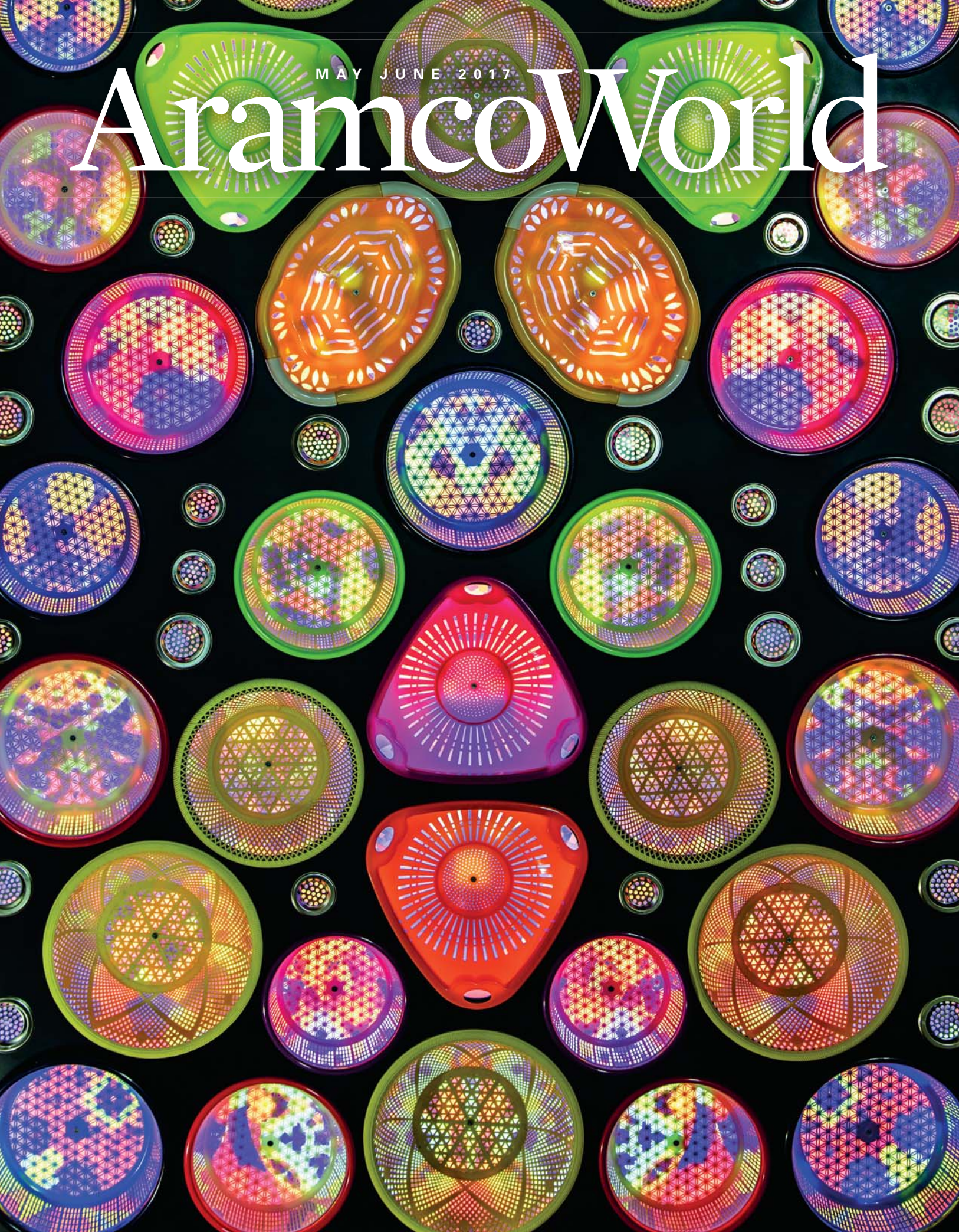


MAY JUNE 2017

AramcoWorld





4 Ambassadors of Art

Written by Piney Kesting

Images courtesy of CULTURUNNERS

When the Museum of Art at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, hosted “Phantom Punch,” it marked the fourth show in a multi-year, multi-city exhibition tour of the United States by an eclectic group of some two dozen artists from Saudi Arabia, where over the past decade, a once-marginal contemporary art scene has become one of the world’s fastest-growing creative movements. Thought-provoking, socially engaged and at times whimsical and even satirical, the works vary from painting and rubber stamps to sculpture, assemblage, photography, video, calligraphy, performance and installation pieces. All share what one curator calls as “an honest need for explanation, an exploration of the world we live in and a desire to understand.”

14 The Silent Silk Road Rendezvous of Konye Urgench

Written by Louis Werner

Abandoned for more than 300 years following its eclipse by competing cities, the remnants of a once-flourishing capital of a once-powerful Silk Roads realm remind us of centuries of craftsmanship and scholarship in one of Central Asia’s most intact historical sites.

 Online CLASSROOM GUIDE

 2 FIRSTLOOK *Photograph by Photoglob Zürich*

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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: Detail from “Heaven’s Doors” by Rashed Al-Shashai shows the artist’s use of simple plastic kitchen strainers to reference stained glass. “Art has to be playful and colorful for people to grasp the essence of it and interact,” says the 40-year-old artist who lives in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia.

Back Cover: Hands big and small indulge in desserts near the end of the iftar potluck that includes, in addition to food, ghost stories, games, intergenerational cooking lessons and, for American Independence day, small backyard fireworks. Photo by Johnny Hanson.



22 I Witness History: I, of the Storm

Written by Frank Holt

Illustrated by Norman MacDonald

"You have marveled at me since beyond memory, at once dreading the flash of my blinding light and eager for my return. My brilliance was recorded and sung about; my rumbles of warnings, in pithy Latin on a North African stone inscribed—'FVLGVR CONDITV'—'Lightening was buried here.'"

28 Iftar Potluck Baltimore

Written by Laila Haddad

Photographed by Johnny Hanson

In a suburb of Baltimore, Maryland, 15 families with origins across the world gather in the author's backyard for iftar, the evening meal breaking the day-long fast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. It's an American-style potluck, and each family brings not only food from homelands and traditions, but also stories and recipes. "Iftars are to me very much a party," says Francesca Pagan, who has prepared an Italian stew of escarole and beans. "Food is one of those things that you do without during the day so you can get spiritually closer to God, but the reward of enjoying it after the sunset takes it to a whole new level."

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5039. P. Z. CONSTANTINOPLE. Kara-Keui et vue de Péra



FIRSTLOOK

Galata Bridge, circa 1890

*Photochrom 6039,
Photoglob Zürich /
Library of Congress*

"Constantinople: Kara-Keui et vue de Péra" reads the caption for this skillfully colored view of late-Ottoman Istanbul, a city connecting East and West and driven by global commerce and trade, at a time when the advances of the Industrial Revolution in fields including photographic processes were connecting people as never before.

The view looks north, across the city's most famous bridge, to the neighborhoods of Karaköy and Pera, topped by the Galata Tower. To the left of the bridge, the Golden Horn waters teem with sundry watercraft; to the right, smoke rises from the stacks of oceangoing steamships. Other details of daily life can be seen, too: horse-drawn carriages; numbered buses; a gas streetlight; a pole for telegraph wires; an open-air shop; decorative roofs.

Photochrom images like this one offered "the truthfulness of a photograph with the color and richness of an oil painting," according to the catalog of The Detroit Photographic Company. The photochrom was created by a "direct photographic transfer of an original negative onto litho and chromographic printing plates," stated Hans Jakob Schmid, the Swiss printer who developed the process.

Each image originated with a single black-and-white plate or negative. From it up to 15 separations were made, each for a separate color, on lithographic limestone coated with a light-sensitive surface that was pressed against a reversed halftone of the negative and exposed to daylight. It could take as long as a day to produce a single image, but the result could be mass produced in books and postcards at a time when color photography was not yet commercially viable.





Ambassadors

of

ART



Suspended in the atrium of the Minnesota Street Project in San Francisco as part of the "Genera#ion: Contemporary Art from Saudi Arabia" exhibit, Manal Al-Dowayan's 2014 "Tree of Guardians" at once imitates foliage in descent and reflects family history, capturing curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist's postulation that "The future is built out of fragments of the past." Right: Visitors view Ahmad Angawi's 2013 "Wijha 2:148 and everyone has a direction to which he should turn," focusing on the past and present of Makkah's Great Mosque, at the "Parallel Kingdom" exhibit in Houston's Station Museum.

ABOVE, MAIN: STEPHANIE MEYERS



Nestled along the Androscoggin River in central Maine, the former mill town of Lewiston is not a place that usually comes to mind for groundbreaking international art exhibits.

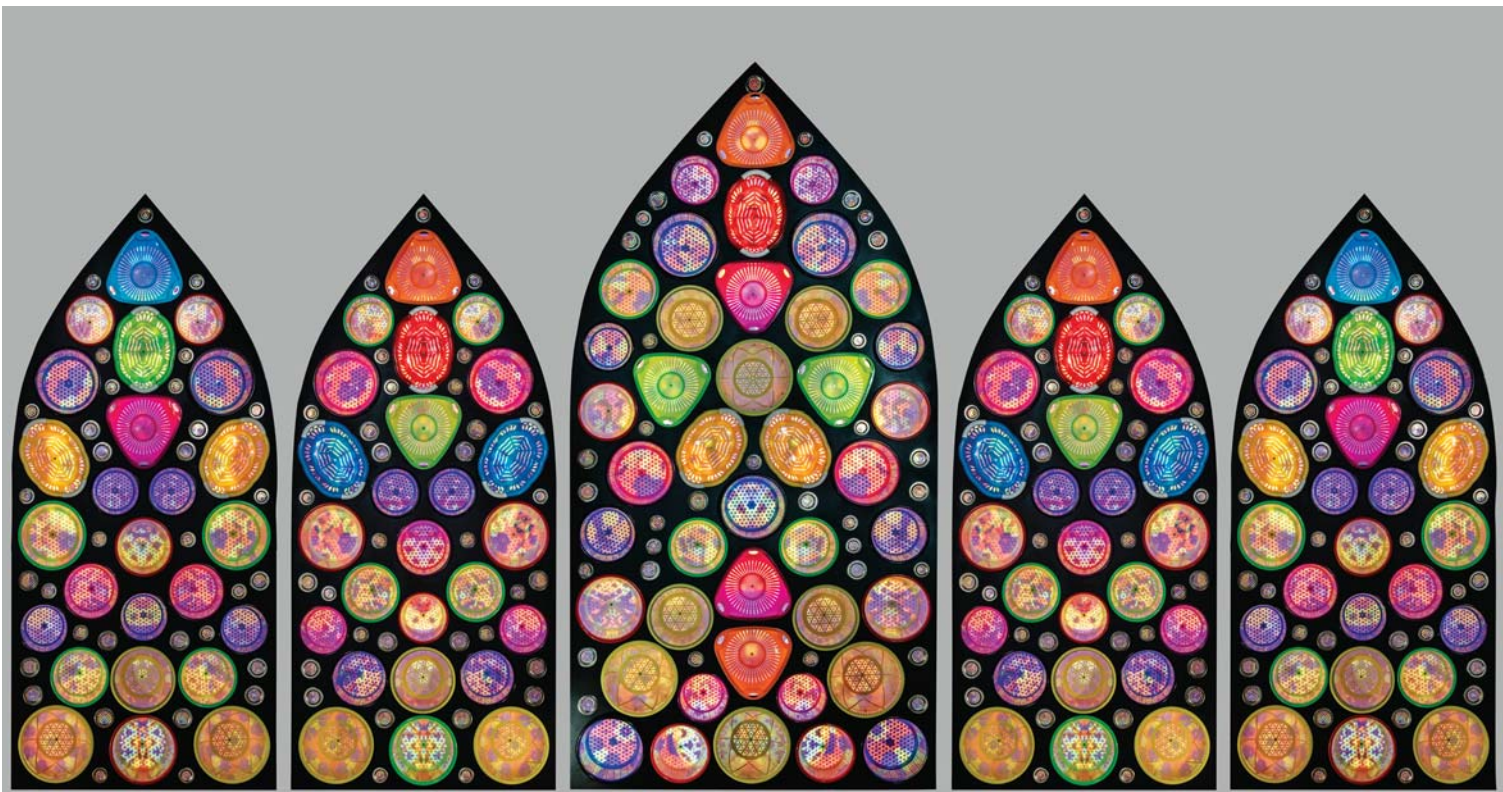
Written by **PINEY KESTING**

Images courtesy of **CULTURUNNERS**

But in late October the Museum of Art on the Bates College campus in Lewiston joined Houston, Aspen and San Francisco as the fourth venue for another version of a two-year, multi-city touring exhibition introducing Saudi Arabia's contemporary art to the United States. Organized by CULTURUNNERS, an international platform for traveling artists, in partnership with Riyadh-based Gharem Studio, the tour is sponsored by the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

Less than 15 years ago, such an exhibit—let alone a national tour—would have been unthinkable, except perhaps in the hopes of a small group of young artists, poets and writers at al-Meftaha Arts Village in the mountainous region of 'Asir in southwestern Saudi Arabia. Built by then-Governor of 'Asir Prince Khalid Al-Faisal, the cluster of two-story buildings with 20 studios was a creative oasis at a time when Saudi Arabia offered artists no institutional support, no official art education in schools and no specialized colleges or art museums, and only a handful of private galleries.

"It was the right place at the right time," says Ahmed Mater, who had one of the studios at al-Meftaha, as did fellow artist Abdalnasser Gharem. Today, Mater, 38, and



Assembled from everyday kitchenware such as plastic colanders, Rashed Al-Shashai's 2013 "Heaven's Doors" effuses color, emulating stained glass windows and acting as "a spiritual cleanser of the soul," says the artist. Lower: Ahmad Angawi's 2012 "Street Pulse," shown at "Phantom Punch," comprises 3,600 microphones and draws on the artist's assertion that dialogue develops community.

Ghareem, 44, are two of the most acclaimed and internationally recognized contemporary artists in Saudi Arabia. Their years at al-Meftaha as part of a small activist artists' group, along with a crucial encounter in 2003 with British artist and traveler Stephen Stapleton, helped launch the contemporary Saudi art scene onto national and world stages.

"They had a group called Shatta ['to be broken up, dismantled' in Arabic] and we had a group called Offscreen," recalls Stapleton. "We were traveling artists who wanted to change the world, and Shatta wanted to change the art scene in Saudi—give a voice where there wasn't one and champion creativity," he explains.

Later that year, the trio founded Edge of Arabia, the first independent art initiative in Saudi Arabia. "The role of the artist was so important at that time," emphasizes Ghareem, "and we wanted to make our stories heard." Stapleton explains that Edge of Arabia helped to gradually bring "artists, governments, media and Western institutions to the same table."

The year 2003 turned out to be significant in the Saudi contemporary art movement in another way as it also saw the founding of Art Jameel, now a leading regional institution supporting exhibits, awards and arts education. In 2008 in London, Edge of Arabia put on the first international exhibit of contemporary art from Saudi Arabia.

Other initiatives, galleries, exhibitions and art-education programs began to emerge, such as those piloted by Art Jameel from 2013 to 2015 in Jiddah schools. The Saudi Arts Council was established in 2014 to "cultivate the local art scene, encourage interest in arts and culture in the region and establish connections to the international art world." It now offers the

new generation exposure through its annual "21,39" exhibition each February around Jiddah.

The role and status of artists moved ahead on the world stage again in 2011, when sisters Shadia and Raja Alem represented Saudi Arabia in its first-ever pavilion at the Venice Biennale—a powerful affirmation of the emergence of artists as confident spokespeople representing a fast-evolving cultural landscape.

"Contemporary art is a wonderful ambassador," says Loring Danforth, Charles A. Dana Professor of Anthropology at Bates College and, with Museum of Art Director Dan Mills, co-curator of the Lewiston exhibit. Inspired by the recent art he had seen during a trip to Saudi Arabia, Danforth approached Mills in 2014. "I realized when I looked at the materials he left for me to review that I knew virtually nothing about contemporary Saudi artists," explains Mills. "That's always a great starting point for me to take on a project."

On October 28, "Phantom Punch: Contem-



porary Art from Saudi Arabia in Lewiston” opened with the work of 18 Saudi artists, six of whom flew from Saudi Arabia to attend: Ahmed Mater, Arwa Al-Neami, Ahmad Angawi, Nouf Al-Himiary, Musaed Al-Hulis and Rashed Al-Shashai.

For the viewers, neither “contemporary” nor “art” were words conventionally associated with Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, area residents, Bates College students, faculty and other guests packed the museum’s auditorium that evening to hear Mater talk about the movement. Every seat was taken, with students sitting on the floor in the aisles and latecomers standing two-deep in the back. “I was delighted there were so many people,” says Danforth. “For me the ultimate was when visitors could interact directly with the artists.”

For most attend-

ing that evening, “Phantom Punch” was their first look at a thought-provoking, often whimsical and frequently confrontational world. It was a side of Saudi Arabia most had never imagined existed.

Hanging near the gallery entrance was Mater’s stark, blue-and-black “Evolution of Man,” which comments on the role of oil in Saudi Arabia by using X-ray imagery that also evokes the artist’s medical practice. Next to it was “Leaves Fall in All Seasons,” the US debut of his video that depicts the



Left: At the “Phantom Punch” exhibit, Musaed Al-Hulis engages Tariq Al-Ghamdi, director of the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, about Al-Hulis’s work, “Dynamic,” a prayer rug made of motorcycle chains. *Lower:* Artist Nugamshi creates a “calligraffiti” performance. “I’m searching for a contemporary spirit within the Arabic language,” he says.



ARTHUR FINK; LOWER AND OPPOSITE: RENE FROY

Get to know *the* ARTISTS



Ahmed Mater, 38

“Art is a catalyst for social progress,” states Mater, who emerged at the forefront of the Saudi contemporary art movement in 2005, when the British Museum acquired his painting “X-Ray 2003.” In-

spired by his mother who was a calligrapher and a painter of traditional houses in ‘Asir, Mater, a practicing physician, uses his work to reflect heritage, faith and science. Co-founder of Pharan.Studio in Jiddah, Mater exhibits internationally. “We are citizens of the world,” he says. “We need to think global but act local.”



Abdunasser Gharem, 44

“The job of an artist is to create a platform where people can start a dialogue, and the subjects I choose come from our daily life,” comments Gharem, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Saudi Army who has become known for his thought-provoking works that challenge the norm. Gharem catapulted to fame following the April 2011 auction of his sculptural

installation “Message/Messenger,” which sold at Christie’s in Dubai for \$842,500—the highest price ever paid for a work by a living Arab artist. A devoted advocate of arts education, he dedicated the entire proceeds to establishing Gharem Studio in Riyadh to support a new generation of artists.



Nouf Al-Himiary, 25

“Artistic expression has always been natural to me since I was a little girl,” explains Jiddah-based Al-Himiary, one of the youngest artists in the tour of contemporary Saudi art in the us. Her love of drawing gave way in middle school to a passion for photography, which has become her medium for exploring female identity and the status

of women in Saudi Arabia. “My platform is the Internet. There is so much room for discussion and for opportunities to connect with, be inspired by and work with people you never thought would be possible.”



Nugamshi, 35

“I am always trying to use my artwork to raise questions, not answers,” says Nugamshi. A Gharem Studio artist who works by day as a graphic designer, he makes innovative use of calligraphy and typography to move traditional Arabic calligraphic

forms into more experimental, modern arenas. “One day I saw my mother cleaning her room with a broom, and that inspired me to use the same tool for my calligraphy.”



Arwa Al-Neami, 30

A photographer and videographer raised in Khamis Mushait, a city in the southern province of ‘Asir, Al-Neami joined al-Meftaha Arts Village in 2000. Known for her astute and contemplative

photographic commentaries on the status of women in the Kingdom, Al-Neami has exhibited her work in Saudi Arabia, England and the us. In 2005 she won the Kingdom’s Southern Regions Arts Award, and she mentors young female artists at Pharan.Studios, which she co-founded with Ahmed Mater.



Ahmad Angawi, 35

“I grew up surrounded by a love of history and tradition,” says Angawi, a prolific and multidisciplinary artist from Jiddah who describes himself as a local artist who is part of a global message. With a degree in industrial design from New York’s Pratt Institute, he currently wears many hats as associate director of the firm

Amar Architecture and Designs in Jiddah, program director of The House of Traditional Arts in Jiddah’s historic al-Balad district and a consultant at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST).



Shaweesh, 28

“My dream is to have my name be synonymous with the new generation of Saudi art,” writes Shaweesh, a self-taught street artist based in Riyadh who is creative director at Gharem Studio,

as well as art director and creative director at Telfaz11, where videos and shows have drawn international recognition as well as more than 1 billion YouTube views. Borrowing from politics and pop culture, he digitally inserts cartoon heroes into copies of old newspapers documenting historic events in the Middle East, blurring lines among history, fantasy and science fiction.



Sarah Abu Abdallah, 27

Born and raised in Qatif, in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, Abu Abdallah works primarily with performance art, video and film to explore gender issues in Saudi

Arabia and create narratives of displacement, belonging and identity. A 2011 graduate of the University of Sharjah in the UAE, she is currently working on a master's degree in digital media at the Rhode Island School of Design. Since 2013 she has been a featured artist at the Sharjah Biennial and the Venice Biennale, in addition to having participated at other international exhibitions.



Rashed Al-Shashai, 40

“Art has to be playful and colorful for people to grasp the essence of it and interact with it,” comments Al-Shashai, a thought he exemplifies in “Heaven’s Doors,” an installation made of dozens of colorful kitchen colanders and baskets that, when lit from behind, create an illusion of five brilliant stained glass windows. Born in al-Baha in ‘Asir and currently residing in Jiddah, Al-Shashai is an arts educator, a conceptual artist and a founding member of both the Saudi Fine Arts Society and the Art Education Society, as well as a mentor.

“It was very interesting to hear Arwa talk about how she views the way women have fun in Saudi Arabia,” explains Keenan Shields, a third-year anthropology major at Bates. “I’ve really enjoyed hearing directly from the artists what they are thinking about or struggling with as they make these pieces,” he adds.



Musaed Al-Hulis, 44

Al-Hulis’s technical education shows in the variety of mechanical materials and electrical objects in his artwork. At first glance a typical prayer rug, “Dynamic” instead is made of heavy, interlocking motorcycle chains, arguably implying the power of the connection between the individual and God during prayer. Al-Hulis has a master’s degree in design and analysis of vehicle systems from the University of Huddersfield, UK, and he lectures at the Jiddah College of Technology. He is also a board member at the Fine Artist’s House and founder and director of Tasami Creative Lab.

“Art is an invitation to look deeply,” says Nouf Al-Himiary, whose three photographs on display from her series *From the Desire to Not Exist* depict a woman wearing a prayer shawl submerged underwater. A graduate of Effat University in Jiddah, 25-year-old Al-Himiary is the youngest artist in the exhibit. “The purpose of showing this art from my side of the world is to show that these feelings of alienation and isolation are universal,” she explains. “It humanizes people who are very different from you.”

Throughout the gallery, from Sarah Abu Abdallah’s video showing herself methodically painting a junked car bright pink, to Rashed Al-Shashai’s brilliantly colorful “Heavens Doors,” to the video accompanying Ajlan Gharem’s “Paradise Has Many Gates,” varied media itself was one of the surprises for visitors. Along with installation art, videos, sculpture, photography, calligraphy and even animated cartoons in the series *Masameer*, there were looped video segments from the wildly popular, Riyadh-based online entertainment group Telfaz11, which has over a billion views and 9 million subscribers.



Ajlan Gharem, 32

“Discussion between the artwork, not just the artists, and the audience is a new idea in Saudi,” says Ajlan Gharem. “This new dialogue is creating a space of knowledge.” Co-founder of Gharem Studio in Riyadh with his older brother Abdulnasser, Ajlan divides his time between his job as a math teacher at a public school and his work in the studio, where he explores the relationships between the individual and society. “The older generation has more beliefs than knowledge, and our generation has more knowledge than beliefs,” emphasizes Ajlan. “So we are trying to find beliefs that can be harmonized with our knowledge.”

Maine-based writer Kay Campbell, a former resident of Saudi Arabia, enjoyed the “many layers of playful irony found in all the works.” Events like this, she says, “bust stereotypes in an instant” because through the

recent construction boom in Makkah. On the floor lay Musaed Al-Hulis’s “Dynamic,” a small prayer rug made out of motorcycle chains. Dominating the center of the room was a large black ball made of 3,600 microphones, called “Street Pulse,” by Ahmad Angawi.

“I always want to create objects and art that help people with their lives and make a difference,” says Angawi. Each microphone, he explains, contains recorded memories and life stories from Jiddah residents, collected from microphones he put up around the city. “No one took them down, or even disturbed them,” he recalls, laughing.

A large screen hung from the ceiling displayed Arwa Al-Neami’s video of Saudi women driving bumper cars in an amusement park. Titled “Never Never Land,” its audio mingled with the evocative, haunting background music of Abdulnasser Gharem’s video “Al-Siraat (The Path),” which played at the back of the gallery.

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“The first time I saw Saudi art, I was as shocked as anyone else,” comments João Inada, a Brazilian videographer who works with CULTURUNNERS. “I think it’s very bold. It’s an art that does not hold back,” he emphasizes. “It’s big, it’s eloquent, it works with beautiful colors, and it uses as inspiration something very foreign to me, which is their lifestyle, their ideas of cities and their idea of social congregation,” he adds. “I find a lot of constructive criticism in their work rather than blunt demands and insults, which many Western artists use to try and shock rather than engage in a conversation.”

Maine-based writer Kay Campbell, a former resident of Saudi Arabia, enjoyed the “many layers of playful irony found in all the works.” Events like this, she says, “bust stereotypes in an instant” because through the

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Top: Video still from "Never Never Land," 2014, by Arwa Al-Neami; Middle: Video still from "Al Siraat (The Path)," 2007, by Abdulnasser Gharem; Bottom: Video installation by Telfaz11, the online video network group based in Riyadh, at the "Gonzo Arabia" exhibition in Aspen, Colorado.



work "you see the many dimensions of Saudi culture."

Saudi Arabia has "a lot more color to it for a country with so much desert," observes Jochamo McDowell, 11, one of the youngest visitors.

"Saudi is a thriving world of creative spirits," comments his father, Ephraim McDowell, an artist who has lived and worked in the Gulf region. "So I'm not surprised in the least by this art, but I think most Americans would be."

"Leading Saudi artists exhibiting in the us did not surprise me," notes Lewiston resident Polly Robinson, who with her husband, Paul, lived in Riyadh for more than 25 years. "However, a major Saudi exhibit coming to Lewiston was quite an unexpected bonus. To stage a Saudi exhibit not only in major cities but in small-town America serves to showcase how art speaks to all." Her husband describes the artists as the "equivalent of diplomats."

Museum Director Mills explains that keeping the show on view until March 18 allowed the college to straddle two semesters. "This way," says Mills, "there were twice as many opportunities to integrate the exhibition and the visiting artists into the Bates College curriculum."

In addition, field trips arrived from the nearby middle and high schools. "I think every eighth grader that goes to the [local] middle schools came to the exhibit twice," Mills says. On top of that, artists visited college classes, accompanied local students and their teachers on guided tours of the exhibit and reached out into the community by visiting after-school programs at Tree Street Youth in downtown Lewiston.

These community programs were essential, says Manar AlDhwila, who coordinates art exhibits for the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture. Through them artists connected with as many visitors as possible on a personal basis, "a peer-to-peer platform for alternative discourse and cultural empathy," she says.

"Saudi artists have one thing in common," she emphasizes, "and that is their powerful and boundless artistic expression. As such, they are viewed as the cultural ambassadors of today's Saudi Arabia, both in the Kingdom and abroad."

The first step in planning the ambitious two-year tour, notes Stapleton, began with seeking out places in the us that tie into the themes in the show and with the art in "unlikely ways." After meeting with Danforth and Mills in 2014, Lewiston seemed to fit. Particularly intriguing



“The older generation has more beliefs than knowledge, and our generation has more knowledge than beliefs. So we’re trying to find beliefs that can be harmonized with our knowledge,” artist Ajlan Gharem says about his 2015 work, “Paradise Has Many Gates,” which was shown during the “Parallel Kingdom” exhibit at Houston’s Station Museum.

to Stapleton was the town’s adjustment to an influx of Somali refugees since 2001. Then the legendary 1965 Muhammad Ali-Sonny Liston heavyweight championship boxing match at the Central Maine Youth Center in Lewiston, which ended in under two minutes due to what became known as Ali’s “phantom punch,” inspired the name for the exhibit.

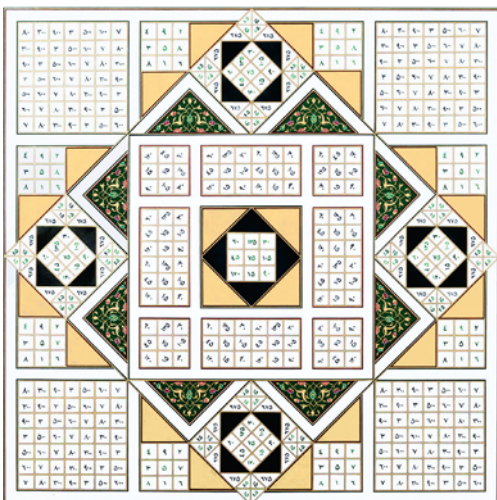
“We all thought this was a great metaphor for what Saudi art in America will do to you the first time you see it,” Danforth explains. “It’s like a phantom punch—you don’t see it coming, and then all of a sudden it hits you, and you are

bowled over and amazed by it.”

“There is a storytelling element to the whole tour,” explains Stapleton. “We believe artists’ points of view and artists’ perspectives across contested borders are extremely valuable because artists can imagine solutions and futures. Their job is to look at things, examine and investigate possibilities,” says Stapleton. They are “image-makers. They are the storytellers.”

Venetia Porter, assistant curator of Islamic art for the British Museum, agrees. “What I love are works which tell stories,

Left: Dana Awartani’s “Saturn” from her 2015 *Heavenly Bodies* series draws upon traditional Islamic geometric abstractions and motifs. “I think the process is more important than the end result,” she says. Right: In a 2011 video titled “Saudi Automobile,” artist Sarah Abu Abdallah paints a junked car pink.





Left: A sign in the form of a painter's palette greets visitors entering al-Meftaha Arts Village, an arts community in Abha, Saudi Arabia. Center: Edge of Arabia founders Ahmed Mater, Stephen Stapleton and Abdunnasser Gharem in Abha, Saudi Arabia, 2003. Right: A poster in the London Underground in 2008 promoted the first international exhibit of contemporary art from Saudi Arabia.

that speak about the now and which juxtapose past and present in interesting ways. Saudi artists seem to have a special quality and perspective that is hard to define but which encompass all of these.”

As the cities on the tour fell into place, it was important to begin in a place with a link to Saudi Arabia: Houston, center of the US oil and energy industries, is arguably the closest of all, notes Stapleton.

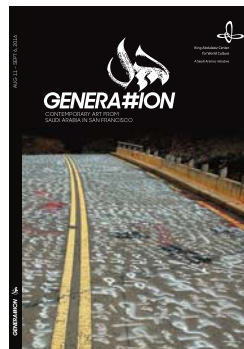
Joshua Poole, assistant director of Houston's Station Museum of Contemporary Art, recalls, “We had very little knowledge about contemporary Saudi art,” despite having exhibited other artists from the Middle East. “Parallel Kingdom,” showing works of 11 artists, opened June 18 and ran through October 2.

The length of each of the four exhibits so far—and as many as six more are in planning stages for this year—ranged from one to five months. Each exhibited a different group of roughly 12 to 18 artists, depending on the works chosen by the local curators. Stapleton points out that together they have attracted more than 15,000 visitors.

Aspen, Colorado, hosted the second exhibit on the tour, “Gonzo Arabia,” June 30 through September 1. This show's title, Stapleton says, references how “the contemporary works from the heart of the Muslim world speak to the intersection of art and activism that animates Aspen's history.” In the 1970s Aspen writer and resident Hunter S. Thompson founded what became known as “gonzo journalism,” after which “gonzo” entered American slang for anything hip, bold and brash.

The third stop was San Francisco, home to many of the historic generational movements in America and most recently to the tech industry that has so profoundly changed world cultures, including Saudi Arabia, which has some of the world's

Catalog covers from each of the four exhibitions reflect the thought-provoking and occasionally whimsical tone of the diverse artworks.



highest rates of social-media use. “The Internet is our platform,” explains Al-Himiary who, like other new-generation artists, connects and shares her art primarily through Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and other social media outlets.

Titled “GENERA#ION,” the show opened at the Minnesota Street Project galleries in the Dogpatch district of San Francisco on August 11. “We welcomed the opportunity to offer our space to showcase artists rarely, if ever, seen in the States,” notes gallery director Francesca Sonora. “I was struck not only by the esthetic distinction of the works, but also by their context.” Her personal favorite, she says, is photographer and social-installation artist Manal Al-Dowayan's “Tree of Guardians,” made of hundreds of gold leaves, each representing lineages of Saudi women. Strung together with clear thread and hung from the trusses of the project's atrium, it provides, as Sonora describes it “an enchanting experience.”

For Poole in Houston, most intriguing is Ajlan Gharem's “Paradise Has Many Gates.” Ten meters wide, seven deep and about four high, this is a “mosque” with only a skein of chain-link fencing for walls, ceiling, dome and minaret, decorated inside with a working chandelier and authentic rugs. Even after the exhibition, it remains on display in the museum's parking lot. “It is a piece that is ever-changing,” says Poole. “Every morning when I unlock the gates [to the piece] and turn on the lights, I have an opportunity to have a different discussion with it. And no matter what my feelings are for it on that day, it is still a place where people in our community stop and pray.”

As the different groups of artists traveled with each exhibit, visitor questions often included skepticism and curiosity about the degree of freedom artists experience back home. In Aspen, former Pitkin County Sheriff Bob Braudis, who produced the show with Gonzo Gallery and the Open Mind Project, bluntly asked about censorship. Shaweesh, a 28-year-old street artist, reminded Braudis that a government-owned institution sponsors the tour. “The government is open,” commented Shaweesh. “It just has to happen gradually, organically.”

Jiddah artist Angawi explains his acceptance of the boundaries he experiences at home. “We don’t want to just express ourselves and go against our morals and principles,” he says. “Those boundaries are meant to be there for a reason because this is our culture. The arts tend to be even more creative when we have to work with these boundaries.”

The aim of CULTURUNNERS, says videographer Inada, is to go “not only where we can exhibit the art but where we can engage in conversation. Just knowing that people are aware that there is a culture and are curious about these things gives artists some kind of hope.”

Poole recalls that skeptical visitors in Houston were met “by works of art that were created out of an honest need for explanation, an exploration of the world we live in and a desire to understand and hopefully leave an impactful mark.”

Three months after “Phantom Punch” opened in Lewiston, on a cold January evening, visitors pack into a small pop-up gallery on downtown Lisbon Street for one more exhibit-related event: a live performance of “calligrafitti” by Nugamshi. Together with Abdunnasser Gharem, he is paying his first visit to “Phantom Punch.”

The next day both artists walk through the exhibit, where they encounter eighth-grade students and their teachers on one of the many tours arranged by Anthony Shostak, the museum’s education curator. “It’s more symbolic than some of the European and American art I’ve seen,” observes student Birch Knight, who, like the rest of his class, had never before seen Saudi art. “There are a lot more things, like the gasoline and the microphone ball, that are symbolic of their culture and the issues they are going through.” Fellow student Emily Ouellette expresses her surprise at Rashed Al-Shashai’s use of translucent, multicolored plastic kitchen bowls and strainers in “Heaven’s Doors.” “I think the art is beautiful, and I like how they are expressing their feelings even just about common household items.”

As Gharem stops in front of his seminal piece “Al Siraat (The Path),” he recalls how in 2007 this work marked a turn-

ing point in his life. “I don’t know what drove me to do this piece, but it was the moment when I knew I had to believe in what I was doing.” Today the former lieutenant colonel in the Saudi Army is devoted to his art and to Gharem Studio, which he and his brother, Ajlan, founded in 2012 in Riyadh to support the new generation of artists. It and Ahmed Mater’s Pharan.Studio in Jiddah are the only studios in the country that offer space to other (usually younger) artists—an homage of sorts to the creative oasis Gharem and Mater enjoyed some 15 years ago at al-Meftaha Arts Village.

“You can’t believe how many great artists we have now in



Students watch Arwa Al-Neami’s “Never Never Land” video during the “Phantom Punch” exhibit.

Saudi,” exclaims Gharem, who never imagined that he and Mater would one day become role models for a younger generation. “Today contemporary art in Saudi is very important because it shows another side of our country to people,” says Gharem, while encouraging younger artists to use their art to engage in a dialogue with society. “We need to keep producing these art shows and lectures, and these artworks,” he adds. “You never know who you are going to inspire.”



Piney Kesting is an author and freelance writer who specializes in the Middle East. Based in Boston, she is a frequent contributor to *AramcoWorld*.

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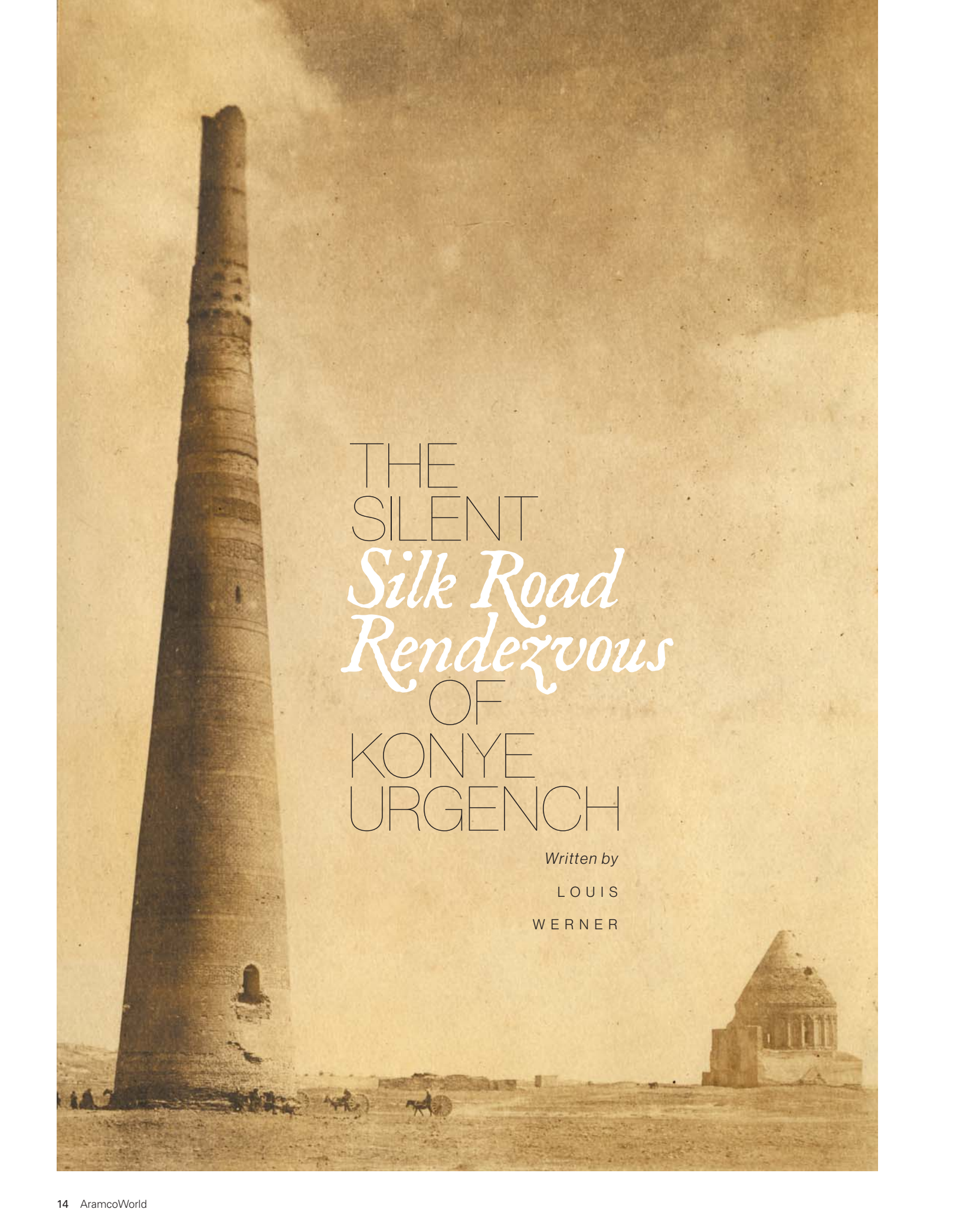
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THE
SILENT
Silk Road
Rendezvous
OF
KONYE
URGENCH

Written by

LOUIS
WERNER



From the south, one must cross the desert of Kara Kum, or Black Sand; from the east, it is the Kyzyl Kum, or Red Sand; and from the west, the route transits the desiccated Usturt Plateau as it tilts off the Caspian Sea's shoreline. From down the the river Amu Darya, known in antiquity as the Oxus and to the Arabs as the Jayhoun, the journey requires 2,500 twisting kilometers from its maze in the Pamir Mountains hard against the border of China.

The Khwarezm oasis on the lower Amu Darya—known also as Khwarezmia and, to students of Herodotus, as Choresmia—lies split between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, both of which gained independence a quarter of a century ago. Their border is not an easy one to cross these days, and the once-grand city of Konye Urgench, the capital of Khwarezm and seat of power of the Khwarezm Shahs, who, in the late 11th century, nearly conquered Baghdad, lies on the Turkmenistan side—the less easy of the two.

This 1746 map of Khwarezm shows Konye Urgench, then identified as "Urjenz", center, at a time when it still played a prominent cultural and commercial role in the region. *Opposite:* Once the capital of the Khwarezm Empire in the 10th century CE, today Konye Urgench is a small town in northern Turkmenistan, minutes from the border with Uzbekistan, whose past is memorialized by relic structures, such as the Qutlug Timur Minaret, built in the 14th century, and the early-13th-century Terkesh Mausoleum, which both appear in this photo taken in the late 1920s or early 1930s by a Russian army officer.

Despite the apparent hardship in reaching the oasis from any direction, Ross Dunn, biographer of the world traveler Ibn Battuta, who passed through Konye Urgench in the winter of 1334, concludes it was a journey that could nevertheless unfold as smoothly as a long voyage by sail on the trade winds of the Arabian Sea. Dunn called the routes toward Khwarezm "a complex crossroads of trails connecting all the major agrarian regions of the hemisphere"—in other words, the Silk Roads.

From the Old Persian word meaning "valley of wolves," early Arabs called the place Jurjan and Jurjaniya; Chinese called it Yuye-Gan, and it was later Turks and Mongols who named it Urgench. Its current name, Konye Urgench, means "Old Urgench," and this differentiates it from modern Urgench over the border in Uzbekistan. This has left Konye Urgench a ghost town of sorts, an uninhabited archeological park replete with memories, ruins and more than a handful of little-known monuments.

The 13th-century Persian historian Ala al-Din al-Juvayni wrote that even after the Mongol conquest in 1221—the second-most devastating attack the city endured—Konye Urgench remained “the throne of the Sultans of the world and dwelling place of the celebrities of mankind; its corners supported the shoulders of the great men of the age and its environs were the receptacles for the rarities of the time.”

Konye Urgench today constitutes Khwarezm’s only significant Islamic site predating 1388, the year of its utter destruction at the hand of Amir Timur. There stand still the hulking remnants of the once-sprawling city, including several tall, wide-portal mausoleums with steeply pitched and faceted conical outer domes, decorated with glazed floral and star-shaped mosaics of cut tile similar to Moroccan *zillij*, carved brick and bands of calligraphy in molded tile panels. Even after Timur had largely leveled the place, the 15th-century historian Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi nostalgically extolled it as “the rendez-vous of the most distinguished figures of the world.”

Among its most visible structures standing today is the finely tapered minaret that rises 60 meters, completed in the 14th century under Qutlug Timur, a regional *khan* (governor) of the Golden Horde. Commissioned more than two centuries earlier, this is the tallest minaret of medieval Central Asia, second only to that of Jam in Afghanistan. Built of raw terra-cotta blocks and decorated with friezes of angular Kufic calligraphy shaped from the same austere, monochromatic brickwork, it compares favorably to the Kalta Minor minaret in nearby Khiva, an unfinished stump in modern glazes that aspired to a height of 90 meters but achieved only 26 due to the death of its patron six centuries after Qutlug Timur heard a muezzin’s call to prayer in Konye Urgench.

Just south of the main cluster of relics that historicize the city flows the Amu Darya, the river that has shifted its course over the years, leaving Konye Urgench alone to its memories. Tourists looking elsewhere at Central Asian Islamic architecture might be more

A statue of Timur, or Amir Timur, sits in central Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Timur built up a formidable army and an empire that encompassed much of Khwarezm, including Konye Urgench, where several revolts provoked him to level the city in 1388—a devastation from which it never fully recovered.



Across the border in Uzbekistan, in nearby Khiva, a statue commemorates Abu al-Rayhan al-Biruni. Born in the region’s oldest capital, Kath, the 10th-century geographer and polymath calculated the circumference of the earth, proposed the earth’s orbit around the sun and theorized the existence of the Americas. To honor al-Biruni’s contributions to knowledge, Kath was renamed “Beruni.”

“The throne of the Sultans of the world and dwelling place of the celebrities of mankind.”

—Ala al-Din al-Juvayni

impressed with heavily restored facades and Soviet-planned infrastructure in Bukhara and Samarkand. It is Konye Urgench’s very desolation, caused largely by the sweeping raids of Mongols and Timurids, but also by years of Soviet neglect fueled by Russian nostalgia for Khwarezm’s later capital at Khiva, that evokes its frozen-in-time, never-to-be-touched-again quality.

The main monuments date from the last years of the 12th century into the pre-Timurid years of the 14th century. By contrast, the historical center of Khiva, a still-inhabited city and the only other important historic Islamic site in the oasis, was built much later. Even hundreds of years before the construction of its monuments, the 10th-century geography book (or treatise) known as the *Hudud al-Alam*, (*Boundaries of the World*) described Konye

Urgench as “Gate of Turkestan and the resort of merchants,” and dismissed Khiva as “a small borough with a wall.”

Other sites in Konye Urgench are known “only archeologically,” as the euphemism has it for buildings that have disappeared. As an example, the Qutlug Timur Minaret’s lower door to its staircase is seven meters off the ground, indicating access to it was from the roof of a missing mosque. (Also missing are the minaret’s final six meters of height, which leaves one only to imagine how it might have been finished.)

Another minaret is known only by its dedicatory inscription on a lead plaque found among the city’s broken remains, showing that it was built at the height of the city’s architectural flowering during the second line of the Khwarezm-Shah dynasty. “The emir, the sayyid, the just prince”—and here is given his full and elaborate name—“ordered the construction of this minaret ... in humility toward religion and to approach God, may His mention be great, with a desire for recompense in this world and the hereafter.” The minaret is thought to have been reduced to rubble by the Mongols not long after it was built. The plaque is now in the Tashkent Museum, 800 kilometers and another country away.





Visitors to monuments at Konye Urgench head toward the Qutlug Timur Minaret and the adjacent site honoring his wife, Tura Beg Khanum. Lower: This map of Central Asia shows the location of Konye Urgench, Turkmenistan, in relation to modern-day Urgench, Uzbekistan, founded in the 19th century.

In correlating Konye Urgench’s surviving monuments to its known history, the one dynastic founder who stands above all others is Anush Tegin Gharchai. He became the slave of a late 11th-century master, under whom he served a Seljuk sultan before becoming the official keeper of the royal washbasins. Though this was inauspicious as a start, he founded a family line that culminated with his great-great-grandson Ala al-Din Muhammad, who, prior to his death at Mongol hands in 1220, threatened Baghdad, forced his name’s invocation during Friday prayer just after that of the Abbasid Caliph and expanded the Khwarezm-Shah empire nearly from the Tigris to the Indus. The

Encyclopedia of Islam calls Konye Urgench in this time “the center of the most powerful military empire of the Islamic East”—if only for a matter of years.

The political history of the greater Khwarezm region is a hodgepodge of names, both pre-Islamic and Islamic, and their various founders, governors, invaders and usurpers—

among them nomadic groups, like Scythians, Göktürks, Oguz and Seljuks, and successive dynasties, most famously Achaemenids, Afrigids, Sassanids, Samanids, Umayyads, Ghaznavids, Chagatayids, Batu’ids, Timurid Gurkanis, Arabshahids and Uzbeks, all the way up to the distant Muscovite family Romanov—some more obscure



LAURA JACOBSEN; OPPOSITE, TOP: STEPHEN LLOY; LOWER: SAM TRANUM



At the Tura Beg Khanum memorial in Konye Urgench, above, details on the inside of the smaller of its two domes illuminate the artistic expertise that blossomed between the Mongol conquest and Timur's destruction. Right: The site is a popular destination among Turkmens.



than the next, but all with parts to play in its past.

According to one Muslim chronicle, the oasis was founded a millennium before Alexander the Great's conquests by Kai Khusrau, a legendary figure from the Persian epic the *Sayvash*, written in the Zoroastrian liturgical language Avestan and later immortalized in Firdawsi's 10th-century epic poem *Shah-nama*. That Kai Khusrau's grandmother was alleged by late medieval historians to be a Turkic princess is fitting, for over the centuries Khwarezm gradually de-Persianized and increasingly Turkified—to the point that the Persian language was lost and a Turkic tongue became the written and spoken lingua franca.

One of the earliest recorded mentions of Khwarezm dates to the Old Persian Behistun Inscriptions, a rock relief inscribed by Darius the Great in the fifth century BCE that lists the oasis as one of 23 countries under the king's domain. The Greek historian Herodotus nearly half a century later wrote that Khwarezm was the Achaemenid Empire's 16th province and that Xerxes relied on its troops for his invasion of Greece in 480 BCE. Alexander's chronicler Arrian wrote that Pharasmanes, King of the Khwarezmians, offered 1,500 cavalymen to help the Greeks defeat the Amazon Queen. It is doubtful, however, that Alexander himself ever visited Khwarezm, for how, in an address to his own troops, could he have referred to such a verdant oasis as "the Choresmian waste"?

The oasis's most famous product was then and still now is the *gurvak* sweet melon, which Ibn Battuta described as being cut into strips, dried and exported, eating it again with fond memories while later in India. The melons were even sent fresh to Baghdad in snow-packed lead

cases. The 16th-century English visitor Anthony Jenkinson remarked on them, too, writing of the oasis's "many good fruites among which there is one called a Dynie, of a great bignesse and full of moysture which the people doe eat after meate instead of drinke."

There was something about Khwarezm that attracted everyone from scholars to the merely curious. The early 11th-century polymath Ibn Sina, a native of a nearby Bukharan village, taught there briefly before heading west. A century earlier, Ibn Fadlan of Baghdad passed through on his way north to the Volga, as did Ibn Battuta of Tangier on his way east to India.



The mathematician Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, who taught at Baghdad's Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom) in the ninth century and whose coordinates of the known world's cities and places much improved Ptolemy's

At the memorial for Najm al-Din al-Kubra, a floral arabesque is glazed in shades of celestial blue. Konye Urgench, renowned for its craftsmanship and architecture, was often a source for design and workmanship for other parts of the Khwarezm oasis region.

Rosettes, strapwork and 10-point stars create a “kaleidoscopic vault of heaven with shimmering scattered jewels and luminary bodies,” wrote art historian Sara Kuehn of the main dome of Tura Beg Khanum, where tile glazes include cobalt blue, celadon green, amber, saffron and red cinnabar with gold leaf highlights.

map, was only the first of its great native sons. Anyone today who marvels or curses at the power of a computer can give him a nod, as his name, in a variant spelling, is invoked by software engineers whenever they code the latest algorithms.

Another Khwarezmian savant was Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Biruni, the 10th-century geographer and famous India traveler who, 1,000 years after his birth, was honored by the Soviets with the name of a city they built on the site of the oasis’s first capital of Kath, a 200-kilometer trek southeast from Konye Urgench. *Biruni* comes from the Persian word meaning “outer,” and far more recently NASA scientists gave his name to a crater on the moon—perhaps fittingly on the far side.

Called by historian C. E. Bosworth “a Khwarezmian patriot clearly concerned with the ancient glories of his homeland,” al-Biruni wrote *Chronicle of Khwarezm*, now lost except for a brief extract that appears in another geographer’s work; however, his extant *Chronicle of Ancient Nations* tells how the world’s peoples—Persians, Magians, Greeks and Khwarezmians included—divided their calendar years into months, festivals and signs of the zodiac. The Khwarezmians, he wrote, had a month they called *Harudadh*, which fell at the start of the hot season, and its first day they named, “when topcoats shall be discarded.” The 10th day of the month of *Ispandarmaji* was the feast of Wakhsh Angam, the name of the guardian angel of the Oxus, showing that Khwarezm, just like all early riverine civilizations, prayed for optimal floods—not too great, not too small.

He wrote of Konye Urgench’s founding in the year 305 CE, reckoning it as the 616th year after Alexander’s conquest, a common reference for pre-Islamic dating by Muslim historians. He mentioned a three-ring, concentric fortress built of clay and baked tile and, rising above it, a residential tower “seen from a distance of 10 miles” that he compared to the skyscraping buildings of Yemen. But floods, he wrote, left Konye Urgench “broken and shattered, and swept away piece by piece each year until the remains had disappeared.”

Exploiting this dependence on the river, the Mongols used the waterway for their conquest. According to the historian Ali ibn al-Athir, who was writing at the time, they destroyed a wooden dam located less than a kilometer upriver, which had been built in 985 for irrigation. This shifted the Amu Darya’s course to the north, leaving the city dry and hungry. (The oasis’s earlier capital at Kath had been set up right on the river’s banks, and repeat-



ed scourings from high floods forced its abandonment.)

As much as floods, so too did low water and drought-induced dry riverbeds present a constant problem on the lower Amu Darya. This made the engineering of canals essential to the oasis—much as they were in the Nile and Tigris-Euphrates valleys. As the Englishman Anthony Jenkinson noted:

The water that serveth all that country is drawn by ditches out of the River Oxus, unto the destruction of that said river, for which cause it to falleth not into the Caspian Sea as it hath done in times past, and in short time all that lande is like to be destroyed and to become a wilderness for want of water when the Oxus shall faileth.

The mistaken belief that the Amu Darya emptied into the Caspian Sea was inspired by the occasions it overflowed into the vast Sarykamysch Depression, south of the Aral Sea near the



A panoramic view of Khiva, Uzbekistan, shows some of the architectural influence of its once-rival city—Konye Urgench. A café in the heart of Konye Urgench, lower, demonstrates the continued popularity of floral motifs and turquoise blue—as well as fresh flatbread.

river’s current final bend to the north, and then drained west. This misunderstanding inspired Russian Tsar Peter the Great’s first foray into Central Asia, when shortly after 1715 he sent his Circassian-born general Alexander Bekovitch-Cherkassky in search of what was thought to be the river’s original mouth. The tsar’s goal was to redirect its flow, thereby creating a military waterway all the way down the Volga, across the Caspian and up the Amu Darya—all to get closer to British India. When Bekovitch was killed by the Khan of Khiva nearly two years later, Russia became set on subduing Khwarezm, and the imperial task took another century and a half.

Al-Biruni was one of the last to be fluent in the Khwarezmian tongue, a member of the early Eastern Iranian language family. He wrote that during the Arab conquest in 712 CE by Umayyad commander Qutaiba ibn Muslim, the sages who knew it had been driven away. “In consequence, these things are involved in so much obscurity that it is impossible to obtain an accurate knowledge of the country,” he wrote.



The 12th-century Arab geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi lived in the oasis

in 1220, a year before the Mongol invasion, and he described its cultural apogee in his *Mu’jam al-Buldan (Dictionary of Countries)*. “There is hardly a town in the world comparable to the capital of Khwarezm,” he wrote, “for its riches and metropolitan grandeur ... all the while there is general security and undisturbed peace”—famously ironic words before the city was flooded, looted and burned just one year later.

The image of Konye Urgench’s treatment at the hands of the Mongols comes through vividly in al-Juvayni’s *Tarikh-i Jahan-Ghusha (The History of The World Conqueror)*, in which he described how the city, after districts on its two opposite sides had been subdued, “was left in the middle like a tent whose ropes have been cut.”

It happened this way, he recounted: A small party of Mongols appeared at the walls “like a puff of smoke.” This drew the weaker Khwarezmian army into the open, “causing the Tatar horsemen and men of might and dread and prowess and war to spring forth from the ambush ... by nightfall they had felled to the dust nearly one hundred thousand [no doubt a great exaggeration] souls.” But that was not sufficient, for next the Mongols destroyed the wooden dam, diverting the Oxus away from the city, causing it first to flood and then be left without drinking water, to become “the abode of the jackal and the haunt of owl and kite.”

Yet in the decades after their conquests, the Mongols began to preside over a *pax mongolica* that brought a wave of creativity to much of continental Asia, including extensive, lavish building programs. In Konye Urgench this is when the minaret was commissioned and two additional mausoleums were built. One of the latter is this period’s architectural highlight, known as the Tomb of Tura Beg Khanum, wife of Qutlug Timur, though it was likely built by a pair of breakaway rulers in the second half of the 14th century and merely given her name.

Islamic art historian Sara Kuehn has called the tomb’s domed ceiling of rosettes, strapwork and star shapes a “kaleidoscopic vault of heaven with shimmering scattered jewels and luminary bodies.” Amir Timur, Kuehn posits, may well have relied later on conscripted Khwarezmian artisans to duplicate its finery in his grand buildings in Samarkand and his birthplace, Kish. She

regards its glazed ceramic veneers—in cobalt blue, celadon green, amber, saffron and red cinnabar with gold leaf highlights—as “the earliest and finest extant example of the labor-intensive, time-consuming and costly technique of tile mosaic on a grand scale.”

Ibn Battuta, too, singled out this tomb for praise, but admired even more the beauty of the horses and the marketplace in this “largest, greatest, most beautiful and most important city of the Turks.” As he wrote, the city in 1334 “shakes under the weight of its population, and is agitated by them in a manner resembling the waves of the sea.... Never have I seen in all the lands of the world men more excellent in conduct, more generous in soul and more friendly to strangers.”

The arts and crafts under both Mongol and Timurid rule flourished in Khwarezm as nowhere else in Central Asia—Herat and Bukhara included. Timurid historian Ahmad ibn Arabshah wrote, echoing Ibn Battuta:

Its people excel those of Samarkand in magnificence and elegance, being devoted to poetry and human learning, all admirable in the fine arts ... indeed, it is commonly said of them that their children in the cradle when they cry Ah! do it in harmony.

This was all to end in the year 1388. For the third time in 15 years, Khwarezm revolted against Timur’s rule and the tributes he demanded. His patience at its end, Timur wrecked the irrigation system and leveled most of the city. As Ibn Arabshah described: “Tightening the belt of resolution, Timur invaded ... and to the beautiful virgin city he sent in a suitor and besieged her and reduced her to the utmost distress.” Fifteen years later, the Spanish ambassador Ruy González de Clavijo did not even bother to enter the devastated city while passing nearby en route to Timur’s court in Samarkand.

Konye Urgench’s light dimmed further still in the 17th century when the Arabshahid dynasty founded a new town of Urgench 30 kilometers northeast at Khiva, which quickly grew into a commercial center. With the rerouted Amu Darya now running north, the upstart settlement was called Toza Urgench (Fresh Urgench) or Yangi Urgench (New Urgench) by locals, and the former capital became Konye (Old). New Urgench’s prosperity did not go unnoticed, and it attracted Ural Cossack raiders from north of the Caspian in the 18th century, Russian imperial conquest in the 19th and finally in the last century the severe urban renewal of the Soviets. Konye Urgench meanwhile lay undisturbed, quietly forgotten.

Despite today being called a “fascinating ramshackle wilderness” by independent researchers David and Sue Richardson, and although some domes and minarets have completely collapsed in more recent years, partial restoration has saved others from further damage, and some of the monuments of Konye Urgench have received repairs. What Anthony Jenkinson wrote not long after Timur’s devastation, that all its buildings were “ruined and out of good order,” has not led to utter neglect 500 years later.



Turkmenistan has mounted efforts to restore Konye Urgench's aging structures since independence in 1991, and the old city was named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2005.

As UNESCO reported in 2005 when naming Konye Urgench a World Heritage Site, the ruined city offers greater historical integrity and authenticity than most other Central Asian cities precisely because it was abandoned for the last three centuries. That barely 3,000 foreigners visited the site last year means that, as it is no longer the “rendez-vous of the most distinguished figures of the world,” this is likely to remain true for years to come. 🌐



Louis Werner is a writer and filmmaker living in New York City.

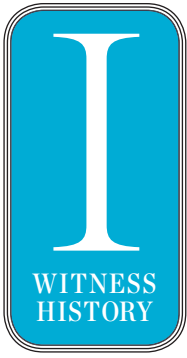


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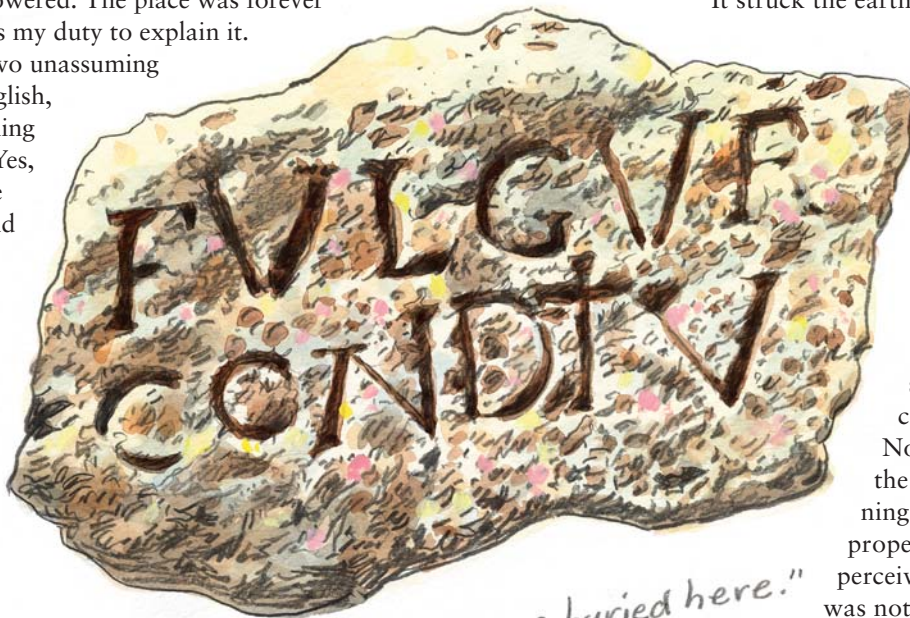
Written by FRANK HOLT | Illustrated by NORMAN MACDONALD

W/e geniuses never waste words. That scientist with the unruly white hair said a lot with $e=mc^2$. No one has come up with a pithier phrase than Sir Fred Hoyle's alliterative "Big Bang" to describe the birth of the universe. Omar Khayyam managed to summarize all pursuits of knowledge with "A hair divides true from false."

For other savants, actions speak louder than words. Unheralded, the Andalusian scientist, inventor, musician and poet Abbas ibn Firnas glided into history with the first successful flying machine in the ninth century CE. Do not call him the Andalusian Leonardo da Vinci, for da Vinci came along 600 years later—as the Italian Ibn Firnas. My own ingenuity touches upon one of Ibn Firnas's other creations: his planetarium that could simulate thunder and lightning. My words, too, are as pithy as any uttered by other great scientists: "FVLGVR CONDITV." Get it? Well, I guess I am not surprised. Have a seat, and let me explain it.

I am a scientific and historical marvel from what you call the Kabylie region of modern Algeria. Something extraordinary happened here 2,000 years ago, and I'm the fellow who put it on record. Sure, I could have been verbose about it, but since the whole thing happened in less than a second, it seemed silly to be long-winded. Wind was actually part of it. And rain. The sky cracked, and a blinding light flashed. Beasts scattered. People cowered. The place was forever changed, and it was my duty to explain it. So I did, in those two unassuming Latin words. In English, they mean, "Lightning was buried here." Yes, I am the gravestone of a thunderbolt and all that it struck. No unsuspecting creature must ever step on any of it, for these things belonged to the Roman gods. I am like one of your modern warning signs telling folks not to wander into a minefield. To issue this admonition, I take the form of an inscribed piece of local stone measuring about 32 centimeters square and 14 thick. Short and to the point—that's me, yet my Roman words and my Berber stone bridge the traditions of a much bigger world. I represent all human reactions to lightning, from the religiosity of the Etruscans and the dread of the Romans to the romantic poetry of the Arabs.

Nearly all of the 31.5 million thunderbolts generated annually will escape the annals of science and history. My bolt is one in billions.



"Lightning was buried here."

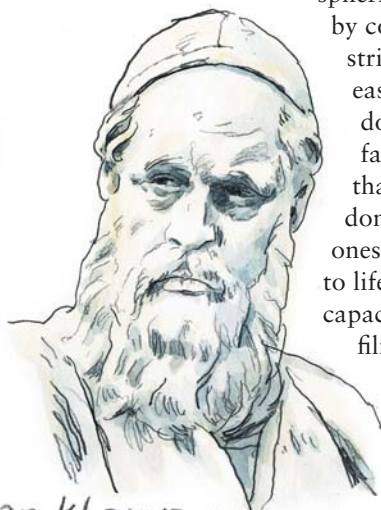
ress around the world. In the time it takes you to read this sentence, as many as 600 bolts of lightning will have struck the ground. Even so, nearly all of the 31.5 million thunderbolts generated annually will escape the annals of science and history. My bolt is one in billions.

It struck the earth near Bida, a town nearly 150 kilometers east of Algiers. The folks in that idyllic setting of mountains and streams did not take this incident lightly. They consecrated the spot in an elaborate ceremony reflecting their reverence for something their science could not yet explain.

No one then could fathom the true mechanics of lightning, much less measure its properties. They could not perceive that a thunderbolt was not a single event, but a series of strokes traveling up and down in pulses lasting millionths of a second each. They could not calculate that one of these pulses could reach temperatures four times hotter than the surface of the sun, or that this phenomenon cooked the surrounding atmosphere so rapidly that the air itself exploded in a violent thunderclap. Lacking satellites, labs and photography, the sharpest human minds of the pre-modern era made the best guesses they could. When eighth-century Syrian scholar Ibn al-Bitriq sought out the Greek wisdom of Aristotle, al-Bitriq's Arabic translation and commentary on the philosopher's *Meteorologica* preserved and passed on to Europe the view that lightning spilled out of ripped clouds. To this work, Ibn al-Bitriq added ideas of his own about the significance of different colors

kite in 1752. Yet lightning occurs constantly. At this very moment, there are about 2,000 thunderstorms in progress

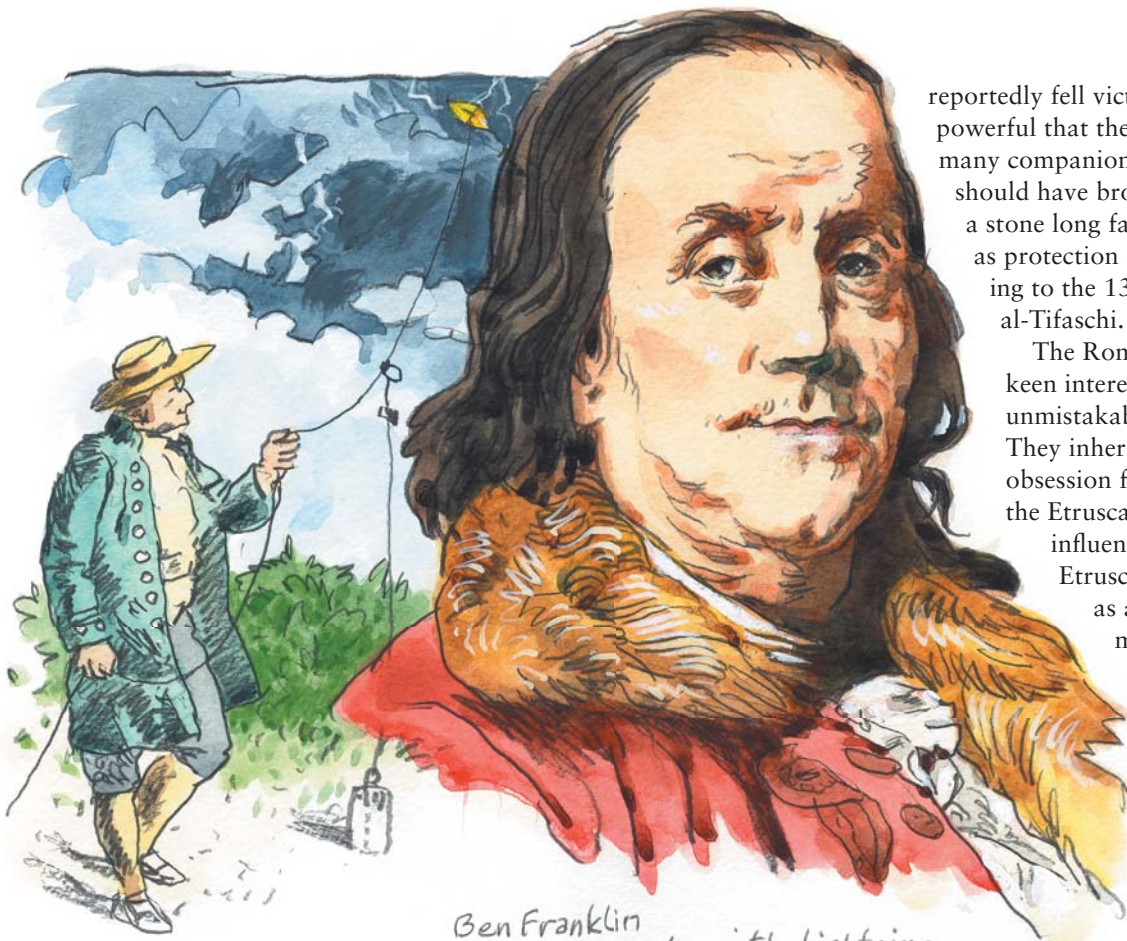
My task is to bring atmospheric science down to earth by commemorating a lightning strike. If you think my job is easy, consider how few have done it. Go ahead, name a famous thunderbolt other than mine. Fictional flashes don't count, including the ones that stirred Frankenstein to life or boosted the "flux capacitor" in the blockbuster film franchise *Back to the Future*. If you stick to science, you might be lucky enough to remember one actual case—the lightning that lit up Ben Franklin's



Omar Khayyam
-A hair divides true from false.



Sir. Fred Hoyle
coined -
'Big Bang.'



Ben Franklin
experiment with lightning

reportedly fell victim to a lightning blast so powerful that the thunder alone frightened many companions to death. Perhaps they should have brought along some nephrite, a stone long favored in the Middle East as protection against lightning, according to the 13th-century writer Ahmad al-Tifaschi.

The Romans of my youth took a keen interest in the ubiquitous and unmistakable power of lightning. They inherited this meteorological obsession from their forbears in Italy, the Etruscans, who in turn had been influenced by the Greeks. The Etruscans looked upon lightning as an awesome, direct communication from the gods.

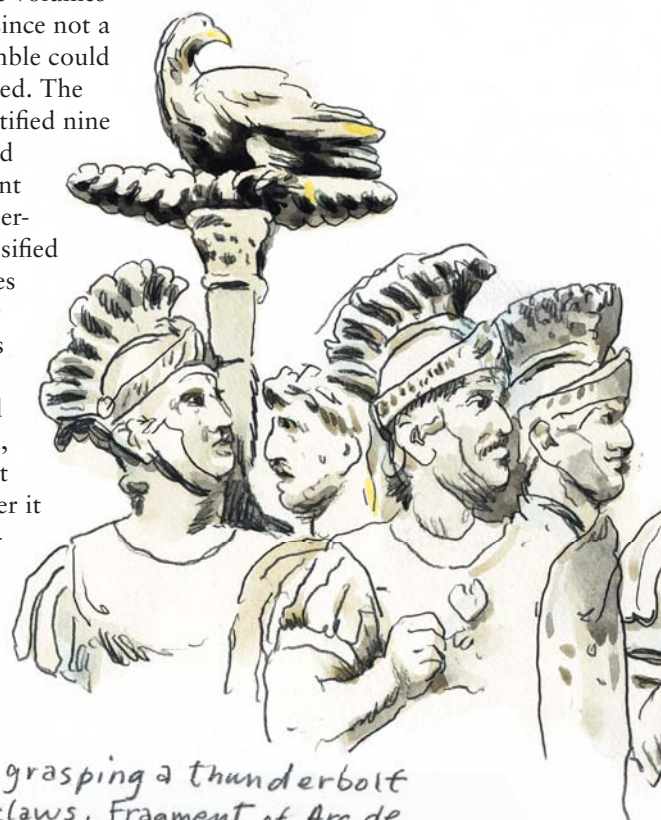
If properly interpreted, lightning and its thunder provided the surest omens about the future. This compelled the Etruscans to observe and record everything they could about thunderstorms, compiling in the process an encyclopedia called the *Libri*

Fulgurales (Lightning Books). Priests

of cloud and thunderbolt. Of course, most ancients found it easier to imagine that lightning had a divine origin and a divine purpose. Many of you modern people still react this way: The closer the zap, the more introspective and religious people of any era are likely to become. I know this firsthand—that's why I'm here.

Lightning is one of those things almost impossible to ignore. In 872 CE in Córdoba, a thunderbolt struck the very carpet on which the Umayyad Emir Muhammad I was praying, killing two men beside him. Ibn Firnas was conducting his researches in Córdoba at the time, and perhaps this event influenced his investigations into lightning. A similar experience in the same area many centuries earlier had provoked a different reaction: One night in northern Spain, Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar survived a near miss when a bolt scorched the litter bearing him and killed the poor slave lighting the way with a torch. The shaken emperor thereafter built on the Capitoline Hill in Rome a magnificent temple dedicated to "Jupiter the Thunderer." He developed a phobia about thunder and lightning so severe that he always wore a piece of sealskin as a protective amulet. The most powerful man in the world would hide underground in a vault whenever a storm approached. He took these precautions because experts assured him that lightning never strikes seals and that it never penetrates deeper than 1.5 meters into the ground. Similarly, Augustus's successor, Tiberius, wore a laurel wreath during thunderstorms since it was also believed that lightning would not touch it. But a later Roman emperor was not so fortunate. In 283 CE while lying in his tent near the Tigris River, Carus

consulted these volumes for centuries, since not a flash nor a rumble could safely be ignored. The Etruscans identified nine gods who could hurl 11 different kinds of thunderbolt. They classified lightning strikes based on entry and exit points and whether the bolt drilled a hole through, shattered or set on fire whatever it hit. Priests cataloged the curious abilities of lightning to melt the coins



An eagle grasping a thunderbolt with its claws. Fragment of Arc de Triomphe in the Louvre of the Emperor's Guards (the time of Antoninus Pius—138–161)

in a moneybag without harming the bag itself; to destroy a sword and not its sheath; to kill a fetus but not affect its mother. The mysteries of lightning left the Etruscans spellbound, and they handed on this legacy—complete with their *Libri Fulgurales*—to the Romans.

The Berbers of my birthplace compiled their own lore about the omens of *iggig*, which was their word for thunder. They imagined it to be the sound of the angel Sidna Jebril moving his wings. Whenever this was heard, three eggs of a laying hen must be painted with soot, or none would hatch. A rumble in summer warned of disease and death. Even more terrifying was *usman*—lightning—and people were instructed to hide their eyes and say a prayer lest they go blind. However, if at the same time a person afflicted with warts were to rub his hands together, he would be cured; a piece of wood from a tree struck by lightning could be burned and the smoke inhaled by the sick to lift a fever.

The cultures of the world have conjured many gods of lightning, from Amm of South Arabia to Tlaloc of the Aztecs. I assume you are most familiar with Zeus, the Greek god, who became Rome's Jupiter. Zeus allegedly got his thunderbolts from the one-eyed Cyclops brothers, whose names just so happened to be Thunderer, Flasher and Vivid. Armed with these terrifying weapons, the great sky-god enforced justice and punished hubris. For example, Zeus was said to have killed King Salmoneus of Elis because the monarch tried to imitate the god by rumbling a chariot across a bronze bridge while tossing fiery torches to the ground, which incited the deity to deploy real lightning to humble the pretender permanently.

Only a few people have ever played the part of Zeus and lived to brag about it. Alexander the Great, hiding behind his claim to be a son of Zeus, was perhaps the first to let it be known that he personally wielded lightning bolts in battle. To advertise, the conqueror minted special medallions showing himself in full battle gear clutching a large thunderbolt in his right hand. Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius later copied this mintage following a victory in which, so it was said, he directed lightning strikes against enemy positions. This sort of thing could get out of hand, of course. Some Etruscans once prayed for lightning to save them from a monster named—aptly enough—Volta, only to have their entire homeland consumed by a barrage of thunderbolts. You can be sure they noted that miscalculation in their *Lightning Books*.

Other traditions appear less preoccupied with war and punishment. You will find in much sixth- and seventh-century Arabic poetry an important trope called the lightning-scene. The oldest record of this theme appears in the work of 'Abid ibn al-Abras, and it features a lovesick protagonist whose beloved has ridden away

from a Bedouin camp with her tribe's caravan. Distraught, the man's yearning deepens during a long, sleepless night, during which flashes of lightning on the horizon signal his distant love. These are not the murderous thunderbolts of a vengeful god, but the melancholy markers of an unrequited romance.

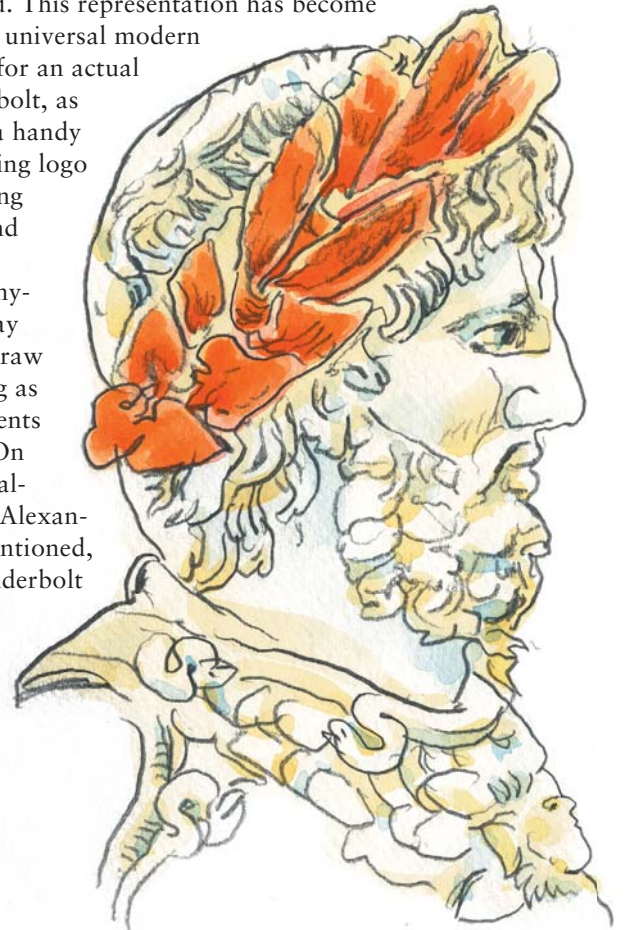
Greeks, Etruscans, Romans, Berbers and Arabs saw a lot of things in lightning, but some of them you might not recognize today. The very appearance of the stuff has mysteriously changed. Ask any modern youngster to

draw lightning, and you will probably be handed a piece of paper with a three-stroke zigzag across it that resembles a stretched out letter "Z"—just like the one on Harry Potter's forehead. This representation has become a nearly universal modern symbol for an actual thunderbolt, as well as a handy advertising logo suggesting speed and power. I doubt anyone today would draw lightning as the ancients saw it. On the medallions of Alexander I mentioned, the thunderbolt



Abbas ibn Firnas (810-887)
Multitalented Andalusian.
'Crater Ibn Firnas' on the moon
is named in his honor.

*Greeks, Etruscans, Romans and
Arabs saw a lot of things in lightning,
but some of it you might not recognize today.*



Bust of Jupiter in the Louvre

In Macedonia, Greece and Rome, coinage was regarded as a means of propagating government authority, generally based on the legitimacy bestowed upon a leader by the gods. For this reason, it was not uncommon for coins, as shown *right*, to depict a city or province's leader or, as was often the case, deity, together with lightning, in the form of double-ended thunderbolts, to symbolize their power.

appears as a straight shaft with antler-like prongs facing opposite directions on either side of the king's hand. On the coin of Marcus Aurelius, the bolt takes the form of a long skein of yarn with cotton-candy swirls. Some other ancient images of lightning might be mistaken these days for birds, bugs or bizarre UFOs. Since lightning itself has not changed at all, you humans must look within yourselves to explain this. Clearly, your perceptions have evolved over the millennia, influencing what you think you are seeing.

Ancient cultures perceived lightning as more than light, heat and electrical energy. Many early versions of lightning reflect its "weaponization" in myth and religion. Some bolts are shown with hand grips, barbed points and wings, as if to improve accuracy and range for the god who wielded them. Modern lightning needs none of these attributes, now that it is no longer a divinely guided missile. Other ancient representations may have derived from what curious people observed at the site of a lightning strike. Splintered trees, for example, suggested that the bolt had formidable mass and momentum, like a spear or axe from the sky: Even now, in Greek a stroke of lightning is called *astro-peleke*—"sky-axe."

Stray finds of Stone Age axes and other implements have been identified since classical antiquity as *ceramniae* (thunderstones), an alleged form of petrified lightning. That explains why the Etruscans fashioned amulets out of flint arrowheads picked up from the ground. The same thing was done in Arabia with small carnelian thunderstones. In fact, the folklore of thunderstones stretches from Europe to farthest Asia. In some places such as Turkey, they are still used as protection against fire, sick cattle and curdled milk. In Burma thunderstones are ground into powder to be swallowed as medicine. Malaysians used to wrap these stones in leaves and immerse them in a tub of water to induce rain. In Italy thunderstones are said to bury themselves in the ground for seven years, seven months and seven days be-



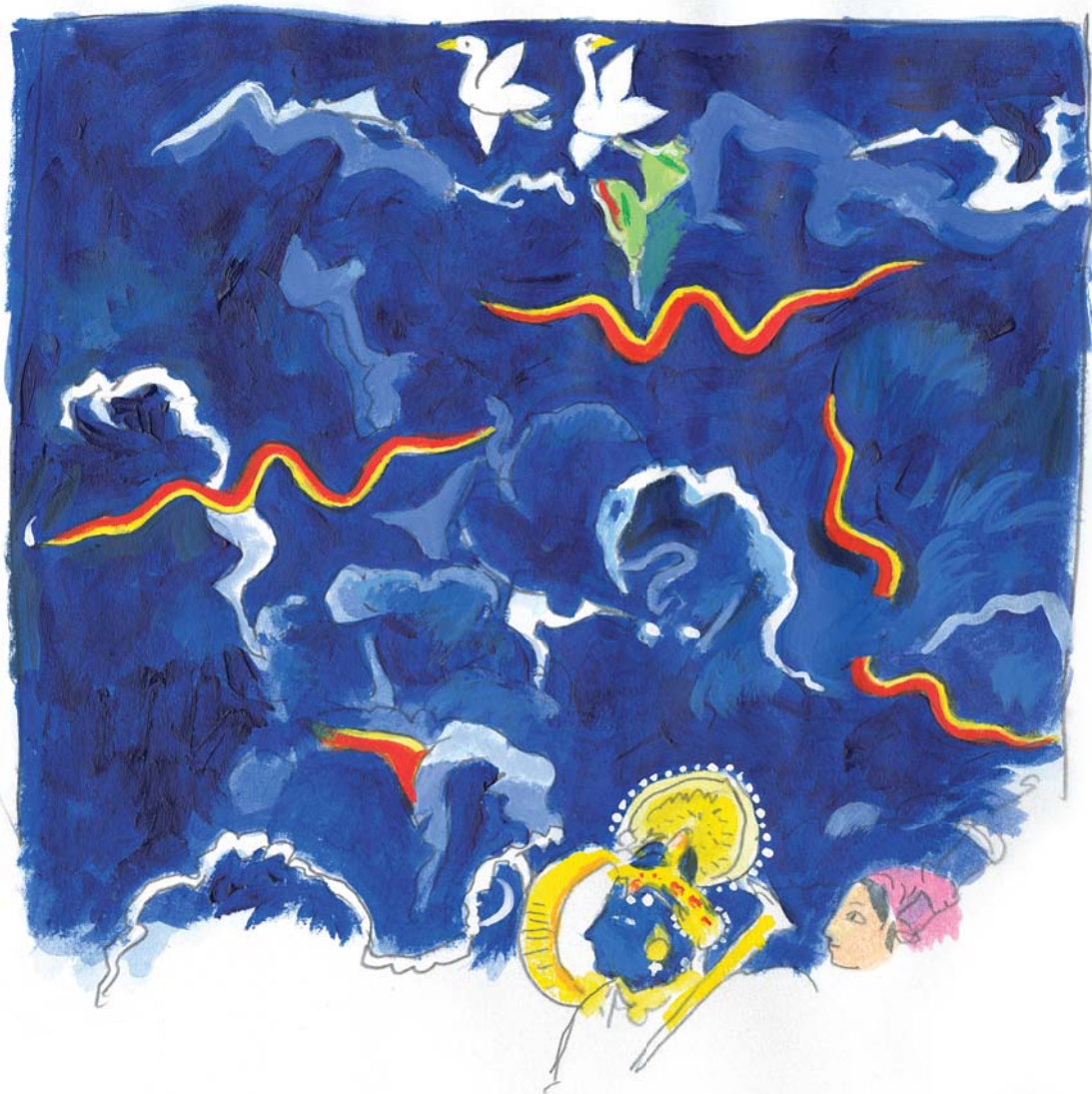
Olympia, Greece -
The thunderbolt -
432-421 BCE



Alexander - Eagle
grasping thunderbolt

fore rising back to the surface. The mistaken belief that these prehistoric implements were left by the gods, and not by humans, long delayed your realization that the Stone Ages ever existed. Other objects besides Neolithic weapons were also mistaken for spent lightning. Belemnites (from *belemnion*, the Greek word for a javelin) are a group of extinct cephalopods whose fossils appeared to be the points of thunderbolts. The same is true of some fossilized sea urchins.

Perhaps most intriguing to me are the ancient world's





spidery renditions of thunderbolts that closely resemble what scientists now call Lichtenberg Lines. Surely, observant ancients noticed that lightning could produce across the ground or a human body where it hit a radiating wriggle of lines. These markings seemed to indicate the shape of the bolt itself, hence ancient artworks that show lightning as if a leggy insect. Fulgurites, another phenomenon caused by actual lightning strikes, are fragile tubes of fused glass that result from the melting of sandy soil along the pathways of the bolt. They sometimes appear like the antlered thunderbolts held in Alexander's hand. Until recently, it was not known if peoples of those times actually found and recognized fulgurites as by-products of lightning, but that riddle is now solved. Archeologists in Greece have uncovered a shrine to Zeus atop Mt. Lykaion, where a fulgurite was interred alongside a bronze hand wielding a thunderbolt. This may be the earliest so-called lightning grave, and thus an ancestor of mine. I could not be more proud.

In my youth the people of the Roman Empire followed a hallowed ritual wherever lightning struck. The touch of a thunderbolt transformed the spot into holy ground, a place henceforth belonging to the gods and not one to be trod by mortals. To be sure of this, the location had to be enclosed within a special wall called a *puteal*. All traces of the bolt and its target had to be gathered and solemnly entombed right there on the spot, including any people killed by the strike. A stone altar would be set up, on which sacrifices propitiated the buried lightning. The Roman poet Lucan describes such a ceremony:

An aged priest gathers bolts from the sky,
 And buries them deep within sacred ground.
 He intones the words that signify
 The holiness of everything he found.
 Then, he raises a gleaming knife
 To sacrifice a magnificent steer

That willingly gives up its life
 To consecrate what happened here.

Hence, my more succinct formulation: FVLGVR CONDITV. I marked the burial of a lightning strike for all to heed out there in the hilly farmlands of North Africa, a task I performed until modern intruders moved me. Priests not of my religion, called "The White Fathers" because of their robes, came here as missionaries in the 19th century. They did, however, still speak my Latin language, and they understood my message. For this reason, they kept me at their headquarters in Djemaa Saharidj, where Algerian archeologist Pierre Salama eventually spotted me. Thanks to his efforts, I have been moderately famous for the past 50 years or so. Stones similar to me have been recovered from other regions of the Roman Empire, such as Britain and Gaul, but very rarely in Africa. No matter how you look at it, I am an extraordinary reminder of one speedy, spectacular moment in history.

Enlightened, I am sure, you may now continue on your way. But remember, you can't outrun lightning. So if science is not your thing, I'd keep a bit of nephrite, laurel or sealskin around—just in case. Proud as I am of my job, I wouldn't want one of me to have to commemorate one of you. ☺

In my youth the people of the Roman Empire followed a hallowed ritual wherever lightning struck. The touch of a thunderbolt transformed the spot into a place henceforth belonging to the gods and not one to be trod by mortals.



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IFTAR
Potluck
BALTIMORE



Written by
LAILA HADDAD

Photographed by
JOHNNY HANSON





“Noor’s deflated the bouncy castle again!” complains one of the children. I look over at our newly planted persimmon tree onto which the now-flaccid structure has fallen, right by our “Happy Ramadan!” garden flag in the lawn. I sigh, but it’s almost sunset and guests are arriving in droves, setting up their dishes of choice in the back yard. It’s potluck *iftar* tonight. What could be a more appropriate way to celebrate just a few days away from July 4, Independence Day?

A few of my friends get to work laying out assorted prayer rugs, beach mats and throws on the lawn in anticipation of the prayer that will commence minutes after sunset. Later, we expect the kids to sit on them, glow sticks in hand, listening to the ghost stories one of the older girls has promised them.

Two boys set off some firecrackers close to the bamboo trees and earn a scolding from one of the men. A few tired toddlers wail in the background. A couple of other kids try to sneak peeks at the goodie bags that have been set aside for them as those of fasting age anxiously await the call to prayer, the *adhan*, signaling it is time to break the day’s fast. One of the guests prepares a Caribbean jerk marinade from his native Virgin Islands in a blender by the grill, serenely oblivious to the hubbub around him.

We’ve hung decorations and set out dates on tables scattered throughout the yard accompanied by glowing lanterns. Soon there is nothing left to do but restlessly check iPhone apps to see if it’s time yet. When someone’s phone goes off

with the melodic *adhan*, we become still and listen.

The holiest month of the Islamic lunar calendar, during which the observant fast from food, drink and worldly pleasures from dawn until sunset, Ramadan has a special significance everywhere, but it is a source of particular delight and anticipation in Muslim communities of the Western world. It is a month for spiritual recalibration, a time for purification of the soul, a time families and communities who are otherwise insular or busy keeping up with popular trends can calm down and, in the evening, come together around a single meal. It is

a time to feed the soul, both figuratively and literally.

Columbia, in Howard County, Maryland, where my family and I live, is a bedroom community of Washington, D.C., and it’s an incredible place to encounter “Muslim Americana.” We know families that have been here for generations as well as recent immigrants and refugees. From Bosnia to Palestine, Senegal, Puerto Rico, Malaysia, Africa or Europe, we all share a common purpose in this one sacred month when friends and family slow down, gather for evening prayers, reflect on the year gone by and the standing of their faith, and share meals.

And what meals they are. Iftar fare! Meals prepared uniquely during Ramadan. They are both nourishment and a reminder of what to be thankful for after a day of material deprivation, vehicles to carry histories and traditions. And only at an iftar in the US, where the history of Islam dates back to the era of slavery, can one experience a *mélange* like that which appeared on our tables. Welcome to the potluck! ☺



Friends and family enjoying a backyard potluck iftar gather in Howard County, Maryland, for a group photo. *Previous spread:* Similar to many suburban get-togethers, parents deck out the lawn, already festooned with a bouncehouse, fill bags of treats for children, and hang decorations. Rows of prayer mats are arranged in the grass, and guests make final touches to specialty dishes for the buffet feast. At 8:39, the moment of sunset, breaking of the daylong fast begins with a call to prayer followed by eager processions toward the table of food, leading to conversations over the multitude of dishes and exchanges of recipes.



FRANCESCA PAGAN

Escarole and Bean Stew (Scarola e Fagioli) RECIPE, PAGE 34

If you are born into a Muslim family, Ramadan is second nature. If you come to Islam later in life, tradition is cultivated.

Born to Puerto Rican and Italian parents and originally from Brooklyn, Francesca Pagan now lives in Laurel, Maryland. She became a Muslim some 15 years ago while she was in college. She says she takes her Italian grandmother’s

tradition of *cucina povera*, or peasant food, and adapts it to Ramadan.

“I like [my children] to feel simple; I like them to feel less entitled. I think that’s the spirit of Ramadan. You’re supposed to simplify your life.”

After a day of fasting, she tells me, iftar is “better than your favorite birthday cake. It’s better than the best Christmas present.



I don't think there's any other experience that you have [that is like it]. The water tastes sweeter than you've ever tasted it. The pleasure you get from everything is increased."

That, she jokes, makes it "a good time to introduce vegetables to your kids!"

"Iftars are kind of, to me, very much a party. There's this vibe, this kind of energy. Kids are excited. Parents are anticipating. Everybody gets together. They stand and they wait. The moment that you hear the adhan, the call to prayer, people begin handing out water and dates, and it's very quiet, and nobody's really speaking. Then there's this burst of energy—people start moving around. People start getting happy. Everybody then goes to pray. Food is one of those things that you do without during the day so you can get spiritually closer to God. But the reward of enjoying it after the sunset takes it to a whole new level."

SURIATI OTHMAN AND NABEELA MOHAMED

Tapioca Cake (Bingka Ubi Kayu) RECIPE, PAGE 34



Suriati Othman meticulously arranges and rearranges her flawlessly cut diamond-shaped tapioca cakes on a vibrantly colored batik cloth layered with a banana leaf. In the middle sits a small bowl of water.

"The water is to cleanse one's hands after eating the cake. It's traditional in Malaysia," explains Suriati. "Presentation is critical," she emphasizes.

For Suriati and her daughter Nabeela Mohamed, 18, America is a home they adopted more than a decade ago when they came with their husband's and father's work. At first they assumed it would be temporary, but 13 years later, they have put down roots in Howard County.

Like many an immigrant, Suriati found herself sorely missing home, especially during Ramadan. Picket fences made her miss street-long holiday markets—and iftars. "Gradually we learned how to connect with the Muslim community and then organize activities and fun things together. The community basically becomes part of the family. But the first few years were tough."

Nabeela recalls how, on trips back to Malaysia during Ramadan, she would watch her grandmother spend hours whipping up elaborate dishes. This time spent cooking together for a month ranks among her fondest memories.

"Everyone jumping in, helping out. My dad, he'll make a drink, or he'll pitch in to help out. Little cousins or something like that, it's always nice to just have everyone together in the process of cooking."

"In Malaysia. She's talking about in Malaysia," her mother solemnly tones in.

The move was a big change for Suriati, and she is constantly reminded of it, especially during meal preparation. Her extended family of 30 or 40 suddenly shrank to four. But she has learned to "extend" her family through her community—and that there is no better time to do this than in Ramadan.

"Ramadan for me is about self-reflection. Thinking about myself, thinking about my relationship with the people around me: my loved ones, my family, my friends, my community. The most important thing is my relationship with my creator," says Suriati.

For Nabeela, as with many children, the deeper purpose of Ramadan came gradually. "When I was little, I remember thinking, 'Oh, man, we're not going to have food and water for like the whole day.' Obviously, as I grew older, I realized that it's not just about fasting from food and water. It's also about refraining from bad habits, and it teaches you discipline, and ultimately it brings you closer to God. Or that's the goal!"





YASSINE DAUD

“Upside-down” Rice with Lamb (Maqlouba) RECIPE, PAGE 35

Yassine Daoud carefully steadies a large pot brimming with steaming spiced rice, packed with roasted cauliflower and fork-tender lamb. He places a large stainless steel tray on top, then flips the entire pot in one swift motion. The contents empty out neatly

in a cake-like mold that we then jewel with fried nuts and chopped parsley.

“It’s the rite of passage of the man of the house to flip it. The women do all the work, and then we men can come around and say we actually participated!” he jokes.

Though not necessarily a Ramadan-specific dish, *maqlouba* is synonymous with Palestinian family gatherings.

“It’s healthy. It’s homey. It’s filling. And it’s a diverse dish with multiple ingredients,” he adds.

Yassine knows much about health and home. From a childhood in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, and then winning a scholarship to boarding school in New Mexico at age 15 before he knew more than a few words of English, he is now a leading eye surgeon at Johns Hopkins.

Ramadan for Yassine brings back memories of cherished moments in the camp—staying up all night with neighborhood kids, waiting in anticipation for sweets and indulging in holiday desserts. But the most important part was when the entire family would come together.

“We were oblivious to the fact that we lived in poverty. We were very happy and joyous, very nurtured and nourished. Peo-

ple were incredibly supportive and looked out for each other.”

He and his family of 11 shared a single room, but on any given Ramadan evening, they would entertain or feed 15 to 20 guests, often by kerosene lamp light.

When he came to America, “there were not many Muslims around me, as well as a lack of festivities and social support. You just don’t feel it. In the us I got the hunger but not the spirit of Ramadan because not many people know what you are doing.”

How did he keep the spirit of Ramadan alive? Yassine poignantly notes that it worked the other way around.

“I think the spirit of Ramadan keeps you alive in that regard, not vice versa. There’s an incredible blessing in the month. There is a switch that turns on for many people. It accentuates the spirituality, brings out the best in people and therefore it becomes an incredible, almost magical time of communal and social well-being—no matter where you are.”



NURIMAN MAMUT SHEETS

Steamed Dumplings with Meat and Butternut Squash (Pitir Manta) RECIPE, PAGE 36

Nuriman Mamut Sheets surveys the living room and makes herself comfortable in the middle of the floor. She fans out an embroidered Turkish tablecloth, tidily arranges platters and gets to work grating squash, mincing onions, slicing and spicing steak, and rolling dough. Three girls, two of them opportune visitors from next door, draw close.

“Come! Join Auntie Nuriman, and I’ll show you how to make manta the way my grandmother did!”

Intrigued, the girls get comfortable.

Nuriman makes little folds to seal the dough, one on top of the other, then instructs the girls. “It’s okay if you don’t do it perfectly! That’s how you learn! My mother would ask me to repeat, ‘What goes into the manta?’ as I was making it. And I would repeat. That’s exactly how I learned! Sometimes she

would say, ‘You put too much flour,’ or ‘You put too much water,’ and that day we’d have to cook something else!”

Nuriman, 40, was born and raised in the small town of Atush, in China’s Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, close to Kashgar on “the old Silk Road,” she explains. She met her husband, David, at university in China and later moved with him to the us. The transition from village to suburb was jarring. What she missed most was her community and sense of belonging, which she wistfully refers to as “communal love.”

During Ramadan, she says, she found it again, but differently: not one community, but many. All American and all





bringing with them different traditions.
 “My love for food started when my mom sent me to the

farmer’s market every day,” she recalls. “And when I would come home, and we would wash, and we would cook together, and we would all eat together.”

Now Nuriman continues this tradition with her own family: She grows her fruits and vegetables in the summer and raises chickens, which her six children help keep. They also make regular visits to her local farmer’s market, where there is seldom a purveyor who does not know her name. Many a neighbor and friend have been at the receiving end of her bounty.

“My mom also saved a plate for somebody else,” she says. “You would never know who comes to your door. In Arabic it’s called ‘their share,’ or *naseeb*, because God provides for everybody.” She, too, hands out food to her neighbors.

“[They] are getting to know our culture through this. When you eat together, all the spirits come together, and we say thanks in our different ways.”

FARIDAH ABDUL-TAWWAB BROWN AND FATIMAH FANUSIE

Bean Pie RECIPE, PAGE 37

The pies are not setting yet. Faridah Abdul-Tawwab Brown opens the oven door to check on them, apprehensive.

She keeps her Ramadan cool, however, and places an emergency troubleshooting phone call to her mother, Najwa, in Florida.

We are making bean pies, a dessert popularized in the 1960s by African American Muslims.

The kitchen is abuzz. My own two girls are scurrying about, one clumsily pouring Turbinado sugar into the mixer, the other making herself useful by licking leftover pie mix. My husband helps open cans of navy beans (“If Mommy were to find out we weren’t using dried beans, that’d be the end of us!” says Faridah), as Fatimah Fanusie, Faridah’s twin sister, moves nervously around. Baking 12 pies that you can’t taste-test because you are fasting is risky. Butter is whipped, and billows of nutmeg, cinnamon and cornstarch float through the air. “Fasting and cooking is an adventure,” quips

Fatimah.

Faridah and Fatimah were born and raised in inner-city Boston, surrounded by colleges and college students from all over the world. Their parents came to Islam through the political

and religious movements of the time. It is an experience perhaps few Muslims outside of their own communities are familiar with across America.

“Halloween trick-or-treating, Christmas, and we weren’t allowed to participate in most of those. Ramadan was our time,” says Fatimah.

“As African Americans we got to experience the traditions coming out of our community and from all over the Muslim world. We would have our iftars—you know, the bean pies, the fried fish, barbecued chicken, things of that nature that were distinct to our experience as northern African Americans with a rich history in the American south.

“Ramadan has always meant a time of reaffirmation of our own particular cultural stamp, and also it’s been about sharing. It’s always been a multicultural experience for us growing up.”

As for the iftars themselves (which Faridah describes as “30 days of Thanksgiving”), they were neighborhood affairs.

“We would just have the whole block party if it was during the warm weather, and the food would be out on the streets, and everyone would come and partake. I loved Ramadan, and I loved iftar for exactly this reason,” says Fatimah. “I knew I would eat Iranian food with Amene and Iraqi food with Zahara and Sudanese food with Moonah Shantur. I loved the smoky incense from one culture, and then the beads from another. You were just really enveloped in a whole new world. I think that was one of the reasons I loved learning about people and traveling so much as I got older.”



ESCAROLE AND BEAN STEW (Scarola e Fagioli)

By Francesca Pagan

Sometimes called “beans and greens,” this southern Italian dish has been in Francesca’s family for generations. “It’s a simple peasant soup of cannellini beans and escarole. It’s usually served with grated Pecorino Romano cheese on top—which serves an important role in the flavor—and crusty Italian bread for dipping. It’s uncomplicated, inexpensive, delicious and nourishing.”

Ingredients

- | | |
|---|---|
| 2 T extra virgin olive oil | 1 32-oz can of cannellini beans, drained and rinsed |
| 8 cloves garlic, sliced & chopped | 6 c water |
| ½ t oregano | ½ c Pecorino Romano cheese, grated |
| ¼ t crushed red pepper flakes | 1 loaf high-quality crusty bread |
| 1 bunch escarole | |
| 1 c cannellini beans (soaked & boiled according to package directions) OR | |

Instructions

Clean escarole thoroughly by detaching leaves and washing in a tub, then chop. Heat a heavy-bottomed pot over medium high flame for 2 minutes. Add olive oil, garlic, oregano and red pepper flakes. Stir with wooden spoon until fragrant, about 1 minute. Lower flame to medium and add the escarole and a pinch of salt. Stir with wooden spoon until it wilts down to half the volume, about 3 minutes. Add the cannellini beans and water. Bring to a boil over high heat, then reduce to the lowest flame. Cover the pot and let simmer for 15 minutes to blend flavors. Serve piping hot in wide-mouthed bowls. Sprinkle generously with grated Pecorino Romano and eat with a hefty piece of crusty bread torn from the loaf. Enjoy!



TAPIOCA CAKE (Bingka Ubi Kayu)

By Suriati Othman and Nabeela Mohamed

Nabeela says this easy, popular Malaysian cake was the first Malaysian dish she learned. Suriati explains its significance: “In 1941 and 1942, Malaya—as it was known then—was occupied by the Japanese, and there was a food shortage. People had to be creative because they could not wait to harvest rice. There was also a campaign to grow your own food in your backyard. The quickest way was to grow vegetables and tubers. Tapioca was the food, like a staple. It was hip. People were exchanging different ways to cook it. It was easy to grow and provided essential carbohydrates during wartime.”

Ingredients

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| 1 lb finely grated tapioca | 1 c sugar |
| ½ stick (4 oz) butter | 1 c coconut cream plus 1 T for glazing |
| 2 large eggs | |
| ½ t salt | |

Instructions

Preheat oven to 375°F. Grease a 9 x 9-inch square tin or baking pan. After grating tapioca, squeeze out as much juice as possible. Mix all the ingredients in a large, microwaveable mixing bowl. Microwave on high for 1 minute until the mixture is thick. Pour into the greased tin, and bake for 40 minutes. After 40 minutes, remove from the oven and glaze with 1 T of coconut cream. Set oven to broil and put the glazed tapioca cake in the oven for about 3 minutes to brown the top. Watch carefully so it does not scorch! Then let the cake cool before cutting into pieces.

“UPSIDE-DOWN” RICE WITH LAMB (Maqlouba)

By Laila El-Haddad and Yassine Daoud

This all-star of Palestinian dishes, literally called “upside-down,” makes a spectacular presentation. Traditionally made with lamb, maqlouba is also wonderful with chicken or beef. This recipe serves a hungry crowd of 8–10.

Ingredients

FOR THE BROTH:

2 lb leg of lamb, in large chunks, or 1 whole chicken, skinned and cut into 8 parts
1 onion, roughly chopped
1 sprig rosemary
1 bay leaf
2 small pebbles of mastic
1 t each of allspice berries, black peppercorns and cardamom pods
1 small crack of whole nutmeg
2 cloves
1 cinnamon stick

VEGETABLES:

1 large onion, julienned
8 cloves garlic, peeled
2 medium potatoes, peeled and uniformly sliced

2 large tomatoes, thickly sliced
1 sweet red pepper, cut into thick strips
3 carrots, peeled and sliced
1 kg eggplant or 1 head of cauliflower

REMAINING INGREDIENTS:

4 T olive oil
½ c dried chickpeas, pre-soaked, or else one 15 oz can, rinsed and strained
2 c rice, washed and rinsed (extra-long grain Basmati is best)
3 t salt
1½ T idra spices*
½ t cinnamon
¼ c pine nuts or almonds
2 T finely minced parsley

*For idra spice, mix and grind: ½ c allspice; ½ c black pepper; ½ c garlic powder; 2 T ground cardamom; 2 T cloves; 2 T dried lime powder (loomi, available from most Middle Eastern grocers); 1 T red pepper; 1 T cinnamon; and ½ T nutmeg. (Makes 2 c. Store in airtight container.)

Instructions

1. If using chicken, wash in a bowl of cold water with a fistful of flour, a little lemon juice or vinegar and 2 T of salt. Rinse and drain. If using lamb, simply rinse under water and drain.
2. Brown the chicken in a little oil. Add enough water to fully submerge, then bring to a boil and skim. If using lamb, no need to brown it, just submerge in plenty of water, bring to boil and skim.
3. Reduce heat to medium, then stir in all remaining broth ingredients. Simmer until tender (60–90 minutes). Strain, reserving the broth.
4. While the broth is simmering, salt and either fry or roast the eggplant as follows: slice eggplants uniformly, then spread them over a kitchen towel and sprinkle both sides with salt. Either fry in very hot vegetable oil until brown or slather with olive oil and oven-roast at 400°F. until golden, flipping halfway. Remove when golden and slightly charred.

5. If using cauliflower, wash, separate florets, drizzle generously with olive oil and roast in a hot oven about 25 minutes until browned.
6. Soak the rinsed rice in a bowl of cold water for 15 minutes.
7. Meanwhile, sauté the onions in 2 T of the olive oil on medium heat until caramelized, adding the garlic halfway through the process.
8. Strain the rice, then add the cooked onions and garlic; mix together with salt, cinnamon and idra spices. Set aside.
9. Generously grease the bottom and sides of a large non-stick pot with olive oil. Do not skip this step or your rice will burn! Arrange the potato slices on the bottom in a circular, overlapping pattern, followed by the tomato slices, red pepper, carrots, cooked chicken or lamb, roasted eggplant or cauliflower and chickpeas, all in successive layers.
10. Pack the rice mixture into the pot on top of the vegetables, using your hand to ensure it is well compacted. Ladle the reserved broth over the rice until just covered, using approximately 1½ c of broth for every cup of rice.
11. Bring the maqlouba to a boil, then reduce heat to low and cover tightly. After 30–35 minutes, taste the rice: if still too hard, add a bit more broth, a ladleful at a time, and leave on low heat until tender, allowing steam to cook it.
12. Remove pot from heat and let rest, covered, for 30 minutes. Meanwhile panfry the pinenuts or almonds in the remaining olive oil and set aside.
13. Uncover the rice and place a large round tray, slightly larger than the pot, serving side down, on top of the pot. Hold on carefully and swiftly—in one continuous motion—flip both pot and tray upside-down. Take care not to burn yourself! Tap on the pot with a wooden spoon (a task ordinarily assigned to children), then gently lift it off, allowing the maqlouba to slide out, as out of a mold. It’s okay if it falls apart!
14. Adorn with the fried nuts and chopped parsley. Serve immediately with plain yogurt and a minced salad of cucumbers, tomatoes, green onions and parsley, dressed with olive oil, lemon juice and salt.





STEAMED DUMPLINGS WITH MEAT AND BUTTERNUT SQUASH (Pitir Manta)

By Nuriman Mamut Sheets

“Breaking fast with pitir manta made with friends and family with the remembrance of God and the stories from our past is an amazing part of my personal Ramadan,” says Nuriman. “While I am making it here in the United States, I know so many Uighurs are making it during their Ramadan as well! It connects me to my childhood memories. It takes me spiritually to my *mehelle*, my neighborhood, where the aromatic smell of pitir manta perfumes the air.” It is traditionally made with ground lamb, but Nuriman uses sirloin steak. You can use either one.

Ingredients

- | | |
|--|-----------------------|
| 2 T olive oil | 1 t sugar |
| 1 medium onion, grated or finely chopped | 1 t cumin |
| 16 oz. chilled sirloin steak, trimmed from the leg, or an equivalent amount of ground lamb | For the dough: |
| 1 medium butternut squash (2 – 3 lb), peeled, cored and shredded | 3 c flour |
| 1 small tomato, finely chopped | 1-1½ c water |
| 1 t salt | 1 T olive oil |
| 1 t pepper | 1 egg |
| | 1 t salt |

Instructions

1. Knead the dough ingredients until combined and no longer sticky, about five minutes. (“You should be able to push your finger through when it is ready, harder than pizza dough.”) Adjust water and flour for this consistency. Cover and set aside in the fridge to chill.
2. Prepare the stuffing by sautéing the onion in the olive oil until transparent. Set aside. Slice the chilled steak in almost translucently thin strips. Combine the meat (or ground lamb) with the onion, squash and remaining ingredients.
3. Roll the chilled dough into two logs. Cut into approximately 12 equal portions and roll each into a small ball using both hands. Flatten using the palm of your hand into a small disc. Then set it aside to relax for 10 minutes.
4. Prepare your steam pot. If you don’t have one, use a colander with a side base and place it inside a pot filled with a couple of inches of water. Cover and bring to a simmer. Keep the water level under the steamer or colander.
5. Roll out each disc on a floured surface into a thin circle, roughly 2-3 times the size of the original. Put the flattened dough in your hand; then place a generous tablespoon of stuffing inside the center. Fold in half, crimp the edges and set aside onto a floured tray or greased pan.
6. Rub a little vegetable oil on the inside of your steam pan to prevent the dumplings from sticking. Gently place dumplings inside the steamer, making sure not to overcrowd them. Using a paper towel, dab a little oil on top of each dumpling as well. Cover and steam for approximately 15 minutes.
7. Serve alongside a dipping sauce made of one part Sriracha hot sauce to one part ketchup, and a basic salad of cucumbers, finger peppers and tomatoes seasoned with vinegar, olive oil and salt.



BEAN PIE

By Faridah Abdul-Tawwab Brown
and Fatimah Fanusie

“This is my mother Najwa’s recipe. Her twist is the lemon essence instead of vanilla. The star of the show is the navy bean, which was emphasized by Elijah Mohammad in terms of the foods that we should eat,” says Faridah. “It was an effort to uplift and dignify the African American person, to take your health and your well-being into your own hands by focusing on whole, healthy foods.”

Ingredients

(MAKES 2 PIES)

¾ c dried navy beans
(or 2 c canned navy beans)
 ½ t baking soda
 14 oz can evaporated milk
 1 stick butter, room
temperature
 1 t nutmeg
 1 t cinnamon
 2 T cornstarch
 2 c sugar
 4 eggs
 2 t lemon extract

2 pie crusts (recipe follows;
store-bought works, too)

CRUST:

2½ c all-purpose flour
 1 T sugar
 ¾ t salt
 1 c (2 sticks) chilled unsalted
butter, cut into ½-inch
cubes
 About 6 T ice water
(leave ice cubes in the water)

Instructions

Begin with the crusts. Mix flour, sugar and salt in a food processor. Add butter and pulse until a coarse meal forms. Gradually blend in enough ice water to form moist clumps. Gather the dough into a ball, divide in half and form into two balls. Flatten into disks. Wrap each disk in plastic and chill 2 hours or overnight. Then remove one crust disk from the refrigerator. Let it sit at room temperature for 5–10 minutes so it can soften just enough to make rolling out a bit easier. Roll out with a rolling pin on a lightly floured surface to a 12-inch circle, or about ¼-inch thick. Carefully place it onto a 9-inch pie plate. Gently press the

pie dough down so that it lines the bottom and sides. Trim and crimp to leave a couple cm over the edge. To prepare for the filling, prick the bottom of the pie crust with a fork about 20 times.

To make the filling, soak the dry beans along with the baking soda overnight in water. Drain, then add 3 c of water for each cup of beans. Bring the beans to a boil and simmer partially covered for 60–90 minutes. When they are cooked, preheat oven to 350°F. In a blender, blend beans, butter, milk, eggs, nutmeg, cinnamon and corn starch about 2 minutes on medium speed. Pour mixture into a large mixing bowl. Add sugar and lemon extract and mix well. Then pour into the prepared pie shells. Bake about one hour, until golden brown.



Maryland-based journalist **Laila Haddad** (www.LailaHaddad.com) is the author of *The Gaza Kitchen: A Palestinian Culinary Journey* (Just World Books, 2013). She frequently writes on the intersection of food and politics and is currently working on a book about the history of Islam in America, as told through food. Follow her on Facebook, or on Twitter @Gazamom. **Johnny Hanson** is digital media editor for *AramcoWorld*.



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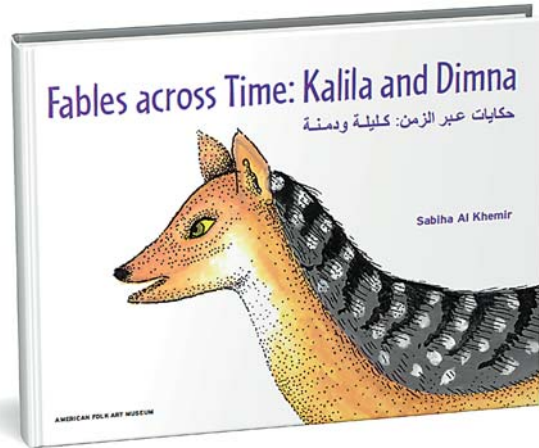




REVIEWS & RECOMMENDATIONS

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“And so the fishermen dined on one fat fish that evening, while the other two fish who valued wisdom and cleverness escaped that net.”

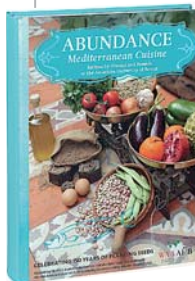
—“The Story of the Three Fish”

Fables across Time: Kalila and Dimna

Sabiha Al Khemir. 2016, American Folk Art Museum, 978-0-91216-133-1, \$19.95 hb.

In 2012 the Bahrain National Museum and the Indianapolis Children’s Museum independently invited art historian and artist Sabiha Al Khemir to organize an exhibition. She created an interactive show for youngsters around stories whose roots reach back through Arabic and Persian to the Sanskrit animal fables an Indian vizier purportedly spun to edify three unruly princes more than 2,000 years ago. Her book, in both English and Arabic, uses paintings she made for the exhibition to illustrate three of these ancient tales: the three fish; the lion and the ox; and the four friends. The moral of each one unfolds through vivid, charming illustrations and clear, simple text. The middle story features the jackals Kalila and Dimna. One is good, the other evil, yet here they look identical. In the grand tradition of Islamic illustrated manuscripts, Al Khemir’s visuals add their own agenda: One cannot judge from appearances, they whisper as we turn the page.

—LEE LAWRENCE



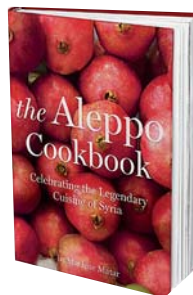
Abundance: Mediterranean Cuisine, Recipes by Alumni and Friends of the American University of Beirut

Carla Habib Mourad, ed. 2016, Worldwide Alumni Association of AUB, 978-9-95358-626-7, \$40 hb.

Alumni cook-books can be hokey affairs: spiral-bound slap-togethers that lack culinary authority. Not so with this “collection of reliable, tested, and tasted family recipes” from graduates and friends of the American University of Beirut. The recipes are both health-conscious and diverse, within the fairly wide purview of Mediterranean/Middle Eastern cuisine. Here is a peek inside the kitchens of AUB alumni from Palestine (*Lahem b’Ajeen* or “meat pies of Aunt Mary”), Spain (Eggplant Salad with Peppers), Morocco (Meat Tagine with Artichokes and Green Peas), Kuwait (Pomegranate Cheesecake, a local twist on a Greek original) and

beyond. Each of the more than 165 recipes is accompanied by nutritional data. These, plus extensive sections on dietary and healthy-lifestyle recommendations, food glossaries and charts of suggested ingredient substitutions, justify the title of this unique accumulation of family favorites and food science.

—TOM VERDE



The Aleppo Cookbook: Celebrating the Legendary Cuisine of Syria

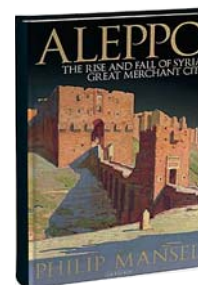
Marlene Matar. 2017, Interlink, 978-1-56656-986-6, \$40 hb.

Considering the recent fate of Aleppo,

it is easy to be distracted from the fact that for much of the city’s long, vibrant life (Aleppo is one of the world’s oldest inhabited places), it has been “steeped in tradition, history and culture,” writes Marlene Matar. Its “reputation as a culinary

magnet” is equally venerable, as reflected by Aleppo’s very name: milk (*haleb* in Arabic). Matar’s ode to Aleppan food and, by extension, Syrian and regional Middle Eastern cuisine reminds us of the city’s importance as a cultural crossroads. Here, Persian merchants, Belgian diplomats and Arab food vendors all broke bread and dipped into delightful dishes such as green garlic and scallion stew and spicy grilled kebabs made of ground lamb seasoned with Aleppo’s signature crushed red pepper; or they contemplatively sipped cumin tea in shady caravanserais. This comprehensive volume preserves the culinary heritage of a proud city.

—TOM VERDE



Aleppo: The Rise and Fall of Syria's Great Merchant City

Philip Mansel. 2016, I.B. Tauris, 978-1-78453-461-5, \$27.95 hb.

In this timely publication, as Syria’s second city suffers from devastation,



Mansel offers a history of Aleppo that both heartens and depresses. The first third of the book forms an admirable 60-page trot through Aleppo's past, beginning with the arrival in 1516 of the Ottoman Sultan Selim I, when Aleppo became "no longer a frontier city, but an entrepôt at the center of an empire." Mansel tracks the growth in trade that made Aleppo a world city in short chapters highlighting its multicultural outlook and economic vivacity, drawing on the memoirs of visiting European diplomats, merchants and adventurers. He speeds the story through the cruel 20th century, when political borders reoriented Aleppo away from Constantinople to serve instead as Damascus's sidekick, and on to the yet crueller destruction of today when the city "has entered its dark ages." But then Mansel returns to his chiefly European sources, devoting the greater part of the book to reprinting excerpts from travelers' accounts of Aleppo, from 16th-century botanist Leonhard Rauwolf to 20th-century writer Gertrude Bell. The definitive history of Aleppo, foregrounding Aleppan lives, has perhaps not yet been written.

—MATTHEW TELLER



All Strangers Are Kin: Adventures in Arabic and the Arab World

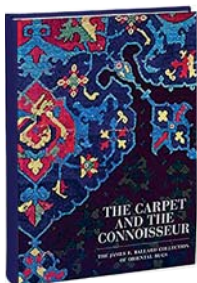
Zora O'Neill. 2016, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 978-0-54785-3-185, \$25 hb.

After throwing herself into formal Arabic study for seven years,

including an intensive course in Cairo in her 20s, the author had admitted defeat and left it all behind until, nearing 40, she decided to make another stab. She went back to Egypt and to Lebanon, Morocco and the UAE in a yearlong series of visits to learn to speak the street language, not simply to read from printed books. This charming memoir, which records those episodes with an air of rediscovery both personal and learned, is sure to bring a nod of recognition to any student of Arabic, however uncomfortably he or she ever sat in that classroom, as well as to enthrall those never-students curious about the world's fifth-

most-spoken language. Arabic's vernaculars are as varied yet simple as its pan-Arab written version is unified yet complex. The author's anecdotes from the lived-in world bring this vividly to life as she coins puns and drops an Upper Egyptian folk idiom just as a Frenchman might a *mot juste*, even without full comprehension.

—LOUIS WERNER

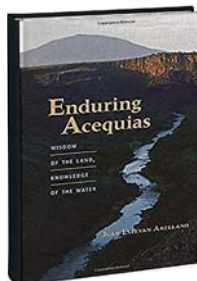


The Carpet and the Connoisseur: The James Ballard Collection of Oriental Rugs

Walter Denny with Thomas Farnham. 2016, Saint Louis Art Museum/Hali Publications, 978-0-89178-072-4, \$50 pb.

A rich selection of handwoven carpets collected by Midwestern businessman James F. Ballard beginning in the early 20th century is examined in this colorful coffee-table volume that highlights the important role textiles play in Islamic art. The book appeared with an exhibition of 52 carpets at the Saint Louis Art Museum drawn from the collection donated to it by the Ballard family. Quite how Ballard came to love and collect carpets is a mystery, but the assemblage demonstrates that he managed to see the "entire artistic spectrum of Islamic carpets as an artistically integrated whole," writes Denny. Each piece is illustrated lavishly, with an accompanying text explaining its provenance, aspects of design and other technical information. Most of the rugs are from Anatolia, but there are examples from Spain, Syria, Transcaucasia and India. Anyone who loves Islamic art and Oriental rugs, or is interested in the life of a collector whose heart was stolen by both, will appreciate this book.

—MARGARET POWIS



Enduring Acequias: Wisdom of the Land, Knowledge of the Water

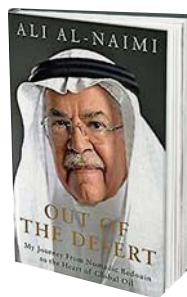
Juan Estevan Arellano. 2014, University of New Mexico Press, 978-0-82635-507-2, \$24.95 pb.

Acequias—gravity-flow irrigation ditches that

evolved over 10,000 years in the deserts of the Middle East—were brought to Spain by the Moors and

eventually to the New World. Spanish settlers built acequias throughout the American Southwest, but those in New Mexico are the most enduring. Juan Estevan Arellano spent much of his life advocating for and teaching about acequias, and working on them too. *Enduring Acequias*, published just before his death, tells everything you need to know about acequias, both as ditches and as institutions of democracy. He takes the reader to his acequia-watered farm at the juncture of the Embudo and Río Grande rivers, about halfway between Santa Fe and Taos, which he lovingly called his *almunyah*, from the classical Arabic word meaning "desire." In his world of acequias, water is a way of life, not a commodity that can be severed from the land.

—GERALD ZARR



Out of the Desert: My Journey from Nomadic Bedouin to the Heart of Global Oil

Ali Al-Naimi. 2016, Penguin Random House, 978-0-24127-925-0, \$42.95 hb.

"If I, a poverty-stricken Bedouin kid born in a desert, can make it,

anyone can," writes Ali Al-Naimi, who spent his early years tending goats in eastern Saudi Arabia, rose rapidly through the ranks at the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) and became minister of petroleum and mineral resources. "Hard work" and "luck" were critical to his success, he says. The fact that American prospectors discovered oil on the east coast of Saudi Arabia in 1938, three years after he was born, falls on the "luck" side. Hard work meant joining Aramco at age 12, getting an education under company auspices and then proving himself as a geologist and a manager. Al-Naimi became Aramco's first Saudi president and then CEO of its successor, Saudi Aramco. He planned to retire in 1995 at age 60, but he got a promotion from King Fahd, and then served as a minister for the next two decades. Al-Naimi guided the growth of an oil company into a global energy business with subsidiary partnerships in refining and marketing, a tanker fleet, chemical plants and alternative-energy research. He negotiated with other key producing countries and expanded Saudi Aramco's overseas marketing in the Far East. Written with candid modesty and

self-deprecating humor, his book is a captivating read. —WILLIAM TRACY



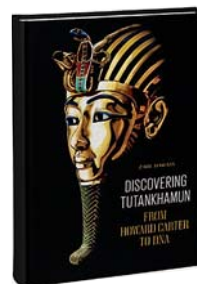
The Unknown Tutankhamun

Marianne Eaton-Krauss. 2016, Bloomsbury, 978-1-47257-561-6, \$29.95 pb.

Discovering Tutankhamun: From Howard Carter to DNA

Zahi Hawass. 2013, AUC Press, 978-9-774-16-637-2, \$49.95 pb.

These books, by two veteran Egyptologists, view a storied pharaoh from two distinct perspectives. In *The Unknown Tutankhamun*, Eaton-Krauss focuses on the boy-king's life



through the temples, statues and artifacts associated with his short reign. Thought to have acceded to the throne at age eight or nine early in the 14th century BCE, Tutankhamun soon moved his court from Amarna, built by the heretic pharaoh Akhenaten, to the old capital at Thebes. There he embarked on a program to rehabilitate the ancient "king of the gods," Amun. Through careful interpretation of inscriptions and artistic trends, Eaton-Krauss has determined that Tutankhamun restored or rebuilt almost all of the great temples at Thebes, helping reestablish the conditions required for Egypt to return to its fabled prosperity, as reflected in the artifacts discovered in Tutankhamun's tomb. By contrast, *Discovering Tutankhamun*, by Zahi Hawass, Egypt's former minister of antiquities, tells the story of the pharaoh from the discovery of his tomb in 1922 to DNA analysis of his mummy in 2013. He suggests that science has resolved lingering questions about Tutankhamun's parentage and the cause of his death. Although the results are not conclusive, DNA study of his mummy and the mummy believed to be that of Akhenaten showed that the latter was indeed Tutankhamun's father, while a female mummy known as the Younger Lady was not only Tutankhamun's mother, but also his full sister. The analysis also showed that Tutankhamun's death might have been caused by a leg wound. We may never know exactly how Tutankhamun died, but few will doubt the glory of his reign, as illustrated by the objects so beautifully portrayed here.

—JANE WALDRON GRUTZ



EVENTS & EXHIBITIONS

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CURRENT / MAY

The World Made New explores five artists' reconceptions of history and landscape. Often departing from superficial reality, their diverse narrative practices suggest another kind of truth in which self-referential approaches blend autobiographical details with personal mythologies of birth, transfiguration and constructed identity. Islands, markers and symbols are recurring motifs. Ritual and performativity emerge as points of connection. The viewer is taken on a journey through the natural environment and human society fraught with disorienting coincidences, displacement, rupture and imaginative leaps. Pi Artworks, **London**, through May 20.

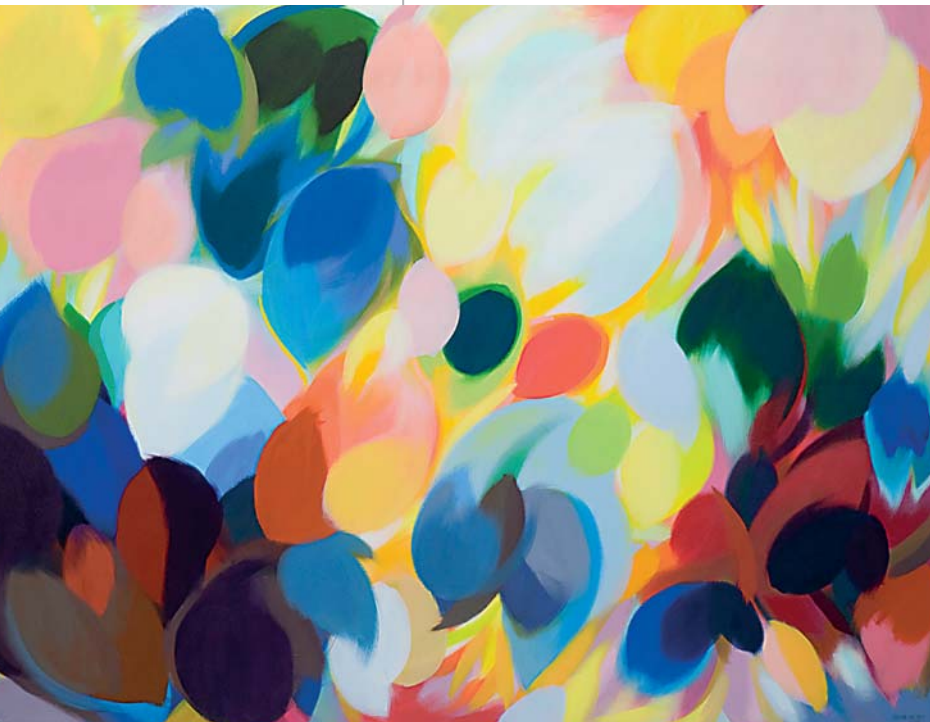
CURRENT / JUNE

Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: *Contemporary Persians*. Cultural rebellion and lyrical reflection come together in this world-premiere exhibition showcasing one of the most important collections of contemporary Iranian art. Encounter the works of 23 artists who have chosen self-expression over silence—men and women separated by generations but united in their desire to explore complex issues against a backdrop of the reality of today's fast-changing world. Aga Khan Museum, **Toronto**, through June 4.

Identity Crisis: *Reflections on Public and Private Life in Contemporary Javanese Photography* is the first exhibition in the us to focus on the recent emergence of photography as an art form in Java, Indonesia. Guest curated by photographer Brian Arnold,

Identity Crisis is the culmination of years of research and consultation with artists, curators, publishers and educators in Java. The 10 included artists pursue investigations of personal and cultural identity, using photography to probe, obscure or heighten questions and curiosities about being Javanese or Indonesian today. The Johnson Museum, Cornell University, **Ithaca, New York**, through June 11.

Moments in the Lives of Muslims in China: *Through the Lens of Peter Sanders*. Since 2000, Peter Sanders has been traveling throughout China documenting the lives of Chinese Muslims. He has journeyed from east to west and north to south and has produced a rare picture of unseen communities throughout the whole of China. "The depth of their faith, combined with extraordinary cultural integration, has invested the Chinese community with a distinctive, matchless beauty that has long been overlooked," says the photographer. Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization, **Sharjah, UAE**, through June 11.



"Flowers," by Samia Halaby, 2015, acrylic on linen canvas, 153 x 203 cm.

is recognized as a pioneer of contemporary abstraction in the Arab world. *Illuminated Space* highlights her experiments in abstraction, which have unfolded over the course of two years. In paintings like "Flowers," Halaby focuses on the soft edges of plant life by incorporating shading and arrives at varying degrees of luminosity with contrasting hues, approaching its concept based on the "relative saturation" that is found in the abstract paintings of Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt. The initial works reflect her interest in biomorphic forms, abstract shapes inspired by the contours of living organisms. Halaby combines her thoughts on space with an earlier focus on the soft and hard edges that are experienced in urban environments, which prompted her 2010 series, *Trees and the High Rising City*. Ayyam Gallery **Dubai**, through June 17.

Samia Halaby: *Illuminated Space*

presents the New York-based artist's latest abstract paintings alongside *Documentary Drawings of the Kafr Qasem Massacre*, a series of work from a long-standing project that led to her most recent publication, *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre* (Schilt Publishing, 2016). Born in 1936 in Jerusalem, a leading abstract painter and an influential scholar of Palestinian art, Samia Halaby became the first full-time female associate professor at the Yale School of Art. Although based in the us since 1951, she



Basim Magdy: *The Stars Were Aligned for a Century of New Beginnings.* Situated somewhere between fact and fiction, Egyptian artist Basim Magdy's work is rooted in dreams, scientific theory and failed utopian ambitions. With humor and quiet melancholy, his works on paper and in film, photography and slide projection reflect on the present social and political climate and our collective tendency to repeat mistakes in a cycle of aspiration, action and defeat. The artist's first solo exhibition focuses on his film work as it layers past, present and future, revealing social blueprints and ideologies that unfold across time. **Arnoldini, Bristol, UK,** through June 18.

SURA 2017 Featuring Reel Stories: *A Student Photography & Film Exhibition.* The award-winning SURA Arts Academy program has provided professional photography lessons to middle-school and high-school students in metro Detroit for 17 years. This season students focus on telling stories through portraiture. Reel Stories is a joint endeavor with the Palestinian Heritage Museum in Jerusalem designed to empower young women through the art of filmmaking. Thirty-two students—17 from metro Detroit and 15 from East Jerusalem—created every aspect of the two short films shown in this exhibition. Arab American National Museum, **Dearborn, Michigan,** through June 25.

1000 Handkerchiefs to Never Forget. "The Roll of Remembrance" commemorates people killed since 1991 in wars in the former Yugoslavia. A project of the Berlin Association for South-East European Culture, it is produced by refugee women who lost relatives, friends and neighbors, and who join with women from other countries in embroidering handkerchiefs with the names and birth and death dates of the fallen, decorating each one individually. Artist Anna Bragger has assembled these into large swaths of material. The exhibition accompanies the presentation "daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives." Museum of European Culture, **Berlin,** through June 25.

CURRENT / JULY

Abdulnasser Gharem: *Pause* presents a remarkable body of work born in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. That the artist is a Muslim, an Arab and a lieutenant colonel in the Saudi Arabian Army likely provides added resonance for an American audience, while serving as a reminder that terrorism is a global phenomenon. For Gharem, like many others around the world, seeing the World Trade Center destroyed on television was one of those moments that seemed to make the world stand still or pause. Gharem has deeply absorbed this notion of "pause" into his work, both as an occasion to examine certain universal dichotomies which lead to choosing life's paths, and more

literally by using the digital symbol for pause—a pair of rectangles—as a visual metaphor for the Twin Towers. Although the media and platforms for his work clearly borrow from the mainstays of modern art, the narratives and images are drawn from his everyday world, while many of his motifs, including designs and floral arabesques, belong to the canon of Islamic art. These powerful and provocative works only gradually reveal their meanings. **Los Angeles** County Museum of Art, through July 2.

Sky Blue: *Color in Ceramics of the Islamic World.* Afghan potter Abdul Matin Malekzadah, whose work is also on view in the exhibition *Turquoise Mountain*, describes the blue-green glaze of his bowls as "the color of peace, the color of competence." As demonstrated in *Sky Blue*, potters in many workshops across the Islamic world have shared these distinctive mineral colors of cobalt blue and copper green as pigments for painting and writing on the clay or as colorants to saturate glazes. The vessels on view span the ninth through the 19th centuries. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, **Washington, D. C.,** through July 16.

Alchemy: *The Great Art* illuminates the deep relationship between art and alchemy with more than 200 works representing more than 3,000 years of art and cultural history from the collections of Staatliche

Museen zu Berlin and the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, supplemented by outstanding loans from renowned international institutions. Alchemy is fundamentally a creation myth, and therefore it is intimately related to artistic practice, an archetypal idea that permeates all eras and cultures, shaping alchemy's theoretical underpinnings as well as artistic creativity. The term "alchemy" is derived from the Arabic *al kimiya* ("metal pouring," i.e., smelting or alloying) and has been disseminated across the West since the 12th century through the translation of Arabic texts. On display are paintings and miniatures, drawings and prints, scrolls, manuscripts and laboratory books, photographs and cyanotypes, chemograms and scanographies, sculptures, installations and videos, fake gems and artificial gold, stoneware and porcelain, gold-ruby glass and jewelry. Works of modern and contemporary art are also included. Kulturforum, **Berlin,** through July 23.

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