

Museum Association Conference 2019

Participation Report

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My participation in the British Museum International Training Program in 2017 became a focal point for my professional and career development, as within one year after my return from UK I changed my work moving from the Cafesjian Center for the Arts to the Ministry of Culture as the Head of Department of Cultural Heritage and Folk Arts, and from this point of view The Museum Association Conference and its main thematic focus on *Sustainable and Ethical Museums in a Globalised World* was a great opportunity to be communicated with contemporary developments in the museum field, widen professional network and of course be connected with new artistic and cultural trends of global world. The biggest advantage and significance of the British Museum's International Training Program is its ongoing connection with the growing ITP network providing them with new development opportunities and collaboration perspectives.



The special program developed for the ITP participants as part of the MA conference offered additional cultural experiences and rich professional encounters, commencing with special trips to the Weald and Downland Living Museum and Polesden Lacey, which became one of the highlights of our visit. Both the Weald and Downland Living Museum and the Polesden Lacey offered new perspectives on the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage, visitor-centered philosophy of museum work and community engagement and participatory models of educational activities. One of the

exemplary and mind-changing directions of UK Museums, to be mentioned, is volunteer-based activities, and in Polesden Lacey I was absolutely stunned to know that about 900 volunteers are involved in their diverse activities. Taking this opportunity, I would like to extend my special thanks to the management and staff of those museums, namely Lucy Hockley, Cultural Engagement Manager of the Weald and Downland Living Museum and Caroline Williams, House and Collections Manager of the Polesden Lacey for their warm hospitality and important professional exchange opportunities.

It is worth mentioning that before the official launch of the program we had two free days in London, which was a great opportunity to explore the cultural life of the city, one of the highlights of which was of course the visit to my beloved British Museum and its new exhibitions. Of special interest was the new *Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World*, the new thematic and design concept of which we discussed with the curators during the Summer Program in 2017. As part of my special interests on contemporary arts I was especially thrilled to visit the exhibitions *Antony Gormley* at the Royal Academy

of Arts, *Olafur Eliasson: In Real Life* at Tate Modern and *William Blake* at Tate Britain – all mind-changing experiences.

Turning to the main mission and destination of our visit to UK, the MA conference, a major gathering and happening for museum professionals, I should note that it was an exceptional honor and opportunity to take part in it. In 2014 I was granted a Getty Fellowship and attended the Annual Conference of the American Alliance of Museums, which had a mind-changing impact both from professional and managerial point of view. So, I absolutely realized the importance of the current opportunity. The only disadvantage you encounter during all conferences is that you had to miss interesting sessions and meetings held simultaneously with the selected ones, but of course this is a pleasant challenge through which you build your own thematic roadmap and conference overview. The program of the Conference was very diverse and engaging, sometimes even very curious – with a broad thematic spectrum from discussing more global questions, such as examining museums' roles in our changing world, challenges and issues being faced globally, including social and political upheavals, demographic changes, rising inequalities and climate change to more local issues and highlights.



After two months, summarizing and identifying the conference highlights I should note that overall the conference opened for me personally new perspectives on the current development direction of museums, which I should define referring to the main motto of the conference – museums are not neutral! And from this point of view sessions with keynote speakers and panel discussion on the ICOM museum definition were of great importance giving insight on the many global questions that museums have to respond to today. Along with these major presentations addressing more global questions, the conference brought other important themes on different aspects of museum work such as questions on leadership and empowering regional museums to issues related to museum toilets – indeed a very delicate and urgent topic for all museums! One of the important parts of the conference was the exhibition which showcased the latest developments in the museum sector and offered real partnership opportunities. I should mention that a number of exhibitors contacted me after the conference, offering their services which we would definitely consider upon respective opportunities. After all, the conference was a three-day *boiler* of new ideas, changes, brainstorming, partnerships, networking and new development opportunities. And to be part of all of these, to feel connected to the sector globally, to share and exchange values, is indeed a very rewarding experience which I think is the main mission of the ITP.

Turning from theoretical aspects of the conference to more practical initiatives, a number of important meetings should be mentioned. First, due to Claire Messenger's efforts, we had a special meeting with Museums Association team, aiming at sharing experiences on how to empower Museum Associations locally as a major advocacy structure in the sector. The meeting was very productive bringing more ideas for future activities.

Also at the time of the Conference, together with my friend and former ITP Senior Fellow Hayk Mkrtchyan, we were preparing a major training program on museum leadership and management to be held in Armenia. Again with Claire's direct engagement we have initiated an important partnership with the British Museum International Training Program, as part of which we were privileged to host two wonderful experts from UK, Janet Vitmayer and Iain Watson. During the conference, I had a great opportunity to meet with Iain and discuss training-related questions and major managerial aspects. I should note, the training was a great success and our guest experts brought very important experience and partnership opportunities for all the local participants. Also, as part of the training in Armenia, I had a wonderful opportunity to reflect on my new experience and knowledge obtained at the Conference and gave a short lecture-presentation on the theme, *Current Development Perspectives of Museums*, highlighting the main motto of the Conference - MUSEUMS ARE NOT NEUTRAL, and encouraging my fellow colleagues to be more proactive on global issues.



Of course, one of the important aspects of the visit was the meeting with ITP fellows. Having said that I should highlight the importance of our ITP network, which is a chain of museum promoters worldwide. The ITP gives a special status and regardless of your cultural and religious differences you always find shared interests. It was a great privilege to get new friends and of course reunite with one of my old friends Zulkifli from Malaysia. I feel enriched with my new friends from different parts of the world and especially miss our visits to exhibitions in London and of course early morning British breakfasts.

Finally, I turn to my beloved part of the report – the acknowledgments, as nothing could happen without generous support and encouragement of many individuals and organizations.

I remain thankful to the British Museum for uniting many museum professionals worldwide under the umbrella of the International Training Program.

I am grateful to all trusts, foundations and individuals who support the ITP, for my visit to Brighton I am especially thankful to Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust.

I also extend special thanks to the Ministry of the Science, Education, Culture and Sport namely the Minister Arayik Harutyunyan for supporting me with my initiative to attend the Museum Association Conference in UK.

Of course my biggest and profound thanks goes to ITP team:

to Anna Cottle, the Coordinator of the Program, who greatly helped us with program-related questions and managerial aspects;

to John Williams, the Head of Photography and Imaging at the British Museum, for his supportive and friendly attitude and of course for his professional photos capturing the most memorable moments of the program;

and ultimately, my heartfelt thanks goes to dearest Claire Messenger, the ITP Manager, who is the heart and the main driving force of the program. Due to her continuous efforts and invaluable work, the ITP continues to reach new heights and geographical borders. Together with the Armenian ITP team we are currently discussing new partnership opportunities with the ITP, and I do hope that in the nearest future one of the ITP meetings will be held in Armenia.