

## Museums in Qatar: Educational Role in Twenty-First Century

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### ملخص البحث

في هذه المقالة أتناول تركيز قطاعات المتاحف في الدوحة، قطر، في دورها التعليمي. ويمكن ربط هذا الدور بافتتاح مركز التعليم في متحف الفن الإسلامي في 10 تشرين الأول / أكتوبر 2009 وفتح متاحف مشيرب في 20 تشرين الأول / أكتوبر 2015 بعد ست سنوات من إفتتاح مركز التعليم في متحف الفن الإسلامي. ويهدف هذا التركيز إلى تعزيز العلاقة بين المتاحف والمجتمعات في الدوحة، حيث تسعى المتاحف إلى جعل نفسها مؤسسات تعليمية هادفة. وتتنمي كل من متحف الفن الإسلامي ومتحف مشيرب إلى منظمات مختلفة في قطر. في حين أن متحف الفن الإسلامي يدار من قبل متاحف قطر، فإن متاحف مشيرب تديرها مجموعة مشيرب العقارية. ومع ذلك، تتماثل وتتشابه هذه المتاحف في رؤاهم ومحاولاتهم الهادفة، الذي يهدف إلى كونهم ملهمين لخيال الناس وعقولهم في الماضي والحاضر والمستقبل في قطر.

### Abstract

In this article I address the focus of museum sectors in Doha, Qatar, in their educational role. The role can be linked to the opening of the Education Centre (EC) at the Museum of Islamic Art in 10 October 2009 and the opening of Msherib Museums in 20 October 2015 six years after the EC. This focus aims to enhance the relationship between museums and communities in Doha, in which museums endeavour to make of themselves educational institutions. The MIA and Msheirb museums both belong to different organisations in Qatar. While the MIA runs by Qatar Museums, Msheirb museums run by Msheireb Properties. However, their visions following similar direction, which is inspiring people's imaginations and minds of Qatar's past, present and future.

## **KeyWords**

Msheirb museums, role of museums Education, Qatari Heritage, Museum of Islamic Art

## **Introduction:**

In this article, I address the focus of museum sectors in Doha, Qatar in their educational role. The role can be linked to the opening of the Education Centre (EC) at the Museum of Islamic Art on 10 October 2009 and the Msheireb Museums on 20 October 2015, six years after the EC. This focus aims to enhance the relationship between museums and communities in Doha, in which museums endeavour to position themselves as educational institutions. The MIA and Msheireb museums both belong to different organisations in Qatar. While the Qatar Museums oversee the MIA, Msheireb Properties are in charge of the Msheireb Museums. However, their visions follow a similar objective, which is to inspire people and offer them information about Qatar's past, present and future.

## **Historical Background of the Museums' Educational Role**

Museums' educational role in Qatar began in the 1970s when the first national museum, the Qatar National Museum, was opened by the Emir at that time, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al-Thani. Sheikh Khalifa believed in the powerful role of the museum to move the spirit and mind of his community forward. At that time, the number of Qatari middle-aged persons with an education was limited. In addition, economic and social lives were much simpler than they are now. In consideration of this modest lifestyle, the educational theme at the museum was vividly illustrated. Sheikh Khalifa wished to enhance his community's knowledge through making from QNM an educational institution that facilitated learning and provided information with the use of numerous illustrations and films. Nonetheless, different obstacles stood in the way of making the educational function of the museum effective. One significant obstacle was the museum's ineffective communication with the public and schools. This issue was a result of the absence of a strategy to manage the constructive educational function of the museum. Therefore, in the

twentieth century, the educational role of the museums in Qatar went largely unnoticed

### **Museums' Educational Role in the Twenty-First Century**

In contrast to Sheikh Khalifa's aims, the educational role of Qatar's museums during the twenty-first century has taken on new dimension and focus. When reflecting upon the early museum experience in the country, the museum sectors in Qatar perhaps recognised that a main ingredient was absent in the previous experience – namely, an effective and close communicative role with the community.

A review of the educational activities of both the newly established Msheireb Museums and the Museum of Islamic Art shows that the current museum educational plan in Qatar seeks to address the position of the museums as academic resources among the other academic institutions in the country. The plan also aims to enhance Qatari self-confidence and to promote a global reputation for the state. Therefore, to build an effective educational role for the museums, museum sectors started their programmes with a focus on developing a relationship with the communities. It is likely that this new museum practice seeks to benefit from the failure of the previous practice, which was unsuccessful in developing an educational strategy at the Qatari museums. As such, museum officials hope to entice the public by offering them opportunities for inspiration, available information, enjoyment and knowledge that stem from their educational programmes.

### **Museum of Islamic Art: The Education Centre**

As part of the government plan to emphasise the educational role of museums, an Education Centre (EC) was opened on 10 October 2009, approximately a year after the opening date of the MIA. On that occasion, Al-Mayassa made the following announcement:

Our goal for the Museum of Islamic Art and its Education Centre is to become a 'knowledge hub' of the nation's arts learning – pivotal in providing high quality, consistent and accessible teaching and learning opportunities for the museum's key audiences – schools, students,

scholars, families, adults and other community groups... Programmes are designed to encourage and inspire visitors to discover Islamic art, its context, its meaning, regardless of ability or prior knowledge. This is a new and exciting place of the museum's history and one which will enliven, inform and educate – not only the people and communities of Qatar but far beyond. (Education Centre, Introduction: 2009)

A series of free admission activities, organised to follow the opening date until the 15<sup>th</sup> of October, were hosted under a programme named 'The Art of Learning'. This programme offered workshops for families and schools on architecture, artefacts, calligraphy, storytelling and drawing. This initiative sought to highlight the important role museums in Qatar can have in educating the community – a role similar to that of schools and universities. To illustrate the importance of encouraging the local community to become involved in museum educational programmes, Sheikh Hassan Bin Mohammed, the deputy chairperson of Qatar Museums, articulated the crucial part that the EC is going to play in shaping the museum's role in the communities:

We wish that centre to become a centre of an Islamic art research. As our vision of the role of the museum do not stand on viewing it as a centre for preserving and displaying antiquities. Rather, our ambition is to create from that museum an interacted atmosphere, a source of knowledge and culture, which everybody can utilize... From its different activities, the centre is going to encourage its members to discover the genius and tolerance of the Islamic civilization. From where they can inspire and borrow a sense of artistic values and meanings. That would also help in developing within them the artistic and creation skills and sensibilities. (Shalan: 2009)

On their webpage, the education staff present their motto of 'dazzle the experts, inspire the child', which could potentially draw the audience's attention to what facilities this department could provide far beyond its educational services. Moreover, the education staff announced their objectives, which are directly linked to the government plans that are aimed at educating Qatari children and the global community about Islamic art and heritage. Hence, they have applied a diverse

range of educational materials, learning programmes and community events. The museum personnel clearly seek to create a platform in which the public can understand the present, explore the past and utilise the knowledge gained to play a role in shaping the future.

In addition, the EC established a programme titled ‘The Community Outreach Team’. Its purpose is to organise and deliver a variety of presentations and activities at universities, professional institutions, schools and creation centres in Qatar. This programme is intended to draw attention to the essential role the ‘museum plays in preserving art and cultural heritage’ (Schools & Community: 2009). According to the education officers at the MIA, such outreach activities also aim to ‘raise awareness in the community about the [important] role of Islamic art and cultural heritage as part of their identity’ (Schools & Community: 2009). For the education staff, the establishment of the education centre is a vital accomplishment for the MIA as its main objective is to educate the community through involving them in interesting subjects and activities related to Islamic art.

However, these educational programmes implement only a limited amount of advanced technology. Rather, they involve the use of creative programmes and activities, where children are actively involved in a close inspection of artwork. Within these programmes, it is apparent that the education officers are presenting the museum to young visitors, as it is invaluable educational centre and extension of the classroom. These officers play a fundamental role in bringing the museum’s experience to the community. Thus, through its centre, the MIA endeavours to create a link between art and education.

### **Msheireb Museums and Their Educational Approach**

On 20 October 2015, the Msheireb Museums were opened as part of the project Msheireb Downtown Doha, which consisted of four restored historical buildings. The Chairperson of Msheireb Properties, Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, requested these museums, personally supervised their development and appeared at the opening ceremony.

These museums are the first phase of a larger project in Qatar, which is the Heritage Quarter. The plan is for Heritage Quarter to become a cultural destination

landmark in Qatar. It consists of four Heritage Houses, which ‘have been restored and converted into four culturally significant museums using carefully sourced materials that retain the spirit and building techniques of the original structures’ (Qatar Tribune newspaper: 2015).

One of these museums is the Bin Jalmoud house, which primarily offers a visual account of the country’s history. However, it also includes a significant background element of Qatar. Bin Jalmoud presents the history of slavery in Islamic civilisation. In one of the rooms, slaves’ history in Qatar is dramatised in an animated film, in which the interpretation of a painful history has two effects. The first effect is the demonstration of a known but untold history. Second effect concerns people’s reception to difficult stories, which was eased by the introduction of slaves’ history in previous rooms that showed that not all slaves were ill-treated. The next room presents the history of Qatari slaves using films that show different activities slaves used to participate in Qatari houses and as part of the community. The digitalisation of activities from Qatari heritage and tradition fill the room with a nostalgic atmosphere, and visitors are able to have valuable experience. Thus, the presentation of the untold history of Qatar had become increasingly visible. Further, it provided the community and researchers access to exceptional stories.

### **New Educational and Communication Methods**

Different concepts were also developed that articulate the educational and communication approaches of the museums. The museum sectors seemingly became aware of the necessity to consider how the museums’ exhibitions could be used for educational and other purposes. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill argues that the current museum practice is to place emphasis on the active use of the museums’ collection. That use also should be carried out with a variety of effective methods for learning that incorporate the available resources for audiences. Specifically, a key aim is for the museums to be more accessible and enjoyable compared to previous museum experiences.

The MIA commissioned its educational centre with numerous programmes that include activities for local and overseas scholars. It is apparent that these programmes correspond to the change that is currently underway in the national curriculum. In this curriculum, the MIA and the Msheireb presumably found an

available foundation to apply to their educational philosophy. Doing so, in turn, will ease the application of that philosophy. The new national curriculum and the educational philosophy of the museum are targeting the same points, which are developing the self-confidence of the community and promoting the country's international profile. Qatar, through the Supreme Education Council, has adopted new, ambitious educational programme, which 'is designed to give Qatari students the necessary skills and knowledge that are required for pursuing advance studies' (Education for new era; 2009) either locally or overseas in order to provide the country with qualified human resources. Museum sectors in Qatar became aware of the changes that the world is witnessing today. While locals are practising and living their customs daily, they are also facing an increase in the challenges associated with traditions during their integration into the global society and their relationships with the larger community.

Regarding the museums' role in society, Phil Nowlen of the Museum Management Institution asked a key question: 'What difference did it make that museums were ever here? [W]hat difference would it have made if they hadn't been?' (Well, 2002: 55). Apparently, Qatar is attempting to consider the most fundamental role of museums and wants to make them relevant. However, curators also direct consideration towards the persons who would value and benefit from the museum. They are trying to make museums have a positive impact and discernible outcomes and that can be effective and and bring about change within the community. The challenges Qatari museums are facing today concern the extent of the changes that can be applied, as well as what the alterations themselves should be over a certain time period. Once these challenges are overcome, then we could assess that Qatari museums succeeded with their educational missions and that their programmes deserve the community's support. The opening of the EC in particular reflects the stakeholders' recognition of the problems that most museums tend to have, such as a concentration on day-to-day business rather than outreach programming. We could assume that stakeholders reached some consensus of what constitutes a good museum and have prepared themselves to achieve greater outcomes that could include a full range of museum services that go far beyond the educational role. Notably, there is no standardised system that corresponds with all of the museums. Rather, each museum has to find what fits well in its programme and thus make its

decisions. Curator Stephen E. Well in Making Museums Matter comments that a good museum depends on the following:

The immense amount of work that your organisation proposes to undertake – what do you ideally hope to accomplish? And, realistically, what do you expect to accomplish? Those questions are not answerable in programmatic terms, but rather by describing how a proposed programme is intended to make a ‘positive difference’ in the quality of people’s lives. (Well, 2002: 60)

That can be seen clearly in the services that the EC offers beyond its educational role, which consider the new era Qatar is approaching today, especially in regard to globalisation. Globalisation requires young people to develop skills that are far beyond what educational systems could deliver alone. Therefore, cooperation among different organisations in the same country is needed to promote broader and new universal visions in order to prepare the new generation to be critical citizens, engaged and informed in the coming millennium. In order to effectively prepare the new generation for their involvement in the new challenges and opportunities of globalisation and to simultaneously complete the educational vision of the country, museum sectors have considered taking part in the new educational challenge that Qatar is currently witnessing. The educational function of museums has an important role to play in the current cycle of the country’s global change. Therefore, the educational officers at the museums are aware that they must create a certain agenda to develop pedagogical programmes that the country needs for its new demography. To facilitate the imparting of cross-cultural skills, the new generation will need to thrive in an equal social environment while combating the worldwide growth of inequalities. ‘Globalization without social justice hurt and threatens us all’, states Orozco and Hilliard (Orozco and Hilliard, 2004: 16).

### **Museums and Galleries’ Combating of Social Inequality**

There is a potential role for both museums and galleries in combating social inequality. The ability of museums to influence society is not new. However, the recent emphasis on tackling new confidence and form has manifested their social pattern. In contrast to the role of other social agencies such as health and welfare, the role of museums in terms of leisure and education has become more



acknowledged. In comparison with other social organisation, cultural organisations appear to be inclusive and have a unique capacity to open dialogue and engage with their audiences. Moreover, the social capacity of culture extends to play a fundamental part 'in helping to develop the capacity of local communities to address their own needs' (Sandell: 100). Richard Sandell argues that alongside an emphasis on making presentations more sophisticated and conceptual, there are new explicit claims which aim to further explore the impact and influence of the museums on individuals' lives and on communities. Furthermore, museums, due to their existence as cultural organisations, are 'taking specific manifestations of inequality – such as racism and other forms of discrimination, poor health, crime and unemployment' and placing emphasis on them. Therefore, a question presents itself here: What methodology can museums use to influence their communities? Sandell suggests that museums could have a positive impact and influence on individuals' lives with a considerable representation of diversity and difference that all museums operate. This would undoubtedly have a potential contribution towards greater social equity.

Objects' selection, interpretation, construction and presentation have effects. However, it is not necessarily the objects' effects; rather, it is the effect of how these objects are used and their different social, cultural and political possibilities, wherein a museum's pedagogical function can be a critical one. Furthermore, Sandell proposes that a museum's outreach and education programmes can produce a fruitful result with their 'combating of social inequality' (Sandell, 2003: 96), especially if these purposeful programmes concentrated on specific groups and communities. In such a case, 'the impact on individuals' lives may only emerge informally through anecdote or remain undisclosed or unevaluated' (Sandell, 2003: 97). The social role that museums can offer to communities depends on the belief of the notion that the culture is generative and constitutive. Through these later functions, the power of the culture can form cultural identities for the communities, can affect their way of thinking and feeling and can influence their ideas, values, emotions and perceptions.

One might wonder why developing countries in particular need to focus on education in the current century. Harvard economist David Bloom claims that the

increase in inequality occurred as a result of a rising gap between well-being and income. Bloom suggests that improving the education would help to narrow the income gaps between developed and developing countries. Globalisation today requires developing countries to tackle different issues, including those concerning health and the fighting of diseases such as HIV and AIDS, promoting local industry and protecting the environment. Thus, education becomes the key solution to confronting these issues.

In his study, Bloom proposes that weaknesses in human capacities are the reason behind many problems, including those that governments face. However, such weaknesses can be improved through the education, which has a powerful effect on humans' development. Moreover, Bloom suggests that the use of education to develop communities corresponds with the recognition that the inequality in global income is in fact a result of the global inequality in education. He explains that 'educational differences exacerbate the economic differences between countries' (Bloom, 2004: 62). Further, he recognised that in order to succeed, nations need to first develop their means of education, as it has become evident that basic educational services vary worldwide. Even though progress endeavours have been adopted in some parts of the world, especially in regard to primary education, the differences between the rich and poor continue to expand as a result of having poor educational services in certain places, such as South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Bloom refers to certain countries whose primary commitment to education enabled them to improve their economy. Examples include the last 150 years of success of the economy in Japan, the spectacular success of China's economy since 1979 and the last two decades of economic success for Ireland. In contrast to these examples, when India began to develop its economy before developing its educational system, that development was considered to be ill prepared. However, to position education as a necessary element in the development, a well balanced plan that takes into consideration social, human and economic growth is needed. Thereafter, education can increase the income growth, which will eventually be invested in further education opportunities. In the current century, wherein globalisation imposes threats, education is more important than ever. To confront the rapid changes that globalisation causes, people need to gain new skills and advance their knowledge.

Therefore, the answer to the previous question is that the current emphasis on education is meant to promote well-planned economic growth for Qatar. In fact, a focus on education is present worldwide as a result of policymakers' realisation that the success in the economy today largely depends on people's education.

## Conclusion

This article has highlighted and evaluated the contemporary role of museum sectors in Qatar. The changes that have been applied are designed to allow potential engagement and interaction between museums and different sections and levels in the communities. Museum sectors follow a focused agenda that has been developed to provide educational services in Qatar. Thus, the foremost priority of these sectors is to build a bridge between themselves and the community through creating and organising various workshops and activities.

The educational activities of the Msheireb Museums and the Museum of Islamic Art show that current museums' educational plan in Qatar is to serve as academic resources alongside the country's other academic institutions. The objectives are to enhance Qatari self-confidence and to promote a global reputation for the state. Within these two organisations, their educational role was enhanced. However, they have applied different strategies. The MIA focused on designing workshops, while the Bin Jalmoud house at the Msheireb Museums digitalised its narrative in films and animations, in which Qatari history is presented as tangible. Thus, these museums inspire people and enhance their knowledge of Qatar's past, present and future.

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