



REFLECTIONS ON A 10-YEAR JOURNEY

A stylized map of Europe and the Middle East, rendered in a light blue color. The map shows the outlines of the continents and major landmasses. Two specific locations are marked with blue dots and labeled: Berlin in Germany and Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates.

Berlin

Sharjah

Ten years have passed since the SAWA Museum Studies Program came to life. Ten years of exchange, collaboration, knowledge sharing, and a never-ending learning process. As the name indicates (in Arabic, سوا means together), SAWA brought together people who were eager to learn from each other, who opened up about their personal experiences working in the museum field, and who all shared the aim of improving their institutions. There was a spark at SAWA—the *SAWA spirit*—that always ignited when participants came together, so the study programme became an emotional and personal journey for everyone involved.

This publication collects memories from the past ten years of this unique programme while emphasising the main takeaways and reflecting on cultural learning now and in the future. Key contributors share insights into SAWA's evolution and holistic approach to museum practice.

Within the space of a decade, SAWA transformed from a purely onsite programme to a digital hybrid with monthly online meetings held over an entire year. Openness to change and flexibility have always been core values at SAWA. These values helped us cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and adapt to shifting financing structures. None of it would have been possible without the huge support of the Sharjah Museum Authority, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, HTW Berlin, the Goethe Institute Gulf Region, the Volkswagen Stiftung and the German Federal Foreign Office. SAWA never suffered from the 'we've always done it that way' mentality that many museum professionals face at their institutions. It is a quality roundly appreciated by the participants, who invariably influence how the programme takes shape each year. It is this versatility, together with an appreciation of the unique personalities and qualities each individual brings to the programme, that makes SAWA special. We hope it serves as an inspiration for international museum professionals to help foster the exchange and cooperation both our museums—and our societies—need.

THE SAWA ***MUSEUM STUDIES PROGRAM***

Reflections on a 10-Year Journey

Berlin and Sharjah
2024

First published for the conference *SAWA Journey: a Decade of Cross-Cultural Museum Learning*.

November 4-5, 2024, in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates.
Organised by the *Sharjah Museums Authority*.

This publication contains a collection of testimonials marking the ten-year anniversary of the beginning of the SAWA cooperation between the Sharjah Museum Authority, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, the Goethe-Institut Gulf Region, and the HTW Berlin University of Applied Sciences.

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This publication was made possible through generous funding from the German Federal Foreign Office.

The SAWA Museum Studies Program has been funded by
The Sharjah Museum Authority 2014-24, the Volkswagen Foundation
2017-21, the German Federal Foreign Office 2021-24

with support from
the Goethe Institut Gulf Region 2014-24, the HTW Berlin University of
Applied Sciences 2015-24, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 2015-24



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FOREWORD

Manal Ataya

Manal Ataya is Advisor for Museums to His Highness Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, Ruler of Sharjah since 2023, providing support and expertise in strategic planning, cultural policy making, and the development of new museum projects. She served as Deputy Director, then Director General of the Sharjah Museums Authority from 2006-23. Manal Ataya was admitted to the Order of Arts and Letters by the Republic of France in 2018 and received the Order of Merit from the Federal Republic of Germany in 2022 in recognition of her significant contributions to culture. She is a graduate of both Hamilton College (2001) and Harvard University (2004).

Over a decade ago now, a group of new acquaintances came together in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates to brainstorm and explore how to develop a project. This new project would build on a recent successful exhibition collaboration with the State Museums of Berlin at the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization. It was from this handful of individuals discussing ideas and identifying gaps in the museums sector, combined with genuine passion for our work in culture, that the concept for a SAWA Museum Academy was born. This initiative would later become the SAWA Museum Studies Program.

Over the years, the programme grew in myriad ways but the fundamental mission remained the same: bringing together students and young professionals in the cultural sector, particularly in museums, and fostering a new generation of leaders equipped to navigate the complexities of an increasingly multicultural world. This programme offered participants the unique opportunity to learn from diverse perspectives, experience new cultural contexts, and develop crucial leadership skills for a sector dedicated to preserving and interpreting the shared heritage of humanity. By focusing on multicultural learning and exploring cross-cultural differences and similarities, SAWA successfully enriched its participants professionally and personally while contributing to its broader goals of cultural diplomacy and global understanding.

The SAWA Museum Studies Program, a joint initiative of the Sharjah Museums Authority (SMA), the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, the Goethe-Institut Gulf Region, and the University of Applied Sciences Berlin (HTW), was designed from its inception to bring together students and young professionals from the Middle East, North Africa, and Germany and serve as a platform for intercultural exchange and professional development in the field of museum studies. By bringing together participants from different cultural backgrounds, this programme would facilitate the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and experiences informed by diverse cultural lenses.





Multicultural learning within SAWA encourages participants to move outside their cultural comfort zones and to engage with new perspectives. This engagement is not merely about acquiring knowledge but about developing empathy and understanding toward cultures that are different from one's own. In the context of museum studies, this means learning to interpret and present cultural artefacts and narratives in ways that are sensitive to and inclusive of diverse audiences. These skills are strengthened in practice, with participants taking part in workshops, seminars, and practical experiences in the UAE and Germany. Here, they learn how museums in different regions approach issues such as cultural representation, content creation, and education. This comparative learning process helps participants develop a more nuanced understanding of the global museum landscape and equips them with the necessary skills to work effectively in diverse cultural settings.

One of the key outcomes of such cross-cultural exploration is the ability to identify common ground between different cultural narratives. This is particularly important in a world where cultural differences are often emphasised at the expense of shared human experiences. By focusing on similarities as well as differences, programmes such as SAWA can help bridge cultural divides and promote a more inclusive approach to museum work and community participation.

In addition to fostering multicultural learning and cross-cultural understanding, SAWA plays a key role in developing leadership skills among participants. The cultural sector, and museums in particular, require leaders who are not only knowledgeable about their field but also capable of navigating the evolving museum landscape and the public's growing expectations with regard to inclusivity, transparency, involvement, and innovation. Leadership in the cultural sector involves more than just managing institutions; it requires the ability to inspire and engage diverse audiences, to advocate for the importance of cultural heritage, and to lead initiatives that promote social responsibility and social cohesion.





SAWA participants doing a World café in Berlin
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Furthermore, by working alongside peers from different cultural backgrounds, participants learn how to lead in multicultural settings. This is an invaluable skill in a sector where collaboration and cooperation with international partners is essential. The ability to lead with cultural sensitivity and awareness is not only beneficial for participants' professional development but also for the relevance of the institutions they will go on to lead.

By promoting intercultural exchange and professional development, programmes like SAWA help ensure that museums continue to fulfil this role in a way that is both powerful and responsive to the needs of a diverse global audience. Moreover, by creating networks of young professionals who are committed to cross-cultural understanding, these programmes lay the groundwork for future collaborations and partnerships that further the goals of cultural diplomacy.

Touring Museum Island in Berlin

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The SAWA Museum Studies Program stands as a testament to the value of such programmes, offering a model for how intercultural fellowship and mentorship provide once-in-a-lifetime learning opportunities and thereby contribute to a more inclusive, inspired, and resilient sector. I am proud to have been part of the establishment of this programme alongside Dr Gabriele Landwehr, Dr Stefan Weber, Dr Ulrike Al Khamis, and Aisha Deemas. We are grateful to all our dear friends in Berlin, including Dr Susan Kamel, Gundula Avenarius, and our wonderful colleagues at SMA, for their valuable contribution to coordinating and delivering various aspects of the programme. Finally, we express our immense gratitude to the vision of His Highness Sheikh Dr Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, the Ruler of Sharjah, for his unwavering support, which allows us to create meaningful, lifelong experiences and societal impact.





SAWA, SAWA. GEMEINSAM. TOGETHER.

— *Stefan Weber*

Stefan Weber is Director of the Museum of Islamic Art at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, Germany. He has published widely on Middle Eastern heritages (seven books, over 60 articles). Dr Weber is an international board member of several museums and the Congress of Turkish Art, a corresponding member of the German Archaeological Institute, a member of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and he belongs to several other relevant organisations. He is currently organising the reconceptualisation of the Museum of Islamic Art/Pergamon Museum in Berlin, which explores new ground in researching and communicating the legacy of art, architecture, and archaeology of the Middle East and neighbouring areas under Muslim rule.

Ten years ago, we embarked upon a shared journey that took us to new shores. Thanks to a collective vision and mutual trust, we—the Goethe Institute and the Museum of Islamic Art of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—developed and initiated a plan together with the inspiring Manal Ataya, the then Director General of the Sharjah Museums Authority. Our aim was to create a summer school that would serve as a museum training programme, bringing together young talent at museums in the MENA region and Germany for a multi-perspective learning experience.

Why is this type of international cooperation important? Professional and personal exchange is a matter of course at scientific institutions and museums. Knowledge develops in networks. We all have been learning from our networks for decades. I broadened my own horizons significantly and decisively by connecting with others through scholarships, summer schools, and exchange programmes while at university. In these types of situations, we learn from each other without noticing it, we change, and we begin to think in larger networks and communities. Many careers in museums and universities would have been unthinkable without such experiences. But not everyone can travel just anywhere, and passports and material resources often represent insurmountable hurdles. Opportunities are distributed unevenly, but demand is similar everywhere—that is to say, considerable—particularly in the MENA region. New museums have been created, but specialist training is not available everywhere.

So why not try it together—sawa, sawa, eye to eye, and as equal partners? It's a win-win situation. Thanks to the great commitment of Aisha Rashed Deemas, Susan Kamel, Gundula Avenarius, and numerous other partners, we have developed a successful, award-winning model that is beloved by its graduates. The best testimony to that success is when young museum professionals bring the ideas they learned at SAWA to bear in their home institutions. Thank you for that!

STATEMENTS BY SAWA ALUMNI

Khawla Alshuweihi, 2022

“Great integrations.

The experience was rich with cultural exchange and practical museum practices focusing on visitor engagement and needs.”

NATIONALITY Emirati | RESIDENCE United Arab Emirates

PLACE OF WORK & ROLE Sharjah Museums Authority, Administration



Moutaz Alshaieb, 2022

“Diversity in our world is the basic foundation for the continuity of life on our planet. Working on the term ‘diversity’ during the SAWA programme was very important and represented a turning point in my personal and professional life. *My concept of life has become broader and more comprehensive, and this has given me many new ideas that could develop my work in the coming years.* I am very grateful for this programme, which developed my intellectual skills and expanded my outlook on the world.”

NATIONALITY Syrian | RESIDENCE Munich

PLACE OF WORK & ROLE PhD in Archaeology - Final year

Viola Attallah, 2023

“The SAWA experience enriched my knowledge of museum terms, connected me with cultural platforms worldwide, and provided me a chance to share my Palestinian identity and culture with new professionals and friends.”



NATIONALITY Palestinian | RESIDENCE Jerusalem
PLACE OF WORK & ROLE Project Manager

Sarah Fnaish, 2019

“I was thankful for the opportunity to participate in the SAWA Museum Academy 2019/2020, as the programme was very insightful and rich, with many actionable takeaways, concepts, and techniques I could apply immediately in my professional role. I always refer to the programme’s material when I start developing a new idea at work. What I liked most about the programme is that it was led by intelligent, well-spoken instructors.”

NATIONALITY Jordanian | RESIDENCE Jordan
PLACE OF WORK & ROLE Marketing and Business Developer

Christine Kainert, 2018/2019

SAWA gave me the unique opportunity to meet colleagues from other countries who share the same passion for museums. Getting to know their experiences and perspectives really *shaped my personal view of things and the way I approach my work.*

NATIONALITY German | **RESIDENCE** Berlin

PLACE OF WORK & ROLE Scientific Researcher at the Free University Berlin and the German Archaeological Institute



Katharina Löhr, 2023

“SAWA still feels like a community to me. Even though my time at the programme has ended, I will feel connected to it for the rest of my life. The shared experiences, mutual learning, dialogues, and lifelong connections have and will continue to shape me in both my professional career and private life. Therefore, I am more than grateful for the opportunity to be part of the SAWA community.

NATIONALITY German | **RESIDENCE** Berlin

PLACE OF WORK & ROLE Berlin Central and Regional Library, Berlin Collections | Education, Program and Outreach Coordinator (Berlin_hub)

Omar Idtnaine, 2023

My encounter with SAWA stands out as a truly distinct learning experience. It primarily revolves around thinking outside the box and re-evaluating traditional definitions within the museum field. It prompts us to reconsider our personal perspectives on practices and methods of approaching various tasks. I genuinely value and appreciate this innovative approach.

NATIONALITY Moroccan | RESIDENCE Morocco
PLACE OF WORK & ROLE Curator at Agadir Musée d'Art

Raneen Kiresh, 2018



The SAWA Museum Studies Program offered a truly enriching experience, allowing me to learn from and connect with a diverse community of museum practitioners from around the world. It was an invaluable opportunity to expand my knowledge and perspectives on the museum field.

NATIONALITY Palestinian | RESIDENCE Jerusalem



Jill Praus, 2023

As a platform for sharing knowledge on innovative but critical museum practices and diverse curatorial approaches, the SAWA programme left a lasting impact on me. Connecting with others to rethink antiquated systems and discuss how a museum (of the future) should look, how we want it to be, and what we could change to diversify it greatly broadened my perspective on our museum work.

NATIONALITY German | **RESIDENCE** Berlin

PLACE OF WORK & ROLE Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Curatorial Assistant

Linnéa Steegmüller, 2023

While exploring the Museum of Islamic Art, I particularly noticed interpretations and objects that illuminated transcultural relationships and global networks. This resonates with the objectives of the SAWA programme, which seeks to challenge perceived cultural boundaries and understands the museum as a dynamic space for dialogue and connections.

NATIONALITY German | **RESIDENCE** Berlin

PLACE OF WORK & ROLE Stadtmuseum Berlin

Sally Mostafa Shaban, 2023



It was the experience of a lifetime. I spent a good time with colleagues from about five countries. This was my first time meeting this many colleagues from different countries. I made some very good friends, and we freely shared our personal and professional experiences together. I would like to highlight the session on diversity and peace building, which touched on one of the most important challenges for everyone. I think this should be our top goal for the future. My experience in SAWA gave me the opportunity to familiarise myself with every phase of the complex process of transforming scholarly research into exhibitions, including conversation and interpretation, legal and economic issues, design and dialogue with the audience, the educational role of an exhibition, and many other phases. The programme helped me build a foundation to enable me to devote myself to this splendid mission.

NATIONALITY Egyptian | **RESIDENCE** Cairo
PLACE OF WORK & ROLE Heritage Interpreter at Grand Egyptian Museum

Lara Maalouf, 2023

Exploring museums and exhibitions between Berlin and Sharjah during SAWA was a great eye-opening experience. Our group discussions after these visits were always insightful. We analysed various curatorial approaches across different institutions, drawing connections to our diverse backgrounds and interests. These cross-cultural experiences were thought-provoking and prompted new questions I hadn't considered before. SAWA definitely influenced my approach to museum practices and, perhaps most importantly, formed friendships crossing borders and cultures that I'll always treasure.

NATIONALITY Lebanese | RESIDENCE Pennsylvania, USA
PLACE OF WORK & ROLE PhD Candidate at Penn State University

Robert, 2019

For me, it is always marvellous to meet people from different places, to see similarities and enriching differences, or different approaches. The memories and connections I made with the fantastic SAWA community impacted my personal and professional life.

NATIONALITY German | RESIDENCE Berlin
PLACE OF WORK & ROLE Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek, Stiftung
Preußischer Kulturbesitz

‘Art is the reservoir of all aspects of cultural heritage, and artefacts were originally artworks created by artists in other ages. So, if you want to optimise how museum audiences perceive the museum collection, start your collection interpretation plans with activities that tell stories about the art dimensions of your artefact. Allow audiences to understand the real meaning of the word “art-e-fact”, which is simply the fact(s) stored by art in every historical object.’ This is what my SAWA experience taught me. After my time at SAWA, I began creating museum projects based on this concept, both at the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC), where I currently work, and in other museums and cultural institutions by way of my start-up, ‘Museiopolis’.

NATIONALITY Egyptian | **RESIDENCE** Egypt

PLACE OF WORK & ROLE National Museum of Egyptian Civilization NMEC – Senior Art Specialist and Exhibition Designer.

Emilia Sánchez González, 2023

As an emerging museum professional, participating in SAWA provided me with the perfect setting to expand my perspective of what museum work entails. Thanks to the open and diverse international team of facilitators and participants, we could discuss wide-reaching institutional dynamics and structures and zoom in on local examples. I especially enjoyed the sense of community in the ‘SAWA Family’, where we identified in each other the commitment to make museums more self-reflective, diverse, and caring places.

NATIONALITY Mexican | **RESIDENCE** Luxembourg
PLACE OF WORK & ROLE Researcher Centre in History of Photography and Exhibitions at the Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C2DH), University of Luxembourg

THE SAWA PROGRAM

PROFILE AND HISTORY

compiled by Khawla Al Awadhi

SAWA Facilitators at Bait al Naboodah, Sharjah





ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The *SAWA Museum Studies Program* is designed to serve as a professional qualification and learning opportunity for young museum professionals seeking to acquire knowledge about the various operational aspects of museums.

The programme is organised and led by partners **Sharjah Museums Authority**, **Staatliche Museen zu Berlin**, and **Goethe-Institut Gulf Region** together with **HTW Berlin University of Applied Sciences**.

SAWA is funded in equal parts by the **Sharjah Museum Authority** and the **German Federal Foreign Office**.

The programme is curated and facilitated by a professional and highly experienced team of Arab and European educators who are leading specialists in their respective regions.

The team works together to develop the programme and curriculum modules in consideration of *the significance and requirements of diverse museological practices in the Arab world and Europe*.

ABOUT THE PARTNERS



Sharjah Museums Authority

The SMA was established in 2006 by His Highness Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Sharjah.

The SMA is an autonomous government authority linking and overseeing 16 museums across the Emirate of Sharjah specialised in various fields, including Islamic art and culture, archaeology, heritage, science, and marine life, as well as the history of Sharjah and its region.

German Federal Foreign Ministry and Goethe-Institut

The Goethe-Institut (GI) is the Federal Republic of Germany's worldwide cultural institute. The GI promotes the study of German abroad and encourages international cultural exchange. It is a non-governmental intermediary organisation entrusted by the German government with independent cultural policy tasks abroad based on a framework agreement with the Federal Foreign Office and receives state funding for this purpose.



Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft, Berlin – University of Applied Sciences

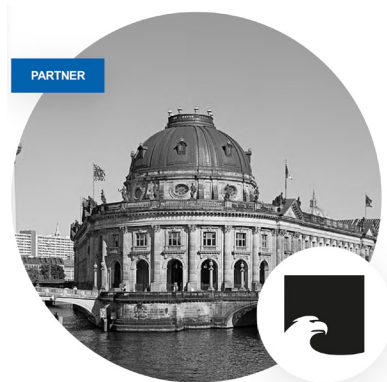


HTW Berlin is a highly esteemed institution of higher education in Germany specialising in Applied Sciences. It offers an extensive selection of academic programmes in many disciplines, including technology, computer science, business, law, culture, and design. HTW Berlin students benefit from exceptional academic assistance, state-of-the-art laboratory facilities, a nurturing environment, and opportunities for global networking.

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

The Staatliche Museen zu Berlin is an encyclopaedic museum complex spread over many sites. It aims to preserve, research, and display art treasures and cultural artefacts from all human history and educate the public about their importance.

The Staatliche Museen zu Berlin's collections encompass the fields of European and non-European art, archaeology, and ethnology from virtually all nations, cultures, and periods.



MODULES

The SAWA Museum Studies Program consists of four key modules, each focusing on specific areas of museum practices and concepts, including collecting, documenting, curation, interpretation, education, and cultural heritage preservation. The critical diversity literacy dimension serves as a holistic framework linking together all modules.

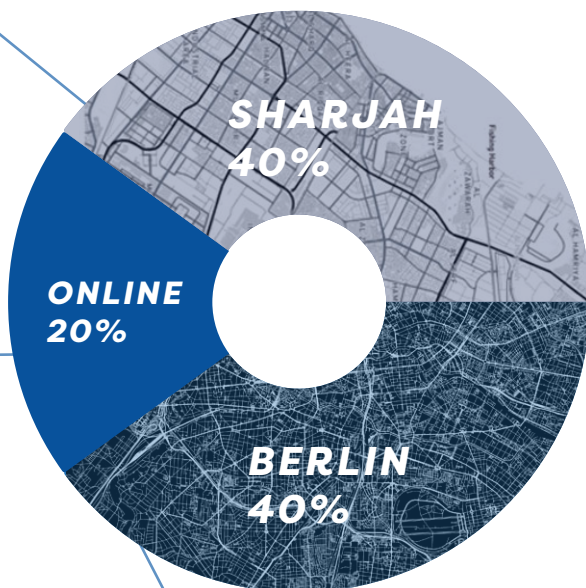
- 1** ***Diversity Training***
From self-reflection to opportunity and asset
- 2** ***What is a Museum?***
Local and international perspectives
- 3** ***Collecting and Documenting***
Participative strategies for past and present
- 4** ***Curatorial Strategies***
From single to shared authorship
- 5** ***Museum Communication***
Access, engagement, and interpretation

PROGRAMME STRUCTURE

While exploring the programme modules, participants engage in a series of workshops, practical projects, and hands-on experiences to deepen their understanding and practical skills. The programme also includes site visits to museums and cultural institutions in Sharjah and Berlin to further enrich the participants' experience through valuable, real-world exposure.

Sharjah 40%

Participants and facilitators meet in person for a two-week intensive training session in the city of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. The programme kicks off with a one-of-a-kind diversity workshop to ensure smooth communication and exchange between participants.



Berlin 40%

Participants and facilitators regroup in person for the organisation and execution of a two-week intensive training session in Berlin, Germany. As the group meets again, they reflect on the programme's impact on their work and studies.

Online 20%

Online meetings and sessions with participants provide a platform to share thoughts and perspectives. Online sessions are held regularly throughout the programme and serve as a bridge connecting the Sharjah and Berlin experiences.

GLOSSARY



Starting with the first SAWA Virtual Series, initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21, each year's participants have contributed to the growing SAWA Glossary, the first Arabic-German glossary for museum terms, which can be accessed on the SAWA website.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG MUSEUM PROFESSIONALS

EMPOWERING EXPERTISE

The programme provides participants the opportunity to enhance their understanding and proficiency in two key areas: contextualisation of museology within local circumstances and cultivation of dialogue acknowledging both commonalities and distinctions among all participants and facilitators.

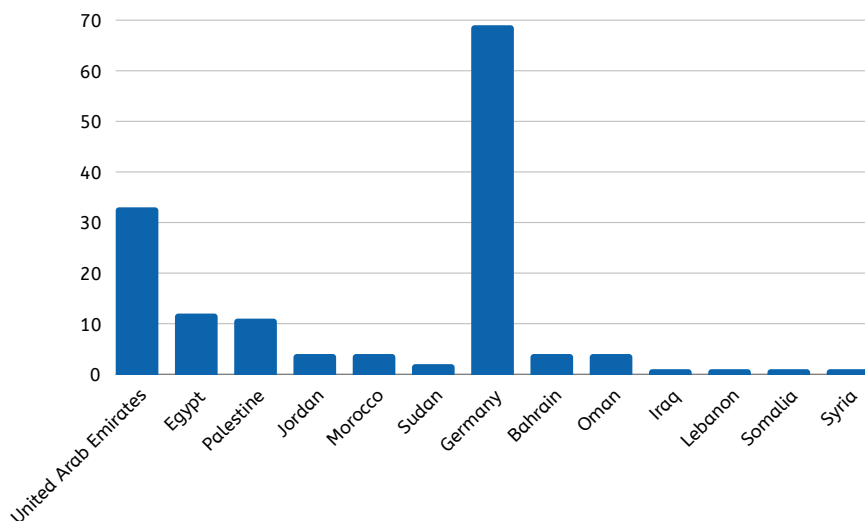
PLATFORM FOR EXCHANGE

SAWA is designed to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, skills, and best practices among participants and facilitators, thereby fostering personal and professional growth.

EMBRACING SECURITY AND INCLUSIVITY

The programme provides a safe, open, and inclusive environment for all those involved in its activities.

PARTICIPANTS



THE SAWA JOURNEY (CHRONOLOGY)

2013

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

Aim: regular institutional exchange and cooperation to enhance cross-cultural communication, understanding, and dialogue through museum collections, art, and culture
Goethe-Institut, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Sharjah Museums Authority

2014

FEBRUARY AND OCTOBER

Workshops in Sharjah

MAY, AUGUST, DECEMBER

SMA staff exchange at Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (SMB)

2015

MARCH

Conference 'Appropriate
museumology – Appropriate
Language' in *Sharjah*

Sharjah, Berlin
SAWA pilot with 16
participants



2020

AGYA Humanities award
Award: Best Cultural
Collaboration



Sharjah

Berlin (online only during
COVID-19 pandemic)
16 participants

*Project: Objects in Dialogue –
The Pandemic*

2021

First purely Online
SAWA due to
COVID-19 pandemic
20 alumni

Project: SAWA Glossary

2022

Sharjah, Online, Berlin
16 participants – Theme:
Sustainability

Project: Objects in Dialogue

Project: SAWA Glossary

*Event: A Museum Glossary:
An Encounter of Words, at
EXPO 2020, Dubai*

2016

Sharjah
11 participants

2017

Sharjah, Berlin
18 participants

2019

Sharjah, Berlin
16 participants



2018

2018 Publication:
*Appropriate Museology –
Appropriate Language*



2023

Sharjah, Online, Berlin
16 participants – Theme:
Thinking historically in
the present

Project: Objects in Dialogue
Project: SAWA Glossary



2024

Berlin, Online, Sharjah
16 participants – Theme:
Cross-cultural learning

Project: SAWA Glossary
Anniversary Conference



AWARDS

AGYA HUMANITIES 2019

The Arab German Young Academy (AGYA) award recognises initiatives and projects that promote the role and value of humanities in research, education, society, and communicating humanities to a broader public.

BEST CULTURAL COLLABORATION 2020

The Sharjah Museums Authority was given this award for its innovative SAWA Museums Academy during the Leading Cultural Destinations Awards (LCD) in Berlin.

A CONVERSATION ON OUR SAWA JOURNEY

Aisha Deemas and Gundula Avenarius



Aisha Deemas has been Director General of the Sharjah Museums Authority since June 2023. She formerly held the position of Director of Executive Affairs at the Sharjah Museums Authority, where she participated in long-term planning and overall management of the services provided to all Sharjah museums under the Authority. She holds a Master of Business Administration and a Bachelor in International Studies from the American University of Sharjah. She has over 15 years of experience in museum management.

Gundula Avenarius is a Museum Education Trainer and Consultant with Master's degrees in art history, English & American studies, and adult education. Since 2014, she has been responsible for the organisational management and curriculum planning of the SAWA Museum Studies Program at HTW Berlin University of Applied Sciences in cooperation with the Sharjah Museum Authority, HTW Berlin, and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

GUNDULA

In 2024, as we approach the second half of the tenth edition of the SAWA programme, it's a good time to reflect on the journey that began over ten years ago. How did we both get involved with SAWA? What are some of our most memorable milestones? And how has this journey impacted both our professional paths and our collaborative work together on the programme? I was thinking we might structure this conversation in the way we often start with participants each year. You know, by looking at an object together to widen our personal perspectives. Only this time, the object is the programme itself!

AISHA

That's a good thought! My involvement began when Ulrike Al Khamis (Senior Strategic Planning Advisor, SMA until 2/2017) and Gabriele Landwehr (Head of the Goethe Institute Gulf Region until 3/2018) were having those initial planning meetings. This was after the preliminary seminars in 2014. At the time, I was just observing from the sidelines in my position as executive director at the Sharjah Museums Authority. I officially became part of the facilitator team in 2017, during the third edition of SAWA. What about you? I remember you did those early workshops in Sharjah...

GUNDULA

Yes. I joined the programme quite early on, in 2014. I had met Susan Kamel through a women-in-museums roundtable in Berlin, and she called me up one day, asking if I would be interested in conducting a workshop in Sharjah. I remember I had to ask, 'Where is Sharjah?' Susan was approached by the Goethe Institute since she had already done a comparative study on museum training programmes. The next year, she became a professor of museology at HTW Berlin. Looking back, there were already aspirations for a programme like SAWA, although it hadn't quite come together yet.

That's true! Even back then, there was already a vision of what SAWA could become. But it wasn't until a bit later that everything came together into what it is today.

GUNDULA

Exactly. It was Susan's extensive background—having worked with the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin and her research in Yemen and Egypt—that made her the ideal person for Gabriele Landwehr to approach. Even before that, Stefan Weber, director of the Museum of Islamic Art, had met Manal Ataya, who, at the time, was director of the museums in Sharjah. The first workshops took place in 2014, with exchange visits by some of your colleagues from SMA to Berlin. After that, Gabriele asked Susan and me to develop what eventually became the SAWA programme. We looked at the diaries our colleagues from Sharjah had written during their stays, and together we decided to focus on co-creating expertise by looking at different practices instead of exporting knowledge. That became the foundation of SAWA.

By 2017, when I joined the facilitator team, the structure was pretty solid, as you mentioned. Before that, I had only heard about SAWA from a distance. I became directly involved when I took over from Ulrike and facilitated the first module "*What Is a Museum?*" with Martina Kopp, who worked as an outreach officer at the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin.

GUNDULA

For me, those early workshops were foundational. In September 2015, we started with a group of 16 participants in Sharjah and then brought them to Berlin in May 2016. This pattern—Sharjah in the autumn and

Berlin in early summer—continued for a while. However, after that pilot year, funding challenges arose. In 2016, we only managed a short ten-day program in Sharjah. However, Gabriele was determined to keep the momentum going. In those days, we were already discussing whether to ask participants to pay for the programme, either partially or fully. I remember that Manal was strongly against this, as it would most likely exclude potential applicants from certain countries. And she was right. Keeping it inclusive was important. We subsequently applied for funding from the VW Foundation, and thankfully, in October 2016, secured three years of support from the German side.

AISHA

Yes, I think it's that inclusivity that has made the programme so meaningful for many participants.

I hadn't realised how much behind-the-scenes effort went into sustaining the programme at first. But when I stepped in as a facilitator in 2017, I got to know the extent of the organisational work that had taken place to make it all happen.

GUNDULA

Yes, it was a lot of work, especially during that time. I always led the organisational processes from Berlin and couldn't have done it without the committed support from the HTW and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Then from 2017 on, you became my direct counterpart in Sharjah and I have always been grateful for our direct communication.

The VW Foundation support allowed us to run SAWA until 2020. When the pandemic hit, though, we had to pivot quickly, and that's when we revived the idea of the Glossary.

That was because essentially, glossary work had always been there, with English as the third language. We kept translating, and we kept talking about what may be lost in translation. In 2018 we published 'Appropriate Museology – Appropriate Language', with essays addressing that theme. But the online Glossary project became a real turning point for us, I believe. It not only connected participants across different years, but it also allowed us to expand the programme in new directions. The pandemic also forced us to think about how museums deal with the challenge of lockdown. So, ultimately, in the years that followed, we selected a yearly theme, such as 'sustainability' in 2022, focused on how museums can be guided by the United Nations' SDGs, and 'Thinking historically in the present' in 2023, inspired by the Sharjah Biennial.

GUNDULA

Right. Not only did we survive the pandemic, but we also emerged with an archive, which was something we always wanted for SAWA. With our growing online Glossary at <https://www.sawamuseumstudies.com/>, we've now more firmly established the website as an archive.

The Glossary was a creative solution to a challenging time. We were all set to bring participants to Berlin in March 2020, but then the quarantine began, and travel became impossible. We had to transition to an online format quickly. The pandemic, in an unexpected way, allowed us to extend the life of SAWA by using the remaining funds for that new project. The online Glossary led to our first SAWA Virtual Series with alumni participants, which helped us secure continuous funding from the German Federal Foreign Office.

And that shows how resilient the SAWA programme is. It's been able to adapt to unforeseen challenges, like the pandemic, while staying true to its mission of connecting young museum professionals. One of the key objectives—or key motivations—for me in SAWA has always been how it creates a platform, particularly in the MENA region. It may be slightly different in Europe, but people in museum professions here tend to be on their own a lot. They don't have the same network. And I always hoped the programme could be that platform for these young people, so that they could have solid ground to stand on.

GUNDULA

Very true. That closely parallels my motivations when I started with SAWA. Besides being positively intrigued by the many challenges that establishing such a project would present, I looked forward to experiencing a different museum landscape in a part of the world that I had not been to and to expanding my network.

There is a certain loneliness to working in museums; you seldom have bigger teams in one department or subsections of museums co-creating. I always liked that SAWA covers not just a single field of museum work, but rather employs a holistic approach, looking at the broader structure and system of museums and their role in society.

But I also remember wondering whether we should specialise more, limiting our focus to a particular field, such as preservation, for example. That was because participants always mentioned their individual professional needs when applying for the programme. But the beauty of participating in this project is that you get the whole picture. That's something you may get working in a small museum, but it's a lot rarer in larger museums. With SAWA, we kind of create a museum structure with many different departments over the space of one year.

And I think that's what makes us different from any other training programme. Because in a way, it's not a training programme in the traditional sense; it's not what people would expect when they sign up for a programme.

It's not about the *what*—it's about the *why*. Why are we doing an educational programme and for whom? What's the outcome, and where are the connections? And it's very macro-level and long-term. Unlike a training programme where you come in with a curriculum, tick the boxes, and move on, SAWA is something you don't move on from. It's something you take with you on your journey. It stays with you—you don't leave it behind.

GUNDULA

You're right. And I'm certain it came to be what it is now because of the changes we made after the pilot in 2015. Back then we had something very similar to traditional programmes: many more lectures—sometimes an hour long—and only very small exercises. After that, I did a long evaluation, interviewing all the participants and facilitators. We quickly realised that to avoid becoming just another vocational training for general museum expertise, we needed to dedicate time to all the other issues that are there but seldom mentioned, such as: Why are we doing this work? For whom are we doing this work? What kind of image of the public do we have? Is it the same between institutions?

We talked about staff, the public, and museums that, at first, all seem to be different. Regional contexts seem to be different. But there are also similarities, and some questions are always the same. And how can we generate knowledge about the important issues? One way SAWA changed between 2015 and now is that we now dedicate more time to dialogue and developing what are sometimes known as 'soft skills'. One example is the introduction of the Majlis, the Arabic heritage form of community conversation, to our in-person meetings.

SAWA is like its own version of a museum. It's evolving just like museums are evolving. And it's creating connections. It actually is a museum in itself.

GUNDULA

Yes, it's a museum for one year. A museum where you can ask all the questions you always wanted to ask and will probably find answers or more questions that keep you going. That's why we say SAWA never ends.

There is one personal moment that stands out for me: During the pandemic, after all the online workshops we did for the Glossary project, we were finally able to meet again in Sharjah in September 2021 with a group of alumni. I remember the sense of accomplishment we felt as facilitators. While the alumni created videos for their terms, we gathered in a separate room, took a deep breath, and acknowledged how far we had come, despite all obstacles.

Yes, that was a special moment. It's not just the participants who have grown; we as facilitators and organisers have developed alongside the programme. One other thing that resonates very strongly with me is how the SAWA group, the SAWA facilitators and organisers, are doing this work on top of their daily lives and jobs. It's a huge commitment. Usually, you would have a full-time team of employees to run a programme like SAWA. But we have been running it for years on the side. I think the project has reached a very stable format. We have the topics and the content. But I hope the programme continues to grow, so that we're able to take on more people, maybe take on people from other parts of the world and expand past the Arab/German model we have now.

GUNDULA

That's true. The programme has become very stable, but there's still so much potential. I hope we can expand it further. We've received inquiries from museums around the world who have heard about SAWA and want to be part of it. So, I often ask myself: Can we create a travelling SAWA, even if it might be questionable due to the impact of air travel on climate change?

AISHA

However we did it, it would be a wonderful next step. We could create a more global version of SAWA, perhaps with a base in Sharjah or Berlin but travelling to other places where people want to collaborate. It would broaden the network and allow us to learn from even more diverse perspectives.

At this ten-year milestone, while we look back to appreciate our progress, we also look ahead to continue this journey that still has so much more potential and is indeed very much needed in today's world. Young professionals need to be heard, they need to have a voice in shaping the museums of the future, and we encourage them to do so in exchange with their colleagues from around the world.

GUNDULA

Thank you, Aisha. It's been such a rewarding experience working with you all these years.

AISHA

I couldn't agree more. It's been an incredible journey, and I'm so grateful to have been part of it alongside you. Here's to the next chapter!

CURATING ACROSS CULTURES

— *David Francis and Alya Al Mulla*

David Francis is an Honorary Lecturer in Cultural Heritage at the Institute of Archaeology at University College London. David combines lecturing on museology at UCL with his work as a curatorial consultant. He has worked on exhibitions at the British Museum, British Library, and Science Museum in London and internationally at the At-Turaif World Heritage Site in Riyadh, the Sadberk Hanim Museum in Istanbul, and the Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo.



Alya Al Mulla is Curator at Sharjah Art Museum, with over 18 years of work experience at the museum. Al-Mulla oversees the museum's operations and day-to-day management. Graduated with a bachelor's degree in Multimedia Design from American University of Sharjah (2003) and received her MA in History of Art and Museum Studies from Paris-Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi (2012). Her work experience includes a three-month internship at the Guimet Museum of Asian Art, Paris, France (2012). She is a SAWA program facilitator since 2015.

In his seminal 1968 work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian educational philosopher Paulo Freire emphasises the importance of language in developing critical consciousness. Freire (1968, 71) argues that through using terms like *favela* in his literacy programmes and exploring the dynamics of social injustice that lies behind them, participants experience a process of ‘reading the world as well as reading the word’. Similarly, within SAWA (سوا – Arabic for ‘together’), a cross-cultural museum studies programme that brings together German-speaking and Arabic-speaking professionals in dialogue, critical awareness of the potentialities and limitations of language must play a central role. This is particularly important when English remains the *lingua franca* of museology and the bridging language between SAWA participants, who typically have either Arabic or German as their first language.

This essay examines how language exploration and the translation process have the potential to reimagine terms like ‘curation’ that have lost their power through overfamiliarity. It also explores the idea of cross-cultural dialogue in its various forms, whether in terms of display or even language itself. For example, when exploring the role of the curator (*Kurator* in German) a familiar line of inquiry is to trace its etymological origins back to its Latin root of *curare*, meaning ‘to take care’ and in turn emphasise the role of care in museum work (Clifford 2018, Krasny & Perry 2023). By repeating the same process with the Arabic term for curation, we find both synergies and new possibilities for how the role of the curator might be understood.



In Arabic, curator can be translated as أمين متحف (*Ameen Mathaf*) whose root comes from ‘protect’, or قِيم (Qayy’em), whose root comes from ‘value’—to select or evaluate. This act of translation provides us with different etymological lineages and in turn allows us to reimagine what curators do and what curation might be.

For Alya Al Mulla, a lecturer in the SAWA programme who has worked as a curator at the Sharjah Art Museum for fifteen years, these two translations allow us to consider her practice in two different ways. Firstly, we can consider her curation of the permanent displays of Arab art in the museum’s collections as an act of protection of both an artistic cannon and a broader culture that is under threat of erasure. This idea of protection is expressed explicitly by Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi in the introductory panel of his Barjeel collection, which is currently staged at the Sharjah Art Museum as part of a long term loan. His introduction serves as a manifesto for art from the Arab world and its accompanying narratives:

At a time when Arab cultures are under threat and attempts are made to effectively erase our histories, and considering the multitude of racial, ethnic, and religious identities that existed in the Arab world for centuries, we must come together to not only recognise but also celebrate the diversity of the Arab world.

– Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, *A Century in Flux*
exhibition introductory panel

Secondly, we can see how the curation of exhibitions dedicated to single artist, such as the 2023 retrospective of the Palestinian artist Samia Halaby

as part of the annual *Lasting Impressions* series, can be seen as concerned with قَيِّم (Qayy'em) or the selection and creation of value. This is manifest in the telling of the story of an artist's career and in turn provide a chance for their work to be evaluated as a whole and the case for the value of their work to be made. But valuing and value-making is also present in the day-to-day work of the curator. This includes the selection of individual works, many of which are in private collections and haven't been exhibited in public for decades, and the relationship building and negotiation that leads to these works being brought together and placed on display. It is through these acts of translation that we both see what we as curators do anew, but also make connections to other ways of thinking. For example, a *Qayy'em's* (قَيِّم) focus on *value* resonates with the work of the pioneer Czech museologist Zbyněk Zbyslav Stránský (quoted in Soares 2016) who argued that museology is not really about the study of museums but on how value – of objects, artworks and culture – is created.

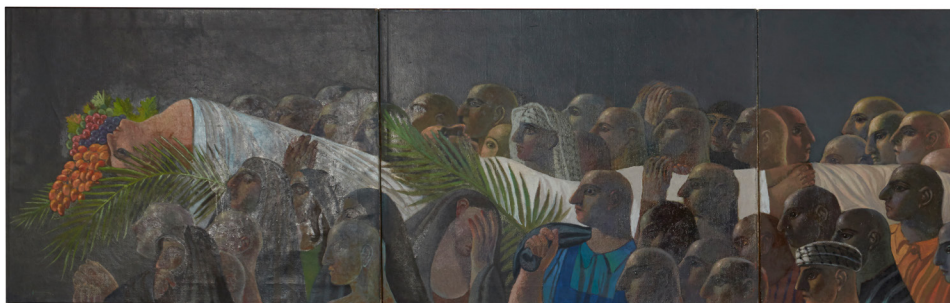
Curators think through objects and so a central challenge for the application of linguistic translation as a metaphor to understand curation is how might we consider translation operating on a material level. One of the ways we do this with the SAWA participants is an exercise called *objects in dialogue* in which the participants create digital displays of objects from Sharjah and Berlin in juxtaposition with one another, as they would in an exhibition, and then explore what emerges from this dialogue. Again, the German and the Arabic translations provide interesting avenues for how the curatorial act of juxtaposition might be considered. Juxtaposition in Arabic can be roughly translated as عمل تركيبي (*am'al tarkeebi*), which corresponds to an art assemblage or fitting together a puzzle. Whereas in German juxtaposition



may be translated much more confrontationally as *Gegenüberstellung*, which is sometimes represented as chess pieces facing each other across a board, or the identification of a criminal in a police line-up. These translations allow us to both reflect on the act of juxtaposition and what we might be seeking to attempt within our own curatorial practice.

One of the benefits that arises from bringing objects together in dialogue is how it allows us to see from another, or an other's, perspective. In the exhibition of the Barjeel Art Foundation's collection at the Sharjah Art Museum, whose previous various iterations included *A Century in Flux/Memory sews together events that previously never met* and more recently, *Parallel Histories*, SAWA participants are asked to journey through the gallery in pairs and enter into conversations about artworks that stand out to them. What is intriguing about this exhibition is how it evokes different responses in the German and Arabic-speaking participants. For many German participants this is the first time they will encounter the artists featured in the exhibition and although the various modernist styles of many of the works will be familiar to them, the history that the works allude to will not. To illustrate, Lea Ashbrock, a SAWA 2020 participant, describes how the exhibition *A century in flux* suddenly made her aware of the limitations of her Eurocentric view of art history she had acquired through her education, which she had previously not been conscious of:

Martyrs by Faisal Laibi Sahi (1978) | oil on canvas, 70 x 450 cm.



With few exceptions my art appreciation was Eurocentric which suddenly became clear to me when I entered the exhibition A Century in Flux at Sharjah Art Museum. I was thrown into an emotional roller coaster. I felt excitement and sadness at the same time as I was amazed by all the astonishing artworks that were new to me while feeling blue about having missed out on such an important part of art history.

Conversely for many Arab participants, the artists and the subject matter of the artworks featured in the exhibition was very familiar and, even if they had not lived through these events themselves, many participants connected the subject matter to their own family's experiences. This is how Khawla Al-Midfa responded to Martyrs by Faisal Laibi Sahi (1978):

Looking back at 1978, Iraq was undergoing so many political events. One year later, Saddam Hussein took over from President Al-Bakr. Two years after 1978, Iraq & Iran began a war which lasted for eight years.

These events made me imagine how our families would want to hear the updates from the radio stations. It made me imagine my father sitting with his little kids (they were five at that time) anxiously listening to the radio with the latest news.

...

IMAGE COURTESY OF BARJEEL ART FOUNDATION. SHARJAH



These two responses are themselves a juxtaposition and in bringing them into dialogue we seek to explore how museum curation might foster the development of a transcultural perspective. This term “transcultural” can be used in a number of different ways. Bond and Rapson (2014, 19) use the term to describe how cultural memory moves beyond national, ethnic and religious collections and forums of remembrance move beyond the idea of political, ethnic, linguistic, or religious borders as containers for our understanding of the past.

The concept of the transcultural might also be used to explore how the synthesis of ideas about a concept taken for different cultures leads to a new way of thinking. This is expressed by the philosopher Bertrand Russell (1922, 3) who describes how:

In comparing an alien culture with one's own, one is forced to ask oneself questions more fundamental than any that usually arise in regard to home affairs.

One is forced to ask: What are the things that I ultimately value? What would make me judge one sort of society more desirable than another sort? What sort of ends should I most wish to see realised in the world?

Finally, the concept of the transcultural might be used to escape the limiting binary containerism of either the nation state or the globalised world. For example, Chinese anthropologist Wang Mingming (quoted in Feuchtwang et al. 2010, p. 914) uses the Chinese term *tianxia*, or ‘all under heaven’, originally used to convey the extent of the emperor's rule, as a category that sits between the national and the global in which different cultures can be co-present.

From a curatorial perspective, the best example of transculturality can be found in the works and lives of the artists represented in the Barjeel Art Foundation's collection, as many of their careers involved movement inside and outside the Arab World. Syrian artist Marwan (Marwan Kassab Bachi 1934–2016), whose epic study of his own head (entitled *Kopf*, German for 'head') is part of the Barjeel foundation's collection, first studied in Damascus and then in Berlin. As an instrumental leader in the creation of the New Figuration Movement in Berlin and a major influence for a generation of artists in the Middle East, he can be seen as one such transcultural figure.

Shifting our focus to Berlin, we can bring the curatorial practice of Sharjah into dialogue with one of the central themes of German curatorial practice: *Erinnerungskultur*, which can be translated as culture of remembrance or memory culture. *Erinnerungskultur* developed in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust as a public battle about the remembrance of these events (Pieper 2010). It has since broadened to be applied to other aspects of German history, such as concerns about erasure of the legacy of the former East Germany (German Democratic Republic) (Arnold-de Simine & Radstone 2013) and more recently, Germany's colonial history (Schilling 2014). *Erinnerungskultur* can be seen embodied in debates around the development of the Humboldt Forum, a controversial museum development involving the demolition of the Palace of the Republic, the GDR's former parliament building, and subsequent reconstruction of the Berlin Palace of Germany's imperial era. This project also called for the relocation of non-European collections from the periphery of the city into the new Humboldt Forum museum located directly opposite Berlin's Museum Island (Macdonald 2024).

Much of the debate around curation undertaken by SAWA participants in Berlin took place in the metaphorical—and sometimes literal—shadow of the Humboldt Forum. The Humboldt Forum's development provided the impetus for a series of experimental acts of exhibition-making in Berlin (Loeseke 2018) as well as academic critique and protests against the institution (Küçük 2022).

The chance to experience and enter into the discursive space around the Humboldt Forum was provocative for SAWA participants, some of whom were involved in their own mega-museum projects, like the Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo. They drew comparisons between the aesthetic veneration of iconic objects such as the Nefertiti Bust in the Neues Museum on Berlin's Museum Island and some of the newest displays at the Humboldt Forum that attempted to grapple with issues like colonialism, consent, and the European gaze. These included *Exhibiting Omissions. Objects from Tanzania* and the Colonial Archive, which replaced original Tanzanian objects in the Humboldt Forum's collections with surrogates made by contemporary artists to highlight how the museum had not received consent to display objects collected through colonial violence.

This leads to another central tenet of curation in Berlin: the quest for criticality. This is manifest both in the readiness of museums in Berlin to include critical theory and in engagement with exhibitions, which often takes the form of identification and critique of elements that are deemed *sehr problematisch* (very problematic). In one of the SAWA programme evaluations, a Berlin-based participant lamented her inability to speak about her curatorial work in the same celebratory terms as her Sharjah colleagues because of the constant requirement to be *critical* of her state museum's colonial origins. While the constraints

of this approach are apparent, for the co-author of this essay, David Francis, coming from another European museumscape in Britain, which is far more celebratory and deliberately forgetful about its imperial history, Berlin's *Erinnerungskultur* and its application to the decolonisation of museum culture is a refreshing and innovative approach.

Alongside the curation of the collections in and around Museum Island, another important focus in Berlin was the curation of contemporary art in institutions like the Berlin Biennale and the House of World Cultures (HKW) where the topic of decolonisation was again a *roter Faden* ('red thread', meaning 'common theme'). One of the most controversial and heated discussions SAWA participants had was around the 12th Berlin Biennale (2022) curated by Kader Attia, which explored two decades of decolonial engagement in contemporary art. The most contentious point of the festival was when Iraqi artists Sajjad Abbas, Raed Mutar, and Layth Kareem withdrew their work in response to the French artist Jean-Jacques Lebel's installation *Poison*, which contained blown-up images of Iraqi prisoners being tortured at Abu Ghraib prison in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In the words of SAWA participant Lea Ashbrook, 'This brought up the question of who an exhibition is curated for; is it meant to confront the oppressor or comfort the oppressed, and are these two approaches compatible?'

This question of gaze—who is looking and who is looked at—is central to how Orientalist art can be presented and understood in the Arab world. This topic is a contemporary curatorial trend in the Gulf, which is currently being explored through exhibitions like *Echoes of the Orient* at the Bassam Freiha Art Foundation in Abu Dhabi and in the creation of the Lusail Museum of Orientalist art

in Qatar. One of the first exhibitions to explore this theme in a Gulf-context was *Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting 1830–1925*, staged at the Sharjah Art Museum in 2009, and created in collaboration with the Tate Britain in London, Yale Centre for British Art in the USA, and the Pera Museum in Istanbul. Such exhibitions of Orientalist art presented in an Arabian Peninsula context explore the nuanced shifts in power that occur when one views oneself through the eyes of others, no matter how distorted the other's gaze might be. An understanding of Orientalist art also allows one to see how dominant Occidental perspectives still inform European narratives about the Arab world. Furthermore, these exhibitions suggest how artworks might be reimagined and revalued beyond the original intent of the artists to address concerns around contemporary identity and the reversal of the gaze in the Gulf region. As part of SAWA's Sharjah-Berlin dialectic, the Orientalist paintings in Sharjah can be brought into dialogue with the history of the construction of Islamic Art as a discursive genre, by the likes of Wilhelm von Bode, the so-called Bismarck of Museums', on Museum Island in Berlin. This enables SAWA participants to become critically aware of both how the categories that inform the Orientalist gaze were constructed in Europe, but also how they might be reimagined, challenged and seen anew in the UAE.

These acts of translation have been a prominent curatorial strategy employed in both Berlin and Sharjah to decentre Eurocentric narratives and processes. In Berlin, it can be found in the House of World Cultures' use of the term *Quilombismo* in their 2023 exhibition of contemporary art entitled *O Quilombismo: Of Resisting and Insisting. Of Flight as Fight. Of Other Democratic Egalitarian Political Philosophies*. The term *Quilombismo* stems from the



Visitors looking at the Orientalist works, displayed at Sharjah Art Museum.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHARJAH MUSEUMS AUTHORITY.

work of Brazilian artist Abdias Nascimento (2020), who adapted it from *quilombos*, or communities created by escaped and emancipated enslaved people, to mean societies of ‘fraternal and free reunion, or encounter; solidarity, living together, and existential communion’. This term becomes a *roter Faden* uniting disparate artists exploring the utopian possibilities of outsider communities.

This act of translation can also be found in Hoor Al-Qasimi’s curation of *Sharjah Biennial 15: Thinking Historically in the Present* (2023). Hoor Al-Qasimi uses the concept of *Kharareef*, a term to describe the stories told by soothsayers in the UAE, as a counternarrative to ‘Eurocentric historiographies of Gulf to frame the oil expeditions of twentieth-century Western powers as the “beginning” of

regional history’ (AL-Qasimi 2023). For AL-Qasimi (2023), these tales act as ‘an alternative history connecting to deep time, knowledge transmission, and the chronotype of our ancestors and have come to contextualise the curatorial ambitions of the biennial.’ AL-Qasimi’s (2023) practice can also be seen as an act of translation of the work of the late Okwui Enwezor, whose *Documenta 11*, staged in Kassel in 2002, sought to move the contemporary art exhibition away from a Eurocentric perspective and instead focus on networks of regional communities and settlements to convey new narratives, perspectives, histories, and futures. This translation takes on a literal sense: Enwezor was originally scheduled to curate *Sharjah Biennial 15* with AL-Qasimi but passed away during the project, leaving AL-Qasimi to complete the Biennial herself while staying true to his vision and translating some of Enwezor’s key concepts into the final exhibition (Meyer 2023).

For SAWA participants, this act of curatorial translation is embedded within the glossary project, which asks them to select a term used in museology, translate it into Arabic or German, and explore its potentialities with reference to their own experiences both across the programme and in their professional practice. Such an approach references the democratisation of the term *curation*—‘we are all curators now’ (Skidmore 2021)—and how it has become a phrase in everyday life, for example in how one’s online presence is ‘curated’. While some have argued that such use denigrates the term *curation* and the status of the curator, it also reflects the fact that since the COVID-19 pandemic, curation in the digital realm has become increasingly important. We see this in the translation of the art majlis held by Sultan Al-Qassemi into a digital format during that time

or in David Francis's own curatorial practice, which involves the safeguarding of the Nuosu ethnic minority culture in China through documentation and preservation in a digital repository as part of the Endangered Material Knowledge Programme.

The glossary entries created and curated by SAWA participants speak to how SAWA's transcultural approach might be applied to individual curatorial practices and how the professional experiences of participants are inherently transcultural. An example of this would be how one SAWA participant, Syrian archaeologist Mohamad Moutaz Alshaie, takes the term *diversity* and explores its two potential Arabic translations: *Al-Tānāw* (التنوع) and *Al-'ikhtilaf* (الاختلاف). *Al-Tānāw* (التنوع) describes the positive side of diversity. It denotes our inherent knowledge that our world is based on diversity: of people, ethnicities, animals, plants, colours, and geographical terrain. *Al-'ikhtilaf* (الاختلاف), on the other hand, describes the negative, or dark side, of diversity. Here, diversity means 'different from me', 'not belonging to my comfort zone'. This side of diversity, Alshaie argues, lies at the heart of conflicts centred on proving the rightness of each side or amplifying the separation between conflicting sides. Alshaie draws on his own career as an archaeologist to explore the potential of the mosaic as a metaphor for diversity in Syria, tracing its diverse forms through Assyrian palaces, Greek and Roman temples, and mosques stretching from the Umayyad to the late Ottoman eras.

In their collaborative entry on intangible memory, SAWA participants Jill Praus and Lina Dolfen take a different approach, translating the genre of fairy tale (خرافة [khu'ra:fa], *Märchen*)—echoing Al-Qasimi's use of *Kharareef* in her curation of the

Sharjah Biennial 15—into a reflection on their own curatorial practice. Here, however, Praus and Dolfen use the form of the fairy tale to both reflect on the narrative journey of the SAWA experience and recast their own experiences of curating exhibitions in German museums as a fairy tale in which the colonial ghosts come back to haunt them. Drawing on the activist group *Guerrilla Girls*' campaign for more gender equality and diversity in museums, the glossary entry sheds light on the struggle for the voices of both objects with colonial *herstories* and early-career curators to be heard. Throughout, footnotes provide a glossary of academic references and playfully blur the distinction between fact and fiction.

Visit of Neues Museum, Berlin COPYRIGHT EMILIA SÁNCHEZ GONZÁLEZ



CONCLUSION

Curation can be seen as an ephemeral practice lasting as long as an exhibition or artwork is still on display; afterwards it is traceable only through the catalogues of exhibitions past or their digital equivalents. This essay has sought to capture some of the key issues and debates from the past ten years of pedagogical practice in the field of curation at SAWA and can itself be seen as an entry in SAWA's trilingual glossary. This is obviously not the last word on the subject of translating curation practice between Sharjah and Berlin. Indeed, this fact is reflected directly in the living format of the glossary, in which multiple entries can be posted about a common term. Through this practice, the glossary brings together different languages, perspectives, and voices to create a truly heteroglossic space. In doing so, the aim is to create a digital repository that mirrors the richness of the SAWA programme, which is powered by the grassroots experiences of its participants and nourished by the diversity of their perspectives.

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FROM BERLIN TO SHARJAH: A DIALOGUE ON CULTURAL EXCHANGE THROUGH SAWA

— *Alya Burhaima and John-Paul Sumner*



Alya Burhaima is Museums Development and Design Manager at the Sharjah Museums Authority, where she works with a team of professional designers to create exhibits and spaces that meet communities' needs and reflect Sharjah's rich heritage. She joined the SAWA Museum Studies Program in 2016 as a facilitator while serving as Learning Department Manager between 2010 and 2021. *Alya* completed her Master in Museum Studies with distinction at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi in 2014, and she holds a Bachelor in Art and Design.

John-Paul Sumner is Heritage Outreach Officer for North Lanarkshire Council in Scotland, UK. He has 25 years' experience in prestigious science, history, and art museums and has recently developed a plan to revive a small town in Scotland through heritage activities. John-Paul contributed to the Interpretation Plan at the Pergamon Museum/Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin. At Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow, he developed interpretation to improve visitor wellbeing and self-confidence. John-Paul has been a SAWA facilitator since 2017.

ALYA

I still vividly remember our first meeting with Gundula and Professor Suzan at the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization. It feels like a lifetime ago, yet the memory is still fresh. This was before the SAWA Museum Studies Program even existed. John-Paul, you weren't there yet, but the seeds of what SAWA would become were already being planted. I had the chance to join an exchange programme with two German professionals, and although I can't recall the precise details of our conversations, the impact they left on me was undeniable. Their openness to feedback and genuine interest in listening changed the way I approach museum work.

JOHN-PAUL

And that's exactly the environment I stepped into in 2017 when I first got involved with SAWA, thanks to my role at the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin. I remember coming to Sharjah with a sense of overconfidence, driven by my position and the unconscious biases I had from years of working in European museums. Like you, Alya, I experienced a transformation, but mine was about shedding that 'white-man-saviour' complex and realising how much I still had to learn. The collaborative spirit I found at SAWA was humbling. I thought European museums could change the world by representing Islamic cultures in a more positive light, but I quickly learned that true change happens when we work together and learn from one another.

ALYA

That's the essence of SAWA, isn't it? It's not just a museum studies programme—it's about breaking down barriers, whether professional, cultural, or personal. I've seen it with every new group: The participants form deep connections, and they carry that spirit of openness and respect back to their own institutions. I've had the privilege of facilitating those moments, watching participants transform as they engage in discussions about interpretation, learning methodologies, and visitor engagement. Every time, I'm reminded of the importance of dialogue—not just delivering information, but creating a space where everyone's voice is valued.

JOHN-PAUL

I completely agree. I think back to when we first started collaborating on the SAWA programme's final module on audiences and interpretation. It was clear that we both came from different museum traditions—mine, shaped by the interdisciplinary 'story display' approach from my work at Kelvingrove Art Gallery in Glasgow, where we curated exhibitions not just for art lovers, but for diverse groups including children, tourists, and people with sensory impairments. Your background, with its deep focus on learning and interpretation in the UAE, brought a different, but equally important, perspective.

ALYA

Yes, I remember those initial conversations, figuring out how our approaches could complement each other. It was in those moments that I realised we weren't just facilitators; we were co-creators of this unique programme. Every year, our sessions have become more fluid, more tailored to the diverse needs of participants. I think back to our observations of visitor behaviour at the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin—how we divided participants into pairs and had them track how long visitors engaged with various exhibits. That level of participation and reflection made me see museum spaces in a whole new way.

JOHN-PAUL

I loved those sessions! Especially how we connected theory with practice. But what always strikes me is how much SAWA helped me evolve, not just as a museum professional, but as a person. Your influence, Alya, really shaped the way I think about museum education now. I used to be focused on tailored experiences for different audience groups—children, tourists, experts—but after our time working together, I started to see the universality of human experience. We all want to connect, to learn, to be inspired. And that's what SAWA fosters—shared learning across cultures.

ALYA

That's such a great point. I think my most memorable moment with you was in 2018, during our visit to the Education Store at the Museum of Islamic Civilization in Sharjah. You were surprised by how similar it was to what you knew in Europe, but for me, it reinforced the idea that while our methods might differ, our goals are the same. We're all striving to create spaces where people—no matter where they're from—can engage with history and culture in meaningful ways.

JOHN-PAUL

Exactly. And it's that realisation that makes saying goodbye so difficult every year. We watch these incredible bonds form between participants, and by the end of the two weeks, they've not only learned about museum practices but also about themselves and each other. It's always an emotional moment, sitting in that final circle, listening to the reflections. It's a powerful reminder of why we do what we do.



ALYA

And even after the programme ends, the connections remain. SAWA's impact doesn't stop with the two weeks in Sharjah or Berlin. The participants continue to share their experiences and learning outcomes online, shaping museum practices in their home countries. It's a ripple effect that I'm incredibly proud of, and I know you are too, John-Paul.

JOHN-PAUL

Without a doubt. It's been a journey, both personally and professionally. My initial scepticism about the impact of intercultural communication has transformed into a deep appreciation for it. The SAWA experience, as we've co-created it, continues to inspire me to look beyond the specifics of audience groups and focus on what unites us all.

ALYA

SAWA has become more than just a programme; it's a reflection of our shared vision for what museums can and should be—spaces for dialogue, learning, and mutual respect. And I'm grateful for the journey we've taken together, John-Paul, as well as for the many more that lie ahead.



MUSEUMS HAVE TO CHANGE. THE WORLD. NOW!

An interview with myself by Suzan Kamil

Susan Kamel is Professor of Museology (Bachelor) and Museum Management and Communication (Master) at HTW Berlin University of Applied Sciences. With her critical attitude toward discrimination, she wants to open up spaces for the empowerment of previously disadvantaged groups. Through her work as a lecturer in Germany and abroad as well as in the context of numerous practical research projects, she aims to transform museums from 'white', classist, ableist, and sexist spaces into relevant forums for social *debate*.

SUZAN KAMIL

You are one of the founding partners of the institution we are celebrating today: the SAWA Museum Studies Program. Why did you choose this name, and would you choose it again today?

SUSAN KAMEL

To address your first statement: Yes, that is true. Just over ten years ago, I was asked to set up a capacity-building programme for museums in the MENA region. After participating in a few training programmes there and exhibitions here in Germany, I found an urgent need for museum staff here in Germany to receive further training on anti-discriminatory and inclusive museum work. Based on that need, I helped develop an idea for a training programme that would benefit both countries and regions. That's how SAWA came about. I had also seen a programme at the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo called SAWA. There, people from the entire neighbourhood of the Townhouse Gallery, located in downtown Cairo, came together to paint. I visited such events back then and was thrilled. Working and drawing together got people talking—not just about museum work and art, but about everything that moved them in their everyday lives. I thought: *That's how SAWA should be.*

SUZAN KAMIL

And did SAWA turn out the way you expected? What would you change if you could do it again today?

SUSAN KAMEL

SAWA is a great project supported by many great people who have identified with it from the beginning. These include, above all, my dear colleagues Gundula Avenarius and Aisha Deemas. I met Gundula at a workshop she gave in 2013/14, in which she conveyed

complex theory—that of social constructivism and museum education—so clearly that I thought her teaching skills and enthusiasm for museums would benefit SAWA. Aisha Deemas grew up with SAWA, so to speak, and went from being an employee of the SMA to its General Director. Her scientific expertise, knowledge of the global museum world, and wisdom in dealing with people have contributed to SAWA's continued existence today.

SUZAN KAMIL

And what would you change?

SUSAN KAMEL

I find this question difficult to answer in times of growing fascism in Germany, the climate crisis, and cultural appropriation in the name of politics. Sometimes I think we weren't radical enough, aren't radical enough, to disrupt the right-wing worldview. So, I would probably make SAWA even more political. *Museums are not neutral, after all.*

SUZAN KAMIL

SAWA was the model for TheMuseumsLab, which has received funding from the Federal Foreign Office since 2021 and was set up for museum employees from Africa and Europe. If you were to compare SAWA with TheMuseumsLab, which is better?

SUSAN KAMEL

SAWA is much smaller and more familial, and it's not subject to the same political pressure as TheMuseumsLab. We at HTW played a key role in setting up TheMuseumsLab and fought to ensure that an African agency was represented from the outset. This is where I see the main difference: At SAWA, we worked together with our friends in Sharjah right from the start. *SAWA is the product of real cooperation, not a large-scale, Eurocentric, neo-colonial project.*

SUZAN KAMIL

A neo-colonial project? You sound very frustrated with TheMuseumsLab. Why is that?

SUSAN KAMEL

Yes, I am a bit frustrated. The HTW team was the only majority Black or African team to be pushed out of TheMuseumsLab, along with our African and Afro-diasporic colleagues. Now, two German institutions—the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin (Natural History Museum Berlin) and the DAAD (German Exchange Service)—oversee the project and look for new partners every year. So, it's clear who has the power. And power is a very important aspect of international projects.

SUZAN KAMIL

What are your hopes for SAWA in the future?

SUSAN KAMEL

We are already working to re-launch SAWA and update our programme content. We'd like to increase the number of participants slightly, and we're aiming to host more of the programme digitally with only one live meeting to reduce our CO2 footprint. We are also thinking about a virtual residency and developing a SAWA Global edition. The only thing missing is the money from the German or international side. It would be nice if someone recognised the value of this programme and supported us financially.

SUZAN KAMIL

Is there anything else you would like to say?

SUSAN KAMEL

I am grateful for my many fantastic encounters with my colleagues. I've learned so much from them over the past ten years. May they all live long lives in peace and freedom.

EMBRACING INTERDISCIPLINARITY:

WORKING TOWARDS A **HOLISTIC** UNDERSTANDING OF OUR MUSEUM PRACTICE

Emilia Sánchez-González

Emilia Sánchez González is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Contemporary and Digital History at the University of Luxembourg for the project 'Tracing the legacy of Edward Steichen: A glocal approach to the international reception and national heritagization of The Family of Man exhibition'. She participated in the SAWA Museum Studies Program in 2023 and served as a Student Assistant at SAWA in 2024.

Museum work does not exist in a void. Every task is part of a complex network of direct and indirect relations.

We (should) know this. Because individuals are part of teams and departments, exhibitions are planned at par with budgets, programming, and conservation concerns. We can attest to an inherent interdisciplinarity in our work.

However, ‘involving two or more different subjects or areas of knowledge’ becomes complicated when we interrogate the degree of involvement, institutional structures, and power relations of the parties involved. Additionally, because museum workers come from different training backgrounds, their understanding of interdisciplinary praxis is influenced by their formative disciplines (often history or art history, management, design, and archaeology, among others).

Navigating these dynamics to reach harmonious, holistic relationships is a matter of learning and practising the process of reaching out of ‘our discipline’ and actively learning from our interactions with others.

The following reflection is based on my participation in the 2023 SAWA Museum Studies programme.





Participants exchange views while discovering the historic town of Sharjah

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WHAT DID INTERDISCIPLINARITY LOOK LIKE IN SAWA?

Something that appealed to me from the beginning of the programme was its holistic approach to museum learning. Before starting my first museum job a year before SAWA, I had to commit to one department that would ‘define my museum track’—or so I thought. I chose public affairs. Of course, many of my projects involved cross-departmental collaboration, but the larger the institution, the more specific the tasks are, leaving little room to experiment with ‘wearing other hats’.

The SAWA programme provided precisely what many like me—emerging professionals in the museum field—are searching for: an opportunity to exchange knowledge across curatorial, collections, conservation, and education areas. And to experience different types of museums and cultural institutions (natural history, art, history, community spaces, libraries). Moreover, learning from perspectives outside the European sphere with a diverse group of facilitators and participants added yet another layer of interdisciplinarity and underscored the value SAWA placed on this concept.

UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

within our institution comes from recognising our work as part of a larger structure. In other words, ‘individual work’ is never truly the work of one individual. The depth of an exhibition, the inclusivity of an educational programme, or the efficiency of a new software tool, for example, are all better informed when they are born of multiplicity. The success of these endeavours does not hinge upon the skills of a single person. In my experience, understanding interdisciplinarity requires us to think about shared power or authority. The participative model in museological work does not only apply to connecting with the public. In an article for the Museums Association, Melissa Strauss summarises her newly published report ‘Democracy at the top’ and discusses power shifts in the museum space. She lists ‘diversity,’ ‘collaboration across all levels,’ ‘open conversation,’ ‘holistic approaches,’ and ‘looking beyond the museum sector’ among the key approaches museums should take to strengthen participation and ultimately ‘fundamentally change museums—to create more porous and relevant organisations.’ These points are essential components in the practice of interdisciplinarity. It is imperative to relinquish the practice of gatekeeping new hires based on their professional backgrounds, foster mutual curiosity between museum departments, and create a healthy workplace culture where collaboration is supported by governance.

We should also explore opportunities for interdisciplinarity beyond our museums and indeed beyond museums as a cultural category. The other institutions of the ‘GLAM’ acronym—galleries, libraries, and archives—would be a good place to start. From there, we can expand to every other cultural institution, learning centre, or community association. And from there to citizen groups, hospitals, schools, or industries. The more expansive our collaborations, the greater our opportunity to open up museums to broader society.



SAWA (سوا) MEANS TOGETHER. It is a name meant to reflect the collaborative nature of the museum studies programme and act as a guiding principle. From my experience as a participant in 2023, I can attest that bringing together a diverse group in a spirit of open knowledge exchange is the perfect recipe for interdisciplinarity training. Conversations with the other fifteen participants soon revealed shared hopes for the future of the museum sector—despite our diverse backgrounds, divergent responsibilities to various institutions (or no institutions), and the different challenges we had overcome.

My first exchange with Viola Attallah about her work at the Rozana Association in Palestine reminded me of the Nature-Culture relations that so often stirred up controversy in my master's programme in world heritage studies. I learned about her work documenting community relations with plant biodiversity across Palestine—a great example of how to create engaging activities exploring cultural landscapes at the local level. I was equally inspired by the Rozana Association's socially responsible approaches to project management based on strong community relations.

With fellow participants Christopher Hölzel and Jill Prauss, I shared experiences of museum projects that brought together the often polarised fields of antiquities and contemporary art. One memorable conversation revolved around museums frequently relying on contemporary artists to create interventions in 'classical' or 'antiquity' galleries to address current topics. We exchanged personal highlights, shared both successful and questionable examples, and imagined alternative models; for instance, doing the opposite and bringing historical objects into contemporary art galleries to highlight that stories of resistance and innovative thinking are not only anchored in the present.

Through a comparative observation of the different museum structures in which participants had been trained, we found widely differing approaches towards hiring policies. To date, institutions in the UAE do not require potential staff to have a background in museum

studies. Several participants considered this an interesting ‘interdisciplinarity by design’ practice that recognises how diverse paths can lead to the museum world. We engaged in a critical discussion of the rigidity of German museum administration and how it affected the diversity, and therefore multidisciplinary, of staff. Finally, almost all participants shared similar experiences on two fronts related to interdisciplinarity in hiring: They expressed that museum workers without citizenship status were confronted with barriers to being hired for entry-level positions, both in Germany and in the MENA region. And they underscored the importance of diversifying their institutions.



Visit to the Museum of Islamic Art in the Pergamon Museum.

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Many different aspects converged to create spaces for the reflections and conversations described. Among them, I would highlight two that had the greatest impact on my experience: First, SAWA is a programme based on

diversity by design that champions multiplicity and plurality as core values every step of the way. I saw this particularly reflected in the diversity of cultural and professional backgrounds of both participants and facilitators. It was also apparent in SAWA's choice of museum visits, themes, and activities. The second aspect is SAWA's emphasis on participative models. This approach heightened the value of open interdisciplinary exchange between facilitators, organisers, participants, and guests. It encouraged us to reflect on the power dynamics in both our museum praxis and our interactions with peers both inside and outside our institutions.

My SAWA journey was personally significant because it helped me expand my definitions, expectations, and responsibilities as a museum professional. If emerging professionals continue to use this and similar networks of conscientious cultural practitioners to create pockets of change, we can build a more open, collaborative, and interdisciplinary museum sector.

THE SAWA COMMUNITY IN PRACTICE

Bayan Hilles

Bayan Hilles is currently completing her Master in Museums Management and Communication at HTW Berlin University of Applied Sciences. She holds both a Bachelor and Master in Art History from the Sorbonne University, Paris. Bayan Hilles participated in the SAWA Museum Studies Program in 2023 and served as a Student Assistant at SAWA from 2023-24.

HOW IS COMMUNITY UNDERSTOOD AT SAWA?

While we don't have a fixed definition of 'community', there are key aspects that characterise how community is shaped and practised within SAWA. These aspects reflect our collective understanding and experience with SAWA, and in this essay, I will address each one from my perspective as a participant in the 2023 SAWA group.

BOTTOM-UP APPROACH:

Community at SAWA is built on a bottom-up approach to knowledge exchange. The aim is to maintain—to the greatest possible extent—a flat hierarchy that allows participants and facilitators to engage in mutual learning. Participants are not just passive recipients but active contributors, co-shaping the programme according to their needs. This is why we don't have 'lecturers' in the SAWA community. Instead, we have facilitators who guide rather than lecture and learn from participants each year.

DIVERSE GROUP:

The SAWA community is notably diverse, with participants from various countries across the MENA region and Europe who span a range of age groups and museum disciplines. This diversity enriches the learning experience and brings together a wide spectrum of perspectives and expertise. Participants gain insights into different ways of thinking and working, which enhances their ability to approach museum practice with a more inclusive, holistic perspective. This transcultural exchange not only makes SAWA a vibrant community of museum professionals but also promotes cultural sensitivity within the greater museum space.

TOGETHERNESS AND COLLABORATION:

Togetherness and collaboration are at the heart of the SAWA community, driving the learning experience. Collective discussions, hands-on group exercises, and collaborative projects encourage participants to work together, co-creating ideas while unlearning and deconstructing 'official narratives'. This collaborative spirit fosters a network of museum professionals who continue to learn and support each other even after the programme ends.

COMMON GOAL:

The SAWA community is united by a shared commitment to transforming museums into more inclusive and accessible spaces. Members actively work towards unlearning and deconstructing preconceptions, dominant narratives, and social conditioning that can perpetuate biases or create blind spots in museum practice. This common goal drives participants to critically rethink their approach to museum practices. By challenging traditional frameworks and embracing diverse perspectives, the SAWA community strives to ensure that museums offer representation to groups that have been historically marginalised.

LANGUAGE(S):

Languages play a significant part in the SAWA community. While English serves as the official language of the programme, the mother tongues of participants, such as Arabic, German, and Spanish, to name just a few, naturally weave into our interactions and communication styles. The diverse linguistic backgrounds of SAWA community members are highlighted in projects like the SAWA Glossary, which bridges linguistic gaps and enhances mutual understanding within the community.



Majlis at Sharjah, SAWA group of 2023.

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MAJLIS:

A central practice of the SAWA community is the Majlis. The Majlis, which means ‘sitting place’ in Arabic, is a cultural and social space where community members gather to discuss topics and exchange news. Recognised by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage, Majlis practice has historically played a key role in transferring and preserving oral culture. At SAWA, participants host and lead their own Majlis. This gives us a space to discuss relevant questions about our museum praxis, share insights, and brainstorm solutions to common challenges.

VALUES:

We strive to uphold the values of mutual listening, respecting others’ perspectives, and fostering togetherness. These values form the foundation of how we interact and collaborate, ensuring that our community remains inclusive and supportive.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE PART OF THE SAWA COMMUNITY?

My dual role in the SAWA community, first as a participant in the 2023 group and later as a student assistant responsible for managing the programme's social media platforms, has given me a unique perspective. It has allowed me to experience SAWA from multiple angles, engaging directly in the learning process while helping to communicate the essence of the SAWA programme and community to a broader audience.

Being part of the SAWA community resonates with the various facets that shape my identity. As a person of Palestinian origin who grew up in Abu Dhabi and has lived in Europe for the past ten years, I have navigated multiple cultural and linguistic landscapes. The SAWA community mirrors this complexity, offering a space where all parts of my identity can be expressed in their nuances. This shared frame of reference allows me both to draw from my biographical experiences during our collaborative work and reflect on the ways in which my background influences my understanding of museum practices.

The community's linguistic diversity has played a significant role in my experience. It has allowed me to express myself in different languages and often switch between Arabic, English, French, and German. This deepened my connection with my fellow participants, transforming languages from barriers to bridges.

Moreover, I find a sense of belonging in the SAWA community rooted in our shared vision for museum work. This community brings together individuals who are passionate about creating change and challenging existing power structures in museums. Many of us face similar challenges in our personal and professional lives, and realising this nurtures a sense of solidarity. Through SAWA, I've made connections with a supportive network of like-minded individuals who inspire and motivate each other, reinforcing our collective sense of purpose.

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES OF KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

SAWA is an invaluable environment for personal and professional growth. The programme heightened my sensitivity to ethical questions in museum work and deepened my understanding of critical issues like representation, decolonisation, participatory curation, and intersectionality. Particularly inspiring has been the exposure to curatorial strategies and ways of collecting in countries in the MENA region. This exposure has broadened my perspective and introduced me to practices that challenge the Western canon in museums. One particularly strong example is the Sharjah Biennial, which challenges the practice of placing national pavilions all in the same location, usually the city centre. Instead, it utilises unconventional venues, such as old factory buildings, former kindergartens, and sites on the outskirts of the city.

In addition to gaining theoretical knowledge, I was learning and working alongside museum professionals, which provided me with enriching practical insights. These experiences helped bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world applications, illustrating how theoretical concepts are implemented in practice and what challenges might arise in the process. Working with professionals from different disciplines within the museum field has allowed me to engage in a rich knowledge exchange with experts in curation, provenance research, collection management, and audience development from different types of museums and cultural institutions. This interdisciplinary knowledge exchange has encouraged me to adopt a holistic approach to tackling complex issues within the museum sector.

Engaging in discussions with peers from different regions and cultures has enhanced my ability to navigate complex cultural dynamics, a crucial skill for museum work in a globalised world. The diversity of perspectives within SAWA teaches participants to navigate differences constructively, honing conflict resolution skills and the ability to mediate discussions in a respectful manner. Working with a diverse group of participants in SAWA has taught me the importance of adaptability and flexibility, skills that are essential in the ever-evolving field of museum management.

GLOBAL THREADS: CONNECTING SAWA 2023 THROUGH CULTURAL X COLLABS

Our SAWA group of 2023 will stay connected for the next two years through the Cultural x Collabs project initiated by the Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin during its renovation closure. For this project, a Doppelgänger of the iconic 17th-century dragon carpet was created and cut into 100 fragments that were distributed to individuals worldwide to inspire cultural dialogue and exchange. Each person who receives a fragment passes it on to the next



person participating in the project. By the time the Museum for Islamic Arts reopens, these fragments will have travelled the world, changing hands and inspiring cultural dialogue. Each piece serves as a connecting thread between co-creators, a link that fosters shared experiences.

We were fortunate to receive Fragment 99 during the vernissage of Cultural x Collabs in September 2023. Fragment 99 will embark on a journey, travelling across the countries of participants from the 2023 SAWA group, creating and collecting stories along the way. These stories will be documented and shared on SAWA's social media and the museum's online portal, highlighting the ongoing impact of our SAWA journey.

Cultural x Collabs opening ceremony,
September 2023.

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The journey begins in Berlin and will continue through various cultural landscapes, symbolising the interconnectedness and ongoing collaboration within our community.

Yet while this journey embodies connection and exchange, it is essential to acknowledge how the reality of global inequities surface in this project. Some participants, particularly those living in countries like Somalia and Palestine, are unable to fully participate due to war in their countries. DHL, the logistics partner responsible for facilitating the carpet's travels around the world, does not operate in war or conflict zones, meaning that some participants don't have access to its services. This highlights the challenges and limitations that come with global participative initiatives. This accessibility barrier underscores the complexities that many of our peers face daily and reminds us that participation and inclusion in museum work are deeply intertwined with social justice.

Despite these challenges, I believe that Cultural x Collabs encapsulates the spirit of SAWA, where collaboration and cultural exchange are at the core of our community. Coordinating the smooth transfer of Fragment 99 across different countries necessitates clear communication between participants. This project also demands organisational skills to track the fragment's journey, manage the stories that emerge, and document them effectively for both social media and the museum's online portal. Each SAWA member contributes their unique perspective and narrative as the fragment passes through their hands, adding to the collective tapestry of experiences that define our community.

In many ways, Cultural x Collabs mirrors the ethos of SAWA itself, a space where diverse voices come together and the boundaries of museum practice are expanded through collaborative transcultural exchanges. Through Cultural x Collabs, we continue to build on the relationships and knowledge fostered during our time in SAWA, ensuring that the connections we made and the insights we gained will continue to evolve and resonate long after the programme concludes.

THE SAWA GLOSSARY

Rebecca Stoll

Rebecca Stoll has been working for the organisation team at SAWA Museum Studies Program since 2021. She holds a Master in Museums Management and Communication from HTW Berlin University of Applied Sciences. Since early 2024, she has managed Galerie Bernau, a public contemporary art gallery. Her special interests in museum work are community museums and international museology.

When I started my master's in museum management and communication at HTW Berlin, I soon learned about SAWA. It was such an attractive programme that students were applying for the master's explicitly because they were interested in SAWA.

But then COVID-19 hit and made our studies more of an online experience. During that time, I started working as a student assistant for the Department of Museology. In May 2021, I was offered a position at SAWA. I was delighted to become part of the programme, and I joined at a time when the programme was undergoing major changes due to the pandemic. During the second year of the pandemic, the team, with its unique gift for keeping the project alive, had developed an online SAWA. Thus, the glossary project was born.

Developing glossaries with the aim of contextualising a term within a certain field instead of giving a manifested definition became a trend in the progressive museum world, and there are many examples of museums that developed glossaries.[1] I embraced the idea from the start, not only because I am interested in working with language, but also because I immediately thought about the great potential of an Arabic-English-German museum glossary, which is certainly unique.





Contemplating terms

The idea to create such a glossary was not totally new. Yet it only became a concrete part of our work when, due to the pandemic, we finally had time to realise it because the normal programme could not take place. It was the perfect moment to lay the groundwork for a long-term project, and the idea was to implement it into the programme from that point on. The team had fruitful discussions and shared their individual goals and questions for the glossary.[2]

One very important basic question was, of course: Whose knowledge does the glossary represent? It was never our aim to give a 'correct' definition—whatever that would mean. Participants were encouraged to create entries for terms they wanted to investigate further and provide their personal definition based on their working experience. For Susan Kamel, this is consistent with the idea of decolonising knowledge and showcasing new formats and methods of knowledge. Gundula Avenarius formulated the following leitmotif: 'I give you an example of how I understand this term from my specific practice'.

Other questions followed: Who is the audience connected to? How should the glossary be used? Presumably, the readers of the terms on the website are people interested in the SAWA programme and professional exchange between European and MENA museum practitioners. For Alya Burhaima, the main objective is to create the first publication in which East and West engage in conversation with one another on the topic of museums. For John-Paul Sumner, the purpose is to give participants with a background in museums the confidence to explore what a given word means to them, despite their prior knowledge of how these words are already used in different circumstances and museums. Our contributions show that we don't have to be bound by other people's definitions, that people can define things themselves. Alya Al Mulla opens an even wider framework, insisting that the questions the glossary 'answers' can be bigger: how to be human, how to avoid prejudice and accept perspectives and the other, how to welcome new voices in museums and reach out to them. This is the basic idea of SAWA: to accept the other, embrace our differences, and most importantly, listen to one another. This listening is also central for Danielle Kujten. She defines the glossary as learning and work in progress; it should be about the discussions held and the search for mutual understanding.

Along with all these reflections comes the question of format. It was clear from the start that the glossary should be open. A written text is what might first spring to mind, but it could just as well be enriched or replaced by other media, such as audio, video, or creative tools to engage users. And that brings us to the question of how to publish and show the entries as well as reflections on 'curating' the glossary. Indeed, the glossary itself can be read as a museum.

Another major topic was language. In SAWA, English is our common language. Most participants speak either Arabic or German as their first language, but some speak others. The glossary should reflect the diversity of



languages along with the opportunities and challenges of operating in different languages. Participants sharing their associations with a term in their first language and debating how to translate and explain it in English became a beautiful part of assembling the glossary. It was one of the main ways in which participants deepened their insight on their term and discovered its personal meanings.

All that remained was for the glossary to be assembled. In 2021, a group of SAWA alumni worked together to add the first terms. They chose these from a preselection voted on by facilitators and based on a list of terms collected over many years. This was done in a Padlet, which allowed everybody to comment and add thoughts under certain terms and then choose a term in a dynamic way. The alumni were asked to work in groups of Arabic and German speakers. It was helpful that these participants knew the SAWA programme and were motivated to deepen and extend their SAWA experience. During that year, they met regularly in online sessions and face to face by appointment to work on their terms. In October, we had the chance to meet in person in Sharjah. We used this opportunity to finalise most essays with direct feedback and create additional material. Afterwards, the terms were published on the SAWA website. This presented a couple of challenges, as the website needed to be prepared and new templates created. Eventually, we decided to embed the glossary in the main menu and have individual buttons on the glossary page that linked to every entry for one term. That allowed us to integrate documents, videos, Miro boards, or Padlets with links.

رعاية	التغير	GEMEINSCHAFT
CON	CURA	إنهاء الاستعمار في المتحف
حو	DIVERSITÄT	GEFÜHLE
ENGAGE	العدالة	HERSTO
ID	الذاكرة غير الم	INTERPRE
INTERSECTIONA	KNOWLEDGE	MINDFULNESS
	ERZÄHLUNG	AUSHANDLU
TEIL	وجهة نظر	POWER IN
متلائم	CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES	

[Glossary homepage](#)

GLOSSARY WEBPAGE

After this dedicated session with the SAWA alumni, the goal was to implement the glossary in the programme curriculum. Starting in 2022, every participant handed in a glossary entry after a full year in SAWA. The process started with the applications. Applicants were asked to name a term within their museum practice that they wanted to investigate further. Of course, they could change their selection over the course of the year but including and announcing it from the start was a way of familiarising participants with the idea of the glossary early on.

In 2022, we had the special honour of presenting the glossary project at the German Pavilion of Expo in Dubai.[3] A huge thank you goes to the team of the Sharjah Museum Authority for this wonderful opportunity to present SAWA

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to a broader audience. As for the glossary on the website, we opted to show different entries for each term much like a blog. The basic structure remains the same, but each year has its own unique characteristics.

SAWA keeps evolving with each new year and so does the glossary work. In 2024, participants received feedback and finalised their choice of term during the Berlin session in May. They subsequently met for online sessions between Berlin and Sharjah to present the current status of their glossary entry as it connected to their use of the term within their museum work.

We had a series of wonderful and impressive presentations and felt like this was a successful way of encouraging participants to deepen their reflections on their term and personal work early on. Participants requested ways of helping each other and giving feedback while outlining and creating their entries, so we also created a Padlet and a folder where everybody could work in collaborative documents. These newly introduced methods made the glossary work dynamic and engaged the whole group in the process.

To summarise our work to date, I believe we have made great progress in integrating the glossary project into the SAWA concept. We aimed to be flexible, respond to participants' wishes, suggestions, and needs, and build a dynamic lexicon with sustainable potential. The glossary was weaved into the programme so that it could continue to grow in the future. We hope it can serve as an example for collaborative museum practice, as it helps to understand differences, shift perspectives, and showcase the complexity we face as museum practitioners.



REFERENCES

[1] For inspiration have a look at Carmen Mörsch: <https://diskrit-kubi.net/glossar/> or Tate Modern's Art Terms: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms>

[2] For this part, I had access to a transcript from a team meeting held in December 2020.

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E__rjh7DeaM

