreciation. Using audio pens—devices easily used by anyone to receive audio information—special experiential paths have been prepared within the exhibition, which intensely involve visitors, especially younger ones, in an unusual and enjoyable discovery of Enzo Cucchi's art.

Conclusions

The path towards full accessibility to museums and art for people with disabilities, and especially for blind people, is still long, but we can say that a viable route has been traced. In general, a change in how accessibility is conceived is necessary—not as an assistive measure for a few, but as a great cultural opportunity from which everyone can benefit. The experience of Museo Omero and its ongoing research indicate tactility and multisensoriality, in terms of enhancement and enjoyment of art and cultural heritage, as the main path to enable people with visual disabilities and beyond to truly participate in cultural life.

This entails a kind of revolution of traditional museology, which has always been designed exclusively around seeing. We have sought to demonstrate that, with proper organization, such a revolution is possible and practicable. Moreover, the multisensory approach can enable a rethinking and general renewal of the relationship with the artwork—not distant but participatory, immersive, for a novel and engaging aesthetic experience.

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