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Dearborn museum presents Web tour of anti-Arab bias

Michael H. Hodges/ Detroit News Fine Arts Writer

From wily sheiks to veiled harem girls of dubious integrity, the West has long regarded the Arab world as exotic and sensual, a desert realm full of spicy menace.

To these romantically sinister Hollywood images, the modern era has added one more — the wild-eyed Arab terrorist wielding a bomb under his flowing robes.

To remind us all that the vast majority of Arab-Americans fit none of these images — and to reacquaint us with the damage such stereotyping can do — Dearborn's Arab American National Museum launched a website in April, www.arabstereotypes.org, that takes the visitor on a guided tour of anti-Arab prejudice and connects it to similar bias directed at other ethnic groups.

"Visitors to the site will have the opportunity to become familiar with Orientalism," says site creator Evelyn Alsultany, professor of Arab-American studies at the University of Michigan. The term refers to "the distorted lens through which Arabs are commonly seen as exotic or dangerous in the West."

Quite apart from the interesting (if occasionally academic) text, as compelling as anything on the website are the sometimes shocking images of long-forgotten commercial products adorned by racist caricatures, whether Sanka coffee with its cunning Arab merchant or "Red Skin" Georgia peaches.

Particularly interesting are a series of three Web pages devoted to ways in which popular culture defines certain groups as the "other." Three common tropes are analyzed — the other as animalistic (Native American warriors), the other as childlike (Mr. Bojangles tap-dancing with Shirley Temple), or the other as closer to nature than the rest of us (the Brazilian Carmen Miranda with her fruit basket hat).

With some ethnic groups, allegedly positive stereotypes get mixed in with the negatives — East Asians are assumed to be math whizzes, for example, while black Americans are said to be gifted with musical talent. But with Arabs, particularly in this age of terrorism, there's mostly just negative, says Elizabeth Barrett Sullivan, curator of exhibits at the Arab American National Museum.

"Arabs are definitely not the first group to be stereotyped," she says, "but there are no counter-images to the negative. Arab-Americans aren't seen as normal people, just the 'other.'"

To rectify that, the website — aimed at high school and college students — devotes a section to "Who Are Arab-Americans?" It also employs a nice technique it calls "Reality Check." These are images of perfectly ordinary — one might even say boringly normal — American families of Arab descent, mixed in with the colorful commercial insults.

Arab American National Museum

The Arab American National Museum created www.arabstereotypes.org, but the online exhibit is not tied to a specific show at the Dearborn museum. Computer terminals are available in the museum library, however, so you can check out the site while you check out this remarkably handsome little museum. The next special exhibit doesn't go up until fall (Sept. 11 — "Patriots & Peacemakers: Arab Americans in Service to Our Country"), but the museum's permanent displays are well worth a visit. Take a peek at the second-floor exhibits on the immigrant experience: "Coming to America," "Living in America" and "Making an Impact."

13624 Michigan Ave., Dearborn



This website takes the visitor on a guided tour of anti-Arab prejudice, and connects it to similar bias directed at other ethnic groups. (arabstereotypes.org)



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10 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday; noon-5 p.m. Sunday

(313) 582-2266 or www.arabamericanmuseum.org

Hollywood and the Arab world

Throughout July, Turner Classic Movies will broadcast "Race & Hollywood: Arab Images on Film" every Tuesday and Thursday evening. Films will range from the 1962 "Lawrence of Arabia" to the 1924 "Thief of Bagdad," with commentary by Middle East expert Jack G. Shaheen.

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