

## **After-hours visitors see Taubman museum's collection in different way: through their hands**

By [Pete Dybdahl](#) – Roanoke Times – July, 16, 2009

On Wednesday night, two hours after the Taubman Museum of Art had closed, 35 people and one black Labrador retriever gathered in the museum's large, glass atrium. Half the group had trouble seeing, or could not see at all.

But sight did not enter in to it. Nor did the "no touching" rule.

"I've got detailed visual descriptions," the evening's guide, Abbie Gail Edens, announced to the group. And she had a box of surgical gloves for the sculpture on the tour, she added.

So with that, the Taubman began its first "touch tour," a carefully guided walk through a palace of the visual for patrons who are visually impaired.

Touch tours started at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the early 1970s and spread across the country. With a bit of ingenuity and a pair of gloves, art collections and antiquities have been opened up to an audience that cannot see them.

Two-dimensional paintings are converted into touchable interpretations. The thick brush strokes of a Van Gogh have been re-created for curious fingers. And sculptures can be handled without a sharp word from the security guard.

The first stop at the Taubman was a 5-foot-high sculpture titled "Dancer," by local artist Betty Branch. The placard read: PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH.

"As far as art, I've never really had much success with that because most of it is too far away," said Dianne Decker, founder of the Roanoke Alliance for the Visually Enabled, which had helped organize the tour. The retired secretary has low vision in only one eye, she said.

But this was up close.

The gloves were distributed, and Betty Ann Surbaugh ran her hands up the pink marble, exploring the typically forbidden surface with gusto.

Poised in front of the "Dancer" for a moment, she looked to be nothing short of a dance partner.

"It was very sensational," Surbaugh said once she stepped back from the figure. "I got the shape."

Opal Ferris, another visitor, also considered what she had felt under her gloved hands during her first trip to an art museum.

"It was cold," she said, as marble will be. Yet also illuminating. "I get a lot from the verbal description, but still it's not like touching it."

The next stop on the tour was the American gallery, where the group was surrounded by pastoral scenes and portraits.

Under one life-sized 19th-century lady was a smaller wooden relief of the painting that offered a rough sense of her bare, fleshy arm.

Next to an amusing Norman Rockwell scene, the painting was rendered in a basic outline that could be traced by an index finger.

Color, however, was a bit trickier for patrons who have lost their palette.

There are memories of colors for those who once had vision, some patrons said. But what about those who have never had their sight?

"Most blind people who have never seen will equate colors with other senses," Decker said. Warmth, for instance, can give the hint of a color, she said.

And so can sound. For one impressionist painting, the guide had brought a nocturne to play along with the landscape.

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