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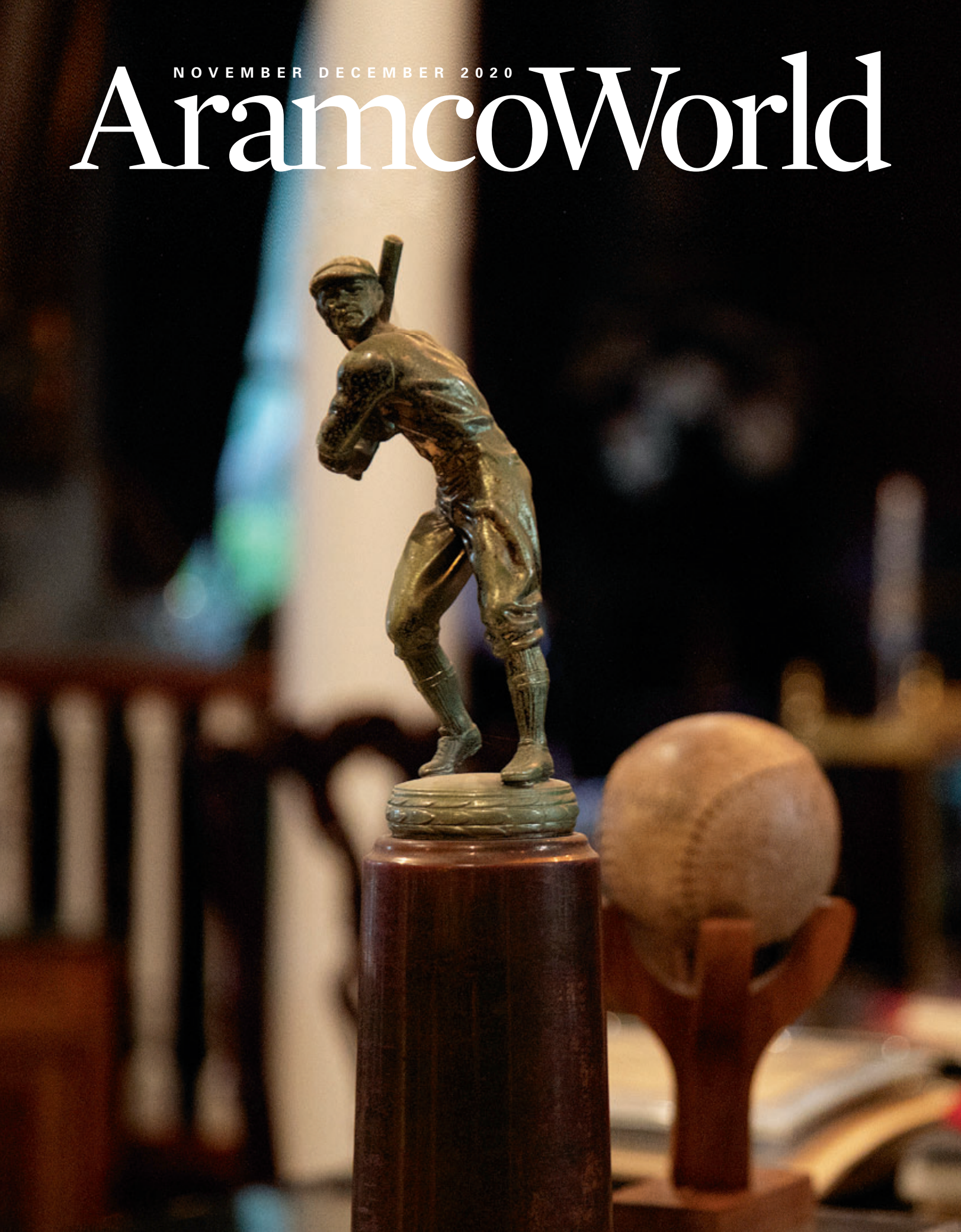
AramcoWorld



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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: William "Bill" Anawaty's Port Arthur baseball team won the Syrian State Championship in 1932, and he and fellow players along the Gulf Coast founded the league that grew to become one of the largest Arab American social and service associations in the US. Photo by Lisa Krantz.

Back Cover: "I miss you. Can you teach me not to miss you?" "Did you wash your hands first?" translates the dialogue in Arabic in a COVID-19-themed digital collage by Jiddah-based artist Shahad Nazer.

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14: SYED ARIFUL ISLAM / MAJORITY WORLD; 22: DAAYNA / MOSAIC ROOMS; 32: FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: DEPT OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND MUSEUMS, PAKISTAN / HARAPPA ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH PROJECT / J. M. KENOYER; THE MET (6); LACMA; CALENDAR: JAMIE ORLANDO SMITH

FIRSTLOOK

East Coast of Saudi Arabia, Circa 1952–1964

Photograph by Mary Elizabeth Hartzell

"Enclosed please find 59 negatives in various holders. These photos were in the possession of my aunt," wrote Margaret Hartzell in a letter accompanying a small green box she donated five years ago to the archives of the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

Her aunt was Mary Elizabeth Hartzell, who passed away in 2009 at age 94. From 1952 to 1964, Mary Elizabeth, as she was known, worked for Aramco as the librarian of the Arabian Research Division, a job for which she had been recruited from the American Geographical Society in New York; she had already been taking Arabic language classes at the Asia Institute.

"She was intrepid for a single woman of that time," says Margaret.

Mary Elizabeth took her photos with a twin-lens Rolliflex camera, and most of the five dozen images in the box show scenes such as this wintertime weekend excursion of expatriate employees along the east coast of Saudi Arabia. While she is remembered at the library for her meticulous expansion of its collections in both English and Arabic, her carefully composed photos remained largely uncaptioned and undated.

Tamia—Falafel

Recipe by Troth Wells

Photograph courtesy Kam & Co. Denmark

Tamia are similar to falafel.

An easy Sudanese recipe for this great snack or mezze/appetizer that is probably as popular in the West as in the Middle East, where it originated.

(Makes 24)

1 can garbanzos/chickpeas

2–4 cloves garlic

1 onion

1 green bell pepper, chopped

1 teaspoon coriander seeds

2 tablespoon cilantro/coriander, chopped juice of ½ lemon

1 slice bread

2 tablespoons flour

1 teaspoon sesame seeds plus 1 tablespoon sesame seeds

1 teaspoon baking powder

Oil

Salt and pepper

Drain the garbanzos/chickpeas and put them in a blender with the garlic, onion, bell pepper, coriander seeds and cilantro/coriander.

Pour the lemon juice on a plate and soak the bread in it, then squeeze out any excess liquid. Crumble the bread into the mixture.

Stir on blend again, then add flour, the teaspoon of sesame seeds, salt and pepper. Set aside for 10 minutes.

When ready, add the baking powder and mix it in well. Adjust the flavoring and seasoning to taste.

Take up small amounts and shape with your hands into flattish rounds. Scatter the remaining tablespoon of sesame seeds on the patties and then fry these for 2–3 minutes on each side until lightly browned. Serve with pita bread, salad and yogurt.

Reprinted with permission from
One World Vegetarian Cookbook

Troth Wells
2011, Interlink Books,
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www.interlinkbooks.com.

Troth Wells is an Oxford-based food writer and cookbook author. She has written several cookbooks, including most recently *One World Vegetarian Cookbook*, *Global Vegetarian Cooking: Quick and Easy Recipes from around the World*, and *Small Planet, Small Plates: Earth-Friendly Vegetarian Recipes*, all published by Interlink Books.

SITAR MASTER *of* Maryland

WRITTEN BY **LARRY LUXNER**
PHOTOGRAPHED BY **ERIC KAYNE**

In her home studio in Silver Spring, Maryland, Alif Laila's vibrant murals and watercolor paintings adorn each wall. It's a space she has grown into over decades, a creative refuge for living, working, meditating, painting and, most of all, playing and teaching music, all amid kaleidoscopic decor inspired by the country of her birth, Bangladesh. A virtuoso of the sitar who has earned the master musician's title *Vidushi*, she steps out from the studio into a well-tended garden. There among greenery and stones, she teaches children and adults of various cultural backgrounds how to pluck and pick her beloved, long-necked, gourd-shaped instrument. Speaking about more than just the flora, Laila says hers is a garden "where the seeds of South Asia's cultural heritage grow lusciously, thousands of miles away from home."

She is especially passionate, she says, about encouraging young women to take up the sitar, as even today Laila stands out as one of few women in the world to achieve fame with the instrument.

"The sitar is mysterious and mesmerizing. You're in a spell. You can't figure out what it is," she says, describing the sitar's tantalizing ability to produce sounds that appeal to ears not only in the subcontinent and parts of Asia but also across the world. Beginning in the 1960s, she explains, "it was the sitar that opened the doors to meditation [and] yoga."

Often compared to an expanded version of a classical lute—to which it is distantly related—the sitar's distinctively chimeric sound comes from its combination of plucked strings with sympathetically tuned, reverberating drone strings. Paired with a tabla (hand drum) to

"complete the essence of the music," the sitar's sound evokes history and spirituality. Laila explains that the sitar has no one place of origin. Rather, it "developed over eras in which national borders were not so defined as today," amid lands that are today Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

"I strongly believe that through the sitar, I'm spreading universal peace and unity," Laila says, mentioning that the sitar's popularity crosses not only countries but religions too, as it is widely popular in South Asia among Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists alike.

Over more than three decades, Laila has performed at concert halls including the Bangladesh National Museum in her native Dhaka, the Kerala Fine Arts Society in Cochin, India, the headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris, South Bank Centre in London, and dozens of other venues from Kuwait to the US, from performance halls to houses of worship and community centers—anywhere cultural diversity is celebrated. "No borders," she says.

In 2013 Laila performed at the prestigious Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the birth of Swami Vivekananda, a 19th-century Hindu monk and proponent of interfaith dialog. Four years later she was invited back to give an audiovisual concert that projected her watercolors around her, the colors dancing and moving along with her *raga*, a Sanskrit word for the form of music she performs and one that refers both to passion and color.

> **"I strongly believe that through the sitar I'm spreading universal peace and unity."**
>
> —Alif Laila

The following year she became the first female sitarist to perform at Dhaka's historic Shahid Minar, a national monument to those who sacrificed their lives during the independence movement that led to Bangladesh's founding in 1971. In 2015 she opened her music school, Sitar Niketan (abode of sitar), with the aim of preserving musical traditions of South Asia.

Laila recognizes her journey as a musician, and her ascent in the world of master sitarists—especially as a woman—has been pioneering. And yet she found her way.

It was her late mother, Laila says, who inspired her. Her mother had wanted to learn the instrument herself when she was growing up in Kolkata, India. But in the 1930s and 1940s, it was considered inappropriate for a respectable young Muslim woman to perform in public as an instrumentalist, and a woman could not be taught privately by a man. Dancing and singing were more culturally acceptable for women, and her mother participated in this, s did Laila, when she was a child. Still both wanted to learn the sitar even though it was thought to be a man's instrument that required male strength to master.

"I started my music training with singing, but I was very shy, and my voice did not have a wide range. So, my mother encouraged me to try the sitar, and that did the magic," she says, remembering her mother's gentle support. Her father, initially, was not as enthusiastic, but he did not bar her way.

One day when Laila was 17, she told her father she was going to visit an aunt in Kolkata. She returned home to Dhaka a few days later carrying a sitar. She knew it would be difficult to master and that support would be infrequent. She also knew that, when she married, the duties expected of her as a wife and mother would be expected to remain her priority.

"It is well known that a male sitar player has to be supported," she says. "But it doesn't work that way for a woman. Career, marriage and childbirth all get in the way. You will not be able to get up early in the morning and start practicing or do yoga and meditation. You have to take care of the house and feed the children."

Laila was fortunate to find a master instructor in Dhaka, the late Ustad Mir Qasem Khan, nephew of noted sitarist and composer Ustad Allaudin Khan, who was often referred to as a "guru of genius." (*Ustad* is a title for a male master musician in the region's Muslim tradition; *Pandit* is its Hindu equivalent.) Her first teacher's cousin, Annapurna Devi, later became a renowned player of the *surbahar* (bass sitar) who married the world's best-known sitar player of all time, Pandit Ravi Shankar. In this way, Laila traces her musical pedigree through generations of masters in what she explains is "solely an aural tradition that cannot be written to

In her home studio, Alif Laila pays homage to her teachers and the musicians who have inspired her, including, from **LEFT**, Annapurna Devi, the first female player in Indian classical tradition of the *surbahar*, or bass sitar; Devi married the world's best-know sitarist, Pandit Ravi Shankar. At right sits a photo of Laila's own teacher, Ustad Mir Qasem Khan, whose musical pedigree includes his uncle—also Devi's father—Ustad Allauddin Khan, one of the greatest modern sitar virtuosos. The photo in the background shows another of Allauddin Khan's students, Pandit Nikhil Banerjee, from whose innovative repertoire Mir Qasem Khan drew, thus directly influencing Laila. **OPPOSITE** Laila is one of few women sitarists in the world to achieve the master's title of *Vidushi*, whose equivalents for men are *Ustad* in the Muslim tradition and *Pandit* in the Hindu tradition.

For inspiration to learn the sitar as a young girl, Laila credits her mother, who was not allowed to pursue her own interest in the instrument still rarely played by women. Laila's years of study have led to concerts around the world and 10 albums. "You need a healthy lifestyle in order to practice three or four hours a day. It's hard for a woman to physically carry around a sitar while touring internationally. You need to be strong," she says.

The **RAGA** *and the* **SITAR**

***Raga* comes from Sanskrit meaning color and passion, explains Alif Laila. In the classical music traditions of the Indian subcontinent, ragas are improvisational melodies, or sets of pitches, based on a scale with a given set of notes. Sitarists can improvise their own melodies and variations within the boundaries of a particular raga, creating unique performances. The mood or atmosphere that performances creates also has a name: *rasa*. And whether playing indoors or out, morning or night, the sitarist can create a rasa of existential reverie. This, Laila says, is one of the instrument's majestic qualities.**

be portrayed in its true form."

After graduating from the College of Fine Arts in Dhaka in 1980, Laila moved first to Kuwait and in 1988 to Maryland. She raised two children and continued her music education with teachers who taught from the repertoire of the late Pandit Nikhil Banerjee—also a student of Allaudin Khan, and Banerjee is recognized today as one of the greatest sitarists of the 20th century.

Through a mutual friend, Indian tabla player Pandit Anindo Chatterjee, Laila had a chance to meet her icon, the late Shankar. The Indian sitarist had shot to global fame in 1971, when his accounts of the plight of millions in Bangladesh inspired one of his friends and students, George Harrison of the Beatles, to produce a pair of benefit concerts to raise funds for refugees: "The Concert for Bangladesh" became a bestselling live album and a precedent for half a century of charitable concerts by popular musicians. Earlier, with the Beatles, Harrison had featured the sitar in his songs "Norwegian Wood" and "Within You Without You." Since then, the sitar has become an adjunct instrument for many popular musicians in the West, from The Mamas and the Papas and The Rolling Stones to Guns N' Roses, Thievery Corporation and Odesza.

"Ravi Shankar opened up the doors of Indian classical music to the whole world," Laila says. Meeting maestros "who are like stars" is always inspiring, she says, but meeting Shankar felt like an "encounter with an entire constellation!"

As an instrument, the sitar is analogous to the medieval Persian three-stringed *sehtaar* and the South Indian *veena*. Usually constructed from teak

In 2015 Laila opened Sitar Niketan (abode of sitar), her music school at her home in Silver Spring, Maryland. "I was brought up in Bangladesh, where the culture is intertwined with the arts very deeply," she says. Her paintings adorn each of her CD covers, too.

wood, its long, hollow neck is strung with 21, 22 or 23 strings: Seven are top strings, which are plucked, and the remainder are the sympathetic "bottom strings." With front and side tuning pegs and 20 movable frets, it measures about 1.2 meters and weighs in at just over 4 kilograms.

Ethnomusicologist Max Katz, associate music professor at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, says the sitar became an integral part of North Indian royal court music starting in the late 12th century, and it endured all the way through the rise of British occupation in the 19th century, reaching its apogee during the Mughal era.

When India's first music schools began opening in the late 1800s, Katz says many of its students were women.

"A lot has changed over the last 150 years," says Katz. "In the early 20th century, it became a lot more common for women to learn sitar. It was part of a shift to a new kind of national consciousness. But Indian classical music was very awkward to perform because the actual origins of Hindustani music were in royal courts. It was designed for elite entertainment, and the people who played that music were hereditary musicians—and all male."

Women did have a role, however, as singers and dancers, though women were not encouraged to perform for anyone outside their immediate family. Even today there remain few international female superstars of Indian music.

> "[The sitar] was designed for elite entertainment, and the people who played that music were hereditary musicians—and all male."
>
> —Max Katz

One of the few pioneering women in the contemporary era was Devi, who passed away in 2018 at the age of 91. Another female great from the subcontinent is Shankar's daughter Anoushka, who in 2016 was nominated for a sixth Grammy in the category Best World Music Album for *Land of Gold*.

"Even today, a modern free-spirited woman cannot be a true sitar player," Laila says. "You have to devote yourself like a monk to be able to master the sitar to a certain level, let alone perform professionally."

It was only after Laila's two sons were grown, she says, that she felt she could turn her fullest attention back to the sitar. "Fortunately, things worked out," she says.

Since 2000 Laila has produced 10 albums, among which both *Devotion* and *Inner Voice* were recorded with Chatterjee on tabla. Later works include *Amma* (a tribute to Laila's mother) and *I Am A River*, a fusion album of Indian classical and jazz ragas with help from saxophonist Bernhard Ullrich. Her most recent album, *Ekavali*, means "the connecting thread" in Sanskrit. All but one of her album covers are illustrated with her own paintings.

As a career performer, Laila understands her journey has been as much about patience and focus as it has been about sacrifice.

"You need a healthy lifestyle in order to practice three or four hours a day. It's hard for a woman to physically carry around a sitar while touring internationally. You need to be strong. And if you're not, that also affects your mental strength," she says.

The burden is a joyful one, she says, and she aims to continue until she can no longer pluck. And even then, she will listen—and encourage other women to take up a sitar and practice until they, too, can improvise a raga.

"It took me a whole lifetime, and some people don't have the patience," she says. "You have to give it your whole mind and your body. You have to breathe it in. And you have to believe in yourself."

Larry Luxner (@LLuxner) is a freelance journalist and photographer, and a regular contributor to *AramcoWorld*. Photographer **Eric Kayne** is a native of San Antonio, Texas. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in studio art from the University of Texas at Austin and a Master of Arts in photography from Ohio University. He has worked for numerous publications including the *Houston Chronicle*. He lives in Washington, DC.

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Written by **DIANNA WRAY**

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

Photographed by **LISA KRANTZ**

As he stepped up to the plate and turned to face the pitcher, everything else—the noise of the crowd, his work back at the newspaper, the parents and sisters he was supporting—dropped away that July day in 1931. On most days William "Bill" Anawaty was preoccupied with the business of life as a first-generation Syrian Lebanese American in the small oil town of Port Arthur, Texas. But as the slim 21-year-old waited for the ball to zip out of the pitcher's hand, he was only a baseball player, the star of the Young Men's Amusement Club Port Arthur, one of dozens of Syrian Lebanese baseball teams that had sprung up across the country in the 1910s and 1920s.

Star of the L'Monar team and cofounder of the Syrian Lebanese baseball league in Texas, William "Bill" Anaway, **OPPOSITE FAR LEFT**, was a son of immigrant parents who had settled in the oilfield town of Port Arthur. His skill on the field helped his team win the Syrian State Championship in 1932, which was commemorated with the certificate, **LOWER**. On it, Anaway appears in the top row, fourth from left, alongside two of his brothers, Henry and Louis. According to Anaway's daughter Peggy Karam, the undated photo at **LEFT** likely shows L'Monar at play.

TOP AND OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF PEGGY KARAM

Maybe the pitcher from the Young Men's Syrian Association team of Houston thought that he might strike out Port Arthur's only left-handed batter, but Anaway's eyes were sharp as the ball sailed toward him. A satisfying pop as wood and leather-bound rubber connected, and Anaway was off, legs pumping toward the bases whether he'd knocked the ball out of the park or not. The crowd, all from Syrian Lebanese communities across Texas, roared its approval. Many in the stands that day may not have grown up with the game, but they knew a great player when they saw one.

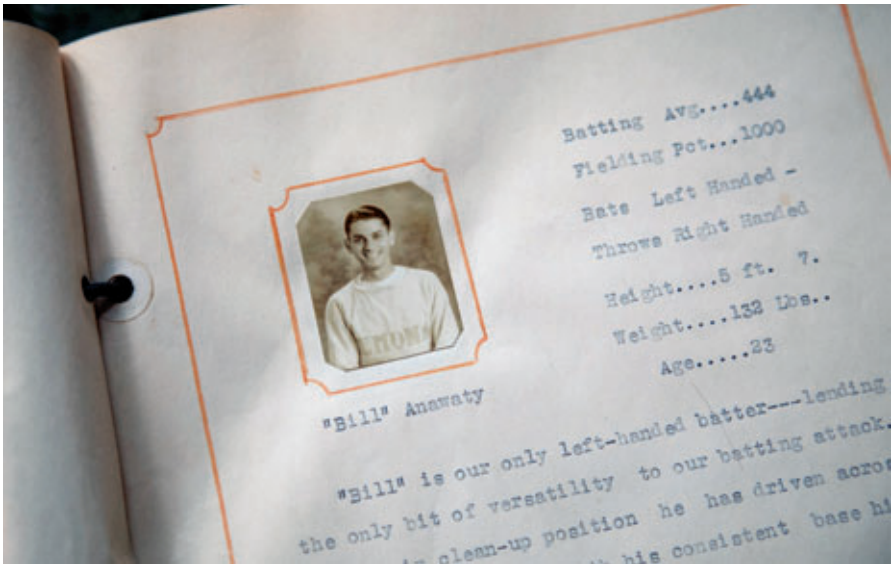
"It was the children of the first-generation immigrants who really played baseball," says George Murr, a Houston lawyer and current president of the Southern Federation of Syrian Lebanese American Clubs whose dad played for the YMAC team in Houston. "Their parents had all come over here, an abrupt baptism by fire of immigration, but the children, like my dad, were born here, and they had a true passion for the game."

No one is entirely clear how the first teams came together, although each probably started in a similar way: as a casual game to spend an afternoon. Baseball was the national pastime, and players like Babe Ruth in the 1920s and '30s and Joe DiMaggio in the '40s and '50s dominated the sport—and captured the imagination of Anaway and thousands of other Syrian Lebanese boys along with the rest of the country.

Anaway's parents had come in the 1890s, part of a wave of migration that saw the departure of nearly half the population of the Mount Lebanon region in what was then part of the Ottoman Empire. (The modern countries of Syria and Lebanon were established in 1920 and 1943, respectively.)

An estimated 60,000 Syrian Lebanese immigrants, most of them Christians, settled across the US from the 1880s to the 1930s. As the first generation of Syrian Lebanese Americans was born over the following years, the community would more than double in size.

The motives for immigration, says Akram Khater, a professor of history who specializes in diaspora studies at North Carolina State University, came mainly from the deteriorating Ottoman economy, which started a long downturn after the Suez Canal opened up in 1869. "This flooded markets with Japanese-made



In her San Antonio home, Peggy Karam holds a photo of her late father posing with his bat, glove and hat. Anawaty remained active with the team for many years as a player and, later, a manager. **LEFT** The team's official scorebook from its 1932 championship year profiled each player, and on Anawaty's page, it stated his batting average was a powerhouse .444, and his fielding was perfect. It also commented that his left-handed batting was unique on L'Monar, "lending the only bit of versatility to our batting attack."

silk, and while there might have been other factors, like religion, the main reason people left was to go make some money. You could do that in America, so they came here, worked as peddlers or in factories. Then if they were successful—and a lot of them weren't—they brought more family over."

The first Syrian Lebanese immigrants to arrive in Texas stepped ashore in the 1880s, just a decade or so after baseball itself had showed up in the Lone Star State. (The first game in the state was reportedly played in Houston in 1867.) By the turn of the century, today's National League and American League had been established, and the professional teams were making stars of gifted players like Ty Cobb, nicknamed "the Georgia Peach"; Walter "The Big Train" Johnson; Christy Mathewson, known as "Big Six" after a fire engine of the time; and baseball's first true superstar, "the Sultan of Swat," Babe Ruth. Anawaty and the rest of the boys, who were learning how to handle dual identities idolized the stars just like all the other kids, regardless of backgrounds.

But life in the US was far from simple. Much of the country, still segregated by race, often didn't know how to classify the Syrian Lebanese newcomers, who spoke Arabic, prepared their foods from home, often worked as peddlers and tended to settle together in cheaper areas of town.

"Wherever our people lived back then, they'd set up their own communities," Peggy Karam, Anawaty's daughter, recalls. "My dad's family lived across the tracks in Port Arthur, with other Lebanese families." They were, she adds, "so poor, and people treated them like dogs outside of their circles, so they kept to

TOP Among the many records of the team Anawaty collected and passed down to Karam is this photo from the 1930s, now tinted with age, showing the L'Monar players after a game. **ABOVE, LEFT** L'Monar players lined up for a team photo in 1932 as Syrian State Champions that year. The team was part of the larger Young Men's Amusement Club of Port Arthur, which proposed in 1931 a Southern Federation of Syrian Clubs, each "embracing all Syrian clubs of the Southern States, each club to be represented by four delegates to convene and draw up articles of federation." The Southern Federation of Syrian Lebanese American Clubs is still active today with chapters in more than 20 states. **RIGHT** *Spice of Life, Y.M.A.C: Syrians Official Score Book 1932* was the title the team gave to its record for that championship year, and it, too, is now part of Karam's collection.

TOP: COURTESY OF PEGGY KARAM

themselves. But the kids who were first born here, like my dad, they were American kids, and American kids played baseball."

The Port Arthur team was formally created as part of the YMAC, the organization established by Anawaty and his fellow teammates in 1925. "Assimilation happens both ways," says Khater. Baseball itself "is arguably an assimilated form of cricket," which came from England, he explains. "In games, in architecture, in so many different ways, this process isn't so much a melting pot as it is a weaving together of disparate influences. So, of course the children of immigrants pick up baseball and make it their own."

Soon the YMAC began competing against teams from other Syrian Lebanese American organizations across Texas, and gradually those events became an excuse to hold tournaments that would bring teams from cities all over the South together to compete—and then dance, eat and socialize. "The competition was fierce, but the whole system was very casual at first," says Peggy Karam's husband Richard, whose father was also an avid player—for the team in San Antonio. "Just some games and then a picnic. But over time the picnics became parties and then banquets, a

way for people to get together." The Port Arthur team, which adopted the name L'Monar, meaning "guiding light," in 1932, "was always the best team though. They dominated."

A big reason for this was Anawaty himself. In addition to having a way with a bat, he also had no less of a way with words. Desperate for work during the Great Depression, he'd shown up on the doorstep of the editor of the *Port Arthur Daily News* after reading they were seeking to hire a copy boy. Thinking of his parents and six sisters at home, he'd refused to leave until the editor hired him.

On the field Anawaty was a gifted athlete, the team's star. He was soon using his position at the paper to further celebrate his team's exploits, making sure the stats for their games were recorded, from their few losses to, especially, their many victories.

"I think it was because they were so poor," Peggy Karam says. "But they could get together, and they could play on a team, and they could win. It was something they could achieve. They lived on the wrong side of the tracks in these towns, but on the field they were superheroes. They were strong. They might still speak Arabic and be newcomers to the American experience, but on the field they were as American as anyone else."

That feeling of camaraderie also led Anawaty to ride his team's popularity—they were nearly unbeatable, and who doesn't love to cheer for a winning team?—to more formally connect the clubs that, by the early 1930s, were playing each other in regular tournaments across the South. There'd been talk of starting a federation to unite these clubs for years by then, but it had never taken off. Anawaty and his teammates hit upon a plan to draw enough potential members together in one place so they could hammer out the details. They mailed out invitations across Texas, Louisiana and the rest of the Gulf Coast inviting young Syrian Lebanese men and women to a Fourth of July celebration in Port Arthur. There'd be dancing and entertainment, of course—that was a given at any Syrian Lebanese gathering.

> **"The kids who were first born here, like my dad, they were American kids, and American kids played baseball."**
>
> —Peggy Karam

But the real draw? A game between Houston's Young Men's Syrian Association team, clad in mustard-yellow outfits that made them look like enormous bees, and Port Arthur, attired in simple white uniforms with the red caps of L'Monar, the team that compensated for a lack of funds with the prowess that had seen them lose only one game so far that season.

L'Monar dominated the game, and the dancing lasted until the early morning hours. By the end of festivities, the various groups had agreed in principle on a federation. It still took another year—and an evening of all the participants being locked in a ballroom at the Driskill Hotel in Austin, Texas, to settle the details. So began what is today the Southern Federation of Syrian Lebanese American Clubs, which today has chapters in more than 20 states.

Peggy Karam holds a ball preserved amid her father's collection and wears his hat with "LM" on it, which stands for L'Monar (Guiding Light). "Some of my earliest memories are of watching Pop play baseball," she says, and it was at a convention of the Southern Federation that she met Richard Karam, her husband of 44 years, **RIGHT**, whose father also played in the league. Richard holds a uniform from the Syrian Lebanese league's San Antonio team whose letters "AME SYR" stand for "American Syrians."

Over the following years, Anawaty married and had three children, but he stayed devoted to the team, saving records and stats and putting each of the annual team photos carefully in scrapbooks. He eventually wrote a book, *The Spice of Life*, that partly recalled L'Monar's many triumphs. He even wrote poetry about those days, musing that it was fate that had provided them with talent for this game, a gift that "showered us with victory to increase our faith." Their prowess on the baseball diamond, Peggy Karam says, helped them face the day-to-day challenges of belonging to a community often viewed with suspicion among publics whose politics often leaned isolationist. (The flood of Syrian Lebanese immigrants had abruptly slowed to a trickle after 1924 Immigration Act imposed strict quotas.)

"Some of my earliest memories are of watching Pop play baseball," Peggy Karam says. She would go on to meet her husband of 44 years at one of the conventions of the Southern Federation. For a time the baseball games remained the group's focus, with the honors of winning the tournaments fiercely prized. When Anawaty stopped taking the field himself, he became L'Monar's manager. By the 1970s the teams were no longer the vital core of the expanding federations. "I think that maybe the need for them had passed after a while," Murr says. "I knew my dad and my uncle played, but by the time I came along, the teams weren't as important to the clubs as they'd once been."

Still, in the 1980s there was an attempt to revive some teams, Peggy Karam recalls. "It was a nice try, with cousins and descendants of the original players out on the field, but everybody was a lot older by then," she says, laughing a little. "Let's just say the injuries were numerous, and after that, we tried bowling instead."

The teams had served their purpose by then. "People don't just abandon who they are even as they adopt being American. They transform as much as they are transformed by it. Baseball was another way for them all to come together, a way for them to connect and to reconnect with each other," Khater says. "Outside of these games, they were different. They had to always be on their guard. But these baseball games were a way for them to just be, where there was nothing wrong with them just being themselves."

Dianna Wray (wraydianna@gmail.com) is a nationally award-winning journalist and editor from Houston, Texas, and the current editor-in-chief of *Houstonia* magazine.

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THE FUTURE'S Golden Fiber

WRITTEN BY TRISTAN RUTHERFORD

From her high-rise flat in Kamalapur in downtown Dhaka, Nishat Tuly reviews a few of her recent clothing designs. Outside her window, within walking distance from Bangladesh's largest train station, a determined monsoon rain comes down in a roar. At 26, the median age in this Southeast Asian nation of 165 million, she is an up-and-coming fashion designer in pursuit of the next trend. That, she says, points her toward environment-friendly materials as the go-to fabrics of the future—and specifically, jute.

"The market of jute and jute-related products is increasing day by day," Tuly says, explaining that what was once Bangladesh's most important agricultural crop is making a serious comeback.

Her most-recent creation, inspired by Bangladeshi painter Qayyum Chowdhury, embraces jute as sustainable fashion.

"The environmental issues are gaining in popularity," she says.

Historically, jute has been a staple of both fabric and food for more than 2,000 years. The earliest mention of what appears to be jute is found in a description written by Pliny the Elder in the first century CE. In his book *The Natural History*, the Roman author and philosopher refers to the plant by its genus name, *Corchorus*, describing its benefits and how people in Alexandria consumed its jute mallow leaves.

"The leaves of it are rolled up, one upon the other … for the viscera, and in cases of alopecy, being good also for the removal of freckles," he wrote.

Today, Egyptians mince jute leaves and fry them alongside garlic and lamb in a popular dish called *molokhiya*, often served with chicken and rice. And Egyptians are not alone at the table: Cypriots simmer jute leaves into a tomato stew, while chefs in Thailand blanche them like spinach in a recipe known as *bai po*. In Sierra Leone jute is stewed with *fufu*, a cassava-based porridge, and it is from that West African country that jute is said to have made its voyage to the New World with the human trafficking of the slave trade—especially to the Caribbean island of Haiti, where it features in *lalo,* a dish of blue crabs, jute leaves and lemon juice.

Jute fiber has no less of a long history as a material for rope and coarse-thread items such as large transport bags and heavy-duty baskets. In this manner the product was sailed across the Pacific to furnish island markets. In India, in 1590, the Mughal Emperor

Stripped from their stalks, washed and wound into bundles, raw jute fiber, **OPPOSITE**, awaits wholesale buyers in Bangladesh, where jute, after readymade cotton garments, is currently the country's second-largest export earner and a livelihood for an estimated 25 million people. In 2015 Bangladeshi scientist Mubarak Ahmad Khan developed a process for producing a biodegradable, "jute polymer" sheet, **ABOVE**, that can take the place of many polythene products. Jute fashion too is making headway among designers such as Nishat Tuly of Dhaka, whose designs, inspired by Bangladeshi painter Qayyum Chowdhury, embrace jute as sustainable fashion, **RIGHT**.

TOP: REYAD ABEDIN; LOWER: NISHAT TULY; OPPOSITE: MOHAMMED ASAD / MAJORITY WORLD

Akbar, who ruled over most of the Indian subcontinent, noted in the *Ain-i-Akbari* that in the province of Ghoraghat, today in northern Bangladesh, "silk is produced and a kind of sackcloth" was worn. Europeans wove jute into what came to be called hessian, burlap or gunny, which is still widely used for sacks, mats and nets. During World War I, an estimated 1 billion or more hessian sandbags lined the trenches of Belgium and France.

Botanically speaking, *Corchorus capsularis* or white jute produces the finest fibers, but *Corchorus olitorius* or tossa jute grows in greater abundance. Both species are the leading sources of both edible jute and jute fiber, and both grow as woody, emerald spears topped by a frilly crown of 10-centimeter-long leaves. Jute has colonized soils in hot, humid, mostly wetland climates the world over, from Brazil to Vietnam, from El Salvador to every equatorial African state. Yet no environment is better for growing jute than the sultry Ganges Delta of the eastern Indian subcontinent, the largest wetland of its kind in the world.

A hectare of jute gobbles around 13.6 tonnes of carbon dioxide and returns to the atmosphere 10 tonnes of oxygen.

Encompassing two-thirds of Bangladesh and a section of India, this green triangle ranks among the most fertile—and fragile—places on Earth, fed by two mighty rivers, the Ganges and Brahmaputra. After carrying nutrients for thousands of kilometers, these waterways spill into labyrinthine channels, pools, streams and swamps—each one a watery haven for cultivating jute. Some 150 million people live in this delta the size of Iceland, or the state of Kentucky in the US.

In Bangladesh, jute, or *paat* in Bangla, supports the livelihoods of 25 million people. Each spring, billions of seeds of *Corchorus*

From seeds sown in wetlands, jute shoots up in the spring, and the late-summer harvest is by hand and sickle. Each stalk is beaten and split to remove the fibers, which are then washed and dried. No pesticides or artificial fertilizers are used. The leaves of jute are enjoyed in dishes such as *molokhiya*, **LOWER**, popular especially in Egypt and Palestine.

capsularis and *Corchorus olitorius* are flung across open ground, mostly by women. The seeds germinate with the first showers, and they grow fast—about 2 centimeters a day. By late spring, the delta pools look like lakes of lime-green saplings, and when the summer's monsoon rains arrive, the jute stalks shoot up until the heat of August, seldom less than 30 degrees Celsius, given them a final nutrient boost. With no artificial fertilizers or pesticides used, the flowering jute plants will tower some 3 meters.

When it's time to harvest, laborers wade through standing water to cull the crop by hand with sickles, stripping and separating the leaves from stalks that are bundled and moved to a slow-moving water source. There, the plant's fibrous innards are extracted in a 10- to 30-day process called *pochano*, or retting. When the fibers are thoroughly soaked, men armed with hefty wooden mallets wade waist deep into the standing water, grab great bundles of stalks and strip them of their vegetative bark. The stalks are then thoroughly whacked to loosen the fibers that are then pulled from the plant's woody core. The men then wash, squeeze and dry the retted, stripped fibers in the sun. Once dry, the fibers are baled, and this raw jute is transported to markets and mills almost exclusively by boat—a necessity in a nation with 700 waterways where 50 percent of all cargo journeys are made by river.

As a finished product, jute can be woven, spun and pressed into handbags, hammocks, hats and a hundred or more other items. As a wearable textile, it offers natural ultraviolet protection to the skin; as a household material, it is flame retardant; as rope, its tiny fibrous hairs offer unrivalled grip. Indeed, jute is so ingrained into Bangladeshi culture that its leaves feature on the national emblem, and the government has a Ministry of Textiles and Jute. There's even a National Jute Day, March 6, to observe jute's endowment to heritage and its future in the manufacture of items that are all fully biodegradable and largely inexpensive.

In the 1950s, however, jute plunged in popularity when polythene became a low-cost alternative for grocery bags and commercial packaging. Together with polystyrene (from the 1960s onward) and polyethylene terephthalate (PET, the compound used to make plastic bottles and product containers), these new plastics replaced almost every jute export. By the 1980s, Bangladeshi farmers were burning jute fields to replace them with other cash crops.

Amir Rangan, director of the jute clothing label Khiyoo Fashion,

Although jute is still the raw material of burlap and high-tensile natural twine, demand plunged in the 1950s with the development of plastics. Now, fewer factories produce jute bags and twine, such as this one in Chittagong in southeast Bangladesh. **LOWER** A trio of jute leaves appears at the top of the national symbol of Bangladesh.

remembers how the local jute mill where his father worked as a timekeeper funded his rural elementary school.

"Gradually factories laid off workers as they lost orders," says Rangan, 41. "Our young country did not have the skills to adapt jute fiber into new forms because most people were illiterate."

Millions became jobless. In 1988 a cataclysmic monsoon that left half the country under water compounded the situation. The Adamjee Jute Mill, the first jute processing plant in Bangladesh and the largest in the world, shut down.

"The farmers could not sell their crop," continues Rangan. "After selling their properties, they started to migrate to towns to change their fate."

Between 1970 and 2000, the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka almost doubled in population every decade, becoming the most densely inhabited city in the world, with 44,000 people per square kilometer. Many other people left entirely: The global Bangladeshi diaspora ranks among the world's largest. The days of the jute farmer, or *paat chashi*, seemed over.

As the country expanded its cotton clothing sector, Rangan began to wonder if he could replace cotton, which the country spends more than $5 billion annually to import, with nationally grown jute.

"It would take me a lot of research to invent a successful clothes fabric from jute," Rangan remembers. In 2007 he organized the country's first and largest jute-garment exhibition at Dhaka University. While traditionally jute garments were "a little thick" because they were exported to "winter-prone countries," Rangan later presented jute garments at Western-style fashion shows, and this put his creations in front of national television and newspaper audiences.

"I gained a wide reputation," he says.

Rangan now shares his production skills with 12 universities across Bangladesh.

"Bangladeshis used to consider jute to be quite primitive, so not fashionable," he explains. "So, by holding fashion shows of jute garments we can show the many ways the product can be used."

For the last six years, Rangan has worn what he calls his "jute uniform" every day. At the National Jute Fair in 2020, he showcased his garments alongside other jute items, including soil-erosion screens and sapling nursery bags that biodegrade when vegetation stabilizes.

"It's all about raising awareness," he explains. "Then these young students can diversify jute into many other products. Nowadays we are very busy destroying our climate balance. To make a better world, the use of green products are the single most important solution."

By 2050 plastic production and incineration are forecast to contribute as much as 10 to 15 percent of the world's global-warming gases, according to a 2019 Center for International Environmental Law report. Climate change looms potentially catastrophic for Bangladesh in particular, as the delta lands are all little higher than sea level. Yet here, too, jute pulls more than its weight: According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, a hectare of jute gobbles around 13.6 tonnes of carbon dioxide and returns to the atmosphere 10 tonnes of oxygen. That same hectare of jute also drops about 10 million leaves, and those not harvested compost and fertilize the area for future crops. Jute actually makes land *more* productive, so much

QAMRUZZAMAN / DRIK / MAJORITY WORLD; OPPOSITE, TOP: SHAHIDUL ALAM / DRIK / MAJORITY WORLD; LOWER: RANIA ALHAMED / ALAMY

Mubarak Ahmed Khan discusses progress of mass production for jute polymer sheeting, **LEFT**, at the Latif Bawany Jute Mill, which is daily turning out 100,000 "Sonali Bags," **OPPOSITE**, each one a reusable, biodegradable replacement for a polythene grocery bag.

so that a follow-on crop of rice can be sown in the same place immediately after the jute harvest.

By replacing wood, jute can also reduce deforestation. Wood and paper products are the fourth major driver of deforestation after cattle ranching, soybean farming and palm-oil production, contributing to about 10 percent of globally felled trees. Given more investment, jute has the potential to replace a significant proportion of wood-based items, from screening walls to shopping bags. The woody cores of jute sticks, historically seen as a byproduct, can also produce charcoal for carbon paper, firesticks, cosmetics and printer ink. While most trees take more than 10 years to mature to harvest, jute takes months.

The Ministry of Textiles and Jute is driving further diversification. Its motivational schemes include asking schools to supply pupils with backpacks and book sacks made from jute. Bangladesh's highways department has requested use of GeoJute, an inexpensive biodegradable net that prevents soil erosion. The ministry also founded the Jute Diversification Promotion Centre, which supports entrepreneurs like Rangan in experimenting with new jute products.

> **"It could replace 90 percent of packaging materials and almost all grocery sacks."**
>
> **—Mohammad Sabuj Hossain**

Abdul Quayyum, secretary general of the Bangladesh Jute Association, supports such action. His role is to boost trade in a country that already exports two-thirds of the world's jute.

"We call jute 'the golden fiber,'" says Quayyum. "The fiber is very strong and has so many uses. And when drying on bamboo poles, it takes the color of gold."

Quayyum, who graduated from college in 1967 and is environmentally passionate, encourages younger generations.

"Synthetic polythene bags are the cancer in society," he asserts, referring to the volume of unrecycled plastic packaging. "In the bottom of the rivers, synthetic bags are stacked there. They will never rot and are hampering the depth of the river and poisoning the fish."

Quayyum is promoting a globalized solution. Automobile giants like Ford and Toyota already use 100,000 tonnes of jute each year to create heavy-duty carpets and seats. "Now in Germany they are now using jute to create glass fiber and to create doors for cars," explains Quayyum. "In South Korea they are making the same."

Yet just 10 percent of the jute used in the automobile industry comes from Bangladesh, and there's a sense that if the country is going to change the world with its miracle plant, innovation and investment are going to be the name of the future game.

There is abundant evidence that Bangladesh is eager to address the challenge. To travel through the rural hinterlands is to witness the diversity and evolution of jute, as if its fibers actually tie the nation together. At riverside restaurants, diners sit on jute cushions. They are served their *ilish macher paturi*, a marinated fish steamed in banana leaves, and *chotpoti*, a chickpea rice with chillies, eggs and cilantro, on jute tablecloths. At home, jute is in the carpets, cupboards, trashcans and toys. Jute matting creates temporary clinics and storage rooms. When jute carpets become ripped, or a birthday gift is needed, a new one can be pressed or woven—and the old one swiftly and cleanly composted. At times the entire country appears biodegradable.

Even the ubiquitous, stray plastic trash cannot entirely spoil views of soaring jute stems and majestic, oceanic rivers. The Ganges Delta hosts freshwater dolphins and clouded leopards, crested serpent eagles and chital deer. At Cox's Bazaar, at 150 kilometers the world's longest beach, five species of sea turtles paddle through the shallows. Asian elephants amble through the wildlife sanctuary behind. Where the delta sprawls into the Bay of Bengal, mangrove swamps shelter pythons and Bengal tigers. Occasionally a cargo boat laden with raw jute chug-chugs through the silence, outrigger-balanced with jute bales, the better to pile the hull sky high with bundles of jute stems.

Investment in jute also seems to finally be paying dividends. In 2010 the Mandatory Jute Packaging Act was introduced to reduce consumer plastics. Industrial commodities, agricultural goods, rice, onions and other staple foodstuffs had to be packaged in jute. Initially the act didn't work as well as hoped. Suppliers were concerned about the supply of sacks. They also had to overcome long-held consumer attitudes that jute was an old-fashioned, even dirty throwback—just not a modern product. Those fears have dissipated. Although polythene remains popular, the act was recently expanded to secure the jute

packaging of garlic, pulses, chilies, turmeric and coriander seeds.

Mohammad Sabuj Hossain, director of Eco Bangla Jute and a leading exporter, explains how the act could become globally successful. Already 60 countries, including Bangladesh, Morocco and France, have banned plastic grocery bags. "You need to present consumers an alternative or else prohibition does not work."

For Hossain, the answer is jute.

"It could replace 90 percent of packaging materials and almost all grocery sacks," he says.

He purchases his stock of jute in two ways: tied in jute rope directly from the farmers market, or from one of Bangladesh's 200 or so jute mills in the form of premade cloth and yarn. Hossain's Eco Bangla Jute export catalog is growing—jute garden mesh, jute yoga bags, jute baskets, jute vegetable planters and jute reusable totes—each one a product with a plastic competitor, all exported as far afield as Denmark, Panama and Mexico. Overall jute exports have netted Bangladesh a consistent $1 billion per year for the last decade, ranking it after cotton garments as the country's second-highest earner.

But to tackle polythene head-on, the country is also looking to empower jute with tech.

Polythene amounts to one third of the world's total plastic market. The fabricated polymer is ubiquitous, from plastic wrap to surgical gloves. In 2015 Bangladeshi scientist Mubarak Ahmad Khan unveiled a biodegradable cellulose sheet, a "jute polymer," that can take the place of many polythene products.

"The physical properties are quite similar," explains Khan.

By 2020 his Sonali Bag, named after the Bangladeshi word for "golden," was being produced at the rate of 100,000 per day at the Latif Bawany Jute Mill near Dhaka, which stands just a short walk from the historic, defunct Adamjee Jute Mill. Although the infrastructure is not yet present for it to supplant the estimated 410 million polythene grocery bags used each month in Dhaka alone, for the jute industry, it's looking like a new day dawning. By 2022, industry forecasters estimate the global market for this and other bioplastics could be worth as much as $77 billion.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the Sonali Bag technology showed it could be put to a different and urgent use. Demand boomed for personal protective equipment (PPE) including gloves, masks and discard bags, the vast majority of which were made of single-use plastic. Khan produced a new line of protective gear—all made from jute cellulose. The compound used to produce it includes chitosan, a natural fiber obtained from the shells of crabs and shrimps, which Bangladesh also exports in number. The tensile strength of Khan's new polymer is nearly double that of polythene. As a bonus, chitosan is shown to have antiviral properties, hence its use in burn dressings and assorted medications. This jute-based disposable PPE dissolves in water in seven days, or in hot soapy water in just three minutes. The wider world is considering the invention right now.

Khan is using jute to take aim also at two final materials. The Bangladeshi inventor recently unveiled Jute-Tin, made from jute hessian, resin and coupling agents. The material is lighter and stronger than iron sheets, not to mention rust-proof, sound-proof and ultimately biodegradable, making it a formidable alternative to informal homes often constructed from corrugated iron made from lead and zinc. Jute-Tin can also be used to make furniture, mobile clinics or other commercial buildings, replacing concrete and bricks. With jute Bangladesh stands on the leading edge of innovative solutions to some of the world's most serious sustainability challenges. The "miracle" biodegradable plant seems primed to become the next global "superplant"—edible, practical and fashionable.

Jute seems primed to become a global "superplant"—edible, practical, fashionable.

Even Nishat Tuly recognizes that to make a global impact, her jute clothing concepts are going to have to appeal beyond her local, jute-conscious Dhaka scene. As a designer, her cuts and colors can influence the runway and the catalog, but in the fabrics she chooses, she can perhaps influence younger generations.

"There is a greater opportunity to develop a great period in jute production for the millennials right now. So, we young people can take the chance," Tuly says. "It is no good thinking only of one country, like Bangladesh. We have to think globally."

Tristan Rutherford has received six major travel journalism awards while traveling among 70 countries in his career. Currently based in England, his work appears in *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The Atlantic*. He has authored two books about Turkey for *National Geographic*.

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TOP: SALAHUDDIN AHMED / DRIK / MAJORITY WORLD; OPPOSITE: REYAD ABEDIN

ARTISTS ANSWER COVID-19

Written and curated by **BELIZ TECIRLI**

Artworks courtesy of **THE ARTISTS**

Salah El Mur, "Quarantine Box 2", acrylic on canvas, 30 x 30 cm.

Inspiration, comfort, challenge, reflection, discussion—at no time do creative arts offer us more than during crisis. Faced with the closing of so many doors through travel bans, museum and gallery closures, lockdowns, quarantines and social distancing, artists of all kinds are responding with new ways to make new connections on new platforms to articulate this moment in history.

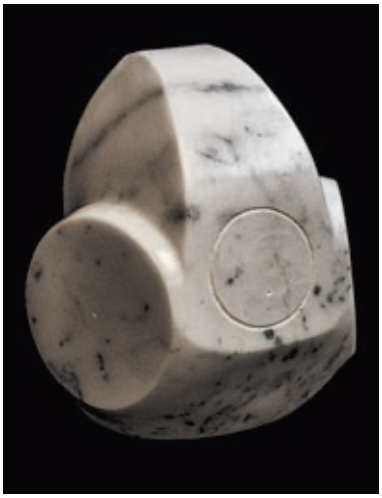
Almigdad Aidikhaiiry, untitled, ink on handkerchief, 20 x 25 cm.

Apical Reform, "Crown Shyness", *Dream+Reality* series, wall-hung kinetic art (acrylic ply and electronics), 100 x 100 cm.

Jassim Al Dhamin, "Waiting", acrylic on canvas, 122 x 183 cm.

Athar Jaber, "A Mask for Life", marble, 12 x 6 cm.

Omar Sfeir with Nadia Hassan, "(I)solation", digital collage, 1080 x 1080 pixels.



For visual artists and their artistic practices, the challenges of COVID-19 have inspired everything from revisiting previous works while in lockdown to creating something entirely new in direct response to the crisis. Here, we look at a selection of artworks, all undertaken since February by artists of Middle Eastern heritage or residence, that pertain loosely to themes of isolation, lifestyle, access, environment and healing. The artists are only a few of the many who, amid coping with their own personal obstacles, continue to create, collaborate and encourage art that, as the works here show, proves both culturally particular and universal.

Coming to Terms with Isolation

While quarantines and social distancing may be our best defenses against the virus, even surveys conducted earlier this year by the medical journal *The Lancet Psychiatry* and the UK Academy of Medical Science forecast "profound" and "pervasive" impacts on mental health that research since has borne out. With the global economy forecast to contract as much as 1.75 percent in 2020, it is increasingly clear that the effects of the pandemic will be with us for some time.

Artistic responses arose almost instantaneously, such as the quick, iconically virus-themed napkin sketch, penned by Almigdad Aidikhaiiry, and a painting of a face-masked man by Salah El Mur (both coincidentally from Sudan).

The uncertain boundaries between fever dreams and reality, as well as cell biology became themes for the Dubai-based design studio Apical Reform, known for its kinetic works and founded by Amrish Patel. The several resulting pieces, which use a "digital canvas" to display gently moving, digital images, all showed the tendency of early COVID-themed art to address the general fear of an unknown and novel coronavirus.

For some, however, isolation played to existing specialities. Lebanese photographer and filmmaker Omar Sfeir looks often at intimacy and human relationships. His most recent work, carried out in collaboration with poet Nadia Hassan, hones in on the psychological pressures of isolation. Hassan's poetry feels raw and unedited, inspiring in Sfeir a complementary, seemingly spontaneous photographic esthetic, producing together effects greater than either could alone.

For Saudi acrylic artist Jassim Al Dhamin, "Art was the only way to escape," he says, from both isolation and worry. Tapping his emotions, Al Dhamin's COVID-fueled work focuses on the ambiguously similar physical sensations of flying and falling, employing his signature palette and expressive linage to evoke instability.

For others, isolation led to outreach. Renowned sculptor Athar Jaber, born to Iraqi parents and currently living in Antwerp, Belgium, says he asked himself, *"How can art and artists directly contribute to society?"* This motivated him to mobilize his stone-working skills to carve from marble 10 different interpretations of face masks, sell them and donate the proceeds to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He dedicated the project, which he titled *A Mask for Life*, to the people who often have little or no physical space for the social distancing COVID-19 demands, "making them among the most vulnerable people" around the world, he says.

Osama Esid, "Memory Fusion in a Time of Quarantine", melted black plastic infused with transparent print on a back-lit frame, 35 x 25 cm.

Shifting Lifestyles

As contemporary artworks are being conceived and brought into existence in relative isolation, COVID-19 is providing a moment to reflect upon artistic practice and lifestyles as a whole.

Syrian-born artist Osama Esid, who now resides in Minnesota, has used the slower pace of pandemic life to re-edit and compile old works in his usual medium of painted photographs in colored oils while developing new techniques. These include the use of a filament pen to draw directly on celluloid and then printing the images using either silver gelatin photographic paper or a printing press.

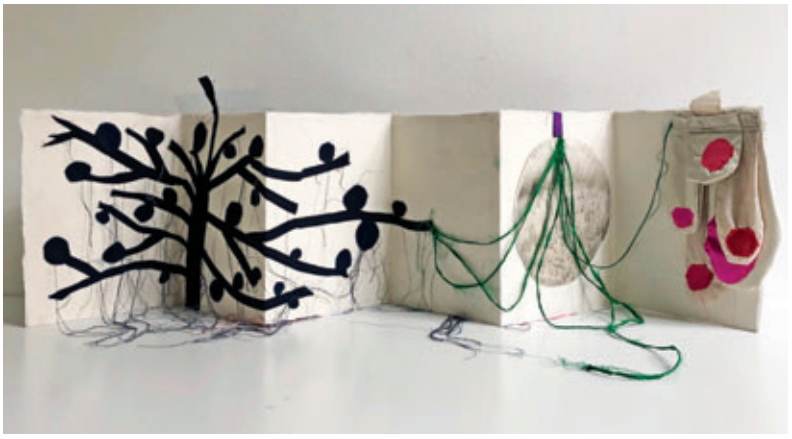
Similarly, Beirut-based painter Tagreed Darghouth says the quietude of social distancing offered "an opportunity to focus" while retaining her usual routines of long days in her studio.

Also working in Lebanon from a home and studio he calls his "little island" amid the mountains above Beirut, Nadim Karam says he has welcomed the opportunity quarantine has given him to invite members of his family into his practice through direct participation in creating some of his large-scale works.

On August 4, for Darghouth, Karam and thousands of others in Beirut, the explosion in the city's port shattered far more than just the windows and glass doors of studios and homes. "Hundreds and thousands, friends and acquaintances, dead, injured and displaced. This disaster has changed our lives forever," Karam laments before shifting to resolution. "Although coronavirus created a definite change, this disaster brings forward a wind of fresh energy"—energy he says should be mobilized as "creative power" to push for political and social change.

ABOVE: Nadim Karam, right, paints with members of his family.

Tagreed Darghout, untitled, acrylic on paper, 21 x 30 cm.



ABOVE, LEFT AND LOWER LEFT: Abed Al Kadiri, *Cities Under Quarantine: The Mailbox Project*.

TOP LEFT For a month, I couldn't touch the book sent to me, as if it morphed into an exhibition hall. I felt it was so precious I could hardly add any imprint with my pencil. I am used to filling large sizes of canvas and walls in lofts and hangars. This contraction of space has pushed me to reconsider the small frame, and I had to readapt. —Dalia Baassiri, Beirut

LEFT When you are sitting confined and everything is a little bit gloomy, this initiative was like fresh air. It gave me the capacity to reconnect with people and to look into the future in a nice way rather than focusing on the small space you're stuck in. —Hoda Tawakol, Hamburg

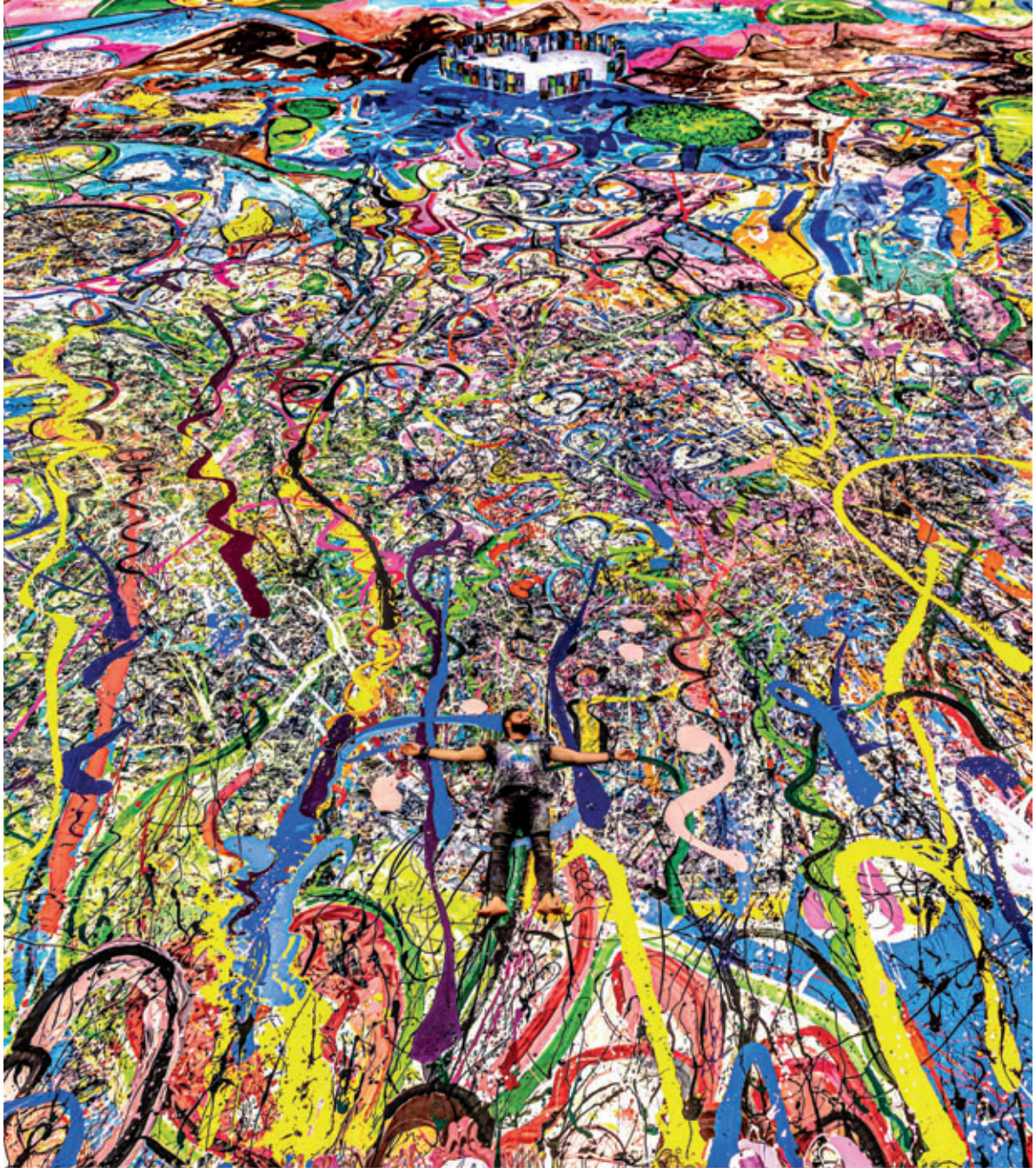
Shifting Accessibility

With museums, galleries, theaters and other arts venues largely shut down, the ways artists interact with audiences has shifted, too. Many artists have taken this as an opportunity to utilize the Internet more than ever to invent new collaborations and reach new audiences.

From April to July, The Mosaic Rooms, a nonprofit art gallery and bookshop dedicated to contemporary culture from the Arab world and beyond in London, worked remotely with local secondary schools on a four-week art project titled *Together Apart: Lockdown Diaries*. Artists Aya Haidar, Marwan Kaabour and Rosie Thwaites invited 60 students from The Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School and Kensington Aldridge Academy to respond to weekly briefs on social distancing, daily exercise, pandemic hygiene and remote relationships. The teachers expressed excitement at exploring "relevant new ground" using digital learning, and students enjoyed expressing freely and personally about their own relationship to the lockdown.

Similarly, Abed Al Kadiri—another Beirut-based artist who also lost work in the August 4 explosion—has promoted artist-to-artist collaboration through *Cities Under Quarantine: The Mailbox Project*. Responding to the closure of public places, he created and shipped identical, handmade art books, all pages

Daayna, "Flowers: Two meters of social distancing", *Together Apart: The Lockdown Diaries*, installation view.



Sacha Jafri, photographed on top of "The Journey of Humanity", work in progress.

blank, to 57 artists across the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and Asia. He invited each artist to fill the pages, which Kadiri plans to publish alongside essays in what he hopes will be "a common space for artists to express and explore this moment in history." An exhibition, he says, may follow when galleries can reopen.

On a vastly larger scale, inside a great ballroom of Dubai's iconic Atlantis hotel, painter Sacha Jafri has embarked on a record breaker: He is attempting to create the largest painting ever to cover a single canvas. Spreading over some 2,000 square meters, the work he has titled "The Journey of Humanity" is also both collaborative and charitable. While Jafri will complete much himself, through his website and social media he has invited children from across the globe to share their own artworks on the themes of "connection and isolation." He will collage the children's works within large circular "portals" set amid Jafri's own expressionistic puddles, splashes and strokes of electric color. Upon completion, Jafri plans to auction the work as 60 individually framed pieces and donate what he hopes will be as much as $30 million to charities serving children in extreme poverty worldwide.

Other projects address our diminished relationships to public spaces, such as "Project 003278079060" by the artist called Neither and Marc Buchy. This turned a voicemail system into a space to host sound-based art, in turn establishing a virtual, interactive audio exhibition space without the Internet. Because the recordings eventually expired, the work created an ephemeral discourse between the recordings themselves and the memories of them.

Empty public spaces themselves have become creative material for Palestinian artist Jack Persekian, who has continued his series *Gates of Jerusalem*, in which he composites and superimposes historic and contemporary photos of the old city's gates, towers and other well-known landmarks. Similarly, Madinah-based artist-photographer Moath Alofi is treating his city of birth as his studio and museum, exploring and documenting both its barren and urbanized spaces.

Jack Persekian, "Damascus Gate", *Gates of Jerusalem* series, photographic collage/erasure, 60 x 60 cm.

Almigdad Aidikhaiiry, "Clarion Call", oil on canvas, 170 x 320 cm.

Shifting Environmental Concerns

While public spaces remain problematic, artists like Saudi photographer Dhafer Al Shehri remind us that even our forms of virus protection are having impacts in the public environment. With images that allude to the hazards of material pollution from predominantly plastic, nonrecyclable and nonbiodegradable personal protective equipment (PPE), he helps us consider whether such environmental pollution is a temporary nuisance we must accept when fighting a global virus, part of a long-term environmental disaster or both. With such waste already damaging the world's oceans and the essential production of PPE continually increasing, such artworks are fundamental in transmitting an urgent message about our methods of disposal.

Others including Los Angeles-based Sudanese American artist Almigdad Aidikhaiiry approach COVID-19 as an opportunity and indeed an alarm for "change in the direction of humanity." Aidikhaiiry's visual works often use playful colors and seemingly whimsical forms that captivate the beauty of the natural world to serve up compelling truths about climate change, deforestation and other threats to ecosystems alongside strategies for change—all of which he makes memorably clear in the title and motifs of his painting "Clarion Call."

Dhafer Al Shehri,
Glove and Mask series,
digital print, 80 x 120 cm.

Jordan Nassar, "A Stream Is Singing Under The Youthful Grass", hand-embroidered cotton on cotton, 105 x 274 cm.

Banu Çolak, "Cultivation of the Inner Garden", manipulated textile and mixed media, 200 x 90 cm.

Art as Therapy, Healing and Material Memory

Let's Tatreez!, another project spearheaded by The Mosaic Rooms, saw textile artist Jordan Nassar design cross-stitch patterns inspired by the rich history of Palestinian embroidery. He then provided the patterns for free download, alongside how-to tips so that audiences online could take on the traditional, meditative craft at home. The project encourages participants to improvise and embellish designs with personal flair, and then to post images of them on Instagram under #letstatreez. Seemingly simple, such work signifies so much in a time like ours, drawing to mind the long-running tradition of community-based handicrafts, which both replicate and innovate passed-down patterns but this time carried out by long-distance collaboration.

To a similar end of healing through meditative practice and textile art, Abu Dhabi resident Banu Çolak has drawn nature into her home by painting textiles and creating prints using natural paints handcrafted from herbs, spices and plant oils. As a result, these works feature repetitive patterns in earthy tones. They bring a breath of the natural world into the enclosed environments that we each inhabit in this crisis.

Beyond coping with new circumstances and seeking in creative

Maysaloun Faraj, "Home 4", *Home Series, Covid-19 Lockdown Week 1*, acrylic on paper, 24 x 18 cm.

practice relief from the stresses of the pandemic, art in the time of COVID-19 is also the formation of collective memory. The concerns expressed, be they personal, social, spatial or environmental, together they are painting the greater picture of our time.

As many of these artworks have been exhibited only online due to a lack of alternatives, they have also thus proven to be part of one of the most sweepingly immediate and far-reaching artistic responses to global crisis in history. In this way, they are emotional touchstones for today and contributions to a shared global heritage for tomorrow.

Beliz Tecirli, Ph.D., advises on business responsibility and specializes in urban cultural development. She writes about art, culture and lifestyle in the Arabian Peninsula and beyond.

Thank you to all the artists who shared work and experiences for this article. Thank you also to Omar al-Qattan, chairman of the board for the A. M. Qattan Foundation; Mahmoud Abu Hashhash, director of that foundation's Culture and Arts Programme; Flora Bain, manager of communications and outreach for The Mosaic Rooms; Stephen Stapleton, founder of CULTURRUNNERS; journalist Rebecca Anne Proctor; and artist Ajax W. Axe. —Beliz Tecirli

THE WESTWARD JOURNEYS OF *Buttons*

WRITTEN BY CAROLINE STONE

A drilled shell disc estimated to date from 7000 BCE, **OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT**, is the oldest-known buttonlike object. It was discovered at Mehrgarh in the Indus Valley, now in Pakistan, where other button-like objects, **OPPOSITE, TOP TWO ROWS**, have been found also at Harrapa, made variously from shells, gold, steatite and faience and dated mostly between 2600 and 1900 BCE. These were used for decoration, not garment closures like buttons today, says archeologist J. Mark Kenoyer. **OPPOSITE, THIRD ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT** People in other regions later produced ornamental buttons, too: Both of these carved, polished shell buttons were likely used on harnesses between the ninth and seventh centuries BCE in Assyria; a button of gold with a male face relief was made between the eighth and seventh centuries BCE and found in Megara, Greece; a finely tooled gold disc dates to a sixth-century-BCE Etruscan site. **FOURTH ROW** This cast bronze button is of Mongolian origin, from the fifth to third century BCE; a simple Phoenician shell button was made from the eighth to second century BCE; the flat side of this lumpy faience button makes it possible it served also as a seal in Egypt between the sixth and first century BCE; from northern China, this button was made of gilt cast bronze between the first century BCE and first century CE. **ABOVE, TOP ROW** Also from China comes a cast bronze button adornment, from the Han dynasty, made between the second century BCE and second century CE; also of bronze, an openwork ornament found in Korea was made between the first century BCE and the ninth century CE; a polished shell-disc button from Sasanid Persia, dated from the third to seventh century CE and, shown under it, an English Roman loop fastener of copper from the first or second century CE. **SECOND ROW** With a dot-in-circle design, a Sasanian button dates from the eighth to 10th century CE; a spherical cloissonne enamel and gold button comes from 10th-century CE Byzantine Bulgaria; a flat-ended bronze button from seventh-century CE northern France; a button or bead from ninth- or 10th-century CE Nishapur is made of bone. **LOWER LEFT** A set of 16 small buttons, cut and hammered in Afghanistan from debased gold in the late second century CE.

CREDITS: SEE NEXT PAGE

From the rear storage room of her country cottage outside Budapest, Hungary, Sylvia Llewelyn holds up a framed display of antique buttons as if it were a portrait of a family member known for telling good stories.

"This one is from China, and it's made of jade. This one is glazed ceramic; this one is glazed turquoise. This one is made from apricot nut. You see this one here that looks like a cherry tomato? This is carnelian, the second hardest stone to jade, and it's about 500 years old," she says, moving through her 4,000-piece collection, some of which are up to 1,500 years old.

An antiques and art appraiser originally from London, Llewelyn is also the former owner of Old Buttons Shop in her town of Ráckeve. She is also the author of *Old Buttons* (Anno, 2011), a book of rare and artful buttons around the world.

"I remember a lady asked me once to appraise some old buttons she found in her mother's sewing box," she recalls. "They were French Revolution buttons, a set of six, and each was different, each with secret symbols supporting the Revolution." Owning such buttons, she says, "may have saved you from having your head chopped off."

For most of us, buttons are so ordinary we tend not to think about them until one falls off. It was not always this way, of course. From origins in Asia and Egypt, for more than 5,000 years people have traded buttons and innovated with materials, designs, techniques and functions in every direction, altering how we dress and how we express ourselves and our cultures.

The earliest object that may have been a button—what archeologists call a perforated shell disc—could have been used as a button or pendant. Dated to about 7000 BCE, it was excavated from a burial site at Mehrgarh in the Indus Valley in present-day Pakistan. Drilled with a hole, it could have been sewn onto clothing. It is made from a type of conus shell, and shell-working was an important craft at the site, which is one of the world's earliest-known locations of organized human settlement along with others in Mesopotamia, China and Egypt. Other Indus Valley sites, especially in the period 2800–2600 BCE, have yielded similar items.

"If they were sewn on clothing or used some other way, we

Compiled in Toledo in about 1283 CE, Alfonso X's *Libro de Axedrez* or *Libro de los Juegos* (*Book of Chess* or *Book of Games*) has among its many illustrations this group of European men playing the game that evolved into checkers: *alquerque*, from the Arabic *al-qirqat*. The players are dressed in buttoned robes that look similar to those worn by Muslims who are depicted elsewhere in the book.

This Qin dynasty terracotta warrior, one of thousands buried between 221 and 206 BCE in northwest China, wears a buttoned coat of leather-plate armor. **RIGHT** A gouache painting describes a hierarchy of ceremonial buttons from both the the Xia dynasty, on the left side, and the Qing dynasty, on the right, which would have been worn on hats or clothing, each one a precious metal with a stone inset to indicate rank or status.

CREDITS, PREVIOUS SPREAD, PAGE 32, TOP AND SECOND ROWS (10): DEPT OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND MUSEUMS, PAKISTAN / HARAPPA ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH PROJECT / J. M. KENOYER; THIRD ROW: THE MET (2); G. DAGLI ORTI / DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY / BRIDGEMAN; THE MET; FOURTH ROW: LACMA; THE BRITISH MUSEUM; THE MET; LACMA; PAGE 33, TOP ROW: LACMA; THE MET (2); SECOND ROW: THE MET (3); THE PORTABLE ANTIQUITIES SCHEME; THE MET (2).

The long, loose-fitting kaftan, such as this one made of silk in the 16th century in Turkey, generally used buttons, either on the back, as shown here, or on the front. They became known in Europe as *caban* or *turcha*, and with their use of buttons developed into the European coat in the sense they are used today.

cannot say for certain whether they were for utility or for decoration," says J. Mark Kenoyer, a professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who has specialized in the Indus Valley Civilization sites for more than 30 years. "People have been putting objects on strings and using them as decoration since early man."

As for these being "the oldest," he adds that "we always think it's the first until we find something else that's earlier, so I never like to use that term."

By 4000–5000 BCE, the excavation finds begin to show some carved and decorated discs of bone, ivory, clay and stone that have two holes in the center or a boss in the back, which adds to the evidence that these may have been sewn onto something.

In China, objects not unlike those found in the Indus Valley have been found at Bronze Age sites. The earliest-recorded button in China dates to about 1000 BCE during the Zhou Dynasty, and it is a knot-and-loop button, in which both button and loop are fashioned with fabric. These are still in use on modern Chinese garments such as the *qipao* or *cheongsam*, a fitted dress for women.

It was not until the Islamic conquests in Central Asia in the late seventh and early eighth centuries CE, and over the later centuries of trade along what came to be called the Silk Road, that the knot-and-loop button closure appears to have made its way West, along with paper and other cultural artifacts.

In this way, it is most likely that buttons reached Europe via the Mediterranean in the course of the great cross-cultural exchanges triggered by the Crusades starting in the late 11th century, which led to the West's adoption of innumerable innovations. Arab geographer Ibn Jubayr, writing about his travels from 1183 to 1185 CE, comments on Christian women adopting Muslim fashions, notably in Sicily. Among these were head-coverings such as the wimple still worn by Catholic nuns and the dramatic, conical hennin, clearly derived from the *tantur* of Syria-Lebanon and, for both sexes, long, kaftan-style coats with hanging sleeves. Although Ibn Jubayr does not specifically mention buttons, the caftan was often buttoned all down the front. It was known as *caban* or *turcha*, and as it came west, it became the first real European coat, the descendants of which form an important part of our wardrobes today. These borrowings came through merchants not only from the wares they brought back but also because they themselves wore and became accustomed to "oriental" clothes on their travels, often in the interest of safety during times of conflict.

As buttons gradually became useful as well as symbolic, it is worth thinking back for a moment about the options for clothing before buttons-as-fasteners. The most obvious answer is drapery, as in the case of classical dress, or even the modern sari. The first of these was held, where necessary, with large decorative fibulae fixed below the shoulders, still to be seen in the traditional North African Amazigh *tizerai*. Other garments such as tunics were pulled over the head and fastened—or attached—with points and laces. Sometimes, in order to obtain close fit, the wearer was stitched into a garment.

The advent of the button as a fastener shows in the fashions preserved in European paintings: From the later Middle Ages,

Though in fragments, this Egyptian tunic, dating to the fifth to eighth centuries CE, **LEFT**, shows a neck flap and a button used as a closure. **RIGHT** An Alanic kaftan, from the Caucasus and made between the seventh and ninth centuries CE, uses a similar type of single-button closure.

TOP: V&A MUSEUM; LOWER: THE MET (2) OPPOSITE, TOP: ALAMY; LOWER LEFT: PHILIPPE TOUTAIN / BRIDGEMAN; LOWER RIGHT: WELLCOME LIBRARY COLLECTION

By the 18th century, buttons as practical devices of closure had become widespread in Europe and the Americas, particularly among those who could afford the fine tailoring buttons made possible as well as the attendants that complex garments, such as this Irish livery suit, **FAR RIGHT**, often required. Other buttons remained decorative or even declarative: This button, **RIGHT**, supports the inauguration in 1789 of the first president of the US, George Washington, with his initials surrounded by a chain of the nation's 13 newly federated states.

dresses fit women closely, showing off the shape of the body and sleeves, again apparently imitated from the East, that could be unbuttoned to free the forearm or when the long sleeve was inconvenient or hot.

Sometime earlier, perhaps around the 13th century, the buttonhole was developed. This made possible really close-fitting garments, which were especially useful in colder climates. The buttons of the period generally had a shank on the back with a hole for sewing, leaving the surface of the button free for a vast range of decorative options.

Archeologist and historian of textiles and dress Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, director of the Textile Research Centre in Leiden, The Netherlands, has spent years on excavations in Egypt looking for early textiles and clothing materials. The earliest forms of buttons there, she says, date to around 1400 BCE, when two ties on the neck openings of clothing evolved into something like the knotted button and fabric loop.

"Looking at ancient Egyptian clothing, they had cloth buttons. Thread was used to create a button on a garment with a matching loop on the other side," says Vogelsang-Eastwood, who earned her doctorate in archeological textiles from The University of Manchester. "We didn't start seeing clothes buttons as a separate item sewn on garments until the 1300s, 1400s."

In Egypt, too, buttons were, like cloth itself, a sign of wealth. The more cloth a person wore usually meant they could afford it, so hemlines were related to income.

"The more cloth you wore, the higher your status," she says.

So too with buttons as they appeared in Europe, she continues. They would have been individually designed and usually made of fine metal or precious stones, often by a jeweler or a specialized button maker. (A Paris document dating to 1292 mentions permits for a button maker.) They would have then been sewn onto a garment or fabric by a tailor or a seamstress. The wearer of the button-adorned garment may have needed an assistant to help them into and out of the outfit, which means they would have to be able to afford this level of service. Sometimes, however, buttons were purely decorative, even on shoes, cloaks, coats and dresses, appearing on sleeves or areas where buttons were showcased and not used as a closure—a practice still often found on the sleeves of Western men's suits.

"Most of the buttons were valuable, and they were usually cut off one garment and put on another. You showed your prestige with buttons," she says. "The idea that buttons are nothing is a 20th-century concept with the onset of plastic."

Among innumerable styles of buttons, including those designed to conceal secret information, contraband (or even poison), metal buttons became popular, especially for military uniforms—remember Llewelyn's appraisal of the French Revolution buttons? In the late 17th century, this fashion appears to have spread eastward, from France to Turkey in the late 17th century. During the Napoleonic period, buttons were found on Ottoman uniforms with a variety of crests and insignia, as elements of Western dress were adopted there.

In a much-debated political mystery attributed to a particular Turkish military button, King Charles XII of Sweden was fatally wounded by a gunshot in battle in 1718. It is thought that the fatal

FAR LEFT A display at the National Pearl Button Museum in Muscatine, Iowa, helps show how the town grew into the early 20th century's "pearl" button capital of the world, at its peak producing more than a billion buttons a year from Mississippi River clams and mussels. **LEFT** The collection formerly in collector Sylvia Llewelyn's Old Button Shop in Ráckeve, Hungary, includes this array of 16th-century filigreed Austro-Hungarian buttons.

BUTTONS AND *OYA*

Buttons on Ottoman Turkish robes were more frequently of the type originally found in China more than two and a half millennia earlier, created with the needle and fastened with a loop. The techniques involved in their production relate to those of an elaborate, three-dimensional needle-lace decoration known as *oya*, meaning embroidery. Often made in the form of flowers and leaves, oya was produced all across the lands under Ottoman control. It was used as edging on personal items such as handkerchiefs and head scarves, as well as on household linens. It can be made in various ways, including crochet, but the most typical is worked with a needle. What makes it socially interesting is that its motifs comprised a symbolic language: Women would choose a flower or colors to convey, for example, contentment (or not) with a family situation. The finest examples, made of silk thread, were the products of the Ottoman court at Topkapı Sarayı, while oya made in the countryside with a crochet hook or a shuttle were usually coarser. There is disagreement among experts about its origins, as it has some similarities to Venetian needle lace; however, while these chains of flowers were typical across the Ottoman world, they do not seem to have been produced or imitated much beyond it.

bullet was fashioned from the melting down of the king's own Turkish-made metal buttons—that is, from a button taken from one of the king's own garments. The implication, of course, is that such a button could only have been acquired by someone close to the king—an act of treason rather than a casualty in battle. The story may never be settled, but melting buttons was common.

"If soldiers ran out of bullets, they would melt the buttons down," says Llewelyn. "The higher-ranking officers of the 17th and 18th centuries would have had brass and gold buttons, and remember silver wasn't that valuable in the old days,"

Fascination with Muslim fashion continued, and as the Ottoman Empire's power and wealth grew, it became a major source of European inspiration. Europeans (as well as Americans) regarded eastern luxuries as the height of elegance, from sumptuous *hi'lat* or "robes of honor" to what became the priest's cassock—a term that came from Turkic *kazak* in the early 17th century for a robe fastened from neck to ankle with numerous buttons.

This is a style that can still be seen, especially in Morocco, in

Iridescent and pearl-like buttons help adorn the elaborately woven and embroidered textiles made by women in Pakistan's far-northern district of Chitral—one of many decorative uses around the world that may faintly echo early uses of buttons to the south in the Indus Valley.

the long lines of buttons, fashioned with classical needlework, that run down the fronts of traditional *djellabas* or kaftans. A formal one can have hundreds. Made with a needle and thread over a paper core, there are today some 40 designs being produced, and each takes between four and 10 minutes to make, depending on the design and the experience of the craftswoman. The pattern names often refer to the shape of the button: acorn, jasmine flower, etc. Button making remains a useful supplementary source of income for women, some of whom have formed independent marketing cooperatives, which by eliminating middlemen increases their income and, consequently, opportunities for their children.

By the early 1900s, while their distant ancestors still lay undiscovered in the Indus Valley, shell buttons found a new center of production: the town of Muscatine, Iowa. Situated along the Mississippi River in the US and naturally supplied by beds of freshwater clams and mussels, Muscatine at its height mass-produced some 1.5 *billion* "pearl buttons" a year. That same pearlescent quality endures today as one of the most common colors of button, though now made from plastic.

Caroline Stone divides her time between Cambridge, UK, and Seville. Her most-recent book, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness*, translated with Paul Lunde from the medieval Arab accounts of the lands in the Far North, was published in 2011 by Penguin Classics.

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TOP: HULYA KOCA / ALAMY; RIGHT: HEMIS / ALAMY; OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT TO BOTTOM RIGHT: DON TROIANI / BRIDGEMAN; LACMA; THE NATIONAL PEARL BUTTON MUSEUM; SYLVIA LLEWELYN

REVIEWS

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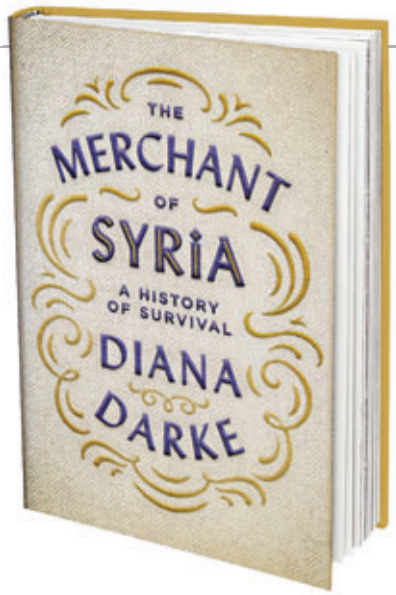
"[I]n spite of all the corruption and ugliness he had witnessed and experienced in his lifetime, Abu Chaker, like so many other Syrians, never lost his humanity."



The Merchant of Syria: A History of Survival

Diana Darke. 2018, Oxford UP, 9-780-19087-485-8, $27.95 hb.

The Merchant of Syria tells the inspiring story of Abu Chaker (1921–2013), an entrepreneurial cloth merchant from Homs, against the backdrop of Syria's complex socio-political history: the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1922 to Syria's independence in 1946 from French Mandate, to the early days of the Syrian Revolution in 2013. His father's sudden passing in 1932 forced 10-year-old Abu Chaker, the only son among seven daughters, to leave school and run the family's textile shop in the historic covered *suq* in Homs. Described as having "the true mentality of a Syrian merchant, a worthy descendant of Syria's Silk Road trading empire across the centuries," Abu Chaker became the largest wool dealer in the Middle East by the mid-1970s, acquiring in 1981 the renowned Hield Brothers wool mill in Bradford, England. In sharp contrast to Abu Chaker's hard-earned success, the ongoing physical devastation, poverty and political chaos in Syria lead Darke to end her book questioning how Syria would survive. *"Can Abu Chaker's legacy as the archetypical Syrian merchant,"* she ponders, *"give clues about the future of Syria?"*

—PINEY KESTING

A Taste for Home: The Modern Middle Class in Ottoman Beirut

Toufoul Abou-Hodeib. 2017, Stanford UP, 978-0-80479-979-9, $65 cloth.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Beirut grew from a small coastal town into an international port city. Rapid political and economic development brought social change as a newly empowered Arab middle class developed tastes for consumption that influenced new ideas of domesticity. Abou-Hodeib takes that social upheaval as the spark to investigate the middle class's "global intimacies of taste." With access to archival sources ranging widely across French, English, Arabic and Ottoman Turki, she looks at how Beirut became a place seen as "neither Oriental nor quite Western." She delves deeply into Beiruti lives, for example, by examining advertisements to understand how material objects defined notions of social status. Of the many points that emerge, one stands out. European imperial influence may have played a role in shaping urban development, but on the ground—and especially in the new privacy of home—Beirutis were making their own city. —MATTHEW TELLER

Impostures

Al-Hariri. Michael Cooperson, tr. 2020, NYU Press, 9-781-47980-0841, $29.95 hb.

The *picaresque*—a series of tales chronicling the roving adventures of a roguish misfit—traces its roots back to the Middle Eastern *maqama*, a genre of tales, usually featuring a rascal-hero. While the 10th-century Persian storyteller Al-Hamadhani is credited with the invention of the genre, it was the 11th/12th-century Arab poet al-Hariri of Basra who elevated it to an art form ultimately imitated and adopted by some of the West's most famous authors, from Geoffrey Chaucer to Miguel Cervantes, Henry Fielding, Mark Twain and others. By retelling al-Hariri's tales in their style, Arabic scholar Michael Cooperson cleverly and creatively helps repay the West's indebtedness to the Arab poet in this engaging and amusing collection, in which antihero Abu Zayd al-Saruji connives and cons his way across the medieval Middle East, impersonating clerics, scamming judges and conning his way out of trouble. Cooperson's al-Saruji invokes everything from cowpoke patter ("I was cozy as a toad under a cabbage leaf") to Yiddish slang ("Look in my pockets: bupkes!") in this colorful revisioning of an Arabic classic.

—TOM VERDE

Table Tales: The Global Nomad Cuisine of Abu Dhabi

Hanan Sayed Worrell. 2018, Rizzoli, 978-8-89181-793-8, $75 hb.

Since the discovery of oil in Abu Dhabi in 1958, thousands of expats have come to the city for work.

Some stay only for a few months and some stay for decades, as their families expand to include children and grandchildren who also consider Abu Dhabi home. This gorgeously photographed book is the story of these multigenerational and multinational expats and their connections to Abu Dhabi through food. Worrell, who has lived in the emirate with her family for 25 years, frames the recipes around portraits of Emiratis and expats who share both re-creations of their favorite family dishes as well as life stories in Abu Dhabi over the decades. The common experience of having lived in many other places before settling in Abu Dhabi reveals itself in the diverse and often overlapping communities in the Emirate built through dinners with friends, colleagues and neighbors, as well as in the eclectic mixture of ingredients brought in from around the world. —ALIA YUNIS

Tatar Empire: Kazan's Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia

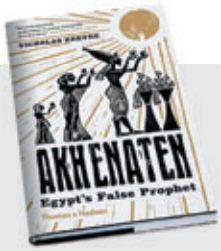
Danielle Ross. 2020, Indiana UP, 978-0-25304-571-3, $30 pb.

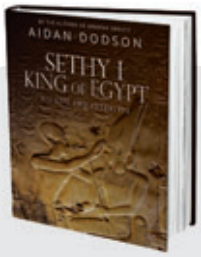
Ross argues that the Kazan Tatars, who had settled along the Volga River as early as the eighth century, played a key role in the rise of the Russian empire some 10 centuries later. After the Russian conquest of their khanate in 1552, Kazan Tatars began forming "a new identity for themselves" in response to 17th-century crises including the impact of Russian policies against their own local leadership bodies. The remnants of the Kazan Tatar nobility adapted, creating a "codependent relationship" with Russian officials that "began to empower specific networks within Kazan Tatar society and to facilitate the extension of those networks [away] from their homeland" to the Urals, western Siberia, the Kazakh steppe, and the Russian-Chinese borderlands. Although Ross neglects to define the cultural and linguistic identity of Kazan Tatars, she succeeds in tracing the "relationships among the multitude of jurists, shaykhs, merchants, industrialists, bureaucrats, teachers, rebels, revolutionaries" that blurred "the categories of colonizer and colonized" and figured significantly in the rise of the Russian state. —ALVA ROBINSON

Two Thousand and One Syrian Nights

Pat McDonnell Twair. 2018, 978-172-907957-7, $20.90 pb.

Pat McDonnell was a journalist, archeologist, activist and native of California who, not long after arriving in Syria in 1977 for doctoral research, fractured her ankle at an archeological site. The mishap led her to her future husband, Samir Twair, and she went on to live in Syria through 1983 and publish some 1,800 stories—quite possibly as the only self-employed American in the entire country. She passed away in January 2018, and this is a posthumous collection of her writings from those years—from falling in love and getting to know her husband's family to the epochal history of Syria, modern social life, relationships, women, artists and politics. It is a story of two people from two cultures meeting where East and West have met for centuries, a story that, in her case, has a happy ending. —SAMIR TWAIR





Akhenaten: A Historian's View

Ronald T. Ridley. 2018, AUC Press, 978-9-77416-7-935, $59.95 hb.

Akhenaten: Egypt's False Prophet

Nicholas Reeves. 2019, Thames & Hudson. 978-0-50029-4-697, $16.95 pb.

Sethy I, King of Egypt: His Life and Afterlife

Aidan Dodson. 2018, AUC Press 978-9-77416-886-4, $35 hb.

Three books about Egypt's 18th and 19th Dynasties offer plenty of food for thought for armchair archeologists. In *Akhenaten: A Historian's View,* Ridley examines a host of questions surrounding the "heretic pharaoh" Akhenaten (r. 1353–1336 BCE), his wife, Nefertiti, and his son, Tutankhamun (r. 1333–1323 BCE), along with evidence underlying the often wildly diverse theories answering them: What led Akhenaten to reject Egypt's ancient pantheon and turn to a little-known sun-disk god, Aten? Why did he move the capital north from Thebes to a new city he named after himself near modern Assiut? Did Nefertiti rule after Akhenaten's death? And perhaps most intriguing of all, did Tutankhamun's successor Ay take the throne by assassination? Ridley throws light on why Akhenaten's story continues to intrigue us even 3,300 years later. *Akhenaten: Egypt's False Prophet,* a paperback reprint of a popular 2001 book by the same title, delves into the "Amarna heresy" and the religion now known as Atenism. No fan of the pharaoh Hatshepsut (r. 1479–1458 BCE), Reeves suggests that her promotion of the sun god Amun and its powerful priesthood led later pharaohs to turn toward Aten. This shift culminated when Akhenaten moved to his eponymous new city and declared himself the sole intermediary between Aten and the Egyptian people, to the neglect of the affairs of state. *Sethy I, King of Egypt: His Life and Afterlife,* moves the story back to Thebes, where Sethy, the second pharaoh of Egypt's Ramesside dynasty, ruled from 1290 to 1279 BCE. Soon after acceding to the throne, he set out to win back Egyptian territory lost by Akhenaten while overseeing a building program that would ultimately include the Great Hypostyle Hall at Karnak; the tomb of his father, Rameses I, who had ruled for only two years; and his own tomb, the largest and most beautifully decorated of all in the Valley of the Kings. Untouched for some 3,000 years, it was uncovered in 1817 by the Italian explorer Giovanni Belzoni. Awed by what he saw, Belzoni hired an artist to copy its near-pristine decorations. A selection of these vibrant paintings, along with photographs of almost all Sethy I's monuments, illustrate this handsome volume. —JANE WALDRON GRUTZ

Rameses III, King of Egypt: His Life and Afterlife

Aiden Dodson. 2019, AUC Press, 9-789-77416-940-3, $35 hb.

The last great ruler of Egypt's New Kingdom—a golden age of economic prosperity and political power, from the 16th to the 11th centuries BCE—Rameses III (r. 1186–1155 BCE) was your quintessential warrior king doing best what Egyptian pharaohs were born and expected to do: crush enemies and boast about it widely on steles and temple walls. But wars cost money. Strains on the treasury prompted history's first-known labor strike during the 29th year of the pharaoh's reign. In the end, palace intrigue and his own family did him in. At the instigation of one of his wives, conspirators cut the pharaoh's throat in the confines of the royal harem. This new, comprehensive, illustrated biography charts Rameses III's dramatic rise and fall, as well as his monumental legacies and "revived appreciation of him" in recent decades as Egypt's "last great pharaoh." —TOM VERDE

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CURRENT / NOVEMBER

Clay: Modeling African Design highlights artistic innovation and creativity in Africa as seen primarily through the traditions of ceramic arts from across the continent and over its long history. Countering the assumption that African arts and societies are largely unchanging and bound to traditions and customs, the remarkable diversity of objects and styles on display tells a different story. Harvard Art Museums, **Cambridge, Massachusetts**, through November 14.

CURRENT / MARCH

Heba Y. Amin: When I see the future, I close my eyes is the first UK-solo exhibition by Egyptian multimedia artist Heba Y. Amin. The exhibition investigates how narratives of regional politics in the Middle East relate to global concerns. Her research-based works take speculative, and sometimes satirical, approaches to understanding these historical events and processes. Alongside performances and interventions, Amin's research integrates film, photography and digital technology in order to think through present-day issues and the potential significance of occluded stories and archives. The Mosaic Rooms, **London**, through March 28.

COMING / NOVEMBER

Artists and Archaeologists: A Victorian Fascinations With Egypt. The landscape and monuments of Egypt have fascinated Western audiences since their rediscovery during the Napoleonic period. Since then, they have been used to foster exoticism, and that enduring flavor "of the Orient." As the political West again threatens to build up geographic and nationalistic boundaries, this idea of Eastern "otherness" continues to perpetuate. This online study aims to explore trends through the work of Victorian artists, how they contributed to this view in particular and its ongoing impact in the 21st century. Book a place in advance. Egypt, Exploration Society, **online**, November 21.

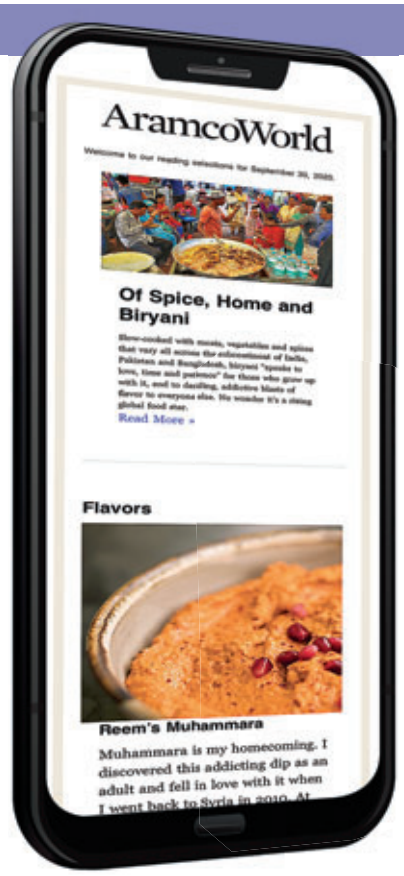
COMING / DECEMBER

Queen Nefertari's Egypt celebrates the wives of pharaohs during the New Kingdom period (1550–1070 BCE), when Egyptian civilization reached its zenith. Not shown as merely royal wives, they were also sisters, daughters and mothers of pharaohs, and sometimes even pharaohs themselves, and the fullness of their lives are evoked through some 230 exceptional objects, including statues, jewelry, vases, papyrus, stelae, mummies, wooden coffins and stone sarcophagi, as well as tools and various items of daily life from the artisan village of Deir-el-Medina, home to the craftsmen who made the royal tombs. Kimbell Art Museum, **Fort Worth, Texas**, December 6 through March 14.

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

Omar Ba: Same Dream ultimately evokes a hybrid world of shared life among humans, plants and animals. Ba's painting engages with some of the most urgent issues of our time: the growing inequality of wealth and power globally, forced migration and our changing relationship with the natural world. His penchant for depicting personal narratives alongside collective ones speaks to the in-between condition of his own work, as he splits his time between Dakar, Senegal, and Geneva, Switzerland, and blends the visual textures of both places. Ba draws from and intertwines a range of elements—the historical and contemporary, figurative and abstract imagery—from African and European cultures, and this includes the techniques and tools he employs (i.e., corrugated cardboard and canvas, paintbrushes and his hands). *Same Dream* brings together several of Ba's paintings, depicting dictators and authority figures, at times represented as hybrid beasts enveloped in an abundance of lush flora and fauna. Indeed, nature becomes a recurring force across Ba's oeuvre, replete with biomorphic shapes often inspired by Senegal's dazzling coastal environment in which Ba grew up helping present works that reveal Ba's affinity for portraying the strength of the human spirit—depictions of youth who, regardless of where they are, share some of the same dreams for the future. Contemporary **Calgary, Canada**, through January 31.

CONTEMPORARY CALGARY



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