

The Jewish Museum of Australia

AN INTERVIEW WITH REBECCA FORGASZ

The Jewish Museum of Australia was established in 1982. Rebecca Forgasz spoke to INSITE about how the Museum explores Jewish history and traditions for all of their visitors.

Is faith a central issue at the JMA or is it more about history and culture?

I don't consider it to be about faith *per se*. Obviously, you can't look at what Judaism is about without looking at belief as a central part of the tradition and what drives it. But Jewishness is also about more than faith and there are many people who feel strongly Jewish but are not 'believers' in a faith-based sense. We are open to the wider public and want to welcome all visitors so they can gain an understanding of this fuller picture of Jewishness. We also think it is important that the Museum is open to Jewish people who are not religious but who still want to connect with Jewish culture. The Museum is a great place to do that because it doesn't have expectations or judgments about who can visit. It is a place where people can find a way to learn and connect with something even if they are not religious. And if they are religious, they can learn things about Judaism in a museum that they may not learn in their day-to-day observance or in a synagogue.

A recent demographic study of the Jewish community showed that they are becoming less institutionally affiliated but I think that there is still a need for belonging and connection. One of our responses to this has been to do more programming around Jewish holidays. These appeal to Jewish audiences who would like to celebrate Jewish holidays but not in traditional ways or places, as well as non-Jewish audiences who want to participate out of curiosity. There are a variety of reasons why visitors might feel comfortable in this environment, such as couples that are from different faiths who would like their children to connect with their Jewish background. Also, there are



some people who have grown up in a traditional Jewish environment who only have the understanding that they got in primary school, so they find a place like a museum can offer them an opportunity to discover some profound meaning and ideas in the religion as adults that they couldn't access as a child.

Do you think that the sense of belonging that a visitor can experience in a specialist museum is important?

I do think it's important and something to aim for, but how much they find that sense of belonging might depend on how much familiarity they already have with the culture and community. Sometimes it niggles me that museums are essentially about objects and images that live behind glass or in displays. For Jewish people seeking that sense of belonging and connection, that could almost be alienating. Objects do, of course, have an aesthetic value and connect to a specific provenance and history, and our museum quite rightly presents them in those contexts. But they also have a more immediate, visceral link to living rituals and spirituality and people's daily lives. The education and cultural programs that we do around the collections are really important in bringing them to life and overcoming any distance that displays may create.

Your schools program is well established, where do these audiences come from?

The school education program attracts more students from non-Jewish schools because numerically there are more of them. Students from non-Jewish schools come for reasons linked to their curriculum, perhaps to get broader contextual information about Jews and

Below: Visitors taking a close look at one of the displays in the *Calling Australia Home* gallery. The Jewish Museum of Australia is custodian of over 20,000 objects and stories. Photos Jewish Museum of Australia.

Judaism if they are studying the Holocaust for example, or because they are studying a novel with a Jewish theme. In Catholic schools there is a subject about the Jewish context in the life of Jesus, and we have recently developed a specific program to support the teaching of this subject. Jewish schools do come as well, but we have to think about what a museum can offer them that is different from what they already do in the classroom. Having hands-on access to the collection plays a big role for those students.

What connection do you have to synagogues?

The founder of the Museum was a rabbi and our original premises were at the Melbourne Hebrew Congregation's premises in Toorak. Since 1995, we have been located opposite the St Kilda synagogue and tours to the synagogue are included in the cost of admission to the Museum. So we do have a standing relationship with that synagogue, but it is educational, rather than representative of a religious affiliation. There are some rabbis who use the Museum as part of their own educational programming; I have even taught some classes about Jewish art and ritual here at the Museum for a group at a particular synagogue who are converting to Judaism.

Historically art and religion are bound, do you collect contemporary art?

We do collect contemporary art, yes, and we have a strong history of exhibiting contemporary art by Jewish and non-Jewish artists working on themes relevant to Jewish identity. I think the inclusion of contemporary art is the thing that most surprises people when they visit. It is the means to open discussion about a diverse range of subjects and it has also given rise to some of our greatest controversies! It's a really important part of our programming, because we want this museum to deal not just with Jewish history but also with contemporary Jewish identity and contemporary art is an important way of dealing with those issues.

Rebecca Forgasz, Director & CEO, Jewish Museum of Australia. The Museum is located at 26 Alma Rd, St Kilda and is open Tuesdays to Thursdays and Sundays. For more visit: <http://www.jewishmuseum.com.au>