

# Top tips for assisting and describing art to blind and partially sighted visitors

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# Introduction

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This resource has been written to support people working or volunteering in the arts and culture sector. It is a resource that will support you to identify and communicate with blind and partially sighted (BPS) visitors and provide best practice on describing art.

Throughout the resource, BPS people will be referred to as 'visitor(s)'.

This resource does not claim to have all the answers, but it offers practical tips to enable everyone to learn as they go and adapt what they offer to the individual needs of the visitor.

Depending on the type of venue (free, payment on entry, gift shop, etc), some sections or information within this resource may not be relevant or may apply in a different order.

# Section one:

## Spotting vision impairments

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- There are a few signs that could help identify a visitor who may require assistance. These visual indicators could include the use of a white cane, the wearing of a sunflower badge or lanyard, a visitor being guided by an assistance or guide dog, or a visitor being guided by another person.
- Equally, some visitors may be more hesitant on arrival, track a wall or just walk much slower; remember, these are only clues and you shouldn't assume that they have a vision impairment.
- Some visitors carry nothing obvious and may move freely and unaided until they approach someone to request assistance.
- A visitor may have enough vision to identify you as the relevant person to approach, but still might need help because of a vision impairment eg, working out details.
- Visitors might be perfectly able to make eye contact or see colour, but due to their vision impairment, not more specific details.
- Finally, if you notice a visitor standing still for a long time, moving cautiously or seeming to walk with no clear aim, approach them saying, 'Can I help you?'. They may be waiting for someone but might gladly accept your help.



## Section two:

# Introducing yourself

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- There is no harm in asking if a visitor needs help. Worst case scenario is that they might say no – this is no different from any other visitor at this point.
- Say 'Hello, can I help you?'. Introduce yourself. It is good to do this as soon as you notice the person, even if the visitor then must wait a little. By doing this, they at least know that help is coming.
- Ask if and how the visitor wants to be guided, as they will know what level of support they need. This could range from just following you closely to letting them take your arm, elbow, or shoulder. All are good methods, depending on the individual's preference.



## Section three:

# Talking about disability

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- Don't worry about saying, 'having a look at this' or 'seeing if you can find that' – BPS people will use these phrases too.
- Do try to avoid broad questions about how they cope with this or that. The visitor may not mind, but they aren't there to educate staff. Such questions are also just hard to answer.
- Avoid phrases like 'suffering from' or 'handicapped' when talking about disability – both are old-fashioned terms and are widely viewed as negative expressions.
- It is also best to put the person first eg 'People with disabilities.'
- Following consultation with the blind and partially sighted community, the preferred term to use is 'blind and partially sighted'. We may also use the terms 'visually impaired' or 'vision impaired' to describe any degree of sight loss. We avoid using 'people living with' or 'affected by' sight loss.
- Remember, you don't need to discuss disability at all whilst helping someone. For many, fear about language is a real issue, but focusing on the task means the subject probably won't arise. If it does, as already stated, just ask what term the visitor prefers.

## Section four:

# Describing art

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Here are a few points to guide you through the describing process for either pre-recorded or in person description. Remember when describing the artwork, you need to give a factual description of what you're seeing and not give any subjective opinions or your interpretation of the artwork. We have provided some examples of how you describe art at the end of this section.

1. What is the piece called and who is it by? If possible/ available, give some background about the artist.
2. Give some context to the piece, including a brief overview of what it is and when it was made.
  - Was the piece created for the exhibition, or for another purpose?
  - Is there anything specific about the material – why have those materials been chosen?
3. How big is the piece?
  - Consider the audience and whether cm or inches would be best. If the piece is really large, consider comparing it to something tangible, for example a large painting might be a similar size to a single bed.
  - How might we interact with the size of the piece?

4. Consider the most logical way to describe what you can see:
- Is there a particular detail which the eye is drawn to?
  - Can the piece be described from left to right or in a clockwise direction?
  - If it's a 3D object, is there a particular point that you can start from - remember that you need to describe all sides?

5. Use vivid, colourful language to create a visual picture.

You are trying to create a picture in the mind's eye for someone, so be as descriptive as possible. Is there a mood to the piece, does it tell a story? Whilst it is important to give a factual description of the art don't feel that you need to be too rigid with this. Descriptions need to be captivating (where possible) to draw the audience in.

- Consider the contrast, and light and dark in a piece.
- What colours are used? If the person has no colour memory, consider using warm and cold terms.
- Is there texture within the piece? Is it rough or smooth? If it's painted, can you see the paint layers and thickness?
- Think about the shape and any symmetry in the piece.

6. Use other senses.

- Can the piece be touched?
- Is there a piece of music or a smell that helps bring the piece to life?
- Can you use your tone of voice to bring an emotion to the piece? If the piece is cheerful or colourful, then you can have a more smiley or uplifting voice whereas if the piece is darker or has a sad theme, then a more sombre and level voice will capture this.



## Example one – a sculpture



### Overview

This sculpture is by Emma Harding. It is made up of three different parts, the representation of a human head, placed on a cube base, with a large decorative basket-shaped form on top of the head.

### Full description (of front of sculpture only)

This sculpture is made by Emma Harding. It was made in November 2020 and is made of a mixture of materials including

ceramic, tile and ceramic fragments. The artist works in both mosaic and ceramic, this piece combines both. Recent work has focused on human heads and what is inside them!

Let's start at the bottom with the cuboid base. The base is approximately 20 cm square, sandy in colour with some variable sized dark patches across the surface. There is a splodge of dark sea-green colour on the front right, as we look at the base, which looks like some paint has dripped down that side.

The head, which is life-sized, sits in the middle of the top of the cube base. The eyes are closed, the mouth set closed in a neutral expression, the ears are just visible on the side of the head and no hair is evident because the top of the head is flat. The face and features are not smooth and flat, but rough and undulated, giving the piece an unfinished, rough appearance.

The left-hand side of the face, the right as we look at the piece, is a cool turquoise blue/green in colour – it's not a constant colour but changes across the face. There is an oval, opaque area where the cheek would be, it looks a bit like smoky glass and is smooth.

The colour of the left-hand side is more neutral, a sandy colour, with a brown, smooth cheek section. There are various parts of the head, three in total, two at the top of the head, above the ears, and one on the left-hand side below the cheek, which look like sections of paper, with text and writing.

The large, colourful basket-shape, on top of the head, is made from a series of mosaic sections held together by what look like tree branches. The mosaic sections on the right-hand side are darker blues and greens in colour, whilst those on the left are orange and yellow. The rim of the basket shape is not smooth.

## Example two – a painting/picture



### Overview

This is a bright, colourful painted collage piece showing a man and woman in formal evening dress at the beach. The work is painted with additional details cut from other media, most likely magazines. It is by Anna Bachène.



## **Full description**

This picture is made by Anna Bachène and was created in 2020. It has a canvas base and the media is mainly paint but with some use of magazines. The artist studied stained glass in the 1990s and then moved into mosaics and mixed media. She moved from London to Hastings in 2010 and has exhibited widely in both places.

Due to the complexity of this picture, we'll describe it in sections. To set the scene though, the bottom third of the piece shows a man and woman in formal evening wear, on a raised bright-red platform by the beach. A thin strip, above this platform, shows the bright yellow sand, with several people on the beach. The top half of the composition is the bright aqua marine blue of the sea and sky with a lighthouse, boat, two birds and two butterflies.

So, if we start at the bottom with the bright-red platform, the floor takes up about a third of the composition and is painted in swirling pillar box red circles with slightly darker centres. There are three visible black posts, one on the left and two on the right, which hold a thin bright pink barrier around the edge of the platform. The pink strip of the barrier has black pom poms spaced evenly along its length. At the far left of the barrier sits two white sea birds.

From left to right on the platform, we have a Greco-Roman looking bust as the stem and base of a table. The tabletop is round and multicoloured, and it looks like yellow, pink and blue/green paints have been flicked across it. Standing on the table is a bottle of red wine, one full wine glass, a plate of cheese – looks a bit like camembert – biscuits and red grapes, and a stack of three side plates with cutlery on top.

To the right of the table, just to the left of centre of the composition, stands the main man of the piece. He is of Asian appearance wearing evening dress – black trousers, a short black jacket with a white shirt, waistcoat and bow tie. On his shoulders hangs a black cloak with bright white lining. On his right lapel is a large red flower – it could be a well opened-rose. His right hand, long bony fingers exposed, sits on his right hip, the elbow and forearm hidden under the cloak. His left arm is held across his body as if he is about to extract something from an inside pocket with his left hand. There is some sort of thin, metal looking bracelet or watch on his left wrist.

The man looks off to the left of the piece, his face neutral, as if he is looking at something in the distance, or lost in thought. His hair is short black and slicked off his high forehead and he has a thin moustache.

To the right of the man, nearer the bottom of the composition, is the woman of the piece. She takes up most of the bottom right-hand side of the picture and is wearing a mid-pink sleeveless evening dress. She is lounging in a chair. We can see one bright pink leg of the chair, the seat of which is red with a few black and white stripes. The woman lounges with her left arm, with chunky gold bracelet, on the arm of the chair and her head resting back against the chair. She has short, or pulled back, dark brown hair and has a yellow floral garland in her hair. She looks to her left, brown eyes open, and red lips closed together with the hint of a smile.

Her pink dress has a thin halter-neck strap showing off her bronzed shoulders and arms. It is a full-length dress which flows down and out with a wide skirt which covers the feet of her male companion to the left. There is a large round decoration at the

plunging neckline of the dress, patterned gold and maroon. She is being shaded from the sun by a pink parasol decorated with yellow flowers with green stems and leaves. The parasol is behind her to her right.

To the woman's left, but to the right of the composition, is another table, this one smaller and simpler, in turquoise blue. A large golden yellow flower sits where the stem meets the round base. On the round tabletop stands a copper-coloured coffee pot and small cup and saucer, a mobile phone, a bottle of sparkling wine and a wine glass. A smoky black cat lays on a green cushion under the table, right at the bottom edge of the composition. The cat stares out at the viewer.

To the right of the table, looking most out of place, is a piece of collage stuck to the work. It is a small, white square on which is visible in faint red a large capital A and B above a maze drawing. Just behind the sticker is a large green, leafy plant in a golden coloured pot with a black rim.

If we move now to the thin strip of bright yellow sand, in the middle of the composition, and work across from left to right we see, all slightly blurry, and not in sharp focus, several figures enjoying the beach. From left to right, the first figure is lying on their side, facing the left, on a blanket or mat, under a red and white decorated cover. As we move on, we notice that the figures on the beach are all spaced between the posts of the platform's pink barrier.

The second figure is on the beach between the first black post and the main male figure's right-hand side. This second figure is lying on his back on a rose-gold and black spotted mat – I said 'he'



as although the figures are not sharply represented, this person is clearly naked, and his male genitalia are on display.

On the other side of the main male figure, just off centre of the composition, is the third mat on the beach – a green and yellow mat - which lies empty apart from what looks like a beach bag with some letters printed on it. Next to it is a small round red object, which could be a ball.

Further along the beach set behind the lounging woman's head, is a large palm type tree which takes up a large portion of the right-hand side of the composition. The leaves of the tree are vivid green with streaks of dark red or maroon. In the centre of the tree is a larger-than-life butterfly with brown and yellow speckled wings. Red and green foliage surrounds the base of the tree.

The last figure on the beach sits at the far right, in an upright chair with arms, under a pink umbrella. This figure is sitting facing the left, looking out to sea and appears to be wearing a red bikini, and has a black lurcher-like dog on their left-hand side.

The next section, above the sand, is of course the sea, which together with the strip of sky forms the top half of the composition. From left to right we have, almost in the top left corner, a red and white striped lighthouse with a grey rocky base in front of which stand a male and female figure. There is a green object between them, which could be a Lilo, it is hard to tell. There are a few more, black rocks just in front of the male figure, to the left, who is wearing black swimming trunks.

Slightly further along to the right, but more inland in the sea are a further two figures, standing in the sea. Possibly both male, they are wearing t-shirts, swimming bottoms and dark sunglasses.

We then jump across to the right-hand side of the composition, with the main male figure taking up the centre, and right at the sea's edge, almost walking on to the sand, we see a naked woman holding a red ball or balloon. Just above her and to the right, there is a larger than life black, red and white spotted butterfly.

Above the woman, further out to sea is a brown sailing boat with pinky-red sails. To the right of this, in the distance, on the horizon, is a small sailboat with one white sail.

The very top of the composition, is the light blue strip of the sky – it is painted smoother than the sea, which is darker and more textured, possibly to show the waves and movement. In the sky, between the lighthouse on the left and the pink sailed boat just off centre are two black and yellow birds in flight. Finally, in the top right-hand corner is a second larger than life black, red and white spotted butterfly.

Overall, this is a colourful busy work, without regard for strict perspective; there is lots to catch the eye and make us curious.

## Section five:

# Paying and exiting

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- Where possible, offer to queue with the visitor. If this is not possible, try your best to explain the procedure. If you offer a designated till service and there is no need to queue, take the visitor to it if they require this support.
- Be ready to help with packing. Some people will appreciate having hands free for paying.
- Make sure the visitor can find the card machines – you can guide a person gently by the wrist for tasks like this, but it is wise to ask first if they mind you showing them.
- Tell the visitor the total price and when the payment has gone through. They also need to know anything that others can easily see on displays etc.
- Ask where the visitor wants to go next. Some will want to exit from where you met them, others might need help to a bus stop or taxi rank. This is reasonable if it's a short walk, but you may not be covered by insurance to go a long way or cross busy roads.

## Section six:

# Reasonable adjustments

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- Level of clutter – walkways should be clear for health and safety reasons. A visitor can risk hurting themselves if walkways are not kept clutter free.
- Lighting – more lights could be turned on to help a visitor navigate and be able to see the artwork more clearly. Equally, for some visitors too much light can be glary and can hinder them from using what vision they have effectively. Where possible, ask the visitor about lighting levels and adjust where possible.

# Section seven:

## Further information

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### What is the Equality Act?

Public spaces have a legal obligation to consider and try to remove the barriers a visitor might face because of a disability. This is so they can access and use goods and services in the same way, as far as this is possible, as someone who's not disabled. This is set out in the Equality Act 2010.

### Acknowledgements

East Sussex Sight Loss Council would like to thank Emma Harding and Anna Bachène from Zoom Arts Community, for providing the artwork used in this resource; and Amy Stocker, Royal Collection Trust, Access and Inclusion Manager for help in creating the art description guidelines.

### Accessibility

If you need this document in an alternative format, please email [info@pocklington-trust.org.uk](mailto:info@pocklington-trust.org.uk) or telephone 020 8995 0880.

### References

For advice on physically guiding blind and partially sighted people, visit [www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)

Access further detail on the Equality Act 2010 at [www.legislation.gov.uk](http://www.legislation.gov.uk)

Learn more about common eye conditions at [www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/common-eye-conditions](http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/common-eye-conditions)

# About Sight Loss Councils

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Sight Loss Councils, funded by Thomas Pocklington Trust, are local groups led by blind and partially sighted members. Together, we use our lived experience to tackle local and national issues, and work with organisations to improve the accessibility of their services.

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