Close Encounters of the First Kind [1]

Partnerships [2]

In the painting, a Caucasian man pulls back a curtain exposing a miniature George Washington pointing to the ax he used to chop down the legendary cherry tree, as the broken tree rests in his father’s hand. Everyone is finger-pointing. In the distance, two African-Americans – a man and a woman – are picking cherries from another tree; the sky tells of an impending storm. The Grant Wood original, Parson Weems’ Fable, is part of the permanent collection at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art [3] in Fort Worth, seen by tens of thousands of visitors every year. This year, thanks to a grant from the Alcon Foundation, hundreds of low- or no-sight visitors can “see” it too.

Peggy Sell, interpretation manager, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, is the inspiration behind the Close Encounters program, designed to remove barriers that prevent people with impaired vision from enjoying the visual arts. Standing in front of a small group of people, just a few feet away from the originals, Peggy presents two-dimensional tactile versions of the paintings under study. She begins describing the paintings, one-at-a-time, in extreme detail, starting with the frame. She describes scenery, action, mood and emotion, as patrons − some with service dogs resting at their feet − quietly run their fingers along the Braille cues inside the plastic version of the painting. These cues allow them to “feel” and understand the important features of the artwork: an object, texture or color. Peggy totes a canvas bag that holds other tactile aids such as a sample of velvet fabric with pom-poms to describe the curtains in the painting. She passes each item around as she describes that particular aspect of the piece.

Made possible through a grant from the Alcon Foundation [4], the Amon Carter’s Close Encounters program is helping to make visual art more accessible to people with impaired vision.

“Amon Carter has taken a bold step forward as the only museum in the Fort Worth area to cater to people with low-to-no vision with a museum educator/staff-led verbal description tour, enhancing their enjoyment and appreciation of visual masterpieces,” said Melissa Thompson, Director, The Alcon Foundation. “This program is an extension of our mission to improve the quality of life by helping people ‘see’ better. In this case, it’s access to the arts, rather than access to care, that’s the means for enhancing sight and enhancing lives. Whether they are blind or losing their sight due to glaucoma [5], macular degeneration, other diseases or an
accident, Close Encounters is an enriching, inclusive experience for vision-impaired museum-goers.”

The program has opened a new door for Subie Green. A docent at the Amon Carter, Subie wanted to share her love of art more deeply with her husband, who lost most of his vision in adulthood. The program has helped her develop more descriptive language to help her husband visualize more precisely. “Phil was fascinated by the tactile presentation,” she said of her husband’s experience. “For him, the scene really came alive with touch. It’s a remarkable program for people with vision loss.”

Liz Campbell has covered this program as a reporter at the Star-Telegram. She, too, is blind. “This is a great start by Amon Carter to be more inclusive in providing ways for everyone to enjoy the art collection. I hope that the museum will expand the program over time to include more pieces,” she said. Currently, only seven paintings in the museum have corresponding aids for the blind.

Amon Carter piloted their program with Lighthouse for the Blind [6], whose employees and volunteers provided guidance on refining the program. “This is so rich for our community,” said Nancy Fisher, community development manager, Lighthouse for the Blind. “People of all ages served by our community can now experience art up close and personal.” She points to other benefits as well. “It is empowering for people living with blindness to go to an art museum without bringing along someone who can interpret for them,” she said. “It helps them enjoy the art world in a new way, chipping away at some of the last stigmas and barriers associated with vision impairment.”

The program is offered every other month or patrons may contact the museum prior to their visit to request the tactile versions of the paintings. Future plans include creating large print labels for all gallery spaces — permanent exhibition and special exhibitions — and expanding the tactile program to include sculpture. “We want all visitors to experience Amon Carter the same as everyone with vision,” said Peggy. “This is the first phase of a multi-year project to bring the finer things in our community closer to all people, regardless of ability.

Editor’s Note: Museums around the world, including the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim in New York City; the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; Museo del Prado in Madrid; and Museo Nacional de San Carlos in Mexico City, are helping to increase access to art for blind and low-vision patrons with a variety of verbal description and touch tour programs.

References


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Links
[8] https://www.guggenheim.org/event/event_series/minds-eye