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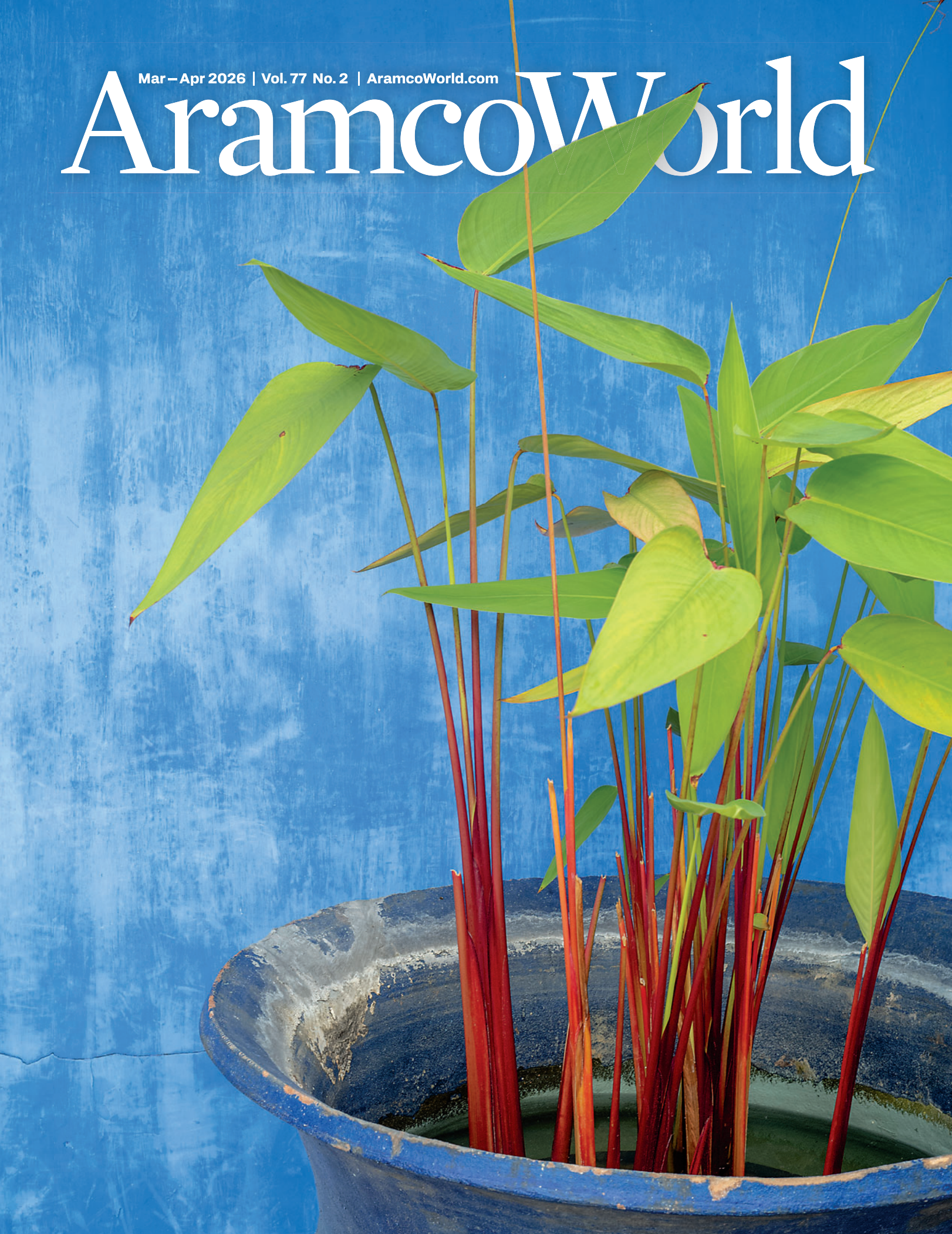

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Editor (A): Amra Pasic

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Budget & Contracts Advisor: Cheryl Kopp

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aramcoworld@sfsdayton.com
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FEATURES

DEPARTMENTS

FRONT COVER A decorative plant stands in contrast against the vivid indigo of the Blue Mansion, a UNESCO-recognized cultural landmark in George Town, Penang, Malaysia. The building's blend of architectural styles reflects its multiethnic history.

Season of the *Sakura*

Photograph by RYOSUKE KOSUGE

Around the world, spring's arrival brings hope for renewal, growth and new beginnings. No place embodies this idea more than Japan, where an explosion of pink and white comes via the *sakura*, or cherry blossom, every March and April. Like an actual explosion, the blooms don't last long—a week to 10 days. But they hold deep cultural significance in the Land of the Rising Sun, where artwork and poetry frequently evoke the national symbol.

While preparing to photograph a woman in a kimono in late March 2018 in Ibaraki Prefecture, northeast of Tokyo, I unexpectedly witnessed elderly women approaching her. The spontaneous interaction added to the calm, gentle atmosphere that felt distinctly peaceful and authentic. Rather than staging the intended portrait, I chose to capture this unplanned moment, drawn by the quiet warmth and natural harmony of the scene.

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Flavors

Marag Simach / Matfi (Aromatic Fish Stew)

Recipe by SARAH AL-HAMAD
Photograph by SUE ATKINSON

This popular fish stew is served in honor of special guests.

The *hamour* (brown-spotted grouper) is another much-prized local Arabian fish, and a staple at banquets. Very high in protein, its chunky white flesh lends itself beautifully to spices. My fish dealer suggested bream, haddock, doc or turbot in place of the hamour used in this traditional stew.

Sarah al-Hamad grew up in Kuwait and lives in London. She worked as an editor for Saqi Books and is the author of several cookbooks, including the 2013 award-winning *Sun Bread and Sticky Toffee*. She recently completed an MA in creative nonfiction at the University of East Anglia.

(Serves 4)

1 kilogram hamour or other fish

1 teaspoon all-purpose flour, or as needed

1 walnut-sized piece tamarind or 1 teaspoon tamarind paste

2 dried limes (lumi) or 2 tablespoons lime juice

3 tablespoons oil for frying

2 medium onions, finely chopped

1 green chili, halved lengthways

1 teaspoon cumin seeds

1 teaspoon dried lime powder or 2 tablespoons lemon or lime juice

2 medium tomatoes, roughly chopped

1 tablespoon tomato puree

1 tablespoon fresh dill, chopped

2 tablespoons cilantro, chopped

Salt and pepper to taste

For the Marinade

2 garlic cloves, crushed

3 tablespoons lemon juice

½ inch piece ginger root, finely chopped

Salt and pepper

Wash the fish pieces and let dry. Rub them first with the flour, then coat them in the marinade ingredients. Season with salt and pepper, and let stand for at least 30 minutes, preferably longer.

If you make your own paste, remove any seeds from the tamarind and leave it to soak in 1 cup warm water.

Puncture each dried lime a few times with a sharp knife. Fry the fish in the oil in large saucepan until nicely golden, then drain on a paper towel. In the same oil, fry the onions until soft and transparent, then add the green chili and spices. Stir for about 1 minute before adding the tomatoes, puree, dill and dried limes.

Strain the tamarind paste into the stew (or add 1 teaspoon tamarind paste) and cook for a few more minutes before adding the fish pieces. Mix in the cilantro and season to taste.

Allow the stew to simmer for at least 15 minutes. Serve with mashkhoul (fragrant white rice).

Reprinted with permission from:

Cardamom and Lime: Recipes From the Arabian Gulf
Sarah al-Hamad. Interlink Books, 2008. InterlinkBooks.com.

KATE WHITAKER

Q&A

Transcending Cultures With the Flick of a Wand

Written by LEON McCARRON
Photographed by SABA KAREEM

"Music communicates beyond words. It transcends cultural, linguistic and social barriers. This was a belief that I wanted to translate into action and to share with all audiences and musicians."

There is a moment, says Karim Wasfi, standing center stage in a concert hall with hands raised, when he can feel the intention and meaning of the orchestral performers around him hovering in the air. He knows that as soon as he makes his next move, like a magician with a wand, something that wasn't there before will be conjured into reality. What Wasfi creates is classical music, and it has been the great passion of his life.

A musical prodigy during his childhood in Baghdad, Wasfi spent years studying in the United States where he learned from virtuoso performers and conductors like Yehudi Menuhin and János Starker. And yet, in his own words, he always had the idea to return to Iraq "and to re-establish the symphony orchestra."

Wasfi, born in 1972 to an Egyptian mother and Iraqi father, is driven by a conviction that culture, arts and civility together form the path forward for Iraq, and that this is especially important as a response to the conflicts he has witnessed during his lifetime. This led him to establish the Peace Through Arts Foundation, which promotes social cohesion and community healing through music and the arts.

In 2007 he became chief conductor of the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra, one of the Middle East's oldest classical ensembles. Today it boasts 85 members, ranging from those in their mid-20s to septuagenarians. Under Wasfi's leadership, the orchestra has integrated elements of traditional Arabic music and created opportunities for local composers to hear their work performed in public.

Although the orchestra is in its eighth decade, Wasfi believes its most exciting years still lie ahead. *AramcoWorld* spoke with him about these ambitions and his life and career in music.

Kareem Wasfi has helmed the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra since 2007.

When did you begin to learn the cello, and what was the appeal of classical music?

At the extremely young age of 4, I started to consciously recognize sound and music and that they were part of our day-to-day life. My late mother was a pianist and researcher from Egypt. My late father was a well-known artist and movie star, and music was one of the major foundations for his work. So, it actually started with home. Sometimes I say it was perhaps before I was even born because music was always there, and specifically classical music.

Later I joined the Music and Ballet School of Baghdad, which was, and still is, the major [arts] institution in Iraq. I grew up with teachers and faculty from what was back then the Soviet Union. That became another element of my educational background. At the age of 6, the cello was chosen for me at school, and it went from there.

When was it clear that music would be your career, and what was your first involvement with the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra?

At the end of every semester at the music and ballet school, we would have a performance. By 1986 [at age 14] and after a few solo performances, the conductor of the national symphony requested that I join them for the experience and exposure, and also to shape my capabilities with others.

I was always more of a soloist, but there was also the need to be able to sit with others and perform. It was sort of annoying in some cases because I felt so free performing as a soloist. But I learned in no time it was important to understand that this was about engaging with others through music.

When you later became chief conductor of the orchestra, what music were you interested in playing?

I became the chief conductor in late 2007 while I was still playing cello and performing. I wanted to turn it into a philharmonic, a full orchestra. I wanted to challenge musicians and the audience.

Some musicians were only used to playing classical music and some Iraqi genres of a smaller size of orchestra: Haydn, Mozart, a couple of Beethoven symphonies. I introduced Richard Strauss and Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov. These were bigger pieces with more instruments.

OPPOSITE AND ABOVE Cellist and chief conductor Karim Wasfi leads the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra through a rehearsal at the Alrasheed Theater in Baghdad.

I managed to attract more musicians, which allowed me to enlarge the repertoire. So, it became everything. It was classical European, as well as promoting Iraqi composers. Then I started the beehive of compositions, as I call it. From Iraq, whoever composed whatever was allowed to perform back then. That was my idea for exposure for composers, that they would get a chance to perform it through the orchestra.

How do you see the relationship between traditional music from Iraq and classical music?

Iraq's relationship with classical music ranges from its early days, with an audience of the expatriate community and westernized Iraqis back in the late 1940s, to the creation of a standardized path of education in the professional music schools, to recent years where audiences once again include expats but also Iraqi graduates from western universities and young people who have discovered the form.

Classical Arabic music as a genre has certain instruments and its own identity. I chose to integrate both [classical music and traditional music from Iraq] within the repertoire for many reasons. I didn't mind [orchestrating or turning] some of these compositions into symphonic or orchestral pieces so that, as a repertoire, they can get exposure both abroad and locally as a manifestation of cultural identity.

In some cases we would also integrate that with language. So instead of an opera, we had lots of instances of citation and narration with a composition. In some cases it was Shakespeare poetry translated into Arabic alongside a certain composition. I have always encouraged local composers to create this different vision for the Iraqi music, as both orchestral and symphonic.

Is there one moment that you're particularly proud of from your time leading the orchestra?

There are so many. In a couple of performances, the power went off, and to my pride—and to the pride of the orchestra—we kept playing and I kept conducting, and we didn't stop until the power was back. I even have a video of one of these performances. Some people thought it was staged. It was actually simply that the orchestra had reached a level, after so much rehearsing, to be able to continue playing with no mistakes.

What is next for you?

I welcome composers from around the world, and I would love to perform work from more contemporary American composers. I would definitely welcome more soloists from abroad, and this is something I'm working on. We are also looking to include more chamber music. I look at the orchestra as a success story that is still continuing, despite the sad fact that there's no opera house yet. There was recently a government reconsideration for the project to build one, and I hope there will be an allocation for it. We're lacking some players of certain instruments, like a harp. We had a harp 6,000 years ago in Sumeria, but we don't have a harp yet today.

For myself I'm excited about the intersection of music and language, and am working on this with the inspiring linguist, intellectual and poet Sina'a Al Taii. These are not just tools of communication but lived experiences that shape how individuals perceive themselves, others and the world.

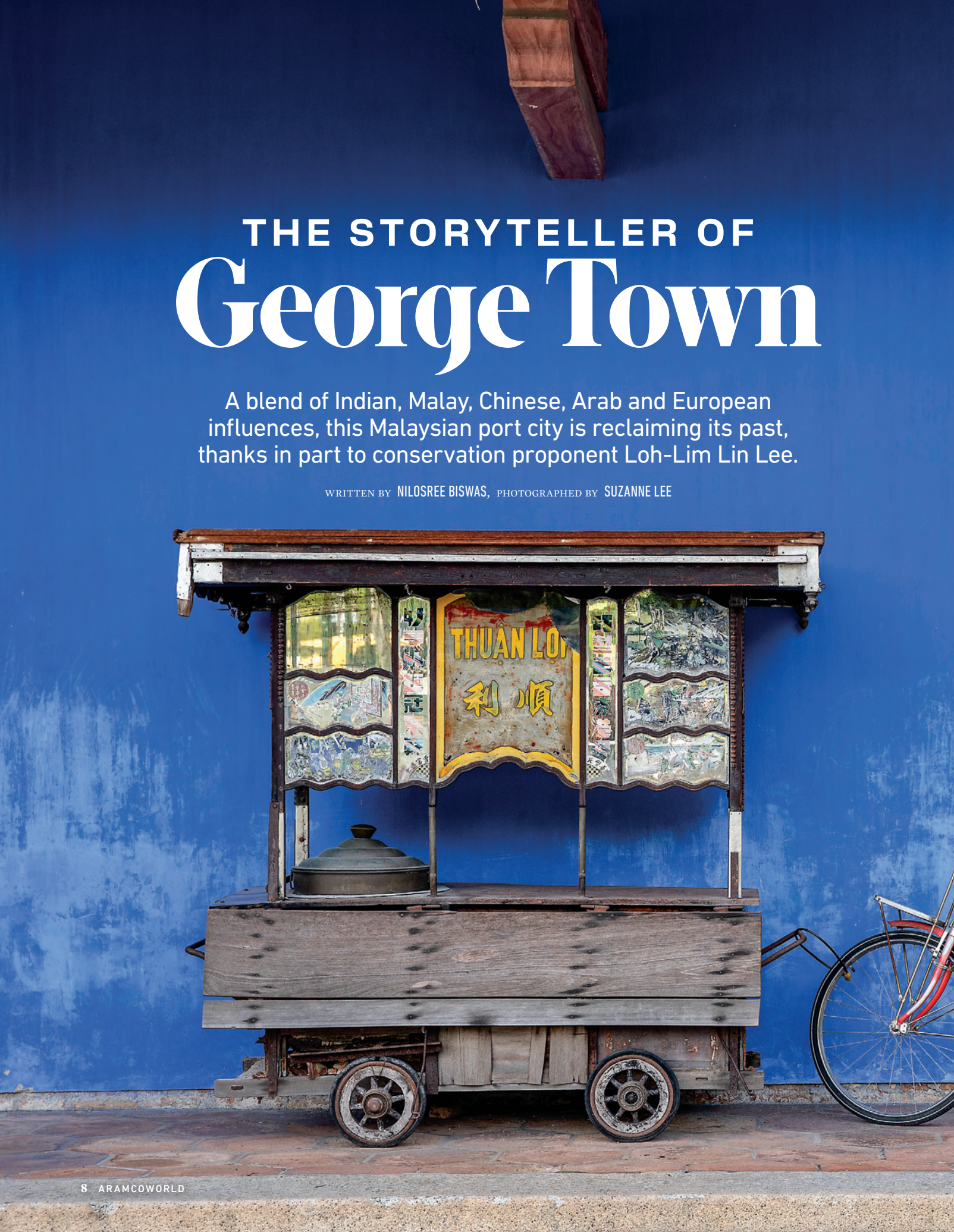
Leon McCarron is an author, broadcaster and hiking-trail designer based in Beirut. He is the author of three books, including *Wounded Tigris: A River Journey Through the Cradle of Civilization*. His forthcoming book, about the Hejaz Railway from Damascus, Syria, to Madinah, Saudi Arabia, will be published in 2026. Baghdad-based Iraqi documentary photographer and videographer **Saba Kareem** works as a photojournalist and visual storyteller, collaborating with Reuters since 2019 as well as various international organizations and magazines. Her work focuses on women's topics, social changes and more.

Read more articles like this online at AramcoWorld.com.

THE STORYTELLER OF George Town

A blend of Indian, Malay, Chinese, Arab and European influences, this Malaysian port city is reclaiming its past, thanks in part to conservation proponent Loh-Lim Lin Lee.

WRITTEN BY NILOSREE BISWAS, PHOTOGRAPHED BY SUZANNE LEE




萬裕興
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ABOVE and **OPPOSITE** Loh-Lim Lin Lee leads a tour of the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion, known as the Blue Mansion, in George Town, Penang, Malaysia. Restoration of the 19th-century residence revived its indigo façade, carved timberwork and traditional Chinese courtyard layout. The project became a model for heritage conservation.

PREVIOUS PAGES The architecture of the Blue Mansion fuses traditional southern Chinese with art nouveau and Anglo-Indian influences.

Indigo walls rise cool and luminous around a courtyard. Sunlight filters from above, lingering on carved timber shutters and cast-iron balustrades. At the center of the space stands a woman with a pixie-style haircut, commanding a small crowd. She pauses before she speaks.

"This was once a working house," Loh-Lim Lin Lee tells the visitors gathered around her. "People came and went all day."

The mansion, on the corner of Leith Street in Penang state's capital, George Town, Malaysia, is the former home of Cheong Fatt Tze, an influential Chinese merchant often described as the "Rockefeller of the East." His trading empire stretched across Southeast Asia and beyond.

More than a century after his death in 1916, his residence—known widely as the Blue Mansion—has taken on a second life, operating both as a heritage site and a boutique hotel owned by heritage advocate Lin Lee and her husband, architect Laurence Loh.

Unscripted and animated in her delivery, the Penang-born and fifth-generation Lin Lee, 76, wants the gathered heritage enthusiasts to notice the details: the wear on tiles, the layout of the rooms—but also to understand how commerce and domestic life once intersected within this space. For her, conservation fails if people cannot understand what they are standing inside.

She then adds another layer: the social hierarchies of the port city where Indian, Malay, Chinese, Arab and European influences have coexisted since the 1700s and the migration patterns that followed shortly thereafter.

"To understand Penang's heritage, it is important to comprehend Malaysia's 'checkered history,' including its colonial times," she says. "I am against the idea of 'pick and choose' when it comes to history."

GEORGE TOWN'S ORIGIN AS A TRADING PORT

Francis Light, an English naval officer and an associate of the British East India Company (EIC), founded George Town in 1786. Light was quick to sense the topographical advantage of Penang as a potential free port in the Malacca Strait. Acquiring

“Built heritage only endures when living culture thrives.”

—DATO’ HAMDAN ABDUL MAJEED

ABOVE Dato’ Hamdan Abdul Majeed leads Think City, an organization established to drive conservation-led development in historical Malaysian cities, including George Town. **OPPOSITE** The Blue Mansion served as both family home and business headquarters for merchant Cheong Fatt Tze.

the region would boost the EIC’s trading interests and keep competitors, the Dutch and the French, at bay.

A skilled negotiator, Light acquired Penang on lease from Sultan Abdullah Mukaram Shah of Kedah Sultanate in exchange for military protection. He founded the port town, naming it after King George III. This marked the beginning of British Malaysia, with Light as its first superintendent.

The settlement grew into a cosmopolitan port shaped by Malay, Chinese, Indian, Arab and European communities. The traders and their families played a central role in this history, building mosques, trading houses and institutions that still frame the city today.

After Malaysia gained independence from British colonial rule in 1957, George Town slipped from prominence. Investment slowed, buildings decayed, and private developers demolished historical shophouses and residences to make way for modern towers.

This erasure of local heritage swiftly changed the character of George Town’s public spaces, decimating the memories of several communities. To remedy this, a movement toward mindful conservation rose.

A NEW PURPOSE IN PENANG

Before she was drawn to mindful conservation, Lin Lee, an alumna of the London School of Economics, returned to Penang in the early 1970s, when few people of her generation chose to come back.

George Town’s population was then fewer than 300,000, less than half of what it is today. Trade routes had shifted, and the free-port status that had allowed for the import and handling of goods without customs intervention had been revoked. Younger residents increasingly left for opportunities elsewhere.

Upon her and Loh’s return, Lin Lee joined Universiti Sains Malaysia as a lecturer in social psychology, teaching and researching how people relate to space

and environment. After seven and a half years in academia, she made a decisive shift. “Finally,” she says, “I took a leap into conservation and heritage.

“The town was much smaller, and we thought we could impact the community with our vision,” reflects Lin Lee.

Over the past three decades, Lin Lee has played a catalytic role in reshaping how George Town engages with its past. She brings academic depth to heritage work.

Broader momentum is working in her favor.

The concept of history as an integrated whole has gained international traction. In 2008 UNESCO declared George Town and Melaka, south of Kuala Lumpur, a joint World Heritage Site, describing the cities as “a living testimony of 500 years of cultural exchange between East and West in the Strait of Malacca.”

The idea finds its clearest expression today at Fort Cornwallis, an 18th-century bastioneded fort at the northeastern tip of George Town, facing the sea.

Low and expansive, its thick laterite walls trace the outline of early colonial defense. A long-buried moat has been reopened, the outlines of bastions and

With its blend of architectural styles, the Blue Mansion serves as a hotel and cultural venue within George Town, a UNESCO World Heritage city that aims to conserve its multiethnic legacy.

gunpowder magazines restored. The fort, named after Charles Cornwallis, then governor-general of Bengal, is the oldest surviving military structure in Penang and a centerpiece of the North Seafront—a flagship public effort to renew cultural assets.

The North Seafront project has re-established the site both as a historical feature and as a functioning stormwater-retention basin—notably resisting the urge to erase traces of damage and disuse.

"Madam Lin Lee is integral to the project," says Dato' Hamdan Abdul Majeed, managing director of Think City, an urban regeneration and social purpose organization established to drive conservation-led development in historical Malaysian cities, including George Town.

> "Stories of the fort are long and too often retold, so we need to see that the right stories are narrated."
>
> —LOH-LIM LIN LEE

Lin Lee's role, however, goes beyond historical consultation. She leads the museology of the fort—shaping how its stories are told.

Inside one of the former storerooms, the stone floor collapses inward, forming a jagged cavity. The collapse dates back to the bombing of Penang in World War II. Rather than conceal the damage, Lin Lee insists it remain visible, anchoring the site's narrative in lived experience.

"For me that's very important," she says. "You may not repair that floor. Leave the great hole there—and then you put up an explanation. That's interpretation."

Think City's work at Fort Cornwallis is part of a broader conservation strategy that extends across George Town, focusing on public access, adaptive reuse and the regeneration of civic space.

"Built heritage only endures when living culture thrives," Majeed notes. "Heritage here is celebrated, contested and constantly reinterpreted. It tells us that preservation is as much about people as it is about buildings."

The project also draws on expertise from the Aga

Fort Cornwallis, **ABOVE AND LEFT,** is undergoing conservation work supported by both the Aga Khan Trust for Culture and Think City. Built in the late 18th century, it stands as Penang's oldest surviving fort and a symbol of George Town's colonial past.

A rickshaw carries tourists along Armenian Street, once a bustling lane for Asian traders that today forms part of George Town's vibrant heritage-tourism circuit.

Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), invited to collaborate with Think City and the Penang government.

"This approach drew from AKTC's experience in places such as Cairo, Zanzibar, Delhi and Mali, to name a few, where heritage conservation had been successfully used as a tool for social and economic development," says Francesco Siravo of AKTC. "In Penang this philosophy translated into a framework of practical action—turning the values of heritage into tangible urban improvements."

Lin Lee's approach communicates those values of heritage. Her storytelling draws a clear distinction between tour guiding and interpretation. Where tour guides often narrate events, she argues, a conservationist or museologist must deconstruct a monument—placing it within wider social, political and cultural histories.

Her academic training allows her to situate buildings within the historical narrative of colonial governance, global trade, war and migration, rather than presenting them as isolated artifacts. New technologies, including augmented reality, are used selectively to support this layered understanding, particularly for younger audiences.

"Stories of the fort are long and too often retold," she says, "so we need to see that the right stories are narrated and hopefully take away what's useful."

A broader conservation strategy extends across George Town, focusing on public access, adaptive reuse and the regeneration of civic space.

RESTORATION IN GEORGE TOWN

One early intervention saw the restoration of the mid-19th-century Syed Al-Attas Mansion, a two-story former residence of an upper-class Muslim trading family whose patriarch was an influential pepper merchant. Distinguished by its porte cochere and terracotta-tiled roof, the home had fallen into disrepair. With work begun in 1996

Institutions of commerce along Beach Street reflect the city's British colonial heritage and mercantile past.

and completed in 2018 in collaboration with Think City, it was the first building restored under the George Town Conservation and Development Corporation. It houses the Penang Islamic Museum, highlighting the history of Islam in public life in Penang and Malaysia.

The project proved a testing ground for later restoration techniques across the city, according to Siravo.

"The lessons learned at Syed Al-Attas Mansion later informed the methods of restoration of other historic structures," he notes, "including the storage rooms at Fort Cornwallis and restoration of the moat."

Preservationists also recognized the Blue Mansion's worth. In 1989 Lin Lee and Loh intervened to save the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion, which was abandoned and slated for demolition.

"I always joke that it was Cheong Fatt Tze himself who told us, 'You come and save my house,'" she says.

Over six "challenging yet fun" years, the couple reinstated the building, including preserving the mansion's distinctive indigo hue.

Eyes lighting up, she says: "We reintroduced the materials and techniques Fatt Tze had originally used, from Scottish cast-iron balusters to Chinese calligraphy to Hokkien cut paste porcelain. This is where Cheong Fatt Tze had lived his illustrious life, and as conservationists, we wanted everyone to experience those times, through the re-created reality."

Today, the Blue Mansion is a cornerstone of George Town's cultural life. It has received a UNESCO award for the "Most Excellent Project in the Asia Pacific Heritage" and gained global visibility as a filming location for the 2018 American romantic comedy "Crazy Rich Asians" and the 1992 French period drama "Indochine." Yet its most enduring feature remains Lin Lee's weekly narrations.

"Without purposeful interpretation, even Stonehenge is a collection of rocks," she says. "It is the storytelling that elicits emotion and response, ignites the passion and appreciation of what we have inherited." AW

Nilosree Biswas is a columnist, author and filmmaker with over three decades of experience 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.

IDENTITY ENDURES at New York's Oldest MOSQUE

Founded by Lithuanian Lipka Tatars, Brooklyn's Powers Street Mosque remains a quiet anchor for faith, culture and belonging.

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL SHAGOURY, PHOTOGRAPHED BY GREG KAHN

In the heart of the East Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, on a quiet residential street, sits a green building with a small minaret rising from its roofline, a crescent perched gently on top. The structure is modest yet distinct—just unusual enough that anyone walking by would notice that it doesn't look quite like the neighboring row houses. This is the Powers Street Mosque, the oldest continuously used mosque site in New York City.

Entering the mosque feels like stepping back in time. Its main hall on the ground floor is warm, the air textured by an old vent heater protruding from the ceiling. Worn wooden doors and columns reveal the building's age.

The space is lined with aged photographs that trace the earliest years of the congregation. A closer look reveals something unique: The faces looking back appear distinctly European—men and women with light-colored eyes and fair complexions. Printed surnames resemble those more commonly associated with Eastern European or Jewish communities. On one wall hangs a Soviet-era ethnographic poster, a map of the former USSR showing the patchwork of ethnic groups that once existed across the region.

This mosque was not founded by Arab, South Asian or African immigrants, groups more commonly associated with American Muslim institutions today, but by a small community of Lipka Tatars, Muslims whose ancestors lived for centuries in Lithuania and neighboring lands before immigrating to New York.

"We really start to see the migration of Lithuanian Tatars to New York, especially in Williamsburg, around the late 19th and early 20th centuries," says Dominique Jean-Louis, chief historian at the Center for Brooklyn History. "It's around that time period when you also have organizations start to spring up to support that community, like the American Muhammedan Society, which is established in 1907."

In the corner of the mosque's main hall sits a small library that houses not only books but personal documents of past members.

ABOVE The Powers Street Mosque, the oldest continuously operating mosque in New York City, sits nestled between houses in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn. **OPPOSITE** The Williamsburg Bridge spans the East River from Manhattan to Williamsburg, where Tatar Muslims first settled.

"These are handwritten personal prayer books and scrolls that folks have donated to us when a family member passes away and their children do not necessarily practice," says Alyssa Haughwout, the former caretaker of the mosque, a role she held for 10 years. Her family has been part of the mosque's congregation for five generations—each enveloped in its cozy, welcoming embrace.

Her first memory of the mosque was rolling a McDonald's Happy Meal toy along the prayer room floor as a child.

"I remember the sense of being related to everybody who was there. It might be a far distant branch on the family tree, but it was understood that everybody was connected to everybody else somehow," Haughwout says.

"It might be a far distant branch on the family tree, but ... everybody was connected to everybody else somehow."

—ALYSSA HAUGHWOUT

Today, she hopes to keep the legacy of the Lipka Tatar community in New York alive through the sustainability of the mosque it established more than 90 years ago.

Easier said than done.

Although the exact numbers are not known, a small Lipka Tatar community still lives in New York, but its presence is much less pronounced today. The mosque's survival has been in question for years since the dispersion and assimilation of the Lipka Tatar community. It is now at a crossroads: It must find that balance between identity and survival.

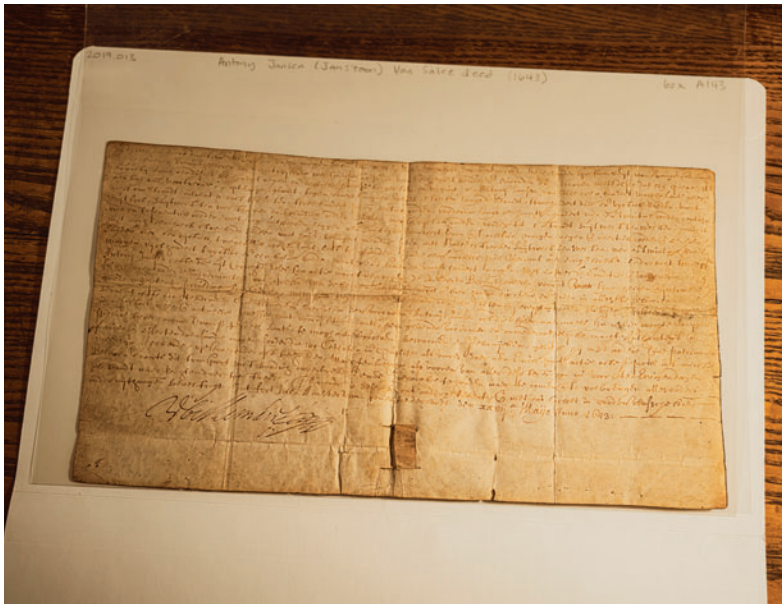
The upper floor is the carpeted prayer room. Along the walls are plaques displaying traditional Islamic creeds, rendered in Arabic script, handmade by past members, some dating back before the mosque's establishment.

At the front of the room sit the key architectural features that define any mosque. Tucked neatly into the corner is the *mihrab*, in this case a wooden stand that serves to orient worshippers toward Makkah. Haughwout explains that even though the direction of the mihrab is not "quite right," tradition has kept it in its original place.

Just beside it rises the *minbar*, a small, elevated platform from which resident imams deliver sermons.

At the far back of the room rests an American flag—a subtle but striking reminder of where this mosque's story ultimately unfolds.

Alyssa Haughwout, a third-generation member of the Lipka Tatar community, served as caretaker of the mosque for a decade.



HOW DID THE TATARS GET TO NEW YORK?

Islam reached Eastern Europe during the 13th and 14th centuries CE, carried by the shifting politics that followed the breakup of the Mongol Empire. As that empire fragmented, Muslim, Turkic-speaking groups emerged across its former territories—and became the peoples later known collectively as Tatars.

Adeeb Khalid, professor of Asian studies and history at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota in the United States, explains: "'Tatar' is a broad term that has come into use over the last 150 years to refer to a number of different groups…. Today the word is used basically for two major groups: the Volga Tatars and the Crimean Tatars."

The Lipka Tatars, however, took shape through a different historical trajectory. Their story begins in 1397 CE, during what Khalid describes as "an intra-Tatar civil war." In that conflict, one faction ended up seeking refuge in Lithuania. Its members' military skill secured them a place in society: "They were turned into nobles because they were warriors, and so they had a pretty good niche in that society even though they retained their faith," Khalid explained.

From the 15th to 18th century, Lipka Tatars lived as a small, well-integrated minority in modern-day Lithuania, Poland and Belarus. When Russia absorbed those regions in the late 18th century, they became imperial subjects but remained distinct.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many of them joined the wider Eastern European migration wave to the United States, driven by "the opportunity in the US more than anything else," Khalid said.

Their arrival coincided with a moment when New York, and specifically Williamsburg, was absorbing hundreds of thousands of immigrants every year.

Immigrants were drawn by both necessity and opportunity. "Jobs were becoming available in the United States. The economy was booming … we really saw Brooklyn's waterfront as being a source of many thousands of jobs," says Dominique Jean-Louis, chief historian at the Center for Brooklyn History.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT A case at Brooklyn, New York's Powers Street Mosque contains donated prayer letters; the founders pose in front of the building in 1934; the Othmer Library, part of the Brooklyn Public Library system, houses a 1643 deed giving 200 acres near Coney Island, a neighborhood of Brooklyn, to Anthony Jansen van Salee, the first-known Muslim landowner in Brooklyn; and the mosque displays an undated photo of its Lipka Tatar members.

LEFT The Othmer Library archives manager Dee Bowers finds in a 1929 atlas that the building that became the Powers Street Mosque once was home to the Democratic Club of the 13th assembly district under Brooklyn's old political ward system. **BOTTOM** The library contains various reference materials concerning Brooklyn and American Islamic history.

"Williamsburg is actually incredibly densely populated at this time with a number of different immigrants."

The Lipka Tatars entered this world as one of the smallest groups in a very crowded field. In Williamsburg, Jean-Louis notes, the dominant newcomers were Eastern European Jews, many leaving the Lower East Side for slightly more space across the East River, alongside older German immigrants, some Irish and Italian families, and Black migrants arriving from the American South. "This Tatar community would have definitely been amongst an extremely crowded, extremely diverse set of immigrants."

Early-20th-century Brooklyn was extremely crowded with limited sanitation and recurring disease outbreaks, according to Jean-Louis. "Water and its cleanliness is going to be a huge issue … you're also getting these waves of communicable disease … [and] a really heart-wrenchingly high infant mortality rate."

Within this setting in 1907, the Lipka Tatar community established the American Muhammedan Society, which Jean-Louis describes as one of the first organized efforts to support this new immigrant group as it navigated life in Brooklyn.

In its early years, the society rented assorted spaces for prayer and community gatherings, but the goal was always a permanent home. By the 1930s, that prospect became real when the community purchased a modest building on Powers Street to be its primary place of worship.

A MOSQUE GROWS QUIET

In the decades that followed, the building became the heart of a modest, tightly knit community. Longtime mosque member Jack Sedorowitz remembers the height of those years vividly. "The prayer room was full. Many people came for holiday prayers and special events…," Sedorowitz says. "We had our own culture and identity."

Yet by the late 1950s, dispersion was underway. Families followed opportunities to New Jersey and other parts of New York such as Long Island, Staten Island and other parts of Brooklyn. In addition, one

“I would love to continue to incorporate [the founders’ devotion] into programs so that the heritage is preserved.”

—ADNAN ROKADIA

of the pressures, Haughwout noted, was the community’s instinct to fit in: a long-standing “push to Americanize.”

Jean-Louis frames this shift within a broader reality of immigrant survival: “People were … thinking of assimilation as a survival tool. ... they understood the stakes of being ‘othered.’”

Over time, the desire to blend in and the small size of the community meant that younger generations gradually lost fluency in the traditions their grandparents brought from Europe.

LEFT Imam Adnan Rokadia, who is not of Tatar origin, says he was drawn to the Powers Street Mosque’s rich history. **BELOW** Rokadia prays in the second-floor prayer room.

While honoring the founders' mission, the Powers Street Mosque's imam has implemented a community-building initiative with people of a variety of backgrounds.

By the 1970s and '80s, the mosque's once crowded rooms grew quiet. Holiday gatherings diminished, elders passed away, and leadership roles became harder to fill. "Everything was so tied to the participation of only the Tatars, and that community … was dwindling," Alyssa recalls.

By the early 2000s, the mosque was still standing and its future was in question.

BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO TATAR COMMUNITY

By the time Haughwout became caretaker of the Powers Street Mosque in 2015, she could see that it couldn't rely on family memory alone.

"When I started to be involved in my early 20s," she says, "that's when I was like, 'Oh, these things are kind of falling to the wayside because no one's around to take care of them.'"

For a decade the mosque was part of her daily routine. But she knew it needed more than maintenance. It needed a spiritual anchor.

Around 2020 the former imam had moved on to another mission, and the board began looking for a new imam. Haughwout knew the importance of finding someone who would be empathetic to preserving the traditions of the mosque's founding community.

Tatar groups generally followed their own Islamic traditions that had evolved over time, sometimes differing from those of other Muslim groups.

"This is the way my grandmother taught me. My grandmother's grandmother taught her this. I think we're just such a unique case where there wasn't really a separation of culture from religion."

Haughwout contacted Adnan Rokadia, an imam she knew by reputation and who had attended events at the mosque but is not of Tatar origin. Expecting a referral, she asked whether he knew anyone who might serve. He wrote back immediately: "Yes, me. I can do it."

Born and raised in Queens, New York, Rokadia is a young, energetic imam who performs pastoral work at Mount Sinai Hospital and works as an interfaith advisor at the Pratt Institute, a private university in Brooklyn. What drew him to the Powers Street Mosque was not size but story.

"There was a lot of love and care that could be given into this very beautiful place to help bring it back to life slowly by appreciating and accentuating the beauty of the culture of the people that came and founded this place," Rokadia says.

His chaplaincy background shaped how he approached this small, aging, historically Tatar community wary of being overrun. "Some Muslims … can be a little bit headstrong about their ideas about things," he says. "In my work as a chaplain, it's all about understanding where people came from … being inquisitive, questioning."

A place like Powers Street, he says, "require[s] a

Downtown Brooklyn, New York, boasts a storied history, of which Lithuania's Lipka Tatars form a distinctive chapter.

delicate approach towards building a community that's going to be loving, caring [and] has the same values as the founders had intended."

Once he became imam, Rokadia launched a weekly gathering organized through an initiative he founded called Nafahat, with the goal to rebuild the mosque's congregation. The core purpose is community-building centered on spiritual practice.

"You see a younger crowd, young professionals, students and all sorts of different people from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and histories," he says.

Nafahat is a closer reflection of the face of the Muslim community in New York today. At the same time, Rokadia makes a conscious effort to preserve Tatar traditions.

"There's a poetic tradition the founders had of praising the Prophet. The more I learn about the works of devotion from that community, I would love to continue to incorporate that into programs so that the heritage is preserved," he said.

Haughwout attends Nafahat meetings every Thursday. From her perspective, Rokadia's leadership has changed the energy of the building. "I'm feeling very optimistic. … I think we're on the verge of something that is very positive," she said. "It's really helped us breathe life into the organization the way that it kind of used to be. … It's a social gathering … we pray upstairs, we do the program, and then we come downstairs, and we eat."

Asked whether the current imam is truly taking Tatar traditions into account, she didn't hesitate: "Oh, 1,000%."

The story of the Powers Street Mosque is a microcosm of the immigration experience. While many large immigrant communities have become mainstream in American society, other small communities have lost elements of their identity and tradition.

However, it is through the efforts and drive of second- and third-generation descendants like Haughwout and Imam Rokadia who have found the common ground required to preserve identity and tradition while they pave the way for a better future. AW

Watch online:

Explore footage about the making of this story at AramcoWorld.com.

Michael Shagoury is a multimedia journalist and media strategist based in Washington, DC. He has covered stories across the Middle East and North America for outlets including AJ+ and CNN International. As managing director of SideKix Media, he leads projects at the intersection of storytelling, digital strategy and emerging technology. **Greg Kahn** is an award-winning American documentary and fine art photographer. Kahn's photography centers on the forces that shape personal and cultural identity. His work has been exhibited in major galleries and museums around the world and published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *National Geographic* and *British Vogue*, among others.

‘SEARCH FOR TRUTH IN ARCHITECTURE’

Antoni Gaudí Embraced Islamic Art in Transcendent Structures

WRITTEN BY JACKY ROWLAND

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MATTHIEU PALEY

On an ordinary street in Barcelona, an extraordinary building rises from the ground. It is crowned with minaretlike turrets and clad in checkerboards of green and white tiles. The house seems misplaced, like an architectural postcard from beyond Spain’s borders.

The building contains echoes of *Mudéjar* architecture, a distinctive style created by Muslim craftsmen in medieval Spain who wove Islamic artistic techniques into Christian buildings.

Latticework evoking the carved wooden screen known as *mashrabiya* covers its windows, while the three-dimensional decoration called *muqarnas*, creating honeycomb-shaped niches, covers a vaulted ceiling.

The building is Casa Vicens, the first major project of Antoni Gaudí, an architect whose name has become synonymous with Barcelona.

Born in 1852, Gaudí is widely considered the father of Modernisme, Catalonia’s version of art nouveau.

“The important thing to understand about Gaudí’s relationship to Islamic art is that it was part of his search for truth in architecture,” said Carlos Canals Roura, founder and honorary president of the Gaudí Foundation.

“He experimented with different styles and influences to create his own methodology. I think that is the genius of Gaudí.”

The Gaudí Foundation is celebrating his legacy with a traveling exhibition that uses interactive technology to explore Gaudí’s artistic imagination. Starting in Tokyo, the international tour is expected to last several years.

OPPOSITE Casa Vicens, Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí’s first major commission, shows his early dialogue with Islamic and *Mudéjar* architecture—geometry, rhythm and ornament shaping the rooftop tower of the landmark in Barcelona, Spain, where Gaudí worked almost exclusively.

INSPIRATION FROM THE EAST

As a student at the Barcelona School of Architecture in the 1870s, Gaudí immersed himself in books containing images of Egyptian, Indian and Persian buildings. His early notebooks are full of observations about the Alhambra in Granada, one of the best-preserved palaces of the historical Islamic world.

Orientalism was in vogue in all branches of the arts at the end of the 19th century. But Gaudí did not use Eastern references for exotic flourish.

"I think what Gaudí did really well in his architecture is that his Islamic influences were more complex than just borrowing its forms," said Sofya Abramchuk, former head of design at the Gaudí Foundation who established the Originate Institute, headquartered in Barcelona, to promote creative innovation inspired by Gaudí's work.

"He was an artist who transcended cultural boundaries, embracing truth and beauty wherever he could find it, and integrating all of it into his work in new and unique ways."

Shortly after Casa Vicens, Gaudí took on a commission in the small town of Comillas in northern Spain. The result was El Capricho, a colorful house that mixes architectural styles.

There are clear Islamic overtones in the minaretlike tower, while the pointed arches framing the windows are reminiscent of Gothic architecture. The house is decorated with ceramic tiles that alternate between yellow sunflowers and green leaves.

"Gaudí's obsession was color," said Mireia Freixa, professor emerita at the University of Barcelona. "Ceramic tiling as found in Oriental

> **"He was an artist who transcended cultural boundaries, embracing truth and beauty wherever he could find it."**
>
> —SOFYA ABRAMCHUK

Madman or Genius: Who was ANTONI GAUDÍ?

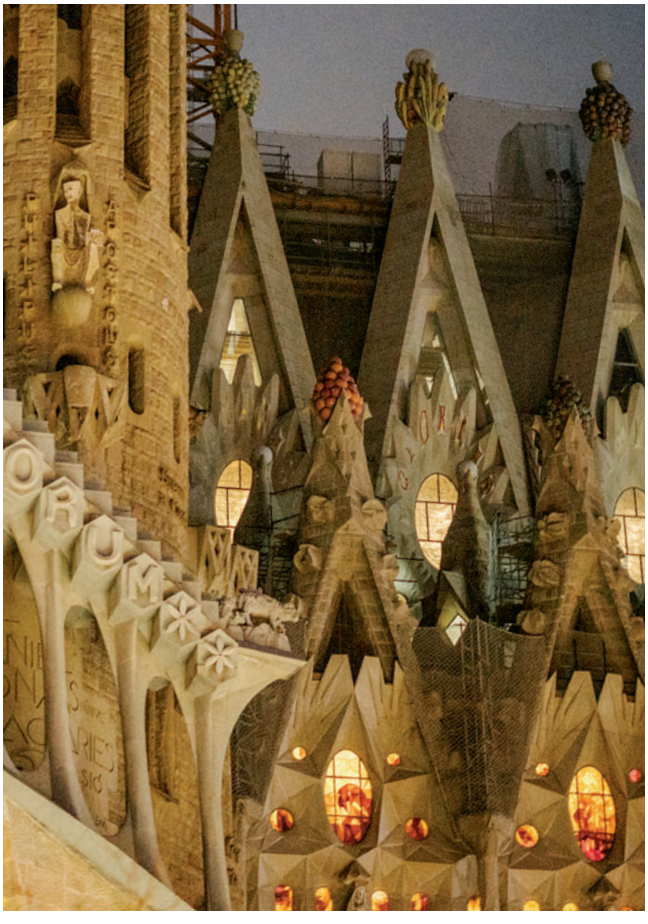
Antoni Gaudí y Cornet (1852-1926) was a groundbreaking Catalan architect who worked almost entirely in or near Barcelona, Spain.

Early influences: Attributed geometric instinct to father, boilermaker who shaped metal into complex forms. As sickly but curious child, spent time at country house in Ruidoms, on coast south of Barcelona, surrounded by Mediterranean pines, Prades Mountains and seashells, whose forms would surface in his buildings.

Shaping of worldview: Moved at 16 to Barcelona with older brother to pursue education amid Industrial Revolution and La Renaixença, cultural revival that aimed to elevate Catalan language and identity. Fusion of modernity and tradition left lasting impression.

Unconventional student: Clashed with teachers at architecture school but excelled at drawing, geometry and history. Experimented with visionary but unbuilt proposals and inventive furniture designs. Upon graduation in 1878, director of school, Elies Rogent, famously said: "We have either given a diploma to a madman or to a genius." Opened first architectural studio that year and began career marked by bold blend of art and utility.

Sources: Encyclopedia Britannica, Gaudí Foundation



Geometry and history meet in Gaudí's ambitious Sagrada Família. Basalt, granite and sandstone, not known for their delicate properties, take on ethereal qualities, inside and out. Light pours in through stained-glass windows—changing the way visitors experience the place depending on the time of day.

architecture offered him an easy way to add color to a building. In my view, Orientalism was not an end in itself. It performed an architectural function."

In 1892, Gaudí received a commission that could have placed him directly in the Islamic world: the design for a Catholic church in Tangier, on the northern tip of Morocco. Although the project was never built, its surviving sketches offer a window into Gaudí's approach.

Far from imposing a European style onto North African soil, Gaudí envisioned a building that harmonized with the local aesthetic environment.

Concepció Peig, a researcher in architectural and artistic heritage, and Manuel Arenas, an architect, studied Gaudí's original drawings in depth, publishing their interpretation of his vision for the church in *Gaudí in Tangier.*

“Gaudí recognized in Islamic esthetics the same spirituality he sought to re-create in his own spatial concepts.”

—DIANA DARKE

“The meaning of Gaudí’s work lies in his architectural language,” said Peig. “Each element combines form, function and metaphor. His architecture appeals to the senses, memory and the imagination. He wanted to create architecture that spoke.”

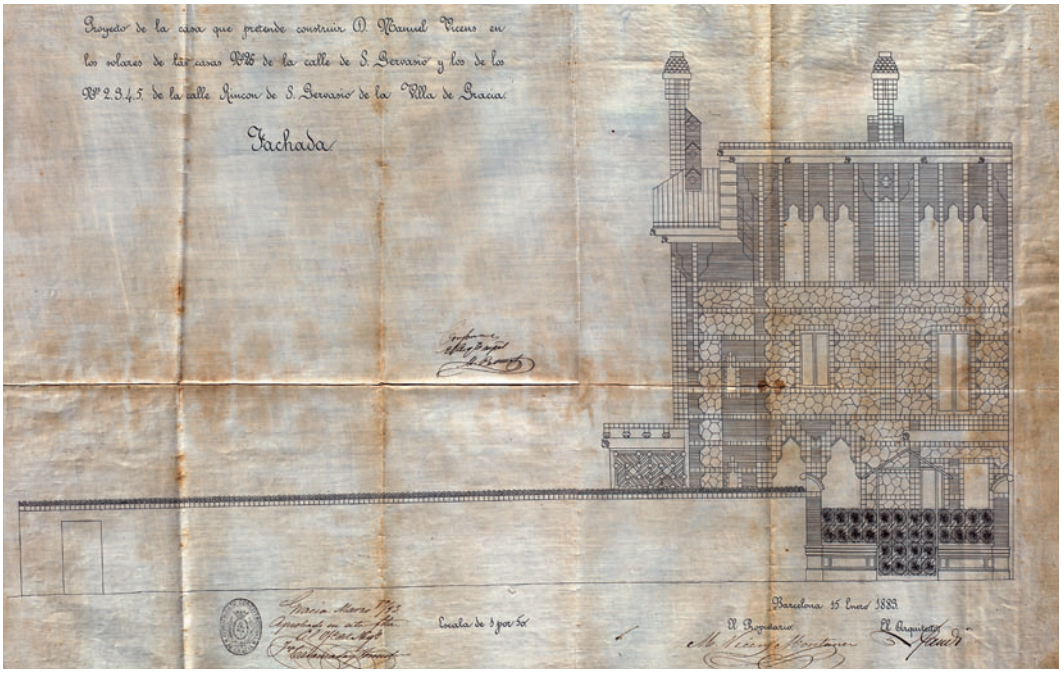
Gaudí’s sketches for Tangier depict a building crowned with tall, slender towers that resemble Egyptian dovecotes. Given the Islamic context, these would not have been bell towers. Their purpose, Peig and Arenas concluded, was to help manipulate the light entering the church.

“For Gaudí, it is the play of light that transforms a room into a sacred space,” said Arenas. “An external dome allows light to enter, then an internal dome filters the light through perforations. The patterns of light constantly change with the sun. We see the same use of double domes in Islamic architecture.”

Although the Tangier church never rose from the ground, the project revealed Gaudí’s engagement with the spiritual underpinnings of Islamic design: light as a manifestation of the sacred, geometry as a metaphor for divine order.

“Gaudí saw that Islamic geometry derives from mathematical principles that are also connected to divine unity,” said Abramchuk. “He used geometry as a spiritual language, rather than just copying patterns.”

The smoking room of Casa Vicens features a vaulted ceiling with the nichelike Islamic decorative *muqarnas* painted in lapis-lazuli with gold accents.



ANTONI GAUDÍ. ARXIU MUNICIPAL DEL DISTRICTE DE GRÀCIA

ABOVE With colorful tile and exposed brick, Casa Vicens differs from Gaudí's later works because of its straight lines and strong Oriental inspiration. **LEFT** Gaudí signed this rendering of the facade of Casa Vicens on January 15, 1883, marking the beginning of his work on the project, which was completed in 1885.

The Patio of Lights at Casa Batlló demonstrates Gaudí's engagement with Andalusian architectural principles, particularly the use of courtyards, glazed tiles and graduated color to modulate light.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: GETTY IMAGES/SYLVAIN SONNET

LEFT An 1892-1893 drawing depicts the facade of Gaudí's Tangier, Morocco, project—one ultimately unrealized. **OPPOSITE** The architect's approach to stained glass at the Sagrada Família draws on both Gothic architecture and Islamic art, where color and light are treated as immersive, spiritual forces.

FORM AND COLOR

By the turn of the 20th century, Gaudí's style was evolving rapidly. The overtly Islamic references of his early works gave way to more fluid, organic forms.

Casa Batlló is one of Barcelona's best-known landmarks. With its sinuous lines, it feels worlds away from the geometry of Islamic architecture. But Gaudí's use of light and his integration of structure with ornament still speak of his early inspirations.

The house centers around an inner courtyard that channels sunlight and ventilation, much like a *riad*, or traditional Islamic home. The courtyard walls are covered in square tiles that modulate through different shades of blue, in a design that is quietly ingenious.

"Gaudí used dark blue tiles at the top and progressively lighter blue as you go down, until the lowest tiles are white," said Judith Urbano, associate professor at the International University of Catalonia. "Likewise, the windows at the top are small and gradually get bigger as you descend. This is because Gaudí wanted to create more or less uniform light throughout the building."

Beneath the roof, Gaudí created a vaulted attic notable for its series of white catenary arches that have been compared to a ribcage.

"In Arabian architecture you find horseshoe arches and lobed arches," said Urbano.

"Gaudí innovated by using the catenary arch, the shape a chain forms when hanging under its own weight. He loved this arch because gravity, nature itself, dictates the shape."

Casa Batlló's facade is covered with a mosaic of shattered ceramic, a technique known as *trencadís*. These tile patterns have been compared to *zillij*, the geometric mosaics found on Moroccan walls and fountains.

Whereas zillij relies on precision-cut pieces, trencadís embraces irregularity. But both turn small

Gaudí, 100 Years Later

A century after his passing, Barcelona and the rest of the world see architect Antoni Gaudí as a bridge between art nouveau and modern expressive architecture. In an era of industrialization and mass production, he prized craftsmanship.

Number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites: 7, including the Sagrada Família, Spain's most visited monument and in whose crypt he is buried. Still unfinished.

Known for: Adapting designs to different climates, landscapes and historical contexts while maintaining distinctive style and vision.

Sphere of influence: Influenced contemporaries and later generations including Portuguese Pritzker laureate Álvaro Siza, Japanese architect and artist Von Jour Caux (aka Toshiro Tanaka) and Canadian American postmodern architect Frank Gehry as well as urban planners and designers.

Sources: Gaudí Foundation, UNESCO World Heritage Centre, RTF (Rethinking the Future)

PEIG AND ARENAS, *GAUDÍ EN TANGER*

In addition to architecture, Gaudí is remembered for creative contributions to the design of gardens, sculpture and other decorative arts.

fragments into shimmering patterns that play with light and shadow.

Another famous Gaudí landmark—Park Güell—stretches over a hillside overlooking Barcelona. In the trencadís mosaics that decorate its various structures, Gaudí and his collaborator, Josep Maria Jujol, gave free rein to their creative imaginations.

A long serpentine bench undulates around the main terrace. It is covered with abstract, seemingly random trencadís patterns that combine nature, geometry and hidden symbols.

THE MASTER'S FINAL PROJECT

In central Barcelona, a jagged cluster of spires pierces the sky, flanked by even taller cranes. The Sagrada Família—Gaudí's final project—has been under construction since 1882 for a mix of historical, political and economic reasons, as well as the need for highly skilled artisans to implement his ambitious vision. A large section of the central tower was lifted into place in October 2025, making it the tallest church in the world.

Near the top of the spires, the words *Hosanna* and *Excelsis* are spelled out in white ceramic tiles. The letters are arranged vertically and increase in size the higher up they go, an optical adjustment that ensures they read evenly from ground level.

"In Islamic architecture, you often see calligraphy, invocations, on the walls," said Joan Aicart, an author and historian. "Such inscriptions are not very common in Christian architecture. But Gaudí put them on the towers of the Sagrada Família."

When Gaudí inherited the project in 1883, the

A serpentine bench, **OPPOSITE**, curves around the main terrace of Park Güell, **ABOVE**, another famous Gaudí landmark in Barcelona. The bench's surface is clad in *trencadís*, mosaics with abstract arrangements.

foundation of a Gothic church was already in place. But the rest—the unique structure, the airy geometry, the manipulation of light—belonged to his own architectural vision.

Inside, gently slanting columns of basalt, granite and sandstone branch out like trees, creating a structural forest that supports and distributes the weight of the building. Light pours in through stained glass windows in a carefully orchestrated dance: blues and greens in the morning, golden tones at sunset.

"Gaudí recognized in Islamic esthetics the same spirituality he sought to re-create in his own spatial concepts," said Diana Darke, a Middle East cultural historian and author of *Stealing From the Saracens* and *Islamesque*.

"He was inspired by the relationship between nature and the divine that he saw in Islamic art and architecture, sensing God in the same spatial uncertainties, the same interplay between light and shadow."

As the Sagrada Família rises toward completion, it carries echoes of a lifetime fascination with the Islamic world: the arches of Andalusi palaces, the filtered light of mosques, the imagined church spires of Tangier.

Gaudí's genius lay in his ability to take inspiration from Islamic architecture, interweaving it with other influences, to create a style unmistakably his own.

His buildings are not only world-famous landmarks of Barcelona. They are the embodiment of a long architectural dialogue between cultures, written in color, light and stone. AW

Based in London and Paris, **Jacky Rowland** is an actor, playwright and broadcaster who writes about art, theater, music and culture. She is a former correspondent for the British Broadcasting Corporation and Al Jazeera English. **Matthieu Paley** specializes in documenting people and regions that are often misrepresented and is committed to issues relating to diminishing cultures and the environment. He is a regular contributor for *National Geographic*.

Author's Corner

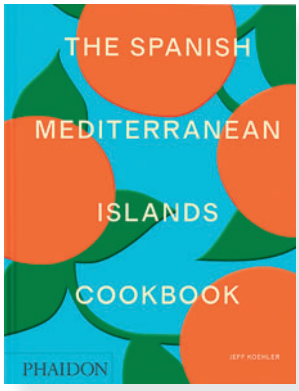
A Quiet Path Through Recipes: A Conversation With Jeff Koehler

Written by SUNNIYA AHMAD PIRZADA

Jeff Koehler approaches food as a vessel for storytelling, for geography and cultural identity. In a publishing world crowded with celebrity chefs and glossy, stylized cookbooks, he carves a quieter, more personal path—one that draws the reader to a Moroccan grandmother's kitchen table as vividly as to the spice routes that once carried cumin to her region. For Koehler, food writing goes beyond what is cooked and served. It follows who gathers, where they live and what they remember.

Koehler didn't set out to be a food writer. After studying drama and testing his luck in theater, he spent years traveling through Asia and Africa before discovering recipes could tell the stories he'd been chasing. By his early 30s, food writing had claimed him.

Koehler says he learned by being in his mother-in-law's kitchen in Spain. Ten books later, including the bestselling *La Paella*, Koehler continues to explore how food anchors memory and reveals the places and people who give it meaning.



The Spanish Mediterranean Islands Cookbook

Jeff Koehler.
Phaidon, 2025.

How did food become your route to storytelling?

I wasn't a classic foodie. I grew up north of Seattle. We had chickens, and my mom gardened and canned. I worked on a blueberry farm and later in a hospital kitchen, a grocery store and a meat store. So, food played a big part quite early on. Storytelling, however, came later.

When I was 30 and living in San Diego freelancing, I found that to write about food is to write about culture.

By the time we moved back to Spain in 2002, I was on my way, working on recipes, and my first cookbook, *La Paella*, was published in 2006.

When documenting regional cuisines, how do you honor local traditions?

In Morocco, I noticed a lot of the cookbooks were full of rich tagines, but everyday foods like flatbread stuffed with the fat of lamb and some shallots were rarely recorded. These simple recipes were important to capture the entire arc of that culinary world as it is important, culturally.

Every recipe in my Moroccan book came from time spent in homes, often with a scale or ruler in hand. What I learned is that people *want* to share. Everyone has their way of making mint tea or couscous, and each is convinced theirs is right.

OPPOSITE Sardines in escabeche marinade, a dish using escabetx, relies on a method for preserving fish that has carried over from the era of Muslim Spain. **LEFT** In Marrakech, Morocco, a street vendor pauses to sell bread. **ABOVE** At the Thursday Market on the Spanish island of Menorca, farmers bring fruits grown from generations of adaptation to sell.

Your recipes seem simple but carry depth. How do you adapt them for readers?

This is one of the biggest challenges in writing cookbooks, especially when you're working with traditional, often orally passed-down recipes from another culture. I make everything in my own kitchen, sometimes over and over, until I'm confident it comes out right. A recipe is a translation of culture, ingredients, even heat sources. I always remind readers recipes are guidelines. Your flour isn't my flour; your harissa isn't mine; your "medium heat" is different from mine.

How do you stay authentic without claiming ownership of the cultures you write about?

By not pretending to be the authority. I'm not reinventing it or "elevating" Moroccan food. I'm documenting it. I double-, even triple-check everything. If a Moroccan reader opens my book and sees a glaring error on page five, why should they trust what I say later? I ask questions constantly and represent variations respectfully. I've met hundreds of experts. I'm just the one telling the story.

You travel, cook, write and photograph. What part grounds you most?

I love being on the road, never knowing what's around the corner. I love taking random turns and ending up somewhere unexpected. But cooking grounds for me. After moving to Spain and traveling through North Africa, I developed a sense of seasonality and how fleeting it is. That's become something I love deeply: cooking in season, eating together, watching others enjoy it.

What have you learned about hospitality from family kitchens?

Watching a household's rhythm is incredibly humbling. In North Africa, I experienced the power of the round table. A rectangular table might seat six, but a round one will somehow fit 30. The message is simple but profound: There's always room for one more; you are always welcome. Everyone is equidistant from the plate; everyone can reach in.

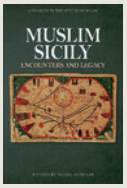
What do you hope readers take away from your books beyond the recipes?

The kitchen lets you travel through recipes. Cooking these recipes, or even just reading them, invites you into another culture. I've met people who ate Moroccan food and then booked trips to Morocco. I hope readers sense that depth and diversity. These cuisines are layered, and I hope my books pass on that sense of discovery to others.

Read more articles like this online at AramcoWorld.com.

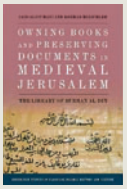
OPPOSITE AND LEFT: SIMON BAJADA. RIGHT: JEFF KOEHLER

Reviews



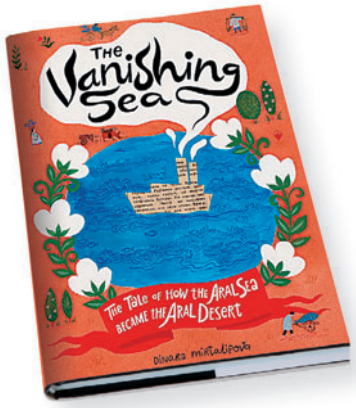
Muslim Sicily: Encounters and Legacy
Nuha Alshaar, ed. Edinburgh University Press, 2024.

What emerges from this volume by Nuha Alshaar, a professor of Arabic literature and Islamic studies, is a rounded picture of Sicily as a site of cultural exchange that shaped the medieval Mediterranean—an entangled, hybrid history that later narratives, influenced by Crusader ideology, often obscured. For nearly 300 years, the island off the toe of Italy's boot formed part of the *dar al-Islam*—essentially the Islamic world. Conquered in the early 800s by the Aghlabid dynasty of modern-day Tunisia, Sicily flourished first under its control and then, from the 900s, under the Fatimid-appointed Kalbid governors, an Arab dynasty that replaced them. Muslims, Jews and Christians benefited from the island's position along key Mediterranean trade routes within a relatively tolerant political order. Arab presence grew strongest in Palermo, seat of the Kalbid court, which attracted artists, scientists and philosophers and linked Sicily to Egypt, Syria and al-Andalus. Alshaar brings together a dozen leading scholars whose expertise spans the humanities and social sciences. Organized thematically, the chapters examine political, social and intellectual life alongside material culture—textiles, coins and art—as well as literature, language and religion. By exploring the intellectual and artistic legacy of Muslim Sicily, Alshaar highlights an area still in need of sustained scholarly attention. By the time the Normans wrested control of Sicily in the 1070s CE, Arabic had dominated the island for generations, while Islam persisted there as a major religion until the mid-13th century, with influences still visible in architecture, food and place names. —CHRISTINA RIGGS



Owning Books and Preserving Documents in Medieval Jerusalem: The Library of Burhān al-Dīn
Said Aljoumani, Konrad Hirschler.
Edinburgh University Press, 2023.

In this painstaking work, *Owning Books and Preserving Documents in Medieval Jerusalem*, historians Said Aljoumani and Konrad Hirschler explore a culture in which books became woven into the fabric of daily life through the case of Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm al-Nāsīrī. A man whose part-time work and personal library make him feel unexpectedly familiar, al-Nāsīrī led a middle-class life in Jerusalem during the 14th century. Al-Nāsīrī, a reciter on the fringes of scholarly circles during the Mamluk rule of Bilād al-Shām (present-day Levant), might have vanished into the ocean of history if not for a detailed inventory of his 300-volume personal library. Rediscovered in the 1970s, this record of books and everyday documents constructs a kind of ghost library that reveals Jerusalem's vibrant culture, otherwise glimpsed only in chronicles. In their translation and analysis, Aljoumani and Hirschler craft a microhistory that redefines how literacy and book ownership shaped life in the late Mamluk period. They show that collecting books reflected not only patronage but also individual ambition and growing literacy across social classes. Beyond tracing one man's shelves, the authors uncover how writing itself—whether in books, ledgers or receipts—shaped social life, blurring the line between private libraries and public archives. Their compelling scholarship invites readers to ponder the deep ties between books and society and to imagine this rich, long-vanished book world of Bilād al-Shām. —DIANNA WRAY



The Vanishing Sea: The Tale of How The Aral Sea Became the Aral Desert
Dinara Mirtalipova. Chronicle Books, 2026.

How often do we take nature for granted, assuming it will never vanish? In US-based folk illustrator Dinara Mirtalipova's new children's book, a sea is the main character: the one that provides livelihood and prosperity, until humans' poor choices cause its demise. The story is based on a real desiccation of the Aral Sea, located in Central Asia between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Once the world's fourth-largest lake, it almost completely dried up within a few decades after the rivers that fed it were diverted for cotton irrigation during the Soviet period. For Mirtalipova, a native of Uzbekistan, this is also a very personal story. After traveling across the dried-up Aral seabed in 2023, she wrote and illustrated the book as a tribute to her homeland and to the memory of people whose lives were once intertwined with water. Her use of color is particularly notable for showing the shrinkage of the sea. Drawn as one continuous piece, the book's pages gradually change from vibrant blue to ochre, signaling that the sea has been reduced to a desert. In addition to its beautiful illustrations, the book includes information about the region's history, its once-rich biodiversity and its people. The author's endnote conveys the powerful conservationist message: to protect and cherish what we have. *The Vanishing Sea* is a great picture book that teaches children to view nature as something worth protecting and to recognize the human capacity to do tremendous good as well as harm.

—AIBARSHYN AKHMETKALI

"What seemed like big mountains or, as locals call them, canyons were in fact once underwater ridges. Only some 50 years ago, they were covered with water."

—The Vanishing Sea

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

Reviews

JEAN-MARC ZAORSKI / CONTRIBUTOR

Novel Explores Reinvention for Survival

Written by DIANNA WRAY

What do we owe each other? What do we owe ourselves? These are the questions that Senegalese author Aminata Sow Fall has posed for nearly half a century—ever since her groundbreaking 1979 novel, *The Beggars' Strike*, helped define post-independence African literature. In *The Empire of Illusion*, she turns again to them, exploring the tensions between tradition and modernity, the weight of family and the struggle to retain respect in a world determined to strip it away.

Every Sunday three families gather in their shared courtyard, a small paradise in an unnamed city along Senegal's Atlantic coast, to share food and conversation. But one lunch shatters the tranquility when young Dieìry, son of Sada, rebukes his father for being cordial with a government minister at a ribbon-cutting ceremony the day before.

In lesser hands this might have become another predictable father-son tale, but here it is only a beginning. After the others at the table soothe the tension between the pair, Sada—a self-made man who lifted his family out of poverty—sinks into reflection, tracing the path that led him to this hard-won peace.

Here the novel truly takes flight. Sow Fall—the first woman to publish a major novel in French from francophone Africa—utilizes her trademark blend of social realism with introspective inquiry to allow the story to unfold. First published in French and translated into English by Meg Furniss Weisberg, the novel carries Sow Fall's signature narrative rhythm: patient, elliptical and alive with moral complexity. Rather than conforming to familiar Western arcs, *The Empire of Illusion* unfolds as a mosaic of introspection, nudging readers to ask what it truly means to live with integrity amid the illusions of progress.

Sow Fall layers her answers. Through Sada's memories, she unravels the journey from childhood in a coastal landfill to the creation of a sanctuary on the same land—a space redeemed through perseverance and care. Yet his success is not solitary. The author underscores how dignity depends on mutual respect, a moral thread connecting every character who gathers in the courtyard under its sighing trees.

The Empire of Illusion urges readers to engage in the fundamental questions of life, honor and morality. Sow Fall's clear, deliberate prose invites reflection on the values that sustain human community. Her novel reminds us that modern life's true empire may be the illusions we build around self-interest and pride. Through Sada's story, she asks readers to rediscover the many ways that living with humility, honor and respect bind us to one another.

The Empire of Illusion
Aminata Sow Fall. Tr. Meg Furniss Weisberg.
Indiana University Press, 2023.

"No one dares intervene, to avoid poisoning the situation any further. Everyone has absorbed the essential unwritten lesson inscribed on the immaterial tablets of their heritage. Wox du forox, *said the sage: Speech doesn't ferment. Know how to listen and not to speak until the opportune moment."*

—The Empire of Illusion

Find more reviews like this online at AramcoWorld.com.

Events

The Arsenale, a historical complex of shipyards and warehouses in Venice, Italy, today hosts the architecture and art exhibitions of the biennale.

ANDREA AVEZZÙ / COURTESY OF LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

Venice Biennale Returns With Invitation for Quiet Reflection

The Venice Art Biennale —one of the world's oldest and most prestigious international art exhibitions—returns for its 61st edition under the theme "In Minor Keys," a musical metaphor inviting quieter, more reflective engagement with contemporary art. The theme honors the late Cameroonian-Swiss curator Koyo Kouoh, former chief curator of the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, who shaped the exhibition's vision before her death last year. Among the participants is renowned British artist Lubaina Himid, born in Zanzibar, whose large-scale and immersive installations explore race and national identity. Himid told the British Council, the UK's international organization for cultural relations and educational opportunities, that its invitation to her to represent the British Pavilion at the biennale is both "a great honor" and an opportunity to create work that "resonates with multiple audiences, communicates with complex histories and looks to a more collaborative future."

▶ **Venice, Italy**, May 9-November 22.

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

Events

Current / March

Biennale of Sydney 2026: Rememory is the 25th edition of Australia's flagship international contemporary art festival. This year's biennale centers on how memory and history intersect to revisit, reconstruct and reclaim erased or repressed narratives. Works will be shown across five major Sydney venues—including White Bay Power Station and the Art Gallery of New South Wales—and complemented by performances, public programs, workshops and family-friendly events that connect art with community and education.

▶ **Sydney**, March 14-June 14.

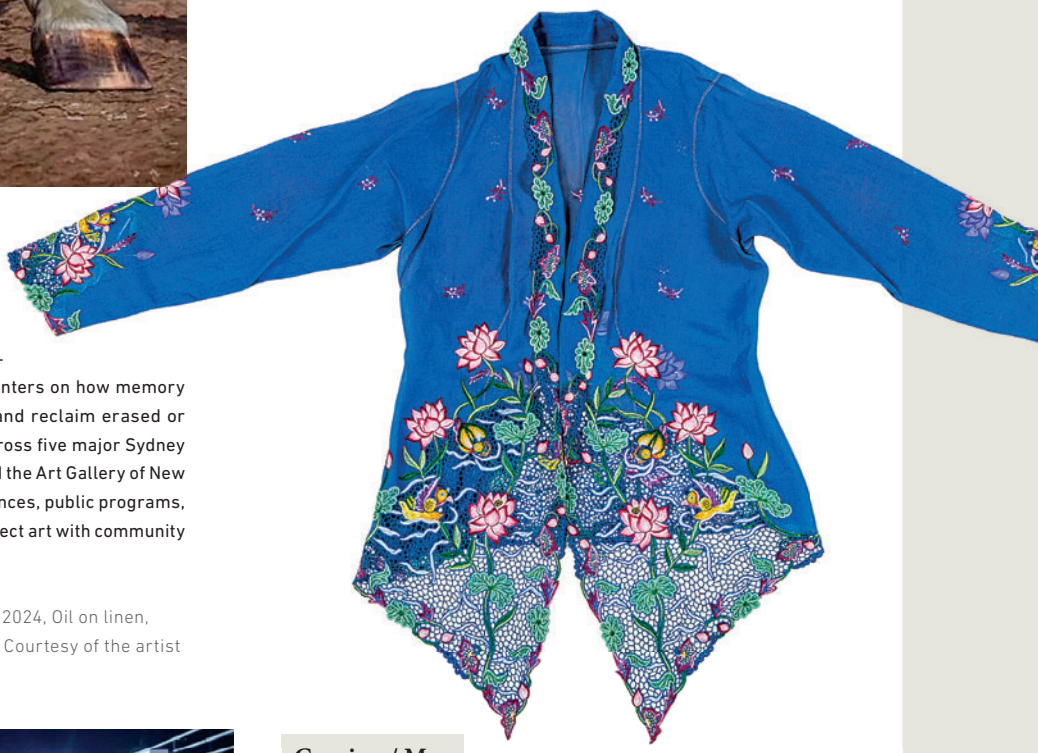
ABOVE Abdul Abdullah, "One Step at a Time", 2024, Oil on linen, 162.5x137.1 cm. Photograph: Art Sodsirikul. Courtesy of the artist Ames Yavuz.

Current / April

Busana: Traditional Costumes of the Malay World is an immersive cultural exhibition that celebrates the rich textile and dress traditions of the region—from present-day Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, southern Thailand and the Philippines. The show highlights the artistry, diversity and cultural meaning of traditional Malay attire (*busana*) through an array of textiles and complete outfits—from shimmering *songket* and rare *ikat limar* weaves to intricately dyed batik, tenun and richly embroidered ceremonial garments.

▶ Islamic Arts Museum **Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur**, through April 12.

BELOW Baju kebaya nyonya with mandarin duck motif, Malay Peninsula (now Malaysia), 20th century. Courtesy of Yayasan Budi Penyayang.



Coming / May

Sandbox Festival 2026, an annual electronic music festival featuring more than 70 artists, boasts a lineup that blends global headliners with regional talent, spotlighting acts from the Middle East and North Africa alongside international DJs and producers. Intentionally keeping its attendance to about 5,000, according to media outlets, to preserve atmosphere and community feel, it gives artists a major platform within the festival's dynamic electronic and dance music program.

▶ **El Gouna, Egypt**, May 7-9.

LEFT Photo courtesy of Sandbox Festival.

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

What's Online?

How Gulf's New Museums Are Championing Cultural Memory and Heritage

The Red Sea Museum in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and other recently opened institutions in the Arabian Gulf symbolize the region's mission to safeguard historical knowledge.

Ramadan Nostalgia Requires Active Reconstruction

Across the world storytellers, artists and photographers reconstruct Ramadan's atmosphere—ensuring the traditions of Islam's holiest month endure through acts of memory and care.

Teach the Art of Collaboration Through the Art of Tiles

With Portuguese tiles as teaching tools, discover how teamwork builds something lasting in one Connecticut classroom via our Learning Center's "For the Teacher's Desk."

Find these digital articles and more exclusively at AramcoWorld.com.

TOP: BADER ALBALAWI; MIDDLE: COURTESY OF DINARA MIRTALIPOVA; BOTTOM: MELANIE STEGNEL

Quiz

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

The universal themes of Khalil Gibran's 1923 classic, *The Prophet*, have helped it endure and lend the work to reinterpretation. The book has been adapted as an animated film, and music has been set to its passages. Most recently it is reimagined as a what?

A Interpretive dance

B Oil painting

C Graphic novel

D Television series

Answer: C. Lebanese artist and illustrator Zeina Abirached adapted the work of poetic prose into a graphic novel. Learn more about her approach at AramcoWorld.com.

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ABOVE A cupboard bears items that Lipka Tatars have used for social gatherings at Powers Street Mosque.
Read more on page **18**