THE ARAB WORLD AND THE WEST:

A History of Intellectual Relationships

Curriculum Units Prepared by Participants
in a NEH Masterworks Program

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PREFACE

In 1994 the University of Michigan's Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies, with ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) in Dearborn, presented a series of workshops for teachers entitled "The Arab World and the West: A History of Intellectual Relationships," funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities Masterworks program.

The series of ten workshops explored the many cultural connections which have existed historically between the Middle East and the West. Designed for secondary teachers of "Western Civilization" classes who are being challenged to teach "World History," the course explored master texts from the Arab world which have influenced thought and science in the West. We traced the cultural influences from east to west (when Arabic translations of Greek thinkers, such as Aristotle, and Arab philosophy, science and literature helped to fuel the European Renaissance) and back again from west to east (when ideas from the colonizing West triggered an Arab Renaissance, nationalism and later reactions against the West).

As courses move from "Western Civilization" to a fuller understanding of world culture interrelationships, we find that some subjects previously have been examined primarily from just the western point of view (for example, the period of the Crusades and colonialism). It is useful to incorporate contemporary Arab accounts of the Crusades with the usually Western accounts. It is also helpful to use indigenous Arab accounts of the colonial period for a deeper understanding of the interactions between cultures.

Because of the pressure to cover a great deal of history in a short time, in world history classes in the U.S. there often has been little attention given to the Arab World, or indeed, the whole Middle East. Sumer, Babylon and Pharaonic Egypt are described in some detail, but frequently there is no mention made of the Middle Eastern lands or peoples after Alexander until the land serves as a backdrop for Western colonialism, or as a theater of conflict for world wars I and II. American youth do not have the chance to learn about the great civilizations of the Early Arab Empires, and the cultural diffusion into Andalusian Spain, and from their to the rest of Europe and after 1492 to the New World.
The project staff included Professor Ron Stockton, University of Michigan—Dearborn, Social Studies Department, project director; Jim McConnell, a teacher in the Dearborn Public Schools, Sally Howell, Cultural Arts Director of ACCESS, and Elizabeth Barlow, Outreach Coordinator at the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies, University of Michigan—Ann Arbor. We enjoyed meeting with the 14 secondary-level teachers, and discussing with them the context in which these books appeared, their meaning, and how they might be presented in the classroom to enhance the understanding of our students.

Several of the teacher-participants prepared activities for their students. Four teachers presented a fair at their school, in which they used some of the material they had learned. Others prepared written units. We include in this book six of the units that we prepared in connection with the program, in the hope that they may be of use to other teachers.