

# الاختلاف Vielfalt التنوع Diversity

By Mohamad Moutaz Alshaieb

## Diversity in the museum between the West and East

Diversity is a very rich word even though it consists of nine letters, it provides a comprehensive concept across the many aspects of museum work. But when we talk about promoting diversity within a museum setting, what do we mean?

The concept of cultural diversity can be understood through the UNESCO definition of the plurality and uniqueness of the identities of societies and groups within them, which constitute humanity. While diversity is about pluralism, inclusivity means welcoming and valuing those with different identities to ensure social cohesion and harmonious interaction.<sup>1</sup>

From the point of view of European museums, there are many questions related to diversity in the museum; “Who is being represented and whose voices are we hearing? What stories are they telling? And whenever we ask who is being included in the narrative, there is always the consideration of who is being excluded or overlooked.”<sup>2</sup>

But although museums frequently speak about diversity how much is it embedded in their institutional structures, for example, a study in 2015 about the museums in the USA showed that of 30,000 employees across 322 US museums, 84% were white. In addressing diversity, museums

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<sup>1</sup> Bobik, Koltsida & Legebeke 2022: Curatorial and Programming Activities to Drive Cultural Participation: A Museum to Relate, Represent and Self-identify, <https://translate.google.com/?sl=en&tl=ar&text=Curatorial%20and%20Programming%20Activities%20to%20Drive%20Cultural%20Participation%3A%20A%20Museum%20to%20Relate%2C%20Represent%20and%20Self-identify&op=translate>.

<sup>2</sup> Charr 2020: What can Museums teach us about diversity? <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-can-museums-teach-us-about-diversity/>.

today must explore this in the context of representation in exhibitions, the audiences they are catering to, but also their workforce.<sup>3</sup>

These issues are complex and controversial in a progressive way that promotes diversity, but museums need to take these three topics of representation, audiences, and workforce into consideration should they wish to carry the banner of diversity.<sup>4</sup>

A museum's identity is shaped by the diversity, of its collections, staff, visitors, and narratives of the varied human work through time, whether since ancient times or even modern history. Regardless of its location, the museum remains a fertile space to explore the topic and meaning of diversity. This topic of diversity has paradoxically remained dominated by Anglophone definitions and in addressing the relevance of the concept within museums in the MENA region (منطقة الشرق الأوسط) it is important to explore how Arabic concepts of diversity can expand our understanding of this term.

## Diversity in the Arabic language

Al-Tānāw' = التنوع, Al-'ikhtilaf = الاختلاف

In Arabic, the word diversity has two different aspects.

Al-Tānāw' (التنوع) describes the positive side of diversity. We know inwardly that our world is based on diversity, there are various types of people, ethnicities, animals, plants, colours, and geographical terrain.

However, when Al-'ikhtilaf (الاختلاف) describes the negative or dark side of diversity. Here diversity means y). different from me, that you are not belonging to my comfort

<sup>3</sup> Charr 2020: What can Museums teach us about diversity? <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-can-museums-teach-us-about-diversity/>.

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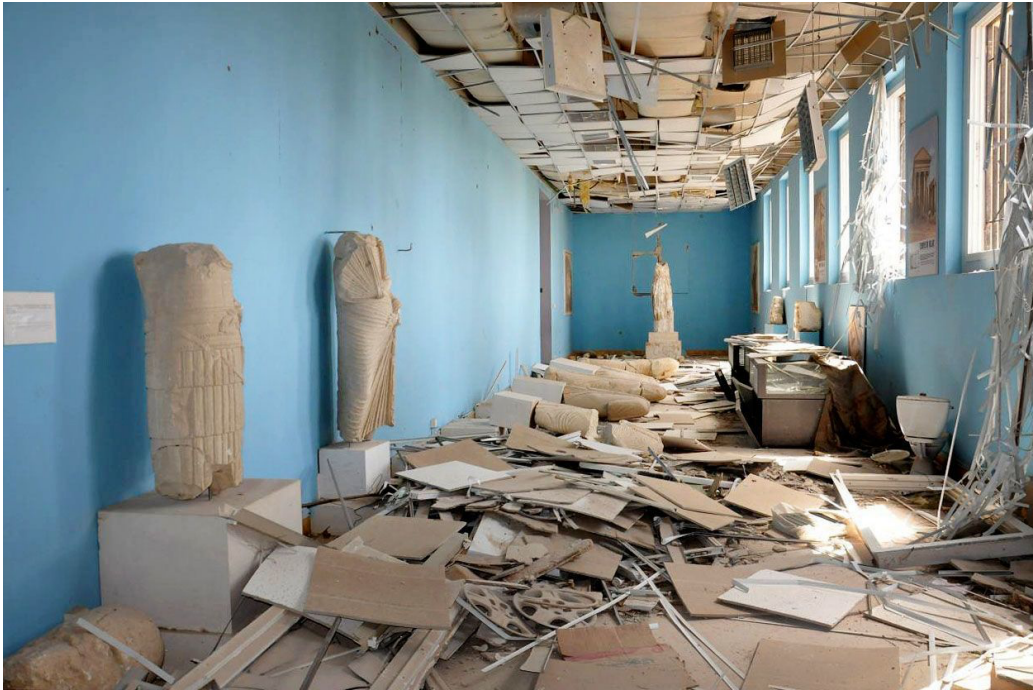
zone. this side of diversity will create a conflict to prove the rightness of each side or enhance the separation between each side within the community.

I am Syrian and the crisis in Syria over the past eleven years has been sufficient to reveal the true face of diverse meanings in my country. Concerning the concept of negative difference (الاختلاف السلبي), this was evident when the Syrian museums and their holdings were subjected to theft and destruction at the hands of religious extremists under the pretext that these archaeological holdings are pagan and oppose the teachings of the Islamic religion. The most prominent example of this is what happened in the city of Palmyra, which dates back to the Roman period. This site is registered on the World Heritage List and was attacked by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in 2015. They destroyed the temple of Bel and Baal-Shamin (Fig. 1), the tower cemeteries, the façade of the Roman theater, the faces of busts and human sculptures, and parts of the museum. (Fig. 2)



*Figure 1. The destruction of the Baal-Shamin temple by ISIS in 2015.*

*<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/isis-destruction-of-palmyra-syria-heart-been-ripped-out-of-the-city>*



*Figure 2. Destroyed statues are seen inside the damaged Palmyra Museum.  
<https://www.heraldnet.com/news/details-emerge-of-isis-destruction-at-palmyra/>*

In contrast and less reported in European media outlets, the best example of positive diversity (التنوع الإيجابي) was the local Muslim community and employees in the area of Mā'rat al-NÜ'man (معرة النعمان) in northern Syria. They made every effort to preserve the famous mosaic museum in the Middle East which has mosaics dating back to the Roman and Byzantine periods, which depict the polytheism of the Greek and Roman tradition as well as Christianity (Fig. 3). This is what the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums of Syria was and still is aiming for in its action plan during this crisis to save the Syrian heritage. By coordinating between the government and the local communities in the various Syrian lands to protect our diverse heritage from prehistoric times until today.



Figure 3. The cooperation between the employees and local community to protect and preserve the mosaics of Mā'rat al-Nu'man museum and the museum itself. <https://syriansforheritage.org/?p=3226&Lang=ar>

## The magic of archaeological excavation

Twelve years ago I took part in my first archaeological excavation in my city of Damascus. It was the beginning of my journey as a young archaeology student at the university who had in his head a certain mental stereotype that all the people in front of him must be the same thinking in the same patterns that he has.

However, when I arrived at the excavation site, I saw more than twenty-five people from different Syrian governorates, with different ages, degrees of education, experiences, and cultural backgrounds, the puritanical, the liberal, the moderate, the shy, the outgoing, the strong and the weak. This was the first real social shock that confused me a lot in the first three days (Fig. 4).

Nevertheless, this shock led to the broadening of my horizons of knowledge and understanding of the meaning of diversity in life. I realised that we have to work together and be one hand (يد واحدة) no matter how different we differ in all the details of our lives. This is what I called the magic of archaeological excavation. After that, in every excavation I participated in, I began to feel how the folds of my brain expanded to receive many new ideas and feed on the knowledge that I gained from the opinions. This is encapsulated in the concept and materiality of the mosaic, which is based on the diversity and differences between its *tesserae*, colours, and decoration.



Figure 4. The Excavation team in the site of Bustān Sukkār (بستان سكر), Old Damascus 2010.

## Mosaic and Diversity/ الفسيفساء والتنوع

If we think of mosaic art, we find in many museums around the world we find a perfect metaphor for diversity. Diversity means inclusivity, mingling, and close communication, ultimately creating an image that represents everyone. This is how the mosaic panel consists of *tesserae*<sup>5</sup> of different types, materials, colours, and sizes. The paving of these various *tesserae* to form a mosaic represents many cultural, religious, educational, or belief connotations and is an obvious expression of the diversity of our ancestors.

I chose the mosaic field after I realized the importance of diversity in an archaeological excavation team. The concept of diversity accompanied me and started to grow more since I sat on the first mosaic panel in the restoration laboratory in Damascus of DGAM (The General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums of Syria) in 2013.

Syrian society has been formed and developed because of the difference and diversity in it. Syria's narrative is shaped by the diversity of the people who have to live there across Millenia.

Syria and Mesopotamia are the locations of the emergence of the first civilizations in the world. Kingdoms, cities, and peoples have successively lived on this land, which enriched the region with its cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. Since the establishment of the Sumerian state in the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, and the successive states and kingdoms after that, such as the Babylonians, Assyrians, and Phoenicians. During the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, the ancient Greeks arrived, and they established many of the major Syrian cities like Apamea and Antioch. After that, the Romans took

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<sup>5</sup> Mosaic cubes called *tesserae*; it is derived from the Greek language.

control of Syria at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC until the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, when a great change took place in the religion of the Roman Empire and its transition from paganism to Christianity, and this continued until the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD when the Muslim Calipha entered Damascus and took control of it. Consequently, Syria in general contains a large variety of mosaic pavements from different historical eras, which possess multiple identities that ultimately constitute the unified identity of Syrian society (Fig. 5).

These civilisations are united and connected through the medium of mosaics. One of the earliest instances of mosaic art in Syria is a panel made of inlaid mother of pearl and ivory depicting the inhabitants of Mari in front of a goddess, from Mari (now Tell Hariri) archeological site, Syria, 3rd millennium BC (Fig. 6). This continuity can be seen in how the Muslims of Damascus have depicted the heaven on mosaics in the Umayyad Mosque (705 – 715 AD), as palaces surrounded by trees with a river running in front of them. There is another theory that says that this scene is representing Damascus itself at that time. (Fig. 7)





*Figure 5. A group of Mosaics from Syria. (Upper left) from a mosaic floor from the Assyrian palace, Tel Ahmar 9<sup>th</sup> century BC. (Upper-right) The mosaic of Tethys the sea goddess, Philippopolis 4<sup>th</sup> AD. (Bottom-left) a portion of a large mosaic has a depiction of a peacock as a symbol of the Resurrection and the eternal life of Christ, Hamah province 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. (Bottom-right) a geometric mosaic floor from Azem palace in Damascus, Ottoman period 18<sup>th</sup> AD.*



*Figure 6. Inlaid mother of pearl and ivory depicting inhabitants of Mari in front of a goddess, from Mari, Syria. G. Dagli Orti /© NPL - DeA Picture Library / Bridgeman Images.*



Figure 7. Mosaic, Great Mosque of Damascus, 8th century (photo: American rugbier, CC BY-SA 2.0)  
<https://smarthistory.org/mosque-damascus/>

In this video, you can see my work on a mosaic from the ancient city of *Philippopolis*, modern days "Shahba" in Al-Swieda province in the south of Syria. This was a period during the time of the Syrian emperor Philip the Arab who ruled Rome between 244-249 AD he made this city a mini version of Rome. This mosaic was detached from its original site in the 1970s and put in storage. At the beginning of 2014, we started to work on this cloudy mosaic, because we didn't have any documents talking about the scene or the details of this mosaic, just one paper where it was in the original site. In this video, we highlighted the main steps of our project.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGQxtBenVyY&feature=youtu.be>

## SAWA and diversity

During my fieldwork excavating and restoring mosaics for many years, my understanding of diversity developed. But participating in SAWA - سوا 2022 helped to expand and develop it. Nine months of discussions and exchange of experiences in the field of museum studies in Sharjah and Berlin provided me with a foundation to understand the concept of diversity and inclusiveness. We can apply these concepts not only inside the museum walls but also in our daily lives. Diversity is a vital term rich in its meanings and the tools it possesses can be employed to serve our societies to satisfy their various cultural, religious, intellectual, and other backgrounds.

In the Emirate of Sharjah, I learned a new meaning about this concept of diversity, where sixteen museums were working to expand and develop the concept of the museum. The museum is not only for artifacts dating back to ancient historical times. As a person who loves nature and plants, the natural museum, or the nature reserve in the city of Kalba (Khor Kalba Reserve and Mangrove forests) was one of the places that made me expand my understanding of the concept of museum diversity. This was especially true regarding what we can offer to all groups of society to raise the level of awareness towards our natural wealth that benefits the earth on which we live. After that, I found explored the concept of diversity in the city of Berlin, where there are many museums and temporary exhibitions that deal with people arriving as refugees in Germany. These people collided with many obstacles due to intellectual, cultural, and religious differences for many years until they merged and formed what is now Berlin with all its contradictions and harmony. I

experienced this most acutely at Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum. (Fig. 8)



*Figure 8. (Left) A picture from Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg Museum shows a demonstration against new immigration laws, in 1990, Berlin, Germany (Right) The leaves of Mangrove trees and how the salt appears on them/ The tree feeds on seawater, then it performs a filtration process, takes sweet water, and subtracts salt on its leaves. Sharjah, UAE. (Taken by the author 2022)*

## Conclusion

Museums as institutions enjoy a position of trust in society and play a role in supporting the community by creating a healthy environment suitable for positive change. Although the challenges of inclusion, integration, diversity, and the difficulty of penetrating complex social issues do not confront museums only, they represent excellent importance for museums, based on the position of social responsibility and the position that museums enjoy in the international community. They strongly stimulated the debate about the possibilities for museums

to play a greater role in creating an appropriate climate to support and improve the community's relationship with its museums and promote the positive diversity concept, which promises a better future.

The difference between human beings' similarities and diversity is the richness of life, and not, as some see, that difference as a door to rivalry. When various communities see themselves represented in the museum, it increases public trust and improves the image of the institution in the public domain. As a result, museums with a diverse workforce are better positioned to understand, communicate with, and engage diverse audiences.

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