Jul – Aug 2026 | Vol. 77 No. 4 | AramcoWorld.com

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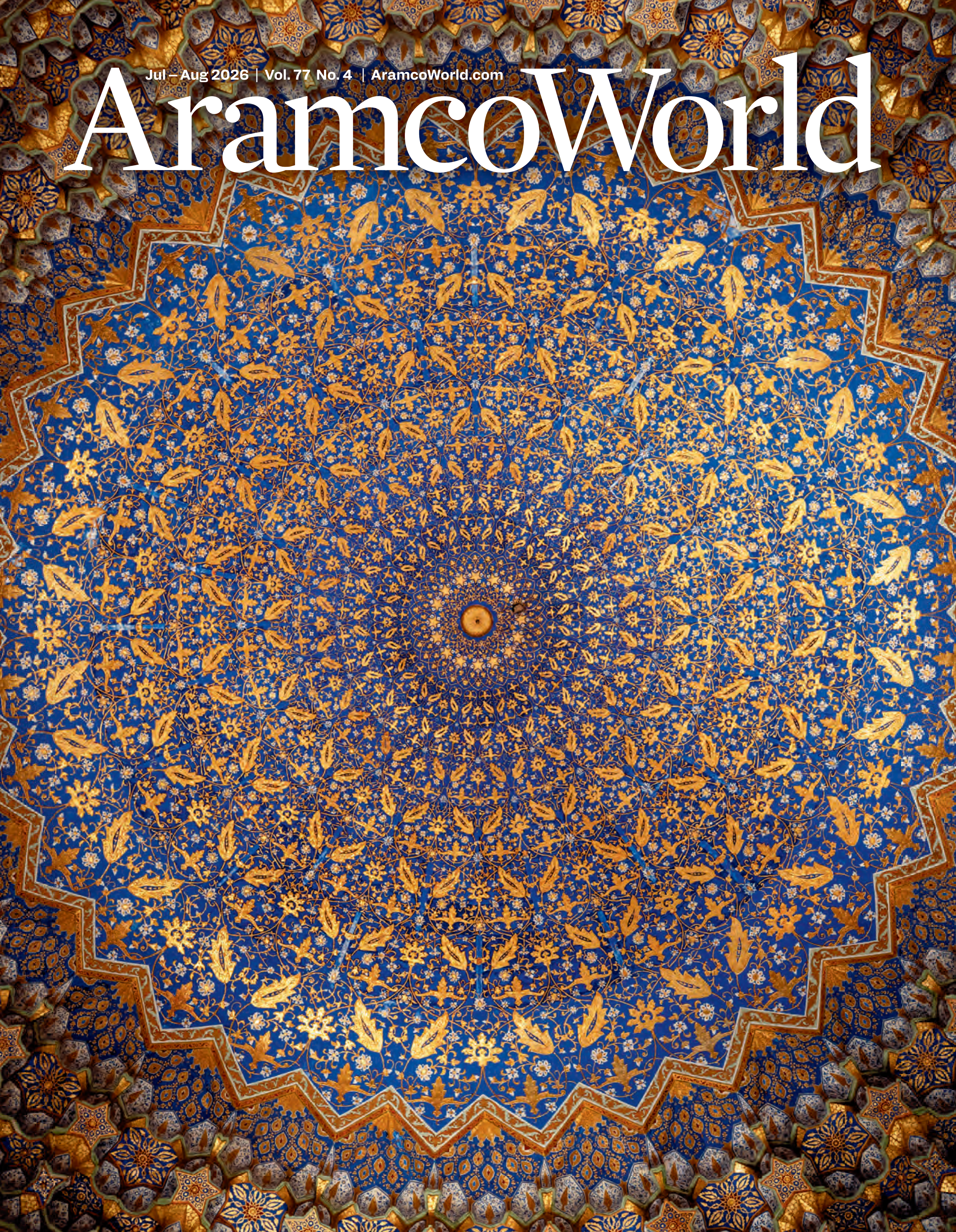

AramcoWorld

July / August
Vol. 77, No. 4

2026

AramcoWorld inspires global connections that broaden the appreciation of diverse cultures. We believe in celebrating our shared experiences through engaging and educational stories and content.

AramcoWorld.com

Publisher: Aramco Americas Company
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Print design: Graphic Engine Design Studio
Printing: RR Donnelley / Wetmore
Web design: eSiteful Corporation

Subscribe online: AramcoWorld.com
Subscription services:
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
ISSN: 2376-1083

AramcoWorld (ISSN 2376-1083) is published bimonthly by Aramco Americas Company, Two Allen Center, 1200 Smith Street, Houston, TX 77002, USA

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Periodicals postage paid at Houston, Texas, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER:
Send address changes to *AramcoWorld*, P.O. Box 292348, Kettering, Ohio 45429.

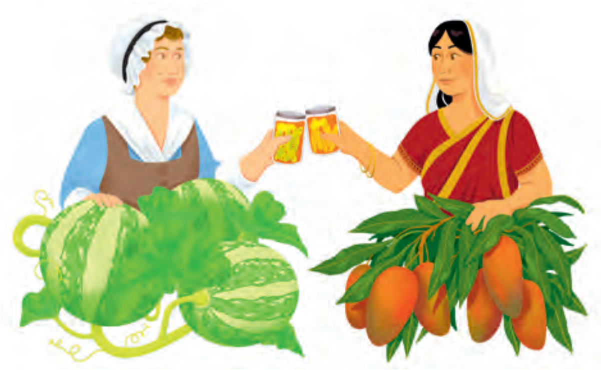
FEATURES

8

Banjo on the Atlas

WRITTEN BY **BANNING EYRE**

How did an instrument with West African ancestors, entwined with Americana music, appear in the lineup of a North African orchestra? Two parallel narratives hold the answer.



14

Early America's Love of Foods From the East

WRITTEN BY **RAMIN GANESHRAM**, ILLUSTRATED BY **IVY JOHNSON**

As the United States marks the 250th anniversary of its independence on July 4, scholars note the Founding Fathers enjoyed foods that relied on ingredients carried through trade routes connecting the Mediterranean, Africa, Asia and the modern-day Middle East.

20

The Unending Work of Safeguarding Samarkand's Monuments

WRITTEN BY **AIBARSHYN AKHMETKALI**, PHOTOGRAPHED BY **DANIIL USMANOV**

With earthquakes, weather, tourism and time threatening some of the world's most celebrated Islamic architecture, restorers ensure that the knowledge behind the monuments survives alongside the buildings themselves.

32

What Has Become of the Hijaz Railway?

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY **LEON McCARRON**

The legacy of an Ottoman-era project to connect Damascas, Syria, to the holy site of Madinah in modern Saudi Arabia and beyond is breathing new life into today's visions for rail in the region.

DEPARTMENTS

2 FirstLook | 4 Flavors | 6 Q&A | 38 Author's Corner | 40 Reviews | 42 Events | 44 What's Online? | 45 Quiz

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FRONT COVER Intricate interior details of the Tilya-Kori Madrasa on the Registan complex in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, include its gilded dome and wall patterns. Preservationists work ceaselessly to restore and maintain the examples of centuries-old Islamic architecture.

OPPOSITE: BANNING EYRE; THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: IVY JOHNSON; DANIIL USMANOV; LEON McCARRON

FirstLook

Framing the Rainy Ride

Photograph by RICCI SHRYOCK

Rainy season in Guinea-Bissau makes for a particularly challenging but also uniquely rewarding time of year to take pictures.

As someone who has been photographing in the West African country since 2008, I have developed a certain rhythm to creating images in public spaces. It involves a lot of walking and even more waiting.

During the June-to-October rainy season, the dirt turns to mud in the capital, Bissau. Potholes put me at near-constant risk of being splashed by a passing public transport. The one in this photo is the blue and yellow minibus known in Portuguese-based Guinea-Bissau Creole (Kriol) as a *toca-toca*, meaning “touch, touch,” because passengers tap or knock on a wall or window to signal the driver that they want to get off.

If I go out right before the rain hits—when the light is electric orange and the air is heavy—or right after the rain—when the drops of water have put a moody gray filter on everything—I can capture the essence of the rainy season in Bissau.

Here, I was walking just after a downpour in September 2025. The roads were still wet, and everyone was moving cautiously to avoid puddles. Buses moved more slowly than usual around the potholes, which had deepened. As the toca-toca pulled up in front of me, I lifted my camera and waved at the woman sitting at the window. She glanced at me and smiled before letting her mouth relax a bit. I snapped her, and the bus lurched back into motion, splashing muddy water onto the sidewalks.

@RICCI_S

Flavors

Rosewater Sutlaç With Pistachio Crumble

Recipe by SHANE DELIA

Photograph by ROB PALMER

Rice-and-milk puddings (called sutlaç) are a big part of the Middle Eastern and Turkish menu.

I have been eating these for as long as I can remember—some good, some not so good, but none of them have been as delicious as the one I had in the Pontic Mountains around Trabzon, along Türkiye's Black Sea coast. Such a simple dish of sugar, milk and rice, but, when it is cooked with love using one of the best ingredients possible, it's a recipe for success.

Shane Delia is the star of the television show *Shane Delia's Spice Journey* and the chef and owner of Maha restaurant and Biggie Smalls Kebab Shop. He is based in Melbourne, Australia. His Lebanese wife, Maha, is the inspiration and namesake of his restaurant. Together they have two children, a daughter, Jayda, and a son, Jude. This is his second book.

(Serves 6-12)

Pistachio crumble:

- 11 tablespoons (150 grams) butter, at room temperature
- 6 tablespoons (75 grams) sugar
- Heaped 1 tablespoon pistachio paste (see note)
- 2 cups (250 grams) all-purpose flour
- 1 cup (125 grams) pistachios, plus extra to serve

Rosewater sutlaç

- 4 cups (1 liter) whole milk (see note)
- ¼ cup (60 grams) baldo rice (or arborio rice)
- ⅓ cup (70 grams) sugar
- ½ cup (120 milliliter) rosewater
- Small handful mint leaves, to serve

Preheat the oven to 170 degrees Celsius (340 degrees Farenheit). Line a baking tray with parchment paper.

Using an electric stand mixer with the paddle attachment, cream the butter, sugar and pistachio paste for 5 minutes at a moderate speed until pale. Add the flour and pistachios to the bowl, reduce the speed to low and mix until it just comes together.

Transfer the pistachio mixture onto the prepared baking tray and spread out into an even layer. Place the tray in the oven and bake for 17 minutes or until golden. Remove the shortbread from the oven and set aside until cool enough to handle. Break up into a crumble.

To make the rosewater sutlaç, place the milk in a saucepan over medium-high heat. Simmer until the milk has reduced by a third.

In a separate saucepan, cook the rice, adding the milk, a ladleful at a time, stirring continuously, until *al dente*. Add the sugar and rosewater, stir well and then pour into serving bowls.

Place a mound of pistachio crumble on top of the sutlaç. Top with pistachios and mint leaves and serve either hot or cold.

Notes: Pistachio paste is available from a specialist Middle Eastern grocery store. It can be purchased online.

Use fresh milk from a cow or goat for superior flavor.

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East/West: A Culinary Journey Through Malta, Lebanon, Iran, Turkey, Morocco, and Andalusia
Shane Delia. Interlink Books, 2017. InterlinkBooks.com.

MATT RUSSELL

Q&A

‘My Vessels of Remembrance’

Written by NILOSREE BISWAS
Photographed by SUZANNE LEE

Two things have shaped Chris Ong like no other: his grandmother’s stories and the interior of a home filled with objects of the Peranakan Chinese, descendants of early Chinese settlers of the Malay Peninsula and Indonesian archipelago whose mixed ancestry forms a distinctive hybrid culture.

Growing up in 1970s George Town, capital of the Malaysian state of Penang, as a fifth-generation Malay Chinese teenager, Ong was captivated by the material culture of a Peranakan household—dishes, cups, spoons, fans, cooking vessels, *almirahs* (wardrobes), cabinets and more. Each object drew him in, sparking a curiosity that would last far beyond his teenage years.

Ong traces his ancestry to 1840, when his maternal great-grandfather Khaw Boo Aun arrive in Malaya, then a British territory, from China. His paternal grandfather, Ong Khong Oon, was a later migrant from China’s Fujian province.

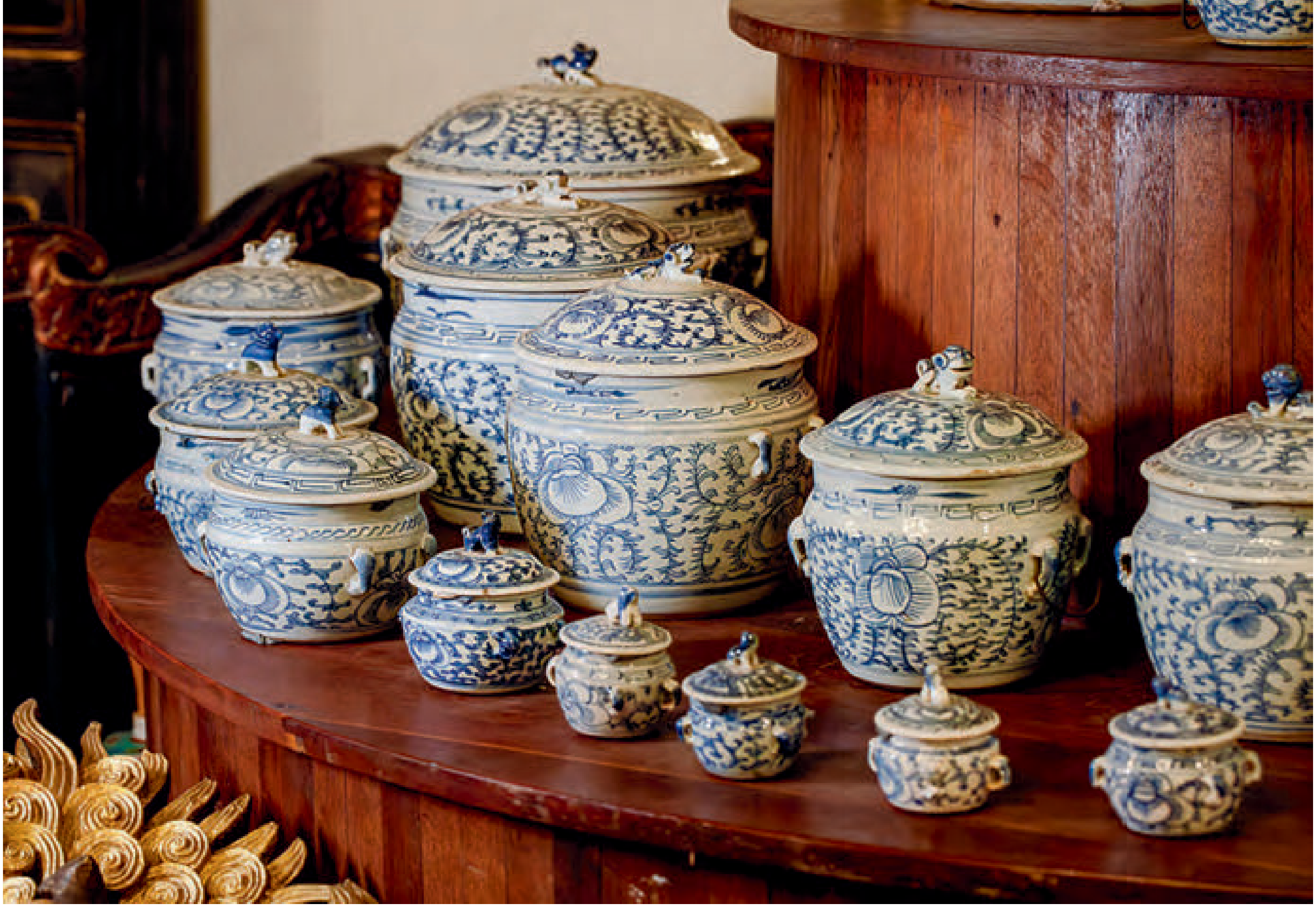
In adulthood, his ever-growing passion for cultural inheritance compelled him to leave a prosperous investment banking career to become a heritage hotelier and full-time collector dedicated to preserving Malay Chinese traditions, also known as Straits Chinese, Peranakan or Baba Nyonya culture.

Historically, the Peranakan intermarried with local communities along the Straits of Malacca, creating a culture shaped by Chinese, Malay, British, Indian and Arab influences. Much of these are reflected in the distinct esthetics of Ong’s heritage hotels. The Jawi Peranakan Mansion, for example, is a restored former residence of a wealthy Tamil Muslim merchant whose façade bears Mughal design elements and whose interior doors, windows, textiles and other items were acquired in India to lend the property an Indian Muslim feel.

But it is mostly his Peranakan Chinese heritage on display. Today his collection encompasses at least 10,000 artifacts, including *kam cheng* (covered jars), *tingkat* (stackable tiffin carriers, like multitiered lunchboxes used to transport home-cooked meals), Peranakan porcelain, Penang wedding beds, mother-of-pearl furniture and rare textiles. A portion of the collection can be viewed at Seven Terraces Hotel in George Town, where the items form part of the hotel’s furnishings and a dedicated gallery.

From his sprawling residence, which resembles a Peranakan home from the late 1850s to the 1950s and serves as a private museum, Ong spoke with *AramcoWorld* about how his collection has evolved from “just gathering stuff” to a meaningful return to his ancestral and cultural roots.

Chris Ong collects objects reflecting Malaysia’s mix of cultures.



OPPOSITE AND ABOVE Ong displays parts of his 10,000-plus-object collection at his Seven Terraces Hotel in George Town, Penang, Malaysia. They include several pieces of Peranakan porcelain and cabinetry.

From investment banker to private collector, you've been on a long journey. Where did it all begin?

In the 1960s, when I was 4 or 5, my widowed grandmother came to live with us. She molded my upbringing with her stories. I would be lost in her conversations, instead of watching the Muppets or [other] television. My head would be filled with her stories as a Nyonya in the gilded age of the 1920s.

…The most heartbreaking [stories] were about the disposal of her entire contents from her Straits Chinese home by my mother because they were deemed too old fashioned in the 1960s. Those memories remained embedded in me. Soon a 13-year-old, I was buying little antiques as if to refill my grandma's life.

[Many] influences and knowledge got channeled into my passion as I retired from banking in my 40s, returning to my hometown after being away for 30 years, to pursue my passion in Straits Chinese heritage. Around the same time, George Town was inscribed as a [UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008], and my financial strength and interest in Straits Chinese culture and heritage came together, as I ventured into the world of hospitality.

How has your role as a collector changed over the years?

Recently, I have started archiving and recording intangible heritage too.

Starting my collection of Straits Chinese antiques at a relatively late stage, and furnishing my terrace house and hotels at the same time, meant I was acquiring a lot of pieces every day. I have collected all on my own terms, acquiring them from the open market. These collections are my vessels of remembrance. They remind me of my heritage and background. The only problem—no one had told me when to stop!

Do you plan to convert your collection into a private museum?

The collection at my home and the hotels is essentially the genesis of a private-public museum. We have been putting together annual exhibitions of parts of my collection to instill the discipline of curation and creating a narrative for each exhibition. So far, we have had nine exhibitions.

What is the future of your heritage work?

The future of my heritage work is about passing on this knowledge, educating younger generations about our history, its relevance and adaptability in this new age.

Archiving and creating a legacy is a priority right now. I am doing this through the publication of books [2024's *The Chris Ong Collection*, written by Ong and photographed by Nick Almasy, was published by group brand George Town Heritage Hotels] and giving talks to students and special interest groups.

Until [my last breath], I will take an active interest in collecting, for the pursuit of beauty and perfection is a never-ending process with immense joy and satisfaction.

This interview has been lightly edited for length, clarity and flow.

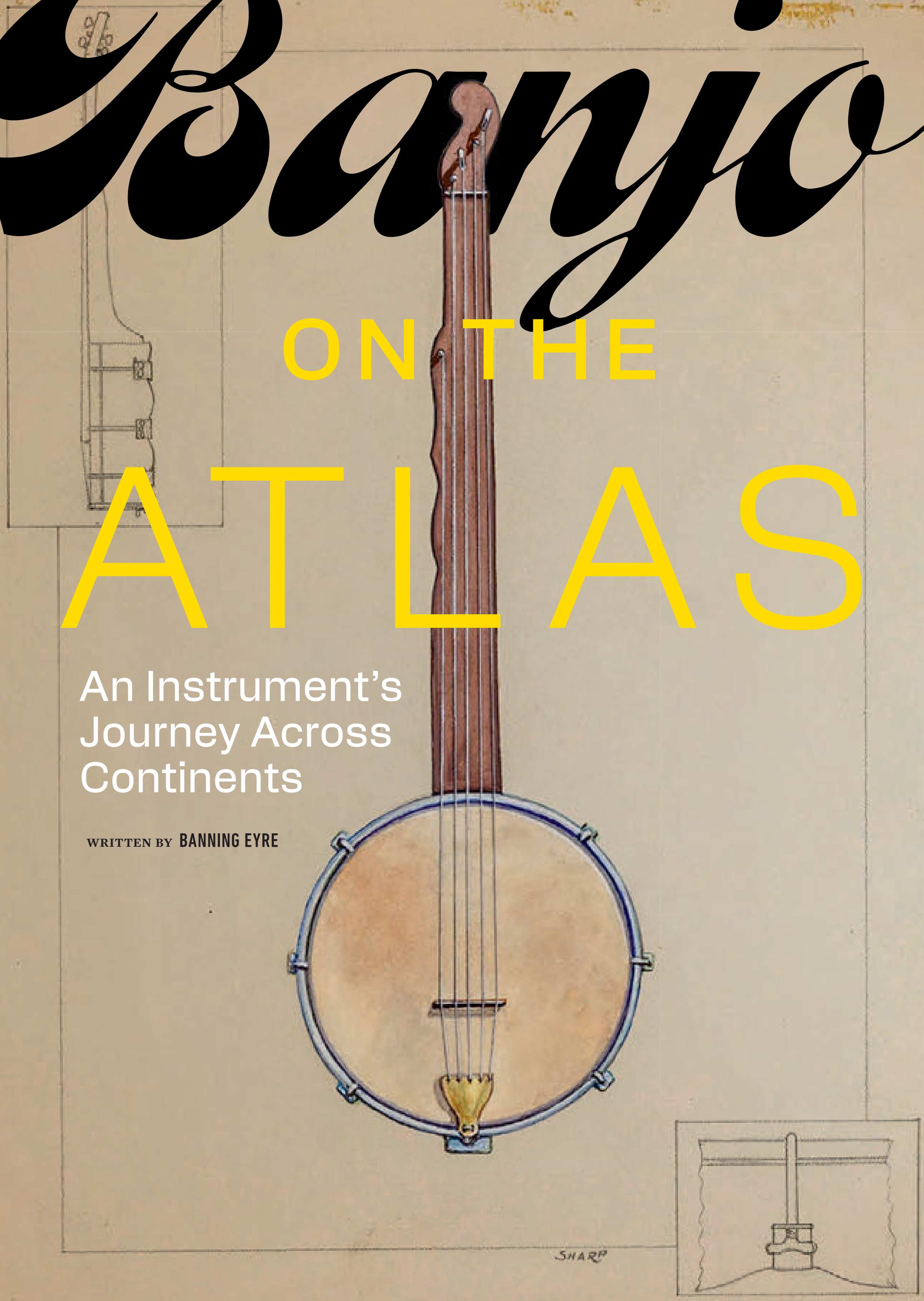
Nilosree Biswas is a columnist, author and filmmaker who writes about Asian history, art, culture, food and cinema. Her articles regularly appear in national and international media. **Suzanne Lee** is a Malaysia-based documentary photographer and filmmaker with over two decades of professional experience covering Asia through visual stories rooted in culture and heritage. She is also a photography educator and co-founder of altstudio.asia, where she leads workshops on visual storytelling.

Read more articles like this online at AramcoWorld.com.

Banjo ON THE ATLAS

An Instrument's Journey Across Continents

WRITTEN BY **BANNING EYRE**



From its West African roots to its American reinvention, the banjo has traveled oceans and centuries to find its place in North African music.

On an outdoor stage at the Nuits D'Afrique music festival, the Montreal Chaâbi Orchestra took the stage in crisp white dress shirts and black trousers. Few members wore jackets, owing to the blazing heat. Still, an air of formality prevailed. The musicians cradled *ouds*, *mondol*s, violins, a guitar and various Arabic percussion instruments—a *tar* and a *darbouka*. Then came the surprise: three banjos gleaming under the sun.

To the uninitiated, the banjo may seem like an odd presence among North Africa's traditional instruments. Imagine a small guitarlike instrument, but in place of a wooden body sits an animal-skin-covered drumhead. The player plucks strings over that membrane to produce a bright, percussive sound that blends melody and rhythm.

"The banjo is basically a drum on a stick," quips Laurent Dubois, a history professor at the University of Virginia, recalling a phrase he once heard at an American banjo camp. Reductionist though it may be, the phrase captures the instrument's essence: simple yet striking in sound.

In the United States today, small acoustic ensembles that play bluegrass, country and folk, including old-time, most often feature the banjo. Players usually use fingerpicks that produce a rapid, sparkling roll. In North Africa, by contrast, the banjo has been absorbed into ensemble traditions that emphasize single-line melodies and modal improvisation; players use a plectrum, a pick prized for its volume and percussive bite rather than chordal accompaniment.

Born from African memory and reimagined in the Americas, the banjo became a companion to work songs, dances and communal gatherings. The earliest examples of this date to the 17th century, when it was played almost exclusively by African Americans and their descendants, long before the instrument entered broader American culture. An instrument as resilient as those who played it, from plantation fields to minstrel performances, its African American roots formed an enduring thread through folk, blues and American jazz.

So, how did an instrument so entwined with American folk music appear in the lineup of an Algerian orchestra rooted in the music of old Al-Andalus?

It turns out two parallel narratives outline the banjo's return to Africa, one rooted in the Amazigh

"The Plantation Banjo," **OPPOSITE**, a circa 1937 illustration by Floyd R. Sharp, depicts the descendant of African stringed instruments that was played in the American South, especially on plantations. It is closely tied to African American musical heritage. **BELOW**, The Montreal Chaâbi Orchestra, including banjo players, performs at the Nuits d'Afrique music festival.

FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL
NUITS D'AFRIQUE
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OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART; THIS PAGE: BANNING EYRE

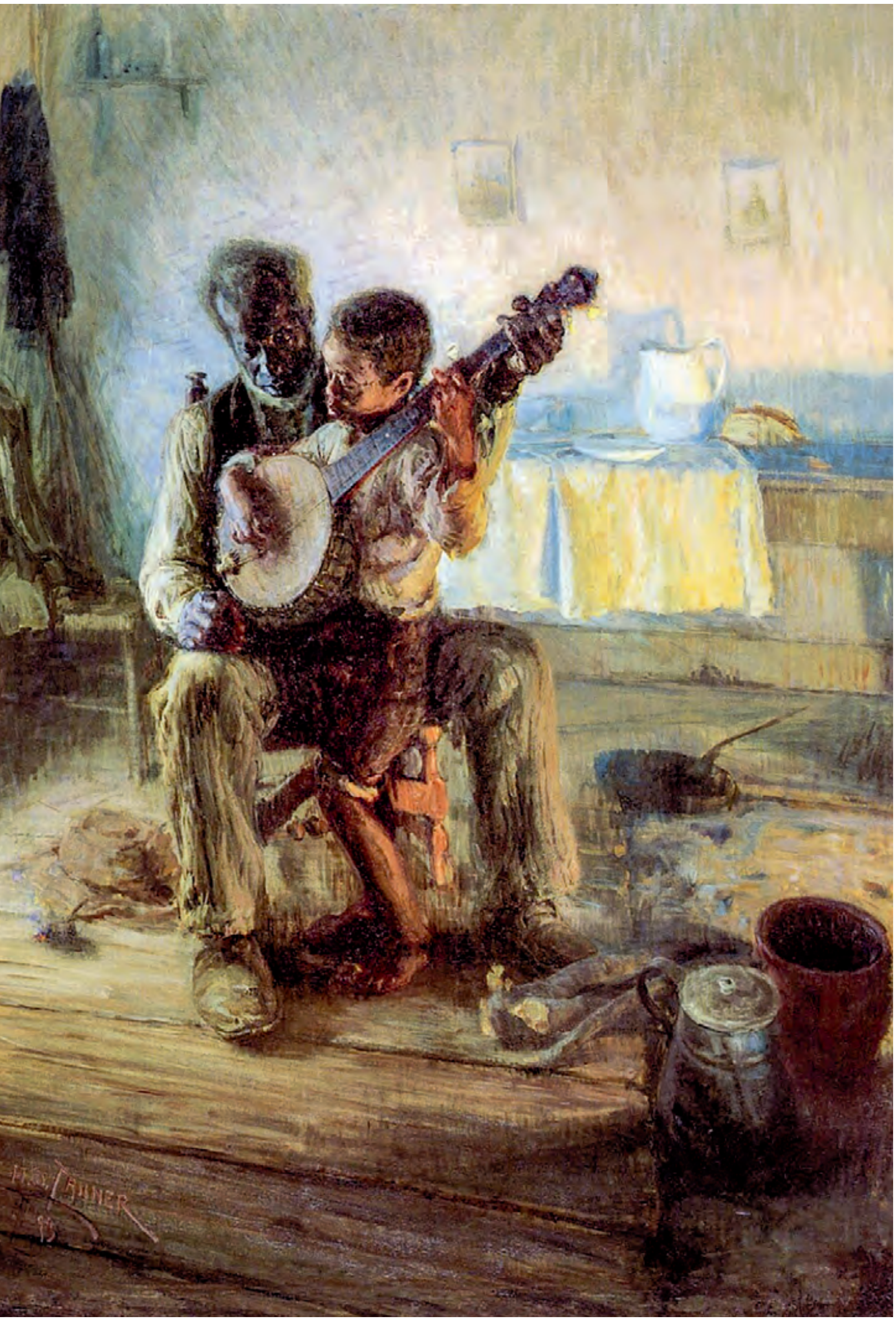
African American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner's 1893 oil painting "The Banjo Lesson" depicts a nurturing scene that refuted widely held racial stereotypes of the era.

(Berber) culture of Morocco's Atlas Mountains and the other involving Algerian *chaâbi* music.

The banjo's improbable backstory unfolds in Dubois's book *The Banjo: America's African Instrument*. His research shows that the banjo's earliest-known ancestors are a family of instruments known as the spike lutes of West Africa.

The banjo can't claim any single ancestor. The Gambian *akonting*, Senegalese *xalam* and Malian *ngoni* all fit the bill—fretless instruments whose sound chamber is a gourd or concave wooden body with animal skin stretched tightly over it and a bridge supporting between one and seven pluckable strings.

Dubois says the banjo resulted from the collision of African cultures in the American plantation South, where captive Africans fashioned gourd banjos using materials at hand. "If you're a musician on a plantation," says Dubois, "you have to successfully play to Ibos, Congos, maybe some Peul, all [ethnic groups who] have totally different musical traditions." In other words, one reason the banjo has traveled far and wide is its ability to traverse cultures. Today, the American banjo is a staple of music genres that descend, to varying degrees, from 19th-century minstrelsy, when the instrument was used to parody Black culture, leading the banjo to pass mostly to white hands.



> "The banjo emerged in places of incredible cultural ferment, of migration and change."
>
> —LAURENT DUBOIS

"The banjo emerged in places of incredible cultural ferment, of migration and change," says Dubois. He adds, "when it gets back to Africa in the 20th century, a lot of Africans are experiencing similar things. It may not be quite right that instruments carry their history, but I would argue that the banjo was invented to deal with different ethnicities."

And that brings us to North Africa.

AMAZIGH STRINGS AND MOROCCAN SQUARES

The banjo found its way into Morocco during the era of French colonialism. Already adapted in various European contexts, it arrived in North African cities, especially in the hands of African soldiers returning from serving in World War II.

Hassan Wargui, a Moroccan banjo player based in France, grew up immersed in Amazigh culture in Morocco. "In my culture, there is the *lotar*, an Amazigh instrument," he explains. "It has a voice like the banjo. There is a skin body and a neck; it's almost the same. That's why Moroccans are very accepting of the banjo." The lotar belongs to another branch of the African lute family tree that includes the likely ancestors of the banjo.

By the 1960s Amazigh ensembles included banjos when performing *rais* folk music. "Going back to my childhood, the banjo was the instrument that you would see in the public square, like Jemaa el-Fnaa in

Marrakech," recalls Said Graiouid, provost and dean of faculty at the School for International Training in Vermont, US, and Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco.

But the instrument's emergence in popular Moroccan culture came later, with the rise of the band Nass El Ghiwane, which American filmmaker Martin Scorsese once described as "the Rolling Stones of North Africa."

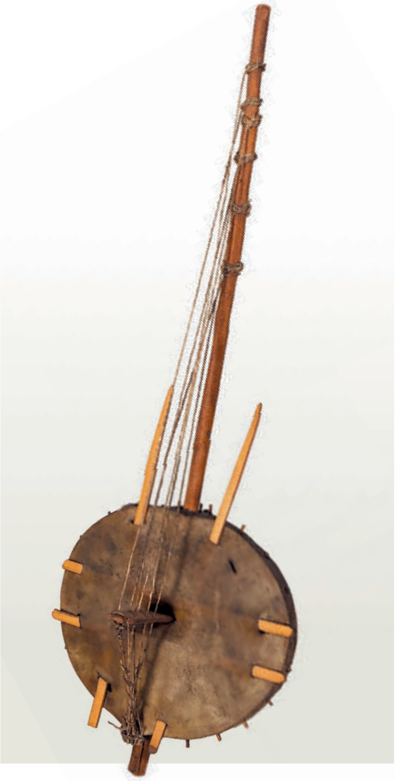
"I don't think we can write about the banjo in Moroccan culture outside the contribution of Nass El Ghiwane," Graiouid says. One of the band's original members, Allal Yaâla, with his Amazigh background, introduced the banjo early on, and it became a signature of the band's sound.

Echoing Dubois's notion of cultural ferment, Graiouid notes that Nass El Ghiwane performed as Morocco was experiencing rapid social and cultural change. Its music offered a fresh, distinctive voice that resonated widely, and in time, the band's innovative style—which Graiouid calls Ghiwanism—became a defining influence on Moroccan popular music.

The same cannot be said for the banjo. Though it remains a constant in Amazigh folk music, more mainstream groups rarely include it. Graiouid says that Nass El Ghiwane today is strongly associated with *al-zaman al-jamil*, basically "the good old days"—mainstream ensembles would not want to be compared to this legendary group nor accused of imitating it.

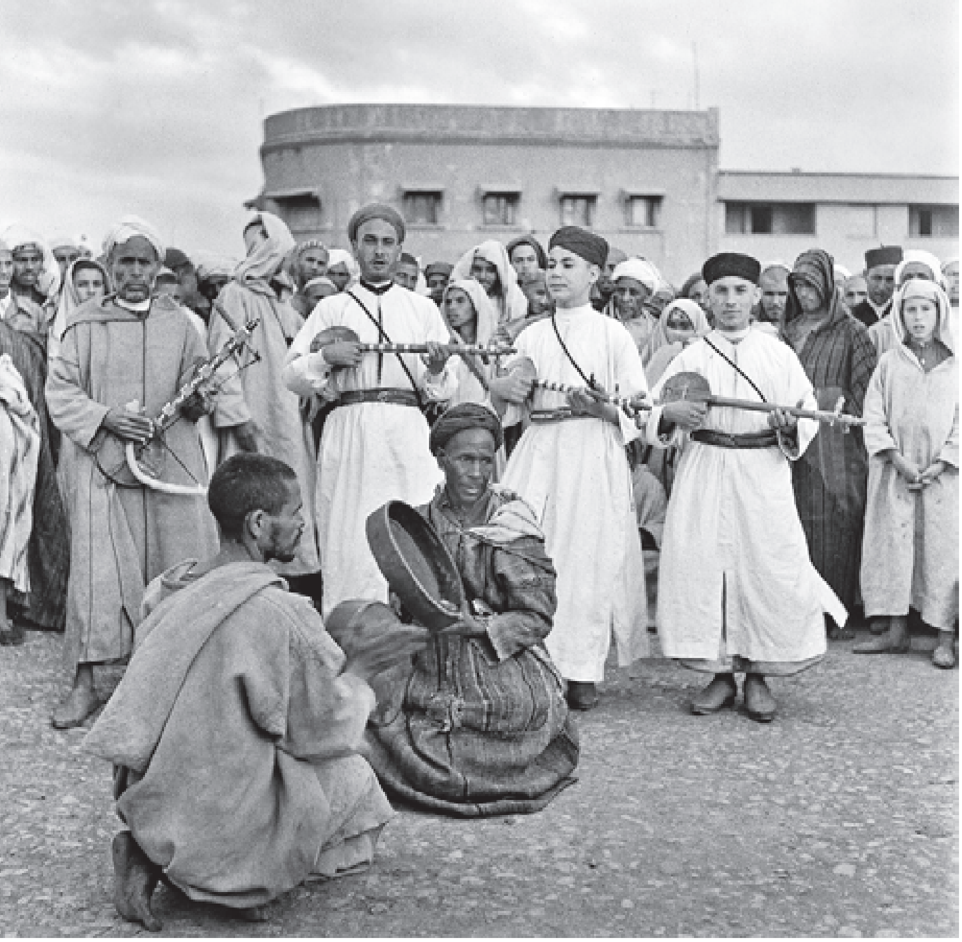
CHAÂBI AND THE ALGERIAN BANJO

The story in Algeria is quite different. Guitarist and banjo player Ali Syroco, a founder of the Montreal Chaâbi Orchestra, explains: "We grew up with the banjo in Algeria. I listened to chaâbi music when I was little. And the two signatures of chaâbi are the banjo and the mondol." The Algerian mondol (sometimes *mandol*, *mondole* or *mondola*) is a steel-string, fretted instrument rather like an oversized mandolin.



ABOVE The banjo's earliest-known ancestors are a family of instruments known as the spike lutes of West Africa, including the Sora Ngoni (aka simbingo) of Mali. **LEFT** An Algerian soldier plays the banjo for his comrades in October 1945, at the end of World War II.

THIS PAGE, TOP: CROSBY BROWN COLLECTION OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS, 1899, COURTESY OF METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART; RIGHT: GETTY IMAGES



ABOVE LEFT Troubadours of the Chleuh tribe of southern Morocco perform in Marrakech in 1946. **ABOVE RIGHT** Hajd M'Hamed El Anka is known as the "grand master" and founder of Algerian chaâbi music. **RIGHT** Hassan Wargui, a Moroccan musician based in France, grew up in the Amazigh culture that he says embraced the banjo for its similarity to a lute known as the *lotar*.

Hadj M'Hamed El Anka, the "grand master" and founder of Algerian chaâbi music, began innovating in the 1930s, enlarging the classic mondol with the help of an Italian luthier to make it louder for ensemble settings.

During and after World War II, as the banjo found its way into Algerian cities, El Anka immediately appreciated its ability to project volume and its percussive quality. "The mix between the mondol and the banjo was a really fresh new sound," Syroco says. "The

"[The *lotar*] has a voice like a banjo. ... They're almost the same. That's why Moroccans are very accepting of the banjo."

—HASSAN WARGUI

The musicians of Moroccan folk band Nass El Ghiwane play a variety of traditional drums and lutes. The banjo forms a large part of the ensemble's signature sound.

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT: RUSSELL WESTWOOD/POPPERFOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM COURTESY OF HASSAN WARGUI; THIS PAGE: BANNING EYRE

metallic banjo sound with the round sound of the mondol was perfect."

Add a darbouka drum and a singer, and you have the basis of Algerian chaâbi, which coalesced in the 1940s. Sporting events began featuring the musical style as sport was becoming a symbol of identity, once again a milieu of cultural ferment and change. In the early '40s, El Anka composed "L'Union L'USMA," a praise song in honor of the USM Alger football club that many consider the first patriotic sports song in Algerian history.

After World War II, El Anka became the music director for Algerian radio, giving him a powerful vehicle for popularizing this young genre. In 1955, he began teaching chaâbi as a professor at the Municipal Academy of Algiers. His first pupils all became renowned musicians, including Amar El Achab, Hassen Said and Rachid Souki.

Syroco says a modern chaâbi ensemble generally includes two banjos, a "guitar banjo" playing on the low strings and a tenor banjo taking the high melodies. These two are sometimes called the "wings" of the chaâbi sound. The mondol plays a main melody while the banjos embellish with what Syroco calls "spice."

The Algerian banjo, like its Moroccan cousin, carries a distinctive voice—bright, percussive and endlessly adaptable. "We play always by pick, never by finger," says Syroco, adding that the instrument plays single-line melodies, not chords. "You always have to respect the melody because in chaâbi, it's always about melody."

Wargui says that the Moroccan banjo has six strings that are generally, though not always, tuned like a lotar. Since the instrument remains mostly in folk circles, there are no established fabricators. This stands in contrast to Algeria, where the luthier Farid Taleb's mondols, guitars and banjos bring renown. Sometimes Moroccan players remove the frets to play quarter-tone melodies. This harks back to the earliest days of manufactured banjos in America, which came with an optional plate that could be placed over the frets to create the same effect.

Wargui adds that Moroccans consider the banjo a traditional instrument. As for its deeper history in West Africa, "I don't think most people know about it." There's another echo: For years, American banjo players were unaware of the instrument's African origins, until more recent scholarship removed all doubt.

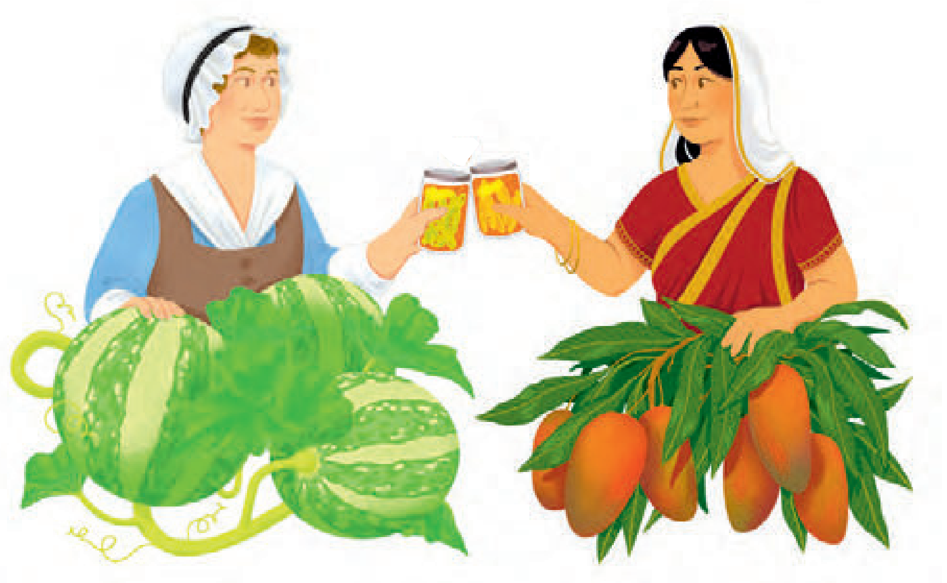
And so, on the Montreal stage, the banjo continues its centurieslong journey—from African roots to American reinvention, back to North African ensembles—carrying with it a history of resilience, adaptation and the enduring power of music to connect cultures.

As Dubois notes, a sense of ownership lies at the heart of the banjo's almost universal appeal. "I think the key is," he says, "nobody thinks of it as foreign." AW

Banning Eyre is a senior producer for Public Radio International's Peabody Award-winning "Afropop Worldwide" (afropop.org) and author of a number of books on African music and history.

Early America's LOVE OF FOODS From the East

WRITTEN BY **RAMIN GANESHRAM**, ILLUSTRATED BY **IVY JOHNSON**



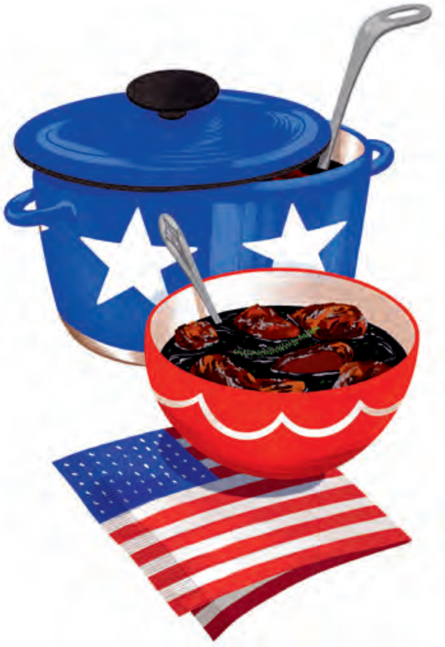
In 1781, during the final years of the American Revolutionary War, Martha Mortier—the wife of an army paymaster in British-occupied Manhattan—learned that Gen. George Washington's wife, Martha, had fallen ill and sent a gift of lemons, oranges, limes, tamarind and orgeat, a syrup made from almonds and orange flower water.

The gesture revealed something often forgotten about early America. As the United States marks the 250th anniversary of its independence from Great Britain on July 4, the foods that filled the tables of the Founding Fathers—the late-18th-century statesmen who were most influential in the new country's creation—are a reminder that even before the nation was founded, elite households relied on ingredients carried through trade routes connecting the Mediterranean, Africa, Asia and regions now known as the Middle East.

In my research as a culinary historian of early America, I've found that many foods recently introduced to American cuisine were already staples of the more affluent kitchens during the founding era.

The misconception persists because some of these ingredients only recently became accessible to mainstream America. Ten years ago, mangoes were not an everyday item in the produce section of a grocery store. Fresh ginger was unlikely to be found 15 years

As the United States celebrates its 250th birthday, scholars note early Americans enjoyed foods from the Mediterranean, Africa, Asia and the region known today as the Middle East. **OPPOSITE** A British Army paymaster's wife sent a letter and citrus fruits, medicinal syrup and tamarind to Martha Washington, wife of American Gen. George Washington, as a goodwill gesture. **ABOVE** Mangoes and melons—and the South Asian tradition of pickling them—were part of the culinary exchange with early America. **LEFT** Some of the same ingredients found in today's pantry were used in the mid-19th century.



ABOVE The spicy beef stew known as pepperpot that was popular in 18th-century Philadelphia likely drew influence from Caribbean and African cooking traditions. **BELOW** George Washington's Mount Vernon greenhouse grew figs, which are native to North Africa, Türkiye and northern India.

ago. When I was a child, cooking with olive oil—or even being able to buy olive oil in anything but the smallest bottle was unheard of. Only a campaign promoting it as a heart-healthful oil in the late 1980s helped popularize it among American consumers. Even then, the oil was tied to the Mediterranean diet—a sophisticated form of eating that promotes maximum health.

In the last decades of the 20th century and first two of the 21st, the "food as culture" craze ushered in an era of beautifully photographed, coffee-table-style cookbooks. It has also brought televised food programming and, more recently, digital streaming content featuring gorgeously crafted eats—very often focused on "nontraditional" American ingredients. Curry, tamarind, rose water and saffron are promoted as "exotic" and retain an association with recent newcomers to the US.

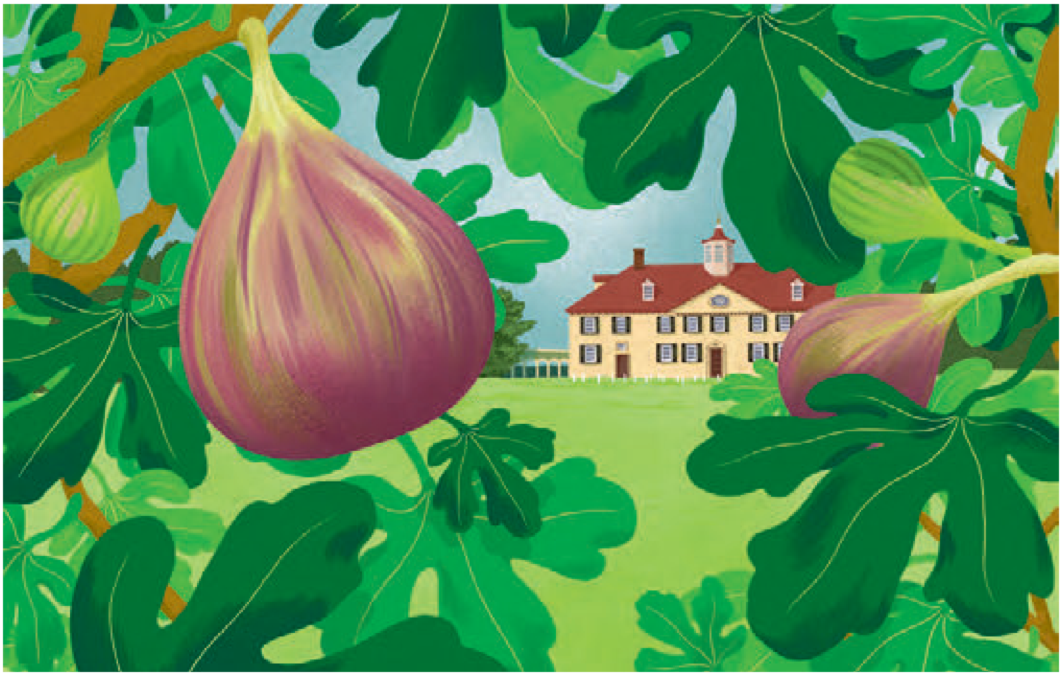
But historical records tell a different story. The foods of the East are key characters in the story of the creation of the American republic. I've found that the Founding Fathers' palates were more adventurous than even modern Americans of comparable wealth and status. Washington's pantry, for example, demonstrated an appreciation for the flavors of the present-day Middle East, Asia and Africa. Wealthy enough to import food from around the world, America's first president enjoyed a larder that included pickled mangoes from India, creamy Mediterranean almonds, woodsy pistachios in the shell and delicately flavored virgin olive oil—then commonly called "sweet oil."

"It's a fallacy that the foods of 250 years ago were somehow simpler than foods eaten today and, at the same time, rather monotonous and bland," said Mary V. Thompson, research historian emerita at George Washington's Mount Vernon in Northern Virginia, just outside the capital city that now bears his name, and an expert on foodways at the Virginia estate. "That might have been true of people on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder who lacked the money to import foods and time to prepare elaborate meals, but it was hardly the case for the wealthier members of society."

I discovered that Washington's food-supply ledgers while he was president in Philadelphia (the U.S. capital in the 1790s) feature specific entries for "Foreign Fruit" and "Foreign Nuts," and citrus was in the regular rotation. Mortier's gift of tamarind was not a new flavor for the first couple after all. Washington was fond of its tart flavor and consumed it in all the ways common to his time: as a sour agent in fruit chutneys, in stews and sauces, and as a refreshing drink, flavored with rose water, like the tamr hindi popular in the Middle East during Ramadan. The preparation likely traveled through longstanding Atlantic food exchanges from Africa, where tamarind is a native tree.

Another key flavor in Washington and his contemporaries' kitchens was rose water (*mā al-ward* in Arabic, *gülsuyu* in Turkish, *golab* in Persian and *gulab jal* in Hindi), which was used in desserts the way modern-day bakers in the West use vanilla.

The flavoring was used in pound cake, an almond "macaroone" similar to Moroccan *ghriba* or Iraqi *hadji bada*, and various puddings, including one made of boiled carrots and flavored with cinnamon, calling to mind Indian carrot *halwa* recipes. Even American apple pie was flavored at the time with rose water.

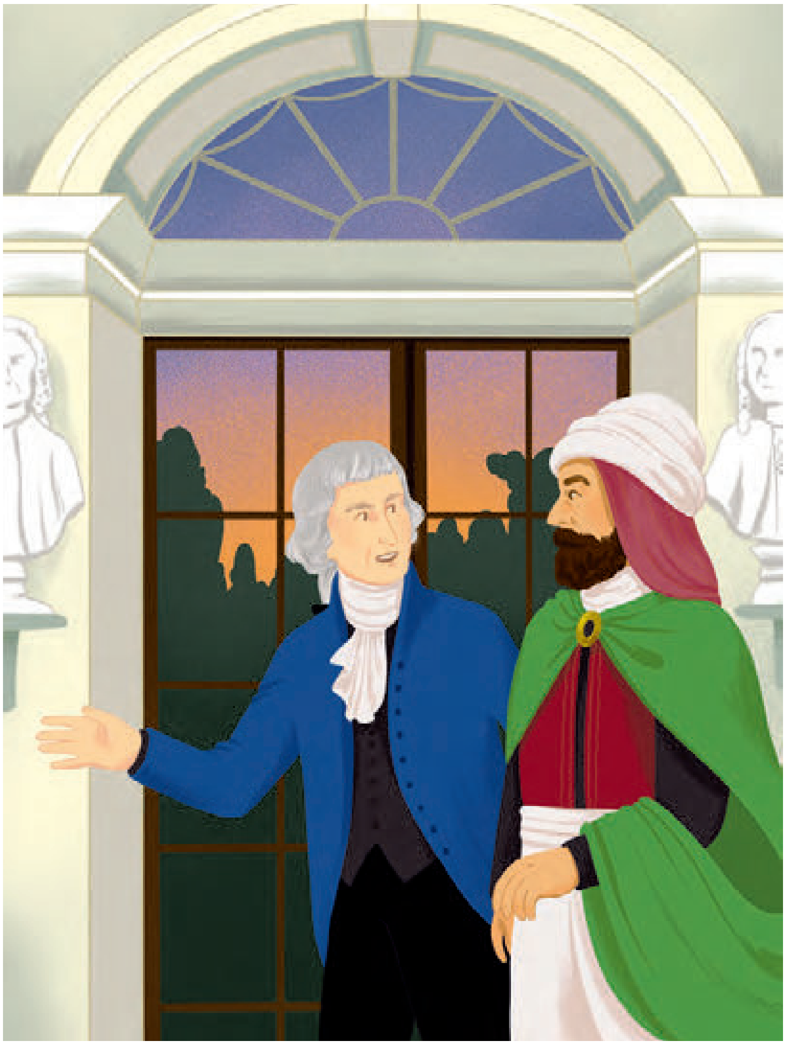


America's Oldest Ally: Morocco

Just one year after the United States of America declared independence from Great Britain in 1776, Morocco became the first state to formally recognize the new country. In 1777 Sultan Sidi Mohammed ben Abdallah al-Khatib (Mohammed III), looking to expand his trade networks, invited the Americans to "come and traffic freely in these ports in like manner as they formerly did under the English flag." The US, needing safe passage of its merchant ships in the Mediterranean Sea, accepted.

The Moroccan-American Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1786, also known as the Treaty of Marrakech, focused on big-picture diplomatic and commercial strategies. In practice it also allowed Morocco to export surplus wool, leather and agricultural products such as arabic gum arabic, used in food and medicine, and to import grain and flour, among other staples. President George Washington later wrote to his "Great and Magnanimous Friend" the sultan that "our soil is beautiful, and our people industrious, and we have reason to flatter ourselves that we shall gradually become useful to our friends."

Sources: ArabAmerica.com, U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Morocco



President Thomas Jefferson hosted an iftar feast in 1806 for Tunisian envoy Sulemein Mellimelli.

RE-CREATING EARLY AMERICAN FOODS TODAY

Chef Justin Cherry is the owner of Half Crown Bakehouse, a mobile bakery based in South Carolina that employs a trailered beehive oven, authentic to the 18th century, which produces authentic colonial and early American baked goods. Cherry is also the baker in residence at George Washington's Mount Vernon. He says he tries to stay as true as possible to baked-goods recipes of America's founding era but has to adapt for modern tastes that are not as accustomed to Eastern flavors.

"I have to account for the fact that the palate has evolved over 250 years, so I educate folks on what they are about to taste and why they are tasting certain flavors. It is staying true to the authenticity but getting the mind ready for what the mouth is about to taste," said Cherry.

Early Americans' passion for Eastern foods wasn't limited to sweets. Spicy pickles were a favorite of Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the Declaration of Independence and served as the nation's third president, and, as with Washington before him, included spicy, salty pickled mangoes from India and the Caribbean. Even in the early 18th century, recipes substituting young melons, soaking them in a saltwater brine then a mixture of sugar, vinegar, spices and hot peppers allowed common folk to approximate the delicacy.

On the other hand, the orange flower water equally used in confections like baklava and basbousa was, in the Americas, often the basis for medicinal syrups, called capaillaire or orgeat, and mixed at home by those who could afford them. I found that among orange flower water's aficionados was the American scientist and statesman Benjamin Franklin.

By the time the Continental Congress voted to secede the 13 North American colonies from the British in 1776, the foods of the East had long been commonplace for some and aspirational for others.

HISTORICAL TRADE, AMERICAN STYLE

The Europeans who ultimately colonized the Americas developed their taste for these flavors many generations before they set foot on the other side of the world. It was the medieval spice routes that

It is easy to imagine old and new whisks, **RIGHT**, preparing dishes for early and modern Americans alike. Similarly, today's lemonade aficionado, **BELOW**, perhaps enjoys the foodways of the lemon as much as a New World connoisseur enjoyed the Old World citrus fruit.

brought spices like cinnamon, nutmeg, anise and saffron, along with nuts like pistachios and almonds, and dried fruits like plums, peaches, raisins and dates, into their sphere. Such costly imports became markers of celebration and status reserved for feast days, weddings and religious festivals.

According to a 1945 article in the academic journal William and Mary Quarterly, "The Import Trade of Colonial Virginia," this culture of cuisine came over on the ships to Virginia, Massachusetts and New York. Ingredients moved through Mediterranean and British trade networks before reaching American ports, where food exchange in the form of sugarcane crop first transplanted from India and its byproducts of molasses and rum were building dizzying fortunes by the 17th century in Jamaica and Barbados. Yet even for the wealthy planters who were rapidly becoming the richest men in the world, the import system proved costly. The solution was all around them: the fertile soils of the Caribbean. In less than a hundred years, all manner of produce and spice from the East had been transplanted and was thriving: tamarind, bananas, nutmeg, cinnamon, mangoes, coffee, pomegranates, lemons, oranges and more. In temperate North American climes, items like rhubarb and quince grew well, as they had in parts of Europe. Barberries were transplanted in the North to be preserved in jams and syrups flavored with rose water. Washington even grew figs in his greenhouse at Mount Vernon.

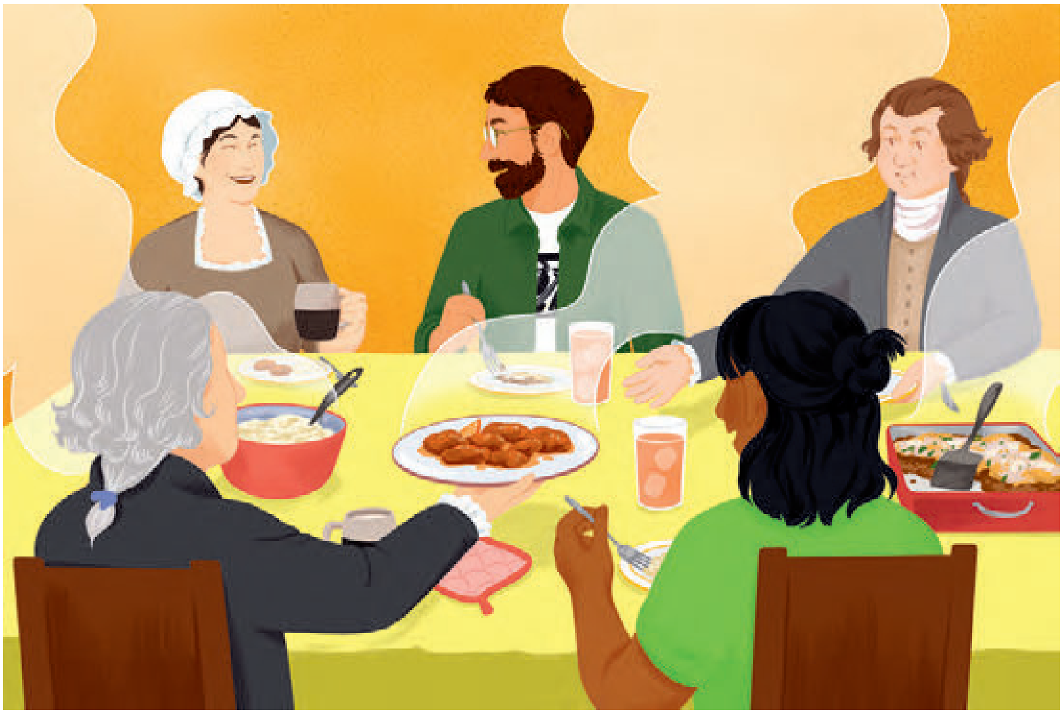
But some things could not be uprooted from the Old World to the New; tea, almonds and curry powder still had to be imported at high costs. When British tariffs to pay for the French and Indian War (the North American theater of the wider Seven Years War of 1756-1763) began to impact access to these and other goods, the colonists decided it was time to throw off the yoke of their British monarch.

CULINARY DIPLOMACY

Within one year of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Sultanate of Morocco was the first country to recognize the United States as a sovereign nation. In 1786, it formalized a treaty of peace and friendship, but the relationship was fraught because of conflicts between American trading ships and pirates off the coast of North Africa in the early 19th century.

Among then-President Jefferson's diplomatic efforts was an iftar feast in December 1806 at the White House with the Tunisian envoy Sulemein Mellimelli and his entourage. Jefferson, who had demonstrated an intellectual curiosity about Islam from youth, moved the mealtime from his customary 3:30 p.m. to sunset to accommodate his Muslim guests.

While we don't know precisely what was served, according to *The Founding Foodies* by food historian Dave DeWitt, Jefferson's purchasing log details what his staff bought ahead of the dinner. The list included sturgeon, watermelon, beef, mutton, olives, olive oil, three kinds of almonds, seedless raisins, figs, prunes and more. Much would have been familiar to Mellimelli: rose water in the desserts, salads dressed



Though generations separate them, both early and modern Americans have enjoyed foods and foodways from the Mediterranean, Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

with olive oil and chutneys flavored with tamarind.

Jefferson became a gourmand who developed his fine tastes not only while serving in Paris as the American ambassador to France prior to his presidency but also through interaction with French Caribbean people trading in Virginia and Maryland, according to Leni Sorensen, independent scholar and retired African American research historian at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello.

At his central Virginia estate, Jefferson cultivated a variety of produce and herbs, including pomegranate, eggplant—then still often considered ornamental—Spanish almonds and benne (sesame) seeds, which throughout the American South were baked into cookies similar to Middle Eastern barazek.

Eventually, rose water was distilled in North America and curry powder made locally.

Over generations, these ingredients were cultivated, prepared and adapted in American kitchens, where culinary traditions from Europe, Africa, the Caribbean and Asia continued to shape how they were enjoyed and consumed.

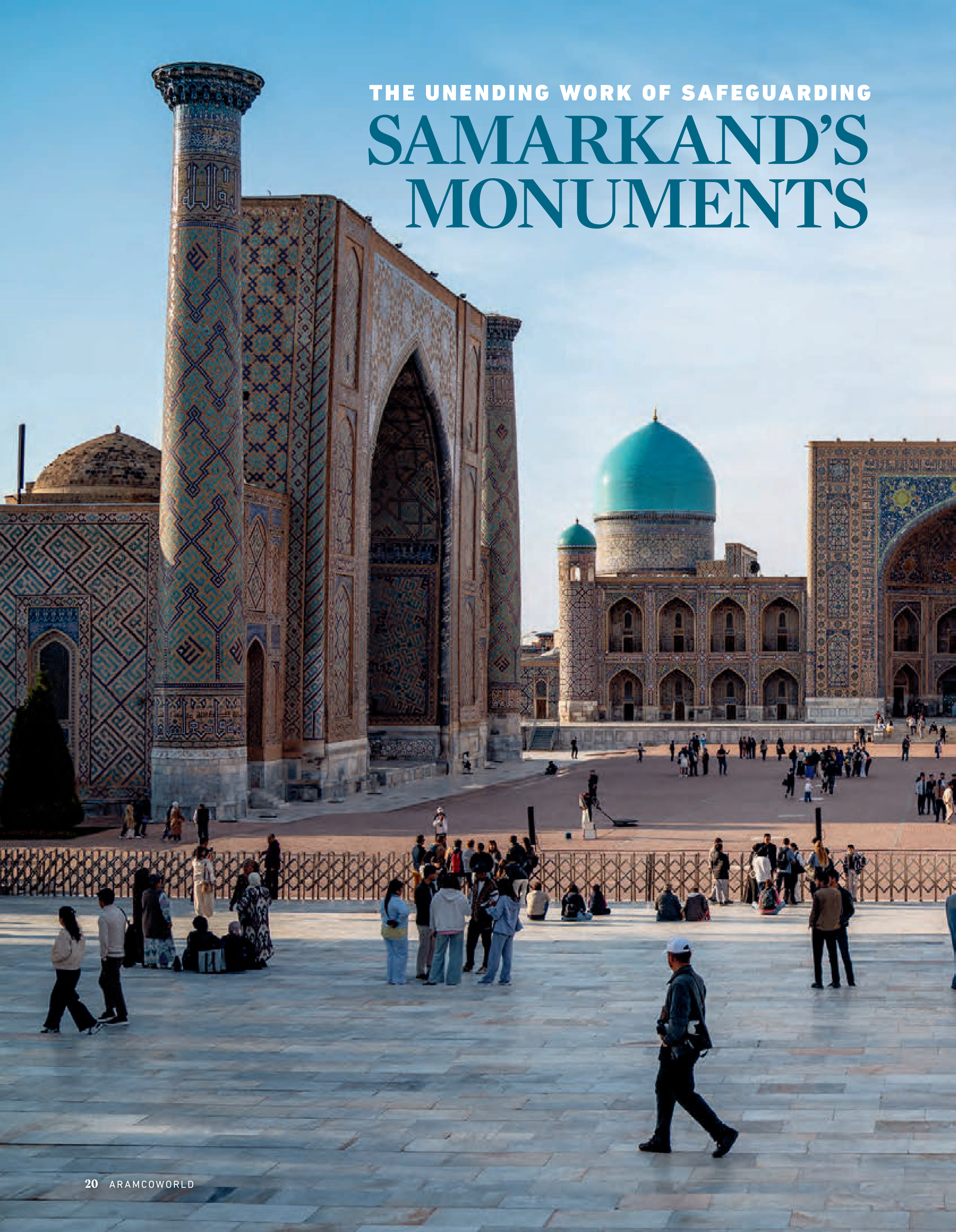
In 1824, Mary Randolph, a distant cousin of Jefferson, included two recipes for curry powder in her cookbook *The Virginia House-Wife*. "The book was published in 1824, but there is no doubt it was based on recipes being made in her household for far longer," said Sorenson. Randolph's recipes included turmeric, cumin and coriander imported from South Asia, along with nutmeg, mace and white ginger that may by then have been sourced from the Caribbean.

The stew called pepperpot is another example. The spicy beef dish popular in 18th-century Philadelphia likely drew influence from Caribbean cooking traditions layered with those of Africa. It featured cinnamon and cloves, key flavorings in the slow-cooked meat dishes of North Africa and parts of the Arab world. By this time, it may well have been seasoned with an all-purpose spice mix, unique to each household and generally called "kitchen pepper," featuring pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg and clove.

> "It is staying true to the authenticity but getting the mind ready for what the mouth is about to taste."
>
> —JUSTIN CHERRY

Equally enjoyed by the upper classes in quality inns and taverns as by common laborers at market stands, pepperpot is still eaten today in the Caribbean. With its rich spices of the Far East, hot chilies native to Central America and the Caribbean and ingredients shaped by centuries of Atlantic trade, the dish embodies the globally connected cuisine that took shape in early America. AW

Ramin Ganeshram is an award-winning journalist and culinary historian focused on colonial and early-19th-century history of the United States and the Caribbean. She is also a professionally trained chef who has authored cookbooks, including *Sweet Hands: Island Cooking From Trinidad & Tobago* and *Saffron: A Global History*, and is working on various forthcoming books. **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*.



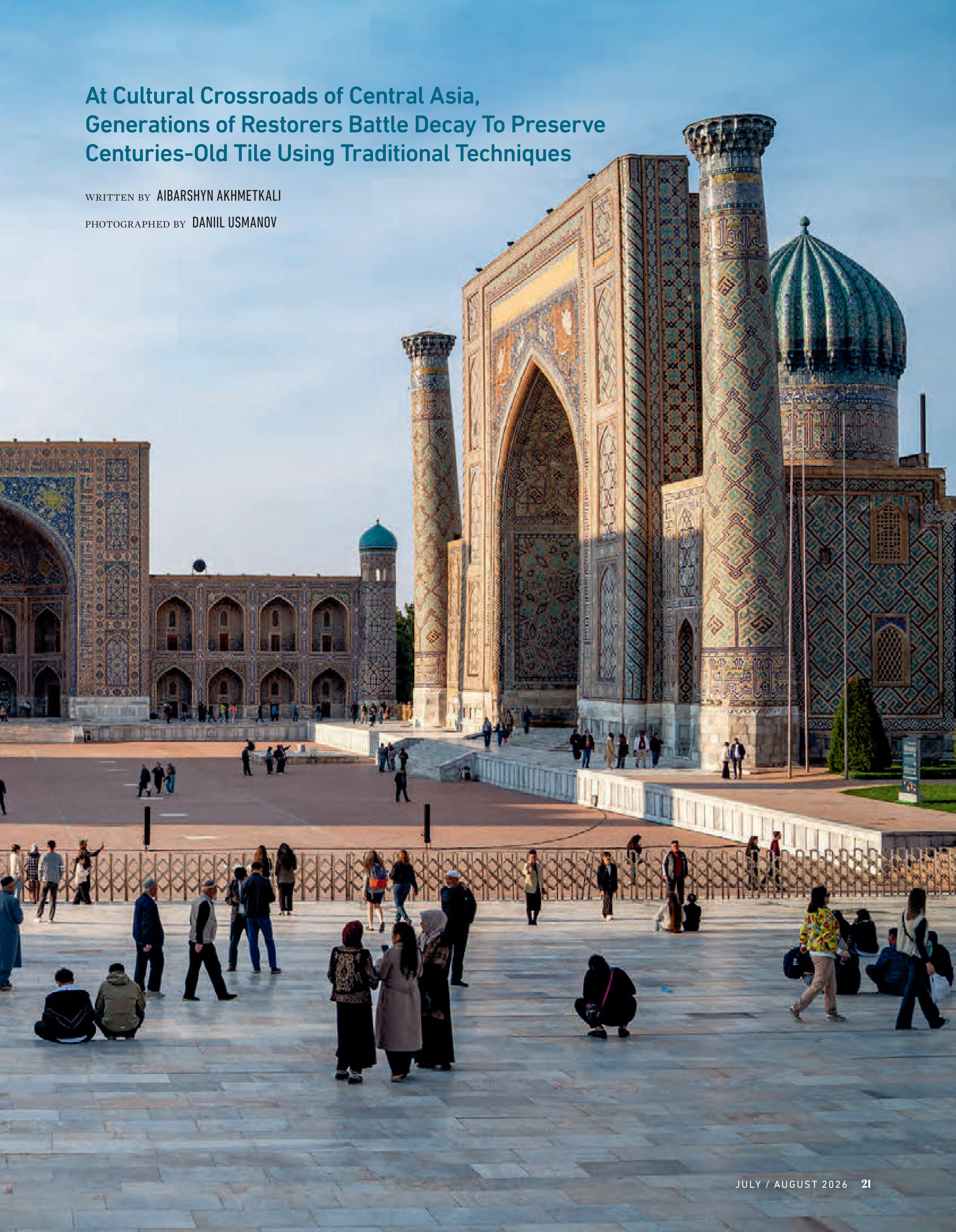
THE UNENDING WORK OF SAFEGUARDING

SAMARKAND'S MONUMENTS

At Cultural Crossroads of Central Asia, Generations of Restorers Battle Decay To Preserve Centuries-Old Tile Using Traditional Techniques

WRITTEN BY AIBARSHYN AKHMETKALI

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DANIIL USMANOV



As restorer Bakhodir Baltayev, 58, fits fragments of blue mosaic back into the walls of the Registan complex, he is helping preserve architectural traditions of Samarkand passed down since the era of Emir Timur, the 14th-century conqueror of Transoxania, who transformed the city into the capital of a vast empire.

PREVIOUS PAGES Registan Square in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, is one of Central Asia's most celebrated examples of Islamic architecture. **BELOW** Restorer Bakhodir Baltayev crafts and installs ceramic panels in one of the halls of the Ulugh Beg Madrasa. **OPPOSITE** Tourists and locals are drawn to Gur-e-Amir Mausoleum.

Inside the towering *madrasas* of Uzbekistan's historical city of Samarkand, restorers like him safeguard inherited knowledge that has survived over 600 years.

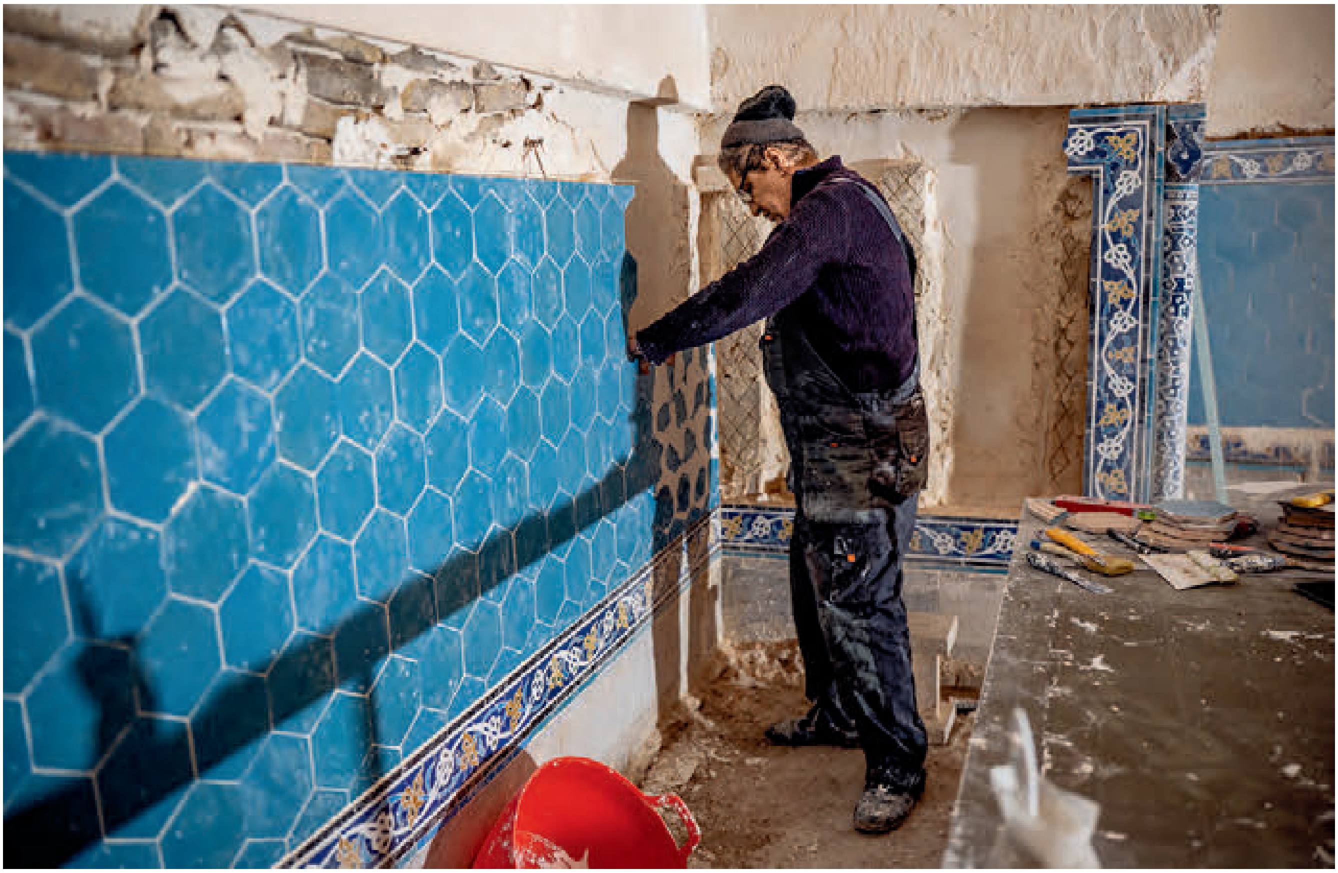
"The work [here] never really stops," says Baltayev, who has worked at the Registan since 1992.

The monumental square—whose name roughly translates as "sandy place" in Persian—is framed by three intricately tiled madrasas, or Islamic schools, and is considered one of the great architectural ensembles in the world.

The day we meet him, he is restoring a mosaic from the Ulugh Beg Madrasa, the oldest structure on the square and once one of Central Asia's leading centers of science and Islamic scholarship. The madrasa was named after Timur's grandson, a renowned 15th-century astronomer and ruler.

"There are 42,000 square meters of mosaics here, and it's all in plaster," Baltayev says. "Their lifespan is 50 to 55 years at most. They need constant restoration."

Doing an almost invisible job of slowing down an inevitable aging process, the artisans preserving Samarkand's monuments are also keeping centuries-old building techniques alive by passing down artistic traditions dating to the Timurid Empire (1370-1507). As earthquakes, weather, tourism and time threaten some of Central Asia's most celebrated Islamic architecture, restorers in the ancient Silk Road city are racing to ensure that the knowledge behind the monuments survives alongside the buildings themselves.



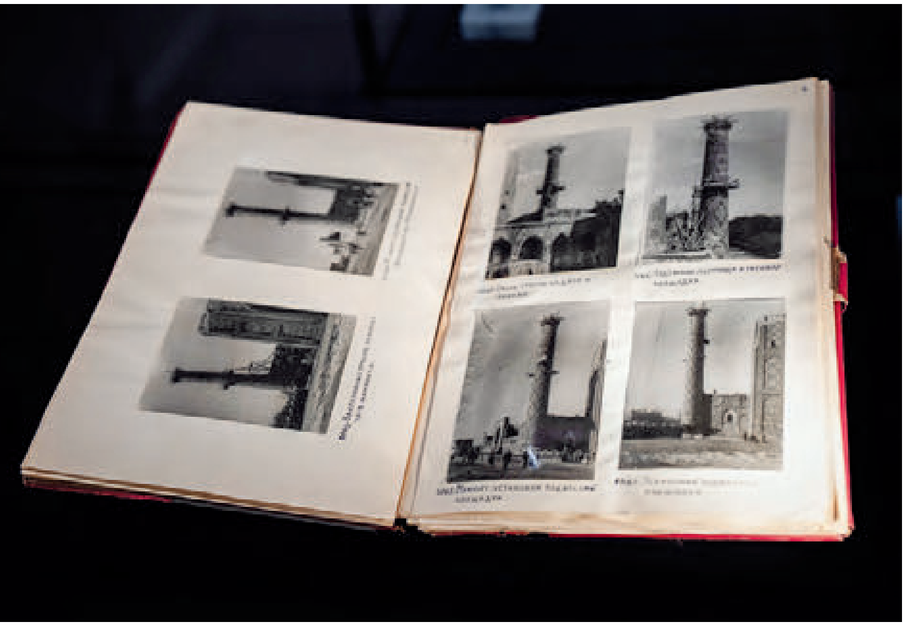
WHERE DYNASTIES LEFT THEIR MARK

For centuries, Samarkand—its name meaning "stone city" in the ancient Persian Sogdian language or "rich settlement" in Uzbek—stood at the crossroads of empires, trade routes and artistic traditions that stretched across the Islamic world. The city became the capital of Timur's empire in 1370 CE and later evolved into one of the great centers of Islamic architecture. Last year, UNESCO recognized the city's revised age as 3,000 years old, underscoring its place among Central Asia's oldest continuously inhabited urban centers.

Today, the city's cream-colored facades and cobalt-blue mosaics still reflect the artistic exchange that once connected Central Asia with Persia, India, Anatolia and the Arab world.

Within a short walk, hundreds of years of imperial ambition unfold in stone and tile: Timur's mausoleum at Gur-e-Amir; the monumental Registan Square; the Bibi-Khanym Mosque, named

OPPOSITE Restorers routinely maintain the intricate interior adornment of Tilya-Kori Mosque's gilded dome and walls, as well as the towering mosaics of the Shah-i-Zinda necropolis, **TOP AND ABOVE RIGHT**, and the Gur-e-Amir Mausoleum.



after Timur's senior wife (one among dozens); and the Shah-i-Zinda necropolis whose tiled tombs pre-date the Timurids themselves.

Under Timur, Samarkand's skyline blossomed with domes, minarets and colossal madrasas. At the age of 33, Timur succeeded in unifying the nomadic tribes of Central Asia before expanding his empire into Afghanistan, northern India, Persia and parts of the Caucasus.

"The Timurid dynasty [14th to early 16th centuries] is extremely important, and you cannot overstate [its] appeal to later dynasties across the region and the eastern Islamic world, from India to Central Asia, Iran and Türkiye today," says art historian Jaimee Comstock-Skipp, a junior research fellow at New College, University of Oxford. She studies the patterns and artistic traditions of Islamic manuscripts, especially those from the Abu'l-Khayrid (Shaybanid) dynasty of 16th-century Central Asia.

While remembered in many parts of the world as a conqueror, Timur also sought to transform his capital into the cultural center of his empire—both to legitimize his rule and to project power through architecture, scholarship, religion and urban grandeur.

Artisans, architects, engineers and scholars from across the Islamic world were brought to the city, helping transform Samarkand into one of the great cultural capitals of the time. The resulting explosion of architecture, science, manuscript production and urban design would later influence dynasties across the region in what historians now describe as the Timurid Renaissance.

"It seems that the motifs get built upon. The dynasty that comes and replaces the other one just uses those models and expands the forms. You can tell that there's a transition that takes place, but [it's] very much indebted to these earlier models in terms of structure and an overall look," says Comstock-Skipp.

She adds, "It's interesting how later in the 1500s, you start getting this cry to be different [from the Timurid style], the emphasis on … developing an individual, visual vocabulary in the built environment, in architectural forms and in the manuscripts."

The architecture of the Registan reflects this layered history. The three madrasas in the complex were built under two dynasties: the Ulugh Beg dates to the 15th-century Timurid era, while the Sher-Dor and Tilya-Kori were added in the 17th century under the Shaybanids, the Uzbek dynasty that succeeded the Timurids after the rise of Muhammad Shaybani Khan.

UZBEK CRAFTSMANSHIP OVER GENERATIONS

For Baltayev, preserving these buildings also means preserving the regional school of craftsmanship that developed here over generations.

"Our Uzbek school [of craftsmen] was among the

Exhibitions at the Gur-e-Amir Mausoleum, **TOP**, and Ulugh Beg Madrasa, **MIDDLE** and **BOTTOM**, preserve and share the cultural history embodied in Samarkand's architecture.

very best in the Soviet Union—if not the first then certainly second," he says.

He explains that local artisans worked alongside specialists evacuated to Central Asia during World War II, many of whom remained after the war ended.

"It became a kind of symbiosis," he says. "Up until [the mid-1990s], our craftsmen, artists and sculptors were recognized around the world." Painter Pavel Benkov, collector and archeologist Igor Savitsky and sculptor Aleksandr Matveyev were just a few among many who spent time in Samarkand, contributing to the development of its artistic and craft traditions.

The results are visible everywhere across the square—in the restored domes, glazed mosaics and geometric vaulting that continue to dominate the skyline centuries after they were built.

As visitors step onto the Registan Square, they become immersed in the symphony of its Islamic architecture: a special harmony and openness that is unique to Central Asia and comes from the abundance of space.

Architect Mamatgul Halikulov, 77, who oversaw architectural and restoration projects across the historic center during the late Soviet and early independence years, says proportion is central to the region's architectural identity.

> "Where there is precision, there is beauty."
>
> —MAMATGUL HALIKULOV

"Islamic architecture has always maintained proportionality because it brings precision," Halikulov says. "And where there is precision, there is beauty."

Walking alongside the Sher-Dor madrasa, Halikulov points upward toward the *muqarnas*—the honeycomblike vaulting common in Islamic architecture.

"[On muqarnas] you can see palms of our hands raised in prayer," he says. "And those flat panels, the ones right after the inscription, represent a *jainamaz* [prayer rug]. All those hands converge at the very center, like a ray. This symbolizes the ascent of the Prophet Muhammad to the Seventh Heaven."

Another element he points out is the *guldasta*, the cylindrical towers placed at the corners of mosques and mausoleums.

"When they [architects] began to design all these buildings, they made them smooth and rounded," Halikulov explains. "They also act as defense towers at the corners, like guards. The pattern on it resembles a rope, which has philosophical meaning: The Prophet Mohammad spoke to his companions, the Sahabas: 'Hold on to the rope of the prayer tightly.'"

For restorers and architects working here today, understanding the philosophy behind the design is just as important as preserving the structures themselves.

Islamic architecture contains thousands of technical terms and ornamental forms—more than 3,700 by some counts—many of which a trained eye can still trace across the city's surviving monuments.

The transmission of knowledge from master to apprentice was central to the Timurid world itself, where artisans and scholars moved freely among courts across Central Asia, Persia and Ottoman lands.

"What's very important to remember is that this

The facade of Registan Square's Sher-Dor Madrasa, which dates to the early 1600s, bears ornate tilework and mosaic patterns.

period is very mobile," says Comstock-Skipp. "People are really coming [and] going back and forth, whether they're going on the pilgrimage route to get to Makkah, Madinah or just going from one court to the next."

TIMURID INSPIRATION IN ARCHITECTURE

By the 16th century, patterns, particularly foliate motifs and geometric designs such as stars and hexagons, influenced artistic traditions of the Safavids, the Ottomans and beyond.

Such patterns are present in Persian structures, says Comstock-Skipp, "but it really seems to me that the appeal is from Central Asia."

Architectural choices were influenced by Timurid tradition as well.

"[From manuscripts] we see [that] the older Timurid inspiration of a dome extending into the upper margin gets modified in each of the later dynasties," she says. "The Ottomans have a distinctive onion shape to theirs, with the courtly figures wearing their oversize turbans; the Safavids open up the architecture to render a party on different levels of the pavilion; the Abu'l-Khayrids really perpetuate the Timurid legacy most closely, but they will go their own way in the 1560s."

For Halikulov, preserving the monuments also means preserving the philosophy behind them.

"Everything that I've learned shouldn't be lost," he says. "I shouldn't keep it to myself but pass it on to others."

That central belief shapes the work of restorer Davlat Khakimov, 72, who entered the profession through family tradition and has spent more than four decades working on the Registan.

Now, one of his primary tasks is to monitor structural weaknesses before they become catastrophic.

Standing inside the courtyard of the Tilya-Kori Madrasa, he points toward a crack running across the plaster before shifting his attention to a bulge caused by moisture trapped inside the wall. "Look," he says regretfully. "This part now is in a bad condition."

Samarkand lies in a seismically active zone and was repeatedly shaken by major earthquakes in the 18th and 19th centuries, which caused heavy damage to its historic monuments, including the Ulugh Beg Madrasa and the Bibi-Khanym Mosque. According to Khakimov, several domes and minarets collapsed as a result. Smaller tremors, typically reaching magnitude 4.5 to 5.5, still occur from time to time, so the threat remains ever present.

OPPOSITE Visitors take in the distinctive buildings in which artisans and scholars across dynasties worked. **THIS PAGE, FROM TOP** Restorer Davlat Khakimov notes the decorative details of a madrasa at the Registan complex; Khakimov and another restorer, Numon Tairov, discuss their task in a workshop of the Sher-Dor Madrasa; and architect Mamatgul Halikulov muses on the importance of preserving not only the monuments but also the philosophy behind them.

Light shows at night lend drama to the Registan complex, which has survived earthquakes, heavy rains and natural aging thanks to the continual work of conservationists.

The historic monuments also face constant threats from a buildup of moisture from heavy rains and other factors, and the natural aging of materials. Conservationists like Khakimov monitor the buildings continuously, often searching for changes so subtle that visitors would never notice them.

Yet many of the engineering techniques that have allowed the structures to survive for centuries are still functioning today.

"Any architectural monument over a hundred years old is like a wise elder," says Khakimov. "It settles over time."

He explains that the foundations beneath some monuments contain layers of reeds designed to absorb vibrations during earthquakes.

"For example, this monument [the Tilya-Kori Madrasa] sits on a 9-meter foundation with a 10-centimeter layer of reeds beneath it," he says. "When affected by earthquakes or water levels, the reeds act as a natural cushion. Our ancestors calculated all this."

> "You can use modern tools, but the restoration technology is better to stay the same. If we change the technology, this all will die."
>
> —BAKHODIR BALTAYEV

PAINSTAKING RESTORATION IS A CALLING

Another challenge facing restorers is deciding how much to reconstruct.

Inside the Tilya-Kori Madrasa, visitors now walk alongside large brick surfaces where decorative stone carving once existed.

"These burnt bricks are conserved areas. Before, there was astonishing stone carving everywhere. Only about 2% of it remains," says Khakimov.

Restoration work attempts to preserve surviving fragments while re-creating missing sections as faithfully as possible.

"We've completely restored the Ulugh Beg Madrasa," he says. "Now, when you walk in, it feels as though it has always been that way."

The picturesque Registan Square has seen countless examples of culture and tradition, including weddings, pass through its buildings and courtyards.

He points toward a surviving section of carved ornament embedded on a sand-brick wall. “There’s a sample here,” he says. “We can build on it. Now we can re-create this [mosaic] on all these walls.”

The process is painstaking. One square meter of mosaic can contain roughly 2,000 individually cut pieces, all assembled by hand.

To preserve the historic buildings, restorers argue that it is equally important to preserve the traditional methods used to maintain them. Baltayev believes that conservationists must remain loyal to centuries-old technologies and materials.

“You can use modern tools, but the restoration technology is better to stay the same. If we change the technology, this all will die,” he says.

Traditional mosaics here were originally affixed using gypsum plaster rather than cement or industrial adhesives.

“Cement immediately affects the color of the tiles,” Baltayev explains. “Over the years, it gets worse and worse. Only gypsum maintains the purity of color. It has been used by humans for 5,000 years,” says Baltayev.

His work has taken him across Central Asia, Indonesia, Germany, Türkiye and Russia, yet he always has returned home.

“We have craftsmen who came here as kids, retired and are still working. They’ve never worked anywhere else except the Registan.”

For many restorers, the profession is less a career than a lifelong calling.

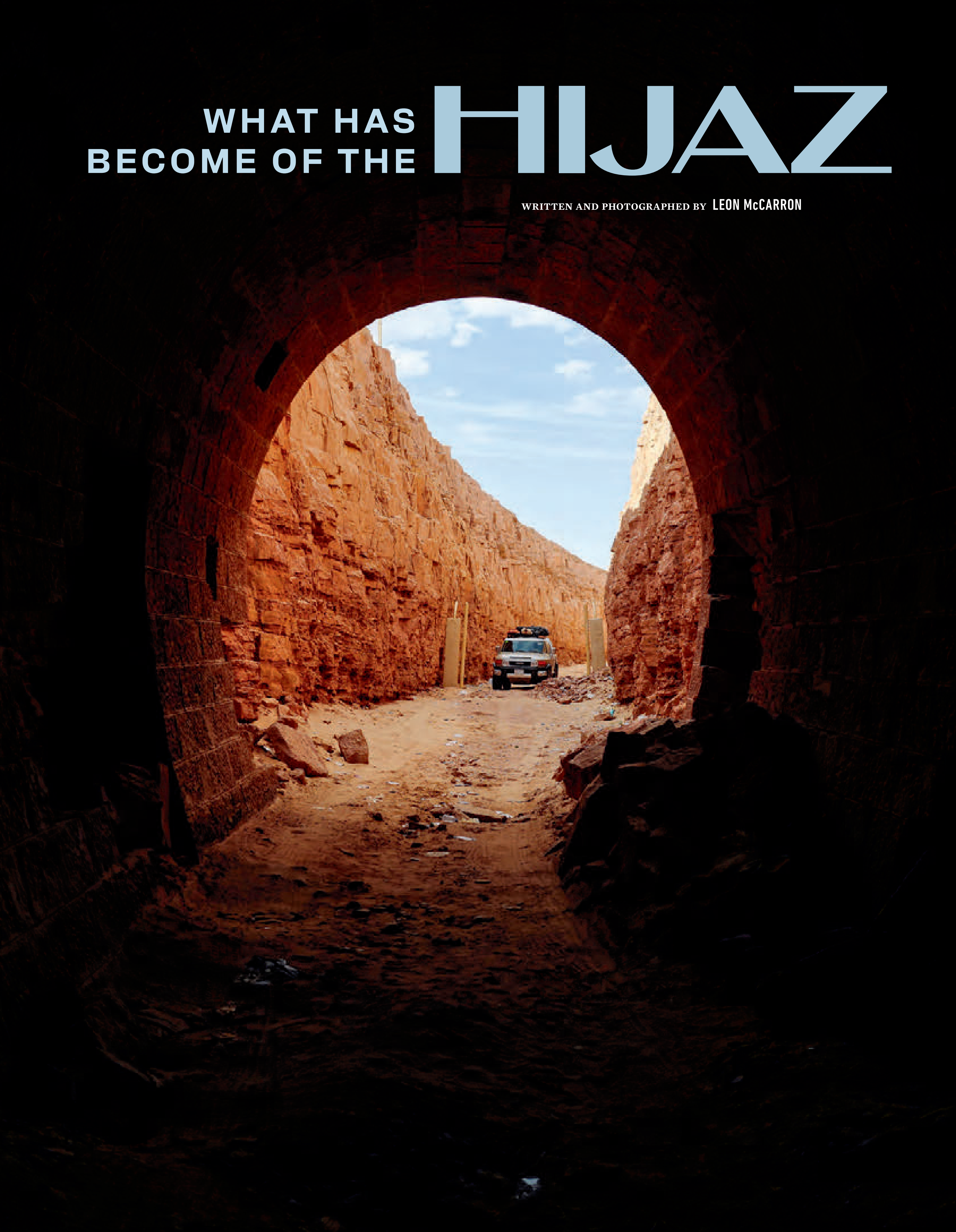
“My teacher once looked at me and said, ‘Welcome to the ranks of both happy and unhappy people,’” Baltayev recalls. “I asked him what that meant. He replied, ‘A happy person is generally someone who has a job he loves. And the unhappy side is that many people don’t understand him; he’s on his own wave.’”

Outside, visitors continue crossing the Registan beneath its newly restored domes and mosaics. Inside the workshop above the square, artisans quietly continue piecing together fragments by hand, sustaining heritage among monuments that continue to age.

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*.

WHAT HAS BECOME OF THE HIJAZ

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY **LEON McCARRON**



RAILWAY?

Tawfiq Al Juhani drove at great speed, though it was hard to tell exactly how fast because none of the dials in his battered old SUV worked. He rested one hand on the wheel, a ponytail poking out from beneath his cap. His feet danced back and forth between the clutch and the accelerator, rarely stepping over to the brake.

We were roughly 80 miles (129 km) south of AlUla in the west of Saudi Arabia. I traveled there in the spring of 2024 to research the Hijaz Railway, which, in the early years of the 20th century, ran for some 800 miles (1,287 km) from Damascus, Syria, to Madinah. On this day, looking at Hijaz, the rugged, mountainous region that extends in every direction, I found such a feat hard to imagine. Al Juhani, the head of his tribe in the area, had offered to show me what remained.

The ribbon of tarmac that we had started out on disappeared as the vehicle careered off-road, and Al Juhani swung us from one track to another. Eventually, at the edge of the *wadi*, or dry riverbed, he stopped and got out. There, nestled into the low, dark hills, was a two-story building made of black basalt. Red sandstone bricks lined the edges in decorative trim.

"This is the first railway station I remember," Al Juhani told me. It was called Mudarraj, and much of its structure has survived the intervening years impressively. "I was first shown this place by my grandfather," he continued. The old man had remembered the line and stations being built, and told his grandson stories of the Ottoman construction effort. "He was fascinated by the skill. And now I am too."

I discovered that the story Al Juhani was telling has been largely forgotten in Saudi Arabia. Yet the Hijaz (Hejaz) Railway helped shape the modern region. Over two years, while researching my forthcoming book on the railway, I traveled across the surviving route to understand what remains of that lost world.

What began as a journey into the region's past felt increasingly tied to its future.

For some time after the untimely demise of the Hijaz route following World War I, part of its legacy endured. In Syria the line continued to be part of a broader railway network. Until 2011, it still crossed into Jordan, where it remained operational, if rarely used, all the way to the south of the country.

Since opening fully in 2018, Saudi Arabia's Haramain high-speed railway has achieved what the Ottoman-era Hijaz Railway never did: a direct rail connection between Makkah and Madinah, dramatically reducing journey times for millions of Hajj pilgrims. In a very different technological and political era, it nevertheless echoes one of the central ambitions behind the original project: shrinking distance across the Hijaz.

Today, however, no passenger services in the Middle East cross an international border. That absence increasingly looks anomalous as Arabian Gulf governments revive plans for regional rail integration.

In December 2025, Saudi Arabia and Qatar signed an agreement for a high-speed electric railway linking Riyadh and Doha. In the spring of 2026, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia formally agreed to advance plans for a railway connecting the two countries through Jordan and Syria. More than a century later, some of the original ambitions behind the Hijaz Railway—including regional integration and the movement of people—are once again shaping infrastructure discussions across the region.

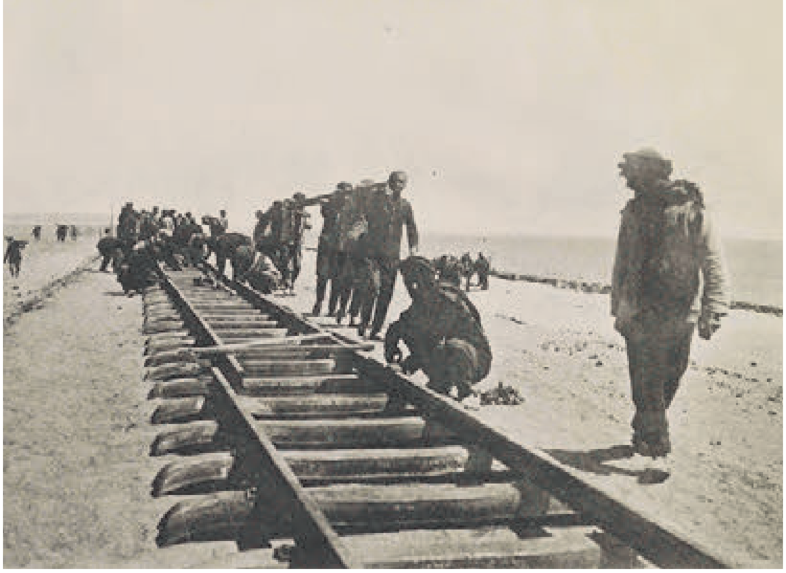
OPPOSITE A railway tunnel cuts through a steep and rocky section of the landscape 50 kilometers (31 miles) south of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. **BELOW** Tawfiq Al Juhani drives off-road near the remote train station of Bir Jdid, part of the historical Hijaz Railway, roughly 220 kilometers (137 miles) north of Madinah.

BELOW Workers lay rails near Tabuk in 1906. Construction of the Hijaz Railway required thousands of military conscripts who toiled for eight years in varied landscapes. **BOTTOM** Tracks run through the countyside south of Daraa, Syria.

ORIGINS OF THE HIJAZ RAILWAY

Construction of the Hijaz Railway began on September 1, 1900, on the orders of Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II, amid the waning years of the empire. The Ottomans had already lost the Balkans and North Africa and were faced with growing internal opposition.

The railway was expected to serve three functions. Politically, Abdul Hamid wanted to connect the periphery of Ottoman territory back to the center, where his control was strongest. Militarily, the railway would act as a bulwark against European imperialism, allowing for reinforcement of defensive positions on the Mediterranean and Red seas. Religiously, it would replace the traditional Hajj camel caravan to Makkah and Madinah. By reducing the pilgrimage from 40 days—one way—to as few as three in a carriage, the sultan stood to gain much-needed legitimacy in trying times.



All three aims were important, said professor Zekeriya Kurşun, a specialist on the subject whose expertise I sought out in Istanbul, “but the religious reason was elevated above the others.” It was popular with a majority of Ottoman subjects, and being the leader behind a sacred project was useful for the sultan. Journeys that once consumed weeks of hardship suddenly became predictable and comparatively safe, reshaping the psychological geography of the region.

“The most unique aspect of all was how it was funded,” Kurşun added. Abdul Hamid contributed personally, and taxes were levied within the empire, complemented by voluntary donations from the global Muslim community. Donations arrived from across the Muslim world, including British India, Singapore and South Africa, turning the railway into a rare pan-Islamic infrastructure project that extended far beyond Ottoman territory itself. The railway became the first in Ottoman territory that received no financing from foreign powers and was designated as *waqf*: an Islamic endowment whose assets could not be sold and charitable purpose not easily changed.

Ottoman authorities deployed thousands of military conscripts to build the railway, said Kurşun, and the landscapes in which they worked were fierce, varied and often far from urban centers. In his comprehensive 2005 history book *The Hejaz Railway*, author James Nicholson writes, “Winding its way through some of the most dramatic desert mountain scenery in the world…its construction was a tale of endurance and resolve made epic by the heat [and] the harsh conditions.”

Another factor was the variation in terrain, which required very different skills for the construction. In Syria, the route passes through the volcanic plateau called the Hauran. There, some years can see vast quantities of rain, making the area green and fertile, and famed for its agricultural capacity—so much so that during Roman rule it was referred to as “the granary of Rome.”

The advancement of the line here required hundreds of bridges, aqueducts and culverts to manage the drainage. In the Yarmouk Valley—a stunning, steep cleavage in the earth (now the border between Syria and Jordan) and through which the railway passed on a slightly later branch line on the way to the Mediterranean Sea—a series of highly complex stone and iron bridges was required to navigate the gorge.

“The railway workers had to overcome many technical difficulties,” writes Nicholson. These, ironically, also included a scarcity of water along much of

The Hijaz Railway passed through the station at Khirbet Samra in the north of Jordan, close to the city of Mafraq—whose name, coincidentally, means "crossroads" in Arabic.

the route south of the Hauran and a severe shortage of locally available fuel sources.

Even in this era, the journey along the route is challenging. I passed through Syria and northern Jordan in winter and spent nights shivering in temperatures that barely reached 40 degrees Fahrenheit (4 degrees Celsius). South of Amman, Jordan's capital, where the desert and its dry mountains take over, it feels terribly exposed, and it's feasible to travel for scores of miles at a time without seeing another human. I thought often of the laborers who built it, who survived on a poor and limited diet and toiled through opposite extremes of temperature that climbed to over 120 degrees Fahrenheit (49 degrees Celsius).

By 1908 engineers had extended the rails to Madinah, and six years later they connected a branch line to the Mediterranean. But in the face of opposition from local tribes who were unwilling to cede their traditional role of transporting Hajj pilgrims, planners eventually abandoned proposals to extend the railway to Makkah.

Still, it was a great success for the ailing empire. In 1909 French explorer Charles-Eudes Bonin noted admiringly in the academic journal *Annales de Géographie*: "By reducing costs and journey times, and by protecting travellers … the Hijaz Railway has restored the terrestrial pilgrimage to its former glory."

The optimism surrounding the railway did not last long. Less than a decade later, during World War I, the railway was repeatedly attacked. Raiding parties destroyed large sections of the route—including the stretch Al Juhani showed me in the desert south of AlUla. The war eventually led to the Ottoman Empire's collapse.

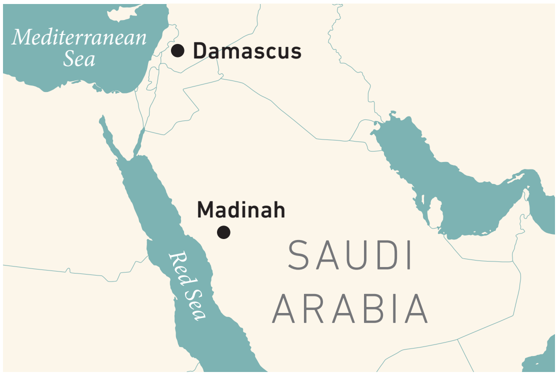
The last train on the Hijaz line in what is now Saudi Arabia departed in 1925. By the middle of the past century, it fell into disrepair; even the rails had been removed.

STEAMING AHEAD FROM PAST TO FUTURE

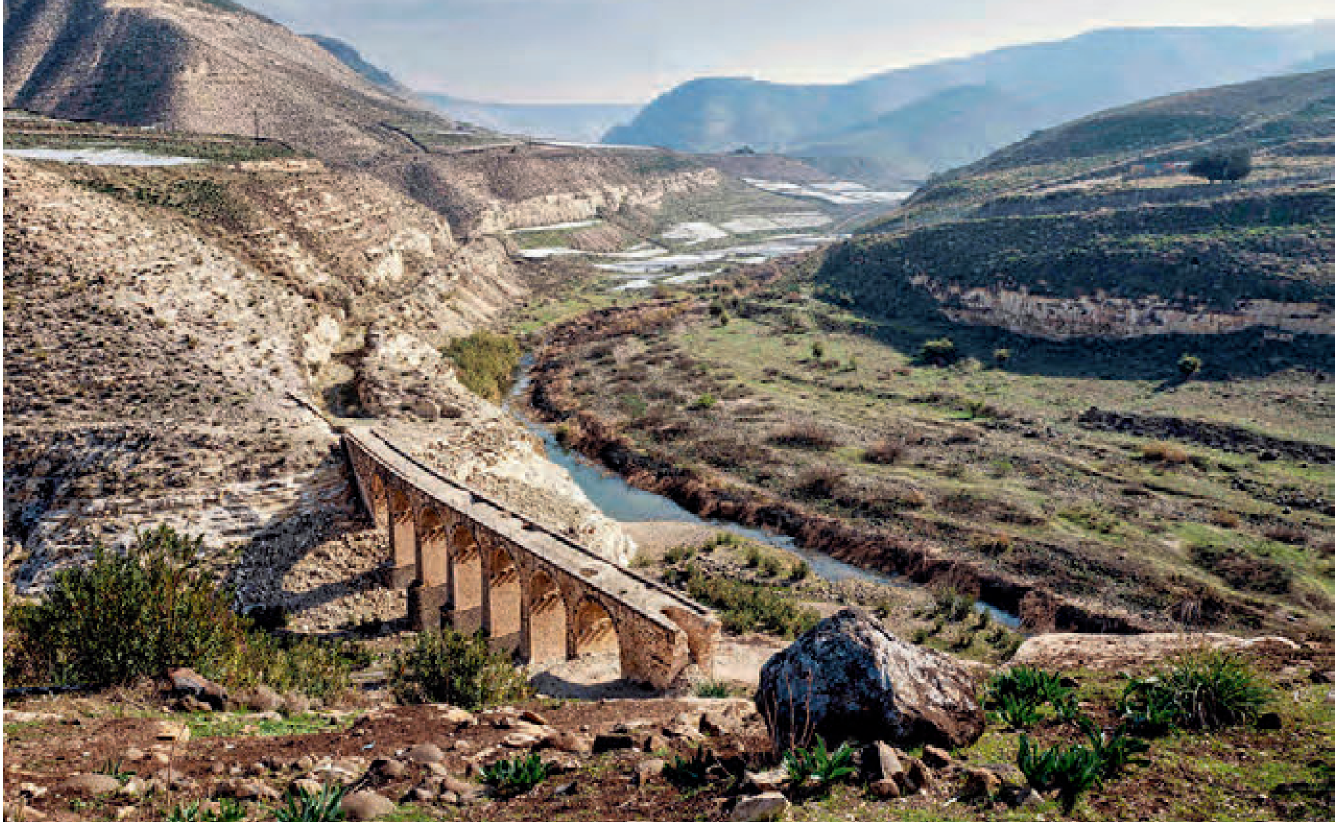
Over the decades, various efforts were made to rehabilitate the Hijaz route. Most notably, in the 1960s, work in the north of Saudi Arabia involved rebuilding embankments and replacing dilapidated bridges and culverts. But cost spiraled, and that vision never fully materialized.

Yet traces of the Hijaz still survive across the region, scattered through deserts, cities, abandoned stations—and even make tourist attractions.

Since 2023 I have been exploring the route, returning multiple times to collect memories of a past era. Its starting point is marked by the grand Hijaz Railway Station in downtown Damascus, where a



OPPOSITE TOP: B.MORITZ/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



A Hijaz Railway bridge spans part of the Yarmouk Valley in Syria. More than a century later, some of the original ambitions of the railway are taking shape.

mixture of European and Ottoman influences is designed to make a suitably striking impression on those preparing to travel by rail.

It has now been 14 years since the last train from Damascus, and in some rural Syrian stations, employees have moved in, turning waiting rooms into divans. Others lie empty and have been targeted by looters. An enduring myth of the presence of buried Ottoman gold has led to stones being pulled from walls and doorways, and holes dug under the track, leaving sleepers sticking out like skeletal ribs.

But for many, it is still a source of pride, and there even lingers the hope of some kind of return.

"When we worked on this railway, we knew we were part of this long, rich history," said Mazen Malla, an engineer at Al Qadem station in Damascus. "It's like a vein for us," echoed Na'im Al Kharazai, an employee from Daraa in southwestern Syria.

I have heard similar sentiments hundreds of times. Much of the desire was for the return of the sense of connection as much as the physical infrastructure. In Mafraq, northern Jordan, the stationmaster Fawzi Al Khar'azeh told me, "There was movement and life back then. I wish for it to return, and I believe that it must."

> "The Hijaz Railway was one of the earliest models of industrial architecture in the Holy Lands."
>
> —RAJA GARGOUR

"The Hijaz Railway was one of the earliest models of industrial architecture in the Holy Lands," said Raja Gargour, who oversaw the renovation and installation of a museum at Ma'an in Jordan. Like Amman and Tabuk, in Saudi Arabia, Ma'an was a small oasis town before the arrival of the railway. The Hijaz, said Gargour, contributed greatly to the development of all three cities.

For many Jordanians, the railway is also intrinsically connected to the foundation of their country. It was at Ma'an that Emir Abdullah, later King Abdullah I of Jordan, arrived by train and established his first royal palace in a railway building. "There's a lot here that is integral to this country's story," said Gargour, "and all of that in turn impacted the rest of the region in the years that followed."

South of Ma'an's new museum, the rails have long since been removed, and only the shape of the railway embankment remains.

In Saudi Arabia the project is furthest from living memory. Yet there is still a physical presence. Bridges, culverts and fortresslike stations survive in isolation in the desert, like islands left behind when a river stops flowing. For many long stretches, the only company is sporadic herds of grazing camels.

Another small but well-curated museum is housed inside an original building at Tabuk, and the extensive Hijaz station at Hegra, the archeological site also known as Mada'in Salih, has been refurbished spectacularly to find new life as a five-star Chedi hotel. What was once the maintenance depot is now a restaurant, and a restored locomotive takes pride of place alongside a section of original railing preserved under glass.

The resurgence of regional railway planning, including proposals for a new rail corridor linking Türkiye and Saudi Arabia via Jordan and Syria—often

ABOVE With its grand façade, the station at Madinah, Saudi Arabia, marks the end point of the Hijaz Railway route. **RIGHT** A refurbished locomotive from the original railway operations stands on display in the five-star Chedi hotel, which has repurposed the station buildings at Hegra (Mada'in Salih).

framed by commentators as a revival of the Hijaz Railway—suggests that regional leaders increasingly see railways as tools for economic integration and long-term infrastructure planning.

Although most of the original route survives only in fragments, the idea behind the Hijaz Railway continues to exert a powerful pull across the region.

As the British engineer Gareth Dennis puts it in his book, *How the Railways Will Fix the Future*: "Railways are both the past and future of human mobility. They are the safest and most energy efficient means of mass transport that we've conceived of and likely ever will conceive of."

For some though, regardless of modern developments, the audacity of the original story is itself essential to preserve. At the end of my journey with Al Juhani, we stopped at a remote Hijaz station called Bir Jdid, just over 137 miles (220 km) north of Madinah. It was one of four of which he was custodian. Close by was a pilgrimage fort, built to support the Hajj caravans a few hundred years before the railway, and behind both lay a deep well. Water sources like this made both early Hajj caravans and later the train journey possible.

In twilight, close to the lip of the well, Al Juhani set a fire and began making tea. The sky slipped away. "Imagine what it took to design a railway here," he implored of me. "Think about all the people who passed by this way." The world was reduced to glowing embers and cracking twigs. "I tell my kids about the railway," Al Juhani said.

"What happened here affected all Arabs. It's our heritage, and I keep it alive by protecting these buildings." Its true value today, he believes, is in showing what humans are capable of creating, especially against the odds. "It can inspire us. But if no one knows, then history is lost." AW

Leon McCarron is an author, broadcaster and hiking-trail designer based in Beirut. He is the author of three books, including *Wounded Tigris: A River Journey Through the Cradle of Civilization*, as well as the forthcoming *Last Train From Damascus: A Journey Along the Hejaz Railway.*

Author's Corner

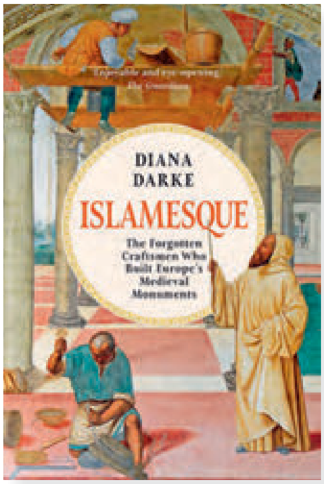
From Damascus to Palermo: A Conversation With Diana Darke

Written by JACK ZAHORA

Historian Diana Darke had spent years puzzling over the zigzag designs that ran around the courtyard of her home in the old city of Damascus, Syria. Her neighbors dismissed it as decorative, but Darke couldn't shake the feeling they meant something more.

One night, while watching a documentary, she discovered these zigzags were also the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph for water, a pattern that first appeared as early as 4000 BCE and came to symbolize the water springs beneath Damascus itself.

That moment led her on a journey to trace the motif across centuries and continents, from Coptic churches in Egypt to the dazzling facades of Palermo Cathedral in Sicily, where Arab craftsmen carved geometric precision and symbolic meaning into stone. In her latest book, *Islamesque: The Forgotten Craftsmen Who Built Europe's Medieval Monuments*, she argues that Europe's most celebrated architecture owes its sophistication to these cultural exchanges—hidden in plain sight, waiting to be read like the zigzags in her own Damascus courtyard.


DIANA
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ISLAMESQUE
The Forgotten Craftsmen Who Built Europe's Medieval Monuments

ISLAMESQUE: The Forgotten Craftsmen Who Built Europe's Medieval Monuments

Diana Darke.
Hurst Publishers, 2024.

You write in *Islamesque* of how many of Europe's architectural masterpieces are rich with Arab influence. So, why choose to highlight the Palermo Cathedral?

The patterning of the exterior of the Palermo Cathedral at the east end shows a high level of skill. It's like some immense piece of woven carpet with a taracea inlay, a very specific Islamic skill, where the black lava contrasts with the white limestone, and it makes these black-and-white patterns with eight-pointed stars. The geometry required to make a pattern like that over such a huge surface is just phenomenal. It is not the sort of thing that you learn in just a couple of generations.

Well, it would seem in this case almost 300 years, from the early ninth century CE to well past the second half of the 11th century. You write it took three Arab dynasties—the Aghlabids, the Fatimids and the Kalbids—to transform Sicily's architectural landscape.

What became very clear to me during my research is that everything with architecture moves very slowly. And the only reason for some new, apparently sudden change is when new craftsmen come in. Even the buildings of Norman Sicily have a continuity from its predecessors because, of course,

ABOVE AND RIGHT Arab craftsmen carved geometric precision and symbolic meaning into stone on the facades of Palermo Cathedral in Sicily.

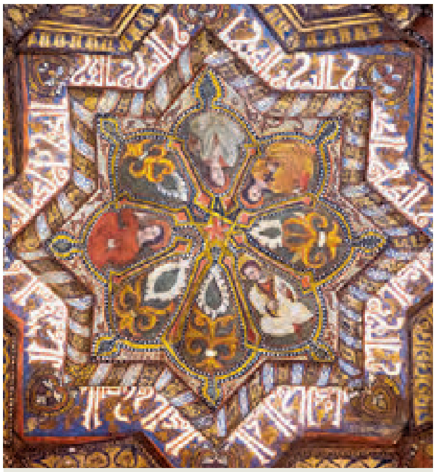
OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF DIANA DARKE; TOP AND ABOVE RIGHT: TARA TODRAS-WHITEHILL

the Normans hired local Muslim craftsmen. They were basically between 150 and 200 years ahead of their time, and they dominated masonry, carpentry and metalwork, the three essential components of construction.

But then the Norman conquest began in 1061 CE and the destruction of what was mostly built preceding it. Do you find it ironic that they then turned around and hired Arab craftsmen, engineers and masons to rebuild everything?
My goodness, the quality of the palaces and the mosques that the Normans saw probably took their breath away in terms of sheer beauty of esthetics. They realized there was nothing close that their own craftsmen could produce. People think about Gothic architecture and assume it was completely inspired from Christian craftsmen. And what I'm trying to prove is that they only learnt their craft from the Muslims who came before them.

And yet most of the credit for these architectural marvels gets misplaced throughout history. How does that happen?
When Sicily's new rulers saw the extent of the level of skill that the Muslims had over their own craftsmen, this inevitably generated a little bit of a rivalry. So, over the course of a couple of centuries, as Christian craftsmen inherited these skills, they set up professional guilds from which they excluded all Jews and Muslims. At that point it becomes an exercise in creating a monopoly.

So, what does this mean for average Sicilians' understanding of the Arab influence that surrounds them today?
The average Sicilian is probably not very aware of it. There are pockets of academia that are aware of it—like Giuseppe Bellafiore, a professor of architecture [in] Palermo that I quote extensively from. He produced an incredible book on the Palermo Cathedral. Really forensic, examining every little thing about it. But how many people have read that book? A handful, probably. When I borrowed it from the London library, it hadn't been taken out for years.



The Palatina Cappella: A showcase of Arab influence on Sicilian architecture

In the 1130s CE, Sicily's King Roger II commissioned a chapel for himself called the Cappella Palatina.

Historian Diana Darke writes that while Byzantine artisans created the mosaics, it was Arab "craftsmen, carpenters and artists alike [who] were summoned from Cairo to magic the *muqarnas* wooden vaulted ceiling with staggering virtuosity." She notably points out that the motif of eight-pointed stars closing around eight-petalled flowers is a geometrical feat.

However, tourists and worshipers making a pilgrimage to the chapel at the royal Norman palace in Palermo will find it almost impossible from the ground to fully grasp the totality of the vaulted ceiling. Darke suggests that visitors should carry a book "with all the images reproduced in detail."

King Roger II didn't just admire Islamic art. According to Darke, in her book *Islamesque*, he immersed himself in Arab customs, spoke the language and copied the lifestyle of an Arab ruler, living in exotic, richly decorated residences surrounded by lush gardens, fountains and lakes.

It shows that while the Norman conquest of Sicily led to the widespread destruction of physical artifacts, the European architecture that followed has preserved the heritage of the Arabs who walked these lands so long ago.

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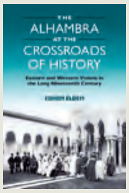
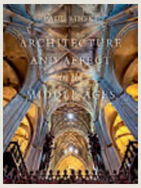
Reviews



The Alhambra at the Crossroads of History: Eastern and Western Visions in the Long Nineteenth Century.

Edhem Eldem. Edinburgh University Press, 2024.

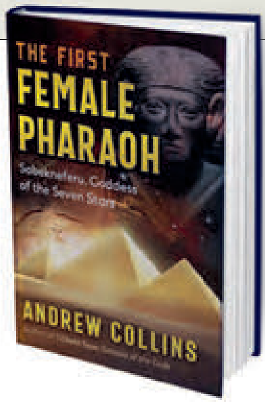
The Alhambra at the Crossroads of History shows how the 13th-century Andalusi palace complex in Granada, modern Spain, generates often conflicting meanings at the same time—meanings actively constructed and sometimes misread. Edhem Eldem, an Istanbul-based history professor, traces its role in shaping social and cultural identities across imperial Europe, Arab North Africa and Ottoman Türkiye from the 18th to the early 20th centuries. He builds his analysis like a layered confection, drawing on sources ranging from architectural history and travelogue to photographs and diplomatic correspondence. This approach both confirms and unsettles earlier assumptions about the Alhambra's significance. One resource stands out and disrupts expectations. A multivolume register of visitors started in 1829 but long overlooked by scholars reveals recurring expressions of admiration and dissatisfaction shaped by shared expectations among travelers locally from Europe to the Maghreb of North Africa and farther east to the Levant. Eldem invokes the image of Russian *matryoshka* dolls to describe these layered reinterpretations. Figures as different as a Moroccan diplomat and a European architect expressed admiration, even as shifting fashions rendered Ottoman observers increasingly indifferent. Then again, Spanish Orientalists reappropriated Andalusian Islamic features copied elsewhere in Europe, while in Istanbul similar structures echoed both the Alhambra and its imitators. In each case, the monument becomes a site where meaning is continually reconfigured through inherited cultural frameworks.—JAMIE S. SCOTT



Architecture and Affect in the Middle Ages.

Paul Binski. University of California Press, 2024.

From the opening pages, Paul Binski's *Architecture and Affect in the Middle Ages* immerses the reader in a dense, multisensory world. It reveals a central claim: Medieval architecture did not merely surround worship; it actively shaped how it was perceived and felt. Drawing on classical, biblical and medieval texts, Binski, a professor emeritus of medieval art history at the University of Cambridge, shows how language and symbolism informed the way these buildings were understood. He conducts us through cathedrals across Europe, where architecture emerges as part of a larger environment. Context is key, he insists. For example, when French philosopher Jean de Jandun described the Virgin Mary at Notre Dame Cathedral as *terribilissima* in 1323 CE, he invoked reverence rather than fear. Within these spaces, soaring columns draw the eye upward. Intricate carvings and opulent materials hold it there. Sound seizes the ear—the rumbling organ at Winchester or the authority of bells at Ely. Comparisons with the sunlit marble of Hagia Sophia and the uplifting sublimity of the workmanship in the Alhambra extend the book's scope, though these remain part of a broader comparative framework. Richly illustrated, the book ultimately asks us to reconsider these sites not as monuments to be viewed but as spaces that act upon those who enter them. —JAMIE S. SCOTT



The First Female Pharoah: Sobekneferu, Goddess of the Seven Stars.

Andrew Collins. Bear & Company, 2023.

In *The First Female Pharoah: Sobekneferu, Goddess of the Seven Stars*, historian Andrew Collins offers a reassessment of Sobekneferu, the first woman to rule both Upper and Lower Egypt—an achievement long obscured by fragmentary evidence and mythmaking. Collins argues that her brief reign deserves recognition not as an anomaly but as a consequential moment in ancient Egyptian leadership. Born to Amenemhat III during the Middle Kingdom, Sobekneferu, also known as Neferusobek, ascended the throne around 1798 BCE, per Collins, amid growing instability. Economic strains and the failure of the Nile to flood undermined royal authority. Drawing on sparse material evidence—broken statues, scattered inscriptions and later textual references—Collins reconstructs Sobekneferu's reign with care. He traces her efforts to stabilize the kingdom, including completing her father's mortuary complex at Hawara in the Fayum Oasis and elevating the crocodile god Sobek to state prominence. While the circumstances of her abrupt end in 1794 BCE remain unresolved, Collins treats uncertainty as part of historical record rather than a narrative flaw. The book's greatest strength lies in its restraint. Collins transforms limited evidence into a readable, measured narrative without allowing speculation to overwhelm scholarship. His prose balances archeological detail with interpretive clarity, presenting Sobekneferu as a political actor navigating structural constraints rather than as a symbolic curiosity. Over time, Sobekneferu's legacy fractured—absorbed into her father's legacy and later mythologized as Nitocris, whose name Herodotus preserved in the fifth century BCE. *The First Female Pharaoh* invites readers to appreciate how authority, gender and memory intersect. —DIANNA WRAY

> *"Sobekneferu exists like a ghost in the darkness, her story ever hidden behind a veil of mystery and imagination."*
>
> —*The First Female Pharoah*

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

Reviews

Work Reveals a Layered, Complex Islamic Polity

Reviewed by ADILZHAN ANAY

Islamic Ecumene opens with a firm refusal: Islam cannot be contained within a single geography, tradition or political form. Edited by David S. Powers and Eric Tagliacozzo, both professors of history at Cornell University, this collection of 22 essays advances a simple yet consequential claim. The Muslim world is not a unified or monolithic civilization but rather a historically layered ecumene shaped by centuries of regional choice, encounter, translation and experience. This insistence that Islamic life has always emerged not through sameness but through plurality binds this volume together.

ISLAMIC ECUMENE

Islamic Ecumene: Comparing Muslim Societies
David S. Powers and Eric Tagliacozzo, eds.
Cornell University Press, 2023.

Powers and Tagliacozzo, both long devoted to the study of Islamic history and culture, bring together scholars from historical, anthropological and political thought. Rather than narrowly define Islam, the editors allow the collection to examine how Muslims across time and place understood themselves and one another. The collection resists the reductive narratives that dominate contemporary political discourse and mainstream media portrayals.

Three essays in particular stand out for how effectively each illuminates a different angle of the Islamic "ecumene"—intellectual hybridity, the trauma of colonial bureaucracy and the agency of institutional reform.

Historian James Pickett's study of 19th-century Bukharan *madrasa*s, for example, is essential reading for those seeking to understand cultural fluidity. Pickett questions whether these institutions of modern Uzbekistan can meaningfully be described as "Persian." While imbued with Persian literary culture, Pickett shows their intellectual foundations rested on Arabic logic and jurisprudence. The convergence of Turkic, Persian and Arab traditions produced a scholarly environment that defies a single civilizational label.

Shifting to the mechanisms of state control, Benjamin Claude Brower's essay on "name regulation" in Algeria stands out for its chilling analysis of the quieter mechanisms of imperial power. The forced simplification of Muslim names—stripped of familial, tribal and spiritual meaning—appears at first as administrative routine, but Brower reveals it as identity erasure. The historian contends that colonization begins not with gunfire but the filing cabinet, showing how the archive wounds long after violence subsides, reshaping lives across generations.

Finally, Middle East historian Mehmet Darakçıoğlu's evaluation of the Ottoman Bureau of Translation offers a necessary counter-narrative focused on adaptation rather than erasure. Founded in the early 19th century, the bureau trained officials fluent in French and European political thought. Translation acted as a bridge through which new political concepts seeped into the empire. Darakçıoğlu illustrates how administrative renewal begins on the page before it takes institutional form.

As these essays intersect, a central insight emerges: Muslim societies do not flow as a single river but braids as a world shaped by power, reform, ethics and historical memory. *Islamic Ecumene* excels in its restraint, favoring close case studies over sweeping theory and allowing complexity to accumulate rather than forcing resolution.

In an age that rewards simplification and loud certainty, this volume offers a rare disciplined invitation to think. It presents Muslim life as dynamic, internally diverse and historically entangled, reminding readers that Islam has always been lived at crossroads.

> *"By transcending geographic and temporal boundaries, we hope to offer a longer and broader view of the ties that bind Muslim societies."*
>
> *—Islamic Ecumene*

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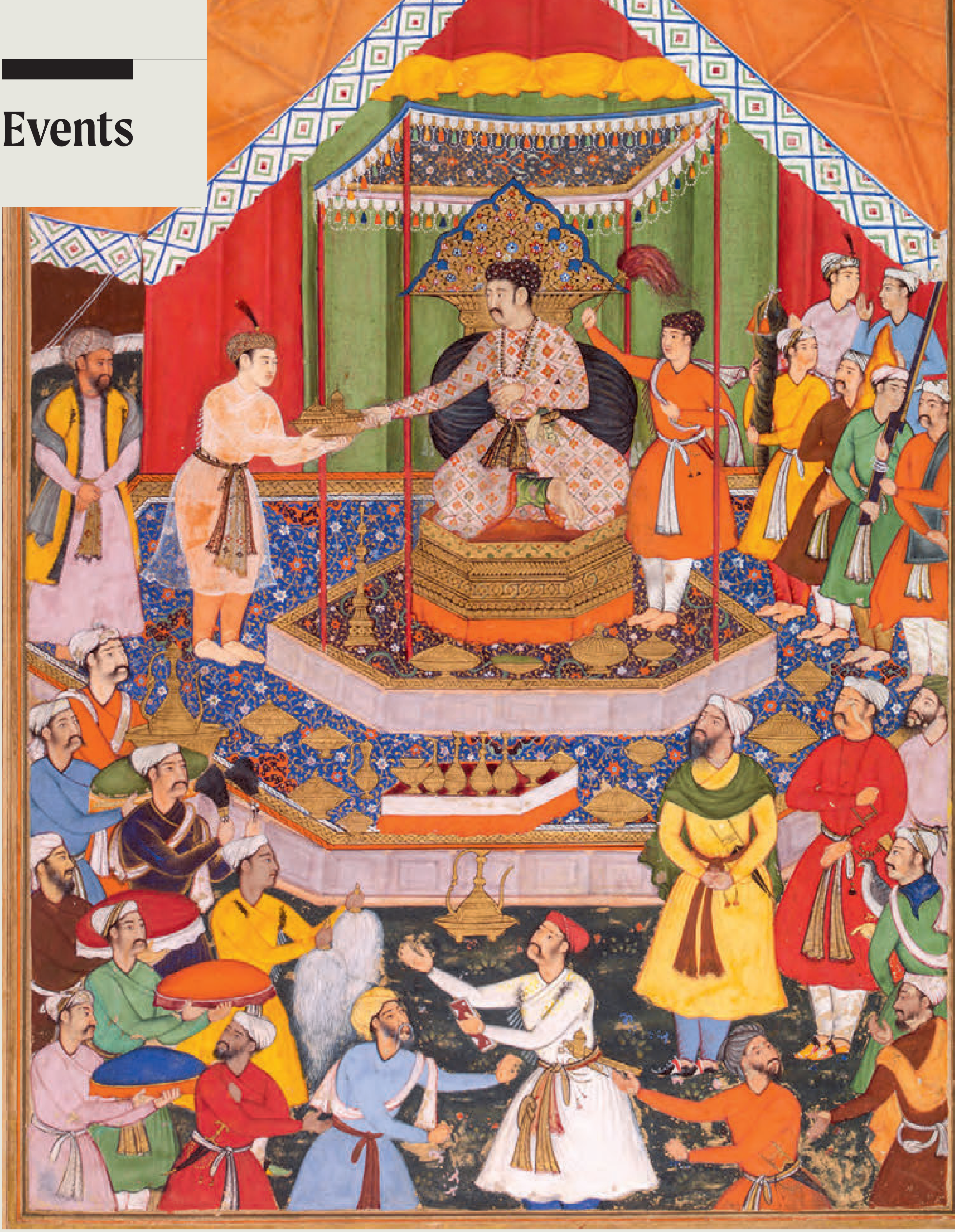
TOP: UNIVERSITY HISTORY ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

Events



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

Tracing 500 Years of Mughal Grandeur

India's Great Mughals: Art, Power and Opulence invites visitors into the richly layered world of the Mughal court (1526-1857), where art, diplomacy and imperial ambition intersected across centuries of cultural exchange. Organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum and presented at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), the exhibition brings together nearly 200 works exploring the artistic achievements and global reach of the Mughal Empire under rulers Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

Jewel-encrusted objects, imperial portraits, manuscripts, textiles and architectural designs reveal how Mughal rulers "consciously constructed a visual language of power that could be deployed—at every scale and in every medium—to communicate their sophistication, ambitions and authority," notes VMFA's coordinating curator John Henry Rice. While the exhibition embraces Mughal splendor, it reframes opulence as deeply strategic. "The sometimes mind-boggling sumptuousness of Mughal artistic productions," Rice explains, "was not simply an end in itself."

The exhibition also highlights the empire's cosmopolitanism and global exchange. Paintings influenced by European Christian prints, Chinese porcelain and Colombian emeralds trace the court's international connections. Diplomatic gifts—including a North American turkey and an African zebra rendered by Jahangir's artists—underscore the Mughals' engagement with the wider world. "The Mughal court was not just a site of power and opulence," Rice says, "but a place of scientific inquiry, rational thought, imagination and learning."

▶ Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, **Richmond, Virginia**, US, through August 23.

OPPOSITE Works include a piece depicting Akbar being entertained by his foster brother Azim Khan at Dipalpur. **ABOVE** Mughal Court Workshops, Thumb Ring, ca. 1615-20 Gold, rubies, emeralds, enamel.

Current / September

Weddings (Algeria-Morocco-Tunisia) explores the rich cultural and social significance of wedding traditions across the Maghreb through a vibrant mix of heritage and contemporary art. Bringing together rare 19th- and 20th-century attire and adornments—many never before shown in France—the exhibition highlights the craftsmanship, symbolism and regional diversity surrounding this pivotal life event. These historical works are set in dialogue with pieces by contemporary artists from the Maghreb and its diasporas, offering fresh perspectives on ritual, identity and evolving social roles. Immersive and multisensory, the exhibition captures weddings as moments of collective joy, cultural continuity and ongoing transformation.

▶ Institute du Monde Arabe, **Paris, France**, September 29 to January 31, 2027.

Current / October

Islamic Art: A Journey of Splendor highlights how Islamic art evolved through cultural exchange, craftsmanship and innovation—featuring 85 objects including manuscripts, ceramics, textiles, metalwork and decorative arts from regions spanning the Middle East, North Africa, Asia and Europe. Drawn from the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in Doha, Qatar, the exhibition aims to introduce Korean audiences to the richness of Islamic civilization across 1,400 years—tracing the artistic achievements while emphasizing recurring themes such as geometry, calligraphy, spirituality and cross-cultural connection.

▶ National Museum of **Korea, Seoul**, through October 11.

LEFT *Planispheric Astrolabe*. Signed Abu Ja'far Ahmad bin Husayn bin Baso. Spain, Granada. Nasrid period, dated 709 AH (1309-1310 CE). Cast brass with engravings and inlay. 13.5cm (diameter). MW.342.2007.

Nevine Mahmoud, Second Nature explores the uncanny intersections of nature, material and imagination. Working primarily in stone, British artist Nevine Mahmoud transforms marble and alabaster into surreal forms—from oversized fruits dripping with glass to toys and figures suspended between playfulness and unease. Installed throughout the museum's public spaces, the works challenge viewers' perceptions of the natural world and the permanence of stone.

▶ Asia Society, **Houston, Texas**, through October 4.

ABOVE Nevine Mahmoud, 'Fruit' (Wet Chord), 2020. Calcite, glass, steel, and paint. Collection of Sarah Stoker.

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

OPPOSITE AND TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF VMFA; LEFT: ©THE MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC ART, DOHA/QATAR MUSEUMS, PHOTO BY MARC PELLETREAU; RIGHT: COLLECTION OF SARAH STOKER; COURTESY OF ASIA SOCIETY

What's Online?

LOWER: GREG KAHN; MIDDLE: TALIE ROSE EIGELAND; TOP: MUSLIM PANTO

How Pantomime Lets New Voices Take the Stage

A UK production, "Snow Brown and Her Seven Chachay," shows how the form of theater continues to absorb diverse influences without losing its familiar sense of play.

Guacamole—With Love From a Turkish Chef

The generosity in the way Yavuz Ozborme prepares, cooks and serves dishes at the London restaurant he runs with his brother extends to showing our writer his recipe for the avocado dip.

Learning Center

From royal spice to Pennsylvanian tradition, Learning Center traces how saffron traveled global trade routes to become part of everyday American life.

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Quiz

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

To what region can Trinidad's Moruga hill rice trace its origins?

A

East Asia

B

West Africa

C

India

D

American South

Answer: Trick question—B and D. Enslaved people from West Africa's Rice Coast developed the crop in the American South in the 17th century. For joining the British against the United States in the War of 1812, Britain gave their descendants rice-friendly land in Trinidad, which they farm to this day. Read more about the cultural heritage that is deeply tied to rice cultivation at AramcoWorld.com.

A: NIK WHEELER; B: SOPHIE BOUQUILLON; C: GREG KAHN; D: JEAN PAUL VELLOTTI

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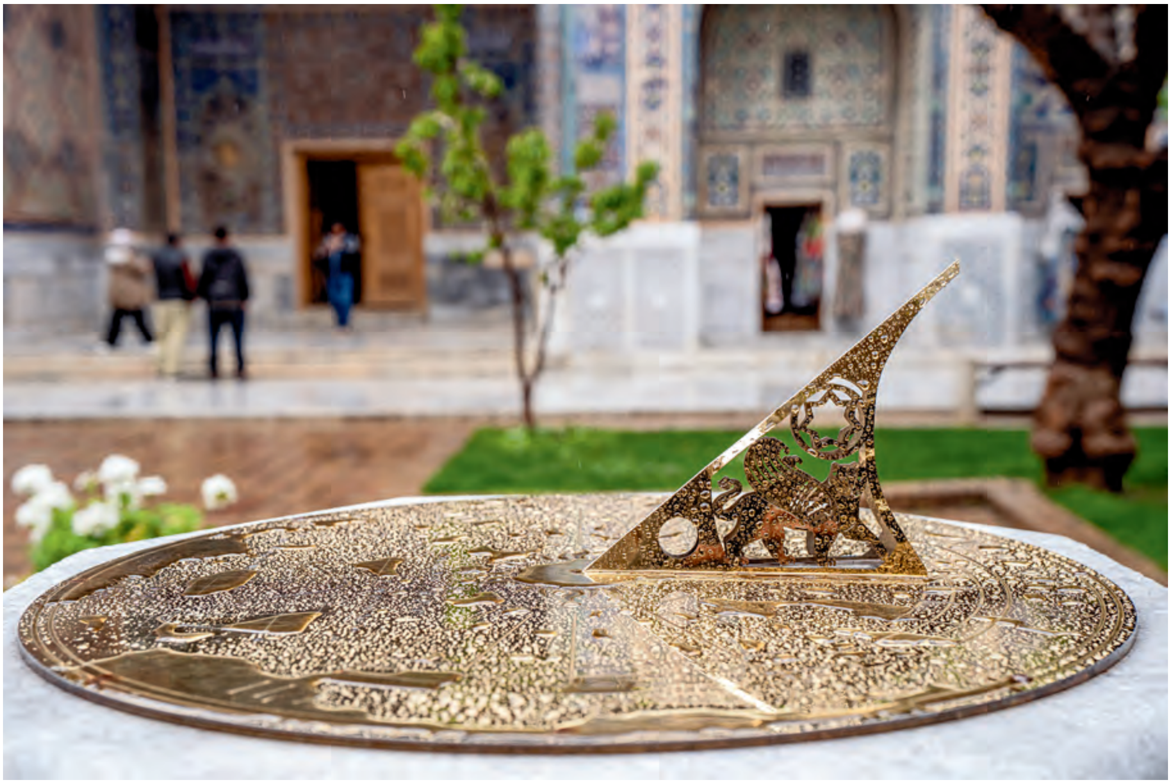

above A sundial rests on a rainy day at the Ulugh Beg Madrasa in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, where artisans preserve centuries-old monuments. *Read more on page* **20**

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