

The image shows the interior of the Arab American National Museum. The space is a large, open hall with a high ceiling featuring a complex, geometric wooden lattice structure. The walls are light-colored with several large, arched alcoves. In the center, there is a white, mobile display case with a model of the Burj Khalifa on top. To the left and right, there are display cases with various items, including books and artifacts. The floor is polished and reflects the overhead lights. The overall atmosphere is bright and modern, with a focus on cultural heritage.

# between two worlds

**the arab american national museum**

TEXT BY ANAN AMER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NABIL ZEBID AND  
COURTESY OF THE ARAB AMERICAN NATIONAL MUSEUM



One of the 17,000 museums in the US celebrates the history of the country's four million-strong Arab American community. Inaugurated in 2005, The Arab American National Museum documents the contributions of Arab and Islamic cultures to world civilisation, as well as that of Arab Americans to the US.

# museum



T

he Arab American National Museum's (AANM) mission is to 'document, preserve, celebrate and inform the public on the history, life, culture and contributions of Arab Americans. It serves as a resource to enhance the knowledge and understanding about Arab Americans and their presence in the United States'. Situated across the street from Dearborn City Hall in Michigan, it stands as a symbol in a city which had been historically hostile to ethnic and racial minorities, including Arab Americans.

Building the AANM was not a simple undertaking. While the Arab Community Centre for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), its parent body and the largest Arab American organisation in the US, enjoys strong local and national support, its primary focus is social services. While

ACCESS has had a well-established cultural arts department since 1987, the building and running of a museum was a more challenging task. Its construction set a \$16.8 million fundraising target, with an additional annual management budget of at least \$2.5 million. Nevertheless, those involved in creating the museum felt the urgent need to provide the public with accurate information about the Arab world and Arab Americans.

Once the decision was made to establish the museum, an intensive discussion began among those involved regarding the nature of the museum, its focus, mission and goals, as well as what it would include (and exclude), and the types of exhibits, programmes and collections it would house.

Posing these kinds of questions made clear the complexities



and the challenges of this project. Building a museum that focuses on Arab Americans and tells their story from their own perspective, if not planned and implemented carefully, could reinforce the view that Arab Americans are the 'others', and not an integral part of the larger American story. By drawing similarities between the experiences of Arab Americans and other immigrant groups, and by having Arab American stories presented within the country's larger story, the organisers hoped that visitors would realise that the Arab American story is actually the American story. It is the story of immigrants coming to the US hoping to build a good life for themselves and their families.

There was also the question of representation. Claiming that Arab Americans needed to tell their story in their own

voice assumes that Arab Americans have one voice and one story, which is of course not true. The challenge was to have AANM's exhibits reflect the complexity of the Arab American experience and represent them in all their religious, national,

Previous pages: The courtyard on the main floor features limestone and mosaic tiles, a working fountain and wall mosaics in traditional patterns and colours, as well as a series of intricately carved wood and glass display cases.

Facing page: The main floor gallery is one of two rotating spaces that host visiting exhibitions. 'Juxtaposed!' an exhibition of new work in mixed media on themes of immigration and identity by the artist Adnan Charara is seen here as part of the museum's Spring season.

Above: A re-creation of Yemeni migrant workers' accommodation in the exhibit 'Coming to America'. By 1890, there were a small number of Yemenis in America, and a handful served in the American military during World War I. After World War II, some came to the US through Vietnam. The number of Yemeni immigrants increased rapidly after the abolishment of the quota system in 1965. Many Yemenis worked on farms in California, in car factories in Detroit, and in steel plants in Buffalo, New York.

Arab World Map



NORTH AFRICA

EGYPT

LIBYA

ALGERIA

TUNISIA

CHAD

SUDAN

SAUDI ARABIA

IRAQ

JORDAN

SYRIA

LEBANON

YEMEN

SOMALIA

ETHIOPIA

DJIBOUTI

REPUBLIC OF SAUDI ARABIA

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

AFRICA

ASIA

EUROPE

AMERICA

ANTARCTICA

“The intention was to create an institution that would make a fourth-generation Arab American Christian whose great grandparents came from Syria and a newly-arrived Muslim from Iraq feel that the museum told both of their stories.”

*Anan Ameri*

professional and lifestyle diversity. In essence, the intention was to create an institution that would make a fourth-generation Arab American Christian whose great grandparents came from Syria and a newly-arrived Muslim from Iraq feel that the museum told both their stories.

To address this issue, the organisers travelled to a wide range of cities and towns and met with new immigrants as well as third and fourth-generation Arab Americans. They collected stories, artefacts and documents in every US state. For example, in the AANM there are items sold by a Christian Lebanese peddler from Massachusetts, the trunk of a Yemeni farm worker living in California, a sewing kit from a Palestinian tailor in Michigan, and a prayer rug of a recent Iraqi refugee who settled in Arizona. These are just a few examples of the hundreds of stories collected and told by Arab Americans, their children and grandchildren, in addition to the many recorded oral histories collected from families, libraries, and historical societies.

What complicated these issues even further was the fact that only one year into the planning process, the 11 September 2001 attacks took place. While these tragic events made the

need for such a museum more urgent, it also made dealing with Arab identity and representation more challenging. After 11 September, Arab Americans felt under attack and apprehension dominated the community. Many expressed fear of having their stories in an ‘Arab’ public place like the AANM. Others, especially new immigrants who were the main target for hostilities, questioned the legitimacy and the sanity of building a museum under the existing situation.

While some of the fear faded away as time passed, some people continued to be concerned. However, the overall response of the Arab American community has been very encouraging. The hundreds of valuable artefacts, historical documents, photos and oral histories that are included in the permanent collection have all been donated by members of the community.

There was also the challenge of documenting Arab American contributions. While the importance of including certain individuals was recognised, such as the late scholar Edward Said and journalist Helen Thomas, the AANM felt that contributions from ordinary people such as railroad and mine workers were equally important. To address this, a nationwide

Facing page: An interactive map of the Arab world. For non-Arab visitors to the museum, it is often one of the most enlightening exhibits as it explains the region’s common language and the 22 diverse countries located on two continents. The interactive element is triggered from a user console, which displays facts about each country.

Left: This suitcase holds a *kohl* eye make-up container and beaded shoes brought to America from Syria in 1923 by Sara Abdalla. She and her daughter, Rose, were initially turned away because of a failed eye test. It took the assistance of a US congressman to reunite Sara and her daughter with her husband, who was already living in America.

Following page

Left: This 1995 gown created by Halima Abdel Fateh is embroidered with Palestinian flags and renderings of the Dome of the Rock. Although the garment is modern-day, the embroidery reflects Palestinian traditional styles.

Right: A carpet of Iraq donated by Dr Hussam A Fadhli who grew up in Baghdad and moved to the US in 1957 to complete his medical studies, later opening a private practice in Texas. In 1969, he became the first surgeon to perform open-heart surgery in the state. Fadhli is also a self-taught artist whose work has been displayed at the 2002 Olympic Winter Games and is in the collection of the Bush Presidential Library.



# museum

consultation process among the Arab American community was initiated. In addition to the 50 scholars, museum professionals and community members whose opinions were sought in Michigan, the AANM team also travelled around the US, holding focus groups in cities with substantial Arab American populations. The research showed that there was a unanimous wish for a museum to reflect the beauty and richness of Arab architecture; have a focus on Arab contributions to world civilisation; and include exhibitions that

highlighted the long-standing presence of Arab Americans, and how they helped to shape US society. This feedback was critical in building the rationale behind the AANM's permanent exhibition.

Visitors to the museum experience the warmth and hospitality of the Arab culture as soon as they arrive. A tiled courtyard with a central fountain welcomes guests to a permanent display featuring Arab civilisation and its contributions to science, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, religion and art.



Facing this exhibit is an interactive map that allows visitors to learn more about each of the 22 Arab countries.

The museum's second floor consists of three thematic galleries. 'Coming to America' examines the history of immigration, beginning in 1528 when the first known Arab, Al-Zamouri from Morocco, landed in the Gulf of Mexico as a slave. With a special emphasis on specific waves of immigration from the 1880s to the present day, the collection also explores the personal stories of immigrants, as well as the broader historical experience.

'Living in America' focuses on the life of Arab Americans during different periods. Topics include family life, religion, activism and political involvement, institution-building, work and leisure. This exhibit takes visitors through the experience of homesteading, peddling and serving in the various wars. It explores the diversity of Arab Americans, their struggle to assimilate while holding on to their cultures, as well as issues of discrimination and stereotyping.

'Making an Impact' tells the story of hundreds of Arab American individuals and organisations whose contributions have influenced our way of life, such as world-renowned heart surgeon Michael DeBakey, consumer advocate and presidential candidate Ralph Nader, White House journalist Helen Thomas and NASA scientist Farouk El-Baz.

An important component of the museum is the Library and Resource Centre (LRC), which acts as a repository for documents and family histories, as well as a centre for those conducting research into the community and its past. Additionally, the centre hosts a variety of public programmes, and recently established the first-ever Arab American Book Award in collaboration with the University of Toledo.

Arab Americans have been an integral part of the American society since its inception. The AANM brings to light the many unacknowledged contributions of the Arab world and Arab Americans and celebrates the personal journeys of thousands of people who ventured across the world in search of new beginnings. □

**The Arab American Museum is located in Michigan. Its current exhibition, 'Threads of Pride: Palestinian Traditional Costumes' runs until 25 November. For further information, visit [www.arabamericanmuseum.org](http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org)**

## Shaping a Nation

**'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country'. Penned by Kahlil Gibran, the phrase inspired a generation of Arab Americans, many of whom made a unique contribution to the US.**

Syrian immigrant **Ernest Hamwi** created the first ice-cream cone at the 1904 St Louis World Fair.

Born to Syrian immigrants, civil rights activist **Ralph Johns** encouraged the famous Woolworth 'sit-in' in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960.

The first Arab American appointed to a Cabinet post was Lebanese American **Donna Shalala**, the nation's longest serving Secretary of Health and Human Services.

The revolutionary 1949 Ford car was designed by the Lebanese American **Richard Caleal**.

Adeeb Diab Eid, better known as **BD Eddie**, became one of Oklahoma's most influential businessmen, building his family's humble store into one of the largest retail companies in the US. An active philanthropist, the American University of Beirut organ was one of the many gifts to his beloved homeland.

The late comedian and actor **Danny Thomas**, one of the best-known Lebanese in America, was also the founder of St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital.

Egyptian-born Texas billionaire **Fayez Sarofim** heads Fayez Sarofim Investments and manages the Houston Fine Arts Museum's \$300 million endowment.

The 2004 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting went to Washington Post correspondent **Anthony Shadid**.

With parents from Lebanon, **Jack Shaheen**, Southern Illinois University Emeritus Professor and author of 'Reel Bad Arabs' is CBS News consultant for the Middle East.