

RIJKS MUSEUM ACCESSIBILITY WITHOUT LIMITS



ACCESSIBILITY WITHOUT LIMITS

RIJKS MUSEUM

‘I’d like you to join me during a sensory-friendly evening opening at the Rijksmuseum. You enter in the Atrium, where the lights are dimmed, the staff talk in whispers and there aren’t many people. There is a quiet area where you can take a moment to unwind after your trip to the museum.

We organize these evenings for people who have a sensory processing disorder caused by anything from an autism spectrum disorder to brain damage, or chronic illness to burn-out. For all these people, visiting the busy Rijksmuseum during the day is simply not possible.

On the evening in question, I stroll through the galleries and see a lady looking at Rembrandt’s *Jewish Bride*. In utter stillness, she gazes at the painting. When I look again, I see a tear running down her cheek, and recognize that her filter for stimuli is wafer-thin, otherwise she would not be here now. The painting moves her deeply. I realize how wonderful it is that we have filtered out as many stimuli as possible so that only those that are essential in a museum can touch her.

At the end of the evening I come across her again and she says: “I’m very touched that you took the trouble to organize an evening like this so that I, too, can visit the Rijksmuseum. I usually don’t dare set foot in a museum because there are so many people and the crowds around the paintings scare me. Tonight I visited the Rijksmuseum for the first time. It was amazing. I feel I’m part of things again!”

To me, that’s what accessibility is all about – being able to take part.’

Cathelijne Denekamp
Accessibility Manager

Education in the Rijksmuseum

Since 2008, many people have contributed to the development of an Education Department at the Rijksmuseum. We create programmes and products designed to make the museum accessible and relevant. Because the Rijksmuseum belongs to, and is for, everyone. At the heart of this are the museum's objects, and we seek to connect people, art and history in an innovative, personal way for all people, of all ages. In both our physical and online activities, we strive for the highest possible quality. This process is an ongoing journey and demands continuous research, testing and alignment with our changing world.

We are often asked why we do what we do. Because the Rijksmuseum values sharing its know-how and insights, we decided to capture the years of knowledge and experience of Education in the Rijksmuseum in a series of publications in which we share this journey with you, per theme. We are delighted to present part one, which covers accessibility in the museum.

Annemies Broekgaarden
Head of Public & Education

Foreword

Accessibility begins by realizing that the limitations people experience are not simply *their* limitations. Often, the building, the website or the service that staff provide does not meet their needs. We want everyone to feel welcome, and to encounter as few barriers as possible. To remove these barriers, the Rijksmuseum has had an Accessibility Manager since 2017, who raises awareness of accessibility within the organization, gathers and shares knowledge, and helps to ensure that, little by little, the museum is becoming truly accessible to all.

This is not a how-to guide in which we outline a process from start to finish. Because every organization is different and has its own challenges, opportunities and ambitions. In this book, we simply take you on the journey we have begun on our way to an accessible Rijksmuseum. A journey we are making with people with disabilities and their interest groups and from which we are learning a lot. We share how we tackled the process, what we ran into, what went well and what didn't, and what we still need to do. Knowing that the process we began in 2017 is far from over.

Taco Dibbits

General Director, Rijksmuseum

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You can download this book from the Rijksmuseum website (www.rijksmuseum.nl/accessibility-at-the-rijksmuseum). On this page, you can also find useful documents about this topic, such as guidelines on designing accessible exhibitions.

**‘I’m part
of things
again!’**

1

**Why
and for
whom**

The Rijksmuseum's mission is to connect people, art and history. At the Rijksmuseum, art and history take on new meaning for a broad-based national and international audience. To fulfil this mission, we need to make sure that everyone has access to the collection, physically and online: people who are blind or visually impaired, people who are deaf or hard of hearing, wheelchair users, people with dementia, people with sensory processing disorders, and many others. We want to be an inclusive museum. This is why we have developed an accessibility vision: all visitors to the Rijksmuseum are equal. Visitors with a disability are welcomed as warmly as any other, must be able to visit the Rijksmuseum independently, and have access to the entire collection.

Accessibility =
equality + independence + hospitality

Equality

Everything starts with access: to the museum, the collection and the accompanying programmes and products. Regardless of someone's disability. But equality goes one step further. For example, if a regular guided tour is not suitable for a blind or visually impaired visitor, they don't want a watered-down version of it, but an equivalent alternative.



Fig. 1 A woman in a wheelchair using the platform lift to enter the 'Teekenschool'

‘A lady in a wheelchair wanted to join a drawing workshop at the Rijksmuseum’s education centre known as the “Teekenschool”. The website stated that the building was accessible. But what happened on the first day of the course? She had to go around the building to the side door, which was extremely heavy and impossible to open without help. Once inside, she encountered a flight of stairs and a lift that she could not operate herself. She then waited for a staff member to assist her, but when he finally arrived, he couldn’t find the key. It was a long and frustrating process. The lady had had enough: “Forget it, I’ll do a course somewhere else, where I can just go in through the front door.”

She had a point: accessibility isn’t automatically the same as equality. In the meantime, we have had a platform lift installed at the main entrance of the “Teekenschool” and all the doors open automatically.’

Cathelijne Denekamp

Hospitality

Some visitors want to ask a staff member a lot of questions, others prefer to explore on their own. But everyone wants to be treated normally and with respect. And no one wants a staff member to be surprised when a visitor with a disability arrives, or for them to touch someone's wheelchair without asking, even with good intentions. Why does something like this happen? Probably simply because of inexperience. That's why it's important to ask ourselves: What does hospitality mean, how do things work for people with a disability and what kinds of disabilities might people have? Knowledge and insight are gained through training, practice, bringing staff into contact with people with disabilities, and hearing their experiences and needs. It is especially important to create awareness: awareness of the diversity among people, and of your own unconscious biases. And the awareness that a visitor's 'atypical' behaviour might be related to a disability. What if someone doesn't smile at you? Some people on the autism spectrum may not be able to. For people with a disability, being treated with a little extra attention and consideration isn't a luxury, but a necessity.

Independence

Every visitor must be able to buy a ticket on the website or move around the building independently. Not everyone with a disability wants to be pushed or accompanied. Ideally, everyone should be able to visit the museum whenever they choose. This is why good signage is essential, or an app that helps people find their own way around the museum. And this golden rule also includes allowing people to use aids such as mobility scooters, walking-bikes and electrically assisted wheelchairs. Mobility aids give people greater independence, and allow them to go wherever they like. In a similar fashion, everyone should have independent access to information about the collection.

For whom

We use the term 'accessibility' here specifically for people with disabilities. But who are they? Many people have disabilities, and there are many different types of disabilities, such as physical, sensory, mental and neurological. And they can be permanent or temporary, such as a broken arm or a burn-out. Some people may have multiple disabilities or disabilities.



Fig. 2 Maaïke Ferf Jentink, who was born deaf, giving a guided tour for deaf children

‘I’m Deaf and once visited a museum. At the ticket counter, I signed to let the desk clerk know I wanted to buy a ticket. The lady behind the counter had clearly never met a deaf person before. I saw the panic in her eyes. She actually walked away and called her manager. I didn’t feel welcome. I then advised everyone who interacted with visitors to learn ten signs, so that they are at least familiar with the basics of sign language and aren’t taken by surprise when someone communicates with them through sign language gestures. Knowing a couple of signs is all they need to make deaf visitors feel welcome. That’s why I made a short film for the Rijksmuseum with ten signs. The film is on the intranet and staff practice it regularly. It includes signs like: welcome, cloakroom, ticket, toilet.’

Roos Wattel

Founder Stichting IN Gebaren
and deaf

It might be a good idea to first look at the definition of 'disability'. Until not so long ago, a disability was seen as an individual's personal condition. Today we see a disability as the mismatch in the interaction between a person and the environment.¹ This mismatch can exist between a person and a building, such as between someone in a wheelchair and an entrance with stairs. Or between a person and a museum employee, such as when a host tells a blind man: 'The cloakroom is over there on the left.' It can also be about the mismatch between a person and a website: for example, a person who is deaf or hard of hearing cannot understand a film without subtitles. And yet another mismatch is between the hustle and bustle of a museum and a person who is sensitive to stimuli.

What is (not) a disability?

A disability ≠ a personal health condition

A disability = a mismatch in the interaction
between a person and their environment

As a museum, you can seek to eliminate as many of these mismatches as possible. By doing so, you place the responsibility on yourself, not on others, and you can take proactive measures to improve your museum's accessibility.

Boards, sponsors or governments often ask for statistics. They want to know how many people we are doing this for. Yet it is difficult to provide figures. We know how many blind or deaf people there are. There are about 17,000 deaf people in the Netherlands whose first language is Dutch Sign Language (NGT).² There are, however, many invisible and temporary disabilities that can't easily be captured in statistics.

Does knowing the number of people really matter? Bearing in mind the mission of the Rijksmuseum, we concluded that it's about making other choices. Do you want to be a museum for everyone? Then this mission should include the broadest possible accessibility, even if specific target groups are small. In terms of numbers, 17,000 people who communicate in NGT is a negligible proportion of our audience of over 2 million visitors a year. Nevertheless, we opted to make programmes in NGT. If we had not, we would be implicitly excluding deaf people, as well as straying from our mission of being meaningful for everyone.

Along the way, we've noticed that focusing on a specific group of people can bring many benefits for others. Does a film have subtitles for the hearing impaired people? If so, it's also ideal for people wanting to watch the film in the quiet compartment of a train. And there are plenty of similar examples. Everybody benefits from an accessible and inclusive museum. But how do you begin?

The process

It's good to focus on one target group first and then, based on the experience gained, slowly expand to others. We began with a tour for blind and visually impaired people. Why? The Rijksmuseum is all about looking. The objects are there to be seen. This means that the collection is not readily accessible to blind and visually impaired people. Some sighted people wonder why a blind person even visits a museum. A pointless question, really, because surely it's up to each individual to decide if a museum visit is something for them? Vincent Bijlo, cabaret artist and blind, nevertheless answers: 'I want to visit a museum with my sighted friends and talk about art. I want to share my art experiences with them, just like everyone wants to share their art experiences.' It's as simple as that. People just want to join in and experience life and that includes visiting a museum.

Precisely because the Rijksmuseum was not easily accessible to this target group, we decided to focus on this particular audience. We first wanted to reach out to people in the target group. To do so, we contacted Bartiméus and Stichting KUBES, two organizations for blind and visually impaired people. They introduced us to people from this target group who were willing to talk to us. We organized two meetings with them, in which they advised us on how we could make the museum more accessible to them. We also benefited from the expertise that other museums, such as the Van Gogh Museum and the Van Abbemuseum, had already acquired.

This process taught us that there are many different forms of blindness and low vision and that these visitors don't all have the same needs and requirements when it comes to an enjoyable, meaningful museum visit. There is no such thing as a typical blind person or typical visually impaired person. Just like sighted museum visitors, some people do not want a guided tour. So, concentrating solely on that turned out to be a bad idea. However, we decided to make this our starting point, because by doing so, and by developing the tour in collaboration with the target group, we were able to understand their needs and adjust the programme accordingly. Starting with a single programme, in this case a guided tour, had another advantage: it made it easier to promote, and to reach people in the target group. And once

people know that you're doing something for them, you can expand your offering based on this awareness.

We started by developing a guided tour. But it soon turned out that people who were interested in a tour also had different preferences. One wanted to touch objects, another wanted to learn more about the object by hearing stories about it. How do you cater to these different needs? We developed a tour in which the tour guide has a variety of methods at their disposal, which they can draw upon according to the interests and needs of (individuals within) the group. Once we started developing this concept, the creative juices started flowing, and we came up with far more ideas than expected. Such as 'embodiment', whereby in a number of steps, a blind person adopts the same pose as the figure depicted (fig. 3).

Another tool is tactile paintings, in which a painting is replicated by means of raised lines so that the visitor can experience the texture of the materials. In one tactile work of art, the wicker bread basket that appears in *The Milkmaid* is made from wicker (fig. 4).³ The extent to which people's needs differ is illustrated by the reaction of one of the participants. The tactile painting held no appeal at all for one blind visitor: 'I want my imagination to be stimulated; as a blind person, I don't want to be taken into the sighted

world – I want to feel that my eyes are being opened.’

To respond to these different preferences, the tour guide has a basket containing various objects that are meant to appeal to different senses (fig. 5). The objects include items that appear in the paintings, such as a rummer (a seventeenth-century wine glass) or a millstone collar, to allow participants to feel an object that appears in the work of art. The target group also suggested stimulating other senses, such as the sense of smell. What did the seventeenth century smell like? Of course, smelling scents in relation to certain works of art always means interpreting it, and for that reason, it doesn’t appeal to everyone; but it’s certainly a tool that can be used if desired.

Where the sense of touch is concerned, many blind and visually impaired people like to touch real objects as a way of experiencing them more fully. This clashes with the museum’s mandate to maintain its collection in the best possible condition. So, with the help of the curators, we went in search of objects that visitors could touch (while wearing gloves) during the tour. We identified two of them: a seventeenth-century cannon (fig. 6) and an early twentieth-century aeroplane. Once the tour had been running for a while, people saw that it was going without

Steps in the process

- Choice of target group
↓
- Investigating the wishes of the target group
↓
- Development of the tour
↓
- Communicating
↓
- Running a pilot and making adjustments
↓
- Expanding programming
for this target group
↓
- Developing guided tours
for other target groups

a hitch, and we increased the number of touchable objects.

To know which of the different tools to choose for certain visitor groups, and how best to use them, the tour guides received specialist training. They practiced describing art in vivid detail so that visitors can picture the depicted scene. We also went one step further than pure description. We trained the tour guides in experiential storytelling: how to tell a story that engages all the senses, so that it comes to life in visitors' imaginations.

Joan Kuhlman, a woman with low vision, created an experiential audio script for us about *The Night Watch*. Blind people taking part in the tour are seated in front of the painting; each is provided with a headset through which they hear the tour guide reading the audio script. This allows participants to hear the story clearly, while still picking up the background murmur of the many other people also looking at *The Night Watch*; they enjoy an intense experience of the painting and at the same time feel part of the museum, along with all the other visitors.



Fig. 3 Embodiment assignment for the family tour for people who are blind and visually impaired



Fig. 4 Visually impaired girl studying the tactile version of The Milkmaid



Fig. 5 The tour guide's basket contains objects to look at, smell, feel and taste. This panel features elements that replicate the texture and brushstrokes of Rembrandt's *Jewish Bride*



Fig. 6 A seventeenth-century cannon can be touched during the guided tour for blind and visually impaired people

Methods and tools for guided tours designed for blind and visually impaired visitors

- Embodiment
- Touching tactile paintings
- Touching replicas, 3D models, objects depicted in paintings
- Smelling scents
- Tasting food depicted in paintings
- Touching original objects in the collection
- Listening to descriptions of the works of art
- Listening to experiential storytelling that engages all the senses

The tour was, of course, piloted (and is still being fine-tuned in response to feedback). Once it was up and running, we were able to use this experience to expand the programming for this target group with comparatively little effort. We accomplished this in the following ways:

- The experiential audio script about *The Night Watch* was so well received that we have added it to the website, read by Joan Kuhlman herself, so that people can listen to the story at home and spend a few moments imagining themselves in the world of *The Night Watch*.
- Originally intended for adults, the guided tour has been adapted for families with children and for schools for blind and visually impaired children.
- We initially programmed the tour to take place once a month, in the museum's permanent exhibition. But awareness grew, and so did demand, after which we offered the tour more often. The target group also recommended expanding the programme by offering guided tours of the temporary exhibitions. We've been meeting that need ever since.
- Since the opening of our new depot – CollectieCentrum Nederland – we've been able to offer people a chance to

touch original works of art: there, together with curators, we organize tactile workshops where participants can handle objects from the collection.

- We invite visually impaired people who want to stand close to a painting to see it to attend the sensory-friendly evening opening, where they can enjoy the work in a quiet setting.
- For blind people or people with low vision wishing to tour the museum independently, we have added additional descriptions to the audio tour in the Rijksmuseum app. If they use their voice-over, the first thing they hear is the description of the object or work of art, followed by the audio tour narration.
- The museum offers the navigation app eZwayZ. Using AR technology, the app helps visitors to find their way around. The camera phone recognizes your location and guides you to where you want to be through audio and haptic feedback (see also pp. 80–81, fig. 16).

Spin-off for other target groups

When we decided to take the next step and start focusing on other target groups, we discovered that we could re-

purpose many aspects of the tour for blind and visually impaired people. This made it far easier to develop programmes for new target groups.

Meanwhile, we also use tactile paintings during the tour for people with dementia. The embodiment assignments also help sighted children to better engage with art. Smells can also be used very effectively for other target groups, and by no means only for people with a disability. For example, sighted visitors can enrich their experience of the painting *The Battle of Waterloo* by Jan Willem Pieneman through the addition of scent. They can smell the horses, the soldiers' fearful sweat, the leather of their boots and the damp earth. As well as the perfume with which, so the story goes, Napoleon doused himself. You would not have known such details simply by looking at the painting.

The tour for blind and visually impaired people turned out to be the first step in a journey that had not been mapped out beforehand. Meanwhile, the tour guides have been trained to give tours to different target groups, and we adapt our use of the support materials and methods according to their different needs. This way, the tour guide is able to establish a good rapport with the participants in the group.



Fig. 7 Seventeenth-century paintings of set tables often depict a rummer (wine glass). Such a glass has prunts on it to keep it from slipping out of greasy hands. For the blind or visually impaired museum visitor, feeling this glass can help them form a better image of the painting

‘I want to visit a museum with my sighted friends and talk about art. I want to share my art experiences with them, just like everyone wants to share their art experiences.’

Vincent Bijlo
Comedian/publicist
and blind



Fig. 8 Guided tour for blind and visually impaired people of the garden exhibition *Eduardo Chillida in the Rijksmuseum Gardens*, 2018



Fig. 9 Using scent to experience a painting

2

How to
do it

The mission to make your organization accessible can only succeed if certain conditions are met: collaboration with the target group, staff awareness and the availability of financial resources. You also need a strategy: What are the various challenges? How do you reach the people for whom you are doing it? And how do you ensure that all this work can be done?

Conditions for accessibility

- Collaboration with the target group
- Staff awareness
- Financial resources

Collaboration with the target group

Collaboration with the diverse target groups is at the heart of every programme we make. The needs and requirements, and ideas about how best to serve them, come from the target group itself. We give them careful consideration and apply them when adapting existing programmes and designing new ones. We also closely monitor what people around the world experience when it comes to accessibility.

There are numerous forums, groups and hashtags about accessibility on social media where complaints or ideas about venues are shared. If we come across a complaint specifically about the Rijksmuseum, we contact the person in question to learn how we can improve things.

This is how we discovered that a changing room is essential for people who cannot go to the bathroom by themselves and need to be changed while lying down. They simply cannot visit a museum that doesn't provide these facilities. And because of this, the person's family can't come either. So, with the help of people from the target group, we set up a room to offer these facilities; they advised us on all the details, such as the right hoist and an adjustable bed. And of course, we then had the room and the facilities tested by people from the target group.

The changing room was not initially on our to-do list, but was created thanks to the request of someone from the target group. This example taught us how important it is not only to involve people from the various target groups in the plans you make yourself, but also to talk to and listen to people with disabilities in order to hear things we wouldn't otherwise think of. The changing facility is still not perfect; the ventilation needs improving and a toilet must be added. These changes will be made during the next round of renovations.

The same openness is essential when developing programmes: generating ideas and developing and testing a programme is always done based on, or in collaboration with, the target group. It is important to realize that everyone is different and has different needs. If you involve one or more people with the same disability during the development of a programme, this does not automatically mean that they are speaking on behalf of the entire target group. That is why it's good to work with professional organizations, too; they know the target group and often have their own test groups. Appendix 1 contains a list of organizations with which the Rijksmuseum collaborates.

If you are only just beginning to make your organization more accessible, it will of course take some time to build up a network. You could start by posting a message on social media that you are looking for people. Once you have a good network, it's important to maintain it. Another tip: don't think of people as free consultants; always try to pay them for their services. If you work for a small organization with a limited budget, look at what you can offer. Invite people to openings of exhibitions, for example, and be honest beforehand about what you can offer in return.

‘I was standing in line outside the Rijksmuseum for the sensory-friendly evening opening. Next to the queue was a large video screen with moving images and text in bright colours. I waited for quite a long time right next to that video; outside it was already quite dark, which made the screen even brighter. Because of the waiting and the visual stimuli, I was tired before I even got inside. It is so important to check the entire visitor route thoroughly each time. From entry to exit, irrelevant stimuli must be removed completely. That’s the only way to be sure that you can prevent over-stimulation.’

Iris van Heesch

Director Stichting Onbeperkt Genieten
and sensitive to stimuli

You can also set up a focus group, and organize structural meetings. We chose to organize meetings with different people each time. This way, we continue to learn, and hear different perspectives. The quote shown here demonstrates that you must continually adjust the programmes and conditions based on the feedback received.

Staff awareness

Accessibility starts when all employees are sensitive to and aware of visitors' needs. It is vital that everyone understands their role in making the museum (in)accessible. A curator must consider the accessibility of art objects when displaying them. An educator must draft a text that everyone can understand. A security guard must be aware that some visitors behave in a certain way because of their disability.

To raise staff awareness about access needs, we purchased three disability simulation suits.⁴ These suits consist of goggles that reduce your vision, headphones that impair your hearing, a kind of harness that makes your body feel heavier, and weights at the wrists and ankles that restrict your movements. Wearing this suit, members of staff were given a one-hour tour of the museum and also used a wheelchair for a short distance (fig. 10).

‘To ensure that my colleagues feel a sense of pride, I share everything we do. Any modifications, no matter how small, are posted on the intranet, so that everyone sees that change is underway. And I also post (and read) a lot on social media. For example, I discovered that the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science intended to write a parliamentary paper on accessibility in cultural institutions. I got in touch with the consultancy bureau so that we could exchange knowledge and let people know what we do, as Rijksmuseum. They visited us, and the Rijksmuseum is mentioned in the parliamentary paper. That’s something the museum management is proud of, and in turn that helps me to get new things done.’

Cathelijne Denekamp



Fig. 10 Rijksmuseum employees are given a guided tour wearing disability simulation suits

‘I was convinced of my mission. So, when I first began, I immediately gave my colleagues an enthusiastic presentation on accessibility. But some questioned its importance. I hadn’t anticipated that and it heightened my awareness that this topic does not necessarily receive the same attention from everyone.’

Cathelijne Denekamp

We have stopped using this method of raising awareness since 2023, following a scientific study by [Movisie](#). The research (not conducted in the Rijksmuseum) shows that after doing the tour, people without disabilities felt sorry for people with disabilities and the distance between them therefore increased. Simulation emphasizes what people cannot do rather than what they can do.

To reinforce this awareness and keep the importance of accessibility on the agenda, the Accessibility Manager regularly gives presentations to different museum departments, or discusses an accessibility topic there. There are also many individual meetings with the staff. This is, of course, very time consuming, which is why the Rijksmuseum has started using ambassadors. These are colleagues from different departments who meet eight times a year and report on what's happening in their department.

The goal of embedding accessibility throughout the organization is no small matter. It can be a little difficult at times when people ask: 'How many people is this really about?' This is why it's necessary to continue to explain why accessibility is so important. And this is where the ambassadors play a crucial role – they help to cultivate support, which encourages accessibility awareness to become organically integrated into the organization.

Ultimately, you want all your colleagues not only to be aware of accessibility, but to regard the accessibility of your organization as a joint achievement that they take pride in.

Financial resources

Physical modifications to the building are often expensive. Developing programmes costs money. In a nutshell, you need a budget. The Rijksmuseum raised the necessary funds externally from sponsors, donors and (institutional) funds. For a long time, the position of Accessibility Manager was also paid for by a fund. In the last few years, a great many grants and funds have appeared in connection with accessibility. We have listed the Rijksmuseum's various funding bodies in Appendix 2.

Sponsors also help us to realize specific projects, such as Night Watch on Tour, in which we partner with companies such as Philips. This project evolved during the first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, when nursing homes were quarantined. Four life-sized replicas of *The Night Watch* were produced, each of which travels to a different care home, and remains on display for several weeks, so residents can take a closer look at the painting in peace and quiet. We also train Philips

staff to become ‘Night Watch experts’. As part of their social volunteer work, the Philips staff spend a day in a nursing home, tell the story behind *The Night Watch* and talk about it with residents. This gives the Philips volunteers a sense of fulfilment and pride, which makes this project an incredible collaboration.

Communications

It can be frustrating if your event doesn’t attract many people at first. It took quite a long time before people with disabilities realized that there were events they could take part in at the Rijksmuseum. Large marketing campaigns often focus on the temporary exhibitions, while the accessibility programmes – initially – only took place in the museum’s permanent exhibition. When people with disabilities saw the press releases about the exhibitions, they naturally wanted to see them too. This is why we now offer a sensory-friendly evening opening for every exhibition, a guided tour for blind and visually impaired visitors and a tour in Dutch Sign Language. It’s important that accessible events and programmes are mentioned in all communications about the temporary exhibitions. These temporary programmes are far more successful than the programme for the permanent display, which is understandable; an exhibition is on display for

a couple of months, and thus has a sense of urgency. You can also team up with interest groups to communicate your programme; they often have a large constituency that they reach through their own communication channels. There are also all kinds of organizations, such as Alzheimer Nederland, the Oogvereniging and the Hersenstichting, with their own newsletters or magazines for their respective target groups. Try to gain exposure for your event by publicizing it in their newsletters. It's also a good idea to ask everyone who takes part in an accessibility programme to join a mailing list. This will help you grow your database, and be an easy way to send a group e-mail with updates about events and programmes.

The role of Accessibility Manager

The Rijksmuseum has employed an Accessibility Manager for 32 hours a week since 2017. This position is very common in the United States. The Netherlands doesn't have many large museums where it is possible to create such a separate position. In general, responsibility for accessibility is shared between different people in an organization: someone from the Education Department takes care of the programmes, someone from the Facilities Management Department takes care of the physical accessibility, a personnel advisor recruits

people with disabilities, and so on. For the first four years, the position in the Rijksmuseum was financed by external funds. After that, it became permanent. Having someone able to focus entirely on this topic creates continuity, resulting in achieving a greater number of goals and speeding up processes. What's more, that individual can really dive into the various issues, gain valuable insights and arrive at broadly supported solutions. One example is the issue of mobility scooters (see p. 52).

Is it important for the Accessibility Manager to have a disability? What matters is that an organization employs people with disabilities because it ensures the institution is more inclusive (see also p. 87). However, we don't believe that you need to have a disability in order to do this job; the Accessibility Manager must address disabilities of all kinds, and will never have all of them simultaneously. It's vital that the person in this role is open and receptive, and reaches out to different target audiences and interest groups for feedback and ideas. They must be a spider in a web, and be able to switch between internal departments, external target groups and relevant organizations. They must also be a project manager who inspires, can create awareness, spends a lot of time listening, and also strives constantly to get things done.

‘When I started in this job, I began by making an inventory of all the visitor complaints received over the past year concerning accessibility. Most related to the fact that mobility scooters were not allowed inside. A mobility scooter is a tool that allows users to visit the museum on their own, and makes people independent. Mobility scooters were banned due to concerns that someone would collide with a work of art or object. Next, I collected information from other large museums where mobility scooters are permitted, such as the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Louvre in Paris and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. It turned out that nothing had ever been damaged there. Besides, it’s not as though lots of people on mobility scooters turn up at once; on average, we welcome one mobility scooter user a day. I put our Head of Collections Management and our Head of Security in touch with their counterparts in the other museums. Drawing on the knowledge we had gained, we were able to consult with the management, so that we could welcome people with mobility scooters inside the museum.’

Cathelijne Denekamp

This role is usually embedded in the Education Department, as was the case at the Rijksmuseum till 2023. This has many advantages: it allowed us to create a large number of new programmes within a short space of time, so that we became noticeably more accessible to the target groups. After all, a guided tour for blind and visually impaired visitors gains more attention than improving our lighting in the museum rooms, but the latter is also important for this audience. Yet the job is much broader; as you will see in the following chapter, it also involves content, digital, physical, social, financial and representative accessibility.

Since 2023, the role of Accessibility Manager has been a staff position reporting directly to the museum's top management. This will convey the message, internally and externally, that accessibility is a cross-departmental topic and entails far more than making programmes for specific target groups.

3

What

The Rijksmuseum has defined six different types of accessibility for people with one or more disabilities that we want to safeguard.⁵

1. **Content accessibility:**
access to stories about the collection
2. **Digital accessibility:**
opportunities to consult digital information sources (website, app)
3. **Physical accessibility:**
accessibility of the building, its immediate surroundings and the signposting
4. **Social accessibility:**
how the staff welcome and treat people
5. **Financial accessibility:**
for a considerable number of people with a disability a ticket or a programme is expensive. Accessibility therefore also concerns the price of your offer.
6. **Representative accessibility:**
museum staff are diverse and representative of society. People with a disability must also be represented in the museum's collection.

Content accessibility

Remember that people with disabilities are not a target group in themselves, but part of a museum's overall audience, such as art lovers, tourists, families with children and schools. For this reason, we try to make our regular programming as accessible and inclusive as possible so that more people can participate. This is done by training our tour guides to cater for different target groups and by providing leeway for the tour guides to adapt the programme to the various needs of the participants. In this way, we strive to be as inclusive as possible.

However, some people may prefer to be treated exclusively. Therefore, we also offer programmes that are tailored specifically to certain target groups. Here is a sample of what we offer.

Guided tour in Dutch Sign Language (NGT)

The guided tour in Dutch Sign Language (NGT) is offered at set times to adults in the current temporary exhibition. Tours in NGT in the permanent display and for families are only possible on request because there is less demand. Deaf visitors from abroad can get in touch and book a guided tour in International Sign. All of these tours are given by deaf tour guides. We deliberately chose to have the tours

given by someone for whom NGT is their first language rather than have the tour led by a hearing person assisted by an interpreter so that the story is not conveyed in an interpretation. The tour guides are trained by Stichting IN Gebaren, which also monitors quality. The Rijksmuseum app offers a video tour in NGT for deaf visitors who want to visit the permanent display independently.

Guided tour for blind people and people with low vision

The guided tour for blind people and people with low vision (see also pp. 20–32) is offered as an entry-level tour and covers both the permanent display and the current temporary exhibition. We also offer a guided tour for families with children, which can be booked on request.

Touch workshops

We organize touch workshops in the CollectieCentrum Nederland (CC NL), which houses the works of art that are not featured in exhibitions at the Rijksmuseum and other institutions. There, under the guidance of a curator who tells them about the objects' origin and materials, blind people and people with low vision can touch objects (fig. 11).

Guided tour for families with children with special needs

We also offer a guided tour for families with children with special needs (fig. 12). Some children have special needs due



Fig. 11 Tactile workshop in CC NL

to intellectual or multiple disabilities, low cognitive and/or social-emotional development or for other reasons. The tour we've developed for these children and their families can only be booked on request. That way, it's a private tour and the tour guide can focus on the child. The tour guides are trained for this target group and are able to fully adapt to the needs of the child. They are provided with an extensive family kit of materials and methods.

Unforgettable Museum for people with dementia

The Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and the Van Abbemuseum have developed Unforgettable Museum, an amazing guided tour for people with dementia, which can be implemented in any museum. During the Unforgettable Museum tours, participants and their loved ones view a small number of objects that require no background knowledge; the focus is on enjoying art, the personal experience and the opportunity to talk together. We were able to introduce the Unforgettable programme at the Rijksmuseum straight away (fig. 13). The website onvergetelijkmuseum.nl has an excellent explanation of the programme.

Guided tour on location in nursing homes

On request, a guided tour on location can be booked for senior citizens in nursing homes. The tour guide visits the care home, presents high-resolution images of works of art



Fig. 12 Guided tour for families with children with special needs



Fig. 13 Guided tour for people with dementia and their loved ones

on a screen, and tells background stories about them. The guide also takes along a number of objects to bring the story to life, such as a millstone collar, a replica of an art object or a cinnamon stick, for people to touch, smell or taste.

Guided tour for people with learning disabilities

For people with mild learning disabilities, we offer a guided tour that includes a creative assignment. During the tour, the participants sketch what they see in the gallery and then complete it in a workshop area. This tour can only be booked on request and the tour leader adapts their story and way of communicating to suit the participants.

Special education (SO)

The Rijksmuseum welcomes 200,000 pupils per year. Some students have special needs and are in special education (SO). In preparation for the visit, it's crucial to make personal contact with the schools to dispel teachers' concerns and answer their questions: Can our children do this, how should we organize it? The Public & Education Department has an SO employee who offers teachers reassurance and support, and approaches schools proactively.

These children usually need more personal attention during their visit. To accommodate this, pupils of special needs education can take part in the various programmes in small

groups in which each tour is led by two guides, instead of one. This creates a quiet setting and individualized attention for participants, ensuring the children will enjoy a full and meaningful visit to the museum.

Unlike in mainstream education, special needs education does not have a curriculum to which the Rijksmuseum programmes are automatically linked. The special education programmes must be adapted per group to the pupils' specific and often diverse needs. Our tour guides, who are trained in working with autistic students, ADD and mild learning disabilities, are able to provide these pupils with the tailored approach that they need.

The programme for blind, visually impaired and deaf children is also suitable for mainstream education. If, for example, a mainstream school class is visiting in which one of the pupils is blind, the whole class will be given the guided tour for blind children, during which real objects may be touched.

Sensory-friendly evening openings

For people who have a sensory processing disorder arising from autism spectrum disorder, brain injury, burn-out or illness, a museum visit can quickly become too much. This is why we organize sensory-friendly evening openings, where fewer people are admitted, the lights in the Atrium are



Fig. 14 Sensory-friendly evening opening

dimmed, the staff talk in whispers and there is a stimulus-free room where people can take a break (fig. 14). The evenings are also intended for other visitors for whom crowds are inconvenient, such as people in wheelchairs whose view of the works of art is often obstructed by people standing in front of them, or visitors with low vision who want to look at the works more closely.

We offer sensory-friendly evening openings for adults, and evenings for families with children. We decided to offer two separate evenings because we found that the children can make sounds that others may find distracting. Everybody is asked to be quiet, and to whisper if necessary. We also offer guided tours during these evenings. On family evenings, there are also cards with factual assignments in the museum galleries designed for children on the autism spectrum.

Special talk shows

At regular intervals, we offer special talk shows that we develop in collaboration with the target group. In 2021, for example, we organized an evening with deaf people during the *Slavery* exhibition that looked at the similarities between slavery and the ban on sign language from 1880 to 1980. In the first instance, people who were enslaved were robbed of their language and identity, in the second this happened to deaf people. Without equating the two situations,

recognizable patterns were highlighted: oppression and discrimination, power struggles, the power of language, the ways in which stories are passed down, and the way that the past trickles into the present, and how we can learn from it. In this way, we used the exhibition to address another social issue. The event consisted of a panel discussion in Dutch Sign Language; the participants included curators from the Rijksmuseum, together with deaf members of the organizations Musea in Gebaren and the Nederlands Gebarencentrum.

Digital accessibility

Website

Before visiting a museum, most people check the website for information or to buy a ticket. Your website must therefore be accessible. The law states that a website must comply with the technical guidelines of the WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines). This is a minimum set of requirements. But meeting these requirements does not automatically mean that your website will be usable by everyone. There are simply too many individuals, each with their own specific situation. While a higher contrast ratio is better for one person because they have low vision, it can be too stimulating for another because she

is light-sensitive. So it is vital that you ask a great many different people to test your website for accessibility, and provide website users with different ways of interacting with the information, such as text-to-speech technology, and a variety of contrasts, with or without images.

The Rijksmuseum website was designed with accessibility in mind. We asked various individuals with a disability to test the usability of the design. The website features large visuals. This can act as a barrier for blind people or people who are oversensitive to stimuli. Someone who cannot use a mouse, trackpad or touchscreen has to move through the website step by step, for example with the help of a keyboard. For certain actions, such as ordering a ticket, that can be too many steps. So we want to continually optimize the website for each target group.

Newsletter

The Rijksmuseum sends out various newsletters, and recently added one on accessibility. We asked various target groups to test the newsletter, to make sure that it was accessible. What we hadn't tested was how easy it was to subscribe to the newsletter, and we discovered that it was impossible for people who are blind or have low vision. As this example shows, you really have to test the entire process, from start to finish.

Webpage

There is a separate accessibility webpage that can be reached directly from the homepage. This page provides information about the various facilities and events offered by the museum. There are tips on ways to make sure your visit to the museum is calm, such as planning your visit for times when it is less crowded, and places where you can sit and catch your breath. We also provide a downloadable declaration for people who don't want to wait in the queue because they find it too tiring. Visitors can also find documents with tips on preparing their visit, which explain things such as 'where is the entrance', 'this is who checks your ticket', 'here are the disabled parking spaces' and 'how far is it to walk to the museum'. This page also lists all the accessibility programmes that visitors can book.

Podcast

A transcript of each episode of the Dutch podcast 'In het Rijksmuseum' has been made for people with hearing disabilities or who cannot listen to a podcast because of sensitivity to stimuli. This can be found on the website.

Social media

The Rijksmuseum's social media content also falls under digital accessibility. The Rijksmuseum social media team has been trained in how to make online content accessible

to art lovers anywhere in the world. We made a short YouTube film in International Sign for deaf people abroad about Rembrandt's facial expressions, which examined the importance of facial expressions in sign language. We subtitled the film so that hearing people were also able to follow it.

Audio tours

The Rijksmuseum app offers audio tours of 300 objects in the permanent display, and a new tour is made for each exhibition. These audio tours are popular among visitors to the Rijksmuseum. They allow visitors to tour the museum independently and learn more about a work of art at their leisure. Visitors with disabilities can use the following options:

- A transcript of each stop in the audio tour can be read in the app.
- There is a video tour of the highlights in Dutch Sign Language.
- When renting the audio tour, visitors can borrow a ComPilot which connects the audio tour directly to a hearing aid.
- If visitors who are blind have the voice-over turned on, they hear a description of the object before hearing the audio tour. These descriptions were made by Front Office

employees who were at home throughout the coronavirus pandemic. This was also helpful in raising awareness.

- For each exhibition, a low-noise version of the audio tour is made without additional sounds and music.

Online interactive tours

When the museum was closed due to the coronavirus pandemic, we started to offer online interactive tours. This worked very well for students with special educational needs. The students could explore the Rijksmuseum from their classrooms. Now that the museum has reopened, we still offer the online lessons to special education classes first, so that they can prepare themselves properly. The advantage of an online tour is that you can zoom in on the paintings, can easily switch from one painting to another and can easily make comparisons.

Physical accessibility

When it came to physical accessibility, our first move was to contact the Nationale Vereniging de Zonnebloem, for people with physical disabilities. We invited their group of user experts (people with a disability who have developed expertise in dealing with accessibility challenges) and accessibility experts to review the usability and accessibility of the entire Rijksmuseum. They provided us with a detailed audit report that outlined quick wins and suggestions for the long term. We immediately started with the quick wins:

- Provide a floorplan for visitors to borrow that shows the quickest routes to the lift, the toilet facilities for disabled visitors, seating areas and areas where it is usually less crowded.
- Make sure the website's accessibility page gives information on how to plan a quieter visit for visitors with sensory sensitivity. We also added a downloadable document for a fast-track declaration so that you can skip the queue at the entrance.
- Purchase lightweight folding stools.

- Provide a voice-over in the lifts that tells you which floor you are on.
- Make sure that thresholds are level and don't pose a physical impediment.
- Provide extra signage for wheelchair routes.
- Make suitable changes in the accessible toilets, such as installing a grabrail on the inside of the door and replacing the waste bins (there were bins you could only operate with your foot).
- The coffee corner can only be reached by taking the stairs to the lower level. We've now installed tables at the top of the stairs for wheelchair users. To ensure that these tables remain available to those for whom they are intended, a sticker with a wheelchair symbol has been placed on the tables.
- Rest areas. There must be a sufficient number of benches in the galleries for visitors to take a break. Set aside a stimulus-free room for visitors who are sensitive to stimuli and need somewhere to rest if they feel overwhelmed. We have a stimulus-free room with a comfortable chair and dimmable light. Visitors can only access this room

when accompanied by a security guard. However, in practice, we often escort visitors who need to take a break to a place that's closer, such as a bench under the stairs. There are a number of places in the museum where visitors can take a few moments, and sit and relax.

The Zonnebloem recommendations also included larger adjustments that require larger budgets. We will spread these over the coming years. In 2023, the list includes making the Auditorium – the venue in which lectures, debates and other programmes take place – accessible. For people in wheelchairs, there is only room at the back of the hall. A speaker in a wheelchair cannot access the stage. To enable this, we need a stair lift. This realization reveals the scale of accessibility: if we want to belong to, and be for, everyone, we must ensure that lectures can be given by people in a wheelchair.

Signage

For people with little energy, it is helpful if they don't have to spend too much of it finding their way around. Clear signage is crucial. The Rijksmuseum is going to alter its signposting so that the museum routes will be clearer.

‘The Atrium in the Rijksmuseum is a rather confusing space where there are a lot of stimuli. My daughter understands so little about the world that it is important for her to have an overview. So we don’t want to be in the Atrium for long, and want to know where to go, and how to reach the galleries we want to take her to, quickly. This is the biggest obstacle for her to visit the Rijksmuseum.’

Hester Kuiper

Mother of a child

with multiple disabilities

Lighting

The museum's lighting is also important. Every visitor must be able to see clearly where they are walking. The objects must be clearly visible and the text panels legible. There are sometimes snags, because certain objects (such as works made of paper or textiles) cannot be exposed to much light. We always try to do the best we can. One option we recommend is giving individual visitors a torch during a guided tour. Make sure that the transitions from a light to a dark space are not too abrupt; it can be difficult for visually impaired people to adapt.

Labels

The labels in the museum are not always easy to read. The font is too condensed, and the font size and the distance between the letters and lines is too small for visually impaired people or for people in wheelchairs who have to look from a distance. Adapting this for the 8,000 objects in the museum would be a major undertaking. In addition, modifying the corporate identity of a museum, which has been widely applied, cannot be done in a short space of time. And deciding what we would like to change is not easy either, because – as mentioned earlier – nobody is the same, and even within the visually impaired target group there are different requirements. This is why we decided to put the labels in the Rijksmuseum app. The app

adapts itself to the phone user's settings, which means that the letters become as large as the user wants.

Collection

The collection itself must, of course, be physically accessible; in other words, the art objects must be easy to see, and must be well lit. Ideally, there should be sufficient space around display cases to allow wheelchair users to get close enough to view the object. Also, items in a display case should not lie flat, but be tilted so that even someone who is shorter than average height or in a wheelchair can see them. Paintings usually hang 1.60 metres from the ground. Wheelchair users have an eye height of 1.20 metres. It doesn't matter too much if large paintings hang a bit higher, although you should always pay attention to how the lighting is directed. Always check for reflected light, which can pose a problem for people viewing the work from a lower eye level.

In the Rijksmuseum, works on paper are displayed in print rooms designed specifically for that purpose. These works are often very precisely drawn and smaller in size, so visitors must be able to get close enough to experience them fully. For this reason, we hung all the prints at a height of 1.40 metres from the ground, so that shorter visitors and visitors in wheelchairs must look slightly upwards, and tall



Fig. 15 A mirror installed above this vase enables people who are looking at it from a low vantage point to see the top

standing visitors need to angle their gaze slightly down. To find out if this works for everyone, we'll trial this display for a year, and also ask the public for feedback.

Another adjustment we made concerns a large vase with an unusual lid. We hung a mirror above the vase, so that people looking at it from a low vantage point are also able to see the top, reflected in the mirror (fig. 15).

Exhibitions

These are all (required) adjustments to the permanent display, and are harder to implement than in temporary exhibitions. After all, the layout of the permanent display is fixed, while temporary exhibitions are designed anew each time. Together with the Zonnebloem, Bartiméus and the Stichting Onbeperkt Genieten, we have developed guidelines for exhibition accessibility.⁶ The designer is given this document before they start designing the exhibition. A focus group looks at the initial design and gives feedback. Although not all requirements can always be adopted, this way of working ensures that curators and exhibition designers are aware of the accessibility requirements, and that when they decide not to accommodate these requirements, they do so intentionally because they wish to achieve a specific effect. In some cases, an experience can be granted priority.

‘If a darkened gallery is central to the experience, you’re faced with a dilemma – how do you reconcile this with accessibility? If you make the space accessible to people who have low vision by adding sufficient light and contrast, you diminish the experience for people who have unimpaired sight. In which case, the most important feature of the design is lost. In this particular case, I’d do the following: use a raised or tactile line to indicate the walking area and, if possible, make sure the line is also clearly visible. And be sure to mention this on your website’s accessibility page.’

Steven Dekker

Accessibility advisor at

Accessibility (part of Bartiméus)

For the exhibition *Crawly Creatures*, held in the autumn of 2022, walls and floors were significantly darkened in order to create the sense of being underground. In this exhibition, it was all about the experience. But if the walls and floor are the same colour, people with low vision don't see where the floor ends and the wall begins, and have difficulty navigating the space (see also p. 79).

Events

Events organized in the museum must also be accessible. Our Events & Receptions Department has a checklist with items such as: Are there enough seats, can people rest in a quiet room, are there low standing tables?⁷ Each invitation also asks people to let us know if they have any accessibility needs such as an Dutch Sign Language interpreter, or speech to text interpreter, a companion or something else.

Navigation

For many blind visitors or people with low vision, it is important to be able to navigate the Rijksmuseum independently. This is the reason Atsence, in collaboration with Bartiméus, has developed eZwayZ, a navigation app (fig. 16; see also p. 32). For this purpose, the entire building was scanned. The app uses your phone's camera to determine where you are. You can then specify where you want to go, for instance *The Night Watch*, the toilets or the restaurant.

The app will guide you to that particular spot, and you can choose how to get there. For people with low vision, a large yellow arrow appears on the screen to indicate how to get there, but you can also choose beeps, a voice-over guide or vibrations while you are walking that route.

Scale model

Using an app, however, doesn't give visitors an accurate impression of a building; after all, you simply follow instructions. This inspired us to develop a scale model of the Rijksmuseum that visitors can touch. The model has foldable floors so that people can get a good impression of the different layers of the building. It gives people a chance to explore and feel the model, so that they understand exactly where *The Night Watch* hangs in relation to other points in the building. The model features the most important works, which are accompanied by audio descriptions.

Immediate surroundings

The immediate surroundings of the museum are also part of physical accessibility. Can a wheelchair easily get on and off the kerb, is there a safe place to cross the road, are there enough accessible parking spaces? These are things we have to arrange in consultation with the municipality.



Fig. 16 The eZwayZ navigation app being tested in the Rijksmuseum

‘A well-designed model adds to the visitor experience because it helps people understand the building’s layout so that they can navigate the spaces independently. The visitor is aware of everything there is to see.’

Hannes Wallrafen
Director Geluid in Zicht
and blind

‘A security guard noticed that a woman was standing too close to a painting, and mentioned it to her. She told him her eyesight was very poor, which is why she had to get so close. The museum was crowded at that time of day, so the security guard explained that he trusted her, but she was at risk of being pushed, and could bump into the painting. He suggested that she return just before closing time, when the museum is quieter, and she would be able to get a close look at everything. He waited for her, and gave her the chance to see everything; she secretly stayed after closing time as well. She had a fantastic experience.’

Cathelijne Denekamp

Social accessibility

A large part of the experience of a visit is determined by how visitors are welcomed. So it's essential that your organization's staff is aware of this and also knows how best to address, direct and assist people with different disabilities.

One of the most important things is never to judge anyone, and always be willing to go the extra mile without being patronizing. To embed this awareness throughout the organization, the Accessibility Manager attends the monthly briefing for front office and security staff, accompanied by a user expert. This may be someone blind or with low vision, someone with Parkinson's disease, or a wheelchair user, who talks about their experiences visiting museums, and offers tips on how to improve.⁸

In many instances, these people with lived experience of a disability are our co-workers. A colleague with autism told us that if he doesn't smile at you, it doesn't mean he dislikes you. Another co-worker attended, bringing his wife who has dementia. What makes these meetings so valuable is that you learn a great deal, and, on top of that, get to know your workmates in a different way. It makes everyone aware of the fact that disabilities come in many different forms, and

you shouldn't make snap judgements, but find out if you can help someone. And always respectfully, on an equal footing.

A museum can be as accessible as is possible, but if someone is not treated well, it can make the museum visit less enjoyable. Conversely, social accessibility can go a long way to improving the visitor experience: if galleries are less accessible, there are still many ways in which staff can make people feel more comfortable. And that's a sufficient reason to continue investing in accessibility.

Financial accessibility

In general, most people do not want to be treated differently, so pay the same admission fee as everyone else. However, the current price for an entrance ticket is a lot of money for people on a modest budget. This is why people with a City Pass have free admission. To lower the financial barrier, we also offer accessible programming for free. The only tours we charge for are the private tours that can be booked on request. Thanks to the support of funds, we can offer a discounted rate. People accompanying visitors with disabilities are admitted free of charge, such as the person pushing the wheelchair, accompanying a blind person or acting as an interpreter, who could also be a partner, child or friend.

Representative accessibility

An inclusive museum not only has the task of being accessible, it also has an important role to play in terms of representation. In order to be a museum for all, in which visitors recognize themselves as equals, it's important that they feel represented both in the workforce and in the collection.

Staff with a disability

For several reasons, we think it's important that people with disabilities work at the Rijksmuseum. First, as a museum, you will benefit from having a staff that is as diverse as possible. More people with disabilities provide multiple perspectives and ultimately a more accessible museum. Second, people with disabilities are often experts in adapting and improvising: useful skills for any staff member. Unfortunately, people often jump to the conclusion that someone won't be able to handle certain tasks. They may assume that a deaf person, for instance, cannot answer the phone, while they often have ingenious solutions that wouldn't occur to a hearing person. And this can be instructive and help raise the awareness of colleagues without disabilities. Finally, it's about equality of opportunity. After all, it's much easier to get a job without a disability, an inequality that you, as an organization, should want to help rectify.

‘It’s essential to hire and retain people with disabilities in all layers of the organization. If you can communicate this successfully, the entire organization will benefit and people will feel welcome.’

Rick Brink

Former Minister of Disabled Affairs
and wheelchair user

This begins with awareness as well. It is crucial that, within the organization, management clearly communicate the importance and value of an inclusive workforce and incorporate accessibility into the human resources vision. Working with a recruitment company that specializes in recruiting people with disabilities can be effective; it can also support the employees and their line managers. Sometimes physical adjustments are needed, such as creating a quiet room for someone who is sensitive to stimuli or a lift for someone with impaired mobility. In many cases this can be expensive, but you can apply for grants to adapt workplaces for employees with disabilities.

This is a process that takes years. Of course, it can go wrong sometimes, if it turns out that someone is not right for the job after all. But that can also happen to people without disabilities. It's crucial that everyone realizes that one person does not represent an entire group of people.

People with a disability in the collection

The collection contains a great many works that were created by individuals with disabilities. There are also works of art depicting disabled people, or accompanying informational texts that refer to them. These texts may still contain outdated, inappropriate, insulting and/or discriminating words, such as 'blind', 'lame', 'deaf-mute',

‘cripple’, ‘insane’, ‘deformed’ and ‘monstrous’ (fig. 17). This is why we appointed a researcher to check the titles and descriptions of the entire collection for obsolete terms. She is writing manuals for each term to help the museum-staff members who draft texts become more acquainted with historical and contemporary terminology. In preparing the manual, social and academic discussions are taken into account and interest groups provide input and feedback.

It isn’t only terminology that is important, but also the way that people with disabilities have been represented throughout art history. The Rijksmuseum collection is surprisingly rich in objects and representations of people with disabilities. From the sixteenth-century depiction of people with an disability in a medieval town (fig. 18), to Rembrandt’s portrayals of disabled people in his everyday surroundings. By looking at the collection from this perspective, and, for example, by organizing exhibitions about it, you help to raise awareness of this underexposed theme in art history for a general public and create a greater sense of representation for people with disabilities.

During the Night of History in 2021, we organized a small exhibition showing that people with physical and mental disabilities have always been part of our society, and that they are represented in the arts. Bert Watteeuw, director of

the Rubens House in Antwerp, gave a lecture on this subject and concluded as follows: 'The Rijksmuseum also fulfils a fundamental form of care in the Netherlands. This is where our world view is preserved. In hundreds of thousands of diverse images: collected, researched and sometimes exhibited. It is because of this ongoing concern that we are able to look back at our own world view, that we can learn how we came to see things as we do, where traces of older visions still remain, and where there is a path to a broader, more inclusive, more diverse and gentler view of the world around us.'

‘When I attended a special school, during history lessons I was always told that people with disabilities did not exist in the Middle Ages. They were often drowned at birth. It wasn’t until I was much older that I discovered that in art – more often than I thought – people with disabilities from all layers of society have been represented throughout history. And that, throughout history, art has been created by people with disabilities. If only I had known that then! It would have done a lot for my self-esteem. Even when I studied at the art academy, those insights were lacking.’

Mari Sanders

Film and theatre director
and wheelchair user



Fig. 17 Karel du Jardin, *St Paul Healing the Man who Could not Walk*, 1663
The former title of this painting was: *St Paul Healing the Cripple at Lystra*.
Today, we no longer describe someone using the term 'cripple'.



Fig. 18 Master of Alkmaar, *The Seven Works of Mercy* (detail), 1504
In the Middle Ages, people with disabilities were portrayed as among the poorest of society. In those days, begging was often their only means of survival.



Fig. 19 Carel Christiaan Antony Last after Louis Joseph César Ducornet, *Portrait of Louis Joseph César Ducornet*, 1851

Louis J.C. Ducornet was born with phocomelia, a condition in which the limbs are not fully formed. He was a talented artist and used his distinctive appearance to his advantage, to promote his work and reach a wider audience.



Fig. 20 Ronald Tolman, *Painting in a Wheelchair*, 1994

Here you see an artist in a wheelchair at work, painting birds with a paintbrush attached to a band he wears around his head. Tolman drew inspiration from colour, unusual perspectives and characters. This work is entirely in keeping with his style.



Fig. 21 Michel Mourot, *Portrait of Petronella Moens*, 1822–1845

Petronella Moens was a political writer and poet. As a child, she contracted smallpox, which left her partially sighted. Moens' prize-winning oeuvre reflected on issues such as women's suffrage. Being a woman had greater impact on her fame than her blindness.

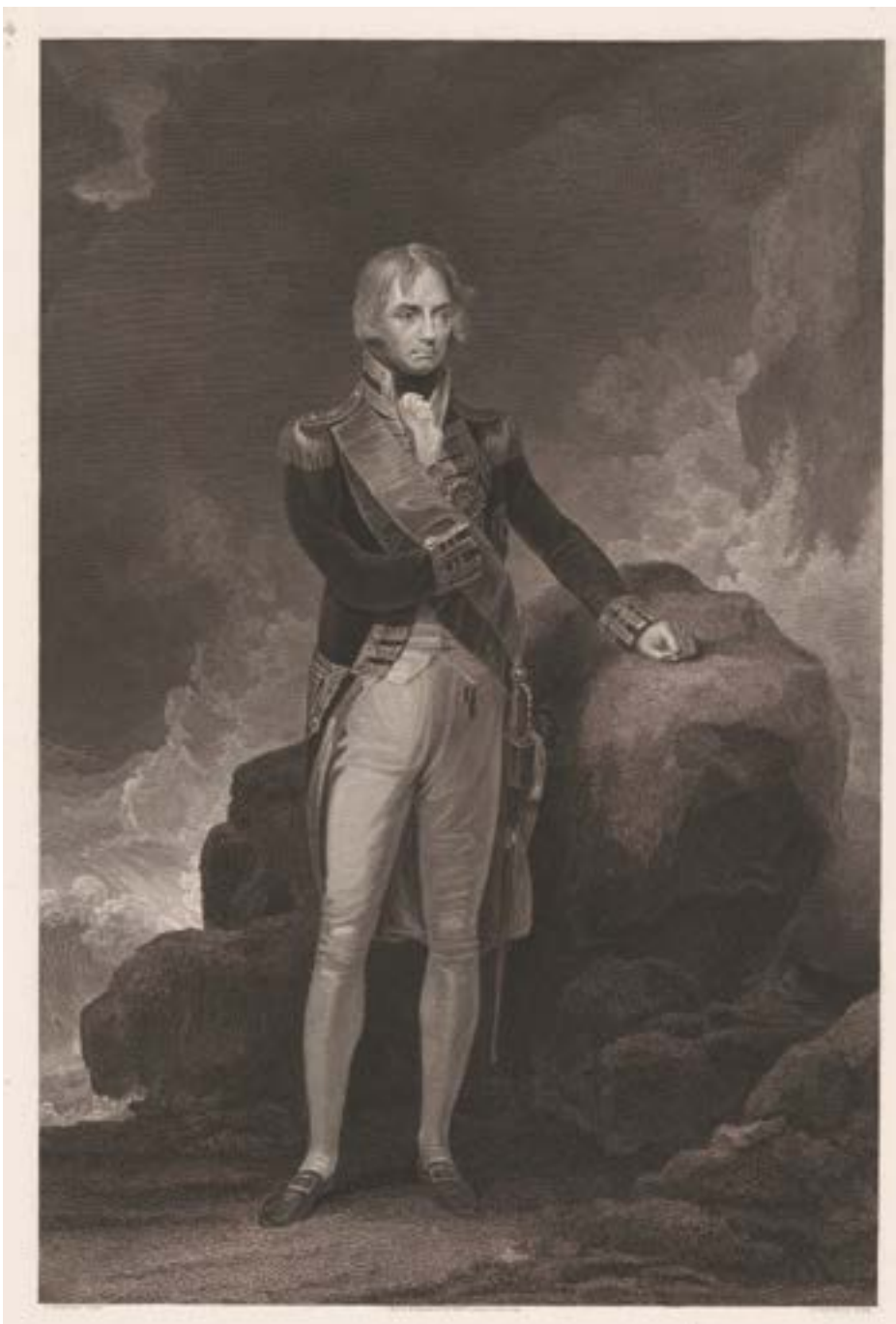


Fig. 22 William Bromley (I) after Robert Bowyer, *Portrait of Horatio Nelson*, 1809
The media sometimes presents people with congenital and acquired disabilities as inspirational. They 'overcame their disability' to achieve success, which is an ableist point of view. Similarly, the war injuries sustained by the British Admiral Lord Nelson are intended to make him look more heroic.



Fig. 23 Michelangelo, *Personification of Day*, 1534

Did the famous Italian artist Michelangelo have autism? Writings about his interests and activities suggest so. Remarkably, this behaviour was never detrimental to his reputation or success.



Fig. 24 Hendrick Avercamp, *Winter Landscape with Ice Skaters*, c. 1608
Hendrick Avercamp was a seventeenth-century Dutch painter who was deaf. He made popular winter landscapes portraying typically Dutch winter fun. Now and then, he also included cheeky details, like the figure defecating.



Fig. 25 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Old Woman Reading, Probably the Prophetess Anna*, 1631
Most people are likely to experience some form of disability at one time or another, such as age-related disabilities. 'Old age comes with infirmity' is a well-known Dutch saying, and for good reason. In fact, to a greater or lesser extent, disabilities always occur, all over the world.

4

Art and well-being

So far, we've focused on the question of how to make a museum accessible to everyone. What we haven't looked at is the role museum visits play in people's wellbeing.

People experiencing depression may lose the ability to connect with the world around them.⁹ Looking at art, with or without the help of a tour guide or audio tour, helps you to reconnect and rebalance. It boosts your mental resilience. Several countries are experimenting with collaborations between museums and the health sector. Doctors in Sweden, Canada and Belgium are now prescribing free visits to a museum. Mindfulness programmes are also becoming increasingly popular in art museums. Looking at art is revitalizing and can improve your wellbeing, and provide a distraction from everyday concerns.

Virtual reality headsets

Night Watch on Tour demonstrates that visitors don't always need to see the original works of art (pp. 48–49, 106–107). To that end, we also use virtual reality headsets to give senior citizens in care homes a chance to enjoy iconic art. They get to tour the Rijksmuseum's Gallery of Honour for fifteen minutes. The experience elicits a great many emotional responses, partly because it triggers memories. This initiative is also a wonderful alternative for people who are unable to visit the museum.

Ambient Experience film for MRI scans

In hospitals, art can also help to boost patients' wellbeing. Philips made an Ambient Experience film for MRI scans with art from the Rijksmuseum set to music played by the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra. Patients watch the film during an MRI scan to relieve the anxiety they feel while undergoing the examination.

Kunstluister

We also launched Kunstluister, a podcast with stories about works of art from the Rijksmuseum. Each story has a special message to offer a brief escape from everyday life, and transport you to a place where you can simply be. Designed to alleviate various kinds of stress, it can help people who are unable to fall asleep, or who – travelling in a crowded train – need a momentary diversion. The stories are written by creative practitioners, and always based on a work of art. Jörgen Tjon A Fong, founder of cultural organization Urban Myth, talks about his burn-out and how the painting *The Threatened Swan* by Jan Asselijn helped him on his path to recovery. Through the podcast, listeners discover that art can be experienced in lots of different ways, and a work of art can have more meanings than you might think at first.

‘In a hectic or threatening environment, our attention jumps restlessly to and fro. Which places strain on the brain. Attention overload has been linked to a variety of problems such as overtiredness, addiction, burn-out and obesity. Fascination inhibits this tendency to self-distort. Looking at a fascinating view or being in a fascinating environment captures your attention and gives the brain less opportunity to react to stress stimuli. People can concentrate and control their attention better, are better able to focus and have greater self-control, when their attention finds a point of rest every now and then in nature, yoga, meditation, music or a museum.’¹⁰

Mark Mieras

Science journalist

‘Night Watch on Tour creates quite a stir in nursing homes, not just because it’s an unexpected event, but because it’s a painting that lots of people know or remember. In this context, a painting like *The Night Watch* plays a useful, very worthwhile role. One woman told us that, in the care home, she and her 94-year-old mother, who has dementia, stood in front of this replica of *The Night Watch*. Her mother stared at the painting for quite a long time, her eyes returning to the same detail. Suddenly she said: “Rembrandt!”, which was remarkable because her mother had stopped speaking. Many people are familiar with the painting because they learned about it in the past. Zooming in on details in the painting and talking about them can really boost someone’s self-confidence.’

Cathelijne Denekamp



Fig. 26 Night Watch on Tour, in which a replica of *The Night Watch* travels to nursing homes



Fig. 27 Once a year, the Rijksmuseum organizes the Prachtnacht, an evening for children who cannot visit the museum during regular opening hours due to illness or disability. They are allowed to bring their whole family with them

Prachtnacht

Every year, we hold Prachtnacht, an evening of festivities at the Rijksmuseum for sick children and their families where they can forget their worries for a while and enjoy a fun-filled evening together (fig. 27). Once a year we send a Pracht package to children who are in hospital and are unable to visit us. This package contains tools with which they can make their own work of art in their hospital room. Using the QR code on the box, they can find inspiration in our museum.

Museums as a remedy for loneliness

Meeting in the Rijksmuseum

Art can also be a way of combating loneliness. Looking at art together sparks conversation and encourages people to connect with each other. This is the goal of the programme Ontmoeting in het Rijksmuseum (Meeting in the Rijksmuseum) (fig. 28). These guided tours were designed for senior citizens living in Amsterdam who feel isolated; the participants visit the museum three times, at one-monthly intervals. A coach collects the group and drops them off at the museum. On each occasion, the same tour guide leads the group, which is accompanied by the same museum volunteer, and the visitor group is always the same. Looking

at art and history is a way to break the ice, and helps the participants to connect with other people of their generation from the same neighbourhood who share the same interests.

The focus here is not on knowledge of art history, but on looking together, sharing experiences and getting to know each other. Participants sit on stools in front of a work of art. The guide asks questions and gives assignments that encourage interaction. After each tour, participants share a drink, and everyone receives a postcard of the work discussed. On the third and final occasion, the participants exchange contact details and we take a group photo that everyone can take home. Our hope is that, after the programme ends, people will get in touch with each other again. Whether this actually happens is something we will look into.

Letter Project

When the museum was forced to close due to the COVID-19 measures, and we were unable to provide the tours to the people who had signed up for the Meeting Programme, we began a Letter Project. Staff of the Rijksmuseum write a personal letter about one of the works of art in the museum, which is sent to this group of senior citizens. The group was soon extended to include seniors outside Amsterdam, and



Fig. 28 Meeting in the Rijksmuseum, a programme for senior citizens who feel isolated

now over 1,000 recipients receive such a letter every fortnight. The letters tell incredible stories. And because so many colleagues from different departments take part – curators, tour guides, HR consultants, the directors – the letters are written from different perspectives. For example, the director wrote about how Rembrandt's *Jewish Bride* made him long to touch his mother again during the Covid pandemic. A security guard compares shoes from Nova Zembla with her own. We received dozens of letters back from people who wrote about their own shoes. The letters are all completely different and uniquely personal, which makes them such a joy to receive. We get very touching reactions. People can still sign up for the project, and also receive all the letters written previously.

‘It’s the little ray of hope I look forward to every week; I keep all the letters in a folder. Because I have no children and my husband has passed away, it’s lovely to know that people still think of you. I really feel that I belong.’

From an elderly lady who
takes part in the Letter Project

**‘I feel
like I
belong!’**

Appendix 1

People and organizations that the Rijksmuseum collaborates with and/or is inspired by in the area of accessibility.

People

- Ann Blokland and Mirjam Eikelenboom, educators at the Van Gogh Museum
- Nynke Feenstra, researcher and policymaker in the field of accessibility and culture
- Marleen Hartjes, Head of Education Museum Catharijneconvent, initiator of the Special Guest programme of the Van Abbemuseum and STUDIO i
- Anouk Heesbeen-de Vos, coordinator of the public programme of Museum De Lakenhal, initiator of STUDIO i
- Rebecca McGinnis and Marie Clapot, educators for accessibility at the Metropolitan Museum, creators of the project 'Crip the Met'
- Stefanie Metsemakers, Head of Education, Audience Engagement & Inclusion Bonnefanten Museum, initiator of the Onvergetelijk/Unforgettable Museum for people with dementia
- Caro Verbeek, curator of Kunstmuseum Den Haag

Organizations

- Accessibility, committed to social, digital and physical access, has helped many museums in the field of accessibility
- Atsence, company for accessible software, creator of eZwayZ, an indoor navigation app for blind and visually impaired people
- Bartiméus, for people who are blind or visually impaired
- Cliëntenbelang Amsterdam, for Amsterdam residents with a disability
- Eén tegen eenzaamheid, a coalition of municipalities, companies and organizations that combat loneliness, founded by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport
- Geluid in Zicht, an organization that provides blind and visually impaired people with a tactile and auditory experience of the structure and architecture of a building
- Gouderdom, for senior citizens
- Ieder(in), network for people with a disability or chronic illness
- IN Gebaren, for people who are deaf or hearing impaired
- KUBES, art and culture for people who are blind or visually impaired
- Museum Plus Bus, museum visitors for senior citizens

- Naareenmuseum.nl, an initiative of Steffie.nl, that offers museum visits for people with developmental and learning disabilities
- Onbeperkt Genieten, for sensory-friendly cultural offerings
- Onvergetelijk Museum, a website about organizing guided tours for people with dementia
- Running Blind, for blind or visually impaired runners
- SILVUR, provides improved visual access to the built environment
- STUDIO i, platform for inclusive culture, an initiative of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and the Van Abbemuseum
- De Zonnebloem, for people with physical disabilities

Appendix 2

Partners, funds and donors that support the accessibility goals of the Rijksmuseum

- Bartiméus Fonds, pilot navigation app for visually impaired people (2021) and development of museum module in navigation app (2022)
- Bas ten Haaf Fonds/Rijksmuseum Fund, appointment of Accessibility Manager (2017, 2018, 2019), video tour in NGT (2019) and many other projects (2017–2022)

- Bob Verheeke Fonds/Rijksmuseum Fund, guided tours for blind and visually impaired people (2018)
- Stichting Edwin Bouw Fonds, Accessibility Manager (2020 and 2021), *Accessibility Without Limits* publication (2022)
- Elisabeth Art Foundation/Rijksmuseum Fund, Night Watch on Tour (2020, 2021, 2022), Meeting in the Rijksmuseum (2019, 2022, 2023, 2024)
- Fonds Sluyterman van Loo, Night Watch on Tour (summer 2021), Letter Project (2021)
- KPN Mooiste Contact Fonds, virtual reality in nursing homes (2022), free visit to museum for players and supervisors of Invictus Games (2021), launching website naareenmuseum.nl by Steffie (2022)
- Microsoft, digital accessibility and accessibility knowledge sharing (from 2023)
- Philips, Night Watch on Tour (2020, 2021, 2022), Kunstluister, stress-relieving podcasts (2022)
- Prachtnacht Fonds/Rijksmuseum Fonds, Prachtnacht (2015–2022) and Prachtpakketten (2021, 2022)
- Pon Holdings, Prachtpakketten (2021, 2022), Night Watch on Tour (2020, 2021, 2022), online tours for special education (2021)
- Private donor, employee Special Education (2022, 2023, 2024)

- Royal Talens, Prachtpakketten (2021, 2022)
- Stichting Thurkownfonds, guided tours for special target groups (2020), special openings of the *Slavery* exhibition (2021)
- Stichting RCOAK, Night Watch on Tour (summer 2021), Letter Project (2021, 2022)

Notes

- 1 World Health Organization, www.who.int/health-topics/disability#tab=tab_1 (consulted 11 July 2022)
- 2 Dovenschap.nl (consulted 15 April 2022).
- 3 We commissioned the tactile painting from Lisouk Thörig-van de Pol.
- 4 We purchased the disability simulation suits from the Participatiekliniek of Zorgveilig.nl.
- 5 Based on the research of and extensive discussions with Nynke Feenstra, researcher and policymaker in the field of accessibility and culture.
- 6 See www.rijksmuseum.nl/accessibility-at-the-rijksmuseum.
- 7 See www.rijksmuseum.nl/accessibility-at-the-rijksmuseum.
- 8 Read the tips on www.rijksmuseum.nl/accessibility-at-the-rijksmuseum.
- 9 Museum on prescription (commissioned by the Mauritshuis), www.mieras.nl/schrijven/museum-op-recept/ (consulted 16 June 2022).
- 10 Museum on prescription (commissioned by the Mauritshuis), www.mieras.nl/schrijven/museum-op-recept/ (consulted 16 June 2022).

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