

# Beirut to Baghdad

## communities, collecting and culture



18 June 2004 – 27 January 2005

This exhibition in the Australian Communities Gallery is part of the Wattan Project, initiated by the museum in 1998 to explore and document the experiences of Australia's Arabic community.

*Beirut to Baghdad* places the Powerhouse Museum's Western Asian collection in an historical and cultural context, viewing it from a local and Middle Eastern perspective.

Teachers and students can approach the exhibition in a number of ways:

1. as an insight into decorative objects from the Arab world
2. as an opportunity to hear the views of local Arabic community members
3. as an invitation to consider the wider issue of cultural representation.

### Syllabus links

The varied collection of objects, including costumes, textiles, ceramics, metalware and antiquities, together with a short film and 14 capsule video interviews with

Arab–Australians provide an integrated, engaging and contextual environment that encourages reflection, enquiry, experiential and collaborative learning.

The exhibition can be easily integrated into or adapted for the teaching and learning of the following KLAS or subjects.

### Stages 1 to 3

#### HSIE

- Strands and substrands
- Cultures — identities and cultural diversity
- Social systems and structures — roles, rights and responsibilities

#### Languages: Arabic

- Objective — moving between cultures

#### English

- Strands and substrands
- Talking and listening — skills and strategies, context and text
- Reading — reading and viewing texts, skills and strategies, context and text
- Writing — producing texts, context and text



## Creative Arts

- Art forms and substrands
- Visual arts — appreciating

## Stages 4 to 5 (2003 syllabuses)

### English

- Aim — to understand, appreciate, reflect on and enjoy the English language in a variety of texts and to shape meaning in ways that are imaginative, interpretive, critical and powerful.

### Languages: Arabic

- Objective — moving between cultures

### History

- Topic 1 of Stage 4 — Investigating History
- Topic 2 of Stage 4 — Societies and Civilisations of the Past

### Visual Art

- Objective — critically and historically interpret art

## Introduction

This exhibition creates a 'dialogue' between objects and people whose ancestral lands are Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq. It presents the personal stories and responses of Arab–Australian community members to objects collected by the Powerhouse Museum since the 1880s — from stone tools chipped 6000 years ago to clothing sewn in the 1940s.

## Cuneiform writing tablets



Cuneiform clay tablet from Larsa, Sumer (Iraq), about 1798 BCE.

Cuneiform is a picture writing that was used in Mesopotamia. The wedge-shaped script was written on a wet clay surface using long weeds.

- Look at the two clay tablets. What are the writings about?

## Druze silver



Druze silver: *tantur* (left) and detail (right), inscribed in Arabic 'made by Antoun the Lebanese', pressed silver.

The objects on display, purchased in 1887, are among the first acquired by the museum. The Druze consider themselves to be part of Islam but they also have traditions that are neither Muslim nor Christian. Find out more about the Druze people. Hear from Dr Mamdouh Matar, one of the community members interviewed in the video featured near the Druze silver display.

- Locate the *tantur* and find out how it is worn, refer to the picture showing a Druze Bride, Lebanon, 1880s.

## Clothing and textiles



Commonly called 'bath sandals', these stilted shoes were traditionally worn in Western Asia as bridal wear.

- Look at the coats and dress on display in this section. What material are they mostly made of? Yet, the everyday *abayeh*, man's coat, is made of wool, goat or camel hair. What are the possible reasons that most of the clothing that survived, and is displayed here, is made of silk?

## European dominance

With increasing Western economic dominance from the mid 19th century, European domestic furnishing, with a local twist, became fashionable among the Arab social elite. What evidence can you find from the picture, table and chair on display that demonstrates this phenomenon?

## Reflections on Orientalism



Bottle, porcelain, Crown Derby, England, 1884.

On the other hand, factories in Europe were producing products, such as the ceramics on display, to satisfy European demand for products evoking the 'Orient'. Look at the ceramics and identify the features that are 'Eastern' or 'Persian'. (Note: the gold writing on the vase is not Arabic; it is decorative.)

*'When I look at historical orientalist objects, I look from a political point of view — what was happening in the 1880s? Beauty was promotion of the exotic, as part of legitimising the colonial enterprise — you can locate the historical political framework of an orientalist object by knowing*

*how it was produced, who the buyers were, and how it ended up in the Powerhouse Museum.'*

— Paula Abood, community cultural development worker, featured in the video to the right of the ceramics display.

- What is your response to this? Discuss with your classmates. Find out more about the concept of 'Orientalism'.

## Reframing the collection

The exhibition includes videotaped interviews with 14 Arab–Australians. Their personal responses create a link between the community and the museum's collection and 'reframe' these historic objects.

### *Monitor 1, near the Druze silver*

- Martha Jabour, visual artist and community cultural worker, *3 minutes*
- Fatima A Killeen, visual artist, *2.5 minutes*
- Noor Al Bassit, year 12 student, *5 minutes*
- Kholoud Hamad, year 12 student, *3 minutes*
- Dr Mamdouh Matar, general practitioner, *4.5 minutes*

### *Monitor 2, near the ceramic tiles and coins*

- Naomi Abood, designer for Prestige Tiles, *3.5 minutes*
- Zeaneb Al Zaidi, year 12 student, *3.5 minutes*
- Loyal Naji, year 8 student, *5 minutes*
- Assad Abdi, writer, *4.5 minutes*

### *Monitor 3, in front of the panel, 'Reframing the collection'*

- Paula Abood, community and cultural development worker, *6 minutes*
- Ahmad Mishal, theatre director and actor, *5 minutes*
- Rokaia Jbeile, year 12 student, *4 minutes*
- Sally Harb, high-school teacher, *7 minutes*
- Nazem Irani, artist and sculptor, *6 minutes*

### *The large monitor, near the map of the Middle East*

- Calligraphy by Fatima A Killeen, *2 minutes*
- 'Revival of a museum: National Museum of Beirut', *13 minutes*

## Antiquities



Earthenware bottle and jar, from Ur in Iraq, about 540 BCE.

These objects were acquired by the museum through support of overseas excavation, donation, and purchase. There is increasing debate over the ethical issues relating to antiquities and their ownership.

*'It's surprising that some of the antiquities have been moved from place to place — most surprising is that there are objects from my own home town here — this is my own heritage — I have ambivalent feelings ... pride ... and hurt ... how have they been moved here? When I realised that they were from my home town of Ur, I felt a deep shock inside of me ...'*

— Ahmad Mishal, theatre director and actor, featured in the video to the left of the earthenware vessels display.

- *Ahmad* said he had ambivalent feelings, both pride and hurt. Why do you think this is the case?

## Stone tools and oil lamps

- Look at the collection of stone tools and oil lamps on display. How did the museum acquire the tools? Tell the story of one of the tools or lamps on display.

## Costume

The *thob* or woman's dress on display was made in Hebron, Palestine, about 1940.

*'In Jordan, when me and my Mum go somewhere and she sees a woman wearing an embroidered dress – old ladies in their 70s and 80s — my Mum says: 'She's from Nablus ... she's from Jenin ... she's from Khalil' — she knows from the embroidery ...'*

— Kholoud Hamad, year 12 student, featured in the video near the Druze silver display.

- Have you or anyone you know had an experience similar to Kholoud — the loss of part of your family's cultural identity? Discuss your experience with your group.

## Arabic language and calligraphy



In NSW, Arabic is the second most spoken language at home after English. Arabic is written from right to left.

See a demonstration of calligraphy by Fatima A Killeen, featured in the video to the left of the map.

## Coins



From the collection on display, find the coin shown in the picture above. Coins are said to be 'conscious and portable records of the past — featuring as they do, names, beliefs, dates, and places'. Find out about the history of this coin.

## Syrian wall tiles



Glazed earthenware tile from Damascus, Syria, about 1600.

- Find the Syrian tiles made in Damascus. Note the intricate design. Try to identify the motifs and symbols used on these tiles.

Each tile is a small part of a much bigger wall, taken out of its original context. In this way one tile carries the 'burden' of representing a bigger cultural picture'.

- Comment on this. Share your thoughts with your group.

## Extension activities and further resources

### Cuneiform writing

- Find out about the development of the cuneiform script.  
[http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/writing/home\\_set.html](http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/writing/home_set.html)

### Ownership of cultural property

This is a complex issue; the debate over the return of the Parthenon marbles is a well-known example.

- Visit the Greek government's webpage for their case  
<http://www.greece.org/parthenon/marbles/>
- and the British Museum's webpage for their view  
<http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/newsroom/current2003/parsculpt.htm>

What are the reasons for and against the return of the Parthenon marbles?

### Tomb 'raider' of the 1920s and 1930s

- Follow the expedition and excavation of the ancient Sumerian city of Ur, led by archaeologist, C Leonard Woolley from 1922 to 1934. Also play an online version of the royal game Ur.  
[http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/tombs/home\\_set.html](http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/tombs/home_set.html)

### Please note

The websites referred to in these notes were available and suitable at the time of publication. We advise teachers to check sites before recommending them to students.

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**For more information on the exhibition**  
*Beirut to Baghdad: communities, collecting and culture,*  
visit the Powerhouse Museum's website  
<http://www.powerhousemuseum.com>

For more information about education support or your booking, contact Education and Visitor Services at the Powerhouse Museum:  
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