

Sudanese Community: working with Islamic Art and Material collections across Oxford University Museums

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The Islamic art and material culture collections at Oxford University Museums span 3 institutions: The Ashmolean, The Museum of the History of Science and the Pitt Rivers Museum.

Using these collections as a springboard, the museums' Community Engagement Team have developed an ongoing partnership with Oxford's Sudanese Community. Over the last 3 years the partnership with the community has mainly been through the Sudanese Saturday School but this has developed as the partnership itself has developed. This document sets out the initial approach, the different ways in which the museums have worked with the community, the partnership's development, and its legacy.

The initial engagement was in response to the Ashmolean's vast collection of Ancient Sudanese / Nubian artefacts which are presented within a very popular gallery. The curator wanted to target engagement with the local Sudanese community in Oxford and support access to this collection. This also fitted in with a wider plan of listening to how local people want to access and use the collections – especially for diaspora communities for whom the museums house objects of cultural heritage.

Through local community support networks the community engagement team located a Sudanese shop and literally knocked on the door and found a contact. Through initial meetings, it was evident that the community were not accessing any of the museums and that co-collaboration was essential to ensure the partnerships met the needs of the community as well as the museums.



The Ancient Sudan collection in the Ashmolean

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Our first workshop was an introductory family day planned during the summer holidays. It revolved around the ancient Sudanese objects in the Ashmolean, connecting the children with life around the Nile and inspiring them to make and design similar pots to take home. Fortunately, the Ashmolean had support from a visiting curator from Northern Sudan, engaging with the families in Arabic and inviting them to the museum in Khartoum. This link to their home country consolidated this first workshop.



Introductory family day at the Ashmolean

From this the community engagement team developed the partnership, focusing on the Islamic art and material culture in the Ashmolean, Pitt Rivers and the Museum of the History of Science. Co-planning these activities, the focus was on supporting the curriculum at the Sudanese Saturday School. The children and parents visited all the museums and engaged with the collections through trails and crafts. The approach developed, encouraging parents to take small groups around the museums and lead on the activities. From observations it was clear that the adults both enjoyed themselves and became the gatekeepers of information and stories for the children, telling them about memories of Sudan, how the objects were used, and their cultural and historical importance – so much more information than a museum label!

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Visit to the Pitt River's Museum

The most recent work developed the partnership further and engaged the Saturday school with 2 poets in a project called Poetry for Peace. This focused the young people on the Arabic language and the ancient collections of Mesopotamia in the Ashmolean. Using these collections, the young people reflected on the effects of modern day war in the Middle East, led by an Iraqi poet who was a refugee and conducted the workshops in both English and Arabic. The school opened an extra day to accommodate the project and the parents were as enthused as the young people. The culmination of this work was a published anthology of poetry and performances in the Ashmolean gallery (in both English and Arabic).

Outcomes

As the partnership developed, the museums developed an understanding of how the community wanted to work with their ancient and recent collections, including the Islamic art and material culture collections. Essential to this is also an understanding the community's aims and priorities. Primarily, the Sudanese Saturday school support the children's language learning of Arabic so it was important that the museums supported this with their Islamic collections. Of equal importance was the aim to improve the children's aspirations and sense of belonging in Oxford. The parents and teachers of the Sudanese Saturday School felt the work in the museums connected the young people with Oxford and also opened up opportunities to them.

The museums have further developed their approach to working with the community; listening and responding to approaches and themes that support the community's priorities. The Ashmolean (in the Ancient Sudan Gallery) hosted an open performance of 'The Nile' a local Sudanese band in Oxford which fuses traditional and modern day Sudanese music.

There is also a move to embedding the community work into the individual museums' approaches: the Museum of the History of Science has worked with the Sudanese Saturday School, helping the museum trial Islamic card games. In addition to this, the Ashmolean co-curated a community exhibition in response to *Power & Protection: Islamic Art and the Supernatural* in which the themes used in power and protection in Islam were used to inspire an exhibition which explored collective community empowerment with a secular group of women who were learning English as a Second Language.

These partnerships continue to develop: listening to the Sudanese Community and engaging in cross-community work. Within this the aim is to use the collections at the museums as a vehicle and focus for reducing barriers between communities as well as reducing access barriers to the institutions and collections themselves.