

# Museums, Women, and Empowerment

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Early museums in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region began in Ottoman Turkey. They developed in the larger cultural centres of Cairo, Baghdad, Jerusalem, and Beirut in the early twentieth century and proliferated after the 1980's. At first, these museums were bastions of male power containing objects representative of male craftsmanship and significance—attracting mainly a male audience. The mid-twentieth century saw a marked change in the philosophy, audience, and contents of museums as more ethnographic museums were founded, displaying objects made by and for women. Undoubtedly, this change, along with the economic situation and increased educational opportunities, played an important part in attracting women to museum work. Indeed a high percentage of women work in MENA museums. In Morocco for instance, 20 of the 29 museums are curated or administered by women and four were founded by women.

How does this feminization of the cultural workforce impact women's equality? With the emergence of women in professional organizations and in the workforce as government employees in the cultural arena, museums can be used as agents for women's empowerment in several ways. Women can use their newly appointed positions as curators, volunteers, administrators, and founders to develop their museums into institutions that represent women equitably, and help to educate, employ, and prepare women for the changing world.

## From global to local

Museums can be effective agents of women's change. Firstly, women in patriarchal societies can use their positions in museums to influence change through participation in international museum organizations, such as the International Council of Museums, and secondly, by reevaluating their local museum programmes to readdress the image and level of participation of women. Further, they can become instruments for the promotion of women's issues through creating cooperative liaisons with existing women's organizations—perhaps even collaborating in the development of exhibitions and publications. Museum facilities represent safe meeting places where both men and women of different social backgrounds can share the same space and view culturally important objects and images together. The museum experience encourages the sharing

**The author in a display of men at leisure, Heritage Museum, University of Jordan**



PHOTO BY CAROL MALT, 2004

**Museums are a public space within the public sphere. Yet they also embody many aspects of the private sphere. This duality, (or perhaps neutrality), makes them appropriate as change-agents in the segregated arena of Muslim society. Museums belong to a universal and growing movement that societies can use to develop a common voice about social concepts such as those relating to women's equality.<sup>1</sup>**

of ideas. As such, museums can be conceptualized as incubators of democracy that promote both intellectual and social interaction across gender and social divides.

To become agents of change and really make a difference, those who administer museums need to rethink, redirect, reuse, and reinvent their facilities, exhibitions, programmes, and philosophies.

By using their collections, their exhibitions, their publications, and trained personnel, they can develop programmes that project a more inclusive, democratic, and positive image of women and develop relevant programmes that address the problems women face in their private, familial, and economic lives. Examples of some existing programmes include vocational training and literacy classes, the sale of artistic products, and exhibitions that dispel stereotyping and subservience of women.

## "Typical" exhibitions

Many MENA ethnographic and history museums contain exhibits described as the "typical" environments of men and women. For instance, at the National Heritage Museum and the Salt Folklore Museum, both in Jordan, the women's display includes women at work cooking, washing, grinding, and sewing while the men's display depicts them at leisure lounging, smoking, and drinking coffee. At the Ethnographic Museum of Tetouan, Morocco, however, the new curator replaced the old "typical" display of a woman seated on the floor doing domestic work with one of a well-dressed woman in her home, seated at a table, and taking refreshment. What messages do these "typical" exhibitions give to their audiences? Where is the balance between continuity of heritage and subservient stereotyping?

## Museums as educators

Museums, as public spaces, offer appropriate places for educational programming. Museums constitute ideal spaces for adult literacy classes. These classes might incorporate the museum's collection in its teaching curriculum so that students learn about their history through the display of objects while learning to read. Literacy classes are being offered at the American Legation Museum in Tangier. The Museum of the Religion and Spiritual Heritage of the North of Morocco in Tetouan, now under development, offers an example of how museums can be used for education and women's empowerment. The Museum will contain a library with legal and religious texts that will be available to a wide audience as well as to feminist scholars interested in the role of women in Islam. Another recent Moroccan initiative is the Museum of the Middle Atlas in Azrou; a crossroads for travelers where there is a rich tradition of artistic production in the area—particularly in weaving. Women who have participated in the development process will be served economically by the sale of their rugs and through training opportunities at this new site.

Museums in the MENA region area are increasingly playing ever-new education functions, testifying to their role in cultural production. Museums clearly hold great potential to serve their audiences in new ways and to help promote women's empowerment through inventive and comprehensive use of their facilities and programmes.

## Note

1. A longer version of this paper was presented at the workshop "Women's Activism and the Public Sphere: Local/Global Linkages" at the 2005 Sixth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting in Montecatini, Italy.

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