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# AramcoWorld





## 6 Gahwa Renaissance

Written by **Shaistha Khan**  
 Illustrated by **Teresa Abboud**

Preparing, serving and sipping *gahwa*—the Arabic word for coffee—is a ritual steeped in centuries of hospitality. In December in Abu Dhabi, the inaugural Gahwa Championships honored not only tradition but also innovation.

## 12 Sepak Takraw Takes Flight

Written by **John O’Callaghan**  
 Photographed by **Beawiharta**

Take the Malay word for kick and pair it with the Thai word for a hollow, woven ball and you have sepak takraw, the name of the acrobatic, lightning-fast Southeast Asian sport in which players use feet, legs, chest and head—no hands—to power a ball over a badminton-style net. (Think “kick volleyball.”) It’s been played across the region for more than three centuries, and recent decades have brought international agreements on rules that have led in turn to local and national leagues, tournaments in schools and capitals—all pushing sepak takraw onto an increasingly global sports stage. With more than two dozen countries now fielding national teams, the sport’s leading promoters have set their eyes on the Olympics.

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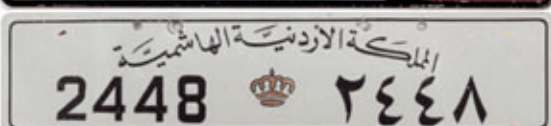
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We distribute *AramcoWorld* in print and online to increase cross-cultural understanding by broadening knowledge of the histories, cultures and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their global connections.

**Front Cover:** Firing the ball over the net and rising to block it, players from Jakarta Province and West Sumatra Province push their limits in a sepak takraw match at POPNAS XV, an Indonesian national student competition in November in Jakarta. Photo by Beawiharta.

**Back Cover:** “Even with demand for specialty coffee, *gahwa* is still used traditionally as a sign of generosity and hospitality,” says connoisseur, cafe entrepreneur and Emirati National Barista Champion Nooran Al Bannai. Illustration by Teresa Abboud.



## 20 The Middle East on a Plate

Written and photographed by Larry Luxner

His roadside discovery of a discarded Lebanese license plate kindled the author's 30-year passion for license plates from the Middle East and North Africa. Along the way, he often found pleasant and humorous stories, as well as bright artifacts of the diversity of daily life.

## 24 The Arabian Journal of Geraldine Rendel

Written by William Facey  
Photographs by George and Geraldine Rendel

In 1937 Geraldine Rendel became not only one of the first non-Muslim women to traverse the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia but also, quite possibly, its first tourist. She and her husband, George, a British diplomat, were invited by King Abdulaziz Al Sa'ud, and 83 years later her account is being published for the first time.

## 32 I Witness History: I, Eternal Bodyguard

Written by Frank L. Holt  
Illustrated by Norman MacDonald

I'm from Kemet. You call it Egypt. Now I live in Texas. Crafted from wood and ritually painted nearly 2,000 years ago, my job in afterlife protection never ends. I haven't always done it so well.

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# FIRSTLOOK

## One Eye on You


*Photograph by  
Mohammad Khorshed*

I usually photograph birds in Kuwait during the migration seasons, when the country becomes an important stop for birds migrating throughout Africa, Europe and Asia. In October 2012 friends alerted me to a spotted, short-eared owl at Jahra Pools Nature Reserve in al-Jahra. Unfortunately I was sick that day, but about two days later when I was feeling better, I went out as if on a mission. I returned to the reserve to search for the owl, and even though I knew there would only be a slim chance of finding it again—since migratory birds usually stay a day or less in one area—I had to try.

Two hours passed when I came upon another group of bird watchers. They told me they had just seen the owl, and it had flown off to another location in the reserve. I had an idea of where it might have landed, so I drove as fast as I could to the other side of the park. After searching the many trees and brush, I sighted the owl behind branches. I inched myself forward, hoping the owl would change its location. As I approached the bird, it flew to a nearby branch where the background colors were perfect for an evening shot.

For three hours I waited for the perfect moment, and then it arrived. I captured the owl as it started to clean its feathers, beginning from the bottom of its wing. Its head twisted back, and its powerful feathers expanded to cover one eye. The moment happened so fast, and fortunately I was quick enough to photograph this rare owl moment. It is the best photo I have ever taken and one of the best moments I have ever experienced in all my years as a photographer.

[www.mohd.photoshelter.com](http://www.mohd.photoshelter.com)

 @mkhorshed



# FLAVORS

## Cherry and Tomato Gazpacho

Recipe by  
Fiona Dunlap

Photograph courtesy  
Fiona Dunlap

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Journey through  
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### Sweet cherries are a Middle Eastern fruit thought to have originated in Anatolia and later cultivated in al-Andalus.

Not the case for the tomato, of course, that American interloper. At Alejandro, a Michelin-star restaurant located in southeastern Spain, an elegant cocktail glass of this gazpacho kicks off their lengthy menu. You can increase the quantities to suit a normal-size dinner, but since the gazpacho is intense and dense, you won't need large helpings. You will need to marinate it overnight.

(Serves 4)

½ small onion, chopped

½ clove garlic, chopped

1 ½ tablespoons chopped  
red bell pepper

1 tablespoon chopped  
green bell pepper

100 grams (3 ½ ounces)  
ripe Raf tomatoes or plum  
tomatoes (about 3),  
chopped

½ teaspoon fine salt

Generous ¾ cup (200  
milliliters) mineral water

½ teaspoon ground cumin

½ cup (70 grams / 2 ½  
ounces) cherries, pitted

1 ½ tablespoons fresh  
breadcrumbs

3 tablespoons extra-virgin  
olive oil, plus more to  
garnish

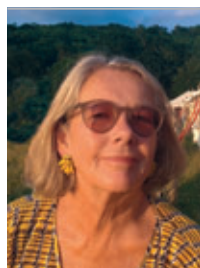
Mint or basil leaves,  
to garnish

In a bowl, combine all the ingredients except the olive oil and herbs, stir roughly together and leave to marinate overnight.

The following day, tip the mixture into a food processor and blend to a smooth puree.

Strain into a bowl and return to the blender. With the machine running, slowly add the olive oil to achieve a smooth emulsion.

Serve in small glasses, garnished with a few drops of extra-virgin olive oil and the mint or basil leaves.



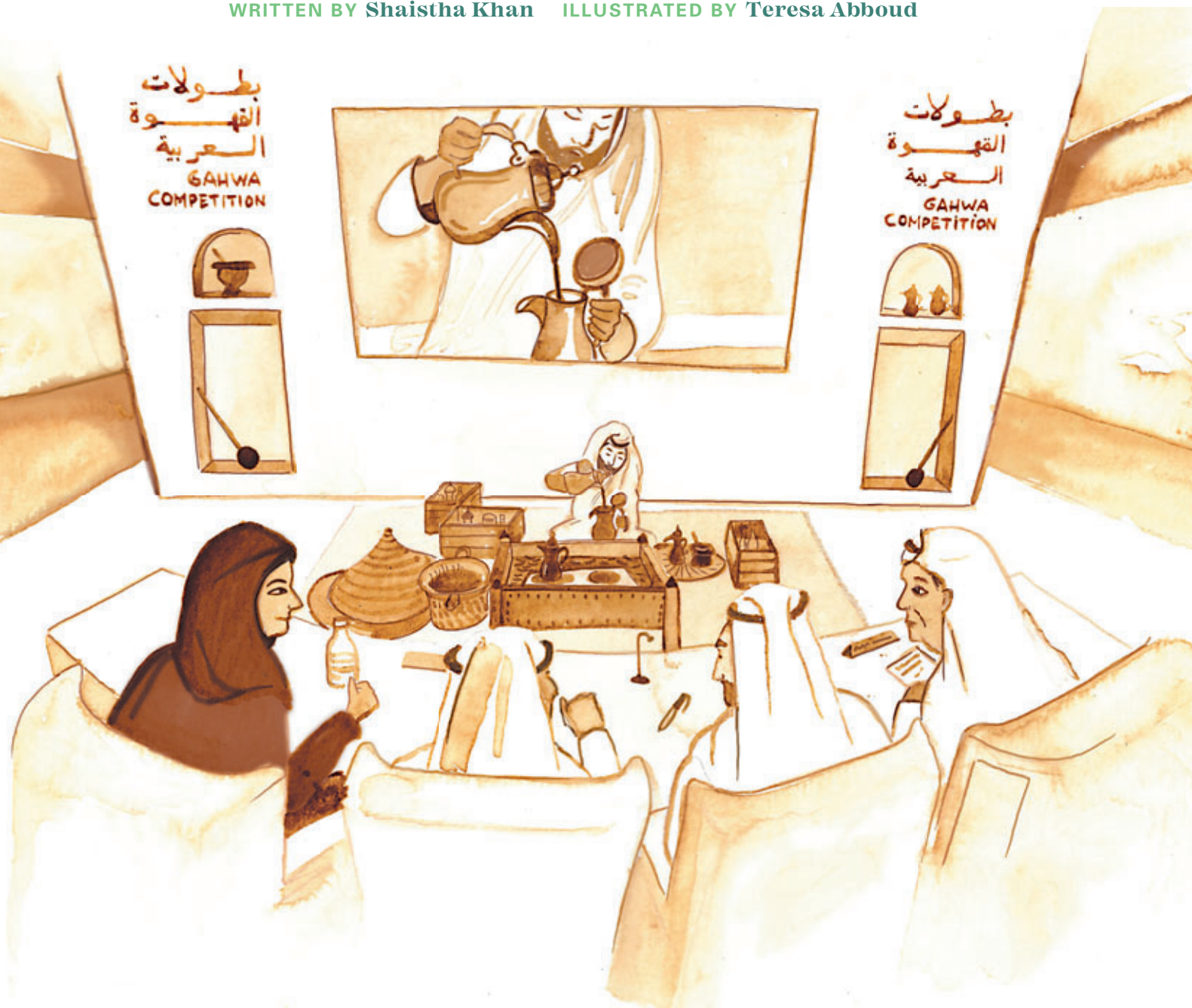
**Fiona Dunlap** is a food and travel writer, blogger and photographer. She has globetrotted for decades from successive home bases in Paris and London while regularly retreating to her house amid the olive groves of Andalusia. After writing widely on travel, art and design, her passion for food led her to create her first cookbook, *New Tapas* (2002), followed by *The North African Kitchen* (2008) and *Mexican Modern* (2013). Her articles have appeared in the *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *The Independent*, CNN.com and numerous magazines. She is the author of *National Geographic's* guides to Spain and Portugal, and she has worked as a guest lecturer on their expeditions as well as on other tours.

FIONA DUNLAP



# GAHWA RENAISSANCE

WRITTEN BY Shaistha Khan ILLUSTRATED BY Teresa Abboud



As Zayed al-Tamimi's brass pestle hits the mortar, its rhythmic clink resounds with the crunch of coffee beans through the hall of the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre. On a display screen above him, closeups of his motions attract the eyes of coffee professionals and enthusiasts. Watching most closely is the panel of four judges.

Al-Tamimi has traveled from Iraq to the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to compete in the first-ever Gahwa Championships, held in December. He is preparing a signature pot of *gahwa*—the Arabic word for coffee—as he vies for honors in the category of *Sane' Al Gahwa*, (literally, “Maker of the Coffee”). As he drops thick pods of cardamom and delicate threads of saffron



into the mortar to crush with the beans, he fuses all he has learned about centuries-old Arab coffee-making.

A later competition includes Dubai barista Louie Alaba, who offers the judges his cold-brew “gahwaccino” that uses fig, chili and cinnamon. As the competitions hit a stride, attendees discuss the importance of coffee-making across the whole of the Arab world, and how it is not just a matter of a dark- or light-roast beverage served with optional sugar and milk. Arab gahwa is a ceremonial affair, each pour symbolic of the historical and social significance of coffee drinking and an embodiment of hospitality. Coffee is synonymous with Arab hospitality.

In the UAE, 1-dirham coins pay homage to coffee culture by showing gahwa’s most time-honored symbol, the *dalah*, or the traditional Arab coffee pot, with its wide, stable bottom, elongated handle, finial lid and gracefully thin, beak-like spout. Across the Arabian Peninsula, it is not unusual to see a giant-sized *dalah* erected as public art in the middle of a traffic roundabout.

In his 1982 poem “Memory for Forgetfulness,” the late, celebrated Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish described the first cup of morning coffee as the “mirror of the hand.” He continued: “And the hand that makes the coffee reveals the person that stirs it. Therefore, coffee is the public reading of the open book of the soul. And it is the enchantress that reveals whatever secrets the day will bring.”

So important is gahwa in the Arab world the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) included gahwa in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar in the agency’s 2015 Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The designation recognized the value of preserving the historical customs and traditions of coffee drinking in these nations.

Eid Bin Saleh Al Rashid of Saudi Arabia’s Royal Hospitality House Group, and one of the supporters for the UNESCO designation, emphasized coffee’s importance for the future of culture in his country, “given its symbolic meaning for national identity and in order to preserve and pass this element to younger generations.”

In the desert at the eastern edge of the vast Rub’ al-Khali, heritage guides Waesam Fathalla and Ali al-Baloushy are doing just that. They share centuries-old coffee traditions with tourists, in much the same way their tribes shared with visitors centuries ago: out under the stars, sheltered by a tent, sitting with friends on floor cushions.

Like all good gahwa, they begin with green, unroasted Arabica or robusta beans. Over a makeshift pit of hot coals and sand, Fathalla roasts the beans in a shallow, circular pan with a handle long enough to keep his hands safely away from the fire. The beans bounce back and forth revealing a golden-brown

The traditional pot in which *gahwa* is served to guests is the *dalah*, whose long, narrow, curved spout, thin handle and finial-topped lid have made it a popular, nearly universal symbol of hospitality throughout the Arabian Peninsula. In the United Arab Emirates, a *dalah* appears on the 1-dirham coin. **Opposite:** Zayed al-Tamimi of Iraq competes before the panel of judges at the inaugural Gahwa Championships in December in Abu Dhabi.

shade and a faint floral aroma. Fathalla explains that while Saudi tradition favors light, blonde roasts, Emirati purists favor darker roasts. Once the beans are ready, they’re removed from the fire and ground into powder using a mortar and pestle. Water boils in a *dalah*, and nutmeg, clove or cinnamon is added before the coffee.

“Emiratis don’t use too many spices in their gahwa. That way, the natural flavor of the coffee can really come through,” Fathalla says as he grinds the coffee beans.

Throughout the centuries, coffee has been a unifying drink, something to do with family and friends old and new. The spices and flavoring in it can signal one’s economic status, level of respect for a guest, or both. Coffee recipes with saffron and rose water demonstrated wealth and regard for a guest most clearly.

He adds the coffee powder to boiling water and leaves it to bubble for a few minutes. Then he removes the *dalah* from the heat and allows it to rest, so the coffee grinds settle at the bottom. He then pours from it into another *dalah* with a filter, and then again into a smaller, ornate serving *dalah*.

Al-Baloushy begins to explain the role of the *gahwaji* or server of the coffee, as his assistant begins pouring. The *gahwaji* holds the *dalah* in his left hand and balances in his right hand a stack of *finajin* (handleless cups; one cup is a *finjan*). He gently clinks the cups together to signal the coffee is ready.

Although there are regional preferences and variations in both the preparation and serving of gahwa, the basics of the ceremony remain much the same from place to place.

Al-Baloushy tries the first cup to determine if the coffee is suitably tasty. Then he begins serving the first of three rounds. The first guest cup is *al-dhaif*, and it cannot be refused without risking insult to the hosts. The coffee is a gift, the men explain, and it establishes trust. To each guest as the *gahwaji* hands out the cups, al-Baloushy says, “You are welcome.”

The heart of the ceremony, he says, is hospitality, a cherished Bedouin value. As nomads, Bedouins often lived in harsh

## Gahwa is a ceremonial affair in which each cup is infused with history and social significance.



A traditional desert *majlis*, or assembly, can be for business or pleasure: Either way, it often begins with three cups of gahwa.

conditions with scarce resources. They relied on reciprocal generosity among the communities and tribes they encountered. Still today, any traveler or visitor, as was the custom of their older tribesmen, is always hosted, sheltered and fed for three days and three nights with no questions asked. All visitors receive a welcoming cup of coffee; simply placing a *dalah* atop a fire pit is invitation enough for anyone to join.

The second cup he serves is *al-kaif*, for enjoyment and pleasure. Finally, *al-saif*—literally the cup of the sword—is served, traditionally when the parties have established a protection deal between them—a promise to defend one another in the event of threats against their people.

It is also significant that the gahwaji first serves the most important person in the *majlis*, or social

seated assembly. Usually, al-Baloushy says, this is the eldest person or a guest of honor. Then he serves the remaining guests, beginning with those on the right of the guest of honor.

“There are many hidden messages in the way we prepare and serve coffee,” al-Baloushy explains.

As guests sip, they can politely communicate a message without offending or embarrassing others in the group. For example, he says that filling a guest’s cup two-thirds full means you are welcome to stay. If, however, if it is served full to the brim, this indicates the guest may



**Visitors receive a welcoming cup of coffee; simply placing a *dalah* atop a fire pit is invitation enough for anyone to join.**

not be so welcome.

“So you drink and leave,” he says.

Placing his own finjan on the ground, al-Baloushy demonstrates that this gesture communicates the guest has an important matter to discuss or a request to make of the host.

“If the time is right, I will talk to him and give him my full attention. If he is satisfied with my reply, he will drink the coffee. If not, he will leave the majlis,” al-Baloushy says.

The gahwaji remains standing to keep an attentive watch on everyone’s

# Coffee CULTURES

In addition to its 2015 recognition of gahwa in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has recognized the cultural significance of coffee traditions in several other countries, too, including Ethiopia, Turkey and Colombia, and Italy is currently short-listed for future inclusion.



Ethiopian



Arab



Turkish



Italian



Colombian

cup. Shaking the finjan sideways is the acceptable way of declining another cup.

Abdullah Khalfan al-Yammahi, a heritage expert and author of *Etiquette of Gahwa Serving in the UAE*, explains how coffee brings together people of different ages, social classes and tribes.

“We sit together to discuss and debate. We talk about anything and everything,” says al-Yammahi, who is one of the four judges at the Gahwa Championships. “A dalah is seen as a living entity because it is present in our happy occasions and in sad ones.”

As al-Tamimi replicates the coffee ceremony during the Sane’ Al Gahwa competition, the judges also quiz him on etiquette.

“There are more than 44 *adab* [etiquette rules] of serving gahwa and more than 22 rules of receiving gahwa,” al-Yammahi explains. This is why it is important that younger generations learn how to interact with others through exposure to the majlis and its rituals. “Something as simple as bending forward to serve is an act of respect and demonstrates morals,” he says.

To encourage dialog, raise awareness and safeguard the coffee ceremony as cultural heritage, Abu Dhabi’s Department of Culture and Tourism has sponsored several programs, of which the Gahwa Championships are one. Another is the *Bait Al Gahwa* (House of Coffee) initiative that, since 2018, has encouraged young Emiratis to train with heritage experts and operate tourism projects related to the ceremony.

Khalid Al Mulla is owner of the Dubai Coffee Museum, national coordinator for the country’s chapter of the Specialty Coffee Association, and a promoter of regional and international coffee-culture preservation.

“The coffee business is all about education, whether that is bringing gahwa to the forefront of the global coffee industry and making it a mainstream beverage, or preserving culture by serving gahwa at formal events, or educating local customers on fair trade and ethically sourced coffee,” he says.

Al Mulla’s small, private museum in Dubai’s heritage-oriented al-Bastakiya district is one way young people and visitors can glimpse the spectrum of

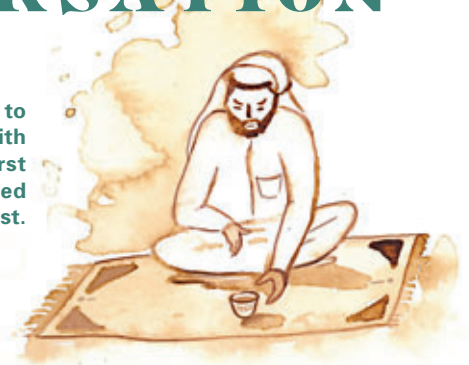
Arab coffee, from its origins to its ceremonies, artifacts, tools and early modern technology.

Mohamed Ali Madfai owns the cafe Emirati Coffee Co, and he observes that everywhere “the coffee bean is the same, yet the culture of brewing and serving is different.” He likens the Arab dalah to the Turkish *ibrik*, with its iconically wide bottom and slanted handle.

## Coffee Cup

### CONVERSATION

It is customary that visitors to a *majlis* receive welcome with three cups of gahwa. The first is *al-dhaif*. It cannot be refused without risk of insult to the host.



The second cup, *al-kaif*, is for enjoyment and pleasure. If the host fills the *finjan*, or small white coffee cup, two-thirds full, it signifies the guest is welcome to stay; however, if it is filled to the brim, it can indicate the host wants the guest to drink and depart.



At any time, shaking the cup sideways is a polite way to decline another cup of coffee. Placing the cup on the ground tells the host that the guest has something important to discuss.



In Bedouin tradition, the final cup, *al-saif*, implies that the parties have established or renewed a promise to defend each other in case of threats to their families or tribes.

# Coffee ORIGINS

The discovery of coffee is popularly attributed to Kaldi, a goat herder who lived in Ethiopia in the fifth century CE. As the story goes, he noticed that his goats became unusually energetic after chewing on the coffee cherry. Soon after his discovery, monks took to chewing coffee beans to stay awake during night prayers. Beginning in the seventh century, Muslim pilgrims brought coffee beans across the Red Sea, where the western highlands of the Arabian Peninsula proved fertile for the new crop. There, coffee beans began to be roasted and brewed. By the 16th century, *gahwa* was a major export, especially from the Yemeni port of Mocha, to Ottoman Turkey and, from there, to the world.





ZAINAB AL MOUSAWI

“Just like Vietnamese-style coffee gained popularity in [the Arabian Peninsula] as much as a Spanish latte, with education and promotion, gahwa could become a mainstream drink in cafes around the world,” he says, noting cafes offering traditional Arab coffee report high demand. Modernizing “gahwa culture,” he adds, will not strip away tradition because “tradition lasts longer than gimmick.”

Zainab Al Mousawi, 31, serves cold-brewed traditional Arab coffee in her Dubai cafe, To the Moon & Back.

“I find gahwa incomparable to specialty coffee. As it is brewed with spices, it makes for a special drink,” she says. “Gahwa and specialty drinks each have their own audience, how and when to be served, and consumed.”

Her gahwa uses single-origin beans and a spice mix, and she brews it over ice using a slow-drip method, another way young coffee innovators are fusing past and present as well as regional and international influences.

“Although young people may be influenced by foreign

culture or trends, they always come back to their roots,” says heritage expert and author al-Yammahi. “They recognize their heritage and traditions. It makes me proud to see their involvement and investment in this intangible heritage.” ☺



**Shaistha Khan** is freelance culture and travel writer living in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. You can reach her via LinkedIn. Lebanon-born and Atlanta-based, artist, entrepreneur and coffee aficionado **Teresa Abboud** produced her illustrations for this article using coffee, a spoon and brushes. She is the creator of her “Coffee Time” and “Teresa Afternoon” collections of art, household items and clothing. Follow @teresa\_afternoon, and visit [www.teresaafternoon.com](http://www.teresaafternoon.com).



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**SEPAK  
TAKRAW  
TAKES FLI**



**S**

aiful Rijal is a blur of motion as he launches into the air, reflexes synched to experience as he anticipates the path of a ball hurtling toward him from the other side of the court. With his body flying parallel above the floor, the Indonesian national sepak takraw striker twists his hips and swings his kicking leg around to blast the ball over the shoulder-high net. Like a cat, he lands on his feet ready for his next chance to spike.

Often called “kick volleyball,” the Southeast Asian sport is more like lightning-fast badminton paired with the explosive elegance of karate.

“The most challenging part of sepak takraw is the acrobatics,” Rijal says during a recent training

Children watch from the sideline as teams in the village of Galesong, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, use heads and feet—anything but hands and arms—to play sepak takraw. This group meets twice a week to play the sport whose earliest records date from 15th-century Malaysia. **Lower:** A sculpture in nearby Makassar celebrates the game’s history in Indonesian culture. In the mid-20th century, Indonesia standardized its rules and regulations to offer the first official tournaments.



**G H T**

*Written by*  
**John O’Callaghan**

*Photographed by*  
**Beawiharta**

camp in Sukabumi, a city amid the green foothills of Mount Gede, south of Indonesia's capital, Jakarta. "It's the jumping and somersaulting in the air and hitting the ball as you're flying."

**H**undreds of years old, sepak takraw is played on neighborhood courts, in schools and at club level across Southeast Asia. As the game's popularity grows in other parts of the world and more teams come to competitions from beyond Asia, the International Sepaktakraw Federation (ISTAF)

is now vying for inclusion in the Olympic Games lineup.

The appeal of the sport—carried by emigrants and enthusiasts from Southeast Asia to the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Australia—is easy to understand. The equipment comprises a net and a lightweight ball about the size of a large grapefruit. The rules are just as simple, too: Players can touch the ball with any part of the body except their hands and arms. The pace is fast, and the precise volleys and flying kicks never cease to amaze spectators.

"You must come and see it live," says Salleh Nanang, the coach and a former captain of Singapore's national team. "Even if you watch on TV, on video, you will see only the jump. You will see only one part."

Named using the Malay word for kick and the Thai word for a woven ball, sepak takraw is played on a badminton-size court. Most games are played by squads of three players—a server, a feeder and a striker. Other versions include games with two or four players on a side. (See sidebar, p. 16.)

At the most recent Southeast Asian Games, held in December in Philippines, Thailand won three of the six gold medals in the



**Left:** The Indonesia national men's team members warm up at their training center in Sukabumi, West Java. The team practiced twice a day in November before going to the Philippines for the Southeast Asian Games, where they won both gold and bronze medals. **Lower:** A striker from Papua Province kicks the ball as a Riau Province defender rises to block it during POPNAS XV, a national student event held every four years in November in Jakarta, Indonesia's capital.





sepak takraw events. The Philippines did well, too, with two golds and three bronzes, while Indonesia took home one gold, one silver and one bronze. Malaysia came in fourth with two silvers and one bronze. Singapore went home empty-handed. Also participating were Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

During a game, players' reflexes and reaction times are put to the test when a spike kick rockets the ball at up to 130 kilometers per hour. For this, strikers often get the glory moves but Nanang, who coaches the Singapore national team, sees the key to victory in the server's position.

"The server can kill the ball and get the point," he says in the team's training hall at a large, well-equipped community center in eastern Singapore. "If not, then the points play like ping-pong."

**T**he origin of sepak takraw is lost in time. As ISTAF states diplomatically on its website, it is "a matter of intense debate in Southeast Asia, as several countries proudly claim it as their own."

Victoria Williams, author of *Weird Sports and Wacky Games*, points to similarities to *jianzi*, an ancient Chinese game that used feet to juggle a feathered shuttlecock. The

**Right:** West Sumatra student team members celebrate victory over Jakarta province at POPNAS XV. **Lower:** Indonesian national women's team members practice ahead of the Southeast Asian Games, from which they took home a silver medal.

first known historical record of sepak takraw is the *Sejarah Melayu (Malay Annals)*, written in the 15th and 16th centuries. It describes a game in the court of the Malacca Sultanate, whose territory comprised parts of present-day Malaysia and Indonesia, as one in which a player would "receive the ball on his foot and keep it up without falling" before passing it to another.

Originally known in Malay as *sepak raga*—literally "kick woven-basket"—the game survived the fall of Malacca to the Portuguese in 1511, and its popularity grew. Murals in Bangkok



show evidence it was played in Siam (now Thailand) in the early 1700s, and similar games have long existed in the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

Thailand gives credit to the Siam Sports Association for setting the first rules in 1829 before adding a net and holding the first public tournament a few years later.

Malaysians claim they shaped the modern version of the game in the 1930s and 1940s by using a badminton court and net and by codifying rules for team play. After this, interest spread rapidly across the region for sepak takraw as a competitive sport.

Even the current name is a multilateral compromise: Before the 1965 Southeast Asia Peninsular Games, discussions between Malaysia and Singapore on one side and Thailand and Laos on the other led to an agreement to name the sport *sepak takraw*.

For decades, sepak takraw has been a fixture of regional competitions and, since 1990, a medal sport at the Asian Games held every four years. Thailand is the powerhouse national team,

***Physical and mental discipline, plus technique and the right attitude, are what it takes to be a good player.***

**—Syukur Saing,  
coach of Indonesia's  
national women's team**



## Rulebook Basics

- Two teams—usually of three players—face each other across a shoulder-high net. The court measures 13.4 meters by 6.1 meters. At its midpoint the net is 1.52 meters high for men and 1.42 meters for women. It is slightly higher at the posts.
- Feet, thighs and heads are used to control and propel the ball.**
- The ball is hollow and woven with colorful synthetic fibers that have replaced the traditional rattan or bamboo. The size of a large grapefruit, it weighs less than two packs of playing cards.
- A point is scored when one team commits a fault. Among about 20 infractions, it is a fault if the ball fails to clear the net on a serve or return, lands out of bounds or is touched by a hand or arm.**
- Players can field the ball and set up a teammate for the return or put the ball in the air for their own kick over the net. But more than three hits by the team is a fault.
- A play for each point begins with the serving team in a triangle—the server in a small circle painted in the center of the zone and the other two at the net near the left and right boundaries. The other team fans out on their side to await the speeding ball.**
- Serving is the exception to the “no hands” rule: One player tosses the ball underhand to the server, who swings his foot toward the sky to hit it in midair and, hopefully, blast it over the net with such force and accuracy that it cannot be returned.
- In competition the first team to get 21 points wins the set. Winning two sets wins the match. Service alternates automatically every three points.**

and it has hosted the prestigious King’s Cup Sepaktakraw World Championship since 1985.

ISTAF, set up in 1992 as the global governing body, now has 50 national associations as members, from the traditional Southeast Asian bastions to newer enthusiasts such as the US, Canada, Brazil, France, Germany, Switzerland, India, China, Japan, Australia and others.

This growing membership makes ISTAF ever more hopeful about securing a place for the sport in the Olympic Games. Those aspirations, and the chance to attract a wider audience, received a boost in July when the Olympic Channel added ISTAF and several other sports federations to its global media platform.

ISTAF has run a series of international tournaments to popularize the game and works closely with the Alliance of Independent Recognized Members of Sport, which seeks to secure official recognition from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for lesser-known sports.

But even at 50 national members, says ISTAF Secretary General Abdul Halim Kader, whose office in Singapore is filled with sepak takraw memorabilia, ISTAF still falls short of what it needs to qualify for the Olympics.

In the US, Lee Pao Xiong, whose family fled Laos in the mid-1970s and who is now a professor of government at Concordia University, has spearheaded the building of sepak takraw courts in Saint Paul, Minnesota. There, the game is popular among the Hmong and Lao communities, and it has started to attract rookies too. The courts, he says, reflect his city’s shifting cultural landscape.

“The baseball and football fields are empty. We’re meeting new needs of the population,” he says.

Xiong is one of many grassroots enthusiasts promoting the sport alongside the official USA Takraw Association. Xiong says the pathway to the Olympics is through developing players, teams

Syukur Saing, **left**, coaches Indonesia’s national women’s team, and Nur Qadri Yanti, **center**, plays on that team. **Right**: Indonesia’s national men’s coach, Tri Aji. The 1990 Asian Games in Beijing included sepak takraw for the first time, and in 1997 the first women’s championship was held in Thailand. Today, the sport’s governing body, the International Sepaktakraw Federation (ISTAF), is looking toward inclusion in the Olympics.



## ISTAF National Associations

- |                  |                  |
|------------------|------------------|
| 1 Indonesia      | 17 Philippines   |
| 2 Malaysia       | 18 Pakistan      |
| 3 Laos           | 19 Australia     |
| 4 Cambodia       | 20 Sri Lanka     |
| 5 Bangladesh     | 21 Singapore     |
| 6 Brunei         | 22 Thailand      |
| 7 India          | 23 Vietnam       |
| 8 Iran           | 24 Canada        |
| 9 Chinese Taipei | 25 Puerto Rico   |
| 10 Japan         | 26 United States |
| 11 South Korea   | 27 Brazil        |
| 12 China         | 28 Colombia      |
| 13 Myanmar       | 29 France        |
| 14 Macau         | 30 Germany       |
| 15 Nepal         | 31 Switzerland   |
| 16 Oman          |                  |



and local leagues, while showcasing the US track record of success at King's Cup competitions.

In the meantime, sepak takraw is no pathway to fortune: Even at the highest international levels, almost all of the players and coaches are dedicated amateurs who juggle training with day jobs.

In Singapore, a tiny city-state of less than six million people, the national team trains three nights a week after a full day of work.

"I know they're tired but they come here, they give me 100

percent," says Salleh, a full-time high school coach by day who coaches a national team of players that includes government workers, police and civil defense officers.

For Indonesian national men's coach Tri Aji, part of the reason Thailand is successful is the frequency of tournaments there. For his team to stay competitive, they try to foster unity while training together. "There must be a vision of a mission to represent Indonesia together," says Aji, a 2003 and 2011 medalist at the Southeast

Sepak takraw national teams now play in Kyrgyzstan, Jordan, Germany, Brazil and more than two dozen other countries including the us, where Minnesota Viking's football mascot Viktor and team member Kyle Rudolph try to play on one of four newly constructed sepak takraw courts in Saint Paul, Minnesota, built with the help of a \$100,000 grant in 2017 from the Minnesota Super Bowl Host Committee Legacy Fund and U.S. Bank's Places to Play grant.

COURTESY U.S. BANK



Asian Games and now a university lecturer in sports science.

What may also achieve on-court synergy for the Indonesian players is their early morning routine.

Before first light, the call to prayer echoes from speakers of a nearby mosque.

Inside the training center, part of a sprawling recreation complex founded by Indonesian badminton legend Tommy Sugiarto, the kitchen staff prepare breakfast and many of the players are already in the canteen.

“Physical and mental discipline, plus technique and the right attitude, are what it takes to be a good player,” says Syukur Saing, the coach of the women’s team.

By 7 a.m. the women are starting with stretching, running, skipping rope and, in a circle, volleying a ball back and forth with their feet.

“I’ve been interested in sepak takraw since I was little,” says team member Nur Qadri Yanti, a policewoman from South Sulawesi province. “I love it because of the chance to achieve something.”

The men start about 9 a.m. After warm-up, some face off in a mock game as coach Aji uses a tennis

racket to smash ball after ball at players from the other side of the net.

To build spring for his gravity-defying leaps, striker Rijal does sets of jumps up onto a wooden box that stands chest-high. At home in eastern Java, he says he trains and plays every day after finishing his job as a government worker.

“Sepak takraw is part of the daily activities in my village,” he says.

**A**t a community center in Jakarta, a tournament for high school students draws teams from across the country who compete for six days each November. It’s part of Indonesia’s efforts to invest in grassroots initiatives to bring new players into the sport.

As crowds pound drums, chant and cheer, scouts from the national team keep keen eyes out for talent. The Ministry of Youth and Sports funds the travel, hotel and food costs for the hundreds of players and coaches here.

“This is originally an Indonesian sport,” says Muhammad Yunas, the ministry’s coordinator of the tournament. “The participants are still

***I’ve been interested  
in sepak takraw since  
I was little. ... I love it  
because of the chance  
to achieve something.***

**—Nur Qadri Yanti,  
Indonesian national team player**

Boys play sepak takraw after school in Pada Cengnga village, South Sulawesi, adding potential to a sport that is counting heavily on a new generation of players. “With the continuing growth of the sport around the globe,” Abdul Halim Kader, ISTAF secretary-general, told *Asian Geographic*, “the ISTAF is confident that in the near future, sepak takraw will be recognized by the International Olympic Committee.”





**Above:** Practicing serve returns in a rice paddy in Pada Cengnga village, South Sulawesi, Heri Udin flies high toward a ball tossed by his teammate. The field, Udin says, offers a soft landing for practicing such extreme kicks. **Left:** Udin and his friends take a break after practicing.



young, but they are the future to make a strong national team.”

On the courts, even at this junior level, the pace and the high-flying kicks are explosive.

“I want to do the best for my province in takraw,” says Muhammad Fatur Rahmat, the 17-year-old captain of his team from South Sulawesi. “I want to keep playing and would love to join the national team.”

**A**cross Southeast Asia, sepak takraw gets regular media coverage—especially during competitions—and Facebook pages dedicated to the sport can have hundreds of thousands of followers.

Outside the region, however, news stories tend to treat the sport as an intriguing curiosity for an audience that knows little about it.

Kader, of ISTAF, regards the relationship with the Olympic Channel as a way to power loftier ambitions.

“The chances for sepak takraw to be listed in the Olympic Games are brighter now that the Olympic Channel has given the green light to promote the sport,” he says.

“As people around the world learn more about it, I’m confident sepak takraw will attract more fans who enjoy the thrill of flying high.” 🌐



**John O’Callaghan** is a former Reuters journalist who has spent much of his career working, living and traveling in various parts of Asia. **Beawiharta** is an award-winning Indonesian photojournalist. He formerly worked for Reuters some 20 years covering events across Asia. He is currently working independently for various publications and NGOs.



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# THE MIDDLE EAST



# ON A PLATE

WRITTEN AND

PHOTOGRAPHED BY

LARRY LUXNER

**O**ne sunny spring afternoon in 1983, I was driving a rental car near Syria's border, admiring a spectacular view. I stopped and stepped out to take a photograph. That's when I saw

it: Lebanese license plate 316205. It was lying alone, discarded in the tall grass, its silver Arabic script and numbers handsome on its black background. This discovery stirred a fascination in me that became a 37-year hobby of license plate collecting. This first find remains on prominent display among what are now 463 others in my collection, 50 of which are from countries of the Middle East and North Africa. These include every country in the 22-member Arab League except Comoros. I've even been fortunate enough to acquire plates from five of the seven Trucial States that since 1971 comprise the United Arab Emirates—only Ajman and Fujairah are still missing.

Like most collectors today, I obtain most of my tin (sometimes plastic, sometimes aluminum) rectangles from eBay or organized plate-collector meetups. But as a journalist who travels frequently, there's nothing more satisfying than going somewhere and coming home with an unexpected, unusual plate—and a story.

For example, one came to me in 1992 when an Egyptian taxi driver taking me to Cairo International Airport was thrilled to sell me the spare license plate lying in his trunk that I noticed while loading my luggage. In 2001, while in

**From top:** Oman; Saudi Arabia; Bahrain; Aramco; Jordan; Kuwait; Djibouti; Oman; Palestine; Egypt. **Opposite:** The author displays his first find.

Bethlehem, I visited a metal shop in the process of minting new plates, and the proprietor happily sold me 10 expired ones that were useless to him. Years later, I happened upon several rare local plates while perusing a junkyard in Djibouti City, capital of Djibouti. In 2007 an assignment took me to Aleppo, where hidden among the treasures in the market of the city's historic citadel, I found a lone Syrian license plate from the early 1960s: Its owner wanted \$500; we settled on \$200.

I'm not the only collector who appreciates the variety of colors, designs and alphabets on plates from the Middle East. Ross Day, archivist of the Automobile License Plate Collectors Association (ALPCA), says most of its members focus on North American license plates, and it's a handful of dedicated others who collect from around the world, many from Muslim-majority countries.

"Their motivations are no different from their colleagues: an interest in license plate design and manufacture, a facility with non-Roman scripts or an attraction to a plate's historical and geopolitical context," he says, explaining that collectors often have personal or professional interests in regions from where they collect.

In the United States (us), Canada and Mexico, plates come in a standardized 15-by-30-centimeter size, mass-produced in factories and, frequently, in prisons. Throughout the Middle East, however, plates vary much in shapes and sizes, and there is a history of craftsmanship. In some cases—particularly before the 1970s, metal was at times hammered out by hand, with skilled individuals raising letters, adding colors and shaping edges. For example, early plates from Saudi Arabia, Lebanon

and Syria are highly sought-after for their distinctively raised lettering and unusual cast-aluminum construction. The most common color combination on Middle Eastern plates is silver-on-black, though yellow, blue, green, red and orange are frequently used.

One especially avid collector, Jim Fox, says he enjoys plates from the Middle East and North Africa simply because the curves in Arabic script make them more visually appealing than the block letters of English and other Roman-based alphabets.

"They've become somewhat of a mystery to the average collector. I like them because they look so different than what we're used to seeing," he says.

Fox, 73, toured the globe for years as a drummer in the American rock-'n'-roll band James Gang. This afforded him the opportunity to amass a trove of international plates, taking to unimagined heights a hobby he began when he was seven years old. He says he once owned more than 30,000 plates but in the 1990s began downsizing. Now he owns 1,000, and about 60 are from the Middle East.

He recalls that one of his most memorable acquisitions came in 1971 in London. He and James Gang bassist Dale Peters schmoozed



**THROUGHOUT THE MIDDLE EAST, THERE IS A HISTORY OF LICENSE-PLATE CRAFTSMANSHIP.**



From top: Syria; Lebanon; Tunisia; United Arab Emirates; Malaysia; Sudan; Iraq; Libya.

their way into a posh hotel to try to meet the driver of a valeted Lamborghini in which they had spotted, in the back seat, a silver-and-red license plate reading “Abu Dhabi 4.” After some dialog with hotel reception, Fox was informed this would be impossible, that the car belonged to a guest who wanted his privacy. A nearby bellhop overheard the conversation, however, and for a tip offered to call the driver’s room.

“Sure enough, he dialed the number and handed me the phone,” Fox says, who explained to the man who picked up the phone he was an American musician in want of the back-seat license plate. Then the driver got on the phone.

“You want that thing? I’ll be right down,” Fox says, telling the story.

They waited in the lobby for a few minutes, the elevator doors opened and out walked “a shaykh” with a small entourage.

“He looked around, saw me and smiled. We shook hands. He said, ‘Come with me,’ unlocked the door of his Lamborghini and gave me the plate. Later on, I sent him some record albums,” Fox says. “I never heard from him again.”

The first country to issue license plates for automobiles was France, in 1893. The first us plates were issued in 1901. In the Middle East and North Africa, Egypt led the way: The October 1914 issue of *Ford Times* magazine shows a photo of a Ford Model T parked in front of the Pyramids in Giza with a red, white and black tag on it that was made of porcelain. Turkey began issuing license plates in 1920; Morocco began in 1923. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Arabian-American Oil Company (Aramco) cast its own aluminum plates for use inside the towns and oilfields of Saudi Arabia within the company’s concession area. The changes in plate sizes, shapes and materials have made collecting license plates another window into the diversity of the region.

Dick Parker of Greenwich, Connecticut, has collected license plates most of his life. After his kids grew up and moved away 20 years ago, the hobby intensified, he says.

“My wife and I are avid travelers, so I got hooked on international plates, especially those with unusual designs and colors, and the most unique designs were from the Middle East and Latin America,” Parker says.

He’s accumulated nearly 5,500 tags, including 381 from the Middle East and other Muslim-majority countries with non-Roman scripts, such as Urdu and Farsi.

Among his prize plates, he says, “Saudi plates from the 1950s and 1960s were almost all cast, and

**AS PLATE SIZES, SHAPES AND MATERIALS CHANGED, IT HAS MADE COLLECTING LICENSE PLATES ANOTHER WINDOW INTO THE DIVERSITY OF THE REGION.**





**Above:** Plate collector Dick Parker sifts through his collection of more than 380 Middle Eastern plates at his home in Greenwich, Connecticut. “The most unique designs were from the Middle East and Latin America,” he says. **Right, from top:** Morocco; Pakistan; Mauritania.

these cast plates always command a premium because of their uniqueness.” In recent years, he notes, some buyers of such plates have been locals seeking something exotic yet with a heritage. “They can’t find any of the older stuff locally, so they’ve been bidding extremely high amounts for these older plates at various auction venues, both online and in person here in the States.”

One even set a world record for the most expensive license plate: Emirati executive Saeed Abdul Ghafour Khouri in 2008 paid the equivalent of us \$14.3 million for “Abu Dhabi 1.”

Another well-known collector of Middle Eastern license plates is Vincent Moens of Paris, who began collecting in 1980 at age 15 and has since acquired 10,000 plates, including about 1,000 from the Middle East and North Africa. Travel and an overseas move in 1979 allowed him to gather plates from around the globe during the 1980s and 1990s.

“During those years, plates were easy to get—and quite cheap too. The Internet changed it all,” he says.

Today, Moens runs a Facebook group called “License Plates from Former Countries and Colonies,” with 143 members. Other Facebook groups, such as “License Plates of the Arabic/Arab World,” with 202 members, and “License Plate Collectors,” with 9,500 members, continue to attract enthusiasts. And for Day, who continues his work as an archivist with ALPCA, the interest in international license plates draws the curious and the avid every day, and Middle Eastern plates remain among the most sought after.

“Worldwide, the notion of preserving—let alone collecting—license plates is, well, foreign. And there is always the possibility of restrictions on the possession or export of license plates, which may be considered government property,” Day says. “While I have only a few Arabic plates in my own collection, they hold a very special place.”

As they do for my collection—starting with 316205, which, if I had been in a bit more of a hurry that day, might still be weathering in the tall grass by the road. ☹



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While traders, herders, soldiers, pilgrims, travelers and more have crisscrossed the central Arabian Peninsula for thousands of years, it is now possible to identify who was likely the first person to go as a tourist in the modern sense of the word: Geraldine Rendel.

In 1937, at age 52, she accompanied her husband, George, a British diplomat, on a three-week, east-to-west traverse of the five-year-old Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Along the way, she kept a journal that, though intended originally for publication, remained in her family for 80 years.

She became not only the first Western woman to travel openly across Saudi Arabia as a non-Muslim, but also the first to be received in public by the kingdom's founder, King Abdulaziz Al Sa'ud, and the first to dine in the royal palace in the capital, Riyadh. Although she had been preceded into central Arabia by a tiny coterie of female travelers—notably Lady Anne Blunt, Gertrude Bell and Dora Philby—unlike them, she was neither a tenacious pioneering female traveler nor on an official mission.

Rather, she went along for the ride. Her purpose was the journey itself. Her account shows her to be a tourist with the decidedly modern attitude in which her personal responses to what she found form as important a part of her narrative as do her descriptions of, and background on, the places and people she encountered.

Until the 1930s a journey across the Arabian Peninsula by any foreigner, male or female, was rare. Least frequently visited was the interior region of Najd, where accounts came to the West through the occasional writings of explorers, scholars, political

**Opposite:** Sailing from Bahrain to the east coast of Saudi Arabia, George Rendel took this photo of Geraldine aboard the small wooden dhow arranged for them by Saudi King Abdulaziz Al Sa'ud's agent. "I was privileged to see and do things forbidden to the men who have explored the heart of Arabia," she wrote.

agents, horse-fanciers, English-speaking pilgrims and the occasional soldier, all traveling more on business than leisure. But in the 1930s came the search for oil, quickening modernization and deepening relations with a rapidly interconnecting world.

Diplomats and oil-company representatives came first, aided by the advent of the automobile and wireless telegraphy. With them also came cameras—a part of what became modern tourism in which the Rendels excelled. Both proved keen photographers,

and their images, now in the archives of the Royal Geographical Society in London and St Antony's College in Oxford, rank among the finest from the period.

At the time of the trip, 48-year-old George Rendel was head of the British Foreign Office's Eastern Department. He had been responsible for Britain's relations with Saudi Arabia since 1930, and in 1932 it was he who suggested "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" as the official name of the newly declared sovereign state.

When King Abdulaziz invited him to pay a semiofficial visit combining diplomacy with travel, the king included

Geraldine in the invitation. "I could hardly believe my good fortune," she wrote in the journal's first pages, noting "Permission to visit Nejd is rarely given to foreigners." The couple kept a detailed, handwritten diary, some two-thirds of it penned by Geraldine. It was this that she refined into her travelog that languished, probably for diplomatic reasons, unseen until 2017 when her grandson, Jonathan Rendel, offered it to Arabian Publishing in London.

Geraldine played no role in planning the trip that she refers to as her "Arabian holiday," even though, like the best tourism, it would prove a transformative experience. "In so far as it is the first record of a European woman's impressions of Riyadh and of

# *The* ARABIAN JOURNEY *of* GERALDINE RENDEL

Written by WILLIAM FACEY  
Photographs by GEORGE and GERALDINE RENDEL / Getty Images

I stepped off the quay into the boat. ... It was like slipping into another dimension and finding surprisingly that one fitted in.  
—GERALDINE RENDEL



"With the help of a chair and in spite of the folds of my 'aba I mounted onto the high narrow parapet, and looked out over a city of flat-roofed houses and little open courts, set in the heart of an oasis," wrote Geraldine of her first impressions from the guesthouse of Amir Saud ibn Jiluwi in the city of Hofuf. "A brilliant sun beat down upon it and the light and shade were dazzling in their contrast."

this particular crossing of the Central Provinces of Arabia," she wrote of her travelog, "it may have an interest of its own. For, as a woman, I was privileged to see and do things forbidden to the men who have explored the heart of Arabia."

Her journal begins on February 21, 1937, outside the southern Iraqi port of Basra in a "frontier post" called al-Zubayr. The Rendels were on their way to Kuwait in a car convoy across the desert "with low thorny scrub not unlike gorse." From Kuwait they took ship to Bushire, Iran, and from there to Bahrain, arriving on March 3.

From Bahrain, the Rendels boarded a dhow supplied by King Abdulaziz's agent in Bahrain and al-Hasa (today's Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia), Abdulrahman al-Gosaibi. Upon reaching the little port of al-'Uqayr on Saudi Arabia's east coast—"a mere speck of civilisation, lying between the sea and the sands," Geraldine noted—they were met by Shaykh Hafiz Wahba, the king's representative in London. He became "our admirable host, guide, philosopher and friend," Geraldine recorded.

Such language can be read as an indication of the extent the Rendels were conscious of who they were and where they were going: representatives of the world's most extensive Western empire invited to travel through the heartland of the only Arab country that had never been subjected to European imperial control. Her tone is correspondingly respectful and unpatronizing.

At the same time, Geraldine also revealed herself a traveler in the romantic mould. Like many European travelers in the East, she proved susceptible to seduction by what she took to be unchanging tradition, the more redolent of *The*

*Thousand and One Nights* the better, while aspects of modernization and progressive change were often so familiar from home as to be unworthy of comment.

"I stepped off the quay into the boat feeling that adventure had begun," she wrote upon boarding the dhow for Saudi Arabia. "I was walking right out of my life into another of which I had no real conception ... I had passed through a magic door and it had shut behind me setting my fancy free. My everyday world grew dim; it was like slipping into another dimension."

Even George, a seasoned envoy, reflected similar wonder: "As we left the port at Bahrain ... we felt we were passing into another age and another world," he wrote in his own 1957 memoir, *The Sword and the Olive*.

From the moment they disembarked in al-'Uqayr, local dress became obligatory for both. Comprehensively veiled, Geraldine found the experience by turns a nuisance, an acknowledgement of local custom, and a surprisingly welcome screen against unwanted curiosity and, of course, the sun. In a society entirely unaccustomed to the public mixing of women with men, her presence elicited wildly contrasting responses.

"My position all through this journey was a mixture of that of a lady of the harem and of a European woman," she wrote. "When with the Amir [Crown Prince Saud], I was always ... put first in everything. But on some other occasions ... I stood without being presented to anyone, and no man would speak to me, or even offer me a chair, because no Nejdi looks at any woman outside his own family circle."

On the other hand, Geraldine received access

**Her descriptions of meeting women of al-Gosaibi and Al Sa'ud families afford rare insights into the side of Saudi Arabian life hidden from public view.**



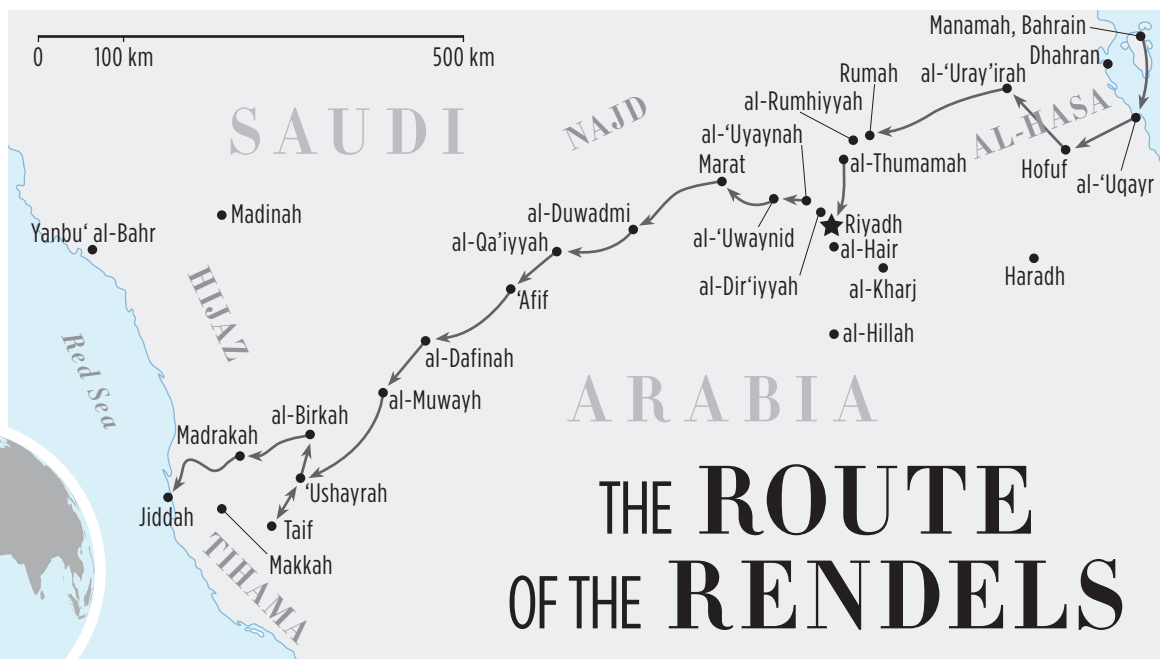
Of Hofuf's main market, Geraldine wrote, "We drifted into the crowd and I soon lost all self-consciousness in the picturesque strangeness of my surroundings." The Rendels shared a single camera, and thus it is not always possible to determine who took a particular photo.

to the private quarters of the Saudi elite and the women's side of society. Her descriptions of meeting the al-Gosaibi women and children and, later, those of Al Sa'ud in Riyadh and Jiddah afford rare insights into the side of Saudi Arabian life hidden from public view.

As her itinerary unfolded, Geraldine's enchantment intensified. On reaching Hofuf, about 90 kilometers inland from al-'Uqayr, she and George were accommodated in comfort in the guesthouse of the palace of Amir Saud Ibn Jiluwi. The ladies of the al-Gosaibi family in Hofuf "looked like figures out of some fine Persian miniature come to life," she wrote.

Her stay was not without at least one harmless faux pas. The Rendels

had arrived after dark, and eager to get a good view of the oasis after breakfast, Geraldine climbed to the palace parapet where she "looked out over a city of flat-roofed houses and little open courts" bordered by the gardens of the oasis and the desert beyond. Rapt by the view, she only slowly became aware of the growing noise from below. One court had filled with "the veiled forms of women and children [who] ... looked and pointed upwards towards me, and I realised to my confusion that word had gone round that the foreign lady at the Amir's Guest House was



to be seen on the roof of the Palace.” She dropped out of sight as quickly as she could.

Two days later, on their way to Riyadh, the Rendels spent a luxurious night at Crown Prince Saud’s hunting camp in a “romantic tent, which took one straight back to the Golden Age of Arabian history.” One may raise an eyebrow at her preference for the picturesque, reflecting orientalist fantasies, but this was not a prepackaged, sanitized “heritage experience” so common in mass tourism today. She showed true fortitude and open-mindedness in taking off into unknown territory and enduring the discomforts, thrills, spills and frustrations of real desert travel with patience and good humor.

Indeed, the evening before, the Rendels’s car convoy had been caught in a sandstorm and separated from the vehicles carrying food and camp gear. “We were tentless and bedless and foodless,” she wrote. “Our car had only a canvas hood and was rapidly filling with sand and we were getting pretty cold.”

Then the trucks began to arrive. “The kitchen lorry, alas, was still to seek; but a camp bed and shelter from the bitter wind and driving sand was immeasurable relief. We turned in hungry but cheerful; and incredibly, in spite of the roaring of the wind and the rocking of the tent, slept sound.”

The Rendels were devout Catholics, but far from alienating them from their hosts and the people among whom they traveled, their own faith, it turned out, predisposed them to deeper appreciation of the all-pervasive religious outlook of Najdi society. And far from being irritated by relaxed attitudes to schedules, they relished the contrast with their own time-tyrannized lives at home. On the way to Riyadh, George reflected on the tenor of travel in Saudi Arabia, calling it “a strange liberation from the servitudes of European life. ... The only fixed points in time are sunrise and sunset and the hours of prayer.”

The group’s halts for prayer en route “won our increasing respect,” he wrote in his memoir, going on to note that many of the Arabs he’d met



**Above:** En route to Riyadh the Rendels stopped at this encampment of one of the largest Bedouin tribes, Al Murrah, to ask for camel milk. “I found it quite delicious,” Geraldine noted. **Right:** In Riyadh, George photographed Geraldine in ceremonial attire at the newly built Badi’ah palace. In the background stands Shaykh Hafiz Wahba, Saudi Arabia’s representative in Britain. **Far right:** Outside Taif in western Saudi Arabia, George posed before a ride into the Shafa hills.



expressed favor toward those of other faiths over those with none.

In Riyadh the Rendels were received warmly by the crown prince, whom they knew from his visit to London in 1935. As aficionados of traditional architecture, they were thrilled to be accommodated in the height of Najdi style, in the New Palace at al-Badi’ah, in the nearby Wadi Hanifah. “What a luxury this was after four days with only G.’s small shaving mirror and my own handglass in a dark tent,” wrote Geraldine.

The king himself was away, on the coast in Jiddah, as the pilgrimage season was in full swing at the nearby holy cities of Makkah and Madinah. The meetings the Rendels had with Crown Prince Saud proved both formal and informal. At a private dinner on the last evening, Geraldine was even able to dispense with her veil. The Rendels left Riyadh for Jiddah on March 12 for what was essentially a sightseeing jaunt southwest across the rest of Saudi Arabia. The scenic route took them first past al-Dir’iyyah, the ancestral home of the Al Sa’ud on the outskirts of Riyadh, and their photographs provide an especially valuable record. This impressive and ruined city was capital of the first Saudi state,

**“We turned in, hungry but cheerful; and incredibly, in spite of the roaring of the wind and the rocking of the tent, slept sound.”**



“It is undoubtedly beautiful and was a revelation to me of how fine modern Arabian architecture can be,” wrote Geraldine of the central palace and square in Riyadh, with its main gate and colonnade connecting it to the Great Mosque. **Left:** Posing at the top of the palace, Amir Saud ibn Abdulaziz—later King Saud—stands with his sons Muhammad, left, and Fahd.

including al-‘Uyaynah, Marat, Duwadmi, Dafinah and Muwayh, en route to ‘Ashayrah, a wooded area in the Hijaz borderlands used for caravan stops. Next came the highlight: a southward leg to the scenic highland town of Taif and the 2,130-meter Shafa escarpment. There they exchanged cars for horses and donkeys, and—when the sun set before they reached the top—overnight in a primitive and spectacular escarpment village.

“I couldn’t help wondering what would have happened in an English village in, say, the Lake District, if a train of twenty donkeys, six horses and some forty souls had arrived out of the blue at sundown and proposed to spend the night,” Geraldine

from 1744 to 1818, and it is now a restored UNESCO World Heritage Site and a showcase of new museums and venues for public events.

They continued along the timeworn Hijaz Road, passing through places

wrote. “I am afraid English hospitality would not have stood the test. These folk took it quite as a matter of course ... and prepared to kill and roast sheep to feed us all.”

Not only that, but “the best house in the village was placed at our disposal” and “a singsong” staged to honor the couple, with poets riffing to the beat of drums. “Several of [the verses] were about our unexpected arrival in the village. They boasted that they always had bread and coffee for all who might come.”

On March 17 they reached Jiddah, and by then they had traveled some 2,175 kilometers from al-‘Uqayr. As Saudi Arabia’s leading western port, Jiddah was home also to most resident British, American and other foreign representatives. They met nearly all of them, and George discussed political business with King Abdulaziz and Prince (later King) Faisal, the foreign minister.

With them also in Jiddah was a trio working for Standard Oil Company of California (Socal) that had followed the Rendels across Saudi Arabia in two light Ford cars: Max Thornburg, Fred Davies and Lloyd Hamilton. They proved genial, despite George pouring cold water on their hopes of making a major oil strike in the al-Hasa region where Socal had outbid British rivals in 1933 to win a royal concession to explore for oil. “It is doubtful,” he told them, “whether oil will be found in Hasa in commercial quantities.” He declared the future of Socal’s Saudi subsidiary, the California Arabian Standard Oil Company, “uncertain.” (Less than a year later drillers would make exactly the discovery George had ruled out, changing Saudi Arabia—and



While George rode horseback, Geraldine opted for a donkey for their ride into the Shafa hills near Taif. Sunset forced an impromptu overnight stay in a village, where Geraldine noted that “a singsong” was staged to honor the couple, with poets riffing to the beat of drums. “Several of [the verses] were about our unexpected arrival in the village. They boasted that they always had bread and coffee for those who might come.” **Left:** In Jiddah the couple met King Abdulaziz. “He seems to bring fresh air into any discussion, to brush away trivialities,” wrote Geraldine.

the world—forever.)

A high point for Geraldine came when the finance minister, Shaykh Abdullah al-Sulayman, arranged a tea party to introduce her to King Abdulaziz. She sat next to the monarch—the first occasion on which he had received any Euro-

pean woman in public. Like almost all foreigners who met him, Geraldine was impressed by his charm and charisma:

alities... [H]e is a man of simple habits; moderate in state, puritan in dress, frugal in food.

When the king “expressed the hope that I had not found the journey too tiring,” Geraldine replied she “had found it of absorbing interest. He answered that he feared it was a poor country, ill-repaying a visit. To this I replied that I should look back on my Arabian journey with the keenest pleasure all my life.”

She went on to visit to the royal harem in the Queens’ Palace. Here, with Prince Faisal and Dr. Midhat Shaykh al-Ard, physician to the royal family, in attendance, she met two of the king’s wives. Um Mansur (mother of Mansur) she described as the king’s “favourite wife,” who “seemed to float rather than walk ... with her draperies trailing about her like a figure in a dream.”

The younger Um Talal followed, wearing “a black gold-embroidered *deraya*. ... On their feet they had black patent leather slippers of the English variety known as pumps.” By then Geraldine had made an effort to master some Arabic, but she still needed the two men to interpret. “I expressed my pleasure at meeting,” she recounted, “saying how sadly I had missed the

society of my own sex whilst crossing Arabia. At this they laughed, the ice was broken and we talked freely.”

She closes her travelog with reflections on the position of women. While critiquing practices of seclusion and restriction, she also conceded:

Yet they appear happy and give one a real feeling of peace and content.

**“It was I who felt at times at a disadvantage and conscious of being somewhat blatant and out of place. ... There are points as well as drawbacks to every system.”**

Presently a stir in the vestibule outside announced the arrival of the King ... [who] shook hands with us [and] seated himself on the throne. ... From his photographs I had expected someone grim and stern. What I found was a combination of sweetness and strength, for which I was wholly unprepared. I understood how he might be loved as well as feared by his subjects. The large scale of his mind and outlook is at once apparent as he talks. ... Like other large-minded men, he seems to bring fresh air into any discussion, to brush away trivi-





In Jiddah on the west coast of the kingdom, near the end of their journey, the couple took numerous photographs in its market and environs. The Rendels' images are now one of several historically important collections of photographs of early Saudi Arabia. **Right:** Jiddah was the center of the kingdom's small foreign diplomatic corps, where the Rendels took lunch at the British Legation and George took this group photo.



What is more, a sense of dignity; a feeling that they are right with their world and suffer from no sense of inferiority. It was I who felt at times at a disadvantage and conscious of being somewhat blatant and out of place. ... There are points as well as drawbacks to every system.

The Rendels left Jiddah on March 22 by sea “with great reluctance” for “our pedestrian life” in London. The poignancy of departure infuses her brief account: “When I gave [butler] Mukhtar a small present as a souvenir of our common experience I think we both had a lump in our throats.”

Like the best tourists, Geraldine felt enlarged by “three weeks of unique experience which had more than justified my most exaggerated hopes.” She signed off her narrative, “My Arabian holiday was over. ... As I leaned over the taffrail and looked back across the water to the fast-fading mainland I thought of the widened horizons of time and space and mentally registered a determination—*inshallah*—to return.”

She never visited the kingdom again. The following year, George was appointed Minister to Bulgaria and, from there, a multitude of increasingly prestigious assignments followed. World War II broke out in 1939, precluding almost all travel to the kingdom, and Geraldine kept busy in London as the wife of a

high-ranking diplomat, deeply active in charitable work as well. She lived to age 81; George to age 90, and her account as “Saudi Arabia’s first tourist,” lives on. 🌐



**William Facey** is a historian and editor who has written extensively on Arabian travelers, British Muslims, the early photography of Arabia, and Arabian architecture and maritime history. After a career as a museum planner in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula states, he founded Arabian Publishing in London in 2002.



#### Related articles at [aramcoworld.com](http://aramcoworld.com)

Lady Evelyn Cobbold: Sep/Oct 2008  
Lady Anne Blunt: May/June 1980



#### For Further Reading:

*Across Arabia: Three Weeks in 1937*, by Geraldine Rendel, with a biographical introduction by William Facey, is forthcoming from Arabian Publishing, 9-780-99298-086-3.

Have you heard the story of the frail old man who emerged from a university lavatory with wasp nests in his skull? He couldn't ask who had led him there because someone had stolen his jaw. He wouldn't stand up for himself because he had lost his backbone. He didn't wave for help because parts of both of his arms had gone missing. He couldn't even point an accusing finger—those bones were lying against his left foot. If you are waiting for a punch line, don't. I assure you this is no joke. I witnessed this firsthand. In fact, I blame myself for all of it. I was his protector, his bodyguard, on duty for all of eternity.



**F**ull disclosure: You might call me a coffin. I was made of wood more than 2,000 years ago. I come from Kemet, the land you know as Egypt. I exist for one purpose, timeless and sacred: to protect my precious cargo from ravages of death in all its forms.

You probably refer to my consignment as a *mummy*, but where I came from, we called a body blessed with the rites that prepared it for the afterlife by the title *sah*. Your modern word, I must point out, comes from a medieval misunderstanding of the Arabic word *mumiyah*, a kind of bitumen that was used at that time in preparing bodies for burial. Calling my charge “a mummy” is like calling the remains of your uncle “an ointment.” It’s just not proper. But I suppose it is too late to correct the error. *Mummy* it must be, though please, use that term with respect.

In my time everyone in Kemet aspired to be a so-called mummy, with the five essential attributes of a living person: *Ren*, or birth name; *Ib*, or heart/soul; *Sheut*, or shadow; *Ba*, or personality; and *Ka*, or life force. Today, many of you tend to think of yourselves less fully—as just a body and a soul, of which only the latter endures. For my makers, having no body made somebody “nobody” in the truest sense. Thus they placed great care in preserving a person’s physical being for perpetual use by entrusting the body to the hands of priestly embalmers whose work might make you squeamish. But they were not the ghouls of your Hollywood films. No, their ministrations were necessary to sustain a life to be lived again.

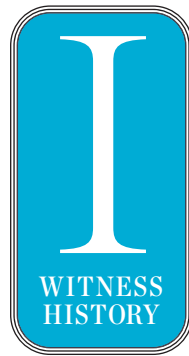
It’s important to know what they did, because I was made to safeguard their work. They started with an obsidian blade to slit the left abdominal flank of the deceased to remove and cleanse the viscera. Reciting sacred incantations, they temporarily packed the body with aromatic agents and began the essential

process of desiccation using natron, a natural preservative akin to a mixture of salt and baking soda. The liquids the body requires for one stage of life turn out to be anathema to the next.

The heart held special significance because it seemed to be the wellspring of intelligence and emotion. It—not the brain—mirrored the moods of a person, beating rapidly if aroused or agitated and slowly when calm. This is why the embalmers normally left the heart in place so it might guide the deceased. Since the heart embodied the behavior of a person, it also had to be weighed in the afterlife to determine its worthiness. This ritual judgment figures prominently in the *Book of the Dead*, a funerary text compiled around 1550 BCE. In it, the jackal-headed god of embalming, Anubis, places the heart on a scale opposite a feather of the deity Ma’at, symbolizing truth and justice. In the presence of Osiris, the god of resurrection and the underworld, any heart heavy with evil fell into the maw of Ammit the Devourer—a frightening composite of crocodile, hippopotamus, leopard and lion—whose meal rendered the deceased a lost, tormented nonentity. For the righteous, whose hearts are light, the *akh*, or resurrected self, found welcome in the great Hall of Osiris.

You might be surprised at the one item that failed to travel along with the *akh* to eternity: the brain. It was considered nonessential baggage because the embalmers could not find a way to extract it intact. It also decomposed too rapidly to save. During the embalming process, priests usually inserted a hooked probe through the ethmoid bone, in the nasal cavity, that could whisk the brain into a slurry, thus draining it out through the nostrils. They partially filled the cleansed cranium with a perfumed resin that often solidified into a dark glassy mass.

Always rushed by the hot sun, embalmers fought back not only with natron but incense and unguents, too, including palm wine, juniper oil, myrrh, cedar oil, cinnamon and beeswax. Toward the end of the 10-week ritual, the hollowed abdomen received a fresh packing of resin-soaked linen. Embalmers then wrapped the body in clean linen bandages and adorned it with panels of painted cartonnage, a pliable material that resembles your modern papier-mâché. The vibrant decorations on the body consigned to my care included a gilded pectoral with the kneeling figure of Nut, the winged goddess of the sky, and a colorful apron draped over the legs.



# I, ETERNAL

## BODY- GUARD

Written by  
FRANK L. HOLT

Illustrated by  
NORMAN  
MACDONALD





Unfinished sarcophagus and carpenters tools.

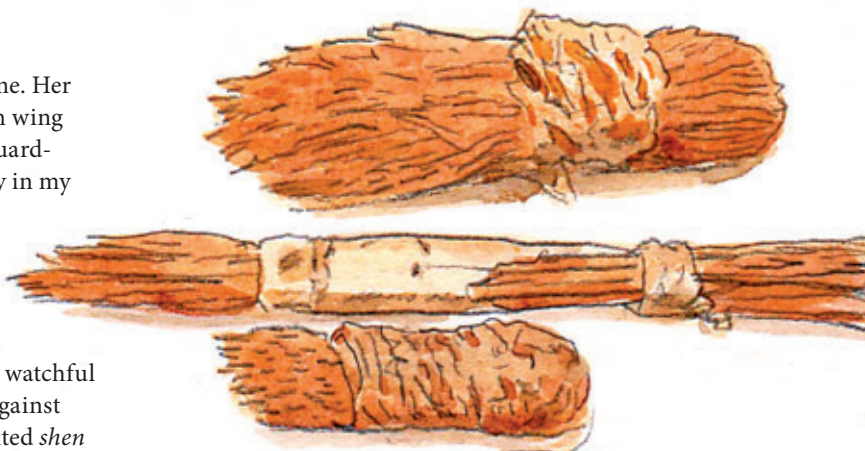
The skills of these embalmers, however, were not enough. My own makers were essential too. Protective magic that rallies benevolent gods against evil forces must always surround the charges in our care. That is why I am much more than a mere “coffin” or burial box: I, too, am as alive as the man inside me. That is why I take my shape with an idealized human face, framed by a painted black wig that drapes behind my ears and down over my chest. This matches the black ceremonial beard that gives me a mature and virile aspect. Painted on my thin layer of plaster are expressive dark eyes, ever wide and watchful. A broad floral collar in sweeping bands of color and intricate design ornament my body. Representing the god Horus, paintings of a head of a falcon wearing a sun disk top each side of the collar. As the devoted son of Osiris and enemy of Seth, Horus played an important role in the rituals of mummification. At either side of my painted collar appear figures of Isis, mother of Horus, and Nephthys, his aunt. These goddesses, sisters of Osiris and Seth, caress a totem of Osiris. In another vignette below the pairs, Anubis makes an offering.

Beneath my collar, as on the cartonnage, the goddess Nut spreads her protective wings across me. Her hands hold aloft two feathers of Ma’at. Under each wing stretch panels depicting the four sons of Horus, guardians of the internal organs removed from the body in my care: Imsety for the liver; Qubehsenuf for the intestines; Hapi for the lungs; and Duamutef for the stomach. Beneath them kneel more figures of Isis and Nephthys. At my feet two facing jackals lie in their shrines. Along both of my upper flanks, lined up behind images of the watchful lion-god Aker, 11 seated protectors wield knives against any approaching danger. On my base a large, painted *shen*

ring signifies eternity. My bottom half is shallower than the lid, to which it connects securely using eight mortise-and-tenon joints with locking pegs. Long, scaly serpents slither along white bands on each of my sides. All of these are not just decorations. They are what stand between my charge and utter destruction.

No small part of my job is to preserve also his name: Ankh-Hap it was, and it appears in the upper left register of the prominent hieroglyphic prayer painted on my lid. He was born of his mother, Ma’at Djehuty, and his name means “the Apis bull lives.” Beautiful to say, is it not? It is a name redolent of piety, much as you might name someone Theodore or Abdullah. Apis was an oracular god who was incarnate in the body of a black-and-white bull tended by priests in Memphis. Throughout much

The artist applied paint with brushes made of plant fibres.





The cat, the ibis and the hawk were protected animals. They were respected for the gods they represented, often mummified.

of pharaonic history, Apis bulls were venerated in a long succession of chosen calves, each of whose remains were mummified at the end of its reign.

In my hieroglyphic text, I call upon many gods to sustain my charge with essential provisions including bread, beer, meat, wine, milk, incense, linen and oil. Unlike your ideas about the futility of wordly gains, the Egyptians believed that one could—indeed, must—take all of it to the next world, or have it delivered by agreeable gods.

I only wish that I could have done my job better. I admit I have not always kept Ankh-Hap safely inside me. Try as I may, I have not

always marshalled effectively all the protective deities mentioned or pictured on my lid. May Osiris, Isis and Aker take pity on my scars of battle. I have lost my ceremonial beard to the greedy hand of some human thief. The tip of my nose has broken away. I have suffered from water damage, one of the two greatest dreads of the Egyptian burial industry—the other being fire—and yes, I bear evidence of smoke damage as well. I have been stabbed with modern metal tacks, stood up in classrooms, stored in strange places, and I have been stuffed with indignities like wads of a modern papyrus called newspaper.

But poor Ankh-Hap suffered far more. This is what happened.

“Going west” with the setting sun used to be an Egyptian way of describing death, but Ankh-Hap

*Ankh-Hap journeyed across an ocean we did not fully comprehend to a “Wild West” we could not have imagined: The us during your 19th century. We were not alone.*

journeyed across an ocean we did not fully comprehend to a “Wild West” we could not have imagined: The us during your 19th century. We were not alone. He and I were among at least 1,000 others who endured a veritable mummy migration. Ours was a diaspora fraught with its own dangers: Many of us were opened, our charges unwrapped and even dissected for public entertainment. Others were ground into medicine, and jars of *mumiya* crowded the shelves of apothecaries, marketed to cure everything from coughing, cramps, nausea and diarrhea to paralysis and poisoning.

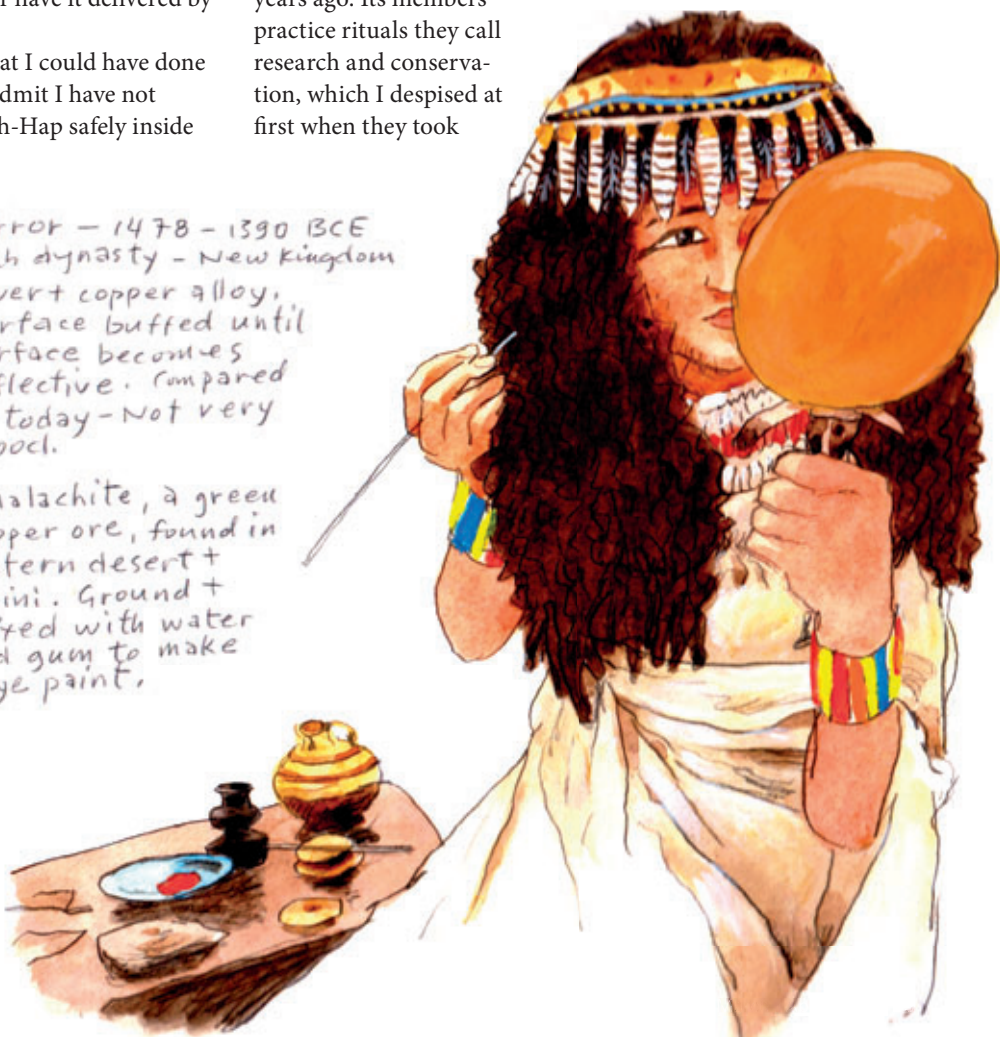
Others pulverized mummies into paints for artists, particularly to produce a once-fashionable pigment called *Mummy Brown*. You can see the remains of many ground-up Egyptians brushed onto canvases that hang today in the world’s finest art galleries.

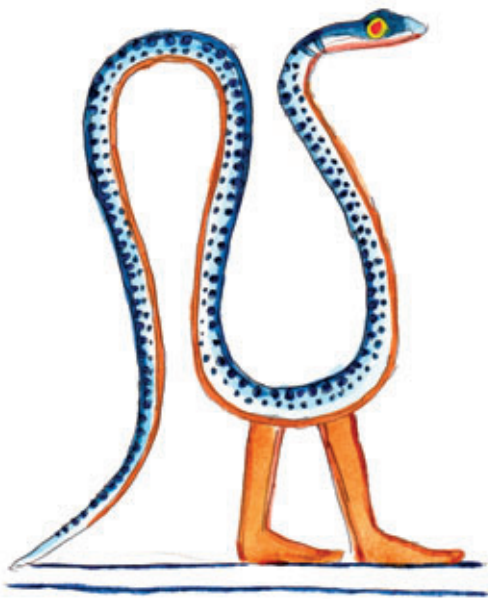
What you might admire, I mourn. Every one of those paintings frames an indictment of some coffin that failed its duty. Many of us do fail, of course. That is why you find more empty coffins than mummies in modern museums. At my present home, the Houston Museum of Natural Science, for example, I am surrounded by the envy of coffins bereft of their purpose. But I have a secret they do not know: They assume I protect Ankh-Hap inside me, but my story is not that simple.

I confessed this to a tribunal called the Houston Mummy Research Program that began investigating my case some 32 years ago. Its members practice rituals they call research and conservation, which I despised at first when they took

Mirror - 1478 - 1390 BCE  
18th dynasty - New Kingdom  
Silver + copper alloy,  
surface buffed until  
surface becomes  
reflective. Compared  
to today - Not very  
good.

Malachite, a green  
copper ore, found in  
Eastern desert +  
Saini. Ground +  
mixed with water  
and gum to make  
eye paint.





my charge away and seemed to rebury him nearby in a new kind of coffin at the University of Houston. It turned out it was only for a few days, yet I felt upstaged by this futuristic casket called a computerized tomography (CT) scanner. It tapped into energies at least as mystical as mine. At the

the spruce family, that were internally buttressing the body. These braces run down the arms and legs and along what is left of the spine. This discovery stunned the tribunal. Were they looking at the victim of an ancient crocodile attack? Had tomb raiders in search of amulets defiled and ripped apart this body before someone else



rewrapped and reburied him? Alternatively, was this evidence of a more recent crime perpetrated by profiteers who literally spruced him up for show and sale?

time only a few other mummies had ever been entombed in one of these contraptions, which have the unearthly ability to peer into all that lies hidden within the bandages and bones. This omniscience disclosed that the person I carried had died in his late 30s or early 40s; he stood at 163 centimeters, with signs of moderate arthritic degeneration. As a child he had suffered from anemia. On the embalming slab, after his brain had been removed through his nostrils, his head had tilted slightly to the left as the resin hardened inside it.

To help the tribunal solve the mystery, I volunteered small samples from one of the wooden poles connecting the head to the body, from the cloth that separately wrapped some of the displaced bones, and from a small sliver of my wooden flesh. (I refused them any samples from the body itself.) The sacrificed bits of wood and cloth then participated in a ceremony called *radiocarbon dating*. As a result, the tribunal found that I was constructed, at least in part, from wood that had been felled sometime between 1210 and 890 BCE—many centuries before the demise of my charge!

Then came some truly shocking revelations as this CT coffin exposed my failures. I shuddered when the tribunal learned that much of the skeleton of the body I was protecting was missing or displaced within his own wrappings. Except for a lone piece of pelvis and some toes, the lower part of his body appeared intact. Everything else, from the lower thoracic vertebrae upward, was a mangled mess. Only a severed spine, a few separately wrapped ribs, a piece of a scapula, a left humerus and only the right ulna and radius remained. He had two fake hands fashioned from cloth, but also parts of both real hands. Within the cranium, the scan revealed the horrific breach of my security that I spoke of earlier: adobe-style nests built years earlier in his skull by mud wasps.

The cloth wrapped around a few detached ribs proved to

The scan also revealed seven wooden slats, cut from a tree in



In the presence of Osiris, god of resurrection and the underworld, Anubis, the jackal-headed god of embalming, places the heart of the deceased on a scale opposite a feather.

be younger, about 60 CE to 580 CE. The wooden brace turned out to be recent, sawn between 1560 and 1840 CE. The tribunal determined that the original burial of Ankh-Hap, based on my design, probably took place between 300 and 30 BCE, during the Ptolemaic period and using very old, recycled wood for my construction. Ankh-Hap's body may have been vandalized and restored in Roman times, or perhaps displaced by an unknown usurper, but that is a secret I choose not yet to share. I cannot hide the fact, however, that the body of Ankh-Hap—or his replacement—fell upon harder times when it was internally rigged with wooden braces just a few centuries ago.

When separating the remains of my charge from me for the CT ritual, members of the tribunal uncovered more of my secrets. A recent dossier had lain hidden for nearly a century beneath the body. This included an American Express mailing label dated May 12, 1914, addressed to Ward's Natural Scientific Establishment in Rochester, New York. Crumpled newspapers were also found, all dated between March 25 and May 29, 1914, most of them issues of the *Rochester Herald*. This evidence placed me at Ward's on the eve of World War I. The tribunal wondered what I was doing there.

That I will tell you. Henry Augustus Ward founded Ward's Natural Scientific Establishment in 1862 as a supplier of minerals and artifacts to schools and museums. He personally collected specimens from Egyptian tombs, including "thousands of crocodile-mummies, of all sizes," he exported "to fill museums and other institutions," wrote Elbert Eli Farman, an American consul general to Egypt, in his memoirs.

Ward was there in the land of the pharaohs, in fact, collecting materials to sell at a time when mummies were like money waiting to be withdrawn from the banks of the Nile. They appeared in circus sideshows, society fêtes and storefront windows. Some were bought outright, some were rented by the day, and others were cobbled together into "Franken-mummies." A speculator could possess a passable mummy by spending \$78 (about \$1,872 today) for body parts at Ward's plus twice that amount for a coffin like me.

The tribunal knew that Mark Francis, a professor of veterinary medicine at Texas A&M University, was a customer of Ward's and that Francis had acquired me early in the 20th century. He propped me at the back of his lecture hall and let locals imagine all manner of nonsense: We were alleged to have emigrated in 1891 from the celebrated Valley of the Kings in Upper Egypt, where royals of the New Kingdom period were buried; my charge was erroneously labeled a tax collector for Ramses II.

*When separating the remains of my charge from me for the CT ritual, the tribunal uncovered more of my secrets.*

In 1921 the sci-fi-sounding name ANH-HR-H3CPJ was attached to my charge, whereupon freshmen were required to recite it whenever asked, "Who is the oldest man on campus?" Souvenir hunters chipped at me and plucked at the mummy until 1937, when we both were moved into a university museum. I thought we were safe inside a glass case, but then someone removed us and committed us to our most humiliating quarters: the men's restroom in an old storage building. When we finally emerged, my charge's jaw was already gone and his toes displaced. It was there that a hole in his face had allowed the mud wasps access to his dry, shady cranium.

In 1970 Texas A&M took pity on us and shipped our tattered remains to a properly curated home in the Houston Museum of Natural Science. Now, crowds of respectful well-wishers come to watch my silent vigil over the remains of somebody—or some bodies—still inside my wooden fortress. I suppose it really should not matter if I harbor Ankh-Hap or not, so long as I keep doing my best to protect some vestige of my beloved Kemet. Afterlife is good here. May Osiris, Isis and Aker bless my task eternal. ☸



**Frank L. Holt** is professor of ancient history at the University of Houston as well as founder and director of the Houston Mummy Research Program, to whose members and contributors he expresses his thanks. When artist

**Norman MacDonald** ([www.macdonaldart.net](http://www.macdonaldart.net)) compared his own brushes, inks and watercolors in his Amsterdam studio to records of those in Egypt as long as 3,500 years ago, he says he "realized again how little the tools of a painter's craft have changed."



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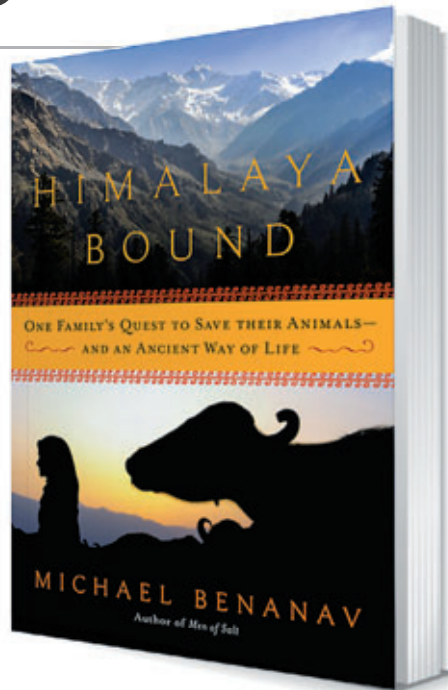
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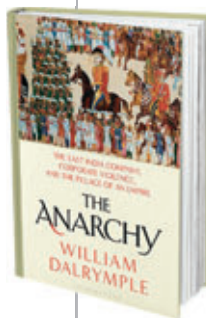
**“[The Van Gujjars’] spring migration into the Himalayas ... sounded like an incredible undertaking: entire families marching with herds of water buffaloes into the highest mountains on earth. And it also seemed as though the tribe was on the cusp of irreversible change.”**

### Himalaya Bound: One Family’s Quest to Save Their Animals—And an Ancient Way of Life

Michael Benavav. 2018, Pegasus Books, 9-781-68177-6-224, \$26.95 hb.

For many, the term *nomad* evokes images of deserts, camels and unbroken horizons. Michael Benavav brings a dramatic new focus to the subject as he accompanies a family of the Muslim Van Gujjar tribe as it guides water buffaloes from India’s lowland Shivalik Hills to the meadows of the Himalayas. The family must navigate both challenging topography as well as the practices of an increasingly recalcitrant forestry department, upon which it relies for permits to visit summer pastures—now in a national park—where the tribe’s herds have grazed for far longer than the department has existed. As officials encourage the Van Gujjars to settle in villages and abandon their traditions, we learn how the forest nomads deal with authorities to continue a way of life that has lasted more than a millennium. Benavav treats his subjects with respect, never portraying them as quaint or primitive, in documenting what might be the last generation of Van Gujjars to make this trek.

— DOUG BAUM



### The Anarchy: The East India Company, Corporate Violence, and the Pillage of an Empire

William Dalrymple. 2019, Bloomsbury Publishing, 978-1-63557-3-954, \$31.50 hb.

### Company Curiosities: Nature, Culture and the East India Company, 1600–1874

Arthur MacGregor. 2018, Reaktion Books, 978-1-78914-0-033, \$60 hb.

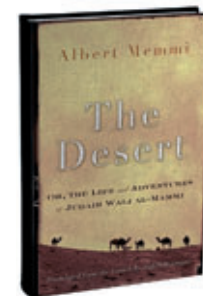
India’s Mughal Empire produced about a quarter of the world’s GDP in the 16th century. Eyeing that bounty, London merchants established the East

India Company (EIC) in 1599, which ultimately controlled half of the world’s trade as “the most power-

ful corporation in history.” How it achieved this dominance is *The Anarchy’s* central narrative. The story pivots on two figures: 18th-century Shah Amal, a “handsome and talented Muslim prince” who valiantly tried to halt British encroachment; and the EIC’s governor of Bengal, Robert Clive, “a violent, utterly ruthless and ... mentally unstable corporate predator,” whose campaign to subdue the Mughals “laid the foundations for British rule in India.” During its near-300 years of economic domination, the EIC was a key source of revenue, material goods and information on the natural world. This storyline continues in *Company Curiosities*, which offers a detailed overview of the variety of items that shipped west, such as animals and plant life, courtesy of EIC agents. In the Kathmandu Valley alone, some 40 species of mammals and more than 120 species of birds were discovered, while large mammals, such as rhinos and elephants, were among the EIC’s “most ambitious”

exports. Individual “gifts of natural and man-made curiosities flowed back to England,” many obtained on Clive’s watch. Given Clive’s reputation, it is no wonder that, as *The Anarchy* observes, one of the first Indian words to enter the English vocabulary was the Hindustani slang for plunder—“loot.”

— TOM VERDE



### The Desert: Or, the Life and Adventures of Jubair Wali al-Mammi

Albert Memmi. Judith Roumani, tr. 2015, Syracuse UP, 978-0-81561-0-557, \$19.95 pb.

*The Desert* draws on “techniques of North African oral literature and Oriental genre,” its translator explains. The story of the roving adventures of the author’s fictional





ancestor, al-Mammi, blends biographical history with “medieval North African philosophy.” The life of al-Mammi, the “courtier, politician, and chronicler of his times” is based closely on the real-life Ibn Khaldun. Al-Mammi’s engagement in 1401 with Amir Timur, and his diplomatic mission to the court of Spain’s Pedro the Cruel, are true episodes from Ibn Khaldun’s life that provide historical backdrops for a journey of spiritual education. As he travels through a precolonial Maghrebi society in which Jews and Muslims coexist peacefully, he reflects, like Ibn Khaldun, on the rise and fall of kingdoms and the wisdom of values rooted in ancient North African “traditional civilization.”

—TOM VERDE



**Islands in a Cosmopolitan Sea: A History of the Comoros**

Iain Walker. 2019, Oxford UP, 978-0-19007-1-301, \$59.95 hb. There are few books in English about the Union of the Comoros, the island nation off southeastern Africa. This is a useful guide, but one unlikely to encourage either tourism or investment. Iain Walker details

Comoros’ cultural links to the Hadhramaut region in Yemen, East Africa and Madagascar, interpreting the interplay of Islamic, Swahili and Malagasy influences. He describes the islands’ strategic importance as waystations for the Portuguese, English and French en route to India in the 16th and 17th centuries and their eclipse following the advent of the steamship and the completion of the Suez Canal, which rendered the islands a commercial backwater. In the wake of independence from France in 1975, came a series of failed coups and new constitutions, along with the main island of Mayotte’s vote to remain with France. The book includes compelling maps and recommendations of titles for further reading.

—CHARLES O. CECIL



**Ottoman Dress and Design in the West: A Visual History of Cultural Exchange**

Charlotte A. Jirousek with Sara Catterall. 2019, Indiana UP, 9-780-25304-2-163, \$32 pb. This book traces the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Europe by considering the influence

of Ottoman dress on costumes in the West from the 1300s to the turn of the 20th century. Arab-influenced fashions, along with textiles, entered the West alongside the Crusades, including elaborate decorative headdresses, buttons, open gowns and long hanging sleeves, and they introduced frogging, or fasteners, on military uniforms. The author

provides a clear historical context for the cultural exchange, which until the 18th century ran largely one way. The book features informative illustrations and a useful glossary, as well as a comprehensive bibliography and notes. While some of the author’s statements can be debated (she perhaps attributes too much to Turkic influences and not enough to other parts of the world), readers interested in East-West relations, fashion and design, textiles and the sociology and economics of costume history will find much to enjoy.

—CAROLINE STONE



**Palmyra 1885: The Wolfe Expedition and the Photographs of John Henry Haynes**

Benjamin Anderson and Robert G. Ousterhout,

2016, Cornucopia Books, 9-780-95659-4-877, \$30 pb.

**John Henry Haynes: A Photographer and Archaeologist in the Ottoman Empire 1881–1900**

Robert G. Ousterhout. 2016,

Cornucopia Books, 9-780-95659-4-860, \$35 pb. Born in 1849 on a farm in the Appalachian Mountains of the northeastern us, John Henry Haynes traveled to the Middle East numerous times as a young man to participate in digs and photograph archeological sites. His books tell a personal story of travel and adventure, rich with beautiful photographs and poignant descriptions of each scene. In 1885 he joined the Wolfe Expedition, traveling across the deserts of Syria to Mesopotamian sites. At the request of the Archaeological Institute of America, the expedition halted for five days at Palmyra. In that short span of time Haynes produced 100 photographs of the site. *Palmyra 1885* presents numerous breathtaking photographs of Palmyra’s Monumental Arch, colonnades and sculptural details, as well as the tower tombs from the Valley of the Tombs—sites all now damaged or lost through war. Haynes later joined the Babylon Exploration Fund expedition to Nippur, a Mesopotamian city in the southern marsh region of today’s Iraq. In 1900, he returned alone to Nippur where he discovered more than 23,000 cuneiform tablets dating to around 750 BCE and reputed to be the largest single Sumerian literature resource. Haynes took masterful photographs of the excavation at Nippur,

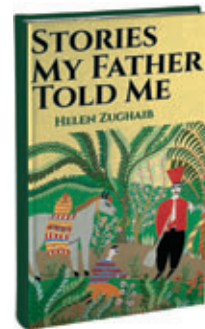


taking in the archeological site and the surrounding landscape, and even capturing the serpentine line of laborers in the sunlight and shadows winding through the excavation. While senior academics and lead members of the expeditions took much of the credit for Haynes’ important archeological work, these books vividly demonstrate his photographic achievements through some of the most revealing, beautifully conceived images of the Middle East of his era.

**Stories My Father Told Me: Memories of a Childhood in Syria and Lebanon**

Helen Zughuib and Elia Zughuib. 2020, Cune Press, 978-1-95108-2-659, \$24 hb.

As its title implies, this book reveals stories of a childhood in Syria and Lebanon during the 1930s and 1940s. It takes its title after Helen Zughuib’s



exhibition of paintings depicting her father Elia’s childhood memories. Each tale has its own vividly patterned and brightly colored illustrations. Many of the stories involve Elia’s visit to his grandparents’ home in the foothills of Mount Sannine in Lebanon. The short stories involve three generations of his family and provide a valuable record of the ways of the old world. Many of the stories provide a lesson, while others are reminiscences of a life once lived in Damascus. There are many themes to glean from the book, each of them worth reading.

—MARGARET POWIS

**Tanbûr Long-Necked Lutes along the Silk Road and Beyond**

Hans de Zeeuw. 2019, Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, 978-1789691696, \$64 pb.

The long-necked lute, known as the *tanbûr*, or *tanbur*, said to have originated in Persia during the Sasanian period (224–651 CE), spread east and west along the Silk Roads. Folk musicians and court virtuosos took up the instrument, and its popularity spurred the development of many similar instruments. The tanbur family now includes the Afghan, Uzbek and Turkmen *dutar*; the *saz*, *buzuq*, and *bouzuki* of Anatolia, the Caucasus, the Levant and southeastern Europe; the *setar* of Iran, Pakistan, and Kashmir; the *dombra* of Kazakhstan and the *topshur* of Mongolia; and the Afghani, Uzbek and Tajik *dambura*. The author has compiled a rich compendium covering the complex varieties of these instruments. After introducing the tanbur, he explains how the instruments are made and played, followed by sections exploring the related instrument families. More than 125 illustrations and photographs, including fret-tuning diagrams and an extensive discography, beckon the reader.

—KAY HARDY CAMPBELL



# EVENTS

Highlights from  
aramcoworld.com

## CURRENT / MARCH

**I Am ... Contemporary Women Artists of Africa**, takes its name from a 1970s feminist anthem and draws on a selection of artworks by women artists from the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art's permanent collection to reveal a more contemporary feminism that recognizes the contributions of women to the most pressing issues of their times. With experimental and sophisticated use of diverse media, the 28 artists offer insightful and visually stunning approaches to matters of community, faith, the environment, politics, colonial encounters, racism, identity and more. National Museum of African Art, **Washington, D.C.**, through March 15.

**Graffiti as Devotion along the Nile:** *El-Kurru, Sudan* provides a unique glimpse into the lives of individuals in antiquity. Religious devotion in

Kush (in what today is northern Sudan) involved pilgrimage and leaving informal marks on temples, pyramids and other monumental structures. Graffiti is found in temples throughout the Meroitic period of Kush (ca. 200 BCE–350 CE), when it bordered Roman Egypt. They represent the few direct traces of the devotional practices of private people in Kush and hint at individual thoughts, values and daily lives. This exhibition explores the times and places where Kushite graffiti was inscribed through photos, texts and interactive media presentations. Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, **Ann Arbor, Michigan**, through March 29.

**Queen Nefertari: Eternal Egypt** offers experiences of magnificent palaces and tombs, including the burial chamber of Nefertari, considered one of the greatest artistic achievements in the Valley of the Queens. It also invites exploration of daily life of the village where tomb build-

ers and artisans lived, worked and worshiped more than 3,000 years ago. The exhibition brings together works that present the richness of life in ancient Egypt with a focus on the role of women as goddesses, queens and commoners. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, **Kansas City, Missouri**, through March 29.

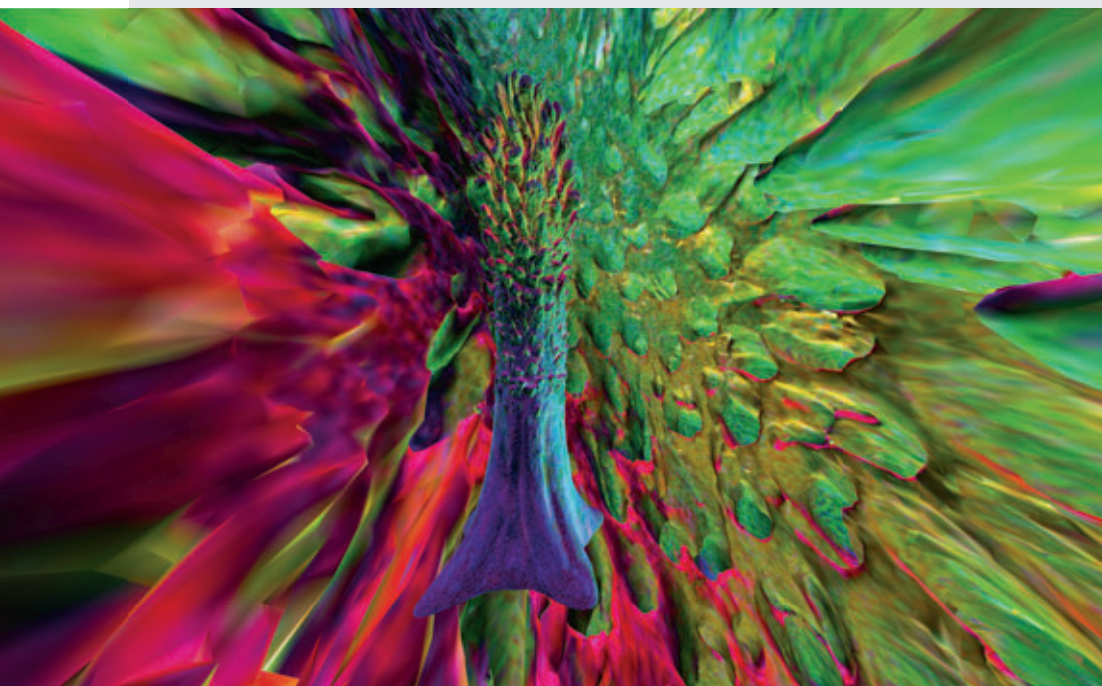
## CURRENT / APRIL

**Unfinished Journeys** shows 35 paintings by artist Helen Zughaib, who since the uprisings of the 2011 "Arab Spring" has created art that draws narrative inspiration from the paintings of Jacob Lawrence, who documented migrations of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North. Zughaib's boldly colorful, graphic style adds to the power of images that speak universally to struggle, uncertainty, endurance and risk as well as to hope and beauty. Creative Alliance, **Baltimore**, through April 11.

**21,39 Jeddah Arts: I Love You, Urgently** asks local and international artists, architects, designers and thinkers to seek tangible solutions to today's issues and formulate alternative and symbiotic ways to inhabit the planet. The title of this seventh-edition exhibition is an address that departs from scientific vernacular to emphasize the highly personal dynamics of today's society. Through displays, commissions and a series

of dialogs, talks and debates in the gallery spaces of the Saudi Art Council and in al-Balad, the historic city center of Jeddah, participants will address three themes: biomimicry, adaptability and specificity. **Jiddah, Saudi Arabia**, through April 18.

Film still of "The Return of the Old Ones," by Saudi Arabian-born Ayman Zedani, whose 2020 experimental film offers a poetic rendition of the story of oil that interrogates anthropocentric attitudes and their global consequences.



AYMAN ZEDANI



**Homeland Under My Nails:** *Mohammad Omar Khalil*: Selected prints (1964–present). Mohammad Omar Khalil, a painter, master printmaker and mentor practicing since the 1960s, is one of the most significant artists of his generation from Sudan and the Arab world. A long-overdue celebration of his life's work, *Homeland Under My Nails* is the first major United Kingdom solo exhibition of his work. The exhibition looks at the international sensibility of the artist, who has lived and worked in New York since the 1970s, trained in Sudan and Italy, and has continued to move between the United States and North Africa. The Mosaic Rooms, **London**, through April 26.

#### CURRENT / MAY

**Hassan Sharif:** *I Am The Single Work Artist* is the first major retrospective of the Emirati artist Sharif (1951–2016) in Europe. Sharif was one of the most influential artists from the Middle East of the 20th century. He is considered a leading pioneer of conceptual art and new experimental artistic approaches that reconceived a conventional understanding of time, space, form and social interactions and that continue to resonate significantly with the younger generation. The retrospective is the culmination of Sharif's long history with the Emirate of Sharjah, presenting around

150 works from the artist's diverse oeuvre, including early newspaper caricatures and comic-strip drawings, paintings, sculptural installations and assemblages. Kunst-Werke **Berlin**, through May 3.

**A Wonder to Behold:** *Craftsmanship and the Creation of Babylon's Ishtar Gate* explores ancient ideas about craftsmanship and the power of clay, glass and stone through the display of the surviving fragments of Babylon's iconic Ishtar Gate and Processional Way. Featuring close to 150 brightly colored large- and small-scale artworks from across the ancient Near East, the exhibition considers the creation of sacred spaces and objects, including monuments, divine statues, items of personal adornment and more. Babylon's Ishtar Gate, commissioned by Nebuchadnezzar in the sixth century BCE, testifies to the transformative powers of materials and making. Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, **New York**, through May 24.

**Rina Banerjee:** *Make Me a Summary of the World* brings together several of Kolkata-born American artist Banerjee's monumental installations in conversation with more than two dozen sculptures, as well as a thorough selection of works on paper, to create an otherworldly and multisensory space. Banerjee's works investigate the splintered experiences of identity,

tradition and culture prevalent in diasporic communities. These sensuous assemblages present themselves simultaneously as familiar and unfamiliar, thriving on tensions between visual cultures and raising questions about exoticism, cultural appropriation, globalization and feminism. Fowler Museum of University of California **Los Angeles**, through May 31.

#### COMING / MARCH

**Art Dubai Modern 2020** highlights presentations of 19 leading modernist artists from 11 countries of the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, making this the largest-ever edition of Art Dubai Modern. The show brings together a number of diverse practices, each of which exemplifies a unique vision and application of modernism ranging from the 1930s until the 1970s. It illustrates the spectrum of formal styles that each of the exhibited artists developed within his or her cultural and sociopolitical contexts, providing visitors with a unique opportunity to learn about some of the most remarkable figures of modernism from the region. Madinat Jumeirah, **Dubai**, March 25 through March 28.

#### COMING / APRIL

**Leila's Quest for Flight** begins when the optometrist shatters

Leila's dream of becoming a pilot and a menagerie of mythic birds gathers to help her accomplish her goal. Drawn from beloved Palestinian folktales, *Leila's Quest for Flight* incorporates music, dance and physical comedy. These dynamic shows are entertaining for all ages, connecting diverse cultural traditions to contemporary themes. South **San Francisco** Library, April 25.

#### COMING / MAY

**Omar Ba:** *Same Dream* brings together several of Ba's paintings depicting dictators and authority figures who lead regimes across the African continent and in other parts of the world, particularly where the legacies of colonialism persist. At times represented as hybrid beasts—part human, part animal—Ba often envelops his warlords in an abundance of lush flora and fauna. The hybrid world of Ba's painting ultimately evokes a shared cosmogony among humans, plants and animals. Contemporary **Calgary**, May 21 through August 16.

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