

Saudis, Dutch build bridges through culture

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Article taken from the Arabian Sun Published February 19th 2003



A participant in the Saudi Dutch Cultural Gathering peruses the art and culture display.

Artist Fatima Bouhazza and Fleur Elstgeest, one of the organizers and a member of the AOC office.



THE HAGUE, The Netherlands — In an effort to build bridges of understanding between East and West, several Saudi women recently took part in an exchange of ideas and information on cultural, societal and historical issues.

Saudi Aramco, through its Aramco Overseas Co. (AOC) offices in Leiden, Holland, co-sponsored the first-of-its-kind event in Europe, along with the Dutch Arab Society, the Arabisch Nederlandse Vrouwen Kring (ANVK).

The event, titled the Saudi Dutch Cultural Gathering, took place in The Hague, where Saudi Aramco has maintained an important link with Holland through its AOC office for more than 50 years.

An audience of 171 attended the gathering, including museum and university directors, scholars, and members of the diplomatic corps, such as the Saudi ambassador to Holland, Waleed El-Khereiji, and the Dutch ambassador to Riyadh, Paul Legendijk.

The gathering began with keynote addresses by Dr. Tamador Meihuizen-Hassoun, president of ANVK; Abdalhafidh M. Nagshabandi, AOC president; and Abdullatif A. Al-Othman, executive director of Saudi Aramco Affairs.

Al-Othman highlighted the role played by culture after referring to the historic links between Saudi Arabia and Holland. “While it’s fascinating to trace the connections of our international alliance from a historic perspective, our purpose here is not so much to review the past but to celebrate the present,” he said.

“Culture is the very essence of society. Its identity as expressed through religion, art, literature, poetry, music, dance, customs and much more,” Al-Othman said.

“Every nation is imbued with the human spirit of creativity, which is shaped in ways as diverse as the colors of an artist’s palette.”

After the opening remarks, six speakers gave presentations on the role of Saudi women in education, medicine, banking, media, art, photography and literature.

During their presentations, the speakers — Dr. Amal Badreldin, Samia Al-Edrisi, Nimah Nawwab, Madeha Al-Ajrourh and Dr. Thuraya Al-Arrayed — shared their personal challenges and achievements with the multicultural audience.

There was an overwhelmingly positive response, as attendees asked many intriguing questions.

The presentations, which are to be published in a book, were complemented by an exhibit of the Kingdom’s regional cultural diversity through colorful dresses and intricate jewelry contributed by private collector Munirah Al-Ashgar, who also presented a video on folklore.

Visitors were also able to view the work of prominent Saudi artists such as Safeya Binzager, Maha Malluh and Fatima Bouhazza.

Master of ceremonies Meihuizen, the former Dutch ambassador to Saudi Arabia, concluded by saying, “We all can agree that this was a unique conference with a different but surprising aspect that shows a unique blend of tradition and progress.”

“Arab people, and especially Arab women, are very conscious of the value and the rich and glorious past of their own tradition. This tradition need not block their more active participation in society, to the benefit of their own country and the Arab and Islamic world in general.”