



The Many Colours of Islam: Museums, Multiculturalism and Canada's 150th

Anissa J. Paulsen

As preparations for Canada's 150th anniversary get underway, questions arise about what it means to be Canadian and the role of museums, historic sites and cultural centres to represent the "great Canadian story." Here on the west coast, we have also been reflecting on how our unique British Columbian identity fits in this context and what legacy our museums and cultural centres should leave for future generations.

I participated in the BCMA's Canada 150 forum in May 2016 where over 140 participants online and in person discussed these important questions. It seemed there was no shortage of participants claiming that Canadians (and British Columbians) pride themselves on being known for our "celebration of multiculturalism," "inclusivity," and our ability to "be peacemakers," "be tolerant" and "care for others."

Few people would argue with these ideals, but according to a new survey conducted by The Environics Institute, at least one segment of our Canadian mosaic still suffers from intolerance and discrimination – those who practice the religion of Islam.

Muslims in Canada

It is perhaps easy to dismiss prejudice against Muslims, but it is real. Many of us here in Canada shudder at the outright discrimination south of our border against Muslims – indeed against many races – that is being exposed by U.S. Presidential candidate Donald Trump. But as Ali Hassan, comedian and producer of the new one-man show, *Muslim Interrupted*, bluntly stated on CBC's April 27, 2016 edition of Q, "Canada is equally as racist, but we hide it better."

The **Environics Institute's** recent "Survey on Muslims in Canada" appears to confirm this sentiment. Results of the survey showed that public concerns about the cultural integration of immigrants (particularly Syrian refugees) are growing and Muslims continue to be viewed with apprehension, if not suspicion, by some non-Muslim Canadians. The survey found that one in three Muslims have experienced discrimination or unfair treatment due to their religion. This discrimination is surprisingly more prevalent among Canadian-born Muslims and the subjects of such discrimination are predominantly Canadian-born Muslim women.

Top: Students interact with "The many Colours of Islam" exhibit through a scavenger hunt.
Photo Credit: Anissa Paulsen.

A disturbing finding from the survey is that Muslim youth are more likely to believe the next generation of Muslims will face more, rather than less, discrimination and stereotyping than they face today.

As the Environics Institute reports: “Muslims represent the fastest growing religious minority in Canada today, but their emerging presence has been contentious. While Canada has yet to experience the type of ethnic violence and terrorist attacks that have taken place elsewhere, Muslims in this country do not enjoy the acceptance of other religious minorities, and are a focal point for discomfort about immigrants not fitting into Canadian society. By global standards, Canada is a welcoming multicultural society but the Muslim community¹ faces unique challenges with respect to religious freedom, national security profiling and the threat of security detentions abroad.”

Much of the discomfort stems from the fact that Islam is not well understood by non-Muslims. The mainstream media continually portrays simplistic stereotypes emphasizing negative characteristics such as violent extremism and terrorism. Without a more thorough understanding and appreciation of the Muslim religion and a more thoughtful understanding of the similarities across cultures, such stereotypes will continue to exist to the detriment of future generations of Muslim-Canadians and indeed, to the detriment of our desire to be a welcoming, inclusive country.

With the recent arrival of Syrian immigrants into many of our communities here in British Columbia, museums can no longer ignore this segment of our diverse Canadian mosaic.

As a result, it is critical for us all to ask: What kind of legacy do we want to leave in our province? What can we museum professionals do to combat this cultural and religious misunderstanding? How can we be active

¹ The use of the term “Muslim community” in this context refers to the country’s Muslim population which shares a common religious faith. It is not intended to imply that this population is otherwise homogenous, or lacks considerable diversity in other ways.



Above: Self portrait by Riri, age 15.

participants in building a strong, positive community that is truly inclusive, tolerant and representative of our multiculturalism?

Museums as Community Builders

Museums are safe and accessible environments for citizens to discuss challenging issues such as cultural misunderstanding. Museums are uniquely positioned to help reverse stigma and discrimination because they are popular, neutral sources of information. They can attract a diverse cross-section of people and provide shared experiences through interpretive exhibits and programming. By exposing adults and children to unfamiliar ways of life (such as Islam) in such a setting museums can go a long way to create bridges of understanding and build positive, welcoming and inclusive communities.

The Environics survey discovered (not surprisingly) that opinions about Islam are closely tied to the degree of personal contact non-Muslims have with Muslims.

Non-Muslims who have frequent contact with Muslims reported much higher positive impressions than those with limited contact with this religious group. Education is the key to tolerance, diplomacy and cross-cultural understanding. Without education and opportunities for positive interaction, stereotypes persist, and fear and misunderstanding about Islam and Muslims will continue to proliferate in our province and country.

The Many Colours of Islam traveling exhibit is one exhibit that tackles this important issue. The exhibit has traveled to museums, schools and cultural centres across the United States for the past six years. It has impacted thousands of children and adults alike and challenged them to think differently about Islam and Muslims – a way of life and a people with whom they may not be familiar.

In the exhibition, self-portraits by young Muslims are accompanied by literary pieces in their own words about their lives, values and what Islam means to them.

The Many Colours of Islam focuses not on the differences between religions, but instead seeks to explore ways in which Islam is similar to other religions and cultures that exist in North America. The artwork and writings demonstrate that Islam is a vibrant and diverse religion and culture that share similarities with many of our western ideals. Thus, countering the sometimes negative and one-sided media representations regarding Islam.

Let's do it for our Children

One of the reasons this exhibition has been so successfully received is due to its point of view. The exhibit was purposefully created by – and for – youth and tells the stories of individual children and their firsthand perspectives of Islam. For a complex subject matter such as religion, this intimate perspective allows their stories to resonate more readily with child visitors and their families. Children and adults alike can learn a lot from another child's honest and apparently simplistic approach to storytelling.

"This exhibit will go a long way in building a better world for our children!"
– Visitor

"Let's work for Peace – I see it in these pictures by children."
– Visitor

"The exhibit is about thinking over all connections. It's all centered on cultural understanding and peace. [The young artists in the exhibit] sound like your next door neighbor talking. These [Muslim] children are just like my daughter – just like the kids in Iowa City." – Executive Director, The Iowa Children's Museum

"The exhibit was so well received by my staff and patrons alike. It was really great to see parents reading the labels to their kids and really learning more about Islam themselves. It's definitely something everyone could use right now." – Staff, Garden State Discovery Museum (New Jersey)

Opportunities for Engagement

The Many Colours of Islam exhibit is designed to be a catalyst for engagement and community building in any community². There are ample opportunities for museums to engage with their local communities – both Muslims and non-Muslims – when hosting this exhibit.

Opportunities for community engagement vary from community to community but so far museums have worked with their local Muslim communities to co-create supplementary exhibit components as well as to develop informative public lectures, cooking demonstrations and musical performances to celebrate the rich diversity of Muslim culture.

The Iowa Children’s Museum sought direct participation from neighboring schools to create additional hands-on interactive elements relating to Islam and artistic representations of mosque styles around the world. A museum in Washington, DC, partnered with Grade 6 teachers to curate a parallel exhibit of their students’ self-portraits as a way to showcase the diverse identities and heritages represented in their classrooms.

The new **BC curriculum** to be introduced this Fall provides incentive for British Columbia’s museums to develop and/or host such exhibits. One of the competencies of the new BC curriculum is the Positive Personal and Cultural Identity competency. This competency focuses on the “awareness, understanding, and appreciation of all the facets that contribute to a healthy sense of oneself. It includes awareness and understanding of one’s family background, heritage(s), language(s), beliefs, and perspectives in a multicultural society.”

²Although the exhibit is centered around Muslim children in Indonesia, it is an appropriate framework for understanding that the Muslim community in British Columbia is not monolithic, it is incredibly diverse and represents Muslims from many regions and continents, including Asia, Africa, Europe and the Middle East.

Right: Illustrating diverse architectural styles of mosques around the world at the Iowa Children’s Museum.
Photo Credit: Anissa Paulsen.

About *The Many Colours of Islam* exhibit

In 2004, children from four prominent art organizations located in Indonesia were invited to participate in *The Many Colours of Islam* exhibition project. The Indonesian Muslim children were asked to create their self-portrait and invited to write a personal anecdote about themselves. Over 100 Indonesian children (ages 5-16) enthusiastically participated. This exhibition of children’s artwork and stories thus provides a window into their world: their lives in Indonesia, their values and beliefs as well as their traditions for celebrating Islamic holidays such as Idul Adha and Idul Fitri.

The exhibit illustrates our common humanity while demonstrating the individual and diverse characteristics that make the Islamic culture unique. *The Many Colours of Islam* is available for rental in Canadian Museums and is your chance to begin the conversation and help to create a future that is peaceful for all our children.



Keeping an open mind to working with your local Muslim community, as well as your local teachers and schools, will further encourage engagement, build community and promote tolerance toward Islam.

The Many Colours of our Canadian Mosaic

Returning to Canada's 150th, as we consider programming at our British Columbian museums, historic sites and cultural centres, we must challenge ourselves to ensure these programs take into account opportunities for representation from, and engagement with, a wide range of diverse segments in our mosaic. It is not enough to talk about our willingness to embrace difference - we need to be willing to act.

But why should we care? Why should we take action? Isn't it someone else's responsibility? As Nina Simon,

author of the Participatory Museum and the [Museum 2.0 blogpost](#) writes, "There are many important problems that touch the museum field: building stronger communities, the need for creative play and inspiration...education about global issues. And so on."



Right: Artwork by Nasia, age 14.



Above: Traditional prayer clothes for boys and girls.
Photo Credit: Anissa Paulsen.



Above: Lukman - in the process of creating his self portrait for the exhibit.
Photo Credit: Anissa Paulsen.

Tackling an important question – no matter which one it is – is the only way we will ever change the world and make our province and our country a better, stronger place to live.

Even if your museum does not choose to reach out to this segment of society, or tackle this particular social concern, we should all consider opportunities to create powerful, educational opportunities at our respective museums that will help to truly celebrate our multiculturalism, involve and welcome diverse members of our community at our museums, and celebrate the rich diversity of stories that make up our great Canadian mosaic.

I'll close with a quote from US President Barack Obama while he was visiting Cairo in June 2009:

"If we choose to be bound by the past, we will never move forward. And I want to particularly say this to young people of every faith in every country. You more than anyone have the ability to re-imagine the world, to remake this world.

All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart or whether we commit ourselves to ...a sustained effort to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children and to respect the dignity of all human beings.

It's easier to start wars than to end them. It's easier to blame others than to look inward. It's easier to see what is different about someone than to find the things we share. But we should choose the right path, not just the easy path."

Creating powerful exhibits and programs in our museums to stimulate curiosity, discover similarities, and encourage positive interactions between diverse visitors is not always easy, but it is essential.

Let's work together now to create our legacy for Canada 150. Let's make a commitment to develop programming and exhibits that allow visitors to our museums – particularly children and youth – to leave equipped with new knowledge that enables them to carry on as positive, citizens in our great country today and in the future.

Anissa J. Paulsen is an independent museum consultant. In 2003, Ms Paulsen received a grant from the United States Indonesia Society (USINDO) to travel to Indonesia and conduct research for this exhibition project. Over the past 18 years, she has worked in the museum field in a broad range of positions and institutions including the Smithsonian Institution, California Historical Society, the University of Victoria and most recently as the Director of Exhibits and Visitor Engagement at the Maritime Museum of British Columbia.

