The Routledge Handbook of Audio Description

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Audio description in museums

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1. Introduction: audio description and museums

It is important to emphasise at the outset that this chapter is based on the real life practice experienced by the authors as key members of the VocalEyes organisation. VocalEyes, as an audio description (AD) service provider, can be said to have set the industry standard, at least in terms of theatre and museum AD. However, the principles and methods described also largely reflect the findings of researchers in the field over the last twenty years or so.

Museums and galleries have traditionally been focused on visual experiences. The ideology of museums as silent spaces, with displays behind glass, continues to dominate and has frustrated the drive for equality of access. Barriers to the inclusion of blind and visually impaired people stem from a lack of understanding as to the full range of ways in which museums can be experienced and the tacit assumption that sight is a prerequisite. This overlooks the fact that through multifaceted, sensory, social and participatory encounters, people with all levels of sight or sight loss can enjoy equally meaningful engagement with arts and heritage. Furthermore, it is a common misconception that blindness is a binary state, leading to the question “what would a blind person gain from visiting a gallery or museum?” In reality, 93% of those registered as blind or sight impaired in the UK have some degree of vision or light perception.

AD is the principal tool for supporting accessible and enjoyable museum visits for blind and visually impaired people. Precise, logically structured language, interwoven with historic references and cultural narratives, can bring collections and venues to life in a powerful way. However, as the UK museum sector has been slower to recognise its value and potential for visually impaired people than other fields of arts and culture such as theatre and film, the practice and provision of AD within museums lags behind. While initial descriptions for performance and screen were developed in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s respectively (Fryer, 2016), AD within museums did not emerge until the 2000s.

The organisation VocalEyes was founded in 1998, originally to provide AD services for theatre productions. In 2003 it partnered with the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) for Talking Images; a research project that audited provisions for visually impaired people at UK museums and heritage sites and investigated attitudes of blind and visually impaired people towards visiting them (RNIB & VocalEyes, 2003). In 2009, VocalEyes undertook a feasibility
study into the most impactful means of supporting the museum sector to be more inclusive (Pereira, 2009). As a result, VocalEyes established a visual arts strategy in 2012, undertaking twelve projects within the first year. In the years since, access for blind and visually impaired people has risen up the UK museum sector agenda. In part this is due to the Equality Act (2010) which requires venues to make “reasonable adjustment” to enable disabled people to visit UK museums on an equal basis to non-disabled people. Additionally, the museum workforce is increasingly attuned to the moral and social imperatives of becoming more inclusive.

In 2018, Arts Council England began to fund VocalEyes’ work supporting the museum sector and in 2018–19 the organisation worked on a total of 59 projects at museums and heritage sites. Many venues increased their accessibility with the support of other organisations such as Mind’s Eye, freelance access practitioners and their own staff and volunteers. The number of AD events at museums and heritage sites promoted through VocalEyes’ website increased from 68 in 2018 to 124 in 2019. Recent pioneering projects include the Old Royal Naval College’s Painted Hall redevelopment and Wellcome Collection’s Being Human gallery. Both culminating in 2019, the organisations consulted with visually impaired people from the outset and throughout the projects, steering the design and development of the new spaces. The venues now offer recorded and live AD on an ongoing basis and have been hailed as exemplars of inclusive museum practice.

Significant progress has been made but the work at Old Royal Naval College and Wellcome Collection remain rare initiatives. Provision continues to be inconsistent and a spontaneous visit to a UK museum by a visually impaired person could well be disappointing. A survey of access information provided on the websites of all UK Accredited museums in 2018 found that only 5% of museums offered live AD tours and just 3% mentioned recorded AD guides (Cock et al., 2018). We are far from a situation where blind and visually impaired people have equality of access to the UK’s museums and heritage sites.

AD is central to the drive for the right of blind and visually impaired people to have meaningful experiences with cultural heritage. Its impact can be transformative, transcending the on-site experience to contribute more broadly to well-being and the sense of self, as expressed by an audio description user adapting to a changed level of vision:

> I’ve only had sight issues over the last three years and museums and history were such a big part of my life beforehand that having audio description gives me a piece of myself back, it gives me a big part of my life.

(Wood, 2019)

### 1.1 Basic principles of audio description for museums

Audio description is a flexible tool which can be employed across cultural settings from contemporary art galleries to natural heritage sites. It can be used by itself or in conjunction with other forms of interpretation, the term used within the museum sector for the broad range of means through which visitors experience artworks or artefacts on display, for example texts, maps, films, items to handle, digital games and participatory activities. Combining AD with other formats can create rich, multisensory experiences. The two modes of delivering AD in museums, live and recorded, will be considered in turn, following an initial review of the broader principles applicable to both.

There is an absence of formal museum AD guidelines in the UK. Practice within the sector is continually honed in response to feedback from visitors and the museums themselves. As such there is variation in delivery and specific approaches at individual museums. The
following overarching principles have been developed by VocalEyes’ team of audio describers and blind or visually impaired visual awareness trainers.

A logical and cohesive description begins at a macro scale and works down to the micro. As such, an initial description of the museum façade, building and/or interior style, particularly features of architectural or aesthetic significance, both sets the scene and supports wayfinding. At a natural heritage site, starting with the broader landscape contextualises the more direct encounters that may follow. Next, a description of the immediate arena in which items will be explored is required; for example, a particular gallery. This space informs what is contained within – displays do not exist in isolation but respond to and interact with their surroundings. Finally, bringing the focus to specific artworks or artefacts, it is ideal for the selection described to include the collection highlights which all visitors come to experience; visually impaired people should not miss out. Museums can make further considerations to ensure the visitor experience is as accessible as possible. A described item should be physically easy to locate. Level access is optimal, so either a ground-floor display, or upper floor accessible by lift is ideal, with a relatively clear path to the object, avoiding crowded areas. The visibility of the piece is important – where in the gallery is it displayed? How does the lighting affect it? Objects around which multisensory experiences can be created will offer greater choice and depth of experience for visitors. For example, exhibits which can be touched, or replicated for handling, or enhanced with music, which may help to tell the item’s story.

1.2 Describing an artefact or artwork

The description of a museum object or artwork usually begins with a general overview, before getting into detail. It can be helpful to listeners for the piece to be initially encapsulated in a single sentence, including what it is, when it dates from and who created, found or owned it. For example, “Kara Walker’s Restraint is an etching with sugar aquatint produced in 2009”. The method of display is also significant – it may be mounted on a plinth or suspended from the ceiling. Providing information on the size at the outset helps build an accurate picture and ensures the visitor is not left guessing or surprised by a late revelation. Measurements can be approximate to the nearest index; “it’s around half a metre wide” is easier and more helpful for most people than “it’s 57 centimetres wide”, particularly if a series of measurements are given in succession. Alternatively, the item’s scale may be related to a common object – for example, “it’s the size of a car”, or a part of the body: “it would fit in the palm of your hand”.

The audience want to know what the piece is made from and what effect this has on the appearance. If it is an oil painting, the thickness of paint, or visible brush strokes may be referenced. Was the sculpture carved, cast, assembled or moulded? What is the visual evidence of this? Describing for the senses is particularly evocative, so if any materials have a particular smell (a leather-bound book), significant weight (an iron sculpture), or known feeling to the touch (a silk waistcoat), including these details can enrich the experience. It may also be relevant for a description to reference the condition of the piece, for example if there is a part missing, faded or worn smooth from use.

Colour is important. Most visually impaired people will be able to distinguish colours and tones, or recall them, if their visual impairment occurred later in life. Congenitally blind people will have a cultural understanding of colours, so this information is still pertinent. Detail about the style of the item, why it is particularly interesting, significant people connected with it, contextual cultural, social and historic stories, can all be included to create a lively description. Layering the descriptive content allows the visitor to choose whether to seek more detail on an object. There are differing opinions as to whether the audio describer’s perspective should or can be objective or subjective (e.g., Perego, 2019a; Hutchinson & Eardley, 2020), with a
clear difference in stance between US and UK describers. Within the UK describer community, the position is that true objectivity is not possible – any form of museum interpretation is, precisely by its nature, an interpretation. Good practice is for describers to provide evidence for why they make a particular claim. For example, rather than make the apparently subjective assertion “this painting has a sombre feeling”, they can explain why they are led to think that: “the painting’s muted colours – ochre, cream and olive – and the man’s downcast gaze give this painting a sombre feeling”. In this way, the listener may choose to interpret the colour palette and facial expression differently – they have been given both descriptive detail and an emotional reading to respond to as they wish. The description allows space for the visitors’ own interpretations. Co-creation of audio description between blind and non-blind people, as a non-hierarchical process, is an approach gaining increasing momentum. This is championed by Thompson (2017) who developed the model of Blindness Gain, positing that accessible approaches developed by and for blind people can benefit non-blind people.

2. Live audio described tours

Live audio-described tours are a popular way for blind and visually impaired people to experience a museum, exhibition or heritage site. They offer the opportunity to be in the vicinity of extraordinary objects and places and experience them in a social way. Chances to share ideas with a companion, meet other visitors on the tour and ask questions of the audio describer, build a participatory experience that is open to the visitor’s influence. Each tour will be unique. This level of choice and exchange can bring a deeper understanding of the subject and potentially greater fulfilment than other means of support can offer.

I was delighted when I heard the Postal Museum in London were starting audio-described tours. As a visually impaired person I love audio-described events, because they really help me to understand and appreciate what I’m looking at and they’re a very easy and engaging way of learning about exhibits and their history . . . The staff were friendly and helpful, the audio description was clear and detailed and there was ample opportunity for discussion and questions.

(Visitor to The Postal Museum, London, 2019)

I have been visiting museums and sites of historical or cultural interest for many years. My memories of such visits reach back into the far-off days when it was unthinkable for a visually impaired person to touch any object on display, expect any prepared assistance on site, or bring a dog through the door. It is with great pleasure, therefore, that I can say that the visit to Shakespeare’s Birthplace in Stratford was one of the best. We were entrusted to the care of Christine, one of the volunteer guides and we set off on the tour.

(Visitor to Shakespeare’s Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2018)

Many museums commission professional audio describers to lead tours. The describer works closely with the museum to devise the event and deliver the tour, ideally in conjunction with a subject specialist (often a curator) from the venue. In this way, the describer can audio describe the gallery spaces and artefacts or artworks, with contextual detail contributed by the museum expert to highlight the significance of the item, the surrounding narrative, the provenance, the artist, maker or owner. This model is very successful for a one-off or short series of tours. Alternatively, museums taking a longer-term approach and aiming to embed inclusive practice within their organisation, can develop skills and knowledge among their staff and
volunteer teams through audio description and visual awareness training. This enables a museum to welcome blind and visually impaired visitors on an ongoing basis by scheduling AD tours regularly as part of their public programme, or upon request.

2.1 Logistics and implementation

Various factors influence the success of a live AD tour and it can take time to build an audience if this is a new part of the museum’s programme. Over time, positive experiences will likely result in return visits, as trust and familiarity are fostered. The 2018 Euan’s Guide Access Survey found that 87% of respondents would re-visit a venue with good accessibility. Furthermore, word-of-mouth is a powerful tool, so one person’s positive experience will have a broader impact and can help establish a reputation. The following guidelines have been developed by VocalEyes following years of devising live-audio described tours with museums and heritage sites, capturing quantitative and qualitative feedback from blind and visually impaired visitors, consulting user panels – VocalEyes’ and those formed by museums – and discussion with visually impaired sector colleagues.

2.1.1 Scheduling

A quieter time at the museum is best so that attendees may more easily hear the tour leaders and each other. This also allows easier access to the exhibits and more comfortable navigation through the galleries or spaces. Some visitors may prefer to avoid travelling at rush hour. Those at work during the week will favour weekend or evening tours. Ideally, a museum will offer a choice of day and time options across several events, to suit different preferences and ensure the maximum number of people can attend and benefit. Consultation with visitors will provide a steer on preferred timings.

2.1.2 Tour capacity

Many blind and visually impaired attendees will wish to attend an AD tour with a companion, so this needs to be factored into the numbers. Group sizes of between 12–20 including companions, will usually be comfortable, depending on the scale and nature of the museum or event. A larger group makes it harder to hear the describer, more difficult to approach the exhibits and more time will be taken to navigate the space.

2.1.3 Staffing

Some visitors will arrive at the museum alone and request sighted guide support. Ideally, two or three additional staff members or volunteers who have received visual awareness and guiding training will be on hand. They can assist with greeting, navigation and support throughout the event. Internal communication is important, so that staff across the museum can help and direct tour-goers and keep relevant spaces accessible and available for the group.

2.1.4 Event logistics

Attendees’ experience on arrival will impact on the remainder of their visit. A clear meeting point is needed, ideally with seating available and close to accessible toilets. Event staff should be there in good time to greet visitors. Time for refreshments and discussion either before or
after the tour will be welcomed by many visitors. For those opting to join, this social opportunity can enrich the experience and lead to connections beyond the event.

2.1.5 Duration

This will depend on the nature of the site, event and audience, but audio-described tours of approximately one hour are suitable for most visitors, with around 90 minutes being an upper limit. Time will be needed navigating to and from the tour start and between the stops. It is important the museum adheres to advertised times, as visitors’ plans and transport will have been arranged and booked.

2.1.6 Booking

The process of booking must not be a barrier to attending the event, or fully experiencing it on the day. If entry to the museum is generally free and the AD event is the “reasonable adjustment” to make the galleries or display accessible to blind and visually impaired people, then tickets should be free. If the museum or exhibition is fee-paying then ticket prices should be in line with a disability concession rate and will ideally permit a free essential companion. Guide Dogs must legally be welcomed and it can be useful to be notified in advance whether a visitor intends to bring one, so that they may be supported on the day. It is best practice for a museum to offer options to book both online or by phone. Ofcom research in 2016 found that 88% of visually impaired people used the internet. A museum’s website should meet technical web accessibility standards and user-testing – including by those who use text-to-speech software – can inform content development and highlight any barriers. Any staff receiving phone or email bookings need to be fully briefed on the event and capture bookers’ individual access requirements.

2.1.7 Marketing

Established channels, such as the museum website, social media and email marketing to members or subscribers, can be used. Further options include local arts and culture listings, Vocal-Eyes website, wider press, Talking Newspapers and local groups for visually impaired people. Advance planning is often key for disabled people, in order to make appropriate arrangements to attend an event. Within their research groups Reich et al. (2011) found the majority of blind and visually impaired participants referenced the necessity of prior planning in order to visit a museum. The 2018 Access Survey by Euan’s Guide revealed that 94% of disabled people seek information prior to visiting a venue. As such, it is advisable to widely promote a live AD tour at least six to eight weeks ahead of the event, allowing time for visitors to make appropriate plans.

2.2 Content and delivery

As mentioned earlier, an AD tour will typically begin with an introduction to the topic or themes and a description of the surrounding gallery or space. This intellectual and physical scene-setting is needed to contextualise all that is to come. This will be followed by approximately ten tour stops – to make the overall event a comfortable length – at which artworks, specimens, displays, rooms, architectural or natural features can be described in detail. Other voices should be included as often as possible – conversation as opposed to
A one-way lecture is what gives live AD events their distinctive appeal. Subject specialists could co-deliver the tour, encouraging questions and input from the group. To ensure an audience-led approach, the describer can prepare initial descriptions, then take cues from visitors for further information; perhaps description of a painting detail, greater insight into a style or technique, or further background to how an artefact was used. Pauses in description are also important, to allow visitors to tune into and experience a place of their own accord. This is particularly applicable to a historic building or outdoor heritage site, where there are numerous sensory stimuli. The absence of description, for a period, can elevate an experience.

Museums combining AD with other participatory opportunities can create a rich experience. Optional handling or touch opportunities might be included within the tour, or form a discrete session, before or after. They could take the form of object replicas (possibly created by 3D printing), tactile diagrams of artworks or artefacts, or direct handling of the original – a marble sculpture, or a soldier’s helmet. Touch or handling resources should be high quality and must be relevant – touch for the sake of it will not be fulfilling for visitors. Tactile resources need to be rooted in the broader interpretive narrative, bringing an extra dimension to the stories and objects being explored. Furthermore, such resources are of little use without accompanying context or descriptive guidance as to how to explore them. As Candlin (2006) notes, “Without instruction, neither blind nor sighted visitors necessarily know how to touch [art] objects or how their bodily experience can contribute to interpretation”.

Another approach is to use scent, which can be evocative and revealing of a time, a place, object or person. Galleries will be full of aromas, naturally encountered, which contribute to the experience. But resources with scent can also be created to support a narrative; for example, different fabrics, living plants, or artificial fragrances. Jorvik Viking Centre in York has a long-established partnership with Dale Air, who create bespoke scents to enrich the visitor experience. As McDonald (2017) states in the Museums Journal, of the redeveloped venue: “Jorvik wouldn’t be Jorvik without the smells of fish, fire and cesspits and these are now enhanced with aromas that evoke forests and damp wharfs”. Aggleton and Wasket (1999) found that the scents used at Jorvik appeared to help visitors better recall their experience at the museum. As part of the Sensing Culture (2018) project in which the RNIB partnered with museums to develop accessible initiatives for blind and visually impaired people, Oxford University Museums devised a successful sensory tour, leading to a great increase in the number of their visually impaired visitors. Susan Griffiths, the Community Engagement Officer said: “we helped visitors on a recent tour to learn about historical drug jars and medical containers by providing cloves, roses and other old-fashioned remedies that these jars would have contained. Having the smells really brings it to life” (Hughes, 2016).

Taking an expansive approach to scent history is the research network Odeuropa, formed in 2020. Comprising historians and computer scientists from UK and European institutions, they will use digital humanities methodology to identify and recreate scents present across Europe between the 16th and early 20th centuries. This landmark initiative could have far-reaching impact on the visitor-experience for museum-goers.

Supplying close-up images of exhibits can be helpful for some visitors. These could take the form of large, printed photographs of the full work, or particular details; or digital access to high resolution photographs, with a zoom function.

Live AD tours for exhibitions at the British Museum often include an object-handling session prior to the tour, providing a tactile introduction to artefacts similar to those that will be
encountered in the exhibition. For the 2019 exhibition *Inspired by the east*, a sensory workshop preceded the AD tour at which attendees could explore some of the smells, sounds and tastes of the Middle East. At Black Country Living Museum, touch opportunities are always a key feature of AD events from historical household items to the resident Shire horse.

AD tours can also be part of events with a practical or creative element. For example, at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, following AD tours of art exhibitions, visitors can attend a workshop to create their own artworks influenced by the displays. The Wallace Collection’s popular Sensations programme offers a variety of ways for visitors to explore the collection in sensory ways. The Royal Academy has pioneered life-drawing workshops for blind and visually impaired people.

An element of performance may be included: The Royal Academy of Music Museum conclude their AD tours with demonstrations of the Academy’s students playing historical instruments, while an AD event at Tate Britain for the 2020 *Aubrey Beardsley* exhibition took the form of an evening private view with a staged reading of Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* in the gallery.

Live AD events can also take place online, using video-conferencing software, for visitors to attend remotely. There are advantages to this, as various barriers – including logistical and physical ones – are removed. The audience-reach is likely to be greater as a result, with some visually impaired people able to attend an event which would be an impossibility were it on-site at the museum. However, virtual visitors do miss the full social experience and the opportunity to experience artworks, artefacts and spaces first-hand. Furthermore, a virtual event relies on access to appropriate hardware and software and the digital literacy of the user. As such a hybrid offer of both on-site and online events by a museum is advisable for inclusive programming.

Live AD tours offer a holistic and social way to experience a museum which holds great appeal for many visually impaired people. Consultations with user panels indicate that live tours are the preferred means to experience museums and venues, with well-devised live programmes routinely selling out their events. However, the format does have limitations – most notably, capacity, both in terms of number of tours and spaces per tour. An accessible visit is dictated by the museum’s choice of timing of an event, rather than that of the visitor. If a tour sells out quickly or a visitor cannot make that date, the opportunity for a supported visit may be missed. Accessible events submitted to VocalEyes’ website for promotion indicate that AD tours at a venue are often several months apart, potentially meaning a long wait for the visitor. If the museum offers no access resources or facilities beyond the tours, a visit outside of those events could be unsatisfying or even impossible. It is therefore important for museums to consider how live AD tours fit within their broader access provision.

One way to address the problem of sporadic accessible tours is for audio-descriptive techniques to be integrated into all events. Blind and visually impaired people could then attend a full public programme and would not necessarily need to self-identify as visually impaired if they chose not to and could navigate independently; they would be intrinsically supported by the museum on an equal basis. Visitors who do not have a visual impairment but may find value from AD would also benefit (Eardley et al., 2017). The absence of labelling and division would create a more inclusive environment, conducive to full experiences for everyone. Strong foundations need to be in place within a museum to ensure an inclusive culture, otherwise there is a risk that non-targeted programming fails to meet anyone’s needs adequately. Such organisational change can take time. At present, no UK museum programme is fully accessible for blind and visually impaired people, however, organisations such as Glasgow Women’s Library and Wellcome Collection are embedding inclusion and diversity throughout their operations. Aspiring to be genuinely accessible to all will set a positive trajectory for the journey towards that goal.
3. Recorded audio description

Recorded AD has an advantage over live descriptive tours in that it is available for a blind or visually impaired visitor to use at any time, and for some, better supports an independent visit. Recorded AD can be provided on listening devices at the venue or online, the latter allowing download and listening in advance of, during or even instead of a visit. On-site, recorded AD is used to support access to artworks and artefacts and the visual aspects of the interpretation. The recorded AD may also incorporate label and gallery text. Any printed gallery text should also be provided in Large Print and/or Braille. For non-Braille readers or people for whom Large Print is not accessible, text information can be made available digitally (in text or word processor file format) for audio reading.

The recorded AD can be fixed, integrated into the display and accessed either using wired headphones or other listening devices and potentially be accompanied by tactile models or replicas. An example of this method can be found at London’s Science Museum for a display within Science City 1550–1800: The Linbury Gallery (2019). However, the most common method of making recorded AD available is as a mobile guide; often forming part of a broader suite of mobile guides for various audiences, which may include a highlights tour in different languages, a family tour, or British Sign Language (BSL) option. Such a set of guides is more commonly found at heritage sites (such as Windsor Castle, Eltham Palace and Canterbury Cathedral) and some national museums (British Museum). Museum mobile guides are usually offered on handsets available for hire from a desk near the venue’s entrance, though the AD guide is usually free of charge for visitors who have a visual impairment as they form the “adjustment” that the venue is making as required by the Equality Act of 2010.

3.1 Hardware and interface

In our experience, many venues use a traditional “audio guide” device with a physical keypad with basic audio controls (play/pause etc.) and a numberpad, which should have a raised dot on the central number five key to assist blind users. Some museums provide mobile guides on an iOS or Android app pre-installed on a cased mobile phone device. The app may also be available for download onto a user’s own device. However, an app-based guide on a touchscreen device will only be accessible to a blind or visually impaired person if it uses assistive software supporting gesture control and text-to-speech translation (known as VoiceOver on Apple’s iOS operating system). This may leave a blind person who is not experienced or confident with assistive technology being expected to learn an unfamiliar interface in a short period of time. Green (2016) draws attention to the fact that people invest considerable time and effort getting to know their phones and frequently-used apps; time and effort they do not have or want to spend at the start of a museum visit. Green asks museums to consider whether the interface is easy to use and navigate, and whether they provide systems and processes to support people having difficulty; most obviously, staff trained in how the guide works. This is particularly important for users who have visual impairments. Staff demonstrations and recorded device instructions can go some way towards mitigating this issue.

To avoid the app/mobile device interface becoming an access barrier, museums often make recorded AD tracks available for download or streaming from their website, the VocalEyes’ website or audio platforms such as Audioboom or SoundCloud. London’s Natural History Museum has recorded guides for many of their galleries, such as the Treasures Gallery, available as audio files online. AD provided through an app needs to be promoted so that visitors
are aware in advance of the visit, to avoid the download becoming an access barrier, whether through insufficient data, poor WiFi or battery challenges.

In summary, museums either provide the user with a device and interface that they (or in most cases, a specialist audio guide company) have designed, or they make the audio available, ceding the user choice and responsibility for the device and software used. Each has advantages and drawbacks; offering both gives users a choice. Promotion in pre-visit access information, marketing and on-site signage will ensure that potential users are aware of the options and can choose the version which suits them best. Venues that have created an app on which the AD tracks are incorporated include UCL Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology (www.ucl.ac.uk/culture/news/ucl-museums-digital-guides) and the Biggin Hill Memorial Museum (Discovery Tablet). Among venues that have traditional handsets with physical keypads are the Old Royal Naval College, Canterbury Cathedral and Bentley Priory Museum. Lastly, venues that make audio description tracks available for download from their website include the Charles Dickens Museum, London (https://dickensmuseum.com/pages/audio-described-tour), the Polar Museum, University of Cambridge Museums (www.spri.cam.ac.uk/museum/shackleton/audio/) and Shakespeare’s Birthplace Trust (https://soundcloud.com/shakespearebt/sets/object-tales-audio).

3.2 Content features of recorded audio description

A recorded AD guide usually offers a selection of highlighted objects for the museum or heritage site, with descriptive directions guiding the user between stops. This provides an accessible equivalent to a “non-AD” highlights mobile guide, but it does restrict access for a blind visitor to a limited number of exhibits within the gallery and the museum or heritage site overall (see for instance Giansante, 2015; Perego, 2019b; Randaccio, 2018 but also Black, 2005 on museums). An example where this is not the case is illustrated by the inclusive design approach taken at Wellcome Collection for the Being Human gallery (2019), where handsets have audio descriptive tracks available for all the exhibits. These can be freely taken by any visitor from a desk close to the entrance.

A mobile guide may take the form of a linear tour (that is, a limited number of stops organised so it follows a logical route through the venue), or what is termed a “random-access” tour, whereby a larger number of objects are covered by the guide and the user selects those they wish to visit, devising their own route, supported by a physical or digital map. Most recorded AD guides at present tend to follow the linear tour model.

The length of a recorded AD linear tour depends on severable variables: the scale of the gallery or set of galleries, or the venue as a whole; the number of stops, influenced by decisions on what are the important artworks and artefacts; the length of the audio for each stop and the time required to cover the distances between stops. The recorded AD tours that VocalEyes have created over the past six–seven years are generally between 45 and 90 minutes long: the longer tours necessary at larger museums or heritage sites. The availability of seating in the galleries is an important consideration for longer tours as is the possibility of breaking up a tour with a visit to a café or restaurant. Other ways of managing tour length are to offer “layered” content (optional extra material for individual stops) or make some stops or sections (e.g., a particular room) optional. A typical AD track is about three minutes, compared to a non-AD stop of around two minutes in length. The AD version is longer because in addition to the historic or contextual information, it also provides vital description of the visual appearance of the object. Mobile guides in museums are generally designed to last for at least five years and often longer, due to the cost of the initial investment in content production and
device purchase or lease contract. For this reason, object selection for mobile guides are usually based on long-term displays, avoiding fragile, light-sensitive textiles, prints or drawings, that are displayed for limited periods for conservation reasons.

3.3 Narrative style

Recorded AD for museums is generally written in a third-person narrative, with description interwoven with contextual information about the exhibit (e.g., historical, artistic, archaeological or scientific, depending on the artefact or artwork and the interpretive context – archaeology, natural history, etc.). This is exemplified in this excerpt from the script of a recorded AD guide of a portrait of the composer George Frideric Handel, by Thomas Hudson:

The painting is circular with an impressive gilt frame made up of ornate bulrushes and leaf blades, each of which has been individually shaped so that they hang over the sides and droop across the edges of the painting, as if real bulrushes and leaves have been painted gold and twisted together to form the frame. The bulrush is associated with Moses, who in the Bible is found abandoned on the riverbank among bulrushes. This may reflect Handel’s involvement with the Foundling Hospital for abandoned children.

(Recorded AD guide, Handel and Hendrix in London)

Different approaches can be taken through different types of narrative and production. One example is character-driven audio description; at the English Heritage property Eltham Palace, the AD was written as if from the viewpoint of the Courtauld family’s butler – the concept being that the butler was familiar with the objects on display through frequent daily care. Bentley Priory Museum’s recorded AD guide for children is written as if by an RAF airman.

3.4 Recorded audio description and touch

Recorded AD tours can include artefacts that people can touch, whether original or facsimile, or architectural elements of the heritage venue itself. For many, though not all blind and visually impaired people, touch is a key component of a museum experience, making it richer and more meaningful than one purely reliant on sight and descriptive language. When a touch opportunity is available as part of a recorded tour, the audio description can encourage the listener to touch at the relevant point and guide the listener’s hands around the tactile object while describing the form being experienced. The recorded AD guide for the British Museum’s Parthenon Gallery (launched 2020) includes several exhibits within an adjacent gallery (Room 18a) including plaster casts and a model of the Temple of Athena, all of which can be touched. The pace of the description is important, allowing the listener time to feel with their hands what they are hearing about, before it moves on to a different detail.

3.5 Directions and orientation for a recorded AD tour

A key component of a recorded AD guide is the means by which it directs the user between stops. For a linear highlights tour, this usually involves the addition of descriptive directions in between stops (see Taylor and Perego in this volume). Distances between stops (and therefore the time taken to move between them) can vary considerably, depending on the venue. Distances should be given in approximate length, for example “just over ten metres”, rather than “11.5 metres”. This is preferred to the time required to cover them – people have different
walking speeds or may use a wheelchair or other mobility support and the time taken will be affected by how busy the venue is. It can be relatively simple to give directions between stops for, as an example, a series of paintings displayed on the four walls of a gallery; but when describing directions between stops across multiple rooms or floors, perhaps involving stairs or a lift, it may be necessary to give directions in stages. These should be interspersed with instructions of the type “pause the guide and restart when you have arrived at the entrance to Gallery B”: the listener should not be expected to retain multiple instructions in their head for long periods. This is their leisure time and they should be able to concentrate on their experience of the venue and the stories being told.

While primarily describing outdoor journeys, Fryer et al. (2013) present two concepts that are central to an understanding of descriptive directions for blind or visually impaired people: landmarks (including points of interest) and milestones. Landmarks are both points where the user is instructed to change direction, or “points of interest” that they pass on the way. Such a point of interest may simply be that the user has walked through the open doorway between Room 1 and Room 2, giving them information to confirm their progress, or it could be that they have passed a prominent feature, such as a famous sculpture that may be of interest even if it is not included as a stop in the guide. Also important are smaller-scale “milestones” that reassure the person that they are on the right track.

Fryer et al. stress the importance of multi-modality in the description: an example of a milestone might be the change of surface underfoot from a polished stone floor to uneven wooden floorboards. The mode could be aural or olfactory, with a route passing a room in which a particular sound or smell can be perceived, or the temperature or atmosphere changes. As the user passes that space, the description should reassure them they are on the right track.

A key component of a tour is the confirmation to a blind or visually impaired visitor that they have arrived at the next stop. A prominent graphic icon and stop number can be included on the exhibit’s label, which may also need to be entered into the device keypad to trigger the audio for that stop. However, these visual cues rely on the user having a level of vision or being accompanied by someone who does. Location technology can be used in this context; the recorded AD guide at Lewes Castle (launched 2017) uses iBeacon technology that triggers audio as you pass points around the site (cf. Archeological Museum in Aquileia, Italy https://museoarcheologicoaquileia.beniculturali.it/).

3.6 Online audio-descriptive museum resources

One form of online provision for blind visitors is the venue introduction; a pre-visit planning tool available as part of a museum or heritage site’s website access information. This provides visitors with a detailed description of what to expect in advance of visiting. The venue introduction also provides a detailed guide supporting a blind or visually impaired visitor to navigate independently to the museum entrance from nearby public transport stops, followed by a general description of the exterior, entrance and main spaces of the museum and what it contains (including practical considerations such as toilets, café and shop). In general, the venue introduction enables a blind or visually impaired visitor to be well-prepared and thus confident and reassured that they can make a visit to the venue.⁸

Recorded AD has also been utilised by museums for use independent of a physical visit: the stops are “stand-alone”, without descriptive directions or other context relating to their physical display. These are made available for streaming or download from a museum’s website, possibly as part of the museum’s online collection catalogue of images, metadata and narrative; giving blind and visually impaired people the opportunity to access, research and
appreciate objects remotely. With audio description, museums can ensure that online collection information is more broadly accessible. An example is the library of 30 recorded descriptions of historical treasures at Shakespeare’s Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon.

Generally though, the vast majority of images of artworks and artefacts published on UK museum websites lack bespoke description, leaving the visually impaired visitor to use what narrative and metadata is available to them on the webpage. In the US, the website of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago is a notable exception to the norm, not only because it has exemplary image descriptions, but also because any visitor to the site can tick a button to render this alt-text (usually only accessible to screen-reading software) visible on the page.

### 3.7 Production process for recorded audio description

The following process is used by VocalEyes for the script development and production of the voice track for professionally-produced recorded AD for a museum or heritage site. An audio describer visits the venue, discusses the object selection with museum staff and learns directly from the curator(s) about the objects and their significance within the display or gallery. The audio describer then scripts the audio description and directions between tour stops, if required. An editor will edit the script for consistency, accuracy and style, ensuring it flows as “spoken word” rather than text for visual reading. In order to ensure an accurate and safe guide, the editor walks the route of the tour with a blind or visually impaired script-tester, together identifying and removing ambiguities or loose ends within the descriptions and ensuring that directions are clear and concise and distances accurate. The edited script is reviewed and finalised in close collaboration with museum staff. High quality production is important. This involves professional recording equipment, in a sound-proof studio with professional or experienced voice artists. Prior to recording, a producer will check correct pronunciation of unfamiliar words, writing in phonetic spellings into the script as a brief for the voice artist(s). After recording, the tracks will be digitally edited and any post-production carried out.

### 3.8 Voices and other audio production techniques

Using multiple voices for the recording provides variety and is more enjoyable to listen to. Most simply, a different voice can be used to signal the change in purpose between the object descriptions and the descriptive directions between them. Enhancement such as sound effects and music can be added to recorded AD in post-production. Hutchinson (2019) found that the inclusion of other modes, both literally (sounds themselves) and as references within the descriptive language (i.e., description of sounds and textures), not only enhanced the listening experience, but also increased memorability of the description, for blind, visually impaired and non-blind listeners.

Enhancing Audio Description (EAD	extsuperscript{9}), a collaborative project between the University of York and Anglia Ruskin University (2016–2018), investigated how sound design techniques and spatialised audio (surround sound) in film production can be used to provide an alternative to traditional audio description. It investigated the addition of sound effects at the production stage to make elements of the soundtrack clearer and reduce the number of verbal descriptions needed. It also investigated how the use of surround sound could replace some of the visual and verbal information, letting the listener know through sound where a character is standing, where they are moving to, what the “sound objects” are. The EAD Project was primarily concerned with film and TV AD, but these experiments are still relevant to AD in museum and...
heritage settings. The mobile audio-described guide at Lewes Castle uses binaural recordings narrated by historic characters.

Recorded AD guides have many positive attributes and benefits: they enable an independent visit; they are available to use at any time when the museum or heritage site is open; the quality of the content can be excellent and engaging, with contributions from artists and curators and additional atmosphere through music and other recordings. However, they are usually restricted to a limited number of artworks or artefacts; changes at the venue can easily render them out of date or inaccurate; unfamiliar interfaces can be difficult to use or inaccessible. They also lack the interactive and social experience of a live tour.

4. Summary and the future of audio description and museums

The value of AD to blind and visually impaired museum visitors is evident. However, its success will be limited unless accompanied by other interdependent elements that together form an inclusive, organisational approach. These include additional visitor resources (such as Large Print and Braille texts, handling objects, scents), committed and knowledgeable staff and accessible marketing and communication.

Creating equality of experience involves understanding what makes a museum visit and that they are not simply visual experiences. Artworks and artefacts have value beyond aesthetics and visiting a museum is often about more than experiencing the collection; motivations may have a recreational or social basis, focus on physical activity, or include facilities such as the café. Offering a range of ways for visitors to experience a museum, alongside AD, provides choice for individuals to engage in way that is meaningful for them. Museums can benefit from consulting blind and visually impaired people, gaining understanding of their varied preferences and interests, plus factors that can prevent barriers. In this way, the venue’s approach to developing accessible resources and events can be based on visitor responses, thereby increasing the likelihood of meeting visitor needs.

To be successful, access provision must be underpinned by a staff commitment to being inclusive. Interactions with front-of-house staff can set the course of a visit for a visually impaired person – positive or otherwise – depending on level of awareness and skill. The degree of knowledge and understanding within curatorial and exhibitions teams will influence how inclusive an exhibition’s design is and which audiences are considered in the development of interpretation. Training in audio description and visual awareness across all staff can support collective understanding and shared responsibility. Embedding an ethos of access and inclusion can lead to incremental, organisation-wide change that has far-reaching benefits.

The nature of gallery design and museum and heritage interpretation changes over time and AD must also evolve to remain relevant; both in terms of ethical and accurate content and responding to technical innovation. The latter includes using up-to-date hardware and software for digitally accessible AD. If handsets of recorded AD are supplied on site, these need to be reviewed frequently, to ensure they meet the needs of the current audience. Museums and heritage sites are exploring new ways of making content available, for example Bluetooth beacons which trigger AD with visitor proximity and the use of Near Field Communication (NFC) by which a visitor can use their own wireless device to reach content via another device. Virtual reality initiatives involving AD are at the research and development stage within museums and multimedia companies and likely to be piloted in the public sphere in the near future.

The diversity of artworks and methods of representing artefacts continues to expand, with a rise in displays of digital, interactive, immersive and time-based media. Approaches to AD
need to adapt to accommodate these, as original principles may not suit. Taylor and Perego (2021) cite the example of Miramare Castle in Italy which mounted a display relating to a painting by the artist Manet, in which neither the artwork nor any original artefact was present – instead, films, simultaneously projected on to three walls and spoken word were used to tell the story. While an audio guide was an integral part of the visitor experience, no AD guide was available.

The Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam created international touring exhibition Meet Vincent van Gogh in 2019, which similarly does not display any original works. Instead, soundtracks, projections and recreations are employed to evoke the artist and his masterpieces, for this self-guided experience. Many such methods present barriers for blind and visually impaired people – AD integrated into the exhibit or made available in a live format would open up this experience for them.

In the UK, London’s National Gallery mounted Leonardo: Experience a masterpiece from 2019–20; a four-room exhibition containing a single painting, The Virgin of the Rocks. The immersive experience was heavy on digital visuals and virtual recreation, with a touchscreen interactive to explore painterly use of light and shadow. In taking progressive approaches to exhibiting and perhaps attracting new audiences in the process, venues must ensure that other visitors are not forgotten and excluded. There is space for creative curating to represent all visitors – if they are considered from the outset, with AD and appropriate support incorporated into designs.

In consideration of the AD content itself, imaginative approaches are becoming increasingly common, taking a departure from the standard “narrator” style of prose. Character-based AD can bring a sense of drama and highlight personal narratives connected to a place or period. Alternatively, the use of sound effects to create “enriched” AD has been researched, as mentioned previously, by Hutchinson (2019) who found that embellishing spoken word tracks with intermittent sound relevant to the content enhanced the listening experience and increased memorability of the description of the object. Interlacing AD with composed music can create a more evocative encounter. Descriptions created by VocalEyes for Illuminated River – a contemporary artwork installed on bridges across the River Thames – include extracts of compositions created by Guildhall School of Music and Drama inspired by the bridges and their social and historical associations.11

There is a real risk if museums do not update their AD in line with other programming and resources, that there will be nothing new for repeat visitors. This sends a poor message – either that blind or visually impaired visitors are not expected to make repeat visits, or that they are not as equally entitled to contemporary provision as other visitors. Blind and visually impaired people must not be left behind in the evolution of museum practice.

Notes
1 Both authors contributed to the full chapter, with Anna Fineman dealing specifically with the Introduction, Live Audio Description and Summary, and Matthew Cock dealing specifically with Recorded Audio Description.
2 RNIB www.rnib.org.uk/rnibconnect/how-i-see
5 Odeuropa https://odeuropa.eu/
6 Natural History Museum Treasure Gallery www.nhm.ac.uk/galleries/galleries-home/treasures/audio-guide/
7 vocaleyes.co.uk/audio-clip/handel-hendrix-in-london-audio-described-guide/
8 Many examples of venue introductions can be found on the VocalEyes website at https://vocaleyes.co.uk/audio/audio-archive/?audioType=museums
9 enhancingaudiodescription.com/abilitynet.org.uk/news-blogs/audio-description-embracing-next-generation-audio
10 See, for example, the Immersive Accessibility (ImAc) project www.rnib.org.uk/next-frontier-accessibility-360-degree-videos
11 vocaleyes.co.uk/illuminated-river/

5. Further reading

UK Association of Accessible Formats, www.ukaaf.org/

6. References

Green, L. (2016). What we know about mobile experiences in museums after 6 years of research. Retrieved from medium.com/frankly-green-webb/what-we-know-about-mobile-experiences-in-museums-after-6-years-of-research-42117def2c49#.4n9l4nx0v
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