

## V&A through the eyes of refugees



To celebrate Refugee Week, guides from Rwanda, Burma, Somali, Sudan and Uganda will take visitors through the museum using objects on display to tell their stories as they go

Fayhaa Abdulwahab, a refugee from Iraq, gives museum-goers her perspective on the objects on display at the V&A. Fayhaa Abdulwahab, a refugee from Iraq, begins her tour by telling the audience she is about to take them into her world. She then leads 20 people through the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, revealing, as she goes, her personal story of the country she fled in 1979. Her first stop is the Islamic galleries. She starts with a potted history of ancient Iraq (Mesopotamia), its rivers, its beauty, its inventions and its problems. "Full of oil and troubles," she says.

Objects, such as a turquoise storage jar – the size of a small child, that visitors may have viewed on previous visits, are seen through Abdulwahab's eyes. The jar hails from Iran, and she says it reminds her of sweetness. She remembers her mother storing pickles and date syrup in a jar like this one. Next, we stop in the China gallery where teapots remind her of the thick dark tea Iraqis like to drink. Here, she sings a song in Arabic and afterwards explains: "Iraqi songs are sad and full of grief. It is because of the wars."

Abdulwahab is one of seven volunteer refugee guides trained to lead My V&A tours. Clare Paul, V&A's Esol (English for speakers of other languages) and arts education officer, who created the tours three years ago, gives the guides freedom to choose several objects on display that resonate and enable them to tell their story. Her aim is to empower the refugees to feel they have a place in the museum and to break down misconceptions. "It's a platform for the refugees to interact with people they wouldn't normally. We are reaching people at a different level, and hope there will be a ripple effect," says Paul.

New recruit Abdulwahab has led this tour only twice before and will be repeating it along with other refugee guides from Rwanda, Burma, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda during the V&A's week of events to celebrate Refugee Week from 12 June.

Abdulwahab, 50, was an English language teacher in Iraq. She was forced to leave because she refused to sign a declaration supporting the regime. One day she was dragged from her classroom, blindfolded and taken to be tortured. It is still very hard for her to tell this part of the story, she says, as we are confronted, in the V&A's sculpture galleries, by a contorted stone figure with an arm clasped behind its back and its head to one side. She was set free but, unable to work as a teacher, escaped the country on horseback. In the museum, Abdulwahab's attention is drawn to a small, brown horse set behind glass. She remembers reaching the Syrian border and turning her head to take in what she was leaving behind. There followed 12 years of rootlessness before she made it to the UK.

Abdulwahab says she sees empathy on the audiences' faces and believes the tours will challenge people's attitudes. "It is a chance for me to deliver a message about the attitude to refugees and why we are here," she says.