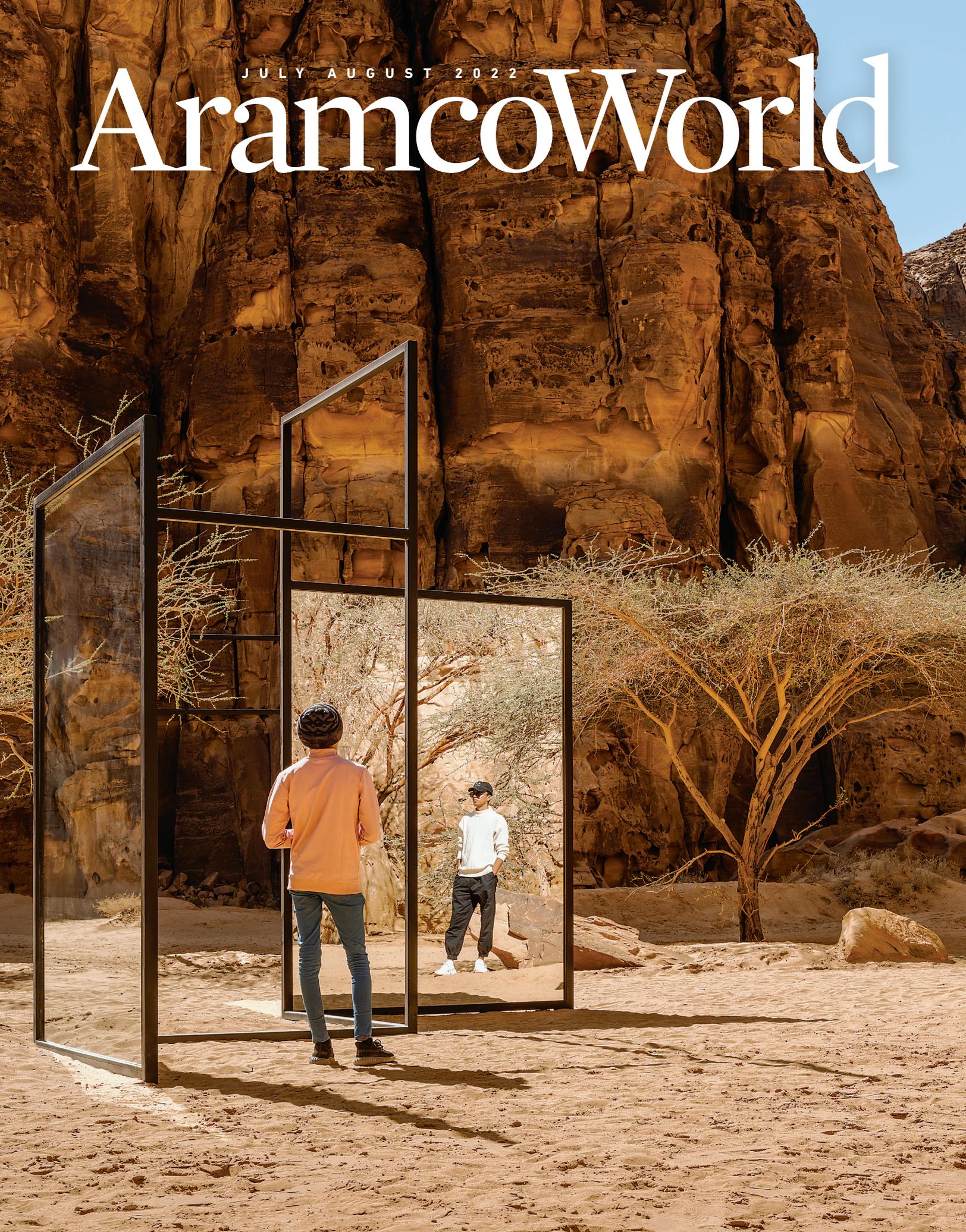
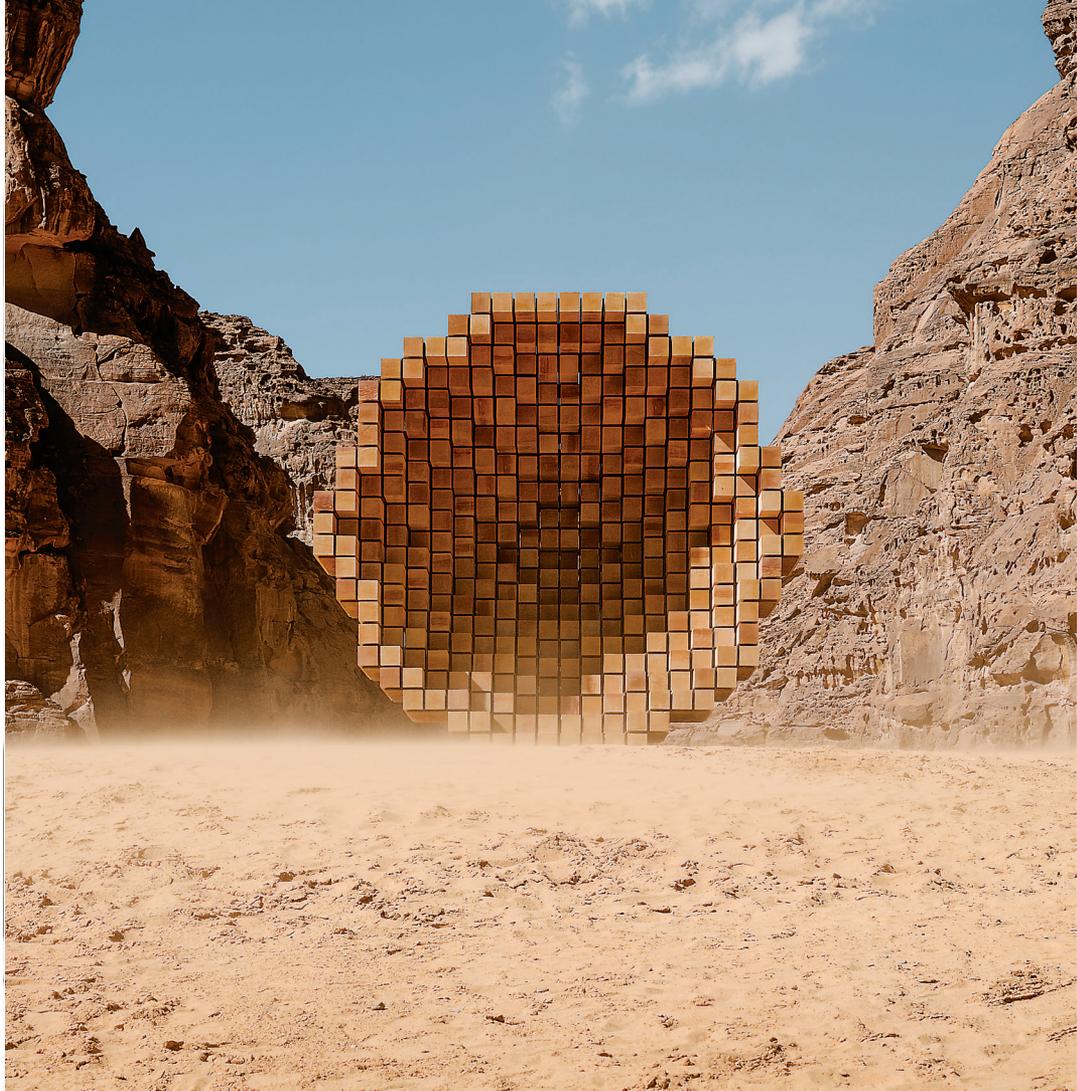


JULY AUGUST 2022

# AramcoWorld





## 6 New Screens in Arab Cinema

Written by **Alia Yunis**

Since the 1970s, independent filmmakers have been a rare breed throughout the Arabic-speaking world. But as a rising number of film festivals and streaming platforms open, opportunities for both artistic expression and viewing experiences are growing faster than ever.

## 12 Kingdom of Art

Written by **Beliz Tecirli**

In less than a decade, Saudi Arabia has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing centers of contemporary art. Both for Saudi artists and international creatives invited to exhibit, install, screen, teach and produce, more than 100 new events sponsored by more than two dozen new arts organizations now offer opportunities across the country. Artists such as Dana Awartani, whose neoclassically symmetrical installation "Where the Dwellers Lay" (above) nestled at the outdoor exhibition Desert X AIUla 2022, and dozens of others are showing at recently opened, large-scale venues, including Riyadh's JAX District, Jiddah's Hayy Jameel cultural center and Red Sea Film Festival, and Dhahran's cultural center, Ithra.

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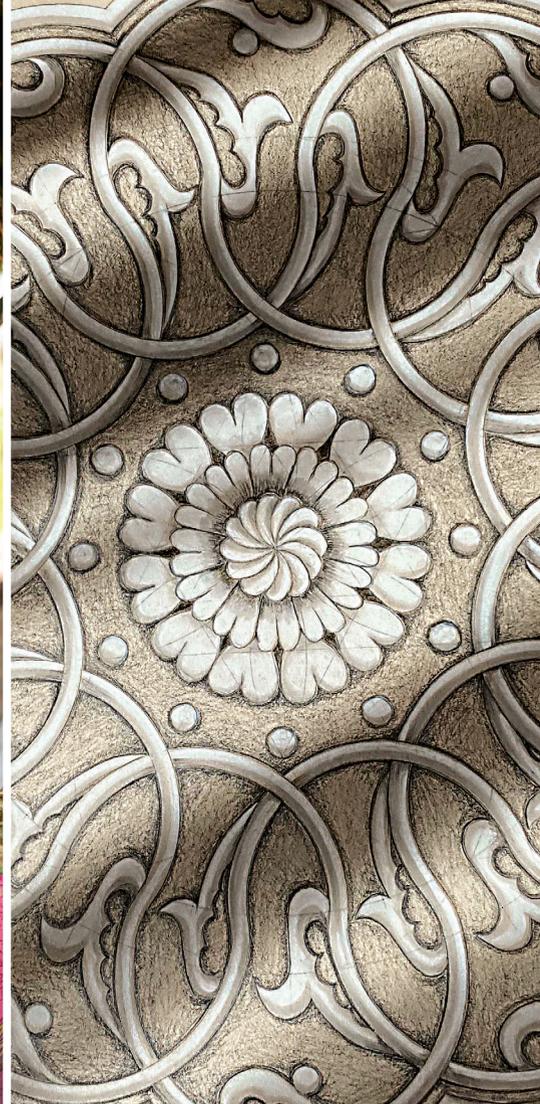
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We distribute *AramcoWorld* in print and online to increase cross-cultural understanding by broadening knowledge of the histories, cultures and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their global connections.

**FRONT COVER** Installed at DesertX AIUla 2022, Berlin-based artist Alicja Kwade's "In Blur" used steel and mirrors to amplify and complicate the sandy expanse under sandstone cliffs. Photo by Lance Gerber / courtesy of the artist and Desert X AIUla 2022.

**BACK COVER** Groundnut-product entrepreneur Adama Ceesy founded her business while still in her teens. Now she sells out of the public market in Brikama, south of Banjul, capital of The Gambia. Photo by Samantha Reinders.



## 20 Queen Mother of Rai

Written by **Mariam Shaheen**  
Illustrated by **Matthew Bromley**

Born in a Bedouin village in rural Algeria, Cheika Remitti sang high-energy songs of love, loss and society that pioneered rai music. Beloved by fans for more than 60 years until her death in 2006, her influence and popularity endure.

## 26 Is the Sky the Limit for The Gambia's Groundnuts?

Written by **Tristan Rutherford**  
Photographed by **Samantha Reinders**

From co-op farms and export-driven factories to market stalls run by young entrepreneurs, continental Africa's smallest country is adapting its globally popular crop of groundnuts—peanuts—to changing climate, changing markets and rising aspirations.

## 34 Art of Islamic Patterns: Rüstem Pasha Rosette

Written by **Adam Williamson**

Originally designed for tiles adorning the mosque in Istanbul commissioned in the 16th century by Ottoman Grand Vizier Rüstem Pasha, this 12-fold rosette combines geometry with plant and flower motifs to achieve a centrifugal, undulating, harmonious composition.

 **40 EVENTS**     **Online LEARNING CENTER**

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# FIRSTLOOK

## Deep Descent

*Photograph by Christopher Pike*

In 2011 I moved to the United Arab Emirates, and I joined a group of cave explorers. After several weeks of training, we traveled to Oman's Eastern Hajar Mountains, some 150 kilometers south of the capital, Muscat. There, we set out to descend into the Majlis al-Jinn (Den of the Spirits), one of the largest cave chambers in the world. This is not a cave to walk or crawl into: Access is only from two entrances, both on the ceiling. The floor lies 158 meters below. These entrances were discovered in 1983 by US hydrogeologist W. Don Davison, Jr., who was working for Oman's Public Authority for Water Resources, and his wife, Cherty S. Jones.

We harnessed up and lowered our rope. For a descent of this length, we used an industrial-grade rope, which was stiffer—less bouncy—and thicker than the ropes usually used for climbing and caving. We began lowering ourselves down, one by one, by hand and slowly enough to avoid rope rub. I went second.

Once at the bottom, I photographed many in the group as each descended. At one point, as the sun was nearing its midday peak, a sliver of light cut into the shaft. I shot this frame as one of my teammates lined up with it perfectly. It only lasted a brief moment.

—Christopher Pike

christopherpike@me.com  
cpike.com



# FLAVORS

## Spinach and Lamb Curry (Sabzi)

Recipe by Farida Ayubi

Description by Durkhanai Ayubi

Photograph by Alicia Taylor

**This is an easy dish to scale up, to feed as many guests as you need.**

My mother recalls having this dish for breakfast during family day trips, such as to Mazar-i-Sharif (in northern Afghanistan) for the Red Tulip Festival (Guli Surkh), during the spring equinox. It would be made in a beautiful copper *karayee*, a shallow heavy-based pan used in Afghan cooking. The *karayee* would be placed directly over a portable kerosene burner, where the eggs, vegetables and spices would bubble away. The large *karayee* is then placed in the middle of the breakfast spread, surrounded by naans and various chais, for everyone to help themselves.

(Serves 4)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 cup (250 milliliters) sunflower oil           | 4 large eggs                                     |
| 1 large yellow onion, halved and thinly sliced  | 1 teaspoon ground red pepper                     |
| 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced                  | Coarsely chopped fresh cilantro leaves, to serve |
| 3 ripe tomatoes, halved and thinly sliced       | Salt   |
| 1 moderately hot fresh red chili, thinly sliced |  |

Heat the oil in a medium saucepan over high heat, and fry the onion and garlic for 5 minutes, or until softened and browned. Add the tomatoes and fresh chili, and cook, stirring occasionally until the tomatoes have softened but are still intact. Then mix in 2 teaspoons salt, or to taste.

Break the eggs into a bowl, then pour evenly over the tomato and onion mixture in the saucepan. Break up the yolks gently, if that's how you prefer them. Then cover the pan with a lid. Reduce the heat to low, and cook the eggs slowly, shaking the pan occasionally to avoid sticking, for 5–10 minutes for soft, 10–15 minutes for medium-soft or until the eggs are cooked to your liking. Sprinkle with 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, ground red pepper and cilantro, and serve hot—straight from the pan.

Reprinted with permission from

**Parwana: Recipes and Stories From an Afghan Kitchen**

Durkhanai Ayubi.  
Interlink Books, 2021.  
interlinkbooks.com.

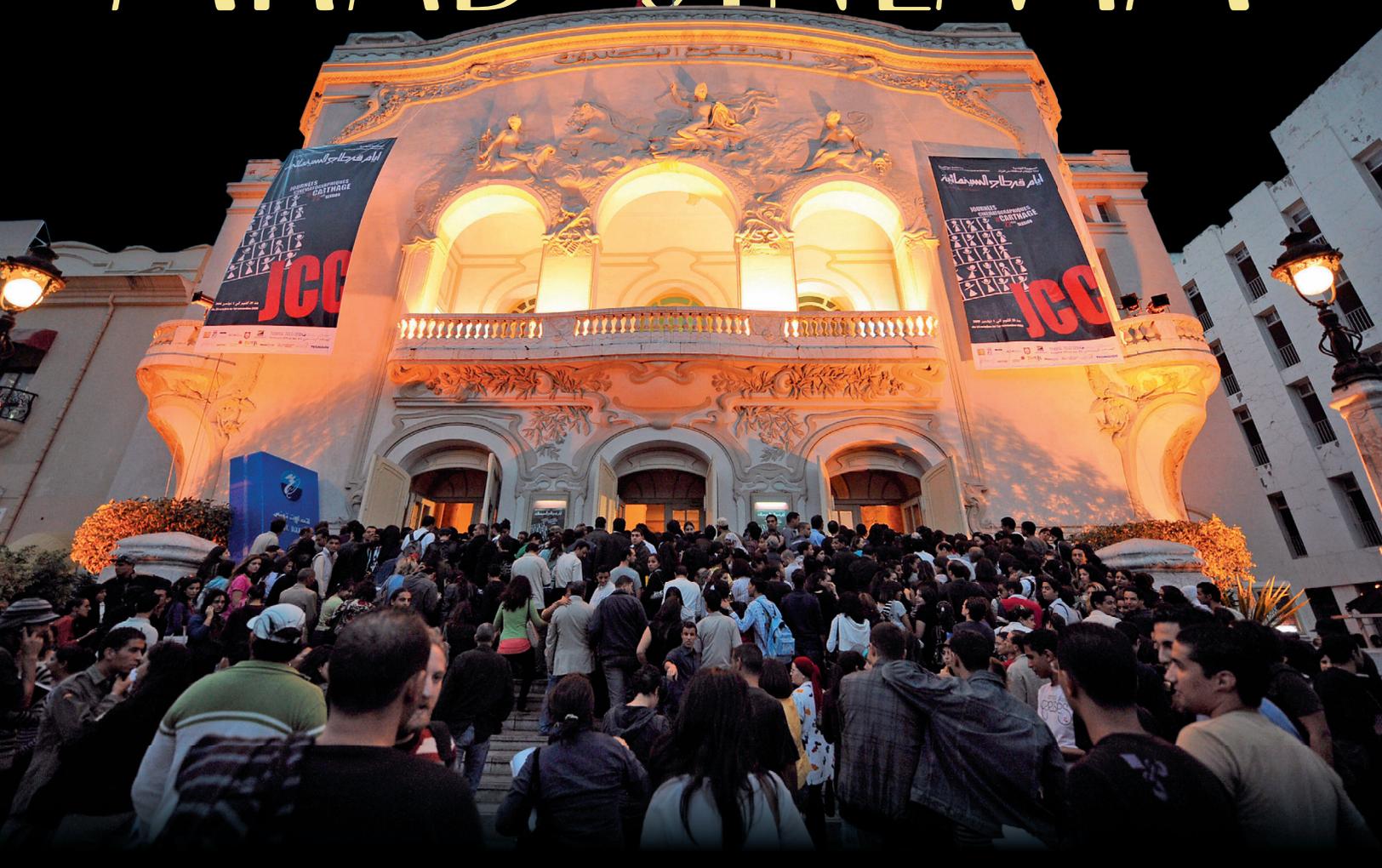


Freelance food writer and restaurateur **Durkhanai Ayubi** is involved in day-to-day responsibilities of two family-run eateries in Adelaide, Australia: Parwana and Kutchi Deli Parwana. She has written for several international newspapers and websites. Daughter of Afghani refugees Zelmai and Farida Ayubi, she tells her family's story from her own perspective while passing along memories and recipes from her parents. *Parwana* is her first book, and it won the 2021 Art of Eating Prize.

JOHNNY MILLER



# NEW SCREENS IN ARAB CINEMA



Written by **ALIA YUNIS**

When filmmaker Khaled al-Siddiq died in October 2021, his debut film, *Bas ya bahar* (*The Cruel Sea*), produced in 1972 and nominated by Kuwait to the Oscars, experienced a posthumous renaissance of sorts among independent filmmakers in the Middle East.

It wasn't just that al-Siddiq was noted as the first in his country to produce a feature film: it was his unflinching realism, which echoes and inspires today.

**M**ore than 50 years after the release of *The Cruel Sea*, film enthusiasts and historians are examining anew the 1970s era of Arab filmmaking, often referred to academically as the era of New Arab Cinema.

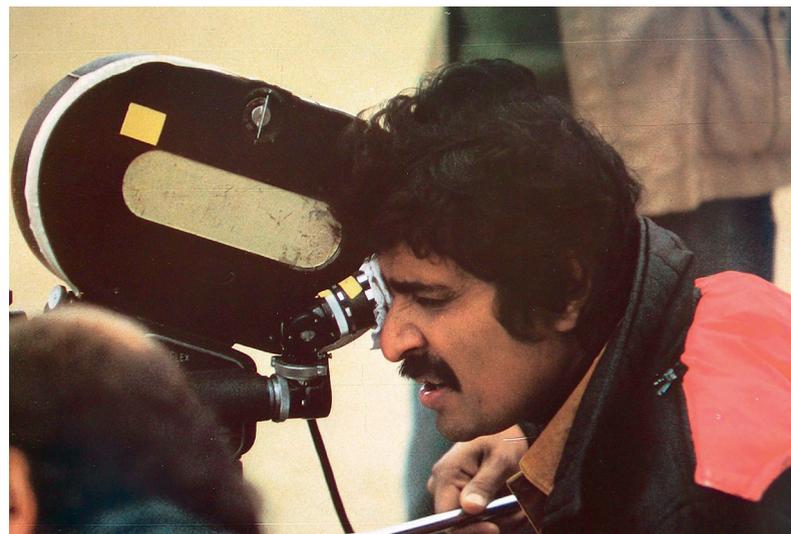
It was a time when filmmakers like al-Siddiq were making socially conscious films with pan-Arab storylines that broke with mainstream Egyptian cinema. In the 1940s through the 1970s, often called the Golden Age of Egyptian cinema, film plots mostly featured predictable storylines and happy endings with actors playing typecast parts. Al-Siddiq, however, looked to the darker, harsher side of life: His film told the story of a struggling pearl diver who dives to ever-more-dangerous depths in a desperate bid to find a pearl valuable enough to earn him the money he needs to marry Nura, who has been promised to another, wealthier man, but that pearl comes into Mussaid's hands only on his last—and fatal—dive.

Egyptian-German author and filmmaker Viola Shafik, who wrote three books on the history of Arab cinema, says by the mid-1930s, Egypt earned its distinction internationally as a rising hub

third-largest film industry in the world, “the Arab Hollywood,” but since then, it has declined. By 2008 it was producing only about 40 films a year, and in 2021, despite pandemic conditions, it produced 21, according to elcinema.com.

Film historians and enthusiasts are today discovering similarities with filmmakers of al-Siddiq's genre, who were then willing to push the status quo, and a rising generation of filmmakers based in Arab-majority countries who are producing more cinema than ever—often with more financial backing than ever. Yet today, even with more films and filmmakers, the industry is driven less by the telling of sweeping, pan-Arab stories and more by the growth in opportunities for filmmakers to find financing and distribution for more specifically localized themes. Propelling this trend is the worldwide shift in viewing via online platforms and streaming services that developed their own, content-hungry production houses.

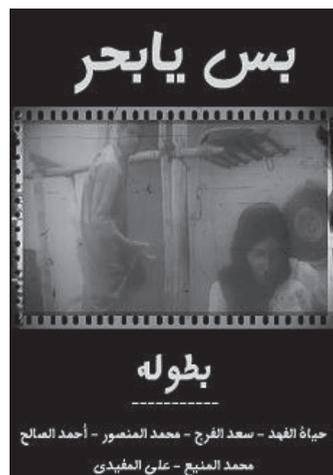
*The Cruel Sea* isn't really being rediscovered six decades later, says Nadia Yaqub, a professor in the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, but rather, discovered for the first time. She also



Critically regarded as a landmark in independent Arab cinema for its departure from feel-good features, *Bas ya bahar* (*The Cruel Sea*), **ABOVE LEFT AND LOWER**, focuses on the hardships of a pearl diver. It was produced in 1972 by the late director Khaled al-Siddiq of Kuwait. **ABOVE RIGHT. OPPOSITE** Attendees crowd the Théâtre Municipal de Tunis in Carthage, Tunisia, in this 2008 file photo of the longest-running annual film festival in Africa, the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage, founded in 1966.

of industry. By the end of World War II, Egypt was producing about 50 films each year, and by the 1980s, Egypt distributed nearly 100 films per year, viewed throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Despite British colonialism, she says, “it was a relatively prosperous economy” that allowed local entrepreneurs and artists to invest in film and create an industry that started “catering for Egypt and its neighboring countries.” The Egyptian film industry spiked in the 1980s with the introduction of video cassette, through which it expanded its viewership into the more conservative Gulf countries, which had few cinemas. At its peak, it was the



attributes the interest in decades-old Arab films like *The Cruel Sea*, in part, to a renewed energy across MENA to connect its roots and contributions to the Arab films of today.

The late 1960s through early 1980s is important for Arab cinema for a number of reasons, says Yaqub, whose ongoing research covers Arab literature and film throughout MENA, a subject she examined briefly in her 2018 book *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution* on Palestinian filmmaking in the 1970s and its regional impact on neighboring countries.

Yaqub credits the founding of several important institutions for matriculating filmmakers in the region and helping them



Globally recognized for his contributions to Arab cinema, the late Egyptian director Youssef Chahine made more than 40 films beginning in 1950, 13 of which are in the Bibliotheca Alexandrina's Top 100 Egyptian films list. **ABOVE** He guides the camera and crew while filming his 1985 film, *Adieu Bonaparte*. **LOWER** a poster from the 1938 *Yahya el Hub*, released also under the French title, *Vive l'amour*, directed by Mohammad Karim, typifies styles of Egypt's Golden Era of cinema. Between 1936 and 1967, most Arab films were produced in Cairo, and many relied on type-cast characters, familiar plots and "happily ever after" endings.

produce substantive and highly regarded films on an international scale. The Cairo Higher Institute of Cinema, founded in 1957, for example, was the first of its kind to train regional filmmakers in film production. Public-sector film industries, which may include government-commissioned films, are prevalent in Syria and Algeria, as well as the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage, or Carthage film festival, in Tunisia is known as the oldest in Africa and has created opportunities to fund, showcase and nurture Arab cinema and filmmakers through the decades, with each generation becoming stronger and more confident.

"Young filmmakers who came of age in the aftermath of the 1967 war were galvanized by that defeat and seized on opportunities to challenge accepted practices in a range of areas, including accepted filmmaking practices," Yaqub says, mentioning it still took decades for most Arab filmmakers to find funding and a platform to create their projects.

The launch of the Dubai International Film Festival, which ran from 2004 to 2019, followed by the Abu Dhabi Film Festival (2007–2015) the Doha Tribeca Film Festival (2009–2012) as well as several smaller Gulf-based festivals all existed to advance up-and-comers in the industry. The international festivals showcased features and shorts from global directors in many languages but remained in operation with the goal of giving

screen time to Arabic-language independent films.

Even by the 2000s, there weren't that many Arab films to screen at international film festivals, unless the Arab festivals helped produce them. Each festival committed to creating funding and mentorship programs for Arab filmmakers, followed by similar initiatives from media companies and film schools throughout the Gulf region. The strongest example is the Doha Film Institute and its grant program, which is still in operation and managed by Algerian producer Khalil Benkirane, even though the institute's film festival shuttered. Since 2010 when the institute first launched, it has helped finance nearly 700 short and feature length Arabic-language films, many later recognized with prestigious international prizes. Annemarie Jacir's *Wajib* (2017) of Palestine, won Best Foreign Language Film at the 2018 Academy Awards; Moroccan filmmaker Meryem Benm'Barek-Aloïsi's *Sofia* (2018) won Best Screenplay at the Cannes Film Festival; Sudanese filmmaker Amjad Abu Alala's *You Will Die at Twenty* (2019) was nominated for the 2021 Academy Awards Best International Feature Film; and Naji Abu Nawar's *Theeb* (2014) was the first Jordanian film to be nominated for an Academy Award.

The Doha Film Institute also cofinanced Oscar-nominated Palestinian film director Hany Abu-Assad's *Idol* (2015) and Lebanese





Filmmaker Naji Abu Nowar, **ABOVE LEFT**, discusses how his 2014 film, *Theeb*, became Jordan's nomination for best foreign-language film at the 2016 Academy Awards and the fourth Jordanian film to be nominated for an Oscar. Prior to the Oscars, *Theeb* had captured awards at the Venice International Film Festival and the Abu Dhabi Film Festival. **ABOVE RIGHT** Telluride Film Festival Executive Director Julie Huntsinger, Palestinian filmmaker Annemarie Jacir and American actor Benicio Del Toro served together on the jury for the 2018 Cannes Film Festival's Un Certain Regard category, which features films from nontraditional, global perspectives. Among the films selected that year was *Sofia*, **LOWER LEFT**, about a young single mother in Morocco. Other recently acclaimed Arab film festival selections include *Capharnaüm*, *The Man Inside* and *Jaddoland*.

director Nadine Labaki's Oscar-nominated *Capharnaüm* (2018). The most recent festival to draw international enthusiasm is Saudi Arabia's Red Sea Film Festival in Jiddah, which launched in 2019 but pushed back its debut to November 2021 due to the global pandemic. Its second edition is scheduled for the first week of December.

"The festivals did indeed foster a film community in the region, and they also gave exposure and opened up regional audiences to films from small but long-established film communities in, for example, Tunisia and Morocco," says Jay Weissberg, former *Variety* film critic and senior film critic at *The Film Verdict.com*. "There is interesting work coming from these places that most (Westerners) don't have access to."

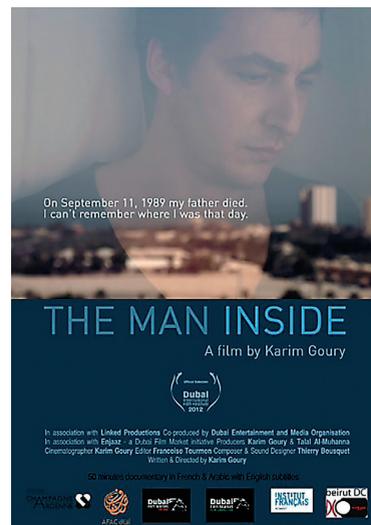
The festivals also made it possible for Arab filmmakers to meet each other, says Jordanian producer and screenwriter Nadia Eliewat, who was part of the award-winning *Theeb* creative team. She moved to Dubai from Jordan in 2016 and immediately discovered others in her profession and began partnering on Arab film projects.

"Such connections wouldn't have been possible in Jordan," she says, mentioning Dubai's robust global filmmaking community. Networking in Dubai's dense professional cinema circles led her to meet Lebanese music video director Sophie Boutros, who invited Eliewat to cowrite and produced Boutros' 2013 directorial film debut, *Solitaire*, available on Netflix. Eliewat also connected with Oscar-nominated Yemeni Scottish filmmaker Sara Ishaq, and currently producing Ishaq's first feature, *The Station*.

Talal al-Muhanna of Kuwait, an independent and documentary filmmaker, says the Gulf film festival markets were the reason he decided to base himself in Kuwait, rather than the United States or United Kingdom.

"Each time I traveled to film markets at the festivals, I would get pitched projects by filmmakers coming from elsewhere in the region and, importantly, from filmmakers in the Arab diaspora," he says, explaining many of the Kuwaiti filmmakers he now knows and works with regularly were connections he formed while attending regional film festivals.

"In 2017 I was Head of Industry at that year's edition of the



Kuwait Film Festival, which allowed me the chance to translate all the regional networking I had done from 2008 onwards into invitations to the most important film funders in the region that were active at the time,” says al-Muhanna, noting that like others in the region, the Kuwait festival has since closed. “It was such a privilege to have all those organizations respond to the invitation to attend our event in Kuwait and pay forward some of what I had learned at other festivals over the years.”

The Rawi Screenwriting Lab in Jordan, an annual five-day workshop for emerging Arab screenwriters, scheduled the last week of November, has provided development tools for more than 100 students since 2005. Its mentorship program, which began in partnership with the Sundance Institute, the nonprofit host of the Sundance Film Festival in Utah, offered a premier platform to screen Haifaa al-Mansour’s 2012 feature, *Wajda*, credited as the first movie filmed entirely in Saudi Arabia. Young Saudi filmmakers have been making low-budget web series and short films since YouTube launched in 2005. Mahmoud Al Sabbagh, of Saudi Arabia, showcases his films on YouTube, beginning with his 2016 romantic comedy *Barakah Meets Barakah*.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has embraced film, lifted its ban on cinemas and is now encouraging filmmakers like Al Sabbagh

Even by the 2000s, there weren’t yet many Arab films to screen at international film festivals, unless the Arab festivals helped produce them.

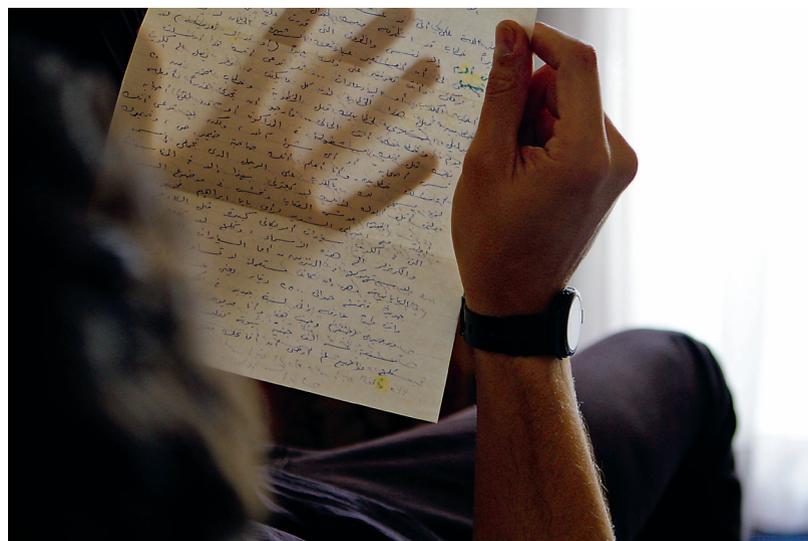
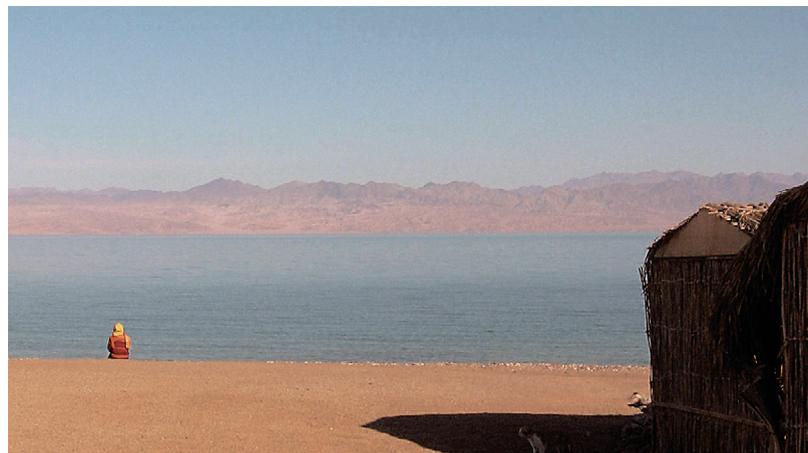
to get connected and creative. Al Sabbagh was tapped as the Red Sea’s first festival director, but his tenure was cut short due to pandemic-related delays.

Since opening its cinemas in 2018, Saudi Arabia has replaced the UAE as the largest theatrical box office in West Asia, according to Comscore Media Measurement, a US-based media analytics company. Unlike in Dubai, where expat populations disproportionately outweigh the local population and therefore Hollywood films dominate box offices, Saudi Arabia’s top-grossing movie in 2021 was *Waghfah Rajallah (A Stand Worthy of Men)*, of Egypt, followed by two Egyptian comedies, *Mesh Ana (Not Me)* and *Mama Hamel (Mom is Pregnant)*.

Saudi Arabia is one of the only Arab countries where movie theaters—and movie theater attendance—are on the rise, when many countries around the world are experiencing historical lows of cinema patronage following pandemic-related closures, according to Gallup. As Egyptian films have historically been favored in the kingdom, the cinema revival and audience demand for more content could mean Egypt’s film creators could see an uptick in production. It may also mean existing multiplexes throughout MENA experience more traffic or that more movie theaters are constructed to cover underserved areas. More likely to see a surge, however, are Egyptian movies made for online

streaming and the launch of more streaming networks and film channels for watching new and classic films at home or on mobile devices. Egyptian classic films are broadcast on satellite free-to-view TV channels across Egypt and can be watched on the Saudi-owned Rotana Classic channel, Rotana Cinema channel and the Egyptian-based M Classic channel, among others.

The Dubai-based Shahid-MBC, an Arabic-content streaming platform launched in 2008, also streams new and classic films to its 27 million monthly viewers, among other options for prerelease and new-release films, documentaries, TV shows, and content for children. Shahid-MBC has recently started including international content with partner companies on its platform to



**TOP** The 2010 documentary *Beit Sha’ar (Nomad’s Home)*, by Iman Kamel, won the Dubai International Film Festival’s Muhr Arab category Special Mention award. **ABOVE** The 2012 documentary *The Man Inside*, by director Karim Goury, screened at the Dubai International Film Festival. Both films demonstrate the steady rise of Arab filmmakers worldwide who are finding more opportunities to distribute their work, from film festivals to streaming platforms.

appeal to an even wider market, but it faces competition from Bahrain’s Orbit Showtime Network, Amazon and Netflix, which are increasingly acquiring or coproducing Arabic language films for their platforms. Like the film festivals, streaming platform business models need constant new content to sustain.



Director Nadia Shihab's 2018 *Jaddoland*, **ABOVE** and **LOWER**, explored an Arab American filmmaker's return to her hometown in Texas, where she discovers a deeper sense of belonging and insight into Arab immigrant stories in the US. The film screened at festivals across the US and won the 2020 Truer Than Fiction Award from the Film Independent Spirit Awards.

"The platforms are great for small films," says Eliewat, who underscores the opportunities they offer for independent producers. "They allow us to produce faster and finance faster."

Eliewat is currently producing *Yellow Bus*, a drama directed by Abu Dhabi-based American Wendy Bednarz and coproduced with the India-based Sikhya Entertainment. It's one of only about 25 films to be filmed in the Gulf that are about the Gulf.

"This is the first time the company has partnered with an Arab producer. It's been an amazing exercise," she says. "I think it's something fresh and different coming from the Gulf region."

While the United Arab Emirates is producing the most Arab content, its financing and producing focus has been international. The Abu Dhabi and Dubai Film and TV Commissions offer attractive huge rebates and financial incentives for production companies to film in the Emirates, including *Dune* (2021), *Mission Impossible 6: Fallout* (2018), *Fast and Furious 7* (2015), *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), *Mission Impossible 4: Ghost Protocol* (2011), and *Syriana* (2005). Bollywood productions have also begun filming in the Gulf, and many of India's major film stars now reside in Dubai, including Shah Rukh Khan, who has appeared in more than 100 movies and is referred to as the "King of Bollywood."

While making films in Kuwait, al-Muhanna is increasingly aware of how the Gulf region has become a crossroads for an exciting and expanding film and entertainment industry. This was once true in Cairo, but now filmmakers want to be in the Gulf, particularly in or near Dubai. More importantly, al-Muhanna says, Arab filmmakers want to tell quality stories, beyond the Arab tropes and typecasts, and transcend geography and language. They continue to fight for more funding and exposure, but

## Arab filmmakers want to tell quality stories, beyond the Arab tropes and typecasts, and transcend geography and language.

they're committed to making their mark and sharing their projects with the most globally connected audience the world has seen to date.

"In some ways, we are still playing catch up with more advanced filmmaking industries and economies in other parts of the world," al-Muhanna says. "But there are such rich stories to tell from this region, and Arab filmmakers are not going away any time soon." 🌐



**Alia Yunis**, a writer and filmmaker based in Abu Dhabi, recently completed the documentary *The Golden Harvest*.



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Ramadan TV: Jul / Aug 2021

New Arab Film: May / Jun 2010

# Kingdom of ART

Written by  
BELIZ TECIRLI

For nearly a decade, Saudi Arabia has pursued a strategy of supporting some of the world's boldest contemporary art together with an arts scene intent on taking a place alongside more-established world art centers. This has attracted attention from international audiences and curators and, at the same time, played an increasingly important economic role.

Speaking on a panel at Expo 2020 Dubai earlier this year, Albara Al-Auhali, deputy minister of cultural strategies and policies at Saudi Arabia's

Set amid the rugged rocks and wadis (dry valleys) of northwest Saudi Arabia near al-'Ula, "Angle of Repose," by US artist Jim Denevan, was among works by 15 artists invited to produce site-specific installations for Desert X AlUla 2022, the second edition of the large-scale, outdoor exhibition in Saudi Arabia. Denevan's curvilinear, radial symmetry referenced classical Islamic designs while his use of loose sand made the piece ephemeral.







Located in Jiddah, Hayy Jameel opened in December: *Hayy* translates loosely to *neighborhood* in English, and the 17,000-square-meter cultural center offers a multitude of spaces for artists and the public to meet and exhibit. Also new to the western port city's scene in December was the inaugural edition of the Red Sea Film Festival, **LOWER**, which screened more than 100 films from 67 countries, and some films were shown at venues located in al-Balad, the historic core of the modern city.

National Identity Enhancement Program supporting Riyadh's new transitional JAX District neighborhood, described well-designed arts districts as reliable boons for communities. They create "job opportunities that help grow and diversify the economy," he says.

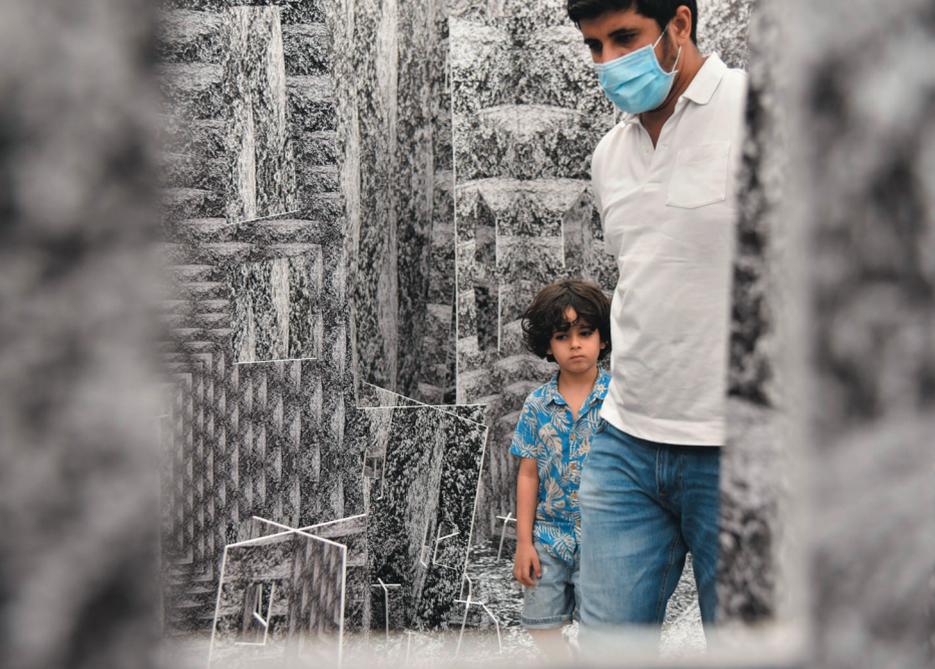
About half of Saudi Arabia's gross domestic product is generated from the oil and gas sector, which accounts for nearly 70 percent of its export earnings, according to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. But over the last six years, since the launch of its Vision 2030, the kingdom has committed to further diversifying its economy, with culture and tourism set to play a central role. The Saudi Ministry of Culture's Amr AlMadani, chief executive officer for The Royal Commission for AlUla, told the World Economic Forum in 2021 the kingdom's plan for investing in the arts will contribute to 3 percent of its total GDP by the end of the decade. This includes

investing in art projects and events, expanding the country's capital projects, implementing more tourism infrastructure and improved access to the UNESCO-designated historical city of al-'Ula, and adding "statement architecture" to major cities.

"Saudi Arabia has been realizing its Vision 2030 reform program—an ambitious plan to diversify the country's economy,



TOP: LAURIAN GHINITOU / ART JAMEEL; LOWER: MING YEUNG / GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE, TOP: WANG HAIZHOU / XINHUA / ALAMY; CENTER AND LOWER: BELIZ TEÇIRLI (2); PREVIOUS SPREAD: LANCE GERBER / COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DESERT X, ALULA, 2022



Exhibited in the new arts and cultural JAX district within the historic confines of al-Dir'iyah in Riyadh, capital of Saudi Arabia, BIENALSUR opened in October with installations by more than 60 global contemporary artists along the theme *Feeling the Stones*. Attendees visited with families, **LEFT**, and viewed works such as Zahrah al-Ghamdi's "Birth of a Place," **CENTER**, with its mud and fabric composite, evokes the story of Riyadh's growing skyline, and Abdullah Al Othman's "Manifesto, the Language and City," **LOWER**.

engage local communities, take pride in our heritage, and open up our society to the world." AlMadani says. "The Royal Commission for AlUla was set up to develop al-'Ula in line with this goal: establishing it as a global destination for culture, heritage and history, with tourism powering a diversified local economy."

Creative culture and the growth of artistic events has seen a swift uptick in recent years, where other global arts cities gained recognition over a period of many decades. Local Saudi artists have also been welcomed to exhibit alongside international masters, especially in Jiddah and Riyadh, the nation's economic centers.

"The idea is to increase Saudi participation in global exchange," says Rakan bin Ibrahim Al-Touq, general supervisor of cultural affairs and international relations for the Ministry of Culture in a 2021 press release. "To make Saudi arts and culture professionals become part of the global conversation."

Alauhali and Al-Touq both agree the Kingdom's growing art scene of domestic and imported virtuosos has matured rapidly over the past seven years. Saudi Arabia now boasts a certain cachet with its variety of cultural events and impressive breadth of exhibited works. In 2021 the Ministry of Culture reported the kingdom hosted 100 cultural events, led by 25 new cultural organizations established by the Ministry of Culture in recent years.



## Home for the Arts: Jiddah

Perhaps the best indicator of the kingdom's artistic blossoming is what one of the world's leading art curators and strategy consultants, Barbara Römer, calls the "museums-without-walls" approach. Römer launched her creative consultancy and think tank, Studio Römer, in 2014, and she regularly consults on global cultural projects that help cities develop and execute cultural visions and projects. She has been working on projects across the kingdom, and she says the museum-without-walls approach is increasingly prevalent throughout Jiddah.

It's a philosophy, Römer says, that culminates when cities develop and build based on local culture, which then attracts wider appeal.

"Recent developments in arts and culture in the kingdom have created a transformative catalyst for inspiring conversations in both the local and international context," says the German-born





Other Desert X AlUla 2022 installations included Claudia Comte's freestanding murals, "Dark Suns, Bright Waves," **ABOVE**. Zeinab Alhashemi's "Camouflage 2.0," **OPPOSITE TOP**, was inspired by the coloring of camels and their ability to blend in with the desert's colors and shapes. **OPPOSITE LOWER** Saudi artist Sultan bin Fahad looked to the region's distant past in his construction of an abstract, sculptural kite, so called by archeologists who have discovered remains of hundreds of such constructions throughout the northwestern Arabian Peninsula and beyond. Dating from Neolithic and even earlier periods, kites are believed to have been hunting traps: Sometimes more than 100 meters on a side, they helped hunters drive game into and down the top "wedge" and, once their prey entered the circular corral, the hunters could use spears.

Römer, who holds a doctorate from Cambridge University and serves as trustee of the Deutsches Museum, the largest science museum in the world.

Jiddah's commercial center, popular resorts and lush villas have continued to help attract artists and young professionals, and the city has long been regarded as more liberal and relaxed. Jiddah's longstanding arts culture goes back to the 1980s when the city began sponsoring international sculptors to come create and erect industrial, outdoor pieces. Today, Jiddah is widely perceived as one of the most open cities in the kingdom, and home to 4.5 million residents, up from 1.4 million in 1970, according to UN-Habitat, with many under 30 years old.

A favorite building is the Hayy Jameel cultural center and arts complex, which opened in December 2021. The center self-identifies as a creative community and "home for the arts." Hayy is an Arabic word meaning *neighborhood*, and Hayy Jameel boasts 17,000 square-meters

of exhibit space and a brightly colored exterior resembling a 1980s color block art style, with layered patterns of pink, blue, red and yellow shapes and lines, by Saudi artist Nasser Almulhim.

Hayy Jameel's inaugural exhibition, *Staple: What's on your plate?* explored eco-social entanglements with food, which helped establish the cultural center as a space for critical socio-economic discussion.

"It's hard to underestimate the seismic shift taking place both in the arts in Saudi right now and in the perception and understanding globally," says Antonia Carver, director of Art Jameel, which founded Hayy Jameel and supports artistic and creative

communities in Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. "Hayy Jameel offers a space and context for year-round international exchange—between institutions, curators, artists, filmmakers, writers, creative practitioners and audiences themselves."

Jiddah's Red Sea Film Festival offers another increasingly international draw to the city and has

**"The idea is ... to make Saudi arts and culture professionals become part of the global conversation."**

—RAKAN BIN IBRAHIM AL-TOUQ



Saudi-born producer Faisal Baltyuor, who formerly served as CEO of the Saudi Film Council and is now CEO of Saudi-based Muvi Studios, says flagship film festivals like Red Sea serve two purposes. The first is to “expose [the kingdom] to the world” and allow global audiences to “see the creative Saudi people.” The second, and perhaps more fundamental purpose, is to nurture local talent and production houses. The Red Sea Film Fund to date has invested \$14 million into Arab and African productions. Red Sea will host its second festival the first week of December 2022.

“Over the past year, a real collaborative spirit has emerged and a sense of an extended ecology across the Kingdom. ... International visitors have revelled in being able to absorb something of the great diversity that the kingdom and its growing arts scene offer,” Römer says.

### **Cultural Capital: Riyadh**

Home to 7.5 million people and for the past decade growing at 2 percent a year, Saudi Arabia’s capital is one of the world’s fastest-growing cities. Similar to Jiddah’s cultural development, Riyadh’s initiatives in recent years have effected sweeping changes in its cultural landscape. For example, the Diriyah Biennale Foundation was established in 2020, and it held its inaugural Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale from December 2021 to March of this year. It set out to cultivate global dialog among diverse art communities abroad and throughout Saudi Arabia while also highlighting the country’s Islamic roots through contemporary art. The first biennale was located in the JAX District near al-Dir’iyah, the historic founding place of Saudi Arabia. The JAX District, established in 2007 and brought to fruition 10 years later, has transformed nearly 100 warehouses into a sprawling region for local and international art organizations,

companies, programs, exhibitions and individual artists. The district is geared toward becoming a wellspring of cultural value for Riyadh, reminiscent of similar postindustrial art neighborhoods and spaces such as Shanghai’s M50, Dubai’s Alserkal Avenue and London’s Canary Wharf.

The now-flourishing art scene in Riyadh owes much of its expansion to the Misk Art Institute, launched in 2011, a cultural nonprofit and a first-mover in the latest developments of Saudi Arabian art. Host of the week-long Misk Art Week, now in its sixth edition and occurring annually the first week of December, the institute spearheads efforts to tackle contemporary themes and promote international cultural relations by nurturing local

become a prestige destination for progressive cinema. In 2019, Saudis from the international film community began supporting large-scale public film screenings in the kingdom. Enough interest followed, and the Red Sea Film Festival was founded the same year, but the organization wasn’t able to host its first edition until December 2021 due to COVID-19. Its inaugural event drew 30,000 spectators and more than 3,000 industry professionals and press. In addition to showcasing best-in-class film, the festival helps foster up-and-coming Saudi filmmakers. The 2021 festival featured 138 films and shorts from 67 countries produced in 34 languages; 27 films were from Saudi Arabia, according to screendaily.com.

**RIGHT AND OPPOSITE** Contemporary works by 20 artists, including “Future Thoughts,” by Italian artist Esther Stocker, and “Six Sliding Doors,” by Carsten Höller, comprised the 2021 exhibition *Seeing and Perceiving* at Ithra in Dhahran, **LOWER**, where the arts and cultural center’s architecture has itself earned regional and global recognition.

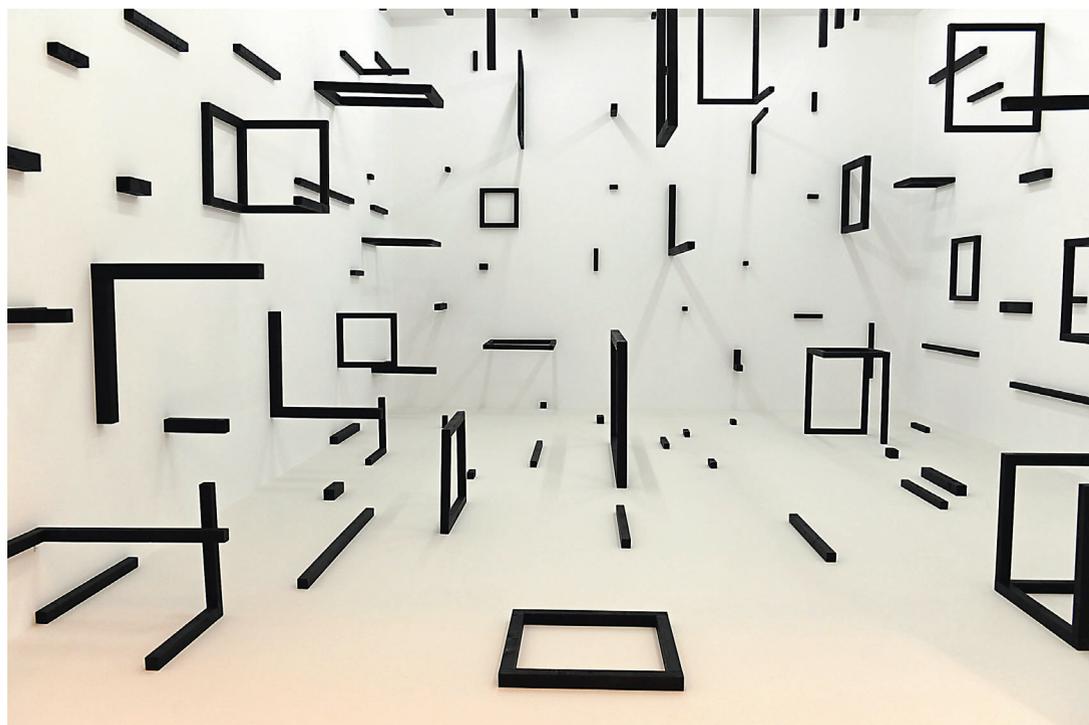
talent through its offerings of grants and residency programs. The institution continues to increase opportunities to welcome international audiences also, with last year’s Misk Art Week receiving 3,500 attendees on-site and 90,000 globally via virtual conference.

These among other events have helped attract other international attention to Riyadh, which hosted the 2019 edition of the roaming Argentinian festival of BIENALSUR, the International Contemporary Art Biennial of South America. The city’s new cultural spaces have also allowed for homegrown events, including the Riyadh Art Festival—launched in 2019 as the nation’s first large-scale public art initiative—and the Tuwaiq International Sculpture Symposium, which invited 20 international sculptors in 2021 to craft a series of permanent artworks to be enjoyed by the public for generations to come.

## Al-’Ula and Beyond

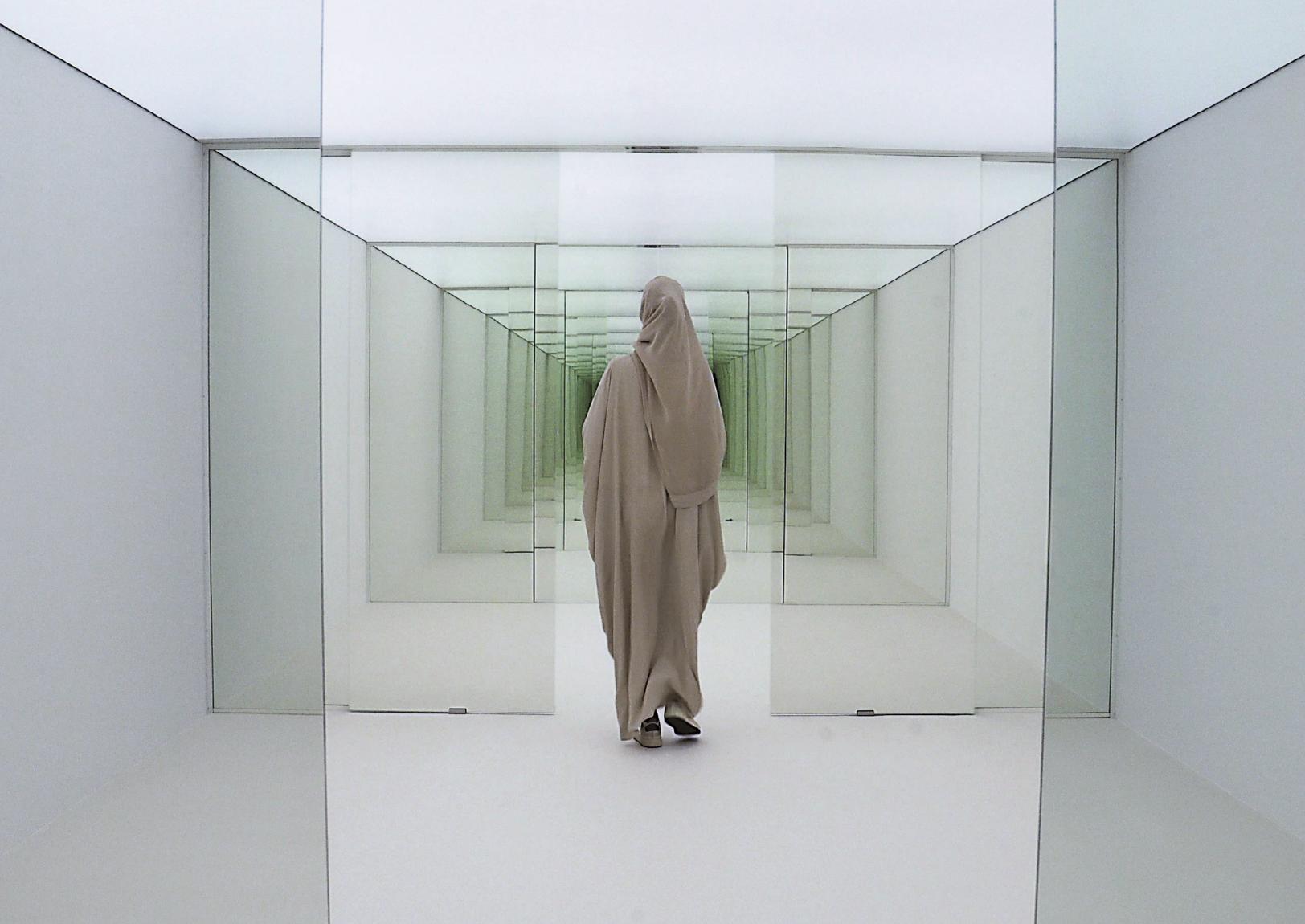
Amid the arid sands and valleys of the kingdom’s northwest corner, the second international art exhibition of Desert X AlUla recently concluded in March, in the historic city of al-’Ula, located about three hours north of Madinah. The event is a collaboration between Desert X, a California-based not-for-profit, and the Royal Commission for AlUla in Saudi Arabia. Desert X is to celebrate the significance of unique desert landscapes worldwide, incorporating voices from international artistic communities. Neville Wakefield, Desert X artistic director and cocurator of the AlUla exhibition, says the “huge reservoir of prospect and talent within the region” are finally being given a proper platform to showcase their works due to “the rapidity of transformation in every aspect of culture and development.” The event, he says, provides a platform for international artists, especially Saudi artists who can be “exposed to art in ways that don’t conform to the largely Western architectural canon.”

Desert X AlUla has brought the historically prominent locale onto the radar of international art enthusiasts, and the Royal



Commission for AlUla’s long-term masterplan for the region, *Journey Through Time*, outlines 15 new landmark destinations in the region for exhibitions on culture, heritage and creativity before 2035. The plan includes establishing five distinct districts, each as a cultural landmark for tourism. Nora Aldabal, executive director of arts and creative industries for the Royal Commission for AlUla, says the efforts will help “invigorate a vibrant cultural economy” and create a “global platform for Saudi artists.”

The city of Dhahran, in the Eastern Province of the kingdom, also ignited a cultural flame in 2018 with the opening of the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture—Ithra, an expansive, multi-functional 80,000 square-meter facility boasting spaces for exhibitions, cinema, theater, intellectual activity and cultural incubation. With developments in arts and culture expanding beyond the



country's major cities, international interest continues to support and attract top talent to the region. Ithra receives about a million visitors every year of which 17 percent, or 170,000, hail from outside the kingdom.

### Creating an Artistic Oasis

These financial investments in the arts are also helping encourage a more open society and tourism. They're creating "new cultural ecosystems," Römer says, arguing that the importance of this moment in contemporary Saudi art should not be underestimated. The pieces "celebrate and value creative pursuits, and that allows artists to experiment, to explore, also to fail, in order to ultimately find and hone their authentic voices."

In addition to shining much-deserved spotlights on Saudi artists, both residing in the kingdom and abroad, the rising scene is cultivating conditions for new talent. Most exciting, Aldabal says, is that the new wave appears far from cresting.

"Young people in Saudi Arabia are hungry for the very best in arts and culture, so it is important to feed this appetite with work

**"Young people in Saudi Arabia are hungry for the very best in arts and culture, so it is important to feed this appetite with work of the highest caliber."**

—NORA ALDABAL

than ever before, both locally and internationally, which is an inspiration for young or aspiring artists in the country to develop their careers," Aldabal says. 🌐



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# QUEEN MOT



# MOTHER OF RAI

Written by **MARIAM SHAHIN**

Illustrated by **MATTHEW BROMLEY**

**H**er given name was Saadia, *the happy one* or *one who is blessed* in Arabic. It was a name that in time befitted the singer who would later be hailed as Oum Rai, Mother of Rai and Queen. On stage, Saadia Bedief went as Cheikha Remitti, and her more than six decades of performing before thousands could aptly be described as both happy and blessed. Throughout, Remitti never shed her identity as Saadia, who was born to a working-class family in Sidi Bel Abbès, in the village of Ain Thrid, about an hour south of coastal Oran in northwest Algeria. She inhabited Remitti, the queen, for decades. But her Bedouin lyrics were Saadia.

“Rai music has always been a music of rebellion, a music that looks ahead,” Remitti said in a 2001 interview on the radio program Afropop Worldwide.

It was she who from the 1940s led the development and popularization of rai, a uniquely Algerian folk genre rich with poignant, often raw lyrics about life’s everyday occurrences that in Arabic means *opinion* or *way of seeing*. Musically, rai blends influences from rural Algeria, Spanish flamenco and other sounds and song structures from around the Mediterranean.

Remitti was a prolific songwriter even though, with no formal education, she never learned to read or write. She authored more than 200 songs, recorded some 400 cassettes and released 300 singles in her lifetime. When she died of a heart attack in May 2006 in Paris at age 83, she was still touring. Only two days before

her last concert, she had released the album *N’ta Gouda-mi* (*You Are in Front of Me*), and she had performed to a packed audience of 4,500 at the Zénith Paris arena in the French capital. She appeared on stage as she always did, in a colorful, rural Algerian dress, adorned with jewelry, henna coloring both her palms and, on her feet, golden slippers.

More than 15 years after her death, Remitti’s music and resonant tenor voice is becoming

popular again among younger audiences, particularly in France and Germany, with their large Algerian populations, as well as in Algeria. All are recognizing her songwriting as a canon that was ahead of its time.

“These female singers are only now getting the recognition they deserve,” says Algerian French visual artist Sofiane Si Merabet, who explores concepts of plural identities among North African diasporas in his artwork and digital platform, “The Confused Arab.” Remitti, he says, “was at the intersection of several universes, and I think it’s key to understand this about her and her music.”

Si Merabet, 42, comes from Relizane, where Remitti began her singing career, and he grew up listening to the Rai Queen. He recalls that at

an early age, he discovered his grandfather’s videotapes of her performances, and he was warned the songs were too mature for children.

“I was told that I should not look at them,” he recalls. “Everyone listened to Remitti, but many people listened to her in private.”



Over six decades Cheikha Remitti composed, wrote, recorded and performed more than 200 songs—entirely from memory, as she never learned to read or write. She also released some 300 singles and 400 albums. *Sidi Bouabdala*, **ABOVE**, is the only album that refers to her title Hadja, which she earned in 1976 upon performing Hajj, or pilgrimage to Makkah. She was better known by Cheikha, a title of respect for an accomplished, usually older woman.



Her songs represented the rural poor, a largely disenfranchised group in Algeria, Si Merabet says. Her lyrics reflected poverty with candor that could include stories about family hardship and more delicate matters of love, femininity, intimacy or drinking. Some considered her music too risqué, Si Merabet says, remembering that his parents, grandparents and others of older generations described Remitti's music as vulgar or morally lax. Loyal listeners and fans appreciated Remitti's lyrical honesty however, and they viewed her as a champion of women, the poor and, more generally, West Algerian Bedouin culture and social progress.

"There were other singers and female singers also singing these songs, but they were not recording records or played on the radio, or later sung on a large stage," says Si Merabet, who moved to France as a child and now resides in Dubai. "Remitti broke the glass ceiling by going public with the ailments and desires of the poor. No one had done this before."

Remitti's songs, which frequently begin slowly and gain tempo gradually, connected with listeners of similar socioeconomic

As her fame grew internationally, Remitti continued to perform wearing traditional Bedouin Algerian dresses, glittering gold shoes, gold jewelry and henna on both palms. By the early 2000s, she was well-known in Europe, and her first performance in the US came in the summer of 2002, where she appeared on an outdoor stage in New York's Central Park.

backgrounds, Si Merabet explains. But today her songs resonate with broader audiences who appreciate her virtuosity and ability to not only sing, but also play the drum, or *guellal*, and *gasba*, a long wind instrument.

"She sang about love, passion, homelessness, hunger, but also about everyday things like pub fights, the advent of the telephone and car accidents," says Si Merabet. She had a nearly photographic memory, never forgot a line or verse, and sang fearlessly about subjects many considered inappropriate for public discourse.

"She told me when she was young, she walked barefooted because her family was so poor," says Nouredine Gafaiti, who acted as manager for Remitti's career from 1986 to 2006 while also

promoting other Algerian rai singers, including Cheb Hasni and husband-and-wife duo Cheb Sahraoui and Cheba Fadela.

Rai singers perform with cultural titles before their given name: *Cheb* is given to young males and *cheba* to young females. *Cheikh* and *cheikha* are given to older rai singers, men and

women respectively. Remitti, who started singing professionally in her 20s, rather than performing as Cheikha Saadia, chose to protect her siblings—her parents died when she was a girl—from any possible hardship they may have experienced from her notoriety by changing her professional name to Cheikha Remitti Reliziana.

Reliziana was often assumed to be her family name, but in fact was a reference to the city of Relizane, about an hour and a half northeast

of Ain Thrid, where she began singing regularly for crowds.

*Remitti*, Gafaiti explains, was a variant of the French word *remettre*, to hand over, which she picked up on one rainy day of a local festival "when she bought an adoring crowd drinks, and they chanted 'Pour some more!'" he says, adding that crowds responded enthusiastically to Remitti's performances and songs

"Rai music has always been a music of rebellion, a music that looks ahead."

—CHEIKHA REMITTI



from the beginning. It was not only her music's honesty, her manager says, but also her confidence in who she was and from where she came.

"She remembers sleeping 'rough'" for years before her singing career took off, Gafaiti says, explaining the measures Remitti would go to growing up to ensure she had enough money for food and shelter.

In the early 20th century, western Algeria was heavily populated by French settlers, and residents of villages like Remitti's often found employment as seasonal workers at local distilleries. The region's ample wheat fields and vineyards made alcohol available across urban and rural areas, an element mentioned in many of Remitti's early songs. She also sang about her early transient years, moving from place to place to find work, laboring on citrus farms and sleeping in bathhouses, barns, and charitable soup kitchens adjacent to mosques.

Cultural anthropologist and University of Arkansas professor Ted Swedenburg, whose research includes rai music and Remitti's songwriting career, says her music depicts historical themes of what Western Algerians experienced in the early decades of the 20th century.

"The music she sings ... took its particular form from various sources, including the harvest seasons," he says, noting seasonal workers employed by the French came from across Algeria to find work, and singing was part of everyday life. "Rai beats and lyrics were partially inspired during these agricultural seasons," which were all the harder due to widespread disease, famine and land expropriation by French colonists.

Amid the hardship and uncertainty in her life, she could always retreat to singing and writing music. Her favorite singer was Cheikh Hamada, an Algerian performer from the coastal region of Mostaganem, about an hour northeast of Oran, who lived from 1889 to 1968. Hamada also played the guellal and sang traditional songs from the region in a genre known as *badawi* (Bedouin), which included the poetry of his forefathers and lyrics about celebrating Algeria's "holy men" often honored by local communities. Remitti incorporated this storytelling

**ABOVE** Released posthumously in 2010, her "Best of" double album features 23 remastered tracks from throughout her career. **RIGHT** A photo posted on her Facebook fan page shows a younger Remitti performing at a festival in Morocco. The Arabic on the photo identifies her as "Cheikha Remitti, the Algerian in Debdou," and below it, in blue, it is noted, "the '70s."

style into her songs, but her lyrics often focused on life challenges, wisdom and advice from both her own experiences and those of women she met at the henna parties that often preceded weddings, as well as other celebrations and also at hammams. In these settings, frank talk among women often included matters of femininity, marriage, children, family and other personal, often intimate concerns. Over the years, these experiences and



Cheikha rimitti

July 25, 2020 · 🌐

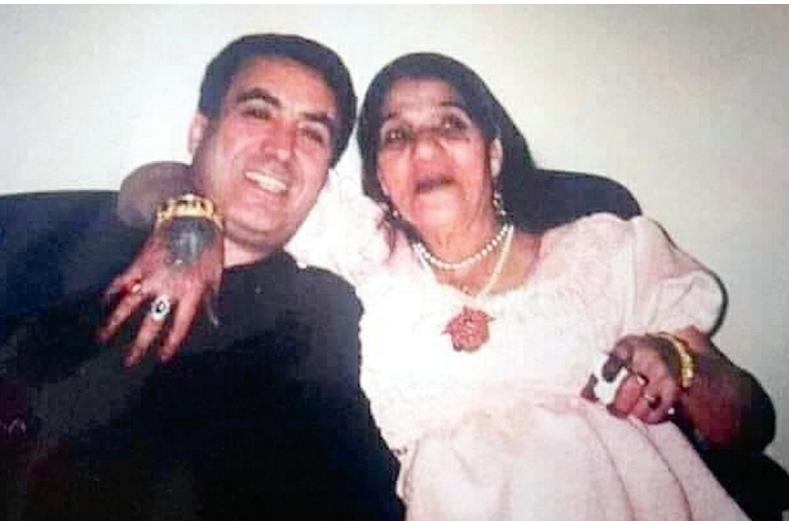
Rimitti in morocco

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conversations became fodder for song.

After moving to Relizane in the 1940s, Remitti found regular gigs. While performing in the small city, she encountered seasonal Algerian travelers who visited regularly on local pilgrimages. At the annual festival there, Sidi Abed el Merja, which drew as many as 80,000 people to the city in the 1950s, Swedenburg says, Remitti introduced rai to Relizane, and its regular visitors eventually became her first fan base. Visitors also made the trek to listen to Remitti's songs sung in the local western Algerian dialect.

"We speak Arabic like the Bedouin in western Algeria, not like the people of Algiers, who have a completely different accent and pronunciation," says Si Merabet, discussing Relizane's Western Algerian culture. "This accent, this way of speaking Arabic sets us, including Remitti, apart regionally in Algeria."

In this way Remitti's style and subjects represented the culture and identity of a region frequently ignored in mainstream Algerian music.

"Her songs and the stories she sings are very local," Si Merabet says.

Gafaiti agrees Remitti's localisms helped draw continuous crowds to the city and to her shows. She helped normalize the region's dialect through her music and introduce it to the wider Algerian population.

"Essentially, Remitti was a pioneer in making singing in local slang accessible on local radio stations and later on records," Gafaiti says.

In 1952 Remitti released her first record for the Oran-based French label Pathé Marconi. Her debut single was "Ha-Rai, Ha-Rai" (Hey rai, hey rai).

While in Relizane, Remitti also met producer and classical musician Cheikh Mohamed Ould Ennems, whom she later

Nouredine Gafaiti managed Remitti's career for more than 20 years. "She was the original rai singer," he says. "Others became more famous because they understood showbusiness." As for publicity, he adds, "She shunned it. She hated the press, especially the French press because they always wanted to sensationalize her. She resented that."

married and with whom had three children.

She continued to play in private clubs and weddings, and she began traveling to France to perform, where she frequented the 18th arrondissement in Paris, where the North African neighborhood of Goutte d'Or and its Bedjaïa Club were a mainstay of Algerian rai singers. Yet in France Remitti did not experience the same level of celebrity as she enjoyed back home, and she traveled back and forth between the two countries for many years.

In 1971 she was involved in a car accident in Algeria that killed three accompanying musicians, and she was in a coma for several weeks. When she awoke her worldview abruptly changed: She adopted healthier life habits, and in 1976 she performed Hajj, the pilgrimage to Makkah, and briefly adopted the title it earned her: Hajeh Remitti. In 1978 she separated from her husband of more than 30 years and quietly moved to Paris. She continued to sing about love and poverty, joy and sadness in clubs across France. By 1986 most of her income came from performing at Algerian weddings throughout France.

"Not all Algerians celebrate their weddings with rai musicians performing. This is a purely Western Algerian tradition," Si Merabet says. "My friends of Algiers express some outrage at this practice. They are more highbrow. But we Western Algerians enjoy celebrating our rural Kabyle and Bedouin roots. We are proud, now more than ever, of this heritage."

Gafaiti met Remitti in 1986 after her performance at France's first Festival du rai in the Paris suburb of Bobigny. She had performed alongside a little-known rai singer from Oran named Cheb Khaled, who later was popularly crowned King of Rai and became Remitti's frequent royal singing counterpart. Cheb Khaled later crossed over also into French and Arabic pop, blues and jazz, and he is credited with adding a European

flavor to rai. Still, everyone came after Remitti, says Gafaiti.

"She was the original rai singer. She was the founder. But others became more famous because they understood showbusiness," he says. "She shunned it. She hated the press, especially the French press because they always wanted to sensationalise her. She resented that."

In France Remitti was often characterized as too liberal and progressive, even though she was quite traditional in her private life. Remitti stood out as "other" among mainstream artists in part because of her rural upbringing and dialect, but more so because she was one of the first women to sing on the radio and in public about life's intimate details. She was not alone in the

**"Remitti broke the glass ceiling by going public with the ailments and desires of the poor. No one had done this before."**

**—SOFIANE SI MERABET**

After decades of fame in Algeria and across North Africa, Remitti toured Europe and Asia. Her New York performance, **RIGHT**, was sponsored by the French government as part of "Vive La World," an annual showcase for world-music acts. **LOWER** In 2019 the Paris City Council honored Remitti with a public square in the 18th arrondissement, a neighborhood where many families with Algerian ties reside and where rai remains particularly popular.

discourse, however. Many female Bedouin singers before her sang and wrote songs about similar topics, Swedenburg says, but they did not perform in public.

"The publicity on Remitti was often misleading and mystifying," he says. "European and especially French writers were making her out to be an anti-Muslim, antitraditionalist, pro-Western, feminist rebel." That, he says, is inaccurate.

Swedenburg continues, "A lot has been written about Remitti being banned" in Algeria for being too controversial, which forced her into exile in France, but this too is not correct.

In the years following the 1954-1962 Algerian war of independence, the Algerian government promoted classical Arabic literature and music as socially desirable forms of art. Musicians outside classical genres, however—such as rai—were barred from radio and TV channels.

This relegated rai in postliberation Algeria to private parties and the sale of cassette tapes on the black market.

Remitti's international breakthrough occurred in 1994, when she collaborated with British guitarist Robert Fripp of the rock band King Crimson and US rock bassist Flea of Red Hot Chili Peppers. Together they recorded *Sidi Mansour*, produced and arranged by Houari Talbi in Los Angeles and Paris. The album included a new electric form of rai that is still influencing rising rai singers in Algeria and France.

"Remitti was a pioneer in making singing in local slang accessible on local radio stations and later on records."

—NOUREDINE GAFAITI



In the last decade of Remitti's life, when she was in her 70s, her career began a meteoric rise. She was invited to perform in 20 European cities and several others including Tokyo. In 2019 the Paris City Council honored Remitti with her own public square in the 18th arrondissement, between rue de la Goutte d'Or and rue Polonceau. The sign in the square reads, "Place / Cheikha Remitti / 1923-2006 / chanteuse / pionnière du rai."

Gafaiti was with Remitti in 2006 when she suffered a fatal heart attack. He remembers holding the singer in his arms in her final moments.

"The last words she said to me as she lay there on the floor were, 'You are in front of me and I follow,'" Gafaiti says, mentioning her reference to the song, *N'ta Gouda-mi*.

Remitti was buried at the Cemetery of Ain Beida in Oran, the city where she recorded her first record and where her three children still reside.

"Remitti was a grand woman, a decent woman with an amazing story," says Gafaiti. "She was a real Bedouin woman." 🌐



Filmmaker and writer **Mariam Shahin** has produced and directed more than 70 documentary films, and she is author of *Palestine: A Guide* (Interlink Books, 2005) and coauthor of *Unheard Voices: Iraqi Women on War and Sanctions* (Change, 1992).

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A woman wearing a white headscarf is looking down at a basket filled with groundnuts. The groundnuts are in their shells, some are whole and some are cracked open. The basket is made of woven material and is filled with the groundnuts. The background is blurred, showing green foliage and a bright light source.

# Is the Sky the Limit for The Gambia's Groundnuts?



Written by

TRISTAN RUTHERFORD

Photographed by

SAMANTHA REINDERS

A late-morning sun shimmers off the broad mouth of the Gambia River as Tamsir Saho fishes into the pocket of his kaftan for his second phone. He takes the call from atop the ferry between Banjul, capital of The Gambia, and the semirural port of Barra on the north bank. A tall chap, Saho, 53, has built a thriving business in groundnuts—peanuts—the crop grown on a third of the country’s arable land, and which sustains livelihoods for roughly half a million people, or a quarter of Gambia’s population.

On the line, Saho breaks into a mix of some his country’s nearly two dozen languages. Switching among Wolof, Serer and Sengembaian Fula, and peppering in Anglo-French phrases like “soixante kilos top quality,” he is both a skilled linguist and a testament to the diversity within Gambia, smallest of the 48 countries of mainland Africa.

When he ends his call, he doesn’t look up but glances over to his other phone’s weather app. “In the growing season, I check it each morning before I check messages from my wife,” Saho says as the ferry chugs past cargo ships clustered in the waterway. Some of them, he points out, will carry groundnuts abroad, including his own, which he mainly sells to buyers in South and Southeast Asia.



**OPPOSITE** Kumbu Nije, 13, removes freshly harvested groundnuts—peanuts—from a basket. With 110 women members working 23 hectares, the Banjulunding Women’s Garden is one of dozens of such collectives across the African continent’s smallest country. **TOP** Trucks loaded with agricultural products fill the deck of the ferry that connects Banjul with Barra across the River Gambia. The river runs the length of Gambia and roughly divides it. **ABOVE** At the market in Brikama, more than 100 vendors sell varieties of husked and unhusked groundnuts, whole and chopped, roasted or raw, and some that are milled into flour or made into peanut butter.

Growing up on a farm with his father and grandfather informed Saho about groundnut cultivation, he says, and now he oversees three of the nine largest groundnut processing plants in Gambia.

It is mainly to the north and east of Barra that the Atlantic monsoon has long poured some 800 millimeters of rain every summer—more than London sees in a year. When the rains come, they transform sere bronze uplands over some 40 to 50 days into an emerald carpet. Varieties of peas and



**ABOVE** Adama Ceesay, 20, started her own business, Adama's Processing Center, through Gambia's EU-backed Youth Empowerment Project (YEP), which gave her access to loans to acquire a press for making groundnut oil and a paste-making machine for peanut butter. Beyond the regular local customers she serves, Ceesay has her eyes set beyond Gambia: "I sell them on Facebook, but I need help to sell more online." **LOWER** YEP leader Modou Touray has overseen the training of more than 5,000 young people like Ceesay, and since 2017, YEP has purchased more than 100 groundnut roasters, paste-making machines and oil presses, in addition to promoting agricultural practices that include varieties hardy enough to adapt to changing climate. The use of solar panels and wind turbines also add sustainability to farms, which Touray says helps Gambia hold on to ambitious youth. "We took a market-led approach to the economic root causes of irregular migration," he says.

beans flower, nourishing seedpods underground.

But changing weather patterns are forcing adaptations and inspiring innovations. Modou Touray, who leads the agribusiness component of the nationwide Youth Empowerment Project (YEP), backed by the European Union in an effort to safeguard Gambia's agricultural future, has been observing the changes and assessing challenges facing the groundnut industry.

"What we are seeing is changes in rainfall ... along with increased pollution," says Touray from his office at the International Trade Centre in Bakau, just west of Banjul. "This has affected groundnuts more than other agricultural sectors because they have a minimum amount of rainfall to make the crop viable."

The monsoons,

he explains, are "not always distributed evenly. ... Sometimes half of it might fall in a few days," rather than across the entire five-month growing season.

Records kept by the World Bank Group back up his observations. According to the international financial nonprofit, rainfall has decreased at a monthly rate of 8.8 millimeters since 1960, compounded by a temperature increase over the period

of 1-degree-Celsius. As a result, crop yields are lower than they were in the 1960s and 1970s, and farming has been losing allure among the young since the 1990s.

"In those days we had a lot of groundnuts, because the rain came when we liked it," says Malik, a resolute farmer in his 60s who offers only his first name as





**ABOVE** One of Ceesay's employees paddles peanut butter into tubs from one of the small paste-making machines YEP helped Ceesay purchase. From seed to product, the groundnut economy accounts for some 80 percent of Gambia's agricultural sector, and is one of the country's leading exports, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

he unloads a shipment of groundnuts at a depot in Barra. The city is amid the heartland of tribes that migrated centuries ago westward from Sudan, and who help give Gambia its cultural and historical diversity. The five-month rainy season from June to October peaks in August, after which collected rainwater nourishes groundnuts as well as other major crops like mangoes and cashews. Malik echoes Touray's concern. "These days it rains, it stops for three weeks, then rains again," he says.

Erratic rains mean seedlings can fail and even the mature seed pods can yield smaller peanuts. This means less income to the farming family, which in a good year can live sustainably on the crop yields. Hunching down to speak, Malik ponders whether his own children and grandchildren will follow him into the groundnut fields. "Groundnuts have always been The Gambia's number one crop," but a litany of problems loom now. "We don't have the equipment. ... There's no space now. ... It's expensive," he says, letting his voice trail off.

Musa Loum, 45, manager of the Barra depot of the Gambia Groundnut Corporation, voices similar concerns. The exodus of young Gambians from farms on the north side of the river to the more urbanized south side have disrupted life as the country once knew it.

"Every child in The Gambia learns that we depend upon groundnuts," he says, patrolling his depot in a T-shirt and jeans. "You find only young people there ... young people are going to the city." Loum points toward the river's south side, noting the country's median age of 18.

That's about the age that the urban centers of Gambia can seem designed to appeal to directly. There's hustle, it seems, on every corner—a kind of energetic medley of voices and noises

that would attract any 18-year-old. Billboard advertising on the highway to Gambia's southern areas tempt with more idealized urban lures: "Saya Condensed Milk—More Protein For More Strength;" "Qcell—20Mbs For The Price Of 13Mbs."

More than this, however, the urban south offers job opportunities. Many people on commuter buses carry a trade: wheelbarrow parts, biscuits, bags of pre-peeled oranges, shelled coconuts, fishing rods, drinking water in small plastic bags and hats to guard against the sun.

This rural-to-urban movement has increased since the 1990s. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social



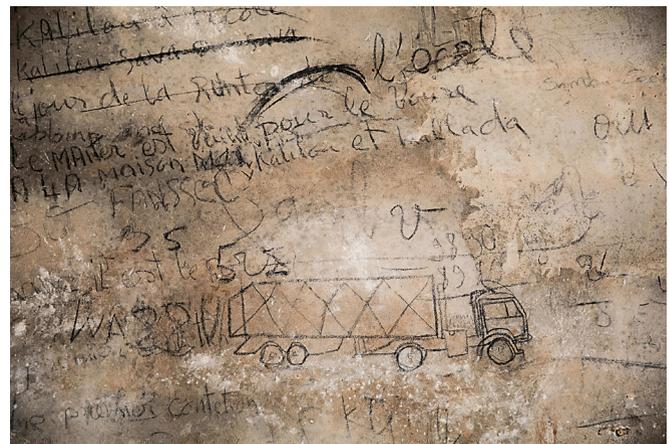


**ABOVE** The National Food Security Processing & Marketing Corporation (NFSPMC) plant in Banjul is one of the country's largest. The nozzle vacuums the whole groundnuts from cargo barges and drops them onto a conveyer belt. Most will be destined for export. **BELOW** Other transport calculations appear on a wall in the groundnut section at Brikama market.

Affairs reports that 17 percent of Gambian migrants from the north to the south made the move in the 1990s. That percentage increased to 28 percent the next decade and, since 2010, the percentage of urban residents has increased at an annual rate of just above 4 percent.

**D**ressed in a blue suit and exuding the calm authority of a master of his subject, Touray sees incentives in the groundnut industry that can retain the young, talented and enterprising. Like Saho and Malik, Touray grew up in the groundnut-growing areas north of the Gambia River. "There were a lot of young people risking their lives to get to Europe by crossing the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea," Touray says. "We took a market-led approach to the economic root causes of irregular migration," and, he continues, "As agribusiness is the main driver of Gambian employment, with groundnuts as the key subsector, we saw the greatest potential for jobs and income for young people here."

Since 2017, YEP has concentrated on vocational training and the creation of export opportunities for small businesses and job opportunities for young adults. "We have trained more than 5,000 young people and purchased over 100 groundnut machines," he says,



including roasters and peanut-paste presses. The government has also introduced new groundnut varieties, like brocou, which can be harvested in just 100 days, and offers improved resilience in shorter, less predictable rainy seasons.

Touray also sees youngsters keen to introduce contemporary tech into groundnut farming and processing. YEP has funded training on the installation and repair of photovoltaic solar panels that can power irrigation systems, borehole irrigation maintenance that can increase water retention amid irregular

**New groundnut varieties can be harvested in just 100 days and offer improved resilience in shorter, less predictable rainy seasons.**

rains, and microgardening to produce extra food and income—again as a buffer against the increasingly higher risks associated with small-hold farming. Independent research showing YEP has created more than 1,000 jobs from its agribusiness support



**ABOVE** Inside the plant, after shelling machinery has shaken the husks from the nuts—which are, scientifically speaking, not nuts but legumes, or beans—employees sort and grade the nuts by hand and practiced eyes. **LOWER** On the other side of the Gambia River, at the NFSPMC depot in Barra, groundnut shelling takes place at night, when the dust from the shells least disturbs surrounding communities. Workers cover themselves to protect against the dust as they bag and carry what may be destined for human consumption, animal feed, fertilizer or processing into oil.

exceeds Touray’s own original forecast of 600 jobs. “We have doubled our targets,” Touray says with a smile. “That means we have the potential to create more.”

Innovation also seems to permeate the independent, small-business commerce in Brikama Market, which sprawls over 4 square kilometers about an hour and a half’s drive south of Banjul. Here are hundreds of stalls selling groundnuts big, small, pulped, powdered, milled into flour and more. Tech here most noticeably takes the form of new roasting machines that spin automatically

and roast a 60-kilogram bag of peanuts in half an hour—turning a cash crop into a value-added food commodity.

Nearby sit the smokey precursors of the automatic machines. Over a fire of tree stumps, workers labor to roast about 10 kilograms of groundnuts in a metal bowl that must be continuously turned by hand. The new groundnut roasting machines have become especially appealing as they can be fixed locally—and creatively: One machine is running thanks to a motorbike chain that has replaced a worn-out rubber belt.





**ABOVE** Nothing is wasted in the groundnut value chain, and the husks are used as fertilizer. **LEFT** Third-generation groundnut farmer and owner of three of Gambia's nine largest groundnut processing factories, Tamsir Saho sells from Banjul to Beijing.



Not far north of the market, adding value to groundnuts is the theme of agricultural stalls at the annual Trade Fair Gambia International. Some 500 exhibitors showcase goods from textiles to handi-crafts at dusk, backed by a DJ and a dozen food kiosks.

Among those set up to sell is Favourite Foods, founded by 19-year-old marketeer Kumba Jobe. She has slickly packaged Gambian snacks like groundnut-coco, a savory mix spiced with nutmeg, coconut and ginger. Each Favourite Foods package lists the nutritional benefits for a young, aspirational audience: antioxidants, potassium, calcium. Jobe's products include *churagerrtah*, a ready-made mix of pounded peanuts and rice, together with cooking instructions to turn it into a delicious porridge—perfect for the busy, 21st-century urban customer.

Also marketing her products at the trade fair is Ceesay. Twenty years old, she hopes to take Gambia's beloved legume to value-added success by marketing her own Adama's Processing Center groundnut oils and peanut butters. The packaging is splashed with aspirational

“Every child in Gambia learns that we depend upon groundnuts.”

—Musa Loum



In Bakau, a town along Gambia's Atlantic coast, Florence Onwuegble, of Nigeria, is among the many selling groundnuts—fresh, roasted, salted or sweet. **RIGHT** Domoda is a popular Gambian groundnut-based stew in which the protein of chicken or beef is supplemented by the country's famous legume.

adjectives like “pure” and “unrefined.” She produces both in the nearby Serekunda district using an oil press and a paste-making machine.

Overseas customers are looking for one thing—“quality,” asserts Ceesay. “I know the person who farmed the groundnuts I use.” This also means she can undercut her competition by purchasing her raw material for a lower price. “I sell my [largest] product at 1,750 Dalasi [about \$32] compared to the imported oil, which costs about 2,100 Dalasi.”

Ceesay has her eyes set on markets beyond Gambia. “I sell them on Facebook, but I need help to sell more online,” she says.

Back on the banks of the Gambia River, Saho's day of making rounds of groundnut processors in Barra is nearly done. Heading back to Banjul on the ferry, he again scrolls through his newer smartphone—this time for WeChat. Saho is ready to ship another container of groundnuts to China, where they will most likely end up as groundnut oil, as that industry gobbles fully two-thirds of the world's total groundnut harvest. Shipping costs, however, have nearly doubled since the COVID-19 pandemic. A container from West Africa to China that cost \$2,500 two years ago has spiked to \$4,000, resulting in tough negotiations over WeChat.

But none of this seems to much trouble Saho's ambitions. As the ferry ride comes to an end, Saho positions himself to be one of the first off. He'll be back again tomorrow. 🌍

## GROUNDNUTS—

or peanuts, *Arachis hypogaea* L.—are indigenous to the lands of Central and South America. Cultivated there for centuries, Spanish colonizers took them from Mexico to Europe and borrowed from the Nahuatl name, *tlālcacahuatl* (cocoa bean of the earth), to call it *cacahuete* in both Spanish and French. Not biologically a nut, it is a legume akin to the bean or pea. By now it has spread so far that many nations have their own names, for example, *karawett* in Maltese, *kikiriki* in Bosnian, *peanøtt* in Norwegian, and so on.

It was in the 16th century that Portuguese colonizers carried it to West Africa from Brazil, part of the horticultural migration that included sweet potatoes and maize (corn), both of which are now also regional staples. Groundnut planting increased as its protein-rich seeds nourished millions of domestic growers and added niacin, manganese and other vitamins inexpensively to the regional diets. Weight for weight, the groundnut legume contains more protein than a beef steak.



**Tristan Rutherford** has won six journalism awards. He writes about travel, culture and sailing for *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*. **Samantha Reinders** is a photojournalist based in Cape Town, South Africa, motivated by the complexity and beauty of the continent. She holds a master's degree in visual communication from Ohio University, and her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *National Geographic*, among others.



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

Walnuts of Kyrgyzstan: Mar / Apr 2017

Hazelnuts of Trabzon: Sep / Oct 2014





# RÜSTEM PASHA ROSETTE



WRITTEN BY  
ADAM WILLIAMSON

ART COURTESY OF  
ART OF ISLAMIC PATTERN

Rüstem Pasha served as Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Süleyman, and in 1563 he commissioned architect Mimar Sinan to build a mosque in Rüstem's name near Istanbul's Grand Bazaar. Now one of the city's historic sites, Rüstem also commissioned for it a dazzling array of ceramic tiles painted with subtle and sophisticated patterns.

In this fourth installment in our series, we recreate one of these tile patterns, a 12-fold composition that, in several variations, decorates the spandrels and dado around the interior. It is comprised of four continuous spirals woven into a radial rosette. The structure beneath its curvilinear geometry is a six-fold division of the circle, which was also used in installments one and three in this series.

Motifs comprise abstract palmettes, stylized flowers, within decorative patterns. Motifs of local plant life distinguish regional styles from one another. The designs reflect thus a continuum of the surrounding nature.

The leaf-shaped motifs along the interwoven lines of the rosette are known as Rumi motifs, a reference to Asiatic Rome, that date back to the fourth century BCE as well as later stylistic developments by both Uyghurs in the ninth century CE and the Seljuks in the 11th century CE.

A floral motif, known as a *penç*, deriving from the Persian

Rendered in the vivid colors that characterize the tiles named Iznik after the city in which they were first made, the rosette appears repeatedly on the spandrels between arches in the Rüstem Pasha mosque.



*penj berg* (five petals), fills the center of the composition. It is rendered here as three concentric rings, comprised of two outer rings of 12 double-lobed petals and a central curvilinear pattern, also of 12 petals. This motif is part of the Hatayı decorative canon that was introduced to Anatolia from central Asia from origins found in Old Uyghur ceramics. The name Hatayı is associated with Herat, Afghanistan, the cultural center of the Timurids and a key trading station along the trans-Asian routes that became known as the Silk Road.

The composition has been skillfully painted onto Iznik tiles, named after the town of Iznik that nestles on a lakeside not far from Istanbul. It was there that in the early 16th century an "Imperial ware," now called Iznik, was developed using a fritware (glass) body and high-quartz content. The extremely durable results are unaffected by water, moisture, chemicals and temperature changes, and under their protective glaze, their colors have not faded over centuries.

The first stage in producing this masterpiece in ceramic was to draw the pattern on paper. Then the lines were pierced with tiny holes, through which the design could be transferred onto the tile with pigment ready to be hand painted before firing in the kiln.

The curvilinear, biomorphic form is created using a combination of straightedge, compass and freehand drawing. There are three key design elements to consider: spiral, symmetry and balance.

In classical Islamic as well as many other world art traditions, biomorphic designs are structured around a spiral, and from this the motifs and leaves sprout. The movement of nature inspires this unbroken flow of the spiral. It has no hard corners, and the curves are sweeping and gentle. As the spiral advances, it radiates secondary spirals, which in turn radiate others, and soon the page is overgrown. The spiral blossoms from its source like a plant from a seed growing toward the light. This centrifugal movement reflects the progression of creation, moving toward infinity.

Once a section of spirals is drawn, they are reflected and repeated to fill a page, a wall or a dome. In so doing, symmetry is fundamental to harmonious design: It exemplifies completeness, perfection and the search for unity.

The decorative designs tessellate across the surface with an even rhythm and texture, with no part taking precedence. The designs oscillate evenly, an effect created by the repetition and arrangements of the motifs.

Because the act of drawing sacred patterns has often been considered an act of meditation, before creating a work the artisan would make sure the process itself was being approached with *adab* (etiquette). In addition to ablutions and meditation, this could include making sure all affairs were in order, the mind is empty of matters of the world and the body was relaxed and in flow.

Learn to make this pattern at [aramcworld.com](http://aramcworld.com)



## WHAT YOU WILL NEED

**Compass:** Choose one of high quality that will precisely hold a radius and for which you can keep a sharp point on the pencil lead.

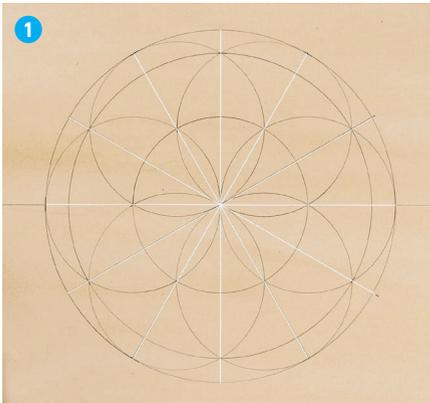
**Straightedge:** A metal one works best, 30 to 50 centimeters in length.

**Paper:** Use smoothly finished drawing paper, at least A3 or 11 by 14 inches. For this pattern, you may wish to cut it into a square.

**Eraser:** A professional drafting eraser works best. Mistakes are part of learning to make patterns.

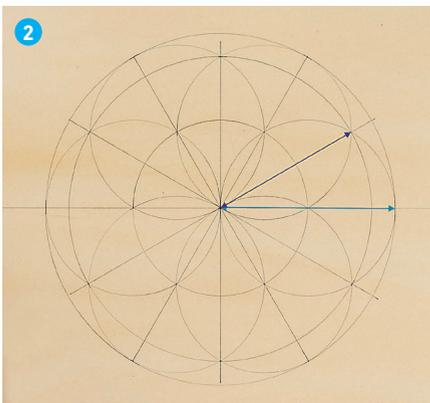
**Pencils:** Use a hard lead, such as 2H, for lighter guidelines and a soft lead, such as 2B and 3B, for heavier finishing lines. Add colors to fill as desired.

**Tracing paper:** A4 or 8½ by 11 inches works well.



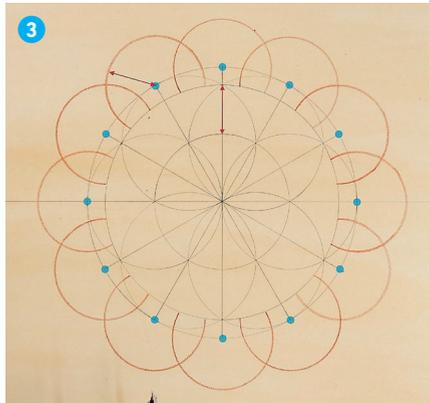
1

- Across the midpoints of the page, draw a horizontal line. Measure its midpoint and, using the compass, inscribe a circle that fills 2/3 of the page.
- Retaining the same radius, place the compass where the circle intersects the horizontal line on the right. Draw a circle. Do the same on the left side.
- Place the compass on each of the four points where the circles meet the circle. Use the intersection points to draw four more circles so that there are now six circles around the first circle.
- Draw the radial lines (white) by aligning the straightedge with the tips of the petals and cross the centerpoint.



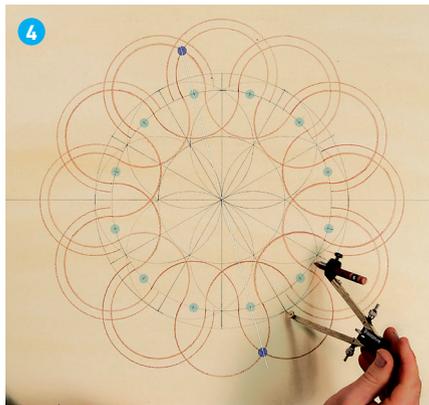
2

- Draw two encompassing circles by placing the compass point in the center, and open the compass to the intersections indicated.



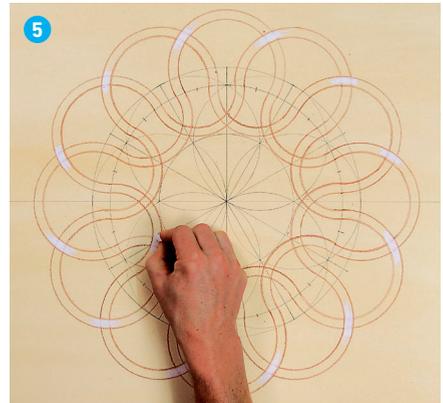
3

- Adjust the compass radius to match the distance between the two smaller circles (red arrow).
- Using this measurement draw 12 circles around the circumference of the circle marked turquoise.

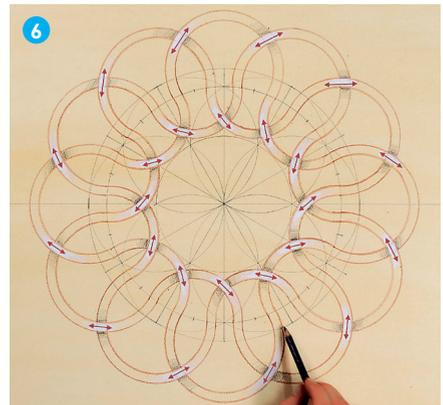


4

- Align the straightedge with the intersections of the curves, marked in white, and prepare to mark 12 new radial divisions in turquoise.
- Place the compass point on the turquoise intersections and adjust the compass lead to meet the ends of the red curves. Then draw curves that join up the spirals.
- Repeat the outer curves, but this time expand the compass proportionally to create a channel. And repeat the process for the small inner curves, again aligning the compass lead with the ends of the outer curves.

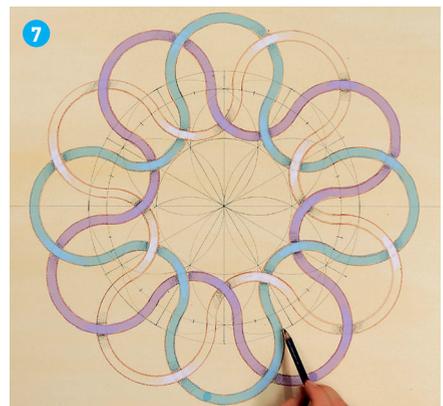


5

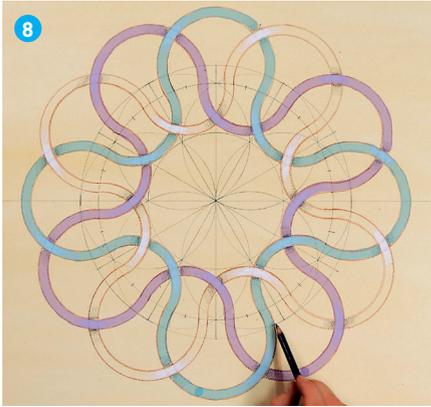


5 and 6

- Erase the overs and unders to weave the spirals together. Note the rotational order in which the weave is achieved.

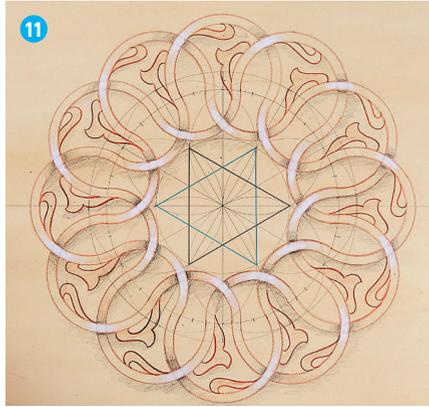


7



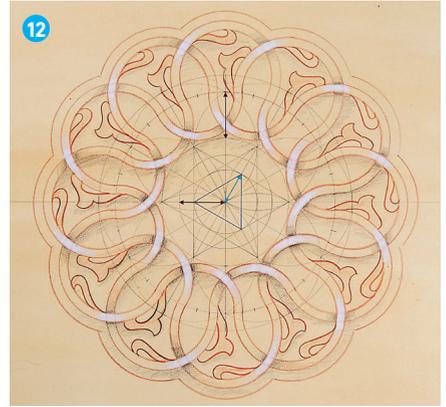
7 and 8

- Notice the four interlocking spirals.



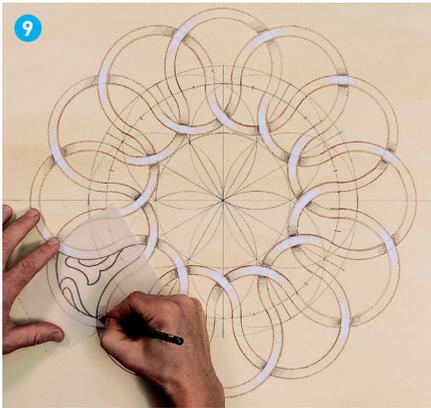
11

- Draw a hexagram inside the center circle by drawing two equilateral triangles in the center circle.

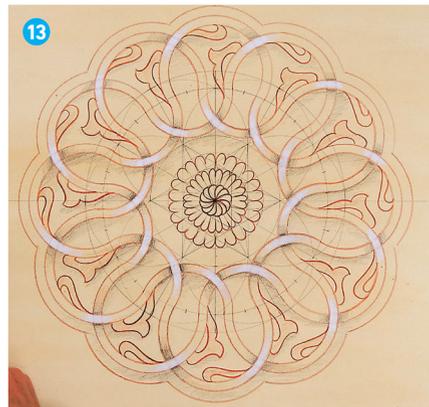


12

- Inscribe a circle inside the hexagon created by the hexagram.
- Inside this circle draw another equilateral triangle (purple) and then smaller circle (green) inside this.



9



13

13 and 14

- Use these circles to proportion the concentric layers of petals that create the *penç* motif.



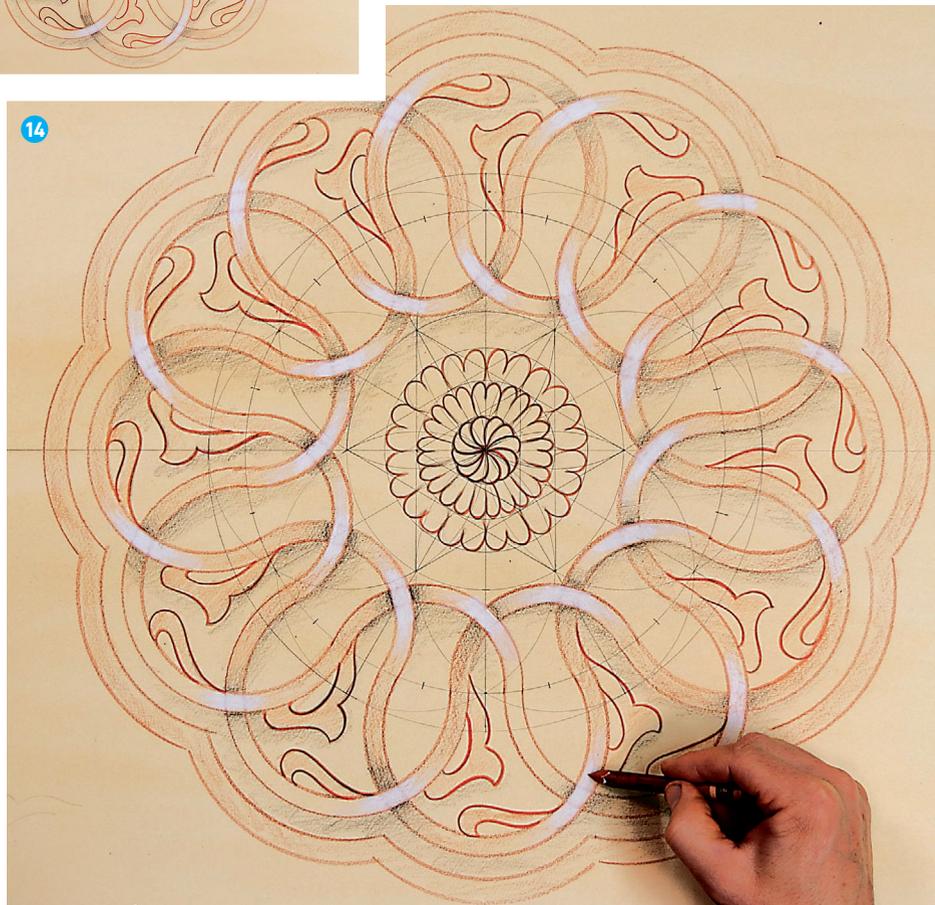
10

9 and 10

- Draw the Rumi motifs onto the spirals in one of the sections. Copy these motifs with a soft pencil on tracing paper. Use this tracing paper to pounce the design into the remaining 11 sections.



**Adam Williamson** specializes in biomorphic pattern (*islimi*, or arabesque), and he is also a stone and wood carver, and artist. With Richard Henry he directs London-based Art of Islamic Pattern ([artofislamicpattern.com](http://artofislamicpattern.com)), which has offered short courses, workshops and exhibitions at locations renowned for pattern-based artistic heritages in the UK and more than half a dozen other countries.



14

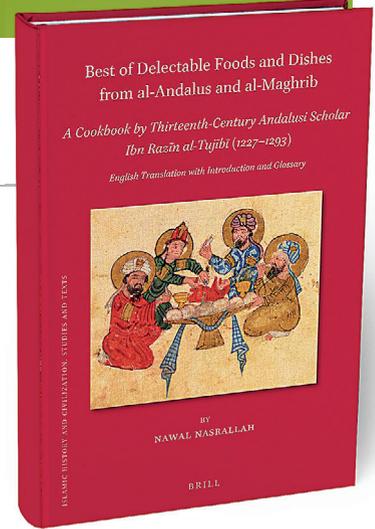


# REVIEWS

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

“Even though most of the recipes might hardly ever get to be cooked and tried, including them will indeed rarely fail to please with their novelty and exquisiteness.”

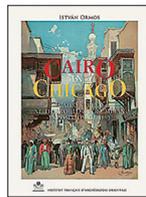
—Introduction



## Best of Delectable Foods and Dishes from al-Andalus and al-Maghrib: A Cookbook by Thirteenth-Century Andalusī Scholar Ibn Razīn al-Tujībī (1227–1293)

Nawal Nasrallah, tr. Brill, 2021.

One of only a handful of surviving medieval Spanish cookbooks, Ibn Razīn’s *Fiḍālat* has been long known to scholars, even if incompletely. By at least the 17th century, 55 of its 475 recipes had disappeared. Then in 2018 a nearly complete 15th–16th century copy of the cookbook, originally composed in Tunis around 1260 CE, surfaced in the British Library. Alerted to the discovery, Nasrallah, a food historian, set out to produce the first complete English translation, preserving Ibn Razīn’s culinary legacy while modernizing 24 of the recipes for the home cook. The book serves as Ibn Razīn’s ode to the cuisine of Muslim Spain, before having to flee the Iberian Peninsula’s conquest by Christian armies. He nostalgically surveys a wide range of dishes, from everyday boiled fava beans to special-occasion *sinhāji*, an elaborate stew and forebear of Spain’s classic *olla podrida*. This faithful translation is an important contribution to the history of Andalusī cuisine. —TOM VERDE

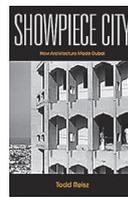


### Cairo in Chicago: Cairo Street at the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893

István Ormos. Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 2021.

This book presents a detailed account of the Cairo Street exhibition in the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago. Ormos, a professor of Semitic philology and Arabic, analyzes Cairo Street with a neutral lens, while previous academics solely viewed the exhibit as a reinforcement of imperialist, colonial and racist attitudes toward the East. Ormos paints a full picture of the exhibit with detailed explanations, from building construction and presentations of common activities in medieval Cairo to the belly dancers who were of North African origins. Even though Ormos highlights the positive cultural exchanges and learning opportunities Cairo Street offered, the often negative perceptions expressed in the contemporaneous letters, articles and photographs the author references make for a complex breakdown of an underrated cultural encounter.

—MARINA ALI

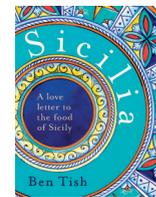


### Showpiece City: How Architecture Made Dubai

Todd Reisz. Stanford UP, 2021.

Dubai’s reputation builds off skyscrapers and boosterism, but its foundation is more prosaic: urban planning. Writer and architect Todd Reisz discards the city’s superlatives by focusing on the city’s transformation from desert backwater to pioneering hub. Sourcing from the library of British architect John R. Harris, designer of Dubai’s first town plan in 1960, Reisz reveals how the city’s growth in subsequent decades relied on both ambition and ambiguity. British disinvestment couldn’t stymie Dubai’s port, and the port’s mystique grew as its wealth remained concealed. Oil compounded optimism, creating a bonanza for British experts, but the benefit flowed both ways: Shaykh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, who ruled Dubai between 1958 and 1990, assumed both the risk and credit for projects from Dubai Creek’s “hardened edges” to the World Trade Centre, what Reisz considered true “showpieces”—infrastructure that hastened Dubai’s ascent.

—TREVOR WILLIAMS



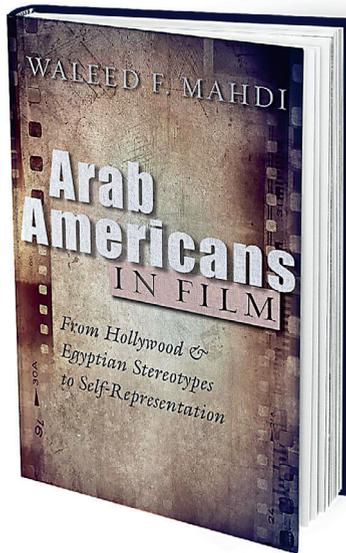
### Sicilia: A Love Letter to the Food of Sicily

Ben Tish. Bloomsbury, 2021.

It’s hard to have a bad meal in Italy, it’s been said. The same is true of using this colorful cookbook celebrating Sicily’s culinary past, particularly its Arab legacies. Both the method of deep-frying and the popular ingredients of rice, sugar and oranges (which meet up in rice fritters with orange-blossom honey) are mainstays of the Sicilian diet traceable to the island’s Arab period (827-902 CE). Similarly, the whole-wheat-and-semolina sourdough bread called *mafalda*, often made in the shape of a crown, is likely of Arab origin. Watermelon jelly with jasmine, chocolate and pistachios—a molded, pudding-like dessert that “would have been the height of sophistication, prepared by skilled Arab chefs”—might intimidate the home cook, yet the book also features plenty of easy-to-prepare, peasant-inspired dishes that equally defined Sicily’s Arab-era diet, such as braised chickpeas and borlotti beans with kale pesto.

—TOM VERDE

# AUTHOR'S CORNER



## Arab American Journeys in Film: A Conversation with Waleed F. Mahdi

by PINEY KESTING

“What does it mean to develop a complex sense of Arab American identity in film?” asks Waleed F. Mahdi, whose comparative and detailed analysis of three motion picture industries—Hollywood, Egyptian and Arab American—searches for an answer to that question. Motivated in part by his own struggles with cultural identity as a first-generation immigrant from Yemen, Mahdi explores the roots of negative film portrayals of Arabs, Muslims and Arab Americans that date to the late 1800s. These persistent and damaging stereotypes arise from orientalist and racist histories, he points out, but also they are also the product of conflicting cultural images perpetuated in both the US and the Arab world. Contemporary Arab American filmmakers, he notes, complicate these images with more nuanced, realistic and individual characters.



Waleed F. Mahdi

### What inspired you to write *Arab Americans in Film*?

This book actually began as my dissertation thesis in 2008. I used to watch a lot of movies to improve my English when I was at Ta'iz University, in Yemen. After college, a Fulbright scholarship helped me pursue my master's and Ph.D. degrees in the US. During that time I discovered Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs* book. I was immediately drawn to the subject matter. I decided to look at some of the films he mentioned, and before I knew it, I was watching hundreds of films. Actually, more than 800 to be exact. Afterwards, it was clear that the majority of Hollywood movies confirmed the racial stereotypes Shaheen was talking about. That was a painful experience.

### How do you distinguish your book from the work of Shaheen, as he was a leading authority on film and TV images of Arabs?

In a way my work is a continuation of Shaheen's critique of an industry that continues to misrepresent Arabs and

Islam. However, I go deeper and provide a scholarly perspective. Shaheen's books looked broadly at images of Arabs and Islam in US media. I focus on the representation of Arab Americans in films, and that encouraged me to look beyond Hollywood to the Egyptian films I grew up watching as a child. My work also benefits from the fact that I am living in a time when contemporary Arab American filmmakers and directors are emerging and producing films that challenge Hollywood stereotypes.

### You write that Arab American filmmakers “breathe authenticity and full dimensional humanity” into their films. Can you give us an example?

Cherien Dabis' film *Amreeka* is a great example. Her representation of a multigenerational Palestinian American household in Chicago is fascinating and something you don't usually see in a Hollywood film. Many of the actors are Arabs or Arab Americans, and the film shows how each generation has very different opinions on what it means to

be an Arab in America. As a young Palestinian American growing up in a small town in Ohio, Dabis injects some of her own story into the film, and that invites us to look at the Arab American experience through a more intimate lens.

### Have you noticed any positive changes in Hollywood depictions of Arab Americans?

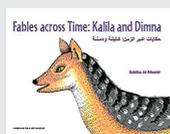
Since 9/11 there have been some efforts to insert positive images of Arabs and Muslims in films, but it seems these are conditioned to playing roles connected to patriotism or doing something heroic for the US. However, streaming services like Netflix, Hulu and Amazon are beginning to compete with mainstream media by giving space for minorities to create authentic materials. These are positive signs, but we have yet to see this filter through the Hollywood system in meaningful ways.

### Arab Americans in Film: From Hollywood and Egyptian Stereotypes to Self-Representation

Waleed F. Mahdi. Syracuse UP, 2020.

The conversation continues at [aramcworld.com](http://aramcworld.com).

  
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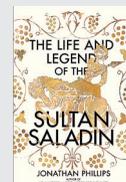
### Fables across Time: Kalila and Dimna

Sabiha Al Khemir. American Folk Art Museum, 2016.



### The Arabesque Table: Contemporary Recipes from the Arab World

Reem Kassis. Phaidon, 2021.



### The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin

Jonathan Phillips. Yale UP, 2019.



# EVENTS

Highlights from  
aramcoworld.com

Please verify a venue's  
schedule before visiting.

## CURRENT / JULY

**Pharaoh of the Two Lands: The African Story of the Kings of Napata** highlights the importance of the vast Nubian kingdom, located in what is now southern Egypt and northern Sudan. In the eighth century BCE, it grew up around its capital, Napata. In about 730 BCE, Nubian King Piankhy conquered Egypt and founded the 25th Dynasty of Kushite kings, who ruled from the Nile Delta to the confluence of the White and Blue Niles. Louvre Museum, **Paris**, through July 25.

## CURRENT / AUGUST

**Crossing Borders: Helen Zughaib** continues the artist's 11-year journey into issues of migration, displacement, war and hope. This exhibit includes new installations using wood and shoes, painted with her signature use of pattern and color, as well as new paintings from her *Syrian Migration* series. Zughaib's focus on the displaced is a timely reminder of the most vulnerable population facing hardship and war. Kennedy Center/REACH, **Washington, D.C.**, through August 20.

## CURRENT / SEPTEMBER

**Jamel Shabazz: Eyes on the Street**, by the Brooklyn-born photographer, serves as a formidable archive of New

York's communities in the outer boroughs. He captures the intricate ballet of daily life in the metropolis, where everyone is part of the audience and on display at the same time, at once a stranger and an equal. His practice exudes a steadfast sense of empathy with the common man and woman he meets on the streets. Bronx Museum, **New York**, through September 4.

**Shifting the Silence** features dynamic works by 32 women artists who use the radical language of abstraction to enhance our understanding of the world we inhabit. Named after artist Etel Adnan's 2020 book about history and existence, *Shifting the Silence* embraces experimentation, impermanence and subjectivity—bold yet poetic characteristics that mark the art of our time. **San Francisco** Museum of Modern Art, through September 5.

## CURRENT / OCTOBER

**A People by the Sea: Narratives of the Palestinian Coast** sheds light on the history of the Eastern Mediterranean coast. It considers possible futures by reviewing and reflecting on past experiences. Starting from the mid-18th century and ending in 1948, the exhibition covers two centuries of historical landmarks, prompting questions and reinterpretations. The Palestinian Museum, **Birzeit, Palestine**, through October 31.

## COMING / AUGUST

**Jordan Nassar**, the first solo exhibition by the US artist in Boston, presents embroidered and mixed-media works drawing on traditional Palestinian craft techniques to investigate ideas of home, land and memory. Nassar's work, created in collaboration with Palestinian embroiders and craftspeople, combines geometric patterns with abstracted landscapes. The painterly esthetic of Nassar's embroidery explores relationships between craft and history in new contemporary dialogues. Institute of Contemporary Art, **Boston**, August 11 through January 29.

## ONGOING

**History of Printing: Bulaq Press** contains early machines of the first Egyptian press, along with several old printing presses and their accessories. The Bulaq Press formed under the rule of Mohamed Ali in 1820. Its first publication was an Arabic-Italian dictionary in 1822. More than just mere machinery, the Bulaq Press served as a beacon that guided Egypt by providing a much-needed source of knowledge in the form of printed books. Bibliotheca Alexandrina, **Alexandria, Egypt**.

Readers are welcome to submit event information for possible inclusion to [proposals@aramcoamericas.com](mailto:proposals@aramcoamericas.com), subject line "Events."



**Omar Ba: A Journey Beyond Illusion** is characterized by enigma and poetic intensity that express the Senegalese artist's subconscious and his symbolic interpretation of reality. Ba engages with themes such as chaos, destruction and dictatorship, draping his political discourse in a veil of poetry thanks to a pictorial language that is entirely his own, both fierce and delicate. Ba lives and works among Dakar, Geneva, Brussels, Paris and New York. Divided among three continents, he has developed a mindset of permanent hybridization, far from the stereotypes attached to his African roots. This hybridity is found also in his paintings, where organic touches and flamboyant colors mix, using various forms, techniques and textures (acrylic, gouache, pencil and even typex). Ba paints on a black background on corrugated cardboard or canvas, a technique that asks the viewer to adapt to the darkness literally and metaphorically. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, **Brussels**, through August 7.

Omar Ba in his studio.

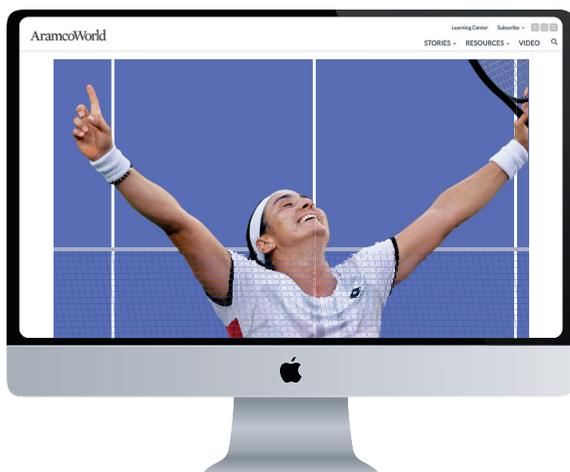


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