

BRITISH MUSEUM INTERNATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMME 2019 FINAL REPORT

Cataline Cavelier Adarve

Head of Intangible Heritage, Instituto Patrimonio Cultural de Bogota

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When I first received the news that I would take part in the International Training Programme at the British Museum I was, naturally, very much excited. I was not sure exactly what to expect, but knew it would be an experience to remember. Later, when the first day finally arrived and the details about the programme became clearer, my excitement grew and I had the feeling that the experience would rise above my expectations. Now I can say that it did. From digging into specific exhibition projects, like the Manga exhibition



or the Albukhary Gallery of the Islamic World, to learning about risk management in museums or documentation systems, the programme offered a broad overview of the British Museum and the UK museum world in a considerably short span of time. The ITP proved to be more than a course about museums. It was a rich experience that opened up learning paths for me in many different levels: not only in terms of specific technical aspects of museum work, but also with regard to thinking about museum challenges today. In terms of getting a deeper understanding of my career possibilities and choices, gaining confidence as a museum and heritage professional, and personally, asserting my ability to create long lasting relationships with colleagues from around the world. Last, but certainly not least, becoming part of the ITP network was topped by the opportunity to get involved with the Santo Domingo Centre of Excellence for Latin American Research and have a close look at how this inspiring project is being shaped.

When I started considering the lessons learned during the programme and how these will influence my work as a museum and heritage professional, a core idea that came to mind was the question about tradition and innovation. In my job managing intangible heritage projects and programmes, there is a constant quest for finding the right balance between maintaining traditions from the past and understanding their need to transform in order to endure over time. During my time on the ITP I reflected on this issue and learnt that it is not alien to the British Museum and other UK museum institutions, such as National Museums of Northern Ireland (NMNI)—the partner institution where I was lucky to spend ten days during the summer. At the BM, this idea struck me when learning about the Albukhary Gallery of the Islamic World. For me it was enlightening to understand the

decision-making process behind the exhibition design as well as the use of digital media in the gallery, since it meant being innovative with aspects such as light design and video resources, while keeping in mind the goal of the exhibition in terms of keeping visitors engaged with the museum collections for thirty years to come. I believe this thought will certainly influence my decisions when participating in future exhibition projects.

Museum management for sustainability was another aspect in which I asked myself about this balance. I had the chance to learn about recent management orientations from senior figures at the NMNI, where a restructuring process is trying to make the organisation more sustainable and business oriented. This offered a valuable perspective about the challenges of balancing a well-established organisational culture, with the need to make the organisation more sustainable without compromising its core mission as a cultural and educational institution. I must confess, it is still difficult for me to pair the words museum and business in the same sentence, but I now understand the need to be innovative for managing organisations that face financial challenges in every corner of the world. This approach to the organisational transformation process at NMNI also relates to the barriers that I might face in trying to apply some of the aspects learnt during the ITP programme in the short term: there is an organisational culture in museums and in my home institution that is difficult to change and to challenge from a non-senior position. I don't have an answer yet as to how I will overcome this barrier but will make an effort to break it down into simpler actions.

If I consider more specific or “doable” lessons that I might consider in current and future projects, I would point out to simple but effective aspects, such as the idea of defining



“gateway objects” and making them stand out through design or making exhibition concept proposals as brief and to the point as possible. Pushing for stronger evaluation of projects and programmes is also a lesson to learn from the ITP, an issue that was stressed both at the BM and the NMNI. An immediate barrier for implementing robust evaluation processes is certainly the lack of funding but also the lack of a serious evaluation culture in public

institutions in my country, where results tend to be measured in a somehow superficial and strictly quantitative way. However, I do believe I can take small but immediate steps to designing indicators and simple evaluation systems that allow for improvement in the near future.

The time I spent learning about the Americas department projects gave light on a whole different set of aspects and, of course, it opened up the possibility of learning about the Santo Domingo Centre of Excellence for Latin American Research. Not surprisingly, this experience allowed me to find a space within the ITP to actually think about my current practice related to intangible heritage management and its connection to the museum spaces. I have an interest in exploring this relationship and thought maybe I wouldn't have the chance to do so during the ITP. Finding myself in a room where a Uitoto elder from the Colombian Amazon was interpreting and healing objects from the BM collection in London was, to say the least, unexpected. This encounter, which was part of a collaboration project of the Santo Domingo Centre, was enlightening about possibilities of establishing a dialogue between the museum collections and the living cultures associated to them today, while remaining critical and aware of the limits entailed in such conversation. Following up on these thoughts, I will actively seek to create opportunities for exploring and discussing the place of intangible heritage within Colombian museums, starting at the Museum of Bogotá with a lecture that will take place next October.



Taking part in the 2019 ITP also meant professional and personal growth for me. Actively participating in the lectures, hands-on activities, networking opportunities and relating to my peers, revealed a confident and mature angle of my personality and professional. I am not used to being a talkative and extroverted person in a group. This discovery became even more relevant when I had the chance to take part in a leadership specialist session, where I had the opportunity to think of myself as potential leader, considering both leader traits that

are strong in my personality, as well as others that I can foster from now on. “What if”¹ I think of myself as a leader? This is powerful idea that was not very clear in my mind before. It represents a starting point for my personal and professional development; it is certainly a long-term project, but can also be materialised in immediate concrete actions in my current role as a team manager. For example, it is possible for me to create more spaces for feedback within the team to help me be more self-aware and take immediate steps for improvement.

On these lines, it was also of great value to hear from Colin Catney, Chief Operating Officer at the NMNI who, coming from the private sector, outlined a particular feature to museum and heritage institutions in relation to staff that have a certain vocation for their job, and thus are committed in a special way to their organisation. As a team manager and leader, I understand now it is fundamental to recognise this, to foster it and to understand its power for organisational growth.

I have outlined in this report a series of aspects that I have reflected upon since I came back from the ITP and that represent fundamental learnings for me. However, one of the most meaningful aspects of the programme is certainly becoming a member of a global network of museum and heritage professionals. The opportunity to share the experience with 22 other people from around the world was inspiring, to say the least. It was inspiring to meet such strong and determined women that work in contexts where gender equality is a much more difficult issue than it is for me. It was also important to find that museum workers find similar challenges around the world, for example, in terms of assuming a variety of roles where there is not enough staff to cover all the aspects necessary for running a museum.

In my view, there was not enough time and opportunities to share each other’s experiences and knowledge about museum and heritage work during the summer programme. Now, it is to us to seek such opportunities through actively participating in the ITP network. There are endless possibilities for devising collaboration projects with other ITP fellows and to stay connected through social networks and the ITP blog. Going through my ITP lecture notes I found a sentence with yellow highlighter: “Museums are about how people have learnt to live together.” I didn’t manage to find the author of this idea but now it feels appropriate for describing what I believe the ITP is ultimately fostering through continuously strengthening a global network of engaged museum and heritage professionals. And it is certainly something that I want to be part of.

¹ I am quoting Neal Spencer, who led a specialist session on leadership. He recommended starting conversations about museum future scenarios with “What if” sentences as tool for encouraging creativity and imagination.

Being the first Colombian and the only Latin-American fellow in the 2019 course feels like a great challenge. Thanks to the support and trust of the Americas Department team and the Santo Domingo family, I have now the responsibility and exciting opportunity of becoming a regional advocate for the ITP global network and marking out the route for fruitful and stronger links between UK and Latin American museums and heritage organisations.

