

Muslim inventions at the NY Hall of Science

by Marium Sattar, qboro Contributor
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Eight-year-old Marissa Campis is playing a game that is part of the new exhibition, "1001 Inventions." A touch screen displays a family room and asks visitors to select the inventions displayed at the new installation at the New York Hall of Science in Queens.

"I like the game because you need to find stuff from the past," said Marissa, a student at PS 14 in Corona. Marissa described her favorite inventions, among them a camera obscura from the 10th century. "What they made was interesting ... like an old fashioned camera," she said. Campis didn't know it but she was learning about Islamic culture.

The purple and golden halls at the exhibition on 111th Street display the contributions to science by Muslim inventors from Asia, Africa, and the southern part of Europe while bridging cultural gaps that result from a lack of information about Islamic culture.

The display comes to New York after opening in London to audiences of over 400,000 people, a record-breaking turnout at London's Science Museum. It also attracted 35,000 people every week it was in Istanbul.

"Its greatest impact may just be to get parents and children to question the dominant narrative about Muslims right now, which is that their adherence to Islam makes them incompatible with the West," said Kristina Richardson, assistant professor of history at Queens College.



Among the items on display at "1001 Inventions" is this replica of a 1,200-year-old water wheel in Hamah, Syria. photo COURTESY NY Hall of science

According to Dr. Margaret Honey, CEO and president of the New York Hall of Science, the exhibition in New York is aimed towards kids, families and teachers. "It introduces visitors to a period of history that has a whole lot to do with science that is not broadly covered in your typical textbook. Its not routinely covered as part of the science curriculum in this country," Honey said.

A favorite of children at the exhibition is the drawing of a ship used by Zheng He, the 15th century Chinese general who sailed on wooden ships bigger than football fields.

Visitors can also learn from short films and replicas of some of the most famous inventions of the era that is focused on — from the eighth through 18th centuries — such as a water-powered clock and instruments used to measure the stars. Interactive screens explain why Arabic numerals, used throughout the West, are written the way they are.

Visitors can also watch a short film featuring Oscar-winning actor Sir Ben Kingsley that explains the exhibition to viewers. The film won an award for the Best Educational Film at this year's Cannes Film Festival.

Other main attractions include a suspended model of the 9th-century inventor Abbas ibn Firnas, who was the first person to create a flying machine. Hundreds of years before Leonardo da Vinci attempted to create an aircraft, Firnas flew briefly over the city of Cordoba in Spain, dressed in feathers while using a wooden glider.

Richardson believes the exhibit will introduce visitors to the partnership of many men and women of different faiths and backgrounds in Muslim civilization

"Hopefully, this exhibit will emphasize the ways in which various cultures, medieval China, the Islamicate world, Latin Christendom ... borrowed, taught, appropriated and reapplied knowledge beyond strict imperial boundaries," said Richardson.

Before the installation came to New York, it was launched in the United Kingdom by the Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilization, a nonprofit based in Britain.

"The New York Hall of Science is the ideal venue for our U.S. premiere, as it has the same ethos as the '1001 Inventions' exhibition," said Junaid Bhatti, a spokesperson for the foundation. One of the goals of the exhibition is "to inspire young people to pursue careers in science through exciting and interactive experiences," he added.

The show's global tour is sponsored by the Abdul Lateef Jameel Community foundation, the philanthropic arm of a global automobile distributor. The group has previously funded exhibitions at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and projects at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Reading one of the displays intently was Victor Riquelme, who was visiting the museum with his kids. "It's something that's not just interesting for kids but adults. The topics are different from other museums," said Riquelme, 53.

The "1001 Inventions" exhibition will be at the New York Hall of Science until April 24, before it travels to the California Science Center in Los Angeles.

'1001 Inventions'

When: Through April 24

Where: New York Hall of Science, 47-01 111 St., Flushing Meadows Park

Tickets: \$11 adults; \$8 children, students and seniors.