

Advanced Curatorial Education Programme Frankfurt 2018

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This year's edition of the Advanced Curatorial Training Programme was organised in conjunction with the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt. As the museum in the Rothschild Palais is currently under refurbishment, the workshops took place in the stores and in the dependence, the Museum Judengasse.

We had a leisurely start on Sunday with Curator Sabine Koessling, who showed us around the archaeological excavations of the five houses on the site of the old ghetto, the Judengasse at the edge of the city centre. I had never seen the previous displays, but was impressed by how the recent reinterpretation of the site has put this astonishing archaeological site in the context of its discovery in the 1980s and the ensuing political controversy. I particularly liked the cylindrical showcases that allowed a view from all sides and admired some of the sophisticated but fun interactives for children (of which I might nick a couple). This was followed by presentations from the participants of items from Frankfurt and Hesse held in their own collections, a very useful exercise as it helps to see parallels in our respective collections, find out about other collections for loans and learn from each other. Later we had a chance to visit the abandoned Jewish cemetery and the memorial on and around the site of the former Boerneplatz Synagogue, both adjacent to the museum.

After that first day, the onus was on us participants, curators from Jewish museums all over Europe, to expand our research skills and knowledge in relation to Judaica while studying the collection of the Jewish Museum Frankfurt. In workshops led by course leader Dr Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek and hosted by the tireless Dr Eva Atlan, Curator at the JM Frankfurt, we were asked, in small groups, to study chanukiot, spice boxes and a few other items such as Torah pointers. We had to work out makers, production dates and materials and identify any possible reproductions and historical forgeries. This is not an easy task, especially under time pressure, but it really made us discuss intensively and we all benefited from each other's knowledge to ask the right questions and to think about the sources required to find relevant answers. As a relative newcomer (this was my second workshop) once again I realised mostly where my gaps are, but I am slowly getting familiar with the methodological approach as well as with some of the styles and materials used to produce these items.

One of the highlights of the week was the visit to the Weygang Museum in Oehringen, where we learnt about the production of pewter Judaica in past and present. It was fascinating to learn that the founder and former owner of the firm August Weygang reproduced what he believed to be historical Judaica items in the early 20th century and which might turn out to have been more modern than formerly believed. In conversation with the current pewterer in residence and his wife we learnt how durable pewter is and how difficult to date when stored at the right temperature. We also learnt about reproduction techniques and the time it takes to produce some of these items. Back in Frankfurt we held a couple of workshops led by Michal Friedlander from the Jewish Museum Berlin focusing on objects from Posen and Hanau. Once more we concentrated on the production process and on how to distinguish between copies of historical artefacts, which might be well be historical themselves, and originals. This material knowledge is incredibly useful to identify and date items and something most of us curators have a rather limited knowledge of.

On the last day we visited a memorial to the Shoah based within the European Central Bank housed on the site of the former market hall from where thousands of Jews from Frankfurt were deported to the camps. It was a rather peculiar experience as the bank is heavily secured and the memorial site therefore extremely inaccessible, which defeats the purpose of the memorial and appears to be a depressing reflection of the value of money versus historical memory in today's society. The workshops were finished off with a discussion, in the presence of Museum Director Dr Mirjam Wenzel, the two memorial sites we had visited and how we thought they worked or did not work and what might help them reach a wider audience.

Overall, this was an intense, but highly pleasurable week (did I mention evening drinks along the Main on these mild early summer evenings?) that hugely expanded my still rather limited knowledge. It was good to study Judaica this time in the context of their production methods, the art market and the collecting history of museums. It was yet another a great opportunity to take a time out from the everyday and see the bigger picture of Jewish ritual items in Europe, learn about various European collections, including improving the knowledge of our own collections, increase our research skills and, last but not least, network with a bunch of enthusiastic and fabulous women.

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