

# Specialist Support Scheme – Engagement Report

## Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery

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Islamic Art and Material Culture



Birmingham  
Museums



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## Introduction

Blackburn is a large town in the North West of England. The population of the town at the 2011 census was 106,537. The town was famous for its textile mills and weaving industry, but these went into decline in the 1950s. Like many other northern towns, Blackburn has since struggled with deindustrialisation and economic challenges. Blackburn has seen significant levels of migration since the 1950s, mainly from India and Pakistan and today has one of the highest proportions of Muslims per population in England and Wales (25%). In 2011 the population of Blackburn consisted of 69.22% White British, 14.31% Indian, 11.45% Pakistani and 12.33% born outside of the EU.

Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery (BMAG) opened in 1874, and is the local museum service for Blackburn with Darwin Borough Council. The museum is most notable for its manuscript and numismatic collections bequeathed by Robert Edward Hart.

BMAG has a small, but significant Islamic Art and Material Culture collection. A specialist, supported by the SSN, looked at the collection in November 2016, and concluded that:

*The most important aspects of the collection derive from its ability to illustrate a series of themes: Arabic and Persian calligraphy (from the Kufic of the dirhams to the Muhaqqaq and Naskh of the Qur'an pages to the Maghribi of 21175 and the Nasta'liq of the poetic works), Muslim piety (The Qur'an 19661, the three Qur'an pages, Muhammad's Ascension to Heaven miniature in 19223, the Holy Cities views in 21173, 21174 and 21175, the Jerusalem album), poetic love (the Leyla and Majnun miniatures in the two Khamzas 19222 and 19223, the rose miniature in 19224, the youth miniature in 21172) and Iranian stories and legends (the folios of Shahnama 19662 as well as the two Khamzas 19222 and 19223, in conjunction with some of the Sassanian coins which feature portraits of Iranian kings).*

This report aims to identify possible audiences that BMAG 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 Officer and both curators at the museum, several audiences have been identified as a priority. As the Education Team at the museum consists of 1 part-time 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 2 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 BMAG's curatorial and learning staff 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. The current permanent displays in the museum, highlighting the history of Blackburn, finish at the 1950s, and in doing so do not tell the story of migration to Blackburn during the last 60 years.

The population of Blackburn is approximately 106,537 (2011 Census), of which 25.75% are Muslim (the national average for England is 3.1%). The local population is 69.22% White British, 14.31% Indian, 11.45% Pakistani, and 12.33% born outside of the UK. The museum is in close proximity to a number of Blackburn's Mosques, including Blackburn Markaz-Makki Masjid, Masjid e Tauheedul Islam, and the Islamic Religious Centre on Leamington Road and the Mohaddis-E-Azam Mission Education Centre.

It would be a sensible for the museum to approach a selection of local mosques and the Lancashire Council of Mosques to begin a dialogue with the mid-term aim being to engage the local Muslim community, to suggest the outline of possible projects and for the community to share how they would like to engage with the museum. 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 Islamic Art and Material Culture 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 Blackburn today
- ii) Link into the local Islamic Schools
- iii) Work with local ESOL groups 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 galleries.

## **Open Day**

The museum could hold an open day to show case a sample of its Islamic Art and Material Culture collection. The items selected could be based on the manuscripts 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, including specific scenes from the manuscripts. 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 manuscripts, 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 manuscripts. 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.

Two members of staff and several volunteers would be needed to run an open day successfully.

## **Families**

The museum runs a series of successful 'Get Crafty' family drop-in days for toddlers through to 12 year olds. The family events also take place in the South Asian gallery at the museum. The IAMC collection lends itself to a series of family themed craft events including calligraphy, pattern, symmetry, and colour. Families could have a go at creating their own illuminated manuscript page using traditional calligraphy pens and ink, or for the younger children colouring pencils and crayons. Inspiration for the craft could be taken from the manuscripts. Photographs of the illustrated pages could be available for families to use as inspiration, or alternatively there could be specially designed short visits for families to view the manuscripts in the gallery led by trained family volunteers.

As poetry and stories such as the Shahnameh are contained within the manuscripts it would be sensible to support the 'Get Crafty' family drop-in with some traditional storytelling. The museum could hire a freelance storyteller to lead storytelling sessions based on the Shahnameh, throughout the 'Get Crafty' drop-in.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shahnameh>

<http://theepicofthepersiankings.com/home/#.WJfJifmLTIU>

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Shahnameh-Persian-Kings-Elizabeth-Laird/dp/1847804977>

## Short Films

Curators at the museum currently share information about objects within the collection via short films on their website. This could be extended to include short films focusing on a selection of the Islamic manuscripts. Initially these films could be led by the museum staff, but a mid-term aim should be to invite members of the wider community to narrate a selection.

An idea could be to create a series of short films telling elements of the Shahnameh. Each instalment of the series could focus on an image from the manuscripts. The films need be no longer than 30-45 seconds long. Instalments would need to go online at regular intervals to maintain interest. The films could be promoted via the museums social media platforms.

A further idea could be to include the manuscripts within a wider short film project. The project could explore the diversity of cultures within Blackburn through the medium of storytelling. Objects within the museum's collection that link to different cultural traditions could be used as the stimulus for retelling stories from different cultures.

## Workshops for Adults – The Art of Writing in Islam / Calligraphy

The manuscripts could be used as the inspiration for a series of calligraphy workshops. Miniatures within the manuscripts illustrate practices associated with calligraphy and learning (see image below).



The museum could run one-off Arabic calligraphy workshops for adults, however due to the time it takes to develop the technique and thus to produce a piece of work it may be more advisable to run a 6-8 week course. You could offer 10-12 paying places, with a weekly 2 hour session. The museum could hire an external calligraphy artist to deliver the course, or alternatively seek a calligrapher from the local community. Participants could work towards producing a final piece of work that could be displayed in the temporary gallery at the museum, or an alternate space. To make the course financially feasible all costs, including the artist and materials, will need to be covered by the course fee.

### **ESOL groups**

BMAG's Learning Officer could deliver a 4-6 week project with a local ESOL group, including those from the local South Asian community. The project should be delivered in partnership between the museum and a local ESOL provider such as Blackburn and Darwin Adult Learning Services. A copy of the most recent Adult Learning brochure (Jan-Mar 17) can be found at the following link:

[http://media.wix.com/ugd/4aca19\\_d2f20f6c1f3049f5bfbac3a9b65eab49.pdf](http://media.wix.com/ugd/4aca19_d2f20f6c1f3049f5bfbac3a9b65eab49.pdf) (see page 8).

The contact details for ESOL services via Adult Learning is 01254 5077720

[neighbourhoodsandlearning@blackburn.gov.uk](mailto:neighbourhoodsandlearning@blackburn.gov.uk)

### **Community Created and Curated Temporary Exhibition**

A long-term aim for the museum could be to use the IAMC collection as a focus for a community created and curated exhibition. This would provide an opportunity to engage a range of audiences (existing and new) over a 12-15 month period, create opportunities for volunteers, and encourage participants to develop new skills.

The museum has a temporary exhibition space within the Social History gallery that could be used to highlight the work generated through this project. The museum could seek funding opportunities to help deliver a project with ambition such as this.

When planning this project, it would be useful to refer to the Blackburn with Darwin Borough Council Equality Strategy 2012-2016, particularly page 8. The council will publish an updated strategy shortly. A copy of the current strategy can be found at

[https://www.blackburn.gov.uk/Lists/DownloadableDocuments/1813-DL-Equality\\_Strategy\\_2012-16\\_v5.pdf](https://www.blackburn.gov.uk/Lists/DownloadableDocuments/1813-DL-Equality_Strategy_2012-16_v5.pdf)

**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 a great way to develop their skills. You may also want to provide opportunities to new volunteers, especially those from the local South Asian community. The community curators would be responsible for researching the collection, writing and

editing exhibition text, selecting objects and images, coordinating the work generated by community groups, 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 throughout the duration of the project.

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

Month 1 Arrange a meeting with Blackburn and Darwen Council's Community Cohesion Officer to discuss project ideas and find out about contacts for local community groups, particularly those from the local South Asian community.

Month 1-2 Museum staff / Learning Officer to contact local Mosques, local schools, community groups, ESOL providers, etc to explore possible opportunities for project work. Create a project plan based around those groups that respond positively to working with the museum.

Month 2-3 Learning Officer to deliver a 4-6 week project with a local ESOL group (see section on ESOL groups)

Month 3-4 Work with a local primary school (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 (refer to the Early Years to Key Stage report for ideas).

Month 4-8 Delivery of community projects (Learning Officer & Curators). Project ideas could include the following:

- Film project with young adults (14-21 years old) capturing what it is like to be of South Asian ancestry living/studying/working in Blackburn today and to document elements of their cultural heritage. What do they think of the IAMC collection at BMAG? Do they feel a connection with it?
- Art & Design project with Blackburn College. Contact the tutors of the Art and Design department and invite their students to engage with the IAMC collections and find inspiration for their work and produce a selection of mixed media responses, including printing, calligraphy, photography, graffiti, 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 (see 'Families' section). Invite families to contribute their work to the exhibition.

Month 10-11 Community Curators plan the exhibition launch

Month 12 Install and 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 the groups involved to explore the possibility of developing relationships further. Would the community curators like to work on further projects? 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 BMAG. 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 BMAG 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.