Chapter Six

AWAKENING OUR SENSE OF TOUCH

PATRICIA MAUNDER

Seeing might be believing but when you touch you know!

BLESSING OFFOR, A Nigerian man who lost his sight as a child, reached up to touch the right side of the monumental sphinx at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Philadelphia and exclaimed, "Wait, what's this? What am I touching? Oh, my, these feel like ribs!" A flashlight shone up onto the sphinx's body revealed that indeed, there were the carefully anatomically correct and beautifully carved ridges of a set of ribs. Gene Magee, a lead docent, was amazed: "I've given tours in this gallery for twelve years and never knew the sphinx had ribs!"[1] The news spread rapidly to other docents who came to see for themselves—the low lighting and subtlety of the carving had made this significant detail easy to miss. The touch of a blind visitor had taught sighted docents something new.

In this moment any doubts about the revelatory nature of touch were dispelled and a new energy swirled, with the realization that the launch of an ancient Egyptian touch tour was a not just a considerate offering by the museum *for* the visually impaired but a joint adventure of discovery and enlightenment *with* those that see in different ways. An exemplar of the credo "Nothing About Us Without Us" could not have been better demonstrated.[2]

Introduction

As the parent of two daughters, one born blind in 1986, and an adopted son born in 1983 who lost his vision through a deteriorating eye condition, I became immersed in verbally describing, guiding, and interpreting what is, essentially, a visual world. Although keen

1 Blessing Offor, interviewed by Greg Johnson, "Penn Museum Visitors 'See' History as Part of Tours for the Visually Impaired," *Penn Current*, October 11, 2012, 10.

2 The concept that no policy should be decided by any representative without the full and direct participation of members of the group(s) affected by that policy, Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990.

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to expose my children to a wide range of cultural experiences, unless we went to a petting zoo or the Please Touch Museum in Philadelphia (specifically geared for children), most venues we visited lacked accommodations and adaptations for people with vision loss. We often called ahead and asked to have at least some memorable tactile or sensory encounter. Those experiences mixed with my own background as an art educator catapulted me down both the practical and academic paths of discovery about touch and the remaining senses.

This essay asserts that engaging with touch is beneficial for all and calls upon museums and cultural institutions to consider greater accessibility of objects in their collections. It begins by providing a theoretical framework about the sense of touch and its critical role in human development. It then describes a pop-up exhibition of tactile art along with visitors' reactions. Thereafter, the essay shares how this experience inspired a professional move into the role of accessibility consultant, and the design of sustainable touch tours with and for people with vision loss. In particular, it highlights "Insights into Ancient Egypt," an "Access Program" at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

Renowned British physical anthropologist and scholar Ashley Montagu claimed touch to be the "mother of the senses" and "the foundation upon which all other senses are based."[3] Highlighting the findings of scientists and psychologists, he demonstrated the profound need for the tactile experience and its lasting impact on the healthy development of both humans and animals. In the decades since Montagu's ground-breaking work, there has been a steady flow of research and documentation about how touch affects our lives. Tiffany Field, Director of the Touch Research Institute at the Miller School of Medicine, University of Miami, emphasizes the critical need for touch in the growth, development and emotional bonding between children and their parents/caretakers and considers the basic psychophysical properties of touch from childhood to adolescence and into adulthood.[4] In *The Power of Touch: Handling Objects in Museum and Heritage Context*, contributing authors include historical, scientific and empirical evidence that "demonstrate[s] the importance of touch in ascribing meaning—both in the past and present—and display[s] how it can be used to facilitate learning in museums and in a variety of cultural and heritage institutions."[5] Much has been written about the dysfunction in interpersonal communication that results from the lack of touch, dubbed "skin hunger." "Affection Exchange Theory" describes the fundamental role of touch in interpersonal relationships, while therapies addressing medical and psychological issues are well documented by Mariana Caplan.[6] This field of study cer-

3 Ashley Montagu, *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin,* 3rd ed. (New York: Harper Row,1986), 3–4.

4 Department of Pediatrics website, accessed November 7, 2019, http://pediatrics.med.miami.edu/touch-research (article no longer available).

5 Elizabeth Pye, ed., *The Power of Touch: Handling Objects in Museum and Heritage Context* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast, 2007), excerpt from back cover.

6 Kory Floyd, "Human Affection Exchange I: Reproductive Probability as a Predictor of Men's Affection with Their Sons," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 10, no. 1 (Fall 2001); and Mariana Caplan,

tainly warrants a breadth of inquiry as we learn about the plasticity of the human brain, synesthesia of the senses and how our skin, hands and entire bodies work in concert to inform our interpretations, memories and life experiences. Touch can be "passive" (being touched) or "haptic" (interactive touch).

In the everyday use of our hands, we take so much for granted. We unconsciously use our fingertips to tap and swipe our phones, squeeze the toothpaste tube or hold a cup of coffee. Yet, in these seemingly straightforward actions there are a plethora of cues and sensations. In swiping the phone's surface we experience slight pressure, smoothness, and immediate visual or vocal feedback; in squeezing the toothpaste tube we use more intense pressure and employ tactile knowledge about how full or empty that tube is; in holding the coffee cup the sensation of warmth combines with the senses of smell and taste to affirm a pleasant experience—yet how present are we? When we slow down the touch and sensory experience with mindfulness and awareness we gain so much, with some surprising revelations.

In 2008, a group of educators and artists designed and presented *Touch: An Art Experience for the Senses*, a Philadelphia-based exhibition and research project.[7] Carol Cole, whose work is reminiscent of ancient and tribal forms, combines found objects with handmade paper, textured paper pulp, and paint. She contributed several intriguing pieces, as did Rosalyn Driscoll, whose sculptural forms of wood, paper, rope, steel, and cloth, often entwined with rawhide, offered a malleable and diverse tactile experience. Visitors to the exhibition included local artists and museum staff, students from The University of the Arts and Overbrook School for the Blind, and other members of the public, both sighted and visually impaired. Those with sight were encouraged to either wear a blindfold or close their eyes while exploring the work, not in any way to mimic blindness, but instead a methodology to use the hands and fingers to fully engage with their tactile sense. Responses to this unusual exhibition were recorded in a "Touch Journal." A visually impaired visitor commented, "The texture of each work was greatly appreciated and very meaningful. I was so happy that this exhibit encouraged interaction." A sighted painter wrote, "I found that my fingers, mind and body were hungry for more—starved for touch. My hands told me what my eyes could not and everything was highlighted and sensual. I fell in love with the smooth and cool surfaces. It was startling and amazing and I wanted more." A student museum educator stated, "Touch challenges the visitor to think and feel differently and draws forth an opening of the self to the work in a way rarely experienced. I hope museum exhibits follow suit and exhibit objects this way."[8] What became evident from observation, discussion and written responses was that there is an "awakening" of sorts, a sense of discovery and an intimate "knowing" about sculptural forms with a new appreciation for their properties of form, shape,

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To Touch Is To Live: The Need for Genuine Affection in an Impersonal World (Chino Valley: Hohm, 2002).

7 *Touch: An Art Experience for the Senses*, curated by Trish Maunder, Mary Pat Coyle, and Jordan Jacobson, at DaVinci Art Alliance in Philadelphia, April 2008.

8 Visitor comments submitted anonymously at *Touch: An Art Experience for the Senses*, DaVinci Art Alliance, Philadelphia, April 2008.

weight, texture, temperature, and material—the reinterpretation of what might have previously been considered an inanimate and silent object as an active, living force. An object's utilitarian function, artistic, or aesthetic value may be seen, heard, or described, but it is the sense of touch that establishes it as a tangible entity, a handleable man-made or natural creation. Direct interaction with or manipulation of an object, be it vegetable, animal, or mineral, yields instant feedback and a direct connection to its properties and physical history with a tangible connection to its maker.

Carol Saylor, a Philadelphia based sculptor who happens to be deaf and blind, was a recent participant in "A Sense of Place," a touch and sensory tour at the Wharton Esherick Museum, the home and studio of the artist for whom the museum is named.

> I had the feeling of light and nature with the large double doors, and industrial windows set in the massive timbers and rough stonework. I love the overall sense of the organic shapes of the work, the little three-legged stools and piano-shaped tabletops and the wonderful sensual satiny smoothness of the oil finishes. My favorite animal sculptures were the small horses and jockeys with their wonderful sense of movement. Wharton's work has inspired me with new ideas to get back to work in my own studio.[9]

Ruth Larkin, a sighted tour participant, commented, "I was delighted to be able to touch things because they seemed to invite it, it felt more intimate to focus on touch. I felt like I was interacting with a segment that itself had a character, a personality. It was like figuring out a puzzle … 'Who are you? What's that rough bit on you?' I liked visiting someone's space and imagined feeling all those surfaces every day if I lived there. I feel like I understand Esherick's relationship with wood better and I better appreciate his craftsmanship and cleverness with functional objects."[10]

Museums and cultural institutions offer themselves as the perfect pairing for touch experiences that can, as exemplified here, inspire new ideas and deeper connections. However, while acknowledging that universal design principles of equity, flexibility, intuition, and perception benefits everyone, exhibitions that allow the public to touch treasured artifacts demand a huge paradigm shift in the museum world. Even for people with vision loss, touch-based programs are a relatively new concept and not commonplace. Fortunately, awareness about how museums can design and offer rich experiences for more diverse audiences is expanding.

An initiative for a touch tour or a touch component of a collection or special exhibition will often come from an education department or accessible program coordinator after attending a conference where discussions around disability are on the agenda or where blind and visually impaired presenters propel inclusionary access into focus. Wherever the idea begins, there are museum staff whose professional considerations are key from the outset. Conservation and curatorial staff must command the early dialogue. No matter the positive intention about such a venture, the viability of creating a

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9 Carol Saylor, in comments provided to the Wharton Esherick Museum and shared with the author, May 21, 2018.

10 Ruth Larkin, in comments provided to the Wharton Esherick Museum and shared with the author July 23, 2018.

tour rests with the professionals who know an object's historical value, physical vulnerability, and its exhibition or conservation schedule.

Case Study: "Insights into Ancient Egypt"

In 2012, the head conservator at Penn Museum approved a selection of objects from the museum's collection for inclusion in a touch tour for blind and visually impaired participants initiated by the museum's department of community engagement.[11] With grants secured from local philanthropic organizations, the next step was to hire an accessibility consultant to fulfill the mission—to design, coordinate and oversee tours and reach an audience of 200 people over a one-year period. I was delighted to take on the position.

Nine people with varied visual acuities across different age ranges were invited to make up three focus groups; they joined two lead docents of the Egyptian galleries and myself to co-create the tour. A cluster of approved objects in the Sphinx Gallery generated a great deal of excitement, connecting us to ancient Egypt, the preeminent civilization of the Mediterranean world. Made of basalt and red granite, the objects were strong, stable, and manifest with stories and learning.

The ninety-minute tour was designed and tested between April and September. It launched at the beginning of October and ran twice a day on Mondays through mid-December, with up to ten visitors with vision loss and their sighted companions attending each session. This intense ten-week time frame was deliberately conceived to foster a dynamic energy and community dialogue. The museum is closed to the general public on Mondays. The reality of providing a rich sensory experience for those with vision loss while hundreds of school students were on the premises was simply not an option. Safe navigation in a quiet gallery space with little ambient sound was a primary goal in creating a comfortable and welcoming environment.

Top of the agenda in designing the tour was seeking approval for visitors to touch the objects without wearing gloves, or at the very least with food prep. gloves, which protect objects from the hand's natural oils yet still transmit some level of texture and temperature, unlike nitrile gloves, which not only make hands sweat but remove sensitivity altogether. As a blind man commented during a discussion at conference, "Wearing gloves is like looking at a piece of art while wearing sunglasses."[12]

Penn Museum's conservator gathered colleagues' opinions and considered the informed response of another conservator whose parents, both blind, told her that wearing gloves to touch stone objects "would be like smearing petroleum jelly on one's glasses," and that "the sensation would effectively be blurred." The ideal compromise was reached: visitors would remove rings and wipe their hands with sterilizing wipes before touching each artifact.

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11 Renamed "Learning and Public Engagement" in 2019.

12 Unnamed participant, "Art Beyond Sight: Multimodal Approaches to Learning" conference, Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 16–18, 2009.

Five objects were selected. They included an ancient stela which served as a tombstone for King Qa'a, the last pharaoh of the first dynasty; a portion of a temple wall with life-size sunken relief carvings of the ancient creator gods Atum and Shu; and the smoothed, red granite head (broken from a statue) of the pharaoh Tuthmosis III. The last two objects were both dedicated to Ramesses II and his thirteenth son, Merneptah: a tall column from a temple; and the museum's signature piece, a monumental, twelve-ton, red granite sphinx, the largest in the Western hemisphere and the third largest in the world. Excavated from near the Ptah Temple in Memphis in 1913, this magnificent artifact was installed in the Lower Egypt gallery in 1916.

It was essential that focus group members got to know each piece well, not so much historically—the purview of the museum docents—but in more tangible and interactive ways. They determined that while historical and descriptive information—its dimensions, material and colour—is important and welcome, the faster the physical engagement the better. As one focus group member pointed out, "waiting is boring."[13]

Spending time with each object was intensely engaging, physical and intimate. We became familiar with their nuanced shapes and forms, textured and smooth areas, and we noted broken, cracked, and restored sections that added new layers of interest. We reached behind an object to relate to its full form, stretched up to touch a hieroglyph, or bent low to examine a pedestal. Having the time to enjoy this level of detail and the opportunity to share these thrilling revelations with our visitors became a driving force for us all.

Research shows that sighted people view works of art for between thirteen and two-tenths and forty-four and six-tenths seconds per object.[14] Compare this to time spent touching an object which may be between five to fifteen minutes—in the case of the Penn Museum's sphinx, visually impaired visitors claimed they would be happy to explore it all day!

One visitor was so overcome she had to sit down and take a breath. "I can't believe that I am touching something this old."[15] While reaching up for her first encounter with the sphinx another visitor chuckled as she gasped, "Oh my goodness, look how big this paw is and oh, look, there are lines here that I think denote the claws … that's awesome! I can see how the muscle of the front leg goes up and the belly goes down and under, and wow, here's the haunch that goes up like a dog—like my dog. Oh, here's the back leg, it's just huge. This sphinx is SO big." She touched areas pitted from years of exposure to wind and sand. "Ah, I love this," she said, "it helps you understand exactly how old it is."[16]

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13 Focus group participant, "Insights into Ancient Egypt" exhibit development, Penn Museum, September 2012.

14 Jeffrey K. Smith and Lisa F. Smith, "Spending Time on Art," *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 19, no. 2 (July 1, 2001): 229–36.

15 Elsie Watson, interviewed by April Saul, "A Touch of Antiquities," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 22, 2012, https://www.inquirer.com/philly/health/science/20121022_Blind_students_get_to_touch_antiquities_at_Penn_Museum.html.

16 Becky, visitor to "Insights into Ancient Egypt," Penn Museum, October 2012.

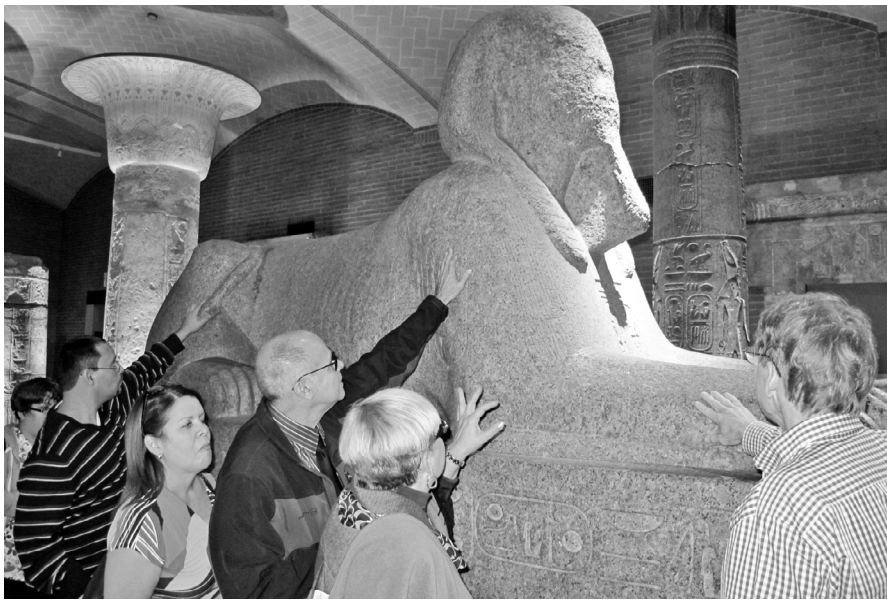

Figure 6.1. Visitors with vision loss touching sphinx, 2012.
Photograph courtesy of the author.

The sphinx's placement on a high pedestal made its upper body and head beyond reach, so it was prudent to make an accessible smaller scale model. Local sculptor, Maria Mosette Kretschmann, was engaged to create it. Using photographs and drawings for reference the replica was meticulously constructed using foam and plaster and overlaid with materials matching the colour and texture of red granite.[17] The original sphinx had weathered, unclear features so the replica followed suit. During tours, visitors flocked around it, several commenting they had imagined a sphinx in an upright position and were surprised it had a horizontal pose, reminiscent of a large dog or cat. They noted the flaps of the headdress and its "ponytail" at the nape of the neck. They walked around the whole form, following the curved tail to the top of the replica's back, mapping out what they would encounter on the larger scale of the original artifact (see Fig. 6.1).

Indeed, the magnificent exemplar of ancient Egypt was the highlight of the tour and although everyone had heard of a sphinx, few had truly envisioned one, let alone touched one. There was so much to revel in. Its placement on a huge rectangular pedestal in the centre of the gallery made it easy for those with vision loss to walk around independently and safely while tracing their hands along the series of royal cartouches and hieroglyphs carved into its base.

17 Maria Mosette Kretschmann, "Touch Tours-All Process!," *ICONSUMEITCONSUMESME* (blog), http://mariamosette.blogspot.com/2013/11/touch-tours-all-process.html.

Docents assisted as visitors explored its anatomically correct, leonine form, including the carved folds of skin on its hind quarters, its giant tail curling up and to the right, and, of course, its discernable ribs. Written and verbal responses were collected via evaluations at the end of the tour and the universally positive comments were inspiring and rewarding for all involved:

> Not many people either sighted or visually impaired would ever have the opportunity to place their hands where craftsmen's hands toiled thousands of years ago. The docent placed my hands on the sphinx and asked if I knew what part I was touching. I realized it was the huge front paw of the lion. I made my way around the sphinx finding the remaining paws along with the massive tail. The base was chiseled and etched with such great precision. This was truly a great opportunity. To a blind or visually impaired person seeing is believing what one describes. However, touching is reality.[18]

The following comment by a visitor affirmed this notion even more: "This Touch Tour was THE most memorable museum exhibit I have ever encountered—with every touch I could feel the energy [from the artifacts] emitting into my body, energy created up to five thousand years BEFORE! I've seen Egyptian exhibits before. The columns, with their hieroglyphs always intrigued me as I looked from afar. I learned more in this short hour-and-a-half about the Egyptian culture than I did in school, past museum exhibits, and books combined—and it is forever embedded in me."[19]

Vision is so often taken for granted with an assumption that information can be gleaned only by looking at and appreciating an object. Conversely, the intense experience of touch yields deep and long-lasting connections that enter the body in much more wholesome and fully realized ways, for both the sighted and visually impaired.

During the touch tours at Penn Museum, those of us hosting them came up with innovative ways to make them even more engaging and interactive. Using one's own body to relate to objects and even maps is a simple yet creative way of building images and scenarios for people who are blind. To make sense of the unusual topography of ancient Egypt, visitors were asked to extend an arm out and down in front of them, palm uppermost with fingers splayed open. With the other hand they touched the shoulder of their extended arm to imagine it as Upper Egypt in the south of the country, and traced a central line down their arm, past their wrist (Cairo) to the triangular form of their outstretched fingers symbolizing the tributaries of the Nile Delta as it spreads out and drains into the Mediterranean Sea. This interactive experience of the river flow from south to north was so well received by blind and visually impaired visitors that Museum docents adopted the technique with their visiting student groups.

Tactile line drawings in the same orientation of a character and of selected hieroglyphs were offered to participants, and where relevant, small replicas consolidated the shape and form of an image before encountering the authentic object.[20] A 6-inch (15

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18 Rita Lang, visitor to "Insights into Ancient Egypt," Penn Museum, October 2012.

19 Tina, interviewed by the Center for Vision Loss, "Penn Museum Touch Tour," *VISION* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 5.

20 This refers to embossed images that were created using "Swell Touch Paper" from The American Printing House for the Blind.

cm), three-dimensional resin statue of the falcon sun god Horus helped visitors locate the bird's rounded eye, carved wing fold, feathered legs, and clawed feet before exploring the profile image of the much larger form on an ancient tombstone. To create a kinesthetic and tangible connection to the similarly embossed hieroglyph below the falcon, visitors bent an arm and extended it across the body with the palm facing inwards, thumb uppermost.

The temple wall piece with its life-sized carvings of Atum and Shu offered an opportunity for visitors to "strike a pose" and "stand like an Egyptian." They relished the challenge to their balance and hilarity ensued as they twisted their heads, legs, and feet to the right while trying to keep their torsos facing forward. Then, with verbal or "hand-over-hand" guidance, visitors used their fingers to trace the carved outline of both figures, exploring the shapes and textures of their headdresses, oval eyes, thickened eyebrows and lips, large ears, and curved beards. Even their subtle rounded cheeks were discernible through touch. This method of transferring information from an internalized physical experience to an externalized tactile one was also much appreciated by visitors who were quickly able to orient to images that otherwise would have been more complex to recognize.

The head of Tuthmosis II provided contrast between the low relief carvings on the wall piece and a three-dimensional iteration of an Egyptian figure. The pertinence of this tactile transition was not lost on our visitors, who found the sequential flow into a fully embraceable, and relatable form helped build a deeper understanding of the varying techniques used by ancient Egyptian artisans and the characters they portrayed. A visitor commented: "It's interesting that this is made from red granite, the same as the wall piece. This feels much smoother, so they (artisans) probably used special tools to achieve that. I love being able to put my hands entirely around the head and feel everything—the eyes, eyebrows, chin, ears, and nose, especially the nose, which even has lines outlining the flare of the nostrils."[21]

While preparing to touch the large, seated statues of the pharaoh Ramesses II and the lion-headed goddess Sekhmet, visitors sat up tall and straight with hands on their knees to imbue themselves with the strength and power of these mighty figures and help them recognize and relate more readily to the figure they will touch. For visitors who cannot see, preparatory experiences prior to touching are vital in making tangible and visceral connections to an external entity. While touching Ramesses II, Austin Seraphin, a man blind from birth, who had been working with the team as a "docent" and guiding others to touch (Fig. 6.2), commented, "It's incredible to see all the amazing detail, things like the feet and the hands, the fingernails and all the exquisite detail in the hieroglyphs that you only really pick up by touch; and to be able to guide other people to those exact points and show them is really cool. When you touch these things, you really bond with them."[22]

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21 Becky, visitor to "Insights into Ancient Egypt."

22 Austin Seraphin, personal communication to author, October 2013.

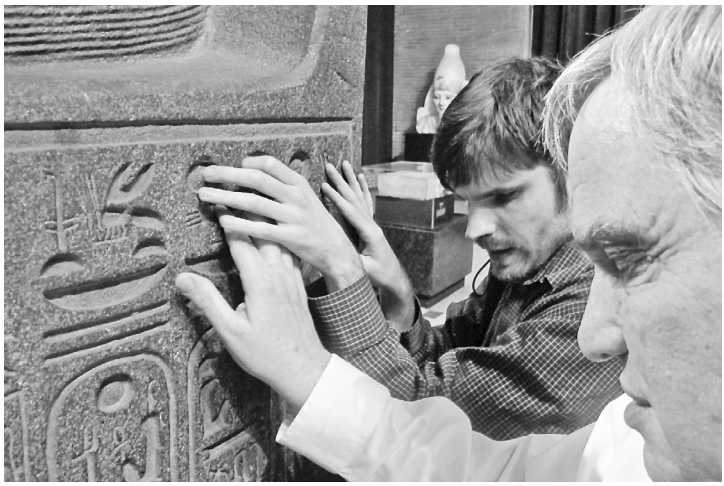

Figure 6.2. Seraphin guides visitor's hand, 2013. Photograph courtesy of the author.

In 2014, after two successful years of tours and programs at Penn Museum it had become clear and apparent that the blind and low vision community had not only thoroughly embraced the experience but were hungry for more inclusionary cultural opportunities and were prepared to collaborate to achieve them. Stepping away from my position at Penn Museum and with the maxim "Nothing About Us Without Us," I co-founded Philly Touch Tours LLC with Austin Seraphin and created a mission to do just that. With our close relationships and respect for the educators, docents and colleagues at Penn Museum, we offered and were supported in the development of Philly Touch Tours's "Signature Program," a handling workshop and sensory tour of the Rome Gallery. As before, focus groups of people with vision loss were an integral part of its development, with principles of best practice we had honed together leading the way.

In the Rome Gallery, visitors stand to emulate the stance of a Pretorian guard carved into the marble stela before them. The transference of this internal knowledge of body form through mirroring is profound in its connectedness. Aside from being a seemingly lighthearted activity, this kinesthetic interaction stays with the visitor as a strong memory of their visit to the museum and a desire to know more: "We were well prepared to approach and tactually examine valuable pieces and learn about the nature of life for the various groups of people during this remarkable period. I came away from the tour with a renewed appreciation for learning without vision as well as for the resourcefulness of human beings in ancient civilizations. Everything came alive for me!"[23]

Philly Touch Tours's firm belief and practice is reflected in its mantra: "Seeing might be believing, but when you touch, you know." We truly champion the conviction that when you touch, you connect, you relate, and you understand.

23 Unnamed visitor, "Insights into the Roman World" tour, Philly Touch Tours/Penn Museum, 2017.

Figure 6.3. Hands reach to touch a marble portrait of a woman, 2014. Photograph courtesy of the author.

As museums shift the paradigm to create inclusive and accessible exhibition environments that are welcoming for everyone, the words of accessibility consultant and researcher Sina Bahram sets the stage. "Accessibility is making sure folks can open the door. Inclusion is inviting people to come inside and enjoy what you have to offer."[24] I leave the final statement in the capable hands of Blessing Offor, the man who excitedly located the ribs on the iconic sphinx: "License to touch the artifacts is unbeatable. It's like full immersion; if you want to learn a language you just have to jump into the culture and environment. If you really want to learn about this stuff, you have to go touch it. Even for someone who can see, I think it's way more valuable to actually be able to put your hands on something!"[25]

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24 Prime Access Consulting (blog).

25 Offor, interviewed by Greg Johnson.