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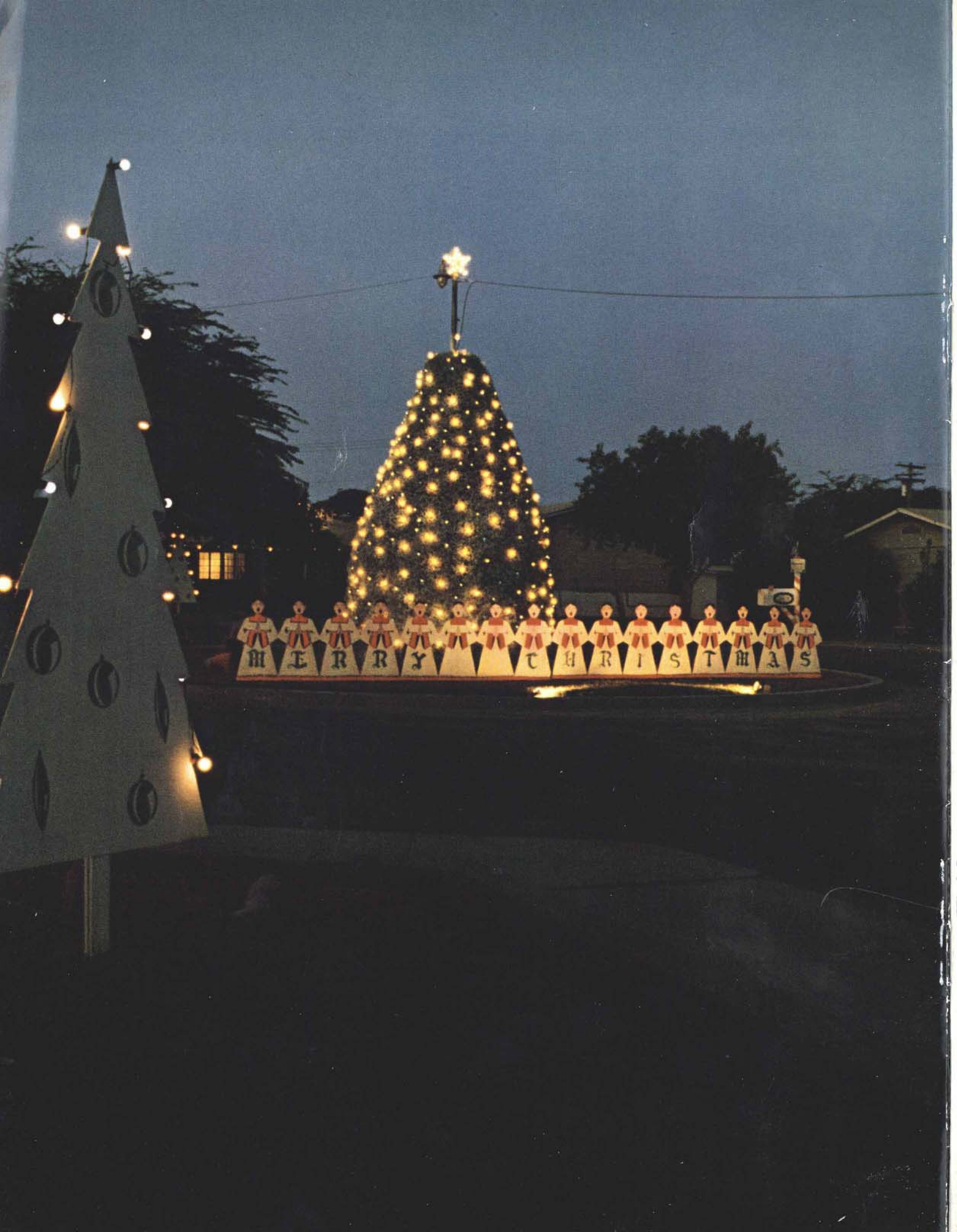
ARAMCO WORLD magazine

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1971

CHRISTMAS IN THE MIDDLE EAST



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Cover: In the polished surface of an ornament in a toy shop window, photographer Khalil Abou el-Nasr saw and photographed for Aramco World Magazine, a reflection of Christmas in busy Beirut—a reflection that so delighted the Women's Auxiliary of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency that they chose it for their 1971 Christmas card, proceeds of which go to assist Palestinian refugees.

Inside front cover: "Christmas Tree Circle," Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Back cover: Arab student choir, East Jerusalem YMCA.

THE CHRISTMAS STORY - According to the Koran

The first Christmas as told in the KORAN, the Holy Book of the Muslim faith...

And mentioii in the Book, Mary,
when she withdrew from her people
to aii easterii place,
and she took a veil apart from them;
then We sent unto her Oiir Spirit that
presented himself to her a man without faiilt.
She said, 'I take refuge in
the All-meriful from Thee!
If thoii fearest God...'
He said, 'I am but a messeiiger
come from thy Lord,
to give thee a boy most pure.'
She said, 'How shall I have a son
whom no mortal has touched,
neither have I been unchaste?'
He said, 'Even so my Lord has said: 'Easy
is that for Me; and that We may appoint
him a sign unto men and a mercy
from us; it is a thing decreed.'
So she conceived him, and withdrew
from him to a distant place.
And the birthpangs surprised her by
the trunk of the palm-tree.
She said, 'Would I had died ere this, and
become a thing forgotten!'
But the one that was below her called
to her, 'Nay, do not sorrow;

see, thy Lord has set below thee a rivulet.
Shake also to thee the palm-trunk,
and there shall come tumbling upon thee
dates fresh and ripe.
Eat therefore, and drink, and be comforted;
and if thou shouldst see any mortal,
say, 'I have vowed to the All-merciful a fast,
and today I will not speak to any man.'
Then she brought the child
to her folk carrying him; and they said,
'Mary, thou hast surely committed
a monstrous thing!
Sister of Aaron, thy father was not a
wicked man, nor was thy mother
a woman unchaste.'
Mary pointed to the child then;
but they said, 'How shall we speak
to one who is still in the cradle,
a little child?'
He said, 'Lo, I am God's servant;
God has given me the Book,
and made me a Prophet.
Blessed He has made me, wherever I
may be; and He has joined me to pray,
and to give the alms, so long as I live, and
likewise to cherish my mother;
He has not made me arrogant, unprosperous.
Peace be upon me, the day I was born,
and the day I die, and the day I am
raised up alive!'
That is Jesus, son of Mary, in word
of truth, concerning
which they are doubting.

Designed by Brian Smith

St. George the Ubiquitous

BY HELEN GIBSON

On the same day in April, white banners with red crosses fly from English churches, a splendidly attired Greek Orthodox bishop in Beirut celebrates a special four-hour mass, a Syrian monastery embraces thousands of pilgrims, and ailing Egyptians wait for miraculous cures in a small Nile Delta village.

The day? St. George's Day, of course, April 23.

Yet to imagine that the average Englishman will know the date of his own patron saint is actually far from a matter of course. St. George probably evokes little more to him than some knight on horseback spearing a scaly, cavern-jawed dragon.

On the other hand, to the Copts, Greek Orthodox, Catholics, Maronites and some Muslims of the Middle East, George is a very real and active saint. His miracles of olden times are matched only by those he performs today. His ancient gilded icons dotting St. George's Orthodox Cathedral in old Beirut are kissed and prayed to all hours of the day. The measure of his help glows in hundreds of candles and gold ornaments donated by grateful worshippers.

Tributes to George, in fact, rise not only from all corners of the earth, but also from the moon. Last August, American astronauts named a deep crater after Saint George. (Although some hint that it was less in honor of George than the Jules Verne explorers who, in "From the Earth to the Moon," toasted their arrival with a wine called Nuits-St-George.)

Yet even for his most devout followers, St. George remains something of a mystery, just as he has done to theologians down the centuries.

Exactly who he was, when and where he lived, why the dragon came into his life and how George arrived in England to become patron saint has had the experts theorizing for centuries.

In fact, such is the doubt over St. George's life, death and subsequent cult that the present Pope Paul VI decided that St. George may have been presuming a little above his station. His Holiness subsequently demoted George a notch to the ranks of the second-class saints. This created something of an outcry in Orthodox Greece, and one old Greek Orthodox gentleman in Beirut said disgustedly, "The Pope just does not know about our eastern saints. He is only bothered with those of Europe."

Orthodox Bishop George in Beirut agrees with one British theologian who suggests that the nearness of St. George's Day to Easter could be one reason "why so obscure a saint should become an object of a cultus in the Church lasting for long ages, and in a magnitude second only to that paid to the most eminent of the Apostles."

Whatever the precise reason may be, paintings, frescoes, stone bas-reliefs and icons of St. George abound throughout Europe and the Middle East. (See inside back cover.)

A bronze statue of St. George stands in a chateau in Prague, a large carved medallion of the saint decorates Barcelona's Palace of Mancomunidad, frescoes of his life and martyrdom adorn chapels in France and Italy—Verona, Padua, Venice. Raphael, Durer and Van Eyck have painted St. George.

On one silver Russian icon, the face of the saint was cut in either precious stone or gilded hardwood, and a golden St. George emblazoned the "George" noble, a coin issued in England during the reign of Henry VIII.

Lebanon itself has its own claim to St. George. In Beirut one can actually see where the dragon lived, exactly where it was slain, and the waters George used to clean the blood off his spear.

Mothers croon their babies to sleep in this country with such songs as:

"St. George's story goes from ear to ear ... people go praising him,

"They tell us hills and hills of praises about his generosity.

"His mother died and he lived an orphan in Beirut. A dragon appeared,

"His breath killed any human being ..."

The song tells how St. George killed the dragon and rescued the princess who was about to be its sacrifice. The monster, a speaking variety, had demanded the royal meal in return for stopping his ravages on the people and their herds.

But although the folk songs eulogize the dragon-slayer, and one of Beirut's best hotels, a club and a bay are named after him, St. George has fallen on hard times in this city.

The 20-foot square well from which the dragon periodically arose stands on the northern edge of the city. Now it forms the center of a Muslim primary school playground, but it is paved over because the teachers were afraid the children would fall in. And the pupils are not told about the dragon lest they have nightmares.

Next to the school lies the site of the slaying. The Crusaders built a chapel over the spot, but since 1661 it has alternated between chapel and mosque. Today, the yard-and-a-half thick walls that formed the tower support a modern minaret.

In itself this would hardly hurt St. George's image. Some Muslims believe in him just as Christians do, linking the saint with an ancient, mystical warrior named al-Khidr.

But progress ordained a noisy garage be built. It gives Green Stamps and completely masks the mosque. The locals say that the pilgrims of 10 or 15 years ago no longer come.

The spot where George is supposed to have cleaned off his spear—about 30 minutes drive north from the slaying site—has fared better. It is a massive rocky cave running into the hillside and overlooking the beautiful Jounieh Bay. The knee-deep waters within the cave are believed to have miraculous powers for fattening ailing children.

On St. George's Day, candles burn in smoke-blackened niches in the rock face beneath an inset marble plaque of the saint. The massed yellow daisies that herald a Lebanese spring cover the open ground around. Mothers with crying babies hurry down the hillside steps from waiting taxis. They dip the infants into the icy water, light a votive candle and place the babies' old clothes on a ledge. These must be left behind for the cure to work.

On the road above the cave, an old couple that run a cafe sit under a sprouting vine and watch the various families place flowers before a second small shrine to St. George.

But St. George, Mar Juryus in Arabic, as a miracle-worker is no new concept—it is at least 16 centuries old.

For now no modern authority doubts George's existence. Four principal versions of his life and martyrdom have been studied—in Syriac, Coptic, Arabic and Ethiopic. They probably were translated from a Greek account which would have been understood in the great monasteries of the Middle East.

It has proved practically impossible as yet to fix the exact date of St. George's life and death. One Byzantine work, dated in the early 7th century, says he was martyred in A.D. 255. But it could have been much earlier, and many fix his death around A.D. 300 in the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian.

However, it is sure he lived long before the end of the 4th century, for a church was built and dedicated to him by then. A Greek inscription has been found on a church in Shakka, Syria, naming the building for the "holy and triumphant" martyr George. It is dated, according to the Christian calendar, either A.D. 368 or 197.

It seems certain now George was the only son of a Palestian shaikh, a Christian who enjoyed an important position in the country under the Roman governor of the province. He trained hard in athletics as a youth and later joined the local army with a commission, where he proved a bold and skillful soldier. On his father's death, George set out to see the province governor with a view to taking on his father's position.

What exactly happened there is not known. That he was tortured and eventually killed for refusing to take part in pagan sacrifices, however, seems true. And some unusual circumstances must have occurred during these proceedings. Otherwise St. George would never have lived in legend for so many centuries.

Theodotus, Bishop of Ancyra (now Ankara, Turkey), in the 5th century wrote a lengthy account of the saint's martyrdom, full of intricately gruesome details of his suffering. He read his work to his congregation on April 23, in a church dedicated to St. George.

He tells how the Roman Emperor Diocletian and his 70 nobles had persecuted Christians for three years. Public exhibitions of every known form of torture had stopped anyone from professing the faith until George came along.

He rode with the Crusaders, slew a dragon in Beirut, inspired England, annoyed a Pope, and to this day cures the faithful in an obscure village of Egypt.

DRAWINGS BY BRIAN SMITH

St. George's tortures take up several hours of reading:

"And they pounded him on it (stone slab) until the whole of his body and his bones were crushed to pulp ... they beat his head with a hammer and with a rod of iron until his brains protruded through his nose ... then the wicked king commanded them to bring a great iron saw and to saw him down the middle of his head and his belly and his feet ..."

During this seven-year period of torture, George performed a number of miracles and converted both a magician sent to kill him and the wife of the governor, or "wicked king." They in their turn suffered torture and death, together with 30,000 others inspired by St. George's example.

The magician often features in paintings and frescoes of St. George.

After being put to death three times in the most horrible ways, Theodotus says, George finally succumbed to a beheading and was buried. Eastern and western tradition alike make his burial ground the little town of Lydda where Peter the Apostle healed Aeneas. Its modern equivalent lies about 15 miles southeast of Jaffa.

Throughout his account, Theodotus makes no mention of a dragon except in describing the governor, whom he also calls a "serpent." In the same way, artists and writers of bygone times may have decided that the infamous governor could only be depicted as a monster. Perhaps this is how the dragon crept into the history of St. George.

Another suggestion is that the legend arose from a mistaken conception of a bas-relief in Constantine's church for St. George at Lydda. The sculpture depicted the Emperor's own figure carrying the banner of the cross and standing on a dragon. The cult's followers could have confused Constantine with St. George.

The most probable explanation is that the scribes who copied out the saint's history incorporated legends, local pious gossip, and even their own particular flights of fancy. They were practically obliged to invent a dragon for George, as a hero of Christendom.

But the main thrust of the dragon-slaying promotion came in the 15th century with the translation of the Golden Legend into Latin, Bohemian, German and English. The Archbishop of Genoa wrote this collection of the lives of the Middle Ages' favorite saints in 1280.

It was the Golden Legend that had George not only killing a dragon, but also rescuing a princess—a story reminiscent of Perseus who saved Andromeda from her fate as sacrifice to the sea-dragon. Incidentally, this is the legend popular in Lebanon.

The Golden Legend was one of the first books to be printed and William Caxton published the English version in 1483.

But 12 centuries before that, St. George had made his reputation. Pilgrims came from near and far when they found a visit to his tomb could cure obscure diseases. They even carried dust off the shrine home with them.

Every strange thing that happened in the church was magnified, and in a very short time the local saint of Lydda became a national saint. He was identified with Perseus, Moses, Elijah, Ra of Egypt, Aburamazda of Persia, Tammuz of Babylon and al-Khidr of the Arabs.

But by 494, Pope Gelasius decided that matters had gone too far. He decreed that the public reading of the acts of certain martyrs, including St. George, must stop, as they were often written by ignorant persons, provoked ridicule and gave occasion for derisive laughter.

In spite of the ban, churches dedicated to St. George sprang up all over Europe and the Middle East.

A high point in the cult came when 91st Pope Zacharias in the mid-8th century, triumphantly produced St. George's head dug out of a reliquary in the Lateran. He immediately called all Rome into the streets and the head was carried through the city with great pomp and circumstance.

By the time Zacharias was showing off his latest relic, England was well aware of St. George—at least three centures before the first Crusade set off for the Holy Land. A monastery had been founded in his name and several churches dedicated to him.

By the 10th century, Aelfric, Archbishop of York was writing his Passion to St. George. It begins:

Misbelievers have written
Misbelief in their books
Touching the saint
That Georius hight
Now will we teach you
What is true thereabout
That heresy harm not
Any unwittingly
The holy Georius
Was in heathenish days
A rich earldorman
Under the fierce Caesar Datianus
In the shire of Cappodocia

But St. George really established his name in England when the Crusaders came home from the Holy Wars.

The Crusaders took on St. George by a sort of osmosis. He was simply always there, wherever they went. When the first Crusade arrived in Constantinople, the soldiers saw Constantine the Great's church dedicated to the saint. They crossed the Bosphorus, in the Middle Ages called the Arm of St. George, marched into Nicomedia and were told it was the site of St. George's martyrdom. They passed through Tarsus, Antioch, Edessa, Tyre and Lydda and every place had its own claimed link with St. George's life. Very soon the Crusaders felt that George was marching with them.

The climax came when the Turks had the Crusaders surrounded and in a sorry plight during the famous Battle of Antioch in 1098. Suddenly, out of the mountains, rode a vast army of troops on white chargers, headed by generals Sts. George, Theodore and Demetrius. Of course, with this help the Christians won the battle.

Peter of Tudebod, historian, said that Stephen the Priest told the men who their helpers were and added that this must be believed for "many of our men saw this take place."

So when the Crusaders arrived in Lydda and found the Muslims had evacuated the town, leaving food and possessions, they duly thanked St. George and raised the town to the dignity of a See.

The year after the battle of Antioch, the Crusaders stormed and took Jerusalem, again with the help of an army under St George—identifiable by the red cross on his white armor. One French historian gives some of the credit to St. Maurice, a co-commander, and adds the army rode 30,000 strong.

St. George also emboldened Richard the Lion Heart in the third Crusade with some timely apparitions at the height of the battle. Richard returned the favor by rebuilding the saint's church at Lydda.

By now the English had adopted St. George as their battle cry and even the French army decided he was on a par with their Saint Denis.

And in England roving troubadours were singing ballads about the white horseman. George was the knight par excellence. Since the perfect Christian gentleman was also the perfect soldier, the King and armies were proud to ride under the flag of St. George.

His fame increased and the Oxford Synod of 1222 declared St. George's Day a lesser holiday. In 1348 King Edward III decided George was a fitting patron saint for his exclusive, chivalry-bent 26-member brotherhood of knights—the Order of the Garter. Paintings of St. George sometimes feature his blue garter across one knee.

The saint was finally promoted in England when he took over as national patron saint in place of Edward the Confessor. Edward III had become convinced of the sovereign power of the battle cry, "St. George for England."

From then, the red cross on a white background became a kind of uniform for English sailors and soldiers and today the emblem is incorporated into the English flag, the Union Jack.

It is often maintained that George, who personified idealistic chivalry of the Middle Ages, lost his raison d'etre in Europe when artillery replaced the lance.

The 16th century's Reformation gave him the final death blow. Then it became fashionable to laugh at the saints and brand their cult as idolatrous. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin found the cult of St. George obnoxious. Calvin called George a "larva," i.e. a scarecrow. Others said he was a "nobody," "a deity created by some madde and idle brains for the poor people to fall down and worship." The Bishop of Norwich described St. George as an Arian heretic and believed the "bloody butcher of Christians" was in hell.

But it was Edward Gibbon, mid-18th-century author of the famous history, "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," who hurt St. George's reputation most of all. Whether it was because of the influence of Calvin's opinions or whether his fanatical dislike of Christianity warped his judgement, cannot be said. But he certainly did his best to belittle the saint's character.

In actual fact, Gibbon totally confused St. George with the graceless, but capable pork-contractor, George of Cappadocia, who from 356 to 361 usurped the Archbishopric of Alexandria.

Gibbon did not go unchallenged, however. A certain Rev. Milner, Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in London, quickly took up the cudgel for St. George.

His paper was entitled "A Historical and Critical Inquiry into the existence and character of Saint George, Patron of England, in which the assertions of Edward Gibbon, Esq. and certain other modern writers concerning this Saint are discussed. London, 1792."

Rev. Milner painstakingly brought together all the principal facts about St. George's life, showing up the flaws in Gibbon's statements, but he had neither Gibbon's fame nor his huge circulation.

Gibbon's exposure of St. George is one of the main reasons why, for most Englishmen, St. George is no more than a name associated with dragons.

But in the Middle East, St. George is very much alive, dragon or no dragon.

In a hot office in downtown Beirut, a white-haired Greek Orthodox gentleman will tell you confidently that St. George is working scores of miracles today, for Muslims and Christians alike. He will recall his own experience, when St. George came one night with the lance and pierced his abscessed leg. Next morning the abscess was gone.

Another 70-year old Maronite lights a mammoth white candle every April 23 in the Maronite Cathedral of Beirut. He maintains the saint appeared in a cloud of dust, mounted on a white charger, when a group of Bedouin tried to kill him in the Syrian desert. St. George told the attackers he was al-Khidr, and the Bedouin released the Christian.

And on April 23, in the Nile Delta village of Mit Damsis, St. George really goes to work. Pilgrims bring their sick to his church wrapped in white sheets. When the red cross in blood appears on the wrappings, the patients know they have been cured.

St. George—patron saint of England, Portugal, the city of Beirut, of harness-makers, of cavalry and those who make plumes for helmets, protector of horses and shield against venomous snakes, plague and leprosy—what is fact and what fiction? But does it really matter? Your spirit has lasted down the centuries. May it never die.

Helen Gibson, now working in the Middle East, attended the University of Nottingham and spent two years in Vietnam as a correspondent for UPI and as a free-lance writer.

CHRISTMAS IN BETHLEHEM

To Americans, Christmas in Bethlehem can be a jarring experience.

This is partly because the sight of armed troops is still an unusual sight to most Americans and in Bethlehem, an occupied territory since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Uzzis are at least as common as rosaries.

More than that, however, is the failure of Bethlehem to fit the American image of the place where Christ was born. Thanks in part to the photographic license of Hollywood moguls who saw box office potential in the Christmas story, and in part to the parochial sentimentality of Christmas card artistry, Christmas to most Americans is something quite unlike the pungent reality of the small village where, 1,971 years ago, a carpenter's wife gave birth to a child whose name would be Jesus.

This vision of Christmas is an often amusing juxtaposition of admittedly picturesque, yet incompatible and frequently anachronistic elements: sleigh bells and snow drifts; plump English squires wolfing plum pudding; trussed turkeys cooking in electric ovens, slim church steeples in New England villages, "Silent Night" sung tenderly in Latin, a Macy's parade, a generous Dutch saint and the clang of cash registers.

Bethlehem has nothing in common with such images. Bethlehem is an Eastern town with more than its share of the sounds, smells and sights that give all Eastern communities their particular and unforgettable flavor: muezzins chanting prayers ... mosques standing in tranquil harmony with churches ... a crowded "suq" redolent with sharp strange smells ... narrow stone streets ... small shops stuffed with statues carved from shell and olive wood ... donkeys laden with boxes ... the black and white mosaic of cassocks, surplices and sisters' habits ... the restless movement of peoples in costumes from all over the

" where stolid shepherds guard their flocks..."

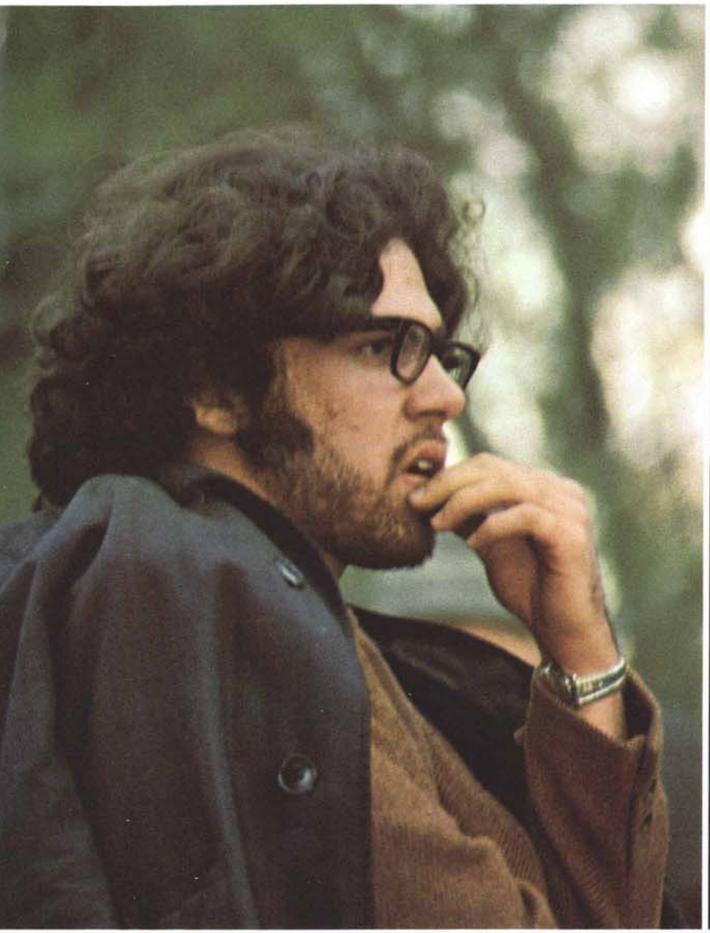
"...the tensions of a city
dedicated to peace
but torn by war..."

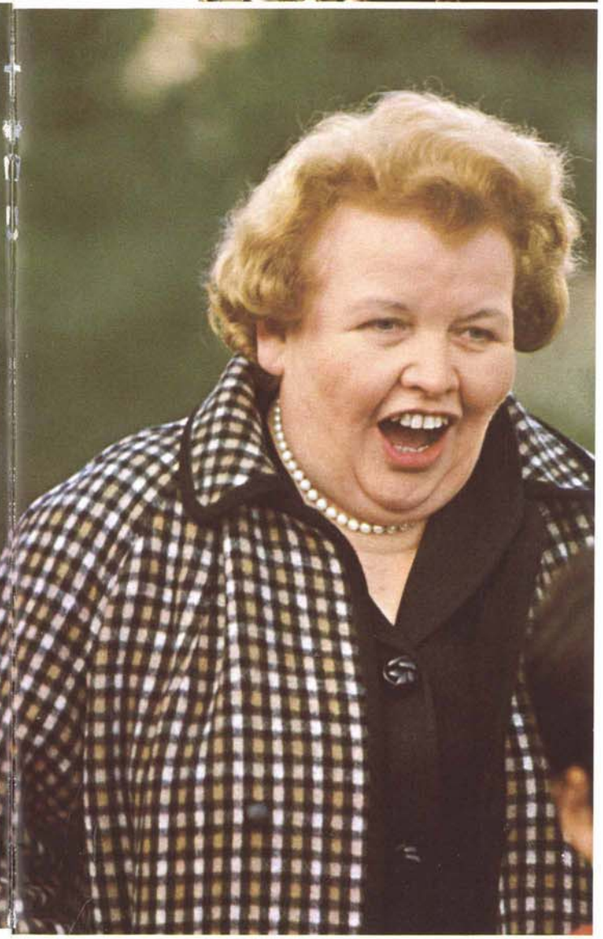
world ... the shape of arid hills in the distance ... an unseasonable warmth.

To those who link the Christmas spirit to crisp winter air and glowing cheeks, all this is unavoidably jarring—as is the stern surveillance by helmeted patrols, the density of the crowds, the pedestrian architecture of the cathedrals, the hum of tourists, and the constant clicking of cameras, the tensions of a city dedicated to peace but torn by war.

Yet it is the birthplace of Christ. And if the customs of the East disturb the visitors, they also affirm a certain continuity of life. For despite the lapse of centuries, Bethlehem retains an aura that is visibly Biblical. Out beyond the town, for example, on winding roads leading to Jerusalem or distant Nazareth, stand villages hardly touched by time, villages with wells dug centuries ago, where women gather in robes that the Apostles would have known and Mary might have worn. There are olive groves too, with trees planted long before that first Christmas, and fields where stolid shepherds in sandals guard their flocks and where, at Christmas, devout pilgrims come to sing of that night so long ago or listen to the echoes of Gregorian chant from candlelit cathedrals in the town. And there are the children whose large Eastern eyes reflect the ageless innocence of childhood.

These traces of the past certainly do not override the strident voice of the transistor, or muffle the exhaust of the buses careening by, or mute the high cry of the Muslim call to prayer or the mutter of a Boeing off to New York. But they do endure, and in enduring remind us that Christmas, like truth, is a timeless and changeless thing.

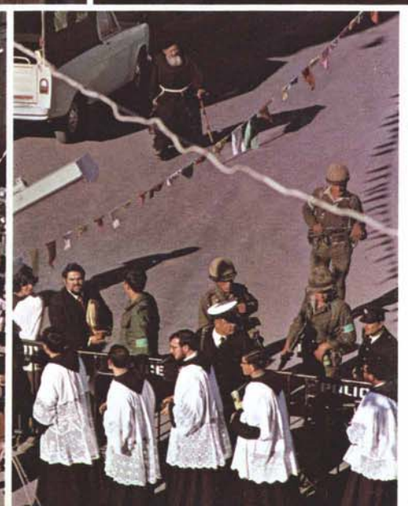




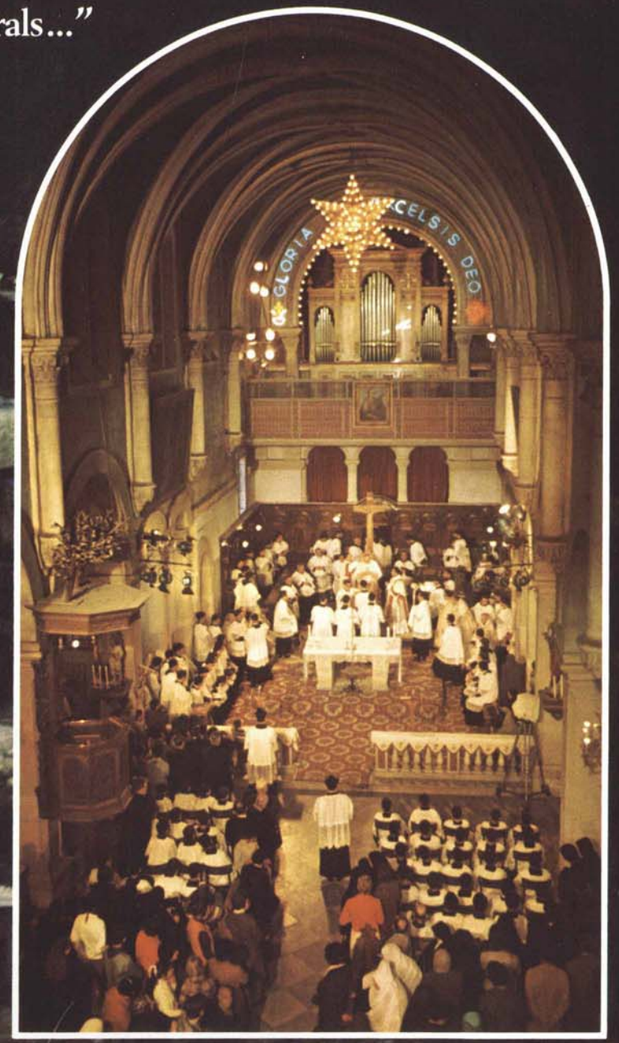
"...the black and white mosaic of cassocks and surplices and sisters' habits..."

"...the restless movement of peoples ... from all over the world..."

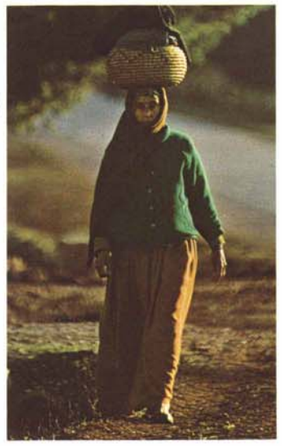
"...the stern surveillance by helmeted patrols..."

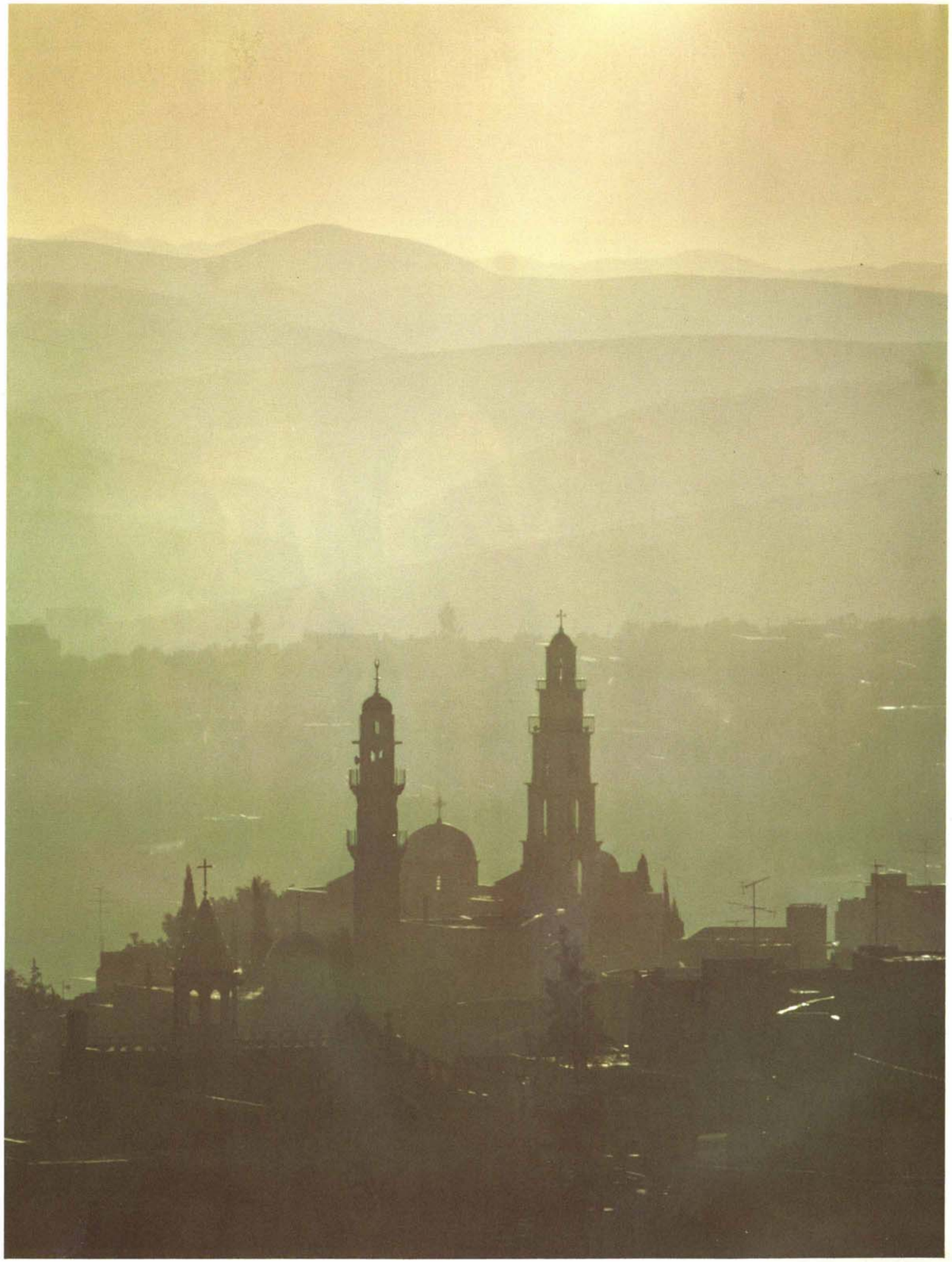


"...beyond the town stand villages hardly touched by time..." "...echoes of Gregorian chant from candlelit cathedrals..."



"...children whose large Eastern eyes reflect the ageless innocence of childhood..." "...women in robes Mary might have worn..." "...devout pilgrims come to sing of that night so long ago..." "...mosques standing in tranquil harmony with churches..."





CHRISTMAS IN DHAHRAN

Dhahran, the oil community in eastern Saudi Arabia where Aramco has its headquarters, pops up in the U.S. press from time to time as "a typical Southern California suburb, transplanted 8,500 miles east of New York." At Christmas time such exuberant comparisons are more than usually valid. For under the sway of nostalgia, Americans in the heart of the Muslim Middle East insist on a holiday season as much like home as possible—but with one big difference. We doubt that even way-out Southern Californians use real camels in their Christmas pageants.

In Dhahran, and the nearby sea terminal of Ras Tanura, presentation of a Christmas pageant is a tradition going back to the late 1940's when the first American families arrived after World War II. Since camels were an integral part of an area which subsisted primarily on date culture and stock grazing, the newcomers leaped at the chance to liven up the usual production of the Christmas story.

Last year's pageant in Dhahran was held beneath the stars at the local softball field and drew an audience of some 2,000 persons, most wrapped in blankets against the desert chill. It featured men, women and children, a chorus of angels, and three stately ships of the desert, one for each Wise Man. (One of the Wise Men, apprehensive at the thought of having to ride a camel, expressed his concern to Nasser Fahad Dossary, a Saudi camel master and a veteran of many pageants. "Not to worry," Nasser replied soothingly. "I haven't lost a Wise Man yet.")

PHOTOGRAPHED BY BURNETT H. MOODY

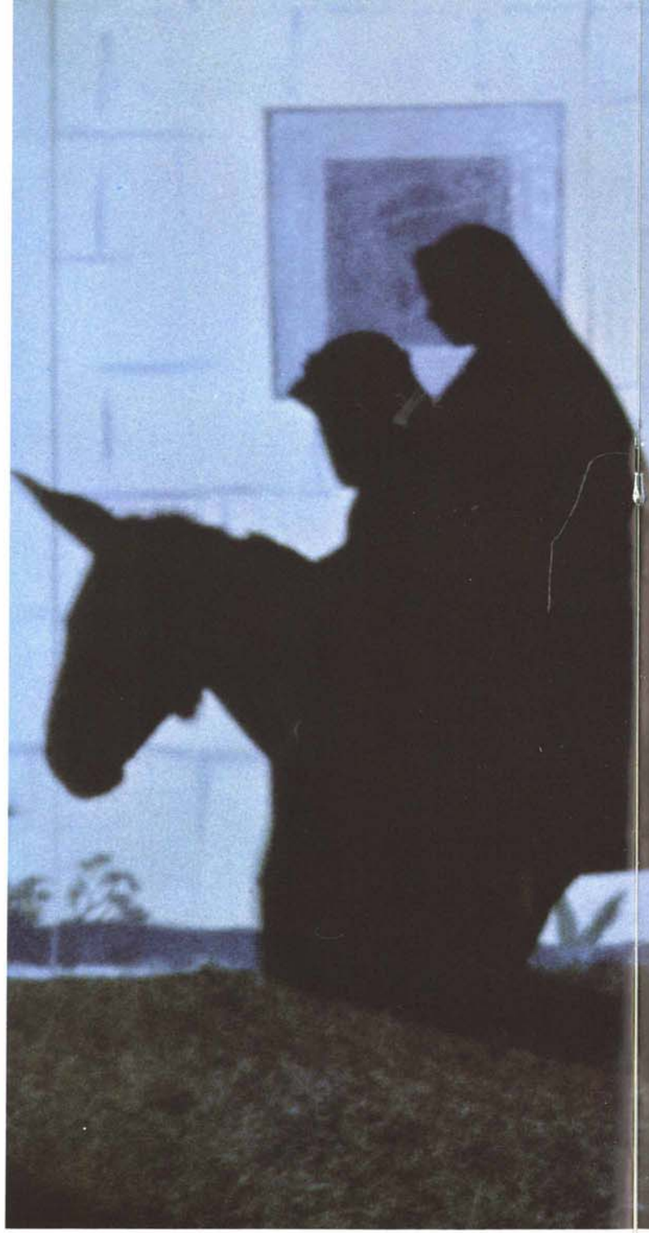
"I haven't lost a Wise Man yet."

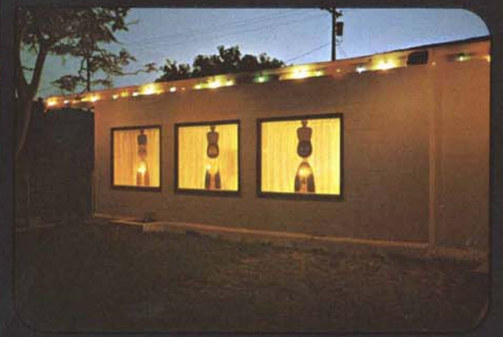
Although no pageant was held there last year, in nearby Abqaiq, the company's drilling headquarters, a camel still managed to get into the act a week before Christmas by carrying Santa Claus into town on his back to hear late requests from local school children.

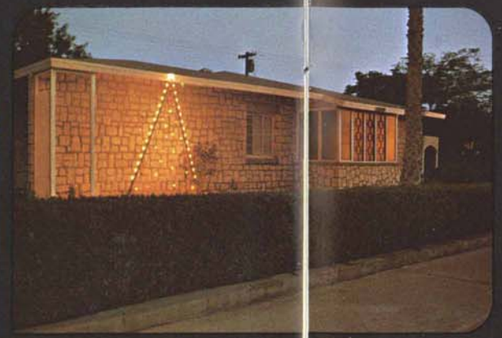
Another familiar custom in the three Aramco oil communities is decorating windows and rooftops with wreaths, lights, reindeer, sleighs and snowmen—artificial snowmen, that is, since Dhahran's lawns are at their greenest about Christmas time.

The normal interest in such decoration is stimulated by the Dhahran Employee's Association, which holds an annual competition and last year drew 40 entries in four categories. One group of apartment dwellers who live in units clustered around a mall with a huge, well-trimmed jasmine hedge in the middle, has so successfully teamed up year after year to decorate their unique "tree" that in local parlance the area now retains the fond nickname "Christmas Tree Circle" right through the blazing heat of an Arabian summer.

"...the Christmas pageant
is a tradition
going back to the late 1940's..."







"Another familiar custom
in the three Aramco communities
is decorating windows
and rooftops with wreaths, lights,
reindeer, sleighs and snowmen..."

CHRISTMAS IN BEIRUT

"...dropped Pere Noel into a sports stadium
from an Army helicopter to the roaring approval of
some 45,000 Lebanese children."

Christmas in Beirut has at least one thing in common with the rest of the year in the bustling Lebanese capital: it is serious business. The rushing crowds, the colorful window displays, the canned carols blaring from loudspeakers, the tinsel and lights hanging above the principal shopping streets lend much of the same commercial atmosphere that Americans today have come to expect—and sometimes deplore—of the year's most brisk sales season.

Also, since the ecclesiastical calendars of the western and eastern churches do not coincide, Beirut merchants enjoy two Christmas shopping rushes. And when the lunar cycle causes a major Muslim holiday to fall during the same period—as it has during the past two years—the visions of sugar plums are positively dazzling.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
KHALIL ABOU EL-NASR

The religious and sentimental importance of Christmas in the Middle East has traditionally taken third place to Easter and New Year's among the area's millions of Christians. But as a commercial event Christmas penetrates the entire economic structure.

Since Beirut merchants have never heard of Thanksgiving Day they don't mix pilgrims with Santa Clauses. Nevertheless, by December 1 workmen begin stringing lights and decorations along the main streets in the modern section and in the suqs in the old section. Last year even the famous old Suq Tawile (the "Long Bazaar") surrendered to the spirit of Christmas. It was closed to automobile traffic and decorated with plants and monumental sculpture.

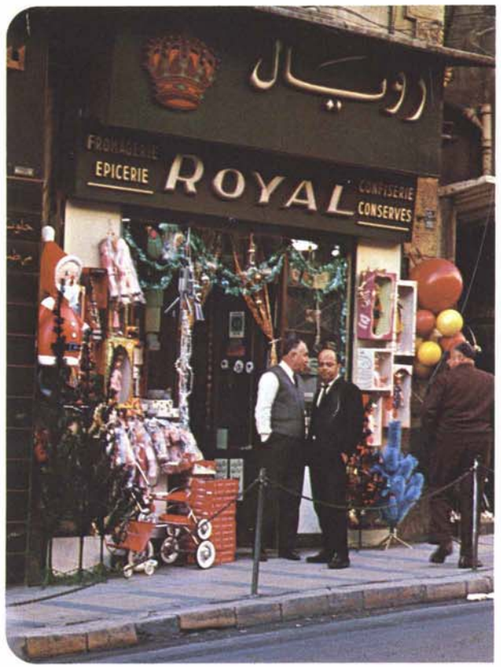
Elsewhere, sidewalks in front of flower shops sprout giant poinsettias, holly and mistletoe, and vacant lots bristle with Christmas trees, some shipped from Italy or Scandinavia, a few ruthlessly—and illegally—cut from reforested mountain areas in Lebanon itself. Along the main streets, pushcart vendors pile inflated Santa balloons from Hong Kong onto overloaded carts, and candy stores fill windows with boxes of chocolates wrapped in red and silver. In record shops an Arabic version of "Silent Night" by the popular folk singer Fairouz, stands side by side with the re-issue of Bing Crosby's "White Christmas." A theater called the Embassy schedules a Walt Disney Festival. Middle East Airlines, cashing in on its normal trademark—the Cedars of Lebanon—distributes nursery-raised cedar seedlings to passengers who leave Lebanon on Christmas day.

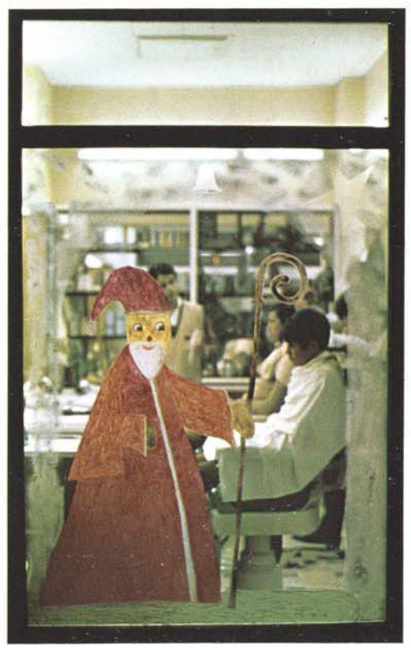
Even the Christmas card ritual has caught on in Beirut. Today Muslims as well as Christians often send Christmas cards to friends. But although large selections of European and American cards are on sale, the biggest sellers seem to be those issued by groups such as UNICEF, the Women's Auxiliary of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and the Friends of Jerusalem Society. Last year even the Palestinian commando organization al-Fateh climbed on the card bandwagon.

As Christmas draws near, the major Beirut newspapers and local magazines publish color supplements heavy with ads for Christmas and New Year's galas at every club and restaurant in town. Last year one paper printed a French translation of Art Buchwald on the Wall Street takeover of "Pere Noel's" operations at "Le Pole Nord." The English-language Daily Star ran the classic New York Sun editorial of 1897, "Yes Virginia, there is a Santa Claus," and the French-language daily, L'Orient dropped Pere Noel from an Army helicopter into a sports stadium to the roaring approval of some 45,000 Lebanese children, 40 of whom won a three-day air trip to Paris.

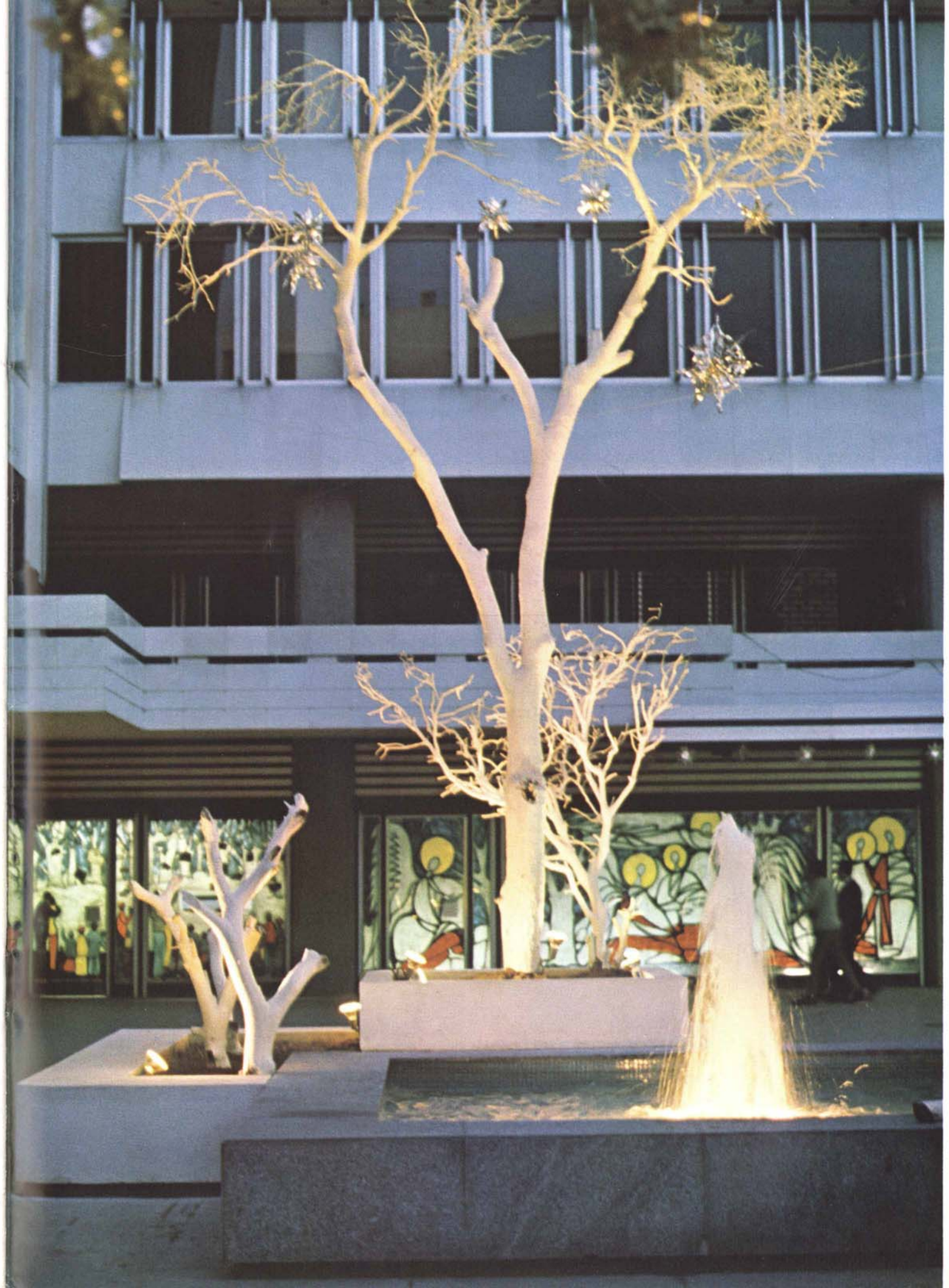
To many, Beirut's extravagant glitter contrasts badly with unhappy conditions in poor villages and refugee camps and with the ancient and holy celebrations taking place in Bethlehem, hardly 150 air-miles away. Yet Beirut is not all glitter. University choirs put on traditional works like "Amahl and the Night Visitors" and Handel's "Messiah." Schools present Christmas pageants. Lebanon's Catholic President and Muslim Prime Minister attend a special Mass. Families draw together in fellowship and prayer. And in all fairness to Beirut it must be mentioned that as crowds came thronging out of one bright movie theater last Christmas Eve, they were engulfed in an even greater crowd of teen-agers spilling down the steps from the Franciscan Chapel where they had attended, in record numbers, a midnight Jazz-Mass.

"The rushing crowds,
the colorful window displays...
the tinsel and lights
hanging above the principal
shopping streets..."





"...Christmas penetrates
the entire economic structure."



ARABS & ICONS

When most people think of icons they think of delicate Greek triptychs or the fabulous jeweled icons of Russia locked deep in the vaults of the Kremlin. Yet for almost three centuries, Arab artists, usually members of Christian religious orders, made icons in the Middle East. Icon is a Greek word meaning 'image' but on the basis of funeral portraits found in Fayyoum, Egypt, scholars have suggested that the iconic form itself may be Middle Eastern.

The Arab icons are called "Melkite" icons because they were painted by Arab artisans who belonged to the Greek Orthodox or Greek Catholic Church. Virgil Candea, a Rumanian scholar, first used the term when he was consultant for an exhibition of icons from Lebanese and Syrian collections produced by the Sursock Museum of Beirut in May 1969. His source was the derisive expression "Melkite" used by heretic Nestorian Christians to refer to communities which remained loyal to the Byzantine State Church after the early theological disputes over the nature of Christ. In the 18th century, after reuniting with the Roman Catholic Church, Greek Catholics used the term to distinguish themselves from their former Greek Orthodox brethren.

According to Sylvia Agemian, the discovery of the Melkite icons is very important scholastically. Mrs. Agemian, a researcher at the Sursock Museum and possibly the only specialist in Melkite icons in the Middle East, says: "For the first time it is being recognized that there were schools of iconographers in the Middle East which followed the Byzantine or Greek iconic tradition with the addition of Islamic elements."

Icons are an integral part of the religious life of Eastern Orthodox Christians. Like statuary and Gothic carvings they are seen as holy objects to be venerated, not merely appreciated as decoration. Yet just as decoration they are unique. Icons—original icons—are images painted onto a gold veneer applied to a smooth coat of plaster on a wooden board. Usually they were placed on a screen in front of the altar for the congregation to contemplate during the services.

Because the first icon was thought to be the image of Christ left on St. Veronica's veil which she had given him to wipe his face with when he was carrying the cross to Calvary, the early Church decided that portrayal of the divine could not be left to the imagination of the individual artist. Up to the 17th century, traditional Byzantine icon painters were forced to follow instructions in a church manual which decreed that holy persons must be as other-worldly as possible. To achieve this the artist imposed geometric molding on the body to make his subjects appear almost fleshless, and minimized any hint of the sensual by swathing them in heavy draperies. Since the saints were blessed with the Beatific Vision and therefore exuded an inner holy light, the artist painted fine white lines on the saint's cheekbones and hands to suggest the light.

As part of the formula to emphasize holiness, the artist also gave his saints heads that were disproportionately large, and formally molded beards and hair. Even colors were specified by the church guide. The Virgin's *maphorion*, a veil which covered the head and shoulders of all female saints, was always an ochre red to symbolize the tragic fate of her son.

If they appeared, mountains and buildings were highly stylized, bearing almost no relation to reality. But they didn't appear often. On orthodox icons divine persons were pictured against a background of gold with no terrestrial elements other than those associated with the particular saint: books for the Evangelists and Patriarchs, swords for martial saints such as St. George. (See article on page 4.)

Melkite artists probably learned the form of the icon from icons brought to the Middle East by Byzantine Greek and Russian patriarchs and pilgrims, and from Greek artists who lived and worked in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. But the Melkite craftsmen also knew the Cretan works of the 14th and 17th centuries. On an icon of the Archangel Michael, which he did in 1726, the artist Hanna al-Kudsi, who worked in Syria and Lebanon during the first half of the 18th century, put an inscription saying it was based on an earlier Cretan icon.

Melkite icons, however, differ from their Greek and Russian counterparts more in detail and treatment of subjects than in form. General traits like decoration, the faces and bodies of the subjects, the frequency of certain themes and, of course, Arabic inscriptions, distinguish the Melkite icon.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY KHALIL ABOU EL-NASR

BY KAREN LEWIS

In the early days, Melkite artists naturally looked to the Byzantine Greek models for guidance. But as they matured they quickly began to express their own tastes and feelings. Although the Byzantine elements prevail in the majority of the early paintings, the presence of markedly Arab characteristics is apparent. *All* the faces painted by the Melkite artists—not just Middle East saints, but Christ and his angels too—have Arabized complexions. There is a more natural oval to the faces and a softer expression than in the Byzantine icon. The bodies are fuller and rounder with less of the modeling which is characteristic of traditional icon painting. In addition, there are Arab costumes, contemporary furniture and daily household objects—all in sharp contrast to the other-worldly and awe-inspiring Byzantine saints. In one early 18th-century Melkite work, for example, the baby Virgin Mary is rocked in a cradle still common to Syria and Lebanon today. In others, Abraham, preparing to sacrifice his son, wears a turban, John the Evangelist writes at an Arab writing desk and St. George brandishes an Arab sword.

The earliest Melkite works are characterized by sumptuous decoration which the Christian craftsmen borrowed directly from Islamic art. The intricate decorations found on brasswork, on Persian carpets, and on the brocades and wood panels of Damascus are all found on Melkite icons. The whole surface of the icon was covered with floral, vegetable and geometric designs; bent leaves, lotus

flowers, pomegranates, lilies, tulips and palms are scattered on the borders, the halos and the clothing of the saints. This is not to say that all Melkite icons are ornately decorated; the 19th-century ones are often simple in the extreme.

Like European artists, the Melkite painters were influenced by their environment when they chose themes to illustrate. Local saints and legends that are typically oriental or have an oriental setting were popular: St. George, who, legend says, fought his battle with the dragon near Beirut, St. Saba, who headed a monastic order outside Jerusalem, St. Simeon Stylites who stood on his pillar in Syria for 60 years, St. Mary the Egyptian, the Virgin Mary in the Garden of Jesse and the Prophet Elie beheading the priests of Baal.

Even the dedicatory inscriptions on Melkite icons take on a distinctly Middle Eastern literary flavor. Whereas Greek and Russian inscriptions are succinct, those on Melkite works are long and flowery. For example, an icon of St. Spiridon given to a Rumanian church in 1749 by Sylvester, the Patriarch of Antioch, has not only the giver's name and the occasion but blessings and salutations covering about one-fourth of the icon.

Most of the early Melkite icons were made in Aleppo, where a family of Syrians and their students produced some of the finest examples of Melkite work. The priest, Yusuf al-Mussawir; his son, Ne'meh; grandson, Hanania; and great grandson, Girgis, span two centuries, from the 17th to the 18th, with their works. The greatest of this family of iconographers was Ne'meh, who developed the Aleppo style. Though he did not completely break with the traditional Byzantine manner of icons, he preferred a stylized naturalism. Ne'meh's angels and women have more pronounced oval heads than in Byzantine painting, his young people have rounded faces and his men have large heads with bulging foreheads, prominent cheekbones and hollow cheeks. While their noses retain the slenderness of their Byzantine prototypes, his saints have the fine almond-shaped and heavily lashed eyes found among Arab people. Ne'meh, moreover, personalized his icons with alternating green and red borders covered with gold decoration.

The influence of the Aleppo School lasted until the late 18th century with an astonishing continuity and abundance. Shukrallah ibn Yuwakim, also from Aleppo, Kyrillos al-Dimashki and some anonymous painters belonging to the Basilian religious order adhered to Ne'meh's physiognomic types, general ornamentation and the characteristic green and red borders that mark the Aleppo School of painters.

Although anonymity remained the general rule among icon painters outside the Aleppo School, several independent Melkite craftsmen do emerge. Hanna al-Kudsi, who painted during the early 18th century, did mostly restorations and reproductions of earlier works, including some of Ne'meh's. His own works are closer to traditional icon painting. Mikhail al-Dimashki, who worked in Damascus about the same time as Hanna al-Kudsi did in Jerusalem, painted

traditional icons of a popular nature with elements taken from western painters.

The works of Sylvester, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, though made in the Middle East, are strictly Byzantine in form. They attest to the controversy between the Eastern Church and the Church of Rome. Sylvester spent most of his life fighting Cyrillus V, the Patriarch of Aleppo and some of Cyrillus' bishops who, under the influence of Jesuit and Capuchin missionaries, left the Greek Orthodox Church and joined the Roman Catholic doctrine. Sylvester's paintings are formally Byzantine because he was countering the spread of doctrines like the Immaculate Conception, which is not a precept of the Eastern Church.

By the 19th century, the demand for smaller, more popular icons, and the larger prosperity made personal ownership of icons a possibility. At the same time, however, individuals had less money to use on the ornamentation of an icon than did the church so instead of etching their subjects on gold, artists took to painting directly on the wood. With the increased demand for icons, especially

Page 29: The Evangelist John at an Arab writing desk; 19th century; Sursock Museum Collection, Beirut.

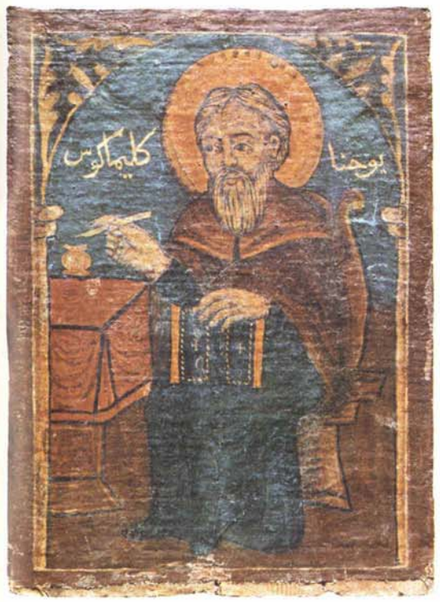
Page 30 (above): Detail of Abraham and the Sacrifice; 18th century, Aleppo School; Henri Pharaon Collection, Beirut.

Page 30 (below, left): Death of the Virgin Mary; by Ne'meh, 18th century, Aleppo School; Henri Pharaon Collection.

Page 30 (below, right): Archangel Michael; by Hanania, 18th century, Aleppo School; Sursock Museum.

Page 31 (above): The Prophet Elie and the Priests of Baal; 18th century, Aleppo School; Convent of St. Saveur, Joun, Lebanon.

Page 31 (below): St. Jean Climaque; by Butros 'Agaimi, 19th century.



from the newly established Greek Catholic churches, the artists had less time, so the elaborate ornamentation of earlier Melkite icons gave way to simpler decoration and by the second half of the 19th century decoration completely disappears. Instead of intricate designs which cover the surface and borders of the icons in works from the Aleppo School, there are simple clusters of flowers. Stylized bodies and faces totally disappear and the painters break completely with dogmatic artistic restraints.

In these later icons, Middle Eastern villagers and peasants are prominent, particularly in the works of Butros 'Agaimi, a Lebanese priest who worked during the beginning of the 19th century near Deir al-Kamar. His icon of St. Jean Climaque pictures the saint with a large fleshy face, a wide nose, big eyes, and rough workman's hands. He could just as easily be a Lebanese or Syrian laborer as the sixth-century priest who lived in Sinai and wrote a famous book of virtues. There is no gold at all used in this icon and the colors are earthy browns and grays.

A mid-19th-century Melkite painter who also favored the simple style is Ne'meh Naser from Homs, Syria. His works are characterized by their roughness. He worked directly on the wet plaster and the grooves are visible even through several layers of paint.

Although the influence of the Aleppo School dies out in the 19th century, in the middle of the century another school of painters appears in Jerusalem—the Kudsi. A group of three Melkite artists, Mikhail Mhanna, Yuhanna Saliba and Nicolas Theodorus, must have had a kind of assembly line workshop because they have so many icons of the same subject done in the same manner. Their works are characterized by large brush strokes and simplicity. Their saints have heads as round as oranges and faces that are touched with a sweet serenity.

The biggest influence on Melkite painters in the 19th century came from a Cretan painter, Michael Polychronis, or Michael the Cretan, who lived and worked in Damascus from 1809 to 1821. Almost every church of any significance in the Middle East has an icon done by Michael. Although his icons have Byzantine and Italianate elements, his works, which are done in oil, include decorative themes from the woodwork panels of Damascus in the draperies of his saints and so are classified as Melkite. The draperies of the robe are magnificently molded and his saints retain the fierce spirituallity of expression of the Byzantine world. Michael's significance is not confined to his achievements but to his influence on the average artist of his day. Outside the primitive painters like Butros 'Agaimy, every Melkite painter tried to imitate Michael's occidental style.

With the attraction of things western at the turn of the century, artists abandoned the local style. For decades the knowledge of Melkite icons was the privileged information of only a few Lebanese and Syrian collectors. With their rediscovery a valuable addition has been made to art and religion. Scholars are hoping, although the study of Melkite icons is still germinal, that they will provide new insights into the lives of the Arab Christians.

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Left: History of the Virgin Mary; 19th century, Aleppo School; Sursock Museum.

Center: Descent Into Hell; by Yusuf al-Mussawwir, 17th century; Henri Pharaon Collection.

Right: St. Mary the Egyptian; by Yusuf al-Mussawwir, 17th century; Henri Pharaon Collection.

Inside Cover: St. George and the Dragon; 19th century, Jerusalem School; Convent of St. Saveur, Joun.