

AEJM Advanced Curatorial Education Programme in London

Report by Sara Tas, Junior Curator Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam

In February 2015 the AEJM Advanced Curatorial Education Programme (A-CEP) was hosted by the Jewish Museum London. During this intense learning week we gained great insight into the collection and history of this museum, and through that also into the interpretation and analysis of our own collections back home.

It was a great pleasure to meet international colleagues from different cultural backgrounds and exchange ideas, interpretations and detailed knowledge about objects, exhibitions and museum policies. All collections of Jewish museums have objects with various geographical origins and are often mixtures of different cultural influences, just as cultural diversity is inherent to Jewish history itself.

The programme started with PechaKucha presentations by each of us on our own institutions and the way we present our Judaica collections. These introductory presentations are a great way to get to know the other Jewish museums and to get an idea of each other's backgrounds and perspectives. The PechaKucha model proved to be a good concept for a dynamic kick-off.

The next day we analysed the Judaica presentation of the Jewish Museum London; a core exhibition that the museum is planning to renew in the near future. Whereas we noticed that the sacred atmosphere the visitors sense when entering this intimate exhibition space is highly appreciated by them, we all agreed that on an informative level there remains much to be improved.

We got to know the museum collection in more detail through a lecture by former director Edgar Samuel on Anglo-Jewish 17th and 18th century silver. This was followed by a workshop on the Judaica collection by Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek and the next day by a lecture on the evolution of the collection by curator Joanne Rosenthal.

After the ceremonial silver we continued with workshops on textiles, specifically wimples: Torah binders that, in the Ashkenazy tradition, are made after a brit milah from the little boys swaddle cloth. We studied both the wimples of the Jewish Museum as well as those of the Czech Memorial Scrolls Trust, where 1600 scrolls that were saved from Czechoslovakia are being kept and restored, many of which are now on permanent loan to communities all over the world.

At our excursion to the V&A Museum a team of curators and conservators showed us a beautiful 17th century Sephardic Torah mantle that will soon be incorporated in the permanent exhibition about European trade history. The mantle was originally made for the inauguration of the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam in 1675. The ark of this synagogue is embroidered on the textile. The mantle probably came to London with the many Sephardic Jews that went to Great Britain from Amsterdam.

The significance of this migration route and the importance of the Dutch Sephardic tradition for the London community became even clearer to me when visiting the Bevis Mark Synagogue the next day. I was struck by the similarity of this synagogue to the one in Amsterdam. It felt like a replica, only smaller in size. Maurice Bitton, curator of the synagogue, explained to us that the architect was indeed told to copy the architecture of the Portuguese synagogue of Amsterdam, built only a few decades earlier. The community that had recently migrated from Amsterdam wanted to be reminded of their home community.

On the last day of the programme we studied the social history collection of the Jewish Museum and the installation of the historical Mikvah in the museums entrance area.

Overall the curatorial education programme gave great insight into the museum practice of the Jewish Museum London, provided the opportunity for exchange with colleagues and lastly enabled me to look at our own collection with a better understanding.