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SENSING CULTURE CONFERENCE, **TUESDAY 1ST MAY 2018**

Trinity House
Trinity Square
Tower Hill
London EC3N 4DH
United Kingdom



BLIND VISITOR EXPERIENCES AT ART MUSEUMS

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THE PROBLEM WE FACE

Many influential contemporary studies focus on the perception of objects and “real things,” such as perception and visual imagery

They do not examine:

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



Hayhoe, S. (2017) *Blind Visitor Experiences at Art Museums*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

GOMBRICH ON VISUAL ART AS NATURAL LAW

“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.**” (P. 95)

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

BOURDIEU ON MUSEUMS AS NATURAL LAW

“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 AS NATURAL LAW

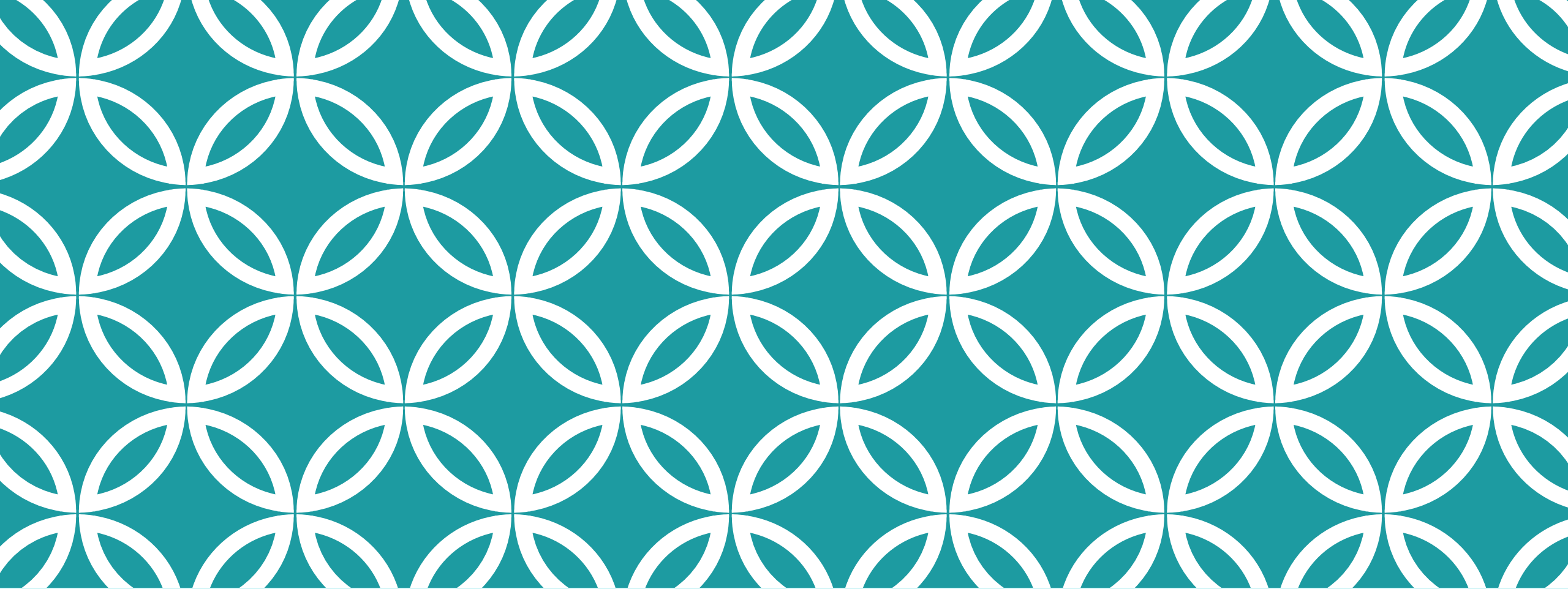
“[From] what sources could a blind person, who has never seen the world with all its wealth of forms and color, derive those manifold experiences?... [No] one born blind is able to become aware of the diversity of nature and to apprehend all the rich and various appearances of objects.” (pp. 316–17)

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

NAGEL, ON WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A BAT

One might try, for example, to develop concepts that could be used to explain to a person blind from birth what it was like to see. **One would reach a blank wall eventually, but it should be possible to devise a method of expressing in objective terms much more than we can at present, and with much greater precision.**

Nagel, T. (1974). What Is It Like to Be a Bat? *The Philosophical Review*, 83(4), 435-450



WHAT CAN A PERSON WHO HAS NEVER SEEN UNDERSTAND?

What can a person with no
visual experience

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Search analysis, research, academics

Arts + Culture Business + Economy Cities Education Environment + Energy Health + Medicine Politics + Society Science + Technology Brexit



How a blind artist is challenging our understanding of colour

March 23, 2018 1:24pm GMT

Erol Arman.

Email

Twitter

Facebook

74

410

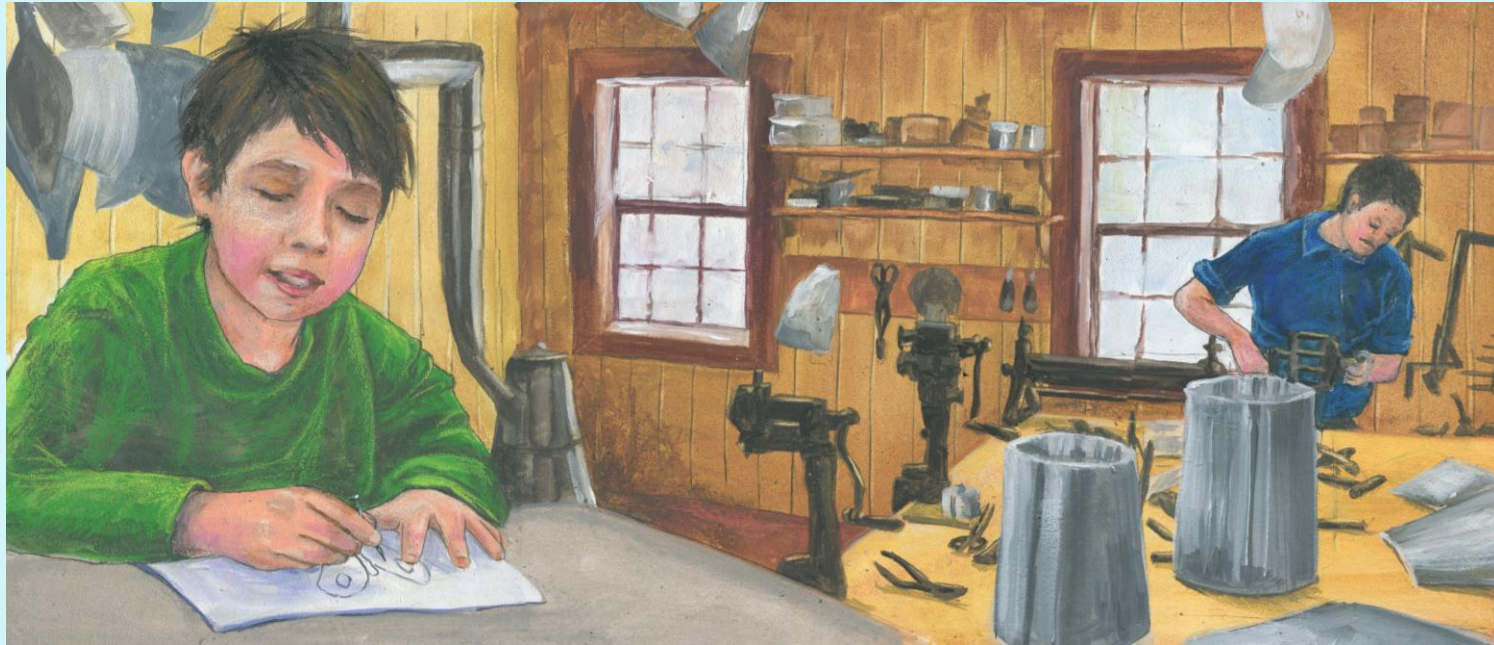
For centuries, people who were born blind have been the intellectual curios of philosophers studying consciousness. This is particularly true for those exploring the way our consciousness is effected by our bodies, especially our eyes, which Leonardo da Vinci described as the “window of the soul”

Author



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ESREF ARMAGAN: A PAINTER BORN TOTALLY BLIND



Esref is a Turkish man, who was born without function in his eyes. He has no what we would think of as *visual* imagination or experience.

IMAGES CREATED BY ESREF ARMAGAN



What are usually thought of as visual constructs used in these paintings:

- Colour
- Foreshortening
- Shade/shadow

Esref's paintings are created by touch.

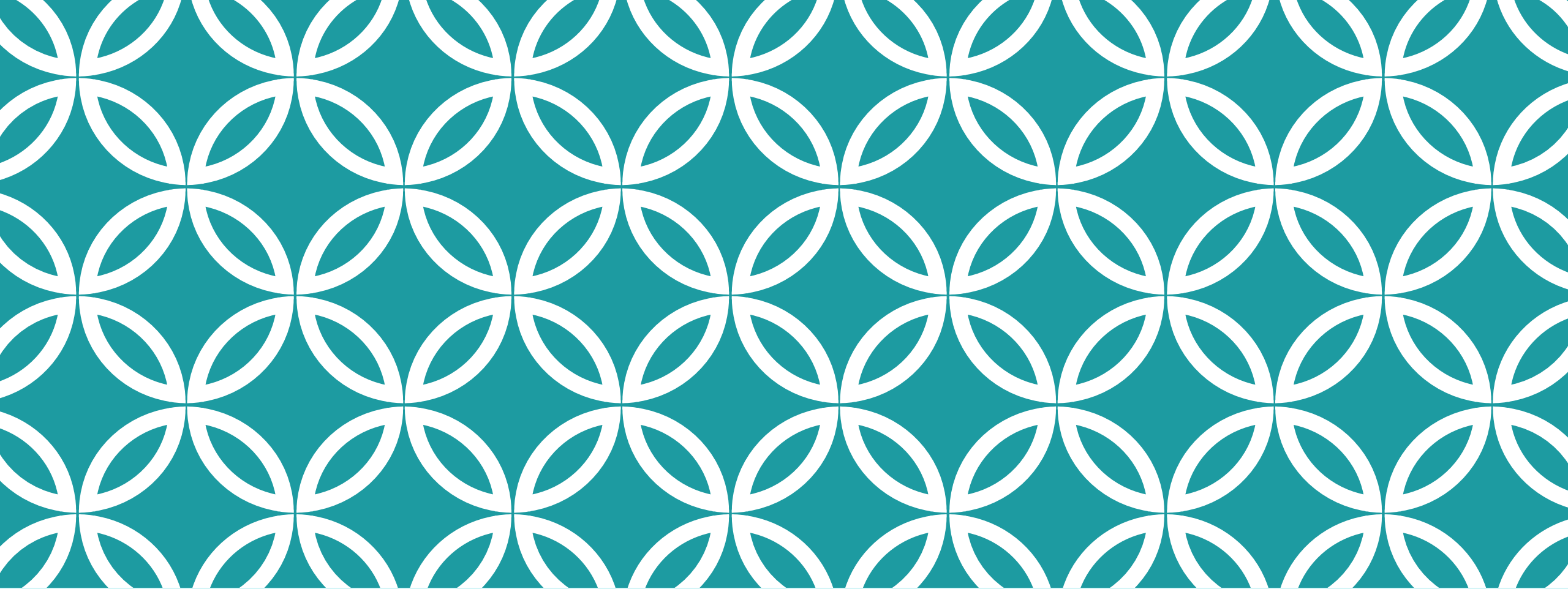
- He paints with UPVC paint or oils
- The paintings are created through Esref's fingers
- Esref works alone, through memory



HOW DID ESREF LEARN TO DRAW AND PAINT?

- He was not sent to school – it was unusual for blind children from his area of Turkey to attend school's for the blind
- He was **not told** he could not draw or paint
- He became bored and asked people what was around him
- He drew items on card to understand them

- Drawing on card gave him a tactile line, he could use to understand lines and *visual* concepts
- He asked people about the visual elements of the things that he drew
- He incorporates these visual elements into his drawings
- He was told about colour, shade and foreshortening
- He began to incorporate these into his paintings and images



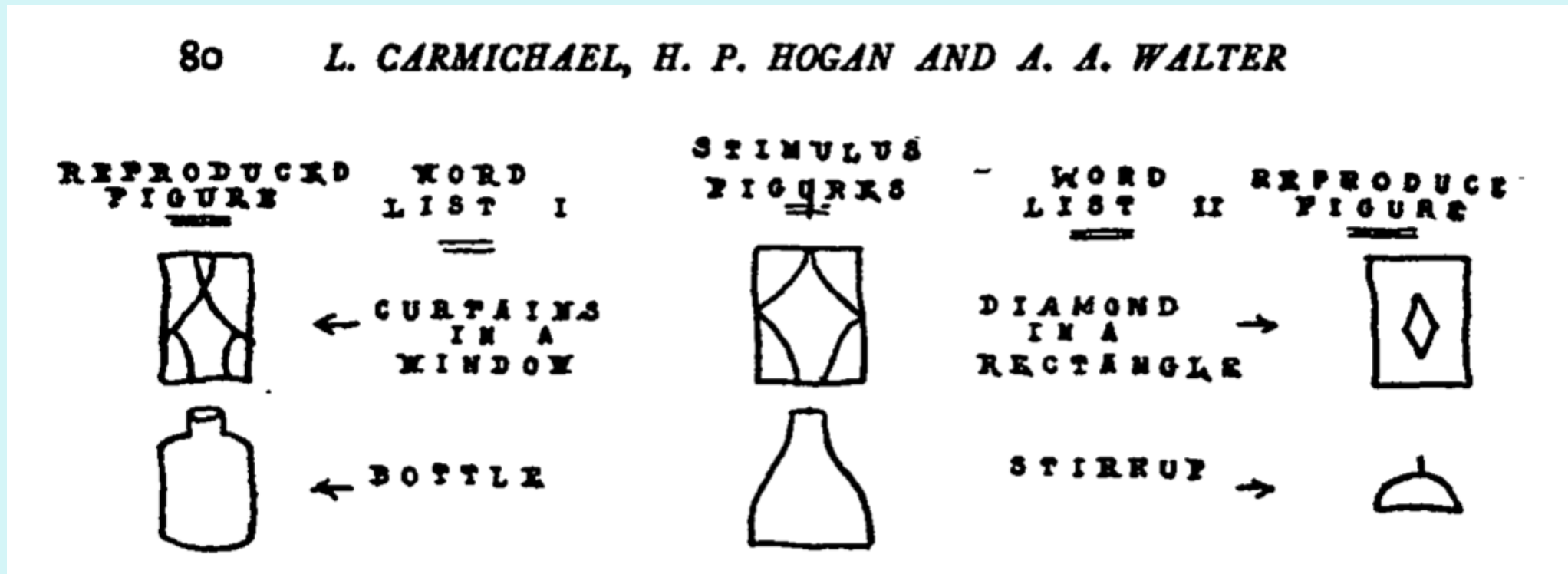
SO, WHAT CAN ESREF TEACH US ABOUT UNDERSTANDING ART

Language and perception

ESREF'S PAINTINGS AND UNDERSTANDING IMAGERY

- We can understand the world around us without recourse to vision
- Esref can create the highest level of understanding, creativity, and reproduce images that can be understood
 - Esref therefore intellectually understand what image reproduction is
- Esref's consciousness is related to his memory and encoded in language
- Esref's understanding of objects was through pattern development coded in language

CARMICHAEL: NAMING & REMEMBERING IMAGES



Carmichael, L., Hogan, H.P. & Walter, A.A. (1932). An experimental study of the effect of language on the reproduction of visually perceived forms. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 15:73-86

HARTLEY: DISCOURSE & THE REPRODUCTION OF IMAGES

Figure 3a The logo for the journal *Handwriting Review*

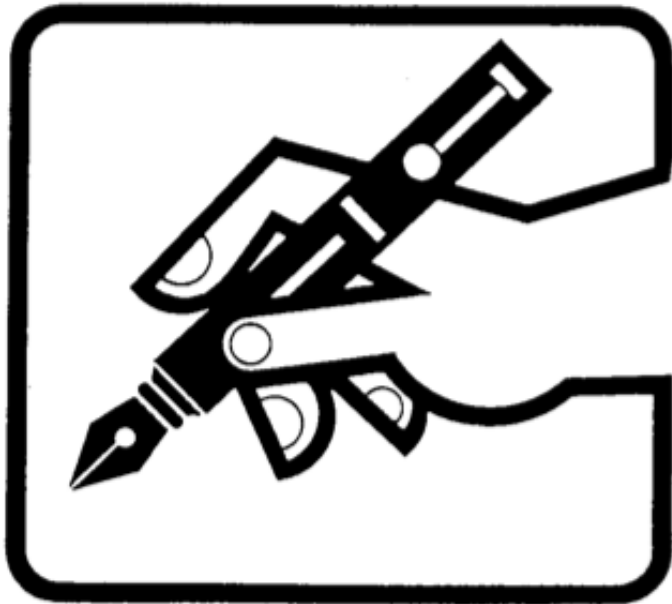
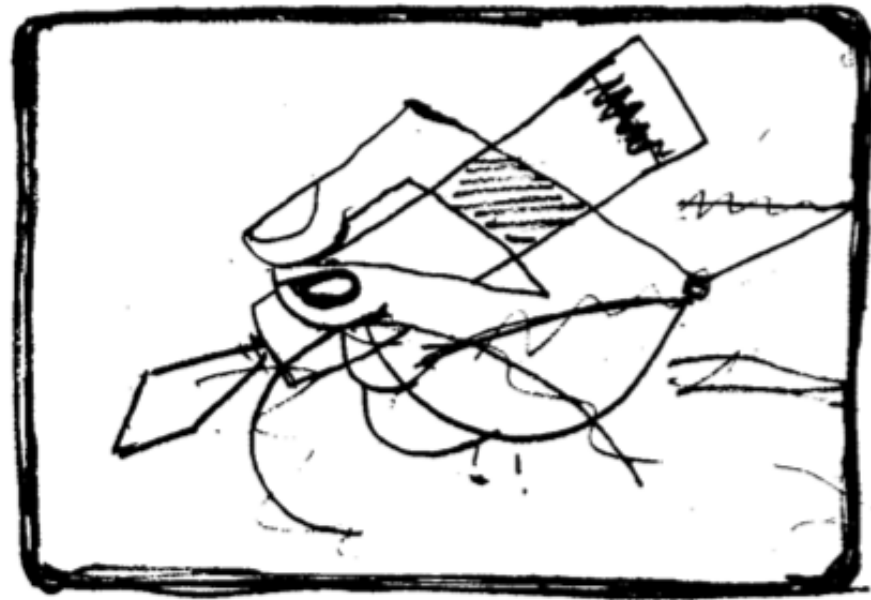
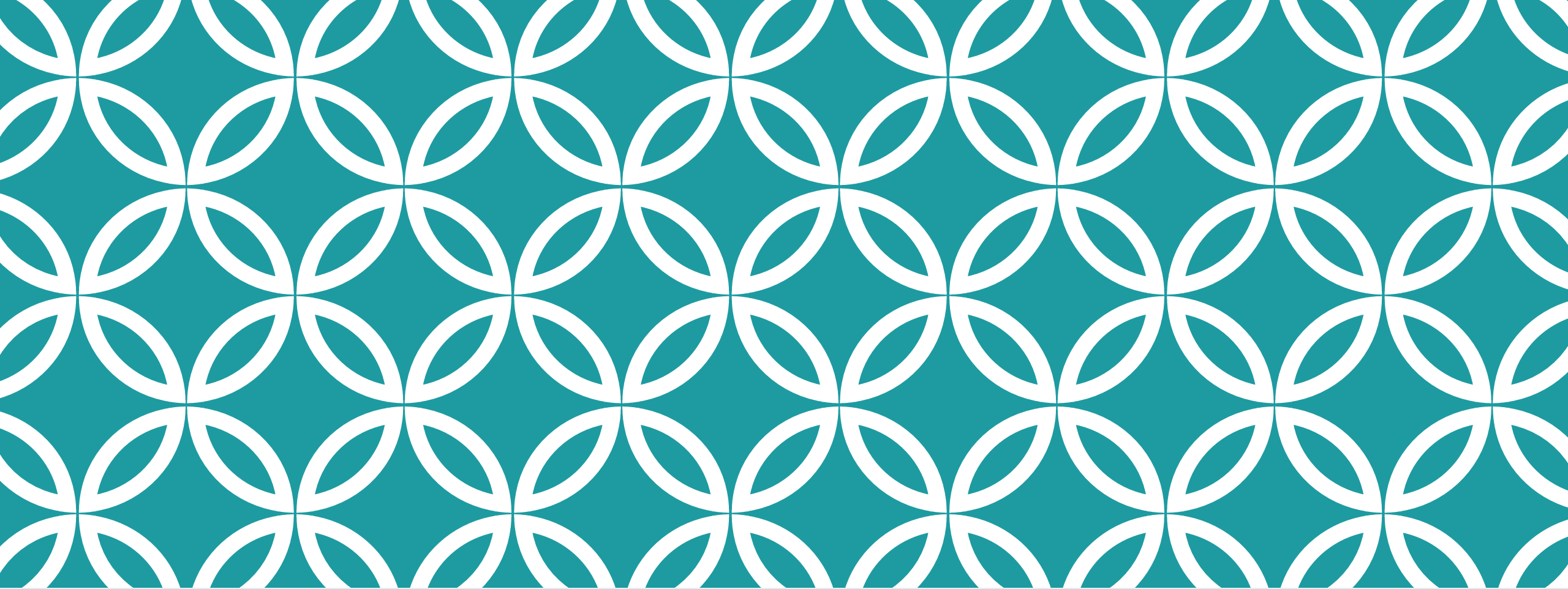


Figure 3b A listener's version





CASE STUDY: CARMEN

A sighted verbal imaging teacher at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, US (Hayhoe, 2017).

CARMEN: TEACHER AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

- She was an art historian by training, and had studied for a PhD, but never completed
- Teaching thirty years at the Met – since 1981
- Taught people who were blind and visually impaired for between 20-25 years

CARMEN: CHALLENGES TO HER SOCIAL NORMS

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...**

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.

CARMEN: EXPERIENCE OF VERBAL IMAGING FOR PEOPLE WITH LATER VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS

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: THE PARTICULARITIES OF LANGUAGE

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!" ...

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.

ARCHES: PEOPLE WITH MIXED ACCESS NEEDS

- People with access needs attend sessions
- Sessions started in London in 2017, and continued in Spain and Austria in 2018
- All those who take part are counted as participants
- Sessions attempt to develop a community, and each participant is given a voice



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Appendix A



MATERIALS USED WITH ALL MEMBERS



Materials used for the audiodescription activity: black paper, tactile image and booklet for notes.



Comparison between the tactile image and the drawing resulted from audiodescribing it.

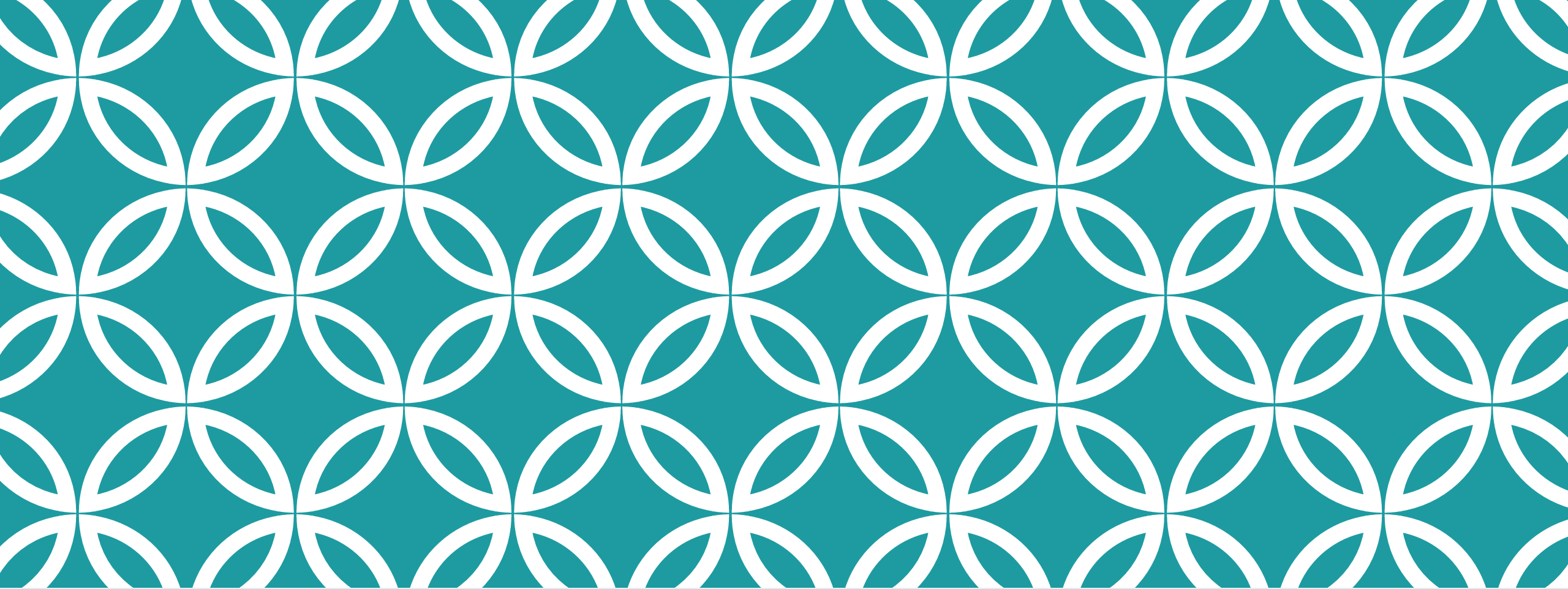
VERBAL IMAGING WORKS FOR ALL VISITORS



Group of participants works together in an audiodescription activity



A participant showing the comparison between a picture and the drawing resulting from audiodescription



CONCLUSIONS


Secondary Findings – Passive
Inclusion in the Museum

THREE PRIMARY CONCLUSIONS

- Previous literature has focused too heavily on the understanding that inclusion in the museum is premised primarily on touch, and therefore “purely” visual concepts cannot be understood
- Case studies show our focus on perception alone is wrong: concepts are not specific to inherent knowledge or individual perceptions
- People should be included in all aspects of visual culture no matter what level of sight, with an understanding that they are capable of developing understanding through language and environment

QUESTIONS

1. “From your research could you offer 3 main areas of improvement that would allow blind and partially sighted people to enjoy the visual arts even more?”
 - I. **MOST IMPORTANT:** Being exposed to museums from a very early age, preferably with families
 - II. If possible, having alternative perceptual input, such as touch – at least having proximity to an artwork
 - III. Being able to have a full – preferably through discourse – discussion about individual pieces

- 
2. “I agree with Simon’s premise that there is a widely held assumption that blind people cannot understand the visual or plastic arts. I think that this assumption is also held by a lot of blind people themselves. If he agrees how does Simon think that this erroneous assumption can best be tackled?”
 - I. I agree, and have seen it in person
 - II. The only way is to get people through the door, this is the hardest part
 - III. After this, things become easier. Not easy, but easier. Verbal imaging and touch sessions have achieved very interesting transformations in my experience.

APPENDIX A

