

Kurdish Museum: Penetrating Insight Into Unique Culture

By Karen Dabrowska

The Kurdish Museum in Hammersmith, West London, provides a penetrating flash of insight into a unique culture.

Established in 2007 by indefatigable Kurdish activist and founder of the Western Kurdistan Association (WKA) Dr Jawad Mella, the museum's collection focuses on traditional Kurdish rugs and colourful costumes, some displayed to best effect on life-size manikins. There are also musical instruments (flutes and the tabour), dolls, jewellery and crafts, including plate decorations made by members of London's Kurdish community. All the items on display were donated by the Kurdish community in London and date back at least 100 years. One of the more unusual artefacts are sugar breakers. The Kurds do not put sugar in

tea but dissolve the cubes in their mouth.

There is also a library and archive with a number of books such as Jews of Kurdistan, daily life customs, arts and crafts, which Mella is convinced is not found in the British library. The museum is the venue for monthly Kurdish film showings, Christmas and Kurdish New Year celebrations.

"The museum already has an impressive profile. The Kurdish community recognises it as an important tool in preserving culture and the non Kurdish community recognises it as a fascinating means of learning about Kurdish culture as a

whole. Many MP's and the cabinet member for community and children's services in the borough of Hammersmith and Fulham all recognise the museum's role in bridging the gap between social communities in London", Mella told Islamic Tourism. Two wanton acts which destroyed Kurdish culture prompted Mella to set up the museum: the demolishing of the Gate of the Arbil citadel in 1953 and the building of the Ilisu Dam in Turkish Kurdistan which will destroy Hasan Keyf, a historical city spanning nine civilisations. Orante mosques, Islamic tombs and cave churches will be destroyed if the dam is completed. Mella is convinced that if this was a Turkish, rather than a Kurdish site, the dam would not be built

"It is important that the museum acts as centre for the preservation of Kurdish culture, identity and empowerment".

Kurdish arts and crafts have

influences dating back to the Halaf period (6000 – 5000BC). They are characterised by decorative motifs on painted pottery fired in two-chamber kilns. Some decorative motifs are based on geometric forms found in nature, while others have no connection with natural forms. Flower designs are used in textiles and decorations.

Rugs and carpets also have a long history. Pile rugs were introduced by the nomads from the cold northern Eurasian steppes. The obelisk of the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III (858-824BC) shows his tribute, which included a pile of rugs. Clay impressions at the site of Jarmo near Suleimaniyah dating back to 8500 – 7000BC contain the world's oldest records of cloth weaving.

Woven products were given as royal presents to the Assyrian court and the tradition of fine weaving continued in Kurdistan until at least the end of the medieval period in the 15th

century. The Kurdish economy stagnated after the 15th century due to the decline in international trade and the 'est and handsomest carpets in the world became a thing of the past, giving way to more rustic products.

Riotous and gaudy colours, many of them thrown together seemingly haphazardly with absolutely no control or care to match them, are a trademark of Kurdish taste in clothes.

The unique Kurdish colour-madness also runs through Kurdish art are, which ranges from modern abstract to cubist style to the traditional miniature painting style of the East. Artwork varies from socially committed nationalist themes to still life scenes.



Dr Jawad Mella in the Kurdish Museum