

Magda Karavanić

The Typhlological Museum as a Pioneer in Addressing the Needs of People with Visual Impairments in Yugoslavia

INTRODUCTION

The status of persons with disabilities in the period between the First and Second Yugoslavia was heavily influenced by the historical, social, and political circumstances of the time. After World War I, many war veterans suffered from permanent physical and psychological effects. State policies mainly focused on these veterans, while other persons with disabilities who were not war invalids found themselves in a notably less advantageous position.

Persons with disabilities were mainly treated within a charitable and medical framework, meaning they were seen as objects of care rather than as subjects with rights. Disability was largely understood as an individual medical issue

that needed to be treated, rehabilitated, or otherwise managed. Various institutions and care facilities were established, often of a segregated nature (such as schools for the deaf and blind or orphanages for children with disabilities), while the employment of persons with disabilities remained very limited and largely unregulated.

After World War II, the primary focus remained on war-related military invalids. Over time, however, social welfare mechanisms began to develop, including rehabilitation centres, specialised schools, and legislation regulating the rights of persons with disabilities. Some progress was made in labour integration, for example, through the establishment of sheltered workshops, yet persons with disabilities continued to be seen mainly as “objects of protection”. Employment was partly promoted through quotas and subsidies, but individuals with more severe disabilities remained particularly vulnerable to marginalisation. The emphasis was on rehabilitation and work productivity.

In Yugoslavia, the medical approach to disability remained predominant until the late 1980s. The shift towards a social model of disability only began towards the end of the socialist era and became more significant after the 1990s, influenced by global changes in the understanding of disability and the expanding human rights movement.

Within this context, the Typhological Museum in Zagreb represents an exceptional example of an institution that, since the mid-20th century, has consistently highlighted the importance of understanding and accepting people with disabilities, especially those with visual impairments. As the only specialised museum of its kind in this part of Europe, the Typhological Museum has, from its very beginnings, played a pioneering role in bringing the world of people with visual impairments closer to the general public. The Museum’s educational programmes have been vital in raising awareness among children and young people about diversity and the importance of including persons with disabilities across all areas of society. Through its exhibitions, the Museum has continually aimed to make cultural heritage accessible to all visitors, including those with disabilities.

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE TYPHOLOGICAL MUSEUM

The history of the Typhological Museum is closely connected with the teacher and typhlopedagogue Vinko Bek, who dedicated his career to educating blind children and increasing public awareness of the abilities of blind people. Vinko Bek was born in Podgajci na Dravi on 19 November 1862. After completing

primary education in Cernik, Osijek, and Pécs, and attending grammar school in Osijek, he graduated from the Teacher Training School in Zagreb. In 1881, he began working at an elementary school in Bukevje near Velika Gorica, where he taught for eleven years. It was there that he encountered the challenge of educating blind individuals, which prompted him to engage more deeply with this field.

In 1888, Bek visited Vienna to study the organisation and working methods of the Imperial Institute for the Blind, to apply the knowledge and experience gained there to his work with blind children. His ultimate goal was to establish the first institute for blind children in Croatia. To achieve this, it was first necessary to demonstrate that the education of blind children was not only possible but also essential. For this reason, Bek concentrated his efforts on publishing articles and on direct educational work with blind children.

In 1888, Vinko Bek started collecting objects and written materials related to blind people and gradually worked towards creating what he called the “museum of the blind.” This was not a museum in the contemporary sense of the word, but rather a carefully assembled collection of items that Bek planned to include as a dedicated section within the future institute for blind children. He sought help from typhlopedagogues in Austria, forming collaborations to more easily acquire specialised teaching aids. Additionally, he appealed for donations from various sources. In the Austrian journal *Blindenfreund*, he published a public appeal for donations of objects and literature related to blind individuals: “I cordially appeal to all teachers and friends of the blind to kindly donate, for my purposes, that is, for the establishment of the museum, books on the education of the blind, teaching materials of all kinds, old and new annual reports of institutions, descriptions of devices, as well as old primers.”¹ In addition to collecting objects and materials for the future museum, Bek also gathered books and other literature on blind persons to establish a library within the future institute to further advance education in the field of typhlopedagogy.

The idea of a so-called “museum of the blind” was not entirely new. In the 19th century, several museum departments existed within already established institutions dedicated to the education and training of blind people across Europe. One such example was the *Museum des Blindenwesens*, which operated under the auspices of the educational institute in Vienna. It can be assumed that Bek drew inspiration for his own museum concept during his visit to the Viennese institute.

The objects that Bek collected for the museum of the blind were displayed to the public at the Economic and Forestry Jubilee Exhibition organised by the Croatian-Slavonian Economic Society in 1891. Within the exhibition, he

1 “Das Blindenwesen in Croatien,” *Blindenfreund* 15 (1889), cited in Franjo Tonković, *Vinko Bek i njegov utjecaj na odgoj i obrazovanje slijepih u Jugoslaviji* (Zagreb: Savez slijepih Jugoslavije, 1960), 54.

arranged a so-called “department of the blind”, for which he also received financial support.² The exhibits included journals and books on blindness and periodicals for blind readers, games for blind children, school textbooks, writing boards, handicrafts made by blind persons, paintings, musical instruments such as the *gusle* played by blind musicians, and similar items.³ Through this exhibition, Bek aimed to demonstrate to the wider community both the methods used to train blind persons and the results of his work so far. An accompanying exhibition catalogue was published, with proceeds from its sale intended for the expansion of the so-called Croatian Museum of the Blind. After the exhibition ended, Bek himself wrote: “Upon the completion of the Millennium Exhibition, the Croatian Museum for the Blind will be established with the support of the government, where all the items currently displayed at the exhibition will be collected. In this museum, the entire historical development of the life and education of our blind people, from ancient times to the present and beyond, will be presented.”⁴

After years of Vinko Bek’s efforts and dedication, the Provincial Institute for the Education of Blind Children was established in Zagreb in 1895. The institute was situated in a building at 83 Ilica Street, alongside the institute for deaf-mute children. One room of the institute for blind children was designated as a “collection of teaching aids”. Bek not only gathered and displayed objects related to blind individuals but also devised a clear conceptual framework for his museum department, illustrating the historical development of the lives and education of blind persons, with plans for future growth. In subsequent years, the institute’s museum collection grew mainly through donations from individuals.

In later years, the institute faced a difficult period during which it relocated several times, resulting in the loss of part of its collection. The remaining objects that were found and preserved were cared for by Danica and Franjo Tonković, employees of the Institute for the Education of Blind Children at the time, who decided to continue the work initiated by Vinko Bek and strive to establish a future museum.⁵

In 1953, a decision was made to establish the Typhlological Museum (then known as the Typhlological Museum of the Yugoslav Blind Union). According to the Museum’s Rules of Operation adopted in 1964, its mission was defined

2 “Sljepački odjel na našoj Jubilarnoj izložbi,” *Slijepčev prijatelj* 2, No. 2 (1891), cited in Željka Bosnar Salihagić, ed., *Protiv predrasuda* (Zagreb: Tiflološki muzej, 2015), 14.

3 Bosnar Salihagić, *Protiv predrasuda*, 13.

4 *Annual Report of the Provincial Institute for the Education of Blind Children in Zagreb for the School Year 1895–1896*, cited in Vjekoslav Mršić, *105 godina Tiflološkog muzeja: Od Hrvatskog sljepačkog muzeja ka hrvatskom muzeju edukacijsko-rehabilitacijskih znanosti* (Zagreb: Tiflološki muzej, 1996), 73.

5 Željka Bosnar Salihagić, *Mi (ni)smo (ne)vidljivi. 60 godina Tiflološkog muzeja* (Zagreb: Tiflološki muzej, 2013), 6.



First traveling exhibition of the Typhological Museum

Kept at the Typhological Museum, Zagreb

as collecting, preserving, and researching objects and documentation related to blind people. The Museum's first president was Danica Tonković, who issued a public call to institutions, schools for the blind, libraries, and all potential donors and supporters to contribute materials. Initially, the Museum was housed in a single room at the Institute for the Education of Blind Children in Zagreb, before being allocated an exhibition hall in Bosanska Street. The first exhibition was organised in 1955 to familiarise the broader public with the lives and work of blind people and their position in society. Most of the objects from this exhibition formed the basis of the first permanent exhibition, which was officially opened a year later in the same space. The Museum continued to collect materials related to the history of education for the blind, everyday objects from the lives of blind people, typhological literature, works by blind authors, and related materials.

That same year, the Museum created and organised the first travelling exhibition in Yugoslavia. The goal of this type of presentation was to influence the still predominantly negative perceptions of blind persons and their abilities. The exhibition was first shown in Karlovac and later in other cities across Yugoslavia. Over eight years, it was displayed in 77 cities and seen by more than 200,000 visitors,⁶ making it the first travelling museum exhibition of this scale in Croatia.

6 Nevenka Čosić, *Iskoraci. 70 godina Tifloškog muzeja* (Zagreb: Tifloški muzej, 2023), 7.

In 1958, the Museum was granted a larger space within the Croatian Blind Union building at the corner of Draškovićeve and Šenoine Streets, where it remains today. In this new space, a permanent exhibition was established, featuring 225 objects and approximately 200 enlarged photographs.⁷ At the time, it was regarded as one of the most modern typhological exhibitions in the world. Moreover, between 1960 and 1979, the Museum published the journal *Socialna misao* (*Social Thought*), informing the public about the social and cultural needs of blind persons.

In 1976, a third permanent exhibition was opened, and two years later, a blind person was employed at the Museum.⁸ In subsequent years, museum activities were planned and reorganised in accordance with legislation; the collection was relocated to a new storage facility, and the archive and library were also organised.

In the first half of the 1990s, due to the immediate threat of war, the museum collections were relocated outside the Museum premises. As a result, the Museum did not have a permanent exhibition until 2008, when a new permanent exhibition concept was developed in line with the most up-to-date professional standards of that time. This permanent exhibition remains in place today, although certain changes are needed, primarily due to advances in information technologies.

ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility within heritage institutions comprises measures, principles, and practices that guarantee equal access to cultural heritage for everyone, regardless of physical, sensory, intellectual, psychosocial, or other disabilities. This encompasses understanding, utilisation, and active participation in cultural life. In recent decades, the museum's mission has evolved, shifting from a primary focus on displaying objects to a broader social role. Museums are no longer seen as separate from their communities but rather as active participants that engage with society and promote positive social change through their activities.

The modern concept of accessibility is based on the human rights model. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly affirms the freedom and equality of all people in dignity and rights. Additionally, the Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the Croatian Parliament in 2005, emphasises the importance of removing physical barriers, improving the organisation

7 Bosnar Salihagić, *Protiv predrasuda*, 38.

8 *Ibid.*, 41.

of education, establishing a more effective employment system, and raising public awareness and understanding of the rights and abilities of persons with disabilities. The Declaration affirms the right of all citizens to participate equally in all areas of society. Moreover, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, an international agreement adopted in 2006, requires United Nations member states to promote the human rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. Croatia signed this agreement in 2007, committing to its implementation and ensuring the equal participation of persons with disabilities in all aspects of social life and employment.⁹

In museums and related institutions, accessibility covers several interconnected aspects: physical accessibility (entrances, movement, sanitary facilities, exhibition spaces); informational accessibility (clear texts, adapted digital tools, sign language, audio description, tactile reliefs, and graphics); communicational accessibility (appropriate interaction, dialogue, and assistance with movement); and cognitive and sensory accessibility (plain language, calm spaces, and adapted interpretations). Equally important is programmatic and participatory accessibility, which involves including persons with disabilities in the design and implementation of museum activities.

From its very beginnings, the Typhlological Museum has aimed to adapt its content and make it accessible to diverse audiences. Early efforts to modify the museum's exhibitions date back to 1956, when the space in Bosanska Street was too limited, yet there was a strong intention to provide visitors with insight into all key areas addressed by the Museum and to bring them closer to the broader issue of blindness. Consideration was given to making displayed objects accessible while ensuring their maximum protection. As early as this period, replicas of objects were produced to enable blind visitors to explore them through touch, while originals were displayed in showcases for sighted visitors. In this way, the Museum responded to the need to make exhibited objects accessible to both blind and sighted audiences. There is no doubt that accessibility issues were considered from the very foundation of the Museum. Over time, new knowledge and professional staff continued to reflect on accessible space, content, and communication, expanding the Museum's activities to include persons with other forms of disability.

Since its inception, the Typhlological Museum has been committed to raising social awareness and offering a comprehensive museum experience for people with disabilities. Over its history, the Museum has updated its permanent exhibition three times to align with current standards and knowledge in accessibility,

9 Željka Sušić, "Protiv predrasuda," in Morana Vouk Nikolić, ed., *Pristupačnost za sve: Smjernice za inkluzivnu praksu. Prvi dio* (Zagreb: Tifloški muzej, 2019), 16.

although early efforts were necessarily modest. As the Museum's collections, exhibitions, and programmes mainly focus on themes from the daily lives of people with visual impairments, tactile and spatial adaptations initially took precedence. Since 2008, when the fourth permanent exhibition was prepared (and which remains on display today), the Typhlological Museum has expanded its focus to address broader contemporary accessibility needs of people with disabilities. In recent years, its activities and adaptations have increasingly aimed to include people with cognitive impairments, dementia, those on the autism spectrum, and members of other vulnerable and underrepresented groups.

Spatial adaptations of the Typhlological Museum, which facilitate movement and orientation for visitors, begin at the building's entrance, where tactile floor-guiding paths direct blind visitors towards the entrance. At the building's entrance, a ramp is also provided for wheelchair users, enabling access over several steps to an elevator equipped with audio announcements for blind visitors. The tactile guiding paths extend from the museum entrance throughout the entire exhibition space, supporting independent movement for visitors with reduced vision. At the information desk, a tactile floor plan of the museum is available, allowing visitors to familiarise themselves with the layout through touch. The height of the exhibits is adapted for wheelchair users, including opportunities to touch replicas of original objects. The Museum also includes fully accessible sanitary facilities.

Content adaptation includes interpreting and communicating displayed objects and museographic tools. Exhibition texts are printed in large font and in Braille for blind and partially sighted visitors. Audio guides and audio content are available throughout the gallery. Photographs are enlarged, and part of the permanent exhibition objects can be explored by touch. Films in the permanent exhibition are subtitled to assist visitors with hearing impairments. The Museum's website is also tailored for visitors with visual impairments, and all content from the permanent exhibition and the website is available in English.

Adapted communication and interaction with visitors are equally important. Museum staff aim to create programmes that promote the active involvement of people with disabilities in museum activities. Interactive and tactile exhibits are organised, alongside community awareness initiatives such as workshops on guide dogs, educational sessions for children covering everyday topics related to the lives of people with disabilities (including sign language and assistive technology), and exhibitions that bring different groups together through shared experiences and empathy.

Since 2019, the Museum has regularly organised and delivered the training programme *Accessibility for All* twice a year, in spring and autumn, for employees

of other cultural institutions. This programme aims to raise awareness and develop the theoretical and practical knowledge necessary for high-quality work with visitors with disabilities. The training encourages reflection on the importance of inclusivity, understanding diversity, and creating accessible content and environments for all visitors. The Typhlological Museum has recognised that educated and informed staff play a key role in creating such spaces – professionals who understand the needs of persons with disabilities and know how to enable their equal participation in cultural experiences. Accordingly, the training programme covers a wide range of topics, from raising awareness of the need for accessible institutions to concrete guidelines for achieving this in practice.

THE TACTILE GALLERY

The term *Tactile Gallery* does not refer to a specific exhibition space, but rather to an idea and a set of exhibition practices aimed at creating opportunities for persons with visual impairments, as well as individuals with other disabilities, to become equal visitors and active participants in exhibition environments.

The concept of *tactile* originated in the field of visual arts and refers to a medal, relief, or small-scale sculpture which, in addition to its artistic value and formal qualities, is characterised by the specificity of its form, the diversity of materials, and the distinctiveness of its volume and dimensions. In this context, tactility means enabling an artwork to accommodate the physical capabilities of the fingers, palms, and hands of persons with disabilities.

Through its exhibition cycle, the Tactile Gallery invites visitors to explore artworks through touch. In this way, one of the fundamental principles of museum practice – prohibiting the touching of objects for conservation purposes – is reconciled with how blind people perceive the world. For individuals for whom touch is the primary means of perceiving form and texture, the Gallery enables them to “see” a work of art. In some cases, two-dimensional exhibits are also included; through carefully designed adaptations, these works are made accessible to blind visitors. At the same time, sighted visitors are given the chance to experience artworks on an entirely new level, further enriching the overall exhibition experience.



Detail from the exhibition by Ljerka Njerš: Ceramics Exhibition – Aquarius Cycle

Kept at the Typhlological Museum, Zagreb

The origins of the Tactile Gallery trace back to 1961, when sculptures by the self-taught blind artist Remzija Đumišić were exhibited in the Museum and made accessible to touch. Although this exhibition was followed by a seventeen-year hiatus, a similar exhibition was organised again in 1978. Since then, the Tactile Gallery of the Typhlological Museum has hosted a continuous series of exhibitions where visitors are allowed to touch the exhibits. In 1980, this practice was formally outlined in the catalogue *Ceramics Exhibition – Aquarius Cycle* by Ljerka Njerš, who first used the term *Tactile Gallery*.¹⁰

Artists who exhibited within the Tactile Gallery exhibition cycle include blind self-taught sculptors, sighted self-taught artists, and academically trained sculptors. By exhibiting works by blind artists, the Museum conveys the message that the absence of sight should not be an obstacle to artistic creation for talented individuals. Simultaneously, blind visitors are encouraged to participate in artistic practice themselves, as they are allowed to become familiar with and experience artworks through touch.

10 Igor Maroević, “60 godina Taktilne galerije Tifloškog muzeja,” *Informatica Museologica* 53, No. 1 (2022): 79, accessed on 21 January 2026, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/438154>.

The Tactile Gallery developed gradually, evolving from modest beginnings into a comprehensive application of modern knowledge and technologies in various modes of adaptation. From an initial idea centred on the possibility of touching objects, it has grown into a sophisticated model of inclusive exhibition practice. To date, a total of 47 solo and group exhibitions have been realised within the Tactile Gallery cycle. Additionally, the Tactile Gallery has helped raise awareness of the artistic capabilities of blind people and has influenced changes in the practices of other cultural institutions, particularly in recognising the need to identify and implement ways to enable blind audiences to experience visual art.

EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The educational activities of the Typhlological Museum are unique in that they focus on raising awareness and sensitising the public to the everyday lives of people with disabilities, while actively including children with developmental difficulties and persons with disabilities as participants in its programmes. For this reason, knowledge in the fields of educational and rehabilitation sciences is highly desirable, if not essential. From the very beginning of the Museum's educational activities, programmes such as exhibitions and workshops have addressed typhlological topics, thereby increasing community awareness of the lives of people with visual impairments.¹¹ Throughout the Museum's history, educational efforts have mainly targeted school-aged children through guided exhibition tours and workshops designed to promote acceptance and social inclusion of blind and partially sighted individuals. Over time, the thematic scope expanded to encompass aspects of the daily lives of deaf and hard-of-hearing persons, individuals on the autism spectrum, persons with Down syndrome, and others, to enhance community awareness and sensitivity to their daily challenges.

11 Zoran Vukelić, "Specifičnosti pedagoško-animatorskog rada u Tiflološkom muzeju Jugoslavije," *Informatica Museologica* 18, No. 1–4 (1987): 43, accessed on 26 January 2026, <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/214193>.



Student activities in the Typhological museum

Kept at the Typhological Museum, Zagreb

Through its educational programmes, the Museum also offers lectures and workshops off-site and organises travelling educational exhibitions in libraries, schools, nursing homes, and similar institutions. In addition, the Typhological Museum participates in various public events and marks significant dates through specially designed programmes, such as International White Cane Day, the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, Guide Dog Day, Helen Keller Week, and similar occasions.

The primary goal of these educational programmes is to further enhance the visibility, recognition, and modern relevance of the Typhological Museum. This objective can only be reached through ongoing communication with the community. Through various activities, the Museum shares its message and pursues its goals, fostering social dialogue, inclusivity, and a shared sense of community.

CONCLUSION

From its very inception to the present day, the Typhlological Museum has remained a distinctive cultural institution dedicated to people with disabilities in this part of Europe. As early as the 1950s, in the former Yugoslavia, the Museum established itself as one of the first cultural institutions to systematically address issues affecting blind and partially sighted individuals, contributing to their social recognition and affirmation. Through exhibitions, educational programmes, and public engagement, the Museum raised awareness within the wider community about the daily lives and needs of persons with visual impairments, operating simultaneously within the spheres of culture, education, and social policy.

Simultaneously, the Typhlological Museum offers blind and partially sighted individuals access to cultural content that has traditionally been seen as solely visual, such as paintings, photographs, and sculptures. By developing tactile, auditory, and interactive methods, the Museum not only adjusts its cultural offerings but also actively engages blind people in its programmes, promoting participation and collaboration.

From its modest beginnings to its current status as a modern institution, the Typhlological Museum has developed in response to societal change and community needs. In doing so, it has become an example of a cultural institution that goes beyond the traditional museological role, establishing itself as a space of inclusion, dialogue, and social responsibility, as well as a significant witness to the historical relationship towards persons with disabilities in the territory of the former Yugoslavia.

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