



àisthesis

Discovering art with all the senses

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The Omero Prize: New Stimuli for Contemporary Art

by Andrea Socrati

The national contemporary art scene can finally benefit from evocative and unprecedented stimuli, thanks to a unique initiative promoted by the **General Directorate for Contemporary Creativity** (DGCC) of the Ministry of Culture and the **Omero State Tactile Museum**.

We are talking about the **Omero Prize**, aimed at established artists in the contemporary art world. They are invited to introduce or expand a new perspective on creative practice, and consequently, on how artwork is experienced. The goal of the prize, in perfect harmony with the philosophy of the Omero Museum, is to stimulate and support original, multisensory, and inclusive artistic proposals able of broadening access to cultural content.

For the first edition published on July 15, 2025, the call achieved great success closing on September 30, 2025, with a total of **114 applications**.

A Committee composed of experts from various sectors determined the winner of the 1st edition of the Omero Prize: the artist **Alberto Tadiello** with his work **RMN - Risonanza Magnetica Nucleare** (NMR- Nuclear Magnetic Resonance).

The members of the Committee demonstrated notable commitment in carefully examining and evaluating the numerous works. This evaluation requires adopting a different point of view much like the one required by the artists themselves. Now, the aesthetic value of the artwork passes through the values expressed by each individual sensory channel starting with the tactile channel.

Based on the experience of the Omero Museum, visually impaired individuals taught us how important the contribution of touch is and how much information, stimulation, and suggestion it can provide. Therefore, experiencing an artwork by touch not only allows blind individuals to know and enjoy beauty but also offers everyone, without distinction, a new and richer aesthetic experience.

Tactile Aesthetics: Texture, Temperature, Affectivity

We must not forget that certain aspects of reality can be perceived only through the tactile channel, such as the texture of an object, its temperature and the characteristics of its material and surface. We must also remember that touch is present all over our body, both externally and internally, allowing a direct and intimate relationship with the artistic object. Finally, we must not miss the affective aspect, an important component of the aesthetic experience, which finds its ultimate expression in physical contact.

It goes without saying that using the tactile channel in artistic practice, both in production and reception, requires careful reflection on tactile methods and values, thorough organization, and therefore, true education.

The education of touch was already discussed in 1921 by the leader of Futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), in his manifesto *Il Tattilismo* (Tactilism). Marinetti writes that he subjected his sense of touch to an “intensive treatment” with the aim of achieving “great tactile virtue,” and that he created an educational scale of touch and a scale of tactile values to be used in the creations of what he defines “Art of Touch”.

During that same period, we can recall the educational experiences of sensory training carried out at the Bauhaus the school of artistic instruction founded in 1919 by Walter Gropius.

Taking into account all the matters just illustrated regarding the value of multisensory and tactility, the Evaluation Committee, as provided by the call for entries, identified three finalist artists admitted to the second phase of evaluation: **Francesca Grilli** with *The Conversation* (2010), **Rachele Maistrello** with *The Silent World* (2022-2023) and **Alberto Tadiello** with *RMN – Risonanza Magnetica Nucleare* (2005).

From February 5, 2026, the three finalists were presented in a digital exhibition accessible on the websites of the Generali Directorate for Contemporary Creativity and the Omero Museum with the purpose of narrating and promoting them through images, texts, audio descriptions and videos.

Multisensory and Contemporary Creativity

The selected works propose artistic experiences involving the body, sound, touch, and spatial perception. The Committee recognized a strong and original multisensory component in the artworks, combined with a conscious and innovative use of the languages of contemporary creativity in full harmony with the aims of the Prize and the criteria established by the call for entries.

With Three Finalists and One Winner Toward the Second Edition of the Prize

At the conclusion of the Committee's second evaluation phase, the winner was announced on February 24. As previously mentioned, he is Alberto Tadiello. The artist from Vicenza (Montecchio Maggiore (VI) 1983) lives and works in a former bakery at the foot of the Dolomites. He graduated in "Visual Arts Planning and Production" from the IUAV University of Venice and held various solo and group exhibitions both in Italy and abroad, as well as participating in numerous residency programs.

The winning work *RMN*, an acronym for ***Risonanza Magnetica Nucleare*** (NMR Nuclear Magnetic Resonance) and ***Rete Mareografica Nazionale*** (National Tide Network), is a sound installation created in Venice in 2005. As the artist says, *RMN* is an invisible yet physically perceptible sculpture realized through the dissemination of low frequencies in the space that hosts itself. The vibrations are emitted by two subwoofers which, through a decoding system, translate **tide levels** in real time. A specially programmed system connected to the center of the **National Tide Network** updates every 30 seconds, tuning and modulating the intensity of the sound production. *RMN* can be imagined as a low-frequency radio station using the meteorological mast of the port of Ancona as its antenna, constantly capturing the local behavior of the tides.

These **vibrations**, characterized by long wavelengths, create ephemeral volumes depending on how they add together or subtract from one another. Their perception occurs primarily through internal body cavities, such as the stomach, head and bones, and stimulates the proprioceptive system. The artwork penetrates and resonates tacitly within the viewer's body, creating a physical

connection with them while simultaneously placing them in a direct relationship with the surrounding marine environment.

The only sculptural detail is a double metallic filament, a free **reimagining of a hydrographic curve line**, which redraws the space like a guiding line leading viewers into an empty architecture filled with energy, shaped by sound.

The internal space of the museum lives in a symbiotic relationship with external natural forces and translates all their patterns and nuances into sound frequencies, like a **seismographic score that is different every day**. For a moment, one finds oneself immersed revealing an energy that, beyond the senses, pervades our daily lives and is constitutive of a deep human **cyclicity** and **biorhythm**.

RMN stands as a dynamic entity in constant transformation and in relation to the movement and presence of the audience. It takes on meaning only for the presence of a spectator who perceives and interprets it becoming an active part of the process themselves. The body becomes a responsible participant that interferes and interacts with the propagation of frequencies, further shaping the forms created by the sound.

Finally, there is **imaginative potential** that the project sets. Evoking a distance, a geophysical expansion, the movement of enormous masses of water, a connection between museum and city, between inside and outside, between nature and artifice, the artwork generates a tension of concepts and images. They are abstract and become deeply subjective and carriers of an intimate possibility of interpretation.

“Indifferent” to visual impairment, the near-total invisibility of the work cancels out any sensorial hierarchy: beyond the eyes, ears, fingertips, or lips, it is perceived with the internal voids of the body; it is experienced by bringing one’s own body.

In conclusion, we are pleased to announce that the 2nd edition of the Omero Prize is already underway; through the themes of multisensory, tactility, and inclusion, we can contribute to fueling and stimulating reflections and new contemporary creative methods.

Art and touch. Toward a conscious experience

by Elena Tesser

(Iuav University of Venice, Head of the Laboratory for the Analysis of Ancient Materials - LAMA)

The ban on touching artworks **has socio-political roots and material-related scientific evidence**. In the 18th century, tactile access was a privilege of the upper classes, whose touch was considered “rational” and non-harmful. With the opening of museums to the general public, the prohibition against touching objects became strict, labeling physical contact as “dirty” and “undisciplined”. This restriction, maintained to this day, has led modern museology to favor sight as the primary sense for learning relegating the other senses including touch, to secondary ways of knowing.

While socio-political justifications may be debatable today, from the scientific perspective, the interaction of skin with artistic materials shows clear evidence. **Skin** is a complex biochemical system consisting of 70% water, 25% protein, and 3% lipids, with lower percentages of mineral salts. The environment we live in leads the body to absorb a variable content of pollutants and gases dissolved in the atmosphere. With touch, the skin transfers a mixture of sebum and sweat: sebum is a lipid secretion while sweat is predominantly watery and non-neutral containing electrolytes and organic compounds that are potentially reactive with various substrates.

The deterioration of artworks cannot be established a priori but depends on the material, porosity, environment and the presence of any conservation treatments. From a chemical point of view, the deposit of sweat on bronze and copper alloy can promote corrosion phenomena due to dissolved chlorides (bronze disease). In other cases, organic residues left by touch on porous stone substrates can feed the growth of bacteria such as *Serratia marcescens* which produce brownish-red pigments. Furthermore, sulfurous substances carried by skin secretions can react with lead-based pigments in paintings causing color alterations.

From a physical point of view, however over time, abrasion due to rubbing can remove the noble patina and the original decorated surface, increasing the roughness and porosity of the substrate.

Through science applied to cultural heritage, artworks constitute an essential source of information for understanding production technologies, provenance, dating, authenticity, and the state of conservation of artifacts, as well as identifying the causes of degradation and developing guidelines that guarantee conservation and accessibility.

However, scientific literature is full of restoration interventions that have compromised the stability of artworks due to the incorrect use of products, unsuitable practices or inappropriate conservation environments. This begs the question: in order to preserve our heritage, are people's hands really the only factor to limit?

Today, "Sensory Museology" promotes **a controlled or layered touch** based on solid bases. The Omero Museum itself doesn't speak of touching but of caressing artworks. Touch provides information about weight, density, temperature, and vibration that sight cannot capture giving a cognitive value. Blind and visually impaired people require physical contact to access art and several studies have shown that touch has brought significant therapeutic benefits even in healthcare contexts.

For large museums that safeguard historical and contemporary works, one could therefore think not of a universal ban but of a study of the collection materials to select "**suitable for handling**" objects, such as low-porosity stones or protected metals, others for "limited use" on special occasions, such as the recent case of the Veiled Christ at the Museo Cappella Sansevero in Naples and objects that are "untouchable" due to the fragility or nature of their materials. For the latter, 3D scans and printers and the creation of faithful replicas of the originals can allow a complete tactile experience without risk.

The diagnostics of cultural heritage could use this solution not only to classify the works that can be touched but also to monitor the impact of touch on surfaces over time potentially limiting or expanding the permitted access.

Tactile visits often promote the use of nitrile gloves to protect both the handler and the artwork, although gloves sometimes limit the actual perception of the material. In some museums, to avoid gloves **hand washing** is required before contact to reduce the contribution of external pollutants, fatty substances and soluble salts. In 2021, on the occasion of the exhibition “This Living Hand”, the Henry Moore Foundation introduced a sink at the entrance of the Henry Moore Studios & Gardens to encourage visitors to interact with the sculptures only after washing their hands.

We must remember that even with perfectly clean hands, the skin continues to emit sebum and sweat; therefore, it would be necessary to repeat the washing depending on the duration of the visit. Furthermore, sanitizing gels do not remove the lipid component of sebum and can leave substances on the skin that are transferable with touch.

In such a rich and multifaceted landscape of variables rather than continuing to apply the absolute rule of “do not touch”, we could work in multidisciplinary groups to regulate tactile visits for the protection of both the works and the public.

The ban should therefore not be taken as a dogma but subjected to scientific evaluation **to allow everyone a wider access** to culture and knowledge).

Do not touch.

Art, conservation, tactile experience

by Maria Pia Coccia (conservator, podcaster), Maria Manganaro

A universal interdiction stands in museums worldwide: DO NOT TOUCH. This imperative is so customary that it is perceived almost as a sacred postulate. However, its *raison d'être* is not in sacred scriptures but rather in the very nature of matter: unstable, alterable, and perishable.

Human skin is not neutral. Contacts deposit water, salt, fatty acids, and sebum: an invisible biological trace that, over time, alters whatever it touches. Sweat accelerates the oxidation of metals, degrades surface patinas and protective coatings, rendering originally glossy and brilliant surfaces dull and progressively porous.

From a scientific standpoint, the degradation produced by touch depends on the constituent materials of the artwork, their porosity, the conservation environment and any treatments sustained over time. In the case of bronze and metal alloys, the chlorides present in sweat can promote corrosive phenomena; instead on porous stone surfaces, organic residues can fuel the growth of microorganisms and chromatic alterations. Furthermore, the abrasion caused by repeated friction can progressively wear away historical patinas and decorated surfaces.

For this reason, touch is normally interdicted in museums. This is not to defend the sacred aura surrounding the artwork but to slow down its deterioration.

Indeed, in Western tradition, the conservation of the original object holds not only an aesthetic value, but a cultural and scientific one. Within the materials of the artwork — pigments, binders, fibers, patinas, execution techniques and traces of past restorations — there is an essential wealth of information for **historical knowledge**. Destroying that physical matter means losing opportunities for knowledge.

In recent decades, however, tactile museums and accessible experiences have challenged a model based almost exclusively on vision. In particular, the work of

Aldo Grassini and the *Museo Tattile Statale Omero* (Omero State Tactile Museum) brought a radical question back to the forefront: **is touch truly incompatible with art?**

The answer does not consist of denying the issue of conservation but of rethinking the relationship between contact and the artwork. The Omero Museum collects artworks that were conceived from their origin to be explored through hands. These are not replicas specially made for the purpose but original artworks donated so that contact could be an integral part of their fruition. Artworks that accept the wear and tear and transformation produced by the tactile experience.

Therefore, touch itself is not interdicted.

Unaware, indiscriminate and cumulative contact is interdicted.

Contemporary conservation does not eliminate contact: it regulates it. For this reason, restorers, conservators and scholars handle artworks following strict protocols and utilizing personal protective equipment. Even during tactile tours, the experience can be regulated through hand-washing, the use of gloves or the selection of more resilient materials.

Furthermore, scientific diagnostics could allow us to distinguish between handleable works, works accessible only on specific occasions and works that are too fragile to be touched. In many cases, 3D scanning and three-dimensional reproductions already enable a risk-free tactile experience for the original pieces.

In this sense, the Omero Museum does not solely represent an inclusive exception to the museum ban. It proposes a different concept relating to art: a tactile experience that is anticipated, designed and accepted. Western tradition tends to recognize **an unrepeatable value in the original artifact**. We do not wish to transmit solely the image of the artwork but its actual historical matter. For this reason, the “do not touch” rule does not derive from the will to separate the public from art but from the attempt to preserve what time has been delivered to us.

However, it should not turn into an absolute dogma but rather into a conscious practice capable of reconciling preservation, accessibility and knowledge.

Guernica.

The Massacre of the Innocents: Iconographic Analysis and Stylistic Synthesis in Picasso

by Loretta Secchi

On Saturday, May 9, 2026, the Museo Tattile Statale Omero (Omero State Tactile Museum) in Ancona hosted the first of three scheduled events. These events are part of a prestigious initiative by AICVAS (Associazione Italiana Combattenti Volontari Antifascisti di Spagna — Italian Association of Antifascist Volunteer Fighters of Spain) for the current year funded by the Ministry of Defense. The initiative is titled: “**Educating for Peace through Art**”.

The subject under examination was **Pablo Picasso**’s undisputed masterpiece, **Guernica**. The celebrated Spanish painter created this artwork after the tragic events that struck the homonymous Basque town which was bombed on April 26 by the German Condor Legion and the Italian Legionary Air Force at the request of Francisco Franco’s Nationalists.

In *Guernica*, Picasso’s symbols and iconographic recollections rise, perfectly suited to the subject matter. Recalling the words of art historian Roberto Longhi, we could argue that the genesis of the painting delves into the depths of Christian iconographic tradition. This was done to bestow a universal and sacred aura upon the civil suffering of *Guernica*.

The most direct link to the theme of the massacre of the innocents is manifested in the screaming mother on the left of the painting. Her image recalls the *Mater Dolorosa* from Guido Reni’s version of the **Massacre of the Innocents**.

Thus, **Pathos and Pietas** are nothing less than a communion of human conditions, simultaneous realities and symbols. The woman holding her dead son echoes the composition of the Pietà turned into a scream of despair. This evokes both certain medieval compositions from Northern European painting and dramatic

representations from Renaissance and 17th-century painting, where gestures of imploration or despair are deliberately eloquent.

In *Guernica*, the child's broken neck, bent backward, is an explicit reference to the tragic rigidity of slaughtered infants in Renaissance and Baroque altarpieces. The mimicry of pain, tear-shaped eyes and a wide-open mouth facing upward, transforms historical reportage into a biblical archetype, where the violence of power strikes the defenseless.

By utilizing these codes, Picasso elevates the 1937 bombing from a political event to an eternal, morally inhuman tragedy. *The Massacre of the Innocents* becomes the filter through which the viewer recognizes the moral horror of war, transforming the Spanish victims into universal martyrs of modernity. There is the instinctual strength of the bull, echoing the bloody and fierce nature of the bullfight in the arena.

Above all, the rearing horse: its anatomy and posture lead back to late 14th-century or proto-Renaissance Triumphs of Death. We can think of the striking detached fresco by an unknown author and date currently exhibited at Palazzo Abatellis. In it, Death, riding a ghostly, skeletal horse, lunges into a gallop while around it life unfolds unheeding of the fate descending upon humans without distinction of age or social background. Similarly, Picasso's geometric horse, with nostrils flared and teeth exposed by terror, evokes this being caught by surprise, there is the inability to escape destiny. This mirrors the warrior lying on the ground, dismembered, still clutching a broken sword, an unmistakable sign of an interrupted life.

Yet, there are also symbols that rekindle hope, however faint: a flower sprouting near the dying people and the lamp held by the hand of a woman who bursts into the scene seeming to light a beacon capable of casting out darkness from the human heart.

"Painting is a blind man's profession. A person does not paint what he sees, but what he feels, what he says to himself about what he has seen," Pablo Picasso used to say. True: if we consider what it means to transfigure reality while maintaining, through style and cognition, adherence to the profound meaning of a theme and

the way it finds worthy and pregnant representation independently of any demand for verisimilitude because this demand is an operation as limiting as inadequate in art. Because the essence of truth triumphs over the appearance of verisimilitude, Picasso studied throughout his entire career the best way to iconically express his thought without over-intellectualization, simply through the power of form and style. This is the finest way an artist chooses a subject to translate into imagery what he feels in his heart.

It is worth noting that a permanent bas-relief reproduction of *Guernica* is on display at the Museo Omero. Rendered in polychrome terracotta on a 1:2.775 scale, it was crafted by eleven students from the Libera Università Cinque Castelli and donated to the museum in 2017, exactly eighty years after the events that led to its creation.

Although this translation introduces some variations compared to the original, it offers blind and visually impaired people a concrete, tactile understanding of this masterpiece.

Unlike the painting, dominated by shades of blue and gray, the terracotta reproduction in its tactile experiential translation has been glazed using white and orange for the figures and shades of blue for the background. This specific color choice facilitates the perception of compositional elements for visually impaired visitors.

During the presentation of the initiative, the AICVAS Coordinator for the Marche region, Giordano Vecchietti, the President of the Museo Omero, Aldo Grassini and the Councilor for Culture of the Municipality of Ancona, Marta Paraventi, showed the educational role and relevance of the conference topic. They invited the audience, including twenty-one students from the “Licini” Art High School of Ascoli Piceno, to reflect on how an artwork can be a *Summa symbolica* and a distillation of human conscience, timeless, yet deeply embedded in history.

A museum for all: innovation and accessibility at the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria

by Costantino D'Orazio

(Director of the National Museums of Perugia – Regional Directorate of National Museums of Umbria)

Thanks to National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) funding (Mission 1, Component 2 - Culture 4.0, Measure 1, Investment 1.2), the [Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria](#) has designed and implemented a targeted intervention aimed at **removing perceptual and cognitive barriers** with the objective of redefining the visitor experience through new content and accessible tools, significantly expanding audience participation.

The cornerstone of the project is the idea of offering a new narrative of the collection privileging universal content over specialized information, making it accessible to diverse audiences. **Traditional audio guides** have been produced in Italian and English structured around a tour of thirty masterpieces. Alongside these, dedicated audio guides for children lead younger visitors to discover naturalistic details—such as animals, plants, flowers, and atmospheric phenomena—and explore their symbolic meanings.

The core of this innovation is [AlfeelGNU](#), a web application conceived by the Gallery's staff and developed by TuoMuseo. **Powered by generative artificial intelligence**, the app creates **customized itineraries** based on an emotional mapping of the artworks. Upon accessing the app via smartphone, visitors are greeted with the question “**How are you?**” and are guided by **a virtual assistant** along a tailor-made route that factors in age, available time, and emotional state. The result is an interactive, dynamic experience capable of accompanying and transforming emotions during the visit, offering a vivid, contemporary perception of art.

In addition to the digital dimension, the project led to the creation of a comprehensive suite of tools designed to overcome sensory and cognitive barriers, developed with the direct involvement of associations and experts. Among these, the **tactile path** represents one of the most significant interventions. Designed for blind and visually impaired individuals, the path integrates **seven original sculptures and five resin tactile reliefs** that translate celebrated paintings from the collection into touch-perceptible forms.

These reliefs, positioned near the original masterpieces and perfectly integrated into the museum layout, allow for a spatial and compositional reading of the pictorial images, rendering their volumes, proportions, and details tactilely legible. The selected artworks were chosen to provide iconographic, typological and chronological variety effectively illustrating different aspects of Medieval and Renaissance figurative production.

Each component of the tactile path—both original sculptures and resin reliefs—is equipped with a tactile QR code. This consists of a small magnet located at the bottom right of each element, which grants access to the **artwork's audio description**. Via smartphone, visitors can listen to content that goes beyond a mere description of the piece; it provides **step-by-step guidance for tactile exploration**, suggesting hand movements, key points of attention and methods of sensory interpretation. The experience thus becomes active and autonomous built upon **the integration of sensory perception and narrative**. The path was implemented by Atlante Servizi Culturali in collaboration with typhlogist Deborah Tramentozzi. The complete list of artworks and their corresponding audio descriptions can be consulted on the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria Official Website.

For Deaf People, the museum developed a series of **16 video-stories** focused on the collection's major masterpieces. **This content, available in Italian and English, integrates sign language, subtitles, audio, and high-resolution images of the artworks to offer a comprehensive and inclusive narrative**. Visitors can access these video-stories by scanning a QR code at the entrance of the exhibition path with their smartphones and playing the videos corresponding to

the progressive numbers indicated on the artwork captions. All materials are also accessible via the “Accessibility” page on the museum’s website. The project was coordinated by the Umbrian section of the National Deaf Agency (ENS APS-EPS), involving specialized interpreters and technicians.

Commitment to cognitive accessibility is further demonstrated by two thematic itineraries designed in **Augmentative and Alternative Communication** (AAC): “*Animals at the Museum*” which explores the meaning and stories of animals in the collection and “*The Galleria Nazionale dell’Umbria Tells the Story of Perugia*” which focuses on the history of the city and Palazzo dei Priori historic seat of the museum.

These itineraries **are distributed free of charge in printed format and are available digitally on the museum’s website**, allowing visitors to preview and prepare for their visit in advance. The design, translation and adaptation process was conducted by speech therapists Daniela Toccaceli and Chiara Occhigrossi in partnership with the associations ANFFAS “Per Loro” APS-ETS and “Popy on the road”. Content was thoroughly tested and validated through workshop activities curated by Atlante Servizi Culturali, which directly engaged members of the involved associations.

Taken together, these interventions outline **a new museum paradigm where technology, accessibility, and active participation intertwine**. The Galleria Nazionale dell’Umbria establishes itself as a space capable of welcoming and engaging diverse audiences, offering personalized and genuinely barrier-free experiences.

Credits

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