TN
The National's Luxury Lifestyle Magazine
Summer 2026

In conversation with Repossi's Anne de Vergeron

Inside the world of rare violins

Meet the running club of Damascus

Juma Al Haj's bold new paintings

One Last Thing with Mohammed Al Turki

Saba Mubarak *Portrait of an artist*

Newsletters

Checking In

Check-in for travel news and destinations in our fortnightly newsletter

Sign up now

The National

CONTENTS

8

42

24

32

Newsletters

The Arts Edit

Your guide to Middle East arts and culture

Sign up now

The National

EDITOR'S LETTER

Before she became one of the Arab world's most recognisable faces, actress Saba Mubarak thought she would be a painter. The daughter of Palestinian artist and poet Hanan Al-Agha, she grew up surrounded by canvases, books and the belief that creativity was not separate from life, but woven into it.

What emerges from *The National*'s arts and culture editor William Mullally's cover profile is more than the story of a successful film star. It is a meditation on creative inheritance: the ways our parents shape us, the ideas we spend years trying to escape and the surprising ways they return later in life. Mubarak speaks candidly about identity, displacement, ambition, failure and the dangers of becoming too comfortable in success. Most strikingly, she reflects on the artist she once imagined becoming and the artist she is still searching for today.

It is a story that resonates far beyond cinema. The people who most interest us are rarely those who follow a straight line. They are the ones who continue to question themselves, resist easy definitions and understand that creativity is not a destination, but an ongoing conversation between past and present.

Mubarak's journey is also a reminder that identity is seldom singular. Moving between Jordan, Palestine, Egypt and the wider Arab world, she carries each influence with her while refusing to be confined by any one of them. At a time when so much of modern life encourages simplification, there is something refreshing in Mubarak's embrace of complexity.

Elsewhere in this issue, similar questions of heritage, belonging and reinvention surface in different forms. We meet the siblings behind Iwan Maktabi as they balance centuries-old craft traditions with contemporary carpet design; enter the discreet world of antique violins, where history is measured in generations; and join the runners of Damascus as a marathon through the Syrian capital becomes a symbol of renewal. We travel from the contrasting landscapes of Bali to the desert highways of the UAE, where *Truck Nation* explores how the pick-up truck became an unlikely marker of work, identity and national character.

In our arts pages, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi revisits the origins of Dubai Creek through the work of Syrian artist Hala Kouatly, while features on Emirati artist Juma Al Haj and a landmark exhibition of Palestinian heritage in Turin examine how culture endures through conflict, displacement and change.

As for Mubarak, she may never return to painting. But by the end of William's interview, it becomes clear that she never truly left it behind. The medium changed. But her way of seeing the world did not.

Nasri Atallah

The National

Editor Nasri Atallah **Deputy editor** Sarah Maisey **Art director** Gerald Du **Creative director** Nick Donaldson **Picture editors** Olive Obina, Scott Chasserot **Sub-editors** Aarti Jhurani, Panna Munyal **Contributors** David Tusing, Faisal Al Zaabi, Farah Andrews, Hayley Kadrou, Jenny Gustafsson, Josh Sims, Maghie Ghali, Razmig Bedirian, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, William Mullally

For marketing and partnership opportunities, contact Mireille Puskulian on mpuskulian@thenationalnews.com. For advertising and commercial opportunities, contact Ella Francesca on 058 508 6860 or ella.francesca@eng-futuremedia.com

Timely codes

Ana de Armas fronts the campaign for the new Colour Blossom watch by Louis Vuitton.

By **Sarah Maisey**

Louis Vuitton has a new face for the latest addition to its Colour Blossom collection: Cuban-Spanish actress Ana de Armas, who has been part of the Louis Vuitton family since joining as a global ambassador in June 2023. Blending watchmaking with jewellery, the watch takes its cues from the Monogram Flower, the house's distinctive petal-shaped motif.

Composed of interlaced LV initials and stylised floral motifs – including a rounded four-petal flower enclosed within a circle – the Louis Vuitton Monogram is best known as the repeating pattern seen across ready-to-wear, bags, accessories and the luggage that first established the maison's name. Designed in 1896 by Georges Vuitton in honour of his father, Louis, the Monogram celebrates its 130th anniversary this year.

The Colour Blossom watch collection reinterprets the floral symbol as a 26 millimetre timepiece offered in four variations. Each adopts the rounded four-petal silhouette within a disc, while expressing a distinctive personality. One pairs a steel case with a dial cut from Australian white mother-of-pearl and a textured beige leather strap. Another combines a pink-gold case with pink mother-of-pearl and a blush leather strap. A third contrasts yellow gold with calming Brazilian amazonite and a matching blue-green strap.

The fourth, meanwhile, offers a more elevated interpretation – it is snow-set with 103 brilliant-cut diamonds totalling 0.91 carats. The diamonds frame a white mother-of-pearl dial, while a textured mocha strap completes the refined design.

Conceived as a balance of femininity and sophistication, each watch relies on intricate savoir-faire. The dial, for example, is only between 0.3mm and 0.6mm in thickness, yet is curved and precision-cut before each slice of mother-of-pearl or hard stone is hand-polished to achieve a glossy finish. Each petal slopes gently inward towards the centre of the dial, protected beneath a curved sapphire crystal. The crown is decorated with a miniature monogram flower, while the hands are secured with a tiny nail stud – a subtle nod to Louis Vuitton's trunk-making heritage. A tone-on-tone railroad motif is also delicately stamped on to every dial.

Such craftsmanship stems from years of investment. In 2011, Louis Vuitton acquired a watch specialist in Geneva, renaming it La Fabrique du Temps Louis Vuitton. The move brought every aspect of watchmaking in-house, allowing the maison to combine mechanical engineering with rare decorative arts.

Artistic director Matthieu Hegi explains the thinking behind Colour Blossom: "We wished to reinterpret an iconic jewellery collection, presenting a woman's timepiece with a jewellery spirit," he says. The use of hard stone and mother-of-pearl was intended to amplify the collection's "inherently precious essence", while the diamonds elevated it further still.

Each watch bears the words "Louis Vuitton Paris" and "Swiss Made" on the dial – a final signifier of the craftsmanship behind this new collection.

Shot by renowned photography duo Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin, the campaign shows de Armas in a relaxed setting, dressed in Louis Vuitton by Nicolas Ghesquière and wearing pieces from the Colour Blossom collection. The result captures the house's vision of understated elegance.

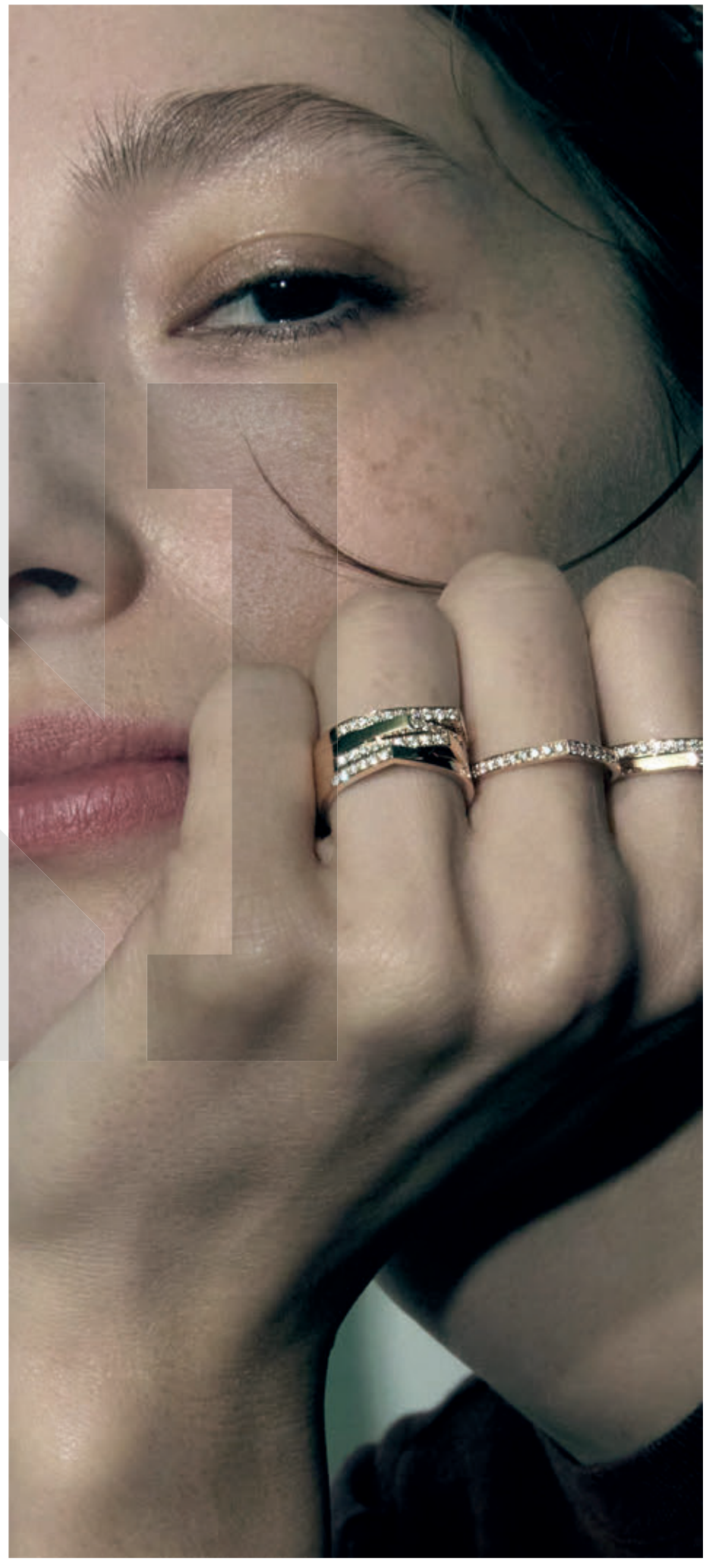
Beyond her role within the Louis Vuitton family, the actress has become one of Hollywood's most recognisable stars. She earned an Oscar nomination for her portrayal of Marilyn Monroe in the 2022 film *Blonde*, and has also starred in *Blade Runner 2049* and *No Time to Die*.

LOUIS VUITTON

Cuban-Spanish actress Ana de Armas has been a global ambassador for Louis Vuitton since June 2023

Balancing the scales

From Place Vendôme in Paris to The Galleria in Abu Dhabi, Repossi chief executive Anne de Vergeron tells **Sarah Maisey** about pairing avant-garde design and exceptional craftsmanship with female-led innovation



Since its founding in Turin in 1957 and the opening of its flagship boutique on Place Vendôme in 1986, Repossi has carved out a singular place within contemporary jewellery. While many maisons struggle to balance heritage and savoir-faire with the need to remain culturally relevant, Repossi – under the eye of creative director Gaia Repossi, great-granddaughter of founder Costantino Repossi – has instinctively gravitated towards the language of architecture, art and modernity.

Under Anne de Vergeron, that balance between heritage and reinvention has only sharpened. After joining parent company LVMH from investment banking in 2015, de Vergeron was appointed chief executive of Repossi in 2020. While the move marked an unlikely pivot into high jewellery, her approach has remained remarkably clear-eyed.

Rather than pursuing aggressive global expansion, she has focused on quieter, more deliberate growth grounded in cultural relevance, craftsmanship and identity.

"When I joined, my vision was to ensure the continuation of the Repossi codes of exceptional jewellery blended with expertise and traditional savoir-faire," de Vergeron says on a call from Paris. "Years later, that vision remains the same. My role is to ensure these codes remain strong and unchanged. We remain focused on long-term, sustainable growth with a clear identity. That is our guide."

Those codes are immediately recognisable. Where many high jewellery houses lean on flora, fauna or historical ornamentation, Repossi takes its cues from contemporary architecture and modern art. A programme of collaborations led by Gaia Repossi, with artists including Sterling Ruby and Robert Mapplethorpe, further underscores the house's ongoing dialogue with the art world.

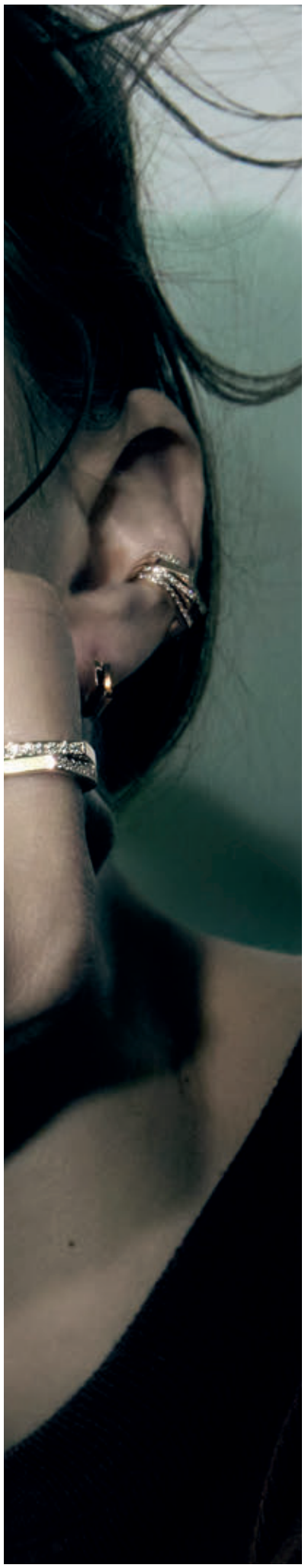
That architectural approach is perhaps best expressed in the Serti sur Vide collection – literally "set on the void". A daring reimagining of the traditional solitaire ring, the pieces are designed using an almost invisible setting to suspend three pear-shaped gemstones against the skin.

"There is a movement in jewellery to assess the beauty of stones by placing them between the fingers," de Vergeron explains. That gesture has now been translated into rings where the stones sit not on top of the finger, but beside it, held by a delicate three-pronged structure engineered to maximise light. Known as the Eiffel Tower setting, it is visible only from the side, recalling the silhouette of the Parisian landmark from which it takes its name.

Stripped of excess, Serti sur Vide is an exercise in pared-back modernism – and, as such, a test of the Repossi workshop's technical skill. "You cannot do minimalism without exceptional craftsmanship. It is impossible," de Vergeron says. Without an ornament to distract the eye, even the smallest flaw becomes visible. "Everything has to be perfect."

That pursuit of perfection has defined the house from the beginning. Every gemstone is painstakingly sourced and selected, while technical innovation remains central to the creative process. The house has also reinterpreted chandelier earrings as ear cuffs, wrapping diamonds around the ear rather than suspending them from it. It is this avant-garde thinking that defines Repossi's ability to challenge established jewellery codes while remaining rooted in traditional techniques.

Today, as luxury consumers increasingly gravitate towards quieter, more personal forms of expression, Repossi's restrained aesthetic feels especially resonant. Whether in the repeating circles of the Berbere collection or the jagged peaks of Antifer, the bold lines and absence of



REPOSSI

Above, chief executive Anne de Vergeron is one of the many women leading Repossi
Left, the Antifer rings feature jagged peaks
Top, the Letters line from the 1980s has been revived as diamond and gold bracelets

fuss possess a clarity attuned to a younger customer raised on contemporary design, art and fashion.

That same clarity shapes de Vergeron's retail strategy. Rather than saturating markets with stores, Repossi is carefully expanding through a tightly controlled network of boutiques. Alongside its historic Paris address, the house operates only a handful of boutiques in key locations including Monaco, Tokyo, Seoul, Dubai, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, where it opened at The Galleria Al Maryah Island in November last year. Partnerships with retailers such as Dover Street Market in the UK, Printemps in France and Lane Crawford in Hong Kong further extend its reach.

The Middle East, in particular, has become an important market for the brand. Openings in Doha, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, alongside the renovation of its Dubai Mall flagship, reflect the region's significance. Yet expansion, de Vergeron stresses, is not simply geographical – it is about resonance and community. "Local sensitivity is very important," she says. "Which is why we work with local artists in the Middle East."

Repossi has collaborated with influential women including Egyptian-Palestinian actress May Calamawy, who fronted the 2026 Ramadan collection, and Saudi model Alanoud Al Turki, star of the Ramadan 2024 campaign. The brand also partnered with Kuwaiti entrepreneur Duha Al Ramadhan and her store Aubade Jewellery on a collection of earrings and ear cuffs.

More tellingly, perhaps, following the devastating Beirut port explosion in 2020, Repossi donated all regional profits from one bracelet collection towards efforts to rebuild the city. That sense of care and female collaboration extends beyond communications. Repossi also works with women miners in the Umba Valley between Tanzania and Kenya through a partnership with Moyo Gems and the Tanzania Women Miners Association.

By allowing women to mine their own parcels of land, the initiative not only improves working conditions, but also ensures gemstone traceability – a thorny issue elsewhere in the industry.

"They are producing the most beautiful sapphires," de Vergeron says. "Not just blues, but greys that look like a Parisian winter sky." Prized for their shifting tones – moving from pale green to dusky pink depending on the light – the sapphires are incorporated into the Serti sur Vide collection. What began as a one-off project is now in its sixth year, and has enabled the miners to build a kindergarten, purchase tools and train other women.

"This isn't just a gesture," de Vergeron says. "We buy stones from them at market prices. It gives us traceability and transparency, and we can even say that every stone on a particular ring has been mined by one woman, which is incredible."

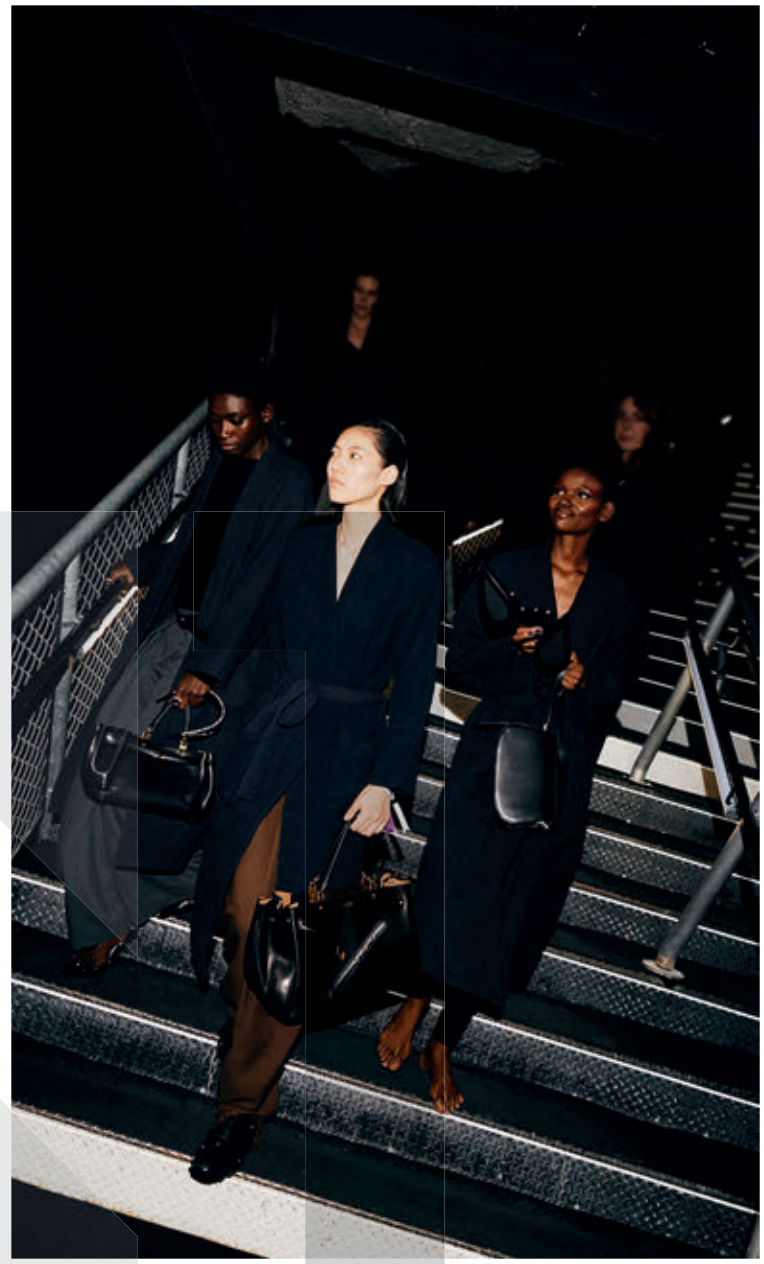
The Middle East, it turns out, is the biggest market for these pieces. "We get calls all the time asking when the new colours are arriving. Perhaps it resonates because there are so many women entrepreneurs in the Middle East – they recognise that the miners are entrepreneurs too," she says.

The emphasis on sustainability feels increasingly rare in the jewellery industry, and reflects a broader progressive culture within Repossi itself. Though jewellery remains traditionally male-dominated, many of the house's senior roles are held by women, including creative director Gaia Repossi, chief financial officer Clémence Saint-Aubert and chief marketing officer Alexandra Dubois.

"This wasn't a deliberate strategy," de Vergeron insists. "It happened naturally, simply by choosing the right person for the role. But I am very pleased." As chief executive, de Vergeron is also one of only a handful of women leading major jewellery houses. There is something quietly fitting about a maison so attuned to the modern woman also being shaped by female leadership.

This year marks Repossi's 40th anniversary on Place Vendôme, a milestone being celebrated through a series of special projects. The Letters collection from the 1980s is being revived as diamond and gold bracelets, while a four-row Antifer ring has been released in graduated shades of gold. Dutch artist and designer Sabine Marcelis meanwhile, has, been commissioned to create artworks for the boutique inspired by the Antifer peak motif.

Doubling down on identity has become increasingly important. "Luxury today must be defined by authenticity, quality and exclusivity," de Vergeron explains. "Being in Place Vendôme means having the best craftsmanship, the highest level of jewellery and the best stones with the correct certification. We are very proud to be celebrating 40 years. It is an important milestone. It is about remaining true to who we are."



The new master of Balenciaga

After redefining Valentino for a generation, Pierpaolo Piccioli arrives at the Spanish house carrying the weight of couture's most formidable legacy. By **Sarah Maisey**

Pierpaolo Piccioli's return to fashion in October, at the helm of Balenciaga, was more than just industry news – the move felt almost cosmically inevitable. After departing from Valentino following a transformative 25-year tenure, Piccioli resurfaced at the storied Spanish maison that has long been defined by radical form, intellectual curiosity and couture-level experimentation. For a designer such as Piccioli, celebrated for romanticism, painterly colour and sculptural elegance, Balenciaga represented a fascinating, almost preordained evolution.

His spring/summer 2026 debut, unveiled inside the house's imposing Paris headquarters, proved to be a telling moment. Rather than erasing the codes of Balenciaga's past – a familiar move for newly installed creative directors eager to establish authorship – Piccioli approached the archive with near reverence.

The opening look, a black sack dress paired with oversized insect-like sunglasses, nodded simultaneously to Cristóbal Balenciaga's revolutionary 1957 Chemise dress and to the futuristic visual language of Piccioli's predecessor , Demna – the architect of Balenciaga's recent cultural dominance – before his move to Gucci.

Elsewhere, traces of Demna's streetwear vocabulary lingered in elongated shorts, severe crop tops, fitted pencil skirts and voluminous bomber jackets, now softened under Piccioli's unmistakably poetic hand through shimmering fringing and fabric flowers.

Construction remained central. Piccioli carved leather into a dramatic wide-collared jacket with sleeves puddling around the elbow; a deeply folded midi skirt that swayed heavily with each step; and a sculptural cape cut from a single hide. Another leather look, also fashioned from one uninterrupted piece of skin, took the form of a backless apron, underscoring his technical mastery.

Cristóbal's signature Watteau backs reappeared in dresses and jackets, while echoes of the house's 1960s bridal couture resurfaced in black-and-white leather. There were nods, too, to Nicolas Ghesquière's era at the house, through cocoon coats and tall riding hats tied scarf-like beneath

NICK THOMPSON; BALENCIAGA

Pierpaolo Piccioli, right, brings his eye for colours such as forest green and sunset orange, left, to Balenciaga in a collection otherwise dominated by an inky black palette and elongated proportion, opposite page

the chin, while the 2001 Le City bag returned in both oversized and miniature proportions.

Piccioli's gift for tailoring emerged by Look Three: a sack dress cut to the hip and paired with impeccably tailored trousers. By Look Six, shocking pink opera gloves introduced the vivid colour synonymous with his Valentino years. The finale, a dusty grey-rose strapless gown gathered delicately at the neckline, with a dropped waist and hem, carried the effortless romance that has become his signature.

For autumn/winter 2026, Piccioli deepened the conversation, opening with nine looks in black. Embracing a darker mood while continuing Balenciaga's exploration of proportion, he presented the collection as co-ed, much like Demna before him. Menswear featured elongated double-breasted overcoats with collars stretched into hoods, alongside jumpers and tops with asymmetrical hems and distorted tailoring that felt elegantly subversive.

For women, a black blouson jacket became a micro-mini dress worn with slouchy boots, while a drape of emerald cloth transformed into a caped gown offset by turquoise opera gloves. A cocoon coat arrived with shoulders dropped almost to the elbow, while a camel tailored coat was peeled open at the lapels to expose the clavicle with couture-like sensuality. Balenciaga's historic drop waist returned in a minidress cinched with a belt slung low on the hips, while prim cocktail silhouettes were toughened with biker boots, clashing polish with youthful irreverence. Across the collection, Piccioli's eye for colour remained unmistakable, with sunset orange, Klein blue, carmine, magenta, forest green and rich burgundy punctuating the inky black palette.

At Valentino, Piccioli explored modern glamour. At Balenciaga, he appears intent on exploring something more cerebral – perhaps the architecture of couture itself. It is fitting, then, that Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel once described Cristóbal Balenciaga as "the only true couturier", while Christian Dior famously called him "the master of us all".

Few designers possess both the technical precision and emotional intelligence required to carry that legacy forward, and since the house opened in 1919, only seven designers have led it. The weight of expectation on Piccioli's shoulders must be immense. Yet, he is wasting little time reshaping the house on his own terms.

Collaborations have already signalled a willingness to disrupt, from crystal-scattered kitten heels created alongside Manolo Blahnik, to lambskin combat boots and an elevated varsity jacket produced for the National Basketball Association.

Balenciaga remains one of fashion's most complex houses to navigate, built equally on avant-garde provocation and commercial appetite. Demna's era attracted a generation captivated by irony, exaggeration and deliberate disruption. Piccioli must now speak to that audience while remaining faithful to his softer, more romantic sensibility. His challenge lies in balancing the intellectual purity of Cristóbal's legacy with the realities of contemporary luxury culture.

In July, Piccioli will unveil his first haute couture collection for the house. Couture, however, is the Italian designer's native language. His instinct for colour is rivalled perhaps only by Miuccia Prada, while his devotion to craftsmanship was demonstrated when he brought Valentino's entire atelier on to Rome's Spanish Steps for the finale of his July 2022 couture presentation.

Now, all eyes are on Balenciaga, its clients and its parent company Kering. Most of all, the pressure rests on Piccioli himself as he prepares to rewrite the codes of one of couture's most formidable houses.

Thread forward

A century after Hajj Hussein Maktabi travelled in search of markets for his carpet business, his grandchildren are balancing heritage and innovation – and exploring new spaces from their UAE base, writes **Sarah Maisey**

On Jumeirah Beach Road in Dubai stands a sleek villa with windows of varying sizes, spaced to a rhythm unlike the buildings around it. Scattered across its façade, each window frames a single handmade carpet.

It is the UAE flagship of Levantine carpet-maker Iwan Maktabi, and this vaulted new space has been a century in the making.

To understand its significance, one must return to 1926, when a young carpet-dealer named Hajj Hussein Maktabi left Isfahan in search of new markets. He settled first in Baghdad, then Damascus, before curiosity led him to Beirut, a city that would alter the family's trajectory forever.

"He saw the sea, the mountains, people wearing modern clothes and speaking foreign languages," recalls his grandson, Mohamed Maktabi, speaking from Beirut. "He never went back, just called his wife and told her: 'Sell the house, bring the children.'"

In Beirut, Hajj Hussein opened an eponymous carpet shop and raised a family of 12. Over time, the business grew alongside the ambitions of his children – particularly his second son, Abbas, whom the family affectionately nicknamed The Bulldozer.

"He was pushy," Mohamed says with a laugh. "He wanted growth." Abbas recognised that carpets could not rely solely on tradition. In the 1990s, he opened Iwan Maktabi for his daughters, filling it with pieces collected on buying trips that did not fit the family shop.

And it was an immediate success. "It was a breath of fresh air," Mohamed says. "There was taste. It was curated. We actually had a shop window at a time when carpet shops covered their windows."

Demand grew quickly. Mohamed's sisters, Chirine and Mona, were soon "overwhelmed", prompting him to join the business. "I never left," he says.

The next major chapter came in 2009 when Mona expanded into Dubai Mall, while Chirine remained in Beirut, and Mohamed split his time between Lebanon and the wider Gulf region. Tourists and residents alike were drawn to Iwan Maktabi's blend of contemporary aesthetics and traditional craftsmanship. Later, the siblings opened a smaller, more experimental outpost in Alserkal Avenue, tapping into Dubai's creative scene. "It's a beautiful place," Mohamed says. "We turned the pop-up into our Design Lab and invited artists to show us their work, which we then translated into carpets."

The concept proved fertile ground. Young creatives, designers and collectors gravitated towards the space and the Maktabis increasingly found themselves operating less as dealers and more as collaborators, commissioners and interpreters of craft.

Eventually, the family decided to consolidate both concepts into a single flagship, finding a villa on Jumeirah Beach Road. "We had to let go of Dubai Mall," Mohamed says. "It was difficult because once you leave, you cannot easily return. But this gave us more freedom."

Earlier this year, the Alserkal location was also folded into the villa. Today, design consultations, artist collaborations and bespoke commissions all happen under one roof. With decades of technical expertise and a vast network of workshops across the region and South Asia, Iwan Maktabi has reinvented itself as a producer of original collections rather than simply a source of existing carpets.

The company collaborates with artists and designers to develop contemporary forms, updated palettes and new techniques, while maintaining the integrity of handmade production. "Dubai changed our approach," Mohamed explains. "We realised we already had this history of collaboration. We just started building on it."

That balance between preservation and reinvention now sits at the centre of the company's philosophy. "To stay true to our grandfather's vision, we need to tell stories through carpets," he says. "A modern carpet cannot just be a drawing translated into weaving; it needs to tell a story. We try to infuse it with meaning so that, in future, people look back and still feel a connection."

It is also, he admits, a question of survival. "The whole world is facing a problem of

Right, carpets from the Cora Collection are inspired by Red Sea coral reefs in Saudi Arabia, and rendered through dense weaving techniques Top, the Maktabi siblings, from left, Mona, Mohamed and Chirine

relevance," he says. "People bring me carpets their parents collected and ask: 'What do I do with these now?' If we want weavers to continue making carpets, the carpets themselves have to remain relevant."

That pursuit has often meant pushing traditional workshops beyond their comfort zones. Resistance, Mohamed says, is common, particularly in places where carpet-making remains deeply tied to cultural identity.

"In Iran, for example, many workshops still want carpets to look traditionally Persian," he says. "They're afraid of losing the DNA." Paradoxically, some of the boldest experimentation has emerged from displaced communities. Iwan Maktabi works with Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Tibetan weavers in Nepal, and many artisans have proved more open to innovation because weaving is no longer solely about heritage, but livelihood.

"They are more open to guidance," Mohamed says. "They are more willing to ask what will keep us coming back with new orders." One of the company's most ambitious recent projects emerged through a collaboration with Saudi Arabia's Architecture and Design Commission.

Paired with Saudi designers Abeer Al Otaibi and Aljuda Albandari, the company developed a collection inspired by Red Sea coral reefs. Called the Cora Collection, it features

amorphous forms and dense textures that blur the line between carpet, furniture and architecture. "The designers had one request," Mohamed says. "We don't want a flat carpet."

The result included seating stools wrapped in undulating coral-like forms, unveiled during Milan's Salone del Mobile in April. Rendered through dense weaving techniques, the project pushed the Nepalese workshop producing it almost to breaking point.

"The master weavers were working at three times their normal speed," Mohamed recalls. "When they finished, the head of the workshop looked at me and said: 'Mr Maktabi, never again,'" he says with a laugh.

The company has increasingly focused on natural fibres, seen in its silk and jute collaboration with Saudi's Syn Architects, as luxury houses increasingly position craftsmanship and handmade production as markers of ultimate value.

"There is a design intent to everything we do, and it's luxurious because it's handmade," Mohamed says. "When something is handmade, it elevates the brand, elevates the craft and adds value to the product."

That philosophy extends to nurturing regional creative talent. Mohamed speaks passionately about giving Middle Eastern designers the kind of platform traditionally reserved for major European names. He points to British brand The Rug Company and collaborations with designers including Alexander McQueen and Paul Smith.

"This region has a lot of voices," he says. "We have a lot of talent." One example is Lebanese designer Shahar Fayez, 24, whose sculptural furniture inspired Sediment, a carpet collection rooted in movement and landscape. "She imagines sand falling and just follows the movement of the sand," Mohamed says.

Woven from wool and silk in tones of terracotta, sand and putty, the pieces feature irregular edges and clusters of tiny dots that appear in motion.

Elsewhere, the company continues working with artists, architects and collectors from across the Gulf and beyond – from Orient 499 boutique in Beirut to the famed Italian luxury design house Fornasetti. This year, the Maktabi family marks 100 years since their grandfather first left Isfahan in search of new audiences for his tapestries.

A century later, the family is still navigating the same question: how to honour tradition without becoming trapped by it. Inside the Jumeirah villa, framed by crisp white walls, handwoven carpets hang like artworks. Made through patience, craft and a century-long devotion to keeping beauty relevant, the answer appears quietly resolved – at least for now.

IWAN MAKTABI

Jacket, Dh6,426; and Bermuda shorts, Dh1,704, both by Max Mara. Bubble bracelets, Dh5,114 each, Alaïa

Saba Mubarak
Portrait of an artist

Before the actress became one of the Arab world's most recognisable faces, she wanted to be a painter. She speaks to **William Mullally** about artistic inheritance, creative freedom, her Palestinian roots and the lifelong search for the artist she once imagined becoming

Everywhere Saba Mubarak lived as a child, her mother made room for art. The family moved around often, and with them went paintings, palettes, canvases and piles of books. Adorning shelves and tables were small objects – a nail, a piece of wood, something oddly shaped – brought in from the street because her mother had seen something in them. Mubarak grew up, she says, inside "a moving gallery".

In those homes, creativity was not treated as something separate from daily life. Her mother was Hanan Al-Agha, a Palestinian visual artist and poet, and Mubarak remembers her as someone who had little interest in the practical machinery around a public life.

"She was one of those hopeless romantics," Mubarak says. "And she was very impractical about it. She did not understand success in terms of career-building, promoting herself, being a hit artist or doing whatever was working at the time. She was just herself."

Following in her footsteps felt inevitable. And Mubarak did, just not how she thought she would. At 17, she was studying fine art in Jordan, moving towards a future she thought she was destined for.

"I was preparing myself without even thinking about it," she says. "I had the skill to be a painter, and that was my whole identity."

Acting wasn't on her mind until the day she accompanied a friend to an audition. Mubarak was just there to keep her company, only for the director to ask her to try out too. She told him she was not an actress and had no idea how to act, but he insisted.

"I felt it was kind of magical," Mubarak says. "I went on stage and auditioned. Apparently, I did well. He chose me to star in the play. Within six months, I was touring the world. I won many international awards for that first role."

There is an Arabic expression for what happened next, she says, something like a creature calling your name until you follow it. It does not translate easily into English. But Mubarak heard that call, and what began as an accident became the work that has shaped most of her adult life.

"This is not a career to me," she says. "It is part of me – part of my identity and who I am. Maybe that is a bit toxic and problematic, because you need to separate yourself from what you do, but it is very hard for me to do that."

It is a modest way to describe a body of work that has made Mubarak one of Jordan's most recognisable actors, and one of the rare performers in the region to build a truly pan-Arab career. She became familiar to Egyptian audiences through dramas including *Sharbat Louz*, *Hekayat Banat*, *Moga Harra* and *Afrah Al Qoba*, while her film work has included *Daughters of Abdulrahman* and *The Guest: Aleppo-Istanbul*, which won her Best Actress at Ireland's Silk Road International Film Festival.

More recently, she led the hit Shahid romantic comedy-drama *Ward Ala Foll Wa Yasmeen*, a 15-episode series about a chance encounter between two people from different worlds. Through Pan East Media, the company she founded in 2011, Mubarak has also become a producer, giving her a measure of control beyond the roles she accepts.

She may not have become a painter, but she still sees herself as an artist. She dropped the brush, not the way of seeing the world.

"I was heavily influenced by my mother," she says. "In fact, I think I am still influenced by her. If you had asked me this question 10 years ago, I might have said: 'No, I found my own identity.' Now I look at it and think it is very cool that I am still influenced by her direction in art and the way she presented herself."

Al-Agha was a Palestinian refugee, and the ideas of homeland and displacement entered Mubarak's life through her before they became subjects in her work. Mubarak was born and raised in Jordan – her father is Jordanian – and says the dual identities of her parents did not feel divided in childhood because families around her were already mixed.

With time – and travel – the distinction became clearer.

"When you live there, when you are born and raised there, you never really think about these things," she says. "It is only when you start moving outside your country, to places where there are fewer Palestinian refugees, that you understand they live in very different circumstances elsewhere."

Working across Arab film and television made me feel I belong everywhere

That plight has continued to inspire her work, including Abu Dhabi TV's drama series *Obour* in 2019, described as the first series filmed entirely inside a real refugee camp.

"That specific cause – protecting refugees, fighting for them and helping them find their voice in the society they are living in – is something I think I have engraved in me because of my mother," Mubarak says.

Her own movement across the region began partly out of a yearning to express herself more fully. Jordan gave Mubarak her start, but

Shelly dress, Dh 36,725, Ralph Lauren Collection. Leather sleeved bomber jacket, Dh4,358, Polo Ralph Lauren. Amelie shoes, Dh4,040, Gianvito Rossi


Jumpsuit, Dh12,670, Alaïa. Helmut booties, Dh2,268, Gianvito Rossi

the country still does not have the structure to sustain a full industry, even if it has strong artists, films that travel to festivals and productions that win major awards. After stops in Tunisia and Syria, Mubarak says Egypt was the inevitable next step.

"When you come to Egypt, it is our Hollywood, our Bollywood," she says. "It is a whole industry that is growing and changing all the time."

From there, she kept moving. Theatre had already made it normal for her to work with different nationalities and methods, and she discovered she could learn dialects and accents easily. What began as a practical advantage became part of the pleasure of the work, as Mubarak traversed the region's various Arab film and television scenes like few others.

"It made my journey very rich," she says. "It made me feel that, as an artist, I belong everywhere and to everyone, which I like a lot – to not have borders."

That fluency brought opportunity, but it also led to her becoming too accustomed to the system. Mubarak says she reached a point when she had become, in her words, "a daughter of the industry". She knew how things worked, what was expected and how to be good. The danger was that being good could start to replace being free.

I started to miss the courageous, carefree artist who wasn't afraid of messing up

That became clearer during the pandemic, when the pace of work slowed and she had more time to sit with herself. Mubarak began asking why she was still acting and what the work had done to her.

"I was different," she says. "Not necessarily better, just different. I started to miss the brave, courageous, carefree artist who was not afraid of messing things up."

Acting can make that difficult because it is built through other people. A performer is always working with a writer's script, a director's vision, another actor's choices and the demands of a production, and while Mubarak values that collaboration, she also knows the effect that can have.

"In this profession, anything can divert your direction," she says. "All of those factors can make you adopt information and beliefs that are not yours."

That realisation changed the kind of collaborators she wanted around her. She credits Egyptian filmmaker Mohamed Diab – who directed her in Jordan's 2022 Academy Awards submission *Amira* as well as in Marvel's *Moon Knight* – with helping her recover a part of herself that had become too controlled.

Yellow dress, Dh4,810; necklace, Dh7,570; and leather jacket, Dh1,200, all by Jacquemus

"He made me re-evaluate everything and go back to my crazy little self," she says. "The version of myself that searches for the fun in the moment and the tiniest details in what I am doing, not the bigger picture. Because in art, there is no bigger picture. That is what I have discovered over the years."

That is not to say that Mubarak is careless about her craft. She watches her performances closely and talks about acting with discipline – she just does not want that discipline to create a comfort zone.

"Wanting to be safe in a role, or just being good in general, is not very interesting to me," she says. "I do not mind being cursed or failing at something. I just want to do different things."

That is why she turns down more than she accepts, even when the sensible choice might be to protect what already works. "If this were just a job for me, what I am doing would be crazy," she says. "But because it is not, I try as much as possible to choose whatever feels different, new, exciting or scary to me." And as much as she always strives to do the best both for herself and her audience, deep down, her greatest concern is that it may resonate too greatly.

Now I am proud of it all – the flops, the failures, the projects that taught me things

"I am most scared when something is very successful," she says. "Even more than when I fail at something, because it is very easy to want to stay comfortable in that love bubble."

That instinct has become harder to protect in the current climate, in which audience reaction arrives earlier and louder than it did when she started. "I belong to a time when there was no social media," she says. "We did not know what people were saying or throwing at us. We were just exploring, trying different things and following a passion.

"Now you have to be correct. You have to adhere to what the audience wants. It is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is limiting."

But even after Mubarak realised she had become too careful in her work, her instinct for risk had not disappeared. It had simply moved to the wrong part of her life.

"What was happening was that I was keeping toxic people around me and being safe in art," she says. "I decided to flip that. If I am going to try to untame a part of myself, it should be my creative brain – not crying over toxic people or feeling unsafe in my day-to-day life."

Jersey maxi dress, Dh5,245, Rabanne. Sunglasses, Dh1,190, Gentle Monster

That thought brings her back to the artist she was before acting. Mubarak does not paint now, but she still thinks visually. She loves fine art, architecture, Art Deco buildings, museums, literature and poetry, and is drawn to installation art because it lets a viewer step inside another artist's world. She still sketches sometimes when working as a director or creative producer, mapping scenes and where characters should stand in a room.

As she travels, she still seeks out exhibitions wherever she can, and can picture the kind of painter she might have become. An impressionist, she says. She is particularly drawn to Spanish painter Francisco Goya and the way his pre-impressionist portraits carry something darker beneath their classical form.

"I am obsessed with Goya," she says. "I love how he turned classical painting into something scary, something that gives you a dramatic feeling the second you look at it."

It is a part of herself that she lost connection with after her mother died in 2008. "Maybe I was trying to go away from that for the longest time because it reminds me so much of my mother," she says. "Maybe it was a way of separating myself, of taming that missing, that void. Maybe I am just analysing now with you, but I never thought about it before. Why did I stop painting altogether?"

The question hangs there, and Mubarak does not force it into an answer. She once thought the story was that she had found her own identity away from the first artist who shaped her. Now, after all the roles, countries, industries and years spent trying not to become safe, she seems more willing to see the beginning again: the house full of paintings, the mother who worked without calculation, and the young woman who learnt to look before she learnt to perform.

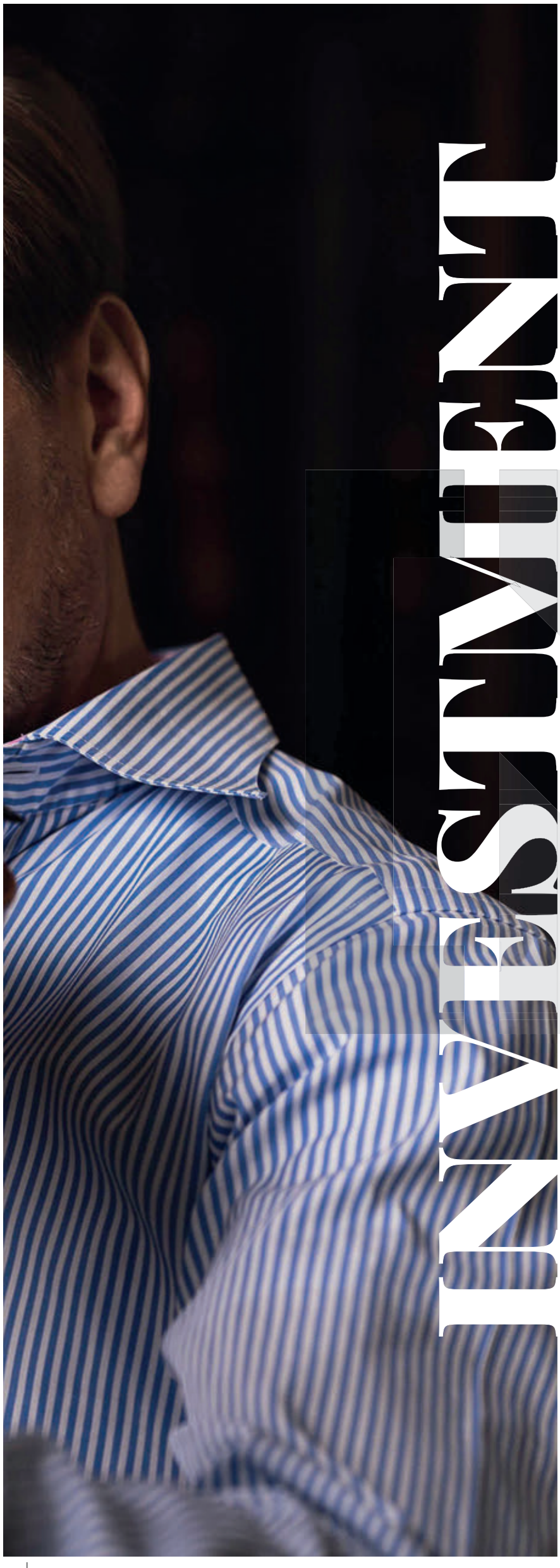
Maybe she will paint again, if the feeling returns. For now, she can look back without apology. "I'm proud of it all," she says. "The flops, the failures, the successes, the projects that taught me things and pushed me forward. I'm proud of the entirety of the body of my work. I feel a little shy saying that, but it's true."

FASHION DIRECTOR: **SARAH MAISEY**
PHOTOGRAPHER: **HUSSEIN MARDINI**
PRODUCER: **OMAR KERDANY**
HAIRSTYLIST: **BISHOY NAGUIB**
MAKE-UP ARTIST: **DANA KHEDR**
PRODUCTION BY **BUTTER FILMS**
PHOTOGRAPHER ASSISTANT: **OMAR KHALED**
STYLIST ASSISTANT: **MARIAM HEGAZY**
MAKE-UP ASSISTANTS: **MARIANNE ASHRAF AND HABIBA AHMED**
WITH THANKS TO **KAREEM SAMY AND NADINE ASHRAF AT MAD SOLUTIONS**
SHOT AT **GEARBOX STUDIOS, CAIRO**

Pression dress in Lurex, Dh4,200; and Double XL Link earrings, Dh1,850, both by Rabanne

SOUND

Violin maker Florian Leonhard was appointed luthier for the Royal College of Music in London in 2018



CHRIS RENTON

INVESTMENT

From London workshops to discreet private sales, a tiny network of experts trade some of the world's rarest objects – antique violins that are worth millions, coveted as much for their voice as their value, as **Josh Sims** finds out

"Don't worry," says Florian Leonhard. "A bit of woodworm isn't usually a problem. In fact, if the creature is in the instrument, it was in the wood before it was made. Of course, it can be bad. I once came across a violin, 280 years old and in mint condition apart from the woodworm. It had turned it into a sieve. But in some cases, it can improve the instrument. The secret is to keep playing it. They don't like vibrations."

Such particular and exacting concerns matter to Leonhard, a dealer and restorer of antique stringed instruments, who was appointed official expert and luthier for the Royal College of Music in London in 2018. They also matter to his clients. After all, they are likely investing between Dh250,000 and Dh125 million apiece.

These are no ordinary violins. They are made by the great Italian masters of the 17th and 18th centuries: Giovanni Guadagnini, Andrea Amati, Francesco Ruggeri, as well as Guarneri del Gesù – Italian composer Niccolò Paganini's maker of choice and the subject of Leonhard's definitive biography, releasing in October.

"Though most people want the biggest name: Antonio Stradivari," says Leonhard. "Stradivari's reputation has cast such a shadow over other makers, but that represents an opportunity."

Why such extraordinary prices? Because while thousands of violin makers exist, there are perhaps fewer than 1,000 surviving antique instruments known today. Scarcity has also driven remarkable returns. Someone who bought one of these violins in the 1980s could easily have quadrupled their investment, or even increased it tenfold. Unsurprisingly, sales are private and discreet.

Like any market, values fluctuate. Reputation, condition and period all matter. Healthy returns remain achievable, but Leonhard cautions

against romantic assumptions. “Some people think they’ve found a bargain, buy a violin by a name-maker and later realise it’s not the best specimen, or not from his best period,” he says. “It’s like buying a lovely 1970s Porsche 911 and then finding none of the parts have matching serial numbers.”

Naturally, with such sums involved, authentication is critical. “And as yet, there are no machines that can help us with that,” says California resident Roman Goronok, one of the world’s few renowned antique stringed instrument brokers. “You need long experience of an instrument’s history, its tool marks, construction and varnish. It comes down to scholarship, visual memory and intuition.”

Authentication has become a specialist discipline of its own. Stradivari research, in particular, took a major leap forward with the 2024 publication of *Antonio Stradivari: The Complete Works*, a six-volume catalogue compiled over eight years by J&A Beare, the London violin dealer established in 1892. Greater scholarship has also brought greater market stability.

But investment returns are not the primary reason people buy these instruments, Goronok argues. Antique violins are, he says, art that can be played. “These instruments represent hundreds of years of culture and handcrafts that may never be reproducible,” he says. “They place their owners at the heart of the arts. This is more about stewardship and philanthropy than commerce.”

Because as Leonhard points out, great musicians need great instruments. Yet, even world-class players often cannot afford their own Stradivarius. Owners therefore frequently lend instruments out, but only fully insured.

Association with exceptional performers – Joshua Bell, Sarah Chang, Midori Gotō – can further enhance value.

Accidents still happen. In 2019, a Royal Philharmonic violinist left his 300-year-old David Tecchler violin, estimated at Dh1.2 million, on a train. It was eventually recovered after secret negotiations and a handover in a supermarket car park. Theft, however, is rare. “Most thieves don’t know what they’re looking at,” Leonhard says. “They grab the iPad and leave the violin sitting right next to it.”

Besides, the antique violin world is so small and interconnected – and instruments so well-documented – that fencing one is akin to selling stolen fine art: extraordinarily difficult.

There is another reason such losses remain uncommon. Goronok says he is only half-joking when he suggests musicians treasure these instruments more than their own children. They are the lifeblood of their art.

> **The shape, form and acoustic principles of a violin designed to play baroque music in the 1700s still haven’t been bettered**

GETTY IMAGES; COLIN BELL; JOANNA YEE

Clockwise from left, Antonio Stradivari: The Complete Works documents all the instruments made by the Stradivari workshop; two craftsmen, pictured in 1955, verify the authenticity of a violin; and violinist Sarah Chang typically plays a 1717 Guarneri del Gesù

"Watching a musician play one of these great violins for the first time and suddenly feeling heard by the instrument is very moving," Goronok says. "It helps owners understand they are custodians. These instruments have survived wars, changing tastes and generations. It's not like buying a painting and hanging it on a wall. Ownership of a fine historic instrument makes it deeply meaningful when it's played and not just sat in a vault."

It's not only about keeping the woodworms at bay, either. There's a good reason why these instruments are so desired by professional players over even the most excellent of modern equivalents. Partly it is because every maker has a distinct voice. Leonhard describes a del Gesù violin, for instance, as having a "lion's roar of depth".

Age itself also shapes sound. Wood breathes. The material expands and contracts. It absorbs humidity, pollution and the passage of time. "Wood absorbs all the world throws at it. But we haven't yet been able to replicate the effect in modern instruments. And people really have tried – salt baths, leaving it in sunlight, drying it out. Nothing works," explains Goronok.

"Remarkably, the shape, form, materials and acoustic principles of an instrument designed to play baroque music in the 1700s still haven't been bettered," he adds.

Goronok estimates he has perhaps 20 years left in the business – time he intends to spend working through his little black book of contacts – and he suspects that his generation may be among the last major brokers of antique stringed instruments. Increasing numbers are disappearing into museums and private collections, which represents a loss not only for investors, but for music itself.

THE RUNNERS

It's an autumn morning, well before dawn. A handful of cars pull into an otherwise empty car park. The city is still asleep. Doors open and people step out, all wearing the same black T-shirt emblazoned with the number 963. It is Syria's country code – and the name of a new running club.

"No matter what happens, I'll be super-proud of everyone today," says Rettaj Shaheen, closing her car door behind her.

Someone nods and smiles while tightening their shoelaces one last time. Someone else pins a race bib to the front of their shirt.

It is the morning of the Damascus Marathon, organised for the first time since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. The race will begin shortly after dawn.

On the morning of the first Damascus Marathon since the fall of the Assad regime, members of 963 Running Club gather before sunrise. Their race through the city's ancient streets is more than a sport, it is a glimpse into a society that is rediscovering itself. Photos and words by **Jenny Gustafsson**

A runner trains in Damascus's multi-use Tishreen Stadium

OF DAMASCUS

More people arrive, joining the small crowd. Each is greeted by Jawad Ibrahim and Ghaith Kanawati, founders of the club. More than two years ago, after realising they were running the same streets, they began organising weekly training sessions. The group has since grown and now regularly attracts more than 50 runners. “We didn’t have a running culture here before, but it is starting now,” Kanawati says.

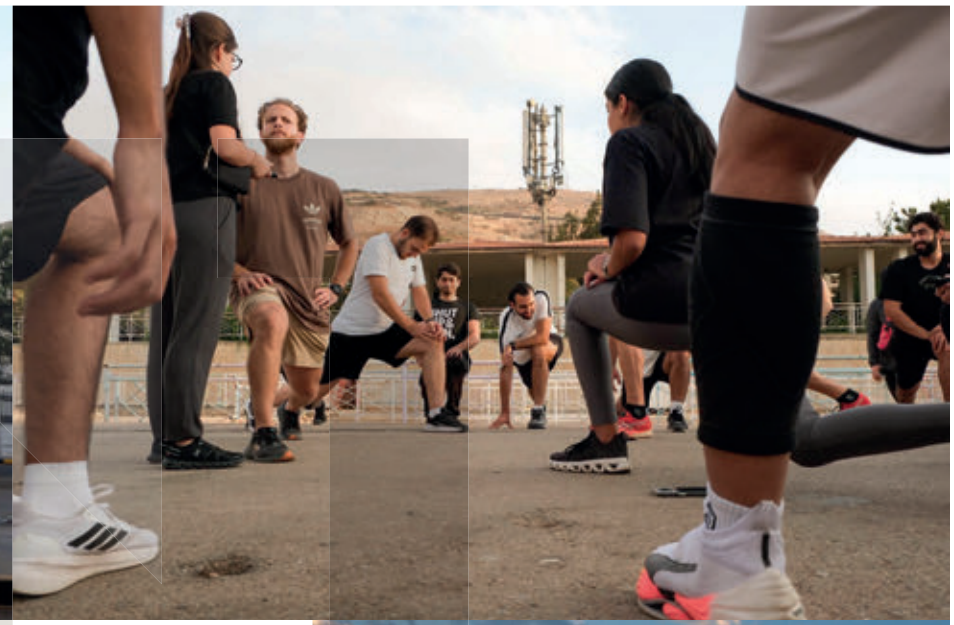
The runners make their way to the start line, where a few hundred people have already gathered. Some have travelled from neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, including a group of Malaysian friends studying Arabic in Amman, but most are Syrians living either at home or abroad. Organiser Ala Aldin Meriden describes this first event as “version zero” and hopes the marathon will become an annual fixture.

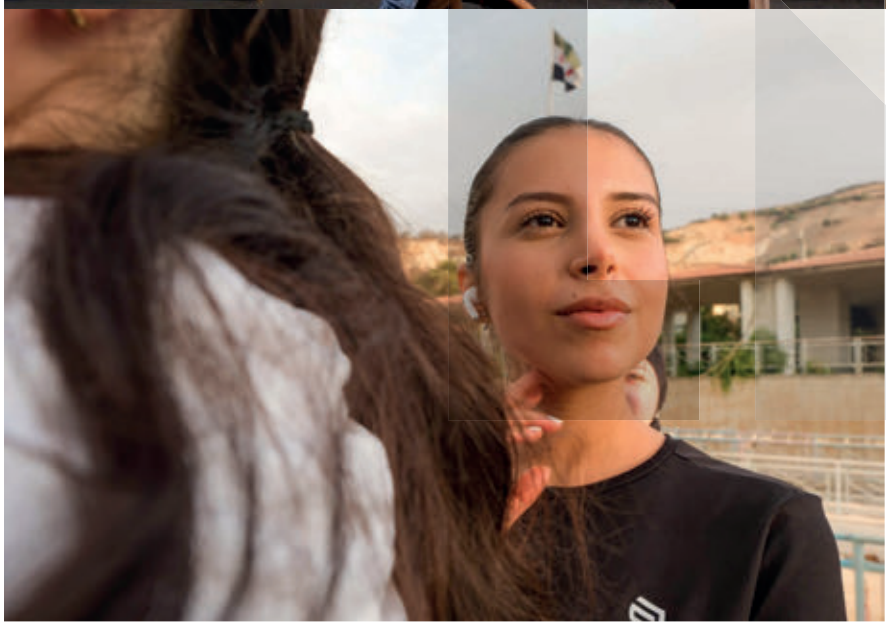
The course covers 21.1 kilometres – the standard half-marathon distance – and is completed twice by those running the full marathon. The route winds through the Old City, zigzagging along the alleys of Souq Al Hamidiyah, past the Umayyad and Sayyidah Ruqayya mosques, and along the ancient Straight Street.

On some Friday mornings, members of 963 Club run parts of the same historic route. Most sessions end with coffee at a cafe.

Today, after completing 42.2km around the city, they will gather once more – not only for coffee, but for a proper Damascus breakfast of foul, hummus and eggs.

The next Damascus Marathon will take place in November



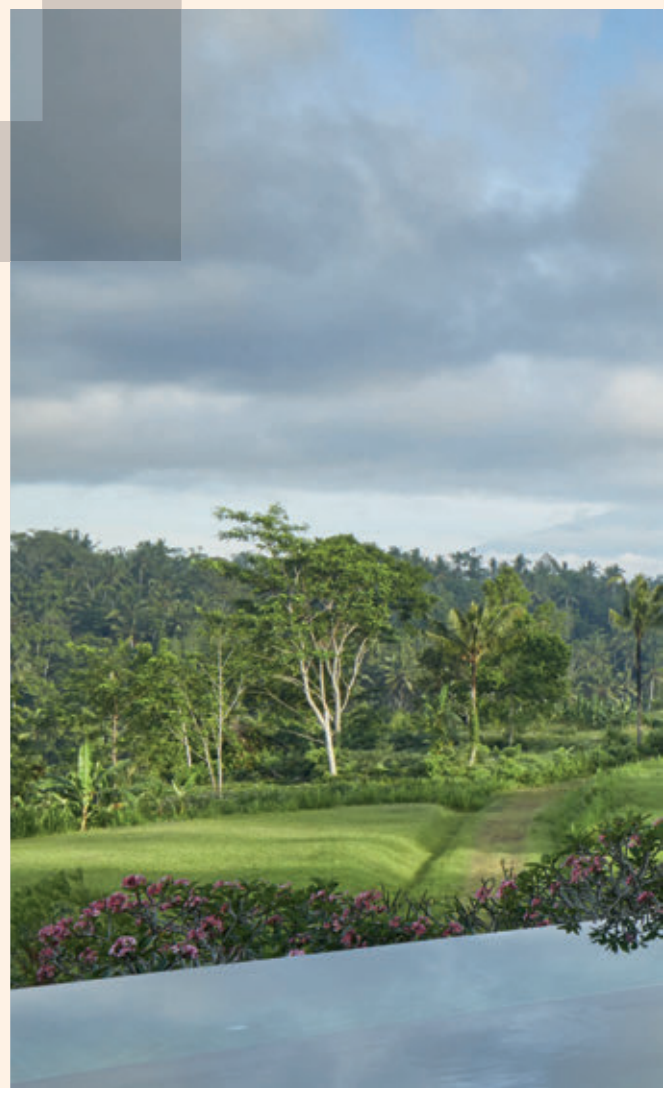


Opposite page, runners from neighbouring countries travelled to Damascus for its first marathon in 2025
This page, clockwise from above left, the army headquarters building, which was bombed last July, is on the run route; members of 963 Run Club train at Tishreen Park; the group, which was formed about two years ago, now attracts more than 50 runners; and members of the running club wear black T-shirts emblazoned with the number 963, Syria's country code

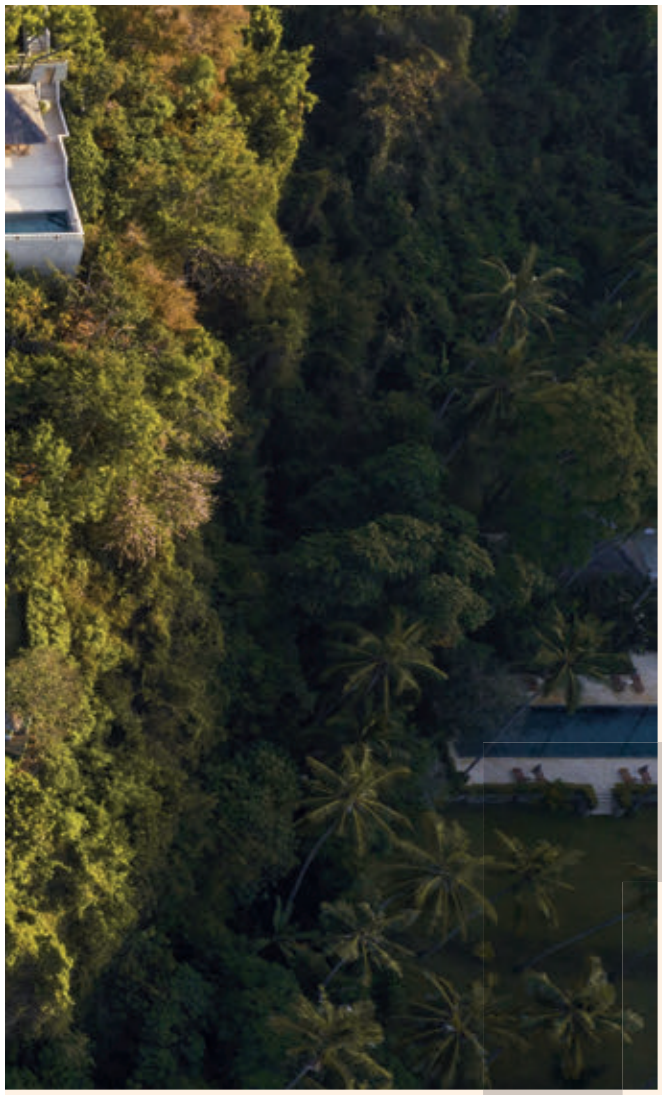
We didn't have a running culture here before, but it is starting now

A TALE OF

Farah Andrews heads to contrasting Aman properties, one immersed in rainforest tranquillity, the other suspended between mountain and sea



Opened in 1989, Amandari, right, is designed to dissolve the line between the indoors and out. Amankila, above, feels more theatrical, with a three-tier infinity pool cascading dramatically down the hillside



AMAN

TWO BALIS

When it comes to Bali's two Aman hotels, they seem easy to file away as opposites: jungle or coast, hills or sea, Ubud or East Bali. The truth, after a week split between Amandari and Amankila, is that they are best experienced together. Two resorts unmistakably Aman, yet entirely different in rhythm.

Opened in 1989 in Ubud, Amandari came first, making it a fitting starting point. It was Aman's second property, following Amanpuri in Phuket by a year, and became something of a blueprint for the brand's now-familiar formula: low-slung suites immersed in nature, architecture dissolving the line between indoors and out. Nearly four decades on, it remains timeless.

The drive from Denpasar Airport to Ubud takes about 90 minutes, weaving past scooters, crowded towns and thick jungle. Then comes the shift. Turning through Amandari's stone-walled entrance feels like crossing into another world. Rosella iced tea appears on arrival, check-in takes place at a pavilion-style bar and, despite arriving after dark, the sense of calm is immediate. The valley view remains hidden until morning.

AMAN

The resort has only 31 rooms, though the word "room" feels inadequate. The bungalow I stay in has vaulted ceilings, teak detailing and vast windows framing impossibly green rice terraces. Privacy is absolute, enclosed by stone walls and opening only towards the fields beyond.

The outdoor bath quickly becomes a highlight: a generous marble tub ideal after long days exploring Ubud on foot. Fresh flowers appear throughout the villa – blooming and growing more fragrant each day – even arranged beside the basin in the WC, a far more elegant alternative to synthetic air fresheners.

It is this attention to detail that elevates Aman beyond conventional luxury. The minibar is constantly replenished with home-made cookies and fresh fruit. Aman-branded amenities include insect spray alongside lotions and shampoo, while a Dyson hairdryer sits discreetly tucked away. When four unexpected days of jungle rain catch me underprepared, raincoats are sourced without any fuss and warm pashminas quietly appear at dinner.

Designed by architect Peter Muller and inspired by traditional Balinese villages, the property has moss-covered pathways that weave past lotus ponds and hidden courtyards. Statues honouring Balinese Hinduism sit throughout the grounds. Only on my final afternoon do I discover tennis courts concealed among tropical planting, alongside an indoor gym, as well as a serene spa.

The signature massage is excellent, though this newly discovered setting may surpass it: half indoors, half outdoors, with a pond filled with fish less than a metre from the massage bed.

Perched above Lombok Strait, Amankila draws inspiration from water palaces

One morning, I join the guided sunrise walk, a gentle 3km route through rice terraces, villages and narrow water-lined paths. Breakfast awaits at a hilltop clearing: fruit, pastries and coffee laid out overlooking valleys with Mount Batur rising in the distance. It is a truly serene way to start the day.

Breakfast, in fact, feels like an Amandari speciality. It can appear on excursions, private jungle decks, in-room or at the restaurant overlooking the Ayung River. If you have ever seen photographs of Bali's famous "influencer swings" suspended above jungle valleys, this is likely the view. Better enjoyed, perhaps, quietly with coffee and fruit, without a queue of TikTokers waiting behind.

Clockwise from above, guests can enjoy a sunrise boat trip overlooking the coastline in Amankila; a staircase leads guests to the Ocean suite; and the main pool at the property
Opposite page, clockwise from main, at Amandari, guests can enjoy sundowners on the hill; swim alongside mountain views; and bed down in a cosy suite

After four days amid Ubud's greenery, it is time to head east. Perched above Lombok Strait, Amankila draws inspiration from nearby water palaces commissioned by the last Balinese king of Karangasem in the early 20th century. Designers Ed Tuttle and Danilo Capellini have created a sanctuary suspended between mountains and sea.

Like its sister property, Amankila has about 30 rooms, but its scale feels dramatically larger. Spread across a sprawling 12 hectares, pathways tumble down cliffsides between hillside pavilions, winding staircases and the beach below.

Arrival at this property begins with a blessing ceremony. Ginger tea and sorbet appear moments later. Unlike in Ubud, I arrive in daylight. The view makes an immediate impression: a quiet bay where every shade of blue seems visible between sea and sky.

Architecturally, Amankila feels a bit more theatrical. Its defining feature is the famous three-tier infinity pool that cascades dramatically down the hillside.

Service at this property borders on telepathic. Cold towels, sunscreen and aloe vera appear unprompted. One attendant quietly offers to clean my sunglasses while I swim.

Dining also feels grander in scale. Where Amandari centres meals around a single restaurant and terrace bar, Amankila offers Italian restaurant Arva, Indonesian dining at Sandikala and an international selection at the Beach Club. Elsewhere, The Terrace provides welcome shelter when an afternoon storm rolls through.

Arva delivers exceptional pasta, but Sandikala is the standout. The Indonesian sharing menu includes lobster and prawn spring rolls, vegetable fritters, satays grilled over charcoal and coconut curry made with the day's catch.

Like Amandari, breakfast remains a ritual. It can be taken at Sandikala, balancing Balinese and international options, or woven into excursions.

One morning, I take breakfast aboard a boat trip along the coastline, earning pastries and iced coffee with a snorkelling stop. Yet the defining meal comes on my final morning.

A walk leads me to a bale hut perched high above the coastline. Below sits a black-sand beach; to the north rises Mount Agung. Breakfast arrives picnic-style. It feels like the perfect place to reflect on two very different sides of Bali before stepping back into traffic, noise and the real world beyond Aman's cocoon.

First Sitting

New culinary experiences to try across the UAE, from Australian coffee culture to Emirati-inspired sharing menus. By Hayley Kadrou

ONA
For a taste of Australia's coffee culture in Dubai, head to the newly opened Ona in Jumeirah. The cafe encourages customers to move beyond the usual Americano and Spanish latte, and instead build their drinks around roasting profiles tailored to three styles: espresso, milk-based coffee and filter brews. More than a caffeine stop, the space also features a terrace, private events area and sensory room designed for guided tasting experiences.
Jumeirah 1, Dubai

WAGAMAMA
Discovering new dishes is often a foodie's greatest pleasure, be it fine dining fare or a chain-restaurant favourite. This month, look no further than Wagamama's biggest menu refresh in years. Offering about 25 new and reinterpreted dishes, plus summer coolers such as matcha colada and wild blossom ginger mint iced tea, the updated menu takes in smashed cucumber and koko prawn crackers; yasai ramen wrap; miso cauliflower lunch box; and gochujang salmon rice bowl.
Various locations

ISABELLA'S STREET KITCHEN
Sharjah is home to a new Italian eatery – the sister restaurant of Isabella Cucina at Vida Emirates Hills – Isabella's Street Kitchen. Terracotta tones, aged timber and handcrafted tiles evoke a traditional Italian courtyard, while the menu centres on wood-fired pizzas and shareable pasta dishes.
Aljada, Sharjah

LA PETITE MAISON ABU DHABI
Sunday brunch is back at La Petite Maison. La Vie en Rose invites diners to settle in for a leisurely, family-style lunch in the restaurant's French Riviera-inspired setting. Start with freshly baked baguettes and croissants, before moving on to eggs Benedict with truffle hollandaise; LPM's signature escargots de Bourgogne; roasted sirloin with heirloom tomatoes; and cherry tomato and aubergine risotto. Classic desserts, including chocolate tart and lemon cake, round out the experience that is priced at Dh185 for children and from Dh370 for adults.
The Galleria Al Maryah Island, Abu Dhabi

THE BARREL
Looking for a cosy new spot to unwind after work or settle in for a relaxed Sunday roast? This gastropub, which recently opened in Dubai Creek, fits the bill. Alongside an extensive drinks menu, expect comfort-food favourites including crispy calamari and onion ring towers to start, followed by burgers and vegetarian options such as wild mushroom ragu pappardelle. Rich woods, ambient lighting and sink-in seating complete the mood.
Vida Creek Beach, Dubai

SHALWA
The Khaleeji restaurant at Dubai Mall is serving a limited-time menu in collaboration with Emirati chef Asayel Mohamed Almarzooqi. Inspired by the Emirati tradition of "fuwalah", the act of welcoming and honouring guests through shared dishes, the menu includes dishes and desserts such as slow-cooked dates with ghee, cardamom and fennel; whipped chami cheese; sambosa with Omani halwa; and butterfly pea farni, with the butterfly pea flowers hand-picked from the chef's garden.
Until June 28; Dubai Mall

PITFIRE PIZZA
Ripe tomatoes signal summer – something the chefs at Pitfire Pizza know well. To celebrate (or commiserate) the season, the home-grown pizzeria has brought back its tomato pie. Vine-ripened tomatoes, grown in the UAE in collaboration with Pure Harvest Smart Farms, sit atop a rich tomato base and Pitfire's signature 72-hour fermented sourdough, finished with olive oil and rock salt. Grab a slice while it lasts.
Various locations

SHAI SALON
Swap busy brunches for a slower summer ritual with afternoon tea at Shai Salon in Four Seasons Resort Dubai. Created by senior executive pastry chef Nicolas Lambert, the menu features savoury bites including lobster rolls, truffle tartlets and chicken mustard cream baguettes, alongside sweet treats such as exotic fruit rice pudding, strawberry shortcake, caramel brioche and chocolate cake. Begin with sparkling green tea, then settle in with unlimited tea and coffee blends throughout. From Dh260 per person.
Four Seasons Jumeirah Beach, Dubai

TRUCK

It is now the home of supercars and one of the world's most diverse automotive markets, but the UAE has a relationship with pick-up trucks that tells a national story of work, identity and life between the city and the desert. By **Nasri Atallah**

Long before the UAE's skyline became dotted with glass towers, before its roads were lined with supercars and before the country became one of the world's most sophisticated automotive markets, there was a simpler challenge: how do you get from one place to another when there are barely any roads?

For much of the country's history, the answer was straightforward. You needed something that could carry people, equipment and supplies across a landscape that was as striking as it was unforgiving. More often than not, that vehicle was a truck.

Today, the pick-up occupies a curious place in UAE car culture. It is both workhorse and status symbol, commercial tool and lifestyle accessory. The same country that buys thousands of Toyota Hiluxes every year for construction sites and logistics fleets is also home to lifted Ram TRXs and Chevrolet Silverados photographed against red dunes beside desert campsites and parked outside Jumeirah restaurants alike.

To understand pick-up culture in the UAE is to understand something fundamental about the country itself. It is a story about the meeting point between utility and aspiration, tradition and modern consumerism, desert and city.

Its origins stretch back well before federation. In the 1950s and 1960s, British surveyors, oil exploration teams and government officials crossed the Trucial States in Land Rover Series I and II vehicles. Lightweight, rugged and capable of tackling terrain that would defeat most passenger cars, they quickly became indispensable. Despite the limited infrastructure, these vehicles became a means of taming the landscape. When the UAE was founded in 1971, that mentality remained intact. The Land Rover Series III became a familiar sight across the young nation, used by municipalities, contractors and government departments. For many Emirati families, a single vehicle often had to do everything: carry children to school, transport supplies, cross desert tracks and support agricultural work.

Then came the oil boom. As construction transformed Abu Dhabi and Dubai throughout the 1970s and 1980s, another vehicle began to dominate the landscape: the Toyota Hilux. The Hilux arrived at the right moment. Reliable, easy to maintain and capable in extreme heat, it could withstand the punishment of construction sites and desert tracks, while demanding very little in return. On several seasons of famed motoring show *Top Gear*, the hosts tried to kill a Hilux – crashing it, dropping it in the sea, setting it on fire, dropping a caravan on it, even leaving it atop a collapsing building – and the indestructible machine started every time.

In the UAE, it became part of the machinery of nation-building. Entire neighbourhoods, roads and industrial zones were put together with fleets of Hiluxes moving workers, tools and materials across rapidly changing landscapes. Ask anyone whose family worked in construction during the 1980s and there is a good chance a Hilux features somewhere in the story.

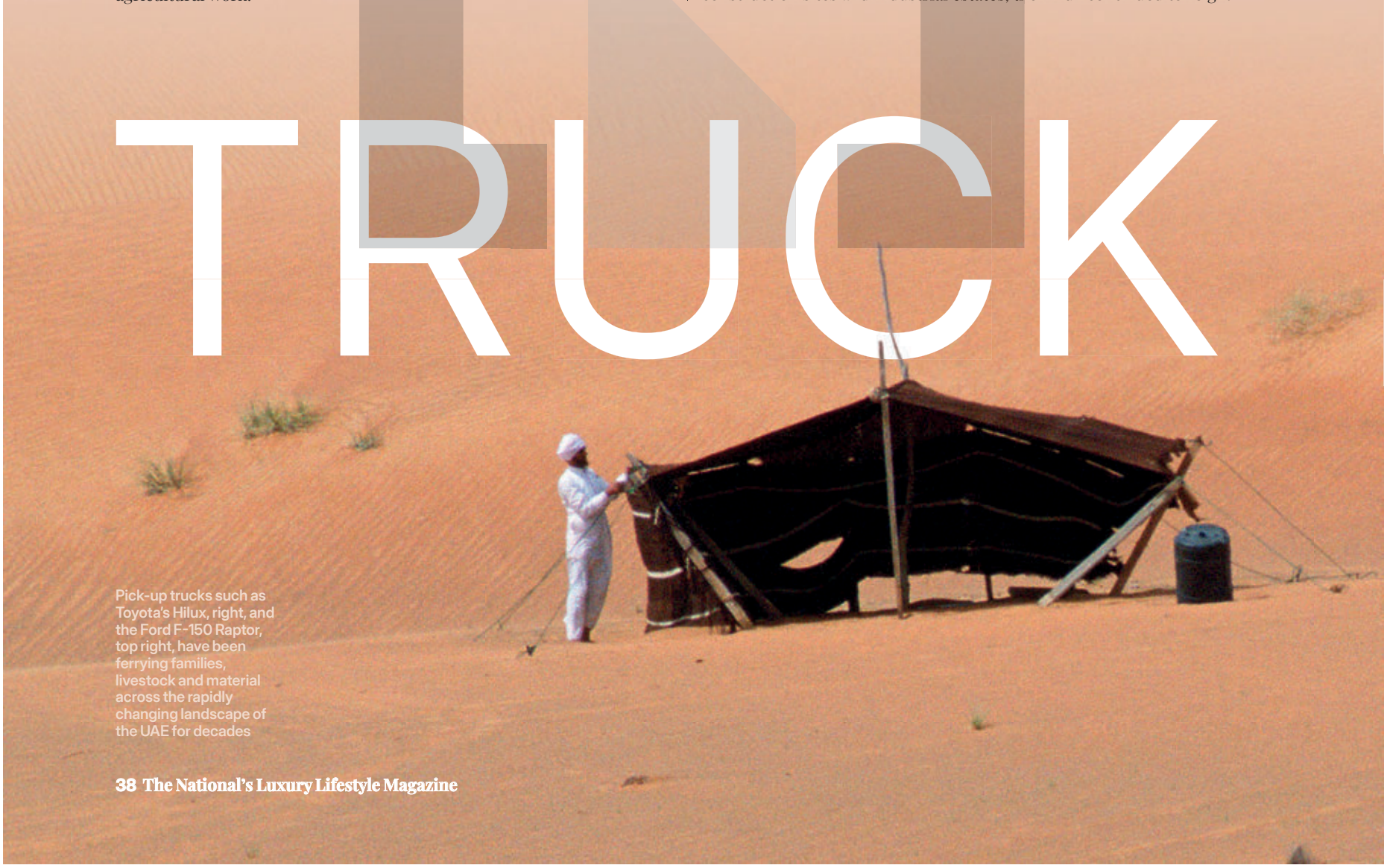
A truck projects capability, adventure, self-reliance and ruggedness

Its success was not merely mechanical. The truck also fitted perfectly into Gulf life. A Hilux could spend the week on a building site before heading into the desert with the family on Friday. It blurred the line between work and leisure in a way few vehicles could.

That dual purpose became central to pick-up culture in the UAE. Yet, as the country became wealthier through the 1990s and early 2000s, the pick-up's place in society began to shift.

The rise of the Nissan Patrol and Toyota Land Cruiser changed everything. These became the defining automotive symbols of Emirati life: reliable, capable, prestigious and yet still desert-ready. Families that once depended on a truck for everything, increasingly owned several vehicles. The Land Cruiser or Patrol became the family car.

Rather than disappearing, the truck became specialised. On farms, construction sites and industrial estates, the Hilux continued to reign.



Pick-up trucks such as Toyota's Hilux, right, and the Ford F-150 Raptor, top right, have been ferrying families, livestock and material across the rapidly changing landscape of the UAE for decades

GETTY IMAGES; THE NATIONAL

Among private buyers, however, a new phenomenon was emerging: the American truck.

The Ford F-150, Chevrolet Silverado, GMC Sierra and Ram introduced something very different to the market. Larger, louder and more theatrical than their Japanese counterparts, they offered vast cabins, powerful engines and a sense of occasion that matched a feeling normally evoked by traditional luxury cards. They also arrived when many buyers were looking beyond the endless procession of German luxury SUVs. In a city filled with Mercedes-Benz G-Classes, a full-sized American pick-up stood out.

By the mid-2010s, trucks such as the GMC Sierra Denali and Ram 1500 Limited were no longer being sold as commercial vehicles. They were luxury products. Quilted leather interiors, giant infotainment screens and premium sound systems turned them into something closer to luxury SUVs with open cargo beds.

The appeal was obvious: a truck projected capability, it suggested adventure, self-reliance and ruggedness, even if its owner spent most of the week navigating DIFC car parks rather than off-roading tracks. This was particularly true in the UAE, where the desert remains such a powerful cultural reference point.

For Emiratis, the relationship with the desert is rooted in history and identity. For expatriates, it often becomes a gateway into understanding the country. Spend enough time here and you will eventually find yourself heading into the dunes, whether for camping, dune bashing or simply to escape the city. The pandemic accelerated that trend. When international travel ground to a halt, people rediscovered the landscapes on their doorstep. Desert camping surged. Convoys headed towards Liwa, Fossil Rock and Lahbab every weekend.

The pick-up was perfectly placed to benefit. Unlike an SUV, it could carry camping equipment, recovery gear, bicycles, barbecues and enough supplies for a weekend away. More importantly, it looked the part. The modern pick-up became a visual statement. This has inevitably produced some irony. Spend enough time around truck owners and someone will point out that many pick-up beds remain conspicuously empty.

But that misses the point. People do not buy pick-ups simply because they need to transport construction materials. They buy them because of what they represent.

A Ram TRX parked outside a coffee shop in Jumeirah is selling an idea. The truck has become shorthand for a particular version of modern Gulf identity: adventurous, capable and connected to the desert, even while living in one of the world's most urbanised environments.

Yet, beneath the lifestyle marketing and social media imagery lies a more interesting truth. The Hilux never went away. It remained among the UAE's best-selling vehicles throughout 2025 and into 2026. Depending on which data you look at, it either briefly overtook or nipped at the heels of the Nissan Patrol earlier this year. While luxury trucks attract attention, the humble workhorse still keeps much of the economy moving.

Despite all the changes, the pick-up in the UAE still performs the same fundamental role it always has. It bridges worlds: city and desert, work and leisure, practicality and aspiration.

The badges have changed and the interiors have become more luxurious. Today's trucks arrive with massaging seats and 12-inch touchscreens rather than steel dashboards and vinyl benches. But the appeal remains remarkably consistent. The UAE was built on movement across difficult terrain. The vehicles that succeed here are still the ones capable of navigating both the landscape and the culture.

Unlike in North America, where truck culture emerged from farming and industry, the UAE's relationship with pick-ups grew from a combination of desert mobility, construction-driven growth and the practical realities of life before modern infrastructure. The models of pick-up truck on the road may have evolved over the years, but what they say about car choices remains constant: it is the landscape and the culture that determines what people drive, not the other way around.

The Creek in Old Dubai (1979)
by Hala Kouatly

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi ON ART

BARJEEL ART FOUNDATION

In 1958, Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed, Ruler of Dubai at the time, secured a loan of nearly Dh2 million from Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Abdullah to dredge the city's creek. According to British records preserved by Arabian Gulf Digital Archives at the UAE's National Library and Archives, the loan was facilitated by the British Bank of the Middle East and repaid in 10 equal annual instalments. Sheikh Rashid recognised the growing importance of trade to his emerging city and understood the creek would need to be deepened to accommodate larger modern ships. In the years that followed, Dubai Creek evolved from a historic lifeline into the region's dominant port.

The creek became not only a hub for trade, but also a centre of financial and political power. Banks established headquarters along its shores, including the National Bank of Dubai, founded in 1963 by Sharjah-born Sultan bin Ali Al Owais.

The area also became a focal point for diplomacy and governance in the years leading to the formation of the UAE, housing the British Embassy in Dubai, the Amiri Diwan and Sheikh Rashid's administrative offices. From here, the city began its expansion under John Harris's 1960 master plan, later documented in Todd Reisz's 2020 book, *Showpiece City: How Architecture Made Dubai*.

This atmosphere is captured in *The Creek in Old Dubai* by Syrian artist Hala Kouatly. Born in Damascus in 1938 into the family of former Syrian president Shukri Al Quwatli, Kouatly studied at Rome's Accademia di Belle Arti before completing her education in Damascus. She moved to Dubai in 1969 after getting married and has lived in the city since.

> **The creek is more than a waterway; it is the commercial foundation of the city of Dubai**

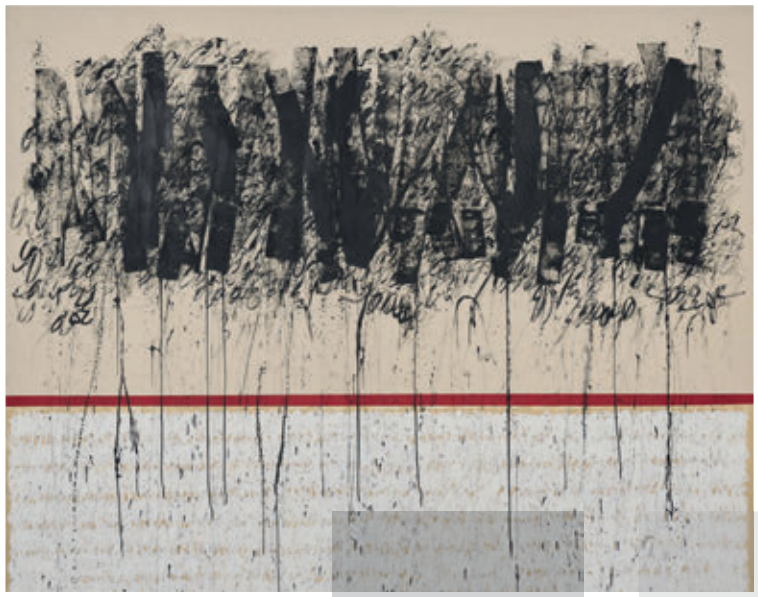
Painted a decade later, the work depicts a timeless maritime scene along the creek. Shades of blue, brown and white dominate the canvas, with dhows lining both banks. In the foreground, traders, sailors and captains converse while others share a meal. Behind them rises the early 20th-century skyline of Bur Dubai, with coral stone, limestone and gypsum buildings suggesting Kouatly painted the scene from the Deira side of the creek.

In a city now defined by state-of-the-art infrastructure such as Sheikh Zayed Road and Mohammed bin Rashid Boulevard, the creek can be regarded as Dubai's first great thoroughfare. Large cargo vessels transferred goods on to smaller agile boats carrying spices, teak, fabrics and gold. Amid the bustle, Arabic mixed with Urdu, Farsi, Hindi, Swahili, Balochi and English as traders negotiated and exchanged goods.

The dredging project initiated by Sheikh Rashid laid the groundwork for the opening of Jebel Ali Port in 1979, today the world's ninth-busiest container port. DP World, the Emirati logistics conglomerate, now manages more than 80 container terminals across 40 countries and handles about 10 per cent of global trade. Even in the age of fibre-optic cables and data centres, Dubai's ports remain central to both the emirate's economy and global commerce.

For some, however, the creek carries something deeper still. In the introduction to her poetry collection *House to House* (2025), Shamma Al Bastaki writes: "While the Dubai Creek is profoundly etched in collective memory, it is my belief that the creek, itself, continues to carry these memories – that the stories I was told reverberate in its depths, still."

The creek is more than a waterway; it is the commercial foundation of Dubai, arguably one of the world's most entrepreneurial cities. Long before Emirates airline connected Dubai to the globe, the creek connected it to the region. Its dhows carried goods, traders and migrants searching for opportunity and a better future. Today, it continues to embody the spirit of an unstoppable Dubai – one built on movement, exchange and openness to the world.



ANTONIE ROBERTSON / THE NATIONAL; JUMA AL HAJ

Black Cloud, Red Line (2026), above, by Emirati artist Juma Al Haj, right, is currently on display at Iris Projects in Abu Dhabi as part of his new exhibition, Interoception

A bold red line cuts through the largest painting in Juma Al Haj's new exhibition at Iris Projects. Underneath are the abstract, calligraphic strokes that have become characteristic of his work. The strokes are methodically applied, amassing as steady rivulets of white.

The part above the red line, however, is unlike anything the Emirati artist has done before.

Long black bars criss-cross against a storm of wiry scrawls. Dissimilar to previous works, where Al Haj meticulously keeps his forms contained within themselves, this disorder of black paint drips down the canvas, running past the red line and into the white.

The painting, like all the other works in the exhibition Interoception, has been created in the months since the Iranian missile attacks on the UAE began. Titled *Black Cloud, Red Line*, the work can be seen as a reflection of recent geopolitical anxieties. It can be interpreted literally, with the red line acting as the skyline – turmoil above and daily life carrying on below.

"We think of the UAE as one of the safest places to be, and that's an emotional state," says Al Haj. When the country came under attack, when that sovereign red line was crossed, "that safe space that we have is also crossed. Our mental sovereignty is also under attack."

As such, *Black Cloud, Red Line* can be explained in more introspective terms that extend beyond regional tension. "It could be about struggling with internal anxieties," Al Haj says. "About grappling with issues that are happening within you."

The paintings within Interoception can all be read in a similar light. The exhibition, which is running at Iris Projects until August 6, has been curated by Shamma Al Mheiri, and examines how moments of crisis are internalised and expressed.

The siren-like emergency alerts, warning the population to seek shelter, has been abstracted into blocks of bold yellow, the colour reminiscent of the caution symbol that, in the first few days of the missile attacks, incessantly popped up on mobile screens. In one piece, Al Haj superimposes the feverish yellow forms atop the neat and ordered streams of abstracted writing.

In another, the yellow takes over the entire canvas. The missile attacks may be the reflective source of Al Haj's new body of work, but they also depict a more primeval scuffle – one between order and chaos. Again, the ingenuity is that they can be read in all sorts of ways – from the internal and geopolitical to the environmental and cosmic.

Al Haj says his meticulous methodology was also challenged in these new works. The artist often has a clear idea of what his paintings are going to end up looking like even before he starts them. With these, he had to let go, to allow his acrylics (he uses diluted house paints) to run and drip at will.

He used water guns in a few pieces, spattering against his scrupulous brushstrokes. In others, he applied paint using slabs of Styrofoam he cut from a large block just outside the door to his studio in Sharjah.

Yet, despite these newfound methods, it would be wrong to assume that Al Haj has given his impulses free rein in his art. Stringent conceptualisation and journalling precedes most of the works, and even

Order, Interrupted

Iran's attacks on the UAE transformed artist Juma Al Haj's meticulous abstractions into meditations on chaos and control. By **Razmig Bedirian**

when he has an idea for a new piece or tool, he almost compulsively tries to ensure that it lends itself to his core concept. Sometimes this process takes weeks.

But there is one work, which he says materialised in a matter of hours. He had been at home in the first week of Ramadan when, right before suhoor, "the windows started shaking. I heard a blast. It was night, pitch black. I went to the studio, to try and make sense of the situation. That entire experience was put into this piece."

The painting is one of the most monochromatic of the new works. It features his textual abstraction in a ghostly white against a black background, with slight dabs of golden-beige in the margins. The scene is a reflection of what Al Haj saw outside the windows that day, the darkness outside the trembling glass.

Abstraction is often a means for Al Haj to explore his inner states and, perhaps counterintuitively, it is how he brings himself into focus, reifies himself. His signature forms, in fact, come from a very private place.

Al Haj spent his childhood years in the United States and, "going to an English-language school, with not many Arab friends or families around", often felt remote from his culture. To put things into context, this was in the years around 9/11, when anti-Arab sentiment was especially potent in the US.

"I had an Arabic tutor," Al Haj says. "He passed away last December, unfortunately, but I kept in contact with him because he had a big impact on me and how I saw the world. During class one day, he looked at my handwriting and said I needed to improve it."

Al Haj sought help from the artist-in-residence at his school, who happened to be of Lebanese origin. "He didn't know how to write in Arabic, but he gave me these exercises to loosen my wrist. They were abstract forms of the Arabic letters. I'd go fast and go slow. Also, interestingly enough, Arabic goes from right to left, but I did it from left to right," the artist says.

Those exercises became a therapeutic pastime for Al Haj, and when he couldn't figure out how to express himself in writing, he would resort to the abstract lettering, a sort of asemic expression that slowly developed into his own unique style.

But that style did not immediately translate into his paintings. It was during a moment of grief when he turned again to those abstract letters, to try and express the ineffable. On July 1, 2019, Sheikh Khalid Al Qasimi, fashion designer and son of Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, Ruler of Sharjah, died in London. Al Haj was in Abu Dhabi at the time.

"He was a friend of mine, more like an elder brother," Al Haj says. "We met in London several times, when I was still trying to find my way. He was only 10 years older than me. I woke up to hear that and I didn't know what to do. The first thing I could think about was not even to write, because I couldn't think about what I wanted to write. So I just did this."

That piece is still in Al Haj's studio, and while an early iteration of his gestural forms are depicted, the piece clearly begins with the date in question – July 1, 2019 – much like a journal entry. It is signed at the bottom with the artist's initials.

"It took all of 15 minutes, but it was powerful. I realised that putting grief on canvas, putting emotions on canvas helped me through a lot of the grieving process."

It was one of Al Haj's first expressions as an artist. While writing and note-taking has long been a reflective process for Al Haj, painting as a way of parsing his thoughts is a somewhat recent undertaking.

He only began focusing on his art career in 2020 and has since exhibited in group and solo shows, while also taking part in residencies at the Cultural Foundation Abu Dhabi and 421 Arts Campus.

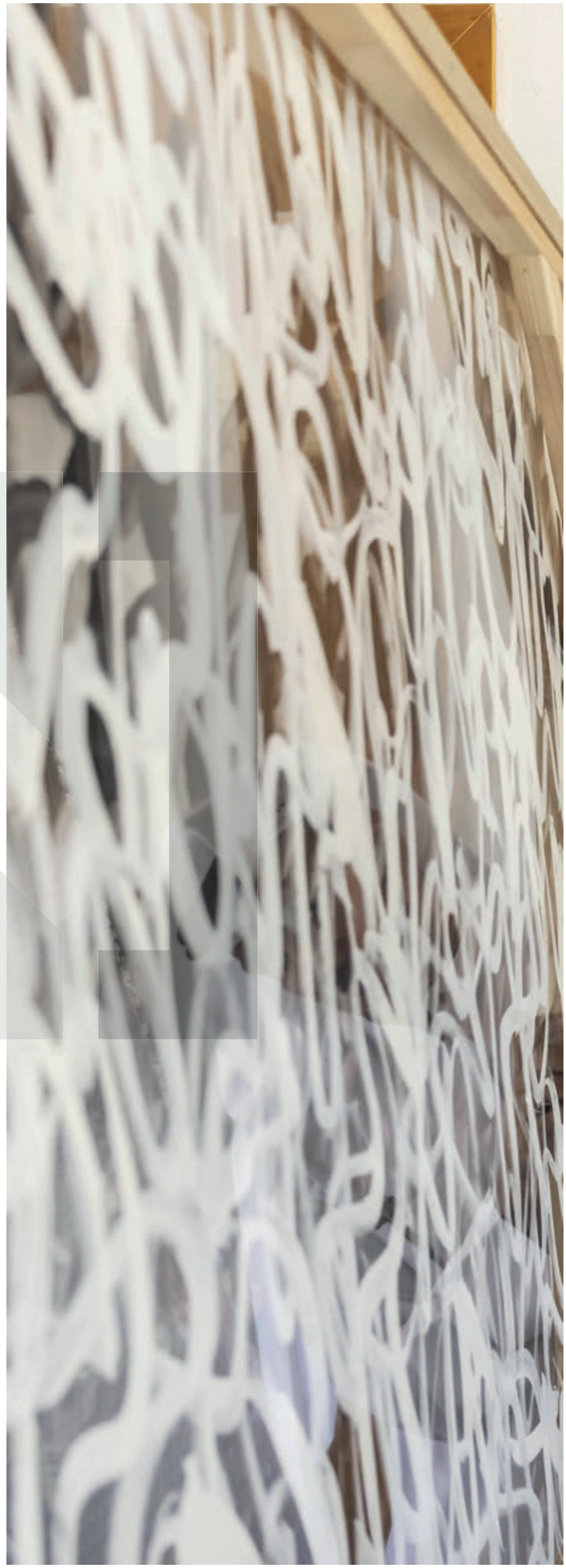
His works are also featured in several esteemed institutions and collections, including Barjeel Art Foundation, the UAE Ministry of Culture, the Bvlgari Art Collection, as well as the private collection of President Sheikh Mohamed.

Al Haj is now preparing for another stride in his artistic career. He has resigned from his day job as the director of marketing at Sharjah Research, Technology and Innovation Park and is taking his chances as a full-time artist, pursing a master's in fine arts at Paris College of Art.

Despite his accomplishments over the past few years, Al Haj is eager to see how his art will measure up outside the UAE. Much like how he was driven to return to the country after growing up in the US, to be amid his compatriots and community, he says he now feels he must leave it for some time, propelled as much by restlessness as ambition.

"I need to get that credibility within myself," he says. "I want to go where the opportunities are much harder. Will I still be successful? That's the journey I am going on."

Juma Al Haj's solo show, Interoception, is on display at Iris Projects in Abu Dhabi until August 6

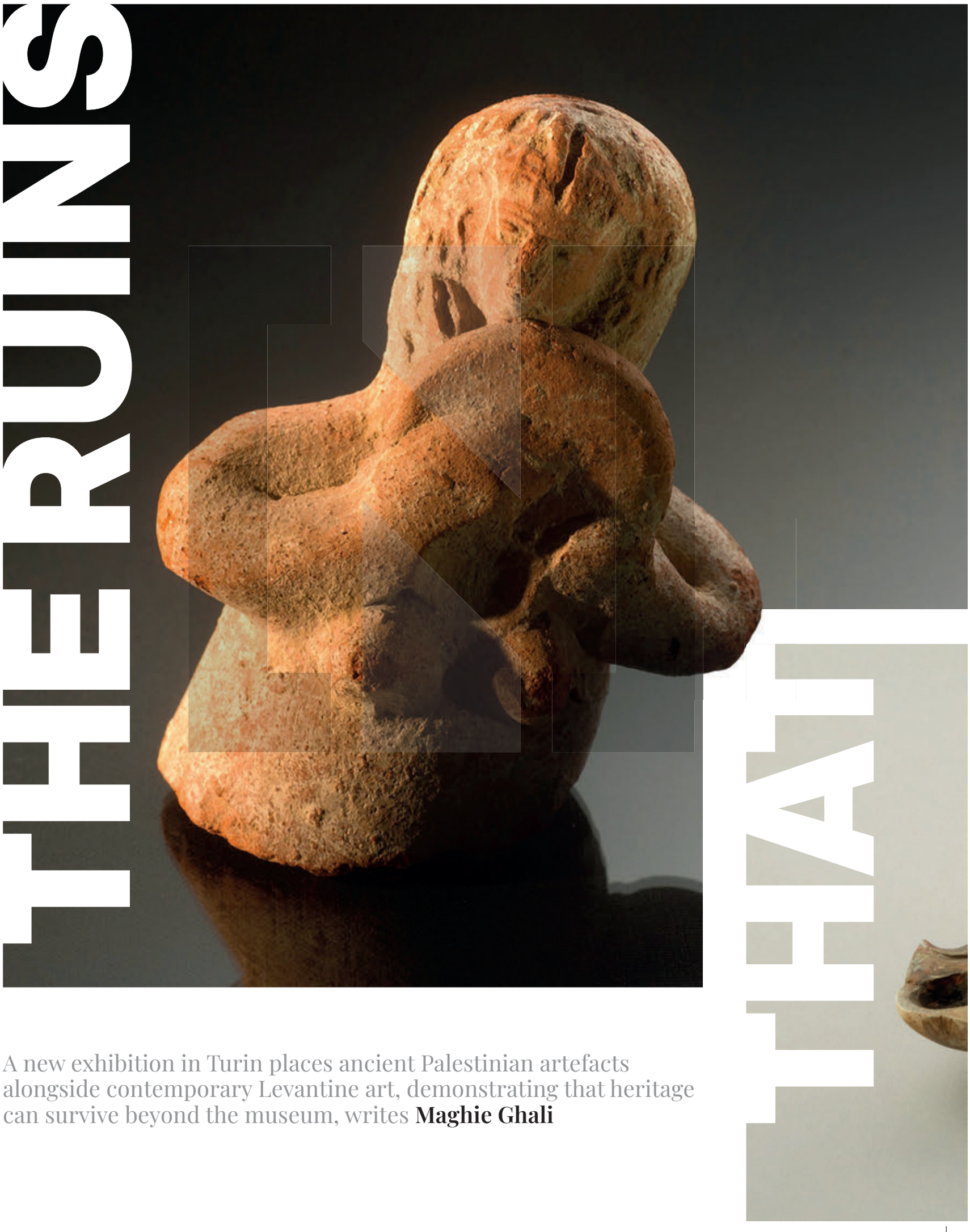


ANTONIE ROBERTSON / THE NATIONAL

Al Haj's works are part of Barjeel Art Foundation, the UAE Ministry of Culture and the private collection of President Sheikh Mohamed

I want to go where the opportunities are much harder. Will I still be successful?

THE RUINS THAT



A new exhibition in Turin places ancient Palestinian artefacts alongside contemporary Levantine art, demonstrating that heritage can survive beyond the museum, writes **Maghie Ghali**

BETTINA JACOT-DESCOMBES; ALBERTO RICCI

PEAK

The exhibition features archaeological objects found in Gaza, including clockwise from left: head with a pointed cap, circa 5th century BC; an oil lamp from the Roman period, between 100 BC and 100 AD; and an Iron Age statuette of woman with a tambourine, circa 800 BC to 601 BC

Gaza, The Future Has An Ancient Heart in Italy brings ancient artefacts from Palestine into dialogue with contemporary works by Levantine artists, in an effort to draw attention to the need to protect Palestinian history and heritage.

The exhibition at Fondazione Merz in Turin has been assembled by a team from the city's Merz Foundation and Egizio archaeology museum, as well as MAH – Museum of Art and History in Geneva.

"With what has been happening in Gaza over the past two years, we felt we had to do something, and as an arts museum, we can do our job," says Beatrice Merz, co-curator and founder of Fondazione Merz.

"We found out about these artefacts in Geneva and thought we should highlight them, add comprehension to them and about the situation in Gaza for the public here in Italy."

"As a contemporary art museum, we also felt it was necessary to draw the relation between the contemporary and antiquity, so we selected artists from the Levant who all have a research-driven approach, or deal with archaeology, history and memory," she adds. "The works are spread throughout the exhibition, and go hand in hand with the artefacts."

The show features more than 80 archaeological objects from MAH, where they are held on behalf of the state of Palestine, as well as from Museo Egizio.

Dating from the Bronze Age to the Ottoman period, the objects are part of a 500-piece collection temporarily held at MAH. They were originally intended for the creation of an archaeological museum in Palestine, a project that remains unrealised because of conflict. First lent in 2007 for a major exhibition at MAH, the pieces were not returned to Palestine due to logistical complications and concerns about their safety.

Contemporary works by Mirna Bamieh, Samaa Emad, Khalil Rabah, Vivien Sansour, Wael Shawky, Dima Srouji and Akram Zaatari bring those histories into the present. The exhibition also includes photographs of Gaza drawn from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) archive.

Spread across four thematic chapters, the show presents Gaza as an ancient crossroads of trade, cultures and beliefs. It explores cultural ties between Gaza and other countries, particularly Egypt and Greece, using the artefacts to trace a long history of exchange.

In one section, domestic objects such as a pestle used to grind food, spices or medicinal ingredients are shown alongside Palestinian artist Emad's *Genocide Kitchen*. Started while Emad was in Gaza, the project has continued since she left for Paris six months ago.

The series of 17 collages documents recipes created or adapted during the Israeli war on Gaza since October 2023. Presented in a scrapbook style, the work examines how Gazans have continued to prepare meals amid starvation, shortages, the destruction of bakeries, as well as restrictions on food and aid supplies.

"We had no cooking gas, and many food supplies, especially flour, were hard to find, so it was hard to prepare a meal for each day. It was a collective experience, and I felt the need to document it, because between the bombings, killings and displacement, these little details can be forgotten," Emad says.

"I started collecting recipes that people invented to be alternatives to the original recipes, replacing ingredients like flour with birdseed, or eating weeds like milk thistle.

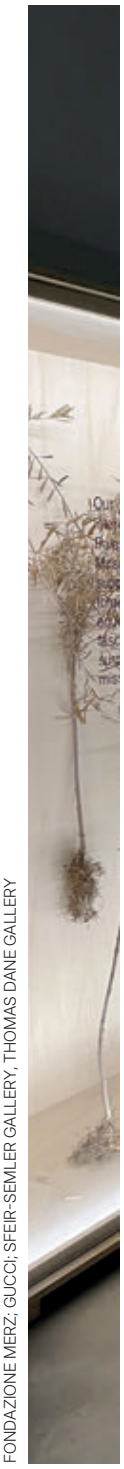
"Everyone around me got so creative, refusing to just starve, and I felt it should be shared," she adds. "These are the crimes between the big events and headlines. I'm working to have it all compiled in one book when I'm finished."

Another series by Emad, *Reimagining Homeland*, is also on show. Through collaged archival images, the work attempts to reconstruct destroyed Palestinian villages remembered through stories passed down by parents and grandparents.

Elsewhere, Srouji's *Phantom Votives* presents beeswax casts of body parts, including fragments of hands, feet and torsos. The work appears in a section devoted to ritual and religious exchange, from the worship of Astarte, Baal and Aphrodite to the co-existence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Marked with the number of days that have passed since the start of the war, during which they were sculpted, the pieces hang from the ceiling like votive offerings.

Zaatari's works consider displaced heritage and the role of photography as a record of lives, places and histories lost or taken during conflict. His video, *On Photography, Dispossession and Times of Struggle,* explores how photographs can become one of the few remaining records of displacement. Also on show is his photographic series *An Extraordinary Event*, which looks at the excavation of the Sidon Necropolis.

"It represents at once a search for photographs, a research on photography in modern times and a story of displacement of thousands of photographs from private, sometimes intimate, spaces in Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan, into the archive of the Arab Image Foundation in



FONDAZIONE MERZ; GUCCI; SFEIR-SEMLER GALLERY, THOMAS DANE GALLERY

"As a contemporary art museum, we felt it was necessary to draw the relation between the contemporary and antiquity

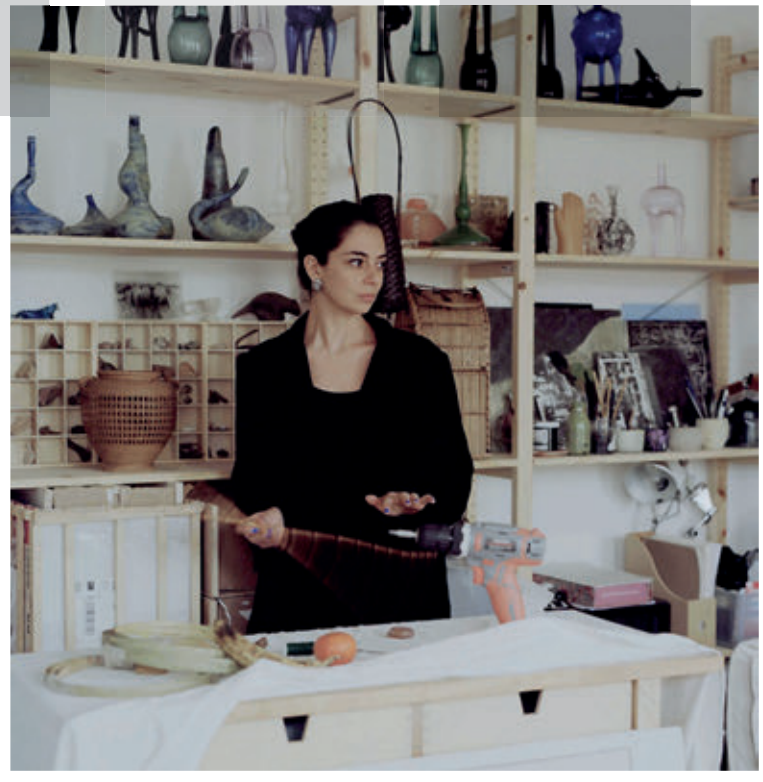
Beirut," says Zaatari. "The film is based on rushes that I videotaped myself while doing my research between 1998 and 2000.

"*An Extraordinary Event* is based on the excavation of the Sidon Necropolis in 1887 by Osman Hamdi Bey, when 17 sarcophagi were extracted and temporarily displayed in a citrus grove before being transported to Constantinople. Hamdi Bey took photographs of the finds, which became part of the Sultan Abdul-Hamid albums, documenting aspects of modern life in the empire, including archaeology. He was primarily interested in photographing the objects, but did not mind the presence of people, which often gave the images scale," Zaatari explains.

"The work plays with these two presences: on the one hand the finds, unearthed after 2,000 years spent in the dark and now barely visible; on the other, the people, the citrus trees and the surrounding landscape, all witnessing – perhaps for the first time – the presence of a camera."

By placing ancient objects beside works made in response to displacement, hunger, memory and loss, Gaza, The Future Has An Ancient Heart argues for Palestinian culture as something both historic and living. The exhibition's central idea is that heritage is not only preserved in archaeological collections, but also in recipes, images, stories and the artistic record of the present.

Gaza, The Future Has An Ancient Heart is on show until September 27 at Fondazione Merz in Turin, Italy



Clockwise from above, An Extraordinary Event (2018) collated by Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari; Palestinian artist Dima Srouji's works are on display; the show is at Fondazione Merz in Turin; and ancient Palestinian artefacts are displayed alongside contemporary art

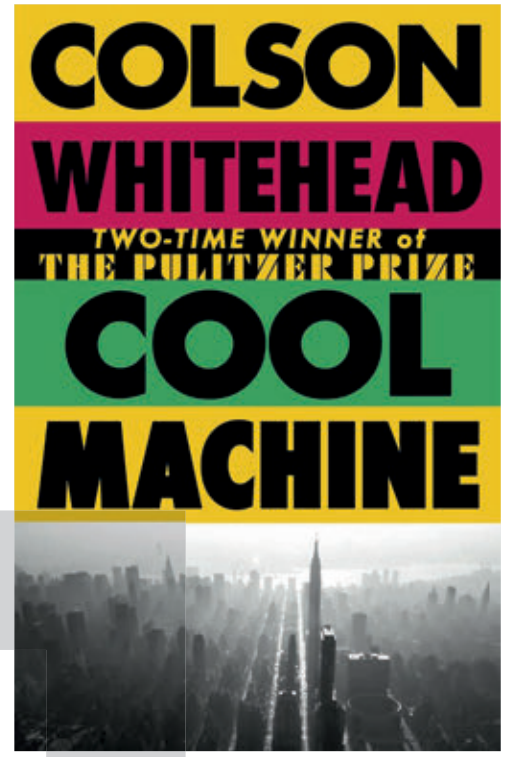
MAKE IT LAST

In a world of viral sensations and disposable media, here is our team's selection of physical media that deserves to be enjoyed slowly and thoughtfully

PING PONG (88 FILMS)

Sport films often follow familiar formulas, but *Ping Pong* never feels interested in convention. Fumihiko Sori's 2002 adaptation of Taiyo Matsumoto's manga turns table tennis into something frantic, emotional and intensely stylish. Recent films, such as *Marty Supreme,* have helped make the sport feel cinematic again, but *Ping Pong* explored that territory more than two decades earlier, transforming matches into something surreal, chaotic and emotionally charged. What begins as a story of teenage rivalry gradually becomes something more reflective. The film captures the intensity of adolescence through exaggerated visuals, rapid editing and moments that feel closer to a music video or anime than a traditional sport drama. Beneath that energy sits a heartfelt story about friendship, insecurity and growing apart. More than two decades later, *Ping Pong* still feels distinct. 88 Films's Blu-ray release gives the cult favourite a fitting presentation, complete with artwork and packaging that suit its bold visual identity.

Faisal Al Zaabi, culture journalist



COOL MACHINE BY COLSON WHITEHEAD (DOUBLEDAY)

This July, two-time Pulitzer prize-winner Colson Whitehead returns to New York with *Cool Machine*, the long-awaited final chapter in his acclaimed Harlem trilogy. Set against the shifting currents of the 1980s, the novel reunites readers with furniture dealer and occasional fence Ray Carney, as one last gamble threatens to pull him back into the city's criminal underworld. Whitehead's great gift has always been his ability to fuse social history with propulsive storytelling, and *Cool Machine* promises another sharp portrait of race, ambition and survival in a changing America – delivered with the wit and cinematic sweep that made *Harlem Shuffle* and *Crook Manifesto* instant modern crime classics.

Nasri Atallah, editor, TN magazine

THE WOW! SIGNAL BY MUSE (WARNER RECORDS)

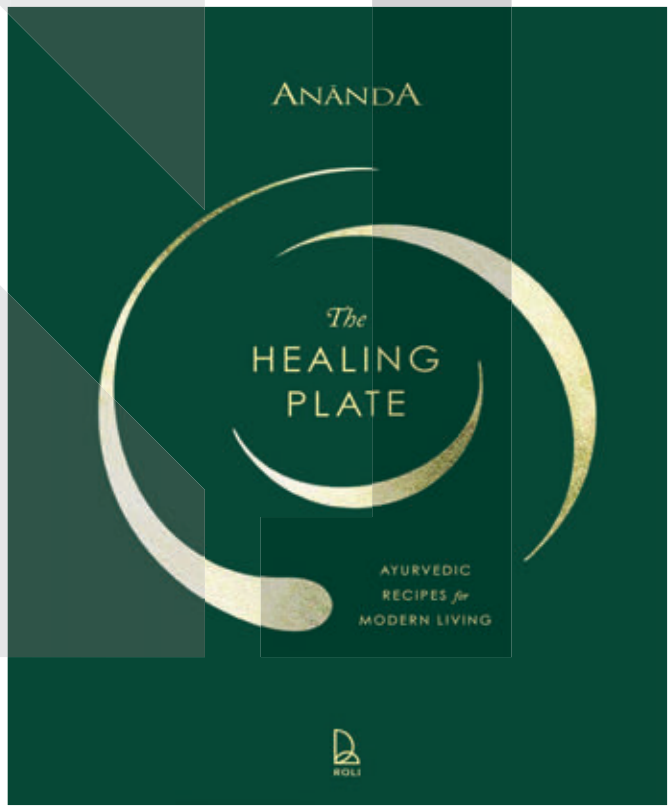
Muse is back with a new album, *The Wow! Signal*, the band's first since *Will of the People* in 2022. Named after an unexplained 1977 interstellar radio transmission, the album explores the theme of technological anxiety and cosmic communication. Filled with raw, energetic riffs, standout songs include *Cryogen*, with its interplay of drums and base; and *Hexagons,* which is best described as vibrant prog-rock, with soaring vocals and arcing electronica. The album features a mix of classic rock and experimental sounds, and is already being regarded as a return to form of Muse's most successful record to date, 2006 album *Black Holes and Revelations*.

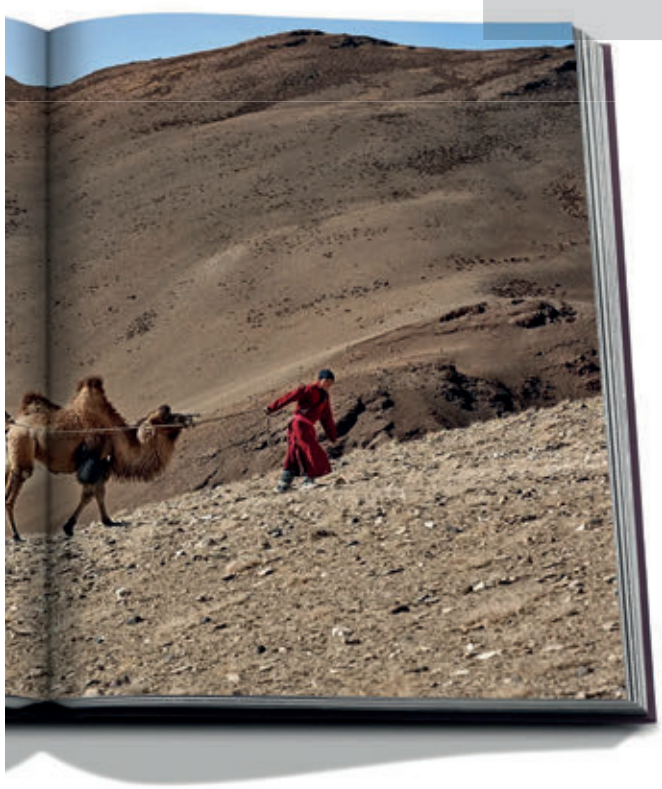
Sarah Maisey, deputy editor, TN magazine

THE HEALING PLATE BY ANANDA IN THE HIMALAYAS (ROLI BOOKS)

Most retreats leave you feeling your healthiest from head to toe – while you are there, at least. Back home, keeping it up is rarely as easy. That was certainly my experience returning from a five-day Ayurvedic detox at one of India's best-known wellness destinations, Ananda in the Himalayas. Which is why the resort's first book feels so timely. *The Healing Plate* combines wellness principles taught at the property, along with recipes that are designed to support energy, digestion, inflammation, immunity and detoxification.

Hayley Kadrou, deputy features editor





ODE TO A CAMEL (ASSOULINE)

Assouline's latest UAE-focused title is created in collaboration with Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammed. Blending fine-art photography, poetry and reflective essays, *Ode to a Camel* pairs images captured by Sheikha Latifa with meditations on the relationship between people, camels and desert life. Published as part of Assouline's Legends Collection, the 228-page volume features the publisher's signature luxury craftsmanship, including a linen hardcover, heavyweight art paper and large-format imagery designed as much for display as reading. Assouline describes the book as "an artistic homage" to the camel, presenting the animal as "a living embodiment of resilience, elegance and quiet strength". Sweeping desert landscapes sit alongside intimate close-up portraits, creating what the publisher calls "a refined visual narrative" rooted in Middle Eastern heritage.

David Tusing, assistant features editor

THE WATCHLIST

David Tusing unpacks this month's slate of must-watch releases, including returning hit shows and Christopher Nolan's first summer blockbuster in three years

1 HOUSE OF THE DRAGON SEASON THREE
OSN+
The teaser for the latest season of HBO's hit *Game of Thrones* prequel promises larger-scale dragon battles, political betrayals and the long-awaited escalation of the Targaryen civil war known as the Dance of the Dragons. *House of the Dragon* is based on George R R Martin's book *Fire & Blood,* and set about 200 years before the events of *Game of Thrones*. Returning cast members include Emma D'Arcy, Matt Smith, Olivia Cooke and Rhys Ifans. Following the premiere on June 22, episodes will be released weekly.
■ June 22

2 AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER SEASON TWO
NETFLIX
The next chapter of the live-action fantasy adaptation will follow Aang and the Gaang deeper into the Earth Kingdom as the war against the Fire Nation intensifies. Season two is set to feature the long-awaited introduction of fan-favourite earthbending master Toph Beifong, played by Miya Cech. New teasers have also offered the first look at Ba Sing Se, the capital of the Earth Kingdom. Returning cast members include Gordon Cormier, Kiawentiio, Ian Ousley, Dallas Liu, Paul Sun-Hyung Lee, Elizabeth Yu and Daniel Dae Kim.
■ June 25

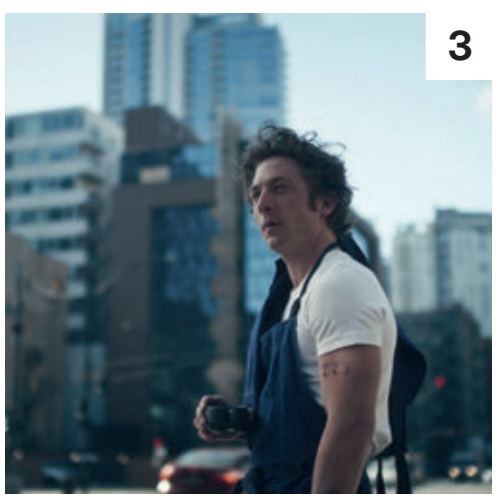
3 THE BEAR SEASON FIVE DISNEY+
The acclaimed kitchen drama returns for its final season this summer, bringing an end to one of television's most celebrated shows, awards-wise, in recent years. The final chapter picks up after Carmy (Jeremy Allen White) steps away from the restaurant business, leaving Sydney (Ayo Edebiri), Richie (Ebon Moss-Bachrach) and Natalie (Abby Elliott) to keep their struggling restaurant afloat while chasing a coveted Michelin star. Created by Christopher Storer, the series has won 21 Emmy Awards, including Outstanding Comedy Series, acting wins for White, Edebiri, Moss-Bachrach and Liza Colón-Zayas (who plays Tina, the cook), as well as a record-breaking 11 Emmy wins in a single year for a comedy series.
■ June 25

4 SILO SEASON THREE APPLE TV+
Set in a future where the last remnants of humanity live in a vast underground bunker stretching hundreds of floors beneath a toxic wasteland, *Silo* has become one of television's most compelling science-fiction mysteries. The series follows engineer-turned-sheriff Juliette Nichols (Rebecca Ferguson) as she uncovers secrets about the silo, the world outside and the forces controlling both. Season three picks up after the dramatic events of last year's finale and promises long-awaited answers about the origins of the silos and the catastrophe that forced humanity underground. Based on Hugh Howey's bestselling novels, the new season also expands the story beyond a single silo.
■ July 3

5 THE ODYSSEY CINEMAS
Three years after *Oppenheimer* dominated the Oscars and the box office, Christopher Nolan returns with what may be his most ambitious film yet: an adaptation of Homer's epic poem about Odysseus's perilous journey home after the Trojan War. Matt Damon leads an all-star cast that includes Tom Holland, Anne Hathaway, Zendaya, Robert Pattinson, Charlize Theron and Lupita Nyong'o. Shot using Imax film cameras, the mythological adventure has been billed as Nolan's biggest production to date and one of the most anticipated films of the year.
■ July 17


1


2


3


4


5

1

2

3

SUMMER GADGETS

From underwater cameras to earphone hacks in unfamiliar cities, **Faisal Al Zaabi** rounds up some travel tools to consider on holiday

4

5

6

1 YOTO MINI
For families travelling with children, the Yoto Mini offers a screen-free alternative to tablets. The compact audio player uses physical cards to play stories, music and podcasts, making it particularly useful during flights and long car journeys. Its simplicity is part of the appeal, especially for parents who are trying to limit screen time while travelling.
- Dh295

2 SHOKZ OPENSWIM PRO
The Shokz OpenSwim Pro is aimed at swimmers, but the headphones are equally useful for summer travel. Using bone-conduction technology, they let users listen to music while staying aware of surrounding sounds, useful when navigating unfamiliar cities or busy airports. Built-in music storage also means phones can be left behind during workouts or trips to the beach.
- Dh699

3 MOFT PHONE TRIPOD STAND
Phone stands have become one of the most useful travel accessories, especially for solo travellers taking photos or watching content in transit. The Moft Phone Tripod Stand folds flat against a device and doubles as both a stand and tripod. Its slim design adds almost no bulk to a carry-on bag or pocket.
- Dh150

4 ANKER 3-IN-1 POWER BANK
Power banks remain one of the few genuinely essential travel gadgets, as phones increasingly function as cameras, maps, wallets and boarding passes. Anker's 3-in-1 model combines portable charging with built-in cable functionality in a compact design that reduces travel clutter. Airline-compliant for carry-on use, the power bank also sits comfortably below most international lithium battery limits.
- Dh183

5 POLAROID UNDERWATER CAMERA 4K
Beach holidays and pool days can become stressful when smartphones are exposed to water. Polaroid's underwater camera offers a simpler alternative, shooting 4K video while staying waterproof enough for swimming and snorkelling. Unlike advanced cameras aimed at content creators, its appeal lies in simplicity. Lightweight and easy to use, it is built for casual holiday photography.
- From Dh190

6 TWELVE SOUTH AIRFLY PRO
Despite the rise of wireless earbuds, many airline entertainment systems still rely on wired headphone jacks. The Twelve South AirFly Pro solves that problem, allowing Bluetooth headphones to connect wirelessly during flights. Small and easy to pack, it is the kind of gadget frequent travellers quickly learn to appreciate, especially on long-haul journeys.
- Dh220

PRADA
Prada has long excelled at blending beauty with pragmatism, and its new Route bag is a perfect example. Crafted from sturdy canvas with leather trim, it features robust stitching, a zipped interior and snap closures. Yet, beneath that practicality lies a distinctly vintage spirit, making the Route feel like something Indiana Jones might have carried on his travels.

BLACK BOOK

Our round up of the most interesting and noteworthy arrivals in the world of fashion, beauty and accessories

ETRO X GLOBE-TROTTER
Just in time for summer, Etro has unveiled a luggage collection created with British brand Globe-Trotter. Blending the heritage house's craftsmanship with Etro's rich textile heritage, the collection reimagines the Arnica case with paisley motifs redesigned by British artist Tabby Booth. Her whimsical illustrations, filled with mythical creatures and folk art, lend the pieces a distinctly otherworldly feel.

PIAGET
Continuing its legacy of playful cocktail rings, Piaget has unveiled nine designs for its Limelight Paradise high jewellery collection, first launched in 2010. Dreamt up by creative director Stéphanie Sivrière, the pieces evoke summer coolers, complete with sparkling "ice" and fruit slices.

INITIO
Fragrance is increasingly moving beyond scent into mood, ritual and well-being. Lift Me Up, from Initio Parfums Privés, embraces that shift with a floral amber composition designed to do more than perfume the skin. Built around an intensified musk accord that radiates warmth and vitality, it is created to soothe, energise and restore balance. Powered by patented fragrance technology designed to reduce stress, elevate mood and support well-being, it taps into the rise of functional perfumery. Part of the Hedonist Collection – centred on serenity, grounding and emotional connection through carefully selected raw materials – Lift Me Up offers a brighter state of mind in a bottle.

ARMANI BEAUTY
Armani Beauty's Prisma Flash lip balm delivers translucent colour as it nourishes. Formulated with 12 per cent squalene for deep hydration, plus shea butter, jojoba and blueberry oil, it offers up to 24 hours of moisture. Its pearlescent finish comes from nano pearls that refract light to create a high-gloss sheen in a single swipe.

GIVENCHY
The new bag from the French house Givenchy is called the Voyou – French slang for a mischief-maker – a fitting name for its air of Parisian nonchalance. Part of the autumn 2026 collection, the bucket bag is shaped with a drawstring closure, while buckle details lend it a subtle biker edge. Crafted from glossy calfskin, it comes in ivory, pink, chocolate brown or black, with hardware in gold tones or cobalt blue with silver.

CELINE
For summer, the French house is offering a new design of men's slides, embossed to resemble crocodile skin. Called the Triomphe Slide, the open design comes in two colours – as a glossy black or a more muted beige. In this version, the maison's distinctive logo forms the top of the calfskin shoe, framed by the words Celine and Paris embossed into the skin.

DOLCE & GABBANA
A sumptuous new book, *Arte Moda*, has been published by Rizzoli New York, offering a journey through the world of Dolce & Gabbana's haute couture, Alta Moda. Presented twice yearly, the collections are entirely handmade, with one-of-a-kind creations inspired by themes ranging from Greek mythology and 1920s New York to Ancient Rome and Renaissance art. The book captures each piece in exquisite detail, often alongside its original source of inspiration.

VERSACE
Versace's Greca Signature fountain pens blend Mediterranean flair with Swiss precision. Adorned with house motifs including the Medusa head and Greek key pattern, each pen is crafted from stainless steel with IP yellow-gold plating. By bonding a thin layer of gold to the steel, the finish becomes highly durable and up to eight times more scratch-resistant than traditional gold plating.

ONE LAST THING

Mohammed Al Turki

Mohammed Al Turki has spent much of his career bringing people together on screen and off. The Saudi producer has worked on films including *Arbitrage*, *99 Homes* and *Crisis*, and later became one of the key figures behind the rise of the Red Sea Film Festival in Jeddah. Now, after years behind the camera, he has stepped in front of it. In Guy Ritchie's big-budget action film *In the Grey*, Al Turki makes his acting debut as Wolfgang opposite Henry Cavill. "Working with Guy Ritchie in front of the camera was surreal," he says. "Watching him direct while bringing Saudi Arabia on to a global stage made the experience even more meaningful. Sharing scenes with Henry Cavill wasn't a bad way to start, either." We caught up with Al Turki for our One Last Thing questionnaire.

What is your favourite time of day and why?
Sunset. There's something cinematic about the golden light fading across the horizon and the brief hush between day and night. It feels like a reset button.

What is your favourite restaurant anywhere in the world?
That's impossible to answer with just one. But if I had to choose today, I'd pick a small local restaurant over a famous one. The best meals are usually tied to a memory and not to a Michelin star.

What do you want to be when you grow up?
Continuously curious.

Do you have any hidden talents?
I'm surprisingly good at connecting people who should know each other. I'm also apparently quite good at playing matchmaker. I introduced Ed Westwick to his now-wife Amy Jackson in Jeddah, and helped bring together my best friend Michelle Rodriguez and Richard Gere as co-stars. The list goes on.

Your favourite book?
The one I keep returning to is *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. Different chapters seem to mean different things depending on where you are in life.

What type of music can't you stand?
Anything that feels manufactured. I can listen to almost any genre if it feels authentic.

What puts you in a bad mood?
Small-mindedness.

What can you not live without?
My passport.

Dream dinner guests?
King Abdulaziz, Anthony Bourdain, Princess Diana, Nelson Mandela and Omar Sharif.

Sitting on the sofa or out with friends?
Depends on the week. The older I get, the more attractive the sofa becomes.

When was the first time you realised your parents were human?
When I realised they didn't have all the answers, and neither do any of us.

What food takes you back to childhood?
Lebanese food.

What smell takes you straight back to childhood?
My mother's perfume.

Which city do you love but would hate to live in?
New York – it has incredible energy, but in small doses.

Can you play a musical instrument?
Well enough to say yes, and poorly enough to know I shouldn't perform publicly.

Have you ever been on a motorcycle?
Yes, and I had an accident at 17 that required stitches to my head. I understand why people become obsessed with them, though.

Any words to live by?
Leave people and places better than you first found them.

Biggest pet peeve?
People who are rude to service staff.

Do you believe in aliens?
The universe is too big for us to be that special.

What is your favourite Arabic word?
Tumaaninah. It means a sense of inner peace and reassurance.

The most niche thing you watch on YouTube?
Videos of abandoned movie theatres that are being restored.

How do you take your tea?
Strong, with ginger and fresh mint.

What makes you cry?
Acts of kindness more than sad stories.

What do social algorithms think you're interested in?
Architecture, films, travel, roller coasters and probably far too many hotel reviews.

TikTok or Instagram?
Instagram.

What is it about you that would surprise most people?
I'm much more introverted than people assume.

What was the last thing you did for the first time?
Act in a film.

As told to William Mullally

Mohammed Al Turki, right, with his In The Grey co-star Henry Cavill

MOHAMMED AL TURKI

I'm good at connecting people who should know each other, and at matchmaking

More summer. More savings.

MORE TO SAVOUR.

Unlock irresistible offers at your favourite venues with the More Cravings by Marriott Bonvoy™ dining app.