



## MULTAKA: MUSEUM AS MEETING POINT

### Refugees as Guides in Berlin Museums – Concept and Content

In December 2015 the Museum of Islamic Art, in cooperation with three other museums, started a project to train refugees or immigrants with Syrian or Iraqi background to be museum guides. Their role was to develop and lead tours for refugees in their first language – by now through 24 guides twice a week. The four involved museums are in direct vicinity and cover history from the ancient Middle East, Byzantium, and the Islamic Period to more recent German history. Thus they connect the cultural heritage of countries of origin with the history of the new host country. With dialogue and discussion, guides and visitors select objects to reflect their personal backgrounds, questions are provoked by exploring objects from the past. No language barrier, no registration, peer-to-peer encounter at eye level enabled thousand refugees to explore the museum.

“Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point – Refugees as Guides in Berlin Museums”, aims to facilitate the interchange of diverse cultural and historical experiences. *Multaka* (Arabic for “meeting point”) aims at an active cultural participation through a process of appropriation of cultural institutions. Through experiencing the appreciation which the museum shows towards cultural artifacts from their homelands, we hope to strengthen the self-esteem of refugees and allow for confident and constructive connection with our cultural institutions. To cover the great interest of the German audience, *Multaka* organized in addition 18 intercultural workshops in 2016 that address refugees as well as German speaking natives to meet directly.

The program is extremely successful. Several thousand refugees have visited the tours and discussed aspects of Middle Eastern and German history in connection to their own realities. Great international media coverage has been generated and the project was awarded with two prices and is nominated for a third one. We have been approached several times by different museums, institutions and scholars who intend to adopt the concept. The narrative and content of our four museums are specific to our situation and location, we also profit from a very good network of Syrian scholarship and heritage. Nevertheless, many of the points outlined here are also relevant to other museums and these ideas could be developed further by museums that choose to do so. This article shall provide the opportunity to share ideas, methodology and challenges.

## Methodology – How to bring the past to the present

It is not the aim of the project to generate more visitors. The Museum of Islamic Art at the Pergamon Museum is visited by many hundred thousand people each year and due to renovation works there is limited access anyhow. Our aim was twofold: how can we – as a museum that covers mainly the period from the Late Antiquities to the Early Modern period (17<sup>th</sup> C) - bring the past to the present and can provide our specific expertise on Islamic Culture for the challenges of a changing society. Further we witness the experience of refugees daily through our Syrian Heritage Archive Project. In this project we work with Syrian specialists in documenting the cultural heritage of Syria.<sup>1</sup> It is hard for newcomers who lost almost everything not to lose also their hope sitting in the shelters without work – especially for those who had once good education and position at home. We wanted to give perspectives! The network of the colleagues of the 'Syrian Heritage Archive Project' was of extreme help to establish the project. Due to the first limited but important funding for several months at the end of the fiscal year 2015<sup>2</sup> we needed to move very fast. This network was able to engage potential guides quickly, and the project proved very popular. Respondents came from diverse professional backgrounds; engineers, architects, artists and lawyers along with professional guides, archaeologists and conservators, giving visitors the benefit of a wide range of approaches to the artefacts. The group of guides was highly motivated. They were the main reason for the success of the project. We worked from the beginning to strengthen social threads among us. Our museum is maybe in a specific position as we work for over a century in Syria and part of our researchers are closely connected to the country – we have a direct emotional attachment. For any other institution it will be more difficult but of course not impossible to build up a network that can function as guides or mediators.

The museum adheres to a strong participatory principal and process. The idea was developed with Syrian contributors. Syrians are part of the project management team and we work closely with our Syrian and Iraqi network. As many Syrians are not experienced in team work in their former professional lives, one would need time and a positive social commitment from the museum team. We keep in close contact through social media and regular team meetings. Guides are invited to be part of the project development – and they do. As the guides were much motivated we faced administrative issues. Some guides arrived to Germany two years ago or more and had no problem to work with the same payment as a regular guide. However, most of them were newcomers and not allowed to earn money due to their refugee status. Instead they became members of the non-profit association „Freunde des Museums für Islamische Kunst im Pergamonmuseum e.V.“ and could receive an expense allowance (the same amount like the other guides). The friends of the museum were extremely helpful as they took over the financial planning.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Museum of Islamic Art and the German Archaeological Institute, which both hold very large data bases established from long-lasting research in Syria, started in 2013 a digital cultural heritage list for Syria, the so-called "Syrian Heritage Archive Project", see: [www.syrian-heritage.org](http://www.syrian-heritage.org) or [www.facebook.com/Syrher.ISL/](https://www.facebook.com/Syrher.ISL/). This developed into key project a large international network, co-organizer of the last UNESCO conference on Syria. Damage Assessment, rescue of local visual archives and cultural education in refugees camps are recent developments of the project.

<sup>2</sup> The project was first funded by the federal program "Demokratie leben!" (Live Democracy!) of the German Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women and Youth. We are also extremely thankful to the representative of the federal government for Culture and Media (BKM) and the Schering Stiftung for their commitment. The Stiftung Deutsches Historisches Museum, the Freunde des Museums für Islamische Kunst im Pergamonmuseum e.V., and to many private donors many thanks for further funding.

<sup>3</sup> Information (mainly in German and Arabic) on the project, downloads of flyers etc. and press review on [www.fmik.de](http://www.fmik.de) and [facebook.com/MultakaTreffpunktMuseum](https://www.facebook.com/MultakaTreffpunktMuseum). The management-team consists of Robert Winkler (until March 2017), Razan Nassreddine (until January 2017), Salma Jreige (from February 2017), Hussam Zahim Mohammed (from April 2017), Cornelia Weber and me. Many more guides and education officers are actively involved – too many to thank them here by name. But without them, the project would not work.

The project profited as well from the high commitment of the directions and education officers of the three other museums. They agreed to join and to take the needed time spontaneously. In collaboration with the department of “Education, Outreach and Visitor Services” of the Staatliche Museen and the “Education and Outreach” department of the Deutsches Historisches Museum, a training program for the guides-to-be was fleshed out, based around the themes of the museums and issues of didactics and methodology. A special trainer for dialogue based communication was hired, as we do not promote a one-way knowledge transfer from museum to guide. The guides did not learn our catalogues by heart. We asked our guides to connect to items they were interested in. The guides select their own museum, their objects and brought in their own biography and life experiences. The Museum deliberately highlighted objects and narratives that may be relevant to the refugees. The refugees were invited to make sense of, and reflect on, the collections in the context of their own history. For example some topics from German history that proved to be very interesting for the Arab visitors:

- The story of war and destruction in Germany: 1945 was not the end of history, it was a beginning.
- German Emigration to the US in the 19th Century or from the east after WWII: We all have in our history people who fled from war or poverty.
- The wars of protestant and Catholics and especially the Thirty Years' War (1618-48): was it only about religion?

For many Germany is associated with economic strength and property. To see the destroyed Berlin of 1945 was translated directly to the situation in Syria and Iraq as a sign for hope. The Thirty Years' War became instead a contrast folio to discuss mechanism of war and confessionalism. Despite the religious, political and social background of the each member of the tour one was able to discuss and agree that confessions are often not the reason but vehicle of civil war – talking of the own reality while looking back almost 400 years to another geographical setting.

We allow people to engage in dialogue: guides and visitors tell their point of view and depart from our scientific prerogative of interpretation. This was the biggest challenge and learning process for me as a museum director and researcher. But we were rewarded directly: people who had not internalized the museum visit as a common practice began to identify with the place. This is a major achievement as almost all visitors of *Multaka* belong to a non-museum-going audience (I have lived for 12 years in Syria and Lebanon, museums are almost empty). But now they discuss with the guides for 1 to 2 hours and many come back. Our guides actually became mediators to discuss through history about our reality here and now. The history of others became a reflection zone for questions of oneself today. The museum is therefore not only an area of new social circles but also a positive reference point and venue for the intercultural constitution of our society. A public institution thus becomes significant for the biographies of Berliners of different origins. *Multaka* became a meeting-point in its full meaning.

### **The grand narrative – connected through human cultural history**

As an institution which is specialised in cultural history we stress the dynamics of cultural processes and developments: interconnectedness and exchange. In times of collective cultural uncertainty, we provide open, networked culture images (multi-religious, multi-ethnic, trans-regional, cross-linked). We aim at our identities, which we see connected, plural, hybrid and inclusive. Crossing the boards of four museums we focused in our training on a broad grand narrative in which all are embedded. The emphasis changed in each museum, based on the collections:

The guided tours in the Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst make reference to the inter-religious roots and the common origins of the three world religions of Islam, Judaism and

Christendom. Cultures in the Eastern Mediterranean region were characterised over the centuries by religiously and ethnically plural societies, which today are under threat. The displays in the Museum of Islamic Art and the Ancient Near East Museum are based on outstanding testimonies of human history from mainly Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran. Both museums provide many narratives of the migration of cultural techniques between Europe and the Middle East, the plurality of societies or of the cultural interconnectedness in each époque until today (see below). The tours at the Deutsches Historisches Museum connect these cultural experiences with their new home. By the way: the majority of the guides from Iraq and Syria have chosen this museum as their preferred place of work.

Through the depiction of such commonalities and the incorporation into a larger cultural and historical, epoch-transcending narrative, museums have the immense opportunity to function as a connecting link between the refugees' countries of origin and their new host country, in order to create a context of meaning for their lives here. In our case we are happy to have the grand narrative through the four museums very close by. However, there are key narratives that function anywhere:

- Migration: No object in our museums exists without migration – every object is an expression of transregional connection and migration: the exchange of techniques, thoughts, pattern, fashions, and ideas is the base of each narrative. No object and no subject in our society can be explained by rigid culturalistic maps. Where does iron come from? Or where does the alphabet come from? What about paper, gunpowder, the telephone, your jeans? Look at our lives: they are all about migration (and trade). No single thread of our cloth is pure and only German, Syrian, and British etc.
- Shared heritage: The specific history of exchange of our cultures and what came from the Middle East may help to understand that none of us would be as he is without the other. The list from the Middle East is long: science, philosophy, ceramic techniques like luster and blue white, paper, the game of chess, the oud as mother of the modern guitar (without the oud no Jimmy Hendrix or John Lennon) etc. It is a long list also the other way around. Many cultural realities are interwoven and both sides of the Mediterranean were formative for each other over very many centuries.
- Common threads in history: what are the common historical experiences? For example, the birth of our cultures from late antiquities or the drastic change of patterns of life during the 19th and 20th century modern period are closely interconnected phases of our developments. They are not the same but they are entangled. Parallel and connected histories of human experience could focus on specific topics on a meta level like, love, war, living, social order etc. on structures of interactions like trade and war (the Silk-Road or the Mediterranean).
- Contact zones: historical and cultural connections between Germany, Syria and Iraq. Exchange from that period of Carl the Great and Harun al-Rashid, the Staufer Frederic II and Sultan Kamil, Wilhelm II and Abdülhamid II. The heritage of Islam in Europe in Sicily, Spain and the Balkans. Court culture along the Mediterranean in the 12th/13th C. etc. Venice and the trade with the Middle East. The Crusaders as culture transfer etc.
- Identity: By discussing the experience of discovering the intercultural networks of objects, often self-awareness may arise in the assessment of visitors' own cultural identity. In times of social uncertainty and increasing culturalistic exclusion, cultural pluralism can be seen as a positive development. Objects from the past then function as reflective spaces and allow for the negotiation of collective identities. How were ideas in art, music, science and history exchanged over the centuries? Where are our origins? We give concrete examples and unusual answers to the question of "who am I and who are you". We are in urgent need for that given the raising phenomena on excluding right-wing populism or religious fanaticism.

## Multaka - Cultural Participation and appreciation

The Syrian and Iraqi artefacts exhibited in the Museum für Islamische Kunst and in the Vorderasiatisches Museum are outstanding testaments to the history of humanity. Its sound naïve but this is our experience: almost all visitors were delighted to see the appreciation for these cultural treasures in a prime location in the middle of Berlin. Many asked of course how these objects found their way to Germany. An open discussion about archaeology, protection of cultural property and calls for return helped to develop a differentiated view mixed with a feeling of happiness to see them here. Meeting with their own culture in the museum made people proud and feeling respected. “Something that keeps your head up” – an Arabic proverb to express proud and self-esteem is mentioned often. Integration as an act of belonging is an active process and happens in steps when one feels respected. *Multaka* started a reciprocal experience by appreciations of the cultures of the Middle East at the Bode Museum and the Pergamon Museum and the history of Germany in the DHM. Cultural self-affirmation is in the debate on immigration always designated as an obstacle to integration. We believe the opposite is the case: if one feels appreciated - feels included and not excluded - one can get into society much easier. Refugees conquer the Museum Island and make this country with its cultural institutions their own. The step in the museums and the active (!) discussion of our common historical heritage is the first step to wave new threads of belonging into one’s own cultural garb. Democracy is based on responsible citizen participation. *Multaka* facilitate cultural participation and encourage this participation on the way to be an active member of our society.

Through the depiction of such commonalities and the incorporation into a larger cultural and historical, epoch-transcending narrative, museums have the immense opportunity. In this way, museums can create a context of meaning for people and receive a new role and reliance in our societies.

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