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EXHIBIT

Arab museum has online exhibit on stereotypes

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BY JEFF KAROUR
ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Arab American National Museum has launched an online exhibit (<http://www.arabstereotypes.org>) that aims to explore —and overcome —Arab stereotypes that have influenced popular culture for more than a century.

The exhibit, *Reclaiming Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes*, includes commentary as well as paintings, books, films and sheet music showing Arab culture as exotic, uncivilized and threatening.

"We wanted to make the knowledge of how Arabs have been represented in culture more accessible to the public," said Evelyn Alsultany, the exhibit's curator and an assistant professor at University of Michigan who teaches about representations of Arabs and Muslims.

"We're hoping people will leave the site with a vivid sense of this discrepancy between who Arab Americans are in their diversity and the actual limited, restricting stereotypes," she said.

Alsultany said the first images of such stereotypes started to appear in the 1880s, about the time that Arabs began to settle in significant numbers in the United States.

The exhibit cites the 1893 World Fair in Chicago, which recreated Arab streets and customs. A book of photographs chronicling the fair included a depiction of the "peculiar manners of Egyptians" and refers to a girl's veil as an "unsightly disguise."

Alsultany said the stereotype of "Arab as terrorist" began to appear in the 1960s, with the Arab-Israeli war. Such depictions have been common in movies during the past few decades, such as in 1994's *True Lies*, but films have a longer history of presenting women as belly-dancers and seductive-yet-veiled members of harems.

"A lot of times, we watch TV, we think to ourselves, 'This is make-believe,'" said Alsultany, whose father came to the United States from Iraq in the 1960s. "I want to challenge that idea. I'd like for viewers to see there are impacts of these stereotypes."

She said the effects include simple misperceptions, such as assuming all Arabs in the Middle East ride camels or live in tents in the desert. But stereotypes and overgeneralizations also can lead to mosque burnings and other crimes, as well as inform or influence U.S. foreign policy.

The website offers video interviews of Alsultany and other Arab-Americans, as well as examples of the community's contributions to U.S. culture and society. The exhibit also explores stereotypes of other groups, such as Jews, African-Americans and Native Americans.

"One of the things we all agreed on, we didn't want to give impression that this is unique to Arabs," Alsultany said. "The creation of an 'other' — these stereotypes —has happened over time to many groups."

The website is the first, full-fledged online exhibit for the museum, which opened in 2005 in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn. The city has one of the oldest, largest and best known Middle Eastern communities in the nation.

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