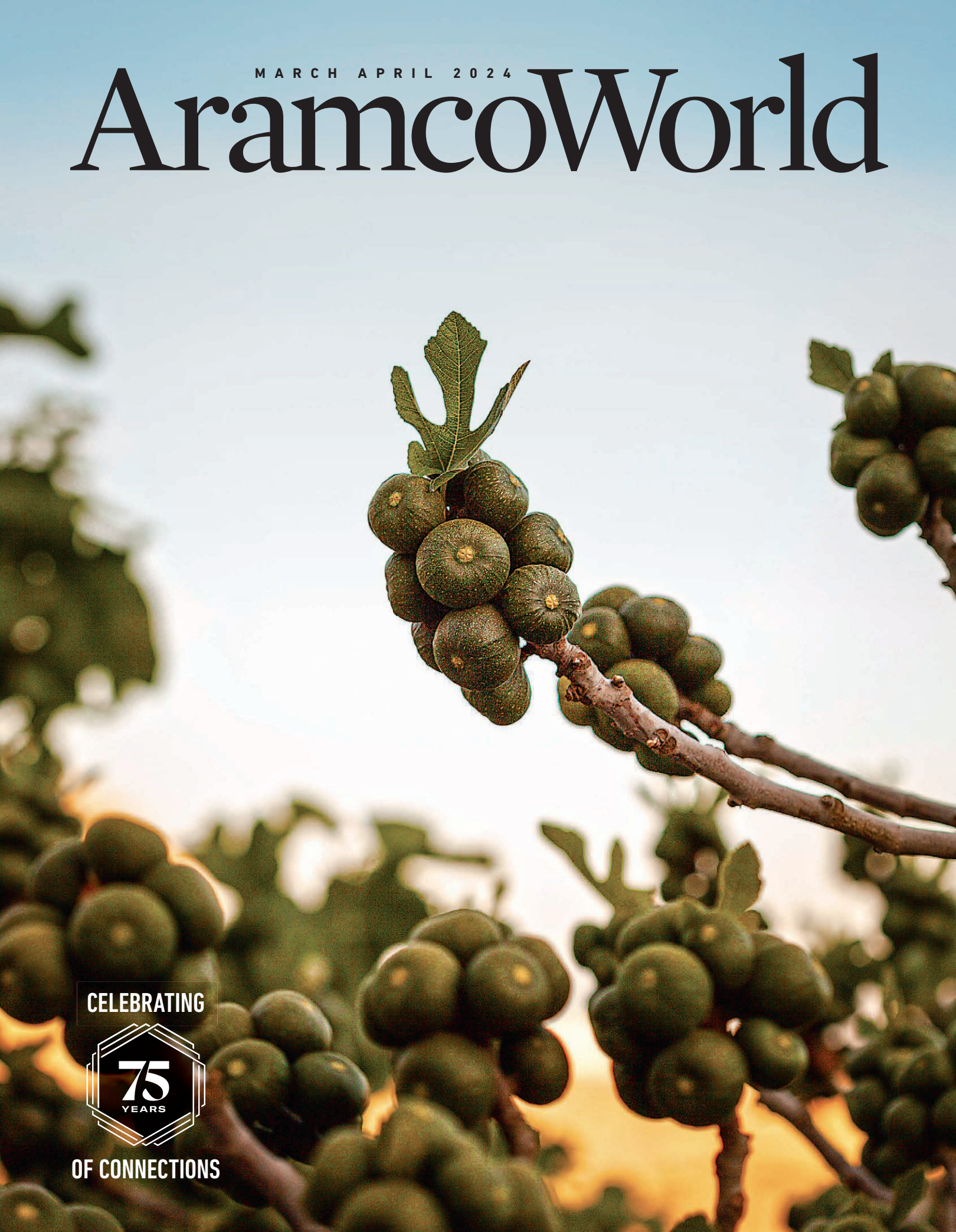
MARCH APRIL 2024

AramcoWorld



CELEBRATING

75 YEARS

OF CONNECTIONS

75 YEARS

AramcoWorld

MARCH / APRIL 2024 | VOL. 75, NO. 2

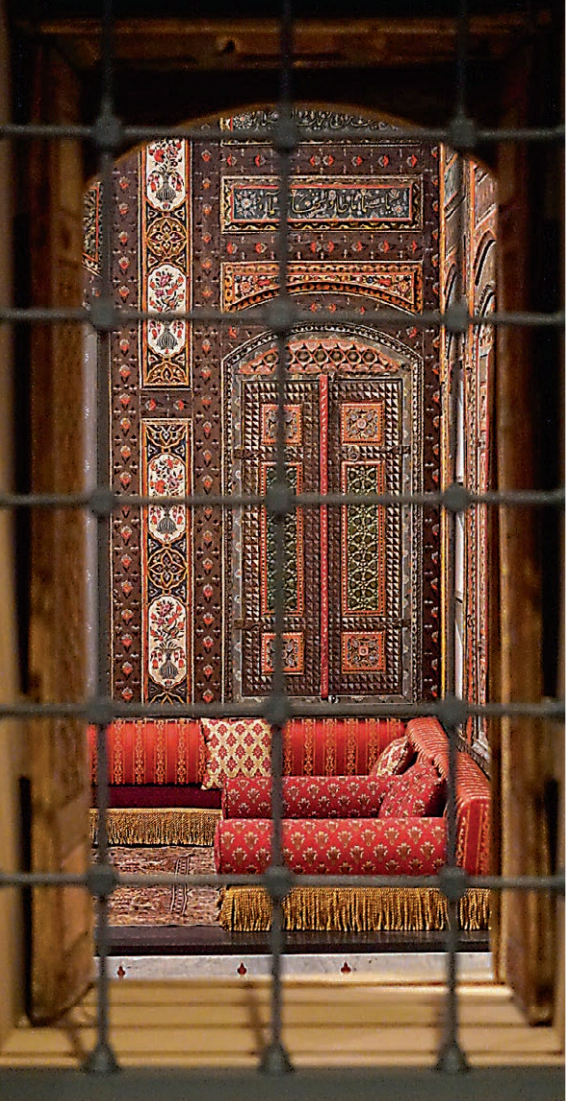
aramcoworld.com

2 FIRSTLOOK 4 FLAVORS

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

FRONT COVER Tunisian farmers know how hardy the fig tree is. As the Mediterranean Basin grows hotter and drier, they've seen it thrive as others struggle. Soon research results will reveal which of the prized fruit varieties they should focus on for the future.

BACK COVER A sketch by Saudi fashion designer Tima Abid demonstrates her blending of traditional and modern via a *sufrat saud* motif—a palm tree and crossed swords—on a contemporary silhouette. She won an award for the creation at Dubai Expo.



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FIRST LOOK

Ramadan's Lanterns

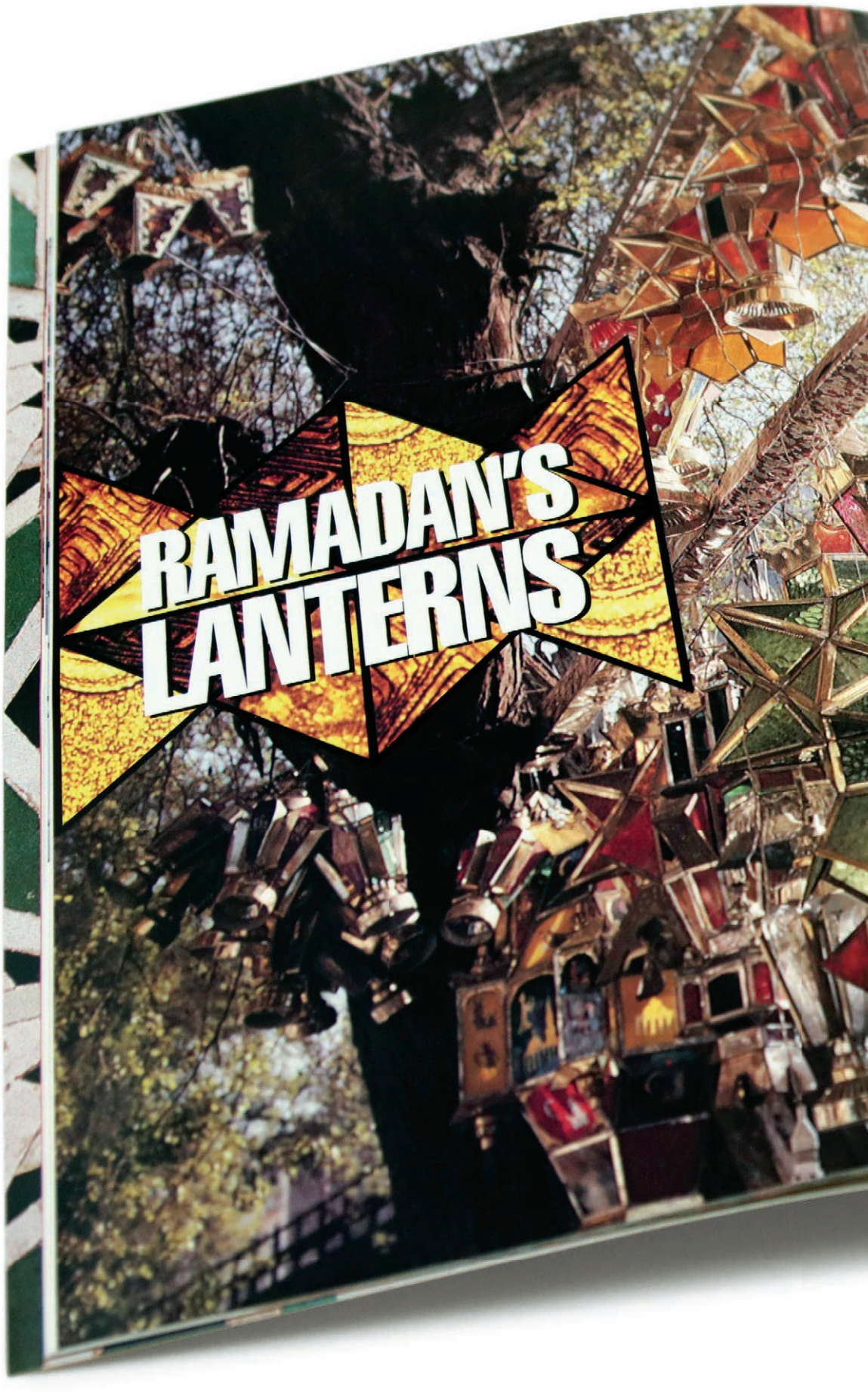
Photograph by John Feeney

In the March/April 1992 issue, writer and photographer John Feeney took *AramcoWorld* readers on a walk through the streets of Cairo during Ramadan. There, they were illuminated with the cover story and tradition of "Ramadan's Lanterns." Feeney, a longtime contributor with close to 100 credit lines in *AramcoWorld*, spent more than 30 years in Egypt, sharing stories and educating readers across the globe.

Ramadan, the ninth month of the Hijri lunar calendar, marks a time for fasting, blessings and prayers. Muslims give thanks to God during this holy month, and within Arab countries, one can find lanterns and other decorations adorning homes throughout. Merchants in larger cities even get in on the festivities, bedecking storefronts with these Ramadan lanterns, or *fawanees* as they're called in Arabic.

"One week before Ramadan begins," writes Feeney in his 1992 story, "part of Ahmad Maher Street, for most of the year a humble thoroughfare in the old medieval quarter of Cairo, is transformed. Usually home to tinsmiths, marble-cutters and makers of mousetraps, for one glorious month it becomes 'The Street of the Lanterns.'"

Discover more about this story and more from our FirstLook section by scanning the QR code below.




Blessed is He who
made constellations
in the skies and
placed therein a
lamp and a moon
giving light; and it is
He who made the
night and day to
follow each other:
For such as have
the will to celebrate
His praises or to
show their
gratitude.
The Qur'an, Chapter XXV (Al-Furq
The Criterion), Verses 61-62

Veganistan Split Peas (Dal Nokhod)

Recipe by Sally Butcher

Photograph by Yuki Sugiura

This is one of those sneaky, apparently super simple dishes that actually has a ton of stuff in it.

That is not to say that it is complicated. Just that it will give your spice rack a really good workout. It is one of my favorite lunch thingies.

It is loosely based on an Afghan recipe given to me by the mother of one of my customer's neighbor's cousins. Or something.

Chana dal are often called yellow split peas, but they are not the same thing—they are in fact split black chickpeas (aka Bengal gram) and cook like a slightly obdurate lentil. They take around 35 minutes to cook (and do not need soaking)—but you do need to watch they as they froth up something awful and boil over the minute your back is turned. And just as with regular chickpeas, they need to be skimmed. Like most beans/legumes, they simply will not cook if you add salt or sour stuff to them (it's all to do with osmotic pressure), so this is why we are going to boil them first.

(Serves 4)

1 cup (200 grams) chana dal

1 tablespoon vegan ghee, plus a splash of oil

1 ½ teaspoon green cumin seeds

2 black cardamom pods, husk removed

2 teaspoons mustard seeds

1 large onion, finely chopped

4-5 garlic cloves, minced

3-4 green chiles, chopped (optional but so good)

2 celery sticks, finely chopped

2 carrots, peeled and grated

1 level teaspoon asafoetida

½ teaspoon fenugreek seeds

1 cup (250 milliliters) oat (or rice) milk

Sea salt, to taste

To Serve

Raw onion, cut into quarters and used as pieces as edible spoons for scooping

Chopped chile

Salad Shirazi

Warm bread

Pick through the chana dal (they often contain small stones) and place them in a pan of cold water. Bring to a boil, leaving the lid slightly open to stop it from boiling over, and bubble for about 35 minutes or until the dal are just cooked. Drain and set aside.

Melt the ghee and oil in a pot and add the cumin, cardamom and mustard seeds. Sizzle over high heat for around 2 minutes before tossing in the onion, garlic and chiles. Once the onion has softened, add the celery and carrots and cook for 7-8 minutes or until the celery has softened and then add the remaining spices, stirring well. Add the chana dal and around 1 ¼ cups (300 milliliters) water plus the oat milk, mix well and simmer, topping up with water if the mixture starts to look dry. Simmer gently for around 20 minutes or until the mixture starts to dry. Simmer gently for around 20 minutes or until the ingredients begin to homogenize. Add salt to taste and serve with raw onion "spoons," chopped chile, some salad Shirazi and plenty of warm bread.

Reprinted with permission from

Veganistan: A Vegan Tour of the Middle East and Beyond

Sally Butcher

Interlink Books, 2023

interlinkbooks.com

YUKI SUGIURA

Sally Butcher is a London-based food writer and cookbook author. She runs Persepolis, the acclaimed Persian food store in London. Her most recent book, *The New Middle Eastern Vegetarian* (also published by Interlink) has been a hugely successful and was shortlisted for the Guild of Food Writers' Cookery Book of the Year Award. Her first book, *Persia in Peckham*, was also published to critical acclaim and short-listed for the 2008 Andre Simon Award. It was also selected by *The Sunday Times* as their cookbook of the year. When Sally is not running her store, she blogs and tweets prolifically and has amassed a devoted online following.


ARAMCO WORLD
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TO A NATION
75
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Reflections on JOURNEYS

Visual Vagabonding: Transforming Perspectives Through Photography

Written by J. TREVOR WILLIAMS | *Illustrated by* RYAN HUDDLE

As we celebrate our 75th anniversary this year, AramcoWorld *is publishing a six-part series that reflects on the connections and impact the magazine has generated over the decades.* AramcoWorld*'s approach to intercultural bridge-building has been integral to its mission since its founding.*

Early in the 1950s the magazine presented those connections through stories of company initiatives, innovations and new experiences. Over the years, the narrative broadened to include what binds us—people, food, histories, arts and science—all to demonstrate common ground among distinct cultures. In the second of the series, we hear from the photographers whose vibrant images have become increasingly vital for providing AramcoWorld*'s readers a sense of perspective and place.*
—AramcoWorld *editorial team*

When Lorraine Chittock rolled off the California lot in a white, four-wheel-drive Jeep Wrangler, her nomadic leanings had long been solidified.

Growing up near Sacramento with British parents, she'd made many trips across the pond, at times by ship.

As a young adult, she'd indulged wanderlust with long backpacking trips in Europe and North Africa, and in her early 30s took a job as a photo editor in Cairo, beginning a 12-year tenure in Africa marked with memorable journeys that began where paved roads ended.

AramcoWorld published photos from her camel trek along the Forty Days' Road between Egypt and Sudan, and she'd spent six weeks bumping along the dunes of Mauritania photographing a piece about the ancient manuscripts preserved in that desert country.

Returning to the United States in 2003, Chittock was merging back onto the road, reacquainting herself with the country of her birth.

"I loved being on the move, so when I was living in both Egypt and Kenya I had this idea—how can you be on the move and be at home at the same time?"

Her plan for a grand American adventure: Create a mobile photography studio and crisscross the country working on

books and practicing her craft, with her two slim Saluki dogs in the back.

"I had this idea that it was always going to be in these wild, open places like I had been while traveling in the Middle East," she says.

She just needed assignments; that's where *AramcoWorld* came in once again.

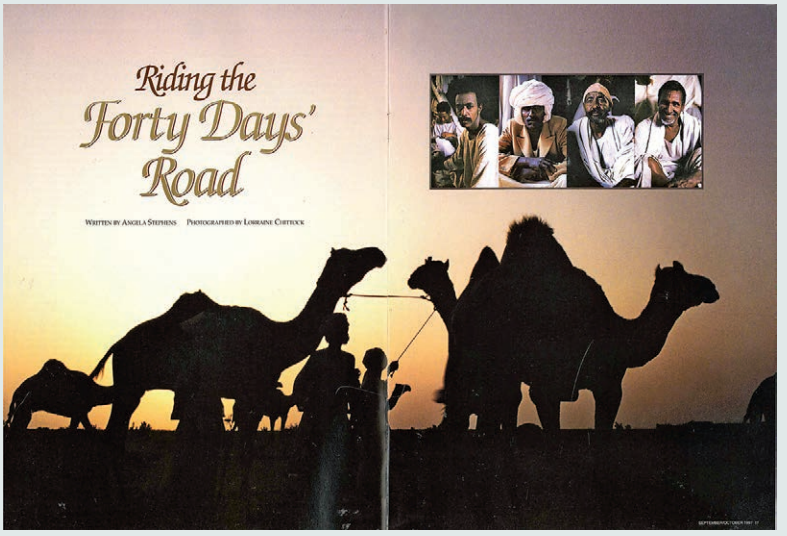
For 75 years, the magazine has commissioned journeys around the globe in pursuit of stories that center human perspectives. Words have always been important, but over time vibrant images have become increasingly vital for providing readers a sense of perspective and place.

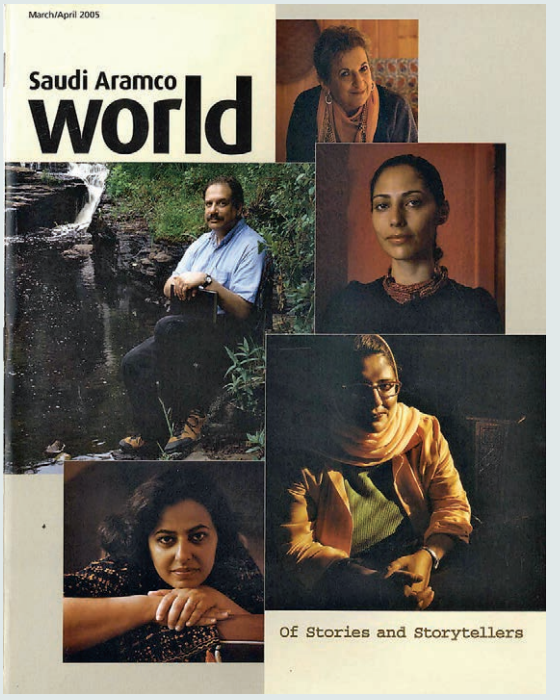
AramcoWorld's former editor Richard Doughty, who'd helped Chittock get to Egypt when he hired her at *Cairo Today* in the early 1990s, knew she was traveling along the eastern US and asked her to photograph Arab American authors and poets who'd settled mostly along the New England coast.

She mapped an itinerary overlaid with the homes of friends she'd met in Egypt. In those reunions, as well as in meetings and meals with Arab authors, Chittock felt she'd picked up a lost rhythm.

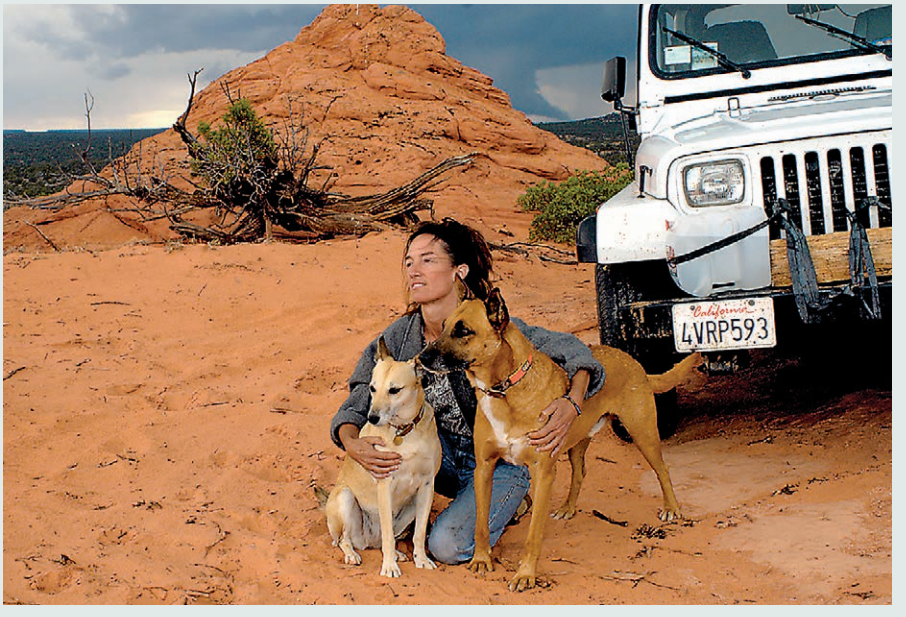
"The authors and poets lived both far from cities and immersed in the hustle and bustle. What was consistent were the symbols in their home of what they'd left behind and brought to the new land," she says. "The spaces they created for themselves were all quiet and peaceful, even if the outside was crazy and chaotic. Or maybe it was me? I, too, was trying to orient myself to a world that had changed radically since I left in 1991. Being amongst those

At a stop in Knab, Utah, Lorraine Chittock poses with her dogs and the Jeep Wrangler, **BOTTOM RIGHT**, which served as her transportation and pseudo-photo studio as she traveled across America documenting Arab authors for the 2005 March/April issue cover story "Of Stories and Storytellers," **TOP RIGHT**. From Jeep to camelback, the 1997 September/October cover story "Riding the Forty Day's Road," Chittock took readers on a camel caravan from Sudan to Egypt.

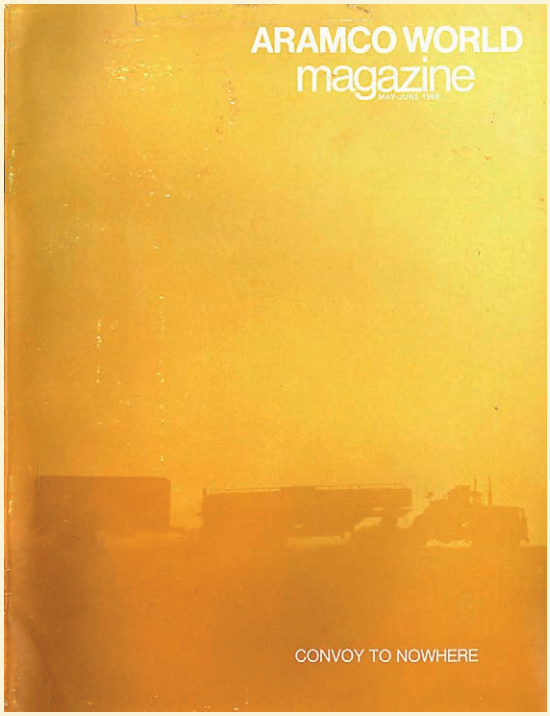


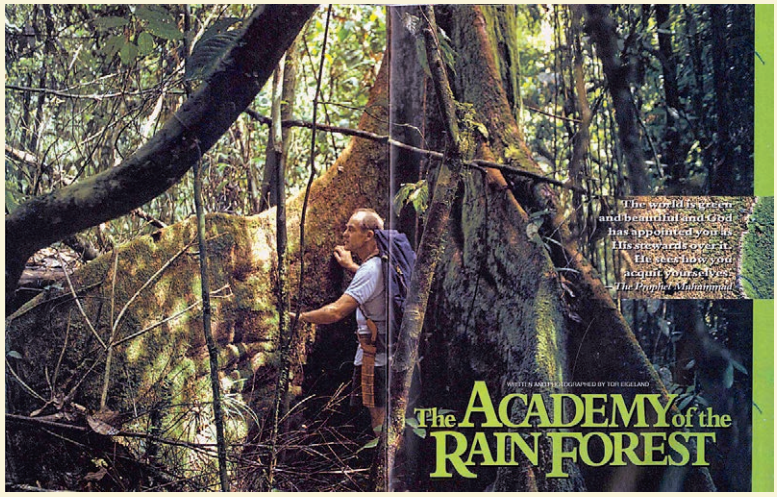


Lorraine Chittock



Tor Eigeland





With more than 100 credits as a photographer and writer and more than two dozen countries visited on assignment for *AramcoWorld* from 1965 to 2015, Tor Eigeland has been one of the publication's most published bylines. In 1969's "Convoy to Nowhere," **TOP AND LEFT**, he took readers across Saudi Arabia's Empty Quarter in a semi-caravan, **LEFT**, showing the endurance of those building up the energy industry in the country. From desert to rainforest, Eigeland, **ABOVE**, shared research and conservation efforts in the Boreno's Batu Apoi Forest Reserve in 1992's cover story "The Academy of the Rain Forest."

authors was like coming home."

Such opportunities were not rare at *AramcoWorld*.

Norwegian writer and photographer Tor Eigeland helped shape this sensibility over some 50 *AramcoWorld* assignments spanning 1966 to his last assignment in Tangier in 2015.

While he wrote and photographed entire issues on Saudi Arabia and Oman in the '70s and '80s, Eigeland's work also tracked the way the magazine gradually opened to other parts of the world.

Among memorable journeys to the jungles of Brunei, the hills of Andalusia and the marshes of Iraq, Eigeland navigated the Silk Road behind the Iron Curtain from Istanbul to China in 1988 and, in his native Norway in 2012, reported a story on Muslims breaking their Ramadan fast north of the Arctic Circle.

So, what's his lesson from that lifetime of journeys? He says despite their differences, people are basically the same the world over.

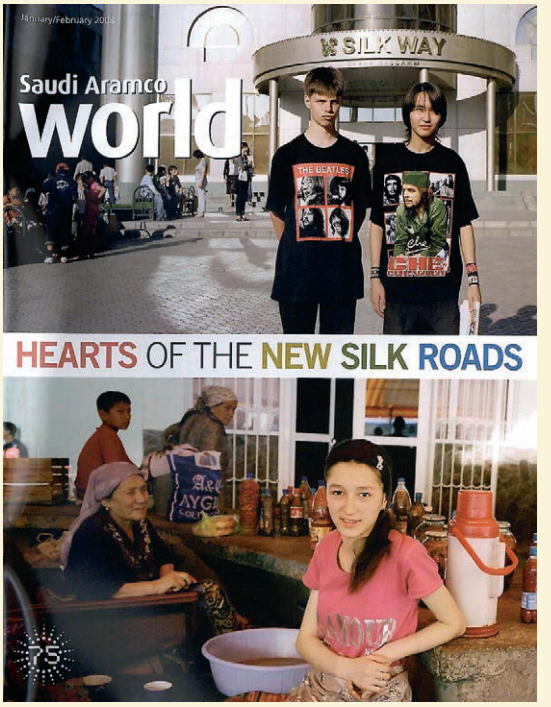
"I have never thought of people as 'others.' We are all people, and we are all diverse. I started traveling as a 16-year-old, taking a year out from school to be a merchant seaman, and my traveling never stopped," Eigeland says.

The magazine has also sought not only to send photographers from West to East, or from the developed world to the developing but to view the world through local lenses where possible.

Shahidul Alam, a prominent photojournalist in Dhaka, Bangladesh, says that's vital in a world where the long

OPPOSITE BOTTOM RIGHT: TROY SNOW

Kevin Bubriski



Award-winning documentary photographer and educator Kevin Bubriski has connected *AramcoWorld* readers with dynamic imagery from across Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and beyond. His work has become a time capsule for many of these places that have experienced trials or undergone the changes of a modern world. For the 2008 article "Hearts of the New Silk Road," **RIGHT**, Bubriski shares representations of the newly emerging global economies of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan through panoramic imagery. And in the 2004 article "Suq: 4000 Years Behind the Counter in Aleppo," **ABOVE**, Bubriski documented the history and the people behind what some considered the world's oldest "mall."

dominance of Western media has contributed to biases and discrepancies in coverage, he said, citing an African proverb.

"Until the lions find their storytellers, stories about hunting will always glorify the hunter," he says.

To counteract these forces, he founded Dhaka's Drik Picture Library to help outside news organizations source locally produced images and to build the capacity of photographers at home and across what he calls the "majority world."

Still, he says, sending trained writers and photographers across borders can offer a refreshing outsider perspective—with the right level of sensitivity.

"Our own limitations and thinking need to be challenged, and they are not always apparent when you're in your comfort zone," Alam says.

Photojournalist David Wells has seen this during 30 years of traveling to India. Married to an Indian photographer, he has a personal interest in the country where he has undertaken many *AramcoWorld* assignments. Those included a journey to the historical city of Bijapur, also known as Vijayapura, which boasts an Islamic architectural legacy some liken to a Taj Mahal without tourists.

In the early days, Wells says he was bringing visual storytelling skills that were harder to find. Now, it's his position between cultures, born of extensive in-country travel and study, that informs the work.

"I think of myself sometimes as a kind of cultural translator," he says, giving a nod to *AramcoWorld* for offering the

BOTTOM LEFT: VENKATESH ALBAL

space not only to physically embed in a place but also to imbibe its culture. "You need people like us, journalists, to take the story and frame it in such a way that somebody who doesn't know it will look at it and say, 'I want to know it, I'm being educated, my brain is being expanded.'"

In the late 1990s, documentary photographer Kevin Bubriski intersected with the magazine as it sought to widen its lens on the Islamic world.

He undertook many assignments in the ensuing decades, joining conservationists following a migrating herd of elephants across Mali and portraying the descendants of sultanates in the mud-walled Saharan city of Agadez in Niger.

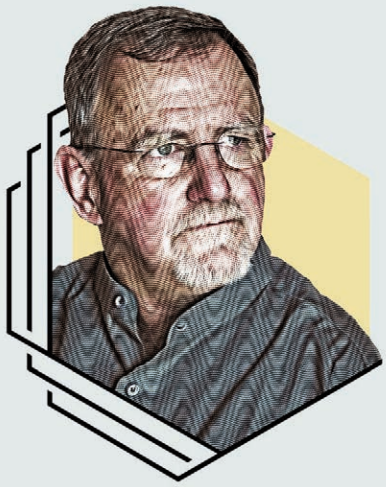
These would set up what would become, unbeknownst to Bubriski at the time, one of his most important pieces from a documentary perspective: a profile featuring his portraits of shop owners in the souk of Aleppo, Syria, in 2003.

"Photographing is always documenting what *is* for the future," Bubriski says, admitting he didn't know civil war would transform Syria in the ensuing years, but he did have a sense of its fragility.

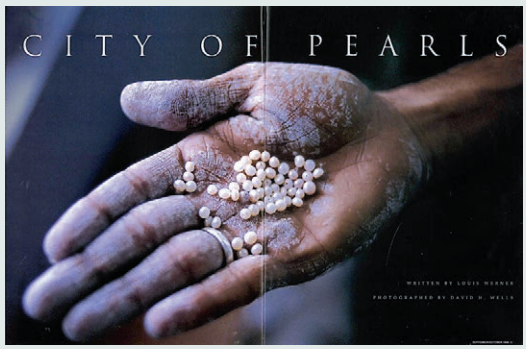
Photos from that journey took on heightened relevance amid the subsequent destruction and displacement, forming the basis for his 2017 book *Legacy in Stone: Syria Before War*.

"Like the title says, it's to remind us of what was and what was lost," he says.

South African photographer Samantha Reinders, who also edits and assigns photographic pieces for the magazine, agrees *AramcoWorld* has a knack for surfacing



David Wells



Multimedia journalist David Wells purposefully has taken the road less traveled to share locations in India that were not often reported in everyday media of the time with *AramcoWorld* readers. In 2013's "Bijapur: Gem of the Deccan," **TOP AND LEFT**, Wells illustrates centuries of influences in a region where East and West have blended. Wells also documented the center of India's pearl industry in Hyderabad in the 1998 September/October story "City of Pearls," **BOTTOM RIGHT**.

stories about timeless customs that may not be well understood outside of where they emerged. That was the case on a dual assignment in 2022 to West Africa, where she examined the prospects for the all-important ground-nut industry in Gambia and did a deep dive into pirogues, the traditional fishing boats of Senegal.

At first, she wondered why a story on the ground nuts of Gambia was relevant; then she hit the ground and tasted that first spoon of peanut butter, the product of an industry that supports many livelihoods in the country of 2.7 million.

"Farming to selling to transporting it to using it, it is kind of around you," she says.

Upon arrival, it was evident that the riverine nation of Gambia was a world apart from her home, reinforcing Africa's diversity in 54 countries.

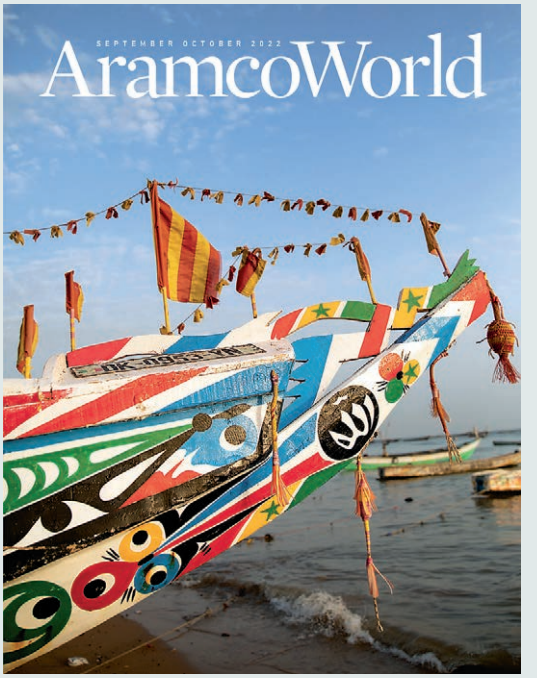
For one, she happened to be there during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which somewhat limited her working hours but gave her a different opportunity. She decided to fast with her Gambian hosts.

"That enabled me to get slightly into the headspace of the people that I'm working with, she says."

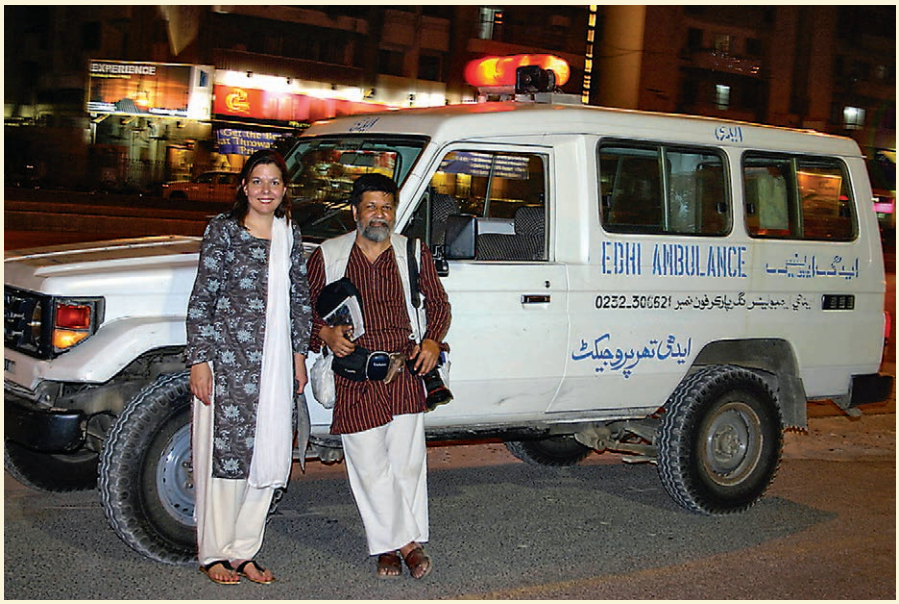
In Senegal, she spent multiple days persuading pirogue pilots of her pure intentions. Yes, she was there to tell the story of the long wooden boats, not reporting on an illicit activity.

The real heroes of each story, she said, were the local people who helped her unlock each place, gaining the cultural license needed not only to snap a beautiful photo but to relay a more nuanced story than the classic portrayals of African

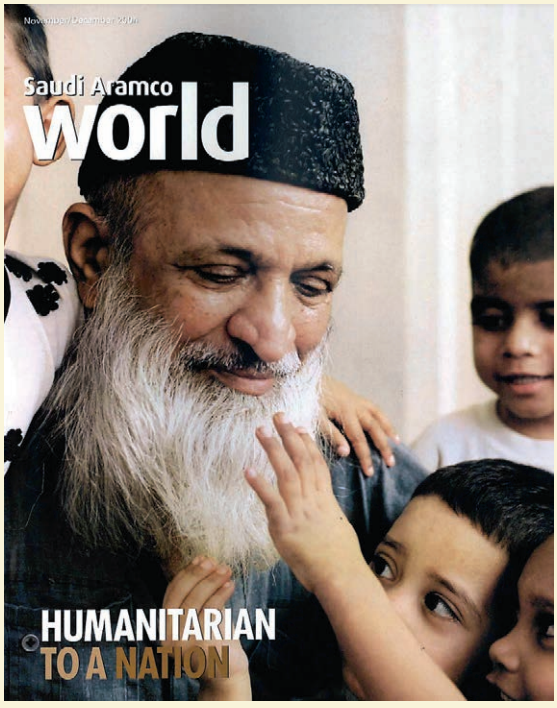
South African Samantha Reinders has documented the continent of Africa for the likes of *National Geographic*. Her ability to get close to people has allowed her unique eye to shine in *AramcoWorld* stories as well. In 2022, she photographed stories about groundnuts in The Gambia, **TOP LEFT**, and the artistry behind Senegal's pirogue boats, **ABOVE**.



Samantha Reinders



Shahidul Alam



Bangladeshi photojournalist, educator and activist Shahidul Alam carries his camera with purpose. This is evident in the November/December 2004 story "Humanitarian to a Nation: Abdul Sattar Edhi," **TOP** and **LEFT**, where Alam took readers into the inner workings of Edhi's network of humanitarian efforts of ambulances, homeless shelters, orphanages and rehabilitation centers in Pakistan. There, he also highlighted the artistry of truck painters in the 2005 story "Masterpieces to Go: The Trucks of Pakistan," **ABOVE**.

poverty and dysfunction.

"You generally hear about the same old, same old. As an African, it's so depressing to hear about the place that you live in described in the same way," Reinders says adding that she appreciates working on stories that challenge long-held stereotypes.

Doing so, says Chittock, requires a publication that values time spent on the ground, among the people one is endeavoring to cover.

After stints in the US and Chile, Chittock returned to Africa about a year and a half ago, settling—for now—in Tanzania. In a hurried world, she says, pace in many ways equals perspective.

"Slow travel is more valuable than fast, and I think this is one of the things that I had in my head when I bought that Jeep Wrangler. I didn't want to just fly in and fly out of a country and just grab little pieces. I wanted to go slower," Chittock says. "What we're trying to give the audience, the viewer, is just a taste of that."

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

Discover more photography from these photographers and more in the online story by scanning here:

TOP LEFT: YASMIN JAFFRI

CAN **FIG TREES** HELP US **ADAPT** TO A CHANGING CLIMATE?

The resilience of these ancient trees prompted a research initiative to study the fruit's potential as a sustainable crop for Mediterranean farmers.

Written and Photographed by **Rebecca Marshall**

Abdessalem Zgaya stands on baked, cracking soil where water once trickled, looking over his fruit fields on the plain below Kesra, northern Tunisia. It's the first time he has seen a spring dry up. "The summers just get hotter and hotter," he says, adjusting his cap to block the sun. "I don't know how much longer my lemon trees can survive."

Amid the still, heavy air, Zgaya points out a row of young trees, starkly green against the brown-gold tones of the landscape. "The figs are different. See how their leaves are wilting? It helps the plants conserve water in the heat. When it gets cooler tonight, they'll perk back up."

Indeed, fig trees tolerate drought better than most, and as agriculture struggles in a warming world, that makes them ripe for study. For nearly four years, a Mediterranean research initiative,

BELOW "[Figs] were here long before us, and knowledge we have of how to take care of them is part of our heritage," says farmer Abdessalem Zgaya. **RIGHT** In caprification, fresh caprifig fruits, which contain hatching fig wasps, are hung in the branches of female trees so that the wasps, their legs covered in pollen, can pollinate the female flowers. Certain fig varieties, like the Zidi, need pollination in order for their fruit to mature and taste good. **PREVIOUS PAGE** Zgaya tills the soil between rows of fig trees on his plantation two or three times a year to remove weeds and break up the soil, which facilitates the infiltration of water.

A wild fig tree grows from a cliff near the summit of Mount Gorra in Djebba, Tunisia. Fig roots can grow up to 8 meters (26.25 feet) long in search of water and are strong enough to break through rocks.

FIGGEN, has assessed how figs succeed while climate changes are causing other crops to fail. Though Zgaya isn't part of the project, he, and other farmers in Tunisia, stand to benefit from FIGGEN's findings.

The study, which concludes in 2024, involves DNA stress testing and analysis of a wide variety of figs in Tunisia, Turkey and Spain. Scientists have been working to identify specific genetic traits that enable the resilience of figs and their varieties that cope best with hot and dry conditions. When FIGGEN publishes the results Mediterranean farmers concerned for their future livelihoods may choose to grow the most promising types. Additionally, the study aims to plant a seed for preserving the biodiversity of increasingly arid ecosystems.

How did figs survive throughout history?

Back in 2006, in the ruins of a prehistoric village in the Jordan River Valley, a team of archeobotanists found proof that figs had been cultivated 11,400 years ago—long before the domestication of wheat, barley or legumes. As they outlined in the journal *Science*, this discovery could make the fruit trees the oldest-known agricultural crop.

Scientists have worked to identify the genetic traits that enable figs' resilience to heat and drought. The study's results can empower Mediterranean farmers to grow the most promising types.

The fig's place in our history and culture is indeed deeply rooted. From its culinary use to its religious symbolism, as evoked in the Bible and the Qur'an, the fig has played a role in the birth of civilization. Believed to be indigenous to northern Asia Minor, figs have been cultivated around the Aegean and the Levant since ancient times. During the Greek and Roman empires, the popularity of figs spread, and their love of the well-draining soil of semi-arid climates made them an important crop, alongside olives, grapes and dates, farmed across the Mediterranean Basin by the first century CE.

Nowadays, agricultural conditions in the region are changing. According to a World Meteorological Organization report released at the end of last year, 2011-20 was the warmest decade on record. Land temperatures,

it reports, have increased by 2 degrees Celsius since Industrial times—twice the global average—and the future bodes more frequent summer heatwaves and less rain. Such conditions also raise salt levels in dwindling groundwater, compounding the challenges plants face.

OPPOSITE Ghada Baraket coordinates the Tunisian portion of the FIGGEN project from a University of Tunis El Manar laboratory. **BELOW** Scientists get DNA from the plants' leaves ready to send to the University of Pisa in Italy, where genome sequences are identified. **BOTTOM** Part of sample 28 (the 'Romani' variety, collected from the Medenine region in southern Tunisia) has been torn off and the veins removed before DNA is extracted.

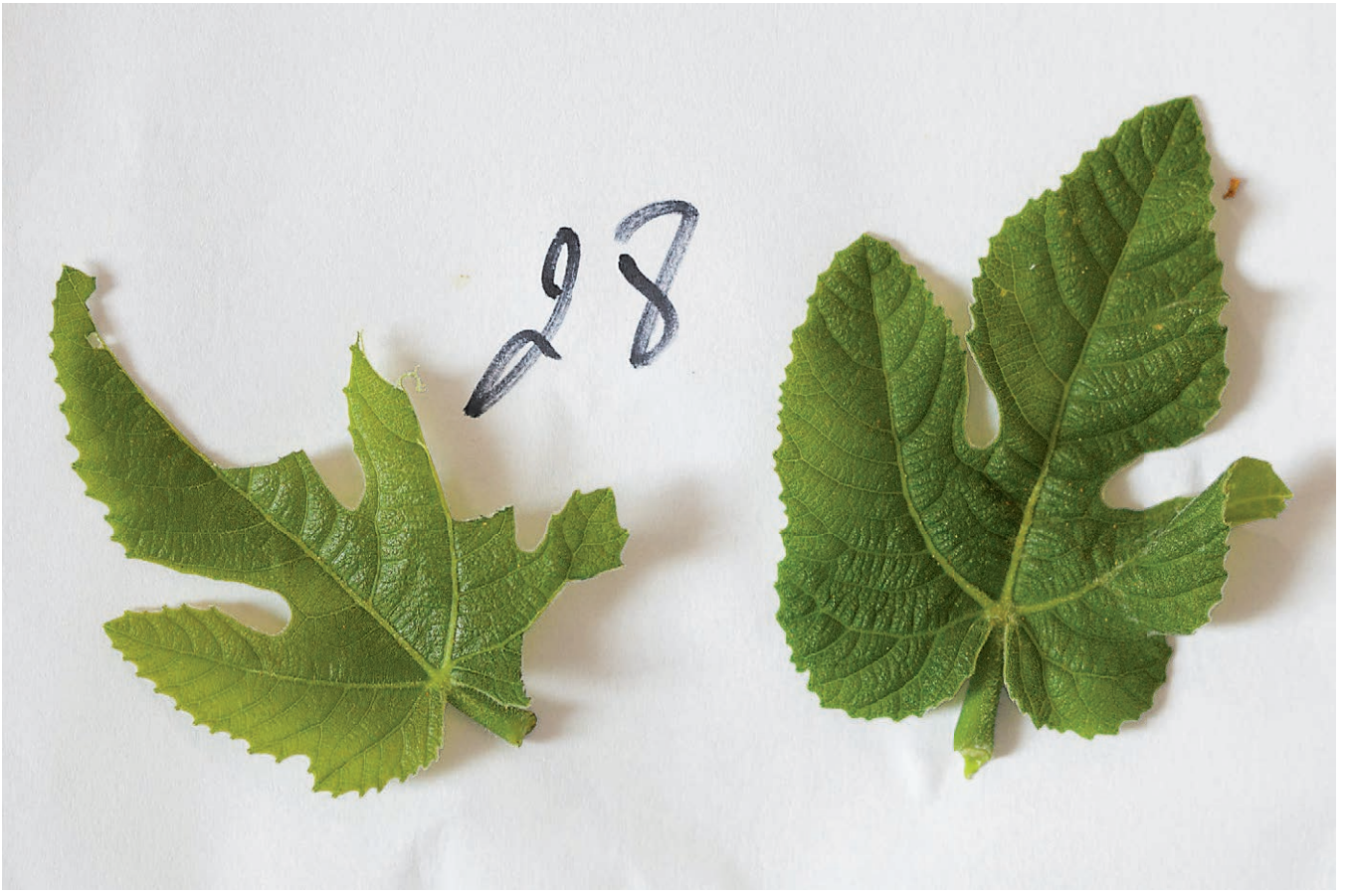
Fig trees, however, survive with minimal water, have little need for fertilizer and are resistant to many pests. They may burn in a forest fire but will grow back the following year. When a fig tree is cut down, a new shoot will generally spring from its stump. Wild figs may even grow on cliffs or in walls, where no soil can be seen and no water reach. Their formidable, fast-growing roots can tear rocks apart, finding water where other trees simply cannot.

That makes many of the 800 species of the *Ficus* genus, as per the *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, ecologically

> "We are trying to find that rather special resistance gene."
> —GHADA BARAKET

exceptional. Shade offered by their dense leaf canopies cools hot air and slows evaporation and the flow of rainwater over the ground, which limits erosion and retains soil moisture and organic matter.

Ficus fruits are a food source for more animal species than any other known fruit, a 2001 Cambridge University study showed. Animals disperse fig seeds (and those of other plants)



widely, increasing the landscape's biodiversity and rendering it more resistant to climatic uncertainties.

The FIGGEN project

A few years ago, the sight from a train window of a fig tree growing robustly out of a cliff drove Riccardo Gucci, a professor of agrarian science at the University of Pisa in Italy, to investigate how any tree could thrive in such an environment. That thought eventually grew into FIGGEN.

To discover which varieties of *Ficus carica* (the common fig) cope best with climate change, FIGGEN teams gathered cuttings of a total of 270 different varieties. Some fig trees

A FIGGEN catalog will detail each project country's most tolerant varieties, noting fruit size, juiciness and perishability, and the tree's resistance to disease.

fruit once a year and others two or three times. Some have male and female flowers, others only female. Some trees need pollination, whereas others can produce fruit without it. In laboratory gardens, eight plants of each variety were grown in pots, and in late 2021 the testing of their resilience to a lack of water and increased salinity began.

The FIGGEN researchers have compiled a list of the 23 fig varieties that did best. A catalog will detail each project country's most tolerant varieties, and their characteristics, including the fruits' size, juiciness and perishability, and the tree's resistance to disease. Catalogs will be distributed to dozens of farmers,

Did you know?

- **Native globally:** There are about 800 varieties of the common fig around the world. They come in many shapes, colors and sizes, each with a different flavor and texture.
- **And guess what:** Fig blossoms are inside the fruit. They produce the edible seeds.
- **Figs can get big:** The 'GE Neri' variety can grow as large as a tennis ball.
- **Myriad uses:** Fresh, dried or canned, figs are used in jams and sweet or savory dishes.
- **Good for you:** Half a cup of figs contains as much calcium as half a cup of milk. Ounce for ounce, they have more fiber than prunes and more potassium than bananas.
- **Tasty inside and out:** The skin is edible and adds bitter, nutty or other dimensions to the flesh's flavor.

Sources: figboss.com, valleyfig.com, bbcgoodfood.com

The fig tree's benefits in arid ecosystems

Fortifies soil: Large leaves slow how fast rain hits the ground, reducing runoff. Roots aerate and stabilize earth, even helping prevent landslides.

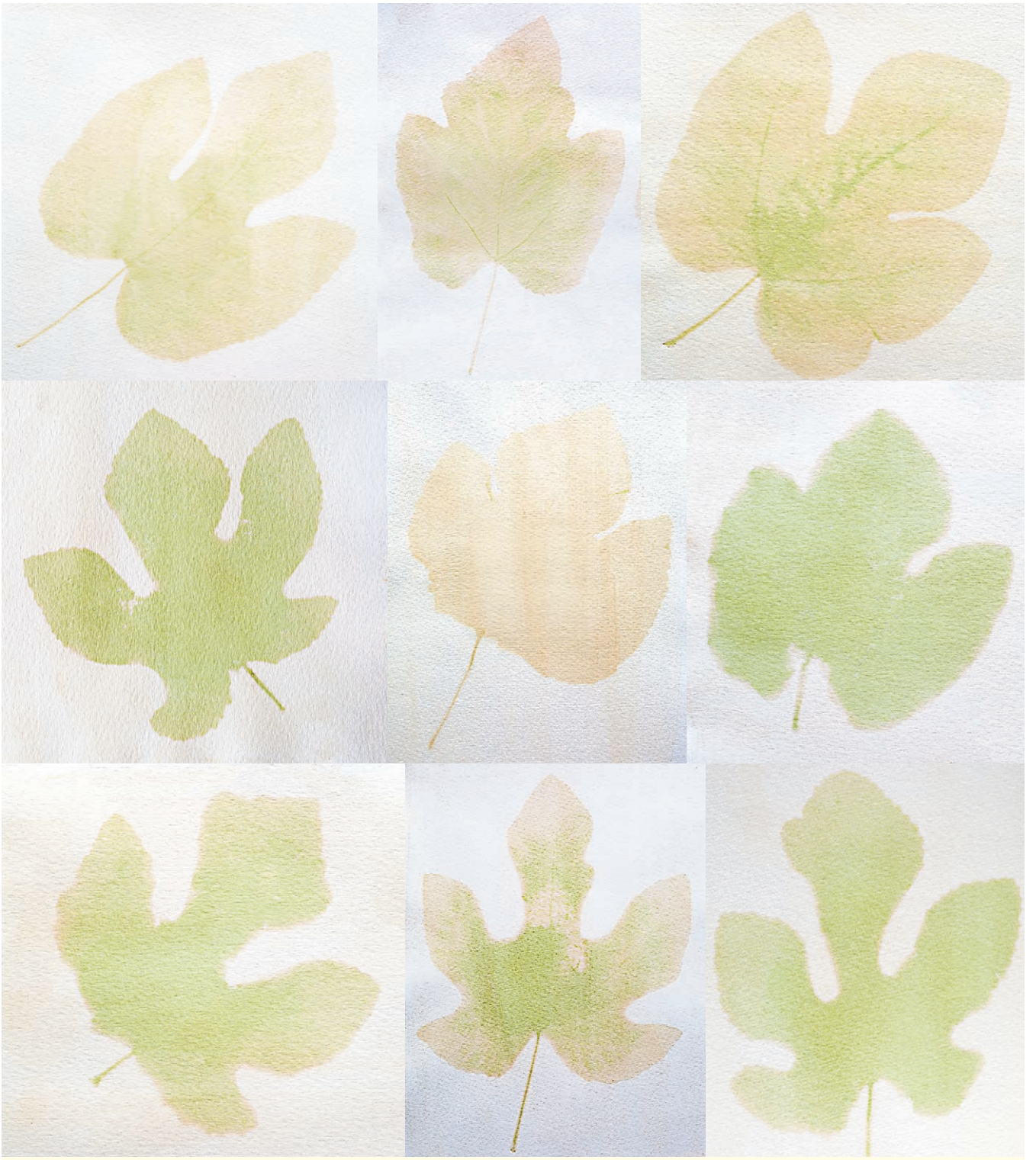
Lowers temperatures: Dense leaf canopy serves as a natural sun umbrella for animals and plants.

Sustains wildlife: A whopping 1,270 bird and mammal species eat the fruits of the Ficus genus—far more than any other kind of fruit.

Makes water accessible: When roots reach an underground source, in some cases water bubbles up to the surface, forming springs.

Encourages reforestation and biodiversity: Fig trees are often first to regrow on deforested sites, brought by seeds in bat or bird droppings. Frugivores then deposit more seeds, reintroducing diverse plant species into the ecosystem.

Sources: roots.gov.sg, agriculture.gov.capital



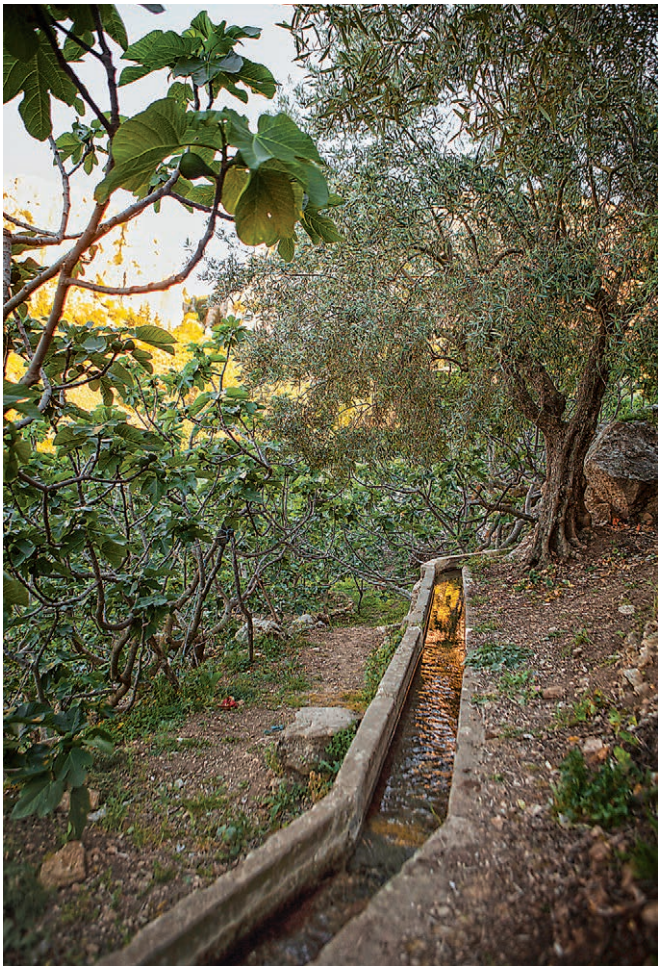
Leaving an impression

Anthotype print process: Anthotypes are unique impressions made with nature's own photosensitive pigments from petals, berries and, in this case, fig leaves.

Scan the QR code to see how writer and photographer Rebecca Marshall created the anthotypes here.

Fig leaf cultivars **TOP ROW LEFT** Assal Boutchich, Tunis Collection; Besbessi, Tunis Collection; Bouhouli, Djebba Collection **MIDDLE** Hamri, Kesra Collection; Jrani, Tunis Collection; "Last tree in the village," an unrecorded variety, Kesra Collection; **BOTTOM** Médenine (name unknown), Kesra Collection; Sekni, Tunis Collection; Hadri variety, Kesra Collection.

OPPOSITE: YASSINE GAIDI/ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGES



LEFT A man carries water on his motorbike from the town spring to vegetable and fig gardens in the village of Kesra. **RIGHT** Since the 17th century CE, a system of tiny canals from mountain springs has carried water to 73 basins that irrigate land in Djebba. Thanks to this collective resource, hundreds of farmers can water their gardens on a rotating basis.

nurseries and plant breeders, so that they may choose the most commercially viable and drought-resistant figs to work with in the future—potentially enabling agriculture across the Mediterranean to adapt to new conditions.

"Figs have the potential to be one of the most profitable crops in the Mediterranean today, especially in areas that are difficult for other crops," says Tommaso Giordani, the coordinator of FIGGEN.

For the first time, FIGGEN's work is identifying DNA sequences linked to the plants' characteristic resilience to drought and salinity, among other qualities. "It is not our job to make future hybrids," explains Giordani. "But by providing the first advanced genetic markers associated to these important traits, we will support fig breeders in their quest to create new varieties of fig even better adapted to climate change and help Mediterranean farmers to survive."

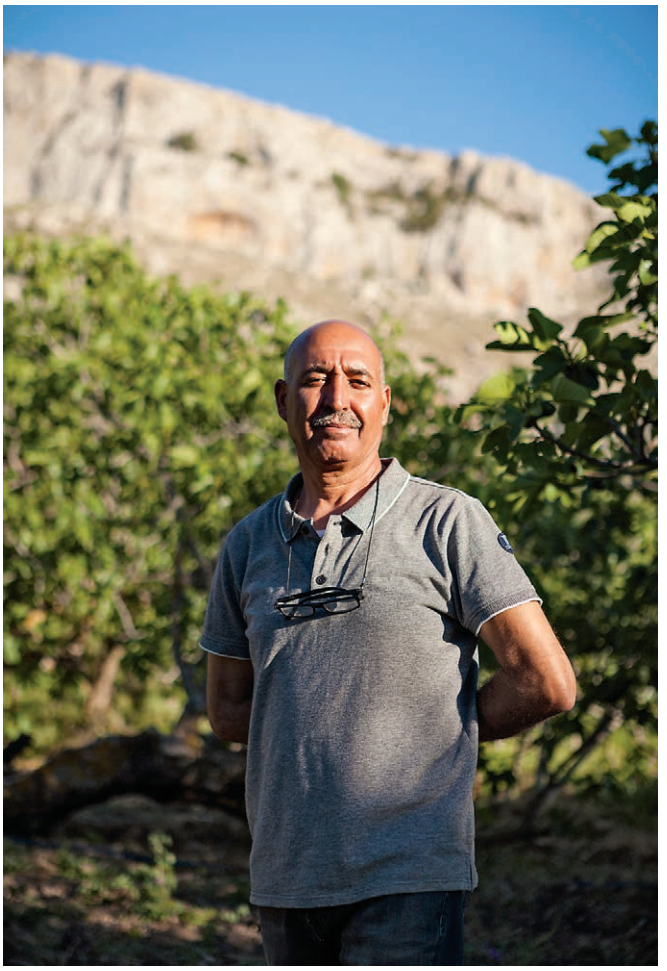
"By providing the first advanced genetic markers associated to these important traits, we will support fig breeders in their quest to create new varieties of fig even better adapted to climate change."

—TOMMASO GIORDANI

According to World Bank records, Turkey is by far the biggest exporter of figs worldwide. Yet Tunisia is an important producer on the south side of the Mediterranean and, unlike Turkey, has never widely industrialized the process.

Tunisian varieties of *Ficus carica*, both wild and cultivated, are numerous. They vary from region to region, where they have adapted to local conditions and been selectively bred by villagers, who continue the age-old Mediterranean tradition of small-scale family farming. It was in Tunisia where FIGGEN researchers scoured the greatest range of regions and climates for fig varieties, rather than taking samples from national collections.

Ghada Baraket, of the University of Tunis El Manar's



LEFT Wahchi fig-tree cuttings grow in a nursery in Faouzi Djebbi's garden in Djebba. He has collected cuttings of 17 of the 24 local varieties of fig and is growing 600 plants to give to fellow farmers to preserve the diversity of local types of fig. **RIGHT** Djebbi, a school headmaster and fig farmer, poses for a portait in his garden under Mount Gorra.

Faculty of Science, holds a doctorate in fig genetics and heads up the FIGGEN project team in Tunisia. Thanks to the length and breadth of the country, and the contributions of farmers, cuttings of no less than 110 varieties were collected for FIGGEN's drought-testing protocol. "We are all different thanks to our DNA, and our morphology is an expression of that. Figs are no different—what makes them resistant to drought conditions is coded in their DNA. We are trying to find that rather special resistance gene," Baraket says.

Tunisia's figs

Because there are hundreds of varieties of the common fig, they bear different names depending on where in the Mediterranean Basin they are grown. The names of Tunisian figs likewise vary by their region of origin; common ones include Bouhouli, Zidi and Magouli.

Figs from the Djebba region, in northwest Tunisia, are known for their exceptional quality because of the valley's microclimate and local farmers' ancestral growing methods.

Few of the terraced plots known as *ejennas* exceed one hectare, and figs grow alongside other fruit trees, vegetables and herbs in polyculture, a sustainable system that is based on traditional Berber farming. A network of tiny canals, established in the 17th century, provides water to hundreds of local farmers.

> "All my knowledge about figs, farming and growing food comes from my father, which came from my grandfather, which came from his father."
>
> —FAOUZI DJEBBI

The hanging gardens of Djebba el Olia, perched on Mount Gorra, are a United Nations-recognized agricultural heritage system and serve as a food resource to the landowners. Djebba's figs—mainly the Bouhouli variety—were the first fruit in Tunisia to receive an *appellation d'origine contrôlée* food-standards label, a recognition for their distinctive qualities

FIGGEN participants Faouzi Djebbi and his wife, Latifa, are the proud owners of a 0.7-hectare plot in Djebba el Olia. Seven

The Hanging Gardens of Djebba El Olia, terraced tracts just below Mount Gorra, grow figs (mostly Bouhoulis), other fruit trees, vegetables and herbs in a polycultural system based on traditional Berber farming. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization recognizes the area as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System.

varieties of fig trees jostle with orange, pomegranate and quince trees; chickens snooze among the broad beans, onions and geraniums growing in the dappled shade.

"All my knowledge about figs, farming and growing food comes from my father, which came from my grandfather, which came from his father," says Faouzi. Yet he says changing climate threatens timeless traditions here. Springs that flowed at 30 liters per second five years ago have slowed to half that, and some crops are disappearing.

Faouzi's father used to grow tomatoes and parsley in the garden, but they don't survive anymore. "Snow used to coat our garden every winter, soaking the soil and killing pests. But it only ever falls on the summit these days," says Latifa, pointing up to the rocky peak of Mount Gorra.

A *Ficus carica* may be resilient to drought, but when watered regularly (farmers in Djebba water their trees up to 3,000 liters every fortnight), it becomes dependent and grows shallow, vulnerable roots.

Faouzi's neighbor Anwer Djebbi (no relation) says his father's garden is outside the catchment of Djebba el Olia's springs and has limited access to water. But he says that is not necessarily a bad thing. "If you don't give a fig much water, it will find it by itself, growing roots far down into the soil."

> "If you don't give a fig much water, it will find it by itself, growing roots far down into the soil."
>
> —ANWER DJEBBI

A big drought a few years ago reinforced what the family knew: "My father's figs may be smaller, but he didn't lose a single tree—unlike many of the farmers growing figs around here."

Kesra is the highest village in Tunisia, perched at an altitude of 1,150 meters. Looking out over breathtaking views from the café terrace, Zgaya points out his plantation on the plateau below. It is one of the largest fruit farms in the area. Alongside cherry, lemon, orange and walnut trees, Zgaya tends to 1,200 fig trees, the majority of the Zidi variety. "When my father was my age, only half the fig trees in Kesra were Zidis," he says. "Nowadays Zidis have completely taken over."

Many traditional varieties originating from the Kesra region produce *abiadh* (white) figs. Over the past 20 years, these older varieties have started to disappear. Until the 1960s, figs could not be transported far as they spoil quickly in the heat, so they were sold locally or kept for home consumption. Vehicles and new techniques to keep cargo cool opened the possibility of selling figs in distant cities where the biggest, darkest, juiciest offerings commanded the highest prices. Zidi figs are large, with a thick skin that keeps the fruit fresh for longer and, depending on

A farmer sells figs that he harvested in the Kasra district of Siliana in Tunisia.

their size, farmers can sell Zidis for three times the sum paid for other, smaller *abiadh* varieties.

There is a catch: To grow lots of fat figs, Zidi trees demand plentiful water. As the land becomes drier, farmers are realizing that reduced fig diversity may threaten their livelihoods. During recent droughts, Zgaya observed that his Zidis sacrificed their fruits to survive. Instead of producing 30 kilograms (60 pounds) of figs, a tree was giving perhaps only 7 kilograms (15.4 pounds) and the fruit was smaller. "However, I have noticed that the fruits of other varieties of fig are less affected by drought," he says.

For example, "one day I tasted some delicious figs in the market that I didn't recognize. I found out that they came from Medenine" in southeastern Tunisia, Zgaya says. His curiosity led him to take a few cuttings from a Bayoudhi fig tree that grew in a wall in that village.

Through his contacts, he was astonished to learn that his cuttings would need watering only once when put in the soil to root. While slower growing than local trees, they had resisted drought conditions well, and Zgaya was thrilled that they produced a large quantity of fruit and high quality: sweet and suitable for drying. He now plans to open a fig nursery and pioneer the propagation of this southern variety in Kesra.

Zgaya was lucky with his discovery. But as the growing season begins, fig farmers, breeders and observers around the Mediterranean will be able to benefit from FIGGEN's catalogs.

The study identifying the most drought-tolerant fig varieties in Tunisia, Turkey and Spain will be available on its website and in scientific journals this year. FIGGEN'S vital work will help protect farmers' livelihoods, benefit rural Mediterranean economies and preserve lands that might otherwise be lost to cultivation entirely in the face of a hotter and drier climate reality.

Back in Kesra, Zgaya takes a fig leaf gently in his hand. "Figs were here before us," he says. "They belong not to us but to this land, and they will be here long after we are gone. There is no doubt about that."

Rebecca Marshall is a British editorial photographer based in the south of France. A core member of German photo agency Laif and Global Assignment by Getty Images, she is commissioned regularly by *The New York Times*, *Sunday Times Magazine*, *Stern* and *Der Spiegel*.

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DINING WITH THE SULTAN

A Look at Islamic Art in the Context of Food

Written by SARAH TAQVI
Photographed by ALFONSO GODINEZ

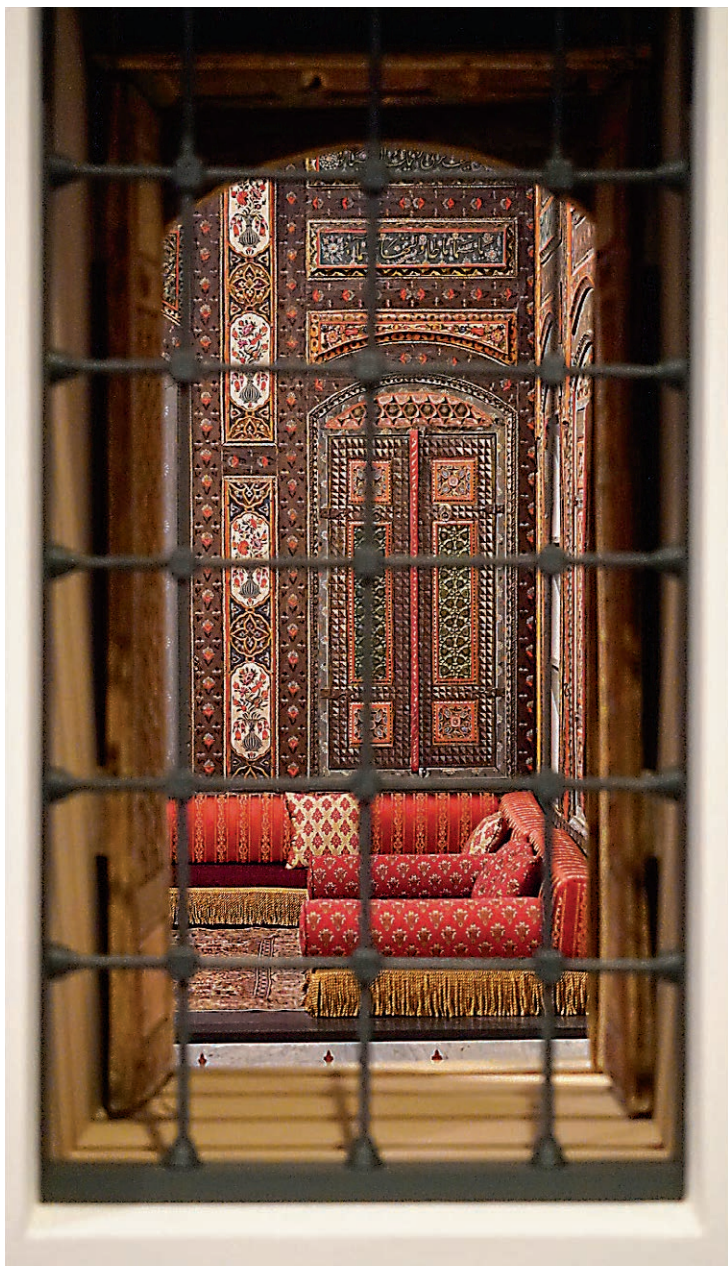
Historically, many Muslim empires prized the sophisticated presentation of food, especially in formal settings, and perceived it as a point of pride for cooks and servers alike. Nowadays, some say the elegant display of those dishes is also a form of art.

Named to signal the setting of an Islamic court, *Dining With the Sultan* is the first exhibition to consider Islamic art within the context of food, according to Linda Komaroff, the department head and curator of art of the Middle East at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The show explores an aspect of or influence in Islamic food culture over time through nine thematic sections, organizing some 250 illustrated manuscripts, pieces of tableware and cookbooks from 30 public and private collections across the US, Europe and the Middle East. The items, mostly dated from the eighth to 19th centuries, focus primarily on Arab, Persian, Ottoman and Mughal empires.

Komaroff spoke about the coordination and intentionality invested in the exhibition that gives viewers a look into the preparation and serving of food.

Why was the appearance of the dishware important to the presentation of a meal?

It is an art form to prepare the food, but it's more the interrelationship between food and art, except that the act of dining was in high enough esteem in Islamic lands, especially among the elite that you would have an absolutely fabulous table where that would be worthy of the food that goes with it … . [In a tent depicted in a 10th-century cookbook featured at the exhibition], it becomes clear that not only is the taste and the aroma important but how the food looks as well. Sometimes they might make [dishware] that's all black or green or white, but the dishware has



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE TOP Linda Komaroff curated the exhibition around "the interrelationship between food and art"; a luster-painted bowl is from ninth-century Iraq; Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's multimedia installation recollects his mother's homemade bread; a *sufra*, or table setting, offers visitors a virtual meal experience; and an 18th-century Damascus reception room shows where royals were served meals.

contrast—decorating [the food] with almonds and pistachios dyed red or yellow. … Wouldn't it be fun if after you emptied your bowl, it looked the same as when it was full or it reminded you of what it looked like when it was full?

What purpose did cookbooks serve?

The cookbooks are not really for cooks there … . It's the kind of thing that someone would have in his library, but it would not end up in his kitchen. The cookbooks come under the heading of *adab*, or etiquette, targeted to a male audience. The person reading it would be more concerned about the types of dinners he's going to, to be able to recognize, "This is such-and-such dish, and the history of the dish is such-and-such."

To be a chef, someone in your family was probably a chef and you became an apprentice … . It's the kind of thing that's passed on. The same with recipes and variants of recipes. The cook would be taught. They either memorize [the recipes] or they took notes. … What you can see here is we're dealing with a highly literate and sophisticated culture.

Tell us about the importance of serving food correctly.

From the time of Akbar, the Mughal emperor who ruled in India in the 16th century, there's an entire [description] on how food was served. Literally once the food is prepared, someone tastes it to make sure it tastes good. [If so], it's put into Chinese porcelain or some other bowl with a cover on top of it, and it's secured with a ribbon and then someone signs it like a certification. So that's how you know. I always joke that I don't think he ever got to eat a hot meal because by the time all of this is done, it's possibly not hot anymore.

What from the exhibition has carried over to the present day?

People like to see how the rich and famous live … . Elite objects—that's what survives. Exclusively things that were precious and costly and needed to be, or someone wanted to save them.

We dine on glazed ceramic tableware even today. … It's a very clean and eventually economical way to produce tableware because they're easy to wash. [Additionally], coffee-making traditions are still the same. … A lot of the foods are the same. Sometimes the ingredients change, but the recipes live over a very long period of time.

What do you want visitors to take away from this exhibition?

How fabulous Islamic art is … . I'd like to think with art … . It does open your mind if you allow it to, to thinking a different way, which is something that's important to me. … Because I don't think we are going to arrive at a better place in this world if people can't move closer to another person's viewpoint.

Sarah Taqvi is the assistant editor and a writer at *Aramco-World*. She holds a master's degree in mass communication from the University of Houston and is also a multimedia artist. **Alfonso Godinez** is a freelance photographer and visual artist, based in Los Angeles. Follow his work on Instagram @leanderstudios.

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OPPOSITE TOP: ROBERT LANDAU

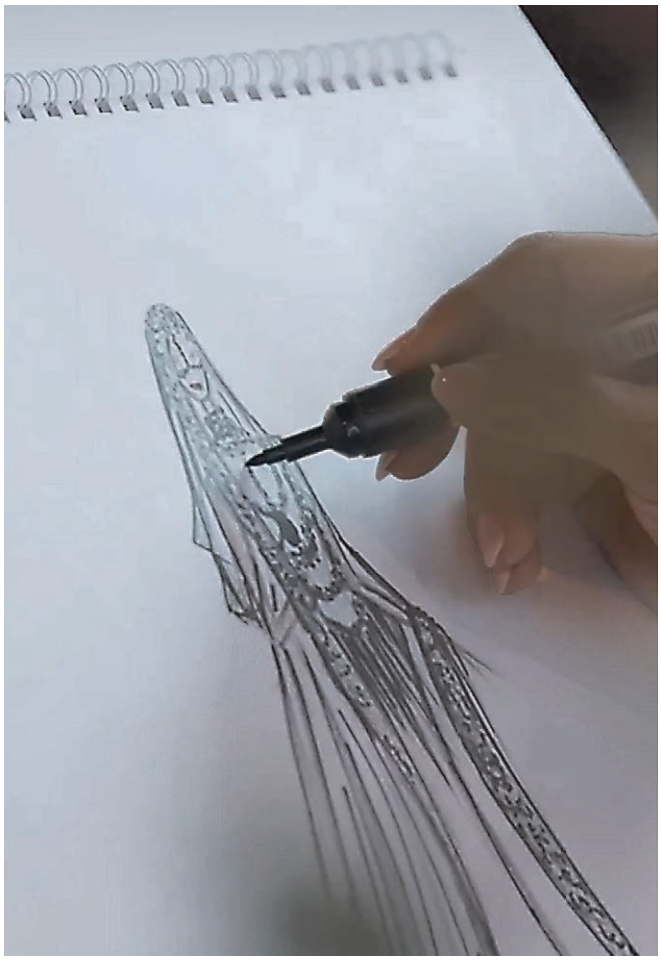
Fashion FORWARD

SAUDI COUTURE DESIGNER MERGES CONTEMPORARY FASHION WITH ARABIAN HERITAGE

Written by REBECCA ANNE PROCTOR
Photographs courtesy of TIMA ABID

Within a specially devised outdoor setting in Saudi Arabia's capital, models in magnificently embroidered gowns of satin, lace, mesh and velvet walked the runway in a presentation that distinctly married contemporary couture with Arabian heritage. Showcasing intricate beadwork and glistening sequins, capes and at times shimmering headscarfs, Saudi designer Tima Abid's latest collection marked her first public presentation in her home country for the inaugural Riyadh Fashion Week last fall.

OPPOSITE Designer Tima Abid puts the finishing touches on a look during the Riyadh Fashion Show. **BELOW LEFT** Abid sketches a dress that would be worn by Saudi television presenter Lojain Omran. **BELOW RIGHT** A model walks the runway of the Riyadh Fashion Show in another of Abid's designs.



Abid's website includes gowns that are "demi couture," meaning an existing silhouette's color or fabric is changed to the customer's taste.

The scene echoed the celebratory vibe of Abid's debut show more than three years prior. During Paris Haute Couture Week she presented an equally glamorous 50-piece collection to invitation-only guests and the alluring songs of famous Tunisian singer Oumaima Taleb.

"Tima Abid has been a household name in Jeddah, known for its glamorous take on the female silhouette and an unapologetic esthetic of decadence," says Marriam Mossalli, a Saudi lifestyle editor and founder of communications agency Niche Arabia.

Abid's collections are regal, grand, bold and ultrafeminine. Highlighted pieces at Riyadh Fashion Week included a skirt made entirely of metallic sequins and blue and red feathers that glistened with every step the model took as well as a wedding gown with jewel-embellished silk panels.

Some contemporary looks came in the form of fitted bolero jackets decorated with jewels and waist-hugging corset dresses; other garments featured high jeweled necklines and fitted long sleeves with feathers or other jewels at the wrists.

Abid's career did not begin with such a spectacle but stems from more than two decades of hard work.

From the time she was a young girl in Jeddah, Abid loved fashion. Elegant dresses represented a magical world about which she would dream.

Growing up, Abid says, she didn't get much exposure to the world of fashion. "There's wasn't much television in my household or magazines for me to read about the latest trends. I still always loved dresses. I even have dresses I have kept for over 25 years."

Abid's first trip to Paris was for her honeymoon. "It was there that I was exposed to the world of international fashion—to Max Mara and Dior," she says, adding, "I fell in love with everything I saw in the designer stores."

> **"I began ... to try and re-create what I had seen with my own style and vision."**
>
> —TIMA ABID

The looks she saw in Paris, one of the centers of the fashion world, became her biggest inspirations.

Abid returned home with her passion amplified. "I began looking at the differences in couture versus ready-to-wear and began to try and re-create what I had seen with my own style and vision," she says.

"I had a new fire in me—a fire that led me to design dresses," she says.

Entirely self-taught, Abid would go to local shops to buy fabrics she loved. "I would then teach myself the difference between the fabrics, the cuts and the way they'd fall on the body,"

she recalls. "I would have a big pile of fabrics on the floor, and I would select from there and just begin designing, first creating dresses for myself and then for my family and friends."

She began designing bridal gowns for friends' and family weddings. As she received more and more compliments, she realized she could open her own business.

Abid's daughter, Sultana Bokhari, remembers the family living room becoming a place for her mother's work where she would meet with clients to discuss the dresses they wanted.

Abid studied psychology at university—a subject that had little to do with the garments she was designing. However, an understanding of emotion has also enhanced the way she creates fashion for women.

"When meeting clients my mother would at first learn about them, their personality, their tastes, dreams and style—the fitting had very little to do with the actual garment," Bokhari explains. "It was from getting to know the client that she would then design the gown."

Over the decades Abid's designs have come to represent both contemporary fashion through avant-garde cuts and Arabian heritage. It is here where she has found her power. This is found in her latest collection through structured gowns exposing legs and arms while covering other parts in long *abaya*s (loose-fitting robes), *shayla*s (headscarves) and, at times, even embellished *batulah*—the Arabian Gulf metallic-looking traditional mask.

"Whoever wears my dresses should know that they evoke boldness with deep balance, strength and freedom and represent part of the personality of whoever wears them," she says.

"My mother is an artist. She loves music, art and meeting other people. All of this is reflected in her designs."

—SULTANA BOKHARI

Fashion shows in the Arabian Gulf have grown exponentially over the past decade and a half. In this emerging environment, Abid has a clear goal. "I want to be the Chanel of Saudi Arabia," the designer told *Vogue Arabia* after her first haute couture presentation in Paris in 2020.

Recently, leading fashion brands like Dolce & Gabbana, which staged its first fashion show in the historical desert region of al-'Ula in 2022, have flocked to Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the national Fashion Commission is producing numerous events such as Riyadh Fashion Week to encourage young and established designers like Abid to present their creations to a wider audience.

Her latest collection reflects, she says, "darkness, light and opposites." Designed especially for Riyadh Fashion Week, her highly architectural looks were inspired by her country's natural desert landscapes, its lush, verdant oases and mountains.

For this dress Abid incorporates what she calls "traditional elegance" that honors Saudi Arabia's origins.

That approach has inspired her before.

"Sometimes even rocks on top of each other at the beach grab my attention," she says. "I even remember one time I was on a plane. I saw the clouds from above, and it gave me a different feeling, so I made a white dress out of cloudy-looking feathers. The dress ended up in the Paris fashion show."

Glamorous and bold, Abid's latest designs merge Arabian heritage with a sense of modernity, where traditional Arabian details, such as the *abaya*, headscarf and *batulah* are incorporated into cutting-edge western styles, such as form-fitting long sleeves, tight high waists, slits, bare shoulders and short skirts.

The results are lavish intercultural gowns that reflect an Arabian woman—one who wears her heritage with grace and dignity while embracing the rapidly changing present.

Rebecca Anne Proctor is an independent journalist, editor and broadcaster based between Dubai and Rome. She is a former editor-in-chief of *Harper's Bazaar Art* and *Harper's Bazaar Interiors*.

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INGENUITY • INNOVATION • 6

A RESEARCHER CHISELS NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ANCIENT ART

Written by LEE LAWRENCE

Whether pelted by sleet in spring or slapped by a harsh summer sun, groups of graduate and post-doctoral students have clambered, undaunted, through the rocky Zagros Mountains near Iraq's border with Iran. Their feet slipping in the mud and skittering through ravines, they have lugged tripods and long-lens, high-resolution digital cameras to document reliefs that artists carved into the limestone mountainside more than 3,000 years ago.

This spring marks the seventh expedition that Zainab Bahrani, chair of Columbia University's Department of Art History and Archaeology, has conducted in northern Iraq and southwestern Turkey since establishing the Mapping Mesopotamian Monuments project in 2012. Spurred by the damage and destruction war had wreaked on sites in the region, Bahrani set out to create a database that could serve current and future generations of conservators and scholars.

Using photography to preserve information is not new—archeologists have been doing this since the invention of the camera in the mid-1800s. How Bahrani photographs these sites, however,

ABOVE Photographs taken by Zainab Bahrani and her Mapping Mesopotamian Monuments team show how ensconced the Darband-i-Gawr relief (2090 BCE) is in the mountains of Iraq's Qara Dagh district—leading them to a very different interpretation of their purpose. Previously, scholars believed they were used for propaganda.

reflects a shift in thinking about artwork made from 4000 BCE to 200 CE in an area that spans present-day Iraq, eastern Syria and northwest Iran.

Scholars now believe that Mesopotamians did not simply regard art as portraying the world around them. To them, some art forms like statues and reliefs also actively participated in the world. In reviewing a compendium of new scholarship published in *Critical Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Art*, professor Sarah J. Scott Wagner College in New York, highlights this perspective as "driven in part by the work of Zainab Bahrani."

Bahrani describes herself as part of an ongoing process in academia that is "decentering Europe from histories of art and histories of archeology, where we were taught to look from only one perspective."

For Frederick N. Bohrer, author of *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe* and *Photography and Archaeology*, one of Bahrani's important contributions lies in looking beyond her field of study. In documenting a site or object, for example, she records those features it acquired at different periods rather than, as is a common practice, focusing solely on its aspect at a particular time "as though it never had any other life." She adopts a similarly unusual wide-angle approach in her analyses, he says, bringing in "aspects of cultural theory and developments in the humanities of the last few decades."

Bohrer, who studies the way scholars in the West have historically described and interpreted the ancient Near East, regards Bahrani as a "remarkable, innovative scholar" who has changed the discourse about ancient art by raising new questions.

Bahrani, a native of Iraq, earned her master's and doctorate in a joint program of ancient Near East and Greek art history and archaeology and, as a graduate student in the 1980s, some things she was learning didn't sit right. A typical assignment was to discuss the ways Greco-Roman art was better or more advanced than the earlier Mesopotamian. "This assumption that there was a development where you go from more primitive to more sophisticated," she says, "was something that I always questioned."

The massive archive of cuneiform writings made it clear to her that ancient Mesopotamians had a highly sophisticated and complex "conception of reality and the relationship of representation to reality." It was different from that of the later Greeks, whose civilization is regarded as the foundation of Western art and philosophy. As 19th-century Westerners studied Mesopotamia, they posited a historical progression with classical Greece at the pinnacle.

But to Bahrani, Greek and Mesopotamian thought were neither inferior nor superior to one another. They were alternative views, "which to me was so fascinating because it also became a reminder that what we sometimes consider to be natural and universal is just our own way of looking at the world," she says.

This insight would come to bear while studying rock reliefs carved in the Zagros starting around 2090 BCE during the last Sumerian dynasty through the Assyrian and Babylonian eras to 300 BCE.

She first encountered them in textbooks where photographs of the Darband-i-Gawr relief, for example, show a man armed with an ax and a bow towering over two small figures sprawled at his feet. Here and in similar reliefs, the photographs are framed in such a way that they appear "almost as if they were paintings," Bahrani says. This tallied with the traditional argument that they served as propaganda, an early version of billboards advertising a local hero. Seeing them in person, however, "it becomes clear that they're *not* panel reliefs, they're *not* architectural sculpture" that stands out against the mountainous backdrop.

Quite the opposite, they're absorbed into the landscape, "very intentionally embedded into the structure of the rock formation, of the geological layers that you can see in the rock."

Far from fully facing forward, the composition of Darband-i-Gawr follows the tilt of the rock, and the step the warrior is climbing is not carved; it is a layer of sediment that the artist has made part of the scene. In shots of the surroundings, we see this stratum running along the rest of the mountain. Significantly, other images—taken at various times of day, from different distances and angles, solo and as part of a high-resolution 360-degree panorama—underscore the relief's remoteness and its minuteness in the landscape. As Bohrer points out, "Photographs don't just capture what is in front of the lens. Every photograph captures a sensibility behind the lens." Close-ups of the relief speak to Bahrani's art-historian interest in stylistic analysis and iconographic details, while the ever-wider views reveal the weight she assigns to how the relief relates to its surroundings.

For comparison, Bahrani cites a famous Achaemenid relief on Mount Behistun in Iran. Sculpted in 521 BCE, it also portrays a 3-meter-tall King Darius facing a line of smaller figures of

GABRIEL RODRIGUEZ. COURTESY OF THE MEDIA CENTER FOR ART HISTORY. © THE TRUSTEES OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

The landscape in the Qara Dagh district underscores the relief's inaccessibility and tiny scale. Bahrani questions who would have seen the sculptures besides the odd shepherd.

LEFT Zainab Bahrani and her team are helping to preserve the 13th-century CE gate of the Amedi (Arabic al-Amadiya) Citadel, **ABOVE**, a centuries-older stone staircase and rock reliefs, paying equal attention to the site's Islamic and pre-Islamic elements.

prisoners, hands tied behind their backs. Unlike Darband-i-Gawr, this scene is part of a 25-by-15-meter (82-by-49.2-foot) carving with 450 lines of inscription sitting some 200 meters (656 feet) up a rock overlooking a broad valley. "From below you can see that there's something very high up," she says. "Now, that is clearly on a major thoroughfare. But the ones that we've been recording are not like that. They're in crevices and ravines and places that only maybe a shepherd or a goatherd might go."

Mapping Mesopotamian Monuments images show that sculptors carved Darband-i-Gawr high above a narrow, rocky gorge known as Pagan's Pass. The surrounding rock is uneven, marked by deep fissures, dark streaks and patches of hardy vegetation. Add to that the shifting play of shadows cast by myriad outcrops, and it is easy to see why Bahrani doubts they were intended as propaganda given how remote and difficult to spot they are. "Who is going to see them?"

This emphasis on context extends to documenting the ways ancient works have been subsequently incorporated into later structures. One such site is the Mosul Gate at Amedi (al-Amadiya), a 13th-century gate with Arabic inscriptions seamlessly integrated with a first-century BCE to second-century CE stone staircase and its three rock reliefs of life-size figures. Since 2019, Bahrani has used this documentation to direct a preservation project that pays equal attention to the site's pre-Islamic and Islamic elements.

Over her career, she has disputed a number of preconceptions about Mesopotamia. In *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia*, she pushed back against the perception of ancient women as subservient and lacking power. The 2022 exhibition *She Who Wrote: Enheduanna and Women of Mesopotamia, ca. 3400–2000 B.C.* at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York, built on those ideas. Among them was her observation that scholars had consistently downplayed the power of Enheduanna—the high priestess of Ur, a Sumerian city-state, around 2300 BCE—solely because of her gender. This included giving little credence to accounts that named her as the author of acclaimed poetic odes. Mining what Bahrani calls "a small idea more than 20 years ago," some of her graduate students presented new research that bolstered her case (for a related article, see *Aramco World* March/April 2022).

She has also introduced new ways of looking at ancient warfare and violence (*Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia*); challenged the treatment of text and image as wholly separate in Mesopotamia as they were historically in Europe; and questioned the term "visual arts" while studying Zagros Mountains reliefs. "It's immediately tied to vision and viewing. But not all historical conceptions of the work of art are about viewing."

Take foundation figurines. About 35 centimeters (13.8 inches) tall, they range from metal pegs topped with the sculpted head and torso of a god or royal to full-bodied statuettes. Created to be buried inside the foundation of buildings, they conferred protection and a powerful connection to the past and a collective memory. Just as these figures were not made to be seen, Bahrani argues, many of the

Sculpted in 521 BCE, the Behistun relief in Iran is a massive carving with more than 400 lines of inscription and huge figurines. Its size, location and visibility suggest it was used for propaganda.

Zagros Mountains rock reliefs were not made with viewers in mind.

Then why commission them? Bahrani believes it is crucial to consider the perspective of ancient Mesopotamians. "We tend to think that it's common sense and patently obvious that an image is not the same thing as a person or a thing, that these are two totally different categories. But for them," she says, "those categories blurred." One's image was seen as a detached part of one's body, like hair or nails. This intimate relationship extended to one's name, shadow and clothes. Carving images of local rulers into limestone, therefore, embedded them into the land where their presence conferred protection and reverence, Bahrani speculates, to nearby springs—a manifestation of Mesopotamians' belief in the "agentive power" of art.

> "Not all historical conceptions of the work of art are about viewing."
>
> —ZAINAB BAHRANI

Her intellectual journey has depended greatly on reading scholars like Linda Nochlin and Partha Mitter, who questioned the veracity of what they had learned in their fields of art history. She vividly recalls diving into Mitter's *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* and feeling thankful: "Reading those books gave me courage to pursue the directions that I wanted to pursue."

Hoping to do the same for others, she included some of the history of archaeology and Western scholars' attitudes in *Art of Mesopotamia*, a textbook she wrote in 2017. Professors of Mesopotamian art welcomed her book as a long-overdue update, an introductory overview that, one critic wrote, "skillfully fills this enormous void in the field." Bohrer points out that, while it is unusual for scholars, particularly top scholars, to take time away from research to write a textbook, there is a lot of power in doing so "because it's what brings people into a field in the first place," he says. Through both text and illustrations, it shapes the way readers think about this ancient art. "That's not just creating knowledge. That's creating a field."

Bahrani has been very outspoken on the need to ensure that this field includes people who call the lands of ancient Mesopotamia home. "One of the things that I find really unfortunate is the lack of translation of good textbooks into Arabic." Having seen that students in Iraq rely on a 50-year-old text "full of racial theory," she is carving out time to translate her textbook.

As for the Mapping Mesopotamian Monuments project, she continues to ensure that new material is simultaneously posted online in Arabic, Kurdish and Turkish as well as English. Bahrani hopes that younger generations will raise new questions—just as she has when standing below rock reliefs in the Zagros Mountains. Why such an inaccessible location? Why chiseled this way? Is there a pattern to the sites? Everything she knows about Mesopotamian thinking tells her that "nothing about this was random," she says. "But because all the focus was on the power of the king, these questions were not being asked about ancient Mesopotamian art. So, I wanted to push to ask them."

Based in Brooklyn, New York, **Lee Lawrence** (leeadairlawrence.com) writes frequently on Islamic and Asian art for *The Wall Street Journal* and cultural affairs for *The Christian Science Monitor.*

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AUTHOR'S CORNER

Finding Echoes of Stories Across Cultures: A Conversation with Elizabeth Laird

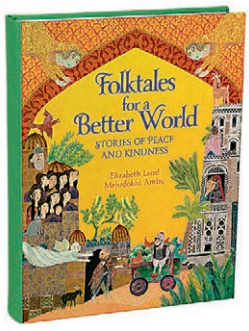
Written by KAY HARDY CAMPBELL

Growing up in South London, children's book author Elizabeth Laird always hungered for stories. Although her family praised her for being a voracious reader, her parents monitored what she read, frowning on fairy tales or anything supernatural.

Despite this, Laird developed a passion for folktales that she would carry into her adult life, first as a teacher, working in countries all over the world, and then as an author, penning more than 100 books with works that have been translated into 20 languages.

Laird got the idea to start preserving folktales while visiting Ethiopia in 1996. While on Mount Entoto, overlooking the capital, Addis Ababa, she encountered an old man who "out of the blue" told her a fable about ants. "I suddenly realized there must be an enormous number of similar tales," she recalls.

The next day she rushed to the offices of the British Council, an international organization that specializes in cultural and educational programs, to propose a project. Soon, she was traversing the country in search of stories. Ultimately, the story-collecting effort amassed more than 300 Ethiopian folktales, now available in an online archive in both Amharic and English.



Folktales for a Better World: Stories of Peace and Kindness

Elizabeth Laird. Il. Mehrdokht Amini. Crocodile Books, 2023.

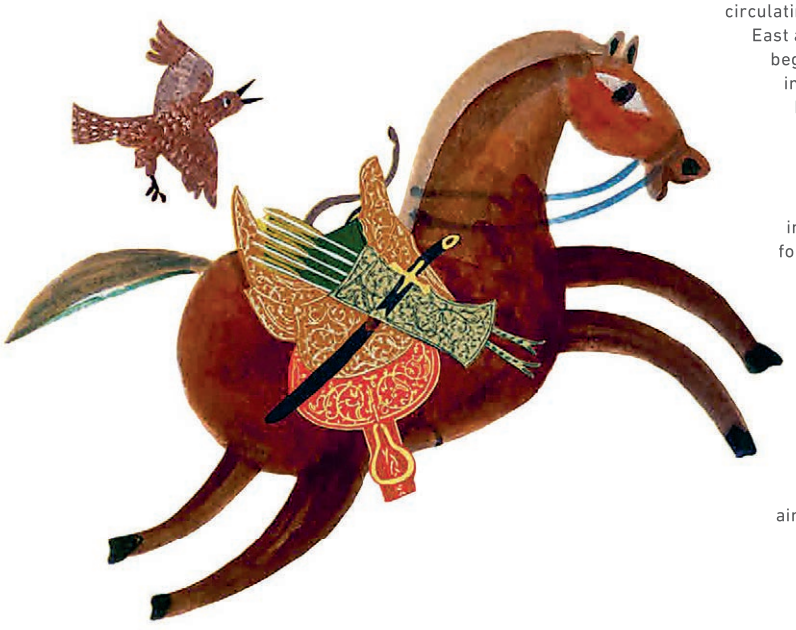
In the years since, Laird has continued to track down stories from different corners of the world. Now, she has drawn on tales amassed over the years for her recent work, *Folktales for a Better World*, her seventh folktale collection.

AramcoWorld recently spoke with Laird about her latest book and her love of folktales.

ABOVE Elizabeth Laird reads with a young boy. **RIGHT**, illustrations featured in the book's story "The Emir and the Angel."

ANGUS MCDOWALL

How did you start collecting folktales?
I lived in Ethiopia for several years in the 1960s. I went back 30 years later and persuaded the Ethiopian Ministry of Education and the British Council to set up a project to collect stories from the 14 regions of Ethiopia [the Ethiopian Story Collecting Project]. Honestly, I cannot tell you how wonderful it was. For example, I'd be sitting there beside a tributary of the Nile with a storyteller—this was down in Gambela in Western Ethiopia—and he would tell me a story about the beginning of time when God created man. I had a marvelous time doing it. Then, in 2001, I wrote the stories in simplified English so that the Ethiopian children could use their own stories to learn English.



Did you have a favorite story growing up?
My family was very religious, so Bible stories were the beginning, really. I always loved the story of Joseph in which you've got these great characters. In the Bible you've got poetry, you've got laws, and you've got character studies like David. I mean it's just the most marvelous stuff: the poetry, the end of the Book of Job.

How did you start writing folktale collections?
Once I started collecting them, the more I read, the more I realized the enormous similarities. There's the story about the magic cow in Afghanistan, one of the most popular Afghan tales, which is pretty similar to the one in the Sudan border. These stories have been circulating around the Middle East and Africa since time began, and so I got terribly interested in the origins. I've always enjoyed the tales, but finding these echoes of stories across so many different cultures was so intriguing I kept looking for more.

When you were putting together *Folktales*, how did you choose which stories to include?
I wanted to find stories about reconciliation, peace and kindness. The aim was to find stories which had a winning message and to show that these cultures have these wonderful traditions of hospitality and forgiveness. I spent ages reading through my collection. The Afghan story "The Emir and the Angel" comes from renowned Afghan storyteller Amina Shah, the sister of the great man of letters, Idries Shah. The Palestinian tale "True Kindness" really spoke to me for this book. I just adore the Sudanese tale "Allah Karim" because it has the most beautiful reconciliation in the end.

What did you hope to accomplish with *Folktales for a Better World*?
I wanted to feature a series of stories originating in places like Ramallah and Gaza, Afghanistan and Syria, places I'd actually visited and places whose people are having a particularly hard time at the moment. In my grandson's London classroom, you will find him next to a Syrian boy and an Afghan boy. There are refugee children in all our schools here. My dream for this book is that a teacher will read one of these stories aloud in class and a child from one of these countries will say, "That's me. That's mine." These stories are intended to act as a reminder that these are beautiful, ancient and wonderful cultures of which they can be very proud.

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

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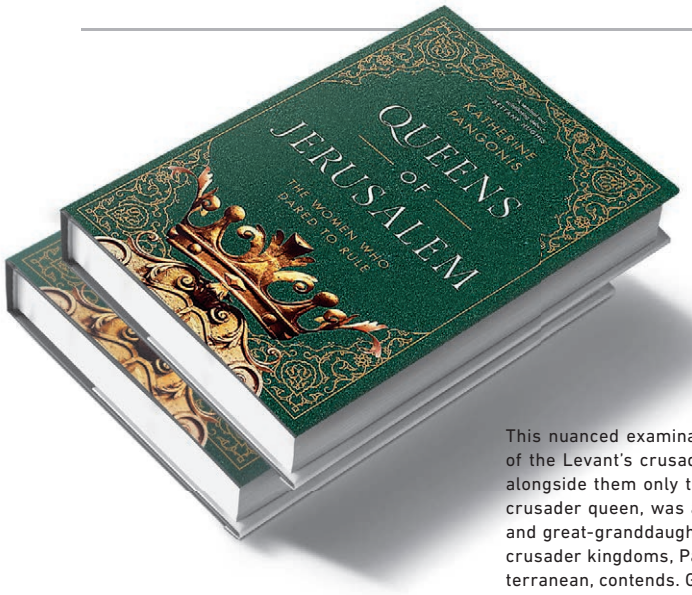
REVIEWS



"The aim of this book is to ... bring the Queens of Jerusalem, Princesses of Antioch and Countesses of Tripoli and Edessa out of the shadows and into the public eye."

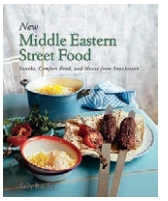
—from *Queens of Jerusalem: The Women Who Dared to Rule*

Queens of Jerusalem: The Women Who Dared to Rule

Katherine Pangonis. Pegasus Books, 2022.

This nuanced examination of the 12th-century Crusades shifts focus from the self-styled kings and counts of the Levant's crusader kingdoms (Jerusalem, Edessa, Antioch and Tripoli) to the royal women who ruled alongside them only to be relegated to the margins of history. While Morphia of Melitene, Jerusalem's first crusader queen, was a consort, the Armenian princess's female descendants, including daughter Melisende and great-granddaughter Sibylla, became powerful countesses, consorts and full-fledged queens regnant of crusader kingdoms, Pangonis, an Oxford-trained historian specializing in the medieval Middle East and Mediterranean, contends. Gifted at palace intrigue, Melisende outmaneuvered her husband and son to rule Jerusalem in her own right. During Sultan Saladin's 1187-CE siege, the kingdom would fall, but not before Sibylla, its last queen, secured her husband's release and the lives of its remaining residents. The stories don't end there. Pangonis has crafted an engrossing crusader history—with women at its center. —TOM VERDE

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



New Middle Eastern Street Food: Snacks, Comfort Food and Mezze From Snackistan

Sally Butcher. Interlink Books, 2023.

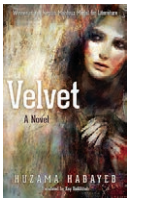
In this whirlwind of a cookbook, Sally Butcher, the London-based food writer, and owner of the popular Persian deli Persepolis, whisks the reader to Snackistan, an imaginary place where every belly is always full but ready for another classic Middle Eastern snack. In this popular title, reissued in 2023 to commemorate its 10th anniversary, Butcher has opted to include a solid mix of recipes from across the region in varying levels of difficulty. The humbler cook may opt to start slowly with street veggies (boiled beets, turnips, corn-on-the-cob and broad beans) or sweet tabbouleh salad. At the same time, for those wanting a challenge, Butcher has more complicated recipes to make Kibbeh, the classic Iraqi street food, or the beloved Egyptian dessert, Ali's Mother's Pudding. With something for everyone, if you missed this book a decade ago, be sure to remedy that mistake immediately. Your taste buds will thank you. —DIANNA WRAY

Profound Patterns

Adam Williamson.
The Squeeze Press, 2023.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, British artist Adam Williamson started offering his geometric drawing classes online, attracting more than 20,000 participants worldwide. Ultimately, the "unprecedented production of masterpieces" created during those sessions inspired this book. Williamson starts by explaining the project's provenance and the basic principles of intricate Islamic architectural design and decoration. From there, over 20 chapters, he explores the art of patterning found in Islamic culture. From Qur'an illumination to carved wood paneling and ceramic tiling, the book features striking color images of artwork attendees created in kitchens, studios and even bedrooms. In addition to Williamson's historical commentary on the patterns studied, personal reflections from workshop participants bear witness to the creative excitement, community spirit and therapeutic power of the experience. The resulting work showcases an inspiring byproduct from a time of deep global disquiet.

—JAMIE S. SCOTT



Velvet: A Novel

Huzama Habayeb.
Trans. Kay Heikkinen. Hoopoe, 2019.

Intensely poignant, Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature award winner Huzama Habayeb pens the life story of Hawwa, a fiercelay strong seamstress living in a Palestinian refugee camp from childhood to death. The novel spans her life as she takes on the burdens of her parents, siblings, and later her husband, children and grandchildren, attempting to insulate her loved ones from the violence in and around the camp. Depicting the highs and lows of modern womanhood, as well as the special strength that comes from an arduous life, Habayeb weaves a heart-wrenching story that springs from the sorrow of a young girl. Hawwa searches for meaning in the love and grief that surround her. Through the years, we witness Hawwa's quiet strength persevere as she tries to stitch her family's life back together. Equal parts touching and tragic, this novel gives an intimate view of love and loss inside of a tumultuous world.

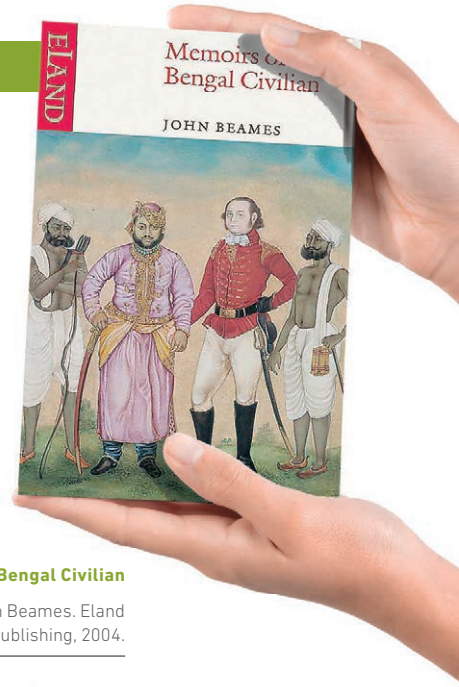
—HANNAH STERENBERG

Better Than Fiction: A Civil Servant's Life, Well Told

Written by DIANNA WRAY

Here are the facts: Indian Civil Service employee John Beams worked in the South Asian Punjab region from 1858 to 1861 and the Bengal region from 1861 to 1893. A gifted linguist, he published a pioneering Bengali grammar book and endeavored to preserve Odia, an endangered Bengali dialect. He died in 1903 a respected government employee and scholar.

The author, a British civil servant, at about age 21, the day before he left for India.



Memoirs of a Bengal Civilian

John Beames. Eland Publishing, 2004.

This might not sound like the makings of a page-turner memoir, as Beames himself acknowledges: "If it should be asked why so obscure a person should think it worth his while to write the story of his life at all, I reply that it is precisely because I am an obscure person—an average, ordinary, middle-class Englishman—that I write it."

Don't be fooled. Beames' recounting of his life story told with Dickensian flair, is as lively, insightful and entertaining as the gimlet-eyed Beames must have been.

Over the course of the book, Beames takes readers through his parents' marriage, his London youth, his growing love for his wife and most of his career.

Beames' father had disapproved of the match, so much so that after the couple agreed to a two-year engagement, he sent the 19-year-old off to start his position in the Indian Civil Service in 1858, months after the British Raj (direct British rule, which would last until 1947) had been established.

From here, Beames brings us along as he marvels at the gleaming white structures of 19th-century Calcutta (now Kolkata), gets to know generous Punjab residents and traipses through the Bengal region's verdant fields.

Born in 1837, the year Queen Victoria ascended the British throne, Beames proves himself a man of his time, but throughout the book he shows his respect for other cultures. He learns to speak Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali and Farsi and diligently observes local customs. Beames offers candid assessments of British government policies and actions, bluntly acknowledging decisions that result in a "stupid political mistakes, brutally carried out." He also makes his own mistakes, he admits, but tries to correct them. In one instance, residents of a small Punjabi town presented him with rupees as a wedding present. Beames, unable to accept the money and aware returning it would be seen as an insult, used the funds to throw them a feast.

Unfortunately, his narrative breaks off in 1887, several years before his retirement. Although Beames started working on the manuscript in 1875, he had never finished it, and the work had gone unpublished until 1961 when it was discovered in an attic. His life proceeded quietly enough, with Beames spending his final years in England with his wife and children, but, reading over the facts, you'll find yourself wishing Beames had told the rest of the story himself.

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EVENTS

Highlights from aramcoworld.com

Please verify a venue's schedule before visiting.

CURRENT / MAY

Suneil Sanzgiri: Here the Earth Grows Gold explores the complexities of anti-colonialism, nationalism and diasporic identity. Using imagine technologies to meditate on what it means to witness from afar, Suneil Sanzgiri's work highlights the solidarity that developed between India and Africa during the 1960s and 1970s. Sanzgiri's first solo museum exhibition pairs the film with a 16 mm projection and new sculptural work. Modeled on bamboo structures seen across South Asia, the assemblage features family photos, 3D renderings, anti-colonial publications, and images of water and red clay soil from Goa that are drawn from his research. Together these works present the concept of diaspora as a way to reconfigure our understanding of history and belonging. **Brooklyn** Museum, through May 5.

CURRENT / JUNE

Irresistible: The Global Patterns of Ikat explores the global phenomenon of ikat textiles through more than 70 masterful examples from countries as diverse as Japan, Indonesia, India, Uzbekistan, Côte d'Ivoire and Guatemala. Prized worldwide for producing vivid patterns and colors, the ancient resist-dyeing technique of ikat developed independently in communities across Asia, Africa and the Americas, where it continues to inspire artists and designers today. The George Washington University Museum, **Washington, D.C.**, through June 1.

Indian Skies: The Howard Hodgkin Collection of Indian Court Painting presents more than 120 examples of Indian court paintings assembled by British painter and printmaker Howard Hodgkin, including works created by the Mughal, Deccan, Rajput and Pahari courts dating from the 16th to the 19th centuries. Underlying Hodgkin's eclectic collection—which includes portraits, palace scenes, royal hunts, illustrations to religious epics, devotional subjects, and nature studies—are several unifying themes that reflect Hodgkin's preferences for compositions that convey narrative drama, poetic allusion and emotional intensity. He also had a predilection for elephants rendered as portraits and in action. The MET, **New York**, through June 9.

COURTESY OF HOWARD HODGKIN COLLECTION

CURRENT / JULY

Anida Yoeu Ali: Hybrid Skin, Mythical Presence explores two of Tacoma-based international artist Anida Yoeu Ali iconic performances *The Buddhist Bug* and *The Red Chador.* Central to many of her performances is the use of textiles, a practice rooted in her Cham-Muslim refugee migration experience—her family fled Cambodia with only the clothes on their backs. The colorful, transformative garments worn by the artist and others during the performances—which the artist considers "artifacts" rather than artworks when not enacted by her—are on view. Video, photography and other installation art bring viewers into previous performances of the works from site-specific locations around the world. **Seattle** Asian Art Museum, through July 7.

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

Africa & Byzantium considers the complex artistic relationships among kingdoms and empires from the fourth century and beyond. The first international loan exhibition to treat this subject, it includes nearly 160 artworks lent by African, European and North American collections. Most were made by African artists or imported to the continent at the request of the powerful rulers of precolonial kingdoms and empires. The art and faith of these historical kingdoms resonate with many worldwide today. The **Cleveland** Museum of Art, through July 21.

Man's Crown, c. 400-600, silver, 20 x 15 cm, Egyptian Museum, Cairo. DeA Picture Library/S. Vannini/Art Resource, NY.

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