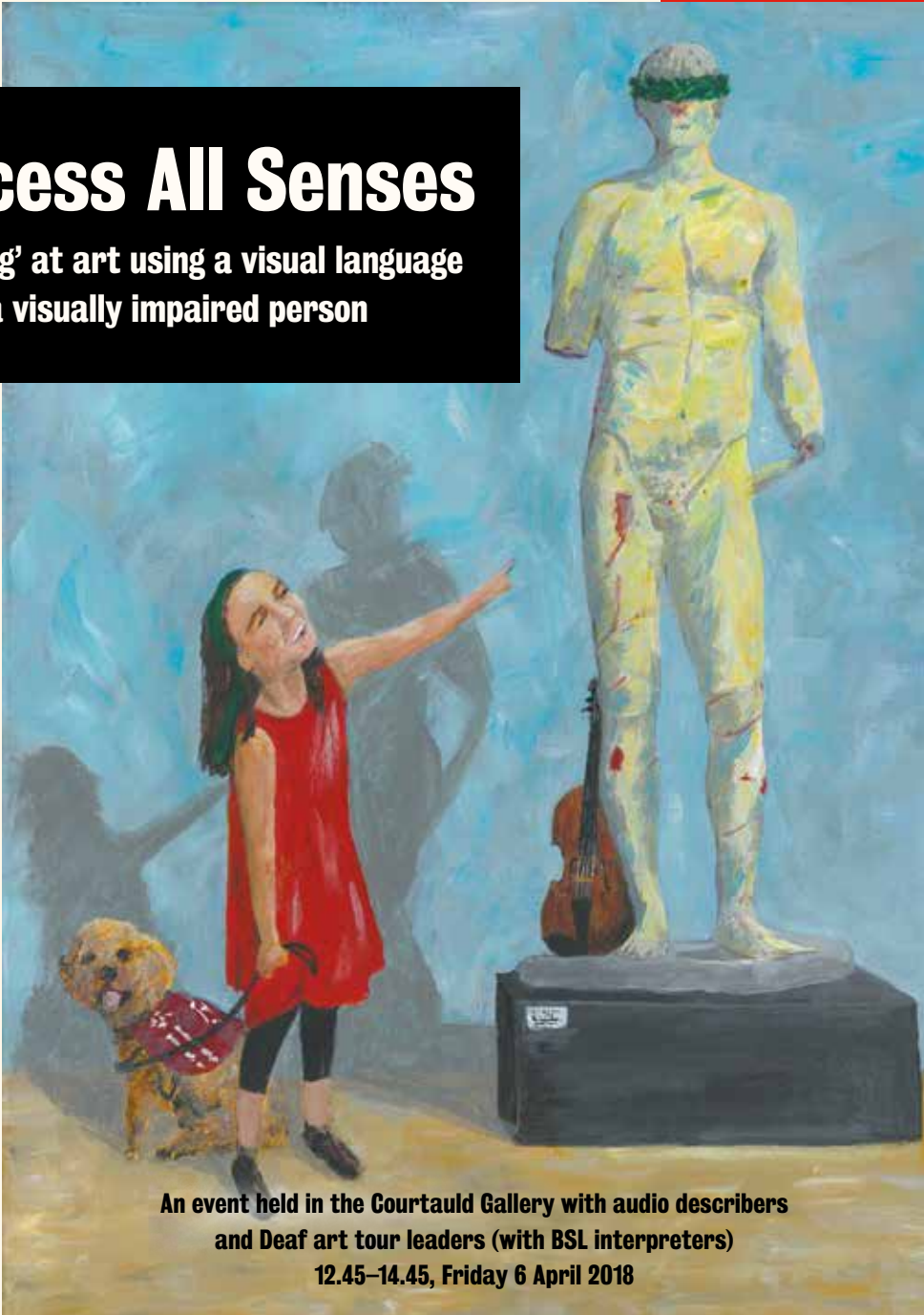# Access All Senses

'Looking' at art using a visual language or as a visually impaired person

An event held in the Courtauld Gallery with audio describers
and Deaf art tour leaders (with BSL interpreters)
12.45–14.45, Friday 6 April 2018

Floor 1: plan and artworks

19th Century: Early Impressionism

Audio description

Pissarro, *Lordship Lane Station, Dulwich*
Degas, *Dancer looking at the Sole of her Right Foot*
Monet, *Autumn Effect at Argenteuil*

British Sign Language

Degas, *Two Dancers on a Stage*
Degas, *Dancer Ready to Dance, Right Foot Forward*
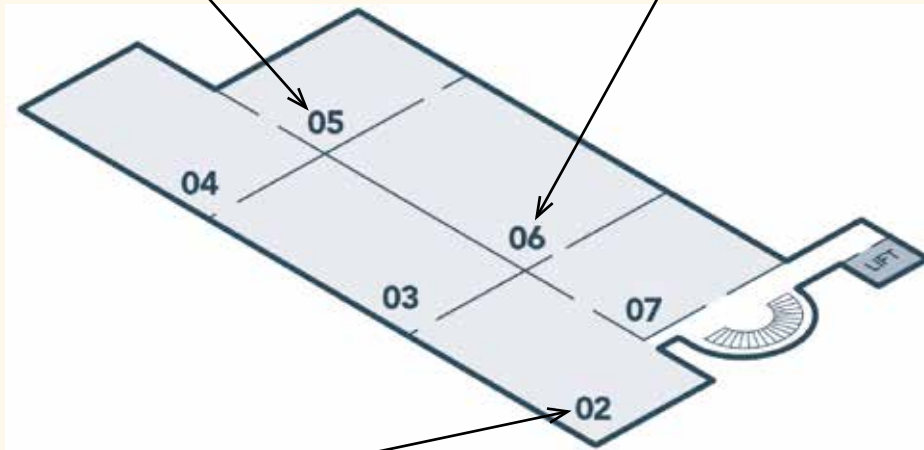Renoir, *La Loge*

19th Century: Impressionism and Post-Impressionism

Audio description

Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur L'Herbe*
Gauguin, *Te Rerioa (The Dream)*
Gauguin, *Nevermore*
Gauguin, *Portrait of Mette Gauguin*

British Sign Language

Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*
Cézanne, *Still Life with Plaster Cupid*
Cézanne, *The Card Players*
Cézanne, *The Lake at Annecy*

16th Century: Renaissance Europe

Audio description

Morelli-Nerli wedding chest, and nearby ceramics
Da Fiesole workshop, *The Virgin and Child with Four Angels*

British Sign Language

L'Ortelano, *Christ and the Woman taken in Adultery*
Del Vaga, *Holy Family with Saint John the Baptist*
Albertinelli, *The Nativity*

Floor 2: plan and artworks

20th Century: French Painting 1905–20

Audio description

Matisse, *The Red Beach*
Vlaminck, *Reclining Nude*
Vlaminck, *Landscape wth Dead Wood*
Vlaminck, *Fishermen at Argenteuil*
Vlaminck, *Banks of the Seine at Carrières-sur-Seine*

British Sign Language

Braque, *The White Boat, Antwerp*
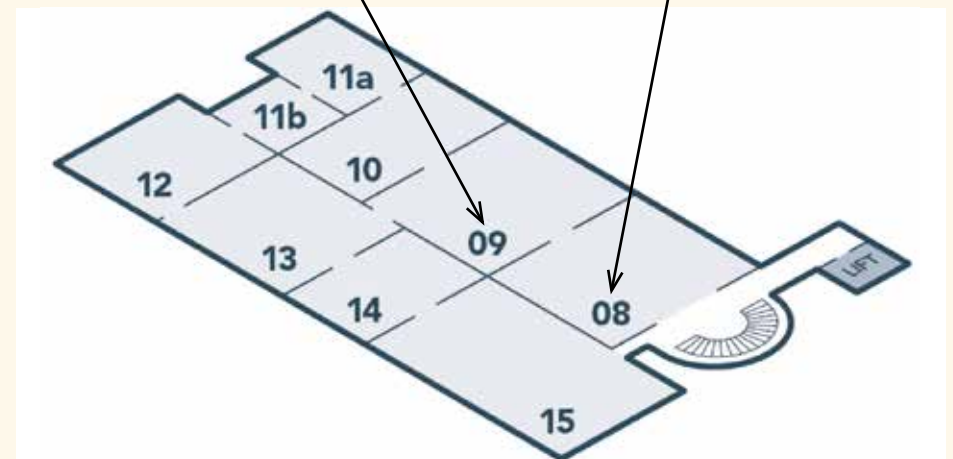Rodin, *Pas de Deux B*
Van Dongen, *Portrait of Dolly*

Impressionist Landscapes

Audio description

Monet, *Antibes*
Pissarro, *Place Lafayette, Rouen*
Seurat, *Bridge at Courbevoie*

British Sign Language

Pissarro, *Festival at L'Hermitage*
Manet, *Banks of the Seine at Argenteuil*
Sisley, *Boats on the Seine*

Three professionals will be based in each of these five rooms: an audio describer, a Deaf art tour leader, and a British Sign Language interpreter. They will be with artworks selected for description (see boxes). Please approach, and ask for demonstrations of these modes of communication!

There will also be museum access staff present, along with the AD charity VocalEyes, and the event organizer Ellen Adams (see page 11).

Artworks and locations as understood at the time of printing.

What is Audio Description (AD)?

AD provides access for blind or partially sighted people, by using words to paint pictures in the mind. Most registered blind people can see something – shapes, colours, or tunnel-vision. Spoken language can help make sense of this partial information. AD therefore offers the greatest challenge – and opportunity – for those interested in ekphrasis, or the vivid, verbal description of the visual.

AD may be provided in theatres, cinemas, dance performances and museums. The description of visual art is atypical, in that it tends not to involve the fourth dimension of time (and movement). AD is a continually evolving practice-led activity, but it does possess certain standardised features, such as a high dependency on the present tense.

While AD is not a separate language like BSL, it represents a very particular style of English, and our five AD specialists can demonstrate a wide range of approaches within this practice. Representatives from the AD charity VocalEyes and museum staff will also be at hand to discuss the development of these access programmes.

Renoir, 1874, *La Loge*

Fryer, L. 2016. *An Introduction to Audio Description: A Practical Guide*.
Hayhoe, S. 2017. *Blind Visitor Experiences at Art Museums*.
Kleege, G. 2018. *More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art*.
Piety, P. 2004. 'The language system of audio description.' *JVIB* 98: 453-69.

What is British Sign Language (BSL)?

Deaf communities developed sign languages as an alternative mode of communication to speech. BSL is a visual language, so there is plenty of scope for iconicity. It is also a spatial language. Placement allows a signer to reproduce a scene in front of them, to describe interactions through spatial verbs (such as exchanges between people and/or institutions), and to indicate abstract concepts (such as a family tree or hierarchical structure).

Public events may be interpreted into BSL to provide access for Deaf people, but museums also run Deaf-led tours in BSL (sometimes translated into English voiceover by an interpreter). These offer insights into how this visual language can describe visual art more directly, in some ways, than English. Role shift, for example, is a crucial part of its grammar, whereby the signer becomes the character. Even with the use of the first person and direct speech, spoken language is not as vivid.

BSL is a recognized language in its own right, and London is home to a flourishing scene of Deaf-led tours. Five tour leaders (and interpreters) are brought together for this event, with different styles and approaches. As with any language, there is no single dialect or application.

Gauguin, 1897, *Te Rerioa (The Dream)*

Baker, A. (et al.) eds. 2016. *The Linguistics of Sign Languages: An Introduction*.
Mirzoeff, N. 1995. *Silent Poetry: Deafness, Sign, and Visual Culture in Modern France*.
Sacks, O. 1989. *Seeing Voices*.
Sutton-Spence, R. and B. Woll. 1999. *The Linguistics of British Sign Language*.

Room 2: 16th Century Renaissance Europe

Art guide: Alan Murray, with BSL interpreter Ali Pottinger

These paintings demonstrate how storytelling works in BSL. The Ortolano scene from the Gospel of John depicts myriad human interactions and emotions, which role shift can bring to life. In contrast, the Albertinelli presents a calmer scene with clear symbolism; here, one can experience how role shift is also used for depicting animals. Both paintings demonstrate the importance of placement in BSL, particularly concerning the depth of field. Finally, the Del Vaga painting is an unfinished work, so we can 'see' the artistic process behind the composition (rather as modern techniques, such as infrared imaging, allow us to view beneath the surface).

Mino da Fiesole workshop, 1470–75,
Virgin and Child with Four Angels

Audio describer: Bridget Crowley

The artworks selected here comprise both 2D and 3D forms: complex figural painting on large furniture, unpainted sculpture, and decorated ceramics. Each kind requires a different type of description, a challenge heightened as we are not allowed to touch these (functional) objects. The combination of monochrome and richly coloured artworks also invites questions about the portrayal of colour in AD. A further debated theme concerns the inclusion of historical background beyond the purely visual description. Many ceramics have timeless or non-figural imagery; this contrasts with the rich references to passages from Livy on the Morelli wedding chest. How much invisible context should be delivered in AD?

Room 5: 19th Century Early Impressionism

Art guide: Chisato Minamimura, with BSL interpreter Peter Abraham

The juxtaposition here of Degas' 2D and 3D representations of dancers is a gift for Chisato, who is a Deaf choreographer and dancer as well as an art guide. How does either visual art or verbal speech depict movement? BSL has a distinctive advantage; here, gesture is grammatical. Role shift, facial expression and body language are all key elements of BSL. The dancers in the painting below are depicted in their own world, or performing on the stage (one is mostly out of view). Likewise, the sculpture is poised, expecting an audience. Eye gaze is a crucial element of BSL grammar. These works are close to Renoir's masterpiece on 'the gaze'; set at the theatre, all the world is a stage, but all participants are also viewers or voyeurs.

Degas, 1894, *Two Dancers on a Stage*

Audio describer: Louise Fryer

This selection of artworks sets out some intriguing contrasts, such as the description of landscapes versus expanses of water, and 2D painting versus the tangibility of sculpture (of a dancer in a pose that is very hard to maintain for long). The Monet here merges sky, land, buildings and water, and dividing lines are not easy to discern. However, the Pissarro sets in sharp contrast modern industry against peaceful, rural, unpeopled land. No people appear in these paintings, but Degas' twisting dancer embraces human movement with considerable power – at whatever cost to the human model. The monochrome of the sculpture contrasts with the rich colours and light of the paintings.

Room 6: 19th Century Impressionism and Post-Impressionism

Art guide: Edward Richards, with BSL interpreter Richard Law

Manet portrays a bustling scene of excitement, but the barmaid's expression is one of detachment. Although this scene is full of people, role shift is less applicable here, as the figures do not seem to engage with one another (in contrast to Cézanne's *Card Players*). The barmaid's reflection in the mirror leans towards a man unlike the 'real' upright woman facing the viewer – BSL placement depicts this confused tangle well. Space is also distorted in Cézanne's *Still Life*, where the floor is tilted, the sculpture twists as though painted from several viewpoints, and the 'real' painted fruit sits as a reflection of the 'canvas' painted fruit. Cézanne's *Lake* is a blast of colour, shapes and patterns, where the reflection is more detailed than the wildness above.

Manet, 1882, *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*

Audio describer: Rachel Hutchinson

These selected artworks show a range of figures, environments and unknown stories. The Manet manages to portray both a great depth of field and a remarkably flat perspective, with a disproportionately large bathing figure in the background. The other works contrast 2D and 3D description, with the mysterious, dreamlike women of *Te Rerioa* contrasting with the solid bust of Gauguin's real-life wife. The monochrome bust is juxtaposed with the richly decorated interior of Gauguin's *Nevermore*. This painting alludes to Edgar Allen Poe's poem 'The Raven'. Gauguin perceived this nude as indicative of 'a certain savage luxuriousness of a bygone age'; she has no voice to tell her story, serving just to stand for a primitive ideal.

Room 8: Impressionist Landscapes

Art guide: Dafydd Jones, with BSL interpreter Stephanie Cole

The artworks selected here illustrate contrasting techniques to depicting landscapes, waterscapes, figures and structures (including boats). The Pissarro portrays bustling figures, the expressions of whom are completely obscured; this conflicts with the vital role that facial expression plays in signed communication. Faces are also turned away in the Manet, where the broad, bright and multi-coloured strokes of the water contrast with the smooth depiction of manmade structures. The light is ambiguous, and it is not clear where it is coming from, in contrast with the clear shadows of the Pissarro. The roughness of the brushstrokes for the sky and water in the Sisley provides a further technique to describe.

Seurat, 1886-7, *Bridge at Courbevoie*

Audio describer: Roz Chalmers

Depicting water and its surfaces is a challenge, and these artworks display a rich variety of methods that are equally testing to describe. The Monet depicts a heat-bright stillness, which suppresses the wilder waters that X-ray images have revealed beneath. It is rather misleading in its simplicity, given the wide range of colours deployed. The greys and long shadows of the Pissarro reveals a winter scene, with the bright river cutting through. This painting contains figures, too distant to see their expressions, but their body language suggests mood and activity. Despite the jaunty effect of the pointillist (dotted) technique, the mood of the Seurat is also sombre, and the water particularly glassy. X-ray images have been made of this painting as well, revealing the depth to this seemingly flat appearance.

Room 9: Early 20th Century French Art

Art guide: Martin Glover, with BSL interpreter Wendy Ledeux

This selection addresses the difference between describing 2D and 3D work, the latter a particular challenge with this double-figured Rodin, for which role shift may be used. This combination of works also offers a comparison between describing monochrome sculpture and vividly-coloured paintings. The blocks of bright colour in the Braque port-scene leave a strong impression without detail, while the composition allows for a clear demonstration of placement. Similar blocks of colour appear in the Van Dongen, where the girl displays a haunting lack of expression.

Rodin, c. 1911, Pas de Deux B

Audio describer: Andrew Holland

Vlaminck was a principle figure of Fauvism (from the French for 'wild animal'). This movement sought to abandon taboos, and Vlaminck wrote of 'using pure colour to the maximum'. This style seeks to challenge the viewer; the audio describer must meet the further challenge of reconstructing it in words. Vlaminck's paintings here include a nude with garish makeup, landscapes with figures, and representations of water. This style can be compared to that of Matisse of the same period, with vivid blocks of colour, applied with thick brushstrokes – in contrast to some bare areas of canvas.

Acknowledgements and participants

Access All Senses

'Looking' at art using a visual language or as a visually impaired person

Museums and art galleries work hard to make their collections accessible to people with sensory impairments. This session, based in the Courtauld Gallery (Rooms 2, 5, 6, 8 and 9), aims to introduce visitors to these activities, notably how Deaf people use a spatial/visual language to explore visual culture, and how blind or visually impaired people engage with art through audio description. A professional audio describer and a Deaf art tour leader with British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter will be placed in each room, ready to demonstrate these modes of communication. Museum access staff and the audio description charity VocalEyes will also be present, for insights into the development of these practice-led programmes.

BSL includes visual iconicity and cinematic elements, such as zooming and role shift (where you 'become' the character you are describing); we will consider how people interact with art differently when deploying this mode of communication, rather than linear spoken or written language. In parallel, we will investigate how audio description, or sensory translation and intermodal communication, adds great insights into how the visual is made verbal (ekphrasis). This session will explore how our perception of 'the viewer' and ways of seeing can be extended through an awareness of the experiences and strategies of those with sensory impairments.

Please drop by and enjoy a demonstration!

Event organizer: Ellen Adams
ellen.adams@kcl.ac.uk

Front cover: tinyurl.com/classics-ds