Museums
United Kingdom

Oxford museums train refugee guides and curators

Berlin’s Multaka programme of Arabic tours spreads to the UK – and beyond

EDUCATION

OXFORD. Berlin’s award-winning museums project training Syrian and Iraqi migrants to lead tours in Arabic is itself crossing borders. Since February, Oxford has developed its own version of Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point – Refugees as Guides in Berlin Museums, first launched in December 2015 by Berlin State Museum and the Deutsches Historisches Museum.

Oxford’s museums have been doing outreach for seven years with the city’s community of Arabic-speaking refugees. Inspired by Multaka, the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Museum of the History of Science decided to run a similar project jointly, taking on the name with the Berlin team’s blessing.

The Museum of the History of Science is training refugees as guides to its astronomical instruments collection. “We realised there was lots of work that could be done to make this collection more accessible, and many of its objects grew out of the Arabic-speaking world, it was a good fit for this project,” says Abigail Flack, the collections officer for Multaka Oxford.

Eight of the 26 registered participants will deliver tours in Arabic and English from the end of this year.

The Pitt Rivers is engaging communities in “more hands-on curatorial work,” Flack says. This helped to secure a £120,000 grant from the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, run by the UK Museums Association, which supports collections projects with a social impact. The refugees are co-curating an exhibition based on a recent acquisition of Middle Eastern textiles. Flack is teaching them to observe, handle and label objects for the show, which is due to open in April 2019.

Translating Multaka to the UK has not been plain sailing, however. German law allows anyone regardless of status to earn up to €2,400 a year, but payment is not possible in the UK without a work permit, which many refugees do not have. “It has not been a major barrier,” Flack insists. Multaka Oxford covers all the participants’ travel costs, which are capped for other museum volunteers.

“The project has gone down well with the city’s forced migrant communities. Some use the workshops for socialising and practising English, while others are developing a deep interest in the artefacts and building their CVs. The museums are planning seminars next year to share their findings with the UK museums sector. The aim is to secure more funding once the Esmée Fairbairn money runs out in September 2019.

“Multaka worked perfectly in the first two years because of high demand; now that has sunk a bit, partly because Germany’s borders have been closed,” says Salma Jreige, the project manager in Berlin. In August, the guides began giving English and German tours to appeal to locals, an increasing number of Arabic-speaking migrants and to help more settled migrants improve their German.

V&A centre brings photographic history into view

PHOTOGRAPHY

LONDON. A new suite of galleries devoted to photography at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum, opening on 26 October, is just the “shop window” for a developing “culture of research” around the medium, says Martin Barnes, the museum’s senior curator of photographs. “That’s why we call it a [photography] centre.”

The V&A has collected photographs since its inception in 1852, becoming the UK’s national collection of the art of photography in the 1970s. Its holdings today comprise more than 860,000 items, including the historic Royal Photographic Society (RPS) collection that was transferred last spring— in 22 truckloads—from the National Media Museum (NMM) in Bradford. Announced in February 2016, the decision to move the archive from the northern city to London drew fierce opposition from local politicians and leading arts figures.

The four galleries, refurbished by David Kohn Architects, offer “a perfect climate to preserve these objects” within the V&A’s listed 19th-century building, says the curator of photographs Susanna Brown. Highlights among more than 600 exhibits will include a focus on the British pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot, featuring his humble “mousetrap” camera and an interactive replica of his camera obscura. A 36-seat room known as the Dark Tent will screen new films on early photographic processes and a projection of magic-lantern slides from a 1921 expedition to Mount Everest.

The centre will be “one of the few places where you can see the beginnings of photography rubbing shoulders with very contemporary work,” Barnes says. The artists Thomas Ruff and Penelope Umbrico have made new commissions inspired by the V&A collection.

This month’s opening marks the completion of the first phase of the project, supported by the Bern Schwartz Family Foundation, Modern Media, Shao Zhong Art Foundation and others.

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