

## 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 Museums 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, as 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

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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



Collections officer Abigail Flack shows volunteers in Oxford a textile from Syria (left), and a Multaka guided tour at the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin

money runs out in September 2019.

The Multaka concept is spreading further afield too. Project leaders in Berlin have been in talks with the Louvre in Paris and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, while a similar initiative around glass-making was started in Portland, Oregon, by the non-profit association Berlin Glas.

No two projects will be exactly alike and the original initiative is evolving.

"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 Farsi-speaking migrants and to help more settled migrants improve their German.

**Ploy Radford**

# V&A centre brings photographic history into view

### PHOTOGRAPHY

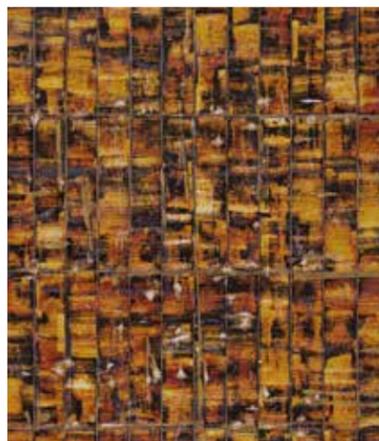
**LONDON.** A new suite of galleries devoted to photography at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, opening on 12 October, is just the "shop window" for a developing "culture of research" around the medium, says Martin Barnes, the museum's senior curator of photographs. "That's why we call it a [photography] 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 800,000 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,

among them the photographers Martin Parr and Don McCullin.

Barnes says the V&A had already planned to expand its permanent photography displays, but the breadth of the RPS collection pushed the museum to review its "whole infrastructure for photography", encompassing publications, exhibitions, cataloguing and research collaborations with other museums.

He asserts that "the collection is now more accessible here than it was in Bradford." Curatorial staff at the NMM were "dwindling" and only around 1.5% of the 270,000 photographs, 26,000 publications and 6,000 pieces of camera-related equipment was digitally catalogued. The V&A hired an additional cataloguer, conservator and photographer to work on the RPS material; so far, around 6,000 records have been added to the website. The museum also built new storage in the prints and drawings study room, where anyone can view photographs that are not on display four days a week.



Clockwise from above: Marco Breuer's *Untitled (C-1656)* (2014), a magic-lantern slide from a 1921 expedition to Mount Everest and William Henry Fox Talbot's 1835 mousetrap camera



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" cameras and an interactive replica of his camera obscura. A 30-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 £3m first phase of the project, supported by the Bern Schwartz Family Foundation, Modern Media, Shao Zhong Art Foundation and others.

**Hannah McGivern**