

## **The Wharton Esherick Museum—ADA: It's Not Just Compliance, but a Visitor-Friendly Service**

From its winding, whimsical staircase to its carved furnishings and the detail of its light fixtures, the Wharton Esherick Studio expresses the extraordinary imagination and talent of this twentieth-century artist and sculptor. Located in Chester County, Pennsylvania, this National Historic Landmark offers visitors a powerful sensory experience through Esherick's artistry in the studio's architecture, its everyday furniture and household items, and his paintings, woodcuts and sculptures. But what do you do if you are blind? Restricted to a wheelchair? Or challenged by other disabilities?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which became effective in 1992, requires that public businesses and services meet the special needs of those with disabilities by providing auxiliary aids such as Braille, audio description for television, or sign language interpretation. Physical barriers must be removed in existing buildings by adding ramps or widening doors when removal can be accomplished without difficulty or expense. These accommodations are required in new facilities. When physical barriers in older buildings cannot be removed, organizations must offer alternative methods for providing access to their services.

Historic sites often struggle to meet ADA regulations and confront important stewardship questions, such as how will a wheelchair accessible ramp or lift impact the historical integrity of the building, the landscape's archaeological resources, or its aesthetic qualities? Site administrators also find themselves constrained by a lack of resources needed to accomplish changes that would improve a disabled visitor's experience. However, improved accessibility can be achieved through creativity and a general commitment to making visitors welcome at historic sites.

Although faced with the same constraints as other historic sites, the Wharton Esherick Museum demonstrates exemplary work in reaching out to audiences challenged by visual, physical, or other disabilities. The Wharton Esherick Museum is one of a handful of historic sites in the Greater Philadelphia region that offers wheelchair accessibility. Although the studio's quirky staircase prevents access to the upstairs, two-thirds of the Wharton Esherick Museum is wheelchair accessible. The museum can accommodate two wheelchairs at one time and requests one-day's notice for tours so enough staff is available to assist wheelchair-bound visitors in and out of the building.

The Wharton Esherick Museum reminds us that ADA is not just about wheelchairs. The museum offers touch tours where visually impaired visitors can handle artifacts to experience Esherick's artistry. For instance, they can feel how he shaped the studio's door handles to fit snugly and smoothly in one's hand. Paoli's Royer-Greaves School for the Blind and the Montgomery County Association for the Blind both send students and groups to participate in the Museum's touch tours.

Because handling objects can elicit powerful, positive responses from those with developmental disabilities, the Museum's touch tours also attract several regional organizations that provide services to these individuals including the Lower Merion Vocational Training Center, Devereux,

and the Post-Program at Elwyn. Approximately twice a month, the Bryn Mawr Rehabilitation Center sends patients recovering from head trauma to the Wharton Esherick Museum as part of their final evaluation in its therapy program. First patients are assessed on their ability to call the museum to make tour arrangements. Then patients, accompanied by a therapist, take a regular tour of the site and are evaluated on how they maneuver through the studio's tight passages and irregular stairways. The Wharton Esherick Museum literally becomes part of an individual's healing process.

By striving to reach out to audiences with special challenges, historic sites become better equipped in their overall hospitality and visitor services. Rob Leonard, Executive Director of the Wharton Esherick Museum sums it up well: "We make every effort to be sensitive to the needs of every visitor that comes to the Wharton Esherick Studio."

*For more information about the Wharton Esherick Museum's touch tours, contact Rob Leonard at 610-644-5822.*