

Expo on Islamic roots of science, medicine opens Saturday, 11 June 2011 04:29



London: H H Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, Chairperson of Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development and British Culture Minister, Ed Vaizey, were guest of honour at the launch of an eye-opening new exhibition at The Royal Society in London yesterday. Arabick Roots is a new display highlighting surprising connections between the scientific pioneers of Muslim Civilisation and seventeenth century Britain's greatest scholars and scientists.

The exhibition displays rare books, scientific instruments and correspondence, showing how science and culture from the Muslim Civilisation influenced and inspired key figures such as Edmund Halley and Robert Boyle.

Early Fellows of the Royal Society eagerly pursued works in Arabic and Persian as well as communicating with their intellectual contemporaries in the Arabic-speaking world. At a time when international collaboration is increasingly important to the advancement of science, Arabick Roots reveals the rich and often surprising history of scientific communication between two very different cultures.

Speaking at the launch event, Sheikha Moza said: "Today we open an exhibition about science in the Islamic world from centuries ago. However, we have a desperate need to repeat history. Only through beautiful minds, like the ones that we can see on display here today, can we achieve that. Collaboration between East and West is the key to repeating that history."

Exhibition Curator Dr Rim Turkmani said: "This exhibition uncovers the never-before told story of the connections between the early Royal Society and contemporary and classical Arabic learning, and how they were used to solve some of the most pressing problems of the day."

"This was a time when British society as a whole was largely ignorant of the cultural achievements of the Arabic world – yet we find that the early Royal Society's group of 'ingenious and curious gentlemen' included three Fellows from the Arabic world. This forgotten history reveals a rich tradition of communication between two very different cultures, and shows that then – just like today – collaboration across linguistic and cultural boundaries can lead to great results."

The Arabick Roots exhibition is sponsored by the Qatar Foundation. The research for Arabick Roots has been sponsored by the Foundation for Science, Technology and Civilisation (FSTC) and the exhibition curator is FSTC Fellow Dr Rim Turkmani. FSTC also created the internationally renowned and award-winning 1001 Inventions exhibition that was recently opened by the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, in California.

Arabick Roots will be open from 9am to 5pm in the week of the Royal Society's Summer Science Exhibition (from July 5 to 10); at all other times guided tours are by appointment (call +44 20 7451 2597). Entrance is free. The exhibition runs until November 2011, after which it will transfer to Doha.

Smallpox Inoculation

The surprising history behind one of the most significant medical advances of all time will be revealed in Arabick Roots. Famously, vaccination against infectious diseases was pioneered by Edward Jenner in the last years of the eighteenth century. However, Arabick Roots shows how thinkers from the Arabic and Muslim world helped to pave the way for Jenner's great breakthrough and other key advances in astronomy, medicine and other disciplines.

When London was devastated by a smallpox epidemic in the mid-eighteenth century, Fellows of the Royal Society turned to their counterparts in the Arabic world to help them understand this terrible disease. In letters seen publicly for the very first time in this exhibition, the Ambassador to Tripoli at the time, Cassem Algiada Aga, describes the practice of inoculation, which had been taking place for centuries in North Africa and the Middle East.

Aga's letters provided valuable first-hand reassurance about the safety of inoculation at a time when there was serious public fear and mistrust of this life saving practice in Europe, and he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society, joining two existing Arab Fellows, Mohammed Ibn Haddu and Ben Ali Abgali.