

# **The Middle East Exhibition at the British Museum**

**A formative evaluation of 'Word into Art'**

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**The Middle East Exhibition at British Museum – A formative evaluation of  
'Word into Art'**

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The British Museum is preparing a Middle East season and wanted to see what the **response** would be from potential visitors.

The season and exhibition concepts as well as the marketing design concepts were **tested** in two focus group sessions.

People are responsive and **open to the idea** but may need persuading that this is an exhibition that they can enjoy through informative and visually appealing marketing materials.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The British Museum is preparing to present a season which will show the vibrancy, richness and complexity of the cultures of the modern Middle East through art, music, film, performance and public debate.

The central feature of the season is an exhibition entitled *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* which explores the British Museum's contemporary collection of calligraphy-based Middle Eastern art. Complemented by loans, it aims to demonstrate the imaginative way in which artists across the Middle East and North Africa are using the power of the written word in their work today.

The Museum was aware this was a very different type of temporary exhibition for the British Museum to present and that the museum isn't widely known for its interest in collecting contemporary artworks. It was also aware that the topic of the Middle East is of current public interest largely because of negative news coverage of political activity and conflict. The Museum was interested to see to what extent these issues affected public perceptions, expectations and attitudes towards an exhibition.

## 1.2 Brief

The specific brief, as well as exploring the above issues, was to explore the responses of two groups, one of current and one of potential attendees, to the concept of the exhibition, the perceptions that potential attendees would have of an exhibition on the Middle East at the British Museum, responses to the design and content of the exhibition, reactions to the proposed poster design concept and marketing message. The research also sought to identify the information and interpretation needs of potential visitors and the intrinsic appeal of the exhibition and season as a whole.

## 1.3 Research methods

### Focus Groups

The research method adopted was focus groups. Two focus groups were conducted and the groups were segmented using the following criteria:

***Culture Vultures / Hedonistic Dilettantes*** – young, up to 35 years old, culturally active people who combine cultural activity within a very active social life, potential British Museum attenders, mix of male and female.

***Silver Scholars*** – older, 45 plus years, regular museum attenders with intellectual, emotional or spiritual motivations, current British Museum attender, mix of male and female.

## 2 The concept of the Middle East

### 2.1 What do people associate with the Middle East?

The groups were asked what their top-of-mind responses to the term 'the Middle East' were. Both groups' immediate response to the Middle East was images of conflict and war:

*Iraq, violence, cartoons overall. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*Conflict Silver Scholar*

Some mention was also made of the cultural associations that the groups had with the Middle East:

*And culture as well. Silver Scholar*

*Mosaics but I'm not sure if I would say that if it wasn't in a museum  
Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*Family and people lots of people together, groups of people. Silver Scholar*

*The Muslim religion, the golden age of the Muslim religion like  
mathematics and art. Silver Scholar*

Most people thought of the cultural aspects of the Middle East in a historical rather than contemporary way:

*Ancient culture I would say Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

Yet some viewed the Middle East in a more modern sense:

*Well modern, it is in the papers everyday Silver Scholar*

### 2.2 They expect a British Museum exhibition to be about ancient culture

Participants were asked what expectations they had of an exhibition on the Middle East at the British Museum.

*It is likely to be ancient. Silver Scholar*

*a good balanced historical overview of particular periods and times to  
give me an introduction, because I would imagine I don't know much  
about the Middle East Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

Expectations and hopes for an exhibition on the Middle East at the British Museum were based around participants' experience of previous British Museum exhibitions and their assumptions about the types of objects that the British Museum may have in their collections already. The immediate assumption was that the exhibition would be similar to the Persia exhibition – a review of ancient Middle Eastern culture.

*I would expect to see old things, because that is what I imagine to be kept in the British Museum rather than new stuff. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*I would hope that it would be maybe bigger than the Persia exhibition and I thought that was kind of small and cramped Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*It would be nice if it was all the good stuff out there now that would be also quite interesting to look at and discuss. Silver Scholar*

### 2.3 An exhibition on the Middle East could contain a great deal more

These expectations were a reflection of their perceptions of the British Museum. In terms of what they would *hope* to see in an exhibition on the Middle East participants seemed to expect a wide range of different cultural aspects, both ancient and contemporary including trade and biblical references:

*I would like to see more female stuff Silver Scholar*

*It would be nice if it were ancient and historical with a bit of contemporary. I mean I don't know apart from Iraqi and Iranian films which seem to be absolutely wonderful at the moment, but I don't know personally what else is done by the way of culture with a capital C and it would be nice if there was something of that Silver Scholar*

*Well bazaars you know and market places and everyday objects and colourful and architecture and meeting places. Silver Scholar*

*Decoration and pattern. Silver Scholar*

*Muslim art. Silver Scholar*

*I would quite like a bit of history as well Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

Nobody in the silver scholars group was against the idea of such an exhibition. Indeed there was a good deal of spontaneous interest in the subject matter and a recognition that there was a lot to discover about this

region, especially in cultural terms. In this respect the concept of an exhibition on the Middle East had immediate intrinsic appeal and, on the whole, contemporary conflict and a media focus on the region heightens the interest of potential attenders in finding out about the culture of the region. This was more clearly discerned in the older group than in the younger group but it was still evident in the younger group.

*I just find it fascinating because it is so far removed from what my everyday life would have, culturally, so it does have so much to offer.*

*Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

#### **2.4 Lack of certainty on what exactly is meant by the Middle East**

Participants acknowledged a sense of confusion over what geographical area was covered by the Middle East, that it could stretch across a huge area from Cyprus to Afghanistan, taking in Egypt and north Africa, and that some clarification of this is obviously needed:

*Cyprus Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*I am not sure where the Middle East is as opposed to the Far East. Silver Scholar*

*There are a number of different ways of characterising it, either on a religious basis, or purely on a geographical basis. Silver Scholar*

#### **2.5 Most people were enthusiastic about the idea of the exhibition**

After the initial concept of the Middle East season and the *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* exhibition was explained to the groups their response was positive on the whole:

*It is fantastic. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*That sounds really good because it is a different thing to what a lot of museums are doing. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*It immediately makes me think of mosques and how beautiful they are, even the modern ones, not just the ancient ones, the modern ones as well. Silver Scholar*

Most people welcomed the idea of discovering something new about the Middle East.

A few people were less enthusiastic, finding the subject matter too narrow, or specialised, for them:

*Maybe I am being a little bit sceptical but it isn't something that makes me say to my friends ' I want to go and check out this exhibit on calligraphy. It is a little bit narrow, maybe.'* **Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante**

*When I go to see an exhibit I want artefacts and I do like a wow factor and I am not getting a wow factor* **Silver Scholar**

*It's not earthy enough, it is not real enough, it is not live enough, not sexy enough, it is just too linear and too formal and it feels like a strait jacket* **Silver Scholar**

## 3 Exhibition and Season Plans Responses

### 3.1 Interest and engagement with overall exhibition plan

After hearing the description of the overall exhibition and the individual displays that would be within it, many responded positively to the concept of the exhibition:

*I think the whole idea behind the exhibition is good and I would find that interesting. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*What strikes me about all those things is in general they are quite colourful and quite intricate, which I suppose I don't get from that. (the poster) Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*I think it looks nice and it has got a bit of everything in it. Silver Scholar*

Another subject that came up in discussion was the fact that the reason behind the popularity of words in art in the Middle East is due to the fact that Islamic culture forbids the use of figurative images in religious art, and that this is not a commonly known fact and so perhaps should be made clearer in the exhibition descriptions, PR and introductory texts. It is worth noting however that the younger group seemed less aware of this fact than the older group:

*Did you say about the art not depicting figures? Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*Because I guess that is the thing that drew me in actually, why and that really kind of hooked me. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

People also mentioned a need to know what people or artists in the Middle East would want to see or would think of the exhibition and whether it should be vetted and approved by an Imam to avoid controversy (the groups were taking place at the same time as controversy was raging over the publication of forbidden images in cartoons in the media)

*I wonder what modern Middle Eastern artists think about that. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*more what modern people in the Middle East how they see it and whether they see it as an important part of their culture now, rather than just in the past. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

### 3.2 Responses to individual exhibition elements

#### *Literature As Art*

Both groups found the idea of words as art quite challenging to understand, and were confused as to how they should approach the subject matter, as purely aesthetic or as something that holds meaning through the language depicted as well as the images:

*I am finding it a bit confusing because Word to me means the spoken word and I am visually looking at the written word and the writing ties all these images together nicely, love it all and to me I think it should be Writing into Art Silver Scholar*

*it is a challenge, because it is calligraphy and it is about words as art and I don't understand any of the words and so why does that have any meaning for me and so it is a bit of a challenge. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*to us they look beautiful, but they don't mean anything, whereas if you're reading say the vase and the figures actually mean something blasphemous then it completely changes what you are seeing. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

Therefore literal translations of the words incorporated into the artworks will be important to make the exhibition accessible to people. It needs to be recognised that many people are naturally inclined to look for literal interpretations of images, to decode images and to seek to understand the narrative behind them. It is unlikely that a high proportion of British Museum attenders will be either open-minded or self-sufficient enough to simply respond to the images as abstract art.

One group highlighted the fact they felt that audio would add another dimension to the exhibition experience, especially of the poetry and song:

*If they had audio I would definitely come because I like hearing just what you just said rather than reading it. Silver Scholar*

*that would definitely be better with audio. To hear the poetry being spoken to you, and to be able to see it in script on the wall as well while it is being read to you that would be wonderful. Silver Scholar*

It was felt that music and the spoken word, perhaps accessible at listening posts, would complement the visual material and enable viewers to make more meaning from the artworks.

One group felt that they wanted to know more about the artists' background and how they were discovered:

*How was the artist found, for example in Iran did they go to the cultural organisation and get the most well known artists, or did they try and get the equivalent of the fringe side of things? Silver Scholar*

So the sourcing of artists, their background and where they live now is very important background information for people.

### **Deconstructing the Word**

One of the questions the participants raised after being given the information about this part of the exhibition was of where else the work on display had been exhibited previously, and they also had questions about the artists:

*Are these exhibited in the Middle East? Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*do people in the Middle East go and see them? Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*Do they live in the Middle East? Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

One respondent also suggested that illustrations of artists' influences may also add to the experience:

*If we had comparative illustrations, just to show how the type of European art that might have influenced the artist. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

What seemed to really interest and engage participants was thinking about whether this work would be acceptable in the Middle East or whether it can only be displayed outside the Middle East. Therefore clear information on how the contemporary religious and political contexts in various countries across the Middle East impacts on the status of art and artists would be welcome.

### **Sacred Script**

One respondent pointed out that the fact that some of the artists use figurative i.e. 'forbidden' images in their art should be highlighted as an important aspect, and that censorship in art was an interesting aspect of the work:

*That is something that you want to use as a wow factor, the forbidden art of this time period Silver Scholar*

*And I am kind of interested in the filters that they have to go through. You know who, what is what and how it affects these artists. Silver Scholar*

*Yeah and some of them I think of being pioneers. Silver Scholar*

Once again, respondents were keen to know how dangerous the art was, to what extent it would be tolerated or censored in the Middle East and therefore what level of risk the artists are living with. Could they only produce this art because they no longer lived in the Middle East or do they risk having their work suppressed?

### **History Politics and Identity**

One group pointed out again that audio would be helpful to add to the display about musician Umm Kulthum, perhaps either on a listening point, as part of an audio guide or as part of the entire display:

*We don't know the music you are talking about. Silver Scholar*

*Yes we have no idea what this would sound like, well I have none whatsoever. Silver Scholar*

*I certainly want to hear it and it would add to the interest of what I am looking at. Silver Scholar*

When introduced to this section several comments were made about the fact that conflict and politics are a huge part of people's concept of the Middle East so this is an important part of such an exhibition, which needs to be treated in a sensitive way:

*I think you have to be careful though that it doesn't just look tacked on as well, oh we have got to cover the politics and a bit of history about that because we can't ignore it. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*I would be surprised to come to an exhibition on modern art from the Middle East and to hear nothing about the politics and to go away thinking are these artists not interested in politics or why is it not being talked about. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

### **General responses**

One issue that did seem to come out was that people wanted to know what the criteria was that had determined the work on show, and what the definition of Middle Eastern art was. They felt that the exhibition and artists could be several things, either a 'British Museum' version of Middle Eastern art, a historical overview, or a contemporary or 'real' representation of what was happening in Middle Eastern art at the moment:

*Is this is accepted artist in the accepted style for them to project over to us the British people and the culture they are trying to project, or is this the underground arts scene of the Middle East. Silver Scholar*

*Yeah is it an honest version of somebody's political machine again, or is it just somebody like from the British Museum just went over there and said this is great stuff get it in the collection. Silver Scholar*

*Do the artists themselves see themselves as Middle Eastern Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

Therefore the curatorial tone-of-voice and narrative are going to play significant part in the way visitors respond to the exhibition.

What became clear in exploring responses to the exhibition was that participants were starting from a very low, or non-existent, level of contextual knowledge. This meant that they didn't really know which questions to ask and were cautious about showing too much ignorance or political incorrectness. At the same time it was clear from the responses across both groups that the exhibition content demanded an intellectual response from them, rather than a purely aesthetic response, and participants were approaching it as a self-improvement opportunity. It is very important therefore that information provided does not assume an existing level of knowledge or intuitive confidence with the works, and provides plenty of background information.

It is also important to provide visitors with translations of the words and interpretation of the images. The interpretation offered was vital to participants' enjoyment of the images. The poetry and artists' quotations helped in the interpretation of the images.

An off-putting factor for some is the fear that the exhibition will arouse controversy or anger amongst Muslim. On the other hand some welcomed the idea of the British Museum entering into contemporary cultural debate.

### 3.3 Season Plans

When the groups were presented with the plans for the Middle East season as a whole, responses were fairly positive and participants liked the range of activities involved:

*I think it is good to be able to go and see some films, a good speaker, a lecture it would be great to have some Middle Eastern food. Culture Vulture / Hedonistic Dilettante*

*It is good, that range is good, but I think this is a quiet exhibition, but quietly essential and I like the idea of it. Silver Scholar*

*If it doesn't rain, a market would be fabulous with food and things to buy. Silver Scholar*

Participants pointed out that the season covered a broad range of different cultural aspects, and preferred this to a narrow focus:

### 3.4 Mixed or limited appeal

There was a mixed view of how different groups would respond to such an exhibition, although the silver scholar group did seem to be able to see how it may appeal to a variety of people:

*I would take my kids Silver Scholar*

*I think it is a difficult one to sell to the family. Silver Scholar*

*I don't think it is a children's thing. Silver Scholar*

*Music and sculpture and some of the patterns, it is perfect for children you know. My children are all interested in art and African art. Silver Scholar*

*I think in multicultural London quite a lot of people will go and see it. I think you are probably selling it to certain middle class aspirations Silver Scholar*

Once again, what lies behind this mixed response is the acknowledgement that this exhibition will demand an intellectual, or at least a proactive, response. It is unlikely to have intrinsic appeal to those who are driven by social motivations and those who are unaware of the aesthetic qualities of calligraphy-based Islamic art.

## 4

### Conclusions and recommendations

#### **Is there an interest in a contemporary exhibition of Middle Eastern art?**

Yes. But, the British Museum will have to work hard at raising awareness and stimulating this interest. The interest has to be engaged through information as it appears that there are very low levels of awareness of issues and influences informing Middle Eastern cultural expression. This will have to be achieved through informative PR and marketing material.

#### **Will the intrinsic appeal of the exhibition speak for itself?**

No. Uninformed and intuitive responses will lead people to assume that an exhibition on the Middle East at the British Museum will be about ancient culture. It is important that publicity both discourages this assumption and clarifies what the exhibition is actually about at the same time.

The poster and publicity material needs to evoke popular images of the contemporary Middle East, particularly through colour and vibrancy, whilst making it clear that the exhibition features contemporary artists working with calligraphy, writing rather than words.

#### **Does contemporary calligraphy interest people?**

Yes. But, it doesn't have immediate intuitive aesthetic appeal for everyone. Many people need literal translations, cultural and political context and interpretation of the images for it to speak to them at all.

This will be an exhibition that people approach from a need to undertake self-improvement and knowledge acquisition. They will come at it mainly from very low levels of existing knowledge and familiarity and therefore there should be no assumptions made about what people may already know.

People will also respond to multi-sensory intervention, audio in the form of songs, music and poetry and artists' voices. Visitors will appreciate an education in the politics, religion, people and culture of a vast and complex region.



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