

Specialist Support Scheme – Engagement Report
Oriental Museum, Durham University

March 2017

**Author: Neil Stevenson on behalf of the SSN for
Islamic Art and Material Culture**



**Birmingham
Museums**



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Contents

- 1) Introduction**
- 2) Open Day**
- 3) Families**
- 4) Workshops for adults**
- 5) Touch Tour for visitors with visual impairments**
- 6) Engaging university staff and students**
- 7) Engaging refugees from Syria**
- 8) Embroidery project**
- 9) Outreach**
- 10) Conclusion**

Introduction

There are many positive outcomes that can be achieved through engaging audiences with the Islamic Art and Material Culture (IAMC) collection at the Oriental Museum. The priority audiences are currently staff and students of Durham University, however the IAMC collection can be used to positively engage, enhance understanding, and break down barriers in what is a predominantly White British, rural, county. The learning team mentioned that some children from the county have asked on visits to the museum if there are Muslims living in Britain. For some who are aware of Islam, their source of information has been negative. The museum has an amazingly varied IAMC collection, and uses what it has on display in engaging and informative ways. Therefore, this report does not seek to reinvent the wheel, rather it makes suggestions about how the current offer could be enhanced, or how the collection could be used to engage new audiences. The ideas and suggestions in this report will focus on how the IAMC collection can be used to inform, make connections and inspire creativity and informal learning. The report makes reference to a number of objects within the collection that are not currently on display. It is hoped that as the museum moves forward with its innovative plans for development, that a greater number the IAMC collection will be on display.

Open Day

The museum could hold an open day to showcase a sample of its IAMC collection, including those on display, but perhaps with a focus on those which are currently in the museum store. The items selected could be based on those discussed by the collections specialist in his report. The open day would provide an opportunity for the museum to engage its general visitors with these items, sharing with them information about each one. It would also provide an opportunity for some targeted marketing. In advance of the open day, the museum could contact local groups and organisations and invite them and their members to the museum to view some of the collection.

Open day staff could invite / encourage all visitors to share responses to the objects, sharing what they like about them and how they might like to see and / or engage with them in the future. The museum could invite visitors to share any personal stories they may have that are linked to or inspired by the objects. The museum, with the individual's permission, should record these for future reference. It would also be worth making a note of any new contacts generated by this event.

Feedback generated on the day could be used by the museum to inform its future planning of both the display and use of its IAMC collection.

The open day would also provide the museum an opportunity to share some of their own ideas with the public on how they might like to use the collection, for example would the public find interesting a temporary display of objects showing animals both real and fantastical as suggested by the collections specialist.

Curatorial and learning staff would need to run the open day, talking to members of the public and possibly engaging them with simple craft activities.

A Quick Turn-a-round Open Day – Eid 2017!

The museum may want to consider organising an open day to tie in with a Festival such as Eid. Although Eid 2017 (25th-26th June) is a short time away, it may be possible for the museum to have some of its IAMC reserve collection on display for this and to use some of the budget provided by the SSN support scheme to buy in materials and resources that could be used for craft activities. Having checked the 'What's On' calendar, it seems that the museum is celebrating Eid with a family activity called 'Celebrate Eid'. In addition to the learning staff could members of the curatorial team be available to set up a table of IAMC objects from the store and to engage parents and children with these? This could be a speedy way to gain some useful feedback about the collection that could be used in future planning, both of learning events and curatorial/display matters.

Resources that could be useful for developing activities for the Celebrate Eid event are as follows:

Story Books

Sweet Dates to Eat: A Ramadan and Eid Story by Johnny Zucker, £5.99

An Eid For Everyone by Hina Islam, £7.49

The Best Eid Ever by Asma Mobin-Udin, £12.95

Ramadan Moon by Na'ima B Robert, £6.99

An Eid Story: Husana and the Eid Party by Fawzi Gilani-Williams, £ 2.23

Rasheed's Ramadan and Eid Al-Fitr by Lisa Bullard, £5.62

Craft Ideas

Paper Eid lanterns <https://uk.pinterest.com/pin/408490628674640291/>

Ramadan sun catchers <https://uk.pinterest.com/pin/452752568767176515/>

Geometric glass window <https://www.activityvillage.co.uk/geometric-design-stained-glass-window>

Henna 'mehndi' Hand print <https://www.activityvillage.co.uk/henna-hand-print>

Lolly stick start <https://www.activityvillage.co.uk/lolly-stick-star>

A selection of Ramadan and Eid craft activities, including Eid lanterns

<https://uk.pinterest.com/pin/70437473400876/>

Potato print Eid card <https://www.activityvillage.co.uk/potato-print-eid-card>

Families

The museum has a strong offer for families. A visit to the museum demonstrates the commitment to this audience, as does the prominence of family events in the 'What's On'. In addition to family engagement that could take place via the suggested open day idea in the previous section, the IAMC collection could be used in a number of ways to engage this audience. Family activities could include:

- i) Calligraphy and story telling
- ii) Pattern, colour and symmetry
- iii) Clay tiles / clay pots
- iv) Jewellery making

In his report, the collections specialist referred to the number of objects in the IAMC collection that displayed scenes of animals, both real and fantastic. He suggested that 'such subject matter can be very engaging and can combine items from all collections in DurOM, making research and mounting an exhibition engaging to the curatorial and education team, not to mention appealing to audiences of all ages.' It would be fantastic if the museum were to follow this suggestion, either focusing on animals from all collections, or more specifically the IAMC collection. With or without an exhibition, the learning team could still develop a family activity based around the animals depicted on some of the IAMC objects (see the following).



1969.486 golden hare



1969.490 unknown animal



2015.306 lion



1992.159 Turquoise-glazed cat figure



2015.396 horse



W214 bird

Not all of the previous examples are currently on display. If a small temporary exhibition was developed then the following ideas could be developed and delivered:

- i) Create your own fantastic animal/creature
- ii) Make an animal puppet
- iii) Make your own animal design tile
- iv) Create a wonderful story about the animals
- v) Gallery tour – move like an animal, what sounds do these animals make?
- vi) Gallery trail – find the draw a picture of..... what colour is the etc

Workshops for adults

The IAMC collection, including objects both on display and in the stores, could be used as the inspiration for a series of short courses and workshops for adults, including calligraphy, tile making, pottery and jewellery making. These could be offered as free one-off workshops that cover the basics of each discipline and enable participants to make a simple product, or as a series of weekly fee-based workshops, delivered by a specialist that encourage participants to develop the skills and confidence to produce a high-quality piece of work. At the end of the course, the museum could display any work produced in a small temporary exhibition. To make the course financially feasible all costs, including the artist and materials, will need to be covered by the course fee.

Objects that could be used to inspire these workshops are:

Jewellery making 2014.143 1-5 Metalworkers tools

A selection of the rings and jewellery currently in the museum store, incl 2014.231

Tile making 1969.566 Moulded and painted stoneplate tile

	1997.176 tile
Pottery	1969.486 Blue and lustre-decorated stonepaste faceted bottle
	1969.490 Animal-decorated bowl
Calligraphy	1987.22.1 Gold-inlaid steel scissors
	A selection of objects from the IAMC collection showing calligraphy

Touch Tour for visitors with visual impairments

The museum has recently welcomed groups of visitors with visual impairments and is keen to develop this relationship and to extend the offer. The IAMC collection would make an excellent focus for a curator and learning officer led touch tour. Included in this could be a mixture of objects that are currently on display and those in store. When selecting the objects for the touch tour it would be a good idea to include a range of material types, objects that represent a geographical spread and also a range of dates. Objects that would be good to include in a touch tour are:

1987.22.1 Gold-inlaid steel scissors and blue velvet and silver thread scissor case

2014.143 1-5 Metalworkers tools

1969.480 Cast and engraved brass candlestick

1969.544 Silver-decorated bowl

1969.566 Moulded and painted stoneplate tile

1962/78 Watch

Door surround with raised embroidery and inscriptions

Engaging University staff and students

A priority audience for the museum is staff and students of Durham University. In addition to making the IAMC collection available for research and study, the museum could engage this audience in a less formal way. Contact should be made with the Durham University Islamic Society (DUISOC) via the following:

<https://duisoc.com>

duisoc@gmail.com

www.facebook.com/DurhamUniversity

Instagram @duisoc

The museum could arrange a meeting with DUISOC so that it can introduce itself and discuss the possibilities of forming a partnership. The museum could arrange a visit to the museum for the society and show case its IAMC collection to the group. If the society was interested in forming a relationship with the museum then several events and activities could be developed.

- i) Invite members of the society to choose an object from the IAMC collection and respond to it. This could include historical information and/or personal responses. The responses could be curated via short online films, a small temporary exhibition in the museum or an online exhibition. An online exhibition would be relatively straight forward to create as most of the IAMC collection is already online.
- ii) With the support of the Learning team, the society could help develop and deliver a public engagement event at the museum linked to the IAMC collection. This could include events for fellow university students, families, a series of talks/lectures, drop-in craft activities, etc.
- iii) A mid-long term aim of the museum is to redevelop its permanent gallery. As staff at the museum have already begun discussions about the development of this space, now might be a good time to invite DUISOC to share their thoughts and ideas on how the IAMC collection can be used in the future.

Engaging refugees from Syria

Like many regions of the UK, Co.Durham council has agreed to provide shelter for 200 refugees from Syria between now and 2020 <http://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/durham-pledges-help-200-refugees-11739198>

The museum has a number of objects from Syria within the IAMC collection, and these could be used to engage local Syrian refugees.

L.1960.10 Lustre-decorated bowl

L.1960.11 Lustre-decorated bowl

L.1960.12 Lustre-decorated bowl

L.1960.13 Lustre-decorated bowl

Pen.1960.41 Blue and white albarello

Pen.1960.42 Green glazed jar

And possibly:

1969.480B Qaytbay era engraved silver-inlaid brass candlestick

Pen.1960-72 Fragmentary silver and gold-inlaid brass candlestick

Door surrounded with raised embroidery and inscriptions

The museum learning staff should seek advice from organisations supporting the refugees to settle into life in Durham before designing any activities. These organisations will be able to advise the museum on what might work, what is appropriate/not appropriate, etc. The museum could provide an opportunity for displaced families to engage with cultural objects from their own country, especially considering that many of the refugees will have few or no personal items with them from home, and to invite members of the group to talk about the objects that are familiar or features that are of interest. In addition to focusing on objects from Syria, the museum could also engage the group with a selection of objects from around the Islamic world and further afield. Crafts could be made available for the parents and children to work together.

Embroidery Project

The door surround with raised embroidery and inscriptions would make a fantastic focus for a community embroidery project. The museum and its visitors would benefit enormously from a replica of the door surround and this could be made by a community embroidery group. A replica would enable the museum to protect the original, but at the same time enable visitors to engage with its intricacy and beauty through object handling and touch tours. The museum could seek funding to undertake an embroidery project and invite local people with an interest in embroidery to get involved. The group could meet on a weekly basis and work under the supervision of an embroidery specialist.

The museum would need to consult with the specialist to work out the costs and time needed to make either a full-size replica, or perhaps a section of the original door surround.

An embroidery specialist local to the museum is Tanya Bentham of Threads of Time. In addition to having the necessary craft skills, Tanya has lots of experience working on museum community engagement projects. Tanya can be contacted via www.threadsoftime.org.uk and tanya.bentham@googlemail

It may be possible that local sewing/embroidery shops/suppliers may wish to support a museum project like this one. If this is something the museum would be interested in pursuing then it would be worth contacting the following:

The Raggy Robin Sewing Room, Unit 14, Vane Tempest Hall, Maynards Row, Gilesgate, Durham, DH1 1QF contact@raggyrobbin.co.uk

Goldstitch Sewing Studio, Mowbray House, Tanhills, Nettlesworth, Chester-le-Street, Durham, DH2 3PA jean@goldstitch.co.uk

Outreach

Staff at the museum have concerns about the lack of understanding of the Islamic faith within the city and wider county. Evidence for this comes from questions that have been asked staff by local school children on visits to the museum.

The museum may need to take an outreach approach to using their collection to help challenge certain views of Islam in the local region. The collection may need to be taken out of the museum setting and into community venues and locations throughout County Durham.

The museum could put together a 'pop-up' museum/display which is taken to community events throughout the region. A member of staff could attend each event with this information, and possibly a selection of objects, or replicas, from the collection that could be viewed or possibly handled. The focus of this could be the Islamic collection, or perhaps a broader Oriental Museum theme, focusing on a range of cultures and religions, including elements of the Islamic collection. In addition to engaging members of the public with the museum's collection, it would hopefully act as a catalyst for people to visit the museum itself.

Alternatively, the museum could produce a display that visits community venues for a set period of time before moving on to another venue. Venues could include community centres, libraries, sports venues, etc.

Conclusion

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