

Victoria and Albert Museum

Call to mind language learning for refugees and asylum seekers and the Victoria and Albert Museum is not likely to be a first choice. Yet since 2000 the museum has been opening its doors to a pioneering project for learners of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Over the past two years the V&A has welcomed around 3,000 ESOL learners on guided tours of the museum, as part of its *Arts and Language Programme*. The visits are led by qualified ESOL tutors, who structure a tour of the galleries around the interests and learning needs of the group.

The original inspiration for the project came from Eithne Nightingale, now the museum's Head of Access, Inclusion and Diversity, who worked with ESOL students when head of Community Development and Regeneration at Hackney Community College. She sensed that the material on display at the museum, coming from a vast range of cultures, would appeal to ESOL learners and would act as a stimulus to language learning.

She organised summer programmes for refugees in Kensington where the V&A is situated. In 2000 and 2001 only a handful of learners attended. ESOL tutors were commissioned to develop a series of worksheets on seven of the most popular galleries in the museum and the V&A marketed visits to ESOL course leaders and community groups. Now the museum hosts visits for up to 2,000 ESOL learners each year.

The tentacles of the project have started reaching into other areas of the museum's work. The V&A also runs the Museum of Childhood in the heart of London's East End, which has been actively working with refugees and asylum seekers. The Museum of Childhood has trained people from migrant communities in the East End as oral historians and to collect memories and objects from their communities. They have also branched out into participatory art and media projects. One such example was *Children in Crisis* in 2005, an exhibition about the conflict in Darfur, through the eyes of refugee children in East London who had experienced it. More recently, the V&A have developed a jewellery project with Iranian and Afghani men in Newham in East London.

Funding from the Baring Foundation is going to expand and develop these new areas to include multi-media displays and exhibitions by refugees at the Museum of Childhood and the V&A in Kensington, to pilot new programmes on ESOL and Citizenship, to develop learning materials and tours for three additional galleries, and to support an extra part-time member of staff.

“You might think: ‘What - the V&A working with refugees?’ But it is part of our norm,” says Nightingale. “The collections themselves represent a huge diversity of people. Language learning through other objects is very invigorating and enlivening. We get many letters commenting on the fact that there has been an impact. Students seem much more communicative. For many it is the highlight of their year.”

This is an outcome that is endorsed by ESOL tutor, Maureen Taylor. “There are some very stimulating questions like whether objects in European Museums should be returned to their country of origin. One student stood there and gave us all a lecture on how this object had been stolen. Another man, who had been a silversmith in his native country, found it very exciting to visit the silver gallery. Although he had been very quiet in the classroom, he came to life on this tour.

“This project inspires discussion on what museums are there for and leads to lots of wider discussions about materials and the importance of art and objects. People also really enjoy seeing objects from their own and each others’ countries,” says Taylor.

The impact for the museum is manifold: “This project links to so many other things: to participation by the community, to intercultural work, to increasing access, visitor numbers and diversity. So it fits very centrally into the V&A’s access, inclusion and diversity strategy,” comments Nightingale.

“Diversity has become more of a strategic priority for the V&A, influencing the work of all departments such as exhibitions and collections. The V&A reports to government regularly on the implementation of this strategy and the Arts and Language Programme is and it is seen as part that. It has not got big PR because its not a new gallery or exhibit. But it has been a project that has grown quietly and effectively. Funding from the Baring Foundation is a vindication that what we are doing is really very good.”

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