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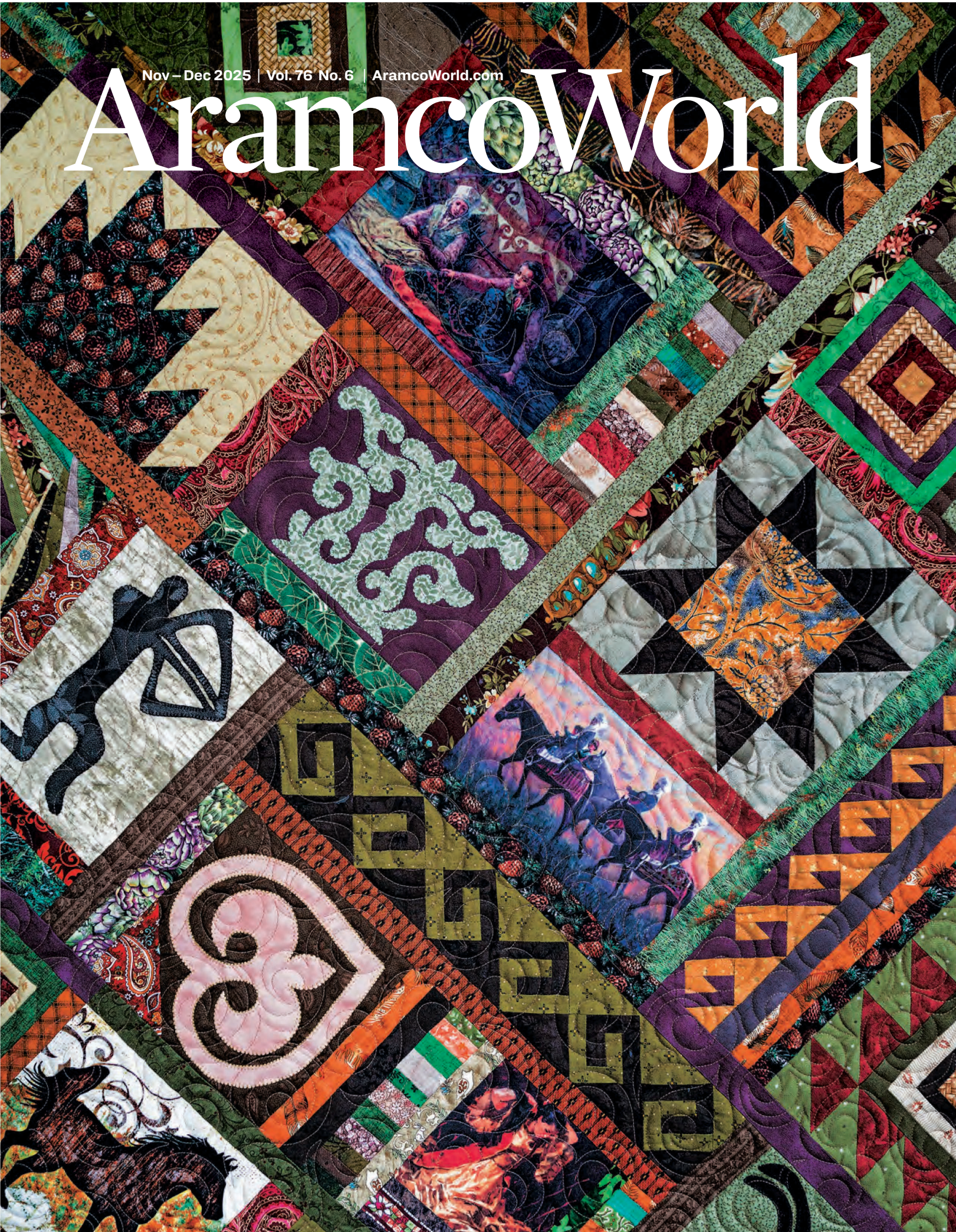
AramcoWorld



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DEPARTMENTS

FRONT COVER The geometric patterns of Kazakhstan's kurak motifs embrace cultural symbolism woven into the fabric, representing blessings and wishes for prosperity, fertility, spiritual and physical strength and more.

FirstLook

Drinking In a Surrealist Brew

Photograph by SERKAN TEKIN

For me, the streets of Istanbul are an endless playground. When I take photos, I don't see the city as a mere backdrop but as a living stage. People, light, shadows and architecture all move together like parts of an opera. While shooting, I often listen to music, letting the rhythm slip into the frame so that each image carries the energy of a live performance.

That was exactly what I felt while taking this photograph in 2019. The copper coffeepots bubbling by the Bosporus Strait were not just brewing coffee; they were adding a new note to the rhythm of the city. The rising steam mingled with the salty air while the figures in the background completed the atmosphere. The reflective surface of the pots has always felt like an instrument to me, playing an invisible melody within the image.

This frame shows that even the simplest moments in Istanbul carry layered meaning. A cup of coffee brewing by the sea contains hospitality, memory and the rhythm of everyday life. The figures seemingly inside the coffeepots create a moment when coincidence and humor collide. This alignment, born from my patient anticipation, emerges as a technique of juxtaposition. It places the authenticity of daily life against a cultural motif of Türkiye, a country widely known for its coffee. That is why street photography, for me, is all about finding and capturing the scene within the ordinary, the serendipitous and the humorous.

@UMAGUMAG

Flavors

Papri Chaat

Recipe by ZAYNAH DIN
Photograph by CHARLOTTE NOTT-MACAIRE

Think of papri chaat as Desi nachos.

One of India's most popular street foods, papri are crispy chips of fried wheat dough, topped with spoonfuls of zesty chickpea salad, drizzled with sweet tamarind sauce and finished with the crunchy Bombay mix of your choice (I like sev, the crunchy little noodles made with chickpea flour) and a dusting of chaat masala seasoning. Use my sneaky day-old naan hack to create a similar base to papri at home.

Zaynah Din is an award-winning digital marketer, content creator and passionate home cook. She started ZaynahsBakes in 2016, and in one year, it transformed from a local cupcake business into an Instagram page with more than 25,000 followers. Din's ethos is to create recipes that are convenient and quick to make—perfect for those fasting but also handy throughout the year for an easy meal.

(Serves 4-6)

1 day-old naan or 2 day-old pitas

Vegetable oil, for shallow frying

1 large potato, diced

1 can (400 grams) chickpeas

1 red onion, finely diced

½ cucumber, finely diced

4 tablespoons pomegranate seeds, plus extra to serve

¼ teaspoon chile powder

1 tablespoon chaat masala, plus extra to finish

½ lemon

50 grams fresh mint, chopped

50 grams fresh cilantro, chopped

⅔ cup (150 grams) plain yogurt

2 tablespoons tamarind sauce

1 ⅔ cups (100 grams) Bombay mix of your choice

Cut your naan or pitas into 2 ½-centimeter squares and shallow-fry in hot oil for 4–5 minutes, until golden brown and completely crispy. Alternatively, you can use store-bought papri.

Peel and dice the potato. Boil until just tender, then allow it to cool. Drain and rinse the chickpeas and put them in a large bowl with the cooled potatoes, red onion, cucumber and pomegranate seeds. Season with salt, pepper, chile powder, chaat masala and squeeze of lemon juice. Add half the fresh herbs, then mix well and set aside.

On a large serving plate, begin assembling the chaat. Start with a layer of papri or fried pita, then add the chickpea mixture. Dollop spoonfuls of yogurt all over and add a generous drizzle of tamarind sauce, the Bombay mix, extra pomegranate seeds and the rest of the fresh herbs. Finish with a big dusting of chaat masala.

CHARLOTTE NOTT-MACAIRE

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Desified: Delicious Recipes for Ramadan, Eid & Every Day
Zaynah Din. Interlink Books, 2024. InterlinkBooks.com.

Q&A

Found in Translation

Written by SUZANNE GAROFALO
Illustrated by MATTHEW BROMLEY

"If someone knows the words of a people, his day is easier." So goes an adage from Hassaniya Arabic, one of the Maghrebi dialects, on the importance of learning languages.

Brian Powell agrees. As a partner in Washington, D.C.-based translation service Industry Arabic, he translates reports, research materials, technical and legal documents for businesses and NGOs from English to Arabic and vice versa. The company's recently published book detours into a more literary realm; as its editor, Powell is now also an ambassador of the original sound bite: the proverb.

1,001 Arabic Proverbs With English Translation is a comprehensive collection of wise sayings extending over 14 centuries, from classical Arabic to nearly a dozen major modern dialects. They are grouped thematically: Speech and Language, Wisdom and Advice, Beauty and Appearance, Love, Marriage, Men and Women, Family and Friendship and more. Powell presents the proverbs in Arabic, followed by the literal English translation and then context, if needed. The compilation is for both the student of Arabic and the curious reader who doesn't speak a word of it.

It is a natural undertaking for Powell, who long has embraced language as a conduit to culture. After a year at The American University in Cairo, the Philadelphia native stayed in Egypt to continue perfecting his Arabic. His Egyptian friends helped him find work as a translator, a career that he's practiced for a dozen-plus years.

These days the polyglot—Powell also speaks fluent French, Persian (Farsi), Spanish and Portuguese—works from his base in São Paolo, Brazil, where, in addition to his everyday translation work, he takes on literary projects. Powell is researching different countries' versions of the Arab folk epic *Bani Hilal*. He also is translating a novel about Al-Qaswa, the camel that accompanied the Prophet Muhammad on many journeys, for Saudi Arabia's premier cultural center, Ithra.

AramcoWorld spoke with Powell about the Industry Arabic book and the art and challenge of translation.

This book is a departure from the type of material you normally translate. What made you want to tackle Arabic proverbs?

The book actually started as an article on the [Industry Arabic] website. In our translation work, proverbs do come up from time to time, and there's always a question of how to translate proverbs because, OK, you can try to fi d an equivalent proverb in English, but then you lose some of the feel of the original. But if you translate the original proverb, then it might not make sense. In the book we tried to include some cultural notes about how the proverb actually works. It's defi itely something that involves a bit of research, talking to native speakers, seeing what they think—and sometimes there's not even agreement about what it means among the native speakers of the different dialects!

Are there in fact 1,001 proverbs in the book? Why does the title play on *The Thousand and One Nights*?

I think there are actually 1,005 [laughs]. 1,001 really symboliz-

GULF

مد ريلك على قد لحافك

Stretch your legs as far as your blanket.
(Live within your means.)

IRAQI

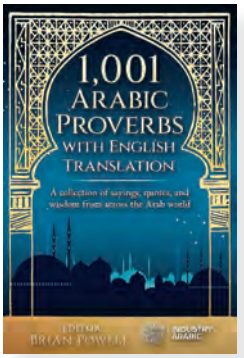
هالكعك من هالعجين

This cookie is made from that dough.
(Children take after their parents.)

EGYPTIAN

اعمل الخير وارميه في البحر

Do good and throw it into the sea.
(You should do good deeds for their own sake, without expecting anything in return.)



1,001 Arabic Proverbs With English Translation

Brian Powell, ed.
Industry Arabic, 2024.

es having a multitude. In the context of *The Thousand and One Nights*, the story collection, it doesn't mean 1,001 stories literally. It's just an expression for an endless number or large number, so we used our title in the same spirit.

Why are proverbs important?
Proverbs are a repository of the collective experiences of an entire culture—in terms of received wisdom, certainly, but also in terms of their material existence, the items they use in everyday life or their natural surroundings. All of this becomes transformed into a verbal expression that captures so much of the culture in a very condensed form that has its own sort of brilliance. For an expression to become a proverb, it has to be very incisive in terms of the idea that it expresses and also the way it expresses that idea. It has to be very witty or clever or colorful.

Why is it important to make Arabic idioms accessible to English speakers?
Looking from the outside, you often see the Middle East or the Arab world as a monolith. The thing is, when you actually go and live in those countries, you realize how much diversity there is; each country really has its own feel and its own culture and even its own foods and clothing. You see this reflected in the proverbs.

In putting this book together, was there a particular proverb that surprised you or that you found especially charming?
There's a Sudanese proverb that says, "The branches of the la'ot shrub only come together when it dies." It refers to a situation where you have a family or group of people, and they only meet when somebody dies, when you're going to a funeral, for example, because you're not really in touch anymore. We can recognize this in the US, but we don't really have an expression for it in English. So here you have an Arabic proverb that captures a common phenomenon, and it's doing it with very local imagery. It's referring specifically to a type of plant in Sudan [with spread-out branches]. It just shows how proverbs can express universal experiences through the lens of a particular cultural background or geography.

Is there validity to the idea that the very act of translation mispresents or dilutes a cultural identity?
There's the Italian expression *Tradutorre, traditore*: "The translator is a traitor." In this proverbs book, I was able to minimize that because the translation includes commentary, so that I'm telling the reader how you should be understanding this. This can be a big issue when you're translating a novel or poetry, when one of the priorities is to make something readable as literature in the target language. A lot of times that can come at the expense of the linguistic or cultural nuance of the original text. It's always a question of finding a balance. Translation involves these hard choices every day.

Do you see your role as a cultural mediator?
For some projects, yes. Sometimes a translator is almost like a lawyer, in the sense that we represent our clients and their interests without regard to our own personal feelings on things. We try to be objective and make sure that they express what they want to express in an accurate way. In [a] more cultural translation, like this proverbs book, I would say we are like a cultural mediator.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Suzanne Garofalo is a copy editor and writer at *AramcoWorld*. She holds a degree in journalism from The University of Texas at Austin and has contributed to a variety of publications for more than two decades. Artist, illustrator and publication designer **Matthew Bromley** runs Graphic Engine Design in Austin, Texas, and he is the graphic designer of *AramcoWorld*.

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Enduring Skills, Enduring Stories

Exhibition Honors Centuries of Traditional Craftsmanship That Is Shaping Today and Tomorrow

WRITTEN BY ARTHUR CLARK, PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF ITHRA

A long *mashrabiya* "window" made of thousands of pieces of turned wood that are fitted together with no nails or glue stands opposite a *jali* screen delicately carved from white marble. The mashrabiya masterpiece fronts a room holding traditional wood and textile furnishings from Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Crafted in geometric patterns and used to solve problems of heat, light and privacy, mashrabiyas form an aesthetic ornamental symbol of Islamic architecture.

The piece is part of "In Praise of the Artisan," an exhibition celebrating traditional Islamic craftwork that is "bringing the past to the future" at the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra) in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The goal is to showcase Islamic arts-and-crafts heritage and keep traditions alive.

Adham Nadim, like other artisans participating in the exhibition, is striving to bridge tradition to modern times. That way, Nadim says, a society can understand—and learn from—its past.

Nadim and a team of woodworkers built the mashrabiya room at their sprawling workshop about 30 kilometers (18.5 miles) west of Cairo. Mashrabiya represents a vital aspect of Egyptian craftwork dating back centuries that was facing extinction 50 years ago.

That's when Nadim's father and mother—newly minted Ph.D.s with backgrounds in folklore and anthropology, respectively—stepped in, establishing a workshop for four craftsmen in their garage

Counterclockwise from bottom right: Adham Nadim and his wife, Hind Mostafa, display woodwork in the Nadim workshop near Cairo, Egypt; his sister, Hend, fits together pieces of paneling; Adham Nadim watches a master craftsman carve a panel similar to those in the Ithra show.

PREVIOUS PAGES
The Mashrabiya Room at the exhibition, which runs through December 2027.

Windows clad in different types on mashrabiyas line a street in the Khan El Khalili area of Cairo. Rather than place them as standalone objects behind glass, Ithra shows the screens as they would appear in settings such as this.

in Cairo. They wanted to "bring things back to their authentic time, to do the work properly [in accord with] their original status of appreciation and perfection," he noted.

Much the same can be said of the exhibition as a whole. It "provides a golden opportunity for artisans to speak," said Idries Trevathan, expert in Islamic art and culture at Ithra, who curated the exhibition.

Islamic artistic tradition is not something "from a dead and distant past," he said. "We want to show that it's still practiced in different places around the world. We highlight those places where these certain crafts are practiced at a very high level."

For Nadim, the show offered the opportunity to express "a sense of national collective pride and identity, not only for us as Egyptians but extending regionally. We feel that it is important to preserve our identity and maintain our [cultural] DNA … to show the world that our inherited know-how can withstand the test of time and adapt to modern needs."

"Traditional arts and crafts are a vehicle for sustainable development through true and decent job creation," he said.

"We feel that it is important … to show the world that our inherited know-how can withstand the test of time and adapt to modern needs."

—ADHAM NADIM

OPPOSITE PAGE: ARTHUR CLARK; THIS PAGE: WALEED DASHASH

"In Praise of the Artisan" highlights tilework from the last Muslim kingdom in Spain, including part of a wall, left. Behind it is the Levantine Room from Damascus, Syria, featuring the 'Ajami technique of raised gesso wood paneling and a striking marble fl or.

"[These] forms and expressions that have been created over several hundreds if not thousands of years need to be protected and given the chance to survive to future generations," said Nadim.

HISTORY OF ISLAMIC CRAFTSMANSHIP

Indeed, "In Praise of the Artisan" evokes a deep appreciation for creative expression in a variety of forms going back thousands of years.

That rich craft amalgam took a huge hit with the rise of industrialization and global marketing for mass-produced objects beginning in the mid-1800s, according to Trevathan. Under the influence of Western thinking, the perception of craftwork as different from—and of less merit or value than—art took hold around the same time.

"In the early or premodern Islamic period, there was no distinction between art and craft. That's purely a European or Western idea that resolved into the Muslim world," said Trevathan.

A "trend" in Islamic art history textbooks to exclude traditional work began "around the 1750s or early 1800s," he noted. "It's almost as if Muslim craftsmen just stopped producing. They often present it kind of like Europeans took over, replacing tradition."

The exhibition aims "to show that contemporary art can also be traditional … that there is no gap between an artist and an artisan. We feel that traditional Islamic art is timeless and always relevant."

Ithra reached out to master craftspeople as far apart as southern Spain and Malaysia to commission works in calligraphy, textiles, ceramics, wood and stone for the show. It also features some 140 more striking objects in those categories, as well as metal and glass, from its collection and the al-Sabah and the Tareq Rajab Museum collections in Kuwait.

Nadim's mashrabiya room is styled after Bayt al-Suhaymi, a 17th-century house in Old Cairo that

In addition to commissioned works, the exhibit features 140 pieces from Ithra's collection and Kuwait's al-Sabah and Tareq Rajab Museum collections.

expanded over generations of family occupation. He and his team restored the rundown building to its former glory in a six-year project completed in 2000, spurring the revitalization of more than 30 traditional buildings and houses in the area.

Nadim lauds the show because it enables visitors to view key works in natural settings, rather than as standalone objects behind glass.

Mashrabiya screens were widely used starting some 900 years ago in the Islamic West to provide privacy, often separating interior courtyards from surrounding corridors, as well as from the street, notes the exhibition catalog. The screen in the exhibition "was inspired by the patterns seen along typical historic[al] streets of Cairo," said Nadim.

In fact, it could have come straight out of *Palace Walk* by Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz. Set in Old Cairo in the early 1900s, the novel describes a household both protected by and isolated from the street below by a mashrabiya screen. Along with providing breezes and light for the house, the mashrabiya offered psychological aid to a new young bride.

"When she was left alone," Mahfouz wrote, "[she would] rush to the latticework screen at the window

LEFT Audiovisual vignettes include an artisan working on the raised embroidery on the kiswah that covers the Ka'aba, the door to the Great Mosque in Makkah. **BELOW** A case displays a panel from the kiswah.

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE, LOWER: WALEED DASHASH

ABOVE AND RIGHT
For the Ithra exhibition, Ustad Siddique Bhati's team carved a ceiling-high jali screen similar to this one in Rajasthan, India.

to peer anxiously through it at the lights of the carts and the coffeehouses, listening carefully for a laugh or cough to help her regain her composure."

Nadim came naturally to his profession. He earned a degree in Islamic art and architecture from the American University in Cairo and became CEO of Nadim Industries in 1999.

His company now employs 800 master craftsmen and apprentices as well as designers using high-tech computer tools, who can shift overnight from making Western-style furniture to crafting traditional pieces.

Each of the commissioned works in the exhibition was a major project. The mashrabiya room took about a year from planning to completion, said Nadim. It was transported by truck and by sea in eight large crates and installed at Ithra in about a week by about a dozen craftsmen from the workshop.

THE EXHIBITION

The three-year exhibition, which opened in November 2024, offers works by master artisans from renowned craft centers in the historical Muslim world.

A commissioned rendering in calligraphy of the *bismillah* ("in the name of God") by Deniz Öktem Bektaş, from Istanbul, Türkiye, opens the exhibition.

"We highlight those places where these certain crafts are practiced at a very high level."

—IDRIES TREVATHAN

That's fitting, for Muslims traditionally begin tasks with that invocation. Another commission, a *mihrab* (prayer niche) clad in vividly colored tilework by Abdul Rahman Toirov from Samarkand, Uzbekistan, stands at the opposite end of the room, overlooking three huge carpets from Syria and Iran dating to the 16th and 17th centuries.

Just steps away from the room featuring the mashrabiya is the Levantine Room from Damascus, Syria. The striking chamber, which falls outside the realm of works commissioned for the show, was part of a house built near the Umayyad Mosque in the late 18th century. When the house was torn down in the early 1970s, the room was sold and shipped to a resident of Beirut. Featuring rich 'Ajami decoration (painted gesso reliefs and woodwork) on its walls and ceiling and a spectacular marble floor, it arrived

at Ithra just in time to be included in the exhibition.

Each commissioned piece is accompanied by an audiovisual vignette portraying the artisan or artisans who made it. A separate vignette focuses on the clothing of the Kaʿaba in Makkah, Saudi Arabia.

The latter shows off embroidery from the *kiswah* covering of the Kaʿaba, including a large silk *sitarah*, or curtain, for the Kaʿaba door that was made in Egypt and likely hung over it in 1909. Its rich colors contrast with a more subdued panel for a sitarah made in Makkah in 2024 as a gift and never hung.

The last kiswah from Cairo came in 1962, after which kiswah manufacturing moved completely to Makkah.

Nearly bisecting the room longitudinally is a 16-meter-long, ceiling-high jali screen carved from the same white marble as the Taj Mahal by a team led by Ustad Siddique Bhati in Rajasthan, India.

Another commissioned work is a gleaming luster-ware jar 132 centimeters (4.3 feet) tall and 68.7 meters (2.25 feet) wide by Shuaib Sanchez from Granada, Spain. Seated in an alcove decorated with Moroccan *zillij* tiles and delicately carved plaster, it is modeled on one of the jars dating to the Nasrid Dynasty, the last Muslim kingdom in Spain, which ruled from the Alhambra in Granada from 1232 to 1492.

Master craftspeople as far apart as Spain and Malaysia contributed works in calligraphy, textiles, ceramics, wood and stone.

"We threw out the rulebook" for the show, said Trevathan. "We worked with the craftspeople to create architectural settings to use as the lens … to exhibit all the work here," he noted, pointing to the jali screen and the mashrabiya, which seem engaged in conversation over a display of metal, glass and ceramic work from across the Muslim world.

On the opposite wall, a radiant *songket* commissioned from Zainun binti Jusoh in Terengganu, Malaysia, dazzles the eye. Woven in brilliant green

A digital screen depicts weaver Zainun binti Jusoh of Malaysia next to her *songket* textile, which involved special tying and dyeing of threads.

WALEED DASHASH

TOP Displayed in an alcove bearing Moroccan *zillij* tiles and carved plaster at the exhibition, a lusterware vase from Granada, Spain, is modeled after a jar dating to the Nasrid Dynasty. **BOTTOM** Shuaib Sanchez works on the vase.

silk, it is intricately patterned with gold metallic threads.

Songket, a type of weaving featuring brocaded designs on wool or cotton—sometimes with interwoven gold or silver metallic threads—flourished in Malaysia beginning in the 15th century. It is traditionally used for clothing like sarongs. Real gold and silver threads are used in songket fabric for royalty.

It took Zainun binti Jusoh more than a year to weave her brilliant songket for the

Visitors looking from inside the mashrabiya to other parts of the exhibit can appreciate its beauty and privacy function.

exhibition. The work required one more step than the eight required to make a simple songket. It involved a special kind of tying and dying threads to make *limar songket*, called the "Queen of Songket" in Malaysia.

As with Nadim's story, her family strongly influenced her lifework. She and her mother, from whom she learned to make limar songket, are among the few weavers who know that otherwise lost art. She is the fifth generation of her family to practice songket weaving.

But it may also be the last. Her family business employed 300 weavers in the 1990s. Today the number has shrunk to about 60. Although her son, Luqman, hopes to open a new songket workshop to train apprentices, "my generation may be the last generation," she says. "That makes me sad."

The survival of traditional craftwork in the face of new fashions and changing economic conditions remains in question. There is a path to success in the marketplace, as represented by the woodwork of Nadim. The work of Zainun binti Jusoh, facing strong economic headwinds due to the popularity of cheaper, mass-produced songket fabric, represents the other side of the craftwork coin.

Whatever the result, "In Praise of the Artisan" takes a beautiful step in bridging the divide between the work of craftspeople and that of artists—seeing them as part of a single expression of the same human spirit.

Exhibition organizers say traditions are one of the greatest aspects of Islamic art.

Abdullah Munif, a Riyadh resident who visited the exhibition in June, agreed. "It's very good to continue traditions," he said.

His wife, Reem, said she sees the value as well. "Here, we are able to get close to our heritage," she said. "We have a great civilization that the current generation must learn about and emulate. This is bringing the past to the future."

Or, as Nadim put it: "We believe that one of the goals of the Ithra exhibition is to open the eyes of visitors, so that we have something here that can be taken from it, something that one can be proud of that belongs to all of us, to take inspiration from it … to create an identity that distinguishes from the other." AW

Arthur Clark is a former editor of *AramcoWorld*, editor of *Al-Ayyam Al-Jamilah*, the magazine for Aramco retirees, and is actively involved in the curation of antiquities and archive materials for Aramco.

OPPOSITE TOP: WALEED DASHASH; OPPOSITE BOTTOM: ITHRA; THIS PAGE: ARTHUR CLARK

Soothing Power

OF KAZAKHSTAN'S KURAK PATCHWORK

WRITTEN BY AIBARSHYN AKHMETKALI

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DANIL USMANOV

TEXTILES 6 SERIES

From a studio overlooking the foothills of the Zailiysky Alatau Range near Almaty, Kazakhstan, three women are quietly working on their next piece of a blanket made in *kurak*, a traditional Kazakh patchwork technique. They are apprentices of a kurak master and founder of a school dedicated to helping this style of art to rebound.

Gulmira Ualikhan pulls out kurak after kurak—pieces of quilt, once present in almost every household in the country—prompting compliments for the women who crafted them from rare fabrics passed along the old caravan trails of the Silk Road. It had both practical use as home décor and as part of a woman's dowry, and symbolic power as protection.

Seeing the toll time and globalization took on the craft, Ualikhan is now slowly reviving the kurak technique, which involves patching together fragments of small textiles in an orderly pattern to form a block. The work fits in with a rising global demand for hand-crafted textiles, inspiring her to reinvent the craft beyond Kazakh patterns.

KURAK ELEMENTS IN KAZAKH CULTURE

Although patchwork is found globally, Kazakhs know it as a common decorative art form. Kurak is used in

OPPOSITE Gulmira Ualikhan aims to preserve *kurak*, a patchwork tradition practiced in Kazakhstan and reflected in cultures worldwide. **ABOVE** Ualikhan (in red) runs a school and workshop for her students in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

blankets and pillows, carpets and clothing.

Ualikhan has spent years researching traditional patterns found in museum collections, old photographs and historical illustrations. Now she applies those patterns in her craft.

"This is shi-kurak, the Kazakh block," says Ualikhan, pointing at a square block that resembles a well. "All over the world, everyone considers it their own, and it's because it is a fundamental block. Probably because it's simple and easy for everyone to understand. In Kazakh it comes from the word *shi*, meaning 'thin.' The Russians call it a well."

Ualikhan explains the cultural symbolism and beliefs behind each quintessentially Kazakh kurak motif. Over the years, the geometric patterns earned evocative names: ram's horn, tree of life, axe, pair of earrings, a wave. One of them is a *tumar*—an amulet.

"In the past people used to make tumars in the shape of triangles and place inside them verses like Ayat Al Kursi [known as the Throne Verse] or other surahs from the Qur'an. Of course, nowadays, when we sew, we don't actually stitch those verses into the fabric. But symbolically, we still call it a tumar, an amulet," says Ualikhan.

With symbolic messages woven into the design, every kurak piece holds some of the artisan's story, thoughts and wishes.

Kurak blankets are a common dowry item, with symbolic messages woven into their design. One such blanket carries blessings for a family: a tree-of-life pattern to denote prosperity, the rhombus for fertility, triangles for spiritual and physical strength, and zoomorphic and nature-inspired patterns like *koshkar-muiz* (ram's horns) to represent masculinity.

Every kurak piece holds some of the artisan's story, thoughts and wishes.

OPPOSITE TOP Gulmira Ualikhan shows kurak pieces at her workshop. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** Kurak employs measured, straight blocks of geometric patterns. **THIS PAGE** A variety of kurak patterns go into blankets, home décor and more.

"Each of my creations is not just a blanket. It carries the history of my family stitched by the warmth of my hands, the inspiration from great masters and the support of my loved ones," says Maira Ramazanova, one of Ualikhan's students.

Ualikhan echoes the sentiment: "When I sew, I say: 'I'm stitching my prayer into this piece; may the person or family who receives this quilt be blessed.'"

Along with creating her own patterns, Ualikhan incorporates motifs inspired by cultures around the world. The patchwork technique spread as far as Japan, Europe and the US.

"The Japanese are considered one of the strongest kurak masters. Their technique is defined by delicate handcrafted details that reflect a distinctly Japanese touch, and soft, vintage tones. In contrast, Russian fabrics are bright and rustic, filled with polka dots and florals. Kyrgyz designs use bold black, white and red tones, sharp angles and tiny kurak patterns. Classic American style, on the other hand, is marked by large blocks and repetitive patterns, offering a sense of structure and simplicity," explains Ualikhan.

In the US, the International Quilt Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska, boasts a large public quilt collection from over 60 countries to satisfy anyone's appetite for color and exuberant detail in patchwork. One can find the black-and-red kuraks from Kyrgyzstan and the soft-toned Japanese pieces Ualikhan mentions, along with quilts from South Asia, China and France, to name a few.

TEXTILE HISTORY IN KAZAKHSTAN

According to Azhar Altynsaqa, textile artist and researcher, archeological finds of fabric remnants and needles made of bone suggest that textile traditions have existed across Kazakhstan as far back as the Botai culture from the fourth millennium BCE. However, surviving kurak pieces mostly date from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

Since then, Kazakhs have lost 60% to 70% of their traditional crafts, says Altynsaqa, citing Russian and later Soviet colonization as key causes, alongside the shift from nomadic to stationary life and changing tastes under foreign influence.

"Even before the [Russian] revolution, sewing

machines, factory-made fabrics, aniline dyes and many other goods began to enter the Kazakh market, with the bulk coming from Russia," says Altynsaqa. "All of these items were fashionable and colorful. People began to buy more and produce less themselves."

In the past 10 years, Altynsaqa has observed a revival of traditional art, including kurak, as more artisans emerge "producing modern items using traditional methods, or vice versa, traditional items using modern techniques."

PATCHWORK AS THERAPY

In her studio, behind a desk laden with brightly colored blankets, Ualikhan describes how she tries to restore the value of the patchwork tradition.

"My mission, first and foremost, is to research the blocks, then to re-create those blocks in kurak technique and then to pass this knowledge to as many people as possible," Ualikhan says.

She had a successful career in finance, but after a personal loss, Ualikhan realized stress had taken

Kazakh textiles date to the fourth millennium BCE, but surviving kurak pieces are mostly from the 18th-20th centuries.

Kurak patterns are woven into everyday life in Almaty, including, **OPPOSITE**, the walls and floor of a metro station, **RIGHT**, a bookstore selling Erily Ospanuly's *Ethnographic Atlas of Kazakh Ornament* and, **BELOW**, "Köp söz bok söz" by artist Munar Abdukakharov, on display at Aspan Gallery.

RIGHT A student carries a kurak quilt. **BELOW** Household items made with kurak hold significant cultural value.

a toll on her health. Once she gave up her job, the patchwork became a form of meditation. "It turns out that kurak is a therapy. I realized it later. What I was like back then and who I am now are two different people," she says.

A solitary sewer finds herself between art and craft. "When someone sews kurak, they're alone with themselves. No one is tugging them. They are structuring here, trying to sew even blocks," says Ualikhan. "And in that process, they learn to navigate and structure situations in life."

Ualikhan went on to open a school that teaches women, including those from underprivileged societies in Kazakhstan, in kurak technique. She teaches the patterns—passed down from mother to daughter—to modern women who are eager to take up the work of their foremothers.

Her student Ramazanova recalls the deep inspiration she felt watching every piece of fabric in her hands

Vendors sell kurak *kurpe*—traditional quilted blankets, mattresses and other goods—at Arlan Bazaar in Almaty.

become a living symbol of tradition. "At that moment, I decided to continue preserving and passing on to future generations a value that is close to the heart of every Kazakh."

For another of her students, Oral Idelkankyzy, learning kurak has brought a sense of pride. "How happy I was when I managed to complete the simplest blocks! These small victories restored my confidence, my anxieties faded away, and my chaotic thoughts disappeared."

KURAK'S INFLUENCE ON MODERN JEWELRY DESIGN

Rising desire for handcrafted items has brought a parallel increase in the number of artisans exploring conventional materials and techniques. Manshuk Yesdaulet, a Kazakh artisan specializing in employing kurak technique by hand, is doing her bit via jewelry design.

She taught economics at universities, but once she went on maternity leave, Yesdaulet wanted to contribute to the family without a full-time commitment. So, a decade ago she turned her interests into a career that is reshaping what kurak can be.

"As Kazakhs, we all love gold, silver or at least something semiprecious," Yesdaulet says. "But then I realized my audience is girls who are bold, progressive and a little extravagant—those who are not afraid to look the way they want."

Her amulets, brooches and bracelets embrace vivid colors. Though she mostly sews them in the traditional form of a well, they rather resemble a budding flower or an eye.

Kurak perfectly expresses the idea of making beautiful products from limited resources, Yesdaulet says.

"Back in the days of the Silk Road … fabric was considered a wealth, a treasure—a true luxury," she says. Even traditional garments like Russian shirts or

"I decided to continue preserving and passing on to future generations a value that is close to the heart of every Kazakh."

—MAIRA RAMAZANOVA

Artisan Manshuk Yesdaulet specializes in employing conventional kurak materials and techniques to create amulets, brooches and bracelets in vivid colors.

> **"Each nation has similar ornaments. ... It feels like our essence is the same."**
>
> —MANSHUK YESDAULET

a Kyrgyz *koinok* (traditional shirt) show that women made use of every part of the fabric. "It was considered a sin to waste fabric," she adds.

Now mass production poses a threat, Yesdaulet says.

"Kurak is meant to be made by skilled artisans who understand that traditionally it was created from leftover fabric," says Yesdaulet, "not from brand-new, store-bought red, yellow or blue cloth that's cut up just for the sake of it."

In 2024 Yesdaulet moved to Palo Alto, California, in the US with her family. Initially she felt lost in a new environment. The soothing nature of hand-sewing kurak lifted her spirits.

"I was doing the one thing I knew how to do, and it helped me get through that time. Now, I want to continue running workshops here or maybe try selling on local marketplaces. I'm not giving up. I want to grow here too, as an artist and a craftswoman," says Yesdaulet.

Ualikhan's studio overlooks the foothills of the Zailiysky Alatau Range in Kazakhstan.

KURAK ACROSS CONTINENTS

Living in the US' multicultural society, Yesdaulet finds kurak even more relevant, as she puts together pieces from different cultures. Each piece of cloth carries its own story, and when put together, something uniquely beautiful comes forth.

> **"Our children will bring their own worldview and find new ways to weave kurak into their world."**
>
> —GULMIRA UALIKHAN

"Actually, I see these techniques in every nation, which is interesting. Each nation has similar ornaments, with maybe a bit of variation or a different reading," Yesdaulet says. "It feels like our essence is the same."

Across the globe in Kazakhstan, Ualikhan shares Yesdaulet's vision of unity rooted in one fundamental block. To her, each kurak reflects the continuity of a collective heritage.

"We must teach the basic blocks of kurak to the next generation. Our children will bring their own worldview and find new ways to weave kurak into their world, taking the tradition to new heights," she says. "But it all begins with the shared foundation we all start from." AW

Aibarshyn Akhmetkali is a contributing writer to *AramcoWorld* based in Astana, Kazakhstan. Her work mainly focuses on the culture, history and arts of Central Asia. **Danil Usmanov** is a documentary photographer dedicated to capturing the untold stories of Central Asia. His work has been featured in *The Guardian*, *Die Zeit*, *Meduza*, *Le Monde*, *New Lines Magazine* and *Der Spiegel*.

The Bard and the Bazaar

Shakespeare's Echoes of the Arab World

WRITTEN BY INDLIEB FARAZI SABER, ILLUSTRATED BY IVY JOHNSON

ACT 4, SCENE I

The ruins of an ancient Roman amphitheater, night. An evening breeze stirs the colonnades. Starshine dusts ancient stone, and somewhere, a voice begins:

"Are you sure that we are awake?
It seems to me that yet we sleep, we dream."

—A Midsummer Night's Dream

From Shakespeare's hometown of Stratford-Upon-Avon, England, to the amphitheater in Jerash, Jordan, **ABOVE**, his works have remained part of the cultural fabric of the Arab world.

The scene is set not in London. Rather, among modern stages and the ruins of Roman amphitheaters scattered across the Middle East, a familiar voice drifts—Shakespeare's. His words, though forged in distant skies, find new life in stone and stage alike. And in the liminal hush between cultures and time, a timeless drama begins again.

Shakespeare's works have become part of the cultural fabric of the Arab world, but the influence flows both ways. His plays were shaped, in part, by the cultural presence of the Islamic world, from its storytelling traditions to the political realities of the Mediterranean. And that same depth of exchange lives on. From the first recorded performances an Arab stages, the Bard's themes—love and betrayal, justice and tyranny, exile and redemption—endure. Through translation, adaptation and reinvention, his plays have taken root across the region.

From the theaters of Cairo to the studios of Beirut, artists continue to reshape and breathe new life into his stories.

THEATER AGAINST BACKDROP OF TRADE

When Shakespeare arrived on the London stage, the Islamic world was no distant fiction; it was deeply woven into the global and political imagination of the day. England under Queen Elizabeth I had entered diplomatic relations with the Moroccan sultanate and pursued trade with the Ottoman Empire.

Ambereen Dadabhoy, a scholar of Shakespeare and early modern English literature at Harvey Mudd College, in the United States, argues that Islamic cultures function as a kind of "shadow text" in Shakespeare's plays—present, influential but rarely named.

Her book *Shakespeare Through Islamic Worlds* examines how Islam and Muslim cultures shape the plots, themes and emotional texture of his works, from Mediterranean tragedies to English histories.

Focusing on the Muslims at the margins of Shakespeare's works, she reveals how Islam informed the cultural imagination that underpinned the playwright's world.

Characters like the Prince of Morocco in "The Merchant of Venice" and Sycorax in "The Tempest," respectively, are geographically tied to Islamic cultures, yet their faith is never explicitly named. "If [the Prince of Morocco] is the Prince of Morocco, he can only be a Muslim," Dadabhoy writes, pointing to Shakespeare's strategic ambiguity. Sycorax, an unseen sorceress, is described as being "from Algiers"—a Muslim-majority locale that again signals Islamic presence without direct identification.

These omissions, she suggests, are not accidental but reflect a broader "evacuation of Muslim presence"

from settings that were historically multireligious and multiethnic, a selective forgetting that renders Islam as ambient but unspeakable. That cultural omission sat against a backdrop of real diplomatic engagement. Professor Michael Dobson, director of the Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom, notes, "There was widespread anxiety across Christian Europe about the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. North African alliances and fears were part of Shakespeare's geopolitical backdrop."

Shakespeare's audience would have been acutely aware of recent diplomatic exchanges with the Islamic world. Dobson adds, "In 1600, Elizabeth I received an embassy from the sultan of Morocco, Ahmad al-Mansur. His ambassador, Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud, is believed to have presented her with a portrait—now hanging in the Shakespeare Institute"—amid discussions of a possible alliance.

Just four years later, Shakespeare wrote "Othello," a play that imagines a Christian military campaign against the Ottomans in Cyprus. Though the battle itself is fictional, the anxieties it evokes reflect real diplomatic and religious tensions of the time.

This political reality left traces in Shakespeare's plays. Sycorax, as noted above, signals a shadowed Islamic identity through her geography. And the proud Prince of Morocco enters with noble bearing and coded references to Islamic culture, without ever being named as Muslim.

Such connections, Dobson says, enriched Shakespeare's dramatic choices. "These characters existed within a larger political context that Elizabethan audiences instinctively recognized."

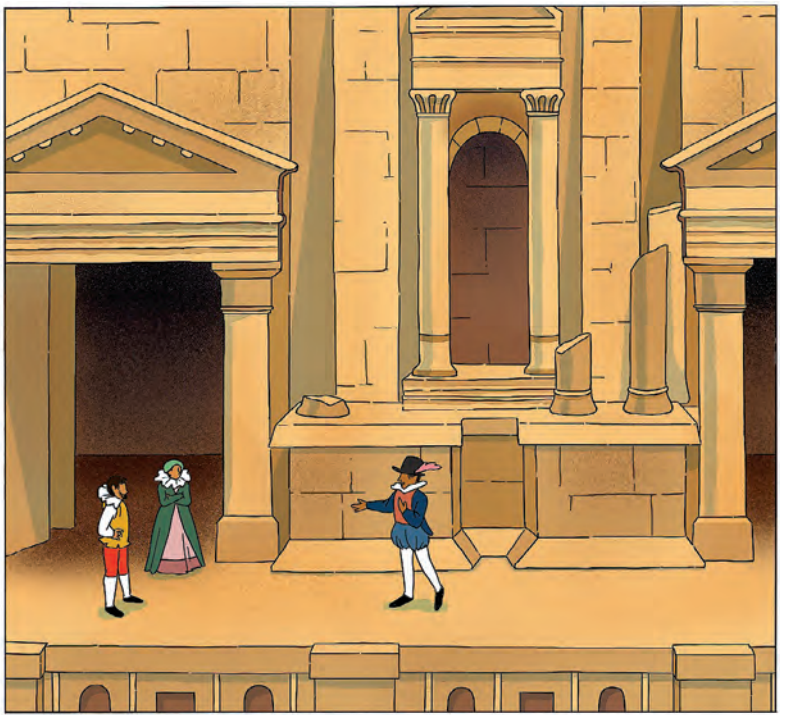
That ambient presence contrasts with the richness of Islamic storytelling traditions that leave their mark on the emotional and poetic fabric of his plays.

These very traditions, often overlooked in Western

BELOW While the titular character of Shakespeare's "Othello" is widely known as a Moor, other examples from Muslim cultures shaped plots and themes in several of the playwright's comedies and tragedies.

literary criticism, are central to understanding why Shakespeare continues to resonate so powerfully in the Arab world.

Tales of vengeance, exile, disguise and redemption—long staples of Arabic narrative—find new expressions in Shakespeare's drama and also explain why his work continues to captivate Arab audiences, artists and thinkers alike.



CROSSROADS OF LOVE AND TRAGEDY

Arabic literary traditions not only shaped Shakespeare's political imagination but also the emotional architecture of his romances.

Ruqayya Khan, professor and Malas Chair of Islamic Studies at Claremont Graduate University, points to the deep parallels between "Romeo and Juliet" and the legendary Arabic romance "Layla and Majnun," first recorded in the ninth century.

"Both stories center on star-crossed young lovers," Khan explains. "Their eloquent declarations of love are doomed by social and familial conflict. The emotional turbulence, the tragic twists and the ultimate deaths, especially the despair of the male lover, are hauntingly similar."

Although Shakespeare likely never encountered "Layla and Majnun" directly, he inherited a literary tradition shaped by centuries of Arab and Persian romance.

Similar currents can be found in "Khosrow and Shirin," a Persian epic absorbed into Arab storytelling, and in the Arab world's *Udhri* poetry, a genre of chaste, tragic love ballads where intense passion meets inevitable separation.

Such traditions formed part of the rich cultural atmosphere, by way of Spain, Italy and the eastern Mediterranean, that infused Shakespeare's tragic vision with echoes of Eastern love stories.

SHAKESPEARE'S VIBRANCY ACROSS THE ARAB WORLD

Dadabhoy helps contextualize why Arab artists and audiences continue to engage so deeply with Shakespeare. She writes, "The Shakespearean Mediterranean excludes Islam, despite Islam's geographic and historical presence in that space." Re-engaging with Shakespeare from the Arab world becomes, in her framing, not only artistic but also a corrective act, repopulating the stage with voices that had been sidelined.

Today Shakespeare's plays continue to find vibrant life in Arab contexts through their shared human concerns—justice, loyalty, love and pride—as well as as powerful lenses for political critique and cultural dialogue.

According to Yousef Abu Amrieh Awad, a scholar of Shakespeare in the Arab world, Arab writers have historically approached the Bard in diverse ways. "Some have tried to mimic his works in a way to reflect their understanding within their original context. Others have adapted Shakespeare's plays to suit local tastes and traditions."

LEFT The Bard was shaped, in part, by the Islamic world's storytelling traditions and political realities of the Mediterranean, of which his audience would have been aware.

Syrian playwright Mamduh Adwan's "Hamlet Wakes Up Late" (1976), for example, reimagines Hamlet as an intellectual paralyzed by moral debates and unable to act decisively. In "Romeo and Juliet in Gaza" (2016), Palestinian director Ali Abu Yassin reframes the classic story of forbidden love within a local context, while Iraqi director Munadhel Dawood's "Romeo & Juliet in Baghdad" (2012) reimagines Shakespeare's lovers within contemporary Iraqi society.

Awad describes these adaptations as part of a "rhizomatic relationship," where Shakespeare's texts branch into local cultural narratives, sprouting sequels and reinterpretations of adaptations themselves, such as Jordanian playwright Zaid Khalil Mustafa's "Hamlet, A While After" (2018), which continues the story as a sequel to Adwan's adaptation rather than to the original play.

This dynamic extends to literature. Arab diasporic writers appropriate Shakespeare's themes to interrogate modern crises. Syrian British novelist Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2008), Sudanese British novelist Jamal Mahjoub's *The Fugitives* (2021) and Palestinian British novelist Isabella Hammad's *Enter Ghost* (2023) all draw from Hamlet to explore political displacement, cultural identity and resistance. These, Awad notes, are "intelligently written 'palimpsestuous' novels" that stand alone yet evoke Shakespeare's timeless concerns.

SPIRITUAL LONGING IN THE BARD'S AND ISLAMIC WORKS

But the Bard's work is also infused with a spiritual longing that resonates deeply with Islamic traditions. As Luqman Ali, founder of the United Kingdom's Khayaal Theatre Company, reflects, in both Shakespeare and classical Islamic literature, characters wrestle deeply with questions of morality, fate and the human soul. "Just as Rumi's lovers and wanderers must lose themselves to find the Beloved, Shakespeare's stage becomes a mirror for the soul's own hidden pilgrimage—an invitation, even today, to seek what lies beyond the surface of the world."

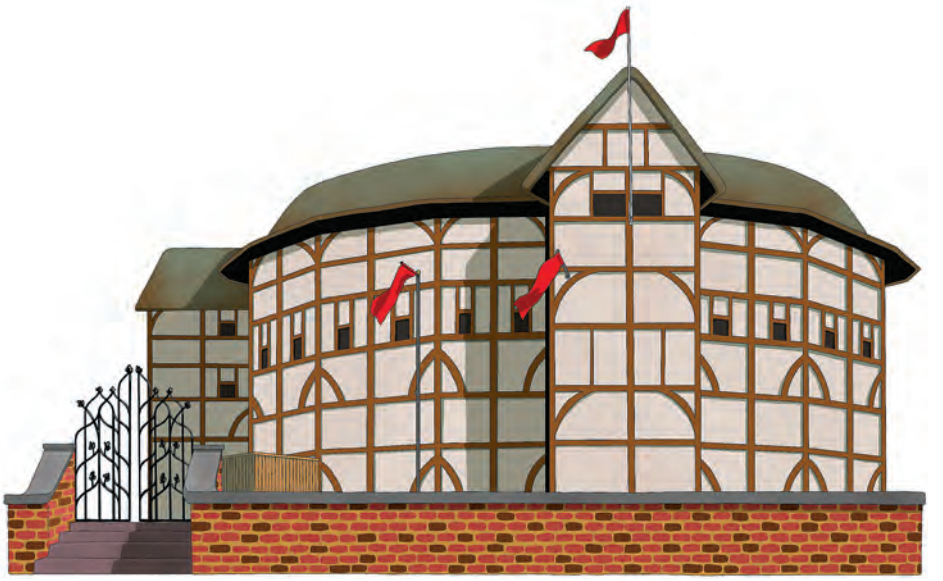
Ali draws vivid parallels: Shakespeare's Portia, a protagonist of "The Merchant of Venice," like Scheherazade of *One Thousand and One Nights*, uses wisdom and heart to transform injustice into mercy. Shakespeare's "Henry V" shares traits with the chivalric heroes of "The Tales of the Marvellous" and the epic the "Hamzanameh"—figures defined not merely by victory but by ethical trials of character. "These characters, from East and West, remind us that the real battlefield is often within ourselves," Ali says. They offer archetypes that "answer a deep human longing for meaning and self-knowledge."

At Khayaal Theatre, Ali has reinterpreted Shakespeare through the spirit of the Arab *hakawati*, the traditional marketplace storyteller. During the Shakespeare and Islam season at London's Globe Theatre in 2004, Khayaal's "Souk Stories" brought tales of grief, joy, love and loss to life in bustling communal spaces.

"Through the spirit of the *souk* [market]," Ali explains, "Shakespeare's plays return to what they have always been at heart: human stories meant to be shared, pondered and lived."

In these performances, Shakespeare's characters become kin, their dilemmas recognizably our own.

Rather than a relic of empire, Shakespeare emerges as a living, breathing bridge: a testament to the shared moral struggles, dreams and dilemmas of humankind. As Arab audiences, artists and scholars continue to read, stage and reimagine Shakespeare, they remind the world that the Bard belongs to the souk as much as to the stage; to Riyadh and Cairo as much as to London; and to every soul seeking to understand the depths of the human heart. AW



"These characters, from East and West, remind us that the real battlefield is often within ourselves."

—LUQMAN ALI

The Shakespeare and Islam season at London's Globe Theatre in 2004 saw reinterpretations of the Bard's timeless tales of grief, joy, love and loss come to life.

Indlieb Farazi Saber is a journalist and storyteller whose work crosses borders, weaving together culture, history and identity. Her work has appeared in TRT World and Al Jazeera English, among others, with one piece earning her a place as a finalist in Save the Children's Global Media Awards. **Ivy Johnson** is an illustrator and cartoonist based in Queens, New York. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Toronto Star*, *The New York Times* and *MUBI Notebook*.

The Ni'matnāma

A sultan's 500-year-old cookbook lives on

WRITTEN BY **NILOSREE BISWAS**, PHOTOGRAPHED BY **IRFAN NABI**

Behind mahogany-finished cabinets and white-tiled walls, in the quiet order of a kitchen in Delhi's Noida neighborhood, chef Sadaf Hussain is bringing back recipes once served at a sultan's table. His deft fingers move in a choreography of their own as he shapes triangular parcels of paper-thin filo pastry, as if arranging folds of silk.

In under an hour, nearly two dozen *samosas*—*sambusak* or *sambusa*, as the savory fried pastries are known in parts of the Middle East and North Africa, respectively—stuffed with minced goat meat are fried to a crisp finish and piled high on a plate.

Hussain crafts each samosa from scratch, shaping and filling them according to a 500-year-old recipe within the pages of an illustrated cookery book, the *Ni'matnāma*, or Book of Delights (1495-1505). It was commissioned by Sultan Ghiyath Shah (also

The *Ni'matnāma* features the preparation and serving of samosas, sweets and other foods for Sultan Ghiyath Shah via both written recipes and opaque watercolors.

Shah (also known as Ghiyas-ud-Din Shah, Ghiyasuddin or Sultan Ghiyasuddin Khalji), the maverick ruler of the Sultanate of Malwa in what is present-day Madhya Pradesh, India.

The chef's golden pastries—with their delicate folds, warmly spiced meat filling and crisp, deep-fried shell—emerge as they would have centuries ago, their flavors unchanged, timeless.

"The essence of the dish has remained remarkably the same," he says, breaking a samosa in his hands to show its perfectly cooked filling.

The manuscript from which he works, a late-15th-century medieval book of recipes and illustrations, not only codified dishes still beloved today but also elevated cooking to a courtly art. Its influence continues to ripple across South Asia, from kitchens to street stalls to celebratory tables, preserving centuries of technique and taste.

The *Niʿmatnāma* also contains early versions of other dishes still found on South Asian tables: semolina *halva*, the buttery dessert; *khichdi*, a textured mix of fenugreek-infused rice and lentils; and even *qima*, the lightly seasoned minced meat.

With the first batch of samosas already devoured—dipped into a rich *imli* chutney, a tangy date-tamarind sauce—only a few stray flakes of pastry lie on the counter. Hussain brushes them aside, a quiet reminder of the centuries-old recipe he has brought back to life.

Now carefully preparing another batch, Hussain demonstrates the original technique of filling the pastry with a generous spoonful of minced meat.

"I have adhered to most of the [original] ingredients. The recipe specifically asks for goat meat and four or five spices to enhance the natural flavor, not to overpower it. This, to me, is one of the most striking aspects; it isn't about masking the flavor with a heavy-handed approach to spices but letting the meat's essence shine through."

He notes one difference between the present and the past. Today samosas are often filled with aloo, or potato, a vegetable the Portuguese introduced to India in the 16th century—long after the *Niʿmatnāma* was compiled. In Hussain's kitchen, however, the pastry still cradles the original minced meat, a direct link to the flavors of a sultan's table centuries ago.

"The *Niʿmatnāma* is a bridge between medieval and contemporary cuisines," says Hussain, a consultant chef, Master Chef India finalist and most recently the author of Masalamandi, a book on Indian

As evening sets in, Old Delhi comes alive with aromas from food stalls that serve dishes in the spirit of the *Niʿmatnāma*.

OPPOSITE: THE BRITISH LIBRARY

> "The *Ni'matnāma* is a bridge between medieval and contemporary cuisines."
>
> —SADAF HUSSAIN

TOP Chef Sadaf Hussain explains how to make *khichdi*, fenugreek-infused rice and lentils, an early version of which appears in the *Ni'matnāma*. In the foreground is a heap of red onions chopped and kept aside for the minced meat stuffing of samosas. **BELOW** Plated recipes prepared from the cookbook.

spices. "Its significance lies in providing an invaluable resource to the origins of these dishes and traditional cooking methods, some of which are still relevant."

THE *NI'MATNĀMA*, A COURTLY COOKBOOK

When Sultan Ghiyath Shah ascended the throne in 1469, he made a striking declaration: He would "open the door of peace and rest, and pleasure and enjoyment," according to contemporary chronicler Nizam al-Din Ahmed.

"During medieval times, rulers were considered ideal when they could balance strength with refinement," Rana Safvi, a historian of medieval and Mughal eras and author of several books on Delhi, says of Ghiyath Shah's unusual emphasis on cultural and culinary pursuits.

While his son Nasir assumed the day-to-day rule of the kingdom, Sultan Ghiyath Shah gathered chefs, musicians, poets, painters and bookmakers from across the world, many of whom were women. It was within this vibrant, unconventional court that the sultan turned his attention to food, commissioning a manuscript that would immortalize his tastes.

The sole surviving copy of the *Ni'matnāma* rests in the British Library in London. Written in bold Naksh—an elegant calligraphic style blending Persian and Urdu conventions—the manuscript features 50 jewel-toned miniature paintings, many showing Sultan Ghiyath Shah taking interest in food preparation.

"Visually rich manuscripts made culinary knowledge more portable to a largely nonliterate audience of courtiers and attendants," says Claire Chambers,

professor of global literature at the University of York and co-editor of *Forgotten Foods: Memories and Recipes from Muslim South Asia*. "One could point to a dish or ingredient without having to read fine Persian script. Finally, these paintings preserve details of kitchen implements, dining rituals, even table layouts—visual data no pure recipe text could convey."

The *Ni'matnāma* goes beyond recipes, encompassing prescriptions and processes for making medicines, perfumes and aphrodisiacs, often with detailed directives for their use. The reader will detect a whimsy that reflects Ghiyath Shah's eccentric tastes, where food was not only nourishment but also play, spectacle and even jest.

Unlike modern cookbooks, the antique tome is not organized by recipe categories. A *shorba* (soup) could follow a sherbet, or a minced-meat dish could appear alongside a sweet. Perhaps this seemingly haphazard order reflects the whimsical nature of Ghiyath Shah's kitchen, a live record of dishes prepared according to the sultan's fancy—one day samosas, the next halva, the day after a *gosht shorba* (meat soup). Notably, the text gives hardly any specific measurements for the ingredients, suggesting it was intended for skilled hands familiar with the techniques.

"The real innovation of Ghiyath Shah and his son Nasir was, I think, institutional," adds Chambers. "They elevated cooking from an anonymous kitchen craft to a courtly art worth chronicling. By commissioning recipes and illustrations, they set a precedent that later

TOP Historian Rana Safvi says it was important for rulers in the sultan's era to "balance strength with refinement." **MIDDLE** The use of spices, here on display at the Khari Baori wholesale spice market, remains largely the same as in the time before Mughal and Deccan courts. **BOTTOM** A dry-fruit seller works amid Delhi's bustling streets. Such fruits accompany milk cream in age-old specialties such as *khoya samosa*.

Mughal and Deccan courts followed, creating a continuum of princely cookbooks."

Even without clear written instructions, the recipes endured. They slipped from parchment into kitchens, carried by memory more often than by manuscript.

FROM MANUSCRIPT TO STREET FOOD

In Old Delhi's crowded lanes, where frying pans splutter and sweetshops spill their aromas into the street, the spirit of the *Ni'matnāma* lingers—even if most cooks and eaters have never heard its name. The markets serve as a living archive of samosas, *puris* (fried breads), halvas and the meat-and-rice dish known as *biryani*, each stall preserving a thread of culinary memory.

At Shyam Sweets in Chawri Bazaar, founded in 1910, fourth-generation confectioner Sanjay Agarwal continues his family's legacy, preparing the famed *Nagori Halva*—bite-sized, slightly sweet puris paired with semolina halva. "Our halva is always cooked in gentle heat," Agarwal says. "The temperature would not be more than what a couple of candles would emit."

A few lanes away, in Chitli Qabar, Zuhaib Hassan preserves his grandfather's recipes at Ameer Sweets.

Its samosas, both savory and sweet, are immensely popular. "Our minced-meat samosas are much loved, and during Ramadan it is one of our highest-selling items," Hassan says. "We also make our age-old speciality *khoya samosa* [stuffing of milk cream and dry fruits]. Every item we make today has been in our repertoire from my grandfather's era."

KHICHDI AND HALVA

Back in his Delhi kitchen, chef Hussain gathers handfuls of lentils and rice to prepare *khichdi*, a simple, comforting dish recorded in the manuscript.

"What we make at home has more rice and less lentils in proportion," Hussain notes, roasting the grains together before adding a few *methi dana* (fenugreek seeds) and a pinch of salt. "In the book the ratio is three parts lentil (*moong dal*) to one part rice."

Perceived as "food for the sick," khichdi is lightly spiced and easily digestible. Yet Hussain

TOP Ever popular samosas and poori are quintessential breakfast items. **MIDDLE** Markets serve as a living archive of *Ni'matnāma*-inspired dishes including *halvas*, left, and *bedmi puri*. **BOTTOM** Homemade halva from the *Ni'matnāma* is cooked and served topped with nuts.

The traditions of the *Ni'matnāma* live on in Old Delhi and across South Asia—even if most cooks and eaters have never heard its name.

"Visually rich manuscripts made culinary knowledge more portable to a largely nonliterate audience."

—CLAIRE CHAMBERS

wonders whether "it really was considered sick food back then or if our perception of 'healthy meal' has shifted over time."

The result, he finds, is hearty enough for anyone. No surprise, he adds, that European travelers adopted the dish, transforming it into the Anglo Indian comfort food, *kedgeree*.

Now Hussain moves to a table in the corner to prepare ingredients for halva, a sweet beloved across South Asia with roots in the Arabic word *halwa*, which literally translates to "sweet." This version, he explains, is a multigrain halva, combining rice flour, roasted gram flour and whole wheat flour for a rich, layered texture.

"A surprising element [from the book] was the use of three sweetening agents in one dish: molasses, sugar and dates. I had never tasted halva made with molasses before, so this was a revelation," he says. "Apart from the absence of camphor and musk, which I replaced with *meetha attar* (a fragrant essence used in cooking), the structure, richness and flavor have been true to the spirit of the *Ni'matnāma*."

For scholars too, the ancient book offers insights beyond flavor.

"Recipes are living documents," Chambers notes, reflecting on how the *Ni'matnāma* also captures trade routes, local and exotic ingredients and the networks of culture that shaped 15th-century Malwa.

With practiced hands, Hussain plates the final spoon of halva. "Techniques are timeless, but the soul of a dish lies in how it's prepared," he says. In his kitchen, the *Ni'matnāma* lives on, five centuries of culinary history still preserved and shared today. AW

Nilosree Biswas is a columnist, author and filmmaker who writes about Asian history, art, culture, food and cinema. Her articles regularly appear in national and international media. **Irfan Nabi** is an Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates-based photographer whose works have been featured in several books and global exhibitions, exploring themes of people, culture and food.

Author's Corner

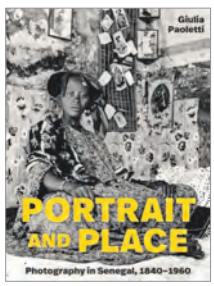
Delving Into Senegal's Past: A Conversation With Giulia Paoletti

Written by DIANNA WRAY

Growing up in Padua, Italy, Giulia Paoletti learned the canon of Da Vinci, Michelangelo and Botticelli like every other student. But her studies abroad at Sussex University in Brighton, UK, opened her eyes to a wider world of art—and to the striking absence of Africa within it. That gap shaped the path of her career.

Encouraged during graduate work at New York's Columbia University to pursue a subject she truly loved, Paoletti turned to Senegal, a country whose photographic traditions stretched back to the 1840s yet had barely been studied in art history. She spent more than a decade researching, including three years living in Senegal, learning to speak Wolof—the country's national language—and conducting more than 100 interviews. The result is *Portrait and Place: Photography in Senegal, 1840–1960*, a book that rethinks how photography took root in West Africa.

AramcoWorld spoke with Paoletti about uncovering overlooked histories, the meanings embedded in images and why context matters so much.



Portraits and Place: Photography in Senegal, 1840-1960.

Giulia Paoletti.
Princeton University Press. 2024.

What drew you to study Senegal's history with photography?

I had taken a photography course when I started my Ph.D., and I just fell in love with the medium. Contemporary art can often be difficult to approach because you need some framing, some intellectual scaffolding, while photography affects you so much in the immediate moment, no matter where you are in the world. In Senegal I found that they have a long history with photography and the Senegalese were so engaged with the medium. Incredible photos were produced, and incredible artists existed, but when I started, I realized there hadn't been a lot of serious study of this history.

Why do you think Senegalese photography was overlooked for so long?

Initially, it wasn't considered an art anywhere. Even in the West, photography was not considered

ABOVE: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART; OPPOSITE: © MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY— JACQUES CHIRAC, DIST. RMN-GRAND PALAIS / ART RESOURCE, NY

OPPOSITE Emile Noal's "Groupe d'Oilofs Sénégalais à St-Louis," c. 1890-1900, print on baryta paper, 5 inches by 7 inches (12.1 cm by 16.9 cm).
ABOVE Unknown artist's "Group Portrait With Record Player," c. 1920s-1930s, postcard-format gelatin silver print, 7 inches by 4½ inches (17.8 cm by 11.4 cm).

an art for a long time. It took many decades before we had the first exhibitions at MOMA. And since it was not considered an art in most places, it was not collected, studied and valued as a craft. So even if some of these images that I've pulled together in the book were seen when they were being produced, they were not necessarily seen as items worth studying and preserving.

Why is the context so crucial for these photos?
We often think that images are passive and that there's one meaning, that when it was snapped the meaning was done. But in fact, an image can mean so many things based on who is seeing it and when they're seeing it and who constructed it.

With this book we need to see that we are still contributing to its meaning and that we are not passive in our viewing. Even in a photo taken by a colonial photographer, there are many ways to look at the image, and some of those ways undo certain assumptions and certain power relations about who is in control of that image, who is shaping what we see.

How did learning to speak Wolof impact you and your work?
It was really transformative. I had never studied a non-European language before, and Wolof has such different grammar and syntax that it completely changes how you say things, what you ask and don't ask, how you move, even how you talk in other languages. Each word has worlds of meaning in it, and understanding that helped me better understand the people I was interviewing. It really opened up a part of Senegal that I don't think I would have been able to experience any other way.

To read a review of *Portrait and Place: Photography in Senegal, 1840–1960,* see page 41.

In more than a decade of research, what was the most exciting moment?
I was lucky enough to interview [famed Senegalese photographer] Oumar Ka before he died in 2020. He still had his studio, and at one interview he hauled out a suitcase filled with negatives, images I wasn't going to find anywhere else in the world. It was incredible.

What was the most important thing you learned over the course of this project?
That this has to be a conversation, one where I always ask questions and remain open to the answers, to wherever the conversation takes me. I think that's the only way one can learn: by being exposed to another perception, to other points of view.

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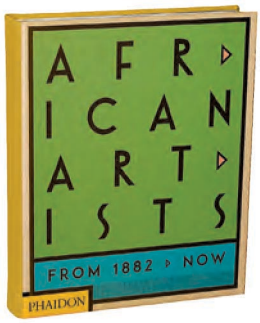
Reviews

Historic Mosques in Sub-Saharan Africa: From Timbuktu to Zanzibar
Stéphane Pradines. Brill, 2022.

Although one-third of the world's Muslim population can be found in Africa, sub-Saharan architecture, let alone places of worship, has remained overlooked even when mosques south of the Sahara reflect the mosaics of interactions that have shaped Islamic and African civilizations. So, Stéphane Pradines, a professor of Islamic art and architecture at London's Aga Khan University, focuses on three significant regions in the 1,000 years before European domination: West Africa's Niger valley, the Horn of Africa, and the Nile valleys and East Africa's Indian Ocean coast. Guided around nearly 300 sites, we come to appreciate the architectural vision and technical skill, and the plural nature of faith and tradition among diverse Muslim communities across the continent. Historical gems range from the mud-brick structures dominating the skylines of Djenne, Koro, Mopti and Timbuktu in Mali to the coral limestone ruins of the Swahili mosques on the island of Kilwa Kisiwani, Tanzania. Pradines tantalizes with concise accounts of the archeological excavations along the Niger valleys of West Africa, for what they reveal for some of Africa's forgotten empires. A historical chart, an inventory of sites and glossaries round out the book. Crammed with details, maps, plans and photographs, *Historic Mosques in Sub-Saharan Africa* is equally at home on the coffee table or on the scholarly bookshelf. —JAMIE S. SCOTT

Mango: A Global History
Constance L. Kirker and Mary Newman.
Reaktion Books, 2024.

This richly illustrated book, written by Constance L. Kirker and Mary Newman, historians specializing in food and cultural exchange, explores the captivating history of the mango—a fruit that has thrived in South Asia and beyond. Through meticulous research and engaging storytelling, the authors trace the mango's journey from its origins in India to its global spread, revealing how it became a symbol of cultural exchange and culinary delight. The book begins with the mango's early history, noting its introduction to East Africa by Arab merchants in the 10th century CE and its later spread by Portuguese traders to the Caribbean and the New World. The authors share fascinating anecdotes, such as George Washington's fondness for pickled mangoes and the tiny island of Nevis's claim as the "Mango Capital of the Caribbean." These stories, paired with vibrant illustrations and photos, bring the mango's history to life. *Mango* excels in its historical depth and visual appeal, providing a treasure trove of global narratives for food historians, cultural enthusiasts and anyone curious about the intersection of food and history. It's a delightful read that will leave you with a newfound appreciation for this beloved fruit. —ROBERT W. LEBLING



African Artists: From 1882 to Now
Phaidon editors, with introduction by Chika Okeke-Agulu.
Phaidon Press, 2021.

African Artists offers a visually stunning survey of modern and contemporary artists born or based in Africa. Through the work of more than 300 painters, sculptors, photographers and conceptual artists, the diversity and resilience of African visual traditions shine. The format—organized by artist name and bearing vivid color illustrations—makes for a visual feast, perfect for dipping into to discover unfamiliar artists or savoring those who have found global fame.

The Arab-speaking countries of Africa are well represented, especially Egypt and Sudan. Sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar applied his Parisian training to the Pharaonic revival of 1920s Egypt, a tradition Adam Henein continued in the 1950s and beyond. Sudanese independence in 1957 inspired Ibrahim el-Salahi, Ahmad Shibrain and Kamala Ibrahim Ishag to found the influential Khartoum School.

From Algeria the book features M'Hamed Issiakhem, one of the country's founders of modern art, and Zineb Sedira, subject of a retrospective at London's Whitechapel Gallery in 2024. Among Moroccans are modernist painter Ahmed Cherkaoui and Lalla Essaydi, whose early-2000s photographs of women in Orientalist poses, layered with Arabic script, turn their gaze back on Western stereotypes of the Middle East. Art has thrived in times of both hope and adversity, and the inclusion of a newer generation—like renowned Egyptian artist Wael Shawky—attests that they continue to do so. —CHRISTINA RIGGS

"…the artists profiled in this book alert us with greater urgency to the remarkable and profound work that has and continues to come out of Africa during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries."

—African Artists

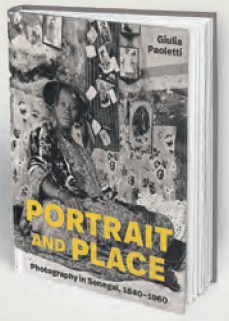
Without endorsing the views of authors, the editors encourage reading as a path to greater understanding.

Reviews

A Fresh Perspective on Senegal's Photographic History

Written by DIANNA WRAY

A picture is worth a thousand words, as the saying goes, but what each one says depends on who is behind the camera, who faces it—and who looks at the result. In *Portrait and Place: Photography in Senegal, 1840-1960*, art historian Giulia Paoletti moves beyond viewing Senegal's photographic history through a Western colonial lens. She shows how Senegalese photographers and sitters shaped visual culture on their own terms while placing their practices within the larger story of photography worldwide.



Portrait and Place: Photography in Senegal, 1840-1960.
Giulia Paoletti.
Princeton University Press. 2024.

"I approach photography as an encounter between people and ways of seeing. Such an encounter is never pure nor peaceful. It engages and affects all who are involved, including the viewers who play an active role in negotiating the visible—that is, what is seen."

—Portrait and Place: Photography in Senegal, 1840-1960

Paoletti's research spans more than a decade—archival work across three continents, flu ncy in Wolof, the West African language, and over 100 interviews. Rather than treat Senegalese photography as peripheral, she situates it at the center of a rich visual world. By the 1850s, the signare class—Senegalese mixed-race women married to colonial officers—commissioned portraits in Saint Louis, the former French colonial capital of Senegal. These photos circulated through families and religious networks, laying foundations for a distinct visual culture. Paoletti traces practices like *xoymet*, where women exchanged portraits to afi m bonds and social belonging, demonstrating how photographs created relationships rather than simply recording appearances.

Her treatment of mid-20th-century studio photographers like Mama Casset and Macky Kane shows how Senegalese artists expressed personal and collective identities decades before Western museums acknowledged their significance. Paoletti connects these practices to broader currents, from Islamic devotional lithographs to modernist studio esthetics, revealing photography's role in negotiating modernity, spirituality and independence.

Equally striking is Paoletti's narrative style. Rather than isolating images as static objects, she integrates them into her arguments, pairing familiar studio portraits with rarely seen devotional photographs to illustrate the medium's layered meanings and mobility.

Portrait and Place does more than recover an overlooked tradition. It repositions Senegal at the heart of photography's global story. By foregrounding creativity, women's practices and religious expression, Paoletti unsettles myths of colonial dependency and offers new vantage points for understanding how images are created, circulated and remembered.

Find more reviews like this online at AramcoWorld.com.

Events

Biennial Celebrates Contemporary Architecture

Chicago Architecture Biennial, the largest exhibition of contemporary architecture in North America, explores ideas around salient issues facing the field, including housing, ecology and material innovation. This edition, titled "SHIFT: Architecture in Times of Radical Change," features more than 100 projects by architects, artists and designers from 30 countries, among them Aga Khan Award winner Kashef Chowdhury of Dhaka, Bangladesh-based studio Urbana and Tosin Oshinowo of Lagos, Nigeria, who led the second Sharjah Architecture Triennial and whose work was acknowledged at the 19th Venice Architecture Biennale.

Chicago, through February 28, 2026.

RIGHT Kashef Chowdhury designed the Friendship Centre in Gaibandha, Bangladesh, a rural training center inspired by one of the country's oldest urban archeological sites. ©Anup Basak.

Current / December

Faig Ahmed: Epoch 2011-2024 traces the evolution of the Azerbaijani artist's practice over the years. This is the fi st time the full collection is being presented in Baku, Ahmed's hometown—bringing together more than a decade of his works in one place, in which he reimagines traditional carpet weaving using a contemporary context.

Azerbaijan Carpet Museum, **Baku**, through December 30.

Current / June

Let's Play! The Art and Design of Asian Games explores the rich history of Asian games and the role they have played in shaping culture, identity and community. Along with more than 150 works, the exhibition features playable interactives, outdoor installations, programs and talks and drama performances.

Asian Civilisations Museum, **Singapore**, through June 7, 2026.

Highlights from AramcoWorld.com Please verify a venue's schedule before visiting.

Events

Coming / December

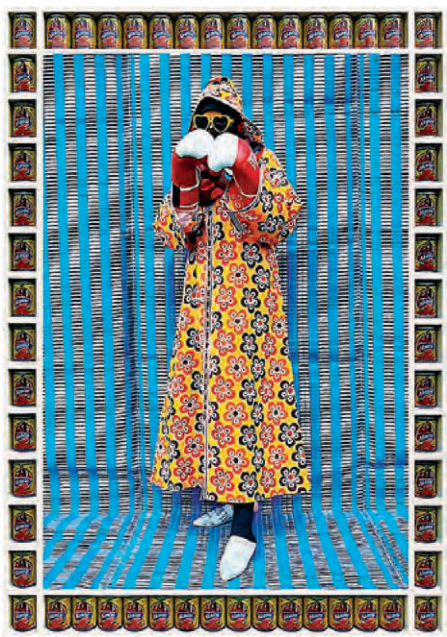
The Red Sea International Film Festival aims to position Saudi Arabia as a key player in the global fi m industry while amplifying underrepresented voices from the Arab world and beyond. Transforming Jeddah's historic Al Balad (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) into a hub for global cinema, the festival will feature Arab, African, and international feature films, documentaries and shorts, an industry market, workshops and masterclasses for filmmakers and fi m enthusiasts, and a competition across narrative, documentary and experimental categories.

Jeddah, **Saudi Arabia**, December 4-13.

Coming / April

Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale is an international showcase of contemporary art, featuring artists from Saudi Arabia and around the world. The third edition of the Biennale fosters cross-cultural dialogue between Eastern and Western Asia. In announcing the Biennale, the Artistic Directors of the Biennale Nora Razian and Sabih Ahmed aim to explore how locally rooted histories, specifically the fi st quarter of the 21st century, have transmitted and transformed through time.

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, January 30-April 23, 2026.



Solo Exhibition Spotlights Women in Sports

La Salle de Gym des Femmes Arab (The Arab Women's Gym) is a photographic series by Moroccan-British artist, designer, filmmaker and photographer Hassan Hajjaj. In this series, Hajjaj places women at the center of sports. Featuring women actively participating in sports like soccer, boxing and surfing, Hajjaj's images celebrate the multi-layered complexity of Muslim identity and emphasize our shared humanity.

Aga Khan Museum, **Toronto**, through May 31, 2026.

LEFT *Southpaw*, framed photography by ©Hassan Hajjaj, 2012/1433, **RIGHT** *Orthodox*, framed photography by ©Hassan Hajjaj, 2011/1432

Readers are welcome to submit event information for possible inclusion to proposals@aramcoamericas.com, subject line "Events."

What's Online?

Remembering 'The Voice of Egypt'

Fifty years after the passing of singer Umm Kulthum, known as "The Voice of Egypt," musicologists and fans still appreciate her legacy as a national and international treasure who remains a unique force in Arab music.

A Dish That Can Change Minds

In a personal reflection, one writer's lifelong egg aversion softens through a recipe for a simple Spanish tortilla and the quiet resourcefulness it shares with Pakistani kitchens.

Learning Center: Showing Students Folk Music's Fluidity

See our activities for learners to discover how traditional Southwest Asian and North African melodies gain new life through cutting-edge remix artistry based on our article "Record, Remix, Repeat."

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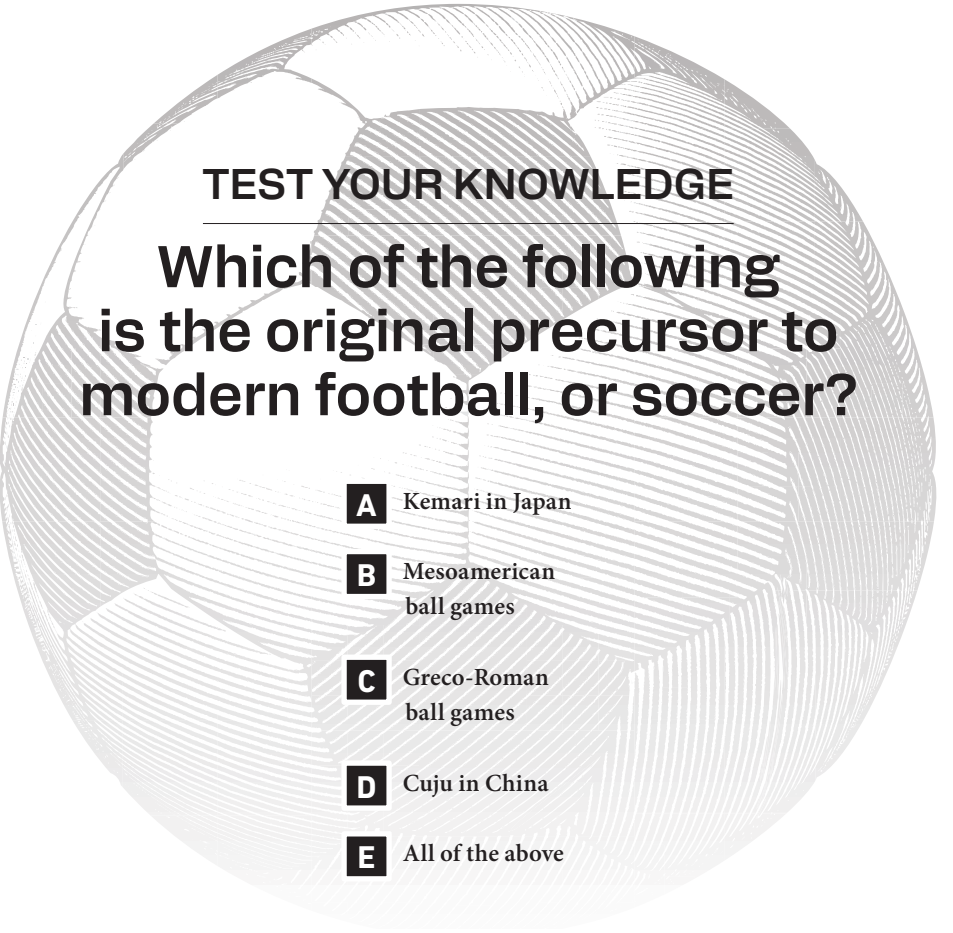
Quiz



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Which of the following is the original precursor to modern football, or soccer?

A Kemari in Japan

B Mesoamerican ball games

C Greco-Roman ball games

D Cuju in China

E All of the above

Answer: **E.** Football, as we know it, originated in 1863 in London, according to the FIFA Museum in Zurich. But for millennia mankind has been drawn to playing with a ball under codified rules, whether for social interaction and entertainment, military training or as part of a ritual ceremony.

It is hard to overestimate the hold this game has on societies all over the world. Football shapes identities and traditions. In 2026, ahead of the FIFA World Cup, which will see teams and fans gather for matches across cities in North America, *AramcoWorld* will explore the cultural influences of football on people everywhere. We invite you to explore our digital and print offerings, including our 2026 calendar and a special May-June edition, to discover the many ways our biggest and most important sport connects us all.

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˜°¸˝˙ *Betel quid*, or *paan*—a betel leaf with areca nuts, fennel, slaked lime and cardamom—is consumed in South Asia much as when it was depicted in medieval cookbook the *Ni'matnāma*. *Read more on page* **32**

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