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For many years, museum education practice has been guided by the watchword *inclusion* – an ideal for public service and professional practice rooted in more than a century of work to expand museum audiences. Most museum educators would likely say that they embrace the intention to be inclusive practitioners, a commitment fostered by the likes of the Inclusive Museum Research Network (founded 2008), The Inclusion (founded 2012), MASS Action (launched 2016), and many other professional associations, grassroots groups, institutional initiatives, and individual leaders.¹ But throughout this phase of our profession’s development, there’s been an odd parallax – our work toward inclusion has often remained separate from, or has completely overlooked, disability as a dimension of identity. Instead, the tendency has been to view inclusion for people with disabilities as a need for “access,” a concept that leads us into a focus on physical affordances, legal compliance, or accommodation, rather than a fundamental mindset of allyship with people with disabilities as active (or potential) museum users, learners, and workers.

This dichotomy is rooted in part in the progression through which disability consciousness initially permeated museums. As the authors relate, when disability awareness first began to arise in museum institutions, it was through a rights-based framework – a response to the demands and standards of new legislation in the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* and the *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990* (ADA). These entry points brought with them a legalistic focus on the built or designed environment, demands for workplace and public accommodation, and actionable standards for statutory compliance. These origins laid a path in which disability access escaped wider affirmation as an element of inclusive practice, instead reducing them to a checklist of accommodations to follow, or as Eisenhower Richardson calls it here in “Museum Education for Disability Justice and Liberatory Access,” an “etiquette course” in appropriate language and pedagogy.²

This mechanistic and legalistic approach has sometimes led to a certain anxiety amongst museum practitioners, reflected in commonly heard questions: *What should we be doing to make our museum accessible? What are we required to do? Have we done enough? Is it possible to do everything?* In many cases, our field’s guiding resources and professional literature have not yet supported a shift away from the deficit-based framing that positions disability as a problem to be solved. The manual of practice *Museum Administration 2.0*, for example, houses its primary discussion of disability in the chapter titled “Legal Issues.” The American Alliance of Museums’ page on Accessibility takes a “fix-it” approach as well, listing how-to articles about accommodation technologies and program formats. Individual museums often make one or two major moves

toward expanded access but stop there, revealing a tendency to be what Robert Sullivan called “episodic institutions, having episodes of success but having difficulty sustaining longitudinal change.”³

In this issue, guest editors Syrus Marcus Ware, Kate Zankowicz, and Sarah Sims ask us not just to revisit and refresh these approaches, not just to affirm or expand accessibility, but to completely *reframe* our way of thinking about disability. The articles they have collected here surface and define the often-unconscious structures we use to think about disability, helping us see how our thinking may reflect outmoded models of disability theory, and offering us a path toward a new understanding and inviting us into anti-ableist practice. These pieces re-situate disability access as a matter of justice, linking it to the intentions reflected in the most basic commitments of our profession. They ask us to consider disability in museums not just as a set of practices for connecting with specific audiences, but as an aspect of the human experience entitled to equal justice. In doing so, they reflect the principles of Article 37 of the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.”⁴ The articles here collectively ask us as museum practitioners, with and without current known disabilities, to embrace a deeply re-oriented approach. Our shared pursuit of disability justice and anti-ableism, they argue, must be founded not merely in a reactive response to access needs, but in the intention to work inclusively. This is about our purpose as educators: to make rich content, representation, and experience available to as many people as possible.

The strongest reason to reframe disability as a justice matter is that it reflects the value of welcoming all users. As Ross Edelstein observes in his piece in this issue, “Often programming gets reduced to the fact that it must support the disability aspect, while not focusing on the people aspect.”⁵ Perhaps the first step in bringing a new focus to this work is taking the time to consider the notion of “radical hospitality” – a concept from spiritual practice that denotes a commitment to total welcome for all. The call to anti-ableism is one that involves deep listening to our user community and the practice of radical hospitality. The lenses of justice and inclusion can help us fine-tune our approaches to serve *all* the individuals who wish to access museum services. As Katie Stringer writes in her article on access and disability in *The Manual of Museum Learning*,

Perhaps the most important characteristic that museum staff should have with any educational program or event is flexibility to adapt to the needs of the visitor. Museum staff should receive training to adapt to visitors’ interests and abilities, regardless of ability or accessibility; the entire staff should feel that it is important for all workers to keep access in mind as a priority.⁶

Let us reach into our imaginations and challenge ourselves to invent new ways of working, new programs and plans, new exhibit strategies, and new relationships that reflect the fullest inclusive intention.

Far from being an exercise in mechanics and technologies, disability justice demands imagination and creativity. Experiments like the Miniature Exhibition Project outlined here in Robledo-Allen Yamamoto and Galuban’s “Illness and Empathy: Promoting anti-ableist practices in art museum education” make for productive thought exercises.⁷ On its face, perhaps it seems unworkable for museums to curate individual exhibits for

people to enjoy in their homes. But is that such a wild notion? Some of that spirit – extending the museum into individual homes, sharing access to art and a sense of intimacy in a low-barrier environment – is reflected in the MCA Denver’s Octopus Initiative.⁸ In 2019 the museum began lending 150 commissioned works by Denver artists to Denver residents, who could install the works in their homes for up to a year. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted many museums to experiment with alternate means of making content available. From the Care Packages developed by Smithsonian’s Asian Pacific American Center – a digital treasure trove of recipes, poetry, image, short film and more – to Historic Arkansas Museum’s drive-through “History is Served: Curb-side!” dinners, to Crystal Bridges’ art kits with accompanying video, museums have explored individual, intimate extensions into the home.⁹ Perhaps we’ve already begun developing a new spectrum of strategies that can help many more people participate in museum offerings.

Finally, since this is the first editor’s introduction I write in my new role joining Nathaniel Prottas as Co-Editor-in-Chief, I’ll take this moment to express gratitude to the guest editors, authors, and all those at the Museum Education Roundtable who have been foregrounding disability justice and anti-ableism in recent work. This issue revisits and refreshes a longstanding thread of content in the *Journal of Museum Education* (JME), whose coverage of disability issues extends back nearly 50 years. In many ways, the JME’s content is a mirror reflecting evolution in cultural understandings of disability. In a 2020 post for the JME blog, “The Arc of Accessibility Work in Museum Education,” Abbie Diaz and Sarah Sims inventoried articles on this topic, dividing them into a two-part collection of pre- and post-ADA writing.¹⁰ The first such piece, “Museums and the Handicapped” by Sue Hoth and Alan Levitt, was published in 1973 (under the JME’s former title, *Roundtable Reports*).¹¹ Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, articles responded to developing “best practices” for access and disability inclusion; though the terms they use are now dated and often offensive, reflecting conceptions of disability no longer accepted, these pieces chronicle gradual knowledge-building and professionalization. This issue continues the JME’s trajectory of pushing disability thinking forward, but rather than just extending this work to the present, it claims the current moment as one that demands we shift our mental frameworks and completely rethink our approaches to disability.

JME and its parent organization, the Museum Education Roundtable, also work on a continuing basis to advance equity, including equity for people with disabilities. In 2020, Abbie Diaz and Sarah Sims (both members of the MER board at the time), along with Jessica Homan and Emma Lockwood of publisher Taylor & Francis, wrote about their shared work to become one of the first journals to adopt alt text for images in the JME, make the journal scannable by screen-reader technologies, and revise layout and presentation for easier reading. In addition, they chronicled MER’s steps toward making its own meetings and forums more accessible (visually, aurally, and through ASL) revising the board nomination process, and conducting internal self-audits.¹² More recently, the JME has begun revising its peer reviewer intake process to better enumerate lived experience and expertise of all kinds, including disability. The Museum Education Roundtable is committed to continuing to shape our own practices to reflect our evolving understandings, and as always, we welcome your ideas, recommendations, and responses as we go forward together.

Notes

1. The Inclusion, co-directed by Rose Paquet, Aletheia Wittman, and Porchia Moore, is an online resource dedicated to building community and inclusion in museums and can be found at <https://inclusion.com>. The Inclusive Museum Research Network, chaired by UNESCO Chair on Inclusive Museums and Sustainable Heritage Development Amareswar Galla, is an international organization that hosts conferences, publishes books and journals, and convenes symposia. It can be found at <https://onmuseums.com/>. MASS Action began as a three-year initiative convening museums to develop resources for building inclusive practice in museums and can be found at <http://museumaction.org/>.
2. Eisenhauer Richardson and Kletchka, "Museum Education for Disability Justice and Library Access," PAGE #.
3. Sullivan, "Evaluating the Ethics and Consciences of Museums," 257.
4. UNESCO, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights."
5. Edelstein, "New Foundations," PAGE #.
6. Stringer, "Accessibility in Museum Education," 185.
7. Robledo-Allen Yamamoto and Galuban, "Illness and Empathy."
8. See Octopus Initiative at <https://octopus.mcadenver.org/>.
9. See "Care Package: Cultural Nutrients for Times Like These" at SmithsonianAPA.org; Historic Arkansas Museum, "History is Served: Curbside!" at <https://www.arkansasheritage.com/events/2021/10/21/default-calendar/history-is-served>; and "My Museum Kit," <https://crystalbridges.org/blog/bringing-art-to-youth-with-my-museum-kit/>.
10. Diaz and Sims, "The Arc of Accessibility Work in Museum Education."
11. Hoth and Levitt, "Museums and the Handicapped."
12. Diaz et al., "Working Together to Advance Accessibility."

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

About the co-editor-in-chief

Michelle Moon joined the JME staff in 2021. She is an independent museum consultant, currently Principal of Saltworks Interpretive Consulting. She has 20 years' experience in museum education and interpretation including roles as Chief Program Officer at the Tenement Museum, Director of Interpretation and Evaluation at Newark Museum, and Director of Education at the Strawberry Banke Museum. A recognized leader in museum education, she is active in professional organizations and served as the 2021 Annual Meeting Program Chair for AASLH. She has published numerous articles and two books, including *Interpreting Food at Museums and Historic Sites* and *Public History and the Food Movement: The Missing Ingredient* (co-authored with Cathy Stanton). She brings a demonstrated commitment and skill advancing equity and inclusion work, having served as the senior founding leader on the Tenement Museum's Equity Council and as a delegate to MASS Action. She holds an M.A. in Museum Studies from Harvard University Extension School and a B.A. in English and Education from Connecticut College.

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