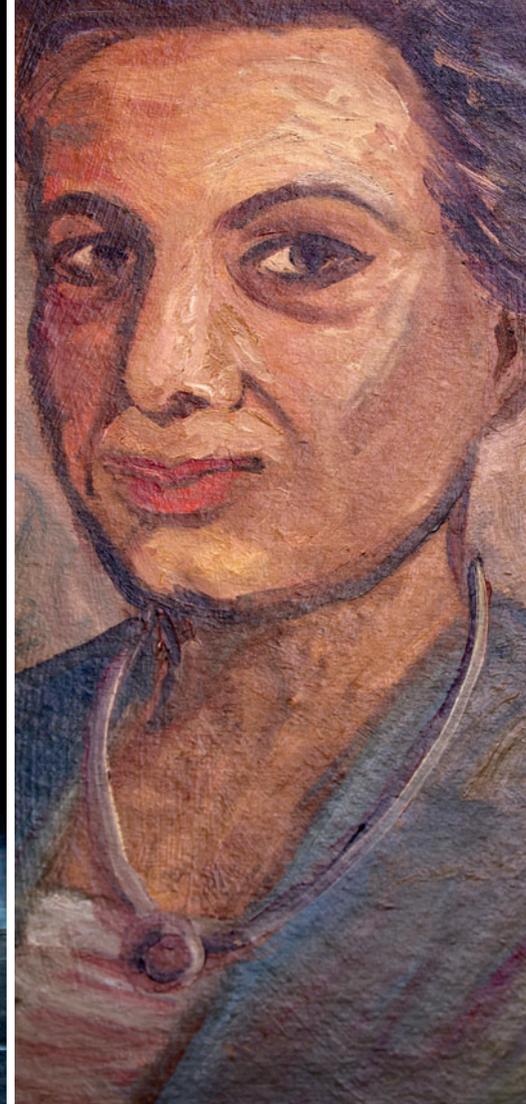


NOVEMBER DECEMBER 2022

# AramcoWorld





## 6 The Long Wandering of the Damascus Rose

Written by **Tristan Rutherford**  
Photographed by **Rebecca Marshall**

Widely regarded as the most fragrant of roses, the Damascus rose bloomed first in Central Asia and came to the Levant and Anatolia via the Silk Roads. Today it is cultivated most intensively in Bulgaria's Valley of Roses, where it thrives as both export and heritage.

## 16 Tapping Into Story

Written by **Ken Chitwood**  
Photographed by **Bear Gutierrez**

Telling stories about life journeys may not be what most people think tap dancers do, but that is where Andrew Nemr taps his way into a deeper root of the art.

## 22 Bibi Zogbé: The Flower Painter

Written by **Dianna Wray**  
Photographed by **George Azar**  
Art courtesy of **Saleh Barakat**

Except for a rare self-portrait, Bibi Zogbé painted flowers—exuberant and confident, as well as modern and symbolic, her paintings reflect her life between her native Lebanon and three decades in Argentina.

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# AramcoWorld

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

**FRONT COVER** Layers of light, contrasts of color and gestures to Berber and Islamic motifs on a Casablanca street hint at the complexities of novelist and architect Alaa Halifi's city in Morocco. Photo by Yassine Alaoui Ismaili.

**BACK COVER** With a crescendo of clicks and stomps from his feet and full motion everywhere else, tap dancer Andrew Nemr explodes a blizzard of chalk, frozen by the camera. Photo by Bear Gutierrez.



## 30 “Prince of Casablanca”

Written by **Ken Chitwood**  
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Working with civic reality as an architect and personal imagination as a novelist, Alaa Halifi has, at age 23, already won awards in both fields. His subject: his city, Casablanca.

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Written by **Adam Williamson**

Cursive, vegetal, biomorphic forms predominate in patterns in Malaysia, Indonesia and parts of Thailand. This final installment in our series is based on the geometry of leaves and petals.

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# FIRSTLOOK

## Beni Isguen, Algeria

Photograph by George Steinmetz

As a young college student in the 1980s, George Steinmetz hitchhiked in the desert lands of north-central Algeria along the Sahara. In 2009 he revisited the region, now as a world-renowned photojournalist working on a book about the world's extreme deserts and the human adaptations and settlements in them.

He recalled the hilltop city of Ghardaia and its unique architecture. This city is actually comprised of five villages, among them Beni Isguen, which in 1982 was inscribed as part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site and regarded as the best-preserved example of the region's traditional building styles and urban organization.

The day before this image was taken, Steinmetz flew up to get a view of the town using the foot-launched, motorized paraglider—at less than 45 kilograms, the lightest motorized aircraft in the world—that allowed him to make uniquely close, low-altitude aerial photographs in remote regions. The next morning at sunrise, he made multiple flyovers above Beni Isguen, bracing the camera between his legs in order to look straight down to the pattern and colors of the village's walled, rooftop patios and narrow streets. "There are still parts of the world that live on, in a traditional way," Steinmetz reflects. "It's important to know there are other worlds out there."

—Sarah Taqvi



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# FLAVORS

## Upside-Down in Babylon Pineapple Palace Cake

Recipe by  
Sarah al-Hamad

Photograph by  
Kate Whitaker

**Not long ago, writing tablets from 1700 BCE were discovered in present-day Iraq, containing some of the oldest recipes known.**

This is how we came to know what the Babylonians ate for breakfast and what they offered their gods in the temples. They used date syrup to sweeten food, referring to it as honey, and enjoyed dates dried in a fermented beverage. Palace cake was made in honor of the gods who were worshipped in the temples of Ur on the banks of the Euphrates. It contained raisins, aniseed, and an unbelievable amount of fat and dates. The original recipe mentions “oodles of butter” and vine leaves to line the baking dish—Babylonian wax/greaseproof paper, of sorts. This lightened version, with pineapple and date slices arranged in a sunny pattern, is delicious and far more digestible.

(Serves 6)

8 tablespoons (100 grams / 4 ounces) butter

½ cup (100 grams / 4 ounces) fine raw/  
golden caster sugar

2 large eggs

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

⅔ cup (100 grams / 4 ounces) self-rising  
flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

2 tablespoons runny honey, for glazing

### For the Caramel Topping

4 tablespoons (60 grams / 2 ounces) butter

¼ cup (60 grams / 2 ounces) light brown  
sugar

8 medjool dates, sliced in half lengthways

4 pineapple rings from a can, drained and  
chopped

Preheat the oven to 190 degrees Celsius (375 degrees Fahrenheit/gas 5). Grease a 20-centimeter (eight-inch) tarte tatin pan or round cake pan.

To make the caramel topping (which will be baked as the base), put the butter and brown sugar in a saucepan over medium heat. Stir continuously until the sugar has dissolved and started to bubble at the sides. Pour the syrup into the pan and swirl to coat the base. Arrange the dates in a circular pattern, cut-side up. Do the same with the pineapple, placing chunks between each date.

Beat the butter and sugar together in a large bowl until light and creamy. Gradually add the eggs and vanilla, fold in the flour and baking powder, and mix well to combine. Spoon the mixture into the pan over the fruit, smoothing with the back of a spoon to ensure all the fruit is covered.

Bake for 25–30 minutes until risen, golden and a skewer inserted into the center of the cake comes out clean. Leave to cool in the pan for 5 minutes before inverting onto a serving plate and glazing the top with honey. Serve warm.

Reprinted with permission from

**Sun Bread and Sticky  
Toffee: Date Desserts  
From Everywhere**

Sarah al-Hamad.  
Interlink Books, 2013.  
interlinkbooks.com.



**Sarah al-Hamad** grew up in Kuwait and lives in London. She worked as an editor for Saqi Books and is the author of several cookbooks, including the award-winning *Cardamom and Lime: Flavours from the Arabian Gulf*. She recently completed her master's degree in creative nonfiction at the University of East Anglia.

KATE WHITAKER



# THE LONG WANDERING OF THE



# DAMASCUS

Written by  
TRISTAN RUTHERFORD

Photographed by  
REBECCA MARSHALL

# ROSE

Delka Kirova has lived a life in roses. Grandmother, community organizer and lifelong rose picker, she works from a modest office alongside a centuries-old library in the Bulgarian village of Rozovo. The scent is almost overpowering but each rosy object in Kirova's office has its purpose. On her office table sits a jug of roses, which Kirova uses to demonstrate how to pick rose buds. On her desk are vials of rosewater, which she once used to massage her children to protect their skin against eczema and mosquito bites. On her sagging shelves are books of rose poetry, from which she treats her guests to a reading. "Roses are everywhere," Kirova explains. "This flower is everything for us."

Kirova may be a grandmother with a slow gait, but her delicate face is as vibrant as a bloom. Perhaps that is because, like almost all of Rozovo's 1,000 residents, she started picking roses young.

The prickly process began at 5 a.m., but her 1970s memories are redolent of fragrance and friendship. "The morning was so clean, the petals were laced in dew, the birds made a song. From our home we took tomatoes, cheese, coffee and bread." Kirova and her young colleagues worked hard to "pluck the pink petals on the first day a bud begins to open," before their life-giving oils, which can regenerate cells and act as an antiseptic, dissipated in the mid-morning heat.

Kirova's memories blossomed in Bulgaria's 100-kilometer-long Valley

"The rose is sacred to me," says Marchelo Valkov, who with his father grows the Damascus rose on the family's two-hectare field near Karlovo, Bulgaria. "There is a great responsibility to being a rose producer. The quality of its scent depends on the way you grow and care for it. I can recognize the scent of my own roses compared to other growers' roses."



In the company museum of rose oil and rosewater producer Enio Bonchev Production Ltd., a photograph from 1919 hints at the long heritage of roses in Bulgaria's Valley of Roses, where Bonchev built his distillery in 1909 and today, his great-grandson Filip Lissicharov runs the company. **RIGHT** Director of the House of Culture community center in Rozovo, Delka Kirova recalls picking rose petals as a child, and the camaraderie that grew among the families and friends who engaged in the harvest.

of Roses, one of the best places on earth to grow roses. Bulgaria is nestled in southern Europe, ringed by Romania, Serbia, North Macedonia, Turkey and Greece. Four centuries ago, roses brought wealth and health, before the rise and fall of communism dented the blooming industry. Today a rose resurgence is under way despite changing demographics and climate concerns. And right outside Kirova's small office a rejuvenated park has been planted with fresh rose shrubs, turning a morning stroll into an olfactory sensation.

**T**he story of how Kirova's "pink petals" arrived outside her office in Rozovo, via Samarkand, Rome and Syria, is even more flowery. The petals belong to the Damascus rose, a two-meter-tall hybrid with the botanical name *Rosa x damascena*, that was born by chance on the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan border an estimated 7,000 years ago. Following the last Ice Age, *Rosa gallica*—one of *Rosa x damascena*'s three parent species—was blown east to Central Asia. *Rosa fedtschenkoana*—an even rarer species—migrated north over the Himalayas as the climate warmed. Here *Rosa gallica* and *Rosa fedtschenkoana* met a wild Himalayan rose, *Rosa moschata*, and together they produced a hybrid—indicated today by the "x" in its scientific name—that produced a uniquely fragrant perfume.

Robert Mattock, who holds a doctorate in biological sciences and is a world authority on the hybrid's botanical and horticultural history, has traced the origin and passage of *Rosa x*



*damascena* across the world. He started on the Silk Road, checking Uzbek carpets and very old Central Asian manuscripts.

"We found records of distillation in a crude form of petals that went back to about 4000 BCE on the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan border," Mattock explains. Stone presses used for making rosewater from petals were found near Samarkand dating from 4,500 years ago. Around 4,000 years ago, the cuneiform tablets, written in the East Semitic language of Akkadian, became more specific.



The Damascus rose, scientifically named *Rosa x damascena*—the “x” denotes its heritage as a hybrid—blooms in the Valley of Roses some 5,000 kilometers west of where it is believed to have evolved, in the region now made up of parts of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan some 7,000 years ago. Under Ottoman rule *Rosa x damascena* was brought from Anatolia when it was discovered that the soil and climate in central Bulgaria provided the roses an ideal environment.

Mattock also explains that from Kazanlak to anywhere *Rosa x damascena* grows, generations of women have known that rosewater can ease menstrual cramps and reduce inflammations—conclusions recently backed up by research. Midwives have long administered rosewater as a muscle relaxant for childbirth, and it is marketed today as a skin softener. “Of course, these women talked to their sisters,” says Mattock, “and it passed down the line, from Samarkand to Rome.”

In pre-Christian Rome, rosewater was also served in sweets, and roses featured in frescoes and even had a festival, Rosalia, held in its honor. From the 10th century CE, Syrian growers began to cultivate the flower in greater quantities. The 12th-century-CE geographer Ibn Khaldun noted that one province of Syria “was required to give a tribute of 30,000 bottles of rosewater annually to the caliph of Baghdad.” The European Crusades had one fragrant silver lining: Christian combatants carried the rose back with them to Europe—with its “Damascus” prefix.

Through war and peace, love and recipes, the Damascus rose has undertaken one of botanical history’s greatest migrations. That is partly because of its fabulous fragrance and life-affirming properties, and partly because it is incredibly tough. Mattock, who runs Mattock Rose Science, a rose research subsidiary of the company Saint Fiacre Ltd, explains: “If you keep a rose sucker damp, wrapped in hessian sacking, it can survive harsh arid climates and rough terrain.” Evidence suggests that one form of the Damascus rose was able to transmigrate from Central Asia to Morocco via Egypt, Libya and across the northern Maghrib.

Kirova lives at the heart of the Damascus rose’s latest cultural home. A few kilometers north of her village of Rozovo sits Kazanlak, the capital of the Valley of Roses. With 45,000 residents, the town is blooming. Local businesses include the Hotel Roza, Rosa opticians and Rozova Dolina Kazanlak, the town’s soccer team. Residents look like they have just stepped out of a facial salon—or a moisturizer commercial—with skins as radiant as blossoms. Flowering roses fire off so much scent that they stop travelers in their tracks. German General Helmuth



von Moltke, not a man known for frivolity, visited Kazanlak in 1837 and noted: “The air is full of fragrance. Kazanlak is the Kashmir of Europe.”

In a flower-filled park sits a new museum dedicated to the history of roses. The Kazanlak Rose Museum documents the Damascus rose’s journey from Syria, across the Ottoman Empire, to Bulgaria in the 17th century.

A museum exhibit shows the alchemy of distilling rosewater into rose oil. This gives the product greater longevity and aromatic intensity yet a smaller volume, rendering it perfect for transportation. The process involves an *alambik* (from the Arabic *inbiq*), which is a copper cauldron topped with a snout, through which steam gets pushed through armfuls of rose petals. The scented steam then condenses and drips into a rosewater vat. The museum’s *alambik* might be recognizable by Ibn Sina, the father of modern medicine from Bukhara in Central Asia, who produced the first distillation of essential rose oil, also known as *attar*, in the 10th century CE by using the exact same method.

Another museum display shows *konkumi* (singular *konkuma*), round, flask-like iron vessels used to export rose oil. The biggest one was last used in 1947, yet it still exudes a glorious perfume. Even using the latest technology, it still takes 3,000 kilograms of Damascus rose petals to make 1 kilogram of rose oil. There are also tiny decorative containers, known as *muscal*s, that each hold

It still takes 3,000 kilograms of rose petals to distill a single kilogram of rose oil.

5 grams of oil—a quantity that is priced today at about US\$50.

“A lot of the terms in rose production, like *konkuma* and *muscal*, have Middle Eastern origins,” says Kazanlak Rose Museum Director Momchil Marinov, whose passion for roses led him to study the economic history of the Valley of Roses. The origin of the town’s name, Kazanlak, comes from an Ottoman Turkish word that means “field of cauldrons.”

In particular, the valley’s Muslim population used roses in their cuisine, explains Marinov. “The rosewater was also used in local Islamic customs and funerals,” and still is, in a nation that has an estimated 10 percent Muslim minority. Even the bottles of spring water that Marinov offers to guests are infused with rosewater. Today Bulgarian rosewater is exported to sea—scores of recipes across the Islamic world including Egyptian *kunafa*, Turkish *delight*, Indian *lassi*, Maghrebi *ras el hanout* and Indonesian *sirap bandung*. Locals like Kirova also consume roses in syrups and drinks. “Although we don’t eat too much rose jam because it’s bad for your teeth,” she explains.

Back in the 19th century, when Bulgaria pushed for independence from the Ottoman Empire, “the first Bulgarian producers marketed their oil internationally, starting with England,” continues Marinov. Exports did not have to go via Istanbul, the empire’s capital, to Western Europe. “Trading families started to individually establish businesses with France, the United States, United Kingdom and Austria,” says Marinov. *Rosa x damascena* was even reintroduced back to Turkey in the

**LEFT TO RIGHT** The tradition for pickers like Christoph Shaousha, 80, is to put the first picked rose of the day behind one’s ear. Ana Dobрева, deputy director of Kazanlak’s Institute for Roses and Aromatic Plants, works with variants of *Rosa damascena* to make the flower larger, more prolific and more resistant to disease. Georgi Chaushev has grown roses for six years near Karlovo, where his 1.5-hectare rose fields have produced an average of 8,000 kilograms of rose petals each year and, from that, a distilled 2.5 kilograms of rose oil.



"A lot of the terms in rose production have Middle Eastern origins," says Momchil Marinov, director of the Kazanlak Rose Museum. In the museum's garden, he poses in front of an antique *alambiq*, a distilling apparatus whose name comes from the Arabic *inbiq*. **RIGHT** Tanya Valeva, marketing manager of Alteya Organics in Yagoda, whose skin and self-care products are exported to retailers in more than 75 countries, says that of all roses, *Rosa x damascena* produces "the highest quality of oil with the most complexity."



1890s—by a resident of Kazanlak.

Planting in the Valley of Roses peaked around 1910 with 9,000 hectares of Damascus roses. After the fall of communism in 1989, "only 1,000 to 1,500 hectares were planted," frowns Marinov. "These were the critical times." Now statistics show around 4,500 hectares planted with *Rosa x damascena*. "Bulgaria is obligated to preserve this production."

To drive into the countryside around Kazanlak is to understand why the Damascus rose found a safe haven here. The Balkan mountains rise to nearly 2,400 meters, and even in May they remain snow-capped. Their cool breezes act like a refrigerator, giving rose buds extra time to swell their essential components each spring. The Balkans also raise the Tundzha River, which pours crystalline water into a plain packed with volcanic pumice. The resulting soil offers unrivaled depth and drainage—superb conditions for growing roses above all else.

In the middle of the Valley of Roses, rows of *Rosa x damascena* shrubs are marked with labels in Cyrillic script that translate "experience" and "control." (The Cyrillic script originated in Bulgaria.) Alongside sits a country villa that contains the Institute for Roses and Aromatic Plants. The scent around the institute is as intense as a department store's perfume counter. Here a mission is underway to safeguard—and improve—the Damascus rose stock using a "gene fund" of hundreds of bushes plus tissue cultures stored in a nutrient soup.

Ana Dobрева, the institute's deputy director, is a scientist of scent. Wearing a floral shirt and a huge smile, her passion for the Damascus rose is as infectious as the blousy blooms out front. "*Rosa damascena* is unique because no other rose has the same qualities," says Dobрева, who also started picking the rose flowers as a schoolgirl before commencing her 30-year study into rose genetics.

"*Rosa gallica* has a good oil yield,"

explains Dobрева. "*Rosa moschata* has a different profile of aroma volatiles." Their hybrid offspring, *Rosa x damascena*, has the greatest number of identifiable essential oil components—around 300 in all—including terpenes, esters and aliphatic hydrocarbons, all of which grant stronger and longer-lasting scents than any other rose. "Plus a richer number of phenolic compounds," adds Dobрева. "It's the relationship between these compounds that makes the best aroma character." Phenolic compounds also guard against aging and inflammation.

As Dobрева strolls through her latest line of experimental plantings, she distills her institute's mission. "We select the best samples of *Rosa x damascena* and work to make them better"—more resistant to diseases, with a larger number of bigger buds, greater yields and improved essential oils.

Would a rose grower from a century ago recognize the institute's latest cultivars? "Years ago I went to Taif in Saudi Arabia to help their rose production," Dobрева explains, referring to the hill town in the mountains of western Saudi Arabia that is

nicknamed *Madinat al-Wurud*—the City of Roses—and renowned for its cool, redolent springtime. "Taif has an old population of *Rosa damascena* and some differences can be recognized, like the number of branches and shape of the thorns. But the genotype is still the same. *Rosa damascena* is our treasure and we have worked with it for hundreds of years."

This season's rose picking has already begun in the fields of Karlovo, a Valley of Roses town 50 kilometers west of Rozovo and Kazanlak. Pink balls of blossom look like party balloons

Though it has grown more than fourfold since the end of communism, total planting in the Valley of Roses is still only about half of what was grown at its peak around 1910.



As the sun rises on a rose field in Karlovo, Christina Chucheba plucks blooms row by row and places them in the pouch of her apron which, once it is full, she transfers to the plastic sack. In peak season, an experienced picker may collect about 100 kilograms of blossoms in a day.

snagged on a thorny forest. The harvest is two weeks later than usual. Climate change has brought erratic weather patterns over the last decade, meaning that picking might be condensed into 30 days rather than the customary 40.

Marchelo Valkov and his father own two hectares of roses. Both have been picking since dawn. “It’s very nice early in the morning,” says Valkov, with the pride of a man whose family have been growing Damascus roses for centuries. Following tradition, pickers often stick the first rose behind their ear, although that is where the romance ends. “It’s hard work because no one can do your job like you do it. You need to go and pick roses and earn your money.” Marchelo Valkov’s roses will be sold to a commercial rose oil distillery, “for around 1 lev per kilo, about 50 cents.”

Most commercial pickers are itinerant and seasonal, moving from one harvest to the next, of roses, cherries, apples, grapes and more. An astute picker can pluck 100 kilograms of buds in a single day. By mid-morning giant sacks will be rushed by tractor to Valley of Roses’s seven large distilleries, including Enio Bonchev, which carries the name of the trader who a century ago pioneered Bulgarian rose oil exports.

**T**he story of Enio Bonchev, now Bulgaria’s leading rose oil exporter, tells the tale of 20th-century rose production. It reads like a Hollywood script. “My great-grandmother ran the business from 1939 to 1947,” says



Bonchev’s great-grandson Filip Lissicharov, the current president of the distillery. It was then requisitioned into a state-owned collective farm by Bulgaria’s communist government. In 1967 the distillery’s rose bud storage room, with its ornate stone walls, was turned into a museum. “Nobody in my family spoke about the distillery since 1947,” Lissicharov explains.

When communism collapsed, Lissicharov’s family moved to Los Angeles. “My father, a Bulgarian movie director, tried to find a job as a director of photography in Hollywood,” he continues.

“I enjoyed the teenage life of a Bulgarian boy who had not seen Coca-Cola.” When news came in 1992 that the state-owned distillery had been restituted to Lissicharov’s family, “it was a shock.” Lissicharov, who dreamt of becoming an actor or a football player, was not initially pleased. “My parents moved back to Bulgaria and decided

“Young people learn rose picking, [but] will roses become part of their family tradition?”

— FILIP LISSICHAROV



From the fields to the distillery, bags of rose petals are unloaded into mixers that begin the distillation process, such as these in the village of Gurkovo. **RIGHT** Rose-infused soaps, perfumes, lotions, and other souvenirs highlight the commercial uses of rose oils and waters at the shop for tourists at the Museum of Roses in Kazanlak. The museum highlights the blooming industry and also shows artifacts such as this 19th-century decorative muscal, **ABOVE**, used for storing rose oil.

to turn it into a working rosewater and oil factory.” In 1997 Lissicharov also moved back to the Valley of Roses, “starting from the lowest level, putting the flowers inside the stills.” Enio Bonchev’s copper stills, which date from the early 1900s, were fired up once again.

TOP: NIKOLAY DOYCHINOV / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



Since 1903 Kazanlak's annual Rose Festival, held this year on June 5, celebrates the end of the rose harvest season and the community's connection to the Damascus rose through traditional costume, dance, music, art workshops, commercial expos and the crowning of the rose queen.

Now Lissicharov has added three modern distillery buildings and accompanies government ministers on export trips to the Middle East. "The Gulf countries have big potential," he says in a serious voice. His nation can undercut some overseas rivals, as Bulgaria's average wage of 6 euros per hour is the lowest in the European Union. "However Bulgarian rose oil is renowned for its quality, not price," asserts Lissicharov. "We are pioneers because there's nowhere to steal ideas from."

Lissicharov's main fear is that "young people who learn rose picking from their parents have a telephone in their pocket with Instagram. My question is: Will roses become part of their family tradition like their grandparents? This isn't like working in a gas station. It's not a business, it's our life."

Alongside changing traditions and weather patterns, a declining population poses a challenge to a labor-intensive industry, where every step must be done by hand. Since 1990 Bulgaria's population has fallen from around nine million to just under seven million. Many emigrated to the United States, United Kingdom and Germany. Few have returned. The fertility rate, which stands around 1.6, is not enough to sustain the population.

Can roses help rejuvenate a region? In the Valley of Roses, where rose production is the second-largest employer, it appears they can. In 2021 Kazanlak recorded 554 births, a number higher than that of some larger cities. Tonight the selection of a rose queen, part of the town's three-week Rose Festival, will pack

hundreds of guests into an auditorium in an event sponsored by vehicle manufacturers, beauty salons and the Enio Bonchev distillery. Kirova organizes another part of the festival in her village of Rozovo. All across the valley, roses are bringing hope—and cash.

"The rose queen event goes back to 1903," shouts Galina Stoyanova over the auditorium noise. Stoyanova is Kazanlak's energetic—and first female—mayor, as well as organizer of the Rose Festival. "In the early years, the event was held for charity, raising funds for the poor young girls of Kazanlak," she explains. "In this way they received the opportunity to improve their lifestyle."

The climax of Stoyanova's festivities is the rose parade in early June. To mark the end of the Damascus rose harvest, residents don traditional dress to dance, sing and throw petals through town. Similar festivals take place in Kazanlak's sister cities including Grasse in France and Fukuyama in Japan.

Sadly in Syria, rose production near Al-Mrah near Damascus has fallen to an all-time low. Recent conflict has kept farmers from their rose fields, where the Damascus-born poet, Nizar Qabbani, spoke of "tales of the Damascene rose, that depicts the history of all fragrance." To help rejuvenate the industry, "craftsmanship associated with the Damascene rose in Al-Mrah" was inscribed by UNESCO in 2019. Some Syrians have carried their plants to the Bekaa Valley in neighboring Lebanon. Syrian refugees also harvest the flowers in Cyprus—with the habitual 5 a.m. start.

"We have a lot of traditions that we show to our daughters and granddaughters."

—DELKA KIROVA



A mural in Karlovo shows a woman in traditional Bulgarian *nosiya* dress with a rose in her hair. The community's connection to roses is rooted in its history and industry. According to Bulgaria's National Statistical Institute, in 2020 the country exported nearly 1.5 tons of rose oil.

Back in the village of Yagoda, a short drive east of Rozovo and Kazanlak, there's a timeless sunset. Rows of Damascus roses are serenaded by birdsong. Butterflies swerve above salmon-pink blooms. Rabbits hop through the wildflowers that tickle the rose bush stems. Alongside these roses sits a gleaming factory that could carry the Damascus rose to the farthest edges of the earth.

The factory belongs to Alteya Organics, a skincare company that in 2004 pioneered biodynamic planting in the region. Business operates on a closed circle. Buds are carried by hand to brand-new stainless steel distilling machines, which—by next year—will be entirely powered by a 100-kilowatt solar array. Over a 24-hour period, these machines spin and steam more oil from each bud than any other method. The remaining rose pulp is composted as fertilizer for next year's crop. Exquisitely packaged cleansers, organic face creams, toners, lip balms and mother-and-baby products are crafted in a new skincare laboratory next door.

Alteya Organics' senior sales and marketing manager, Tanya Valeva, translates Damascus rose magic to the Instagram-generation. "There are more than 7,000 different types of roses all over the world," she explains. "*Rosa damascena* produces the highest quality of oil with the most complexity."

Although Alteya Organics exports to over 75 countries, in stores like Whole Foods and Planet Organic, Valeva believes the future is social. "The visual materials are really important," says Valeva.

Consumers in each country and social media channel are different. "For example, American users look for high-quality functional products with organic certification, but they want to know you're real, that what you're doing is not just for the

money." Valeva believes that local education in product development, packaging design and marketing would be beneficial for the Valley of Roses. Then the Damascus rose can complete its final passage around the globe.

Back in her office in Rozovo, globalization is far from Kirova's mind. The former rose picker is organizing her village's rose ritual next week. "We will dress in traditional Bulgarian costumes and sing special rose songs before the harvest," Kirova explains. Another volunteer will clang bells to ward off evil spirits that might damage the ripening Damascus roses. "We have a lot of traditions that we show to our daughters and granddaughters," concludes Kirova. Through blooms and busts, changing climates and winds of politics, the Damascus rose has been one constant in a life well lived. The future of one of the botanical world's most successful migrants looks rosy. 🌹



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TAPPING

INTO

STORY

WRITTEN BY *Ken Chitwood*

PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Bear Gutierrez*



**SWEAT BEADS ANDREW NEMR'S FACE AS HE GLIDES AND CLACKS, CLACKS AND GLIDES HIS TAP SHOES ON THE WELL-SCUFFED WOODEN DANCE SQUARES OF HIS PORTABLE PERFORMANCE STAGE. SOUND REVERBERATES FROM THE METAL TAPPING TIPS AT THE TOE AND HEEL OF EACH SHOE, INTERSPERSED WITH HIS SYNCOPATED THUMPS ON THE WOOD. BUT HE'S ALSO TALKING, TELLING A STORY. IT'S 2017, AND HIS ONE-MAN PRODUCTION, RISING TO THE TAP, COMBINES TAP DANCE AND CHOREOGRAPHY WITH STORYTELLING.**

His subject: life, and our journeys to discover purpose, across continents, among cultures and over time. With crescendos and decrescendos of stomps and silent pauses, he tells his own story, from his birth in 1980 to parents who had fled the Lebanese Civil War four years earlier and settled in a suburb of Edmonton, Alberta. He takes his audience from that small town and builds toward an understanding of his identity amid wider cultural, national and religious narratives.

Five years later, Nemr is still performing *Rising to the Tap*. He has appeared on countless stages large and small, TV and YouTube. He has given more than half a dozen TED Talks. Alongside Nemr's own life experiences, his show and script have continued to evolve.

Nemr's childhood memories of the Lebanese Civil War consist of TV screens showing columns of black smoke, bombed-out apartment blocks and chaos in the streets of Beirut, all framed by family discussions of a Lebanon that was.

At the family dinner table, he remembers his father, Joseph, recounting stories, from histories of the Ottoman Empire to the writings on life, death, beauty and peace by 19th-century Lebanese American poet Kahlil Gibran.

"Even though I didn't have personal connections to some of these stories, the relationship to Lebanon was evident," he says.

Nemr makes it clear Joseph and Marlene, Nemr's mother, never framed their own lives in terms of the war that had forced their emigration. Nonetheless, "it does something to a kid when you turn on the TV in the '80s and there are pictures of the place where your parents are from being bombed," he says. "I could see that my parents were feeling the pain of the war."

When he was 3 years old, the family moved to the United States, just outside Washington, D.C. Soon after arriving he enrolled in his first dance class. At age 9 Nemr recalls he "fell in love" with tap dance after watching the 1989 movie *Tap*, which starred Gregory Hines and Sammy Davis, Jr. Most compelling was the film's "challenge dance" scene, which featured tap legends Bunny Briggs, Harold Nicholas, Steve Condos, Sandman Sims and Jimmy Slyde.

"They were so free, so expressive, so in tune with themselves and the tap," says Nemr. "I wanted to be like them."

Nemr would later be mentored by Gregory Hines, a Tony, Emmy and Screen Actors Guild Award winner and one of the

International tap dance virtuoso Andrew Nemr began learning the art as a boy. At 9 years old, he watched the movie *Tap*, which inspired a lifelong dedication to the craft that has included training with some of tap's top names, including Harold Cromer, seated at **LEFT**, and Gregory Hines, **LOWER**.





most-celebrated American tap dancers of all time. Nemr studied under Hines in New York at Woodpecker's Tap Center, honing what Hines called Nemr's "rich and truly expressive" skills.

It was at Woodpecker's that Nemr also met New York tap dancer, actor and renowned dance mentor Savion Glover and, later, joined Glover's DC Crew before helping found Glover's dance company. International performances followed in 2001 at the Cannes Film Festival and the following year at the Winter Olympics Arts Festival. He tapped on the hallowed stage of the Apollo Theater, in Harlem, where so many musical icons began their rise to stardom, from Ella Fitzgerald and the Supremes to James Brown, Sammy Davis, Jr. and Michael Jackson.

He danced alongside and studied under some of the world's best tap dancers including Jimmy Slyde, Sandman Sims, Elvera Davis, James "Buster" Brown, Dianne Walker, Barbara Duffy and Henry LeTang. These dancers, he says, became his "gateway into the oral tradition of the craft. They mentored me not only so I could share their steps but also share who they were."

That resonated with Nemr, for whom dance has always been about the collective and the wider story of traditions and peoples sidelined, put down by injustice or chased by conflict.

"I am one person, but there are tons of other 'one persons' around," he says. "I was grafted into a kind of confluence of communal story in which you begin to parse out your place. It goes beyond utilitarian performance or learning a craft to finding a deeper story."

**"HIS UNIVERSAL, UNIQUE  
EXPRESSION THROUGH TAP—  
HIS STYLE—IS ABLE TO CROSS  
BOUNDARIES IN WAYS THAT  
OTHER FORMS OF STORY-  
TELLING MAYBE CAN'T."**

—JIM DOLLE

Dancing, says Nemr, "is choreographed movement that exhibits technique and entertains, but it also displays shape and leaves traces. If it's done well, it tells a story: something historical, something commonplace or something that is both and beyond at the same time."

That puts him in a class by himself. Contemporary US artist Makoto Fujimura once described Nemr as "one of the greatest tap dancers of our time" and perhaps "even greater of an artist."

Jazz tap historian Constance Valis Hill wrote in her 2010 book *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* that Nemr is "one of the most hardworking and diverse dancers of his generation."

As a TED Fellow, Nemr has explored how digital technology can help oral traditions survive and even thrive in changing times. In a talk entitled "Stepping Back in Time Before It's Too Late," Nemr related how his emergence into the tap-dancing scene in the US enabled him to become a carrier of its oral tradition, a raconteur of its "good ol' days" and a chronicler of its 1990s





reemergence into the national psyche.

“In all the change that goes on, there must be something that isn’t changing as fast,” he says. “For me, that something is, for lack of a better word, the nature of the person.”

When he speaks about oral traditions in workshops or courses, Nemr says, he likes to remind his students that until recently, each generation did not have its own styles of music. Music was shared through the years, passed down through generations: Music was communal. The purpose of music and dance was to reinforce the identity of the individual within the story of the community. In a world where every person can curate a unique soundtrack, that communal aspect of music and dance is vulnerable to loss, he says.

“In ‘tap-dance land,’ you learn this thing that you do from people, shaped in part by who they are and their personalities. And as you learn from them, you begin to embody someone else’s personality, someone else’s story—their choices, preferences, approaches to excellence, relationship to the audience, music—and then you can begin adding your own and passing it on,” he says.

It is, as he often tells his students, in these larger stories that one can really find oneself and, perhaps, make the world a better place.

“That pursuit has been a theme, a constant inquiry for me,” he says.

In 2004 Nemr founded his own dance company, Cats Paying Dues. It went on to garner critical acclaim with its focus on the ensemble rather than the individual. It also eventually brought Nemr into contact with Jim Dolle, branch director at McBurney YMCA in Brooklyn, New York, who in 2016 attended Manhattan Center’s Hammerstein Ballroom to catch a dancer Dolle had heard of but not yet seen perform in

**TOP** A screen shot from the film *Identity: The Andrew Nemr Story* shows Nemr performing on the streets of Tokyo. The documentary film unpacks the complexities of Nemr’s life-journey with tap dancing. **CENTER** At the 2019 international event Tap on Barcelona, Nemr put on a workshop and, **LEFT**, performed.



Now resident in Boise, Idaho, Nemr makes time for reflection and inspiration. “The stories that we tell can either breathe life into someone, or death. As a storyteller, there’s a lot of power there. And with a lot of power comes a lot of responsibility,” he says.

person: Andrew Nemr. As Dolle watched Nemr’s mix of tap and spoken word, a vision began to form in Dolle’s mind.

“I saw Andrew as an authentic catalyst for being able to build bridges between different communities in New York City—performers, artists and people of faith,” Dolle says.

Dolle met with Nemr after the show and warmed quickly to Nemr’s sincerity and kindness. Nemr became a regular instructor, coach and performer at the YMCA.

“Andrew’s power comes from his ability to cross genres and to connect with people of various backgrounds, to relate different cultures together, where you would not necessarily think there is a natural similarity,” Dolle says. “His universal, unique expression through tap—his style—is able to cross boundaries in ways that other forms of storytelling maybe can’t.”

Dolle also says Nemr “brings an interesting mix of heritage and personal experience that shows how circumstances in life are not that simple.”

Nemr describes some of his stories as not just narratives but homilies, intentionally instructive tales that invite the audience into both wider wonder and compassionate understanding.

“The stories that we tell can either breathe life into someone, or death. As a storyteller, there’s a lot of power there. And with a lot of power comes a lot of responsibility.”

That, he adds, requires a firm foundation, a grounding. For himself, that means always landing in the same place: on love.

“Over the course of my life, I experienced significant disappointment and pain, as relationships fell apart on account of things I had no control over. Other peoples’ lives are the same. The question is whether you allow a seed of bitterness to be planted and grow ... or try to water the seed of love that is there even in the midst of that pain.”

That, he adds, is “the kind of story the world needs to hear more.” 🌐



**Ken Chitwood**, Ph.D., is a Germany-based religion scholar and award-winning religion, travel and culture writer. He is the author of *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean* (2021). **Bear Gutierrez** is a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist and commercial photographer based in Denver. After 10 years on staff at the *Rocky Mountain News*, he is now also a frequent volunteer mentor for aspiring journalists.



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# Bibi Zogbé

## THE FLOWER PAINTER

Written by DIANNA WRAY | Photographed by GEORGE AZAR | Art courtesy of SALEH BARAKAT

“NOTHING TAME EVER SEEMED TO DRAW HER EYE.”

—Saleh Barakat

It was the vibrant hues in the painting that first drew his eye almost 20 years ago, recalls Beirut art gallerist Saleh Barakat. It was one painting amid a shipment of works that arrived for sale at his Agial Gallery, all of them painted by artists from Lebanon’s modern art movement. The shades of emerald, cornflower blue and chestnut, rendered by thrusting gobs of color on the canvas, made him do a double take, all without a hint of hesitation. The painting showed a simple garden of Lebanese cacti, but the painter’s strokes were strikingly confident, and in style it was unlike anything else from the era. Though he recognized the artist’s name, Bibi Zogbé, inked in the bottom right corner, he did not recall ever having seen work by her before.



**LEFT** “El Año del Libertador” (The Year of the Liberator), 1950, oil on canvas, 60 centimeters x 80 centimeters. “It was this big painting of cacti with her style that is strong but not very academic or trained that hooked me,” says Beirut art collector Saleh Barakat, who began investigating what was then the virtually unknown career of Bibi Zogbé. **OPPOSITE** Zogbé left Lebanon at 16 years old for marriage in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where this undated photo was taken with one of her paintings in the background.

“How could someone this good not be more famous?” he wondered.

The question nagged him. He had studied business administration at the American University of Beirut in the 1980s, but his passion, he says, was art. He combined both in 1991 by opening his first gallery in Hamra, an urban district where its vibrant scene of cafes, theaters, museums and galleries was reemerging following the civil war of the 1970s and 1980s. By the

“I knew Bibi was a Lebanese painter, of course, but I didn’t know anything else about her,” Barakat says now. “It was this big painting of cacti with her style that is strong but not very academic or trained that hooked me.”

From then on Barakat kept an eye out for any of Zogbé’s paintings coming on the market. He tried to pick up tidbits about the artist herself along the way, but not much turned up, he says. Within months Barakat had seen enough of her work to recognize a Zogbé on sight, but the woman herself remained enigmatic.

time he became intrigued with Zogbé, he had plenty of connections in the art world to help his search.

Barakat knew Zogbé had been a member of Lebanon’s modern art scene in the period from roughly the 1930s to the 1970s, decades when many citizens of the nascent country looked to art to help create a cohesive sense of what it meant to be Lebanese—a concept that had only been formalized when France took control of the region in 1920 and pieced together from collapsing Ottoman rule in what would become Lebanon’s



“Her work was unique, entirely her own, and I wanted to know what was behind it.”

—SALEH BARAKAT

year, she was awarded the prestigious Lebanese Cedar Medallion of Excellence.

Despite this renown, Barakat found little about her in the Lebanese modern art history books that started coming out in the 1980s. He spoke with other artists who had traveled in similar professional circles, and he sought information about her in art catalogs and newspaper archives. While her contemporaries were thoroughly covered, Zogbé was rarely mentioned, even as other female Lebanese artists such as Helen Khal, Huguette Caland

and Etel Adnan, were lionized. For the most part, when Zogbé’s name came up, she was referred to simply as “the woman who painted flowers.”

“People would say this, and I realized that it was a way of dismissing her,” Barakat says. “Bibi’s work was much more than just a society lady who would do a little painting.”

Barakat gradually realized she had most likely created hundreds

modern borders. This quest for a distinctive identity would produce esteemed painters such as Moustafa Farroukh, Helen Khal and Marie Hadad, head of the Association des Artistes du Liban in the 1940s, as well as Omar Onsi, considered Lebanon’s most-renowned impressionist. Amid the celebrations when the country became fully independent from France in 1947, Lebanon funded publications about three artists: Onsi, Zogbé and Saliba Douaihy. Of them, Zogbé was the sole woman. That same

**FROM LEFT** Untitled and undated, oil on canvas; “Hydrangeas,” 1942, oil on canvas, 65 x 60 centimeters; “Chrysanthemums,” 1975, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 centimeters; “Japanese Apple Tree,” undated, oil on hardboard, 70 x 60 centimeters.



Born Labibe Zogbé, Bibi spent her childhood in the village of Sahel Alma, just north of Beirut, Lebanon, but even this simple fact was little known in Beirut art circles until recently. It is still not known what precisely drove Zogbé's almost singular passion for flowers as her subjects.

of works, most of them renderings of flowers and other plants native to Lebanon. But Beirut's art community offered only slivers about her life. She'd grown up in a small town on the Lebanese coast, some recalled, but they weren't sure which one.

More than a year after the painting had arrived in his gallery, Barakat learned why her trail kept going cold: When Zogbé was 16 years old, she left Lebanon for an arranged marriage in Argentina. Maybe what he was looking for was over there, he thought.

Around the same time as his discovery, by happenstance, Barakat encountered an Argentinian diplomat in Beirut who proved another fan of her work and confirmed Zogbé had spent a large portion of her life in Buenos Aires. When Barakat's gallery was invited to participate in the 2005 arte-BA, the Buenos Aires Contemporary Art Fair, he felt it was a sign.

He applied for a visa to Argentina in 2004. Yet, even now, Barakat struggles to put his finger on what compelled him. Something about Zogbé's paintings reminded him of his own mother, who had raised him alone, but his quest was fundamentally about understanding Zogbé, he says.

"I was fascinated by her," Barakat says now. "Her work was unique, entirely her own, and I wanted to know what was behind it. I wasn't trying to make her paintings more valuable or

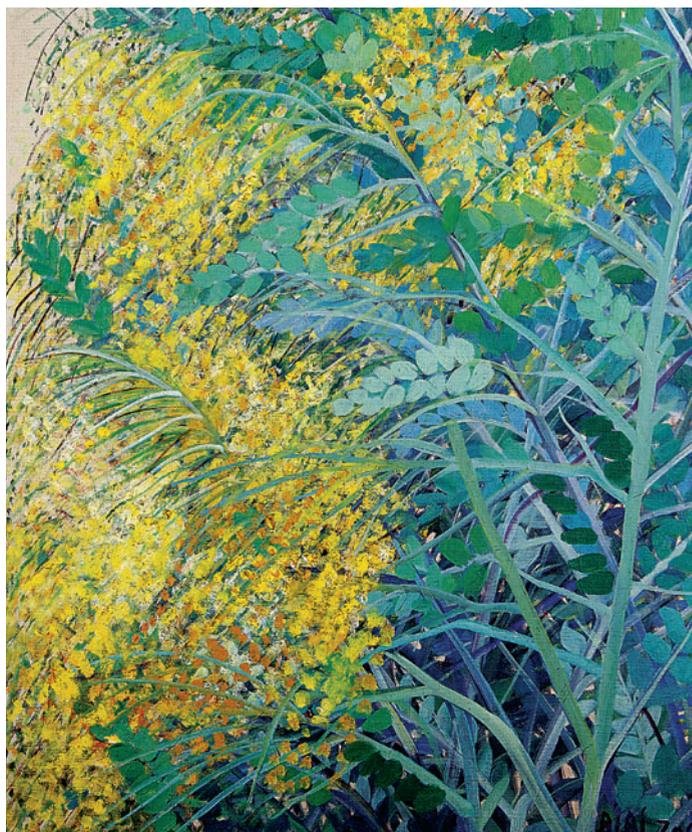


anything like that. I just loved her art."

It took a year and a day for the visa to arrive.

"By then I was telling myself the whole thing was silly," he remembers. "But with the visa in hand, how could I not go? I decided I would simply try."

In Buenos Aires, Barakat found that, as in Beirut, local artists knew one another while the large Lebanese immigrant community proved to have a long collective memory as well. Within a few days he had connected with people who knew "La Pintura de Flores," as she was nicknamed in Spanish, "The Flower Painter."



LOWER LEFT AND OPPOSITE, LOWER LEFT AND RIGHT: MUSEO PROVINCIAL DE BELLAS ARTES FRANKLIN RAWSON; FAR RIGHT: NATIONAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BUENOS AIRES



She had been born Labibé Zogbé in 1890 to a prosperous family in Sahel Alma, a small, coastal village along the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea now about a 40-minute drive north of Beirut. It's a town known for gardens, lemon trees and orange blossom fragrances lacing the air each spring. Zogbé received a French education from a local Catholic school, most likely College Notre Dame Sahel Alma, where she likely was taught about French art as well.

It's unclear when she started painting, Barakat says. Nobody he talked to in Buenos Aires knew or even pretended to know much about Zogbé's life before she arrived in South America. Still, more information about her turned up in Argentina than in Lebanon.

When she moved to Argentina in 1906, as planned Zogbé immediately married Domingo Samaja, a

**RIGHT** "Ceibo y espinillo," 1964, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 centimeters. **ABOVE** Zogbé paintings on view at the Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes Franklin Rawson in Buenos Aires.

Lebanese immigrant. Such arrangements were common at that time for women of her social standing, Barakat says, as many who left Lebanon had prospered.

What wasn't common, he continues, was that by the early 1930s, she had left the marriage and was legally divorced.

"Dropping out of a marriage then, and refusing to marry again, was a courageous choice at that time," he says, noting she chose to remain in Argentina after her divorce and start a life with a mix of new friends from all over the world.

From her friends and their children, Barakat learned that her home in Buenos Aires became a kind of salon, a place where people of all backgrounds could meet despite social strictures in Argentinian society that tried to prevent newly arrived immigrants from mingling with Argentinians who identified as native. (Argentina experienced multiple waves of immigration from the late 19th to the mid-20th century from the Middle East and Europe.)

It was in the mid-1930s that Zogbé began to show her paintings in galleries and exhibits in Argentina. The works almost entirely focused on inventive interpretations of flowers gathered in bouquets, growing in gardens, the petals either gently opened to the sun or featured as tightly closed buds, Barakat says.



“The way she paints flowers is very unusual,” Barakat says, and much of her style suggests she was self-taught or minimally taught. “It’s not a classical or a European style—she seems to have jabbed the colors onto the canvas with her brush. She was not interested in nice domestic flowers, only in wildflowers, thistles, cacti, things that grow on their own. Nothing tame ever seemed to draw her eye.”

In the early 1930s, she began studying with Argentina-based Bulgarian painter Klin Dimitroff. She mounted her first solo exhibition in 1934 at the famed Witcomb Gallery in Buenos Aires, and Argentine President Agustín Justo presided over its opening. This was followed by a show at the Charpentier Gallery in Paris in 1935 and another show in Chile in 1939, according to catalogs and newspaper reviews, says Barakat.

“The art from this period and this region is unlike anything else. Fields of painting like still lifes and landscapes that were considered old fashioned in the Western world were respected here,” says

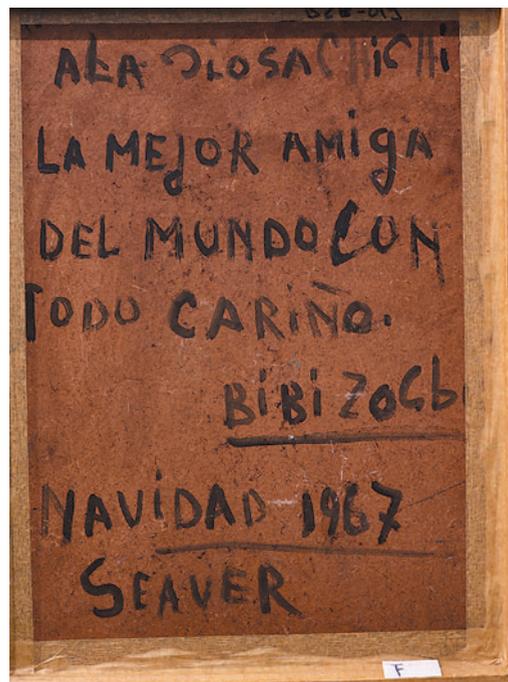
Kirsten Scheid, an anthropology professor specializing in Arab modern art at American University of Beirut. “Lebanese artists were having their own cultural conversation, so a landscape wasn’t just a landscape: It was a landscape of Lebanon. Flower paintings weren’t just still lifes: They were Lebanese flowers. It was all part of establishing a shared art, a shared culture.”

The Lebanese “had no idea what a post-colonial identity would look like, and because of that, the art from this period is unlike anything else. The modernism of this period has entirely different meanings for Lebanese painters compared to what it would have meant in other places.”

Lebanese artists drew upon French impressionism, Spanish modernism and German expressionism. They celebrated nature, the human form, landscapes, trees and, of course, flowers, all to



After World War II, Zogbé traveled back to Lebanon and spent time in both Paris and Dakar, as well as Buenos Aires. She occasionally broke away from floral themes: In 1947 she painted “The African Princess” in Dakar. In 2005 in Buenos Aires, Barakat met the daughter of the late Chichi, one of Zogbé’s friends, and she gifted Barakat this portrait, **RIGHT**, which Zogbé had painted of Chichi. The dedication on its back translates from Spanish, “To the goddess Chichi, the best friend in the world, with all my love, Bibi Zogbé. Christmas, 1967.”



look inward and establish Lebanese ideas of beauty amid a Lebanese identity that would bind diverse people in a time of mass self-invention. Despite living half a world away, Zogbé embraced many of these ideas.

“We tend to think about these modern artists from the Arab World as almost derivative of European modern art, but the reality is not that simple,” says Sarah Rogers, a professor of art and architecture at Vermont’s Middlebury College who specializes in Arab and Lebanese modern and contemporary art history.

“Artists like Bibi were not so much reflecting European art trends as they were engaging with what Lebanese artists in the country and across the world were doing.”

Zogbé enjoyed painting still life, Rogers says, and her Lebanese contemporaries also painted a number of various nature scenes.



**LEFT** “Chrisentemos” (Chrysanthemums), undated, oil on canvas, 31 x 25 centimeters. **CENTER** Untitled, 1935, oil on masonite: This painting shows her use of thick paint to achieve a 3D texture. **RIGHT** “La Rosa en el balcon” (The rose on the balcony), 1956, oil on wood, 30 x 24 centimeters.

“That might have seemed old fashioned to someone who wasn’t involved in Lebanon’s art scene, but within that scene there were a lot of paintings of landscapes, nature, plants, flowers,” she says. “There was a lot of emphasis on celebrating the natural beauty found in Lebanon, but if you weren’t looking at it that way, it was much easier to dismiss what she was doing.”

Her works also tended to have double meanings, Barakat says. Her paintings usually operated on two levels so that at first glance you might simply see tastefully rendered flora, while a closer study of a bouquet—the specific flowers in the arrangement, the state of the blooms, and other details—offers clues for a deeper interpretation, Barakat says.

Even a brief mention of Zogbé from a 1948 overview of Lebanon’s art movement by poet and writer Charles Corm does not fail to comment on how symbolism was underpinning her work, Barakat notes. “Each one of Bibi’s flowers seems a naked soul, tormented by passion, sobbing with delight, tensed to the extreme, reaching toward infinity,” Corm wrote.

Over the decades following World War II, Zogbé continued to paint and also travel, passing through Lebanon and spending time in both Paris and Dakar, although Argentina remained her primary homebase. She never remarried, but in Buenos Aires those who knew Zogbé said she maintained a close relationship with noted Argentinian painter Benito Quinquela Martín for

many years, although she insisted the pair keep separate houses. Zogbé died in 1973 at 83 years old, leaving no children. Her lack of immediate family may have contributed to her lack of enduring recognition, Scheid hypothesizes.

“It’s something that happens with many artists who don’t leave behind someone to gather up their work, put together exhibitions and generally understand and advocate for the importance of their art,” she says. Artists need advocates, Scheid notes, both during their lives and after. An added wrinkle was her constant travel and her ties to both Lebanon and Argentina.

Divided between two homelands, her work never achieved timeless acclaim in either country.

“She never entirely fit in,” Barakat says. “Argentina wrote her off as a Lebanese artist, while Lebanon classified her as South American.”



“Flower paintings weren’t just still lifes: They were Lebanese flowers. It was all part of establishing a shared art, a shared culture.”

—KRISTEN SCHEID

Scheid elaborates that in the end, Zogbé's dual identity even extended to her style. "Her art was just as hard to classify," she says. "It's not quite the exploration of sight for the sake of sight of the Impressionists, or anything that slots her into a specific style. Her colors were more jarring; sometimes her backgrounds were more flattening; but the praise in the press was intense for her individual approach."

The Lebanese press lauded her as the "truth-telling" painter for her works that focused on flowers without ever showing docile bouquets, Scheid says. Wild, wind-tossed, beautiful without ever being arranged to be so, Zogbé's flowers exuded vitality. Despite these bursts of printed acclaim, ultimately the press in the early and mid-20th century had difficulty with cross-cultural, dual-nationality artists like Zogbé.

## "Argentina wrote her off as a Lebanese artist, while Lebanon classified her as South American."

—SALEH BARAKAT

"Newspapers were struggling with how to categorize artists as well, to define how they could be French and Lebanese, and many other things all at the same time," she says.

And when artists didn't fit the narrative that was ultimately established about Lebanese art, they were simply left out, Scheid says.

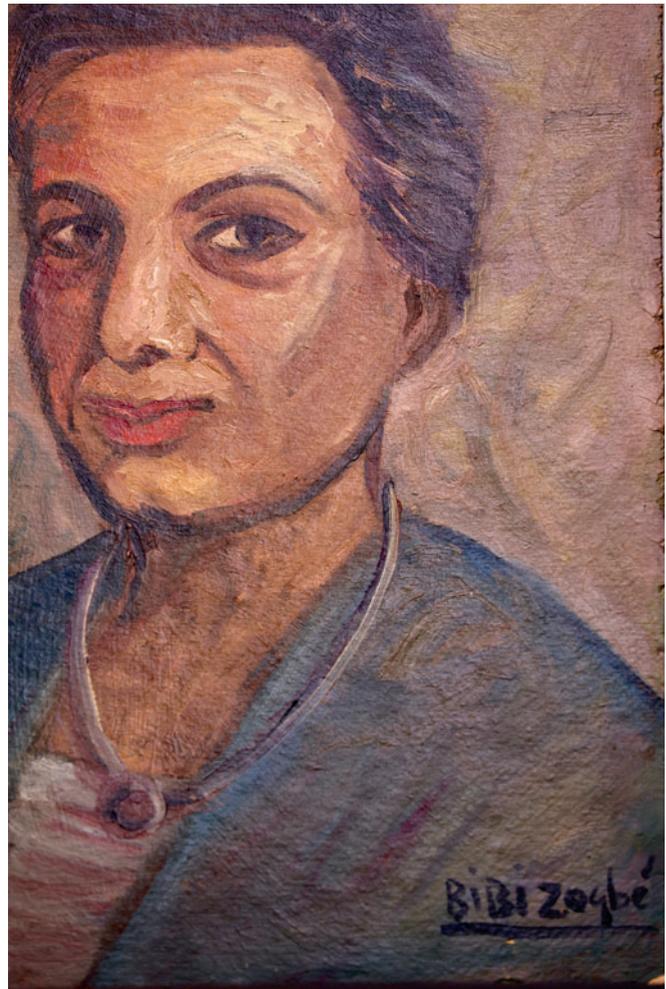
In Argentina, Barakat visited Zogbé's home in Buenos Aires, though he has long forgotten the address. He looked at the gardens she drew upon for inspiration and walked in her footsteps around the neighborhoods. Among the people who knew her was the daughter of Zogbé's best friend in Argentina. After talking with Barakat and showing him the portrait of her mother Zogbé had painted, she gave him the painting. Turning it over, Barakat saw Zogbé's distinctive scrawl across the back: "A Chichi, mi mejor amiga en todo el mundo." (To Chichi, my best friend in the world.)

"She knew I would take good care of it," he says. The portrait now hangs in his home in Beirut.

Barakat still hopes to be the advocate that Zogbé never had—until now. His goal is to produce a retrospective depicting Zogbé's life and career. In spring 2020 Barakat felt he was finally closing in on tracking down enough of her work and enough about her life to begin to seriously consider mounting the show, but the COVID-19 pandemic in March, followed by the devastating explosion in Beirut that August, only blocks from his galleries, forced a pause. "The world was in chaos. My city was in chaos. I started to wonder if I could afford to spend any more time on this," he says.

But as the months rolled past, he gradually began taking a few minutes here and an hour there to spend with his Zogbé archives. "In such a bad time, I could forget about the rest of the world for a while and enjoy her flowers," he says.

Barakat is now in the last stretches of researching and



Zogbé did not date the painting that today is her only known self-portrait. Based on style and Zogbé's apparent age in the image, Barakat believes it dates from the 1950s. Zogbé lived to 83 years of age.

gathering her work, he says. He's confident that with an exhibit fully exploring her life and her paintings, Zogbé will finally begin to take her place in the pantheon of Lebanese art. His search has also been a gift to himself, Barakat says.

"Because of the difficulties that have so often been a part of being in Lebanon, at one point I probably would have said a bunch of paintings of flowers were boring," he says. "But for me, over the years, that's become the whole reason I love her work. When things get difficult, I want to simply be surrounded by her flowers, her colors, her view of nature."

Zogbé's work, he says, "has become my oasis, the place I go to find peace," he says. 🌍



**Dianna Wray** is a nationally award-winning journalist and editor from Houston, Texas. **George Azar** is author of *Palestine: A Photographic Journey*, co-author of *Palestine: A Guide* and director of the films *Beirut Photographer* and *Gaza Fixer*. He lives in Beirut.



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Women photographers: Mar / Apr 2019

# “PRINCE OF CASABLANCA”



Written by  
KEN CHITWOOD

Photographed by  
YASSINE ALAOU I SMAILI

Romanticized by Hollywood and toyed with by European architects, Casablanca sprawls along the sea and gnaws steadily at its outskirts, much as other modern metro areas where growth seems to have all happened pretty much in the last century. Known colloquially by both Arabic speakers and others simply as “Casa,” it is a conglomeration of chaos and contradictions, heritage and kitsch; brutal and beautiful, unsettling and inviting, ephemeral and enduring. It is a merge lane for past, present and future that leads to a collision of Moroccan artisanship and European modernism.

**It’s also a city where 23-year-old author and architect Alaa Halifi walks the streets with the affectionate yet critical eye of a native son.**

He set his first book, a novel titled *Madeeh al-junoon* (In praise of madness), on these streets to “reflect the complex reality of my city” and “shed light on the marginalized and chaotic part of the city’s underworld,” putting to paper what he and his generation see. The resulting story fuses reality and fantasy and offers a vision for the city as it is as well as what it could be.

It earned him the 2021 al-Rafidain First Book Prize. Launched in 2019 by the Lebanon-based al-Rafidain Foundation, the prize recognizes young, newly published authors from across the Arabic-speaking world. Out of 200 submissions, Halifi’s was distinguished, the judges wrote, by its “deep dive into the worlds of Casablanca.”

Halifi brings this same award-winning energy to his design for restoring disused city buses as mobile health clinics. He has also designed a network of green spaces in a city where these are at a premium. His hope is that his work can speak for a generation of Casawi, or Casablanca locals, who he explains have been left out of too many discussions of the city and its future.

“Without art or concrete forms of expression, we will be forgotten. Instagram posts and TikTok videos aren’t enough,” he says. “So I write, design and dream of a world that could be, in the midst of the one that is.”

## FROM PORT TO METROPOLIS

Casablanca was established in the seventh century CE by Zenata Berbers who named it Anfa. It rose to prominence as a thriving port and trade center under the Marinid Dynasty of the 13th to 15th century. Independent after the Marinid fall in 1465, Anfa became a safe harbor for privateers—pirates—whose anticolonialist predations led the Portuguese to raze the town by bombardment three years later. Several decades later, the Portuguese resurrected the port, built their own fortress and called the town Casa Bianca (White House). The name moved into Arabic as Dar al-Bayda under Sidi Mohammed ben Abdallah during his reconstruction of the city following its devastation by earthquake in 1755, and the Arabic name is still used on maps and

official correspondence.

The Spanish inherited what they referred to as Casablanca—Whitehouse—via treaty in 1799. In 1907 the French, too, bombarded the city, and their occupation of Casablanca and Morocco brought the city into yet another era. Under French colonial rule, and through a combination of armed power, debt control and the co-opting of Morocco's royal family, Casablanca became a booming commercial center. Between 1916 and 1927 alone, the population doubled. The port city transformed into an "ethnic and financial nerve center," taking in people of various backgrounds, many seeking relief from repressions in Europe. Half Muslim, one-third European, and one-sixth Jewish, Casablanca's "mosaic of populations" intermixed on social and urban levels, wrote architect Jean-Louis Cohen and sociologist Monique Eleb in their book, *Casablanca: Colonial Myths and Architectural Ventures*.

Other scholars such as a Patrick Calmon de Carvalho Braga and Driss Maghraoui commented that colonial Casablanca, a hub of rapid, if often unequal determination became known to European architects and city planners as a kind of living laboratory for the imposition of modernist urban design.

One "huge, buzzing construction site," Cohen and Eleb wrote. The "sprouting city" featured Paris-style broad avenues and boulevards that connected sea, rail and industry with neighborhoods built for particular populations. Though rife with ethnic and class-based inequalities, its modern, sober, often grandiose lines married Moroccan, Berber and Islamic traditions and vernaculars with European modernism. From its terraces, balconies and porticoes, every view evinced a style with "the hand of the present firmly imprinted in the mould of the past," wrote Cohen and Eleb.

## A REAL CASABLANCA?

Still today, everywhere you look, Halifi says, Casa's fragile former glories are evident.

Walking through the al-Fida neighborhood in the Mers Sultan district, Halifi points out art-deco-inspired theaters that used to show films from Bollywood to Hollywood to kung fu, once famed, now shuttered.

Fading legacies like these inspired Halifi to embark on one of his first deep explorations into Casablanca's history. Speaking to residents living on and around Avenue al-Fida, one of Casa's oldest thoroughfares, he uncovered memories of revolution and revelry through archived documents and photographs from decades past. Halifi's inspiration not only emerged out of a desire to rediscover the past but also to understand the streets he himself grew up on.

Halifi has always lived here, within a few blocks of Avenue al-Fida, in Derb Sultan, one of Casa's most densely populated and historic districts. As a kid, he would often frequent al-Fida's now-derelict theaters with his friends.

It was on Derb Sultan's side roads and squares, what is to him "the real Casablanca," that Halifi became the young man and



"There's the Casablanca where I live and then the imaginary Casablanca that lives in me," says Halifi. In his conceptual project "Re-Casablanca," **TOP**, he sketched the revival of urban space to emphasize natural carbon capture through green spaces. **ABOVE** Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Halifi and fellow student Boudraa El Yazid collaborated on "W(H)eat," which prototyped the transformation of mothballed public buses into mobile health spaces. The project won first place in the 2020 Architecture Pittsburgh Prize for Environmental Health Equity.

celebrated creative he is today. Eating spicy tuna sandwiches at Place Sidi Maarouf, hanging with friends in the shade of a eucalyptus tree at the Hermitage Gardens or watching the traffic honk and swerve its way in front of the raw concrete of Assunna Mosque—designed in brutalist style by Jean-Francois Zevaco—Halifi got to know his city, story by story, character by character.

Many people don't like Casa, Halifi says, because it is a kind of "monster city," a hodgepodge of people from different corners of Morocco and beyond. In the words of Moroccan travel writer Tahir Shah, Casablanca is "the butt of every joke, the place people came to but never admitted coming from. No one belonged."

But for Halifi, he's always belonged. And he always will.

Deeply proud of his roots even as a high schooler at Lycée oum eL banine, Halifi took to calling himself "*amir Casablanca*" (prince of Casablanca). "Skipping class and walking from place to place, we used to write our names on the walls of Derb Sultan," he says. "I chose that nickname because I really felt that this was my inheritance, my kingdom, my country. Casablanca was all I ever wanted, all I ever needed."

It was around the same time he began to write with the same virulent fidelity to his city. His first stories chronicled both the monstrous and the mundane, tales in which aliens, angels and other mythical creatures walked the same streets as corrupt teachers from his school, recovering addicts selling henna in the suq, or the woman with pink cheeks walking up and down the



**TOP LEFT AND RIGHT** Halifi grew up and still lives near Avenue al-Fida, one of the city's oldest streets, in Derb Sultan, one of Casa's most densely populated neighborhoods. **ABOVE LEFT** From a rooftop, the city sprawls toward its port on the Atlantic. **ABOVE RIGHT** A European baroque-revival building framed by a pointed arch juxtaposes the colonial and local stylistic traditions that give Casablanca both identity and historic tension.

square calling out the madness of the marketgoers around her.

"There's the Casablanca where I live, and then the imaginary Casablanca that lives in me," he says. "People who don't know Casa can get to know the city, its cafes and bars, its characters, squares and forgotten spaces through my writing, but at the same time, they may not know where the fiction ends and the reality begins."

And yet Halifi himself says he cannot escape the Casablanca *as it is*.

This became the theme of one of the short stories in his award-winning book, which Halifi describes as "of wandering and absurdity, a taste of madness and dreams." The book's first chapter—or "case," as he calls it in a wordplay with "Casa"—is titled "*Ulbat al-ihimalat*" (The room of possibilities). It is a story of a man trapped in a chamber with a hole in the ceiling, and he has only an apple and some water. Scheming his escape through the opening above, the man removes a seed from the fruit and waters it to grow a tree, which he eventually climbs to reach the aperture that turns out to be no escape at all: It leads to another room, one that has no exit at all.

"I could never leave Casa," Halifi says, "but if I ever did, it would never leave me." Halifi calls Casablanca his prison, his addiction, his muse. Or, in other words, the city is his "Shawshank"—a reference to the 1994 movie, *Shawshank Redemption*,

starring Morgan Freeman and Tim Robbins as two men who find solace amid the indecencies of prison.

"Perhaps," he says quoting author James Baldwin from *Giovanni's Room*, "home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition."

### LESSONS FROM SURREAL FICTION

The other conduit for Halifi's creative revisioning has been architecture. While writing expands creative capacity, he says, architecture expands this power and becomes practical. "Without architecture, I could not write books. Without writing, I could not do architecture. One gives me creative freedom, the other formal, visual freedom," he says.

In architectural school, Halifi's designs emerged like his writing, grounded in gritty realities but envisioning things anew, even absurd, that could emerge from the old. In a project titled "Re-Casablanca," Halifi and his classmates sketched out how an urban slum slated for demolition could be recreated into an "urban lung" for a city with one of the lowest ratios of green space per

person. Other projects envisioned overhauling of a portion of the city's port as an educational, interactive outdoor museum, and the transformation of an abandoned prison in al-Fida into a public recreational complex. Each, he says, was a way of raging at wasted opportunities, derelict buildings and abandoned spaces,

"Casablanca was all I ever wanted, all I ever needed."

—ALAA HALIFI



In the center of *Derb Sultan*, Halifi looks to where a local boy points toward his house. “True architecture reflects society and sets out to solve its problems,” he says. “People who don’t know Casa,” he adds, “may not know where the fiction ends and the reality begins.”

to make something new with what was being left behind. “True architecture reflects society and sets out to solve its problems,” he says. “It seeks to solve physical, real problems, unlike other arts.”

It was during the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic that Halifi’s own anxieties inspired him and a colleague, Boudraa El Yazid, to design what became the award-winning project, “W(H) eal,” a name that compound “wheel” and “heal.” The duo set out to solve three problems facing Casablanca in 2020: a devastating number of COVID-19 cases, insufficient health infrastructure to respond effectively and dozens of old, blue-and-green city buses rusting in storage. Their idea was to take the buses, for which many Casawi feel a certain nostalgia, and remodel them into mobile testing, treatment and vaccination centers—for use in the pandemic and beyond.

Praised for its practicality and focus on real needs, the project was awarded first prize in a 2020 ideas competition, the Architecture Pittsburgh Prize for Environmental Health Equity. Hosted by the Pittsburgh Platform, Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, Sweden, and Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, United States, the prize was designed to recognize innovation in architectural and urban concepts that “ensure environmental health equity.” Even though it remains unbuilt, the jury praised the idea as a “conceptually strong” approach that was not only “well-thought out” but also immediate, exemplary and holistic.

“In Casablanca, projects like these take political influence or money to become real,” says Halifi. “I have neither. I have power to dream, to envision, to imagine, to write but not to build. I am not a magician.”

For now, his designs—like his writing—remain high-energy

fictions. Nonetheless, he does not discount their potential. “The real world does not have magic, but even in mad fictions, we can find lessons.” Harkening back to 16th-century philosopher Erasmus of Rotterdam, whose essay “In Praise of Folly” encouraged the drive us to search out “new and unheard-of mysteries,” Halifi says, “it is perhaps the same madness that holds sway over a city, inspires its artists and arouses innovation.”

On any walk around Casa, he says, “you might notice a lot of crazy people expressing themselves, ranting and raving about this or that. They need to express their frustrations, their hope, their fury. Humans express ourselves. That’s what makes us,” he continues.

“I am no different. I may not scream, I may not yell, but I write books. I design buildings. I write what I live, and what I live is Casablanca.” 🌐



**Ken Chitwood**, Ph.D., is a Germany-based religion scholar and award-winning religion, travel and culture writer. He is the author of *The Muslims of Latin America and the Caribbean* (2021). **Yassine Alaoui Ismaili** (@yoriyas) is a Casablanca-based artist and photographer specializing in urban spaces and daily life in Morocco and elsewhere in Africa. His work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Vogue*, *National Geographic* and other leading international publications, as well as exhibitions around the world.



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

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## A SOUTHEAST ASIAN ROSETTE

6

WRITTEN BY  
ADAM WILLIAMSON

ART COURTESY OF  
ART OF ISLAMIC PATTERN

In this final study of Islamic patterns from around the world, we travel to Southeast Asia to draw a radial pattern and experience the long tradition of architectural floral patterns carved in wood.

From Thailand to Malaysia and Indonesia, there is less focus on geometric, star rosettes like those found elsewhere in the Islamic world. Instead, designs here are generally cursive and vegetive. Many traditional houses feature window grills, brackets, architraves, doors and paneling intricately carved with floral biomorphic patterns, each one a formal, cohesive representation of forms and movements found in the surrounding jungle. The patterns have both practical and spiritual significance. Many utilitarian objects, too, from spoons to quail traps, are decorated and honored with these reverent designs.

Central to the designs is the spiral, from which the motifs and leaves sprout. This representation of continual growth and movement is called *awan larat* (moving cloud). The spiral or *batang* (stem) progresses from the *benih* (seed) or *punca* (source) like a plant growing toward the light.

This creates a centrifugal movement that reflects the progression of creation from the creator to infinity, sprouting *daun* (leaves) and *bunga* (flowers). Artisans stress that these motifs should coil back as if bowing in humility to the source or creator.

The development of motifs in this regional style is due to a convergence of influences. It is common that at the center of a

composition sits the *bunga teratai*, or lotus, a form rooted in Hindu-Buddhist traditions. It is a representation of purity, rising through swampy waters and remaining pristine to surface and reveal its splendor.

Some leaves that sprout from the vines are reminiscent of Greco-Roman acanthus in the classic lobed and folded form. Other motifs originate locally, such as the *daun lancasuka* motif from Patani in south Thailand that is recognizable by characteristics like uptilted ends of the tendrils or *ulir* (volute). The *kelopak dewa* (deity leaf) can be sourced back to the sixth century as a motif that symbolizes earth's natural, elemental energy.

Central to the Malay artisanal practice is the concept of *semangat*, which represents vital force or primal energy that is invested in things that are created. It is most relatable in the grain of wood and the growth movement of plants, yet it is a quality found everywhere. To align with Semangat before working, an artisan should ensure the workplace is clean and personal quarrels are settled. Then through meditation and prayer the artisan can be free of *nafsu* (personal needs). This will allow connection to the *Guru Asal* (Primordial Teacher), which will in turn enable the manifestation of the archetypal forms that have been passed down through the generations.

This excerpt from a Malay poem describes the approach to a composition:

*Tumbuh berpunca,  
Punca penuh rahsia,  
Tumbuh tidak manenjak kawan,  
Memanjat tidak memaut lawan,  
Tetapi melingkar penuh mesra.*

Growing from a source,  
A source full of secrets,  
Growing without piercing a friend,  
Climbing without clinging to a rival,  
But intertwining with grace and friendliness.



AREEJ AZEM; OPPOSITE: INES ARÖSTEGUI



## 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.

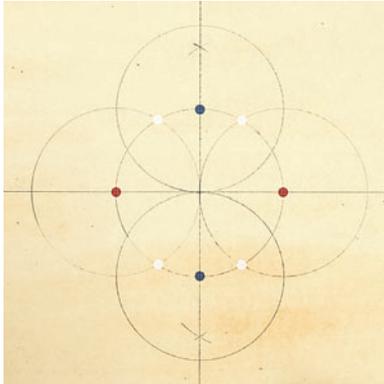
**Straightedge:** A metal one works best, 30 to 50 centimeters in length.

**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.

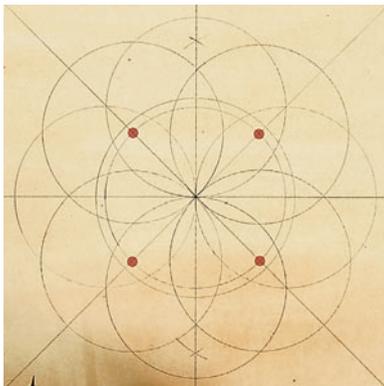
**Pencils:** Use a hard lead, such as 2H, for lighter guidelines and a soft lead, such as 2B and 3B, for heavier finishing lines. Add colors to fill as desired.

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



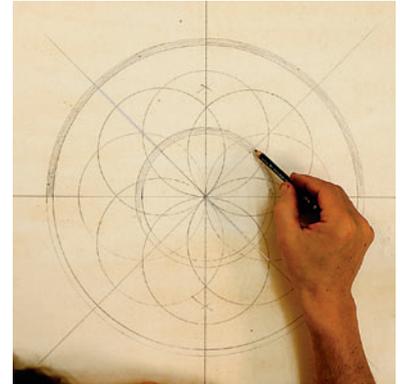
1

- Across the midpoints of the page, draw a horizontal line. Measure its midpoint and, using the compass, inscribe a circle to fill the page.
- Retaining the same radius, place the compass where the circle intersects the horizontal line on the right (red). Draw a semicircle. Do the same on the left side.
- Place the compass on each of the four points where the semicircles meet the circle. Use the intersecting points of the top and bottom arcs (white) to find the points that define the vertical axis. Note these will be above and below your paper, so make sure you allow for space. Draw the vertical axis across the circle.
- From the top and bottom intersections of the circle with the vertical axis, draw semicircles (blue).



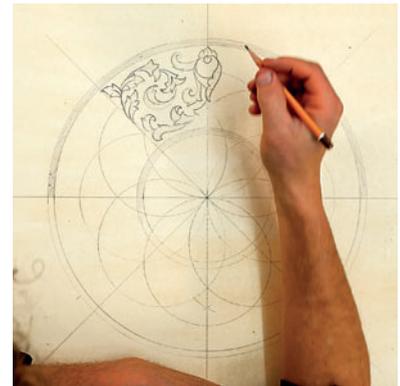
2

- Draw the radial lines by aligning the straightedge with the tips of the petals (red), and cross the center point.
- Using these same intersections (red), draw four more circles using the same initial radius measurement.
- Place the circle in the center of the design increase the compass radius a little, and draw an additional circle, which will create a border.



3

- Adjust the compass radius to match the length of one of the petals (white), and use this measurement to mark the distance from the central border and the outer border.



4

- Between the two shaded border circles, inside 1/8 segment, draw the central folded motif, using a circle to help proportion the form.
- Draw a spiral that emanates from this motif.
- Add the leaves, lightly sketch in vesica forms to represent the leaf shapes before adding their lobes and details, making sure everything is positioned evenly.



5

- At the center of the composition, use a compass to draw a circle and then the existing radial divisions to add the petals of the lotus.

### Source

Noor, F. A. and E. Khoo. *Spirit of Wood: The Art of Malay Woodcarving*. Periplus Edition (HK) Ltd., 2003.

6

- Add half the flame petal to the central lotus motif.
- Fold a piece of tracing paper, align the fold with vertical line.
- Trace all the biomorphic elements with a 2B or 3B pencil.



7

- Flip the folder tracing paper horizontally, pivoting on the vertical line.
- Retrace the biomorphic elements for a second time.



8

- Open and flip the tracing paper so that the pencil lines are facing down.
- Align the traced unit with the empty quadrants of the rosette.
- When the tracing is in position using a polished stone or your finger nail, rub the back of the tracing paper to transfer the graphite from the tracing paper back into your design.



9

- Rotate the tracing, and repeat the transfer process in each of the quadrants.



10

- With a sharp 2B or 3B pencil, redraw the pattern.
- Use more pressure on the tips of the leaves and motifs, graduating your strokes.



11

- Paint in a watery wash of walnut ink.
- Add highlights using a white conte pencil.



**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.



Watch our video tutorial on this pattern at [aramcoworld.com](http://aramcoworld.com)

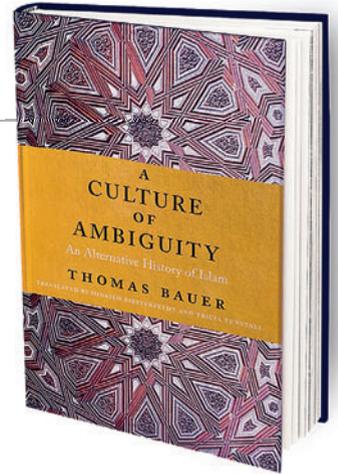


# REVIEWS

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

“Long before the discovery of ambiguity in modern times, Islam followed the idea that ambiguity is something unavoidable, with the idea that it opens new horizons.”

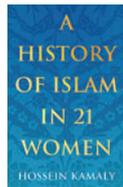
—Excerpt from *A Culture of Ambiguity*, by Thomas Bauer



## A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam

Thomas Bauer. Trans. Hinrich Biesterfeldt & Tricia Tunstall. Columbia UP, 2021.

This novel approach to the culture and history of Islamic thought earned the author, a professor and director of the Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Münster, Germany, a 2013 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Prize for research. Bauer argues that one’s approach to ambiguity—the ability to debate ideas—is not only cultural in itself but also has been a fundamental aspect of Islamic intellectual life that has often been overlooked or ignored. Although he focuses on the history of Muslim people, he engages the perspectives of other cultures both to challenge and support his own arguments. For example, during the golden age of Islam, Muslim mathematicians, naturalists and philosophers were generally content with uncertainties over fixed truths. By contrast, as the Enlightenment later swept across Europe, scholars like Rene Descartes maintained that clear and unchanging answers were the only solutions to life’s questions. While his points are interesting and the book has won wide praise, it can be overly dense for the non-specialist reader. —MARINA ALI

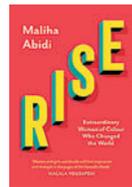


## A History of Islam in 21 Women

Hossein Kamaly. One World Publications, 2019.

This encyclopedic collection of biographies explores the lives of 21 women who have “shaped many aspects of the history of Islam.” Included are women from the Arabian Peninsula, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia and the US, starting with “The First Believer”—Khadija, whose husband was the Prophet Muhammad. Throughout Islamic history, we are reminded, women have achieved political power, such as Morocco’s Sayidda al-Hurra, the stubbornly independent 16th-century ruler of Tétouan who inspired fear and commanded respect among European colonizers whose aggressions she resisted. Then there are heroines, such as Indian American Noor Inayat Khan, a British spy during World War II who snuck radio communiques to London from Nazi-occupied France and was ultimately executed by the Gestapo. All the figures, whose life stories “seldom appear together in general histories of Islam,” are persons of courage whose Islamic faith shaped their character and often motivated their resolve.

—TOM VERDE

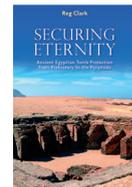


## Rise: Extraordinary Women of Colour Who Changed the World

Maliha Abidi. Saqi Books, 2021.

Growing up, Pakistan-born author/illustrator Maliha Abidi struggled to find stories of women with whom she could identify, finding “little space for more women of colour in mainstream media,” explains Abidi, who decided to correct that deficiency. Following the 2019 success of her first publication, *Pakistan for Women*, Abidi widened her scope. In short profiles accompanied by colorful portraits, she introduces 100 pioneering, inspirational women from over 30 countries: Esther Afua Ocloo, Ghana’s food-processing pioneer; Negin Khpalwak, Afghanistan’s first female orchestra conductor; Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, founder of the Nigerian Women’s Union; Hayat Sindi, a Saudi Arabian biotech scientist, and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, a US entertainer. “I wanted to create *Rise* so that women of color could find themselves, and empowerment, in a book,” notes Abidi. “These trail-blazing women not only stood up for themselves. They paved the way for so many others.”

—PINEY KESTING



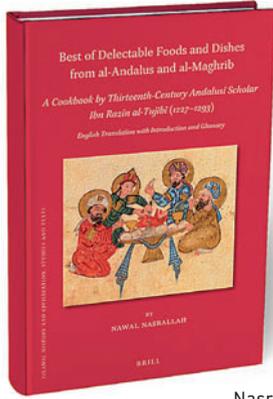
## Securing Eternity: Ancient Egyptian Tomb Protection From Prehistory to the Pyramids

Reg Clark. AUC Press, 2019.

For ancient Egyptians, the tomb served as a crucial part of the afterlife, a place where spiritual elements of a person’s being, *ha* and *ka*, reunited with the body each night. Thus, every tomb was outfitted with what the deceased would need or want to enjoy themselves. Although this practice attracted grave robbers in droves, for centuries ancient Egyptians opted to alter their burial architecture and security systems versus removing the temptation of well-stocked tombs, Clark writes. Driven by his fascination for Egyptian tomb security—sparked during his first visit via a robber’s tunnel to a stone-lined burial chamber—Clark has written a thorough guide to Egyptian burial security methods from more modest Predynastic Period (about 5000 BCE) reinforcements to sumptuous, carefully crafted Fourth Dynasty (about 2500 BCE) chambers. Clark traces an evolution that saw everything from architectural tricks to curses deployed to protect the tombs—and almost never paying off.

—DIANNA WRAY

# AUTHOR'S CORNER



## Refuge in Recipes: The Research Journey of Nawal Nasrallah

Written by DIANNA WRAY

It was time for the family to sit down for dinner at Nawal Nasrallah's home in Bloomington, Indiana. Nasrallah had made her 18-year-old daughter Iba's favorite dish, Iraqi-style eggplant biryani, in honor of the college acceptance letter Iba had just received. Iba spooned the biryani onto her plate, took a bite and burst into tears. "Where am I going to find food like this at school?" she asked.



Nawal Nasrallah

Nasrallah points to that moment more than 20 years ago to show how the power of food does so much more than provide sustenance. "It connects us deeply," she explains—from families to friends, communities and cultures. For Nasrallah, this realization came to her in the early 1990s while she was building a life half a world away from Iraq, where she had grown up, earned a master's degree in English literature and taught at

**"When I make these recipes accessible again, it almost feels like I am bringing their creators back to the world as well."** —Nawal Nasrallah

the University of Baghdad and the University of Mosul. In 1990 she followed her husband to the American Midwest while he pursued his doctorate. The Gulf War was beginning as she and the couple's three children departed Baghdad.

It did not take long for her to discover that most people in Bloomington knew little about Iraqi culture or its culinary history that reaches back thousands of years. "I started making traditional dishes as a way to show people other sides of us," she says. "Then I started to wonder where the dishes had come from."

Not finding cookbooks that could provide both the recipes and the historical context she was looking for, Nasrallah decided to start making her own. She started by gathering Iraqi recipes she and her family enjoyed. But with her research background, she soon was delving into Arabic texts that were centuries old, some reaching back to the 10th century CE, scavenging for the earliest versions of dishes, or at least trying to get close to their primary sources. "I started wondering where all these traditions in our food came from," says Nasrallah. "That was the spark. Suddenly, I had a project."

She had plenty to work with. Some of the world's first writ-

ing, recorded on Akkadian cuneiform tablets in about 1700 BCE, was a set of recipes, she points out. Although other academics had studied these instructions for preparing stews and baking bread, Nasrallah also worked with the oldest Arabic texts she could find, some of which had never been translated to English. Working from Indiana, she witnessed the 6,000-year-old roots of her own Iraqi culture begin to coalesce on the page. In person, via photocopies and later on PDF files, she found instructions for countless types of bread, arrays of eggplant dishes, myriad ways to make hummus and more.

Her work was well under way when, in 1994, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Two years later her youngest son, Bilal, age 13, suffered a sudden, fatal brain hemorrhage. "I am so thankful I had my work then," Nasrallah says, her voice softening. "It was a safe place. It helped me survive."

In the weeks and months afterward, Nasrallah found solace in the university libraries in Indiana and Boston, where in 2000 the family relocated. "I retreated to another time," she says. "I couldn't change what had happened in my life, but I could rescue someone's lost way of making baklava."

**Some of the world's first writing, recorded on Akkadian cuneiform tablets in about 1700 BCE, was a set of recipes.**

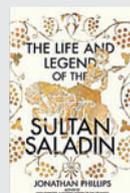
Her research resulted in *Delights From the Garden of Eden*, 664 pages with more than 400 recipes that traced the history of Iraqi cuisine, edited by her husband and in 2003 self-published after more than 20 rejections from publishers. Copies were printed only after they'd been ordered, yet they started selling briskly—and then publishers took note.

The article continues at [aramcoworld.com](http://aramcoworld.com).

**Best of Delectable Foods and Dishes From al-Andalus and al-Maghrib: A Cookbook by Thirteenth-Century Andalus Scholar**

Ibn Razin al-Tujibi.  
Trans. Nawal Nasrallah.  
Brill, 2021.

  
Find these and other reviews at [aramcoworld.com](http://aramcoworld.com)



**The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin**

Jonathan Phillips. Yale UP, 2019.



**The Old Woman and the River**

Ismail Fahd Ismail. Trans. Sophia Vasalou. Interlink Books, 2019.



**The Translator of Desires**

Muhiyuddin ibn 'Arabi. Trans. Michael Sells. Princeton UP, 2021.



# EVENTS

## Highlights from aramcoworld.com

Please verify a venue's  
schedule before visiting.

### CURRENT / DECEMBER

**Wael Shawky** is a multimedia artist born and based in Alexandria, Egypt. His work tackles notions of national, religious and artistic identity through film, performance and storytelling. The exhibition features the US debut of a new single-channel film exploring the historical significance of Alexandria accompanied by several new paintings. Telling tales from the complex history of Shawky's native region, his works invite analysis into collective belief systems, from faith to the recording of history. Lisson Gallery, **New York**, through December 17.

### CURRENT / FEBRUARY

**Baghdad: Eye's Delight** celebrates the capital of Iraq as one of the most influential cities in the Islamic world. The exhibition highlights Baghdad's heritage both as the capital of the Abbasid caliphs (750 CE-1258) as well its 20th-century prosperity that followed the discovery of oil. The exhibition features objects and artifacts on loan from 22 world-renowned institutions, including the Louvre and the Vatican, as well as photographs and video footage. Museum of Islamic Art, **Doha**, through February 25.

### CURRENT / MARCH

**A Golden Treasure: The Dinar in All Its States** includes nearly 1,100 coins, many of which are rare or even unique, that tell the complex history of the civilizations of Islam. For the first time shown to the public, the exhibit consists of dinars and gold coins minted throughout the Arab-Muslim world between the 8th and 19th centuries. Institut du monde arabe, **Paris**, through March 26.

**Baya: Women in the Garden: Works and Archives, 1944-1998** pays tribute to 20th-century Algerian artist Baya Mahieddine. Documenting all her periods of activity, from 1947 to her death in 1998, this exhibition shows the evolution of her painting, up to the last produced by the artist. It also sheds new light on her life and work from the perspective of colonialism studies. Institut du monde arabe, **Paris**, through March 26.

### CURRENT / APRIL

**Nubia: Jewels of Ancient Sudan** covers 3,000 years of kingdoms that flourished in Nubia (present-day southern Egypt and northern Sudan), a region rich in sought-after resources such as gold and ivory whose trade networks reached beyond Egypt, to Greece, Rome and Central Africa. This exhibition features jewelry, metalwork and

sculpture exhibiting the wealth and splendor of Nubian society. Getty Villa, **Los Angeles**, through April 3.

### COMING / DECEMBER

**Ghada Amer** is the first retrospective of the Franco-Egyptian artist to be held in France. Outraged by the difficulty of asserting herself as a painter in the 1980s, and even more so as a female painter, Amer developed an oeuvre of canvases, embroidered installations, sculptures and gardens, through which painting gradually asserted itself. The retrospective brings together modes of plastic expression from her beginnings to her most recent works. Mucem, **Fort Saint-Jean, France**, December 2 through April 16.

**Marwa Arsanios: Reverse Shot** reflects on colonial and ecological violence, and the alternative possibilities in grassroots community resistance and more harmonious relationships with the land. The works in this first solo exhibition in the UK by Beirut-based artist Arsanios feature reading rooms, films and live talks. The Mosaic Rooms, **London**, December 10 through January 22.

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



## Memory Sews Together Events That Hadh't Previously Met

draws from the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation. Artworks in the exhibition reflect the manifold ways in which artists in the Arab world have responded to socio-political events and the human condition across the 20th century. The selection offers an opportunity to explore the heterogeneity of regional art and its many histories, striving to propose an expanded vision of modernism. **Sharjah Art Museum, UAE**, ongoing.

Nazha Selim, "Untitled," 1989, oil on canvas, 50 x 68 centimeters.

NAZHA SELIM



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