

JULY AUGUST 2024

AramcoWorld

CELEBRATING



OF CONNECTIONS



6 Building Cultural Connections: AramcoWorld's Architectural History

Written by **J. Trevor Williams**
 Photographed by **Ryan Huddle**

Since its beginnings 75 years ago, *AramcoWorld's* editors have viewed architecture as an essential lens on history and a crucible for cultural connections. Early stories, in particular, added human context to a discipline that often focused on the form of buildings with little regard for the people who used them. In Part 4 of our series marking our 75th anniversary in 2024, we look at the ways these stories encapsulate architecture in the evolution of world history.



AramcoWorld

JULY / AUGUST 2024 | VOL. 75, NO. 4



aramcoworld.com

12 Pieces of the Past

Written by **Jack Zahora**
 Photographed by **Tara Todras-Whitehill**

Thanks to children who kicked up little pieces of red ceramics while playing on a hilltop in 1977, the town of Mértola, Portugal, has taken its place alongside much of the rest of the country as it rediscovers its Islamic past. Years of excavations have turned Mértola, which lies near the border with Spain, into a destination for both tourists and researchers, and officials have applied to make Mértola a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

 2 FIRSTLOOK

 4 FLAVORS

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 Pottery fragments dating to the era of Moorish rule in what became Mértola, Portugal, have been meticulously catalogued.

BACK COVER Offshoots from varieties of date palms from the Middle East and Northern Africa grow in the California desert.



22 The Rise of Contemporary Art in the Arabian Gulf

Written by **Homara Choudhary**

From installations in the desert to abstract sculptures by the sea, the Arabian Gulf is flourishing as a multicultural hub for contemporary art. Part of a cultural revolution marked by the expansion of galleries and exhibitions, the surge of interest has helped artists from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates rise to the global scene. The growth of this art ecosystem is being hailed as a seminal moment in that cultural transformation.

28 America's Arabian Superfood

Written by **Alia Yunis**

Photographed by **Stuart Palley**

In recent years in the United States, dates have been trending as a nutrient-dense, easily transportable source of energy. Nearly 90 percent of US-grown dates are from California's Coachella Valley. Yet the date palm trees from which they are harvested each year aren't native; they were imported from the Arab world in the 1800s. Over the years, they have become a part of Coachella's agricultural industry—and sprouted Arab-linked pop culture.

 **36 AUTHOR'S CORNER**  **38 REVIEWS**  **40 EVENTS**

Publisher: Aramco Americas | President and CEO: Nabeel I. AlAfaleg | Director, Public Affairs: Hatem Alfayez | Editor: Johnny Hanson | Senior Editor: Amra Pasic | Associate Editor: Alva Robinson | Assistant Editor / Social Media Editor: Sarah Taqvi | Visuals Editor: Waleed Dashash | Copy Editor: Suzanne Garofalo | Administration: Sarah Miller | Editorial Intern: Sarah Khan | Print design: Graphic Engine Design | Printing: RR Donnelley / Wetmore | Web design: eSiteful Corporation

Subscribe online: aramcoworld.com

Subscription services: aramcoworld@sfsdayton.com or P.O. Box 292348, Kettering, Ohio 45429 USA

Editorial: editor@aramcoamericas.com or P.O. Box 2106, Houston, Texas 77252-2106, USA

ISSN: 2376-1083



FIRSTLOOK

Zillij in Fez
March / April 2001

Photographed by Peter Sanders



Zillij in Fez

In patterns and refractions, the old city of Fez, Morocco, comes to life through the geometric tile works known as *zillij*. In 2001, *AramcoWorld* commissioned photographer Peter Sanders to tell the story of a family who for five generations has added new dimensions to art and architecture.

"I have always been fascinated by the widespread use of Morocco's mosaic patterns of eight- to 24-point stars decorating otherwise blank walls, floors and fountains. So, when an opportunity arose to spend time with craftsmen of these running bands of *zillij*, I happily jumped at the opportunity," Sanders said.

Sanders recalled how each piece of tile was individually chiseled by hand. Thousands of pieces were placed face down on the ground based on memory of geometric design, assembling a large panel of complex patterns of interspacing shapes and colors that could often extend 3 meters (10 feet) or more. Coated in plaster and dried, the panel would be gingerly lifted revealing the work of art.

"This experience deepened my appreciation for Morocco's rich cultural heritage and timeless beauty of *zillij* art and craftsmen."
—Peter Sanders

Discover this story
and more in our
Back Issues section
by scanning here:





Written by LOUIS WERNER
photographed by PETER SANDERS



FLAVORS

Desi Breakfast Sandwich

Recipe by Zaynah Din

Photograph by Charlotte Nott-Macaire

This recipe for breakfast contains long-lasting carbohydrates, protein and healthful fats to keep you fueled as long as possible.

These 5-minute breakfast sandwiches are protein-rich, filling and inspired by Indian street-food vendors who grill up sandwiches lathered in green and red chutneys in just seconds.

(Serves 2)	2 tablespoons red chutney
6 slices of halal turkey rashers	1 large beefsteak tomato
1 tablespoon butter	½ a red onion, sliced
4 thick slices of crusty sourdough	2 handfuls of arugula or baby spinach
2 eggs	1 ripe avocado, sliced or mashed
2 tablespoons green chutney	

In a frying pan over medium heat, fry the turkey rashers for 2 minutes on each side until just crispy, then remove from the pan.

Add the butter to the pan, then add your slices of sourdough and toast them low and slow for 3-4 minutes on each side until warm and crispy. Remove from the pan.

Finally, fry 2 eggs, then remove them from the pan.

To assemble your sandwiches, add a dollop each of green and red chutney to two of the slices of sourdough. Layer each one with the turkey rashers, an egg, slices of tomato and red onion, arugula or spinach, and avocado. Top the sandwiches with the second sourdough slices and enjoy.

Zaynah Din is an award-winning digital marketer, content creator and passionate home cook. She started ZaynahsBakes in 2016, and in one year, it transformed from a local cupcake business into an Instagram page with more than 25,000 followers. Now with an engaged and loyal combined following of more than 370,000 across TikTok and Instagram, Din combines her passion for cooking and photography, sharing South Asian-inspired recipes as well as cooking tips, daily vlogs and her viral Ramadan Recipes series. For the past five years, she has worked at Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, with clients such as PepsiCo, Universal Music and Topshop. Din's ethos is to create recipes that are convenient and quick to make—perfect for Muslims who are fasting during the holy month of Ramadan but also handy throughout the year for an easy meal.



Reprinted with permission from

**Desified:
Delicious Recipes
for Ramadan, Eid
& Every Day**

Zaynah Din.
Interlink Books, 2024.
interlinkbooks.com.

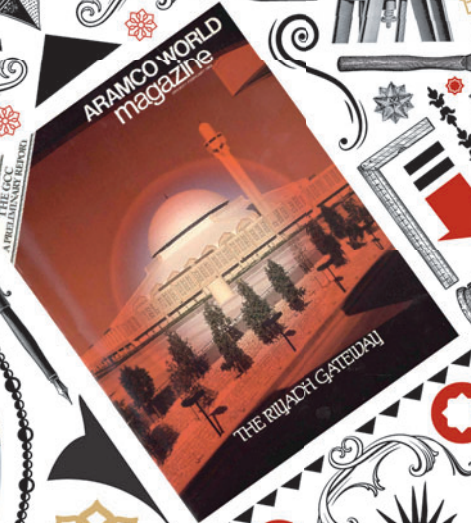
CHARLOTTE NOTT-MACAIRE







75
YEARS



Building Cultural CONNECTIONS

AramcoWorld's Architectural History

Written by J. TREVOR WILLIAMS | Illustrated by RYAN HUDDLE

As AramcoWorld celebrates its 75th year in 2024, the magazine is publishing a six-part series reflecting on the connections and impact it has generated over the decades. AramcoWorld's approach to intercultural bridge-building has always been integral to its mission.

In the fourth part of our series, we examine architecture as a crucible for those intercultural connections. AramcoWorld's early stories, in particular, added human context to a discipline that often focused on the form of buildings with little regard for the people who used them. The magazine has sought to highlight not the design styles themselves so much as what they say about the evolution of world history.

—AramcoWorld editorial team

After becoming a specialist in the architectural history of India in the 1960s, Attilio Petruccioli encountered a paradoxical problem.

The more the Italian architect learned about design sensibilities east of the Mediterranean and the confluence of cultures that led to their emergence, the fewer resources he realized existed to educate those in the West interested in Islamic architecture.

Captivated by its images, in 1968 he began collecting print issues of *AramcoWorld* and would continue for a quarter century, using them as teaching tools in classes as he became an established academic.

Before the magazine *Mimar* appeared in 1981, he says, *AramcoWorld* was the only international magazine with a sustained focus on architecture in the Middle East and the Islamic world.

"All that period, there was nothing. Of course, you could relate to archaeology, and there were books here and there, but essentially, it was the only magazine," Petruccioli says.

But *AramcoWorld* did something else that esoteric publications did not; the magazine added human context to a discipline that often focused on the form of buildings with little regard for the people who used them, he says.

"I found interesting the idea of introducing interdisciplinarity for the first

time, to my knowledge—the idea that architecture could be connected with cuisine and other aspects of life," says Petruccioli, who went on to found his own magazine, *Environmental Design*, and study urban design and gardens in the Islamic world.

While *AramcoWorld* has never had a formal section devoted to architecture, since its beginnings 75 years ago the magazine's editors have viewed the discipline as an essential lens on history and a crucible for cultural connections.

"Architecture is an excellent one for crossing both geography and time because so much of it endures, unlike, say, music or food recipes or even clothing designs, all of which do not survive centuries as well," says Richard Doughty, a photojournalist and longtime *AramcoWorld* editor.

During his nearly 30-year tenure starting in the 1990s, Doughty tried to keep a sharp focus on the sciences and architecture, using them to tell stories of global interconnection.

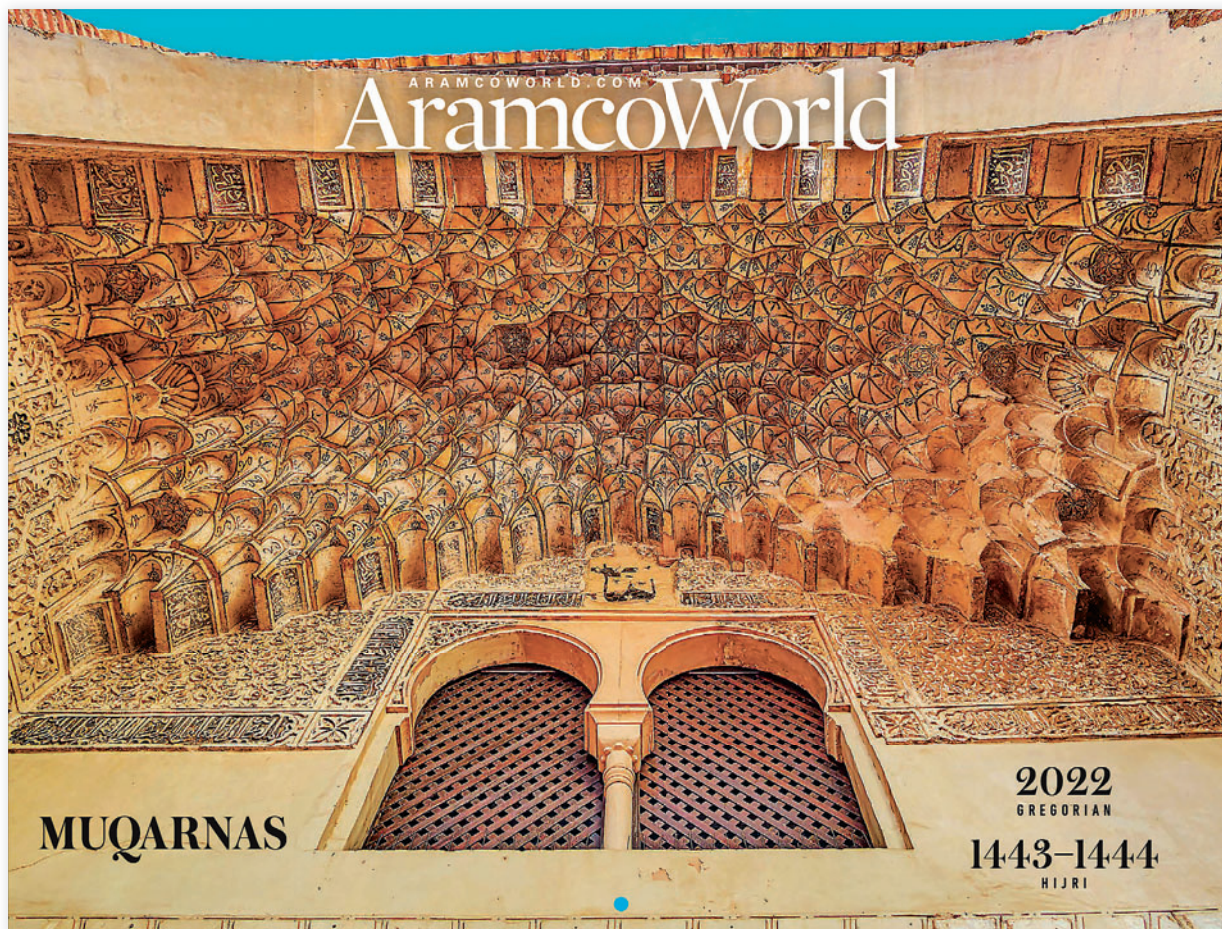
Sometimes those highlighted design elements in mosques and palaces, drawing out how stylistic elements and practical innovations shaped the arc of history. One of Doughty's favorite motifs is the *muqarnas*, a three-dimensional, tessellated geometric pattern often found above doorways and in the negative



Attilio Petruccioli

"I found interesting the idea of introducing interdisciplinary for the first time, to my knowledge—the idea that architecture could be connected with cuisine and other aspects of life."

—ATTILIO PETRUCCIOLI



Richard Doughty



space created in the corners of domes.

“It’s a metaphor for an infinite cosmos, and it’s also the most complex pattern mathematically,” says Doughty, who inspired *AramcoWorld* to produce a calendar featuring nothing but *muqarnas*. “It creates a sense of wonderment

The 2022 *AramcoWorld* calendar featured the dazzling and prismatic architectural detail of *muqarnas*, a three-dimensional decorative technique unique to Islamic architecture.

when you realize the people did this with analog instruments in the classical Islamic ages.”

Muqarnas, Petruccioli says, provides an example of why it’s so dangerous to refer to Islamic architecture as a “style.” The pattern emerged as a solution to a problem rooted in the blending of designs that occurred over centuries as Islamic conquerors encountered Roman forms, particularly during the Ottoman Empire. *Muqarnas* was an Islamic riff on the squinch, an element that bridged the structural gap between domes, which have a circular base and cubic structures beneath them.

Numerous stories, however, have been inspired more by what the adoption of a certain style says about the evolution of world history than the architectural elements themselves.

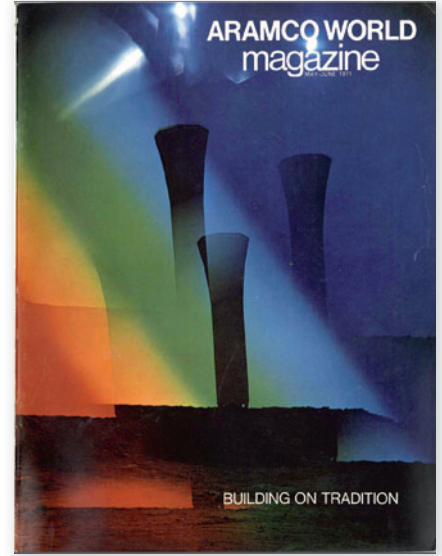
One memorable story for Doughty was the “Alhambras of Latin America (2021),” whose idea came from seeing a building marked “Alhambra” on Google Maps

during his stroll through Santiago, Chile.

The iconic Moorish building in Granada, Spain, he thought, must have inspired designs across Latin America, even as the Spanish sought to stamp out the influence of Islam from their colonies in the New World. When he brought the idea to his friend and *AramcoWorld* contributor Ana Carreño, a Granada-based writer specializing in Arab Mediterranean cultures, he learned that an exhibition focused on “Alhambriismo” was already underway. The two partnered with University of Granada art-history professor Rafael López Guzmán to craft an article.

Mitra Taj, a Peru-based journalist, built on that foundation with “The Box Balconies of Lima (2022),” a story that helped her see her adoptive home in a new way.

Taj, an American who had spent time studying in Spain, noticed what looked like traditionally Islamic elements in the older sections of the Peruvian capital, Lima, but, like many locals, had not



In 1979 innovations in medical care at the King Faisal Specialist Hospital were reflected in a story about its architecture, **TOP LEFT**. Even earlier in 1971's "Building on Tradition," **TOP CENTER** and **LOWER LEFT**, photographer B.H. Moody took a non-traditional look at modern architecture with Arab influences in the story "Building on Tradition." The Alhambra Palace's architectural influence is undeniable and has been highlighted in *AramcoWorld* numerous times over the years, including in 1976's "Architecture in Arabia" and 1967's "The Alhambra," **TOP AND BOTTOM RIGHT**.

delved into their origins.

She learned that these *balcones de cajón* originated in Egypt and were carried to Spain through Muslim conquest, with craftsmen learning them over time. Cantilevered over the narrow streets of old Lima, they presented a way for residents, especially women, to observe street life without being seen, their eyes peering through ornate panels that found inspiration in *mashrabiyyah*, elaborate screens often used for shade and concealment in buildings in the Middle East.

After her article synthesized the views

of academic specialists, everyday people began to reach out to her in person and online, some offering their observations of the balconies and others reminiscing about their families' Arab origins.

"Peruvians are very interested in learning about themselves through the eyes of foreigners," Taj says. "They were super into it. They didn't know that there was this sort of history there."

Taj now sees cultural fusion where she once saw only decoration. While these balconies were likely not built by so-called *moriscos*, converts to Islam

who were expelled from Spain following the Catholic conquest in the 15th century, the persistence of the style as a status symbol pointed to their lasting influence in the colonies.

"Architecturally, downtown Lima looks completely different to me now," Taj says.

Perhaps more than most, George Azar understands how working on an *AramcoWorld* story can change perspectives on design, both for the reader and the contributor.

The prominent photojournalist got

his start documenting the Lebanese civil war in the 1980s. But in its aftermath, he landed an assignment for *AramcoWorld* about the restoration of Beirut to its earlier grandeur.

“If you go to the downtown Beirut, it’s absolutely gorgeous; it’s not built in a modern style. It’s built in a classical Lebanese architectural heritage. They rebuilt it to a T,” says Azar.

Walking the streets of Beirut, where he now lives, Azar sometimes

experiences a “double exposure,” recalling still images of the war’s devastation even while viewing the fruits of the city’s contemporary renovation.

As his tenure with the magazine grew, it became a font of memorable (and challenging) pieces, giving him time and space to dwell with stories like “Amedi: Citadel of Culture (2019),” where he persisted through days of rain to capture modern life on an ancient mountain fortress in Iraq’s Kurdish region.

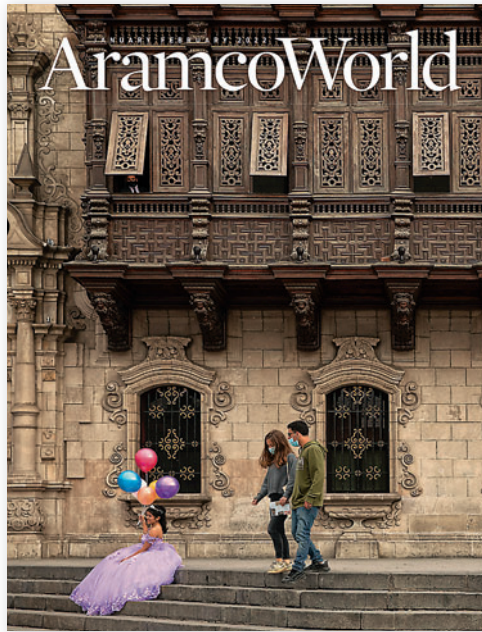
Going back even further in time, Azar faced the daunting task of portraying prehistoric architecture in “Jordan: Long Before Petra (2014),” and he observed in “Listening to the Land (2018)” how architect Ammar Khammash counterintuitively focuses on ensuring his designs’ own invisibility.

“The great thing about being a journalist is that you can throw yourself into a story and try to make yourself an expert (with a small e). I was not really someone who knew a lot about architecture, but by its very nature, it’s about design. The best architects are often very good photographers.”

Carreño, the specialist on Mediterranean cultures, found a picture-perfect blend of tradition and modernity in the Louvre Abu

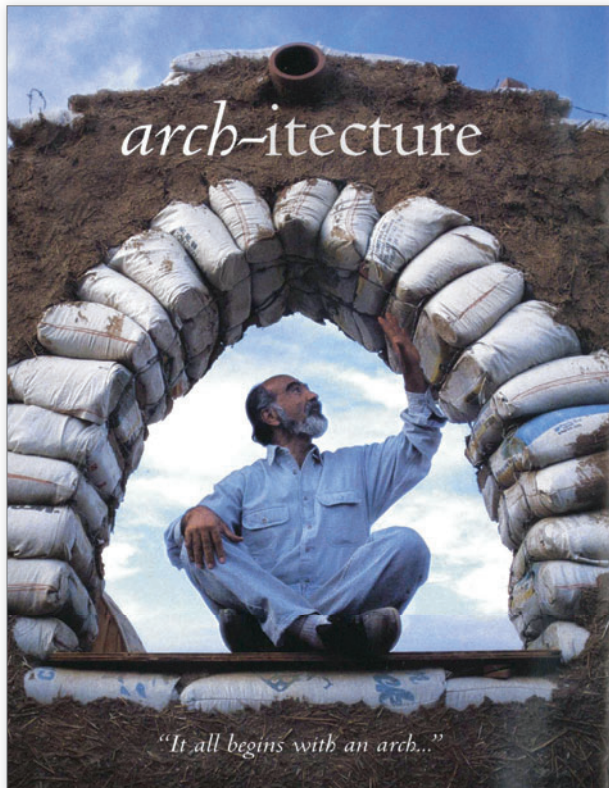


Mitra Taj

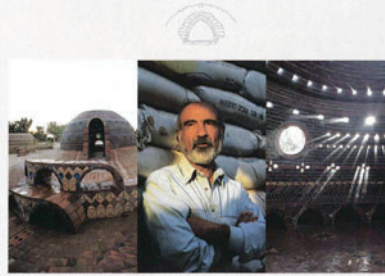


ABOVE In the cover story “The Box Balconies of Lima,” writer Mitra Taj connects the architectural influences from Spain’s Islamic heritage to Lima, Peru’s street-lined balconies. **OPPOSITE** The May/June 1995 issue featured architect Nader Khalili, who has carried out the principles of desert architecture from across the Middle East to California. “Clay is the gift of Eastern civilization to the West,” Khalili said.





"It all begins with an arch..."



Using only earth as a building material reduces construction costs to a minimum, says Nader Khalili. His sandbag dome house began with an arch, left, while his geoflitan, or fired-earth, house, above left and right, has received international recognition.

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY GEORGE BARAKMI AZAR

Under the great dark dome of a Mojave desert night, architect Nader Khalili's students sit before a campfire reading Persian poetry aloud. The words of Hafez and Rumi mingle with the crackle of burning logs. Each student has traveled to Hesperia, California, to learn about building homes with earth, and the poems they read are about clay.

"Clay is the gift of Eastern civilization to the West," Khalili says. "My goal is to enable two people to create their own home, with no machinery and very little money, using the earth under their feet as their primary building material."

Not far away, on the grounds of Khalili's California Institute of Earth Architecture, sit several sections of experimental houses, each basically round.

"It all begins with an arch," he says. "You take an arch and repeat it linearly and it becomes a vault. Rotate it, it becomes a dome. Raise it from the ground, it becomes an apex."

Born in Teheran in 1936, Khalili studied philosophy and architecture in Iran, Turkey and the United States. By the time he was 40, he owned a successful com-

pany specializing in high-rise office design. Yet he was dissatisfied, concerned that Western building methods did not always suit the needs of his native land.

Throughout the Middle East and the third world, they tear down what they have and rush to build with concrete blocks, because their teachers were educated in the West," he says.

In 1975 he gave up his shares in the company and headed into the California desert to search for a new way of building.

Inspired by the adobe houses of the Iranian plateau, Khalili devised a process he calls *geoflitan*, from the Persian *ge*, fire, and *flitan*, earth. Traditional adobe homes, he knew, crumble over time and can melt in a heavy rain. The *geoflitan* process actually fires an entire clay house, using an interior blaze that burns for three days and bakes the soft clay bricks into a seamless, rock-hard ceramic shell.

Earthquake- and flood-resistant, energy-efficient and astoundingly cheap, *geoflitan* houses are finished with an interior glaze, like a piece of pottery. The United Nations is so impressed it has named Khalili a consultant for earth architecture and ceramic housing.

Khalili has also taken Middle Eastern desert architecture into the realm of high-tech dreams, working with McDonnell Douglas and the Princeton-based Space Studies Institute on ways to use sunlight to fire lunar dust into a ceramic material that could then be used in landing pads, walkways and housing.

But low-income housing on earth remains Khalili's most meaningful mission. His latest prototype, the sandbag dome house, can be built in two weeks by two people, he says, using 1400 sandbags, two rolls of barbed wire, and earth of almost any type. The basic cost is about \$500.

"Middle Eastern architectural forms, built with the materials on the site, are still best even by the standards of today's design," he says—including energy efficiency, environmental impact and cost. "With a little adobe you can build an arch, with that arch a house, and with that house a whole town." ■

San Francisco photojournalist George Barakmi Azar is a frequent contributor to *AramcoWorld*.

MARCH/APRIL 1988 39

George Azar



Dhabi, whose architecture she profiled for the magazine in 2018's "A Museum of the World."

Designed by Jean Nouvel, a French architect, the museum features a massive central dome that incorporates many functional aspects of Eastern design. These include recurring fractals, ventilation and cooling methods inspired by wind towers (*barjeel*) and irrigation channels (*falaj*), as well as the concept

of a *madina*, a combination of narrow streets and wide-open plazas.

"To me, like to everybody visiting the museum, the space right under the dome was astonishing," Carreño says. "When people entered it through a small door, they found an unexpected outbreak of fragments of light and shadow, falling like drops from under a futuristic palm tree in the middle of an oasis surrounded by the waters of the Gulf."

One of Nouvel's earlier works, Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, built in 1989, won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, a prestigious prize recognizing designs that impact life in Islamic societies.

Farrokh Derakhshani, the director, has been associated with the award since 1982, when far fewer resources existed to spread knowledge globally about quality architecture.

"From the very beginning, we understood that this lack of communication, this lack of information, was the problem," Derakhshani says.

AramcoWorld had a similar mindset, and Derakhshani remembers when John Lawton, a longtime contributor, visited him in Geneva to write about six award-winning projects in "The Changing Present (1987)." An in-depth feature, "Shaking Up Architecture" by Lee Lawrence, followed in 2001.

While it puts shortlisted projects on its own website, the Aga Khan Award disseminates other submissions through a platform at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in the US.

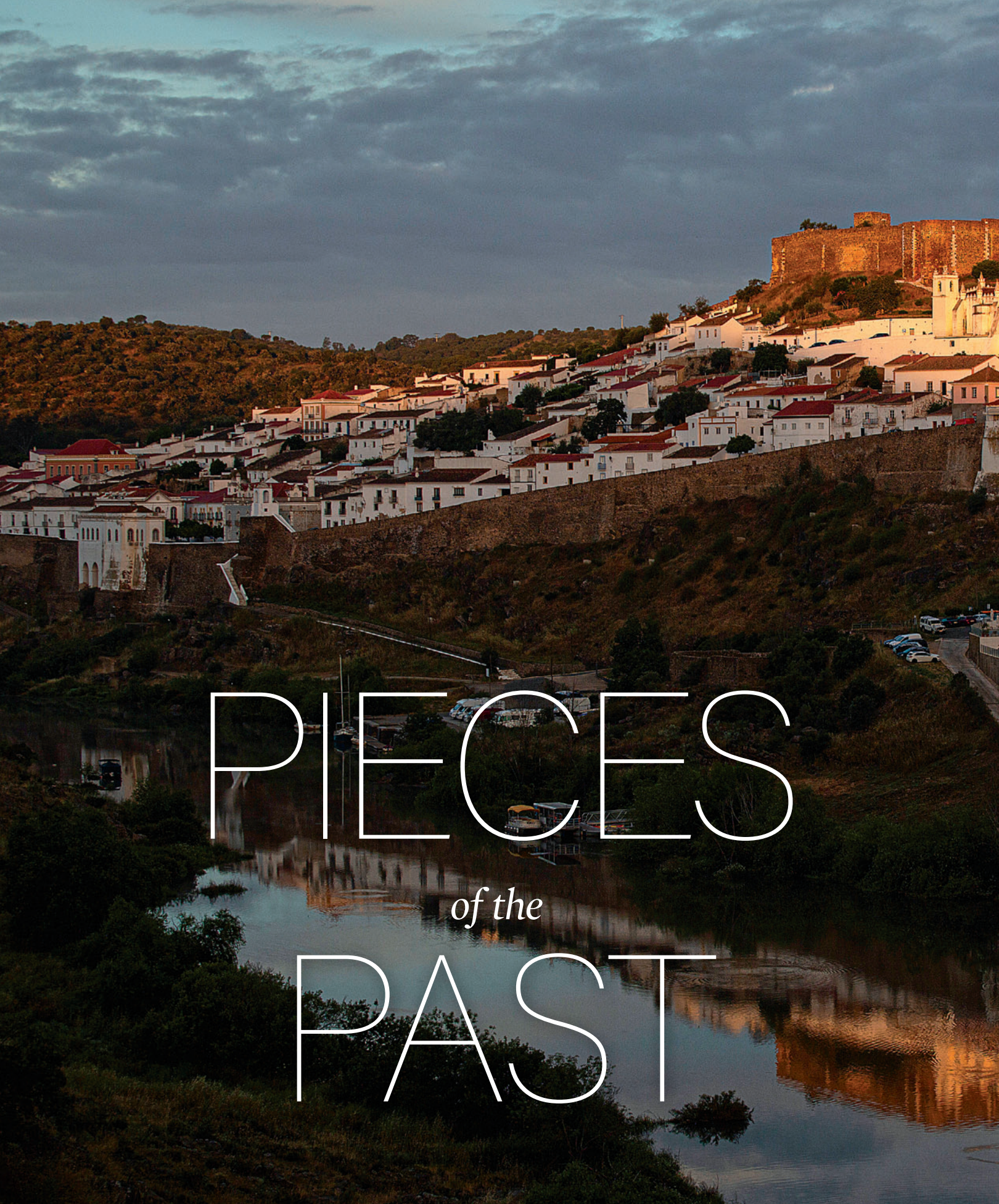
That's where Petruccioli, the Italian expert, served as the Aga Khan Professor of Design for Islamic Societies in the 1990s.

It's unclear, he says, where the field of architecture will go in the age of artificial intelligence, but he hopes that resources like *AramcoWorld* continue to center the way it influences cultural development.

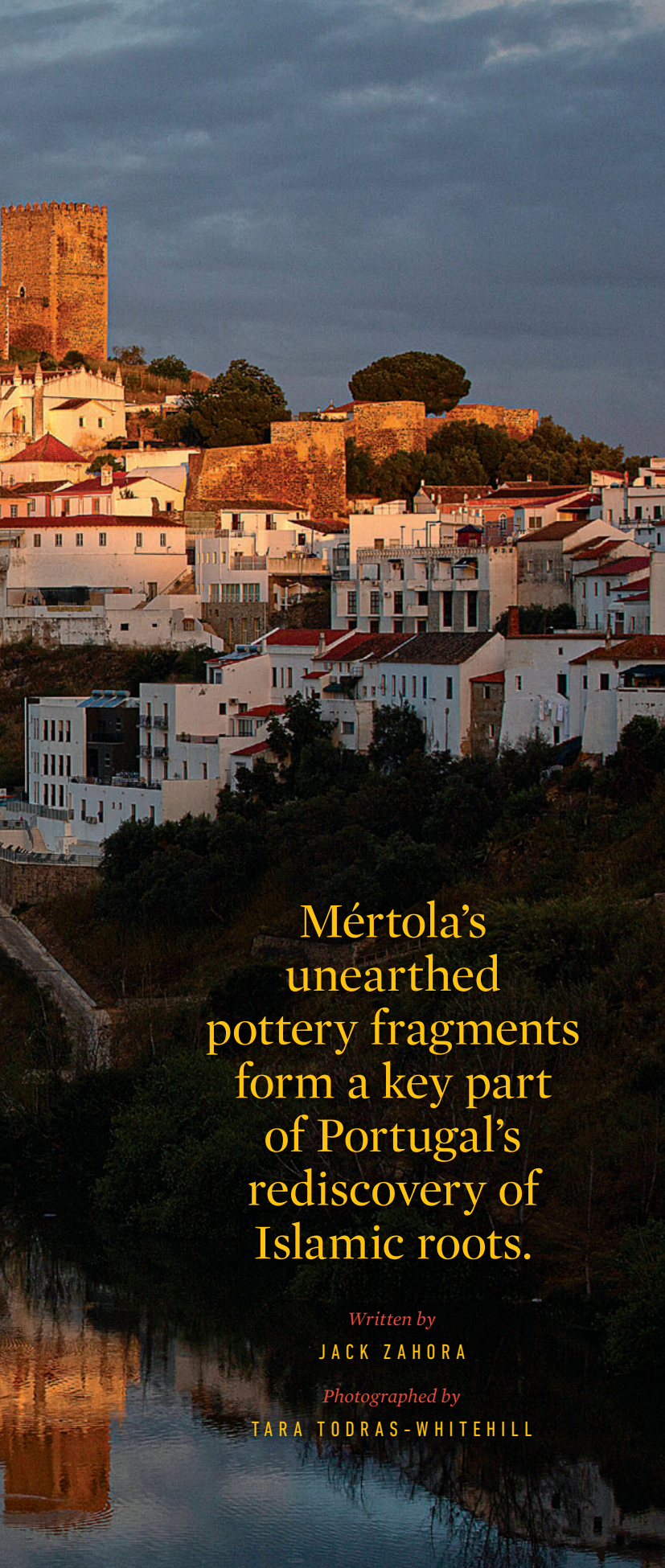
"I cannot predict the end of the story." ■



J. Trevor Williams is a global business journalist based in Atlanta, where he serves as publisher of the online international news site *Global Atlanta* (globalatlanta.com). Follow him on X (formerly Twitter) @jtrevorwilliams. **Ryan Huddle** is a Boston-based graphic designer and artist whose work appears regularly in the *Boston Globe* and other leading publications.



PIECES
of the
PAST



Mértola's unearthed pottery fragments form a key part of Portugal's rediscovery of Islamic roots.

Written by

JACK ZAHORA

Photographed by

TARA TODRAS-WHITEHILL

The town of Mértola overlooks the Guadiana River near Portugal's border with Spain. Historically, this area has connected paleo-Christian settlers with Roman emperors, Arab armies and European monarchies—making it a goldmine for archeologists in search of historical artifacts.

That lineage had been buried for centuries, but thanks to children who kicked up little pieces of red ceramics while playing on a hilltop in 1977, Mértola has taken its place alongside much of the rest of Portugal as the country rediscovers its Islamic past.

In Lisbon's historical Baixa district, an artist stitches Arab-inspired embroidery; in nearby Sintra, an Islamic defense fortification called a *ribat* is being excavated; and there's been a significant increase in research about the North African armies that invaded the Iberian Peninsula, beginning in the eighth century CE.

In 1974, a revolution toppled the strict regime established by António de Oliveira Salazar. Free from his Catholic orthodoxy, says Santiago Macias, a historian and director of Portugal's National Pantheon, academics no longer glossed over their country's Moorish rule. They began shifting the country's founding mythology away from a land solely conquered by Christian kings.

OPPOSITE The southeastern Portuguese town of Mértola, along the Guadiana River, showcases its Islamic heritage through well-preserved archeological sites and museums. The town served as a significant cultural and commercial center from the eighth to the 13th century CE, a period of Islamic influence in the region.

BELOW Arabic inscribed on a stone tablet is displayed at the Núcleo de Arte Islâmica museum.





ABOVE Mértola boasts 14 museums. Ligia Rafael, who oversees all of them, holds a comb from the Islamic period at her office. **RIGHT** Water jugs dating to the town's Islamic period, from one of hundreds of excavations over the years, is kept at the Núcleo de Arte Mértola, the museum of Islamic art in Mértola. Painstakingly, one small fragment at a time, Guilhermina Bento, a technician for conservation of ceramics, works to restore an Islamic-era bowl at a museum office.

Those pieces of broken pottery found just a few years later sparked a curiosity in Mértola's mayor at the time, who turned to Claudio Torres, a young professor of archeology at the University of Lisbon. Torres assembled a team of archeologists that set up their base of operations in Mértola and recruited an army of local volunteers.

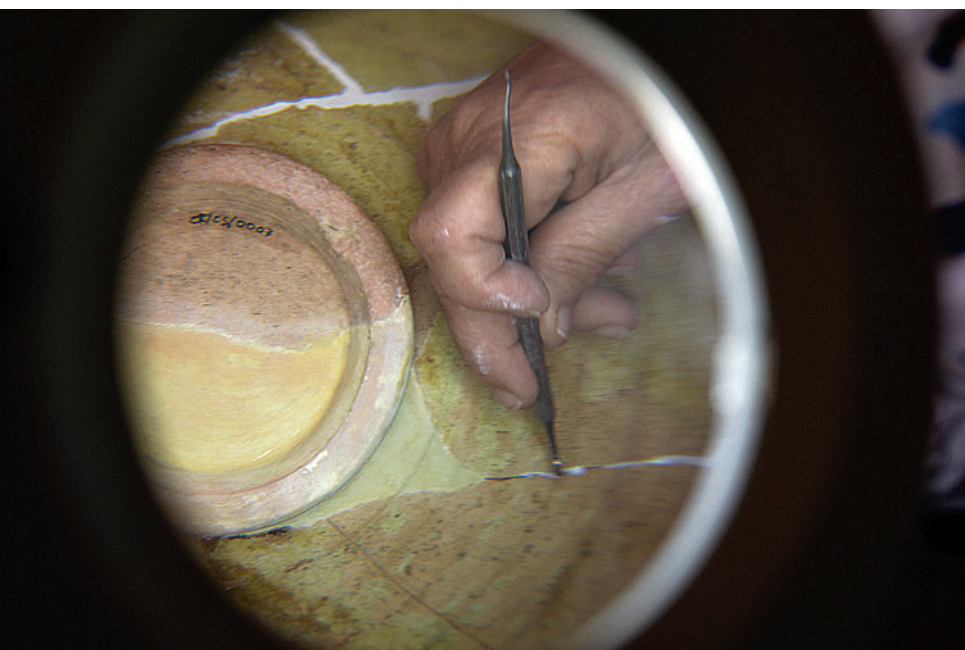
Mértola, a Living Museum

Years of excavations have turned Mértola, a town of 1,200 residents, into a destination for both tourists and researchers, and Portuguese officials have applied to make Mértola a UNESCO World Heritage Site—a lengthy process that began in 2017. The status would not only heighten Mértola's global profile but also make it eligible for international legal protections and funding from the World Heritage Fund. The latter is critical as the area is susceptible to



desertification from rising temperatures, declining rainfall and generations of deforestation.

Ligia Rafael, who was a teenager when she first volunteered for Torres, now oversees all 14 of Mértola's museums, four of which specialize in Arab heritage. "What we have in our



museums,” Rafael says, “is a connection between the Mediterranean that goes all the way to the Middle East.”

At the Núcleo de Arte Islámica, Mértola’s museum of Islamic art, pots designed to hold drinking water display a Moorish pattern. A few steps away, a video recording shows a Portuguese man

playing a hand drum similar to a *daf*. When asked if a *tagine* (cooking pot) on display is one of a kind, Rafael is flabbergasted by the notion, exclaiming that “here in Mértola we have excavated hundreds of millions of artifacts,” mostly pieces of ceramic pottery.

Aside from the massive facility where most of these pieces are stored, a look inside Rafael’s office supports her claim. To one side lie several life-sized Roman statues, many of which the Moors repurposed as home-building materials. One floor up, museum workers painstakingly brush away debris from pottery that is pressed into Styrofoam, ready to be cataloged. In an adjoining room, a specialist gives museumgoers the opportunity to handle fragile items, by recreating them with a 3D printer.

“I think what they tried to do is to make it accessible to two different kinds of public,” says Barbara Ruiz-Bejarano, the director of *Fundacion Las Fuentes*, an organization that helps promote Islamic heritage and tourism.

Mértola’s officials aim to attract both tourists and researchers, she says. “The important thing for me is the balance they manage,” Ruiz-Bejarano asserts that it’s a struggle for a small town like Mértola to divide its resources between these two audiences.



ABOVE A Spanish student takes a picture of artifacts from a Roman house that is showcased under the municipal building in Mértola. Tourism has steadily increased, benefiting the local economy. **RIGHT** The head of a Roman statue is just one of the hundreds of thousands of excavated artifacts that are carefully tended in Mértola's museums.

Layers of History

The ancient ruins of a Roman maritime fortification called the Torre do Rio, one of the few structures left on the river's bank, harken back to Mértola's heyday as a major trading post. The site is why the town now calls itself "the last port of the Mediterranean."

Scholars struggle to pin down the exact dates of Moorish rule in Portugal, as the country's territories often changed hands between warring factions. However, Britannica says North African tribes entered Portugal in 711 CE and held onto power until the end of the 13th century. The Christian states' centuries-long campaigns to oust these forces from the region have been collectively known as *Reconquista*, or reconquest.

Approaching the Church of Nossa Senhora da Anunciação, Mértola's Vice Mayor Rosinda Pimenta walks past walls of white *tadelakt* plaster; the Moroccan waterproofing technique has been adapted into traditional Alentejo methods of protecting buildings from humidity.

She enters the church through the building's north-facing door, stepping into

"[The juxtaposition of the Catholic altar and Muslim *mihrab* indicates] the willingness of Mértola's townspeople to embrace their region's Islamic heritage."

— ROSINDA PIMENTA





ABOVE Visitors tour the Church of Nossa Senhora da Anunciação. The church, which was previously a mosque, has its altar turned toward Makkah. **LEFT** Nuno Roxo, a tour guide and restaurant owner at the Citadel archeological site, was at first conflicted about Mértola's rise to fame but has learned to embrace it.



an interior whose design would likely be disorienting for devout Catholics. “Notice that our altar is turned toward Makkah,” she says. “It’s a decision made during a renovation project that unveiled a *mihrab* behind this wall.”

This architectural niche, typically found in a mosque or religious school, directs Muslim worshipers toward the holy city of Makkah. Pimenta says the juxtaposition of the Catholic altar and the Muslim *mihrab* is both a testament to the layers of

“I began hearing the Islamic influence in our choral music. The black head coverings that women wear at funerals, and the way they cry out to indicate their suffering, is similar to those in northern Africa. Even the way we bake bread in community ovens is similar.”

—NUNO ROXO



history buried deep inside the walls of the town's buildings and an "indication of the willingness of Mértola's townspeople to embrace their region's Islamic heritage."

The extent of that history's richness surpassed even Torres' own expectations. His initial excavation unearthed what was once an Arab neighborhood that included 20 dwellings. Built by the Romans and redesigned by the Moors, the ruins have continued to be an active archaeological site for the past five decades. "A family of seven or eight people would live in each home," Pimenta says, "which includes a pantry, a kitchen, an indoor lavatory, a reception room and one small space where the patriarch of the family would sleep."





ABOVE People fish on the side of a maritime ruin in Mértola. The fortification is one of the few structures left on the river's banks, and harks back to when Mértola was known as "the last port of the Mediterranean." **RIGHT** At the Citadel archeological site, excavations uncovered a dense necropolis from the Late Middle Ages—an intricate Islamic quarter and an impressive paleo-Christian religious complex. Fernando Grácio Martins, center right, gives a tour at the Núcleo de Arte Islâmica to a group of students from a Spanish university.

She says indoor plumbing was a facet the Moors adapted and preserved from Roman architecture. "Unlike other invaders that destroyed the infrastructure that they conquered, early Moorish settlers kept their predecessors' way of life intact," she says, adding, "the Islamic inhabitants of this era built additions that are also unique to Arab culture as well."

Pointing to what at first looks like a pipe with a hole cut out of its side, she explains that "this is a water receptacle that's been recently excavated." She says the water would have been heated, turning the room into a sauna that functions as a private *hamam*.

Torres' team would dig up numerous other examples of what makes Mértola a crossroads of civilizations. They include a paleo-Christian basilica just a two minutes' walk from the former mosque. A series of tombstones known as the Mértola stones bears Latin, Greek, Arabic and Portuguese inscriptions.

"Wherever we dig we tend to find objects," Pimenta says. "And to keep those objects within the context of the town, we build another museum so that people understand how the artifacts were used during their respective times."





Helena Rosa, right, works on a loom as Fatima Mestre assists her at a weaving workshop in Mértola. Every step in making woven textiles uses centuries-old techniques.

Saving the Past

The decision to refashion the town of Mértola into a bona fide living museum has not always been fully appreciated by local residents.

Nuno Roxo was a teenager when Mértola’s local government, in conjunction with the European Union, began investing millions of euros into the museum project.

At a bustling cafe called *Processo Regenerativo em Curso* (Progressive Regeneration Underway), Roxo waits on a group of tourists from Cyprus and Australia as American classic rock blares in the background. The makeup of Roxo’s clientele, and the nontraditional vegetarian dishes he serves them, is emblematic of Mértola’s changing demographics, as many locals have resettled in the cities of Lisbon or Porto.

“As a [junior] high school student in the 1990s, I would see my class size get smaller and smaller every year,” Roxo says. “At the time I wasn’t concerned about building museums—we needed better indoor plumbing, hot showers and jobs.”

Perceptions have changed considerably, he says, as tourism steadily increased, benefiting the local economy. He also launched his own tour-guide business, acquiring a nearly

encyclopedic knowledge of Mértola’s history. He fluidly transitions from talking about the philosophical differences of the early Moorish “conquerors” to the North African tribes that supplanted them a few hundred years later.

But the town’s Moorish history became very personal for him in 2001 after Mértola’s inaugural *Festival Islamico*—a biennial that recreates a once thriving Middle Eastern marketplace, replete with food, music and dress from the Moorish period.

Roxo even boasts about having worn a Moroccan-style *djellaba* and fez during the four-day event. His pivot toward inclusivity doesn’t surprise Alejandro Garcia-Sanjuan, a professor of medieval history at the University of Huelva in Spain. “[The] Portuguese don’t care very much about *Reconquis-*

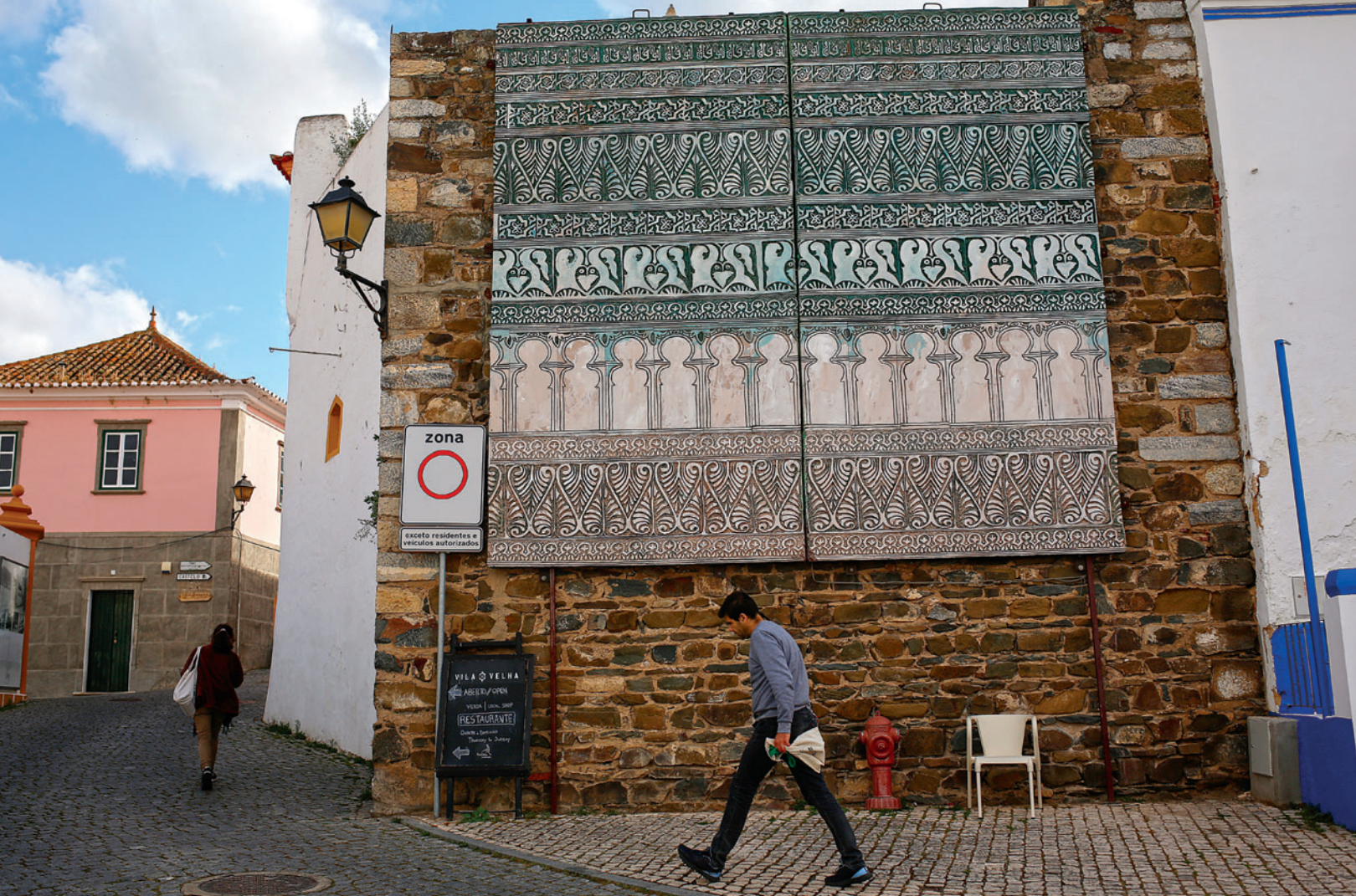
ta,” he says, arguing that it’s not a founding part of their national identity. Because of that, he says, “there is less resistance to remembering their Islamic past.”

The festival also led to Roxo’s epiphany that Moorish rule was not just a footnote in Mértola’s history but left its mark on everyday life.

“I began hearing the Islamic influence in our choral music.

“We have a responsibility to carry out a tradition that is in danger of being lost.”

—NAZARÉ FABIÃO



A mural highlights Mértola's Islamic heritage. Its pattern references ceramic jugs from the 11th century similar to the ones shown on page 14.

The black head coverings that women wear at funerals, and the way they cry out to indicate their suffering, is similar to those in northern Africa. Even the way we bake bread in community ovens is similar.”

While Roxo expresses that he and his neighbors are embracing the past, he also paints a dire picture of where their traditions may be headed as Mértola's local population diminishes.

One glimmer of hope shines in a dimly lit room that houses Mértola's weaving workshop. A group of women fashion woolen blankets adorned with Arab motifs akin to those showcased in the area's Islamic art collections. “We have a responsibility to carry out a tradition that is in danger of being lost,” says Nazaré Fabião, who has worked as a weaver for several years.

Every step in making her textiles follows centuries-old techniques. Wool is sheared in the springtime from local herds of sheep. It's then hand-washed in nearby tributaries and passed on to the workshop's 23-year-old apprentice Bruno Mareco, who treats the material before it's spun into yarn.

“I am studying under Ms. Vitorinha,” Mareco says, referring to Mértola's 78-year-old weaving master, who's known only by her first name. “She has been doing this work since [she was] a

“[The] Portuguese don't care very much about *Reconquista*, [so] there is less resistance to remembering their Islamic past.”

—ALEJANDRO GARCÍA-SANJUÁN

child and is passing her knowledge on to me.”

Mértola's municipality subsidizes their work, hoping that more young people like Mareco join its ranks.

They would be counted alongside Torres, who to this day continues to be among Mértola's remaining residents. At 85 years

old, Torres no longer gives interviews, but his legacy includes the revitalization of an entire epoch of Portuguese history—all from the fragments of clay found on a hillside half a century ago. 🌐



Jack Zahora is an award-winning journalist whose work has appeared on various major outlets including National Public Radio and Al Jazeera English. He's also the Chief Content Officer and managing partner of TW Storytelling Agency, a media company that's based in Lisbon, Portugal.

Tara Todras-Whitehill is an award-winning photojournalist and CEO of the TW Storytelling Agency, based in Lisbon, Portugal. Her passion is empowering NGOs, social impact teams, and journalists with impactful storytelling.



Related articles at aramcoworld.com

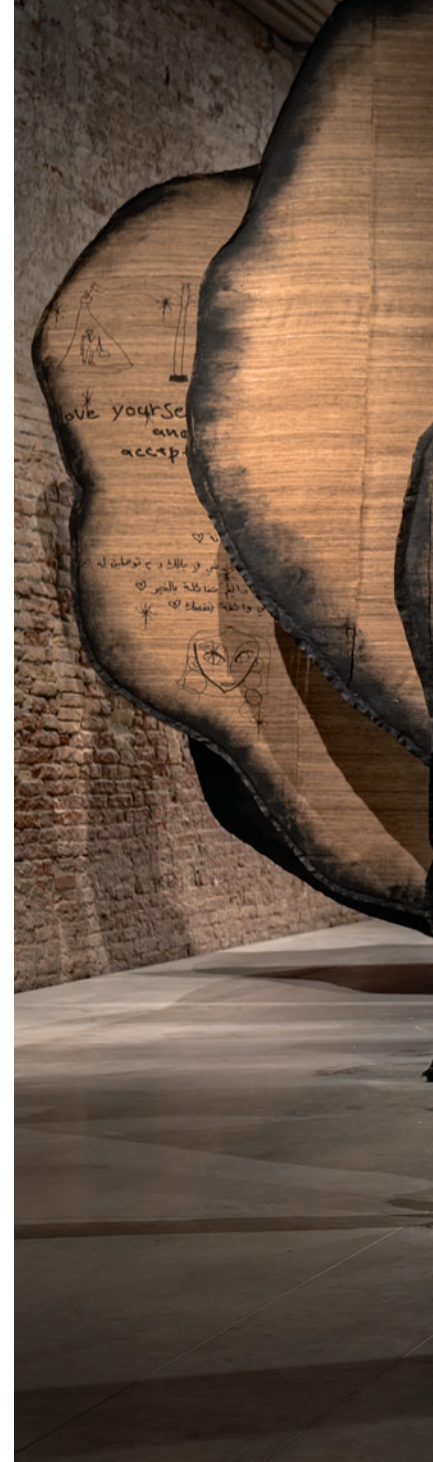
Palermo's Palimpsest Roads: Mar / Apr 2023

The White Olives of Malta: Jul / Aug 2017

The **RISE** of Contemporary **ART** in The Arabian Gulf

Expansion is being hailed as a seminal moment in the region's cultural transformation

Written by HOMARA CHOUDHARY



LEFT Manal AlDowayan works on her art piece "Shifting Sands: A Battle Song."

OPPOSITE She created the multimedia installation using sound paired with tussar silk, ink and acrylic paint.



COURTESY OF THE VISUAL ARTS COMMISSION, THE COMMISSIONER OF THE NATIONAL PAVILION OF SAUDI ARABIA

A

multimedia installation at this year’s Venice Biennale combines the desert’s sonic and geological features with the voices of hundreds of women humming.

This is the Saudi pavilion’s theme entitled “Shifting Sands: A Battle Song,” created by artist Manal AlDowayan. It questions common Western views and myths surrounding the portrayal of women in Middle Eastern societies.

The contemporary artwork consists of participatory action, soft sculpture (silk, ink and acrylic paint) and sound as the mediums. As a concept AlDowayan looks at the impact of image and media on self-perception, focusing on her own experience and that of other women in Saudi Arabia.

Curated by a trio of female art experts, Saudi native AlDowayan’s sound-meets-sculpture installation brings together much of what she has explored in her practice of photography, sculpture and other installations over the past two decades.

“The title ... ‘Shifting Sands’ represents change with all its implications in a country like Saudi Arabia,” AlDowayan explains. “A Battle Song’ references the traditional Arabian performances like alDhaha and alArdha, a ritual of dance movements, poetry and songs.”

AlDowayan says the artwork’s sound component combines two recordings. The first is of singing sand dunes, which hum when wind moves across them. The second captured 1,000 women in three cities who hummed and chanted in harmony with the singing dunes.

“Alongside this artwork, the curators and my studio team have produced a beautiful catalog of commissioned essays that articulate the nuances of my artwork through the words of poets, historians and researchers,” AlDowayan says.

The Kingdom is home to many such talented artists who have been gaining recognition both domestically and internationally.

The country’s blossoming art scene includes an Andy Warhol exhibition underway in the oasis city AlUla, the fourth edition of the Red Sea International Film Festival taking place in November in Jeddah, and various works punctuating Noor Riyadh, world’s largest festival of lights, in the capital, Riyadh.

But the rise of contemporary art scene is a regional experience.

From installations in the desert to abstract

sculptures by the sea, the Arabian Gulf has seen a cultural revolution in recent years and is flourishing as a multicultural hub for contemporary art. The surge of interest has helped regional artists rise to the global scene.

While the art scene is rapidly developing in Saudi Arabia,



RIGHT The sound component of “Shifting Sands: A Battle Song” consists of two recordings, one of which features 1,000 women in three cities who hummed and chanted in harmony with the other, a recording of “singing” sand dunes. **BELOW** “Now You See Me, Now You Don’t,” a 2020 installation by AlDowayan, was at Desert X, AlUla, Saudi Arabia.





The 2017 acrylic-on-canvas work "Is it the Wrong Way!" by Fahad Al Obaidly, **BELOW**, exemplifies how artists in the region are pushing their creative boundaries.

the neighboring state of Qatar is no slouch in the culture department and has also been investing significantly in the arts for decades. Twenty-five years ago, the Gulf state opened the Virginia Commonwealth University School

of the Arts, the region's first art school.

Qatar boasts a plethora of galleries, art spaces and exhibitions. It has three new museums in the pipeline, including one dedicated to hosting a huge collection of Orientalist art.

Artists are pushing their creative boundaries and embracing

opportunities that have allowed them to showcase their talent, says local artist Fahad Ahmed Al Obaidly. He has multiple interests ranging from drawing and installations to fashion design and film.

The country is actively fostering an environment where creativity can thrive. Qatar Museums has a nine-month Artist in Residence Program, in which Al Obaidly took part.

"It was my first real serious milestone in entering the art industry, and I felt both nurtured and endorsed," he says. "The program gave me a voice and developed my artistic character; it helped me develop my cultural identity and diversity."

Contemporary art is fast becoming a part of Qatar's cultural identity under the government initiative. In addition to the country's expanding museum sector, there has been a significant increase in public art installations by international artists, from Damien Hirst's "The Miraculous Journey," a series of bronze sculptures, some 46 feet high, of human reproduction at Sidra Medical and Research Center to Richard Serra's "East-West/West-East" steel monuments in the desert area of Zekreet.

It has been well documented that Qatar has been one of the

21st century's most avid buyers of art globally, buying some of the most expensive paintings in the world: Rothko's "White Center" for \$70 million; Cézanne's "The Card Players" for \$250 million; and Gauguin's "When Will You Marry?" for \$300 million.

Al Obaidly says art has always been important in Qatar.

"From education to investment, that is what really helped Qatar to have organic development in the country. That then led to the incubations; for example, the Doha Film Institute, the Fire Station art center, the Tasweer Photo Festival and Fashion Trust Arabia, to name but a few. All those initiatives and infrastructures really helped nurture and support local and regional talent."

In the United Arab Emirates, the art scene offers profound experiences. As more museums and galleries have opened their doors, the appetite for learning, engaging with and collecting art has developed in fascinating ways, says Michaela Watrelot, the curator and director of exhibitions at the Bassam Freiha Art Foundation in Abu Dhabi, which showcases global and regional art collections. "A memorable example was Manar's [light-art

display] inaugural exhibition which ran from November 2023 to January 2024. Co-curated by Reem Fadda and Alia Zaal Lootah, these light-focused installations by local and international artists beautifully merged elements of nature, water and light

art to celebrate Abu Dhabi's unique environment."

The UAE has a rich art history, and the government there, like its neighbors in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, has invested heavily in art over the past 20 years. The country is already home to several museums and galleries featuring contemporary art, such as Louvre Abu Dhabi and Manarat Al Saadiyat, with plans to open a branch of the Guggenheim in the heart of the Saadiyat Cultural District. The rise of contemporary art is down to multiple factors, according to Watrelot.

"The arrival of new museums such as Art Jameel in Dubai and The Louvre Abu Dhabi, new universities such as NYU Abu Dhabi and

a buzzing commercial art scene that attracts international attention through annual art fairs and auctions has now given artists, collectors and art enthusiasts increasing access to contemporary

The arrival of new museums, universities and a buzzing art scene [in the United Arab Emirates] "has now given artists, collectors and art enthusiasts increasing access to contemporary art."

—MICHAELA WATRELOT

NIKA Project Space in the United Arab Emirates focuses on artists and curators from the Global South. Among works the gallery highlights are watercolor paintings by Katya Muromtseva from 2023.





ABOVE Bassam Freiha Art Foundation in Abu Dhabi, UAE, displays “Echoes of the Orient.”
LEFT Veronika Berezina is the founder of NIKA Space Project, also in the UAE.



art,” she says.

The NIKA Project Space focuses on artists and curators from the Global South. The gallery’s founder, Veronika Berezina, says she has always valued the potential of art to offer new perspectives and foster cross-cultural dialog.

“By championing emerging and established practitioners, with a particular

focus on female practitioners from the Global South, the gallery aims to offer a platform for lesser-known stories to be told,” she says.

Dubai-based NIKA recently started hosting a research program, inviting artists to create impactful works that implement research-based and experimental creative processes. Berezina says she hopes this will facilitate the exploration and portrayal of nuanced societal experiences and historical narratives.

AlDowayan says Saudi Arabia is a young country living through times of cultural change, and the art of an era has always been a vital tool to bear witness to societal transformations.

“Contemporary art is indeed developing at a high pace in Saudi Arabia; however, artistic expression has existed on our

land for millennia, starting with rock engravings and sculptures created by the Nabateans, Lihyans and Dadanites,” she says. “My generation of artists uses contemporary art as a language of documentation to write the canon of contemporary Saudi Arabia.”

Curator and painter Yasmeen Sabri, who is also an advisor to the Royal Commission for Riyadh City, agrees.

She describes the growing art scene as a “renaissance” and says government institutions are committed to prioritizing arts and culture in the Kingdom.

“There is a lot of intention with building institutions and grassroots spaces,” Sabri says. “And naturally, art speaks to everyone, so people are reacting positively to it, and they are excited to express themselves and to have spaces where they can come and see art and enjoy it.”

AlDowayan says the art sector in the Kingdom has changed significantly from when she began her career.

“Creatives, curators, artists, researchers are all working hand in hand-building the art scene with outstanding speed,” she says. “There are infinite opportunities, and creatives are collaborating in a fascinating way. So many artist-led initiatives are taking off the ground!” 🌐



Homara Choudhary is an international multimedia journalist, presenter and moderator, who has worked for major networks like BBC, ITV and Al Jazeera. She has also moderated for Web Summit and produced content for Doha Debates and Media City in Qatar.



Related articles at aramcoworld.com

Adel Abidin Preserves Historical Memory: Jan / Feb 2024
 Ambassadors of Art: May / Jun 2017





America's Arabian **SUPERFOOD**

THE DATE PALMS OF
THE COACHELLA VALLEY

Written by ALIA YUNIS | Photographed by STUART PALLEY



If you like an easy, sweet summer drink, perhaps try blending dates, cold milk and vanilla ice cream. The drink is known as the “California Date Shake” and has been associated with the state’s Coachella Valley for decades.



PREVIOUS PAGE A suburban tourist sprawl in California’s Coachella Valley collides with its agricultural history. **ABOVE** Shields Date Garden has been selling all things dates since 1924—including the date milkshake, which has become a tourist attraction in its own right. **TOP** Heather Raumin owns Shields Date Gardens with her husband in Indio, California.

In the US over the past few years, dates have been trending as a superfood, often promoted in the recipes of energy smoothies or nutrition bars. As medical institutions such as the Cleveland Clinic note on their websites, numerous studies show that dates provide long-lasting, easily transportable energy, are rich in minerals like iron and potassium, and may help reduce cholesterol, keep blood-sugar levels steady and aid digestive health.

“People really know about dates now, and the health-food market has led the way in increasing interest,” says Mark Tadros, co-owner with his father of Aziz Farms, an independent date-producing and -packing facility in Coachella Valley.

Tadros says that close to 90 percent of the dates grown in the United States are from Coachella Valley with the Yuma, Arizona area accounting for much of the other 10 percent. Yet date palm trees are not native to the US. Rather, they were imported from the Arab world in the 1800s. Over the years, they have become

a part of the Coachella agricultural industry—and sprouted Arab-linked pop culture.

The valley’s signature milkshake treat has been popular since the 1920s and is a tourist attraction itself. Shields Date Garden, one of the initial shops, has beckoned passing travelers for 100 years to try its date shake. A café and date shop surrounded by date palms, Shields’ bustling aisles are packed with curious shoppers who struggle to pronounce the different types of dates for sale, especially the Barhi, Zahidi and Halawa varieties, which all originated in Iraq.



ABOVE Tadros Tadros founded Aziz Farms, and his son Mark Tadros currently owns and runs the operation near Thermal, California. **LEFT** A box of Shields' famed "Blonde" variety of dates, named by original owner Floyd Shields for his wife, Bess, is for sale.



“The temperature and climate of Basra, Iraq, was very similar to the valley,” says Robert Krueger, horticulturist and research leader at the United States Agriculture Department’s Agricultural Research Service National Clonal Germplasm Repository for Citrus and Dates in Riverside, California. He says this explains why American agricultural explorers, sent out by USDA in the late 1800s to acquire crops for the US’ newly acquired California and Arizona deserts, saw the potential of planting date palms, particularly in the Coachella Valley. The explorers, he says, would bring offshoots from some 70 varieties from the Middle East and North Africa, especially Oman, Morocco and Algeria, to the US for experimentation.

Over the years US farmers have cultivated a number of new date varieties. Floyd Shields, founder of the store, was one of the pioneer date farmers in the valley.

“Like all the early growers, Mr. Shields did a lot of date

experimentation,” says Heather Raumin, co-owner of Shields today. “Every date has its own unique flavor and texture,” says Raumin, “and everyone has their own taste preference.”

Raumin is most fond of the story behind the “Blonde” variety named by Shields for his wife, Bess. “The Blonde variety is the basis of Shields’ signature date powder,” she says, and it can be activated into a paste with the addition of liquid. It was one of the first successful American experiments in preserving dates beyond their natural shelf life and the building block for Shields’ date shake.

Much of California’s date history was recorded in the late 1990s and early 2000s by Pat Laffin, whose family once owned Oasis Date Gardens, one of the largest date growers. Her research shaped the Coachella Valley Date Museum, located in the city of Indio in a former school library. Managed by volunteers, the dimly lit museum’s simple displays show the evolution of tools for cultivating dates as well as photos of the early US date explorers and farmers.

The museum also tells the story of the two most important dates in the valley. In 1903, independent farmer and explorer Bernard G. Johnson brought back 129 “Deglet Noor” offshoots from Algeria. The cultivar would become known as the “queen of dates” because of its ease of growth and dry texture, which makes it easy for pitting for baking. In 1927, the USDA’s Walter T. Swingle brought back what would become known as the “king of dates”: 11 offshoots of the Medjool, a soft, jammy Moroccan variety threatened by disease at home.

“Nine shoots survived by the time they reached the USDA Experiment Station,” says Diane Laffin Burke, the daughter of



ABOVE Pat Laflin's meticulous records of much of the area's date industry shaped the Coachella Valley Date Museum, a treasure trove of date memorabilia, in the town of Indio. **BELOW** Laflin and her daughter, Diane Laflin Burke, are part of the founding Oasis Date Gardens family. **OPPOSITE, TOP** Mecca, California, is an agricultural center at the south end of the Coachella Valley. **MIDDLE** A spray-painted logo on the loading dock of Aziz Farms references its Arab roots. **BELOW** Minarets adorn the walls bordering the Riverside County Fairgrounds in Indio, where the National Date Festival is held each year.

Pat Laflin. “They were nurtured into 72 shoots, and of the 72, my grandfather got 24. And from there, we ended up with 200-some acres of dates.”

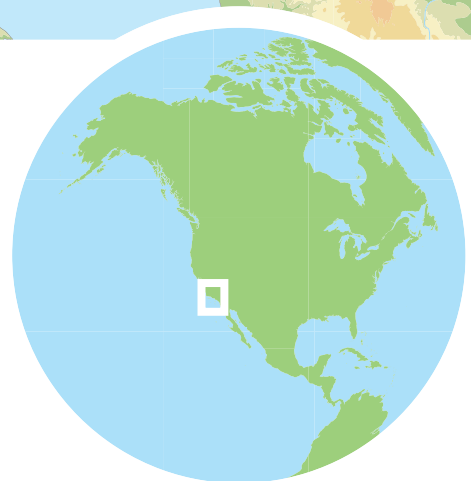
Compared to the Arab world, where in desert areas dates were the most important source of sustenance, the fruit has not been a significant part of the American diet. Nor are they imbued with religious significance, as they are for many Muslims during Ramadan. Coffee importers first brought dates from the Arabian Gulf in the mid-19th century, most notably Hills Bros., the largest coffee importer. Hills Bros. fostered the country's appetite for this exotic fruit by marketing dates with camel-caravan illustrations.

“A hundred years ago, when the date industry began, America was in a pop-cultural relationship with the greater Middle East, but traveling there was not feasible for most Americans,” says Sarah Seekatz, a professor of US history at San Joaquin Delta College, who has researched the culture around the date industry. “Americans had no language for the desert, except religious texts, The Arabian Nights and Hollywood films and shows like ‘The Sheik’ and ‘I Dream of Jeannie,’ so the community made those connections.”

While Coachella Valley is known today mostly for music festivals and golf resorts and the campy love of Arabia faded away in the 1970s, the remainders of that history can still be found. Coachella Valley High's mascot is still the Mighty Arab. Pageant



winners at the Riverside County Fair & National Date Festival have been crowned Queen Scheherazade and Princess Jasmine since 1947 at a fairgrounds anchored by Disney-like minarets. The town of Walters became Mecca in 1904, when the state's first USDA Date Experiment Station was located there.





TOP A field of young date palms grows near Mecca. **ABOVE** A palmero prepares young female date palm seeds for pollination at Aziz Farms in Thermal.

The California date industry today has benefited from a decades-long wave of immigration from the Middle East and North Africa. For Tadros, the growth in the Muslim population has been a great boost for business and is the market on which he focuses. But California dates face stiff competition from other countries and with other crops that are much easier to grow, like vegetables and citrus. “Dates are not a short-term investment” he says. “I’m lucky if I am harvesting from that offshoot in 10 years’ time.”

One of the greatest challenges is the spring pollination season. Date pollination is the highest-paid farm labor in the valley because it takes special training and involves risks. Date-trunk thorns and scales can pierce skin. “Date trees cannot pollinate by

THE DATA ON DATES

More than

2,500

 species of date palms around the world

“The Tree of Life”

The nickname for date palms, owing to their ability to thrive in extreme weather conditions

20 calories per date, otherwise packed with nutrients

Over 5,000 years

How long dates have been grown, making them the oldest cultivated fruit

4–7 years for ‘Deglet Noor’ and Medjool trees to bear fruit

SOURCES: DESERTEMPIREPALMS.COM, NATURALDELIGHTS.COM, ARABNEWS.COM, KIDADL.COM, SMITHSONIANMAG.COM



Packers at Aziz Farms sort Medjool dates on a conveyor belt, readying them to be packaged for retail sale. **LEFT** Ninety-three-year-old Julian Delgadillo sells Medjool dates from his truck in Mecca.



innovations that have developed the date industry. Tadros is well-versed in the contributions US growers have made to the industry. Prime among them are mechanized cleaning and freezing methods that allow dates to last far longer than the few weeks they did when they used to arrive on boats from the Arab world. Many California growers have shared their techniques with growers in the Middle East. Tadros has also been impressed with inventions coming out of the Middle East, like a new lift and some unique grading equipment.

“The date-growing region here wouldn’t exist without the date-growing region in the Middle East. We were fortunate to get the trees from there—and initial knowledge,” says Tadros. The future of date production is set to continue to be an exchange of knowledge and innovation between the Arab world and the US, as the appetite for the fruit grows beyond its original homeland. 🌍



Alia Yunis, a writer and filmmaker based in Abu Dhabi, recently completed the documentary *The Golden Harvest*. **Stuart Palley** is a photographer based in Southern California focusing on documenting climate change, environmental issues, and infrastructure in the American West. He is a contributor to *National Geographic* magazine among other publications. His memoir *Into the Inferno: A Photographer’s Journey Through California’s Megafires and Fallout* was published in 2022.



themselves,” Tadros says, explaining the precise cutting and binding required. “You have to bring the male to the female if you want a good yield, which can be 200 or more pounds from one tree.”

Today, date pollinators, called *palmeros* in Coachella, ride on mechanical lifts to reach the tops of trees, one of the many



Related articles at [aramcoworld.com](https://www.aramcoworld.com)

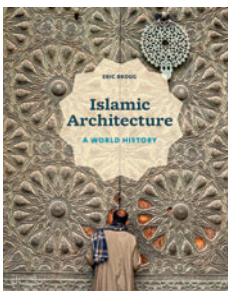
Fig Trees and a Changing Climate: Mar / April 2024

Pistachios’ History of Graft: Jul / Aug 2023

Walnuts and the First Forest Farms: Mar / Apr 2017



AUTHOR'S CORNER



**Islamic Architecture:
A World History**

Eric Broug,
Thames & Hudson, 2023.

Finding Structure: A Conversation with Eric Broug

Written by CHARLES O. CECIL

As a boy living in Jakarta, where his Dutch father worked as a civil engineer in the early 1970s, Eric Broug grew fascinated with Islamic culture. By the 1990s, after having begun studies in Middle Eastern politics at the University of Amsterdam, Broug turned his interest to Islamic geometric design and joined the master's program at London's School of Oriental and African Studies in Islamic art and archeology.

After finishing the program in 2002, Broug began recording instructional videos in Islamic design principles and giving lectures and workshops around the world. Over the course of his career, he has also published three books on

the art of patterning circles, squares and other geometric shapes in arabesques designed to represent the infinity of God.

The success of these books (translated into at least half a dozen languages) gave way to Broug's numerous workshops and lectures around the world, as well as several video tutorials teaching the principles of Islamic design.

Now, after 25 years focused on design, Broug has turned his attention back to Islamic architecture, resulting in his latest book, *Islamic Architecture: A World History*.

Broug recently spoke with *AramcoWorld* about his career evolution and the origins of his new book.



What led to your interest in Islamic culture and design?

I've always been focused on the beauty of Islamic architecture and on the ornate, intricate patterns and designs that decorate these structures. After four years studying Middle Eastern politics in Amsterdam as an undergraduate in the 1980s, I wanted to find something that would allow me to give something—a big challenge, an impossible dream.

Then a book came onto my path—*Arabic Geometrical Pattern and Design*, by [J.] Bourgoïn. I found it fascinating because it's art, history and science, and Islamic geometric design was under-researched at the time. I thought, if I'm going to choose something this obscure, then I must do it 100 percent and never give up.

Your search for images for this book led you to review more than half a million photos. How did you decide what buildings to include?

I knew that certain buildings would have to be in there, like the Alhambra [Spain] and the Topkapi Palace [Turkey]. But the interesting thing was to see whether I could find less well-known Islamic architecture examples like the mosque in Kouto in the Ivory Coast, or the Mubarak Mosque in Prek Pnov, Cambodia, structures that don't receive as much notice for their architecture because of where they're located. It took a lot of time to find such buildings. I couldn't do every country, but I did want it to be globally representative.

Now, after 25 years focused on design, Broug has turned his attention back to Islamic architecture, resulting in his latest book, *Islamic Architecture: A World History*.

Part of your book explores the roles women have played in Islamic architecture history. What did you discover?

Islamic architecture history is very male-oriented. But, sometimes, in doing research, I found that the influence of a mother of a ruler, or a wife, or a sister will be mentioned. There are so many of these interesting stories that I decided it merits highlighting in a special chapter. It's not always just men who've been doing something.

Who have been some of the most recent influential architects?

Zaha Hadid designed the prayer space—*musalla*—of the King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center, in Riyadh—a wonderful building. And Zeynep Fadillioglu became the first woman to design a mosque interior when she created the interior of the Sakirin Mosque, in Istanbul.

How do you see Islamic architecture evolving today in the Middle East?

The countries in the Gulf are looking in more depth to their own visual heritage and not just using geometrical patterns. You see that in Saudi Arabia and in the UAE, in particular.

Modern architects sometimes draw on various aspects of Islamic architecture for inspiration. Do you have any concerns about that?

What troubles me is the way geometric patterns are used in contemporary architecture because quite often they're added to an exterior or to a floor to add a little bit of "Islamic flavor" to a building. Traditionally these patterns are meant to engage with the passersby, to invite people to reflect. It would be wonderful if that element of engaging with the people could be taken into consideration in contemporary architecture.

What do you have in mind as your next project?

It's funny because every time I finish something, I think I'm done. After I completed my first book, *Islamic Geometric Patterns*, I thought that was it; God's plan fulfilled. But then I was given the opportunity to write two more books on the same subject, much to my amazement. Again, I thought, surely this is the plan for me fulfilled. So now, I have written this book, and I make no more claims to know what His plan is for me.

This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for length and clarity.

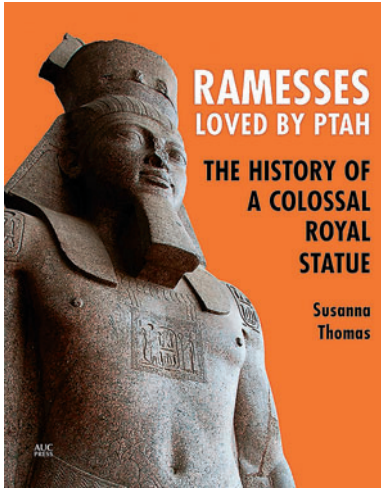
Read more articles like this online at aramcoworld.com.



TOP LEFT: GMBH & CO. IG / ALAMY; ABOVE: BOKEHCAMBODIA / ALAMY



REVIEWS



“The functions of statues ... were to act as representations, to be a substitute for who they were representing and also to act as a physical host for various non-physical or spiritual aspects of the entity so that they could be present and participate in rituals.”
—From *RamesSES Loved by Pthah*

RamesSES Loved by Pthah: The History of a Colossal Royal Statue

Susanna Thomas. AUC Press, 2022.

Shelley’s famed poem “Ozymandias,” on unearthing the 19th-century statue of Ramesses II, finds an echo in Thomas’ history of the Grand Egyptian Museum statue, one of the best-preserved statues of the storied pharaoh, who reigned from 1279 to 1213 BCE. This engaging chronicle by Susanna Thomas, who specializes in display and interpretation of ancient Egyptian material culture at the Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo, details the discovery and excavation of the 36-foot-tall limestone statue at the Great Temple of Pthah near Memphis. The book also serves as an accessible primer on Egyptian monument art and the meanings behind the different forms, both to people of the time and those who discovered it centuries later. Whether you’re interested in how such relics are preserved or in understanding the meaning of these figures of pharaonic Egypt, you will find this to be an easy yet enlightening read.
—NURTILEK ABDIMALIKOV

Without endorsing the views of authors, the editors encourage reading as a path to greater understanding.



A Stranger in Baghdad
Elizabeth Loudon.
Hoopoe Fiction, 2023.

Diane, a young English nurse, marries Ibrahim, an Iraqi doctor, and returns with him to Baghdad in 1937 to live in his family house on the banks of the Tigris. The couple raise two sons—Ramzi, an air force pilot, and Ziad, a poet—and daughter, Mona, torn between her English and Iraqi heritage. Although the novel initially centers on Diane and Mona’s rocky mother-daughter relationship, it gradually becomes a tale of political intrigue and divided loyalties as characters grapple with decades of turmoil in Iraq. Drawing on her time in 1970s Iraq for her first novel, Elizabeth Loudon successfully evokes the changing face of Baghdad as Ibrahim, physician to the ruling elite, and Diane, nursemaid to the last king of Iraq, ultimately face jeopardy when their old allegiances collapse. This story of heartbreak and perseverance illustrates the difficult choices people face when they are swept up in the capricious flow of history.

—KYLE PAKKA



A Gift of Geology: Ancient Egyptian Landscapes and Monuments
Colin D. Reader. AUC Press, 2023.

Although the Greek historian Herodotus called ancient Egypt “the gift of the Nile,” author Colin D. Reader, an engineering geologist, makes the case that the country’s auspicious geology became another crucial source for the glories of pharaonic Egypt (3000-30 BCE). Beginning with an introduction describing how geological principles shaped the Egyptian landscape, Reader sweeps us along 2 billion years of geologic history that brings long-vanished environments to life while vividly explaining the dramatic formation of the Nile River Valley. In the latter chapters, Reader chronicles the sources of stones and minerals, as well as the methods ancient Egyptians used for mining them. Over centuries, Egyptians unearthed granite, limestone, gold and other raw materials that craftsmen transformed into jewelry, statuary, obelisks, temples and pyramids marveled at today. Abundantly illustrated with photographs and maps, this book offers new perspectives on the sources of ancient Egypt’s magnificence.

—KYLE PAKKA



On the Sultan’s Service: Halid Ziya Uşaklıgil’s Memoir of the Ottoman Palace, 1909-1912
Douglas Scott Brookes.
Indiana UP, 2019.

Readers interested in the twilight of the Ottoman Empire, and by an insider’s tales of the workings of a royal household, will find much to admire in this memoir, translated and edited by Douglas Scott Brookes, the author of previous books on the Ottoman Empire. Uşaklıgil, the author of two well-received novels, supported the Young Turks in the coup of 1908. His sympathy with the Young Turks and his renown as a writer earned him an appointment as first secretary of the court chancery, where he oversaw the paperwork for managing the Dolmabahçe palace. After the Young Turks fell from power, Uşaklıgil returned to teaching and writing. In the last decade of his life, he penned this memoir of his time in the service of Sultan Mehmed V. Uşaklıgil brings a novelist’s eye to his tales of palace life, painting vivid portraits of state dinners, pageants and parades, court intrigue and the waning of imperial power.

—KYLE PAKKA

Exploring History: One Artifact at a Time

Written by AIBARSHYN AKHMETKALI

When studying mosques, the focus often falls on the architectural aspects of places of worship. But doing so may overlook the extensive urban, social and educational roles they have historically played in societies, as the editors of this engaging book maintain.

Intended as a catalog to accompany the joint exhibition by the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo and the National Museum in Riyadh, this book examines an array of artifacts typically found in mosques, explaining the origin of each piece and its meaning beyond functionality. The resulting essay collection explores the journey, evolution and impact of 10 types of objects, as well as their connections to the communities their mosques have served.

Each chapter, written by experts of diverse professional backgrounds, ranging from architects to artists, to curators, poets or scholars, manifests a true appreciation for the objects it highlights and their functions in mosques around the world, be it a 16th-century Ottoman prayer rug or a 17th-century hammered copper finial that was once a turret atop the Holy Mosque of Makkah. This approach allows each writer to animate the language, moving away from an encyclopedic tone.

As the title hints, these essays act as a back way into understanding Muslim history, both within the structure of the mosque and on the world stage. Although the astrolabe, for example, had been invented around 200 BCE in Greece, medieval Muslims later adopted and refined it, using it to determine the orientation of the *qiblah*, the direction Muslims face during prayer. "These instruments, and the learning that went with them, had a massive effect on world history," Abdullah Alkadi, professor of architecture at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Saudi Arabia, writes, noting how modern astronomy has its roots in Muslim Spain having brought the improved astrolabe back to 11th-century-CE Europe.

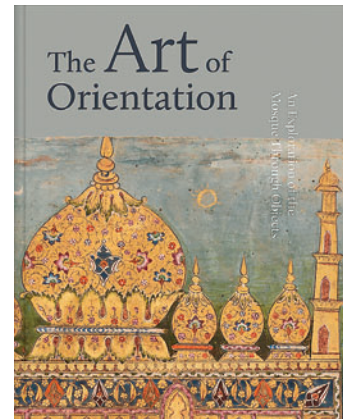
Other pieces have readers ruminate on how much story an object can tell.

Thus, Idries Trevathan, Islamic art and culture curator at the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, points to a 14th-century-CE Egyptian wooden writing table inlaid with redwood, ebony, ivory and bone, and other educational tools to explore how the introduction of *madrasas* in medieval Islamic mosques transformed education. "It is difficult to overstate the historical importance of the mosque institution and its role in supporting literacy and education in local communities," he writes, noting how the *madrasas* led to high literacy levels and the emergence of calligraphy as an art form.

Similarly, a lamp bearing royal inscription acts as the gateway to a tale of how a 14th-century-CE Mamluk sultan's passion for architecture transformed modest villages into

self-sustaining cities for Sudanese poet Mohammed Abdel Bari. Even the intricate geometric designs on a 12th-century-CE portable *mihrab* (prayer niche) speak volumes, showcasing a sophisticated understanding of non-Euclidean geometry. It reflects "the world of mathematics made tangible," University of Virginia religious studies professor Oludamini Ogunnaike marvels.

While each piece reveals only a fragment of a mosque's essence, taken altogether these items make it clear that the mosque is much more than the sum of its distinct parts. Offering a range of viewpoints, this book has something for everyone.



The Art of Orientation: An Exploration of the Mosque Through Objects

Idries Trevathan, Mona Aljalhami, Murdo Macleod and Mona Mansour, eds. Hirmer Publishers, 2021.



Read more articles like this online at aramcworld.com.





EVENTS

Highlights from
aramcoworld.com

Please verify a venue's
schedule before visiting.

CURRENT / JULY

John Baldessari: Ahmedabad 1992 is a solo exhibition of an alluring series of mixed-media assemblages by John Baldessari, a pioneer of American conceptualism, produced during his residency in India. For the first time in decades, a selection from this unique period in the artist's oeuvre will be on view. The late Baldessari continually challenged clichés and explored the expectations that shape how we perceive works of art. Throughout his storied and influential career, his distinctive approach to painting, photography, source images and texts recontextualized art-historical narratives and rejected traditional boundaries. Drawing from a breadth of sources, he created absurdist, complex yet accessible juxtapositions. Sprüth Magers, **London**, through July 27.

CURRENT / SEPTEMBER

Plants in the UAE explores the life conditions of each plant indigenous to the United Arab Emirates' landscape, looking at the surrounding atmosphere that affects its growth and gives it its unique variations of color, texture, size and behavior. From the iconic Ghaf tree to the resilient desert grasses, each specimen in this exhibition holds a story of adaptation and survival told through a curated collection of art installations and informative displays that shed light on the ecological significance of these plants and trees. Cultural Foundation, **Abu Dhabi**, through September 1.

CURRENT / OCTOBER

Treasured Ornament: 10 Centuries of Islamic Art illuminates the expertly crafted and exquisitely ornate objects that anchored everyday life in the region we today refer to as the Middle East, including Egypt and India. Featuring fine glassware, ceramics, metalwork, painting, weaponry, weaving and much more, "Treasured Ornament" evokes the rich history of the Islamic world and the shared human experiences that bind us, transcending borders and boundaries. Frick Art Museum, **Pittsburgh, US**, August 17 through October 20.

The Seven Saints of Marrakech is an invitation to better perceive a spiritual heritage fundamentally linked to the life of the inhabitants of Marrakech. The Moroccan city conceals a multitude of mausoleums whose fortunes have evolved over the centuries. However, the best known and venerated are the Sab'atou Rijāl, the Seven Saints. An annual pilgrimage, the "Ziyara," is dedicated to all the saints who rest in the cemeteries of Marrakech. House of Photography of **Marrakech, Morocco**, through October 31.

CURRENT / NOVEMBER

Voices of Oriental Antiquities features contemporary creations investigating the most current territories of reflection, all by Simone Fattal, a sculptor, painter, poet and publisher. In three spaces, facing the collections of Mesopotamia, Phoenicia and Cyprus, she offers her reinterpretations of myths and

forms, inviting us to feel the power of ancient works in the present as much as we perceive the strength of her own sculptures. Louvre, **Paris**, through November 11.

CURRENT / DECEMBER

Sensory Silhouettes: Experiencing South Asian Garments includes the converging the textures, colors and histories of South Asian textiles. Centering cultural associations, memories and place-based details, the exhibition features garments specially selected from the museum's collection for their distinctive sensory properties and richness of hand, as well as the stories of cultural exchange and collaboration embedded in their making. RISD Museum, **Providence, US**, through December 8.

COMING / JANUARY

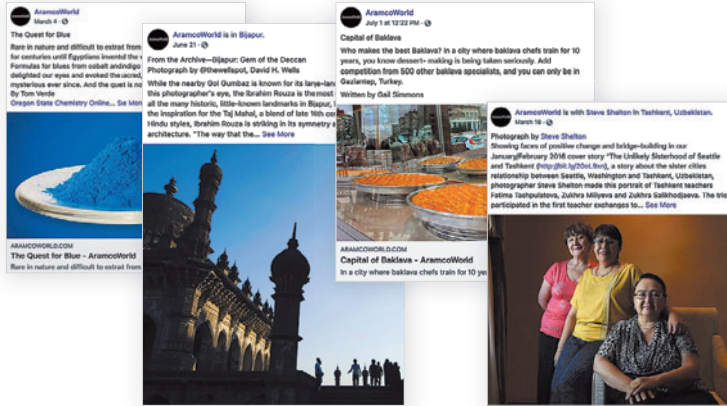
Wonders of Creation: Art, Science, and Innovation in the Islamic World will illuminate the extraordinary global impact of science and artistic production from the Islamic world while introducing new audiences to its diverse geographies and multifaceted visual cultures. More than 100 works, including illustrated manuscripts and paintings, maps, scientific instruments, magic bowls, luster dishes, architectural elements and contemporary art, will evoke sentiments of wonder through a visual journey inspired by the text of scholar Zakariyya al-Qazwini (d. 1283). **San Diego** Museum of Art, **US**, through January 5.



Neighbours of the Sea

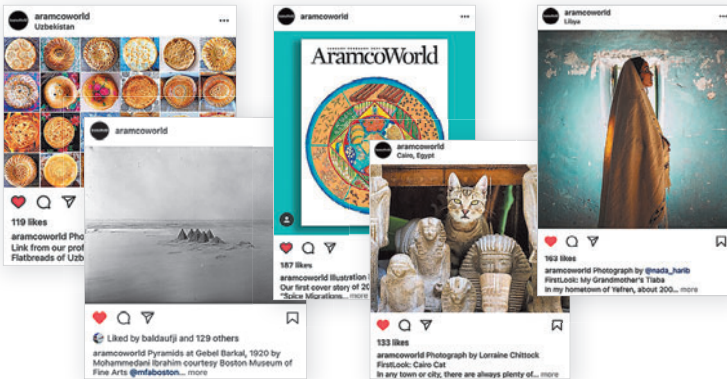
presents an intersection area for the artists Wafika Sultan Al-Issa and Hassan Al-Mulla, who are considered among the pioneers of fine art in Qatar—despite the difference in the method of expression and artistic style, where the local environment and culture constitute a meeting point and a common inspiration for both. Qatari people have always been influenced by the desert and their proximity to the sea at the same time, and living in this unique environment has affected their way of life, culture, urbanism and popular heritage. The series of works displayed represents this reflection on the artists as they are part of this society, its culture and its land. The exhibition presents more than 30 mixed-media paintings. Fire Station Museum, **Doha, Qatar**, through August 17. "Untitled," Wafika Sultan Al-Issa, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 75 cm.

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



Want more?

Discover more on social media.



Follow us on Facebook, Instagram.



Download our free mobile app.

AramcoWorld is a bimonthly publication available in print, web and mobile editions, and an email newsletter is published biweekly. Two-year (12-issue) renewable subscriptions to the print edition are available without charge to a limited number of readers worldwide.

To subscribe to the email newsletter: aramcoworld.com → Subscribe → Newsletter Subscription.

To subscribe to the print edition: aramcoworld.com → Subscribe → Print Edition Subscription.

Change of address: aramcoworld.com → Subscribe → Change of Address Form. Have your mailing label with you to enter your Subscriber Account Number.

Back issues, from 1960 onward, can be read in full online and downloaded from aramcoworld.com/resources/back-issues.

Article Proposals: aramcoworld.com → About → Guidelines for Contributors.

Permissions:

Texts of articles may be reprinted without specific permission provided that the text be neither edited nor abridged, that the magazine and author be credited, and that a copy of the reprinted article or a link to it be provided to the editors.

Photographs and illustrations: Much of our photo archive is available on our website. Image licensing for approved uses is royalty free.

No spam: Contact us with confidence. You will receive no unsolicited marketing email or postal mail as a result of your subscription or inquiry.

Privacy: aramcoworld.com → Privacy Policy

AramcoWorld (ISSN 2376-1083) is published bimonthly by Aramco Americas, Two Allen Center, 1200 Smith Street, Houston TX 77002, USA.

Copyright © 2024 by Aramco Americas. Volume 75, Number 4. Periodicals postage paid at Houston, Texas, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to AramcoWorld, P.O. Box 292348, Kettering, Ohio 45429.

AramcoWorld



aramcoworld.com