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CRITICAL MOMENT

PO Box 4253
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

www.criticalmoment.org • editors@criticalmoment.org

BEGINNING THE DIALOGUE: THE NEW ARAB AMERICAN MUSEUM

By MOHAMAD BAZZI

Visiting the new Arab American National Museum is a must for anyone who desires to know more about the history and issues of Arabs in America. In addressing the issues of historical and contemporary Arab America, the museum opens the gates to the issues, in some instances offering facts, in other instances offering deeper answers, and still in others only lightly tapping the surface of the issue, provoking questions that inevitably beg for much more dialogue and investigation. This is a good thing, because it is difficult to encapsulate anyone's history in four exhibit spaces, and one would hope that thinking people ask more questions after any investigation. The museum does a good job at presenting the character Arab America in general terms, an identity that has been unrepresented and misrepresented for a long time. For this reason, people have expressed relief and joy that such a museum has "finally" been established in America. Yet at times, certain subject matter

presented with varying degrees of intensity and coverage, keeping in mind that many issues dealing with the Arab experience are very tough to grapple with for a new institution that desires to include itself within the mainstream framework of American society.

The museum is comprised of four wings. The first wing (on the main floor) informs the visitor of many significant contributions that the Arab World made to human civilization, listing ancient examples as well as those that come down to us from the apex of the Arab Renaissance during Europe's middle ages. The other three wings, the meat of the museum, comprise the second floor.

The "Coming to America" wing portrays the journeys of everyday folk as they made their way to this land and established lives; narratives of a number of people are included, dating back to the first known Arabic-speaker in America, a slave named Zamouri, and leading into the narrative of a man who lost his home in Palestine when the state

of Israel was declared in 1948; the gentleman, now elderly, bequeathed to the museum a pile of dirt and a small stone that he brought with him from his village in Palestine when he was made a refugee.

The "Living in America" wing illustrates the lives of people as they became part of the fabric of life here, from an average American teen's whimsical narrative about her lifestyle, to other rooms presenting varying experiences of Arab American life. Within this wing there is a multi-media room that deals with Arab stereotypes as portrayed in the media. Our intention was to show that Arab Americans are integral members of the human family, the same basic way that anyone else is; this point should be banal but instead Arabs still evoke xenophobic impressions in the American consciousness today. Today, such attitudes have fallen by the wayside within society's official "correct" positions regarding discrimination, except for the "fair-game" racism directed towards Arabs and Muslims, one

that is still wildly pervasive and visible on many a comedy show one may see on T.V. We thus designed the Stereotypes Installation by presenting stereotypical images from pop culture, both historical and more recent, showing them on two opposing walls. Between these two walls we placed a large video projection showing Americans on the street being asked if they could remember when they had last seen an Arab on T.V. A fourth wall is juxtaposed against all this negativity, showing a positive mural that explores images of the more realistic identity of average Arabs; it encourages people to seek out and be creative, unplug the T.V., and formulate their own identity and image of self.

The final wing in the museum is the "Making an Impact" wing. This wing enshrines Arab Americans of notoriety who have made their mark on American culture in many fields, such as politics, activism, science, entertainment, the arts, sports and business. This wing is full of "did you know" type of

exhibits, with mundane as well as impressive surprises: Such as the fact that waffle cones were invented by an Arab American, or the story of Arab American geologist Dr. George Doumani, who proved the theory that the Earth's continents were once attached before splitting and moving apart.

The museum serves the Arab American community by establishing an institution to represent the community to general American society through a cultural framework. It wants to involve itself more emphatically in the community's cultural discourse and evolution, now that it has opened its doors.

For non-Arabs, the museum provides certain truths that had been made distorted or hidden from sight, about the humanity and reality of this segment of the population. Certain issues, such as the role of religion in people's daily lives, as well as the Palestinian struggle and its impact on Arab American society, are de-emphasized and should be explored further, perhaps in future projects. Overall, the purpose of the museum comes through clearly and succinctly, and provides a beginning for dialogue and engagement for Arabs and non-Arabs alike.

Mohamad Bazzi teaches art in Dearborn and is a member of "OTHER: Arab Artists Collective - Detroit" (www.otherart.org) He can be reached at other@otherart.org



TOP RIGHT: MOSAIC SIGN OVER MUSEUM ENTRANCE. ABOVE: CROWDS GATHER ON OPENING DAY. PHOTOS BY FAREQ, S. OWENS.