

# SPOTLIGHT ON MUSEUM ED

*This column explores innovative informal education projects being undertaken within our local museum community. As active spaces for dialogue, connection and critical thinking, it seeks to highlight programming that makes our institutions more inclusive and that encourage more meaningful engagement with our visitors.*



## Welcome to Canada – Programming for Newcomers

Canada has welcomed immigrants from around the world. While our story of immigration is not free from discrimination or exclusion, multiculturalism has become a key component of Canadian identity. Today, one in five Canadians is foreign-born. While most newcomers choose to immigrate to Canada, some come **seeking refuge** from crises or conflicts. This past year, the top five countries of origin for refugees coming to Canada were Syria,<sup>1</sup> Eritrea, Iraq, Congo and Afghanistan.

As spaces where people of all backgrounds can gather and celebrate diversity in our community, museums have the opportunity to be responsive to these changing demographics. Given the challenges that newcomers face adjusting to life in a new country, from learning a new language to finding housing and a job, it is important to not only think about what cultural institutions can offer but also if that service will meet their needs. In Berlin, an innovative museum project was

created in response to the **recent surge of refugees in Germany** with the country's open-door migration policy. **Multaqa**, or 'meeting place' in Arabic, is a program where refugees are trained to lead native-language tours of local museums for others newly arrived in the country. In Canada, there is also this potential for institutions to help build connections between Canada's cultural heritage and that of newcomers' home countries.

### Local Programming for Newcomers

Within B.C., most programming for newcomers in museums, in particular the refugee community, has been organized in partnership with organizations that work closely with new immigrants and refugees. Taking its name from the Arabic word for welcome, **Ahlan** is a series of events created by the Institute of Canadian Citizenship as a way of welcoming Syrian refugees and connecting them to Canadian cul-

ture through history and art. Translated by Ahlan volunteers who have recently become Canadian citizens themselves, tours have been offered at major cultural institutes across the country, including the Museum of Anthropology and the Vancouver Art Gallery last July.

While visiting the **Museum of Anthropology**, participants were introduced to Indigenous history and presence in Vancouver and the museum's Islamic collection. During their tour at the **Vancouver Art Gallery**, Syrian refugees and their families learned about Emily Carr and had the chance to recreate some of her works on display. The gallery has also partnered with the Immigrant Services Society of BC Welcome Centre to offer programming for young immigrants and refugees, which they hope to continue in the future. Over the course of several days, teens visit the gallery and take part in a variety of activities. Building upon a guided exhibition tour on their first visit, where they were inspired by the paintings by Claude

Monet, Emily Carr and many other influential artists, they were invited to create their own drawings in a hands-on workshop.

Home to many new Canadians and the primary destination for government-assisted refugees in Metro-Vancouver,<sup>2</sup> the **Surrey Art Gallery** is another BC institution that offers accessible programs for newcomers. Introduced several years ago in response to the rapid population growth and changing demographic within their community, the gallery's *Newcomer Tour and Workshop* introduces new Canadians of all ages to the gallery as a welcoming space and place of learning. Participants begin with a tour of the facility and current exhibitions and are then invited to explore ceramics in a hands-on workshop. Creating clay vessels using a technique familiar to many different cultures, provides the opportunity for the mutual exchange of knowledge and experience amongst staff, volunteers and newcomers while also allowing for the celebration of creativity and cultural diversity.

If your institution is thinking about developing programming to meet the needs of newcomer groups in your area, here are a few things to think about before getting started:

Reach out to organizations within your community that already work with newcomers. They can provide valuable insight about the needs of new immigrants and refugees, as



**Above:** *Surrey Art Gallery's first Newcomers Workshop with artist-educator April Davis.*  
Photo credit: Surrey Art Gallery

well as anticipate potential barriers to participation. They may also be able to connect you with newcomers in your community who may be willing to provide feedback or partner with you to plan and develop your program.

Be open to new approaches to programming. Creating a program that will truly meet the needs of new-

comers requires flexibility, creativity and time.

Consider offering specialized training for your staff to promote cultural awareness and understanding of cultural differences and provide them with tools to facilitate programs for newcomers.



**Above:** Oil Pastel Art Session at Vancouver Art Gallery for Welcome Centre Youth Group. Photo credit: ISS of BC Youth Hub

## References

1 More than 40,000 Syrian refugees have come to Canada since 2015 with over 600 Syrian refugee families settling in British Columbia (#WelcomeRefugees, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/welcome/index.asp>).

2 According to the 2011 Census, 18.6% of Surrey population is comprised of new immigrants who have been in Canada for less than five years. As of June last year, 799 Syrian refugees have settled in Surrey, representing 44% of all government-assisted refugees who have arrived in British Columbia since November 2015, and approximately 60% of those settling in Surrey are under 19 (City of Surrey's Planning and Development Division and the Surrey Local Immigration Partnership).

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**Above:** Surrey Art Gallery's first Newcomers Workshop with artist-educator Claire Cilliers. Photo credit: Surrey Art Gallery