



Rakursi Gallery – Initiatives for People with Visual Impairments

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Abstract

The paper analyses the initiatives for people with visual impairments realized by the Rakursi Gallery in Sofia, Bulgaria as one of the leading institutions in the country that offers educational programmes for this public. The research methodology includes Case Study, interview with a curator from the gallery, analysis of the website, publications and other materials.

Many museums worldwide, such as Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Great Britain, have developed special tours, events or workshops for visitors with disabilities. However, in Bulgaria there are only few examples of such initiatives.

In this context Rakursi Gallery has achieved remarkable results within the exhibitions “Touch the Treasure” (April 2016), “A Look at Modern Art” (June 2016) and “Feel the Art (Access to the visual arts of students with visual impairments)” (March 2019), organized for students from the School of visually impaired children “Louis Braille” in Sofia. As part of the exhibitions the staff of the gallery held workshops during which the children were able not only to learn more about the main theme of the event but to become artists themselves.

Moreover, the founders of Rakursi share their experience with this type of public with other museum workers during specialized training sessions.

The activities of the Rakursi Gallery for children with visual impairments could stand out as a good Bulgarian practice for educational programmes. It will be used as an example in the training process of Bachelor students at the academic courses Access to Information for People with Special Needs and Accessible Tourism at University of Library Studies and Information Technologies. Thus the students would develop a better understanding of the educational mission of modern galleries and museums as “cultural institutions for all”.

Keywords: Rakursi Gallery, people with visual impairments, educational programs, audiences, Bulgaria, academic education

1. Introduction

The importance of ensuring access to cultural venues for people with disabilities has come to the attention of the governments of many countries worldwide ever since the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities was implemented in 2011 [2]. The European Union, as one of the parties to the Convention, developed a strategy to facilitate the access to culture for people with disabilities via different projects and programmes. A successful step in the right direction was made in October 2018 when the EU ratified the Marrakesh Treaty, administered by the World Intellectual Property Organization, thus facilitating the access to published works for visually impaired people [4]. As important cultural and educational institutions, many European museums adapted their policies and buildings in an effort to become more accessible to people with disabilities. Furthermore, these institutions started to offer special tours and educational programmes for this type of public. Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, Great Britain, for example, has developed different initiatives for visitors with mobility, hearing or visual impairments, people with learning disabilities and dyslexia. V&A offers mobility aids, guiding services, talks in British Sign Language for deaf and hard of hearing people, audio guides, tactile books, talks and a range of touch objects for visually impaired people. Museum’s specialists have also created an interactive sensory backpack, which helps children with visual impairments and their family to learn more about ceramic objects from China to the Netherlands [13]. All these different types of services show the importance of people with disabilities as a valuable part of the museum public. Moreover, those visitors are no longer passive admirers of art. They participate actively in the cultural dialogue between the museum and its public via various educational programmes.



2. Goals and Methodology

In Bulgaria there are only few examples of museum programmes and initiatives for people with disabilities. Some museums are not even accessible for people with special needs. However, galleries such as National Gallery Kvadrat 500 and Sofia City Art Gallery have created tactile paintings and replicas of their most famous artworks for people with visual impairments [5,10]. When it comes to working with this type of public many museum curators prefer to cooperate with non-governmental organizations who have experience with projects for people with disabilities.

In this context, Rakursi Gallery in Sofia is a rare example of a private institution which creates its own interactive workshops for children with visual impairments [6]. The main goals of this paper are to analyse those initiatives realized by Rakursi and to highlight the gallery's potential as an educational centre. Rakursi has become one of the leading institutions in the country that offers educational programmes for children with visual impairments. The curators share their valuable experience and know-how with specialists in the field, cooperate with schools and universities during different national and international projects. The research methodology includes Case Study, interview with a curator from the gallery, analysis of the website, publications and other materials.

3. Rakursi Gallery - initiatives for people with visual impairments

Rakursi Gallery was established in 2004 by Rositsa Chusheva and Romyana Yoneva and mainly focuses on modern and contemporary art. One of the main goals of its curators is "to bring art to public of different backgrounds" [7]. An expression of this mission are the exhibitions "Touch the Treasure" (April 2016), "A Look at Modern Art" (June 2016) and "Feel the Art (Access to the visual arts of students with visual impairments)" (March 2019), organized for students from the School of visually impaired children "Louis Braille" in Sofia. "Touch the Treasure" and "A Look at Modern Art" were part of the international project BaGMIVI: Bridging the Gap between Museums and Individuals with Visual Impairments [8]. The project is a cooperation among the gallery, the Bulgarian Association of Visually Impaired Children, the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Faculty "Special Education", and other European universities, museums, institutions. BaGMIVI's aim is to change the understanding that museums only collect, preserve and exhibit artworks. They are also educational institutions and places with important cultural and social roles where people with different backgrounds, interests and needs could come together and exchange thoughts and ideas. In this context, the people with visual impairments are an important part of the public which more and more museums try to attract.

"Touch the Treasure" was a successful event that started a cooperation between the Rakursi Gallery and the School of visually impaired children "Louis Braille". During this initiative the students could examine replicas of famous Thracian treasures and they are encouraged to find the artifacts' locations on a tactile map of Bulgaria. There is a theoretical part which teaches the children about the history and customs of the Thracian tribes. At the end of the programme, the participants create their own replicas of the treasures with the help of museum specialists. The value of "Touch the Treasure" is in the multidisciplinary approach that broadens the students' knowledge in the fields of art, history and geography. The visually impaired children begin to perceive the art gallery as a place to learn but also to have fun with their peers in a cultural environment.

After the success of "Touch the Treasure", the gallery's curators decided to continue the educational programme under a new name - "Feel the Art (Access to the visual arts of students with visual impairments)" [3]. This initiative was similar to the previous one but it included another group of children from the same school. For the realization of "Feel the Art", Rakursi Gallery gained the financial support of the National Cultural Fund of Bulgaria which is another testament for the educational and social role of the initiative.

While developing the educational programmes the museum curators worked closely with teachers and kids from "Louis Braille". They took into account the students' interests and abilities. Moreover, the Rakursi's staff encouraged the foundation of a school museum inside the building of "Louis Braille" where the participants present the artwork created during the workshops [1]. In this way, the initiatives of Rakursi Gallery reached a larger audience.

Another programme organized specifically for the students from "Louis Braille" is "A Look at Modern Art". The theme of this project was chosen during a discussion with the children. One of them mentioned that she would love to get familiar with the physique of a horse so the curators asked several Bulgarian artists to donate sculptures of horses. During the workshop the students could touch the sculptures which were representative for different art movements from the 20th century and compare them. They also listened to a lecture about expressionism, cubism, abstract art, etc. In the end of the programme, the children became artists themselves by creating a self-portrait using different materials, fabrics and aromas. The initiative helps the participants learn more about art



history but also encourages them to use their imagination and creativity. “A Look at Modern Art” teaches the children that art offers limitless possibilities.

As experienced professionals who worked closely with visually impaired children, Rakursi’s staff were chosen to become partners in the international project EU UNESCO4ALL TOUR. The goals of this initiative are to present UNESCO’s cultural heritage sites in an accessible manner, to encourage the cultural tourism for people with visual impairments and to promote multicultural dialogue through art and history [9]. The partners in the project would create replicas of famous UNESCO sites for the visually impaired people to touch and explore. The replicas would include an audio guide that would make the visitor familiar with the history of the site. Bulgaria would be represented by a replica of the Rila Monastery and an icon of St. Ivan Rilski. This initiative offers an innovative and technology-driven way for the people with visual impairments to learn more about valuable local and international cultural heritage sites. Moreover, as part of the project, Rakursi would organize educational seminars for museum curators, university professors, tourist agents, hotel managers and would share its know-how for working with this public [1].

4. Conclusion

The curators of Rakursi Gallery work closely with local and international professionals while developing programmes for the visually impaired. They take into account the specific needs and interests of the public and accomplish remarkable results. They also share their experience with other Bulgarian cultural institutions during special seminars and sessions thus turning the gallery’s building into a social place and an educational centre.

The activities of the Rakursi Gallery for children with visual impairments could stand out as a good Bulgarian practice for educational programmes. It will be used as an example in the training process of Bachelor students at the academic courses Access to Information for People with Special Needs and Accessible Tourism at University of Library Studies and Information Technologies [11, 12]. Thus the students would develop a better understanding of the educational mission of modern galleries and museums as “cultural institutions for all”.

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