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Reaching out

At the National Museum in Bangkok and other museums in the country, the blind will soon have a chance to see _ with their fingers

Story by PICHAYA SVASTI & Photos by PATTANAPONG HIRUNARD

When Sakolsupa Jaikhong, 13, visited the Grand Palace and the ancient city of Ayutthaya three years ago, all she could do was listen to the guide. The few exciting moments for her were when she was allowed to touch some temple doors and cannons. The teenager is blind.

Her visit to the National Museum in Bangkok in February this year was completely different. She had a field day learning art history by being able to touch many ancient artefacts and reproductions.



It was part of the museum's pilot project to help the blind better enjoy their visits by providing a special corner where they can "see" the artefacts on display by touching them.

If all goes as planned, other museums in the country will soon follow suit.

The touch corner is under the Blind Access Project, which is a joint cooperation between the National Museum Volunteers (NMV) group, the National Museum Bangkok (NMB) and the Thailand Association of the Blind (TAB).

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The source of their inspiration is Matt Sedensky's "Art with a Human Touch", an Associated Press feature story published in Outlook on February 6, 2006, said Susy Barry of National Museum Volunteers.

It tells of touch tours for the blind at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, and more than 100 other museums in the United States. According to the writer, "the image formed in the blind person's mind is ... identical to the image formed in the sighted person's mind".

Barry, whose mother lost her sight in her seventies, then decided to approach her club president, Barb Maidelis, about the possibility of developing a similar access programme for the blind.

Although the National Museum Volunteers' main goal is to help foreign tourists better appreciate Thailand's ancient cultural heritage, it has noticed the increasing number of elderly visitors, many of whom are visually impaired.

The answer received was a big "yes". Barry got the same positive reply from Monthian Buntan, president of the Thailand Association of the Blind (TAB) and the then-director of National Museum Bangkok, Somchai Na Nakhonphanom.

Somchai said he was impressed by the discovery room for the blind at the Museum of Modern Art (Moma), New York, where visitors are provided with braille descriptions and are allowed to touch the reproductions of art pieces with assistance from volunteers. "So, I wanted to make the same thing happen in Thailand to help the blind when they visit our National Museum."

It was agreed that the National Museum Bangkok and the Thailand Association of the Blind would be in charge of developing the touch tour programme in Thai while the National Museum Volunteers would develop the programme in English first before moving on to other languages.

To make sure that the project really answers the needs of blind visitors, two members from the youth club under the TAB attended museum lectures and tours several times to help design the touch tour.

Since there is much to learn from other museums abroad, members of the National Museum Volunteers also visited several international museums and their curators to seek advice on how to set up touch tours for the blind.

After two years of preparations and some test sessions at the Southeast Asian Ceramics Museum, Bangkok University, the National Museum Bangkok held its pilot touch tour in February. Sakolsupa was among the group of 20 blind volunteers chosen to give feedback on the touch tours for further improvement.



The next tour will be held for some 40 school children in May, said Barry, while the programme for foreign visitors with visual difficulties is expected to be available on request by the end of May.

Although Somchai is no longer with the National Museum Bangkok, the touch tour programme receives strong support from the new museum director, Amara Srisuchat.

That is not only the good news. According to Somchai, better services for the blind have become one of the priorities of the Office of National Museums. The director-general of the Fine Arts Department, Kriengkrai Sampatchalit, has also given the green light to the National Museum Bangkok to set up special corners for the blind in some exhibit rooms.



To better serve the disabled as a whole, the department has allocated a budget to improve museum facilities for the disabled at all 44 museums in Thailand.

With such support, plans are afoot at the National Museum Bangkok to offer touch tours for the blind on request. Its artisans are also busy making reproductions of art and ancient artefacts for the programme.

According to the plan, the same touch corner is expected to be available in museums in Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen within two years, he said, adding that a more ambitious plan is already in motion to equip the new museums with braille and sign-language facilities.

A National Museum Bangkok guide, Nanthana Yubol, said she was impressed by the blind students' enthusiasm during the touch tour test. "By touching with their bare hands, they could tell the fine details of the artefacts, much more so than some visitors with good eyesight," she noted.

"For example, they could tell that the hair knots on the Buddha images with large hair knots come from the Dhavaravati period."

The museum staff, however, need more training to accommodate the blind visitors better, particularly on the use of effective words to better describe the artefacts, noted another museum staff, Ms Duangsamorn Parnboon.

For Kannica Wongpen, 23, a member of the Youth Club of Thailand Association of the Blind who helped develop the touch tour programmes from the start, there is much to be done to equip the museums with braille media, not only in Bangkok but throughout the country.

According to Barb Maidelis, National Museum Volunteers president, the touch tours will not only help the visually impaired better appreciate their cultural heritage, but will also provide work opportunities for them to work in the tourism industry.

In the view of Senator Monthian Buntan, the blind association's president, to the blind the sky is the limit if and when support is available to give the disabled full access to public life.

For example, he said, all museums in Thailand could write their databases and web sites in the blind-friendly Extensive Markup Language (XML), as learning tools for everybody.

Touch tours and special corners for the blind at museums are only the beginning, he noted. "Eventually, all museums should undergo comprehensive design changes for full accessibility not only for the blind, but for all disabled persons."

INFO FOR Donations

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