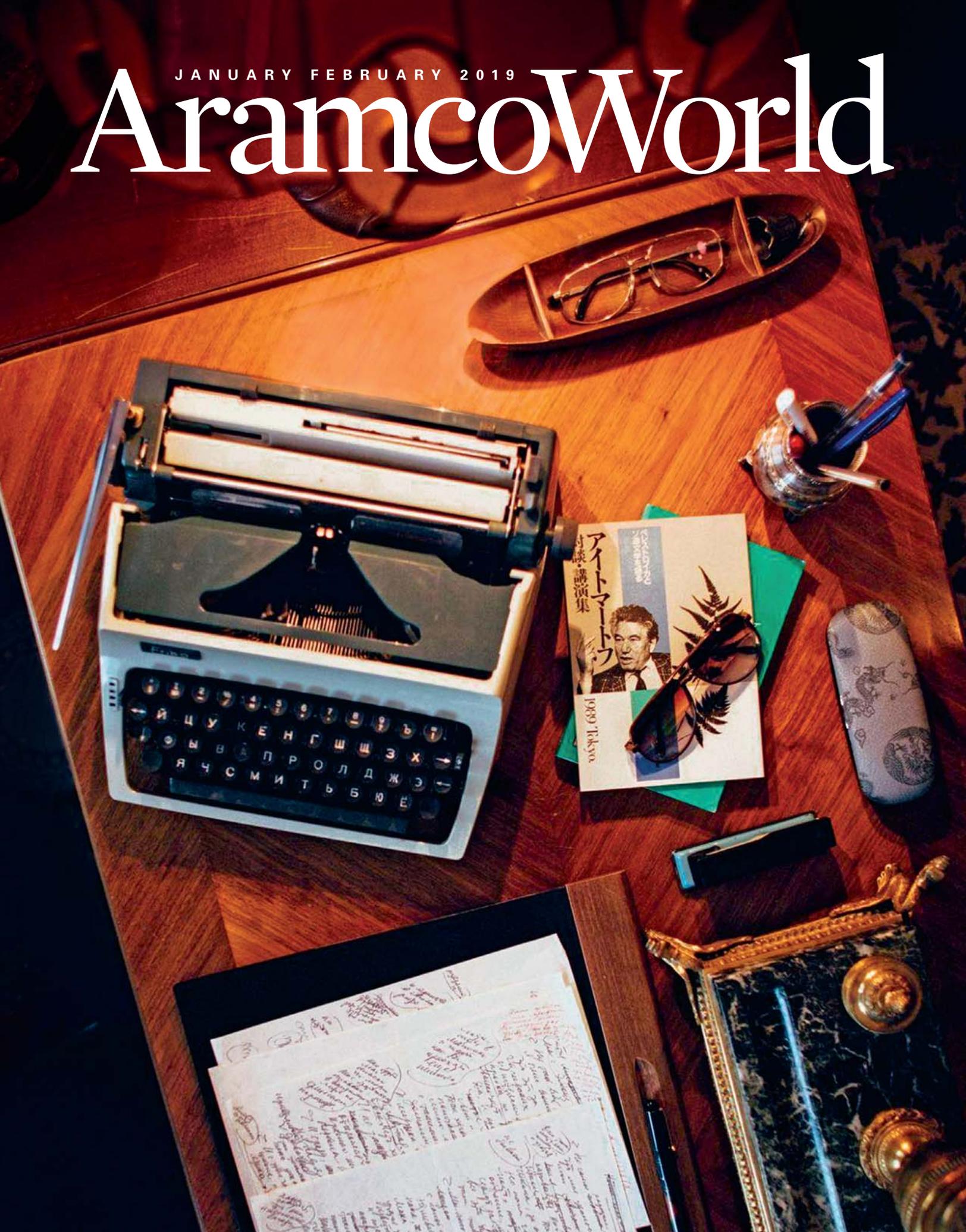
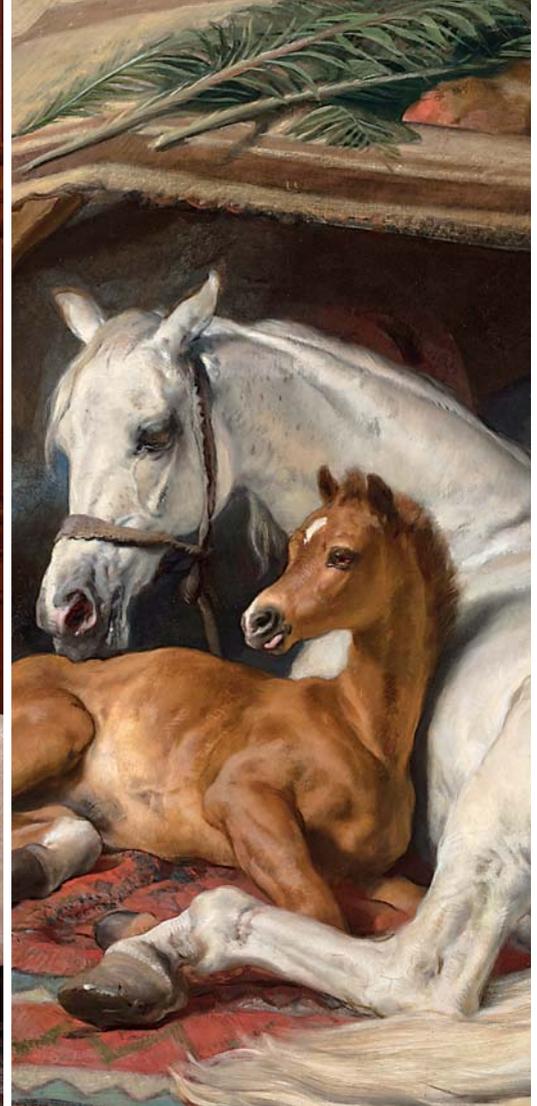


JANUARY FEBRUARY 2019

# AramcoWorld





## 6 After Manas, My Kyrgyz, Your Chingiz

Written by Alva Robinson

Photographed by Seitek Moldokasymov

Schooled in Russian literature and steeped in Kyrgyz nomadic oral traditions—especially the 1,000-year-old hero-epic *Manas*—Chingiz Aitmatov was also seared by Stalinist purges that took his father's life and threatened the very foundations of Kyrgyz culture. Through more than 30 literary works, translated into more than 170 languages, as well as films and theater, he became credited with raising the profile of his country and, with it, the cause of cultural preservation throughout Central Asia and even—by the 1990s—independence. To his country, which designated 2018 “The Year of Chingiz Aitmatov,” he remains Chingiz *ata* (respected father).

## 14 Orientalism's Equestrian Eye

Written by Lucien de Guise

Orientalist artists—generally 19th-century European and American painters of Arab-world subjects—are often criticized for stereotyping. But one subject they painted with fidelity continues to win universal respect: horses.

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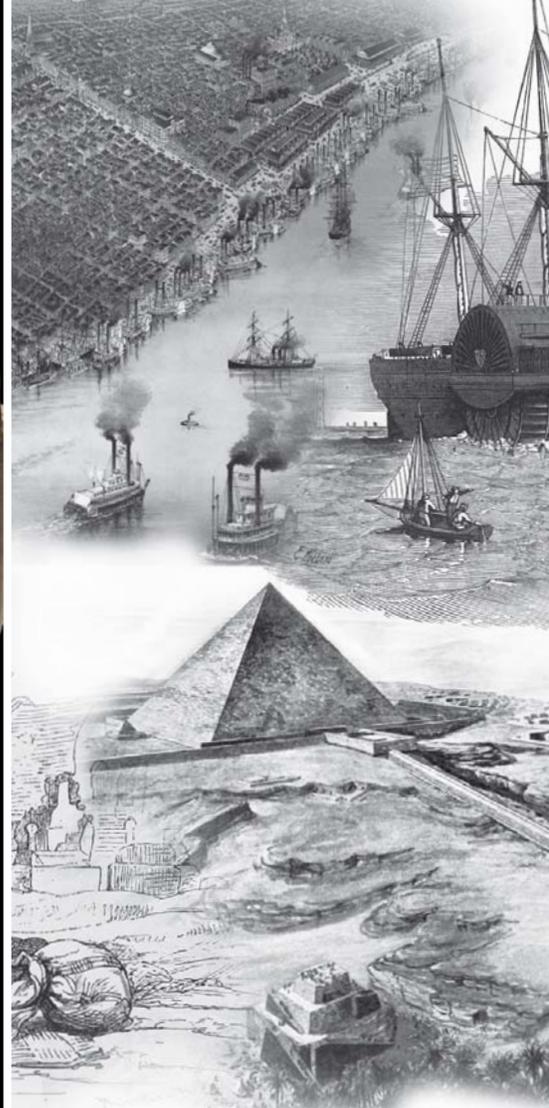
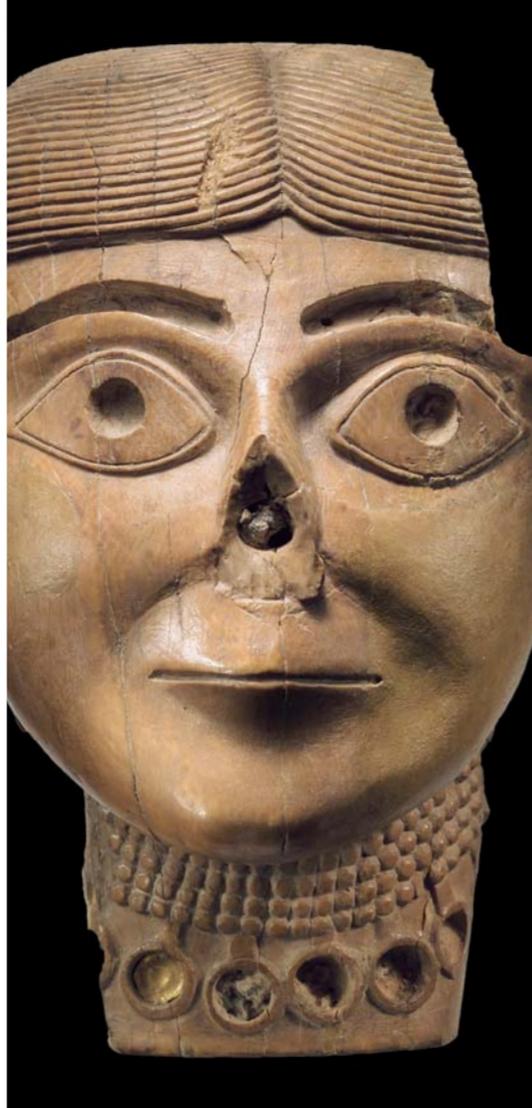
January/February 2019  
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We distribute *AramcoWorld* in print and online to increase cross-cultural understanding by broadening knowledge of the histories, cultures and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their global connections.

**Front Cover:** In Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan, the desk of Chingiz Aitmatov stands on display at the Aitmatov House Museum. Photo courtesy of the Aitmatov International Foundation.

**Back Cover:** This pair of Syro-Phoenician ivory panels, whose original purpose is unknown, were among hundreds “of considerable beauty and interest” discovered by British archeologist Austen Henry Layard in the 1840s at Nimrud, near modern Mosul, Iraq. Photo by Arthur P. Clark.



14: THE WALLACE COLLECTION (DETAIL); 20: TOM VERDE; 26: BRIDGEMAN IMAGES; 34: LISZT COLLECTION / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES (TOP); IVY CLOSE IMAGES / ALAMY (LOWER)

## 20 Cairo's House of Knowledge

Written by Tom Verde

Shortly after the founding of Cairo, Egypt, in 969 CE, its ruler started a research center whose legacies—particularly in optics and astronomy—helped shape the world we know today.

## 26 The Age of Ivory

Written by Graham Chandler

Some were found at the bottoms of wells. Some were scattered about palace rooms. Thousands of exquisitely carved works of ivory, all produced nearly 3,000 years ago in and around what is now Iraq, make up one of the most beautiful and enigmatic legacies of Assyria.

## 34 David Dorr's Window East

Written by Matthew Teller

Like other "Grand Tour" travelers of the 1850s, David Dorr visited Europe, Egypt and Palestine. But unlike others, Dorr did not travel freely. His book, *A Colored Man Round the World*, is the only known account of travel to the Middle East by an American slave.

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# FIRST LOOK

## AramcoWorld at 70

From the current print edition's cover, *top left*, to that of the first edition, *lower right*, we've assembled 368 of the nearly 450 regular and special editions published since 1949, along with a few historical highlights.

*AramcoWorld's* goal remains the cultivation of knowledge and the exploration of inter-cultural connections.

Whether you are here for the 368th time or the first, we are glad you are along to discover with us.

Vimeo channel, **2018**;  
online newsletter, Facebook,  
Instagram, **2015**

Name change to *AramcoWorld*,  
mobile edition, **2014**;  
first geo-linked videos, **2013**

Dome of the Rock Virtual Walking  
Tour, **2009**; Aramco at 75,  
Washington Irving audio tour, **2008**

First online videos and Virtual Walking  
Tour, **2006**; Indian Ocean history, **2005**;  
first annual calendar, **2004**

aramcoworld.com, "Classroom Guide,"  
**2003**; digital image archive, **2002**; name  
change to *Saudi Aramco World*, **2000**

*Aramco World* turns 50;  
theme issues on Hassan Fathy,  
Saudi centennial, **1999**

Events calendar, **1993**; "The Middle  
East and the Age of Discovery," **1992**

"Islam's Path East," **1991**;  
Silk Roads, **1988**; *Aramco World*  
move to Houston, **1987**

Arab American roots,  
"Arabs in Space," **1986**;  
"Islam in China," **1985**

"Science: The Islamic Legacy,"  
Marsh Arabs of Iraq, **1981**

Arab development aid,  
"Sesame Street" in Arabic, **1979**

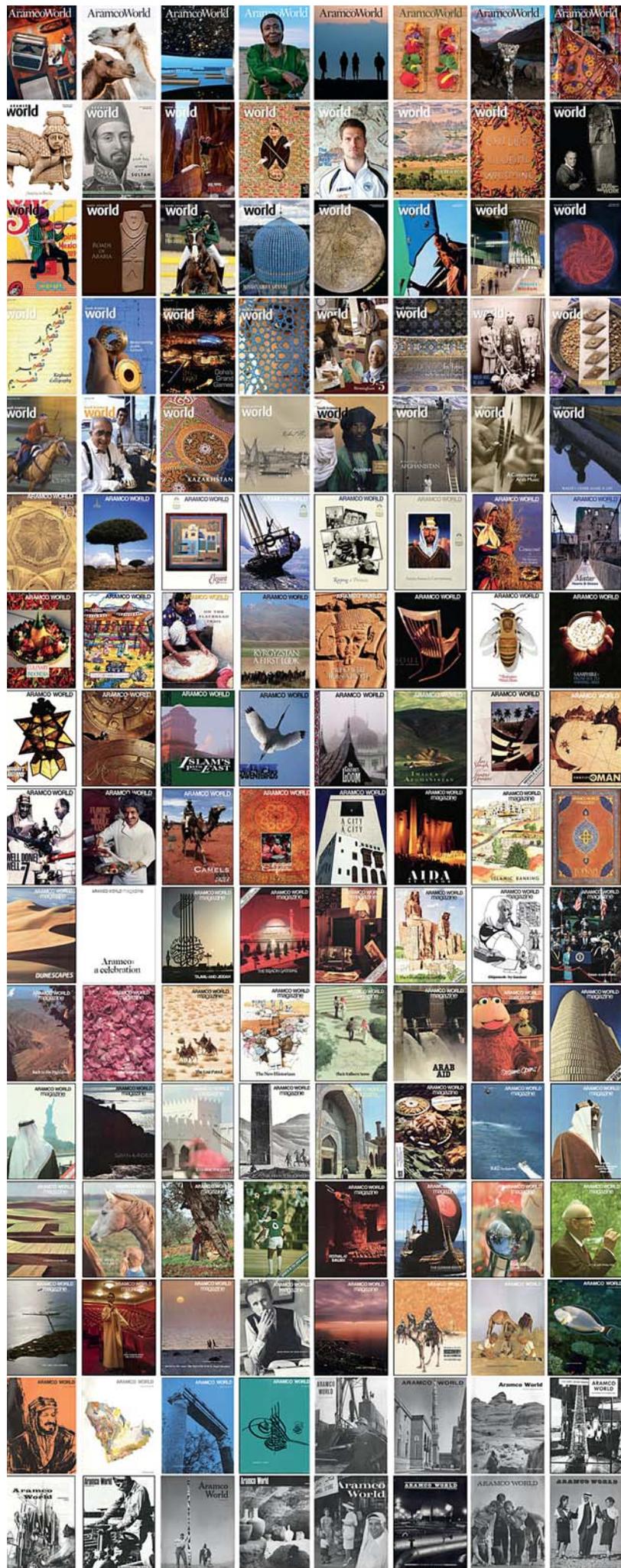
"Islam in Russia," **1976**;  
*Aramco World* move to Leiden, the  
Netherlands, **1975**; "The Hajj," **1974**

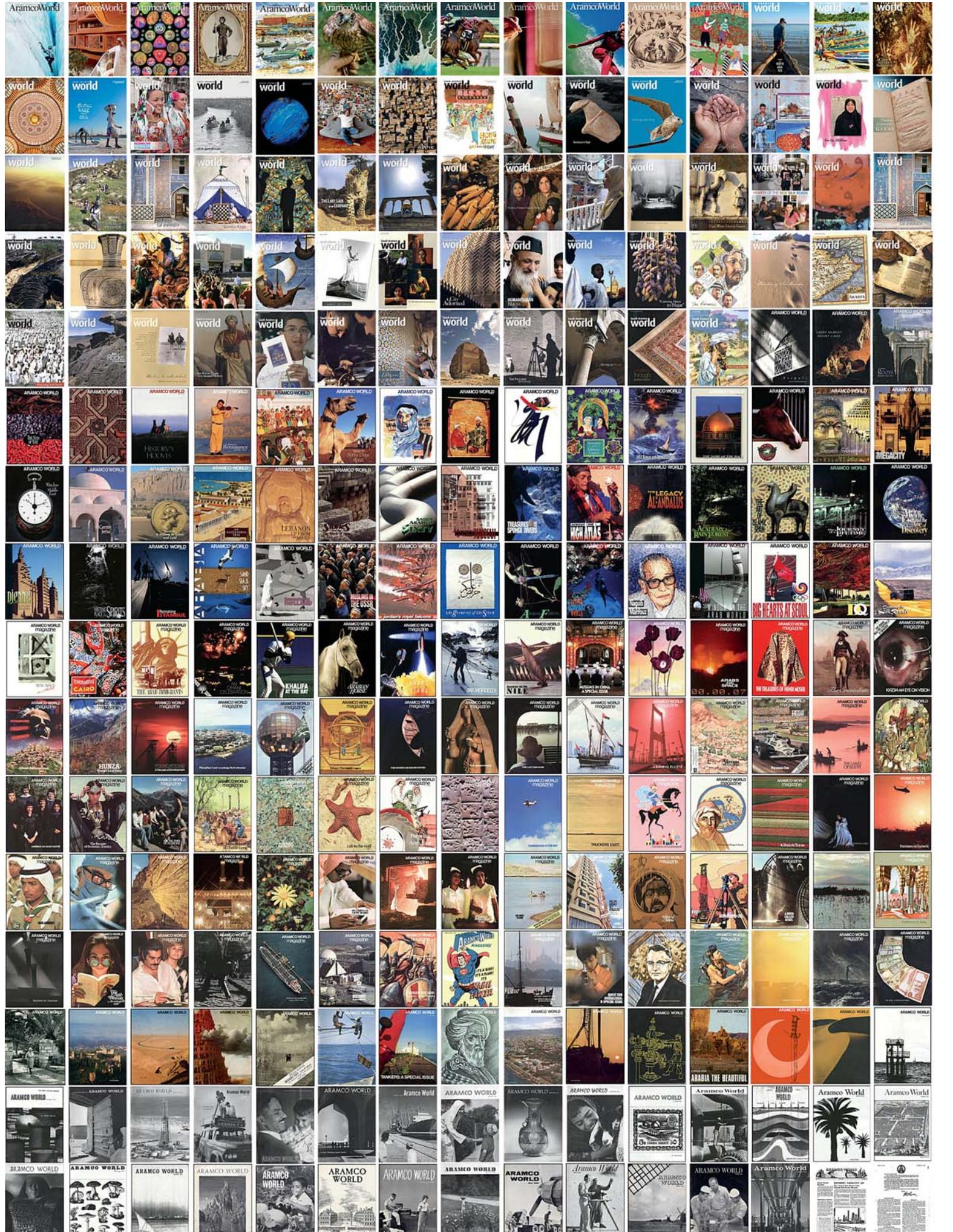
Oversize picture editions:  
"Sports in the Arab World," **1972**;  
"The Arab Woman," **1971**

First color theme issue,  
"Arabia the Beautiful," **1965**

First issues with color, **1965**;  
*Aramco World* move from  
New York to Beirut, **1964**

*Aramco World* redesign as a popular  
picture magazine, **1954**; *far right*: Vol. 1,  
No. 1, November 1, **1949**







# FLAVORS

## Chicken with Charmoula

Recipe by  
Mourad Lahlou

Photographs  
courtesy Anders  
Schonemann

**Before the development of the poultry industry in Morocco in the 1970s, it was customary to go to the market and pick out a live chicken.**

The chickens were large, and the meat really needed to be soaked and braised or it would be extremely tough. The breed of chicken, a *beldi*, is equivalent to some of the free-range artisan chickens sold in the US. And this is still what I prefer to use, pure poultry raised by hardworking farmers who take pride in their product. Though it is not as critical in a recipe like this, which marinates the meat in spices and herbs, I still encourage you to seek out the purest ingredients available to you.

Look for preserved lemons in specialty and Middle Eastern grocery stores.

(Serves 4)

4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts  
(about 2 lb/1 kg in total)

### Charmoula

2T sweet paprika

2 t ground cumin

½ t ground ginger

2T coarsely chopped thyme

1T coarsely chopped flat-leaf parsley

2 t coarsely chopped cilantro

2 t finely chopped garlic cloves

1 c (240 ml) extra virgin olive oil

salt and ground black pepper

### Vinaigrette

¼ c plus 2 t (70 ml) extra virgin olive oil

2 t freshly squeezed lime juice

1½T finely chopped flat-leaf parsley

2½T diced preserved lemon

Stir all of the charmoula ingredients together in a large bowl.

Trim the chicken breasts of any excess fat and remove the tenders. Cut the breasts and tenders into 1½-inch (3 cm) pieces. Add the chicken pieces to the charmoula, turning to coat them, and refrigerate overnight, or for at least 6 hours.

Soak 6 long wooden skewers in cold water to cover for at least 20 minutes (or plan on using metal ones).

Next, make the vinaigrette: Whisk the olive oil, lime juice and parsley together. Stir in the

preserved lemon and set aside.

Preheat a grill to medium-high heat, or heat a large cast-iron grill pan over medium-high heat on your stovetop.

Lift a quarter of the chicken pieces from the marinade, letting any excess stay in the bowl. Skewer the pieces, leaving about ¼ inch (6 mm) between them so the chicken will cook evenly. Repeat with the remaining chicken and skewers. Season lightly with salt and pepper.

Lay the skewers on the hot grill or grill pan and don't move until well marked, 2 to 3 minutes.

Rotate the skewers 90 degrees and grill to mark with a cross-hatch pattern, about 1 minute more. Turn the skewers over and grill until the chicken is cooked through, about 2 minutes.

Carefully remove the chicken from the skewers to a bowl. Add just enough of the vinaigrette to lightly coat the meat and serve with any remaining vinaigrette on the side.

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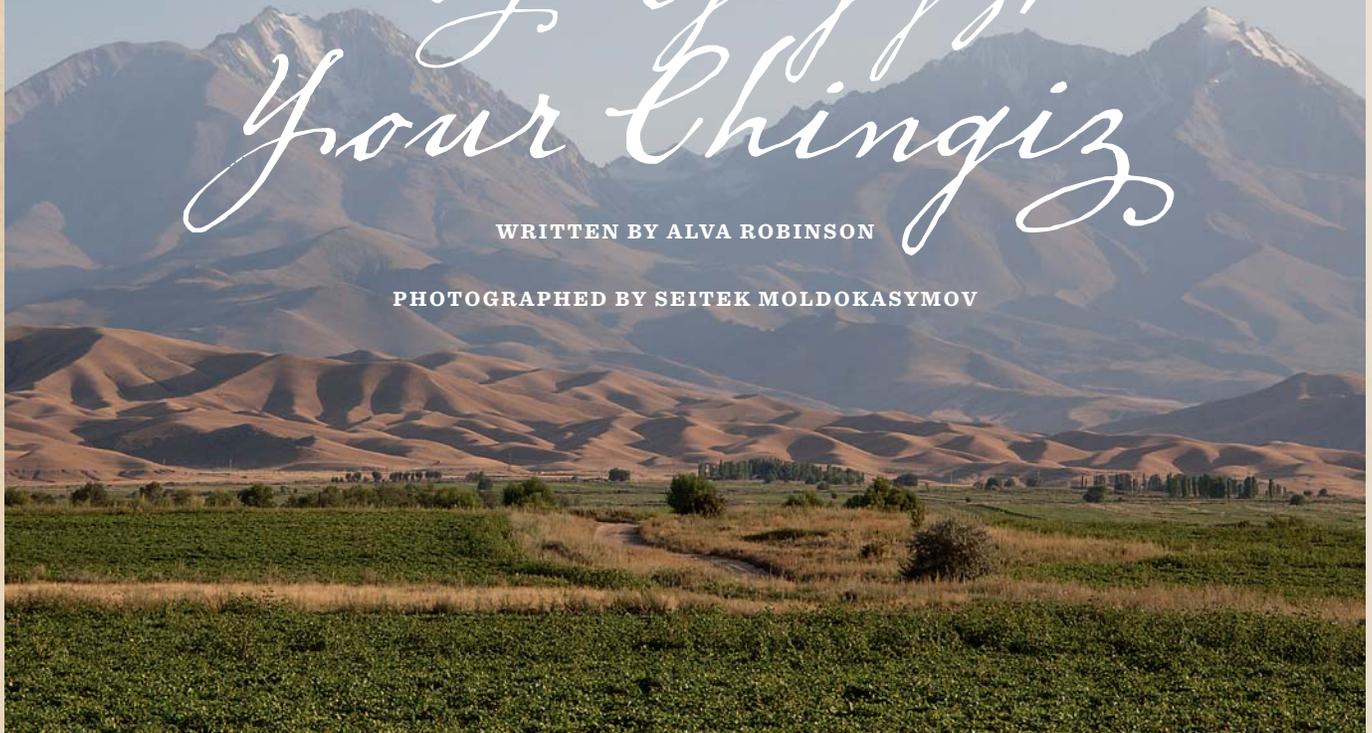
Arriving in California from Marrakesh in 1985 to study, a homesick **Mourad Lahlou** began to channel his mother and aunts as they prepared traditional Moroccan dishes at home. He started to cook for himself, then for friends. He completed a master's degree in macroeconomics, but the lure of the kitchen pulled him from his doctorate, and he opened his first restaurant, in San Rafael, California, in 1997. He then opened Aziza, named after his mother, in San Francisco in 2001. In 2009 he won Iron Chef America, and in 2010 Aziza became the first Moroccan restaurant to receive a Michelin star. He is the author of *Mourad: New Moroccan* (Artisan, 2011).



# After Manas, My Kyrgyz, Your Chingiz

WRITTEN BY ALVA ROBINSON

PHOTOGRAPHED BY SEITEK MOLDOKASYMOV



## The path to the universe starts from the village.

In Kyrgyzstan's northwestern province of Talas, bordering Kazakhstan, lies a village along an unpaved road. At its entrance a sign reads in Kyrgyz: "The path to the universe starts from the village." Just above it appears a silhouette portrait of its famous native son and author of the saying. Adjacent to it, an oversized inkwell and quill pen welcome visitors to Sheker, "the village of Chingiz."

Known among Central Asian Turks as Chingiz *ata* (respected father), Chingiz Aitmatov was a literary giant who published more than 30 works that have been translated into more than 170 languages. A cultural icon who raised the global profile of his country, he was also a diplomat who helped usher in a new era of independence.

From his hometown of Sheker, two mountains tower within view. The taller, sharper one the Kyrgyz honor with the name Manas Ata, after the Kyrgyz hero who lived more than a millennium ago. Locals say Manas used to ride horseback up that mountain and, from its peak, survey the area for approaching enemies.

"I am always excited when, approaching Sheker, I see the blue-white snows of the Manas sparkling with patches of sunlight at that inaccessible height," Aitmatov wrote in 1975 of his early life experiences. "If you cut yourself off from

Viewed from Sheker, hometown to Chingiz Aitmatov, the peak of Manas Ata, right, rises 4,483 meters in the Alatau range of the Tien Shan Mountains, separating Kyrgyzstan from its neighbor to the north, Kazakhstan. It is named for the Kyrgyz hero Manas, who is said to have united the 40 Kyrgyz tribes a millennium ago.

everything and gaze for a time at this mountaintop, into the sky, then time loses its meaning."

Cascading from the mountain, the K rk r o River, "a white-foamed pale blue," surges through fields in the broad, flat valley, feeding life into flora and fauna. "At midnight, I would awaken in the tent from the river's terrible heaving and see the stars of the blue, calm night peeping," Aitmatov wrote.

Locals say Sheker proclaims itself at the K rk r o's headwaters. The river, they say, interweaves the natural world and a thousand years of history that is expressed through oral lore—poetry, songs, speeches, folktales and proverbs—all legacies of nomadic heritage.

"The legacy of folk wisdom, so too the bridging together of generations" depend on such oral traditions, Aitmatov explained. "Elders used to sternly ask young boys to recite the names of their seven forefathers," he continued. In this way, each generation became "compelled to remember and not diminish the integrity of those who have lived and passed before us." Tracing his own ancestral line, Aitmatov paid homage to his own: "My father, T r kul; T r kul's father,

Aitmat; Aitmat's father, Kimbildi; Kimbildi's father, Konchujok—as far back as Sheker himself.”

Törökul, who was born in 1903, grew up schooled in Muslim *maktabs* and studied Russian. In October 1917, eleven years before Aitmatov was born, the Bolshevik Revolution erupted in Moscow. “The Bolshevik appeal was infectious,” writes Jeff Lilley, author of the recent biography on the late author, *Have the Mountains Fallen?* Having endured colonialization under Russian tsars, Kyrgyz tribes, like others in the vast region, “believed they had been quite literally saved from extinction,” Lilley continues.

Törökul demonstrated energy for the changes the revolution appeared to promise. Moscow relished such young enthusiasts who over the next decade paved the way for newspapers, schools, theaters and clubs of various sorts, all “positive contributions of Soviet communism,” Lilley adds.

In 1928 Törökul's wife, Nagima, bore Chingiz, the first of what would be four children. By that time the land reforms known as collectivization had begun to threaten the very existence of nomadic life, including that of the Kyrgyz, whose history, nature and livelihood depended on their relationship to the land. Törökul, who believed in the egalitarian ideals of the revolution, aided the transition to the new economy. Higher-ups took notice and in 1934 appointed him second secretary of the Kirghiz Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

**Father, I know not where  
you lie buried, therefore,  
I dedicate this to you.**

—*Mother Earth* (1963)

Not long afterward, in Moscow, Soviet General Secretary Joseph Stalin and the Council of People's Commissars (the heads of each republic) began attacks on “enemies of the people”—mostly landowners, merchants, nobles, business owners, clergy, monks, members of the political opposition and their kin.

Törökul began expressing his doubts, calling people who had been arrested “true patriots of their people.” His record of accomplishment prevented party leaders from doing more than removing him from his post and sent him, with his family—by then including Chingiz's younger siblings Ilgiz and Lyutsia—to Moscow, to pursue higher education, outside of politics.

On the outskirts of Sheker, “the village of Chingiz,” a welcome sign pays homage to its most famous son, who passed away a decade ago at age 79. At its base, words of the writer remind visitors that “the path to the universe starts from the village.”

Yet politics followed him. Party officials soon labeled Törökul, too, an “enemy of the people.” He implored Nagima to save herself and the children by going back to Sheker, where they could take refuge in the mountains. Nagima was at a loss. According to 81-year-old Roza Aitmatov, Chingiz's youngest sister, Törökul tried to reassure Nagima. “First, I'm not guilty. Second, I am well-enough known to the Kyrgyz,” he said, and he promised Nagima he would join them as soon as the situation calmed.

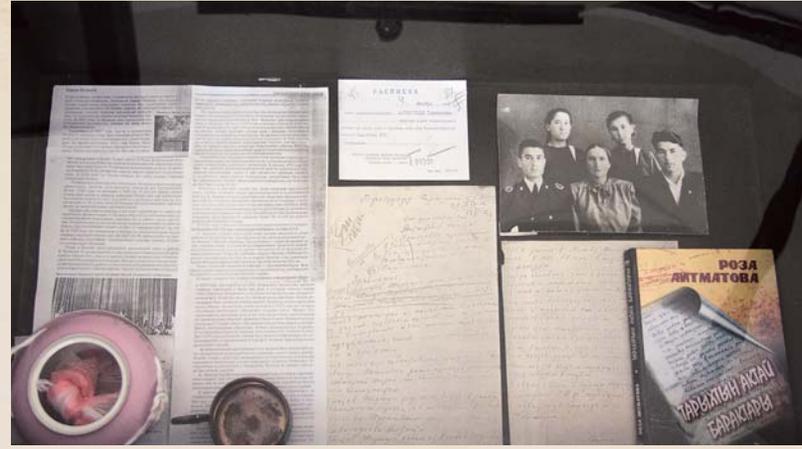
The next day Törökul watched as they boarded the train. Chingiz, then just eight years old, “never forgot the look in his eyes,” says Eldar Aitmatov, the youngest of Chingiz's three sons and president of the Chingiz Aitmatov International Foundation, based in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. “When the train moved, his father ran till the last moment, until he could run no more. That was the most tragic moment in [Chingiz's] life.”

Törökul was arrested on December 1, 1937. He joined more than 12 million across the Soviet Union—936,750 in Kirghizia alone—who were persecuted that year.

It would not be until 20 years later that Nagima would receive an official notice of her husband's execution on November 5, 1938, and his posthumous rehabilitation. But Nagima had “lived through the course of many long years with transparently deceptive hopes that Törökul would return.... My poor Mama—what did she not go through!” Aitmatov wrote.

It would be decades until, in 1991, a tip led officials to an undiscovered mass grave on the outskirts of what is now





Right: Roza Aitmatov, 81, and youngest sister of Chingiz Aitmatov, discusses family history with Gulnara Jamasheva of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences in a room of the Frunze Restaurant in Bishkek recently dedicated to the late author. In 2007 Roza published *Tarix-itin aktay baraktari* (The white pages of history), detailing the tragedy that befell her father, Törökül Aitmatov, top left, during the Stalinist purges, a history also shown far right at the museum of Ata Beyit (Graves of Our Fathers). Above, center: Nagima Aitmatov, mother of Chingiz and Roza, who for two decades, "lived ... with transparently deceptive hopes that Törökül would return."

Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan and then called Frunze. In it lay 137 victims. Found inside the shirt pocket of one, a letter of condemnation riddled with three bullet holes; on it the name Törökül Aitmatov.



**Trains in these parts went from east to west, and from west to east.**

—*The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (1980)

On August 31, 1937, after five days of travel from Moscow, Nagima and the children arrived at Maimak Station in Sheker, the very stretch of railway Nagima’s husband and father-in-law helped construct nearly three decades before. Roza, who was born only months before the family’s departure from Moscow, recalls their story. “Nagima carried one of the girls, leading the second daughter, with her sons barely carrying the luggage,” she says.

As kin to an accused “enemy of the state,” the family was a social pariah. In Sheker, Törökül’s mother, Ayımkan *apa* (respected mother) and his sister, Aunt Karagöz, became their support. They were “like one and the same grandmother in two persons, the old and the young,” Aitmatov wrote in appreciation.

Roza calls Ayımkan *apa* the “fountain well of all motivation,” the one who introduced young Chingiz to Kyrgyz nomadic culture. Although it was traditional for the eldest boys to spend their formative years living with their grandparents, Törökül and Nagima had insisted on modern schooling,

so in summers Ayımkan *apa* took Chingiz to the *jailoo* (summer pastures). From there, she taught her grandson to dress in *chapans* (traditional robes), drink *kymys* (fermented horse milk), ride horses, and listen to *Manaschis*, reciters of the epic *Manas*. “I saw real nomad camping, which disappeared when life became settled ... an exhibition of the best harnesses, finest adornments, best riding horses ... performances of improvising women singers,” Aitmatov detailed in a 1972 autobiography.

Aitmatov credits Ayımkan *apa* for his love for his first language, Kyrgyz, and the richness of nomadic literary heritage. Among the children in Sheker, she became a “treasure house of fairy tales, old songs and all kinds of true and invented stories,” Aitmatov wrote.

Aunt Karagöz, like her mother, was also a storyteller, and even after exhausting all her tales, she turned to dreams to entertain the children. Aitmatov was so fond of her stories that when she napped for even a few minutes, he would wake her and entreat her to describe what she had seen.

Together with her husband, Aunt Karagöz “shared with us everything they had—bread, fuel, potatoes and even warm clothes,” Aitmatov wrote. More importantly, she taught the

children never to shy from mentioning their father's name, "without lowering our heads, looking straight into people's eyes."

Within a couple of years, World War II broke out. Prisoners of the state and large numbers of Central Asians were among the first sent to the front lines. In 1941 German forces invaded Soviet territory, and Aitmatov recalled witnessing "soldiers marching to war ... the women who sobbed and whispered something when the men's names were called out; the farewells at railway stations."

The war consumed everybody. Those left behind toiled on the land. Mules and oxen were "driven by boys and soldiers' wives, black with sunburn, wearing faded clothes, their bare feet calloused from the stony roads," he wrote. Aunt Karagiz openly cursed Stalin for dragging the country to war, and for the first time Aitmatov, saw beyond youthful imagination. "Poverty and hunger in our midst, how all our produce and manpower were being fed into the war," he wrote.

Impoverished and with few prospects for further study, Aitmatov quit school and found work as the village secretary. He soon also served other positions: teacher, tax collector, accounting clerk and wartime courier. The last role weighed heavily on the teenager. Almost daily he carried news to families of the deaths of husbands, fathers and sons. These announcements used to be given "with due dignity by white-bearded *aksakals* [elders]," he wrote, but now it devastated Aitmatov each time he had to bear witness to "the sorrow of people dear to me."

Such experiences ultimately forged his literary career. His first novella, *Face to Face*, which he published at age 29, in 1957, tells a story about the moral regression of a wartime deserter. Though some Kyrgyz deemed it an affront to their national reputation, Aitmatov stood by the work "as a truthful interpretation of the situation ... between two authorities: the government and the individual."

Yet writing did not come at once after the war. In 1947, Aitmatov enrolled at the Dzhambul Animal Veterinary Technical School in Kazakhstan. Afterward, he moved to Frunze to work at the Kirghizian Scientific Research Institute of Agriculture, where he wrote two scientific articles. Proximity to the natural world by way of nomadic upbringing and these years studying animal husbandry also influenced his writings, which tended to explore symbiotic relationships between humans and animals.



Aitmatov's more than 50 years as a writer, diplomat and humanitarian were shaped by the death of his father, Törökul, who once cautioned a fellow political prisoner about his son: Chingiz is "a very sensitive and responsive lad—especially to unfairness in life."

**Though I may use  
the pen as a sword,  
I will never abandon  
the pen for the sword.**

—*Ode to the Grand Spirit*  
(2008)

Aitmatov tried his hand at translating and authoring short articles, and in 1952, he wrote short stories for various Russian newspapers. Lilley calls these forays into writing "formulaic, portraying progressive changes under communism, such as the mechanization of agriculture and the rise of a communist-inspired generation."

That same year, Soviet partisans began a cultural offensive against the Kyrgyz's central oral epic of *Manas*, claiming it countered the tenets of socialist realism.

It was part of a broad campaign to Sovietize Turkic peoples throughout Central Asia by eliminating national heroic epics. In the Caucasus, Azeris

suffered attacks on their hero, Dede Korkut; Kazakhs, Koblandi Batir; the Nogais, Er-Sain; Turkmens, Korkut Ata; Uzbeks, Alpamish, and more. Each epic became accused of "religious fanaticism" and "brutal hatred," writes cultural anthropologist Nienke van der Heide of Leiden University.

Supporters across the USSR, however, responded in swift defense of *Manas*. Party officials forced a conference of some 300 scholars to convene at the Academy of Sciences of Kirghizia, in Frunze.

Eldar Aitmatov, 39 and the youngest son of Chingiz Aitmatov, reflects on his father at the Chingiz Aitmatov House Museum in Bishkek, where he serves as director. The museum, which opened in 2014, conserves the late author's manuscripts, photographs, awards and other personal belongings.





*Left:* In October 1986 Aitmatov convened 18 influential friends from around the world to meet Soviet Politburo General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev for what became the Issyk-Kul Forum, during which informal discussions focused on global challenges of ecology, peace and cultural understanding. *Center:* Aitmatov, at right, with Gorbachev, for whom Aitmatov was both a friend and advisor. *Lower:* After his 1958 novella *Jamila* was smuggled out of the Soviet Union and translated into French, Aitmatov became a global figure known for his broad humanitarianism and defense of local cultures.

Aitmatov lamented. Then Auezov rose from his seat, and he fearlessly defended *Manas* for nothing less than its intense cultural power. “To take this epic away from the life of its people is like cutting out the tongue of our whole folk,” Auezov said, according to Aitmatov.

Hundreds of Kyrgyz, overcome by the courage of one man from Kazakhstan speaking out to save their cultural treasure, erupted in applause.

The event left a lasting impression on Aitmatov to carry on the same struggle to preserve *Manas* and, with it, the cultural dignity of his people. Thirty years later he would serve as chief editor of his country’s first printed edition of the *Manas* recitation, based on recordings made by Auezov.

By 1953, with the death of Stalin, Aitmatov’s attitude toward him and the system became more critical. Joseph Mozur, author of *Parables from the Past: The Prose Fiction of Chingiz Aitmatov*, notes, “Although Stalin was ultimately responsible for the deaths of his father and uncles,” Aitmatov struggled with that truth. The same year Aitmatov published his first literary work in Kyrgyz, “*Ak Jaan*” (White rain). His ability to compose in both Russian and Kyrgyz was a credit to his parents’ dedication to nurturing bilingualism. Years later Aitmatov would admit that writing first in Russian was “in my interests to do so; books get published and disseminated faster.”

In 1956, with the ascent of First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev and de-Stalinization, Aitmatov formally joined the Communist Party, which, along with his first steps in writing, paved the way for a welcomed membership into the Writer’s Union of the USSR and his enrollment at the Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow. Over the next two years, Aitmatov expanded his knowledge of other literary traditions and refined his skills in original literature. The same year he graduated, he also published what became his most remembered novella, *Jamila*, a love story that captures the tragedy of war. The book so moved French poet Louis Aragon that he sneaked it back home to translate it into French, thus giving Aitmatov his first international audience. The work catapulted Aitmatov into so much popularity that by 1960 Uzbekistan National Writer Muhammad Ali Akhmedov remembered, “We students from Central Asia, of course, would not leave his side for a moment.”

Aitmatov followed up his success in 1963 with a compilation of stories in *Tales of the Mountains and Steppes*, which included *Jamila*, in addition to *Duishen* and *Farewell, Gyulsary!* The former, with its focus on the struggle



The hall “was packed to the brim,” Aitmatov recalled. “People hung from the door handles, even standing in the street to hear something.” From the doorway, Aitmatov peered in. Sitting at the stage next to the first secretary of the Committee Central was Mukhtar Auezov, a Kazakh historian well regarded for his research on *Manas*.

One by one, speakers assailed the heritage epic. “Privileged” and “pan-Turkism” they charged. “It seemed that at any moment we were going to lose our beloved epic,”

between tradition and progress, was adapted to film a few years later, thus introducing Aitmatov to cinematic audiences and paving the way for a career as a movie producer and screenwriter that culminated with the Berlinale Camera award at the Berlin International Film Festival in

1996. The latter story, however, reproaches the Soviet system for the spiritual degradation of its people, and its ending challenges readers to question unfulfilled promises: “Had he not done what he had for the sake of the collective farm? But had it actually been necessary?”

Aitmatov received his greatest acclaim for the compilation when, in 1963, he became the second recipient from Central Asia to win the Lenin State Prize in Literature, after Auezov. “Dignity was restored to the Aitmatov family,” he recalled. Other Kyrgyz, meanwhile, felt “the Kirghizian folk have once again shown, through Chingiz, that we are a worthy people.” A resulting trip to Europe proved “the author had suddenly become a non-Russian writer of all-union stature,” asserts Mozur.

In 1970 Aitmatov published *The White Ship*, a story infused with Kyrgyz oral literary traditions that dramatizes the brutality of a society without a moral compass. The suicide of its seven-year-old protagonist, who refuses to participate in society’s decay, so rattled Soviet critics for its lack of an optimistic ending that they censored the work and forced a rewrite. Aitmatov argued, “Through the death of the hero ... the spiritual moral superiority remains.... Such is the power of artistic conception.”

The reproach hardly impeded Aitmatov’s success. Three years later in Moscow, Aitmatov debuted his first play, *The Ascent of Mount Fuji*, “the most provocative and talked-about drama in Moscow,” *The New York Times* wrote. Set in 1942, the play revolves



A shelf at the Chingiz Aitmatov House Museum holds a collection of the author’s more than 30 works, which have been translated into more than 170 languages.

by the US Department of State, *The Ascent of Mount Fuji* opened in Washington, D.C. *The New York Times* lauded Aitmatov as “unquestionably on the side of the angels.” *The Washington Post* praised the play’s universality as “quite a revelation,” with characters “all too familiar.” The play continued to garner attention in the US, and by 1978, PBS aired a live performance.

The play’s US debut also coincided with a Soviet-sponsored, 25-day, multicity tour of the US, with Aitmatov playing the role of the USSR’s special envoy. The trip ended with a televised viewing of the joint Soyuz-Apollo mission alongside US novelist Kurt Vonnegut. The two did not share the same views: Aitmatov emphasized the “very important aspect of the moral and ethical relations between our two countries,” and Vonnegut tied the event to ideas of “adversaries” and “greater strength.” Aitmatov cautioned his fellow writer, “If one is to seek a source of strength in confrontation alone, one should maintain a boxing stance all the time.”

Years later Aitmatov would recall the episode with Tajikistan National Writer Akbar Turson: “I really wanted, before a multimillion-person audience, to think aloud about the most monstrous of crises against man: inciting hatred between nations.”

Five years later Aitmatov published his first full-fledged novel, *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*. Its themes captures the spiritual bonds connecting human memory to





On December 12, 2017, on the 89th anniversary of Aitmatov's birthday, Kyrgyzstan announced 2018 as "The Year of Chingiz Aitmatov." Displays like this one, in Bishkek, the capital, decorated streets, halls and other public places to commemorate the 90th anniversary of his birth and to honor his legacy.

universalism. Through metaphor based on the legendary Turkic *mankurt*—one who is forced to forget his identity—the novel also sheds light on the consequences of Stalinism and Soviet thought control. He continued to inspire readers to question, reason and hold onto faith: "We are drawn there by the thirst for knowledge and by Man's ancient dream of finding other intelligent beings in other worlds."

Aitmatov's next major work, *The Place of the Skull*, published in 1986, became a cult sensation across the USSR. The story unfolds in two separate plots, raising concerns about ecological threats on the one hand and campaigns against religion on the other. One of its protagonists, Avdii Kallistratov, is a monk-turned-journalist, and through him, Aitmatov demonstrates the fortitude of belief and the spirit of good over evil. The work was a first on many levels: For starters, Kallistratov is unlike any of Aitmatov's other heroes. He is both Russian and Christian, neither Kyrgyz nor Kazakh; yet the story manages to incorporate both Central Asian and Islamic allegories. It is also notable for being the book that capitalized—for the first time in Soviet history—the word *God*. Finally, the story brought to the forefront the issue of drug abuse—heretofore an unspoken problem in the Soviet Union.

The work drew much criticism, to which Aitmatov countered that his critics kept "a blind eye to all that came before in human culture ... [and] religious teachings."

Four months after the book's publication, in October 1986, Aitmatov initiated a meeting in Kirghizia's northeastern province of Issyk-Kul among 18 creative figures including American playwright Arthur Miller, French Nobel Laureate Claude Simon, English actor and writer Peter Ustinov, and

### After independence in 1991, he declined suggestions he should serve as president.

by criticizing the condemnation of Uzbeks, as they were the ones "most adversely affected by corruption." So thankful were the Uzbeks for his loyalty that Islom Karimov, the late president of Uzbekistan, appointed him as the first president of a Central Asian Turkic union.

During the same period in 1989, the Congress of People's Deputies singled out Aitmatov from as many as 2,500 members to "place the Soviet leader's name in nomination of Chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet," says political scientist Eugene Huskey of Stetson University in Florida. Then, upon the establishment of the Congress, in front of millions of television viewers, Aitmatov declared the societies of Sweden, Norway, Finland, Spain and the Netherlands "something we [Soviets] can only dream about." Despite such statements—or perhaps because of them—in February 1990 Gorbachev appointed Aitmatov as a part of a 10-member Presidential Council.

Glasnost and perestroika, however, had unintended ramifications. Nationalistic sentiment flared into rage, which grew into interethnic conflict. One of the most violent episodes occurred between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in June 1990 in Kyrgyzstan's southern city of Osh. Aitmatov immediately flew from Moscow to calm both sides and remind them of their common heritage. "We are fraternal nations. Our roots are the same, they are joined in our Turkic family," he said. For this, many Uzbeks still credit Aitmatov for having helped to stop the conflict, says his son, Eldar.

Glasnost and perestroika also took much of the blame for the eventual downfall of the Soviet Union, but Aitmatov praised its outcome. "For the West this period signified the end

Soviet Politburo General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. The Issyk-Kul Forum, as they called it, was a discussion of ways to prevent a nuclear war, spearhead an ecological campaign and present "national and global aspects of cultures in present-day conflicts," Aitmatov wrote.

Gorbachev, who viewed Aitmatov as both a friend and advisor, addressed the participants and called its declaration "a tremendous document confirming the results of the new way of thinking." He further praised its significance and vowed to pursue a system "using openness and democracy"—one of his first articulations of what became his signature policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, or openness and reconstruction.

With this, Aitmatov used his platform on behalf of other fellow Central Asians. In one notable instance in 1989, certain elites from Uzbekistan ignited national outrage after falsifying cotton production numbers, with the result that Russians turned on both Uzbeks and other Central Asians. Aitmatov responded

of the Cold War and the reunification of Germany; for the USSR it meant the division without bloodshed of the Soviet imperium into independence,” Aitmatov said.

Even before the Soviet breakup, however, Aitmatov had tired of political life. He yearned for the time to write again, and Gorbachev appointed him ambassador to Luxembourg. This marked the beginning of his official diplomatic career for the Soviet Union, then for Russia and, finally, for Kyrgyzstan, which became independent in 1991. Although many Kyrgyz encouraged him to become president, he declined. Many, Eldar says, felt that with his time away in Europe, “he left them.” Aitmatov, however, understood that his role for his people was to continue telling his truth through his writing.

His next book, *The Mark of Cassandra*, focuses on space travel and cloning. It was published in 1995, the same year he began serving as an in-absentia member of Kyrgyzstan’s parliament.

In 2008 Aitmatov published his last work, *Toolor Kulaganda* (When the mountains collapse). At the same time, other Turkic nations nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. In May of that year, while in Tataristan, Russia, he suddenly fell critically ill. Gorbachev arranged for Eldar to accompany his father to Germany for treatment. Eldar recalls that from the airport en route to the hospital, the paramedics recognized Aitmatov. “They knew him. They knew exactly his works,” Eldar says. Aitmatov passed away nearly a month later, on June 10, 2018, at age 79.

### A person does not die while he is remembered.

—*Farewell, Gyulsary!* (1963)

On December 12, 2017, on the 89th anniversary of Aitmatov’s birth, Kyrgyzstan announced 2018 “The Year of Chingiz Aitmatov.” This, Eldar maintains, represented a national opportunity after a decade of political and economic instability. “Time has passed, [and] people look at it differently now—from a different perspective, and now they really understand whom they lost.” The celebrations involved every region of the country. “Even the medical college is doing some events—people not even linked to literature or culture,” says Eldar.

One Kyrgyz writer once declared Aitmatov “an outstanding author of the 20th century thanks to his truthful depiction of Kyrgyz life as it evolved under socialist conditions.” Aitmatov’s message, however, was not only for his Kyrgyz. “Aitmatov’s highest calling was and will forever be as Kyrgyzstan’s cultural ambassador to the world,” says Huskey. Indeed, this sentiment is shared by the Kyrgyz, too, as shown in a 2008 tribute by Kyrgyz poet-singer Elmurbek Imanliev to the late author: “After Manas, My Kyrgyz, / Your Chingiz was your pride. / We used to say he was a world saga.”

Aitmatov was a cultural bridge to unity for all of Central Asia—and for everyone beyond affected by the hardships of the 20th century. “They all considered him their own, a part of their culture,” Eldar says. “It was the Russians who



An architectural rendering shows the future home of the Chingiz Aitmatov International Foundation, for which his son Eldar serves as president. An internationally supported project, the center will include a school, a museum, and most importantly, it will also “keep alive Aitmatov’s philosophy,” Eldar says.

organized his 75th-birthday celebration, and when he was leaving his post in Belgium, it was the Kazakh Embassy who made the main event.” Now seven nations, including Luxembourg, have commemorated him by naming major thoroughfares in his honor.

Eldar, too, has taken it upon himself to carry the mantle of his father’s message. With plans for the Chingiz Aitmatov International Foundation to open an internationally funded state-of-the-art cultural center in Bishkek that will include a school and museum, Eldar’s goal is to connect the next generation with his father.

“He belongs to every Kyrgyz, and every Kyrgyz should know him,” says Eldar. 🌐



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# Orientalism's EQUESTRIAN EYE

WRITTEN BY LUCIEN DE GUISE

## In Orientalist art, the subject that most easily crosses cultural boundaries is the Arabian horse.

—Gina MacDermot, *Mathaf Gallery*

“Orientalism” was a term first used several centuries ago to describe scholarship and art by “Westerners”—short-hand for Europeans and

North Americans—who sought to depict largely Islamic cultures of North Africa and Asia. Some 40 years ago, it came under criticism for cultural bias. Despite these changes in attitudes, one subject in Orientalist art has remained universally admired: the region’s horses. The 19th-century European and American artists who specialized in scenes of North Africa, the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula were as enamored of the equines of those lands as were the inhabitants.

The first collectors of Orientalist horse paintings were those among the affluent of Europe and America who hungered to see expressions of heroic values. The Arabian horse and its several cousins represented to these artists and patrons a kind of raw honor and nobility. Suitably painted, the Arabian horse became a nostalgic symbol to a Western world rapidly being eclipsed by the Industrial Revolution. The same yearning for a simpler past was visible elsewhere, notably in the work of British Pre-Raphaelites; in the US, the “Wild West” of Frederic Remington’s cowboy extravaganzas had much in common with Orientalist depictions of Bedouin scenes. (Indeed, the wild horses of North America were descended from Spanish horses that were, in turn, descended from Barbs and Arabians.)

The Arab masters of these equine marvels were accorded

a similarly romanticized respect. For French painter Ferdinand Victor Eugène Delacroix, the people of North Africa were, even without their horses, “Greeks

and Romans ... the Arabs who wrap themselves in a white blanket and look like Cato or Brutus.”

The paintings from certain easels were more convincing than from others. “Some artists would portray any horse they painted to match the physique of the Arabian horse,” says Rania Elsayed, an equine veterinary authority and photographer at University of Exeter in England. Clients did not tend to question bioscience when buying an image: Horse plus Arab rider plus “Oriental” setting were often enough, even for connoisseurs who might, regarding other subjects, be more discriminating.

The institution that has done the most to keep this niche of East-West fraternalism alive is London’s Mathaf Gallery. Since the 1970s it has stuck with the field that was for decades tainted for its colonialist origins.

“After 40 years of working with Orientalist art, the subject matter that most easily crosses cultural boundaries is the Arabian horse,” says Managing Director Gina MacDermot. “Its appeal seems to be universal.” The Orientalist artists of the 19th century, she adds, “provide some of the most sensitive depictions of these horses among the people who loved them the most.”



**Ferdinand Victor Eugène Delacroix**  
**"Horses Coming Out of the Sea,"** 1860  
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Delacroix became the pioneer Orientalist artist, relying on his memories of a single visit to North Africa in 1832. His love of animals is clear from the many paintings and drawings made before then, and his Romantic respect for the peoples he visited comes through in his diary: "The Moroccans are closer to nature in a thousand ways."

His praise for their horsemanship comes through too. According to Susan Behrends Frank, curator at The Phillips

Collection, "as Delacroix developed as an artist, he paid less and less attention to the accuracy of anatomical structure and physical movement and focused more on capturing the heroic grandeur of the horse for emotional effect."

This painting shows a training technique that is still popular for developing equine endurance. The setting is, however, based on scenery he observed along the English Channel. As Frank points out: "He noted in his journals of 1850–54 that he created the most successful scenes of North Africa when he had forgotten the small details and could recall only the poetic and striking aspects of the experience as channeled through his memory and imagination."





Top: **Eugène Fromentin**  
**"Storm in the Plains of Alfa,"** 1864  
 Najd Collection, Mathaf Gallery, London

Fromentin was also French, and he took a more precise and less color-saturated approach than his great inspiration, Delacroix. Fromentin was also a more frequent traveler who wrote two books on his experiences in the Sahara and the Sahel. He claimed that the combination of an Arab rider with his horse added up to "the two most intelligent and fully developed creatures that God has made."

His appreciation of horses may also have been stimulated by Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau, who reportedly informed him that, in an age in which art dealers and commercial patrons were becoming increasingly crucial to an artist's career, paintings of horses were easier to sell than paintings of camels. (Before then, Fromentin had divided his Orientalist animal subjects between the two.)

Fromentin's painting of the hot, dust-filled desert wind known as the *simum* might not have been so moving if camels had been the centerpiece. As it is, the painting shows the mutual vulnerabilities of both man and horse, which confront as one the desert storm Fromentin whipped up so vividly.



Lower: **Sir Edwin Landseer**  
**"The Arab Tent,"**  
 1865  
 The Wallace Collection

Dogs, birds and even the lions in London's Trafalgar Square: Landseer was the pre-eminent animal artist of the Victorian era.

He was not known as an Orientalist, says The Wallace Collection curator Lelia Packer, but he did understand the anatomy of the horse "very well." In the company of Rembrandt, Titian and Velazquez, the collection accords a place at its entrance to "his finest painting of horses," she says.

A tender view of an Arabian mare and her foal, the painting limits Arab elements mostly to a rug and the painting's title. The non-equine occupants include dogs and monkeys. Absent are blood, battle and tension that were so often associated with Arabian breeds by many 19th-century artists.



Above: **Jean-Léon Gérôme**  
**"Rider and Dying Horse in the Desert,"** 1872  
 Private collection

Tenderness is taken yet further in what is perhaps the most poignant horse painting by any Orientalist. Gérôme was the leading artist of the genre in the mid-19th century, legendary for the detail and so-called "licked finish" of his canvases. He usually put his painstaking efforts toward scenes of urban or courtly life that he had experienced on his travels, and into them he often projected elements from his imagination. This painting is less precise and more emotive. He had spent enough time in the Arab world to know that losing a conveyance in the desert could also mean losing one's life.

The bond between rider and horse is unequivocal. Gérôme also understood the accoutrements of equestrianism, and although later he painted a view of an Arab rider buying a bridle and other accessories with his signature precision, here such elements are secondary to this tear-eliciting tour de force.

Right: **Georges Washington**  
**"The Falconers,"** date unknown  
 Mathaf Gallery, London

Life in the desert was seldom far from the thoughts of other Orientalists too. Georges Washington, whose name is a gallicized tribute to the first president of the United States, was one of the many artists who—when traveling at least—preferred privation in the desert to comfort in the city, and he often chose falconry as one of

the activities that drew his fading, preindustrial Europe closer to contemporary Arab lands.

Although Washington often also depicted hunting and warfare, on this occasion it is a representation without bloodshed. Falconry was one of the several common pursuits of European nobility that had roots at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. This association was clear to critics, one of whom declared at the 1863 Salon: "The grand air of the horsemen, their dazzling costumes and noble steeds indicate great African lords. Falconry is indeed the privilege of the Algerian aristocracy."





Above: **Adolf Schreyer**  
"The Ambush," date unknown  
Albukhary Collection

One step beyond falconry was the activity for which hunting had been used as preparation since time immemorial: war. For Westerners facing the increasingly impersonalized slaughter of uniformed infantry in the 19th century, preindustrial tribal warfare became a source of nostalgic fascination. An Austrian, Schreyer had spent time among the European military, and his paintings were sought after by horse lovers and armchair generals alike in both Europe and America. As a result, his extensive travels around North Africa and the Near East were largely sponsored by purchases from the Vanderbilts, the Rockefellers and other collectors with large walls to fill.

The softness of Schreyer's brushwork does not diminish the intensity of his moment. The group's commander heightens the sense of drama: He is fully loaded with weaponry although the rifles seem to have rather slender barrels, especially when contrasted with the powerful physiques of the leading horse and rider. Warfare was a supreme test for a horse, and both Europeans and Arabs praised Arabian breeds for their speed and agility in battle.

Below: **Francesco Coleman**  
"The Skirmish," date unknown  
Albukhary Collection

Coleman was an Italian who probably never left Italy, but he possessed a sufficient sense of drama to capture what felt like an essence of the Arabians he depicted. He was fascinated by horses and clothing, like most Italian Orientalist painters. Anne Brown, chairman of the Centenary Committee of the Arab Horse Society, points out that the title of the painting was given





not by the artist, who must have intended it to be a “fantasia”—a mock battle that tested equestrian skills—rather than an actual armed confrontation.

“These tribesmen are celebrating,” she says, “which is probably why the horses wear elaborate saddle cloths and embroidered chest bands. The horses are not scared of the musket shots.” The abandon with which the riders are firing their weapons provides an exaggerated spectacle.

### Edwin Lord Weeks

“**Outside a Moroccan Bazaar Gate,**” circa 1875–1880  
Albukhary Collection

Despite a name with an aristocratic British flavor, Weeks was a Bostonian who made Paris his home. After studying with Gérôme, he traveled as widely and boldly as any Orientalist of his day. Horses appear in his paintings more as props than

main attractions, and he was equally adept with camels and elephants. His greatest strength as an equine artist was in the way he incorporated horses into vignettes of daily life.

The horse in this painting is radiant, even by Weeks’s standards. The brocades and gilt trappings suggest a more important occasion than merely meeting a gun seller outside the gate of a bazaar. He brought a theatrical quality to a composition that in real life would not likely have included such a princely figure making a roadside purchase. 🌐



**Lucien de Guise** is a former head curator of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia and is now its associate curator, based once again in his London hometown. He is the co-curator of an exhibition on East-West encounters to be held at the British Museum in October 2019.



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# CAIRO'S HOUSE *of* KNOWLEDGE

—  
WRITTEN BY TOM VERDE

**O**n March 24, 1005, a man reputed for madness came to his senses long enough to establish one of the most progressive and influential academic institutions of the Middle Ages.

“On this Saturday ... the so-called House of Knowledge in Cairo was inaugurated,” wrote the chronicler al-Musabbihi, a friend of the new institution’s founder, Caliph al-Hakim, who had assumed his title nine years before. Though al-Musabbihi’s original manuscript is lost, copied sections survive in the writings of 14th-century Egyptian historian al-Maqrizi.

As al-Musabbihi and others at court well knew, staying on al-Hakim’s good side could be tricky. The “Mad

Although the building that held Cairo’s *Dar al-‘Ilm*, or House of Knowledge, disappeared long ago, it stood not far from the Mosque of al-Aqmar, right, along Muizz Street, a thoroughfare that dates back to the founding of Cairo in the 10th century.

Caliph,” as he was later called, could be mingling jovially with his subjects in the streets at one moment and ordering the summary execution of an esteemed courtier the next—or the extermination of the city’s dogs because their barking annoyed him.

So al-Hakim—the name means “the Wise”—must have been having an especially even-keeled day when, as al-Musabbihi reported, he commanded that books and “manuscripts in all the domains of science and culture, to an extent to which they had never been brought together for a prince” fill the shelves of his new *Dar al-‘Ilm*, or House of Knowledge.

For more than 100 years, *Dar al-‘Ilm* distinguished

itself as a center of learning where astronomers, mathematicians, grammarians, logicians, physicians, philologists, jurists and others conducted research, gave lectures and collaborated. All were welcomed, and it remained unfettered by political pressures or partisan influences.

“There is no evidence that it ever served as a propaganda institution. It was created simply as a public academy,” says historian Paul Walker of the University of Chicago, who has written on the Fatimid dynasty of which al-Hakim was a member.

Among the breakthroughs that emerged from Dar al-‘Ilm were discoveries in optics by polymath astronomer, mathematician and philosopher Ibn al-Haytham and in astronomy by Ibn Yunus, an astronomer who lived during the late 10th and early 11th centuries. Their charts, tables, experiments and empirical research would inform the work of later scientists and thinkers in Europe. (See “Legacy of Knowledge,” p. 24.)

It was sectarian infighting and philosophical clashes that ultimately ran roughshod over the founding aims of Dar al-‘Ilm 114 years after its opening. Its doors closed in 1119, and attempts to revive it veered from its founding, nonsectarian principles.

Yet during its heyday in the first half of the 11th century, Dar al-‘Ilm, as its name implied, advanced the knowledge of its era, the pursuit of which, according to a famed hadith, or saying, of the Prophet Muhammad, “is an obligation upon every Muslim.”

**W**hile unique in some ways, Dar al-‘Ilm was not the first of its kind. Baghdad’s *Bayt al-Hikma* (House of Wisdom), established early in the ninth century by the Abbasid Caliphate, is the most famous of its predecessors.

Jundaysabur Academy, founded around 555 CE in the province of Khuzestan, near the current Iran-Iraq border, was perhaps closer in spirit to the Cairo academy. It was devoted mostly to the study of medicine and philosophy and attracted scholars from many corners of the Middle East.

Other models included an early ninth-century palace library, *Khizanat al-Hikma* (Library of Wisdom)—maintained by Yahya ibn Abi Mansur, chief astronomer to Abbasid Caliph al-Ma’mun, patron also of the Bayt al-Hikma. Scholars from throughout the caliphate, especially those keen on astronomy, traveled there to learn. In 10th-century Mosul, in modern Iraq, a wealthy patron named Ja’far ibn Muhammad al-Mawsili founded a library where he lectured on poetry, while students studied a variety of topics—and were supplied with free paper. In Basra and Ramhormoz, in southern Persia, a certain Ibn Sawwar established libraries where research scholars were offered stipends. To the north, in Rayy—“the finest city of the whole east,” barring Baghdad, as 10th-century geographer Ibn Hawqal wrote—more than 400 camel-loads of books lined the shelves of its *Bayt al-Kutub*

(House of Books). And around 993 in the Baghdad suburb of al-Karkh, a vizier named Abu Nasr Sabur ibn Ardashir founded the Abode of Knowledge, whose library was said to keep more than 10,000 volumes.

This last institution, founded just 12 years before Dar al-‘Ilm, was likely al-Hakim’s most direct inspiration, according to Heinz Halm, professor of Islamic studies at the University of Tübingen. It was through al-Hakim’s contacts in Baghdad that the caliph learned of Sabur’s institution, and he was thus “encouraged to promote the sciences in his own empire in a similar and even more generous manner and to raise the cultural level of his followers,” Halm wrote in his 1997 study, *The Fatimids and their Traditions of Learning*. Yet al-Hakim did not merely copy: He incorporated elements of the other earlier institutions, including stipends for scholars, support staff and free writing supplies.

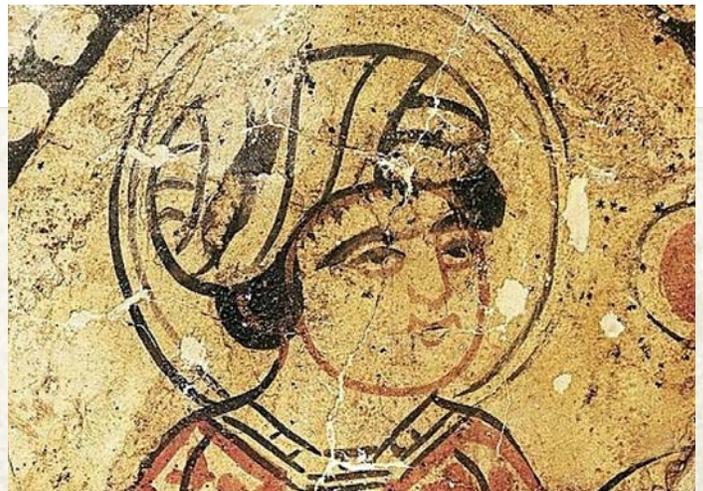
The time and place were just right.

“Egypt was a real center of learning during this whole classical period, and Cairo in particular. People came there to learn from all over the Islamic world,” says historian Paula Sanders of Rice University, author of *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo*.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Dar al-‘Ilm’s founding coincided with the rise of Fatimid regional power. Expanding west from Syria in the 10th century, the Fatimids seized Egypt and North Africa from local client rulers of the Iraq-based Abbasids. In 969, Caliph al-Mu’izz li-Din Allah founded Cairo—*al-Qahira* (the Victorious) in Arabic—which became the dynasty’s political and economic capital.

By the time al-Mu’izz’s grandson al-Hakim took the throne 30 years later, Fatimid governing authority was located in Cairo’s Eastern and Western Palaces. These royal administrative and residential quarters—now gone—stood facing one another in the heart of the city, separated by a 2.5-hectare parade

Al-Hakim ruled as caliph in Cairo from 996 to 1021 CE. Although he vanished without a trace, he left a cultural and scientific legacy in Dar al-‘Ilm, which furthered astronomy, mathematics, medicine, law and other fields of knowledge.





Dar al-‘Ilm drew scholars from across the Muslim world. It was established in 1005 with books donated by Caliph al-Hakim, whose own palace library was said to hold some 400,000 volumes.

ground called *Bayn al-Qasrayn* (literally meaning “between the two palaces”) along all that now remains: Muizz Street, one of Cairo’s oldest, most atmospherically historic thoroughfares.

**A**l-Maqrizi (quoting al-Musabbihi) pointed out that Dar al-‘Ilm was located in a house that formally belonged to a slave-steward of al-Hakim’s father, Caliph al-Aziz. That house, explains Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities for Legal Affairs Archeologist Ahmed Maher, was lost long ago. But it was once appended to the northern wing of the four-and-a-half hectare, staple-shaped western palace, opposite the Mosque of al-Aqmar, which still stands and dates from about a century and a quarter later.

Down Muizz Street, the intricately decorated facade of the mosque, together with the rest of the street’s surviving medieval architecture, now all rub shoulders with storefronts advertising cell phones, Arab sweets and touristy bric-a-brac. Maher, who specializes in the medieval Islamic period, peers through the modernity and hazards an educated guess as to what Dar al-‘Ilm’s interior may have been like when it opened its doors some 10 centuries ago.

“I think there would have been a great hall,” for lectures, in addition to cubicles for individual study and shelves for books, Maher says. Al-Musabbihi’s eyewitness description all but confirms Maher’s speculation:

After the building was furnished and decorated, and after all the doors and passages were provided with curtains, lectures were held there by the Qur’an readers, astronomers, grammarians and philologists, as well as physicians.

This scholarly staff was supported, al-Musabbihi wrote, by “[g]uardians, servants, domestics and others.” In addition to these “blessings, the like of which had been unheard of,” al-Hakim “granted substantial salaries to all those who were appointed by him there to do service.”

Salaries and other financial support flowed from a *waqf* (endowment) established by al-Hakim, the terms of which have survived in fragments of Dar al-‘Ilm’s original deed, quoted by al-Maqrizi. While records of the scholar salaries are absent, tallies of Dar al-‘Ilm’s annual budget for support staff and upkeep have survived:

For the purchase of mats and other household effects, 10 dinars; for paper for the scribe, i.e. the copyist, 90 dinars—that is the greatest single item—for the librarian 48 dinars; for the purchase of water 12, for the servant 15, for paper, ink and writing reeds for the scholars studying there 12; for repairing the curtains 1 dinar; for the repair of possibly torn books or loose leaves 12; for the purchase of felt for blankets in the winter 5; for the purchase of carpets in the winter 4 dinars.

Here the deed fragment breaks off, and the distribution of the remaining 48 dinars of Dar al-‘Ilm’s annual 257-dinar budget remains a mystery. (One dinar averaged 4.25 grams of gold.)

Al-Maqrizi also makes clear that the largest expense was the cost of paper. Per al-Hakim’s edict, people “of all walks of life, whether they wanted to read books or dip into them” were not only permitted to browse Dar al-‘Ilm’s collection of around 1,500 books but were also provided with free “ink, writing reeds, paper and inkstands” should they wish to walk

in and copy any book they pleased.

“That’s astonishing. People didn’t know what to make of it,” says Walker, though Sanders stipulates that given its setting in the royal palace, Dar al-‘Ilm would have been frequented by a literate and sophisticated clientele, as opposed to the general public.

The books were gifts from al-Hakim, whose own personal library was said to house no fewer than 400,000 volumes on history, jurisprudence, grammar, philology, biography, astronomy, alchemy and other sciences.” This included 2,400 boxed Qur’ans, each illuminated in gold, silver and lapis lazuli. By the fall of the Fatimid dynasty in 1171, al-Maqrizi reported that the royal library housed an estimated 1.6 million books, and not long after him, poet Ibn Abi Tayyi of Aleppo praised the palace library as “one of the wonders of the world.”

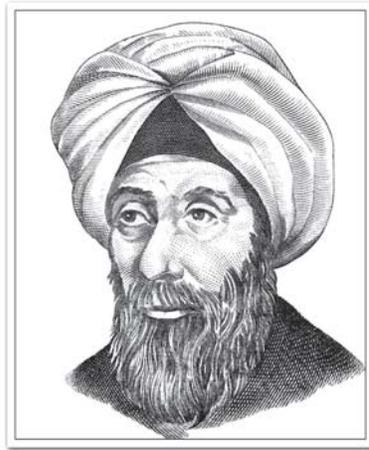
Such anecdotal reckonings were likely inflated. But even if the shelves of al-Hakim’s library contained but one-tenth of its reputed inventory, it “would have been larger, by a factor of fifty or more, than any contemporary library in Christendom,” observed scholar Jonathan Bloom, author of *Paper Before Print: The History and Impact of Paper in the Islamic World*.

**B**ut Dar al-‘Ilm’s greatest asset was its brain trust. Among the most notable drawn to it was Ibn al-Haytham, who today is regarded as the father of modern optics.

Born in Basra, Iraq, in 965 CE, little is known of

Ibn al-Haytham’s early years, beyond that he served there as a vizier. Preferring science to politics, he spent most of his time studying Aristotle, Euclid and other Greeks while developing his own passions for mathematics, physics and astronomy.

Exactly when Ibn al-Haytham traveled to Cairo to join the faculty at Dar al-‘Ilm is unknown, but by the time he got there, his opinion of himself seems to have grown as inflated as some of the estimates of the caliph’s



One of Dar al-‘Ilm’s best-known scholars was Ibn al-Haytham, whose discoveries in optics included the correct hypothesis that human sight involved light rays entering the eye—rather than emanating from the eye, as previously believed.

book collection. Standing before al-Hakim, he bragged that he could accomplish something the Egyptians never had achieved: control the annual flooding of the Nile. Al-Hakim enthusiastically funded the project, and Ibn al-Haytham set off on an expedition upriver.

After examining the Nile’s powerful flow at Egypt’s southern border, Ibn al-Haytham realized the task was beyond his capabilities. He further rationalized that any civilization capable of such engineering wonders as the Great Pyramids would surely have regulated the flow of the

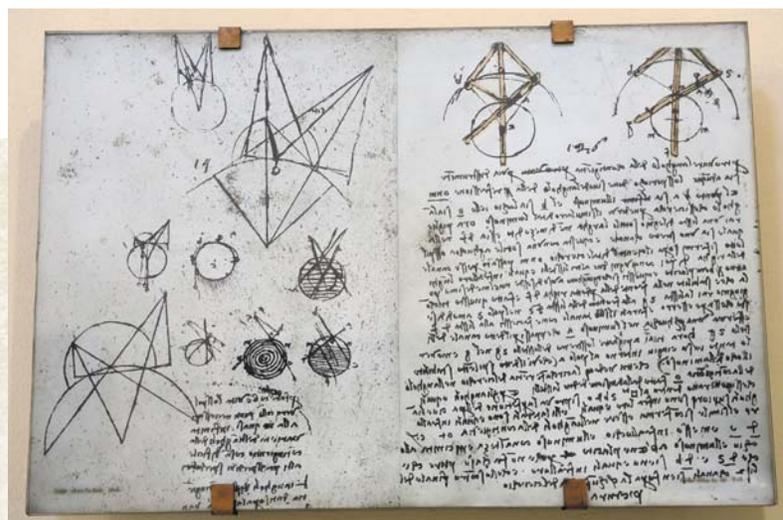
Nile long ago, were it possible. He quietly tiptoed back to Cairo, where in order to avoid al-Hakim’s anticipated wrath, he feigned madness. He spent the rest of his days, before passing away around 1040, earning a modest living copying manuscripts in his quarters at Dar al-‘Ilm.

Down Muizz Street, the intricately decorated facade of the mosque, together with the rest of the street’s surviving medieval architecture, now all rub shoulders with storefronts advertising cell phones, sweets and bric-a-brac.

He also continued to study mathematics, physics and astronomy, as well as optics, which he helped pioneer as a physical science. In his greatest surviving work, *Kitab al-Manazir (Book of Optics)*, he became the first to correctly postulate that the “act of vision is not accomplished by means of rays” that emanate from the eyes to fall upon objects, as some of his classical predecessors, notably Euclid and Ptolemy, believed. Rather, he surmised, “vision is accomplished by rays coming from external objects and entering the visual organ.”

He arrived at his conclusion via experimentation using lenses, mirrors and what he called his *al-bait al-muzlim*, or in Latin, *camera obscura*, which translates simply as “dark room.” Noting that light entering a darkened room through a pinhole cast an inverted image of the outside world onto the opposite wall, he concluded from this and other observations and experiments that light itself traveled in rays, a fundamental principle of optics. In doing so, he anticipated the modern

Leonardo da Vinci addressed “the problem of Alhazen” (as Ibn al-Haytham was known in the West) in the early 16th century in his encyclopedic *Codex Atlanticus*. The problem posed by Ibn al-Haytham concerned calculating the angle at which a ray of light is reflected by a concave mirror.



## LEGACY of KNOWLEDGE

Research at Dar al-'Ilm would inform the works of later European scientists and thinkers, including 13th-century philosopher Vitello and Roger Bacon, both of whom drew upon Ibn al-Haytham when writing their own tomes on optics. Enlightenment-era astronomer Johannes Kepler explicitly credited Ibn al-Haytham when developing his theory of retinal imagery, as did Kepler's contemporary mathematician-philosopher René Descartes when wrestling with the question of where light lands when reflected off a curved or spherical surface, a puzzle that later became known to mathematicians as "Alhazen's problem." ("Alhazen" was Ibn al-Haytham's Latinized name.) Ibn al-Haytham solved the problem using geometry and a study of curved planes; an algebraic solution was not discovered until the mid-1960s. Artists and art historians also theorize that Ibn al-Haytham's work on optics enhanced the use of perspective in Renaissance art, particularly the paintings of 15th-century artist Lorenzo Ghiberti, who quoted Ibn al-Haytham in his commentaries.

Ibn Yunus's critical reassessment of the Greco-Roman astronomer Ptolemy, whose *Amalgest* placed Earth at the center of the universe, helped pave the way for the kind of thinking that led to the theory of heliocentrism posed by 15th century Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus. As late as the 19th century, Ibn Yunus's time-keeping tables were still being used in Cairo, while his observations on planetary conjunctions remained useful to astronomer Simon Newcomb of the United States Naval Observatory in Washington, D.C., while formulating his theories on lunar motion in the 1870s.

Today, Ibn Yunus's intellectual descendants—Arab astronomers from Morocco, many of them members of the Arab Astronomical Society—continue to contribute to global scientific efforts with telescopes such as those at the Oukaïmeden Observatory in Morocco's Atlas Mountains. In 2016 data from the observatory helped identify TRAPPIST-1, a planetary system composed of a central, ultra-cool red dwarf orbited by seven exoplanets within the constellation Aquarius.

"The primary motivation for the search for extrasolar planets is identifying how frequent habitable worlds and life may be within the Galaxy ... [and] to better know about the formation of our own solar system," said Zouhair Benkhaldoun, director of the observatory and president of the Moroccan National Committee for Astronomy, speaking to a writer for the website Nature Middle East. And in Cairo, scientists like Yehea Ismail of The American University in Cairo recognize the contributions of their predecessors and continue to build upon their foundations. Ismail's research is in nanoelectronics, which seeks to reduce transistors to increasingly microscopic sizes that may add power and functionality to products from smartphones to biochips that could, for example, help analyze blood chemistry.

"What I am doing is cutting edge, but it is a continuation," he says. "The European Renaissance and Industrial Revolution stood on the shoulders of medieval Arabs."

scientific method by refusing to take at face value the writings of those who had come before him, relying instead on his own experiments and accumulated data—and even then he reserved judgment:

"A person studying science with a view to knowing the truth ought to turn himself into a hostile critic of everything that he studies," he observed in *Al-Shukuk 'ala Batlamyus (Doubts Concerning Ptolemy)*. "He should

criticize it from every point of view and in all its aspects. And while thus engaged in criticism he should also be suspicious of himself."



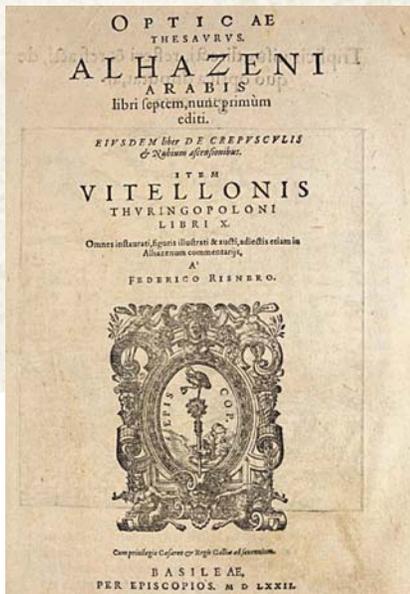
Research at Dar al-'Ilm laid foundations for later studies by scientists, philosophers and artists from other parts of the world. Ibn al-Haytham's work in optics influenced the use of perspective in Renaissance art, and in the early 15th century, Italian artist Lorenzo Ghiberti quoted him in his commentaries.

Another of Dar al-'Ilm's most famous scholars, and also a champion of empiricism, was astronomer-poet Abd al-Rahman ibn Yunus. Born between 950 and 952 in Fustat, the first Muslim capital in Egypt, he was an almost stereotypically absent-minded professor, known to be careless and even comical in his attire and appearance, according to al-Musabbihi. Yet while he may have come across as sartorially slap-happy, he was keenly observing, recording and calculating the movements of the heavens.

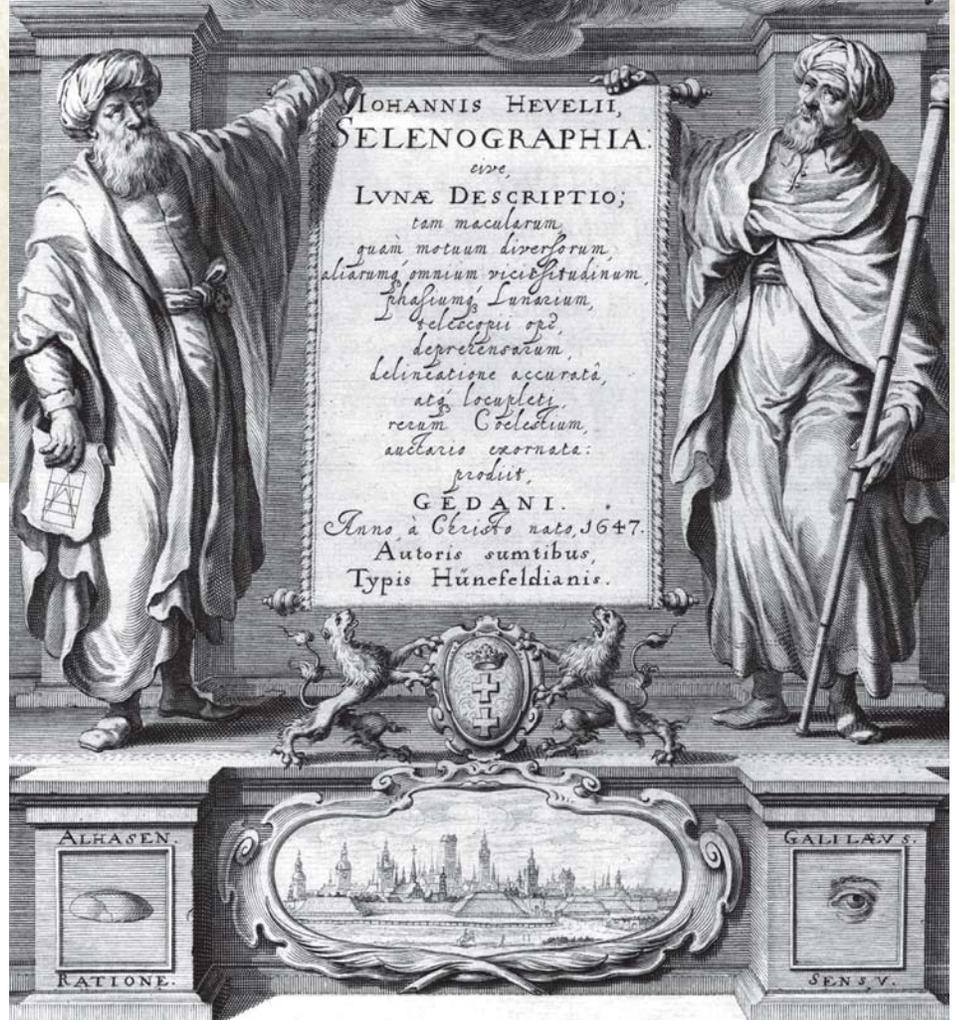
His most famous work is the monumental *al-Zij al-Hakimi al-kabir*, an astronomical handbook (*zij*) with records of observations and tables. The title also reflects its dedication to al-Hakim, his patron, as well as its ponderous length (*kabir* means "large"). At 81 chapters, it was indeed twice the length, and contained twice as many tables, as earlier works of its genre.

He not only recorded astronomical observations he made between 977 and 1003, but he also compared them to those of earlier astronomers. This comparative, empirical approach was previously unknown in Islamic astronomy. The text reveals other insights: For instance, where applicable, his calculations took into account the atmospheric refraction of the sun's rays at the horizon. His tables of solar, lunar and planetary longitudes and latitudes are considered the most accurate of the medieval Islamic period.

He also provided instructions for the conversion of dates among the Muslim, Coptic and Syrian calendars, as well as finding the meridian and determining the position of the *qibla* (the direction of Makkah) and the phases of the moon. Such knowledge was critical, explains Doris Behrens-Abouseif, professor emerita of Islamic Art and Archaeology at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.



Above: Polymath Ibn al-Haytham wrote his seven-volume study of optics, *Kitab al-Manizir (Book of Optics)*, at Dar al-'Ilm. Printed in Latin in 1572 as part of German scholar Friedrich Risner's *Optical Thesaurus*, it enhanced the study of optics in the West. Right: A page from Polish astronomer Johannes Hevelius's *Selenographia (A Description of the Moon)*, published in 1647, recognizes the influence of Alhasen, or Ibn al-Haytham, left, and Galileo, right, on his pioneering description of the lunar surface.



“Astronomers were always very important in Islamic culture, to calculate prayer time, to calculate when Ramadan begins, when you begin fasting, when you have to stop. All of this is not possible without looking at the moon,” she says.

Ibn Yunus’s calculations were uncannily precise, even to the point of his own life. One day in 1009, even though he appeared to be in good health, the astronomer announced that he would die in seven days. He locked himself in his house and began to recite from the Qur’an while washing ink off his manuscripts. A week later, he was dead.

**T**he death of Dar al-'Ilm was not quite so neatly planned. Nor was that of its founder.

By 1020 the caliph had taken to donning a rough cloak and riding alone at night on a donkey into the hills east of Cairo, ostensibly for purposes of meditation. In February 1021, during one such outing, al-Hakim disappeared. Foul play was suspected after a search produced nothing but his riderless mount and bloodied cloak.

The caliphate began to gradually unwind. Under al-Hakim’s grandson al-Mustansir, who ruled from 1036 to 1094, clashes among the army’s Berber, Turkic, Persian, Arab and Sudanese troops intensified. A famine contributed to political instability and weakened the economy. Soldiers went unpaid, and though al-Mustansir sold off personal treasure to compensate them, they wanted more. In 1068 they looted the palace, including the royal library and Dar al-'Ilm. According to al-Maqrizi,

some of the books fell into the hands of Berber tribesmen who reputedly used some of the covers to make sandals. As for the pages, they were burned for fuel, and their ashes “formed great hills” that in al-Maqrizi’s day were called *tilal al-kutub*—hills of books. Others, al-Maqrizi noted, “reached the great metropolises” of other countries.

When religious zealots took over Dar al-'Ilm in 1119, the government shut it down. It reopened, briefly, in 1121 but was shut down once more for the same reasons. In 1123 Caliph al-Amir ordered its reopening but, to keep a closer eye on its proceedings, had it relocated to the Eastern Palace, where he resided. Although it appears to have survived another 48 years, until the end of the Fatimid caliphate in 1171, there are no records of research conducted there at any time after 1119.

Despite political tides and storms, this period of Egyptian history was one of economic success, and Cairo remains a pre-eminent capital to this day. Historians further credit that success also to the era’s intellectual legacies, when Dar al-'Ilm shone brightest of all. 🌐



**Tom Verde** (tomverde.pressfolios.com) is a senior contributor to *AramcoWorld*.

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This ivory head from Nimrud, standing 8.7 centimeters tall and originally overlaid with gold foil, could tell tales of Assyrian conquest and, finally, defeat. Discovered by a team led by British archeologist Max Mallowan in 1962 in the ruins of a room likely used to store campaign loot or tribute, it dates from the eighth or ninth century BCE. It is now on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

PETER HORREE / ALAMY



# IVORY

THE  
AGE  
OF

BY GRAHAM CHANDLER

British archeologist and adventurer Austen Henry Layard may be best known for the discovery in 1845 of the colossal winged bulls from Nimrud, Syria, that are displayed at the entrance of the Assyrian gallery at the British Museum. But that same year he found the first of more than 100 exquisitely carved ivory specimens—the initial pieces of a 2,500-year-old jigsaw puzzle that is still being put together today. In fact, it would take another century before the Assyrian capital from the ninth to seventh centuries BCE would yield the largest concentration of ancient worked ivory ever discovered, illuminating Middle Eastern art, culture and history, and earning the period the title “The Age of Ivory.”

It's not just the splendor and sheer amount of worked ivory that captivates. Most of the highly artistic pieces were found in what first appeared to be the unlikeliest of places: in well bottoms, in the remains of warehouses or even strewn haphazardly about. Furthermore, despite being found in an Assyrian capital city, relatively few are of Assyrian origin or style.

“They're incredibly beautiful,” says Georgina Herrmann, honorary professor and emeritus reader in Near Eastern Studies at University College London. “You can spend hours with them. They are a fabulous art archive that has been very little studied.” Herrmann is probably the world's leading authority on the ivories found at Nimrud, as illustrated by her latest work, *Ancient Ivory: Masterpieces of the Assyrian Empire*, which appeared in 2017.

We're having breakfast at the ornate Athenaeum Club in London, where Herrmann is a member. Petite and silver-haired with meticulous manners, she talks enthusiastically about her passion for the ivories she's been studying, cataloging and publishing for decades.

“One of the things about ivories is that they look very dead in an exhibition case. You really need to see them in your hand, and also you have to remember how they were used,” she says. “Most of them were elements of furniture; you'd have sets of them on the backs of chairs, for example. They weren't

designed just to be looked at as an individual piece.”

Many were even more stunning in their original form, for their surfaces were laminated with gold or brightly colored, “like the Elgin Marbles,” she says. “People don't realize that.”

It was from this very club that Henry Rawlinson, a former British diplomatic resident in Baghdad, corresponded with Layard regarding additional funds to continue excavating at Nimrud and to work in nearby Nineveh. Layard had discovered the first of the ivories at Nimrud, 30 kilometers south of Mosul, in the autumn of 1845 when he cut the initial trench through what would be identified as the North West Palace of Ashurnasirpal, king of Assyria from 883 to 859 BCE.

“In the rubbish I found several ivory ornaments, upon which there were traces of gilding; amongst them was a figure of a man in long robes, carrying in one hand the Egyptian *crux ansata*, part of a crouching sphinx, and flowers designed with great taste and elegance,” he wrote in *Nineveh and its Remains*, published in two volumes in 1849. (Although many of the plates in the volume of illustrations deal with Nimrud, Layard chose the title to appeal to a public that was familiar with biblical Nineveh.) Layard continued with his excavation of the palace, and by 1847 he had identified 28 chambers. One, which he labeled “V,” was “remarkable for the discovery of a number of ivory ornaments of considerable beauty and interest,” he wrote.

*Left:* Mallowan dubbed this piece “Lady of the Well” or, more admiringly, “Mona Lisa” of Nimrud. It was found together with other fine ivory pieces at the bottom of a well in the Palace of Shalmaneser III in 1952. *Center:* This ivory plaque, known as “The Lady at the Window,” was part of a larger assembly. *Right:* The so-called “Ugly Sister” ivory was also discovered at the bottom of a well in Nimrud’s North West Palace.



About a decade later, writes Herrmann, British geologist William Kennett Loftus found “an immense collection of ivories, apparently the relics of a throne or furniture,” at Nimrud in the very first room he excavated in an area showing fire damage. Appropriately, he named it the “Burnt Palace.” The ivories were then largely forgotten for almost a century—until Max Mallowan entered the picture.

Mallowan, a professor of Mesopotamian archeology at the Institute of Archaeology, University of London, was intrigued with the ivories. He was a man who appreciated beautiful art objects and was seeking to start an appropriate major excavation. In 1948 he told his wife, famed crime novelist Agatha Christie, Nimrud “will rank with Tutankhamen’s tomb, with Knossos in Crete, and with Ur.” So he mounted a major series of campaigns at the site which lasted from 1949 to 1963 under the auspices of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq (BSAI), now the British Institute for the Study of Iraq (BISI).

Mallowan focused his first efforts on the palace chambers where Layard had discovered his finest ivories. “We wanted to know not only how many fragments he had overlooked, but how the ivories had originally been situated,” he wrote in his memoirs. He and his team were soon rewarded, finding “one ivory of rare delicacy, a model of a cow ... giving suck to a calf.” Then more ivory quickly filled the expedition’s dig-house.

By his fourth season, in 1952, Mallowan and his workers

were ready for the “difficult and dangerous operation of clearing three wells in the Administrative wing” of the palace. In the first, labeled “AB,” Layard had stopped work at the water level. Mallowan wanted to go deeper. After yielding much ivory treasure, it collapsed “with an almighty roar. This deterred us from getting to the bottom of nearby AJ, where 40 years later the Iraq Department of Antiquities ... successfully excavated a dozen splendid ivories ...,” he wrote. The third, which took two seasons to clear, was “our main triumph.” It yielded the now-famous carving of a lioness mauling a young man (thought stylistically to represent victory over the enemy) and masterpieces the team named the “Lady

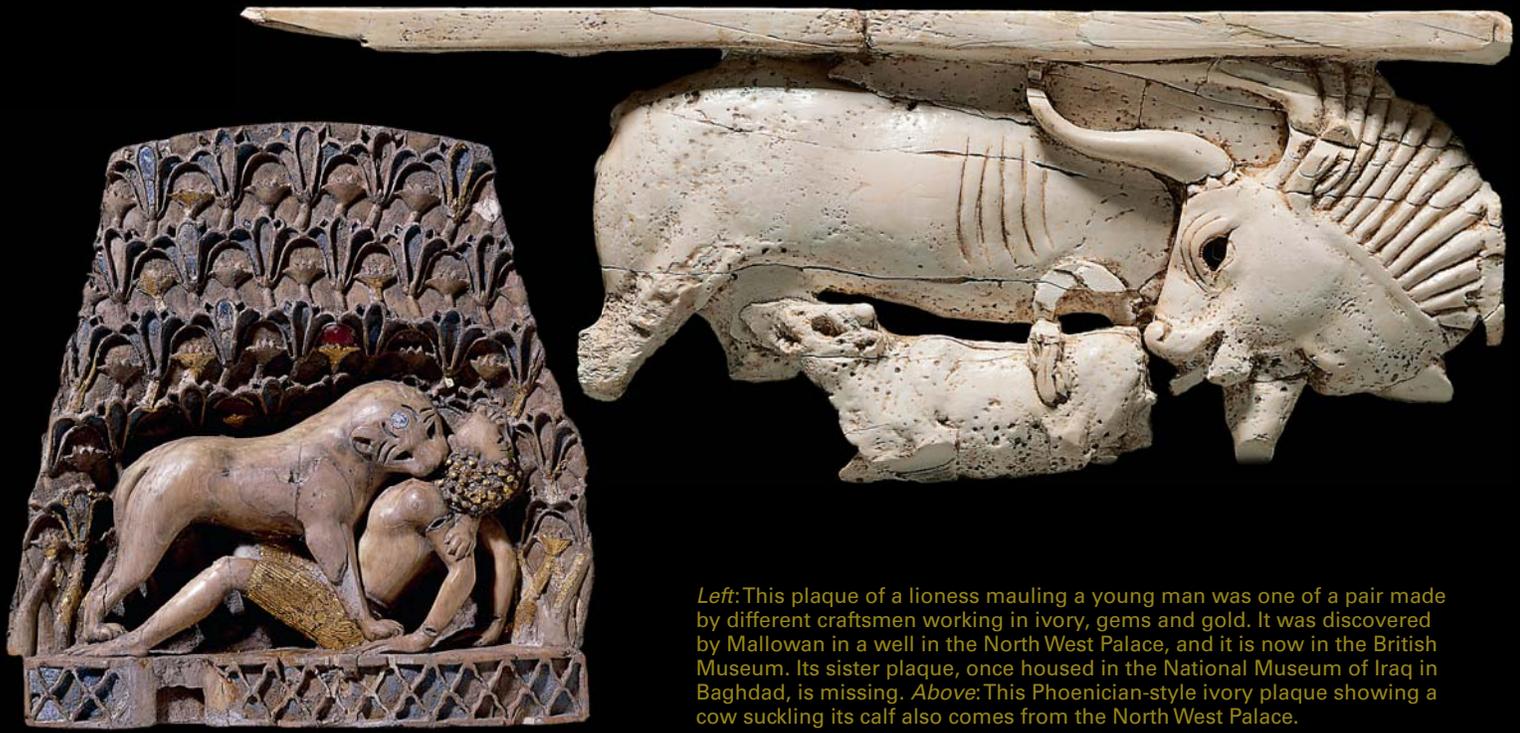
## Nimrud “will rank with Tutankhamen’s tomb, with Knossos in Crete, and with Ur.”

—archeologist Max Mallowan to his wife, crime novelist Agatha Christie

of the Well” (“Mona Lisa”) and the “Ugly Sister.” Later the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (ISBAH) went deeper and found more, including a magnificent stag browsing against a mountain backdrop.

Elated with the volume of spectacular finds, the BSAI pressed on season after season. The greatest number of ivories came from an area where a vast building of over 200 rooms had once stood. Mallowan dubbed it “Fort Shalmaneser,” after Shalmaneser III (859–824 BCE), the Assyrian king responsible for its construction. Excavations commenced in 1957, and the variety of finds was striking.

“Among the most beautiful are the animals ... oryx, gazelle and other horned beasts,” Mallowan wrote. The BSAI team also excavated the Burnt Palace, where “of all the discoveries



*Left:* This plaque of a lioness mauling a young man was one of a pair made by different craftsmen working in ivory, gems and gold. It was discovered by Mallowan in a well in the North West Palace, and it is now in the British Museum. Its sister plaque, once housed in the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, is missing. *Above:* This Phoenician-style ivory plaque showing a cow suckling its calf also comes from the North West Palace.

the ivories were outstanding.” A final tally of the Nimrud ivories is elusive, but Herrmann estimates the number runs well into “the tens of thousands.”

It was all, she writes, “an enormous jigsaw puzzle.” To

date seven volumes devoted to the ivories from Nimrud—the bulk authored or coauthored by Herrmann—have been produced under the auspices of the BISI, with yet another planned.

The 14 seasons of British excavation, and subsequent Iraqi work at the site, were not devoted primarily to the search for ivories. The teams uncovered thousands of clay tablets with cuneiform text detailing daily

life, and sculptures, paintings, seals, colossal carved stone figures and lavish royal tombs. However, the ivory pieces proved Nimrud’s artistic *crème de la crème*. As David and Joan Oates from Cambridge University put it in *Nimrud: An Assyrian Imperial*

*City Revealed*: “[I]f one were forced to select a single category of object for which Nimrud stands out above all contemporary ancient sites, it would have to be the carved ivories.”

Julian Reade joined them at Nimrud as a junior assistant

after graduating from Cambridge in 1962. “I had arrived more or less as a detached observer,” recalls the retired British Museum curator of the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities and honorary professor at the University of Copenhagen.

I’m sitting with Reade on a park bench in sunny Russell Square, just a few hundred paces from the British Museum where thousands of the Nimrud



This ivory backrest, probably from a chair or couch, consists of six panels mounted in a plain frame. Discovered at Fort Shalmaneser, it likely came to Assyria as tribute or booty.

ivories are kept. A dozen or so are on display for the public, including several pristine examples of winged sphinxes and goddesses, and the exhibition “I am Ashurbanipal: king of the world, king of Assyria,” running at the museum until

TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: BRITISH MUSEUM; CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES; LOWER: ARTHUR P. CLARK; OPPOSITE, LEFT TO RIGHT: IRAQI MUSEUM BAGHDAD / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES; BRITISH MUSEUM; THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



This contemporary view of Nimrud, on the Tigris River about 30 kilometers south of Mosul, looks to the northwest, over the Burnt Palace, with the North West Palace and ziggurat toward the background. When Austen Henry Layard began archeological exploration in 1845, the now-excavated ruins lay almost entirely buried.

February 24, shows a number of other prime examples. Herrmann is right: These are hauntingly beautiful objects of art.

Reade attests to the meticulous, painstaking work required to clean them and reveal their exquisite detail: “It was very tricky. Earth was firmly adhered to them and you didn’t want to nick the ivory removing it.” And, he says, it was a race against time to preserve the ivories as the soil would gradually harden once exposed to the dry air.

Agatha Christie regularly pitched in. “I had my own favourite tools; an orange stick, possibly a very fine knitting needle ... and a jar of cosmetic face cream ... for gently coaxing the dirt out of the crevices,” she wrote in her 1977 autobiography.

All of the excavated ivories belonged to the ISBAH, so it had to be decided which ones could leave the country. “The finds were divided into two groups,” explains Reade. “The director of the excavation together with the Iraqi director general of antiquities would lay out everything on a table basically balanced in two groups. Together they would decide which would go to the Iraq museum and which would be allocated to the expedition for export to the British and various other museums.” Luckily, there were a large number of duplicates, which facilitated the process.

The Iraqis were willing to part with some of the masterpieces to ensure continued funding for further excavations. “Nimrud was one of the best preserved of ancient sites and they had wanted to promote it as a tourist site,” says Reade. “They weren’t just digging for ivory; they were digging for information—tablets, architecture, tombs, etc. The fact that there happened to be ivory was sort of an additional bonus which assisted in the raising of finance for future seasons.”

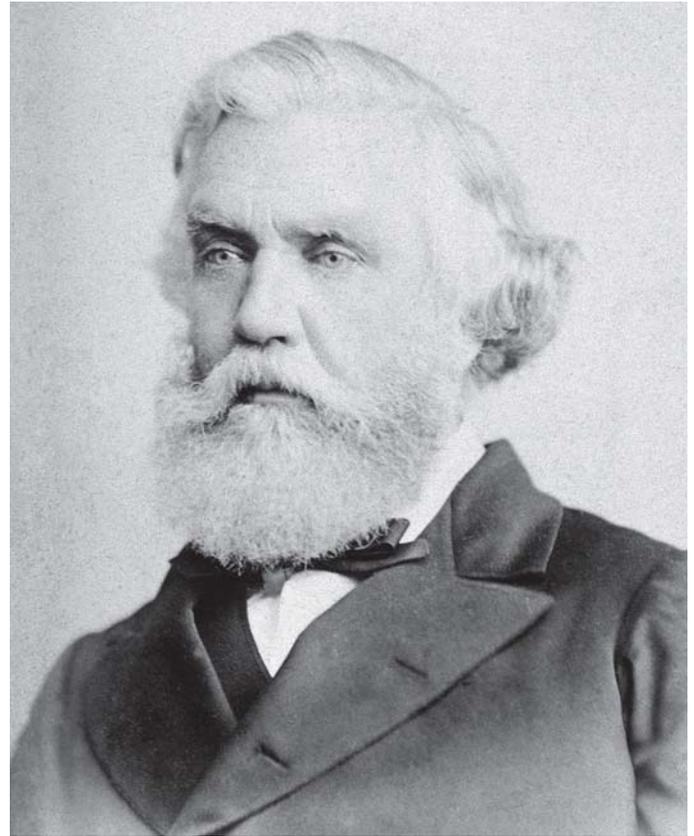
That later proved fortunate when many Iraqi museums were looted, damaged or destroyed during recent conflicts.

Valuable pieces, including the mauling lioness, are now missing. But the British Museum’s sister piece remains, and Reade credits Mallowan for that. “Without his energy and drive, I don’t think anything like as much would have been done,” he





**Above:** Max Mallowan, assisted by his wife, Agatha Christie, led a team that excavated at Nimrud for 14 seasons, beginning in 1949. **Right:** British archeologist Austen Henry Layard paved the way for exploration at Nimrud. In the first trench dug there, in 1845, he uncovered several carved ivory pieces.



says. “The very last time I saw Max was at the British Museum, and on the way out he paused in front of the lioness ivory he had found and looked at it for a long time. I very much thought he was drinking it in as one of his major achievements.”

Nimrud had a profound impact on Reade too: He went on to pursue a doctorate in Assyrian architecture, buildings and their decoration. Nimrud influenced “what I’ve done since then [and] has become part of my academic life,” he says.

Nonetheless, significant questions remain: Where did the ivory come from? How did this incredible treasure trove come to be at Nimrud? Mallowan believed it was sourced from the Syrian elephant, which may have been hunted into extinction. Herrmann, however, believes that most of the ivory must have come from Egypt, the Sudan or North Africa. “It’s one of those academic disputes,” she says.

Herrmann also reckons most of the ivories came as booty from conquered cities. “The ivory images were meant to protect people,” she explains. “They provided power. So if your city was conquered, then their power had clearly failed. The

conquerors didn’t use the ivories but kept them because they didn’t want other people to have the signs of kingship.”

Herrmann says the political picture in the region at the time was volatile and complex. “You are looking at a huge area and a lot of different kingdoms, each producing their own visual and propaganda art, each slightly different. And then you had Assyria gradually sweeping in and absorbing them all, knocking them out. And after a while, they got knocked out.”

The Assyrian empire expanded rapidly in the early first millennium BCE to control an area from modern Iran to the Mediterranean. Its power peaked around the 8th century BCE. Then its heartland came under increasing attack from the Medes and the Babylonians. The empire finally crum-

bled in 612 BCE when the allies sacked Nimrud. This is thought to be the reason so many ivories ended up in the wells—although one Iraqi excavator surmised they might have been lowered in baskets so they could be pulled up again later.

This tapestry of independent minor powers underlies the regionalism reflected in the art

**This artist’s depiction of Nimrud shows the Assyrian capital’s palaces on the right and ziggurat on the left. It was published in the second series of Austen Henry Layard’s *The Monuments of Nineveh*, in 1853.**





**A** A plaque for furniture or a cosmetic box plaque featuring three heads, probably blackened when Nimrud was sacked and burned in 612 BCE. **B** One of a set of Syro-Phoenician panels discovered by Layard in the North West Palace. **C** Two panels of a set of hinged ivory writing boards scored to receive wax upon which cuneiform was inscribed. **D** A winged sphinx reflecting the Syro-Phoenician style. **E** The head of a roaring lion that once figured as a furniture element, found in a storeroom in Fort Shalmaneser.

of the area, says Herrmann. And it is the art, specifically the ivories, that reveals the great wealth of these states.

Dating and sourcing the ivories calls for some creativity. “The ivories [the Assyrians] brought back were made in a number of different centers and we can’t tell which came from which center,” Herrmann says. “There’s no ‘Made in Birmingham’ stamp on them. But from stylistic analysis you can begin to group them.”

They can generally be sorted into three stylistic groups, Herrmann says. The first is Assyrian, characterized by similarities with the kingdom’s sculptures. In spite of their ivory hoarding, “the Assyrians were not great ivory lovers,” she notes. “They did carve some but it was very limited.”

“The ivory they used was that which they decorated with their own art,” she adds. “So the Assyrian style is very distinctive.... You’ll find it in ceremonial and royal areas” in the palaces and in Fort Shalmaneser.

Items of booty, gifts or tribute—usually stripped of any gold overlay by the Assyrians or their conquerors—are mostly found in storerooms.

Based on stylistic considerations, the second group is called Phoenician and shows a strong Egyptian influence; it’s the largest assembly found at Nimrud and includes winged deities and sphinxes. The Phoenicians were famed craftsmen with a long history of woodworking and, as active traders, had access to plentiful supplies of ivory and gold, writes Herrmann. All the conditions were right for the production of luxury goods designed for the court and temple. Panels in this style would have decorated furniture, the backs of chairs, footboards of beds, or chests.



A specialist handles pieces from the collection of Nimrud Ivories at the British Museum. Although ivories from Nimrud have been acquired and displayed by museums around the world, the largest collections are held by the National Museum of Iraq and the British Museum.

The third group, based on sculptures found along the Syria-Turkey border, is called North Syrian. Academic debate starting in the 1970s added a possible fourth group:



A The right side of an ivory head covered in its original gold overlay. B An openwork panel showing a ram-headed sphinx with a flattened version of the Egyptian double crown, walking over papyrus flowers toward a stylized tree. C A colored plaque showing a winged man holding papyrus flowers. D A woman's head found in the Burnt Palace. E A furniture plaque showing a ram-headed sphinx standing on the palms of two kneeling men. F The head of a woman blackened by fire. G An ivory plaque found in the North West Palace, with seated deities facing a cartouche reading, "Shu, son of Re."

Syro-Phoenician, perhaps located in south or central Syria and including a number of style groups.

Working from these observations, Herrmann estimates probable dates for the ivories from the Mediterranean area at between 1050–800 BCE, with production in northeastern Syria about 50 years earlier.

A striking and unexplained observation is how comparatively little ivory there is in Egypt, despite its artistic influences. "There is a group of ivories I call Egyptian because they look it," says Herrmann. "But I had a specialist look at them—reading the hieroglyphs and things—and he said these aren't really Egyptian. They are fake Egyptian even though they look it. He said nothing like them has been found in Egypt—which to me is surprising."

This leads to other major puzzles with the ivories: Why are they found in such massive numbers at Nimrud and nowhere else; and did the Age of Ivory end with the sacking of Nimrud?

"It's accidents of discovery," offers Herrmann. "We don't know how much ivory continued to be used because we haven't found other Nimruds. The finds are so enormous that people think this must be the only one."

That's the nature of archeology: Assumptions are constantly upended. Herrmann uses an analogy: "Nobody thought there would be tombs of the queens at Nimrud until they were found in the North West Palace." And that led to overturning another assumption: It had been thought that the ivories were mostly feminine items. But very few were found in the queens' tombs. Ivory cosmetic containers, for example, were found only in kings' tombs. "They were

completely a masculine thing," Herrmann says. "The queens were richly furnished with a wide variety of grave goods; the absence of ivory must have been deliberate."

"It's a large and complex subject which requires a lot of additional study," she adds. But her immediate priority is to continue cataloging the ivories. "My main aim was to try and rescue the ivories because when Max died, thousands of pieces had not yet been described in his three completed volumes. What I've published is not yet complete."

The "Age of Ivory" moniker associated with Nimrud is justified by the record. "[Nimrud] completely changed the picture," Herrmann says. "Nobody had found anything like it before—not in Egypt or anywhere. The amount they used is just astonishing."

Reade agrees. "I think it is fair to say that the Nimrud ivories are one of the great stories of the ancient world and they haven't received the academic attention they deserve," he says. "The Age of Ivory is a powerful chapter that stands alone in archeology." 🌐



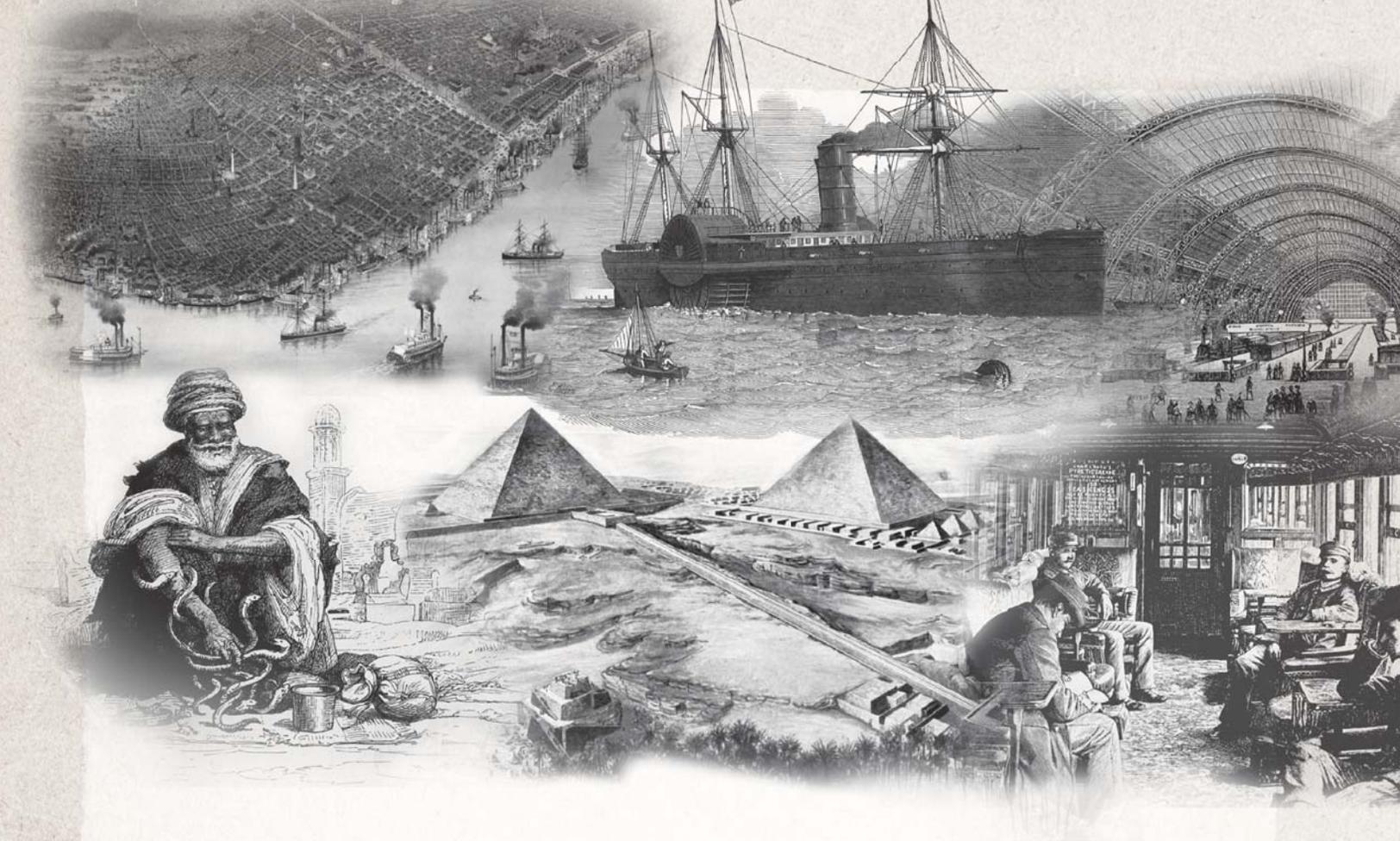
Writer **Graham Chandler** ([www.grahamchandler.ca](http://www.grahamchandler.ca)) focuses on archeology, aviation and energy. He received his doctorate in archeology from the University of London, and he lives in Calgary, Alberta.



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# David Dorr's WINDOW EAST

BY MATTHEW TELLER

Sometime in the spring of 1853, an American traveler named David Dorr rode a camel out of the deserts of southern Palestine.

**A**t one o'clock we were passing over rolling mounds adorned with olive trees," Dorr wrote later. "One was higher than the rest, and from its summit I saw Jerusalem only half a mile ahead ... The [Dome of the Rock] glittered in the sun beam ... [and] towered above all the other buildings.... I made my way straight to our humble edifice [the Church of the Holy Sepulchre], and fell upon [its] marble slabs."

Superficially, this is not such an unusual account. Europeans and Americans had long been exploring—and writing about—this part of the world. More such writing would follow, partly inspired by Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad*, published in 1869: this witty, much-celebrated travel memoir helped fuel a Western fascination for visiting (as well as shaping and colonizing) the Holy Land that has never really abated.



By contrast, Dorr's memoir of his three-year journey around parts of Europe and the Middle East, self-published more than a decade before Twain's, is virtually forgotten today. Few quote his witticisms or commend his insights. The extraordinary story of his journey—and his life—remains almost completely unknown.

The title of Dorr's book gives a clue as to why this might be. He called it *A Colored Man Round the World*.

African American social reformers including Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown and, most famously, Frederick Douglass had traveled to Europe before Dorr, lecturing and publishing. Others had been as far as Egypt.

But as far as we know, David Dorr was the first African American ever to visit Jerusalem.

He did not travel of his own free will. In this period before the American Civil War, and before the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, Dorr—like some four million of his compatriots—was enslaved. He was forced to accompany his owner.

Dorr was born in New Orleans in 1827 or 1828 (he had no birth certificate, but we can deduce the date from later evidence), enslaved to a business owner named Cornelius Fellowes. He described himself—and was described by others—as a “quadroon,” a now-archaic term meaning that he was one-quarter black, born of one white parent and one parent of mixed white and black background. He refers to his mother being enslaved in Louisiana, but he doesn't name her, and we have no way of identifying either her or Dorr's father.

Setting out from New Orleans, *opposite, top left*, Dorr traveled through Europe to both Constantinople, *top right*, and Egypt, *opposite, second from left*. He also is the first African American known to visit Jerusalem, *above right*.

Although Fellowes legally owned Dorr, the practical nature of their relationship, and how it was expressed, seems to have had more nuance than might be expected. Dorr says Fellowes treated him “as his own son” and “as free a man as walks the earth”—though we should be wary of taking such words at face value.

When Dorr was in his mid-20s, Fellowes brought him on an extended world tour. They probably left New Orleans in early 1851 and most likely took ship from New York to cross the Atlantic: Dorr records his arrival in Liverpool, England, on June 15 that year. After London they crossed to France and then meandered through Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, often with long stopovers. Paris became a favorite haunt. Significantly, Dorr's skin color seems to have been pale enough for him to “pass” as white. Their return ship departed Le Havre, France, on September 2, 1853.

Back in New Orleans, everything changed. As Dorr wrote: “When we returned, I called on this original man [a sarcastic reference to Fellowes] to consummate a two-fold promise he made me, in different parts of the world, because I wanted to make a connection, that I considered myself more than equal in dignity and means, but as he

refused me ... I fled from him and his princely promises.”

In other words, Fellowes vowed to free Dorr, but reneged. Astonishingly for any enslaved person at that time, Dorr then escaped, “reflecting on the moral liberties of the legal freedom of England, France and our New England States, with the determination to write.”

Perhaps helped by the clandestine network of guides and safe houses known as the Underground Railroad, Dorr made it to Ohio, where slavery was illegal. He lived as a clerk, lecturing and, in 1858, paying to self-publish his book. During the Civil War, he enlisted but was wounded in battle, returned to New Orleans in failing health, and there he died, probably in 1872, aged in his mid-40s.

But for his book, we wouldn't know Dorr at all. We have nothing from Fellowes against which to compare his account. The purpose of their long journey is never made clear, but in a literary act of deep resonance, considering the erasure of Black perspectives and Black lives in America before (and after) the Civil War, Dorr almost entirely erases Fellowes from his narrative. Dorr describes his journey as if it were his alone: He is the one dining grandly; he is the one selecting itineraries and ordering transportation.

“I went down to have my bill made out,” he wrote of his Liverpool hotel. In Germany: “I declined all invitations and got a carriage.” In Italy: “Having arrived and hoteled myself, I ascertained where the races were.” This might be the truth. Perhaps Dorr did pay the bill. But it might not be the whole truth. Quietly and deliberately, Dorr claims in writing the agency denied him in life.

Moreover, where Dorr does include Fellowes, it is generally to mock him as clumsy or socially awkward. Dorr shows acute sensitivity to power relations, yet he subverts them not through righteous anger but subtly, by recreating himself on the page as a refined and tasteful gentleman of leisure. He invents and inhabits a persona that can wield the cultural capital that he himself, back home in New Orleans, could not.

In this way, Dorr created a genre.

“*A Colored Man Round the World* appropriates the forms and structures of Anglo-American travel writing so completely that what we have is a superb case of literary doublespeak: the blackest of texts in whiteface,” writes Malini Johar Schueller, professor of English at the University of Florida, in her 1999 introduction to what is still the only modern edition of Dorr's book.

In contradistinction to “blackface,” a theatrical tradition in which white performers wore clownish makeup to appear as and usually caricature black people, Schueller's idea of “whiteface” has Dorr adopting a privileged air of urbane sophistication to undermine his owner and, with him, other wealthy American travelers. The veneer may be jokey, but the purpose reads sharply. Dorr is “writing for an American audience, mostly a white audience, and fash-

ioning a self that is radically different from perceived ideas about African Americans, especially slaves,” Schueller told me. By assimilating, or even by just affecting assimilation, Dorr can quote Shakespeare and Byron. He can speak French. He can comment with insight on social issues of the day. Schueller pinpoints this unsettlingly implicit critique of white literary style as a reason scholars and critics have shunned Dorr over the years.

Most of the book is devoted to Dorr's travels in Europe, where he encounters social contexts radically different from back home. One example: “26th of September [1851], and I am at the capital of Holland ... I just dined with a king. The father of the Queen ... is putting up here [at my hotel] ... He is going out—he bows to me.”

The significance of a king bowing to a slave—and of a white man bowing to a “quadroon”—would not have been lost for a moment on Dorr's readers. It is one of many such anecdotes throughout the book, whose very title reflects Dorr's almost gleeful deconstruction of power and privilege through a juxtaposition that would have seemed both striking and dissonant. Amid overwhelming disadvantage, and between the covers of what is

ostensibly a travel diary, this self-confident and sometimes even cocky young man offers a pointed commentary on American racial prejudice.

He also seems to have had a whale of a time. He describes flirting with hotel maids (presumably white); attending high-class balls; viewing fine art; hobnobbing with nobility and having a hundred other adventures that would be barred to him at home.

But when he reaches the Muslim world, a harder, more judgmental tone takes over as Dorr's manufactured identity coalesces further. In Constantinople (modern Istanbul)—whose “immense number of steeples, towers and minarets; ... [made] the fairest sight I ever beheld”—Dorr adopts a common Western literary trope in describing the Ottoman sultan Abdulmejid as “a weak looking man ... surfeiting on the fat of the world.”

His internalization of a Western notion of supremacy deepens in Egypt. In Alexandria he is disgusted by the food. Cairo he describes with a backhanded compliment as “a still magnificent city for its age.” He scoffs at local guides' descriptions of sights (“I could plainly see that his information was merely traditionary, without the least shadow of history for support”), and he rails against the crew on his Nile riverboat and others when they ask for tips. There is even outright racism: “To believe what an Arab says when trying to sell anything, would be a sublime display of the most profound ignorance.”

Why the shift in attitude? Schueller criticizes Dorr for “buying into well-established stereotypes [that would] bring him closer to white status.” Further clues lie in an unusual chapter that delivers the book's weightiest message. In a

## His very title reflects Dorr's almost gleeful deconstruction of power and privilege.

lengthy evocation of Egyptian prowess in civilization-building, Dorr reflects on historical context and Black identity. He discusses Alexander the Great, the Ptolemaic dynasty and Biblical history, painting one particularly stark picture: “In going to these Pyramids, one walks over a pavement of dead bodies. I sunk in the sand, one hundred yards from the pyramid of Cheops, and my foot caught in the ribs of a buried man, which I afterwards learned to be a mummy.... [T]he whole plain, from the Pyramids to Cairo, some six or seven miles, is macadamized with dead Egyptians.”

University of South Carolina professor Scott Trafton writes of this passage: “Dorr intrudes violently into a history from which he was being just as violently excluded, and yet he presents his understanding of the racialized issues crunching under his feet as complex and curiously bittersweet.”

It is a pivotal moment. Dorr calls the ancient Egyptians “the ancestors of which [I am] the posterity.... Egypt was a higher sphere of artistical science than any other nation ... the Egyptians ... [were] men with woolly hair, thick lips, flat feet and black.”

Dorr’s horizons have expanded massively. In America, he was enslaved and discriminated against as black. In Europe, he not only encountered social equality, but he was not even seen as black at all. Then Africa presented a social context where Black achievement and Black cultural pride were a norm, and he felt deep affinity.

But extended travel seems also to have undermined Dorr’s debonair persona. The security and enlightenment that Egypt offered exposed a different prejudice, this time against Arabs.

From here, it’s as if something breaks in his resolve. Having devoted more than 180 pages to the journey so far, Dorr rushes through the remainder of his trip in a bad-tempered eight pages.

After a long camel ride across the desert into Palestine, Dorr harrumphs when authorities in Hebron refuse entry to the town’s mosque. Lodged in a Jerusalem convent, he offers a wry, Twain-like comment on the economics of pilgrimage: “They make no charges against a pilgrim, but no pilgrim can come here unless rich, and no rich man will go away without giving something to so sacred a place.” He announces a visit to Bethlehem, but then he describes the tomb of Lazarus and Bethel, which are far in the other direction: Was he lost, or misled? A local guide is “impudent.” Jerusalemites are “ignorant.”

Finally, having stayed 17 days, Dorr leaves Jerusalem, “never wishing to return.” He hurries to Damascus, which he leaves undescribed, before speeding through Lebanon to Acre and then Jaffa, where he—presumably

with Fellowes—departs for home.

Near the end of this rushed sequence comes an apparently minor episode that encapsulates Dorr’s singular style. He wrote: “The same evening I camped at Jericho.... We took a bath in the Jordan [River], and tried some of its water with *eau de vie*, and found it in quality like Mississippi water.”

Centuries of yearning in African American poetry and song evoke a remembrance of “Zion” in exile, often centered on the liberating experience of flowing water. Countless images link biblical baptism with both spiritual and material freedom from enslavement. Here is Dorr, a literal slave, presumably alongside an older man who claims legal ownership over him, surrendering his body to the flowing water of a river that holds profound metaphorical significance for his own culture, religion and political identity—and he calls it merely “taking a bath.”

Then he drinks from the very river of liberation and, with a devastating comparison, anchors his own emancipation to the lives of his readers in America, beside another flowing river. With one line Dorr nods to his white audience, who might grin (or tut) at the irreverence, and simultaneously broadcasts a message of solidarity and hope to African Americans. He also, per-

haps unwittingly, exposes the contradictions within his literary affectation: Dorr, Schueller observes, “claims an authority over the landscape that he, as a Black person with origins in Egypt, [feels he] can claim,” yet he vilifies the Arabs who live there— as much as, presumably, his owner might have done.

If “cool” began with African Americans assuming a front of ironic detachment as a personal rebellion against overwhelming oppression, concealing the emotional impact of injustice behind a persona created to disarm, David Dorr is a pioneer of cool. He asserted his authority to speak, despite enslavement. He shamed American readers by demonstrating the abnormality of what they took as normal. Laconic, funny, literate, sharply observant—and also arrogant and prejudiced—Dorr’s writing speaks as loudly to our century as to his. ☪

## Bathing in the Jordan River, evoked in centuries of African American song and poetry as a metaphor for exile and liberation, Dorr compares it to the Mississippi.



**Matthew Teller** is a UK-based journalist, broadcaster, and documentary-maker for the BBC and other international media. He contributes regularly to *AramcoWorld* and his new book on Jerusalem will be out next year. Follow him on Twitter @matthewteller and at [www.matthewteller.com](http://www.matthewteller.com).



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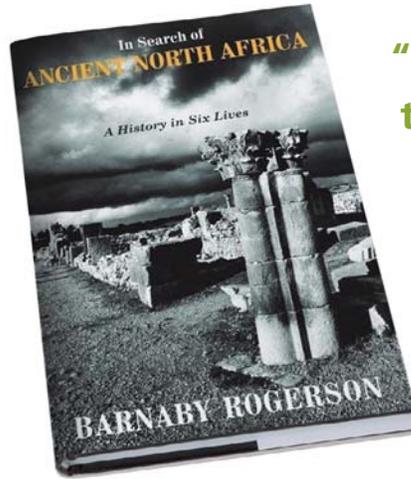
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# REVIEWS

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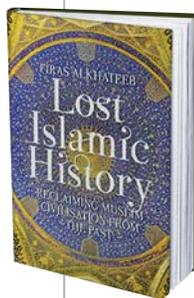
“Neither a history nor a travel book, but a journey into a landscape of ruins to tell the stories of half a dozen individuals whose ... destinies ... still speak to our time.”

### In Search of Ancient North Africa: A History in Six Lives

Barnaby Rogerson. 2017, Haus Publishing, 978-1-90996-154-8, \$29.95 hb.

North Africa is home to some of the most impressive ruins of classical antiquity, and British author Barnaby Rogerson has been visiting (and picnicking at) those sites for the better part of 40 years. “I have watched with annoyance, which has gradually changed into amusement, how many European[s] ... act as if they own the classical part of North Africa,” Rogerson writes—as he presents evidence that clearly shows otherwise. His understanding of these ruins’ geographies informs the illuminating biographical sketches of the prominent North Africans at the core of a book that spans some 1,200 years to the mid-fifth century CE: Queen Dido, King Juba II, Emperor Septimius Severus, St. Augustine, Hannibal and the Berber cavalry commander Massena, who played a key role in Hannibal’s ultimate defeat. Former war photographer Don McCullin’s haunting black-and-white photographs highlight the sites, but sadly, the book lacks maps to help orient the reader on this marvelous journey.

—JOSEPH HAMMOND



### Lost Islamic History: Reclaiming Muslim Civilization from the Past

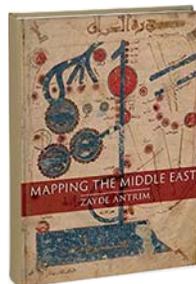
Firas Alkhateeb. 2017, Hurst Publishers, 978-1-84904-689-3, £9.99 pb.

Presenting 1,400 years of Islamic civilization in a comprehensive,

easy-to-follow manner is no small feat. Firas Alkhateeb has been doing that for years as a high-school teacher in Illinois, and he puts those skills to work in *Lost Islamic History*, a revised and updated version of the title originally published in 2014. Alkhateeb pays close attention to the foundation of Islam and the early Caliphate. Elsewhere, he focuses on Muslim accomplishments both in the sciences and in governance, and discusses such topics as philosophy (*fiqh*) and theology (*‘aqaidah*). Sidebars highlight “lost” aspects of Islamic civilization, from the Bengali architect who planned

the Sears Tower in Chicago, to the Islamic school established in China by the Ottomans in 1908. The book is valuable not only for its insights into lesser-known aspects of Islamic history, but also as a general introduction to the subject.

—JOSEPH HAMMOND



### Mapping the Middle East

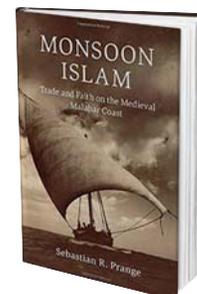
Zayde Antrim. 2018, Reaktion Books, 978-1-78023-850-0, £35 hb.

The earliest surviving paper maps of the Middle East are found in Arabic manuscripts dating to the 11th century CE.

In this analysis of a millennium of cartography of the ever-changing region, Antrim provides welcome insights into the evolving function and meaning of its maps. This detailed and lavishly illustrated volume spans the “realm of Islam” (11th–16th centuries), where maps served more as memory aids than accurate geographical representa-

tion: Ottoman mapping traditions; European colonial mapping; and 20th-century national mapping. It shows that from the start—well before the birth of nationalism—citizens imagined land in relation to aspects of belonging. While early Islamic maps bear little resemblance to modern maps, over the centuries people in the Middle East deliberately chose what, how and why to express this sense of “home” via maps. Academic yet highly readable, this book presents the history behind the maps.

—GRAHAM CHANDLER



### Monsoon Islam: Trade and Faith on the Medieval Malabar Coast

Sebastian R. Prange. 2018, Cambridge UP, 978-1-10842-438-7, \$120 hb.

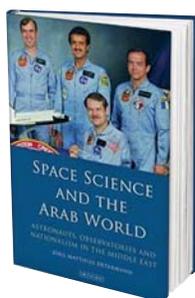
Western scholars of Islam and its myriad civilizations have

long qualified the religion by many geographical and cultural subheadings: African Islam, folk



Islam, urban Islam, or the like. This is the first academic attempt to analyze Islam through the lens of a weather pattern. Prange looks at India's Malabar Coast, *bilad al-filfil* (land of pepper), so named by Arab merchants who arrived on the monsoon trade winds beginning even before the first Islamic century. He argues that Islamic expression there and at the far ends of all its commercial traces on the Indian Ocean littoral is a synthesis explained by the seasonality of these traders' arrivals and departures, permanent settlements, and their commercial and personal interactions among Hindu and fellow Muslim South Indians. By all readings, Prange's analysis is a success.

—LOUIS WERNER



**Space Science and the Arab World: Astronauts, Observatories and Nationalism in the Middle East**

Jörg Matthias Determann. 2018, I.B. Tauris, 978-1-78831-014-7, \$95 hb.

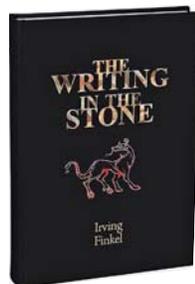
Arab-Islamic contributions to astronomy in the

Middle Ages (8th–14th centuries) were crucial antecedents to the European scientific revolution that led to what we know as space science. This meticulously researched book contends that today's Arab involvement in space science is a fresh, integral part of a modern enterprise blending nationalism with globalism. The cover illustration highlights the 1985 space-shuttle flight of Saudi Prince Sultan bin Salman—the first Arab and Muslim space traveler. But there is much more, with the region's first modern astronomers, including Syrians Yakub Sarruf and Faris Nimr, emerging in the 19th century. Links between us East Coast universities and newer Mideast institutions led to the expansion of astronomical science in the Arab world, and knowledge sharing aided growth of Arab space science. By the 20th century, Arab astronomers were once again contributing to world knowledge. Shadia Habbal of Damascus University became a recognized expert on solar wind. Farouk El-Baz of Egypt trained Apollo 11 astronauts for their historic moon landing, and more.

—ROBERT W. LEBLING

into the controversies surrounding those discoveries and weigh the theories spun from them; we wind up in the Troy of today with a broad understanding of how and why ancient lives and literatures affect us still. Travelers to the site of Troy need this book in their backpacks. For everyone else staying at home, reading this volume is the next best thing to being there.

—FRANK L. HOLT



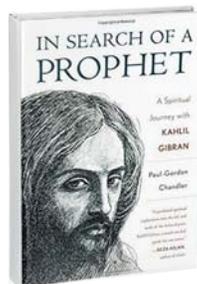
**The Writing in the Stone**

Irving Finkel. 2017, Medina Publishing, 978-1-91148-720-3, £20 hb., £11.99 pb.

As assistant keeper of ancient Mesopotamian script, languages and cultures in the British Museum's Near

East Department, Irving Finkel is skilled at deciphering ancient cuneiform. He is also good at weaving stories around it. In his latest piece of fiction, he gives us a macabre tale centered on the lead interpreter of inscriptions in a court in Nineveh that closely resembles that of a real Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE). The story begins when the interpreter (called the First Exorcist) receives an inscribed stone he cannot read, and in a bid to gain understanding, sets out on a trail of murder and mayhem. Obscure incantations raise the dead, a golden needle leads to agony and certain death. No one is safe. This erudite but easy-to-read book introduces us to a world where demons and dragons lurk around every corner, animated by a character who, the reader is bound to hope, never really existed.

—JANE WALDRON GRUTZ



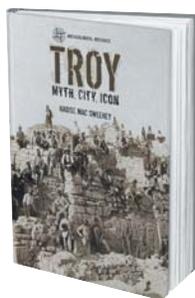
**In Search of a Prophet: A Spiritual Journey with Kahlil Gibran**

Paul-Gordon Chandler. 2017, Rowman & Littlefield, 978-1-53810-427-9, \$19.95 hb.

Paul-Gordon Chandler takes

readers on a fascinating journey across three continents as he explores the life, works and spirituality of Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931), the elusive author of *The Prophet*. Published in 1923, Gibran's most famous work has been translated into 40 languages, sold more than 100 million copies and inspired millions of readers around the globe. Yet Gibran, who once explained, "My life is a life interior," is far less known. Chandler exposes that interior life as he retraces Gibran's footprints from his birthplace in the mountains of Bsharri, Lebanon, to the tenements of Boston where he, his mother and three siblings lived after immigrating to the us in 1895, to Paris and New York, where he emerged as an influential author, artist and poet. Full of contemporary links to Gibran (who knew that Elvis Presley could recite *The Prophet* by heart?), *In Search of a Prophet* underscores the timelessness of Gibran's vision of a shared humanity that crosses all cultural and religious divides.

—PINEY KESTING

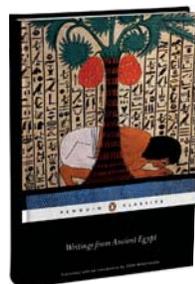


**Troy: Myth, City, Icon**

Naoise Mac Sweeney. 2018, Bloomsbury Academic, 978-1-47252-937-4, £19.99 pb.

No one, not even Homer, has ever tried to tell the whole story of Troy, but this slim

volume comes incredibly close. The author guides us briskly through 5,000 years of fact, fiction and folklore. We walk the ruins of the city at the southeastern end of the Dardanelles in today's Turkey in each of its physical iterations; we witness layer by layer the excavations of Heinrich Schliemann and others; we wade



**Writings from Ancient Egypt**

Toby Wilkinson, tr. and intro. 2017, Penguin Classics, 978-0-14139-595-1, \$17 pb.

Ancient Egypt was awash in writing, from the surfaces of its monuments to its reams of papyri.

Yet "the impenetrability" of ancient Egyptian script (hieroglyphs)—fully deciphered only two centuries ago—largely restricted its meaning to scholars. This title offers general readers access to myriad selections

from the "surprisingly rich and varied corpus" of ancient Egyptian writing. Here are stories of adventure as well as dramatic accounts of battles, practical advice, and windows into "the world of everyday life under the pharaohs." Twelfth Dynasty (second century BCE) maxims remind us that "there is no job without a boss," that "hippos are grievous" for the farmer, and that "friends are a well-watered field, greater than riches." Via edict, the 14th-century BCE pharaoh Horemheb sought to "drive out chaos and destroy falsehood." This is an engaging and entertaining encounter with the distant past—one that sometimes seems to mirror the present.

—TOM VERDE



**Koum Tara: Chaâbi, Jazz and Strings**

Karim Maurice, Sid-Ahmed

Belksier, La Camerata. 2018, Odradek Records, 859024006006, \$15.59 cd.

This groundbreaking ensemble breathes new life into one of North Africa's most appealing popular traditions, Algerian *chaâbi*. Vocalist and mandole player Sid-Ahmed Belksier came of age in the Algerian port city of Oran, steeped in passionate works of chaâbi's great singers. Here, he collaborates with acclaimed French pianist and composer Karim Maurice, who brings the freedom and openness of jazz improvisation and even the subtle swing of Afro-Cuban music and traces of flamenco to chaâbi classics like "Ya Kalek Lechia" ("Creator of All Things"), with its poetic lyrics of yearning and repentance. And there's more. A string quartet drawn from Gaël Rassaert's larger ensemble, La Camerata, adds richness and heft to these exquisite arrangements. Maurice's piano breaks are consistently crisp and eloquent, and at times he works in synthesizer elements, as on the earthy chaâbi folk melody "Koum Tara" ("Stand and Behold Beauty"), which opens with the lobe of mambo, and ends in a dreamy swirl of electronica—cross-cultural fusion at its best.

—BANNING EYRE



# EVENTS

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## CURRENT / JANUARY

**The Progressive Revolution:** *Modern Art for a New India* is a result of the Progressive Artists' Group, which formed after India's declaration of independence in 1947. It examines the founding ideology of the Progressives and explores the ways artists from different social, cultural and religious backgrounds found common cause at a time of massive political and social upheaval. Works in the exhibition—spectacular paintings from the 1940s to 1990s—underscore how these artists gave visual form to the idea of India as a secular, heterogeneous, international and united society. Asia Society, **New York**, through January 20.

**Rasheed Araeen:** *A Retrospective* is the first comprehensive survey of the artist's work, which spans more than 60 years. Staged across BAL-TIC's Level 3 and Level 2 galleries, the exhibition presents work that profoundly influenced generations of artists, writers and thinkers. It is structured across five chapters: the artist's early experiments in painting in Karachi in the 1950s and early 1960s; the geometric structures he produced after arriving in London in 1964; key pieces from the 1970s and 1980s following Araeen's political awakening; his nine-panel cruciform works from the 1980s and 1990s; and a selection of his new geometric paintings and wall structures. BAL-TIC Centre for Contemporary Art, **Newcastle, UK**, through January 27.

## CURRENT / APRIL

**The Far Shore:** *Navigating Homelands* features five Arab American visual artists with new work responding to five Arab American poets, all dealing with themes of displacement and survival. The exhibition coincides with the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, and the beginning of a period of great colonialist upheaval in the Arab world. It is also particularly poignant in America's current political climate, where the ways and means of dealing with migrants is a topic of headlines and debate. Arab American National Museum, **Dearborn, Michigan**, through April 7.



Exhibition view of the Albukhary Gallery at the British Museum.

**The Albukhary Gallery.** This new gallery in the British Museum, underwritten by the Malaysia-based Albukhary Foundation, draws the Islamic world from the periphery to the center, in terms of the museum's magnificent collection itself and as a principle of display that emphasizes mutual influences among cultures around and within it. Visually it has been brilliantly arranged, largely by curators of Islamic Art Venetia Porter and Ladan Akbaria, to demonstrate the longstanding interconnectedness of the world through trade and cultural contacts—globalization before the word was coined. This emphasis on contact and bridge-building is a key feature of the Albukhary Foundation itself, which will be lending special displays from the Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur. The fact the gallery will be changing and evolving is an incentive to revisit.

Although the space is not very great, the design of the cases and the lighting are admirable, enabling the visitor to be immersed in one particular geographical area or to follow a chronological progression through the displays.

As a result, the rooms can be visited for purely esthetic pleasure or to learn about the geography and history of Islam. Textiles are particularly well represented and will be changed regularly for reasons of conservation, and state-of-the-art lighting has made it possible to display treasures previously considered too fragile for presentation. Music and stories accessed using headphones add further context, and terminals with audiovisual displays make it possible to explore in greater depth.

Beautiful as it is, the gallery is not simply another display of masterpieces. Rather, by demonstrating lines of development, it also draws on the museum's ethnographic collection to set luxury objects alongside more modest possessions enjoyed by ordinary people: an artfully shaped water jug, for instance; an embroidered towel; a carved comb. These greatly increase the sense of reaching across centuries to connect with their former owners. **British Museum, London.**

—CAROLINE STONE



## CURRENT / MARCH

**The Dancing Soweï:** *Performing Beauty in Sierra Leone* focuses on one spectacular work in the Cantor's collection—a *soweï* mask, used in dance by the senior women of the women-only Sande Society. The *soweï* mask symbolizes knowledge of feminine grace, and is part of a girl's initiation into adulthood. Thus, for many women of the region, beauty is literally performed into existence through *ndoli soweï* (the dancing *soweï*, or the *soweï* mask in performance). Taking an in-depth look at a *soweï*'s esthetic expressions of elegance, from its serene gaze of inner spirituality to the corpulent neck rolls that signify health and wealth, the exhibition explores beauty as defined and danced by women. Cantor Art Center, **Stanford, California**, through March 2.

## CURRENT / MAY

**A Century in Flux:** *Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation* is a long-term exhibition that features a selection of key modernist paintings, sculptures and mixed-media artworks from the Barjeel collection, known for its inclusion of significant 20th-century art from across the region. The exhibition covers a century of artistic production in the Arab region and its diaspora, beginning in the late 19th century. **Sharjah Art Museum, UAE**, through May 30.

## COMING / JANUARY

**Syrian Migration Series:** *An Exhibition by Helen Zughaib*. In her most recent work, Zughaib creates a series of paintings inspired by the narrative paintings of Jacob Lawrence's Migration series from 1940–1941, a visual record of the great migration of African Americans from the south to the north. In her *Syrian Migration Series*, Zughaib begins with the initial uprisings of the Arab Spring and its aftermath, the Syrian civil war and the subsequent displacement of millions of people, and the following refugee crisis that continues to affect the Arab world, Europe and the US. Gallery al-Quds, **Washington D.C.**, January 25 through February 28.

**Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time** *Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa* challenges the colonial stereotype of "timeless Africa," a continent cut off from the dynamics of history. This is the first major exhibition to take stock of the material culture of early trans-Saharan trade and to offer strong evidence of the central but little-recognized role Africa played in global medieval history. Among the materials on view are sculptures, jewelry, household and luxury objects, manuscripts and architectural remnants, all united by their connections to routes of exchange across the Sahara from the eighth to the 16th century. **Northwestern University** Block

Museum of Art, **Evanston, Illinois**, January 26 through June 21.

## COMING / MARCH

**Art Dubai 2019** features Art Dubai Contemporary, Art Dubai Modern, the second edition of Residents and Bawwaba ("Gateway"), a new section to the fair that presents 10 solo presentations showcasing works created within the last year or conceived specifically for the fair. For the past decade, the Art Dubai Group has played a key role in the Emirate's journey toward becoming a leading global destination for arts and design by producing internationally recognized annual art and design fairs and festivals: Art Dubai, Downtown Design, Art Week and Dubai Design Week. These collaborative ventures highlight a broad program of creative and cultural events and programming across Dubai, the UAE and beyond. Together, the Art Dubai Group-run fairs and festivals help shine the international spotlight on Dubai and position the city as an international destination of culture. Various locations, **Dubai**, March 20 through 23.

**Alexandria International Book Fair** continues the realization of a dream of Alexandrian intellectuals that came true after the inauguration of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in 2002: an international book fair in the city historically renowned for its library. The fair has since succeeded in drawing attention to the city with

a vibrant cultural stir that increases each year. A section selling old and used books has been added to cater to young people seeking inexpensive books. Bibliotheca Alexandrina, **Alexandria, Egypt**, March 25 through April 7.

## PERMANENT

**Traum und Trauma: Reopening of the Carpet Halls at the Museum für Islamische Kunst.** Carpets reflecting Islamic cultures are also integral to European cultural history. As a testimony to the ongoing exchange between Europe and the Middle East, they form a focal point in the permanent exhibition of the Museum für Islamische Kunst (Museum of Islamic Art). Displayed in refurbished exhibition halls, the colorful rugs invite visitors to experience the origins and history of the collection with all their senses. The exhibition shows some of the oldest collection pieces, from the former property of museum founder Wilhelm von Bode, up to current acquisitions. **Pergamonmuseum, Berlin**.

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