ARAMCO WORLD
magazine

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MARCH-APRIL 1983

"Yesterday But Today's Memory, and Tomorrow Is Today's Dream."

"How shall I go in peace and without sorrow? Nay, not without a wound in the spirit shall I leave this city. Long were the days of pain I have spent within its walls, and long were the nights of aloneness..."

"You have given me my deeper thirsting after life. Surely there is no greater gift to man than that which turns all his aims into parching lips and all life into a fountain."

MacDonald

Gibran Remembered

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Cover: As Norman MacDonald suggests, in this centennial painting, Kahlil Gibran, poet and painter, drew inspiration and nourishment from Bsharri, the mountain village in Lebanon where, 100 years ago, he was born and to which, later, he left the proceeds of his writings. To mark his centennial, places like Bsharri, Beirut and Boston are scheduling a variety of ceremonies in honor of one of the most famous modern Arab writers in the world. Back cover: A detail from a door in a renewed and renovated Baghdad house. Photograph by Jill Brown.

◂In Baghdad, this subtly lovely detail of a door symbolizes the precious beauty that farsighted architects and planners are trying to preserve.

THE DRAGONS OF AL-HASA

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY A. R. PITTAWAY

In the silence of the oasis ~a flicker of color... a whisper of movement.

In the 40° heat of noon – (104°F) a gentle breeze rustles the regimented stands of reeds so characteristic of the al-Hasa Oasis in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Then, on a shrub, there is a flicker of color and a whisper of movement as a tiny but terrifying creature moves suddenly, and rays of scattered sunlight cascade from two pairs of shiny wings on a slim, bright red body, and from enormous red and blue eyes as fierce as a dragon's in an ancient legend.

That's not a wild simile. It is a dragon – a dragonfly – and in other times the dragonfly, Odonata, which pre-dates the dinosaur, was proportionately as dangerous as the dragon of mythology. Fossil remains from the Carboniferous period, 300 million years ago, show giants with 70-centimeter wingspans (28 inches), the largest flying insects that ever lived. Even today, in fact, the dragonfly can eat its own weight in 30 minutes.

The dragonfly is a complex creature. Almost the entire head is occupied by two enormous eyes, highly sensitive to movement and able to track prey and predators at some distance. Indeed, in some species the eyesight is so good they often fly at night; one species in Java has even become completely nocturnal.

Certain types of dragonfly – such as the Arabian Emperor *(Anax parthenope)* – constantly patrol a given territory in which they intercept potential victims, such as flies, and eat them on the wing, but most, like the Crimson Darter *(Crocothemis servilia)* and Purple-blushed Darter *(Trithemis annulata)* perch upon some sunny prominence whence they seize smaller insects or chase away competitors. Aerial dogfights are common, with the victor claiming the hunting ground after a noisy clash of wings.

Skilled fliers, they have four nearly equally sized wings which seem fragile but are, in fact, reinforced by a fine network of tubular veins. Unlike those of nearly all other insects, they're attached directly to the body's flight muscles. When the dragonfly is hovering or flying slowly forwards or backwards, each pair beats alternately to produce a characteristic rustling sound as they rub against one another. At high speed, which can exceed 80 kmh (50 mph), both pairs beat in silent unison.

The Desert Darter migrates north by night to breed.

The Arabian Emperor hunts food in a given territory.

The Azure Stalker above, and, left, the Carmine Darter.

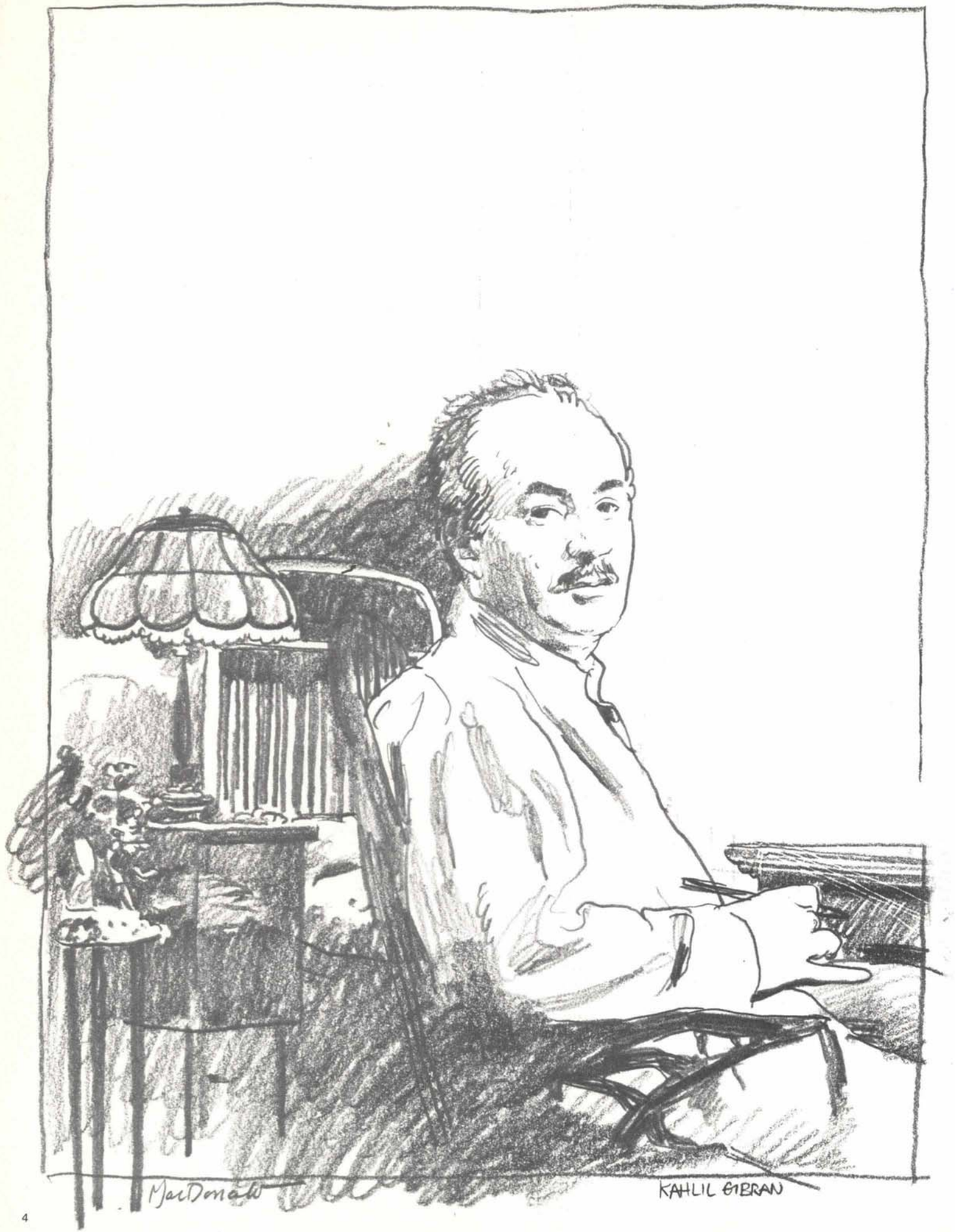
In Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Gulf, the dragonfly has need of flying skills; dependent on often temporary water bodies in which to breed, many species must undertake long migrations. Each March and April, islands in the Gulf are often inundated by swarms of dragonflies on their way north, especially the Desert Darter *(Selysiothemis nigra)* and Arabian Emperor, many migrating during the hours of darkness.

Water plays a large part in the life cycle of the dragonfly and almost every water body has its complement of living jewels cavorting over it. Few people, admittedly, associate Arabia with water; yet there are numerous oases, waterholes and rockface trickles to be found there – which support diverse dragonfly fauna: some 22 species, ranging from the Giant Emperor dragonfly *(Anax imperator)* of Northern Oman with its 15 centimeter wingspan, to the diminutive 3 centimeter Layla Damselfly *(Enallagma vansomereni)* of central Saudi Arabia. Indeed, so extensive are the oases of eastern Saudi Arabia that one species, the Scarlet Darter *(Crocothemis chaldaeorum)*, appears to have evolved in isolation there.

Some species breed in algae-overgrown channels in dark, cool oases, where, from eggs laid underwater, tiny nymphs, or naiads, are hatched. Though wingless, these nymphs have gills and are every bit as ferocious as their elders. Once mature, a nymph will crawl slowly out from the water to hang motionless on some vertical surface until gradually the back splits and a soft, pale adult emerges, its wings crumpled and small. Then, as blood is pumped into them, the wings grow and harden and it takes flight.

Considering their ferocious appearance and habits, it is not surprising that they have given rise to strange tales. In rural England – and urban New England – dragonflies were often known as "Darning Needles" or "Sewing Needles," because, everyone thought, they were capable of sewing up the eyes, ears and mouths of children. In al-Hasa and the eastern part of Saudia Arabia, however, the tradition is mellower. In Arabic *ya'sub*, the dragonfly is known affectionally as *Abu-Bashir*, "the bearer of good news."

A. R. Pittaway is a graduate entomologist who has spent many years working in the Arabian Peninsula.



Gibran Remembered

WRITTEN BY AILEEN VINCENT-BARWOOD
ILLUSTRATED BY NORMAN MACDONALD

Suddenly, from Boston to Beirut, they're remembering Gibran: Kahlil Gibran, Lebanon's beloved poet, painter, philosopher and mystic – a writer who irrevocably changed modern Arabic poetry, and who is probably the one modern Arab writer known throughout the world.

The occasion is Gibran's centennial – the 100th anniversary of his birth – and it seems that everyone wants to celebrate it. Boston, where he once lived, proclaimed January as "Kahlil Gibran Month," President Gemayel of Lebanon has announced that 1983 will be the Kahlil Gibran International Year and Lebanese authorities announced, on January 19, that funds are available to complete an hour-long film on Gibran and release it to the Public Television System (PBS) in the U.S. for showing this fall.

Celebrations are being planned in Oxford, Dublin, Africa, Australia and South America and on January 25 Lebanon's Minister of Education Issam Khoury announced a commemoration program that would include a Gibran International Conference in Beirut August 17-21, inauguration of the Gibran Memorial Museum in Bsharri August 21, publication of centennial posters and pamphlets in five languages, a $10,000 international competition, issuance of commemorative stamps and the founding of a university chair of Gibran studies.

And on January 6, some 500 Gibran fans gathered at the Boston Public Library – an event sponsored by the Arabic speaking community and the American Lebanese Community of Greater Boston. It featured a reception at the library and the opening of a month-long exhibition of 18 lithographs of Gibran's paintings and 20 photographs taken near Bsharri, Lebanon, the writer's birthplace.

Boston, calling Gibran "one of Boston's own" and not content to let one celebration suffice, also scheduled interviews and special musical programs on television, a revival of the Golden Links, an Arabic literary group, in the St. George's Community Center – at which Professor Fawzi Abdul Razak of Harvard's Widener Library spoke – and the scoring of Gibran's poems on love and marriage by Boston composer and pianist Minuetta Kessler; it will be sung by Leslie Holmes.

Elsewhere in the United States, equally ambitious programs are planned. The lithographs, and other Gibran works will be shown in Chicago, Detroit, New York, Los Angeles, Washington and Pittsburgh, according to Percy Dahan, formerly director of Lebanon's Tourist and Information Office in New York, now the new economic attaché.

"And then there is the film," he said. "Dr. Suhail Bushrui of the American University of Beirut's English Department, who revised the script and who is also arranging a Gibran retrospective at AUB's library, will be here for that. There is also a full program of speakers and presentations. We hope it will lead to a Gibran revival."

At the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., meanwhile, a series of poignant photographs of a young Gibran and his family – taken by Frederick Holland Day and identified recently by Gibran biographers Jean and Kahlil G. Gibran – will go on display. And in June, at the University of Minnesota's Department of Immigration History Research Center – which houses the papers of Philip K. Hitti, one of the first modern Arab historians in the United States – Rudolph Vecoli, director of the center, has arranged the first Philip K. Hitti Symposium. The theme will be: "Arabic Speaking Immigrants to the U.S. Before World War II", and a day long program on Gibran will be added.

Nor is this all. In Washington, Sheryl Ameen, an art historian, is forming a national committee to sponsor traveling exhibits from more than 80 paintings and drawings left to the Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences in Savannah, Georgia.

In addition, Miss Ameen wants to erect a statue of Kahlil Gibran in Washington, D.C. "Almost every other nationality has one somewhere in the capital but the Lebanese do not," she said, adding that she and other Arab-Americans have proposed the issue of a commemorative stamp by the U.S. Post Office and – a long term project – hope to establish a Gibran museum, possibly in Boston, to house Gibran's work.

Behind all this is the story of a remarkable man: Kahlil Gibran, an ethnic folk hero in his youth, a cult figure of the 1960's youth movements, a respected representative of symbolist art and the author of a small, philosophical book that by 1983 had sold some seven million copies.

It was in that village – Bsharri, in what was then called Syria – that Kahlil Gibran was born 100 years ago, and it was from that village that Gibran's mother Kamila, a proud woman with a profligate husband, emigrated to America in 1895.

To get from Bsharri to the United States at that time was not easy, but having done so, Kamila went to South Boston, settled into quarters next to relatives and, to support her four children, began to sell cloth and lace in Boston's then-wealthy Back Bay. She also, in a venerable Lebanese tradition, spent most of her free time in the houses of friends – most of them as homesick for Lebanon as she was. During those evenings, hours were devoted to poetry and storytelling; as much a part of family life as marriages, births, dedications, anniversaries and funerals, these evenings frequently attracted poets from the Arabic-speaking community, some of whom wrote special poems just for such occasions.

At that time, Kahlil, 12 years old and Kamila's youngest son, was beginning to enjoy and absorb this beloved tradition. According to his cousin and biographer, Boston sculptor Kahlil G. Gibran, he would sit on the floor in a corner with the other children, listening intently to the words of his elders as they spoke or sang about Lebanon, the land where they were born, the land where their hearts remained – and the land to which the boy would later return.

It was at that time too that Gibran discovered Denison House, an early Boston settlement center – and that Denison House discovered Gibran.

Denison House was under the guidance of a group of dedicated and idealistic women, who quickly discovered the young Syrian boy's unusual – and obvious – gifts. They, in turn, called him to the attention of Fred Holland Day, co-owner of a publishing house, and a pioneer in the new art-form sweeping America: photography. This was important because Day was able to offer Gibran the chance to illustrate poems and book covers as well as to write poetry.

As echoes of transcendentalism could still be heard in New England at this time – and as poets like Louise Guiney, Lilla Cabot Perry and Josephine Peabody were then attempting to break the shackles of a narrow upbringing and attain a mystical union with the universe – Gibran's already mystical approach to poetry appealed to them.

NEW YORK IN GIBRAN'S DAY

Art patron Sarah Choate Sears also admired Gibran's work, and photographer Charles Peabody, as well as Day, photographed him; some of these photographs show the dark-eyed lad and his handsome family in Middle Eastern dress, a reminder that at this time all things Eastern were much in vogue.

Of all his patrons, the most devoted was Mary Haskell, headmistress of Boston's Marlborough Street School for Girls. His advisor, his admirer, his benefactor and his guiding spirit for many years, Mary Haskell would later help him to study in Paris, would inherit many of his paintings – and leave them, in turn, to the Telfair Academy – and would serve, one biographer said, as a model for Almitra in his famous book *The Prophet.*

But Boston, though vital to Gibran's development, was only one stop in his journey toward greatness. At 14, he returned to Lebanon to study Arabic and Arabic literature and, unhappily, quarrel with his father, a man who was opposed to Kahlil's creative tendencies.

Despite this traumatic development, Gibran continued to live and work in Lebanon. He stayed there attending college from 1898 to 1902 and then went back to Boston – and tragedy. By 1904 he had lost his mother, his sister Sultana, his half-brother Peter and, as if this were not enough, his entire stock of art work; it burned in a fire at the Harcourt Studios on Irvington Street, where his drawings were being exhibited.

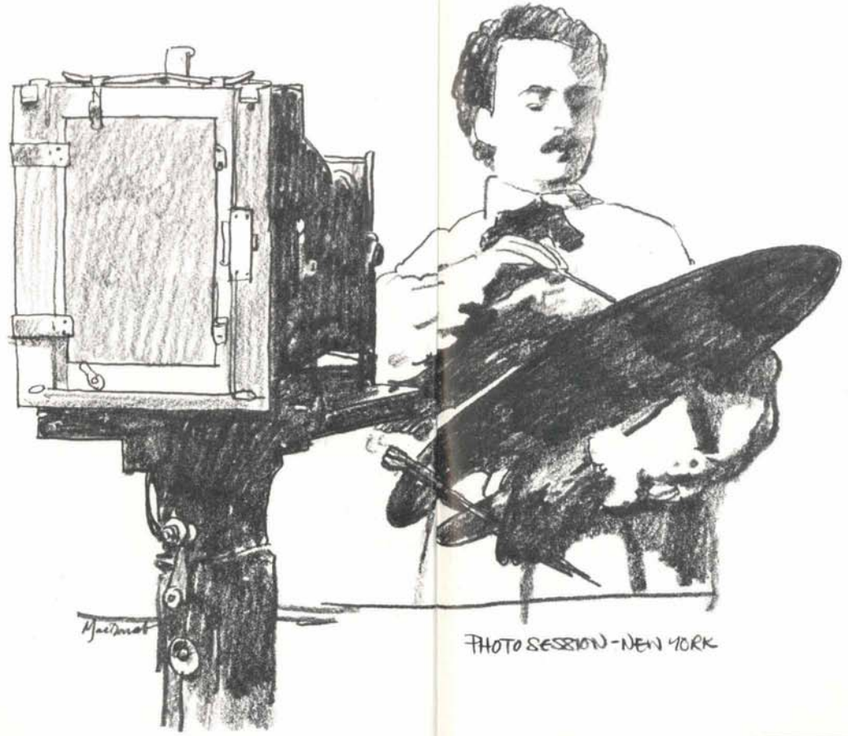
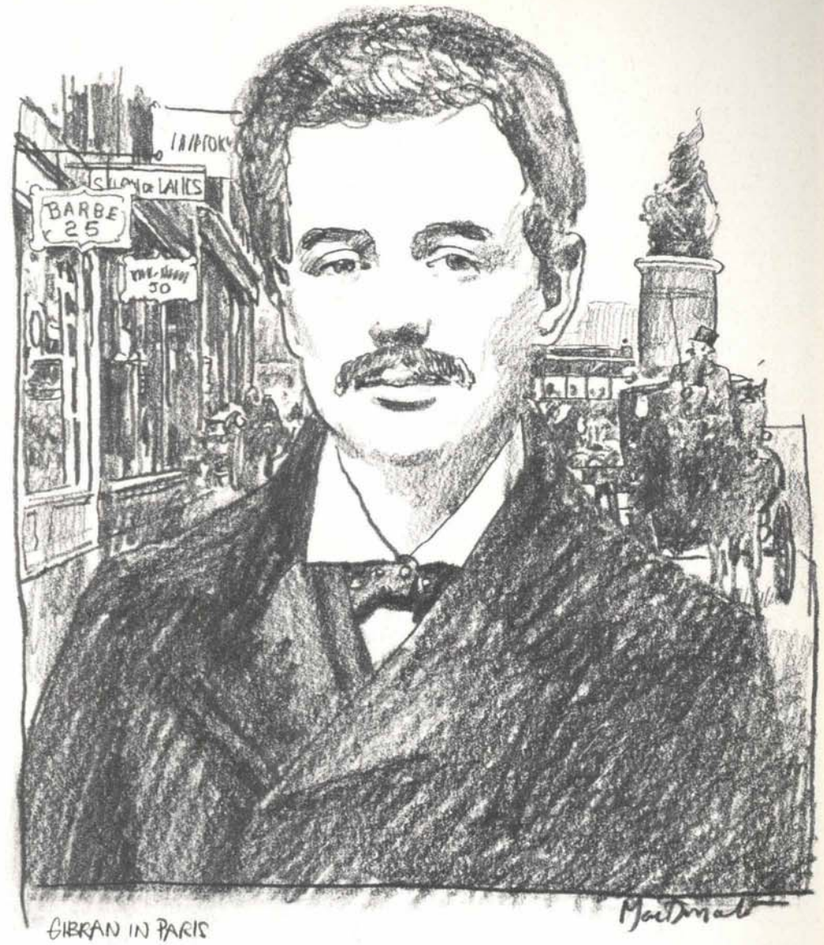


PHOTO SESSION - NEW YORK

For Gibran, this was a devastating series of losses, and in the next few years, possibly searching for solace, he plunged into the world of Arab emigré writers, contributing articles and essays to New York newspapers, publishing books of allegories and rebellious and romantic themes under the *al-Mohajer (The Emigrant)* imprint and helping to organize the Golden Links, a group of Arab-Americans in Boston who met regularly to hear discussions and lectures; in New York he also helped form *al-Rabild,* a society of eight major contributors to Arabic emigrant literature. Two of them, Ameen Rihani and Mikhail Naimy, would later contribute extensively to the developing *mahjar,* or Arab-exile movement, in New York. It was a prolific time, according to his biographers Jean and Kahlil, authors of *Kahlil Gibran, His Life and World,* and was to have a lasting impact on the use of Arabic in modern writing in the Arab East.

Today, in their fashionable South End town house, not far from the area where both Gibran and his cousin-namesake grew up, Jean and Kahlil still have many of Gibran's original manuscripts and drawings – including *The Prophet.* Now 60 himself, the sculptor has tried hard to establish his cousin's place in American art and letters – especially as a figure in the Symbolist painting that Gibran took up in Paris between 1908 and 1910. In that period, he studied at the Académie Julian and worked in the *atelier* of Symbolist painter Pierre Marcel-Beronneau; he also began a series of portraits of great artists that were exhibited at the National Society of Fine Arts.

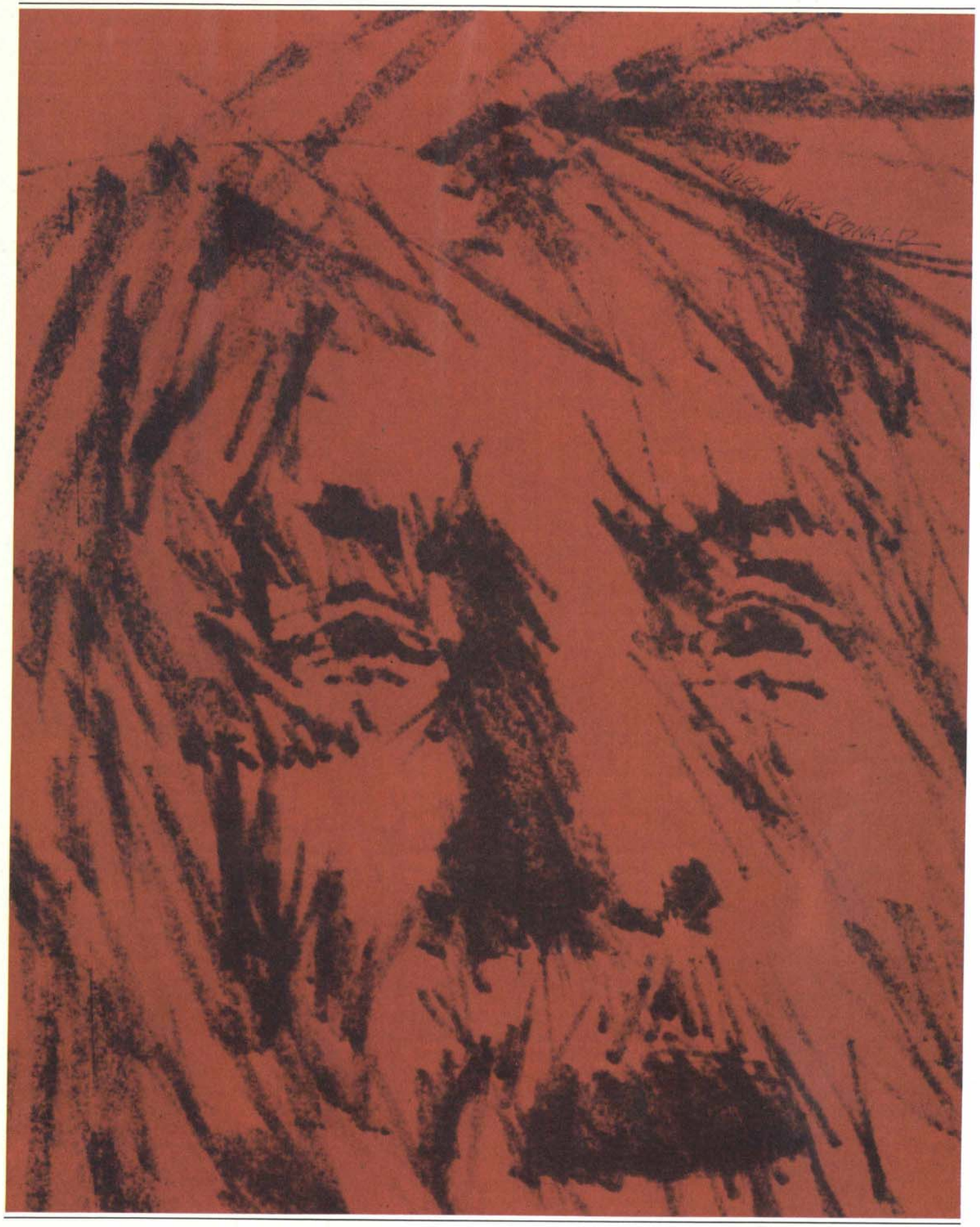


GIBRAN IN PARIS

On his return from Paris, Gibran settled in New York's Greenwich Village, where he published two more books in Arabic – *Broken Wings* and *Tears and Laughter* – exhibited his drawings at the Montrose gallery and, though he continued to produce Arabic poems and anthologies, began writing in English.

His first book, *The Madman,* a selection of parables based on Lebanese folklore, was published by Alfred Knopf – the publishing firm that continues to publish him to this day – and indicated the personal dichotomy that Gibran was to feel all his life, and that Mary Haskell described well in her diary: "He lives in two worlds – Syria and America – and is at home in neither."

With the publication of *The Prophet* in 1923, however, Gibran changed. An immediate sellout, *The Prophet* made him internationally known and, in a sense, committed him to English – and to a universal rather than national vision of people. He even called himself a "citizen of



A Strange Little Book

WRITTEN BY MIKHAIL NAIMY
Adapted from Aramco World Magazine
November-December 1964

In his modest third story apartment in New York one night in 1924, Kahlil Gibran handed me a letter from the president of Colorado college asking permission to use a verse from Gibran's recently published book, *The Prophet;* he wanted to engrave the verse on a bell in the college chapel. The verse was "Yesterday is but today's memory, and Tomorrow is today's dream."

Gibran by then had earned a modest reputation as a promising artist in Boston, and as a promising Arabic writer in both New York and Lebanon. Many of his stories and other writings had already appeared in some of the Arabic journals published in New York, journals which carried his name back to the Arab countries in the old world where the younger generation hailed him as a rising and brilliant star in the firmament of new Arab literature.

Not content with success in the small, little known cultural world of Lebanon, however, Gibran began to think seriously of invading the much more influential Anglo-Saxon world and in 1918 published a small book titled *The Madman.* That was followed two years later by another small book called *The Forerunner,* and then in 1923, by *The Prophet,* about which, Gibran, the letter in hand, said to me that night: "It's a strange little book, Mischa."

It was indeed. Though barely 20,000 words long, mystical and philosophical, *The Prophet* soon began to attract attention in a very odd way. One New York minister, for example, began to read from it and then dramatize it at services. Indeed its reputation spread so widely that one day, much later, he received a letter of admiration from the Queen of Rumania. Later, during World War II, sales of *The Prophet,* never quite out of print, went up sharply again [as they would still again in the 1960's when the book was taken up by the youth movements – Ed.].

It is all the more strange if you remember that *The Prophet* is, in effect, a simple collection of aphorisms – on love, marriage, work, death and other subjects close to the human heart – voiced by a certain stranger in a certain city.

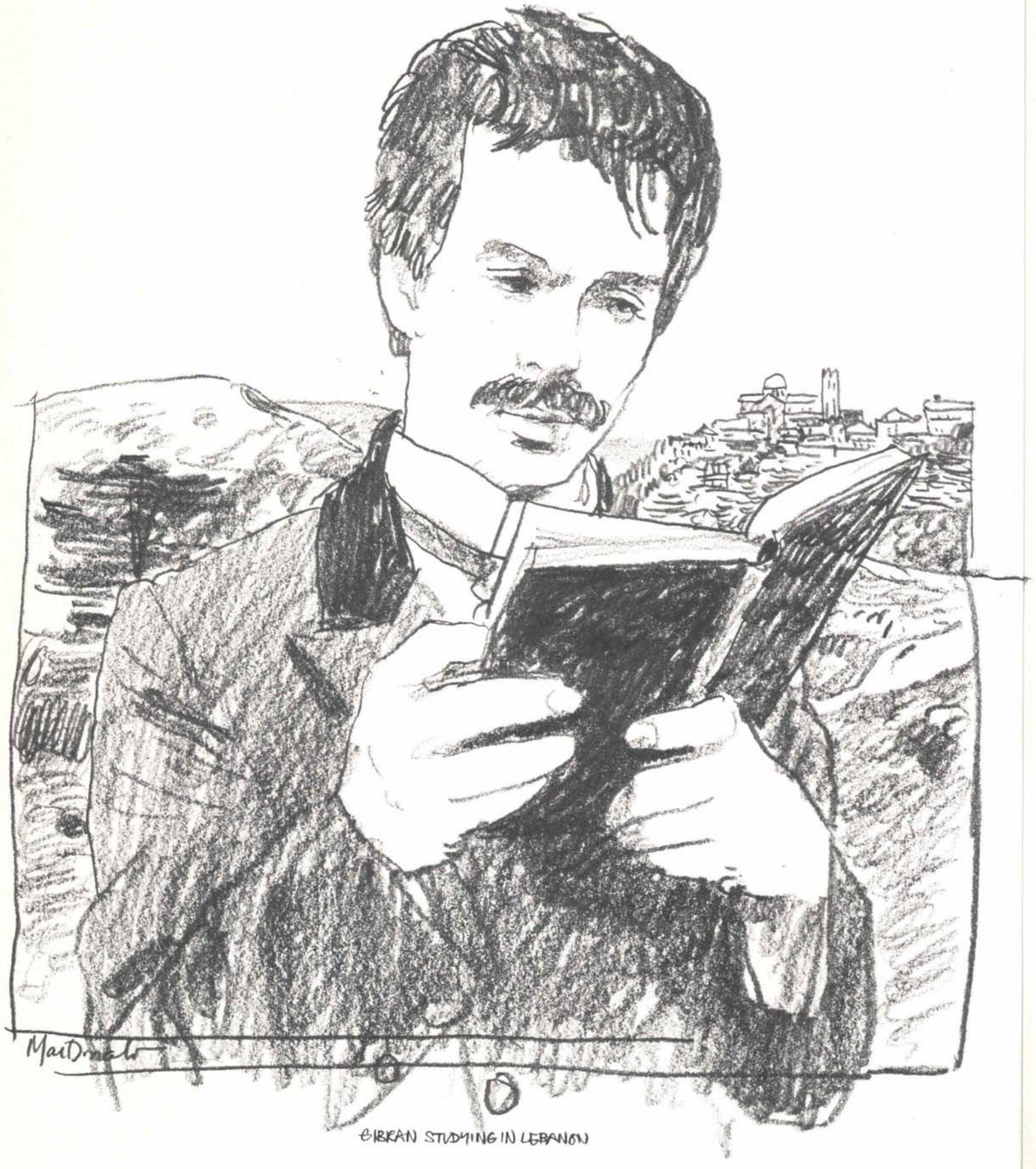
Somehow, though, Kahlil Gibran breathed passion into those sayings and *The Prophet,* as a result, is infused with the reactions of an impassioned, high-strung and over-sensitive soul that had known the full range of human experiences – extreme dejection to the highest exaltation – expressed in words like shafts of light that pierce the dark.

To me, of course, *The Prophet* was more than literature; it was also disclosures of deeply personal feelings that I, born but 50 miles from Bsharri, at the foot of Lebanon's majestic Mount Saneen, could both sense and share. I knew, for example, or thought I knew, how lonely Gibran had been in New York. And I could, therefore, share the pain of Almustafa when he says: "Nay, not without a wound in the spirit shall I leave this city. Long were the days of pain I have spent within its walls, and long were the nights of aloneness…"

Similarly, I could share his gratitude for the lessons that life in New York can teach, and for the marvelous recognition that it accorded Gibran and that he captured so well: "You have given me my deeper thirsting after life. Surely there is no greater gift to man than that which turns all his aims into parching lips and all life into a fountain."

I knew, moreover, that Gibran, a year before publication of *The Prophet,* had planned to return permanently to Lebanon – a fact that undoubtedly deepened the reluctance to depart that Almustafa expressed so poignantly. He had purchased a small deserted monastery outside Mar Sarkis near Bsharri in the heart of the mountains that had nourished him as a child and as a youth.

On the night we talked of his verse on a bell in Colorado, we could not, of course, know that seven years later, in April 1931, Gibran, only 48, would die unexpectedly, nor that Mar Sarkis would be his tomb rather than his retreat. No, we only knew, both of us, that *The Prophet* was just what he said it was, a strange little book.



GIBRAN STUDYING IN LEBANON

MAR SARKIS MUSEUM, BSHARRI

the world," and went on to publish such works as *Sand and Foam, The Earth Gods* and *The Wanderers.*

In those works, according to his biographers, he was moving ever closer to the transcendental philosophy of the early part of the 19th century. Earlier, during World War I, when Turkey joined Germany and Austria and, as part of their Middle East strategy, occupied Syria. Gibran's feelings were strongly nationalistic. Now, however, he moved toward a "universal" approach.

Basically, the Gibrans have written, Kahlil Gibran had a simple message to convey. "You are far greater than you know. And all's well," a message that accorded well with the Flower Children's simple – and sometimes simplistic – thinking, as the 1960's various youth movements got underway. Because of this, perhaps, Gibran's writings, especially *The Prophet,* were much in vogue among the young, if not always among scholars and critics, who were usually reluctant to acclaim Gibran.

This may be attributed to some extent to Gibran's tendency to preach, the original title of *The Prophet,* in fact, was "The Counsels." But it is also true that Gibran's special form of romanticism collided head-on with the new literary currents of the 1920's: the expressionism, naturalism and sometimes disillusioned realism that were then transforming American drama, poetry and fiction.

But if Gibran's style failed to elicit profuse praise in United States literary circles, it had quite the opposite impact in Lebanon. His style of writing and that of his small band of New York Arab writers affected all Arabic writing. "It is his own, an unmistakable 'Gibranian style", Dr. Salma Jayyusi told the audience at the January 6 gathering at the Boston Public Library, "characterized by a loose and flowing verse which is both rich and modern."

Gibran, said Dr. Jayyusi, founder and director of PROTA, a publishing project aimed at translating Arabic literature into English, "also gave modern Arabic literature a new and creative impulse. He was young, he was daring and he brought to Arabic literature an entirely new and inventive vocabulary which challenged the formalized language of tradition."

Such views are shared by Bob Elias, the co-producer of the upcoming film. Elias wrote a screenplay himself on Gibran's life 15 years ago. "His poetry had a simplicity and beauty which influenced others," said Elias, the son of Syrian-American parents who knew Gibran.

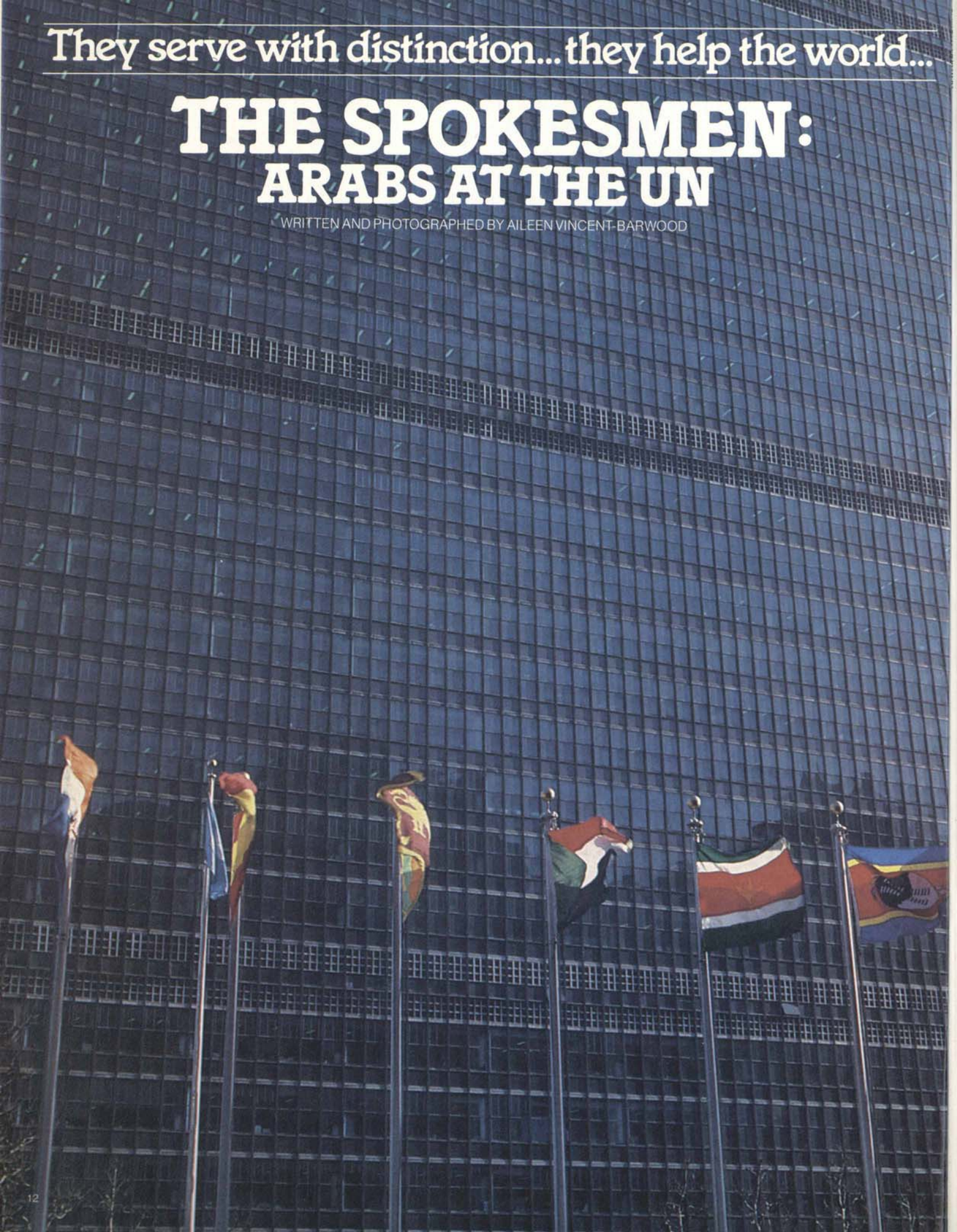
Gibran, as his one time critic, biographer and friend Mikhail Naimy suggests (See box), drew much of the depth and feeling in his writing from his own deeply-felt experiences. In sum, however, his output was very small, partly perhaps, because he died so young – on April 10, 1931, at 48 – like his mother, sister and brother in that tragic period shortly after he returned to Boston from Lebanon.

Today, with Lebanon in ruins after years of bitter civil strife and hatred, as well as the heartless bombing during the Israeli invasion, Gibran's views on the brotherhood of man may seem hopelessly innocent. But Lebanon, nonetheless, is gearing up to salute him – and his ideas – because, as Sheryl Ameen puts it. "It is this view of the brotherhood of man, this idea that man must reconcile his differences, that makes Gibran the poet-philosopher he is. All his life he hoped and worked for reconciliation."

They serve with distinction... they help the world...

THE SPOKESMEN: ARABS AT THE UN

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY AILEEN VINCENT-BARWOOD



At the United Nations complex in New York, on the bank of the East River, a small, select group of Arab men and women have often provided the first contact – and sometimes the only contact – that many people, especially Americans, have had with the Middle East. Highly educated, literate in several languages, politically astute and well versed in more than one culture, they work, teach, travel, lecture, write books, give papers and serve with distinction on a variety of agencies which benefit the entire world. Many, in addition, have spouses distinguished in their own right and children who are often high achievers.

Their loyalty to their countries is, of course, unquestionable, but many nationals possess another loyalty as well: to the United Nations and to the concept of a global community dedicated to *"safeguarding the fabric of international law and to ensuring world peace and security."* Over their many years of service to this UN principle these men and women have acquired a world view of today's problems, a remarkable patience to work toward their solution and an enviable grasp of world politics. They are, in fact, a good example of what Lebanon's former ambassador to the UN, Ghassan Tueni, terms "the new Arab image."

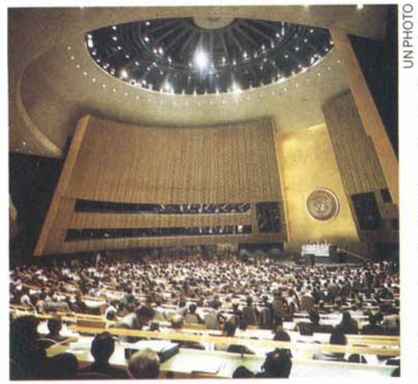
"We refuse to be maintained any longer in a romantic position," Tueni said firmly. "The folkloric, the romantic Orientalism approach to the Arab must go, as must the days of seeing Arabs as objects, as consumer kings, as oil magnates... The new image now emerging is one of modernity, of the Arab and his ideals integrated with the universal culture, someone with much of value to contribute to the world's present civilization."

One example of such an Arab might well be Jaffar Allagany, Saudi Arabia's chief representative to the United Nations, a lean and courteous diplomat whose soft-spoken words often conceal their firm purpose, a graduate *magna cum laude* in political science from New York City's Fordham University and a 26-year veteran of his country's foreign service.

Diplomacy, says Allagany, is a career he aspired to ever since he was a youngster growing up in Jiddah, one of two brothers and 10 sisters – a career in which his businessman father encouraged him by sending him to high school at Victoria College in Alexandria, Egypt, and on to higher education in the U.S.

His efforts were successful. He was accepted in the foreign service and after serving the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – first in Madrid, then in other European posts – he was sent in 1964 to the UN Mission in New York.

An avowed museum-goer, art lover and bibliophile – at present he is enlarging the mission's library of reference books on the Middle East – Allagany is widely read on many topics, particularly Islamic history. "Did you know," he asks, "that it was an Arab country which was the first foreign nation to recognize the government of the newly-constituted United States? The country was Morocco."



UN PHOTO

The United Nations General Assembly in session.

His work at the UN, of course, is of paramount importance, but he is also deeply committed to the establishment in New York City of an Islamic Center, with schools and shops, and a mosque for the more than 1.5 million members of the Tri-States area Islamic community (New York, New Jersey and Connecticut), a total that includes approximately 6,000 Muslims in the UN community.

Towards this end, land on 96th Street has already been purchased and leveled in anticipation of the collection of the $30 million needed to start building. "It is our religion which sustains us when we are away from our country and our families," Allagany says, "so it is important that our children do not miss out on being members of a Muslim community."

Two of Allagany's sons, Khalid and Hisham, attend the UN school; another son Tarik, attends the University of Portland; and a fourth son, Kamal, who has his M.B.A. degree, works at the Saudi-American Bank in Jiddah. His wife, Huda, is finishing up her degree in history at New York University.

About the UN and its importance, Jaffar Allagany is emphatic. "It's a pity that of the many facets of the UN, the only one constantly in the limelight is the political one. Because of a handful of countries who consistently ignore the UN's resolutions, this aspect of it is often a failure. But we've had enormous achievements! Human rights. Disaster relief. Worldwide economic, industrial and labor cooperation. Population. Agriculture. The World Food Program – Saudi Arabia is the largest cash contributor to that, giving approximately $55 million a year for each of three years. No, you cannot say, as some are doing these days, that the UN is not an important force in the world today."

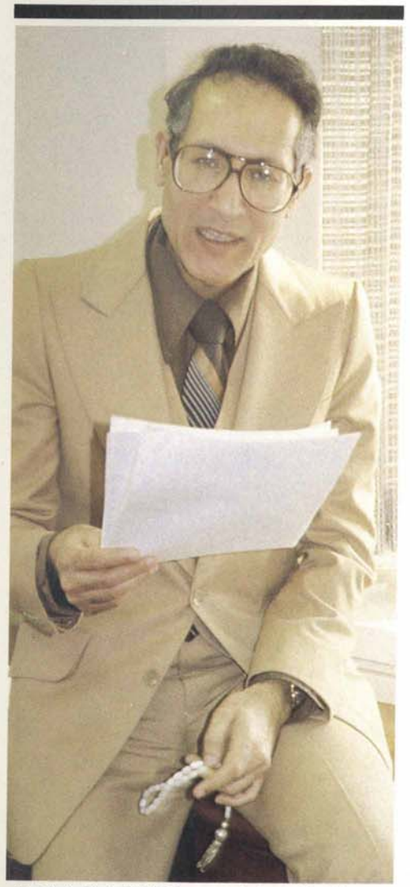
A similar opinion is heard from Hala Kittani, of Iraq, since September, 1975, the person in charge of the Middle East section of UNICEF's Information Division. A slim, beautiful graduate of Vassar, the only child of Iraq's first ambassador to the United States and the niece of a former Iraqi prime minister, Hala Kittani says that "the United Nations has been under heavy criticism for a long time but the UN is necessary – think of what the world would be without it! What we must do is forget about our image and get on with the job. There's much to be done."

Though her responsibilities are many, Hala Kittani's present priorities are: providing information on what the use of infant formula feeding may be doing to the babies of the developing countries; cooperating with the governments in some of those countries to assist, through information and education, the efforts of Prince Talal ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz Al Sa'ud, of Saudi Arabia, UNICEF's special envoy and president of the Arab Gulf Program for the UN Development Organizations (AGFUND), to improve the health and well-being of the world's children.

To Hala Kittani, Prince Talal's program is immensely rewarding. A mother herself – her 15-year old son Dara is now living in Baghdad to learn Arabic – she speaks with knowledge and with emotion about the poverty and hunger of the world's children. She is dedicated to doing what she can to ease their lot and, through her job, helps design and present information on UNICEF which will help raise funds to further the agency's work.

Like all the agencies of the United Nations, UNICEF is non-political. "We must be," Hala Kittani says adamantly. "We must remain free of all political strings or we will cease to be effective." It is a statement often heard among her colleagues, both Arab and non-Arab, and echoes Prince Talal's view that "it does not matter if the needy are Christian, Muslim or Jewish; politics makes such distinctions, humanitarianism does not."

Helping care for the Third World's children is but one of the worldwide programs that the UN's more than 15 agencies and their various branches are involved in – and in which Arab representatives play important roles. Riyad Tabarra of Lebanon, for example, who, prior to his recent appointment as resident UN representative in Tunisia, headed up the Middle East section of the Economic Council for West Asia (ECWA), a division of the UN's Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA). Financed by seven Western and five Arab nations, this program, with a budget of $138 million a year, seeks, through information, census-taking and educational programs, to assist member nations in family planning projects.



Saudi Arabia's chief UN representative Jaffar Allagany.

According to Tabarra, large world populations eat up the world's resources and have a devastating effect on the land, the environment, the economy and, consequently, the stability of the world. Such surveys as the census taken recently by ECWA are valuable because they show developing trends – in this case a continuing decline in the fertility of the world's population – indicating to the population experts that global stability could be reached by the year 2040, despite apparently enormous growth in such areas as Africa and South America.

With the help of the UN's education efforts, the infant mortality rate is also decreasing, surveys show. In the long run, this will also help bring down the birth rate, Tabarra says, since faith that a child will live brings greater security to the family and a corresponding belief that it is safe to have fewer children.

Although the United Arab Emirates do not have to concern themselves with an over-population problem, they are among the Gulf countries who are donors, through AGFUND, to UNICEF's program to help mothers and children in the rest of the world.

The United Arab Emirates mission to the United Nations is headed by Ambassador Fahim Sultan Al-Qasimi, one of six brothers and five sisters of the ruling family of Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah. A lawyer with a degree in international law, and a master's degree in international politics from Johns Hopkins University, Ambassador Al-Qasimi is married to Linda Usra Soffan, a Lebanese-American whose book, *The Status of Women in the U.A.E.,* was recently published.

A modest man who speaks fluent English and French, paints when he has time, plays chess when he can find a partner, and plays the *'ud,* a string instrument, for his own pleasure, Ambassador Al-Qasimi admits that he sometimes finds the UN "frustrating," but says that it is nonetheless an important forum.

"The UN is not Aladdin's lamp," he insists. "It is, rather, a place of meeting and discussion for people of different cultures, different ideals, different concerns. You listen to each other's problems, get to know and respect them, and work in concert – when possible – to solve them. Without the UN it would be difficult to do this. You might say that, despite our difficulties in the Security Council, we are the world's peacekeepers."

Ambassador Al-Qasimi joined his country's foreign ministry after getting his first law degree from Cairo University. He served four years at the UN in Geneva as its permanent resident and consul-general, and has been in New York for the past two years.

A true diplomat, at home anywhere in the world, he nonetheless misses his country and his family and friends in Ras al-Khaimah. "The UAE is building up so rapidly," he says, "that sometimes when I go home I lose my way in my own country."

It is a comment often heard among the Middle East Arabs at the UN. Diplomats all, cosmopolites every one, their hearts and minds nonetheless still dwell in their homelands.

"What else would you expect?" asks Dr. Hazem Nuseibeh, Jordan's former UN ambassador, in his gruff, outspoken way. "Our roots, all that has made us what we are, are there."

And well he might say so, for his own illustrious family, the Nuseibehs of Jerusalem, is the oldest recognized family of that ancient city, reportedly dating back 1,400 years. Originally from Medina, the members of this Muslim family, as a sacred trust over centuries, have held the keys to Christendom's holiest shrine, the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.

Though he now calls Amman his home, Ambassador Nuseibeh was born in Jerusalem, spent his childhood there,

Fahim Al-Qasimi, head of the UAE Mission to the UN.

attended Rawda College, and served as an elected member of the municipal council and later as a member of the executive committee, once the highest governing organization of Arab Jerusalem.

Like Jaffar Allagany, he attended Victoria College in Alexandria, where, some years later, King Hussein would also go and which then was considered the finest English public school in the Middle East. Upon graduation, young Hazem was accepted at Cambridge, but just a week prior to his departure for England, World War II broke out and he went instead to the American University of Beirut, where, in 1943, he was graduated with a B.A. degree.

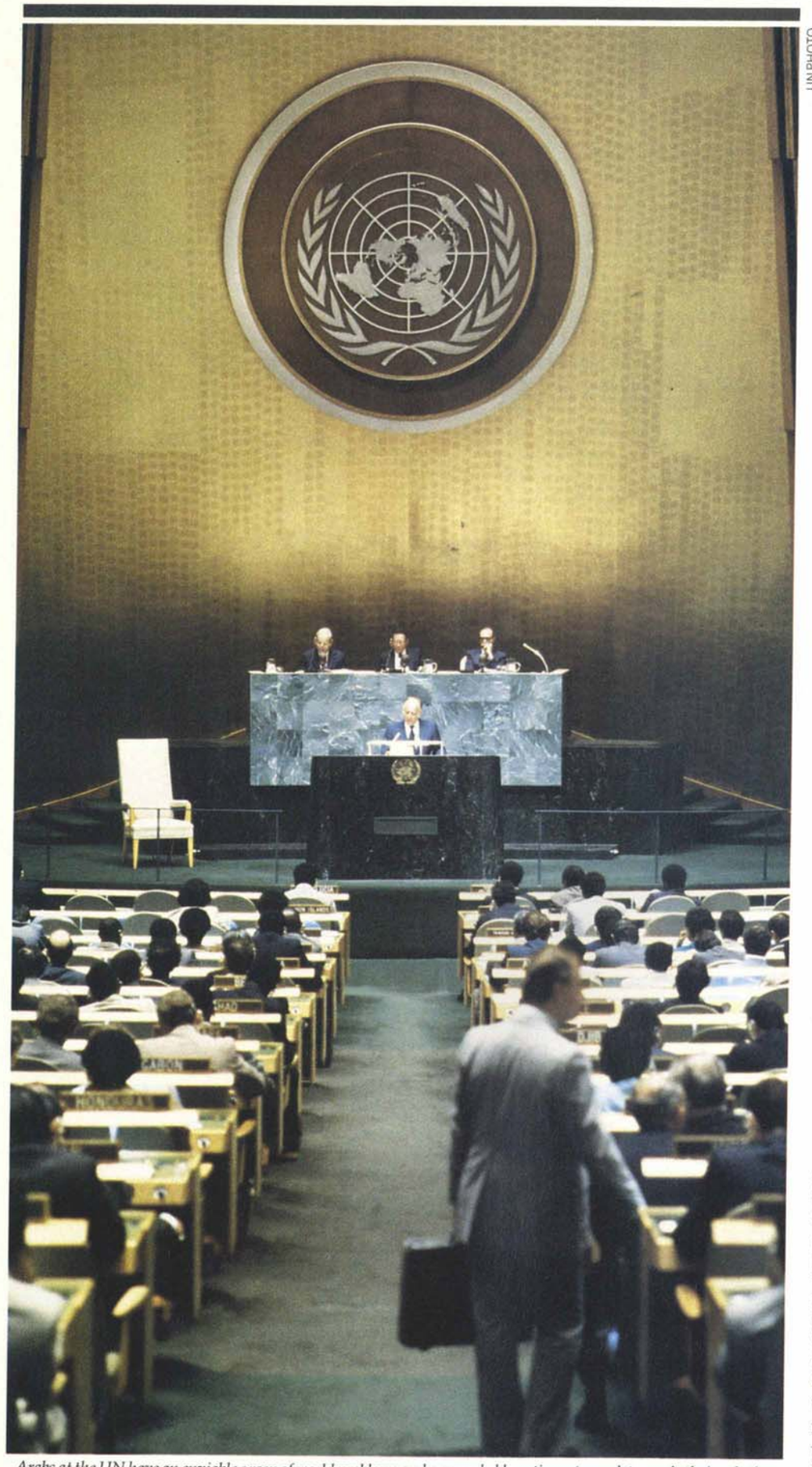
In Jerusalem, during the next five years, he worked as a journalist with the Palestine Broadcasting Station, and studied law at the Jerusalem Law College, graduating in 1948. He then headed for Princeton – to the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs – where he proceeded to earn three more degrees: a master's in public affairs and a master's and a Ph.D. in political science. Finally, in 1962, he was appointed Foreign Minister of Jordan.

Despite his role as diplomat, UN representative and, in 1982, a member of the 15-member Security Council, Hazem Nuseibeh is irrepressibly and determinedly outspoken on the UN and on U.S.-Arab relations. "The Arab World has a longtime friendship with the United States, dating back to the 1920's, when American doctors, teachers and missionaries gave us the early impression of Americans as a dedicated, serving people with high ideals. In fact, in 1920, Syria spontaneously chose the U.S. to administer its League of Nations mandate. Then in the late 1940's – by design – that long accord was broken. We still have a good relationship but now it is merely through inertia.

"The UN has great potential importance, but it is continually frustrated because the Security Council cannot translate its resolutions into action. The result is that we get one resolution after another being consistently ignored, we see blatant violation of the most basic tenets of the UN charter, of international law, of human rights, of both The Hague and Geneva Conventions – and nothing is done. This must change."

Lebanon's equally outspoken Ghassan Tueni – now a member of a team trying to negotiate the withdrawal of Israel's invasion forces from Beirut and southern Lebanon – agreed. "The Security Council must be revamped into an instrument of negotiation, rather than just a forum of debate," he maintains. "In the

Lebanon's former UN ambassador Ghassan Tueni — now helping negotiate withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon.



UN PHOTO

Arabs at the UN have an enviable grasp of world problems and a remarkable patience to work towards their solution.

Security Council as it is now, we mistake resolutions for solutions; and we endlessly debate the exact meaning of a word, a line, a phrase, while human lives are endangered, cities in flames, societies disrupted, and the very existence of countries challenged and destroyed."

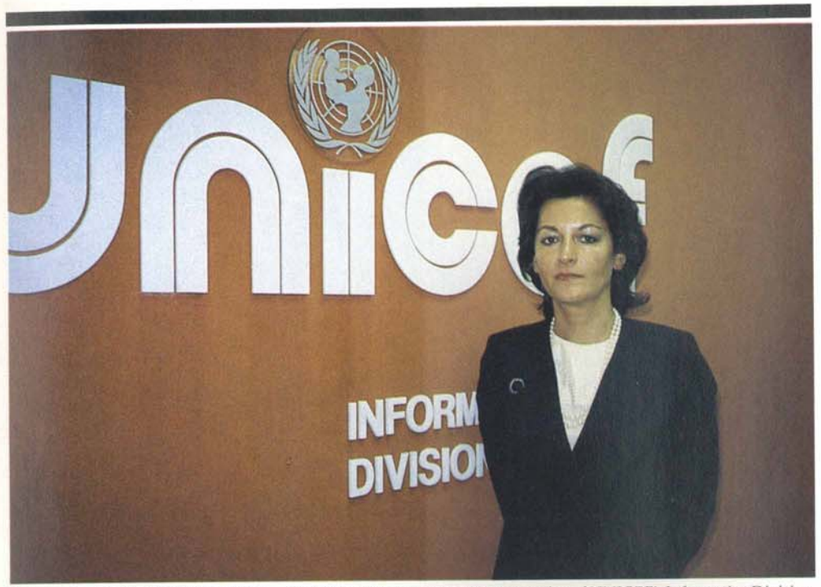
One of the most widely-known of the Arabs at the UN, former Ambassador Tueni was much in demand on the lecture circuit, traveling to speak to audiences as diverse as West Point cadets, the U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce, the congregation of St. John the Divine Cathedral, Harvard University, the U.S. War College and an international seminar in Sali, Yugoslavia, where he spoke on "Freedom of the Press in a Developing Society".

Some months back, after a Paris lecture, Tueni, seated in the handsome leather chair of his teacher and mentor, Charles Malik, revealed both his skepticism and his hopes for the UN.

"The idealists are disappointed that the UN is not an international government, and so they get frustrated," he says. "The realists, of which I am one, realize the UN is not a super world government, not an international court, not a special club of privileged persons, but an association of all the countries of the world that mirrors what the world thinks and believes. It is a point of encounter in times of crisis, an opportunity for conflict control and crisis management, and if it did not exist we would have to invent something just like it."

While Tueni was at the UN, his wife Nadia and younger son Makram lived in New York, but his older son Gibran stayed in Beirut, to work on the family newspaper, *An-Nahar*, founded by Tueni's father, Gabriel Tueni, in 1933. *An-Nahar*, according to Tueni–owner, publisher and former editor-in-chief – has always spoken out for freedom of opinion, civil liberties, human rights, a free press and democratic government.

With a B.A. in philosophy from the American University of Beirut and an M.A. in government from Harvard, Tueni has taught both political science and law, was a member and deputy speaker of the house in the Lebanese parliament from 1951-1957, later a vice-premier and Minister of National Education and Information. At various times he has also served as Minister of Social Affairs, of Industry and Petroleum, and in recent years, worked with former President Sarkis in a number of diplomatic capacities. He first went to the UN in 1947 as press attaché for Camille Chamoun, then chairman of the Lebanese delegation, and returned in 1977 at the request of President Sarkis to handle the crisis then brewing in South Lebanon. He expected to stay six months and remained four years.



Helping care for Third World children — Hala Kittani, head of Middle East section of UNICEF's Information Division.

Tueni, again, is representative of the high quality of Arabs at the UN. Other examples include Faith Hanna, formerly of the Mission of Lebanon, who is a *summa cum laude* graduate of Boston University and author of the recently-published *An American Mission — The Role of the American University of Beirut;* Diana Takieddine, a widely acclaimed concert pianist, who works long hours for the UN's Third Committee, which concerns itself with social, human and cultural rights, refugees, women and children, and global hunger. On the same committee are Faize Aboul-Naga of Egypt and Hala Kittani.

Through contributions to AGFUND and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the small countries of the Arabian Gulf – Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman – contribute through philanthropy as well as regular membership to help solve global problems.

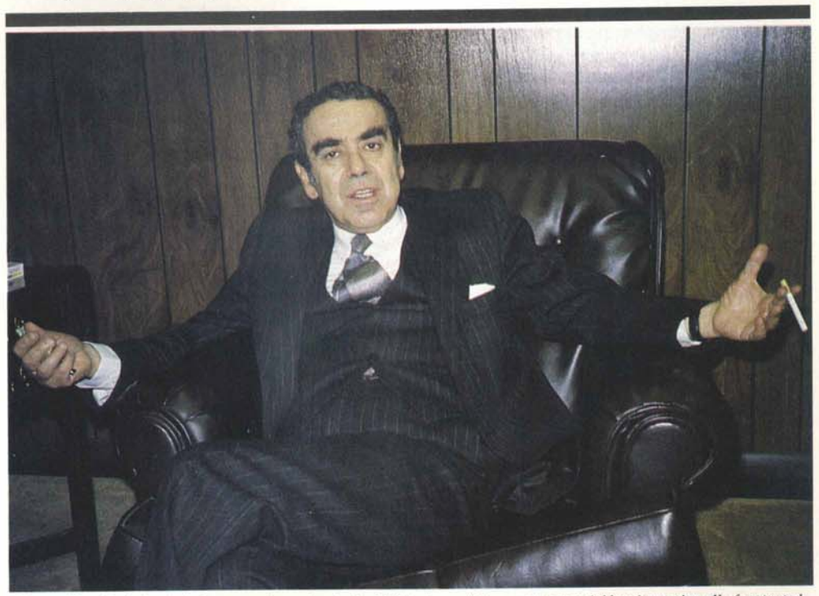
Bahrain," says Muhammad Abdul Ghaffar, that country's first secretary and acting representative to the UN, "knows what it is to be poor. Before oil we had only pearls. Now we are eager to help." A former journalist, political scientist, historian and specialist in Islamic political theory, this young man of 32 has impressive credentials: an M.A. in political science from the New School for Social Research in New York City and a Ph.D. in comparative politics and international relations from the State University of New York. As a child in primary school in the 1950's – before the days of TV and magazines in Bahrain, as he likes to point out – he distinguished himself in history and geography.

"I used to make a list of the countries of the world," he says, "and learn their capital cities and all I could about them. Then I'd plague my friends by asking them questions, which, of course, they couldn't answer. It didn't make me popular with them, I can tell you!" He is proud that his own children, five-year-old Mo'ath, and two year-old Ahmad, are avid learners who both speak Arabic and English fluently and are at home in several cultures. This, their father feels, is important, because the world is changing and future generation must be prepared.

"Eighteenth and nineteenth century politics are out-of-date," he comments. "There is a new global perspective now, the world system theory of international relations, the interdependence of nations. This requires global negotiations. Today, no country can live independently. In the UN we see this happening. Whether the major powers like it or not, the Third World nations are a bloc."

His excellency Mahmoud Aboul-Nasr, Oman's UN Ambassador, puts it another way: "We are agreed on the principles though we may differ in our approach to them." As an example he cites the emphasis which the western nations put on civil and political rights, as compared to the Third World nations, which emphasize economic and social rights.

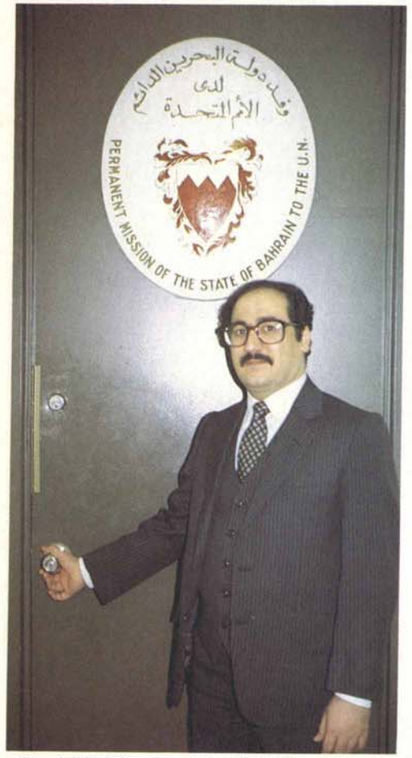
"If you ask me which is more important, having five political parties or having food, health care, education and work to do," he



Hazem Nuseibeh, Jordan's former ambassador to the UN, believes it has great potential but is continually frustrated.

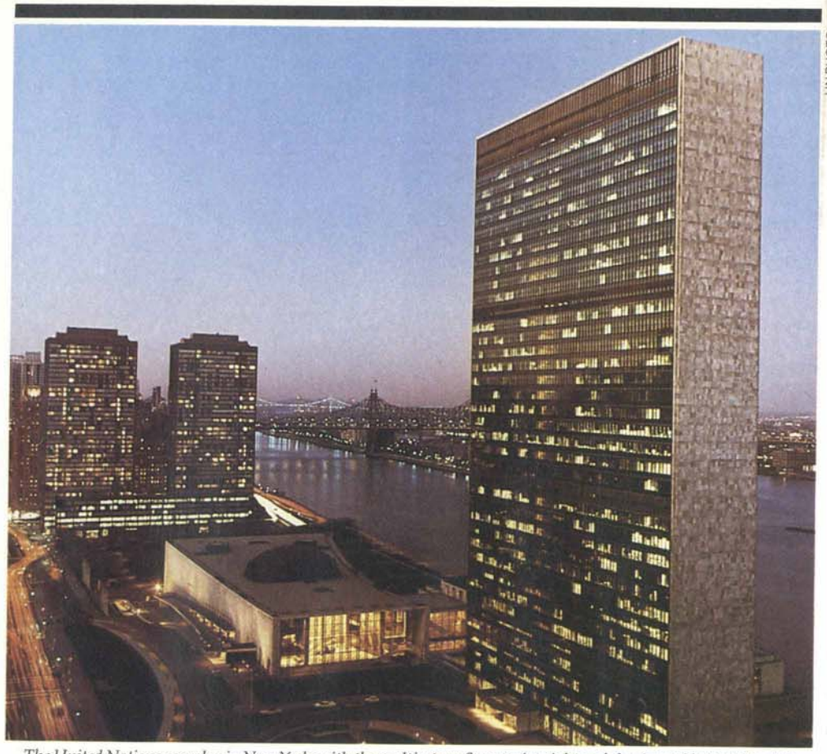
says, "I will tell you that having five political parties is a luxury when you are in a race against time to stave off misery and hunger."

Criticism of the UN doesn't bother him. "Without criticism there'd be no improvement," he says. "You seldom hear of the UN's social and economic achievements, the eradication of malaria and polio, the wars we've stopped, the hunger we've averted, the misery and poverty we've alleviated."



Bahrain's First Secretary to the UN Muhamad Ghaffar

Egyptian by birth, Mahmoud Aboul-Nasr has spent 21 years at the UN. Five years ago he was asked by Sultan Qaboos to open Oman's Mission to the UN, where he now has five young Omani diplomats-in-training. He is a graduate of Cairo University Law School, speaks four languages, has his Ph.D. in international law, plays chess for recreation, and is the son of a politician who wanted him to be the same. Instead, he committed himself and his family to an international life. His Egyptian-born wife Soraya and son are in New York and his daughter works for the UN in Cairo.

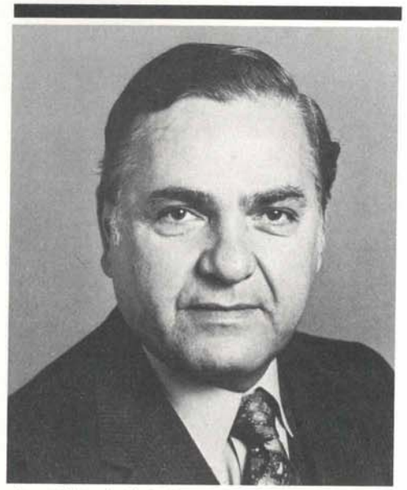


UN PHOTO

The United Nations complex in New York, with the multi-story Secretariat right and the Assembly Building left.

Like Oman, Qatar is a comparative newcomer to the UN. In March, 1972, Ambassador Jasim Jamal, leaving his post as Director General of Cultural Affairs at the Ministry of Education in Doha, came to New York to open the UN mission.

It was not his first time in the United States. Ten years earlier he had arrived here with only a few words of English, no friends, and no experience outside his own country, to attend Northeastern Mississippi State University on a government scholarship; the first Qatari student to come to the U.S.A., he admits it was a difficult time.

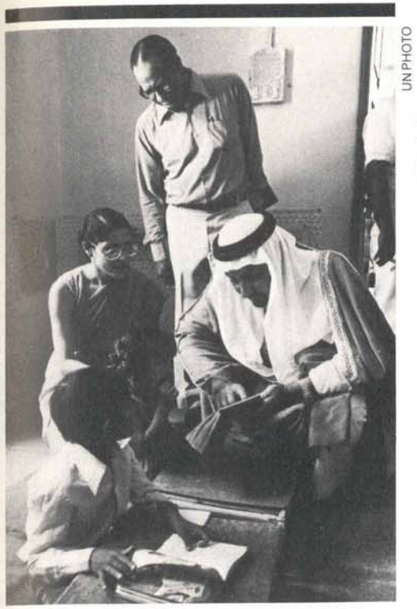


Ismat Kittani, of Iraq, has spent 25 years with the UN.

Last year he was chairman of the UN's Fourth Committee, dealing with decolonization, and it was then, he says, that he saw how much the UN had accomplished over the years. He notes that there were over 120 items on last year's General Assembly agenda alone and though he says he is often discouraged over the lack of progress in some areas–notably disarmament–he is still optimistic.

"The interests of the superpowers often conflict with those of small countries like Qatar," he says, "but we must keep trying to get a new basis for global negotiations. We must do everything we can to protect the UN. It is the only hope for small nations."

Like many of those serving at the UN, Ambassador Jamal misses home, family, friends and country. Since his daughters Aisha, Fatima and Hessa attend school in Qatar, his wife Musa must stay with them, visiting him only in the summer–an example of how delegates must sometimes disrupt their personal life to serve a larger cause.



UN PHOTO

Prince Talal of Saudi Arabia, UNICEF's special envoy.

Similarly Ismat Kittani, Iraq's Under-Secretary for foreign affairs and president of the 36th session of the General Assembly which ended last September spends much of his time commuting between New York and the Middle East, much as he has done since his assignment to the UN in 1964 from the Iraqi Foreign Service. Among the many international positions he has held are: delegate to the World Health Assembly, member of the governing body of the International Labor Organization, chairman of the World Health Assembly's Committee on Financial and Legal Matters, rapporteur-general of the Fifth Summit Conference of the Non-Aligned Countries, and chairman of the political committee at the Sixth Conference, president of the Conference on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, and the holder of executive positions up to the rank of assistant secretary-general in the UN Secretariat.

A man of recognized diplomatic skill, a quarter of a century of whose life has been dedicated to the UN, he was born in Iraq in 1928, received his B.A. in political science and English from Knox College in Illinois, and was for a while a high school teacher in Iraq. As a 19-year-old sophomore in college he wrote in his notebook:

> The fact that a person comes from a certain geographic, political, economic, ethnic, religious or other background should not be a source of either pride or shame for him, for the simple reason that he had nothing to do with it. But, after having been given a certain chance, if any ethnic, political, economic, religious, cultural or geographic group is either proud of a person or ashamed of him, that is something he has to account for.

It is a view he has tried to live by all his life.

This handful of Arabs, of course, is but part of the 1,000 serving the UN. It is, therefore, perhaps appropriate to conclude with the career of Leila Doss of Egypt, Assistant Secretary-General for Personnel Services, who considers herself and all who work for the UN as "international civil servants."

As the person responsible for the recruitment, assignment and termination of 18,000 Secretariat employees from 157 countries, she hopes to forge an independent international civil service which does not seek or accept instructions from any government.

"I'm a loyal Egyptian," she says, "but when I'm working for the UN I'm loyal to the UN." Such an attitude, she maintains, is both necessary and vital for a strong UN. "And a strong UN is in everyone's interest," she says.

Though she's had many job offers during her more than 34 years with the UN, she would work at no other job. "I believe in one world," she says firmly, and her life to date verifies this.

Born into an "internationally-minded" family in Asyut, Egypt, in 1921, she became, in 1943, the first woman broadcaster and program manager in the Egyptian State Radio. After five years there, she spent the next 20 serving the UN, starting in 1948 at Lake Success and moving successively through posts in New York, Geneva, Cairo, Bangkok and Rangoon. She initiated the UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in Vienna in 1968 while serving for four years there as UN Information Service director. Next she was chief of information services for UNICEF's 1979 *Year of the Child* (see *Aramco World*, January–February 1980), then the director of the Division of Economic and Social Information in the Department of Public Information. For the last four years she has served as vice-chairman on the UN appointment and promotion board. One of her priorities in her new position is to see that more women move up into responsible positions.

Leila Doss of Egypt, is responsible for 13,000 UN staff.

Mahmoud Aboul-Nasr opened Oman's Mission in 1978.

Her chief problem, she says, is "never enough time," and she often puts in 10 and 12 hour days to try to find more. Somewhere in between she manages to pursue hobbies of sewing, international cooking, music and theater; the UN, however, is her paramount interest.

"If you don't believe in the UN," she asks, "what do you believe in? If it fails it's the fault of its members, for not accepting its resolutions, for not taking care of the Third World, for not respecting human rights, for not negotiating but fighting."

And, she adds, "If we don't learn to live together we will all die together."

Aileen Vincent-Barwood, once a freelance correspondent for CBC, lived in Saudi Arabia for several years and has contributed both articles and fiction to U.S. periodicals.

The King of Ghassan

WRITTEN BY BARRY HOBERMAN
ILLUSTRATED BY MICHAEL GRIMSDALE

Despite the best efforts of generations of distinguished Arabists, the history of the Arabs before Islam remains exasperatingly obscure. But thanks to a new commitment to archeological reclamation in countries like Saudi Arabia (See *Aramco World*, March-April 1980), Yemen, and Oman, it is likely that such knowledge will expand dramatically in the coming years.

Paradoxically, far less is known about the three centuries immediately preceding the *Hijra* of the Prophet Muhammad in 622 – his migration with his followers from Makkah (Mecca) to Medina – than about other, even more remote eras in the history of the Arabs. The ancient Sabeans of South Arabia, the Nabatean kingdom (See *Aramco World*, March-April 1981) with its capital at rose-red Petra, and the Palmyrene kingdom of Odenathus and Zenobia (See *Aramco World*, September-October 1981) are much better documented – and consequently more familiar to us – than such later Arab states as the Lakhmid state at Hira, the central Arabian confederation of Kinda, or – a vital force in the sixth-century rivalry between Sasanid Persia and Byzantium – Ghassan. Yet even for that dimly-illuminated, legend-enshrouded age, literary sources, when used judiciously and with extreme care, can shed light on a few key figures – such as al-Harith ibn Jabala of the Ghassan tribal confederation.

Properly speaking, the Ghassanids were an Arab dynasty whose members belonged to a clan of the south Arabian tribe of Azd, believed to have arrived in the Syrian desert about A.D. 250-300 and, about the year 500, to have become the dominant confederation in the desert east of the Jordan and southeast of Damascus. Scholars admit, however, that any attempt to reconstruct Ghassanid history rests on exceedingly shaky ground until we reach the year 529, when al-Harith ibn Jabala succeeded his father as head of the Bani Ghassan tribal confederation.

For the historian, perhaps the most frustrating problem in studying the Ghassanids is the relative lateness of the Arabic sources. The stirring odes of the pre-Islamic Arab poets overflow with references to Ghassan. Three of the most famous poets, Labid ibn Rabi'a – "the man with the crooked staff" – Nabigha al-Dhubyani, and Hassan ibn Thabit, were associated with Ghassan by virtue of either kinship or official Ghassanid patronage. But the poetry of "the days of anarchy or the days of ignorance" – as Muslims call the pre-Islamic era – was handed down orally and was not committed to writing until the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries. Moreover, many of the poems eventually underwent considerable revision. Coupled with the obvious fact that poets everywhere are creative artists and not academic historians, this makes it almost impossible for modern scholars to extract reliable historical data from the polished lyrics of the pre-Islamic bards. Think of the difficulty involved in trying to apprehend the history of, say, Britain or the United States on the basis of their poetry.

The key Arab and Persian historians wrote long after Ghassan had ceased to exist, and though each used all written and oral sources available, their results sometimes differ radically. Abu al-Fida, for example, lists 31 kings of Ghassan, whereas the scrupulously critical 10th-century historian al-Mas'udi, writing almost four centuries earlier, knows of only 11.

Fortunately, the modern historian's task is not hopeless. In many respects, in fact, it is easier than that faced by al-Mas'udi and Abu al-Fida. Written sources contemporary with the Ghassanids – in some cases even contemporary with the reign of al-Harith ibn Jabala – have survived in Greek and Syriac manuscripts, in Epigraphic South Arabian and in documents in Ethiopic, Coptic, Armenian, and Georgian. While they do not explicitly mention Ghassan, they do help elucidate the history of the sixth-century Arabs. By meticulously weaving such shreds of information into the picture 19th-century scholars like Theodor Noeldeke and today's Professor Irfan Shahid of Georgetown University have done much to foster the emergence of Ghassan from the proverbial mists of time.

From the standpoint of world history, the dominant motif of the sixth century was the epic rivalry between Byzantium and Sasanid Persia – and Ghassan played a pivotal part in that ongoing conflict. In fact, it is in its role as a Byzantine-sponsored buffer state that Ghassan definitely enters the clear light of history. This was in or around 529, when the Byzantine Emperor Justinian, realizing the need for a strong ally in today's Syria and Jordan, appointed al-Harith ibn Jabala leader of the Arabs of the Syrian desert and authorized him to use the title of king

– which may imply that the Ghassanid chiefs normally did not use the title.

The investiture of al-Harith ibn Jabala was Justinian's countermove in the endless political and military chess match with the Persian Emperor Chosroes Anushirvan (531-579), who, for years, had subsidized another Arab dynasty – the Lakhmids of Hira, in southern Mesopotamia – as *its* buffer state in the struggle with the Byzantines. Justinian hoped that al-Harith would neutralize the formidable Lakhmids who had already mounted a series of spectacular raids into Byzantine territory on behalf of the Persians.

As it turned out al-Harith was indeed up to the task. The first Ghassanid ruler to mold the Arabs of what are now Syria and Jordan into a cohesive tribal confederation, the dynamic and charismatic al-Harith, as the sixth-century Syrian churchman John of Ephesus put it, "was held in…awe and terror by all the nomad tribes of Syria…"

As a result of Justinian's move, the history of the northern pre-Islamic Arabs was dominated – from 529 to 554 – by the wars of al-Harith and al-Mundhir – the also-remarkable leader of the Lakhmids. Sometimes their battles were part of the larger Perso-Byzantine conflict, but just as often, al-Harith and al-Mundhir carried on a private struggle of their own, one that looms large in Arab traditions. Even in the heavily embellished, stylized accounts found in later Arabic literature, the actual historical kernel of a bitter, hard-fought personal rivalry between these two remarkable adversaries can be discerned.

For 25 years, the pendulum of victory swung back and forth. First one, then the other, would make a daring raid into the territory of his opponent, or score a triumph in a border skirmish. And largely because the Ghassanids and Lakhmids were so evenly matched during this period, Byzantium and Persia were stalemated in the Middle East. Each of the Arab buffer states was a pivotal factor in the regional defense system of an empire.

The final encounter between al-Harith and al-Mundhir has gone down in Arab tradition as "The Day of Halima." The battle, which took place in northern Syria in 554, resulted in al-Mundhir's death and a decisive victory for Ghassan. Here is the account of the ninth-century Baghdadi historian, Ibn Qutaiba (as translated by R.A. Nicholson):

> When al-Mundhir ibn Ma' al-Sama' marched against him with an army 1,000,000 strong, al-Harith sent 100 men to meet him – among them the poet Labid, who was then a youth – ostensibly to make peace. They surrounded al-Mundhir's tent and slew the king and his companions, then they took horse, and some escaped, while others were slain. The Ghassanid cavalry attacked the army of al-Mundhir and put them to flight. al-Harith had a daughter named Halima, who perfumed the hundred champions on that day and clad them in shrouds of white linen (to make them ready for burial in the event they were killed) and coats of mail…

The strife between Ghassanids and Lakhmids did not abate after al-Mundhir's death, any more than did the Perso-Byzantine wars, but, with his rival out of the picture, al-Harith ibn Jabala of Ghassan became the preeminent figure.

Unfortunately, little is known about Ghassanid society, in al-Harith's time, or for that matter, in any other time, since most of the clans and tribes were nomadic, with no permanent capital other than an encampment at Jabiya, south of Damascus.

Unlike many pre-Islamic Arab tribes, the Ghassanids were not pagans but monophysite Christians – members of what later came to be called the Syrian-Jacobite church. It was, in fact, through the personal intervention of al-Harith ibn Jabala that Ya'qub Bar-Addai, better known as Jacob Baradaeus (whence the term "Jacobite"), was consecrated Bishop of Edessa for the provinces of Syria and Mesopotamia, in 542 or 543. The rigidly monotheistic doctrine of Syrian Christianity probably helped to prepare the Arabs of Ghassan for the revelation of Islam, whose Prophet Muhammad was born very soon after al-Harith ibn Jabala's death in 569.

In November, in the year 563, al-Harith and the Emperor Justinian held a summit meeting in Constantinople, at which al-Harith was to tell Justinian which of his sons would succeed him. And though the Ghassanid king was the head of what we would today call a client state, he and the emperor met on an equal footing – as comrades in arms, as illustrious statesmen, as old veterans of international diplomacy, discussing matters of earth-shaking and, as colleagues may, of less-than-earthshaking importance.

We know that they covered the crucial question of al-Harith's successor – it was to be his capable son, al-Mundhir ibn al-Harith – and surely they talked of the prevailing military situation and speculated about the future plans of Chosroes Anushirvan, the Persian king of kings.

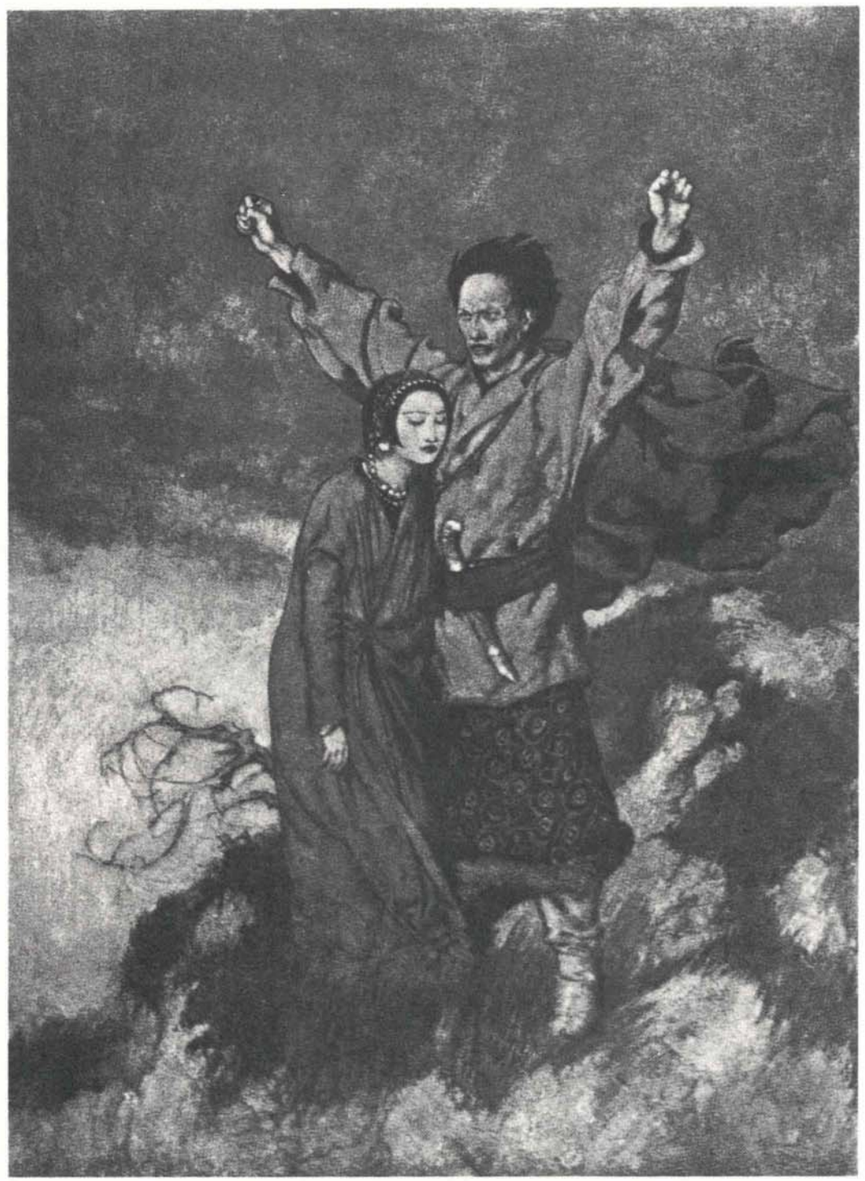
It is also easy to imagine that as these two titans of the sixth century sat face to face, they talked of things other than the pressing business at hand. Each man had been in power for well over 30 years, and each had lived – and made – an extraordinary amount of history. There was much that they should have been able to share and reminisce over, many events that they could now re-evaluate from hindsight.

Perhaps they chatted about Justinian's late wife, the Empress Theodora, whom al-Harith had met in Constantinople some 20 years earlier, and with whom he had arranged the consecration of Ya'qub Bar-Addai. And could they possibly have failed to recall – and grudgingly praise – that pertinacious foe of Byzantium and Ghassan, al-Mundhir ibn Ma' al-Sama' of Hira? A meeting in Constantinople between a Byzantine emperor and a pre-Islamic Arab king is truly a stimulant to the active historical imagination.

Unfortunately, the skimpy records from contemporary historians preclude our saying anything about al-Harith's appearance, the size of his entourage, or the impression he made upon Justinian and his courtiers. We can suppose that al-Harith's arrival in the Byzantine capital caused quite a stir among the citizenry, but barring an unforeseen manuscript discovery we will never know for sure.

We do know that al-Harith ibn Jabala has a role in Byzantine history, in Syrian and Jordanian history and in Christian ecclesiastical history. Above all, however, he is a protagonist of Arab history. He stands as one of the towering figures of the pre-Islamic era, right alongside Odenathus and Zenobia of Palmyra, al-Mundhir ibn Ma' al-Sama' of Hira, and the celebrated poets of Ukaz (See *Aramco World*, March-April 1980). Under his stalwart leadership, a significant portion of the Arabs were successfully united – prefiguring, in a secular sense, the more complete unification of the Arabs that was to take place only a few decades later, under the Prophet Muhammad and the early caliphs of Islam.

Barry Hoberman studied Islam at Harvard and is now Managing Editor of Biblical Archaeologist.

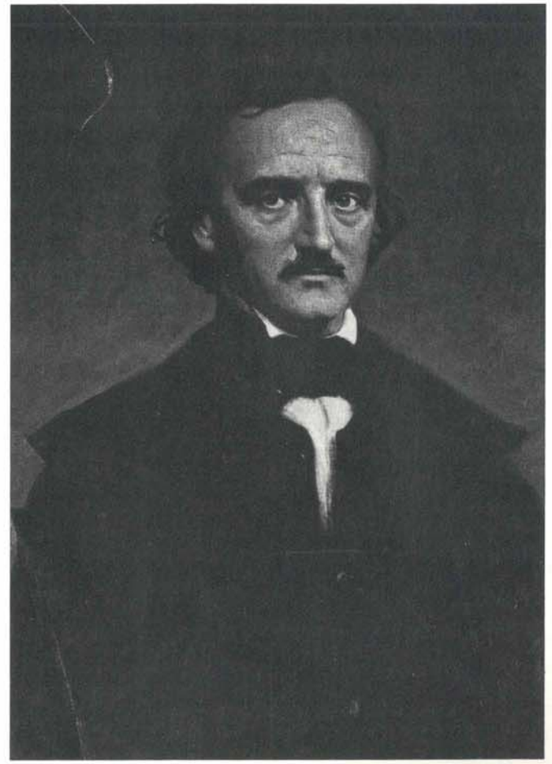


Tamerlane – subject of Poe's poetic debut – as a youth.
Painting by Edmund Dulac. Courtesy: Weathervane Books, New York, 1978.

From the Arab East...
eternal thoughts, universal moods...

Edgar Allan and the East

WRITTEN BY WILLIAM GOLDHURST



Portrait by Thomas C. Corner. Courtesy: The Pratt Library.

Edgar Allan Poe, one of America's most versatile and talented men of letters, is too often remembered as no more than the father of the modern detective story, the psychological thriller and "twilight zone" terror.

This, to be sure, is natural; his tales of terror, which impressed generations of readers and authors who fell under his influence – such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Jules Verne and Rod Serling – often emphasized only those aspects assured of a warm reception by the public. But the result was a partial distortion of Poe's total achievement. A complex author, who excelled in a wide variety of literary forms and moods, Poe also wrote black comedies, love poems, philosophical essays, journalistic hoaxes, satires and literary criticism. He also, though few remember it, drew deeply on the culture of the Middle East: history, religion, personages, legends and ideas. And although his sources of information were usually second hand – derived from commentaries and translations, rather than original texts – he put his Saracenic-Arabic-Mongol-Islamic motifs to a wide variety of ingenious uses: slapstick comedy, biting satire, earnest philosophy and sentimental depictions of heroes. Some of his exotic references are admittedly designed to impress the reader with his erudition, but he also displayed a sincere respect for the Eastern materials he imported.

In one story, "Some Words with a Mummy" – in which a mummy is revived – Poe directs what is roughhouse humor towards faddish American Egyptology and Yankee vanity rather than anything in ancient Egypt. As the story progresses, in fact, it becomes apparent that Poe is measuring 19th-century American achievements in technology against the expertise of ancient Egypt – with Egypt coming out far ahead in terms of "advanced" ideas. In the story, American authorities enumerate our impressive public buildings, our steam engines and inventions and our highly developed modes of thought. But the mummy, not only revived but articulate, cites his own list of facts and figures and shows that the ancient Egyptians had anticipated most of those ideas – including experiments with democracy and monotheism – by thousands of years. Indeed, the "modern" Americans came up with only two original achievements: cough drops and patent medicine.

A similar story is "The Thousand and Second Tale of Scheherazade," which Poe

derived from reading an English translation of *The Thousand and One Nights.* Here Poe repeats the legend of the sultan who marries a beautiful woman each night but delivers her to the executioner the following morning – a routine that Scheherazade interrupts by tantalizing the ruthless monarch with different but incomplete tales every evening.

As in the original scenario, Poe's Scheherazade succeeds at first. But Poe then has her continue with a new series that combines modern wonders – such as battleships and hydrogen balloons – with slightly distorted natural wonders: a petrified forest, distances measured in light years and mathematical abilities displayed by bees. In having the king remain incredulous throughout – as if these factual "adventures" are *more* unbelievable than the original tales of flying mechanical horses and the like–Poe achieves an amusing irony. And then, when Scheherazade comes to the most far-fetched wonder of all – the bustle worn by 19th-century women of fashion – the sultan loses patience and disposes of her after all.

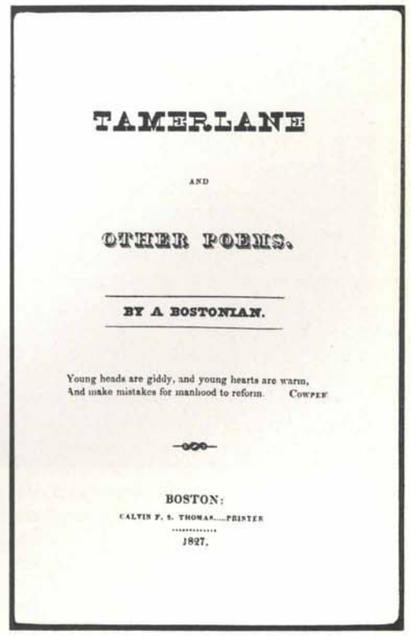
The substance of Poe's tale is a catalog of 19th-century natural and man-made marvels, but the author's imaginative use of *The Thousand and One Nights* framework gives his enumeration of facts a piquancy which other collections lack, and his tongue-in-cheek treatment of the sultan and Scheherazade adds a touch of burlesque.

Another tale – derived from ancient Syrian history – employs a different kind of humor for a more cynical purpose. Entitled "Four Beasts in One," this little known story deals in mock-heroic fashion with the homecoming of Antiochus IV, monarch of the Seleucid Kingdom of Syria in the second century B.C. To mark the occasion, Antiochus stages a wild celebration in which the king, a boisterous mob and some presumably tame lions and tigers, parade in Antioch. Dressed up in a giraffe costume, the king amuses himself by kicking various subjects as he goes along. They, however, heedless of his behavior, sing his praises – until the animals, disturbed by the commotion, turn on their trainers. The crowds flee and the "courageous" king runs so fast that he is awarded a wreath for victory in the foot race.

Though the story is actually more complex than that, it made a point: Poe's distrust of President Andrew Jackson, whom he saw as a grotesque tyrant leading a frenzied rabble. Poe was only one of many Americans who felt Jackson's frontiersmen had opened the door to mob rule, but some of his colleagues were much more direct and explicit about their message. Poe's sentiments were as fierce as theirs, but his presentation was more artful.

Equally fanciful, but much more delicate in tone, is Poe's treatment of Tamerlane, the 14th-century Mongol conqueror also known as Timur Lang (Timur the Lame). Claiming descent from Genghis Khan, Tamerlane captured Samarkand, led an army against Persia, invaded Russia and subdued parts of India and Asia Minor. A ruthless conqueror, Tamerlane slaughtered thousands of captives, (See *Aramco World,* September-October 1975) and left pyramids of skulls as monuments to his victories. Yet Poe improvises a love story to humanize or possibly sentimentalize the conqueror.

Original in concept and executed with surprising skill – considering that he was 17 when he wrote it – this poem presents Tamerlane on his deathbed confessing a secret grief that for years has made him



TAMERLANE

AND

OTHER POEMS.

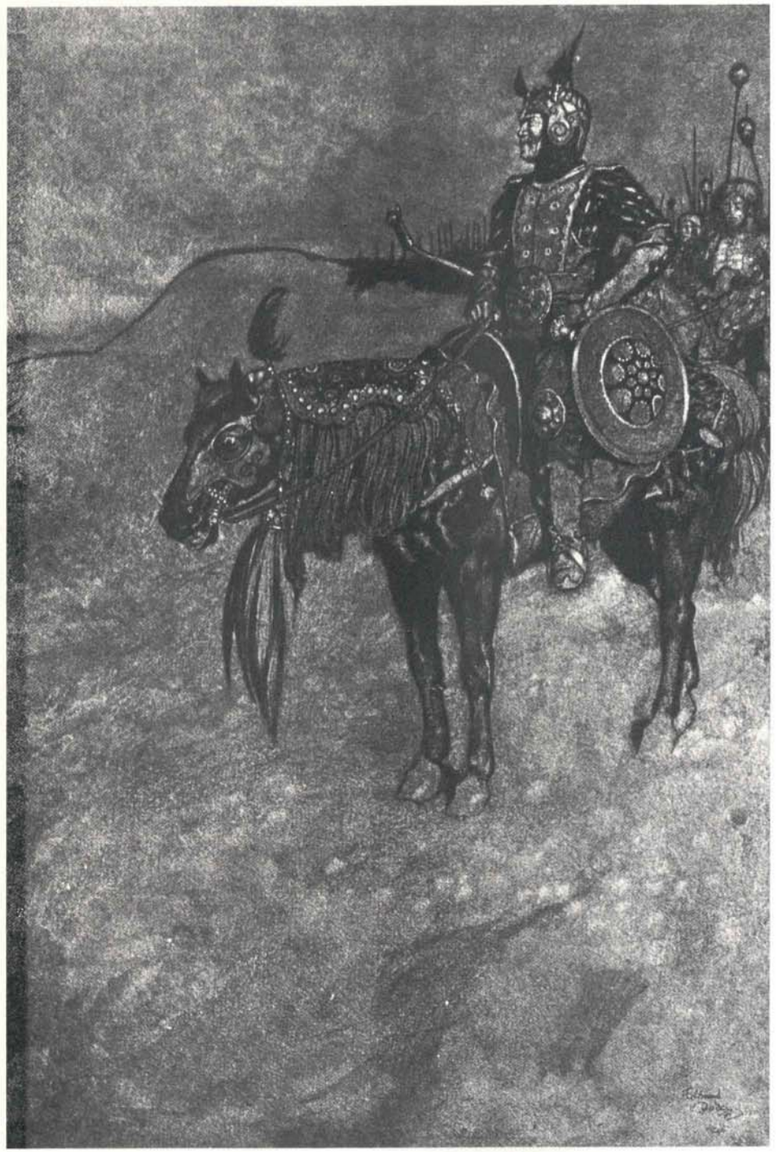
BY A BOSTONIAN.

Young heads are giddy, and young hearts are warm,
And make mistakes for manhood to reform. COWPER

BOSTON:
CALVIN F. S. THOMAS....PRINTER
1827.

Title page of Poe's first published work. Courtesy: Joseph Regenstein Library, the University of Chicago.

◂Scene from Poe's *Scheherazade.* Illustration by Wilfred Satty. From *The Illustrated Edgar Allan Poe.* Courtesy: Warner Books, 1976. ©1976, Wilfred Satty.



Tamerlane, who, Poe wrote, neglected his deepest feelings at his peril. Painting by Edmund Dulac. Courtesy: Weathervane Books, New York, 1978.

sick at heart. In his youth, he says, he had a tender side to his nature that impelled him to seek out the company of a sympathetic young woman to whom he could confide his fears and disappointments. But then, in his daydreams, he heard:

. . . the crush of empires — with the
captive's prayer —
The hum of suitors — and the tone
Of flattery round a sovereign's throne.

He said he thought of her as a suitable queen to share his glory, but in his impatience left abruptly, intending to return later. Of course, when he goes back, the girl has died and their special bower is overgrown with weeds.

This, no doubt, is sentimental and romantic, but the force of its theme triumphs: each individual neglects his deepest feelings only at great peril to his own happiness. Everything considered, "Tamerlane" was a brilliant poetic debut.

The most difficult of all Poe's poems, "Al Aaraaf," is also the work most heavily saturated with Eastern terms and concepts. This relatively lengthy work, which also utilizes elements from Shakespearean drama and Indian lore, is probably the most explicit example of the deep impression Middle Eastern thought made on Poe. The title of the poem – derived from an English version of the Koran – refers to an area between heaven and hell (*al-a'raf* – dividing lines) where departed souls can distinguish between the blessed and the damned. According to Poe's source – a commentary by the translator – this zone was a sort of limbo where mortals whose lives had been a perfect balance between good and evil remained until purified.

From these suggestions, Poe created a sort of sanctum where the Spirit of Beauty sings hymns about the function of poetry, where fragments of earthly art are preserved and where a mortal foolishly dallies with an angel – to show that human passion has no place in the realm of pure spirit.

An allegory, Poe's "Al Aaraaf" foreshadows several themes he would cherish throughout his career – art, love, the origin of the universe – and would develop later. No doubt these views, which Poe held with fervor, were inspired by various elements in his personal experience and wide reading, but Islamic thought apparently played a part too.

The poem, "Israfel" – its title derived from Islamic tradition – is simpler, shorter and less famous than "The Raven". It is also one of the most beautiful statements of its kind ever made. The gist of this Poe lyric is that Israfel, whose lyre is strung with his own "heart strings", makes music so compelling that even the stars pause in their cosmic motions to listen. Poe plays upon the idea of an angel's heart – its string being a fusion-image of emotion and spirituality, the blend producing sweeter sounds than mere mortals can hope to achieve:

If I could dwell
Where Israfel
Hath dwelt, and he where I,
He might not sing so wildly well
A mortal melody,
While a bolder note than this might swell
From my lyre within the sky.

The poem expresses romantic yearnings for ideal beauty. "Shadow" and its companion piece, "Silence," are both short pieces distinguished by extraordinary originality and verbal facility. Neither may properly be termed a tale or story, while "sketch" seems too trifling a category to do justice to these gloomy little masterpieces. Set, respectively, in ancient Egypt and along the shoreline of the River Zaire, "Shadow" is a study in man's futile endeavors to escape the reality of death, while "Silence" is a parable delineating varying degrees of human despair, culminating in a confrontation with nothingness.

In both "Shadow" and "Silence" Poe's style is visionary and highly poetic, rather than realistic, with a trace of nightmare imagery. In "Shadow" seven men sit around a table drinking wine, trying to block out their awareness of a plague that is exacting a heavy toll from the ranks of their friends and loved ones – one of whom lies dead in the same room, where they are "celebrating." In the midst of their desperate attempts to be carefree a mysterious figure emerges from behind some black curtains and announces that he is Shadow, the spirit of thousands of their dead friends. In "Silence" a demon tells the narrator about a strange territory on the banks of the River Zaire, a setting into which the author introduces a solitary male figure dressed in a Roman toga. The man sits upon a rock bearing carved letters that spell the word Desolation; later, when the narrator curses the scene with a curse of Silence, the letters on the rock alter to spell out the word Silence; the mysterious man flees in dread.

Poe is not noted for a meticulous attention to historical or geographical accuracy; and in these two tales the author's emphasis falls upon psychological truths and earnest glimpses into the mysteries of the human spirit, achieved through imagery that sounds very much like the stuff of dreams. Nonetheless, in these two works, Poe's exotic references are both functional and precise. The plague that frightens the characters of "Shadow" occurred in the Nile Delta region during the reign of Justinian (527-565). Egypt is selected as a setting because at that time in its history it was a death-denying culture, a fact which lends additional force to the theme Poe is dramatizing in the story – the idea that try as we might, we can not escape the reality of death.

If we turn our attention to the background materials that went into "Silence," we find a similar degree of authenticity. Words engraved on rock were a common motif in ancient literature; a faint duplication of this practice in Poe's story gives it a link to the foundations of our civilization. At the conclusion of the tale, Poe's heavy use of references to Magi, Genii, and Sibyls – all sacred or prophetic spirits from the East – reinforce the ritualistic and religious tone of his story. At the same time, the lush, fertile, and almost magical-appearing setting along the Zaire (formerly the Congo) provides an origin-of-life atmosphere that makes "Silence" profoundly disturbing in its effects. Poe's riverbank, in other words, is ideally suited to his purpose, which is to create a parable about fears implanted in man from his earliest beginnings. No other setting would be as effective for what the author is trying to accomplish.

There is one more very strong indicator to suggest that Poe's continuing worldwide appeal as an author is based in part on Eastern influence. Early in his career the author began referring to some of his works as "Arabesques," even though some of them had nothing whatever to do with Arabian culture or geography, and a few years later gave the title *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* to his first and probably most famous collection.

In his preface to that edition, Poe hinted that the term "Arabesque" applied to his "more serious" tales. And according to L. Moffitt Cecil's essay, "Poe's Arabesque," Poe seems to be extending the meaning of the word to include not only Arab history and culture, but also that of other Middle Eastern peoples.

But another more conventional meaning might be "a complex and ornate design of intertwined floral, foliate, and geometrical figures." Applied to his style, it could also describe such tales as "The Purloined Letter" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," in which can be found not only the customary twists and turns of plot found in all mystery stories of the last 100 years, but also a carefully patterned use of theme and incident.

One example is "The Sphinx" – which has nothing to do with ancient Egypt. In this little story, a high-strung narrator thinks he sees a monster, but is assured by his host that what he saw was really only an insect. Next, both monster and insect are woven into the idea of perspectives on American democracy. Then it is suggested that monster and insect are somehow related to a microbe. Finally, at the conclusion, the host, who gradually becomes the narrator's double, assumes the position the narrator was in when he saw the monster, which actually was an insect – or perhaps a microbe.

This is a style which is truly Arabesque: interwoven strands of theme, incident and character, with additional loops, overlaps and flourishes – effects that Poe achieves in literally dozens of his best stories. The technique, as Poe practiced it, was both subtle and unobtrusive; no one of his many imitators in the mystery story genre has been able to reproduce it as successfully. Yet Poe's Arabesque designs, though applied with a subtle brush, have a potent effect too, lending a feeling of what Cecil called the "patterned strangeness" that constitutes no small part of its perennial appeal.

Poe lived at a time when many of his writing colleagues – Emerson and Longfellow among them – were clamoring for a native American literature derived from authentic Yankee sites and experiences. To these pronouncements Poe said: nonsense. The only literature worth producing, he said, is *world* literature – the kind of prose and poetry that transcends national and chronological boundaries. It seems evident that in electing to use Middle Eastern materials in such poems and stories as "Tamerlane," "Al Aaraaf," "Israfel," "Four Beasts in One," "Shadow," "Silence," "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade," and "Some Words with a Mummy," Poe was doing more than giving his works the Oriental flavor then fashionable with Romantic authors. Rather, he was reaching back to the East for thoughts and moods and designs that impart an eternal and universal quality.

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Renewal in Baghdad

WRITTEN BY JOHN BULLOCH
PHOTOGRAPHED BY JILL BROWN

The urban planning conference in Baghdad was droning on in its predictable way as Dr. Ihsan Fethi rose angrily to his feet: the speakers reading papers, the audiences applauding politely, the dignitaries on the platform under the portrait of Iraq's president, listening benignly, if drowsily, to the familiar arguments for conservation, urban renewal, and the rest of an all too familiar litany.

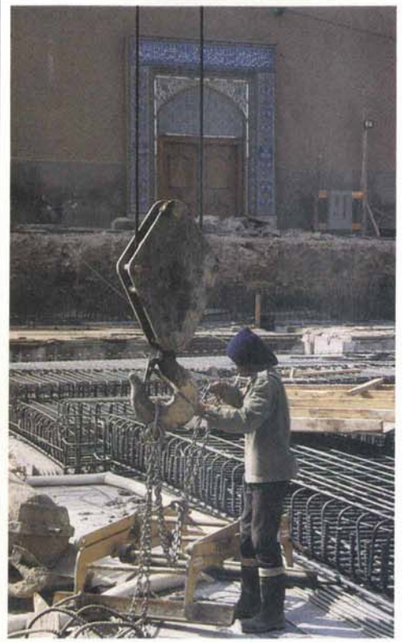
But then Dr. Fethi, a professor of architecture at Baghdad University, began to speak and the calm was shattered – not by noise, but by the intensity of an unscheduled intervention that would launch one of the biggest urban renewal projects in the Arab East.

Dr. Fethi, it seems, had had enough, and was willing to say so. "We talk of urban renewal," he said, "but all I see is destruction. We discuss the need to build up, not to tear down, but everywhere the bulldozers are at work. We are agreed on the need to plan our city in keeping with its past, but everywhere concrete blocks more suited to New York than Baghdad are springing up."

Suddenly, the lethargy of the previous days was gone. When he finished Dr. Fethi received the first real applause that had been heard since the meeting began. And within minutes aides were dispatched to invite Dr. Fethi to back-room meetings, city officials and other architects were called in and – in one of the most dramatic developments in the history of urban planning – Samir al-Sahab, the mayor of Baghdad, made an immediate, impressive and far-sighted decision. "Stop the bulldozers," he said and they stopped.

Simultaneously, at the conference hall, the mayor turned to Dr. Fethi and, in effect, said: "Right, now what should we be doing? We had decided to clear away the hovels and the shacks and you say we are wrong, what *should* we be doing?"

Dr. Fethi, whose doctoral thesis at England's Sheffield University was devoted to Baghdad's historic buildings, was ready: Call in specialist architects, he said. Call them in and ask them to renew Baghdad. Ask them for a development plan in which there is room to create new but traditional quarters. Ask them to save and restore the hundreds of beautiful old Baghdad houses.



Restoring al-Gilani mosque, left, and, above, building a new selfcontained neighborhood around it in Baghdad

"We talk of... renewal, but all I see is destruction"

Ask them to revive the two great mosques of our capital, to restore them to the life they must have known when first erected.

The actual execution of these plans was not, of course, carried out at the same pace as the original decision. Nevertheless, when a competition for the appointment of specialist architects was held, the winner, John Warren, an Englishman, and his company, the Architectural and Planning Partnership, were not slow in getting started; three months later elaborate feasibility studies had been completed, by 1981 the municipality had approved the idea and by that summer work had begun.

John Warren, in fact, had been at the conference and, as electrified as anyone else, was enthusiastic about this rare chance to see ideal theories translated into homes, shops, cinemas, hotels and other structures.

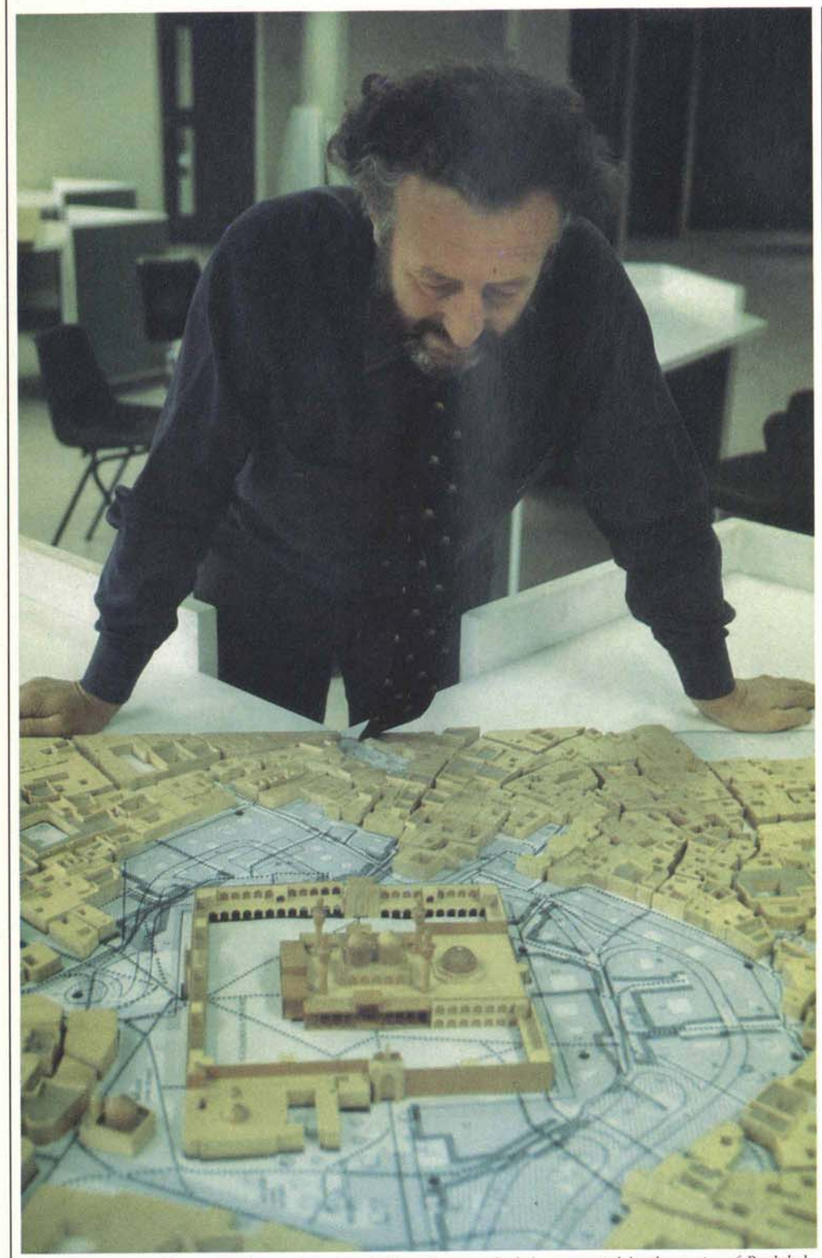
With the backing of the municipality, the *Aminat al-'Asima,* Warren and his planners first identified two districts as "preservation areas," one around the mosque of al-Kazimiya, "the Golden Mosque," with its four soaring minarets and vast golden dome, the other at Bab al-Shaikh, the neighborhood surrounding the mosque of al-Gilani, a more modest but no less beautiful structure.

Then, in those areas, they picked out several hundred houses whose outstanding architecture made them worth preserving – and went back to Horsham in England to start on the first plans.

Their goal was not to provide a copy of what had originally existed, nor to experiment with Western ideas of what would be suitable for a Muslim city; rather, they wanted to express the ideas which Middle East planners and builders – and the people – had found appropriate over the centuries.

As in all major cities of the world, the planners discovered, Baghdad was once divided into neighborhoods, each a *mahalla,* a village in itself, a tight commun-

"Call in specialist architects... call them in and ask them to renew Baghdad..."



John Warren with his model of one of the two "villages" presently being recreated in the center of Baghdad.

ity inside the city, where people who were linked together by family, work or social position chose to live. In Baghdad, however, as more and more people flooded into the capital over the years, the newcomers gravitated towards the great mosques – *Shi'i* Muslims generally settling by the al-Kazimiya, and *Sunni* Muslims largely around the al-Gilani mosque – and the influx soon exhausted available accommodations. As a result, shanty towns sprang up, some in the shade of grand old houses and courtyards, or under the overhang of the balconies, and soon those who could began to move out. It was the start of urban blight and as the years went by things got worse – especially after two new roads were driven through the al-Kazimiya area; though badly needed to give access to the mosque, they split the neighborhood into separate parts.

Recognizing the trouble, the city planners, lacking cash, could only come up with one easy solution: clear away the slum buildings and turn the adjacent areas into parks and gardens; pretty enough, perhaps, but doing little to provide housing space for those who needed it. Such an approach also ignored urban history; in all Muslim countries, houses, shops and other structures have always crowded up close to the walls of the mosques, making them a vital part of the community, rather than something separate and apart.

In the wake of Dr. Fethi's challenge, therefore, the Baghdad planners decided to put buildings right up against the huge, nine-meter (30-foot) walls of the mosques, and recreate as far as possible the feeling and atmosphere of the traditional *madina.* This meant, basically, that the pattern of the old, narrow streets had to be followed, not eliminated. As John Warren explained: "The street is much more than a mere passageway in the Arab city. It's the meeting place of the community, so if it's an uncomfortable place, the social life and the quality of life of the community will suffer in consequence. The narrow street has persisted in the Arab city because with its

"The street is much more than a mere passageway in the Arab city."

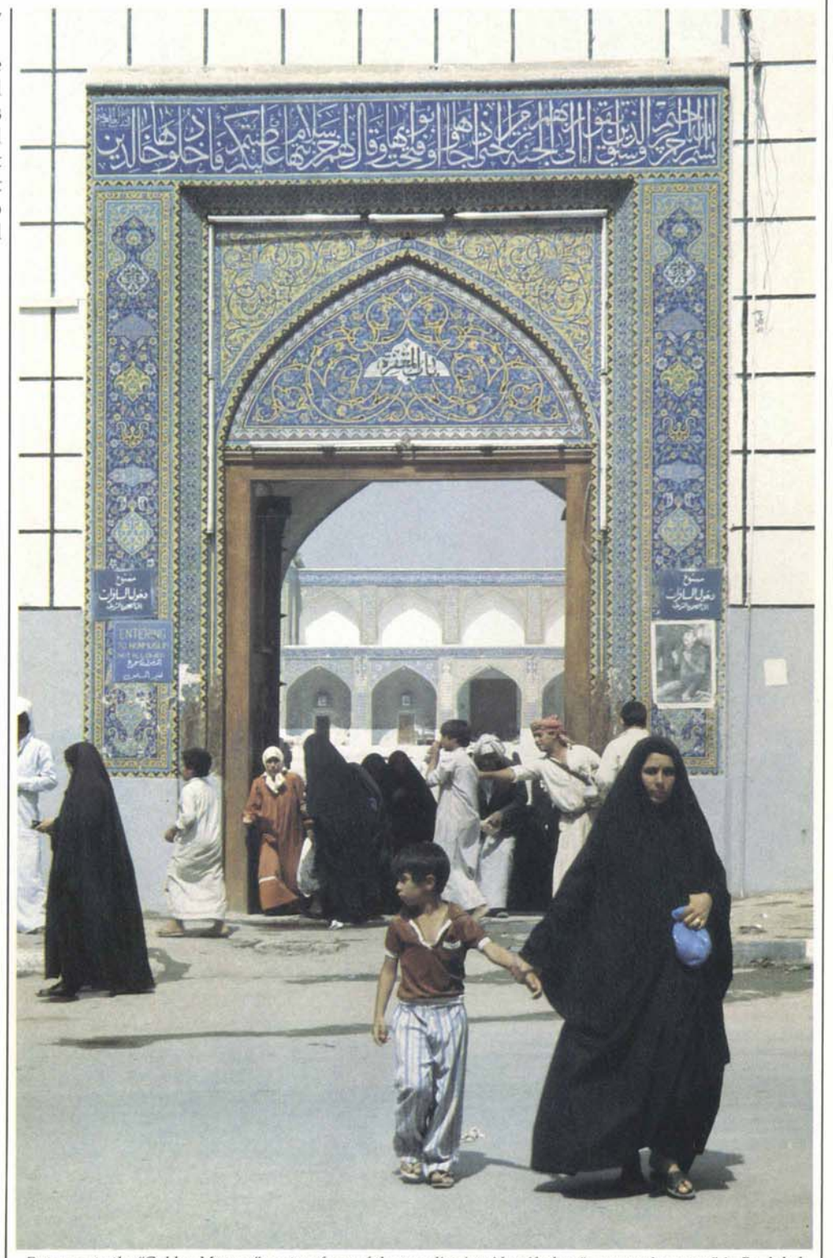
narrow opening to the sky it stays relatively cool in summer."

All very well, but Iraqis, like everyone else, are attached to their automobiles, and thus need both garages and parking places and since the old urban maze provided neither, space had to be found elsewhere: at a new level – an underground level for not only garages and parking lots, but also other services needed in a modern city – all in a vast subterranean cavern.

Detail of a wooden door in one of Baghdad's old houses.

Thus a huge excavation, with access to all the houses, shops and hotels which were to be built, and with space for sewers, lighting cables, telephones, air conditioning and everything else needed had to be dug.

This decision to go underground, however, led to a particular form of construction. Since the soil was a loose compaction of ancient mud-brick and general debris, thousands of piles would have been needed to support the new buildings. But



Entrance to the "Golden Mosque," center of one of the two districts identified as "preservation areas" in Baghdad.

"Ask them to save and restore the hundreds of beautiful old houses."

A workman strips paint from a wooden ceiling in one of Baghdad's beautiful old houses prior to its restoration.

the architects decided that it would be more "structurally honest" to build directly off the base slab – using the slab as bedrock, and this entailed removal of three meters (10 feet) of soil, a weight equal to the load of the structure to be erected.

The new houses also presented problems: since they had to be in keeping with the older patterns, they should have been built around a central courtyard. But since in Iraq the birth rate is falling, people no longer need the large traditional houses. The architects, therefore, came up with a "generic" house or prototype and then designed various scaled-down versions which have a large hall opening onto a central courtyard, two essential areas in a Muslim home.

Today, less than three years after Dr. Fethi persuaded the mayor to stop the clearance, all the underground work has been completed and the way is clear for the second stage of the project: the construction of a hotel, a supermarket, houses, hundreds of shops and everything else needed in a self-contained city-within-a-city.

So far, only John Hatchlove, a model maker in Horsham, knows the full shape of things to come, but the idea is clear to all concerned: to turn each of the areas back into a *mahalla,* a self-contained "village" in which the inhabitants will have a sense of identity and place, and in which thousands of small businessmen, artisans and craftsmen who now work in the existing old buildings can be joined by newcomers seeking premises.

Work has also been going on in restoring some of the old houses, each one picked for its fine design or its position; some are in places where they will either blend with new structures, or provide a pleasing contrast, a change in perspective or a visual focal point.

The work, done by teams of craftsmen employed by the Bengal Development Corporation, is painstaking. Layers of paint are stripped away from wooden panels; facings of intricate glazed tiles are cleaned or reproduced; mirrored screens are restored; and the graceful wooden columns supporting balconies are copied, since most original columns have been destroyed by termites.

"We want to put these houses back as they were, but we also have to make them habitable for people used to modern ways."

One thing is clear: the houses are not antiquities. With many of them stripped to the essentials, it is possible to see what flimsy structures they are – usually single skins of brick between the wooden reinforcing posts, with roofs made of woven reeds over poles. Unlike the great al-Kazimiya Mosque, completely restored in the early years of the 16th century, and as good now as when the masons left, the Baghdad houses were not built to last; then, as now, there were probably speculators who balked at investing too much time or money in housing.

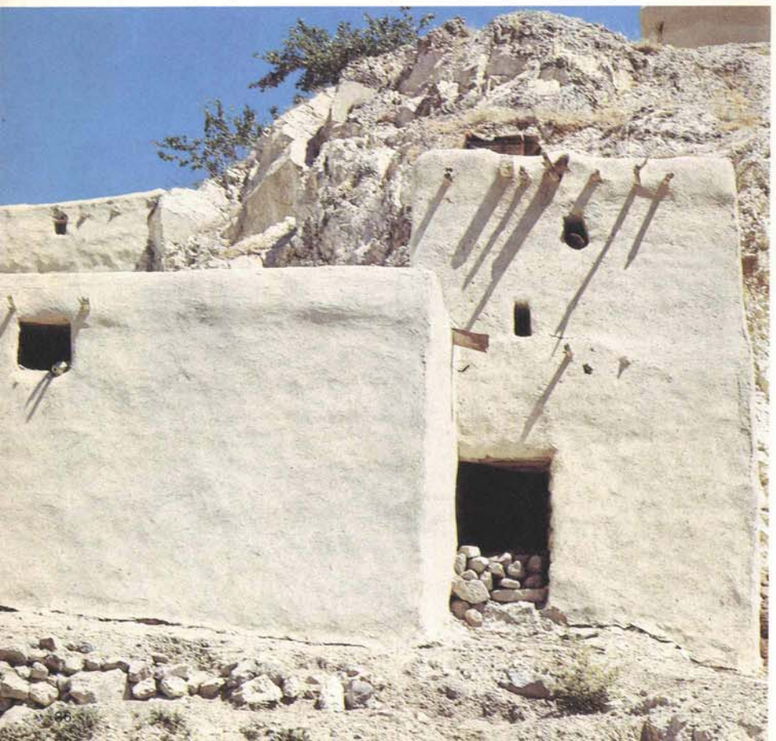
Nevertheless, by modern standards each of the preserved houses is a work of art, with intricately fretted wooden screens, colored glass bosses in the ceilings, from which to suspend lamps, roof tunnels – *badgirs* – to catch every breath of air and route it into the rooms below, overhanging balconies with close woven screens – *mashrabiya* – to allow the ladies of the household to see without being seen, and at the same time provide shade for passers-by in the street below (See *Aramco World,* July-August 1974) and massive brass door knockers and locks.

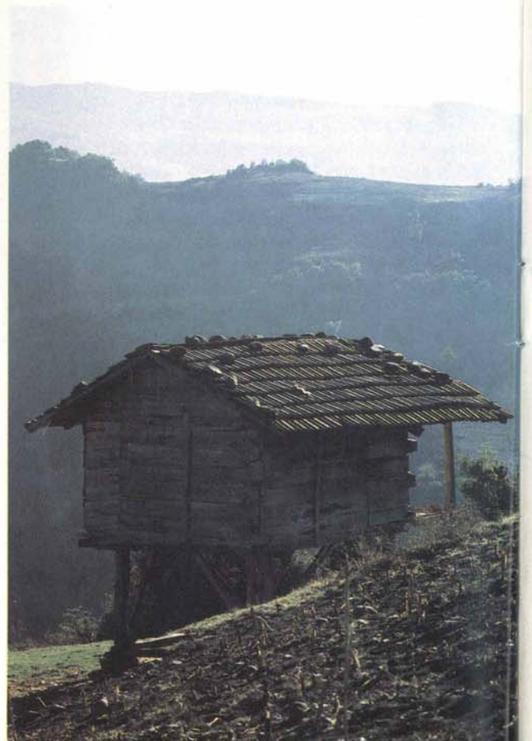
Archie Walls, an expert in the restoration of Muslim architecture, works with Leila Youssef, the young civil engineer who represents the *Aminat al-'Asima,* and who has been so taken with the whole idea of what is being done that she is waging a single-handed campaign to get similar projects approved in other areas of the city. Together, these two know every nook and corner of the dozens of houses being restored, and never allow anything to be botched, or permit substitute materials to be passed off as original. When something has to be replaced completely, no attempt is made to "age" it, or to make it appear as anything other than the modern material it is.

"We want to put these houses back as they were," says Walls, "but we also have to make them habitable for people used to modern ways. So electricity is being laid on, bathrooms installed, new roofs provided, and some of the small rooms

Cleaning and repairing brickwork flanking one of the walls of a house in a Baghdad preservation zone.

Traditional Turkish homes vary: above, a timber and clay house typical of western Turkey, below left, a mud-brick dwelling of central Anatolia and, below right, a wooden Black Sea home.





A tradition in peril

WRITTEN BY JOHN LAWTON – WITH AYSEN AKPINAR
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ERSIN ALOK

Baghdad is by no means the only Middle East city where traditional homes are being torn down to make way for the new. As early as the 1960's the same thing had begun to happen in Beirut, and in the 1970's even such cities as Riyadh and Jiddah were affected.

Usually, in the oil producing states of the Arabian Gulf, where space and funds are plentiful and the population small, the new homes combine the best elements of both modern and traditional architecture. But in other countries, like Turkey, where the overriding criterion is to provide as many dwellings as quickly and as inexpensively as possible – to meet the demands of rapidly rising populations – high rise models from the West have been almost totally adopted. As a result, traditional domestic architecture is being destroyed.

In Turkey, traces of the traditional home are still visible, but rapidly changing conditions have made their survival impossible, since the Turks, in addition to facing problems of overcrowding, have, since the 1920's, deliberately sought to westernize their country and their ways.

In recent years, as industrialization has drawn more and more people to the cities of western Turkey, the old, warmly weathered wooden houses have been demolished to make way for characterless apartment blocks. At the same time, fast cinder-block construction has put the traditional builders out of business. As a result, says one Turkish architect, "the general character of contemporary Anatolian house architecture today can be defined as a product of a withering technology which seems to hover above a nonexistent socio-economic foundation."

In a sense, it was bound to happen anyway because, unlike the stone houses of Europe, the traditional Turkish home was not built to last. Stone was reserved for massive and magnificent palaces and mosques, while wood and dried brick were used for dwellings and these were regularly destroyed by fires, especially in the "aubergine (eggplant) season." Because Turks like to eat aubergines sliced and fried, great fires, starting in kitchens as cooking oil caught fire, would spread quickly through tinder-dry buildings.

In Turkey, which includes regions varying greatly both in climate and in natural features, traditional house types vary according to materials and design. Houses in the cold mountainous east and the hot south, for example, were made of stone, while timber and clay were favored in the temperate regions of the north and west, typical houses of central Anatolia were built of sun-baked mud-brick with heavy earth roofs.

Stone and mud-brick dwellings were usually one-story cubic structures with few windows; timber houses usually stood two, or even three, stories high, with sloping, tiled roofs. In the hot dry regions of southeast Anatolia, houses had rooms with one side opening onto a shaded courtyard; and on the humid southwest Mediterranean coast, homes had numerous windows and balconies overlooking the sea.

On the northern Black Sea coast, the houses were usually made almost entirely of wood, while in western Anatolia they were only half-timbered, with clay packed between carrier beams. Frequently, the ground floor was built of stone.

With the exception of stone houses in southeast Anatolia, where the sides of the courtyard were remarkable for their arched and ornamental masonry, external architecture was usually plain, and coloring was generally natural, or white – except for gaily painted villas overhanging the Bosporus Strait.

Turkish houses usually had overhanging upper stories and projecting roofs to increase interior living space and to protect the lower walls from sun and rain; the windows were covered with wooden lattice work to keep out prying eyes, doors were often decorated with hand carving, and ceilings with geometrical designs and star patterns made of thin strips of wood and colored to resemble the sky on a starry night.

While traditional Turkish house types were very different externally, internally they were not. In fact, with the exception of small concessions to regional taste,

The environmental setting in old Turkish homes was provided by colorful surfaces and empty spaces—not furniture.

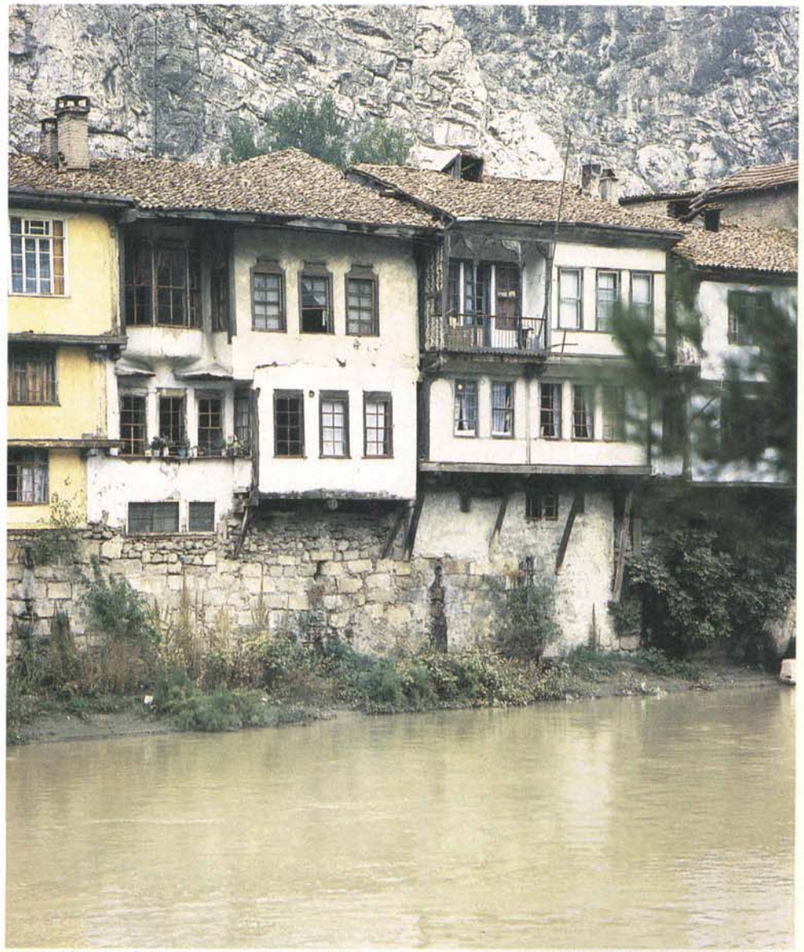
their interior layout conformed more or less to a general, three-unit working plan: rooms, the space between them and an antechamber. In various combinations, this elementary scheme could provide surprisingly flexible living arrangements; since all rooms were approximately alike in size and interior, each could serve either as a bedroom, living room or dining room. Each room, furthermore, was similarly, and simply, furnished – with the environmental setting provided not by three dimensional furniture, as it is today, but by colorful surfaces and empty spaces; since meals were served on large trays and bedding was stowed away during the day, the only furniture in most rooms was low, built-in couches strewn with cushions and pillows, while around the room there were alcoves and built-in cupboards. Heating was provided by fireplace or tiled charcoal stove.

Between the rooms were recesses called *eyvans*; they too were integral parts of the living area, they were used for activities other than sitting, eating or sleeping. And stretching alongside the rooms, linking the *eyvans* with the inner structure was an open-plan area known as a *sofa* in which sitting arrangements were often set up in a sort of lattice-work bay window overhanging the exterior wall. The *eyvans* and *sofa* were normally on the first and second floors, and the ground floor usually consisted of store rooms, kitchen, bathroom and stables, thus the ground and upper floors, together with the courtyard, formed an organic whole.

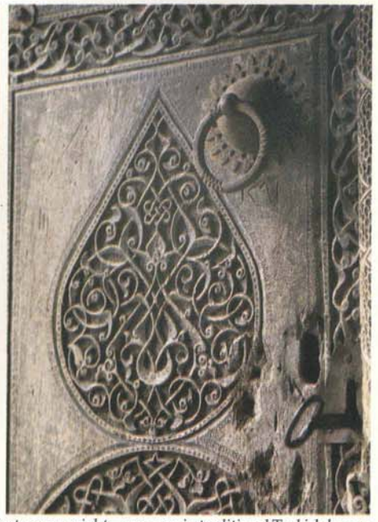
The traditional Muslim family structure and the characteristics of its lifestyle also had an important influence on designs; houses, for example, were usually divided into two parts–the men's quarters, and the women's quarters–and an insistence on privacy was expressed in the walled courtyard and lattice covered windows.

"From the standpoint of the nation's cultural history," says one authority, "the traditional homes are very precious indeed, but far more important than that is the role they still can play in our contemporary architecture and life style." Instead of being torn down to make way for new ones, he argues, they should be "reorganized to fit present conditions – something which, bearing in mind their versatility, can easily be achieved."

For "only by accepting its own socio-cultural heritage," he says "can the contemporary community achieve a healthy architectural conception."

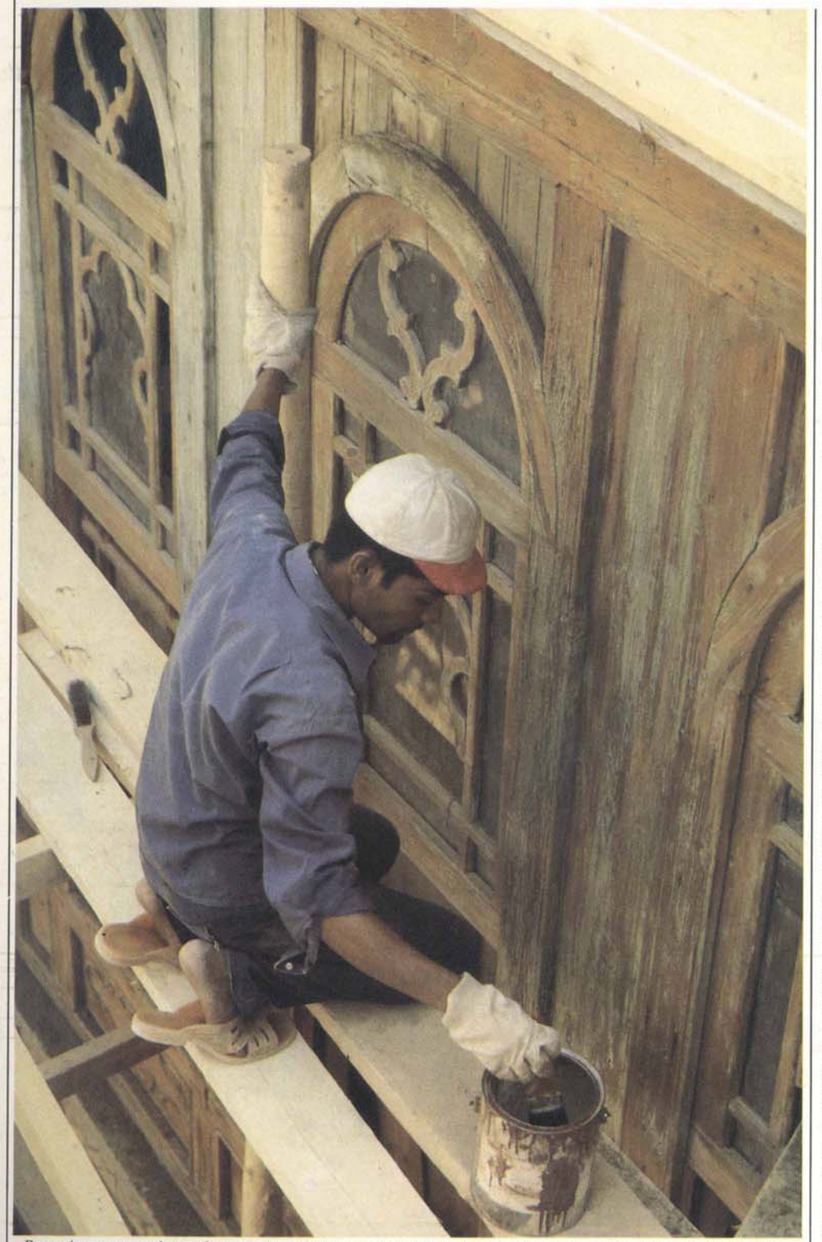


Typical houses of eastern Turkey: above, at Cifteler in the northeast, and, far left, at Samsat in the southeast.



A decorative ceiling at Budur, left, and a carved wooden door at Kastamonu, right—common in traditional Turkish homes.

*"The work...by teams of craftsmen...
is painstaking, layers of paint are stripped away...
facings are cleaned or reproduced..."*



Restoring a carved wooden window frame in one of the dozens of houses being restored in Baghdad.

knocked together to make better use of space. When we do have to use new materials we make no bones about it. We are creating houses to be lived in, not museums."

Iraqi authorities have already decided that some of the best houses should be used as club houses and meeting places, rather than as private homes, and other houses are likely to become "grace and favor residences," that will be rented to Iraqis who have given distinguished service.

This upheaval has had considerable impact on the two areas concerned, but in both cases, the authorities of the mosques have given their full support to the work. At Bab al-Shaikh, members of the al-Gilani family still own some of the best of the old houses surrounding the mosque and the present head of the family, Sheikh Youssef, a scholar and former member of the staff of Baghdad University, takes a personal interest in the project, often acting as a representative of the planners when they differ with their clients, the *Aminat al-'Asima.*

For the municipality, Rifat Chadirji proved a hard taskmaster as he pushed the architects and contractors ahead far faster than they wanted to go or believed possible. Now, while the rest of Baghdad is turning into just one more modern city – people boast there are now more cranes than palm trees there – it is all proving worthwhile; some of the past is being preserved, but, more importantly, the ideas and atmosphere of earlier times are being used with new materials for new purposes to create living communities within the city as they were centuries before.

Rarely can a speech at a learned seminar have had such immediate and far reaching effects. When, in the fullness of time, Ihsan Fethi's epitaph comes to be written, like Christopher Wren it will be said of him: "If you seek his monument, look about you."

John Bulloch, Diplomatic Correspondent for the Daily Telegraph *in London, has covered the Middle East since 1969 and is the author of two books on Lebanon, and a general history of the area.*