Disability in British Art Institutions

Remarks by Charles Saumarez Smith
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Good morning!

I have been asked to speak about my experience of dealing with issues of access and disabilities in British art institutions: first, the National Portrait Gallery, an institution devoted to the study of British portraiture, where I was Director from 1994 to 2002 **(Slide 1. The National Portrait Gallery entrance)**; then the National Gallery, the major British collection of historic western European paintings, where I was Director from 2002 to 2007 **(Slide 2. The National Gallery façade)**; and now the Royal Academy of Arts in Piccadilly, where I have been Secretary and Chief Executive since 2007 **(Slide 3. The Royal Academy)**.

I should perhaps explain my interest in the topic. It began when I was involved with the design of a new wing to be added in the back yard of the National Portrait Gallery, in space which was jointly shared with the

National Gallery **(Slide 4. The National Portrait Gallery backyard)**. At the time, I have to confess that I was not particularly alert to issues of disabled access, not having previously had to deal with them. But, by chance, my oldest son, Otto, was born with mild cerebral palsy and, at the time that I was working on the plans for the development of the National Portrait Gallery, he had a major operation which involved rotating his upper thigh bones. It meant that, for a period of three months or so, just at the moment when we were facing issues relating to disabled access, he was confined to a wheelchair. It was a salutary experience. In a way, I would recommend that every museum director should be required compulsorily to push a wheelchair round public institutions as part of their initiation into the role in order to find out what the experience is like for disabled visitors.

What one discovers is that some are very good, well designed, and access is pretty straightforward. Doors open. There are ramps where there need to be ramps. The lifts have been designed with due thought that they should be able to accommodate not just a large wheelchair, but the person who is accompanying or pushing the wheelchair. But, far too often, the assumption is that, provided there is some level of access, even if it is at the back or side of the building, through the tradesman's entrance, that is enough. Not

nearly enough thought is normally given by architects and by those drawing up plans for new museums to ensure that access is as good for those with wheelchairs as it is for everyone else. I always remember wheeling my son round Canary Wharf, the great, then brand new office development in the east end of London, one Saturday morning at the time that we were working on the National Portrait Gallery **(Slide 5. Canary Wharf)**. Nearly every door had an efficient system of automatic opening for wheelchairs placed at a convenient height immediately next to the doors. We made smooth progress through the buildings. But one single one did not. We were then compelled to make a long detour through into the service quarters, past the dustbins behind Tesco, into the twilight private zone behind the grand public spaces. Immediately, the whole sense of disabled access having been carefully and scrupulously thought about collapsed. You need 100% convenient access, not 95%. It is hard to convey the sense of humiliation for the wheelchair user when the person finds that official bodies have not fully thought through issues of disabled access.

It happened that, when we were working on the design of the interior of the National Portrait Gallery, we met a very characteristic issue in the conversion of historic buildings when it came to providing access from the

lifts to the top floor galleries. It was originally planned in such a way that you came out of the lift and, immediately in front of the lift door, there was a semi-circular set of stone steps, which were part of the original architectural design by Ewan Christian, the late nineteenth-century architect of the original building **(Slide 6. National Portrait Gallery: Ewan Christian design of NPG staircase)**. The architects, Jeremy Dixon and Edward Jones, who were and remain close friends, felt that it didn't really matter that this meant that no-one in a wheelchair could have access to the top floor galleries from the lifts at the front of the building. They were more interested in the integrity of the original design and felt that wheelchair users could just as well use the lifts towards the back of the building. It was only a matter of the wheelchair users following a slightly different and not especially inconvenient route up to the top floor **(Slide 7. National Portrait Gallery: plan of ground floor)**. But, this is precisely the sort of issue that one faces very commonly with a historic building and I'm afraid that, because of my experience of taking my son round museums, I insisted that we found a solution which made access possible from the lifts at the front of the building. We got rid of the original circular steps, raised the level of the floor, and re-laid the original late nineteenth-century mosaics **(Slide 8. National Portrait Gallery: view of space at the top of the main**

staircase). I'm sure it was very expensive. But I feel that it was worth it. Now, not one person in 100,000 would realize that we changed the original layout of the building. But what it does mean is that, if you are in a wheelchair, you <u>can</u> visit the top floor galleries by the lift at the front of the building.

What is the lesson of this experience? The answer is that providing proper and convenient disabled access requires an effort of will. It is not something which is necessarily thought of as part of the design as a whole, but is often treated simply as an add-on, to be dealt with by specialist consultants. And, of course, it does make the conversion of historic building more expensive. But, in the end, I think that there is an issue of human rights, which one experiences when one is with a disabled person. Are we going to treat the disabled as having rights equivalent to the able bodied or are we going to treat them, in all sorts of subtle, but significant ways, as second-class citizens?

Now, it happens that, since that first experience of dealing with issues of disabled access at the National Portrait Gallery, I have had much more experience, because, in 2002, the year in which I moved next door from the

National Portrait Gallery to be Director of the National Gallery, my wife was diagnosed as having multiple sclerosis. Her medical condition has gradually declined to the point where she is now entirely confined to an increasingly large, heavy and unwieldy, automated wheelchair. It is not easy for us to travel. But she still wants to. She still wants to visit museums. Next week we will travel through France in a specially converted Fiat Multipla with my oldest son who is passionately interested in visiting buildings designed by Le Corbusier. The movement in my wife's body has nearly entirely gone, but her mind remains just as active as it was before. I have found it an interesting experience and it has made me much more aware of the issues of disabled access than I would otherwise be.

In Britain, owing to the disability discrimination act, which was passed in 2005, the state requires the provision of effective means of disabled access in all new buildings. At the National Gallery, I was involved with some of the same issues, working with the same architects, Jeremy Dixon and Edward Jones. Before I arrived, the Trustees of the National Gallery had drawn up plans to open up the two side entrances into the building from Trafalgar Square **(Slide 9. National Gallery: view from Trafalgar Square)**. I do not ever remember it being stated, but I assume in thinking

about the scheme in retrospect that there must have been a drive to break down the sense that the National Gallery had been designed as a temple of the arts, placed on a substantial plinth and podium, and could only be reached by steps which led up off the pavement onto the podium. By opening up the two side entrances, it would be possible for people, including wheelchair users, to come into the building straight off Trafalgar Square. The architects had intended that, once in the heart of the building, there would be an escalator taking people up to the main floor picture galleries, equivalent to the escalator which they had provided at the National Portrait Gallery **(Slide 10. NPG escalator)**. But, by the time I arrived, the Trustees' building committee had forbidden an escalator in the heart of the National Gallery. Why? It was regarded as vulgar, an inappropriately commercial addition to a temple of the arts. They did not want it to be convenient for visitors to see the collection. Psychologically, they wanted it to be difficult, to be an effort, to require a change in the state of mind as one approached the contemplation of art. So, instead, they allowed the creation of a big and rather forbidding, extremely steep staircase up into the heart of the building **(Slide 11. National Gallery: Annenberg staircase)**. I look back on this as an emblem of the fact that access to museums is not just an issue of physical access, but of psychological access as well. It is about a

state of mind as to how convenient one wants it to be for people to look at and enjoy the experience of works of art.

My third experience of dealing with issues of disability is at the Royal Academy of Arts in Piccadilly **(Slide 12. Royal Academy of Arts)**. This is probably very comparable to the experience of Russian museums. We operate in a big, old building, which was originally a seventeenth-century private house, built on the north side of Piccadilly on what was then the western, residential side of the city of London; it was acquired in the early eighteenth-century by the Earls of Burlington and was done up in the latest and smartest Italianate style by the third Earl of Burlington and his close friend and artistic associate, William Kent, sometime between 1715 and 1722. In 1854, the whole site, including the courtyard at the front and garden behind, was acquired by the government in order to provide a site for the so-called learned societies, including the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries; in the 1860s, the main building was given to the Royal Academy of Arts, who built fine public exhibition galleries on the back of the main house; and, in the 1880s, the then Surveyor of the Royal Academy, Richard Norman Shaw, added two wings on either side of the main entrance. So, the building is, in other words, a magnificent and historic hodge-podge,

important for the archaeology of the various changes which have been made to it, but none of them have been made with the needs of the disabled visitor in mind.

So, what can be done? A certain amount has already been done. In the late 1980s, Norman Foster, now Lord Foster, and his project architect, Spencer de Grey, designed the so-called Sackler Galleries replacing the old diploma galleries at the top of the building and inserting a large and beautiful lift into space between the original, seventeenth-century building and the picture galleries behind **(Slide 13. Royal Academy of Arts: Sackler Gallery lift)**. This was deliberately designed as a prominent feature of the new building. It enables everyone to go up to the attic storey galleries comfortably and that includes disabled visitors, who are accommodated along with everyone else, which, in my view, is the ideal. Sometime around 2000, Michael Hopkins inserted a very elegant ramp at the front of the building which provides disabled access alongside the original nineteenth-century steps **(Slide 14. Royal Academy of Arts: Hopkins ramps at front entrance)**. Again, this has been done simply, unobtrusively and elegantly, a model of how to add a ramp without making it look too obvious.

We now face a whole series of problems in the conversion of the rest of the site as we try to modernize it for the purpose of improving the experience of visitors in time for our 250th anniversary in 2018. Let me outline some of the problems. The restaurant is on a different level from the rest of the building. At the moment, there is a ramp down to the restaurant, but it is designed too steeply and contravenes current building regulations **(Slide 15. Royal Academy of Arts: architecture ramp)**. If we insert a platform lift, I have anxieties about the way in which platform lifts have to be designed, which makes them very ugly, slow, noisy and inconvenient, making the wheelchair user feel conspicuous and uncomfortable. The lift to the Sackler Gallery is a single lift. It is nearing the end of its operational life. But we are wholly dependent on it. There had been going to be a second adjacent lift, but it was apparently axed at an early stage of the 1980s building plans, so we now have to create a second ancillary service lift at vast expense **(Slide 16. David Chipperfield: south-west wing)**. It will be extremely hard to raise funds for it. We have a beautiful and historic art school in the basement of the building, which has an extraordinary integrity representing, to a remarkable extent, the history of art teaching in Great Britain **(Slide 17. Royal Academy of Arts: cast corridor)**. It has absolutely no disabled access whatever. We are planning to create a link between Burlington

House and the building we own to the north of Burlington House, but nearly every part of the building is on a slightly different level. How are we going to connect the two buildings, so that passage between them is easy and does not consist of a whole series of uncomfortable platform lifts? **(Slide 18. David Chipperfield: axonometric drawing of site)**. All of these are problems and it is easy to be cast down by them and think that they are difficult, if not impossible, to solve. All I would do is to urge you that the effort is worthwhile. Convenient disabled access is not a luxury, but a basic requirement of public buildings.

So, I would like by way of conclusion to draw up my experience into a set of rules, which I hope might provide some guidance as you approach the long task of adapting Russia's many wonderful historic museums for the needs of the twenty-first century visitor.

First, I do not think that architects and, indeed, museum directors think of disabled access as a first and necessary requirement of design. They — or, I should say, we — think of design as a set of aesthetic choices and, then, are too inclined to treat disabled access as an add-on, to be inserted by specialist

consultants, rather than as something which should be integral to every aspect of the thinking about new museum design.

Second, there is often an elegant solution to the issue of disabled access. Too often, disabled access is treated as a disfiguring addition to a historic environment with a huge, clunking ramp, necessary, but looking as if it is not particularly desirable. This is the reason for integrating the thinking about disabled access into the original design, rather than treating it as an add-on.

Third, and I know this will seem ridiculously obvious, but it is surprising how often it is ignored, do please make lifts large enough to accommodate a large wheelchair with ease <u>and</u> the person who is accompanying the wheelchair as well. I now have to steer my wife's wheelchair. It is surprising how often this is difficult to do in lifts even if they have been quite recently designed.

Fourth, don't treat disabled access as just a physical issue. It is a state of mind as well. It is surprising how many subtle indicators there are as to whether a disabled visitor is welcome or not. At Christmas, we went to see

a Cranach exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. It was quite obvious that almost no thought had been given to a disabled visitor. They were able to locate an enormous and unwieldy automated vehicle which looked like a snow plough with which I was allowed to wheel my wife through the exhibition backwards. My wife quite enjoyed it. I did not. I thought it was humiliating.

Fifth, think about the visit as a whole, not just entry and exit. Disabled lavatories need to be large. If one goes into a restaurant or café with a wheelchair, you want it to be easy and convenient and not to involve moving hundreds of chairs and making other people get up to make way for the wheelchair.

I realise that, in pushing my wife round half the museums of Europe, I have become very determined to try to ensure that disabled visitors are treated as having rights and expectations of their visit equivalent to those of other visitors. This would seem straightforward, but it is surprising how often it is ignored.

When we had finished our visit to the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels, we went to the museum restaurant to get something to eat. There was a step into the restaurant and no ramp. No-one seemed to care or have thought of it. So, at the end of a long and frustrating visit, pushing a huge great monster vehicle round an exhibition, you suddenly find that lunch is denied to you. You would be surprised how emotionally crushing and aggravating the experience can be. I'm afraid I can only say that I recommend it as a way of opening your eyes to what it is like to view the world from a wheelchair.