

AEJM Curatorial Education Programme 2014 Amsterdam

Report by Christina Meri, curator Jewish Museum of Greece, Athens

Having attended the AEJM Curatorial Education Programme already three times by then, I was happy to meet again old and new colleagues from other member museums and eager to participate in a programme, which for the first time included in great part also Sephardic objects and textiles.

The curators of the JHM Amsterdam, Julie Marthe Cohen, Mirjam Knotter and Hetty Berg, introduced us to the history of renewing the core exhibition. It was interesting to see how the fact that the space had formerly been an Ashkenazi synagogue complex was avoided to be accentuated in the former exhibition, but played nowadays a leading role in the new concept of the museum's ground floor exhibition. The great variety of objects and the extensive use of multimedia on the first floor level dealing with Jewish life in Amsterdam during the 20th century helps not only the younger generation to approach history, but also to link it to contemporary Dutch society. It persuaded me once again that dealing with contemporary Jewish life in an appropriate way should be an important part of our core or temporary exhibitions.

The following day we presented our assignments on a Sephardic object from our museum's collection. I was curious to see what kind of Sephardic objects - being part of Central and Eastern European collections - the other participants would present. Many of them were single remnants of a once existing local Sephardic community or purchased objects. It became clear that we are all able to discern an Ashkenazi from a non-Ashkenazi object, but that we have gaps in knowledge concerning the differences and similarities between Sephardic, Mizrahi and Maghrebi Judaica objects.

The afternoon – my personal highlight - was devoted to the metal objects and textiles of the Amsterdam Portuguese Synagogue. We were all thrilled with this functioning synagogue complex-museum. During the workshops led by Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek and Mirjam Knotter we were divided into small groups in order to investigate a number of well-chosen objects. I was impressed by the splendour of these Amsterdam Sephardic artefacts, and I clearly realized here that every Sephardic community developed its own more or less unique tradition and style dependant on its locality, history and exegesis of the Jewish law. The cooperation between the participants during all the workshops in general worked out successfully, and our analytic mind was sharpened again during the search of the objects' story and use.

The programme continued on the next day with a lecture by curator Emile Schrijver of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana at the University of Amsterdam, on the history and content of its collection, including the presentation of selected printed books and fascinating manuscripts. During the workshop on provenance research by Julie Marthe Cohen and Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek, we presented objects from our museum's collections with a provenance issue in terms of questionable pre-war ownership. The following discussions revealed many of the controversial points of this topic. For my part, I appreciated to get useful hints, how to trace back the provenance of an artefact or how and where to look for lost Greek objects.

The joint afternoon with Paideia started with an inspiring short speech by Barbara Spectre on Jewish learning culture, revealing by simple means the hidden order in the biblical creation story. All in all, it was a very successful programme, giving the participants a much-needed hands-on instruction in the broad field of Judaica.