



The Shap Award 2008: St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, Glasgow

Harry Dunlop

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The transliteration of specialist terms and the opinions expressed in this article are those of the writer, not of the Shap Working Party.

ABOUT THE AWARD

Shap makes an annual award to the producers of the highest quality resources in any media which help to further Shap's aims. This year's Shap Award was awarded to the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art for its contribution to education about religion and spirituality at all levels. The Museum has an extensive education programme, designed to engender a critical and reflective approach to the reality of religious pluralism, as Harry Dunlop, its curator, explains below.

Religion is a topic many museum professionals would rather avoid for fear of offending or 'getting it wrong'. However, in order to understand today's society, make connections with the wider world and, indeed, understand something of the dynamics of human culture we need to look at religion by exploring the vast collections of material culture museums have within their collections. St Mungo Museum in Glasgow tries to do just this.

The museum opened in April 1993 and is housed in a building originally built as a visitor centre for the neighbouring medieval cathedral. The space is divided into four principal exhibition areas: the Gallery of Religious Art, the Gallery of Religious Life, the Scottish Gallery and a temporary exhibition space. The museum also features Britain's first permanent Zen garden, located in an enclosed courtyard in the shadow of the cathedral. There is also a bookshop and teashop.

The museum aims to foster mutual understanding and respect between people of different faiths and of none, and since opening has worked with inter-faith groups encouraging and facilitating dialogue and debate between the religious traditions found in Glasgow. Displays cover various aspects of religious life, from the 'classical' works of art of the different traditions to the more popular and ephemeral artefacts, especially relating to rites of passage and festivals, and include audio and video material of the contemporary religious life of Glasgow. Through both our exhibition and public programmes we have tried to explore some of the more difficult areas of religion such as religion and violence, religion and racism and religious sectarianism – a subject very close to home. Our Faith to Faith adult education programme, initially set up following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to support an exhibition of photographs of the Islamic world, now covers broader current religious affairs.

Formal Education



An extensive formal education programme is offered by our Learning and Access team and on average 8 schools groups visit the museum each week, Monday to Thursday. We offer a broad range of formal education sessions for schools ranging from 'Discover World Religions' to 'Bigot Busters'.

In the Discover World Religions sessions pupils are introduced to world religions and objects of faith. Each workshop can cover one or two of the following: Buddhism, Chinese Beliefs, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. These workshops include looking at and handling objects, discussion sessions and a teaching in the Galleries element. Questions from the participating students are encouraged throughout these sessions to ensure they grasp the meanings behind the museum objects. Our Learning Assistants phone each school before they come along to ask what they want to get from the session so that they can tailor the workshop to the group's specific needs.

The museum offers some issue-based workshops which tackle aspects of Glaswegian and Scottish society: 'Citizenship', 'Bigot Busters' and 'Towards Understanding Slavery'. These sessions also include looking at and handling objects and teaching in the Gallery spaces but have more focus on the discussion aspect. Pupils are encouraged to question what is being presented to them and to put forward their own thoughts and opinions on the issues being looked at; this approach feeds directly into the Curriculum for Excellence, the programme of work that is reviewing the current curriculum in Scotland. It aims to provide:

- more freedom for teachers;
- greater choice and opportunity for pupils; and
- a single coherent curriculum for all children and young people aged 3-18.

The main outcomes for the Curriculum for Excellence are:

- successful learners;
- confident individuals;
- responsible citizens; and
- effective contributors.

St Mungo Museum can really contribute to the Curriculum for Excellence as many of its aims fit very well with the aims and practices of our workshops. For example, our Citizenship Workshop explores multi-faith Scotland, sectarianism, racism, territorialism and the arrival of new communities in Scotland, which fits directly with the 'responsible citizens' part of the Curriculum for Excellence. The way that we encourage the pupils to engage with these themes, by asking them to contribute their own thoughts, feelings and opinions, fits with the 'effective contributors' outcome.

Informal Education

The Informal Education programme at the museums includes 'Faith to Faith' which is targeted at an adult audience. This is a series of presentations or debates which focus on themes either suggested by our audience or relating to our temporary exhibitions, and covers current religious affairs including controversial topics associated with morality and ethics. Recent themes have been: 'Islam – the Sunni and Shia divide'; 'Secularism'; 'Religion and the Environment'; and 'Spiritualism'. These sessions give people the opportunity to listen to different opinions on these themes and discuss them as a group. It also provides a space for people of different faiths and of none to come together and to promote mutual understanding and respect.

See <http://www.glasgowmuseums.com/venue/index.cfm?venueid=13>