

The cover art features a close-up of a woman's face. The right side of her face is covered in bright red face paint, while the left side is in grayscale. Her dark hair is visible on the left. The background is a light, textured surface, possibly a wall or a piece of fabric. Several red circles of varying sizes are scattered on the white background to the left of the woman's face.

Arts Education

in a

Postnational State

Guest Edited by
Madhavi Peters

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The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal that promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence. Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO

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COVER IMAGE

'Apítaw-Picíkwas' (half apple).

Artist / model:
Lana Whiskeyjack,

Photo:
Rebecca Lippiatt
2014

This was a collaboration between
Edmonton-based photographer
Rebecca Lippiatt and
art actionist / educator
Lana Whiskeyjack's alter-ego,
'Apple', in Cree, 'Picíkwas'.

Cover page design:
Seraphina Nicholls

Looking Back and Looking Forward: The First Education Programs at the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto¹

Dr Patricia Bentley

BIOGRAPHY

Patricia Bentley is a textile expert, museum education specialist, and exhibition curator and designer. She recently completed her doctoral studies in Humanities at York University; her dissertation focuses on visual patterns on human-made objects, comparing the perspectives of scholars writing about art to those of museum visitors encountering them in the galleries.

Dr Bentley curated and designed several exhibitions of the Textile Museum of Canada including *Drawing with Thread*, *The Lion King of Mali*, *Dance of Pattern*, *The Blues*, *The Cutting Edge*, and *Magic Squares: The Patterned Imagination of Muslim Africa in Contemporary Culture*. Her online authoring projects include *Canadian Tapestry: The Fabric of Cultural Diversity* and the game and explore site *In Touch: Connecting Cloth, Culture and Art*. As an artist educator with the Ontario Arts Council's "Artists in Education" and the Royal Conservatory of Music's "Learning Through the Arts" programs, she has developed mathematics focused art education programs for many different ages and levels of learners. As Education Manager at the Aga Khan Museum (Toronto) from 2011 to 2014, she helped to plan and produce the Aga Khan Museum's inaugural programming season.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM

The Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Canada, has been established and developed by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), which is an agency of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). The Museum's mission is to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of the contribution that Muslim civilizations have made to world heritage while often reflecting, through both its permanent and temporary exhibitions, how cultures connect with one another. Designed by architect Fumihiko Maki, the Museum shares a 6.8-hectare site with Toronto's Ismaili Centre, which was designed by architect Charles Correa. The surrounding landscaped park was designed by landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic.

Introduction

The Aga Khan Museum (AKM) in Toronto, Canada is a building clad in white granite, set in a park on a hill. Seen from afar, in the evening when its windows and skylights glow with light, it seems to say, 'Come, everyone, and experience the wonders within. You are very welcome here.'



Figure 1
The AKM building and
reflecting pool
Photo: Janet Kimber

The AKM is also an idea. It began with an aim of the highest calibre: 'to connect cultures through art, fostering a greater understanding of how Muslim civilizations have contributed to world heritage' (Bentley and Kana'an 2015, p. 2). I had the privilege of acting as its first Education Manager. I worked for three years in that role, before the museum opened in September 2014, to help conceptualize, shape and bring into being the first education programs that would run in its brand-new galleries and classrooms.

In this essay, I summarize the conceptual frameworks that were developed by the first team of curators, educators, exhibition planners and other museum professionals, recount how these frameworks informed the implementation of the inaugural education programs and reflect on the experience as a benchmark for future planning.

The setting for the AKM is apt: Canada welcomes immigrants and refugees of many nationalities—the journalist Doug Saunders calls Toronto an 'arrival city' (2011, p.21)—and they in turn have enriched the city with their presence, transforming it into the truly multicultural hub that it is today. Our team was dedicated to the work of fulfilling the AKM's mission, so it could take up its role as a venue for the expression of multicultural values.

Shaping the Vision

From the start of our planning in 2011, the Education Department, headed by Ruba Kana'an, envisioned the education program as the connector running between the assets of the AKM—the collection of historic objects from Islamic-ruled lands plus the environments in which they were to be displayed—and the Canadian and international audiences who would come to the AKM to appreciate them. Our difficulties in fully articulating this vision arose from many factors, among them the unfinished state of the building, the collection still being far away in Geneva, Switzerland and the delayed opening date.

For the first few years of planning, the AKM was solely an idea and not yet an actual location. This was both wonderful—we were not encumbered by the daily needs of running a cultural institution, nor did we have baggage from past missteps—and frustrating—we had anxiety about getting the idea right in the absence of the physical building. Along the way, there were inevitable changes in plans as the architecture took shape and talks with stakeholders progressed. As we grew more familiar with the building, it began to suggest what was possible. For example, practical questions such as whether to have sinks in the classrooms seemed to occupy much time to resolve, and yet, knowing they were crucial to the feasibility of robust art-making activities, we worked hard to get them included in the plan.

In talks with instructional leaders and superintendents of the Greater Toronto Area school boards, we heard that their pupils, members of a very diverse student body, did not see themselves in the official Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum. The educators hoped that the AKM's programs could fill that gap by highlighting alternate histories that would make Muslim students proud of their heritage, and non-Muslim students more informed about that heritage. We were determined to answer the need that the school board officials expressed to us.

Beyond programs for schools, the Education Department's brief included adult and family programs, as well as interpretive planning on behalf of walk-in visitors. We knew if we wanted to attract a wide audience beyond traditional museumgoers, we needed to understand that audience and find ways of appealing to it. My research into best practices in museum education indicated that the old models of museum audiences are not relevant anymore.

A major visitor study at the Tate Modern in London, UK noted that the categories that used to mark populations as either established or immigrant have changed, since social and cultural identifications weaken when people are in a constant migratory state (Dewdney et al. 2013). One effect of this fact on diverse populations can be more openness to and acceptance of other peoples' difference, as is indeed the case here in Toronto.

In fact, Toronto, a city of neighbourhoods, showed us how to have a global viewpoint at the same time as being embedded in and deeply concerned with local communities. We knew that this perspective aligned perfectly with the approach of our umbrella organization, the Aga Khan Development Network, which took pluralism as a watchword and was engaged in building the Global Centre for Pluralism in the nation's capital. In the face of countless details such as sinks in classrooms, the education team struggled at times to keep a focus on big picture thinking, constantly asking ourselves, what will our audiences, broadly defined, need to take away from their AKM experiences? We could not assume people would come in knowing anything about the histories of our objects and exhibition settings. We needed to give them the broad outlines using the toolkit of museological displays: objects, interpretive labels, maps, timelines, animation and interactive displays.

We needed to tell the big stories about the arts of Muslim societies: the cross-cultural nature of world history, especially in areas of trade and migration, the integration of science and the arts as they both contribute to the development of innovation and new knowledge about the world, and always highlighting what is unique about Islamic arts and cultures (e.g. in visual cultures the importance of calligraphy and the widespread use of sophisticated geometric patterns) and what is universal in all human cultural expressions. Messages needed to be aligned across exhibitions and educational programs, creating a museum-wide vision and mission.

Implementing the Vision

We developed a multi-pronged strategy, always mindful of maintaining consistency in our messaging. Our audiences were going to be diverse in kind: beyond the casual walk-in visitors, we expected that there would be youths and adults who were interested in more in-depth learning experiences such as lectures on special topics, seminars and courses. In addition, we wanted to encourage children to come, with their schools or with their families. We reached out to other Toronto cultural attractions as a means of both testing our ideas and plans and finding out what they were doing, and found them generous with their advice and happy to collaborate on joint programs. Gradually the inaugural program took shape: gallery tours, lectures, courses, workshops and programs for school visits.

The nascent performing arts department was developing its first season, and we discussed how to offer special afternoon performances for students to attend with their classes, after a morning of exploration in the galleries and a hands-on session in the classrooms.

We authored a document, the Curriculum resource guide for grades one to eight, in order to support teachers' efforts to use the AKM's assets in their teaching. In it, we defined education broadly as a consortium of intersecting disciplines under the acronym STEAM, with lessons focused on museum collection objects that highlight their relevance to science, technology, engineering and mathematics, as well as visual and performing arts. History shows that these disciplines are networked to one another in the social and cultural productions of past civilizations, and especially in those Muslim societies represented by the objects in the AKM permanent galleries. Several senior educators at the Toronto school boards – and at the Aga Khan Academies – reviewed the Guide and offered edits and suggestions to bring the content into alignment with current curriculum expectations. Instructional leaders from the Toronto District School Board's Social Studies and Visual Arts Departments contributed lesson plans based on AKM collection objects and paintings.

Our watchword in developing programs for all ages was always experiential learning. Envisioning the museum visitor as a 'co-creator of experiences' (Antón et al. 2018, p. 1406) means assuming 'that each person, however young, brings their own unique life experience to an encounter with a work of art, and that learning is an active process of inquiry (asking questions), dialogue (exchange of ideas) and interaction' (Bentley and Kana'an 2015, p. 17). In this spirit, we put together the first roster of public and school programs. Finally, the exciting day came in September 2014, when the AKM opened its doors to the public.

Reflections

As a brand-new institution, the AKM has already had a profound and salutary effect on countless individuals as well as on the cultural climate of the city. I offer two instances when it has also had a profound effect on me. The first instance happened when I was on the road with a small travelling exhibition in the year before the opening. In 2013, the AKM team created a pop-up exhibition called "Enlightened Encounters", based on *Nasir's ethics*, a 16th-century illustrated manuscript in the collection, as a preview and a way to drum up excitement in the community about the AKM. The exhibition included an interactive art activity that I led and repeated in four different venues in the US and Canada. It involved close collective looking at one of the paintings in the manuscript, followed by the isolation and framing of a small area of the painting and a series of sketches and studies of it, done by each individual student. This was an experiential learning activity, an undertaking to learn about art by making art.

The painting in *Nasir's ethics* is one of a young boy, a noble or prince, on horseback being trained by his elders, who gesture their relative opinions of the boy's abilities.

The training takes place in a park or forest, and in the far distance is a rather pale-coloured castle on a hill. The art activity was enthusiastically engaged in by the young students, who particularly enjoyed the crowning activity of making up a story around their framed detail of the painting. One student came up with a story that the young prince was learning to protect the castle on the hill from any dangers. The realization came to me that his interpretation of the painting's action was universal and timeless, and that perhaps we citizens of Canada were learning, too, how to protect the fragile idea of pluralism embodied in the newest white building on the hill, the AKM.

The second instance of the AKM's profound effect on me occurred just after we opened to the public. I was teaching the first *Pattern Play*, an inaugural program for school visits that is still among the programs offered. We had just come out of the Permanent Collection Gallery where the students had been playing a pattern hunt game and sketching the patterns they had found on the objects. On a whim, I led them into the courtyard that lies, open to the sky, at the heart of the building, and we all crossed it to the far door, playing an improvised game of Tic Tac Toe on the tiled granite floor, calling out the geometric shapes we landed on after a fixed number of moves. When they were all through the door

Figure 2

The Art of Chivalry, folio from the manuscript of Akhlaq-i Nasiri (Ethics of Nasir) by Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1274), signed by Kanak Sing, Pakistan, Lahore, 1590–95, opaque watercolour, ink, and gold on paper, 23.9 × 14.2 cm
© The Aga Khan Museum, AKM288.7

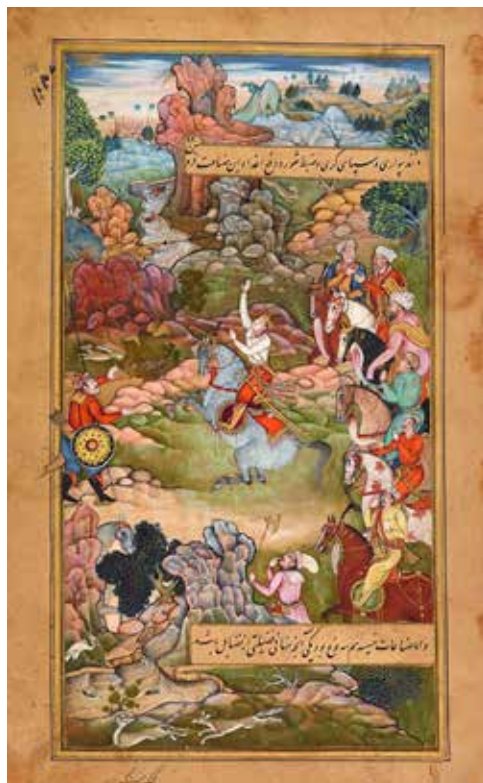


Figure 3

A prototype page of the “Enlightened Encounters” student activity

and had gathered in a classroom to make their own patterns on paper, I had a chance to think about what had happened. I realized that the building had shared with us its patterns –there are patterns to be found all over the walls and floors and in the way the light falls – for use in our programs. We had only to look, the students and I, and we would find them. It felt like a gift.

Today and Tomorrow

In the years since its opening, the AKM has flourished, attracting many thousands of visitors to its gallery and public spaces. The school programs have been strongly subscribed, with thousands of schoolchildren visiting the galleries and participating in hands-on activities. Many of the performances and public programs have also been successful. In the summer of 2019, the AKM held three free outdoor festivals that showcased world cultures and stories, thus bringing to life our original vision of an institution that would have both a global and a local impact.

After the first five years in operation, the AKM has acquired a position in Canadian cultural life whereby it is integrated into it and yet unique within it. Toronto is a multicultural city situated within what Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has called a ‘postnational state’ (Foran 2017). In the city, the AKM is like other Toronto galleries and museums in the sense that it wants to attract wide audiences and it needs to pay its way. But it is also a unique institution in that it directly speaks to the need for a greater understanding, through their cultural productions, of a diverse group of people who follow a diverse religion, which has been misunderstood and maligned in many instances. While the AKM has enjoyed a good measure of success in its first years—and its initial vision is as relevant as ever—the future is unfolding in the ‘arrival city’, and it will be exciting to see how the challenges set by that future are met by the AKM.

Notes

1 I am immensely grateful to my past and current colleagues at the Aga Khan Museum for their generous sharing of expertise and insights into the process of creating a brand new Museum. My special thanks goes to Dr Ulrike al-Khamis, AKM Director and CEO, who helped me develop a critical perspective on the importance of educational programs to the impact of the Museum in the twenty-first century.

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