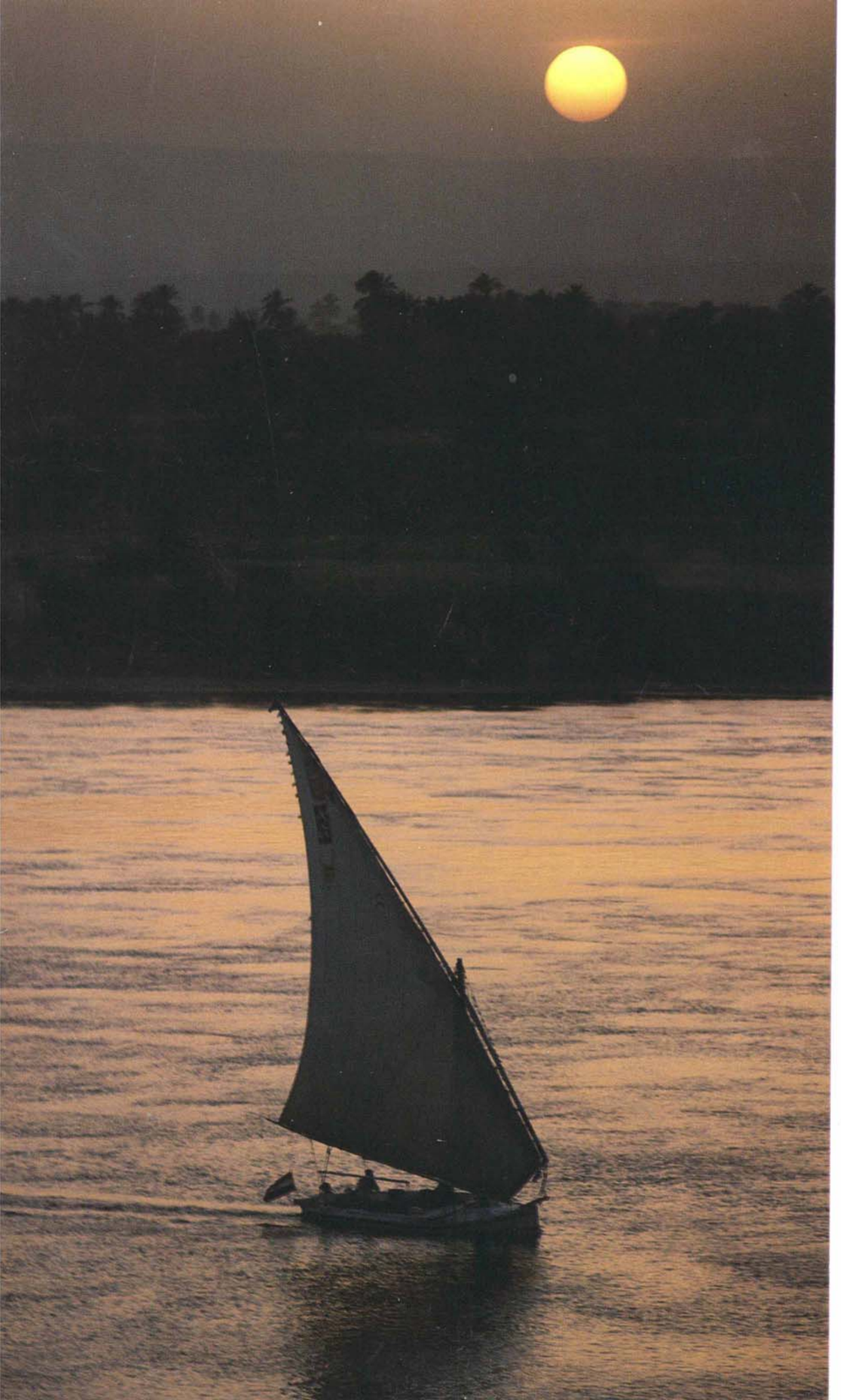

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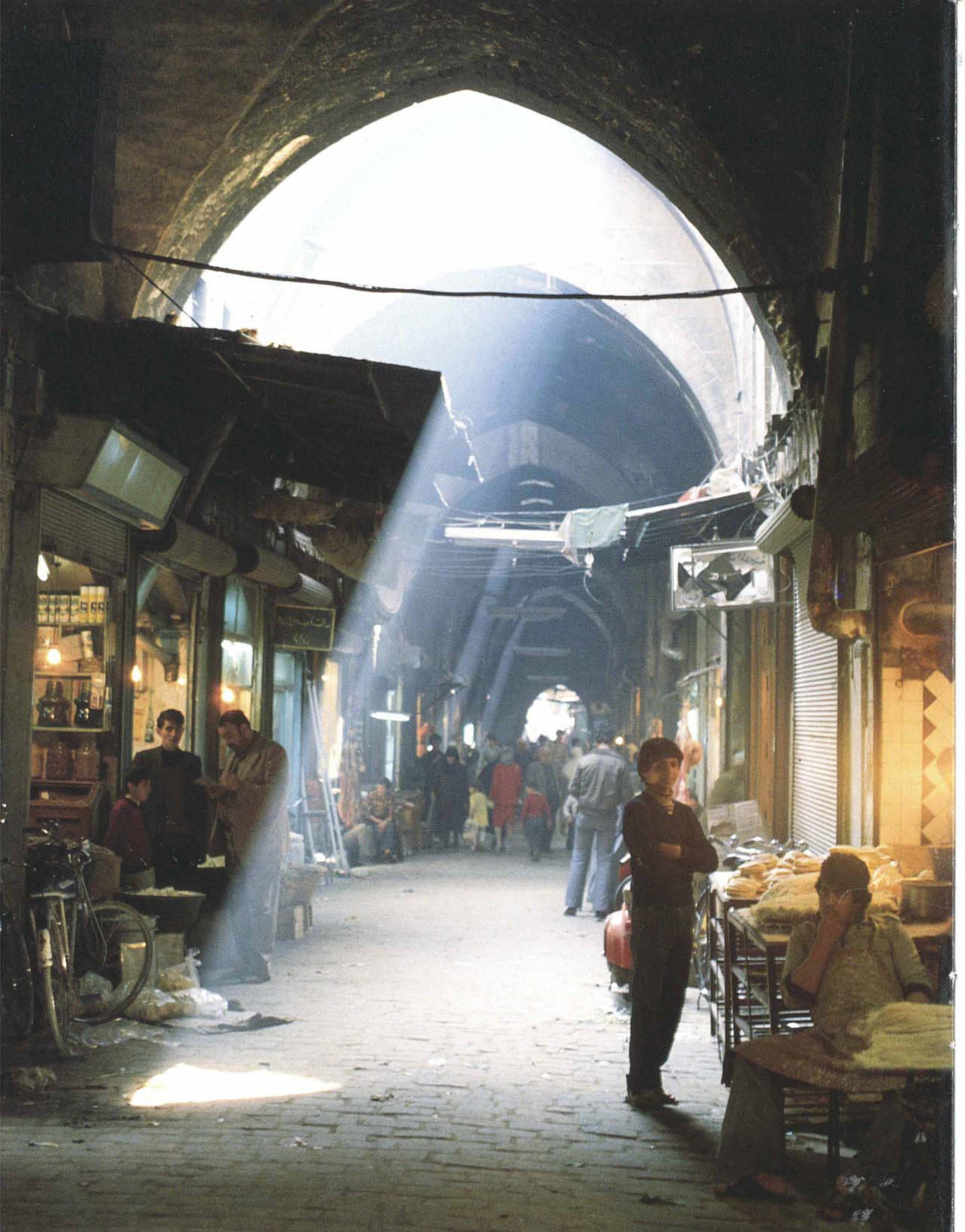
AIDA
AT LUXOR



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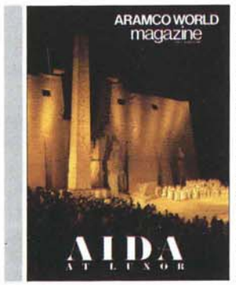


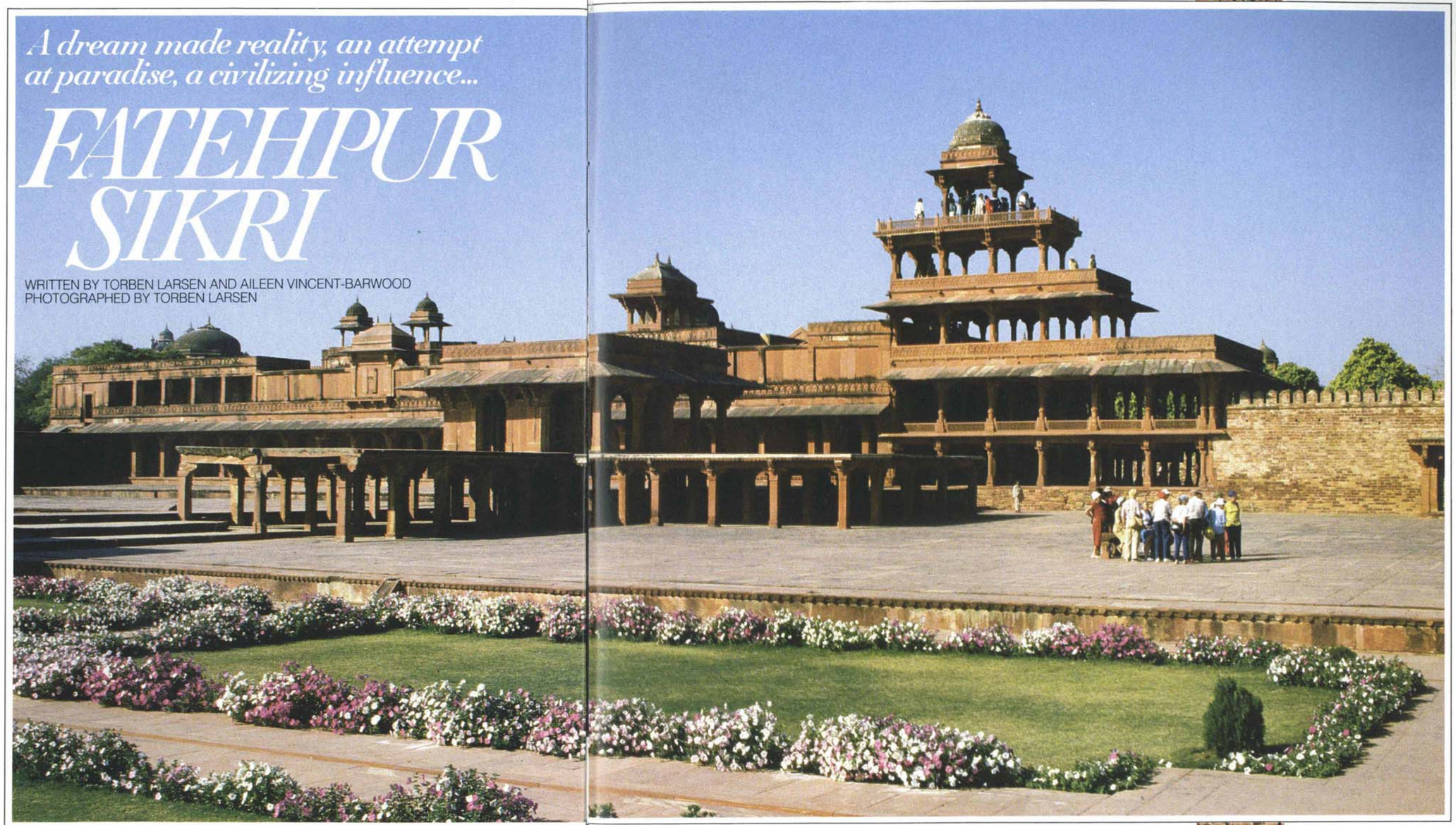
Cover: The Ente Arena di Verona chorus rehearsing Guiseppe Verdi's opera *Aida* in the Temple of Luxor, Egypt, last May. Portraying priests preparing to consecrate the Egyptian general Radamès for battle against the Ethiopians, the chorus is enacting a historical event: It was from Luxor Temple in ancient Thebes that Egyptian armies set forth 3,000 years ago to defend the borders of the pharaonic empire. Photo by Barry Iverson/Frank Spooner Pictures. Back cover: The *Aida* audience's view of sunset on the Nile, by Tor Eigeland

◀ Shafts of sunlight puncture the subterranean gloom of Aleppo's labyrinthine bazaar – said by some to be the most colorful in the Middle East.

A dream made reality, an attempt at paradise, a civilizing influence...

FATEHPUR SIKRI

WRITTEN BY TORBEN LARSEN AND AILEEN VINCENT-BARWOOD
PHOTOGRAPHED BY TORBEN LARSEN



On a ridge of red sandstone jutting up from the flat, endless alluvial plains of northern India's Ganges basin, some thirty kilometers (20 miles) west of Agra, lies what must be the most spectacular ghost town in the world. An entire royal capital, built just over 400 years ago and abandoned a scant 14 years after its completion, stands almost unscathed by the passage of time. We owe its presence to Jalal al-Din Akbar, third of the great Moghuls, the Muslim emperors of most of northern India for more than 200 years, from 1500 onwards.

Always overshadowed by its more famous neighbor, the Taj Mahal, Fatehpur Sikri nonetheless continues to haunt the imagination of builders and dreamers, artisans and poets around the world. Its red walls rise elegantly against the hot blue of the Indian sky; its courtyards, walled gardens, latticed balconies and carved pillars, its gates and towers, cupolas and arches, workshops and mosques and palaces present to the modern world a harmony and beauty often sought but seldom found.

Babur and Humayun, Akbar's predecessors, had ruled Moghul India from Delhi and Agra. When Akbar acceded to the throne at 13, he first followed this tradition: It was he who raised the imposing walls of the Red Fort in Agra. But a curious set of circumstances conspired to change his mind.

Still without a male heir in 1568, 12 years after he came to the throne, Akbar stopped one day at the village of Sikri to ask the help of a famed mystic, Salim Chisti. Chisti predicted the emperor would soon have not one son but three. And in fact the following year one of Akbar's wives bore him a son, the future emperor Jahangir, and two other sons followed. Out of gratitude, Akbar moved his capital nearer to the seer's village and began building a new city on the ridge above the lake. To the name of the village he added the qualifier *fatehpur* – the place of victory.

But Akbar was not content simply to build a seat of government for his empire. A man of tremendous energy and vitality, he wanted also to redirect India's social, political and cultural attitudes through a series of bold experiments at his imperial city. Fatehpur Sikri was to be the empire's center of political and spiritual power.

"Akbar," says Michael Brand, curator of Asian art at the Rhode Island School of Design, "is the man who firmly established the Moghul Indian empire. He was keenly aware of the social and political potential of art, and during his 49-year reign he brought art and architecture to unrivaled heights in the Indian empire."

A tireless patron who slept little and thought much, Akbar commissioned individual paintings, carpets, textiles, carvings and manuscript illustrations which were no longer in the traditional static Persian mode, but teemed with action, life and color. He was also an avid collector of manuscripts and paintings, was interested in drawings from life – an unheard-of break with tradition – and even in European art.

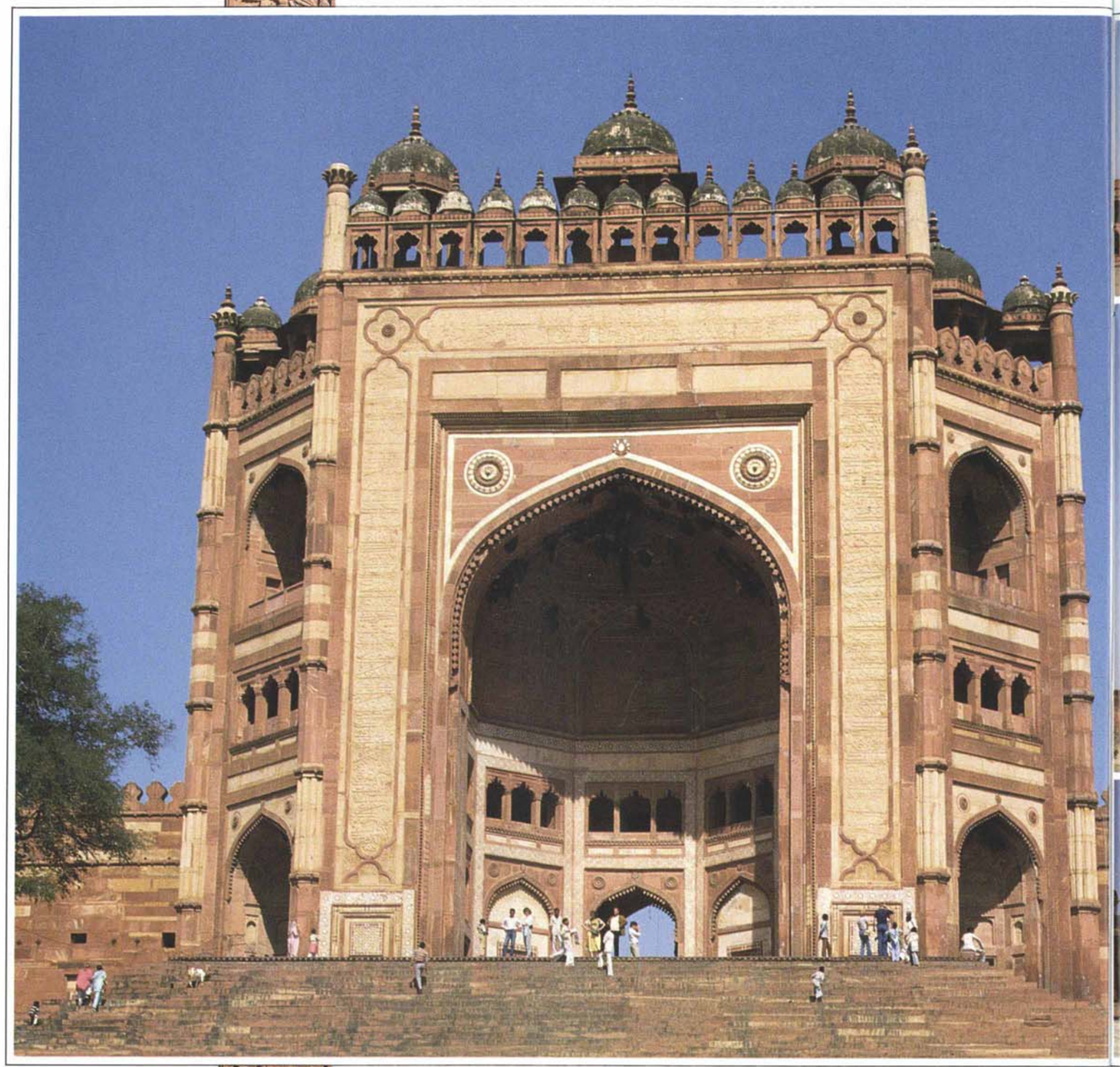
Akbar's biographer, Abu Faisal, quotes the emperor as saying that "knowledge is itself regarded as the summit of perfection, yet unless displayed in action . . . it may be considered worse than ignorance." So because he believed that art should not be just for esthetic enjoyment – that ideas must be tempered with practical experience – the philosopher-king could often be found out in the stone quarries with his laborers, sawing and cutting the stone for his city himself.

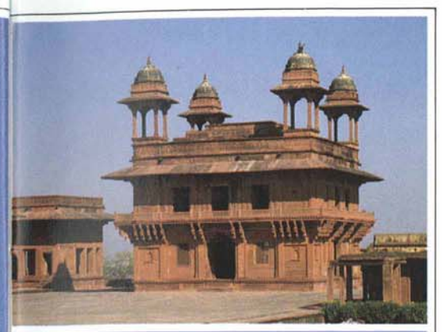
The plan of the capital he laid out was brilliant and centuries ahead of its time. Bringing in architects, artists and designers from all over the known world, he instructed them in his wishes: There would be lots of light and air and gardens. There would be clean water, proper sanitation and plenty of green space. Privacy and security were paramount. Residential areas would be separate from work areas. Above all, Fatehpur Sikri would be a city where all the arts flourished, where scientists and other scholars pursued their studies, and where all people, all religions, and all races lived together in harmony.

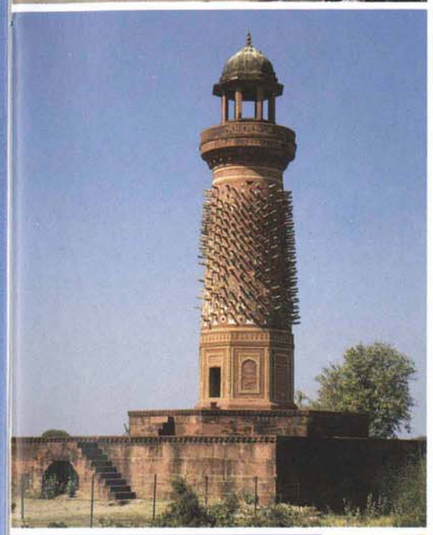
His dream came true.

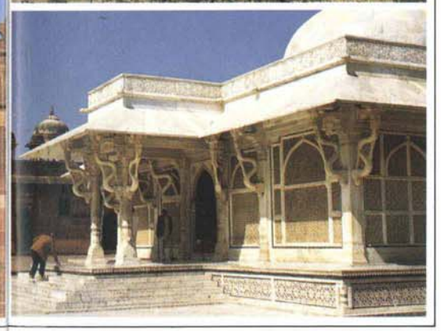
In less than 14 years of work, armies of stonemasons, hordes of laborers, and the cream of the empire's creative artists built the complex still visible today. In its time, however, that royal precinct was surrounded by a large town of lesser build-

Flowers and ring-necked parakeets provide most of the color in Fatehpur Sikri today, but the sandstone buildings were beautifully painted in Akbar's time. At left, pomegranates and grapes twine up a column in the Khas Mahal, *said to be the palace of a Turkish wife of the emperor's.*









The main gateway of the Friday Mosque, above, testifies to Akbar's power – and complexity. Opposite page: The Hall of Private Audience, top, was the venue of the emperor's "seminars" on religion, statecraft and art. Hundreds of imitation elephant tusks adorn the Hiran Minar, *center. Salim Chisti's white marble tomb, below, was added to Fatehpur Sikri years after Akbar's death.*

ings, most of which have now vanished. English visitors then reckoned that both Agra and Fatehpur Sikri outranked London in extent, sophistication and wealth. In the words of Ralph Finch, one of the first Englishmen to visit the Moghul court,

> "Agra is a very great city, and populous, built with stone, with a fair river running past it. . . . Fatehpur Sikri . . . is larger than Agra but the houses and streets are not so good. The king hath in Agra and Fatehpur Sikri 100 elephants, 30,000 horses, 1,400 tame deer, 800 concubines and such a store of leopard, tiger, buffaloes, cocks and hawks, that it is very strange to see. He keepeth a great court. Agra and Fatehpur are very great cities, either of them much greater than London."

Indeed, during Fatehpur Sikri's 14-year peak between 1571 and 1585, over 100 workshops housed artisans of each craft and art. There were studios and workrooms for weavers, goldsmiths, painters, calligraphers, tapestry-makers and potters; workers in jade, ceramics, wood and metal; carpet makers and manuscript illustrators. There were dance and music studios, rooms for writers, a library of 4,000 books – though Akbar himself never learned to read – and every Thursday groups gathered with the emperor for discussions of religion and philosophy.

Architecturally, Fatehpur Sikri was a pleasure to live in. It had no streets. The graceful sandstone buildings, ranging from golden to maroon in color, rose around courtyards and gardens, giving the inhabitants shaded walks to tread and flower-filled gardens in which to work and rest. The few architectural motifs – the arches, domes and turrets, the pillars, pavilions and arcades – repeat like themes in a concerto. The names of some of the buildings give an idea of the life at court: the Hall of Private Audience, the Friday Mosque, the Elephant Gate, the Pachisi Board, and the Tomb of Salim Chisti, then as now a place of pilgrimage for childless couples of every religion.

On the northern edge of the city, the Elephant Gate, overloooking the lake below, was the formal entrance to the city. Inside the walls the city was divided into huge mosque and palace complexes. At all times of the day and night, according to Abu Faisal's *Akbarnama* (the history of Akbar and his times), the vast courtyards and parks vibrated with life.

There were constant religious festivals, exhibits and games. On the large *maidan* below the city there were polo matches, elephant battles, gladiator contests and stunt-flying performances by the trained imperial pigeons. Writes Abu Faisal: "His majesty was very fond of perfumes, thus the courtyards and palace halls were continually scented with fragrances composed of ancient recipes and mixtures invented by his majesty. Incense was daily burnt, and sweet-smelling flowers were used in large quantities."

One of the buildings so adorned – and the most prominent in Fatehpur Sikri – is the *Panch-Mahal*, a pavilion of rare delicacy. Old pictures show that each of its five stories was covered with red sandstone screens, and today the structure affords an excellent view of the whole complex, so the *Panch-Mahal* was probably used to allow the ladies of the court to observe the goings-on from decent seclusion. The building's second floor is supported by 84 pillars, the next by 56, and its roof by only four, but each of the seemingly identical pillars is subtly different in design and decoration.

"There was nothing experimental or amateurish in [the city's] architecture," states Dr. Stuart Cary Welch, curator of Islamic Art and Indian Painting at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum. "It was, quite simply, a work of genius: a composite style of art which incorporated all previous forms and is representative of a cosmopolitan outlook. It is eclectic, inventive in its approach, and had all the elements to become a classical style – which it did. It is a cumulative contribution of Akbar's great personality."

Two of Fatehpur Sikri's buildings give us some insight into that strange personality. One is the Hall of Private Audience, a small, square building. Inside, the hall is a single chamber surrounding an extraordinary central column, an octagonal pillar carved from base to top with symbols of India's four great faiths – Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. Walkways run from the capital of this column to the four corners of the room's second-floor balcony.

At the intersection of the walkways, atop the pillar, Akbar sat to give audience, with his courtiers and guests ranged along the balconies on all four sides. Below, on the floor of the room, were assembled those who were allowed to listen but not participate in the exalted discussions above. We know that Akbar had very little patience with those scholars whom he considered narrow-minded and hair-splitting, and given his great interest in art, statecraft, ethics and other topics, it is likely that many a session here in the *Diwan-i Khas* was wide-ranging and provocative.

The other evocative and illuminating building is the Friday Mosque, spacious enough for 20,000 worshipers and the only part of Akbar's royal complex still alive today, teeming with people when the call to prayer rings out. Its main gateway serves as monumental testimony to Akbar's triumphs, but the juxtaposition of inscriptions on its two sides testifies to his character. On the left it says, with no minced words, "The king of kings, shadow of God, Akbar the emperor, on his return from [conquest], came to Fatehpur in the 46th year of his reign." On the right, another side of this extraordinary man is revealed: The inscription reads, "The world is a bridge; pass over it but build no house upon it. The world endures but an hour; spend that hour in devotion."

Fatehpur Sikri, perhaps the ultimate architectural expression of royal will, was inhabited for only 14 years. In 1585, Akbar decamped for Punjab and later returned to Agra to rule. He never restored Fatehpur Sikri to its status of an imperial capital; soon it was inhabited only by a skeleton staff, and later by no one. To this day the exact reasons for his departure are unknown. A favorite theory is that the city's lavish use of water for ornamental lakes, fountains, baths and even a primitive air-conditioning system exhausted the local water supply. Or possibly Akbar came to feel that the established and fortified city of Agra was more suitable as the seat of power. Probably a combination of circumstances coalesced to remove its inquisitive, imperious and protean founding spirit from this red-sandstone city.

Akbar seems to have left Fatehpur Sikri behind as an insect leaves behind its outgrown skin – a duller, discarded imprint of itself. And even that is intriguing and exquisitely beautiful.

Torben Larsen visited Fatehpur Sikri during a year spent doing entomological research in India. Aileen Vincent-Barwood is a veteran reporter on the Muslim world.

Perspective drawing of a neighborhood mosque and courtyard dwellings in Meknes, Morocco, by Gaetano Arcuri.

History, culture and ethnicity are again receiving their deserved attention...

THE · KING · FAHD · AWARDS

A WORLDWIDE PERSPECTIVE

WRITTEN BY ARTHUR CLARK

An international jury was busy in Istanbul's historic Yıldız Palace last August, judging what sponsors termed a "suprisingly high" number of entries in a brand new architectural competition: the $100,000 King Fahd Award for Design and Research in Islamic Architecture.

Some 30 young winners from places as far apart as Canada and Egypt, Saudi Arabia and China, were selected in the contest's two categories from among approximately 360 entries received from 40 countries. Prizewinning topics spanned an equally wide spectrum: In research, they ranged from Istanbul's Topkapı Palace to Cordoba's 10th-century Madinat al-Zahra; in design, from a foundation complex in Cairo to a secondary school in Malaysia.

That is exactly how contest organizers hoped it would turn out, for this competition is meant to stimulate thought – concrete and abstract – on architectural issues, single buildings, and towns and cities.

The awards were established by the International Commission for the Preservation of Islamic Cultural Heritage, headquartered in Istanbul; they are funded by Saudi Arabia's King Fahd ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz Al Sa'ud, who, as guardian of Islam's two preeminent mosques in Makkah and Medina, has a particular interest in protecting the Muslim cultural heritage. The commission was established in 1982 by the 46-nation Organization of the Islamic Conference, and is chaired by Prince Faysal ibn Fahd, president of Saudi Arabia's wide-ranging Youth Welfare organization.

The territory the awards have staked out lie in the borderland between anthropology and architecture, between culture and construction. Their objectives, the commission says, are to promote "the discovery of the creative spirit of Islam as embodied in its cultural and artistic legacy"; to encourage "the search for the formative principles of architecture as inspired by the Islamic way of life"; to promote debate "on the architectural design issues that challenge … contemporary Muslim societies"; and to further "the pursuit of compatibility and continuity" between the historic traditions of Muslim societies and modern visions of their future.

The first triennial contest was promoted around the world, in Muslim and non-Muslim countries alike, says Dr. Mohammad Gazdar, director of the commission's Riyadh office. "The idea is to encourage Islamic architecture more and more. It makes no difference where it comes from."

The number and range of entries were "more than the jury or anybody else expected," he says. Prizewinning submissions even came from the Soviet Union – on tower dwellings in Yemen – and the People's Republic of China.

The awards, established "to recognize the emerging talent of individuals excelling in the field," were designed to promote the work of young people, not well-established professionals. In fact, entry was restricted to students and recent graduates of schools and institutes of architecture, giving the awards a sharply different stamp from most other major architectural competitions. The prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture, for example, honors individuals for *completed* works – something far beyond the means and the experience of most young architectural practitioners.

To further the Award's educational aspect, advisors to the prizewinning entrants are also honored with cash awards. Moreover, the commission urged participating institutions to offer studio design courses for students taking part.

Although most of the winners were Muslims, the majority of the institutions which sponsored them were located in North America and Europe. They included Harvard, Princeton and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, U.S. schools whose up-to-date architectural resources arguably give their students a natural advantage over their counterparts in the Muslim world.

But that may be changing.

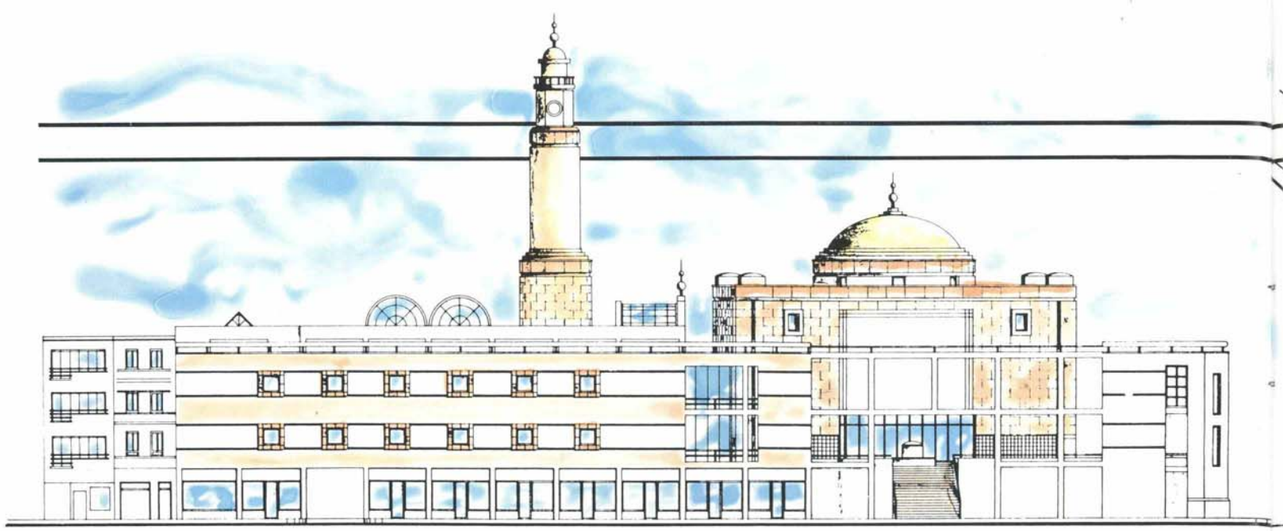
After years of decline under foreign influence, Gazdar notes, there has been a recent resurgence of Islamic design visible throughout the Muslim world today, and the Award is intended to fuel that resurgence. "The basic aim of this prize is to preserve Islamic architecture, and to bring it alive as well," he says.

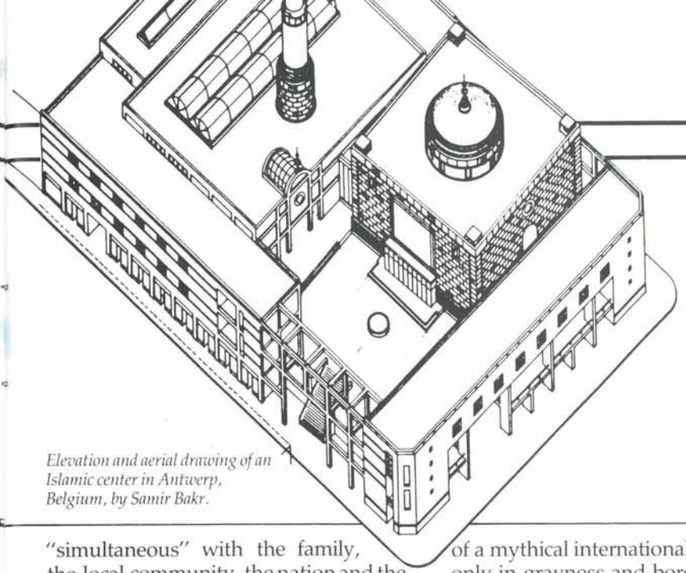
From his desk in Riyadh, Gazdar points to a good example of what he means: an entrant's plan to revitalize the crowded Zine el-Abidine district in the heart of Meknes, Morocco. The traditional urban framework of the town's *medina*, or old city, highlighted by multitudes of minarets and green expanses of tiled mosque roofs, has been shattered by an "influx of Western urban planning and architecture," writes prizewinner Gaetano Arcuri of the University of Rome.

Arcuri's plan calls for the creation of a grid-pattern district comprising a neighborhood mosque surrounded by traditional two- and four-storied dwellings with inner courtyards and windows with *mashrabiya* – wooden screens – for privacy. By using both traditional elements and the technical and cultural progress of the last century, Arcuri says, he aims to create a link "between the historical fabric of the city and the more recent expansions on the edges of the *medina*."

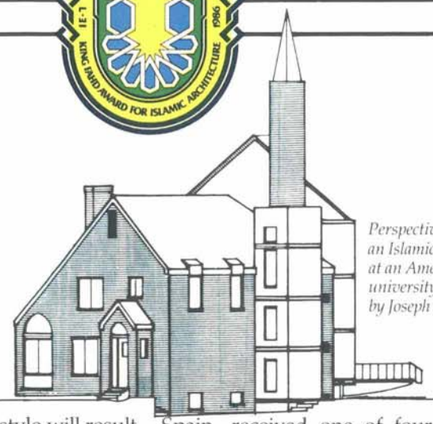
Arcuri's name, and the names of 30 other King Fahd Award prizewinners, were announced last August. The formal award ceremony was planned for this summer – possibly in Riyadh – to enable as many of the award-winning students as possible to attend during their vacations.

Ten prizes of $4,000 each were awarded in the field of design. One of the winners, Ahmet Ergelen, a Turk at the University of Stuttgart in Germany, received special attention from the jury for his plan to develop new housing in Zeyrek, a section of Istanbul on the Golden Horn occupied by recent, low-income immigrants from rural provinces. A flood of village immigrants to Istanbul has turned the city into a battleground between Turkey's widely differing rural and urban cultures.

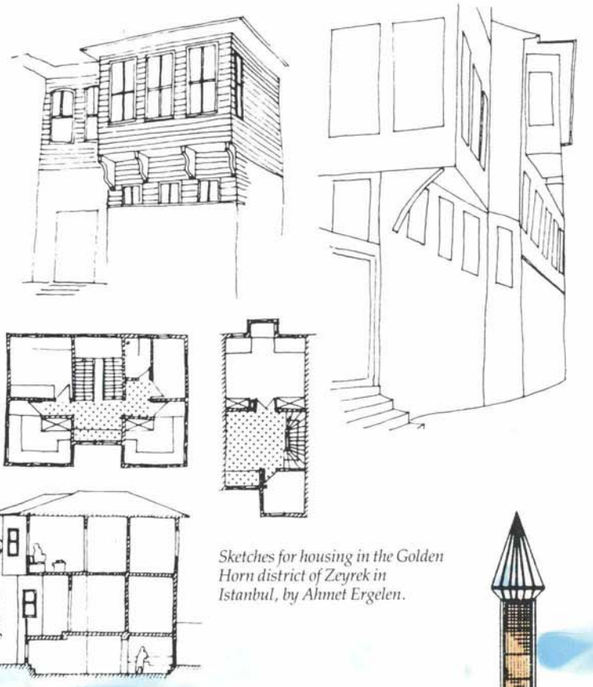




Elevation and aerial drawing of an Islamic center in Antwerp, Belgium, by Samir Bakr.



Perspective drawing of an Islamic student center at an American university, by Joseph Knight.



Sketches for housing in the Golden Horn district of Zeyrek in Istanbul, by Ahmet Ergelen.

"Zeyrek is now a slum district that still contains examples of traditional Turkish-Islamic town structure, as well as a relatively intact stock of wooden houses dating back to the late Ottoman era," Ergelen wrote. In his proposal, new housing would be built on unused land nearby. It would retain many traditional elements, including projecting alcoves and multi-functional rooms, and would face on narrow streets.

The point of such design is to make the development itself act as "the medium of transition from the rural habits of its residents to urban life," notes Ergelen. "Special care has been given to preservation and nurturing the idea of neighborhood in the traditional Islamic society.... Ramps, steps and narrow streets connect the home groups with the rest of the district."

Ergelen's scheme answered one of two key design challenges posed by the prize board: to submit a project reflecting and nourishing "an Islamic self." Rather than limiting the scope of projects, that issue stretched it across architectural horizons. For in Islam, noted the commission, self is "simultaneous" with the family, the local community, the nation and the *ummah*, the one Muslim nation worldwide.

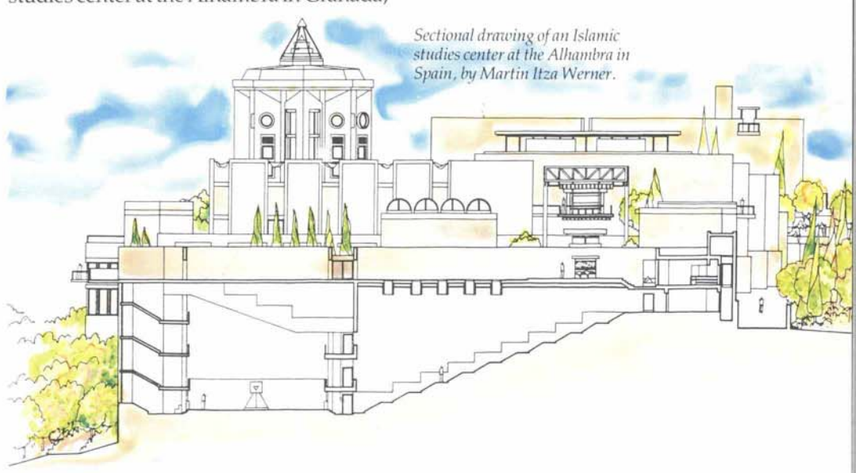
Other prizewinning entries included the Kedah Islamic secondary school in Malaysia, which uses the traditional Southeast Asian roof in the mosque; a proposal for a *waqf* complex, or group of buildings established by an Islamic trust, in Cairo; and a project for a "source dwelling," or basic housing unit, from Dan Zhou of the People's Republic of China.

The second design issue had a sharp contemporary focus. Contestants were asked to design a structure for an Islamic nation or group in a non-Islamic context. The facility might be an embassy or a mosque and community center in a non-Muslim country "where Islam as a religion and culture is expressed through a recently converted Muslim community – such as North America or Western Europe – or an old minority – such as southeastern Europe."

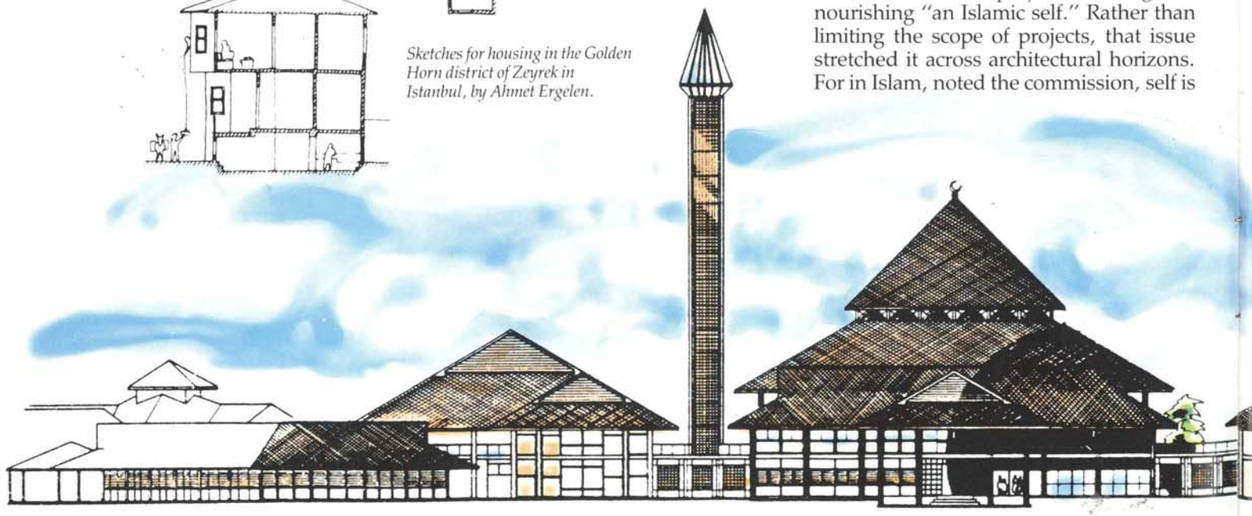
"The mood of internationalism in our architectural experience of the past half-century has demonstrated that the pursuit of a mythical international style will result only in grayness and boredom," said the commission. "History, culture and ethnicity are again receiving their deserved attention. Pursuit of meaning is once again a respectable aim in architecture."

Here, prizes went to designs for an Islamic center in Antwerp, Belgium, and a Muslim community center in the United States. An ambitious design for an Islamic studies center at the Alhambra in Granada, Spain, received one of four honorable-mention awards.

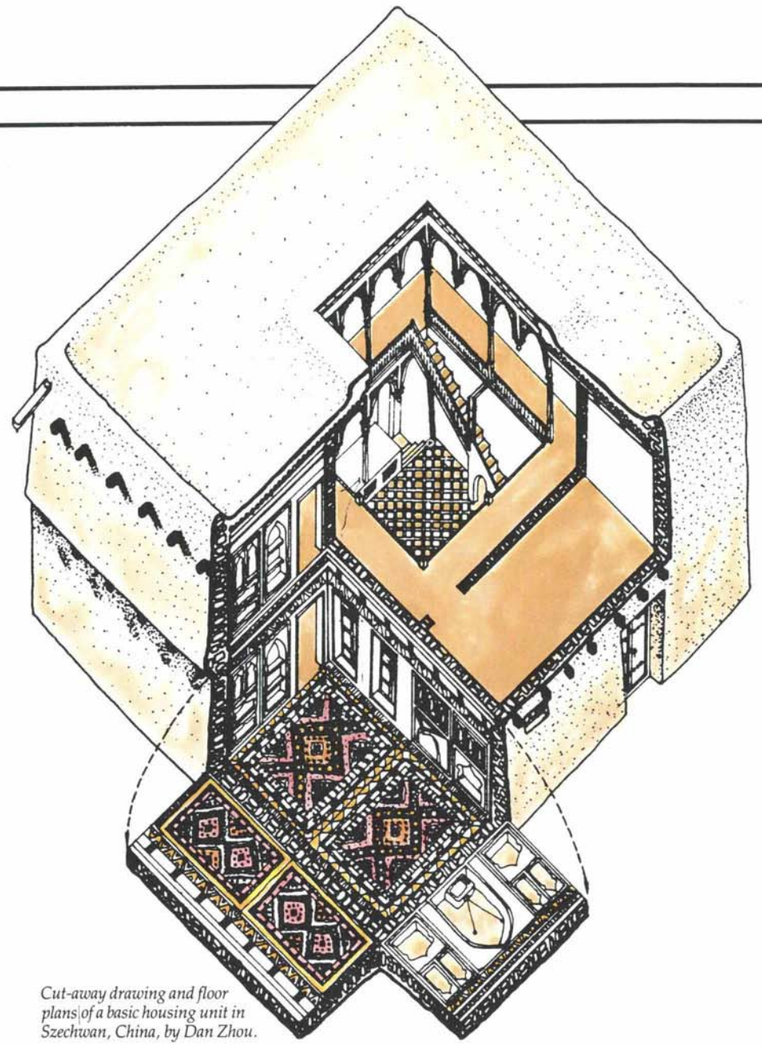
In the Award's research branch, suggested topics included "Islam and its view of man and the man-made," "responsibilities and challenges facing man as God's vice-regent on earth," and "the potential role of architects and planners in alleviating the crises associated with urbanization in the Muslim world."



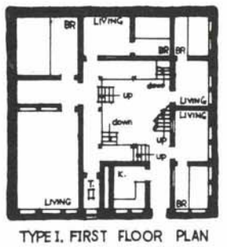
Sectional drawing of an Islamic studies center at the Alhambra in Spain, by Martin Itza Werner.



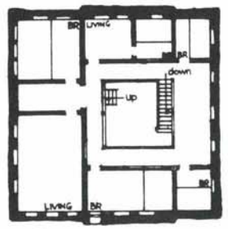
Elevation drawing of an Islamic secondary school at Kedah in Malaysia, by Teh Joo Heng.



Cut-away drawing and floor plans of a basic housing unit in Szechwan, China, by Dan Zhou.



TYPE I. FIRST FLOOR PLAN



SECOND FLOOR PLAN

architecture classes at the King Faysal University School of Architecture in Dammam, will probably fulfill a key objective of the King Fahd Award by sparking more than a few debates. Called "Responsibility and the Traditional Muslim Built Environment" – the title of his doctoral thesis at his sponsoring institution, MIT – Akbar's paper looks to the homes, meeting places and alleyways of Muslim cities of the past to gain a perspective on architecture for the future, he says.

Many architects today "look romantically at the traditional environment," Akbar says, but often fail to understand it. What was good for people a century ago won't necessarily be practical now. "We are different, with different resources and different needs.

"Our ancestors' buildings can serve as a resource to enlighten the future [generations]," said Akbar, but only if architects look at the process that led to their creation. "Now we are copying the process, sometimes blindly.

"Most elements in the traditional environment were used, owned or controlled by the adjacent individuals," he noted. "The dead end street, for example, was considered by the law to be owned by the people who owned homes on the street, just like a living room."

Nowadays, he said, an expanded government looks after myriad public interests – including dead-end streets – resulting in "a built environment that maybe people wouldn't care about."

Traditionally, an official called a *muhtasib* stood guard over local construction, controlling the quality of building materials to ensure the strength of structures. (See *Aramco World*, September-October 1977) "These days it's exactly the opposite," said Akbar. "There is more concern about the facade, ignoring the quality."

For Akbar, who is writing a book on his subject, the contest has already paid off handsomely. While few knew about his work before, "suddenly everybody is interested – students, other faculties, daily newspapers," he says.

He predicts the King Fahd Award will have a "very powerful impact" on institutes of architecture. "I can assure you that a lot of students will be sharpening their pencils to win in the future."

The two winners of the grand prize, both entered in the research category, were Gülru Necipoğlu, a Turk sponsored by Harvard University, and Morteza Sajadian, an Iranian sponsored by the University of Wisconsin. They will share a $10,000 award, Necipoğlu for work on the evolution of Topkapı Palace in Istanbul in the 15th and 16th centuries, and Sajadian for his thesis on the architecture and decoration of the city palace of Cordoba, Madinat al-Zahra. While Topkapı still stands, Madinat al-Zahra was destroyed by invaders in the 11th century; its restoration is continuing today.

Ten other researchers were honored with merit awards; each of them will receive $2,500.

The research paper presented by Jamel Akbar, a Saudi who was both a prizewinner and an adviser to students in his

Arthur Clark has lived in Ireland and Morocco, and is now an Aramco staff writer in Dhahran.

...Studies that enhance, rebuild and encourage the art of Islamic architecture

THE · KING · FAHD · AWARDS

THE AMERICAN CONTRIBUTION

WRITTEN BY DONNA DRAKE
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ILENE PERLMAN AND CHRISTOPHER D. SALVO

Gülru Necipoğlu can take you back in time. Her trip takes you directly to the 15th century and Turkey's Topkapı Palace, seat of the Ottoman empire for 400 years.

Restored to its original form, the palace dazzles you with bright silk carpets strewn across marbled floors, and with embroidered draperies hung on elaborately tiled walls. Its gardens, landscaped to resemble paradise, are home to lions and tigers; gazelles and ostriches drink from flowing fountains. Today, the palace prepares for the arrival of Austria's ambassador: Bejeweled horses, carpeted benches laden with gifts and a sumptuous banquet served on Chinese porcelain and gilded plates are part of the reception ceremony. The sultan sits cross-legged on a golden throne beneath a blue ceiling picked out with gold stars. He's attended and entertained by scholars, gatekeepers, foot soldiers, minstrels, musicians and dancing courtiers dressed in rich fabrics.

These scenes are not an Orientalist fantasy. They are well researched, and they live in Necipoğlu's 700-page doctoral dissertation, which she wrote as a Harvard university graduate student.

Necipoğlu, who left Turkey 12 years ago to study in the United States, represents a growing number of students pursuing the study of Islamic arts and architecture at American universities. Her work earned a half share in the grand prize of the first international King Fahd Award for Design and Research in Islamic Architecture.

Necipoğlu's extensive study unearths revelations about a centuries-old structure.

"I tried to address how the palace was originally intended by the people who built it," Necipoğlu says. "If we just interpret old buildings without looking at them in the context of their day, we can reach very misleading conclusions about the meanings builders gave their buildings."

People who look at Topkapı today see an extensive but essentially modest creation compared with later palace architecture, Necipoğlu explains. But when Topkapı was built, what mattered was not the monumentality of the building, but how it was used.

"Part of the glamour of Topkapı was the ceremonies that brought the building to life. The palace served as a stage, and if you don't understand the exhibits [on it], the palace is simply an *empty* stage.

"For the Ottomans, the image of power was completed by gilding, textiles and

Gülru Necipoğlu

ceremonies, not by grand dimensions."

To bring life to Topkapı, Necipoğlu studied first-hand accounts of life in the palace in the 15th and 16th centuries. Written in Italian, Turkish, German and French, her sources were account books, treatises, travelogues, books of ceremonies, inscriptions, poems of dedication, inventories and imperial decrees.

"This enabled her to bring to her work archival discoveries that were heretofore unknown," says Necipoğlu's adviser, Oleg Grabar, a leading authority on Islamic art and architecture and mentor of 50 doctoral students.

"I discovered all sorts of documents that outlined expenses for new buildings, decorations, remodeling," Necipoğlu says. She had to resort to old dictionaries to recognize 400-year-old terms in the various languages but, she says, "you get used to these little peculiarities."

The only other complete work on Topkapı Palace has been out of print for 20 years and provides only a guide to the present-day structure. Necipoğlu's volume, on the other hand, describes precisely the original appearance of the building and provides a history of how it developed – and why.

Necipoğlu's information, and the insights she derived from it, went undiscovered for so long because, typically, art historians "don't see it as their job to do archival research," she says. No one had used the Ottoman-era sources to study Topkapı's development before. And though historians make liberal use of archives, they rarely quote information that would be valuable to art historians. She credits Grabar with pointing out the importance of using written sources.

Necipoğlu and Grabar are among nine student/adviser teams from American universities who each received one of the 31 King Fahd Award prizes, marking the United States as the largest contributor both to the competition itself and to its goal: to recognize and promote studies that enhance, rebuild and encourage the art of Islamic architecture.

That statistic points out a scholastic fact: Though U.S. universities are far from Islamic lands, they have become the international leaders in teaching Islamic architecture, thanks to students and support from the Middle East. The faculties, grant funding, library networks and other resources of American schools attract many gifted students interested in the Islamic arts.

Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), for example, offer a cooperative program established specifically for the study of Islamic architecture. At the nation's oldest university, students delve into the history of Islamic art. Then at MIT, they study the last two centuries of change and development in Islamic countries and, in that light, grapple with contemporary design issues.

Though Harvard and MIT have shared resources for many years, this program was formed after the schools received an $11-million grant from the Aga Khan Foundation in 1979. The foundation's intent was to establish a curriculum of Islamic architecture studies; its purpose was to form scholars and practitioners who would use their skills in the Muslim world.

But students pursuing the art of Islamic architecture had been choosing U.S. universities even before dedicated programs recently became available. In fact, says MIT's Standford Anderson, it was Middle Eastern students – not faculty – who initially fostered Islamic studies.

"Even before the grant, MIT already had two Saudis studying aspects of Islamic architecture," says Anderson, adviser to King Fahd merit-award winner Rajmohan Shetty of Pakistan.

It was one of those students who made MIT professors realize that, though the school then had no specialization in Islamic studies, it was still the optimum place to learn.

"When Saleh al-Hathloul came to me and said he wanted to study Islamic architecture, I said, 'That's ridiculous. We don't know anything about Islamic architecture,' " Anderson recalls.

Al-Hathloul argued that, between Harvard and MIT, he had all the resources he needed – faculties that excelled in teaching history, culture and architecture, as well as in providing educational guidance. Anderson said he would consider al-Hathloul's request if Grabar of Harvard also agreed to play a role in his studies. Grabar did.

Today, Dr. Saleh bin 'Ali al-Hathloul – scion of a long academic relationship between the U.S. and the Middle East – is Saudi Arabia's Deputy Minister for Town Planning.

"We learned that as long as you have a good student who knows how to use the resources, we can be of help," Anderson says. "Our role is to help students understand the issues that can be raised, the philosophical approaches that can be taken, and then to help with the exposition – putting it all in a way that others can appreciate."

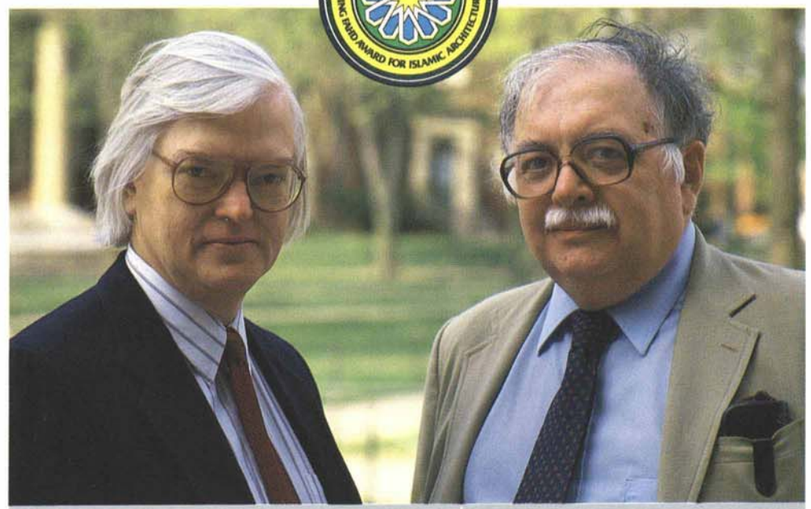
Of course, since the Aga Khan grant, MIT and Harvard's resources have grown. And as the foundation intended, its investment is paying off in the Middle East. Harvard is already trying to develop more modern techniques for sharing teaching tools with poorer countries, such as Bangladesh. It is also negotiating with universities in Pakistan and Jordan to establish architecture programs similar to the one it shares with MIT.

But for now, as Narciso G. Menocal puts it, U.S. universities' resources still "are not equaled anywhere else in the world."

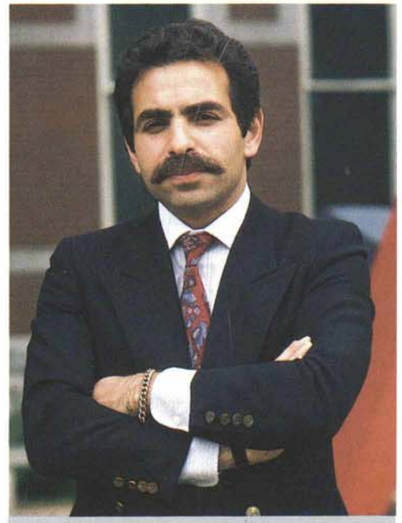
Menocal is a professor of American and European architecture at the University of Wisconsin. He shared in the honors when his student Morteza Sajadian won the other half of the grand prize in the King Fahd Award competition.

Like Necipoğlu, Sajadian made discoveries about a major Islamic monument. He is the first to establish that Madinat al-Zahra, a 10th-century city palace in Spain, was in its day the cultural center of the Islamic world, giving rise to the "caliphal period – an energetic and brilliant burgeoning of the art, culture and political ideals of Islam."

Madinat al-Zahra, destroyed as early as 1010, was excavated in 1910. But in the years since then, Sajadian is the first scholar to recognize the palace's tremendous influence on the development of later Islamic art and architectural monuments in Spain. These include the Alhambra in Granada and even the nearby Great Mosque of Cordoba, which, he says, was actually designed with forms first established at Madinat al-Zahra. Sajadian showed that the palace, itself a fusion of earlier Eastern and Western elements of Islamic art, became a prototype in architecture and decoration that influenced the art of the western Muslim world.



Stanford Anderson *Oleg Grabar*



Morteza Sajadian

His discoveries were so boldly original that Sajadian was uncomfortable publishing them. He shelved his research for two years, until, with the encouragement of Menocal and others at the University of Wisconsin, he expanded it into a thesis.

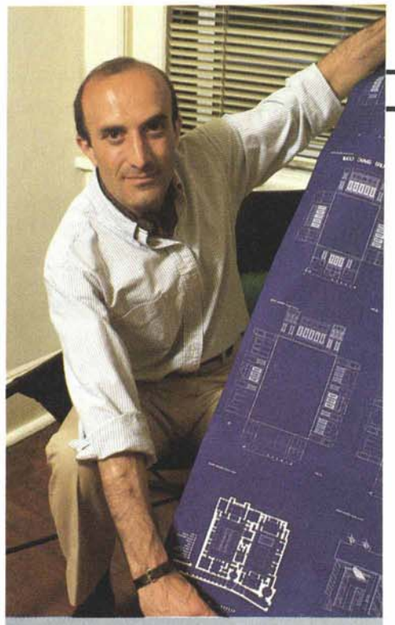
"The fragments are there. We know the floor plan, we know of the extensive French and Spanish literature that refers to Madinat al-Zahra," Sajadian says. "We need to give it credit for what it was."

Not all the King Fahd Award winners, however, explored history. Many sought solutions to problems facing Muslim communities today.

One of these winners was University of Pennsylvania graduate student Reza Ghezelbash, an architect who believes his job is "like a poet's: He arranges words to create beautiful verse." To enter the King Fahd competition, Ghezelbash arranged the language of architecture to create what could become a beautiful solution to one of the Muslim world's most difficult problems – urban housing.

Over the last 25 years, Middle Eastern cities have become engorged with new residents from rural areas. They have responded to this challenge as unsuccessfully as Western cities facing the same crisis: with project housing, a poor habitat for the human spirit.

Ghezelbash addressed the problem by creating designs for courtyard housing that can be prefabricated and built in modules: as single houses, housing clusters or entire neighborhoods.



Reza Ghezelbash

"The most common housing in the Middle East is courtyard housing," says Renata Holod, Ghezelbash's adviser. "It suits the culture, it suits the climate. But the architectural profession has avoided working in a modern way on this very good housing solution."

After two years of studying the courtyard housing of Yazd and Isfahan in his native Iran, Ghezelbash spent months breaking down the basic courtyard-house design into its simplest architectural elements and plotting each of them on a computer. Combining the elements into larger units, he put together different types of houses, then designed clusters of houses around courtyards, and finally arranged the courtyards into neighborhoods.

Ghezelbash's computerized designs "bridge the timelessness of Islamic housing and the timeliness of today's technology," he says. His courtyard houses, for example, provide for a public-to-private hierarchy of space that includes the modern garage as well as interior gardens at the heart of each home – a standard feature of Islamic housing that dates back hundreds of years.

"It is very difficult to combine the sense and spirit of traditional architecture with the needs of modern living," he says. "The nature of my work was to create Islamic architecture for the present time, to regenerate and update the architectural vocabulary of the past for the present."

The computer became an important tool for accomplishing his design, Ghezelbash says, because Islamic structures are made of extremely simple forms. "You can put in all this vocabulary, such as gateways and transition areas, and recall it as needed. In Islamic courtyard housing, there are only certain types of rooms, and they can be located only in certain places. It's very ordered, so it's very amenable to the use of a computer."

The genius of Ghezelbash's work, however, is in the combination of elements, says Holod. "It has all kinds of potential." For example, one reason architects have rejected courtyard housing is because it "wastes" space. But Ghezelbash's design can make the requirements of Islamic living conform to the space available. One family unit can be as small as 110 square meters (1,185 square feet).

"It's the quality of the space that is important," Ghezelbash says. "In the Islamic world, minimal housing has the same *types* of space as housing for the rich."

Beyond the modern-day significance of his work, Ghezelbash had wanted to tackle the subject of housing for years because, "in my viewpoint, housing has much more application than any other structure. Where you have two mosques, for example, you have 1,000 houses."

His work to measure Iran's courtyard homes, millimeter by millimeter, served to document a common but classic structure.

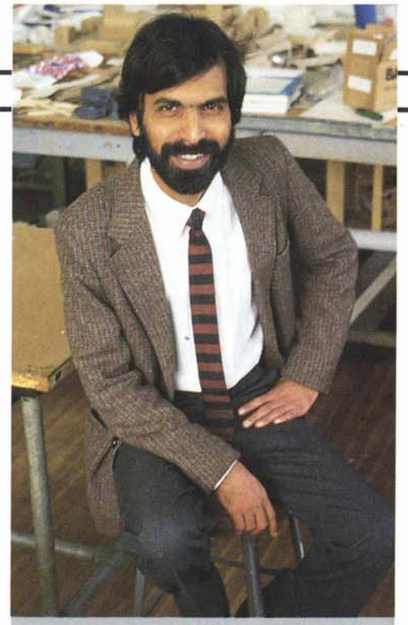
"If Islamic housing is ever destroyed, there are no drawings of it, no way to recreate or remember what was," Ghezelbash says. "Famous mosques, that's easy. But not housing."

Though it was not his primary goal, merit-award winner Rajmohan Shetty's thesis also documented a building type, as well as a social structure, already being forced to change by today's society.

Under Anderson's guidance, Shetty, a Pakistani, examined a Muslim matrilineal community in India's Kerala State, a social structure Shetty believes is unique in the Islamic world. There, women head families of up to 100 people in homes that have expanded as the individual families grew, often covering an area of more than a block. It's a dramatic, living example of how a social system affects the organization of space.

Rafik Mohamed Mavrakis, a student at the University of Washington in Seattle, went beyond housing to the larger problem of planning entire Muslim cities.

Mavrakis, originally from Libya, sees a crisis in today's Muslim cities.



Rajmohan Shetty

"They are losing their identity. They increasingly look like Western cities. Rapid urbanization threatens the existence of what historical heritage remains, not to mention the cultural identity of the Islamic society," he says. "It's necessary to design environments that facilitate Muslim life."

For his merit award-winning doctoral dissertation, Mavrakis developed guidelines that, if followed by urban planners in the Middle East, could eliminate these problems from future Muslim cities. The dissertation explains four principles critical to planning a Muslim community: to create a strong physical link between people and their religious institutions; to create structures that maintain privacy; to incorporate the symbolism of gardens in the city; and to promote a sense of community and independence by maintaining a form of the traditional quarter.

"I think the jury has recognized Rafik's work as a guide for future developers of Muslim cities," says Norman Johnston, Mavrakis's adviser. "No one has gone into it in the depth that Rafik has. It's a significant contribution, ideally suited to assist the urban planner in the Middle East."

Johnston, who has taught at Istanbul Technical University, says, "In the Middle East, where American firms came in, designs were conceived largely in the Western tradition."

This practice, states Mavrakis, has resulted in the rapid transformation and disruption of urban environments and of a heritage that took centuries to evolve.

Serene and beautiful Middle Eastern cities have been transformed into ugly, unspecific urban environments because architects and planners overlooked the values of traditional design, as well as the character, customs and values of the local people.

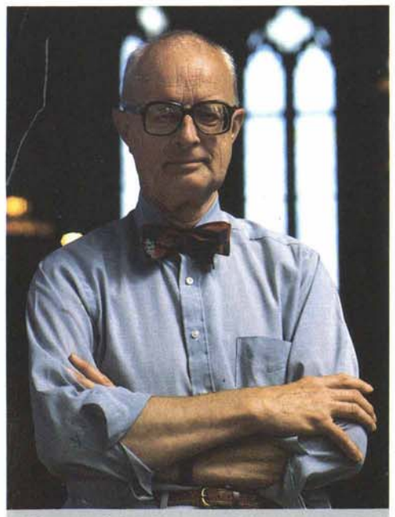
The situation offers a lesson, Johnston says. "Designers of environments for human life must focus not only on functional needs, but also on psychic and perceptual needs. That's true of the Islamic world, and it's certainly also true of ours."

Through his work with Mavrakis, Johnston says he has learned that "the Islamic world has some very specialized architectural needs, based on its religion. We must recognize these unique circumstances and design accordingly."

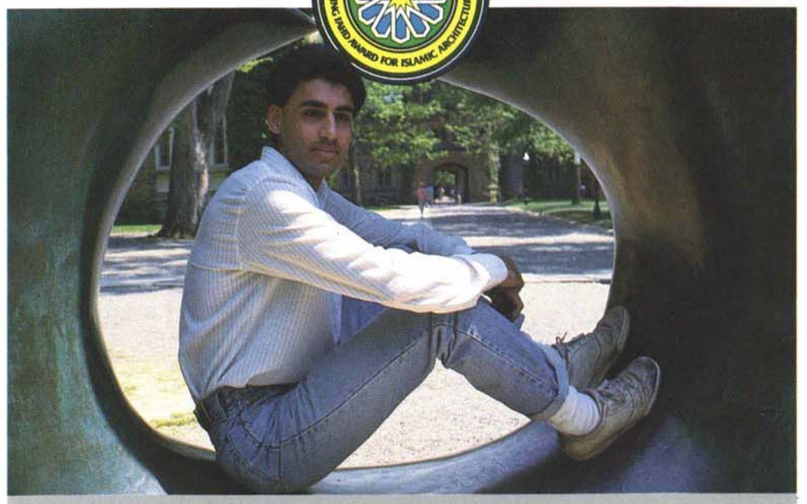
The problems of applying Islamic principles to architecture are not limited to Muslim settings. Yahya Jan of Princeton University won a merit award for his design of an Islamic community center located in the United States – at the corner of Madison Avenue and 85th Street in New York City.

"I thought a community center was needed here, so I made up my own program," says Jan, a Pakistani who has studied Islamic architecture as a hobby, as Princeton has no specialized program. "I also thought it would be more challenging to do a project designed for a specific area, and that corner was empty at the time."

Jan's community center, much like the endowed mosque complexes of the



Norman Johnston



Yahya Jan

Middle East, includes a mosque, a research library, living quarters for visiting scholars and the *imam* (prayer leader), and a center that includes an auditorium, a Koran school and common areas.

"What was interesting for me," says Jan's adviser, Allen Chimacoff, "was that the project had to contend with the liturgical requirements of the structure and the practical regulations of a New York City grid. From that confrontation emerged all the issues of the conflict between the idealism of the religion and the arbitrary constraints of the location.

"If you saw it," Chimacoff adds, "you would understand that the structure is part of both worlds, both considerations."

In each case, Award entries – some of which could have a profound influence on the future of Islamic architecture – grew from the joint efforts of both student and academic adviser, a fact the King Fahd Award was designed to recognize.

"The very attractive thing about the King Fahd Award is that it acknowledges that the writing of a thesis is not the lonely work of a student, but is the interaction of student and teacher," says Grabar. "It's unique and nice that the Award recognizes the people behind the scenes. It's like applauding a stage designer."

In turn, the King Fahd Award is being noted as a means of fostering not only Islamic architectural principles, but the spirit of Islam as well.

"I think that's what the commission has tried to say: It's the culture of Islam that is important, not just its location," says Sajadian, whose grand-prize entry dealt with a structure outside the Islamic heartlands.

"In the 15th and 16th centuries, Islam never conceived of itself as divided into countries. It was thought of as the community of Muslims, wherever they might be. Let's stop thinking of ourselves as Iraqis, Saudi Arabians, Tunisians, Libyans. We can bring people of all these different regions together through the arts. Programs like the King Fahd Award bring out the best from all these cultures."

Equally important, perhaps, is the Award's goal of encouraging gifted students by rewarding their early accomplishments. Even in its first year, the program has pinpointed an exceptional group of scholars who are already crafting futures that will extend understanding of the Islamic arts and benefit both their own countries and the United States.

Sajadian, for example, has recently been named associate director of the Museum of Art and Archeology at the University of Missouri in Columbia – the sort of position, says his adviser, that is offered "to the up-and-coming young stars."

As for Gülru Necipoğlu, she surprised no one with the news of her grand prize. Currently teaching at Columbia University on a Mellon Fellowship, Necipoğlu soon begins a job she was offered even before receiving the prize: teaching Islamic art and architecture at Harvard University.

Donna Drake is the editor of ASC Focus, *employee paper of Aramco's U.S. subsidiary in Houston.*

AIDA AT LUXOR

WRITTEN BY JOHN LAWTON PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOR EIGELAND

From Luxor Temple's inner sanctum, the haunting chant of female voices filled the Nile Valley night. Horsemen galloped across the temple forecourt and columns of soldiers advanced up an avenue lined with sphinxes. Chariots approached, trumpets sounded. *Aida* was back.

One hundred and sixteen years after it was first performed in Cairo, Guiseppe Verdi's spectacular opera came home last May to the city in which much of it is set. A $10-million extravaganza, *Aida* re-created amid the imposing ruins of ancient Thebes the pharaonic splendor of 3,000 years ago, inspiration of the original *Aida* story.

In the opera, it is to Thebes, and the Ethiopian slave girl he loves, that the Egyptian general Radamès returns in triumph after defeating the Ethiopian army. But patriotism briefly overcomes Aida's love for Radamès: She extracts vital military secrets from him. Realizing his own treason, Radamès surrenders to the high priests and is condemned to be buried alive. But before he is entombed, Aida slips into the death chamber to share his fate.

Verdi

Theatrically magnificent, the Luxor Temple production was musically somewhat disappointing, due to poor amplification. Nonetheless, the glittering first-night audience – which included Queen Sophia of Spain, Princess Caroline of Monaco and First Lady Susan Mubarak of Egypt – loved it, especially the Theban parade celebrating Radamès's victory. That brought onto the stage – an area larger than most whole theaters – almost the entire cast of more than 1,500 singers, dancers, musicians and extras, a small herd of horses, and even a lion. It was, everyone agreed, the grandest Grand March in *Aida* history.

For pure atmosphere, however, the opening scenes stole the show. Against the stunning natural backdrop of Luxor Temple, from where pharaonic armies actually once went forth to defend the borders of the land, the priests and priestesses emerged to consecrate Radamès for his coming battle. And Aida wept at the foot of a colossal statue of Ramses II, whose military exploits against the Hittites are celebrated in bas-reliefs on the great pylon behind the statue.

Even Spanish tenor Placido Domingo, who had played Radamès more than 60 times before he came to Luxor, was deeply moved. "It was a unique feeling," he said after his first-night performance. Just waiting for his cue among the giant papyrus-shaped pillars of the 3,350-year-old temple was "splendid," he said.

The dress rehearsals too were different: Domingo arrived, jacket characteristically slung over his shoulder, to meet with the production staff among the ruins, while officials of the Egyptian Antiquities Department hurried here and there to ensure that the fragile monuments would not be damaged by technical crews and their miles of electric cable.

Rehearsals were full of the usual "bugs" that delight theater buffs everywhere: a bewildered temple groundsman wandering across the set at the start of the first act; an Egyptian horseman falling spectacularly – and harmlessly – to the ground when his saddle girth snapped in full gallop; and the city cannon, fired to wake fasters during the holy month of Ramadan, going off with a deafening roar in the middle of the climactic death scene. But all went right on the night.

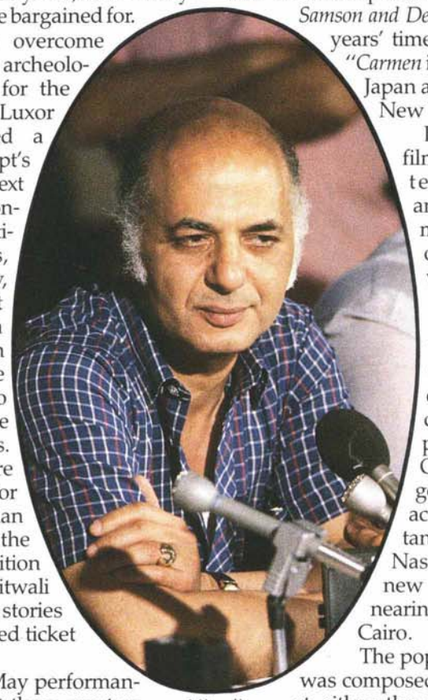
During the day, tourists picked their way around plastic props littering the temple complex: With Luxor Temple to the left of the audience, the Avenue of the Sphinx to the right and the River Nile before them,

there was little need for scenery. Normally sedate Luxor took on a bustling, festive air. There were parties, press conferences, and Egyptian folkdancing on the river bank. Nine luxury river liners arrived from Cairo, Concorde jets flew in from London and Paris, and for a moment the faded splendor of the 100-year-old Winter Palace hotel came alive again with tuxedos and evening gowns.

Among them, Egyptian-born entrepreneur Fawzi Mitwali, the man who had made it all possible, seemed out of place. He was nervous, tired and unsmiling.

"Ever since I was a boy in Egypt," he said, "it has always been my dream to bring Verdi's opera back to its place of origin." But it cost Mitwali, who has lived in Vienna for the past 30 years, more worry – and money – than he bargained for.

First he had to overcome objections from archeologists, who feared for the safety of the Luxor Temple, considered a jewel among Egypt's ancient treasures. Next Mitwali had to contend with competition: Certain parties, he said ominously, announced that they would stage a rival production of *Aida* at the Pyramids – two weeks *before* the Luxor performances. And finally there was the press. For although the Egyptian government halted the unseemly competition over the opera, Mitwali said, adverse news stories nonetheless "reduced ticket sales."



Mitwali

Most of the ten May performances were only about three-quarters sold out, and even with tickets priced between $250 and $700 Mitwali was expecting to lose near $1 million. "But that doesn't matter," he said. "Egypt is my homeland and Egypt will gain $10 million in tourism."

In fact, by the time the estimated 20,000 visitors had seen the opera and "done" Egypt, tourism officials were hoping they would have spent as much as $50 million. And Mohamed Nassim, chairman of the Egyptian General Authority for the Promotion of Tourism, was suggesting that *Aida* might even become an annual event.

The private sector too was pleased with the unexpected boost the opera gave to the tail end of the Egyptian tourist season. "Normally, at this time of the year, we are half empty," said a receptionist at the Winter Palace hotel. Huessin Yahya of Memnon Tours confirmed, "It's the best season we've had for ten years," and souvenir shops reported a brisk trade in Aida tee-shirts and other, less likely, memorabilia.

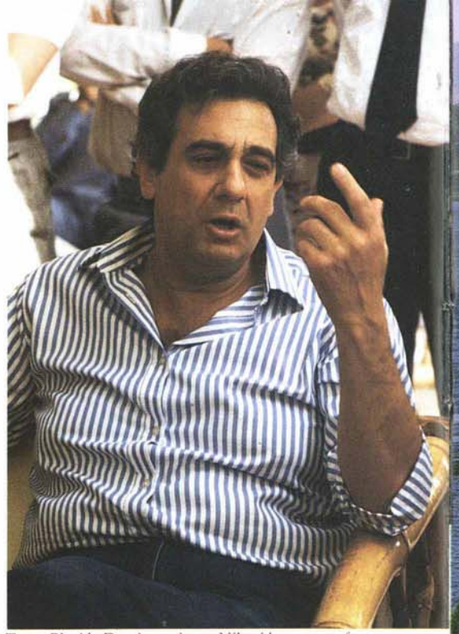
With the teething troubles of first night solved, even Mitwali cheered considerably. "What's a million dollars anyway?" he was quoted as saying. "Now I have the experience, I can do it again, even bigger. And next time, every seat will be sold." Looking relaxed and happy on the Nile-side terrace of the Sheraton Hotel, Mitwali's entrepreneurial instincts rekindled, and he told reporters he hoped to stage *Samson and Delilah* at Luxor in two years' time. Later he spoke of "*Carmen* in Seville, *Butterfly* in Japan and *West Side Story* in New York."

Domingo, whose films and worldwide television appearances have done much to popularize opera, said he too would like to return to Egypt. "But next time, said the tenor, "I want to sing for the Egyptians," few of whom got a chance to see this production of *Aida*. On the spot, the singer received and accepted a spontaneous invitation from Nassim to sing at the new opera house now nearing completion in Cairo.

The popular belief that *Aida* was composed for and performed at either the opening of the old Cairo Opera House or the opening of the Suez Canal, or both, is apparently false. The Cairo Opera opened on November 1, 1869, with *Rigoletto*, and the Suez Canal opened 15 days later, both before Verdi had agreed to compose the music for *Aida*.

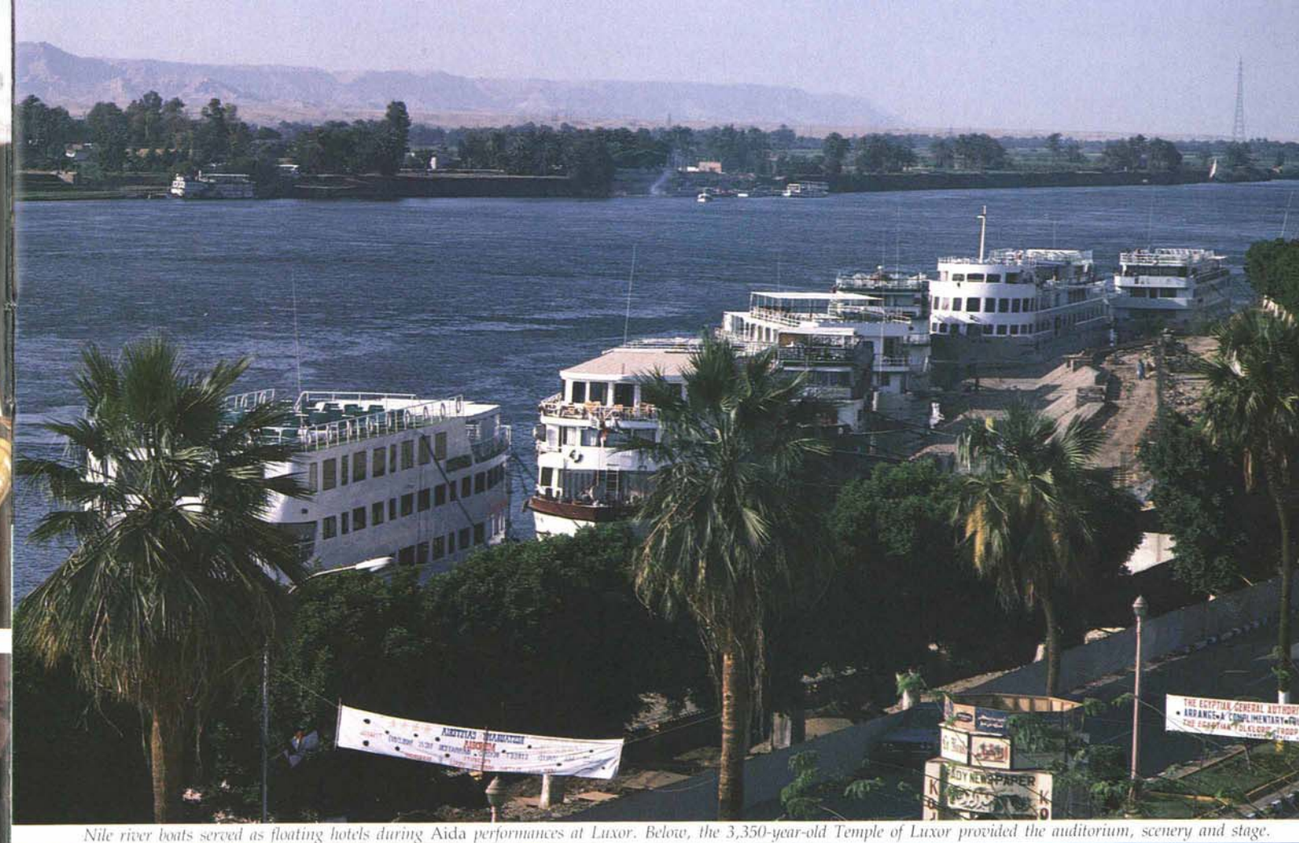
In fact, there is some doubt if, by then, Verdi had even been *asked* to write an opera for Egypt. And if he had, he certainly could not have completed it in time for either inauguration.

What actually did happen is described by Verdi in a series of letters to his publisher, Giulio Ricordi, and to Camille du Locle, the director of the Paris Opéra-

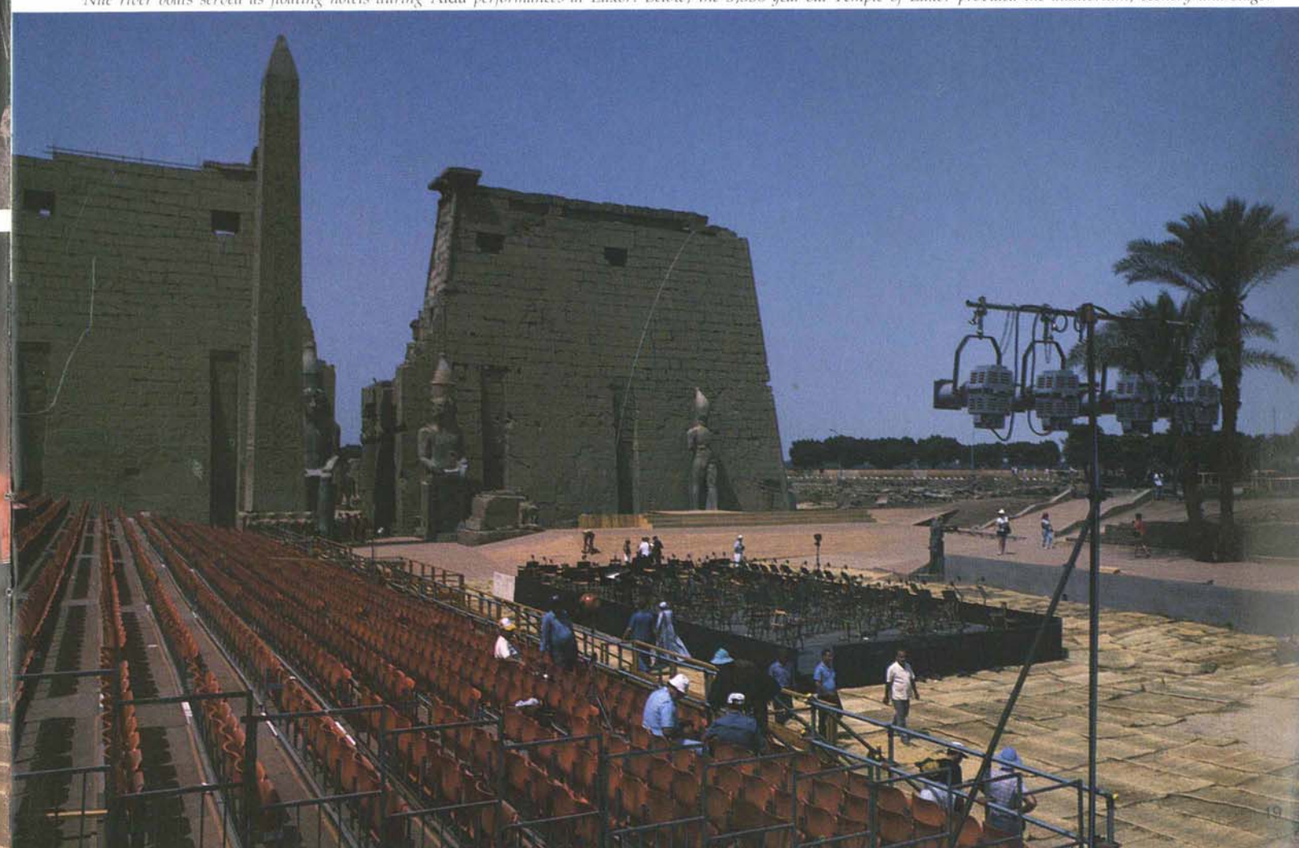


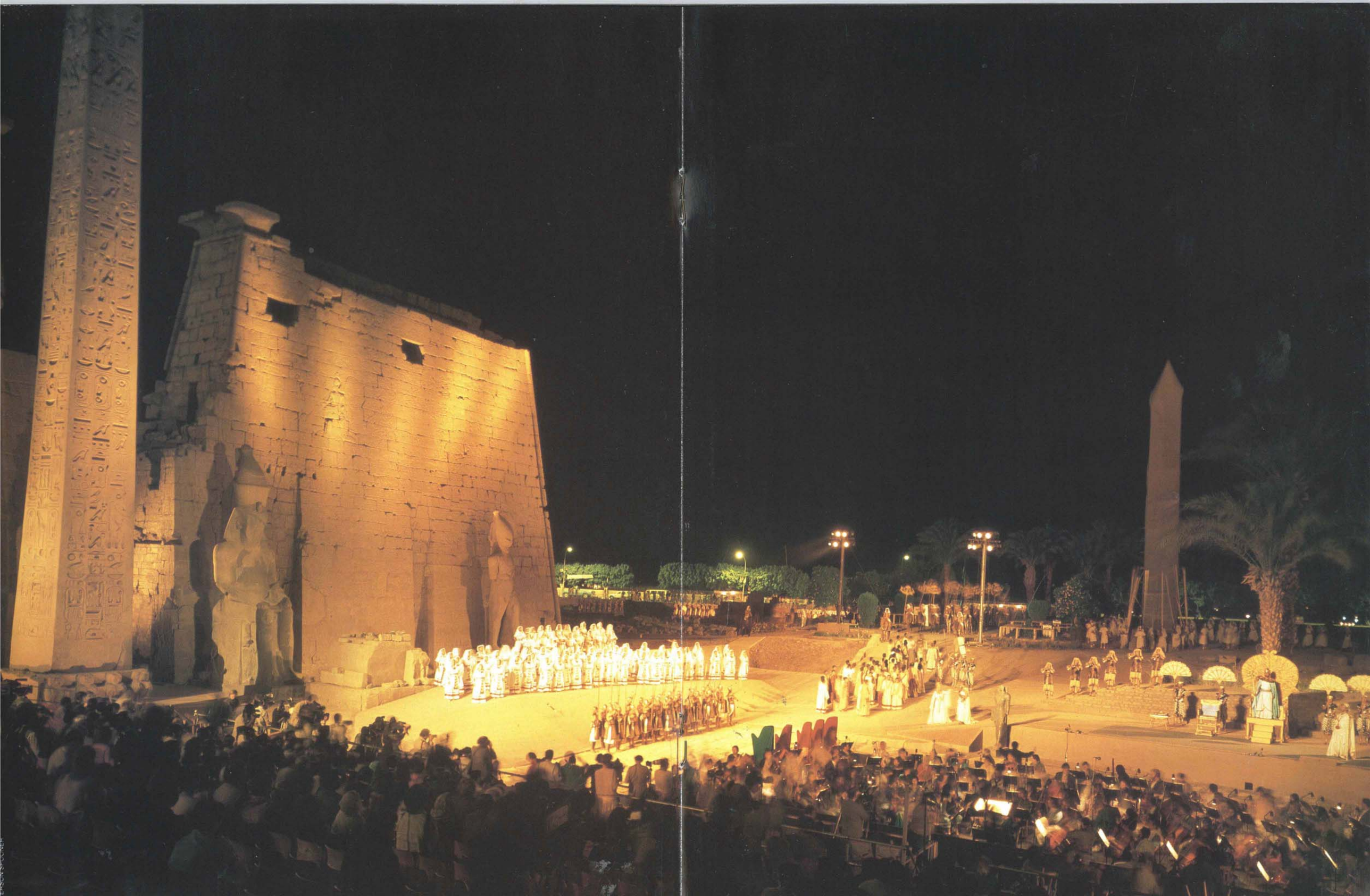
Tenor Placido Domingo gives a Nile-side press conference.

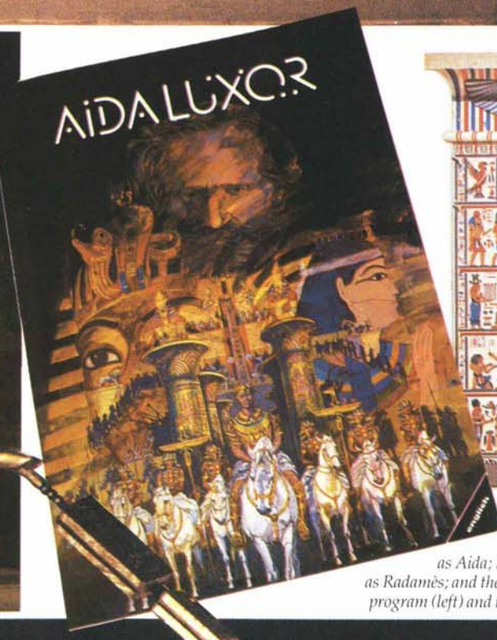
Opera fans at Luxor and, below, Aida *tee-shirts on sale.*

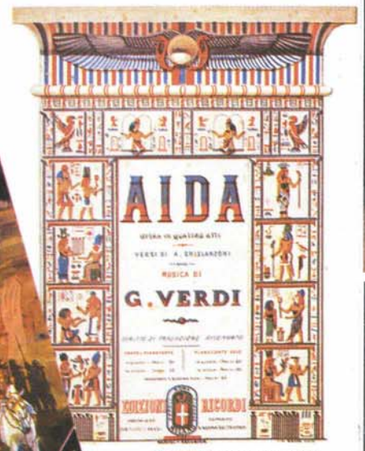


Nile river boats served as floating hotels during Aida *performances at Luxor. Below, the 3,350-year-old Temple of Luxor provided the auditorium, scenery and stage.*

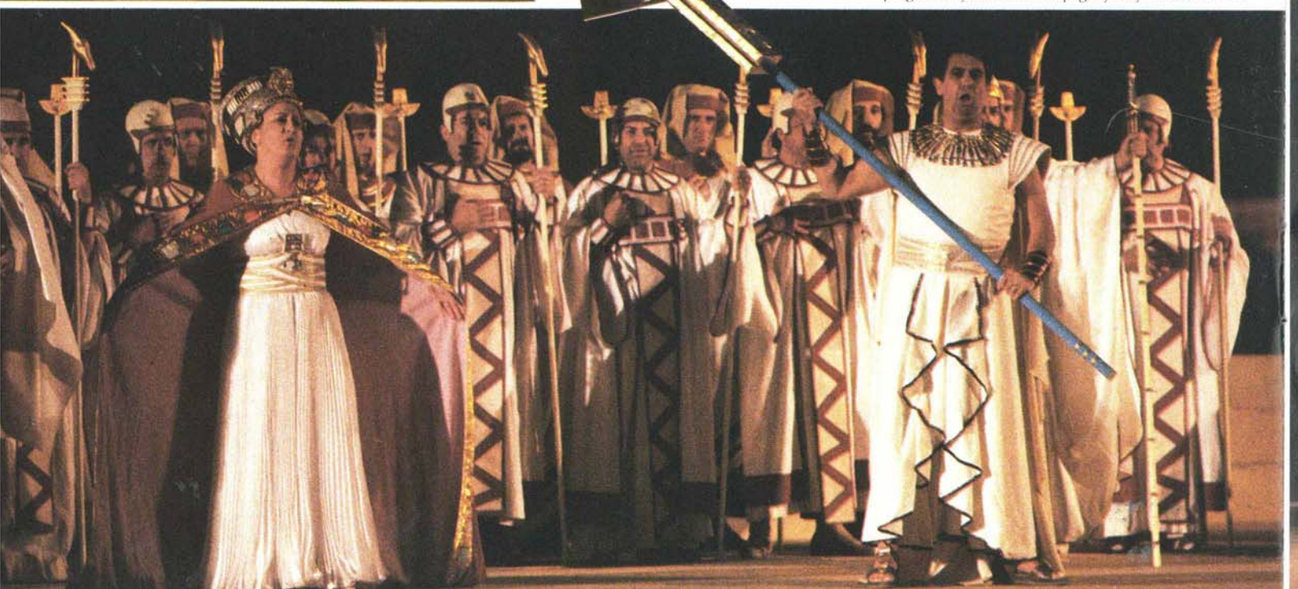


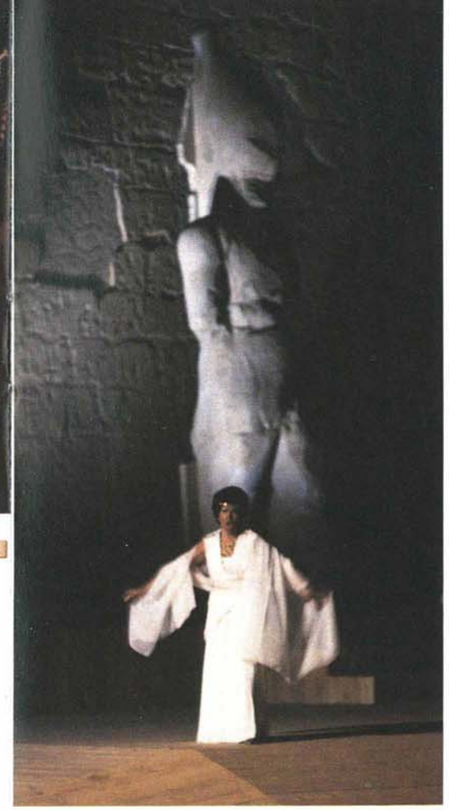


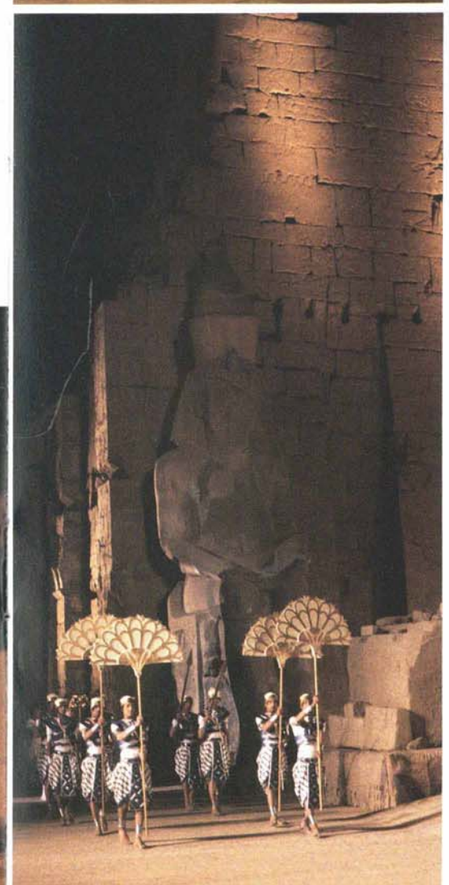




(Clockwise from top left): Corps de Ballet *of the Ente Arena di Verona: Maria Chiara as Aida; Egyptian extras; Placido Domingo, as Radamès; and the Pharaoh. Center: The* Aida Luxor *program (left) and the title page of the first* Aida *score.*







Comique, who secured Verdi's services for the Viceroy of Egypt, Khedive Ismail.

"At the end of last year," Verdi wrote Ricordi in June 1870, "I was invited to write an opera for a distant country. I refused. When I was in Paris [in the spring of 1870], du Locle opened the subject and offered me a large sum of money. Again I refused."

At this point the Khedive became impatient. "If M. Verdi does not accept," his agent, the French Egyptologist Auguste-Edouard Mariette, wrote to du Locle, "His Excellency begs you knock on another door .... Gounod and even Wagner are being considered."

Du Locle, however, persisted. "A month later," Verdi wrote Ricordi, "he sent me a printed *précis*, saying it was the work of an important personage (which I do not believe), that he thought it good, and please would I read it."

While the money had not tempted Verdi, the story did. "I found it first-rate," he wrote Ricordi, "and replied I would set it to music." But the authorship of the opera libretto continued to puzzle Verdi. "Who did it?" he demanded of du Locle. "It shows a very expert, experienced hand that knows the theater very well."

Far from it, said du Locle. "The Egyptian libretto," he replied, "is the work of the Khedive and Mariette Bey, the famous antiquary; nobody else has had a hand in it." Later, however, du Locle dropped the attribution to the Khedive as co-author, stating categorically in 1880 that "the first idea of the poem belongs to Mariette Bey."

Even without that credit, Mariette would still probably be remembered for his work as an archeologist. His discoveries, including the Temple of Serapis and the tombs of the Apis Bulls at Memphis, have been described as among "the most important and rarest ever made in Egypt."

Mariette was made Inspector of Monuments in Egypt and given the title of *bey* by the Khedive, whom he served in numerous capacities. It was Mariette, for example, who signed the contract with Verdi on behalf of Ismail. (The composer was paid 150,000 French francs and retained rights to the opera in all countries except Egypt.) And it was Mariette who supervised the designs for the scenery and costumes of *Aida*, famous in their own right for their attention to historical detail.

In his music, Verdi seems to have hit upon a piece of archeological exactitude by accident. Two trumpets discovered decades later in the tomb of Tutankhamen produce the same unique tones as Verdi's two sets of modern trumpets, the one pitched a minor third higher than the other, in his celebrated Grand March.

The third major contributor to *Aida* was Verdi's Italian collaborator Antonio Ghislanzoni, who wrote the opera's moving verse. An unconventional character who once startled Milan by appearing in the city's cathedral square dressed as a general of ancient Rome, Ghislanzoni had been in turn a medical student, a musician, an opera baritone, a journalist, a novelist and a playwright. His theatrical and literary experience made him an ideal partner for an operatic composer.

Aida began to take shape during the summer of 1870, and by the end of August the first two acts were almost finished. Even war did not halt the process of composition, though it did delay production: Mariette was trapped for four months in the Prussian seige of Paris with all his designs. Although he did manage to stay in touch with Verdi – by messages carried on balloons launched from the roof of the Théatre National de l'Opéra – the opening of *Aida* had to be postponed.

Originally scheduled to open at Cairo's sumptuous red, white and gold opera house in January 1871, *Aida* didn't see the curtain go up until December 24, 11 months later than planned. Then, however, the opera, with its cast of 300 including Arab trumpeters, was an immediate success; six weeks later the production set off on a triumphal tour of Europe.

Although *Rigoletto* and *Il Trovatore* have been performed more times than *Aida* – they were written 20 years earlier – *Aida* remains the most popular of Verdi's operas. It has been translated into 20 languages and sung all over the world, but never, apparently in Arabic – the language of the country that commissioned it.

Verdi was curiously indifferent about the first production in Cairo. He did not even go to Egypt, angered by the negative publicity to which his new work was subjected – apparently because it was commissioned by a foreign ruler. To the correspondent of a Milanese newspaper, Verdi wrote indignantly of "wretched tittle-tattle that adds nothing to the worth of an opera, but rather obscures its true merits. It is deplorable, absolutely deplorable."

Success despite controversy thus marked *Aida's* first performance in Egypt, as well as its latest one. Guiseppe Verdi would undoubtedly have sympathized with Fawzi Mitwali – but, Placido Domingo was asked, would he have appreciated the production?

"I think he would have been satisfied," replied Domingo, "but the music – he would have liked to hear it better."

John Lawton, a contributing editor of Aramco World, *was in Luxor for the performance of* Aida.

The Golden Age of Ottoman Art

WRITTEN BY ESIN ATIL

Ottoman art flowered magnificently in the 16th century. With unprecedented prolificacy, court artists created splendid examples of illuminated and illustrated manuscripts; objects fashioned of gold, silver, jade, rock crystal, ivory, and inlaid wood; ceremonial and functional arms and armor; brocaded satin and velvet kaftans and furnishings; flat-woven and pile rugs; and a variety of ceramic vessels and tiles. They formulated unique and indigenous styles, themes, and techniques that not only came to characterize the artistic vocabulary of the period, but which also had a lasting impact on Turkish art. The vestiges of that impact are still visible today.

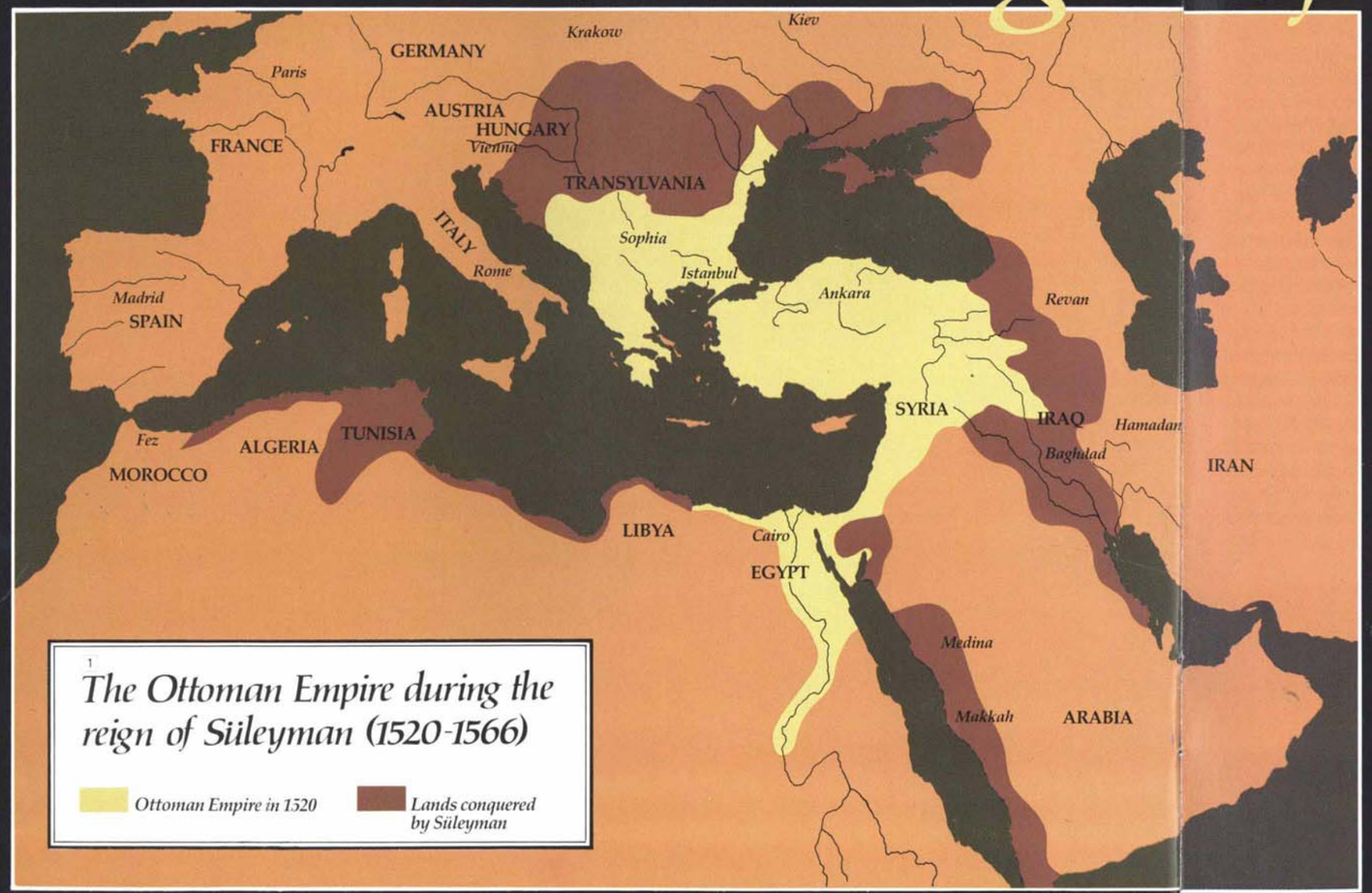
This extraordinary burst of artistic energy took place during the reign of Sultan Süleyman I (1520-1566), a remarkable half-century when the political and economic power of the Ottoman Empire reached its zenith. [1] Süleyman – a brilliant statesman, acclaimed legislator, and benevolent patron of the arts – more than doubled the territories of his domain, personally leading a dozen military campaigns that extended its frontiers from Iran to Austria. His state occupied the crucial link between three continents and controlled western Asia, eastern Europe, and northern Africa, while dominating the surrounding seas. Istanbul, the capital, became one of the largest and wealthiest cities in the world, attracting flocks of diplomats, merchants, and artists, who came to reap its riches.

The Ottoman Empire was governed by a highly efficient centralized system, at whose core was Topkapı Palace, the administrative and educational seat of the state. Attached to the palace were diverse imperial societies of artists and craftsmen collectively called the *Ehl-i Hiref* (Community of the Talented). These societies included men whose backgrounds were as varied as the lands the sultan ruled, their talents ranging from calligraphy to boot-making. The artists entered the imperial societies as apprentices and advanced to the rank of master, and the most outstanding finally rose to head their corps. They were assigned daily wages commensurate with their status, level of accomplishment, and range of responsibilities, and were paid four times a year. Their wages were carefully recorded in quarterly registers.

The registers preserved in the archives of Topkapı Palace reflect the scope of the *Ehl-i Hiref*. The earliest document, drawn up in 1526, lists 40 societies with over 600 members; by the 17th century the number of societies had increased and their membership had risen to some 2,000. In addition to the artists employed in the imperial societies, Istanbul, like all the major centers of the empire, had diverse guilds of artisans which supplied both domestic and foreign needs.

The *Ehl-i Hiref* attracted the most talented and promising artists; its members were the elite and were stylistically by far the most influential of the Empire's artists. Artists from Herat, Tabriz, Cairo and Damascus worked alongside those hailing from Circassia, Georgia, Bosnia, and even from Austria and Hungary, collaborating with the local masters. They produced splendid works of art that represented a unique blend of Islamic, European and Turkish traditions. And because the Empire was as centralized artistically as it was politically, the artistic themes and designs produced for the court soon spread to all corners of the sultan's lands and influenced the artists of neighboring countries as well. The heterogeneous nature of the imperial societies and the scrutinizing, personal patronage of the sultan fructified a cultural blossoming which affected all the arts.

Süleyman, known to Turks as *Kanuni* (Lawgiver) in honor of his numerous legislative acts, and as "The Magnificent" in Europe, in deference to his military conquests and the wealth of his court, was also a magnanimous patron. [2] He himself was trained as a goldsmith, following the tradition of the Ottoman house that every sultan have a practical trade, and he wrote poetry under the pseudonym Muhibbi (Lover or Affectionate Friend), composing odes in Persian and Turkish.



1
The Ottoman Empire during the reign of Süleyman (1520-1566)

Ottoman Empire in 1520

Lands conquered by Süleyman

2 *Portrait of Sultan Süleyman, attributed to Titian, ca. 1530. (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 2429)*

3 *Dragon in foliage, mid-16th century. (The Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J.H.Wade Fund, 44.492)*

The sultan personally inspected the works of the artists and rewarded them for outstanding performances. Palace documents pertaining to the list of gifts received by the artists during religious holidays record cash awards as well as kaftans made of luxurious fabrics. For instance, a document datable to 1535 indicates that Süleyman gave over 225,450 *akçes* (silver coins) plus 34 garments to some 150 court artists; several masters received up to 3,000 *akçes*, a generous five months' salary for men making less than 20 *akçes* a day.

The most innovative artists belonged to the *nakkaşhane*, the imperial painting studio where hundreds of religious and secular manuscripts were produced. The primary duty of this society was to decorate the volumes commissioned for the sultan's libraries, that is, to illuminate and illustrate them. The *nakkaşhane* artists not only created original styles and themes that characterized the decorative vocabulary of the age; they also established the genre of historical painting that documented contemporary events and personages. They reinterpreted existing themes, experimented with new ideas, and formulated a synthesis which became unique to the Ottoman world. The styles and themes used in manuscript illumination quickly spread to the other imperial societies and were transmitted to a variety of other media, ranging from textiles and rugs to ceramic vessels and tiles.

One of the decorative styles that characterized the court arts of the age was called *saz*, an ancient Turkish word used to define an enchanted forest. It was originally applied to drawings which depicted such ferocious creatures as lions, dragons, *senmurvs* (phoenix-like birds) and *chilins* (four-legged creatures) in perpetual combat, engulfed by fantastic foliage bearing large composite blossoms and long feathery leaves. 3 Also included in the repertoire were *peris* (fairies or angelic female figures). This imaginary world, inhabited by spirits which manifested themselves in flora and fauna, reflects a mystical approach with echoes of the shamanistic beliefs of Central Asia.

The originator of the *saz* style in Süleyman's court was Şahkulu. This artist, who was from Baghdad, first worked in Tabriz, was exiled to Amasya around 1501, then entered the *nakkaşhane* in 1520/1521. He became its head in 1545, a post which he retained until his death in 1555/1556. Şahkulu's drawings of placid *peris* and ferocious creatures in combat, and his studies of single blossoms and leaves, were incorporated into imperial albums. Their themes were employed by other imperial societies and applied to different materials.

One of the most spectacular representations of the *saz* themes appears on the *yatağan* (short sword) made for Süleyman in 1526/1527 by Ahmed Tekelü. 4 This 66-centimeter (26-inch) ceremonial sword has an ivory hilt decorated with superimposed gold-inlaid *saz* scrolls, that is, scrolls bearing the same composite blossoms and long leaves found in the drawings. The upper portion of the blade shows the combat between a dragon and a *senmurv* in a fantastic landscape; the animals, cast separately of iron or steel and affixed to the blade, are gilded, and their eyes are set with rubies, enhancing their ferocity. 5

Intertwining scrolls with *saz* blossoms and leaves became a most popular decorative feature after the 1540's. They were applied to manuscript illuminations and bookbindings; jeweled objects made of gold, silver, rock crystal, and jade; and imperial arms and armor as well as textiles, rugs, and ceramics.

Carved in several superimposed layers, *saz* scrolls decorate a unique ivory hand mirror made in 1543/1544 for Süleyman by Gani. 6 They also appear on a dazzling ceremonial kaftan worn by Süleyman's son Şehzade Bayezit (died 1561). 7 Woven in polychrome silk and gold thread, the textile was designed almost like a painting, without a single repetition of the pattern.

6 *Carved ivory mirror with ebony handle made for Sultan Süleyman by Gani in 1543/1544. (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum, 2/2893)*

4 *Gold-inlaid and jeweled* yatağan *made for Sultan Süleyman by Ahmed Tekelü in 1526/1527. (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum, 2/3776)*

5 *Gold-inlaid and jeweled* yatağan, *detail of blade.*

7 *Brocaded satin ceremonial kaftan made for Şehzade Bayezit, mid-16th century. (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum, 13/37)*

MAGNIFICENCE ON THE MALL

WRITTEN BY SUE GUNN

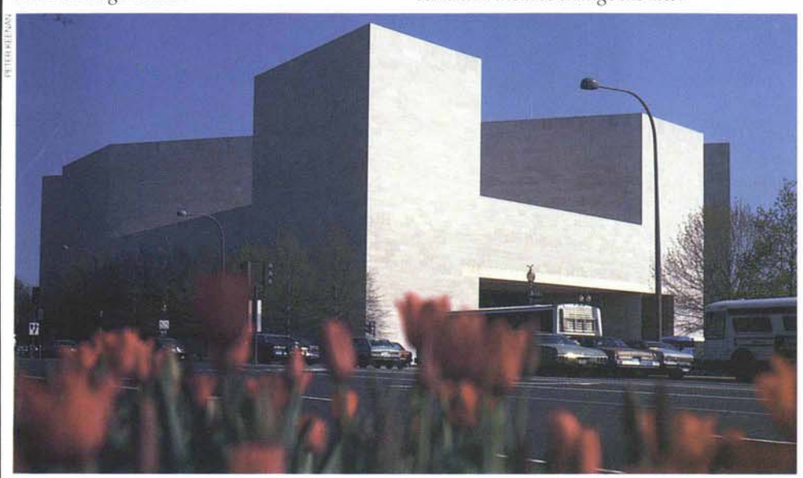
The audience was rapt. It was guest curator Esin Atıl's first lecture on Sultan Süleyman at the National Gallery of Art. The culmination of her years of research was beginning.

"It was so crowded," Atıl remembers. "The auditorium holds about 450 people, and there were about 100 standing up or sitting on the floor. I had to cut the lecture quite a bit, because I felt badly about people standing in the back."

A jammed lecture hall is only one measure of success for Atıl's exhibition, "The Age of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent." Scheduled from January 25 to May 17 at the National Gallery, on the Mall in Washington, D.C., the compact and splendid exhibition attracted more than 400,000 visitors, and at the end of its run was extended for a further 10 days. Süleyman's treasures drew yards of coverage in newspapers and magazines, as well as extensive airtime from radio and television stations. The exhibition catalogue, authored by Atıl, sold more than 10,000 copies. Exhibition posters, usually marked down after a show's end, sold out within only a few weeks and had to be reprinted.

This success story began a decade ago, when Atıl's idea for an important exhibition of 16th-century Ottoman art led her, naturally, to Istanbul – where Topkapı Palace, now a museum, had held Süleyman's treasures ever since his reign ended.

Here, Atıl encountered a major obstacle: a Turkish law, enacted after a museum fire a dozen years ago had destroyed a number of loaned objects, which prohibited lending national art treasures to museums outside Turkey. For 10 years, Atıl worked with a succession of government officials, trying to convince them to change the law.



Simultaneously, she encountered a more general challenge: the conviction of many in the museum world that large foreign exhibitions of unique treasures – like the one Atıl was contemplating – were simply too risky.

"Even some of my colleagues felt that these loan exhibitions were detrimental to the objects and that certain objects might be lost or damaged in the process," Atıl says.

"And my argument was, yes, problems could happen. But if you choose the crème de la crème *of museums in a country like the United States – where museum technology is far more advanced than in any other country in the world – the chance of anything happening is almost zero."*

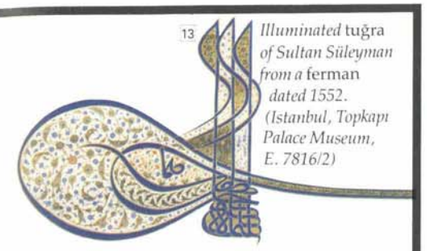
In 1982, Atıl won her battle. Turkish government officials were impressed by her credentials, which include advanced degrees in European and Islamic art and numerous Islamic exhibitions under her curatorship at the Freer Gallery of Art, as well as an extensive list of catalogues, articles, lectures and other publications. The prohibitive law was altered to allow a small but brilliant collection of artifacts from the time of Sultan Süleyman to enter the United States.

The importance of Atıl's conquest has not been overlooked by Turkey's ambassador to the United States, Şükrü Elekdağ. The Süleyman exhibition, he says, will help educate Americans about Turkey's culture, history and accomplishments, and will contribute to forming a more balanced view of the country and its people.

Also underlining the exhibit's significance in the United States is a statement by Turkish president Kenan Evren. In a preface to its 357-page catalogue, Evren hoped the exhibition will "draw the attention and appreciation of the American public, and will contribute to the creation of a bridge of culture between the Turkish and American nations."

Yet for Atıl, the exhibition's goal is not to enhance U.S.-Turkish relations. "If it does, it's of no interest to me," she says simply. "I hate to politicize a cultural activity. My purpose in doing this exhibition is to educate the public; that's what a museum curator does."

The first element in this educational process, however, is the seductive power of the objects themselves: The items in the collection cry out for appreciation simply for their beauty.



13 *Illuminated* tuğra *of Sultan Süleyman from a* ferman *dated 1552. (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum, E. 7816/2)*

"Ottoman art is *beautiful; it is joyous, sensuous and colorful. Esthetically, it is very pleasing," Atıl says. "The proportions are just right, the inlays are just right, and, technically, it is of incredible quality. I want to show that there are forms of art for pure personal pleasure, and that it is this personal pleasure – this sort of splendor – that surrounded the Ottoman court.*

"Ottoman art really is not an art that has a secret intention. You look at it, you see the beauty of the textile, and then you understand that it's made for an upholstery cover, for example, or for a ceremonial kaftan. Its meaning is immediately understood."

More specifically, Atıl wants her audience to appreciate the mythical saz *and the floral naturalistic designs, two decorative styles that evolved during Süleyman's reign. "I would like them to understand how they were sometimes totally blended in objects and sometimes used separately. I would like them to understand the joyousness of creation and nature, and the celebration of that – the perpetuity of spring that continually appears in Ottoman art."*

Once captured by the esthetics, Atıl hopes visitors will begin to ask where and for whom these beautiful objects were made. Often, they're struck with questions after they've left the gallery.

"I get tremendous numbers of calls from the public," Atıl says. "They want to know more about the art, they want to read more about the society that produced it, or they have a similar piece they want me to identify.

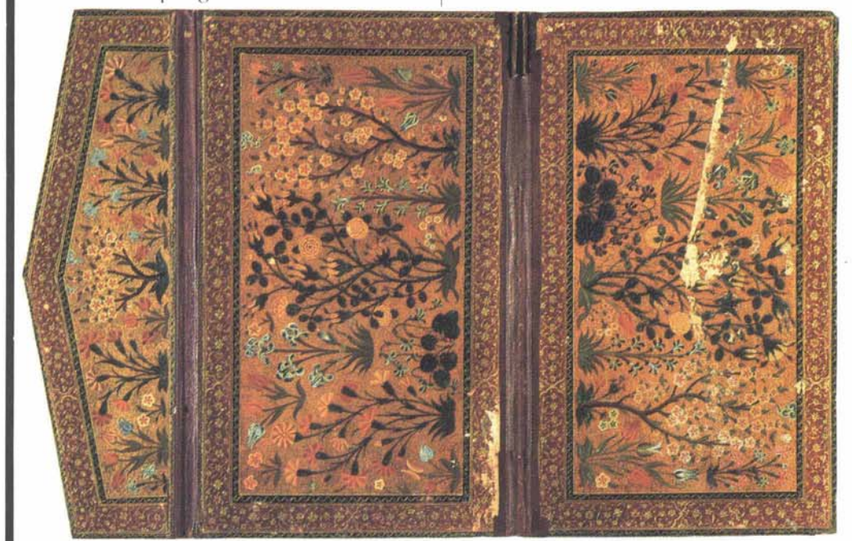
"When they start asking these questions, I believe they will learn a little bit about a world, a lifestyle and a sense of esthetics that is quite *far from the United States and the 1980's."*

Communicating across such barriers of place and time constitutes success on another, deeper level for Esin Atıl and for her Sultan Süleyman exhibition – and there are signs that that success is being achieved. From the comments book placed at the exhibition's exit, one voice far removed from the Ottoman Empire of 400 years ago spoke its approval. In a looping, adolescent script, an American junior-high visitor wrote, "It was rad, awesome and totally cool."

Another decorative style that originated in the *nakkaşhane* was created by Kara Memi, who had studied with Şahkulu and became the head of the corps after his master's death. Kara Memi, who flourished between the 1540's and 1560's, was the promoter of the naturalistic style in which spring flowers, such as tulips, carnations, roses and hyacinths, grew from clusters of leaves amidst blossoming fruit trees. This style was fully developed by the 1540's, as observed on the doublures, or linings, of a lacquered bookbinding 8 used on a copy of the Hadis (in Arabic, *Hadith*, the collected sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad) made for Süleyman's favorite son, Sehzade Mehmet, who died in 1543. This binding recreates a garden in perpetual bloom filled with spring flowers and trees.

Similar themes were used to decorate a splendid Koran transcribed in 1546/1547 by Ahmed Karahisari, the most innovative calligrapher of all times. Although the layout of the opening folios and the designs employed follow traditional schemes, the two pairs of ovals flanking the text depict branches bearing blossoms growing from leaves. This theme was called *bahar*, meaning "spring" as well as "a blossoming fruit tree," and was popularly used on diverse objects.

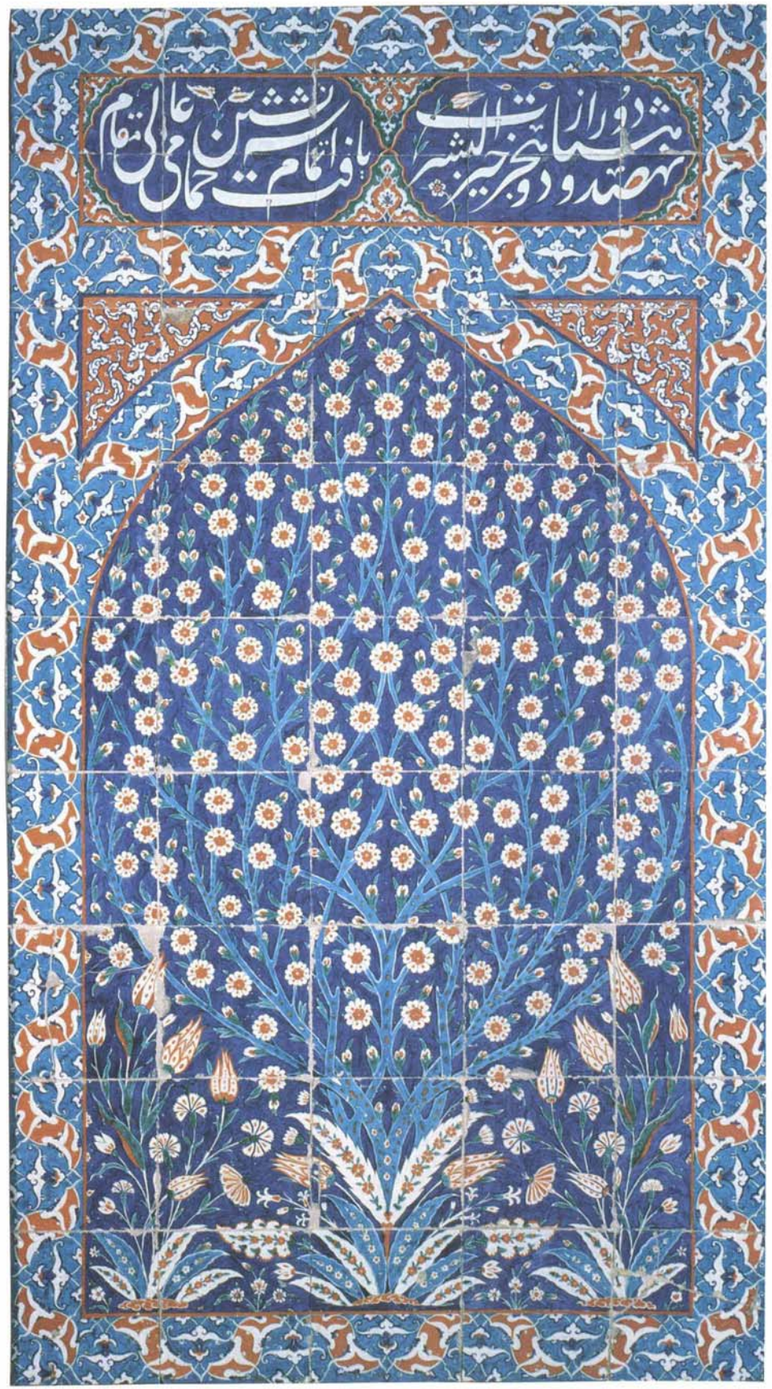
One of the favorite flowers in the Ottoman court was the tulip, which was cultivated in the gardens of the capital. (See *Aramco World*, May-June 1977) This flower was introduced to Europe during Süleyman's reign by Baron Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, the Flemish-born Austrian ambassador to the court. Its name derived from *tülbent* – the Turkish word for the fine gauze-like fabric used to construct a turban – since its shape was thought to resemble the headdress worn by the Ottomans.



8 *Lacquered bookbinding (interior) from a Hadis made for Şehzade Mehmet, ca. 1540. (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum, E.H. 2851)*

9 *Embroidered wicker shield with gold-inlaid steel boss, mid-16th century. (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum, 1/2571)*

Three-petaled tulips and fan-shaped carnations became standardized and formulaic and were frequently combined, as on an embroidered wicker shield 64 centimeters (25 inches) across. 9 Wicker, a strong and resilient material, is also lightweight, making it extremely desirable for both the Ottoman cavalry and infantry. These shields were constructed of withes wrapped with silk and metallic threads, then coiled and stitched together. The fronts were further reinforced with steel bosses and the backs padded and lined with velvet to cushion the elbow and protect the arm.



10 *Tile panel from the Harem of Topkapı Palace, dated 1574/1575. (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum, 8/1067)*

The naturalistic style was particularly favored by the potters of Iznik, a town which supplied the court with ceramic vessels and plates as well as tiles used on residential and religious architecture. The blossoming fruit tree was especially popular, and was used on tile panels decorating a number of buildings, including the mausoleum of Süleyman's beloved wife, Hürrem Sultan, who died in 1558. A similar version was used on a panel, constructed of forty-five square tiles, made in 1574/1575 for a chamber leading into the imperial baths in the Harem of Topkapı Palace. 10

In addition to *saz* scrolls and sprays of naturalistic flowers, the court artists employed such traditional designs as *rumis*, cloudbands, *çintemani* patterns, and spiraling vines. *Rumis* (split leaves) were generally used in scrolls, at times joined to create cartouches, as seen in the border of the tile panel from the Harem. Cloudbands, resembling twisted and knotted ribbons, were often combined with other elements. They appear in the spandrels of the tile as well as in the voids of a brocaded velvet cushion cover decorated with *çintemani* motifs. 11 *Çintemani* referred to designs composed of clusters of triple balls and/or double wavy lines. Traced back to ancient Central Asian traditions, this pattern had talismanic as well as royal connotations, and is thought either to have derived from Buddhist symbols or to represent leopard spots and tiger stripes. The balls and wavy lines, used alone or together, were favored on satin and velvet textiles made for garments and furnishings, such as covers for cushions and bolsters or floor spreads.

11 *Brocaded velvet cushion cover, mid-16th century. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Art Museums [Arthur M. Sackler Museum], The Edwin Binney, 3rd Collection of Turkish Art, 85.295)*

12 *Plate with spiral scrolls, second quarter of 16th century. (Kuwait National Museum, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, LNS 231 C)*

The spiraling vine – thin branches bearing delicate blossoms and leaves – was first used on Süleyman's *tuğra*, the imperial monogram that contained his name and title. It was also applied to a group of ceramic vessels and plates painted in blue or blue and turquoise. 12

The artists fully exploited the decorative motifs created in the *nakkaşhane* and harmoniously combined them, as exemplified on the *tuğra* affixed to a *ferman* (edict) dated 1552. 13 Here *saz* scrolls fill the large ovoid extension on the left, *rumis* and sprays of naturalistic flowers adorn the smaller ovoid, and cloudbands and blossoming fruit trees are placed in the voids between the vertical strokes at the top.

14 *Illuminated folio from the* Divan-ı Muhibbi *transcribed by Mehmed Şerif and illuminated by Kara Memi in 1566. (Istanbul University Library, T. 5467, fol. 359b)*

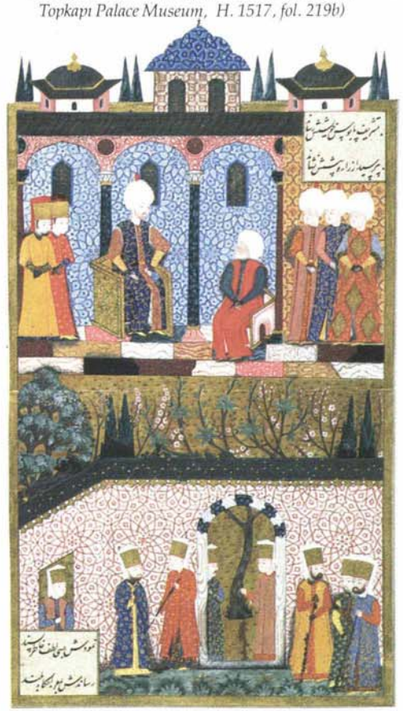
15 *Prayer rug, second half of 16th century. (Vienna, Österreichisches Museum fur Angewandte Kunst, T. 8327)*

The same profusion of decorative elements appears in a most spectacular copy of the *Divan-ı Muhibbi*, a collection of Süleyman's poems transcribed by Mehmed Şerif and illuminated in 1566 by Kara Memi. 14 The margins of the folios have *saz* scrolls rendered in metallic gold and silver inks – the silver has now oxidized to grey – and the panels between the lines of text burst with brightly colored naturalistic flowers and trees.

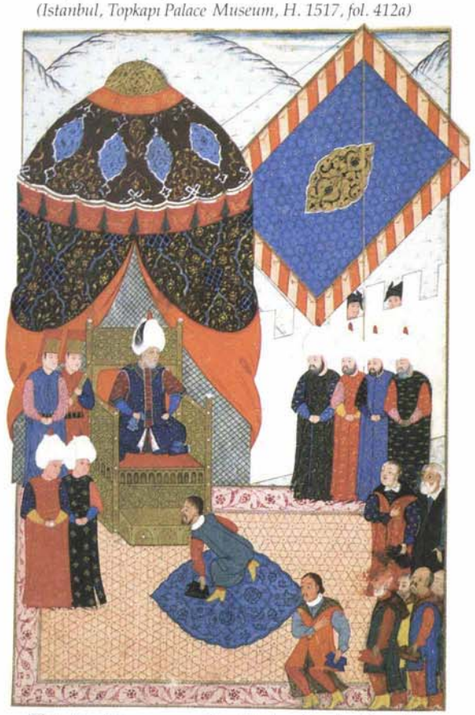
Both stylized and naturalistic floral themes were skillfully combined by the other artists, including the potters and weavers. Ottoman textiles were greatly admired by the Europeans, who collected brocaded satins and velvets, some of which were fashioned into ecclesiastical garments or royal robes. Ottoman rugs were equally in demand, frequently used as wall hangings or table covers. One of the most celebrated 16th-century prayer rugs 15 was preserved in the Schönbrunn Palace, the residence of the Austrian kings outside Vienna. Its field is densely packed with a variety of *saz* blossoms and leaves, intermingled with branches of blossoming fruit trees.

16 *Battle of Mohács (right half), from the* Süleymanname *of Arifi, dated 1558. (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum, H. 1517, fol. 219b)*

17 *Sultan Süleyman being entertained, from the* Süleymanname *of Arifi, dated 1558. (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum, H. 1517, fol. 412a)*



18 *Sultan Süleyman with Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa, from the* Süleymanname *of Arifi, dated 1558. (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum, H. 1517, fol. 360a)*



19 *Sultan Süleyman receiving Stephen Zápolya, from the* Nuzhet El-Esrar el-Ahbar der Sefer-i Sigetvar *of Ahmed Feridun Paşa, dated 1568/1569. (Istanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum, H. 1339, fol. 16b)*

The decorative styles initiated in the *nakkaşhane* had a profound impact on the production of the other imperial societies of the *Ehl-i Hiref*, as well as on that of the artisan guilds. These styles constituted the artistic vocabulary of the age and were universally applied to both imperial and non-imperial arts throughout the Empire.

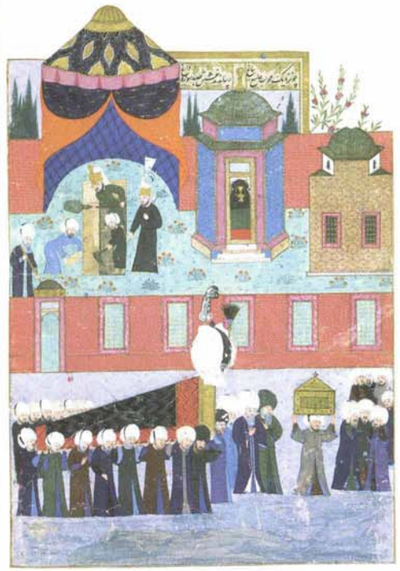
In addition to illuminating manuscripts and *tuğras*, the *nakkaşhane* artists illustrated scores of literary and historical works for the imperial libraries. (See *Aramco World*, March-April 1987) These manuscripts were exclusively produced for the sultan's personal enjoyment: It was only when the imperial Ottoman collections became national museums, after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, that these volumes were made public.

The *nakkaşhane* artists illustrated the texts of past authors as well as those dating from Süleyman's reign. But their greatest contribution was the representation of contemporary events and the creation of the most outstanding genre of court painting, that of illustrated histories. This genre, which depicted the most important events of a sultan's reign, was fully established in the 1550's.

The two significant ingredients of illustrated histories – the documentation of the settings and the portrayal of the personages – owed much to the efforts of two men who were not members of the *nakkaşhane* but belonged to the administration. The most prolific among them was Nasuh (died about 1564), a court official who accompanied the sultan on several campaigns and recorded these events. Nasuh was a true renaissance man: he was a historian, calligrapher, painter, mathematician, swordsman, and inventor of athletic games. He not only wrote about Süleyman's campaigns but also transcribed and illustrated his own texts, carefully documenting the cities and ports conquered by the Ottomans. One of his texts, entitled *Beyan-ı Menazil-i Sefer-i Irakeyn*, is devoted to the campaign to Iran and Iraq which took place between 1534 and 1536. The first painting in this work depicts Istanbul and represents in detail all the monuments of the capital. (See *Aramco World*, March-April 1987, inside front cover) Nasuh's topographic renditions are invaluable sources for the recreation of the city in the 1530's.

One of his colleagues was Haydar Reis (1492?-1572), a naval captain who practiced the art of painting. He made portraits of the sultan, his son Selim II, and other court officials, using the pseudonym Nigari. His portrayal of Süleyman as an aging ruler accompanied by two officials was made toward the end of the sultan's life and realistically depicts the physical condition of his subject. (See *Aramco World*, March-April 1987, page 12) Nigari's paintings, executed from life, helped to promote the development of portraiture in the court.

Ottoman sultans were acutely conscious of their role in history and established the post of *şahnameci*, the official court biographer. During Süleyman's reign this post was held by Arifi, who was commissioned to write a five-volume history of the Ottoman dynasty. The fifth and last volume in the series is the *Süleymanname*, devoted to Süleyman's reign and completed in 1558.



20 *Burial of Sultan Süleyman, from the* Tarih-i Sultan Süleyman *of Lokman, dated 1579/1580. (Dublin, The Chester Beatty Library, MS. 413, fol. 115b). Courtesy of the Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library.*

Arifi chose the artists who illustrated this volume with great care. Most of the paintings were assigned to an anonymous master who devised the compositions for accession ceremonies, receptions of foreign dignitaries, sieges of fortresses, and battles in the field. He conjoined the topographic style seen in the works of Nasuh with Nigari's interest in portraiture, and depicted the events, the settings, and the participants with documentary realism. His paintings are exquisite works of art, as well as historical documents that recreate the age – whether they show the Battle of Mohács, Hungary's decisive defeat in 1526 16, a ceremonial event in the Throne Room during the 1539 circumcision festival of two princes 17, or an intimate meeting between the sultan and Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa, the grand admiral, in 1533. 18

The *Süleymanname* covers the sultan's life from his accession in 1520 to 1556, a decade before his death. The activities of his last years were recorded in two other manuscripts. The painter who illustrated them was Osman (active from the 1560's to the 1580's), a remarkably talented artist who followed the traditions initiated by the master of the *Süleymanname*.

One of these manuscripts was written by Ahmed Feridun Paşa, a famous statesman, and narrates the 1566 campaign to Szigetvár, Hungary. Süleyman was 72 years old at the time and in poor health, but he had insisted that he lead his own armies once again. He stopped en route to receive his vassal Stephen Zápolya, the king of Hungary. The painting depicting this event 19 portrays Süleyman as a majestic but tired and ailing monarch. An atmosphere of solemnity – even sadness – permeates the scene, almost as if the participants had a premonition that this was to be Süleyman's last campaign.

Arifi's *Süleymanname* was concluded by Lokman, the official court biographer who replaced him and wrote the *Tarih-i Sultan Süleyman*, ending his text with the death of the sultan. One of the paintings in this work 20, which was completed in 1579/1580, shows Süleyman's coffin being carried toward his grave, which is being dug next to the mausoleum of Hürrem Sultan, behind the Süleymaniye Mosque. This painting proves that although Süleyman's mausoleum had been designed at the time the Süleymaniye complex, comprising the mosque and some 18 other buildings, was conceived between 1550 and 1557, it was not built until after his death.

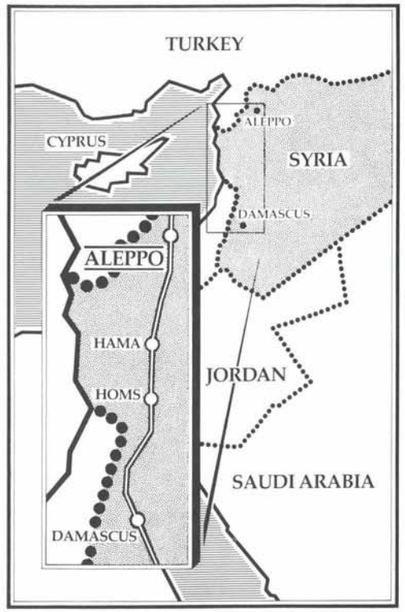
Lokman and the following *şahnamecis* produced voluminous works illustrated by hundreds of paintings depicting the activities of the sultans in detail. But no Ottoman sultan was as celebrated as Süleyman, and none provided the artists with so many glorious subjects to represent.

The artists of Süleyman's *nakkaşhane* not only formulated the decorative style and themes that characterized the golden age of Ottoman art, but also recreated the life and achievements of their patron, enabling students and scholars to understand and appreciate a most remarkable man and the magnificent and fascinating age which he shaped.

Esin Atıl, former curator of the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., is the guest curator responsible for assembling the exhibition "The Age of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent." The exhibition, which opened at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in January, will be on display at the Art Institute in Chicago until September 7 and will be shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York from October 4 to January 17, 1988.

The Lure of Aleppo

WRITTEN BY LYNN SIMARSKI
PHOTOGRAPHED BY IHSAN SHEET



Cradled in a bowl of dry hills in northern Syria, the city of Aleppo presents an austere facade to those entering her ancient gates. Serious, tight-lipped, sober – the adjectives often applied to her people convey a dignity befitting Aleppo's age, for she vies with Damascus and Sana'a as the oldest existing city in the world. Though eclipsed by the political and economic hegemony of modern Damascus, Aleppo preserves more purely the essence of a traditional Arab city.

She is the northernmost of Syria's great inland towns, including Damascus, Homs and Hamah. Halfway between the Euphrates and the coast, Aleppo's location made her a natural commercial depot and a busy center of traffic. Pilgrims and traders from the north also transited the city, tracing the edge of the mountains rather than the rugged coast, down through Damascus to Makkah.

The dynamism and raw energy of Aleppo have captivated travelers for ages. Gertrude Bell, in *Amurath to Amurath*, was one.

> If there be a better gate to Asia than Aleppo, I do not know it. A virile population, a splendid architecture, the quickening sense of a fine Arab tradition have combined to give the town an individuality sharply cut, and more than any Syrian city she seems instinct with an inherent vitality. The princes who drew the line of massive masonry about her flanks and led her armies against the emperors of the West, the merchants who gathered the wealth of inner Asia into her bazaars and bartered it against the riches of the Levant Company have handed down the spirit of enterprise to the latest of her sons.

Today, Aleppo is a distribution point for neighboring countries' goods, and a market for the hinterland's bounty: cotton, grain, pistachios, olives, produce, and sheep. A local proverb conveys the city's legendary mercantile bent: "An Aleppine can sell even a dried donkey skin." Aleppines hone their age-old rivalry with Damascus, arguing that they are craftier merchants than the lazy Damascenes.

They also claim to be more open and blunt, as even their dialect reflects. "The Aleppines speak more like men, the Damascenes like women," runs a saying that contrasts the northern city's harsh, emphatic Arabic with the softer Damascene drawl. The Aleppo accent is graceless and clipped, says a Damascus merchant in all earnestness, because the city lacks the bountiful flowing water that formed the fluent Damascene people.

Part of Aleppo's flavor is her cuisine, considered Syria's finest. Its variety is enriched by the diverse traditions of the city's ethnic and religious minorities. Local cooks serve particularly tasty versions of kebab, *kibbe* (ground cracked wheat and lamb), *mezze* (appetizers), and the usual Levantine stuffed vegetables. More distinctly local are *muhammara*, a spicy paste eaten like *hummus* but made of the city's renowned hot pepper, pomegranate juice, and ground walnuts; a seasonal kebab in a sauce of stewed fresh cherries, called *kabab bi-karaz;* and varieties of *kibbe* made with sumac and quince.

The traditional dishes draw upon the wealth of the surrounding countryside: flocks of hardy Awassi sheep – the fat-tailed Middle Eastern breed – and orchards of olive, nut and fruit trees. Aleppo's famous pistachios are creatively deployed in many sweets – rolled in doughs and smothered with syrup, or embedded in sweet gelatin.

Along with ephemeral delights such as food, which Aleppines – like all Syrians – take very seriously, the city has more enduring treasures. Her character, from her foundations to her minarets, is formed of sturdy stone. Limestone was chiseled into ribbon patterns for Byzantine churches near Aleppo, into Koranic verses for the city's mosques and building blocks for her houses and *khans*, the urban caravansaries. *Halab ash-shahba*, or "Aleppo the Gray," Syrians call her, after the once-golden stone houses, walls, and streets now weathered by age.

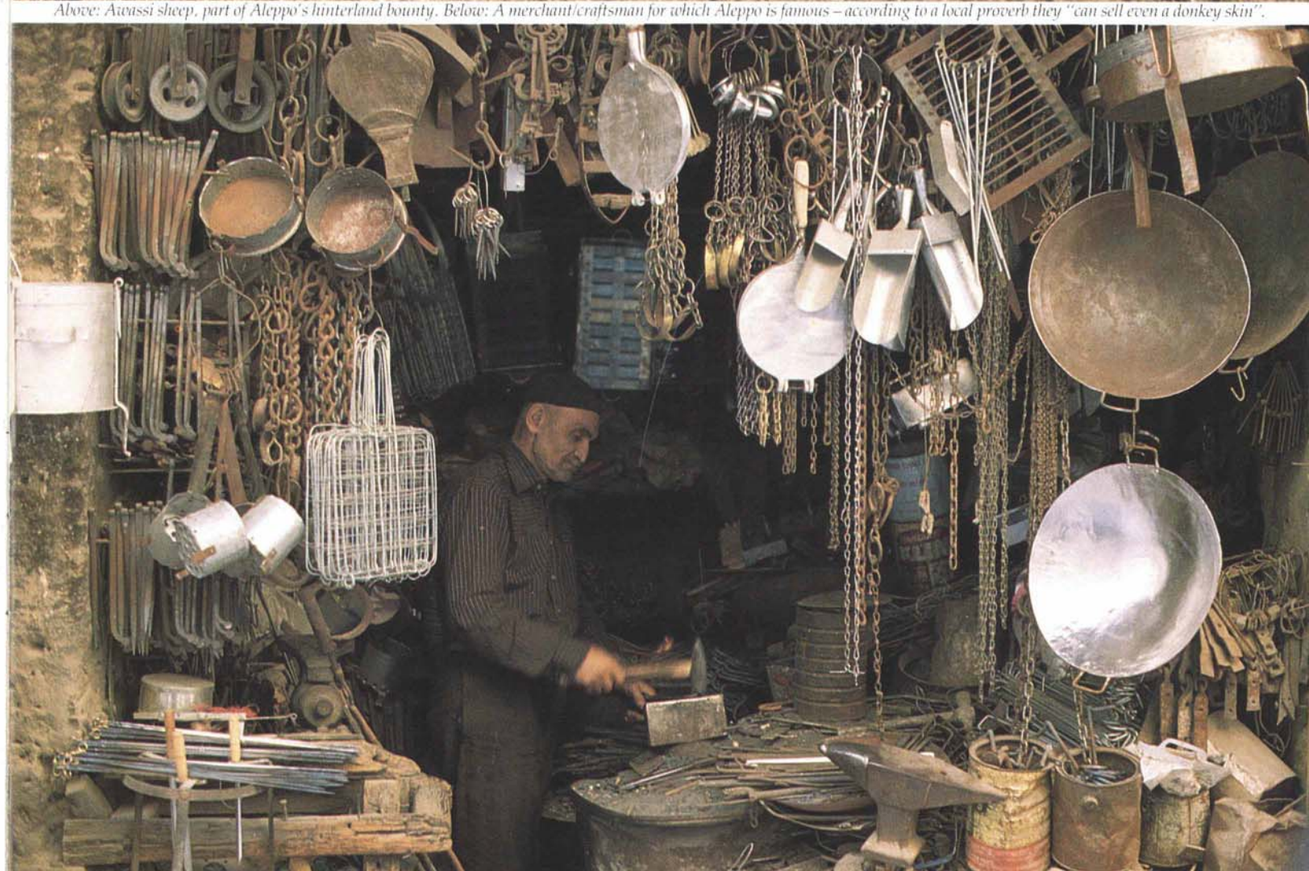
But scrape away the city's accretion of modern suburbs, tune out the honking of traffic, and Aleppo turns back into the city of the past: the *suqs*, the spacious courtyard *khans*, the great bulk of the citadel. The city's traditional urban fabric is remarkably coherent, less scarred by recent development than Cairo or Damascus, and much of its past, particularly since the Muslim conquest in 636, is inscribed in its architecture. For a city that suffered countless invasions, that so often found itself on the frayed edge of empires, many monuments remain.

Traces of the wall embracing the old city, built on Hellenistic foundations, sketch a rudimentary square with the citadel at its approximate center. The western gate, Bab Antakya, still holds ancient pride of place as the gateway to the bazaar. Nearby Bab al-Qinnisrine still looks much as it did when it was the departure point of the old route to Damascus and the pilgrimage to Makkah. To the west of the gate, a fine section of wall with two towers has recently been restored. Bab al-Maqam (Shrine Gate) and Bab al-Hadid (Iron Gate) are also well-preserved, unlike Bab al-Nasr and Bab al-Faraj, of which only traces remain. Other gates have vanished completely.

Although ancient Aleppo's roots lie buried out of reach beneath the modern city, legend connects the site to the prophet Abraham. As he journeyed southward to the land of Canaan, legend has it, he paused in Aleppo. He milked his cow on the citadel hill, spawning the city's Arabic name, Halab, derived from the word for milk (*halib*). On a hill to the south of Aleppo, a mosque called Al-Salihin or Maqam Ibrahim enshrines the rock where the patriarch rested on his way out of the city, and other sites in or near Aleppo commemorate his visit.

Also scattered about the bleak hills nearby are the remains of approximately 750 settlements from Byzantine times – the famous dead cities of northern Syria. The only notable Byzantine relic within Aleppo, however, is Madrasa Halawiya, an

STUART BROWN



Above: Awassi sheep, part of Aleppo's hinterland bounty. Below: A merchant/craftsman for which Aleppo is famous – according to a local proverb they "can sell even a donkey skin".

amalgam of eras. A temple that once stood on the site was rebuilt into Aleppo's great Byzantine cathedral, founded, according to tradition, by St. Helena, mother of Constantine the Great.

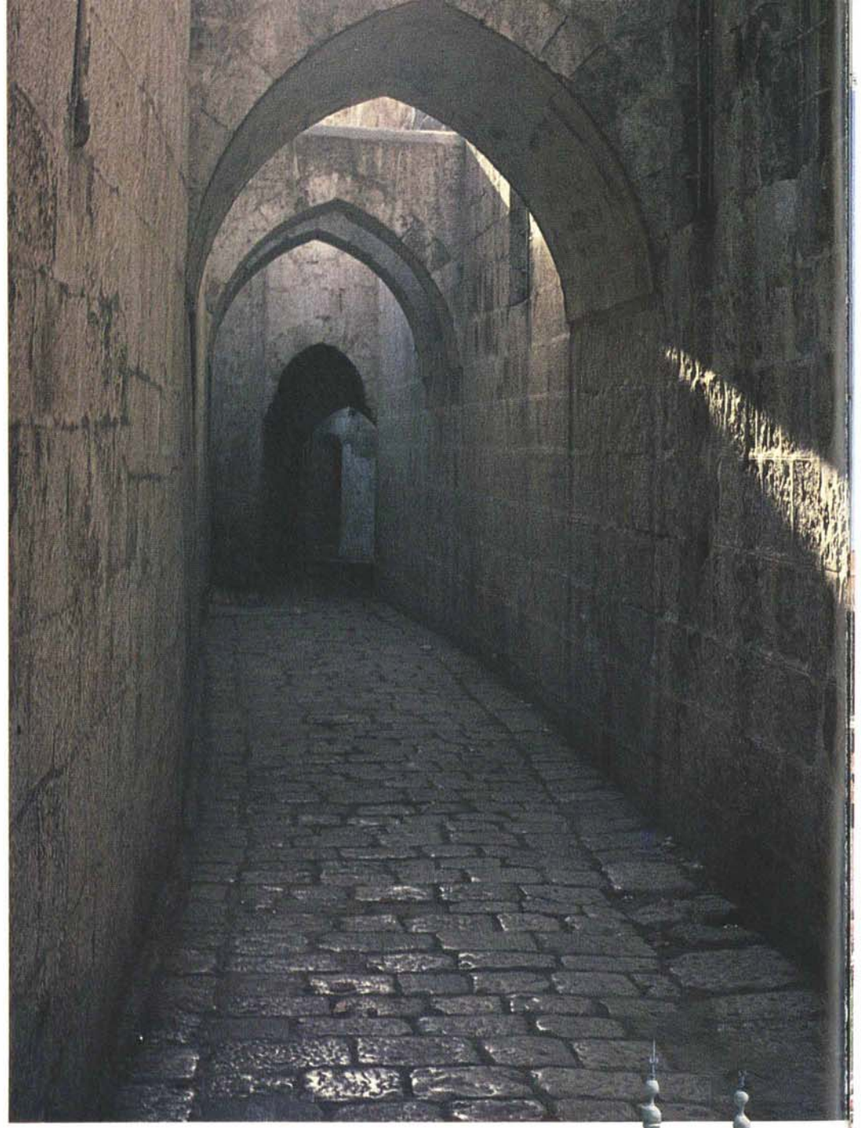
Inside the ruins, columns with Corinthian capitals, trimmed with wind-blown acanthus leaves, have been flawlessly preserved from weathering. In Crusader times, when the invaders pillaged the countryside near Aleppo, the city's chief judge converted St. Helena's cathedral into a mosque, and in the middle of the 12th century the famous leader Nur al-Din founded a *madrasa* or religious school that encompassed the former cathedral.

Many of Aleppo's monuments have similarly complicated pedigrees. Almost a century after the Muslims took the city, the Umayyad dynasty, ruling from Damascus, erected a mosque in the northern city. "The Great Mosque of Aleppo rivaled that of Damascus in its decoration, painting, and mosaic," wrote Aleppo's 15th-century historian, Ibn al-Shihna. He had never actually seen the original mosque which he described, however: It had been looted and burned by his time. The present edifice dates from Nur al-Din's complete reconstruction in 1158, itself then partly rebuilt after the Mongol invasion of 1260.

The oldest part of the mosque complex is the minaret. Completed around 1090, it is an architectural masterpiece whose trim of lacy stone echoes the ribbon-like molding on the Byzantine ruins in the countryside.

One of Aleppo's most brilliant periods – the rule of the Hamdanid Sayf al-Dawla, whose name means "Sword of the Dynasty" – left no lasting architectural legacy. He made Aleppo his capital in 944, and his cosmopolitan court attracted scholars and artists from distant lands. Poets such as the famous al-Mutanabbi celebrated their patron's military prowess in enduring verses, but below the modern suburb bearing Sayf al-Dawla's name nothing remains of his lavish palace. Old accounts relate that the river Quwayq was channeled through the palace to enliven it with flowing water.

The formidable symbol of Aleppo – the citadel – belongs to a later era. Crowning a precipitous hill in the heart of the old city, it is regarded by some travelers as the most spectacular medieval fortress in the Middle East. The hill itself is partly artificial, a



Above: Entrance to al-Uttrush mosque.
Left: Impassive stone walls of Jadayah street conceal fine 17th and 18th-century Arab houses.
Below: Minarets dominate the view toward the citadel – the formidable symbol of Aleppo.

prehistoric tell built up of ruins from many cultures each layered atop the last. The citadel is said to have been stormed successfully only once: by the Mongol Timur Leng (Tamerlane). More often, the fortress, with room for a garrison of 10,000, stood firm even as invaders devastated the city below.

The existing citadel was erected in 1209 atop fortifications from Byzantine, Roman, and probably earlier times. Al-Malik al-Zahir Ghazi, the son of Salah al-Din (Saladin), was its architectural patron: He constructed the citadel's entrance bridge, gates, and moat, and paved its glacis with slippery stone slabs. His body is entombed in a mosque at the foot of the gate. Under Ayyubid rule, including that of Ghazi and his line, Aleppo was known as one of the most beautiful and dynamic cities of the Middle East.

An Ayyubid signature in northern Syria was the restrained decoration of building exteriors. Stonecutters focused their attention on the monumental entrances topped by *muqarnas*, or "stalactite" decoration that accomplished the architecturally difficult transition from concave corners to the surfaces above them. Inside religious buildings, stone of alternating colors was inlaid and plaited in *mihrabs* or prayer niches.

Among Aleppo's finest Ayyubid assets are the *madrasas* or religious schools. In the Maqamat area, south of the old city walls, stands a trio of restored Ayyubid *madrasas*: Firdous, Kamiliya, and Zahiriya. Madrasat al-Firdous, built in 1235, is the loveliest. Perhaps the grace of the "School of Paradise" reflects the feminine hand that summoned it forth, for it was commissioned by Dayfa Khatun, the wife of Ghazi. Her name and lineage appear in the calligraphy carved around the walls.

Inside, the original elegant fountain survives in the center of the courtyard. Firdous' *mihrab* is formed of polychrome inlaid marble interwoven as delicately as silken ribbons. Local legend holds that Timur Leng wanted to carry off the *mihrab* to his capital, but artisans convinced him that to remove it would be to destroy it.

The Ayyubid dominions eventually fell to the Mamluks. From their seat in Cairo, they ruled Egypt, Syria, and Palestine for more than 250 years.

As the Mamluk era progressed, Aleppo prospered as a strategic frontier city, and was enriched with a number of notable buildings. A Mamluk hospital, Bimaristan Arghun, still stands remarkably intact near the bazaar. Converted from a palace by Arghun al-Kamili, a governor of Aleppo, its courtyard may have served as a waiting room, and the *iwans* – outdoor living-rooms with one face open to the courtyard – probably doubled as stages, for records show that musicians' salaries were provided as part of health care. Patients' cells had fountains bubbling outside.

Aleppo's last Mamluk governor, Khayer Bey, helped bring the era to a close with his treachery. In 1516, when the Mamluks battled the Ottoman Turks on the plain of Marj Dabiq north of Aleppo, Khayer Bey deserted with his troops, helping to cement an Ottoman victory.

Aleppo became the third city of the far-flung Ottoman lands, exceeded in population only by Istanbul and Cairo. Approaching travelers repeatedly remarked upon the grandeur of Aleppo's skyline – flat roofs and domes starkly punctuated with minarets and dark, straight cypresses.

From above Bab Antakya, three pointed Ottoman minarets dominate the view toward the citadel. One belongs to Jami'a Khusruwiyya, completed around 1544, and the first documented mosque built by Sinan, the great architect of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent and his successors. Awkward and imperfect compared to Sinan's later achievements, it is still "bold and tough and, in its Syrian setting, very Ottoman," as Godfrey Goodwin judges in *A History of Ottoman Architecture*.

In early Ottoman years, a new Christian suburb called Jadaydah flourished north of the old city wall. Today it is one of the liveliest and most intact of the old neighborhoods. Impassive stone walls like dikes channel the flow of traffic and conceal the quiet charm of the homes behind them – Aleppo's finest collection of Arab houses from the 17th and 18th centuries. Heavy, half-open doors reveal elegant courtyards and fountains, the most splendid of them in the mansions of the rich, who built prestigiously near the churches.

The limestone houses, generally of one

or two stories, nestle back-to-back to minimize the expanse of wall exposed to sun. Privacy is paramount, so many entrance passageways twist to block courtyards from direct public view.

Inside, patios are paved with contrasting flagstones. Citrus trees, jasmine, and roses grow in basins near fountains or pools. In wealthy homes, a musicians' stand in the courtyard was used for concerts. The house called Bayt Achakbash, now the Aleppo Museum of Folk Traditions, is furnished to depict the sumptuous lifestyle of the wealthy – now largely vanished from the gracious old houses.

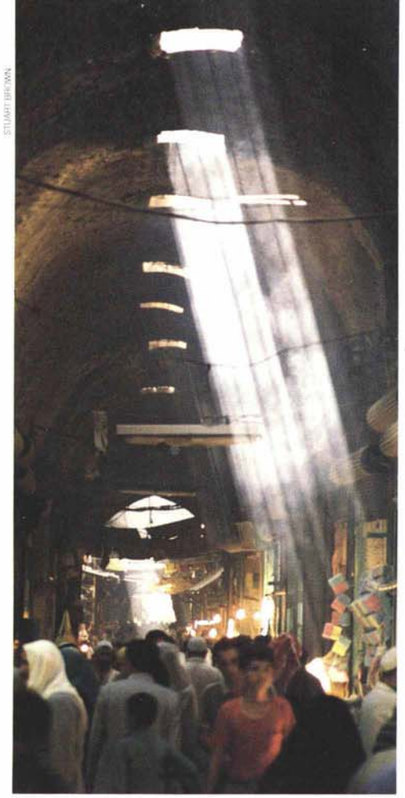
John Barker, an English consul in Ottoman Aleppo, recorded a wedding celebration in such a house on a summer evening.

> ...the courtyards are illuminated at night with different coloured lamps, and nightingales in cages are hired and placed among the shrubs and trees, which sing at intervals when the music ceases. The dazzling diamonds of the ladies, and the various colours of their dresses, the lights, the singing of the birds, and the trickling of the water falling on the marble basins, made one fancy it to be Fairyland.

During the prosperous Ottoman years, Aleppo's covered *suq* – sometimes called the most beautiful in the entire Middle East – was expanded. Since then, whining Suzuki trucks, the only vehicles small enough to negotiate the alleys, have replaced the pad and clatter of camels over the cobblestones, but the ageless din of braying donkeys, bargaining women and shouting boys is much the same. Labyrinthine passages still twist beneath arched stone vaults, their subterranean gloom punctured only by shafts of sun from skylights. Overhead, sheep graze on the grassy roofs, where guard dogs once roamed at night to foil inventive thieves.

People and animals still stream down the many miles of bazaar streets. Donkeys squeeze past, laden with wood, vegetables, or burlap bags stuffed with cotton and wool. Western-suited textile businessmen brush past tall bedouins with heads swathed in red-and-white *kaffiyas*.

Massive gates open off the streets into the *khans*, or inns. More than any other



Suq *al-Medina and, right, al-Uttrush mosque minaret.*

monument, these embody the city's mercantile essence: The prosperity of a Middle-Eastern city in any given era is often proportional to the number of new *khans* constructed. Aleppo's great Mamluk and Ottoman *khans* were built on a model used throughout the Islamic world. Merchandise, and sometimes animals, were housed in ground-floor rooms around a courtyard, while merchants lodged in cells above. The *khans'* great doors were locked at night to safeguard goods and owners.

Among Aleppo's most beautiful *khans* is Khan al-Wazir, the Minister's Khan, built between 1678 and 1682. Its striking black-and-white marble facade furnished the backdrop for a recent fashion layout in *Vogue* magazine. Khan Alabiya still bears a trace of its former use as an Italian consulate in the Italianate balustrade rimming a courtyard terrace. Khan al-Sabun, the Soap Khan, built early in the 16th century, has an elegant carved-stone entrance.

The largest – Khan al-Gumruk, also known as the Great Khan – was built in 1574, and in Ottoman times housed French, Dutch, and English trading firms. Its name, the Customs Khan, comes from its use by the customs authorities at the end of the 18th century.

The *khans*, *suqs*, *madrasas*, and houses fit into Aleppo's tightly-knit urban texture – one that evolved organically over many centuries in response to climate and society. Narrow meandering streets, for instance, kept out hot sun and dust. Privacy was safeguarded behind high walls.

Old Aleppo's unique character was first violated on a large scale in 1952 by the master plan of André Gutton, a French architect commissioned by the city. Wide new thoroughfares were to be cut through the ancient pedestrian network. Although the plan was not fully implemented, straight streets were slashed through parts of the old city and remain today like unhealed wounds. One road carved off part of Khan al-Wazir, the apogee of *khan* construction in Aleppo.

The new roads permitted modern traffic to pour into neighborhoods that had never been designed for it. Traditional sections were fragmented: The old Jewish quarter was cut in half, and in 1979 most of the old city's northwest quarter, Bab al-Faraj, was razed.

In came incongruous high-rises that cut off light and air from the courtyard houses, while robbing them of the privacy so integral to their character. One tall building blights the view of the citadel from the Great Mosque's minaret; another looms ungraciously over the courtyard of Madrasa Uthmaniya.

Further destruction, including additional roads, was planned. But a turning point came in 1983, when excavations for a high-rise development in Bab al-Faraj uncovered part of the city's old Ayyubid walls, including a tower with a staircase. Local and foreign conservationists joined with a more sympathetic local government to plan a scaled-down complex – encompassing the ruins – that will mesh visually with surrounding neighborhoods. It will include a *suq* and a cultural center, preserve the old traffic pathways, and draw architectural inspiration from earlier eras.

The visionary Bab al-Faraj project could herald a new respect for the entire old city, whose historical legacy has been eroded by a narrow concept of progress. For a city that wears her ancient heirlooms so unpretentiously, Aleppo has responded to destruction, over the ages, with irrepressible vitality. That quality will be needed in the future to keep the city's heritage intact. ⊕

Lynn Simarski, a writer specializing in the Middle East, lived in Aleppo for two years. She has just finished writing a book on the history and architecture of the city.