

A museum touch tour

When visiting a museum in Thailand, one rapidly grows accustomed to all those "Do not touch!" signs.



Most of us think: ""Well, that's okay. I can get a good look in this glass cabinet."

But what about the disabled - like the blind? Have we ever considered their chance to appreciate, or to learn from, these highly-protected antiques? In fact, the National Museum of Bangkok has given it more than thought.

Recently, 25 children from the Bangkok School for the Blind were given the opportunity to take part in a "touch programme" pilot for blind Thai children that aims to help them learn Thai history by touching inscriptions and ancient pots in the National Museum's collection.

"Like most of us, these children are Thai and they deserve a similar chance to learn about their roots - more than reading from a Braille textbook," said museum curator Disapong Netlomwong.

"Although they can't see, touching objects from the past will help them to better understand how their primogenitors lived and survived."

The one-day tour began in the museum's Thai pre-history gallery, where they learnt of ancient life in the Northeast by touching shards and artifacts left over from the period, such as pots and ceramics from the archaeological site at Ban Chiang.

"We decided to give them knowledge about pre-history because it is a period that is not mentioned much in the [school] curriculum, compared to the Sukhothai or Ayutthaya periods," Disapong said.

In the afternoon, the blind students enjoyed making their own pots based on their touch learning of the morning session.

"Without touching with our hands and fingers, we would not be able to understand these things like a person with normal vision. So, for us, the molding session was like the practical part in learning Thai history," said Kannica Wongpen, a blind participant.

"Besides, I believe that having the chance to create our own pot gave all of us more confidence in working only with our hands, when we face the need to work with normal people in a normal situation in the future."

The touch tour was organised by the National Museum, the Thailand Association for the Blind and National Museum Volunteers. It is now planned to hold the tours on a regular basis for blind Thai school students and adults.

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Foreign tourists with sight difficulties can contact the National Museum Volunteers at (081) 450 9532 for a tour in English at the National Museum or visit www.museumvolunteersbkk.net/blind_project.html.

By Watchara Saengsrin

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