

N:\WPDOCS\Cog Psych\imagery\art for vis impaired

SHOW: WEEKEND SUNDAY (NPR 12:00 am ET)
NOVEMBER 30, 1997, SUNDAY
Transcript # 97113008-215

TYPE: PACKAGE
SECTION: News; Domestic
LENGTH: 1443 words
HEADLINE: Art for the Blind

WEEKEND SUNDAY (NPR), NOVEMBER 30, 1997

BYLINE: Jill Weitzner, New York; Liane Hansen, Washington, DC

HIGHLIGHT:
Jill Weitzner reports on a new program designed to help th blind "see"
paintings.

BODY:

LIANE HANSEN, HOST: Museums across the country have been experimenting for a long time with ways for patrons without sight to see art. They found partial solutions -- touch tours of sculptures, for example.

Well, now the two-dimensional world of painted canvasses has become accessible. Jill Weitzner reports.

JILL WEITZNER, REPORTER: About 15 people and three guide dogs sit around a U-shaped wooden table in the education department of New York's Museum of Modern Art. They are studying Jasper John's 1955 work "Target With Four Faces."

VIRGINIA HOOPER, TEACHER, ART EDUCATION FOR THE BLIND: Target image is a series of concentric circles -- one circle surrounding another circle, surrounding another circle going out...

WEITZNER: Before each person is a large rubbery sheet textured with raised dots and lines. It's called swell paper.

Virginia Hooper, a teacher from Art Education for the Blind is telling the students where to put their hands on the tactile canvas.

HOOPER: Now from the upper left corner, move down. That unpatterned area, if you'll follow that unpatterned area...

WEITZNER: The students concentrate to keep up with Hooper's instructions. Occasionally, someone's fingers become lost, and Hooper begins again from home base.

HOOPER: OK, from the upper left corner of the painting, move down an inch, about an inch along...

WEITZNER: Slowly, as the students move their hands across the canvas, an image takes shape. At the top of the 3D canvas is a wooden box. Inside are four plaster casts of human faces.

HOOPER: As you move across to the right, you'll find four of those little boxes with the four faces.

WEITZNER: After a few minutes, Nina Rustayi (ph) leads a class discussion.

NINA RUSTAYI, LEADER OF CLASS DISCUSSION: OK, what is -- what are some of the associations you have?

REED DEVLIN (ph), STUDENT IN ART CLASS WHO IS VISUALLY IMPAIRED: I hadn't really-- I was just enjoying the symmetry of it and hadn't really thought of any -- anything beyond that.

RUSTAYI: Uh-huh. Symmetry...

WEITZNER: The student remarking on the balance of the composition is Reed Devlin, who began losing his sight as a child. He said he doesn't think in visual terms, but remembers colors and the look of brass and pavement.

Devlin says he can't wait to get to class.

DEVLIN: And it's exciting. It really is. I took off, you know, days from work, vacation days just so that I could be part of all these classes. I want to learn everything I can about every picture that I'm able to look at or touch.

WEITZNER: Not everyone shares Devlin's enthusiasm. Susan Matula (ph), an actress who is visually impaired, says she doesn't go to museums because she can't enjoy the artwork like everyone else.

SUSAN MATULA, ACTRESS WHO IS VISUALLY IMPAIRED: If you lean close to a painting to really get a good look at it, you oftentimes see that guard's head really snap toward who's looking at that print. They're just doing their job. I recognize that, but it's disconcerting.

WEITZNER: Franchesca Rosenberg (ph) coordinates the Museum of Modern Art's

expanding program of touch classes.

FRANCESCA ROSENBERG, COORDINATOR OF TOUCH CLASSES, MUSEUM OF MODERN ART:

There's something in a work of art for anyone. And I think that, you know, it remains true for the people that are blind or visually impaired -- that they really see just incredible things.

WEITZNER: Two years ago, Rosenberg arranged a touch class on the geometric work of Dutch painter Pete Mondrian (ph). The lines and rectangles of his canvasses were easy to translate into raised-line diagrams.

Rosenberg says you can't do this with the work of all artists. She won't arrange a touch class, for example, on the abstract expressionist paintings of Jackson Pollock.

ROSENBERG: They'll all look exactly the same, you know, because so much of it relies on his colors and the slight differences in the splatter patterns and that kind of thing.

Picasso's probably the hardest one that we've done, and even that worked well. What we have to do with a very complicated painting is break it up into several tactile diagrams.

WEITZNER: Though the tactiles have their drawbacks, the non-profit group Art Education for the Blind is creating an art history series for the blind modeled on the museum classes.

The 22-part series, "Art History Through Touch and Sound," will include more than 500 raised-line drawings, books, and a series of tapes. Here's how a shadow is described in the first installment called "Building Blocks," which introduces concepts fundamental to the study of art.

(BEGIN AUDIO CLIP FROM "ART HISTORY THROUGH TOUCH AND SOUND")

UNIDENTIFIED NARRATOR ON RECORDING: Think of yourself in the kind of shower where the water comes out in a fairly narrow spray. As you stand in front of this spray, the front of your body gets wet but not your back.

If the water were a light source, the front of your body would be highlighted and the back would be in shadow.

WEITZNER: A narrator coaches listeners through the raised pictures just like in the museum classes.

(BEGIN AUDIO CLIP OF MUSIC FROM "ART HISTORY THROUGH TOUCH AND SOUND")

WEITZNER: There is also music: period pieces and original compositions.

MUSIC RISES

WEITZNER: This composition describes Peter Paul Rubens' baroque painting "The Gathering of the Manna," a work in rich gold and red that shows Moses and some of his followers reaching to collect the small beads of food, or "manna," God has rained upon them.

Each voice corresponds to a particular element of Rubens' work. Here's the music that illustrates the two curving columns which frame the painting.

MUSIC RISES

And the manna falling from heaven.

MUSIC RISES

And here's Moses reaching heavenward.

MUSIC RISES

Finally, here are the voices of other people collecting the manna.

MUSIC RISES

Combined, the swirling voices are meant to imitate the swirling energy of the baroque painting.

MUSIC RISES

Nearly 40 prominent art historians worked on the series, including Beth Venn (ph) of the Whitney Museum; Marilyn Stokstad, author of the survey text "Art History;" Marsha Hill (ph) of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and Paula Gersin (ph) of Florida State University.

Gersin wrote three of the volumes in consultation with blind volunteers.

PAULA GERSIN, ART HISTORIAN, FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY: I worked very, very hard

at trying to find analogies that would convey the sense of something, but using those senses that were available for the visually impaired. Got to think of

image and word together.

And the balance changes -- sometimes image is more, you know, is more important; sometimes word is more important.

WEITZNER: Kyoka Tokanaga (ph) of Art Education for the Blind acknowledges the art history material can't replicate a sighted person's experience of walking through a gallery.

KYOKA TOKANAGA, ART EDUCATION FOR THE BLIND: It takes a little more time than it usually does to...

SOUNDBITE OF SNAPPING FINGERS

... glance at a picture and just look at it. And now they're being given access to a lot of things that are referred to in daily life, you know. Oh, that's very cubist or ooh, she's very Rubenesque or something like that. And they're going to understand what people -- they're going to experience for themselves, you know, what these things are.

WEITZNER: This experience, however, may not be cheap. Art Education for the Blind estimates the entire series of books and tapes will cost close to \$1 million to produce and take another year to complete. So far, the group has relied mostly on volunteer work and in-kind donations to meet some of these costs and is looking for funding.

It remains to be seen how many museums, libraries, and colleges will be willing to pay the estimated cost of \$6,000 to buy the 22- volume set. The first installment of "Art History Through Touch and Sound" will be released this winter.

For NPR News, I'm Jill Weitzner in New York.