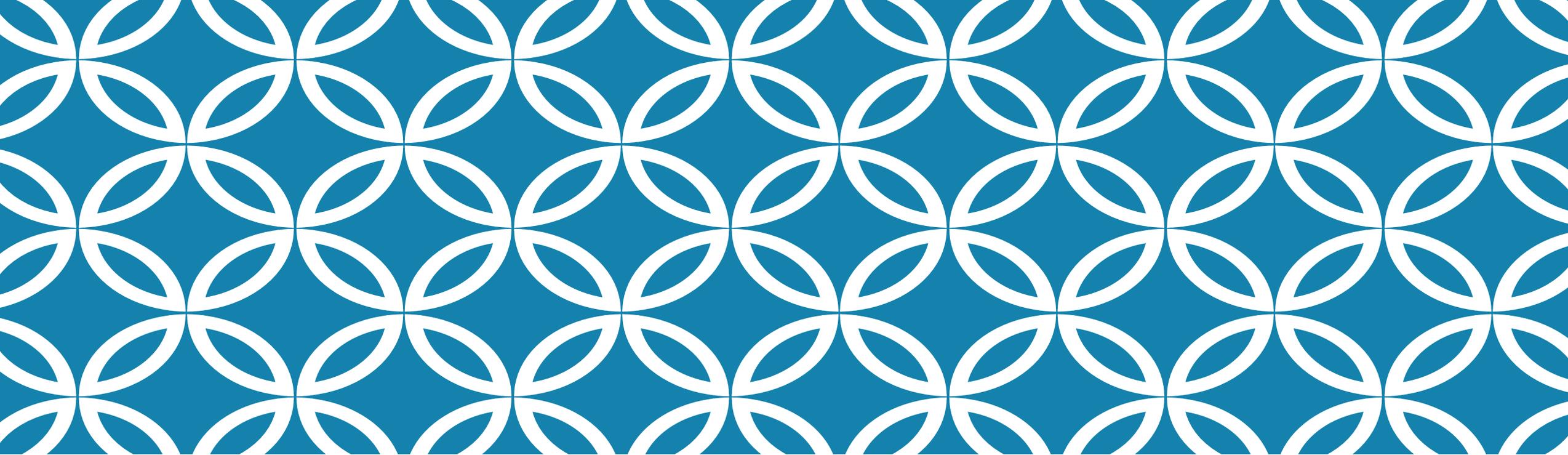


**BLIND CREATIONS CONFERENCE,
28TH-30TH JUNE 2015**

Royal Holloway College,
London University,
Egham, Surrey, UK



**AN ENQUIRY INTO PASSIVE
INCLUSION AND UNREACHABLE
ARTWORKS AT THE METROPOLITAN
MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK**

Two case studies of
verbal imaging
teachers describing
artworks in galleries
and classrooms

WELCOME: WHO AM I AND WHAT DO I DO?

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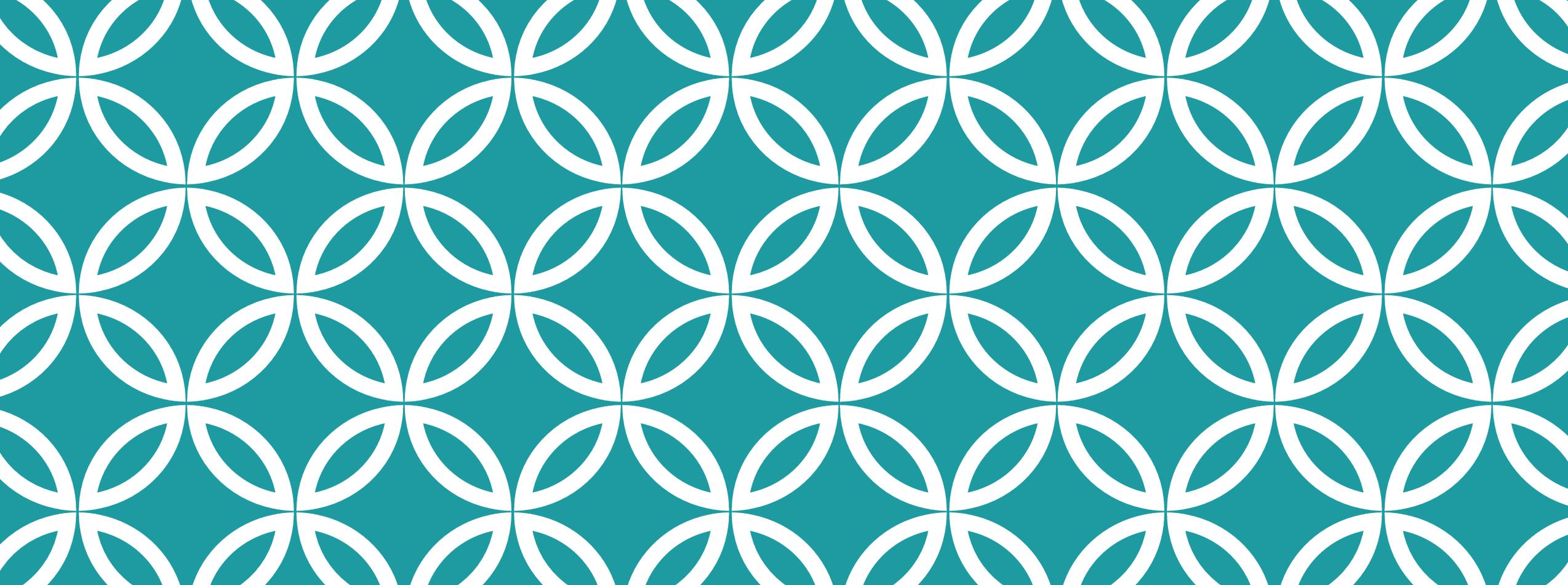
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STRUCTURE OF THE PRESENTATION

- Traditional thoughts on creativity, arts and museums – the context of the project
- Methodology
- Findings from previous elements to the study
- Three case studies of teachers at the Metropolitan Museum of Art
- Conclusions



HOW DO ACADEMICS DEFINE CREATIVITY, ARTISTIC IMAGINATION AND THE INSTITUTION OF MUSEUMS

Traditional visual
stereotypes of creativity,
imagination and art
institutions

TWO TRADITIONAL PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT ON BLINDNESS

The Metaphysists

- membership examined the metaphysical joining of visual art, nature, aesthetic purity and direct sensory experience

The Empiricists

- membership examined the scientific representation of sensory data as material perception
- this is what we now call cognition and intellectual comprehension

Hayhoe, S. (In Press). Philosophy as disability & exclusion: The development of theories on blindness, touch and the arts in England, 1688-2010. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing.

THE METAPHYSIST : 15TH CENTURY PHILOSOPHY

- DA VINCI

“The eye which is called the window of the soul is the chief means whereby the understanding can most fully and abundantly appreciate the infinite works of nature; and the ear is the second, which acquires dignity by hearing of the things the eye has seen. If you, historians, or poets, or mathematicians had not seen the things with your eyes, you could report but imperfectly of them in writing. And if you, O poet, tell a story with your pen, the painter with his brush can tell it more easily, with simpler completeness, and less tedious to follow. If you call painting dumb poetry, the painter may call poetry blind painting. Consider then which is the more grievous defect, to be blind or dumb?” (P.190)

Da Vinci, L. (T. Wells, Ed.). (2008). Leonardo da Vinci notebooks. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

THE EMPIRICISTS: 17TH CENTURY PHILOSOPHY - DESCARTES, BOYLE & LOCKE

Locke believed that perception was:

- plastic – i.e. that concepts could be understood through sight and touch similarly
- learnt through life course and not born in people

“[A] blind man I once talked with, who lost his sight by the smallpox when he was a small child [had] no more notion of colours than one born blind. I ask whether anyone can say this man had any ideas of colours in his mind, any more than one born blind? And I think nobody will say that either of them had in his mind any idea of colours at all...

[The] truth is, ideas and notions are no more born in us than arts and sciences, though some of them indeed offer themselves to our faculties more readily than others and are therefore more generally received, though that too be according as the organs of our bodies and powers of our minds happen to be employed: God having fitted men with faculties and means to discover, receive, and retain truths, accordingly as they are employed.” (pp. 41–42)

Locke, J. (J. W. Yolton, Ed.). (2001). An essay concerning human understanding. London: Everyman Library / J. M. Dent.

THE EFFECT ON 18TH CENTURY PHILOSOPHY

This concept was tested by Bishop Berkley, who studied a boy born blind who gained his sight through surgery

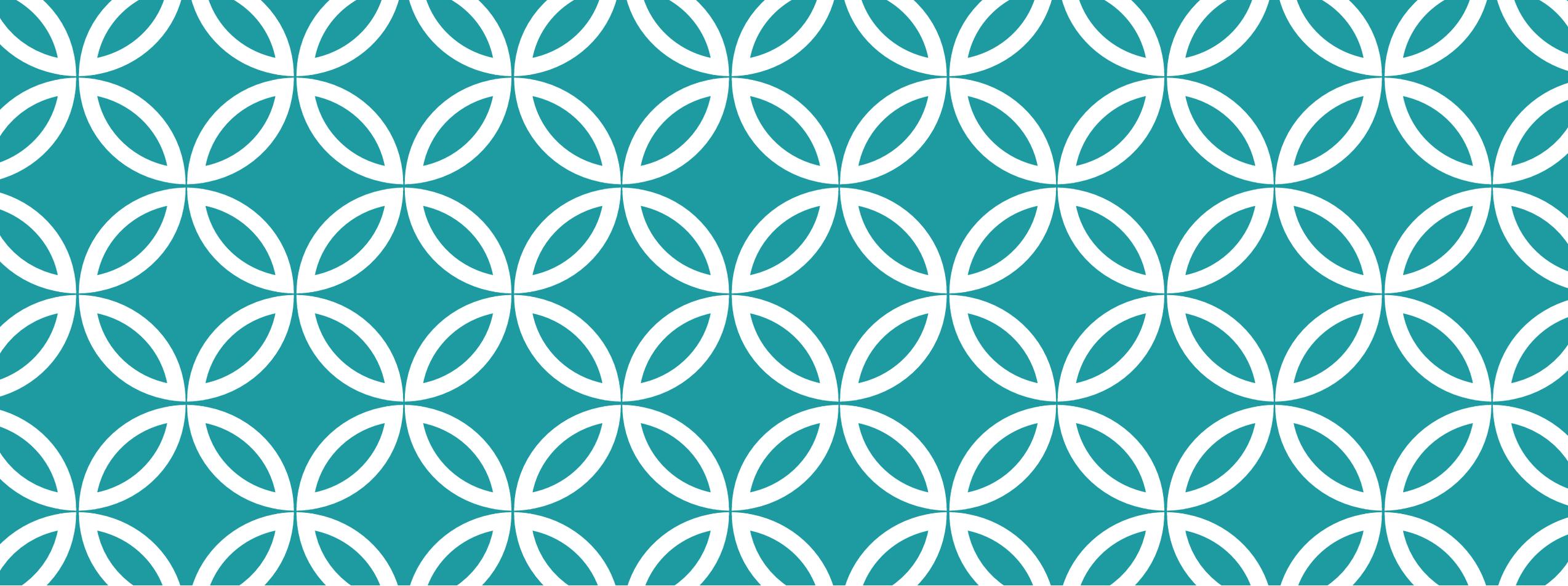
- The boy was unaware of what he had felt before, but built an understanding through touching what he saw
- Diderot suggested that people who are blind can be creative and imaginative in the production of music and academic subjects, such as mathematics, based on observations of beggars and Sanderson

Hume suggested that understanding can only – given one exception – come through perception and not language or description

HUME ON PERCEPTION & LANGUAGE

“If I comprehend the Author's Doctrine, which, I own, I can hitherto do but imperfectly, it leads us back to innate Ideas. This I do not advance as an Objection: For nothing ought ever to be supposed finally decided in Philosophy, so as not to admit of a new Scrutiny; but only that, I think, the Author affirms I had been hasty, & not supported by any Color of Argumen[t] when I affirm, that all our Ideas are copy'd from Impressions. I have endeavoured to build that Principle on two Arguments. The first is <a Detail> desiring any one to make a particular Detail of all his Ideas, where he would always find that every Idea had a correspondent & preceding Impression. If no Exception can ever be found, the Principle must remain incontestible. The second is, that if you exclude any <I> particular Impression, <. . .> as Colours to the blind, Sound to the Deaf, you also exclude the Ideas. ” (P. 416)

Wood, P. B. (1986). David Hume on Thomas Reid's An Inquiry into the Human Mind, On the Principles of Common Sense: A New Letter to Hugh Blair from July 1762. *Mind*, 95(380), 411-416.



TWENTIETH CENTURY PHILOSOPHIES OF ARTS AND MUSEUMS

Philosophy built into our modern
philosophical consciousness

CONTEMPORARY STUDIES OF BLINDNESS AND ARTS

Most contemporary studies of blindness and arts focus on the perception of objects and “real things”, such as Perception and Metaphorical visual language

They do not examine:

- the nature of aesthetics
- the motivation for creative and imaginative activity
- why art is important to people who are blind

I would argue these are the most important questions:

- aesthetic understanding of art is through the eye

I would also argue that contemporary epistemology hails largely from previous eras rather than new empirical studies

Hayhoe, S. (In Press). *Philosophy as disability & exclusion: The development of theories on blindness, touch and the arts in England, 1688-2010*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing.

GOMBRICH ON UNDERSTANDING ART THROUGH THE ECONOMY OF VISION

“Art educators sometimes try to make us feel guilty for our failure to use our eyes and to pay attention to the riches spread out before us. No doubt they are occasionally right, but their structures do little justice to the difference between seeing, looking, attending and reading, on which all art must rely.” (Gombrich, 1984: P. 95)

Gombrich, E. (1984). *The sense of order: Studies in the psychology of decorative art*. London: Phaidon Press.

GOMBRICH ON MUSEUMS

“[In] defining the aim [of the museum] on which I wish to concentrate, I shall adapt the famous line from Horace’s *Ars Poetic* and suggest that aut prodese volunt, aut delectare custodies. As museum people you want to offer us profit and delight... I am prepared for the objection that delight may not be the mot juste for the rendering of suffering from the Laocoon to Guernica; the fact that all arts are capable of transfiguring the tragic and the unpleasant has challenged philosophical aesthetics since the days of Aristotle” (P. 450).

Gombrich, E.H. (1977). The museum: Past, present and future. *Critical Inquiry*, 3, 3, 449-470.

BOURDIEU ON THE PURPOSE OF MUSEUMS

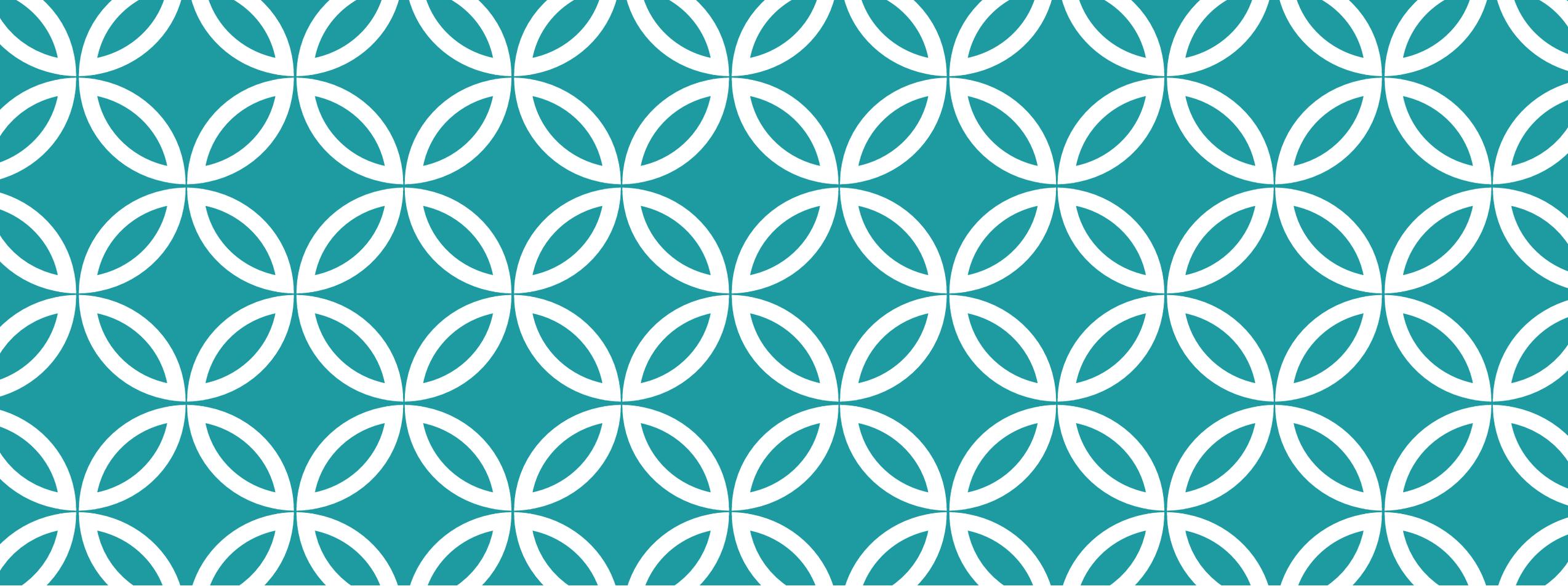
““I wanted to be able to tell myself I’d done the museum, it was very monotonous, one picture after another. They ought to put something different in between the paintings to break it up a bit.” (engineer, Amiens, aged 39, Lille Museum). These comments are reminiscent of those of the conservator of the New York Metropolitan Museum, who sees his museum as “a gymnasium in which the visitor is able to develop his eye muscles.”” (P. 269)

Bourdieu, P. (2010). *Distinction*. London: Routledge Classics.

REVESZ'S STUDY ON ARTS AND BLINDNESS

“[From] what sources could a blind person, who has never seen the world with all its wealth of forms and color, derive those manifold experiences?... [No] one born blind is able to become aware of the diversity of nature and to apprehend all the rich and various appearances of objects.” (pp. 316–17)

Revesz, G. (1950). *Psychology and art of the blind*. London: Longmans, Green.



METHODOLOGY

The context, methods
and structure of the
study

THE AIMS & METHODOLOGY

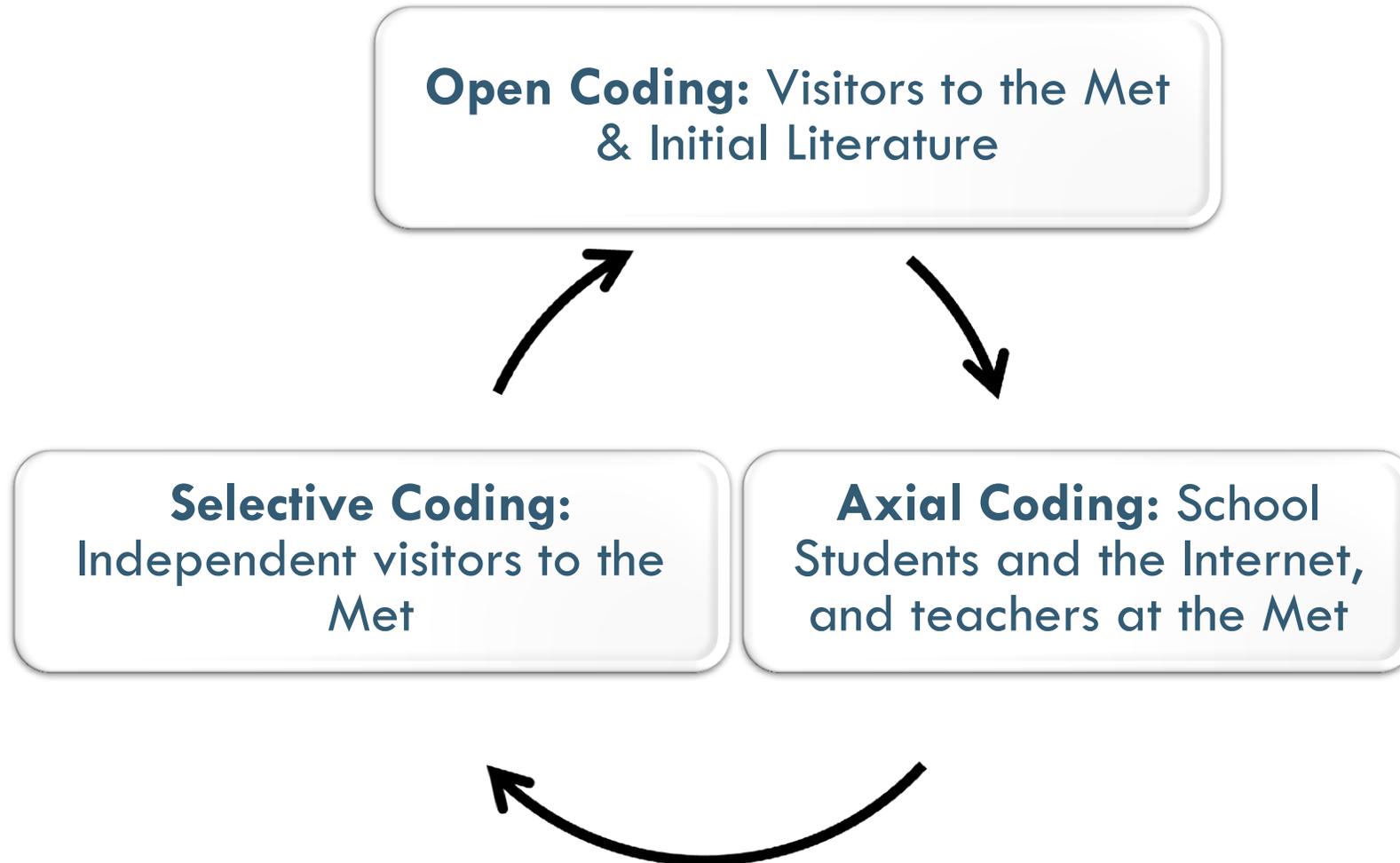
The research was designed to investigate the epistemological model of disability, investigating the following concepts:

- Museum visitors' strategies for understanding paintings aesthetically without vision or with very limited vision
- Museum visitors' problems trying to access museums
- Museum visitors' understanding of visual culture
- If visitors who are born blind or become blind early in life are different from those who have become blind later in life

The research used grounded theory, using three stage of analysis

Hayhoe, S. (2012). *Grounded theory and disability studies: Researching legacies of blindness*. Amherst, New York: Cambria Press.

THREE PHASES OF GROUNDED THEORY



PHASE ONE: OPEN CODING OF PRIMARY DATA

Surveys, observations and interviews with students who were legally blind and who learnt through the Metropolitan Museum of Art's education department

- through galleries
- via the web

FINDINGS FROM THE OPEN CODING

Visitors developed an emotional relationship with art as a symbol of identity through their residual vision or touch, or through description

These identities were largely motivated by the participants' cultural backgrounds, their education, or their early sighted identity

Thus, the open coding established that physical proximity to artworks and the experience of “being there in the museum,” is an important factors in this emotional connection.

Findings not explained by traditional theory of exclusion

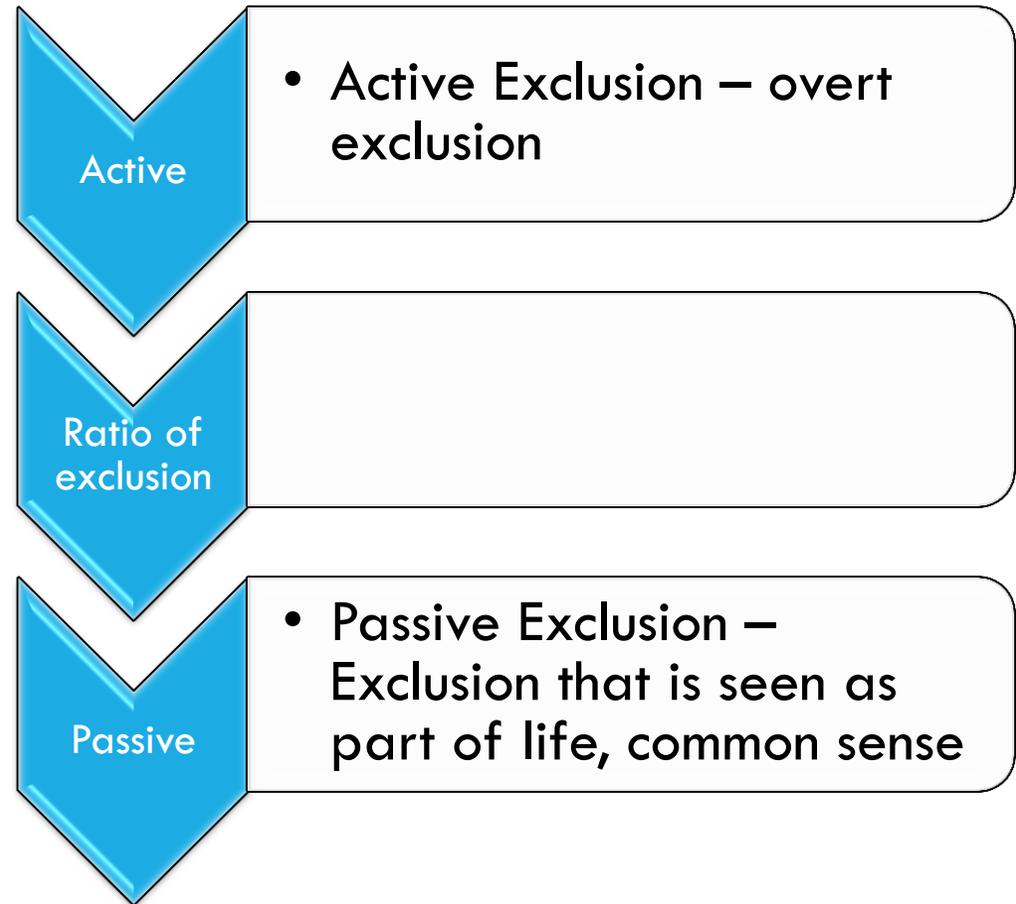
Hayhoe, S. (2014). An enquiry into passive and active exclusion from sensory aesthetics in museums and on the Web: Two case studies of final year students at California School for the Blind studying art works through galleries and on the web. *British Journal of Visual Impairment*, 32/1/44-58.

NEW THEORY: TWO FORMS OF EXCLUSION

There appeared to be two forms of exclusion discussed in the literature on disability

- Active exclusion
- Passive exclusion

Set on an axis of extremes
Exclusion can be seen as individual, based on a position on this axis



ACTIVE EXCLUSION

Linked to the social model of disability

- linked to a belief that there was a conscious oppression of disabled people, analogous to the oppression of race, gender, sexuality and class
- sees all disabilities as equally oppressed (Oliver, Barton)

Bourdieu's (2010) theory of distinction used to explain these forms of exclusion

in education, historical similarity observed between the treatment of disabled and black children (Valeo)

Active exclusion particularly celebrates disability arts as / should be a separate art form (Barnes & Mercer, Sandell & Dodds, Darke)

PASSIVE EXCLUSION

Based on a notion that the design of societies inadvertently excludes people with disabilities

- pragmatic notions of a language that included the largest number of people (Groce)
- ignorance of the needs of the disabled person and a complex epistemological development of understanding disability (Hayhoe)

PASSIVE EXCLUSION - CONTINUED

Looks at the exclusion of individual disabilities, not in terms of vilifying the institutional medical model

in a museums context, it finds that the traditional educational function is premised on the design of exhibits though sight

led to the exclusion of blind and partially sighted people, as non-visual perceptions are rarely catered for in this process. change of attitudes needed (Hayhoe, in press)

PHASE TWO: AXIAL CODING

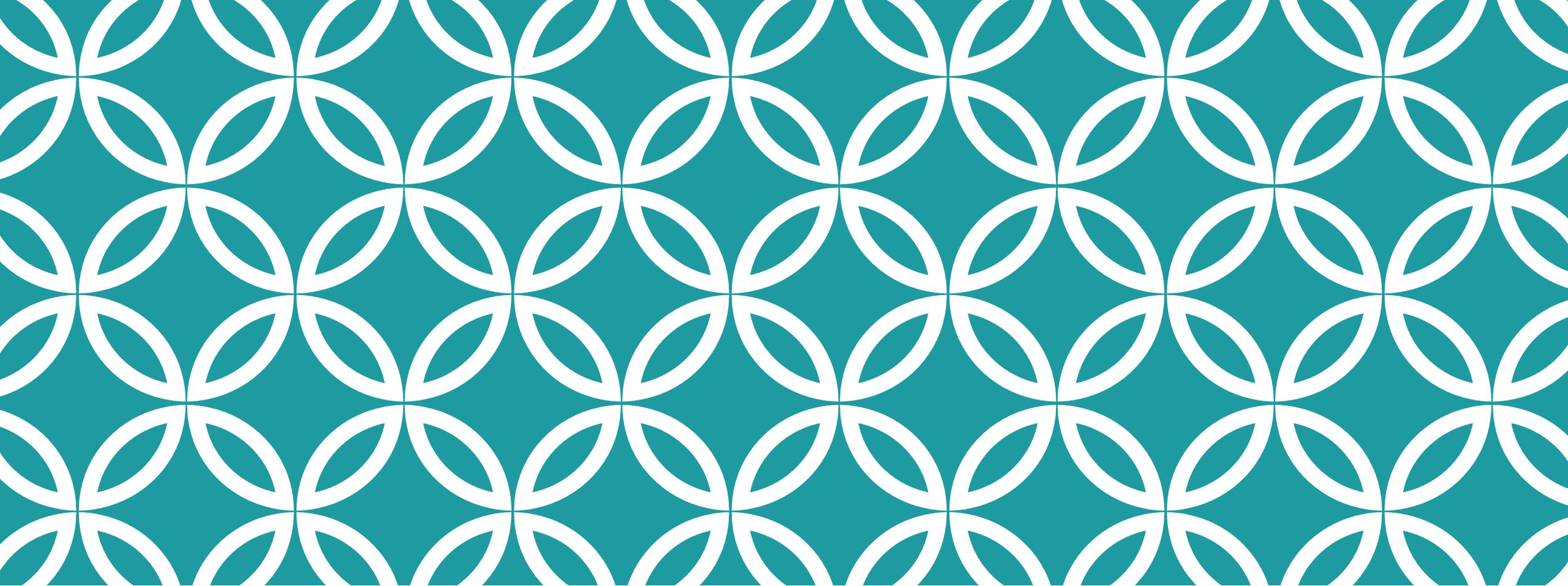
Surveys and interviews of students at:

- California School for the Blind
- Perkin's School for the Blind

Teachers from the Metropolitan Museum of Arts

To develop the observations and findings from phase one related to:

- exclusion from the museum
- learning through web access
- understanding of paintings related to arts practice



TWO CASE STUDIES

Teachers at the Met

CASE STUDY 1: CARMEN

A Spanish lady who had first come to the US to study, and stayed

She was an art historian by training, and had studied for a PhD, but never completed

She was a naturalised American citizen

Teaching thirty years at the Met – since 1981

Started teaching at the Met “Always at the Met, and it was continuous.”

A lecturer in art prior to this

Taught people who were blind and visually impaired for between 20-25 years

CARMEN

“The first person I taught was totally blind. And I fell in love with the way of teaching. I was not supposed to be doing it. I was a lecturer and I was asked to show up to guide somebody who was blind, and they asked me if I would go. And I never forget the first picture I [described], it was a Rubens. It was a picture of himself, his wife and his child. And to me it was a miracle, because the person was totally blind and they started asking me questions. And I realised that I was looking at the picture for the first time.”

“They were born blind. I always remember, so they were tough on me. They would ask me about everything

Me: Were they asking about colour?

Carmen: Colours, brush work, and parts of the picture – and this is a picture that I know very well because it is right in my field, 17th Century – they would ask me things and I would say “it is a nice day,” and then they would say “so the sky is blue, or it has a few clouds” and I would tell myself that I had never seen the clouds before. And they would say “on top of their heads there is sky?” And I would look up and I would say, “oh, there is a pergola.” And I would say [to myself] thirty years and I have never seen the pergola.

“So to me, working with someone who is blind is seeing for myself, it slows me down. It helps me enjoy the picture.”

“Me: And in terms of what people mainly ask for, say they are early blind people, would they mostly ask... about colours or for example would you describe the technical aspects of it for them?”

Carmen: I would if they are interested. I would find that most people are most interested in the mood of the picture, which I think is fascinating, because I think the artist himself (sic.) is creating a mood. And I think, that’s what they feel the most.”

“Let’s just stay with one picture, with Reuben’s picture... “So how are they dressed?” So I would go, “He has an extremely fashionable outfit...” [And they would say,] “What does he want to say? What is he painting himself? What does he want to say for the future? Why do we HAVE this picture?”

“Me: They never ask about the technical aspects...?”

Carmen: They do ask, but I find that someone who is totally [born] blind... don’t ask me about brush work, for example... they will ask me more about composition, and texture – “Is it flat? If I touch it what do I feel?” Usually someone who is totally blind will ask me to describe the colour, in a way that is much more difficult for me. I cannot get away with saying something is red, because they are going to say, “What kind of red? Is it a red that burns?”

Me: So they look for metaphors and symbols?

Carmen: Yes.”

CARMEN

“Doing verbal imaging is a guide for me. They are my guide. They are the ones that ask the relevant questions. They are the ones that guide me through the picture.”

Me: So later blind people, what kind of things will they say [referring to older people who have lost their sight]...?

Carmen: I find them very different. Many of the people who come to the museum who have macular degeneration, I find that they want to almost imprint the picture into their minds... I had this wonderful woman, who we'd worked with her for years and years, and she was always making photos of art. Everything [was] perfect, so she would say, “Do I remember well that the flowers are on the work? Were the flowers really pink like I remember?””

CARMEN

“I always want to bring the picture in front of the picture. This is because I want them to know what distance they are... This is my belief. I think that it is important to actually bring someone who is blind in front of the actual work... It is the ambience, it is the smell. It is the noise. It is the other people, the other reactions. And I really do think that when you have them [blind visitors] in front of the work of art there is a connection, not just the eyes. They are observing the picture many other ways by being in front of it.”

“Carmen: There’s a reason I don’t want to see El Greco on a print. It’s worse. I need to be in front of El Greco to see the work. That’s what moves me. I don’t want to cheat somebody who is blind and show them a print. Or worse yet, one of those dioramas [tactile facsimile]. In a lot of museums there are dioramas for the blind.

Me: So it’s the gallery itself?

Carmen: It’s the whole thing. When we went to the Leaman collection, the gallery works much better for a blind person.

Me: You have the furniture, the acoustics?

Carmen: Everything! And the smell... All that they are missing is their eyes, they can make up for it with their words. And the noise. They can always hear the words.”

CARMEN

“Me: Is there a difference between the questions a person who is blind will ask you and a person with sight will ask you, beyond [the questions of perception]

Carmen: [People with sight] have much lower expectations. People with sight, they don't see anything. With people with sight we tell them, “Stop!” With my gallery talks I say, “take two minutes to look at the picture.” Because nobody looks at pictures... That's why I worry about people, that they don't see...” For me, it's like they are all blind, I have to teach them how to see.”

“Me: For [people who are blind] is it more about the technical aspects of the painting, the historical era, the setting?

Carmen: I find that there is a combination... Different people, who are sighted and blind, are interested in different things... I just don't see much difference to be honest with you.”

CASE STUDY2: FIONA

A freelance American teacher at the Met – teaches adults and children

She was an artist by training, and still practised. She taught art at the Met as well as verbal imaging

She had been a teacher at the Met for around 10 years – could not give a precise date

Her first teaching was at the Met, and she started mainstream teaching of children – she then moved to Access

She first taught blind and visually impaired people at the Met

FIONA

“The big difference is [blind people] want to know everything. Whereas people who are sighted, I think they think that because they can see it they’ve got it, they’ve got everything there is to see. You know, [blind people] feel a stone and they’ll say, “What kind of stone is it?” And I don’t get that so much from sighted people...”

[Blind people] like to know the name. I usually tell them if it’s a harder stone. Or they can feel sometimes if they’re feeling a granite.”

About untouchable pieces: “They’ll talk about the texture of the work of art itself. And if the work of art is conveying something. For example, I was presenting a Japanese piece with a kimono. They couldn’t understand the visual structure of a kimono with the big sleeves, and what the material might be made of. So we talked about that as well as the painted material.”

FIONA

“Me: Have you ever used the small versions of [pieces], you know the Marquettes?”

Fiona: I have, but sometimes we don't have anything that represents what we're looking at, because as you know we'll go fairly deep into a collection. And we don't always have [a Marquette]...”

On younger visitors: “I'll get young girls and boys. I think the youngest I've had is twelve or thirteen... Sometimes they'll come with a friend, sometimes they'll come with family. And they're about twelve or thirteen I think for the verbal imaging tour. I have one girl who comes back a couple of times, because she'll have a report to do for school. And so I'll sit with her in front of works that she's interested in. it's interesting, because she comes prepared. And then we go back and forth, and she touches.”

FIONA

“Me: what kind of things do they want to know about the historical backgrounds of the paintings?”

Fiona: Why it is important? Why the piece is in the museum?... What makes it art?...

Me: Is that quite a common question?

Fiona: Yes, in various ways of asking it...

Me: Would they want to know all about the gallery as well?

Fiona: You know we kind of, at least I do, when I enter a gallery I give even a quick description. Like this gallery has a higher ceiling. There’s twenty paintings in it. There’s carpet on the floor, although they’d probably notice that. And I’ll say, we’re walking through the Egyptian hallway. The part that we’re passing through is when the Romans were leading the empire. They never really ask me where am I right now? But I think if we’re approaching through galleries that it makes sense to mention what they’re all about. Actually if I have new people, which is what we usually have on the Egyptian touch tour, as we walk through Urus upstairs I’ll mention that we are walking through a small area of Hellenistic art, and quickly explain the connection. And now we’re walking through ancient Greece. And then I talk about the museum being an encyclopaedic collection. And then they understand it covers a scope of time way back to now, and we cover a terrific scope of time.”

FIONA

“Me: Do they ask questions about the galleries you’re walking through?”

Fiona: Yes.. Especially in Egypt when we are on the way to a piece, [blind visitors] will ask, “What’s around us now?” And I actually have one person who is so inquisitive that he stopped and I asked, “Do you want a verbal imaging tour of Egypt, or would you like a touch tour because I can do it half and half, and we can switch to verbal imaging. Because he was very inquisitive about everything. And it seems to me that he had a little bit of vision because he was drawn to things...”

Me: When a person has a tiny bit of vision... would they ask you to fill in the gaps for them?

Fiona: Yes, a couple of things will happen. When I feel it is alright for me to do it I’ll say, “Would you mind letting me know how much you’re seeing. Can you tell me if you’re seeing like dark.” And sometimes I’ll be describing it and they’ll say, “Yes, I can see that part of it.” So, I’ll ask, “What is it that you’re not getting? What is it that you don’t see?” So it’s kind of like a hand in hand thing, where if they’re doing it, I’ll do it, and we work together.”

FIONA

There are dynamics in a family when you take someone on a touch tour... I've had quite a few where it'll be friends. It will be friends who live here and they have a friend who is an out of town person with a vision impairment. And they'll bring them in. I had one group who was wonderful, I had three sighted boys bring in a non-sighted boy.

Me: So that was a gang of friends almost?

Fiona: Yes, they were either freshmen... it was unusual because that age group of kids can be a little uncomfortable.

Me: When they come in do they see it more as a social aspect as well?

Fiona: Amongst themselves they do, for sure... They're all allowed to get involved in the touching aspect. So, I find that it is very hard for the sighted people to let themselves do that. So that's a social opportunity that we offer them that I can't say a lot of people take up. But these guys are really social, because they would even, "Oh, look at this one over here and they'd say it was such and such." And then we'd go to another piece. So I think it was very social for them... And I also think that they stay in the museum after I leave."

FIONA ON CLASSES

“Very social. I would say that 80% of people who come to those classes, I mean it mixes up every time, but I think they come because they love the camaraderie. Sometimes when Helen [the other teacher] and I are trying to start the class or interject something, we have to quieten them all down, because they’re all [talking]. But we love that, because its all part of the wonder for them. The enjoyment I should say... I think the friendships that are forming in our drawing class, I think they stay and have lunch or they go back into the other galleries... The ones who are more [physically] independent seem to have more fun in the class.”

“For example, we have a 15 year old coming to this program on Saturday. Well most of these are kids. And Francesca [another teacher in the class] decided to let her come [despite the class being aimed at adults] most of all because the girl said, “I wanted to come to this because my teacher, and she’s in an inclusion school, told me that I can’t make art, and that I wouldn’t be good at it.” And she wants to come and we said, “Come on in.””

FIONA

Me: [The majority of visitors who are blind], would you say they'd had art education before coming to the museum?

Fiona: Yes, I would. For most of them.

Me: Are there ones who've never had any art education as far as you can tell...?

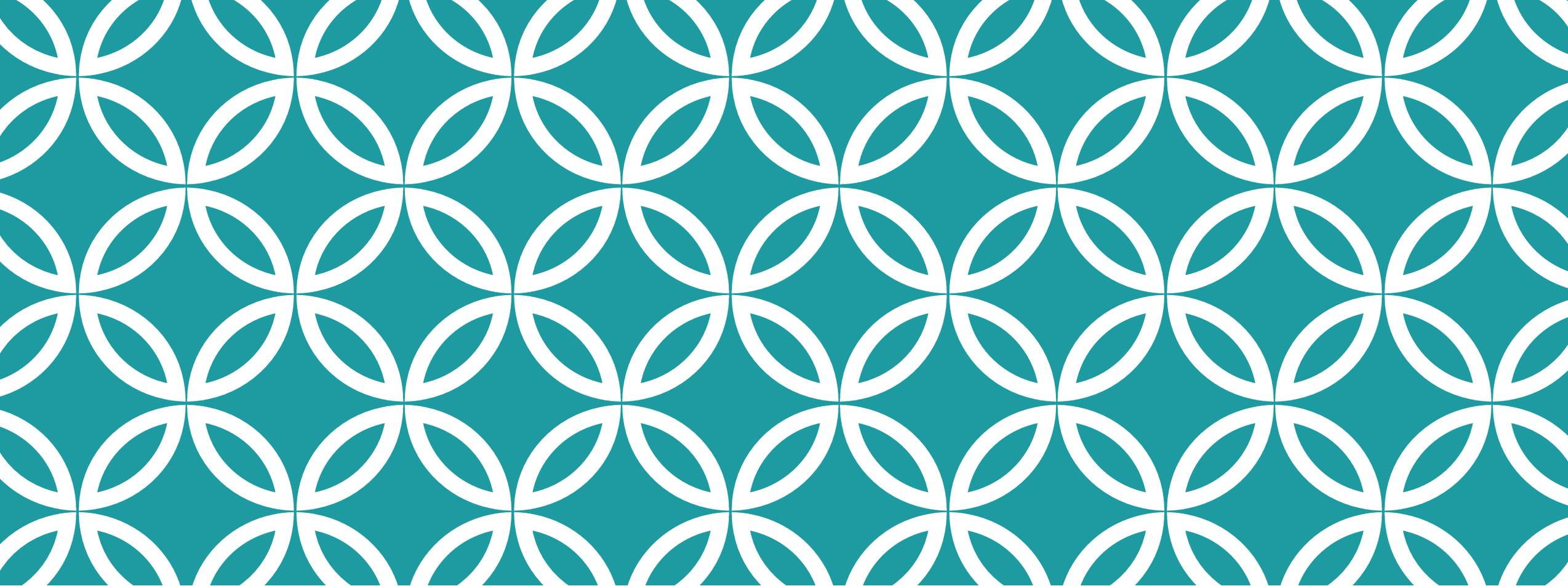
Fiona: Yes, I think I had a young girl with her grandparents and her niece a few weeks ago. She was probably 16. She seemed to have another potential disability because her choice of words for descriptions wouldn't always make sense for what she was handling. Her grandparents were over protective. Like they would jump in and tell her what it was... I don't know if they were over-protective because she has another disability that I was not able to see the extent to which it would go if they hadn't jumped in."

FIONA

“I get some people who come and they use both hands, and they really explore. And then there are people who are like this and they touch with their fingers. There is a timidity in some...”

Me: So there are people who are experienced in touching, and they’ll be all over the piece?

Fiona: Yes, and I always compliment them on it... I feel like they must have been able to touch other things with permission without always being thwarted, and so they’re comfortable touching. And they must use touch more in their life, to manage their life... sighted kids will go right in, but I find even if I invite [sighted adults], they’ll start out and then they’ll just back off.”



CONCLUSIONS

Secondary Findings – Passive
Inclusion in the *Museum*

THREE PRIMARY CONCLUSIONS

The three teachers devised methods to passively rather than actively include students in their descriptions of unreachable artworks

- They discussed and developed bespoke modes of communication
- These modes were tailored to the viewer's background and impairment

Visitors often develop symbolic, intellectual and emotional connections with artworks and the museum through verbal descriptions and being in their presence

Previous literature has focused too heavily on the understanding that active inclusion in the museum is premised primarily on touch