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The past masters

Trish Lorenz

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In today's fast-moving Dubai, the old Emirati crafts are often dismissed as irrelevant. But a new generation of designers is turning this rich tradition into very modern pieces



Khalid Shafar seated on his 'Octa' bench beneath 'Palm' lights

Hugging the coast of the Arabian Sea, the city of Dubai sits perched on the edge of a vast sandy desert, its climate hot, dry and inhospitable. For centuries, the surrounding area was home to nomadic people who survived in one of the harshest environments on the planet and built a rich, distinct culture of crafts to make the most of the desert's scarce materials.

Khalid Shafar is one of the United Arab Emirates' most established contemporary designers, and is based in Dubai. "Emirati crafts are different to those in north Africa and the Levant because of geography and culture," he says. "We were a tribal and nomadic people in a desert area and that meant our crafts were connected to living and survival and had to be easily movable. What people traditionally think of as Middle Eastern design doesn't relate to

us; there are only very minor similarities between the Gulf and the rest of the Middle East."

Aljoud Lootah, another Dubai-based Emirati designer, agrees. "Traditional Emirati crafts reflect the deep bond that existed between local people and their surrounding environments. Despite a lack of resources, people managed to invent tools to help them withstand the harsh living conditions and also to add an aesthetic touch to their daily lives."

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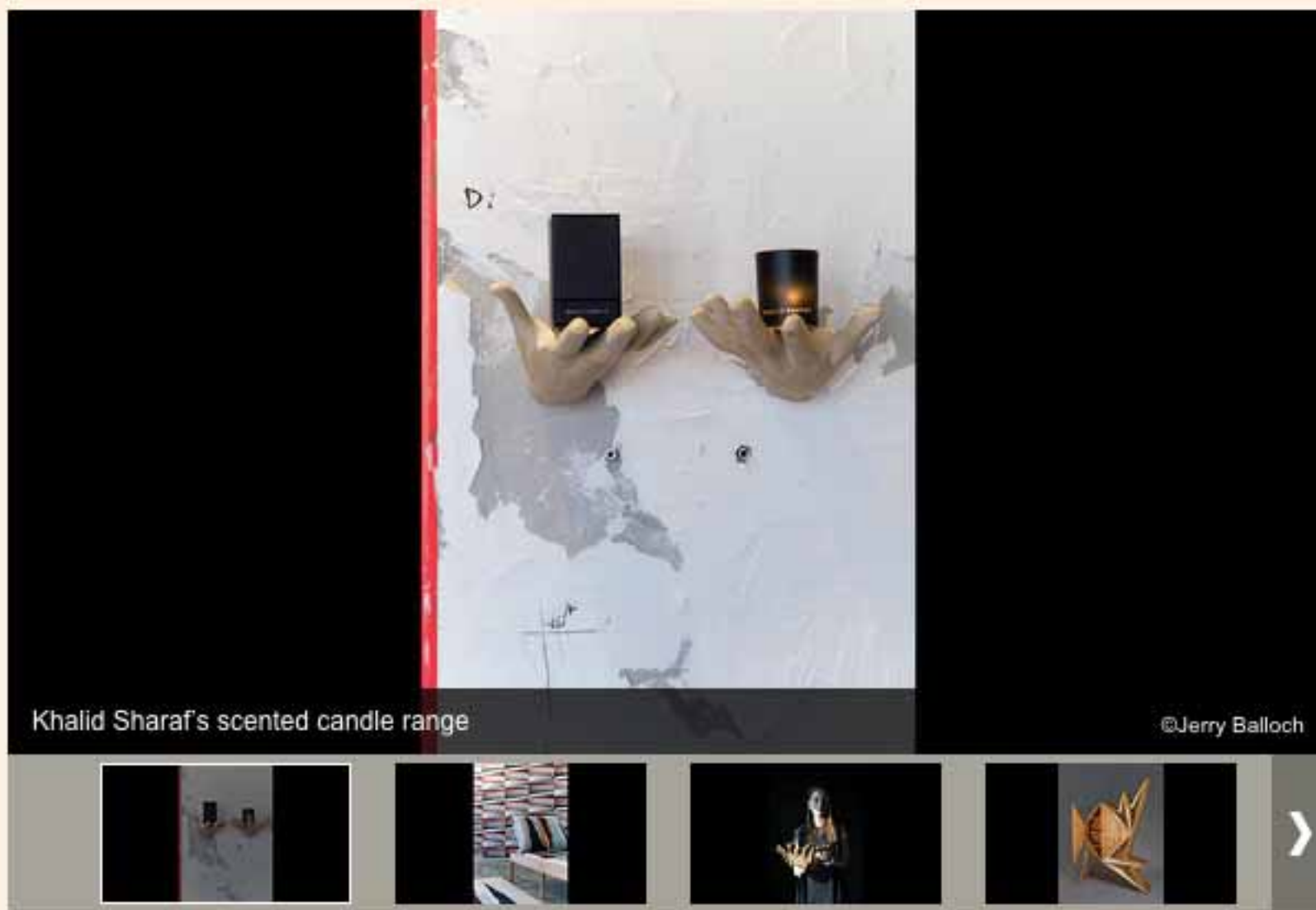
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Traditional crafts in the region included weaving palm fronds to make baskets, mats and other household accessories, a skill known as khous. Sadu is another local weaving technique, which uses wool to make tent furnishings and accessories for camels and horses. Palm trees were used in architecture, as were sand and coral stone. The distinctive dhow, a trading and fishing boat, emerged from the region, as did fishing nets called yarroof, specifically designed for shore fishing. Turmeric, saffron and henna were used as dyes for clothes.

But the discovery of oil in 1966 transformed Dubai's culture in a dramatic sweep. Today, the city is a place of soaring steel and glass skyscrapers, glitzy hotels and luxury retailers. In this process of rapid development, heritage crafts came to be seen as a symbol of the past and were largely discarded in the pursuit of a more modern lifestyle.

Khalid Mezaina is project co-ordinator at Tashkeel, an organisation that supports emerging Emirati designers and links them with craftsmen and manufacturers. "Post oil, traditional crafts were marginalised. They were generally associated with a gimmicky, heritage village-style presentation and had no contemporary relevance," he says.

Artist and designer Zeinab al-Hashemi agrees. "For a long time people weren't curious to learn about traditional crafts or develop them. We are a young country and people wanted to catch up with the rest of the world, and these important skills were put aside to be looked at as purely heritage."

That is beginning to change. Contemporary design is emerging as a force within the region: the 21 million sq ft Dubai Design District, known as d3, launched this year; the Design Days Dubai fair saw its fourth edition in March and, according to its director Cyril Zammit, 50 per cent of the 90 exhibitors were from the Middle East, of which 20 per cent were Emirati-based.

“ We were a tribal and nomadic people in a desert area ... That meant our crafts were connected to living and survival ”

- Khalid Shafar

Many of these local designers are beginning to ask questions around local aesthetics and identity. “In the last few years we have begun to see contemporary designers who want to understand traditional crafts and reinterpret them in a more contemporary way,” says Mezaina.

Al-Hashemi is one of them. She creates public artworks using traditional crafts such as palm rope-making, and also works with local materials. Her collection of modular rugs made of camel leather and sand is called “Sanam”,

Arabic for camel hump, and is inspired by the experience of sitting on sand dunes. The design incorporates the versatility typical of nomadic peoples: rugs can be used both indoors and out, as throws or for seating.

“I see it as my responsibility to bring traditional crafts into the present by including them in my work,” says al-Hashemi.

Architect Talin Hazbar is Syrian-born but has lived most of her life in the UAE. She is collaborating with another young local designer, Latifa Saeed, and the duo are working with local potters, reinterpreting traditional clay pots to create lighting pieces. “People throughout the region are revisiting traditional crafts. It’s about exploring techniques and thinking about how to use them in a contemporary way,” she says.

Hazbar believes that initiatives such as Dubai Design Week are changing perceptions of heritage craft and its role in modern lives. The event’s organisers have commissioned more than a dozen permanent installations for public spaces in Dubai — including a piece by Hazbar and Saeed that will be on show at the city’s Meraas Beach.



Fashion designer Khulood Thani

“We’re now seeing craft pieces being used in very luxurious settings, including the lobbies of five-star hotels,” says Hazbar. “We’re exposing them to a different audience and also, socially, we’re starting to see people begin to value craft. People relate to it differently when they see it out of the traditional context.”

Lootah too is creating an installation for Meraas Beach — inspired by yarooof fishing techniques — and is experimenting with traditional crafts. Her next collection will combine camel leather with sadu weaving. “I’ve long been fascinated by sadu weaving and have been exploring the possibility of slightly changing its structure and

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“ I see it as my responsibility to bring crafts into the present ”

- Zeinab al-Hashemi

Shafar’s work also repurposes the traditions of the region for contemporary life. His “The Trap” bookshelf is based on the design of local fishing traps, while his “The Auction” table, which features a travertine marble top and cloth base, is inspired by the sack that salesmen used when they sold toys and household objects door to door.

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“The men used to call out ‘Auction, auction!’ as they came around the neighbourhood and then open up their sacks, and women would bargain for the things they wanted,” says Shafar. “These salesmen are not around any more, it’s a part of our history and culture that has disappeared and I wanted to tell the story of it. But I was also looking at the function of the traditional objects and looking to repurpose it in a way that works in modern lives.”

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Other designers are looking at what can be learnt from heritage crafts without necessarily employing traditional methods. Faysal Tabbarah is assistant professor of architecture at the American University of Sharjah and co-founder of Architecture + Other Things. His practice explores traditional vernacular structures, such as the palm-leaf houses that were used in the desert for summer living. “We’re not so interested in the palm frond as a material but more in its abstract possibilities — what forms does it give, what textures and how can we replicate that with modern materials.”

The group has designed a temporary structure called “Shelter O” made from recycled car tyres cut into strips to mimic the qualities of palm fronds. “Palm fronds are highly textural, porous and visually exuberant,” says Tabbarah. “We used tiles made from recycled tyres in a similar way to create Shelter O.”

“ For me, this is beyond a fashion piece — it is about communicating my own culture ”

- Khulood Thani

The heritage approach is also moving into fashion design. Khulood Thani is the founder of Dubai-based label Bint Thani. Her range includes colourful silk turbans and a ready-to-wear collection. “I take global themes and try to find a local identity within that. It’s about finding the essence of the UAE and incorporating it in bigger themes,” says Thani.

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Thani’s collections combine local materials such as camel leather with modern technology. For “Between the Dunes”, a dress inspired by the sand dunes that surround Dubai, she employed laser-cutting techniques, and has also experimented with 3D printing. “I use biodegradable camel leather to create unconventional accessories and created a semi-couture dress in laser-cut golden organza, shaping the desert dunes. For me, this is beyond a fashion piece — it is about communicating my own culture.”

Thani believes this trend to explore heritage is just beginning. “Dubai is building its own design identity. We are the first generation of designers to express our identity in a contemporary way,” she says.

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own design identity. We are the first generation of designers to express our identity in a contemporary way," she says.

Zammit too believes that this is just the first stage of design development in the region and says that, in a city renowned for its pace of growth, the sector will rapidly mature. "This generation of designers is looking to write its own story, to build narratives about Dubai, and naturally there is a strong link to traditional crafts," he says. "Designers here want to develop a 21st-century sensibility of their identity but at the same time they are embracing new technologies and new materials and I think in the future you'll see Dubai design identity evolve further."

Photographs: Jerry Balloch

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