ACCESSIBILITY OF ITALY'S ARTISTIC HERITAGE: BEST PRACTICES IN VENICE AND VICENZA

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Abstract

Cultural heritage accessibility has been studied and funded in Italy and in the rest of Europe for several years. Experts and academics have worked together with exhibition spaces and organizations of persons with disabilities to design and implement guidelines that could help museums and tourist destinations become fully accessible. As a research grant holder within Spoke 6 of the publicly funded research program "Interconnected Nord-Est Innovation Ecosystem" (iNEST), I have analyzed and compared the accessibility offering and practices adopted in some among Venice's and Vicenza's main exhibition spaces. The two cities are representative of the Veneto region, as they are very different in terms of size and tourist flows. On the one hand, Venice has an extremely rich cultural and artistic heritage, which makes it a unique and must-go destination for Italian and foreign tourists alike. On the other hand, the smaller and lesser-known Vicenza has become a necessary stop on the cultural and architectural routes linking Venice to Milan, thanks to its museums, the works of 16th-century architect Andrea Palladio and the numerous villas dating back to the time of the Venetian Republic.

I will begin my presentation by providing some relevant data and the legislative framework necessary to analyze accessibility practices in Italian museum. More specifically, I will first provide data on disability in Italy, then I will offer a brief overview of the conventions and laws regulating the right to tourism and accessibility in Italy, and I will conclude this first part by presenting some relevant accessibility projects and initiatives that have been carried out in Italy. Subsequently comes a summary of the most significant and innovative part of my research: the study and analysis of the accessibility practices adopted in 19 exhibition spaces in Venice and Vicenza. At the end of the presentation, I will comment and compare accessibility practices between the two cities and compare the data I collected with official data on Italian museum accessibility provided by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat).

Text
Disability in numbers in Italy

The Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) reported in 2019 that over three million people in Italy, constituting 5.2% of the population, face severe limitations in everyday activities, hindering their participation in cultural and social life. In the Veneto region alone, an estimated 5.6% of women and 3.2% of men experience one or more kinds of disabilities, including motor, visual, hearing and intellectual impairments.

Motor disabilities, which affect a person's mobility, impact 7.2% of the Italian population aged 15 and above (Istat 2019). Sensory disabilities, encompassing visual and hearing impairments, are estimated at 2% for severe visual disabilities and 4.1% for severe hearing disabilities (*ibid.*).

Intellectual disabilities, undermining cognitive and adaptive functioning, are estimated at 1% in Italy (Anfass).

A further kind of impairment was identified by professor and intercultural communication expert David Katan (2018), namely linguistic and cultural disabilities. This concept refers to the challenges faced by non-Italian speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds visiting or living in Italy. Katan argues that these individuals encounter linguistic and cultural barriers hindering their engagement in daily activities and compares such barriers to the one being faced by people with broadly-recognized types of disabilities, like the ones mentioned above. Considering the novelty of this perspective, official data on cultural and linguistic disabilities is lacking. Therefore, I have turned to data on foreign tourist flows and foreign residents in Italy, assuming that a majority of foreigners in Italy encounter some kind of linguistic and cultural barriers during their stay. Istat (2022a) reported that, during the first nine months of 2022, Italy received 164 million foreign tourists, and as of January 1, 2021, 8.7% of the population, totaling 5.2 million people, were foreign residents (2022b).

Legislation on cultural heritage accessibility in Italy

Italian legislation can count on only two documents specifically addressing cultural heritage accessibility. The first, enacted in 1989, is titled *Disposizioni per favorire il superamento e l'eliminazione delle barriere architettoniche negli edifici privati* ("Provisions to overcome and eliminate architectural barriers in private buildings"). This law, applicable to private buildings, including exhibition spaces, outlines guidelines for adapting architectural structures to accommodate individuals with disabilities. In 2008, the Italian Culture Ministry complemented this law with a series of *Guidelines to overcome architectural barriers in cultural heritage sites*. The document includes a section focusing on museums and exhibition spaces, providing recommendations for designing or enhancing buildings and exhibition halls to ensure accessibility for individuals with disabilities. The guidelines cover aspects such as optimal lighting, safe placement of objects, artworks, and display cases, and the inclusion of audio texts and tactile props. Despite their brevity and partial implementation, these guidelines serve as a foundational effort, highlighting the ministry's commitment to making Italy's cultural heritage universally accessible.

Additionally, a crucial law for museum accessibility is the *Disposizioni per favorire l'accesso dei soggetti disabili agli strumenti informatici* ("Provisions to favor access to IT tools for disabled persons"), commonly known as *Legge Stanca* ("Stanca Act"), enacted in 2004. While not directly addressing the cultural heritage sector, its inclusion in this legislative overview is deemed necessary due to the sector's rapid digital transformation. Given the widespread digital presence of museums globally, with online platforms showcasing collections and educational materials, the "Stanca Act" plays a pivotal role. As museums increasingly offer experiences online, any comprehensive museum accessibility strategy must ensure that websites are equally accessible to individuals with disabilities.

An overview of Italian museums' accessibility

Cultural engagement is known to have a positive impact on individuals' well-being and self-esteem, as evidenced by a survey conducted by Istat (2019). The resulting report reveals that, among people with severe disabilities who actively participate in cultural activities like cinema, theater, concerts, or visits to cultural heritage sites, one in three expresses high life satisfaction – a 15% increase compared to people with disabilities who don't have an active cultural life. This correlation emphasizes the

importance of cultural participation for overall life satisfaction, echoing national and international legislation recognizing the right to leisure and cultural life (such as the United Nations 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*) and validating the further development of inclusive cultural experiences.

Despite the documented benefits and legal emphasis on accessibility, Italian museums appear to predominantly address the needs of visitors with motor disabilities. Current Istat data (2022b) indicate that 61.6% of museums have adapted their infrastructures to overcome architectural barriers, primarily through ramps and elevators. However, accessibility for individuals with visual or hearing impairments remains limited, with only about 8% offering touch maps for visitors with visual disabilities, 20.4% featuring specific touch props such as replicas (Istat 2015), and 4.4% featuring videos in Italian Sign Language (LIS) (Istat 2022). Furthermore, assistance, activities and guided tours for those with visual, cognitive or communication disabilities are available in just above 10% of museums.

A sort of paradox emerges from Istat data. Despite 66% of museums being free for visitors with disabilities and their caregivers, almost 40% still have architectural barriers, and around 90% are not fully accessible to individuals with sensory or intellectual disabilities. Consequently, in 2018 (Istat 2019), only 9.3% of Italian residents with severe limitations participated in three or more cultural activities, including museum visits, compared to 30.8% of those without limitations. Focusing on museums, 88.5% of people with severe disabilities did not visit them, while the figure dips to 66% among people without limitations. (*ibid.*)

I will conclude this section by examining linguistic accessibility. Istat data from 2015 reveal that English is spoken in 60.3% of Italian museums, with French, German, and Spanish also represented, although the availability of written information material and audio guides in foreign languages is limited. However, having the staff speak a foreign language or information material translated does not necessarily make a museum accessible for foreigners. As Professor Katan (2016) explained, the most effective tool to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers is *mindful* translation, that is, a process where the translator is aware of the gap separating the speakers of the two cultures and works towards bridging it. There are no data on the availability of mindful translation in Italian exhibitions spaces; however, studies have shown that this practice is still little known (Katan 2016).

Accessibility: from theory to practice

Several European and Italian initiatives have been established to enhance accessibility to cultural heritage sites in Italy for individuals with motor, sensory, or intellectual disabilities. Noteworthy among these are two EU-funded projects with Italian involvement. The COME-IN! initiative, part of the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme (2014-2020), engaged various institutions across Central Europe, including those in Austria, Croatia, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Slovenia. Italian contributors included the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, educational centers ACLI and ENAIP Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and NGO Consulta regionale delle Associazioni delle Persone con disabilità e delle loro Famiglie in Friuli-Venezia Giulia ONLUS. This project produced guidelines adopted by the Archaeological Museum in Udine.

Concurrently, the EU-funded ADLAB (2011-2014) and ADLAB PRO projects (2016-2019) at the University of Trieste, focusing on visual disabilities, resulted in guidelines and online materials for training visual accessibility professionals.

Italian initiatives include: MAPS, a website by the Italian National Institute for Deaf People and the Culture Ministry, mapping culturally accessible sites for people with

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hearing disabilities; and *Articolo 27*, a newsletter developed by the Culture Ministry and Omero National Tactile Museum in Ancona, promoting accessible cultural heritage sites.

Addressing intellectual disabilities, Museo per tutti and Bene FAI per tutti were launched by NGO L'abilità and by the National Trust of Italy FAI, respectively. *Sentire l'Arte*, another project by FAI, caters to those with hearing disabilities.

Region-specific projects have also been implemented. *Turismabile*, initiated by the Piedmont region in 2007, set a precedent for accessibility initiatives, including wine and food tastings and accessible exhibitions at Turin's National Automobile Museum. In Veneto, the *Keep in touch!* project, launched in 2018, eliminated architectural barriers in several regional museums, creating visit routes and props for those with sensory disabilities. Moreover, from 2018 to 2021, the Veneto regional administration collaborated on the TOURISM4ALL project with Italian and Croatian institutions under Interreg Europe. This comprehensive initiative targeted all facets of the tourism industry, producing an accessibility handbook, video tutorials, and an English-Italian list of accessible venues and experiences. All materials are accessible on the TOURISM4ALL website, providing valuable resources for enhancing cultural accessibility across Italy and Croatia.

Educational offer in Italian museums

Museum education plays a pivotal role in Italy, addressing diverse audiences regardless of their background or abilities. According to Istat (2015), Italian museums excel in educational offerings, with 57.7% providing classes and workshops, 51.6% organizing conferences, and 50.7% hosting live shows and events. Dedicated activities for preschoolers and school-age children are available in 31.2% of museums, while 15.2% feature areas and edutainment activities for kids and toddlers. Notably, educational initiatives extend beyond age to include programs for the elderly, individuals with dementia, and migrants, fostering cultural exchange and social integration. These efforts aim to dismantle the misconception of museums as exclusive spaces, making them accessible and enriching for people of diverse backgrounds and experiences in places like Venice and Vicenza.

Research methodology

This research investigates the application of cultural heritage accessibility guidelines in a sample of 19 Italian museums, including 18 museums and one villa, situated in Venice and Vicenza. Conducted 15 years after the Italian Culture Ministry released its accessibility guidelines and nearly 25 years since the UNWTO introduced the term "accessible tourism" (1999), the study aims to assess the practical implementation of these guidelines in private and public museums. The selected case studies encompass various museum types in both cities, with Venice representing a unique cultural hub and Vicenza offering a more typical Italian historical city experience. Data were gathered from museum websites and supplemented with semi-structured interviews with museum staff, covering topics such as architectural, linguistic, visual, hearing, and intellectual accessibility, as well as educational activities. The research provides valuable insights into the status of accessibility practices in Italian museums.

Here is a list of the cultural heritage sites included in the sample:
Venice:
- Peggy Guggenheim Collection

- Gallerie dell'Accademia
- Galleria Giorgio Franchetti a Ca' d'Oro
- Museo di Palazzo Grimani
- Museo Archeologico Nazionale Vicenza:
- Museo d'Arte Orientale a Ca' Pesaro
- Museo Correr
- Museo di Storia Naturale di Venezia Giancarlo Ligabue
- Palazzo Mocenigo
- Ca' Pesaro - Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna
- Palazzo Ducale

Vicenza:
- Gallerie d'Italia – Vicenza
- Palladio Museum
- Basilica Palladiana
- Teatro Olimpico
- Museo Civico di Palazzo Chiericati
- Museo Naturalistico Archeologico
- Museo Diocesano
- Villa Valmarana ai Nani

Analysis of results

Venice and Vicenza host diverse exhibition spaces, involving public, private, and diocesan entities. The accessibility offerings in both cities are largely consistent, with the primary distinction being that Vicenza's museums collaborate through the "Musei per tutti" (Museums for All) project, a networked initiative supported by the local tourism consortium Vicenza è. This has resulted in a series of different initiatives that cater to various disabilities. Specifically, municipal museums have launched the "Vicenza Inclusion" project, the diocesan museum have their own "MuseoxTutti" and the Palladio Museum feature the "Palladio per mano/Touch" initiative. Conversely, the high number and diverse nature of cultural heritage stakeholders in Venice draws a rather fragmented landscape. The main exhibition spaces can be divided into three categories: a network of national museums, a network of municipal museums (MUVE foundation) and private spaces, which operate independently according to available funds.

The forthcoming sections will delve into research results categorized by architectural, linguistic, sensory, intellectual accessibility, and education for a clearer analysis.

Architectural accessibility

Despite historical buildings posing architectural challenges, most museums have made progress in overcoming these barriers. However, the implementation of guidelines issued by the Culture Ministry 15 years ago appears incomplete. Indeed, the guidelines suggest designing exhibition materials according to "readability and accessibility criteria," which, in our interpretation, include that captions and display boards are placed at a suitable height for children and wheelchair users. Among the 19 analyzed exhibition spaces, only four (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Museo di Storia Naturale and Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna in Venice, and the Palladio

Museum in Vicenza) have adhered to these criteria. Inconsistencies were observed at Vicenza's Museo di Palazzo Chiericati.

Efforts toward accessibility appear incomplete and further research is needed to investigate the reasons for this. My guess, at least in the case of public museums, is that setups are outdated and funding insufficient, as some interviewees noted.

Linguistic accessibility

All museums, except the Basilica Palladiana in Vicenza, have translated their contents into English and often French and German, as well as other (mostly European) languages. This is true in Venice as well as in Vicenza, proving the latter's relevance in the tourist routes of Northern Italy. However, a more detailed analysis is needed to assess whether communication is genuinely accessible for foreign visitors, considering the mindfulness criteria proposed by Katan. A first indication comes from an interviewee at Venice's Museo Archeologico, who has observed that adult visitors, both international and Italian, tend to prefer exhibition texts for children, finding them more accessible due to their simplicity. This is a sign that mindfulness is lacking even in intracultural communication.

On a positive note, some museums – like the Guggenheim Collection, Museo di Storia Naturale, and Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna in Venice – engage in promising activities to promote social inclusion for migrants and foreigners.

Sensory accessibility

I have decided to group visitors with visual and hearing disabilities together to better compare the museum experiences each group is offered. Despite the overarching goal of fostering inclusivity, a clear pattern emerges from our data: museums in both cities tend to address the needs of visually-impaired visitors more than those of hearing-impaired ones.

Touch tours, workshops, Braille texts, and replicas are featured in almost all 19 exhibition spaces, regardless of their nature and ownership (national, municipal or private). Conversely, the accessibility offering for those with hearing disabilities paints a contrasting picture. Only a select few museums have available resources such as Italian Sign Language videos or special headphones, exposing a notable gap in adequately addressing the needs of this public.

A couple of times I asked museum staff about the disparate treatment between these two groups. The response was straightforward: visitors with hearing disabilities can read, so they access information through display boards, exhibition sheets, and video guides featuring written text. This asks for further research into the reasons behind this difference in treatment. My two guesses are that either museum managers are not aware of the importance of engaging all visitor demographics through tailored communication tools; or, once again, they lack the funds to do so.

Furthermore, the study has shown that accessibility is not complete even for patrons with visual disabilities. While touch tours and props are widespread, lighting is generally poor and information materials are hard to read. Only the the Gallerie d'Italia in Vicenza have specifically designed their lighting to be accessible to all.

This partial but common – maybe systemic – disregard of official guidelines made me wonder whether museum managers and curators are aware of the crucial societal role their institutions should play. Museums are not merely repositories of information but should foster dialogue and integration among different social groups, including minorities. Already in 2019, the above-mentioned Istat report *Conoscere il mondo della disabilità* highlighted that an active cultural life improved the quality of life and social

inclusion of persons with disabilities. But the same report acknowledged that good practices in Italy were still "fragmented and occasional" (p. 98; my translation), as my findings seem to confirm.

Intellectual accessibility

More than half of the museums are accessible for persons with intellectual disabilities, usually through dedicated workshops, tailor-made guided tours, or educational activities. Moreover, the Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna in Venice can be visited autonomously thanks to a free-to-download Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) guidebook. The MUVE foundation, which manages the Galleria, has stated that the guidebook will soon be translated into English and more will be created for the other municipal museums.

Education and social inclusion

Education has emerged as the strong point of all studied museums, with diverse and numerous activities available in multiple languages (mainly Italian and English). These educational programs cater to a wide audience, from kindergarten to high-school interns, and include summer camps, art workshops, and interactive tours. Noteworthy initiatives include Venice's Museo d'Arte Orientale's accessible kids' website and Vicenza's Palladio Museum's blogs and online games.

I would like to conclude this analysis by spotlighting some of the many social inclusion initiatives in both cities. In Venice, museums like MUVE foundation, Peggy Guggenheim Collection and Museo Archeologico Nazionale offer activities for migrants, the elderly, inmates, and visitors with dementia. In Vicenza museums work together to offer activities to elderly individuals, cancer patients, and persons with intellectual disabilities or Alzheimer's.

Comparison with official data on accessibility in Italian museums

I have conducted a comparative analysis between the accessibility offering in our sample and Istat data on Italian museum accessibility from 2015 and 2022 (b), which I have detailed in the third section.

In 2022, Istat reported that 61.6% of Italian museums had adapted their infrastructures for visitors with motor disabilities. In my sample, 73.7% (14 out of 19) are fully wheelchair-accessible, surpassing the national average.

Regarding sensory and intellectual disabilities, while in 2015 20.4% of Italian museums offered touch props, 78.9% (15 out of 19) in our sample featured them, exceeding once again the national average. Accessibility for visitors with hearing disabilities reached 21% in our sample, with 15.8% featuring Italian Sign language videos, surpassing the national 2022 average of 4.4%. Moreover, 57.9% of our museums offered suitable materials and tours for visitors with intellectual disabilities, against 18.9% reported by Istat (2022b).

Linguistic accessibility in our sample was also notably high, with materials available in English (95.7%), French (63.2%), German (26.3%), and Spanish (15.8%). This compares to lower Istat data, specifically: English in 56.7% of Italian museums, French or German in little over 20% and Spanish in 7.9%.

Educational activities, present in 57.7% of Italian museums in 2019, were offered by 100% of our sample.

Overall, the 19 museums in our sample outperformed the national average in all categories, painting a promising scenario in Venice and Vicenza, with local museums taking action towards accessibility.

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