



## **Bridging the Gap: A “Shared Life” Program of the Ruth Youth Wing for Art Education**

**German Friends of the Israel museum**

**Final Report 2019/20**



## About the Israel Museum

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, is Israel's foremost cultural institution and one of the world's leading encyclopedic museums with wide-ranging collections of art and archaeology of world-class status, numbering some 500,000 objects. Its three curatorial wings – Archaeology; Jewish Art and Life; and Fine Arts – offer a dynamic program of some 20 new exhibitions a year, and a rich annual program of publications, educational activities, and special cultural events which reach out to every sector of the population, attracting close to one million visitors annually.

[www.imj.org.il](http://www.imj.org.il)

## About the Ruth Youth Wing for Art Education

The Museum's educational arm, the Ruth Youth Wing for Art Education is renowned internationally as a model for art education in a museum setting, providing a dynamic and diverse program of exhibitions, activities, and special events intended to deepen the connection between the Museum and the public. The Youth Wing aims to make the Museum accessible and enjoyable for visitors from all walks of life, carrying an inclusive educational and cultural message to all sectors of the population, regardless of age, background, religion, ethnicity, or special needs. Its innovative programs cater to more than 100,000 children annually from schools and communities throughout Israel.

## The Current Situation

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak in Israel and worldwide, since March 15 and until further notice, our Museum has been closed to the public in compliance with the instructions of the Israeli government. Once the Museum received notification of the closure of all cultural institutions in Israel, we were forced to immediately stop operating all of our educational programs, and our staff members were no longer able to come into work. The Museum is now operating with a minimal staff of some forty essential employees (10% of the Museum staff) who are working round the clock to safeguard the Museum and its treasures.

In this report, we are pleased to provide you with a detailed annual report about **Bridging the Gap**, our flagship program that we implement with the generous support of the **German Friends of the Israel Museum**, and to share with you our thoughts about the new reality and the future of the program.

## The Bridging the Gap Program: Introduction

The Museum's "Shared Life" programs include the flagship "Bridging the Gap" project which brings Arab and Jewish youth together to work on joint art projects. As its name suggests, Bridging the Gap, which is generously supported by the German

Friends of the Israel as well as by the HSS Foundation, utilizes the universal language of art to bring disparate groups together who might not otherwise meet in their everyday life. Arab and Jewish youth meet in the Museum's galleries and art studios, and work together on joint art projects. All meetings, held in a welcoming, friendly, and safe manner, are conducted in both Hebrew and Arabic. The combination of a warm and safe environment, and a prolonged period of time to explore art and creativity together, fosters mutual understanding, respect, and tolerance.



## **The Program's Goals**

On an individual level, the program aims to encourage and facilitate interaction and connection between Jewish and Arab participants, breaking down negative stereotypes on both sides. This goal is achieved by the participants working together in pairs and small groups, through social games, and through conversation between the participants. The children also enjoy an annual field trip together.

On a cultural level, the program aims to expand the horizons of the participants by exposing them to the Museum's exhibitions and collections which traverse world culture. This year the group was able to tour the galleries of African Art; Art of the Americas; Jewish Art and Life; and Islamic Art, in our Fine Arts Wing; as well as Jewish, Islamic, and Christian mosaics in our Archaeology Wing. Last but not least, they were able to visit and interact with the Youth Wing's annual theme exhibition for 2019, *BAUHAUS: our play, our party, our work*, which celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Bauhaus School through a hands-on interactive presentation that explored this unique art school as a birthplace of modern art and creativity.



On a creative level, the program develops the children's creative skills and artistic abilities, and fosters their appreciation for the creative process. Through personal expression in the visual arts, and by learning and practicing diverse art techniques and mediums, the children are exposed to a newfound world of imagination and possibilities.



## 2019/20 Program Overview

The project is managed and supervised by a committee of Jewish and Arab school principals, as well as senior professional staff of the Youth Wing.

The meetings took place at the Israel Museum on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Commencing in mid-October 2019, the program was supposed to continue through the beginning of April 2020, but was forced to close in mid-March due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2019 and 2020, 47 children participated in the Bridging the Gap program. This year, the staff built an art-educational curriculum around the theme of **"Animals."** Meetings took place in the Ruth Youth Wing's classrooms and in the Museum's galleries, combining hands-on artistic workshops with guided tours of the Museum's galleries and exhibitions. The project was led and taught by Jewish and Arab artists, alongside experienced, professional educators from the Youth Wing.

On Wednesdays, students from the Agron, Yeffe Nof, and Silwan elementary schools in Jerusalem met from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. On Thursdays, students from the Keshet,

Pola Ben Gurion, Tali Gilo, and Beit Tzafafa elementary schools in Jerusalem met from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. The students arrived by organized transportation, escorted by an adult counselor. Part of the weekly routine included shared light refreshments upon arrival at the Youth Wing.

The first sessions were devoted to the children making each other's acquaintance. Much emphasis is made at this stage of ensuring the correct Hebrew or Arabic pronunciations of the names of the participants. As the children learned each other's names, they began to feel more at ease. The instructors led ice-breaking games and activities with the children, in order to establish a playful atmosphere and positive energy. As the meetings progressed, the children explored the Museum's galleries, and sketched individually or in pairs, focusing each time on a different artistic genre. It is important to note that, unlike a regular class visit to the Museum, there was less emphasis on verbal explanations or communication. In most sessions, the children spent half their time in the gallery, with the second part devoted to artistic creativity in the art studio. As the year progressed, the activities in the workshops gradually challenged the children to work as a group on a more serious art project. As the images accompanying this report illustrate, this year the children sketched animals in the galleries, eventually leading into their final project of creating large-scale animal sculptures from recycled materials. Another special treat and unifying experience was a group field trip to the Jerusalem Zoo, which, as the photographs taken during the visit show, combined sketching with much laughter.

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 crisis, we were unable to complete the group art project, nor invite the students and parents to our traditional festive end-of-year event. We still hope to be able, once the Museum reopens, to send them evaluation questionnaires and we will share with you their written feedback and evaluation at a later date.

## **Positive Outcomes**

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to our German Friends for partnering with us in this important and optimistic educational endeavor. Thanks to your friendship and generosity during the past 25 years of the program's existence, we have witnessed quintessential and lasting transformations in the children, and through the children, in their families and communities. The stereotypes and prejudices with which they entered the program were either diminished or negated. As the year progresses, we see the children adopt a new language of visual literacy to interact with "the other" in special and unforeseen ways. With every student attending, this program positively influences some of the challenging patterns that are often found in Israeli society.

Despite the inherent challenges, the children who participated in the program got along well and established good interpersonal relationships. The diverse educational staff worked in harmony, also serving as a role model for the children for good

teamwork and cooperation. The visit to the zoo was the climax of this year's activity, involving plenty of laughter and creation of shared memories. The selection of the theme of animals, and the choice of the technique of sculpting with scrap-iron/found objects, proved very successful, as evidenced by the children's enthusiasm and level of collaboration.

## **Challenges**

Ironically, the great success of last year's project turned out to be also problematic, since the positive feedback of the parents of the children who attended the program attracted much attention and ultimately led to widespread political objection to its very existence which greatly challenged its current operation. In the Arab village of Silwan, there were objections and requests made for its cancellation. The principal of the school in Silwan finally obtained parental approval for the participation of the children in the project only a week before the beginning of the school year.

Towards the middle of the project, we experienced a dropout of Jewish participants, so we had to quickly recruit new pupils from the Tali School in the Gilo neighborhood of Jerusalem. Additionally, one of the Jewish teachers and one Arab teacher had to leave the program due to personal reasons, so we had to slightly alter the make-up of the educational team as well.









## Staff Feedback on the 2020 Program

### **Yusuf Dewick:**

*"There were a few struggles during this year's program: the rather frequent absences among both Arab and Jewish children led to a reduced number of participants in the program as well as a decrease in the overall number of the group. Despite this, we were able to melt the barrier between the kids through the application of the Animals theme in the curriculum. The theme that was selected this year helped a lot in creating this positive outcome. I would suggest increasing the activities before and after the classes and sessions, because, according to the kids, they liked these activities. I sincerely hope that we will be able to finish the project in a celebratory manner, but first I wish to share my hope that we will meet soon, all of us healthy.*

*Thanks, Yusuf."*

### **Klill:**

*"First and foremost, I think that this is an amazing program, especially in the way that it creates an encounter between the kids through art. The component of the games in the meetings adds a lot to the formation of the group. After this year, I have some thoughts about how to incorporate art even into the initial acquaintance between the kids. I think we could benefit a lot if we could join Ahmed [the Israel Museum educator in charge of the Arabic language guides] so we could introduce the group to Islamic Art as well as Jewish objects.*

*I think the recruitment of participants should start earlier, and maybe we could think of a more attractive name for the program, one that might appeal more to the kids. I have many ideas about how [to improve] the communication between all the different people*



*working together on the program. Maybe even a WhatsApp group that includes the kids, guides, and volunteers.*

*I feel this is an important and well invested program. Personally, I am very glad that we have a professional psychologist accompanying us. I think it would be great if we could use her help to upgrade discussions with the kids and deal with even more challenging issues.*

*I think it would be really important to finish the project and say goodbye properly, maybe even finish the large-scale animals ...it is such a pity because we only need to paint them.... 😞*

**Hadas Levy - Coach, Psychologist, and certified Organization Consultant:**  
**Summary of the 2019/20 Activity:**

2020 presented many challenges to the consistent work of the program, but ultimately it was an international pandemic that brought the program to its abrupt ending ahead of time. Unfortunately, not only an external virus threatened the program, but also many inner conflicts that sadly lie at the core of Israeli reality challenged the instructors and students, and the group's framework and unity. I remember especially one meeting that an Arab teacher arrived very late because she was held up by soldiers at a checkpoint for a long period of time. The teacher was very upset and shared with the group her accumulating feelings of frustration, helplessness, and resentment. This situation is a small example of the need for a secure space and safe setting to bring up these kinds of emotions, and also shows the potential for dialogue, and the importance and healing nature of the group's ability to express empathy towards the teacher and share with her the complexity of the Israeli reality, a rough one that sadly shows hardly any sign or promise for change. Small moments of humanity, friendship, and compassion occur during the sessions in the Museum; these moments bring hope and happen between the Arab and Jewish children, and among the staff. The framework that allows a psychological supervision over these occurrences helps the staff encourage dialogue and safe conversations. Together this navigates the kids, as individuals and as a group, towards an awareness of the complexity and challenge of these moments and helps assert their confidence in their ability to be part of this meaningful dialogue in the future as well.

**Summary and Final Remarks**

- This year, there were 47 students (22 Jews and 25 Arabs) in the program.
- The program was taught by 7 artist-educators.
- The program was assisted by seven 10th-Grade students from the Beit Tzafafa High School, who worked as volunteers as part of their personal commitment duties at high school.
- The program ended on March 12, 2020, following which the Museum was forced to close its doors to the public, in line with the Israel Ministry of Health's COVID-19 restrictions and regulations.

- From the program's start in October 2019, until its end in March, 19 classes were held.
- The final project of the course was a large-scale group sculpture of animals made from recycled materials, which still has to be completed.

We are already working on our program for the 2020/21 school year and would be truly grateful for the German friend organization continued support in the project.

Should the current health restrictions accompany us to the next school year as well, we will consider creating an alternative remote learning system – perhaps even a program with components that integrate digital media into the art education curriculum.

Until we can meet again, we wish you all the best – stay safe and healthy.

Kind regards,

Eldad Shaaltiel  
Acting Chief Curator  
Ruth Youth Wing for Art Education  
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem