ithra

Issue 030

# Ithraeyat Magazine

Fall 2026





Roots

Artist **Sara Al Abdali**



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.

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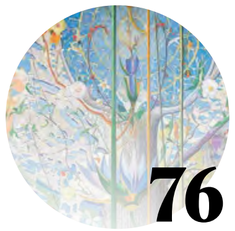
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# Re-rooting, **Regrowth**

By **Rym Al-Ghazal**

> All that is gold does not glitter,
> Not all those who wander are lost;
> The old that is strong does not wither,
> Deep roots are not reached by the frost...
>
> **– J.R.R. Tolkien (1892 - 1973), academic and writer,**
> **The Fellowship of the Ring**

A postcard dating from 1900-1910 featuring a scene including tree trunks and roots growing on a hillside that look like those drawn by Vincent van Gogh. The location in Auvers-sur-Oise was discovered by Wouter van der Veen, the scientific director of the Institut Van Gogh, who found the postcard.

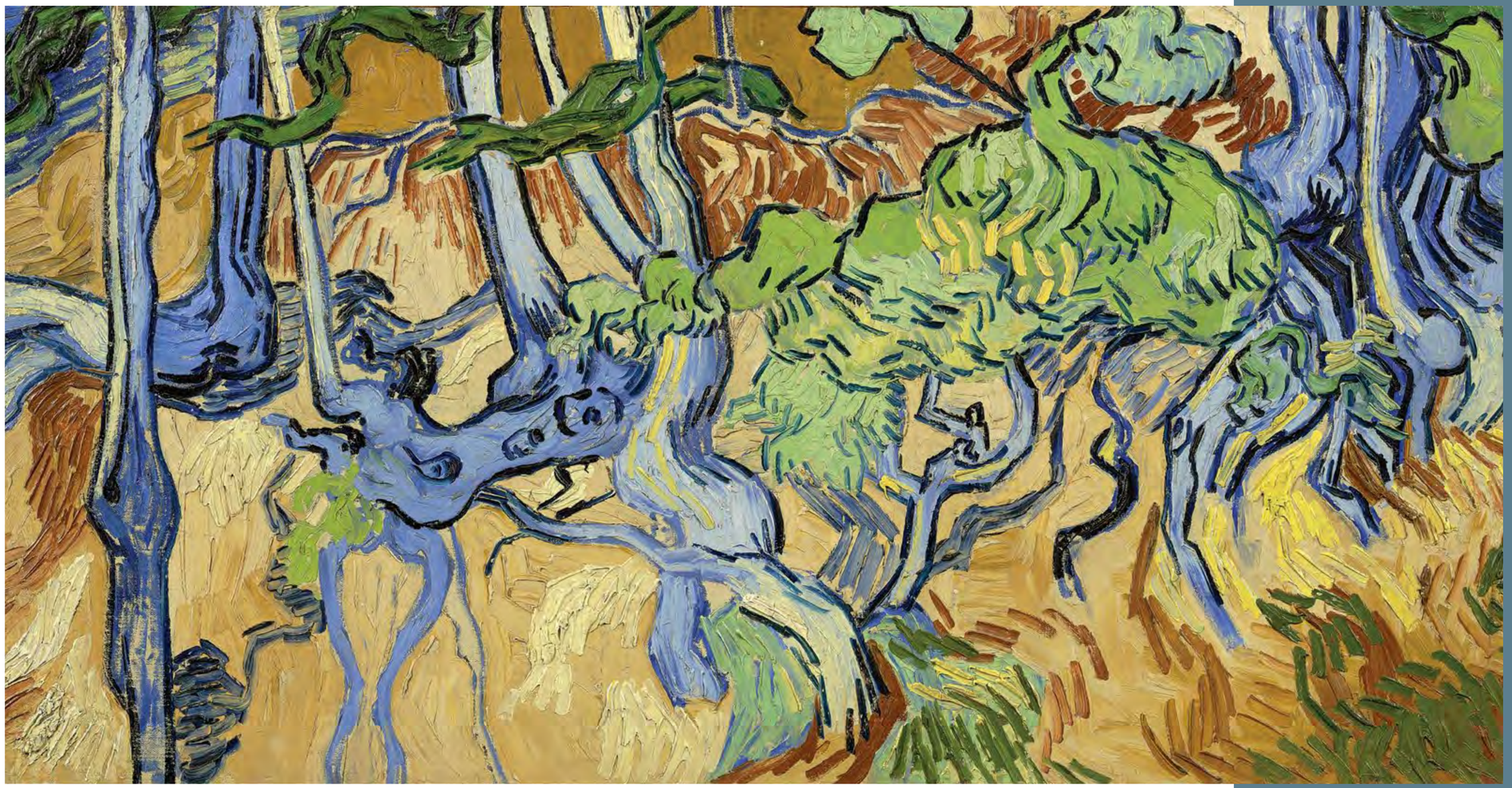
Credits: Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.






**In a world that often feels suspended in a frantic race toward the future and instant responses, we have chosen, for this edition, to pause, and turn our gaze downward towards the very thing we often take for granted. We have chosen to explore the realm of 'Roots.'**

It is a theme that hums with a quiet, ancient power. We are often too caught up by the louder and more visible elements of life—the bright bloom, the sweet fruit, the towering trunk of expectation and ambition; the list of tasks that keep growing. But the true story of resilience, of quiet strength, and of profound connection is often written in the dark, silent world beneath our feet, and in what we carry deep in our hearts. However one chooses to understand them and define them, roots are often our main anchor in a storm, a conduit to a shared narrative among one or many communities, a delicate network of life and its many players and settings.



**'Tree Roots.'**
Vincent van Gogh.
Auvers-sur-Oise. July 1890.
Oil on canvas. 50.3cmx100.1cm.

Credits: Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation).

This notion finds a powerful echo in the work of Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890), whose life and art we begin this edition's journey with. In his final masterpiece, 'Tree Roots,' painted in July 1890 in the small French village of Auvers-sur-Oise, he poured his last frantic energy onto a canvas of exposed, gnarled roots clinging to a sandy bank. For over 130 years, the painting's exact location remained a mystery; until 2020, when it was remarkably rediscovered, its sage-like twisted roots and clinging soil almost identical to Van Gogh's rendering.

We wonder what it was about this spot that left such an impression on the great master. What did Van Gogh see? Was it a reflection of his own soul, a "life's struggle" manifested in the fiercely determined grip of a tree against the ravages of time and storm?

For Van Gogh, the divine resided in both humanity and nature. In those twisted forms, he recognized a profound truth, and one he captured in an earlier drawing titled 'Tree Roots in a Sandy Ground ("Les racines," April-May 1882) and described in a letter to his brother Theo: In these tree roots, 'those gnarled black roots with their knots,' he recognizes something of 'life's struggle,' namely the 'frantically and fervently rooting itself, as it were, in the earth, and yet being half torn up by the storm.'

> We invite you to reflect on what grounds you. In the hustle of daily life, it is so easy to become a detached branch, or a confused leaf, blown about by the winds of opinion and expectation.





**'Tree Roots in a Sandy Ground (Les racines).'**
Vincent van Gogh. April-May 1882. The Hague. Pencil, black chalk, brown and grey wash, opaque watercolor on watercolor paper. 51.5cm×70.7cm.

Credits: Kröller-Müller Museum. KM 117.091 RECTO.



It is a powerful metaphor for the human condition itself—our own beautiful, and sometimes painful effort to find our footing in the world, to hold on to our identity and our connections or form new ones as we uproot and are transplanted, often without warning, into unfamiliar soil: new cities, new cultures, new phases of life that feel foreign to our senses. In this edition of Ithraeyat, we wander through this concept in all its complexity. We explore the roots of our stories, of our crafts and art, and our search for a home wherever we go.

We invite you to reflect on what grounds you. In the hustle of daily life, it is so easy to become a detached branch, or a confused leaf, blown about by the winds of opinion and expectation. We hope this edition serves as a gentle, necessary invitation to reconnect — to remember your own story, to honor the soil from which you came and the nourishing elements that sustain you. For it is only from a place of deep, secure rooting that true regrowth can begin.

**Welcome to this journey of rediscovery, regrowth and roots.**

With appreciation and respect,



**Rym Al-Ghazal**
Editor-in-Chief

# The Tracks We Left Behind

By **Rawan Talal**

Roots transcend their role as mere remnants of the past to become the starting point from which our awareness of the world takes shape — a hidden force that continues to shape the present we inhabit, connecting us to our memory and to the history that formed our society and culture.

Returning to our roots, then, is more than an act of nostalgia. It is an attempt to understand what shaped our identity and what continues to influence the way we see the world today.





**'Circle of Life.'**
Sara Al Abdali. 2024.
Gouache and gold on crimson-dyed wasli paper.
38 × 43 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.

In the work of Saudi artist Sara Al Abdali, a painting does not begin with the first stroke of color or with the first element taking shape on its surface. It begins earlier, with reading, research and a return to the archives. What ultimately appears as a finished artwork is simply another step in a research journey that, for her, is far from over.

In this interview, we take a closer look at the practice of Sara Al Abdali. An artist and researcher, her work centers on identity and culture, as well as questions of belonging and historical narratives in the region. Through her artistic world and practice, we discover how she brings forgotten historical contexts back to life by telling  stories that have gone untold.

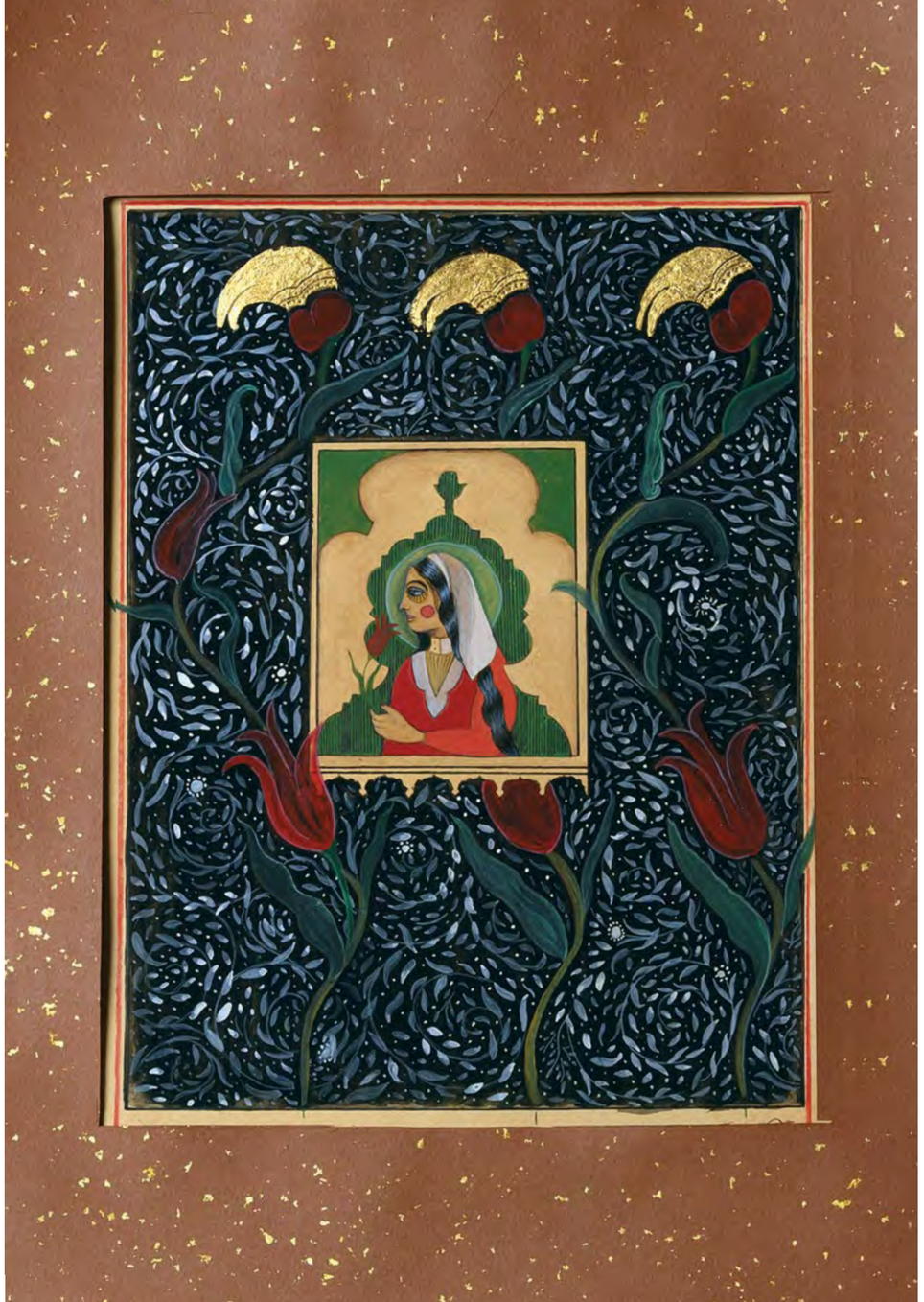


**Artist Sara Al Abdali**

Al Abdali describes the relationship between art and research as a complex one: "Some works emerge after years of research, where my research topics come together and vary within a single framework. An important artwork may transcend interpretation, or it may be connected to a particular research topic."

> Art is a metaphorical tool for asking questions rather than answering them.





**'Leleh.'**
**Sara Al Abdali. 2018.**
**Natural pigments, gold, and gouache on paper. 23 × 29 cm.**

**Courtesy of the artist.**

For this reason, Al Abdali sees history as more than material for documentation; it is also a space for rereading and reinterpretation. In "After Hijrah," commissioned by the 2023 Islamic Arts Biennale, she revisited gravestones from Al Ma'alah Cemetery alongside a sound installation that traces a timeline of events in Makkah and its political and social history. This work later extended into a series of works documenting the culture of death and mourning in the Hijaz through an artistic retelling of the poems inscribed on gravestones. This historical exploration also found its way into her first novel, "*Departure in the Depths of Madinah.* "

Those who follow her work will notice that she does not seek to retell history as it was, but rather to question it and let it speak. She explains: "I look for ways to make history speak, whether through art or writing, because without a thoughtful projection onto present realities and contemporary events, history remains neglected and confined to academic research and scholarly articles. As an artist, experimentation and breaking conventions are part of my nature. I find both challenge and pleasure in trying to understand history and engage with it in new ways."

Researching archives, oral histories and material culture does not lead her only into the history of the wider world. At times, it also reveals her own personal history as well. She explains: "One of the things that surprised me most while researching before writing my novel *Departure in the Depths of Madinah* was something I found in an issue of Al Qibla newspaper, which was published during the same period in which the people of Madinah endured the Seferberlik siege. By chance, I discovered that some of my grandmother's relatives had been forcibly deported to Bulgaria. My research was originally driven by a desire to understand the collective psyche of the people of Madinah, who had buried so many memories of that painful siege. I never imagined I would encounter a history that touched me so closely; one that I had never heard about from my own family."





'Al-Bait Al-M'amur.'
Sara Al Abdali. 2018.
Natural pigments and gouache on paper. 20 × 20 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.

Architecture, ornamentation and traditional crafts feature in her artistic practice as more than visual elements. She explains: "These elements reflect the society and the city they come from. Through their details, whether rich or minimal, we can understand a person's social standing, the kinds of work or lifestyles connected to a household, and even the level of influence its inhabitants may have had.

Within these details are the stories of families and communities, waiting to be read piece by piece until they reveal a clearer picture of society at that time. They also reflect society today: the way people choose architecture, collect art, or even live with the simplest material objects can tell us a great deal about their tastes, their identity and the cultural influences that shape them."

On art and its role in preserving memory, she says: "Art can play an effective role in preserving memory and in finding innovative, contemporary ways to bring its features into our modern age. Art renews the life of every past, while also having the capacity to build bridges between different professional practices."

Perhaps this is why Jiddah and the Hijaz remain a constant thread throughout her artistic practice. The deeper she ventures into research and artistic practice, the more convinced she becomes that vast areas remain unexplored.

And on returning to one's roots and remaining faithful to them while embracing experimentation, she says: "I see no conflict between the two, as long as respect for one's roots and origins remains firm and assured."



**'Women and the Bougainvillea.'**
Sara Al Abdali. 2018.
Gouache and tea stain
on paper. 42×59 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.







**'Bride.'**
Sara Al Abdali. 2026.
Appliqué embroidery on
cotton fabric. 124 × 179 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

She adds, regarding the process of delving deeper into one's roots: "It requires great courage, an enormous degree of honesty and a willingness to accept criticism, given the controversy it may provoke. I do not believe an artist can venture very far without undertaking that difficult journey. The seed that gave rise to such extensive questioning and experimentation, and that set the artistic journey in motion in the first place, cannot mature without taking that path and seeing it through. Even as an artist matures in thought, they continue to journey around those roots, however far they may travel from them."

When asked about art and its boundaries in the face of what cannot be said, she explains: "I believe the complexity of art lies in its ambiguity, its capacity to accommodate multiple interpretations, and the extent to which many works prove worthy of entering the realm of the timeless, both in their intangible and material value. Despite all of this, the human being remains central to making art speak." She adds: "Art has no voice without people and their appreciation of it."

Despite her artistic and research-based engagement with history, memory and identity, one question continues to guide her work, and she has yet to come close to answering it. She says: "The deliberate forgetting of memory, which sometimes hides behind neglect, leads me to many places as I try to understand this phenomenon. I do not know whether I have offered any answers. For me, art is a metaphorical tool for asking questions rather than answering them."

**Enjoy more of Sara Al Abdali's remarkable work.**



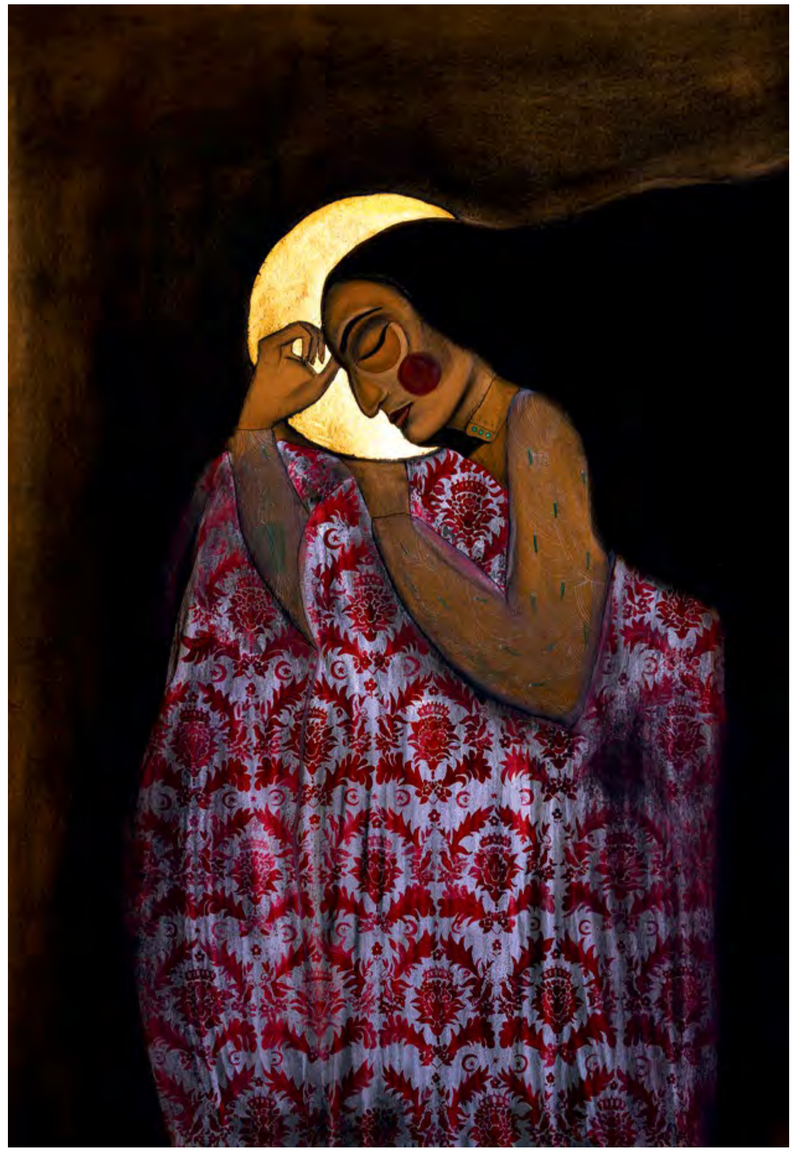
**'Glimpse of Eve 2.'**
**Sara Al Abdali. 2026.**
**Japanese gouache, ink, and gold on handmade wasli paper. 42 × 64 cm.**

**Courtesy of the artist.**

> "Art has no voice without people and their appreciation of it."



**'Sukoon.'**
Sara Al Abdali. 2018.
Natural pigments, gold, and gouache on paper. 18 × 34 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.



**'Layla Falls Asleep.'**
Sara Al Abdali. 2019.
Gouache, charcoal, and gold on paper. 70 × 160 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.



**'Burning From Love.'**
Sara Al Abdali. 2024.
Gouache, charcoal, and gold on paper. 14 × 24 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.





**'Against the Howling Wind.'**
Sara Al Abdali. 2023.
Acrylic and oil paints
on wood. 100 × 100 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.

# The Art of Diplomacy

## In Conversation with HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar Al-Saud

By **Rym Al-Ghazal**



**'The Majestic Leopard.'** Eva Cellini. Undated. Part of HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar Al-Saud's private art collection.

Photo by Rania Abdel Razek.

> Art is a language that unifies, and it transcends politics. It is a tool that can help bring people together in the same way that music can unify.
>
> — **HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar Al-Saud**



Over the years, Ithraeyat has had the privilege of serving as a subtle cultural ambassador for Saudi and Arab creatives and their work, bringing together a kaleidoscopic collection of voices and narratives that reflect the diverse cultural, intellectual and human spirit — and often the resilience — of our time.

In this landmark 30th edition, we are honored to feature an exclusive interview with Her Royal Highness Ambassador Reema Bandar Al-Saud, whose own story is a masterclass in diplomacy, vision, service and cross-cultural dialogue, underpinned by unwavering faith and a deeply compassionate heart; themes that have also defined much of Ithraeyat's journey.

As one of the country's most recognized figures, her public story is well known, yet her answers here reveal something quieter and perhaps more intimate: a deep compassion for people, animals and nature, a love of art rooted in feeling, an enduring sense of humor and a faith in what is still possible.





**Her Royal Highness Ambassador Reema Bandar Al-Saud, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United States of America.**

Photographed at her home in the United States by Rania Abdel Razek.

Princess Reema. One could begin with the historic firsts, the leadership roles and the causes she has championed. Yet when asked which of the many hats she has worn has taught her the most about herself, she chooses motherhood.

"Motherhood is one of life's greatest teachers," she tells us, speaking of patience, responsibility, service and the importance of retaining a sense of humor through life's most challenging moments. A gentle insight into the great woman behind the titles, a leadership that is founded on caring for others.





'Art of Flowers.'
Eva Cellini. Undated.
Part of HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar Al-Saud's private art collection.

Photo by Rania Abdel Razek.

> "Motherhood is one of life's greatest teachers."

When Her Royal Highness was appointed ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United States in 2019 by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, she made history as the first woman to hold this distinguished post. Yet her legacy of enrichment began long before her diplomatic service. As CEO of Harvey Nichols Riyadh, she did more than lead a business: She championed women's inclusion in the workforce and commissioned groundbreaking research that led to the Kingdom's first workplace childcare center — a testament to her belief that true leadership "begins with service."



This philosophy, she shares with us, was shaped in part by her experience as a mother, which taught her "people management, organizational skills, patience, and responsibility." It is also reflected in her profound care and compassion for mother nature and its many beings.

Her journey from private sector innovator to public servant has included becoming the first woman to lead a multisport federation in Saudi Arabia, serving as president of the Saudi Sports For All Federation (formerly known as the Saudi Federation for Mass Participation), alongside various other roles in sports. Throughout, she has been guided by a holistic vision in which art, nature, and culture are inseparable from human flourishing.

In our conversation, she reveals the deeply personal stories behind this vision—from her beloved adopted cats, George and Faith, who bring "a sense of calm and perspective," to her treasured art collection, including a striking piece by Saudi artist Skna Hassan depicting a woman with an Arabian leopard. It is this majestic leopard, brought back from extinction, and its home amid the breathtaking landscapes of AlUla, that symbolizes her commitment to stewardship, a principle she extends globally through her founding of Catmosphere and WAVE, initiatives centered on interconnected well-being, big cat conservation and ocean regeneration.

Her Royal Highness Ambassador Reema has built a rich career dedicated to supporting local talent, advancing Saudi Arabia's sports, cultural, conservation and sustainability efforts, and expanding social and economic opportunities for women across Saudi Arabia and beyond. She continues to wear many hats and lead across numerous fields. Her roles have included president of the Women's Committee and member of the Board of Directors of the Saudi Olympic and Paralympic Committee, as well as chair of the Executive Committee of the Fashion Commission at the Saudi Ministry of Culture. The breadth of her contributions reaches across many layers of society.

Her Royal Highness founded Alf Khair in 2013, a social enterprise focused on building professional capacity and financial self-sufficiency among Saudi women, and was a founding member of the Zahra Breast Cancer Association in 2007. She is also an active member of the International Olympic Committee, where she serves on the Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Commission; the Sustainability and Legacy Commission; and the Coordination Commission for the Brisbane 2032 Olympic Games, among other roles.

**We invite you to join us in this intimate conversation with a leader whose vision of enrichment and service is rooted in heritage while extending boldly towards new horizons, building bridges of understanding along the way.**



**'The Offering.'**
Fathi Hassan. 2007.
Part of HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar Al-Saud's private art collection.

Photo by Rania Abdel Razek.

## Q1.

**You have worn many hats throughout your career—diplomat, advocate, leader, mother, and champion of culture, champion of nature and many others.**

Which role has taught you the most about yourself?

Motherhood is one of life's greatest teachers. It teaches you about people management, organizational skills, patience and responsibility. It reminds you that true leadership begins with service, and that even in the most challenging moments, a sense of humor is one of life's greatest gifts.





## Q2.

What does art mean to you?

Art is where dreams meet reality.

## Q3.

Saudi Arabia is undergoing one of the most significant cultural transformations in its modern history. How do you hope the world will remember this era 50 years from now? Are there specific areas you would like to shine a special light on?

We are witnessing a profound transformation, but it is also a moment where Saudi Arabia invested in its greatest asset, and that is its people. When history looks back 50 years from now, I hope the story is not about the buildings we constructed or the events we hosted, but about the opportunities we created.

The greatest transformation has been the confidence of a new generation of Saudis—particularly young women and men who now see no limits to what they can contribute. This era is about inclusion and fostering a society where everyone has opportunities to shine. Because ultimately, a nation's greatest legacy is not what it builds, but what it enables its people to become.




> Art is where dreams meet reality.



HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar Al-Saud at her home in the United States, in front of one of her beloved art pieces by dynamic Saudi artist Skna Hassan.

Photo by Rania Abdel Razek.

## Q4.

We understand you are an admirer and collector of art. What draws you to a work of art? Is there a particular artwork or artist that has profoundly influenced you personally?

Are there any Saudi or Saudi-American artists you have supported or like to highlight? Are there any emerging Saudi artists and creatives whose work particularly excites you?

Any piece of art that I have ever appreciated, admired or purchased has made me feel something. For me, art reminds you of a moment, a person, a place or a thing that you have experienced in some way. For me, art isn't about the financial value, it is about how it makes me feel.

So, all of the pieces that are highlighted here are pieces that have done just that - they have evoked a feeling of something, someone or some place. One of my favorite pieces in my home is a piece by a Saudi artist, Skna Hassan.

It is colorful, bright, striking and powerful all at the same time. It features a woman with an Arabian Leopard.

Another artist that I love is Eva Cellini whose work is filled with beauty and contrast. I find her pieces to be moving and intriguing and I've collected various pieces from her throughout the years.







## Q5.

We were delighted to learn that you enjoyed our Nature issue, particularly our feature on the revival of the Arabian leopard. What role does nature play in your own life? And what is something each of us can do to protect it?

Nature reminds us that our well-being is deeply interconnected with the health of the world around us. The story of the Arabian leopard is a powerful example of what is possible when we choose stewardship over complacency. Each of us has a role to play, whether through the choices we make every day or by helping the next generation develop a deeper appreciation for nature. After all, protecting our environment is ultimately about protecting our shared future.

HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar Al-Saud with her cat Faith at her home in the United States.

Photo by Rania Abdel Razek.

“The story of the Arabian leopard is a powerful example of what is possible when we choose stewardship over complacency.”

HRH Ambassador Reema Bandar Al-Saud's cats, George and Faith, adopted from a local shelter.

Photo by Rania Abdel Razek.

## Q6.

We understand you have cats? Can you share their stories, their names and what lessons do they teach us?

I adopted my cats George and Faith from the local shelter. I had first adopted Faith - and then a few months later George came along. There are so many animals waiting for a second chance, and every act of kindness matters.

How we treat animals says a great deal about who we are, it teaches compassion. My cats have an incredible ability to bring a sense of calm and perspective, even after the most demanding days. I've found cats to be remarkably intuitive and quite frankly, amusing.



HRH Ambassador
Reema Bandar Al-Saud
with her cat George at her home
in the United States.

Photo by Rania Abdel Razek.



## Q7.

Are there any favorite places you visited and traveled to? Why did they leave an impression? Is there a place in Saudi Arabia where you feel most connected to nature?

AlUla is breathtaking. It is the home of the Arabian leopard, and when I close my eyes I can imagine them roaming around the dunes and the rocks. I look forward to the day that becomes a reality again.

## Q8.

What do you hope people will see if and when they visit Saudi Arabia? Are there any special areas you hope people visit in Saudi Arabia and why?

I hope visitors leave with a deeper understanding of who we are. Saudi Arabia is a country of rich history, and vibrant culture, but what stays with most people is the generosity and warmth of the people. Every region of Saudi Arabia has its own beauty — it is incredibly diverse. You can swim in the Red Sea, explore the ancient ruins of AlUla, go zip-lining in Abha or visit our history in Diriyah.

## Q9.

You have inspired countless women in Saudi Arabia and around the world. What advice would you give young women who are just beginning their creative or professional journeys?

My advice would be the same for any woman. Be open to opportunities that may not seem obvious.

## Q10.

As a diplomat, you have witnessed the power of culture to transcend language and politics. Can art succeed where diplomacy sometimes cannot?

Art is a language that unifies and it transcends politics. It is a tool that can help bring people together in the same way that music can unify.

## Q11.

What piece of music or composition (or poetry) do you find yourself returning to again and again?

"Free," by George Michael.

“You’ve got to have faith.”

HRH Ambassador
Reema Bandar Al-Saud
with her cat George at her home
in the United States.

Photo by Rania Abdel Razek.

## Q12.

Is there an object you own that holds deep personal meaning?

**Yes, my father's Air Force Wings, they are very dear to me.**

## Q13.

If you could curate your own exhibition at Ithra, what story would it tell?

**It would be the story of the Mother of the Faithful Khadija bint Khuwaylid – رضي الله عنها. As it is one of the most inspiring stories, not only for women, but to society and humanity. Her story is one of inspiration that deserves celebration.**

## Q14.

What cultural legacy would you personally like to leave behind?

**I haven't lived long enough to think about what I'd leave beyond. There is so much more to do.**

## Q15.

Finally, if you could write a letter to the next generation of Saudi creatives, what would be the opening sentence? And if you would like to share, what would you write to a younger self?

**You've got to have faith.**

There is a lovely symmetry in those final two answers. Asked to look backwards towards legacy, HRH Ambassador Reema turns instead towards the work still waiting to be done. When asked to look forward and offer the next generation a first line, she offers faith. And somewhere amid these larger horizons are her family, George and Faith, a favorite song, a father's wings and works of art chosen simply because they made her feel something.

We thank Her Royal Highness Ambassador Reema Bandar Al-Saud, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United States of America, for sharing her story and her insights with Ithraeyat and with readers who have long admired her and continue to be inspired by her journey as it unfolds.

*Photos were taken exclusively for this special feature by Rania Abdel Razek, an internationally exhibited photographer, curator and educator whose work explores visual storytelling, cultural identity, architecture, landscapes, and the relationships between people and place.




Assouline Collection - Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
Part of HRH Ambassador
Reema Bandar Al-Saud's collection of books.
Photo by Rania Abdel Razek.

# The Gold-Bearded Prince of **Arabian Horses**

By **Rym Al-Ghazal**

He swims in the desert sea, my stallion,
Carving the waves of sand.
Snowy peaks he plows
As a dolphin plows the breakers,
Ever faster, still faster,
Skimming over the gravelly footing.
Higher, still higher,
He soars from the dust like a cloud—
A storm-cloud—this stable stallion of mine.
The star on his forehead gleaming like the dawn,
He tosses his ostrich-feathery mane to the wind.
Fly, white-legged kite, oh fly!
Vanish, footpaths; forests, recede!

**From the poem 'Farys' by Adam Mickiewicz (1798 - 1855), written in tribute to Count Waclaw Seweryn Rzewuski**



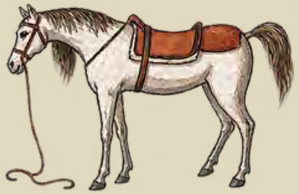

A watercolor by Count Waclaw Seweryn Rzewuski.
It is included in the correspondence and papers of Rzewuski regarding the purchase of Arabian horses for the Württemberg and Russian courts. 1817-1825.

Image credit: polona.pl.

For every dreamer who has ever gazed upon the endless golden dunes and felt the pull of the unknown, the desert offers either oblivion or immortality. It strips away certainty, rewards only those willing to surrender to its vastness, and for that it has long drawn strangers searching for something beyond themselves.

Few had answered its calls as completely as the Polish nobleman Count Waclaw Rzewuski (pronounced Vatsuaf Zhevusky), who crossed into the untamed expanses of Arabia in search of horses, but found a new identity and planted long-lasting roots in the shifting sands.

"My dear Count," wrote Prince Eustachy-Erazm (1768 - 1845) to Count Rzewuski.



> I tell you the simple truth, that no eye has yet seen in our country such Arabian horses, nor has the ear heard of such as I now possess.





Portrait of Waclaw Rzewuski, nicknamed "emir." 1825.

Credit: National Museum in Warsaw.

Waclaw Rzewuski, a Polish count and traveler, born in Lvov in 1785, needed no persuasion from this Prince or any other. He was already on his way to the Arab world, a land that has fascinated him since childhood. In 1817, at the behest of Tsar Alexander I of Russia, Rzewuski went to the Middle East to collect purebred Arabian horses to replenish the Tsar's and military stables, which had been devastated after the Napoleonic Wars.

Between 1818 and 1820, he journeyed through Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and the Arabian Peninsula, including the lands of present-day Saudi Arabia. His preparation for the journey became legendary. He is said to have toughened his stomach by eating raw meat and spoiled food, offered only water and pipes to guests, ate and slept beside his horse, studied the Qur'an, immersed himself in Arabic literature and wrote in Arabic.

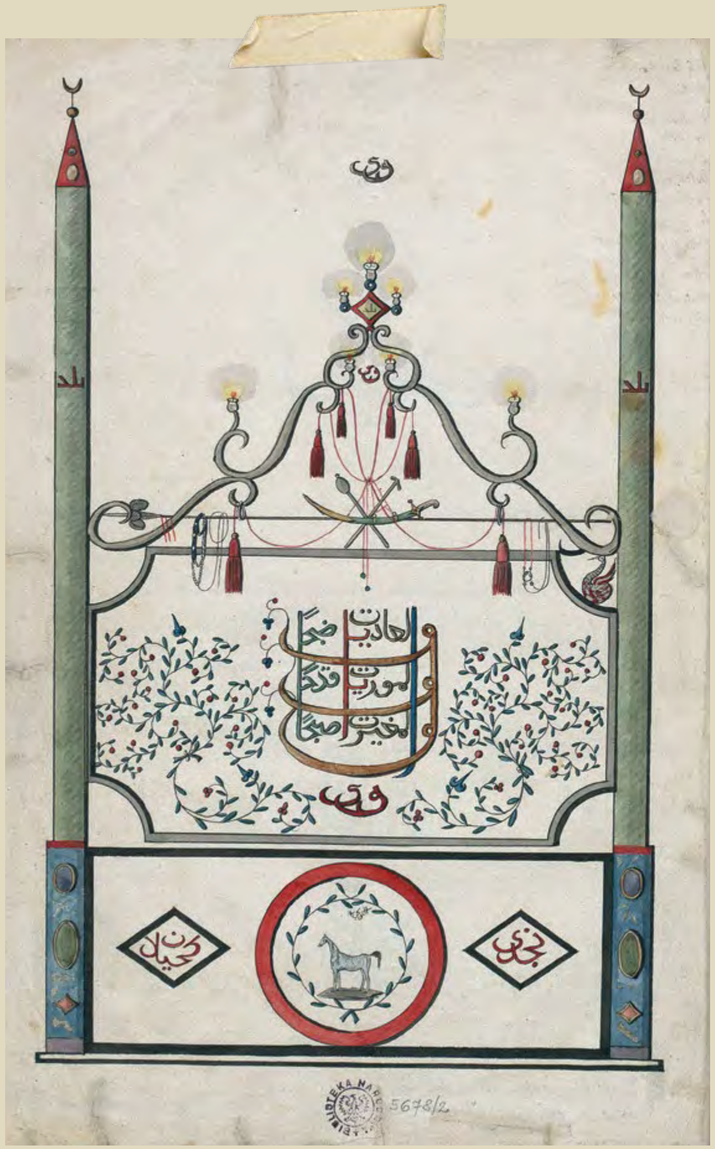
What drove this obsession? It is said Rzewuski believed that his aristocratic Polish family descended from Arab tribes. Another enduring legend held that he was, or claimed to be, a descendant of the legendary Zenobia, the third-century queen of the Palmyrene Empire in Syria.



An excerpt from Count Rzewuski's Sur les Chevaux Orientaux et Provenants des Races Orientales ("Concerning the Horses of the Orient and Those Originating from Oriental Breeds"). 1820 - 1830.

Source: polona.pl.

In his mind, the journey to the Arab world was more than an expedition; it was a homecoming, a return to ancestral roots. He saw in the Bedouin way of life a purity and nobility that resonated with his romantic ideals and his own sense of identity. And indeed, he returned to Poland transformed. He became the Arab Polish prince. He wore Bedouin attire, adopted Arabic customs and behaved as a true ambassador of Arabia in 19th century Poland. During his travels, he mastered the Arabic language and was able to earn the local tribes' trust and friendship. He was welcomed to 13 different tribes, and the gold-bearded horseman, as he became known, was reputed to have received the title of Emir, Sheikh, Taj Al-Fakhr ("Crown of Glory or Pride") and Abu Asad ("Father of the Lion"). His Arabic name, Taj Al-Fakhr, is a direct translation of the old Slavonic meaning of his given name, Viacheslav, or "Crown of Glory," later Polonized to Waclaw.

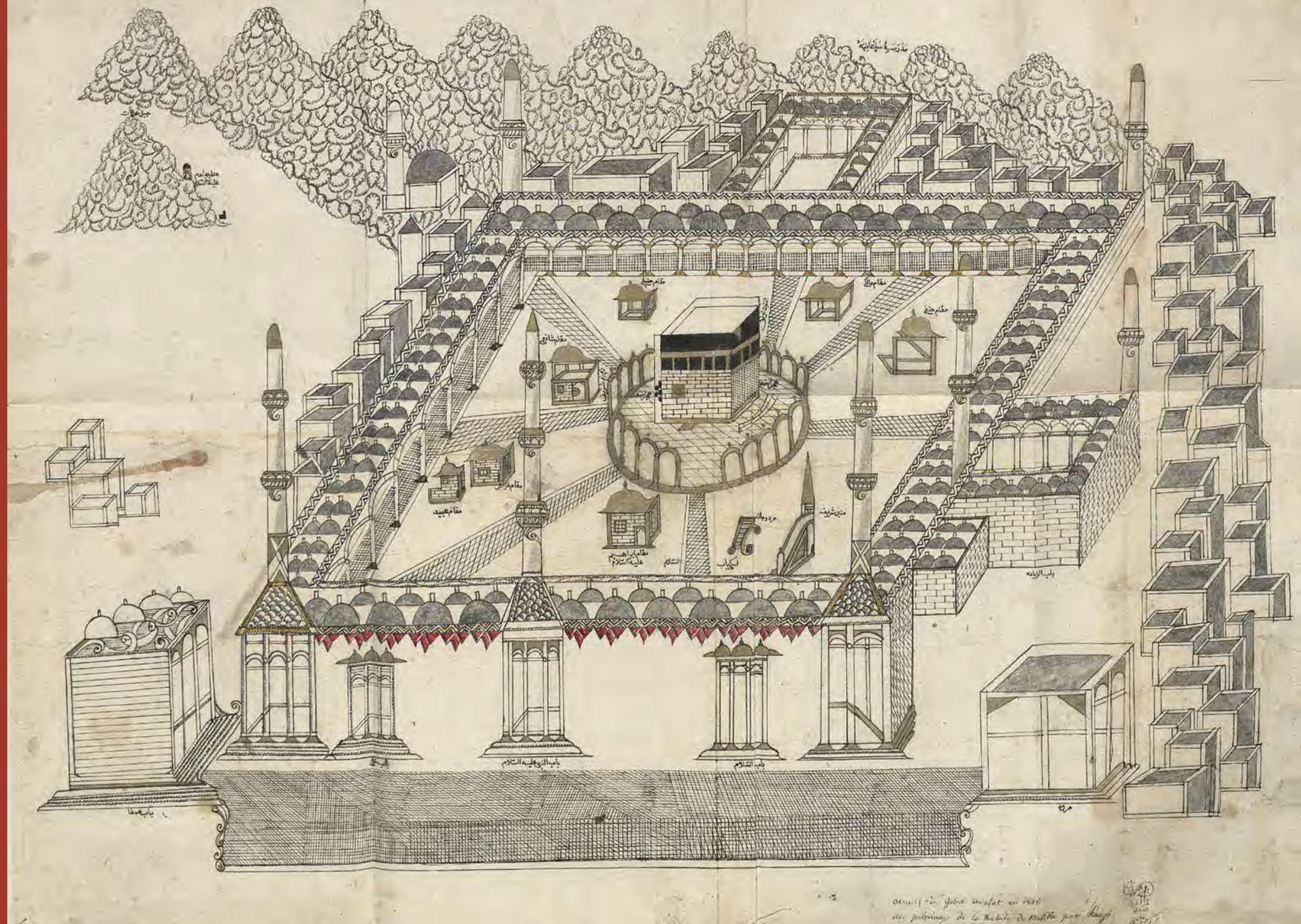


An excerpt from Count Rzewuski's Sur les Chevaux Orientaux et Provenants des Races Orientales ("Concerning the Horses of the Orient and Those Originating from Oriental Breeds"). 1820 - 1830.

Source: polona.pl.

# I sought free people remaining in a natural state.

"I can say that in the desert I feel as if I was in my home country. The knowledge of the exact language and customs of the locals has always been of great help to me in my travels through Arabia - they will serve me also during my future expeditions. I ride on horseback and have the power of a spear like a Bedouin; my strong health is not affected by heat or climate change. I am not afraid of hardship and fatigue..."




**The Holy Kaaba, Makkah. An excerpt from Count Rzewuski's Sur les Chevaux Orientaux et Provenants des Races Orientales ("Concerning the Horses of the Orient and Those Originating from Oriental Breeds"). 1820 - 1830.**

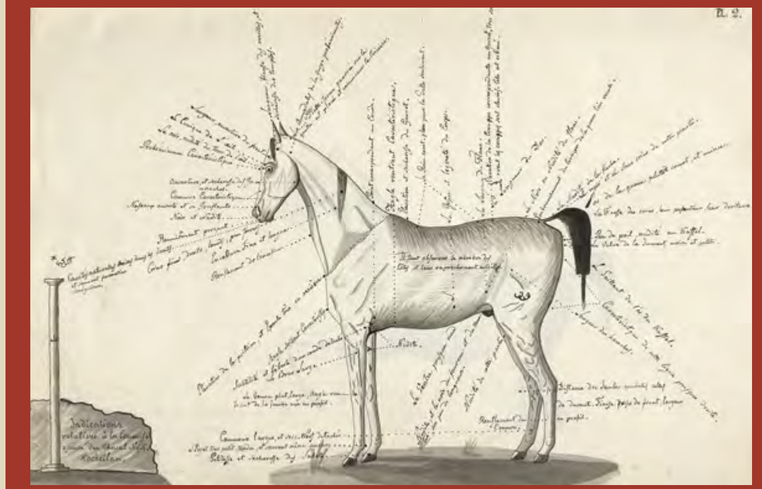
**Source: polona.pl.**

Count Rzewuski is credited as one of the first to bring Arabian horses to Europe. A pioneer breeder, he brokered the sale of purebred Arabians to royal studs from France to imperial Russia. Renowned for their endurance, intelligence, strength and loyalty, these horses captivated Europe.

Today, their descendants remain among the world's finest bloodlines, continuing to inspire admiration, poetry and praise from all those who encounter them.

The man who found new roots and became a legend in his own right, left behind an extraordinary work, Sur les Chevaux Orientaux et Provenants des Races Orientales ("Concerning the Horses of the Orient and Those Originating from Oriental Breeds"), which contains more than 400 colorful illustrations and hundreds of pages of meticulously handwritten observations.

It remains an invaluable compendium of knowledge about Arabian culture, heritage, horse breeding and equestrian traditions, documenting bloodlines, history, physical characteristics and breeding practices. The manuscript also preserves musical notation that allows scholars to recreate Bedouin music from two centuries ago, along with a census of several tribes and detailed descriptions of the methods of taming, training and breeding Arabian horses.



The wealth of knowledge and heritage of the Arabian horse. An excerpt from Count Rzewuski's Sur les Chevaux Orientaux et Provenants des Races Orientales ("Concerning the Horses of the Orient and Those Originating from Oriental Breeds"). 1820 - 1830.

Source: polona.pl.



Notes (music notation) of Bedouin music over 200 years ago. An excerpt from Count Rzewuski's Sur les Chevaux Orientaux et Provenants des Races Orientales ("Concerning the Horses of the Orient and Those Originating from Oriental Breeds"). 1820 - 1830.

Source: polona.pl.

The survival of Rzewuski's manuscript for more than 200 years is a miracle in and of itself, having narrowly escaped destruction multiple times over the centuries. After his disappearance – and what some believe was his mysterious death in a battle – it passed through the hands of family members and among horse enthusiasts, was briefly lost, and was eventually acquired by the National Library in Warsaw in 1928. The manuscript survived World War II and is now on permanent display in Krasiński Palace, also known as Palace of the Commonwealth, in Warsaw.

These records, preserved to this day, are a testament to the gold-bearded Count Rzewuski's profound respect for the roots and lineage of the people who welcomed him as one of their own.
He also lived up to the Polish saying:

> A man without a horse is like a body without a soul.





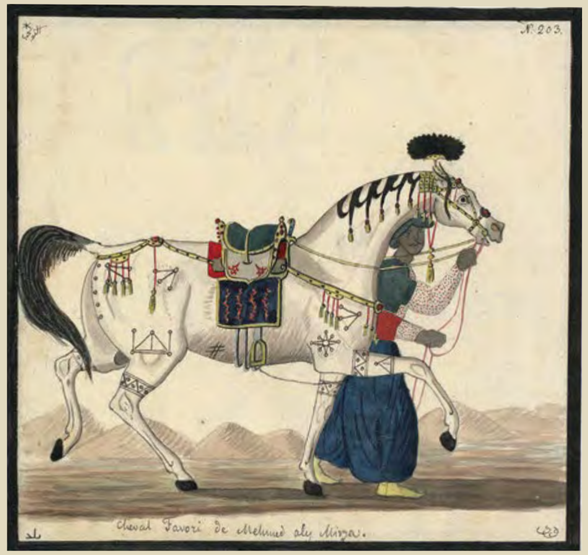
Count Rzewuski in the Arabian desert. 1874.

Image credit: polona.pl.

Rzewuski's story is a testament to the power of cultural exchange and the universal human quest for belonging. His life reminds us that roots are not always defined by geography or birth; they can also be chosen, nurtured and earned through respect, understanding and a willingness to become part of something greater than oneself.

In an age marked by borders and division, the tale of the Polish nobleman who became an honorary Arab sheikh endures as a luminous example of how one man's search for roots blossomed into a legacy that transcends nations and centuries.

**Enjoy exploring a selection of some of the remarkable pages of the manuscript that were hand-picked for you in this article, and find the full magnificent manuscript** [here at the National Library of Poland](#).



An excerpt from Count Rzewuski's Sur les Chevaux Orientaux et Provenants des Races Orientales ("Concerning the Horses of the Orient and Those Originating from Oriental Breeds"). 1820 - 1830.

Source: polona.pl.



# The Soil and Soul of **Saudi Art**

By **Rima Ruhman**

She looks not at you, but through you. Her expression holds something that tells you she knows something you do not. It is a portrait of a young lady wearing a thin white veil, through which you can glimpse the auburn tint of her long, wavy hair falling over her shoulders. Her spacious wide-set hazel eyes, small aquiline nose, delicately curved, and tiny mouth—neither smiling nor frowning—reveal very little, yet somehow suggest that she knows much more.

## She is the Saudi Mona Lisa

It is an oil on canvas painted by Saudi artist Fahad Alrubayq in 1975, when he was a young man. Inspired by his readings on the masters of the Renaissance with his limited resources, he found his muse- the sitter of the portrait is a nine-year old neighbor, posing for him at her own home. This nod to the greats is just that.

As "Bedayat: Beginnings of Saudi Art Movement" illustrates, the Saudi art movement began by acknowledging its predecessors but evolved into something far more complex, more firmly established, and more deeply rooted in society.



**'Saudi Mona Lisa.'** Fahad Alrubayq. 1975. Oil on canvas. 62 x 50 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.
Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.



**'The Bright Shore.'**
Ibrahim Bugis. 1986. Oil on canvas. 56 x 76 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.





**'Camel Pasture.'**
Mohammed Alajam. 1985/1986. Oil on canvas.
74 x 120 cm. Courtesy of Mohammad Abdullah
Alalyani private collection.

Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.



Shelter, fertile ground, stillness, water, stability—this is what was poured into the Saudi Art Movement in the early 1960s—a Kingdom with love for its people, a wish for them to flourish and grow and take root in the arts, to find and express who they are, and to learn from artists around the world and find their own expression.

It was in this climate, in this fertile landscape that Fahad Alrubayq, with the writings of the Renaissance masters in his home and their methods for preparing pigments and canvases at his fingertips, found his calling as an artist. Other Saudi artists, similarly inspired, also discovered their own creative paths and found a place to thrive and grow.

Bedayat: Beginnings of the Saudi Art Movement exhibits the visual language of these early pioneering Saudi artists. It is a landmark exhibition, initiated by the Visual Arts Commission based on in-depth research including site visits, interviews with artists and extensive documentation. The exhibit celebrates artists like Fahad Alrubayq, Abdulrahman Alsoliman, Fouad Mougharbel, Dia Aziz Dia and Safeya Binzagr, who were all active during the early days of the Saudi art movement from the 1960s to the 1980s.



**'Ornaments.'**
Mirza Alsaleh. 1984.
Mixed media on canvas. 79 x 140 cm.
Credits: Collection of the Museums Commission, Ministry of Culture.

Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.



**'My Father.'**
Ibrahim Alfassam. 1977.
Oil on canvas. 69 x 55 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.

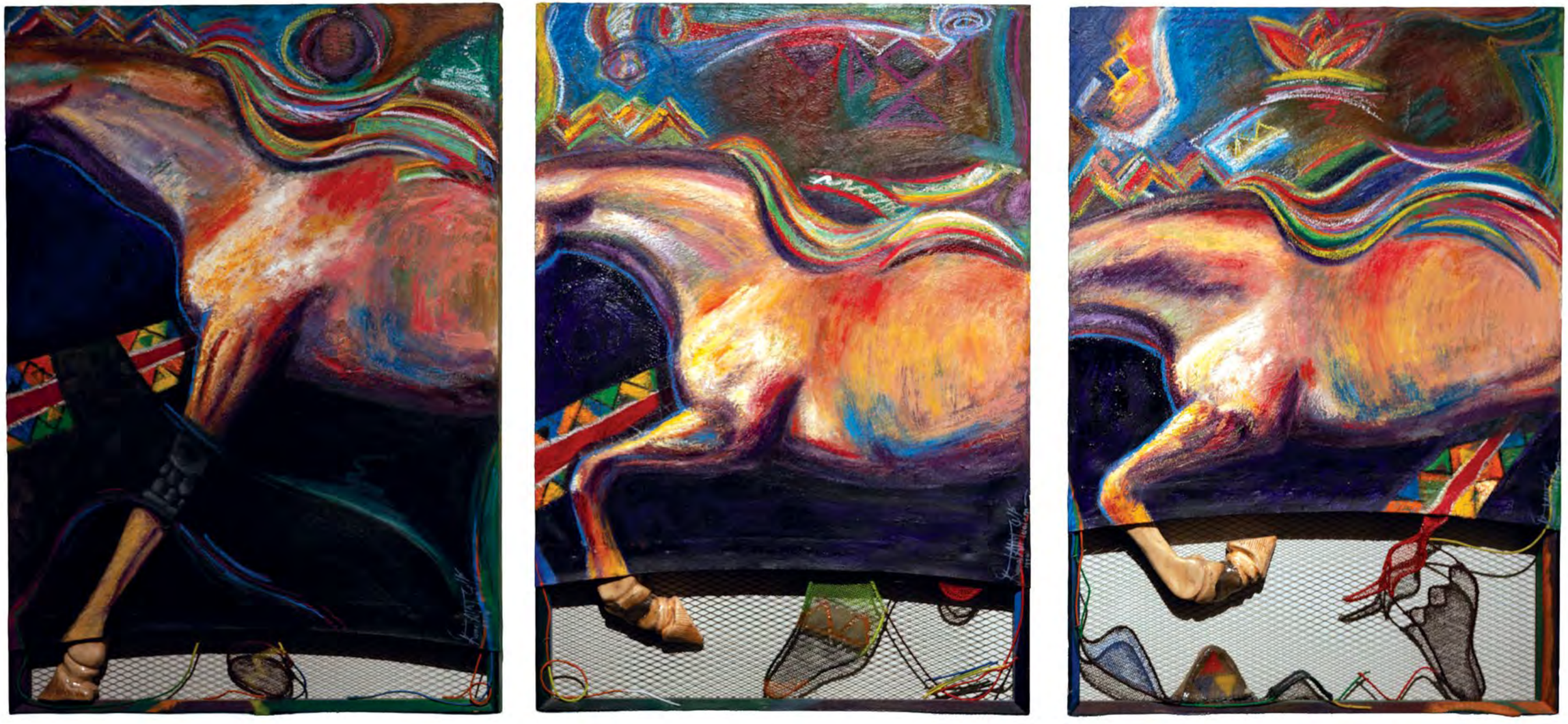




**'Untitled.'**
Abdulhamid Albaqshi. 1974-1976.
Oil on carton. 52 x 70 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.

The exhibit shows how first-generation, early Saudi artists created their own unique visual language and built artistic communities during this formative period. It celebrates the beginnings of a community-led art scene, nurtured with passion for creative expression and an eagerness to tell Saudi stories.
By examining the origins of the Saudi art movement, "Bedayat: Beginnings of Saudi Art Movement" provides a stunning look into the country's rich cultural heritage and the evolution of its artistic identity.



**'Triptych.'**
Kamal Almualem. 1994.
Mixed media on canvas.
Credits: Al-Mansouria Foundation for Culture and Creativity, Jeddah, KSA.

Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.

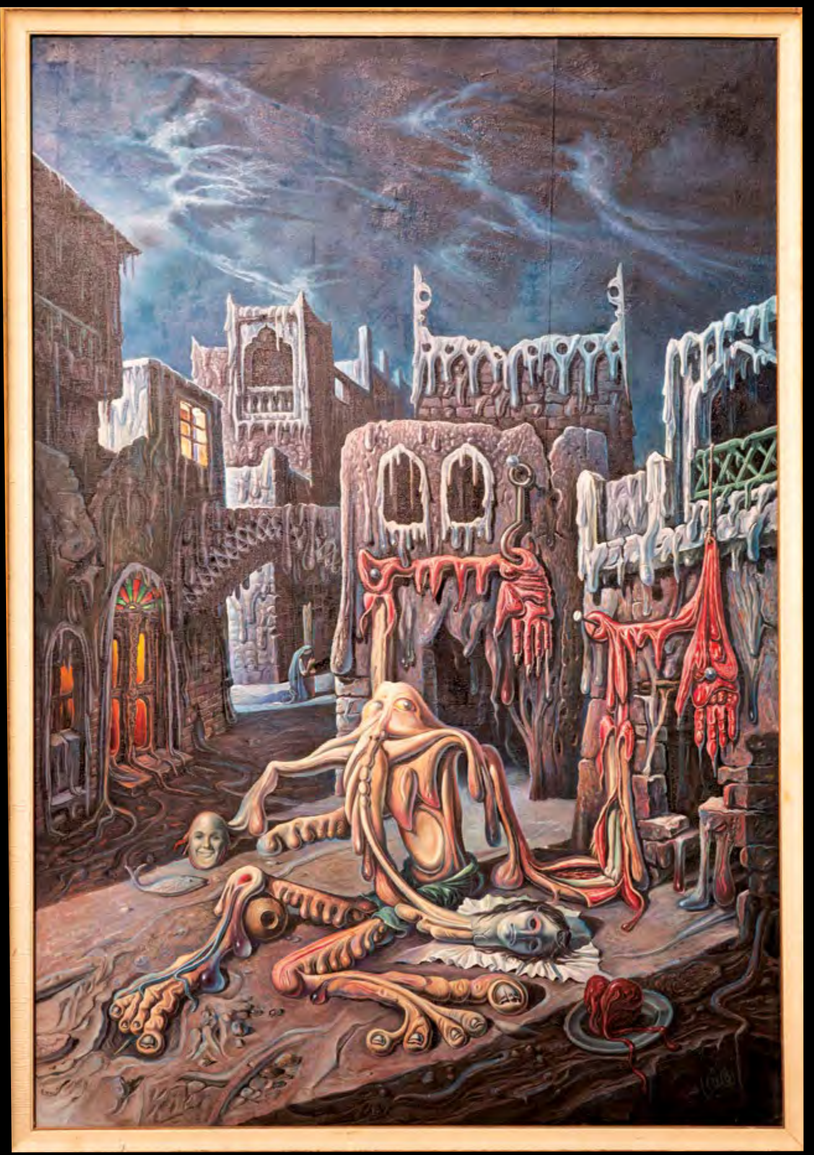
A blend of the old and the new, the real and surreal, the everyday and the extraordinary, "Bedayat: Beginnings of Saudi Art Movement" is an exhibition that is distinctly Saudi, firmly attached to its own culture, its own vision, bringing its own flavor.




**'Untitled.'**
Khalil Hassan Khalil. 1986.
Oil on canvas. 107 x 120 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.





**'The Loud Silence.'**
Abdulhamid Albaqshi. 1973.
Oil on canvas. 160 x 110 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.



**'Islamic Composition.'**
Abdulrahman Alsoliman. 1983.
Oil on canvas. 100 x 75 cm.
Courtesy of the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman, Jordan.

Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.



This seed has sprouted, and it continues to grow. Today, Saudi artists stand with their brushes in hand, ready to paint, define their forms, choose their textures, colors, opacity and translucency. Yet beneath the surface, their roots continue to spread, drawing nourishment that allows them to flourish and grow into something born of the soil and soul of the Saudi people—something that first drew inspiration from the world while branching out to explore its own identity.

The Saudi Mona Lisa has the countenance of a woman-- wise beyond her years, seemingly prescient in her thoughts-- who perhaps has glimpsed the seed that would be planted and the roots that would take hold in Saudi Arabia. She saw the future in a young man who sat before her, perhaps with trembling hands, painting for a society beginning to move beyond the conventions—and even the confines—of words and poetry, translating its stories into a visual language that would grow into something more brilliant and vibrant than anyone could have imagined. Is that why she looks as she does? A solidly fixed shape from the past foretelling the future? Did she know that she would become a symbol of the beginnings of Saudi creativity?

> What seeds are we planting, and what will they grow into?



**'Untitled.'**
Mohammed Alsaleem. 1977.
Oil on canvas. 80 x 80 cm.
Courtesy of Turki AlShabana.

Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.



**'Untitled.'**
Mohammed Alsaleem. 1986.
Oil on canvas. 50 x 70 cm.
Courtesy of Art Jameel Collection, Dubai UAE.

Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.

As the future comes into view, we ask: what seeds are we planting, and what will they grow into?

Maybe we should all be a little curious about what this art scene will become as the world continues to evolve, and as these seeds take root and grow into something greater and more profound—something authentic, rooted in the soil and spirit of Saudi Arabia.



**'Untitled.'**
Mohammed Alresayes, 1980.
Ink on paper. 27 x 38 cm.
Courtesy of Abstract Art Gallery, Riyadh, KSA.
Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.





**'Untitled.'**
**Abdullah Alshalti. 1985.**
Oil on canvas. 90 x 121 cm.
Courtesy of Turki AlShabana.
Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.

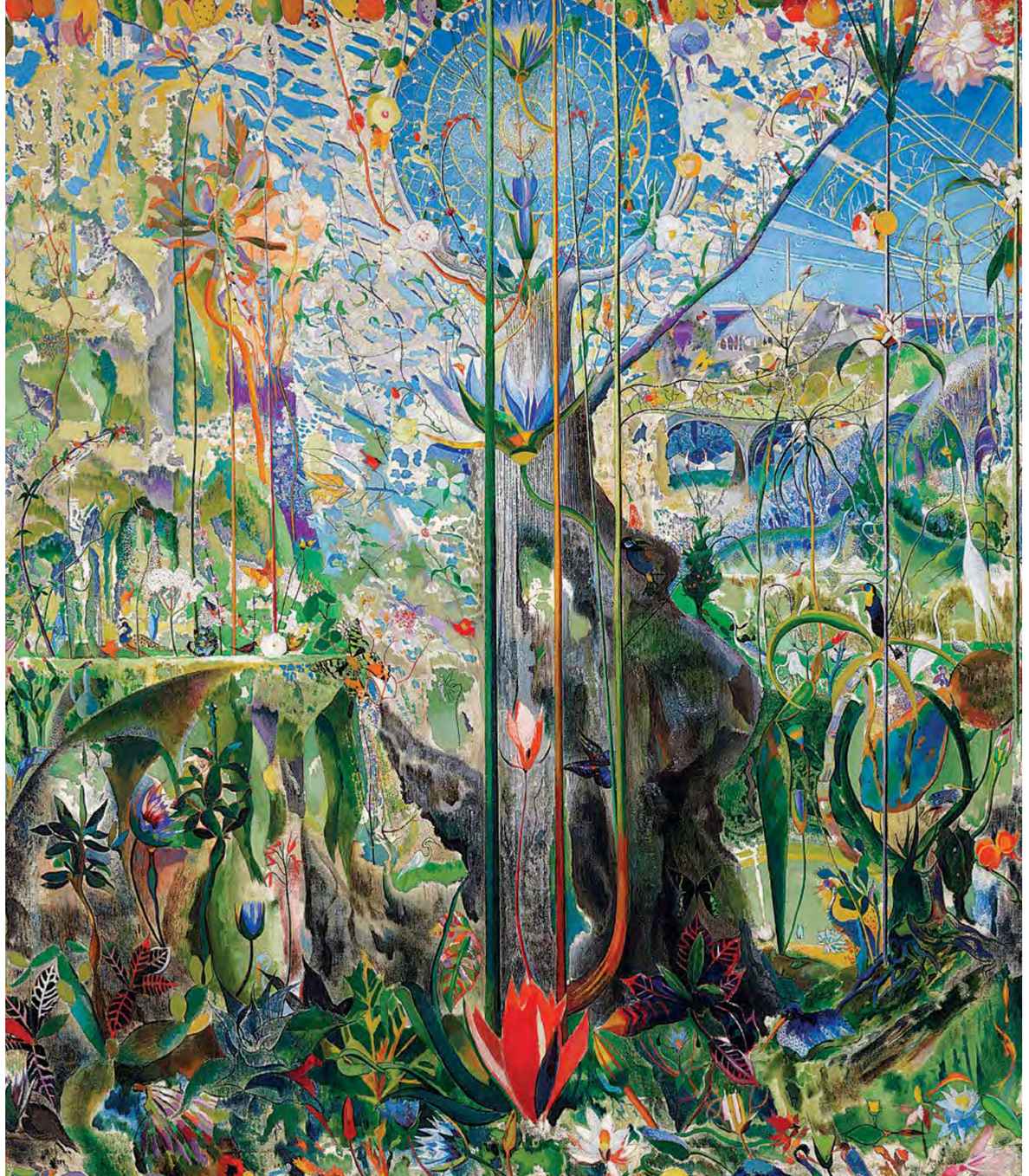
**Rima Ruhman is a writer and novelist.**

"Bedayat: Beginnings of Saudi Art Movement" travelling exhibition is an initiative of the Visual Arts Commission presented in collaboration with the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra). The exhibition is on display from July 13 to November 7, 2026, at Ithra for its second edition, having been originally shown at the Saudi National Museum in Riyadh from January to April 2026.

# Roots, Unbound

By **Ali Almajnooni**

When we speak of roots, we often summon a reassuring image: an origin fixed deep below, from which branches sprout and grow, while the root itself remains still and impervious to change, as though time passes only above the surface of the earth and never reaches it. In cultural and national discourse in particular, this image becomes even more rigid. Roots become synonymous with purity, authenticity and continuity, and the persistent return to them becomes an attempt to recapture a moment or a primal image, presumed to have been whole and harmonious.



**'Tree of My Life.'**
Joseph Stella. 1919.
Oil on canvas. 193 x 213.4 cm.
Source: Obelisk.

Yet a root is anything but still. It is a living organism that advances, branches out and tests the soil. It responds to moisture and drought, avoids obstacles and enters into relationships with microorganisms, fungi and other roots. The root does more than sustain the life of the tree; it also lives a life of its own, one no less dynamic and complex than what unfolds among the branches.

The traditional view of the tree assumes a clear hierarchy that determines the place of the root and every other part of the tree. Within this order, the root is the origin, the trunk its extension, the branches its results and the fruit its purpose. By the same logic, the past becomes a foundation that exists in a final, settled form, while the present is a branch that derives its legitimacy from that foundation. Yet this image conceals a fundamental truth: The roots themselves grow in tandem with the branches, though in the opposite direction. As the tree expands and rises into space, it must reshape its presence in the soil. What happens above affects what happens below, and vice versa. The size and vitality of the leaves, the amount of light, the force and intensity of the wind, and the changing seasons all redirect the growth of the roots.

The relationship between root and branch, then, is one of continual exchange and interdependence, rather than a fixed cause producing a changing effect. They are two expressions of the same life. The branches reach toward light, while the roots reach toward water. The branches test the air; the roots read the soil. Each expands the boundaries of the living organism that is the tree and helps ensure its continuity.

Branches should not be given a higher status than roots simply because they are visible. Human cultures have long favored what can be seen over what remains hidden: light over darkness, sight over blindness. If the branches represent what culture produces — art, ideas, institutions, and new forms of life — then roots represent the deep reservoir of language, memory, customs, stories and ways of sensing the world. Yet this reservoir is reinterpreted whenever the present changes. It never remains exactly as it was.

> “The roots themselves grow in tandem with the branches, though in the opposite direction.”





Culture, in this sense, is not a repository containing relics of the past; rather, it is a living system transformed through use. Language, which we consider one of our deepest roots, changes every day. New words enter it, meanings recede, and new metaphors emerge from words that have existed for centuries. The same is true of a social ritual, which no longer carries the same meaning when its setting, audience or historical circumstances change, or of a folk tale, which does not remain the same as it passes from one storyteller to another.

Even what we call heritage does not reach us whole and complete from some bygone era. We select from it, arrange it, give it names, boundaries, and interpretations, and decide what is displayed in museums, what is taught in schools and what is left out. It is not enough, then, to say that we inherit our roots when we are continually participating in their making and reshaping.

At particular moments in history, the desire to search for roots intensifies, especially when nations seek to define themselves. This happens when states are founded, when they are liberated from colonial rule, when disparate groups and regions are united under a shared national identity, or when rapid transformations threaten familiar forms of life. At such pivotal moments, a nation needs a narrative that tells it who it is, where it came from, and what binds it together. It turns to artifacts, genealogies, narratives, language, dress customs and places, selecting from them markers capable of creating a sense of continuity.

Such a return to the past is understandable and necessary to building a sense of belonging, but it carries the risk of turning history into a static image. A nation may imagine for itself a single, fixed origin and a straight path, even though its formation was the result of countless encounters, migrations, conflicts and exchanges.

National culture may be presented as an ancient essence preserved from outside influence, even though cultures grow through contact, translation, borrowing and proximity. The question we ask of our roots, therefore, should not be: What pure form did we once possess? It may be more useful to ask: What paths formed us? What relationships did we enter into? And how did the elements of our culture change as they moved across time and place?

Here, the concept of the "rhizome," as formulated by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, takes on particular significance. In contrast to the model of the tree, built around a single origin and hierarchical branches, the rhizome offers the image of a network spreading horizontally, in which any point can connect to any other.

The rhizome has no single center, no absolute beginning, and no predetermined path. It may be severed in one place and resume growing in another, while multiple lines intertwine within it without losing their distinctiveness. This way of thinking helps us understand culture as a network of relationships rather than as a lineage descending from a single origin.

The concept of the rhizome does not ask us to abandon roots or deny history. It frees the root from the image of a rigid column. Roots can spread sideways, meet, exchange nourishment and cross the boundaries humans draw on the surface of the earth. Cultural identity can therefore be understood as a form of life shaped by overlapping memories and continually renewed connections, rather than as a solitary tree enclosed within its own soil or a collection of branches severed from their past. A culture can be national and local while also carrying traces of trade, migration, religion, translation and contact with other cultures.

Placing roots and branches on equal footing frees both from the need to rank one above the other. Renewal does not require severing ties with the past, and fidelity to the past does not require repeating it as it was. A new branch expands the possibilities of the root; in the same way, a changing root allows unexpected branches to emerge. A living culture need not choose between authenticity and transformation.

Perhaps, then, what we need is less to dig into the earth in search of some first root than to listen to what the roots are doing now: how they spread, what they connect with, what they absorb and what they give to the soil around them.

The root is not a silent witness to a completed and closed past. It is a living thing that continues to write its history unseen, beneath the soil. If the branches give the tree its shape in the sky, the roots redraw and reshape it underground. Between what is hidden and what is visible, between memory and transformation, culture takes shape as continuous growth rather than a final return to an imagined point of origin.

**Ali Almajnooni is a writer, translator and researcher.**






**'Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras.' Joseph Stella. 1913–1914. Oil on canvas. 215.3 x 195.6 cm.**

**Source: Obelisk.**

# Rooted in Silence, Speaking in Networks

By **Gaida Almogren**

Beneath the visible world of trunks, leaves and human perception lies a dense and dynamic system of exchange, an underground architecture where trees communicate through their roots. In recent decades, scientific inquiry into what is often called the "wood wide web" has revealed that trees are not solitary organisms but participants in complex, interdependent communities. Through fungal networks and root systems, they transmit nutrients, warn one another of disease, and even redistribute resources to sustain weaker members. This silent language, conducted through chemical signals, electrical impulses and symbiotic relationships, unfolds at a temporal and sensory scale far beyond human awareness. It challenges the assumption that intelligence requires speech or visibility, suggesting instead that connection itself may be the most profound form of knowledge.



**'You Are From Me and I Am From You.'**
Manal AlDowayan. 2017.
Courtesy of the **artist**.

This hidden ecology finds an intimate echo in the work of Manal AlDowayan, whose practice frequently interrogates the unseen, whether social, historical or natural. Drawing from personal memory and cultural inheritance, AlDowayan reflects on the women in her family who spoke to their palm trees with reverence and familiarity, addressing them as one might an elder. "The women in my family talk to their palm trees... These are intelligent, sane, religious women... The conversations would mostly revolve around polite subjects like health and the weather, but there were times when more personal topics were discussed, like love and death."

Though these exchanges appeared one-sided, they were grounded in an intuitive recognition of presence. It was only later, upon encountering scientific research, that this inherited practice revealed a deeper resonance: trees communicate through "a sophisticated silent language, communicating complex information via smell, taste and electrical impulses."

> The women in my family talk to their palm trees.





**'You Are From Me and I Am From You.'**
Manal AlDowayan. 2017.
Courtesy of the artist.

What once seemed like quiet superstition emerges instead as an instinctive awareness of an unseen world.

AlDowayan's 2017 temporary installation, *You Are From Me and I Am From You*, emerged from this convergence of intuition and science. Commissioned in response to the historic Al Ain Oasis, the work invited viewers to reconsider the boundaries between the visible and the invisible, the human and the non-human. Rather than focusing on the towering palms themselves, AlDowayan directed attention downward, into the soil where the true network of life resides. Using ground-penetrating scanning technology, she captured images of the roots beneath the oasis, revealing what she describes as an unseen universe operating beneath our feet.

"In this artwork I will search for the unseen universe of the date palm oasis... attempting to orchestrate the encounter of the viewer with an alternate universe," she explains. Her focus on palm roots is deliberate: "Palm roots are at the center of the date palm community structure... the invisible network that allows for palms to talk to each other, to create families and friendships... and to contribute to the sustainability of the whole community."

This density, and the impossibility of distinguishing one root from another, reflects a radical form of collectivity. In this subterranean world, individuality dissolves into interdependence. Trees do not compete in isolation but thrive through cooperation, forming what might be understood as a model of sustainable community. AlDowayan translated this idea into a spatial experience. Fabric walls printed with root imagery formed a corridor through which visitors walked, simulating a passage from darkness into light, an ascent from the hidden to the seen.

The work was not solely about botanical systems; it also operated as a meditation on memory, visibility and cultural narrative. AlDowayan frequently situates her work within the context of Saudi and Arab women's experiences, exploring what is preserved and what remains obscured. The root network becomes a metaphor for histories that persist beneath the surface, shaping identity even when they are not immediately visible. "The women in my family somehow knew, by instinct, to recognize the hidden language of the world around them," she reflects, linking inherited knowledge to broader questions of perception and awareness.

In this sense, *You Are From Me and I Am From You* operates on multiple registers. It is at once a scientific inquiry, a personal narrative and a philosophical proposition. By aligning human experience with the silent intelligence of trees, AlDowayan challenges anthropocentric notions of knowledge and agency. She asks whether trees, with their extended lifespans and intricate networks, might possess a form of wisdom that humans have yet to comprehend: "Are trees superior to humans when it comes to building safe and sustainable communities? ... Are palms better equipped to engage with a deeply interconnected world than we are?"

The work serves as a reminder that spaces of infinite knowledge surround us constantly. "It is our responsibility to train our eyes and minds to see the unseen, to listen to the unheard," she writes. The roots beneath our feet are not only structural supports; they are conduits of relation, memory and exchange. In attending to them, we begin to perceive a broader ecology of meaning, one that situates human life within a vast, interconnected continuum.

**Gaida Almogren is an artistic independent curator.**



“Palm roots are at the center of the date palm community structure... the invisible network that allows for palms to talk to each other, to create families and friendships... and to contribute to the sustainability of the whole community.”

Enjoy discovering more about the colorful and intricate wood wide web, through this special trees project in Google Arts and Culture.



'You Are From Me and I Am From You.'
Manal AlDowayan. 2017.

Courtesy of the artist.

# Family Roots:

## The Stories We Remember, and Those We Forget

By **Gaida Almogren**



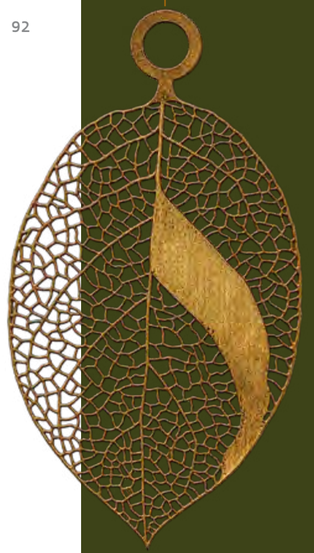
**'Tree of Guardians.'** Manal AlDowayan, 2014. Exhibited at the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale, 2021, Saudi Arabia.

Courtesy Of the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale and Manal AlDowayan Studio.

Every family tree begins with roots, yet not all roots are remembered equally. In many cultures, ancestry is traced through the father's surname, family name and lineage.

Generations can often be followed through the paternal line with photographs, documents and oral histories, creating a strong sense of identity and belonging.





In contrast, tracing the mother's side of the family is often far more difficult. A woman's surname may change after marriage, family records may not preserve her ancestry, and over time the stories of her parents and grandparents gradually fade. These maternal connections can become invisible, despite being just as important in shaping who we are.

This idea echoes Tree of Guardians (2014) by Saudi artist Manal AlDowayan, an installation of 2,000 brass leaves and hundreds of family tree drawings accompanied by oral histories. Rather than celebrating only documented family lines, the artwork honors mothers, grandmothers and generations of women whose names and stories have often been forgotten. It reminds us that women have long preserved culture through stories, songs and traditions passed from one generation to the next.



“Today’s women have the power to not only speak for and about their own mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, but also to reclaim the collective legacy of generations of women that might otherwise be lost to memory.”

— Manal AlDowayan

By highlighting the other sides of our heritage, this artwork encourages us to value every ancestor equally and preserve the memories, names and experiences of mothers and grandmothers before they disappear from our collective history.

## If you were to draw a family tree, what and who would you include in it?

**Gaida Almogren is an artistic independent curator.**





'Tree of Guardians.' Manal AlDowayan. 2014. Exhibited at the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale, 2021, Saudi Arabia.

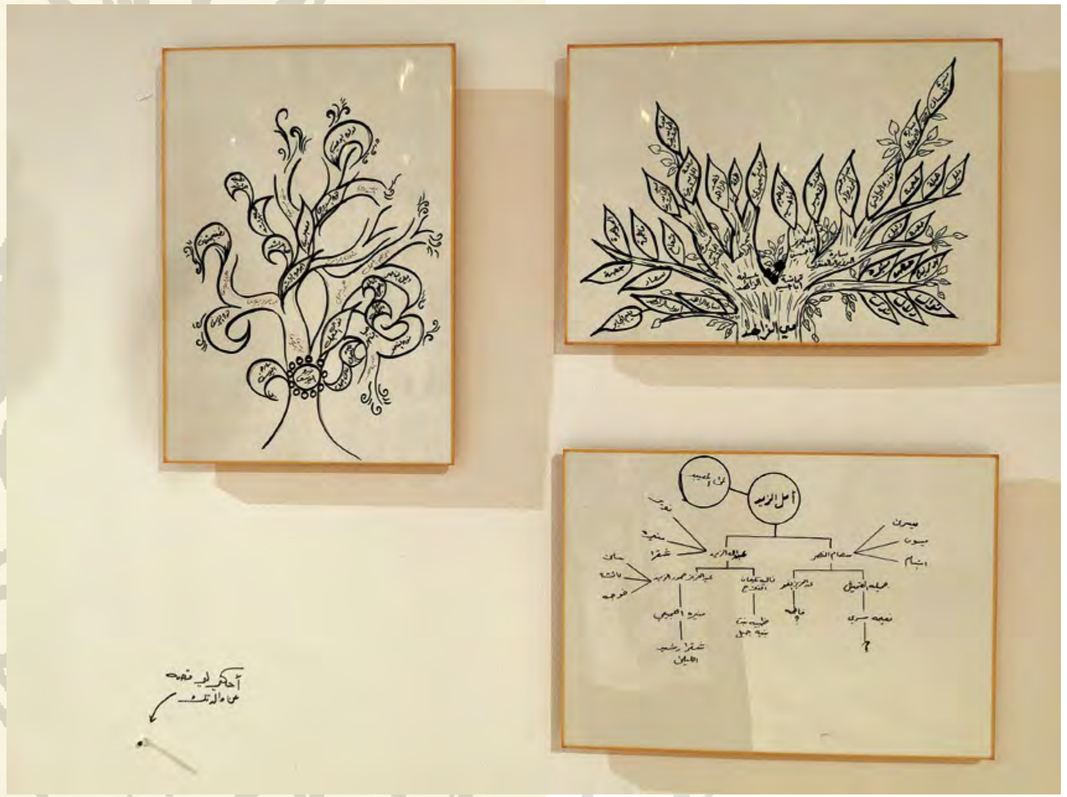
Courtesy Of the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale and Manal AlDowayan Studio.



'Tree of Guardians.'
Manal AlDowayan. 2014.
Exhibited at the
Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale,
2021, Saudi Arabia.

Courtesy Of the Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale and Manal AlDowayan Studio.





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# The Rock of the Seven Hands:

## The Roots of Rock Art and Engravings

By **Mubarak Mohammed Al Masfuh**

Thousands of years before humans learned to write, before cities were built and histories were recorded, nature was humanity's first teacher and source of sustenance. It provided food, shelter and the raw materials for the earliest tools. Among these natural resources, rock held an exceptional place.



**'The Rock of the Seven Hands.'**
2000 BC. Sandstone. Hima, Najran Region.

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It was shaped into hunting implements, used to prepare food and for self-defense and eventually became the foundation of dwellings that offered security and stability.

As human societies evolved, particularly during the Neolithic period around 10,000 BC, people gradually shifted their focus beyond mere survival. They began seeking ways to preserve their thoughts, experiences and beliefs. . Rocks assumed a new purpose, becoming the surfaces upon which people engraved the details of their lives.

They became humanity's earliest visual archive, preserving memories across millennia. Their surfaces bear witness to people's understanding of the world, their relationship with nature, and the fears, hopes and aspirations that shaped their lives.

The discovery of the Rock of the Seven Hands offers a remarkable example of the earliest roots of rock art in Saudi Arabia. It was discovered by a citizen in the Hima Cultural Area in the Najran region of southern Saudi Arabia, one of the world's most significant UNESCO World Heritage sites for cultural rock art, with evidence dating back to around 2000 BC.

From a technical perspective, the monument consists of a large sandstone boulder with multiple surfaces of varying sizes, covered with a dark layer of patina. Its front face preserves two principal types of archaeological evidence:

The first consists of deeply carved human hands. Six complete hands appear on the front face, while the seventh extends onto the reverse side. Each carving includes the palm, forearm and shoulder joint and all have been hollowed from the interior, leaving only faint traces of the ancient patina within them. The hands vary slightly in length, allowing researchers to reconstruct the carving process.  The artist likely began by forming a mental image of the composition, then outlined each hand before carefully hollowing out its interior.





The second consists of an incised inscription on the front face of the rock, composed of several letters written in Thamudic script along the left side of the stone.

The grooves and deep indentations suggest the use of hard tools, such as stone implements or sharp metal objects, to carve several millimeters into the sandstone. Previous scientific studies of rock art across the Kingdom indicate that this type of archaeological evidence spans an extensive historical period, from prehistoric times through the later Islamic era.

**Back to the Earliest Roots**

The discovery of prehistoric cave paintings was a serendipitous event that transformed the world's understanding of human history. During the second half of the 19th century, researchers became interested in a cave in northern Spain after prehistoric bones and stone tools were discovered near its entrance. These findings prompted the Spanish archaeologist Marcelino Sautuola to investigate the site, which would later become known as Altamira Cave.

In 1879, while exploring the cave with his young daughter Maria, she looked up at the ceiling by the light of a lamp and cried out in amazement at the vividly colored images of animals above her. That moment marked one of the most significant archaeological discoveries in human history. It revealed that prehistoric people were far more than hunter-gatherers; they possessed artistic sensibilities and the ability to express their thoughts and beliefs through visual art. Similar discoveries in France and Spain later confirmed that rock art represents one of humanity's earliest forms of expression, with stone preserving the first chapters of our shared visual memory.

In Saudi Arabia, systematic scientific research into rock inscriptions began with archaeological expeditions conducted in 1951 and 1952 to document inscriptions, rock art and ancient writings across the Kingdom. These surveys laid the foundation for modern research in the field. Later, the Italian researcher Emanuele Anati devoted years to studying the rock art of the Arabian Peninsula. His four-volume work examined sites across central Arabia and introduced a scientific methodology for classifying and analyzing rock art. His publications remain foundational references for researchers today and have played an important role in demonstrating the cultural significance of the rock inscriptions in the Kingdom, as an enduring testimony to the depth of human history in the region.

Saudi Arabia is among the richest regions in the world in terms of this archaeological heritage, preserving evidence of human presence spanning thousands of years. Its importance has earned international recognition. The rock art sites of Jubbah and Shuwaymis in the Hail Region, together with the Hima Cultural Area in the Najran Region, have been inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in recognition of their exceptional value as some of the world's most important visual records of prehistoric human life.

**Classifying and Deciphering Rock Art**

Rock art is a broad scientific term encompassing several forms of visual and written expression. These include engraved human or animal figures, tribal markings, graffiti and symbolic motifs, many of whose meanings remain uncertain. It also includes inscriptions written in both Arabic and Islamic scripts.

These elements may appear together on a single rock panel or exist independently. Specialists work to document, analyze and decipher them, a task requiring extensive scientific expertise because the surviving evidence often lacks precise contextual information. Inscriptions accompanying drawings can provide valuable clues, identifying the owner of a depicted camel, naming the artist or recording an event or journey. Such details help researchers reconstruct the historical context behind the artwork.

Even today, rock art retains much of its mystery, remaining a historical enigma that continues to invite researchers to explore one of humanity's oldest visual languages.

**Mubarak Mohammed Al Masfuh is a researcher in Islamic antiquities and a museum expert.**

# The Quest for Blue

By **Tom Verde**

Rare in nature and difficult to extract from minerals, blue eluded artisans for centuries until Egyptians invented the world's first synthetic pigment. Formulas for blues from cobalt and indigo followed, and the results have delighted our eyes and evoked the sacred, the royal, the opulent and the mysterious ever since. And the quest is not over.

It's easy to think of blue as a naturally pervasive color. It's all around us in clear skies and bodies of water. Yet elsewhere blue appears infrequently, coloring only a handful of minerals and less than 10 percent of flowering plants. Even the feathers of birds, from blue jays to bluebirds, are not truly blue but the result of a biologically sophisticated trick of the eye. The scarcity of blue in the natural world has, for much of history, made it hard to reproduce.







**'Untitled.'**
Hussain Al-Mohasen. 2014.
Mixed media on paper.
The vibrant colors of this work are its most important elements. For Al-Mohasen, they encapsulate the messages and emotions he wishes to convey. The letters stenciled form words that have no precise meaning. The meaning is individual to you, the viewer.

Part of Ithra Museum's art collection.

# Other colors were made from natural materials that you perhaps processed, but blue as a pigment didn't already exist and had to be created,

— Mark Pollard, professor of archeological science at University of Oxford





The earliest humans could pick up chunks of red or yellow ochre or white chalk and use them almost like crayons, and black could be found at the end of every burnt stick. But the transformation of natural materials into the color blue, Pollard explains, required considerable effort and ingenuity.

The quest to unlock the secret of that transformation dates back millennia and spans cultures and civilizations, from Bronze Age Central Asia to early imperial China, from medieval Venice to the modern Maghrib (Islamic North Africa).

The breakthrough came more than 5,000 years ago along the banks of the Nile when early Egyptian chemists first brought the color of the sky down to earth.

**Of all the colors on a painter's palette, the most elusive have been blues.**

## The First Blue

"The fields are caused to grow, the fields are made blue, everything alongside the earth is caused to come into being," reads a hieroglyphic inscription from the third-century-BCE temple of Horus at Edfu, referring to how the annual floodwaters of the Nile nourished the fields. A source of inspiration and worship, blue was also the color of the cosmos, fertility, sustenance and rebirth, according to Lorelei Corcoran, professor of Egyptian art and archeology at the University of Memphis and a translator of the Edfu text. Additionally, the shimmering interplay of sun and sky embodied the spark of life itself, Corcoran explains.

"Blue isn't immediately a color one would associate with the sun. We usually think of yellow or red," she says. "But if you look at the headdress that the ancient Egyptian kings wore, at the mask of Tutankhamun for example, you see it's made out of blue and gold stripes, and it's been suggested that it represents the rays of the sun breaking through the heavens."

This is an excerpt from a special dispatch from AramcoWorld.

**Tom Verde, a senior contributor to AramcoWorld.**



**Page from a Manuscript of the Holy Qur'an: Surat an-Nisa (4): 2–8.**
Tunisia, probably Qayrawan, late ninth – early 10th century. Gold leaf, silver, and ink on parchment colored with indigo. Height: 28cm, width: 36cm. According to the waqfiyya (endowment deed) of the Qayrawan Mosque in Tunisia, the volume from which this page comes – the Blue Qur'an – was donated to the mosque sometime in the 13th century.

Part of Ithra Museum's art collection.

# Ever Longing for the First Abode

By **Tariq Khawaji**

The word bayt ("house") occupies a central place in the Arabic language— linguistically, idiomatically, culturally and across its deep anthropological and historical dimensions. In its most literal sense, it denotes a place of permanent residence.



**'Tafasahu: Make Room.'**
Nada AlMulla. 2026.
Part of an Ithra Museum exhibition that invites visitors to enter as a guest—to pause, gather and reflect on the conditions of belonging within the context of the traditional Majlis, Arabic for "gathering space."

In Arabic literature, however, the bayt is also the fundamental unit of poetry, the building block upon which every poem is constructed. Classical critics traditionally did not consider a poem complete unless it comprised at least seven verses (abyat, plural of bayt). Bayt Allah al-Haram (The Sacred House of God) is the direction of prayer (qibla) for Muslims, while Bayt al-Maqdis (the Holy House) refers to the city of Jerusalem. Together, these meanings reveal the profound religious and cultural significance the word carries in Arabic and Islamic civilization.

Because the house is the repository of memory and the place from which one's roots extend into the past, it naturally became the center of human existence. It is no coincidence that the classical Arabic poet begins his poem by standing before the abandoned campsite and lamenting, drawing from the transformation of a once inhabited dwelling into a deserted ruin, a metaphor parallel to existence itself. Likewise, the Bayati maqam, renowned among the Arabic musical modes for its gentle melancholy and contemplative rhythm, has long been favored by reciters when serenading verses of mercy.





Traditional majlis in a traditional home, filled with beautiful moments and meticulous crafts. Part of Ithra Museum's exhibition, 'In Praise of the Artisan.'

Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.

When I was a child, my father's work required our family to move from one city to another. Every summer, when school ended, we could hardly contain our excitement at the prospect of returning to al-deera (hometown). To me, this word referred directly to the city of Sabya. It was synonymous with origins, roots and belonging. The concept of metaphor and figurative language has not yet entered my young mind, so I often wondered why others also called their other hometowns "al-deera," or why there was even a neighborhood in Riyadh—where I grew up—called "Al-Deera".

Over time, however, language gradually revealed its layers to me. I came to understand that the word "Deera" carries multiple meanings, of which home ("bayt") is only one. Anything encircled by the desert sands may be called a "dar" (house). Muslim jurists even defined a dar (house) as a place enclosed by a surrounding wall. In



**Every part of a home has a story, has a memory, and is rooted in our hearts. Traditional Damascus Majlis. Part of Ithra Museum's exhibition, 'In Praise of the Artisan.'**

**Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.**







Arabia, the interconnected network of homes bound by kinship and marriage gave rise to the common use of the term to signify one's home and community. Among the Arabs on the Gulf coast, however, they used it as a navigational reference during journeys across the desert; a compass pointing travelers toward home.

The house also occupies a privileged place in modern Arabic literature. In Sidi Wehdana, Raja Alem grants it absolute protagonism. Although the novel is populated by active characters, it is the rooftop that becomes the passage - and ascension - to a wider world through a creative mystical practice in which time moves freely and space dissolves into a phantom. In Amal Al-Faran's novel Hujra, we witness pivotal moments unfolding within Maryam's house. Maryam suffers from a psychological condition that remains elusive, and we observe her through the eyes of her unnamed niece. We never get to know her name, yet we come to understand both what she witnesses  and what Maryam murmurs in her delirium. This is sufficient, even for readers familiar with Al-Faran's minimalist narrative style, to realize that the story's dimensions extend far beyond the modest small house inhabited by the main character.

**Traditional majlis in a traditional home, filled with beautiful moments and meticulous crafts. Part of Ithra Museum's exhibition, 'In Praise of the Artisan.'**

**Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.**

In a different vein, Ahmed Al-Haqil in his short story collection Bayt, works with the memory formed in the rooms of the house, one that lingers like a persisting headache, until the house itself is transformed into a ruin reminiscent of the abandoned campsite of the pre-islamic Mu'allaqat, where memory does its work externally more than it emphasizes the inside of the house and its physical details. In this way, the concept of the house within the Arab philosophical imagination remains largely free from sentimental nostalgia or the imported romanticism of homesickness often associated with modern Western culture. Nor does it resemble the more radical explorations of space found in the works of Georges Perec, such as Species of Spaces or Things, where place acquires an autonomous value detached from human belonging and shaped instead by the materialism that emerged in the West after World War II.

The house may be where we are born and where we first take root, yet it grows larger with time. The farther we move away, whether for work or the inevitability of forced displacement, the greater it remains as engraved memory. It remains etched within us, like the key of any displaced person, who keeps it close to their heart, waiting for the day of return — very soon.

**Tariq Khawaji is a writer and cultural consultant.**





**Traditional majlis in a traditional home, filled with beautiful moments and meticulous crafts. Part of Ithra Museum's exhibition, 'In Praise of the Artisan.'**

**Photo by Ahmed Al-Thani.**

# Finding Our Roots

## in the Echoes of Silence

By the **Ithraeyat Editorial Team**

What does it mean to find our voice when the world has gone silent? For Syrian-Armenian artist Kevork Mourad, the answer lies not in speaking out loud, but in listening—to the whispers of stones, the rhythms of forgotten bells and the timeless wisdom of stories and myths that have survived centuries of displacement.



**'Kalila wa Dimnah.'**
Kevork Mourad.
Acrylic on linen, 63 x 103 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery.

In his solo exhibition, The Echoes of Silent Bells, on view at Dubai's Leila Heller Gallery, Mourad invites us on a profound journey into memory's emotional architecture and encourages viewers to reflect on the extraordinary harmony that once existed among cultures and faiths, and on the beauty they created by inspiring one another, embracing shared legacies and entangled roots.

> "Through our ancestors, we inherit far more than genetics. We inherit culture, traditions, language, stories, values and memories. Even the food we eat and the rituals we practice carry echoes of those who came before us,"
>
> **the artist told Ithraeyat.**





Born in Qameshli, Syria, and shaped by Aleppo's rich cultural tapestry, the New York-based artist transforms personal and collective histories into layered visual narratives, where architecture dissolves into rhythmic lines and human figures emerge like ghosts from densely composed surfaces.

Central to this exploration are the mythical traditions that have long sustained displaced communities as they seek new roots and connections. Mourad draws inspiration from timeless tales such as **Kalila wa Dimna** and **The Conference of the Birds**—stories that, like his art, become vessels for carrying heritage forward and preserving endangered histories. These fables, with their animal protagonists and spiritual quests, mirror our own search for identity in a fractured world.

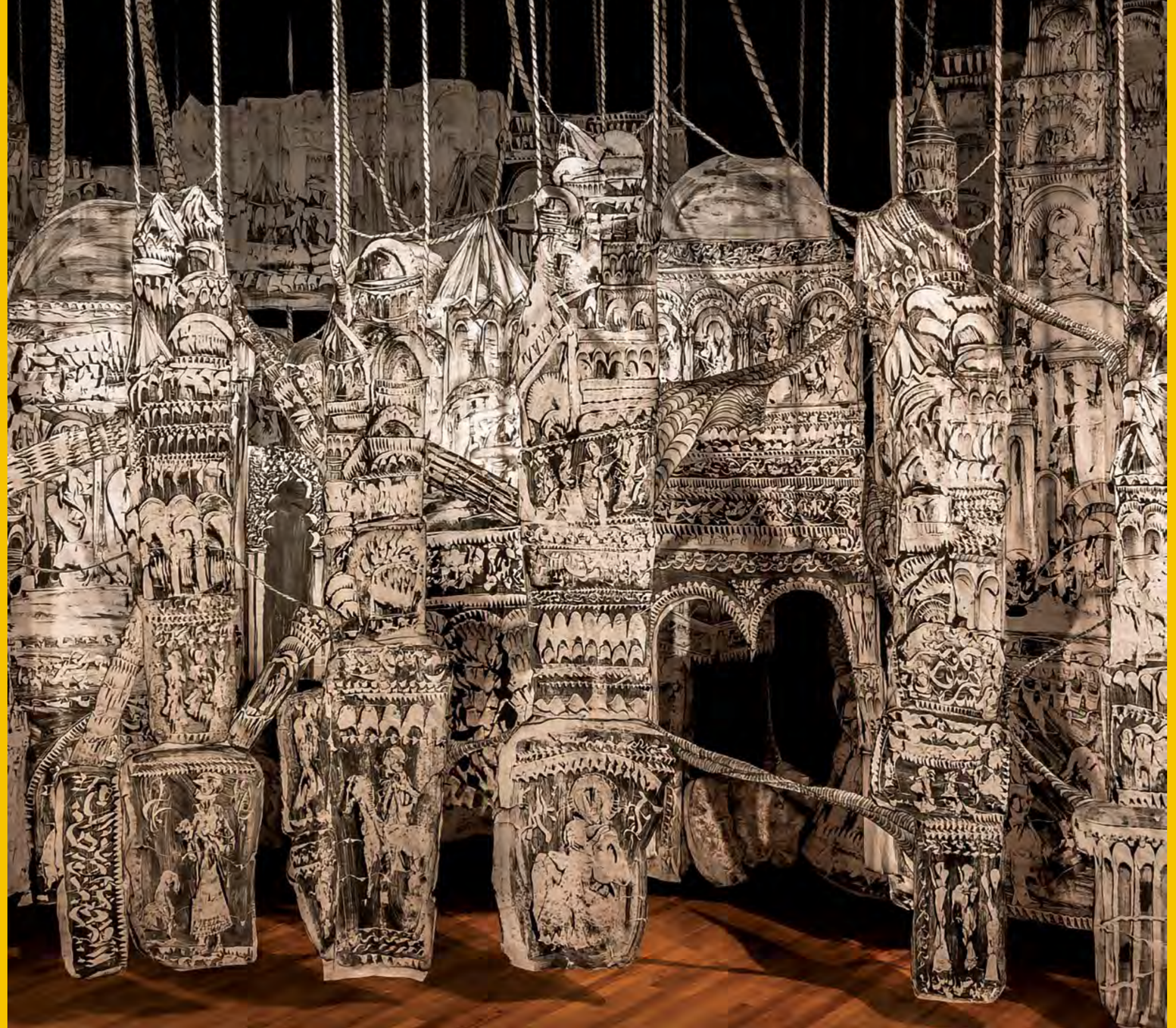
"For me, this work is a celebration of the knowledge passed down through generations and a reminder that ancient stories continue to offer profound guidance in understanding ourselves and the world around us," says Mourad.

"I was drawn to **The Conference of the Birds'** poetic journey because it speaks to a universal human experience: the endless search for meaning, fulfillment and a place to belong," he shares.



**'The Conference of the Birds.'**
**Kevork Mourad.**
**Acrylic on linen, 63 x 103 cm.**

**Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery.**





“We often spend our lives wandering the world in pursuit of happiness or an ideal destination, believing that what we seek exists somewhere beyond ourselves. Yet the story reminds us that the deepest sense of peace and abundance cannot be found through distance or possessions. It already exists within us.”

**Through his art, he invites viewers to reflect on their own inner journeys and recognize that the quiet place we long for is not somewhere else — it is already within us.**

**'Memories of the Stones.'**
Kevork Mourad.
2019; 2026. Installation,
Diptych; 600 x 280 x 70 cm (each piece).
Courtesy of the artist and Leila Heller Gallery.

# What Roots Preserve: Oral Heritage as a Living Memory

By **Tara Al Dughaither**

This interview began with a simple question from a musician friend: Why does folk music disappear when the environments and cultures that gave rise to it disappear? But the question led me somewhere broader. If folk music is part of oral heritage, what happens to the memory of society when the environments that gave this heritage its language, rhythm and meaning begin to change? And how do we preserve this heritage, as one of the roots of our cultural identity, without turning it into a static relic or reducing it to nostalgia for the past?
In this interview, I speak with Dr. Samir Al-Dhamer, one of the foremost researchers of Saudi culture and oral heritage, about the place of oral heritage in the Arabian Peninsula, its relationship with folk music, its role in preserving memory and identity, and why safeguarding it remains a cultural necessity today rather than simply an exercise in recovering the past.



**'The Traditional Folk Dance Al-Khubayti.'**
**Fouad Mougharbel. 1987. Oil on canvas. 90 x 70 cm.**
**Courtesy of Mohammad Abdullah Alalyani private collection.**

**Photo by: Ahmad Al Thani. From the exhibition, Bedayat: Beginnings of Saudi Art Movement.**

## Q1.

Oral heritage is classified as “intangible cultural heritage.” But is it truly intangible? Or is it embodied in place, body, relationships and daily practice?

The classification of oral heritage as "intangible cultural heritage" is an academic and organizational one, intended to distinguish it from buildings, artifacts and other physical objects. But my many years of documenting cultural heritage and folk arts has led me to see oral heritage as something that is not entirely intangible. It is a living heritage, embodied in people, places and practices.

Through my interviews with storytellers and elders, I came to understand that oral heritage cannot be separated from place or the body. Place is no silent backdrop to a story; it is part of its memory.

The body, too, is its first archive, preserving the manner of performance, the tone of a call, the movements of craftspeople and the rhythm of work. A storyteller may forget some of the words, but the body remembers the movements. A craftsman may struggle to explain a skill, while their hands perform it with remarkable precision.

So, when we describe oral heritage as "intangible," this does not mean that it is detached from the physical world. Rather, its essential value lies in knowledge, skill and meanings. This heritage cannot survive without a body to carry it, a place to hold it, a community to practice it, and human relationships through which it can be passed on.

It may be classified as intangible heritage, but it is deeply embodied in life. Perhaps a more precise way of putting it is this: Oral heritage is an intangible memory that cannot survive without tangible vessels.

## Q2.

Why does oral heritage hold such particular importance in the culture of the Arabian Peninsula, not only as a subject of study, but as a system of knowledge and a way of understanding the world? What factors, in your view, helped establish this significance?

Oral heritage holds special importance in the culture of the Arabian Peninsula because it was never simply a means of preserving the past. It was a complete system for producing, transmitting and interpreting knowledge. Through stories, proverbs, poetry and counsel, people passed on knowledge of nature, routes, seasons, ways of life, and social values and norms from one generation to the next.

These forms were not merely entertainment or displays of eloquence; they preserved knowledge, shaped behavior and carried the accumulated experience of generations. When we study oral heritage, we do not ask only, “What happened?” We also ask, “How did people understand what happened? And how did they reshape it through their stories, proverbs and poetry?”

Historical, social and environmental factors all helped establish the status of oral heritage in the Arabian Peninsula. Before the spread of writing and printing, oral transmission was the primary means of preserving and sharing knowledge. It was supported by a culture that valued memorization and storytelling, as well as by social institutions such as gatherings (the majalis), which provided spaces for learning and exchanging experience. Life in the Arabian Peninsula also demanded precise knowledge of place, seasons and resources, making the oral transmission of such knowledge across generations essential. In this way, oral heritage became an integral part of society’s knowledge system rather than simply a means of preserving the past.

Oral heritage in the Arabian Peninsula, then, is not something we return to out of nostalgia. It is a complete system of knowledge, and the traditional storyteller was one of its most important custodians. When a storyteller passes away without their knowledge being documented, part of the community’s memory disappears with them.



> “Oral heritage in the Arabian Peninsula is not something we return to out of nostalgia. It is a complete system of knowledge, and the traditional storyteller was one of its most important custodians.”

— Dr. Samir Al-Dhamer,
an intangible heritage and cultural researcher

## Q3.

Some believe that folk tales and songs are no longer relevant to contemporary life because they emerged from very different circumstances. How do you respond to that view?

I think this view comes from seeing folk tales and songs as products of a bygone era rather than expressions of enduring human questions. It is true that the circumstances in which many of these tales and songs emerged have changed, and that some of the professions, occasions and environments that once sustained them no longer exist in the same form. But the emotions and experiences they expressed remain very much a part of our lives: love, fear, loss, longing, injustice, hope, courage and the search for security and belonging.

A folk tale does not lose its value simply because circumstances change. Its purpose is not to describe the tools of the past, but to reveal people confronting life. Its forms may change, but the questions it explores remain.

The same is true of folk songs. I know many young people who feel a deep connection to folk music despite never having experienced the environments or circumstances from which it emerged. This shows that engaging with heritage does not require us to have lived in the era that produced it. It is enough to find something within it that speaks to us or reconnects us with roots we feel are our own. Young people do not reject heritage itself; they turn away from the rigid ways in which it is sometimes presented to them.

When heritage is presented merely as something to be memorized, young people distance themselves from it. When they encounter it through film, games or digital content, they discover that it can speak to their questions, too.





'From the Desert.'
Abdullah Nawawi. 1987.
Oil on canvas. 90 x 123 cm.
Credit: Collection of the Museums Commission, Ministry of Culture.

Photo by: Ahmad Al Thani.
From the exhibition, Bedayat: Beginnings of Saudi Art Movement.

## Q4.

How do you see the relationship between folk music and oral heritage? Can folk songs be considered one of the most prominent vessels of cultural memory, alongside tales, proverbs and poetry?

I see the relationship between folk music and oral heritage as organic and inseparable. Folk music is more than melody accompanying words; it is one of the ways a community preserves its memory and expresses its experience. If a tale preserves events and characters, a proverb distills experience and poetry gives form to emotion, the folk song brings together words, voice, rhythm and performance in a single vessel. Through it, we can hear how the heart of a community once beat.

This is especially evident in songs associated with the sea, agriculture and weddings. They preserve more than words; they carry the rhythm of work, social relationships and collective feeling. We see this particularly clearly in maritime folk arts, which I will return to as an example.

A folk song, therefore, cannot be fully preserved through its lyrics alone. Its sound, performance and context must also be documented, alongside the accounts of the performers and audiences who experienced it. Only then can we preserve its ability to be transmitted, renewed and reinterpreted by new generations.

## Q5.

Could you share an example of a folk song that embodies the ideas we have discussed in this interview? What makes it particularly significant?

We can look at the maritime folk arts of Al-Uqair coast and the Arabian Gulf, particularly the Hasawi tradition. It is a significant example because it is a composite art form in which many elements come together: poetry, melody, rhythm and bodily performance, as well as traditional objects used as instruments, such as the Jahla (traditional water jar) and the Hawen (mortar).

Sailors also produced rhythm with their bodies through collective singing, clapping and rhythmically striking their hands on the deck of the vessel, swaying, spinning, “zafin” dancing, and "nash."

In nash, the performer rises into the air and comes back down in time with the final "drum" beat of the rhythm. The body itself becomes a rhythmic instrument, and the performance becomes an expression of the group’s cohesion and harmony.
When we listen to these traditions, we hear more than a sea song; we encounter the entire world of the sailors. This tradition also offers an important example of the intermingling of cultural environments across the Arabian Gulf. Melodies, rhythms and poems traveled with sailors between ports and coastlines, yet in al-Hasa they acquired a distinctly local mode of performance and their own cultural memory. This shows us that heritage is neither fixed or closed. It is alive: it travels, interacts and is continually reshaped within each environment.

The folk song thus becomes a vessel of cultural memory; it preserves the lyrics, the rhythm of work, the movement of the body and the relationship between people and place.



‘Untitled.’
Abdullah Hammas. 1953.
Oil on canvas. 56 x 76 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Photo by: Ahmad Al Thani.
From the exhibition,
Bedayat: Beginnings
of Saudi Art Movement.



## Q6.

Is there any idea, experience, project or message you would like to share with the readers that we have not touched on in this interview?

The message I would like to leave readers with is that documenting oral heritage should not stop at collecting texts, transcribing them and publishing them in books. We need a more complete form of documentation, one that preserves people performing their heritage within its natural setting: their voices, movements, tools, expressions and relationship with place and the community around them.

Caring for oral heritage is not the responsibility of researchers and institutions alone. It is a responsibility shared by families and communities. In every home there is a storyteller; in every family, a story; in every village or neighborhood, a song or memory worth preserving. Every day we postpone speaking with elders and documenting their experiences, we lose pages for which no other copy exists.
Preserving heritage does not always begin with a major project. It can begin with a sincere question asked of a mother or grandmother, with recording a song remembered by an elderly sailor, or with documenting a movement performed by a folk artist. From these small acts, we can build a living national memory, one that preserves the past while giving new generations roots to draw on as they help build the future.

I began this conversation wondering what happens to folk music when the world that gave it meaning begins to disappear. I leave it thinking that perhaps disappearance is not inevitable. Memory can survive change when we continue to ask, listen and record — not to keep heritage untouched, but to keep it in conversation with the lives that come after it. Perhaps preserving our roots begins as simply as that: listening before a voice falls silent.

**Tara Al Dughaither is an artist, researcher and art curator.**

To discover some of the folk musicians who remain popular among younger generations, listen to a recording of "Glory Be to Him Who Brings Forth Water and Causes the Greenery to Grow" by Taher Al-Ahsa'i, from Dr. Samir Al-Dhamer's archive on YouTube.

# Casting Roots

## Sculpting the Shape of Memory

By **Hassan Albather**





**'Refugee Woman of Smyrna.'** George Petrides. 2022.

Courtesy of the artist.

Before the chisel touched stone, hands shaped meaning from mud and memory. Sculpture emerged from humanity's earliest search for identity, belonging and permanence. It is one of the world's oldest crafts and artistic expressions, transforming raw material into vessels of memory and meaning. Across time, we carved those who inspired us from granite, turned grief and devotion into marble, and preserved our stories and memories in wood. Every mark became a conversation with ancestors, each shape telling both our story and their own. We sculpt to leave a testament, a hope that something of us will outlast the body, rooted in its own place and time.

Famous statues continue to captivate us. They speak silently of the hands that shaped them and the heartbeat those hands tried to keep, and in their silent gaze we find ourselves wondering about their story, their maker's and our own. This is not simply the history of a medium, but the story of our relationship with creation itself.

There are sculptures that commemorate history, and there are sculptures that begin at home. For Greek American sculptor George Petrides, born in 1964 in Athens, the two have never been separate.



George Petrides in the studio. 2021.
Courtesy of the artist.

> Our roots are not only behind us. They remain active in the way we see, the choices we make and what we pass to the next generation.
>
> **— George Petrides, American Greek sculptor**



His latest body of work, Hellenic Heads, traces a century of his family's story through five sculptures, each rooted in a different generation and historical moment. Together, they become an exploration of inheritance, transcending the people we descend from, to honor the experiences, memories and values that continue to shape us long after they have passed.

And, this unique series begins with his grandmother; Maria. "My grandmother, Maria. She is the root of the series," Petrides says. "I could have gone back further and chosen an earlier ancestor, but she is the one I grew up with; she lived with my parents and me in Athens and then in New York, where we moved."

Maria inspired 'Refugee Woman of Smyrna', a sculpture born from both family memory and one of the defining tragedies of modern Greek history. Yet when a Greek municipality commissioned a larger public version to mark the centennial of the burning of Smyrna, Petrides discovered that the work had already outgrown his own family.

"At the unveiling, several residents came up to me and said, 'That's my grandmother.' So my root was their root too."

That moment captures the quiet ambition behind Petrides' work. His sculptures begin with individuals, but they seek something shared. Portraits become archetypes.

Private memories become collective ones. "Art is everything to me," he says. "It is gratifying to be recognized for it, but that is secondary. What is primary is that this is the way I can offer something of value to other people. It heals me, it makes me content and it makes me a better human being."

As he assembled Hellenic Heads, Petrides found himself studying not only faces, but the historical forces that shaped them. His grandmother's displacement, his parents' generation rebuilding their lives and his daughter's place at the end of that century-long journey became chapters in a larger narrative.



**'Medusa of Serifos.'**
George Petrides. 2026.
Courtesy of the artist.

"It helped me understand my grandmother: her life as a refugee and how she rebuilt it in a new land. At the other end of those 100 years, I am proud to present my daughter in a different light: optimistic and lighter. The generations before her did the hard work of clearing the obstacles and establishing a new foundation."

His practice follows that same process of excavation. Although Hellenic Heads is organized as a series, Petrides sees his work as a continuous return to the same enduring questions.

"Across the series and the one-off works, however, I return to the same questions of family, history, resilience and how a private likeness can become a public archetype." Truth, rather than beauty, remains his guiding principle. "The value I pursue is truth — the truth of emotions and observations," he says. "Conventional prettiness is not my thing. If I get the truth right, that is the beauty I want."

That philosophy extends to the surfaces of his sculptures. Marks of process are left intact, layers remain visible and imperfections are embraced as evidence of human experience. Even the medium itself reflects continuity rather than nostalgia. Most works begin with natural river clay shaped by hand before digital scanning and metal casting become part of the process.
"I look to the end result, and I will use whatever tools get me there," Petrides explains. "The sculpture will be judged on two questions: is it truthful, and does it serve other people?"

That same instinct has also led him beyond Greece. While reflecting on the cultural landscapes surrounding the Mediterranean and the Arabian Gulf, Petrides became increasingly interested in the unexpected affinities between them. Those observations eventually became The Aegean and the Gulf: Parallels in Art, Space, and Civic Imagination, an essay exploring the shared ideas that have shaped both regions across millennia.



**'Kore.'**
George Petrides. 2024.
Photo taken by the artist near Aglaia Kyriakou General Children's Hospital on July 21, 2026.
Courtesy of the artist.

> If I get the truth right, that is the beauty I want.



**'Refugee Woman of Smyrna.'**
George Petrides. 2022.
Courtesy of the artist.

Despite their distinct artistic and cultural traditions, he argues that both civilizations were formed by maritime worlds where stories traveled alongside people and trade. Oral poetry, civic gathering spaces, architecture and craftsmanship all emerged as ways of preserving collective memory.

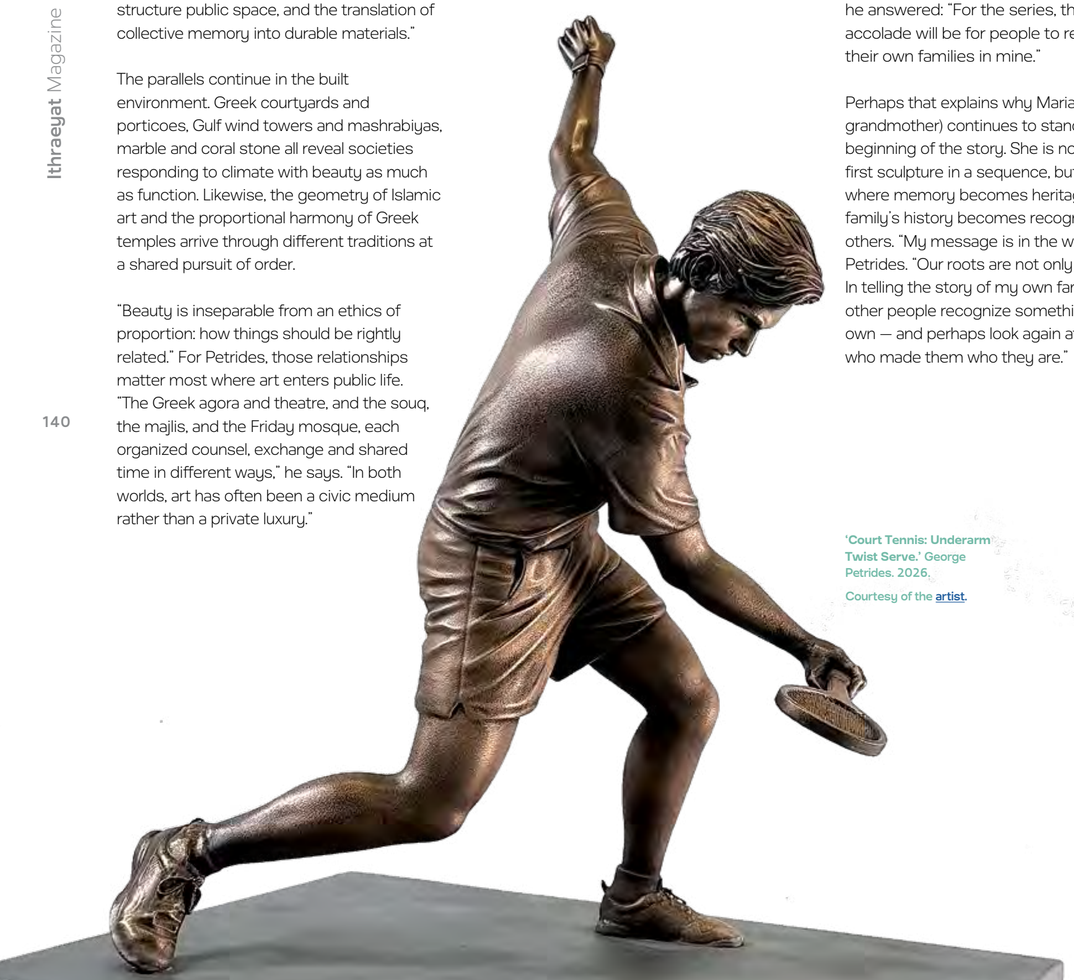
"Across three millennia," it notes, "the Aegean and the Arabian Gulf have been maritime crossroads." Beneath the obvious visual differences lie "formative mythologies, a focus on order and measure, ideals that structure public space, and the translation of collective memory into durable materials."

The parallels continue in the built environment. Greek courtyards and porticoes, Gulf wind towers and mashrabiyas, marble and coral stone all reveal societies responding to climate with beauty as much as function. Likewise, the geometry of Islamic art and the proportional harmony of Greek temples arrive through different traditions at a shared pursuit of order.

"Beauty is inseparable from an ethics of proportion: how things should be rightly related." For Petrides, those relationships matter most where art enters public life. "The Greek agora and theatre, and the souq, the majlis, and the Friday mosque, each organized counsel, exchange and shared time in different ways," he says. "In both worlds, art has often been a civic medium rather than a private luxury."

That understanding informs his own work. Today his sculptures inhabit museums, hospitals, municipalities, universities and public institutions; places where art accompanies everyday life rather than standing apart from it.

The distinction between history and heritage, he surmises, runs through the same outlook. "History is the record of the past, heritage is what a community chooses to preserve and pass on, tangible and intangible alike, and it is bound up with identity, memory and values."



**'Court Tennis: Underarm Twist Serve.'** George Petrides. 2026.
Courtesy of the artist.

As an artist, he works with both. Historical research provides the framework; family stories, artistic precedents and lived experience give that history its emotional weight. Tradition, in turn, becomes something inherited, interpreted and renewed by each generation.

Petrides speaks warmly of the region's growing investment in culture and hopes the series will find its first audience there. When asked about what he hoped Arab audiences will take away from his work, he answered: "For the series, the highest accolade will be for people to recognize their own families in mine."

Perhaps that explains why Maria (his grandmother) continues to stand at the beginning of the story. She is not simply the first sculpture in a sequence, but the point where memory becomes heritage and one family's history becomes recognizable to others. "My message is in the work," says Petrides. "Our roots are not only behind us... In telling the story of my own family, I hope other people recognize something of their own — and perhaps look again at the people who made them who they are."



> "Beauty is inseparable from an ethics of proportion: how things should be rightly related."



**'Davy Crockett at the Alamo.'** George Petrides. 2025. Part of the White House collection.
Courtesy of the artist.



'Head of Thalia II.'
George Petrides. 2022.
Courtesy of the artist.



'Medusa of Serifos.'
George Petrides. 2026.
Courtesy of the artist.

# The Trace of the Unseen



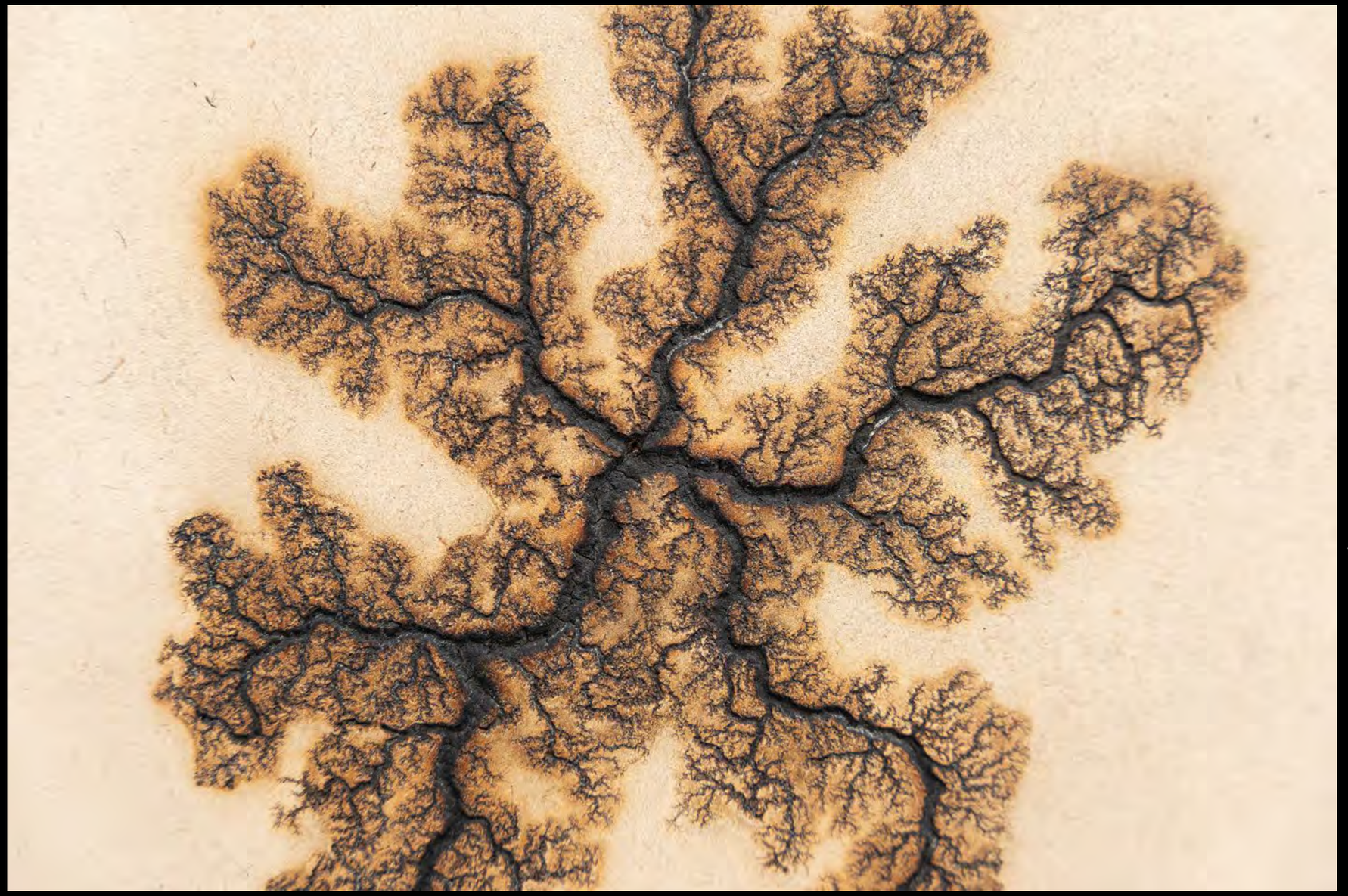
By the **Ithraeyat Editorial Team**

Things don't begin where we first see them. What appears on the surface is often shaped by something hidden, a memory, a passing place, accumulated experiences or a cultural inheritance that changes each time we return to it.

In artistic practice, these sources remain the spark behind creation. They appear in countless forms, inviting new readings and interpretations, and giving rise to dozens of questions. Here, we journey into the worlds of three artists, each with their own way of reading the world, their sources of inspiration and the traces that point back to their roots.

# **Douglas White:** Forces of Nature

Douglas White is a British sculptor known for transforming discarded and overlooked materials into evocative, often monumental works. His practice explores transformation, revealing unexpected forms and structures within the remnants of the everyday.



**'Lichtenberg Drawing 14.'** Douglas White. 2026. 10,000 Volts on Board. 34 x 28 cm.

Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery and Douglas White.

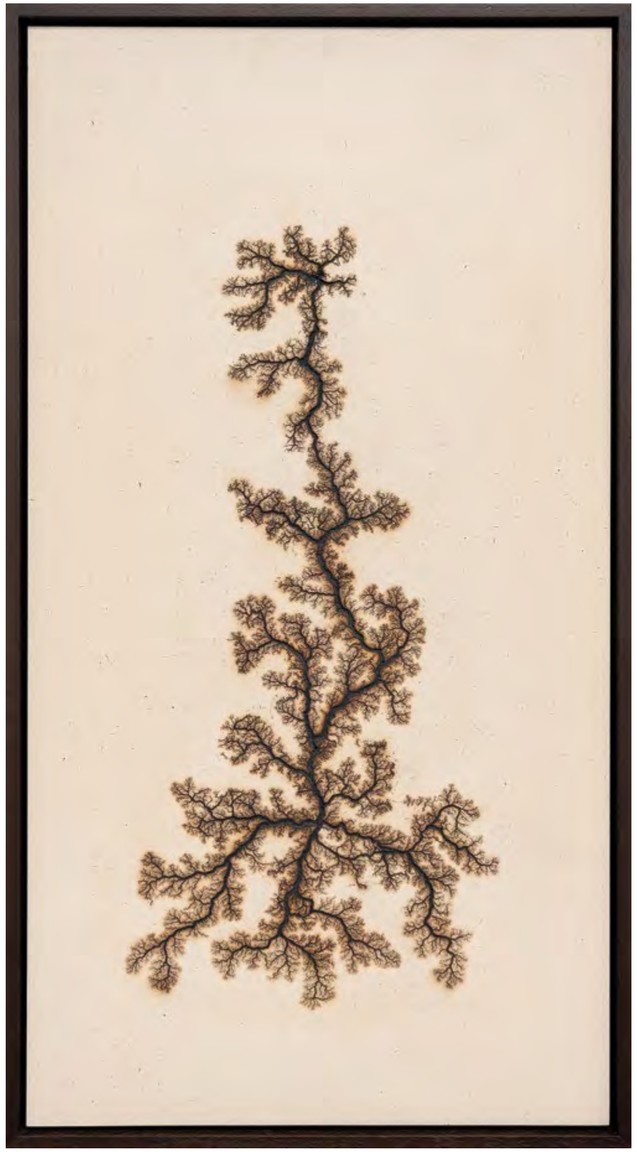
**Q1. What does art mean to you?**

Art is how I navigate the world. My sculptures have never followed a predetermined plan but have evolved through a chain of discoveries, with one investigation leading naturally to the next.

A sculptural intervention exposing tree roots led me to think about arborescence and branching systems, which in turn led to lightning strikes and electrical discharge, eventually becoming the Lichtenberg Drawings. Each work opens the door to another. The world, and our place within it, is impossibly complex and endlessly fascinating. Faced with that complexity, the question for me is always where to direct my attention. Every material carries the history of its formation, the forces that have acted upon it and, eventually, its destruction, just as we do. I'm interested in those moments when the material world seems to speak directly to our inner lives.

Certain forms, materials and processes—the branching roots of a tree, the dried husk of a cactus, the torn steel filaments of a blown-out tire—carry a strange psychological resonance. They seem to carry a familiarity that precedes explanation. I'm less interested in explaining those correspondences than in creating the conditions in which they can be encountered. Sculpture, for me, is a way of inviting us to attend differently to the material world.





**'Lichtenberg Drawing 5.'**
**Douglas White. 2026.**
**10,000 Volts on Board. 83 x 46cm.**

**Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery and Douglas White.**

**Q2. Tell us the inspiration behind your collection.**

I'm drawn to moments of transformation, when a material becomes something other than what it was before. Many of the works begin with an unexpected correspondence, usually prompted by a material that has undergone some kind of violent change. I've always been fascinated by the way destructive forces can reveal an unexpected delicacy.

I'm interested in that uncanny moment when a material is both recognizably itself and something entirely new. Blown-out truck tires are a good example. During the blowout, the rubber tears apart and the fine steel filaments are exposed, transforming what was once a heavy, inert object into something that appears almost organic and alive. Those unexpected correspondences create a kind of psychological recognition that is difficult to explain but immediately felt.

Ultimately, my work is about the movement of energy. One form becomes another. Violence becomes delicacy. Destruction becomes creation. Matter is not erased or replaced, but continually transformed.

**Q3. Do you have a favorite piece? And why is it your favorite?**

The Great Wave (after Hokusai) holds a special place for me. It marked a new way of working with a material that has occupied me for many years, allowing me to explore movement, accumulated force, suspension and transformation. The wave is caught at the instant before it breaks, holding an enormous amount of energy in a temporary state of balance. Hokusai's wave felt like the perfect image through which to explore a sense of turbulence in the world, of something impending, hanging over us.

Earlier this year, having collected the raw materials from around the world, I shipped them to Dubai to construct the work in situ. At exactly that point, conflict broke out across the region and we continued building and installing the work throughout that period of uncertainty. It felt as though the work, the conditions under which it was being made and the wider world had briefly converged. While it was an incredibly difficult time, looking back I feel those circumstances became inseparable from the work. They gave it an intensity that it still carries.

**Q4. Is there a motto you live by? What is it? And tell us more about it?**

The French chemist Antoine Lavoisier wrote: "Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed."

This quotation has long been a touchstone for my practice. I'm fascinated by the way energy moves through the world, acting upon materials, pulling them apart and giving rise to new forms. What interests me is transformation as a physical reality rather than simply a metaphor.

I think every material bears the evidence of its own formation, its use and the forces that have acted upon it. My role is not to erase those histories or impose something entirely new, but to work with them, allowing unexpected possibilities to emerge from within the material itself.



**'Lichtenberg Drawing 11.'**
**Douglas White. 2026.**
**10,000 Volts on Board. 27 x 49 cm.**

**Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery and Douglas White.**

**Q5. When we say "roots," what comes to your mind?**

Roots belong to what is buried. They are the systems, histories and forces that sustain us without necessarily being visible to us. My first thought is of Enraciné, a site-specific intervention I created in a forest in northern France. Using specialised excavating machinery, I removed a carpet-like section of topsoil while leaving the network of tree roots intact. What was normally concealed beneath the forest floor was suddenly exposed, revealing an extraordinarily intricate structure spreading between the trees.

I was interested in the strangeness of revealing something so fundamental to the landscape. The roots had always been present, supporting and connecting the visible life of the forest, but they existed beyond ordinary perception. Once uncovered, they appeared both anatomical and otherworldly, as though the forest had been turned inside out and its hidden nervous system exposed.

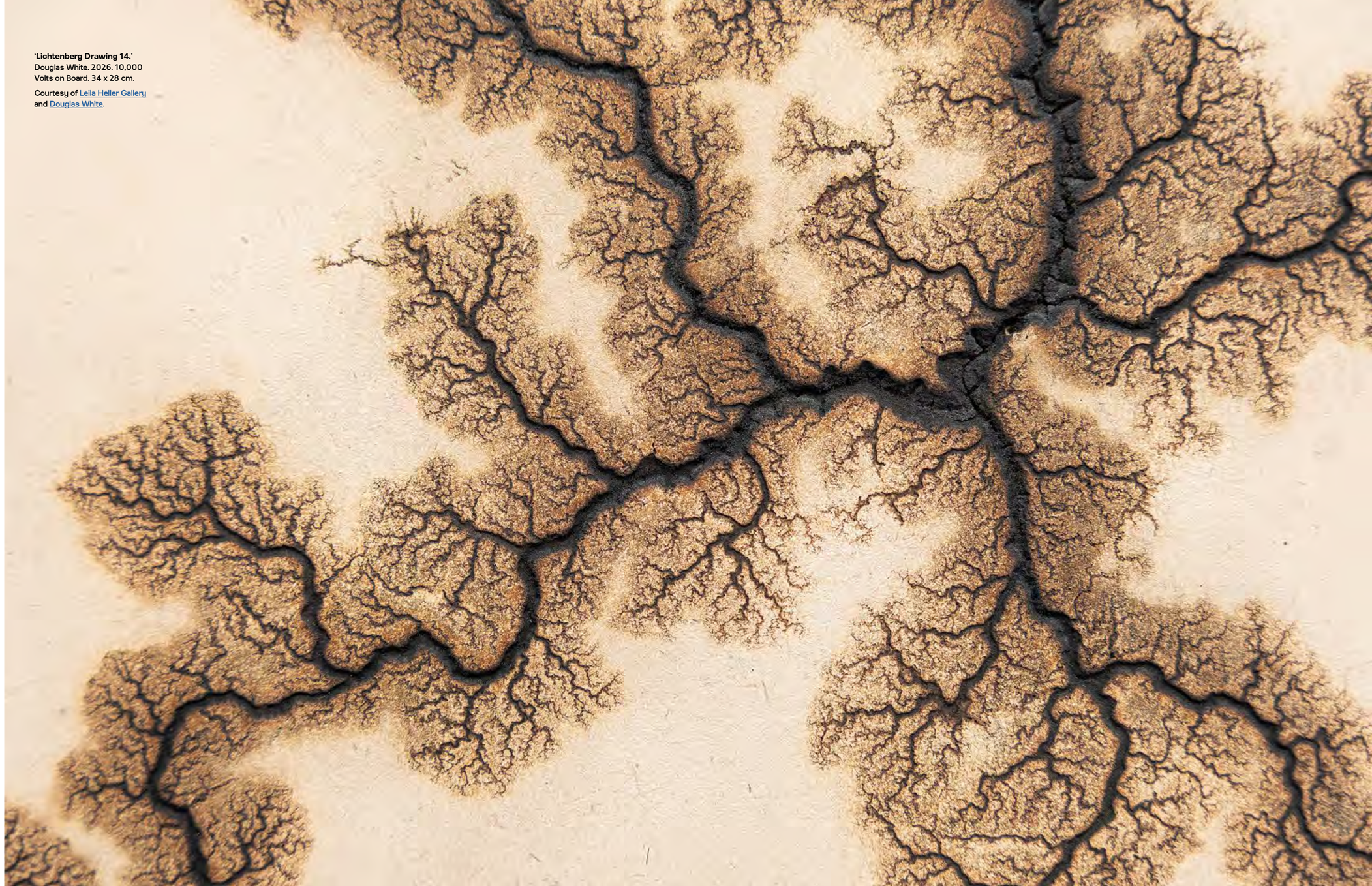
**Q6. What is your next project and what do you hope comes from it?**

There are always several projects in development, often because of the scale and complexity of bringing them to fruition. The next major milestone is showing a large Black Palm at Frieze Sculpture in London. It feels particularly significant because London is my home, and it will be the first time I have presented work at this scale in the UK for many years.

Alongside that, I am working on my first major museum commission for a new museum in Saudi Arabia, the details of which remain under wraps for now.

More than anything, I hope these projects allow the work to reach new audiences and find new contexts. I'm interested in how sculptures change as they move between landscapes, architectures and cultures. Ultimately, I hope each project creates the conditions for the next one.





**'Lichtenberg Drawing 14.'**
**Douglas White. 2026. 10,000 Volts on Board. 34 x 28 cm.**

**Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery and Douglas White.**

# **Ran Hwang:** Playing with Flowers

Ran Hwang is a Korean-born, New York-based artist known for creating intricate installations from everyday materials. Her work explores the cyclical nature of life, impermanence and the beauty of fleeting moments.



**'Becoming Again_BSA'.**
Ran Hwang. 2025. Mulberry paper buttons, beads, pins on Plexiglas. 177 x 300 cm.

Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery and Ran Hwang.

**Q1. What does art mean to you?**

For me, the repetitive labor of hammering tens of thousands of pins is a form of spiritual practice that goes beyond mere physical work. In the process of inserting each pin, one by one, I empty myself of human greed and distracting thoughts. Paradoxically, my mind becomes most serene when physical pain reaches its peak. I believe this discipline and tranquility infuse my work with spiritual energy.

**Q2. What inspired this body of work, and what do you hope people see or feel when they experience it?**

This body of work is inspired by the coexistence of humanity and nature, as well as the philosophical balance between reality and illusion. For instance, **Healing Oblivious Aqua_OS** visualizes coral bleaching caused by environmental pollution in the form of plum blossoms, using recycled hanji (traditional Korean paper) to reflect on the cycle of life. **Return to Nature** uses a transparent medium to reveal the coexistence of the glamorous surface (reality) and the hidden shadow (illusion) behind it.

When people experience these works, I hope they look beyond their immediate visual beauty and reflect on our deep connection with nature, ultimately feeling a sense of profound healing and inner tranquility.

**Q3. Do you have a favorite piece? Why?**

I am particularly attached to one of my recent works, **Renascence (2025),** which incorporates a discarded Jagaejang, a traditional Korean mother-of-pearl lacquerware chest. Korean Goryeo-era najeonchilgi, or mother-of-pearl lacquerware, is recognized worldwide for its outstanding artistry and technique, with examples now housed in museums around the world.

Carrying on this profound legacy, these chests became beloved symbols of wealth and essential household furnishings in Korea during the 1970s and '80s. However, as homes became increasingly westernized with the rise of modern apartments and built-in closets, the chests were left behind by changing times and are now frequently abandoned on the streets.

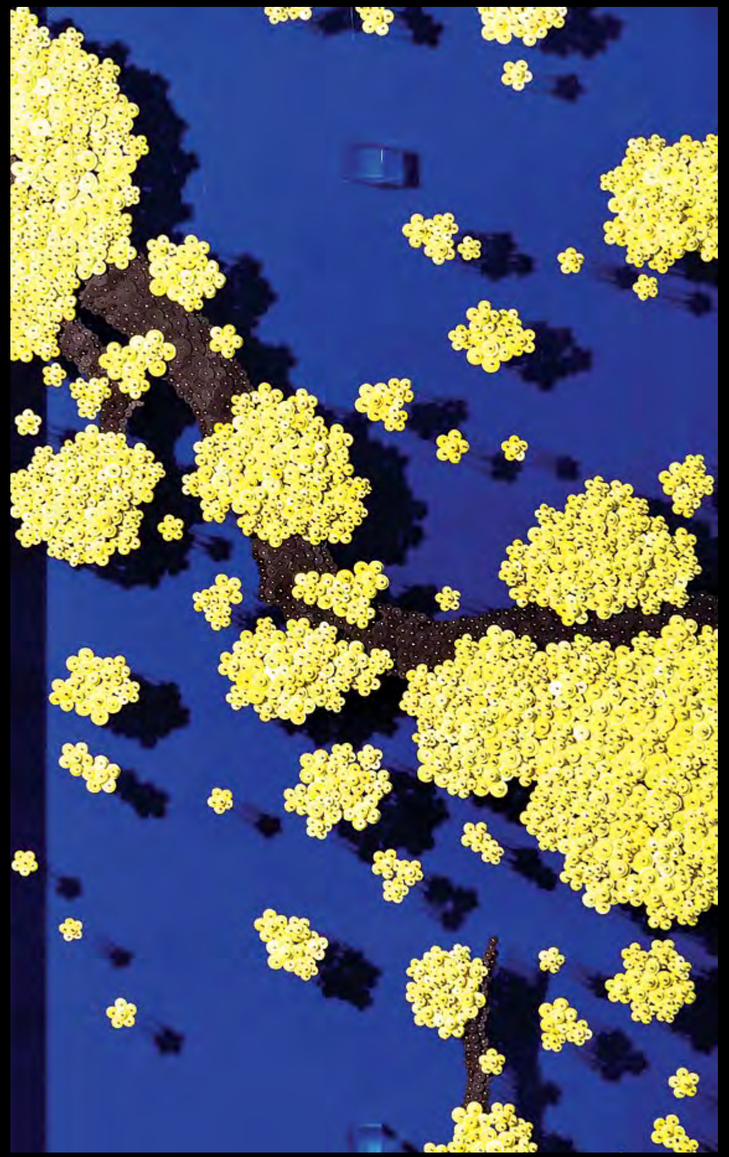
This piece is very special to me because it fully embodies the value of "regeneration," by breathing new life through art into a jagaejang that was once an object of both cultural and personal value but has since been discarded.



**Q4. Is there a motto you live by? If so, what is it?**

The philosophy that guides my life and art is "Emptying and Filling." My motto is embodied in the very process of my work: hammering countless pins to empty myself of the pain and emptiness of life, then filling those vacant spaces with meditative energy, tranquility and solace.





**'Becoming Again_BY3.'**
Ran Hwang. 2021.Paper buttons, beads, crystals, pins on Plexiglas and Plexiglas frame. 242 x 63 x 12 cm.

Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery and Ran Hwang.

**Q5. The theme of this edition is "Roots." What does that word bring to mind for you?**

To me, roots are the source of a life force that continuously gives rise to new growth. During my childhood, the image of my father— a master calligrapher —holding his brush, and the scent of ink that permeated our home, became deeply rooted in my emotional landscape. Just as a tree grows taller when its roots grow deeper, my respect for tradition and my own roots firmly support all my new artistic experiments.

**Q6. What are you working on next, and what do you hope comes from it?**

I am currently preparing a comprehensive monograph commemorating my 30-year artistic career. I am also continuing to work on projects that combine digital technology with various materials, allowing the audience and the artwork to become one seamlessly integrated whole. I plan to continue creating large-scale installations in which the entire space breathes as a single story.

Ultimately, I sincerely hope my work connects deeply with the lives of those who encounter it, offering a fleeting moment in which forgotten memories resurface and they experience sublime emotions that cannot be expressed in words.





**'Becoming Again_BSA'.**
**Ran Hwang. 2025. Mulberry paper buttons, beads, pins on Plexiglas. 177 x 300 cm.**

**Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery and Ran Hwang.**

# **Azza Alqubaisi:** Wood and Life

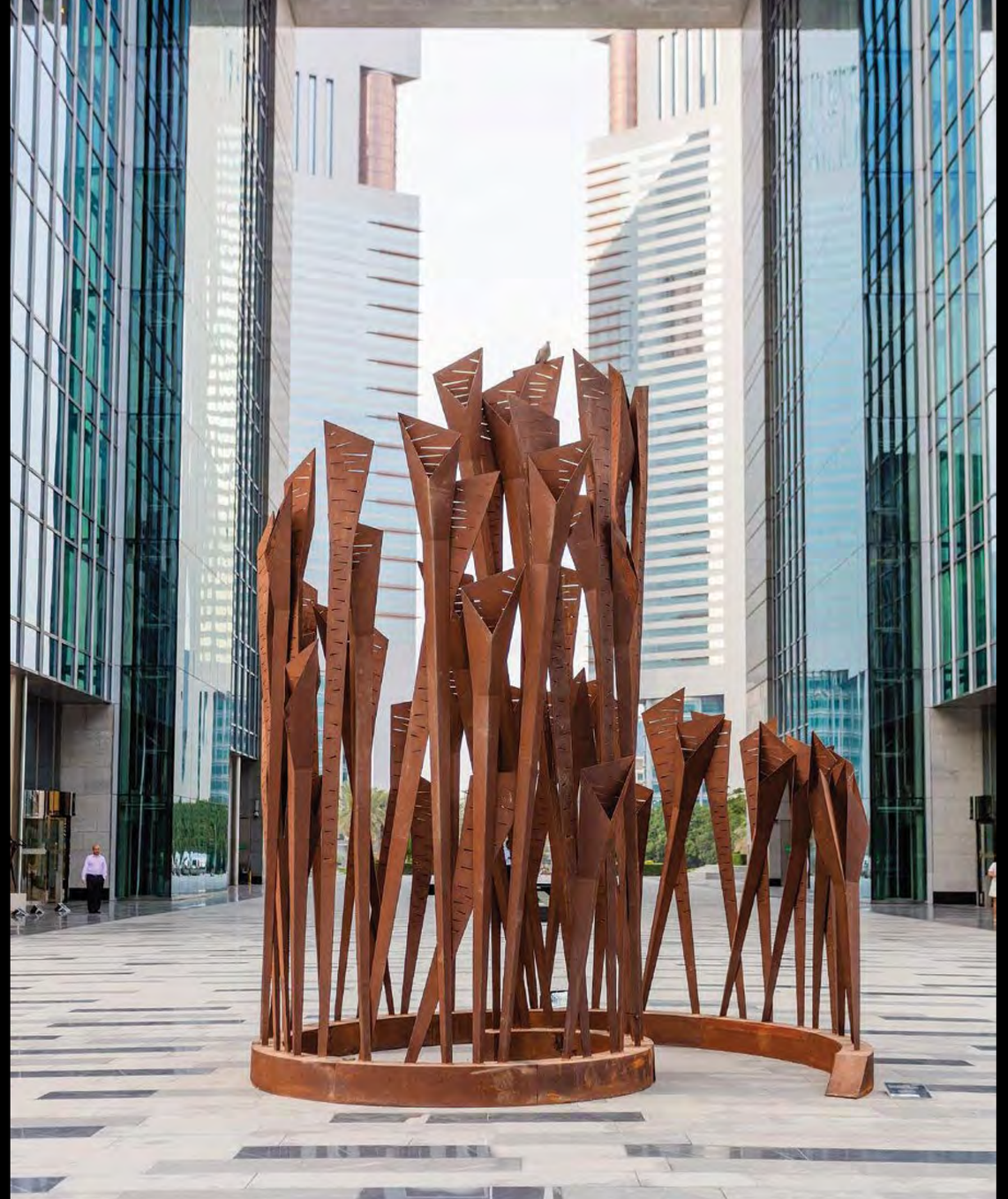
Azza Alqubaisi is an Emirati multidisciplinary artist and designer known for exploring identity, heritage and place through materials ranging from metals to palm fronds. Her practice spans jewelry, sculpture and public art, drawing deeply on the landscapes and traditions of the UAE.





**'Alphabet of Life.'**
Azza Alqubaisi. 2018.
Mild steel. 300 x 300 x 600 cm.

Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery and Azza Alqubaisi.



**Q1. What does art mean to you?**

Art is how I understand and respond to the world around me. It allows me to transform memory, nature and lived experience into material form, creating works that connect people to place, identity and time. For me, every artwork is an opportunity to begin a conversation rather than provide an answer.

**Q2. What inspired this body of work, and what do you hope people see or feel?**

This body of work is inspired by the natural environment of the UAE and the systems that quietly sustain it. I am fascinated by the patterns, structures and rhythms found in nature and by how they hold stories of resilience, continuity and belonging. Rather than directing the viewer toward a single interpretation, I hope the work invites curiosity and reflection, allowing each person to discover their own connection with it over time.

**Q3. Do you have a favorite piece? Why?**

It is difficult to choose one piece because each represents a different stage of my journey. If I had to choose, it would be Roots, one of my latest public sculptures in Dubai. It brings together ideas I have been exploring for years—our relationship with nature, cultural memory, movement and the dialogue between people and place. Seeing the work become part of everyday public life has made it especially meaningful to me.

**Q4. Is there a motto you live by?**

The words of the late Sheikh Zayed have always stayed with me: "He who has no past has no present or future." It is a principle that guides both my life and my practice, reminding me that meaningful innovation begins with understanding where we come from and carrying those values forward with honesty and purpose.





**'Ghaff and Mangrove.'**
**Azza Alqubaisi. Mild steel and wood.**

**Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery and Azza Alqubaisi.**

**Q5. The theme of this edition is "Roots." What does that bring to mind for you?**

The word "roots" immediately brings to mind belonging, continuity and the unseen connections that shape our identity. It is a title I have returned to more than once because it reflects an ongoing thread in my practice.

My public sculpture Roots in Dubai explores the visual language of the date palm and our relationship with place, while another body of work under the same title draws inspiration from the mangrove ecosystem and its remarkable resilience. Although they are different works, they share the same belief: Our strongest foundations are often the ones we cannot immediately see—our connection to nature, culture, memory and one another.

**Q6. What are you working on next?**

I am continuing to expand my public art practice, exploring larger sculptural works that encourage interaction and invite people to experience art as part of their everyday environment. My current research continues to focus on nature, material innovation and environmental awareness, while exploring how sculpture can strengthen our connection to place and create meaningful shared experiences.

**Discover more of Azza Alqubaisi's remarkable works:**



**'Seeking identity.'**
**Azza Alqubaisi.**
**2023. 22 x 22 x23 cm.**

**Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery and Azza Alqubaisi.**





**'Metaphor.'**
**Azza Alqubaisi. 2024.**
**Stainless steel and mild steel.**
**50 x 50 x 185 cm**
**and 50 x 50 x 170 cm.**

**Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery and Azza Alqubaisi.**

What connects these artists is a sensitivity to what endures: the history held by a material, a childhood memory that continues to inspire, a landscape whose patterns become a visual language. Their roots appear differently, yet each artist allows them to grow into something distinctly their own. And somewhere between what is inherited and what is made, another source begins.

**To view more wonderful artworks, you can visit: Leila Heller Gallery.**





**'Root 04.'**
**Azza Alqubaisi. 2023. Stainless steel and mild steel. 70 x 70 x 50 cm.**

**Courtesy of Leila Heller Gallery and Azza Alqubaisi.**

# House of the Tamarisk

By **Sulaiman Alfozan**

We speak of a "foundation stone" because stone evokes strength and permanence, but it is the often-overlooked roots that provide stability and continuity through uncertain times.

Yet endurance does not always depend on rigidity. Often, what survives is what knows how to bend. The proverb "Bread and oil are the pillars of the house" captures this truth: a home can be sustained by simple essentials, without wealth or the trappings of fleeting luxuries.

It is often said that people do not simply inhabit a home; the places around them come to inhabit them as well. Few trees are as closely woven into the Arab memory of home as the tamarisk. For generations, it grew beside houses until it became part of their identity and memory. The tamarisk has no prized fruit or flamboyant blossoms. Its virtues are quieter. It withstands intense heat, bends against strong winds and lives for generations in landscapes where survival itself can be difficult. Beside the home, it offered shade, softened the heat and helped shield families from wind and dust.

Over time, this practical relationship acquired a deeper meaning. The value of a home, like that of a tamarisk, lies in what it gives those who dwell within it. Walls can rise in days; a sense of security takes years to build. The tamarisk grows slowly, too, but once rooted and mature, it can stand for generations, witnessing the passing of years as though gathering the memory of the place beneath its branches.

Its place in the home extended beyond the shade it cast. In the heritage of the Arabian Peninsula, Arab tents relied on tamarisk poles, and later, mud-brick houses used tamarisk wood for roofs and doors. Pliant yet durable, it became part of the very structures it once stood beside, sheltering generations and enduring with the homes it helped support.

Perhaps no architectural element captures this relationship more vividly than the door. It symbolized privacy, security and hospitality. Through it guests were welcomed; upon it, good news came knocking; and behind it, families kept the intimacy of home. The quality of its wood was therefore inseparable from the protection it offered, and the tamarisk, valued for its durability, was well suited to the threshold between the household and the world beyond.
Here the tamarisk reveals something essential about endurance. Its pliability is part of its strength. It survives because it can adapt, yielding to difficult conditions without surrendering its roots. Those roots, reaching deep into the earth, evoke the values on which homes are built. They remain unseen, yet everything above them draws strength from their presence; they give the structure its stability. Respect, affection, compassion and generosity form the roots of a household, holding it firm when the winds of life begin to blow.

Perhaps this is why the tamarisk remains so vivid in the memory of Arab landscapes. It stands quietly beside the home, grows old with its inhabitants and witnesses their joys and sorrows until its story becomes entwined with theirs. If trees are measured by the shade they give, perhaps homes are measured by the peace they provide. In the tamarisk, we find an enduring metaphor for such a home: deeply rooted, resilient through the years and generous to those that seek its shade.

**Sulaiman Alfozan is a Saudi heritage and cultural history enthusiast.**



**'The Enchanted Tree.'**
Richard Doyle. 1868.
Watercolor, gouache, gummed watercolor, applied in layered, opaque and transparent washes with the underlying paper revealed in minute areas throughout the composition.
37.2 × 61 cm.

Credits: Harry G. Sperling Fund and The MET.

# The Queen's Gambit and a Falconer's Case

By **Louvre Abu Dhabi**

Roots, it turns out, are rarely confined to a single soil or place. They travel, graft and intertwine across oceans, civilizations and generations—nourishing identities that are as much forged in exchange as they are in tradition. In this edition of **From the Vault**, we descend into the majestic collections of Louvre Abu Dhabi to uncover five remarkable objects that did not simply reflect their cultures of origin, they built bridges and networks of exchange that nourish identities far beyond their point of origin.



**Falconer's Feed Case: Falconry and Cultural Identity**

Produced in northern Italy during the 16th century, this finely crafted feed case reflects the prestige of falconry, a practice long associated with courts and the nobility. Decorated with heraldic motifs reminiscent of the Medici coat of arms, it embodies the close relationship between hunting traditions, social status and artistic craftsmanship. Although European in origin, the object resonates strongly in the Arabian Peninsula, where falconry remains a living cultural tradition.

Materially robust yet intricately detailed, the object embodies the technical and artistic excellence that characterized luxury production linked to courtly pursuits.



**'Falconer's Feed Case, Decorated with a Coat of Arms.' 16th century. Northern Italy. Wood and leather. 22.4 x 11 x 11 cm.**

**Credits: Louvre Abu Dhabi © Department of Culture and Tourism - Abu Dhabi. Photo by Thierry Ollivier. LAD 2012.008.**

## Mamluk Glass Mosque Lamp: Illuminating a Shared Artistic Legacy

This monumental 14th-century Mamluk mosque lamp represents the height of Islamic glassmaking. Decorated with botanical ornamentation, Qur'anic calligraphy—including the celebrated Verse of Light (Qur'an 24:35)—and the blazon of the Mamluk Amir Sayf al-Din Sarghitmish, it reflects the artistic refinement of the Mamluk period.
This mosque lamp is a great representative of Mamluk examples in both its shape and technique. The surface of the lamp is organized in numerous registers, with two calligraphic inscriptions, and registers intersected by two medallions holding the patron's emblem, and decorated with botanical ornamentation. The calligraphy is that of a dedicatory inscription mentioning the commissioner and the sultan with whom he is affiliated.

A usual format mentioning the commissioner, referred to here as Amir Sayf al-Din Sarghitmish, and that of the name of whom he is in service of, the Sultan al-Nasir. Medallions holding the blazon of the red napkin or buqja of the master of the robes or the jamdar, also refer to the commissioner, who was Mamluk Amir Sayf al-Din Sarghitmish al-Nasiri, Ras Nowhat-el-Nowab (d. 1358). According to Al-Maqrizi, he was an emir and later, the atabeg of the army. Such lamps were often produced in large numbers to adorn the ceilings of architectural religious monuments commissioned by important Mamluk patrons, in an act of religious piety. A production often done in a mass, mentioning their name as patrons and their emblems.

This lamp would have most likely been commissioned for the complex of Sarghitmish still standing today within Cairo's medieval quarter of Sayyida Zaynab. The complex, which appears on the 5 Egyptian pounds note, was inaugurated in 1356 in an opulent event in presence of emirs and ulemas according to Al-Maqrizi.

This work also embodies the broader context of artistic patronage during the Mamluk period, a time of considerable prosperity for the dynasty. The flourishing of the arts during this era was closely tied to this economic and political strength, enabling the production of objects of exceptional quality.

Inscription appearing on the first register:

"اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مَثَلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ "

"Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp"
Qur'an (Surat Al-Nur, verse 35)

Often the inscription that prevailed on such lamps, referring to the light that will eminently pass and enlighten the religious space and the path of the believers.

Inscription appearing on the third register:
"المقر الكريم العالي المولوي المالكي المخدومي السيفي صرغتمش رأس نوبة الملك الناصر"
"His Honorable and High Excellency our Lord, the Royal, the Well-Served, Saif ad-Din Sarghitmish, Chief of Corps of Mamluks of al-Malik an-Nasr."





**Mosque Lamp.**
**Commissioned by: Amir Sayf al-Din Sarghitmish al-Nasiri, Ras Nowhat-el-Nowab (d. 1358). Egypt or Syria. 1351 - 1358, Mamluk Sultanate (1250-1517). Enameled glass. 38.7 x 27.5 x 27.5 cm. Louvre Abu Dhabi © Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi.**

**Photo by Noora Alzaabi. LAD 2024.021**

## Quadrant and Case: Mapping the World Through Knowledge

Produced in southern France around the turn of the 14th century, estimated between 1291 and 1310, this astrolabe quadrant reflects centuries of scientific exchange across the Islamic world, the Mediterranean and Europe. Used for navigation, timekeeping and determining prayer times, it exemplifies the union of scientific knowledge and master craftsmanship.

Across the Arabian Peninsula, instruments such as these supported the maritime networks that linked the region with East Africa, India and beyond, underscoring the global nature of scientific progress.

This quadrant astrolabe, quadrans novus, is used to for latitudes, longitudes and calendrical and time calculations. It is engraved on both sides filled with red and black wax infills and like the majority of European and Islamic astrolabe quadrants, it is made of brass. The astrolabe quadrant was invented by Jacob ben Machir ibn Tibbon (ca. 1236-1305). This quadrant is very rare, the earliest of only eight known specimens of its kind, this one is the earliest. Such instruments are usually only valid for one, single latitude, while Ibn Tibbon's quadrans novus (new quadrant), is a universal tool to resolve many issues in spherical astronomical and astrological calculations.






**Quadrant and Case.**
Southern France (?). ca. 1291 to ca. 1310.
Brass, leather case. 15 x 14 cm.
Louvre Abu Dhabi © Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi.

Photo by Ismail Noor. LAD 2019.036

**The Queen's Gambit: Games That Crossed Continents**

Long before they became forms of entertainment, board games fostered strategy, learning and human connection. Francis Cotes's double portrait depicts the Welby couple engaged in a game of chess, with the board occupying the compositional center. Quite symbolic, only the two kings remain on the board: the game ends in a draw, where neither the husband nor the wife can win.

The painting is among the earliest representations of chess in the history of English portraiture. By choosing this subject, the Welbys signal their stylishness — chess was enjoying considerable popularity among European elites at this period — whilst the contrast between William's animated posture and Penelope's composure suggests a relationship characterised by intellectual equality.

Nearby, a katra board from Madagascar represents one of the many regional expressions of mancala, a game whose enduring appeal lies in strategy, calculation and foresight. Though its rules and names vary across regions, its objective remains constant: to move seeds from pit to pit, gathering as many as possible.

Together, these works, featured in Louvre Abu Dhabi's exhibition **A Board Game Adventure,** demonstrate how games have crossed cultures for centuries, carrying with them shared traditions of competition, learning and exchange.

**Discover more treasures from Louvre Abu Dhabi's collection by visiting the museum's website.**





**'Katra Game.'**
**Madagascar. At least 100 years ago.**
**Credits: Children Museum, Louvre Abu Dhabi**
**© Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi.**

**Photo by Nino Consorte.**

> The painting is among the earliest representations of chess in the history of English portraiture.



**'Portrait of William and Penelope Welby Playing Chess.'**
Francis Cotes. 1769. United Kingdom. Oil on Canvas. 135 x 152 cm (unframed). Credits: Louvre Abu Dhabi © Department of Culture and Tourism - Abu Dhabi.

Photo by APF. LAD 2013.007

# Beneath the **Surface**

By **M. Lynx Qualey**

We often talk about people being rooted: to place, to family, to a cultural identity. People journey abroad but later "return to their roots." The metaphor links us to the trees and plants that spend their entire lives in one spot: growing up out of the earth and reaching, in many cases, toward the sun.



Physically, of course, humans are not rooted. We roam the earth, migrating greater distances than any other animal. And yet, psychologically and emotionally, we set down roots in the place where we are born and in the families that raise us. While these roots may not be tangible, a sense of rooted history and belonging is at the core of what it means to be human.

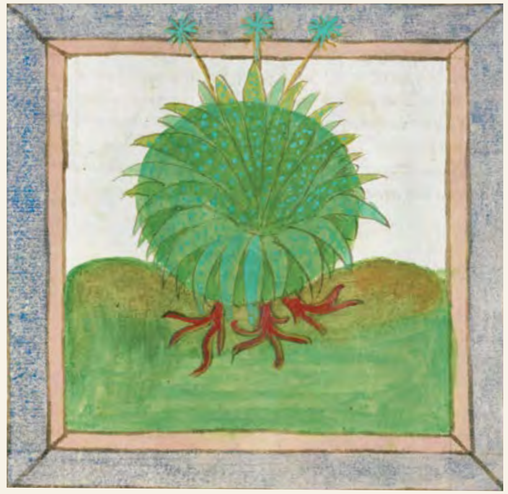
And so, we are more like trees than we first appear. Trees, too, are more like humans. As forester and author Peter Wohlleben explains in The Hidden Life of Trees, the forest is not just a series of individuals. Instead, it is a social network, where trees support each other and communicate, often by way of their roots.

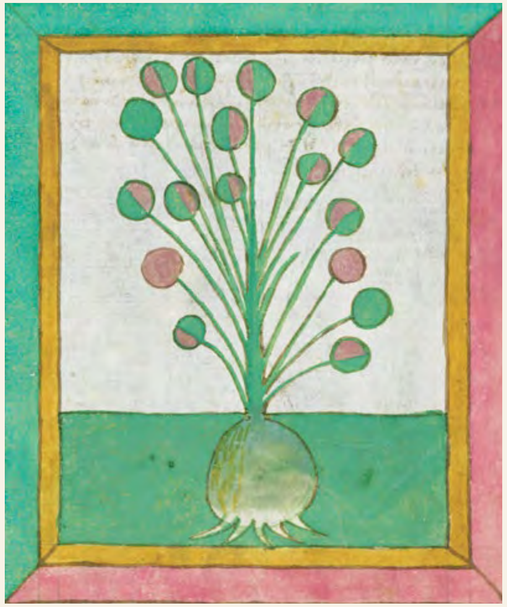
In this brief journey through roots and books, we take a look at both real and metaphorical roots and how, as one of Maroun Abboud's characters says,

**"The trees are wiser than we humans. They live in harmony beneath the earth while we fight over its surface."**

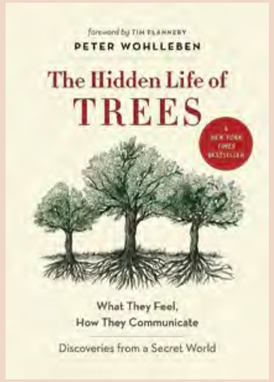








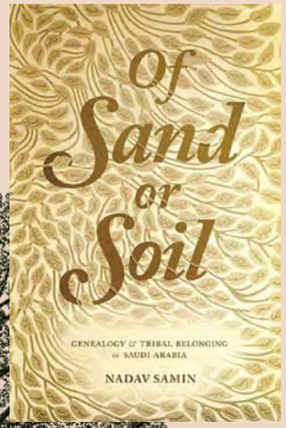
**Kräuterbuch ("Book of Herbs").**
Johannes Hartlieb. 1462.
Credits: The Public Domain Review.




## The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate

**By Peter Wohlleben**

In this popular and acclaimed exploration of the social and emotional lives of trees, Peter Wohlleben gives readers a glimpse of the many ways in which trees communicate: by smell, by visual signs and by electrical signals. Root systems, he says, create a complicated "wood wide web" beneath the earth, where fungi often act as intermediaries. As Wohlleben writes, "The connections transmit signals from one tree to the next, helping the trees exchange news about insects, drought and other dangers." This book gives a fascinating, sometimes speculative look at the interior lives of trees.

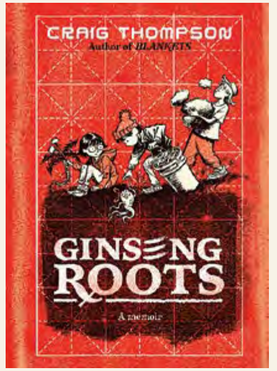



## Of Sand or Soil: Genealogy and Tribal Belonging in Saudi Arabia

**By Nadav Samin**

Genealogy is another kind of rootedness, where we belong not to a place but to a series of ever-more-distant ancestors. This book, runner-up for a 2016 British-Kuwait Friendship Society Book Prize, explores tribal genealogies in contemporary Saudi Arabia. The book builds on the work of 20th century Saudi scholar Hamad al-Jasir, whose genealogical studies frame a story about belonging and identity in the kingdom. This book ties together kinship, oral histories and the formation of the modern state.

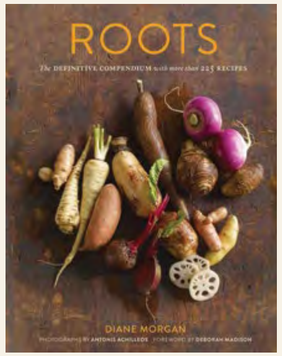





## Ginseng Roots

**By Craig Thompson**

This beautiful, pen-and-ink graphic novel traces the roots of the global trade in ginseng. It begins with the author and his siblings, who spent the summers of their childhood weeding and digging up rows of American ginseng in rural Wisconsin for a dollar an hour. It then journeys back 300 years to the ginseng-root hunters in China, connecting them to industrial farmers and migrant harvesters in the American Midwest, including those in Thompson's own family.

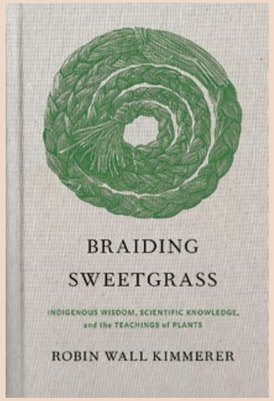



## Roots: The Definitive Compendium with More than 225 Recipes

**By Diane Morgan**

Most of us know how to cook with the basic root vegetables: potatoes, carrots and onions. But what about burdock root, galangal or malanga? In this exploration of edible roots, prolific cookbook author Diane Morgan traces the history and lore around 29 major root vegetables, as well as their nutritional content, how to buy and store them, and, of course, how to cook with them. The book includes both practical recipes and an exploration of lesser-known flavors.

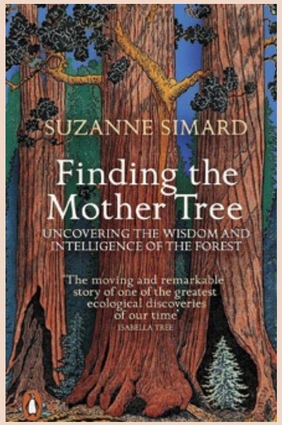





## Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants

**By Robin Wall Kimmerer**

This best-selling book by Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer takes readers on a journey into how our human cultural roots are entangled with the roots of the plant life all around us. As she writes at the beginning of the book, "Sweetgrass is best planted not by seed, but by putting roots directly in the ground. Thus the plant is passed from hand to earth to hand across years and generations." A surprisingly moving read that gives readers a different way to think about our relationship to the natural world.



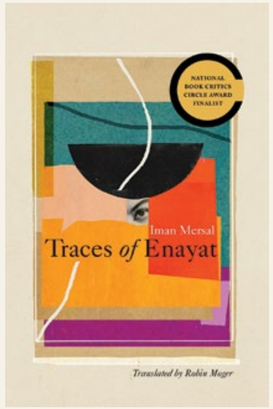

## Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest

**By Suzanne Simard, translated into Arabic by Basima Al Mesbahi**

In Finding the Mother Tree, Suzanne Simard explores what we know about the conversations between trees. Simard is a leading scholar in the field of plant communication and intelligence. In this deeply inspiring book, which is both science and personal biography, she explores how trees use their root systems to communicate: how they adapt their behaviors, recognize their neighbors and cooperate with one another. While, above the surface, trees may appear to be completely alone in the world, beneath it, they make use of a complicated underground network to communicate with one another.



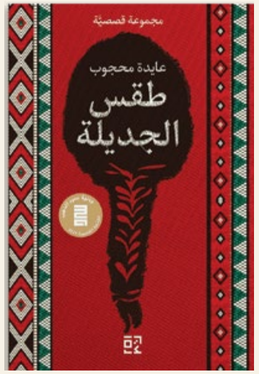





## Traces of Enayat

**By Iman Mersal, translated by Robin Moger**

Going in search of our roots doesn't have to mean finding those who are our ancestors by blood. In this book, which won a 2021 Sheikh Zayed Book Award, Egyptian author and scholar Iman Mersal goes in search of her literary roots. To do so, she tries to rebuild a story of the life of marginalized writer Enayat al-Zayyat, whose only novel was published after her death. A beautiful reclaiming of literary and cultural history.




## Taqs al-Jadilah

**By Aida Mahjoub**

Much of human history tells the stories of men. In the same way, genealogies are often traced through male ancestors and leaders. Saudi novelist Aida Mahgoub's 2025 novel explores, instead, our female roots. It takes a thing as ephemeral as human hair and uses it to trace the long-neglected stories of Bedouin women. In the novel, Ruhayel, a young Bedouin man and recent archaeology graduate, stumbles upon a small, weathered box buried deep beneath the sand. Inside, he discovers a single lock of a woman's braided hair, preserved with deliberate care. Through it, he begins to explore the roots of women's stories.






## Children of Nut and Other Myths: Ancient Egyptian Tales

**By Mohamed A. Gamal**

Myths and legends are one of the key ways we humans root ourselves to our pasts. Ancient Egyptian myths are among our oldest written stories. Yet while we have these ancient writings, in many ways, these roots were severed. For the most part, these ancient stories aren't passed down by grandmothers, but by academics. What Mohamed A. Gamal does in this novel is to recover the excitement of ancient Egyptian myths, reconnecting us to these ancient roots, making them come to life for the modern reader.

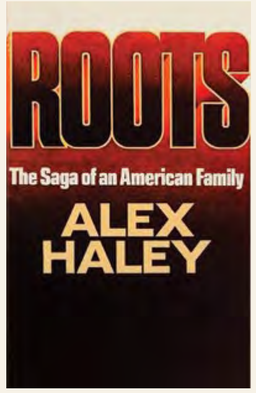



## Aqzam Jababirah

**By Maroun Abboud**

This classic short-story collection concerns itself with roots and rootedness in a Lebanese village. In one story, two neighbors are determined to build a trench along the border between their properties. One neighbor, Abu Fares, believes this will ensure the integrity of his soil and stop his hard-earned fertilizer from benefiting his neighbor's trees. Yet when they dig into the earth, they realize that the tree roots are too deeply entangled. As one man says, "The trees are wiser than we humans. They live in harmony beneath the earth while we fight over its surface."





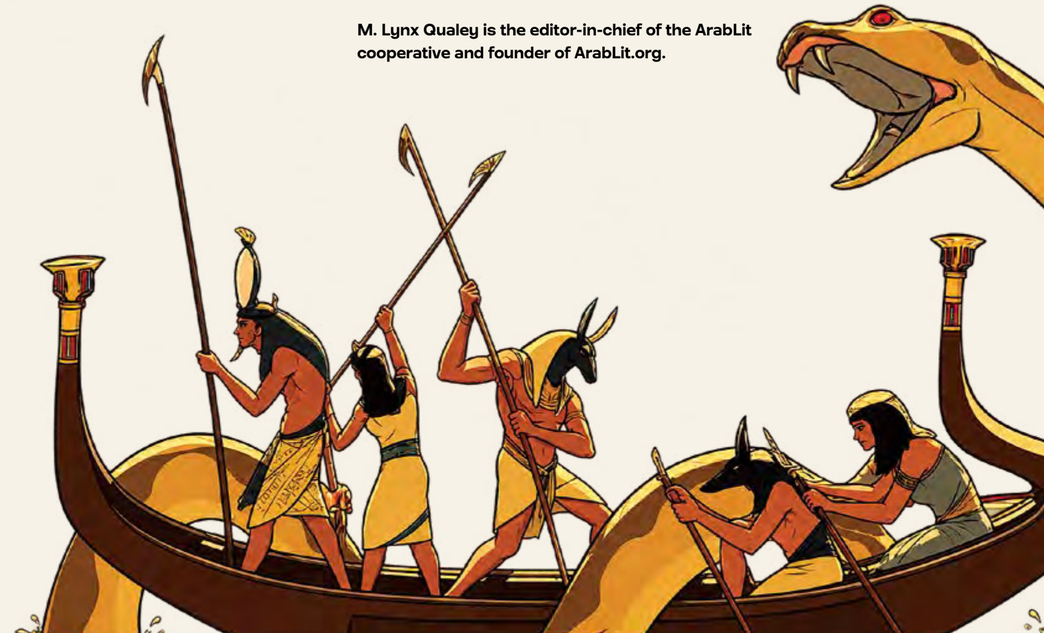

## Roots: The Saga of an American Family

**By Alex Haley**

This American novel, which was turned into a popular 1977 TV series, is a classic in the genre of imaginative genealogy. The book opens in West Africa in the 1750s and traces family history across the next 200 years. Since historical records were often absent, the book weaves together history and mythology in an attempt to rebuild severed roots. Because of the violence of trans-Atlantic slavery, Haley can't give precise genealogies. But as author Nadia Owusu writes of the novel, "When roots are out of reach, perhaps myth is the next best thing."

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

**M. Lynx Qualey is the editor-in-chief of the ArabLit cooperative and founder of ArabLit.org.**



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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.

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