

1001 Inventions

Science Museum, London SW7 This small but important show educates and amuses in equal measure

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They gave us our number system; built the first university; left us with the names for many of the stars we see at night; formalised the use of zero in mathematics; and provided us with a huge array of words, from giraffe to crimson and from traffic to cheque. For a millennium they chronicled the work of the ancient Greeks, Indians and Chinese while developing their own expertise in surgery, water and wind power, optics, agriculture and other subjects. While Europe shivered in the dark ages, the Arab world kept scholarship alive. Hence the importance of *1001 Inventions*, the Science Museum's homage to Muslim science – which turns out to be surprisingly enjoyable.

For a start, there are the goodies that curators have been able to move from the vaults to help illustrate the exhibition: a beautifully ornate astrolabe, used to measure the position of stars and planets; an 11th-century alembic used to distil chemicals; and a plate with rows of numbers all adding up to the value of 194. All fascinating stuff.

However, there is a more spectacular side to the exhibition, which is aimed, unashamedly, at family audiences. For example, there is a marvellous reconstruction of the great clock designed by al-Jazari. Powered by water, the 16ft high machine marks each half hour with rattling drums and moving serpents.

Even more spectacular is the exhibition's astronomy display. In a darkened room, stars shine on a huge screen. Simply by moving a hand a visitor can then select one of several constellations and move each across the screen until it fits over the correct part of the sky. It sounds easier than it is, but is utterly absorbing fun.

In all, this is a quite wonderful little exhibition, filled with surprises. It is easy on the eye but is still dense with information (there are over 100 pages of information deftly secreted around the displays).