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**RECONNECTING  
CULTURES  
IN THE BALKANS**



Young members of a folkloric dance and music troupe wait for their performance near Breznitsa, Bulgaria, a village that is leading the resurgence of Pomak—Bulgarian Muslim—pride through new cultural events, historical research and personal connections. Photo by Boryana Katsarova.

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**Back Cover**



A painting by Zahra Faya is a product of workshops for artists in Rijal Alma'a, Saudi Arabia, that encourage young people to learn the traditional women's painting patterns of the 'Asir region, adapt them to modern media and experiment with new patterns and symbols. Photo by Manal Al-Dowayan.

Saudi Aramco, the oil company born as an international enterprise just eighty years ago, distributes *Saudi Aramco World* to increase cross-cultural understanding. The magazine's goal is to broaden knowledge of the cultures, history and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their connections with the West. *Saudi Aramco World* is distributed without charge, upon request, to a limited number of interested readers.



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## Reconnecting Cultures in the Balkans

Written by Matthew Brunwasser

Photographed by Boryana Katsarova

Isolated from each other by nearly a century of wars and political strife, Muslim communities in Bulgaria, Kosovo and Albania are using open borders and, more recently, social media to rediscover cultural ties lost since the Ottoman era.

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## The Catalyst

Written by Juliet Highet  
Photographs courtesy  
of Rose Issa Projects

Widely regarded as a top leader of today's boom in contemporary art and film from the Middle East, Rose Issa recently moved her London gallery, where since 1985 she has sought to "give visibility to wonderful, virtually unknown artists" with the "guts and talent to create stories."



## 20 Part 4: Perils

Written by Tim Mackintosh-Smith

Lost, stranded, attacked, bitten, robbed, shipwrecked, nearly drowned or just scared out of your wits—perils make gripping reading, and in this fourth installment in his series, the author samples classic Arabic writers who knew this well.

ترجمان المكنوز  
INTERPRETER  
of TREASURES



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Written by Alia Yunis with Hisham Mortada  
Photographed by Manal Al-Dowayan

As far back as anyone's grandparents can remember, a guest-reception room, or *majlis*, in 'Asir, Saudi Arabia, would be adorned by vibrant patterns—all painted by women. As housing styles changed in the 20th century, the custom nearly disappeared, but artists and preservationists are reviving it now, stoking regional pride and giving new life to a visually electric art.

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Written and photographed by Banning Eyre

Featuring one of Afghanistan's most acclaimed singers of the modern era, 66-year-old Ustad Farida Mahwash, flanked by five virtuoso instrumentalists, *Voices of Afghanistan* is coming out of Fremont, California to bring to US stages a musical repertoire that takes listeners by the heart, no translations needed.



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Knocked about the map like a ball on its own playing field, polo started in Iran some 2600 years ago and spent a couple of millennia as a mostly aristocratic sport, mostly in Persia, Central Asia and northern India. There, in the 19th century, the British jumped in and carried the game west not only to their native isles but also as far as Argentina—only to have the action shift back east again. In Dubai, last March, royally sponsored teams mounted up alongside private ones to vie for the 2013 Dubai Gold Cup.

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# RECONNECTING CULTURES IN THE BALKANS

Written by MATTHEW BRUNWASSER Photographed by BORYANA KATSAROVA



In the villages that nestle amid southern Bulgaria’s remote, scenically spectacular, economically underdeveloped Pirin and Rhodope Mountains, Pomaks—Bulgarian Muslims—are reclaiming their name. Marginalized under 45 years of communism, they saw *Pomak* become “a word you had to feel guilty about,” says Mehmed Boyukli, a leading Pomak analyst. Now, he says, “with the Internet, the term has become acceptable. It has become a symbol of all the cultural heritage we have preserved.” And although they are the largest of the several Balkan Muslim communities, Pomaks are not the only ones using open borders and, more recently, social media to rediscover common cultures in the Balkan nations that

Top: First noted in Ottoman records in 1464–1465, the village of Breznitsa in southern Bulgaria is a leading center of Pomak cultural expression and preservation. Mehmed Boyukli, left, credits social media for helping Muslim minorities throughout the Balkans. “When we understood that there were others like us somewhere else, it legitimized our culture.... We realized we weren’t alone.”

*“Through the Internet, we have succeeded in defining ourselves for others; they can decide for themselves what to think of us.”*

Mehmed Boyukli

were carved out of the Ottoman Empire following World War I.

With the opening of borders in the late 1980’s and the advent of social media, young people like Saleika Groshar of Breznitsa, Bulgaria—who is 22 and has never known communist rule—are forging newly pan-Balkan Muslim identities. She adores traditional folk music, and she administers the Facebook group “Pomaks, Torbeshi and Gorani: Three Names, One People.” She has made friends among Gorani—a Muslim ethnic group living in southern Kosovo and northern Albania—with whom she chats and exchanges audio files of local folk music. “They are learning Bulgarian and I’m learning Gorani,” she says.

Though it is early for such claims, these cultural shifts appear to be reknitting ties that were cut in the late 19th- and early 20th-century transformations of the western Ottoman Empire into the nation-states of Bulgaria, Albania and Yugoslavia. Before then, Ottoman governance had been based on the concept of *millet*—communities defined by their Muslim, Jewish or Christian faith and allowed to govern themselves according to their own laws. Their respective millets provided Ottoman subjects with their primary source of identity until

they began gaining national identities in the 19th century. Within the Ottoman Empire all Muslims—whether Turks or Albanians, Arabs or Slavs—belonged to the Muslim millet, and their language, geographic origin and ethnicity were secondary.

The establishment of new Christian Balkan states in the 1800’s left the Muslims in those territories isolated, and they were seen by the new governments as potentially subversive minorities. In the 20th century, communism brought at least four forced-assimilation campaigns in Bulgaria alone, the first in 1912, the last only in 1989, promulgated under the guise of “restoring” Christian identities to people assumed to have become Muslims centuries ago under Ottoman duress. But following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, and the opening of borders by the expanding European Union, it is now on-line social media tools that are most powerfully changing how Balkan Muslims see themselves and how they relate to each other.

“All of a sudden the borders opened all around us, and we

discovered that there were other islands of cultures just like ours, with people who are just like us,” says Boyukli, who also lives in Breznitsa, a town well known for both its traditional Pomak culture and its online Pomak activism. “We realized we weren’t alone.”

Boyukli says that the more Balkan Muslims learn about each other, the more the names for Muslim ethnic groups feel artificial. Pomaks, for example, live not only in Bulgaria, but also in northern Greece and in western Turkey, where they are largely assimilated. The Pomaks residing in Bulgaria speak Bulgarian, and diaspora groups speak the languages of their new countries.

In Kosovo and Albania, Torbeshi and Gorani both speak *Nashenski*, a south Slavic language that Bulgarian-speakers can partially understand. Torbeshi live in Kosovo and Macedonia; Gorani live in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. In Bosnia, there are also Muslim “Bosniaks,” who are seen as cousins, distant both linguistically and culturally; they identify themselves as Bosnians first, rather than as Muslims.

Outsiders are generally unaware of the nuances of such distinctions. Officially, *Gorani* means simply the people living in the province of Gora, which was divided in 1928 between Albania and Yugoslavia. Torbeshi and Gorani have a common language and think of themselves as the same people, distinguishing between Torbeshi and Gorani only when speaking with outsiders. The name of their language, *Nashenski*, literally means “ours-ish,” from *nash*, meaning “our.” They call an individual of either group a *nashenets*—“one of ours.” According to Bulgarian ethnographer Veselka Toncheva, the weight of marginalization is unmistakable: To define oneself as “us” means viewing everyone else as “them.” But this distinction is starting to change.

**Saleika Groshar, left, and Zeynep Sakali, right, are members of Gaitani, a Breznitsa folk-music group that is connecting with like-minded musicians in both Bulgaria and Kosovo. Groshar, 22, also administers a Facebook group called “Pomaks, Torbeshi and Gorani: Three Names, One People.”**





Serenaded at point-blank range by Ottoman-era reed instruments called *zurnas* and a drum called a *tupan*, Musa Hadzhi dances in the wedding procession that brings his cousin, Musa Darakchi, to the home where his bride-to-be lives. Though all has long been arranged, there will be pro-forma dowry negotiations at the gate of the bride's parents' house before the groom's party is granted admission.

**B**reznitsa, in the Pirin foothills, is famous not only for the activist preservation of Pomak culture but also for the beauty of its singing, weaving, dress and Islamic traditions. Its population of around

3500 is about 90 percent Muslim. Old-fashioned wood and mud-brick buildings rub up against modern houses made of concrete. An "Easy Credit" shop in an aluminum shack offers instant consumer loans. Internet cafés have closed, because almost every home now has its own on-line connection.

Economically, the people of Breznitsa have been moving away from traditional tobacco farming after communism

**Librarian and cultural activist Nafie Kosinova, center, receives help adjusting her scarf before the folkloric dance and music group she leads gives a performance.**

as opportunities in construction have opened, drawing men to Bulgarian cities and abroad. Many of the women work at one of the village's two textile factories, whose production is exported to



Germany: One makes designer suits for men and the other produces *dirndls*, Bavarian women's folk dresses.

During the communist era, Bulgaria's forced-assimilation campaigns against its Muslim population, including ethnic Turks and Roma (Gypsies), meant that Islamic dress, music and culture and even Muslim names were banned. Everyone had to take new Bulgarian names—often those of flowers and birds.

"The idea was that we had no culture, and that we had to change our entire way of life, our names and even our songs," says Boyukli, born and raised in Breznitsa and a plasterer by profession. In the dark years of communism, he recalls, a Yugoslav vinyl record of Gorani music smuggled into the village brought great joy, because it sounded exactly like local music. "When we understood that there were others like us somewhere else, it legitimized our culture," he says.

The end of communism saw Bulgarian Muslims take back their names amid a rush of enthusiasm for expressions of Muslim identity. Now, 20 years later, the excitement has cooled as a new hybrid traditional-modern culture is taking shape.

Nowhere does this show more clearly than at weddings, where Muslims throughout the Balkans have maintained a rich variety of Ottoman-era traditions. Many are identical to those practiced in Muslim communities in different countries, despite 45 years of Cold War divisions that kept Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Albania separated by hostile borders.

Musa Darakchi is getting married tomorrow. He's 27, and he has taken advantage of the open borders to work for five years in flower fields outside Düsseldorf, Germany to pay for his new home in Breznitsa and the wedding with upward of 500 guests.



"It's important for me to know that the traditions will continue for future generations," he says. "Compared to my father and grandfather, I know less about the traditions, but I want to pass something on."

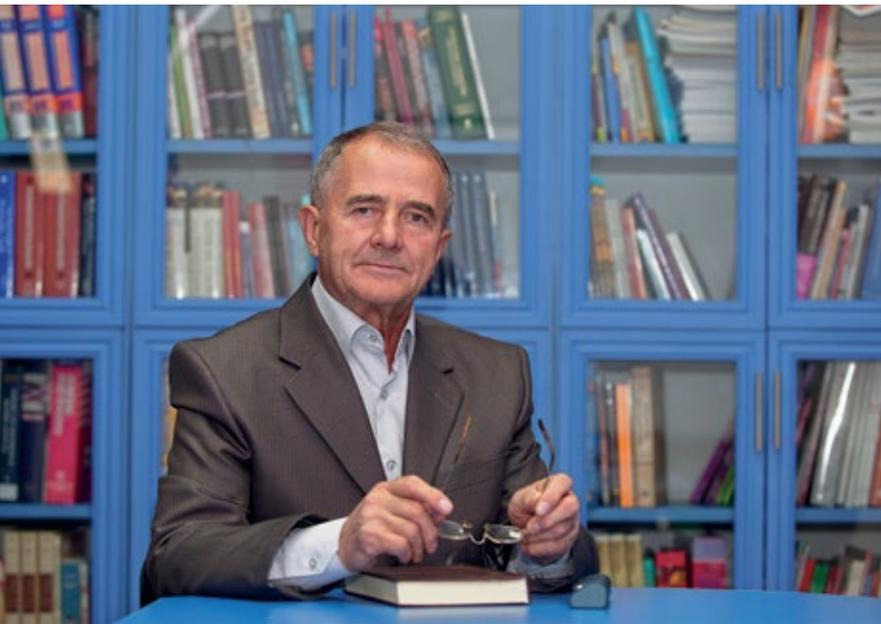
The next morning, the wedding is announced at 8:30 in the town square by the wailing of *zurnas*—stubby, Ottoman-era clarinets with the tone of a kazoo and the force of alto saxophones. When the four *zurnas* and three *tupans* (drums) start up, no other notification is needed.

The groom's brother, a lanky young man in a flashy silver suit, leads the procession, waving a pole with the red wedding flag. In the corner of the flag, where a crescent and star once signified the Muslim millet, there is a heart made out of sequins. "The communists didn't like the crescent and star, but they let us keep the flag because it was red," says Boyukli.

During the assimilation campaigns, even musicians had to give up their *zurnas*, because the instrument was considered "too Turkish." They had to take up accordions or saxophones, and they could play only Bulgarian or Russian music.

Below left: Some two-thirds of the song requests received by the local cable station are for local folk music, says Ismail Groshar, who owns and operates the service in Breznitsa. Below: Village financial director and unofficial ethnographer Salih Bukovyan has recorded local poetry, songs and weaving patterns. He holds a locally handmade sock, a traditional wedding gift. "Women are the ones who carry and preserve our identity," he says.





In 2004, writer Miftar Ademi of Prizren created an alphabet called *Nashenitsa*, adapted to writing the spoken dialect of the Torbeshi Muslims of the region, which he describes as “very archaic, but a living language.” The name comes from the Torbesh word for “our people.”

When the groom comes out of his house, he has a crisp €50 banknote pinned to his lapel, along with a white rose. He leads the procession slowly, stopping from time to time to dance. By the time it arrives at the bride’s house, a large crowd is following him. The front gate is held shut by hands inside. Banknotes pass and discussion follows. The orchestra is too loud for the crowd to hear the negotiations.

Finally the gates open and the guests press inside. The couple poses for pictures in front of the *cheiz*, or dowry, given by the bride’s family: a stack of carpets and blankets as tall as the couple themselves, surrounded by piles of kitchen goods, from a dish rack and bowls to fluffy pillows and a teddy bear. It’s a literal and symbolic representation of the new family’s wealth.

When the crowd thins, the *cheiz* is lowered piece by piece from the third-floor balcony to a truck waiting in the street. The back of the truck is an open metal frame over which the *cheiz* is displayed,

and it forms the centerpiece of the procession that rolls slowly to the square for celebratory folk dancing.

Breznitsa’s unofficial ethnographer is 36-year-old Salih Bukovyan, the village financial director. He likes to think about the big questions facing Pomak culture. He also has one of the largest collections of traditional clothes and songs in the region.

“If our women stop wearing the clothes which make us different, the assimilation will be successful,” Bukovyan says. “Women are the ones who carry and preserve our identity, and if they lose it, we all lose a lot.”

Bukovyan says he was drawn to folklore as a boy by his grandmother. He felt the harmony she sought in the songs she sang—the same harmony she wove with bright colors and geometrical designs into her daughter’s *cheiz*. “In short, she loved beauty,” Bukovyan says. “She died with a song in her mouth.”

While women in Breznitsa still weave and knit, some of the stitches are being forgotten. So Bukovyan documents stitches and designs using Excel spreadsheets, listing the colors and motifs. In addition, he has written down 10,000 lines of traditional songs and poetry. He also has a blog with a small online ethnographic museum, and someday he hopes to build Bulgaria’s first Pomak brick-and-mortar ethnographic museum.

Like many curious Balkan Muslims, Bukovyan spends much free time online with friends in Bulgaria, as well as in Macedonia, Kosovo and Turkey. Balkan Muslims’ mutual acquaintance is at an early stage, he notes.

“If we succeed in consolidating Pomaks in Bulgaria as a single cultural group, we might also speak of Torbeshi and Gorani as members of the same community in different



Broadcasting from Gornje Ljubenje, a Torbeshi village near Prizren, Raif Ademi owns and runs Radio ASTRA, the first Bosnian-language pop-music radio station in Kosovo.



Once the cultural center of Ottoman Kosovo, Prizren's townscape is dominated by the Sinan Pasha mosque, which dates from 1615. Although in 1857 some 70 percent of the population was Muslim, today it has no ethnic majority, and Serbian, Albanian, Turkish, Nashenski—and English—can all be heard in its cafés and streets.

states," says Bukovyan. "Then there wouldn't be Pomaks in Bulgaria or Torbeshi in Macedonia any more. We will have a new name with which we will all identify." And that name, he adds, would be *nashentski*, the same "us" used by the Gorani and Torbeshi to refer to themselves.

The cable television company in Breznitsa also serves as a local news service. Almost everyone in the village subscribes, and it's the leading public forum. Callers request songs and make dedications, which appear as text on screen, for birthdays, births, deaths, anniversaries and upcoming weddings.

Owner Ismail Groshar says that, in recent years, mainstream Bulgarian music has been losing popularity in favor of traditional local folk music, and he estimates that two-thirds of the requests are now for traditional folk songs. As well, a Gorani folk group from Kosovo, Braca Muska ("Muska Brothers"), has become popular in Breznitsa, ever since Mehmed Boyukli brought MP3s of the group to

the station. Groshar says that local musicians are now playing their songs at celebrations. They include titles such as "Vo Kafana" (In the Café), "Cerno Oko Sareno" (Shiny Black Eyes) and "Tudzina je Mlogo Teska" (It's Very Sad Abroad).

Nineteen-year-old Zeynep Sakali is a Braca Muska fan who sings in the Gaitani folk group, one of two ensembles in Breznitsa. She says about half the young people in her town are interested in traditional music. When she's under stress, she says, "I don't want to watch a movie. I prefer to listen to folk music and weave."

Her friend and fellow Gaitani member, Saleika Groshar, considers herself fortunate to be one of the first Pomaks to visit Kosovo: Her ensemble performed there last year. "I didn't expect them to take so many pictures. They really loved our *nosi* [traditional clothes]," Groshar says. In return, she has invited Braca Muska to Breznitsa. "It's our dream for them to come," she says.

Kosovo radio journalist Raif Kasi, right, who is Torbeshi, is welcomed by his mother and father at their family home in the village of Gornje Ljubinje during the second day of the Kurban Bayram, as the Muslim Feast of the Sacrifice (*Id al-Adha*) is known. "There was so little information before [the end of communism]. Even I as a journalist didn't know there were other people like us Torbeshi."

A six-hour drive into Kosovo, in Prizren, lives Raif Kasi, a Torbeshi journalist working for the Bosnian-language service of Kosovo Radio and Television. One of the key online movers among Nashentsi, he uses the Internet to network with Muslims across the Balkans, do research and help arrange connections across borders. He also attends regional meetings and conferences on Balkan Muslim issues. His hometown of Prizren, in southern Kosovo, might well be the most Ottoman city in the Balkans, not just in architecture but in its multicultural spirit. The city has no ethnic majority and you can freely speak any language—Serbian, Albanian, Turkish, English or Nashenski. Like much of the



former Yugoslavia, Prizren has a distinctly southern-European café culture. The macchiato is creamy and masterful.

"We're very similar people, with a very similar culture and faith, but with a different language," Kasi explains, sitting in an outdoor

With his son looking on, Murat Muska readies his traditional Gorani musician's outfit at his home in Restelica, a village in southern Kosovo. Performing with others in his musical family, Braca Muska ("Muska Brothers") has won a regional following with a kind of "new Balkan folk": songs about contemporary life but arranged traditionally. "The new songs are about more modern themes, like immigrant life in Italy or Switzerland and things like visas," he says.



café. “A hundred years ago we all spoke the same language [Nashenski], but it’s changed since then.”

Gorani, who are defined as the Nashenski-speaking Muslims living in the south Kosovo province of Gora, are one of the six official ethnicities of Kosovo. Torbeshi, however, are not, as they have always felt pressed to identify publicly as Bosniaks, a much larger group that speaks Bosnian (formerly known as Serbo-Croatian) and within which the Torbeshi minority could find greater political inclusion. For all official business and education, Torbeshi today speak Bosnian, reserving Nashenski to speak at home.

Miftar Ademi is hoping to change that. He has come to the café with the Nashenski grammar book he wrote and published. He also created an alphabet called Nashenitsa—based on Latin letters with diacritical marks for sounds special to the language. His son Anando, a medical student, designed a font for the script. “It’s easy to install in Windows,” Anando says. The goal is to make writing Nashenski more “natural and authentic.”

Ademi speaks of the beauty of Nashenski like a connoisseur of rare languages. “It’s an archaic language, very archaic, but also a living language,” he says. It was the basis for other South Slavic languages like Serbian and Bulgarian. “Our language is the trunk and the other regional languages are the branches,” he explains. “It was never a literary language,” he says factually, without shame or pride. He says there are only about 15 books published in Nashenski, but he hopes the number will increase.

**A**cross the border, in northeast Albania, there are nine Gorani villages and about 15,000 Gorani. During the communist era, they lived in almost complete isolation. In the car on the way to Kukës, Albania, to meet Nazif



**In Kukës, Albania, Nazif Dokle has written more than 20 books about Nashenski language, literature, history and culture, including the first Albanian–Nashenski dictionary. During the communist era, he says, he kept volumes of secret field notes, right.**



Dokle, a respected scholar of Nashenski language and culture, Kasi recalls his first trip across the border in 2000.

The village of Borya, he recalls, was holding its first cultural festival. Kasi was one of the first Nashentsi to visit from Kosovo. “I grew up 32 kilometers from this border and no Yugoslavs could cross it,” he says. “It was hermetically sealed, so it was always very interesting to me.”

We pass a muddy field that in 1999, a year before his visit, had been filled with refugees from the Kosovo War. Today it’s raining heavily. The gray sky melts into wet asphalt and colorless mountains, all blending and blurring like the complicated mix of Balkan identities.

Dokle, who has written more than 20 books about Nashenski



Amid the Šar Mountains, which locals often regard with deep affection, a wintertime rainbow connects village and sky.

language, literature, history and culture, is home when we arrive. As a school inspector during the communist period, he traveled extensively in the region, combining business with research on the sly. “I asked people everywhere in the Gorani villages about words. My aim was to make a dictionary.”

His Albanian–Nashenski dictionary is the first Nashenski dictionary of any kind. Dokle takes yellowing notepads from a shelf and shows me decades of fieldwork from the days when interest in Gorani culture—or any minority culture—was dangerous. “I worked in secret. No one

ever caught me,” he says.

Dokle says that writing in Nashenski is only meant to preserve the language for scientific purposes—not to be read. “Many scientists have concluded that Gorani and Torbeshi are musical people with a musical culture. It’s true. At weddings, it doesn’t matter whether you have a nice voice or talent. Everyone sings,” he says. The oral tradition is so strong that he uses the words “poem” and “song” interchangeably.

We return to Kosovo to meet Braca Muska, the traditional

Gorani musical group newly popular in Breznitsa and across the Balkans, thanks to social media, digital audio and

Web sites. The road to their village of Restelica, in the southern tip of Gora, passes by the western slopes of the sharp and jagged Šar Mountains (pronounced *shar*). Many locals see the mountains as physically representing their spirit. Indeed, Kasi posts photographs of the Šar on Facebook from an endless variety of angles and seasons, as if they were members of his family.

“I want Pomaks, Gorani and Torbeshi to establish a cultural core so we can better develop our culture, songs and traditions,” Kasi says. “There was so little information before. Even I as a journalist didn’t know there were other people like us Torbeshi.”

The streets in Restelica are clean and steep. The exteriors of the houses look flawless, for Gorani have earned their livings abroad for decades in other former Yugoslav republics, Italy and Switzerland. Construction has replaced sheep herding as a traditional profession. Women in the street wear formal, long black satin coats as they visit friends before tomorrow’s Kurban Bayram, or Feast of the Sacrifice, known in Arabic as *‘Id al-Adha*.

Once a common tradition across the Balkans, the painting of a bride’s face and hands, including decorations in sequins and henna, occurs very rarely now, mostly in just three villages in Bulgaria. Even local historians are unsure of the custom’s origins.





“It’s a source of great happiness to maintain the traditions,” says Selma Shaipi as she shows a video of her own recent wedding. “At the same time, every year something new is thought up.”

At the home of Murat Muska, one of the three Muska brothers, the singer explains that their music sounds sad because it is realistic. “I live in Restelica, and yet I have no work here,” he says. “Our songs are about precisely this: the kind of life we live. Some are based on the memories of our people from the time we were shepherds. But the new songs are about more modern themes, like immigrant life in Italy or Switzerland and things like visas.”

Restelica is also home to Radio Bambus, the village station. While its FM signal only reaches about 15 kilometers (9 mi), it has been streamed on the Internet since 2009. Manager Nesim Hodja says the station often has 500 to 600 on-line listeners at any given time, many of them emigrants living in western Europe and other Balkan countries.

Hodja says the mission of the station is to help Nashentsi learn more about each other. The Internet offers easy connections never before possible among Balkan Muslims separated by borders and long distances. Hodja takes out his cell phone and plays a recording: It’s a broadcast phone call from a Pomak in Bulgaria who requested a song. “I have a huge collection of many varieties of Nashenski music now,” Hodja says. He adds that just as residents of Breznitsa make song requests for Braska Muska, here in Restelica locals continue to ask for the songs of Gaitani, who came here from Breznitsa last year.

When we arrive at Kasi’s house in Ljubinje at 6:30 a.m., the deep blue sky is just starting to lighten behind the peaks of the Šar Mountains. “We need to get there early to get a good spot,” he says, setting out for the local mosque.

The streets are crowded with men walking purposefully in the same direction. The mosque was built in 1979 in a Yugoslav futuristic style, looking as though it had been constructed by people who were quietly confident about the future. The main prayer area has



Gorani Kosovar women decorate their hands with henna designs for Kurban Bayram (Feast of the Sacrifice, or *‘Id al-Adha*).

sent its overflow of worshipers to adjoining hallways, upstairs balconies and a classroom, where “Happy Holiday” is written on a blackboard in Arabic, Turkish and Nashenski.

After the prayers, the men walk to the cemetery. Islamic traditions are such a basic part of life here that they seem to be practiced through instinct. Kasi kneels to pray silently by a simple concrete rectangle with grass on top: the grave of his grandmother and grandfather. Then he walks to the grave of his wife’s mother. “This is how we have always done it, for every Bayram,” he says.

After a large Bayram lunch, we visit the home of Selma Shaipi, a young bride. “It’s a source of great happiness to maintain the traditions,” Shaipi says as we watch a video of her wedding. “At the same time, every year something new is thought up.”



Social media connect more than Balkan villages, says émigré Ismailj Zulji, who makes photos for his family in Switzerland of the celebration he has helped sponsor in their home village of Nebregoste in Kosovo. “We even have marriages between Gorani in Gora and Gorani in Switzerland who met on the Internet,” he says.

Her wedding shows many of the same elements found in Bulgarian Pomak weddings: the cheiz of carpets, weavings and textiles stacked up high for public display; the zurnas and drums announcing the wedding; the gift economy of *chorapi*, or handmade woolen socks, which seem to be given in large quantities on every occasion; and the towels on the shoulders of male members of the wedding party, symbolizing hygiene in the new home.

Shaipi says there are “big differences” between her mother’s wedding and hers. Her mother, she says, rode on a horse, and everyone ate from the same dish, for example. While Shaipi wore her bright, colorful, traditional clothes during the pre-wedding ceremonies, she was married in a western-style white dress. Her mother was married while wearing her traditional *nosi*. “It’s a great thing to wear these beautiful clothes when you are so happy,” she says. The greatest difference is that her mother was married while painted—literally.

The ritual of bride-painting, in which the bride’s face and hands

are painted white and decorated with elaborate designs of brightly colored sequins and henna, used to be common among Muslims across the Balkans. Although the tradition dates back to the Ottoman era or earlier, its origins are uncertain. In Kosovo, only one elderly woman in a nearby village still practices the art; in Bulgaria, there are only three villages where brides may still on occasion be painted.

In the video, Shaipi is surrounded by female friends singing to her. The married women wear bright red-and-yellow traditional clothes, while the unmarried women wear white. Shaipi is crying loudly and genuinely because she will soon have to say goodbye to her family. Her sadness does not seem tempered by the fact that her new house—that of her husband and his family—is only about two minutes’ walk from her parents’ house.

Her girlfriends sing, “Until now you have listened to your mother. Now you will have to listen to your mother-in-law.”

“Does she listen?” I ask her mother-in-law, who is sitting across from her in the living room. “Yes, she listens,” she says, with equal measures of seriousness and pride.

“I listen,” Shaipi says playfully. “I have ears.”

Another important part of the Kurban Bayram celebration—the traditional sacrifice—is under way in the nearby village of Nebregoste, where houses seem to spill down the steep streets with the Šar Mountains towering in the background. There’s a lot of activity in the central square. About 30 men in camouflage and yellow rain suits, with knives, ropes and plastic bags, are getting organized. A large grill is being set up in the bus stop to cook the meat of seven bulls, donated by local Nashentsi émigrés in Switzerland.

The slaughter is efficient and according to Islamic principles. There are scales to weigh the meat and plastic bags to divide it for distribution among the poor. Soon a man is walking around offering freshly grilled kidneys on a cutting board.

Ismailj Zulji is framing the scene with his smartphone, sending live video to his family in Zurich. A general contractor, he is



Following a morning visit to pay respects at the graves of their forebears, which is part of the ritual of the Feast of the Sacrifice for Muslims worldwide, three generations of Torbeshi men return home, where food and family await.

nearing retirement, and he drives back to his village here several times a year. He helps raise funds for projects like fixing up the central square or buying cattle for the Bayram.

The Nashentsi community in Zurich is united and well organized, he says, normally gathering 1500 people for celebrations at a place called Sports Club Šar. “It’s important for our children to know as much as possible about our culture and to know where their roots are,” Zulji says. There are countless such Balkan diaspora communities, the first generation of which dates back to the socialist Yugoslav period.

While Zulji’s grandfathers herded flocks of sheep on Šar Mountain every summer and drove them down to the lowlands of Thessaloniki every winter, his children are educated and no longer have traditional professions. Social media, he believes, help them develop both personally and as a community. “My son reads about Pomaks in Bulgaria on the Internet,” he says.

The Internet has helped strengthen the connections. “Not only do

we have nonstop communication, but we even have marriages between Gorani in Gora and Gorani in Switzerland who met on the Internet,” he says. “Some children are so connected that it’s like they are here.”



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Islam in Bulgaria: M/J 94

Islam in Albania: J/A 92

# The CATALYST



Written by JULIET HIGHET

Photographs courtesy of ROSE ISSA PROJECTS

*"I'm interested in showing the concerns of our region—whether social, political or aesthetic. I am not interested in art that is simply well executed, without originality. That's valid, but life is short, and you have to choose what you want to represent. Art in our region is mainly inspired by personal experience, and it takes guts and talent to create stories that best reflect our artistic priorities. If they can touch someone else, bring something to the globe, that's enough for me.*

*I am a catalyst. That's what I do."*

ALEX MAGUIRE

Rose Issa is widely regarded as the leading mover and shaker in contemporary visual art and film from the Arab world and Iran, having built an international platform from her London base in the course of three decades. In 2005 she established Rose Issa Projects, which presents visual art and film, and publishes books and catalogues. Last year she expanded further to a new, larger London exhibition venue where “an ever more mobile society can interact with exceptional art in a space where something takes off,” she says. ¶ Of Lebanese-Iranian heritage, Rose was living in Paris in 1982 when she finished her master’s degree in Arab history and literature. She was unable to return to her home in Lebanon because of the long-running civil war. Art commentator Juliet Hight interviewed her in London.

**Juliet Hight** How did you get from student life in Paris to your position today as the doyenne of the London and global Arab contemporary art scene?

**Rose Issa** 1982 was the year Israel again invaded Lebanon. I felt I had to do something, and the only people I knew in Paris were filmmakers and artists—cultural activists. So I arranged a film festival about resistance and occupation, showing the work of regional cineastes. It was very well attended, making mainstream news, and I realized that nobody in Europe was representing contemporary Arab culture. I discovered that there was a growing awareness and need, which is why the Cannes Film Festival approached me for collaboration. I worked with them for several years.

Then in 1985, Dr. Mohammad Makiya, an Iraqi architect, came to Paris. Part-owner of Al Saqi Books in London, he invited me to launch a gallery in an adjoining space, as its artistic director. So I made London my home. I discovered a cosmopolitan group of westerners who were interested in the Middle East, as well as a large community of Arabs. The Kufa Gallery, as it was called, became such a leading cultural venue that it was clear that people were hungry for art from our region.

After two years, I thought that public institutions like the British Museum, the Barbican, Leighton House Museum and the National Film Theatre offered better platforms of exposure. I felt it was important to get them involved with our culture, specifically its contemporary aspect.

**JH** Since those years you have served as an advisor on Arab art to the Smithsonian Institution, the National Gallery of Jordan,



**Ayman Baalbaki, “Wake Up” (2012), installation, 170 x 110 x 80 cm.**

Rose Issa: “‘Wake Up’ is about constantly moving and changing.”  
**Baalbaki was born in southern Lebanon in 1975, at the outset of an uprooting 15 years of civil war. This installation of bundled belongings topped by a rooster is a “wake-up call about learning from what one loses and also about preparing the present for the future.”**

the Museum of Mankind and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, to name just a few. What did you learn from those experiences?

**RI** My first brush with public institutions was with the British Museum. I pointed out that their holdings of Arab and Islamic art were exclusively from the past. Why not update them with work by living artists for future generations? What was fantastic about

collaborating with inspired people like Venetia Porter [curator of Islamic and modern Middle Eastern art at the British Museum] was that they had the courage to understand this. Venetia had acquired works from me at the Kufa Gallery as early as 1987, many of which were shown in 2005 in the Museum's groundbreaking "Word Into Art" exhibition.

It was mainly after working with Tate Britain in connection with their Orientalist exhibition ["The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting"] in 2005 that I decided to get my own space, Rose Issa Projects. I was asked to curate a contemporary response to Orientalism. That project, although prestigious, was frustrating, taking two years and 10 meetings to finalize. I learned that I was spending too much time on what was, in the end, a small solo show. That year I did four exhibitions at Leighton House—a series called "This Is That Place," introducing the concept of what "the Orient" is now, which the Tate was addressing differently.

What I took away from the Tate experience was actually very useful, because I learned about the criteria of choice of western museums. They are not storage spaces; they invest money and effort in exhibitions. Like them, I have an agenda, and that includes ensuring there is a future for collections from promising artists. I ask myself whether these artists are investing in themselves, because I cannot be the only one to do so. How ambitious are they? How original is their work? Will they take it further? How much richer and more articulate is it becoming? Does it move me, shake me up? And not just me—does it speak to a wider audience?

**JH** You currently represent about 20 artists on a long-term basis and about 40 for projects. How do you choose them?

**RI** There's no formula—you see the work and you have to trust your eyes and your heart to gauge its aesthetic and human qualities. However, I would say that originality and poetry are the most significant factors for me.

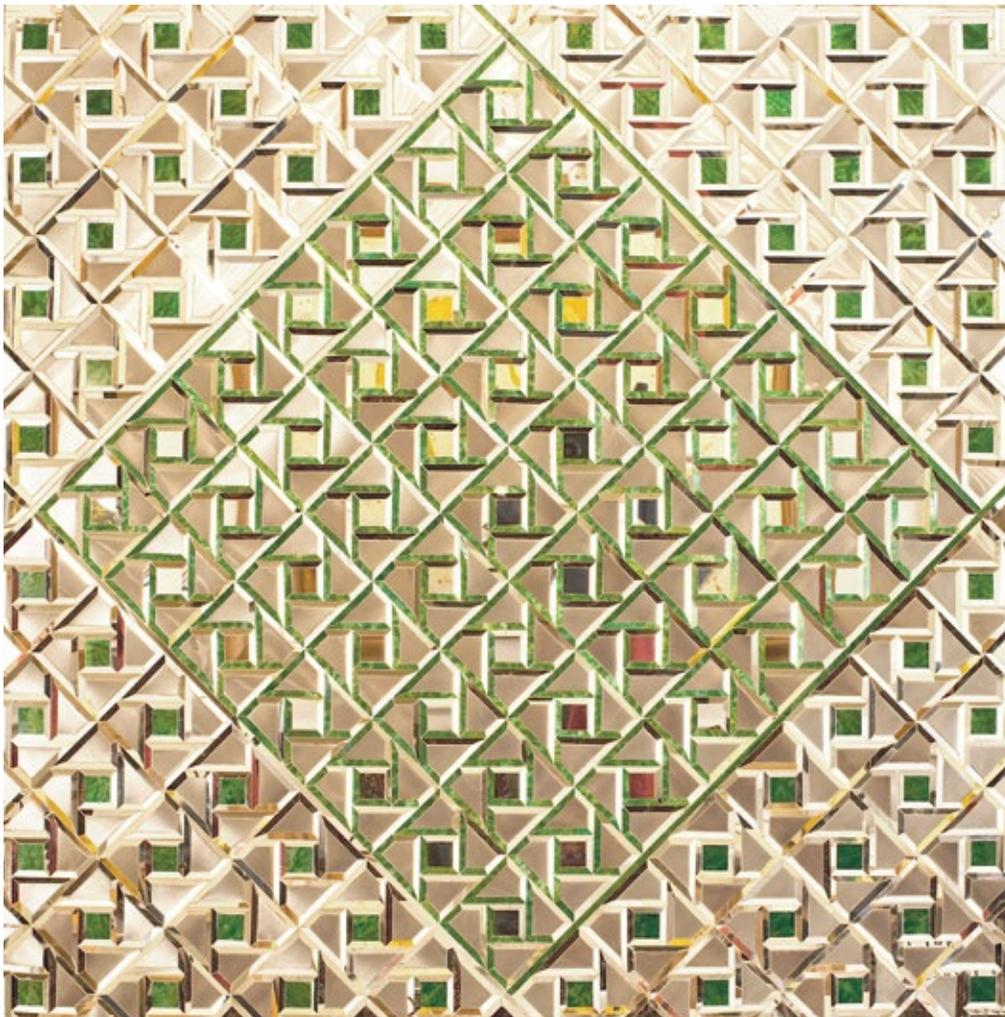
**JH** These days, what is it that distinguishes artists living in the Arab world or Iran from those outside? Does it matter anymore?

**RI** For those in the West, self-promotion is easier, especially if they've studied here. However, nobody wants to be labeled or "ghettoized." These artists don't want to be just "Arab," "Iranian" or "Middle Eastern." They don't represent governments. They want to be themselves.

**JH** Do you see yourself as a pioneer?

**RI** Well, I deal with living artists, and 30 years ago, few people in the West, if any, knew about Arab artists. So in 1987, when I organized the first Arab Film Festival at the National Film Theatre, I was asked to become their advisor. I got British TV stations to interview the directors, and I participated in television documentaries myself. Then in 1999, I arranged the biggest-ever festival of Iranian cinema, with a publication, and in 2001 the first exhibition of contemporary Iranian art at the Barbican, a high-profile event attended by the UK minister of culture. The Museum of Tehran lent us works for that—the first collaboration between two such public institutions. Earlier, at the Kufa Gallery, I had arranged the premier exhibition of Arab women artists in the UK. I'm always very aware of whether we have enough women in each show or publication in which I'm involved. Is it 50 percent? As a woman curator, their concerns are my concerns. But gender is not an issue as long as we respect each other.

**JH** What influence and contribution do you think you and Rose Issa Projects have made to the burgeoning of contemporary Arab and Iranian art?



*Monir Shahrudy Farmanfarmaian, "Geometry of Hope" (1975), mirror mosaic and reverse-glass painting, 128 x 128 cm. RI: "She created this at the height of her artistic career in pre-revolutionary Iran. This example is one of the few of her older creations to survive the revolution. It shows her mastery of the traditional techniques of mirror mosaic and reverse-glass painting. To these she added the modern industrial materials of aluminum and plastic, creating more lightweight artworks."*

**RI** I can't be the judge of that. Time will tell. But what I have done in the past 30 years is to give visibility to wonderful, virtually unknown artists. I can say that many of those who have high profiles today exhibited with me at some stage in London, and in most cases this was their first show outside their country of origin. I also encouraged British and American public institutions such as the British Museum, the [Smithsonian Institution's] Sackler Gallery, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan Museum of Art to acquire relevant works. In 1995, I had an exhibition of Chant Avedissian's work in London and the Smithsonian acquired almost the entire show. An influential exhibition I organized at the Barbican that same year, called "Signs, Traces & Calligraphy," really put me on the map as a curator. It traveled to the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, and then to the National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., which bought most of it. It was a key moment when the work of North African and Arab artists was being appreciated and purchased in the United States.

I started my own publishing house in 2005 because there is an acute shortage of written material about contemporary Arab/Iranian art and film. How can you do an M.A. or Ph.D. without source material? How can teachers help you or judge your work without it? Our new central London location [at 82 Great Portland Street] is already having a significant impact, as there are several art schools in the area whose students drop by the gallery. I give them publications for their libraries. Now the teachers are coming in! After decades under the radar in art and film books, we are producing many key texts. These include my books, exhibition catalogs from "Iranian Contemporary Art," "Iranian Photography Now," "Arab Photography Now" and "Signs, Traces & Calligraphy," as well as monographs on individual artists. In a sense, we are rewriting our own history.

**JH** How is the impact of your work unique, as compared to that of other art entrepreneurs in London or elsewhere?

**RI** The uniqueness comes from the fact that I speak both Arabic and Persian and that it was my passion that drove me at a time when no



**Rose with visitors at the Rose Issa Projects booth at Art Dubai, March, 2013. "My job is to promote artists, and their work is also me."**

one was promoting these artists in the West. Sometimes I feel like a prisoner of my passion, working 24/7! At the Kufa Gallery, we had such a tight budget that we just covered costs but couldn't produce catalogs. Later, members of the Africa '95 organization approached me, saying they knew nothing about North African art—they were more sub-Saharan specialists. So I co-organized a film festival season, exhibitions and publications. But they did not allocate any budget for these projects, so I raised the funds. Before I got my own space, I curated 20 shows at Leighton House Museum, for which we never asked a penny, and they never charged us. I arranged sponsorship for everything, including shipping costs and hosting the artists. Somehow, I've always managed to find just enough to make

things happen. I learned a lot from that process.

**JH** What do you tell people of Arab origin who aren't familiar with the art you exhibit to help them appreciate it and understand it?

**RI** I would say, "Look and 'iqra'"—"read," which is the first word of the Qur'an. Gain knowledge. Learn about the positive side of your culture. We've done and are doing so much. A lot of Arabs don't love themselves sufficiently. Love is about knowledge—the more you know, the more you love. Go to galleries and museums, and complain if there's not enough about our culture today. Governments shouldn't underestimate art. As to art education in our region, there's never enough. There are few courses teaching our own culture, and insufficient teachers qualified in it. But the situation is improving, as more books are being published, and more

scholars are invited from abroad to lecture and share their knowledge.

**JH** You have said, "We are all cultural nomads." How so?

**RI** It's impossible to be insular. We have to know about each other. Everything is interconnected with our chosen subject. Now everybody's a nomad—artists, curators or representatives of public institutions—we're all traveling and meeting halfway, in a space where something takes off.

*The fundamental for any artist is to be sincere, produce works that are truly unique, reflecting his own vision, his own concerns, be it aesthetic, philosophical or conceptual—a vision that opens minds, that can be shared, that can be reflected upon.*



Chant Avedissian, "Al-Watan al-Arabi" ("The Arab Nation") (2008), pigments and gum arabic on corrugated cardboard, 250 x 300 cm. RI: "The Egyptian artist captures the spirit of the Arab nation in this eponymic work that features Um Kulthum, whose songs from Cairo transfixed listeners from Morocco to Lebanon and beyond for decades until her death in 1975. This stencil also features Pharaonic, Islamic and socialist symbols, highlighting the multilayered history of his country and region."

**JH** You have also said that the hubs of global culture are shifting away from London, Paris and New York. Where are they going, and why? Is your success contributing to these shifts?

**RI** There are many more hubs now. Today it's Shanghai, Hong Kong, Dubai, Delhi and Brazil—maybe tomorrow South Africa. Art has to do with economics, and if that's where the burgeoning economies are, then those are the places where art will blossom. People are making money out of our contemporary art now, and there are many more auctions, fairs and biennales. Everybody is competing. In Dubai, several collectors have recently created their own public foundations, and more and more art spaces are opening. Let them compete—it's fantastic!

If I take any credit for the success of Rose Issa Projects, it's because I persevered and

believed in the work of these artists. So why not make it accessible to others? If it is beautifully and originally expressed, why not share it?

**JH** In describing artists working under cultural and political constraints, you've used the term "loophole language." What does it mean?

**RI** When I did the first festivals of Iranian art and film, I thought, "How can artists facing so many restrictions, so much censorship and with so little money create such wonderful art and films?"

For example, in Iranian films, a couple can't be seen kissing, but in a phone conversation, they can certainly say something. The best way to circumvent

*Beauty elevates.  
It makes us more  
generous to each other.*

ensorship is to learn how to express yourself despite the restrictions, to find a language that communicates with your public. These are the loopholes—expressing your concerns without hurting anyone, doing it gently, without aggression, so you can make people think.

**JH** If you had three wishes for the future of Arab art, what would they be?

**RI** Actually, I would like four wishes. The first is peace, in order for us to have museums, galleries, collectors and artists staying home. In Syria there were plans for two museums of contemporary art, but that's finished for the time being. Second, education. Knowledge makes people

**Artist Chant Avedissian used a photo of Rose Issa for this image titled "Forbidden City, China" (2000), made with pigments and gum arabic on corrugated cardboard, 50 x 70 cm.**



**Jowhara Al Sa'ud, "Butch" (2012), C-41 print mounted on aluminum, 122 x 152 cm. RI: "She represents a generation of Saudi artists in their 30's who have found their voice in an environment of traditional representational restrictions and lack of a well-developed fine-arts educational infrastructure. Made by drawing on a photographic negative, this image says, 'I can be feminine and, despite tradition, do jobs normally done by men.' But most of all, it is beautiful photography."**

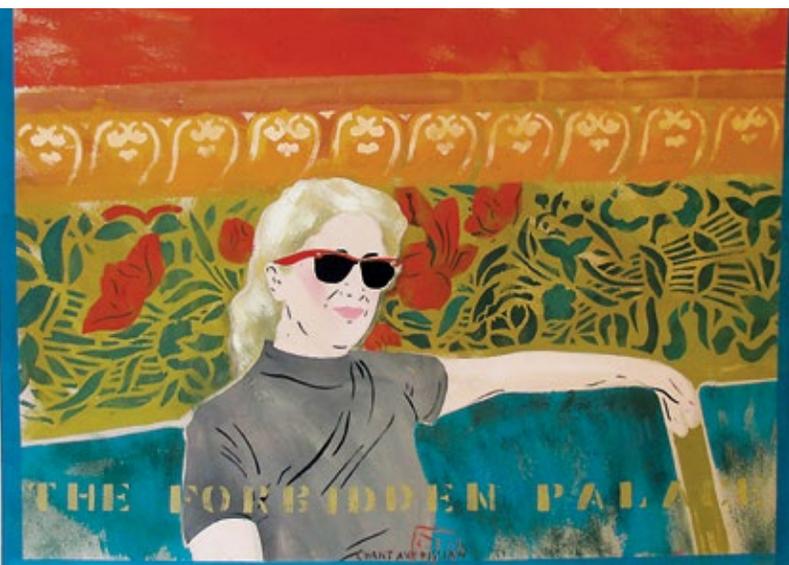
interested in art. Third, work, so that we have the economic means for more cultural life. Lastly, beauty. There are lots of artists who make ugly things to express themselves, but I'm not interested in that. There are enough ugly things in life. Beauty elevates. It's uplifting, and it makes us more generous to each other. The art I promote is about beauty, originality and justice—about contributing to a better world. 🌍



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Arab contemporary art: M/J 11  
Islamic art in London: M/J 9





**PART 4:**  
**Perils**

WRITTEN BY TIM MACKINTOSH-SMITH  
TITLE CALLIGRAPHY BY SORAYA SYED

This is the fourth of the author’s six collections of eclectic, occasionally irreverent, excerpts from the vast treasure-house of Arabic literature. In each, he samples and comments thematically, seeking that which is insightful, prescient or poignant, as well as the curious, mischievous or wisely satirical. Like that of the original authors, his goal, and ours, is to entertain, educate and enlighten.

—The Editors



**NEAR THE BEGINNING OF HIS BOOK**

of descriptive geography and adventure, *The Best of Divisions*, the 10th-century traveler al-Maqdisi listed some of the perils he had encountered in his 20 years of wanderings. These include getting lost in the desert and almost drowned at sea, escaping murderers and highwaymen, and losing his money and literally the shirt off his back. “What a difference there is,” he concluded, “between someone who compiles a book from hearsay in the comfort of his home, and someone who writes having experienced such difficulties.”

He is right, of course: Perils are good to write and read about only when they are over and done with, or have happened to

someone else. An almost exact contemporary of al-Maqdisi, the Iraqi judge al-Tanukhi, realized this and compiled a whole collection of supposedly true tales of remarkable escapes called *Relief After Distress*—and a very good read they are, too.

This miniature collection of perils, mostly from my library (one is from a beach in Oman, another from a *sug* in the Sahara), begins with some appropriately miniature dangers remembered by Ibn al-Hajj al-Numayri, a 14th-century judge and author of Granada. His judicial work took him on circuits of the rural areas of the Spanish sultanate, where he often had to share his accommodation with numerous small and unwelcome bedfellows. In one village, he recalled,

*Also called al-Muqaddasi. Both names show that he was a native of Jerusalem—in Arabic, al-Quds. Bayt al-Maqdis or al-Bayt al-Muqaddas.*

I was taken into a house with cramped passageways, as intensely dark as the blackest night, which brought to mind the grave and its terrors and banished memories of my loved ones. Or rather, it was worse than the grave, for it was full of fetid mud that stuck to me, and fleas like the seeds threshed from flax, and mosquitoes that pierced me all the while with their lances and were never satisfied till they’d drunk their fill, and bugs that fell on me like morning dew and marched over my mattress like an advancing enemy, and speckled snakes appearing from every hole in the wall, and vipers whose bite would make your flesh fall off, and the constant humming moan of the wind, and thieves who never ceased to terrify. In short, the only difference from being incarcerated in a prison cell was that they gave me a rug—and that had been in use so long that it was black.

*His varied output included works on comedy and sleep, and a dictionary of double entendre.*

*l.e., “sulfur” (why?). His Winter and Summer Journey describes travels through Egypt and Syria to Istanbul.*

But, as the Arabic saying goes, “Many a nuisance has its uses” (“Every cloud...”), and even fleas have their beneficial side—at least according to an unnamed poet quoted by the 17th-century traveler

and native of Madinah, Muhammad ibn ‘Abdallah al-Musawi, known as “Kibrit.” A literal translation shows how the verse depends entirely on a clever (or you might say awful) pun:

The pun works even better visually: short vowels and doubled consonants are not usually indicated in Arabic script, so *brghwth* and *br + ghwth* look identical on the page.

**D**o not hate the flea [*burguth*], for its name is *birr* [kindness] and *ghawth* [assistance] for you, if you only know: Its "kindness" is to suck corrupt blood, and the "assistance" is to wake you for the dawn [prayer].

As in law, so in poetry: The spirit is as important as the letter. Here is an attempt to catch that spirit in a non-literal translation. Having failed to

find suitable plays on the English word *flea*, I looked up the scientific name of the insect, and found it belongs to the order *Siphonaptera*:

**A**flea by any other name would drive you hopping mad,  
But call it "siphonapteran"—you'll see it's not all bad:  
It comes to *siphon* off bad blood that tends to cause us harm,  
And as a dawn-prayer wake-up there's no *apteran* alarm.

Perhaps the pun is indeed the lowest form of wit. It is certainly the lowest form of poetry. Some of the other verses on minor perils of the night

quoted by Kibrit do, however, hit a more elevated poetic note. This one is also unascribed.

**M**osquitoes quaffed my blood to an accompaniment  
Of all the themes and variations their choir sings.  
And for this diverse night-music their instrument  
Was *me*—a human violin with veins for strings.

Of course, the slow and dangerous business of travel was filled with many greater perils than insects, no travel more than the pilgrimage to Makkah. Ibn Jubayr of Valencia, who recounted his own 12th-century pilgrimage in what is perhaps the most brilliantly written

travel book in the language, described the crossing of Egypt's Eastern Desert to the port of 'Aydhah on the Red Sea. One arrives there, he said, "looking like a corpse resurrected from its shroud." But worse was to come on the sea crossing to Jiddah:

The *jalbah* was a medium-sized vessel used to carry goods and passengers. The word is obscurely connected to the old English term "jolly-boat."

**T**he conduct of the people of 'Aydhah toward the pilgrims is governed by unholy laws. For they pack them into the *jalbahs* so tightly that they end up sitting on top of each other, and the boats resemble crowded chicken-coops. The reason for this is the shippers' greed for fares, which is such that the owner of a *jalbah* will aim to recoup the cost of his vessel in a single trip; after that, he cares nothing at all about what happens to the boat on later voyages. They say, "We'll look after our hulls, and the pilgrims can look after their souls," and this is a well-known proverb among them.

Sea perils are, of course, more often natural than man-made. Here is one of the greatest Arabic descriptions of a storm—one experienced by the Algerian-born writer al-Maqqari on a voyage to Egypt

in the early 17th century. I have tried to catch something of the flavor of the original rhyming prose:

Felicitously, the word for "swell"—here *hawl*—more usually means "terror," as in Abu 'l-Hawl, "the Father of Terror," the Arabic name of the Sphinx.

**W**hat with the din of storms and waters, we abandoned hope of getting out alive and well—// may God give neither life nor succor to that fearful swell! // The waves applauded when they heard the voices of the winds, and raved, and came to blows, // as if they'd drunk a draft that sent them into frenzy's throes—// now far, now near they rose, // waves in squads at odds with one another, // clapping and slapping, dashing and clashing with one another, // until you'd think the hands of the air // had grabbed them by the hair // and dragged them from their deepest lair, // and you'd all but see the bed of the sea between those waves laid bare, // and their crests flying high to wrest the clouds from the sky in their snare, // till fear and illness made each soul confront destruction's stare, // and all resolve threatened to dissolve in despair, // and imagination conjured up the worst that could be feared, // as death in every shape before our

700 years later, dhow skippers on the Red Sea crossing were still unscrupulous in their dealings with pilgrims. "Only too often," recalled Laurence Grafftey-Smith, a British diplomat in Jiddah in the 1920's, "the skipper would land them in the wilds, a hundred miles and more south of Jiddah, and leave them to die there, telling them that Jiddah was but a mile or two away." I too have heard horror stories about the crossing, from Somali refugees in Yemen.

eyes appeared, // and the sails barged in pell-mell to brave  
// the armies of the swell that charged us, wave on wave, //  
while there we sat, each one of us, storm-sick, // and helpless  
as a tick upon a stick.

Al-Maqqari would no doubt have been comforted by the following prayer. I came across it en route to the Kuria Muria Islands,

off the southern coast of Oman. It was carved on the stern of an old wooden sailing vessel, beached at the small port of Sad'h.

*A strange echo, across seas and centuries, of the last sentence of that passage from Ibn Jubayr, above.*

**I**n the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful  
O Protector of souls in hulls  
O Savior of hulls in the fathomless sea  
Protect for us this *sambuq* called *Al-Dhib*  
O God, O Sustainer, O God, O Protector

*The sambuq is the later equivalent of the jalbah. Al-Dhib means "the Wolf."*

Turning to the perils of travel in general, they are neatly summed up in a verse I heard recited while stuck in a market in Mauritania.

*The poem, attributed (I later discovered) to the 11th-century Andalusian scholar and traveler Abu Bakr al-Tartushi, is a parody of a famous verse listing five benefits of travel.*

**D**on't ever go a-roving, O my friend, if you'd  
Escape the seven circles of the traveler's hell.  
The first's a haunt of homesick thoughts and solitude,  
The second's where your fears for far-off family dwell.  
The third's a den of thieves, the fourth's the latitude  
Where rogues rip off an unsuspecting clientele.  
Then come the hells of lonely nights and nasty food.  
The last, and worst: the Hades of the Bad Hotel.

*The inscription was dated 5 Rajab 1371 (March 31, 1952). Later, by one of those beautiful coincidences of travel, I stayed with the grandson of the Wolf's owner: the owner's son—my host's father—had done the calligraphy for the prayer. The Wolf, I learned, had carried frankincense to Aden, Basrah and India, and dried shark to East Africa.*

Let us return now to seemingly minor perils that had major consequences. The first comes from the *Short History of Abu 'l-Fida*, ruler of Hamah in Syria, and recounts the story of the death in

1277 in Damascus of al-Malik al-Zahir Baybars, the celebrated Mamluk sultan of Egypt and Syria.

*The Ayyubids were the former rulers of the region.*

**A**mong the various accounts of his death, the following story was told. A total eclipse of the moon occurred, and rumors spread among the populace that this presaged the death of a man of very great rank. Hearing this, al-Malik al-Zahir decided to make sure someone else fulfilled this prediction. So he summoned a scion of the Ayyubid dynasty called al-Malik al-Qahir ... having first had some poisoned *qumizz* prepared. The sultan told the cup-bearer to pour some of this out for al-Malik al-Qahir. He did so, and the the Ayyubid drank some of it. No sooner had his guest drunk than al-Malik al-Zahir, in a moment of forgetfulness, took a swig from the same glass. Al-Malik al-Qahir died immediately. As for al-Malik al-Zahir, he fell ill with a burning fever and expired later.

*Qumizz (English "kumiss"), a drink made from fermented mare's milk, was a favorite of the Turkic peoples from whom Baybars and the other early Mamluks descended.*

*Other accounts attribute the sultan's death to natural causes or to a wound received in battle. However, Abu 'l-Fida is not alone in giving this more lurid version.*

*The earliest and most notorious of such assassinations in Arabic literature was that of the poet Imru' al-Qays in about 540 CE: He was supposedly killed by a poisoned shirt. Less well known, but equally ingenious, was an assassination in Tunis mentioned by al-Maqdisi—by means of poisoned toothpaste! (Was the poison in the stripes?)*

It could of course be argued that the story illustrates a number of other perils—those of believing in superstitious *suq* gossip, of sharing tableware and, not least, those of abusing the rules of hospitality by murdering your guests.

The dangers of frequenting the courts of autocrats are well documented. As one poet said, the three greatest perils are “seas,

sultans and the march of Time.” In the case of sultans, apparently minor slips of etiquette could prove perilous, if not fatal. The 14th-century encyclopedist al-'Umari, for example, says that at the West African court of the emperor of Mali, sneezing was one of the biggest social gaffes:

**I**f one of the courtiers suddenly feels the need to sneeze, he will throw himself on the floor and sneeze in such a way that no one is aware of it. As for the emperor, if he should sneeze, then all those present hit their chests with their hands.

The consequences of a standing sneeze are not spelled out. But al-Qalqashandi, a later encyclopedist, noted the penalty for a different breach of

court manners—forgetting to take off your footwear. If anyone walks into the emperor's court in sandals, he says,

he is killed without mercy, regardless of whether his error was intentional or not.

According to the 12th-century geographer al-Idrisi, the female rulers of the Indian Ocean archipelago of the Maldives cracked down

on sandal-wearers in almost as draconian a fashion:

In these islands no one walks about in sandals, with the single exception of the queen. And if they find out that someone else has worn sandals, his feet are cut off.

Visitors to the archipelago today may go shod with impunity. According to the Arabic History of the Maldives, the sandal ban was repealed by a 17th-century ruler.

Staying with rulers, but turning to the perils of linguistic misunderstandings, the following tale is told by the 13th-century

geographer Yaqut in his gazetteer entry for Zafar:

It was the seat of the kings of Himyar, and the origin of the saying, "When in Zafar, speak as the Himyaris do." According to al-Asma'i, an Arabic-speaking man arrived for an audience with one of the Himyari kings. The king, who happened to be up on a high roof terrace of his palace, said to the man, "Thib! [Jump!]" So the man jumped off and was smashed to pieces. At this, the king said, "We have none of that Arabickte here. When in Zafar, one must speak as the Himyaris do." In the Himyari tongue, thib means "be seated."

Now little more than a village in the central highlands of Yemen, Zafar is still littered with the ruins of its greatness in the early centuries of our era. The Himyaris, whose capital it was, spoke one of the ancient South Arabian languages, related to but distinct from the Arabic of central and northern Arabia.

A celebrated early Islamic antiquarian.

"Arabickte" is an attempt to imitate the king's quaint and antiquated-sounding rendering of the word-Arabiyyat for Arabiyyah.

As for the third of those great perils, the march of Time, even if its consequences are ultimately inescapable, some of them—like gray hair—may be overcome by artifice or wit. The following story is

told of Yahya ibn Hakam, a ninth-century Andalusian poet and diplomat who was nicknamed "the Gazelle" on account of his youthful good looks.

It happened that the Gazelle was sent on an embassy to the land of the Majus. At the time, he was approaching 50 years of age and quite gray-haired, although he was still completely fit and healthy. One day, the wife of the king asked him how old he was. Being in a playful mood, he told her he was 20. She said, "So what's with all this gray hair?" And he replied, "What's wrong with gray hair? Or don't you know that just because a young stallion's coat is gray it doesn't stop him siring foals?" The queen was delighted with this retort.

The Norsemen. It is unclear whether the anecdote is set in their native Scandinavia or in one of their overseas settlements—Dublin, for example.

By Ibn Dihya, a disgraced Andalusian judge who took to traveling and died in Cairo in 1235. Ibn Dihya's reputation as a historian is not high, but I like to think this anecdote is true.

This was clearly going too far. According to Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell, the age to be is 35: "London society is full of women of the very highest birth who have, of their own free choice, remained 35 for years."

Some of the perils of Time are, however, insuperable. Here is the nonagenarian 12th-century Syrian nobleman and warrior Usamah

ibn Munqidh reflecting in his memoirs on the effects of old age:

I wonder that my hand, too weak to hold a pen,  
Speared lions long ago in its young day;  
That when I walk with stick in hand the ground,  
Though solid, clings beneath my feet like clay.

Isma'il ibn al-Qasim al-Jarrar (748–828), is usually known by this nickname ("Father of Stupidity"). His surname, al-Jarrar, "the Jar-Seller," comes from his day job as a purveyor of pots. Fellow-poets, it is said, would come to his shop and use shards of broken crockery to jot down their latest gems.

As the poet Abu 'l-'Atahiyah is supposed to have said,

If only our young selves could visit us one day  
And see what Time has done to us when we are grey.



Even the best efforts at translation often entail some loss. However, the pleasing sound of the original Arabic title of this series, *Tarjuman al-Kunuz*, makes up for some of the literary shortfall when it becomes the syntactically accurate but less euphonious English "Interpreter of Treasures." *Tarjuman* is the root of the English word "dragoman," which refers to an interpreter serving in an official capacity. The full title echoes Ibn al-'Arabi's early-13th-century collection of poems, *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (Interpreter of Desires).



**Tim Mackintosh-Smith** (tim@mackintosh-smith.com) recently appeared in *Newsweek's* list of the top dozen travel writers of the last 100 years. Following his award-winning trilogy of travels in the footsteps of Ibn Battutah, he is working on a history, a thriller set in 14th-century Spain and the translation from Arabic of an early collection of travelers' accounts from around the Indian Ocean.

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# THE MAJLIS PAINTERS

WRITTEN BY ALIA YUNIS WITH HISHAM MORTADA  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY MANAL AL-DOWAYAN

AT THE ABHA PALACE HOTEL IN SAUDI ARABIA'S SOUTHWESTERN PROVINCE OF 'ASIR, A FLOOR-TO-CEILING PAINTING DOMINATES THE LOBBY. PATTERNED IN BRIGHT YELLOW, BLUE, PINK AND GREEN, IT IS CONSIDERED ONE OF THE FINAL WORKS OF FATIMA ABU GAHAS, THE LAST AND GREATEST OF 'ASIR'S BELOVED FEMALE MAJLIS PAINTERS. SHE DIED TWO YEARS AGO, BELIEVED TO HAVE BEEN CLOSE TO 100 YEARS OLD. ➔



As increasing numbers of tourists from other Gulf nations have joined those from inside the kingdom in recent years, 'Asir's population of about 1.5 million has begun to double in the summers. The visitors come to take in the province's cool mountain temperatures, spectacularly green parks and free-roaming wild baboons, and locals have become interested in sharing their colorful heritage with visitors. This especially includes the literally colorful work of its female *majlis* painters. The majlis (plural: *majalis*) is the "parlor" of a Saudi home, the room in which guests are received. In 'Asiri homes, as far back as living memory reaches, the majalis have traditionally been painted by women in a

**Corners, says artist Sharifa Mohammed Al-Mahdi, lend themselves to complex *nagash* designs such as this one at far left, which she painted in her home in the village of Rijal Alma'a, near Abha. Third-generation artist Fatima Faya painted this design, left. Traditionally, such designs were sketched by one woman and painted by others, making each one a social community project led by the main artist.**





Traditional stone-and-mud homes, once common in Rijal Alma'a and throughout the region, are now mostly dilapidated.

defined pattern of lines, branch-like figures, triangles and squares that wraps around the entire room. Within each square (called a *khatma*), the artist expressed her individuality in a miniature of sorts. The colors were always vivid and the patterns might be intricate or simple, but the wall paintings were a mark of pride for a woman in her house.

In the capital city of Abha and in 'Asir's villages, which are scattered from the mountains down to the plains near the Red Sea, simplified versions of the art, with its splashes of color, can be found on bridges, businesses, restaurant walls, residential buildings and furniture. 'Asiris have become so nostalgic about the women's art that imitations of it have made their way to the *suq*, where the basic designs are found on bowls, coffee pots, fire pits and other household items.

These products are a nontraditional interpretation of the paintings and are mass-produced, most often not by women or locals. But the 'Asiris are reclaiming the art in new ways. Halima bin Abdullah, known as Um Abdullah, is one of the key figures in this ad-hoc preservation movement. Now in her early 60's, she and her husband, Abu Abdullah, opened Al Shat Village Museum a few years ago: a recreated stone home near the remains of their family's traditional

lived in those homes, which included the painting of the majlis, disappeared as well.

Um Abdullah always remembered fondly the frescos in the old, crumbling village next door. Ten years ago, after raising 10 children, she decided to teach herself how to do the *nagash*, as the paintings are called in 'Asir. "I watched my mother when she did our majlis when I was a child," she recalls. "The triangles in the paintings with the little trees are called *banat* [girls], and she would name a triangle for each of us daughters, like all mothers did. It was fun."

"These unusual paintings are linked to the work of other women in the region by virtue of their purpose—to enhance interior spaces—and by the use of geometric patterns to create a narrative reflecting their lives," says Dr. Sharon Parker, an independent scholar and art historian who has spent decades studying Middle Eastern art.

"Squares, triangles and broken diagonal lines are found in Bedouin al-Sadu weaving; in Afghan, Baluchi, Bakhtiari and

Few old, traditional *nagash* paintings survive today. This one endures in an abandoned home in the village of Al-Shat.



other tribal rugs; and in tent wall hangings and small bags made by women to beautify their tents or to carry their belongings,” Parker explains. “The patterns on these household items denote the landscape and the plants and animals of the region these groups traveled through.

“Some of the large triangles represent mountains. Zigzag lines stand for water and also for lightning. Small triangles, especially when the widest area is at the top, are found in pre-Islamic representations of female figures. That the small triangles found in the wall paintings in ‘Asir are called *banat* may be a cultural remnant of a long-forgotten past.”

About 70 to 80 years ago, commercial paints began to arrive in the area. Before that, the colors had come from natural sources, and Um Abdullah enjoys using both media. She collects the earthier natural colors herself, picking up stones as she walks along the mountains with the grazing sheep. Then she experiments, crushing the rocks and mixing the dust to see what colors she gets. Red comes from the *meshiga* stone. Light brown comes from the sap of the *somgha* tree in the spring. The same tree in the summer and winter gives her a dark brown. The

grass the animals graze on provides her with the green she needs. Certain mountains have stones from which she can make a yellow-gold color.

“You could tell a family’s wealth by the paintings,” Um Abdullah says. “If they didn’t have much money, the wife could only paint the *motholath*,” the basic straight, simple lines, in patterns of three to six repetitions in red, green, yellow and brown.

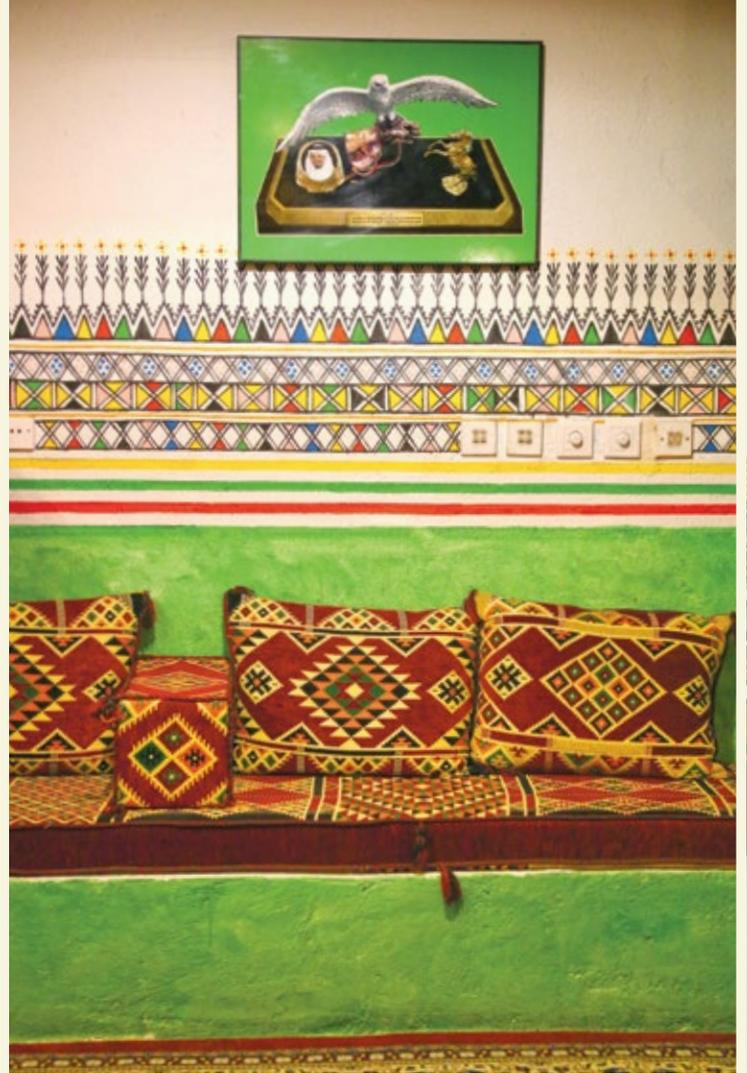
In the old village, the fading remnants of paintings can be found if you know which nook or cranny to crawl into, as Um Abdullah’s nephew Mohammad Tala does. “It’s sad we’ve lost all this,” he says, commenting on a fading, cracked painting he discovered on a stone house wall high up the mountain. “I had an aunt I loved, and it was only when she died that people started talking about her paintings and how beautiful they had been. I had no idea. For a long time we forgot these women’s work.”

The old painting he came across consisted mostly of greens and browns. The palette of colors available to artists expanded over the years, however. The color blue, which could not be created from the mountains’ bounty, came with commercial paint, for example.

“The traditional colors were black, white and red, but with

**Six years ago, Shahera Ali Al Sharif decided to paint her home in Musallem the way she remembered her mother and older relatives had done. A grandmother, she enlisted the help of her daughters, letting them fill the spaces between the black lines she sketched out. “I just felt like trying,” she says. “I tried to get as much from nature as I could.”**





**Left: A men's sitting room (*majlis*) is adorned by designs by Aisha Mohammed Al-Sughaiar, who was assisted in the work by some 25 women from Rijal Alma'a. Right: As Abha grows as a tourist attraction within Saudi Arabia, The Abha Museum of Heritage is decorated in local motifs and includes a restaurant with local dishes.**

increased trade, particularly with Aden in Yemen, the women could get more and more creative and proud of their work,” says Ali Ibrahim Maghawi, author of *Rojol, Memory of an Arab Village*. “And then the elaborate designs appeared, especially among upper-class women who had more time.”

Maghawi and his uncle Mohamed Mohamed Torshi Al Sagheer (better known as Aam Torshi)—both retired teachers—have dedicated much of their time to preserving their nearly 1000-year-old village of Rijal Alma'a as a tourist attraction. They have turned what is left of the abandoned, fortress-like stone compound into a museum with the addition of a recreated building. “This was a trading village. Every village had its purpose,” says Maghawi. “Now our purpose is to save our culture, and that includes the paintings.”

Climbing up the steep steps, through the low archways and along the village paths, we crossed the indented floors the women used to make by sweeping their hands across wet mud flooring to create a massaging surface for the feet. We found remnants of paintings that reflected the sophistication of each painter's household.

But Maghawi and his wife Fatima Faya have also worked to bring the art back to life. Fatima studied the art of the older generation and

developed a cooperative of about 20 women who learned and worked together on the paintings. Today, they paint canvases to hang on walls. Sometimes they paint the traditional metal plates that were strung together above the frescos as wind chimes.



**Um Abdullah, who painted this design in her home, remembers her mother painting their home: “The triangles in the paintings with the little trees are called *banat* [girls], and she would name a triangle for each of us daughters, like all mothers did. It was fun.”**



The men's sitting room was often the place where a woman painter sought to best showcase her skill. This elaborate design was produced by Fatima Abou Gahas, who also painted the large design in the Abha Palace Hotel, shown on page 25.

When someone tells Maghawi that the women should still be working on majalis, he disagrees. “We would rather have it so that everyone can see the paintings and buy the paintings,” he says. “It becomes a business this way, too, which is good for the women. This way the art survives. We are a more conservative society now than we were before, and it would not be possible for a woman to go to the houses of strangers today and paint their houses.”

Until 40 years ago, few women in Asir veiled, and painting other people's houses was the livelihood of some. Indeed, a legendary handful are remembered by name for their unique styles, but if any of their work remains today, it's only partially intact.

Um Abdullah remembers the old ways. “If a lady didn't know how to paint her own majlis, she would hire someone to do it by bartering,” she says. “Maybe for honey or *samma* [ghee].”

Fatima Abou Gahas, armed with brushes made of goat hair, was the only one of these famed painters who lived to paint the walls of a modern home, that of her son-in-law Aam Torshi and her daughter, Salha.

Fatima Abou Gahas's mother, Amna, had also been a well-known painter, but Fatima, who was widowed young and had four little children, actually had to paint for a living.

A few years before Fatima died, Aam Torshi

asked her to teach her art to several women of different ages. The venue? A workshop in which the women painted the majlis of the modest home where he had been born. He has now made Qasr Bader, as the home is called, a private museum, and he still locks the door with the original key, about the size of his forearm.

“She first drew with black paint to make the basic design, although





“The traditional colors were black, white and red, but with trade, particularly with Aden in Yemen, the women got more and more creative and proud of their work,” says Ali Ibrahim Maghawi, author of *Rojol, Memory of an Arab Village*. “And then the elaborate designs appeared, especially among upper-class women who had more time.” Today, the designs promote regional identity through items for sale to locals and, increasingly, Saudi and other tourists.

parallel lines separated by square miniatures. Almost two hours by car from Abha, the area’s adobe houses are well over 200 years old and still hold their ground, many of them in good condition. But the occupants have moved out, and the art is hard to find.

In Musallem, a village well off the main road, one house stands out. Six years ago, Shahera Ali Al Sharif decided to paint her home the way she remembered her mother and older relatives doing. A grandmother, she enlisted the help of her daughters, letting them fill in the black lines she sketched out. She also painted the ceilings the traditional white, using chalk mixed with salt and water. Painted lines on the deep steps lead visitors upstairs to the separate majalis for men and women. One has to bend over so as not to bump against the painted doorframe. Shahera serves coffee and dates to her guests and shrugs when asked why she did all this. “I just felt like trying,” she says of the brilliantly bright results. “I tried to get as much from nature as I could. For example, the browns are from rocks and the greens are from *qat* and other plants.”

on her own; unlike most, she didn’t need so many guidelines,” he says, noting that charcoal, rather than black paint, was used in the old days. “Then she put a black dot where color needed to go and the other women painted the color in. The women would come at around four p.m. and they would stay until the last call to prayer [in the early evening]. They finished in less than two weeks.”

Normally a majlis takes one to two months to do, depending on the detail. Salha grew up hearing her mother referred to as a “genius.” Sitting in the modern majlis her mother painted, Salha can only say that Fatima Abou Gahas’s creativity “came from God.”

“Her designs would just appear to her,” she recalls. “One time she was praying in my home, and afterwards she got up and told me that the prayer rug had given her an idea and she needed to borrow the rug.”

Down on the coastal plain, the Tihama, where it is some 10 degrees centigrade (20°F) hotter and far sunnier, the traditional homes were made of earth mixed with straw and water. Paintings in this part of ‘Asir are bolder, bigger and less detailed than their high-country counterparts, but they still follow the pattern of

**Um Abdullah at work.** In the old days, she says, “If a lady didn’t know how to paint her own majlis, she would hire someone to do it by bartering, maybe for honey or *samna* [ghee].”





Recently, men, too, have begun painting in the 'Asir region using the local motifs of colorful triangles and geometry. Ahmed Neyazi says his paintings, left, are inspired by both his grandmother's designs and "my own interpretation." Ibrahim Munather has painted the delicate designs above on an even more delicate object: eggshells.

its exteriors, it can host 30 artists at a time. Many of those artists, male and female, have incorporated elements of the women's art into their canvases—the pattern of the setting sun in one case and the fabric of a dress a figure wears in another. Artists and visitors to Al Muftaha frequently debate the origins of the paintings. Some say the influence is from Yemen and India, perhaps Africa. Some say it is completely organic and that the women's art was carried to Spain during the Arab conquest and went on to influence Latin America.

"Whereas patterns and color preferences may travel and be replicated by another group, the unique feature of the 'Asiri wall paintings is that they were traditionally designed and executed solely by women," says Sharon Parker. "The inside of 'Umayyad palaces in Cordova and Safavid palaces in Isfahan, family dwellings and official buildings from Spain to Asia were frequently embellished with frescos, tiles or painted wooden panels. But those were made by male workers and craftsmen. The women of 'Asir painted their own interiors." ☺

Flowers and branches make up part of the design. This differs from the mountain artwork, where no living things appear. In another contrast with the mountains, this house's exterior and windows and doors are also painted in primary colors and broad patterns. However, the exteriors of most adobe houses on the Tihama are simpler on the outside, maybe with just white, blue or yellow trim around the windows and a single band of color on the front, if any.

Shahera's daughters and granddaughters enjoyed the project, but have no painting ambitions of their own. "The art is something we study about in school," one of them said. "We have our own ideas for our houses."

However, all seem to agree that that modern decor doesn't have the complexity of the paintings, which offer constant entertainment and surprise as you explore each square's unique patterns.

The mountain region has made several efforts to build museums to recognize and showcase the paintings. However, little has been done in the lowlands. Schoolteacher Ali bin Saleh is trying to rectify that.

The adobe home he grew up in is now used to store grain, mostly the white corn for which the region is known, while his family lives next door in a modern house. But he takes pride in the paintings in the old home, done by his mother, and hopes to keep the house intact for future generations. "We're living somewhere between the past and the present," he says, standing next to a traditional outdoor oven, which the family still uses to bake bread, even though the house has a modern kitchen. "I take care of the old house and the paintings because I want to make sure our kids can see both the past and the future."

Back in Abha, Muftaha Village is the only government-funded artists' colony in Saudi Arabia. With plenty of simulated nagash on



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crafts: S/O 87  
baboons: N/D 12

# Voices OF Afghanistan

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED  
BY BANNING EYRE

When the six members of Voices of Afghanistan took the stage at Wheeler Auditorium on the UC Berkeley campus in early March, parallel worlds intersected.



classical ornamentation here, a hint of a rasp there, still conveys the urgency of a young girl eagerly embarking on a journey to fulfillment.

On stage, Mahwash is flanked by five instrumentalists. To her right, brothers Homayoun and Pervez Sakhi, on rubâb and *tula* (flute) respectively, sit cross-legged side by side. Homayoun Sakhi, the group's musical director, is young enough to be Mahwash's son. Trained in both classical and folkloric traditions by his music-master father, Ustad Ghulam Sakhi, he was a natural musician from childhood. Not satisfied with the limitations of his 2000-year-old instrument, he added melody strings to extend the rubâb's melodic range and developed original picking techniques that diversify its sonic possibilities—from the spitfire, percussive staccato of a banjo to the jangling overtones of a *santoor* hammered dulcimer. Sakhi also plays *tabla* (hand drums) and harmonium and sings beautifully, sometimes adding his velvet tenor to complement Mahwash's love-sick alto.

To Mahwash's left, on harmonium, sits Khalil Ragheb. His

Capable of unleashing "feral virtuosity," percussionist Kossimov mixes Afghan and Uzbek sounds with those of India, West Africa and jazz. His principal instrument is the *doyra*.



Since 1980, the San Francisco Bay Area has become home to the largest community of Afghan expatriates in the United States—some 120,000—most of them living in the East Bay community of Fremont. Tucked away in that tight immigrant enclave are some of the greatest exponents of Afghanistan's war-shattered art-music tradition. The principals in this group, legendary vocalist Ustad Farida Mahwash and Homayoun Sakhi, the young master of the double-chambered *rubâb* lute, enjoy iconic status among Afghans.

No surprise then that a large number of Bay Area Afghans have made their way through the unfamiliar maze of the Berkeley campus to attend the concert. The rest of the house consists mostly of uninitiated, culturally curious listeners. The Afghans witness a summit of star power rarely seen at their intra-community concerts, while the newcomers experience an irresistible seduction by the passion and virtuosity of Afghan music. That allure, and the confluence of these communities, goes to the heart of the group's mission: to give Americans a vision their country that is—to borrow a Berkeley phrase—based on love, not war.

"I am a messenger of love," says Mahwash with definitive simplicity. "Art generally, and singing especially: It's all love." Romantic classical songs, or *ghazals*, are Mahwash's specialty, and they dwell feverishly on the joy, frustration and heartbreak of people in love. Hearing her clear, supple voice tracing those wistfully meandering melodies, and seeing shadows of ephemeral emotion cross her transparent, world-weary face, you understand this right away; no translation of the songs' mostly Dari and Pashto lyrics is really needed. At 66 and elegantly attired, a jewel-studded heart of gold on the side of her nose, her black hair in a tight bun above her head, Mahwash cuts a figure of modest, matronly grace. But that liquid voice, gilded by



Performing in Berkeley on March 2, *Voices of Afghanistan* is, from left to right, Abbas Kossimov, Pervez Sakhi, Homayoun Sakhi, Ustad Farida Mahwash, Khalil Ragheb and Ezmarai Aref.

good looks—think a middle-aged Paul McCartney—believe his 16 years as a television presenter in Iran, a career he has revived during his 23 years in the Bay Area. Ragheb first played with Mahwash in 1977, when he was working with another iconic Afghan singer, Ahmad Zahir, who died in his prime in June 1979, when the country was in political turmoil. That event helped drive Ragheb into exile, more than a decade before Mahwash herself. So their reunion in this group has a depth of nostalgia that you feel in their ceremonious interactions.

Bookending the ensemble are the two percussionists, tabla player Ezmarai Aref and *doyra*, *daff* and *derbouka* virtuoso Abbas Kossimov. Kossimov is Uzbek, the only non-Afghan in the group, but his broad knowledge of Central Asian music more than qualifies him in this company. Furthermore, like Homayoun Sakhi, he is a phenomenon—a ferocious performer and brilliant innovator.

Kossimov’s principal instrument, the *doyra*, is a small frame drum lined with a curtain of 64 metal rings that can jingle together or slap against the inner wall of the instrument’s dried-skin face. However, he has extended its possibilities in every way imaginable, borrowing techniques, strokes and rhythms from Indian tabla, West African *djembe* and even jazz drummers. Today he has students around the world and tours with a variety of world-class artists, including Indian percussion colossus Zakir Hussain.

At one point in the *Voices of Afghanistan* program, the group departs from romantic ghazals and Afghan folk songs, and Homayoun Sakhi—accompanied by the two percussionists—plays a demanding classical *raga*. Ragas call on a player’s deep knowledge of melodic ornamentation, rhythmic structure and improvisational skill. Beginning slowly and alone, he explores the sonic possibilities of his instrument with deft slides and melodic flourishes. The *rubâb* is the ancestor of the *sarod*, one of the most popular instruments in North Indian classical music. But as this long piece unfolds, Sakhi displays unusual trademark techniques, such as striking the *rubâb*’s

15 sympathetic, or resonating, strings with his fingernails to produce chiming cascades of cyclic melody.

In the Berkeley concert, Homayoun engages in near-telepathic exchanges with the percussionists, particularly Kossimov. The two seem to share one mind as they shadow each other’s tricky improvised rhythms perfectly. Near the end of the raga, Kossimov cuts loose with a display of feral virtuosity. Teeth set and eyes gleaming, his fingers fly like mechanized hammers, and out of a torrent of beats a few announce themselves with the force of rifle shots. He plays two *doyras* at once, tosses one in the air and catches it within context of his phrase, and—in an almost carnivalesque flourish—spins his *doyra* on his finger like a dinner plate. The crowd rises with a collective roar of approval. Afterward, Kossimov, Homayoun and Aref come together again in a jaunty reiteration of the raga’s main theme, releasing the pressure, rocking with physical ease and smiling at one another like brothers in on a family joke.

The group then eases into one of Mahwash’s slowest and deepest ghazals, “*Ishq Mami Biya*” (You Are My Love and Soul). Mahwash’s voice, absent for a time, returns like a fresh breeze, the occasional break in it like a flaw in a diamond. The performance ends in a sustained standing ovation, an encore and another ovation. For *Voices of Afghanistan*, the intersecting worlds have joined; the group’s mission has been magnificently fulfilled.

Of course, none of this has come easily. Dawn Elder, who created this group with Mahwash and Homayoun, has made a career of bringing music from many corners of the world to international recognition. “Sharing music is the greatest gift one person can give to another,” she told me after two years of hard work on the project.



Originally a European musical invention, the hand-pumped organ known as the harmonium that Ragheb uses in *Voices of Afghanistan* has been part of classical ensembles in India and parts of Central Asia since the late 19th century.

“Voices of Afghanistan are an inspiration to me. They bring together incredible talent, a humble nature and a deep love for their country and culture. The world needs to hear this music.”

For the musicians, the hard work began many years earlier, when they chose to brave the stigma of pursuing an artistic career in a conservative and politically unstable society. Each of the Afghan members of Voices of Afghanistan followed his or her own path from Kabul to Peshawar, Pakistan—the destination for Afghan musicians driven from the capital by the many outbreaks of war since the Russian incursion of 1979—and ultimately California, the place they all now call home. But it was not until 2012, at Elder’s urging, that they came together as a formal group.

None of these musicians’ journeys has been more storied, or harrowing, than Mahwash’s. Today she lives with her husband, Farouq Naqshbandi, in a small house just off Fremont Boulevard. In the days before the Berkeley concert, they welcomed Elder and me into a home festooned with framed awards, posters and photographs with famous people—including Mahwash’s musical masters and her personal favorite, the late South African singer Miriam Makeba.

There were cases crowded with figurines of flowers, whirling dervishes, women singing and other whimsical fare. To tour Mahwash’s salon and dining room was to relive a career that spans four decades and five continents. As we sat down with green tea, almonds and

Far older are the hand drums called *tablas* and the stringed *rubāb*, which Homayoun Sakhi was taught to play by his master-musician father.



sweets, she returned to the beginning—the home in Kabul where she grew up listening to her mother recite the Qur’an and instinctively singing every beautiful melody she heard.

“My mother had a good voice,” Mahwash recalled. “I have this voice from her.” Just the same, the person most responsible for Mahwash’s successful career might actually be her husband, whose support has been courageous and unflagging. It’s also somewhat surprising, considering the couple’s beginnings. “Our marriage was not a love marriage,” noted Farouq. “It was an arranged marriage. We had not met face-to-face, only *heard* about each other.”

“One month later,” interjected Mahwash in her scant English, “I am Farouq’s fiancée. Three months, finished. We married.” Forty-eight years on, sitting in their sunny Fremont salon, Mahwash and Farouq are a picture of marital bliss. They were courtly and sweet with one another, and nearly every time Mahwash broke into song—as she often does—Farouq became enraptured, sometimes exclaiming that he was falling in love all over again.

“The first person who heard me singing was Ustad Khayal,” said Mahwash, describing the start of her career. (*Ustad* is an honorific meaning “master.”) Ustad Hafiz Ullah Khayal was a supervisor at the office where Mahwash worked as a secretary, but he also programmed music for Radio Kabul. Upon hearing this secretary sing, he was determined to get her on the air.

Mahwash told him this was impossible, saying, “My husband would kill me.” Not so, it turned out. Farouq recalled, “I said, ‘Okay, I agree.’ Of course, this was not easy for me. I would have to fight with my family, and fight with my in-laws’ family, but I took this responsibility.” Soon, Ustad Khayal gave Farida Gualili Ayoubi Naqshbandi the name by which she would always be known, Mahwash, meaning “like the moon.”

Fearful but excited, Mahwash made her radio debut in 1967, and soon her formal education in music began. A renowned Afghan singer, Ustad Hussain Khan Sarahang, heard her on the radio and invited her to study with him, which she did for two years. Sarahang had learned music from his father and traveled to India to study classical ragas. He returned an *ustad*, although, as Mahwash and Farouq recalled, he was known by more prosaic titles in Kharabat, Kabul’s musical neighborhood: “Mountain of Music; Crown of Music; Son of Music; Lion of Music; Father of Music.”





The members of Voices of Afghanistan came together in Fremont, California, having emigrated from Afghanistan via Peshawar, Pakistan, at different times. Above: Flautist Pervez Sakhi and videographer Saeed Ansari. Above right: Rubab virtuoso and cofounder Homayoun Sakhi. Right: In 1970, Farida Mahwash, lower left, was honored by master musicians in Kabul with a *gurmany*, a ceremony in which she was accepted as one of them by the master musicians of Afghanistan. Later, she had five daughters, and in 1989 she fled with her husband, Farouq, to Pakistan, and then to Fremont.



In Fremont, Mahwash showed us a black-and-white photograph from Kabul in 1975. She is sitting at the center of a festive informal gathering, her black hair in a tall bun, a coiled lock drooping down to caress the side of her face. She looks pleased. Everyone is smiling. At her side sits the era's preeminent tabla master, Hashim Chishti, who has just taken Mahwash on as his student. "In our musical culture, when you go to someone to learn music professionally, they hold a ceremony like this, kind of the official announcement," she explained. The image exudes casual camaraderie among male and female musicians.

"That was the golden time for all Afghans," Mahwash said wistfully. "Women and men worked shoulder to shoulder. Now, whenever you see Afghanistan on the TV, you see people in turbans or in uniform, with guns on their shoulders. When I see this, I am totally confused. I don't know where these people came from. I am so sad about what is going on in Afghanistan now...."

In 1977, Mahwash performed a song called "O'Bacha" (Hey, Boy), a playful jab at western influences in Afghan life, saying, in part, "Hey, boy, I don't want to do western dance with you. I don't want to dance cha cha cha with you. I want to dance Afghan style. I want to dance *balkh* and *logar*."

The song is complex, with many changes of raga and rhythm, "like seven songs in one," said Mahwash. Another singer had failed to master it after three months of practice, but Mahwash learned it in a day. The country's new president, Mohammed Daoud Khan,

took note of this performance and called together some of the country's most powerful culture brokers to discuss it. "They spoke among themselves," recalled Mahwash, "and they approved that I should receive this title: *ustad*." She was the first, and is still the only, woman in Afghanistan to receive the honor.

Mahwash's golden era of artistic openness, with its concert-hall tours around the country and region, came to an abrupt end when Russian tanks rolled into Afghanistan late in 1979. The new regime purged the radio staff, and Mahwash was one of 13 singers summarily dismissed. She was forced to take a job as a typist at the Central Bank of Afghanistan. But two years later, new management at the national radio shifted the politics once again and Mahwash was invited back. She spent the next eight years as an official singer of the state, performing for visiting dignitaries, and touring Eastern bloc nations—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany—with an ensemble of Afghan musicians.

"Of course, I was thinking about our people, the problems of the people, especially in far villages," she recalled. "They didn't know about politicians, the war, communists and capitalists. So when I was traveling

through the Russian bloc to do concerts, I focused only on culture, on my art and songs.” But in 1989, the *mujahideen* resistance was gaining ground on the Russian regime, and the fight came to Kabul.

“The mujahideen used to fire rockets into the cities,” Mahwash remembered. “One rocket hit near my house and near my daughter’s school. I went into a deep depression. We couldn’t handle it anymore. My husband arranged for the family to leave Afghanistan and go to Pakistan.”

This was no easy decision for Farouq, who had to move his wife and five daughters overland to Pakistan in the midst of war. But life in Kabul had become impossible. “That’s why we accepted this horror trip,” he recalled. “There were two choices, life or death. If you want to live, you have to try to move.” Their stay in Peshawar was a relatively brief 18 months. By then, one daughter had established herself in California, and so began the long sojourn in Fremont.

Homayoun Sakhi and his younger brother Pervez were reared in music from the start. Born in 1976 when Mahwash was already a star, Homayoun began beating out rhythms on a tin can as a child, and his maestro father knew right away he was looking at a prodigy. Ghulam Sakhi had been a student of his era’s towering rubâb player Ustad Mohammad Omar (d. 1980), heir to a musical lineage that went back to the 1860’s, when the ruler of Kabul, Amir Sher Ali Khan, brought classically trained musicians from India to perform at his court. They established Kharabat, the artistic neighborhood where the Sakhi family and so many other Afghan virtuosos honed their knowledge and skills. Kharabat’s fostering of Persian, Indian and Afghan musical ideas came together in a distinctive approach to the art of ghazal that became popular all around the country, and Kharabat’s percussionists, singers and rubâb players were legendary.

The rubâb itself is a classical instrument with a folkloric past. It originated in Central Asia and belongs to a family of double-chambered lutes that includes, among others, the Iranian *târ*, Tibetan *danyen* and Pamir rubâb. After the rise of Islam, the rubâb was used to play a devotional style of traditional Afghan music called *khanaqa*. The instrument then had four gut strings for melody and no sympathetic strings. Today it has three melody strings, made of nylon, and 14 or 15 sympathetic steel strings.

The rubâb’s heavy wooden body is constructed in three parts: a carved hull, faceboard and headstalk. Goatskin is stretched over the body’s open face, taut like a banjo, and the melody strings pass through a bridge made from a ram’s horn. The classical rubâb technique developed under the influence of Indian and Persian music is almost like



“I am a messenger of love,” says 66-year-old Mahwash. “Art generally, and singing especially: It’s all love.”

claw-hammer banjo picking, resulting in parallel melodies, incorporating both low and high drone tones interspersed with melody.

“When I was 10 years old,” recalled Sakhi, “I was practicing rubâb every day—eight hours, 10 hours, 12 hours. I learned everything, because I loved all kinds of music. I loved Pashtun music. I loved sitar music. I would listen, and I would say to my father, ‘I want to play this style.’ He would say, ‘Okay.’” Before long, the youngster was picking up ideas from local folklore, Persian classical styles, even guitar music, and developing spectacular technique, playing faster and harder than anyone else on the scene.

“This is an instrument that can play everything,” he told me with the air of an evangelist. “It’s not just for Afghanistan.” Indeed not. Sakhi has performed with the Kronos Quartet, the Berlin Philharmonic, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, jazz and pop musicians and, of course, many, many Indian and Afghan singers.

“Why not?” he asked, refusing to be pigeonholed, even when it comes to his own ethnic identity. The Sakhi family is Dari, but he would not tell me as much. “I am Afghan,” he insisted. “I’m not talking about Pashtun, Dari, Tajik. I am just Afghan.”

In September 2012, Voices of Afghanistan spent four days in residence at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, the first American university to offer a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology. Mark Slobin, a professor there since 1971, is one of just three scholars to have made an extensive study of Afghan music before the country was consumed by war.

Slobin impressed the Afghan musicians with images, video clips, recordings and instruments from a time before the younger players were born. He brought Sakhi to Wesleyan’s climate-controlled instrument museum and pulled out a rubâb that had been donated to the university. Sakhi was awed by this specimen and treated Slobin to a detailed



analysis of the various repairs and decorations it had undergone over the years—a history only an expert eye could decipher. Sakhi said the instrument dated from the late 19th century, far earlier than Slobin had imagined.

On the eve of the Berkeley concert, Voices of Afghanistan gathered in the living room of the small, modern home Homayoun and Pervez Sakhi share in Fremont. Homayoun came straight from the airport, flying from India to Dubai to Frankfurt to San Francisco, and was exhausted. This did not stop him from running an efficient rehearsal, refining unison melodic passages, reaching over to adjust accompaniments on Khalil Ragheb's harmonium, tapping out rhythms for the percussionists on the face of his rubâb and, on occasion, gently directing Mahwash herself. These musicians were easy with each other, highly professional and at home in their California milieu.

"Our community is here," explained Farouq, "our mosques, our wedding salons, offices helping people with immigration, green cards, citizenships, markets selling Afghan food..." Even the town's surrounding hills, though minute by Afghan standards and always green, provide a distinct reminder of the majestic peaks that flank Kabul. Elder and I experienced all this when Mahwash, Farouq, Homayoun and Aref escorted us around Little Kabul.

We perused Afghan carpets at a showroom in a small roadside mall; the proprietor, thrilled by the visit, agreed to lend five carpets to adorn the stage at the Berkeley concert. We browsed the Zam Zam and Little Kabul markets, which sell imported rice, sauces and saffron from Herat, as well as kites, traditional clothing and jewelry and, of course, CDs and DVDs of Afghan music and film.

There are five Afghan television stations in California, available along with a variety of Central Asian media via satellite. One of those stations was showing an Afghan drama, with the sound

Having performed around the world with classical, jazz and pop ensembles, Homayoun and others in the group visit schools both in the US and in Afghanistan, below.

*As a young woman, Mahwash chose to pursue music. It was the Afghan context that made her choice revolutionary.*

turned down, at the Maiwand Kabob House and Bakery, where we feasted on *buloni*—fried flatbread stuffed with either greens or potatoes—lamb, rice, *kofta* and green tea. All delicious!

As we ate, Elder quizzed Mahwash about her visits to Afghanistan, where she's returned to perform five times since 2007. Does she see herself as a model for young Afghan women who might aspire to become singers? Mahwash considered this, and firmly said no. "Things have changed. When I was a singer in Afghanistan, I was so modest," Mahwash said.

Mahwash lamented the way young women in today's Afghan music, mostly in diaspora, lack serious training or knowledge of tradition. "What about your daughters?" Elder pressed. "If one of them wanted to be a musician or a singer, would she have your support?"

"No," said Mahwash in English. "No music. It's too hard a life. Women are not respected for their work." When she was a young woman, Mahwash chose to pursue music; her goal was not to overturn the social order. It was the Afghan context that made her choice revolutionary. Yet even as she hesitated to recommend this life, Mahwash does dream of establishing a school for girls in Afghanistan—a place to learn music, not celebrity.

When they return to Kabul now, Farouq and Mahwash said the strongest emotion they feel is missing Fremont. Mahwash's commitment to Voices of Afghanistan is not premised on any illusion of great commercial success; she might do just as well playing at upscale events for Afghan expatriates. Rather, it has to do with a desire to give something back to America for receiving her family and community with such generosity and ease, and for trying to help her deeply troubled homeland.

"I feel so sorry about what has happened in Afghanistan," said Mahwash, "and especially for those who lost their lives and their loved ones there. God is the God of all human beings, not just Muslims. So I pray for everybody."

As they returned to the studio with Elder to finish work on their first ensemble recording, *Love Songs for Humanity* (due out in 2013), the musicians of Voices for Afghanistan all expressed variations of this sentiment. Their art ensures that they remain deeply attuned to their ancestral pasts. It also affords them a powerful vehicle for connecting with so many strangers whom fate has made their neighbors. ☉



**Banning Eyre** is an author, guitarist, radio producer, journalist and senior editor at Afropop.org. His work with Public Radio International's *Afropop Worldwide* has taken him to more than a dozen African countries to research local music. He comments on world music for NPR's *All Things Considered*, and he recently completed a series on music and history in Egypt for *Afropop Worldwide*.



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# POLO

## GAME OF KINGS

WRITTEN BY GAIL SIMMONS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY CELIA PETERSON

“Let other people play at other things.  
The king of games is still the game of kings.”



Left: Resembling polo players depicted both in 18th-century India (lower left) and in 15th-century Iran (right), two contenders face off on a grass pitch during the competition for the 2013 Dubai Gold Cup. Polo came to the West in the 19th century with British colonial troops, who found it popular in northwestern India.

A balmy March wind blows off the Arabian Gulf and ripples through palms framing the verdant playing field of the Dubai Polo & Equestrian Club. On the far side of this smooth rectangle of grass, glossy black Aston-Martins and gleaming white Bentleys park, while American-style cheerleaders flounce to the beat of a Michael Jackson song. Men in crisp, pressed *thobes* and mirrored shades mingle with ladies teetering on high heels and families sitting down to picnic lunches. Around me I hear a mélange of English, Spanish and Arabic; behind me, in the corrals, the ponies whinny and stamp.

Then there's a rumble of hooves as the match gets under way, followed by the sharp thwack of a wooden mallet as it strikes the ball. After a

few hard-riding minutes, the first chukka is over and the horses canter off the pitch, snorting, pumped up and foaming with sweat. After a quick change of mount, the players, dazzling in pristine white jeans and polo shirts in primary colors, are off again. Even if, like me, you don't quite understand the rules of the game, it's a truly exciting spectacle.

The typical polo match comprises at least four chukkas of seven minutes, and each of the four players on the two sides will need a fresh horse for every chukka. But this is no average match: This is the 2013 Dubai Gold Cup, a major event on the global polo calendar since its inception in the United Arab Emirates in 2010. As businessman Amr Zedan tells me—he is both patron of and player on the Zedan Polo Team competing here today—"Back in 2010 there was barely an event

here. Now the Dubai Gold Cup really puts the UAE on the polo map." As elsewhere across the globe, polo is primarily a pro-amateur sport here, with each of the teams supported by wealthy amateur players who pay their professional teammates, and the tournaments are heavily sponsored.

International polo tournaments may be a fairly recent UAE import, but it is in present-day Iran, only 200 kilometers (125 mi) away across the Strait of Hormuz, that the game is thought to have been invented at least 2500 years ago. The prevailing theory has it that polo, or *chogân*, as it is known in Farsi, originated among the Aryan (Iranian) tribes of Central Asia, with the first recorded public match taking place around 600 BCE, when the Persians took on the Turkomans and lost. And certainly it's in Persian art and literature that we find the most evocative accounts of polo dating from this period and on to its heyday in the Middle Ages.

In his epic *Shahnama* (*Book of Kings*), the 10th-century poet Abul-Qasim Firdowsi gives several descriptions of polo; in each case the game is cited to demonstrate the horsemanship and valor of the player. Firdowsi's near contemporary, Mantiqi Razi, wrote these lines, quoted by George Morrison in his *History of Persian Literature*:

Is the moon ill perhaps tonight?  
She looks so thin that she could cry.  
A silver shield before, but now  
A polo-stick across the sky....

A century later, also according to Morrison, the *Qabusnama*, written by an amir of the Ziyarid dynasty for his son Gilanshah, offers advice on such weighty matters as "eating, drinking, playing polo, buying slaves, medicine, poetry, generalship, love, marriage, musicianship and many more." But perhaps the most famous Persian writer on polo, as on other more profound subjects, was the 11th- and 12th-century poet, astronomer and

**The oldest record of polo comes from an Iranian account dating near 600 BCE. That is some 2000 years before this miniature, left, was painted in the 1440's for the *Shahnama* of Firdowsi. It shows the legendary character Gushtap playing polo against Caesar in one of several allegorical sporting contests.**



mathematician Omar Khayyam, whose *Rubaiyat* contains a verse rendered like this in Edward FitzGerald's classic 19th-century translation, written before polo was familiar in England:

The Ball no Question makes of Ayes and Noes,  
But Right or Left, as strikes the Player, goes;  
And He that toss'd Thee down into the Field,  
He knows about it all—He knows—HE knows!

and like this in a modern rendition:

In the cosmic game of polo you are the ball.  
The mallet's left and right becomes your call.  
He who causes your movements, your rise and fall,  
He is the one, the only one, who knows it all.

For these Persian poets, polo is evidently more than just a game—it's an allegory for life itself. And it's not only in literature that such charming depictions of the sport are found. Many of the world's great libraries proudly display illustrated Persian manuscripts, and many of the miniatures show polo matches, some with royal participants and riveted spectators.

If, as it appears, polo had evolved into the sophisticated "game of kings" by the time it was patronized by the sovereigns of the Parthian Empire (247 BCE–244 CE), how did this apparently captivating arrangement of horse, mallet and ball start out? Dr. Abdelrahman Abbar, a lawyer and polo enthusiast from Saudi Arabia who has played with England's Prince Charles and has read widely on the subject, thinks he has an answer—and it's a pretty gruesome one. "Originally, when warriors from the Central Asian steppes went into battle, killing the enemy's general meant you

had won. There were no phones or Internet then, so they took the general's head and put it on a spike to show it off to the losing army. They would relay it on these spikes, and pick it up with the spikes when they dropped it. In peacetime, they practiced with the head of a goat or sheep."

It was in Gilgit, capital of present-day northern Baltistan, in the foothills of the Karakoram Mountains, that this brutally triumphal act of war evolved into something closer to the gentlemanly game we know today, continues Dr Abbar. "They had an area of land there, measuring around 150 meters by 100 meters (500' x 325'), and this became the pitch, the playing field. They would play a game with the head of a sheep or goat whereby whoever ended up with the head was the winner." The pitch Dr. Abbar refers to may even be the one near which is a plaque with the famous inscription, "Let other people play at other things. The king of games is still the game of kings." Polo is still played there to this day.

John Horswell is coach of the Habtoor Polo Team, also competing in the 2013 Dubai Gold Cup, and while he agrees about the birthplace of the game, he tells a slightly different version of the story. "Whether it was Chinese, Mongolian or Persian, the game came out of that region of the world," he says. "The oldest prints on polo show Mongolian women



**Above: Polo tires horses quickly, and advantage in the game can go to those who field enough mounts to change horses frequently between each match's four or more seven-minute periods, called *chukkas*. Left: Players for the Abu Dhabi Polo Team get ready for a match. Many top polo players today hail from Argentina, where the British introduced the sport in the late 19th century. "At that time, we had a lot of gauchos in Argentina," says Hugo Barabucci of the Ghantoot Racing & Polo Club. "We are born with horses." Opposite: A post-game shower helps keep horses healthy in Dubai's warm climate.**



Polo memorabilia fill a museum-like hall at the Desert Palm Polo Club, founded in 2006 by investor and polo enthusiast Ali Al-Bwardy.

playing polo with enemies' heads. The men were out at war, so to keep the women amused, they used to throw them the odd head."

Whether the heads used for polo were those of goats or generals, it's apparent that the sport's foundations are mercifully shrouded in the mists of time, and modern theories amount to little more than a blend of fact and fiction. Likewise, whether polo's birthplace was Persia or Pakistan, China or Tibet, Mongolia or Manipur, depends largely on whom you ask. In truth, it seems most likely that polo was a folk game that developed more or less concurrently in different regions of Central Asia, with local variations in "rules"—a loose term in this context. In some areas a headless goat carcass was used instead of a head, a distinction that then developed into

the fast and furious game of *buzkashi*—still played today in some areas of Central Asia.

What isn't in doubt is the game's rapid expansion, courtesy of the Mughal conquerors, across Central Asia as far as the Indian subcontinent where, by the 16th century, the Emperor Babur—himself an expert player—had established the game as a royal pastime. There's some evidence it had reached India even earlier: *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, published in 1881 by Sir William Wilson Hunter, records the death of Sultan Qutb-ud-Din Aibak in 1206 when his pony fell during a polo match.

By the seventh century, the game had spread along the Silk Roads to Japan from China, where a polo stick appeared on the royal coat of arms. It was in 10th-century China that the Emperor T'ai-Tsu, after a relative fell and died during a polo match, reputedly ordered the beheading of all the remaining players. In the other geographical direction, the game's popularity stretched as far west as Egypt, where Harun-al-Rashid was the first of the Abbasid caliphs to play the game, and to Byzantium, which saw the first recorded royal polo fatality in the late ninth century, when the Emperor Alexander supposedly died from exhaustion after a particularly arduous match.

Yet despite Crusader armies trampling all over the Levant between the 11th and 13th centuries, polo didn't reach Europe until six centuries later, when the British discovered the game in northeastern India. Nicholas Colquhoun-Denvers, chairman of England's venerable Ham Polo Club in Richmond, Surrey, takes up the story. "The game was played in Persia in antiquity, but modern polo originates in Manipur, near Burma," he says. "And this was thanks to a gentleman we call 'the godfather of polo,' Major General Joe Shearer, the assistant administrator in the region for



the British government. In his dispatches he mentioned a game they played there called *sagol kangjei*, and around 1860 a reporter from *The Field* magazine wrote an article about it.

Some British army officers stationed in Aldershot, Hampshire, read this, took some walking sticks and a billiard ball, mounted their chargers and tried it out. In those days most of the army was mounted, and they decided this was a great way to train the cavalry officers. Then, some 10 years later, the Hurlingham Rules were created, which we still use today. Polo is a great sporting success story for Britain, which exported it to perhaps 77 other countries around the world.”

Including, of course, its most famous home, Argentina, by which time the game was known by an Anglicized form of the Indian name for the wooden ball, *pulu*. In contrast to polo’s foggy ancient origins, most experts agree on how this modern spread happened.

In Dubai’s neighboring emirate, Abu Dhabi, is the Ghantoot Racing & Polo Club, which covers some 300 hectares (740 acres), its seven velvety-green pitches vibrant against the stark desert backdrop. Inside the clubhouse, all leather armchairs and wood paneling, I meet Hugo Barabucci, 45, an Argentinian polo player who has adopted this club and this country as his home. Over a cup of Arab coffee, he fills me in. “We’ve been playing polo in Argentina for more than 100 years, since the English came over to buy land and farm there. At that time we had a lot of gauchos in Argentina, from the pampas, and as we are born with horses it was not a difficult sport to pick up. This is why, in my opinion, we have the best polo players in the world. It’s part of our culture.”

Marco Focaccia, 35, polo manager at the Dubai Polo &

## Like the players themselves, many of today’s top polo ponies come from Argentina.

Equestrian Club—the host of the 2013 Gold Cup—is another Argentinian who has relocated to the UAE. He echoes Barabucci’s thoughts on how polo grew to be so popular in his homeland, adding, “When the

English came to Argentina in the 19th century, they brought their own thoroughbred horses with them to play the sport. Argentina is flat and ideal for the game, as you can improvise a polo field anywhere. Then, when the English thoroughbreds mixed with the Argentinian ponies, that helped improve the game further.”

So, it seems, the key to this long-running global saga lies with the horse. And perhaps the horse is also the reason polo has returned, full circle, to the part of the world where it began at least 2500 years ago. Santiago Torreguitar, polo manager at the Santa María Polo Club in Sotogrande, Spain, and series director of the Dubai Gold Cup, thinks so. “There is a culture of horses here, similar to Argentina. And this is a nice country to hold tournaments—you have the weather here, and money. Anything to do with horses requires some money.”

But polo in the UAE is a fairly recent phenomenon. It is businessman Humaid bin Draï who is generally credited with bringing polo here in 1974, when he established the Dubai Polo Club near al-Awir. And although he himself never played, all four of his sons do. The eldest, Saeed bin Draï, is now patron of the Bin Draï polo team, the first all-family squad in a sport still dominated by Argentinians, who make up three out of every four players in the UAE.

One of the native Emirati players is Nasser Mohammed Saif al-Dhaeri, 38, of the Ghantoot Racing & Polo Club. “I’ve been playing since 1997,” he tells me. “I rode horses when I was a boy

**Spectators watch from the shade of a tent at the Dubai Polo & Equestrian Club. Modern polo is played with four players to a team, and the rules of play are enforced by an umpire on the field.**





**Good cheer, fellowship and a handsome trophy are the rewards for 2013 champions Ghantoot Racing & Polo Club of Abu Dhabi.**

growing up on our farm. Shaykh Falah [bin Zayed Al Nayhan, brother of the president of the UAE] saw me and asked me to join his team. He sent me to London to learn to play, at Ham Polo Club, with the teacher Tim Healey.” Al-Dhaeri has also learned much from the Argentinians he’s played with—and against—in his years as a top competitor. “When they play polo in Argentina, they play from the heart, and there are so many good players that it’s hard even to touch the ball!” he adds.

For the players, at least, Argentina and the UAE seem a polo match made in heaven. But does the world-renowned Arabian horse fit into this latest chapter of the story? Dr Abdelrahman Abbar again provides enlightenment. “It’s true that Arabian horses have certain qualities—beauty, intelligence, endurance—and were famous as warhorses. But they are not suitable for the game of polo, which is more confined than the battlefield.”

So today’s “Emirati” polo ponies are mostly thoroughbreds—Anglo-Arabian fusions—imported from Argentina and valued chiefly for their speed, says Dr. Abbar. Hugo Barabucci agrees that the pure Arabian horse is unsuited to polo. “We tried many times to use pure Arabian horses, but they are too sensitive for polo, and not as strong as Argentinian ponies. So we are now breeding Argentinian horses here, too.”

One downside to polo in the UAE compared to Argentina, the UK or the US—the current top three polo-playing nations—Barabucci continues, is the expense of keeping horses, mostly due to the nature of the terrain. “In Argentina it’s cheap to keep horses. The terrain’s flat and the weather’s good,” explains Amr Zedan of the Zedan Polo Team. “And in both the UK and Argentina, there’s natural greenery that the horses can graze off-season, but here you have to keep them stabled, which is expensive. It can cost \$1000 per month to keep a horse in the UAE, whether it’s playing or not.” That cost is multiplied for elite players, who replace their fatigued mounts after every chukka and need a number of ponies to compete at the top level.

Despite the difficulties of the terrain, and the expense of the game here, polo’s evidently a sport that’s becoming increasingly popular—and not only with men. One notable female player is Shaykha Maitha bint Mohammed al-Maktoum, daughter of the prime minister of the UAE, a keen polo player who won the 2013 Cartier International Dubai Polo Challenge with her team, competing

alongside the men. Faris Al Yebhouni, patron and captain of the Abu Dhabi Polo Team, is not surprised the game is taking off in the UAE. Between practice chukkas, he explains why. “There are various reasons: The country’s very famous for the horse industry—racing, show-jumping, dressage—but polo gives you the additional excitement, the adrenaline charge. Polo is like a drug,” he argues. “And it’s a small world—you know everyone. With the increasing investment over the past few years, polo has a great future here.”

Timur Tezişler, who sits on the 2013 Dubai Gold Cup committee, agrees. “The thing about polo is that it’s a really exciting sport.

Anyone who comes along here can enjoy a

decent game. In this respect it’s totally different from horse racing, where you have to know lots about the horse and the form to really appreciate it.” As I discover myself, as I watch the final match of the Gold Cup back at the Dubai Polo & Equestrian Club, where Ghantoot and Habtoor are battling it out for the champion’s trophy. A horn blows to signal the end of the match, with the final score Ghantoot 14, Habtoor 6.

The sun is setting as the podium is prepared for the prize-giving, and long shadows thrown by the surrounding palms stretch across the now silent pitch. There’s no prize money at stake here: The tournament, hosted by the Al-Habtoor family, is held purely for sport, doubtless combined with the satisfaction of trouncing one’s rivals.

First the three runner-up teams come up to receive their prizes, the shaykhs in their shades, the players in their now-grubby white jeans. Even the best-playing pony wins a prize, looking rather overwhelmed as he comes up to receive it. Then, finally the winning team climbs the podium to a roar from the crowd and a lightning storm of flash bulbs. There may not be Champagne to spray over everyone, but that doesn’t seem to dampen anyone’s spirits this warm March evening. 🌍



Historian and travel writer **Gail Simmons** ([www.travelscribe.co.uk](http://www.travelscribe.co.uk)) surveyed historic buildings and led hikes in Italy and the Middle East before becoming a full-time travel writer for UK and international publications. She holds a master’s degree in medieval history from the University of York and is currently earning her Ph.D. She lives in Oxford, England.



**Celia Peterson** ([www.celiapeterson.com](http://www.celiapeterson.com)) has lived in Dubai for 10 years as a portrait, editorial and lifestyle photographer, and she recently expanded into filmmaking. Her favorite subjects are “compelling either for their quirkiness or because they highlight positive human stories.”



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Dubai: J/A 96, M/J 99, J/A 00, M/J 01, N/D 07, M/A 08  
Arabian horses: M/A 86, M/A 98, N/D 01, N/D 10



## FOR STUDENTS

We hope this two-page guide will help sharpen your reading skills and deepen your understanding of this issue's articles.

## FOR TEACHERS

We encourage reproduction and adaptation of these ideas, freely and without further permission from *Saudi Aramco World*, by teachers at any level, whether working in a classroom or through home study.

—THE EDITORS

## Curriculum Alignments

To see alignments with us national standards for all articles in this issue, click "Curriculum Alignments" at [www.saudiaramco-world.com](http://www.saudiaramco-world.com).

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## CLASS ACTIVITIES

This edition of *Saudi Aramco World* includes several articles about the arts—from the works of Arab artists collected and exhibited in galleries and museums, to the traditional Afghan music of a group of expatriates, to the paintings by 'Asiri women that once decorated the walls of their homes and now fill large canvases. All of the activities in this Classroom Guide, including the Visual Analysis activity, revolve around one theme: Defining Art.

### Theme: Defining Art

#### 1. How do different people define art?

Although lots of people make art and talk about art and show art, if you asked three of them what art is, you'd probably get three different answers. "Big deal," you might think. "Why does that matter?" After all, as the old saying goes, "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like." If you like it, who cares whether you call it art or something else? But it can matter a lot. As you'll see, how different people define art reflects what they value, and shapes what they do and why they do it. In these activities, you're going to look closely at how three different women think about art, what they do with it, and why.

Take out three pieces of paper. At the top of each, write the name of one of these three women: Ustad Farida Mahwash, Rose Issa, or Um Abdullah. As you work through the following questions about each woman, make notes on the appropriate piece of paper. This will help you organize the relevant points from the articles as well as your thoughts about them.

In "Voices of Afghanistan," vocalist Ustad Farida Mahwash states very clearly her defi-

nition of art. She says, "Art generally, and singing especially: it's all love." Write her words on your Mahwash page. Then think about what she means. To be sure, she is a little less direct in explaining that, but both she and writer Banning Eyre make statements from which you can infer her meaning. Read the article, and make notes on your page to help you clarify what Mahwash means about art being love.

Next, read "The Catalyst." Rose Issa, the woman interviewed in that article, doesn't create art, but she "represents" it—specifically the work of young Arab artists. That means that she shows their work, and encourages galleries and museums in the West to collect and exhibit it. You can get a sense of how she might define art by reading between the lines of her story. Here are a few questions to help you. What was the theme of Issa's first film festival? What inspired her to put it together? What does her reference to "loophole language" reveal about how she thinks of art's purpose? When you put together the answers to these questions, how do you think Issa would define art? You can also gain insight into how Issa defines art by looking at her actions. What does she do and expect others to do with the artwork she represents? What do those actions reveal about how she defines art? How does she explain the importance of the work she has done during her career? What value do you see in the work she does, and in the art she represents?

"The Majlis Painters" presents yet another view of what constitutes art. It describes the traditional designs that women of 'Asir painted on the walls in their homes. Um Abdullah, who used to watch her mother paint, decided to revive this type



## VISUAL ANALYSIS

Imagine someone reading *Saudi Aramco World*, and that reader gets to page 38. She looks at the top image and notes to herself, “There’s a photograph of a polo match. The photo gives me some information about what polo playing looks like.” She then looks at the image below it and thinks, “Here’s a work of art. I wonder if it’s an accurate depiction of a polo match. Polo must be pretty interesting to look at if artists make paintings of it.” Thinking about what you’ve read about Rose Issa and the majlis painters, write a response to that reader. Here are a few questions to get you started: Do you agree with how she has identified the two images? If so, why? If not, how would you identify them? Cite evidence from each of the two articles you read to support your response.



of painting. The following questions will help you tease out how Um Abdullah might define art, based on the type of painting she’s reviving. Why did her predecessors paint? On what type of surface did they paint? Why did they do so? What did their painting express? Who are the *majlis* painters today? Why are they painting the traditional designs? On what types of surfaces are they painting them? Why are they painting on those surfaces? How do you think women in the past would have defined their art? How do you think Um Abdullah and her peers today would define it?

### 2. Analyze similarities and differences in how different people define art.

Ustad Farida Mahwash, Rose Issa and Um Abdullah are dedicated to the arts from their native lands. Now that you’ve read and thought about the artwork that each of the three women is committed to, think about what they have in common and how they differ. Divide the class into groups of three for a role-play activity. Have one person in each trio take the role of Rose Issa, while the others take on the roles of Um Abdullah and Ustad

Farida Mahwash. Use the notes you have made about the woman you will represent to have a conversation among the three women. Start by having each woman explain to the others the type of creative work that interests her, and why. Go on to discuss the ways in which these artistic works are similar to each other and how they differ. What do you imagine Rose Issa would think about the ‘Asiri paintings? What makes you think so? What do you imagine Um Abdullah would think about the work in Issa’s gallery? What makes you think so? What would each think about Mahwash’s music? And what might she think about the art they create or champion? In a similar vein, talk about how each woman wants to share the work, with whom, and why and how she wants to do so. In what ways are their aims similar? In what ways are they different? See if the women have suggestions for each other.

### 3. What is necessary to create art?

At the end of her interview with Rose Issa, Juliet Hightet asks, “If you had three wishes for the future of Arab art, what would they be?” Issa answers with four wishes, which really express what she believes is necessary in order for art to exist. Add the four wishes to your Issa page. Then have the person playing Issa in the conversation explain to the other two women how each wish contributes to the future development and preservation of art. For the two people playing the other two women: You have learned a fair amount about what the woman you represent thinks about art. Based on what you know, how do you think she would respond to Issa’s four wishes? Which, if any, would she agree with? Why? Which, if any, would she disagree with or de-emphasize? Why? What might she add? How would her addition reflect her own values and beliefs about art? Share your thinking in the role play.

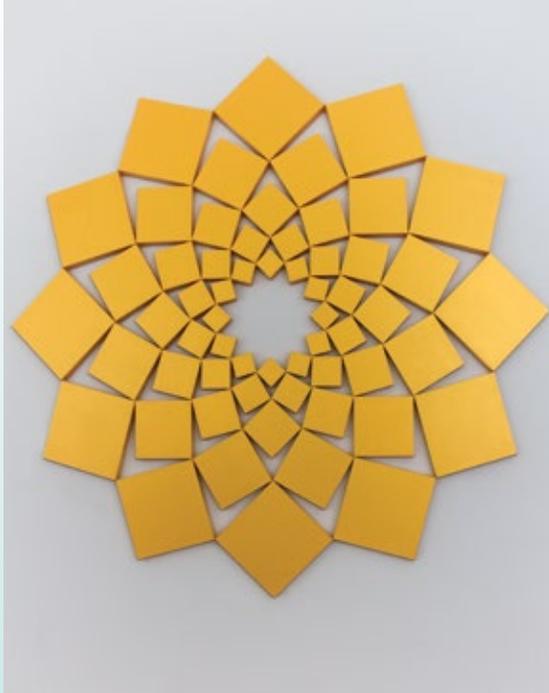
### 4. What do you like?

Finally, think about the examples of art associated with each woman, including the forms of that art and the ways in which it is shared with others. Does one art form move you more than the others? Do you feel more connected to one? If so, why? If, on your next vacation, you could visit Rose Issa’s gallery, or Abha, or hear Voices of Afghanistan perform—only one of the three—which would you choose and why? (Of course, you can always see/hear the other on a later holiday!) Write your thoughts in a journal entry.



### IF YOU ONLY HAVE 15 MINUTES...

Read “The Catalyst,” an interview with Rose Issa, whom interviewer Juliet Hightet describes as the “doyenne of the London and global Arab contemporary arts scene.” In it, Issa explains how she began her career and some of its high points. Write a résumé for Rose Issa, following these steps. First, list Issa’s professional activities and achievements, in chronological order as much as possible. Then study the list. What themes or patterns emerge? Use those themes as the organizing categories for the résumé. Under each theme, list the achievements or activities that show what Issa has done. When you’ve done that, step back. Write a headline for Rose Issa—a phrase or sentence to put under her name that sums up for a reader what makes her unique. Here’s an example of what a journalist’s résumé might say at the top: “Path-breaking, prize-winning reporter, writer, and editor with more than 20 years’ experience; author of five best-selling books.” Compare your résumé and headline with other students’ work.



Left: “Suida V: Iridescent Gold” (1998), acrylic on 60 canvases, 305 cm by 305 cm (120 x 120”); right: “Petra I: Copper” (Detail) (2011), acrylic on 30 canvases, 172 cm by 185 cm (68 x 73”).

**Found in Translation:** *The Art of Steven Naifeh* includes 26 large-scale works of modern art that reflect the artist’s personal preferences and attitudes about geometric abstraction, developed over the span of 40 years. His childhood in the Middle East educated his eye to the rigorous forms of Arab and Islamic art. Naifeh’s work represents universal harmony and attains this geometric symmetry with intellectual discipline, rigorous skill and authentic joy in the process of communication. Naifeh studied contemporary art with Sam Hunter, former curator of the Museum of Modern Art and the Jewish Museum, and Islamic art with Oleg Grabar and Cary Welch. He is co-author of the biography *Van Gogh: The Life*, one of the “best books” of 2011. This is the first retrospective museum exhibition of Naifeh’s paintings and sculpture. **Columbia [South Carolina] Museum of Art**, through September 1.

**Current July**

**Resplendent Dress From Southeastern Europe:** *A History in Layers* presents 57 beautiful 19th- to 20th-century women’s clothing ensembles from Macedonia, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro and neighboring countries—all formerly parts of the Ottoman Empire—and more than 100 additional individual items such as vests, aprons and jewelry. These colorful and intensively worked garments were often adorned with embroidery, lace, metal threads, coins, sequins, beads and—most important—fringe, which has been a marker of virginity in women’s dress for more than 20,000 years. By 1900, a southeast European village woman’s clothing and its historically accreted layers could be read at a glance, informing the viewer of her marital status, religion, wealth, textile skills and more—all part of her suitability as a bride. Fowler Museum at UCLA, **Los Angeles**, through July 14.

**New Blue and White.** From East Asia through the Persian and Arab lands and finally to Europe and the Americas, blue and white porcelain was a cultural marker of certain times and places, and is now one of the most recognized types of ceramic production worldwide. Today’s artists refer to those markers and continue the story, creating works that speak to contemporary ideas and issues, and working not only in ceramics but in glass, fiber and furniture. Museum of Fine Arts, **Boston**, through July 14.

**Darling Hair:** *Frivolity and Trophies* uses the hairdo and hair undone to explore intimacy, social signaling and self-definition. Hair is socially significant in almost every culture, whether hidden or displayed, often linked with intimacy, decency and sexuality, sometimes symbolizing masculine strength, sometimes femininity. Highly constructed, shaved off, colored, covered with ashes or clay, hair can have ceremonial functions and can express individuality or group adherence. The exhibition begins with rivalry among blond, dark or red hair and among straight, curly and frizzy, drawing on a wide range of classical paintings, sculptures and photographs; it continues through the notion of hair as a human

raw material, and closes with hair as a symbol of loss, of the passing of time, and of illness and death. Musée du Quai Branly, **Paris**, through July 14.

**A Chaque Stencil Une Revolution** is titled after a quotation from Yasser Arafat, referring to the power of carbon paper as a duplication technology that was central to the abilities of political groups of earlier generations to disseminate information and opinions. Moroccan-born artist Latifa Echakhch pays homage to the uprisings of the 60’s and 70’s, but her work also rings with melancholy as it links abstract art with politics. Hammer Gallery, UCLA, **Los Angeles**, through July 18.

**Birth of a Museum** is the first large-scale presentation of the collection of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, in the context of Jean Nouvel’s architectural vision. The exhibition unveils a selection of 130 works, most never before seen, and is based on artistic and esthetic themes that reveal the principles of the museum: universality, dialogue among artistic expressions of major civilizations and emphasis on the multidisciplinary nature of artistic creation. Mirroring the future museum, *Birth of a Museum* proposes a new and unique reflection on the history of art. The suggested dialogue between the Bactrian Princess, a Cypriot idol-statue and Yves Klein’s figural expression is a demonstration of key issues of human representation. Manarat al Saadiyat, **Abu Dhabi, UAE**, through July 20.

**The Shortest Distance Between Two Points** by Rayyane Tabet. Sfeir-Semler Gallery, **Beirut**, through July 20.

**Cairo to Constantinople:** *Early Photographs of the Middle East.* In 1862, the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) was sent on a four-month educational tour of the Middle East, accompanied by the British photographer Francis Bedford. This exhibition documents his journey through the work of Bedford, the first photographer to travel on a royal tour. It explores the cultural and political significance Victorian Britain attached to the region, which was then as complex and contested as it remains today. The tour took the Prince to Egypt, Palestine and the Holy Land, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Greece. He met rulers, politicians and other notable figures, and traveled in part on horseback, camping in tents. On the royal party’s return to England, Francis Bedford’s work was displayed in what was described as “the most important photographic exhibition that has hitherto been placed before the public.” Queen’s Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse, **Edinburgh**, through July 21; Queen’s Gallery, Buckingham Palace, **London**, October 2014.

**The Philippines:** *Archipelago of Exchange.* The Philippines archipelago includes more than 7000 islands extending over nearly 7000 kilometers; its geographical and historical situation has resulted in extensive and varied

artistic expression of a dual nature: One artistic vision is turned toward the mountains, the other toward the sea, and they are linked by the concept of exchange—symbolic or commercial—that creates relationships between donors and recipients, whether they are individuals or groups, real or divine. The exhibition includes more than 300 works of art. Musée du Quai Branly, **Paris**, through July 24.

**Art in Labor:** *Skill, Deskill, Reskilling* examines the complex relation between art and labor. Its purpose is not to honor or celebrate labor but to look at art itself as a form of production, inquiring what kinds of labor enter into its making. In the past, artists were individuals who possessed certain manual skills that they acquired in the feudal system of guilds, later in the *écoles* and *académies des beaux-arts*, and—not long ago—in the Soviet schools of art and the unions of artists. In the early 20th century, the artistic avant-garde assaulted the very basis of the institution of art, and this was reflected in the domain of artistic labor. In an emerging post-industrial, post-Fordist, post-modern, late capitalist society, the traditional artisanal skills of feudal or early industrial capitalism began to lose their prestige. This exhibition revisits and rethinks this complex art-historical process. AUB Art Galleries, **Beirut**, through July 27.

**Unveiling Femininity in Indian Painting and Photography** considers the depiction of women in Indian court paintings and photographs from the 17th to the 19th century. Women are often depicted as archetypes from Indian literature and poetry—the devoted heroine awaiting the return of her lover, or the *ragini*, a personification of classical musical modes. Other paintings offer a rare view into the *zenana*, where court ladies lived in seclusion, showing them unveiled and enjoying music, poetry, dance and food. The allure of Indian femininity—and of the “exotic other”—continued into the colonial period, when photographic portraits were made of dancers or courtesans. **Los Angeles** County Museum of Art, through July 28.

**Alia Syed:** *Eating Grass* comprises five overlapping narratives, filmed in Karachi, Lahore and London, each representing different emotional states experienced throughout the day that correspond to the five daily prayers of Islam. The film captures the ebb and flow of urban dwellers as they move between bustling streets and quiet interior spaces. A soundtrack that includes Syed’s prose, in English and Urdu, adds a further narrative dimension. **Los Angeles** County Museum of Art, through July 28.

**Eve II** is a group show by artists from France, Mexico, Spain and Jordan. Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, **Amman**, through July 31.

Current **August**  
**From Palestine With Hope** by Jeffar Khaldi and Tarek Al-Ghoussein. Artspace, **London**, through August 3.

**The Cyrus Cylinder and Ancient Persia:** *A New Beginning* focuses on a document sometimes referred to as the first “bill of rights,” a football-sized,

barrel-shaped clay object covered in Babylonian cuneiform that dates to the Persian king Cyrus the Great’s conquest of Babylon in the sixth century BCE. Almost 2600 years later, its remarkable legacy continues to shape contemporary political debates, cultural rhetoric and philosophy. The text on the cylinder announces Cyrus’s intention to allow freedom of worship to his new subjects. His legacy as a leader inspired rulers for millennia, from Alexander the Great to Thomas Jefferson, and the cylinder itself was used as a symbol of religious freedom and the hope for peace in the Middle East. Metropolitan Museum of Art, **New York**, through August 4; Asian Art Museum, **San Francisco**, August 9 through September 22; Getty Museum, **Los Angeles**, October 2 through December 2.

**Making the Invisible Visible:** *Conservation and Islamic Art.* Conservators and conservation scholars made many exciting and interesting discoveries as they and the curators re-examined the museum’s collection of Islamic art in preparation for the reopening of the new galleries in November 2011. This exhibition traces their investigative journey with a range of works of art, providing new perspectives for appreciating this extraordinary collection. Metropolitan Museum of Art, **New York**, through August 4.

**Objects From the Kharga Oasis**, where the museum excavated for 30 years, includes late Roman and Byzantine textiles, ceramics and grave goods from an intact tomb. Kharga and the neighboring Dakhla Oasis have yielded evidence of human habitation in the Middle Paleolithic (300,000 to 30,000 years ago), and close contacts with the Nile Valley as far back as the Old Kingdom (2649–2150 BCE). Vital to Egypt’s trading network, the oasis towns were access points for Saharan and sub-Saharan trade, as well as producing numerous crops and manufactured goods—ceramics and glassware—for export to the Nile Valley. Metropolitan Museum of Art, **New York**, through August 4.

**Don’t Forget to Remember** reflects on the concept of time. Artist Volkan Aslan infuses the days of the week with his personal rhythm and sense of time by inserting several other everyday patterns into the template known as “the week.” Though the titles of the works have been borrowed from a fixed and repetitive pattern of time that moves in a straight line, Aslan is interested in a subjective perception in which this linear flow is interrupted through the acts of remembering and forgetting. ARTER Space for Art, **Beyoglu, Istanbul**, through August 11.

**Hung From the Moon** is Emirati artist Farah Al-Qasimi’s photographic exploration of the accidental and the mundane, a documentation of the autobiographies that form as we inhabit a space and turn it into a home. The artist began this series about her irrational fear of returning home and realizing that everyone had disappeared. Through these photographic prints of still, quiet moments in domestic spaces, Al-Qasimi seeks out the personal traces that transform a hollow space into a home. Pavilion Downtown, **Dubai, UAE**, through August 31.

**Trading Style:** *An International Fashion Dialogue* presents the results of the cross-fertilization of more than 500 historical ethnographic objects, photographs and films from the museum’s collection with such modern-day fashion labels as Buki Akib (Nigeria), A Kind of Guise (Germany), Cassette Playa (UK) and P.A.M./Perks and Mini (Australia). Working in the museum, each designer investigated ethnographic artifacts and then created new prototype garments inspired by them. Weltkulturen Museum, **Frankfurt/Main**, through August 31.

Current **September**  
**Sky Spotting Stop** is a temporary site-specific installation that shades the courtyard of the museum while floating gently on the hidden waters of the Bosphorus and projecting its host space upon the city. Thanks to this ephemeral, lively addition, part of the museum’s Young Architects Program, the courtyard becomes part of the skyline. On the ground, a changing landscape, made of mobile recycled elements, transforms the courtyard into a new stop in the city for special events aimed at young people, for sitting, resting, gathering, playing or “sky-spotting.” **Istanbul** Modern, through September.

**Datascape:** *What You See May Not Be What You Get.* The landscape, whether realistic or imagined, has been painters’ subject or backdrop for centuries. The artists in the exhibition perpetuate this tradition and also reflect on the intricate blend of visual information and data enhancement that has modified our perception of the world. The landscape has become a composite that is as much an interface as our multiple digital screens, which in turn look increasingly like landscapes. This “enhanced reality” is a new landscape: a datascape. Borusan Contemporary, **Istanbul**, through September 1.

**Terms & Conditions** presents an open-ended debate on how history and social realities are represented, with an emphasis on the Arab world. The artists examine the divide between those who control the discourse and those who are silenced or forgotten. The title phrase may refer to the fixed guidelines at the basis of any official contract or agreement. Though sometimes overlooked in everyday practice, their implementation can dictate the representation and interaction between people, entities and countries, and set rigid parameters. Yet, separately, the words “terms” and “conditions” convey fluid and precarious concepts that can, in actuality, be continually negotiated and modified. Many artists with roots in the Arab world work simultaneously across different geographic, physical and cultural contexts, making it difficult to define and constrain them to specific identities and representations. Their work thus enables them to navigate and speak within multiple contexts. **Singapore** Art Museum, through September 8.

**Beauty and Belief:** *Crossing Bridges With the Arts of Islamic Culture* aims to bridge differences and inspire insight through beauty, and address the question, “What makes Islamic art Islamic?” Tunisian-born project director Sabiha Al Khemir has assembled more

than 250 works from 40 lenders in the US and nine other countries, including unique manuscripts from the Royal Library in Morocco. The exhibition represents a journey through Islamic culture from the seventh century onward, combining historical and geographic background with successive sections on calligraphy, figurative imagery and pattern, but it makes a point of touching on the present day, also including works by contemporary artists. **Portland [Oregon]** Art Museum, through September 8.

**Shirin Neshat:** *The Book of Kings* features a new body of photography works and a video installation by the acclaimed Iranian artist. Her work interweaves an austere yet sensuous visual language with music, poetry and history, as well as political and philosophical matters. Faurischou Foundation **Beijing**, through September 8.

**Zarina:** *Paper Like Skin*, the first retrospective of the Indian-born American artist Zarina (Zarina Hashmi), features some 60 works dating from 1961 to the present. Paper is central to Zarina’s practice, both as a surface to print on and as a material with its own properties and history. Works in the exhibition include woodcuts as well as three-dimensional casts in paper pulp. Zarina’s vocabulary is minimal yet rich in associations with her life and the themes of displacement and exile. The concept of home—whether personal, geographic, national, spiritual or familial—resonates throughout. Art Institute of **Chicago**, through September 22.

**Projects 100:** *Akram Zaatari.* Working in photography, film, video, installation and performance, Beirut-based Akram Zaatari has built a complex, compelling body of work that explores the state of image-making today. One of the founders of the Arab Image Foundation, which aims to track down and preserve photos from North Africa, the Middle East and Arab communities around the world, Zaatari collects, examines and recontextualizes a wide range of documents—from found audiotapes to family photographs to videos found on YouTube—that testify to the cultural and political conditions of Lebanon’s postwar society. His artistic practice involves the study and investigation of the way these documents straddle, conflate or confuse notions of history and memory. *Projects 100* features the American premiere of two video installations: “Dance to the End of Love” (2011) and “On Photography, People and Modern Times” (2010). Cutting across temporal and geographic borders, they probe the nature of time and assert the permeability of memory. Museum of Modern Art, **New York**, through September 23.

**Life and Death in Pompeii and Herculaneum.** The two cities on the Bay of Naples, in southern Italy, were buried in just 24 hours by a catastrophic volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE. This event ended the life of the cities but also preserved them until their rediscovery by archeologists nearly 1700 years later. Herculaneum was a small seaside town, Pompeii the industrial hub of the region. Work continues at both sites, and recently uncovered artifacts include such treasures as finely sculpted marble reliefs

and intricately carved ivory panels. The exhibition gives visitors a taste of the cities' daily life, from the commerce of the bustling street to the domesticity of the family home, and explores the lives of individuals in Roman society—businessmen, powerful women, freed slaves and children. Thus a beautiful wall painting from Pompeii shows the baker Terentius Neo and his wife holding writing materials to show they are literate and cultured and posed to suggest they are equal partners. Other evocative items include six pieces of carbonized wooden furniture, among them a linen chest and a baby's crib that still rocks on its curved runners. British Museum, **London**, through September 29.

#### Current **October**

**Out of Southeast Asia:** *Art That Sustains* displays treasures from the museum's own collections alongside the work of four contemporary textile artists and designers: Carol Cassidy, the team of Agus Ismoyo and Nia Fliam and Vernal Bogren Swift. The exhibition demonstrates how contemporary artists are preserving the traditional arts even as they interpret them in innovative ways. Textile Museum, **Washington, D.C.**, through October 13.

**Saloua Raouda Choucair** is a pioneer of abstract art in the Middle East and a significant figure in the history of 20th-century art. Though she was born in 1916, this is the first major museum exhibition of her work. A rare female voice in the Beirut art scene from the 1940's onward, Choucair combines elements of western abstraction with Islamic aesthetics. Her work is characterized by an experimental approach to materials alongside an elegant use of modular forms, lines and curves drawn from the traditions of Islamic design. Viewing her paintings and drawings, architecture, textiles and jewelry, as well as her prolific production of experimental sculptures, visitors can discover how Choucair worked in diverse media as she pursued her interests in science, mathematics and Islamic art and poetry. The exhibition focuses on Choucair's sculptures from the 1950's to the 1980's, created in wood, metal, stone and fiberglass, as well as extensive examples of her early abstract paintings and such key figurative works as "Self-Portrait" (1943) and "Paris-Beirut" (1948). Tate Modern, **London**, through October 20.

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## Safar / Voyage:

*Contemporary Works by Arab, Iranian and Turkish Artists* is constructed as a journey in the company of 16 artists, all transhumant between the Middle East and the West. Their diverse artworks speak to the universal theme of "voyage," from the external and geographic to the internal, emotional and existential, expressed in media ranging from painting, sculpture and video installation to performance and a carpet. Accompanying publication by curators Fereshteh Daftari and Jill Baird. Museum of Anthropology, University of **British Columbia, Vancouver**, through September 15.

**Kutluğ Ataman, "Strange Space" (2009), video still, courtesy of the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery.**

#### Current **November**

**Roads of Arabia:** *Archaeology and History of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.* An eye-opening look at the largely unknown ancient past of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, this exhibition draws on recently discovered archaeological material never before seen in the United States. **Roads of Arabia** features objects excavated from several sites throughout the Arabian Peninsula, tracing the impact of ancient trade routes and pilgrimage roads stretching from Yemen in the south to Iraq, Syria and Mediterranean cultures in the north. Elegant alabaster bowls and fragile glassware, heavy gold earrings and Hellenistic bronze statues testify to a lively mercantile and cultural interchange among distant civilizations. The study of archeological remains only really began in Saudi Arabia in the 1970's, yet brought—and is still bringing—a wealth of unsuspected treasures to light: temples, palaces adorned with frescoes, monumental sculpture, silver dishes and precious

jewelry left in tombs. The exhibition, organized as a series of points along trade and pilgrimage routes, focuses on the region's rich history as a major center of commercial and cultural exchange, provides both chronological and geographical information about the discoveries made during recent excavations, and emphasizes the important role played by this region as a trading center during the past 6000 years. Carnegie Museum of Natural History, **Pittsburgh**, through November 3; Museum of Fine Arts **Houston**, December 22 through March 9, 2014; Asian Art Museum of **San Francisco**, October 17, 2014 through January 18, 2015.

**The Roof Garden Commission:** *Imran Qureshi* is a site-specific work painted directly onto the surfaces of the museum's roof garden and relating both to elements of his earlier works and to the broad vistas of Central Park visible from the roof garden, as well as to the area's architectural and historical contexts. The Pakistani artist is

considered one of the leading figures in developing a "contemporary miniature" aesthetic, integrating motifs and techniques of traditional miniature painting with contemporary themes. Metropolitan Museum of Art, **New York**, through November 3.

**RE:Orient** is an exhibition showcasing modernism in the Arab world. Barjeel Art Foundation, **Sharjah, UAE**, through November 22.

#### Current **December**

**Steel and Gold:** *Historic Swords From the MIA Collection* displays swords not as weapons, but as means of self-expression, historical artifacts and masterpieces of technology and design. Museum of Islamic Arts, **Doha, Qatar**, through December 14.

**Disappearing Heritage of Sudan, 1820–1956:** *Photographic and Filmic Exploration in Sudan* documents the remnants of the colonial experience in Sudan from the Ottoman, Egyptian



and British periods. This photographic and video project by Frederique Cifuentes explores the mechanics of empire, highlighting colonial architecture, design and construction—official buildings, private residences, cinema houses, railways, irrigation canals and bridges—and the impact they had on Sudanese society before and after independence in 1956. It also helps us understand the ways in which people appropriated and used the buildings after the end of the colonial period. Oriental Museum, University of **Khartoum, Sudan**, through December.

Current **January and Later**  
**Echoes of Egypt: Conjuring the Land of the Pharaohs** considers 2000 years of fascination with ancient Egypt. Visitors enter through a reproduction of the Egyptian-style gateway that is the entrance to New Haven's Grove Street Cemetery, designed by Henry Austin in 1839, and then discover how a culture that flourished thousands of years ago has impacted our own world. Echoes of ancient Egypt appear in art, architecture and literature around the world, from ancient Africa, to medieval Europe and the Middle East, to modern North America. Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, **New Haven, Connecticut**, through January 4.

Coming **August**  
**Count Your Blessings** exhibits more than 70 sets of long and short strings of prayer beads from various Asian cultures, many with flourishes, counters, attachments or tassels. Some are made of precious or semi-precious stones, others of seeds, carved wood, ivory or bone. Collectively, they reveal sophisticated and complex arrangements and structures based on symbolic meanings. Rubin Museum of Art, **New York**, August 2 through March 24.

**Our Work: Modern Jobs—Ancient Origins**, an exhibition of photographic portraits, explores how cultural achievements of the ancient Middle East have created or contributed to much of modern life. To show the connections between the past and today, artifacts that document the origins or development of such professions as baker, farmer, manicurist, brewer, writer, clockmaker, or judge in the ancient world are paired with a person who is the modern "face" of that profession. The resulting photographic portraits by Jason Reblando represent the diversity of Chicago residents, ranging from ordinary workers to local luminaries. They are accompanied by information on the specific contribution of the ancient world and remarks from the modern representative, resulting in fascinating new insights into how members of the public view their relationship to the past. Oriental Institute Museum, **Chicago**, August 20 through February 23.

Coming **September**  
**Little Syria, New York: An Immigrant Community's Life and Legacy** documents the rich history of New York's first Arab-American community. From the late 19th century through the mid-20th century, an area of Manhattan's Lower West Side was the home to a vibrant and productive community of Arab-Americans. Dubbed the "heart of New York's Arab world" by *The New*

*York Times*, the Washington Street neighborhood was where many participants in the first wave of Arab immigration to the United States got their start. Their experiences, all but lost to living memory, parallel those of other immigrant groups of the Great Migration period. Immigration History Research Center, Andersen Library, University of **Minnesota, Minneapolis, Fall**.

**The Map Is Not the Territory: Parallel Paths: Palestinians, Native Americans, Irish** is a juried invitational exhibition showing 50 works on paper by artists from these three cultures, who examine their shared historical and contemporary paths. Jerusalem Fund Gallery, **Washington, D.C.**, September.

Coming **October**  
**Meditation on Nature: Photography by Karam Mishalani**. Jerusalem Fund Gallery, **Washington, D.C.**, October.

**The Book of the Faiyum** is an exquisitely illustrated papyrus from Greco-Roman Egypt, one of the most intriguing ancient representations of a place ever found. The papyrus depicts the Faiyum Oasis, located to the west of the Nile, as a center of prosperity and ritual. For the first time in over 150 years, major sections owned by the Walters Art Museum and the Morgan Library & Museum, separated since the manuscript was divided and sold in the 19th century, will be reunited. Egyptian jewelry, papyri, statues, reliefs and ritual objects will illuminate the religious context that gave rise to this enigmatic text, which celebrates the crocodile god Sobek and his special relationship with the Faiyum. Walters Museum of Art, **Baltimore**, October 6 through January 5. The exhibition will travel to the

Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum in Hildesheim, Germany.

**Arab Festival: Naseej—Weaving the Threads of Arab Culture** is an opportunity to sample Arab food, dance to Arab music, and engage in the culture through exhibits, films, music and dance, workshops and panel discussions on current and historical events and issues. Entertainment and presentations will include both local and visiting performers and speakers representing the cultural heritages of 22 countries and two continents. All events are free and open to the public. **Seattle [Washington] Center**, October 12–13.

**PERMANENT / INDEFINITE**  
**Greenbox Museum of Contemporary Art From Saudi Arabia** is a small private collection exhibiting works by artists living and working in Saudi Arabia, including Ahmed Mater, Abdullnasser Gharem, Maha Malluh, Reem Al Faisal, Lulwah Al-Homoud and Ayman Yossri Daydban. Open Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, Sunday afternoons and by appointment. Admission €5. Phone 420-92-69 before visiting. Korte Leidsedwardsstraat 12, **Amsterdam**.

**Feast Your Eyes: A Taste for Luxury in Ancient Iran** displays luxury metalwork dating from the first millennium BCE, beginning with the rule of the Achaemenid kings (550–330 BCE), to the early Islamic period, exploring the meaning behind these objects' overarching artistic and technical characteristics. Highly sophisticated Iranian metalwork, especially in gold and silver, was created in an area extending from the Mediterranean to present-day Afghanistan. Favored with an

abundance of natural resources, the region became known for works ranging in shape from deep bowls and footed plates to elaborate drinking vessels ending in animal forms, largely associated with court ceremonies and rituals. Other objects, decorated with such royal imagery as hunting or enthronement scenes, were probably intended as gifts to foreign and local dignitaries. Sackler Gallery, **Washington, D.C.**

**The New Islamic Art Galleries of the Louvre** provide a permanent home for the museum's renowned collection of Islamic art, considered the greatest outside the Islamic world. Over 2500 objects, many never on public display before, are shown in rooms totaling 3000 square meters (32,000 sq ft). The galleries present the entire cultural breadth of the Islamic world, from Spain to India, spanning the seventh to the 19th centuries; their \$127-million renovation was financed by the French state, supplemented by donations from a Saudi prince, the King of Morocco, the Emir of Kuwait and the Sultan of Oman. Musée du Louvre, **Paris**.

Information is correct at press time, but please reconfirm dates and times before traveling. Most institutions listed have further information available at their Web sites. Readers are welcome to submit information eight weeks in advance for possible inclusion in this listing. Some listings have been kindly provided to us by Canvas, the art and culture magazine for the Middle East and the Arab world.

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