

Metro Detroit home to world's first and only Chaldean museum -- check it out

Museum tells history of Chaldeans dating back more than 5,000 years ago

A look inside the Ancient Mesopotamia gallery of Chaldean Cultural Center's museum. It is one of five galleries that comprise the world-class boutique museum.

WEST BLOOMFIELD, Mich. – Metro Detroit is home to the first and only museum in the world dedicated to preserving the culture and heritage of Chaldeans for future generations.

The Chaldean Cultural Center and its world-class boutique museum located inside the Shenandoah Country Club in West Bloomfield tells the story of a people dating back more than 5,000 years ago to ancient Mesopotamia before the time of Christ to present-day Detroit.

There is no better place for a Chaldean museum than Metro Detroit. The region has the largest concentration of Chaldeans in the world with more than 160,000 residing in it, according to the Chaldean Community Foundation.

For more than a century, Chaldeans have had a profound impact on the region, both socially and economically.

There is a story and group of Chaldeans behind the museum, which cost more than \$2 million to build.

The outside of the Chaldean Cultural Center's museum. The name of the museum can be seen written in both Aramaic and English.

Making of the world's first and only Chaldean museum

The idea for a Chaldean museum was born in February 2003. At the time, there was a committee comprised of Chaldeans in Metro Detroit who wanted to preserve their heritage and make it known to future generations of Chaldeans, as well as to the public at large.

It was around this same time that the Shenandoah Country Club was being established as a community center for local Chaldeans. Members of the committee were approached by the Chaldean Iraqi American Association of Michigan (CIAAM), which owns the Shenandoah Country Club, about establishing a cultural center inside Shenandoah.

The committee and CIAAM agreed to designate about 2,500 square feet inside the club for the establishment of a cultural center and museum. When the committee was ready to build the museum, the space would be there.

Victor Saroki, a Chaldean American, was the architect for the Shenandoah Country Club. In 2005, the committee found an architectural team in New York that designed boutique museums. Saroki consulted with the team.

The Shenandoah Country Club opened in February 2005, but the museum didn't open until May of 2017. Mary Romaya was a member of the committee and remained at the heart of the project from the very beginning to end. Romaya, a Chaldean American, worked as a history teacher and counselor in the Warren Woods School District for 45 years.

"We want our children and grandchildren to know that they are Chaldean, but not just know it, but embrace and love their heritage. Not that we are not American, but we have an identity that spans over 5,000 years," Romaya said.

The founders of the museum were committed to detail and capturing authentic images of Chaldeans over thousands of years. To make sure that happened, they contacted experts in the art world. They hired a freelance media producer from New York who had work published in National Geographic and who has done work on the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York. They also hired a fabrication company.

The museum consists of five galleries, including Ancient Mesopotamia, Faith and Church, Chaldean Village Life, Journey to America, and Chaldeans Today. Leading experts were hired to be the curators of each exhibit.

"We wanted experts in the field. It is a boutique museum, but it is a first-class museum. We wanted it to be a real museum, first-class, state-of-the-art. And so we wanted the experts in the field," Romaya said. "And so it was bringing all of those teams together -- the architects, the media producer, the fabricator -- but we had to tell them what we wanted."

Items on display in the Chaldean Cultural Center's ancient Mesopotamia gallery. Archbishop Allen Vigneron, center, visiting the museum. Vigneron is standing with popular Metro Detroit Chaldean priest Father Manual Boji, left, and Mary Romaya, the former director of the museum. Metro Detroit is home to 12 Chaldean churches.

They also consulted with people from the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, the Holocaust Memorial Center of Farmington Hills and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., to get insight on the best practices.

Founders of the museum also dug up photos from the archives of the Detroit Historical Society, The Detroit News and the Detroit Free Press to help chronicle life for Chaldeans in Detroit over the decades.

"I want Chaldeans to come because a lot of them know their own parents' story but don't know the story of how large our community is, how dynamic our community is. We've been here for over six generations now," Romaya said.

Because of the 2008 recession, which was a major setback, the museum did not open until years after the project launched.

“A lot of people in the Chaldean community thought: What are you doing? Why is it taking so long? But the Great Recession hit and Detroit got hit harder than the rest of the country and fundraising stopped,” Romaya said.

From the cradle of civilization to present-day Detroit

Chaldeans are Iraqi Catholics. However, most don't identify as Arabs because they are the indigenous people of Iraq and speak Aramaic, the language of Christ, which can also be written. As the ancient inhabitants of Mesopotamia, their roots date back thousands of years, before Iraq was even established as a country.

To truly understand who Chaldeans are, one must travel back to Mesopotamia, known widely as the first civilization in the world.

The five galleries are the cornerstone of the museum. The first exhibit, Ancient Mesopotamia, takes visitors back in time 5,300 years ago to Mesopotamia. Visitors can see the time imprinted on the floor before entering each gallery. When first visiting the museum, visitors enter the Ancient Mesopotamia gallery, where the time 3300 B.C. is engraved on the floor.

Chaldeans trace their roots to Babylon, a kingdom in Mesopotamia. The most noticeable and notable piece in the gallery is an interactive replica of the Code of Hammurabi that is on display.

The Code of Hammurabi was the law thousands of years ago in Babylon.

"There are 282 laws. This is the law of Babylon. They are uniform laws and they were living in a society with rulers," Romaya said.

The original Code of Hammurabi is at the Louvre Museum in Paris, which sells replicas to museums across the country. There is a replica of the Code of Hammurabi at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and one at the Oriental Institute in Chicago.

A replica of the Code of Hammurabi on display at the Chaldean Cultural Center. The Code of Hammurabi was the law thousands of years ago in Babylon.

The exhibit also features a replica of the famous Gate of Ishtar. This is the gate that led to the city of Babylon. When leaving the ancient gallery, visitors walk under the Ishtar Gate and into the Faith and Church gallery.

In many ways, the museum is a community-led effort. Members of the local community donated their own personal items to the museum to help create an authentic portrayal of Chaldeans in Iraq and Metro Detroit.

The exhibit also highlights the contributions of ancient Chaldeans to math and science, astronomy, geography and medicine and depicts them as pioneers of science and math.

“They even had the idea of the Pythagorean theory before Pythagoras,” Romaya said.

The Museum also features a replica of the famous Gate of Ishtar. This is the gate that led to the city of Babylon.

Ancient artifacts, items with sentimental value on display

Chaldeans are very religious. In the Faith and Church gallery, you can hear and see Chaldeans participating in religious ceremonies through a series of interactive displays.

The exhibit features vestments from local priests and a Sunday liturgy book written in Aramaic and donated by a longtime Metro Detroit Chaldean bishop, Ibrahim Ibrahim.

A look inside the museum's faith and church gallery. A Sunday liturgy book written in Aramaic on display in the museum's faith and church gallery.

There is also an oil lamp from an antiquity dealer that goes back to the time of Christ.

One of the most noticeable pieces is a replica of a baptismal font from the St. Peter Chaldean Catholic Church in Mosul, Iraq.

Before leaving the Faith and Church gallery and stepping into the Village Gallery, there is a special decorative element on the wall that might be recognizable to people who grew up in Telkaif, Iraq. It is a sculpture of the Last Supper and there's a story behind it. The sculpture is a replica of the Last Supper sculpture that was above the main altar of the Sacred Heart Church in Telkaif.

Telkaif is the village in Iraq from which the majority of Chaldeans trace their roots. Today, the village is no longer comprised of Chaldeans, because so many have been displaced.

The church no longer exists. It was destroyed in 2014 when the Islamic State group gained a stronghold in Mosul, Iraq and forced the remaining Christians in the area to flee.

“In 2014, (the Islamic State group) took over the church and that sculpture was vandalized. All Catholic and Christian elements were destroyed in the church,” Romaya said. “The idea behind it is that when Chaldeans who used to worship in Iraq and used to go to Sacred Heart Church, would remember it, and it would make them feel good. We are honoring them.”

She said that, after (the Islamic State group) was driven out in 2017, Chaldeans wanted to restore the church.

“What was a copy has now become the only remnant of the original, so the copy has sort of become the original, so it has been photographed and they want to restore it to the way it was,” she said.

Replica of the Last Supper sculpture that was above the main alter of the Sacred Heart Church in Telkaif, Iraq.

The traditional attire worn by the figures in the Chaldean Village Life exhibit depicting everyday life for woman in Telkaif were donated by Chaldeans who used to live there.

“We got all the items from Chaldeans who came to America from Telkaif, and they may not be as much as what was purchased from the Louvre Museum,

but they are absolutely authentic,” she said.

The attire worn by figures in the Chaldean Village Life gallery depicting everyday life for woman in Telkaif were donated by Chaldeans who used to live there.

‘Coming to America’

The Coming to America exhibit features Chaldeans telling their stories of coming to America. Most of the Chaldeans who came to America came through Ellis Island or Boston, Romaya said.

There are three other well documented reasons Chaldeans came to America. The first was for jobs at Ford Motor Co.

Decades ago, Ford was offering its \$5-a-day plan to workers in its factories. For immigrants, this was an attractive offer and a good reason to come to the United States.

“And so that was attractive to people who did not speak English. And they knew, if they came to Detroit, they would be able to survive. The early pioneers were men in their late teens and early twenties,” Romaya said.

Young Chaldeans tour the museum. Its mission is to preserve the culture and heritage of Chaldeans for future generations. (WDIV)

The second reason was that Chaldeans in the village heard there was already an Arab-speaking community in southeast Michigan. And while Chaldeans in the village spoke Aramaic, they also spoke Arabic, which they picked up from living in an Arabic-speaking country.

“So they knew, if they came to Detroit, there would be people from the same region of the world in which they could communicate with using the Arabic language, and so that gave them a comfort level when coming to a new country,” she said

Romaya said the third reason was that, when you went through the immigration process back then, if something went wrong in terms of not having the right visa and passport, you would be able to immigrate to Canada, which had more liberal immigration policies at the time.

By 1930 both the Detroit Windsor Tunnel and Ambassador Bridge were built, making travel between the two countries easier.

“So, if something went wrong, they could just go to Canada and then visit other Chaldeans in Metro Detroit. There was close proximity even though separated by international borders,” she said.

Young Chaldeans tour the museum. Its mission is to preserve the culture and heritage of Chaldeans for future generations. (WDIV)

Over the decades, war and religious persecution have driven the majority of Chaldeans out of Iraq, which is also one of the main reasons Metro Detroit now has the largest community of Chaldeans in the world.

Romaya said the first known Chaldean came to America in 1889. Chaldeans donated their immigration documents to the museum. Some Chaldeans featured in the museum served in the army and navy in World War II.

The Coming to America exhibit features Chaldeans telling their stories of coming to America.

A lot of Chaldeans owned grocery stores when they came to America. All of the replicas and items in the museum are from the 1930s although, Romaya said, some Chaldeans were buying stores in the 1910s. By the 1930s, they fully owned stores, she said.

According to the Chaldean Chamber of Commerce, Chaldeans contribute more than \$10.7 billion annually to Michigan’s economy.

“We are extremely entrepreneurial. We are extremely hardworking. We tend to have larger families. We are hardworking, industrious people,” said Romaya.

Mary Romaya standing in the Coming to America gallery of the museum at its grand opening celebration.

Future generation different than ones of the past

The museum tour ends by recognizing the past and future generations. Near the end of the tour, you’ll find a wall featuring photos of today’s young Chaldeans adjacent to another wall filled with the photos of the first Chaldeans who came to the United States or, as the museum calls them, the original pioneers.

“As long as they were here and fully established before 1940, before the start of World War II, we call them the original pioneers,” Romaya said. “The past and the future are looking at each

other. We do not want them to lose their identity. We want them to be fully immersed in the American society. We are American. I myself am American, but we don't want to lose our ethnicity. We don't want to lose our identity. We do not want to lose our faith. It is our faith that has sustained us, nurtured us and kept us together."

Life changed for the Chaldean community as it has assimilated more in American culture and society. The future generation is different than previous ones in so many aspects. They are crossing boundaries and doing things older generations never did, including pursuing careers in public office. There is no telling what the future generations will accomplish.

While exiting the museum, you will see a sign that reads "our story continues."

"We've been around for 5,000 years. We'll be around for another 5,000," Romaya said.

For more on the Chaldean Cultural Center's museum, [click here](#).

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