

Charter relating to the audio description of paintings, embroideries and tapestries

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I. Introduction

1. Context

Carried out as part of the ANR project “Inclusive Museum Guide”, this charter is the result of seven years of work, carried out in three successive research projects:

- TETMOST (2017-2019, Challenge CNRS AUTON)
- “Museum Guide” (2019-2021, Normandy Region with the support of the European Union)
- "Inclusive Museum Guide" (2021-2025, ANR).

This work was done in collaboration and partnership with

In France: The PERCEVOIR association, the Musée du quai Branly, the Valentin Haüy association, the Fédération des Aveugles et Amblyopes de France, the Normandie Lorraine association, the musée de Bayeux and the château d’Angers.

In the United Kingdom: Royal Holloway, University of London and the University of Westminster.

This charter is part of the legal framework of the *Convention on the Rights of persons with Disabilities* (UN, 2006) signed by France in 2010, and more particularly Article 30.1.a: “The States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to participate in cultural life on an equal basis with others and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that they have access to cultural products in accessible formats.”

It takes place in a double context of increasing the availability of audio descriptions of works of art in museums and other institutions in France, and of the absence of a charter relating to these same audio descriptions.

2. Objectives of the Charter

This charter aims to help fill this gap by proposing a framework for the production of audiodescriptions of works of visual art. Its aim is 1) to work toward the realization of the cultural rights of blind and partially blind people¹ on the basis of equality with others, 2) to renew, for every person, the relationship to visual art by promoting senses other than sight.

3. Who is it for?

This Charter is addressed to any person or institution interested in this dual objective.

4. What is audio description?

¹ By “blind people” we mean people who do not use the sense of sight, and by “partially blind people” we mean those who mobilize it while using alternative perceptual means (cane, dog, etc.). To refer to people who do not meet these definitions, we use the term “non-blind people”. In accordance with the concept of *blindness gain* (explained below), we want to make blindness rather than sight the default reference point.

Audio description is both the act of describing and its result, namely the putting into words, intended to be heard, of the perceptible characteristics of one or more elements (place, living being, object, work of art, etc.).

In French, originally, the act of describing means “tracing with the hand or by the movement of the body” (*Trésor de la langue française*).

Applied in this charter to paintings, embroideries and tapestries (but also applicable to other types of visual art such as photography), audio description is understood as a means of cultural accessibility for all, and not only for blind and partially blind people. Research has shown that audio description opens up imagination and promotes aesthetic experience for everyone (Hutchinson and Eardley 2021). As such, it is a cultural and literary genre in its own right (Kleege 2018, 12).

Audio description offers anyone who can hear, the possibility of an aesthetic experience without the need for sight.

Ideally, the audio description text is made available to anyone. A signed interpretation, intended for the D/deaf public should also be provided, ideally created by a deaf person².

Audio description can also (re)educate the way non-blind people look. Indeed, if it is necessary to see (at least a little) to describe a work of visual art, it is not so much the gaze that allows the description as the act of describing that forges the gaze (Recht 1998, 11).

However, we have found that audio description alone does not allow access to the exact forms depicted in works of art, because the words used remain general and the power of the imagination limited (Chottin, Romeo and Thompson 2022). Tactile reproductions of certain shapes can compensate for this lack.

Finally, we broaden the traditional conception of audio description and conceive it as the transition from multisensory (and not just visual) to verbal (we explain multisensoriality below).

II. Ethical principles

1. Respect for human diversity

We understand human diversity (gender, race, disability, etc.) as a wealth that must be preserved and valued in the same way as biodiversity (Poulain 2024).

As such, our audio description work is not intended to “show” a work to blind and partially blind people (Thompson and Chottin 2021, 38-39): it is not intended to create in their imagination a “mental image” of the work as seen by non-blind people. Such an objective, which is unattainable, is in our opinion part of contemporary attempts at the sensory, motor, physical or psychological normalization of disabled people / people with disabilities.

On the contrary, our audio descriptions aim to create a multisensory experience of the work in every person, by favouring listening without sight.

² On the question of remuneration, consult the appendix below.

Originally intended for blind and partially blind people but now recognized as beneficial to all people, audio description, for this reason, makes blindness an asset (*blindness gain*, Thompson 2017, 14).

2. Respect for the listener

Respecting the right to aesthetic accessibility

Aesthetic accessibility is a component of cultural accessibility that is a right for everyone. It designates “the set of conditions that allow access to the expressive forces of a work of art” and thus goes “beyond the mere transmission of information” (Guerreiro and Kastrup 2019, 26). This is why our audio descriptions try to create an aesthetic experience.

Respecting equality with others and the right to freedom of interpretation

The blind, partially blind or non-blind listener has the right to access the works without such access or information about these works being imposed on them. This is already the case for non-blind listeners.

The listener also has the right to remain free to interpret the work of art in their own way.

This is why our audio descriptions do not comment on the work (they do not impose historical and artistic information) or explain it (they do not impose a unique meaning). They try to describe it by leaving open a plurality of interpretations.

Respecting the listener's intelligence, well-being and singularity

Whatever their mental faculties, the listener has an intelligence that should be respected. Our audio descriptions take care not to infantilize (both in terms of the style and vocabulary of the audio description and the tone adopted in its voice).

In order not to constitute a cognitive overload, our audio descriptions avoid complex syntax and specialized vocabulary, unless they specify the meaning. They may refrain from indicating details of the work that might hinder the understanding of the audio description.

Non-blind audio describers strive not to “assume sightedness” (to act as if everyone can see). In particular, they make sure to indicate the positioning of the elements in space and in relation to each other. They should also be careful to describe shapes, even when they may seem obvious, which is not the case in reality, even for many non-blind people (e.g. the shape of an animal, an object, a building, etc.).

3. Respecting the audio describer and the voice artist.

Audio description is work, and, as such, deserves remuneration, from the beginning of the act of describing until the final voicing³.

This principle applies to everyone, and in particular to blind and partially blind people, who, much more often than non-blind and other non-disabled (also known as “able-bodied” people), are subject to requests to participate in research and/or creative activities. It is often mistakenly assumed that people with disabilities necessarily have time to devote to research, but also that this participation

³ On the question of remuneration, refer to the appendix *below*.

amounts to a gift given to them (which is therefore not worth paying for). The idea of participatory research is then diverted from its meaning in favour of a form of exploitation.

4. Respecting the work and museography

The audio description should take care to respect the singularity, the style, the rhythm, the genre of the work and the culture to which it belongs. There can therefore be no audio description model applicable to all works. Audio description adapts to the work in terms of what it describes (elements, structure, and other aesthetic effects) and how it describes it (language register, rhythm of sentences, vocabulary, etc.).

However, audio description is not limited to the artist's "intention", which is not always known and does not necessarily exist.

The audio description respects and takes into account the environment of the work (the place where it is exhibited and the set of works to which it belongs, if applicable). Such respect is similar to that of the blind or partially blind listener, whose right of access to the aesthetic experience cannot be limited to the work described.

It is thus museum provision more generally, until now centred on the sense of sight, which in our opinion must be rethought.

III. Principles of audio description

1. Universality

Audio descriptions should be co-created by blind, partially blind and non-blind people (universal creation) and intended for blind and partially blind and non-blind (universal reception). They:

- should be relevant to blind and partially blind people,
- should escape the charitable model of audio description (whereby non-blind people provide a service to blind and partially blind people by providing audio descriptions),
- should make blindness an asset.

2. Subjectivity

Every description is subjective: there are always one or more ways of looking in a description, as many descriptions as there are ways of looking, and a plurality of descriptions for the same way of looking according to the describer's position in front of the work.

Audio descriptions that accept such subjectivity:

- respect, by their honesty, the listener;
- can convey aesthetic emotion.

However, it is not a question of making a personal judgment on the work. An audio describer is not an art critic

We make sure to present our audio description as only one of many other possible audio descriptions, and to arouse feelings without imposing our own on the public.

3. Multisensoriality

Every work of art has a materiality (canvas, wood, fabric, etc.), which can be different from (in the case of a painting or embroidery) or identical to (tapestry, sculpture) its means of expression (oil paint, charcoal, wool, marble, etc.). Audio description seeks to include this materiality and mobilize, to describe it, the richness of the vocabulary of touch.

In general, a work of visual art is not reduced to sight but involves several senses : sight suggests tactile sensations (that of the material of the work, but also, for example, a sensation of warmth, body movement, etc.), auditory sensations (the sound of a river or a musical instrument), olfactory sensations (the smell of a flower, etc.), taste sensations (the taste of an apple or a freshly squeezed orange).

Multi-sensory audio descriptions should:

- be relevant to people who are blind from birth;
- transmit all sensory registers of the work of art (Bourges 2024, 142-143).

4. Inclusiveness

An authentically inclusive audio description is not just a universal description.

It is also an audio description that includes a range of ways of seeing, including those of partially blind people (Chottin *et al.* 2024).

We refer to audio descriptions that comply with these principles by the acronym ICAD (*Inclusive Co-created Audio-Description*).

IV. Application of the principles: our methodology

The work should be done in front of the artwork and should be recorded.

In order not to “assume sightedness” (as discussed *above*), the group that describes ideally includes at least one person who is blind from birth.

1. Collective description of the work environment

Partially blind and non-blind people describe to blind people the room where the work is located and, if applicable, its location in relation to other works.

They tell them the material nature of the work (painting on canvas, bark, embroidery, tapestry, etc.) and its approximate dimensions with emphasis on body measurements (arm spacing, etc.) or items whose size is generally known (such as an everyday object).

2. Individual realization of a brief impression (description)

A concept forged by a blind person (Michelle Roux de Raspide), the brief impression is the verbal equivalent of the “first look” (a glance/gimpse) at a work by a non-blind person. This brief impression:

- gives the listener the freedom not to listen to the detailed description
- highlights the inherent temporality of vision (the view of an object is indeterminate before being specified) and thus refutes the prejudice of its instantaneity.

To respect the principles of diversity and inclusiveness, this brief impression is made by a partially blind person. They indicate where what they see is located and then describe the element in question. There may be blocks of colours, for example.

In this way, non-blind people discover the different forms and aesthetic value of partial blindness (Calle 2011, 64-65).

As an alternative or possible complement to this brief impression, a blind person can describe the work from a tactile transposition of it (a raised “image”) made earlier. In this case, the brief impression is not visual but tactile.

3. Collective realization of a detailed description

Blind and partially blind people ask questions to non-blind people to clarify the brief impression. Non-blind people do not initiate the detailed description and simply answer the questions asked.

They take care to situate the elements within the work but also in relation to each other, and to indicate the approximate dimensions (as discussed above).

They also indicate the colours of the elements: In general partially blind people (but also some blind people) perceive colours, people who have become blind as adults and who no longer perceive colours still remember them, and those who no longer remember them, as well as people who are blind from birth, associate them like everyone else with abstract ideas and feelings, either culturally (in western culture, black is associated with mourning), or individually, but also with sensations other than visual (for example yellow with the heat of the sun).

In order to respect the principles of subjectivity and multisensoriality, the detailed description should take into account:

- non-visual sensations suggested by sight
- the movements of describers in front of the work.

These movements can give rise to several types of description that can be combined. Here are some examples:

- "Kinesthetic" description

Describing the painting through bodily movement, as the artist might have created it.

For example, in our description of Sally Gabori's *Ninyilki*: "On a white background, a large black disc stands out: [...] the painter seems to have made a large circular upward movement."

- "Creative" description

Describing the painting as if you were painting it yourself, starting from a blank page in the mind and gradually having its elements appear there.

For example, in our description of Maggie Watson's *snake vine dreaming*: "Let's place the shapes that stand out most clearly, using an imaginary brush that slides over the canvas." "[...] let's draw a double circle ringed with black."

- The "Zoom in/out" description

Describing the work by approaching or moving away from it. Such a movement of the body reveals a multiplicity of ways of looking at and seeing the painting.

Consult the example given in the last part of this charter.

- "Panning" description

Describing the work by moving parallel to it.

Consult the example given in the last part of this charter.

During the detailed description, a collective "perceiving body" (Ink 2023) thus emerges.

4. Writing and collective proofreading of the whole text

From the audio recording of the previous steps and the principles of this charter, a nominated person should write up the description of the work environment, the brief impression and the detailed description, transcribing the words used and intervening as little as possible.

This person should ensure the coherence of the whole and add, at the beginning of each description, the order followed (for example, from left to right, from bottom to top, or according to any other path that makes it possible to grasp the unity and composition of the work). They should ensure that the position of the elements is indicated before they are described.

To broaden the sensory palette, the names of colours can be associated with corresponding elements (honey yellow, meadow green, etc.).

The dialogue format can be maintained or removed. Insofar as the audio description is meant to be listened to, the oral style of the dialogue should be preserved as much as possible. Simple sentences are preferred.

Finally, one or more people, ideally those who will eventually record the text (as discussed below) should read the text obtained aloud to the whole group, so that the participants can experience the effect produced when the audio description is spoken out loud, and improve it accordingly. We thus distinguish between the spontaneous speech of the co-description group in front of the work, and the work of putting the final text into a form that can be easily spoken and listened to. The people who will be voicing the text can also propose modifications during this editing phase. Their suggestions should be discussed collectively and considered in accordance with the principles of this Charter.

5. Voicing and sound

The last stage of the audio description work, and just as crucial as the previous ones, is the voice recording. This should, ideally, 1) also be carried out by a group of blind, partially blind and non-blind people, 2) who are different from those who carried out the description.

As a crucial part of the aesthetic experience, the voice or voices used should be human rather than artificial; the voicing process should respect the ethical principles of this charter; the involvement of voice actors external to the process also allows the audio describers to step back from the work and assess it with critical distance.

Concern for comfort and ease of listening:

The voicing team should ensure that all words are intelligible.

They should also ensure, in the rhythm of their reading, that the multisensory imagination of the listeners can unfold and that a meaningful experience is created, possibly though not necessarily through a representation of the work.

In accordance with the principle of freedom of the listener, the title of the work and the name of its author should be recorded separately. In this way, listeners remain free to discover the work without knowing these elements, as do non-blind people in a museum or art gallery

Sonic elements (such as music or sound effects) can be added during sound editing in collaboration with the co-writing team. These should contribute to the multisensory experience of the work.

The voicing team should share their work with the co-writing team early on, so that all those involved agree on the way the description is read aloud before the recording is finalised.

V. Excerpts from the inclusive co-created audio description of the Bayeux tapestry

1. Presentation of the experience

"Welcome everyone. We are a group of blind, partially blind and sighted adults from France and England, we are of various genders and ages, and we work in the research community.

[...]

We have focused on 8 key scenes of the Tapestry, selected with the help of the curators of the Bayeux Tapestry Museum in France. For each of these scenes, we provide:

A brief description by one person in our group, an English, French-speaking, partially blind woman, Hannah. [...] In a scene, the element that attracts her is often located on the right, then her gaze moves to the left [...]

We then provide a detailed collective description. [...] These detailed descriptions follow the direction of the narrative, from left to right.

We have kept Hannah's "I" and the collective "we" because there is always one or more ways of looking in a description, and as many descriptions as there are ways of looking. We are keen to express the subjectivity of any description.

Finally, so that the story of the embroidery makes sense, we have briefly described the scenes that are between the 8 selected scenes.

The voicing of our work was carried out by the association PERCEVOIR. The texts are read aloud in Braille by Pascale Isel and Mickael Guillaume, and in print by Valérie Pasquet."

2. Overall description of the tapestry

"Imagine yourself standing at the very beginning of this Tapestry. About 68 meters long (70 cm wide), it is located behind glass panes, on the left side of a long, dark corridor, with a very high ceiling. Halfway down its length, it turns to the left and then turns back on itself, making a horseshoe shape. We discover the work as we gradually move forward, following a wooden handrail that keeps us at a distance of about 50cm from the tapestry.

Strictly speaking, this is not a tapestry but an embroidery: the scenes depicted were made with a needle and wool threads stitched onto a bleached linen fabric; they were perhaps based on a pre-existing drawing. [...]"

3. Scene 57 - Brief description by Hannah

"What I see in this scene where the light colour of the linen canvas predominates is, on the right side, an orange mass the size of a large horizontal hand: A horse moving to the right, exactly as in the first scene of

the embroidery. But this time, the rider is dressed in light colours and is leaning forward. In front of his horse, I distinguish a thin, slanted, brown-red shape: A soldier who seems to be falling backwards.

On the left, three large, rather pale vertical shapes stand out slightly from the light background of the embroidery: I have learned to identify them as three soldiers on foot. On the middle one, a small light blue shape along his body catches my eye: probably a shield. However, it is the character on the right who seems the most important: he is located just below the inked in number of the scene."

4. Scene 57 - detailed collective description

"We are facing the raging battle: there are bodies in motion, and, as we get closer, arrows and lances whistling from all directions. There are two parts to this scene: on the left, three soldiers on foot; on the right, a horseman and a man almost on the ground – all armed, all helmeted.

Let's first observe the soldiers on foot: Three men, turned to the left. The first brandishes a very long and thin lance above his head – a single reddish-brown embroidery line – towards the Norman enemy attacking from the left. The second holds up a large banner, whose mostly reddish-brown oriflamme [a long, thin flag], floats above his head. Let's get very close: this horizontal oriflamme is a thin winged dragon, two claws to the left near its head, and, to the right, a tail pointing upwards. It looks like it is biting the upright shaft [the long handle]. We imagine the wind bringing this destructive creature to life. Both dressed in chainmail, these first two soldiers each hold up, in front of them, a large oblong shield; when we move closer they both appear pierced with 3 arrows. A horizontal lance seems to skewer the 2 men at neck level. It is actually in the background. Its tip is on the right: it is coming from the left, from the Norman camp. Just to the right of these first soldiers: the third man on foot, also facing to the left. Do the Latin letters "Harold", embroidered in light blue on either side of his head, mean that he is the King of England? Dressed in chainmail made of small reddish-brown circles, he holds his large shield in front of him; it is very light blue and particularly ornate. Like those of the other two soldiers, it is pierced with 3 arrows. A lance protrudes from his shield, tip upwards. His right hand, closed, embroidered in the same very striking reddish-brown colour, is raised to his face. What is he doing? We need to get closer to notice that he is holding a beige arrow. This arrow disappears behind the part of his helmet that protects his nose. Is it planted in his right eye, which, because of his position in profile, we do not perceive?

Now let's look at the right side of the scene. Immediately after this mysterious character, an orange and olive-green horse facing to the right carries a rider whose shoulders and head are leaning forward. Moving to the right, in the direction taken by William's army: This rider is a Norman. He seems at first glance slumped: has he too been hit? However, we immediately distinguish his large grey-blue sword pointing toward the ground: Far from being injured, he is striking a man who is at his feet. This man falls backwards, his head to the right. The Norman's sword seems to cut his legs. Who is this falling man? He wears beige chainmail and a moustache like the character hit in the face by an arrow, but his helmet and hose are different. Could he in fact be Harold? Or was the King of England depicted twice in this scene? Above the scene, along its entire length, something we are certain of: *Harold rex interferectus est*: King Harold was killed."

5. Quick description of scene 58

"3 or 4 steps further on, the last preserved scene of the embroidery, where the linen canvas is most damaged, and patched with almost white fabric, shows riders at full gallop, and, in front of them, on two levels, men on foot and on horseback who seem to want to leave the work and its interrupted narration. It is inscribed: "And the English took flight." The lower frieze is littered with naked bodies, some dismembered. What remains of Harold's camp retreats."

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Appendix: The question of payment

In France, the funding of research in the humanities and social sciences does not allow, for the time being and unlike several countries such as England and Australia, the remuneration of audio describers, directors and voice artists who are not otherwise public servants (the latter can participate, depending on their contracts, in research-creation such as the design, production and voicing of audio descriptions). In this context, which we would like to change, we ensure that people who are not public servants receive what is allowed by research funding (transportation, accommodation and food costs, etc.) and we help them to obtain external funding for research (museums, local authorities, private companies that respect our values - social justice and respect for human and ecological diversity).