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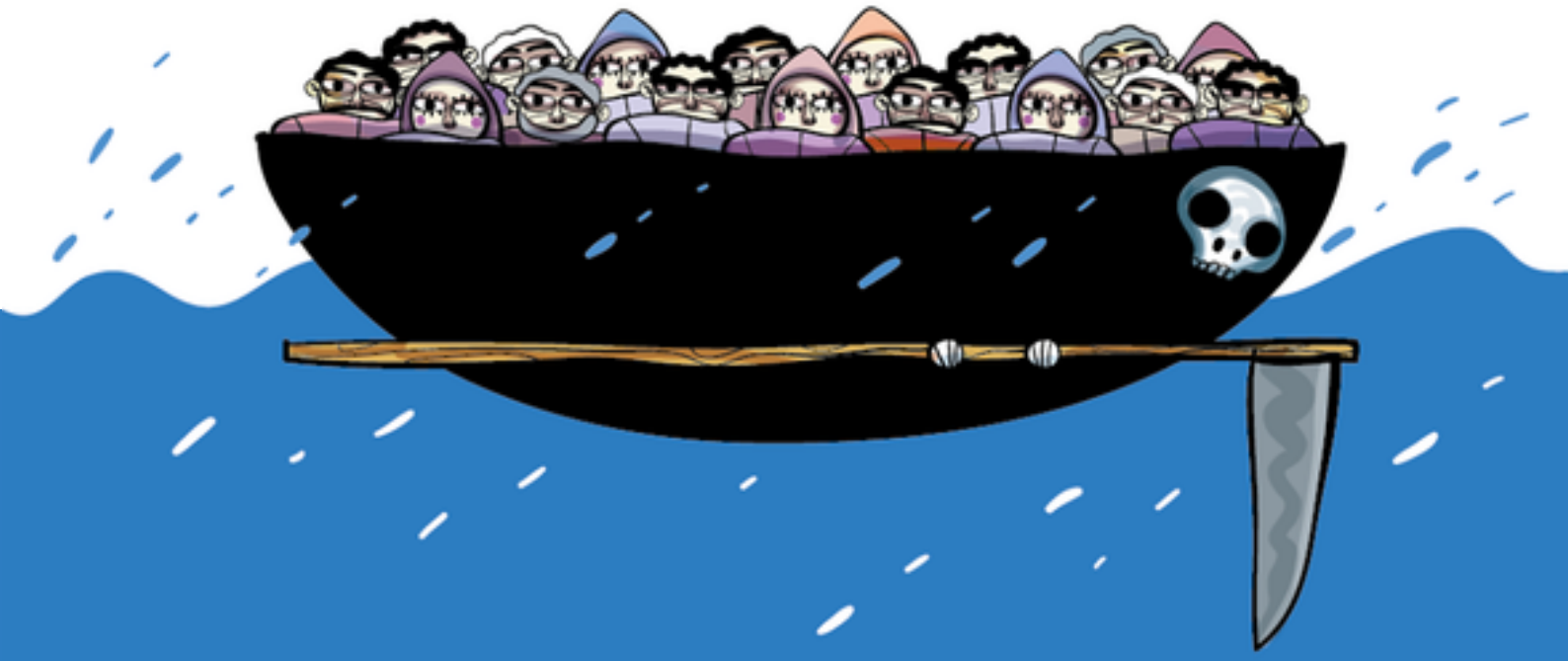

WHAT'S THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE?

A QUARTERLY ON ISLAMIC ART

“Art—even controversial art—can unlock communication between diverse nations, peoples and histories”

Sheikha Mayassa al-Thani,
Chairperson of Qatar Museums

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Editorial

Here we are at the second issue of IWA – Islamic World of Art.

Some of you may ask: “How long will this free, digital-only magazine fueled by pure passion with no funds survive amongst the thousands of magazines available on the Internet?”. Some of you may be noticing it for the first time and say: “Hey, look there!” Some of you may be overwhelmed by a number of questions that I’m not summing up here, but in any case, I’m sure you will find an answer just by looking attentively at the cover of this issue.

The keywords are: sea, water, death, desperation, boats, makeshift boats, Europe, dream, life. All these keywords have something in common, for better or for worse.

What’s the value of human life? This question is not only a headline; it’s a question we should ask ourselves every day, many times a day, especially when watching the news on TV that broadcasts images of desperate immigrants who lose their lives in the Mediterranean waters while trying to reach their promised land: Europe.

In their imaginations, Europe is a country of civilization, rights, possibilities, equality, and all these attributes clearly contrast with what they were destined to suffer in their homelands, being born due to bad luck in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Once again, art helps contextualize and analyze all the latest events in the light of history and universal truths, and if the language of art itself is universal, it is easier to get the real picture of the situation by just looking at a picture (sorry for the wordplay) rather than spending a bunch of words with the aim of trying to explain and represent the different nuances of meaning that we must consider when judging every phenomen.

What we tend to ignore is that there is another image that could straight-up inspire the best and truthful answer to this terrifying question “What’s the value of human life?”. It is the image we see in the mirror, every day.

The question becomes then: “What’s the value of my life?”

Sara Ibrahim
Editor-in-Chief

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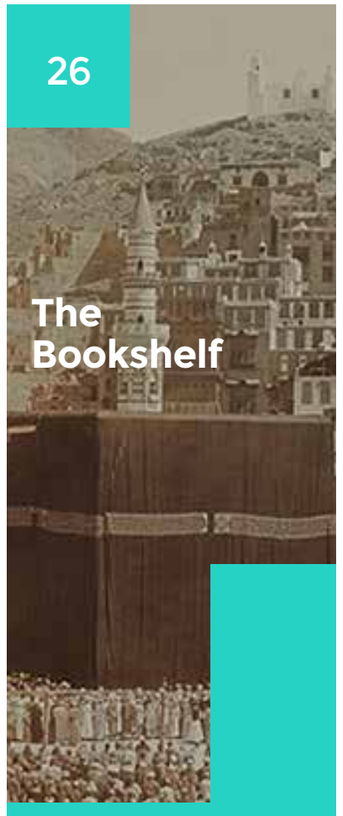

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The Game of Patterns

Giulia Gallini
IWA - Islamic World of Art's Editor-in-Chief
Islamic Art Historian

What an indie video game on geometry and maths can tell us about Islamic design

Pure Islamic art is something you do not see frequently in video games.

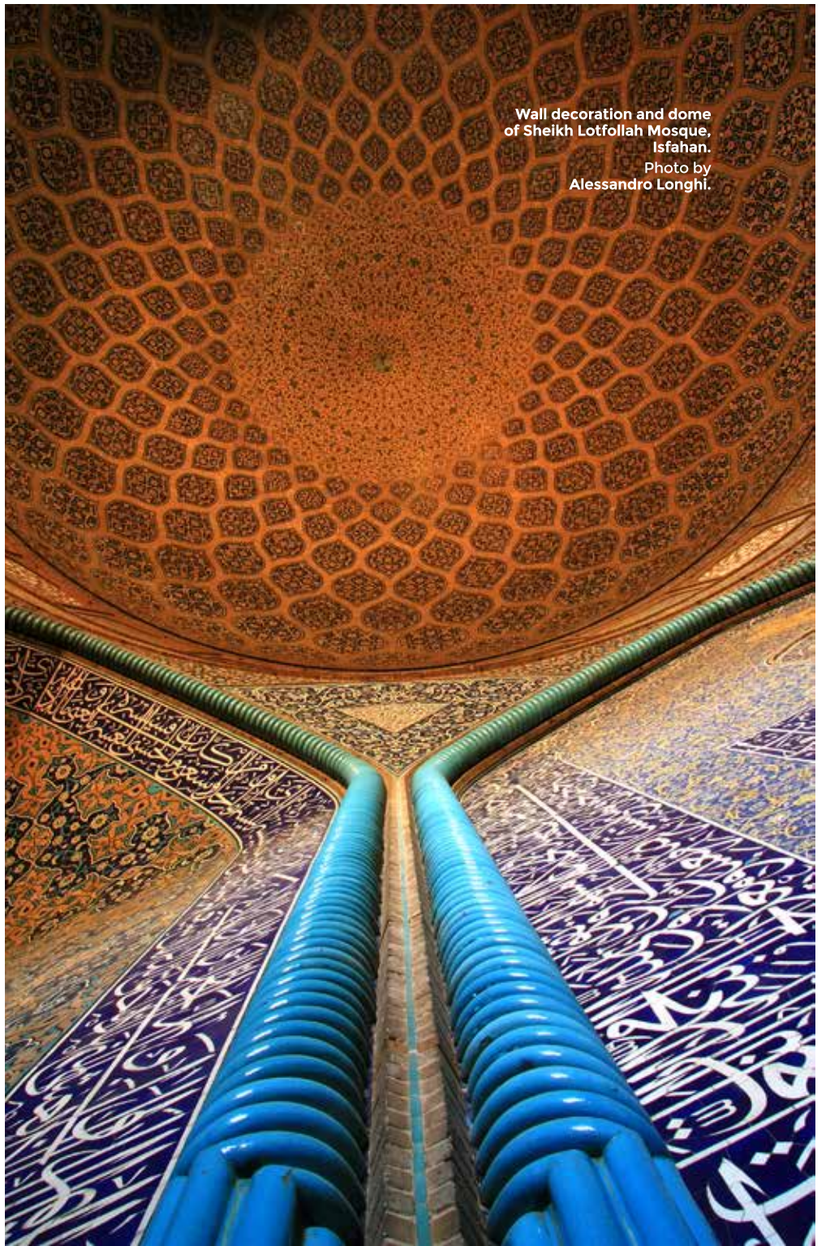
As a matter of fact, some of the video games that have been and are still produced do have references to the Middle East and, in a general sense, to the Islamic world, but the representation of the Orient in video games still relies on an Orientalist narrative, a point of view that counterposes two static entities: the civilised Western world; and the exotic Orient, more or less defined, full of mysteries and danger, enchanting and obscure.

This narrative has been frequently criticized and in some aspects recognized as obsolete. Games such as *Prince of Persia, Close Combat, Call of Duty* and *Halo* give the player a stereotyped image of the Orient, depicted as "different from us" in all aspects, without any deeper research and contextualisation.

In the world of mainstream video games, Islamic art as such has never had a great role; here and there we can find some hints, but they are superficial references used to contextualise the setting.

That is why it is so impressive that an indie game designer from Iran is developing and will shortly release a totally different game, with a totally different perspective on Islamic culture and the art that it produced.

Engare, designed and developed by Mahdi Bahrami, is one of a kind.



Wall decoration and dome of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Isfahan.
Photo by **Alessandro Longhi.**

First of all there are no characters engaging in a quest, no plot is developed around one hero. This is due to Mahdi's personal taste, as he explains clearly: "I don't like games with a plot, they are like movies. I prefer games where I have a clear goal, just like Tetris: games following mathematical and geometrical rules". And actually if you have to compare *Engare* to another game, it is more similar to *Tetris* than to *Call of Duty*.

In *Engare* the player is confronted with moving, usually rotating, objects; pointing one part of the moving object one can see the line that it creates. The aim is to create a given shape. You draw it, you win.

His video game stands out also because of the focus on Islamic art and its pattern. Again, the personal taste and biography of Mahdi play a crucial role in his decision to use maths, geometry, and pattern . Born and raised in Isfahan, his cultural background is imbued with Islamic art.

Coming from Iran, Mahdi has a great and long historical past in which to find inspiration for his game. His Iranian friends at Dead Mage Inc., for instance, developed Garshasp, a third-person action-game set in pre-Islamic Persia, with numerous references to Zoroastrianism and Iranian mythology.

His choice of Islamic art was determined mainly by Mahdi's love for maths and geometry; the repetition of patterns in Islamic art, ruled by mathematics and geometry but nevertheless enchanting and pointing to the infinite is something that has always fascinated him. The cultural and political moment we are living in pushed him even more to go on with this subject: "People are scared, everything that is Islamic seems to be evil nowadays. I wanted to show that Islam in itself has nothing wrong and can produce something beautiful. I wanted to underline the Islamic aspect of the game. I have decided to release it worldwide and at the beginning, instead of showing a logo, I have decided to write 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate'. In Iran it is common: everything starts with an invocation to God, and I think if I would have released the game only in Iran I would have omitted it. But since I'm releasing the game outside Iran, I want to keep the initial dedication to God." And he adds cheerfully: "When people will open the game, they will probably feel uneasy reading 'In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate', but when they'll start to play, they'll realise nothing is actually wrong with Islam".

Engare,
by **Mahdi Bahrami.**

But again, the main reason that pushed Mahdi to pursue the design of *Engare* is geometry.

"In school I was interested in geometry and maths. I remember my teacher explaining how a rolling ball can draw lines and shapes." He then developed the concept of shapes created by moving objects, and at the age of seventeen he released what can be considered the ancestor of *Engare: Everything can draw*!. "You see, it is very simple

and has nothing to do with Islamic art, but simply with geometry. It's colorful and funny. The principle is the same: objects moving and creating shapes."

When he launched *Everything can draw*!, his attention was focused on geometry. The connection with Islamic art came later.

When reading an article published about his game, he started to realise the connection and eventually he decided to develop it.

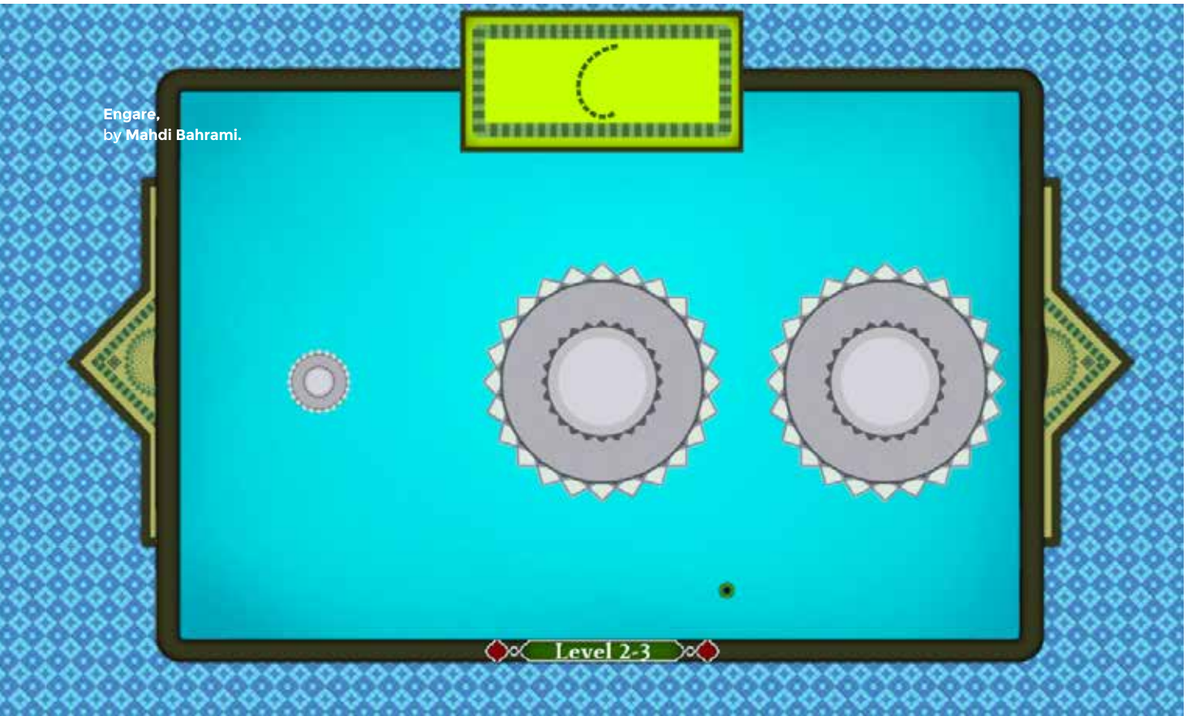
A totally different game, with a totally different perspective on Islamic culture and the art that it produced

The shapes the game creates seem to be the prototypes from which one can draw the intricate and repetitive patterns so typical of Islamic art. When asked if there was a study behind the shapes we find in the various levels, Mahdi innocently and blissfully admits, "I chose the shapes quite randomly, trying to produce with the moving objects shapes that I found interesting. Then, when the shape created the pattern I realise they were similar to something I had seen before, for instance the decorated domes in the mosques I had visited in Turkey and in Iran. But I did not use to take an image of an artwork, recognising the basic patterns and then reproduce them in the game. It was a happy coincidence".

When comparing the patterns created by the video game with Safavid and Ottoman art, a resemblance is actually apparent, but when compared with patterns developed in other parts of the Islamic world, like Spain or Egypt, things are different. No clear connection is present.

Islamic art is mostly known for the decorative patterns it produces, from Spain to India. The omnipresence of the decorative geometrical patterns has justified and fuelled, together with other features, the definition of "Unity in Diversity". According to this paradigm, Islamic art is basically homogeneous and shows its typical characteristics regardless of the origins and periods of production. Engare and the way the game produces patterns may contrast with this view, in a way.

Also, usually when studying the patterns in Islamic art, and their design, everything is made thanks to 'statics' tools: rules and compasses. In *Engare*, it is the movement that creates patterns, and the patterns created are those of a certain tra-



Engare,
by Mahdi Bahrami.

The decorative patterns on the niche of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Isfahan.
Photo by Alessandro Longhi.

dition related to the eastern Islamic world. As Mahdi puts it, "We are not one hundred percent sure of how the patterns were actually designed, if thanks to a rule or using moving elements such as the ones reproduced in the videogame. We can assume that in Iran the movements of objects and the shapes that this movements create could be studied: in the work of Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (Mashhad, 1201 - Baghdad, 1274) the movement of the circles were studied. It can be that they were also used for the creation of patterns." And citing

The shapes the game creates seem to be the prototypes from which one can draw the intricate and repetitive patterns so typical of Islamic art

the work of Peter Lu, researcher at Harvard studying physics and also Islamic geometrical patterns, Mahdi explains that "we are not one hundred percent sure of how the patterns in Islamic art were created, using which tools and following which rules". And the intriguing question is: can a video game shed light on the design of patterns in Islamic art?

Engare is an appealing and enchanting game. Just like Islamic art, it can be enjoyed on many different levels. A kid can enjoy the rotating and mesmerizing elements that create shapes, a graphic designer enjoys the ease with which patterns can be created, and even those who are less familiar with the Islamic world will love the atmosphere created by the visual concept and the evocative music, composed by the Iranian musician Moslem Rasouli. Last, an expert in Islamic art can possibly draw new and challenging conclusions on the creation of patterns.

And definitely, everyone would enjoy playing with it and with its shapes. Looking forward to the official release.

The interior decoration of the dome of Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Isfahan. Photo by Alessandro Longhi.

Engare, by **Mahdi Bahrami.**

Engare is an appealing and enchanting game. Just like Islamic art, it can be enjoyed on many different levels

The Value of Human Life

Maritime art has been drawing on the history and destiny of thousands of men and women since the 16th century. Today, maritime installations tell us something more about what we are prepared to do to survive and of the price of indifference

Dr. Bilgehan Köhler
Curator for Islamic Art
and Archaeology, SANArT LTD

The Raft of Medusa

Théodore Géricault, 1818-1819.

The maritime drawings by the artist Adel Abdessemed impress with their simplicity. Black lines on white paper. The pictures show a man reading a newspaper or a single boat with crowded people on it. Only the silhouettes of the people are shown. Neither the man reading nor the people crowded in the boat show individual characteristics. The black smeared lines on white paper appear sinister. Not much is needed to explain what we are seeing: crowded boats with people fleeing to Europe. These are pictures we know from the newspapers in the West today.

Lampedusa is the name of this series of maritime images that Adel Abdessemed drew between 2012 and 2014. The name is a reference to the small, Italian island of Lampedusa, which was until recently a tourist resort for Europeans. In the 21st century the former resort has become a refugee destination for many boat people coming from Africa and the Middle East.

Stefano Boeri, architect and author of the project Solid Sea, formulated the bitter truth at the Documenta 11 (Kassel, 2002) about the boat people on the Sicilian coast, when he said: “This place is the largest Mediterranean mass grave after the Second World War.”

Adel Abdessemed’s pictures and installations mirror the current affairs of the 21st century;
he questioned sad realities in the language of art.

His art installation Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf shows a boat full of garbage bags, which represent people on refugee boats. This associative juxtaposition of refugees and garbage bags provides the fundamental question of the value of people. Are the refugees as worthless as the contents of the garbage bags? Of what value are these people?

Lampedusa
by **Adel Abdessemd,**
2014.

Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf,
by **Adel Abdessemed,**
2012.

The current political discussion of the 21st century about the “emigrants - a burden on wealthy and prosperous societies in Europe” - puts the achievements of civilization and of humanity into question.

In the last century literature discussed the same topic, for example in the famous radio drama Das Schiff Esperanza (The ship Esperanza) (Fred von Hoerschelmann / 1901-1976). Migration caused by poverty in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries led to a flow of refugees from Europe to America.

The text Das Schiff Esperanza deals with a captain who onboards European emigrants and earns a fortune from them. However, due to fear of prosecution, he leaves the European migrants on a sandbank rather than keeping his promise; they drown in the next flood.

When the captain finds out that his own son has joined the migrants because he, like them, believed to be in America the captain is appalled. Now with his son exposed to suffering and death, he has to answer for himself. This raises the question of the value of humans one's own value and that of strangers.

This associative juxtaposition of refugees and garbage bags provides the fundamental question of the value of people

Adel Abdessemed thus meets the dramas of the past, connects to the critical art traditions and bridges over to contemporary art and catastrophes. He compares his work thematically with the maritime landscape painting The Wreck of Hope / The Sea of Ice by Casper David Friedrich of the 19th century.

The marine painter's images of hundreds of ships all too often seem obsolete, and its contents are not immediately comprehensible the contemporaries of the 21st century. But their relationship to the contemporary art of Adel Abdessemed offers new interpretations of the old oil painting.

What is the main topic of "old" oil painting of the 19th century?

The typical subjects and patrons of these oil paintings (16th-19th century) were kings, sultans and later rich commoners. The art served as an end in itself to display their own policies, successful battles or state-supporting events, such as diplomatic encounters, and their covenants were painted on these old art works.

One example is the painting entitled "The Battle of Preveza" which shows the victory of the Ottoman fleet over the ships of Venice in Preveza (Barbarossa Hayreddin Pasha Defeats the Holy League of Charles V under the command of Andrea Doria at the Battle of Preveza - 1538).

At that time they were enemies, and nearly 150 years later in 1710 the painting "*The Entry of Alvise Mocenigo in Constantinople*" demonstrates that Venice and the Ottomans are in political harmony by showing Venetian diplomacy in front of the sultan's palace on the Bosphorus.

In the 16th century there are alliances between the French and the Ottomans (Sultan Suleyman - François I) against the British and Spaniards. The Ottoman miniaturist, Nakka Osman, documented this on a miniature of the wintering of Ottoman fleet in the French Toulon.

From patriotic art to social criticism

In addition to these heroic images painted for powerful patrons, there were artists who were already raising social criticism in the 19th century as the artist Adel Abdessemed does for the 21st century.

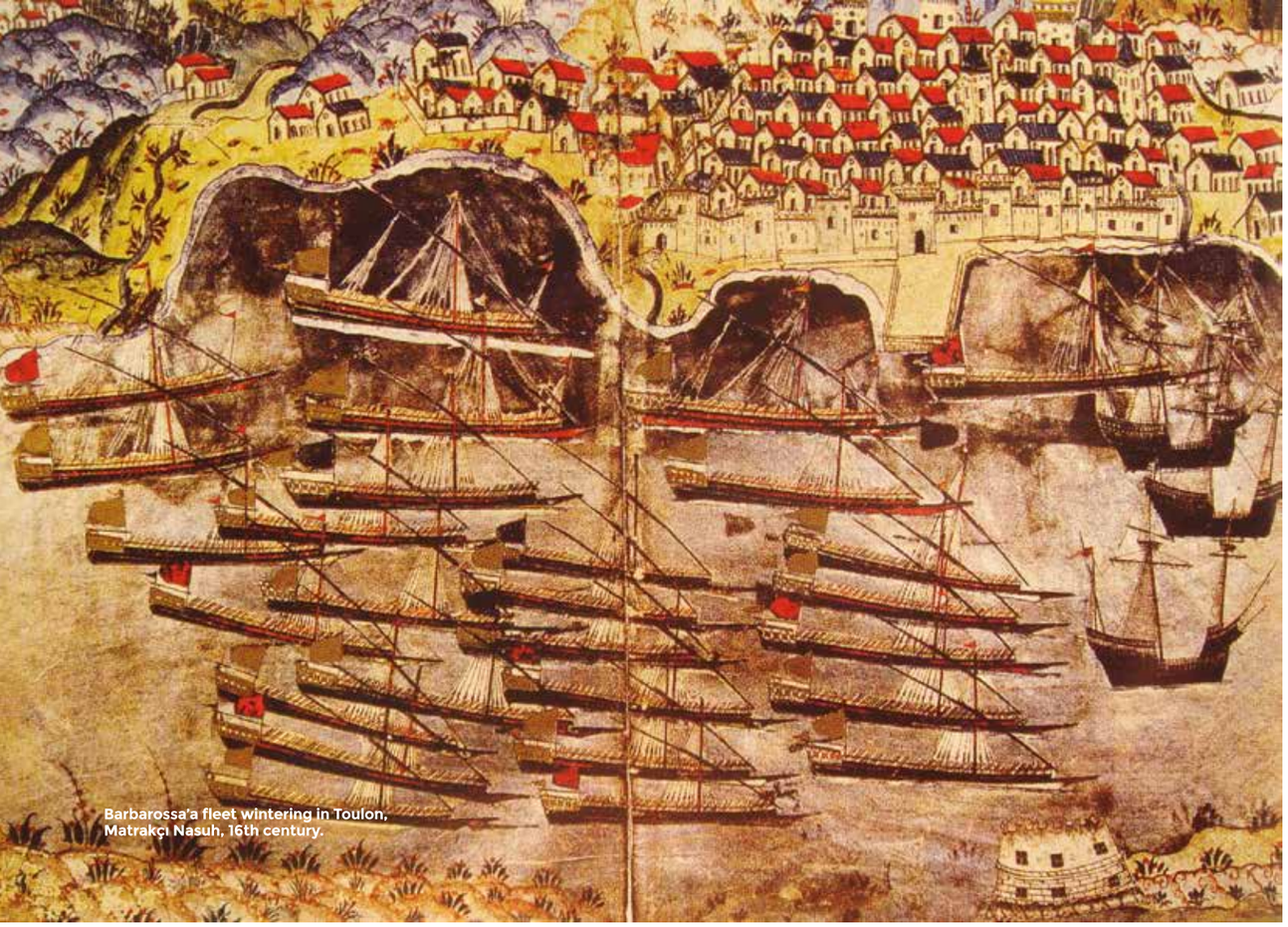
In his romantic landscape painting The Wreck of Hope, Caspar David Friedrich paints a ship, a typical symbol of the power and strength of the ruling and wealthy class of the 19th century, that simply perishes in the Arctic Ocean.
The ship is a symbol of power: the government and hope sink as the shipwreck sinks beneath the ice floes. The rising ice floes become tables, like tombs of the sinking ship. He dubs the image A Failed Ship among Rising Ice Floes. As soon as the next exhibition he will have to play down the title The Wreck, and two years later, it becomes only Views of the Arctic Ocean.

The critical attitude of the artist to the responsibility of society also encompasses Théodore Géricault and William Turner.

Another famous painting, The Raft of the Medusa, has a critical social point of view and is displayed in the Louvre museum in Paris. The painter Théodore Géricault was allowed to exhibit the picture in the Salon de Paris, but he was required to modify the title of the painting, due to the pressure of the government, to Scenes of a Shipwreck.

The Salon de Paris was an important institution for art exhibitions of the government and thus the cultural pride of the respective regimes in the 19th century. Because Gericault painted the picture in heroical, naturalistic way, at first the government did not notice the criticism. Shortly before the exhibition at the Salon, the artist changed the image and added new characters into the scenery, whose explosiveness was probably recognized only later.

Lampedusa
by **Adel Abdessemd,**
2014.



Barbarossa'a fleet wintering in Toulon,
Matrakçı Nasuh, 16th century.

What happened? What historical event is behind it?

The painting takes a position on an event that actually occurred, and the public was very aware of, in the 19th century.

A French frigate, Medusa, was on its way to Senegal, at the time a French colony in West Africa. Because of a disagreement between the officers on board, the ship had run aground.

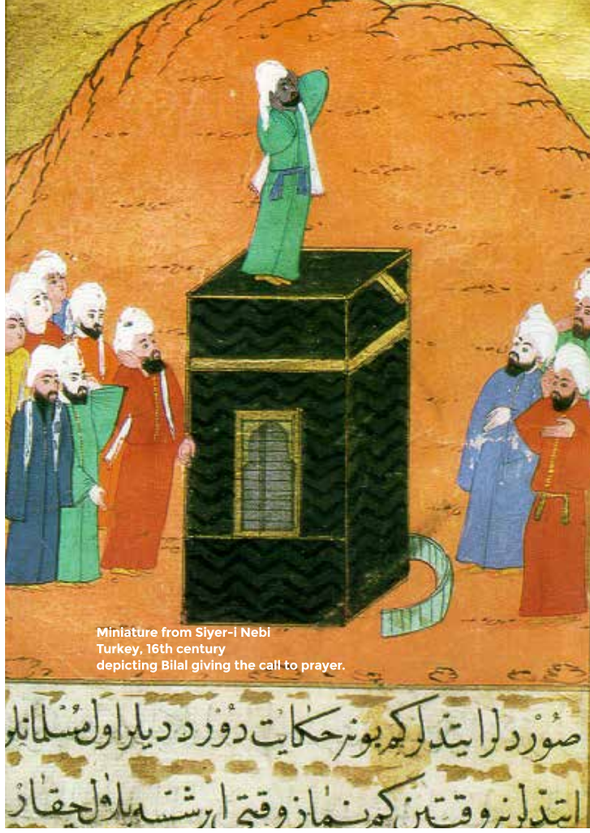
Those responsible for the capsizing of the ship survived because they occupied the only seaworthy emergency boat; the remaining 147 passengers were left on a raft that floated down the ocean currents. Soldiers from Italy, Arabia, Guadeloupe, San Domingo, India, Asia, America, Poland and Ireland were placed on the raft. Only 15 men survived; their reports shocked the public.

"We could not believe we were left until the boat disappeared from our sight, but then we fell into a deep despair", said one of the survivors.

The sinking of the Medusa was seen as a symbol of the unjust conditions in France, where only the interests of the rich were pursued.The incident became a political scandal and forced a minister and many officers to resign.
Théodore Géricault, inspired by the public discourse, created a masterpiece in the Old Masters' tradition of paintings: the courageous survivors as heroes in a scene. But the new heroes did not correspond with the social ideas of the time. In the picture a black African, probably a slave, stands at the forefront of the heroic survivors. A slave is the central hero, who is supported and uplifted by the survivors. The picture shows an open criticism of the ruling class and the states where slavery had not been abolished.

This European event has a predecessor in the Islamic miniature of the Turkish epic Siyer-i Nebi about the life of Muhammad, 1388, written by al-Darir . On the miniature, the former slave Bilal is at the Kaaba and calls for prayer. Again, a change in society is displayed. Bilal ibn Rabah, an Afro-Arab former slave, becomes a hero in the Islamic world and one of the most loyal supporters of the Prophet Muhammad. Bilal is a 7th-century symbol against racism and suppression in the Arabian Peninsula.
The English painter Joseph Mallord William Turner also belongs to the socially critical painters of his time. In 1840, similar to his French and German counterparts, he uses the canvas to criticize the inhuman conditions in society imposed by its rulers.

The Slave Ship (originally titled Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying - Typhoon Coming On), painted by Turner and displayed at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, shows a dramatic maritime scene. In the foreground are extended arms and



Miniature from Siyer-i Nebi
Turkey, 16th century
depicting Bilal giving the call to prayer.

Lampedusa
by Adel Abdessemd,
2014.

Lampedusa
by **Adel Abdessemd,**
2014.

legs, people in agony in the highly turbulent sea. However, the human body seems to be just food for fish and birds and doomed to death. The rescue ship disappears over a reddish orange dramatic horizon.

Turner's painting is based on an actual event from 1781: as instructed by Captain Collingwood on the British slave ship Zong, 133 slaves were thrown overboard to gain insurance money (around 30 pounds per slave) for the "loss of goods" at sea.
Turner paints no heroic images. He represents nature affected by light, as he perceives it subjectively (Impressionism). He also enriches content by bringing new topics to the forefront, such as social injustices.
Turner is the "key figure in the transition of the painting to the historical modernity". He was a role model for the socially critical nature of Impressionism and 20th century abstract art.

In the 21st century, 300 years later, the topic of "human dignity" remains a key and unfortunately pressing topic

In the 21st century, 300 years later, the topic of "human dignity" remains a key and unfortunately pressing topic.

Although contemporary art and the old oil paintings may not change the world, art can ask three questions, which must be resolved for a civilized world. Art questions politics, pointing out its beneficiaries and their lack of ethical values. It questions social injustice, making the individual the centre of its narration. Last, art questions humanity and the behaviour of human beings when facing the "others" and other cultures.

Adel Abdessemed calls for viewers' reflections in his works Lampedusa and Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf and asks viewers to review their perceptions while creating a new reflection on the political and social conditions in our century with the dramatic events that take place in the Mediterranean.

Men in the Sun, Men Underwater

Sara Ibrahim
IWA - Islamic World of Art's Editor-in-Chief
and Publishing Professional

In 1963, the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani wrote *Men in the Sun*, the tragic story of three Palestinian refugees who put their lives at risk for the sake of a better future

The Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani's classic novella Rijal Fi Ash-shams (*Men in the Sun*), one of his first works, was published fifty-three years ago and is still the milestone of his entire literary output. At that time, fifteen years after the establishment of the State of Israel and the Palestinian exodus – called "Nakba" (catastrophe) – many Palestinians were still living in the refugee camps in Lebanon - a dramatic effect of the diaspora - enduring hardship and uprooted from their homeland.

Besides being a writer, Ghassan Kanafani was an intellectual *tout court* and an eminent politician, an activist fighting for the Palestinian cause and a leading figure of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. We can guess, just knowing these few facts about him and his life, that there isn't room for sugarcoating in his books: We expect from an activist for rights that he will always be looking for the truth, and that's the main reason why he was assassinated by the Mossad in 1972.

The realistic and truthful account of the tragic death of the three main characters is indeed the strength of a book like *Men in the Sun*, which can rightly be considered an evergreen, being such a powerful story with an outstanding literary and sociological power that many contemporary readers will see lots of similarities between the destinies of the three "men in the sun" described by Kanafani and the thousands of immigrants trying to reach Europe by boat today.

Scene from The Dupes (Al-Makhdu'un), directed by Tawfik Saleh, 1972, inspired by Men in the sun.

A book like *Men in the Sun* can be rightly considered an evergreen

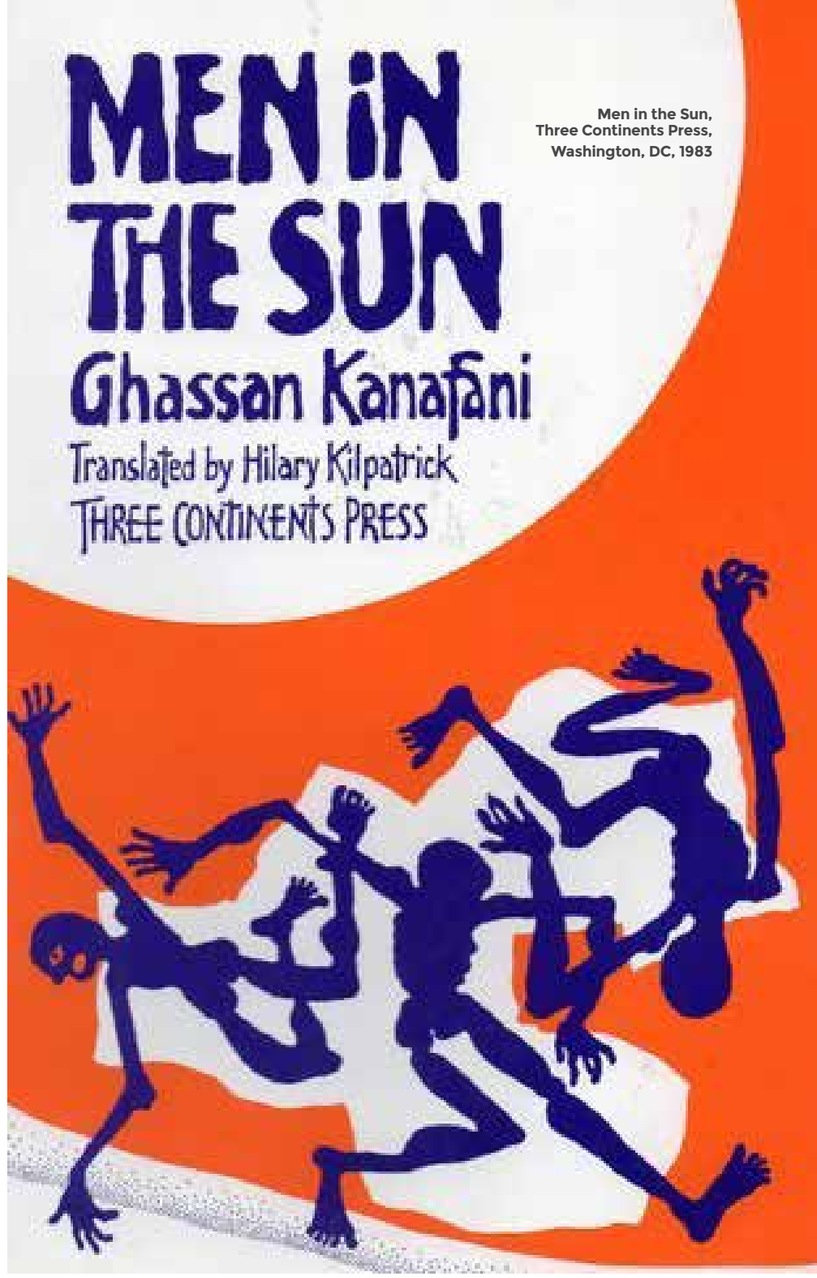
What's most current and topical about this book is the narrative linked to the compulsory nature of the decision made by the three main characters, who are relegated in a blind corner of poverty and hardship from which it is impossible to escape except by looking for a better chance elsewhere.

That's what happens to Abu Qais, Marwan and Assad in this story, the three male Palestinian refugees coming from three different generations whose lives will be bonded by a bitter destiny: death under the hot desert sun on their way to Kuwait.

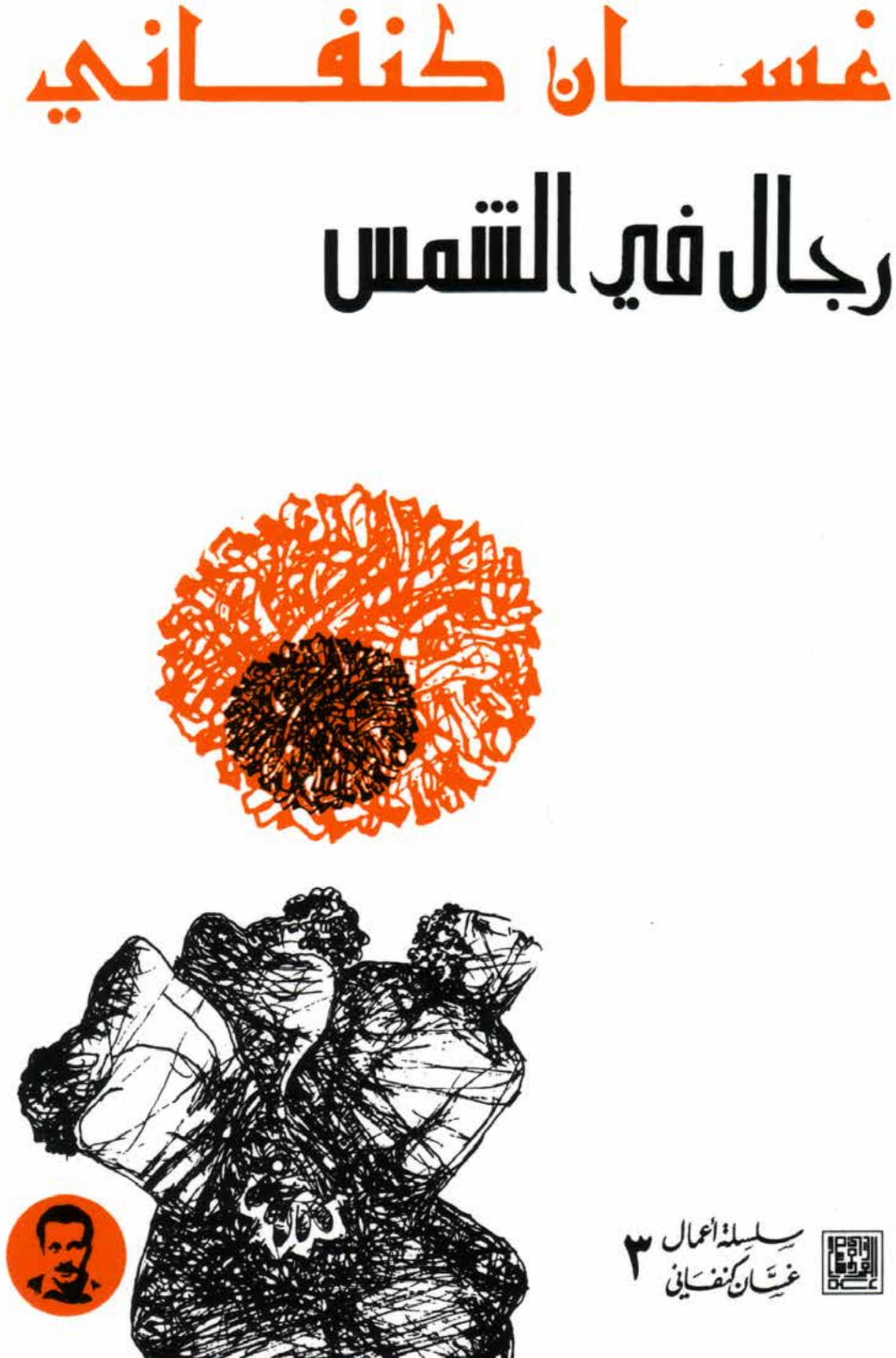
Although the Israeli Palestinian territory is their homeland, Lebanon is their temporary land – a place where they live a suspended life – and Kuwait is their promised land. There are not so many miles in between, but to get from Lebanon to Kuwait, refugees must pass through many checkpoints on the road and survive the hot desert sun staying hidden in a tank. Just after the last checkpoint, a few miles before the Kuwaiti border, Abul Khaizuran, the smuggler who promised to drive the three men to Kuwait for a good price, finds them dead in the tank.

The question that Abul Khaizuran asks himself after the tragic discovery is very pragmatic: "Why didn't they knock?" Similarly, we ask ourselves almost the same question when we see men, women and children die in the Mediterranean waters: "Why?" "Why do they risk their lives on those makeshift boats?"

Kanafani's *Men in The Sun* makes us reflect upon how much the



Men in the Sun,
Three Continents Press,
Washington, DC, 1983



power of desperation can lead a human being to risk everything. We can identify a sort of highly cynical and blunt – but also objective – thought behind this hard choice: "Is there anything to lose if the only thing that you can lose is your life?" So you weigh your life,

Kanafani's *Men in The Sun* makes us reflect upon how much the power of desperation can lead a human being to risk everything

pure and naked and with no embellishments, with a better idea of how life itself should be. And that is revolutionary and terrible at the same time, when a human being has to put his or hers life on the same scale as death.

Besides all that, dignity is another word that can define these people's real point to seek a better future for themselves and for their children. We must not forget that dignity is a major component of these risky choices, and in this sense immigration is a revolutionary decision, as long as it serves the purpose of reacting to inhuman conditions, wars, poverty and injustice.

From 1963 to 2016 nothing has really changed if we consider the enormous scale of the phenomenon of immigration. Today, even more people are ready to risk everything to survive starvation, indigence, oppression and war. In this sense, we see a universal meaning in Kanafani's short story.

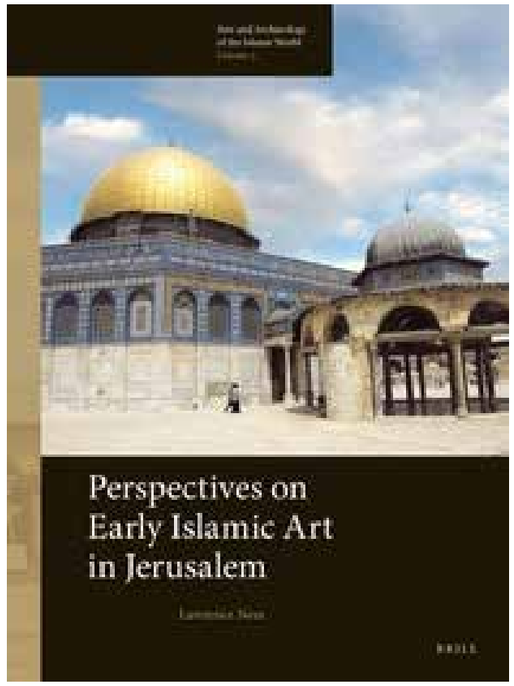
I'll close this piece with an excerpt from *Men in the Sun*:

"The sun was pouring flame down on his head, and as he climbed the yellow slopes, he felt he was alone in the whole world. He dragged his feet over the sand as though he were walking on the seashore after pulling up a heavy boat that had drained the firmness from his legs. He crossed hard patches of brown rocks like splinters, climbed low hills with flattened tops of soft yellow earth like flour. If they had taken me to the desert prison, Al-Jafr, at H4, I wonder if life would have been kinder than it is now. Pointless, pointless. The desert was everywhere. Abul-Abd had given him a headdress, and he had wrapped it round his head, but it was no use for keeping off the blaze. Indeed it seemed to him that it too was catching fire. The horizon was a collection of straight, orange lines, but he had taken a firm decision to go forward, doggedly. Even when the earth turned into a shining sheet of yellow paper he did not slow down".

Rijal Fi Ash-Shams,
Muwassasat al-Abhath al-Arabiyya,
Beirut, 2002

The Bookshelf

Perspectives on Early Islamic Art in Jerusalem



Almost every month a new book on Jerusalem and its long history is published, but Lawrence Nees's Perspectives on Early Islamic Art in Jerusalem stands out among the other volumes.

This newly published volume, edited by Brill, focuses on one particular area of the city and on one particular part of its history: the Haram al-Sharif, or Temple Mount, in the seventh century. It may seem a quite narrow subject, but the new approach Nees uses to describe the history of the Holy City makes the book and its subject much wider.

Lawrence Nees, professor of Medieval Art at the University of Delaware, primarily studies the art of the Early Middle Ages, focusing in particular on north-western Europe. In his research he has also considered the Mediterranean area, the Byzantine world and the artistic tradition of early Islam.

This academic background cannot but heavily contribute to his new and challenging description and analysis of the Haram al-Sharif and the history of Jerusalem. In the author's words: "Sometimes distance can bring into focus what is difficult to see standing very close, and my perspective is at least a different, and perhaps a fresh one".

Challenging a decades-long scholarly tradition of a subject as important as the Haram al-Sharif must be regarded as a great step towards a full understanding of the subject itself. The elements of originality are not confined only to the approach but also reach the monuments and objects considered in the volume.

The author does not focus only on those well-known monuments of the Haram al-Sharif, such as the Dome of the Rock and the al-'Aqsa Mosque, but he also takes into consideration, for instance, a long neglected monument such as the Dome of the Chain, which has remained hitherto almost unstudied.

It is not, as the author admits, a comprehensive study of Jerusalem, and probably the reader should already be acquainted with the history and main features of the Holy City, in particular of the Haram al-Sharif. Nevertheless, even for someone who has just a superficial understanding on the subject, the unusual point of view the author proposes can help any further analysis or study.

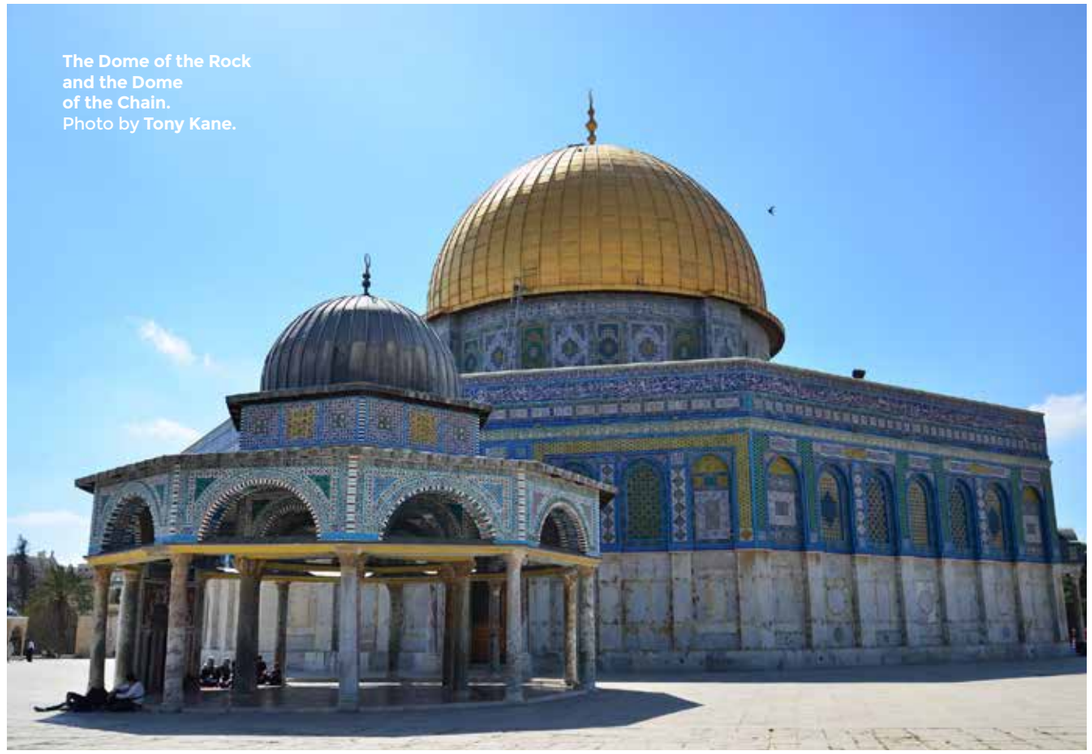
The author is interested in disproving accepted theories about borders and continuity between historical periods

Jerusalem, the Holy City, is renowned for its internal divisions, the major one being religious, between Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities. They are taken, almost without exceptions, as monolithic entities, without noting any difference in their division between "yesterday" and "today". Nees challenges this particular tendency: we cannot explain the Haram al-Sharif of the seventh century if we still combine that history with that of the eighth century. If there is a division between the three communities now, or in later centuries, we cannot assume a priori that the division has always existed and that it also existed in the seventh century. The social borders are thus challenged, and the same is valid for iconography and history in general. "Archaeological evidence suggests significant continuity and overlap, across a Late Antiquity/Early Muslim border that may be more a feature of modern scholarly divisions than of the situation on the ground in the past".

The volume is thus not simply a book on the early Islamic art history of Jerusalem: its challenging perspective gives the reader a new interpretation of the past and of the early stages of Islamic rule over Jerusalem and teaches us how to interpret history setting aside modern concepts. By reading this book introduces us to a period when the borders that today we consider natural and essential and inevitable were actually not.

Perspectives on Early Isalmic Art in Jerusalem

By **Lawrence Nees**
Brill
Publication date: **October 2015**
ISBN: **9789004301764**
Hardback, 235 pages, 71 illustrations
$ 179,00

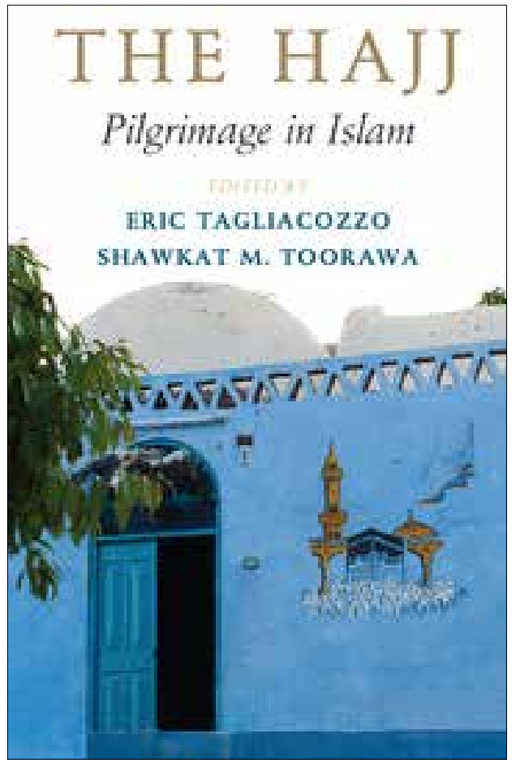


The Dome of the Rock
and the Dome
of the Chain.
Photo by **Tony Kane.**

Photo by
Tony Kane.

Photo by
Tony Kane.

The Hajj Pilgrimage in Islam



"The Hajj is one of the largest gatherings of human beings on the planet; it is also one of the oldest." This is how the new book The Hajj, Pilgrimage in Islam edited by Eric Tagliacozzo and Shawkat M. Toorwa begins.

As we learn from the preface the book was born from the curiosity of the two scholars over the pilgrimage to Mecca, its meaning and its origin, to develop in a volume dealing with a number of aspects related to the hajj. As it is pointed out "the pilgrimage to Mecca is as varied as its practitioners", and that's why the two editors have gathered essays written by scholars from a variety of fields and with different expertises. The Hajj is discussed providing a number of crucial point of views, each one helping building up a narrative of the pilgrimage itself. The narrative fuses history, geography, anthropology and religion, from pre-Islamic times to nowadays. It takes into consideration the changes in transportation, the economic and political infrastructure of today's Hajj, including an insight on issues such as global health and the intersection of contagious diseases and mass pilgrimage. It tackles issues such as social media and digitalisation and how they affect this ancient religious practice. The hajj is described as the mass event it is, but leaving enough space for the private sphere. The voices and memoirs of pilgrims are presented, letting the personal experience of Muslims emerge.

The book is thus multifaceted and kaleidoscopic, with interlocking points of view and analysis. The picture it conveys cannot be but greater than the sum of its parts.

The Hajj is a book born from curiosity and aimed for the curious: the variety of approaches makes it valuable for anyone, from the specialist to the layman, interested in having a deeper look at this ancient, yet contemporary, practice, crucial to the life of millions of Muslims.

The Hajj, Pilgrimage in Islam

Edited by **Eric Tagliacozzo**
and **Shawkat M. Toorawa**
Cambridge University Press
Brill
Publication date: **November 2015**
ISBN: **9781107612808**
Paperback, 441 pages
$ 29,99

The Mosque of Cordoba

As Oleg Grabar puts it, “The Great Mosque of Cordoba is acknowledged as a major masterpiece of Islamic architecture”. The Great Mosque of Cordoba has been described by scholars as both a typical hypostyle mosque (i.e. a mosque where the roof is supported by rows of columns and pillars) and as a peculiar architectural masterpiece. The peculiarity of the mosque is, in two words, its internal consistency: the aesthetic purpose is to create a space which gives pleasure to believers and visitors. The arches and the columns, the mihrab, the mosaics, all the architectural elements in the mosque play a critical role in creating an aesthetic whole, a “visual beauty” and “sensory effectiveness” that make the Great Mosque of Cordoba one of the most admired monuments of Islamic Spain.

The history of the monument is a long one and closely related to the history of the city, and its architectural elements are a mirror of the historical events in a curious and peculiar way.

Inner courtyard.
Photo by
Massimo Tartaro.

The columns and arches

The use of columns and arches is a typical feature of Middle Eastern mosques of early medieval times, and so probably this was the aim: linking the new mosque, promoted by an exiled caliph, to the traditional mosques back in the homeland.
The dethroned Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Rahman I, after escaping Damascus, settled down in Cordoba, already part of the conquered Islamic lands. There he started the construction of the mosque in 785-786. According to some sources the mosque was built on a pre-existent church, giving the Great Mosque of Cordoba the same origin as the Great Mosque of Damascus, which was also built on a church site. This could be true, but we also need to take into account the strength of such a literary topos, connecting once again the Umayyads of Spain with the Umayyad Caliphate in Syria.

In any case, it took only one year to complete the mosque, which was smaller than the one we know now. As the community of believers grew, the mosque was expanded by later rulers, in particular by 'Abd al-Rahman II (833-852), al-Hakam II (961-976) and the vizier al-Mansur (987). These expansion plans did not diverge in any way from the basic structure of the mosque, and the aesthetic whole was not impaired.
The single support (column with arches) was adjusted in a flexible manner to accommodate the increasing number of believers. What is strikingly attractive in the colonnade of the Great Mosque is the harmony of proportions between these elements, the equilibrium they create and the double superimposed lines of arches; it is one of the most amazing features of the mosque.

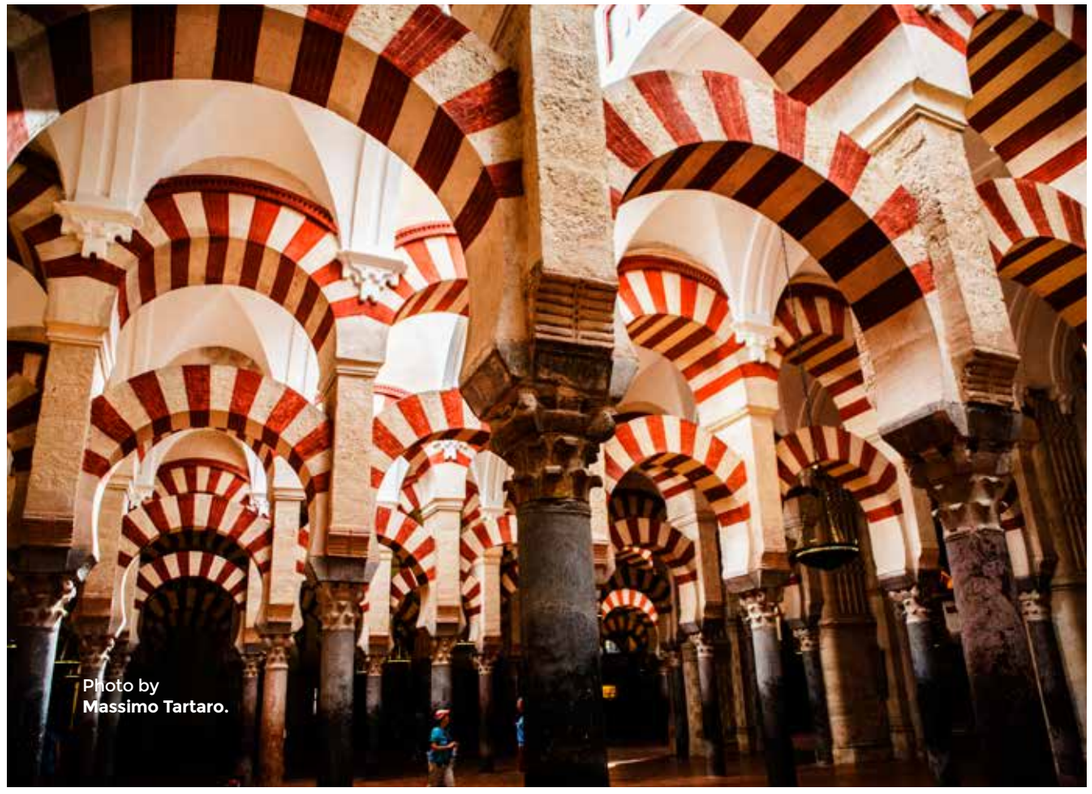


Photo by
Massimo Tartaro.

Photo by
Massimo Tartaro.

Photo by
Abdulrahman Bader.

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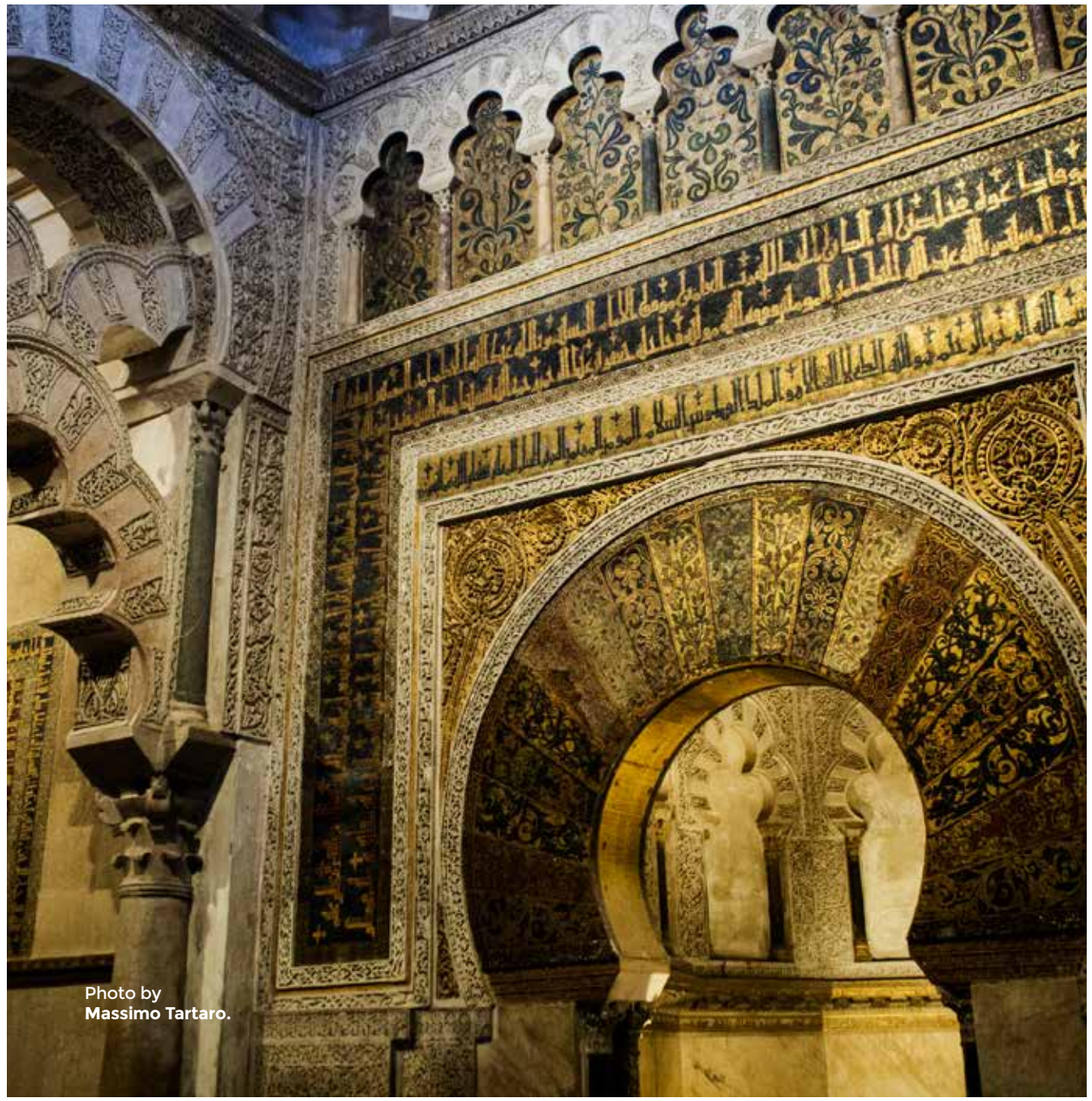
Abdulrahman Bader.

The mihrab

Yet one of the most peculiar features of the Great Mosque of Cordoba is the mihrab and the deep niche it creates, “which is like an empty chamber, or else the gate toward another realm than that of man” (Oleg Grabar). Built and decorated between 965 and 971, the mihrab of the Great Mosque is quite unique, being not simply a niche but a small chamber itself, with three domes in front of it and lavish mosaics and inscriptions. Oleg Grabar suggests that this mihrab can be explained in part by the general direction taken by the Islamic world in this period in which the words mihrab and gate were connected in a deeply symbolical meaning that created peculiar forms. The mihrab is thus an example of a new form, that of gate into another, spiritual, realm.



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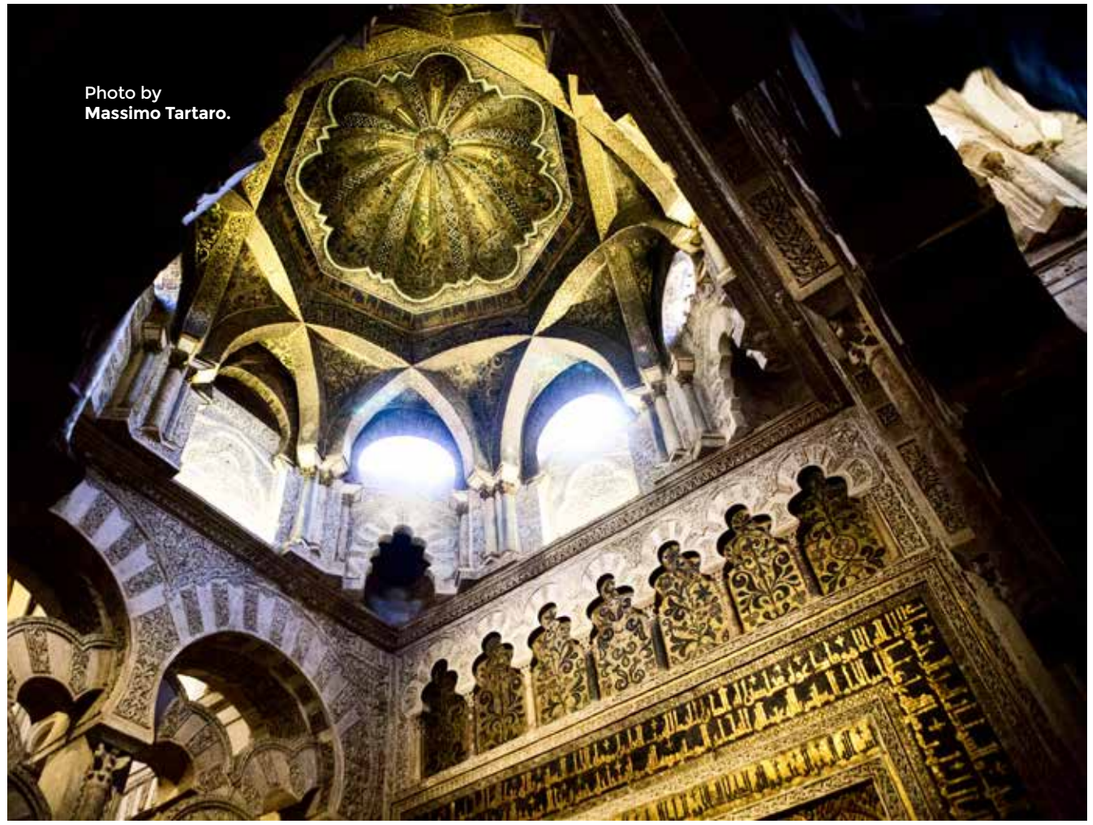

Photo by
Massimo Tartaro.

Photo by
Massimo Tartaro.

The 16th-century cathedral

No major change occurred to the mosque from the date of its construction to the Christian reconquista, even in 1236 when Ferdinand III King of Castile consecrated the mosque as the city's cathedral.
Three centuries later the bishop and the canons of the cathedral proposed the demolition of the old mosque to erect a 'proper' cathedral, but the proposal encountered the opposition of the population who didn't want to see a major historical monument destroyed. As a solution, controversial and uneasy, a Gothic chapel was inserted in the centre of the mosque, creating a strange yet again unique architectural output.

Photo by
Massimo Tartaro.

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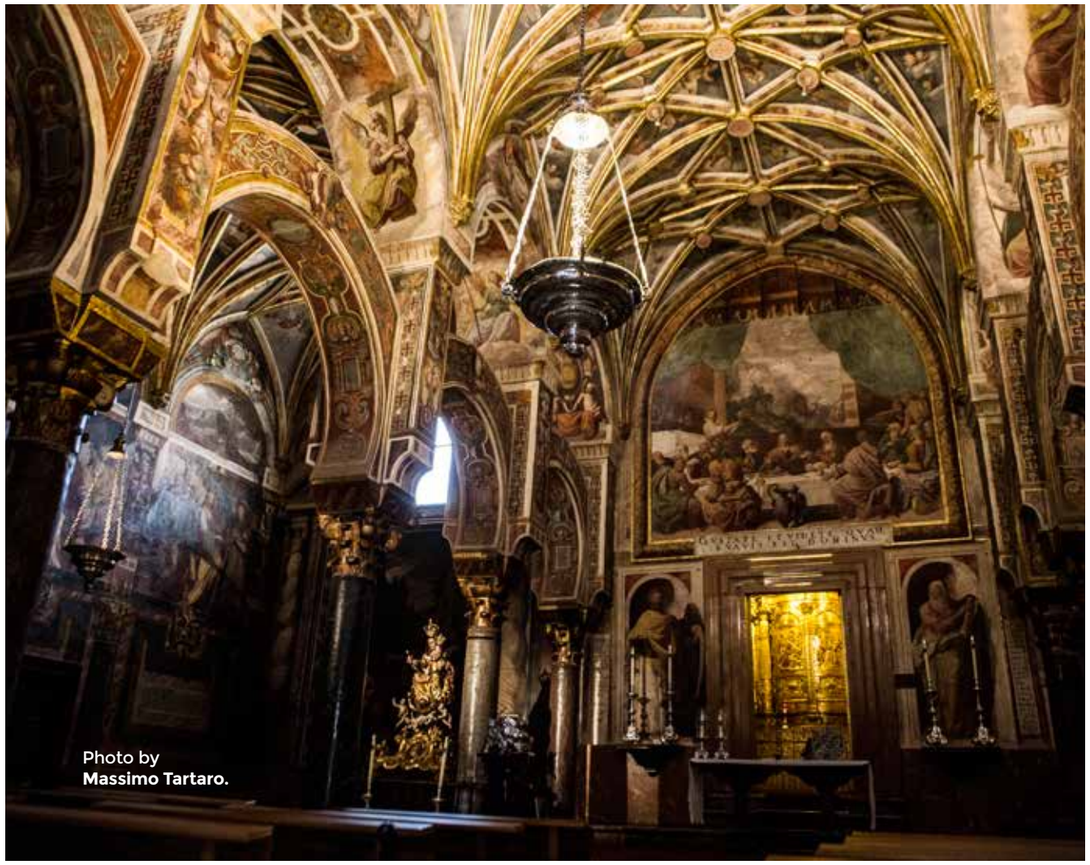
Massimo Tartaro.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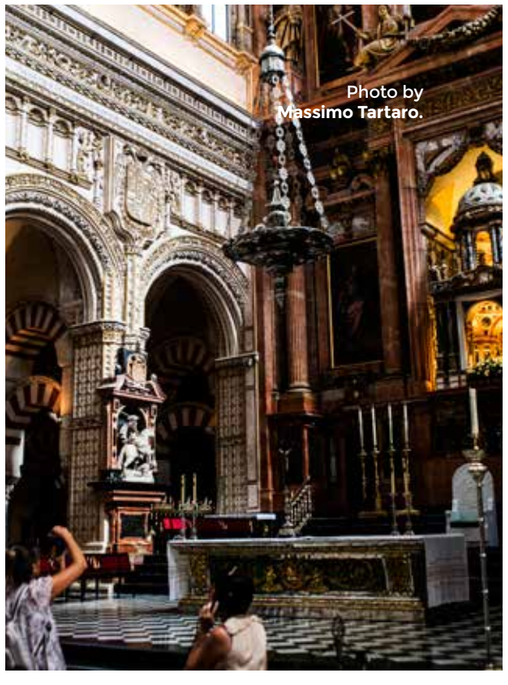
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