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# *Cultus*

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TOURISM ACROSS CULTURES  
Accessibility in Tourist Communication  
2016, Issue 9, Volume 2

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# CULTUS

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## The Intercultural Question and the Interpreting Professions

2016, Issue 9, Volume 2

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*the Journal of Intercultural Mediation and Communication*

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## **Enriched Descriptive Guides: a case for collaborative meaning-making in museums**

*Joselia Neves*

### *Abstract*

*By being open to the public, museums are making culture accessible to audiences that may, or may not, have the ability to engage with the exhibits given their background knowledge, their understanding of given curatorial approaches, or their social and personal profiles. In many museums around the world audio guides are used to provide information in multiple languages and styles, using different narrative approaches and, often, with specific audiences in view. Such audio guides are mainly informative, sometimes provide audio description for blind users and in the odd case bring distinguished voices – the museum director, the curator, the artist, or a celebrity – to inform the listener through a particular viewpoint. All these audio guides serve their purpose and are valuable tools that “guide” visitors in meaning-making, that is, however, rather passive.*

*This paper addresses how audio guides can benefit from and lead to enhanced museum experiences if their content and use is “enriched” in participatory ways. It takes the case of creating an enriched descriptive guide (EDG) for Features from Qatar, an artwork by the Qatari artist Jassim Zaini, to illustrate how this particular audio guide was scripted and re-scripted on the basis of knowledge gained during exploratory sessions with different stakeholders. The exercise allows us to conclude that EDGs best grow out of collaborative meaning-making and that they can stimulate engaging multisensory experiences by providing thinking prompts that fuel the senses, invite cognitive and/or physical exploration, and capture the uniqueness of the cultural context the guide relates to. It further illustrates the various steps taken towards creating a text that is simultaneously informative, expressive and operative (Reiss 1981) to arrive at a version that resonates with a wide range of users.*

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## 1. Introduction

A common activity when travelling to a new country as a tourist is visiting local heritage and museums in the expectation of finding relevant information about the region or aspects considered representative of the local people's most valued assets. Tourist attractions come in the guise of natural or built heritage, theme parks, and/or museums. Among museums, one will find as many types and curatorial stances as collections, intended audiences and interpretative approaches. In all cases, visitors are led to see culture through the "eyes" of a curatorial team that, with varying degrees of audience evaluation/consultation, has selected, interpreted and decided upon a mediation strategy that will inform and, perhaps, entertain or engage the visitor.

The growing interest in cultural tourism and the realization that it can be of vital importance to the development of local communities/regions/areas has taken to investing in making cultural heritage accessible to a growing range of visitors. In many cases, culture is seen as an asset of social and economic value that can be "consumed" by growing numbers of people. This commodification of culture for easy consumption has led to the application of interpretation/communication strategies that tend to fall within established parameters in more conservative or high-culture contexts, but that can become more creative. This is particularly true in contexts where experimentation and interpretation are seen as assets, and interaction is valued as an effective educational strategy. While big established museums in capitals around the world will have long queues of people wanting to visit their permanent or temporary exhibitions, in the present global climate, smaller lesser-known museums in remote places may be struggling to subsist and to attract visitors. Many turn to inventive strategies that may differentiate them from other cultural offerings and propose experiences that will draw both on tourists and on the local communities to explore and enjoy a cultural heritage that might not be known even to the locals.

The desire to make culture 'accessible' both to visiting and local audiences has led to curatorial, interpretative, and educational strategies that will stimulate visitors with different profiles by offering them information and experiences in ways that will be adequate to their personal needs and interests. Such offers come in the guise of interpretative media – labels, text panels, audiovisual materials such as films, or interactive devices, for instance – or through live tours or educational and social

events.

## 2. From *audio guides* to *enriched descriptive guides*

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, audio guides gained a significant position among museum media. These technology-based forms of mediation provide people with basic or detailed aural information about spaces, exhibits and other elements of interest in a specific venue. Expanding on what Schwarzer (2001) said about museum guides, Hornecker and Bartie (2006: 4) state that:

Travel and museum guides are the most common and long-standing approach to augmenting the experience of site visits. One can argue that digital guide systems are the natural next step after guide books and audio guides on cassette. While they provide the same basic functionality, they can enhance the experience and provide more or different information. It has been found that visitors remember more from an audioguide than from reading labels and that they benefit people with disabilities.

The essence of audio guides, as described above, remains unchanged even if technology has progressed beyond purposed hand-held devices to take the shape of any mainstream mp3 or mp4 gadgets or latest generation smartphones to which content, made available online, can be easily downloaded. Traditional audio guides, where a human voice simply provides an audio commentary of an exhibit, have given way to multimodal guides, and even to complex immersive audio experiences, as those proposed by the LISTEN project, in which visitors are exposed to audio augmented environments by wearing “motion-tracked wireless headphones displaying a location-aware, adaptive audio presentation augmenting the physical space with virtual sound-scenes” (Goßmann, 2004). However, as Mannion et al. (2016) point out:

(...) innovating within an existing product genre like audio guides is risky. It is especially hard to offer new formats that satisfy frequent users and also appeal to new and occasional users. Frequent users have strong expectations about what a guide should be and are critical of products that disrupt the familiar model.

With this in mind, audio guides have become a specific text type in themselves, building upon given norms and looking towards innovation that will not be too disruptive of given expectations. In the present as in the past, travel and museum guides will continue to “augment the experience of site visits and to provide more or different information” (*op. cit.*) and to benefit all those who use them for they have the ability to reach out to diverse audiences through carefully scripted and delivered content. Multi-lingual versions will provide for linguistic difference and diverse communicative approaches will take messages to specific users, as is the case of audio guides for children or those with audio description for people with vision impairment.

In a nutshell, truly meaningful and engaging audio guides are all about making content relevant and adequate to the needs of different users. In the context of museums, audio guides are usually scripted in house by curators and museum teams or outsourced to specialized companies who, most often, provide both the equipment and the content. In the latter case, the text itself is frequently developed in collaboration with the museum teams, for much of the information about exhibits is very specific and only obtainable through the learned input of specialists in specific fields. In either scenario, the scriptwriter’s task will mainly be to make often opaque and specific concepts and terms “accessible” to lay persons, while conveying information in the “dignified tone” that is still today expected within the context such reputable cultural bodies as museums.

In the context of Translation Studies, and within the functionalist approach to text type proposed by Reiss’ (1981/2000/2004), audio guides may well be placed within the typology of Informative Texts, which aim to communicate facts and knowledge. However, if audio guides are to be engaging, they will have elements of expressive and operative texts. Particularly in the context of art, audio guides will require some degree of creative composition and aesthetics if they are to capture the uniqueness of the piece. In a similar guise, engaging audio guides will be operative in their “appeal” to reflection, guiding the gaze or attention of the visitor to particular elements. It is normally in descriptive guides for blind people and in audio guides for children that these two functions become as important as the informative function itself for, in the first case, vision is being compensated through verbal and non-verbal auditory stimuli, and in the second, the short attention span of children is extended by the dialogic approach that operative texts take. Purists will question how much objectivity may be lost when factual information is “enriched” by

expressive language, suggestive sound effects and music or by the voices of the local communities or specialized commentators. The question is heightened when the audio guide is made to work together with multisensory stimuli, such as raised pictures or replicas to be touched, props, games and activities that help meaning making in cultural venues that are still often alien and unwelcoming places to many visitors. Even if, at present, there is a real effort to bring the museum “to life”, in many cases, a visit to a museum, is still a passive experience in which people are led, by the hand of a curatorial strategy, to awe at a wealth that is to be observed and preserved, rather than experienced. This may be due to a mismatch between curatorial expectations and visitors’ ability to engage, for lack of information or misconceptions about “museum manners”. Enriched descriptive guides (EDG) may well be the key to more inclusive museums. They can provide scaffolding for the integration of new information and guide holistic multisensory experiences; they may also promote personal space and creative thinking; and be used to engage local communities and foreign visitors alike, thus stimulating personal growth and social interaction.

For the benefit of clarification, the concept of “enriched descriptive guides” builds upon that of “sound painting” (Neves 2010) and of “descriptive guides” presented in the ADLAB guidelines (Neves 2014:68-71) and has developed since out of a number of research projects in Portugal, the UK and Qatar (cf. Eardley et al. 2016; Eardley et al. forthcoming). At this point in time, we understand Enriched Descriptive Guides to be (audio) guides, in which factual information has been “enriched” through the creative use of description, sound effects and music, to provide thinking prompts that fuel the senses, invite cognitive and/or physical exploration, and capture the uniqueness of the cultural context the guide relates to. Unlike sound painting and descriptive guides that are primarily directed towards blind users, EDGs take *all* users into account in the belief that this approach will make culture accessible to people of any age, cultural background and personal profile. When combined with other forms of interpretative mediation strategies – as are multimedia or multisensory materials –, EDGs will contribute towards holistic augmented experiences that trigger the imagination, stimulate the acquisition of knowledge and the desire to explore the exhibit or cultural environment through personal and social interaction. This approach to audio guides is by no means new. There will be thousands of instances of audio guides around the world that may, totally or partially, fit the

category. From rich informative and stimulating audio guides in the National Gallery (London), the Louvre (Paris), the Guggenheim (New York) or the Museum of Sydney, to those in lesser known museums, as are the MCCB in Batalha (Portugal) or the Ângulo in Pelotas (Brazil), exhibits are brought to life in ingenious “enriched” ways. In many instances visitors are even given choice among quite distinct audio guide types. If we are to take the National Gallery, as an example, visitors are offered themed audio guides (Highlights of the Collection, Kings and Queens, Science and Discovery, Fame and Celebrity, Writers); language specific versions (English, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish); family audio guides “for young visitors aged 7-11 and their parents or carers”<sup>1</sup>; and online audio description and digital resources for people with a disability<sup>2</sup>. Although many of the National Gallery’s audio guides have been enriched with sound effects and music and even contain the voices of recognizable celebrities, description is still reserved for blind people and offered as a separate option and even publicised as being specific to people with special needs. The questions remain: Why wouldn’t mainstream guides take the descriptive approach that is used for blind users, thus helping sighted people direct their gaze to make sense of the exhibit? Might enriched descriptive guides be a way to make accessibility mainstream?

At the very same time in which, in Qatar, answers are being sought for the above mentioned questions, researchers in Poland (Szarowska et al. 2016) are experimenting with an app providing “one multimedia description of a work of art, in the form of a short video consisting of images of the work with audio narration in multiple language versions” (302) in the hope that, by following the principles of Universal Design, both in technology and content, they will be providing equal access to all.

While there may be guidelines available on how to script audio guides with and without description (cf. Axel et al. 1996, CDC 2011, Giansante n/d, Neves 2014, Szarowska et al. 2016), understanding how EDG may be effectively construed is still work in progress. Even if in the discussion of their work, Szarowska et al (2016, 312) lead us to what they see to be the “optimum description of a work of art”, following criteria in many ways similar to the ones used hundreds of miles away in a totally different

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npg.org.uk/visit/audioguides.php>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.npg.org.uk/footer/accessibility.php>

context as is Qatar, (discussed in section 3 below), more research will be required to arrive at standards or guidelines for the description of art, given the subjective nature of such cultural realia.

The case below is a description of the phases and outcomes of an instance where an enriched descriptive guide was put together collaboratively, involving different stakeholders - curators, art historians, painter's family members, as well as the museum visitors themselves. Its outcomes, as the ones previously found in the MCCB project (Neves et al. 2012), allow one to consider that, when an audio guide is constructed collaboratively, by bringing together professionals and visitors in meaning making, to arrive at scripts that showcase local voices and in which description and information are interwoven and explored in approachable ways that stimulate various senses, a one-size-fits-all solution is achievable. With this in mind, "enrichment" comes through form, substance and through the interactions that are stimulated both in the making and in the use of these products.

### 3. The 'Art Translates' Project and the case of *Features from Qatar*

The case to be discussed in detail below – the EDG of *Features from Qatar*, a 1973 painting by Jassim Zaini – took place in 2015, as part of the Art Translates project, carried out by students attending the MA in Audiovisual Translation (MAAT), at Hamad bin Khalifa University, in collaboration with Mathaf (the Arab Museum of Modern Art), both in Qatar. Students attending the course in AVT for Access, in the MAAT program, were invited to take part in an Action Research project in which all those involved explored how to go about creating audio guides in the Arab context. The underlying brief was that of "enriched descriptive guides" even if, at the time, the concept itself was not clear. The project's stated aim was to "(1) Create Descriptive Guides (in Arabic and English) of 10 paintings for the local blind community; (2) Make the experience multisensory by providing 2½D (raised image) tactile versions of the paintings + props; (3) Evaluate the accuracy, adequacy and impact of the description with blind and sighted visitors of all ages and using different conditions (live guided tour; simple recorded audio guide (with no sound effects); soundscaped audio guide (with music and sound effects); and video guide (with guided viewing))." The project was to be completed within one semester (roughly 4 months) and the output was to be

academic (new knowledge on how to produce audio guides), instructional (training future audiovisual translators) and practical (audio guides that can be used by regular visitors at Mathaf). Careful planning and tight project management allowed all outputs to be achieved, the first of which, partially presented in this reflection.

2.1 The Process

The process discussed below for *Features from Qatar* (FFQ) was replicated for all the paintings in the Art Translates project. This painting would come to be a pilot in which the processes to be used by all those working on the rest of the chosen paintings were determined. The process of creating the EDGs, captured in Fig. 1, was iterative in nature and often non-linear, for each phase (from 2-8) contributed with valuable findings that would come to make important changes to the initial script.



Fig. 1: The process

*Features from Qatar* was selected along with another 9 paintings in a dialogue with the Museum’s Head of Educational Services. In a guided tour given at the beginning of the project, this particular painting was highlighted as being representative of Qatari art and is a much prized exhibit at Mathaf. In this case, choice was determined by curatorial value, a situation that happens in most museum contexts.

Once chosen, *research* followed to collect as much information as



possible about Jassim Zaini's work and on the painting itself. No efforts were spared to identify the people portrayed, the painter's style and cultural implications of the artwork. Careful *analysis* of the artwork itself was carried out, in close collaboration with the curators and experts on Jassim Zaini's artwork. Intensive discussion and multiple visits to the gallery allowed the group to capture the detail and the feel of the work of art in the context in which it is shown to the public. This provided the team with the valuable information they needed to describe the painting for vision impaired visitors.

The task of scripting implied a balance between technical and creative writing, two antagonistic forces at play: the desire to be accurate in the terminology and information provided and simultaneously to create a text that would be engaging and easy to follow. What was considered to be a short, concise and yet engaging script was achieved after multiple attempts in which audio description techniques were merged with those used in museum writing. *Validation* and *adjustment* happened in numerous focus group sessions with museum personnel and lay persons to arrive at what was then considered to be a "final version" of the initial script (figure 3) that would later be translated from English into Modern Standard Arabic. A set of materials – audio guides in English and in Arabic; a video guide revealing parts of the painting as they were mentioned in the audio; and a touch-able replica of the painting – were created to be used in distinct testing scenarios. Throughout the various sessions, with and without the additional materials, we tested how accurate, adequate and impactful the enriched descriptive guide might be. Given the educational objectives of the project, a simple production approach was taken: the audio and video texts were uploaded and made available to users through mp4 devices and smartphones and the 2 ½ D replica of the painting was created by printing the artwork on fabric which was then padded, sewn and mounted onto a solid frame so as to highlight form and volume.

The exploratory research that followed happened in the course of open and arranged museum visits involving both blind and sighted audiences, school visits and workshops with children of different ages, and professional workshops with museum experts and scholars in audiovisual translation. By the end of the various formal and informal exercises, the initial DG script had to be touched up (figure 3) on the basis of the information collected through observation, questionnaires and formal and informal interviews.

2.2 The Structure

The exercise with *Features from Qatar* was also used to determine a textual structure (fig. 2) for the scripting of the EDGs. Given the nature of the project, a set framework to work from would become a vital element, for different people would later be scripting texts for quite different artworks. This would bring consistency and coherence to the set of stops that would come to feature in the *Art Translates* audio guide, but it also served as a first step towards mapping out the basic features of a descriptive guide for paintings.

IDENTIFICATION	What? By whom? when?
LOCALIZATION & CATCH PHRASE	How is presented? What makes it interesting?
THEME	What is it about?
DESCRIPTION	What does it look like? Depicted figures/objects Positioning Appearance Details
TECHNIQUE	What technique is used? Colour / light / perspective /...
FOCUS	What makes it special?
INTERPRETATION	What is it? How do you interpret it?

Fig. 2: Textual structure

Each script was complemented with a simple soundscape storyboard featuring the sound effects and music to be added in specific moments. As happens with other audiovisual constructs, in this EDG sound was used to suggest geographical context (Arabic music), location (indoor/outdoor sounds), and ambience (echo), for instance. No particular pattern was established for the use of sound in this project, but the participants’ feedback revealed that sound does play an important role in EDG. Listeners acknowledged its presence and referred to it in a somewhat impressionistic manner as being “interesting” or “rich”. If we are to fully understand the intricacies of EDG, this is an area that definitely deserves further study.

## 2.3 Textual/cultural “enrichment”

As presented above, the “enrichment” of the descriptive guide may appear to happen beyond the text to be found in “extras” such as sound effects, music, props and other multisensory engagement strategies. However, important “enrichment” comes within the text itself in word choice, style, (cultural) references and personal interpellation.

One of the most interesting processes of enrichment in the case of *Features from Qatar* is related to the way the script captures (or not) “the uniqueness of the cultural context”. When evaluating “the accuracy, adequacy and impact of the description” (see above) with different audiences, a number of issues with the information provided in the initial text (version 1 in Fig. 3) came to the fore revealing how carefully audio guides need to be scripted if they are to be accessible to a significant number of listeners. Six instances in which textual/cultural enrichment derived from collaborative meaning-making are highlighted in the final version (version 2 in Fig 3) and discussed below. Each instance is revealing of how minute elements can have significant impact in the way people perceive what is being said.

### VERSION 1: *Features from Qatar*, by Jassim Al-Zaini, 1973

Features from Qatar is an oil painting, approximately one meter wide and half a meter high, made by the Qatari artist, Jassim Zaini, in 1973.

As it stands in this museum, it is presented within a tailor made wooden frame, with carvings on all corners, reminding us of a traditional window frame. This may create the illusion that the picture itself is a scene happening in the privacy of a Qatari home.

The picture is about two young people, a man and a woman, who take up most of the canvas space.

The young man is lying across the bottom, his back is propped against a cushion on the right making his head tilt forward a little. His legs are bent, creating a triangular shape to the left as if to squeeze in within the space given.

He is wearing a *thaub* and *ghutra* in the Qatari tradition. His very thin and long body stretches across the bottom, with an equally long arm stretching along his side. He is holding prayer beads in his hand.

Next to him, a young women sits, her right leg folded at the knee, head tilted to the side while she stitches on a button to the young man's *thaub*.

The striking features in this painting are the multiple layered thick rich warm colours that come together to create contrasts of light and shade. The light shades of the man's *thaub* contrast with the dark shades of the women's reddish brown trousers and dark top and scarf with golden linings.

A further interesting element is the way both faces resemble each other in youth and in expression. As they tilt, both heads come slightly together, their big brown eyes appear attentive to the girl's task of sewing a button to the garment: an actual button that the artist has attached to the canvas, making the painting all the more real.

Who are these young people? What brings them together? (323 words)

### VERSION 2: *Features from Qatar*, by Jassim Al-Zaini, 1973

Features from Qatar is an oil painting, approximately one meter wide and half a meter high, made by the Qatari artist, Jassim Zaini, in 1973.

As it stands in this museum, it is presented within a tailor made **wooden frame, with carvings on all corners, reminding us of a traditional window frame** <sup>(a)</sup>. This may lead us to believe that the picture itself is a **scene happening in the privacy of a Qatari home** <sup>(b)</sup>.

The picture is about two young people, a man and a woman, who take up most of the canvas space.

The young man is lying across the bottom, his back is propped against a cushion on the right making his head tilt forward a little. His legs are bent, creating a triangular shape to the left as if to squeeze in within the space given.

He is wearing a **long white thaub** <sup>(c)</sup> (ثوب) and a **ghutra** <sup>(d)</sup> (عقرا) **on his head** <sup>(e)</sup> in the Qatari tradition. His very thin and long body stretches across the bottom, with an equally long arm lining his side. He is holding prayer beads in his hand.

Next to him, a young women sits, her right leg folded at the knee, head tilted to the side while she stitches on a button to the young man's *thaub*.

The striking features in this painting are the multiple layered thick rich warm colours that come together to create contrasts of light and shade.

The light shades of the man's *thaub* contrast with the dark shades of the **women's long reddish brown jalabiya** <sup>(f)</sup> (جلبية), and a **bakhneg** <sup>(g)</sup> (بخنق) **and a scarf with golden linings** <sup>(e)</sup>.

A further interesting element is the way both faces resemble each other in youth and in expression. As they tilt, both heads come slightly together, their big brown eyes appear attentive to the girl's task of sewing a button to the garment: an actual button that the artist has attached to the canvas, making the painting all the more real.

Who are these young people? What brings them together? <sup>(f)</sup> (336 words)

**Fig. 3: Initial and Final script**

Within the structure proposed for the Art Translates audio guides (Fig. 2), the script for *Features from Qatar* starts by responding to the questions “How is it presented?” “What makes it interesting?” in the following way:

As it stands in this museum, it is presented within a **tailor made wooden frame, with carvings on all corners, reminding us of a traditional window frame** <sup>(a)</sup>. This may lead us to believe that the picture itself is a **scene happening in the privacy of a Qatari home** <sup>(b)</sup>.

These opening statements, which are more interpretative than factual, gave rise to a number of considerations on the part of different participants, all of which of great importance in the context of EDG. It is clear that the first statement (a) is descriptive and had blind people as its primal addressees. Sighted people looked at the framed painting on the wall and quickly related what they heard to what they saw. However, both blind and sighted participants reacted to the text for lack of relational knowledge. What does a “traditional window frame” look like? Where is it traditional? In Qatar? In the Gulf? In the Arab world? And what makes it traditional? The kind of wood? The carving technique or the design? No unanimous understanding was achieved, but the statement served its purpose. It raised people’s curiosity and gave the team an important cue for the development of tactile props.

The interpretative suggestion that the painting could be “a scene happening in the privacy of a Qatari home” (b) also found reaction, particularly on the part of Qatari participants, who referred to a breach in important cultural norms pertaining to the privacy of the home. This understanding was not shared by all the participants. Most non-Arabic and even many Arabic participants actually enjoyed the suggestion and said it “brings life to the painting”, “it makes me want to look better”, “it adds to the sense of intimacy”. That which might be innate voyeuristic pleasure or a sense of trespassing will have heightened interest, thus fulfilling the operative function we think necessary for an EDG. People are invited to “do something” with what they hear: relate, question, agree or disagree, react in some way and take what they hear further. With all this in mind, the opening statement was left untouched in the final version for it is clearly marked as interpretative – “it may lead us to believe” – and subjective, and as a means to capture the listeners’ attention.

A different approach was taken by the team when lack of clarity, inaccuracy or inconsistency were at stake. This is the case of the examples (c) to (e) highlighted in the final script (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4), all of which

related to the traditional attire the depicted characters are wearing. Even if the first version had been written in collaboration with Arab speakers, details went unnoticed and were only revealed during the validation/testing process

Issue:	Version 1:	Version 2:
Lack of clarity	He is wearing a <i>thaub</i> and <i>ghutra</i> in the Qatari tradition.	He is wearing a long white <i>thaub</i> <sup>(c)</sup> (ثوب) and a <i>ghutra</i> <sup>(d)</sup> (غطرة) on his head in the Qatari tradition.
Inaccuracy	(...) the women's reddish brown trousers and dark top and scarf with golden linings.	(...) the women's long reddish brown <i>jalabiya</i> (لابية), and a <i>bakhneg</i> (بخنق) a scarf with golden linings <sup>(e)</sup> .
Inconsistency	The light shades of the man's <i>thaub</i> contrast with the dark shades of the women's reddish brown trousers and dark top and scarf with golden linings.	The light shades of the man's <i>thaub</i> contrast with the dark shades of the women's reddish brown <i>jalabiya</i> (جلابية), and a <i>bakhneg</i> (بخنق) a scarf with golden linings <sup>(e)</sup> .

**Fig. 4: Changes in content**

The *thaub* and the *ghutra* are the national attire of Qatari men and are widely used in the Gulf and also a little throughout the Arab world. The first script took it for granted that everybody listening to the audio guides at Mathaf would relate to the terms and fully understand the meaning of the Arabic words used in the English script. Questions from expats soon made the team realize that the assumption was wrong and that not everybody knew the Arabic term for the attire they so well recognized in the street. Clarification came in the new version (c) and (d), even though *thaub* could have been better explained had we opted to refer to it as a “long white robe”. We opted to leave the term *thaub* unexplained to activate the visitors’ attention in the effort to determine which piece of attire the *thaub* is. This was easily achieved through the exclusion of parts, for we say the *ghutra* is “on his head”.

The need to further clarify that the *thaub* in the painting is white, again became evident when testing the script with young sighted children. The exercise undertaken asked groups of school children (aged 9-13) to complete and colour in an outline of the painting on the basis of the description (EDG) they listened to. None of the children were given the opportunity to see the painting before or while listening to the piece. At the end of the exercise they were taken to the gallery to compare their

output with the original artwork and to discuss their take on what they heard and how they represented it on paper. One of the outcomes was telling (Fig. 5): various children had coloured in the *thaub* in brown and the *ghutra* in red.



**Fig. 4: A child's take on the description of a thaub and ghutra**

This unexpected outcome happened simply because, in winter, many men wear brown, instead of white *thaubs*; and red *ghutras* are also more common then, even if some men wear red *ghutras* all year round. The clarification might have happened by chance. Had the experiment taken place in hotter months, this detail might have gone unnoticed. Once this nuance was brought to our attention through a simple colouring in activity, we stated the colour in the final script. This is a clear example of how enrichment can take place.

A textual inconsistency, which turned out to be an inaccuracy, was drawn to our attention in the course of the sessions. Why had we chosen to use the Arabic terms for the man's attire and not for the woman's outfit? Worse still, why did the 1<sup>st</sup> version say she was wearing trousers, a



top and a scarf, when, in fact, she was wearing a dress (*jalabiya*) and a head piece (*bakbneq*), the traditional attire Qatari women wear when they are at home? No valid explanation for the oversight was found, but the correction was made and the decision taken to have real props made available for people to try on, should the EDG be to be made regularly available at the museum. Non-Arabic and blind visitors who might have never seen these particular garments would thus be given the opportunity to fully grasp the given description.

A final contribution to the *Features from Qatar* EDG came through social media as an answer to the final question “Who are these young people? What brings them together?”<sup>(1)</sup>. During a session with professionals from Qatar Museums, somebody put up a picture of the painting with the given question on Instagram. The answer came within minutes in the form of a post by a family member of the painter himself to clarify that the painting was nothing less than a self-portrait of Jassim Zaini and his sister. Again the operative function had been central to this EDG. The question had led to action, the action had led to engagement and knowledge. The team decided to leave this thinking prompt as it was in the understanding that others would find similar pleasure in unveiling something that is only suggested in the text, hinted at in the phrase “the way both faces resemble each other in youth and in expression”, a fact that cannot be missed by those who observe the painting.

### 3. Final considerations

The details presented above reinforce the value of Enriched Descriptive Guides and the vital importance of making them grow out of shared experiences that inform and allow for the validation of the product in offer.

With this exercise it becomes clear that there is enormous potential for EDGs as a specific museum text type that can contribute to visitor engagement; but, above all, that such texts are best created in dialogic collaboration, to which various stakeholders contribute with their unique experience and needs. Borrowing from the context of web design, the effort towards creating enriched descriptive guides allows one to believe that following the principles of “user experience design” (UX) or “user-centered design” (Norman 2013), in which the product is designed on the basis of the needs and wants of the users, is the best way to arrive at a

product that might not equally satisfy everybody, but that has a strong potential to create regular users, a situation museums want to stimulate. This said, the descriptive guide's "enrichment" may happen within the process of scripting and soundscaping; and beyond that, in the process of presenting, using and engaging with it.

While further experimentation is under way for a better understanding of the value of EDGs, the knowledge gathered in the Art Translates project allows us to foresee that these audio guides may come to bring audio description and tourist guides together in an effort to make culture accessible to all in engaging and enjoyable ways.

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