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LIMITLESS

BEAUTY WITHOUT BORDERS:
HOW DUBAI'S FAMOUS FACE CAPTIVATED THE WORLD

OCTOBER 2016



From left: Sheikha Aisha bint Rashid Al Khalifa, Sheikha Hind bint Isa al Khalifa, Sheikha Atefah bint Isa al Khalifa and Sheikha Thajiba Al Moawda

PEARLS OF WISDOM

Bazaar discovers how a Sheikha's pioneering vision led these Bahraini women to cross cultural and geographical borders, and define their roles in the arts to inspire the next generation of adventure-seekers

Words by ALEX ALBRY
Photography by KIM JAKOBSEN TO

It is known of women's histories in the Arabian Gulf prior to the discovery of oil, where such stories were traditionally passed down orally among family members. Yet occurs away in England is a rare image documenting the first instance of women from the region travelling to the West. Housed at the Kennel Club's headquarters in London is a leather-bound album containing a single, sepia-toned photograph of Bahrain's ruler Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa during his first visit to England in 1925. He is standing next to his son, Sheikh Dujai and brother Sheikh Abdulla, who had first visited the UK in 1919 to attend celebrations marking the end of WWI.

The image is all the more intriguing for its inclusion of Sheikha Hamad's wife, Sheikha Aisha bint Rashid Al-Khalifa, and her sister-in-law, Sheikha Thajiba Al Moawda. Smiling back at the camera in floor-length gold-embroidered abayas, the Sheikhas were accompanying their husbands during an unofficial trip to the UK to purchase furniture and plumbing fixtures for Sheikh Hamad's new residence, Sakhih Palace. Not much is known of the Sheikhas' first impressions of London, which by 1925 had emerged as a cosmopolitan metropolis filled with fashionable fashions in knee-skimming skirts, stately department stores such as Harrods and new technologies that were rapidly transforming people's lives. Yet shortly after her return from England, Sheikha Aisha began to advocate for the education of girls. By 1928, Sheikha Hamad's sophisticated and influential wife had opened the first public school for girls in the Arabian Gulf, with the assistance of Marjorie Belgrave, the wife of the Chief British Advisor to Bahrain's ruler. Named Al-Khalifa Al-Kubra, the school was initially housed in a building in Muharraq and welcomed 75 girls in its first year.



Clockwise from left: Sheikha Shama Bahlil, Sheikha Aina Al Khalifa, Sheikha Aya Al Zayani and Sheikha Sharmeen Al Shirawi (red jacket). Yazir Al Moawda is also in West London to share their experiences. All wear Hind Malar

INSET IMAGE COURTESY OF THE SALUKI OR GAZELLE HOUND CLUB. IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE KENNEL CLUB, LONDON

"Her Highness Sheikha Aisha was a pioneer amongst women in the Gulf and a first lady who was ahead of her time when it came to her participation in the country's decision-making process and encouraging women to take a more active role in Bahraini society," says Sheikha Aisha's great-granddaughter, Sheikha Yasmeen Al Khalifa. Sheikha Yasmeen also noted that her great-grandmother's impact went far beyond education. "In addition to her interest in healthcare, opening the Al-Naim Hospital in 1940, she also embraced tolerance amongst Bahrain's diverse religious communities."

In the preceding decades Bahrain, together with Kuwait, would become one of the first countries in the Gulf to send young women abroad to continue their education in 1957, as well as the first to establish social organisations for women in 1965, mobilising them to raise awareness of health, social and philanthropic causes. By 1971, a newly-independent Bahrain could boast a professional class of women, many of whom were the first generation in their families to acquire degrees in higher education and become professors, doctors and lawyers. Yet despite such rapid development during her lifetime, Sheikha Aisha could have never imagined the scene unfolding at an art-filled Edwardian town house in Knightsbridge on an overcast September day. Inside, London-based Bahraini designer Hind Matar was styling a group of young Bahraini women in her designs during a photo shoot for *Harpers' Bazaar Arabia*. "Even though they all call London home, it was a challenge getting these amazing women together," confides Hind. "We owe a lot to these early pioneers who paved the way for us," she adds, pointing out that the women in the room that day are continuing to build on that legacy through diverse careers that are redefining the roles Bahraini women are playing in an increasingly global world.

AMAL KHALAF
Projects Curator at Serpentine Galleries Edgeware Road Project



Amal working at her office in Brixton, London. Khalaf is the first Arab woman to be named as the first home of London's Serpentine Galleries. Photo: Michael

On a mild Sunday morning, Amal Khalaf is seated at an outdoor table, cradling a cup of frothy green tea at Corneropia in Brixton, a neighbourhood punny/café stocking ingredients sourced from the local market. Slightly bleary-eyed, she has just returned from two months on the road, during which she visited Beirut, Cairo, Dubai, Bahrain and Berlin to work on exhibitions, lectures and research projects in her role as a curator. “I grew up with a very different set of geographies from those of Khalaf’s kids who spent their summers in London. Having a Bahraini father and Singaporean mother meant that we frequently travelled in the other direction to Southeast Asia,” observes the young curator. “When you are from two tiny island states separated eight hours by plane, I think you are always looking outwards, which partially explains how I ended up in London.” She pulls out a photograph of her teenage self, standing in front of the gate to London’s Chinatown during her first trip to the UK in 2000. “My dad was dropping me off at university, and the first place I wanted to go to was Chinatown, which is still one of my favourite areas of the city,” notes the Bahraini who calls Brixton home. During the 1940s and ‘50s, it became a destination for immigrants from the warmer reaches of the British Empire, transforming the neighbourhood south of the Thames into a multicultural mix of African, Caribbean and Southeast Asian influences.

Amal developed an interest in uncovering histories and storytelling while growing up in Bahrain, a passion that eventually led her to pursue an undergraduate degree in communications and documentary filmmaking at the University of Leeds from 2000 to 2003.

“My parents came of age during a time of rapid change in the 1960s and ‘70s when it was all about making the world a better place, and my sister and I were encouraged to take a similar path. They hoped I would become a human rights lawyer or join the UN, but I decided to channel my love of art and photography into a career as a documentarian to bring stories to the surface and make an impact that way,” says Amal who, after graduating, landed an internship at the BBC in London.

“It was right at the start of the second Gulf War in 2003, and they needed someone who spoke Arabic to translate the daily news posts coming in,” recalls Amal, who, thanks to a producer at the BBC, was introduced to a German filmmaker working on a documentary about the Bedouin of the Sinai Peninsula. “She was looking for a translator and researcher, and I jumped at the opportunity. I had never been to Sinai before, which is a magical landscape filled with amazing sites such as St Catherine’s Monastery,” she recalls, describing her experience of living amongst the Bedouin as a turning point in her life, which saw her travel to Cairo after filming was completed in 2004.

“I had also made a film while in Sinai and I was looking for a gallery to screen it,” says Amal, who made her way to the Townhouse Gallery, an independent art space founded by William Wells in 1998. She would end up working at the gallery for the next few months, before returning to Bahrain to take on a position at the Al Riwaq Artspace. “Working at both galleries provided me with my first exposure to the regional art scene and made me realise that there are people producing compelling art in the Gulf and the Middle East,” says Amal, who continued to make films, attracting the attention of a recruiter at Ohlc.

Based in Rome at the time, the Arab satellite TV channel was looking for Arabic speakers with a background in film production and hired her on as a film editor. “Living in Rome from 2005 to 2006 was an absolute dream and I loved my job while there, but the art world was never far from my mind. I got involved in film festivals and travelled throughout Europe visiting contemporary art exhibitions and it was then that I decided I was going to go back to school,” says Amal, who in 2007

ART IS ABOUT
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THE REGION*

Amal Khalaf/

received a scholarship to pursue an MA in visual cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Initially wanting to run a film programme, she instead teamed up with fellow Goldsmiths students Robert Dingle and Tom Treat to launch Hold & Freigh, an independent not-for-profit space committed to exploring art, architecture, film, live performance and discourse. “We focused on sight-specific productions and artists working at a large scale, which led to exchanges with galleries in Germany,” she recalls.

Shortly after graduating from Goldsmiths, she landed an internship in the residences programme of Casworts, a non-profit contemporary visual art organisation, offering opportunities for international artists to research and develop new work in London. “I liked the residency format, where you work with artists over a long period of time to help them develop ideas and create discursive moments,” says Amal, who ended up collaborating with CAMP, a collective of resident artists at Casworts that would lead to her current position. “They were doing research during the early days of the Edgeware Road Project, and needed a translator and research assistant. Within a few months the Serpentine Gallery’s Sally Tallant had created a role for me, which three years later morphed into my current position as the Projects Curator for the Edgeware Road Project,” she

notes of the international residency and site-specific research programme based in the Edgeware Road neighbourhood at the Centre for Possible Studies.

“The Edgeware Road Project commissions artists to explore questions related to the neighbourhood’s history and community for up to five years, and part of my role is to facilitate that,” says Amal. “What I find fascinating are the rich stories connected to this visibly Middle Eastern neighbourhood that are uncovered by some of these artists. It’s very hard to find documentation on London’s Arab communities in the city’s official archives, so we set about creating an alternative archive,” she says of the history of Arab nightclubs and restaurants along Edgeware Road.

“One such place is Shishawi, which was a newsworthy theatre during WWII that had been acquired by a wealthy Egyptian businessman who made his fortune from importing chickens from Brazil into Sharjah in the 80s. He first turned it into an Arabic cinema, before transforming the space into the popular Al Rimal nightclub,” says Amal, who is also a trustee of the Crossway Foundation and a member of the art collective GCC, which was founded in Art Dubai’s VIP lounge in 2013.

Based in the Middle East, Europe and the U.S., its members collaborate on projects through numerous apps and cloud services in addition to meeting in person. “We wanted to critique this idea of homogeneous identities in the Gulf and address issues of racism and regional stereotyping,” she says of her role in the GCC collective, which has shown at galleries and art biennales in New York, Miami, London, Sharjah, Kuwait and Berlin. “We’re also contributing to a book project with Phaidon on art collectives,” Amal adds, noting that she is currently working on several artist commissions with the Sepanque, as well as an experimental curriculum and workshop with Theatre of the Oppressed. “Art production is more than pretty pictures on a wall.

At its most potent, it’s about creating a space for debate and discussion around critical social, political, economic and even environmental issues impacting the region,” says Amal who, in 2007, travelled to Dubai to attend the first edition of the city’s art fair and Global Art Forum. “I was in my early twenties and had never seen anything like it. I suddenly found myself in a room with artists, writers, technologists, historians, musicians and thinkers, all debating art’s place in shaping communities. I realised this is what I wanted to do.”

SHEYMA BUALI

Director of the BBC Arabic Festival/Independent Arts Journalist

The BBC's Broadcasting House has loomed over the intersection of Portland and Langham Place near Oxford Circus since 1932. Resembling an Art Deco ocean liner, it is home to the Radio Theatre which for close to a century has served as a venue for musical performances and speeches by notable artists, personalities and politicians. Most of them were recorded in front of a live studio audience and broadcast across radio waves and television screens. Today the theatre is also home to the BBC Arabic Festival, which launched in 2014 to present short films and documentaries about social and political changes affecting the Arab world.

As a publicly funded organisation, part of the BBC's mission is to promote art, which is why it maintains orchestras as well as buildings such as the Broadcasting House, where the public can experience a programme of concerts, film screenings and an extensive art collection," says Sheyma Buali, the Arabic Festival's Director, noting that the BBC introduced its Arabic service in 1938 as she makes her way along the grassed-in walkway connecting the Radio Theatre's reception area to the new Media Cafe, offering sweeping views of the largest live newsroom in the world. "I think my interest in film and television developed early on as a child because it was an accessible medium," notes Sheyma, who was born in Washington DC, where her father was stationed as a Bahraini diplomat. She would spend her formative years growing up in Paris and Kuwait, before moving to Bahrain as a teenager to complete high school. "I never had a desire to be in front of the camera, indeed I wanted to play a role in supporting directors and creating a platform for artists to tell their stories. So I studied film and TV production at Emerson College in Boston," notes the Arabic Festival's Director, who moved to Los Angeles in 2001 after graduating to pursue a career in the film industry.

"It was shortly after the September 11 attacks, and a strange and surreal time when one really felt the world wouldn't be quite the same again," says Sheyma, whose move to Hollywood altered her perception of the industry and the role she wanted to play within it. "It was the first time I heard people referring to a movie as a 'product', and there was a disconnect between a desire to create a fictional world and reflect the reality of what was happening around us at a pivotal moment in time. I began to realise that's not the kind of movies I want to make, as I was interested in telling human interest stories that revealed truths about living in the world today, as opposed to fiction or fantasy adventures," notes Sheyma, who returned to Boston where she worked for a while, before moving back to Bahrain to produce a programme focused on women's issues for Bahrain television. She would go on to take a position at Ohi TV when the satellite channel moved its offices to the island, where she produced and edited promos for films and newswires from 2006 to 2008.

"Towards the end of my time there, I realised I still had a lot to learn, especially in terms of crafting stories and understanding the history of the region," says Sheyma, who applied for a scholarship at the British Council in Bahrain to pursue a master's degree in London. Although it's linked to Bahrain's colonial past of the 50s, the British Council was responsible for sending generations of Bahrainis abroad to study at universities in the UK at a time when the population was small and a skilled workforce was needed for emerging industries," observes the Bahraini director, noting that both she and her father were recipients of British Council scholarships. "My dad went to Reading to complete his master's degree and was part of that first wave of Bahrainis to study abroad," says Sheyma, who went to the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, to pursue an MA in critical media and cultural studies from 2008 until 2009.

"The year I spent at SOAS, was incredibly enriching and introduced

me to new ideas, especially in terms of thinking critically about the history and culture of the Gulf. At the same time I found myself trying to balance theory-heavy courses with my focus on current issues affecting the region," says Sheyma, who used writing to bridge and make sense of both worlds. Around this time she developed an interest in exploring Bahrain's rapid transformation over the last few decades, particularly in terms of its urban fabric. Since 2010, she has carved out a niche as an independent journalist covering topics related to film, the visual arts, theatre and urbanism, often touching on cultural production in the Arab world and its relationship to society and politics.

"I didn't feel enough was being written about Middle Eastern art and culture from a critical perspective for an Arab-speaking audience, so I began writing for the London-based Arabic newspaper *Ashraq Al Awwal* in 2011," says Sheyma, whose work has also appeared in a number of publications, including Harper's Bazaar Art, *Caravans* and *Brownbook*, in addition to contributing to exhibition catalogues in London and the Gulf. "Writing for a publication that's accessible to a larger Arab public is important, because there is a concentration of cultural resources related to the Middle East here that you can't find anywhere else in the world," observes the Bahraini journalist.

WE ARE

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MIDDLE EAST"

Sheyma Buali

"I've interviewed a lot of women artists, and I find we are gradually beginning to see more nuanced stories emerging about women in the Gulf and the Middle East through their work," says Sheyma, who has lived in London for eight years, where she is also a commissioning editor for *Bharaz Channel*, an online visual arts publication with a focus on the Middle East. In 2011, she began taking a more active role in the city's independent film festival scene when she joined the London Palestine Film Festival. "I initially began as a volunteer and ended up working with them for four years. I had never been to Palestine, but by the end of those years I was able to recognise different towns because I watched hundreds of films. I learnt a lot which prepared me for the job I have today," says the woman who has been the BBC Arabic Festival's Director since 2015. During four days of free film screenings, the festival captures the mood of the Arab street and transports it to an international audience in the heart of London. "The Middle East is a region that's often misunderstood and going through a very complex time, so the festival's mission is to bring to the surface stories of ordinary people carving out an existence in the Arab world and its diaspora," says Sheyma, who also believes film festivals can play a valuable role in bringing Arab cinema to a wider audience. "Despite there being some very talented Arab filmmakers telling compelling stories from the region, they still suffer from a lack of opportunities to distribute their work. In most cases these festivals are a major way for these films to get screened, especially if they can't be shown in their own countries because they touch on sensitive topics."

"We want to give new directors a chance to have their voices heard, especially if they are presenting a unique point of view on the region's rapidly changing social, cultural or political landscape," says Sheyma of the festival, which also offers an award to promising filmmakers under 30 that includes training and equipment for their next project. Although she receives hundreds of submissions each year from filmmakers across the Arab world, she notes that there is still a significant gap when it comes to films from the Gulf. "I'm not sure why that is. We look for films that don't simply scratch the surface, but delve deep into a topic and there aren't many people making those kinds of films in the Gulf at the moment," she observes, noting Saudi director *Ahd Kamel* and her film *Sanctuary* as an exception. "Luckyly what I enjoy the most about my job is being surrounded by storytellers, which is what attracted me to it in the first place." ➤



Sheyma quit a burgeoning career in Hollywood when she realised that's not the kind of movies she wanted to make. Sheyma by Hind Matar

Larifa creates a 2011 exhibition in London's helping her see art "through new eyes." Larifa wears clothes by Hind Matar



LATIFA AL KHALIFA
Independent Curator/Founder of 'Too-Far-Co

"This is where contemporary art really clicked for me," says independent curator Larifa Al Khalifa, standing in front of the Hayward Gallery at the Southbank Centre, a brutalist concrete building that opened in 1968 to showcase experimental art. Although currently closed for renovations, back in September 2011 she had just completed a Masters degree in Cultural and Creative Industries from King's College London. "They were showing a retrospective of Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist called *EyeBall Massage*, which fused imagery, music and text to create an immersive experience. It was the first time I had walked into an exhibition and felt an emotional charge, and that's the moment I got hooked on this medium called art, which I always knew was, but was seeing through new eyes," recalls Larifa. "The Hayward exhibition was a pivotal moment in that it sparked my interest in art as a mode of expression or critique," says Larifa, who grew up travelling around the world thanks to her diplomat father. "I was only a few months old when I made my first trip to London, and I lived in Washington DC from the age of five to nine where my dad was Bahrain's ambassador. I think that early exposure to different cultures shaped my approach to art as a form of cross-cultural dialogue."

Sensing that her calling was in a creative field, she applied to King's College London, where the city became part of her educational experience. "Going to university in London is unique in that the city is your campus," says the Bahraini curator, who was exposed to London's art scene through her pers at school and by going gallery hopping around East London or attending shows at the Royal Opera House. "Loving her taught me how to be independent, and to see the world through different eyes, which comes with being in a large city that attracts people from all over the globe," says Larifa, who would go on to organise and curate the first exhibition of contemporary Bahraini art in London after attending Edge of Arabia's 2012 show at the Old Truman Brewery in Brick Lane.

"I remember being blown away by the exhibition, but I also wondered why Bahrain's own contemporary art community wasn't engaging with an international audience at that level. It quickly became apparent that we didn't have the mechanisms in place to do so, so I decided to take the leap and organise the first major display in London of contemporary art from Bahrain. The finding wasn't there to begin with so I also had to raise the money for the exhibition," says Larifa, noting that Edge of Arabia as well as Bahrain's Authority for Culture and Antiquities provided support early on. "I did some research beforehand and worked closely with the Al Barsh gallery, which put me in contact with some of the artists. Looking back now, I realise I was a newbie with a really big idea, but many of these artists jumped at the opportunity to show their work abroad," says Larifa, who on June 27, 2013 unveiled *In the Open*, which was organised in collaboration with London's Shubbak Festival of Contemporary Arab Culture. The exhibition included the work of seven emerging, and established artists presenting diverse points of view.

"It was about creating a platform, not only for their work, but also to explore larger questions of identity and belonging in a culture that has been transformed through rapid urbanisation, immigration and social diversity," says the curator. "It was gratifying to see the exhibition open up doors for many of these artists, who were contacted by galleries and collectors about their work. I think a lot of people were also surprised by the variety of media on view, from Mohammad El-Mehdi's powerful abstract expressionist paintings to Hasan Hijari's interactive sound sculpture, and a photographic mural depicting ongoing conversations spread across Bahrain's graffiti-strewn walls by Ghada Khamji," says Larifa.

"There is an entire segment of the population that remembers when Bahrain was a poor country with minimal development, before that

ALLA AL ZAYANI
Senior Architect at Zaha Hadid Architects

"I always look forward to Clefemwell Design Week, which is London's leading independent design festival. It's a time when this space really comes alive with ideas," says Alla Al Zayani, a Bahraini architect who has called the British capital home for the past three and a half years. She is standing amongst towering architectural models of skyscrapers in the Zaha Hadid Design Gallery at 101 Goswell Road, which occupies one of two buildings housing the firm's offices and design studios (the second is housed in a former Victorian school, steps away on Bowling Green Lane).

Alla first came to Zaha Hadid Architects for a three-month internship in 2010, while still an architecture student at the Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. "My school offered a co-op programme for students to gain work experience before graduating. My dream was to work for Zaha Hadid Architects and I was overjoyed when I was accepted for the internship," notes Alla, who knew she wanted to continue her career at the firm after completing her Bachelor of Science and Masters degrees in architecture in 2012.

"There is an energy and passion for design at the firm that's both exhilarating and contagious," says the young architect, who has worked on several projects in the Gulf that include private residential villas, the King Abdullah Financial District Metro Station in Riyadh, the Lusal Hotel in Qatar and the Be'ah Headquarters in Sharjah. Although Zaha Hadid passed away unexpectedly last March, her firm, now led by Patrik Schumacher, continues to develop innovative architectural projects in the Middle East, including a stadium for the 2022 World Cup in Doha, as well as the Iraqi Parliament.

"What I enjoy the most about my job is working on the design of a project throughout its different stages and seeing it develop from start to finish. Each phase is unique and interesting, whether it's developing a design concept or a construction detail," observes the young Bahraini architect, who decided to pursue a career in architecture during her first year of high school. "It was around the time my parents had decided to redesign our house in Bahrain. I was fascinated by the idea of what our home could transform into, and once they began working with an architect, I made sure to sit in on meetings and be included in the design process," recalls Alla, who credits her parents with encouraging her and her siblings to pursue their dreams.

"Architecture can be a high pressure and demanding job because of constant deadlines and the complexity of each project, and one still doesn't see many women from the Gulf in this profession," admits Alla. "My parents never placed limitations on us and supported us throughout our career choices. Creativity was also valued and encouraged in my family which shaped who we are today."

Alla spends her weekends visiting London's many museums such as the Royal Academy of Arts. Among her favourite exhibitions was *Constructing Worlds: Photography and Architecture in the Modern Age* at the Barbican Art Gallery in 2014. "It explored the power of architectural photography to reveal wider truths about society, and was a global tour of 20th and 21st century design captured by leading photographers who changed the way we view architecture and think about the world we live in," notes the creative, who also cites the *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* exhibit at the V&A as a personally inspiring moment.

"As an architect I never felt limited to one discipline but constantly find connections between the work of a conceptual artist such as Ai Weiwei to that of a fashion designer like Alexander McQueen," says Alla, who points to a dress by the late designer as a prized possession in her closet. "McQueen was a technician who grasped the intricacies of drape and construction. He thought like a sculptor and I was lucky enough to acquire a prototype of one of his dresses that sheds light on his design process," adds the architect, who was also shaped by her travels and living abroad. "I feel very grateful to have grown up in an environment where I was exposed to different cultures and languages from an early age. Living abroad the last few years has not only helped me grow as an individual and an architect, but has also impacted my future goals."

EARLY EXPOSURE
TO DIVERGENT
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MY APPROACH TO
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DIALOGUE

Larifa Al Khalifa

dotted throughout Adly's Block 338. In December 2015, she was one of two guest curators invited to work with the three recipients of the inaugural ArabRami/NEST Award, the Kingdom's first award for young Bahraini artists. "The best part of working on the prize with Sheikh Rashid bin Khalifa Al Khalifa, the founder of the non-profit ArabRami, was the opportunity to work with the artists. We don't have established art academies in Bahrain, so most of them are self-taught," says Larifa. "With everything going on in the world today, art can serve as a vital tool to engage in cross-cultural conversations that may not happen otherwise." ➤

Finding inspiration

in the art and fashion created by Ai Weiwei and Alexander McQueen has helped shape Alla's view of architecture. Alla wears clothes by Hind Matar



YAZZ AHMED
Bahraini-British jazz musician and composer

The Vortex in London's northeast borough of Dalston is a small unassuming venue, which has long been considered something of an institution amongst jazz aficionados, who come to listen to the leading European and American musicians of the day. Yet it has also built its reputation as a place to discover jazz's rising stars, many of whom are redefining the genre in unexpected ways. On a cool October evening, a full house gathered to witness something special, as the Bahraini-British trumpeter, player and composer Yazza 'Yasmin' Ahmed took to the stage with her talented quartet, the Ahmed Family Hada.

In Arabic, Hada refers to a friendly social gathering or informal party, and we wanted to create an experience that's inclusive and bridges cultures. The group also represents my musical family, where we work on projects that explore my Middle Eastern roots," says Yazza, who appeared on stage in a dapphous green hajibayah embellished with gold embroidery that flickered under the spotlights. "When I'm choosing clothes to perform in, I want to reflect my dual heritage while taking into account practical considerations. Playing the trumpet is a very physical activity and I need to be comfortable, able to breathe and move freely."

Celebrated as a rising star by publications such as *Jazzwise* and *Time Out*, Yazza has spent her career exploring connections between the musical traditions of the Arabian Gulf and Western jazz, which culminated in funding from the Jazzlines Fellowships Programme and the Jerwood Charitable Foundation in 2014.

"To be commissioned to compose and perform a new piece of music was a turning point in my career. During that time I grew as an artist thanks to their support over the course of a year of research and writing," says Yazza, who was able to travel to Bahrain to conduct fieldwork. With the help of a contact at the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities, in October 2014 she flew to the island to attend a private performance by the few surviving pearl divers at their clubhouse in Muharraq. "It's an experience I will never forget, being crammed into a small reception room, listening to the infectious rhythms of clapping hands and drums, the finger cymbals cutting through the air and rich deep voices supporting the soloists who's melodies soared over these magnificent textures," recalls Yazza, who also interviewed the retired pearl divers about the histories behind these traditional secular work songs.

While in Bahrain, she researched wedding songs traditionally performed by all-female groups – the descendants of former African slaves, they included a singer accompanied by women on drums – in addition to searching the island's specialised bookstores for wedding song lyrics and poems. "A rare and unexpected treat was listening to my paternal grandfather, who sang songs to me from his own wedding day," recalls the composer, who returned to the UK with her field recordings, fragments of which found their way into the fabric of the music.

"With the help of voice sculptor Jason Simpki, I created new sounds, loops and textures, which formed the basis of many of the pieces and shaped the creative process of composing *Albwan Al Sidari*," says Yazza, of her suite of songs, whose title came while researching the ancient mythology of the Gulf. "I discovered an interesting character from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* named Sidur, a goddess of the Gulf who lives on an island at the edge of the sea. So I imagined that this island mentioned in the epic poem is Bahrain, the island of two seas," added the composer, noting that it was one of her most challenging projects to date, given she had never written songs and only instrumental music up until then.

"Some of the songs were in Arabic, so I tapped London-based Iraqi singer Alva Marguant to perform them. I must admit that when it was time for the concert, I was a bit nervous as the audience were totally silent throughout, but they gave us a standing ovation in the end."

says Yazza who plans on recording *Albwan Al Sidari* as an album in 2017. Six years after graduating from the prestigious Guildhall School of Music and Drama, she made a splash on the UK jazz scene in 2011 with her debut album, *Finding My Way Home*. The album not only established her as a strikingly original voice, but also laid the foundation for *Albwan Al Sidari*. "I wasn't interested in becoming a professional musician until my last year at Sixth Form College. I wanted to study jazz at a music college in London, but I wasn't ready, so I enrolled into a standard music degree course at Kingston University," says the Bahraini-British composer, who during that time focused on improving her knowledge of jazz and playing the trumpet.

Her hard work paid off when she received a scholarship to pursue a Masters degree in jazz at Guildhall. "Mixing with the elite musicians of my generation in all genres, forced me to step up my game to keep up with them," says Yazza, who took a while to find her own voice as an artist. "After graduating, I set up a band and started writing my own music. But it was initially challenging to find something unique and personal to say in an already crowded music scene, where everyone is shouting to be heard," says Yazza, who eventually stumbled on a piece of family history that gave her a renewed sense of identity.

"I discovered my father's family traces their lineage back to the Al Emadi tribe, which lived in present day Qatar in the 1700s, from where they travelled back and forth as traders between Bahrain and Persia. Knowing I was part of this much larger tribe became a font of inspiration for me," notes Yazza, who decided to explore her Bahraini roots in *Finding My Way Home*. Yazza credits her choice of the trumpet to her maternal grandfather Terry Brown, the noted British jazz trumpeter of the 1950s and '60s who played with legendary musicians such as John Dankworth, Tibby Hayes and Ronnie Scott.

"Growing up, my grandfather introduced me to a lot of British jazz musicians of the 1950s and '60s who became the soundtrack to my teenage years, but as an adult I also discovered other artists such as Ibrahim Maalouf, the French-Lebanese trumpeter and Rahih About Khalil, the renowned Lebanese oud player and composer," says Yazza, who began to explore her Bahraini heritage much later in life. "I hope I can play a role in broadening definitions of identity through my work. In my early twenties I began to rediscover and celebrate my diverse roots through music, and invite people to join me on this journey of discovery," says Yazza, who has performed around the world in countries such as Japan, Russia, Mexico, France, the Netherlands, the United States and Kuwait, in addition to touring with bands, including These New Puritans, Kaldhead, Swing Out Sister and The Maine Street Preachers.

"Each time I visit Bahrain, I discover a slice of my family's history, and it's become a part of my creative process," says the composer, recalling one particular visit to her grandfather's office in Muharraq. "While there I couldn't help noticing a gallery of photos, and I came across one particular image of him shaking hands with Winston Churchill. I wondered what words they exchanged at that moment," says Yazza, who is also hoping to organise workshops in Bahrain to increase awareness of music education and an appreciation for jazz.

"Music brings people together, overriding differences and prejudices. It's a way of bringing peace and that's what I really enjoy. When audience members tell me that I've moved them in some ways, or even inspired them, I feel like I've done my job," confides the British-Bahraini artist, who will perform *Albwan Al Sidari* with her band at Bahrain's International Music Festival in October. ➤



Yazza has found a rich seam of inspiration in her Middle Eastern heritage

PHOTOGRAPHER: KIM JAKOBSEN TO. HAIR: ADAM GARLAND USING ORIBE. MAKE-UP: CHRISTIANA AMANKRA. SKIRT AND EARRINGS: MATAR. SHIRT: STYLIST'S OWN. STYLIST: HIND MATAR

SHERMEEN AL SHIRAWI

Interpretive Planner & Content Developer for Museums & Exhibitions

Shermeen Al Shirawi likes to tell the story of when her father was invited to give a talk at London's Architectural Association in 1976, in his role as Bahrain's Minister of Development and Industry. "It was not long after the Lebanese Civil War broke out, and he predicted that Beirut would cease to be the capital of the Arab world and it would shift to London," says the Bahraini interpretive planner and museum content developer. "In hindsight it's an interesting observation, as today London is the only place in the world where one can walk into a restaurant and see the Arab world's leaders, businessmen and cultural figures all dining in the same place," observes Shermeen, pointing out Britain's long presence in the Arabian Gulf as a major factor.

"London tends to attract the English-speaking Arabs of the Gulf because of that colonial history and familiarity with the language," says Shermeen, noting that for her generation of Arabs from the Gulf, there is an interest in rediscovering a golden age of pan-Arabism when travelling abroad meant a visit to one of the region's cosmopolitan centres such as Damascus, Beirut, Cairo and Baghdad. "Although I can fly from London to New York in seven hours, for my father's generation a trip to the UK in the 1950s meant travelling through Baghdad or Beirut, places that I may not have the opportunity to visit today because the region is more fragmented," says the

London-based Bahraini museum professional, who learnt from an early age how artifacts from the past can be used to impart life lessons.

"I remember asking my father how he dealt with the pressures of work shortly after beginning my own career. He responded by placing a 1,300-year-old Islamic coin in the palm of my hand," recalls Shermeen of her father, who explained that such a coin had underpinned an empire for over 700 years, allowing for the exchange of goods from Spain to China. "He was making the point that this coin had witnessed centuries of tumultuous events yet it is still with us today. It was his way of saying that one needs to keep things in perspective and focus on long-term goals and not be consumed by short-term issues that crop up along the way," says the Bahraini museum professional who also counts her paternal aunt as an early role model.

Shermeen recalled the day her aunt, a collector of old Islamic manuscripts, shared one of her most prized possessions with her, a rare 13th century handwritten Holy Qur'an. But instead of lingering on its meticulously decorated pages, she carefully flipped to the back of the Holy Book to reveal an inscription left by the calligrapher noting he had completed The Holy Qur'an on that day; the century was at Damascus gate. "It wasn't the object itself that was significant to her as the story behind it, which reveals that history often repeats itself," says Shermeen, noting that her aunt wanted to highlight that civilisations are in a constant state of flux and change, which one must adapt to.

"She was born in the early 1930s and only completed the fifth grade at a time when Bahraini women weren't expected to pursue a higher education," says Shermeen of her aunt, who never stopped learning and went on to pursue a BA in Philosophy. "I learnt through her the subtle difference between illiteracy and ignorance, and to be compassionate towards the former and inpatient of the latter," adds the interpretive planner, who was also exposed to the world of museums from an early age during summer vacations with her family. "Wherever we went in the world our first stop was always a museum or cultural institution, whether the Louvre in Paris, the Guggenheim in New York, or the Space Museum in Washington, DC," says Shermeen, who came to the early realisation that museums were the perfect compliment to a formal education.

In 1999, she earned a BA in History from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, the first of three degrees from the school. "My father hoped I would become an archaeologist, but I wanted to study Middle Eastern history, particularly from 500 AD to the 20th century. That background gave me a deeper understanding of more recent transformations taking place in the region today," says Shermeen, who also pursued an MA in International Relations at SOAS in 2000. "I wanted to explore the Middle East through the lens of international politics and SOAS was a great school to learn about the geo-political factors shaping the region," she recalls, noting that she spent hours in the school's extensive library poring over books and archival documents about the Middle East. Through her love of research and exposure to students from diverse backgrounds, Shermeen also developed an interest in exploring the role religion has played in shaping the region's culture and history.

"Religion is always present in the background when it comes to the Middle East, and historically the region was home to diverse faiths. At SOAS I was exposed to different perspectives that I hadn't necessarily grown up hearing, so I embarked on a second MA in Islamic Studies from 2001 to 2002," says Shermeen, who learnt to question official narratives and dig a little deeper beneath the surface. "That was an important lesson for me, because as an exhibition content developer I approach each project or artifact with the assumption that nothing is carved in stone, that history is constantly evolving, as we uncover new layers of information," says Shermeen, who in her 10-year career in the museum and exhibition field has worked with major cultural institutions in the UK and the Middle East.

Beginning her career as a current affairs journalist for the London-based pan-Arab daily newspaper *Al-Bustan*, she would enter the museum world when she was asked to write the text for an exhibition at Paris's Institut du Monde Arabe. "Although it was initially challenging to interpret artifacts succinctly in a few words, that experience made me realise the role language can play in bringing objects to life," observes Shermeen, who went on to join the London-based museum consultancy Baker Langham, where she worked on cultural projects around the world as a content manager and exhibition developer.

"A lot of the work we did involved researching material on the Gulf that either came from the British Library or the British archives in India, which holds a number of documents related to the British presence in the region," recalls the Bahraini museum professional, noting that the archives also contained informal correspondences between British officials which offered glimpses into daily life in pre-oil Arabia.

Today, Shermeen works with Cultural Innovations, a leading London-based cultural and heritage consultancy, where she continues to grow professionally. "I used to think I knew the Middle East pretty well, but now I approach each project with a blank slate, challenging myself to uncover new layers of history," says Shermeen. "The Islamic Empire once stretched from Asia to Europe, encompassing people of diverse backgrounds and faiths who were united by one language. During this period Arabic became the language of science, poetry, literature, law and medicine. It created this dynamic environment where ideas could travel across large distances thanks to this ease of communication."

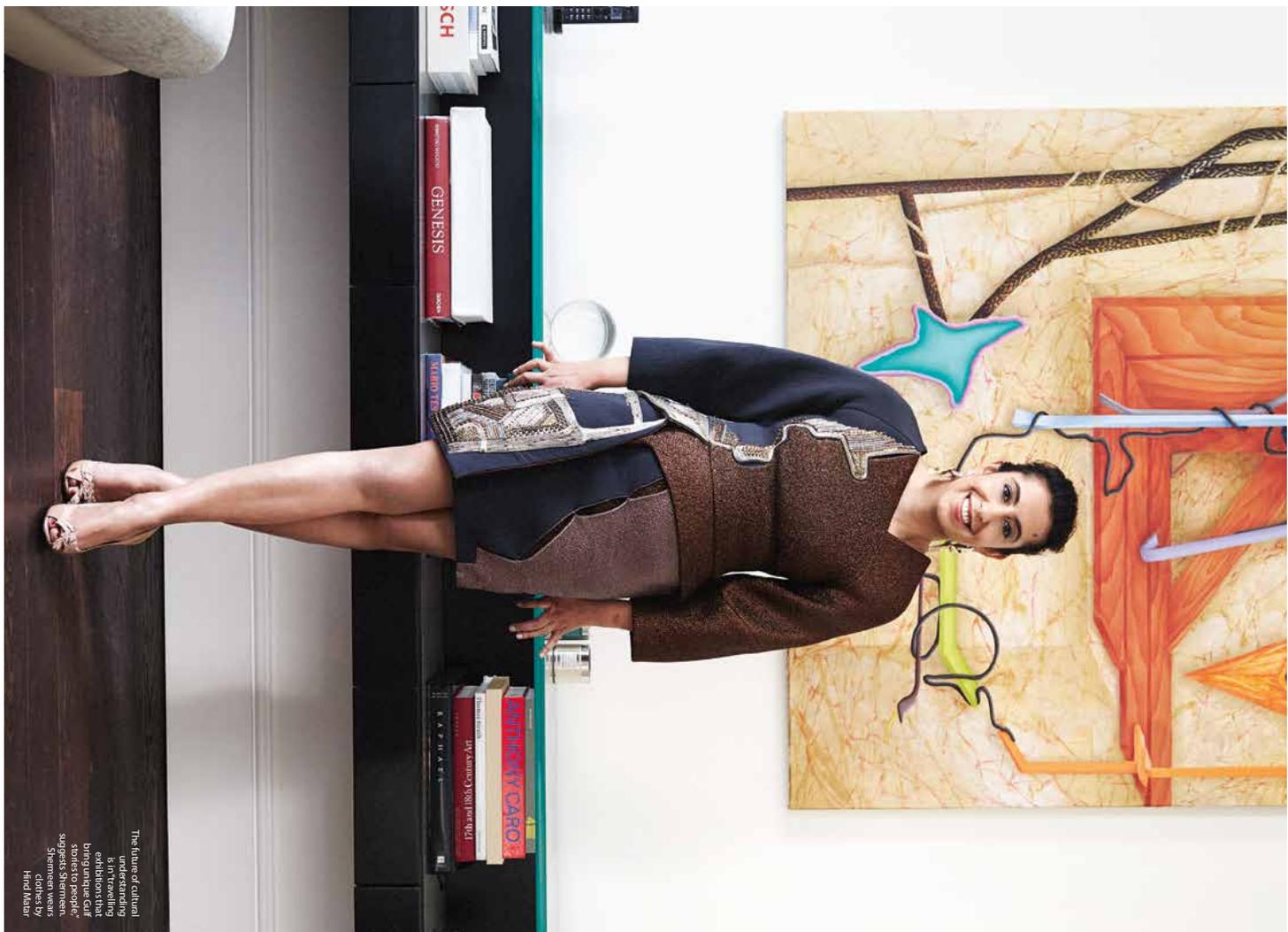
"The museum story is a human story, which is one of the reasons I wanted to study history," says the Bahraini exhibition developer. "I think the future will be in travelling exhibitions that bring unique Gulf stories to people who otherwise wouldn't travel to the region," says Shermeen, noting that such exhibitions can serve to emphasise the shared humanity between different cultures. "These aren't necessarily stories that appear in the mainstream media, but they also require investment from both the government and private sector to make such exhibitions a reality." ■

"I USED TO THINK I KNEW THE MIDDLE EAST PRETTY WELL. BUT NOW..."

NEW LAYERS OF HISTORY

Shermeen Al Shirawi

OPENING IMAGE: PHOTOGRAPHER: KIM JAKOBSEN TO. PHOTOGRAPHER'S ASSISTANT: WOJCIECH SZCZERBETKA. HAIR: AKIKO KAWASAKI USING BUMBLE AND BUMBLE. HAIR ASSISTANT: CLARE CLARK. MAKE-UP: ADAM DE CRUZ. MAKE-UP ASSISTANT: CHRISTIANA AMANKRA. WARDROBE: MATAR EXCEPT FOR ALIA'S TOP WHICH IS HER OWN. EARRINGS ON MMJ; MATAR, EARRINGS ON YASMEEN AND SHERMEEN AND CLIFF ON ALIA; MATAR X NOMEI KLEIN JEWELLERY. STYLIST: HIND MATAR



The form of cultural understanding is in travelling exhibitions that bring unique Gulf stories to people, says Shermeen, whose clothes by Hind Matar