



Inclusive Learning: The Antipa Museum for Neurodiverse Children

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Abstract

This article examines the programs designed for neurodiverse audiences developed by the Grigore Antipa National Museum of Natural History in Bucharest. Framed within the theoretical context of Disability Studies and informed by relevant legal frameworks, the analysis situates the museum's activities in relation to inclusive practices implemented by contemporary European and U.S. museums. The study pursues two main objectives. First, it investigates the availability, structure, and specific features of educational programs targeting neurodiverse children and young people at the Antipa Museum. Second, it shows the degree of interest and engagement demonstrated by the target audience in response to these initiatives. By addressing these objectives, the article contributes to a broader understanding of how cultural institutions can design and implement inclusive educational strategies that respond effectively to the needs of diverse audiences, while also aligning with international accessibility standards and theoretical developments in the field of disability and museum studies.

Keywords: disability studies, neurodiversity, museum, inclusion

1. Introduction

Museums are increasingly recognized as partners in the field of education, offering non-formal learning experiences that complement and extend formal curricula. Through interactive exhibits,



workshops, and inclusive programs, they engage diverse audiences in active, experiential learning. By ensuring accessibility for persons with disabilities, museums promote equal participation and strengthen their role as inclusive educational spaces that foster lifelong learning for all. In a context where cultural institutions are making increasing efforts to facilitate access for people with disabilities and to offer them inclusive cultural experiences, the “Grigore Antipa” National Museum of Natural History (The Antipa Museum) in Bucharest has long stood out for its commitment to creating an accessible environment for all visitors. Since 2003, the museum has implemented a series of initiatives designed to engage visitors with visual and hearing impairments through interactive and multisensory experiences. Among the most significant projects are “Lumea văzută de noi” (April–December 2003), “Simte Arta” (2011–2012), “Muzeul Tutoror” (2012), and “Vizite senzoriale – Sensory Visits” (2012–2013). Moreover, the institution is the first museum in Romania to offer educational programs specifically tailored to neurodiverse children and young people—a group that is often difficult to reach and remains largely underrepresented in museum spaces across the country—and to include these programs as part of its current educational offer.

The objectives of this study are twofold. First, it seeks to investigate the availability and specific features of educational programs designed for neurodiverse children and young people at the Antipa Museum. Second, it aims to assess the level of interest and engagement demonstrated by the target audience in relation to these programs. By addressing these objectives, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how cultural institutions can develop inclusive educational strategies that respond to the needs of diverse audiences.

2. Literature Review

Disability Studies represent an interdisciplinary field, drawing from the humanities and social sciences, which examines the concept of disability in social, cultural, and political contexts. This field developed primarily in Anglo-Saxon countries starting in the 1990s and is linked, on the one hand, to activism around the rights of persons with disabilities, and on the other hand, to moving away from viewing disability solely through a medical lens (the so-called medical



model). The traditional dichotomies of normal–abnormal and healthy–sick have progressively been replaced by approaches emphasizing social inclusion, the recognition and acceptance of diversity, and active participation. The cultural and artistic dimensions of disability have become increasingly prominent. In recent years, academic literature has explored the intersection between **museum studies** and **disability studies**. Museums are developing projects in collaboration with, or targeted toward, specific communities of people with disabilities. In doing so, they are positioning themselves as platforms that amplify social messages, advocating for inclusion, solidarity, and acceptance. A growing number of collective volumes have assembled empirical studies, theoretical interventions, and project-based analyses that foreground both the museum visiting experiences of audiences with diverse disabilities and the transformative role of art and culture in these experiences.

A foundational contribution to this field is the volume *Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries*, edited by Jocelyn Dodd, Richard Sandell, Debbie Jolly, and Ceri Jones (Dodd et al., 2008). This work presents the outcomes of a large-scale initiative implemented across nine museums and galleries in the United Kingdom, encompassing exhibitions, educational programs, and bespoke interpretative materials designed for disabled audiences. Beyond its descriptive dimension, the volume offers concrete case studies that critically illustrate how institutional practices can facilitate more inclusive forms of engagement. Importantly, it positions such initiatives not merely as targeted accommodations but as catalysts for raising awareness among non-disabled visitors, thereby reshaping broader museum narratives and visitor dynamics. The role of museums in redefining societal perceptions of disability and in fostering collaborations with diverse disability communities is examined in the volume *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, edited by Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (Sandell et al., 2010). The volume mobilizes case studies, artistic projects, activist collaborations, and critical debates to underscore the imperative for museums to assume an active, agentive role in reshaping dominant discourses on disability. Collectively, these interventions position museums not as neutral spaces of display, but as cultural actors capable of challenging and transforming social imaginaries surrounding disability.



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In recent decades, sustained scholarly attention has focused on the **access of neurodiverse individuals to education and culture**, including museum engagement. Early contributions, such as Elise A. Freed-Brown's "*A Different Mind: Developing Museum Programs for Children with Autism*" (2010) and Chiara Di Lello's "*Guggenheim for All*" (2015), explored the challenges faced by autistic visitors and examined inclusive program models grounded in Universal Design for Learning, emphasizing flexibility and multimodal engagement. Since 2020, research on **neurodiversity and disability inclusion in museums** has expanded significantly, reflecting a broader institutional shift toward participatory and accessible practices. Notable works include Piper and James Hutson (2022) and Ross Edelstein (2022), which collectively theorize museums as adaptive spaces and identify key strategies: pre-visit preparation, sensory-friendly environments, structured and predictable programming, small group formats, multisensory materials, quiet zones, accessible communication, trained staff, and collaboration with disability communities. These studies further articulate broader accessibility principles, including co-decision-making, lifelong inclusion, integrated physical and cultural access, and institutionalized long-term commitments.

These developments align with broader thematic concerns in contemporary museology, ranging from the **new definition of the museum** adopted at the ICOM General Assembly (Prague, 2022), to the increased emphasis on audience engagement, the creation of meaningful and diversified visitor experiences, and the adaptation of institutions to evolving societal interests. The use of terms such as "accessible," "inclusive," "diversity," "sustainability," and "communities" reflects the incorporation of issues frequently debated in society and confirms the ongoing trend of museums becoming increasingly active and socially engaged institutions.

In Romania, research and initiatives in the field of disability studies are sporadic and still in their early stages. There are several articles discussing various projects carried out in museums, such as: Dan Patzelt on the "Simte Arta" ("Feel the Art") projects from 2011–2012 (Patzelt, 2011, Patzelt, 2012), Ioana Mucenic on "Muzeul Tutoror" ("Museum for All") project in 2012 (Mucenic, 2012), Despina Hașegan on accessibility projects at the Antipa Museum and the National Museum of Art of Romania in 2014 (Hașegan, 2014) and about artistic projects on



inclusion and diversity at The National Museum of Contemporary Art and at the Maps Museum (Hașegan, 2024) and Costel Crangan on projects at the Galați County History Museum in 2019 (Crangan, 2019) Other works address the implementation of measures to ensure access to cultural activities, such as Oana Maria Sava's "Access of People with Disabilities to Cultural Institutions in Romania"(Sava 2021). Moreover, increasing efforts are being made to ensure that museums comply with legal provisions regulating the rights of persons with disabilities and facilitating their access to culture. Relevant legislation includes Law no. 221 of November 11, 2010, (Legea nr. 221/ 11.11.2010) which ratifies the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in New York by the UN General Assembly on December 13, 2006; the National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities "O Românie echitabilă 2022–2027", adopted through Government Decision no. 490 / 2022 (HG nr. 490/ 2022), which is also based on the provisions of the UN Convention; and Law no. 448 of December 6, 2006 (Legea nr. 448 / 6.12.2006), on the protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities, which regulates the main aspects regarding the rights and obligations of people with disabilities in Romania, including their access to culture.

3. Methodology

This article forms part of a broader research project examining access to museum heritage in Romania for individuals with disabilities. The analysis focuses on the programs developed by the Antipa Museum for neurodiverse audiences, situating these initiatives within the theoretical framework of disability studies and in dialogue with approaches implemented by major museums in Europe and the United States. Adopting an interdisciplinary cultural studies perspective, the research methodology integrates several components: a critical review of specialized literature in disability studies and legal studies; analysis of the museum's official reports and digital communications; and on-site participation in programs, which included informal discussions with both staff and visitors. The theoretical framework draws upon general disability theories as well as museum-specific initiatives addressing neurodiversity. The legal analysis highlights Romania's formal alignment with relevant international frameworks concerning disability rights



and accessibility. The overall analysis combines descriptive presentation of the museum's programs with empirical data derived from institutional reports, media coverage, communications from non-governmental organizations (such as *Supereroi printre noi*), and first-hand field observations.

Programs for neurodiverse children at the Antipa Museum: the “Quiet Hour” and the “Discover Workshops”

In 2021, the Antipa Museum organized its first activities specifically designed for neurodiverse audiences, in collaboration with the association “Supereroi printre noi” (“Superheroes Among Us”); this is a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting the social inclusion of persons with disabilities by facilitating their participation in cultural life, as well as in a range of events and activities, with particular emphasis on supporting neurodiverse individuals. Previously, the museum had developed several projects dedicated to visitors with mobility, visual, and hearing impairments. Notable initiatives include “Lumea văzută de noi” (“The World Seen by Us”), April–December 2003, “Simte Arta” (“Feel the Art”) 2011–2012, “Muzeul Tutor” (“Museum for All”) 2012, and “Vizite senzoriale / Sensory Visits” 2012–2013. Through these initiatives, the museum ensured access for all categories of visitors to the building and created products and services tailored to specific needs, such as Braille labels and catalogues, a presentation film in Romanian Sign Language, and various tactile materials. However, neurodiverse audiences had not previously benefited from dedicated projects.

Terms such as “neurological diversity,” “neurological pluralism,” and “neurodiversity” emerged in the mid-1990s within online communities of individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in the United States. Judy Singer (Singer, 1999) introduced the term neurodiversity to conceptualize neurological variation as an inherent and natural aspect of the human condition, analogous to biological or cultural diversity. Later, Nick Walker (Walker, 2014) refined the terminology, defining “neurodiversity” as the range of neurological differences within a group, “neurodivergent” as individuals whose neurological functioning diverges from social norms, and “neurotypical” as those who conform to such norms. The term “neurodiversity” is not a medical



category and does not appear in Romanian legislation. Instead, expressions such as “intellectual disabilities,” “neurocognitive disabilities,” “special needs,” or “learning difficulties” are commonly used. This variety reflects the complexity of the subject and explains the growing adoption of the term “neurodiversity” in both academic and public discourse. Neurodevelopmental conditions can manifest in diverse ways, including but not limited to difficulties in understanding or communication, involuntary movements, restlessness, limited attention spans, as well as stereotyped movements or vocalizations. A variety of external factors—such as crowded environments, intense lighting or loud noises, dark spaces, as well as specific emotional states or social interactions—may intensify these manifestations. Consequently, certain everyday activities may pose significant challenges, including visiting museums, attending theatrical performances, or going to the cinema. This broad spectrum of manifestations and the factors influencing them highlight the institutional challenges faced by museums and cultural organizations in designing and implementing inclusive educational programs for neurodiverse audiences.

The “Quiet Hour” program was launched at the Antipa Museum in August 2021, within the context of the exotic butterfly exhibition. In support of the neurodiverse audience, the butterfly house was equipped with a glass-enclosed area, enabling visitors to observe the butterflies from outside while minimizing direct contact. Participation was free and required completion of an online registration form. Neurodiverse visitors, particularly children and young people, along with their accompanying caregivers or friends were invited to attend the museum on Mondays, when it is normally closed to the general public. This arrangement provided an opportunity to explore the butterfly house in a calm and unhurried manner, without the usual bustle and crowding associated with standard visiting hours. Similar initiatives are implemented in prominent Anglo-Saxon museums, including the Smithsonian Institution, Tate Liverpool, and Tate Modern. Programs such as “Quiet Hours,” “Relaxed Hours,” and “Morning at the Museum” offer neurodiverse visitors a tranquil environment, free from crowding and potential sensory disruptions, thereby facilitating thoughtful exploration alongside family or friends.



The “Quiet Hour” initiative proved successful; according to the museum’s 2021 activity report, a total of 82 neurodiverse visitors and their companions participated in three visits to the butterfly house. Since December 2021, the program has been adapted for the permanent exhibition and is organized in various spaces within the museum or in the butterfly house in the garden, free of charge, by registration. Also, the duration of the program was extended from one hour to two hours, prompting a corresponding change in its title to “Quiet Hours”. Now part of the museum’s regular offerings, the program has an increasing number of participants, as shown in the museum’s official annual reports, summarized in the tables below:

Year	2021	2022	2023	2024
Activities	3	5	6	6
Participants	82	223	365	144

Table 1. “Quiet Hour”/ “Quiet Hours” in the butterfly house

Year	2021	2022	2023	2024
Activities	1	18	23	24
Participants	6	846	774	726

Table 2. “Quiet Hour”/ “Quiet Hours” in the museum

The visits take place in a calm and relaxed atmosphere. Emphasis is placed on the visitors’ sense of well-being and comfort, as they enjoy discovering the museum in a quiet environment, free from disruptive factors, at their own pace, exploring the interactive areas in an unhurried manner.



The visits are supervised by museum staff, though with a reduced number of employees compared to regular opening days.

The first workshops designed for neurodiverse children – with special educational needs – and their peers were organized by the Antipa Museum in collaboration with the association “Supereroi printre noi” in August 2021. Participation was free of charge and based on prior registration. Entitled “**Discover Exotic Butterflies**”, the workshops were held outdoors, near the butterfly greenhouse, for groups of up to 10 participants. The overall structure of the program, as well as the various stages of each session, were clearly explained and reiterated throughout the activities to support comprehension and engagement. The workshops incorporated a wide range of activities aimed at facilitating learning about butterflies, including their life cycle, habitats, and feeding behaviors. Participants either visited the greenhouse or observed the butterflies from outside, conducted microscopic observations, explored tactile replicas and various related objects, and engaged in creative activities such as drawing and collage-making. Periods of movement, musical listening, and storytelling were interspersed with activities focused on learning, observation, and fine motor skills activities during the workshop. This structure allowed for the inclusion of breaks, supported the development of sustained attention across different types of tasks, and engaged multiple sensory modalities. Basic information regarding butterflies and their way of life was conveyed using clear and accessible language and was reinforced through successive activities. For example, participants first observed a particular species in the greenhouse, then examined the same species under the microscope, and finally identified it among a selection of materials prepared for hands-on exploration. The program aligns with general principles used by museums that organize activities for neurodiverse children or children with autism — such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Guggenheim Museum — and outlined by Elise A. Freed-Brown (2010), Chiara Di Lello (2015), and more recently by Piper and James Hutson (2022) and Ross Edelstein (2022). These include: small group formats, multisensory materials, structured and predictable programming, and accessible communication.



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According to the Antipa Museum’s Annual Report, the first three workshops organized in 2021 brought together a significant number of participants and accompanying persons — 64 in total. In the subsequent years, both the number of workshops and the number of participants increased steadily, reaching 41 events with 445 participants in 2023, as shown in the table below, which summarizes data from the institution’s official annual reports. In 2024, a slight decrease can be observed, occurring in the context of an overall decline in the total number of visitors.

Year	2021	2022	2023	2024
Activities	3	16	41	25
Participants	64	245	445	380

Table 3. The “Discover” Workshops

The inclusion of the “Discover” workshops in the museum’s regular program was motivated by the increasing interest expressed by beneficiaries — neurodiverse individuals, persons with various other disabilities, and their companions, friends, or family members. Over time, the range of topics has expanded to cover various themes from the museum’s permanent exhibition, as reflected in titles such as: “Discover: Life in the Forest”, “Discover Life in the Mountains”, “Discover: Life on Ice”, “Discover: Stories from the Animal World” and others.



Figure 1. Materials prepared in the room for the “Discover” workshop, May 2025



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The workshops are organized on a monthly basis, with participation requiring prior registration. They continue to take place on Mondays in order to provide these groups with a calm, low-stimulation environment, away from the crowds typically present during regular opening hours. Although the themes differ, the structure of the program remains consistent. Each session begins with a visit to the museum or to the butterfly greenhouse, during which participants complete a treasure-hunt-style worksheet. The second part takes place in the workshop room, where participants listen to a story or watch a short film, engage in guided discussions, and take part in practical, hands-on activities related to the theme. During the museum visit, children are directed to exhibition halls selected according to the theme of the workshop. Using the instructions provided in the worksheet and information available on the museum's touchscreens, they are tasked with identifying specific exhibits, observing them carefully, and recording various details (e.g., appearance, habitat). These notes are reviewed in the initial part of the workshop, and participants' knowledge is further consolidated through complementary materials and activities, such as storytelling, film screenings, or tactile exploration of objects including toys, replicas, and samples. Participants are allocated approximately two hours to complete all activities at their own pace, alternating between different types of tasks, moments of rest, and opportunities for social interaction. Throughout the session, the workshop coordinator provides clear explanations and instructions, using simple, accessible language adapted to the participants' needs.

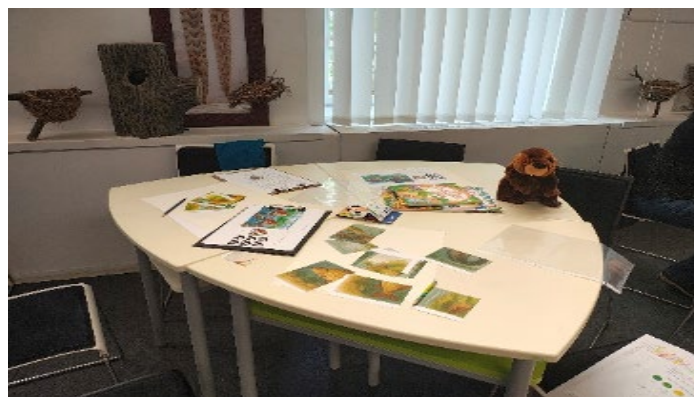


Figure 2. Work table during a “Discover” workshop, May 2025



4. Results

The “Quiet Hour” program, initiated in 2021, has continued to evolve and is currently implemented under the name “Quiet Hours”. Similarly, the “Discover Workshops”, first organized in 2021, have become a regular component of the museum’s monthly programming. Between 2021 and 2024, the “Quiet Hour” initiative expanded substantially, increasing from a single activity involving 6 participants to 24 activities with a total of 726 participants. Over the same period, the “Discover Workshops” grew from 3 activities attended by 64 participants to 25 activities with 380 participants. Adopting an inclusive approach, these programs are designed to involve not only neurodiverse children and young people but also their friends and family members, thus fostering shared cultural experiences within the museum setting.

This success can be attributed to a series of well-considered measures implemented by the museum, as documented in its official annual reports for the period 2021–2024. Key measures include: **The creation of a safe and quiet environment**, accompanied by the extension of the allocated time slot on Mondays from one to two hours, and the rebranding of the initiative as “Quiet Hours.”

- **Collaboration with associations representing people with disabilities** (such as “Supereroi printre noi”) which provide feedback and contribute to the ongoing improvement of the programs.
- **Partnerships with a wide range of organizations**, including day care centers, social service providers, neuropsychiatric recovery and rehabilitation centers, maternal centers, as well as associations and foundations that support individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, persons with intellectual disabilities or mental health challenges, and special schools for students with visual, auditory, or neurocognitive impairments.
- **Engagement with new audiences**, notably refugees and asylum seekers from Ukraine, Palestine, Iraq, and other countries, facilitated through partnerships with organizations that provide assistance to these communities. Their participation in “Quiet Hours” is motivated by the need for translation services and by a preference for a calm, less crowded environment, which enables them to explore the museum in a more comfortable and supportive setting than during regular visiting hours.



5. Conclusions

Situated within the broader framework of disability studies and international museum practice, the programs developed by the Antipa Museum for the neurodiverse children distinguish themselves through their conceptual coherence, methodological rigor, and alignment with established international standards and validated implementation models. These initiatives are grounded in fundamental principles, including the creation of safe and welcoming environments, the systematic consultation of persons with disabilities and the active involvement of representative associations in program design and delivery, as well as the promotion of inclusion and meaningful participation in community life alongside family members and peers.

While the achievements to date are significant, several avenues exist for further enhancement of the museum experience for these audiences. These include:

- The creation of additional relaxation areas along the visitor route, offering opportunities to withdraw from sensory or emotional overstimulation.
- The development and distribution of a sensory map to support visitors in identifying areas with potentially challenging environmental factors such as lights, sounds etc.
- The strategic engagement of collaborators and volunteers willing to contribute to program implementation, addressing the increasing demand for these programs, which has occurred despite limited human resources.

The steady expansion of both the range of activities and the number of participants, alongside the programs' integration into the museum's permanent educational offer, demonstrates both the growing interest of the target communities and the museum's institutional capacity to address genuine social and cultural needs. In this context, the Antipa Museum emerges as a benchmark within the Romanian museum landscape, exemplifying how cultural institutions can develop inclusive programs that are open to diverse audiences while upholding the universal right of all individuals to access and participate in cultural life.



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All photographs included in this paper were taken by the author. Their use complies with ethical standards for research and publication, ensuring respect for the dignity and privacy of all individuals depicted. The identities of persons with disabilities have been appropriately protected.

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