



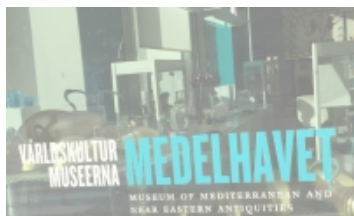
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Exhibitions and Objects of Wellness—Part 3



By Brenda Cowan, Associate Professor, Exhibition and Experience Design, FIT



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Associate Professor Brenda Cowan of the department of Exhibition and Experience Design at SUNY/Fashion Institute of Technology (New York) shares her theory and framework for the connection among people, objects and mental health called “Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics,” in the final installment of a three-part series for SEGD.org.

(PSST! Don't miss "Exhibitions and Objects of Wellness" [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), or the [excerpt](#) from Cowan's book, "Museum Objects, Health and Healing.")

Exhibitions and Objects of Wellness: Part 3, Stories From Syria Revisted

By Brenda Cowan, Associate Professor, department of Exhibition and Experience Design, SUNY/Fashion Institute of Technology

June is the time of Midsommer in Sweden. In reward for a very long and very dark winter, the country receives Midsommer: a period of seemingly endless days. The sun barely sets before it rises again and, if you are a New Yorker like me, and haven't earned the gift of sunlight at midnight, it can be a very bizarre experience. You find yourself bustling away at things well through the early hours of morning, quite awake and wondering where the time went. There is a feeling of unreality to it all. It was during a dreamlike and bustling Midsommer that I spent three weeks listening to the very real stories of Syrians living in Sweden and feeling grateful for the long days I was able to spend with them. Long and bright days that shed further light on how it is that museums, and the objects that frequent them, can help us heal.

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"Exhibitions like Stories From Syria are for the people. They provide a healing process. We could understand the world as the lived and the living, and it would change something in yourself and in other people. Thinking about objects and their personal stories changes you." —Staff member, Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities

A Second Syria

We are in a time of unprecedented global refugee crises. In response, museums worldwide are finding themselves uniquely positioned as forums for physical, emotional and intellectual safety, cross-cultural understanding, and healing. They are repositories for the myriad of voices and stories of displaced persons that need to be heard, yet are seldom positioned to drive the conversation. In 2018, Stockholm's Medelhavet (Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities) embraced the Syrian crisis head on via a co-created exhibition titled "Stories From Syria." The highly evocative environment, displaying precious personal belongings and stories from Syrian immigrants and refugees, was a model of participatory practice and authentic engagement of an underrepresented constituency.

In alignment with the institution's strategic vision, Stories From Syria was developed over two years in partnership with Syrian individuals and families throughout the country. Medelhavet's predominantly Swedish exhibition team partnered with Lusian Alasaaf, a cultural liaison and interpreter—also a Syrian refugee and museum professional—who slowly and thoughtfully enabled them to build trusting relationships with this very diverse community. One person, one family, one neighborhood at a time, Syrians throughout Sweden were welcomed into a planning leadership role and form the themes of home, family and identity that would drive the exhibition narrative. These once-wary participants would become family to the museum, and the exhibition space would be seen as a literal home. Their objects would leave their pockets, shelves, necks and ears for an entire year, to create a place and moment in time that would for many, become the Syria that they had left and lost.

The goals of the exhibition were straightforward and important: to show personal objects alongside museum artifacts, providing glimpses of Syria's long and rich cultural history; convey the area's role as a place for people and cultures; show Syria beyond the headlines; and provide a welcoming space for meetings, conversations and community. The exhibition displays resonated with personal belongings, imbued with stories and memories that were at once ordinary and extraordinary—and relevant to us all. Syrian music played in the background, creating a feeling of depth and quietude and a stained glass treatment on the ceiling added vibrancy. A large gathering space

extended from the exhibition, outfitted with long and low couches, a brass tray table, octagonal side tables and bold textiles indicative of a traditional Syrian sitting area.

The combination of Arabic, Swedish and English translations with each object added the dimension of being among many voices, altogether speaking words of hope, love, loss and resiliency. A language that you could feel in a child's pair of sneakers, hand crocheted shawl, empty bag of coffee beans, love letter and house key. Walking through the exhibition, I wondered about the people who owned them, and how they mustered the courage to loan them for the duration of the exhibition. I thought they must have been courageous people, in that one action of separation alone. And, I wondered whether through their courageousness—as refugees, immigrants and participants in an unconventional museum initiative—if those objects were helping them to heal.

My Arabian Days

Bolstered by a Fulbright grant in the summer of 2019, I returned to Sweden, this time for interviews with the Syrian object donors, museum staff and visitors. With Lusian as my translator and cultural guide, I conducted a study of the exhibition and object experience that would take place in kitchens, living rooms, cafes, offices and cars. We would take advantage of Midsommer's endless days to deeply immerse into Syrian life—as it is in Sweden—to listen and learn about just how meaningful Stories From Syria had become to 25 individuals who had given it life.

The study followed the conventions of qualitative exhibition evaluation, and sought to identify whether, and in what ways, the exhibition development process, design and incorporation of personal objects and stories met the exhibition's goals. Additionally, as per my ongoing research interests, I was also keen to find evidence of healthful and healing impacts using the Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics framework as an instrument. With three years of empirical data grounding the theory, it was time to see how the framework could be applied as a tool for seeing and understanding these aspects of exhibition experiences and processes.

Unsurprisingly, the experience and meaning of being a refugee and/or immigrant dominated the study. Participants in the evaluation associated specific exhibition objects with broad concepts of Syrian culture, geographical places, eras and larger world events, as well as more intimate representations of personal and individual milestones—moments in time, people, rituals and daily life. To the Syrians interviewed, the objects represented inward narratives of a cultural identity that had been uprooted and feels misplaced. To them, these otherwise ordinary objects had become a means of connecting with a time and place that has been lost or taken away in a temporal form. The objects were immigrants themselves, sharing their experience as companions who alongside their owners, straddled two worlds:

"[The object's] story is coupled with my heart. It's a magic feeling with my heart. When I hold it I become powerful, power to be in another place, traveling through space to Syria."

"I have a history with [my object]. It's like a companion in my life."

"These are the keys to my house, my love, my memories, my everything. They open all of this, they open my house. When you move from your home you are like a plant in a changed environment. You need time and hard work when you change your home. It's very hard. I have keys but no home."

Over and again, during elaborate home cooked meals, drives through Swedish suburbs, coffee served in pillow-strewn living rooms, and in offices with professionals determined to maintain their expertise, I would hear stories of people whose lives had been much like my own. Familiar stories of everyday life from scholars and designers, students and parents, business owners and musicians, that didn't correlate with the scenes of destitution riddling the internet. The winding yet script-guided interviews, revealed instead a portrait of people who endured horrendous journeys—some chosen, some forced—to make new lives for which they are grateful, but that come with struggles. These are the stories told in turn by their objects, in an exhibition that they informed, for an audience of people

they were eager to connect with.

Outcomes and New Family Portrait

The results of the study were, as one might suspect, deeply moving and highly informative. The three weeks of interviews and several hundred transcriptions produced the hoped-for data that illustrated achievement of the exhibitions goals:

“The museum let all Syrian people together in one room. This was incredible. For such different people who might be in conflict the museum brought us all together.”

“I couldn’t believe how special it was and I was so grateful for seeing all the people together—Swedish and Syrian together. The way that they made it [exhibition], I knew I would never feel those feelings of being in Syria again yet I could feel those feelings in the exhibition.”

“I was a little bit happy to give a story of Syrians and to show that we are strong and we like to give. To show people that Syrians are many things and we had a nice life and sophisticated. I could show that Syria is more than war. People have love and families and we are modern and I got to show them that.”

“The exhibition is a stage between the wild [war in Syria] and our lives here. A place for compassion and condolence. It’s like a movie of my life has come together in this exhibition.”

“The family could all meet together in the exhibition as it was the only place we could all meet. It was big enough. The family was living separately and this exhibition was the only home for all of them.”

“[When I brought in my object to the museum] I was really proud and really happy. I gave my identity to the museum.”

Using the framework of the seven actions comprising the Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics, evidence of health and healing outcomes were prevalent as well. Participants spoke of the ways in which the giving and receiving of their objects enhanced their wellbeing. They described the relief of unburdening through letting go of objects; the synergism of contributing to a larger collection with a shared meaning; and feelings of power and individual identity that came with keeping objects near to them throughout difficult life transitions. Participants described the creative process associated with making the object they put on display, and how touching their object transforms them. Donated objects were intentionally kept together and displayed as compositions, where their meaning was enhanced through their grouping. With each object experience, participants shared how their relationships generated feelings of relief; power; self identity; continuity; connection; resilience and transformation:

“When I see [my object] I am feeling strong and proud.”

“These shoes are me being an individual. The shoes today continue to say ‘no’ to the things I didn’t want in my life anymore. I started my new life. The shoes teach me how I threw back everything the people around me were speaking and how I can care for myself in my own way.”

“[My object] is very potent. It is potential. I will have a future and a special person in it.”

“If you keep connected to objects you aren’t going to make it. You can’t hang onto things when you are in this [refugee] life. Sharing these stories helps you to move on—the object loses some importance when you share them and this is good somehow.”

“Thirty-eight stories and thirty-eight objects. They are like my own life. Each one is just a small thing that is coupled with my life.”

“When I touch it, I read it, I fly. It’s a ticket for me to fly, it’s magic. It’s special when it’s in my hands. Such a special feeling to a time and this special place.”

“I brought my [collection of] objects in a box and a zippered bag to make sure they would all be together.”

“I am showing how my family is all together. We have an identity together. I learned [through sharing my object] that it’s not just about me.”

“I think the making of an object is still in it—like the energy. You can see the time invested in the complexity of its making and that time invested is still in the object.”

“I had a nice life before and I could feel better if I shared [my object].”

Grounded in the institution’s strategic vision, Stories From Syria provided a successful model of participatory practice. The exhibition process included a comprehensive approach to identifying participants, beginning with the decision to engage Syrians with different religious affiliations, geographic and ethnic origins and various cultural traditions.

The process took into consideration the responsibilities of co-creation in its methodical approach to building long-term relationships. The critical phase of initial outreach to potential participants was thoughtfully paced, allowing time for developing familiarity, establishing trust and making the project’s intentions transparent. Second, the opening of the exhibition was personalized, emulating a Syrian wedding tradition of bringing together the bride and groom to represent the bringing together of Syria and Sweden. This reference and simulation generated deeply positive emotional responses by participants. Third, the project concluded with a personal moment of closure, where the donated object was wrapped like a gift when returned to the donor. Throughout, participants were continuously encouraged to visit, bring family and friends, personally connect with museum staff and participate in programs.

“I had to trust the museum first and that they weren’t making a joke of Syrian people. I was so happy to give [my object] to them knowing it was safe. When I saw it was treated like an artifact, and then the contract, it made me realize I will be treated professionally.”

“[When my object was returned to me] it was wrapped like a present! I checked it all over and I was so happy that they gave me the text panel. I gave it to my son and he was so proud. I have this exhibition in my heart and in my house. I put the label over my son’s bed, the exhibition is now over his bed.”

“The charge to create the exhibition was concerning, so we decided to go for intimate stories. The experience of interviewing and coordinating and speaking felt like I came a little bit closer—the distance between me and Syria was getting closer. I felt a little scared and guilty, but the process was good; there was a lot of laughter. The final exhibition made me proud.”

The evaluation provided an opportunity to not only assess the exhibition initiative and its human-object encounters, but also provided information that shaped a portrait of the relationship among Syrian object donors, visitors, staff, the museum and the exhibition. Seven overarching themes emerged that illustrated a museum-constituency relationship most museums dream of. This portrait is shaped by participants’ experiences, thoughts, feelings and perspectives resulting from engagement in the exhibition process, the collection, environment and the museum overall: vulnerability and trust, reality, giving, house, pride, gratitude and loss and flush.

Vulnerability and Trust

The theme of vulnerability and trust was the predominant experience felt by object donors when deciding whether to donate an object to the exhibition and build a relationship with the museum. For a population experiencing trauma, the significance of their choice to join in this initiative was remarkable:

“When I thought about [donating] I was worried, afraid it would get lost or harmed. I really had to think about it. It was the only thing I had to share. They were all I brought with me. I handed it over and I felt afraid but I just had to trust.”

“I was a little bit afraid about letting it go—it’s not easy—and it was a weird concept to me at first. But I gave it. The procedure was very important.”

“I was really afraid [to donate]. I trusted, but I was afraid. And it was bittersweet.”

Reality

The theme of reality is one that appears often in studies related to objects and mental health. Objects are core to human cognition, perception, meaning-making, and constructing one’s relationship within the world. In this evaluation, reality speaks to the need for the Syrian people and their experiences to be seen as relevant:

“Most exhibitions are about things from buried underground. Archaeology, ancient artifacts. But this kind of exhibition shows reality and humanity and what happens now. It’s alive.” —Visitor

“I felt like I was a part of this reality—of all these people [objects] around me in this exhibition.”

“I want to share my story, not just be a number, and tell the reality of my story. I am here.”

Giving

Giving was described by participants as a key aspect of Syrian culture and mindset as a common social interaction, means of connection in daily life and as a response to the challenges of attempting to assimilate. The exhibition initiative provided participants with a means of giving in several different ways, fulfilling a deep need to enact a key part of their Syrian identity and form a relationship with the Swedish people in a meaningful way:

“It was important that I share. The museum knows me now and they allowed me to show who I am.”

“I was a little bit happy to give a story of Syrians and show that we are strong and we like to give. Especially Syrians in Sweden want to give—not just take. Here I had the opportunity to give.”

“I would give my ring to the museum—I would leave it here today! I want to share my experience with many people and the museum is for good things and respect. I would give it [permanently] to the museum. I would give my hand to the museum and they would keep it safe and show it in a nice way.”

House

As a theme, house refers to the literal exhibition space and adjoining gathering area; personal associations and affiliations with objects in the exhibition; the museum and its staff; and personal everyday objects from Syria that are gone. House is core to participants’ concepts of family, community, love, comfort, cultural traditions and societal and familial rituals and roles:

“I call this exhibition house because this exhibition speaks about the love, the family, the connection, and the meanings of home to me. I was so proud that they made this house for Syria—my house.”

“[The exhibition] was warm and comfortable, like coming into a house. They are my friends [Syrians], these are their things.”

“I wish I could start over and have a solid house and feel like home. My house was always there. In Syria we lived in the same house for 35 years. Now it’s gone. A house in Syria means you are settled. I’m sure every immigrant has experienced this—this need for a house. Here there just isn’t a feeling of people being established in them, in their houses. Houses in Syria are a family system. Now I literally feel like I’m swimming all the time.”

Pride

Pride is another theme participants described as representative of a key aspect of Syrian culture and identity. Pride in culture, tradition, family, community, ethics and belief systems. Pride also represents the feelings of power and strength in participants who overcame feelings of distrust and anxiety related to sharing their objects and stories and forming relationships with the museum:

“The exhibition made me feel proud and missing my country. I was surprised. Because it [the exhibition] was working.”

“I am proud of myself. I wrote the story and my husband cried. I felt really strong and great power and happiness. I felt hope. My story did not die.”

“I didn’t think it would be more than a small thing. I was so surprised. It was so big and each object and story was really thought about. It made me so proud to be Syrian.”

Gratitude

There were powerful feelings of relief, surprise, awe and appreciation that emerged in participants as the exhibition project unfolded and the high level of care and reverence for their stories and objects were demonstrated. This appreciation and feelings and expressions of gratitude were also associated with the personal, respectful and well-informed social dynamic that underscored the co-creation process:

“I couldn’t believe how special and important the museum was and I was so grateful to see all the people—Swedish and Syrian together.”

“I was surprised [by the exhibition] because it’s unusual in the museum context. I was surprised by just how personal the stories were—like reading someone’s diary. I felt grateful for their [the Syrian’s] generosity.”

Loss

Loss emerged as a theme related to objects, lifestyles, homes and systems of life, and also in relationship to participants’ relationship to the museum. The closure of the exhibition had a profound impact on participants, including feelings of the loss of a house that had been created and is now gone, the loss of a gathering space that was for some a significant means of interacting and connecting, and the loss of a conduit or repository of cultural and individual identity. This is extremely significant to the Syrian community that struggles to find means of connecting with their own self-identity, among themselves and to the Swedish people:

“I am surprised by how it’s closed. The exhibition was a memory of my community and of us now in Sweden. I have a new home now and I want the people here to see my life. I’m disappointed inside because I have a lot of meaning inside of me, especially because the exhibition was a house, and was peaceful and now it’s gone. Taken away from me. I felt safe there. Every day I went there, even if just seeing it from the outside. Once I felt I wanted to go but it was closing so I went inside to say goodbye. Now I don’t feel well and I have a lot of sadness, of loss.”

“It’s hard now. I can’t believe [the exhibition is] over now.”

“[The exhibition] feels like a fleeting acquaintance that leaves a feeling. I miss it.”

Flush

Perhaps it’s odd to conclude an article about an immensely beautiful exhibition project on the subject of loss. Loss carries grief and pain, yet in the case of the highly successful Stories From Syria, loss is flush. The surge of emotions resulting from the exhibition’s closure, among staff as well as object donors, have indicated the opportunity and need for new and continued growth. A connection was made, a meta-narrative was communicated. Healing was fostered and avenues for wellbeing were formed. Relationships and friendships were created and a

unique family was born.

From a marriage between incongruous lives and a cultural institution focused on making a difference, came a place and a means to build something lasting and purposeful. The Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities will be continuing to cultivate their relationship with the Syrian community. And, with objects, those essential things of life, health and meaning-making, a museum and a displaced people will show the world what the humanity that connects us looks like: an empty coffee bag; a collection of dolls; a love letter; a house key; and a child’s pair of shoes.

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