The Richness of Touch
The Paradoxical Meanings of Disability in Japanese Culture

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Two blind men have taught me the importance of the sense of touch, or blind culture. One is Louis Braille (1809–1852) and the other is Kuzuhara Kōtō (1812–1882). Louis Braille, the originator of Braille, was born in Coupvray in the rural area of France. His eye was injured in an accident when he was three years old, and gradually he lost his eyesight. In 1819 he left home to enter the Paris School for the Blind where he stayed until his death, first as a student and then as a teacher. The Paris School for the Blind, built in 1784, was the first school for the blind in the world. In the beginning of the education for the blind, students did not have Braille, so they had to read and write normal letters. (For an example of raised letters or embossed lettering for the blind that were included in the author’s exhibit, discussed below, see figure 1.) These letters are very beautiful and soft to the touch, and from them we can perceive the possibility of touch. However, for the blind, they are difficult to read and to write. Producing a book in embossed lettering is time consuming, and the resulting book is very thick.

Louis Braille was interested in efficient communication and self-expression for the blind. He knew about sonography, or the “letters for
night,” a system used as a cipher in the French army. Sonography was composed of twelve raised dots, so people could read a cipher in the dark. From this system, Braille got the idea for the new lettering system that blind people could read and write easily and in 1825 devised a system that used only six dots. Every student in the Paris School for the Blind was fascinated by the Braille system and was fond of communication and self-expression using Braille. However, Braille met with strong opposition from sighted teachers, who persisted in using embossed letters because they themselves could read raised letters with their eyes. They insisted that the blind should use normal letters and that Braille was not universal. Here we must ask what the meaning of “normal” is. The sighted hold a majority in this world, and the disabled—blind people among them—are regarded as a special group or as being in the minority.

After the invention of Braille, authorities in the Paris School for the Blind prohibited students from using Braille. Nonetheless, for the

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1. Raised letters (*totsu monji*) used for making embossed texts. In the collection of the Kyoto Prefectural School for the Blind.
rest of his life Louis Braille tried hard to improve and spread the use of his Braille system. In 1854, two years after Louis Braille died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-three, the French government finally adopted Braille as officially recognized letters. Louis Braille put greater importance on dissimilation than on assimilation. In other words, he thought that the blind had to maintain their identity or originality. His system was introduced to the United States in the 1860s, and in 1890 Japanese Braille was adapted from Louis Braille’s system. (For a chart of Japanese Braille printed in raised letters, see the inserted card and appendix 1.) Braille has been the simplest and easiest method for the blind to read and write since its birth. And, by the invention of Braille, Louis Braille revealed the uniqueness of blind people or blind culture.

Another example of blind culture, this time from Japan, is found in the life and work of Kuzuhara Kōtō. In his lifetime, Kuzuhara experienced the Meiji Restoration, but he lived his life quietly, staying in the rural part of Hiroshima as a koto musician. His achievements in koto music were great. He invented the Yakumogoto, a two-stringed bamboo koto, and he is famous for his diary Kuzuhara Kōtō Nikki. Because of smallpox, Kuzuhara lost his eyesight at the age of three. He later studied koto and shamisen at the Ikuta school in Kyoto and entered Tōdōza, a guild composed of blind musicians and acupuncturists. Tōdōza, founded in the fourteenth century by biwa-hōshi (lute players or minstrels) all of whom were blind, had a long tradition dating from the tenth century, the middle of the Heian period. Kuzuhara Kōtō’s given name, “Kōtō,” is the name of the third-highest rank in the hierarchy of Tōdōza.

In premodern times the blind were unable to use characters. Actually they did not need characters. Again, be reminded that Japanese Braille was contrived only in 1890, and before that, the blind were dependent fundamentally on their memories. Heike Monogatari (The Tales of Heike) by biwa-hōshi is one example of the fruits of their special abilities. Kuzuhara Kōtō tried to communicate with sighted people, and he wanted to leave for coming generations positive proof of his life. The appearance of his Kuzuhara Kōtō Nikki marks the shift from premodern times to modern times. Modernization forced the blind to embrace characters. In other words, the blind, or minorities, were expected to be “normal” in modern Japan.
Kuzuhara started keeping his diary in 1827, at first written down by his pupils. Then, from 1837 to his death, he wrote his diary by himself—a period of more than forty years. (See figure 2.) Kuzuhara Kōtō Nikki is probably the first written self-expression by a blind man in Japanese history, and this diary showed the uniqueness of blind culture. How was it possible for him to “write” a diary before the invention of Braille? His printing type is called moku-katsuji (wooden type). Each piece of type was marked with a unique identifying mark so he could recognize it by the sense of touch. He put wooden type into a frame one by one to fill up a line and then began a new line. The type were then inked and printed on paper as a woodblock print is printed. His wooden type included the Japanese alphabet “iroha,” numerals, and a small number of Chinese characters. (See figure 3.) On one of Helen Keller’s visits to Japan, she saw Kuzuhara’s moku-katsuji. Impressed, she was reported to have said “an Oriental typewriter was invented by a blind man.”1 A famous Japanese novelist, Dazai Osamu called Kuzuhara’s diary “a blind man’s chuckle.”2 With useful wooden types and his diary, Kuzuhara chuckled at his interesting life compared with the sighted world of normal people.

Braille is suitable for self-expression for the blind, while Kuzuhara’s wooden types were good for communication with sighted people. It is by chance that Louis Braille and Kuzuhara Kōtō lived in the same period of the nineteenth century. As an inevitable consequence of the crisis for blind culture, both of them were enthusiastic about new lettering systems for the blind. Today we have computer technology, and through this technological revolution, the blind can read and write normal scripts easily and the sighted can put a document into Braille even if they do not know the rules of Braille. From a viewpoint of normalization and equalization of opportunities, it would seem that the blind or the disabled today must be happy.

What can we say about the present situation of blind culture? Biwa-hōshi will disappear sooner or later. The number of people who can read Braille is now decreasing. The days when Louis Braille and Kuzuhara Kōtō repeated trial and error seem to belong to a different age. By making full use of the sense of touch, Louis Braille and Kuzuhara Kōtō opened up one kind of modernization in the nineteenth century. Through an exhibition mounted at the National Museum of Ethnology (Kokuritsu Minzokugaku Hakubutsukan) in Osaka from 9 March
2. Pages from Kuzuhara Kōtō's diary. In the collection of Kan Chazan Kinenkan in Hiroshima-ken.

3. Wooden type used by Kuzuhara Kōtō to print his diary. In the collection of Kan Chazan Kinenkan in Hiroshima-ken.
through 26 September 2006, I introduced the wide range of possibilities
of blind culture in the twenty-first century. And again, in the spirit of
Louis Braille and Kuzuhara Kōtō, through the exhibit I said to everyone,
“Touch and Grow Rich!”

The National Museum of Ethnology, covering over fifty thousand
square meters of floor space, conducts anthropological and ethnological
research and aims to promote a general understanding and awareness of
peoples, societies, and cultures around the world through the collection
and conservation of ethnographic materials and public exhibitions. My
thematic exhibition, “Touch and Grow Rich: You Can Touch Our Mu-
seum,” was well received. Mass media reported on this exhibition many
times, introducing it widely because the exhibit was intended for visually
handicapped people, who rarely have opportunities to visit museums. The
exhibit was organized with several unconventional purposes and hoped
for effects in mind. First, it was designed to be an exhibition friendly for
appreciation by the visually handicapped, that is, an exhibition possessing
what I term a “barrier-free” quality. And, second, we insisted that the
museum experience that we created not prejudice or exclude any indi-
vidual or group so that the exhibit was universally appreciable, a quality
that I term “inclusiveness.” By this I mean that despite the existence of
barriers, people freely come and go over the barriers. People with dis-
abilities and people without disabilities recognize the differences between
them and enjoy the communication between the different cultures.

With those principles in mind we built an exhibit that paid
specific attention to people most removed from museums. The exhibits
included historical examples of writing systems for the blind—raised
wooden letters, needle letters, a textbook written in raised wooden let-
ters, and origami paper letters. (See figures 2 and 3 above.) On display
were raised and topographical maps and a globe used in the Meiji era
as educational devices and Kuzuhara Kōtō’s diary and the wooden letter
set that he used to print his entries. We invited visitors to handle and
touch many aesthetically pleasing pieces of art, among them the Fureai
Buddhist statue created by the late Nishimura Kōchō, master sculptor
and chief priest of the Otagi Temple in Kyoto; bird sculptures carved
by one of Japan’s leading bird sculptors, Uchiyama Haruo of Chiba; and
model of a Japanese shrine created by carpenter Shimizu Masakazu, also
of Chiba-ken.(See figure 4 for a photograph of the shrine model.)
In planning a truly universal museum—one that everyone can enjoy regardless of disabilities—, there are actually a good many things to be considered. When we use the word “disabled,” we should understand there is not a single kind of disabled person but rather there are various kinds: hearing impaired, mentally handicapped, physically impaired, and so on. In addition, regard for the aged, consideration for people from other countries, and so forth are to be included in thinking about the words “universal” and “everyone.” Sad to say, my ability alone or a single thematic exhibition cannot cover all aspects of these goals. Museums mainly expect that their exhibits are appreciated visually. Therefore, those who cannot see may be, in a sense, alienated from museums. So the goal of this exhibition was to take a first step toward realizing the idea of “universal” or “everyone” in a museum-exhibit design.

News about the exhibition spread widely by word of mouth as well as through the media. Fortunately, beginning with groups involved with the visually handicapped, many people visited the exhibition throughout its entire run. Ordinary people may have sometimes seen a person with
a white cane or been asked for directions. However, never before had so many visually handicapped people been seen in a museum at one time. Ordinary people had not imagined it possible for them to appear there. Indeed, the response far exceeded their expectations and had a great influence on many fields of our society. Since visually handicapped people mostly came accompanied by family members or volunteers, the number of visitors naturally was very large. That so many visually handicapped people from far-away districts appreciated the exhibits also far exceeded my expectations. As one of the persons in charge, I was pleased with the large attendance but felt a little sad, for it showed clearly the difficult circumstances through which the visitors had to go to get to the museum. That the visually handicapped have few chances to appreciate exhibits that they can freely touch understandably involves some disappointment on my part.

The museum staff looked to foster the attitude of “cheerfulness to accept” and on the part of the handicapped visitors the “courage to go out.” Totally blind, I myself observed what was going on inside and outside of the museum building sometimes as an “insider” and other times as an “outsider.” The staff at the information desk and the ticket counter had not learned how to relate to people with a white cane whose visits formerly were very rare. I suppose they had regarded it as common sense that visually handicapped people were not able to enjoy themselves in the museum. When the museum staff came to accept this large number of visually handicapped visitors, they found out that their own expectations had been wrong. They became aware that there are many visually handicapped people in our world and that, quite naturally, they wanted to come to the museum just as ordinary people did. Thus the staff members acquired a newly expanded sensitivity—a new “common sense.”

Through the six months that the thematic exhibition was on display, the museum staff gradually grew accustomed to the feeling that while visually handicapped people could not see, they could appreciate the exhibits with the sense of touch. Our museum had to accept various people and offer various means of enjoying exhibits. This “innovated consciousness” on the part of the museum—this attitude of accepting the visually handicapped cheerfully—, which I termed “cheerfulness to
accept,” is something that is far more important than efforts at improving a museum’s physical facility and, in fact, is operating a museum with a consciousness that is barrier free.

Equally important is “consciousness innovation” on the side of museum visitors. I stress the need for them to go out to visit museums. Visually handicapped people inevitably have an expectation that a museum is a facility where people “see” exhibits, and therefore, without “sight” it will not be interesting for them to visit such a place. In addition, there are many barriers to their getting to a museum. The visually handicapped maintain some sort of resignation that they need not take the trouble to go to such an inconvenient place. Through this exhibition, however, they discovered their potential as people with an acute sense of touch. Those who felt that “the museum is unexpectedly interesting” or that “it might be worth visiting” invited their friends one by one to visit my exhibition.

Some of the visually handicapped visitors’ remarks that the permanent exhibition was more enjoyable than the thematic one pleased me, but that was not without a bit of mixed feelings, for it was I who had organized the thematic exhibition. However, considering their remarks objectively, it was good that some blind people were satisfied by touching various exhibits for there are far more materials in the permanent exhibition than in the thematic exhibit. It is my hope that this “touching-is-believing” experience will spark a trend among the handicapped to increase their “courage to go out.”

Consciousness was enlightened for both the visually handicapped visitors and the museum staff. “Courage to go out” and “cheerfulness to accept” will become key phrases in the movement to promote a barrier-free experience at museums. When we no longer distinguish people based on the concept of “the disabled versus the ordinary” but as “those who comprehend by touching versus those who comprehend by seeing,” the possibility for existence of a “universal museum” will expand. In order that the high-minded idea—the museum as enjoyable for everyone—does not become “pie-in-the-sky,” it is indispensable for the two key ideas—“courage to go out” and “cheerfulness to accept”—to develop with a mutual influence.

In practical pursuit of barrier-free access, various kinds of so-called
“services for the disabled” are being tried out in many fields. At the National Museum of Ethnology we worked to get over the preoccupation with “service for the minority.” Our thematic exhibition provides some examples of ways to support the visually handicapped.

For my exhibition, I translated the exhibit captions and pamphlet into Braille. The pamphlet, printed on transparent resin using UV printing techniques in both Braille and normal Japanese scripts, was usable by both the sighted and the blind. The design and the appearance of the pamphlet was both beautiful to see and soft and appealing to touch. (See figure 5 for photograph of the cover of the pamphlet.) It was innovative that the same pamphlet was intended for both the visually handicapped and the sighted and was handed out to all visitors. Making these pamphlets surely cost more than I had expected, but I was able to do this experiment because the period of this exhibition was limited. Judging from the answers in the questionnaire completed by visitors, this experimental pamphlet was favorably received by the sighted as well as the visually handicapped.

Lately it is more and more common for museums, especially new museums, to hand out Braille pamphlets or to translate exhibit captions into Braille. Braille users are thankful for this consideration. Thinking more deeply about this special accommodation, however, it is clear that Braille pamphlet users are unmistakably in the minority. Usually, a museum staff works on revising the Braille pamphlet only after improving the pamphlet most sighted people use. As a result, while the ordinary pamphlet is kept current, the Braille one, in some cases, is long out-of-date, unedited from the time the museum started. Even in a museum where ancient materials are displayed, I am very sorry to say that far too often pamphlets in Braille are allowed to grow out of date and can be counted among the museum’s ancient holdings.

It is unfair to decide things based on the distinction of “majority” and “minority,” but the service maintenance for the minority, such as the preparation of Braille pamphlets, frankly is neglected. A museum in difficult financial circumstances may not be able to afford the cost of producing Braille pamphlets to be used by only a few people. That a museum cannot help considering the balance between supply and demand is understandable. Nonetheless, it is important to make materials that
5. Cover of the exhibition pamphlet, 21 x 29.5 cm (8 1/4 x 11 5/8 in). Printed in color with embossing to simulate both raised and recessed Japanese kana and with embossed Japanese Braille text floated over the printed surface.
meet the needs of all individuals, or else the idea “everyone is the same” cannot always be called “universal.” Our experimental Braille pamphlet played a big role in getting rid of the common notion of “service for the minority.” If more museums made pamphlets printed in both Braille and normal letters and handed them out to all visitors alike, the concept that Braille is something peculiar would fade and the high cost of Braille printing decrease.

Most sighted people cannot read Braille. How do they feel when they put their hands on the pamphlet bearing a code consisting of lots of raised dots? (For this experience, please see and touch the Japanese Braille chart insert.) Some may feel it is bothersome, and others may be interested in the unfamiliar code. I hoped that this pamphlet would trigger notice that there are Braille users in our neighborhood. Totally blind, I am not able to read normal printed matter at all. In spite of that, day by day I am surrounded by paper documents that I cannot read without the help of a personal computer or assistants. In making the exhibit pamphlet, I hoped to reverse the positions of the sighted and the visually handicapped to give the sighted an enjoyable and informative experience.

While the pamphlet was printed both in Braille and normal letters, in fact, what is written there differs delicately. The text written in Braille and the text written in normal letters do not, strictly speaking, correspond exactly. That is just what I intended because I wanted a dialogue to be born mediated by the pamphlet. Thus this pamphlet was further innovative because it functioned as a tool for starting dialogue and as a device of communication among different cultures, including, in this case specifically, sighted visitors and visually handicapped visitors.

Another typical barrier-free service for the visually handicapped available in museums is the audio guide. To be sure, it is a very convenient tool, and experimentation is going on in every area of audio communication. The cell-phone-type audio guide is most popular. Pushing a given number in front of an exhibit allows one to hear an explanation on the cell phone. Recently, a new type of tool that sends messages and images automatically through a sensor has been developed. Such a system will be effective in providing service for people from other countries. I intentionally used very few audio guides in my exhibition. However, since
I had expected complaints about this from some visually handicapped visitors, I did install one audio-guide machine at the entrance of the exhibition area. I did not furnish any audio guides or cell-phone-type devices inside the exhibits. Shortage of money was one reason, but I had a more positive reason for not furnishing any vocal-guide tools.

Most museum visitors basically prefer a self-guided tour, which allows them to take a tour at their own pace. Some of the museums in the United States have recommended the self-guided tour to visually handicapped people. Each visually handicapped person visits a museum alone, following the guided course and enjoys the exhibits in his or her own style. On such an occasion, an audio guide that enables him or her to listen to explanations by pushing a button will be very helpful.

I have had several bitter experiences with audio guides. In 2006 the Kyoto National Museum mounted a large-scale picture-scroll exhibition. It was known widely because very precious scrolls were exhibited. Full of curiosity, I visited the museum with one of my friends. There were many picture scrolls laid in the glass cases, and being reminded that picture scrolls were something to be enjoyed visually, I borrowed an audio guide. At first, my warm-hearted friend supported me by offering some explanation. I listened to the voice from the audio guide with my right ear and to my friend’s voice through my left ear. I sometimes acknowledged his friendly support, but because different information came into my brain from right and left at the same time, I gradually grew disturbed and tired. Meanwhile, probably noticing my embarrassment, my friend came to speak less. Then another problem arose. My friend’s pace of enjoying scrolls and the pace of the explanation by the audio guide differed somewhat. My friend wanted to stop in front of the exhibits he was interested in, appreciating them closely. The explanation by the audio guide, however, was short. Having nothing to do, I was obliged to listen to the explanation of the next exhibit. As a result, even though both of us were in front of the same exhibit, dialogue between us grew more and more difficult.

I have occasionally had such inconvenient experiences that interrupt dialogue. The visually handicapped, who live relying on the surrounding sounds, want to keep their ears open. If they were able to enjoy exhibits by talking to each other, they would not have to use audio guides, and
perhaps they would in fact rather not use them. Taking a self-guided tour with an audio guide in his or her hand may in some cases be an ideal barrier-free experience for a visually handicapped person. However, the audio guide will truly become a comfortable service when the visually handicapped can come to a museum alone and learn by touching exhibits in addition to hearing an audio description.

As I said before, handicapped people have to cross big barriers on the way to our museum. It is very difficult for those who come for the first time to get to the National Museum of Ethnology, which some call a “desert island on land” because it is remote from the city center and a fifteen-minute walk from the nearest station. After visitors get to the museum, they will find the large exhibition hall itself is a maze. It would be practically impossible for the blind to take a tour alone even if we supplied audio guides and guided tours. Since they encountered so many difficulties just getting to the museum, it was important for them to enjoy themselves to the fullest while they were in the museum.

My target was a thematic exhibition that the visually handicapped and the sighted visited and enjoyed together. What is the same and what is different between the impressions gained through the sense of sight and those gained through the sense of touch triggers the beginning of a dialogue between the people of different cultures. I thought the visitors would enjoy the exhibition much more if they toured the exhibit conversing with each other rather than relying on machinery. This was the reason I dared to provide no audio guides in the exhibition area, and I decided to offer tours guided by human beings.

When we considered various devices to attract visually handicapped people to our museum, we found out the best and the most feasible one was to provide individuals as guides. In visiting museums in the United States, I am always impressed how well they make use of volunteers. Increasingly Japanese museums have begun to appeal to the public to work as volunteers to offer many kinds of services. Our museum has just started offering various services provided by a volunteer group named “Minpaku Museum Partners,” (MMP; Minpaku stands for the National Museum of Ethnology). Further, not only its museums, but also American society itself is built by making good use of the power of volunteers. What Japanese society should learn from the United States
is to provide less in terms of facilities and equipment for barrier-free museum-going and more in terms of services provided by an organization of volunteers.

Our museum was built in the 1970s when there were no modern ideas such as universal design or barrier-free experience. Having a policy to improve its facilities and equipment to make the museum barrier free, committee members in the museum sometimes ask for my opinion. Thankful for being asked, I was nonetheless at a loss where to begin the transformation. Of course, we are obliged to start at what is relatively easy to improve, but the reformation is inevitably limited in the case of an existing building. If we built a museum totally anew, we could make it perfectly universal and barrier free, providing all necessary facilities. On the other hand, turning an existing museum structure into one completely accessible to the handicapped is very difficult and costly. Under these circumstances, providing human guides offers a viable solution. A guided tour given by trained volunteer staff might not be perfect, but it is a practical alternative. A human guide can work flexibly in accordance with the situation. For example, when the volunteer notices that the visitor seems not to be interested, he or she will ask, “Shall we go ahead to the next exhibit?” Or when the visitor seems to be attracted to a particular exhibit, the guide will give detailed explanation. Such resourceful guidance is impossible with an audio guide.

By designing an exhibit to be touched, providing a pamphlet printed both in Braille and in ordinary letters, and encouraging dialogue between the visually handicapped and the sighted by providing human guides, we moved toward our goal of making this exhibit “barrier free.”

The second target of this exhibition, as I mentioned briefly above, was to make the thematic exhibition “inclusive,” in every way. The achievement of this second goal hinges on the operation of two experiences, which I term “creating” and “opening.” Here, let me attempt to illustrate these keywords of my exhibition, experiences toward which I worked to facilitate throughout the period of the exhibition.

This exhibition focused on the visually handicapped, yet, to tell the truth, most of the visitors were the sighted. Information acquired visually, as the phrase “obvious at a glance” shows, is very convenient—all too convenient. As a result, the sighted do not use all five senses to the
fullest, except perhaps the sense of vision; and in particular they tend to neglect the sense of touch. In our world, however, there are things that cannot be identified without touch and things that we get interested in through touch. My exhibition was an opportunity for museum visitors to realize the potential of the five senses and to discover the possibility of the sense of touch. I want the world to notice the profound culture of touching. This is my message to sighted people.

Although I sometimes admire some woman's voice and jokingly, "fall in love at a hearing," so to speak, the phrase "fall in love at a glance" is much more widely used. The ability to get much information of various kinds in a moment is the characteristic of the sense of vision. On the other hand, the sense of touch is inconvenient. One might say that getting a large number of images and a large amount of information without freedom of choice or some regulation or moderation is not always pleasant. An example is the often-criticized, unfavorable influence of video games on children.

While the sense of sight can catch considerable information in an image, the sense of touch gets information only by the points that hands touch. Information gained by the sense of touch is a point at first, but as you move your hand back and forth, the information expands from a point to a surface, and then to a three-dimensional space. It is highly intelligent work and a world of creation and imagination. I recommended that sighted visitors taste the fresh impression of the exhibits by touching sensitively with the eyes closed. You can create an image of an exhibit in the mind gradually with your hands and brain working actively. Since information about texture and temperature is acquired only through the sense of touch, sighted people who noticed that the impression gained by vision and that gained by touch were different enjoyed my exhibition doubly.

I call the work that expands an image by the power of the sense of touch "creation." A big model of a shrine at the entrance of the exhibition area let visitors understand the charm of creating. This model, the symbol of the exhibition, was a magnificent shrine clearly visible from a distance. (See figure 4 above.) Touching it, the visitor sensed the rough texture of its roof and the fine lines of its intricate timbering. Gathering such pieces of information, little by little you will grasp the
whole image by activating your hands and brain. It is certainly difficult to identify the shrine only from information gained through the sense of touch, but what is important is not the conclusion, rather the process of creating the image by activating the imagination and creativity. My exhibition placed such an emphasis on the work of creation that the visitors could experience the imagination and creativity unaided by the convenience of vision and could literally “feel” the latent ability of the sense of touch that the sighted tend to forget.

Increasingly museums have begun to allow visitors to touch exhibits. Sculpture is beautiful to look at, but you will have a different impression by touching it. My former art teacher, now a professor at Tsukuba University and one of the best sculptors in Japan, has carved statues of nude women. There were many such statues made of wood or plaster in the art room of my junior high school. As a junior high schoolboy, I was greatly excited, eager to hold them tightly but rather touched them diffidently, afraid of being seen by somebody. However, the art teacher encouraged me, saying, “You must not touch that way. Touch it with your whole body so as to feel the energy of the sculpture.” Taking my hands, he himself had me touch the breast of the sculpture. Since then, I have made it a rule to touch sculpture bravely for both pleasure and aesthetic appreciation.

I have practiced martial arts for many years and am occasionally conscious of “qi” (alternately “chi” or “ki”) in my daily life. The energy of the sculpture, my former teacher once said to me, will be the energy that the artist put into his sculpture and that of the sculpture itself, energy that rises from the earth to the sky up above the world, as well. Energy is also given off from the hands that hold the sculpture tightly. It is the creative energy of the sense of touch that starts with a point and extends to a surface, and then to a three-dimensional body. Unparalleled “qi” is born where those three kinds of energy mingle. It is the world of art vastly different from the world perceived visually.

Work to “create” is extending an image through the hands moving dynamically. In contrast, work to “open” is delicate finger movement. For example, you cannot read Braille if you touch strongly with your two hands as you do when you touch a sculpture. In reading Braille, you have to touch the raised points softly, concentrating the nerves at
the tips of the fingers. Touching with all your might is “creating,” and touching extremely delicately is “opening.”

Why do I call touching precise parts delicately “opening”? During my exhibition, I received several delightful comments from some of my friends. One of my sighted friends said, “I tried touching an exhibited picture with raised lines with my eyes closed. Sorry to say, I could not recognize anything at all at first. After the first tour, I tried again but in vain. Before leaving the museum after appreciating the permanent exhibition, I tried for a third time. I am not sure, but I felt the impression was different each time.” I said to myself, “He is really tough.” Indeed, I was most grateful to him for his persistence and his favorable interest in my exhibition.

You touch something. You may have no idea about it at first touch, but as you continue touching, you soon will know vaguely what it is. That is precisely the experience that I aimed to create with my exhibit. I learned Braille in my junior high school days and was not able to understand Braille letters at first. I felt as if they were a kind of code with a lot of raised points. As I kept reading them again and again day after day, I came to know the number of the points and their arrangement by touching them. Soon I began to use Braille as a very convenient system. Needless to say, Braille can be read quite smoothly even in the dark, and in fact I have grown so familiar with Braille letters that now I read texts in Braille in bed before falling asleep almost every night.

Just as with the case of learning Braille, there is a moment when the “closed sense”—the sense of touch that remained asleep—suddenly “opens” as you touch repeatedly. I hoped that through by exhibition, as many visitors as possible would feel that deep emotion of “opening.” To that end during the period of the thematic exhibition, we had monthly Braille-experience workshops with the cooperation of members of the Minpaku Museum Partners. Observing the reactions of participants, I discovered that children learned absolutely fastest and that their way of thinking was very flexible. Even though they could not read at the first touch, using a tool called “slate-and-stylus,” they wrote some Braille letters themselves and tried to read them. (See figures 6a and 6b.) Human beings will instinctively try to touch something they are interested in, and I realized that, compared with adults whose sense of touch is growing
dull, children have the suppleness to “open” simply. A “mind to open” will be fostered through experiences for the “senses to open.” Schools where the Braille experience is adopted in class are of late increasing in number. Such learning is meaningful in two ways: the closed sense of touch becomes “open,” and the mind to cooperate with Braille users is “opened.”

One day near the close of the exhibition, I had the honor of a visit from Dr. Umesao Tadao, who came to see, or rather, to touch the exhibits. He is the founder of the National Museum of Ethnology and a well-known scholar of comparative civilization study. Though he lost his sight some twenty years ago, still at more than eighty years of age he continues his writing activity. In the thematic exhibition, we displayed various kinds of “letters to touch” used in many areas in the world before the invention of Braille. “Letters to touch” consisted of uneven dots and lines impressed onto a wax-board or made out of folded-paper strings, carved wood, and other materials. They were really beautiful to look at. Feeling those letters, Dr. Umesao commented, “I cannot read them at all. It is hopeless.” Since he lost his sight after the age of sixty, the great Dr. Umesao has probably had much difficulty in switching from being a sighted person to being a visually handicapped one. Certainly it is desperately hopeless for a daily user of Braille, such as I am, to read the raised letters used by the blind in the nineteenth century. The point of exhibiting these various letters to be touched is for us all to become aware of the existence of people who really read these letters in times past and to notice that there is a moment for the closed potential sense of touch to “open.” What is important is not whether you can read those letter forms, but the process of moving your fingers to seek an expanding world of touch.

Many visually handicapped people, myself included, are challenged to learn to read Braille to overcome the hopeless situation of not being able to use the sense of sight. However, precisely because they lost their sight, the visually handicapped may be counted as very lucky people who have been able to open the latent power of their sense of touch and experience the unique use of the senses. Following the lead of Dr. Umesao Tadao and from my own perspective as a cultural anthropologist, I have come to some new insights into what modern civilization, which
6a and 6b. Young visitors to the Japanese National Museum of Ethnology
learning to write and read Braille.
predominantly gives priority to the sense of vision, should become. The “act to create” and the “work to open” as I have introduced them above, are the important keys to my lifework of reconsidering what modern civilization, which gives priority to the sense of vision, should become. In order to overcome the hopeless situation of modern civilization, it may be that we all need a “mind to open,” which is acquired by recovering our five innate senses.

In the history of Japanese religion and entertainment, blind people have played an important role. As mentioned above, blind lute-playing minstrels, biwa-hōshi, creators and popularizers of the Tales of Heike (Heike Monogatari), late seventeenth-century tales, transmitted their unique performing arts successively from master to pupil through oral instruction. Their incomparable art has been handed down even until today. Blind female mediums, itako, living in small numbers in the Tōhoku district, are shaman who, through severe training, acquired the art of seeing the unseen world of the spirits of the dead. In the Edo period the blind acquired the skills of massage and acupuncture as occupations. Hand-therapy, in which practitioners infer the inward condition of their patients with their fingertips and palms, is also a way the blind make a living.

Beyond those examples of the special skills practiced by the blind, the life of the Ainu or people in the Jōmon era (ca. 1400–300 BCE) provides evidence that natural human beings, that is people with innate abilities uninfluenced by modern civilization, freely exercised the full power of the five senses. The Ainu or the people in the Jōmon era hunted and fished, exercising their five senses, which were probably far keener than those of so called “civilized,” modern human beings. In the process of modernization with the introduction of written language, however, visual communication of information became the mainstream, and what was not visually perceptible, such as the world of the spirits of the dead, was abandoned as superstition. With the introduction of Western medicine, inward physical conditions came to be observed directly and visually. Blind people, whose special powers of perception—totally independent of the sense of vision—were increasingly discriminated against, specifically because they could not use the sense of vision.

The advent of the museum can be seen as characterizing modern
society’s dependence on the convenience of visual sense and the information it brings. A museum, which collects and exhibits valuable historical materials, is a cultural system that displays the authority and power of a nation and of the museum’s founder to the world. Museums became places where exhibits were to be visually appreciated, while the sense of touch was given only a subordinate role and, in fact, was largely forbidden. Those who could not see—the visually handicapped—dif-fidently enjoyed only those exhibits that they could touch, specially mounted in only a few museums. This was the unfortunate situation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Because of what we have learned from history, the significance of our museum’s opening the touch-culture exhibition in the twenty-first century hopefully at last will become clear. The trigger for opening up the possibility of museums is not the exhibition that permits touching but which considers the sense of touch a mere alternative to the sense of vision, rather it is the exhibition that is designed to be touched and that explores the identity of the sense of touch. The words telling pointedly the special qualities and nature of “the exhibition to be touched” are “create” and “open.”

Partially following Dr. Umesao’s idea from the foundation of our museum, the permanent exhibits of the National Museum of Ethnology are fundamentally open-access-style displays that the visitor can touch with his or her hands outstretched. This is the only museum in Japan having so many touchable exhibits. Indeed, this is innovative, but the basic premise of the exhibits’ being designed to be touched actually only supplements the museum’s main approach. Unfortunately, that approach continues to be for visitors to appreciate our museum’s exhibits visually.

Though my thematic exhibition “Touch and Grow Rich” was a small-scale, personal project, it was an exhibition different from traditional ones in offering a display all of which was designed to be touched. While conventional museums are biased in favor of visual sense, I recognize the five senses as equivalent and that each has a different character. In this 2006 exhibit I focused on enjoyment through the sense of touch, but in the future I want to mount other exhibits that concentrate on hearing and smell.
The concept of “barrier-free” experience is useful to museums because it turns the museum’s attention to the handicapped who generally have been forgotten. “Barrier free,” which seeks the idea of human equality, hereafter will be a goal for museums as public institutions. In order that the visually handicapped—or any minority—enjoy museums just as the sighted do, special supporting services are indispensable. As a precursor to barrier-free museum exhibits, consideration for the disabled (the so-called weak people) is important, and the necessary budget will have to be allocated to meet these goals.

In fact, a museum—and particularly an ethnological museum—is a place where people turn their attention to the differences among them and which produces meetings with different cultures, as well. “Different cultures” is a phrase with diverse meanings, and I define bringing out the potential of the five senses as an “intercultural” experience. The visually handicapped are not weak people who cannot use the sense of sight, but rather are unique people who do not use the sense of sight. My first and last challenge is to offer an active image of the blind as people who know how to enjoy a museum in a way that is different from the common sense, finding fun in touching.

It is my ideal to see that in society each person recognizes differences that exist among individuals, respecting another’s life style as a different culture. In addition, by creating inclusive environments each person interacts with different cultures. “Inclusiveness” is my term for such a new cultural framework, one that would overcome the conventional image of the disabled. In my exhibition I introduced touch culture, comparing it with visual culture. It was a space that embodied the concept of “inclusive museum” for the sighted and the visually handicapped. Different from the “barrier-free” museum experience, evidenced by the increase in number of handicapped visitors, what I intend with the phrase “inclusive” is difficult for ordinary museum visitors to understand.

How we can have many ordinary people notice touch culture and how we can get many ordinary people to stop to look at the exhibits were big themes of my exhibition. Here again we must return to discussion of the individual, human guide. For my exhibition, members of Minpaku Museum Partners functioned not only as guides for the visually handicapped but also as the vanguard of “non-discrimination,” bringing
out—for all visitors—the creative aspects and imagination potential of the five senses. The museum is the best field on which to experience “inclusiveness,” and it is the human guide who can indicate innovative ways to enjoy exhibits. With a human guide, visitors will come to understand different ways of living, which they cannot do when they simply look at exhibits vaguely.

In order to bring into being museums that can be universally appreciated, the latest information technology will play an important role. However, looking at the activities of Minpaku Museum Partners members accompanying the groups of visitors, I deepened my confidence in the effectiveness of the human guide. With respect to both a “barrier-free” museum experience—one that allows direct contact with the objects on display—and a “non-discriminating, universal” museum experience—one that does not prejudice an individual from any “culture”—the human guide will “create” and “open” the way to universal society—starting here with exhibits in the Japanese National Museum of Ethnology. Through the experience of organizing, designing, and mounting the touch-culture exhibition, I have become convinced that a great flow toward the post-modern civilization is about to start in the museum of the twenty-first century and that this current will develop and extend the potential of human beings.

Appendix One
Explanation for Chart of Japanese Braille

Michael Emmerich

In 1825 a Frenchman named Louis Braille devised a means of writing using raised dots that became the basis for similar systems now employed all around the world. In Japan, Ishikawa Kuraji succeeded in translating the method for use with the Japanese language in 1890, contributing greatly to the development of an information culture for the visually impaired. In recent years people have also devised ways to represent the Sino-Japanese graphs (kanji), using raised dots, but printing [for the visually impaired] in Japanese syllabary (kana) remains the standard. New uses for computers to aid the visually impaired are being developed as well.
Tenji, as the raised-dot writing system is known in Japan, makes use of combinations of six dots, this means that only sixty-three written forms are possible. Since it would be ill advised to mark voiced consonants, such as “ga,” or the blended sounds written as a combination of two syllables, such as “kya,” the way one does in standard writing (sumiji)—by adding two dashes at the upper right, in the first case, and by printing the second element in the diphthong combination smaller, in the second—we add on voiced-consonant dots or blended-sound dots before a given Japanese-braille syllable, tenji, doubling its width. At other times, we add a mark indicating that a numeral or writing in the Roman alphabet follows and by this means use a particular combination of dots to represent several different meanings. For instance, the complete array of six dots represents the sound “me” in the kana syllabary, but when read as an English word it means “for,” when read as a number it means “infinity,” and when read as a musical notation it means “an F whole note.”

Because the size of the writing in books printed using Japanese braille can’t be changed, such books are considerably longer than typeset books. The Japanese-braille edition of the Sanseidō New Concise English-Japanese Dictionary, for instance, is printed on 18,000 pages approximately the size of a page [of this journal] and runs to 100 volumes that take up about five meters of shelf space.

Here at our center we publish textbooks, children’s books, works of general interest, and dictionaries intended for schools for the blind, all projects requiring sophisticated techniques. We also prepare various printed matter in Japanese-braille form, tactile maps, Japanese-braille signs and door plates, and so on.

Thank you very much for your continuing support.
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NOTES

2. Osamu Dazai, “Mōjin dokushō” (A Blind Man’s Chuckle), Shinpū 1 (1940).

GLOSSARY

Ainu アイヌ
biwa-hōshi 琵琶法師
Chiba 千葉
Chiba-ken 千葉県
Dazai Osamu 太宰治
Edo 江戸
Fureai ふれ愛
ga が
Heian 平安
Heike Monogatari 平家物語
Hirose, Kojiro 広瀬浩二郎
Hiroshima 広島
Hiroshima-ken 広島県
Ikuta 生田
Iroha いろは
Ishikawa Kuraji 石川倉次
Itako 巫女
Jōmon 縄文
Kana 仮名
Kanchayama ki’nenkan 菅茶山記念館
Kanji 漢字
Kokuritsu Minzokugaku Hakubutsukan 国立民族学博物館
Koto 筝
Kōtō 勾当
Kuzuhara Kōtō 葛原勾当
Kuzuhara Kōtō Nikki 葛原勾当日記
Kya キャ
Meiji 明治
Minpaku 民博
Mōjin dokushō 盲人独笑
Moku-katsuji 木活字
Nishimura Kōchō 西村公朝
Ogura Toyofumi 小倉豊文
Otagi 愛宕
Qi (chi, ki) 気
Sanseidō 三省堂
Shamisen 三味線
Shimizu Masakazu 清水政和
Shinpū 新風
Sumiji 墨字
Tenji 点字
Tōdōza 当道座
Tōhoku 東北
totsu moji 凸文字
Tsukuba 筑波
Uchiyama Haruo 内山春雄
Umesao Tadao 梅棹忠夫
Yakumogoto 八雲琴