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aramcoworld@sfsdayton.com
or P.O. Box 292348, Kettering, Ohio 45429 USA

Editorial: publications@aramcoamericas.com
or P.O. Box 2106, Houston, Texas 77252-2106, USA

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FEATURES

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DEPARTMENTS

FRONT COVER Crocuses sit ready to have their fire-red stigmas plucked and transformed into the world's most expensive spice—not in the Middle East or North Africa but in Pennsylvania, the heartland of American saffron country.

FirstLook

Fire and Ice

Photograph by DANIL USMANOV

In the winter of 2020, Lake Ara-Köl in Kyrgyzstan was becoming more and more popular. Social media was full of new videos of people from nearby villages spending time right on the surface, which freezes over when winds sweep across the steppe.

When we arrived music was playing. Horses—deeply woven into Kyrgyz culture as a nomadic symbol of the mountain landscape—carried visitors across the ice, unfazed as children sledded at their hooves.

Amid that scene unfolded something I had to capture: a man grilling shawarma right on the ice—meat for sale, turning on a spit over a gas burner. It all looked chaotic yet somehow perfectly natural. At that moment it seemed absurd. But now, remembering it, I think it was wild and beautiful.

@DANILUSMANOVPHOTO

Flavors

Berkoukes (Algerian Pasta Soup With Labneh)

Recipe by SALLY BUTCHER
Photograph by YUKI SUGIURA

This is a really hearty soup. It is pretty much dinner if you want it to be, and certainly lunch.

The *berkoukes* are giant couscous balls cooked into soups and stews, with little differentiation across North Africa and the Levant. This dish has been around in various formats since at least Avicenna's time. We serve it with spiced labneh—because everything is better with spiced labneh.

Sally Butcher is a London-based food writer and cookbook author. She runs Persepolis, the acclaimed Persian food store in London. Her most recent book, *The New Middle Eastern Vegetarian: Modern Recipes from Veggiestan* (also published by Interlink), has been hugely successful and was shortlisted for the Guild of Food Writers' Cookery Book of the Year Award. Her first book, *Persia in Peckham: Recipes from Persopolis*, was also published to critical acclaim and short-listed for the 2008 Andre Simon Award. It was also selected by *The Sunday Times* as its cookbook of the year. When Sally is not running her store, she blogs and tweets prolifically and has amassed a devoted online following.

(Serves 6)

Big lump of vegan ghee, plus a little oil

1 teaspoon caraway seeds

1 teaspoon cumin seeds

1 large onion, finely chopped

4 celery sticks, finely chopped

½ fennel bulb, finely chopped

4 garlic cloves, minced

1 teaspoon dried thyme

1 teaspoon dried lavender

1 leveled teaspoon smoked paprika

1 heaped teaspoon sweet paprika

1 heaped teaspoon harissa paste

1 tablespoon tomato paste

2 peeled carrots, cut into 2-centimeter chunks

2 large waxy potatoes, cut into 2-centimeter chunks

125 grams *berkoukes* pasta (giant couscous or *m'hamsa* will do, or use petit plomb pasta)

2 400-gram cans chopped tomatoes

Sea salt, to taste

For the labneh

200 grams thick vegan yogurt

Sea salt

1 teaspoon dried mint

½ teaspoon Aleppo pepper

Melt the ghee with the oil in a heavy-bottomed pan and, once it is sizzling, throw in the caraway and cumin seeds, followed after 30 seconds by the onion. Once the onion has softened, add the herbs and spices, stirring well, followed by the harissa, tomato paste, carrots and potatoes.

Add the *berkoukes*, stirring well, and then add the canned tomatoes and around 3 cups (750 milliliters) of water. Bring to a boil, turn down the heat and simmer for about 30 minutes or until the potatoes and carrots are cooked and the couscous soft. I would recommend using a heat diffuser to prevent sticking; regular stirring will also help. Add salt to taste.

Mix the yogurt with salt to taste. Add the dried mint and Aleppo pepper.

Serve the soup in your most rustic-looking bowls, topping each one with a spoonful of the labneh.

Reprinted with permission from:

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Sally Butcher, Interlink Books, 2023. InterlinkBooks.com.

YUKI SUGIURA

Q&A

Statement Pieces

Written by SUNNIYA AHMAD PIRZADA

What began with a handmade pair of earrings exchanged between sisters in 2017 has evolved into a jewelry brand with pieces worn in more than 50 countries.

Three sisters from Pakistan—Hira, Hajra and Hina Hafeez-ur-Rehman—are behind HUR (recently renamed from Pierre Gemme by HUR), which blends history, craftsmanship and storytelling into wearable art.

Residing in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Hira brings global perspective, partnerships and strategy; Hajra leads much of the brand's campaigns and narrative storytelling from Rome; and Hina guides design and oversees production from Lahore, Pakistan.

They maintain daily contact through calls and collaborate through online platforms.

Together they weave legacies of Mughal, Persian, Byzantine and South Asian artistry into contemporary jewelry that honors women's voices across history. At the heart of their work is a deep collaboration with artisans in Pakistan, a commitment to heritage and a drive to use jewelry pieces as conversation starters.

They have inherited their flair from their father, Hafeez-Ur-Rehman, a poet. His work was often difficult to read, sometimes morbid, but always threaded with hope. He signed his poems "Hur," a version of his initials, and carrying that forward is deeply meaningful for the sisters.

In this interview with *AramcoWorld*, Hira reflects on their beginnings, inspirations and the future of jewelry that connects past and present.

From left, sisters Hira, Hina and Hajra Hafeez-ur-Rehman operate the global jewelry brand HUR.

Hina made a pair of earrings that she sent to Hajra. How did that small gesture evolve into a global brand?

When we created that first piece, inspired by the Achaemenid dynasty from 550 BCE, we didn't realize how profound it was. It reminded us how jewelry has always carried stories and legacies. What inspired us most was the role of women in this history. We wanted to highlight that they were not silent figures; they were thinkers, leaders, creators. Through our designs, we try to bring their voices back to life. Our jewelry is less about ornamentation and more about conversation—between past and present, heritage and modernity, and the women who came before us and those who wear our pieces today.

How do you merge different histories into your designs?

Design is about finding the invisible threads that connect worlds. These eras may seem far apart, but they share a language of geometry, detail and symbolism. We love taking a Persian motif, a Mughal stone setting or a Byzantine pattern and letting them speak to each other. It feels less like borrowing and more like continuing a conversation across centuries. But inspiration doesn't only come from history. Our Apex collection was inspired by Pakistan's northern landscapes. Nature is an endless teacher. So are other art forms including painting, sculpture, even music. In the end, jewelry becomes a way of holding history, nature and imagination close to you.

Craftsmanship and heritage are central to your brand. How do you work with artisans to bring your designs to life?

It feels like a responsibility: to honor artisans in Pakistan whose skills are inherited through generations, to preserve traditions while reimagining them. We've been working with one artisan and his team in Lahore's Shah Alami market since the beginning. As we've grown, more young craftsmen have joined. Jewelry making here is male dominated; we tried hard to bring women into the process, but it has been challenging.

Many of our techniques are traditional South Asian ones—*kundan*, *polki*, *meenakari* and *jali* work. These require extraordinary precision, especially polki, where uncut stones are set into pure gold foil without prongs. We also draw on techniques we've learned while traveling. Our upcoming collection will incorporate methods from Egyptian artisans.

OPPOSITE HUR artisans employ traditional South Asian techniques requiring "extraordinary precision," according to Hira. **ABOVE LEFT** Signature Collection gold earrings carry influences of various cultures and eras. **ABOVE RIGHT** Mughal-era portraiture of women inspires some HUR pieces.

HUR jewelry is often described as a conversation starter. What do you mean by that?

Whenever we wear one of our pieces, people ask, "Who is this woman?" or, "What does this motif mean?" That's when a story begins. One example is a piece depicting a delicately rendered half-length portrait of a lady by 17th-century Mughal artist Kalyan Das, and suddenly we're talking about these enigmatic historical figures. There are not many named portraits of women from that era.

How do you decide which stories or figures to bring into your collections?

One of our favorite pieces is "Pursuit of Pleasure," inspired by that first Mughal painting of a woman [alone, rather than as part of a scene]. Until then most portraits were of men and their animals. For us it was momentous—a woman finally claiming space in art. That's the kind of story we feel compelled to tell. Another favorite is "Gulestan." It brings us back to childhood evenings when our father would introduce us to poetry, especially by [13th-century CE] Persian poet Saadi Shirazi. His "Gulestan" reminded us that humanity is interconnected beyond race, class or borders. Designing this piece felt like carving poetry into metal—something eternal, something that holds unity even in diversity. It reminds us that our design philosophy is a way of keeping humanity bound together.

How does your father's legacy continue to shape your journey?

When we sit down to write the stories, our inspiration often comes from reading our father's work. He set the bar so high—in the way he crafted his words, moved between layers of emotion and expressed both grief and joy. We recognize the patterns in how he built stories, how he said so much in such subtle ways. In that sense we do feel we are honoring him, though we also know we still have a long way to go before we can truly say we've done justice to his legacy.

We haven't yet published his poetry, but I hope one day his words can be worn, just as his spirit lives on in our storytelling. For now, every piece we create feels like an echo of his voice. And the brand's name was recently changed to just HUR.

How do you stay rooted in Pakistan while resonating globally, and what does it mean to see women worldwide wearing your work?

No matter where our inspirations come from, our jewelry is made in Pakistan, by artisans in Pakistan, led by three sisters from Pakistan. That can never change. We've realized that as individuals we have power. We aren't famous or influential, but stories shift the needle. That has always been our intention: to bring forward feminist stories, especially from the subcontinent.

Many women tell us our pieces make them feel seen, even the "smartest person in the room." That's powerful yet humbling. It shows that jewelry is more than an ornament—it's a vessel for connection, expression, even confidence.

Sunniya Ahmad Pirzada is a Peabody Award-winning journalist whose work focuses on the intersection of race, class and gender and how it impacts people and societies around the world.

Read more articles like this online at AramcoWorld.com.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF HUR

MALTESE LANGUAGE

WRITTEN BY JACK ZAHORA, PHOTOGRAPHED BY TARA TODRAS-WHITEHILL

Where ARABIC

SEMITIC TONGUE SHAPES ISLAND NATION

Meets EUROPE

Mohamed Kasem remembers the shock when the passport control officer at Malta International Airport told him, "*Għandek viża għal ħmistax-il jum*."

"He said I had a visa for 15 days," says Kasem, "but I couldn't believe he would say this to me in Arabic."

Except, this had not been the case. Instead, Kasem, a native of Homs, Syria, had been given his first introduction to Maltese—Europe's only Semitic language, which is made up of several languages, including an Arabic dialect, Italian and English.

It instantly made this small cluster of islands between Sicily and the North African coast feel like home to Kasem. So much so that today he's only a 15-minute drive from where he first landed 20 years ago, hanging out with his friends at a shawarma restaurant called Aleppo Food.

"I'm a fluent Maltese speaker," he says, "but it was so easy because [so much] of Maltese is Arabic."

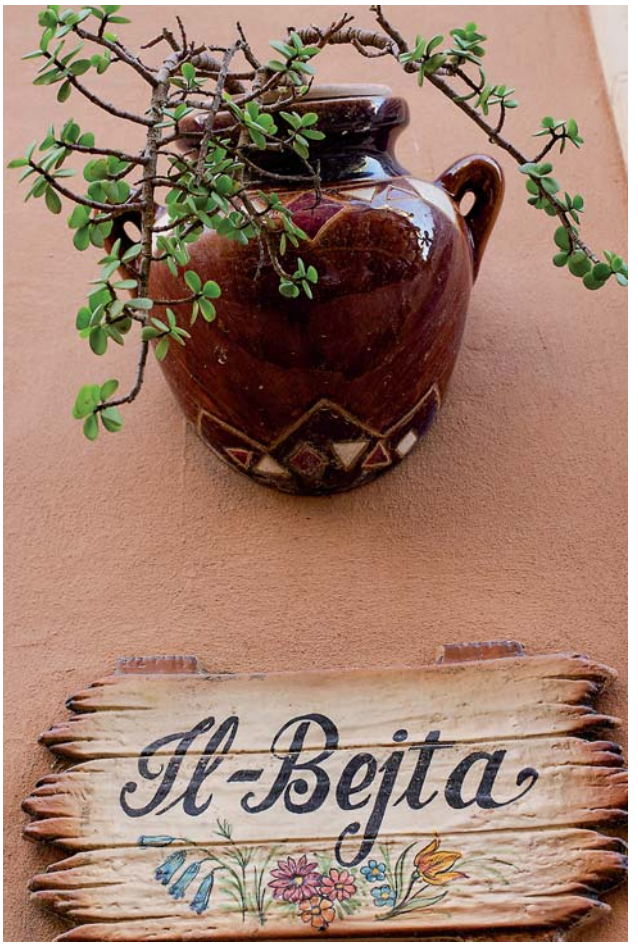
While Arabic makes up 32 percent of Maltese, researchers confirm it's a much bigger part, as much as 60%, of the language in everyday speech. "I learned mostly on the street," Kasem says. "Even the place we're in is called Hamrun, which is like the Arabic word for 'red' [*hamra*]." According to one theory, the town derives its name from the reddish clay found in the area.

CHALLENGES OF TRACKING DOWN MALTA'S ARAB HISTORY

Hamrun, now a town of 10,000 people, was settled by the Aghlabids—an Arab dynasty that originated from parts of modern-day Tunisia, Libya and Algeria—which in 870 CE wrested control of Malta from the Byzantines.

However, finding archeological evidence of this centuries-old empire in Malta has been nearly impossible, according to Matthew Grima, a lead researcher at Heritage Malta, a government-run

RIGHT The dominant presence of Arabic within Maltese helped Mohamed Kasem feel right at home after emigrating from Syria. **PREVIOUS PAGES** Valletta, the capital of Malta, is a port city.



agency tasked with preserving the country's cultural artifacts. He says Malta's Islamic period is "void of a lot of material culture in our collection and thus [is] seldomly researched."

Grima believes that the Norman conquest of Malta, which occurred in 1091 CE, led to either the destruction, deterioration or phasing-out of the country's Islamic architectural remnants.

Yet the main market in the capital of Valletta is called Is-Suq Tal-Belt. Arabic speakers will immediately understand that part of its name is nearly identical to *sūq* (or *souq*), the Arabic word for "marketplace" or "commercial quarter." Elsewhere city signs greet visitors with *merhba*, which means "welcome" and comes directly from the Arabic *marhaba*. And a local nonprofit organization, Dar l-Emigrant, which was established to assist Maltese emigrants moving abroad, uses the word *dar*, which in both languages means "home."

ARABIC'S CENTURIES OF SURVIVAL IN MALTA

In 1048 CE, a community of Arabic speakers settled in Malta, says Joseph M. Brincat, a retired professor of linguistics at the University of Malta and one of the island nation's foremost authorities on the Arab origins of Maltese. He says not much is known regarding where these people came from, but he says their language survived on the island under extraordinary circumstances.

"The Normans, the Swabians, the Angevins, the Aragonese and the Castilians never bothered to interfere with the way the people spoke," Brincat says about the long line of successors who controlled Malta. While Italian was the official language of Malta for centuries, "so long as the [local people] obeyed the laws, they were happy, and that's how Arabic survived in Malta but nowhere else in the Christian world."

According to Brincat, a dialect of Arabic coming from Sicily (spoken between the ninth and 14th centuries called Siculo-Arabic) continued to evolve even during the rule of the Knights Templar—a medieval Christian order that controlled the island from 1530 to 1798. "Because these knights of Malta did not identify with any one European state," says

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A doorway in Valletta bears a sign using the Maltese *Il-Bejta*, meaning "the nest" in the context of a cozy home and stemming from the Arabic *bayt*; a sign greeting visitors to the city of Gżira says *merhba*, which means "welcome" in Maltese and comes from the Arabic *marhaba*; and Arabic speakers would easily recognize Valletta's main market, Is Suq Tal-Belt, by *sūq* (*souq*), or "marketplace."

As Europe's sole Semitic language, Maltese is also the only Semitic language that employs the Latin alphabet.

Brincat, "they were not interested in changing the language that was loyal to any outside place."

His research shows that Malta lost contact with outside Arabic speakers in 1446 CE, "and Maltese started developing on its own, getting simplified grammar and [becoming] Romanized." It's partially why it's the world's only Semitic language that is written in the Latin alphabet—with added diacritics (markings to indicate sounds that are specifically heard in Maltese.)

Politics played another major role in Maltese's popularity. "[Maltese] was used as a tool by the British who wanted to cut off Malta from [Sicily]," says Brincat, who notes political tensions between the British and Italians began to strain during the lead-up to World War II. And in 1934, Maltese joined English as an official language of the country.

Brincat says that doesn't mean the British didn't

ABOVE Oriana Cachia, a Maltese woman, studies Arabic at her home in the southern seaside town of Marsaskala. **FAR RIGHT** A street crossing cautions pedestrians in Maltese and English: *stenna*, which is much like the Arabic *istanna*, and "wait." **RIGHT** A Valletta street named for the late Catholic bishop of Malta Mauro Caruana uses the Maltese word for "road," *triq*, which reflects the Arabic *tariq* (*tareek*). L-Isqof, meaning "Bishop," is also similar in Arabic (pronounced "Osqof" or "Isqof").

Nonprofit organization Dar l-Emigrant was established to assist Maltese emigrants moving abroad. Its name includes *dar*, which in both Maltese and Arabic means "home."

try to perpetuate now debunked myths of revisionist history, which persist today. "If you read the Encyclopedia Britannica of the 1950s," Brincat says, "the article insists that Maltese is of Punic origin, and that the Maltese are a Punic race."

CHANGING TIDES OF COMMUNICATING IN MALTA

In the southern seaside town of Marsaskala, 27-year-old Oriana Cachia flips through her Arabic studies workbook. She says she has wanted to learn the language since childhood. "I knew it was very close to my language, but what made me actually start was my trip to Morocco two years ago."

Cachia says speaking Maltese was exciting for the people around her in the cities of Marrakech and Essaouira. "They were so happy to hear a language similar to theirs, and it made me want to gain a full understanding of Arabic."

However, apart from some private tutors and a course at the University of Malta, Cachia says, not many opportunities are left in Malta to learn Arabic. That's a far cry from the mid-1970s, when for a short time, the Maltese government made Arabic compulsory as a secondary language of study in state-run schools. Wanting to increase trade with North Africa, the government welcomed Arabic teachers sent by Libya. Ultimately, the policy did not catch on and was dismantled. According to a 2022 government survey, few people on the island speak standard Arabic despite 90 percent of the island's population having a basic understanding of Maltese.

Nowadays, Cachia relies on tutors when she has a

A Syrian employee works at the Halweyat nut shop in Hamrun, Malta.

rare free moment from work, but she's not deterred. "I go on the Shahid [streaming platform] and watch as many crime shows and dramas as I can, usually Syrian or Lebanese ones, because I like the dialect." As for music, she says the Egyptian rock band Cairokee is among her favorites.

Turning to a chapter about counting, Cachia goes into an explanation about how numbers in her native tongue are pronounced nearly identically to Arabic. However, when asked to write them down phonetically in Maltese, Cachia has to rely on a translation app. "When I'm speaking with my friends, I can say everything perfectly in Maltese, but it's more of a spoken language than one that is commonly written." This disconnect is exacerbated by the sheer number of regional variations of Maltese that are spoken by only half a million people, on an island nation so small that a cross-country trip can take as little as 40 minutes.

This, combined with a recent influx of native English speakers moving to the island and the dominance of English-language media, has prompted government officials to sound an alarm over what's being called a national crisis, as headlines in the Times of Malta and MaltaToday show. The officials also cite a low proficiency in Maltese even among primary school educators.

AN ENDURING LINGUISTIC LEGACY

Malta's multicultural mix of immigrants, ones who have lived here for decades and those who can trace their lineage back centuries, is represented across St. Joseph High Street back in the town of Hamrun.

A pan-African shop of goods called Inshallah Minimarket is sandwiched between a Catholic church and an Afghan restaurant. Just a few blocks down, past the diner sporting American flags and the Australian butcher, is the Halweyat nut shop. While most of the chocolate for sale is from Türkiye, the shopkeeper, Amer Farid, is most definitely Syrian, which is revealed by a close inspection of the baklava that is devoid of the liberal amount of honey for which Turks are known.

A customer, Aesop, who's from Morocco, notes a stark difference between the Arabic in Maltese and the language he speaks in his home country. "In Morocco, you can say that Darija [Moroccan Arabic] is a dialect of Arabic, whereas in Malta it sounds like they've just added pure Arabic into the mix with English and Italian."

While Farid agrees, he alludes to something more profound than linguistic similarities.

"Our languages have built a bridge between our two cultures, and I think it's why I find the Maltese people so welcoming," he says. "As a Syrian, this is more why I've learned Maltese in a matter of months than years."

> "Our languages have built a bridge between our two cultures."
>
> —AMER FARID

‘A Kind of Arabic Music’: Malta’s Għana Folk Songs

WRITTEN BY JACK ZAHORA, PHOTOGRAPHED BY TARA TODRAS-WHITEHILL

Fans call him “tas-Samba,” or The Samba.

His stoic face barely cracks a smile as the guitars reach a crescendo and the audience looks intriguingly at this slender 13-year-old boy, seemingly out of place among the middle-aged men flanking him.

This scene unfolds at the Ritmu Roots Festival (recently rebranded Festgħana). The annual four-day affair, kicking off at a bocce ball club in the country’s port region of Floriana, showcases performances of quick wit and mastery of the Maltese language in the folk music tradition known as Għana (pronounced AH-nah).

The genre is playing a key role in safeguarding both the cultural and linguistic legacy of Malta: In 2021, UNESCO added Għana to its representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity, calling it “vital to the transmission and development of the unique Semitic Maltese language.”

The festival’s artistic director at the time, Andrew Alamango, stresses Għana’s importance. He says the genre has preserved what nowadays is a marginalized community called the *għannejja*—or those who perform Għana. He adds that “the language which they use to express everyday moments is poetry in rhyme. It’s a tradition that is not your everyday language.”

Ranier Fsadni, a professor of anthropology at the University of Malta, is in the back of the audience and explains that the genre has three main styles: *tal-Fatt*, a historical ballad that can last for hours; *la Bormliza*, a vocally ornamental performance sung at a very high register; and what is currently on stage, the relatively popular spirtu pront, which can be

The Ritmu Roots Festival, recently rebranded Festgħana, features the Maltese language in the folk music tradition known as Għana in Floriana, Malta.

In 2021, UNESCO called Għana "vital to the transmission and development of the unique Semitic Maltese language."

interpreted as "champion of rhyme."

"What you see is three guitarists accompanying four performers, which are actually two competing couples. Singer 1 is the antagonist of Singer 3. Singer 2 is the antagonist of Singer 4," says Fsadni.

These competitors are not judged by any jury, but by the audience through informal discussions following the performance. Fsadni says spectators will pore over the quatrains they've just heard. As with chess aficionados, "there are people who can remember the give-and-take and the crushing years and decades afterwards."

And yet, what typically is a back-and-forth battle of words that traditionally takes place in taverns and social clubs across this country's three inhabited Mediterranean islands, in this case turns out to be more a heartfelt correspondence between a young apprentice and his mentor. Tas-Samba, whose real name is Liam Gatt, belts out:

Għalkemm ilna ħafna ma ngħannu,
M'għalaqtx il-bieb u m'għadtx daqshekk,
Bejnietna pjaċir sa nieħdu,
U ma naqbdu l-ebda battibekk.

Although it has been a while since we had performed together,
I didn't shut down this opportunity (closed the door and said enough),
We shall enjoy this performance together.
And we will not quarrel.

His counterpart, Rene Calleja, a coachman of traditional Maltese horse-drawn carriages who goes by the nickname il-Bessie, responds with his own assurances:

Inti rasek tista sserraħha,
Kull darba li tgħanni miegħi,
Għannili waħda u ngħidlek oħra,
Nistmgħak qisek it-tifel tiegħi.

You can put your mind at ease,
Every time we will perform together,
You will give me a reply and I will give you another,
I hold you in high esteem as if you were my own child.

The Ritmu Roots Festival includes a traditional folk dance in the Argotti Gardens.

A slight look of consternation emerges from Fsadni, who remarks, "They might not be antagonists in the end; they might actually, particularly if it is in a festival setting, have decided to act as a representative of this art form that is not given its due."

TOP Thirteen-year-old Liam Gatt, known as "tas-Samba," or The Samba, performs Għana at the festival. **ABOVE LEFT** Ranier Fsadni, a lecturer in anthropology at the University of Malta, says spectators pore over the competitors' performances. **ABOVE RIGHT** Andrew Alamango served as artistic director of the festival.

PRESERVING A TRADITIONAL ART FORM

In his academic research paper, "From the Bar to the Stage: Socio-Musical Processes in the Maltese Spirtu Pront," ethnomusicologist Philip Ciantar writes, "Għana is generally looked at as symbolizing a kind of 'Arabic' music that predates Maltese romance culture."

For an uninitiated Western audience, it's easy to understand why. Gatt and Calleja's improvised

George Aquilina "ta' Nofsillejl," left, and Karol Aquilina "ta' Nofsillejl" play traditional folk music called *prejjem*, which accompanies Għana performers.

stanzas follow an A-B-C-B verse structure that resembles more of an explosive recitation of a haiku than a melodic song in the Western tradition. That's mainly because in Għana, multiple pitches are belted out on a single syllable. "There is some parallel which you will find with raï," Fsadni says, referring to a still popular form of Algerian folk music that arose in the 1920s and later was popularized in Morocco.

Għana fits squarely into Malta's pre-industrial framework, where the lyrics are likely to be about owning herds of horses, farming and nostalgic times before the 1950s, when the country transformed into a mainly tourist economy and exported mostly English-language media.

However, what gives Għana its defining characteristics as a Maltese traditional art form is also what marginalizes it within the country's popular culture and has caused a rift between traditional and modern audiences.

Writing about Għana, Ciantar says nowhere is the tension between language and official culture more apparent than "the decision taken [in the mid-1970s] by the Maltese Cultural authorities to participate in the Eurovision Song Contest with a song in English rather than in Maltese."

> "There is some parallel which you will find with raï [Algerian folk music]."
>
> —RANIER FSADNI

The televised competition, which is one of the continent's biggest platforms for showcasing European culture, is massively popular in Malta. Competing since 1971, the country has voted to send an overwhelming number of pop songs in English.

At a cafe in Malta's capital, Valletta, a young girl poses for a picture with Gordon Bonello, a television music personality and the head of Malta's Eurovision delegation.

In his capacity as a government official, Bonello says he dreams of having more Maltese-influenced music exported outside the island. But he concedes that he "cannot push [artists] to write in Maltese."

Sipping tea from a glass largely akin to those used throughout Türkiye and the Middle East, he notices the musician Fiona Cauchi walk by. "We have lots of good singers on the island ... but they worry about what sells to an international audience," he says. "Why not use the Maltese language, or the Maltese sounds or the Maltese stories so they can be different from the rest of the world?"

Bonello says that some people perceive a class division between speaking Maltese and English or Italian. But following a major influx of immigration to the island, coupled with an exodus of Maltese

The Ritmu Roots Festival showcases a tradition that usually takes place in taverns and social clubs across Malta.

speakers to mainland Europe, the United States and Australia, Bonello contends that there recently has been a reinvigorated sense of nationalism. "That is helping with local people here embracing the Maltese language—I've seen that they're more passionate now about it."

FESTIVAL'S MISSION FOR MALTESE IDENTITY

Day 3 of the festival is spread throughout the Argotti Botanical Gardens in the town of Floriana. Folk dancers wearing traditional cloaks called *għonnella* (for women) and *faldetta* (for men) participate in "Il-Maltija," Malta's national dance.

A local caterer serves plates of antipasti that inadvertently showcase Malta's agrarian kaleidoscope of cultures stemming from successive conquerors. They include fava beans called *ful* (stemming from the Arabic word); olives stuffed with tuna, which were popularized by the island's North African rulers; a sheep's cheese called *ġbejna* that resembles Greek feta; and Italian penne pasta in a pomodoro sauce.

During what amounts to a three-ring circus of activity, Alamango maintains a cool air of calm despite busily conferring with performers, stage hands, audio engineers and patrons. As a musician and archivist who studied musical heritage in Athens, Cairo and Istanbul, Alamango says his goal is more ambitious than putting on a mere musical event. He instead aims to create a vehicle to preserve a critical aspect of Maltese identity.

"It's a social catharsis, with a need for us to come together," he says. "My focus is to find new audiences for the *għannejja*, who don't merely choose their artistry but are raised on it."

Up on stage, second-generation *għannej* Jean-claude Zahra, "tal-Fox," is handed a microphone and unknowingly confirms Alamango's sentiment:

Li twilidt u trabbejt ġol-Għana,
Dal kliem għandna nikkonfermaw,
Mel'isa u ibda illustrani,
Issa'mbgħad kif nidher naraw.

That I was born and raised in Għana,
These words need to be confirmed,
So hurry up and start polishing me,
Then we shall see later how I'll look. AW

Jack Zahora is an award-winning journalist whose work has appeared on various major outlets including National Public Radio and Al Jazeera English. He's also the chief content officer and managing partner of TW Storytelling Agency, a media company based in Lisbon, Portugal. **Tara Todras-Whitehill** is an award-winning photojournalist and CEO of the TW Storytelling Agency, based in Lisbon, Portugal. Her passion is empowering NGOs, social impact teams and journalists with impactful storytelling.

TEED UP

The Arab World's Quest for Golf's Elite Championships

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL SHAGOURY

The manicured greens and stately grounds might lead the average spectator to assume they have landed at an upscale golf course in Phoenix, Arizona, or Pebble Beach, California—if not for the Arabic signage.

This is Riyadh, not necessarily associated with a game that originated in medieval Scotland. And this is no ordinary golf tournament. This is the annual PIF (Public Investment Fund) Saudi International golf tournament, the final stop in the 2025 International Series tour, the most prized pathway in professional golf today.

As players warm up on the driving range ahead of the first round of the tournament at the Riyadh Golf Club, one figure stands out—not for his world ranking but for what he represents. Othman Almulla's footsteps on the fairways echo a deeper story. He is Saudi Arabia's first professional golfer.

From a summer in Dhahran, in eastern Saudi Arabia, to teeing off alongside the game's biggest names on this day, Almulla signals with his presence not just how far Arab golf has come—but how far it's aiming to go.

The Arabian Gulf region now hosts more than 10 internationally sanctioned professional golf tournaments.

"We want to create an Arab major champion by 2035, male or female," says Mohammed Attallah of the Arab Golf Federation, which represents 17 member nations. "In order to do that, we are facilitating the growth of a sustainable golf industry and ecosystem across the Arab world."

Today to the average spectator, golf in the Middle East appears to serve primarily as a magnet for tourism and investment, which may be true to some degree. But the history of the sport in the Arab world is much richer and more nuanced.

HISTORY OF GOLF IN THE ARAB WORLD

The origins of modern golf can be traced to 15th-century Scotland. At first, the game was banned by King James II, who feared it distracted young men from practicing the archery needed for military defense during conflicts with England. Yet the game continued to gain popularity. The ban was eventually lifted in 1502 as the strife eased, and the game has been gaining popularity around the world ever since.

OPPOSITE Othman Almulla, Saudi Arabia's first professional golfer, competes in the Omega Dubai Desert Classic in 2020 in the United Arab Emirates.
ABOVE The PIF Saudi International, shown in 2023 at Royal Greens Golf and Country Club in King Abdullah Economic City, Saudi Arabia, is one of the premier sporting events in the Arab world.

ABOVE: TOM DULAT/GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: DAVID CANNON/GETTY IMAGES

“The vision is clear: to see a player from the Arab world lift a Major championship trophy by 2035.”

—MOHAMMED ATTALLAH

Foreign interests in North Africa introduced golf in the late 19th century, with Egypt and Morocco leading the way. In Morocco, the Tangiers Golf Club was established in 1897 to cater to the diplomatic community. While in Egypt, The Mena House Hotel opened its own course in 1899, offering visitors the surreal sight of tee boxes aligned with the pyramids.

Less than two decades later, Cairo’s exclusive Khedivial Sporting Club, founded in 1882 and later renamed the Gezira Sporting Club, added a 12-hole course. In Beirut, the Golf Club of Lebanon was founded 1923, also primarily catering to non-Lebanese members.

David Lesch, a professor of history at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, who has written numerous historical books on the Arab world, characterizes the impetus of golf in the region as exclusive. “It was aimed toward expats in various countries, diplomats, businesspeople and then of course to try to draw tourism mostly from the West,” he explains.

The roots of the game had been laid, but it was not until the oil-exploration boom in the Gulf region in the 1930s that golf in the Arab world would get its next boost.

The Awali Golf Club in Bahrain—the oldest in the Arabian Gulf—was founded in 1937 to cater mostly to employees of the Bahrain Petroleum Company. This course, like the others that followed in the area, was carved not from verdant parkland but from parched desert.

Sand courses started to appear in Kuwait, Qatar and, perhaps most famously, the Aramco Rolling Hills Golf Club in Dhahran. Today, the Rolling Hills Golf Club remains a central venue for regional tournaments, including key events on the Asian Development Tour.

While the first half of the 20th century was a key driver for golf in the region, the game itself remained a pastime for foreigners. There was one man, however, who wanted to change that.

In North Africa, King Hassan II of Morocco, who reigned from 1961 to 1999, was an avid golfer and student of 1948 Masters champion Claude Harmon’s son, according to an interview with his son Butch Harmon in 2015.

In 1971, the monarch inaugurated the Royal Golf Dar Es Salam, a majestic complex nestled among the cork forests of Rabat and designed by renowned British American golf course architect Robert Trent Jones. His goal was to make golf a part of Moroccan tradition.

The course became the home of the Hassan II Trophy. Winners didn’t hoist cups—they were awarded jeweled daggers, a nod to the fusion of tradition and prestige that defined Moroccan golf.

That tournament is now a stop on the PGA Tour

OPPOSITE The pasha of Marrakech, Morocco, Thami El Glaoui, plays golf in April 1946. **BELOW** The original clubhouse at the Golf Club of Lebanon in Beirut, which opened in 1923.

Champions, a men's professional senior golf tour. But its origins trace back to a monarch's personal obsession and the belief that Morocco, and by extension the Arab world, could not just play golf—they could host it.

"The Arab world has a rich history in golf," Attallah says. "Last year we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Arab Golf Federation. This year we're going to be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Hassan II Trophy…we do have a history, and now we are building on that heritage for future Arab golfers."

In 1974, the Arab Golf Federation was established with the core mission to strengthen governance of the game across the region and support overall player development.

In the 1980s, as countries in the Gulf continued to develop, the region started to see more investment in traditional green first-class golf facilities, largely driven by real estate development and tourism.

The apex was in 1988. The Emirates Golf Club in Dubai was opened as the first all-grass championship golf course in the Middle East. Lesch sees that opening as a culmination of overall development in the region.

And it is around this time that Almulla's story begins...

FROM PITCH TO GREENS: OTHMAN ALMULLA'S JOURNEY TO PROFESSIONAL GOLF

In many ways, Othman's story mirrors that of Arab golf itself: humble beginnings shaped by limitations and circumstance.

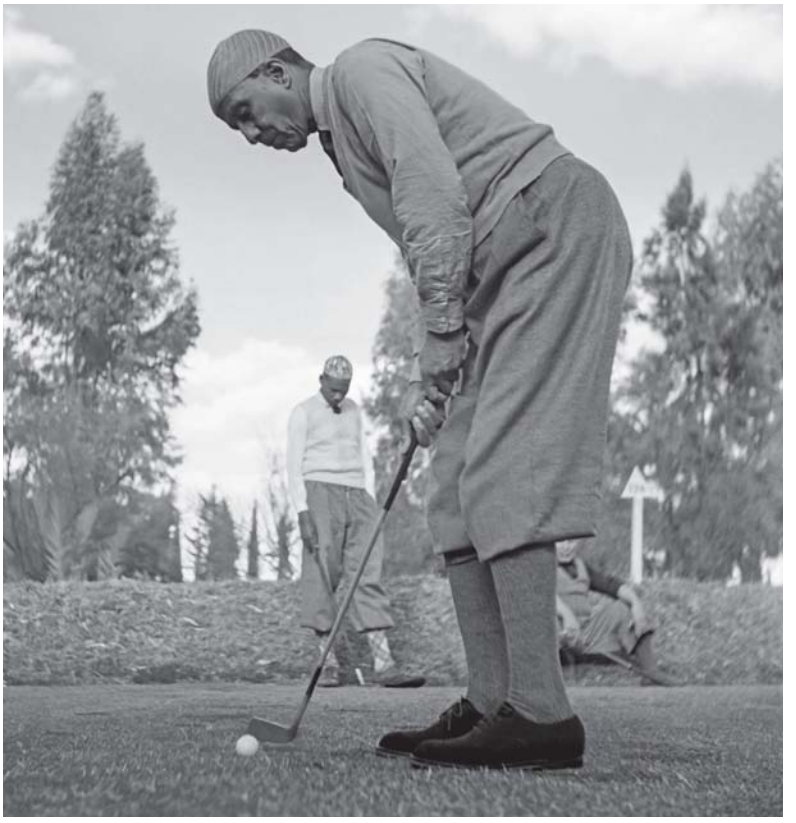
Growing up in Dhahran, Almulla was introduced to the game in the mid-1990s. But golf wasn't his first love. In fact, it was football. As a boy, he dreamed of representing Saudi Arabia in the World Cup.

"Football was the most important sport in Saudi Arabia, and I excelled at that. I loved it," he recalls. But when Almulla was on the verge of signing with a Saudi football club, his school report card—missing just one "A"—upended everything.

His mother's rule was simple: "No straight A's, no football." With nothing to do that summer, he tried golf at a friend's invitation. The dusty sand course wasn't what he expected—nor was getting beaten by kids he used to crush in football. "I hated that," he says. "The next day I told my friend, 'Let's go again.' "

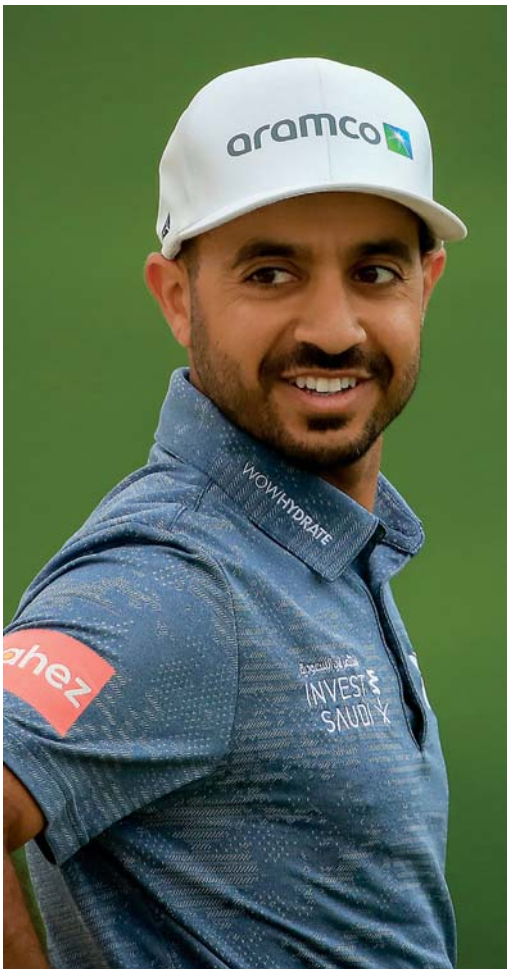
And so, the obsession began.

From 2003 to 2013, Almulla won titles across the region and spots in several European Tour qualifiers. But a professional career seemed out of reach as his love of golf took hold at a time when accessibility to the sport in the Kingdom was limited.



ABOVE: AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE TOP: COURTESY OF MOHAMMED ATTALLAH; BELOW COURTESY OF GOLF CLUB OF LEBANON

Evidence of golf's growing accessibility and future potential in the region includes increased former players' participation in key roles of national federations, as Almulla, **RIGHT**, notes.



In his early 20s, Almulla slowed down. He continued to play for the Saudi national team, which competes in both amateur and professional tournaments, but with much less commitment and lower expectations. That was, until a tournament in 2014.

Competing at the GCC Championship in Kuwait, he was on pace to win. But on the final hole, a disastrous triple bogey dropped him out of the lead. He was devastated but realized how much he still cared. He signed his scorecard and told his father he needed a few minutes.

"I went and bawled my eyes [out] in the bathroom," Almulla recalled. "I looked in the mirror, and I said, 'I have a decision to make here. I can go back to my job, or I can push on from here…' I decided to push on."

In 2016, Othman, along with fellow Saudi golfers Khaled Attiyah, Ali Al Sakha and Saud Al Sharif, led Saudi Arabia to its first Pan Arab Championship win in Oman. "It was one of the most pivotal moments of my life. To hear the national anthem, it was awesome," he recalls.

Around 2018, Othman reached out to Golf Saudi just as the organization was starting to ramp up its plans to grow the game in the Kingdom. Trying to figure out his next move, he put together a full business proposal on why the group should support his turning pro. He set up a meeting to pitch it, but before he could even get started, the representatives asked, "How do you feel about turning professional?" He laughs remembering the moment: "Nice. I guess I don't need my business proposal."

At age 33, Othman Almulla had become Saudi Arabia's first professional golfer.

CROSSROADS AT THE PIF TOURNAMENT

Almulla's journey from amateur to pro runs parallel with the region's ambitions to take the game of golf to the highest level. The two stories merge at the crossroads of the PIF Saudi International, one of the premier sporting events in the Arab world.

Essential to the transformation of golf in the region is the Arab Golf Federation, supported by voices like Attallah, who speaks plainly about the challenge ahead.

"Now, we want to build the ecosystem to get us there. We're not just talking about one champion, we're talking about making it sustainable, learning from the trials of pioneers like Othman Almulla, whose path was often lonely and undefined, to create pathways for the next generation. … The vision is clear: to see a player from the Arab world lift a Major championship trophy by 2035."

At the heart of that goal is a new generation of programs and partnerships designed to identify, nurture and retain Arab talent—especially youth.

"With efforts to establish a homegrown golf presence where Arabs themselves are playing golf to the point where they can get on the professional tours and compete, I think it has a bright future."

—DAVID LESCH

A caddy and Almulla assess the 18th fairway during the first round of the PIF Saudi International in 2019.

These initiatives include scholarship programs for top junior Arab golfers to train abroad.

"Participation is beginning to resonate across all demographics," says Attallah, emphasizing that the three-pronged strategy of raising awareness, opportunity and investment is bearing fruit.

But there is still work to be done. While countries like Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have established world-class facilities and deep tournament calendars, other countries are catching up. Even in places with significant investment, there is more to be done to cultivate local talent, Attallah says.

In addition, Almulla highlights the increased participation of former players in key roles of national golf federations as a positive development.

"I think you're starting to see a lot more athletes go into management of federations now, and I think that will be transformational."

Attallah agrees, reiterating the retention of golf professionals in the industry as a key to success.

He says that's where the legacy of pioneers like Almulla becomes instructive. "He made us aware that we should always look to the people who took the risk and had the pressure. ... Their reputation was on the line first."

Almulla's story is only one of many when it comes to rising professional Arab golfers: Shergo Al Kurdi from Jordan, Issa Abouelela from Egypt, Elyes Barhoumi from Tunisia, Azzan Al Rumhy from Oman. Arab women, such as Maha Haddioui and Inès Laklalech from Morocco, are also making a splash.

As for the big picture, Lesch believes this evolution is an overall positive development for the region. "With efforts to establish a homegrown golf presence where Arabs themselves are playing golf to the point where they can get on the professional tours and compete, I think it has a bright future," Lesch concludes.

According to a 2024 report from R&A, a leading body that monitors golf participation around the globe, the Middle East has seen a 238% rise in golfers across the region between 2012-2024, and the results are tangible to professionals like Almulla. "To see busloads of kids come in and try golf and have fun playing the sport, I would say that's an emotional moment for me." AW

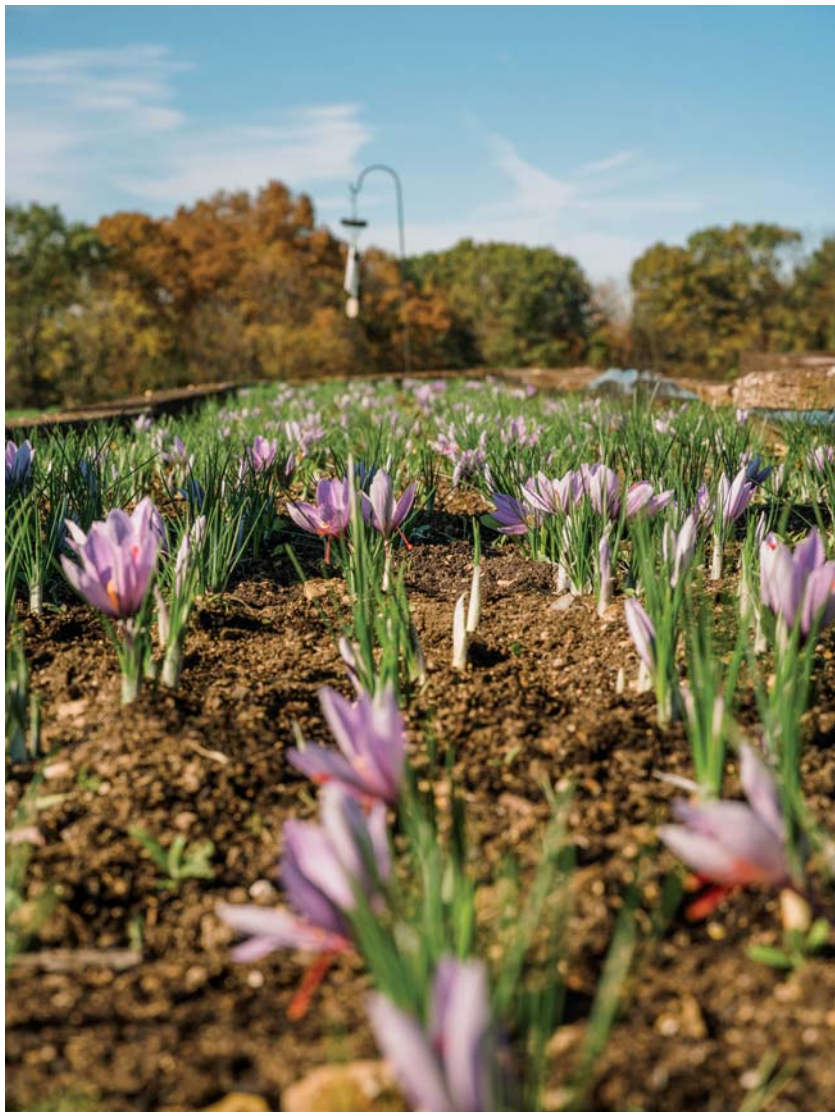
Michael Shagoury is a multimedia journalist and media strategist based in Washington, D.C. He has covered stories across the Middle East and North America for outlets including AJ+ and CNN International. As managing director of SideKix Media, he leads projects at the intersection of storytelling, digital strategy and emerging technology.

ABOVE: ROSS KINNAIRD/GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE TOP: COURTESY OF TRINITY UNIVERSITY; OPPOSITE BOTTOM LEFT: EGYPTIAN GOLF FEDERATION; OPPOSITE BOTTOM RIGHT: ANDREW REDINGTON/WME IMG VIA GETTY IMAGES

PENNSYLVANIA GOLD

WHERE ANCIENT SAFFRON THREADS SPARK A MODERN REVIVAL

WRITTEN BY RAMIN GANESHRAM, PHOTOGRAPHED BY GREG KAHN



TOP Crocuses bearing saffron stigmas open in the sun at Christine Martin's farm in Mohrsville, Pennsylvania. **BOTTOM** Martin keeps her harvested saffron stigmas in an old Whitman's chocolate box. **PREVIOUS PAGES** Christine Martin surveys her farm with Ruth Zimmerman Martin and her daughter Wanda (no relation to Christine).

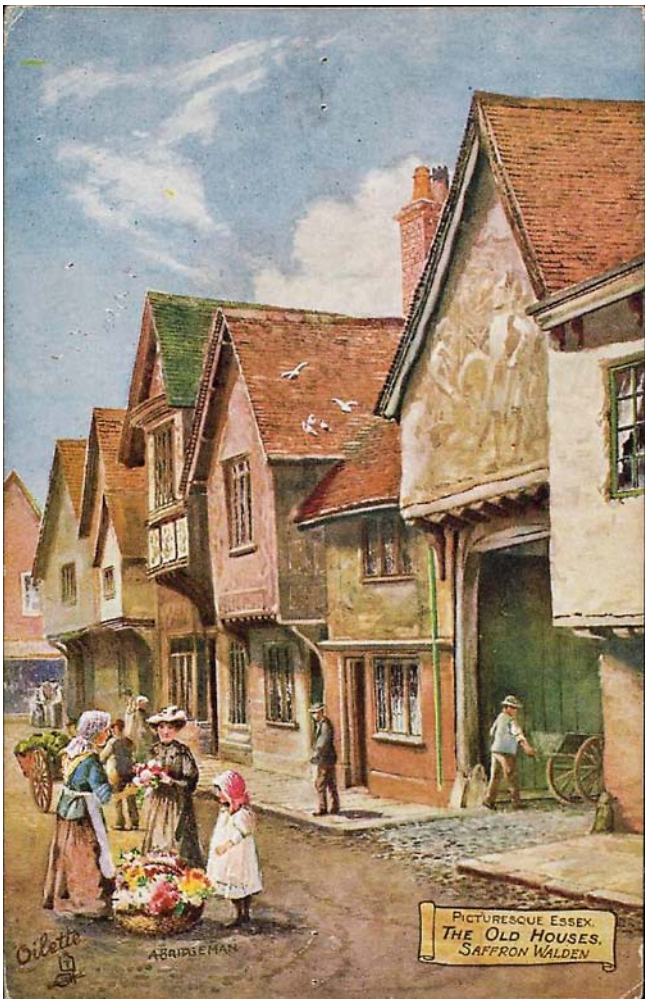
At the peak of the sloping hillside at the zenith of autumn, three women survey the fields of purple crocuses at their feet. As the chill of the previous evening still ripples through the morning air, impossibly fat bees buzz around them, drunk on the pollen from the open flowers. Marked by their modest clothing and covered hair, the women gauge the hours ahead required to pick the precious flowers and pluck out their fire-red stigmas to be gently dried and transformed into saffron, the world's most expensive spice.

These are not the ancient saffron fields of South Asia or Iran, where the highest grade of saffron can sometimes rival the price of gold. This is Berks County, Pennsylvania, in the northeastern United States. The women, Christine Martin, Ruth Zimmerman Martin and her daughter Wanda, are Mennonites: keepers of American saffron.

"Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?" the eldest of the three, Ruth Zimmerman Martin, asks, beaming. No relation to Christine, the octogenarian gave the younger woman some of her first saffron corms more than 20 years ago. "I'd say she's really succeeded with it," Ruth tells me.

As is expected in their culture, Christine remains humble in the face of her older neighbor's praise. She knows there are long hours ahead of her for picking the red stigmas from the pretty purple crocuses.

"I'll put them in small packages to send to family and friends with their Christmas cards," she says. After keeping some for her



own cooking, the rest will be sold in small containers in her nephew's butcher shop about 35 miles away.

HEARTLAND OF AMERICAN SAFFRON

Mennonites like the Martins are a Christian pacifist, close-knit community committed to simple living and plain dress. They have been growing saffron in this region for generations.

This little-known fact that I first came across while researching my book *Saffron: A Global History* immediately captured my attention. As a person of both Middle Eastern and South Asian descent, I grew up certain in the knowledge that Americans and Europeans knew little of the precious spice that was so important to our cuisine.

It turns out I was wrong. Mennonites are descended from Swiss and Norwegian immigrants, who were versed in using saffron in foods like St. Lucia buns, a Christmastime treat. They likely learned saffron farming in Pennsylvania from the Schwenkfelders, a sect of German Protestants who were both saffron farmers and merchants who arrived in Pennsylvania in the early 18th century carrying saffron corms (as the bulbs are properly called) to William Penn's New World colony. There they joined previous émigrés from Germany incorrectly labeled "Pennsylvania Dutch"—a misunderstanding of the word "Deutsch," which means "German." Saffron became key to elevating their simple foods for special occasions, and so it has been grown continually for generations.

Ruth Zimmerman Martin lives just outside Lititz, Pennsylvania, the historical heartland of American saffron. About 75 miles west of Philadelphia, the birthplace of the nation, Lititz was the Schwenkfelder saffron traders' first stop.

Dubbed "the coolest small town in America," Lititz is 5,000 miles (8,047 kilometers), three continents and almost six millennia from saffron's birthplace in the Mediterranean. Along its main street, 18th-century homes and businesses now house cute shops and trendy restaurants. But just outside town, it's still common to see Amish carriages traveling the paved roads, just as their ancestors did when those same throughfares were made of dirt.

It is here that the descendants of the Geelder Deutsch and the Mennonites, their Anabaptist cousins, still largely live around the site of their forebears' arrival. And it is here in Lititz that saffron growing became vibrant and widespread as both a private and commercial enterprise into the early 19th century.

ABOVE LEFT
An 18th-century drawing of the saffron crocus by Roman botanist and physician Giorgio Bonelli.
ABOVE RIGHT
A postcard, circa 1906, depicting the picturesque town of Saffron Walden recalls that in the Middle Ages, saffron was grown as far north as England, not unlike the way it's grown in the US today.

ABOVE LEFT: NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY; ABOVE RIGHT: THE NEWBERRY LIBRARY


YETI

Stigmas are harvested by hand and dried to make saffron spice. **OPPOSITE TOP** Freshly picked saffron crocuses from Toby Allspach's farm in Coopersburg, Pennsylvania; **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** Allspach separates the few stigmas from the flowers daily during harvest season; **ABOVE** Allspach places the stigmas into a food dehydrator; and **LEFT** a vial containing 1 gram of saffron is ready to be sold.

Gwen Hoover sells saffron in Lititz, Pennsylvania, where saffron growing became widespread as both a private and commercial enterprise in the early 19th century.

I spoke to local dairy farmer Martin Keen when writing *Saffron: A Global History.* He told me that his family has used saffron for generations. "They had 40 large garden beds, and one would be nothing but pure saffron," he said.

Keen explained the lack of recipes or written history about saffron growing in the Lancaster County community was because growing saffron was women's work. "Usually it was grown in family vegetable gardens, and the vegetable garden was the purview of the wife and daughters," he said. "You never find farm journals written by women."

Keen also told me that saffron was culturally important to the Geelder Deutsch as a flavoring in soups, stews and baked goods. Those who did not grow it could buy it from the local Mennonite grocers and pharmacies—in small packets kept behind the counter, just as it is today. At home saffron was stored in wooden pedestal jars hand carved especially for that purpose and painted in a folk German style.

In the 18th century, saffron was also capturing the interest of America's wealthiest citizens. While researching saffron of this period, I came across a letter at the Library of Congress from President Thomas Jefferson, who wrote Philadelphia horticulturist Bernard McMahon in 1807 seeking saffron corms for Monticello, his estate in Virginia. McMahon had returned just three months before from traveling the Louisiana Purchase territory—land the US bought from France that stretches from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains—with explorers Lewis and Clark as the duo's official plant collector. It was probably from this same Lancaster County community that the gardening guru collected those specimens.

In modern-day Lititz, Charlene Van Brookhoven, an avid gardener and member of the Lititz Historical Foundation, muses that while saffron was fit only for kings in Asia and Europe, here in Lancaster County it is a staple among simple rural people who add it to boiled chicken or dumplings to make their meals a little more special.

Although not herself a Mennonite but rather of German Moravian descent, Van Brookhoven has enjoyed saffron dishes in her travels to Spain and Italy. Today she grows a small planter of saffron for her own use. Many of her neighbors do the same—gone are the vast gardens of home-grown saffron she witnessed decades ago. She became fascinated with

Charlene Van Brookhoven checks on her saffron at her home in Lititz. She keeps forks in the pot to deter rabbits and other animals.

the abundant use of saffron, which she considered a sophisticated international flavor, among the neighbors she calls "simple folk."

"Here are these unassuming people quietly eating simple dishes with a spice that adorned the table of royalty," she notes.

QUEEN OF THE EAST

From its first harvest three millennia ago in Greece to its mass cultivation in Persia in the 10th century BCE, saffron indeed largely graced the tables of nobles and kings.

Ancient writers like the first-century CE Roman/Spanish writer Columella are among those who first described saffron movement through the world: Phoenician traders first took the precious corms, native to the Mediterranean and southwestern Asia, from Santorini in modern-day Greece by ship to ancient Iran, where it was cultivated and carried along on the silk trade routes to the Roman Empire, to the Middle East, Asia and the north of both Africa and India. It quickly became integral to local culture. Moors from the North of Africa brought saffron to Spain in the sixth century where it became integral to the cuisine of the Iberian peninsula during the next 800 years of Muslim rule.

From Spanish paella to Moroccan saffron tea to Iran's layered rice dishes and Arabic coffee, saffron is important in both sweet and savory dishes as well as in natural medicine. The third-century CE Greco-Roman physician Galen wrote about saffron's medicinal uses, as did Persian physician Ibn Sina in his *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* or "The Canon of Medicine" written in 1025 CE.

Just as the ancients realized its value, so too do people throughout the Middle East and North Africa with shops singularly selling saffron still common in bazaars in Morocco, Saudi Arabia, India, Turkey, Iran and elsewhere. It remains the world's most expensive spice. Our obsession with saffron makes it feel reasonable to me that wars have been fought over it. According to Pat Willard's 2002 book *Secrets of Saffron: The Vagabond Life of the World's Most Seductive Spice*, in the 14th century a ship filled with saffron destined for Basel in Switzerland was intercepted by a group of European nobles. An international conflict ensued. International counterfeiting rings

have tried to capitalize on the public's hunger for a cheaper alternative from antiquity to today.

Legend says that saffron first reached Europe with English crusaders who smuggled the highly regulated corms when returning from the Holy Lands in the 14th century CE. According to food historian Andrew Dalby, around that time Venice had largely cornered the market on imports of the valuable spice.

Sixteenth-century English writer Richard Hakluyt devoted several pages to the viability of commercial saffron growing in England in his papers. The plant grew decently in chalky or sandy soil, even in

Mennonite horse-drawn carriages travel paved roads just outside Lititz.

> **"Here are these unassuming people quietly eating simple dishes with a spice that adorned the table of royalty."**
>
> —CHARLENE VAN BROOKHOVEN

Northern European climes like Essex in England, where it gave its name to the village of Saffron Walden.

By the 15th century, the German town of Nuremberg became a powerhouse of saffron trade. In addition to farming saffron, German merchants imported vast quantities of the spice from the east and traded it across Europe, where it was valued for its culinary and medicinal uses. It was so important to the city's economic fortunes that Nuremberg and other saffron trading cities enacted the Safranschou Code, which strictly regulated the spice and severely punished counterfeiters.

SAFFRON ARRIVES IN AMERICA

In America saffron was advertised for culinary and medicinal use as early as the 1720s. English cookbooks most often used by American colonists, like Hannah Glasse's 1747 *The Art of Cookery Made and Easy*, feature several saffron recipes.

Around the same time, the arrival of the Schwenkfelders with their corms made it easier to access saffron in the New World. Fifty years later Delaware farmer John Spurrier gave advice for growing saffron in his 1793 book *The Practical Farmer*, including the wisdom that saffron flowers should be harvested as soon as they fully open—right after the last of the morning dew has dried. Because the flowers are so delicate, harvesting and processing the bright red stigmas or threads at the blooms' center still must be done by hand. This is true wherever saffron grows, whether at Christine Martin's farm or an hour away at Toby and Janelle Allspach's Joie De Vivre Saffron farm in Cooperburg, Pennsylvania.

"When the saffron is ready, it is a family affair. We get my mom, our friends and our young helper Trent to harvest. It's probably about 10 to 15 people, and we make a party out of it," said Toby Allspach. "We will go out there before the sun comes up because as soon as those crocuses open, they start to deteriorate. We get them picked, and then we just kind of spend the afternoon carefully separating and drying the stigmas."

The Allspachs are not Mennonites, and they have no other cultural or familial tie to saffron. In fact, despite being born and raised as Pennsylvanians, they had no idea they were living in American saffron country. The couple began growing saffron in 2022 for personal use when Janelle was suffering from health issues after a car accident. When traditional medicine failed her, she started researching holistic treatments. She came across multiple scientific studies that confirmed the ancient belief that saffron was valuable for inflammation, digestive issues, eye diseases, to treat anxiety and depression and more.

According to research published by the US

“[Harvesting] is a family affair. We will go out there before the sun comes up.”

—TOBY ALLSPACH

National Institutes of Health in 2022 based on studies in Iran and at the University of Vermont, compounds in saffron do, in fact, alleviate symptoms of depression and mental fatigue.

The couple decided to try growing saffron in a 25-square-foot patch in their yard and were surprisingly successful—netting 30 to 40 grams (1 to 1.5 ounces) of finished saffron by the second year. Given that saffron is most often sold in single-gram or half-gram quantities, the Allspachs’ first attempts yielded a bumper crop.

Today as in the past, Pennsylvania saffron is mostly sold locally at farmers markets or small specialty stores. Additionally, Joie De Vivre and other small farms tend to sell their products online, including saffron syrups, sprays and other flavored products, along with pure saffron. As their harvest expands, they hope to branch out to other states. In 2024 they increased their saffron field from 25 square feet to a full acre, on land rented from a fallow farm next door. Their hope is to yield 100 grams from this year’s harvest.

Whatever the reasons for the renewed interest in growing saffron outside its traditional regions, the University of Vermont has created the North American Center for Saffron Research and Development to promote saffron cultivation as a financial opportunity for small farmers. The organization hosts symposia and offers growing, harvesting and processing advice for those hoping to become saffron farmers in various states.

But even as small homestead farms are once again putting American saffron on the map, in Pennsylvania it’s the small home growers, like Christine Martin and Ruth Zimmerman Martin, who are keeping the culture alive.

While she grew up eating saffron-flavored dishes, Ruth’s mother was not a saffron grower. She learned on her own 40 years ago when her husband, Lloyd, a dairy farmer, was gifted saffron in return for moving a widow’s belongings. She tried her hand, and to her surprise, the crocuses came up. As the years passed, Ruth tried different soils, fertilizers and techniques for separating the corms, which naturally multiply under the soil. Her expertise grew, and so did her fields. Soon she was being consulted by the local farm extensions and the University of Vermont to teach others.

The year after Lloyd passed away in year 2007, 3,233 saffron crocuses bloomed on her land. “That was so beautiful,” she said. “I called my daughter to look at how beautiful they were. I was taking saffron stigmas out until suppertime.”

A year later, when she sold her farm to move in with her daughter, Ruth started growing saffron in a planter—like Van Brookhoven—because she couldn’t give up her decadeslong passion. Ruth credits her golden thumb to paying close attention to what the finicky plant demands and experimenting with fertilizers, drainage and natural ways to repel critters.

“You do exactly what saffron wants you to do, and then the plants bless you,” she said. AW

The sun rises over farm country in southeastern Pennsylvania. Americans have grown saffron—prized for centuries in the Middle East and North Africa for its culinary and medicinal properties—since the 1700s.

For recipes please visit our website.

Ramin Ganeshram is an award-winning journalist and culinary historian of colonial and early 19th-century US and Caribbean history. She has authored cookbooks including *Sweet Hands: Island Cooking From Trinidad & Tobago* and *Saffron: A Global History*. **Greg Kahn** is an award-winning documentary and fine art photographer. His work has been exhibited in galleries and museums around the world and published in The New York Times Magazine, National Geographic and British Vogue, among others.

Author's Corner

Finding Her Voice in Umm Kulthum's: A Conversation With Rhonda Roumani

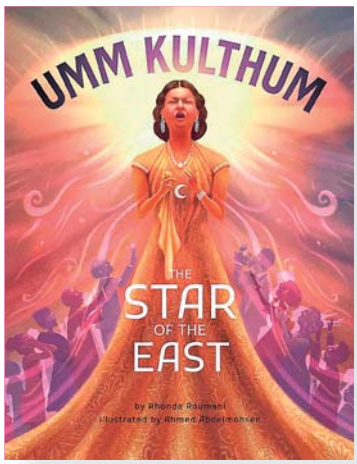
Written by INDLIEB FARAZI SABER

In *Umm Kulthum: The Star of the East*, Syrian American author and journalist Rhonda Roumani illuminates the life of a girl from the Nile Delta who rose to become one of the most celebrated voices in the Arab world.

Published 50 years after Umm Kulthum's death in 1975, Roumani's work traces the journey of the woman born Fatima Ibrahim as-Sayed el-Beltagi, from a childhood spent beside her father in the village courtyard to the moment her voice became a vessel for Egyptians on Cairo's grand stages.

Roumani presents more than just a biography. *Umm Kulthum: The Star of the East* meditates on perseverance, identity and the courage to stay true to one's voice. Drawing from her own experience growing up Arab American, Roumani reclaims the story of a woman who turned authenticity into art—and art into legacy, earning the title "Star of the East."

We sat down with Roumani, who reflects on what drew her to Umm Kulthum, what her enduring voice continues to teach us and how writing for children became her way of passing that light forward.



Umm Kulthum: The Star of the East

Rhonda Roumani.
Crocodile Books, 2024.

You first encountered Umm Kulthum's music as a child in your family's home in California. What do you remember about that, and what drew you back to her story later as a writer?

As an Arab American, I grew up listening to Arabic music by Fairouz, Sabah Fakhri and contemporary pop. But I never really listened to Umm Kulthum until I was older, when my father became close to an Egyptian friend, Ahmed Zewail—we'd call him Amo Ahmed—who'd later win the Nobel Prize in Chemistry.

My father would teach him about classical music, and Amo Ahmed would introduce him to Umm Kulthum. It became part of their friendship, a sort of musical exchange. It was almost as if they were giving each other what they loved the most.

From my father's basement office, I'd hear the sounds of Umm Kulthum. But it wasn't the songs that captivated me—it was watching Amo Ahmed listen, completely mesmerized. It was as if he was consumed by the music, under a spell.

As a teenager, Umm Kulthum's music had felt heavy and distant to me but witnessing that connection made me curious about her power.

Years later, when I became a parent, I noticed how few books existed about Arabs written by Arabs. That realization—and wanting my own children to see themselves in stories—pushed me to write for young readers.

Umm Kulthum's story moves from a poor village to international fame. What about

OPPOSITE: RHONDA ROUMANI; ABOVE: FROM *UMM KULTHUM: STAR OF THE EAST*, PUBLISHED BY INTERLINK PUBLISHING. ILLUSTRATION COPYRIGHT ©AHMED ABDELMOHSEN. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER

that journey spoke to you personally or creatively?

Discovering how this young woman from Egypt's countryside lifted her family through her talent—it's such a powerful story. She started performing religious songs with her father and ended up shaping modern Arabic music.

There's also something timeless in the way she took control of her image. When she moved to Cairo, she decided how she wanted to be seen. Today that reminds me of how young people manage their presence online, shaping how they're perceived.

And as someone who became a fiction writer later in life, I admire that she mastered her craft. She refused to sing a line she didn't fully understand. For me, as a writer—or for any artist—that's everything: knowing the meaning behind what you create.

The book feels both historical and deeply human. How did you bring her story to life for young readers?

Writing for children means connecting to your younger self. I focused on her childhood—her desire to go to the *Kuttab* [religious elementary school] when only her brother could, her determination to learn. Those emotions are universal.

I also wanted the book to feel Egyptian. I requested that Interlink, the book's publisher, find an Egyptian illustrator, and they found Ahmed Abdelmohsen, who did an amazing job of infusing his drawing with details of Egyptian culture and the countryside that really only an Egyptian could bring—because whereas all Arabs loved Umm Kulthum, she is really an Egyptian icon. Egypt's fourth pyramid!

His full-page spreads pull you into her world, the Nile villages, the tents, the sense of movement. Picture books have that power to let children jump into the pages of another time and place.

Umm Kulthum faced criticism and social limitations early on. What do you think her life teaches us about staying true to oneself?

It's about authenticity. Everything she did was rooted in that. When she first came to Cairo, she tried to sing what was popular, and it didn't work. So she returned to what she knew best, the classical Arabic forms, and that became her strength.

When someone is authentic, we feel it, we see it. That's what drew great poets and musicians to her: They knew her voice carried truth. She spoke for herself but also for generations. That's what made her timeless.

Your books often explore identity and resilience. Do you see a connection between Umm Kulthum's story and your larger body of work?

Definitely. As a journalist, I've always tried to tell stories of ordinary people in the Arab world, rather than through Western lenses. Writing for children is an extension of that. It's about telling our stories early, so young readers grow up knowing that these figures existed and mattered.

My earlier picture book, *Insha'Allah, No, Maybe So*, introduces the word *inshallah* to Western audiences through a child's eyes. It's about reframing how our words, our stories and our cultures are seen. In a way, every book I write is an act of reclaiming our narratives.

Umm Kulthum's music still echoes across the Arab world. What gives her voice such enduring power, and what do you hope readers take from her story?

She sang about love and longing—feelings everyone understands. That nostalgia, that yearning, is part of who we are as Arabs. Even today, you listen to Umm Kulthum at night for dreaminess and Fairouz in the morning for vitality.

What I hope readers, especially young ones, take away is that doing what you love is key to a fulfilling life. You don't have to conform. If you stay true to yourself, no matter your values or background, there's space for you in the world.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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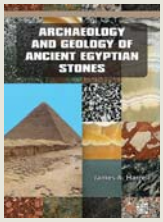
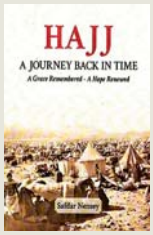
Reviews



Archaeology and Geology of Ancient Egyptian Stones
James A. Harrell. Archaeopress Publishing, 2024.

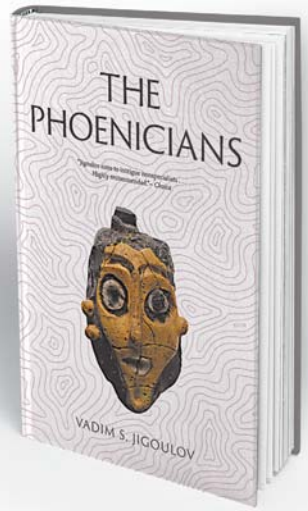
Spanning three decades of fieldwork, *Archaeology and Geology of Ancient Egyptian Stones* is as vast as its subject: the stones ancient Egyptians used to shape their civilization. A massive text of more than 1,000 pages, it identifies those stones geologically and traces their sources wherever possible, uniting geology, archeology and cultural history in one monumental reference. Egyptian stones, retired geology professor James A. Harrell explains, fall into five broad categories: building stones for temples and tombs; utilitarian stones for tools, weapons and pigments; ornamental stones for statues and sarcophagi; gemstones for jewelry and amulets; and source stones processed for metals such as gold and copper. From this framework emerges a vivid picture of how Egyptians worked the land itself. In Aswan, for example, workers used stone pounders to remove corners and edges of boulders, often first setting fires to fracture its bedrock—a blend of heat and force that turned geology into craft. Harrell's achievement lies not only in scope but verification. He links tool marks to techniques and samples to sources, standardizing identifications that will aid museums and conservators. In an age when ancient quarry landscapes face modern extraction, this book stands out as both a reference and reminder—a modern monument carved from the same endurance it documents.

—ROBERT W. LEBLING



Hajj: A Journey Back in Time: A Grace Remembered—A Hope Renewed
Safdar Nensey. Cinnamon Teal Design and Publishing, 2023.

Safdar Nensey's *Hajj: A Journey Back in Time* invites readers into one of the world's oldest and most sacred annual expeditions: the Muslim pilgrimage to Makkah. Through a rare collection of postcards spanning from the 1890s to 1980, Nensey traces how the Hajj has changed in appearance—through new technologies and evolving landscapes—while its spiritual purpose remains constant. A retired petroleum engineer who built his career in Pakistan and the Arabian Gulf region, Nensey has spent decades collecting historical artifacts and visual ephemera. This book, along with his earlier volumes on Jerusalem, Lahore, Karachi and Pakistan's cultural heritage, reflects both scholarly curiosity and personal devotion. *Hajj* begins with two contrasting images: one from the 1950s showing pilgrims arriving by sea and another from the 1970s depicting air travelers at Jeddah Airport. The pairing shows how pilgrimage adapts to the modern world—yet still fulfills the same deep call to gather, pray and reflect. The book's structure echoes the stages of the pilgrimage itself, guiding readers through preparation, spiritual rites and moments of personal closure. By documenting this sacred journey over time, Nensey offers more than a visual archive; he opens a window onto a living act of faith—one that connects generations, cultures and histories through devotion made visible. —OLZHAS ERTAY



The Phoenicians

Vadim S. Jigoulov. Reaktion Books, 2024.

Rather than a single civilization, the Phoenicians appear here as a fleet of city-states—Arwad, Byblos, Sidon and Tyre—whose sea routes and trade networks tied the ancient Mediterranean together. Vadim S. Jigoulov, a historian of early Middle Eastern commerce, steers between history and archeology to reconstruct the seaborne world of these coastal communities. Drawing on textual sources alongside archeological finds, he traces how the city-states, from 1200 BCE to the end of the Persian period in 332 BCE, launched westward expeditions, often led by Tyre and joined by Sidon, founding trading posts from Carthage to the Spanish island of Ibiza. Jigoulov's prose is clear and steady, and the book's maps and illustrations help navigate dense scholarly waters. His balanced tone and careful organization invite readers to sail with confidence through three centuries of cultural exchange and maritime ambition. The study closes by urging further exploration beneath the waves, where future discoveries may emerge along ancient routes. In reminding us that connection—not conquest—bound the Mediterranean world, *The Phoenicians* reveals how trade carried civilization across the sea. —ROBERT W. LEBLING

"Economic competition, along with occasional cooperation, was the hallmark of relations between the Phoenician city-states, and the ebb and flow of Tyre's and Sidon's fortunes illustrates this very well."

—The Phoenicians

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

Reviews

GETTY IMAGES/JOHN IMAGES

Green Tea in Mali: Culture Pours From Global Trade

Written by AIBARSHYN AKHMETKALI

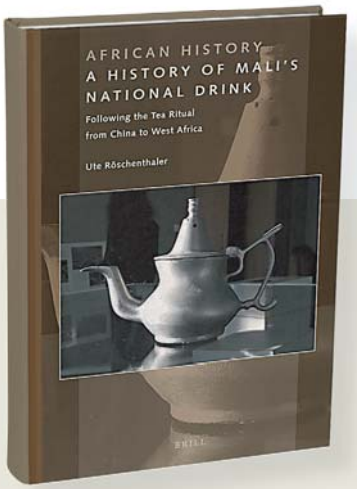
In 2005, while attending a tea ceremony in Bamako, the capital of Mali, where serving tea punctuates daily life across courtyards, offices and roadside stalls, anthropologist Ute Röschenthaler realized that green tea had become more than a national drink.

The elegance of the ritual and the warmth surrounding it revealed how Malians have transformed a leafy commodity into a distinct expression of hospitality and reflection. The moment launched her decadeslong investigation into green tea's journey from China to West Africa.

For much of the past century, scholars have explained global commodities like tea through the lens of empire—seeing them as outcomes of colonial exploitation. With A *History of Mali's National Drink*, Röschenthaler invites a different view. Drawing on her long study of cultural mobility and trade across the Global South, she shows that the story of tea, grown widely in Mali since the early 19th century, involves multidirectional routes and local agency. By tracing ritual instead of commerce, she uncovers a world in which adaptation itself became a creative and authorial act.

Her research highlights Mali's early participation in South-South exchange: The country's first president traveled to China in 1961 to explore tea cultivation, initiating cooperation that bypassed colonial channels. Röschenthaler also lets material culture tell its story. A teapot, she notes, changes shape with geography and class—small in China, larger in British salons and Moroccan palaces, and again small among Saharan traders, where scarcity of water and the value of tea shaped its use. Each object records local decisions about value and esthetics.

To ground these insights, Röschenthaler spent 10 months conducting ethnographic fieldwork across West Africa, visiting markets, teashops and wholesale outlets. She consulted Arabic-language texts and interviewed Mali's leading tea importers, ensuring that African voices guide the narrative from within. From the host's arrangement of teaware to the graceful pour and the custom of three rounds, she reads each gesture as a philosophy of respect, patience and conversation.



A History of Mali's National Drink: Following the Tea Ritual from China to West Africa

Ute Röschenthaler. Brill Publishing, 2023.

"In the wake of its global movement, [tea] brought new cultures around consumption, it kick-started entire industrial sectors, supplying preparation and consumption accoutrements, and it offered novel ways of considering society. …"

—A History of Mali's National Drink

Find more reviews like this online at AramcoWorld.com.

Events

ABOVE I.M. Pei stands outside his John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in 1979 in Massachusetts in the US.

Pei Retrospective Explores Icon's Transcultural Architecture

I.M. Pei: Life Is Architecture explores the life and work of the late Chinese American architect, who believed architecture could honor both regional histories and global movements. Through original drawings, sketches, models and architectural material, this first full-scale retrospective of Pei's seven-decade career celebrates how the designer of buildings around the world used collaboration and transcultural dialogue.

It emphasizes his role as a trusted collaborator in high-profile commissions, among them Paris's Louvre Pyramid, which blends modern and classical design; Washington, D.C.'s National Gallery of Art East Building, where Pei used geometric shapes that guide visitors intuitively; and Doha, Qatar's Museum of Modern Art—the current stop for the retrospective—for which he translated classical Islamic architecture into a modern, minimalist tiered facility that's become a favored landmark.

Co-curated by Shirley Surya and Aric Chen, the exhibition offers a contextual and nuanced portrait of Pei. In promotional materials Surya noted the icon of architecture "drew from the regional while shaping the global"—showing how "his work articulated artistic and cultural ideas while forging urban skylines—negotiated through dialogue and collaboration, and with results that innovated architectural forms and feats of engineering."

The goal of the exhibition is to be as revelatory for attendees as for the curators, Surya tells *Scale Magazine*. "Ultimately, the work deepened my understanding of how architecture sits within the economy, politics, culture and public agency."

▶ **Qatar** Museums Gallery, **Doha**, through February 14.

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

Events

Current / March

More Than a Day as a Tiger invites visitors to learn about Haider Ali and his son Tipu Sultan, who from 1761 to 1799 ruled Mysore, one of India's dynasties with a legacy of resistance to British empire-building. In addition to a gem-encrusted gold finial from the throne of Tipu—who adopted the persona of a tiger—the exhibition includes portraits and highlights the artistry of weapons along with other artifacts.

▶ Islamic Arts Museum **Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur**, through March 29.

ABOVE Gem-set finial from the throne of Tipu Sultan Mysore, ca. 1787-'97.

Kochi-Muziris Biennale is South Asia's largest contemporary art event and the first biennial established in India. This is the biennale's sixth edition, titled "For the Time Being," featuring 66 artists and collectives from more than 20 countries to take part in art exhibitions, performances and workshops across multiple venues to create a vibrant and immersive experience. Featured artists include Indian painter Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, Moroccan artist Hicham Berrada and Iraqi visual artist Hiwa K.

▶ **Kochi, India**, through March 31.

BELOW "Between Memory and Music," 2024, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh. Hand embroidery on cotton poplin fabric.

Current / April

Ancient Civilizations of Turkmenistan presents more than 150 archeological works from the historical regions of Margiana and the Parthian capital of Nisa in modern-day Turkmenistan. It features rare items never before exhibited outside the country—including clay heads of rulers and warriors, gold and semi-precious gemstone jewelry and ivory drinking horns (*rhyta*)—that highlight the region's role as a pivotal cultural and commercial crossroads connecting Mesopotamia, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

▶ Musei Capitolini, **Rome**, through April 12.

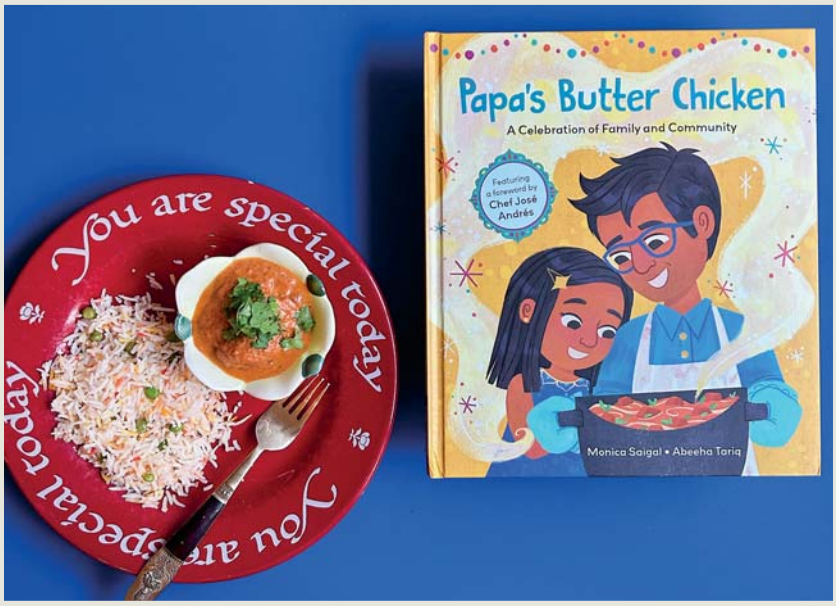
RIGHT Compartment seal III-II millennium BC. State museum of the State cultural center of Turkmenistan.

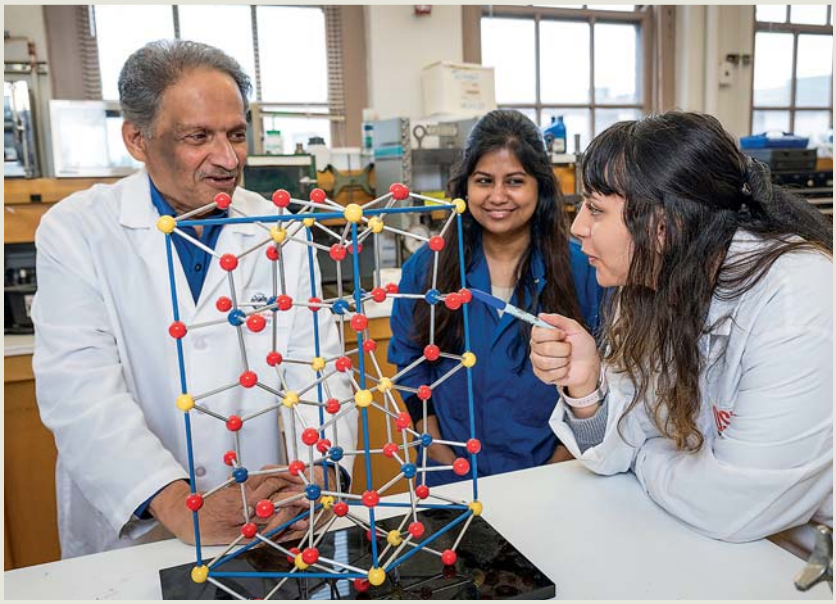
Inner Structures—Outer Rhythms showcases how innovative Arabic and Persian typography contribute to global visual culture—featuring the reinterpretation of tradition scripts by contemporary graphic designers from Southwest Asia and North Africa.

▶ Aga Khan Museum, **Toronto**, through April 19.

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

What's Online?





Artist Reconnects With Sicily's Arab History

Stefania Artusi Khalfi's lineage is split between Italian culinary royalty and Maghrebi immigrants who arrived in Sicily a century ago. Her art maps out the Arab landmarks that make up the multicultural fabric of her home city of Palermo.

A Quest To Perfect Butter Chicken

A culinary historian enlists a food-writer friend to help make an authentic version of the globally recognized and beloved classic dish—and in the process connect to her ancestral homeland of India.

Bring History Into the Lab

Our Learning Center's "For the Teacher's Desk" suggests students can learn science not as a static collection of facts but rather as an evolving continuum of discoveries—often born of missteps—when teachers give them a backstory.

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TOP: TARA TODRAS-WHITEHILL; MIDDLE: ELIZABETH DUNN; BOTTOM: KARL MAASDAM

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Traditional Islamic art and design influenced which famous jewelry house?

A

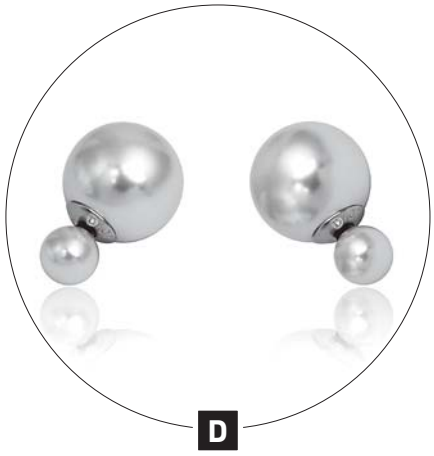
Cartier

B

Tiffany & Co.

C

Bvlgari



D

Dior

Answer: All of the above to varying degrees; however, Cartier most openly absorbed Islamic art into its designs starting in the early 1900s. Brothers Louis, Jacques and Pierre Cartier developed a deep appreciation for the artistry and craftsmanship of the Middle East and India that they infused into their gem-studded creations. Learn more at AramcoWorld.com.

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A: DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE AND TOURISM-ABU DHABI/PHOTO: ISMAIL NOOR/SEEING THINGS; B: IVAN MARC; C: ROBERT WAY; D: ART OF LIFE

AramcoWorld

ABOVE Folk dancers participate in "Il-Maltija," Malta's national dance, at dusk in the town of Floriana.
Read more on page **15**

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