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Nizwa

A Special Place in the
Hearts of the Omani People

Voyage of the

Phoenix

Muscat Tom

A Finback Whale

Henna

A Trendy Tradition



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EDITORIAL TEAM

Chief Executive Officer
Dr. Ibrahim bin Ahmed Al Kindi

Editor-in-Chief
Abdullah bin Salim Al Shueili

Creative Consultant
Clive Gracey

Design
Paragon International
www.paragonmc.com
Diana@paragonmc.com
+968 2440 6136

Advertising, Printing and Publishing
Oman Establishment for Press,
Publication and Advertising
P O Box 974, Postal Code 100
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: 24649444, 24649451,
Fax: 24649469
Website: omanobserver.om
Email: observermazoon.om
editor@omanobserver.om
Salalah Office:
Tel: 23292633,
Fax: 23293909
Nizwa Office:
Tel: 25411099

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Abdullah bin Salim Al Shueili
Editor-in-Chief

EDITOR'S NOTE

For a long time now, I have held the view that there is a need for a high quality magazine that showcases the culture, art, heritage and landscapes of the Sultanate of Oman. Now, in April 2015, I am proud to introduce you to the first issue of that magazine, which we have decided to call *Mazoon*, the name by which the Sultanate of Oman was known in ancient times, a name that signified “A land abounding in fields and groves, with pastures and unfailing springs.” So, welcome to Mazoon!

We begin this first issue with an in-depth look at the city of Nizwa, which has been designated a Capital of Islamic Culture for 2015 by the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISECO). Nizwa served as the capital of Oman in the Early Islamic Period and since that time has been renowned as a seat of scholarship, as well as for its ancient mosques, agricultural resources, suqs and markets.

During the Medieval Islamic Period, a startling innovation took place in the architecture of mosques in the interior of Oman - the decoration of mahrib, or prayer niches, with intricate geometric and floral designs carved into stucco surrounds. The most famous exponent of this art form was Abdullah bin Qasim bin Muhammad Al Humaymi, who was active in the first two decades of the 16th century. In this issue, we learn the remarkable story of a plate, embedded in the mihrab of a mosque in the ancient settlement of Harat Al Bilad in the Wilyat of Manah.

For centuries, Oman has been a source of interest and inspiration for foreign travellers, many of whom left valuable written accounts of their experiences here. It is from several of these accounts that we learn about a remarkable and much loved inhabitant of Muscat in the middle decades of the 19th century, Muscat Tom, as he (or possibly she) was fondly known.

Other articles in this first issue of Mazoon introduce us to the unique ways of life of the Coastal Bedouins of Ash Sharqiyah Region, to the age-old use of henna in the Sultanate, to an insider's reflections on the art scene in Oman, to the town of Hasil in Dhofar Region and to our featured artist, the renowned photographer Ahmed Al Harthy.

All that remains for me to say is thank you to all who have contributed to this magazine and happy reading to all our readers.

PRIDE OF OMAN

This page: Detial of the carved Mihrab in Al Masjid Al Sharjah, Nizwa
Photographed by Clive Gracey

NIZWA

*A SPECIAL PLACE IN THE HEARTS
OF THE OMANI PEOPLE*

Text by Ray Petersen
Photographs by Yelena Glukhovtseva and Alexandra Petersen



*the home of
great leaders and
the sanctuary
of intellectuals,
scholars, poets
and men of
literature*



During his National Day Speech in 1994, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said described Nizwa as “the home of great leaders and the sanctuary of intellectuals, scholars, poets and men of literature.” For these reasons, Nizwa has long played a seminal role in the formation of Omani national consciousness. It was the capital of the land during the 9th century, a period of peace and prosperity in Omani history that is viewed by scholars as a “Golden Age”. This year Nizwa is a capital again, for along with Almaty in Kazakhstan and Cotonou in Benin, it has been designated a Capital of Islamic Culture for 2015 by the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (IESCO).

In announcing the award, Sheikh Hamad bin Halal Al Mamaary, Undersecretary at the Ministry for Heritage and Culture, said that, “Nizwa has been chosen due the depth of its cultural influence, which dates back



more than 12 centuries, and the richness of its heritage sites.” Not only has Nizwa been notable for its long-standing reputation as a bastion of the Islamic faith and as a center of cultural and religious scholarship, it is also renowned for the preservation of its cultural heritage and as an important manufacturing centre for traditional Omani handicrafts. Of the many attractions in the city, Nizwa Fort, the traditional *Souq*, the Falaj Daris and several medieval mosques are internationally recognised as being of huge historical and cultural value.

Nizwa Fort as we see it today was built during the reign of Imam Sultan bin Saif bin Malik AlYaarubi, who ruled from 1649 till his death in 1680). Imam Sultan bin Saif is venerated in Omani history for having led the army that expelled the Portuguese from Muscat in 1650, after an occupation that lasted almost a century and a half. In the decades following this momentous event, the Imam took the fight to Portuguese colonies in the Arabian Gulf and on the coasts of India and East Africa. According to the Omani chronicles, it was loot captured from the sack of Portuguese enclaves on the southern shores of the Arabian Gulf that paid for the construction of Nizwa Fort, a task that took 12 years and cost hundreds of thousands of gold and silver coins.

According to the Omani chronicler Al Izkawi, during Sultan bin Saif’s rule “Wealth ... increased, and the country was prosperous and brilliant, the people gratefully enjoying tranquillity. The harvests were abundant and prices low. He was affable to his subjects and



Nizwa has been chosen due the depth of its cultural influence, which dates back more than 12 centuries, and the richness of its heritage sites.



liked by all.” Nizwa Fort stands testament to Imam Sultan bin Saif’s strong leadership and to the strategic and economic importance of Nizwa in times past. Restored in the 1990s using traditional materials and techniques, today Nizwa Fort is Oman’s most visited and perhaps most imposing national monument.

Nizwa *Souq* and Livestock Market occupy a large area adjacent to the Nizwa Fort. The Livestock Market is an amazing sensory experience for locals and visitors alike, not least because of the close and very vocal interaction between buyers and sellers. The *Souq*,

surrounded by a high wall with magnificent wooden doors, has been a centre of commerce from distant times. Vendors sell all manner of goods, including meat and fish, fruit, vegetables and animal fodder, perfumes and spices and of course, dates and date products from the surrounding areas. The *souq* is also famous for traditional Omani handicrafts, particularly the silver jewellery for which Nizwa is renowned, as well as for pottery, leatherwork, copper crafting and ancient armaments, such as Khanjars, or traditional Omani daggers, and swords.

One of the busiest *souqs* in the country and second only to

Muttrah in size, Nizwa *souq* is a bustling, noisy marketplace built in a traditional Omani fashion with extensive latticing and wooden shuttered windows as architectural features. The aroma of spices and perfumes issues from the Eastern side of the *souq*, where the more exotic oils and fragrances are keenly sought after. Most prominent are the scents of frankincense and rose water, along with hundreds of subtly different varieties of bahoar.

The Falaj Daris is the largest falaj, or water channel system, still operational in Oman. It is the lifeblood of Nizwa as it provides the water on which



local agriculture depends for its existence. Farming is an important industry in the area and the district's palm plantations stretch for miles along the banks of Wadi Kalbough and Wadi Abyadh.

Although the Falaj Daris is referred to as one system, it actually originally consisted of a network of 134 different channels, of which 100 are still in use today. Falaj Daris is what is known as a Daoudi falaj,

“Oman’s falaj system is universally recognized as an engineering masterpiece and is featured on the UNESCO World Heritage List”



after Suleiman bin Daoud (the Biblical King Solomon) who, according to legend, built the first falaj in Oman. Unlike ghayl afalaj, which channel water from surface catchments such as storage tanks and wadi pools, Daoudi aflaj tap groundwater trapped in the shale outwash fans of major wadis where they debouch from the Hajar mountains. The water is brought to the surface by means of horizontal subterranean tunnels, often stretching for many kilometres underground before reaching the surface.

No historical source material survives relating to when and by whom the first aflaj were built in Oman, though there is mounting archaeological evidence to suggest that the earliest may date from around 1000 BCE, during the Iron Age Period. When the first major waves of Arab migrants from Yemen arrived in the area south of Bahla, probably in the 2nd century CE, they found “A land abounding in fields and groves, with pastures and unfailing springs,” which

suggests that the falaj system was already in existence at that time, at least in part. Whatever its origins, Oman’s falaj system is universally recognized as an engineering masterpiece and is featured on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Nizwa has played a central role in the Islamic culture and civilization of Oman since the early days of Islam. As such, it has long been renowned for its traditional mosques, a number of which are still in daily use. Nizwa also has four stunning examples of carved stucco mahrib, or prayer niches, dating from the medieval Islamic period. The most spectacular is to be found in the Great Mosque of Saal, an old quarter of Nizwa situated just across the wadi from Nizwa Fort, and dates from 1252 CE. The inscription on the *mihrab* is partly damaged, so we know the craftsman who carved it only as Muhammad.

For reasons so far unknown, there is a gap of some 250 between the date of

construction of Muhammad’s *mihrab* in the Great Mosque of Saal and the second oldest surviving carved stucco *mihrab* in Oman, which is to be found in the nearby Wiliyat of Manah and dates from 1504 CE. It was carved by Abdullah bin Qasim bin Muhammed Al Humaymi, who is credited with having revived this beautiful art form. Abdullah bin Qasim bin Muhammad Al Humaymi’s skills were evidently in great demand in the first two decades of the 16th century, for we find examples of his work not only in Manah, but also in Bahla and in Nizwa. The *mihrab* of Al Sharja Mosque in the Saal Quarter, was carved by him in 1516 or 1517.

A third carved stucco *mihrab* can also be found in Saal. It is in Al Jinah Mosque and was carved by one Muhammad bin Ahmed bin Saif in 1519.

The latest surviving carved stucco *mihrab* to be found in Nizwa is in Al Masjid Al Shawadinah, located in a narrow lane behind Nizwa Souq. Al Shawadinah mosque is reputed to be the oldest in Nizwa, dating from the very early days of the *hijra*. The large and beautiful carved stucco *mihrab* is a much later addition, dating from 1530, and is the work of the craftsman Issa Bin Abdullah Al Yusuf.

As a treasure house for traditional handicrafts, artistry, culture and scholarship, Nizwa is of immense cultural and historical significance not only in Oman but throughout the region. In the words of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, “This great city has a special place a big place in the hearts of our Omani people.”



ISLAMIC ART IN OMAN



Voyage of the Phoenix

Text and Photographs by Clive Gracey



“The object in question is a simple dish, with a phoenix in flight and some lotus blossoms painted on its white surface in deep cobalt blue.”



We learn from the history books that for at least two millennia, from the time when Arab mariners first made use of the monsoon winds to navigate the Arabian Sea, to the advent of steam navigation in the Indian Ocean in the middle of the 19th century, the northern coast of Oman occupied a hugely important position on the ancient Arabian Gulf-Indian Ocean maritime trade route. At its apogee, this route stretched from Basra to Canton, a distance of some 7,000 km. Before 878 AD, it was not unusual for goods from China to be carried to Arabia without changing ship. We know, for example, of an Omani mariner by the name of Abu Ubaydah Abdullah bin Al-Qasim who arrived in Canton around 750 AD and returned to Oman two years later with a valuable cargo of aloes and

wood. After 878 AD, the year Canton was sacked by Chinese rebels and its large community of foreign merchants massacred, goods mostly made their way westwards in stages, changing hands and ships at entrepôt ports in the Straits of Malacca, Sri Lanka, India, Oman and Persia before reaching Arabian markets. And as the Chinese silks and textiles, ceramics and metalwork were traded at different ports along the way, they gained incrementally in value as each ship's captain and each merchant took their percentage. Yes, it all makes for fascinating reading, but is there anything to see today to make this remarkable maritime history come to life, to make it tangible?

I can think of one object which speaks clearly and eloquently of those monumental medieval voyages from the coast of China to Oman, and of the hosts of people who played a part in it in that halcyon time before the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean in the first decade of the sixteenth century. The object in question is a simple dish, with a phoenix in flight and some lotus blossoms painted on its white surface in deep cobalt blue. I saw it for the first time in 1996 and what little I knew then about ceramics told me that it was made of porcelain, was certainly Chinese in origin, and possible dated from the Ming Dynasty (AD 1368-1644). How, then, had it come to be set in a carved stucco *mihrab*, or prayer niche, in a beautifully simple mud-brick mosque in the ancient settlement of Al-Bilad Manah in the interior of Oman? I was fortunate enough to live in Nizwa in the early 2000s and regularly visited Al-Bilad Manah,





so I had many opportunities to inspect the dish. Eventually, I decided to try and find out more about its symbolism and provenance.

A little research on the internet threw up a very informative website dedicated to Chinese porcelain run by Mr Koh, a dealer in Chinese ceramics based in Singapore (www.koh-antique.net). After a crash course in the ceramics of the Ming Dynasty, I found that the phoenix, apparently, has been a popular motif in Chinese ceramics since the Tang Dynasty (618-906 AD). In Chinese mythology, it is believed to

be an auspicious bird, being one of the four supernatural creatures that protect the four directions of heaven, the others being the tiger, the dragon and the tortoise. Presiding over the southern quadrant, the phoenix symbolizes sun and warmth, and by extension, summer and harvest.

Mr Koh's wonderful website also helped me to identify the Manah dish as an example of Folk Kiln Ming, or in other words porcelain manufactured for everyday use as opposed to the highly ornate Royal Ming ware that attracts vast sums of money at auctions today. The

“the phoenix symbolizes sun and warmth, and by extension, summer and harvest.”

website also helped me to date quite precisely when the Manah dish would have been made. The dating of Ming porcelain, according to Mr Koh, requires consideration of the painting techniques used, the form of the vessel and the type of clay and glaze employed, and the stage of evolution of the motifs depicted. Additionally, later Ming porcelain may have a datable mark on the base. As the Manah dish is embedded in a stucco prayer niche, it is not possible to tell if there is any base marking or to assess the thickness of the clay or glaze. The painting technique, though, is clearly calligraphic,

with writing movements having been used to produce fluid lines of varying thickness, as well as some stippling on the back of the phoenix. This calligraphic painting technique, along with the stylized lotus scroll foliage, helped me to date the plate to the reigns of the Emperors Chenghua and Hangzhi, between 1465 and 1505 AD.

I sent my findings and a photograph of the Manah dish to Mr Koh, hoping that he might confirm or correct what I had found out. He replied almost immediately, saying that my dating was accurate. He also attached a photograph

of a strikingly similar dish that had been reproduced in a book called *Lost at Sea: The Strange Route of the Lena Shoal Junk* (London, 2002).

The so-called Lena Shoal Junk is believed to have set out from the port of Guangzhou around the year 1490, carrying a large and valuable cargo of porcelain, ceramics and stoneware, some of which may have been destined for the Middle Eastern market. Unfortunately for its crew, the junk sailed into a typhoon in the South China Sea, was blown onto a reef and foundered. The wreck was discovered in 1996 off the Philippine island of Busuanga with most of its fabulous cargo still in perfect condition. A detailed scientific examination of the porcelain items found that they had mostly been manufactured in the city of Jingdezhen, in Jiangxi province, which has been a prominent centre for the production of ceramics from the Southern Song dynasty (1125-1279 AD) till the present day. Among the many hundreds of pieces of porcelain recovered from the wreck was a dish almost identical in form, size and decoration to that in the prayer niche in Manah. While the decorations on two plates are clearly the work of different hands, it seems likely that they originated in the same locale, around the same time and perhaps even came from the same workshop.

So, how did a Folk Ming porcelain dish manufactured in the city of Jingdezhen in the late 15th century come to be in Manah?

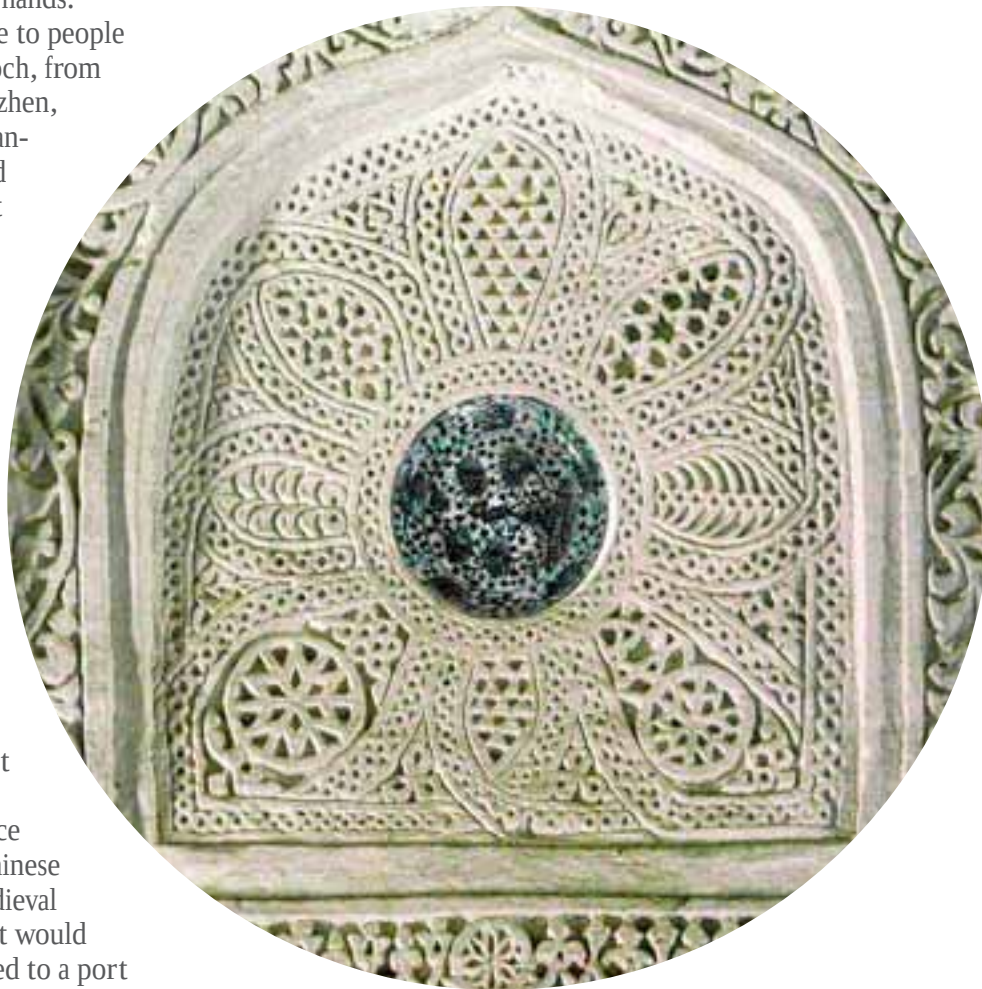
Whenever I go to Manah and gaze at this simple, beautiful

object, I realize I am just the latest in a long line of admirers, stretching way back half a millennium to that day, sometime in the 1490s, when a potter in a bustling workshop in Jingdezhen slapped a lump of porcelain clay onto a wheel and began to fashion its shape with his experienced hands. This dish connects me to people from a far distant epoch, from the artisans of Jingdezhen, the sailors of the ocean-going junk that would have carried it as part of their ballast on a voyage down the coast of Indo-China. That cargo may have been carried by mule train across the Isthmus of Kra, the narrowest part of the Malay Peninsula, to the Andaman Sea, or possibly the junk passed through the Straits of Malacca to the port of Kalah Bar, which was a popular interface between Arab and Chinese merchants in the medieval period. From there, it would have been transshipped to a port in Sri Lanka or South India in a Malay or Indian vessel and then brought by an Arab or Persian ocean-going dhow to the cities of Qalhat or Muscat. From the coast, it would have traveled by camel train to the city of Nizwa, where we may suppose a man of culture and aesthetic taste spotted it and bought it.

That man was Abdullah bin Qasim bin Mohammed Al-Humami, a native of Manah who made a living carving beautiful decorations around prayer

niches. He likely knew or cared nothing about the symbolism of the phoenix in Chinese mythology. What he saw was the skill of the craftsmanship and the beauty of the object. And for some reason we shall never know, he felt an urge to include the

under restoration. Soon, though, the beautiful Masjid Al-Ayn, with its stunning carved stucco *mihrab* and exquisite Folk Ming dish will begin a new lease of life.



beautiful dish in one of his own works. And so in AH 911 / 1505 AD, he set the porcelain dish from Jingdezhen in the central rosette of the carved stucco *mihrab* of Masjid Al-Ayn in Manah. And there, after a two-year journey covering some 7,000 km, the dish has rested in this village in Oman's interior for five hundred and nine years until the present day.

Al-Bilad Manah is currently

Detail of the Mihrab of Masjid Al Ali, with chinese dish, created by Al Humaimi in 1504.

FINE ARTS IN OMAN



SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE ART SCENE IN OMAN

Text by Christine O'Donnell, Director Bait Muzna Gallery, Muscat
Photographs by Clive Gracey

“my favorite
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A

lthough I am relatively new to the art scene in Oman, I have been working both as an artist and in art management for more years than I care to mention. During my career in Art, my favorite moments of the working day have always been when I get to meet and talk with artists, particularly emerging artists. These discussions have given me a keen insight into the workings of the artistic mind and the various concerns that younger and more experienced artists face, both in their personal creative struggles and in the challenging task of getting their work into the public domain where it can be appreciated and, hopefully, bought.

From my meetings with emerging artists in Oman over the past few months, my overriding impression is that many are keen to reach greater creative heights, not least by attending the various art workshops that are now regularly available from Bait Muzna Gallery, Stal Gallery, Gallery Sarah, Bait Al Zubair Museum and the Omani Society for Fine Arts. As a result of their continued efforts at artistic development, it is pleasing to note that many up-and-coming artists in Oman are beginning

to find a strong individual voice that is becoming ever more evident in their work. Sadly, though, others seem rather lost – confused about what sort of art they should be making, paralyzed by self-doubt or caught in an endless cycle of producing clichés. In this article, I would like to share with you some of my personal beliefs about what art is and how we can get better at it, as well as a few tips on getting your art into the public domain.

What is Art?

When we sit down and make a drawing, painting or sculpture, do we have the right to call it art? What about if we bake a cake, or knit a sweater? In my view, the answer is yes. Art is simply creative expression and I firmly believe that every single person has the right to express himself or herself creatively, by engaging in a joyous process of giving form to something that previously did not exist. From this, it follows that art is not just paint on canvas or clay on wire frame. Creative expression belongs to every area of life. When we as individuals feel that our minds and our hearts are engaged in a process of making something new that involves our personal tastes and choices, then I believe we are experiencing an artistic process.

Not surprising, then, that I see art in all areas of human endeavor. An engineer engrossed in designing a racing car engine, or a mathematician joyously working out new equations, a home-maker lovingly putting



"From my Country"
by Maryam Al Zadjali

Acrylic on Canvas
145 x 200 cm
1500 OMR

together a delicious dinner for her family, are artists in their own right. I believe all of us have the ability and the right to express our creativity in whatever ways our particular aptitudes direct us. The key condition is that we do it with passion.

What makes art good?

Turning to traditional art, and more specifically to visual art, it is important to understand what makes art good. Within the above description of art being defined simply as any manner of creative expression, there will no doubt be a range of natural talents and abilities. If we accept that art is essential to human contentment and growth, at this most basic level it does not

matter whether or not it is good art or bad art. The importance is in the doing — it makes us better human beings.

So when does art have to be good? The quality of art matters in the art world, that is, in galleries and museums, as well as auction houses and private collections. A primary function of galleries and museums is to filter the quality of artists and their works. They are the institutional measuring stick of the quality of art. Galleries have the tricky job of selecting art for the public domain, setting the price and speculating on the potential of an artist, whereas museums have an anthropological and ethical obligation to house and showcase 'good' art for future generations to appreciate.

How do galleries and museums determine the quality of art?

Art experts can quickly discern levels of professionalism and excellence by an artist's command of technical skill in their chosen medium and their ability to communicate a worthwhile message from their internal place of emotions, sentiments and desires. Skill and technical knowledge can never be secondary to the intended message. Anyone who wants to



If we accept that art is essential to human contentment and growth, at this most basic level it does not matter whether or not it is good art or bad art



No great artist sees things as they really are, for if he did, he would cease to become an artist

be considered a real artist must have a proper understanding of his or her tools. A painter, for example, must be able to use paints, brushes, brush strokes and canvases in a skillful way, and like learning any skill, this requires a lot of practice.

While an aspiring artist is working on developing technical skills, it is also important that they be emotionally involved with the subject in order to foster their own personal style, regardless of what the subject matter is. If you attend an art class and the assignment is to paint a bowl of peaches, it is guaranteed that everyone's bowl of peaches will look different, and not just as a result of varying degrees of technical competence. Each person brings to their work their own personal set of feelings, emotions and perceptions. As the Irish playwright and aesthete Oscar Wilde once wisely said: "No great artist sees things as they really are, for if he did, he would cease to become an artist."

For artists who have not mastered the tools of their trade, then art courses and workshops are a must. One of the most important suggestions I can make to aspiring or blocked artists, as well as working artists who did not attend a fine arts academic program, is to find the time to study art history.

Not only is it a very interesting and enjoyable subject, studying the works of important artists from the past, in particular the techniques they used, will broaden your technical vocabulary and expand your notions of what is possible in your art. This is a well-recognized way to help your work become more mature.

How much to charge for your art?

When an emerging artist has reached a good level of technical and creative accomplishment and of self-confidence, they should naturally find ways to show their work to the public. Then arises the question of how much to charge for a piece of work? This question of pricing artworks is an issue that worries not only art directors such as myself, but also artists and art lovers too. Galleries need a steady turnover of sales in order to be commercially viable, artists need to see a healthy return on their huge investments in time and effort and members of the art-loving public want to be able to own and enjoy good art.

Maryam Al Zadjali, who is Director of the Omani Society for Fine Arts and a widely respected painter, is a fine

example of a very accomplished artist who charges very modestly for her work. After noticing that every single painting in her recent exhibition at Gallery Sarah had sold within a few days of the opening, I approached Maryam and asked her why she charged so little for her work. Her answer was very refreshing.

"I want people to have my art," she said emphatically. "My art is for people to enjoy and frankly I don't care that much about the money."

"But you are an art mentor in Oman," I said. "That naturally means other artists look to you for guidance on pricing. Do you not think you are undervaluing your work and forcing other artists to do the same?"

"No," she said. "My artwork is for people to enjoy. If I charge a high price, then people who appreciate my work may be unable to buy it." As a result of this exchange, Maryam and I decided to co-host a pricing workshop for artists in May. It promises to be a lively discussion, so I hope many of you will join us.

As I continue with my observations of the art scene in Muscat, I sincerely hope any artist working in Oman will feel comfortable in coming to me, or any of the other art directors in Muscat, for guidance and support. After all, we are here for you.

OMANI LIFESTYLES

Traditions trail on

A road in eastern Oman that seems to lead to nowhere, but the nothingness of the expanse *Rachael MacIver* passes through reveals a deeper tale of Oman's coastal Bedouin traditions and their love of both the Sultanate's land and sea

Text by Rachael MacIver
Photograph by Ahmed Al Harthy

I leave my car engine running while I stop to read the sign post by the side of the road in Sharqiyah, on Oman's eastern coast. I'm sure that every tourist and expat traveller on this route before me has done the same. The sign stands like a guard at the start of 'the new road', as locals refer to it, and it announces that the road will eventually connect with Sur, but that it is still under construction and therefore not open yet, or words to that effect.

Nothing could be further from the truth, but unfortunately the sign stops a lot of people from ever finding this out for themselves, as they relent and turn their cars back, despite the road having been open for more than 3 years. Knowing this, I nod at the metal sentinel and enter unknown territory.

The road is perfectly smooth with its un-spoilt tarmac and a pleasure to cruise along. The first stretch follows the very edge of the desert, offering a spectacular view of the sand dunes that have drifted from Wahiba Sands and come here to rest for now. The topography changes from week to week as the wind changes the shape of the dunes. When blustery, the sand will spill onto the road and make driving hazardous. It is a landscape unlike any other and it is fascinating to watch how the desert gently meets the Arabian Sea. It makes for a visual last frontier between the Arabian Peninsula and the lands of East Asia and India that lie across the water.

To say the road was crowded would be a huge exaggeration — to say it was

It makes for a
visual last frontier
between the
Arabian Peninsula
and the lands of
East Asia

empty would be a lie. Soon it became clear that it was mostly a certain category of vehicles passing or overtaking at great speed; a steady stream of Toyota pickup trucks of various ages and conditions, with enormous cool boxes strapped onto the flatbed at the back. These are the vehicles of choice for Bedouins and fishermen, who are not on their way camping, but rather on their way to pick up fresh fish straight from the boats or in a rush to deliver their cargo to buyers inland. They head for vast stretches of the Oman coast, the winter homes of the coastal Bedouins, or bedus as they are known here.

Though sparsely populated, the coastline still shows signs that this unique lifestyle deeply ingrained in the culture of the population still survives. Seasonal settlements, scattered like giant camps, are used during the fishing season in the winter months, but vacated and deserted during summer when these fishermen join their nomadic cousins in market towns in the interior for date harvesting. This migratory lifestyle has given these coastal Bedouins the flexibility to follow work where it was to be found. Fishing in the winter when the waters are teeming with shoals of sardine and anchovy and date



“
The settlements
lay eerily deserted,
the silence broken
only by plastic covers
flapping in the wind
and the seagulls left
to catch their
own fish
”

picking inland in the summer. They have the best of both worlds.

From May, when the summer temperatures are scorching, humidity blankets the land and fierce winds can whip up without warning, fishing boats were pulled high up onto the beaches and the people upped sticks, goats, kettles and all. They set off towards towns like Sinaw and Adam where they would get well paid as seasonal workers during the date harvest. Nowadays, this journey continues by road.

The settlements lay eerily deserted, the silence broken

only by plastic covers flapping in the wind and the seagulls left to catch their own fish. A walk around the settlements showed the huts were locked up and the goat pens empty. Many huts are simple weather-beaten wooden structures without windows, although some inventive owners had painted neat windows directly on the walls, giving the hut a certain naïve child-like impression. The goat enclosures next to the huts were almost as large and roomy as the huts themselves. Heavy tree branches formed a circular wall, dark and cool for the goat kids, which needed to be separated from the mothers at an early stage to protect the precious supply of



fresh milk, vital for the bedus who used it for yoghurt making. People on the coast relied on herds of goats, sheep and camels for their meat and milk, important sources of protein. It was a perfect example of how the coastal communities had had to integrate fishing with other activities to survive this harsh environment.

Visit the settlements during the winter months and the picture runs a very different course. What was previously as quiet and dead as a lunchtime restaurant during Ramadan, was now a place full of life and vigor. Children run about, goats snatch anything edible from the rubbish containers, lorries loading fish and unloading blocks of ice, and the ever-present smell of drying fish. Women help their husbands by spreading out catch after catch of tiny anchovies, or the fatter sardines, on cloths to dry in the sun. Like a giant wall-to-wall carpet they lay there, their silver bellies gleaming in the sun. Once dry and crisp they would be sold at the markets for livestock feed or even exported to India and used as fertilizer. It seemed such a waste to harvest the sea just to harvest the land.

Historically settlements along the coast provided an important link between the camel caravans and the ships carrying frankincense from Dhofar to the main port of Qalhat close to here. From this point the golden nuggets would be shipped out to the rest of the world. The boats would stop at these small harbours along the way and unload frankincense destined for the souqs of big towns like Nizwa and Sinaw. The camel caravans would collect the goods and in return bring the fishermen supplies from the interior, items that would be hard to come by for the inhabitants of the coast. At the same time, caravans and passing ships would buy dried fish from the coastal Bedouins, who made a thieving business from this, especially the local delicacy, dried shark.

To this day, Nizwa *souq* still has a corner dedicated solely for dried shark vendors, and it remains an important commodity and source of income for the fishing communities on the coast. A piece of Omani heritage which has survived the march of time - and the long journey from the coast to the interior.

Today fish and shark are more likely to be picked up and taken to their buyers via pick-up truck and the fishing industry is now on a much larger scale than in times past, thanks to the introduction of high-tech fishing equipment. Yet, their lifestyles remain largely unchanged. The coastal Bedouins still live a migratory life and the white, new houses built by the government to house the fishermen that lie empty are proof of that.

I drove further along the new road and marveled at the landscape; it was beautiful but unrelenting and surely a tough place to live. Eventually I was greeted by a string of small fishing villages. These had long been connected with roads to Sur or inland towards Jalaan Bani Bu Hasan and Al Wafi, and emitted a sense of permanence with their solid houses, coffee shops and rusty petrol pumps. I had crossed an invisible border between two different lifestyles within a matter of kilometres.

As I pass the picturesque fishing harbours with their huge wooden boats and concrete bollards, I can't help but wonder how long the Bedouin settlements further south would remain now that the new road was here. How long before their simple winter dwellings and centuries old ways of life would be forgotten in favour of villas, credit cards and cafes.

Maybe there was a reason why the road sign at the beginning of the road was left there, I think, smiling. 'Still under construction - not quite ready yet.'



LESSER SPOTTED OMAN



Hasik opens up to the future

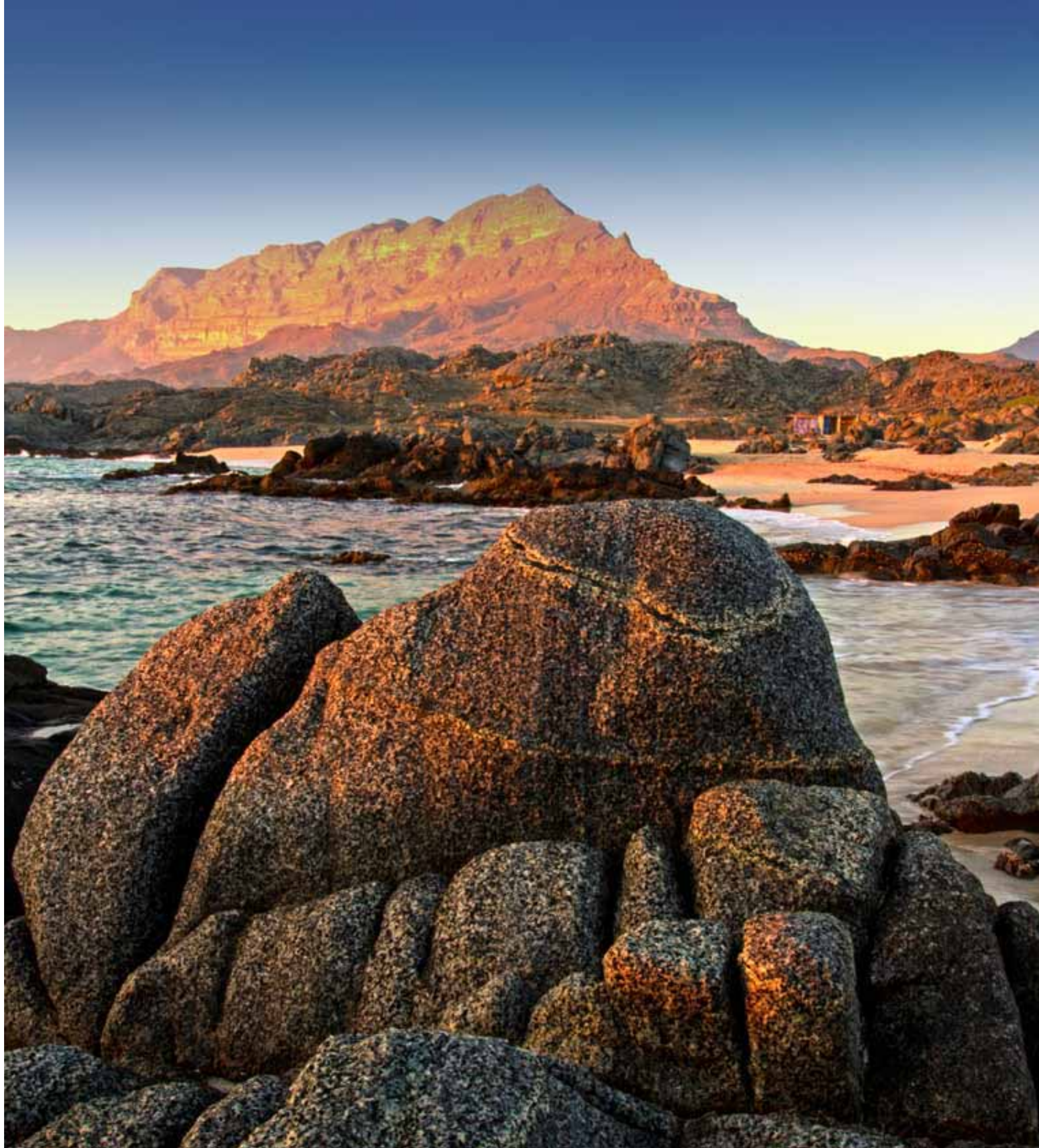
Text by Najah Al Riyami
Photographs by Ahmed Al Harthy

*Hasik, a small fishing village that lies on the Dhofar coast, is a place stuck between its age old past and the relative modernity of the nearby city of Salalah. **Najah Al Riyami** visits a group of local ladies who still collect molluscs of the coast of Hasik, what was once a prosperous trade and is now becoming a dying industry.*

It is 5.50am and the light is still dim, with just a few wisps of cloud hanging in the grey sky over Hasik. A lone woman makes her way between two rock faces, her sharp eyes gazing out towards the sea. Dressed in traditional clothing, long black pantaloons and a bright fuchsia garment that floats in the breeze, her face is almost completely covered by a mask. She balances a bundle over her head for easier carrying; a few belongings wrapped up in a colourful kanga cloth, which she will need for her endeavours in the shallow water. This is a walk she has taken many times, as her mother did before her, and as she hopes her children will do after her.

Reaching the shoreline, she squats beside a large rock that gives shade from the newly risen sun. “Qahwa?” she asks, holding out a coffee tumbler. I accept her offer and sit, asking where she has come from. “Min henak,” from there, she replies, pointing to the mountain behind us.

Today, Oudi is heading to the sea to collect rock oysters. The coastline here is blessed with such an abundance of this highly prized shellfish that the locals often add them to their biryanis, something unheard of in other parts of Oman. The rocks that emerge from the shallow tide are coated with the oysters. Crisp shoreline breaking into pock-marked rocks textured with layer upon layer of oyster shell growing between them. Oudi makes her way onto these rocks now and using a screwdriver, she breaks through the oysters’ rock shells one by one, putting the flesh into a plastic bucket.



While the majority of the incomes in Hasik come through fishing, a job left solely to men, women in Hasik also contribute to the local economy by collecting rock oysters, abalone and frankincense. But times are changing, and Hasik is beginning to a shift as people turn away from the sea and move to the city in search of work.

Villagers, mostly young people, are beginning to leave Hasik for the nearby city of Salalah when the tourist season picks up. During the peak monsoon season, tens of thousands of people from across the Gulf descend on Salalah to escape the summer heat. A massive new container shipping port also means that there are jobs aplenty in Salalah. The city could be something of a logistics hub for Africa, Europe and Asia in the near future, so employment prospects are good. Undoubtedly, there will be changes in the local customs and characteristics of Hasik as things develop in Dhofar over the next few years. The sea, which has provided a livelihood for villagers for countless generations, will undoubtedly change, too.

Overfishing has already led to some species of fish becoming endangered. With modern nets, larger boats and an increased population in the country, fishing is becoming an increasingly difficult industry and it is seeing the ever resilient villagers turning to new ways to make a living.

Abalone, a mollusc that fetches high prices on the market, once thrived in the waters of Hasik between October and



December. Oudi recalls how her older sister had taught her how to dive fifteen years earlier. Using a simple snorkel-mask, she was able to dive down three meters to collect these shellfish. There were times when she would go diving in groups of up to fifty women at the start of the season. These first days in October would always bring in the biggest catches. The abalone would be collected by the local fishermen and eventually distributed for international export, reaching markets in Dubai, Hong Kong and China. A good catch could see them get as much as 7000 rials, with each kilo selling for anywhere between 50 to 60 rials to traders.

The numbers of abalone caught has decreased exponentially in recent times, to the extent that between the years of 2008 and 2010, fishing for them was banned in the hope that it would help the abalone recover. While this resulted in a better

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Hasik is an embryo still in the making. It is an echo of the future falling onto the old shadows of the village

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catch in 2011, these numbers were back down by 2012. Today, the abalone season is only one month long rather than two and the numbers caught are nowhere near what they used to be.

Oudi is ending her day with her collection of seashells and returns home before sunset. The small village of Hasik with its crumbling houses and over-patched windows sits along a dusty potholed road. The old village looks as if it has been unnoticed for generations, hidden within the shadows of the mountains. It stands low and humble, embracing the salt-breeze from the nearby ocean that is barely visible beyond

the dust cloud from a nearby construction site which has the skeletons of modern homes that will soon house the residents of the village.

The new Hasik looks as though it will span a much bigger dimension than its old counterpart and is something of a metaphor for this changing world. This is the future of Hasik. New roads and rows of identical houses all line the clean, freshly tarmacked road that shines crystal and granite beneath the sun. New pavements frame their sides and the houses look gigantic in comparison to the single-level huts of the old village; these are two-storied modern masterpieces painted cream, decorated with wide windows and overlooking the great mountains beyond. It looks like a different world has arrived and Hasik has finally caught up with the fast-paced world outside it.

For now, despite its old age, Hasik is an embryo still in the making. It is an echo of the future falling onto the old shadows of the village. The rows upon rows of modern homes are empty, waiting patiently for their new occupants. Soon, the people of Hasik will move and the old houses that have been their homes for generations will become empty and fall apart like so many ruins in Oman. How will the dimensions change in Hasik, Oudi muses, and will her children still understand the ocean in a way that she does? Or will this new generation emerge with a new understanding of the world, welcoming their new life in place of the old and take their village to a new age of technology, commerce and prosperity?

HISTORY



MUSCAT TOM

Text and Photographs
by Clive Gracey

From the time when the forces of Imam Sultan bin Saif Al Ya'arubi (ruled 1649-1688) evicted the Portuguese from the coast of Oman in 1650, until the mid-19th Century when steam ships took over much of the trade of the Indian Ocean and Arabian Gulf, Muscat served

as an important victualing port for foreign vessels engaging in the Indian Ocean monsoon trade. Reports from captains and sailors operating in the Gulf and Indian Ocean frequently make reference to the popularity of Muscat as a stop-off point for ships' crews, owing to the ready availability of fresh water, the

abundance of reasonably priced fresh produce from the interior for sale in the bazaars, and for the locals' open and welcoming attitude towards foreigners. Not surprising, then, that quite a number of foreign visitors from the educated classes, often visiting officers, diplomats and officials, felt impelled to write

“*‘Muscat Tom,’
a finback whale
who inhabited
the waters in and
around Muscat
harbor during the
middle decades of
the 19th century.*”

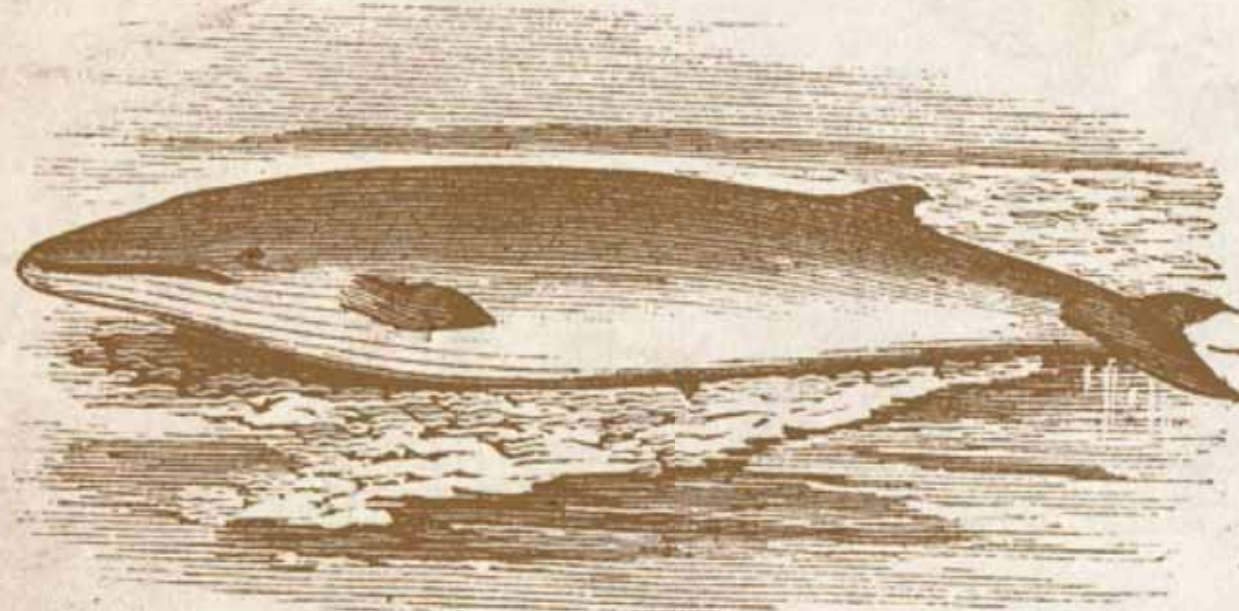
accounts of their brief visits to Muscat and its environs, offering descriptions of the architecture of Muscat and Mutrah, their bazaars and traders, the local fishermen and their practices, and the rulers of Oman and their courts. Even now, these eyewitness accounts make for fascinating reading and provide valuable source material for anyone wishing to learn about Oman in times past.

One particular resident of Muscat mentioned in these historical accounts was ‘Muscat Tom,’ a finback whale who inhabited the waters in and around Muscat harbor during the middle decades of the 19th century. He was not only greatly loved by the natives of the city during the many years he lived there, but was also

highly respected by the crews and passengers of visiting ships. The earliest mention of Muscat Tom is by Edmund Roberts, the first American Emissary to the Eastern courts of Cochin, China, Siam, and Muscat, who was instrumental in forging the first trade agreement between the USA and Oman. His sloop-of-war the USS Peacock, a single cannon naval ship, docked at Muscat harbour in September 1833 and despite the fact that “perspiration poured from [his] body like rain”, Roberts spent a good deal of time exploring Muscat and Mutrah and later writing detailed and colourful accounts of the city and its inhabitants. It was during this visit that he became acquainted with Muscat Tom, who accompanied the Peacock as it entered the harbour, flying



Formerly the cove was much infested with sharks, so that no person would venture into the water; but after he took possession, it was freed entirely from these pests



and incumbrances of their household, to the great joy of the land-animals, who again paid them frequent visits.”

The finback, more commonly referred to as the fin whale, is the second largest living mammal after the blue whale. In place of teeth, the fin whale has long baleen plates, which it uses to filter small and medium-sized fish from great mouthfuls of seawater. Roberts’ provides an interesting account of Tom and his mate dining upon the abundant shoals of fish in Muscat Harbour: “Hourly the happy pair may be seen moving along very lovingly together cheek by jowl, occasionally sinking to the bottom . . . they are now seen rising with great swiftness perpendicularly half their length out of the water, and with wide expanded jaws, catching all that comes within the vortex, filling the enormous sack under their throats full to overflowing; and thereby they suck in no small advantage.”

Although fin whales do not prey on larger sea creatures, they have been observed aggressively nose-butting sharks, which they rightly perceive as a threat to their calves.

Despite its cumbersome size, the fin whale is one of the fastest and most elegant sea creatures and capable of speeds of 37km/h in short bursts, which is why some maritime travellers refer to them as the ‘greyhounds of the sea’. As Roberts observes, “Whenever the water is too shallow to rise in this manner, they dash forward with the rapidity of lightening, making a great breach, their ponderous body being thrown frequently entirely out of the water. Many fishermen follow them to catch the fish that they kill, but do not swallow; and by these means obtain during the day a great number.”

From time to time, the whales’ excitement when chasing schools of fish in the

harbour waters was such as to unintentionally upset some of the nearby boats. “However, as no offence was intended, an apology was deemed wholly unnecessary, and the natives acted a very wise part by not showing a useless resentment to their benefactors,” Roberts says. Fin whales still collide with ships fairly frequently, and although it is a dreaded experience for sailors, it is often the whales that come out the worst off.

More than a decade after Robert’s last visit to Muscat - he died and was buried at sea not long after leaving Muscat in 1834 - Muscat Tom caught the attention of another American visitor, Joseph Barlow Felt Osgood, who recorded his impressions in his Recollections of Majunga, Zanzibar, Muscat, Aden, Mocha and other Eastern Ports, written in 1845. “No visitor to the harbour is better welcomed by the natives than ‘Muscat Tom’,” he recalls. “This

under the bows and stern of the ship.

Roberts, who returned to Muscat in 1834 to ratify the treaty he had negotiated with the ruler of Oman, the Imam Seyyid Said bin Sultan Al Busaidi (ruled 1807-1856), wrote: “The male has been a daily visitor in this harbour for upward of twenty years, and goes by the name of Muscat Tom. Formerly the cove was much infested with sharks, so that no person would venture into the water; but after he took possession, it was freed

entirely from these pests, these sea-manduleens (mandarins), as the Chinese fishermen call them, in derision of the all-grasping land mandarins.”

Muscat Tom’s continued presence in Muscat Cove proved a reassurance for Omani fishermen and those wishing to take a sea bath. A few years before the account was written, the finback whale was missing from the area for several days, during which time the sharks not only returned and “banqueted upon his larder,

which was filled with a great variety of fine fish, but actually invited and sore pressed some of the land bipeds to follow them; as they are as equally pleased with flesh as with fish, the consequence was, the natives refused to join any other jamb or crush of the usurpers, and took a great dislike to aquatic parties.” To the relief of locals and visiting mariners, Tom duly returned with a mate and “brought her under his fin, and ‘she was a helpmeet unto him’ and together they made a clean sweep of all the pests



*Tom's value
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sharks ensured
that strenuous
efforts were
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fishermen not to
interfere with his
daily activities*



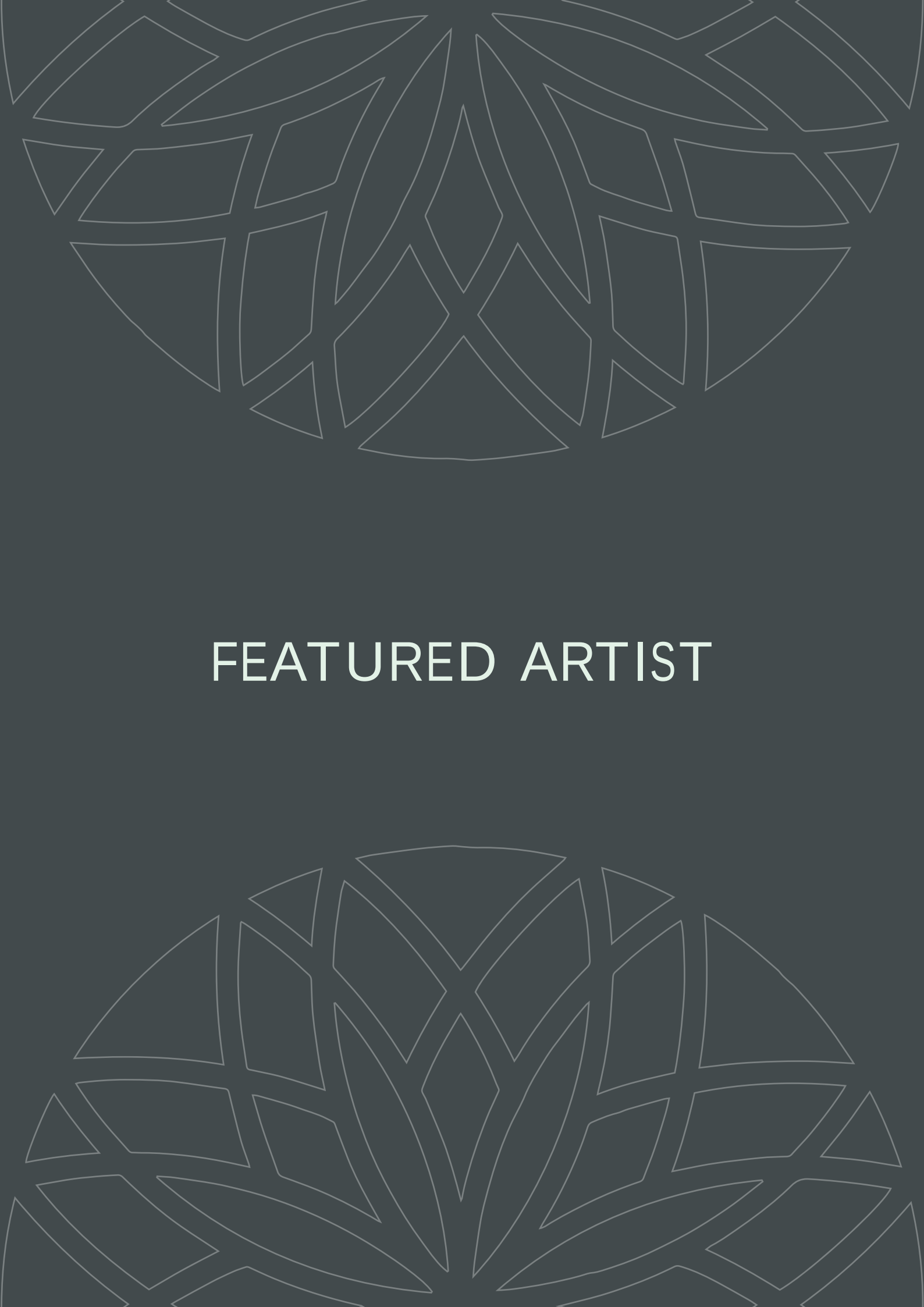
name has been given by sailors to a male fin-back whale which has made a habitual practice for over forty years to enter, feed and frolic about the cove several hours in each day, always leaving before night. Sometimes a smaller member of his tribe, supposed to be a female, accompanies him. His length may be not less than seventy feet and that of his companion fifty feet."

Tom's value in warding off sharks ensured that strenuous efforts were made by local fishermen not to interfere with his daily activities. Osgood, reports, "He shows no fear of such vessels as trespass upon his watery field. One day as he came rolling leisurely and jollily alongside a vessel at anchor in the harbor, and on board of which I was, one of the crew threw with considerable impetus a stick of wood into his open mouth as he raised his huge head out of the water. This breach of good treatment which he had been wont to receive did not draw any sign of displeasure from his whaleship, although

more than one malediction was bestowed upon the imprudent tar by exasperated natives who had observed his censurable conduct."

From Osgood's observation that the whale had been a frequent visitor to Muscat Cove for 40 years prior to his visit, we may assume that Muscat Tom was a mature adult whale. Male and female fin whales look almost identical, though adult females are between 5 and 10 per cent larger than adult males, reaching up to 27 metres in length and weighing some 70,000 kg. So if Roberts and Osgood's statements that Muscat Tom was male were based on the fact that he was the larger of the two whales they saw, then it is possible that Muscat Tom may in fact have been female. Both male and female fin whales have a lifespan of up to 90 years, so perhaps Muscat Tom continued to keep the city's cove free from sharks for many more years, and in so doing, no doubt continued to earn the good favour of the residents of Muscat.

FEATURED ARTIST





A H M E D   A L   H A R T H Y



My interest in photography started in 2003, when I bought my first semi-professional camera. Suddenly my eyes were opened to the natural beauty surrounding me. My passion grew stronger and my desire to explore more of this beautiful land drove my photographic development. A series of trips to far-flung locations in Oman, with camera always in my hand, resulted in an ever-growing series of adventures and a deeper passion to explore what lies beyond the lens.

At the beginning of 2010, I started social networking and was surprised when I received my first request for a print from a complete stranger who had stumbled upon my website. Thus, a serious hobby began to transform into a profession that drove me to keep up to date with latest technical advances in photography and the never ending search for the latest modern tools. Over the years, I explored the exquisiteness that lies within my own country and finally came to realize that it was time to share these shots with a wider audience

in order that they may appreciate the beauty Oman has to offer. My love and passion for nature led me to chose landscapes as my main photographic interest.

In 2012, I decided to turn my passion into a business, not only with a view to sharing my photos and experience with others, but also to make my own contribution to the art market in Oman. And so MuscArt was born.

ahmed.alharthy-photography.com
www.muscart.net