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FEATURES

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Soaring Perspective on the Global Food Chain

WRITTEN BY **J. TREVOR WILLIAMS,** PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF **GEORGE STEINMETZ**

In his latest book, *Feed the Planet*, photographer George Steinmetz visits nearly every corner of the world to record diverse yet linked aspects of the global food chain—including aquaculture.

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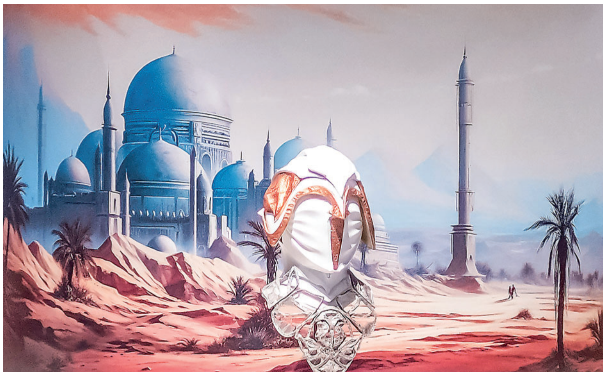
Centuries-Old Scent Oud Now Perfuming East and West

WRITTEN BY **NILOSREE BISWAS**

Musky and sweet, oud wafted its way into the culture of the Arabian Gulf from South and East Asia. Now the resin that is processed into an essential oil is sweetening perfume and room fragrance in the West.



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Arab Immigration and the French Art Scene

WRITTEN BY **JACKY ROWLAND**

While France is rediscovering its relationship with Arab artists of the 20th century, the latest generation of French Arab contributors to the country's world-class art scene is exploring their own sense of identity.

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Nakshi Kantha: Tradition and Identity in Every Stitch

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY **SAMANTHA REINDERS**

A traditional form of quilting in Bangladesh in which women embroider family history, love and memory into the fabric is blanketing markets locally and beyond.

DEPARTMENTS

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FRONT COVER Pictured working in her London studio, French Lebanese artist Marie Obegi is one of many artists adding new perspectives in contemporary art through their own cultural dualities. Obegi said her dual heritage allows exploring points of view differently than those from purely Western cultures.

16: JURATE BUIVIENE/ALAMY; 22: COURTESY OF INSTITUT DU MONDE ARABE; COVER PHOTO: KRYSTEN RESNICK, COURTESY OF MARIE OBEGI

FirstLook

A Market's Port of Call

Photograph by
Claudia Farkas Al Rashoud

Until the 1950s a bustling marketplace called Souk Al Fordah operated along the seafront of Kuwait City. After the war in 1991, Kuwait faced a demand for consumer goods. In response, a popular market reminiscent of Souk Al Fordah sprang up in the same area, selling merchandise transported by traditional wooden ships. Eager to replace household items that had been looted, people flocked to the new market and found everything from flowerpots, kitchen items and electronics to furniture, dry goods and fresh produce.

Claudia Farkas Al Rashoud, the first professional female photojournalist at the Arab Times, who has documented Kuwait for more than 40 years, captured the scene. “Nostalgia undoubtedly played a role in the popularity of the new market. Shoppers took pleasure in an experience that took them back to the days when wooden dhows discharged their goods from ports around the Arabian Gulf, India and Africa,” recalls Al Rashoud, whose books on Kuwait's history and heritage showcase her pictures.

@CLAUDIA_ALRASHOUD

Flavors

Cracked Wheat and Tomato Kibbeh

Recipe by Shane Delia | Photograph by Rob Palmer

Talk about my idea of heaven …

Sitting on the beach with my feet in the sand, listening to sounds of Lebanese pop music drifting through the air, watching children play in the water, eating simply cooked line-caught fish with this beautiful vegetarian tomato kibbeh. I don't know how you could top it.

Shane Delia is the star of the television show *Shane Delia's Spice Journey* and the chef and owner of Maha restaurant and Biggie Smalls Kebab Shop. He is based in Melbourne, Australia. His Lebanese wife, Maha, is the inspiration and namesake of his restaurant. Together they have two children, a daughter, Jayda, and a son, Jude. This is his second book.

(Serves 4)

½ cup (265 grams) fine bulgur

1 large tomato

½ red onion

1 heaped tablespoon dried mint

1 heaped tablespoon sumac

1 teaspoon smoked paprika

Pinch cayenne pepper

1 heaped tablespoon red pepper paste

2 ½ tablespoons pomegranate molasses

10 mint leaves, finely chopped

10 cilantro leaves, finely chopped

Drizzle of olive oil

Toppings

1 radish, thinly sliced

1 candy beet (or another heirloom beet), thinly sliced

1 cocktail onion, thinly sliced

Handful arugula leaves

½ cup (60 grams) Greek yogurt

Handful small heirloom tomatoes, halved

Drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil

Soak the bulgur in a bowl of hot tap water for 30 minutes or until soft. Drain.

Using a food processor, grind the bulgur, tomato and onion into an even consistency. Alternatively, use a grinder. Transfer the bulgur mixture to a bowl and add the remaining ingredients, tasting as you go to balance the flavors; if one flavor dominates, adjust by adding more of the other ingredients. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate until required.

Place the radish, beet, onion and arugula into separate bowls of iced water and leave to crisp for about 10 minutes. Drain on paper towels.

Arrange the bulgur mixture on a serving plate and add a few dollops of yogurt. Top with the thinly sliced vegetables, arugula and tomatoes. Drizzle with olive oil and serve immediately.

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Shane Delia. Interlink Books, 2017. InterlinkBooks.com

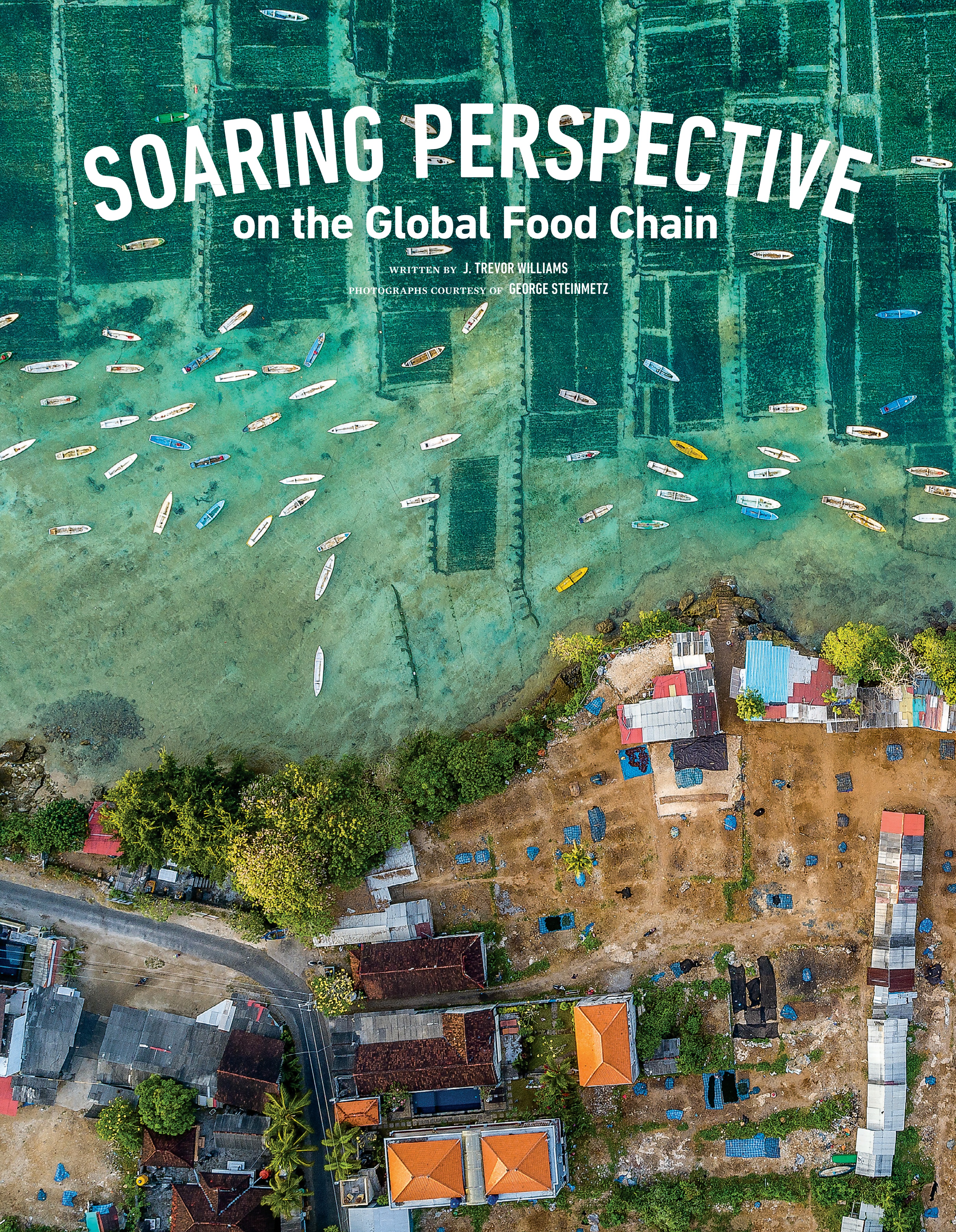
MATT RUSSELL

SOARING PERSPECTIVE

on the Global Food Chain

WRITTEN BY **J. TREVOR WILLIAMS**

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF **GEORGE STEINMETZ**



George Steinmetz grew up in Beverly Hills, California, before the over-the-top Hollywood glitz arrived, but his upbringing was far from bucolic.

Grocery stores stocked with produce that defied local growing seasons. Bike rides to school. Cub Scouts during the week—an urban American childhood, predictable and safe.

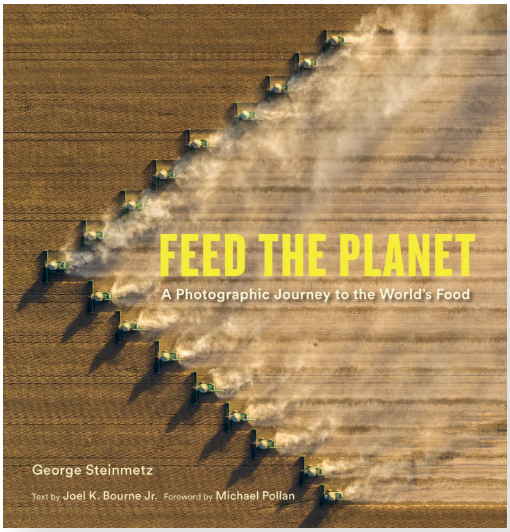
He followed a well-worn path to Stanford University, where he studied geophysics with an eye toward the energy sector after graduation.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do, and it was the highest-paying major at the time," says Steinmetz, now an accomplished photographer with six books under his belt.

Something changed after a short stint in the business, and Steinmetz decided to shift careers. A walkabout, of sorts, was in order, and Africa, the furthest cry from his cloistered California existence, beckoned.

Hitchhiking across the continent, Steinmetz found himself rattling atop loads in truck beds 25 feet above the ground, ducking branches and taking a giraffe's-eye view. Something about it recalled his childhood, climbing trees and seeing the world spread out beneath him.

"I just loved that perspective," he says. "I just wanted to get higher, and in the big, flat landscapes in Africa, I climbed up water towers to try to understand the terrain. It's something that's just kind of instinctual to me."



FEED THE PLANET

A Photographic Journey to the World's Food

George Steinmetz

Text by Joel K. Bourne Jr. Foreword by Michael Pollan

PREVIOUS PAGES Steinmetz first scouted the seaweed farms of Bali, Indonesia, with Google Earth, "but when you are there, it's always a surprise as you see people on the land (or on the water) and how they interact with it. It's also more 3D, from the oblique perspective of the camera and, in this case, reflections." He calls seaweed harvesting "a real bright spot in aquaculture because you're growing food in a very sustainable way."

OPPOSITE Using a pole-mounted camera attached to his shoe, photographer George Steinmetz once took a self-portrait while piloting a motorized paraglider. **ABOVE** These days Steinmetz more often sends a drone up to capture his images—sometimes under the watchful eye of curious young locals, as in 2016 in Indonesia.

A camera became his excuse to capture and convey ways of living that were once foreign.

"I wanted to go and discover those worlds and decode them for people in my world," he says.

His push for panoramic perspectives soon led him up into the air. Long before drones became a viable option for photographers, he pioneered the use of motorized paragliders, soaring high enough to capture the ordered beauty of agriculture, an enterprise that has shaped 40 percent of the world's landmass, but low enough to interact with the people whose lives he was seeking to illuminate.

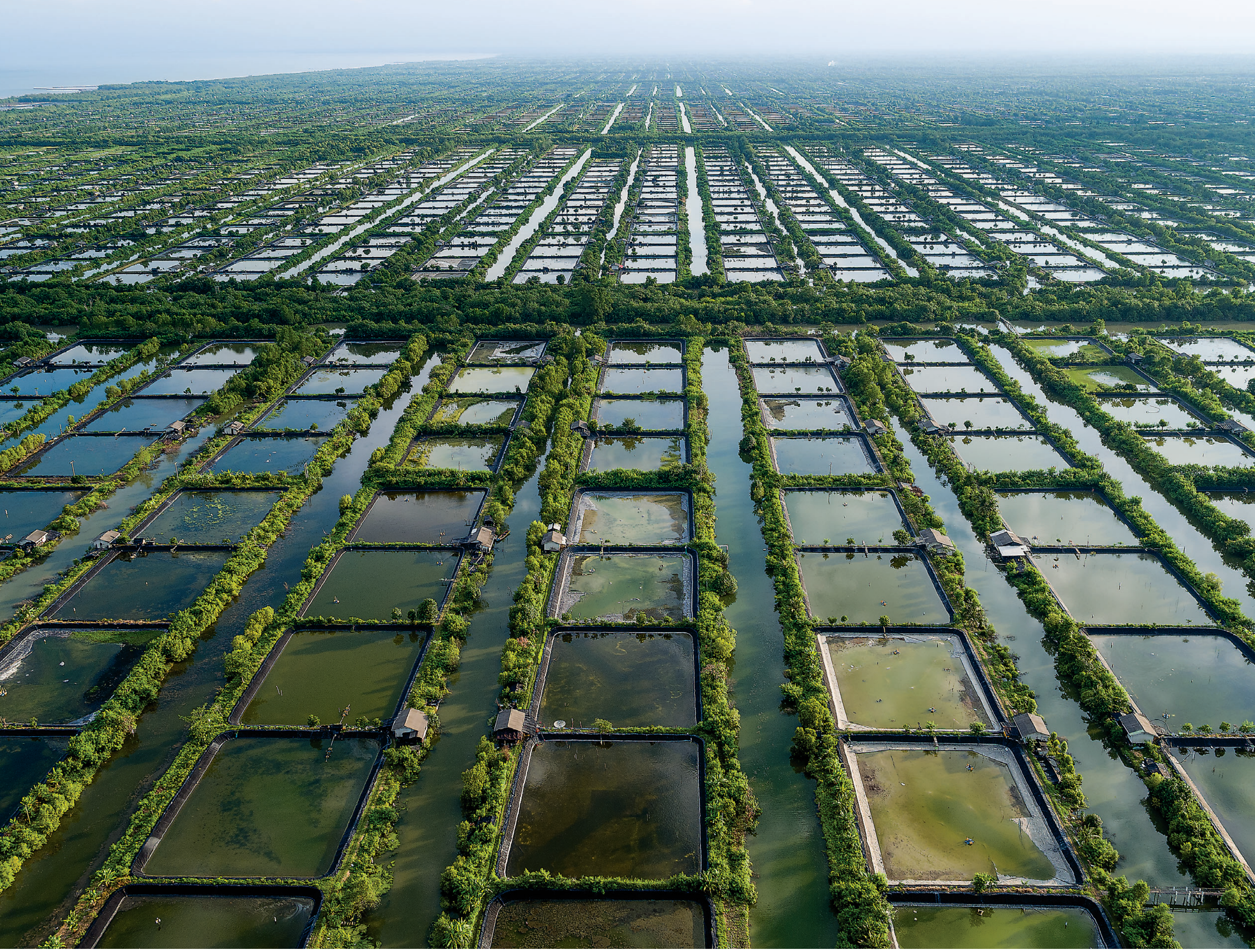
His first book, 2008's *African Air*, validated his approach, and he continued to land high-flying assignments that took him to 100 countries and through the occasional arrest—in Libya, China and Finney County, Kansas—which showed him "that there are parts of our food system some of our bigger players don't want us to see."

Along the way, Steinmetz has been driven to uncover how the intricate patterns he sees from above reflect the land-use policies crafted by people below—often with drones. "From above, you can grasp the geography of land, and the enormous scale of feeding humanity," he says.

In his latest book, *Feed the Planet: A Photographic Journey to the World's Food*, Steinmetz pursues this theme to its extreme in nearly every corner of the world, holding aloft for fresh observation the interconnected global system that comprises our individual choices around subsistence—including, notably, a section on the viability of aquaculture—and how readers can "vote with their forks" on the kind of world they want to cultivate.

He spoke to *AramcoWorld*.

> "From above, you can grasp the geography of land—and the enormous scale of feeding humanity."
>
> —GEORGE STEINMETZ



A 2016 flyover of one of the largest shrimp farms in the world, in Sumatra, netted this image. At its peak in the 1990s, it produced 200 tons of shrimp per day, but today pollution, poor management and disease have idled more than half of Indonesia's shrimp farms.

This book is sweeping in its scale and scope. When did you realize an ambitious book like this was both possible and necessary?

I was working on assignment in China, the world's biggest importer of food, looking out how this growing demand influences the most industrialized supplier nations: Brazil and the US. China has turned to the sea to feed their people, and [along] the coast of the East China Sea, many areas are covered in fish farms almost as far as you can see, like floating villages. And I would get a boat out to the fish farms, and I look at the sacks of fish meal and see they came from a Chinese company in Peru.

I was just scratching the surface, and I realized that to really tell the story, it had to be global. Food is kind of an infinite story because food is produced in virtually every country, and everybody eats, and it's done in different ways. I realized that to give a sense of how global it was, I had a lot of traveling to do.

The book is an anthology of individual visual stories about how the world of food works in various locales. But what is the larger narrative you're trying to convey?

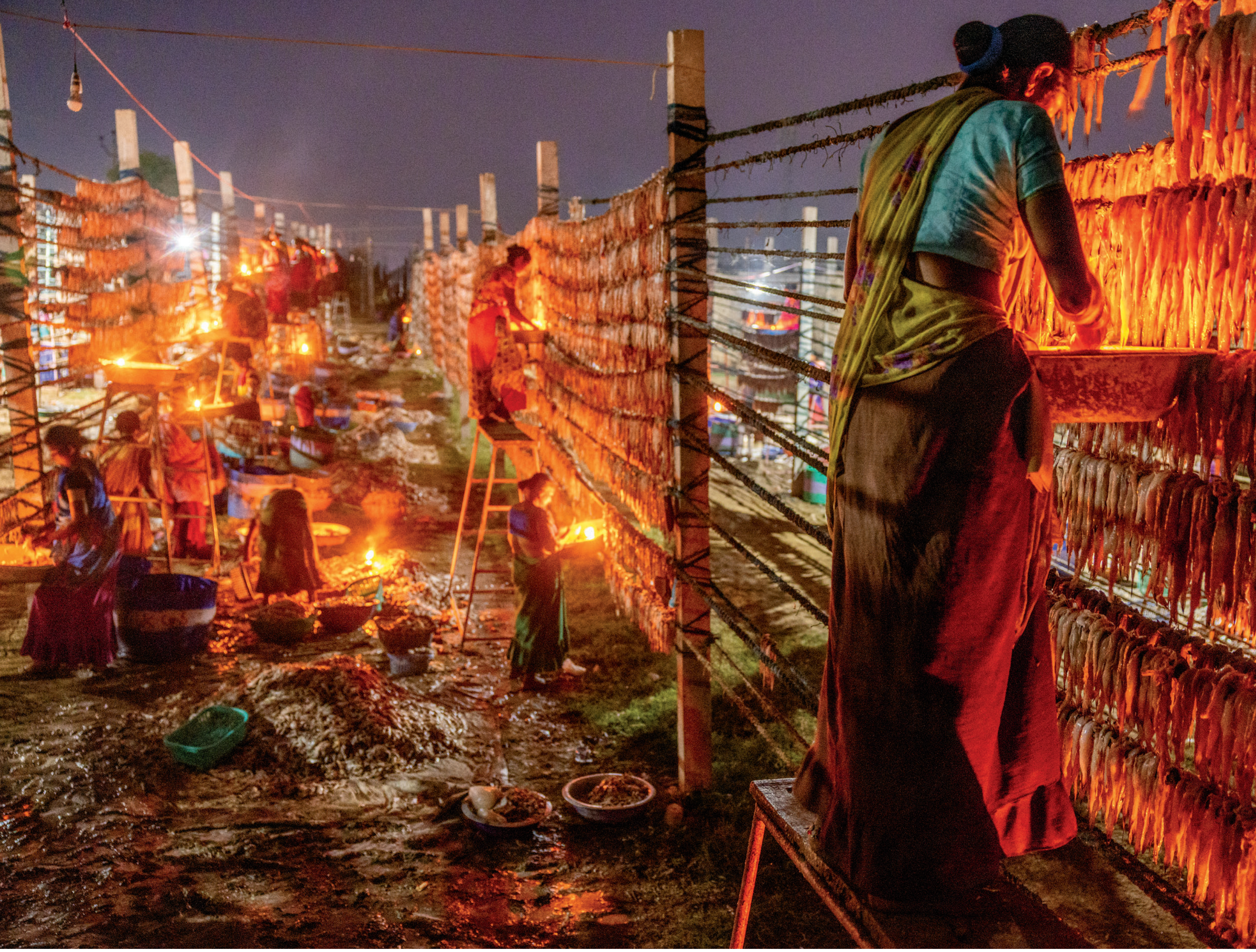
I wasn't trying to look at food from the aspect of gourmet or taste. It was more from an environmental perspective—most people don't know where their food comes from except the supermarket.

Being a curious person, I was also interested in the spectacle of food. And I think there are all these stories that people just aren't aware of.

You encountered a lot of manual methods of farming and bringing goods to market. Where did you see these being sustained even amid the onslaught of modern technology?

We're a long way from having a robot that can pick out the stamens on saffron flowers, and those flowers only blossom for a few days per year. There's like a two-week season. It's virtually impossible to mechanize that. It's also the most expensive food in the world.

And so it is quite beautiful to see that, with all the flowers, but generally, you find that in it's in low-wage environments—the Chinese aren't competing very well with the Indians of the Kashmir Valley.



ABOVE Steinmetz also shoots images related to the food chain from the ground. In the fishing port of Jafarabad, India, he photographed women filling drying racks with the evening's catch, mainly a lizardfish known as "Bombay Duck"—an affordable source of protein used in curries and pickles.

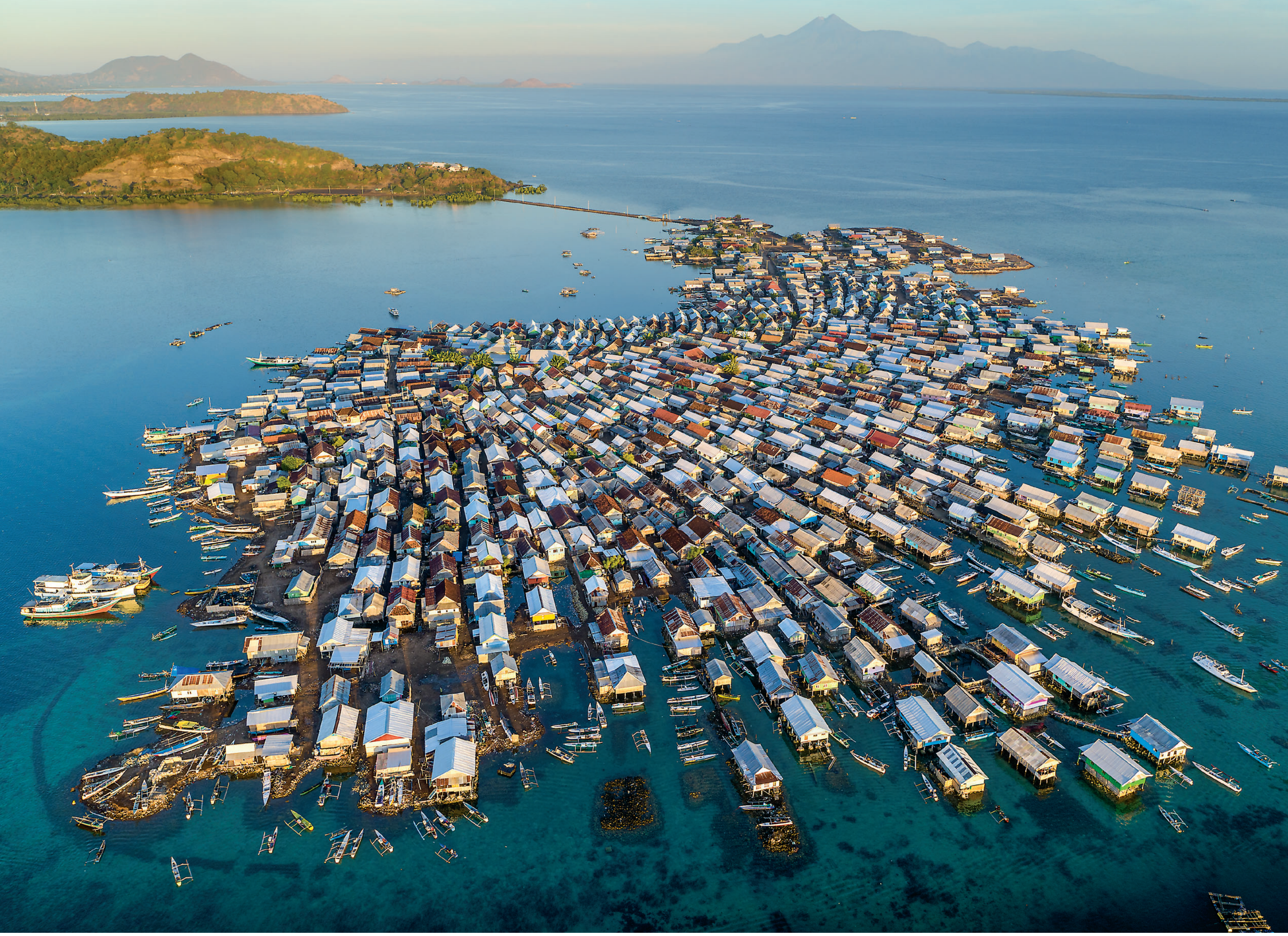
Were there places where traditional methods ended up being more desirable or financially sustainable?
The *almadraba*, a 3,000-year-old fishing method used off the coast of Cadiz, Spain, is a really good example. It was invented by the Phoenicians. Basically, all the tuna that are coming through the Straits of Gibraltar to breed, they hug the coastline to avoid the killer whales that are predating on them in the deeper water.

Fishermen realized they could set up a kind of a labyrinth of nets to trap the tuna, and the Atlantic bluefin that they're getting are some of the most prized for sushi in the world. These fish are massive—hundreds of kilos, beautiful fish.

Because Atlantic bluefin became so overexploited in the open waters, the numbers were plummeting, and they started using the *almadraba* as almost like a scientific census but also as a sustainable way for the local people to make money and continue their tradition.

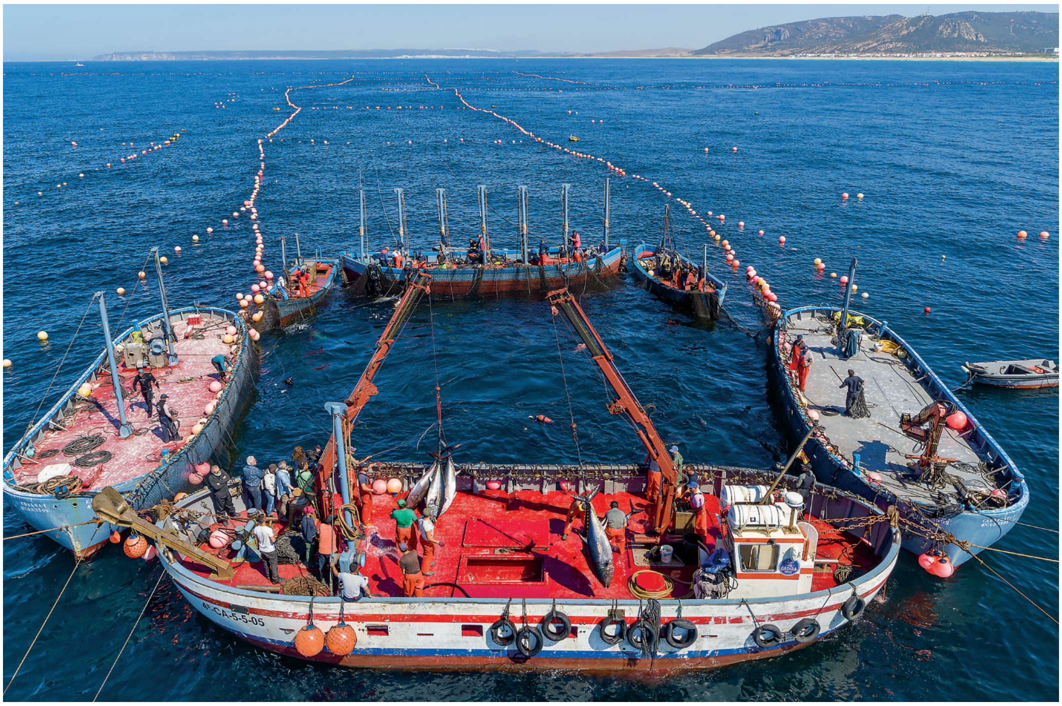
The book contains a key section on aquaculture, also called aquafarming. How globalized has the international fishing supply chain become, and how does this kind of trade affect local communities?
Well, it's very complicated. The biggest complication is that it's a shared resource, and a lot of the seafood

> “Most people don't know where their food comes from except the supermarket.”
>
> —GEORGE STEINMETZ

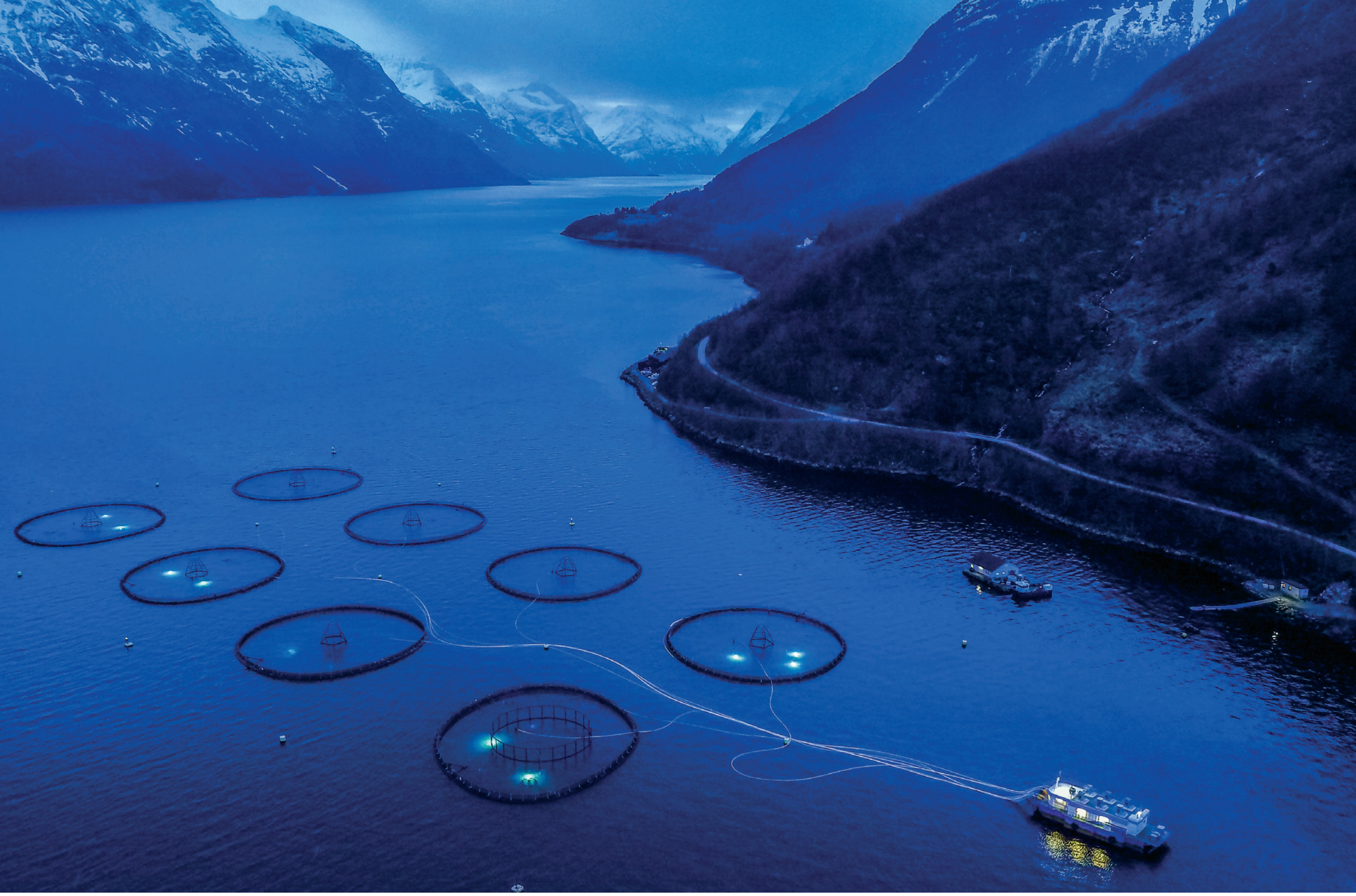


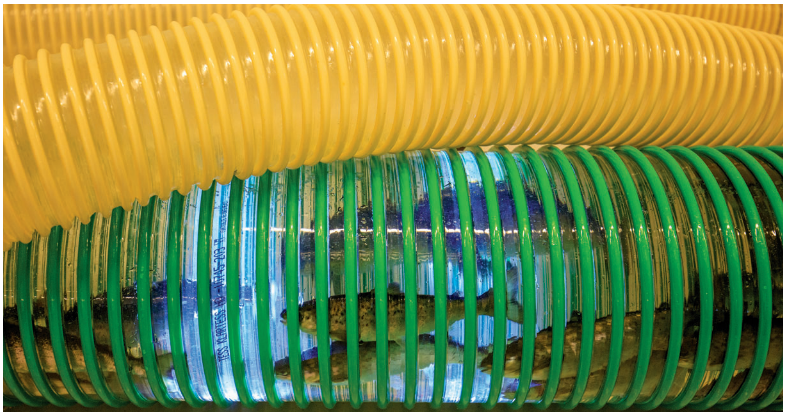
ABOVE Steinmetz documented the homes of the Bajau, a culture of fishermen and seaweed farmers, that are clustered on a man-made coral atoll off Bungin Island in Indonesia.

RIGHT The *almadraba*, photographed off the coast of Cadiz, Spain, is a 3,000-year-old fishing method. Invented by the Phoenicians, promoted by the Romans and perfected by the Moors, it remains financially and ecologically viable.



ABOVE In response to declining octopus numbers, the government has set new quotas and shortened the season. **LEFT** Fishermen return from the sea in motorized pirogues, or small boats.





ABOVE Atlantic salmon pens dot the calm cold waters of a fjord in Norway, a global leader in salmon aquaculture. **LEFT** The fish are transferred to the net pens from hatcheries once they reach 7 ounces.

> "As people start thinking about the source of their food and how it's produced, that actually points in the direction of finding solutions."
>
> —GEORGE STEINMETZ

that we consume is migratory. In the course of its life cycle, it will move from one country's territory water to another to international waters. When you have a shared resource, it's very easy for it to be overexploited because nobody really takes responsibility for the loss. It's the tragedy of the commons.

How did that play out in places like Senegal and Mauritania, where you photographed hordes of pirogues (small boats) on the shores?

The problem the local people are in is that as a fishery declines, that puts even more pressure on people to go out and fish harder, which is exactly the opposite of what you want to do to maintain your fish stocks. They go further, and they get more and more desperate, and then people start using smaller, finer nets, so you start catching the breeder fish, and you rapidly head towards collapse.

Did you see places with some insulation from these global megatrends? In some places, were traditional methods helping people sustain

ABOVE In Bristol Bay, Alaska, fishermen pull in sockeye salmon from shore-based nets that catch the fish as they migrate upriver to spawn. "They don't open the fishery until enough fish have gone past the checkpoint upstream so they'll lay enough eggs for next year," Steinmetz says.

their way of life?
Well, if you have ownership of the resource, then you can have management. In Bungin Island, Indonesia, I didn't talk to the fishermen, but in that photo you can see that there's rapidly increasing population pressure, and generally people end up having to go further and further to fish to feed their families.

In Southeast Asia and the Bay of Bengal, you talk to older farmers, look at their records and you see how meager the catches are there compared to what they once were. In Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, where people don't have refrigeration and they dry fish at large drying yards, I remember seeing about half the racks being empty. It was really a sign that we're past peak fish, and you see this phenomenon repeated. It's fairly global.

Do you see tension between sustaining traditional aquaculture methods with the idea of improving productivity and adding new technology, as in the developed world?
You find solutions on both the megascale and the microscale, like the artisan work with seaweed, which is a real bright spot in aquaculture because you're growing food in a very sustainable way and hardly deforming the food chain. In Bali, people go in and harvest it by hand, so it provides jobs for the local community.

But you also see large-scale solutions. I was really impressed in Alaska, seeing how they're managing the fishery there. They have scientists in towers on every river the salmon come up, and they don't open the fishery until enough fish have gone past the checkpoint upstream so they'll lay enough eggs for next year. Then, boom, by radio, all of a sudden, all the fishing boats start fishing.

Your book dives into various other aspects of food, from meats to grain production. What message do you want readers to take away?
I'd like people to think more about their food as an important environmental choice and that there's a cumulative effect of their decisions. Food webs are very complicated, but as people start thinking about the source of their food and how it's produced, that actually points in the direction of finding solutions, and it starts to put pressure on producers to make things with more environmental responsibility. AW

J. Trevor Williams is a global business journalist based in Atlanta, where he serves as publisher of the online international news site Global Atlanta (globalatlanta.com). Follow him on X (formerly Twitter) @jtrevorwilliams.

CENTURIES-OLD SCENT Oud NOW PERFUMING EAST AND WEST

A once little-known treasure of the Arab world now gets top-shelf space in chic perfumeries across cities of the West as markets embrace the centuries-old scent called oud.

WRITTEN BY **NILOSREE BISWAS**

ABOVE A farmer inspects an *Aquilaria* tree at his farm in Assam, India, from which agarwood resin, **RIGHT**, is extracted. **OPPOSITE** Six grams (a half-tola) of Cambodian oud oil is poured into the bottle that a customer purchased at an Ibraheem Al Qurashi Company store in al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia.

TOP/BOTTOM: PHOTO BY ANUWAR HAZARIKA/NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: PHOTO BY WALEED DASHASH

Known as agarwood or agaru (in the East), the resin of a particular Asian and South Asian heartwood, oud possesses an earthy, animalic and leathery aroma that makes it a coveted ingredient in luxury perfumery. While the world is still getting to know oud as an olfactory ingredient, the Middle East's relationship with it is deep rooted.

Oud has been an inherent element of Middle Eastern tradition; from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to Turkiye to India, Indonesia, Vietnam and France, oud has served as a cultural bridge—albeit an aromatic one.

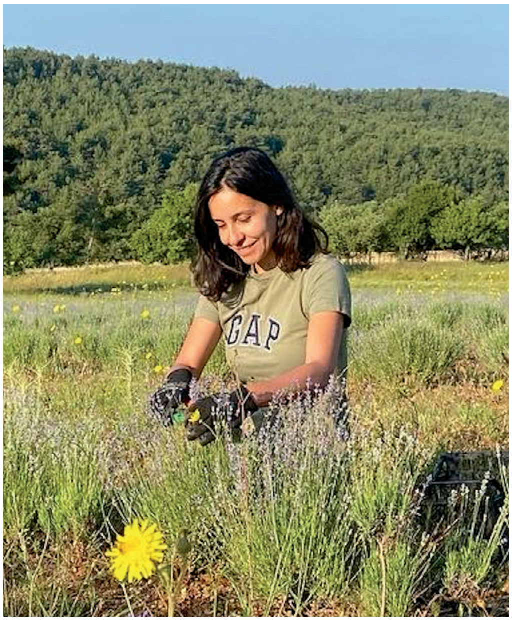
OUD THROUGHOUT HISTORY

Oud may date to 2000 BCE, with its first-known mention in ancient Indian texts as *gahuru* or *agahuru* (oud in Sanskrit) and described as *prâna,* "life" or "spirit of life," as explained in books like *History of Use and Trade of Agarwood.*

Oud in India was used not only as an aromatic (a fragrant smoke in rituals of veneration) but as a medicinal plant derivative. *Suśrutasamhitā*, a seminal medical treatise by Sushsruta, an ayurvedic master, strongly advocated oud's therapeutic usage to treat inflammation.

Ancient Egyptians used oud and frankincense to embalm mummies of their nobility. At the other end of the world, Japan's classical history book *Nihon Soki* mentioned a certain scented wood of Cambodian origin.

Evidence from China's Wu dynasty indicates the use of agarwood in funerary practices, and a manuscript titled *Han Gong Xiang Fang* (*On the Blending of Perfumes in the Palaces of the Han*), written in the second century CE, suggests interest in perfumery in China.



WHAT IS OUD?

Oud is the extracted aromatic resin at the core of the *Aquilaria* tree, found in Southeast Asia, India and Bangladesh. One of the most rare and expensive raw fragrance ingredients in the world, it is converted into an essential oil used in traditional perfumes, incense and spiritual rituals across various cultures and regions.

Just 2%: *Aquilaria* trees infected by fungus that triggers production of resin. Trees now protected in most countries; resin often produced and extracted from plantation-grown younger trees.

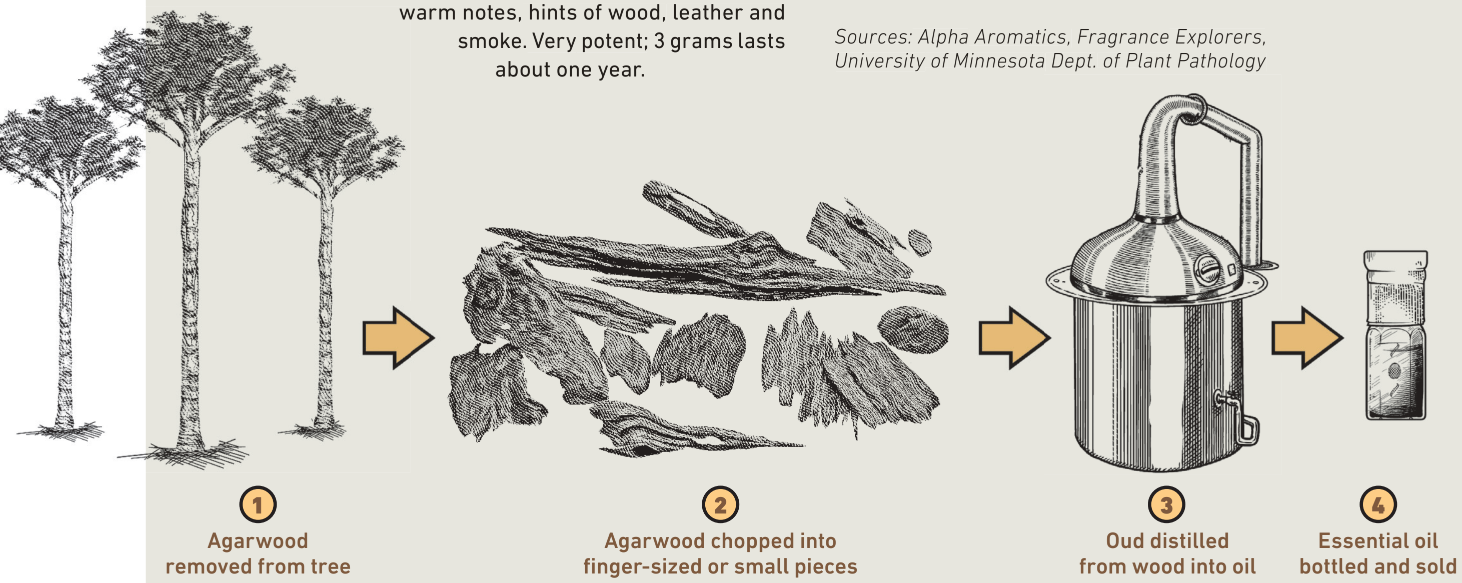
US $6 billion: Annual global oud market. Raw material can sell for $5,000 per pound. A .1-ounce (3-gram or quarter-tola) bottle of essential oil is $300 or more (synthetic versions are cheaper).

Scent: Predominantly musky, sweet and warm notes, hints of wood, leather and smoke. Very potent; 3 grams lasts about one year.

Uses: In perfume—prized as rich, long-lasting (eight- to 14-hour) base note; for interior spaces—burned as *bakhoor* or incense, either as whole pieces of agarwood (finest quality) or as essential oil saturated in wood chips, sometimes infused with other oils (a cheaper alternative); can also be sprayed to create sense of luxury.

Possible benefits: Like other essential oils, touted as spiritual and therapeutic tool. Associated with harmony, thought to enhance meditation.

Sources: Alpha Aromatics, Fragrance Explorers, University of Minnesota Dept. of Plant Pathology


① Agarwood removed from tree
② Agarwood chopped into finger-sized or small pieces
③ Oud distilled from wood into oil
④ Essential oil bottled and sold

In ancient Greece physician-botanist Pedanius Dioscorides (40-90 CE) wrote the famed five-volume pharmacological encyclopedia *Materia Medica*, noting oud as plant-derived medicine.

Though oud has a formidable presence in the Middle East, its large-scale import began only in the seventh century CE with Arabs traveling beyond the region.

"Their first contact with oud as a commodity of import happened via trading trips across India," notes Zakir Laskar, who runs Ahom World perfume company in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. "This early interaction through trade significantly contributed to the cultural and economic integration of oud and furthered [Arabs'] storied history as seasoned merchants and traders."

Laskar refers to the robust movement of oud via the Silk Road across East, Central, Southeast and West Asia, and Europe and North Africa (the Silk Road—from the second century BCE to the 15th century—was an intricate mesh of land and sea routes stretching over 4,000 miles that fostered cultural, political and religious cross-pollination).

Oud has been integral to many cultures, but today it is most prominently used as a perfume ingredient in the Arabian Gulf.

HOW DO WE GET OUD'S SCENT?

Oud is derived from the infected heartwood of *Aquilaria* trees that grow naturally in India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Laos, Thailand, Papua New Guinea and parts of China.

"The infected tree in the wild produces a fragrant resin as its ultimate defense by the formation of a [fungus] against a wood bug called *Zeuzera conferta* by filling its heartwood with a resinous substance, which becomes saturated, dark and thick over time," Laskar says.

That botanical secretion creates the dark wood to be harvested, broken into smaller blocks and chiseled, he says. "The final step would be distillation, and the oil extracted hereto is referred to as oud."

Farmers now cultivate the trees too, and artificial inoculation with fungi produces the resin.

The exact fungal species can depend on the region, specific genus of tree and environmental condition, explains Rana Babaç Çelebi, a clinical aromatherapist and medical historian at Medipol University in Istanbul, whose work revolves around the intersection of scent and historical medical practices.

The aromatic attributes of oud are influenced by its geography, root origin, trunk and branches from the time of fungal infestation to final processing of the resin. The oil must be stored in dark bottles, away from direct heat and sunlight, to best let its aroma develop over time.

> "Oud offers a unique blend of history, complexity and sensory experience."
>
> —RANA BABAÇ ÇELEBI

OUD IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND GLOBALLY

Accounts of oud's first use in the Arab world vary, but some of its traditional use may be related to the inception of Islam.

"As an incense, oud has played a significant role in religious, spiritual practices of quite a number of cultures. In Islamic cultures, the use of oud as *bakhoor* [incense] is deeply ingrained in social customs," including to perfume homes, says Babaç Çelebi, who hails from a family of practitioners of Anatolian folk medicine and is the founder of Turkiye's first online library dedicated to medicinal and aromatic plants.

Laskar, known as "Zak" in the industry, is a fourth-generation perfumer. He prefers to call himself a "nose," someone who is "into exclusive artisan

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OPPOSITE LEFT A man near Jorhat in northeast India is on his way to market to sell his agarwood harvest to traders. **OPPOSITE RIGHT** Clinical aromatherapist and medical historian Rana Babaç Çelebi tends to medicinal plants at her farm. **RIGHT** A salesman at a perfume shop in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province fills an oud bottle for a customer.

GLYNNE JOSEPH PRITCHARD/GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE: TOP LEFT COURTESY OF ZAKIR LASKAR. TOP RIGHT COURTESY OF BABAC CELEBI; BOTTOM: ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN HUDDLE

ABOVE A groom in Saudi Arabia has his clothing infused with *bakhoor*, or incense, the result of agarwood being burned in a vessel called a *mibkharah*. **RIGHT** Salesman Abdulrahman Alwan retrieves agarwood to weigh it for a customer at the Abdulsamad Al Qurashi store in al-Khobar.

oud oils and agarwood chips showcasing a profound connection to both the raw and refined aspects of the trade."

His niche interest in these formats of oud reflects on the resin's potential to evoke a versatile sensory impression. Babaç Çelebi echoes the idea: "As a perfume note, oud offers a unique blend of history, complexity and sensory experience. Its ability to evoke emotion and create lasting impressions makes it a truly remarkable ingredient in the perfumer's palette."

Babaç Çelebi says "the popularity of oud in Turkish and Middle Eastern culture is fascinating, especially considering its source in regions are far-away South and Southeast Asia." This popularity can be attributed to the region's cultural appreciation for fragrances and oud's suitability with warm climates due to its 'cooling' effect.

In Saudi Arabia, oud oil has applications in "weddings, celebrations and for personal usage," says Abdulrahman Alwan, a salesperson for Abdulsamad Al Qurashi Company (ASQ), a perfume house of the Kingdom.

"People have started to come back to the original stuff: oud, Eastern scents, Arabian scents," says Alwan, who is based in al-Khobar, in the eastern part of the country.

While ASQ prefers to source agarwood from India, other companies in the region prefer Indonesian or Vietnamese wood, and perhaps blends.

Individual artisans like Laskar consider crafting oud-based products as an artisanal homage to their ancestors.

"My father once said that our entire village was into this trade from pre-partition Sylhet, Bangladesh. Some were distillers, traders … and others skilled

Arabian Oud
Arabian Oud
Oriental Perfumes

Arabian Oud perfume shop operates on Oxford Street, a major retail thoroughfare in London.

workers in agarwood," Laskar recalls. "We are a few agarwood houses who possess a unique skill in creating *oud mukhallat*s [ingredient mixtures] and *attar* [an essential oil] blends which elevate our offerings to an art form."

Babaç Çelebi says, "I think oud is particularly interesting as a perfume note for its ability to evolve on the skin. As it dries down, it reveals different facets of its character, creating a dynamic olfactory experience." She says this complexity allows oud to pair beautifully with a wide variety of other notes, from florals and spices to woods and resins.

It is perhaps oud's ability to pair with other fragrance notes that has fascinated Western perfumers. Oud entered the European markets with brands such as Yves Saint Laurent (YSL) in the early 2000s, and since then there has been no looking back.

Today global perfume houses like Tom Ford, Chanel, Dior, Chopard and their Middle Eastern counterparts to whom oud owes its growing popularity at the market level.

Every luxury perfume house has come up with its own interpretation, though the European note palettes are a tad more subtle.

However, these interpretations have been favorable to oud's appeal globally. The discerning Western "frag head" is curious to venture into oud's original dark, leathery attributes.

Back in the Middle East, oud-based perfumes are in greatest demand.

Omeir Kalsekar, founder of Azha Perfumes in the UAE, says it is committed to preserving the local heritage. "Oud holds a sacred place in Emirati and Gulf culture, and it will always remain a symbol of hospitality, intertwined with spirituality, a key element in mosques and religious rituals."

All at once, excitement is swirling around oud the world over. "Oud is here to stay, having transitioned into a commercial phase. It isn't a mere passing trend," says Laskar as he focuses on blending.

Babaç Çelebi adds, "I believe this trend is a sign of a more interconnected, globally inspired approach to luxury fragrances."

Perhaps for some oud is a tale of connectivity, and an example of earliest globalization that so many are linked in their love of a scent. AW

Based in Philadelphia and Mumbai, **Nilosree Biswas** is an author, filmmaker and columnist who writes about Asian history, art, culture, food and cinema. Her work regularly appears in national and international media.

URBANIMAGES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; OPPOSITE TOP: SULTAN THAWWADI; BOTTOM: WALEED DASHASH

ARAB Immigration AND THE FRENCH Art Scene

WRITTEN BY **JACKY ROWLAND**

Wearing a sculpted white helmet and an ornate space suit, a solitary figure is running across a desert landscape. He strides over sand dunes until a shimmering city of domes and minarets appears on the horizon. The figure stops for a moment, turning to assess his options, before racing onward.

Composed of three large screens, a series of 3D-printed sculptures and a joystick, this interactive digital installation was created by Mounir Ayache, a young French Moroccan artist. The work is inspired by a 16th-century Moorish traveler, whose adventures Ayache reimagines and projects into the 26th century.

"I discovered the book *Leo Africanus* by the French Lebanese author Amin Maalouf when I was an art student in Paris," said Ayache. "I had always read books about knights, but here was an epic story not told from a Western perspective. For the first time, there was a hero who had the same origins as me, and who created a bridge between the two sides of the Mediterranean."

Still playing with desert topography, Ayache has created a multimedia work for the Paris gallery Jeu de Paume, which is staging an immersive arts festival, "Moving Landscapes," in early 2025.

Ayache has created dunes from sheets of silk printed with Moroccan-style arabesques. The silk was made in an artistic collaboration with the French luxury fashion house Hermès. Part of the design is printed in colorless ink, visible only under ultraviolet light, which reveals the complexity of the motif.

Video screens mounted on robotic arms move above the dunes, playing images based on the Greek

ABOVE A screen shot from Mounir Ayache's video-game prototype is shown. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM** A station to play the game is displayed with his 3D-printed dioramas and digital prints at the Arab World Institute's 2024 "Arabofuturs" exhibition. **LEFT** Ayache has created a multimedia work based on desert topography for an immersive arts festival in Paris in early 2025.

> “Exchanges between France and the Arab world have contributed enormously to the artistic scene here.”
>
> —JACK LANG

myth of Ulysses, reimagined 500 years into the future.

Ayache belongs to the latest generation of artists born in France to Arab immigrant parents. Some use traditional painting and sculpture, while others experiment with new media. What most of them have in common is a desire to use their artistic practice to explore their own sense of identity, thereby contributing in fresh ways to the French art scene.

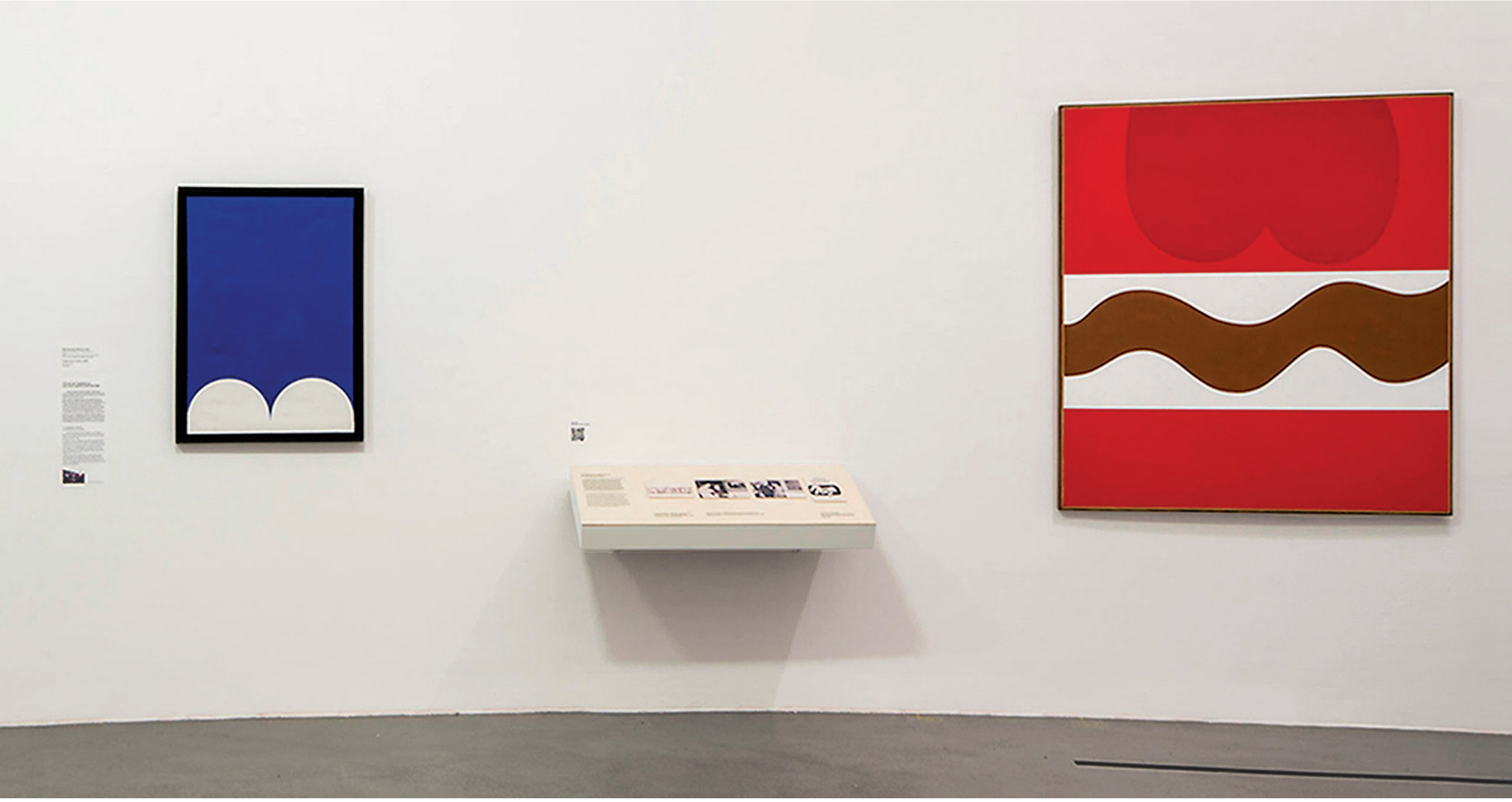
“Exchanges between France and the Arab world have contributed enormously to the artistic scene here,” said Jack Lang, the president of the Arab World Institute in Paris and a former French culture minister.

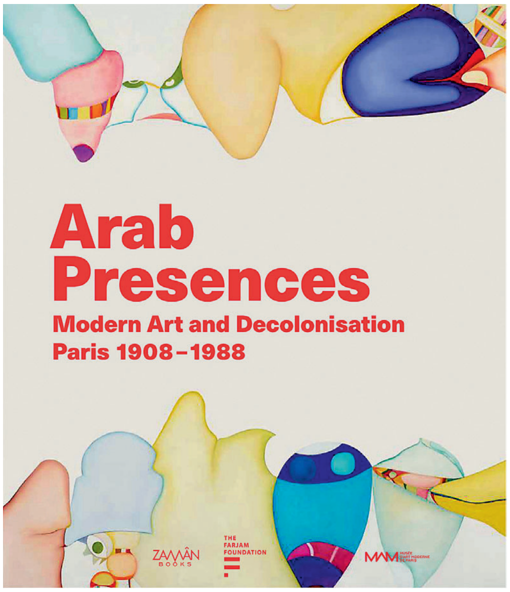
The Arab World Institute staged an exhibition in 2024 entitled “Arabofuturs,” showcasing work by contemporary French artists of Arab heritage and their counterparts from several Arab countries. Their paintings, sculptures and installations contain visions

RIGHT Jack Lang serves as president of the Arab World Institute, where the “Arabofuturs” exhibition, **BELOW**, featured 18 Arabian artists and those of its diaspora who explore science fiction and imagine future societies.

PREVIOUS PAGES: TOP: DANIELE MOLAJOLI; BOTTOM: COURTESY OF MOUNIR AYACHE; OPPOSITE: COURTESY OF ARABOFUTURS

UNE EXPOSITION ÉVÉNEMENT
À L'INSTITUT DU MONDE ARABE
ARABO
FUTURS
SCIENCE-FICTION ET NOUVEAUX IMAGINAIRES
23.04
— 27.10
.2024
INSTITUT
DU MONDE
ARABE
معهد العالم العربي
Entrée principale / Main entrance
Restaurant DAR MIMA ZIRYAB
Fermé les lundis / Closed on Mondays





of the future that play with, and sometimes subvert, Western conventions of science fiction.

While this exhibition gazed into the future, the Museum of Modern Art in Paris staged a major retrospective. "Arab Presences—Modern Art and Decolonisation: Paris 1908-1988" brought together more than 200 works by well over 100 Arab artists who studied, worked or exhibited in the French capital during the 20th century.

Most of the works on display were borrowed from French collections, although some had been languishing in storage. The exhibition explored how Paris influenced these artists and how they affected the French art scene.

"There has been a lot of rediscovering of non-Western modernist movements," said the exhibition curator, Morad Montazami. "We tried to unveil the undocumented relationships between Arab and French artists, which was well overdue in terms of our post-colonial consciousness."

THE ARRIVAL OF ARAB ARTISTS

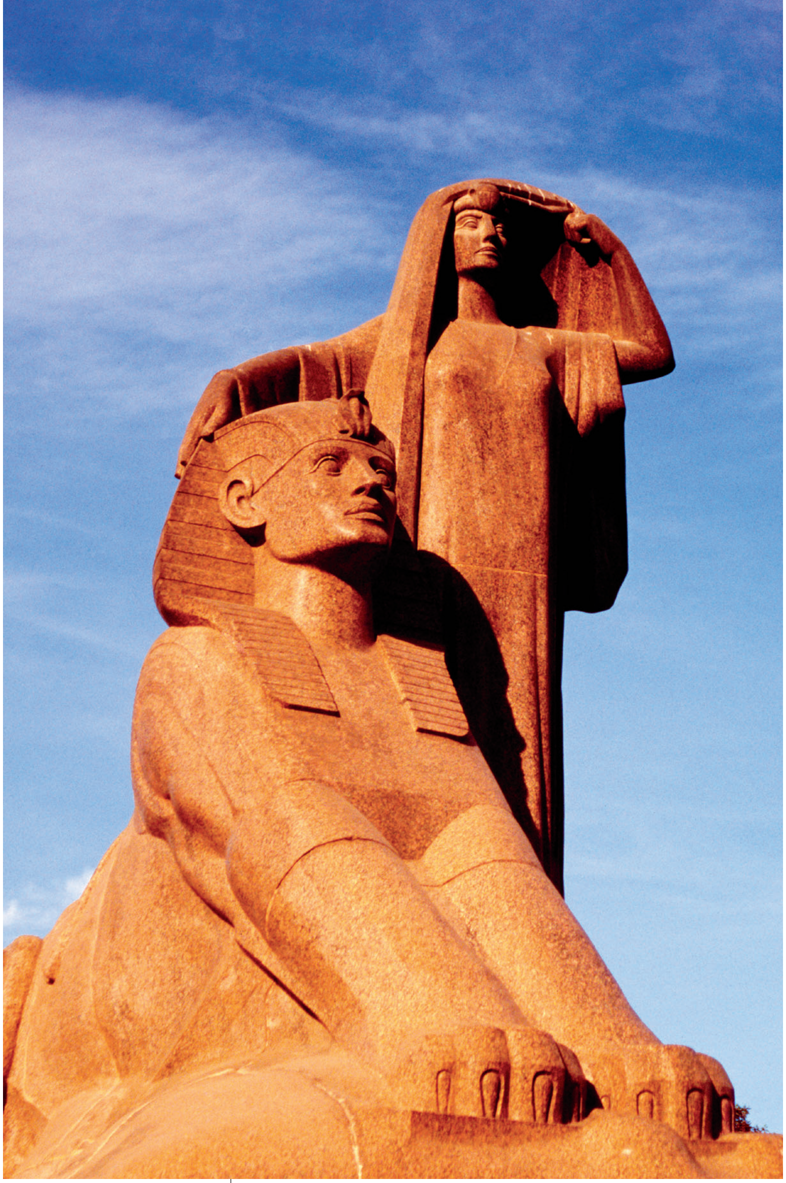
Paris was arguably the capital of the art world from the late 19th to the mid-20th century. The young artists who arrived from the Francophone countries of North Africa and the Levant discovered a city of contradictions. Paris was a place of cultural connection but also exclusion, a center for anti-colonialism but also the heart of an empire.

"The point of "Arab Presences" was to show that Arab artists are part of French art history and part of the Parisian art scene," said Silvia Naef, an art historian.

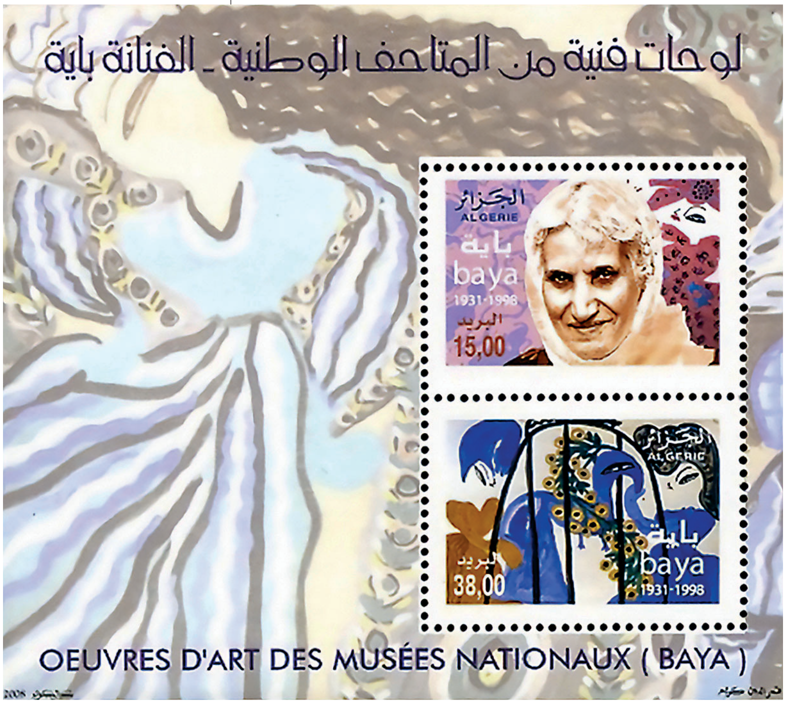
The exhibition included works by some of the giants of 20th-century Arab art, such as the Egyptian sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar, who arrived in Paris in 1912.

ABOVE Moroccan artist Mohamed Melehi's painting "Pulsation" (1964), right, was featured next to French Moroccan painter Mohamed Ataallah's "Tanger Bleu et Blanc" (1969) at the "Arab Presences—Modern Art and Decolonisation: Paris 1908-1988" exhibition held last year at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris. **LEFT** Lebanese painter Huguette Caland's "Espase blanc I" (1984) was used to promote the art show.

TOP: MAM-PARISMUSÉES/NICOLASBOREL; OPPOSITE TOP: MAJORITY WORLD CIC/ALAMY; BOTTOM: DAMIEN PAILLARD, COURTESY OF INSTITUTE DU MONDE ARABE



L'École de Paris arabe
The Arab School of Paris


لوحات فنية من المتاحف الوطنية ـ الفنانة باية
الجزائر
ALGERIE
باية
baya
1931-1998
البريد
15,00
الجزائر
ALGERIE
البريد
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باية
baya
1931-1998
OEUVRES D'ART DES MUSÉES NATIONAUX (BAYA)

Mukhtar's knowledge of ancient Egyptian art, together with the friendships he formed in France with Egyptian nationalists, inspired one of his most famous sculptures, Egypt's Awakening. Many art historians consider him the founder of Egyptian modernism.

Also on display were works by two of Morocco's most distinguished modern artists, Farid Belkahia and Mohamed Melehi, who passed through Paris half a century later. They spearheaded the Casablanca School, an avant-garde movement in the 1960s that aimed to bring art closer to ordinary people.

"All these artists had formal, classical training in Europe," said Alexandra Roy, an expert in modern and contemporary Arab art with the auction house Sotheby's. "They then took these skills back to their own countries and found a way to produce work that is very much of their heritage but in a so-called modern way."

Belkahia rejected the canvas and oil paints he had used at art school in Paris in favor of traditional Moroccan materials such as leather and vellum, and natural dyes like henna. Melehi combined Western geometric patterns with Islamic art, switching to car paint as a cheap, everyday alternative to acrylics.

“Arab Presences” also demonstrated how artistic influences between Paris and the Arab world traveled in both directions, with Arab artists leaving their marks on the French capital.

One of these was the self-taught Algerian artist Baya Mahieddine, who arrived on the Paris art scene as a teenager in 1947. Her vivid, fantastical paintings of women defy classification, with critics variously describing her work as surrealist, primitive, naive and modern.

Pablo Picasso later cited her as an inspiration for his “Women of Algiers” series of paintings.

“The Arab artists who went to Paris definitely enriched the scene,” said Roy. “You can only be a hub if you are international and welcome all these different influences and artists. Otherwise, you become very provincial.”

NEXT-GEN ARTISTS BORN ON FRENCH SOIL

In the 1990s, the first generation of dual-heritage artists started to make their mark. Unlike the Arab painters and sculptors who passed through Paris as part of their training, these artists were born in France.

The French Algerian artist Zineb Sedira is one of the most prominent figures of this generation. Highly influenced by the Algerian films she saw growing up in the Paris suburbs, she preserves and re-creates cultural memory through video art and photography. In 2022 Sedira represented France at the Venice Biennale.

“Algeria coproduced a lot of films with France in the 1960s,” Sedira said, “so it is easy for me to talk about my two identities through film.”

As a child, Neïla Czermak Ichti, a young French Tunisian artist, was delighted to discover that her name, written backwards, spelled “alien.” She filled the margins of her schoolbooks with doodles of monsters, influenced by the “Alien” movies.

“We have identities that are different from the so-called French identity, even if that identity doesn’t really exist,” Czermak Ichti said.

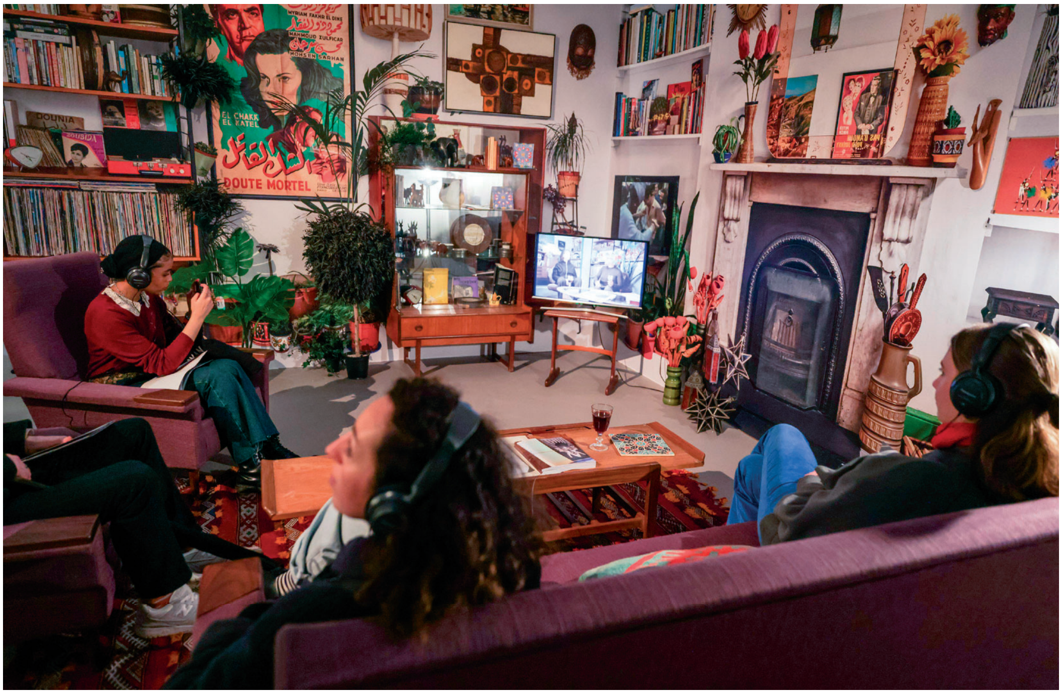
Ballpoint is her medium of choice, sometimes intensified with vibrant acrylic paint. She draws her own face stitched onto the body of an animal or creates domestic scenes in which the familiar sits

ABOVE Works from The Arab School of Paris are shown at “Arab Presences.” The exhibition also featured works by sculptor Mahmoud Muktar, who is known for Egypt’s Awakening, **OPPOSITE TOP**, and, **OPPOSITE BOTTOM**, famed Algerian artist Baya Mahieddine, who held her first exhibition of paintings in Paris at 16. She was honored with a postage stamp in 2008 in her home country.

ABOVE: MAM-PARISMUSÉES_YASSER GHAROONI; OPPOSITE TOP: B. O’KANE/ALAMY

MONDES ORGANIQUES
MONDES À VENIR
ORGANIC WORLDS
WORLDS TO COME

RIGHT "Dreams Have No Titles," by French Algerian artist Zineb Sedira (pictured) at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, featured an immersive diorama of her living room in Brixton with video.

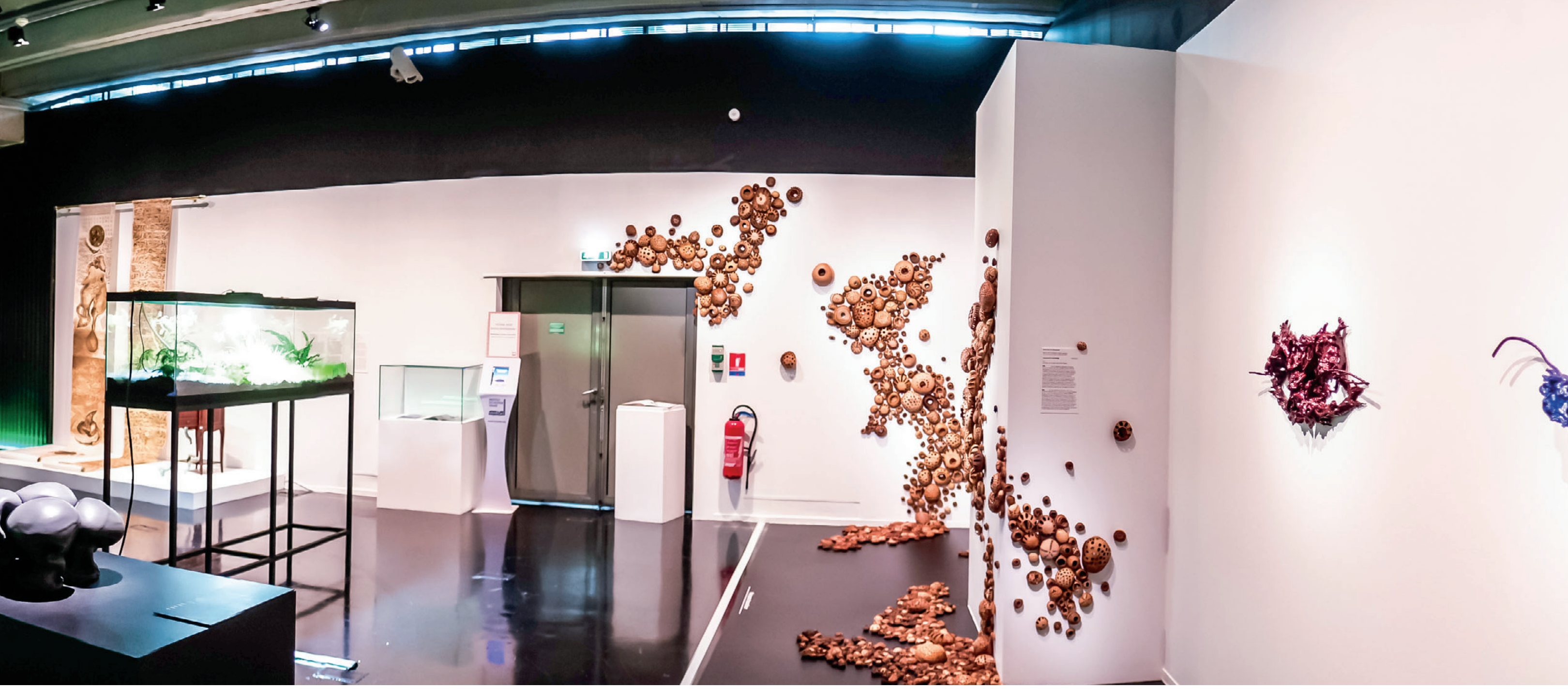

EL CHARK EL KATEL
DOUTE MORTEL
DOUNIA

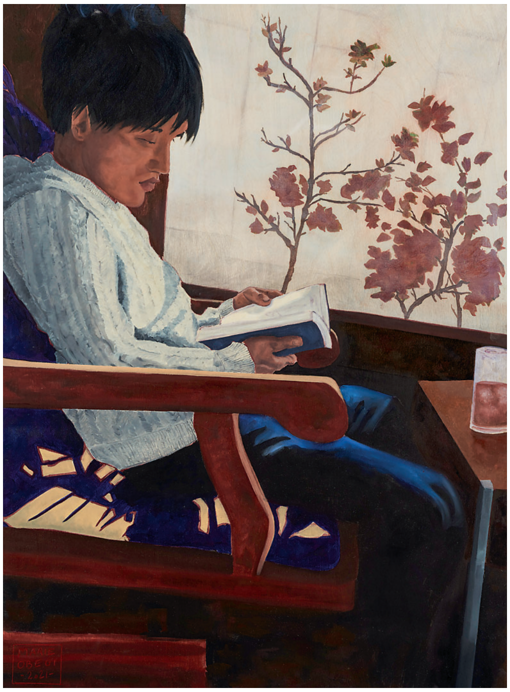
uneasily with the bizarre.

"In the media and cinema, we see stereotypical narratives, very narrow ways of representing characters," she said. "I depict characters with as much complexity as possible so that it's difficult to put a label on them."

Whereas the direction of travel for Arab artists in the 20th century was south to north, many French Arab artists are now making journeys in the opposite direction. They want to reconnect with their origins and explore the cultural heritage of those countries.

"This heritage was not understood as part of the national heritage of France, whereas it infuses our society and co-constructs the identities of these artists," said Frédérique Mehdi, the Arab World Institute's





> “Not having a sense that I am *something* from *somewhere* is what gives me the ability to feel comfortable being ‘other’ in different places.”
>
> —MARIE OBEGI

head of cultural activities. “We are looking in the rearview mirror—not in a nostalgic way but to understand who we are.”

Research into the past led Czermak Ichti to discover Baya, in whose work she found echoes of her own fascination with strange worlds and hybrid creatures. She was inspired to create a body of work that she exhibited in 2024 alongside a selection of Baya’s paintings.

Most young French artists of Arab heritage do not see themselves as rooted in one place and one culture. Many circulate between two or more countries, making art in their own studios or collaborating with local galleries.

Marie Obegi, a French Lebanese painter and illustrator, uses portraiture to explore the human psyche. An avid reader of manga comic books, she was drawn to Japanese culture and moved to Kyoto for two years. She is now based in London.

In recent years Obegi has consciously reconnected with her Lebanese heritage and today runs a residency in Beirut for visiting artists.

“Not having a sense that I am *something* from *somewhere* is what gives me the ability to feel comfortable being ‘other’ in different places,” she said.

These artists draw strength and inspiration from their multifaceted identities. They embrace opportunities to forge new cultural connections while creating work that challenges perceptions and inspires people.

“My dual heritage enables me to show a different point of view from the purely Western,” said Ayache. “I see my work as a bridge between two cultures, and I want to show my other culture in an unexpected way, free from clichés or preconceived ideas.” AW

ABOVE A panorama shows the diversity of futuristic work found in the “Arabofuturs” exhibition. **LEFT** French Lebanese artist Marie Obegi found inspiration from Japanese woodblock prints in her piece titled “Inkyo” from her series “Nagori.”

TOP: COURTESY OF ARABOFUTURS/DAMIEN PILLARD; BOTTOM: COURTESY OF MARIE OBEGI; OPPOSITE TOP: DPA PICTURE ALLIANCE/ALAMY; OPPOSITE BOTTOM: IMAGEPLOTTER/ALAMY LIVE NEWS

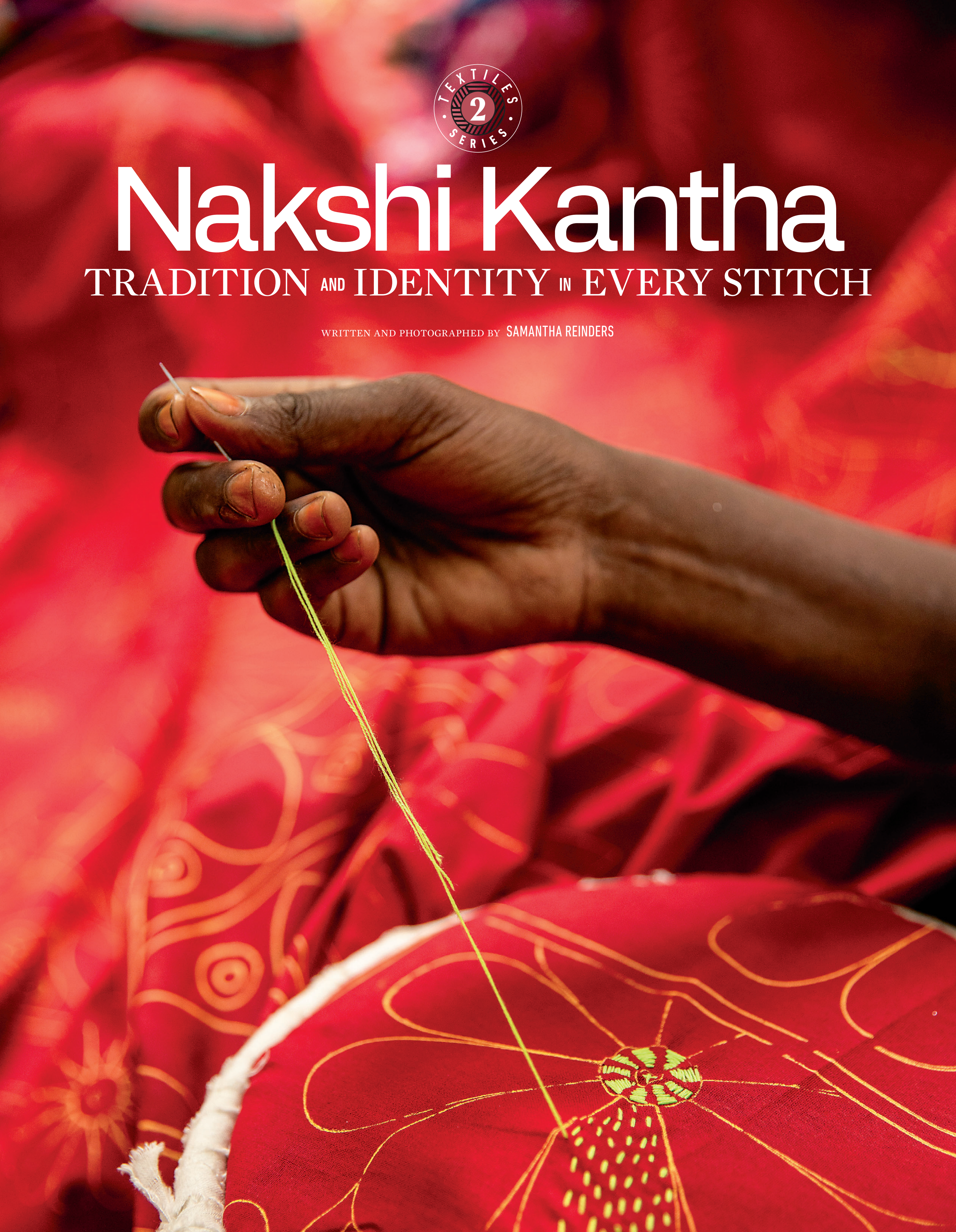
Based in London and Paris, **Jacky Rowland** is an actor, playwright and broadcaster who writes about art, theater, music and culture. She is a former correspondent for the British Broadcasting Corporation and Al Jazeera English.

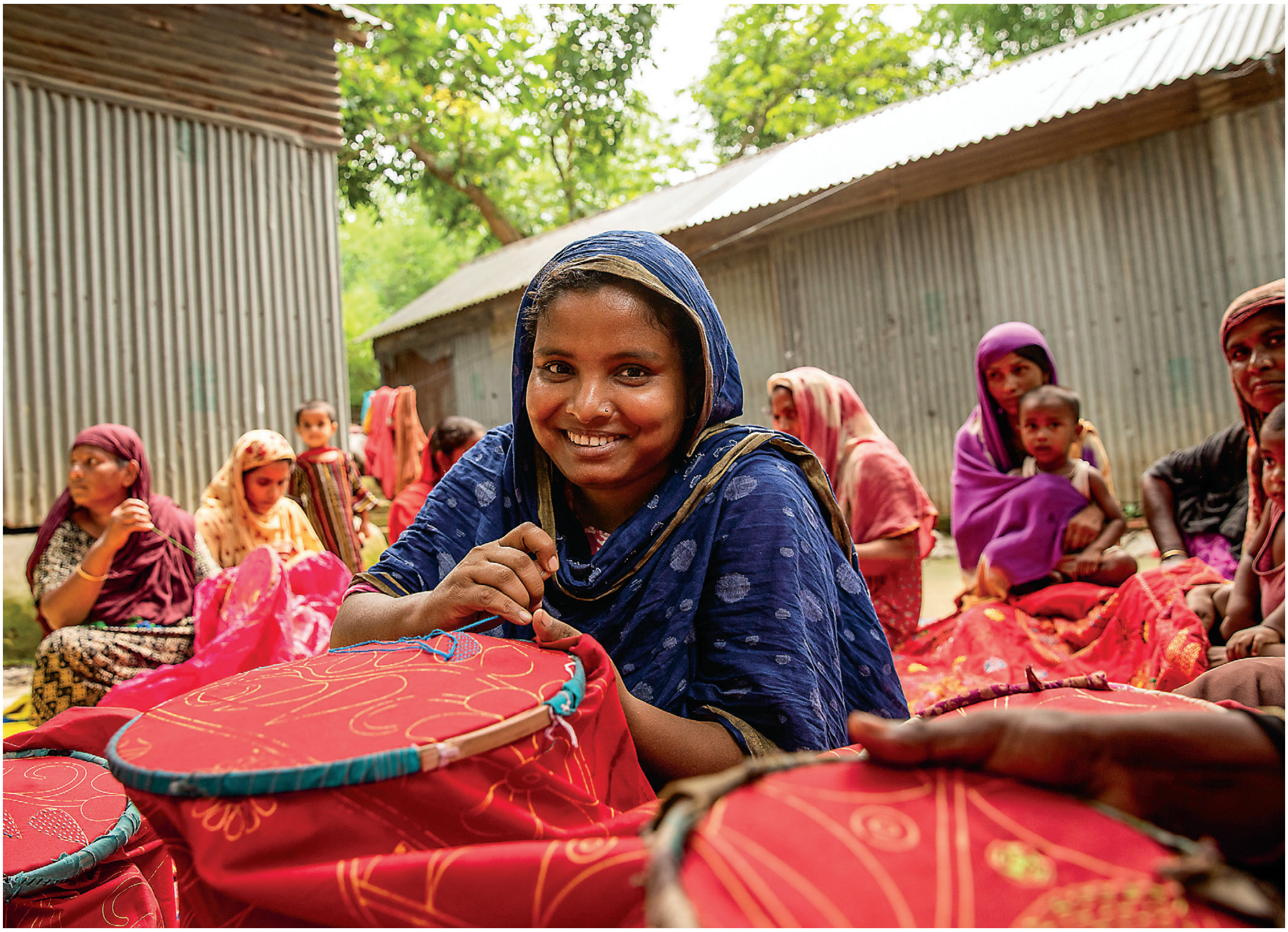
TEXTILES 2 SERIES

Nakshi Kantha

TRADITION AND IDENTITY IN EVERY STITCH

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY **SAMANTHA REINDERS**





ABOVE
Scenes such as this, where Jorina Begum begins stitching a kantha, play out in thousands of villages across Bangladesh and India every day.

Jorina Begum sits among friends in the Bangladeshi village of Magura Para. They're gathered outside their home on mats made of old rice sacks sewn together. Amid gossip and laughter, their needles dance elegantly through fabric, stitch after stitch creating colorful quilts.

Theirs is the timeless art of *nakshi kantha*.

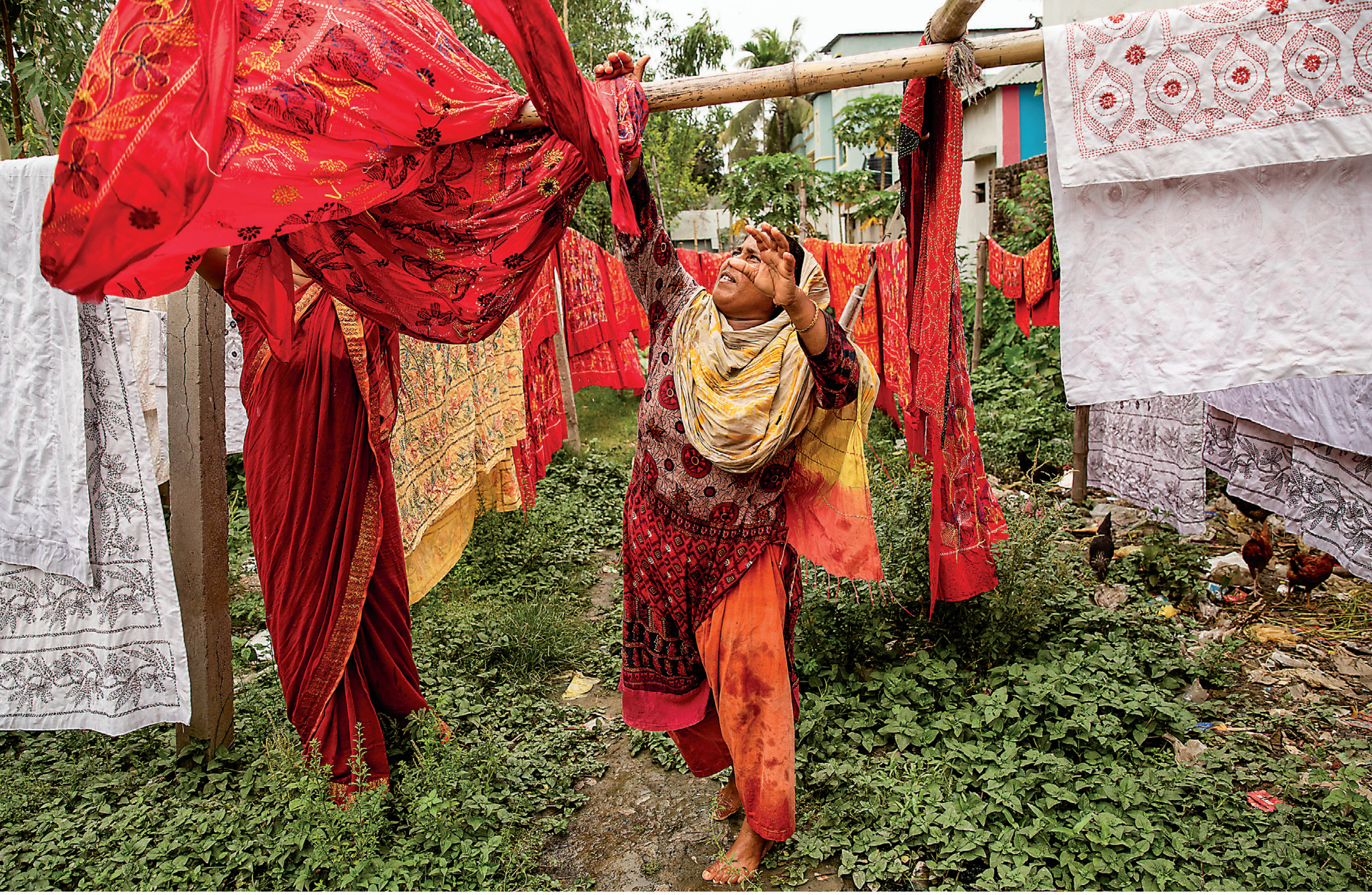
This traditional form of embroidery is seeing a resurgence in popularity, both within what is today Bangladesh and India and on the global stage, in boutiques, at museums and on catwalks.

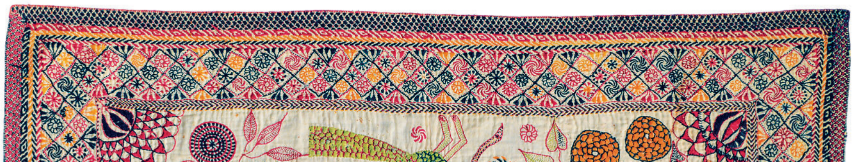
The reason for this current surge: ease of access to goods from around the globe due to online buying and the tide of enthusiasm for upcycling and environmental awareness. Another reason is what Krista Sartin of Kantha Bae, a Tennessee-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) that sources kanthas in India and makes and sells beautiful clothing from them in the US, says is simply—hope. "Hope is what is going viral. Hope is the bridge that is being formed by these sacred art forms reaching across cultural boundaries," Sartin says.

The quilts are deeply tied to the cultural and historical identity of Bengal in South Asia. Bengal was, for centuries, a major cultural and economic hub, known for its trade, art and literature.

WHAT IS NAKSHI KANTHA EMBROIDERY?

Conventional nakshi kantha are quilts made by women in rural Bangladesh. They derive their name from the Bengali words *nakshi* (artistic patterns) and *kantha* (quilt)—although the Sanskrit word *kontha* is perhaps more fitting: It means "rags." The quilts are made from several layers of old saris, adorned with designs that reflect everyday life, folklore and personal memories. The craft is handed down from mother to





ABOVE Swapna Begum hangs kanthas to dry. She works for a business that sells the quilts in shops in Dhaka and elsewhere. **LEFT** A Bengali kantha from the 19th century portrays typical animal and floral motifs. Many antique quilts now hang in galleries and museums in the Global North.

daughter and has evolved over centuries as trends have shifted and the materials used and needs of the artisans have changed.

According to Maleka Khan, a social worker and author of a book on nakshi kantha tradition, the embroidered quilts have humble beginnings—they were made for warmth during winters and monsoons. Over time, though, the designs became more and more filled with meaning. The quilts became repositories of family history, woven with threads of love and memory.

For local communities, nakshi kantha is a significant form of art. "European markets have always yearned after Bengal's cotton and silk for their fine quality. Rural women declined to just throw them away. Rather, they reused them in ingenious ways," says Khan. "Even the colorful borders of the old saris were torn off and put away for safekeeping. Then the

ABOVE In her Dhaka home, Maleka Khan flips through her book on nakshi kantha, sharing its place in history, folklore and literature and its evolution across districts and decades.

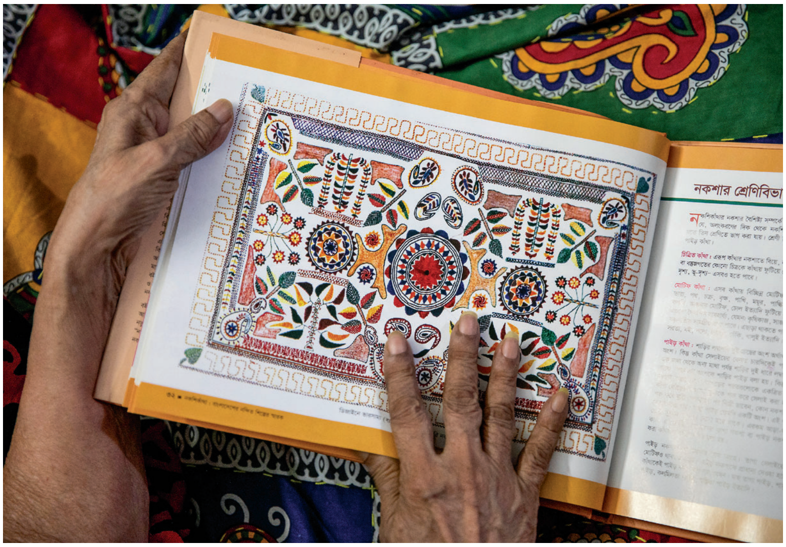
threads were wound around needles to be used later."

Paging through her book, she points out several early-19th-century kanthas that have vivid scenes drawn from contemporary life, myths and legends. Many depict chronological narratives of chariot processions, wedding rituals and nocturnal blossoms, with stitching following centerpieces of conch shells, lotuses and blazing suns, depending on the story the maker is trying to tell.

Khan explains that the old cloths also had a magical purpose, as they were believed to ward off the evil eye, keeping the user safe from harm and that whatever the motif, no two kanthas are ever the same. "That is where the magic is," she says. "I've never seen this kind of artwork anywhere else in the world."

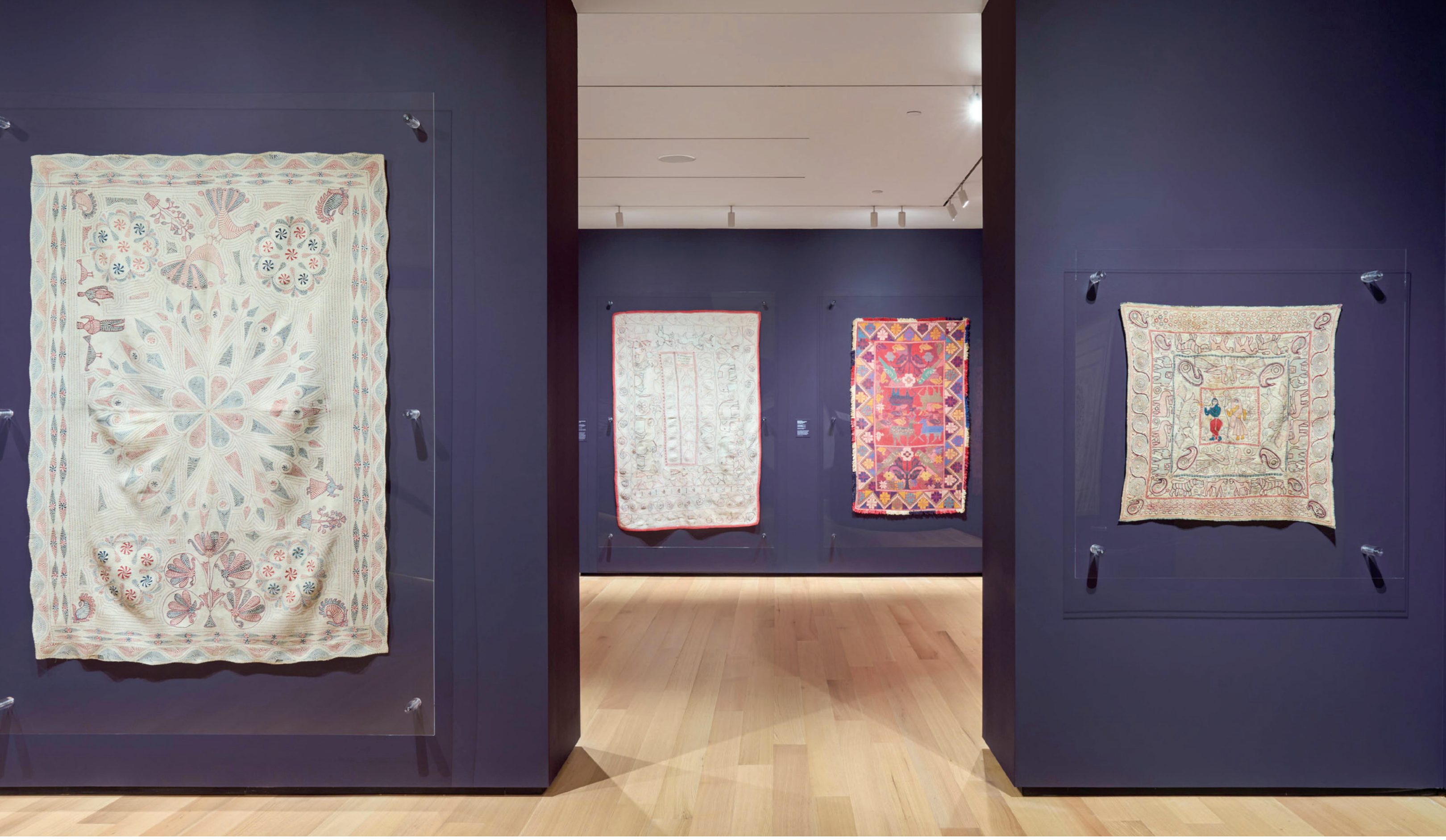
HISTORY OF NAKSHI KANTHA

Kanthas can be traced back to the pre-Vedic age (earlier than 1500 BCE). A written record can be found in Krishnadas Kaviraj's book *Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita*, in which he wrote about how Chaitanya's mother sent a homemade kantha to her son



> "I've never seen this kind of artwork anywhere else in the world."
>
> —MALEKA KHAN

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: HISTORY AND ART COLLECTION/ALAMY



ABOVE The Philadelphia Museum of Art hosted a 2024 exhibit titled "A Century of Kanthas: Women's Quilts in Bengal, 1870s-1970s." **LEFT** Mahua Lahiri grew up surrounded by the Nakshi Kantha quilting traditions in Eastern Bengal (today's Bangladesh) where she was mentored by her mother. Today, Lahiri's contemporary works are global exhibits. In 2016 she co-founded the brand Hushnohana to help preserve and share the tradition, and in 2023 Lahiri was recognized with the Architectural Digest India X JSW Prize for Contemporary Craftsmanship. "My goal is to bring this art into contemporary spaces, allowing it to resonate with new audiences while preserving its essence," Lahiri says.

residing in Puri in India.

Bengal was ruled by various empires, including the Maurya, Gupta and Mughal empires, and later became a key colony under British rule. In 1947, when British India was partitioned, Bengal was divided into two parts: West Bengal (part of India) and East Bengal (which became East Pakistan). Tensions between East and West Pakistan led to the Liberation War of 1971, resulting in the independent nation of Bangladesh.

It is in Bangladesh that the tradition of nakshi kantha remains strongest, and as time has changed the borders of Bengal, so too have nakshi kanthas morphed over the centuries. The emblematic stitch remains—but these days the designs are simpler overall.

During the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, Khan says, nakshi kantha played a surprising and unsung role. When millions of people fled to India

RIGHT Burberry's Prorsum fall 2015 ready-to-wear collection was inspired with kantha quilting influences. **LEFT** Krista Sartin (pictured) discovered kantha when a friend gave her a scarf in 2016. Today she owns Kantha Bae, a company based in Tennessee, where she transforms the textiles into a bohemian look, bringing more attention to the craft.

> "Hope is what is going viral. Hope is the bridge that is being formed by these sacred art forms reaching across cultural boundaries." —KRISTA SARTIN

to escape the brutality of the war, their personal belongings were bundled in knapsacks fashioned from nakshi kanthas. Moreover, the kantha was used as a tool for occupational therapy during the war.

Khan, who was working as a social worker at the time, describes how many of the women of Bengal were left numb with trauma after their experiences in 1971. She and her team worked with recovering women and girls and often found that though they couldn't—or wouldn't—talk about their ordeals, they found relief in stitching. "By making kanthas together, we eventually helped some of the victims to become stronger. By occupying them in an everyday skill that they enjoyed, it allowed their subconscious minds to cope and overcome," she says.

NAKSHI KANTHA TODAY

Today, nakshi kantha has witnessed a stellar revival, with commercial demand soaring both locally and globally. But it is more likely to find them made with new cotton cloth as opposed to reused saris. While the single stitch remains the root of the art form, designs

BANGLADESH
INDIA
Bay of Bengal

RIGHT: CATWALKING/GETTY IMAGES; LEFT: COURTESY OF KRISTA SARTIN;
OPPOSITE TOP: COURTESY OF THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART; BOTTOM: COURTESY OF MAHUA LAHIRI

RIGHT Mitu Bashphor, from the Jamalpur District, appreciates that making kantha allows her to educate her sons while working from home. **BELOW** Kantha agent Sultan Mahmud's business is booming. Nearly 100 women in local villages work for him. Customers can buy directly from his shop, but the majority of his income comes from bulk sales in the country's capital.

are often stenciled onto the material and then stitched over, allowing quicker and cheaper production.

Yet the old ones still exist. In rural towns, one can still find nakshi kanthas complete with decades of patchwork and stories seeped into the layers of cloth.

Jamalpur, the district in Bangladesh where Begum and her friends sit and stitch, is just one of several hubs of nakshi kantha production across the country. As in other such hubs, entrepreneurs employ up to 100 women in nearby villages to produce the quilts for them—providing them with the already stenciled cotton material and thread and paying them for a returned quilted piece. They in turn wash, package and distribute the finished products farther afield.

Sultan Mahmud is one of these entrepreneurs. He arrived in Jamalpur 30 years ago with empty pockets. "I just had the *lungi* [men's garment akin to a sarong] I wore and one shirt. I started my business very slowly," he states. His business now prospers, and today he serves as the joint secretary of the Jamalpur Cooperative for Nakshi Kantha and sells, at a minimum, 5,000 kanthas a month.

> "The fact that each kantha is unique, so far from the mass-produced items filling shelves in most stores, is their appeal."
>
> —ROBIN SEYFERT

As the demand for nakshi kantha has increased, so too has its contribution to women's empowerment and employment across the country. Mitu Bashphor, who lives near Jamalpur, uses her spare time to make kantha for Mahmud. "I'm able to send my kids to school using the money I make from selling kantha, which feels good," she says. In a country where women are often not financially independent, this opportunity to contribute to the family is crucial.

At NGO Basha's head office in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, women spend their weeks laying out material and embroidering while their young children are offered child care and school lessons, taking this burden off the women while they earn. Retailers buy from the NGO online, and their products are sold globally.

According to Robin Seyfert, founder of Basha, part of kantha's revival in the past decade has been a global surge in customers wanting less commercial, ethically produced products. "The fact that each kantha is unique, so far from the mass-produced items filling shelves in most stores, is their appeal," she says.

The recycled aspect is a bonus. Eco-friendly sells. Basha's products are sold almost exclusively online—from Estonia to Hong Kong, the United States to Singapore. It sells the traditional kantha—but has also modernized the concept and sells other such embroidered products as jackets and bags. "It's easier to connect and send products around the world than it used to be," says Seyfert.

Whether vintage or contemporary, nakshi kanthas remain a beautiful symbol of the Bengal region and its people, preserving a rich heritage while adapting to modern trends and changing markets. AW

ABOVE A mother in a Jamalpur District village patiently teaches her daughter to stitch.

Samantha Reinders (samreinders.com; @samreinders) is an award-winning photographer, book editor, multimedia producer and workshop leader based in Cape Town, South Africa. She holds a master's degree in visual communication from Ohio University, and her work has been published in *Time*, *Vogue*, *The New York Times* and more.

Author's Corner

A Life of Words: A Conversation With Zahran Alqasmi

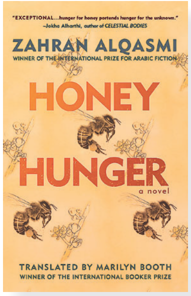
Written by DIANNA WRAY

For as long as poet and novelist Zahran Alqasmi can remember, his life in Mas, an Omani village about 170 kilometers south of the capital of Muscat, in the northern *wilayat* (province) of Dima Wattayeen, books permeated every part of his world. “I was raised in a family passionate about prose literature and poetry,” Alqasmi recalls.

As a child growing up in the late 1970s and early 1980s, cradled by mountains and the intersecting wadis (river valleys) of rural Oman, Alqasmi would listen intently as his father and older siblings entertained one another with readings. He devoured their modest family library, jumping from *The Thousand and One Nights* to volumes of poetry and treatises on jurisprudence. “My early reading and my interest in books arose from those books we had. Since there weren't many of them, I would come back to them, rereading them every so often.”

From there, Alqasmi's appetite for literature shepherded him further afield. He plumbed the shelves of neighbors and friends so that he could gulp down the works of Dostoyevsky, Hemingway and Victor Hugo and inhale the writings of Naguib Mahfouz, Tayyib Saleh, Yasunari Kawabata, Gabriel García Márquez and Abd al-Rahman Munif. “I think that my wide and hugely varied reading as a very young person has had the most impact. I still return to those works I read when I was very young.”

Alqasmi would go on to pen 10 books of poetry, a short-story collection and four novels, one of which, The Water Diviner, was awarded the 2023 International Prize for Arabic Literature, making him the first Omani recipient. *AramcoWorld* caught up with Alqasmi to discuss his lifelong passion for literature and how he approached writing his hypnotic 2017 novel, Honey Hunger, published for the first time in English this year.



“EXCEPTIONAL…hunger for honey portends hunger for the unknown.”
—Jokha Alharthi, author of *CELESTIAL BODIES*

ZAHRAN ALQASMI
WINNER OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRIZE FOR ARABIC FICTION

HONEY
HUNGER
a novel

TRANSLATED BY MARILYN BOOTH
WINNER OF THE INTERNATIONAL BOOKER PRIZE

Honey Hunger: A Novel

Zahran Alqasmi.
Tr. Marilyn Booth.
Hoopoe Books, 2025.

How did growing up in the Dima Wattayeen, in northern Oman, shape your fiction?

As in any village in Oman, the people here are deeply engaged with customs and traditions and popular narratives, as well as with family issues and gossip and the latest news. This makes for a fertile environment for creative writing. I have been able to construct my fictional characters from what I see and hear around me. I continue to live in my little village, Mas, which gives me a quiet and contemplative setting and allows me to write.

What led you to become a writer?

There was some kind of internal voice that said to me: “Try writing.” This was particularly an internal poetic voice; I composed poetry for years without really having a sense of why I loved poetry so much, and why I kept on composing it—and I still do. And then, when I began writing novels, I was

OPPOSITE MIDDLE AND TOP: ZAHRAN ALQASMI

experimenting, I was trying it out. No human being knows their ability at something until they do it. So I tried writing a novel, my first one. And then I got completely engrossed in the joy of writing novels. And so, I am still writing novels.

There's been a surge of global interest in Omani literature in recent years. What do you think is behind this?

Writers in Oman have grown up in a society that loves its literature, its poetry and modes of live repartee and oral heritage. This makes for a very rich environment for writers of my generation who have embraced literary creation. Writers formed in such an environment rely on their creative work on history and other aspects of heritage and use these thoughtfully in their writing. And innovatively. We write differently, and our particular use of our heritage has gotten a lot of attention.

How did focusing *Honey Hunger* on the world of Omani honey shape your approach to the book?

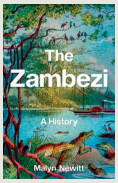
We know that just a few grams of honey are the bounty from hundreds or even thousands of flowers whose nectar the bees take in. I wanted the architecture of the novel to be like the bees gathering honey. From another perspective, the "hunger" that honey generates has a lot of overlap with the idea of how individuals derive and experience pleasure. Each character has their own focus of enjoyment, their own hunger—but what brings them together is the search for the honey, the hunger they share.

***Honey Hunger* deals with nature and the land, and the ways humans interact with both. What interests you in this subject?**

I am deeply engaged with it in my life. I love walking and observing how people get along when they live embedded in nature: how it shapes their behavior, their ways, their understanding. I believe strongly that nature plays an enormous role in shaping personalities—as in Abd al-Rahman Munif's novel Endings, where he portrays Bedouins in a time of fertility on the land, and then how differently they act when the rains stop and drought comes. People's behavior really depends on the surrounding environment and the changes it undergoes. … There is a "honey hunger" in times of extreme dryness when the bees cannot find nourishment. And people are hungry, and so they are searching for their own honey through their own actions and relationships.

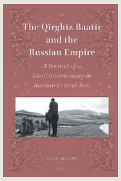
Read more articles like this online at AramcoWorld.com.

Reviews



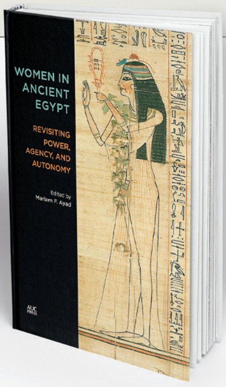
The Zambezi: A History
Malyn Newitt. Hurst & Company, 2022.

The Zambezi River, the fourth longest in Africa, originates in the northwest corner of Zambia. It courses 2,575 kilometers (1,600 miles), plunging over Victoria Falls and roaring through the Cahora Bassa gorge before spreading out into a vast delta on the Indian Ocean coast of Mozambique. A shallow stream in the dry season, the Zambezi becomes a torrent in the wet season, October to April. Until the construction of bridges and dams in the 20th century, escarpments along the middle and lower reaches of the river isolated valley settlements, while forest and marsh impeded movement in the upper reaches. The Zambezi's variable flow and physical barriers prohibited it from becoming a viable commercial waterway, shaping the fortunes of local competing and encroaching colonial powers as they wrestled for control of the ivory, gold and slave trades and, later, copper and water. The earliest written records of the region date from 1498 with the arrival of the Portuguese, who found Arab and Indian Muslims already engaged in trade. Malyn Newitt, a historian of Portuguese colonial history, draws extensively from the journals of explorers, traders, missionaries, big-game hunters and colonial administrators to draw a lucid and engaging portrait of the peoples of the Zambezi, particularly the Bantu-speaking Lunda and Lozi kingdoms. In tracing the past six centuries of history, Hewitt captures the cyclical rise and fall of the river and the people—the rulers and the ruled—who, whether seeking wealth, knowledge or power, wrought changes good and bad on the lands straddling the Zambezi. —KYLE PAKKA



The Qïrghïz Baatïr and the Russian Empire: A Portrait of a Local Intermediary in Russian Central Asia
Tetsu Akiyama. Brill, 2021.

Japanese historian Tetsu Akiyama's book offers an in-depth study of Shabdan Jantay uulu, the pragmatic Kyrgyz chieftain who led his people during 19th-century Russian imperial expansion into Central Asia. Jantay uulu stands out for having balanced the interests of the colonizers and his own people amid shifting power dynamics in the region. Relying on primary native-language sources, the monograph enriches scholarship previously built off only colonial records. In the mid-19th century, Central Asia constituted a vast territory occupied by related nomadic groups of Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Oirats (Kalmaks). Local elites, surrounded by the Kokand Khanate, the Russian Empire and the Qing Dynasty, consolidated authority through military prowess and by raiding neighboring tribes and clans. That's when Jantay uulu's military reputation earned him the honorific title of baatïr (hero/warrior). As Russian rule advanced deeper into Central Asia, his growing influence helped position him as an intermediary earning both the trust of local communities and the favor of Russian officials in their military quest against the Kokand Khanate. In showing Jantay uulu's role as mediator, Akiyama challenges the narrative that the Kyrgyz were a "static and monotonous 'traditional' society'" destined to be subsumed by the Russian Empire. With its storytelling approach, the book will appeal to a wide readership looking to understand the dynamics shaping colonialism. —AIBARSHYN AKHMETKALI



Women in Ancient Egypt: Revisiting Power, Agency, and Autonomy
Mariam F. Ayad, ed. AUC Press, 2022.

In this collection of 24 academic essays, Egyptologists cast fresh light on the lives of women in Ancient Egypt, from the First Dynasty to Late Antiquity in the 5th century CE. Editor Mariam F. Ayad, an Egyptologist at the American University in Cairo argues that gender bias among historians, not a lack of evidence, accounts for an underrepresentation of women's lives in historical studies of Egypt. The essays correct long-held views regarding women and political power, economics, law, literacy and health. Rather than a chronological overview, each chapter closely examines evidence associated with a specific time or site. A detailed review of carved reliefs suggests that the previously unattributed Fifth Dynasty pyramid complex at Saqqara is a part of was built for one of the period's Egyptian queens. Another chapter, challenging prevailing interpretations about the rule of Hatshepsut a thousand years later, reflects the overall approach of the book. Hatshepsut assumed the mantle of sovereign when her husband died c. 1479 BCE, leaving the throne to their son. Historians generally assumed she usurped power, but evidence shows that, facing a crisis of succession, Hatshepsut stepped up to rule within the traditional religious framework of power. Primarily of interest to other scholars, this collection of essays will intrigue those curious to see the process by which the past reveals its many truths. —KYLE PAKKA

> *With their ability to work outside the home, inherit and dispose of property, initiate divorce, testify in court, and serve on a local town council (qnbt), women in ancient Egypt exercised more legal rights and economic independence than their counterparts throughout antiquity.*
>
> —*Women in Ancient Egypt*

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

Reviews

COURTESY OF NOORJAHAN BOSE

Life of Learning

Written by DIANNA WRAY

Noorjahan Bose, a Bangladeshi social worker and activist, was born in 1938 into a farming family of nine in what was then British India. Growing up in Katakhali, a remote village along the banks of the Agunmukha, a ferocious river whose name literally means "fire-mouth," in present-day Bangladesh, Bose shared with other young girls the same impending fate—a limited one.

In her village, during her childhood, female education stopped at the fourth grade, and child marriages deprived children of their childhood. Bose's mother, Johora Begum, a small, soft-spoken woman who carried herself with reserve, felt deeply seized by the experiences of the other daughters of the Agunmukha that besieged her community. She resolved to cut a different path for her five daughters, of whom Bose was the eldest. "'You have to get a proper education and leave this house as fully developed human beings. I won't let you lead a life like mine,'" Johora Begum would say.

Her determination fuels Bose, as her book, Daughter of the Agunmukha: A Bangla Life, which straddles the line between memoir and autobiography, relates. The 2009 Bengali bestseller won the Ananya Literature Award in 2012 and the Bangla Academy Literary Award for Autobiography in 2016.

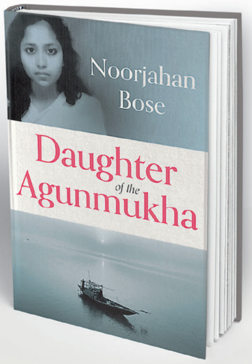
Divided into eight parts, Bose's memoir, translated by Tamil and Bengali scholar Rebecca Whittington, reads more like the wisdom tales for which you'd pull up a stool next to your grandmother to hear. Bose takes the reader across the surge of trials and tribulations she and her fellow countrypeople have faced, weathering seven decades and three continents of living. But learning remains the story's core focus, whether from teachers, books, her mother or the world.

While pursuing her education as a child and staying with relatives across the region to attend school, Bose recognizes that her female relatives and friends live very different lives from her own and rebuffs the fate of those around her. They're married off to men decades older, divorced, abused or trapped by the dictates of their circumstances at the time. Learning doesn't shield Bose from all of this, she knows, but it emboldens her to withstand whatever life gives her.

Despite, seemingly enough, having been dealt a series of bad hands and suffering injustice, she plunges herself into reading (Tolstoy, Gandhi, Neru, Hardy, Russell, Shaw) and studies, becoming the first girl in her region to graduate high school. It's in schooling that she finds refuge time and again.

Embarking on a path of self-actualization, Bose completes her master's degree in social work. And in this growth, halfway around the world, whether in the United Kingdom or United States, she discovers the daughters of the Agunmukha are not alone in the fate of she bore witness to back home.

Taking inspiration and direction from her now-deceased mother, this daughter of the Agunmukha now shifts her energy toward empowering other daughters of the Agunmukha through education and opportunity.



Daughter of the Agunmukha: A Bangla Life
Noorjahan Bose.
Hurst and Company, 2023.

> *"I felt that I was not alone.*
> *I had to live, to stand on my own feet.*
> *If not for myself, then for my child."*
>
> —From *Daughter of the Agunmukha: A Bangla Life* by Noorjahan Bose

Find more reviews like this online at AramcoWorld.com.

Events

Global Conference Explores Sustainability for the Future

Expo 2025 Osaka features the theme "Designing Future Society for Our Lives," fostering the exchange of values, connections and creations and overcoming global challenges. More than 160 countries, regions and international organizations from will be in attendance, including Indonesia, Uzbekistan, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Turkmenistan. Each one will showcase their diverse lifestyles, technological traditions and future-oriented initiatives.

Osaka, Japan, April 13 to October 13.

RIGHT Courtesy of The Saudi Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan.

Current / June

Oceans That Speak: Islam and the Emergence of the Malay World explores the complex currents of exchange that accompanied the movement of people, ideas and faith along the Maritime Silk Route. It delves into the historical interactions facilitated by the sea, highlighting the spread of Islam and its cultural influences across different regions. The exhibition features more than 130 artifacts, as well as scholarly essays and a series of educational programs, including workshops, expert talks and interactive sessions, all scheduled throughout the exhibition.

Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, **Kuala Lumpur**, through June 15.

Coming / July

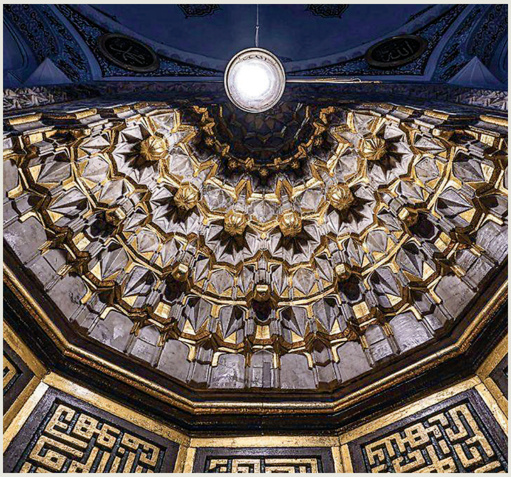
Mamluks, 1250-1517 recounts the history of an Egypto-Syrian empire that brought about a golden age in the Near East during the Islamic period. Featuring some 260 works, the exhibition explores the rich productions of this society, whose visual culture considerably influenced the history of art and architecture in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and more. The exhibition is articulated around five sections: the Mamluk sense of identity, a pluralistic and cosmopolitan society, the wealth brought by intermingling cultures, the connections established with surrounding cultures and the character of Mamluk art.

Louvre Museum, **Paris**, April 30 to July 28.

ABOVE Basin, known as Baptistery of Saint Louis, Musée du Louvre, Paris ©2009 musée du Louvre dist.

Highlights from aramcoworld.com Please verify a venue's schedule before visiting.

Events



Current / September

Muqarnas: Form and Light showcases the intricate beauty of *muqarnas*—three-dimensional architectural elements adorning domes and portals in Islamic architecture. The display spans examples from the 11th century to the present, highlighting *muqarnas* crafted from materials like wood and mirrored glass. The exhibition also includes archival images of now-lost *muqarnas* structures.

Aga Khan Museum, **Toronto**, through September 7.

ABOVE Çoban Mustafa Paşa Complex, Gebze, Türkiye ©Glenn McArthur

Current / November

Ancient Sudan: Enduring Heritage delves into the rich history of the Kushite Kingdom, which thrived in Sudan 3,000 years ago, serving as a cultural crossroads between Central Africa and the Mediterranean. Visitors will explore the kingdom's skilled craftsmanship, unique religious beliefs and the significant role of women in its society. Highlights include exquisite ceramics, a carved stone offering table and a striking bronze ceremonial mask.

British Museum, **London**, through November 9.

RIGHT Bronze figurehead of a goddess ©2024 the trustees of the British Museum

THE 2023 ISLAMIC ARTS BIENNALE AT THE WESTERN HAJJ TERMINAL OF KING ABDULAZIZ INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, IMAGE COURTESY OF THE DIRIYAH BIENNALE FOUNDATION

Biennale Celebrates History, Faith and Dialogue

Islamic Arts Biennale 2025 provides a platform for new discourse about Islamic arts, offering an unparalleled space for learning, research and insight. Featuring more than 30 artists from Saudi Arabia, the Arab world and beyond, the biennale explores how faith is experienced, expressed and celebrated through feeling, thinking and making. It offers a unique platform for artists to explore themes of spirituality, identity, and the intersection of past and present while fostering cross-cultural connections and expanding the global understanding of Islamic art and culture.

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, through May 25.

LEFT "On Weaving," by East Architecture Studio, courtesy of East Architecture Studio.

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

What's Online?

TOP: BADER ALBALAWI; MIDDLE: JOHNNY HANSON; BOTTOM: ARMIN DURGUT

New Platform for Islamic Arts

The Islamic Arts Biennale 2025 celebrates cross-cultural understanding by featuring contemporary works with historical objects from Islamic cultures. Being held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, it includes institutions and individual artists.

Experiencing Ramadan in Different Ways

An American non-Muslim living in Saudi Arabia juxtaposes his personal journey experiencing Ramadan with that of his Muslim friends in the US.

Learning Center: A Case Study in Reconciliation

A bridge in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, served as a symbol of unity and strength for over 600 years—until its destruction during the 1990s war. Learn how its reconstruction has reconciled a nation and about the figures of speech associated with both.

AramcoWorld

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Quiz

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TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

What does *tiraz* mean?

A

The sound of jingle bells

B

A medieval Islamic textile inscription

C

Dancing in the dark

D

A yogurt-based sauce
used in Albanian cuisine

Answer: B. *Tiraz* inscriptions contain blessings on textiles that caliphs and other rulers bestowed on worthy individuals. The term is defined in our 2025 Calendar, which kicked off our series on textiles throughout the Islamic world. Learn more at AramcoWorld.com.

A: BELIZ TECIRLI; B: COURTESY OF THE GEORGE WASHINGTON MUSEUM AND THE TEXTILE MUSEUM; C: JOHN FEENEY; D: ILIR TSOUKO

AramcoWorld

ABOVE The themes stitched into *nakshi kantha* reflect the timelessness of the Bangladeshi craft.

Read more on page **30**

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