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Written by Alia Yunis
Photographed by Samantha Reinders

One heirloom connects Muslim families of Cape Town to heritage more than any other: a *kitab*. Historians and linguists value them, too, as some preserve the first written form of the Afrikaans language, which was in Arabic script.

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Written and photographed by Beliz Tecirli

In the oblique and often provocative ways of contemporary art, the 17-artist exhibition "Crude" probes the roles of oil in cultures and societies of the Middle East through the eyes of artists of the region. It is "art rooted in the Gulf, yet addressing universal ideas," says Antonia Carver, director of the new Jameel Arts Centre in Dubai, which in November inaugurated its galleries with the show.

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Written by Gerald Zarr
Photographed by Rebecca Marshall

Founded in the 10th century in southern France, Montpellier grew on commerce and knowledge. In the 12th century, Christian, Muslim and Jewish scholars opened what is today Europe's oldest continuous school of medicine.

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We distribute *AramcoWorld* in print and online to increase cross-cultural understanding by broadening knowledge of the histories, cultures and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their global connections.

Front Cover: Every September 24, the family parade highlights Heritage Day in the historic neighborhood of Bo-Kaap in Cape Town, South Africa. Photo by Samantha Reinders.

Back Cover: Tranquil, atmospheric and skillfully composed, this photo of a woman fishing along the coast of Lebanon is one of hundreds of images of daily life in the early 20th century by Marie al-Khazen / Arab Image Foundation.



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Written by Juliet Hight

The Modernist movement expressed postcolonial aspirations, elevated traditional cultures and redefined identities from Morocco to Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, the Levant, the Gulf and more. As Arab Modernist paintings command rising prices at art auctions, curators and historians are paying increasing attention to its diverse and dynamic origins.

28 Women Behind the Lens

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Some took portraits of women or worked in the labs of family studios. Some worked across the region with employers or family members. A few struck out on their own. None received much notice—until recently. Three historians introduce leading women photographers of the early 20th century in the Middle East.

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Written by Alia Yunis

Gentle and at times curious, dugongs likely inspired the first tales of mermaids. Once widely hunted, they are now globally protected, but their food—seagrass—is in decline, and from East Africa to the Pacific Islands, conservationists and communities are taking action.

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FIRSTLOOK

Baking Naan



Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan

Photograph by
Farshad Usyan

On January 3, on the way to an assignment, I saw this boy waiting on customers in this bakery. Afghan bread, called *naan*, can be oval, circular or rectangular, and it is baked in a *tandoor*, a cylindrical oven. The bread is formed as dough and stuck on the interior wall of the oven. Black cumin or caraway seeds are often sprinkled on, as much for decoration as for taste, while lengthwise lines scored in the dough add texture.

After taking this picture, I learned the boy's name is Mousa and asked his permission to publish it. I use photography to change people's perceptions about Afghanistan by depicting daily life—the beautiful and the good, as well as the challenges. I believe that my work as a photojournalist allows me to tell stories others wouldn't see about my country and my people.

—Farshad Usyan

  @farshadusyan







FLAVORS

Vegan Lebanese Moussaka

Recipe by
Salma Hage

Photograph courtesy
Ricarius Photography

Moussaka is a wonderfully inclusive dish; there are countless versions of this much-loved recipe.

My version is vegan and maintains the simplicity and richness of flavor that make this dish so popular. We ate it frequently during my childhood, since feeding a large family meant we rarely ate meat due to its expense. I offer here a modern twist on the traditional Lebanese preparation. A guaranteed crowd-pleaser, it can be served as a main course or as a part of a mezza spread.

(Serves 4)

2 large eggplants

¼ c (1 oz / 30 g) all-purpose or gluten-free flour

2 t Lebanese seven spice

Salt and ground black pepper

2 T extra virgin olive oil

2 14-oz (400-g) cans chickpeas, drained

Tomato Sauce

2 T extra virgin olive oil

1 onion, finely chopped

4 garlic cloves, finely chopped

1 t ground cumin

1 bay leaf

2 ½ lb (1.1 kg) tomatoes (6 large), finely chopped

7 sundried tomatoes, preserved in oil

2 T tomato paste

14-oz (400-g) can diced or chopped tomatoes

½ c (100 ml) water

1 t unsweetened pomegranate molasses

Juice of ½ a lemon

Preheat the oven to 400°F (200°C). Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper.

Slice the eggplants into ½-inch (1-cm) disks. Mix the flour, spices and a pinch of salt and pepper on a large plate. Dab each side of the eggplant slices in the spiced flour mixture to lightly coat. Lay them on the prepared pan, drizzle with the olive oil and bake for 10 minutes. Flip the pieces over, then bake for an additional 10 minutes or until browned and cooked through. Remove and set aside to cool, leaving the oven on.

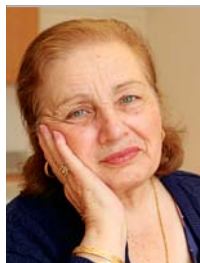
In the meantime, make the tomato sauce: In a large skillet or frying pan, heat the oil over medium heat and sauté the onion for 2 minutes. Add the garlic and cook for 1 minute, then add the cumin and bay leaf and cook for another 1–2 minutes. Add the fresh tomatoes, stir and cook for 3 minutes. Add the sundried tomatoes, tomato paste, canned tomatoes, water, pomegranate molasses and lemon juice and cook for another 20–30 minutes, stirring occasionally, until you have a rich thick sauce. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Turn off the heat and remove the bay leaf.

Layer the eggplant disks in the base of a roasting pan or large casserole dish. Add a layer of tomato sauce, followed by a layer of chickpeas. Repeat until you have used all of your ingredients (about 3–4 layers), ideally finishing with a layer of tomato sauce. Return to the oven for 40 minutes. Set aside to cool. This dish is served at room temperature, when all the flavors are at their best.

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**The Immigrant
Cookbook**

Leyla Moushabeck, ed.
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Salma Hage is a James Beard Awards winner and best-selling author of two Middle Eastern cookbooks. Her *The Lebanese Kitchen* is considered the definitive book on Lebanese home cooking. Growing up in Mazarat Tiffah (Apple Hamlet), in the mountains of the Kadisha Valley in North Lebanon, she learned to cook from her mother, mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. Having helped bring up her nine brothers and two sisters, she grew up cooking for the entire family. She has pursued this love for cooking throughout her life, working for many years as a professional cook.

RICKY RODRIGUEZ



The Handwritten Heritage of South Africa's Kitabs

Written by ALIA YUNIS | Photographed by SAMANTHA REINDERS

In an orange house along one of the sloped lanes of Bo-Kaap, Cape Town's Muslim neighborhood, 92-year-old Abdiyah Da Costa deftly climbs the stairs to the second floor to what essentially has become a personal museum. Meticulously dressed and made up—she used to own what she describes as four “high-fashion” clothing shops—she’s been waiting to show us around. Outside her window is a view of Cape Town’s iconic, flat-topped Table Mountain, which overlooks the city and the Atlantic Ocean. Inside, her walls are covered with black-and-white photos of her husband, parents, siblings and other relatives long gone. Her beaded wedding dress is on display, as are souvenirs from her pilgrimage to Makkah as well as awards and certificates received over the years. But we didn’t come to see these things. We came to see her *kitabs*.

These are religious lesson books that, for many Muslim Cape Malay families, are often heirlooms and precious links to a past that is only now being gradually rediscovered. (Pronounced *ki-TAB*, the word literally means *book* in Arabic.) Classified as “colored” under apartheid, most Cape Muslims descend from slaves and political convicts from Southeast Asia, as well as other parts of Africa, whom the Dutch captured and brought to the Cape area during the 17th and 18th centuries. A smaller number descend from Muslim merchants who came from India in the late 19th century, and together they make up, according to a 2014 government



At her home in the Bo-Kaap neighborhood of Cape Town, Abdiyah Da Costa, 92, shows a photo of herself during younger years. Known as the Malay Quarter, Bo-Kaap dates back to the 1760s when Dutch colonist Jan De Waal leased homes to his slaves, who were mostly Malay Muslims. *Opposite:* Da Costa's heirloom *kitab*, handwritten by her father, is one of a few remaining today.

census, 7.5 percent of the population of the Western Cape.

Even after the official end of slavery in 1834, and prior to apartheid forcing the separation of people by race in 1948, Cape Muslims lived on the periphery of the white colonial rulers, and they remained connected through religion. During community gatherings and family lessons, a religion teacher or family member would write



Generations of Bo-Kaap residents enjoy music and dance during the annual Heritage Festival 5KM Family Fun Walk, which parades through the neighborhood on September 24, Heritage Day.

and read from kitabs, which mostly contained Qur’anic lessons and sermons.

This October day, two blocks from Abdiyah’s house, performers mix in with musicians playing the uniquely raucous Bo-Kaap brass-band music, and people crowd onto neighbors’ stoops, watching or joining in the dancing. It’s Heritage Day, one more way that, in the postapartheid era, Cape Malays have begun to claim their history, and the kitabs play a part in that reclamation.

Most of the kitabs have disappeared with time. Abdiyah is one of the few people who still has her family’s kitabs.

“I was born in this house, and I shall die in this house, *inshallah*,” Abdiyah says, not quite ready to answer our questions about the kitabs.

But this house’s history is much older than she is—and very much linked to the kitabs.

Her father, Imam Sheikh Mohammed Khair Issacs, ran a *madrassah* (Islamic school) out of this house, where pupils would learn the Qur’an. He taught the boys,



As descendants of slaves, Cape Malays had no heirlooms, so the *kitabs* became important in that way. The kitabs are a form of cultural capital for both individuals and communities.

—Sarah Jappie, historian

and Abdiyah’s mother taught the girls. Later, Abdiyah’s husband, Suliymán, taught in the house as a volunteer, and Abdiyah was the only one of her sisters not to go on to be a *madrassah* teacher.

“Every room was used, and people were just crowded in,” Abdiyah recalls. “Morning classes were like kindergarten learning the Arabic alphabet and basic words, and the afternoon would be learning recitation and then more advanced studies in the evening with the young men and women.

“We learn better when we learn together,” she adds, remembering how every student had a *kitab* for writing down lessons, as even student’s simple copybooks for these lessons were also called *kitabs*. She still recites the Qur’an beautifully in Cape-

accented Arabic, her voice hesitating only occasionally.

After some encouragement, we convince her to go to the closet in her bedroom and dig out her family’s *kitabs*. There are two books, each handwritten by her father, and two older, yellowing books that are not

Right: Local historian and archivist Ebraheim Manuel sits in his living room surrounded by newspaper articles and photos he has collected relating to Cape Malay history. The 71-year-old has lived through much of that history—including both apartheid and, as a teenager, the Group Areas Act that forcibly relocated families. *Lower:* Ebraheim holds one of many kitabs he has collected from self-taught families over the years, which he donates to the Simon's Town Heritage Museum.

mere copybooks but gracefully written, elegantly bound tomes in the practiced hand-writing of religious teachers. One is in Jawi, a Southeast Asian language that uses Arabic script. The other one is especially rare: Dated 1871, it is one of the few remaining kitabs in Arabic Afrikaans.

Afrikaans, which today is one of 11 official languages of South Africa, is derived largely from Dutch, as the Dutch East India Company established Cape Town (and later all of South Africa) as a stopping-point colony until the Dutch government was forced to hand it over to the British in 1814. In addition, Afrikaans also carries influences from Malay, English, Portuguese and Khoi, an indigenous language. And the first time Afrikaans was written down—possibly as early as 1820—was with the Arabic script, mostly for lesson writing in kitabs.

Dutch linguist Adrianus van Selms coined the term “Arabic Afrikaans” in the early 1950s upon discovering manuscripts in Arabic script but with Afrikaans words. The oldest existing one is *Uiteensetting van die Godsdiens* (*An Exposition of Religion*) written in 1869 by Islamic scholar Abu



Bakr Effendi. Linguists believe that although there may have been earlier Arabic Afrikaans publications, the first usage of Arabic Afrikaans, and thus the first written Afrikaans, appeared in homegrown kitabs. Afrikaans was not taught in schools until it became an official state language in 1925.

We ask Abdiyah to read for us from the Arabic Afrikaans kitab. She agrees and puts on her glasses. But then she wavers, becomes overwhelmed, a little frazzled. “No, no, it’s been too long,” she says. “I’m not so fluent. I can’t. No.” It’s a firm no. She only agrees to read us a poem she has

written in memory of her husband. She’s tired now. It is time for us to go.

Abdiyah’s family draws its lineage back to Imam Abdallah Qadri of Tidore, a spice-trading island now in the northeast of Indonesia’s archipelago. Better known locally as Tuan Guru (Master Teacher), he was brought to Cape Town in 1780 by the Dutch as a state prisoner, likely having been accused of collaborating with the British. For more than 10 years, he was held on Robben Island, the offshore prison that would later hold Nelson Mandela for 18 years. The story goes that Tuan Guru spent his time there writing out several copies of the Qur’an by memory and that upon his release he opened South Africa’s first mosque, Auwal Mosque, which still exists today on Dorp Street: Abdiyah herself still goes there to attend lectures.



Top: A local landmark and one of many historical buildings in Bo-Kaap, the minaret of the Masjid Boorhaanol Islam rises amid the neighborhood's colorful walls on Longmarket Street. Local leaders, including Minister of Arts and Culture Nathi Mthethwa, are beginning the process of designating Bo-Kaap as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Above: Detail of a kitab at the Heritage Museum in Simon's Town.

Today there are few of Abdiyah's generation left—and even fewer who can read Arabic Afrikaans. There is, however, soft-spoken Saarah Jappie, in her early 30s, whose Cape Malay parents immigrated to Australia, where she grew up. In 2008 she began to hear about the kitabs while working as a researcher on the Tombouctou Manuscripts Project, a study that looked at Arabic-script writing throughout continental Africa. Now a historian at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, she can read the kitabs in all their languages: Arabic, Arabic Afrikaans and Jawi.

“As descendants of slaves, Cape Malays had no heirlooms, so the kitabs become important in that way,” Saarah explains. “The kitabs are a form of cultural capital for both individuals and communities. Given that many such objects have been lost or destroyed, merely owning one is significant. For people who have been dispossessed over multiple generations by slavery, apartheid and other actions, accessing, and even owning, an object of tangible heritage is very important.”

Through her research she has created a network of senior citizens—more like a family of great aunts and uncles—who have developed a deep affection for her.

While we have talked via Skype for the past couple of years, the first time we meet is at the house of one of the best known—some would say notorious—kitab owners, 71-year-old Ebrahiem Manuel. While he is apologetic for not having finished

After leaving Abdiyah, I chat with several people on their stoops. Almost everyone has at least a vague memory of kitabs or stories about kitabs. But no one seems to have any.

One couple pointed me towards the house of Achmat Davids, a renowned scholar who dedicated much of his life to the study of Arabic Afrikaans. He died suddenly in 1998 at age 59, which has only added to the mystique of kitabs. There are foreign students renting his house now. They don't know who he was. The kitabs he collected seem to have disappeared, and no one seems to know who might have them. Some suggest finding his sisters. Others suggest finding his second wife, but it all leads to dead ends.

high school, Saarah barely mentions having recently finished her doctorate in history at Princeton University, but Ebrahiem proudly brings it up almost as soon as she walks in.

Ebrahiem lives in a four-room house with bars on all the windows, which is the norm for Cape Town's Grassy Park neighborhood. Cars drive by blasting music, especially as the day progresses into evening. Though the neighborhood has a reputation for gang violence, Ebrahiem lives in a world apart, a world made up of both real and imagined heritages, with unclear divisions between the two. The house is musty, perhaps because of the stacks and stacks of papers and boxes of

laminated articles we have to weave our way through to get to the three plain red chairs that make up the living room furniture. Two other rooms are empty, but every inch of wall space is covered with articles and photos relating Cape Malay people's history and current accomplishments. The third room contains only a small bed.

Before we ask any questions, he begins to tell his story, and he doesn't take a break for three hours. His most frequently uttered expression is "it was divine intervention." This includes his discovery, through a kitab—with a yellow cover—that his family goes back to Indonesian royalty.

Ebrahiem was born in Simon's Town, a 45-minute drive from Cape Town. He describes himself as a bad boy who shunned his father's efforts to teach him the Qur'an, running in the streets and dropping out of school. But he says he remembers his father's brown suitcase that carried the family's kitabs and his father telling him, when he was five or six years old, that he should not touch them.

Ebrahiem not only lived through apartheid, but also the Group Areas Act, initiated in 1950, in which the South African government issued mandatory relocation to segregate communities by race, taking millions from the homes they had known for generations. Ebrahiem was a teenager when a truck came to collect his family to move them to the Cape Flats with only the possessions that would fit on the truck. "I think that is when we lost some of our kitabs," he says. "We were a big family, and we couldn't take everything. They put the family on the truck, and what didn't fit got left behind. All gone now."

Ebrahiem did not actually get on the truck. "When I saw the trucks, I ran away," he recalls. "I lived in a shack on the beach with other runaways until someone convinced me to join the navy as a galley worker in the kitchen, cooking for the White soldiers in training."

He would end up being a cook for several years on freighters exporting South African fruit until "divine intervention" would change his life and make him a devout Muslim.



Top: Zainab "Auntie Patty" Davidson, 84, walks through the home she grew up in and in 1998 turned into the Heritage Museum. She has filled the home, including a bedroom, *lower*, with images, newspaper clippings and kitabs, which can be seen in the glass case. After apartheid ended, Auntie Patty and her husband returned to Simon's Town in 1995 to reclaim her family's confiscated property. "Our community was wonderful," she says.

His father passed away on September 7, 1992. Almost exactly five years later, as he tells it, his father came to him in a dream and told him to look for the family's yellow kitab. The same thing happened for the next two nights. He contacted his Auntie Kobie, and she told him yes she had the yellow kitab. When she gave it to him, he saw the genealogy of the family had been written on one of the pages. It went back to Abdul Qader Jaelani Dea Koasa, royalty from the Indonesian island of Sumbawa, and his son Imam Ismail Dea Malela. The Dutch brought them to the Cape of Good Hope in 1753 and incarcerated them in a prison in Simon's Town. In 1755 they escaped by digging through one of the walls.



With his wife, Hawa, recovering from surgery at the couple's home in Kensington, Cape Town, Bapak Ismail Petersen, 94, shows photos explaining his founding, after the end of apartheid, of the Indonesian and Malaysian Seamen Club, which helps connect Cape Malay people to organizations and families in Malaysia. He remembers how his father would bring out kitabs some evenings for the family to study together.

The father and son are local heroes, and both are buried high on a hill in Simon's Town overlooking the ocean. It's chilly and rainy when I visit the simple graves. On a bench next to them, an elderly man recites the Qur'an, while his wife shields him from the rain with an umbrella. Down in the town, closer to sea level, is the house of Ebrahiem's Auntie Kobie. Next to that is Simonstown Mosque and the simple green muslim school, built in 1923, nestled in the middle of a gated white neighborhood where the houses overlook spectacular ocean vistas.

"Divine intervention" also led Ebrahiem to travel to Sum-bawa with a translator in 1999. As he tells it, there in remote Pemangang, villagers were waiting for his return, and they cried when they saw him because everyone still knew the story of the day their leader was taken away as a slave for noncooperation with the Dutch East India Company.

"I was treated like royalty," he says. "My whole body was engulfed with this energy, and I was overwhelmed. The leader of the village looked exactly like my father."

He shows a copy of the page of the yellow kitab that lists the family lineage. Where is it now, I ask. Visibly pained, he replies that he lent the yellow kitab and two red ones to a family member in 2003 and never saw them again. He turns to Saarah and says his hope is that she will continue to search for missing kitabs and their stories.

Though there are people in both Indonesia and South Africa who dispute the facts of Ebrahiem's story, his tale resonates like

Though there are people who dispute the facts of Ebrahiem's story, his tale resonates like a collective truth.

house on the beach, built in 1858. We wait for her to come from upstairs, where they live, to open the museum, which is on the ground floor of the house.

There are displays of old dresses and dishware; the walls are covered with photos and documents and, behind glass cases, kitabs, mostly in Jawi and Arabic.

There are no professional curators involved in this preservation. But the kitabs are kept away from human touch to prevent the bound yellow and brown pages, with uniform but sometimes awkward Arabic script, from falling apart, as the bindings barely do their jobs anymore. Sedick comes in to show us a kitab he believes is the oldest in the house, but it's hard to be sure.

This is the house Auntie Patty grew up in, and she opened it as a museum in 1998.

"Our community was wonderful." Auntie Patty smiles. "People brought their things, and Ebrahiem Manuel brought boxes and boxes of the newspaper articles and photos he'd been collect-

ing, and we made copies of everything." On opening day, she says, "something like 700 to 1,000 people came."

Auntie Patty's own family kitabs are not here. They, she explains, are with the son of her eldest brother. She thinks some of them are in Arabic Afrikaans. "They are precious," she says, "and stay in the family."

Not every family has valued the kitabs in the same way. Saarah takes me to meet Bapak (father) Ismail Petersen, 94, and his wife, Hawa. Bapak Ismail, a retired tailor, practices his

a collective truth.

"Ebrahiem has undertaken a remarkable journey to find his family roots," says Saarah. "So his perspective sheds light on deep, personal tensions regarding shared heritage, which is why his story is significant."

This is also why many people have loaned Ebrahiem their kitabs, all of which he has given for safekeeping and display to the Simon's Town Heritage Museum.

This, it turns out, is actually the home of Zainab Davidson, known locally as Auntie Patty, and her husband, Sedick. He's outside fixing the squeaky gate of the rambling cottage-style



Working to piece together histories denied during apartheid, Fatima February of the Iziko Social History Centre in Cape Town shows a kitab that is being conserved in an archival wrap and box.

conversational Arabic on me when he greets me, enjoying my surprise. He says he picked up small talk in several languages working at the seaport.

The couple lives in a small, well-kept house in the heavily barred Kensington neighborhood, near an industrial area of Cape Town. He can perfectly describe his childhood home before relocation and remembers his father bringing the kitabs out some evenings for the family to study together. Some were in Arabic Afrikaans.

He takes his place on the edge of the bed where Hawa rests from hip surgery, turning to her after every sentence, her blue eyes taking in everything. Bapak Ismail, Saarah explains, was also a close friend of her grandfather, and they even went to Makkah together.

Ten years ago Bapak Ismail also showed her some of the family kitabs, and she asks him now if he would show me. He goes and comes back with recent publications that include photos of him meeting the king of Malaysia and photos of events organized so Cape Malay could meet with Malaysian officials interested in building links to modern South Africa. After apartheid ended, Bapak Ismail says, he started the Indonesian and Malaysian Seamen Club to connect Cape Malay to civic and religious organizations in Malaysia. After more than half a lifetime as a second-class citizen, the photos in these books are deep validation.

And for him a happier story than his family's kitabs: They are with his brother who lives across the street but doesn't share them. He tears up. They are clearly not close. Bapak Ismail says

his brother may have even burned them. Some people, Saarah explains, do this so they do not end up outside of the family.

As Bapak Ismail's generation passes away, the kitabs need more formal care. At the Iziko Social History Centre in Cape Town, Fatima February is in charge of preserving its small collection of kitabs. Wearing white gloves, she pulls them out of archival boxes. They are wrapped in tissues, not yet cataloged or identified, and thus not on display. Fatima doesn't have an answer about where so many missing kitabs might be. Nor do the other curators working there. You get a feeling they have suspicions. This is just one more set of mysteries that might someday be solved, as defining one's place in South Africa's difficult history becomes ever more possible, page by aging page. 🌐



Alia Yunis, a writer and filmmaker based in Abu Dhabi, recently completed the documentary *The Golden Harvest*.

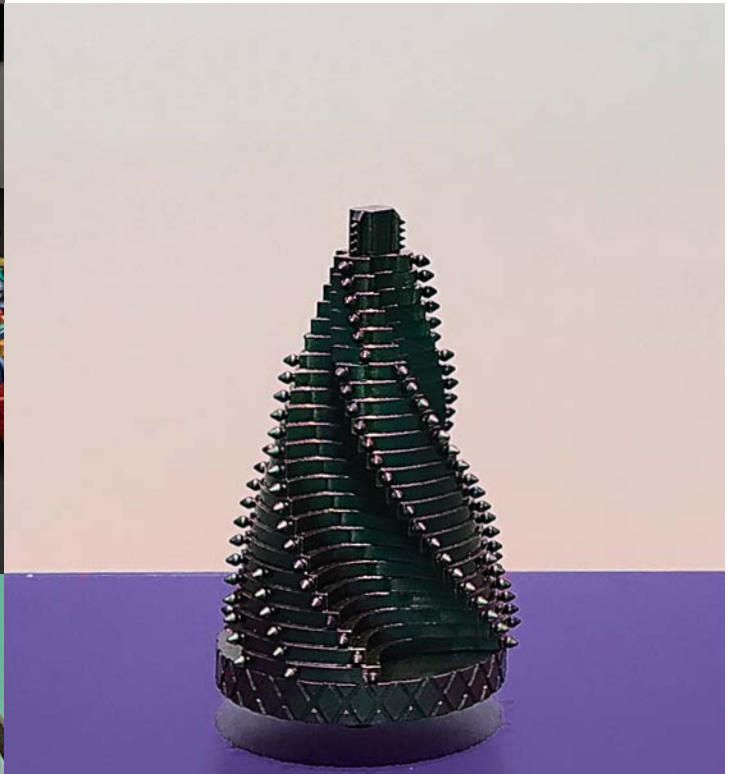
Samantha Reinders (samreinders.com; @samreinders) is an award-winning photographer, book editor, multimedia producer and workshop leader based in Cape Town, South Africa. She holds a master's degree in visual communication from Ohio University, and her work has been published in *Time*, *Vogue*, *The New York Times*, National Geographic Books and more.



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Bo-Kaap: May/June 2014

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As I looked at artists from the Middle East, I found work that was looking not only at oil's impact in the present and future, but also its history, its past.
—MURTAZA VALI



From top left, clockwise: Hassan Sharif, "Slippers and Wire," 2009, slippers and copper wire. Monira Al Qadiri, "OR-BIT 1," 2016, 3D-printed plastic, automotive paint and levitation module. Latif Al Ani, photographs from Iraq, c. 1958–1961. This gallery view of "Crude" includes works by four of the show's 17 artists: Monira Al Qadiri, "Flower Drill," 2016, fiberglass and automotive paint, top; Raja'a Khalid, "Fortune/Golf," 2014, archival inkjet prints, left; Michael John Whelan, "Aqua Lung," 2018, blown glass objects made of sand obtained from the site of Jacques Cousteau's 1954 British Petroleum-sponsored maritime survey, center; paintings by Houshang Pezeshkian, right. The gardens and galleries of the Jameel Arts Centre are located along Dubai Creek. Curator Murtaza Vali with Rayyane Tabet's "Steel Rings," 2013, rolled, engraved steel with kilometers, longitude, latitude and elevation marking locations on the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline).

A CRUDE HISTORY

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY **BELIZ TECIRLI**

An iridescent green cone appears to levitate a few centimeters above its royal purple background like a fairytale wizard's hat. But this is a replica of a shark-toothed head of a drill capable of spinning through rock as the literal cutting edge in the extraction of oil from the earth. Its sensually shimmering color comes from thick coats of automobile paint. A mundane industrial tool reimagined as a talisman of miracles—even magic.

“OR-BIT 1,” by 35-year-old artist Monira Al Qadiri, features in “Crude,” the inaugural group exhibition at the Jameel Arts Centre, which opened this past November in Dubai. The exhibition explores, in the oblique ways of contemporary art, the impacts of oil on the lives, cultures and societies of the Middle East.

“There are surprisingly few art exhibits dedicated to oil,” says curator Murtaza Vali, 44, who works both in New York and Dubai. “As the environmental and ecological concerns of oil use have grown, they have become the focus of attention among Western artists. But as I looked at artists from the Middle East,” he continues, “I found work that was looking not only at oil's impact in the present and the future, but also at its history, its past.”

Vali spent nearly five years assembling works of paper, sculpture, video, found objects and installations from 17 artists and art collectives—all but one of them from Middle East backgrounds. As Vali guides me through “Crude,” I realize that the histories these works narrate are deeply complex and multileveled. Together, Vali explains, they engage aspects of prosperity and upheaval, economic development and conflict—all facets of what has become the world's most vital commodity.

One of the most personal pieces is a video installation, “If I Forget You, Don't Forget Me,” by Manal AlDowayan, who used oral histories and personal artifacts to focus on individual lives transformed by the opportunities that came with the oil industry in Saudi Arabia. Although it documents an economic transformation from poverty to wealth, a sense of loss nonetheless suffuses these testimonies, even when they are celebratory. The industry has elevated many people materially, but it has also brought challenging social changes to traditional family structures. Wealth, she seems to say, has come with a price tag.

Others such as Hassan Sharif point out that while oil has given the modern world everything from lipstick to jet fuel, it also, along the way, has given us plastic footwear. His dramatic pile of garishly colored, cheap sandals (“Slippers and Wire”) confronts the viewer with, as Vali puts it, “a critique of the rapid consumerism that happens in Gulf societies as they go from a subsistence economy to an economy of abundance.” The act of piling them in the gallery, Vali says, “reduces a functional item to its materiality, to a mass of plastic or synthetic rubber”—oil metamorphosed into the mundane.

“The artworks are a way of telling history without having it be boring,” Vali says as we consider Sharif's sandals. “Art shows you history without being didactic. Artists are like

history buffs, super-enthusiastic about one odd episode.”

To Jameel Arts Centre Director Antonia Carver, who formerly oversaw the annual Art Dubai fair, this is what made “Crude” a strong debut. “We want to showcase art rooted in the Gulf, yet addressing universal ideas,” she says. “There have been virtually no exhibitions on this theme. That made the choice of subject matter even more relevant and urgent.”

Raja'a Khalid takes a playful, even absurdist, approach to the relationships between oil-producing lands and oil-hungry nations. “Fortune/Golf” frames a 1976 cover of *Fortune* magazine that shows two American men golfing on a fairway of sand. Oil flares flame dramatically in the background; smoke billows, and the men, unperturbed, wear only white shorts and golf shoes. The startling image begs the question, “What kind of men have come to work in this desert landscape, who are so hungry for home they will burn under its sun?”

After the galleries, in the Art Jameel Shop, Vali points out Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck's “Last Oil Barrel.” At 3.5 centimeters tall, it's a quite miniature wooden oil barrel, painted black. Alongside it sits a display that shows, in real time, the market price of a barrel of the real stuff. “The financial industry is one important technology that oil has produced and enabled,” says Vali. “That realization makes clear that the value of oil is not absolute. It is a part of the social relationship. This financial system, it's an abstraction that we create amongst ourselves.”

The history of oil refracted in “Crude” is, Vali notes, “not authoritative, it's not linear, and it's not continuous or smooth. It is inherently a crude history.” From the magical and talismanic to the ironic and skeptical, it's not unlike the wider world's view of this era-defining commodity. 🌐

Alessandro Balteo-Yazbeck, “Last Oil Barrel,” date postponed; India ink on sustainable wood, printed paper and financial markets.



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Jameel Prize: Sep/Oct 2016

Montpellier's Multicultural Medicine

WRITTEN BY GERALD ZARR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY REBECCA MARSHALL



Anyone, no matter their religion or roots,
[can] teach medicine in Montpellier.

—Guilhem VIII de Montpellier, 1180

“Frequented by all nations, Christian as well as Muslim,” wrote that tireless traveler of the 12th century, Benjamin of Tudela, when he visited Montpellier, which one modern historian has called medieval France’s “Little Córdoba.”

I found that same vitality—on a 21st-century scale—on my own visit last fall. Indeed like historic Córdoba in Muslim Spain’s al-Andalus, the French city near the Mediterranean coast has a rich history of hosting Christians, Muslims and Jews, and of sharing the benefits of its mix.

Founded in the 10th century, Montpellier rose to prominence

in the 12th century as a trading post importing spices from Alexandria, Algiers, Tripoli and other Mediterranean entrepôts, according to 20th-century Montpellier historian Jacqueline Liault. This trade helped support the city’s medical school, which is the oldest continuously operating medical faculty in the world. Formally established in the 13th century but operational from the mid-12th, it reflects principles articulated by Christian, Muslim and Jewish physicians. And the city’s most recent cultural mixing took off in the 1960s, when it became, like other cities along France’s coast, a haven for people of both European and African origins fleeing the Algerian War.

It's a city that has long set its own standard. For 300 years after its founding, Montpellier was a ministate, an independent feudal domain that was only incorporated into France in 1349. Its historical core was built in a shape that resembles a medieval heraldic shield, or coat of arms, and thus, the area is known today, fittingly, as l'Écusson, or escutcheon.

Despite periodic setbacks, including the devastating siege by France's Catholic Louis XIII against the city's Protestant Huguenots in 1622, it has prospered. For the past quarter century, fueled by high-tech industries and education, Montpellier has been the fastest-growing city in France. Amid its population of 275,000, some 70,000 students help set its intellectual and cultural tone.

Last October I met local historian and professor of chemistry Valdo Pellegrin at a café not far from the Place de la Comédie, one of the largest pedestrian areas in Europe, a few steps from the medieval streets of l'Écusson. His 2017 book, *Montpellier, Scholars and Discoveries*, explores the city through 18 iconic venues that have influenced science, medicine and agronomy.

Pellegrin traces the origin of Montpellier to November 26, 985, the date the count and countess of Melgueil granted a knight named Guilhem (William) a domain of 10 hectares that was named Montepestelario. The lands included farms, vineyards, forests and expanses of rugged terrain known locally as

guaranteed citizens civic rights and privileges.

Liault believes that as Guilhem's fortunes rose, his first chateau would have been built nearby. "The choice of location was certainly not taken idly," she wrote in *Montpellier, la médiévale*. "The feudal chateau was the emblem of lordly power, always built at a strategic location so that ... those who passed at the foot of its walls could admire the prowess of the lord who had facilitated the construction of markets, the transport of foodstuffs and assured the security of travelers."

Location indeed favored the town: Just three kilometers north lay the Via Domitia, originally the Roman road to Spain. In the Middle Ages, thousands of pilgrims and, later, merchants traveled it. Montpellier became a major rest stop. Today 300 bronze markers, set throughout l'Écusson, trace where medieval pilgrim feet trod.

Montpellier might never have developed into a renowned medical center but for these travelers. Some would arrive ailing and, after rest and care in the city, regain their health and go on to spread the word about the good care they had received. This gave Montpellier a reputation across Europe. Then, as now, medical care was not within the financial means of every patient. Among them was the archbishop of Lyon, who fell ill in 1153, regained his health in Montpellier yet complained that he left there "all he had and even what he didn't," wrote Liault. However, she adds, "No one would have chosen the city as a rest stop if it had the reputation of being a cutthroat."

By the 12th century, Montpellier merchants had begun to trade with the entire Mediterranean world. Traders arrived at the port of Lattes at the mouth of the river Lez with

Founded in the 10th century along the Roman road to Spain and just six kilometers up the river Lez from the Mediterranean Sea, Montpellier had become a flourishing commercial partner with the entire Mediterranean region by the 12th century. *Left:* Valdo Pellegrin, who delved deeply into the city's history in his 2017 book, *Montpellier, Scholars and Discoveries*, poses before a 13th-century fresco in Hôtel de Gayon, a mansion on rue Draperie Rouge. *Below:* The city's most famous multicultural legacy, the University of Montpellier Medical School, opened in the mid-12th century. Founded on principles laid down by Christian, Muslim and Jewish physicians, it is the oldest school of medicine in Europe.

garrigue. Guilhem's two-story manor house started as a kitchen and room for animals on the ground floor, with food storage bins and bedrooms above. Within 100 years, the manor had become a town. Its name became gallicized: Montpellier.

Today the location of Guilhem's land grant within l'Écusson reaches east from the 17th-century Arc de Triomphe to Place Jean Jaurès, where the first houses sprouted up on the hillside. Anchoring them was a small church, around which itinerant merchants and moneychangers set up stalls and tables. There must have been many of them, because the church was given the name Notre Dame des Tables. Today Pellegrin ranks it high on his list, as many significant moments of Montpellier's medieval history took place here, he says. For example, it hosted the ceremony at the beginning of the 13th century when the lords of Montpellier swore to abide by a Magna Carta that





Laurent Deguara, *above*, is president of the Archeological Society of Montpellier, where galleries include fragments of a funerary stele inscribed in Arabic with Kufic script from a 12th-century tomb in the city. *Right*: Montpellier's Arc de Triomphe, built in the late 17th century, stands at one edge of the city's old core, named l'Écusson for its shape like a medieval heraldic shield, or escutcheon.

silk, spices and sugar, which they transferred to barges for the winding, six-kilometer journey upriver to Montpellier.

“The place is good for commerce,” wrote Benjamin of Tudela. “One finds there merchants from the Algarve, Lombardy, Greater Rome, from all Egypt and the land of Israel, and from Greece, Spain and England.”

Abroad, Montpellier merchants set up *funduqs* (Arabic for merchant hostels) in the eastern Mediterranean to facilitate their business travels. As Liault explains, “A funduq didn’t consist of a few tables sheltered under a tent.... It was like a city in miniature with houses for merchants, warehouses, public baths and a courtroom to resolve disputes.” Montpellier had funduqs in Alexandria, Antioch, Algiers, Constantinople, Tyre and Tripoli.

The important exports of the city included worked leather, tanned skins, woolen goods and fabric, but none were more famous than its *draperie rouge*—red-dyed cloth, which proved popular among both men and women of the period. The red dye came from an insect called the kermes, a

name that came from the Arabic *qirmiz*, from which we derive “crimson.” It fed on a species of small evergreen oak that grew abundantly in the garrigues around Montpellier. To protect this industry, the city banned foreigners from dyeing and selling red cloth in Montpellier, and peddlers were allowed to sell only as much red cloth as they could carry around their necks.

Traders imported luxury silks, brocades, damask fabric, musk, sandalwood and incense from the East, as well as indigo for dyes and alum from Aleppo for tanning. They also imported spices—pepper, cloves, nutmeg, ginger, saffron and cinnamon—both to heighten the taste of dishes and to make medicine—an activity in which Montpellier



excelled. After all, medicinal plants grew wild in the garrigue. The Montpellier Botanical Garden, established in 1593 to grow just such plants, is France’s oldest, and even today its director is drawn from the faculty of the medical school.

Not surprisingly, Montpellier developed expertise in spice-based culinary products, including “teas of the garrigue”

infused from rosemary and thyme. The city’s largest spice merchants had shops in Paris and Avignon. Montpellier also re-exported ginger in bulk to England to make gingerbread and ginger biscuits, for example.

Montpellier had *funduqs*—hostels for merchants—in Alexandria, Antioch, Algiers, Constantinople, Tyre and Tripoli.

Muslim Spain's legacy of cultural coexistence among Muslims, Christians and Jews, known as *convivencia*, cast its light on Montpellier too. During its golden age, from the eighth to the 11th centuries with its opulent capital of Córdoba, al-Andalus was renowned for its spirit of relative comity that benefited culture and economy. By the 12th century, however, *convivencia* was in retreat as increasingly assertive Christian rulers continued their march south to confront the equally assertive new rulers of al-Andalus, the Almohads from North Africa.

As their old lifestyle vanished, numerous Muslim and Jewish thinkers, teachers, physicians and scientists left al-Andalus. Some came to Montpellier, where they



The winding rue du Bras de Fer (Iron Arm Street), where blacksmiths once worked, still casts a medieval spell. *Left:* A tram decorated by fashion designer Christian Lacroix glides past the 12th-century Tour de la Babote, one of just two towers that remain from the 25-tower wall that once surrounded Montpellier.

found peace, tolerance and opportunity. Taking advantage of this Andalusian brain drain, Montpellier's ruler Guilhem VIII proclaimed in 1180 that "anyone, no matter their religion or roots, [can] teach medicine in Montpellier"—an early articulation of Montpellier's cultural and intellectual openness.

In the curriculum of the new medical school, the most important subject was Arab medicine. And the school adopted a motto that affirmed a Hippocratic liberalism: *Olim Cous nunc Mospeliensis Hippocrates* (In times past, Hippocrates was from [the Greek island of] Cos; now he is from Montpellier).

Among the best-known families that came to Montpellier in the exodus from al-Andalus was the Tibbons family. Almost all of the family members were physicians and scientists, starting with Judah ben Saul ibn Tibbon (1120–1190). He spent the first 30 years of his life in Granada before moving north. Generations of his family worked as Montpellier's premier translators of Arabic medical, scientific and philosophical works for a century and a half. They translated Arabic works by Ibn al-Haytham, al-Ghazali and al-Zarqali, Greek works by Aristotle, Euclid, Menelaus and Ptolemy, and the prodigious output of the polymaths Ibn Rushd, or Averroes, and Maimonides, both Córdoba-born, one Arab, the other Jewish.

To learn more about this cross-cultural and linguistic exchange I visited Michaël Iancu, director of the Institut





Michaël Iancu, director of the Institut Universitaire Maïmonide-Averroès-Thomas d'Aquin, calls Montpellier "Little Córdoba." As with historic Córdoba in al-Andalus, or Muslim-ruled southern Spain, Montpellier has a rich legacy of cultural transmission.

Of the nine Guilhems who ruled in succession in Montpellier over more than 200 years, it is the penultimate, Guilhem VIII, who speaks most clearly to us today. During an era often reduced to rugged if not brutal stereotypes, he supported openness and educational freedom. In 1174, by a happy juncture of circumstances and his own diplomatic skill, he married the niece of Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenos, Princess Eudoxie. It was a clear indication of Montpellier's status. At his death in 1202, the city of Guilhem VIII was celebrated for its richness,

Universitaire Maïmonide-Averroès-Thomas d'Aquin, in his office in the former medieval Jewish quarter. "There were Jews who knew Arabic and Hebrew, but many had no or very little Latin," he says. "There were Christians who knew Latin but had no Semitic languages. Jewish doctors thus translated Arabic into Hebrew and then into Occitan, the local language, and their Christian colleagues translated Occitan into Latin." It's because of these "Judeo-Christian encounters around the Greco-Arab legacy" of cultural transmission that Iancu refers to medieval Montpellier as "Little Córdoba."

Medieval Islamic artifacts on display at the Archeological Society Museum reveal Montpellier's rich past. These include a beautiful, engraved floral drinking cup and fragments of a funerary stele from a 12th-century tomb inscribed in Arabic using Kufic calligraphy, each found at a different spot in l'Écusson. Although the identity of the individual to whom the funerary fragments belong is not known, according to the museum's director, Laurent Deguara, the stele seems to point to an Arab presence in Montpellier during the Middle Ages.

Montpellier's law school also dates to the 12th century. The noted jurist Placentinus arrived from Bologna in 1165 and, at age 30, founded a school of Roman law, the first on contemporary French soil. Francisco Petrarch, Italian scholar and poet and one of the earliest humanists, studied law at the University of Montpellier from 1316 to 1320. He wrote of it fondly: "What tranquility we had there, what peace, what abundance, what a flood of students, and what masters!" Today Montpellier honors the law school's founder with rue Placentin adjacent to the Palace of Justice.

its intellectual breadth and its tradition of tolerance.

Marie of Montpellier, daughter of Guilhem VIII and Princess Eudoxie, went on to marry Peter II, king of Aragon. Not long after their marriage in 1204, Peter II recognized the traditional rights of the citizens of Montpellier in a charter granting them local government. But this did not last. In 1349, Montpellier's destitute ruler, James III of Majorca, sold the city to France.

In 1432 Jacques Coeur, a famous French merchant and financier, established himself in Montpellier in a bid to recapture the city's glory days as a Mediterranean powerhouse. From the tower of his Gothic mansion (now the Archeological Society building on the aptly named rue Jacques Coeur), it is said he

A street in l'Écusson, historic heart of Montpellier, bustles on a winter day.





This seal of Montpellier's school of law dates to between 1292 and 1349, but the school's faculty, like that of medicine, had opened in the city more than a century earlier. *Right:* A medieval mural in the Hôtel de Gayon depicts scenes from the life of the patron of the fabricators of Montpellier's famous crimson cloth, a color name derived from *qirmiz*, the Arabic word for the insect that provides the red dye. *Lower:* A statue of Montpellier's 15th-century entrepreneur and benefactor Jacques Coeur, who developed the city's maritime trade.

could watch his commercial fleet sail for foreign ports, returning with spices and silk from the Levant. Professor of history Vincent Challet, of Paul Valéry University of Montpellier, explains that Coeur became an illustrious benefactor, improving the port of Lattes and building a *loge*, a kind of stock exchange for merchants, on what is now rue de la Loge. (Coeur's infatuation with Montpellier eventually waned, however, and he turned his entrepreneurial sights on Marseille.)

In the past four decades, Montpellier has changed more than at any period in perhaps the three previous centuries. In the 1960s some 15,000 refugees arrived in the wake of the Algerian war for independence, and other émigrés have come ever since, helping to turn Montpellier into the seventh-largest city in France.

Today Montpellier's elegance, culture and tolerance makes it a fitting legacy for its founders. Lacking heavy industry, the city stands on brains and bravura. World-class architects are turning up to add showpieces, and its trams are decorated in riots of color by fashion designer Christian Lacroix.

But the city also celebrates its past. While the fortified walls that once surrounded l'Écusson are gone, two towers, the

Babotte and Pin, remain. Rue du Bras de Fer (Iron Arm Street), where blacksmiths once toiled, still casts a medieval spell. A plaque at 2 rue Germain announces that on this site Pope Urban v paid for the education of 12 needy medical students. Beautifully decorated earthenware pharmaceutical pottery adorns the old pharmacy of the Chapel of Mercy at 1 rue de la Monnaie. Medieval frescos discovered in 1999 in the Hôtel de Gayon on rue Draperie Rouge, which once belonged to merchants in the red-cloth trade, are being restored through public subscription.

Nor is Guilhem VIII forgotten. His seal shows him playing a harp, a sign of his love of culture and the arts. On February 13, 2018, a replica of his harp, produced by master artisan Yves d'Arcizas, was unveiled in a public ceremony hosted by the International Center of Medieval Music at the Emile Zola Media Library. According to d'Arcizas, there was a parallel in medieval thought between music and governing because both required harmony. After listening to the clear, rich tones of d'Arcizas's handiwork, Montpellier's mayor, Philippe Saurel, called Guilhem VIII "an iconic figure." The notes of the harp, he said, spoke to Montpellier's mellifluous multicultural history. 🌐



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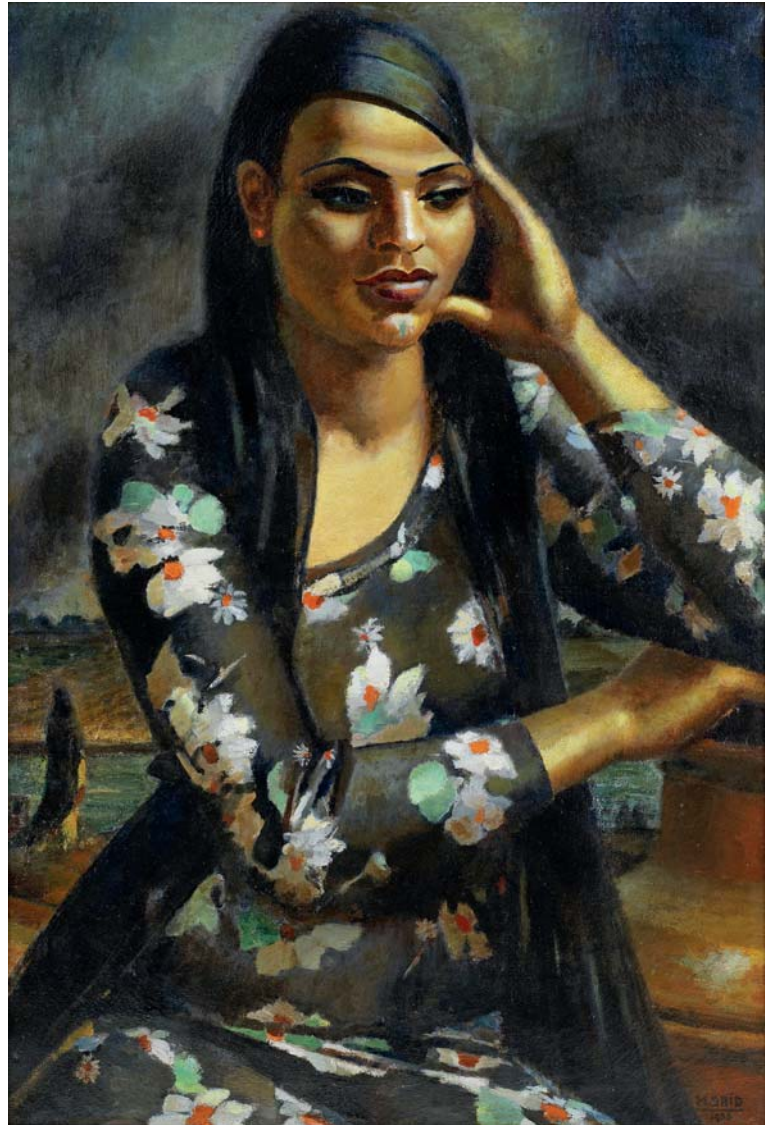
Modernism AWAKENING

WRITTEN BY
JULIET HIGHET

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BARJEEL ART FOUNDATION,
SHARJAH

The rise of modern painting in the Arab world does not have its roots in Islamic manuscript illustration or calligraphy, nor does it reflect their continuation. Rather, it draws upon Arab concrete realities, leading to a new form of expression.

—NADA SHABOUT



With multimillion-dollar art sales now almost routine around the world, it was not much publicized when, last spring at a London auction, “*Fille à l'imprimé*” (“Girl in a printed dress”), painted in 1938 by Mahmoud Said, fetched \$664,951. Said (pr. sy-EED) was one of Egypt’s leading Modernists, and although he grew up in a privileged, European-style family, he rooted his work in his country’s Pharaonic heritage and committed himself to the social and political realities of his era. In this painting, Said portrays a *fellaha*, or female peasant, who appears reflective, dignified and ultimately enigmatic. It inspired a commentator of the time, Youssef Kamal, to write, “Perhaps the model is expressing Oriental mystery in contradiction to the Occidental mystery of the Mona Lisa.”

Such high-priced sales of Arab and Middle Eastern Modernist works have become even more robust in Dubai, a rising hub for art sales of all kinds for more than a decade. Collectors of Modernist works now include museums, both established and

new, as well as individuals and galleries across the region and beyond. Around the same time that London auction house Bonhams lowered its gavel on Said’s painting, Art Dubai, the Middle East’s largest annual art fair, hosted its most comprehen-

sive exhibit to date on Arab Modernism. Titled “That Feverish Leap into the Fierceness of Life,” it explored five city-based schools of the region’s Modernist art active between the 1930s and 1980s. This year, Art Dubai has announced it will show Arab Modernist art in its main hall.

So what is behind the growing appreciation for Modernism? Is it Modernism’s sense of historical identity, so engaged with post-colonial politics? Its esthetic assertions and quest for cultural renewal? Heartfelt identifications with rich visual heritages and traditions, often stemming in part from the frequent denial of them during the colonial era? From Morocco in the west to Iraq and Iran in the east and Sudan in the south, prior to the independence that came mostly after World War II, educated middle classes were emerging and becoming patrons of Modernism because it spoke to them of their own culture and experience.

But how do we define Modernism, this artistic movement that, on the one hand, Arab artists adapted from European origins and, on the other, flowed from what Iraqi artist Jawad Salim in 1951 called *istilhim al-turath* (inspiration from heritage)? The fresh perfume of freedom from colonialism was in the air everywhere; nationalism was blossoming.

At the same time, says Nada Shabout, professor of art history at the University of North Texas and author of *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, “Modernism is characterized by disconnection, by severance from what are seen to be shackles of the past. This often included categories and identity labels, as many Modernist artists did not want to be labeled as Arab, Middle Eastern, African or, more commonly, lumped collectively under ‘Islamic.’” Because Modernists worked from mostly secular traditions, and not all the artists were Muslims, they attempted to reject these notions. In Marrakech, for example, Modern artists were hanging their works in the street.

“This language of daily life, of slogans and manifestos is *not* ‘Islamic art,’” continues Shabout. “The Modernists also refuted the one-dimensional inference of ethnicity” to identify with a new world characterized by nationalism.

Lower. Jewad Selim (Iraq), “Untitled (Two Figures),” 1951, oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm. *Right:* Samir Rafi (Egypt), “Two Sisters,” 1950, oil on board, 98 x 69 cm. *Opposite, left:* Mahmoud Mukhtar (Egypt), “Egypt’s Awakening,” 1928, granite, Giza. *Opposite, right:* Mahmoud Said (Egypt), “Fille à l’imprimé,” 1938, 81 x 56 cm.



“But the biggest challenge today,” says Shabout, is that Arab (or Middle Eastern—a term that includes non-Arabic-speaking countries such as Turkey and Iran) Modernism “is still perceived as an enigma” that “remains a neglected field, both in the Arab world and in the West.”

Modernism originated in Europe, inspired in part by late-19th-century artists such as Monet, Manet and Cézanne, who were aware of the growing effects of the Industrial Revolution and the economic changes it was bringing to traditional class structures. There is a considerable range of dates for the origins of Arab Modernism based on locations: Cairo’s School of Fine Arts, founded in 1908, marked the first Arab Modernist institution. Artists and institutions in other countries of North and East Africa, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, Anatolia and more, all followed over the next half century. There were also parallel movements in other parts of postcolonial Africa, India and the Americas.

It was between the 1950s and the 1970s that Modernism really burst forth in most countries of the region, Shabout observes. In this sense, “Modern” is not a description but a historical period, distinct from Contemporary, which, as Shabout says, “is the *now* of every period, including our times.” Modernists of the wider Middle East not only responded to histories, heritages and hopes of the early and mid-20th century, but also saw themselves as active agents of change. “Art! It is always the capacity to transform the artist’s internal vision into an external wakefulness that influences social change,” wrote Hassan Soliman in Cairo in 1968.



One of the most significant early works of Modernism was a sculpture titled “Egypt Awakening,” by Egyptian artist Mahmoud Mokhtar. This iconic granite colossus, produced between 1919 and 1928, shows “a resurgent sphinx” alongside a standing woman holding her veil, “two powerful statements of the secular nationalism that was to become so influential on Egypt’s future development,” wrote Saeb Eigner, author of *Art of the Middle East*. Mokhtar trained first at Cairo’s School of Fine Arts, and then went to Paris: Such classical and academic training that combined local and European training was shared by many Arab Modernists.

Almost half a century later, Samir Rafi’s untitled 1973 painting of a woman, shown in ancient stylized profile, shows her reaching out to Anubis, the jackal-headed deity of the ancient Egyptian afterlife. Ragheb Ayad’s “In the Field,” painted in 1960, depicts an ox, also in profile recalling Egyptian reliefs from the pharaonic past. Celebration of traditional rural ways of life were also catalysts for Inji Eflatoun, whose

Education that combined both local and European training was an experience shared by many Arab Modernists.

1984 “Cotton Harvest” shows her empathy for the *fellahin* (peasants) much as Mahmoud Said did, along with many other Egyptian Modernists.

In 2013 an outstanding exception to the West’s overlooking of Arab Modernism opened at London’s Tate Modern: “Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist.” It placed El-Salahi, born in 1930 in Sudan and little known in the West, into context both globally and in his own region, tracing his journey across five decades of painting, calligraphy and photography, during which he developed a vision that blended Islamic, African and Western elements

into a transnational, cosmopolitan art form. Now living in Oxford, he has retained his lifelong passion for calligraphy, which gradually evolved into abstraction of its symbolism and focus on its esthetic, iconic aspects rather than the meaning of words.

Writing shortly after the June War of 1967 on the theme of “Arabness,” poet and critic Buland al-Hardari described artists “vying with each other in trying to blaze a new trail which would give concrete expression to the longing for Arab unity, resulting in the Arab world giving birth to an art of its own.”

Much of this quest flowed from the traumas of war and political turmoil, which have exerted and sustained a profound influence on artists. Most visible have been Palestinian Modernists such as London-based Laila Shawa, many of whose screen prints, photography, sculpture and mixed-media paintings are direct responses to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. “I believe that one of the roles of contemporary artists is to record the signs of their times,” she has written, and indeed the written word is often present in her work, such as the acclaimed photograph-and-silkscreen *Walls of Gaza* series, which focuses on messages of hope and resistance spray-painted by ordinary people of Gaza upon the walls of their city. She remains one of the most directly politically engaged Modern Arab artists, often employing irony to convey critique, even agony, by, for example, sculptures of rifles pasted with Swarovski crystals, or addressing the 21st-century hyperconsumerism of Dubai. Her latest exhibition was titled “The Other Side of Paradise.”

Last Spring’s Dubai exhibition “That Feverish Leap into the Fierceness of Life” drew its title from the 1951 founding manifesto of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art: “If we fail to fulfil ourselves through art, as through all other realms of thought, we won’t be able to make that feverish leap into the fierceness of life.” Curated

Paul Guiragossian (Lebanon), “La Famille,” early 1980s, oil on canvas, 61 x 46 cm.



by independent curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath and sponsored by Misk Art Institute, “Feverish” also took academic guidance from Shabout.

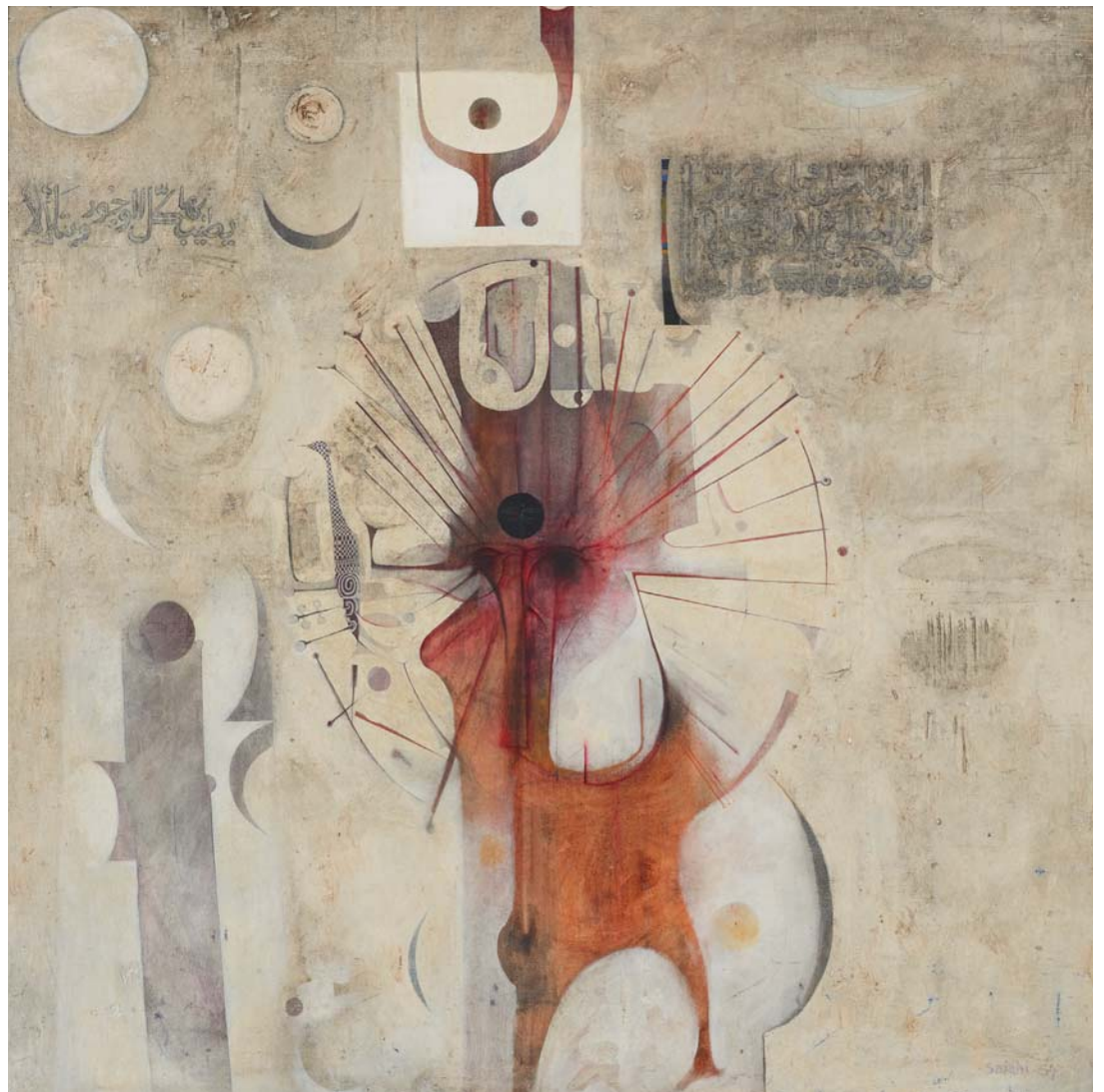
Moving in a roughly chronological sequence, the show surveyed constellations of artist groups that met everywhere from intimate gatherings in homes and art shops to more structured settings like universities, art colleges and galleries. Bardaouil writes about the Contemporary Art Group in Cairo, which during the 1940s and 1950s reflected the accelerated political and social dissent across the region by going beyond the idealizations of earlier Modernists such as Mahmoud Said.

“How to make art authentically Egyptian, expressing the Lingua Franca of local people became a core concern, requiring more than the depiction of rural scenes, ‘noble’ peasants and Pharaonic references, which came to be viewed as stale, archaic and out of step with the nascent republicanism on its ravenous quest for modernisation,” Said observed regarding years after World War II, during which Egypt abolished its monarchy and ended British colonial rule. The group’s creative impact endured, Bardaouil asserts, because it captured the spirit of the moment in a colloquial style, and relevance led to impact.

In Baghdad, “Modernists got their start from serendipitous encounters during World War II between Iraqi artists and Polish ones stationed in Baghdad as soldiers,” commented Shabout, who wrote about Iraqi Modernists in the show’s bilingual catalog. When the Baghdad Group for Modern Art formed in 1951, she says, “it represented an important change of vision, a specific moment in history that made Iraqi artists think differently about their work. It was as intellectual as it was spiritual, connecting the past with the future.”

The spiritual aspect related to the idea of *istilham al-turath*, which, for this group, specifically meant inspiration from Mesopotamian artistic heritage as well as that of Baghdad prior to its devastation in the 13th century by the Mongols. At its inaugural exhibi-

tion at The Museum of Iraqi Costumes in 1951, artist and head of the group Jewad Selim joined artist and writer Shakir Hassan Al Said to declare: “We thus announce today the beginning of a new school of painting, which derives its sources from the present age ... with the unique character of Eastern civilization.”



Top: Mohammed Melehi (Morocco), “Untitled,” 1975, cellulose paint on panel, 100 x 120 cm. *Right:* Ibrahim El-Salahi (Sudan), “The Last Sound,” 1964, oil on canvas, 121 x 121 cm.



Above: Shaker Hassan Al Said (Iraq), "The Victorious," 1983, mixed-media on wooden panel, 122 x 101 cm. Left: Laila Shawa (Palestine), "Amulets," 1992, acrylic on canvas, 102 x 76 cm.



In visual terms, this meant a shift toward abstraction, away from the figuration favored by the city's newly emerging local patrons. In doing so, Selim emphasized a dilemma that has proved challenging to Modernists ever since: How can artists speak to—and develop a market among—a public for whom Modern art is often unfamiliar?

In Morocco, shortly after independence from France in 1956, a group of artists, writers and intellectuals, many of whom had been educated abroad, began to rebel against the dated academic empha-

sis of the fine-art schools. In the mid-1960s, several artists took the reins at the *École des Beaux Arts* of Casablanca and—with much controversy—transformed the curriculum to favor an international outlook, simultaneously post-colonial in its emphasis on local visual culture and Modernist in its emphasis on abstraction.

In this environment, post-colonial Moroccan Modernists such as Mohammed Melehi created consistently hard-edged, optically abstract canvases. Farid Belkahlia discarded the tradition of oil painting to create copper bas-reliefs. In 1969 a statement by leading Moroccan artists described 10 days during which they hung their work in the great Djemaa el-Fna square in Marrakesh, where local people and those from rural areas gathered: "We wanted to engage the people ... and so we presented this living exhibition—works outside the closed circuit of galleries, salons—places this audience has never entered.... People came by the hundreds."

Emerging in the early 1970s, the Khartoum School reinterpreted heritage in a way that included development of Arabic calligraphy as well as ancient Kushite and Meroitic legacies that fused plant and animal forms with masklike faces. Its leading light was Ibrahim El-Salahi, who, on his return

from studying art in Britain, found that people rejected his art. "I had to examine the *Sudanese* environment," particularly the craftspeople, he says. What later became known as the Khartoum School owed much to El-Salahi's abstract experimentation, and also the symbolic potential of the Arabic letter, often enlivened by African imagery. A new, distinctive aesthetic emerged, made relevant by intellectual and socio-political commitment.

Other Sudanese artists, such as Osman A. Waqialla and Ahmed Mohammed Shibrain, also used Arabic calligraphy as a creative element, carrying



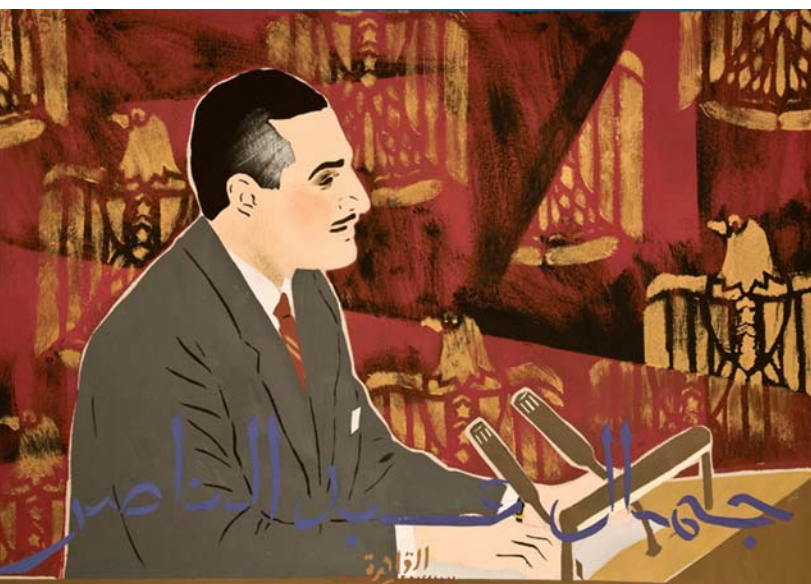
Left: Najla Al Saleem (Saudi Arabia), "Abstract - Entry 1," 2009, oil on canvas, 122 x 91 cm. Right: Dia al-Azzawi (Iraq), "A Wolf Howls: Memories of a Port," 1968, oil on canvas, 84 x 104 cm. Lower: Chant Avedissian (Egypt), "Gamal Abd El Nasser," 2008, gouache on cardboard, 49 x 69 cm.

it into a secular context in a practice that came to be called *hurufiyah*. Shabouth describes this as a use of letter-forms that "unlike calligraphy, does not have rules, such as the height of the letter, a specific structure." In the 1970s and 1980s, hurufiyah gained popularity and prompted artists throughout the Arab world to make newly creative use of the letter. Important experiments include many works by Shakir Hasan Al Said, Dia al-Azzawi and Rafa al-Nasiri of Iraq; Mahmoud Hamad of Syria; Kamal Boullata of Palestine; Rachid Koraichi of Algeria, and more.

Eiman Elgibreen, a Saudi artist and art historian, asserts in "Feverish" that a fifth group is arguably the least known of all. As early as the 1960s, he wrote, a handful of Saudi Modern artists were working largely in isolation. "There were no art schools,

galleries, or purpose-built art centres," Elgibreen added with reference to a kind of local hero emerging in the form of artist Mohammed Al-Saleem, who in the 1970s, opened an art supply shop in Riyadh that became a hub for artists both male and female. In 1979 he established Dar Al Funoon Al Sa'udiyyah (The Saudi Art House.) The next year he opened a gallery that hosted a dozen solo and group exhibitions before closing in 1981.

In founding the Baghdad group of Modernists, Iraqi artist Selim observed, "Modern art truly is the art of the age, and its complexity is a result of the complexity of this era." Today, it is clearer than ever how the art of his age left at least four major legacies. Each one has helped pave the path for the spectacular rise, over the past two decades, of Arab contemporary art in all its diversity, splendor and challenge. First, Modernism pioneered active engagement with socio-political life in all its postcolonial vigour, along with recognition of the value of local traditions; second, its technical prowess inspired by bold experimentation in diverse media; third, attention to an esthetic of beauty and profound introspection. These three together produce the fourth, which perhaps helps explain why, last spring, "*Fille à l'imprimé*" fetched such a high price: a capacity to touch the universal within the local, which affirms and raises the human spirit. 🌐



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WOMEN BEHIND THE LENS

The Middle East's First Female Photographers

ESSAYS INTRODUCED and EDITED by TOM VERDE

When the “Here and Elsewhere” exhibition opened in 2014 at the New Museum, *ARTnews* magazine called it the first comprehensive survey of Middle Eastern and North African contemporary art and photography to show in New York. More impressive, the magazine said, was that of the show’s 45 artists, nearly half were women. Two years later, the work of Middle Eastern women photographers was the subject of two landmark shows: “I AM,” at the National Gallery of Fine Arts in Amman, Jordan, and “She Who Tells a Story,” at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C.

As groundbreaking as these were, historians are learning that women have played roles behind the camera in the Middle East since the advent of photography in the region in the mid-19th century. Some acted as assistants in photography studios in major cities of what was then the Ottoman Empire: Beirut, Jerusalem and Constantinople (today’s Istanbul). Others established themselves as individual talents in an emerging high-tech field predominantly occupied by men.

Karimeh Abbud of Palestine made a name for herself in the early 20th century by shooting portraits. Lebanon’s Marie al-Khazen caught the wave of social and cultural change during the Roaring Twenties. Others such as Beirut’s Octavia Kova and Najla Krikorian, active during the late 19th century, took up the craft as members of what had become established photography families.

The following essays explore the lives and careers of women whose work challenged, and continues to challenge, preconceived attitudes toward images in the Middle East—and especially those of women. They reveal that, like artists anywhere, early women photographers embraced new ideas and new technologies to chronicle the world around them—both as they knew it and as they helped imagine it for Orientalist clients.

The images here, shot with achingly slow shutters on glass-plate negatives (until film came along), act as junctures where the spirit of the subject and the vision of the photographer meet. They provide a glimpse of those

moments when women in the Middle East began to engage with society in new ways. “We were there,” these pictures tell us—there at the beginning of an artistic narrative that continues to unfold.

Following are three historians’ perspectives.

Behind Every Male Photographer: The Invisible History of Local Women Photographers in the Middle East

BY STEPHEN SHEEHI

Among the many challenges in discovering the history of early indigenous photography of the Middle East is the loss or neglect of photographic and written archives from studios due to political instability and conflict in the region. While scholars are now shedding light on the practice and use of photography in the late Ottoman Empire and post-World War I European Mandate periods, the importance of women as photographers and in studios is only now being grasped.

Women were involved in photography from the time it arrived in the Ottoman Empire in the mid-19th century. In Anatolia, Turkish and Armenian female photographers started to cater specifically to Turkish women in 1919, with Turkish photographer Naciye Suman (1881–1973) leading the way. Meanwhile, pioneering photographers Semiha Es (1912–2012), a Turk, and Maryam Şahinyan (1911–1996), an Armenian, ran Galatasaray Photography Studio in Istanbul, which was operated by Şahinyan’s father, Mihran.

A small number of women may have owned their own studios during those early years. Two professional female photographers from 19th-century photography dynasties in Beirut come to mind. In 1909 *Dalil Beirut* (*Beirut Guide*) listed a photography

business called Studio Madame Philippe Saboungi. Philippe Saboungi was the son of Georges (Jurji) Saboungi (1840–1910), who was the first photographer in the Arab world to



Lydie Bonfils, from France, operated the Maison Bonfils photography studio in Beirut with her husband, Felix, beginning in 1867. It is likely that she was the one who photographed this woman, as women were generally more comfortable sitting for a female photographer.

open a locally owned studio. Madame Philippe Saboungi seems to be Rikke, the younger Saboungi's Danish wife. Philippe operated his father's practice until 1916, and one can only speculate about why the name of his wife was attached to another studio at the same time.

Octavia Kova is equally mysterious. The Kova Brothers, Iskander and Joseph, were award-winning studio photographers in Beirut. We can only assume that Octavia was the child of one of these two brothers. While no photographs she produced are known to exist, the fact that she worked as a photographer is attested through a postcard, perhaps made by the Beirut-based Sarrafian Brothers. The 1919 photograph of Beirut's Gemmayzeh neighborhood shows a building with the sign to her studio that reads "photographer" above her name.

The true difficulty in uncovering the history of the role women in early Middle Eastern photography stems from the fact that most women worked behind the scenes. Early Ottoman photographic studios were known to have rooms—and, presumably, photographers—for women. These studios were less artistic ateliers than commercial ventures. They often operated according to a strict division of labor, with the photographer working in the front studio handing glass-plate negatives, to others in the back taking care of developing, glossing and hand-coloring. The studio owner's family frequently seems to have played a large role in this assembly-line production.

Lydie Bonfils held such a position. She ran Maison Bonfils in Beirut for decades after her husband, Felix, returned to their home in France and died in 1885. And she is not unique. Najla Krikorian (1895–1983) is understood to have been a major force behind two photographic studios in Jerusalem. She was the niece of Khalil Raad (1854–1957), who operated a famous studio on Jaffa Street, across from a studio owned by his former mentor and bitter rival Garabed Krikorian (1847–1920), one of Palestine's pioneer studio photographers. Najla married Krikorian's son, Johannes, in 1913, making peace between the two studio owners and then worked hand-coloring photographs taken by her father-in-law. The more we learn of family members attached to the marquee male names of famous studios, the more we realize that Najla's story is more emblematic than unique.

The sheer output of postcards produced in Beirut during the first half of the 20th century by the Sarrafian Brothers, whose branches stretched throughout Lebanon, Palestine and Syria, suggests that the women in their families, too, were active participants in their business. After all, Abraham Sarrafian (1873–1926) and his wife had three daughters and two sons. His brother Boghos (1876–1934), and his wife had a daughter and two sons, and Samuel Sarrafian (1884–1941) and his wife also had three daughters.

Margo Abdou elicits similar speculation. Before Karimeh Abdou established her own studio in Bethlehem in 1932, Margo assisted her brother David, who owned a studio in



Top: Either Sonia or Schlomo Narinsky, Ukrainian-born photographers in Palestine, photographed this harvest scene, published by the Jamal Brothers in Jerusalem in 1921. Above: Maryam Şahinyan captured this image in the Galatsary Studio in Istanbul, where she worked from 1935 to 1985.

Palestine, and she ran it whenever he was traveling. Equally interesting are Shlomo and Sonia Narinsky, Ukrainian-born photographers in Palestine who sold their photographs through the Jamal Brothers. In the late 1800s, the Jamal

Brothers published and marketed photographs of Palestine, including a large number of pictures of Jews native to the region, partnering with the Narinksys.

When we speak of Arab photography, we should expect that behind every male photographer is a woman. While the origins of the photography of Middle Eastern women remain to be explored more thoroughly, it is clear that Arab, Armenian and expatriate women were central to the production of indigenous photography in the Middle East from its earliest days.

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Karimeh Abbud: First Female Photographer of Palestine

BY ISSAM NASSAR

Karimeh Abbud practiced photography from 1915 to 1940, a time when even male photographers in Palestine were few. She was known as the only portraitist who specialized in photographing women who might have chosen not to sit for photos in studios run by men.

She was born in Bethlehem in 1893. Her father, Said Abbud, the city's Lutheran pastor, hailed from the village of Khayam in the upper Galilee region (now Southern Lebanon). He studied

at the Schneller Orphanage in Jerusalem when the region was still under Ottoman rule, before the borders between Palestine and Lebanon were drawn by the French and the British after World War I. During the first few years of her life, Karimeh lived in the Galilee, where her father was a pastor in Nazareth and the village of Shafa Amer. In 1899 the family moved to the Bethlehem area, where she spent most of her life.

Although her photographic career largely unfolded in British Palestine, it was grounded in techniques that had developed in the Ottoman world for half a century. The first professional photographers, Armenian siblings Vichen, Hovsep and Kevork Abdullahyan, established the Abdullah Frères studio in Istanbul in 1858; it was followed by a number of other Armenian studios throughout the empire. The Abdullah Brothers's claim to fame was a result of their role in a massive survey of the Ottoman lands at the request of Sultans Abdülmecid and Abdülaziz.

Closer to her home, the first school of photography had been established in Jerusalem in the early 1860s at the Armenian compound of the Cathedral of Saint James. Around 1885 Garabed Krikorian, who had trained at the school, opened the first photographic studio in the city just outside the Jaffa Gate and mentored other young photographers in the area. He specialized in studio photography, while his apprentice Khalil Raad became known for his landscape and social photography.

Did Abbud learn photography from Krikorian or one of his apprentices? The answer to that question is not known. Considering the lack of opportunities for women in that field at the time, however, it is likely that she trained with someone in her neighborhood. We know of five Lutheran photographers practicing in the Bethlehem area then. We also know that one of her few photographs (and the only one to show her with a camera) was taken by one of them, Jerusalem photographer Militad Savidas, who also photographed in the Bethlehem and Ramallah areas. She may have trained with him or any of his compatriots.

Abbud devoted a great deal of her work to portrait photography. In her collection, we find a large number of photographs of her sisters and cousins, some partially hand-colored, which suggests that she used them as subjects for training. She also practiced family photography, as her collection of images of family outings and social occasions attests. Her newspaper advertisements highlighted the fact that she was the "only national woman photographer in Palestine." Her studio was in her home in Bethlehem, and it is likely she had much more access than her male peers to family homes and to women's activities.

In her portraits, Abbud used the poses and backgrounds common at the time, showing her clients seated with flowers in their hands, for example. However, she was less rigid than her male peers in her sittings. Her subjects typically appear at ease, even playful, and thanks to them, we can glimpse middle-class Palestine as it wanted to be seen. While other photographers catering to tourists and pilgrims were produc-

Karimeh Abbud described herself as the "only national woman photographer in Palestine." She was known for her family photos and for playfully posing her subjects, as in this 1921 picture of children in a Jerusalem orphanage.



ing biblical scenes and Orientalist photography, Karimeh Abbud was letting her patrons show who they really were.

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In Her Own Voice: Marie al-Khazen

BY YASMINE NACHABE TAAN

During the early French mandate in Lebanon in the 1920s—a period of major social, political and economic changes that included a rising women’s movement in Syria and Lebanon—Marie al-Khazen, the daughter of an aristocratic family, took to recording her everyday life in her northern Lebanon village, Zgharta. Not with a pen, but with a camera.

Then in her mid-20s, al-Khazen developed an interest in the imported, lightweight, user-friendly Eastman Kodak camera. Clicking the shutter to capture whatever shot she deemed worth the effort, she left more than 200 six-by-nine-centimeter negatives that are carefully preserved in the archives of the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut.

Al-Khazen likely printed most of her photographs in a darkroom she had constructed in her family’s mansion in Zgharta. In one of her photographs, she staged herself and her sister as men: Was she expressing her desire to be looked at as a woman who shared equal power with the men of her society? While she left no writings to directly answer such questions, her images seem to make just such a statement.

Within a climate of a rising intelligentsia among Lebanese women, activist writers such as Anbara Salam, Salma Sayegh and Adila Beyhum voiced concerns about the image of a changing, modern woman. Their agenda, as reflected in the increasingly important women’s press in the 1920s, focused on the construction of this new woman. Through their writings they promoted an image of the new woman as both an educated mother and the ideal housewife supporting her husband.

Al-Khazen, however, was neither a mother nor a wife, and as her photographs demonstrate, she had other concerns. In many of her photos, she and her female friends are seen partaking in activities associated with men: smoking cigarettes, driving cars, fishing and visiting Lebanon’s tourist landmarks. She also practiced taxidermy, and she was a passionate hunter, according to her relatives.

Al-Khazen’s photographic construction of the new woman went further than the writings of Salam, Sayegh or Beyhum. She created an image of this woman as an independent individual who refused to withdraw into domestic duties and cater to the needs of the man of the house. Perhaps masculinity seemed more attractive to her than femininity because it connoted power, liberty and independence.

Her photographs stand out because she used the medium to imagine an alternative feminine identity. She raised questions concerning cultural assumptions about gender roles. She contested the assumptions of the local women’s press of



Marie al-Khazen broke new ground in Lebanon beginning in the 1920s, photographing women in activities usually associated with men. In this double exposure, the female rider looms over her male counterpart.

the 1920s about the female figure as naturally feminine. For the early 20th-century bourgeoisie, authority and control exemplified masculinity, while obedience, love and affection represented femininity: Al-Khazen offered up the possibility of a masculine femininity.

Her photographs not only *re-presented* femininity for her time, but also presented a new vision of women through new narratives. Notwithstanding the fact that such a redefined femininity was, and still is, perceived as negative and threatening by many, most of her work highlights the happiness and personal interests of her subjects. Al-Khazen’s photographs can be read as a rejection of assumed gender roles and an attempt to immerse herself in masculine public spaces as opposed to feminine private spaces—challenging the patriarchal status of her brother, father and uncle.

A serious amateur photographer, al-Khazen recorded her life as it was happening, improvising and experimenting in domestic environments during family trips, taking both candid and carefully constructed photographs of her subjects. She controlled the shutter speed of the camera, cropped her images and studied the lighting and positioning of her subjects. In these and other respects, her work anticipated the technical skill and artistically inspired vision of modern, professional art photographers.

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Tom Verde (tomverde.pressfolios.com) is a regular contributor to *AramcoWorld*. His “Malika” series, on historical Muslim queens, won “Best Series” awards from both the National Federation of Press Women and the Connecticut Press Club in 2017.



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SIRENS OF THE SEAGRASS

Written by

ALIA

YUNIS

“I used to see them in the 1970s when I’d go swimming as a little girl. I can still see one of them in my mind’s eye. It was low tide, so you could walk far out. It was sandy with lots of green grass in the water. Then right at the edge where the water dipped down into the deep again, I jumped in. And there was this big thing under the water—it was slow and fat and had big sad eyes. I swam up to it—and it to me—and we looked at each other. Then I remember coming up for air and my mother shouting, ‘Giselle, Giselle, come here,’ from the shore where she had waded in after me. I went back under, and it was already gone. But I sat there for a long time playing with the seahorses thinking it would come back.”

The other day when I mentioned to my friend Giselle, who had spent part of her childhood along the east coast of Saudi Arabia, that I was working on a story about the dugong, I expected her to say “the du-*what?*” like most people. (Even me, until I started reading about them.) Instead, she surprised me with her beautiful recollection from her childhood of an unforgettably gentle, eye-to-eye encounter.

It is a story, it turns out, that people have told in various ways for thousands of years. Dugongs likely inspired the original mermaid tales. Aboriginal rock artists in Western Australia drew a dugong as part of a “great fish chase” some 8,000 years ago. Stories specifically mentioning mermaids began circulating in the South Pacific and Indian Ocean about 3,000 years ago. Assyrians, whose empire was based far inland in what is today Iraq, wrote about mermaids. Italian explorer Christopher Columbus recorded three mermaids sighted near what is now the Dominican Republic. The most famous collection of Middle Eastern folk tales, *Alf layla wa layla*, (*One Thousand and One Nights*) mentions mermaids at least twice.

To most people today—even those living along the warm-water coasts of the Indian and Pacific oceans and the Red Sea—mythical mermaids feel more familiar than, for example, the actual 5,000 to 6,000 dugongs that inhabit the waters off the coast of Abu Dhabi alone. But in Abu Dhabi, as everywhere else dugongs live, as the human population has surged, dugongs have dwindled. The reasons are many: coastal development, boats and warming waters are a few, and all of these affect the dugong’s food: seagrass. Dugongs are also known in Arabic as *baqarah al-bahr* (sea cow), because they spend all day in shallow waters grazing on the seagrass.

A two-hour boat trip takes me from Abu Dhabi to meet people who once lived and worked among dugongs. Tiny Delma Island was once a key port for both fishing and pearling. Although fishing is no longer a necessity and pearling long defunct, the most common expression here is “*al-bahr kulshee*”—“the sea is everything.” Retired fishermen gather every morning to play dominos in a dusty café called Angry Birds. It overlooks the harbor, where families still have their wooden

Tracking density and the species diversity of the seagrass that dugongs rely on for food, researchers from Cardiff University set quadrants on the seafloor off the coast of Sri Lanka. Worldwide, seagrass is declining at roughly 110 square kilometers annually. *Opposite*: In the Red Sea near Marsa Alam, in southeast Egypt, this dugong—named Dennis by local divers—featured in a documentary about the pressures dugongs face from growth in tourism.

dhows anchored. The fishermen and sailors remember the marine mammal as docile and weighing 250 to 400 kilograms.

Then someone says, “We used to eat them.” One dugong, he explains, is literally big enough to feed a village.

“But we are not allowed to catch them anymore,” another fisherman emphasizes. Like most countries now, the United Arab Emirates has banned the capture of dugongs, which the International Union for the Conservation of Nature lists as “vulnerable,” depending on location.

While the swish of a dugong’s tail could sync with any Hollywood mermaid, and dugongs go about with what appears to be a permanent smile, dugong eyes are small—nothing like the ones Disney gave Ariel. And its ears tuck, unglamorously, inside. Nonetheless, it hears well, which compensates for poor eyesight.

“Sailors would be out to sea for long periods of time, and given that, the dugongs probably reminded them of women, particularly if they came across them breastfeeding,” says Helene Marsh, Distinguished Professor of Environmental Science and Dean of Graduate Research at James Cook University in Australia, home of the largest dugong population.

Although dugongs are shy, they have been personified because they sometimes (although increasingly rarely) enjoy interacting with humans, much like dolphins. In the low-lying archipelago nation of Vanuatu, in the South Pacific, where the dugong is the largest resident mammal, tourists visiting the island of Epie used to go out on boats to wait for Pontas, a dugong who would come up to the boats to say hello—until one day, after 10 years, he didn’t. Veterinarian Christina Shaw, who is also founder and CEO of the Vanuatu Environmental Science Society, says that Pontas may have perished in a fishing net, a cyclone or simply lived out his estimated 70-year lifespan.

Shaw has had her own encounters diving with dugongs.



“Sometimes they stay around, and sometimes they will just stay for a minute or two and then swim off.” Sometimes this is just to breathe, she points out, as dugongs need to surface every three to 12 minutes. “It’s just very unique to have interactions with a wild animal that isn’t afraid of humans.”

In other places, encounters have stoked other legends and customs. In the Lau Lagoon region of the Solomon Islands, in Oceania, journalist Bira’au Wilson Saeni recently recorded a tribal chief telling the tale of a woman who jumped into the sea and became a dugong to escape her evil mother-in-law. The chief told him this is why his tribes do not eat dugongs.

Chelcia Gomes, who facilitates the dugong conservation project at WorldFish in the Solomon Islands adds, “We are split along two lines. While some tribes used to eat dugongs, in the village of Naro, the dugong is sacred because the tribe there believes it is descended from dugongs.”

Across the Indian Ocean, Mozambique’s Bazaruto Island has East Africa’s only remaining viable dugong population. Here Alima Taju is mapping the population for her doctorate in conservation biology. She has discovered that many people here too do not eat dugongs because of their resemblance to women. (And in northern Mozambique, with a Muslim population, people do not eat it because there it is called “sea pig.”)

“It can even be bad luck to catch one in a fishing net in Bazaruto,” Taju explains. “People used to believe catching a dugong cursed you as a fisherman. In order to be able to catch fish again, and thus make a living, a fisherman had to undergo a ceremony performed by a witch doctor.”

The names *sea cow* and *sea pig* refer to the less elegant side of the dugong—the way it eats. Dugongs are picky. That green seagrass that surrounded Giselle may have been her childhood dugong’s lunch, but not all the seagrass—only the soft, new leaves that don’t upset its tummy. Nonetheless, almost like a vacuum cleaner, a dugong can munch through 30 kilos of it a day.

But there is now, according to the Abu Dhabi-based Dugong and Seagrass Conservation Project (DSCP), 29 percent less seagrass than decades ago. Every year, the world loses 110 square kilometers of it a year—an alarming rate of decline roughly equivalent to that of tropical forests.

Around 40 countries are known still to have dugong populations, and the DSCP is now working with eight along the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific



In the not-so-distant past, coastal people from the Arabian Peninsula to Australia—such as this group of aboriginal sea hunters—depended on dugongs for food. Today dugongs are protected nearly everywhere.

to create community-based programs that support seagrass, dugongs and humans.

Among them is Vanuatu, where Shaw and her team are writing the world’s first full guide to conserving the dugong. In 2015 a cyclone devastated Vanuatu’s seagrass beds, and thus, minimizing both natural as well as human-induced decline is important.

So are sustainable tourism practices. Shaw cites one such example in which fishermen take tourists on outrigger canoes to the dugong conservation area. Each tour guide then brings back money to be divided within a community pool. This system discourages competition among tour guides, which is often a cause of too much human impact in an area.

“The dugongs know that we use them as an attraction, so they will put their head out when they see the canoe,” says Program Director Joseph Soksok. “We want more dugongs. There are some places where we used to have seagrass. These areas used to look brown because of the sea grass, but now when we go there, we only see white, sandy beach,” he continues. “The dugongs don’t have enough food. If we want more dugongs, we need to figure out a way to increase the seagrass.”





Near Alor Island, Indonesia, a drone image shows a dugong interacting with a sea turtle. Drones now allow researchers to survey larger areas of sea than ever before to more accurately estimate dugong populations. *Right:* Near Marsa Alam, a dugong grazes seagrass. Dugongs spend much of the day grazing up to 30 kilograms of seagrass, earning them their other name, “sea cow.”

In the Solomon Islands, where 30 percent of the population depends on fishing for income, Gomese, the WorldFish conservationist, works with programs that help this nation of 1,000 islands find paths out of poverty and environmental degradation. She estimates that only half the islands’ citizens know anything about dugongs, but seagrass monitoring programs are helping change this.

For example, on Tetpere Island, a marine protected area since 2003, scientists have trained women to record seagrass beds and how they change from place to place over time. This helps the community understand which spots are at highest risk.

In Mozambique, the civil war that lasted from 1977 to 1992 displaced many people from the interior to the coast.



The new arrivals came without generations of sustainable fishing practices passed down to them, and they would catch the dugong for food. “They had different ways of respecting nature, and so they overfished,” says Taju. “But I would say

Dugongs, Manatees and Mermaids

For all their resemblance to humans, as far as the lore goes, dugongs (*Dugong dugon*) are more related to another marine mammal: the manatee (*Trichechus*, of which there are three species). But they do not share the same waters: Manatees can live in fresh and salt water, depending on the species, and they are most commonly found in the Amazon, West Indies, and West Africa. The manatee and the dugong are classified as sirenians, which refers back to how sailors described them long ago. Both use shrills and whistles to communicate, but scientists have not figured out what these mean, and this only adds to their mystical status. The dugong can live up to 20 years longer than a manatee. The biggest physical difference between them is their tails: The manatee's is rounded like a beaver's, and the dugong's is triangular, like a dolphin's—or a storybook mermaid. Unlike dolphins, however, dugongs are vegetarians, and they live largely solitary lives.



Dugong bones lie along the shore of Marawah Island near Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, not far from where the Gulf region's oldest-known dugong bones, dating back almost 8,000 years, were found. Other finds indicate that dugongs were not only food, but also used for sandals, helmets and other items of daily life.

those who came in the 1970s are now local, and they understand proper fishing better now. We also have programs in schools to train teachers to educate students about proper fishing and dugong conservation,” she adds. “Migrant fishermen are the problem today. They stay, for example, for two weeks—and they don't come from a specific place—and they will catch dugongs because they don't have the respect for them that coastal people do.”

She explains that people will go to jail and pay a fine if they intentionally catch a dugong, but if they accidentally kill one, they only pay the fine. Ultimately, she says, it's a code of conduct. Dugong tourism plays an increasing economic role in Bazaruto too: One of the few places for tourists to stay is named Dugong Beach Lodge.

There is still one place in the world where dugongs can be hunted legally—and then only with a spear: the Torres Straits, in northern Australia near Papua New Guinea, a remote area inhabited by a population of 4,500. This is the dugong capital of the world, and here dugongs are both food and family. Along with the green turtles of the area, dugongs have been a major source of protein for some 4,000 years. Dugongs are also embedded

How to free a dugong that has become stranded or entangled in a fishing net is the subject of a lesson in Sahamalaza, Madagascar, during the town's annual dugong festival, held every spring.



in the culture, appearing on everything from pottery to T-shirts. Since the 1970s, the islanders have become known in art circles for their prints and linocuts that often tell the cultural history of the people. When an exhibition went on tour to various countries 10 years ago, it was called “*Gelan Nguzu Kazi*” (“Dugong My Son”).

For many years scientists worried that the dugongs in the Torres Straits were at risk of overhunting, but 30 years of research by Marsh demonstrated the opposite. “We think the number is around 80,000,” she says, which far exceeds the 12,000 she and other scientists had estimated before newer technology allowed them to better assess life deeper underwater.

But Marsh does not think that the Torres Strait balance can be achieved anywhere else, and captive breeding, she adds, does not work for dugongs. The problem is partly size, but mostly “taking care of a suckling dugong is a 24-hour job, like looking after a human baby.”

Back in Abu Dhabi, standing on a seemingly empty beach on Hudayriat Island, just a few kilometers away from the city center, archeologist Mark Beech points down at what he calls a “dugong midden” because of the large number of dugong bones scattered under the sand and associated with pottery dating from the 18th to the early 20th centuries. These remains, he explains, are proof of a village involved in fishing and pearling.

Farther from the city center, on Marawah Island, Beech has excavated the region’s oldest-known dugong bones, which date back almost 8,000 years. “Dugong bones found within different rooms at the settlement mean it made a valuable



A stylized dugong is the subject of this work by an Aboriginal artist in Cooktown, Queensland, Australia. Many traditional cultures have long recognized the importance of the dugong for the stability of the sea and, more recently, tourism income.

The Torres Straits in northern Australia is the only place dugongs can be hunted legally—and only by residents.

contribution to their diet,” he says. Bedouin, he adds, used dugong hide for sandals. “It was also used to make soldier’s helmets, shields and other protective gear by populations


of the Red Sea and North East Africa. The oil from dugongs had many uses,” he adds, “including for cooking, conditioning wooden boats, fuel for lamps and medicine. It was even considered by some to be an aphrodisiac, and thus it was

traded to many countries.” Beech also discovered dugong bones on some of the gravesites of the island, which locals explained indicated the deceased was a dugong hunter.

“We need to conserve cultures as well as species,” says Marsh, explaining that dugong conservation connects to other global efforts to conserve species, traditions and heritages. Then, more children might get the chance to meet these real-life mermaids, eye to eye. 🌐



Alia Yunis, a writer and filmmaker based in Abu Dhabi, recently completed the documentary *The Golden Harvest*.

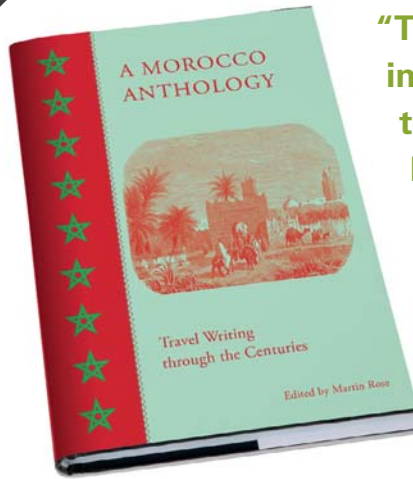
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REVIEWS

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“The only simile which will give the correct impression of the Medina [of Fez] ... is to imagine a human beehive, with each bee sitting cross-legged in its own little cell, with thousands of others passing to and for gathering their honey—the necessities of everyday life.”

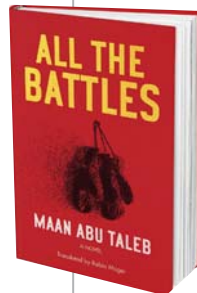
—Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, 1910

A Morocco Anthology: Travel Writing through the Centuries

Martin Rose, ed. 2018, AUC Press, 978-9-77416-8-468, \$18.95 hb.

Western writers say there’s an almost dream-like quality to arriving in Morocco for the first time, as one world dissolves into another. The romance of Morocco comes from its heady blend of Arab, Berber and European cultures. The editor of this compact collection notes that in precolonial times Morocco was defined not so much by borders as by declaring the name of the ruling sultan at Friday prayers: The country had “an almost metaphysical existence, with boundaries woven of sound and prayer.” These brief and impactful excerpts from travelers’ stories take readers through Morocco’s four “imperial cities” of Fez, Marrakech, Meknes and Rabat, among other sites. Fez was first among the capitals and the greatest center of learning. Marrakech was the golden gateway to the Sahara, Meknes the fanciful creation of a single sultan, Moulay Ismail, and Rabat (the modern capital) infused by a cultural legacy of Andalusian refugees.

—ROBERT W. LEBLING



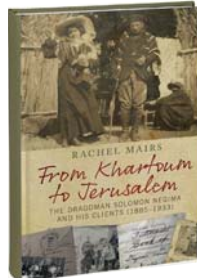
All the Battles: A Novel
Maan Abu Taleb. Robin Moger, tr. 2017, Hoopoe, 9-789-77416-847-5, \$17.95 pb.

There is more than a whiff of Ernest Hemingway in this compelling, crisply written

debut about boxing and society at large. The author hails from Amman, Jordan, the city in which his protagonist, a 28-year-old advertising executive from a middle-class family, looks like an unlikely candidate to become a professional boxer. But he pursues the sport to near-obsession, foregoing his career and his relationship with the upper-class daughter of a surgeon. Mocked for his bourgeois ways when he dives into training at a gym on the wrong side of town, he thrives and wins enough bouts to be noticed by British promoters who offer a sizable purse. When he’s placed on the bill in Dubai, he’s nearly killed in the match. After he recovers in the home

of his parents, he empties his locker and drives into the mountains, leaving the reader wondering where he’ll wind up—and hoping it’s not back in the ring.

—BRIAN E. CLARK



From Khartoum to Jerusalem: The Dragoman Solomon Negima and his Clients (1885–1933)

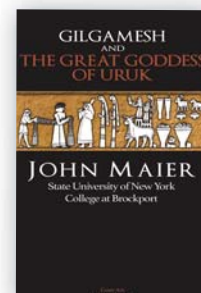
Rachel Mairs. 2017, Bloomsbury Academic, 978-1-35005-412-7, \$39.95 pb.

In 2014 British professor Rachel Mairs won an Internet auction for

a scrapbook into which dozens of old letters were pasted. The slender volume, which had been found in an estate sale years earlier in the hamlet of Rogue River, Oregon, turned out to be a collection of testimonials from clients of Solomon Negima, who worked as a dragoman (local guide) in Palestine in the years either side of 1900. In an engrossing piece of academic sleuthing, Mairs uncovers details of Negima’s life—born in Palestine,

he had served with the British military in Sudan. Then she painstakingly investigates letters and testimonials whose authors range from English tourists to American church ministers and military officers, cross-referencing among sources to build a picture of each client. She shows that Negima and his competitors in the Holy Land tourism industry stood at the center of a network of cultural and commercial relationships that extended both regionally and internationally from Jerusalem. This is a fascinating window into Middle East tourism of old, through lives rarely discussed.

—MATTHEW TELLER



Gilgamesh and the Great Goddess of Uruk

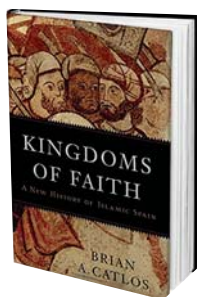
John Maier. 2018, SUNY Brockport eBooks (digitalcommons.brockport.edu/sunybeb/4/), 978-0-99762-943-9. Free.

In 1984 an English translation of the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh* by academic John

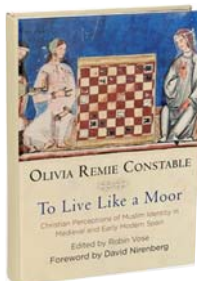


Maier and novelist John Gardner restored the poetry that had been lost in many earlier renderings. Now Maier, an English professor at SUNY Brockport, has taken that work a step further in a lengthy digital commentary on this tale of man's search for eternal life. When Gilgamesh rejects the love of Ishtar, the great goddess of Uruk, she sends the Bull of Heaven to deal with him. But when Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu kill the bull, Ishtar takes Enkidu's life, leaving Gilgamesh to wander the world in search of immortality. After visiting Utnapishtim, the sole survivor of the Great Flood (the same flood found in the story of Noah), Gilgamesh realizes his life can be extended only through the good works he leaves behind him. Maier explores how various threads of the story, some dating back more than 4,000 years, coalesced about 2,000 years ago into the version we know today.

—JANE WALDRON GRUTZ



Kingdoms of Faith: A New History of Islamic Spain
Brian A. Catlos. 2018, Basic Books, 978-0-465-05587-6, \$35 hb.



To Live Like a Moor: Christian Perceptions of Muslim Identity in Medieval and Early Modern Spain
Olivia Remie Constable. Robin Vose, ed. 2018, University of Pennsylvania Press, 978-0-812-24948-4, \$55 hb.

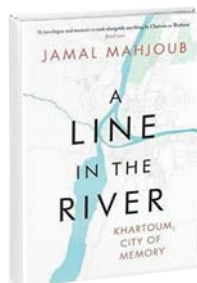
Brian Catlos offers a fresh treatment of the multicultural tapestry of al-

Andalus (medieval Islamic Spain). Drawing on recent North African and European scholarship, plus overlooked "stories of women, slaves, renegades, and functionaries," he emphasizes that rather than a mono-cultural emirate, al-Andalus was a complex network of more-or-less-independent enclaves and principalities (*taifas*). In these diverse communities, "episodes of cross-religious and cross-ethnic solidarity; of alliances and friendships ... forged between the faiths" of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, were far more common than the polarized, political history of the Reconquista, the Catholic reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula completed in 1492, would have us believe. Not everyone always got along, yet "Islamic Spain" was, for the various peoples living there, as much a cultural identification as a religious one. Digging deeply into that identity, the late Olivia Remie Constable dissects the manifold ways in which "Moorish" customs and lifestyles endured in the wake of the Reconquista, when local Muslims, forced to convert to Christianity, emerged as Moriscos. She explores cultural legacies in chapters focusing on subjects such as clothing, food and bathing. In late medieval Spain, eggplants and couscous might have indicated a Muslim diet, yet ended up on Spanish royal tables as exotic delicacies, for example. The bathhouse, essential for ritual cleanliness in Islam, also served "social, recreational and cultural functions."

—LEE LAWRENCE

Images from 15th-century illuminated manuscripts demonstrate "the similarities and continuities in bathhouse culture and usage in Christian and Muslim regions."

—TOM VERDE



A Line in the River: Khartoum, City of Memory
Jamal Mahjoub. 2018, Bloomsbury Publishing, 978-1-40888-546-8, \$30 hb.

British novelist Jamal Mahjoub, perhaps better known to readers

of his Sudanese detective series under the pseudonym Parker Bilal, has written a bittersweet love letter to his Sudanese father's birthplace, which he left for England once in the 1940s and permanently in 1990. By that time the author too had left to study abroad. He let decades pass before returning to write this memoir-cum-history of the capital. Mahjoub presents a kind of a stop-motion take on Khartoum, seen through the lens of his late father's stymied ambitions, updates from struggling relatives who stayed home and his own perceptions of the city as it was and as it is today. He portrays its metamorphoses from a sleepy British imperial backwater to the place embodying the hopes of a new nation after independence in 1956 to a now bursting-at-the-seams, hustling hodgepodge of migrants, war and climate-change refugees, and elite families credentialed years ago in the freedom struggle or by current politics. All these memories and aspirations, fueled by new money and old dreams, make Mahjoub, like V. S. Naipaul in India, an acutely ambivalent observer of his national roots.

—LOUIS WERNER

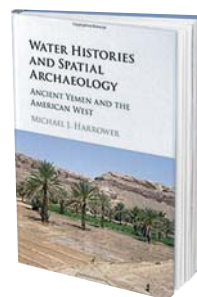


Neslishah: The Last Ottoman Princess
Murat Bardakci. Meyzi Baran, tr. 2017, Auc Press, 9-789-77416-837-6, \$39.95 hb.

This biography of Neslishah Sultan, born in Constantinople in 1921 and who died in that same city—renamed Istanbul—at age 91 after decades in exile, is a royal roller

coaster through Middle Eastern and European 20th-century history. The granddaughter of the last Ottoman sultan, Mehmed VI (1861–1926), and the last Ottoman caliph, Abdülmejid II (1868–1944), Princess Neslishah was as purebred as they come. She and her family fled for France when she was three, when Turkey became a republic. Raised in Nice, she married at 16 into the Egyptian royal family, only to face exile once more after Egypt's monarchy was overthrown in 1952. Neslishah "often faced financial problems, political turmoil" and a painful longing for home. Yet, as the last surviving member of the Ottoman dynasty born during Ottoman times, she "never relinquished" her sense of identity as a royal, writes Bardakci. This translation of the 2011 Turkish biography features lengthy excerpts from interviews with the princess, as well as numerous family photographs.

—TOM VERDE



Water Histories and Spatial Archaeology: Ancient Yemen and the American West
Michael J. Harrower. 2016, Cambridge UP, 978-1-10713-465-2, \$116 hb.

The author of this technical study is an archeologist with experience in Yemen,

and a leading specialist on Global Positioning System and Geographic Information Systems mapping. He uses those tools to compare the water histories of two arid regions, Southwest Arabia, c. 3500 BCE–600 CE, and the American West, c. 2000 BCE–1950 CE. He analyzes how the two areas—far removed from each other in time, culture and history—"are unique in similar ways," emphasizing environmental, social, political and religious factors. This leads him into discourses on xenophobia, Orientalism, water crises, Western water law and even the War on Terror. Surprisingly, he does not discuss a living link between Yemen and the American West: *acequias*, the gravity-flow irrigation ditches that evolved over 10,000 years in the deserts of the Middle East. Carried to Spain by the Moors and thence to the New World, including the American Southwest, acequia technology endures in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.

—GERALD ZARR



Islam: An Illustrated Journey
Farhad Daftary and Zulfikar Hirji. 2018, Azimuth Editions in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 978-1-89859-235-8, \$44.95 hb.

The choice of images in this beautifully illustrated historical overview speaks volumes about the multifaceted Islamic world, as does the layout design with double-paged asides of short, themed essays (e.g., on women, the importance of a particular site or how Islam traveled to China). The main narrative is equally compelling. The authors, whose combined expertise covers cultural, social, economic and Islamic history, discuss the influences of cultures on Islamic thought and practice; the role interpretation has played since Islam's earliest times; and the motivations of individual actors as they have pursued aspirations and responded to changing historical circumstances. One closes the book with a deeper understanding of Islam and an appreciation for the complexities of its journey.



EVENTS

Highlights from
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CURRENT / MARCH

Watch before You Fall: *Manal AIDowayan* looks at symbolism found in books written about the bodies of women. Using sculpture, ceramics and fabric, AIDowayan describes this exhibition as “a space that stands between fear and activism. The artworks are symbols of the resilience and fragility of both the context and the artist.” She attempts to fragment these symbols and reconstruct them to create a new form, a room full of “healing totems” that alters perception and corrects memory. “My totems will be permanent memorials to stand against the attempt to reduce the complex into simple symbols,” says the artist, who was born in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The forms developed for this collection of artworks are meant to stimulate dialogs about symbolism and feminism in the contexts of religion, politics and media. Sabrina Amrani Gallery, **Madrid**, through March 30.

CURRENT / APRIL

The Cloth that Changed the World: *India’s Painted and Printed Cottons*. Made with novel cotton, vivid colors and exuberant design, the painted and printed cottons of India revolutionized art, fashion

and science wherever they went. Featuring pieces from the museum’s world-renowned collection, this exhibition explores how, over thousands of years, India’s artisans created, perfected and continually innovated these printed and painted, multicolored fabrics to dress the body, honor divinities and beautify palaces and homes. Included are the stories behind the art: the people who made, commissioned, shipped, sold and ultimately used these pieces. Royal **Ontario** Museum, through April 19.

Speech Acts: *Reflection-Imagination-Repetition*. What do public museums collect, and why? Which works become highlights? Which lie in storage, forgotten? Which stories emerge to frame the visitor’s encounters with the art they see? How do these stories change over time? Through the work of more than 40 artists, including Yara El-Sherbini, who grew up between England and Saudi Arabia, and the late Pakistani artist Anwar Jalal Shemza, the exhibition considers how public museums reflect and shape our collective imagination, and examines how exhibitions can influence these shared narratives. This presentation shows how artworks can nurture stories if they are shown in ways beyond

the limited frames of biography and identity. **Manchester** Art Gallery, **uk**, through April 22.

CURRENT / MAY

Hammer Projects: *Jamilah Sabur*. Miami-based Jamilah Sabur is a multidisciplinary artist whose work incorporates performance, video and installation. *Un chemin escarpé / A steep path* (2018) is a five-channel video installation featuring her inner world, from a cricket field in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica to underwater geological features of the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean. The video bridges ritualistic practice with digital technology and evokes questions related to navigation between the material and the transcendent. The piece is inspired by geophysical data taken about the retired research vessel *Vema* and the geological term escarpment, which references a sleep slope formed from erosion. Hammer Museum, **Los Angeles**, through May 5.

CURRENT / JUNE

Beyond Compare: *Art from Africa in the Bode-Museum* introduces superlative works of art from Africa from the Ethnological Museum of Berlin into the peerless sculpture collec-



The Far Shore: *Navigating Homelands*

features five Arab American visual artists with new work that responds to five Arab American poets, all dealing with themes of displacement and survival. The exhibition coincides with the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I and the beginning of a period of postcolonial upheaval in the Arab world. It is also particularly poignant today when migration, displacement and survival are issues of daily life for many around the world. Arab American National Museum, **Dearborn, Michigan**, through April 7.

“Syrian Migration #9,” by Helen Zughaib, 2018, gouache.

COURTESY OF HELEN ZUGHAIB



tion of the Bode-Museum. Pairs of sculptures from both continents are placed throughout the collection, and a special exhibition gallery addresses specific themes, revealing possible correlations including historic contemporaneity, iconographic and technological similarities, and artistic strategies while exposing contrasts, such as depictions of motherhood, which rely on different visual languages in Africa and Europe and convey different messages. Bode-Museum, **Berlin**, through June 2.

Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa challenges the colonial stereotype of “timeless Africa,” a continent cut off from the dynamics of history. This is the first major exhibition to take stock of the material culture of early trans-Saharan trade and to offer strong evidence of the central but little-recognized role Africa played in global medieval history. Among the materials on view are sculptures, jewelry, household and luxury objects, manuscripts and architectural remnants, all united by their connections to routes of exchange across the Sahara from the eighth to the 16th century. Northwestern University Block Museum of Art, **Evanston, Illinois**, through June 21.

CURRENT / JULY

Power of Pattern: Central Asian Ikats from the David and Elizabeth

Reisbord Collection showcases more than 60 examples of visually dynamic Central Asian *ikat* robes and wall hangings. Organized by motif, the exhibit examines how the region’s textile designers, dyers and weavers used improvisation and abstraction to create unique textiles. Central Asian *ikat* textiles are a testament to the power of pattern and are influenced by the various cultures along the historic Silk Road. Employing creative use of scale, proportion and orientation, with hues that are compelling in their purposeful contrast, these luxury fabrics functioned as beacons of kaleidoscopic color that reflected the wealth and sophistication of its patrons. Their vivid patterns with blurred, cloud-like juxtapositions of color are known locally as *abrbandi* (literally “cloud binding”). When worn on the body or decorating the home, these textiles resonated against the Central Asian landscape. **Los Angeles** County Museum of Art, through July 28.

CURRENT / NOVEMBER

Subverting Beauty: African Anti-Aesthetics. Beauty stops us in our tracks. It makes us pause, look, consider. Sometimes it overwhelms us. We are often told art should aspire to this standard and be proportionate, symmetrical, naturalistic and orderly. But what of work that is designed to revolt and terrify? Across sub-Saharan Africa, artists

working in a range of states, societies and cultures deliberately created artwork that violated conceptions of beauty, symmetry and grace—both ours and theirs. This exhibition features approximately two dozen works from sub-Saharan Africa’s colonial period (c. 1880–1960) that are accumulative, composite, crude, counterintuitive and disproportionate. More importantly, it explores the reasons why artists working during this turbulent period in the continent’s history turned against beauty to express the meaning and vitality of their day-to-day lives. The **Baltimore** Museum of Art, through November 17.

Clay: Modeling African Design. By its nature, clay embodies the notion of transformation, shifting from a soft to hard state in the course of firing. The unique malleability and plasticity of clay, as well as its prominent use in global art contexts, make it ideal for exploring not only African art forms and esthetics in particular, but also broader questions of design. This exhibition highlights artistic innovation and creativity in Africa through traditions of ceramic arts from across the continent and over history. Countering the assumption that African arts and societies are largely unchanging and bound to traditions and customs, the diversity of objects and styles tells a different story. A selection of more than 50 works on loan appear alongside works from the Harvard Art Museum’s permanent

collections. Harvard Art Museums, **Cambridge, Massachusetts**, through November 14, 2021.

COMING / MARCH

Art Dubai 2019 features Art Dubai Contemporary, Art Dubai Modern, the second edition of *Residents and Bawwaba* (“Gateway”), a new section to the fair that presents 10 solo presentations showcasing works created within the last year or conceived specifically for the fair. For the past decade, the Art Dubai Group has played a key role in the Emirate’s journey toward becoming a leading global destination for arts and design by producing internationally recognized annual art and design fairs and festivals: Art Dubai, Downtown Design, Art Week and Dubai Design Week. These collaborative ventures highlight a broad program of creative and cultural events and programming across Dubai, the UAE and beyond. Together, the Art Dubai Group-run fairs and festivals help shine the international spotlight on Dubai and position the city as an international destination of culture. Various locations, **Dubai**, March 20 through 23.

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