

ICOM UK Report – European Conference on African Studies

I spent five wonderful days in the stunning city of Prague, with thanks to ICOM UK for their support with my living expenses during the trip. I presented at the European Conference on African Studies with my colleague David Maina, and the conference offered us the opportunity to meet in person for the first time, after collaborating only online for a year. David and I have both worked on a digital archive and collaboration project for the British International Research Institutes (“the BIRI”). David is a postdoctoral research fellow and an archivist for the British Institute of Eastern Africa, and I represented the British School at Athens at ECAS. Founded in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as archaeological excavation headquarters and training schools, the British International Research Institutes (BIRI) are now global research centres with a focus on arts, humanities, and social sciences.

Today, these research centres hold archival collections covering the Mediterranean, Türkiye and the Black Sea, North, Eastern and Southern Africa, the Middle East, Iran and Central Asia and receive funding from the UK Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, administered through The British Academy, the UK’s national academy for the humanities and social sciences. Since 2022, we have been exploring the potential benefits of adopting Linked Open Data (LOD) standards and methodologies in order to identify links between our collections, with the eventual aim of developing a joint archive portal. Would machine-readable structured data be the silver bullet that allowed us to completely automate description? Probably not. But could it allow institutes with differing amounts of time and expertise to make significant leaps towards getting a more diverse set of collections online? Absolutely! Using Linked Open Data, we can foster cross-institutional collaboration a lot more easily—unlocking new scholarly potential and turning static records into a living, interconnected resource for global research. We used our presentation at ECAS to demonstrate the interactive online publication (using ArcGIS “StoryMaps”) that we create to engage public and academic audiences alike in our project. ArcGIS StoryMaps allows for visualising of data through maps & network diagrams, and plus audience immersion through full bleed images, archival photographs & documents embedded in the same pane, along with maps showing their geographic context.

We shared demo videos from the online interactive exhibition, [‘Women Transcending Boundaries: Over a century of scholarship, fieldwork and friendship across the British International Research Institutes’](#) including a special focus on Linked Open Data connected to people and places pertinent to African and Islamic collections from Benghazi to Somalia. Our presentation was very well received by our co-panellists on the Digital Humanities panel, and by the audience, with several follow up questions about methodology and impact. The conference afforded me the opportunity to meet new colleagues across decolonial and digital humanities, and exposed me to deeper thinking on these issues within the African context(s).

It was my first time visiting Prague and David’s first time visiting Europe, so we also were keen to engage with all that the city had to offer during breaks from the conference. I visited the Prague castle and the stunning St. Vitus Cathedral, marvelling at the kaleidoscopic stained glass windows which recalled the Krupa exhibition at the Kampa art collection, which I gained free entry to using my ICOM card. Similarly, my ICOM card gained me free entry and a warm welcome to the National Gallery of Prague – Trade Fair, where I was quite awed to see Toyen’s surrealist paintings for the first time in person since studying Czech surrealism as an undergraduate. Her work, ‘Summer’ (1931), I will be referencing within my doctoral research at the University of Sussex, as it relates to my PhD on representations of water.

My singular complaint about Prague would be being ill-advised to try fried 'Edam' cheese (famously a Netherlandish speciality) as a "local" recommendation – avoid at all costs!

Jessica Holland





