

***Potemkin in Baghdad –
the Abbasid ‘House of Wisdom’ as constructed by 1001 Inventions***

Lutz Richter-Bernburg
Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen

1001 Inventions: The Enduring Legacy of Muslim civilization, the exhibition under this heading as well as the accompanying publication, are textbook cases of spurious, meretricious historiography. The extent and quality of distortion to be observed at every step but permit of one conclusion: what is at issue, is plain malice aforethought, not merely good intentions naively gone awry.

The charge thus levelled is in obvious need of substantiation—which the contribution here outlined will undertake to furnish; given constraints of time and space, the single example of the Abbasid ‘House of Wisdom’—a temporary ‘department’ at the caliphal court (c. 180-240 H. /800-850 C. E.)—will have to suffice. It will serve to demonstrate how blatant disregard of historical data as well as current research of at least these past two decades leads to falsification for transparent political reasons. If criticism has to be addressed to much of previous scholarship as well, this is no excuse for criminal negligence in the early 21st century. The ‘House of Wisdom’, originating as a repository of wisdom literature in the Iranian tradition, served caliphal policies in various domains, including religion. No shred of evidence can even vaguely support assertions about the existence of an ‘academy of science’ with multilingual personnel, not to mention other, even more phantasmagoric attributions.

The misrepresentation of the ‘House of Wisdom’ by the authors of *1001 Inventions* is not a minor point; marking as it did, in their view, the glorious entrance to a presumed ‘golden age’ of seven centuries, it is symbolically charged. All the more urgent is the task to restore it as far as *lege artis* possible to its historical dimensions.

‘Truth’ may well be a contested issue. Yet incontestably, it is the ultimate standard, in academe as well as in politics, by which everybody without exception is to be measured.