

1001 inventions: exhibit helps people discover muslim heritage throughout our world

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The story of "One Thousand and One Nights" helped shape a certain stereotypical understanding of Islamic culture here in the West. Now an exhibition called "1001 Inventions: Muslim Heritage in Our World," which opened in December 2010 in New York Hall of Science, focuses on the reality — the period when Muslims' sphere of influence stretched from China to Spain for hundreds of centuries.

Highlighting what organizers say is a forgotten period of history, "1001 Inventions" is a global educational initiative that promotes awareness of a thousand years of scientific and cultural achievements from Muslim civilization from the 7th century onwards, and shows how those contributions helped build the foundations of our modern world.

Originally launched in the United Kingdom in March 2006, 1001 Inventions was created by the Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilization, FSTC, a British based non-profit, non-religious and academic organization.

Its focus is to connect with the viewing public through educational media and interactive global exhibitions, and to focus on the shared cultural and technological inheritance of humanity between the West and the Muslim world, Peter Fell, Senior Adviser to the Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilization, told Arab News in a phone interview from New York.

"As part of the exhibition, we focused on heroic individuals of the past. They are role models and have made major contributions, but now, sadly, are often forgotten. We wanted to use them to help the children identify with Muslim history," said Fell.

The exhibition will remain in New York until April 2011, then will travel in May to the Los Angeles Science Center, and from there will end in Washington DC at the National Geographic in the second half of 2012.

Parallel with the exhibition is the book, "1001 Inventions," "Muslim Heritage in Our World," published to document the highlights of the show. "The book and exhibition are two products," said Fell. "We find that people who attend the exhibition become inspired and then buy the book.

"It's a major task to cover all that is highlighted in the show, so we're keen to use the book to address the lack of knowledge of this period of Muslim enlightenment," said Fell, adding that the first edition of the book sold out in three months. "We would hope to see the book available in large numbers to publically funded schools."

Divided into seven zones, "1001 Inventions" includes more than 60 interactive exhibits that delve into discoveries that shaped the 1) Home, 2) School, 3) Market, 4) Hospital, 5) Town, 6) World and 7) Universe.

"The exhibition reveals the forgotten history of men and women from a variety of faiths and backgrounds whose contributions to the advancement of scholarship and technology during the Middle Ages helped pave the way for the European Renaissance," said Fell. "This period of history from the 7th through 17th centuries is commonly—though, often erroneously — referred to as the 'Dark Ages.'"

Visitors learn when scientists first discovered how we see what we now see; how ancient approaches to health influence modern medicine; why East and West share so much architectural heritage; and the origins of everyday items like coffee, toothbrushes, soap and much more.

The exhibition's main international sponsor is the Jameel Foundation, part of the Saudi-based Abdul Latif Jameel Community Initiatives. ALJCI is the Corporate Social Responsibility arm of the ALJ Group.

"There also are plans for the exhibition to tour the Muslim and Arab world," said Fell. "So that people within the Muslim world will also a better understanding of their own rich history."

The organizers of the 1001 Inventions exhibition in New York have focused on getting young people to attend the exhibition. Schools, said Fell, are bringing children in by the bus loads. "What has been rewarding to the organizers, he said, was the discovery that many of those children who came with their school would then return with their parents.

"But we're also very keen on sharing the information with educators and the teachers, and libraries and the museum world. We're trying to reveal this hidden part of history, and want to help people understand it," said Fell.

"What's really interesting is that the exhibition has the ability to attract people who normally don't go to an exhibition, said Fell. "Over 30 percent of those who attend this exhibition have never been to a museum before."

The organizers believe this is due to the fact that exhibition was built with innovative technology meant to fascinate and be user-friendly to children.

"It was built for the new generation, and was designed to use the latest technology available. The exhibition is filled with computer games, touch screens, a movie and even a mini-planetary where you can move the stars with your hands. You also can move the different constellations around and see where they fit, and learn the Arabic names of the constellations and the roots of Arabic astronomy."

"The project is designed to stimulate students' understanding of science and technology and to provide positive Muslim role models for evolving Muslim identities, especially in the West," said Fell.

For more information, visit: www.muslimheritage.com and www.1001inventions.com.