

## SECTION 3: MUSEUMS & HISTORIC SITES

### The St. Louis Art Museum

One Fine Arts Drive

Forest Park

St. Louis, MO 63110-1380

(314) 721-0072

<http://www.slam.org>

#### **Rating of Accessibility (out of 5 stars)**

Overall Rating: 4.4 stars

- Accessible by Metro's bus routes: 4 stars
- Availability of docent-led tours upon request: 5 stars
- On-site docents and staff: 5 stars
- Quality of experience if visiting unaccompanied: 4.3 stars
- Tactile and auditory components: 4 stars (based on a visit with an accompanying docent guide)

This evaluation was last updated on May 6, 2012 by Stephen Kissel, Blind Community Enrichment Associate for the St. Louis Lighthouse for the Blind, with the assistance of Ms. Cheryl Benjamin, Associate Educator for the St. Louis Art Museum, and Mr. Michael Murawski, School Services Director for the St. Louis Art Museum.

Founded in 1879 and showcased at the 1904 World's Fair, the St. Louis Art Museum remains committed to making "one of the finest comprehensive art collections in the country" accessible and meaningful to all of its visitors, regardless of physical or mental capabilities. Docent-led tours yield much insight into the composition and meaning behind the numerous works of art, and developments continue within the Education Department in an attempt to utilize multiple senses when exploring art with museum visitors. When combined, these factors reflect a welcoming and accommodating atmosphere at the St. Louis Art Museum towards visitors who are blind or visually impaired.

Overall, sight-impaired individuals will find it relatively easy to reach the Art Museum via St. Louis' public transportation systems. Yet until such a time as the massive construction

project at the Art Museum reaches completion, it may be advisable for independently-traveling blind visitors to rely on modes of transportation that can leave them directly in front of the main entrance, so as to avoid navigating construction zones. Cabs, sighted drivers, and Metro's Call-A-Ride service are able to drop off passengers directly in front of the main entrance to the museum. The closest Metro Link station is on DeBaliviere, approximately 1.10 miles from the Art Museum. From this station, visitors can catch the south-bound Number 90 bus which will put the passenger within a reasonable walking distance from the main entrance of the Art Museum. If an individual were to visit the museum during the summer tourist season (i.e., April through October), the Forest Park's summer trolley also makes regular rounds between the DeBaliviere station and the major facilities and attractions located throughout Forest Park. As the trolley stops directly outside the Art Museum's main entrance, this option is by far the easiest and most direct way by which to reach this particular venue through established public transportation routes. For further details, see the "Getting Around" section at the beginning of this guide.

The museum is very accustomed to receiving visitors with disabilities, and with the current services, a blind or visually impaired visitor should be able to experience the displays in a way that is both captivating and culturally enriching. The guest services desk is located off to the side of the main entrance and can be easily located upon arrival. From this point, a blind or visually impaired visitor will find it easy to solicit assistance. It is a convenient spot to rendezvous with one's tour guide, and low-vision visitors will also have the opportunity to pick up large-print maps, magnifying glasses, and large-print copies of name plates from key displays. Although the hallways can be navigated with an adequate amount of ease, the rooms are numerous, and, especially during the current construction and renovation project, some amenities, such as bathrooms, are rather difficult to locate. As a result, utilizing sighted guide assistance in the Art Museum is advisable. Most hallways are wide enough to allow for an easy flow of traffic, but please avoid shore lining with canes as a way of maintaining personal orientation, because many of the works of art are safeguarded by motion sensors.

The museum staff makes every effort to accommodate visitors with special needs and will often provide special tours upon request for visitors with disabilities. However, in order to best cater to the needs and interests of the visitor, the staff prefer to be given two to four weeks advanced notice if such a tour is desired. This way, the staff has ample time to line up docents within the visitor's specific areas of interest. Adequate advanced notice also allows docents to gather any extra relevant material or tactile objects that may enhance the visitor's experience.

At present, verbal imaging serves as the primary tool of the docents in making art accessible to visitors who are blind or visually impaired. Verbal imaging consists of a spoken detailed description of the particular pieces of art, highlighting the layers, content, colors, and style. Docents are also quick to expand upon the overall meaning and history behind the creation of a particular piece of art, deepening the visitor's understanding and appreciation. Unfortunately, even amid the three-dimensional displays such as sculptures, Egyptian sarcophagi, and medieval suits of armor, there is nothing in the museum that may be touched or felt. This is in order to preserve the artifacts on display, and many of the galleries are equipped with motion sensors in order to prevent visitors from straying too close to the priceless works of art.

However, the museum's Education Department does maintain a modest assortment of materials which may be felt. These include Native American beadwork, unique fabrics, and a

miniature covered wagon, among others. Such tactile components do not provide scale replicas of any particular piece of art found in the museum. Rather, they are meant to reflect the different cultures represented by the various artistic displays. If the museum is given ample advanced notice about visitors with visual impairments, these tactile components may be incorporated into tours and educational programs wherever applicable. The above accommodations for blind and visually impaired visitors may be obtained by filling out the online Tour Request Form or by calling the museum two to four weeks in advance of one's visit.

The Education Department at the St. Louis Art Museum, in conjunction with the St. Louis Lighthouse for the Blind, is currently conducting a series of docent workshops that focus on interacting with sight impaired visitors and on multi-sensory methods of exploring two-dimensional and three-dimensional works of art. The goal of these workshops is to help docents better anticipate and understand both simple and creative ways in which a sight impaired visitor's experience can be made just as meaningful as that of a fully sighted visitor. Simultaneously, the workshops serve to break the conception that art can only be understood and explored visually. Verbal imaging will continue to serve as the docent's foundation for making art accessible to blind and visually impaired patrons, but it is also hoped that additional tactile and auditory components may be eventually incorporated into the existing displays, offering even more dynamic avenues for art exploration and education. Current proposals include installing tactile representations of selective two-dimensional and three-dimensional works of art, as well as utilizing music, temperature, sounds, and literature in order to create a "living" representation of various styles of art. These additional enhancements are still in the conversational stages of development and have not been finalized or green-lit. More information will be made available as the project further develops.

While visiting the Art Museum, guests may wish to purchase a drink or light meal at the museum's café. This is located on the Main Level within Gallery 213, and it remains the only food venue within the Art Museum during the current construction and expansion project. The café is set up in a typical cafeteria lunch line style, and the staff is very helpful in making a quick and orderly selection from the menu.

Blind and visually impaired visitors will also find the museum's website extremely helpful and insightful when planning a visit. The clear alternative text within the links and the use of headings to organize the material maximize the ease with which screen reading and screen enlarging software can navigate the website. Each page contains a detailed description and (when applicable) a phone number or E-mail through which the individual may make further inquiries. Altogether, blind and visually impaired individuals with an interest in art and art history will enjoy their visit to the St. Louis Art Museum, and with the potential for further accommodations, there will continue to be new ways for both sighted and non-sighted visitors to experience artistic displays from new perspectives.

For further information concerning present and upcoming accommodating services at the St. Louis Art Museum, please contact one of the following museum personnel.

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