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# Ektashif: Art through the Senses—Families shaping museum programmes in Qatar

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Josélia Neves, Ph.D. is Associate Professor at Hamad bin Khalifa University, Qatar, where she teaches Audiovisual Translation. She has led a number of projects for the provision of subtitling, subtitling for deaf and hard of hearing viewers, and audio description for blind audiences in a wealth of cultural contexts, including museums.

What would it be like to step into a painting? Do you know what a painting feels like? Does it make a sound? How does it smell?

These questions attracted over sixty families to *Ektashif: Art through the Senses*. The programme, which took place at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar, revolved around the concept of a 'sensory toolkit'. Designed to provide an un-facilitated gallery experience, in which families can explore art in new ways together, the programme and toolkit were developed as part of a collaborative research project. This involved curators and educators from Qatar Museums (QM) joining forces with researchers from the University of Westminster in London and Hamad bin Khalifa University (HBKU) in Doha, Qatar. Combining expertise in museum studies, curatorial practice, cognitive psychology, and audio-visual translation, the project was grounded in multisensory learning and inclusive design.

## Developing the programme

The project began in December 2015. At this time QM curators were developing new strategies to increase access to collections for children. One idea they were exploring was the creation of 'sensory toolkits', designed to support a deeper multisensory engagement with objects that cannot be touched. The researchers from the University of Westminster were working on methods for evaluating the long-term impact of a museum visit, and were interested in multisensory tools as a way of promoting memorability. The Translation and Interpreting Institute at HBKU was developing approaches to audio-visual translation, making use of multisensory imagery and enrichment, to increase access and inclusivity for sighted and non-sighted museum visitors. The project combined this unique portfolio of skills and professional perspectives to explore and evaluate how multisensory interaction might enhance the impact of a family museum experience in Qatar.



Image 1: *Turathiaat* (Traditional), Jassim al-Zaini, 1970. Mixed media on plywood, 82x121.5cm. (Picture courtesy of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha)

The development of *Ektashif: Art through the Senses* centred on three core aims:

1. Remove barriers faced by families in traditional museum spaces
2. Extend engagement with artworks that cannot be touched
3. Make learning about Qatari art and culture more relevant, meaningful and engaging for children and families.

The main activity within the programme, which grew from these aims, focused on a painting by celebrated Qatari artist Jassim al-Zaini (Image 1). This large mixed media artwork incorporates real wood and metal studs, as well as thick, textured paintwork. Unglazed and in reach, on the wall of a museum that necessarily prohibits visitors from touching the artworks, the intuitively and tantalisingly tactile painting would ordinarily provide a frustratingly limited offer for families. The introduction of a sensory toolkit aimed to increase levels of engagement for children and reduce levels of anxiety for parents, whilst maintaining an authentic museum experience.

The title of the painting *Turathiaat*, meaning 'traditional' in Arabic, refers to its rich content relating to Qatari heritage and culture. The sandoq (box), the palm frond guffa (basket), the sadu (carpet) and the carved gypsum panels in the centre of the painting, although ubiquitous in Qatar, are becoming increasingly symbolic of times past. Traditional items such as these have, relatively recently, ceased to play functional roles in many contemporary households. Although painted in 1970, al-Zaini's image projects a dramatic shift between the old and new—by contrasting a crumbling arch and a broken heb (water jar) on the right with the semi-abstract forms of modern construction on the left. The value and potential for bringing this important cultural content to life, through multisensory engagement and intergeneration storytelling, made *Turathiaat* the perfect subject for QM's first sensory toolkit.

### **The *Turathiaat* Activity**

The first stage of the *Ektashif* programme took place at Mathaf in April 2016 and was open to families with at least one child aged zero to eleven. The name *Ektashif*, meaning 'discover' in Arabic, was chosen to reflect the visitor-led nature of activities within the programme.

The focal point was the *Turathiaat* activity. For this, each family was given twenty-five un-facilitated minutes to explore the painting together, using a sensory toolkit. Designed to promote tactile, auditory, and olfactory modes of exploration, the toolkit encouraged families to interpret and engage with the artwork in ways that suited their specific needs.

The toolkit included an enlarged image of *Turathiaat*, reproduced as a play-mat. Spread out on the gallery floor, in front of the artwork, the play-mat enabled children to step into and around the composition, exploring the different textures and details within. Addressing the first aim of the project, the play-mat helped create and delineate a welcoming space for families within the museum (Image 2).

Every element in the sensory toolkit related to something within the painting. Drawing on its rich historical content and tactile qualities, objects, replicas, puzzles, and props inspired a range of hands-on activities. Some links between the toolkit and painting were very literal, such as an accurate replica of the sandoq (chest) in the centre. Other references were subtler, including wooden building blocks made to resemble the colours and shape of semi-abstract cube-like forms to the left-hand side of the painting, or the scent pots which included traditional spices and aromatics associated with Qatar (cardamom, cinnamon, frankincense, and saffron). Opportunities for auditory engagement ranged from a descriptive audio guide, which could be listened to in English or Arabic, to the sounds made by the children themselves (and some adults) on musical instruments provided.

The formal qualities of some elements within the picture, such as the cobweb on the right

and the pylon on the left, were brought to life through interactive toys. Whether building with the coloured blocks, stretching the elastic bands to create the criss-cross pattern on the pylon, or winding the fluffy grey wool around the pegs to make a web, children (and adults) were engaging with the content of the painting through constructive play (Image 3). Programmes like this shift the emphasis away from sight as the unique sensory channel for experiencing art, and as such, address the second aim of the programme.

Whilst permitting independent play, the programme was designed to promote social interaction and collaborative learning. The intention was that families would be able to develop and share their own narrative journeys around the painting, using the multisensory tools provided. It is hard to quantify whether or not programmes like this achieve such aims, which is what made the evaluation process and design, created by the researchers at the University of Westminster and HBKU, such a crucial element of the project.

### **Evaluating the programme**

Traditionally, museums have focused on qualitative methods, such as interviews and observation, for evaluating the success of programming activities. Cognitive psychology, on the other hand, is generally based on quantitative methods, which can require a baseline measure to enable comparisons between conditions. In order to establish whether the multisensory nature of the *Turathiaat* activity enhanced concepts such as fun, engagement, and multigenerational interaction, it was necessary to run a second comparative activity. For this, families were simply given ten minutes in another gallery and asked to select their favourite painting. Without a sensory toolkit, this required cognitive engagement with the artworks, which depended solely on vision.

Evaluation data was collected in the form of observations, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The observational research recorded how families interacted



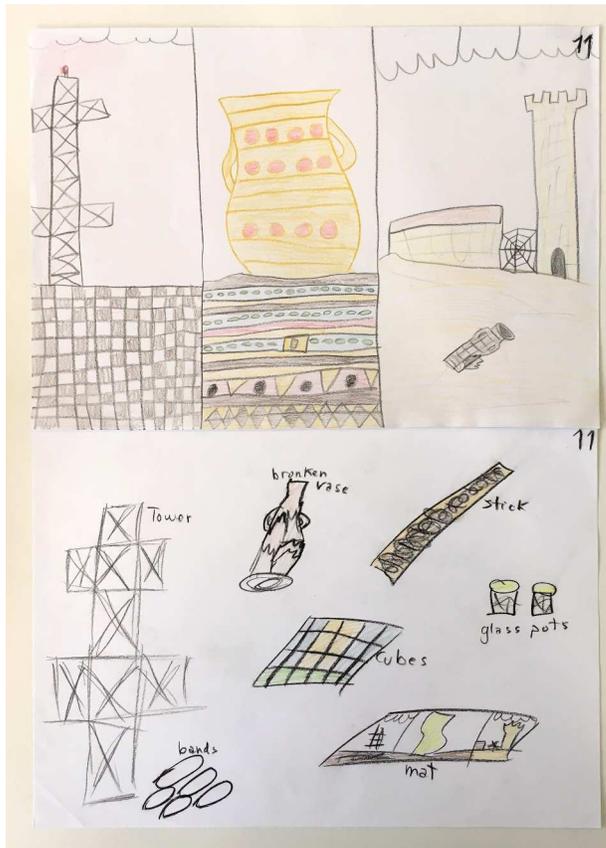


Image 4: Drawing of *Turathiaat* and the sensory toolkit by an eleven year old participant, one month after the programme. (Picture by Angela Ruggles.)

with the toolkit, the artworks, with each other, and to some degree the museum environment. A standardised observation sheet was designed to enable students at HBKU and staff across QM to contribute consistent data to the evaluation process for both tasks.

The questionnaires captured the personal perspectives of adult participants, focusing on their thoughts during the tasks. This included memories, as well as reflections on the specific activities. Questionnaires were completed immediately after the programme, then again one month later, as part of a second family activity. In order to assess the impact on memory, the two sessions enable comparisons to be made across time. They also created opportunities for a more in-depth analysis of data. In addition to capturing how thoughts about the experience and the painting had embedded over time, the follow up session included all participants being asked to draw the painting from memory (Image 4).

On a practical level, accurate quantitative data requires large participant numbers. As such, sixty families participated in the first phase of the programme and evaluation process in April 2016. The standardised observation sheets were designed to be time efficient, but still required a huge amount of focused work from the students and staff completing them, as well as those analysing the data.

The evaluation process also asked a lot of participants. Whilst the focus of the project for the researchers was on generating strong data through comprehensive well-crafted questions, museum staff needed to ensure that the visitor experience was that of a coherent family programme. Concerns arose in the planning stage around how to balance these essential and potentially conflicting project priorities resulting in a number of compromises.

Questionnaires were briefer than initially proposed, for example, and observations were made at a set distance away from the family. Although this sometimes meant missing dialogue, it enabled participants to relax into a natural and authentic pattern of behaviour, which was as important to the research as to the visitor.

Participants also self-regulated the impact that the evaluation process had on their overall experience. Some enjoyed and fully committed to the reflective process of completing the questionnaires, whilst others contributed more briefly, as more of a courtesy to the organisers.

The interviews enabled a more relaxed and in-depth qualitative assessment of the *Turathiaat* experience, with a smaller sample of participants. Six families, varying in size from one adult and one child to three adults and seven children, were interviewed. Children included boys and girls aged one to eleven, and adults included parents, aunts, and grandparents. Semi-structured in format, the interviews included set questions to record specific reflections on the programme, as well as prompts to encourage more open-ended discussion. In most cases this initially revolved around the painting, but led to a wide variety of personal connections being made and shared. The *Ektashif* project enabled QM to demonstrate the potential of their sensory toolkit concept, which expanded greatly as a result of the collaboration with HBKU and the University of Westminster. This can now be rolled out across QM Family and Schools Programmes, focusing on different artworks, objects and museums. It was the opportunity to evaluate the programme, however, and measure its impact with local and international audiences, that will help realise the full potential of multisensory engagement as a way to increase access to collections for children and families.

The evaluation of *Ektashif: Art through the Senses* has generated a vast amount of data, for which analysis is still ongoing. As well as having significance for upcoming academic

publications, the results will provide an invaluable resource for museums, in and beyond the region.

### **Removing Barriers**

The first and overarching goal of the *Ektashif* programme was to remove barriers faced by families in traditional museum spaces. The advertisement alone attracted over sixty families to Mathaf, revealing the value of merely promoting more multisensory visitor experiences. Over one hundred children participated in the programme. With an average age of 4.5, and the majority being aged between two and seven, these children and their families are an important and currently underrepresented audience for museums in Qatar.

It is well documented that modern art museums can be intimidating spaces. The *Ektashif* programme took place in one of Mathaf's main galleries, so that the context being addressed by the programme was an authentic museum environment. The play-mat and the toolkit transformed the pristine expanse of floor beneath the painting from one side of a 'white cube' into an inviting place for families to sit and play.

The visitor information sheets revealed that over 15% of the adults who participated in the *Ektashif* programme had never been to a museum or art gallery before. It is pertinent to note, in relation to audience development, the power that a family activity can have in attracting first-time visitors of all ages.

Observations captured the fact that many adults as well as children participating in the *Turathiaat* activity intuitively removed their shoes, sat, and even lay down in front of the artwork. These are neither standard behaviours in a modern art gallery nor the actions of visitors who feel uncomfortable, suggesting the programme succeeded in making a traditional, object-based museum environment a more welcoming space for families.

### **Extending Engagement**

The second objective of the programme was to extend engagement with objects that cannot be touched, in this case an artwork. Being unable to touch comes up again and again in audience research with parents in Qatar as a significant reason for not visiting museums, closely followed by restrictions on noise.

*Ektashif* participants clearly benefitted from the range of tactile and sound-based interaction facilitated by the sensory toolkit. In the questionnaires, parents state that they enjoyed the *Turathiaat* activity not just for their families, but also for themselves, giving it a higher rating than the favourite painting task. Families were also more likely to use all of the twenty-five minutes allocated for the *Turathiaat* task, than using the full ten minutes available for choosing their favourite painting.

A higher level of anxiety among parents was also observed in the favourite painting activity, particularly with regards to younger children needing to be carried, restrained, or repeatedly reminded not to touch the artworks. In contrast, during the *Turathiaat* task, adults were observed enjoying the experience, not only as facilitators for their children but as active participants. Once given permission to play adults seemed to engage with the sensory toolkit for their children, with their children and, in many cases, for themselves. In one instance it was observed that initially “the father seems like he thinks toys are for children and the painting for him and the only thing he is meant to engage in”. But then later on in the session he is observed to “really get into making the cobweb on his own”. This serves as another reminder to recognise and address the needs of adults within a family group as well as the children, especially those for whom the museum context might be unfamiliar.

### **Learning Together**

The third goal of the programme was to make learning about Qatari art and culture more relevant, meaningful, and memorable for children and families. The level at which families understood their *Ektashif* experience

as ‘learning about’ or interpreting the painting varied dramatically. Some did not recognise the blocks as having any connection to the artwork, for example, whilst others made the visual link with al-Zaini’s abstract forms, and one parent even commented on the conceptual significance, through playing with the bricks, of constructing and deconstructing the artist’s image.

What was important was that families supported and enhanced each other’s learning experience (Image 5). This was observed as a reciprocal and alternating process, with children and adults identifying and sharing the connections they made between the painting and toolkit:

Look Mum, all these toys are like the painting!  
(Quote from child, Family 9)

Mother explained connections between the toys and painting...Girl recognised tower from painting herself.  
(Observation, Family 4)

Observing who took the lead during the *Turathiaat* task demonstrated a symbiotic relationship, with children taking the lead in some instances and the adults in others. For the majority of families these roles changed throughout the session.

The observation, interviews, and questionnaires confirm that by engaging the whole family in learning together, the sensory toolkit helped enrich the visitor experience for everyone (Image 6). Although based on the content of the painting, the visual, olfactory, tactile and auditory tools were designed to promote open-ended exploration. Families were invited to make their own connections and meaning. This enabled a visitor-led exchange around the painting, from which narratives surrounding Qatari art and culture could unfold naturally and in accordance with age, ability, and interest.

In some cases, personal connections allowed families to engage with the painting in authentic ways that were uniquely relevant to



Image 5: Sisters and mother engaging with the sensory toolkit. (Picture by Angela Ruggles.)



Image 6: Family transforming the gallery space with the sensory toolkit. (Picture by Angela Ruggles.)

them:

My son said 'this looks like my Grandma Fatima's house'... she has a box similar to this box and she has most of these elements in her majlis.  
(Interview, Qatari Mother)

Participants who were less familiar with the subject of the painting, however, were also able to engage with and construct meaning around the content, using the sensory toolkit. Only 50% of participants had the descriptive audio guide, which was developed by HBKU. This allows a comparison to be made between audiences with in-depth contextual information about the painting and those without. What is becoming evident from the early stages of analysis is that with the right tools, in the right environment, families are able to elicit meaning with or without the 'museum' voice.

Opportunities for families to actively participate in the creation of narrative journeys around a painting, and to share in physical, sensory, intellectual, or purely imaginary interpretations of art, can engage and empower families with children of any age. The *Ektashif* sensory toolkit demonstrated how, with remarkably few resources, museums can transform traditional object-based exhibits into welcoming engaging space for families (Image 6). Participatory programmes like these offer more than new ways for families to learn together—they provide new way for museums to learn from families—and join forces in shaping the museums of the future.

“ Once given permission to play adults seemed to engage with the sensory toolkit for their children, with their children and, in many cases, for themselves.