

## University museums: distinct sites of intersection for diverse communities

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### Resumo

No artigo 'The Politics of exhibiting culture: Legacies and possibilities', Shelley Ruth Butler refere-se à "dicotomia problemática, frequente na literatura, entre uma perspectiva crítica e uma perspectiva otimista da exposição de cultura [material]". A museologia crítica, argumenta Butler, levanta questões sobre a história de uma "política de domínio" que prevaleceu na prática dos museus ocidentais e respectivas exposições sobre culturas não ocidentais, encaradas como "o outro". A museologia otimista, por outro lado, dá ênfase "ao papel educativo dos museus e à promoção do diálogo plural e multi-cultural entre cidadãos" (BUTLER 2000: 74). Este artigo discute como um museu universitário pode constituir um espaço apropriado para a intersecção destas duas perspectivas. Centrar-me-ei essencialmente no trabalho com comunidades multi-culturais no desenvolvimento de uma exposição e de programas educativos sobre o Islão e a vida muçulmana.

### Abstract

In her article 'The Politics of exhibiting culture: Legacies and possibilities' Shelley Ruth Butler refers to "a problematic dichotomy that exists in museum literature between critical and optimistic perspectives on exhibiting culture" (BUTLER 2000: 74). Critical museology, she says, raises questions about the relationship between existing museum practice and the history of a "politics of domination" that has underpinned how western museums exhibit non-western cultures, the "other." This has resulted in the re-evaluation of motivations that have driven the collecting, classifying, and displaying of material culture. Optimistic museology, on the other hand, focuses "on the role of museums in public education and in facilitating conversation between diverse and multi-cultural citizens" (BUTLER 2000: 74). The intent of this paper is to discuss how a university museum proved to be the appropriate site of intersection for these two perspectives. I will focus specifically on our work with diverse communities on the development of an exhibition and programming about Islam and Muslim life.

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### Introduction

Thinking of museums as distinct sites of intersection for diverse communities is a concept that is gaining momentum in this world where peoples are seeking to maintain and express their ethnicity in atmospheres of misunderstanding and mistrust that exist both within and between peoples. Global media channels offer sound and sight bites that deliver severely edited impressions of peoples and events from all parts of the world. There is a dearth of channels or sites available to those peoples who might

want to communicate and interact with each other. While museums are becoming more important sites for interacting with diversity, how might they avoid or transcend the common cycle of 'seduction and abandonment'? This paper explores a case study that illustrates how an institution attempted to transcend that dilemma, though at significant cost, and without clear evidence that it will be able to sustain that transcendence for the long term.

The Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia is the largest

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university museum in Canada. The founding collections are from the Pacific and were donated to the university in 1927. The museum was founded in 1947 and was housed in the basement of the library until 1976, when it moved to a new building<sup>1</sup>. It is best known for its collections from the Northwest Coast. As well as being a university museum and therefore considered a research unit of the university; it is also an anthropology museum with world-wide ethnographic collections, a training museum for undergraduate and graduate museum studies students, and a community museum that works closely with communities in the conception and production of exhibitions and programming. The organizational structure of MOA has evolved out of an academic model wherein decision-making is participatory or 'democratic' and there is no board of trustees. MOA's director reports to the Dean of Arts.

The university's Department of Human Resources has designated the majority of the professional staff at the museum as curators: this includes collections' personnel, conservators, designers, and programmers. All cross-appointed staff to academic departments are also designated curators. All museum staff (about 25) are engaged at varying levels in teaching or supporting museum-related undergraduate courses in the Department of Anthropology. This teaching activity secures the connection between the museum and the Department of Anthropology. Teaching curators also sit on graduate committees, conduct directed studies and have voting rights on the department caucus. They and other staff members sit on various university committees. As well, staff create and work on research projects that have resulted in various publications and awards. All these factors contribute to the museum's place as a research unit within the university. The university embraces the museum as 'the jewel in its crown'; it is frequently featured in the university marketing strategies and is always included in the itinerary of official visits. Its public face, somewhat ensured by its world famous

architecture and Northwest Coast collections, is one rarely enjoyed by university museums and c.150,000 people visit each year. Although this may sound laudable, it also reflects a constant challenge for MOA, a museum that in many ways has to be all things to all people<sup>2</sup>. Credibility within the university rests on the quality and quantity of research produced, and credibility with the communities defined as 'museum visitors' rests on the quality and quantity of programmes produced. Yet some specific communities view the museum as a site of interaction, a place where the stature of the university as 'a higher branch of learning' is incorporated in the publicly accessible messages contained in its exhibits and programming. This brings us to the 'Spirit of Islam', a collaborative project with members of the local Muslim communities.

### Seduction and abandonment

It is true that many museums have good track records for working with communities that have resulted in innovative programming, wonderful celebrations and award winning exhibitions. It is also true that all museums now live in an era of complex negotiations and collaborations involving the interpretation and ownership of their collections. Ideas about collaborative frameworks are changing as we move away from some 'consultative' models that kept the ultimate decision making power within the museum to 'collaborative' models based on the true sharing of power. These earlier 'consultative' models frequently resulted in cycles of 'seduction and abandonment'. Communities are seduced with promises of shared involvement in the development of a project only to be abandoned once the project is complete. Communities are left with no reason to come back to the museum and the museum moves on to the next community. Nobody is truly satisfied, everybody is exhausted and progress is minimal. This cycle of seduction and abandonment is built on the shifting sands of good intentions and history has shown that the cycle continues and relationships

<sup>1</sup> See A. HAWTHORN 1993. *A. Labour of love: the making of the Museum of Anthropology, UBC, the first three decades, 1947-1976*. UBC Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver.

<sup>2</sup> See also K. KRUG, A.-M. FENGER & M.M. AMES 2001. *The faces of MOA: a museum out of the ordinary*. *Archiv für Völkerkunde* 50: 249-263.

fade as time and resources are reallocated. At MOA, as in most university museums, staff, particularly curators, are expected to initiate new research that contributes to the museum's image as a research unit of the university and, at the same time produce, through consultation or collaboration with originating communities, publications and exhibits that are publicly accessible. This trying to be all things to all people has resulted in an indefatigable quandary that was still with us when we started to work with the Muslim communities. How this progressed is perhaps better told as a story.

The exhibition 'The Spirit of Islam: Experiencing Islam through Calligraphy' began in 1997 when a prayer space, designed by architect Farouk Noormuhammad, was installed for Muslim leaders attending the APEC meetings at the Museum of Anthropology. The museum was perceived as an appropriately apolitical place for the meeting of these political leaders who represented diverse communities<sup>3</sup>. The prayer space remained in situ for a couple of months after the meetings were over. There was a great deal of interest from the general public – here was an opportunity to visit a place that they would not normally feel comfortable visiting. Religious institutions whether they be churches, synagogues or mosques, can be intimidating structures to those not of the associated faith.

The idea of reinstalling the prayer space as part of a larger exhibition about Islam initiated discussions with community members. This was initially made possible by the connection with the Ismaili community afforded by a staff member, Salma Mawani. She spoke with her community and discussions began. Members of the community were welcomed to the table in a spirit of 'shared authority' yet clearly they represented a shifting aggregation of interests and securing consensus was a continual challenge. We were working with the different orthodoxies of the Shia, Sunni, Ismaili and Persian

communities who seldom interact with each other. In her article 'The Embattled Curator' July Klein states that this sharing of authority "In the best cases [...] can result in a more authentic and revealing exhibition: in the worst, blandness, incoherence, or self-congratulation" (KLEIN 2001).

The site of a university was considered an appropriate place because here, as one member of the community stated, 'scholarship and truth took precedence'. The objective articulated was 'a desire to inform the non Muslim community about Islam and the Muslim community'. Having said that, it was clear that the people around the table had no clear consensus about how to articulate this objective through the vehicle of an exhibition or what objects and programmes might be appropriate to achieve this. Underpinning all this was a presumption on my part that these members of the community would have knowledge about their own antiquities – this was not so. They looked to the museum for that knowledge and we looked to scholars on campus. Herein lies one of the great advantages of being a university museum.

Initially my role was as the curatorial member of the MOA team that included a liaison person, a designer, an educator, and a marketing and fundraising officer. The curatorial role was not one of embarking on a research project with the intent of producing an exhibition, rather I was to offer advice associated with theme, spatial organization, object choice and so on – in other words arms length and guided by a collaborative process wherein the community would be the 'curator.' This instigated a move away from the primarily research, and usually singular, curatorial role (BRYK 2001). Ownership of research is fiercely protected on a university campus and curators are usually accountable for the scholarship that underpins the story line of an exhibition – alongside the choice of objects and graphics. Clearly there was a real need to define what we meant by ownership and accountability.

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<sup>3</sup> For further information on this event, see R.B. PHILLIPS 2000. APEC at the Museum of Anthropology: The Politics of Site and the Poetics of Sight Bite. *Ethos* 65: 172-194.

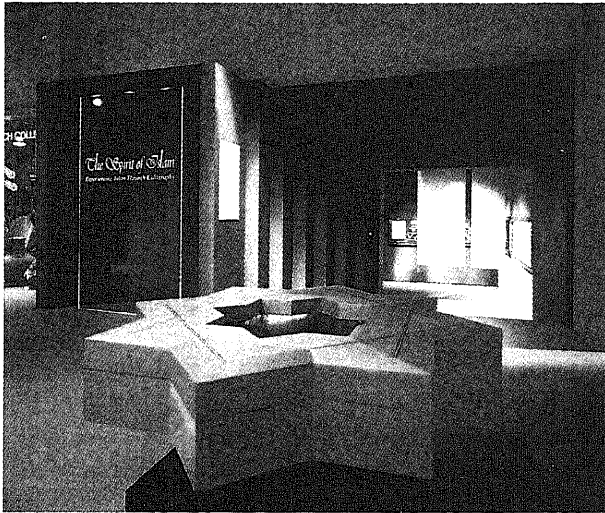


Fig. 1 – Entrance to ‘The Spirit of Islam’ exhibition  
(© Ken Mayer Studios).

The MOA team attended a few meetings with representatives from the Ismaili community, scholars in the religious studies department and the Muslim student association. This was a new endeavour for all of us and much time was spent discussing what the exhibition might be. Committees increased: education, gallery, design, fundraising, marketing, and advisory all of which included members of the Shia, Sunni, Ismaili and Persian communities. All teams developed terms of reference that specified the objectives of the team along with expectations relating to attendance, minutes and responsibilities. Attending all these meetings, usually in the evenings, stretched the small museum team who were also invited to attend and speak at various Muslim gatherings.

From the beginning, it became clear that the presence of human or animal representation in the exhibition was an area of insolvable difference<sup>4</sup>. From this grew the idea that all the objects chosen would be connected by the fact that they were decorated with calligraphy – considered the highest art form of Islam. As time progressed the learning objective of the exhibition evolved and was articulated in a phrase riddled with

complexity: ‘Islam is a religion that teaches there is one God whose messenger is Muhammad – those that believe this are called Muslim’. As we discussed this statement we realized that two words were constantly being articulated: Unity (in the belief in Islam) and Diversity (of the Muslim peoples). We added Knowledge (needed to understand the relationship between Unity and Diversity). These three words then underpinned the three sections of the exhibition: a prayer space, a *madrasa* and a gallery. Unity in the belief in Islam was expressed in the prayer space and in religious objects in the gallery; Diversity of the Muslim peoples was expressed in photographs of Muslims all over the world, a video of Muslims in Vancouver and secular objects in the gallery that reflected great craftsmanship; Knowledge was expressed in the *madrasa* – a place of learning, school and public programmes and in evidence of scientific achievements and instruments of calligraphy in the gallery. A banner greeted visitors entering the exhibit with the words thought to be by the great Persian poet, Rumi (1207-1273 C.E.).

“Don’t treat me as a stranger  
I am your neighbour  
My house is close to yours  
I may look different, but my heart is good  
My inside is shining even if my sayings  
are obscure”

This poem assumed particular significance after the events of September 11, 2001, and, for many, was more relevant than the introductory text. Behind the banner was a wall of photographs showing Muslims from all over the world – Diversity. It was noted that one-fifth of the world’s population is Muslim. Opposite was a wall of photographs showing places of prayer all over the world – Unity and Diversity. The title ‘Places of prayer’ instead of mosque, *masajid* or *jamatkhana*, was used to avoid the confusion that might be experienced by non-Muslim visitors. Every photograph was selected by consensus of the gallery and education committees. Entering the prayer space (Fig. 2), the visitor finds him/herself in a quiet,

<sup>4</sup> Muslims do not possess pictures or depictions of any of the prophets, or even of the companions of Prophet Muhammad. For further information see [http://www.cie.org/About\\_Islam.html](http://www.cie.org/About_Islam.html)

contemplative place, oriented towards Mecca – a place of prayer – a place of Unity. In the prayer space are the words from the Qu’ran that begin:

“Allah is the Light of the heavens and  
the earth.  
The Parable of His Light is as if there  
were a Niche  
And within it a Lamp: the Lamp enclosed  
in Glass:  
The glass as if it were a brilliant star”

A scholar approved by the advisory committee verified all quotes from the Qu’ran. Leaving the prayer space the visitor heads towards the *madrasa* – a warm and soft place – a place of Knowledge. On the way, the history of calligraphy is described – and each style is connected to objects in the gallery. In the *madrasa*, school children learn about calligraphy and Islam from members of the Muslim community who work alongside museum docents. This represented a level of community commitment that we had never managed before. A time line, developed by community members and the educator, situates Islam in history. Visitors could also view a video of Muslims talking about being a Muslim in Vancouver, sit on comfortable benches and read the literature available or take away English translations of the Qur’an donated by members of the Shia community.

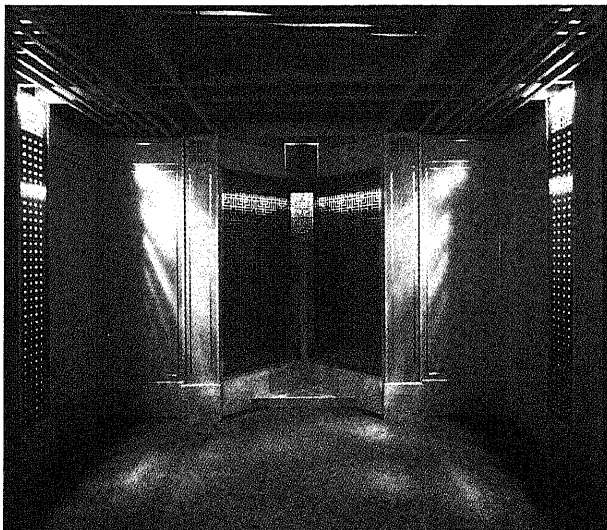


Fig. 2 – Prayer space in ‘The Spirit of Islam’ exhibition (© Ken Mayer Studios).

From the *madrasa* visitors can enter the gallery – a place of Diversity, where they are greeted by a 14<sup>th</sup> century lamp set high in a niche, lit dramatically to evoke a sense of wonder and resonance (GREENBLATT 1991). It has the same calligraphic inscription from the Qur’an previously encountered in the prayer space. This leads visitors to the Sitar and other religious objects relating to Islam – an area of Unity. Objects displayed in the centre of the gallery reflect Knowledge – pen and ink containers, an exercise book, an astrolabe, a manuscript on astrology, and a game of knowledge that was later adapted to become the game snakes and ladders. In the third section, the different materials used in the creation of the great arts and crafts represent Diversity. Calligraphy and exhibition text connect the three areas.

Visitors leaving the gallery encounter four panels that illustrate minute details of objects in the gallery. The labels ask the visitor to think about how we at times look so closely at one part of something and accept the detail as being the whole and that to appreciate the whole we have to stand back and seek it. At the exit of the gallery, there is a painting of a garden, a place of light. The artist Pari Motamedi, a Vancouver Muslim, was commissioned to create this work many months before the exhibition opened and its meaning for her changed significantly after September 11. She added the following poem:

It is absolutely clear for me  
At this moment;  
That only in an environment of symbiotic  
interconnection  
Can we all grow;  
That light and love and caring can grow  
And expand  
Into more love, light and caring;  
When my neighbour and I  
Each of us  
Alone, and in the chambers of the heart  
Come to that conclusion:  
We will have discovered the elemental truth  
of the garden

Clearly, the events of September 11 impacted significantly on this exhibition. The tragedy of the attack emphasized for the MOA and its community partners the importance and relevance of ‘The Spirit

of Islam'. There was no question of cancellation but there was a raised awareness that the public would probably scrutinize every word, every graphic and every object in the exhibition. The text was examined by the advisory committee and much time was spent on reaching a consensus. In Vancouver, bookstores reported that within a few days of September 11 they were sold out of books on Islam. This seeking for knowledge and understanding was also reflected in the public interest in the exhibition. They came in their thousands. We will however, always be left with the question of whether or not being housed in a university museum contributed to its credibility as an 'unbiased' presentation.

The process took longer than we could ever have anticipated. An average of 300 hours of overtime per team member left the institution reeling. This was not due to bad planning; it was due to the creation of a partnership model for which we had no precedence. Traditional roles were deconstructed and a general hesitancy to assume responsibility in areas that were no longer clearly delineated led to some confusion and time-consuming negotiations. In retrospect, a Terms of Reference should have been crafted for the MOA team as it had been for the various committees. Good facilitating skills became paramount, especially with groups who would never normally sit around the table and who brought with them very different agendas. In many ways the exhibition process proved to be a catalyst for creating unity where there was little. The MOA team and community committee members were exhausted. All worked long hours over and above their regular jobs and duties. Obviously, this level of collaboration could not become the norm. There was a need to recover, to rediscover a sense of normality, to move back into a more comfortable and predictable space – only to discover that the space was no longer

the same. By working on 'The Spirit of Islam', we had changed our trajectory and could no longer do things in the ways that we had. Traditional 'ways of seeing' and 'ways of doing' become subjected to closer scrutiny. For example: embedding a learning space as an integral part of exhibitions, as opposed to attaching it as an appendage, has now become our practice. We learned that the learning space, for the Muslim community, was the most important aspect of the exhibition. We cannot ignore this.

## Continuing the journey

When thinking about how to conclude this story, I returned to the model of seduction and abandonment and am left with the question of not whether but how are we going to find ways to continue our journey together? We know that the community advisory committee has agreed to meet with us for a year after the closing of the exhibition to discuss how our relationship might continue. To date we have created a web site that can be found at [www.moa.ubc.ca/spiritofislam/intro.html](http://www.moa.ubc.ca/spiritofislam/intro.html) and will eventually be released as a CD-Rom. This legacy might be augmented by further programming that could take place at the museum or within the community; a publication that provides a tangible memory of the event; or possibly the development of a collecting strategy that would demonstrate the museum's commitment to include objects relating to Muslim life in its acquisitions policy. All these require commitment on all sides and will not happen if that commitment falters, or if the institution and its community partners are unable to manage their time more efficiently and effectively. Will MOA be able to sustain a resolution of that contradiction of seduction and abandonment? Can any museum without abundant resources?

### Acknowledgements

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