

Of Islam and Inventions



Dith Pran/The New York Times

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Published: August 12, 2007

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THE story of aviation often begins with [Leonardo da Vinci](#)'s designs for flying machines, which would later inspire the Wright brothers and their famous sustained flight at Kitty Hawk in 1903.

Yet centuries before Leonardo, in A.D. 875, Abbas bin Firnas, a Muslim inventor in Spain, cloaked himself in bird feathers, strapped himself to a glider made of wood and silk, then jumped into the air and stayed aloft

for some time — making him the first person in recorded history to fly.

This tidbit and many others like it can be gleaned from “Islamic Science Rediscovered,” an intriguing new exhibition at the Liberty Science Center in Jersey City that explores the vast spectrum of accomplishments by Muslim scientists from A.D. 700 to 1700. It is a copy of a show that has been at the Ibn Battuta Mall in Dubai since last year; it may make other stops in the United States after it ends its run in Jersey City.

Through interactive models and vivid displays and artifacts, the exhibition illustrates how Muslim scholars helped advance nine different scientific disciplines, including medicine, engineering and astronomy.

On display are 13th-century surgical tools that influenced many of today's medical instruments, ancient precursors of the internal combustion engine, and astronomical equipment that traced the movements of celestial bodies hundreds of years ago.

The show, designed by MTE Studios in South Africa, is one of several new exhibitions that await visitors to the Liberty Science Center, which reopened last month after a two-year, \$109 million transformation. The new center contains high-tech, hands-on exhibitions

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like one on skyscrapers and another on the Hudson River that replace the simpler exhibits on subjects like static electricity that visitors to the old center may remember.

Simply put, this is science for big kids.

With “Islamic Science Rediscovered,” a primary goal is to showcase the work of early Muslim scientists and their influence on Western society — an effort to offer a balanced perspective on Islam.

“This show is basically about science and technology,” said Wayne LaBar, the center’s vice president for exhibitions and theaters. “But at the same time it is also a show that allows us to create an understanding of a different culture that in some ways is demonized these days.

“Where we are today is based on a lot of different people and a lot of different cultures,” he added, “and the show offers a way of connecting our modern cultures.”

The exhibition begins with a visit to a re-created souk, or Arab market, that includes a large and colorful timeline showing the dates of scientific achievements in the Muslim world juxtaposed with the dates of momentous events in other societies.

Rather than overwhelm viewers with wall text and complicated descriptions — as scientific exhibitions sometimes do — this one engages with interactivity.

Visitors can play with engineering models, grip pulse sensors to see their own heartbeats, examine a four-foot-tall elephant clock, and experiment with optical illusions.

Another compelling element of the exhibition is its attempt to bring to life the personalities behind the brilliant inventions. Many of the displays revolve around individual scientists and explorers, and visitors can see their portraits and learn about the quirks and convictions that guided them.

There is Ibn al-Jazari, the 12th-century scholar and engineer whose myriad inventions and mechanical contraptions make him seem a kindred spirit to [Thomas Edison](#). There is Al-Kwharizmi, the Persian astronomer and mathematician whose name gave rise to the word “algorithm.” And, of course, there is the aviation-obsessed bin Firnas, who made his historic first flight at the age of 70 and, just before leaping into the air, is said to have told friends, “If all goes well, after soaring for a time, I should be able to return safely to your side.”

He did, and “Islamic Science Rediscovered” celebrates his achievement.

The Liberty Science Center is at 251 Phillip Street in Liberty State Park in Jersey City. Open daily this summer, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Starting in September: closed Mondays; open Tuesdays through Fridays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and weekends and holidays, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Information: (201) 200-1000 or lsc.org.

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