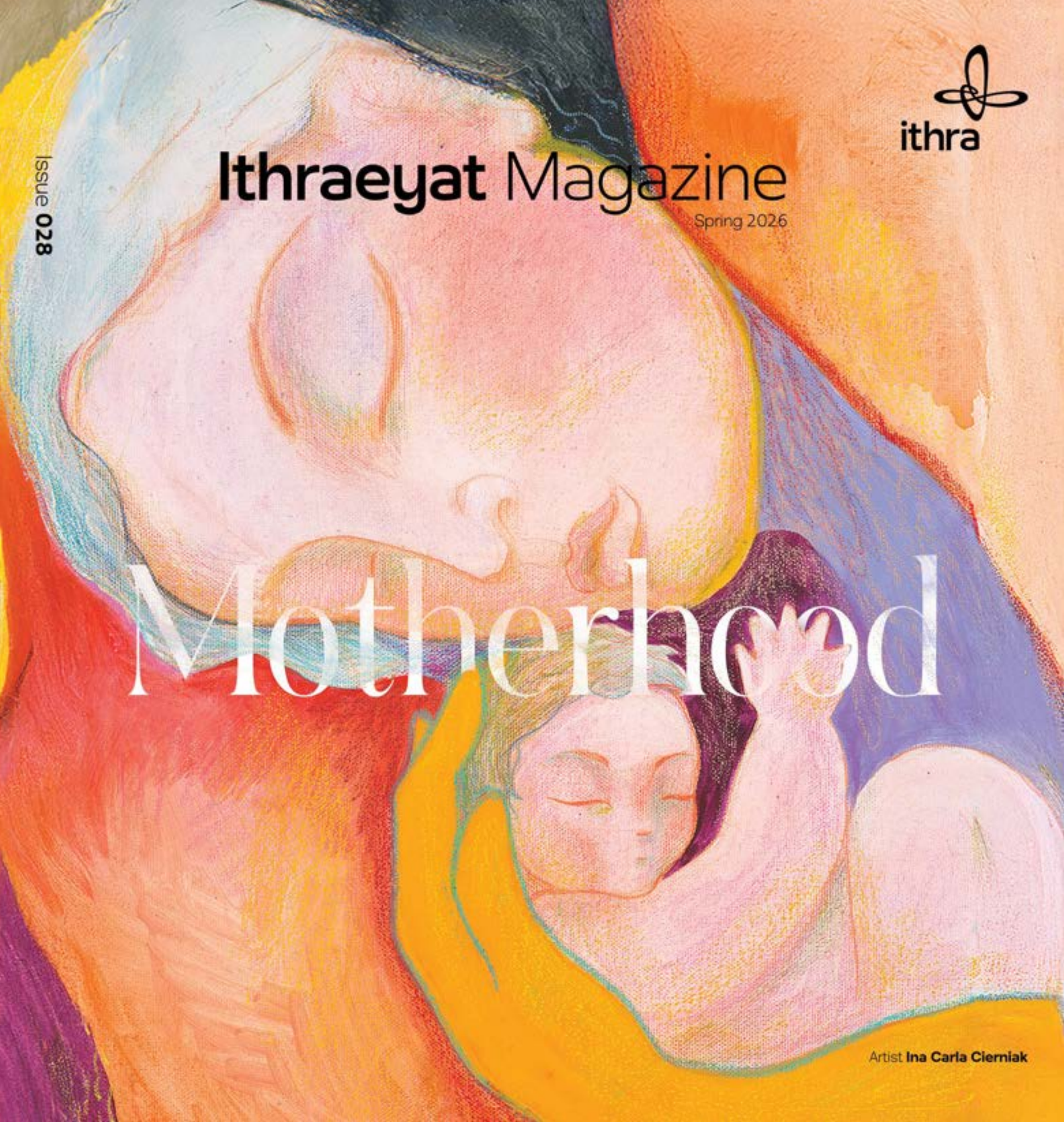
ithra
Ithraeyat Magazine
Spring 2026
Issue 028
Motherhood
Artist Ina Carla Cierniak

Welcome to **Ithraeyat**, a seasonal cultural magazine produced by The King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra). Created to **inspire** hearts and **enrich** minds, this Saudi-inspired platform with an expansive international outlook captures the art scene and the culture of art by bringing together a mosaic of stories collected from across the Kingdom, the region and beyond.

Behind the scenes:
Ithraeyat is the plural of Ithra (enrichment).
Magazine has its origins in the Arabic word makhzan, a storehouse. And therefore, Ithraeyat Magazine is a storehouse of unique, enriching stories.

'Mother and child drowsing at midday,' by Ina Carla Cierniak. Acrylic, colored pencil, canvas. 30 x 40 x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

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Letter from the Editor:

A Letter to Mother – What Would You Write to Yours?

By **Rym Al-Ghazal**

"All houses are dark until the mother wakes up."

It is widely widely attributed to the writer and poet Kahlil Gibran, whose poignant observation captures that first, essential light: the warmth of a mother.

For me, that same light was my first and most profound teacher in the art of storytelling. Before I ever set foot in a war zone, tracked down a rare species through a sacred forest, or sat inside a desert tent to record the oral histories of tribal elders, I was first an apprentice to a great mentor, my mother.

In a home where the disciplined genius of German composer Johann Sebastian Bach — a part of our lineage — would fill the air with timeless music, along with the distinct floral scent of freshly-cut flowers from a lush garden thriving in a desert, mother would regularly conduct a quieter symphony of creation and compassion for us, the family.

"Even the spider who visits us, has a story," she would say, as she welcomed yet another creature into our home.

‘Mother and child within the poppy flower field,’ by Ina Carla Cierniak. 2025. Canvas, acrylic and oil pastels. 70 x 75 x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

'Mother and child in serenity,' by Ina Carla Cierniak. Acrylic, canvas. 100 x 120 x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Taking my small hand in hers, we drew a multilayered masterpiece: an entire, sprawling amusement park that hung on our wall for years. It was a world she envisioned, but insisted I help build with my own colors, some of which made no sense (such as a pink sky).

And as our family grew, so did the park. With each new family member, we would together add another child to the scene; the landscape expanding joyfully to hold us all.

That evolving mural was my first lesson in what I now call "archival storytelling"—a living document, a collective memory, a piece of art that grows to include everyone and preserves a family's history and its many stories in real time.

This, to me, is the heart of the nurturing principle we explore in this issue that is not just dedicated to mothers, but fathers as well, family members and friends, and even the pets that are there for us and being "motherly" in their own ways.

That "mother light" is not just a title, but a tender, potent force found wherever love chooses to tend, to mend and to awaken beauty and kindness in another. It is the same force that compels us to protect the forgotten, the weaker and the abandoned.

In these pages, we celebrate that wakeful, creative nurturing spirit in all its forms. Discover the diverse ways artists and creatives celebrate the universal theme of "Motherhood."

So as you explore the pages, may you find echoes here of your own first mentor, first teacher, or artist—the one who turned on the light, and taught you how to paint with it.

With gratitude, thank you mother for always being that guiding light, in the darkest of hours, and even with the sun fully shining.

Hope you enjoy our latest collection of enriching stories, and may it inspire you to think about what letter you would write to your mother – perhaps one that is long overdue.

With Appreciation and Respect,

Rym Al-Ghazal
Editor-in-Chief

Cover **Artist:**

Where Motherhood Meets the Canvas

By **the Ithraeyat Editorial Team**

Hamburg-based artist Ina Carla Cierniak creates paintings that radiate peace and joy. Her colorful and expressive canvases burst with feminine energy and layers of vibrant hues, inviting us to embrace life's positivity.

'Mother and child drowsing at midday,' by Ina Carla Cierniak. Acrylic, colored pencil, canvas. 30 x 40 x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

‘Eden,’ by Ina Carla Cierniak. Acrylic, canvas. 120 x 130 x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

“The unconditional love that came with motherhood is indescribable. A kind of connection that I didn’t know before.”

— Ina Carla Cierniak

Hamburg-based artist Ina Carla Cierniak creates paintings that radiate peace and joy. Her colorful and expressive canvases burst with feminine energy and layers of vibrant hues, inviting us to embrace life’s positivity.

She employs a distinctive technique that creates delicate watercolor effects, highlighted with opaque colors. “When I paint, I feel like I’m looking for treasure,” she explains. “Instead of digging deeper and deeper, I layer layer upon layer of colors on top of each other.”

Born in 1980 in Germany, Cierniak grew up surrounded by nature’s beauty, and with an early enthusiasm for painting. As a teen, she joined the flourishing Heidelberg graffiti scene, discovering her passion for large-scale and bold formats.
Eventually she studied fashion design and worked as a make-up artist for more than 15 years, but she finally followed her heart in 2020, devoting herself to painting full time.

Join us for an exclusive interview with this talented artist, as she shares her journey with art and motherhood and how they intertwine to make something uniquely beautiful.

'Night Breezes Seem to Whisper I Love You,' by Ina Carla Cierniak. Acrylic, canvas. Size 89 x 95 x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Q1.

What does "motherhood" mean to you?

For me, motherhood is a journey. The unconditional love that came with motherhood is indescribable. A kind of connection that I didn't know before. I am very grateful that I was able to become a mother and I also believe that I draw a lot from it for my art.

However, it is as simple as: the basic need is love and compassion. I need both as a mother and as an artist at the same time. It is what we all need most as a human to be able to live in peace with one another here on this beautiful planet.

Q2.

Tell us about your journey with art.

When I look back and realize that art has always been with me in one form or another, has always surrounded me, then I realize that I just had to get into making art. One of my first memories of art is from my early childhood. My mother painted the most beautiful pictures in my eyes. Simply free, abstract or even small drawings like in children's books. It seemed to me that she could paint just about anything. That really impressed me and stayed with me.

I kept meeting people from the art scene that I admired. But my career remained a dream that I didn't take seriously. Actually, I've always painted for myself in the background, but it took until 2020 for me to dare to show my art. Initially only online via Instagram and my homepage. Since then, there has been no standing still.

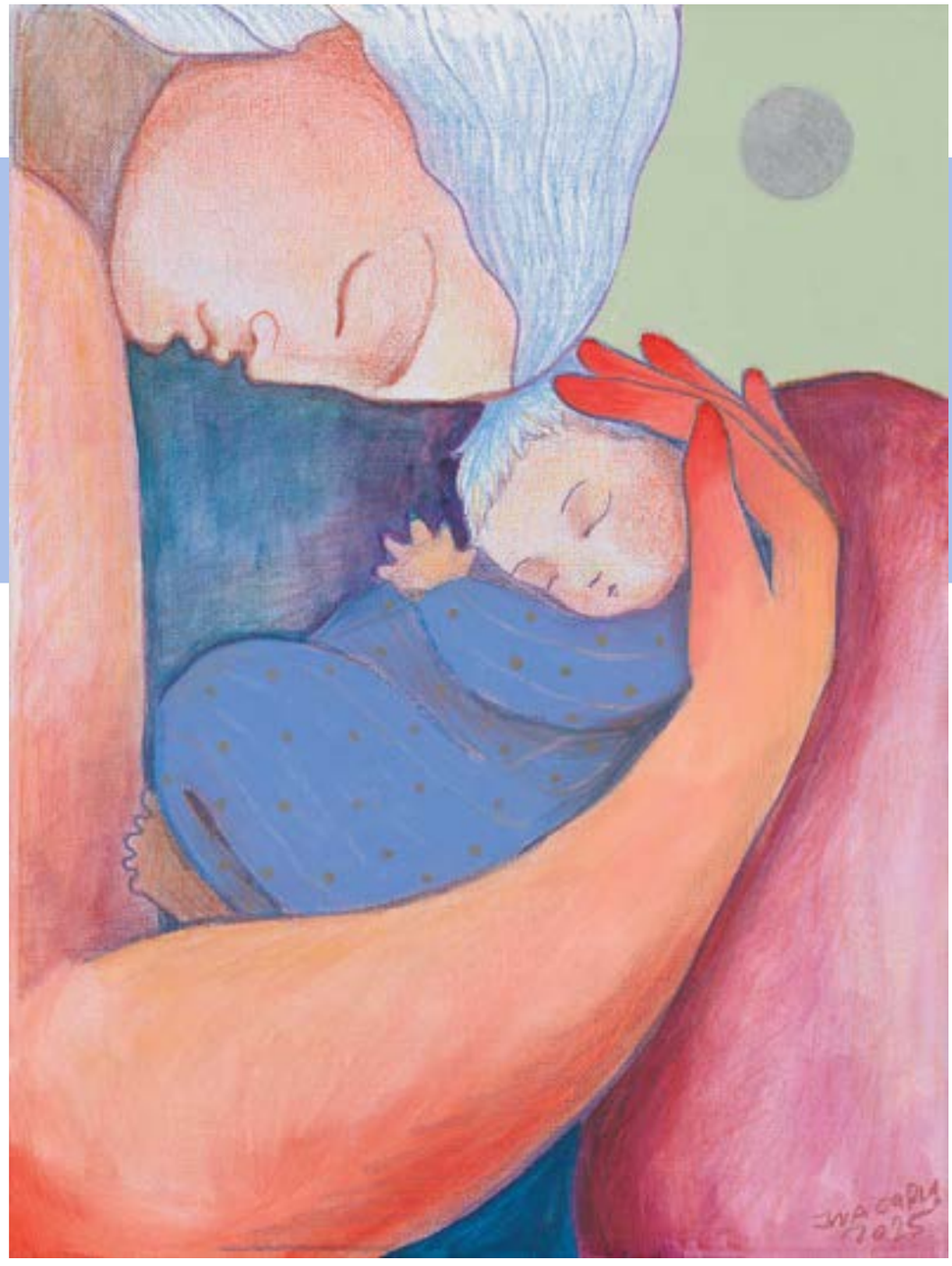
'Mother and Child at Noon,' by Ina Carla Cierniak. Acrylic, canvas. 30 x 40 x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Q3.
What does art mean to you?

Art has accompanied me throughout my life, but I believe that I am only now beginning to understand it. When I immerse myself in my studio and completely get into the flow of intuitively painting, the world suddenly seems so simple, so loving and united.
It feels like a big hug, a warm blanket. A place where I want to be.

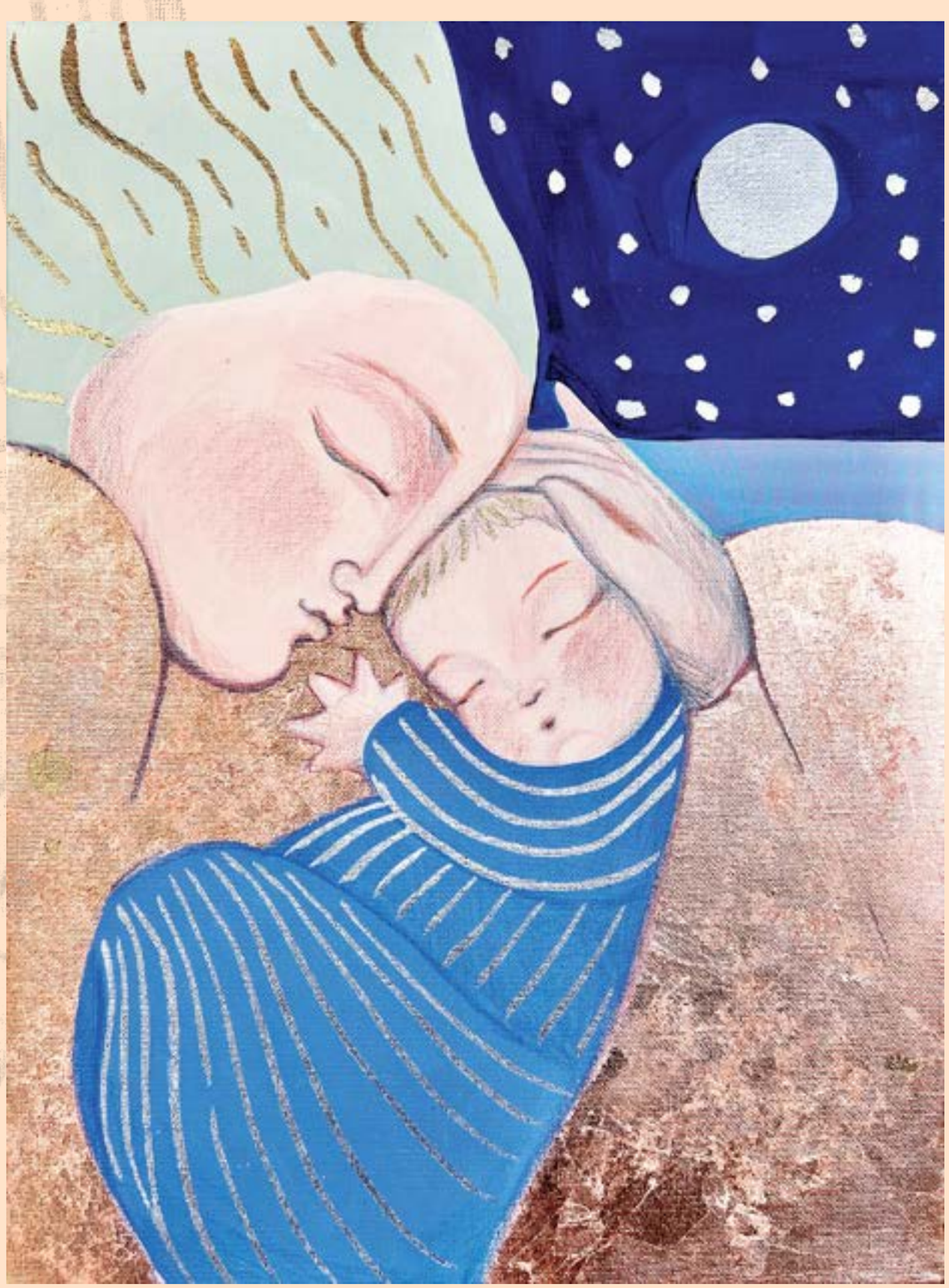
Truly, each piece inspires peace in their viewers, and takes us all on a journey of love, tenderness, whether it be present, past or the future.

Enjoy the rest of Ina's art here.



'Mother and Child Underneath the Full Moon,' by Ina Carla Cierniak. Acrylic, oil pastel, colored pencil, metallic marker, canvas. 30 x 40 x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

‘Mother and child are snoozing at noon,’ by Ina Carla Cierniak. Acrylic, oil pastel, colored pencil, metallic marker, canvas. 30 x 40 x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



'Receiving Love,' by Ina Carla Cierniak. Acrylic, colored pencil, gold leaf, canvas. 30 x 40 x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

'Mother and child dreaming of angel wings,' by Ina Carla Cierniak. Acrylic, oil pastels, canvas. 30 x 40 x 2 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Motherhood Across Borders

By **Layla Alzahid**

Motherhood is an important chapter in all our lives. It is a story of life, and has a great lasting impact on all those who have mothers have been mothers and have lost mothers.

At Kutubna Cultural Center's new Motherhood Exhibition, we explore how motherhood can be told through different colors, formats and emotions. We met with Nora Qudah, one of the Center's curators, and interviewed her about the amazing art on display.

'Sanctuary,' by Klaithem Aljabri. Acrylic and gold leaf on canvas. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

Q1.

What is the main idea behind this exhibition?

The idea of the exhibition is to celebrate motherhood globally through carefully selected artworks, highlighting the remarkable range of talent among contemporary artists and photographers. In this exhibition Kutubna Cultural Center presents over 50 works by 28 artists and photographers from 17 countries: Albania, Bahrain, Belarus, the United Kingdom, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, France, India, Jordan, Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Poland, Russia, Tanzania and Ukraine.

‘Mother and Child,’ by Nasta Martyn. Ink on paper. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

Q2.

What do you hope people will get from this exhibition?

The exhibition revolves around themes of deeply personal and unique experiences of motherhood as well as universal emotions and shared understandings. As a curator, I like to see the connections that arise between people who visit this exhibition as they view these works. I hope it encourages visitors to ask questions and learn more about other cultures when they see the colorful traditional outfits or practices some mothers pass to their children. I also hope that this exhibition highlights the challenges mothers face as they strive to protect and provide for their children.

‘Mother and Her Baby (The Theatre Of Life Series),’ by John Parkes Railton. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

Q3.

What is motherhood to you?

Motherhood is the miracle of truly loving a person unconditionally and with devotion. It is the drive to protect and guide, a commitment that gives life meaning and purpose. Motherhood motivates me to improve myself so I can positively influence my children and contribute to a better world. This instinct extends beyond just biological connections, it is shaped by the drive to nurture and care for a child, which forms an important part of a mother's sense of self, and this is what leads some women to adopt when they are unable to have children of their own. This nurturing bond isn't exclusive to humans; I believe it exists in all living beings.

'Untitled,' Photo by Alia bent Sultan. Giclee print. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

Q4.

What surprised you about the art?

I was amazed by the diverse interpretations and variety of mediums, approaches and visual languages that artists and photographers presented of the theme of motherhood. Additionally, I found it remarkable how enthusiastically this theme was received, with such excitement not only in Dubai, but also among international artists.

‘In Her Arms,’ by Paresh Janardan Thukrul. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

'Roots of Love,' by Onuoha Columbus. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

Q5.

How does motherhood change across cultures?

Motherhood shares fundamental similarities across cultures. However, in certain cultures the role can be carried out by different family members. The responsibilities of motherhood may be undertaken by grandmothers or, at times, by elder sisters if the age gap is big.

Q6.

Tell us more about Kutubna Cultural Center.

Kutubna Cultural Center was established in 2023 as an independent bookstore, literary hub and art venue for Dubai and the Gulf region. Kutubna offers an inclusive community space to enjoy books, art, specialty coffee and cultural events. Kutubna's vision is to become a premier destination for literary and cultural enrichment in Dubai and the Gulf region.

Kutubna celebrates the accomplishments of Khaleeji, Arab, Middle Eastern, North African and Muslim writers, poets, thinkers, artists and researchers. We amplify these essential voices through lectures, readings, guided conversations, workshops and other activities for people of all ages. Kutubna strives to make creative and scholarly pursuits accessible to people who are traditionally at the margins. We work especially hard to make cultural events easier for mothers with young children to attend.

Since the opening of Kutubna's art galleries in August 2024, the center has hosted eight exhibitions. Works exhibited included paintings by Farid Aouad, Amine El Bacha, Saliba Douaihy, Farghali Abdel Hafez, Faek Hassan, Shaker Hassan, Paul Guiragossian, Saad El Khadem, Michel El Mir, Fateh Al Moudarres, Abdel Kader Al-Rassam, Georges Sabbagh, Najat Makki, Khaled Ben Slimane, Ali Hassan, Ismail Fattah, Khaled Al Jader, Louay Kayali and Salah Taher.

Q7.

Anything else you would like to add or highlight?

It is important to note that this exhibition was made possible by the support and vision of our founder, Dr. Shatha Almutwa, who is also a mother of two. I felt truly honored when Dr. Shatha invited me to curate this special exhibition.

My journey with Kutubna began in May 2024, when I participated in the Mothers/Work program led by Dr. Shatha to support mothers who want to join the workforce. I had the opportunity to share both my challenges and ambitions openly. Soon after, I started working at Kutubna as an art instructor and curator, and supporting the center in various other roles. I consider myself fortunate to work in a field I am passionate about while still having the flexibility to spend time with my children.

To explore and enjoy rest of the art and photography, please visit the website: www.kutubna.ae.

Please enjoy more of motherhood art and photography here.

'A Mother's Shadow Never Fades,' Photo by Mohammed Buhasan. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

‘In Her Arms,’ by Anxhela El Ahmadieh. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

‘Braiding Time,’ by Anna Grosheva. Inkjet on Epson-enhanced matte photo paper. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

‘Mother’s Love,’ by Karin Stumpf. watercolor on paper. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

‘Embrace,’ by Komaldeep Makkar. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

'In Her Arms,' by Anna Grosheva. Inkjet print on Epson-enhanced matte photo paper. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

'In Her Arms,' by Ibrahim Nagi. Photographic matte print. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

'Mum,' by Latifa Ahli. Pastel on paper. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

'A Mother's Shadow Never Fades,' by Mohammed Buhasan. Photographic print. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

'The Final Embrace,' by Malak Yasser Saleem Dalloul. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

▲ ‘Abundance,’ by Rima Wehbi. Photographic print. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

‘She Mirrors Me,’ by Zaheda Muntazir. Giclee print. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

‘Family Flow (Mom, Dad, The Girl and The Boy)’ by Renata Athanasio. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

‘Mother Earth, The Pale Blue Dot,’ by Mona Biswarupa Mohanty. Mixed media-soil. Ink and acrylic on cotton canvas. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

‘Intertwind Forms (Series 1),’ by Shrutika Gosavi. Mixed media and ink on paper. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

‘Intertwined Forms (Series 2),’ by Shrutika Gosavi. Mixed media and ink on paper. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

‘Cradle of Love,’ by Tumpa Banerjee. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

‘Safety,’ by Maha Abdelmaged. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

‘Dream,’ by Wafa Khazendar. Mixed media on canvas. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

‘Golden Hour,’ by Nisreen Mounib Shawwa. Mixed media on canvas. Courtesy of Kutubna Cultural Center.

Spot**light:**

Inside Our Mother's Kitchen

By **Rym Al-Ghazal**

"The child who has never traveled thinks their mother is the best cook,"

— says an old proverb

Well, as someone who has traveled, I can still say that my mother's cooking is the best — or special at any rate. More so, I think we all travel back in time whenever we bite into a dish made by the loving hands of a parent.

The recipe of that "special" dish, if it even exists, invariably always has vague measurements—"a handful of this," "a pinch of that, until it feels right." The saucepan is the same one mother used for decades, its bottom slightly warped and its edges cracked.

And yet, when that oh-so-familiar and magical aroma begins to waft throughout the house, it no longer feels like dinner is being prepared, but rather summoned.

No matter how old one gets, it takes a childhood dish prepared by a parent to bring back fond and tasty memories of a time when we shared a meal with loved ones and ate without concern for our weight or figure or how much time we spent eating at the table.

We often fail to recreate the recipe of that special dish (potato salad with pickles in my case) as there is always something missing; that special magic ingredient only a loving parent knows to add. Almost like an alchemist in the kitchen, they add some unmeasurable 'dash' of love that makes all the difference.

During special occasions, children in the Middle East would be treated with either a slew of sugary sweets, such as bowls of jelly and creme caramel, lop-sided birthday cakes, cookies or hot chocolate; or perhaps a favorite pasta with that thick white sauce (Béchamel) that got sticky and hard, gloriously lumpy mashed potatoes, over-cheesed pizza, or stews that suspiciously looked like a mix of yesterday's leftovers.

Nothing beats the 'Everything Is Okay' Soup, which varies from house to house: chicken noodle, vegetable pasta, peas and carrots, and everything in between. It is never about the illness it is meant to cure, but the comforting scent, the sound of the spoon gently clinking against the bowl as your parent stirs and blows on it, and the unforgettable salty taste of the dish.

I personally would kidnap those fresh potato Perogies (traditional slavic dumplings), stuff them in my pocket and escape to my room before anyone discovered that out of the 15 pieces, five were missing.

‘Mosaic Floor Panel Depicting an Almond Cake.’ Roman, 100 CE–200 CE. Roman houses were frequently adorned with wall paintings and floor mosaics depicting food to convey to visitors about the owner’s wealth and hospitality, as well as about the quantity and variety of goods available in the house. Stone, mortar. 27 x 27 x 6.4 cm. Credit Line: Gift of Lynn Hauser and Neil Ross. Source: The Art Institute of Chicago.

‘Toy Kitchen.’ 1830–80. Possibly made in Germany or the United States. Wood, metal, ceramics. 43.2 x 73.7 x 35.2 cm. Credit: The Sylmaris Collection, Gift of George Coe Graves. 1930. Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

So, what is that special dish you associate with home?

Not all have been privileged to have a loving parent stand at that stove, cooking, tasting, adding seasoning, adjusting, all with you in mind. That care is the rarest, most nourishing ingredient of all.

So, we chase these tastes for the rest of our lives. We try to replicate them and find, frustratingly, that our own attempts, even with the same ingredients, lack that specific magic.

The secret, we eventually realize, was not in the pot. It was in the person holding the spoon.

From the **Field** - Community

Artistic Expressions: A Presence Felt and Retold

By **the Ithraeyat Editorial Team**

Motherhood is more than a biological bond or the act of giving birth. It reaches into many forms of care, protection and quiet generosity. We see this clearly in nature, where nurturing seems woven into the fabric of the planet itself, a life-giving system that helps living beings survive, grow and evolve.

That is why mothers, and the idea of motherhood, hold such a strong presence in the arts, especially in visual expression. Some artists portray their mothers to preserve their memory or to soften the pain of absence. Others see in the mother a symbol of unconditional giving and protection, a language through which they express love, identity and a longing for comfort. For many, art becomes a space to reflect on the mother-child bond itself, exploring its layers, its intimacy and its quiet complexities.

In art, the mother moves from being a person we see and touch to becoming a lasting trace. In this article, we explore how motherhood shows up in art, often in small, gentle details where her caring presence still quietly lives.

Marija Stefanović

The Prague-based artist Marija Stefanović creates paintings filled with softness and comforting, nostalgic imagery that capture the warmth and life-giving spirit at the heart of her art.

When asked about her concept of motherhood, Marija shared her thoughts: **“I see motherhood as a fundamental natural cycle, the creation of new life, and the woman as its essential conduit. When I paint scenes of motherhood I’m thinking not only of a mother and child, but of this larger, universal process unfolding in nature.”**

Speaking about what art means in her life, she said: “For me, art is a kind of bridge between myself and the world around me, between myself and society. Art gives me a voice and the opportunity not only to express myself, but also to be heard, to receive a response and feedback from people all over the world. In other words, it is simultaneously a way to speak and a way to be heard, which is very important for a creative person.”

Marija has always wanted to be an artist whose work evokes warmth, kindness and hope, qualities she believes are deeply needed in today’s world.

She simply paints in a way that feels true to her aesthetic vision and emotions, working with gouache and watercolor on paper. Her wish is that when people look at her art, they glimpse the kind of world we all long to live in: beautiful, safe, comforting and nurturing.

Discover Marija's concept of motherhood through the following paintings.

▲ 'Starry Night,' by Marija Stefanović. Courtesy of the artist.

'Innocence,' by Marija Stefanović. Courtesy of the artist.

‘Pies are for Sharing,’ by Marija Stefanović. Courtesy of the artist.

‘Apple Harvest,’ by Marija Stefanović. Courtesy of the artist.

‘Illustration of Little Women by Louisa May Alcott,’ by Marija Stefanović. Courtesy of the artist.

'The Warmth of Mother's Hands,' by Marija Stefanović. Courtesy of the artist.

Rahaf AlShehri

“Giving is an effort that may succeed, and sometimes it may fail.”

— Artist Rahaf AlShehri

In her work, Saudi artist Rahaf AlShehri looks at motherhood in a very human way. The mother in her paintings is not flawless or heroic in a grand sense, she is simply someone who keeps trying. She loves, she gives and she learns. Sometimes she succeeds, and sometimes she falls short. Her giving may feel incomplete, whether to herself or to the child who sees it from the other side.

In Rahaf’s paintings, the mother is always in motion, reaching, caring and searching for better ways. She carries a small light, as if holding a torch she lit with her own hands, hoping it will make the road clearer. That light can feel like a symbol of the quiet sacrifices mothers make, giving warmth and guidance even when they are tired.

Motherhood is not about being perfect; it is about continuing, about showing up, about trying again and about the everlasting mark that effort leaves behind.

‘Shortsighted Giving,’ by artist Rahaf AlShehri. 2023. Mixed media on canvas, 180 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

'Giving to the Point of Sacrifice,' by artist Rahaf AlShehri. 2022. Mixed media on canvas, 180 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Guest **Columnist:**

Motherhood and Beyond

By **Shirin Abu al-Naja**

"To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of the rainbow."

— Maya Angelou, from her book 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings'

A clear question about motherhood can only be asked through a conscious act that rests on the belief, perhaps an illusory one, that a final, certain answer exists; an answer that places itself above all the questions that refuse to be resolved. Perhaps the only certainty we can hold onto, as we set out on one journey or many to think through motherhood, is this: that there has long been a vested interest in shaping a single, controlled image of the mother, an image that literature and art have returned to, and continues to return to, across time.

Across the 14 chapters of my book 'Womb of the World: Transnational Motherhood,' the texts I explore show that there is no single version of the mother. Mothers are many, and even this difference resists neat definition. Motherhood, understood as an action, a role and a lived practice, does not exist in isolation. It is shaped, willingly or under pressure, by the relationships and circumstances that surround it.

Those who view motherhood as an instinct strongly reject this idea. Instead, they frame motherhood as something rooted in universal laws, moral values and social traditions, presenting it as an innate force embedded in women's inner lives.

What stands out, however, is how quickly feminist perspectives are dismissed by this group and others like them. Feminist analysis is often portrayed as something imported from the white Global North, imposed on women in the Global South and disconnected from their social realities. This objection rests on a flawed assumption: that feminist thinking always comes from elsewhere.

This is where intersectional analysis becomes especially important, as it considers how different social, cultural and economic factors shape power and lived experience. While intersectional feminist approaches can be flexible and inclusive, motherhood seems to trigger a breaking point. The mother is almost always blamed, whether for not fulfilling her role properly, for challenging rigid expectations, or for failing to balance paid work (seen as secondary) with raising children (treated as the ultimate responsibility).

‘At the Seashore,’ by Anna Bilińska-Bohdanowicz. 1886. Oil on cardboard. Public domain.

Meanwhile, the father largely disappears from the picture, as if children arrive into the world without him. And when fathers do appear in literary scenes, they are often portrayed as violent, threatening or marginal figures. When a father is present in a caring or active way, it is usually treated as an exception rather than the norm.

Framed by the tension between norm and exception, I am deeply preoccupied with the figure of the patriarchal mother, the mother who stands guard at the gates of the system, ensuring its continuity and reproducing it in her sons and daughters alike. In a striking way, Gabriel García Márquez manages to paint this model in his work "Big Mama's Funeral," where the matriarch rules the kingdom of Macondo for 92 years. As her death approaches, we are told that 'she needed three hours to list everything she owned in this world.'

Through Big Mama, Márquez condenses metaphor into a powerful image: the mother shifts from a body and an individual into an authoritarian patriarchal symbol.

In her actions and in her language, she embodies a model of motherhood that exercises control and domination. These repressive maternal practices draw their legitimacy from the long span of time over which they operate, becoming deeply rooted in the collective mind. This is precisely how dominant narratives of motherhood gain their authority and endurance, so firmly embedded that any alternative or opposing narrative is easily dismissed or rejected.

Reading the mother or the daughter's forms across culturally diverse texts and literary genres opens a window onto the different systems through which motherhood is shaped in various societies. These systems define the mother's role, the patterns of her relationship with her children and the influence of the wider community on how these relationships are formed and sustained.

From outside the literary or artistic text, cultural differences may appear pronounced, each society seeming distinct and self-contained. Yet this view only scratches the surface.

Beneath these differences, the texts reveal shared threads that bind cultures together—threads that reinforce the idea of motherhood as inseparable from women's identity. They show how women are encouraged to find meaning and fulfillment in this role, to the extent that any departure from the culturally sanctioned model of motherhood is treated as an anomaly, pushed to the margins as an exception. But if all alternative practices of motherhood in literature are dismissed as mere exceptions, a crucial question arises: what, then, is the dominant model endorsed by culture? Whose experience defines it? And which experiences are rendered invisible in the process?

These questions are less about finding final answers than about opening the door to more questions. Why do societies feel the need to fix motherhood into a single, rigid form? And what happens to the deep differences between women's lived experiences—differences shaped by place, history, psychological time, class, education, and social and political conditions? From this understanding, it becomes clear how gender is narrowed into a closed circle, with women's roles defined primarily through their place within the family. When we take these causes seriously, motherhood emerges as a deeply personal experience, one that is shaped by difference and cannot be reduced to a single form. Yet civil and religious laws often turn motherhood into an institutional practice, governed by rules rather than lived realities.

From here, we can begin to understand the pressures faced by mothers who do not conform to dominant expectations, and the tension between a society that enforces fixed ideas of motherhood and individuals who attempt to step outside those fixed paths.

‘A Mother and Child in an Interior,’ by Peter Vilhelm Ilsted. 1898. Oil on canvas. Public Domain.

Special **Feature:**

Picasso, Napoleon and Faten Hamama — *Great Letters to Mothers*

By **Gaida Almogren**

The mother is always the first audience.

Before their words circulated in courts, studios or lecture halls, many of the people we now associate with authority and innovation were writing to one reader alone: their mother.

Writing to a mother alters tone. It narrows the distance between ambition and uncertainty. The reader is not abstract, and she cannot be impressed easily. She remembers the writer before the work, before the posture, before the argument learned how to stand on its own. That history presses quietly against every sentence.

Sigmund Freud's correspondence with his mother reflects this shift. The man who would later insist on detachment and analysis signs his letters with the childhood name she preferred. He reports his successes carefully and his failures more openly than he ever would in print. The letters don't contradict his theories; they complicate them.

Albert Einstein's letters to his mother, Pauline, carry a similar tension. They are filled with ordinary worries: money, employment and health. He explains his decisions patiently, sometimes defensively, as if brilliance alone were not enough to justify risk. The figure we now associate with intellectual certainty sounds, in these letters, tentative and practical. Genius appears not as confidence, but as persistence under scrutiny from someone whose approval mattered long before the world's did.

Franz Kafka's letters to his mother are more restrained than his famous confrontation with his father, but no less revealing. He clarifies himself to her, attempting to make his inner life legible. He writes as someone aware that she stands between him and a household structure he finds unbearable. These letters are careful, almost apologetic. Kafka does not present himself as a writer of consequence, but as a son trying to justify a way of being that refuses robustness.

Virginia Woolf's relationship to maternal address is more complex. Her mother died early, yet Woolf continued to write toward her indirectly through memory, essays and fiction. Rather than idealizing motherhood, Woolf examined its weight, how it shapes women's silences as much as their care. Her engagement with maternal absence became a method for thinking rigorously about inheritance, obligation and intellectual freedom.

Power reshapes itself differently in political figures, but it does not disappear. **Napoleon Bonaparte's letters to his mother, Letizia, are notably unadorned. He discusses money, logistics and family matters.** There is little attempt at grandeur. Letizia had little patience for excess, and Napoleon seems to adjust accordingly. The correspondence suggests that his public theatricality was learned elsewhere; with his mother, efficiency mattered more than spectacle.

Artists often allow themselves more emotional exposure. Pablo Picasso's letters to his mother shift over time, from early assertions of certainty to later expressions of doubt and distance. His confidence reads less like arrogance than insistence, an effort to convince someone whose belief preceded evidence. Even as his reputation grew, he continued to explain himself to her, as though success required translation.

'The Mother,' by Pablo Picasso. 1901. Oil on cardboard mounted on a panel. Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

This maternal audience is not confined to Western correspondence. In Arab cultural memory, it appears through memoir, testimony and literary address, often without the formal structure of letters but with equal intimacy and authority.

The Egyptian actress Faten Hamama addressed her mother repeatedly in reflective passages that function as intimate letters. Though not a literary letter-writer in the conventional sense, Hamama spoke to her mother directly in tone and intent, particularly in her later memoirs and interviews. Her mother was not only emotional support but an ethical anchor.

She addresses her mother with unembellished clarity: **"My mother, you taught me that fame means nothing if one loses respect for oneself. You watched my steps in silence, gave me the freedom to choose, yet you were always the compass that never failed."** Elsewhere, she admits: "When I stood before the camera, I was never afraid of failure, because I knew there was a mother who would hold me if I fell." To her, success is framed not as achievement, but as permission, granted quietly by maternal trust.

A more literal form of maternal address appears in the letters of Gibran Kahlil Gibran, written to his mother, Kamila Rahmeh, during his years in exile in the United States.

These letters, later published among his correspondences, reveal a voice stripped of prophetic distance. To Gibran, the mother was homeland, memory and moral refuge.

He writes without disguise: **"My beloved mother, I am still a child when I write to you, even as gray hair visits my head. I am not ashamed of my weakness before you, for only you understand that strength is born of tenderness."** In another letter, he confesses: "Mother, if you knew how many times your voice saved me from loneliness, how often your image was stronger than this harsh world." These letters do not seek admiration; they seek survival.

Taken together, these letters show how even the most commanding voices are adjusted when the listener is someone who remembers the writer before competence hardened into authority.

Reading them now does not make these figures smaller. It makes the process of becoming visible. The mother remains present as a constant, difficult to persuade, impossible to escape, and deeply woven into the way a voice first learns how to sound honest.

Spot**light:**

Melodies of Peace

By **the Ithraeyat Editorial Team**

Wherever night falls and darkness settles in, you can be sure to find mothers humming lullabies to their children. After a long day, a gentle melody carried in a warm voice is often all a mother and child need.

Lullabies are more than simple songs passed down from one generation to the next. They create a deep, wordless connection. Long before a child falls asleep, the melody itself becomes a source of comfort and safety.

Some lullabies are old and familiar, while others are made up in the moment, shaped by love and instinct.

Even when she is exhausted, a mother somehow finds the tenderness to sing. She chooses her words gently, and little by little, the child relaxes, listening to the rhythm of her voice, until sleep quietly carries them away.

In a previous issue, Ithraeyat had published an Arabic article on lullabies, **Songs of Tenderness**. In this issue, we continue our journey by exploring lullabies from around the world.

Despite differences in language and accent, lullabies share striking similarities across cultures. Many speak of the stars and the moon and offer gentle blessings to protect the child. But, some lullabies take a different tone. This Russian lullaby, for example, weaves in elements of fear and warning, revealing another emotional layer within this universal tradition.

Hush-a-bye, hush-a-bye,
don't lie on the edge.
A little gray wolf will come,
he'll grab you by the side
and drag you to the forest,
under the willow bush.
Hush-a-bye, hush-a-bye,
you, little child, fall asleep.

'Mother and Child,' by Christian Krohg. 1883. Courtesy of National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.

Meanwhile, this Chinese lullaby feels much gentler, softly soothing the child and wrapping them in reassurance.

The moon is bright, the wind is quiet,
The tree leaves hang over the window.
My little baby, go to sleep quickly,
Sleep, dreaming sweet dreams.
The moon is bright, the wind is quiet,
The cradle moves softly.
My little one, close your eyes,
Sleep, sleep, dreaming sweet dreams.

Next, we explore an Italian lullaby, whose gradual, flowing rhythm brings to mind our local chant "Doha Ya Doha," in the way the words rise and layer softly.

Lullaby, lullaby, to whom shall I give this baby?
I'll give him to the boogeyman who'll keep him a whole year.
I'll give him to the Befana who'll keep him a week.
I'll give him to the ox and donkey who'll make him pitiful.
Lullaby, lullaby, to whom shall I give this baby?

And of course, we can't forget the beloved Arabic song by Mohammed Fawzi which many have turned it into a lullaby. Sung in the Egyptian dialect, it carries a simple, joyful warmth that makes it feel close to the heart.

Mama is coming soon
she will be coming very soon
bringing toys and stuff.
Bringing with her a bag
which holds a goose and a duck
saying: 'quack quack quack'

In the end, no matter how different the words may be, lullabies are the first sweet melody we ever hear. They stay with us, quietly living in our hearts, until one day we find ourselves singing them again to the next generation.

'Lullaby,' by Alvar Cawén. 1921. Courtesy of The Finnish National Gallery.

Special **Feature:**

How Artists Painted Their Mothers

By **Farah Al-Ibrahim**

Across art history, the figure of the mother appears in the work of major artists as both a personal presence and a deeply human subject.

From Vincent van Gogh's longing for his distant mother and Picasso's restrained but realistic portrayals, to Dalí's transformation of loss into surreal symbolism and Lucian Freud's lifelong engagement with painting his mother, these narratives are bound by a shared question: how artists represent their mothers, not as literal likenesses, but as figures shaped by memory, emotion and lived experience.

'Madame Roulin and Her Baby,' by Vincent van Gogh. 1888. Source: the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Van Gogh's Mother as he Saw her

'Photo of Anna van Gogh Carbentus (mother of Vincent van Gogh).' Source: Wikimedia Commons.

In the autumn of 1888, in Arles, Van Gogh received from his sister a faded photograph of his mother Anna in the Netherlands. The grayness of the photograph disturbed him, and he wrote to his brother Theo that he could not stand its coldness and that he wanted to paint her as his memory preserved her, in colors rather than rigid gray tones.

The painting Portrait of the Artist's Mother was created from this desire. Not a polite keepsake, but a face immersed in sharp yellows, greens and reds, as if the color itself exposes the distance between an anxious son and a conservative, devout mother who always felt his life and choices conflicted with what she wanted for the family.

'Portrait of the Artist's Mother,' by Van Gogh. 1888. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Behind this painting lies a longer history shaped by a complex and often tense relationship. Anna, the wife of a pastor and the daughter of the royal bookbinder, believed deeply in discipline, order and what she understood as a "proper" life. Vincent, by contrast, rebelled against these values in both thought and action, confiding to his brother Theo: "Pa cannot empathize or sympathize with me, and I cannot settle into Pa and Ma's routine; it is too constricting—it would suffocate me."

Yet within the limits of her own world, Anna remained a supportive mother. She painted flowers and plants in watercolor, filled notebooks with careful studies and shared with her son an early attentiveness to nature. The portrait brings these tensions into a single image: a mother who outwardly embodies the values of the religious middle class, rendered in restless colors that bear the imprint of a bond suspended between love and disappointment, intimacy and distance.

Picasso's Mother in a Realistic Image

In Picasso's early life, his mother was the most stable presence. María Picasso López had trust in his talent, encouraged his father to support him, and believed that he would live from his art. She was a source of early confidence in his abilities, more than a traditional domestic figure. Emotionally attached to her in childhood, at the age of 15 he painted her in a calm, realistic portrait: a seated mother in a fixed pose, with exact features, soft lighting and academic structure.

▲ 'Portrait of the Artist's Mother,' by Pablo Picasso. 1896. Source: Picasso Museum Barcelona.

Decades later, in 1923, he painted her in an oil portrait as an elderly woman, shown in profile with gray hair and a simplified classical style that combines dignity with a quiet presence. Between the works, María remains outside his Cubist adventures. In a way it was as if Picasso chose to preserve her image in his memory and paintings within a realism untouched by fragmentation.

'Portrait Of María Picasso Lopez,' by Pablo Picasso. 1923. Source: Arthive.

Dalí's Mother Between Reality and Dream

'Portrait of the Artist's Mother,' by Salvador Dalí. 1920. Source: WikiArt.

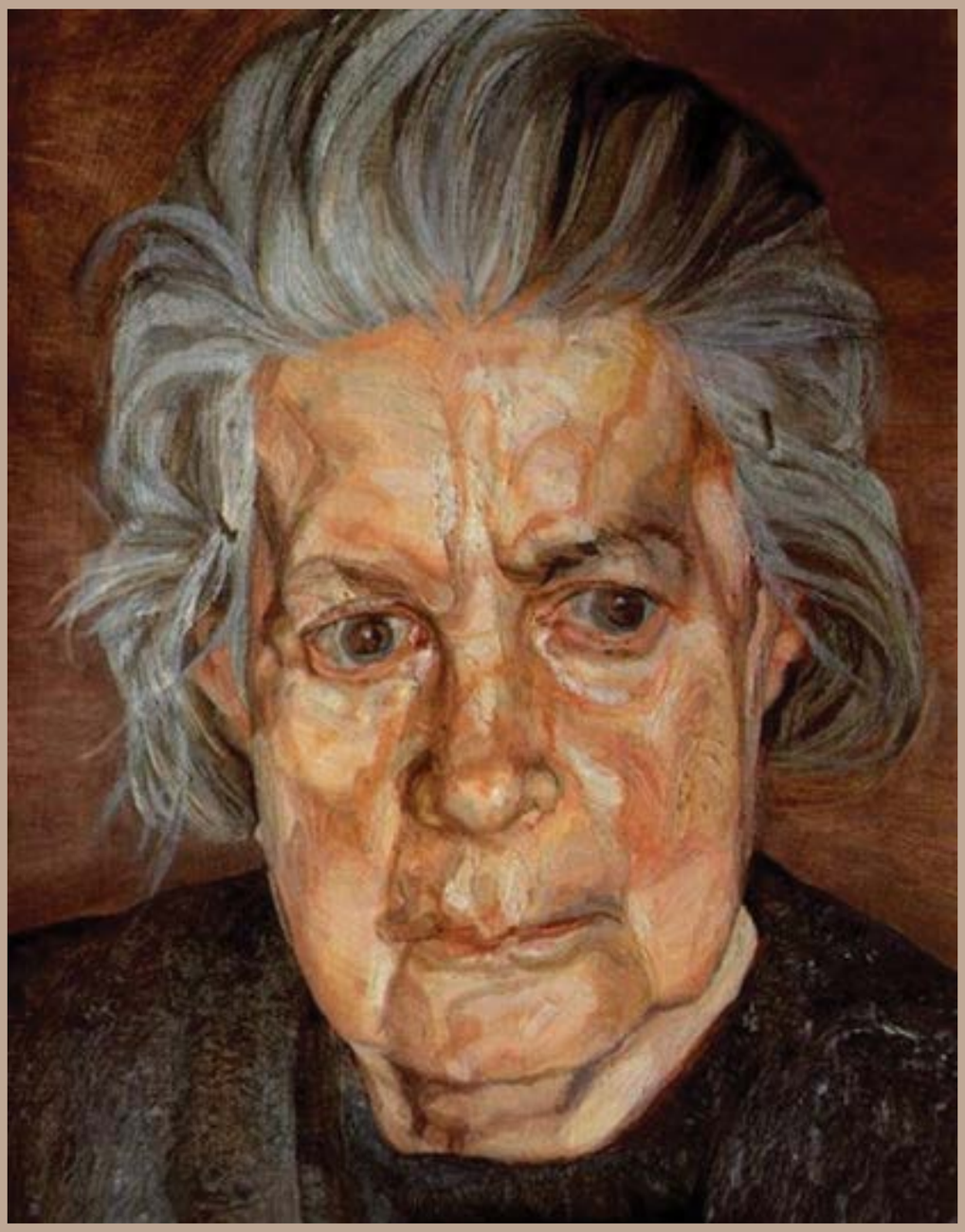
'The Enigma of My Desire,' by Salvador Dalí. 1929. Source: WikiArt.

In his childhood, Salvador Dalí was exceptionally attached to his mother, Felipa Domènech Ferrés; a bond he continued to reference throughout his life. She was the emotional center of his world, and he described her death from cancer when he was 16 as the greatest blow of his life. Dalí adored her. In his early works, his attachment appears in dignified, realistic portraits: a half-length portrait against a dark background, precise features and calm, earthy colors. The painting reads as a tribute to a woman he saw as the pillar of the family and the person who encouraged his talents from an early age.

After her death, the image transformed. The mother no longer appears as a defined face, but becomes, in surrealist works such as The Enigma of My Desire, or My Mother, My Mother, My Mother, a symbolic mass in which the word "mother" repeats within a barren space, alongside feminine symbols and organic forms. In this surreal symbolic world, Dalí expresses his longing for his mother and the wound left by her loss.

Lucian Freud and His Mother in Daily Confrontations

'The Painter's Mother Reading,' by Lucian Freud. 1975. Source: Bridgeman Images.



‘The Painter’s Mother II,’ by Lucian Freud. 1972. Source: Bridgeman Images.

The story of Lucian Freud and his mother is among the richest in modern art. A complex relationship, emotionally distant in his childhood, that transformed after the death of his father into a long series of portraits that became almost his life's project with her.

Lucie Freud lived in her husband Ernst's shadow for many years, before psychologically collapsing after his death in 1970. At that point, her son began to summon her as a model to sit before him almost daily. This was an attempt to rescue her from depression, and to turn the distance between them into a working relationship and long hours of companionship.

From this routine came a series of paintings that are among his most important works, with titles such as The Painter's Mother, The Painter's Mother Reading, and The Painter's Mother Resting. In these works, he paints an aging body without beautification – sagging skin, dense wrinkles and an exhausted look – yet with intense light and a large portion of frame devoted to her, like she was the center of gravity of the visual world.

After her suicide attempts, he almost completely stopped painting anything else and focused on painting her daily. From many critics, these portraits were a harsh exercise in confronting her slow death and his part with her at the same time, and they made his body language more truthful because he was painting someone he could not hide from.

'The Painter's Mother Resting I,' by Lucian Freud. 1976. Source: Bridgeman Images.

Arabic Treasure:

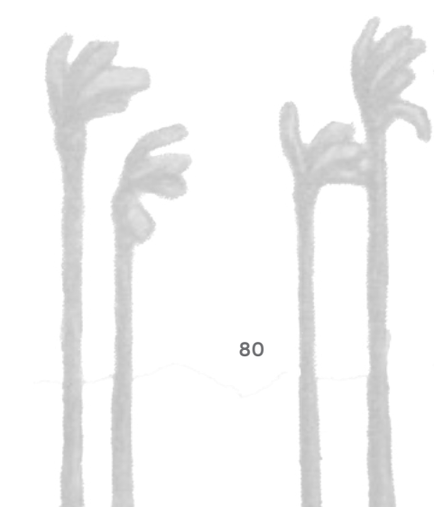
The Image of Motherhood in *Arabic Poetry*

By **Abeer Al Deeb**

It is often said that the first sound spoken by humans was “Ma/Um,” a simple, primal sound connected to human beginnings and a deep longing for motherhood and warmth. In many cultures, “Ma/Mama/Um” is considered sacred, linked to the earth, to human origins and to our emotional and physical roots.

As language developed, motherhood moved from myth into everyday social and religious life and gradually became a strong poetic symbol. In Arabic poetry especially, the mother appears so often that it is hard to find a poet who has not written about her. Poets return to their mothers as symbols of care, generosity and devotion, using the language and images of their own cultures to express that bond.

What is remarkable is that the image of the mother in Arabic poetry never seems to run out. Sometimes she is the main subject of a poem, and at other times she appears quietly within verses written for other themes, adding warmth, beauty and emotional depth.



‘Untitled,’ by Attyat Farag. 1959. Oil on canvas, 67 x 82 cm. This art was part of the ‘Horizon in Their Hands’ exhibition in collaboration with Barjeel Art Foundation held at Ithra. Courtesy of Ithra.

When Warmth Becomes Memory

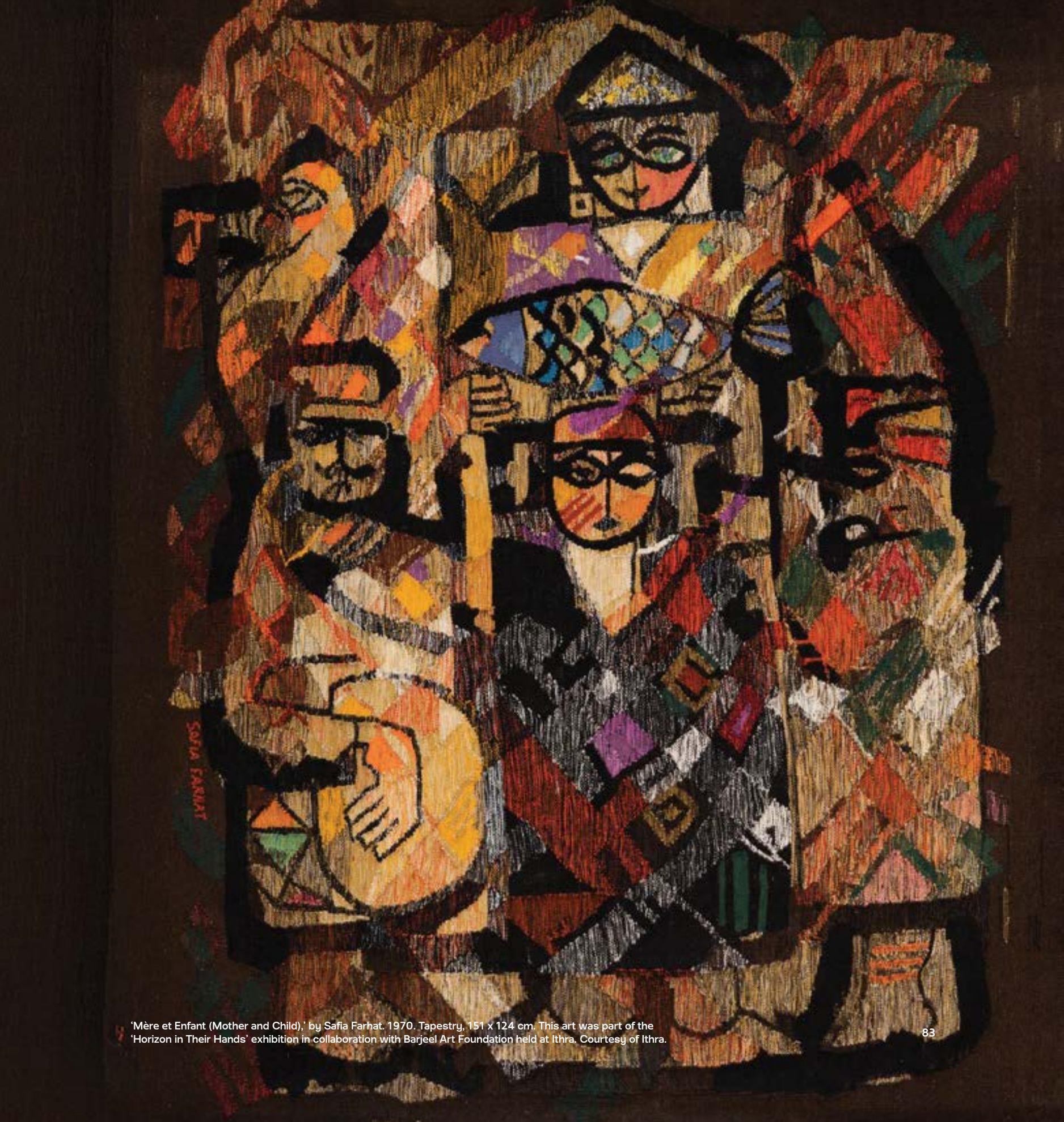
The image of the mother in poetry has changed many times over the years. In pre-Islamic poetry, women were often spoken of indirectly, yet the mother held a special place. She was linked to the idea of refuge and safety in a harsh desert world, and described through qualities such as patience, loyalty and resilience.

Many **poets** openly expressed pride in their mothers. One of them was Antarah ibn Shaddad, who spoke of his mother, Zabibah, with defiance, responding to those who mocked him because of her:

I am the son of a dark woman,
raised like a hyena among ruins undone.
If I am a slave among slaves they name,
my will still rises beyond the stars' flame.

In the Islamic era, the mother was regarded as a doorway to Paradise and a path to spiritual redemption. In this spirit, **Imam Al-Shafi'i** said:

Bow to your mother, seek her grace,
For turning from her is pride's disgrace.



'Mère et Enfant (Mother and Child),' by Safia Farhat. 1970. Tapestry, 151 x 124 cm. This art was part of the 'Horizon in Their Hands' exhibition in collaboration with Barjeel Art Foundation held at Ithra. Courtesy of Ithra.

In modern times, shaped by sweeping social and demographic changes caused by forced migrations, wars, displacement and exile, traditional narratives began to fracture. Amid these upheavals, poets reimagined the mother.

She was no longer seen only as a biological figure, but as a presence rooted in nature itself, enduring, life-giving, and in a constant state of rebirth.

This transformation is most powerfully evident in elegiac poetry, which has moved beyond conventional mourning to a deeply personal and symbolic expression.

A notable example is the poem “Fatimah” by the Saudi poet **Abdullah Al Saykhan**, written in memory of his mother. In its opening, he writes:

As if all women were born of water’s flow,
but Fatimah alone from sleet.
As if her braids were falling stars outspread—
if she comes not home, no one returns instead.

In this passage, Al Saykhan, devastated by his mother’s death, raises her memory to the level of legend, someone no one can ever resemble. She is purer than water, like “sleet,” and at the same time stronger and more vividly present. Although the simile “as if” suggests something dreamlike rather than real, and deepens the feeling of loss, the poet returns to affirm her warm and glowing presence through the image of her braids/falling stars.

At the same time, he denies any real or physical presence of the other people in the house after her absence.

He continues, describing time as distorted and out of place since his mother's passing:

It was said that those who came two days
after they had buried her in the earth,
found in that place,
a moon rising behind her henna,
a moon of tenderness.
A hand rested, half-loosened.
God drew from its stain a thread of red away.
from that thin line of blood there grew,
a tree, still green,
and Fatimah was the name.

In this passage, Al Saykhan finds comfort in the idea that the mortal body does not simply disappear but turns into a lasting light. The image of "a moon rising behind her henna" suggests warmth and tenderness that soften the darkness of loss. Her henna-ed hand becomes a thin thread of blood, as if it connects death to life. From that thread grows a green tree, a clear sign of renewal and survival. Through this vision, the poet moves toward a spiritual, almost mystical space that rises above the laws of nature. He takes us into a world of quiet wonder, where the mother keeps her presence alive on the earth through the tree that bears her name.

When a poet turns a mother's embrace into a memory filled with vivid scenes and shaped like a complete dramatic work, the result is a poem too expansive for a single article and too meaningful to reduce to a summary.

It is layered with deep metaphor, and although it carries a powerful sense of orphanhood, it rises above mere emotional appeal or personal grief. Al Saykhan ends with a sweeping tribute: **"I was not her son alone... I am the son of every woman who resembles her... and she is my mother, the closest among them."**

Throughout the poem, he makes it clear that the mother does not disappear. She continues to exist through her symbolic presence in nature and through the traces she leaves in the everyday lives of her children. From the pain of loss, he creates a modern, thoughtful, and original reflection on one of the oldest themes in Arabic poetry.

Unmarked Grave, Unending Loss

In another example from contemporary Arabic poetry, this time written as prose, the Saudi poet **Ahmed Al-Mulla** expresses his deep pain over losing his mother. In his poem "Aisha's Grave," he writes:

I do not know my mother's grave.
I kiss her only in dreams.
Loss still covers my heart.
Her call
a slow blade,
widening longing.
If only a knock at dawn.
If only a sign at the door.
I would have followed.
I would have carried forgetting
like mercy,
sealed the cracks with it.
I would have written the nights
into my skin.

In the poem, Al-Mulla's sense of loss has more than one level. His mother is gone, and there is no grave he can visit, which makes it harder for him to say goodbye. So, he creates an image of a dome for her in his imagination, and this imagined picture only increases his pain. His grief feels not only emotional but almost physical. He describes it as a spear stuck deep inside him, moving slowly and making his longing hurt even more.

The irony is that the mother's call, something that should feel safe and comforting, becomes a source of pain. It makes him imagine different possibilities and repeat a series of impossible wishes. He says "if only" again and again, answering himself and suggesting things he wishes he had done, as if they could help him fight the deep sense of orphanhood forced on him. He says, for example, "I would have faced absence and overcome it," or "I would have carried forgetfulness with care and sealed the cracks with it."

In the second part of the poem, the poet changes direction. He begins using command-like verbs that sound more like prayers or requests, and he says:

Come back...
leave your scent on the road,
morning and henna in your wake,
so I can follow.
Or light your lost grave
with a small candle,
that I may rest in your glow
and sleep.

Here, the poem turns into simple, familiar details that remind him of his mother: henna in her hands and the dress patterned with trees. In his culture, these are gentle, everyday signs of womanhood and warmth.

He focuses on scent because smell is the sense most closely tied to memory. For him, it would be enough to catch her fragrance in the air, the hint of henna in her hair and palms, or the soft smell of her bright, patterned dress. These scents stand for the color and warmth that left his life when she did.

In the end, he returns to the pain of not even knowing where her grave is. Without a place to visit, he feels unanchored. So, he asks for even the smallest light from her, just a candle's glow. He wants to rest his head on that gentle light of motherhood, to sleep, and to feel safe again.

From the very first sound, "Ma/Um," to this day, no matter how languages change or ways of speaking evolve, motherhood remains one of the highest human values. A mother's embrace is still a place of safety: the child clings to it, and the adult quietly longs for it. In the face of such greatness, even words fall short.

‘Scéne de familli (Family scene),’ by Zina Amour. 1967. Oil on wood panel. 72 x 92 cm. This art was part of the ‘Horizon in Their Hands’ exhibition in collaboration with Barjeel Art Foundation held at Ithra. Courtesy of Ithra.

From the **Vault:**

Postcards *with love*

By **the Ithraeyat Editorial Team**

These postcards are frozen vignettes of a timeless truth: the mother in all her glory.

The monochrome palette strips away distraction, leaving only the profound architecture of a shared look, the protective curve of an arm, and the weariness and strength etched in hands that tell stories of labor and love.

These postcards, sent across seas and decades, were never just souvenirs of a place, but fleeting testaments to its soul, carried in the enduring figure of the mother.

Here we share a selection from **Qatar National Library's** distinctive collection in Heritage library, we hope you enjoy this trip down a photographic memory.

Enjoy exploring these vintage postcards.

'Special Collection of Postcards "Motherhood",' from archival postcards album. (HC.HP.2017.0018). Courtesy of Qatar National Library.

Bédouine à la citerne.

‘Local woman carrying a sleeping child on back,’ photographed by Alexandre Bougault. (1851-1911). (HC.HP.2017.0001-0008). Courtesy of Qatar National Library.

‘Local woman carrying her child,’ photographed by Alexandre Bougault. (1851-1911). (HC.HP.2017.0001-0009). Courtesy of Qatar National Library.

‘Studio portrait of a Georgian family in traditional costumes,’ photographed by D.I. Ermakov. (1846-1916). (HC.HP.2016.0040-0007). Courtesy of Qatar National Library.

‘Special collection of “Motherhood” postcards from archival postcards album,’ (HC.HP.2017.0018). Courtesy of Qatar National Library.

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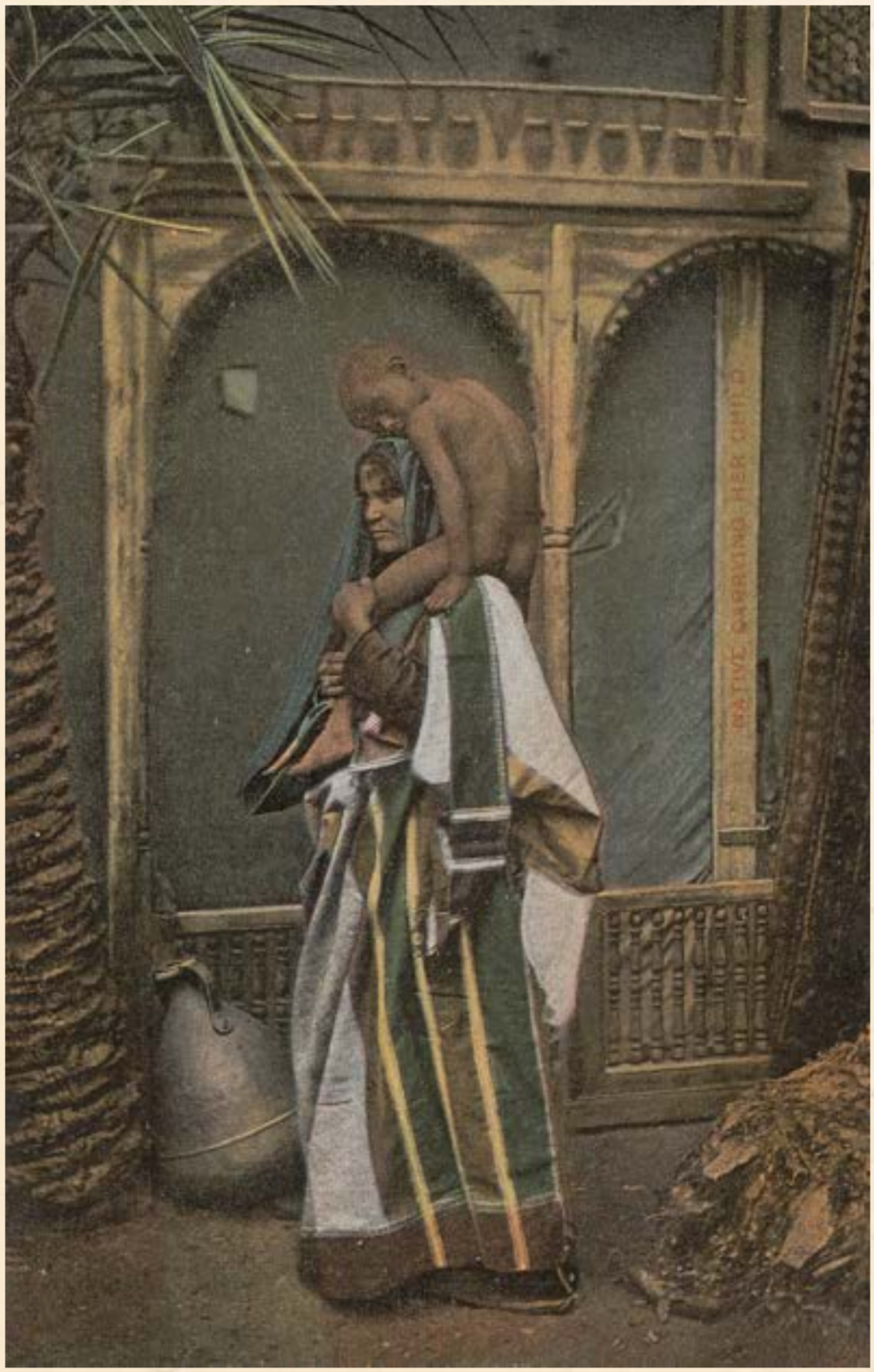
‘Special collection of “Motherhood” postcards from archival postcards album,’ (HC.HP.2017.0018). Courtesy of Qatar National Library.

‘Women of Bethlehem,’ photographed by Photoglob Co. (HC.HP.2015.0007-0118). Courtesy of Qatar National Library.

‘Algiers. Moorish woman and child on the terrace,’ photographed by Photoglob Co. (HC.HP.2015.0007-0124). Courtesy of Qatar National Library.



‘Special collection of “Motherhood” postcards from archival postcards album,’ (HC.HP.2017.0018). Courtesy of Qatar National Library.

'The Child's Bath,' by Mary Cassatt. 1893. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Robert A. Waller Fund and The Art Institute of Chicago.

From **the Shelves:**

Motherhood in Literature

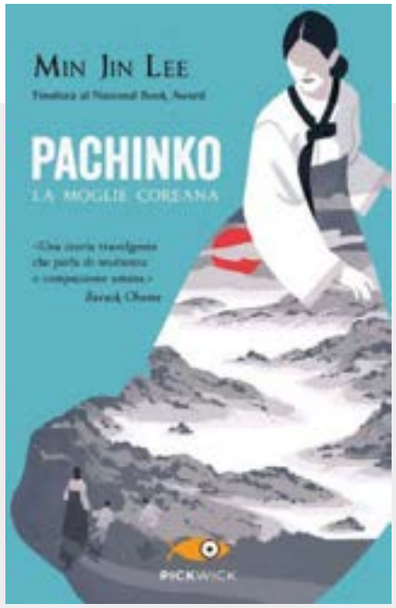
By **Fatma Alsaif**

From nurturing archetypes to challenging realities, motherhood has been explored in literature through stories of selfless love, sacrifice, devotion and identity, while also confronting societal expectations, gender roles and the internal struggles of mothers.

The complexities and joys associated with motherhood have inspired a multitude of narratives in literature that delve into the essence of this fundamental relationship. In exploring the diverse experiences depicted, we gain insight into the common threads that bind mothers together, despite the unique challenges they confront in their journeys of nurturing and caregiving. But the question is, did literature give mothers justice?

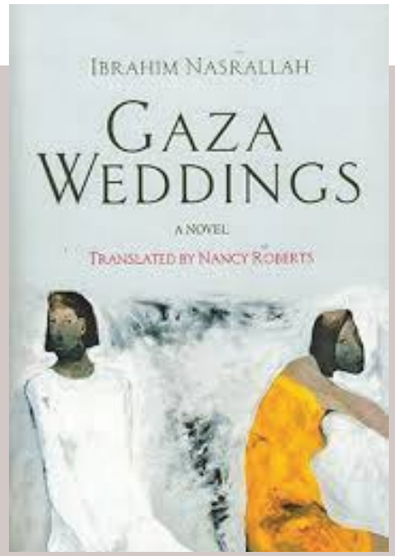
'Happy and You Know it,' by Laura Hankin

This is a witty novel about modern motherhood, social media facades and female friendships. It follows a young musician who gets into the seemingly perfect lives of a group of wealthy, Instagram-obsessed mothers, exploring the themes of judgment and messy realities behind the perfection this clique of mothers portrays under societal pressure.



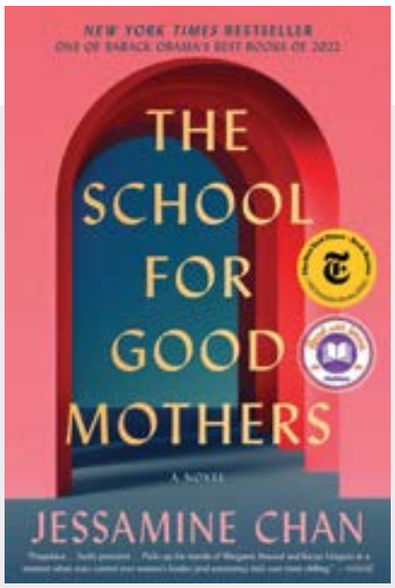
'Pachinko,' by Min Jin Lee

In a historical setting, the novel portrays the resilience and sacrifices of a mother who is navigating poverty and discrimination as a Korean immigrant in Japan, while trying to protect her son from a dark past that might damage his future and view of himself. It deftly navigates the intricacies of the mother-son bond, loss and persevering identity and heritage.



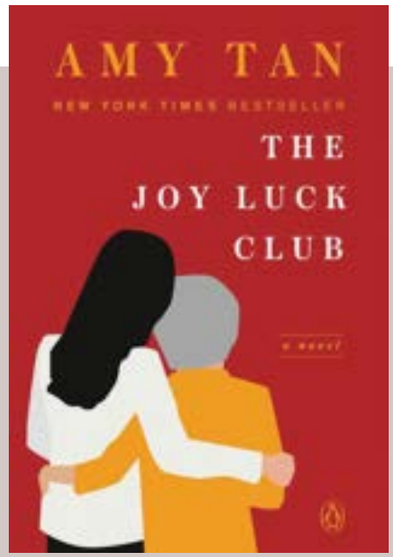
'Gaza Weddings,' by Ibrahim Nasrallah

The novel depicts motherhood through resilience, love and the challenge of finding joy despite all odds in the midst of war and the constant loss, grief and ambiguity in a war zone. The narrative in this book offers a constant reminder of the unbreakable spirit of women despite the trauma, pain and grief mothers endure upon losing their loved ones while desperately trying to survive a war and occupation that fails to see the humanity in those innocent ones. It is a homage to all mothers in war zones.



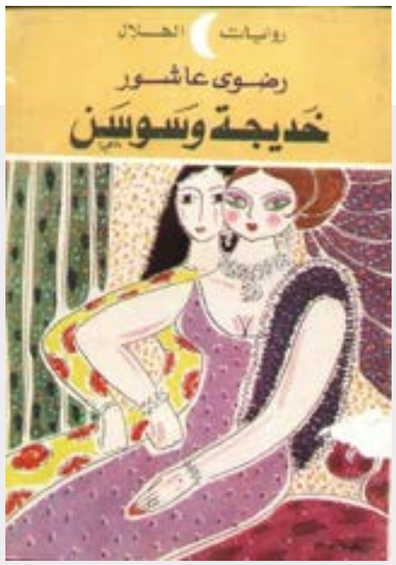
'The School for Good Mothers,' by Jessamine Chan

In a dystopian setting, the book explores themes of unrealistic societal expectations, pressures for perfection and constant guilt, where mothers who fail to meet the impossible standards are forced into a school for re-education, and confront these unrealistic expectations through robotic training that decides what a "good mother" looks like.



'The Joy Luck Club,' by Amy Tan

This classic explores the complex relationships between mothers and daughters, and the constant bond between them across generational and cultural conflicts. The reader follows the main character, who tries to understand her deceased mother's life from the stories told by her mother's closest friends. The novel explores that the daughter-mother connection goes beyond a mother's death or knowing their personal stories, but rather through the inherited behaviours, unconditional love and selfishness.



'Khadija and Sawsan,' by Radwa Ashour

The novel explores the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship while navigating traditional gender roles and motherhood and its cultural significance. The author tackles the misconceptions about love between a mother and daughter, and the pressures arising from "control" and "rebellion," and seeking closeness, forgiveness and understanding despite these conflicts in an intergenerational dialogue, or lack of it.

The exploration of motherhood in literature sheds light on the diverse experiences that resonate with the universal truths of maternal love, the reality of their struggles and inspiring resilience. It reminds us of the shared struggles and challenges faced by mothers around the world, and most importantly, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and joys inherent in the maternal journey.

From **the Shelves**:

Motherhood, a Literary Starter Kit

By **M. Lynx Qualey**

Much as it takes a community to nurture a child, it also takes far more than one book to raise a reader. Indeed, it takes a library. And while no magazine has the space to highlight the tens of thousands of how-to books for new mothers (or the millions of children's picture books) we can still offer a small literary starter kit.

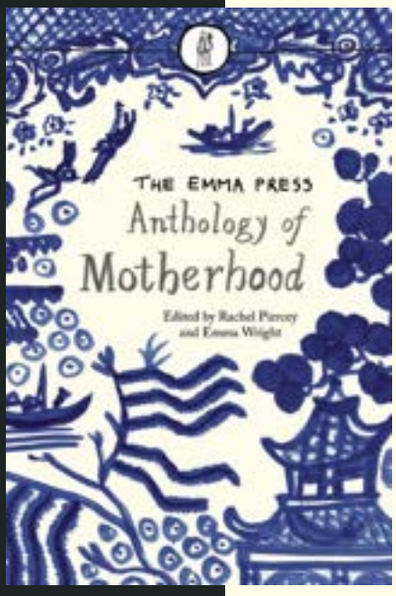
Below, we bring together a slender collection of English and Arabic books for both mother and newborn. It includes titles to help mothers grapple with their new and sometimes raw emotions and responsibilities, as well as classic bedtime and alphabet books to read with the baby. Taken as a collection, these six books can form the seeds of a library that will encourage a lifetime of reading together.

'The bedtime story, evening reading hour,' by Felix Schlesinger. Source Wikimedia Commons.

Two books for mom:

'Diwan Al-Umumah (Office of Motherhood),' edited by Rana Al-Tonsi

This collection of poems and essays, curated by Egyptian poet Rana Al-Tonsi, brings together works by 17 women writers, each focused on their personal experiences with motherhood. The collection includes work by poets and novelists from across the region as they grapple with motherhood in different ways, from the wit of Palestinian writer Maya Abu Al-Hayat to the tenderness of Iraqi poet and essayist Manal Al-Sheikh. This is a look at motherhood that doesn't put mothers on an impossible pedestal, but rather face-to-face with the reader.



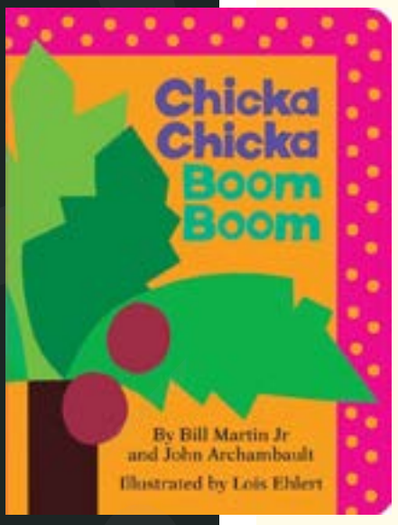
'The Anthology of Motherhood,' edited by Rachel Piercey and Emma Wright

This second anthology also underlines that there is no one "correct" way of being a mother. The Anthology of Motherhood brings together a wide range of short poems by poets with varying life experiences and views of motherhood. Most of the poems are brief and straightforward, yet narrated with an eye-opening freshness. Each can be read in a single sitting: between diaper changes, nursing sessions, or during the grace of a 15-minute nap.

Two books for learning letters:

'Aswat al Abjaddyah (Sounds of the Alphabet),' by Nadine Touma and Lara Assouad

Alphabet books are important to all tiny readers, and there is a wide variety in both Arabic and English. I have a sentimental attachment to Walid Taher's sweet and funny Horoufy Al-Gamila (My Beautiful Letters), since it's what I read with my own children, but Nadine Touma's Aswat al Abjaddyah is a singular classic. The Arabic letters here are printed in the award-winning "Tabati" script created by Lara Assouad, and each letter leads to an active verb that uses a sound that echoes its meaning, such as where the playful T sound is the taktaka of a ticking clock.

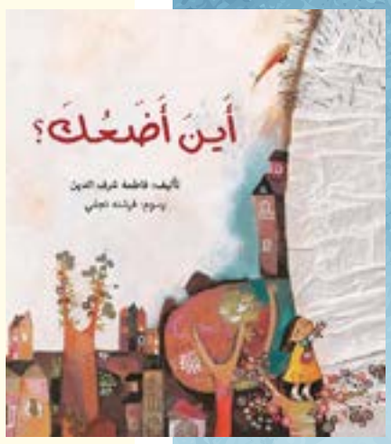


'Chicka Chicka Boom Boom,' by Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault, illustrated by Lois Ehlert

This classic by the author of the beloved Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? is a warm and musical delight, and it's hard not to dance a little while reading it aloud. It begins with "A told B and B told C, I'll meet you at the top of the coconut tree," and each verse is punctuated with a separate "chicka chicka boom boom." I am not sure how many thousands of times I read-sang this book to my children, night after night, but I'm not tired of it yet.

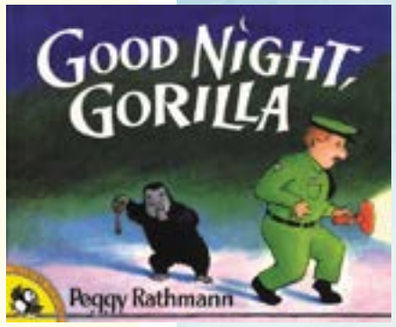
Two bedtime books:

'Ayna Ada'ak (Where Do I Put You?),' by Fatima Sharafeddine, illustrated by Fereshteh Najafi



One thing that's essential for bedtime reading is repetition and familiarity. This means both a book that repeats certain phrases over and over (in this case, while trying to fit an elephant into small spaces) and a book that will hold a child's attention, night after night. Where Do I Put You shows us the parts of an elephant, one at a time, as a girl tries to fit her friend into increasingly improbable places. Throughout it all, the elephant is simply too big—until the girl realizes an elephant is the perfect size to fit in her heart.

'Good Night, Gorilla,' by Peggy Rathmann



This is another book that balances humor and repetition. In it, a zookeeper goes around and says goodnight to various animals in a zoo. But when he comes to the gorilla, the gorilla manages to steal his keys. At this point, the gorilla looks directly at the child who's reading and puts a finger to his lips, urging the child to keep his secret. The gorilla then lets loose a bunch of other animals, who follow the zookeeper home, after which his wife must bring them all back to their cages. The book keeps a child's nighttime attention with both sweet simplicity and gentle humor.

To enjoy the borderless world of books, please visit **the Ithra Library** and the **Arablit website.**

From the Archives:

Motherhood Across Decades

By **the Ithraeyat Editorial Team**

A symbol of tenderness, strength and life, across decades of time, motherhood remains one of the deepest experiences shared across species.

Here we let the photos speak for themselves, and explore mothers through different eras. There are all kinds of visual narratives here displaying sweet emotions and solid dedication among parents and their little ones. Each photo captures a moment of care, protection and instinctive love.

Enjoy discovering these rarities from Aramco Archives.

April 6, 2012 |

'An Arabian Sand Gazelle mother and her baby.' Courtesy of Aramco Archives.

December 1, 2025

'Oryx and her baby being fed, Shaybah Sanctuary.'
Courtesy of Aramco Archives.

March 11, 2007

'Mother with her child in the park.'
Courtesy of Aramco Archives.

October 14, 1951

'Mrs. Nahas Rice with her partner and child.'
Courtesy of Aramco Archives.

‘Mother and child looking outside the window.’ Courtesy of Aramco Archives.

‘A typical day in the life of an Aramcon family (Singelyn family).’ Courtesy of Aramco Archives.

May 7, 1958

'Mrs. L. B. Devenney of Abqaiq with her children.'
Courtesy of Aramco Archives.

'Mother and her children in aramco camp.' Courtesy of Aramco Archives.

▲ 'Untitled.' Courtesy of Aramco Archives.

"Untitled." Courtesy of Aramco Archives.

Reflections:

Gargeeʻan — The Sweet Spirit of Togetherness

By **Hassan Albather and Nora Taha**

Guided by the lantern light,
Kids come knocking door to door,
They come singing through the night,
"Hands that give are never poor."
Kindness echoes evermore,
Share a sweet and share a smile,
Sweep your pouch through the candy pile,
Bring your family and your friends,
To a Gargeeʻan that never ends.

An annual tradition along the eastern coast of Arabia, held in the middle of Ramadan, Gargeeʻan is a celebration of togetherness, generosity and childlike joy. On these evenings, neighborhoods come alive. Doors open. Children gather in small processions, moving from house to house, chanting traditional songs in cheerful unison and asking for treats from the families who welcome them.

There is a special colorful Gargeeʻan event held each year at Ithra, where parents and their children share in the delightful sweet tradition of candy collection and activities.

Gargeeʻan, which means knocking on doors, is all about the shuffle of small slippers across town, with the polite half-rehearsed chorus of "Give, and God will give you," echoing all over the streets. It is grandmothers preparing candy bowls days in advance, mothers adjusting tiny vests and thobes, and neighbors lingering a little longer at the doorway than they usually do.

The event is known by many names around the region: Gargeeʻan in Al-Hasa; Garangaʻoh in Qatar; Nasfa Halawa in Bahrain, Qatif and Saihat; Haq Al-Layla in the UAE; Qaranqashoh in Oman; and Ma Jeena in Baghdad.

In many ways, Gargeeʻan is Ramadan seen through a child's eyes, and a gentle tradition of bonding with parents. It honors faith through illustrations of festivity, generosity and community brought together. The ritual of knocking and receiving becomes an early lesson in giving and gratitude.

Celebration of Gergaa'an with sweet treats on display. Doha, Qatar. 2025. Source Shutterstock.

Competition:

The Art of Motherhood

By **the Ithraeyat Editorial Team**

Dear participants in the "Art of Motherhood" competition, thank you for your thoughtful and valued contributions.

We were truly touched by your engagement and creativity. The quality of the submissions was remarkable and made the selection process both exciting and genuinely challenging for our team.

We are pleased to announce the winners:

1. Fatima Al-Zahra Karim
2. Al-Anoud Al-Amoudi
3. Fatima Janahi
4. Ayman Anan
5. Wejood Al-Romaih
6. Jenya Gashimova
7. Reem Al-Qahtani
8. Noura Al-Ashwali
9. Ghaliah Saleh
10. Anne Berthet

It means so much to see your creativity and dedication, and we're happy to share a selection of works that truly stood out.

We also welcome one of our first written submissions, **a winning essay by Lubna Al-Ghamdi.** that we hope you enjoy. We will be launching essay competitions in the near future, where we would love to see some more of your creativity shine through.

Thank you to everyone who shared their passion and talent with Ithraeyat. And if you couldn't take part this time, don't worry, there will be more chances ahead to join us and share your passion.

Kind regards,
The Ithraeyat Editorial Team

Mother and child with cats. Oil on canvas by Eduard Meyerheim. Around 1900.

Fatima Al-Zahra Karim

Al-Anoud Al-Amoudi

Motherhood

Footsteps Behind a Mother's Shadow.

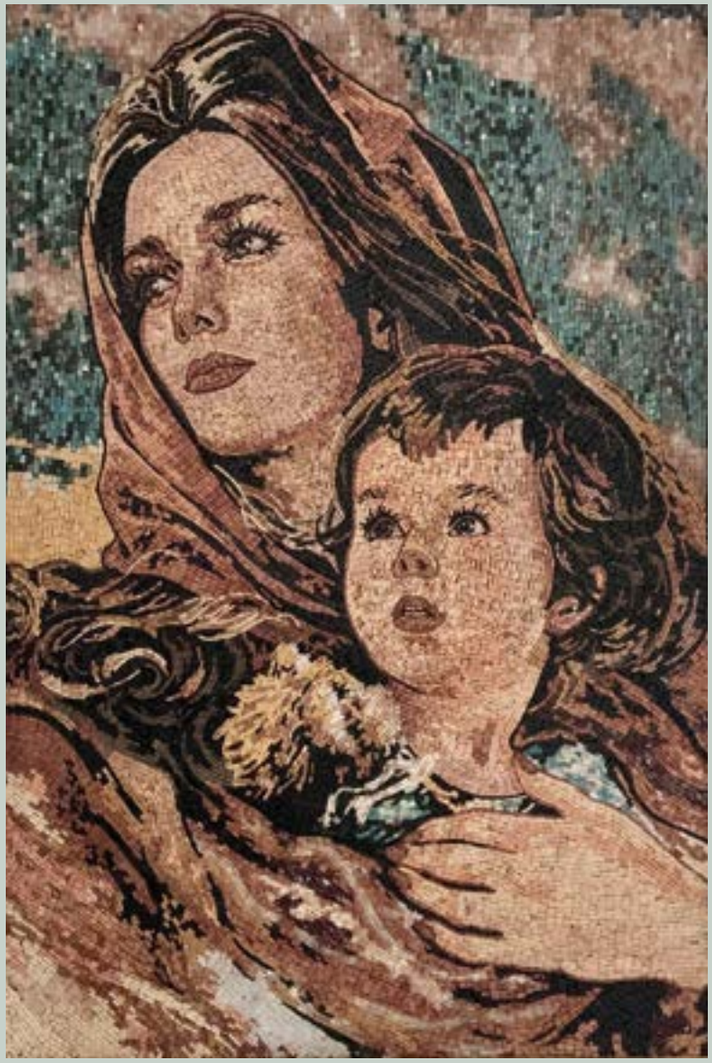
Fatima Janahi

The Embrace of Life

Inspired by the style of Gustav Klimt, this piece shows motherhood as a timeless symbol of love and protection. Gentle circular patterns and soft touches of gold surround the mother and child, creating a feeling of warmth and closeness.

The faces remain natural and real, reminding us that true emotion is at the heart of work and that a mother's embrace is where life begins and where we first learn what safety feels like.

Ayman Anan



Motherhood

Mosaic Stone

This mosaic, Motherhood, reflects the beauty of the first and most honest human bond, the bond between a mother and her child. In this work, hard stones are transformed into something soft in meaning, speaking quietly of love, care and lasting connection.

Created using the stone mosaic technique, the piece is made from more than 15,000 tiny pieces of natural and semi-precious stones. Each one was carefully hand-cut, ranging from 0.5 mm to 2 mm, and placed with patience and precision. The result is a rich surface with gentle shifts in color and texture that invites the viewer to look closer.

The turquoise background surrounds the figures like a protective space. Known for symbolizing calm, purity and protection, the stone reflects the idea of motherhood as a safe refuge, a place of comfort and inner peace.

The mosaic was built slowly, piece by piece, much like the relationship between a mother and her child, formed over time, shaped by care, and strengthened through attention to detail. The strength of stone meets the softness of feeling, reminding us that motherhood is not fragile; it is enduring.

Completed in 2024, this work combines craftsmanship with heartfelt meaning, making it a piece that speaks both to the eye and to the soul.

Wejood Al-Romaih

Inheriting Inspiration

The painting captures the gentle passing of inspiration from one person to another through love and closeness. Here, passion is not forced or demanded; it is offered freely, like a warm human legacy. It grows naturally in an atmosphere of care, trust and nurturing.

Jenya Gashimova

Bound by the Red Thread

This piece explores motherhood as a living exchange between memory and becoming. Created primarily by hand on paper, the work carries visible texture and movement, reinforcing its emotional sincerity.

This piece tells the story of a mother and child bound by an invisible thread. Inspired by the legend of the red thread of fate, it speaks of protection, devotion and enduring love. The maternal bond stretches across the canvas like a fragile line that cannot be cut by distance or time. It protects, yet sometimes blinds, softening our sight and allowing us to overlook small imperfections and missteps.

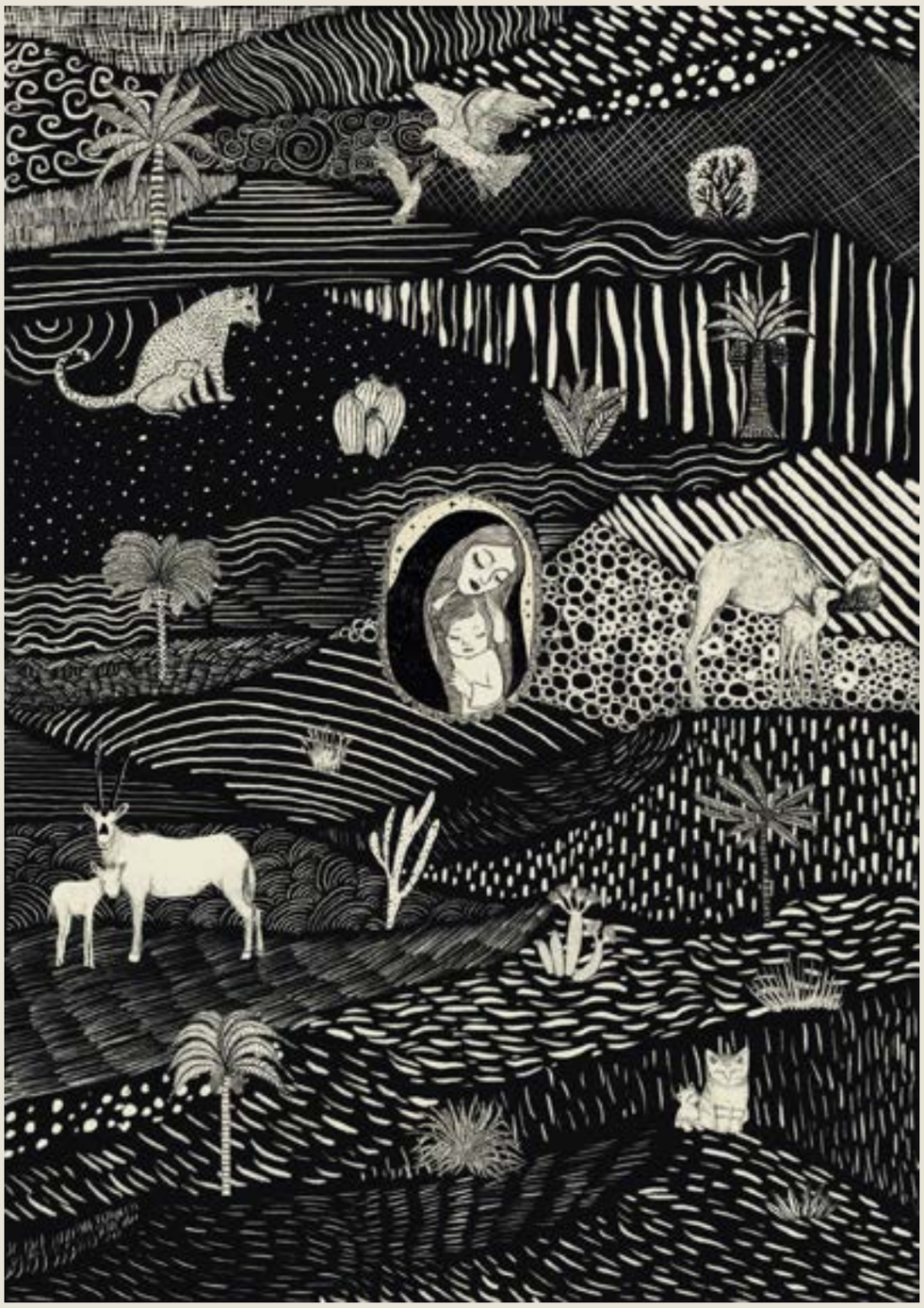
Reem Al-Qahtani

Pomegranate of Paradise

They say Paradise lies at the feet of mothers, but I saw it in my mother's hand. In a small, everyday moment, one that no camera would think to capture, there was something that held a lifetime of meaning.

This painting tries to keep that moment alive: the way my mother gives quietly and generously, seed by seed, not knowing that she is creating a love that will stay forever.

Noura Al-Ashwali



A digital painting.

Ghaliah Saleh

Tender Fingers

The painting captures a timeless moment of motherhood, where a mother's fingertips become a symbol of care and tenderness, weaving safety and warmth into the heart of her child. It expresses the quiet love that accompanies every moment of the child's growth and presence.

Anne Berthet

The Silent Alarm

My comic explores the feeling of maternal hypervigilance and how silence can feel more alarming than noise. It reflects the steady rhythm of care that never truly rests, showing that a mother's watchfulness becomes most visible in the quiet moments, when the world seems still.

Special Mention:

Hala Farwana

Eternal Blossom

Lamees Al-Gain

Sitto

Rym Al-Shkyly

Azza Darandari

Maab El-Zain

Ruqaya Ismail

Sharing and Creating Memories

Fatima Al Matar

This piece was created in a mosaic style, using eggshells arranged on a circular plate measuring one meter by one meter. Through this delicate material, the work expresses a mother's embrace and the way she cares for her children, a sacred bond we are born into, a relationship unlike any other.

Dania Osama Obaid

My Mother, My Companion on the Journey

This painting tells the story of a lifetime. A young woman stands in her graduation gown, smiling for a quick phone photo. It looks like a simple moment — but it holds a shared triumph.

Behind her is a wall of memories: her first cry as a baby, her small, unsteady steps held by her mother's hand, the long nights of studying and quiet encouragement.

Each image in the background helped build this very day.

The painting is more than a graduation scene. It is a heartfelt thank you to the one who stood quietly behind every achievement. It reminds us that motherhood is not just where life begins, it is the steady presence that walks beside us through every stage of the journey.

'Unconditional love.' Courtesy of the artist Ceren Degirmenci.

A quiet, intimate moment between a mother and her newborn son, capturing the tenderness, protection and unconditional love that marks the very beginning of life.

Special Highlight:

Continuing Achievement

Ceren Degirmenci graduated from Avni Akyol Fine Arts High School in Istanbul, Turkey, and in 2013 earned her degree as a Fine Arts Teacher.

While completing her undergraduate studies, she joined the Erasmus+ program and spent six months studying at the University of the Arts in Linz, Austria; an experience that enriched her artistic journey.

In 2017, she received her Master of Fine Arts from Doğuş University, Institute of Social Sciences, in Istanbul. Her thesis explored the field of Islamic art.

From 2013 to 2015, she worked as a Fine Arts Teacher in Turkey. Since 2015, she has been based in Saudi Arabia, living for several years in Ras Tanura before moving to Dhahran.

Alongside her artistic career, she is a mother to a young son. Today, she continues her studio practice while teaching art.

'Melodies of the Orient.' Courtesy of the artist Ceren Degirmenci.

A vibrant celebration of culture, music, and mentorship, the painting depicts two figures in ornate garments, engrossed in the act of playing a traditional stringed instrument.

Motherhood Art Competition: Winning Essay

Before All Else, Nature was Mother

Contribution by **Lubna Al-Ghamdi**

Across many cultures and throughout history, nature has consistently been referred to as a mother, and this is no coincidence. Nature is a fertile embodiment of warm tenderness, boundless care and limitless love.

Every aspect of nature evokes the meaning of motherhood: the fruit on the branches of trees, the warmth of the sun's rays, the cool morning breezes and the nurturing of the seed hidden deep within the dark earth. Motherhood, in its essence, is an instinct inherent in the universe, an innate manifestation of life.

For this reason, ancient peoples bestowed upon mother nature profound gratitude, respect and appreciation. But in a modern world obsessed with materialism and dominated by greed, humanity has severed its connection to mother earth and neglected the deep-rooted relationship of respect that binds it to her.

Instead, another relationship emerged, based on notions of consumption, individualism and humanity's perceived entitlement to the natural resources bestowed by God. When the maternal relationship perishes, wisdom perishes with it; for wisdom, as Nietzsche says, is "feminine."

For this reason, we need to appreciate nature and see it again as a mother. When we look at it through this understanding, we can confront the destructive greed of the economy, which depletes nature's resources and corrupts its environment, so that we may reconnect with it anew, with a bond dominated by love, mutual care and gratitude.

Let us not be content with merely respecting what we see, such as flocks of migrating birds in the sky, or a lioness carrying and nurturing her cub. Rather, let us perceive what we do not see, what happens in valleys and forests: a giant tree protecting the creatures beneath it from the scorching sun, a bluebird hiding in the branches at the end of the day, or the sacrifice of seeds that lie dormant in the darkness until harvest time, when humankind takes the harvest and forgets mother nature.

When we contemplate nature, it teaches us as a loving mother would, helping us to see the wisdom in the steadfastness of tree roots, the resilience in the face of changing seasons and the beauty in the brilliance of stars and the sparkle of sea waves.

'A Good Book,' by Anna Pugh. Source: Toovey's Antique & Fine Art Auctioneers & Valuer.

Like a bird that tires after a long flight and finds rest inside a tree trunk, so too does a person, weary from the scorching sun or a long, arduous walk, sit quietly in the nearest shady spot. Nature, in its very essence, shares with a mother the quality of being a safe haven, not through comforting words, but through its tranquil presence; through its inherent generosity, love and guiding wisdom; and through its radiant beauty, authenticity and everlasting magic.

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The King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra) is one of Saudi Arabia's most influential cultural destinations, serving as a hub for the curious, creatives, seekers of knowledge and more.

Through a compelling series of programs, performances, exhibitions, events and initiatives, Ithra creates experiences across its interactive public spaces that bring together culture, innovation and knowledge that are designed to appeal to everyone. Connecting creatives, challenging perspectives and transforming ideas, Ithra is graduating its own leaders in the cultural field.

Ithra is one of Saudi Aramco's important initiatives and one of its largest cultural contribution to the kingdom. Ithra's components include the Idea Lab, Library, Cinema, Theater, Museum, Energy Exhibit, Great Hall, Children's Museum and Ithra Tower. For more information, please visit: **www.ithra.com**

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