Since antiquity, foods and food cultures have migrated from the Middle East westward as far as the Canary Islands. After 1492 and their global connections. We distribute AramcoWorld in print and online to increase cross-cultural understanding by broadening knowledge of the histories, cultures and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their global connections.

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The display questions the notions of hierarchy, shared visual motifs, forms and group affiliations. The names and stories associated with the fabrics differ from country to country and region to region. One fabric may have different names in different countries, depending on the symbolism that the consumer can read in the fabric. Though not originally African, these textiles have become ingrained in African culture and society, and loved and identified by Africans as their own. Staatliches Museum photograph, Montevideo, Kanas, October 22 through November 30.

PERMANENT
 Trans-Cultural Relations, Global Biographies—Islamic Art? Selected artifacts on display in the Museum Hall intermami Hafiz at the Pergamonmuseum illustrate how various cultures have migrated across continents and how, on closer inspection, shared visual motifs, forms and craft techniques reveal a network of references to other cultures, which one might not necessarily associate with “Islamic art” today. The display questions the notions of rigidly defined cultural boundaries that are often currently posited. Pergamonmuseum, Berlin.

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Perched on a table-topped, naturally defensive crag overlooking green valleys in Iraq’s rugged north, the town of Amedi is one of what were once nearly 200 historic citadels and one of the most intact. Experts at home and abroad are pitching in to meet the town’s newest challenge: preserving the history that remains and, at the same time, turning it into a much-needed economic engine.

**The Borderless World of Kahlil Gibran**

Written by Piney Kesting
Photographed by Kevin Bubriski

Arriving penniless in Boston from Lebanon, Gibran Khalil Gibran—whose name a schoolteacher misspelled “Kahlil”—grew up to become one of the early 20th century’s most inspiring writers. The story of his against-the-odds rise is one of not only pluck and talent, but also luck and mentors, whose little-known stories are shedding new light on the complex biography of a man whose poetry and prose speak today as richly as nearly a century ago.
I love walking the beach in Casablanca. Earlier this year I saw a dog digging a hole into the sand. The scene grabbed my attention, and I began to take a couple of pictures. When a boy rode up on a horse behind me to watch what was happening, I quickly took three steps back, placing the horse in the left of the frame, and made this photograph. To me this photo represents Casablanca—chaotic yet organized at the same time. It is part of my series “Casablanca Not the Movie,” which I began in 2014 as a love letter to the city that has inspired me the most. The group of images show a truthful representation of Casablanca that you won’t get from Hollywood: one of diverse cultures, people, traditions and urban development.

— “Yoriyas” Yassine Alaoui Ismaili
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FIRST LOOK

“Casablanca Not the Movie”
Photograph by “Yoriyas” Yassine Alaoui Ismaili
Muhammara is my homecoming. I discovered this addicting dip as an adult and fell in love with it when I went back to Syria in 2010.

At the time I was soul-searching in my father’s homeland and started to open my eyes to all the richness of my Syrian identity, particularly through the food and hospitality. Up until then I was only exposed to my mother’s Lebanese and Palestinian cooking and wasn’t as well-versed in Syrian food. In every home in Syria, my family would serve multiple mezze dips with dinner, and muhammara was always a centerpiece. It has the perfect combination of tangy, nutty and spicy flavors. And it looks beautiful on a dinner spread. I began to feature it at my farmers’ markets and catering, and it became an instant hit. Now it is a staple in my restaurant and represents my Syrian pride. Look for Aleppo pepper and pomegranate molasses in Middle Eastern or specialty grocery stores. Halve or double this recipe to suit your needs. Serve with your favorite bread.

(Makes 4 cups)

2 ½ lb (1.2 kg) red bell peppers (7 large)
2 ½ c (9 oz / 250 g) walnut halves
1 c (2 oz / 60 g) panko breadcrumbs
2 T pomegranate molasses
1 T lemon juice
3–4 garlic cloves
1 t cumin
1 T Aleppo pepper flakes
1 t salt
¼ c (75 ml) extra virgin olive oil
Pomegranate seeds, walnuts or chopped parsley, to garnish (optional)

Preheat your oven to 400°F (200°C). Line a baking sheet with parchment paper and place the peppers on it. Roast until the skins are charred, about 30 minutes, turning them over once or twice. Transfer to a sealable bag, or a bowl covered with plastic wrap, and set aside until cool enough to handle. Tear them open, remove the stem and seeds and peel the skins.

Working in batches, if necessary, combine the walnuts and breadcrumbs in a food processor and process to a cornmeal-like texture. Add the roasted peppers, pomegranate molasses, lemon juice, garlic, cumin, Aleppo pepper and salt. Pulse until smooth, turning off the machine and scraping down the sides of the bowl from time to time.

With the processor running, slowly add the olive oil and blend until the oil is completely incorporated. Taste and add salt if needed.

Garnish as desired and serve chilled or at room temperature.

Reem Assil is the chef and founder of Reem’s in Oakland, California. Reem’s was founded with a passion for the flavors of Arab street-corner bakeries and the vibrant communities where they’re located. Growing up in a Palestinian Syrian household, Reem was surrounded by the aromas and tastes of food from her homeland and the connections they evoked of her heritage, family and community. Before dedicating herself to a culinary career, Reem worked for a decade as a community and labor organizer and now brings the warmth of community to all her events. In 2017 she graduated from La Cocina, a competitive food business incubator program focusing on immigrant women.
But no less striking are the echoes here of what went westward, to the areas I’ve known for most of my adult life in the arid New World landscapes of the “desert borderlands” of the Southwestern US and northern Mexico. This includes, on the US side, Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, southern Colorado and West Texas; on the Mexican side, the states of Baja California, Sonora and Chihuahua; and cities from Ensenada to San Antonio.

For more than a dozen years, I have been tracing agricultural and culinary influences shared among communities from the Levant to North Africa and southern Spain, to the Canary Islands, to Mexico and the vast North American desert-borderlands region. The journey makes me think of a string of beads, each distinct, but reflecting one another along a common chain.

Here in these islands I can smell the same flowers—orange blossoms, rose and jasmine—in both the gardens and patios of Córdoba in Spain, and those of my uncles and aunts in Lebanon’s semiarid Bekaa Valley. I can taste the same foods, literally from A to Z: meatballs spiced with parsley, onion and garlic called *albóndigas*; eggplants stuffed with fruits or ground meats called *berenjena rellenas*, swimming in creamy walnut sauce topped with pomegranate seeds; a kind of biscuit dusted with powdered sugar and laced with the bite of anise called *biscochitos*. There are *callos* of tripe sautéed with chickpeas; *empanadas* stuffed with chard or spinach; kebabs, or *asados*, marinated in spices and olive oil, strung on skewers and grilled, and fritters doused in orange syrup or honey called *zalabías*.

I can see prickly pear cacti and towering, flowering stalks of agaves such as sisal. I can taste the cactus juices, feel the texture of rich tomato pastes and revel in the heat of chili peppers.
stuffed with cheeses. All these and more were once agricultural passengers from the Americas transplanted to the Canaries and far beyond to a world eager for novelty and nutrition. It was the eastbound leg of what is known historically as the Columbian Exchange, which began with the Spanish arrival in the West Indies more than 500 years ago.

Of the many questions that swirl around in my head, there is just one really big one: How did people of Arab ancestry—people of all faiths and geographical origins who may claim the name, in whole or in part—come to play roles in shaping what grows today in the region that includes Tucson, where I live? And how does that affect what I eat?

To deepen my search, I head for the Canaries, home of important, but not always well-known, “bridges” between Old and New Worlds. I pay a visit to noted Spanish- and Arabic-speaking agricultural ecologist Jaime Gil, and he guides me to Lanzarote, the easternmost island, which once had the largest population of people the Spanish referred to as Moriscos.

Like many such ethnonyms, Morisco meant somewhat different things over different times and places. Most frequently it meant Muslims of North African or Iberian descent who, in the wake of the Spanish bans on Islam, Judaism and Protestantism from the late 15th and well into the 17th centuries, either converted or, under duress, outwardly professed conversion to Christianity. Gil cautions me that when it comes to the agricultural and culinary links between the Middle East and the Canaries, I could be looking at a dense web of relations over a far greater period—nearly 3,000 years.

To show the extent of the Canaries as a kind of western outpost of even the earliest Mediterranean maritime networks, Gil points me to the work of Canarian archeologist A. José Farruia de la Rosa, an expert in prehistory at the Universidad de La Laguna in Spain. Farruia and his team have found sixth-century-bce inscriptions in the Canary Islands with Libyco-Berber characters identical to those that have been found in Morocco.

Gil also explains that just as the term Morisco has carried...
diverse meanings, so too has Converso, which was used to identify Sephardic Jews as well as Protestants who had to renounce or conceal their faith from Spanish authorities.

While the number of members of each faith affected by Spain’s religious edicts are unknown, historians generally agree it is in the hundreds of thousands for both Moriscos and Conversos. Demographic historian Trevor Dadson and ethnohistorian Karoline Cook have explained that the numbers are difficult to assess because emigrants frequently either concealed their background in official port-of-embarkation records or avoided documentation altogether. To the Canaries, however, Dadson estimates that the ratio of Morisco to Converso emigrants—refugees—may have been as high as 10 to one.

Though ruled by Spain then as now, the Canaries for a while lay at a relatively safe remove from both the Crown and the Inquisition, Dadson says. But eventually, with the immigrants came social and economic tensions. Dadson notes that the Moriscos who had lived long in the Canaries “were anxious that the Inquisition activity directed against the Granada Moriscos did not touch them.”

Adding to the complexity, many of the Muslims who departed Spain for North Africa—and the kingdoms and principalities of Morocco in particular—found less than warm welcomes. This too stimulated migrations, both westward to the Canaries and to numerous other locations, and many people also found ways to sneak back into mainland Spain. Canarian historian Luis Alberto Anaya Hernández estimates that as much as 14 percent of the half-million Morisco refugees from the Spanish mainland later fled from Morocco.

While the Canary Islands at first offered a haven, the islands soon became overpopulated. Then the reach of the Inquisition spread, and the Crown’s price for an official name-change—a symbolic ritual called “blood cleansing” that was a tantamount profession of Catholicism—became out of reach for both native-born Canarians and immigrant Moriscos. A voyage to the terra incognita—the West Indies and the Americas—became more attractive, despite the risks and uncertainties.

It was in this way that New World Moriscos and Conversos came with incentive to settle as far from the Inquisition tribunals as possible. In continental North America, many chose to head north to the arid hinterlands—especially after the establishment in 1610 of the Inquisitional Court in Mexico City. The austere lands of the Sonoran Highlands may have also been attractive because they likely reminded the newcomers of the semiarid lands of al-Andalus, as the parts of southern Spain under Muslim rule were called. (Catholic colonists and immigrants recognized this too about the desert-borderlands region: In the 18th century, Jesuit priest Ignaz Pfeffercorn wrote of welcoming Europeans and North Africans alike to “an altogether blessed country” that he favorably compared to the landscapes of Spain.)

“Due to [formal] prohibitions on Moriscos’ and Muslims’ emigration to Spanish America,” writes Cook, “many histories of the Iberian Atlantic world have overlooked the possibility that Moriscos and Muslims played a role in colonial society.” Her work and that of other historians who have...
researched primary records, including census documents and church archives from settlements, towns and cities on both sides of the Atlantic now allow us to trace the arrivals of nearly 800 Canary-born colonists—including descendants of both Muslim and Jewish families—who settled in the desert borderlands. They set up residence in places we now know well: Tucson; San Antonio; St. Augustine; and Santa Fe, New Mexico, among others.

In these remote outposts, it seems that only a few were in fact arrested by Spanish authorities and charged with blasphemy, heresy or adherence to non-Christian food taboos and forced to travel to Mexico City for interrogation. Fewer still, it appears, were brought to trial, and yet even fewer were convicted, imprisoned or executed.

Still, it comes as no surprise that settlers of Morisco or Converso backgrounds were reluctant to identify as such. Nonetheless, there is evidence they were aware of each other, and this awareness likely contributed to continuity in the trade and production of heritage agriculture and foodstuffs—many of which they also had in common with Catholic settlers.

Records point to what scholars are coming to see as a practice by both Moriscos and Conversos to adopt new surnames that referenced animals or plants, and trees in particular. This worked as a kind of code. Research into the founding families of Tucson, Santa Fe, San Antonio and Monterrey, Nuevo León, show a surprising number of these “floral” and “faunal” names: Aguilar, Alicante, de la Garza, de León, Cabrera, Castañeda, Granada, Martínez, Manzanares, Mora, Olivo, Olivera, Palma, Robles, Romero, Rosa, Uvedo and so on. All are names that continue to abound throughout the region today as a kind of linguistic link to the agricultural and culinary heritages of crops, fruits, nuts and game that flavor the culture of this part of the Americas.

Fittingly, those who chose to adopt such surnames appear to be among those who helped introduce and adapt what number
more than 50 kinds of Old World crops and animals. Of course, some of these terms have much older origins, harking back to millennia of interactions among the civilizations joined by the long shores of the Mediterranean. Some of the words come from Hispanicized Arabic or Berber-influenced Arabic, while other words have been adapted from other languages including Persian, Dravidian and Sanskrit.

Today we can make food-historical links, because by the time they arrived, these food crops were mostly called by names that were already in use in Iberia, and often also in the Canaries.

Along with Middle Eastern fruit crops like date palms—which arrived in Mexico as early as the 1530s—there came also figs, pomegranates, olives and grapes; there came spices like anise, coriander, cumin, fennel and safflower. Settlers essentially reconstructed the oases of their former homelands, using irrigation systems of qanats and acequias as models to better farm crops they knew best how to farm. They complemented these with plantings learned from Native American tribes, most famously squashes, beans, peppers and maize.

Recently, historians have received help from geneticists in tracing the origins of crop and livestock species. The Mission olive, a cultivar of *Olea europea*, prized in Arizona and the Californias, is closely related to both the Andalusian variety, Cañivano Negro, and its Moroccan counterpart, Picholine Marroquine. The Mission grape, *Vitis vinifera*, is closely identified with a dark red grape of the Canary Islands, Listán Prieto, which was formerly grown also on the Iberian Peninsula. The closest variety to the Mission fig, a cultivar of *Ficus carica*, is the Albacor or Coll de Dama Negra, which is still found on the southern Spanish coast and in the Canaries.

With regard to livestock, the Churra Libranza sheep of southern Spain is a likely precursor to the Navajo-Churro still valued for its two-layered wool. (The other potential source is a Churra breed from near Basque country in northwestern Spain.) The Criollo Corriente cattle (*Bos taurus*) of the borderlands comes from a blend of ancient livestock breeds.

**10 Culinary Travelers**

What I find most intriguing (and delicious!) are traditional foods of Arab origin that have been shared and variously adopted among the *mestizo* traditions of Andalusians, Isleños, Maghrebians and residents of the North American desert borderlands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name in us-Mexico desert borderlands today</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Name in Canary Islands</th>
<th>Name in al-Andalus (Muslim Spain)</th>
<th>Name in Arabic or Berber</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>alfajor</td>
<td>almond-pureed, marzipan-like confectionery</td>
<td>alfajor</td>
<td>alajú, alafaxur</td>
<td>al-hasuú, alajú</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>albóndiga</td>
<td>meatballs with sauce</td>
<td>albóndiga en salsa</td>
<td>al-bóndiga</td>
<td>al-bunduq, al-bundiqa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cazuela, cocido</td>
<td>baked casserole of grains, legumes and vegetables</td>
<td>cazuela, puchero canarioc</td>
<td>berza gaditana, cocido, puchero</td>
<td>fatteh, moji</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sopa de pan/ capirotada de la vigilia</td>
<td>bread pudding with fruits, nuts &amp; cream</td>
<td>budin de pan sabor canario</td>
<td>pudin a la española, sopa de pan</td>
<td>jüdháb/asyūtiyyah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mole negro, adobo, recaudo, salsa macha</td>
<td>chile and savory spice paste with ground nuts or oilseeds</td>
<td>mojo</td>
<td>harisa, harissa</td>
<td>muhamara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>carne machaca</td>
<td>dried and jerked meat, rehydrated with greens and vegetables</td>
<td>carne mechuca</td>
<td>cecina de vaca</td>
<td>naqaddad, yuqaddad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>menudo</td>
<td>tripe and garbanzo (or hominy stew)</td>
<td>callos</td>
<td>qalias, gallos</td>
<td>qálías</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ceviche</td>
<td>whitefish marinated in citrus juice or vinegar</td>
<td>escabeche (probable)</td>
<td>(e)sicba</td>
<td>sikbāj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gazpacho</td>
<td>bread soup with almonds, garlic and cucumber</td>
<td>gazpacho</td>
<td>gazpacho blanco, maimones</td>
<td>tharid, mukarrarah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>buñuelo sopapilla</td>
<td>fritter in a honey or bitter orange sauce</td>
<td>zulubia, buñuelo</td>
<td>zlebia, zulubia</td>
<td>zalabia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that go back to North Africa, particularly Morocco, the southern Iberian Peninsula and the Canaries.

Back on the island of Tenerife in the Canaries, where I see how Listán Prieto, Listán Negro and Listán Blanco grapes, all precursors of Mission grapes, remain widely grown, Gil directs me to one of the island’s historic vineyards. This one is owned by the Núñez Garcia family, and they show me their use of a very old cultivation method: Their vines grow horizontally, just above the ground, on trunks of rope three to five meters long, not trellised upward as in most modern vineyards. This is the very same grapevine style I had encountered both in Baja California Sur, at Misión San Francisco Javier, more than 300 years after it was introduced there, as well as in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon. Such discoveries of shared farming and food heritages, both large and small, now also have support on a global scale through the UNESCO Cities of Gastronomy, which is part of

Talking Gastronomy

AramcoWorld spoke with chef and Latin-cuisine specialist Elizabeth Johnson, founder of the UNESCO-recognized San Antonio City of Gastronomy, and archeologist Jonathan Mabry, cofounder and president of the Tucson City of Gastronomy.

What does it mean to be a UNESCO City of Gastronomy?

**Johnson:** As a chef, and as somebody who is deeply interested in our history and our culture, I believe that food tells a story. I believe that what you eat tells a story about who you are and the people that you descend from. It talks about trade. It talks about wars. It talks about immigration. These are all aspects that I believe are alive in the plates of food that we eat on a daily basis. So it means that we are now expected to use food and culture as that medium for living cultural heritage to affect change in our city. It connects all the things that touch and affect food and culture with sustainability initiatives, groups of people as well as our history and of course our future.

**Mabry:** I’m an archeologist, and the excavations that I directed were some of the projects that demonstrated Tucson’s 4,000 years of agricultural history. Our goal is to use this designation [as a City of Gastronomy] to increase recognition of our region’s agricultural heritage, food traditions and culinary distinctiveness.

What does recent scholarship document the diversity of people who came to the borderlands region in the colonial era, especially via the Canary Islands, mean to the food histories of your cities?

**Mabry:** I would say that Tucson’s cuisine is culturally layered. The foods that were introduced during the Spanish colonial period were transformative. The winter wheat, the cattle, the different varieties of citrus, and a whole host of other Old World plants that were introduced by the earliest missionaries and colonists complemented the native crops. So in addition to 4,000 years of native crops, we have a 300-year tradition of orchards and vineyards, and cattle ranching layered on top of that.

**Johnson:** Many have written about our iconic dish called chile con carne. People claim it’s a fusion between [Spanish and] our native indigenous cultures, which would have prepared wild meats with chile pequin and made like a stew out of them with hot rocks. Also if you look at our Tex-Mex cuisine, cumin is king. So cumin is probably one of the most important parts of our seasoning profile, and it’s undeniably a link to our Canary Island heritage.

**Mabry:** An interesting difference between San Antonio and Tucson is the varieties of fruit trees, the olives, the citrus, the apricots and a whole host of other varieties that were introduced to Tucson’s region by those first colonists, including immigrants from the Canary Islands. Heirloom varieties of trees that we identified trace back to those trees introduced during the Spanish colonial period, including a number of varieties that Gary [Paul Nabhan] has determined came from the Canary Islands.

**Johnson:** One of the things that kept people here was our source of water. It basically created a breadbasket, if you will, in a semi-arid landscape. Our river was the reason that the Spanish decided to come here. It’s the reason the Canary Islanders came and established the first civil form of government here.
the greater Creative Cities Network program. Out of 26 cities worldwide, three in the desert borderlands now belong to the gastronomical network—Tucson, San Antonio and Ensenada—and Santa Fe participates as a UNESCO Creative City.

These affiliations are putting contemporary chefs and food historians in closer contact both with their own histories and with one another. Cultural-culinary creatives from Spain, Lebanon, Turkey and Iran are all engaging with North American counterparts.

And for me now, whether I am biting into a hot empanada in Tucson, savoring grapes in the Canaries or sitting down to lunch on my cousins’ farms in Lebanon, I feel more connected than ever along this necklace of history strung across a hemisphere.

Gary Paul Nabhan (garynabhan.com) is a Lebanese-American writer, agricultural ecologist and ethnobotanist who lives in the Mexico-US borderlands. He has been honored with a MacArthur Fellowship, the Vavilov Medal for plant exploration, and lifetime achievement awards from several professional societies. He has authored or edited more than 30 books as well as numerous scholarly and popular articles. Norman MacDonald (macdonaldart.net) has been a frequent contributor to AramcoWorld for more than 40 years. He lives in Amsterdam.
Krym Altynbekov has been doing detective work for more than 40 years—but not to solve crimes.

The 65-year-old uses his forensic skills to preserve and reproduce archeological treasures in his homeland of Kazakhstan.

He has restored and replicated long-buried wooden chariots, gilded horse saddles of nobles, as well as the clothes, tools and ornaments of warriors and priestesses who lived as long as 2,700 years ago. One of his reproductions was the Altyn Adam (Golden Man), a sixth-century-BCE Saka warrior prince whose discovery in 1969 generated international headlines due to the armor of gold foil and ornamentation buried with him. Since then, the Golden Man has become Kazakhstan’s most prominent national symbol after the shangyrak, the crown of the nomad’s yurt.

The artifacts that Altynbekov preserves allow scholars to
learn more about Kazakhstan’s nomadic heritage. And the reproductions, which are major attractions at museums, provide windows into the past. His work has helped the country, independent since 1991, distinguish its own history from that of both the former Soviet Union and its Turkic neighbors in Central Asia.

All this takes place at Altnbekov’s Scientific-Restoration Laboratory of the Island of Krym—a name, he explains, that is a not-so-subtle nod to the financial independence of the two-story lab, located in Kazakhstan’s largest city, Almaty.

It functions as “kind of a small independent country, which conducts its own business,” Altnbekov says. It is also a family operation: The 15-person team includes Krym’s twin daughters, Elina and Dana, as well as his wife, Saida. Together they have preserved thousands of artifacts large and small, mostly from Kazakhstan but also from around the world, much of it on contracts with museums and Kazakhstan’s ministry of culture.

Some of the artifacts have been so badly decomposed, or in such danger of rapid deterioration when exposed to air, that Altnbekov developed new preservation techniques to save them—approaches he shares with experts from other countries.

His dedication to his work and his preservation breakthroughs have earned him recognition at home and abroad, including from the Louvre in Paris and the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg.

Hermitage restorer Natalia Vasilyeva was so intrigued with his techniques she came to Almaty to learn them.

“Preserving the different materials found at archeological sites—wood, leather, tissue, bone—is very difficult,” Vasilyeva says. Altnbekov’s team is so successful it can “recover archeological finds from the rot,” even after having been ravaged by bacteria, she says.

Viktor Novozhenov, an archeologist and historian at al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty, teases that he has worked with Altnbekov “seemingly for centuries.” The family’s preservation lab has been instrumental in shedding light on who Kazakhs are and where they come from, he says.

Restoration specialists face a major challenge in the preservation of wood, which can disintegrate when hit by air. So Altnbekov journeyed to Grenoble, France, to see how a preservation facility there did it. Its system of climate controls was far too expensive, Altnbekov reasoned, so—after six years of experimentation—he invented his own method. He soaks wood in alcohol and polyethylene glycol to strengthen its
structure. This preserves the wood without costing as much. Now other restoration facilities that can’t afford the Grenoble approach adopt Altynbekov’s.

Archaeological finds with gold, jewels and other valuables may be the ones that capture the public’s imagination, but as Altynbekov’s daughter and protégé Elina points out, “gold isn’t the treasure for us. It’s the information we obtain about our past.” To be sure, gold pieces provide insight into the past, but so do the wood, textiles and other materials they’ve found.

She and Dana, both 34, work alongside their father in the lab, while their mother, Saida, keeps the lab’s records.

One reason the family loves the work is that trying to create a picture of a civilization from bits and pieces “is like doing detective work,” Elina says. The payoff is in learning about “how our ancestors lived. Their artifacts show us their way of life, their myths, their connections with other civilizations,” she continues.

Typical projects, Altynbekov says, take up to six years, depending on the state of the artifacts when excavated.

The family’s most recent projects have focused on preserving the belongings of two priestesses, one of whom was found in the province of Batys Qazaqstan (West Kazakhstan), bordering Russia, and the other in Shyghys Qazaqstan (East Kazakhstan), just west of Kazakhstan’s border with China. As was the custom of the period, the priestesses, along with weapons, household objects and bodies of horses, had been interred in burial mounds known as kurgans.

The finery of the women’s clothes, jewelry and tools suggest they held high social positions. In addition to mediating with the gods, their roles likely included fortune telling, traditional medicine and varieties of scientific work.

The priestess of Batys Qazaqstan, whom Kazakhs refer to as Altyń Khanşayim (Golden Princess), was

Ryskali Baktygereevich, who has worked with Altynbekov and his family since the late 1980s, gently applies layers of varnish to a wooden pillow discovered in the burial grounds of Berel’ Kurgan II.
unearthed from the Tak-sai Kurgan complex near the Ural River, where she had lain buried for some 2,500 years. Immediately after her discovery in 2012, the Altynbekovs began work on preserving her belongings.

Archaeologists found buried with her a wolf paw and a gold-dipped bracelet made of wolf teeth: Both objects together suggest the wolf served as a mythological symbol of her clan, most likely Sarmatian, a nomadic people.

But “the most interesting thing she had was a wooden comb,” says Elina. Its intricate carving offers insight into war chariots of the time and suggests interaction between her people and Persian warriors.

The carving consists of two men in a chariot—a driver and an archer—and a third warrior holding a horse. The clothes and headwear of the men in the chariot are Persian, while those of the man holding the horses are Saka—a nomadic group neighboring the Sarmatians to the east.

Elina Altynbekova works with her father, her twin sister, Dana, and their mother, Saida, to preserve her country’s heritage. “Gold isn’t the treasure for us,” Elina says. “It’s the information we obtain about our past.”

Altynbekov’s knack for historical craftwork has prompted others “to ask that I make jewelry and other things for them,” or restore items, he says.

He proved so skilled at restoration that he enrolled as a young man at the Soviet Union’s top trade school for the

One reason the family loves the work is that trying to create a picture of a civilization from bits and pieces “is like doing detective work,” Elina says.

Visitors to the National Museum of Kazakhstan in Nur-Sultan examine a horse saddle and pair of stirrups discovered in southwestern Kazakhstan and restored by Altynbekov and his team, who have helped Kazakhstan distinguish its culture from both its Turkic and Soviet neighbors.
work—the All-Union Scientific Research Institute for Restoration in Moscow.

One of his first projects was the high-profile Tsar's Village in Pushkin, just outside Leningrad, now Saint Petersburg. He has also helped restore historical treasures in Moscow and Yekaterinburg in Russia, and Sevastopol in Ukraine.

It was while Altynbekov was still in high school that archeologists unearthed Kazakhstan's most celebrated cultural treasure, the Golden Man, near Issyk, just outside Almaty, in 1969. Altynbekov was too young to become involved in preserving the original, which now stands in the Museum of Gold in Nur-Sultan. But he noticed later that the first reproduction of the Golden Man's golden raiment wasn't authentic.

“So in the 1990s my father decided to make his own version,” says Dana. He spent a lot of time backgrounding himself. He pored through books and archives, studied photos of the original and talked to the archeologists who took part in the discovery, she says.

When he finished the reproduction, the archeologists said that although it was not of pure gold, "my father's version was truest to the original," she says.

Altynbekov has made a number of copies since that first one. The others are in the Museum of the First President and in the Nazarbayev Center, both in Nur-Sultan, as well as in the UN headquarters in New York and other venues across the world.

One of the Altynbekovs' most heralded recent projects was the restoration of a glittering saddle found in the tomb of a noble at Berel', in eastern Kazakhstan's Altai Mountains.

To insure the best preservation effort possible, Altynbekov had the entire block of earth containing the saddle and part of

Above: A sculpture representing the Altyn Adam (Golden Man), a Saka warrior prince discovered in 1969, stands on top of a winged leopard to crown a column in Almaty’s Independence Square. In the early 1990s, Altynbekov’s lab helped reconstruct a more authentic version of the Golden Man based on the armor, headgear and weaponry, all dressed in sheets of gold and other precious metals, with which he had been buried. Lower: Burial mounds like this one at Issyk Kurgan just outside Almaty can be found as far west as Poland and as far east as southern Siberia.
One of the 13 horses found at Berel’ Kurgan II in the Altai Mountains in East Kazakhstan wears a mask reproduced by Krym and his team, a pair of horns (or antlers) and a bridle with lotus motifs, all of which provide a glimpse into the horse-dependent society of the steppe nomads some 2,500 years ago. **Right:** A reproduction of a fifth- or fourth-century-BCE Urzhur priestess, discovered in 2013 in East Kazakhstan’s Urzhur River Valley, is on display in the National Museum of Kazakhstan. The fern and other items in her hands signify her social role.

The horse’s remains lifted from the burial site. This approach, which he has used many times since, allowed his team to remove and preserve artifacts with the utmost care, resulting in minimal loss. It is one of his innovations that has been adopted by other preservationists.

“The first thing we did was make an X-ray and [3D] tomography analysis to see what was inside,” Dana says.

As the team got to the saddle, they discovered it consisted of wood, leather and cloth that included depictions of a tiger attacking a deer and a mythological creature with horns similar to that of a mountain goat.

Afterward, the team began identifying and eliminating bacteria on the saddle—a process that took years. They then cleaned it, gently, meticulously. Their combination of preservation and reproduction has allowed the original saddle to be stored and displayed at room temperature.

It is a stunning artifact: The luxurious red cloth and ornamentation are unmistakable signs that it belonged to a leader.

The Altynbekovs have been so successful that many of the artifacts they’ve preserved or reproduced have been shown abroad.

In 2012, “Nomads and Networks,” the first exhibition in the US to offer a full overview of early steppe nomadic culture, opened at New York University’s Institute for the Study of the Ancient World. Other exhibitions in major cities across North America, Europe and Asia followed, and these led to collaborations and opportunities for Altynbekov to share his techniques.

While some scientists closely guard their formulae, “the Altynbekov family is always ready to share their experience and offer professional advice,” says Vasilyeva, the Hermitage restorer.

Hal Foster is a former Los Angeles Times journalist who spent eight years in Kazakhstan as a communication professor and writer. **Seitk Moldokasymov** is a freelance photographer based in Kyrgyzstan who specializes in nature and landscape. His work has been published in tourism-related websites, calendars and periodicals.

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n the bazaar, Nuna is worried.

Nuna’s shop is small. Just a few square meters, with an open front to the street. Shelves of wood and metal line the rough stone walls, some slumped at an angle, and all piled with neatly wound bolts of cloth. Spooled thread rests near at hand as Nuna Issa Nuna, a trim, twinkle-eyed figure in an ironed shirt and tweed jacket, sits in his red plastic chair against the wall. A white undershirt shows at his throat. Well-groomed white hair shows at his temples, beneath a vividly zigzag-patterned skullcap. A sewing machine before him is threaded and ready to work. As voices drift around us from the Chaikhana Piramerd, or Teahouse of the Old Men, just across the narrow street, Nuna shifts a pair of oversized tailor’s scissors to one side and drops his hands into his lap.

“There was a time when all the villages around here, hundreds of them, only had this bazaar,” he tells me before embarking on a long story. He details his service as a soldier in the Iraqi army in 1949 fighting for Palestine, all the way to the awful day during war in 1961 when he had to flee the bazaar because a mob was on the rampage, setting fires. “I lost all my sewing machines,” he says with a rueful smile.

Nuna returned seven years later and has been back in the bazaar ever since. But he tells me without rancor that “the taste of life has gone.” The bazaar, he says, is not what it was. A new strip of shops near the town’s entrance is siphoning business away. Lots of people stay down in the valley now and don’t bother to come up to the town at all. What’s next? Nuna isn’t sure.

Amedi is changing.

To Iraqis, Amedi (which is the Kurdish name, stressed on the first syllable; its Arabic equivalent is al-Amadiya) is as familiar as Mount Rushmore or Niagara Falls might be to Americans. Located in the
Kurdistan region in the far north of Iraq, barely 15 kilometers from the border with Turkey, the town draws visitors all summer long—partly for its history but mainly for its natural beauty. Amedi sits 1,400 meters above sea level in a landscape of high mountains and rushing waterfalls. When the rest of Iraq swelters, Amedi keeps cool. People come from Baghdad, Basra and further afield to draw breath, relax and picnic beside flowing water.

If you approach, as most visitors do, on the narrow road that clings to the contours of the foothills, passing through sunlit villages of farms and family commerce, past forests and fruit orchards and the now-empty mountain palace of Iraq’s boy-king Faisal II (1935–58), you’re unlikely to forget your first glimpse of Amedi. Like a ship, this town of only 4,000 rides above the valley atop its own flat-topped crag—a sheer-sided mesa marooned 400 meters above a floor of green, its elliptical surface tilted toward the road as if to show off its best aspect to newcomers. At its back to the north, Amedi has the barrier of the Mateen range, which crests at 3,200 meters on the Turkish border. In front to the south, across the rumpled, 10-kilometer-wide Sopna valley, watered by runoff streams, looms the wall of the Gara mountains, almost as high.

Today it’s Amedi’s setting that draws visitors, who tend to pay less attention to the town itself than to the cluster of mountain resorts nearby, particularly Sulav, a thread of gaudy restaurants and snack outlets that coils between waterfalls at the foot of Amedi’s mesa. But before the age of tourism, it was Amedi itself—and the appeal of its stupendous, easily defendable location—that drew attention. The first mention in the historical record comes when an Assyrian army captured the rock in the ninth century BCE. That implies the site had already been fortified, but by whom? The Assyrians recorded the name of the place as Amadi or Amedi. To many historians, that suggests a link with the Medes, a confederation of tribes from northwestern Iran, though hard evidence is so far lacking.

The Medes eventually took—or retook—Amedi, and developed it into the second city of their empire. The Parthians were next, venturing into these mountains some 2,000 years ago from their power-base farther east in Iran. A larger city might have retained evidence of the long periods of Median and Parthian rule—but in tiny Amedi, restricted...
steep, twisting footpath down to the valley. This is the only one of Amedi’s ancient gates to survive, on the southwestern flank of the mesa facing toward the largest city in the area, Mosul, 90 kilometers away. Carved overhead with wolf-headed serpents, images of the sun and booted warriors, the gateway—its walls an extension of the sheer mountain cliffs—forced invaders to make two steeply ascending, 90-degree turns to enter the city. Impregnability was virtually guaranteed.

Though partly destroyed in the 1970s and poorly rebuilt with blocks inserted higgledy-piggledy and carvings mismatched, the Mosul Gate symbolizes a cultural heritage that is growing in importance. The devastating social and cultural upheavals suffered by Iraq during this century and the last have helped spur widespread recognition of the value Iraqis of all backgrounds have long placed on their own heritage. In 2014 UNESCO inscribed the fortified and restored citadel of Iraqi Kurdistan’s capital, Erbil, on its World Heritage Site list. That added fuel to multinational efforts to raise the profile of cultural heritage preservation across Iraq—particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan.

One example is the British government-funded Nahrein Network, an academic support body set up in 2017 to foster cooperation between Iraqi and British researchers. It is jointly run by teams at the University of Kurdistan Hewlêr in Erbil, University College London and Britain’s Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Similarly, Washington, D.C.’s Smithsonian Institution has been working since 2015 with the Erbil-based Iraqi Institute for the Conservation of Antiquities and Heritage to develop workshops and professional courses for local heritage experts. The institute’s director, Abdullah Khorsheed Qader, Ph.D., was instrumental in the restoration of the Erbil Citadel, and he remains closely involved with heritage issues across the country.

“Cultural heritage preservation is all about awareness and
"I know that my people need to be aware of what our heritage is. That depends on economic buoyancy, which depends on political stability."

Amedi, according to Dr. Qader, is of "incalculable" value. "We had more than 200 citadels in Kurdistan. Most were destroyed, but Amedi kept its history in situ."

That history comes to us today mainly from Amedi's "golden age," when for nearly 500 years this small mountaintop city was capital of the Bahdinan Emirate, one of a string of semi-independent principalities that threaded the mountains between Anatolia and Iran. Founded in 1376 and ruled by a succession of Kurdish nobles who claimed descent from the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad, the emirate persisted right through to 1843.

"Amedi was the center ruling the whole area. The political and administrative position of the city was very high. This is an important part of our history, both Kurdish and Iraqi," says Shireen Younus Ismael, Ph.D., a professor of spatial and urban planning at the University of Duhok.

"In many cities, urban expansion meant that the citadel became part of a bigger city, as in Erbil. But Amedi has kept its original characteristics. It has been used as a fortified citadel for the inhabitants right down to today. This makes it unique. It should be preserved," she says.

Dr. Ismael's involvement with Amedi extends back more than a decade. From 2006 to 2009, she presented Amedi as a case study in an international program run by Dortmund University, in Germany. Her often solo lobbying of authorities at regional and national levels, and her research into Amedi's cultural significance, led in 2011 to UNESCO's acceptance of Amedi on Iraq's Tentative List of World Heritage Sites, a preliminary step toward full listing.

Since 2013 the World Monuments Fund (WMF), a New York-based nonprofit that works to preserve cultural heritage sites, has run training courses at the conservation institute in Erbil. Alessandra Peruzzetto, the WMF's Middle East program specialist, credits her organization's involvement to Dr. Ismael. "She gave a lecture in Duhok. Then we went to Amedi, and she took us around. Everything started from there."

Through Peruzzetto, the WMF's London office brought in Dr. Ismael as coordinator and consultant. "Shireen's vision for Amedi became the WMF's vision," says Peruzzetto.

In 2016 the WMF nominated Amedi to its World Monuments Watch list, and last year the British government's Cultural Protection Fund awarded the WMF £100,000 ($127,000) to support its ongoing documentation of Amedi's heritage. The European Union has also awarded educational grants.

"We, as the Kurdistan region, have been excluded from these [cultural conservation] activities for a long time," says Dr. Ismael, whose 2014 doctorate was the first such advanced degree in conservation ever accredited in Kurdistan. "We have no sites registered as a historic quarter or historic city. The lists deal with heritage as individual sites. But as professional conservationists, we look at each site in context, developing different strategies to manage the site in its surroundings."

In Amedi that often comes down to a challenge faced around the world: how to marry conservation needs with the needs of the inhabitants.

"People need space, comfortable houses, infrastructure—but they also need work. They can use the potential the city has to create job opportunities," Dr. Ismael says.

On a chilly morning in fall, the approach to Amedi winds from the rain-damp restaurants and souvenir displays of Sulav across a saddle to the base of the city's eastern cliff. Here the stepped footpath of old has been swept away by almost a century of successively ambitious access schemes, culminating in an immaculately engineered and illuminated highway ramp opened in 2016. Cars and pedestrians now enter Amedi at a roundabout and follow the city's only road, a 20th-century innovation that traces a broad, well-kept 1.8-kilometer oval around the mesa's circumference.

The sense of civic responsibility is palpable. "Amedi is a city, but what does that mean? To be a city is in your mind. You need education, trade—and you must have culture," says Sayyid Ibrahim, a store owner.
But improving access has resulted in loss, notably that of the Zibar Gate, the cross-town twin to the Mosul Gate. (Zibar is a village east of Amedi.) Photographs from 1933 show an arched entryway of stone being demolished by a work crew before the first road was laid. You can stand today where the Zibar Gate once stood, on an exposed shoulder of the mountain, the remnants of the older, steeply sloping road at your feet. Behind you, what was once the main artery into the city is now an alleyway between houses, though the old geography is still discernible: The road from the Zibar Gate led straight to the mosque—whose stone minaret is in plain sight a few meters ahead—and from there continued as the bazaar street, which cuts diagonally across town to the Mosul Gate.

The minaret itself is one of Amedi’s most prominent landmarks, 31 meters high and built around 450 years ago during the Bahdinan Emirate. Beside the Zibar Gate, and once bonded to it by stonework, stood the former political and administrative center of the city known as Emirate House. A two-story gubernatorial palace, it fell into ruin as Amedi’s power waned in the 19th century. In the 1950s a school was built over the ruins, and more remnants were swept away in the 1970s—both political acts of cultural erasure by the Baghdad government of the time. All that survives, wedged between modern walls, is a single arch of stone, the old palace gate, carved overhead with an eagle and two snakes (or, some say, two dragons).

“You see the same creatures on gates in Baghdad, in Sinjar [west of Mosul], in Aleppo [in Syria],” says Dr. Qader. “The Kurds were connected. Amedi wasn’t remote. It was all the same culture.”

But buildings are only part of Amedi’s story. At least as important is the city’s intangible heritage—and, specifically, its reputation for coexistence. Here, as in other cities across Kurdistan, people of different religions lived, worked, played and prayed side by side.

Today, Muslims are in a majority, but around a third of the district’s population identifies as Christian: Amedi’s 30-odd Christian families still live and worship in what is known as the Christian quarter on the west side of town. For Shavin Ismael, librarian at the Amedi campus of the University of Duhok, this is a source of pride.

“”We, as the Kurdistan region, have been excluded from these [cultural conservation] activities for a long time,””

—Shireen Younus Ismael, Ph.D.

With a population of 4,000, Amedi is alive with shops, restaurants, cafés and neighborhoods. Younis Sadallah Younis has been the town’s barber since 2011. Although he keeps up with sartorial trends, he says most of his customers tend to keep to traditional cuts.
a family is Christian or Muslim. Last month there was a Christian funeral, and three quarters of the mourners were Muslim,” she tells me.

Nearby, and behind the mosque’s towering minaret, extends a cluster of alleyways that long formed Amedi’s Jewish quarter. Jews have lived in Kurdistan perhaps since the time of Nebuchadnezzar, 2,600 years ago, and for centuries Amedi was a leading center of Jewish population. In the 12th and 13th centuries, the community supported two synagogues. Among the fig- and pomegranate-shaded lanes behind the mosque, it’s still possible to visit the tomb of Hazana, dedicated to a part-forgotten Jewish holy man of antiquity and now almost swamped by undergrowth. Kamiran Islam, in his 70s, lives in a house directly across from the tomb.

“I remember very well every Friday night the Jews came to pray here. I was a little boy. They asked us to light candles and gave us a coin or two,” he tells me.

Virtually all of Kurdistan’s Jews left en masse to Israel in the early 1950s. Controversy persists as to whether they left voluntarily or were forced out, but people in Amedi freely acknowledge that their departure tore a hole in the social fabric that has never been repaired. Many offer a positive communal memory of intermingling.

Amedi’s cultural mix “is lovely. It’s one of the points that attracted me to study the city,” Dr. Shireen Ismael says. But if no action is taken, she adds, “Amedi will lose its value and significance because the changes are so fast. Heritage is nonrenewable. When you’ve lost it, it’s gone.”

Those changes are social, including economic stagnation that has driven younger generations away, and also physical. Heritage properties survive, but new construction abounds, some of it unregulated. New residential neighborhoods have been built beside Sulav to cope with overflow, but as Wan Ibrahim, a postgraduate architect whose family lists seven generations of residence in Amedi, points out, many houses function only as summer-vacation properties, their owners absent most of the year. According to Dr. Ismael’s statistics, of every 10 visitors to the area, nine stay in or near Sulav and never even once venture up the hill to engage firsthand with Amedi’s distinctive history. And dominating the hillside above Sulav, construction of a $1.3-million hotel promises to tip the scales even further.

All this intensifies a sense of urgency. Peruzzetto of the WMF talks of a strengthening desire

“Cultural heritage preservation is all about awareness and education.”

—Abdullah Khorsheed Qader, Ph.D.
among municipal and regional authorities as well as townspeople for action. Ismail Mustafa Rasheed, governor of Amedi district, talks of “strategies of movement” already under way to address conservation. Dr. Ismael and her colleagues are working with the WMF to identify specific clusters of surviving heritage houses and parts of the bazaar, analyzing materials, designs and typologies of windows, doors and archways. They are bringing in local architects to sketch possible reconstructions.

There are proposals to continue excavation at the Qubahan School, a part-ruined complex below Amedi’s cliffs that was, for several centuries during the Bahdman Emirate era, one of Kurdistan’s leading scientific universities, linked with al-Azhar University in Cairo, and attracting students from around the Muslim world.

There are, similarly, efforts to identify and encourage artisans in crafts, terracotta and the sesame-seed paste tahini, which is an Amedi speciality, in hopes they can help redirect the town’s economy toward new, heritage-oriented markets.

For Najat Shaban Abdulla, elected last year to represent Amedi in the Kurdistan parliament, the trend of vacationing in Sulav while ignoring Amedi is a “disaster.”

“Cultural heritage is part of the economy now. All the focus is on Amedi. I ran on a platform of reducing unemployment.

“Protecting our heritage is very important. But we need new buildings, new hotels and restaurants.”

—Khalid Khalil Ahmad

“We don’t want Amedi to become a museum. We grew up there. It’s our city. How can we leave it?”

—Shavin Ismael
Linking that with heritage conservation can create jobs for Amedi,” she says. 

Asking around in town produces mixed opinions. Khalid Khayat, a bank executive, welcomes the new energy. “Protecting our heritage is very important. But we need new buildings, new hotels and restaurants.” 

Shavin Ismael, the university librarian, is “very sad” that Amedi has lost its visual appeal to modern buildings, but she adds, “We don’t want Amedi to become a museum. We grew up there. It’s our city. How can we leave it?”

Yet college lecturer Halkawt Rajab Basso, the fourth generation of his family to live in Amedi, says he is ready to leave if that’s what’s needed to make space for restoration of the city’s surviving architectural heritage. 

But he may not have to. 

Peruzzetto points to the experience of the Jordanian capital, Amman, where older, semiabandoned urban townhouses have been restored gradually as new generations realize the appeal of living or working in a heritage building. The wmf is talking to developers in Amedi about how to encourage traditional building techniques in ways that would both enhance existing heritage and encourage adaptive reuse of buildings. 

Another idea transplants the Italian concept of an albergo diffuso, or “scattered hotel,” in which abandoned mountain villages are transformed into vacation hubs that offer individual restored properties for lodging or tourism services. 

While tourism could rise with such restorations, that is not the ultimate goal, she says. Nor is gentrification. “The idea is to try and generate a sustainable income in Amedi that is not disruptive of the heritage and existing ambience of the town,” she says. “Protection is the first objective.”

Standing at sunset on the edge of Amedi’s cliffs, with sawtooth mountains looming behind and mist clinging in the ravines all around, among the hundred generations who’ve stood on the same spot, the idea of protecting Amedi at this crucial turning point seems the least we can do.

The author thanks Laween Mhamad, Miran Dizayee and Birgit Ammann for their help in preparation of this article and offers gratitude in memoriam for the hospitality and conversation of tailor Nuna Issa Nuna (1931–2019).

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I believe in you, and I believe in your destiny.
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I believe that you can say to the founders of this great nation:
‘Here I am, a youth, a young tree whose roots were plucked from the hills of Lebanon, yet I am deeply rooted here, and I would be fruitful.’

—Kahlil Gibran, excerpt from “To Young Americans of Syrian Origin,” 1926
In 1895 the future author of this poem was a 12-year-old boy. With his mother and three siblings, he had recently emigrated from Lebanon to Boston, where they settled with relatives in the South Cove tenements. Left behind in their hometown of Bsharri was his father, whose conviction for embezzlement had thrust his already impoverished family into penury. They arrived with next to nothing. Yet Gibran Khalil Gibran brought with him something precious—an uncommon talent for drawing.

Against all odds, the young immigrant caught the attention of Florence Pierce, an art teacher at Denison House, an experimental settlement house designed to better the lives of immigrant and urban poor families. Impressed by his drawings, Pierce introduced him to well-connected mentors who nurtured and embraced him. These early connections, coupled with his exceptional talent as an artist and later as a writer, would lead him away from the tenements.
By the time he was an adult, Gibran was renowned among the literary and artistic circles of Boston’s Back Bay, and later of Paris and New York.

Jean Gibran and her late husband, Kahlil George Gibran, Gibran’s godson, were the first to document the multidimensional story of his life. Gibran’s experiences, observes Jean, across identities of nationality, class and language, along with his universally humanitarian point of view, are as relevant as ever—perhaps even more today. Nearly 90 years after Gibran’s passing, new biographies are out. Two museums in particular honor him, and his best-known book, *The Prophet*, has been translated into more than 100 languages. Still in print, it is one of the best-selling books of all time.

These developments would have surprised New York publisher Alfred A. Knopf, who released the book in September 1923. Gibran’s first two—*The Madman* and *The Forerunner*—had sold only modestly. Yet in its first month, *The Prophet*, a slender volume of 26 prose poems, sold an astonishing 1,300 copies. The *Chicago Evening Post* lauded it as “a little bible” for those “ready to see the truth.”

“My entire being is in *The Prophet,*” wrote 40-year-old Gibran. “Everything I have ever done before was only a prelude to this.” By the time the book came out, Gibran had become a prolific writer in Arabic and English. He was president of the New York-based Arab émigré writers group, The Pen League (see sidebar, p. 35), and an accomplished illustrator and artist. The acclaim *The Prophet* received, however, catapulted him onto the global stage. His passing at age 48 on April 10, 1931, in New York made front-page news around the world.

“Kahlil Gibran was to some 60 million persons whose tongue is Arabic the genius of the age,” read the *New York Herald Tribune*. “But he was a man whose fame and influence spread far beyond the Near East.”

The world mourned the loss of its quiet, reflective, charismatic writer, whose spirituality and wisdom not only uplifted a generation emerging from the trauma of World War I, but have resonated ever since.

**Searching for “The Real Story”**

Jean and Kahlil set out in 1970 to reveal the many layers in the life of the young immigrant who emerged from Boston tenements to become an internationally acclaimed writer and artist. “I remember exactly when it began,” recalls Jean. “We were driving home from Provincetown, Massachusetts, when Kahlil said, ‘Let’s do something about Gibran,’ and he asked me if I wanted to help him.” This started a mission that occupied the couple for decades.

Kahlil George Gibran, who was born in 1922 and grew up to become a well-known sculptor, passed away in 2008. He was named by his godfather, a second cousin whom he referred to throughout his childhood as “Uncle Kahlil.” He and his family also lived in the same tenements where his godfather had grown up, and he, too, spent time at Denison House, where the elder Gibran’s artistic talent was first noticed in 1896. Memories of the godfather who had encouraged his own interest in art as a child kindled a lifelong desire to understand who Gibran was.

“We searched and searched for the real story,” explains Jean. She says that one of the main reasons her husband wanted to research Gibran’s life was because of the vast social difference between the tenements in the South End of Boston and the wealthy environment of the Back Bay, just a few streets away. “I remember my husband wondering how Gibran was able to...”

This portrait of 15-year-old Kahlil Gibran, left, was made in 1898 by one of his mentors, photographer and publisher Fred Holland Day. Lower: Gibran recalled his family’s heritage in a painting of cedar trees in Bsharri, Lebanon.
hurdle that difference so quickly, how he did it,” she adds.

Gibran's surviving sibling at the time—his sister Marianna—contributed to the pair’s search. They began with letters in Marianna's possession from Mary Haskell, the author's most important benefactor. They also looked into a photograph that hung in Marianna’s home of the elder Gibran at age 15 by photographer and publisher Fred Holland Day, as well as correspondence between the two.

According to Jean, her husband uncovered other photographs Day shot of the elder Gibran's family in an early-20th-century photography magazine buried in the stacks of the Boston Public Library. Marianna Gibran, who remembered Day, said he often arrived in a carriage to visit the family.

The trail of clues took the pair to Day’s former home in Norwood, Massachusetts, which now houses the Norwood Historical Society. This brought more unexpected treasures, including correspondence from Jessie Fremont Beale, a social worker at the Children’s Aid Society, asking Day to help an artistically talented “little Assyrian boy Kahlil G. … [whose] future will certainly be that of a street fakir if something is not done for him at once.” This note, and correspondence from poet and dramatist Josephine Preston Peabody, allowed them to gain a fuller understanding of the people who had shaped Gibran’s life from the age of 13 and contributed to his success.

One clue led to another. The pair combed through Haskell's 47 diaries archived at the University of North Carolina, along with the 615 letters she and Gibran exchanged over 27 years. They located Day’s papers at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Additional correspondence and papers from Peabody and Haskell were found at Harvard University’s Houghton Library and at Wellesley College. And that was just the beginning.

What they discovered, after a national trek, was that fateful encounters and influential mentors nurtured the elder Gibran’s uncommon talent and artistic vision throughout his life. This helped account for much of how he bridged cultures and languages, and how he thrived as both a writer and an artist. “Gibran had a very complex life, and he was a complex person,” explains Jean. She and her husband realized that to accurately assess his life, they would have to research the milieu in which he lived.

In 1974 the husband-and-wife team published *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World*. An updated edition of the same title came out in 1991. The biography uncovered the people who had helped shape Gibran’s artistic life. “We were the first to point to Fred Holland Day, Josephine Preston Peabody and Mary Haskell, all enormous influences,” says Jean. She also emphasizes that the story “is by necessity that of his contemporaries, most of whom have since been relegated to the footnotes of history.”

“Gibran’s American journey shaped his life and literature in profound ways,” comments Lebanese author and poet Henri Zoghaib. The biography “proved to be an invaluable key to unlocking many of the mysteries revolving around this towering literary figure whose life is a masterpiece in itself.”

### Growing Up Gibran

The journey began in June of 1895 when 12-year-old Gibran, his mother, Kamila, and his siblings Boutros, Sultana and Marianna arrived in Boston. There they joined other primarily Christian immigrants from the Ottoman province of Greater Syria who began arriving in the US in large numbers in the 1870s.

His landing in Boston turned out to be serendipitous. Known as the “Athens of America,” Boston had a thriving intellectual and artistic community. Prominent Bostonians embraced Transcendentalism,
The movement that rejected materialism, supported women’s rights and believed in the sanctity within nature—all themes reflected in Gibran’s future literary and artistic works. They were also exploring the traditions of non-Christian, “Eastern” cultures.

Gibran’s artistic drawings soon led him to Day, whom Beale had contacted in the fall of 1896. She had learned of Gibran’s talent from Pierce, his art teacher at Denison House. “Miss Pierce feels he was capable of some day earning his living in a better way than by selling matches or newspapers on the street,” wrote Beale to Day, “if some one would only help him to get an artistic education.”

Day accepted the challenge. Under his tutelage, Gibran learned the arts, classical literature and poetry. Gibran acquired Day’s appreciation of Belgian symbolist writer Maurice Maeterlinck’s works, whose belief in the “oneness of the individual with the absolute” resonated with Gibran throughout his life. As an apprentice at Day’s publishing house, Copeland & Day, Gibran learned the craft of bookbinding. Before he turned 16, Gibran had sold cover designs to New York publishers. Years later he acknowledged Day’s role: “You, dear Brother, who first opened the eyes of my childhood to light, will give wings to my manhood.”

Day introduced Gibran to Boston artists such as Lilla Cabot Perry, a poet and painter who had studied with Monet and Pisarro. According to Jean, once Gibran gained access to the elite world of the Back Bay, he demonstrated “a lifelong ability to negotiate American intellectual and artistic circles, due to his charisma, innate talent, modesty and will to succeed.”

“Being an Arab immigrant in the new world served to shape his distinct identity,” writes author Paul-Gordon Chandler in his 2017 book, In Search of a Prophet. “[This] identity would later enable him to artistically and spiritually bridge the worlds of the East and West.”

The Road to The Prophet
Josephine Preston Peabody was a 24-year-old poet when she met Gibran at an exhibit of Day’s photography in March 1898. Though he was only 15, she praised the spirituality in Gibran’s drawings and later described him as a mystic and prophet. His work, she wrote with prescience, would “shake up the world.” (Years later she

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“She-Angel”
Mary Elizabeth Haskell

The she-angel I found in Boston is ushering me towards a splendid future and paving a path of intellectual and financial success for me,” wrote 25-year-old Kahlil Gibran to Ameen Ghorayeb in February 1908. “God willing, this is the beginning of a new chapter in the story of my life.”

The meeting between Gibran and Mary Elizabeth Haskell, headmistress of a private girls’ school in Boston on May 10, 1904, began a 27-year relationship that changed the course of his life.

Born in Columbia, South Carolina, Haskell moved to New England to attend Wellesley College outside of Boston. Ten years older than Gibran, the independent Haskell became his most important patron, confidant and advisor. (She later declined his marriage proposal because of their age difference.)

It was Haskell’s financial support that sustained Gibran as he moved from Boston to Paris and later to New York. “You have given me my life in a literal sense,” wrote Gibran in 1914. “It was not just the money but the way you gave it, the love you gave it with and the faith.... I wonder sometimes whether ever in history one soul has done for another what you have done for me.”

When Gibran decided in 1918 to begin writing in English, Haskell faithfully edited his manuscripts, continuing long after her move to Savannah, Georgia, in 1923 and her subsequent marriage to Jacob Florence Minis in 1926.

“Do you notice how full these things are of what we have said in talking together, sometime years ago,” noted Gibran as they reviewed drafts for The Prophet. After Haskell received her copy of The Prophet in October 1923, she wrote immediately to Gibran. “This book will be held as one of the treasures of the English language. And in the darkness ... we will open it to find ourselves again.... Generations will not exhaust it, but instead generation after generation will find in the book what they would fain be.”

Prior to her death in 1964, Haskell bequeathed her collection of Gibran paintings and drawings to Telfair Museums in Savannah. She donated all of her journals and correspondence with Gibran to the University of North Carolina. It was her preservation of these documents that years later opened the door to Gibran’s multidimensional worlds.
wrote a poem about his childhood in Bsharri and titled it “The Prophet.” Biographers have speculated that this may have inspired Gibran’s own title a quarter century later.

In 1902 after two years studying in Beirut at the Madrasa al-Hikmah, Gibran returned to Boston, where he rekindled his friendship with Peabody. She included him in her Sunday salons frequented by artists and intellectuals, and she arranged for his debut as an artist in May 1903 at Wellesley College near Boston.

The following spring, Peabody invited an acquaintance, Mary Haskell, to attend an exhibit of Gibran’s drawings at Day’s studio. Headmistress of a private girls’ school in Boston, her arrival on the last day of the exhibit changed Gibran’s life.

“The cross-cultural connection between Kahlil Gibran and Mary Haskell marked one of the 20th century’s most important creative partnerships,” comments Tania Sammons, a writer and curator who is working on a biography of Haskell.

“The Prophet is one of the most important literary works of the 20th century because of its wide-reaching appeal. While popularity in and of itself does not make a work important, the use of the work makes a difference,” she continues. “People go to The Prophet in times of need for solace and reflection, as well as for guidance and celebration. I can’t think of a comparable 20th-century work, and I don’t believe it would have existed without Mary Haskell and their relationship.”

While Day and Peabody were essential mentors to Gibran during his formative years, it was Haskell who loyally supported Gibran emotionally and financially for the rest of his life. (See sidebar, p. 32.)

Haskell’s school soon became Gibran’s refuge when he lost, in devastatingly swift succession, his beloved mother, brother and youngest sister. He and his younger sister Marianna, a seamstress who would devote herself to her older brother for the rest of her life, struggled to regain their footing. “I live here and only here,” he wrote to Haskell. “At other times I am not living.” Yet despite this most difficult time, Gibran’s reputation as a writer was growing. Syrian Lebanese newspapers in New York began to publish his works.

### An Emerging Voice

In 1905 the newspaper Al Mohajer (The Emigrant) published Gibran’s first book in Arabic, Nubthah fi Fan al-Musiq (On Music) and launched his column “Dam’ah wa Ibtisamah” (Tears and Mirth), which soon drew a large following. The 1908 publications of his second and third books, Ara’is al-Muruj (Spirit Brides) and Al-Arwah al-Mutamarrida (Rebellious Spirits), greatly enhanced his visibility in the Arab American immigrant community as well as abroad in the Arab world.

Gibran’s early writings, often embraced in the West, also caught critics’ eyes in Lebanon. In Rebellious Spirits, wrote editor Ameen Ghorayeb, “The writer combines knowledge of Lebanon with work in the US and the thought of a philosopher.” Gibran was emerging as a voice for social reform.

Between 1908 and 1910, Haskell encouraged and funded Gibran’s trip to study art in Paris, France. Gibran enrolled
In the Académie Julian in Paris, where he met and mingled with luminaries such as Auguste Rodin, Claude Debussy and William Butler Yeats. Paintings by Eugène Carrière inspired him for the artist’s fascination with nature and the “mysterious haze that hung over his paintings.” For the rest of Gibran’s life, nature and mist become prevalent themes. In Paris he decided to start his “Temple of the Arts” series, in which he drew portraits of leading figures of modern art and culture, a project he continued for the rest of his life.

Encounters with Syrian dissident émigrés in Paris awakened Gibran’s interest in the political situation in Greater Syria, which was under the control of the Ottoman Empire. His article “Ila Suriyen” (“To Syrians”), published in the newspaper of Najib Diab, Mirat al-Gharb (Mirror of the West), expressed his frustrations with attempts to overthrow the Ottoman regime in his homeland.

In 1910 a chance meeting in Paris with Lebanese writer Ameen Rihani led to another critical friendship. Gibran and Rihani shared a common background. Both were raised as Maronite Christians in Mount Lebanon, both shared a love of their homeland, and both came of age as immigrants in the US. Gibran would

At age 15 Gibran met poet Josephine Preston Peabody, who wrote with prescience that he would “shake up the world.” She later introduced Gibran to Mary Haskell, who would become his most enduring muse, benefactor and editor.
consider the older writer mu’allimi (my teacher), and Rihani encouraged him to move to New York, where he could be closer to his fellow Arab émigré writers.

“The immigrant experience elevated and expanded their consciousness,” explains May Rihani, director of The Kahlil Gibran Chair for Values and Peace at the University of Maryland and niece of Ameen Rihani. “They were ready to embrace different cultures and different religions and had a vision of a shared humanity.”

Gibran wanted to live near Rihani so he could become more involved with fellow émigré writers and publishers in the Lower Manhattan neighborhood known as “Little Syria.” In 1911 Haskell financed his move, and he settled into his permanent studio, which he named al-Sawma’ah (The Hermitage), at 51 West 10th Street in Greenwich Village.

The Cosmopolite

New York expanded Gibran’s horizons further. By the time he arrived, his work was already well-known among his contemporaries, but his background was not. He chose to conceal his early life as an impoverished immigrant.

“His identity among his friends in New York was based less on his personal history as an immigrant adolescent,” writes Jean. “Instead, perceptions of him sprang from his arrival as a Levantine newcomer with an unknown past, cosmopolite, fluent in Arabic, English and French, artistically precocious and intent on building a future.”

Gibran flourished as both a writer and artist. He and fellow mahjar (immigrant) writers were at the forefront of linguistic innovations in Arabic, efforts later underscored by the founding of The Pen League in 1920.

“Gibran in particular was one of the pioneers in the development and introduction of the short story into the Arabic tradition,” says University of Pennsylvania Professor Emeritus Roger Allen.

In 1911 Gibran illustrated Rihani’s The Book of Khalid, the first

AL-RABITAH AL-QALAMIYAH
(The Pen League)

In the early 1900s, the proliferation of Syrian Lebanese newspapers, journals and magazines in New York reflected the diversity of the growing Arab immigrant community. These publications also served as incubators for literary works by Gibran and his fellow writers, all members of the mahjar literary movement. Al-Funun editor Nasib Arida and his colleague Abd al-Massih Haddad, editor of As-Soayah [The traveler], suggested forming a union in order to protect the rights of the mahjar writers and to advance Arabic language in literature.

Ilyas Ata Allah became the first writer in May 1916 to sign his work “Udu fi al-Rabitah al-Qalamiyah” (“member of the Pen League”) in an edition of As-Soayah. Two months later, other leading émigré writers, including Gibran, Ameen Rihani, William Catzeflis, Nadra Haddad, Amin Mushriq, Arida and Abd al-Massih Haddad followed suit, establishing the first informal union of Arab immigrant writers.

They formalized the union in April 1920 with Gibran as president, Mikhail Naimy as secretary and Catzeflis as treasurer. “The tendency to keep our language and literature within the narrow bounds of aping the ancients in form and substance is a most pernicious tendency,” Naimy wrote in its bylaws. The challenge, he added, “is to lift Arabic literature from the quagmire of stagnation and imitation and to infuse new life in its veins so as to make it an active force in the building up of the Arab nations and to promote a new generation of Arab writers.”

Members of the Pen League produced some of the most creative literary works of the early 1900s. These in turn made significant contributions to the larger Nahda—the “awakening” of Arabic letters and culture. The organization was short lived, however, and it dissolved after Gibran’s death in 1931 and Naimy’s return to Lebanon the following year.
Arab American novel published in the US. The literary journal *Al-Funun (The Arts)* dedicated its inaugural issue in 1913 to Gibran, acknowledging his growing prominence. And in 1914 the first New York exhibit of his drawings was held at Montross Gallery on Fifth Avenue.

Gibran broke new ground when one of his short stories in English appeared in the first issue of *The Seven Arts*, a literary magazine founded by James Oppenheim in 1916. Haskell considered it one of Gibran’s greatest accomplishments to be the first Arab writer included among influential Western authors such as Robert Frost, D. H. Lawrence and Eugene O’Neill. By 1918 he was writing the majority of his work in English, with Haskell assisting from afar as his faithful editor. At that time he and Rihani were the only two mahjar writers known to publish in both English and Arabic. The gap between the tenements of his youth in Boston and the status he enjoyed as a mature writer and artist in New York grew with each succeeding year.

**A Universal Message**

As his writing flourished in the 1920s, Gibran became a source of pride for the Lebanese American community, which waited eagerly for his articles in the Arab press. In 1926 Andrew Ghareeb, a 28-year-old Lebanese immigrant acquainted with a number of mahjar editors and writers, became the first person to translate Gibran’s Arabic articles into English for *The Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, a leading New England newspaper.

“My father liked Gibran’s style and the beauty of his work,” says Edmund Ghareeb, a renowned Lebanese American scholar and expert in the mahjar press. “He was also very interested in his ideas about the need to fight against discrimination, intolerance and bigotry. That’s why he wanted to translate his works for the English-speaking world.”

The elder Ghareeb was a young man when Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924 (the Johnson-Reed Quota Act), which escalated anti-Syrian sentiment and severely curbed immigration from the Near East. “He felt Gibran was not only speaking to the people of Lebanon but that he had a universal message,” Ghareeb says of his father.

Others point out that Gibran’s legacy continues. “Gibran was the voice of the oppressed and the marginalized,” says May Fawaz-Huber, a former Lebanese journalist. “He is still deeply ingrained in Lebanese history, cultural heritage and collective memory, and he keeps me connected to my homeland.” She adds that many Lebanese still introduce themselves to...
strangers by saying, “I come from the land of Kahlil Gibran.”

Lebanese actress and director Nadine Labaki agrees. “To this day there is no one who more poetically illustrates for Lebanese the importance of coexistence … than Kahlil Gibran.”

By the late 1920s, Gibran's large extended family would gather for long evening celebrations whenever he returned to Boston to visit his sister Marianna. Yet he remained secretive with his New York friends about that part of his life. Until his passing, none of them knew about Haskell, his most significant benefactor, friend and editor—not even his secretary and companion for the last five years of his life, Barbara Young.

In contrast to his family’s humble world in Boston, Gibran's New York colleagues, friends and patrons were an astonishing array of leading creative, social and political influencers. He was admired and befriended by prominent Arab American and western publishers and editors. He became a favorite of Mary Khoury, a successful Lebanese American businesswoman who included him in her coveted Manhattan literary gatherings. Corinne Roosevelt Robinson, the sister of early-20th-century US President Theodore Roosevelt, would invite him to read from his works at her New York home. And wealthy New York socialite and arts patron Julia Ellsworth Ford frequently included him in her salons where he mingled with the likes of Yeats, poet Ezra Pound, dancer Isadora Duncan and actor Charlie Chaplin. His two worlds—Boston and New York—rarely overlapped.

Celebrating a Life in Letters

On January 5, 1929, hundreds of guests gathered at The Hotel McAlpin in New York to honor Gibran at a dinner organized by The Pen League. Celebrating Gibran’s 25 years as a major contributor to literature, Philip K. Hitti of Princeton University said, “Our hero of tonight … has become the father of a new school of thought all his own. While others use empty words … Gibran unfailingly produces gems of thought and is always natural and sublime.”

The dinner was held at the pinnacle of the ailing writer’s career. He died two years later at 48 from cirrhosis of the liver and tuberculosis.

Today, Gibran’s legacy seems larger and stronger than ever. In Bsharri the Gibran Museum, which also houses his tomb, attracts more than 50,000 visitors a year from around the world. In Mexico City, Mexico, where Rev. Anthony Bashir, a Syrian Orthodox priest, was the first to translate The Prophet into Arabic in the late 1920s, the Museo Soumaya houses the largest Gibran collection in the world, which it acquired in 2007 from Jean and Kahlil Gibran.

As an integral part of the Fundación Carlos Slim, the museum incorporates Gibran's literature, art and philosophy into both displays and outreach programs to schools. Cultural Director of the Museo Soumaya Alfonso Miranda explains that by highlighting Gibran’s work, the museum recognizes the contributions immigrants make to their adopted countries. “Gibran teaches us that we all live in one world,” adds Miranda, emphasizing that this message is as relevant today as it was in Gibran’s time.

Publisher Michel Moushabeck of Interlink Publishing also views Gibran as especially relevant today. His 2017 publication Kahlil Gibran: Beyond Borders is an expanded version of Jean and Kahlil Gibran's 1991 biography. “It’s a new book published at a time when its immigrant story and message are needed more than ever before,” says Moushabeck.

Jean credits Moushabeck for encouraging her to write Beyond Borders. “There was still an enormous amount of new material that I was excited about,” she says. “Rediscovering his story in the light of the present brings Gibran as a person more clearly in focus,” writes Jean. “An artist in exile, a pioneer and peer among his emigrant compatriots, Kahlil Gibran became a faithful citizen artist without borders.”

Although only 48 years old at his death in 1931, Gibran’s legacy today grows not only through continuing book sales, but also museum exhibits, academic conferences and a 2017 expanded edition of Jean and Kahlil George Gibran’s biography.
Gardens of Renaissance Europe and the Islamic Empires: Encounters and Confluences
Mohammad Gharipour, ed. 2017, Penn State up, 978-0-27107-779-6, $94.95 hb.

While establishing diplomatic relations and trading goods during the Renaissance, the Ottoman East and European West discovered they also shared a passion for gardens and garden design. European narratives of travel to the major Islamic empires of the day—Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Persia and Mughal India—include descriptions, drawings and sketches of cities and their gardens. These added “to the reciprocal flow of ideas and concepts in terms of architectural and garden design,” including the “exchanges of gardeners” and “horticultural or irrigation techniques.” Vivid descriptions of Ottoman gardens, for example, led to the French court’s replacement of Italian gardeners with Ottoman specialists after 1495. The “gardens of Mughal emperors served as models” for the Lisbon gardens of Portuguese envoys to Goa and became “symbols of wealth and status.” In the cultural rivalry between Rome and Istanbul, “villa gardens constituted a stage for outdoing each other.” This collection preserves, at least visually, Syria’s heritage, and becomes an essential archive for enthusiasts of the region. This is especially important to those who wonder if others can ever experience the Syria they knew—a place that was bustling, hospitable and simple. In one haunting picture, a young woman with furrowed brows and flowing hair clutches an object in her sun-scorched hand. Her face, garments and jewelry hint at an untold story, leaving the reader wanting to know more. That is the enigmatic beauty of this book.

—TOM VERDE

Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography
Robert Irwin. 2018, Princeton up, 978-0-69117-466-2, $29.95, hb.

This is not so much a traditional biography as an exploration of one of the greatest minds in the history of thought. There are sections on Ibn Khaldun’s education, travels and government postings in North Africa, Egypt and Spain in the 14th and early 15th century. And we learn of shoulder-rubbing with contemporary historians like Fez’s Ibn al-Khatib, “the single most influential person in Ibn Khaldun’s life,” or Egypt’s al-Maqrizi, who praised his colleague’s groundbreaking analysis of history—the Muqaddimah—as “the cream of knowledge,” composed in a style “more brilliant than a well-arranged pearl.” This study examines Ibn Khaldun’s manifold interests and curiosities (among them nomads, law, astrology and economics), and methodology, particularly “cause and effect,” and “how things work” when they are similar or dissimilar—an unusual approach for a historian of his day. The reflections of modern admirers, from Arnold Toynbee to Mark Zuckerberg, add scaffolding to Irwin’s pursuit of the “sheer depth” of Ibn Khaldun’s thinking.

—TOM VERDE

Legacy in Stone: Syria Before War

Today, many only know Syria as a geopolitical disaster and humanitarian crisis depicted in traditional media. Through his book of photography, Kevin Bubriski presents a poignant look into a time before years of civil turmoil took their toll on the land and its people. Shot in 2003, a hundred black-and-white photos—offered with brief written context—capture the dignity and prominence of several of Syria’s oldest and most captivating cities, including Aleppo, Palmyra and the Dead Cities (abandoned Roman- and Byzantine-era settlements in northern Syria). The collection preserves, at least visually, Syria’s heritage, and becomes an essential archive for enthusiasts of the region. This is especially important to those who wonder if others can ever experience the Syria they knew—a place that was bustling, hospitable and simple. In one haunting picture, a young woman with furrowed brows and flowing hair clutches an object in her sun-scorched hand. Her face, garments and jewelry hint at an untold story, leaving the reader wanting to know more. That is the enigmatic beauty of this book.

—JUDY SULTAN

“A people without cultural heritage is lost and cut off from its identity, just as artifacts without their culture are merely stones.”
Islamic Geometric Patterns (revised edition)

Islamic Geometric Patterns, Eric Broug teaches how to create designs that appear on more than 20 different edifices, from the Grand Mosque of Cordoba in Spain to monuments in India and Pakistan. The book is a practicum for designers interested in expanding their repertoire and a storehouse of information for new generations of practitioners. Notably, the book's straightforward instructions are equally accessible to people with no design or architectural-drafting experience. The only required tools are a compass (a pattern always starts with a circle) and a ruler (the pattern is always conceived by dividing the circle into equal parts, then connecting points with straight lines). Creating motifs and tessellating them into patterns also help train the eye to recognize recurring shapes and the underlying grid. Best Practice in Islamic Geometric Design sets out six principles for successful compositions. They include rules governing the disposition of lines and ensuring symmetry; scaling compositions to fit a predetermined area; embellishing designs, typically with color or curvilinear elements like calligraphy; engaging viewers by juxtaposing different patterns; favoring traditional, familiar shapes; and innovation. Broug argues that there is plenty of scope within these principles to innovate and that once these rules are internalized designers can successfully break them.

—LEE LAWRENCE

Lost and Now Found: Explorers, Diplomats and Artists in Egypt and the Near East

The title refers to a treasure trove of forgotten travelers' tales recovered in recent years by the Association for the Study of Travel in Egypt and the Near East. This volume features 18 compelling stories discovered in neglected manuscripts and other documents after assiduous research. The tales help solve mysteries about Western contacts with the East in previous centuries, adding insights into the Near and Middle East that are often missing from conventional histories. One account tells about the discovery in 2013 of a forgotten 440-page diary from the Karl Lepsius expedition to Egypt in the 18th century—a document "hiding in plain sight" in an Australian museum. The diarist, a 19-year-old German artist, drew hieroglyphics, murals and monuments for lithographs during the three-year expedition. His recollections add new life to a fascinating archeological adventure.

—ROBERT W. LEBLING

Reframing the Alhambra: Architecture, Poetry, Textiles and Court Ceremonial

This volume offers an intriguing interdisciplinary look at the Alhambra, the last Muslim bastion in al-Andalus, built in Granada from the 12th to the 15th century. Although the palace complex has been studied extensively, the author, a visiting scholar of Islamic art and architecture at Vassar College, “reframes” it by addressing not only its famous architecture, but also the poetry carved in its walls, and the textile designs and court ceremonials of the period. She then shows how these media interrelate scientifically, artistically and transcendentally. Most significantly, she explores the application of fractal theory—the replication of a geometric structure where each part is identical to the whole—in the Alhambra, filling out her treatment of a structure that, ultimately, reflects both spirituality and state power.

—ANA CARREÑO LEYVA

Mathematicians and Their Times: Based on Historical Writings

This book will fascinate readers with even a passing interest in mathematics. Among the “top 25” mathematical pioneers profiled, Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi (c. 780–c. 850) will stand out. “What is easiest and most useful in arithmetic” for resolving legal, commercial and engineering difficulties, al-Khwarizmi pondered in his landmark al-Kitab al-mukhtasar fi hisab al-jabr wa-l-muqabala (The Compendious Book on Calculation by Completion and Balancing), written around 830. His answer, identified in the title, was al-jabr, “completion,” later Anglicized to “algebra,” a method he devised to find unknown quantities in what are now familiar, x-y equations. And while he was at it, he “almost singlehandedly” introduced medieval Europe to “Hindu numerals”—including the hitherto unknown zero—which ultimately led to “Algorithmi” or algorithms, a term derived from his Westernized name (Algorismi).

—ROBERT W. LEBLING

Tunisia: Archipelago of Architectural Expressions

Sicily is a rich trove of forgotten travelers’ tales recovered in recent years by the Association for the Study of Travel in Egypt and the Near East. This volume features 18 compelling stories discovered in neglected manuscripts and other documents after assiduous research. The tales help solve mysteries about Western contacts with the East in previous centuries, adding insights into the Near and Middle East that are often missing from conventional histories. One account tells about the discovery in 2013 of a forgotten 440-page diary from the Karl Lepsius expedition to Egypt in the 18th century—a document “hiding in plain sight” in an Australian museum. The diarist, a 19-year-old German artist, drew hieroglyphics, murals and monuments for lithographs during the three-year expedition. His recollections add new life to a fascinating archeological adventure.

—ROBERT W. LEBLING

Where Three Worlds Met: Sicily in the Early Medieval Mediterranean
Sarah Davis-Secord. 2017, Cornell Ur, 978-1-5017-0464-2, $39.95 hb.

Sicily lies in the middle of the Mediterranean, off the toe of Italy. Its most prominent physical feature is Mount Etna, whose eruptions have produced the rich soil that make Sicily a breadbasket for the region. Sicily’s role in history remains elusive, in part because of its paradoxical nature as a central island and as a boundary zone between cultures. Conquered many times over the centuries, it boasts a rich cultural and ethnic legacy to augment its agricultural bounty. The author’s primary interest is to probe the island’s role as a trade and travel nexus of the medieval Mediterranean. She illuminates both the intrinsic importance of Sicily and also the roles it played in larger transformations of the Mediterranean Basin. The book focuses on travel records and medieval historians’ details on trans-Mediterranean communication—commercial, diplomatic, literary and cultural. Three periods of rule are highlighted: by Byzantium (sixth–ninth century); by Islamic North Africa (ninth–eleventh century); and by the Latin Normans (eleventh–twelfth century), when Muslim-Christian trade experienced its greatest flourishing in the Mediterranean.

—ROBERT W. LEBLING

Musician/producers Abdesselam Damoussi and Nour Eddine have recorded and accompanied musicians from various parts of Morocco in this captivating album, crafted in Eddine’s 15th-century home-turned-studio in Marrakech. Some tracks work around found elements—an impromptu jam session in the Marrakech madina, an old beggar’s prayer, a chance encounter with a local imam. Others are more deliberate, such as Yemdeh Seleem’s electrifying vocal from the Moroccan Sahara, accompanied by his signature electric guitar in a richly altered tuning. Still others feature fluttering ilafla flutes, keening double-reed gaitas, the Berber rebab and rolling, tripping frame-drum rhythms and voices that soar, chant and ululate, forming and informing this mesmerizing collection.

—BANNING EYRE
Sorgente di Luce
(Source of Light)

In a plaza below ground level, Italian artist Giuseppe Penone has set three organically lifelike trees of cast bronze supported by a larger fourth one made of telescoping sections and illuminated within. Together they appear to levitate and tower nearly 30 meters, with their “trunks” and “branches” symbolizing the growth of human creativity. The site-specific commissioned work—Penone’s largest ever—also symbolically complements the nearby historic Well No. 7, known as “The Prosperity Well,” where in 1938 oil was first struck in commercial quantities. "It illustrates life springing forth from the ground and reaching majestically toward the sky, a poetic allusion to how Saudi society has grown and flourished as a result of the discovery ... of a wealth of natural energy contained in the telluric depths of the earth," says the King Abdulaziz Cultural Center for World Culture (Ithra) in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, where the installation is permanent.
Since antiquity, foods and food cultures have migrated from the Middle East westward as far as the Canary Islands. After 1492 the Canaries became a leading port of departure to the New World. Mexico has a rich food tradition that has flowed particularly to the dry lands that today straddle the border between Mexico and the United States. Today—from albóndigas and atoles to sopapillas and zalabias. The influence of crops and livestock that have helped produce the region’s distinctive cuisine can be traced back centuries to Mexico’s history.

Working patiently in his family-run lab, Krym Atyntsekov has restored and re-created chariots, saddles, weapons, tools and clothing unearthed over the past four decades, including the Kearny warrior dubbed “the Golden Man,” who has become a national symbol of the Central Asian nation’s nomad history. But “gold isn’t the treasure for us,” says Altynbekov’s daughter Elina. “It’s the information we obtain about our past.”

What attracts these pilgrims? What stories do their images and impressions and experiences carry back? For centuries the pilgrimage to Makka has inspired many artists and rulers to create spectacular works of art. More than 300 appearing pieces from important collections of Islamic art are brought together. These pieces, from China and Indonesia to Turkey and Morocco, span a wide range of time, from the 10th century to the present day. Topkapi Palace, Istanbul, through August 12.

LONGING FOR A MECCA
Offering a unique insight into the Hajj, Islam’s most important pilgrimage, millions of people travel to Makka each year, including thousands of Druze. It is one of the world’s biggest religious, spiritual and cultural phenomena. What attracts these pilgrims? What impressions and experiences move them on the road, when they reach their destination and when they come back? For centuries the pilgrimage to Makka has inspired many artists and rulers to create spectacular works of art. More than 300 appearing pieces from important collections of Islamic art are brought together. These pieces, from China and Indonesia to Turkey and Morocco, span a wide range of time, from the 10th century to the present day. Topkapi Palace, Istanbul, through August 12.

COMING / SEPTEMBER
EGYPTIAN MUMMIES: EXPLORING ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS
A North American precursor, reconstructs the lives of 30 individuals who lived along the Nile from about 300 BC to 180 AD. Non-invasive techniques have enabled researchers to build a profile of each individual, painting a picture of who they were. Age, lifestyle and the diseases from which they suffered―each mummy has a story to tell. Digital visualizations present new discoveries that, when viewed alongside more than 200 objects from the British Museum’s renowned Egyptian collection, provide unique insight into how people lived and died in Egypt of this era. The exhibition explores themes such as mummification, health, food and diet, nursing, music, adornment and childhood in ancient Egypt. Topkapi Palace, Istanbul, through August 12.

Longing for Mecca offers a unique insight into the Hajj, Islam’s most important pilgrimage. Millions of people travel to Makka each year, including thousands of Druze. It is one of the world’s biggest religious, spiritual and cultural phenomena. What attracts these pilgrims? What impressions and experiences move them on the road, when they reach their destination and when they come back? For centuries the pilgrimage to Makka has inspired many artists and rulers to create spectacular works of art. More than 300 appearing pieces from important collections of Islamic art are brought together. These pieces, from China and Indonesia to Turkey and Morocco, span a wide range of time, from the 10th century to the present day. Topkapi Palace, Istanbul, through August 12.

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