

Rediscovering Muslim Heritage in London

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It is not very often that I find myself walking through an exhibition where I go weak at the knees. But that is exactly what happened while attending the launch of the 1001 Inventions: Discovering the Muslim heritage in our world exhibition at the Science Museum in London.

With more than 1.5 billion adherents around the world, representing almost every country, incorporating a rainbow of cultures, the past 2000 years have been troubling for Muslims. Worse, more recently, the past

decade has seen a handful of crazy people who have used the faith of Islam to rationalize murder; an ugly, shameless distortion of its beauty. While those with such points of view do not begin to represent even 0,0001 percent of the world's Muslim, the media in pursuit of sensationalist stories have given them a platform for expression.

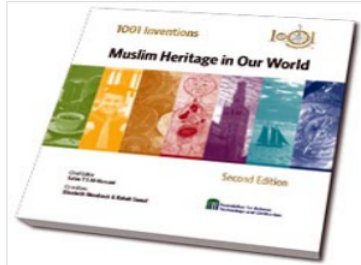
Thankfully, there is always a voice of reason, a counter to that nonsense. This exhibition, with thanks to the Jameel foundation and the hard work of the team behind 1001 Inventions, reminds us all of the once beautiful way in which the teachings of Islam complimented scientific development; a time when it wasn't Oxford, Cambridge, or Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), rather, to the likes of Baghdad, even Cairo which the scientific world turned.

The Camera Obscura

As an avid photographer, one of the highlights for me was the references to the scholar and scientist Ibn al-Haitham, who lived and taught in both Baghdad and Cairo. In an age where still today many "scholars" are of the opinion that photography is haram (prohibited by Allah) — they have adopted the opinion that implies photographs are similar to the idols that people used to worship. In the 10th and 11th century AD, Ibn al-Haitham developed the principles, which led to modern day photography. In one of his experiments, he said,

The image of the sun at the time of the eclipse, unless it is total, demonstrates that when its light passes through a narrow, round hole and is cast on a plane opposite to the hole it takes on the form of a moon-sickle.

From these and other experiments, Ibn al-Haitham built the first camera, a pinhole camera. The term he used specifically was Al-Bayt al-Muthlim, which was later translated into Latin as camera obscura — meaning a dark, private closed room. Such is the impact and relevance of this that the Royal Observatory in Greenwich still houses the only public camera obscura in London, projecting an image of the National Maritime Museum and the Royal Naval College. Today, the word qamara is still used in the Arabic-speaking World to refer to a dark room.



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The Sky at Night

Of course, while the Royal Observatory itself was commissioned in 1675 by King Charles II, it was Caliph Al-Ma'mun, who ruled Baghdad from 813– 833 AD, who set up the first observatories, the first being built in the Al-Shamasiyah quarter of Baghdad and on Mount Qasiyun in Damascus. Even, the Iranians built one in 1263 to the south of Tabriz, known as the Maragha Observatory. As a result of this early Muslim achievement, scientists, such as Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi, a Persian astronomer in 964 AD, was the first to describe the Andromeda Galaxy. To place this all in context, the first observatory built in North America, admittedly a "new nation," was later in the 18th century, in Canada.

With more than 160 stars today still being referred to by their Arabic names, such as Aldebaran meaning "follower" of the Pleiades; and Altair, meaning the flying eagle, the exhibition includes a number of interactive displays and activities, the most impressive for me being the education tool that helps identify constellations in the sky, using hand controlled virtual sensors.

What this exhibition shows, particularly with the support of the Science Museum, is that there was a Golden Age of Islam — a time when education and knowledge were sought, when the wealthy invested heavily in scientific initiatives, where faith was not reduced to a series of mechanical functions rather a mechanism, a channel through which to enhance our lives. Today, so many Muslims shun the life of this world, failing to heed the words of seeking success in this life, and the next as ordained in the Qur'an. This exhibition reminds us of how beautiful our faith once was, and how beautiful it can become again.

Those unable to attend the exhibition can find solace that they intend to tour next to the United States, followed by a tour into the Middle East. However, for those eager to learn more about the contribution of Muslims to the world of science during what is otherwise described as "the dark ages," they can purchase the book entitled 1001 Inventions: Muslim Heritage in Our World, edited by Professor Salim T S Al-Hassani, ISBN-13: 978-0-9552426-0-1.