

# Specialist Support Scheme – Engagement Report

## Sandwell Museums – Oak House and Wednesbury Museum & Art Gallery

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Islamic Art and Material Culture



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Museums



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## **Introduction**

Wednesbury Museum & Art Gallery (WMAG) was opened in 1891 and was built to display a large collection of works owned by Edwin Richards and his wife Mary. However, the collections which this report focuses on were mostly donated to WMAG by Helen Caddick (born 1845), a local resident, writer, intrepid traveller and one of the first governors of the University of Birmingham. Between 1889-1914 she travelled the world, including trips to Palestine, Egypt, Japan, Canada, India, Java, Australia, South Africa, Uganda and other parts of Africa, USA, Mexico, the Caribbean, New Zealand, Panama, Peru, Argentina, Cambodia, China, Korea, Burma and the.

In addition to the collection at WMAG, Helen Caddicks travel diaries are held at the Library of Birmingham.

The IAMC collection will be used at Oak House, West Bromwich.

This report follows a specialist collections survey carried out on WMAG's Islamic Art and Material Culture Collection by George Manginis in December 2015, a visit to the museum by an engagement specialist, and ongoing communication.

This report aims to identify possible audiences that WMAG/Oak House could engage using its IAMC collections. It is not a comprehensive report focusing on all audiences. In consultation with the staff at WMAG a number of audiences have been identified as a priority. A report focusing on engaging Early Years to Key Stage school children has been produced separately to this one.

This report has been made possible via funding from the Subject Specialist Network for Islamic Art and Material Culture.

## **The Story of Helen Caddick – A Key Thread**

The Islamic Art and Material Culture collection at Wednesbury Museum is one which has the potential to interest and engage both existing and new audiences. Helen Caddick, her travels and collecting could be the focus of a permanent exhibition at Oak House. Through this exhibition it should be possible to display a good selection of objects looked at by George Manginis in December 2015, and represent a range of places visited by Helen Caddick and the different cultures she encountered. An exhibition of this nature would provide a springboard from which a range of engagement could take place with local communities and audiences. It may also be possible to use public engagement events, i.e Festival of Spice in April 2016, to undertake public consultation to find out how local people would like to engage with the IAMC collection and to build the results from this into the

planning of the exhibition. It may also be possible to work with local groups to help develop content for the exhibition, including object selection, creation of text, image selection, etc.

### **Engaging the local Muslim community**

From a discussion with Oak House's Learning Manager it is apparent that the museum would like to engage their IMAC collection with the local Muslim community. The Muslim population of West Bromwich is one of the highest outside of London. The nearest Mosque to Oak House is:

Jami Masjid and Islamic Centre, 67 Dartmouth Street, West Bromwich, Birmingham, West Midlands, B70 8BX

An option would be for the museum to approach the Jami Masjid and Islamic Centre with reasons why they would like to engage the local Muslim community and to suggest the outline of possible projects. It would be helpful to promote the idea that the museum would like to work with the local community collaboratively and develop ideas together.

Using the IAMC collection the museum could develop projects that:

- i) Encourage the community to access and interpret the IAMC collection by linking their own objects, personal stories and reminiscences, and including elements that discuss what it is like to be a Muslim living in West Bromwich today.
- ii) Work with a local ESOL group to explore the collection and help with their language development. Produce work with the group that can be displayed alongside objects from the IAMC collection at Oak House.

### **Young Friends**

The museum service is keen to create opportunities for young people to develop basic skills. They are currently in the process of launching a Young Friends group. There are approximately 4-5 young people in the group, and the museum would be open to increasing numbers. The museum would be interested in looking at ways to engage this group with their Islamic Art and Material Culture collection.

There is an opportunity for this group to work alongside staff to develop an exhibition, or elements of an exhibition, focusing on the Islamic Art and Material Culture collection to go on display at Oak House.

The project would develop the young people's skills in the following areas:

- i) Research
- ii) Object selection
- iii) Text writing
- iv) Editing
- v) Image selection and copyright

- vi) Display
- vii) Marketing
- viii) Design and delivery of a small event linked to the exhibition

As Oak House is in a community with a high Muslim population it would be a positive step to try and encourage Muslim teenagers to join the Young Friends group. This could be done by making contact and advertising the opportunity with local schools, community centres, and the local Mosque.

Alternatively, it may be possible to offer opportunities to get involved via 1-2 week work placements, or teenagers working towards alternative forms of accreditation such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

Although training the Young Friends in basic exhibition skills could be time intensive for staff in the short-term, it would be hoped that over time the young people could use their new skills in future work/opportunities. Inevitably members will leave the group, but it is hoped that they will pass on their skills to newer members of the group as and when they join.

## **Families**

The type of material in the Islamic Art and Material Culture collection lends itself to an exciting and varied range of possible activities to engage families.

The collection would lend itself to:

- i) Themed family events
- ii) Smaller, family gallery activities linked to exhibits

### Themed Family Events

The diversity of the collection, comprising objects from many different Islamic countries, reflects the diversity of the local Muslim community (Middle Eastern, North African, South Asian). There is an opportunity to engage this local community through a series of family themed events and activities.

The museum currently offers a lively programme of family events and activities. In addition to the Festival of Spice weekend that is already planned (2 & 3 April 2016), family events linked to the IAMC collection could include some of the following suggestions:

- a) Step back in time and meet Helen Caddick, a Victorian / Edwardian traveller. Find out about her travels around the world, explore some of the objects she collected and take part in crafts.
- b) Beautiful patterns – come and explore some of the beautiful patterns in our IAMC collection and have a go at sewing your own / drawing your own
- c) Be inspired by our Syrian tiles and have a go at making your own clay tile

### Smaller, family gallery activities linked to exhibits

If the museum develops a permanent exhibition at Oak House using the IAMC collection it would be a good idea to build in to this a family interactive. Based on the work carried out by George Manginis in December 2015 on the IAMC collection and his suggestion that any permanent exhibition should focus on the travels and collecting of Helen Caddick, it would seem sensible to create a family interactive around this theme.

This could be in the form of a travel trunk that could be opened and explored. It could contain dressing up costumes (Victorian hat, dress, gloves, shoes, and travel shawl), copies of Helen Caddicks diary, type writer, camera, and possibly a small selection of the material she collected on her travels, either the real things secured safely or photographs of the objects.

### **Research Project**

There is a potential research project focusing on Helen Caddick, her travels and collecting. Utilising the collection at Wednesbury Museum and Oak House alongside her travel diaries, currently held at Library of Birmingham (reference number MS 908), a stronger understanding of her work and its significance could be developed. This could only enhance the opportunities to develop further engagement with the IAMC collection at the museum and to bring the collection to a wider audience. If the museum was interested in exploring this idea then it would be sensible to contact Birmingham University to enquire about the possibility of delivering a project in partnership.

### **Conclusion**

This report aimed to highlight possible audiences that could engage with the IAMC collection at Oak House. The report did not aim to cover all audiences or all possibilities, rather it aimed to highlight a selection of both. Much will depend on future priorities, staff time and budgets.

As a result of the Specialist Support Scheme from the SSN for Islamic Art and Material Culture it is hoped that the staff at Oak House have an increased confidence to both explore the potential display of their IAMC collection through permanent or temporary exhibitions and to use them to engage the local community.