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Jewish Museum in London spreads the love with crowd-sourced exhibition

Christian, Muslim and Jewish members of the public have donated items to a show that celebrates religious tolerance



Tahniah Ahmed, left, models the wedding sari of her mother Hasna Hena at the Jewish Museum in London Photograph: Linda Nyland for the Guardian

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On a November day in Bangladesh 30 years ago, Hasna Hena Ahmed encountered for the first time her gold and pink wedding sari, and her husband to be, Ashfaque. The sari was chosen by her mother-in-law, the husband by her next-door neighbour, Ashfaque's uncle: fortunately she liked both. As she looks in admiration at her daughter, Tahnia, modelling the gorgeous outfit, Hasna Hena is proud to see it in the exhibition that opened this week at the [Jewish Museum in London](#). However, she can remember almost nothing of the wedding, organised in three days flat. The urgency was because they had to tie the knot before her husband returned to his work as a lawyer in England. They wouldn't meet again until she came to London six months later.

Her daughter, a Muslim, is studying for a postgraduate qualification in Judaism and the relationship between religions, including the impact of generations of cartoons that have been judged harmless jokes by one faith, bitter insults by the other. The exhibition, entitled Love, is full of shadows of the recent terror attacks on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris, as well as notions of what is taboo and offensive.

Love, which includes striking portraits of women from an Anglican parish in the formerly strongly Jewish area of Bethnal Green, east London, painted in the style of Greek Orthodox icons by an artist from an Irish Catholic and Maori background, was conceived as a light-hearted display of objects on the theme of love loaned by members of the public from Christian, Muslim and Jewish backgrounds. It is the first such "crowd-sourcing" experiment by the museum, and was organised with the Cultural Institute at King's College [London](#), whose Aaron Rosen, a lecturer in sacred traditions and the arts, was behind the idea.

Abigail Morris, the museum's director, points to a Victorian

portrait of Princess Alexandra with the lines of the image drawn in minute Hebrew script, the Jewish artist's way of getting round his own faith's prohibition on representing the human form.



Tahniah Ahmed models her mother's wedding sari. Photograph: Linda Nylind Morris herself loaned the three hand-corrected, typewritten

pages of the moving address given at her own wedding by her friend, Rabbi Sheila Shulman. She was given them 30 years later when, to her astonishment, another rabbi read part of the same address at Shulman's funeral.

"We ask people all the time to trust us and lend their treasures to museums – but I was surprised, when it came to the point, how reluctant I was to let it go," she said. It now shares a display case with the wedding sari, and Morris says that the friendly, mutually interested, even amused relationships within and between the faiths are far more representative of what's happening in Britain than the grim headlines about inter-faith fear and suspicion.

The exhibition, which runs until 19 April, has been in planning since last summer, but the changed context struck Rosen forcibly when he arrived at the museum to find a police car in the Camden street and security guards on the front door.

His father was Jewish, his mother Christian, and his own loans to the exhibition include a painting he commissioned incorporating the lines from the Song of Songs the family chose to commemorate the death in a car crash of his sister Whitney, aged 26. It hangs beside a photograph of the verses tattooed on his brother's arm, and Rosen has her name on the inside of his wrist, defying the orthodox Jewish prohibition on tattoos.

If she can barely remember her wedding day, Hasna Hena vividly remembers the day six months later when she arrived in London. She insists that she was to meet with nothing but kindness and friendship, from her husband and her head and colleagues in the school where she taught; the sort of relationships she thinks are far more typical between the faiths in Britain than the recent gruesome headlines. The marriage has been a very happy one.

"But the day I came, oh dear. The country I left was so beautiful and when I walked out of Heathrow everything

looked so grey, so strange, so miserable. I thought this has been an awful mistake. But I got used to it. It has been good, people have been good.”