

Specialist Support Scheme – Engagement Report

Nuneaton Museum & Art Gallery

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Islamic Art and Material Culture



Birmingham
Museums



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Introduction

Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery was opened in April 1917, in the grounds of Riversley Park. The museum currently has galleries dedicated to local history, fine art and George Elliot.

The museum has approximately 180 objects that could be classified as Islamic Art and Material Culture, mainly from North Africa and the Middle East. The collection was amassed during the 1960s and 1970s by curators with an interest in ethnographic material. It was part of a proactive collecting scheme and was perceived as a coherent body of objects with a focus on everyday life rather than elite art. Although no original statement of intent was examined, the nature of items (clothing, utensils, jewellery and armour) testifies to such agenda. Some objects appear unused and may have been collected during travels. None of the objects appears to be directly connected to historical persons or events.

This report aims to identify possible audiences that Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery (NMAG) could engage using its Islamic Art and Material Culture (IAMC) collections. It is not a comprehensive report focusing on all audiences. In consultation with the Education & Outreach Officer at the museum, a number of audiences have been identified as a priority. As the Education Team at the museum consists of 1 core Officer, this report focuses on ideas and suggestions that are realistic, deliverable and sustainable. The museum is currently working at near capacity and therefore any work focusing on the IAMC collection needs to either slot into the existing offer or be added to the mid to longer term learning strategy.

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.

Engaging the local Muslim community

From a discussion with NMAG's Outreach Officer it is apparent that the museum would like to engage their IMAC collection with the local Muslim community. The museum has worked with the community previously, but would like to focus on renewing this relationship. Previous engagement tended to be via outreach in community venues, however whilst the museum would be happy to deliver some outreach, it is very keen that any work included visits to the museum.

The population of Nuneaton is approximately 81,877 (2011 Census), of which 2.3% are Muslim. The museum is located in close proximity to the Nuneaton Muslim Society and

Mosque (Frank Street). The Society has an active website that provides information on the work of the mosque.

'The management of Nuneaton Muslim Society seeks to reach out to promote greater dialogue and understanding amongst all of the faiths and cultures of our considerable and diverse communities. We carry out this noble intention through working with other faith organisations, the local authorities, statutory agencies and public sector bodies'

Nuneaton Muslim Society website

The Nuneaton Muslim Society also runs an Islamic School that meets on Saturdays for children between the ages of 4-16.

Initial contact with the Muslim Society could be made via email or phone:

E: admin@nmsuk.org

T: 012476 382372

It would be a sensible for the museum to approach the society 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 Nuneaton today
- ii) Link into the local Islamic School, which is part of Nuneaton Muslim Society. The group works with 4-16 year olds and meets on Saturdays. The museum could host the group to explore the IAMC collection. The group can be contacted via the following email address: amai@nmsuk.org
- iii) 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 in the museums community showcase.

Families

The museum has a strong current offer for families. A visit to the museum demonstrates their commitment to this audience. Art work produced by children is displayed prominently in the museum, and each gallery has interactives and activities for this audience. The offer is particularly strong during school holidays.

The museum recently ran a public open day to showcase some of the IAMC collection and to generate responses from the public as to how they would like to access this collection in the future. The museum should use the responses generated from this event to feed into their short to long term planning for families. Themes within the IAMC collection that could be used for family activities include calligraphy, design, pattern, shape and colour, and daily life. Although the IAMC collection is not currently on permanent display, examples could be brought out from the stores for specific events or if they are included in an exhibition.

Teenager project

The museum has a strong track record and innovative approach to engaging teenagers. Examples of previous projects include animation and film. The museum is willing to try new ways of engaging this audience. There is potential to use the IAMC collection in a number of ways to achieve this.

Taking key objects from the collection, rather than focusing on a single object, the museum could develop creative and artistic responses. Taking inspiration from the different design elements of the collection, including calligraphy, pattern repetition, shape, colour and symmetry the museum could employ a freelance graffiti artist to work with a group of teenagers to create a piece of graffiti art. A recommended West Midlands based artist would be Aerosol Arabic (Mohammed Ali) who is well known for combining street art with Islamic script and patterns. <http://www.aerosolarabic.com/>. If the work was created on transportable (MDF) boards it could be displayed in numerous locations, including the museum.

Ethnographic Temporary Exhibition

The museum is currently discussing a possible ethnographic exhibition for 2017. This provides the museum with an opportunity to showcase their IAMC collection and to demonstrate their strength in engaging different audiences. Staff at the museum have the ambition and the skills to be able to plan and deliver a coordinated programme of engagement that would result in a community created and community curated exhibition. The museum currently has a small showcase cabinet which different community groups use to display their work. By working on a larger scale community created and curated exhibition, the museum can extend what it already does well. It is an opportunity to continue to work with local community groups, to bring groups from different cultural backgrounds, ages and abilities together to celebrate the diversity of the collection and Nuneaton.

There are many UK museums that deliver excellent community curated exhibitions. It would be a good idea to carry out some research into these. A museum that does this work to a very high standard is the Museum of Oxford:

https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20208/community_projects/771/museum_community_projects

https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20208/community_projects/776/oxfords_sporting_heritage_project

https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20208/community_projects/773/east_oxford_from_above_project

A possible structure for this focused approach could be (based on a 12 month delivery period resulting in a community curated exhibition):

Month 1-12 Recruit a small team of community curators. You may want to offer this opportunity to your existing volunteers first. This is a nice way to acknowledge their commitment to the museum and also a great way to develop their skills. This group would be responsible for researching the collection, writing and editing the majority of exhibition text, selecting objects and images, working on the design of the exhibition panels and labels, installation of the exhibition, and planning an exhibition launch.

The group could meet on a weekly basis in blocks of 2 month periods.

Members of staff would need to train/equip the group with the basic skills to deliver this work.

Month 1 Outreach Officer to contact Nuneaton Muslim Society and Mosque to explore possible opportunities for projects. Agree project start dates and project aims

Month 1-2 Outreach Officer to deliver a 4-6 week project with a local ESOL group, preferably including Muslim participants

Month 1-6 Work with local primary schools (museum staff) using the structure provided in the specialist report focusing on Early Years to Key Stage 2. Encourage the schools to produce an output that could be shared in the exhibition.

Month 3-10 Delivery of community projects (Outreach Officer) – (possibly 2 separate projects). These may include a project with teenagers (see earlier section), and a craft themed project with a local adult group. Crafts to explore could include weaving, embroidery, wood work, calligraphy, jewellery making, etc.

Month 7-9 Design and deliver a family friendly activity / event focusing on the IAMC collection. This could focus on calligraphy or patterns, shapes and colours. Invite families to contribute their work to the exhibition.

Month 10-11 Develop an Under 5s storytelling session based around the IAMC collection ready to deliver during the period of the exhibition.

- Month 10-11 Community Curators plan an exhibition launch event
- Month 11 Design and produce a family trail linked to the content of the exhibition
- Month 12 Launch the exhibition
- Month 12 -15 Series of events linked to the exhibition
- Month 13 Museum staff to host a celebration party for all those involved in the exhibition
- Month 15 Exhibition take down
- Post exhibition Evaluate the whole community curated exhibition. What worked well, and not so well. Consult all of the groups involved to see if there are ideas for developing relationships further. For example would your community curators like to work a further project? Would they like to share their skills with new members of the group, etc.

Conclusion

This report aimed to highlight possible audiences that could engage with the IAMC collection at NMAG. 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 NMAG 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.