

Festival to honor medieval land of tolerance

By GARY STERN

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Andalusia, the southernmost province of Spain, is best known today as a cradle of bullfighting and flamenco music, thanks in large part to Europe's keen competition for tourists.

But it is medieval Andalusia that is being studied and promoted more and more these days, for the region was a bright light of tolerance and scholarship while most of Europe slogged through the Dark Ages. Muslims ruled the land for almost 800 years, and for several centuries they lived at peace with Jews and Christians. It was a

period that produced great art and architecture as well as progress in medicine and mathematics, and it came before the Enlightenment.

"Here was a period of time when there was not only coexistence, but prosperity," said Salem Mikdadi of Dobbs Ferry, a Muslim and a board member of the Irvington-based Center for Jewish-Christian-Muslim Understanding. "We can't emulate what happened 1,000 years ago, but we can look to it as a model."

The center, which was established after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, is a primary sponsor of a weeklong festival honoring medieval Andalusia that will be spread across Tarrytown, Sleepy Hollow and Pocantico Hills. "The Spirit of Andalusia" begins tomorrow with two lectures about Andalusia at the Union Church of Pocantico Hills. Mikdadi organized a smaller event about Andalusia at Manhattanville College this past spring. It was such a success he decided to become more ambitious.

"We have a head start when it comes to trying to promote the spirit of Andalusia, as Westchester is a multicultural county of immigrants," Mikdadi said. "People say this is a homogenous community, but there are many groups of people here." The Moors — Muslims from northern Africa — took control of southern Spain from the Visigoths between 711 and 718. They oversaw one of Europe's most advanced and tolerant cultures through the early 1000s. Students and others flocked to the capital, Cordoba, to take advantage of its libraries and hospitals, not to mention the first street lighting in Europe.

Infighting led to a breakup of the government into smaller Moorish cities and states. But Muslims continued to rule until they were defeated in 1492 by Prince Ferdinand and Princess Isabella, who had already started the Spanish Inquisition and wanted to drive out Jews and Muslims.



From left, the Rev. Charles Colwell of Irvington, Joyce Stanton of Tarrytown and Salem Mikdadi of Dobbs Ferry organized an exhibit titled "Israeli and Palestinian: Artists' Impressions" at the Rockefeller State Park Preserve in Pocantico Hills on Nov. 1, 2005. (Angela Gaul / The Journal News)

Several books about medieval Andalusia have been written in recent years. And a new Muslim day school in Yonkers has taken the name Andalusia School, explaining on its Web site that Muslims there "were able to produce a great civilization that the whole world experienced and benefited from."

Joyce Stanton, who heard Mikdadi speak at a meeting of the Rotary Club of the Tarrytowns and became involved in organizing the festival, said Jewish people should learn the story of Andalusia.

"We want people to know that Muslims and Jews lived together and got along well, creating a brilliant civilization," she said. "It was a golden age in Jewish history."

The festival will include lectures, storytelling, poetry readings, a workshop on Islamic art, a joint exhibit by Palestinian and Jewish artists and a culminating music festival.

"The whole point is to bring together people of the three faiths around music, poetry, art," said the Rev. Charles Colwell, rector of St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in Irvington and a founder of the Center for Jewish-Christian-Muslim Understanding. "We want people to know there was a period in Spain, around the year 1000, when the three Abrahamic faiths lived side-by-side and did rather well. How exciting for the three faiths to learn more about each other in this day and age, when there is so much misunderstanding and prejudice and fear and hatred."



Karen Drucker of White Plains looks at an exhibit featuring the work of Westchester artists Tamar Drucker and Renate Ghannam at Rockefeller State Park Preserve in Pocantico Hills on Nov. 1, 2005.
(Angela Gaul / The Journal News)

If you go

Event schedule for "The Spirit of Andalusia." For more information, visit www.cjcmu.org.

- **Lecture:** Maria Rosa Menocal of Yale University will explain how Andalusia became the "Ornament of the World" and Ross Brann of Cornell University will discuss Andalusian love poetry. 3 p.m. tomorrow, Union Church of Pocantico Hills, 555 Bedford Road. Free.
- **Readings:** Storytellers and poets from different religious and cultural backgrounds — Herbert Hadad, Mansour Ajami, Sholeh Wolpe and Matthew Shenoda — will read from their works. 4:30 p.m. Sunday, Hudson Valley Writers' Conference, 300 Riverside Drive, Sleepy Hollow. Free.
- **Lecture:** Educator Audrey Shabbas, a leading expert on the Arab world, will talk about the history and people of the Middle East. 7:30 p.m. Monday, Warner Public Library, 121 N. Broadway, Tarrytown. Free.
- **Art workshop:** Shabbas leads a workshop on Islamic art. 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Nov. 12, Sleepy Hollow High School cafeteria, 210 N. Broadway. Free. Reservations required.
- **Art exhibit:** Renate Ghannam's oil paintings of Palestinian women and Tamar Drucker's fabrics with Jewish/Israeli themes. 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily through Nov. 12, Rockefeller State Park Preserve, Route 117, Mount Pleasant. Free. A reception will be held at 1 p.m. Sunday.
- **Music festival:** Four diverse musical groups will perform. 3 p.m. Nov. 13, Tarrytown Music Hall, 13 Main St., Tarrytown. Tickets are \$25 for the orchestra, \$20 for the balcony and \$12 for students.

For tickets, visit <http://tickets.tarrytownmusichall.org>.