

Making Sense of Visual Art Through a Visual Language (BSL): Assessing the Impact for All.

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How Snake Wrangling feels in the Wild



PROJECT SUMMARY

My research explores new approaches to art appreciation through the lens of access provision for people with sensory impairments, namely: **1)** visual/material culture through a visual-spatial language (BSL); **2)** audio description and visual-verbal translation (ekphrasis); and **3)** touch tours and haptic appreciations of art. This necessitates a service-led approach, which gives more voice and agency to Deaf or blind/partially sighted people in the cultural sector, while assessing how these access activities might be beneficial for 'mainstream' visitors.

The wider implications of engaging with the lived experiences of disabled people in the Humanities has been explored in my edited volume, *Disability Studies and the Classical Body: The Forgotten Other* (2021). I am now working on a monograph that explores how experiencing the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum can be enriched through the different modes of communication, including BSL.

The three points of library research, service and impact form a multi-directional feedback loop for increased understanding in how we engage with ancient visual/material culture in the modern world.

HOW DID THE PROJECT COME ABOUT?

I am congenitally deaf and started learning BSL several years ago. I began going to Deaf-led museum tours, and was immediately struck by how this mode of communication seemed to have a more direct connection with the objects and images than linear spoken language. As my primary training is in archaeology and visual culture, this seemed to be a potentially important way in which a marginalized community could contribute to academic disciplines and the cultural sector. As a parallel project, I considered audio description as a practice-led version of ekphrasis, the vivid, verbal translation of visual culture.

In addition to establishing a network of access museum staff ([MANSIL](#): Museum Access Network for Sensory Impairments, London), which has provided key feedback in various ways, I have engaged with Deaf tour guides, BSL interpreters, blind art lovers, and audio describers, who all have provided insights into how we behold and communicate about art, in addition to testing the general public in how these practices might be extended.

MANSIL: MUSEUM ACCESS NETWORK FOR SENSORY IMPAIRMENTS (LONDON)

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MANSIL research project

MANSIL was established by Dr Ellen Adams, Reader in Classical Archaeology at King's



Holyrood Park BSL project with HES

This collaboration with Historic Environment Scotland produced four BSL videos about



Minoan Snake Goddesses and Spoken Language

Compare different approaches to these iconic figurines, including audio description and poems

Due to the ambition of my aims (changing attitudes towards disabled people and their potential to contribute to the cultural sector), and that fact that I need to deal with various practical and ethical challenges and long-standing preconceptions, this project requires a long-term, slow burn approach. Before Covid, I organized pop-up events in museums (the British Museum, Courtauld Gallery, and the Whitechapel Gallery), whereby BSL tour guides (with interpreters) and audio describers offered tours for people with all variations of sight and hearing (see www.mansil.uk/museum-pop-ups for booklets). Covid imposed the challenge of transferring such activities online, and this resulted in the project [*Language and Landscape in Holyrood Park*](#), in collaboration with Historic Environment Scotland. Finally, in collaboration with colleagues from Bristol and Trinity College Dublin, [*The Many Lives of a Snake Goddess \(MLSG\)*](#) project marries this current project and my original field of Minoan archaeology. This has commissioned a series of creative writing, which my Impact Award was able to extend by commissioning works by and for people with sensory impairments.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The [*MLSG project*](#) aims to commission new artworks and writings to reconsider these two figurines by, for example, exploring different styles of English creative writing from description, through interpretation, to imagination. It has commissioned Ruth Padel to write 15 new poems based on these objects, and a mindfulness activity to consider how art can promote wellbeing. The Impact Award allowed me to commission three professionals to contribute this from the point of view of sensory impairments. Karly Allen, an audio describer, produced a detailed portrayal of one of the objects, while the blind creative writer Tanvir Bush recorded three pieces to reflect her handling of and engagement with these objects. It was vital that the sighted audio describer was 'balanced' with content from a blind person.

I [commissioned a Deaf actor](#), Zoë McWhinney, to provide two information films on the Snake Goddesses, and to translate two of Padel's poems into BSL (filmed and edited by King's Media).

The rationale for this approach is to gauge how these different styles of English and modes of communication allow us to engage with the figurines differently, and to rethink how people might engage with culture and art.

In a separate project, Zoë McWhinney provided [six films based on the Parthenon sculptures](#) in the British Museum (filmed and edited by King's Media). This will support further negotiations with the British Museum concerning how they can support the 2022 British Sign Language Act (which places the duty to promote BSL on public bodies). I now have three different sets of BSL films: landscape (Holyrood Park), monument (Parthenon) and object (Snake Goddesses). These can be used to assess how this visual language engages with different scales of cultural content.

I paid for feedback from Prolific, a survey platform. I tested it initially for the Holyrood Project, before deciding that this was not the best use of money – this kind of participatory involvement is normally for quickfire responses. 'Natural' feedback using the online survey form has been poor. I changed tack and, with this Award and an EDI Grant, I was able to run five focus groups with students to gain more in-depth feedback. In addition to open discussion, they filled in questionnaires (anonymized for honesty). They were offered vouchers for their time.



Zoe McWhinney translating one of the poems written for the project by Ruth Padel.

WHAT WAS THE PROJECT'S IMPACT?

The project's impact is detectable in a number of ways. First, some of the collaborators that were commissioned for the *MLSG* project have reported how this experience has changed their working practice. For example, the audio describer stated: 'I became more self aware of my own practice – of how I research and write for audio description projects, the purpose I hold in mind and the tone I employ'; 'In particular, I was grateful for the steer to include a touch description of the materiality of the object. It was a surprising and rewarding challenge for me to find the vocabulary to describe a sense other than sight'; 'The complexity and richness of the experience allowed for greater nuance and aliveness than I have encountered on other projects in which blind and partially sighted people were supported to encounter an artwork in other ways, for example through raised line drawings. These are aspects I will take forward into my future work in this area'.

Second, the focus groups have provided rich feedback for how access activities might benefit 'mainstream' experience in museums. The data and summaries for these focus groups have been written up. Third, I will share these materials with my MANSIL group (of museum access staff), intended for September 2023 after the summer break. I will hold a meeting to get feedback on what these practitioners need in terms of making adjustments themselves. I will also use this opportunity to see whether an experimental exhibition in the Bush House Arcade would provide them with the evidence and/or reassurance needed to apply such changes in their own areas, whether for temporary or permanent exhibitions.

The main importance of this Award has been to inform the next stages – this is not a one-off, short-term endeavour. For example, the approach taken in the Holyrood Park project responded to the 2015 British Sign Language (Scotland) Act, which gives public bodies the duty to promote BSL, in 2022, Westminster followed with its own BSL Act.

This project has the potential to inform museums and other cultural institutions on how to respond, and to improve the Deaf community's visibility and society's awareness of BSL.

WHAT DID I LEARN?

Given that this project has a rolling nature, one vital thing I learned was what to do next. I want to run a competition for KCL students on a piece of audio description based on the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum. While useful for my research, this will also enable me to explore further the potential role of audio description for teaching visual studies. I also plan, with a contact at the RNIB among others, to run a competition for blind and partially sighted people on a piece of creative writing about art appreciation. This is to counter my concerns about the lack of agency for blind people, the main role in museums being for sighted audio describers.

Working with a Deaf actor rather than a Deaf art tour guide has led me to think about how the incorporation of BSL in theatre plays could be transferred to museums. I have made a contact who is interested in taking these BSL videos into Deaf schools, to help children learn about BSL linguistics. I am also continuing to explore how I can extend this work abroad, notably Greece. While I am still hoping to develop a partnership with the Heraklion Museum on Crete (an aim for this year, which is on hold as the Museum changed legal status and management), I am now going to Athens in September to follow up some contacts there (and this is also, of course, where half of the Parthenon sculptures are).

I continue to get a sense of the practical and ethical landscape of this project. Each element of the process, such as the best way to translate the BSL videos into English, has added insights into how we communicate about art and cultural dissemination.

MY 3 TOP TIPS FOR IMPACT:

1. During writing this report, I re-read my application with a laugh. In a sense, I've achieved more than was suggested in the application. But the activities are notably different, due to having to apply a series of Plan Bs when all the key partners (Heraklion, Ashmolean and British Museums) were unable, for good and unforeseeable reasons, to fulfil our original intentions. The timeframe for this Award has been 9 months, which is very short if you need to find high-quality practitioners, should plans need to change. The Faculty has acknowledged this problem, by introducing 2-year awards. My impact work may well end up stretching 20 years, so this longer period makes good sense – don't underestimate how long things take when other parties are involved.
2. Don't underestimate how much support here is available from the Faculty, including training sessions and general advice. They can't support everything, and it's ultimately the responsibility of the PI. But there have been notable improvements in this support.
3. I suspect impact will result in blurring the difference between the Art/Humanities and Social Sciences. A lot of impact seems to involve participatory research, for example, so getting some training in this (and the ethical implications) is probably good to do at an early stage. These are different skills, and it isn't always advisable to rely on 'common sense'.

If you are interested in reading more about how Disability Studies may be folded into traditional Humanities subjects, then Routledge has made the introduction to my edited volume open: [*Disability Studies and the Classical Body: The Forgotten Other*](#).

In addition to warmly appreciating the opportunities this Fund has enabled, I'm very grateful to the many creative practitioners who have contributed to this work (Karly Allen, Tanvir Bush, Zoë McWhinney, Ruth Padel and Lucia van der Drift), to the KCL Media team for recording support, to my partners in the wonderful MLSG project (Nicoletta Momigliano and Christine Morris), and to the interest at the British Museum for this ongoing work on the Parthenon marbles (Stuart Frost and Tom Harrison).



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