

The Big Idea



How can colorblind people experience art the way it was meant to be seen?

By using color-correcting glasses at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

BY TAMI ALTHOFF

As much as Nathan Thompson loves art, visiting a gallery or museum has never been a very colorful experience for him.

Due to Thompson's severe red-green color deficiency, also known as colorblindness, a bright Van Gogh emits only dull grays and yellows. Even works as bright and bold as "Yellow Red Blue" by Wassily Kandinsky appear as brown and murky as Sir George Clausen's "The Farmer's Boy."

Thompson, who serves as board president of the University of Oklahoma's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art Association, was first told he was colorblind in kindergarten after he colored the trunk of a tree green and the leaves brown.

He compares his condition to a flavorless bag of Skittles.

"You've heard the phrase 'taste the rainbow,'" he says. "Imagine not being able to taste all the flavors. It's like that for me with colors."

Thanks to EnChroma glasses now available for colorblind visitors at the Fred, Thompson and others who can't see colors correctly can taste the entire rainbow in the museum's varied collections.

During a recent visit, Thompson walked through each gallery, observing various paintings with and without the EnChroma glasses.

"When you first put on the glasses, everything has a rosy tint to it," he says. "Eventually, things fade back to a normal light. Then the colors really start to deepen."

Thompson took a long look at William Ronald's "Manasquan," then Lee Mullican's "The Fountain," two works in the museum's permanent collection.

"With the glasses off, I see more muted colors," he says. "When I put them back on, the colors pop back out."

Thompson made his way through the museum, eventually

stopping at the vibrantly colorful "Menagerie," a collection of Mexican and Navajo carvings. He viewed the collection several times with the glasses on and off, before settling on "Coyote in Flowers" by Mexican artist Candido Jimenez Ojeda.

"Some of the details—the flowers, the mini-dots, the oranges, the reds and the little bits that you don't normally see with the glasses off—just pop," he says. "It's really neat to see. With the glasses off, you don't get to see the details compared to when you're wearing them. Everything is bolder."

Lesha Maag, the museum's director of audience development, is continually looking for ways to help everyone enjoy what the museum has to offer. She says the museum realized the need to serve those with color deficiencies after Chelle' Guttery, director of OU's Accessibility and Resource Center, and Jack McMahan, an accessibility-needs consultant with Crossing the Chasm, LLC, evaluated the museum, making suggestions for improving accessibility efforts.

"In 2018, we were raising money for accessibility. Once we raised the money and started looking at our needs, we tried to be as comprehensive as possible. We're a museum, so color correction for works of art seemed a little more obvious to us than others," she says.

After raising \$18,000 at the museum's 2018 Silver Soiree event, Maag says the association bought another brand of color-adjusting glasses for patrons to use. After the *OU Daily* ran a story on students using the glasses, EnChroma sent the museum three pairs of its top-of-the-line product, which feature a patented, light-filtering lens technology that maximizes color vibrancy for those affected by red-green color vision deficiency.

"We officially launched the glasses July 15, 2021, and be-



Travis Caperton

Nathan Thompson compares the range and intensity of colors with and without special glasses purchased by the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art Association to help those with colorblindness see art in its true palette.

came the first institution in Oklahoma to have EnChroma materials available to the public, joining the likes of the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum and others,” Maag says.

Patrons can request the EnChroma glasses from a visitor services representative at the museum’s front desk. Maag recommends visitors take EnChroma’s online colorblind test (<https://enchroma.com/pages/test>) and read all the instructions before their visit to make sure they request the best glasses for their type of colorblindness.

“Each pair is slightly different, and we want to make sure our visitors have the best experience possible,” Maag says.

The glasses are one of several changes the museum has made to improve the experience for visitors. In addition to wheelchairs, there are now 40 lightweight, collapsible gallery stools available for patrons who can’t stand for long periods of time.

Other accessibility improvements include an entrance handicap switch to keep doors open as people enter, adaptive scissors and no-tip water pots for use in the museum class-

room, LED lights in each gallery and mono-FM personal PA sound amplifiers.

Thompson says experiencing art as it’s meant to be experienced is nothing short of lifechanging. He almost wonders if it’s real.

“It kind of plays with your mind,” he says. “You think, ‘Did I see it before with the glasses off and I’m just making it up, or are colors actually popping out with the glasses on?’”

“I feel like I’ve been ripped off my whole life,” Thompson says with a laugh. “But it’s really like looking at two different paintings. You’re missing out on a lot of nuances without the glasses.”

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is located in OU’s Arts District, 555 Elm Ave. Admission is free. To learn more about the museum, including more detailed information about its accessibility efforts, visit www.ou.edu/fjma.

Tami Althoff works for OU College of Professional and Continuing Studies and OU Outreach.