

NY Hall of Science Spotlights 1001 Inventions From the Muslim World

SATURDAY, 04 DECEMBER 2010 02:27



Perry Santanachote - WNYC



As most of Europe sank into the Dark Ages during the 7th century, Muslim countries in the east carried the torch towards technological and medical advancements into the 17th century. But unlike Galileo and da Vinci, the scientific legacies of Muslim pioneers never really went down in history—not in the western world anyway. A touring exhibit called 1001 Inventions, opening Saturday, December 4, at the New York Hall of Science, hopes to change that.

"The exhibit tells a story that is very rarely heard," said Junaid Abbas Bhatti, the director of marketing for the exhibit. "People still often believe in the "Dark Ages," this concept that there was nothing happening for a thousand years. When, in reality, outside of Europe, huge amounts of activity were taking place in terms of science, technology, engineering, mathematics and cultural developments."

After successful runs in London and Istanbul, the Hall of Science was happy to host the exhibit's U.S. premiere at its Flushing Meadows Corona Park center.

"At a time when most of our images of Muslim culture are negative, this exhibit represents a very important shifting of perspective and represents the extremely significant contributions that Muslim culture has made to science and technology," said Dr. Margaret Honey, the hall's president.

Bhatti added that the exhibition was designed for the YouTube generation. It has plenty of touchscreens and interactive technology, including components geared towards older primary school children: a cinematic introduction that stars Sir Ben Kingsley as the Turkish engineer Al-Jazari. Kingsley leads three school children through a fantastical preview of the inventors. "From darkness into light my young friends, from ocean onto land," he says, "There are things you should know."

Maria Papadimitropoulos and her eighth-grade science class from the Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School school caught a preview of 1001 Inventions this week. "I thought it'd be really interesting because the kids are always asking, 'How did this come about or where did this come from?' So, this gives them background on a lot," said Papadimitropoulos. "The kids seem really intrigued."

The exhibit is divided into seven pods: home, school, hospital, world, town, market and universe. The "home" zone highlights domestic innovations like the origins of the camera, eyeglasses and the toothbrush, while the "hospital" zone describes breakthroughs in surgery, cancer treatment, and immunization.

Then, there's the giant elephant in the room—a 20-foot "elephant clock" that roars, chimes and rattles every half hour. It's a replica of Al-Jazari's 13th century hydraulic powered clock, which celebrates diverse cultural and technological influences from India, China, Egypt and Greece.

1001 Inventions attempts to expand this theme throughout the exhibit—that cultures are enmeshed and science has historically been a global endeavor. It stresses that during the Middle Ages, Muslim civilization stretched from southern Spain to China, encompassing a plethora of cultures. But the issue of faith or the influence of religion on science aren't confronted.

"The exhibit is fundamentally about science and technology," said Honey. "And although discoveries that happened in that thousand-year period represented the work of Muslim civilization, the exhibit itself is very inclusive of people of different backgrounds, different ethnicities, different religious persuasions. It's really a United Nations of scientific discovery."

1001 Inventions was created by the non-religious and apolitical non-profit Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilisation, and was originally funded by the British government. The exhibit runs at the New York Hall of Science through March 2011. Admission is free with a regular museum ticket (\$11 adults, \$8 children and seniors).