

## CRAFT TRADITIONS OF THE DESERT, OASIS, AND SEA

MARCIA STEGATH DORR AND NEIL RICHARDSON

[66]

**C**raft industries have been a defining element of Omani cultural heritage for more than 5,000 years. In towns, villages, and desert camps throughout the country, craftsmen and craftswomen continue to link the cultural past with the present. Their crafts express national identity and endow Oman with an unparalleled living heritage.

Oman's craft traditions have evolved to meet utilitarian needs, but combine the most basic of these—food, water, shelter, and safety—with the innate human desire for self-expression through personal adornment and artistry. The traditions have been further shaped by harsh climatic conditions, particularly the scarcity of water, which has had a strong overall influence on lifestyles, economic development, and settlement patterns in a varied landscape that includes desert, oasis, and sea.



PHOTO BY/COURTESY MOHAMMED AL ZUBAIR

### VOICES OF THE DESERT

For the Bedouin tribes of Oman's desert regions, survival has depended on adaptation to an untamed environment. The nomads' proficiency in utilizing scarce natural resources to satisfy the needs for shelter, food, and nomadic equipment has enabled them to thrive in the arid lands.

The defining characteristic of Bedouin craftsmanship is portability. A decision to move may come suddenly, as news is received about better pasturage or an important tribal event. It may also be precipitated by seasonal occurrences such as the ripening of dates in oasis towns or the running of sardines along the desert coast. Tools and equipment are few in number, light in weight, resistant to breakage, and easily packed and transported to a different location.

Men and boys, responsible for the welfare of camel herds, work together to load them for travel or to fit them out for races and celebratory events. The making of camel trappings is a group endeavor, with as many as four men required for the braiding of a heavy loading strap.

Women and girls also work in groups, some minding children and goats, others churning milk, and still others engaged in spinning, weaving, or embroidery. Weaving is a particularly convivial activity. Several women may work together to spin or dye wool for a single weaving, their work accompanied by the hubbub inevitably associated with young children. Visitors come and go frequently throughout the day and may often be seen helping with the tasseling of a camel rug or saddlebag while drinking coffee and discussing the latest news.

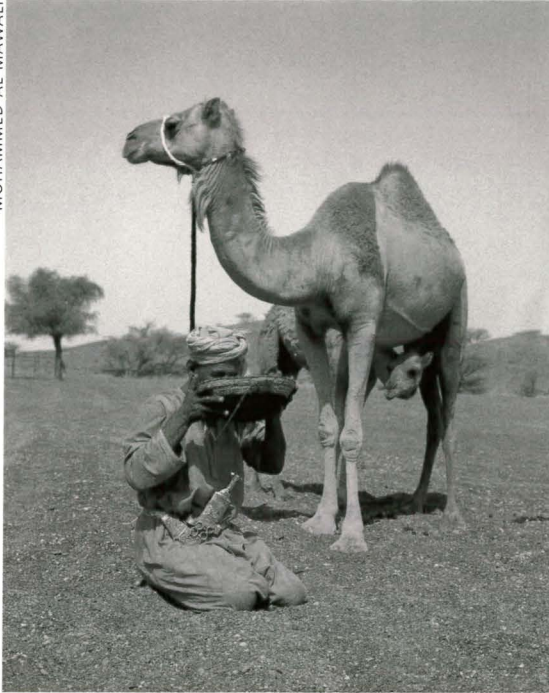
Bedouin craftsmanship combines utility with a strong sense of self-expression. The intricate geometric designs on rugs, bags, and trappings reveal patterns of daily life in the

The shop of a silver and antiques dealer in Mutrah souk (marketplace) is a storehouse of treasures including *khanjars* and jewelry.









The coiled, leather-covered basket used by desert dwellers for milking camels is lightweight and unbreakable, typifying the requirement for portability that underlies all Bedouin craftsmanship.



Young girls from a Bedouin family work together to braid the ends of a rug woven by their mother.

desert and display the weavers' ingenuity in depicting the world around them. Sources of inspiration for designs include spindles and other weaving tools, kohl containers, combs, goats, lizards, bird tracks, and the camel itself; most have been passed down from mother to daughter for untold centuries. Other designs, such as scissors and helicopters, are evidence of creative invention by new generations of weavers and illustrate the dynamic nature of crafts as a vehicle for expression.

On the fringes of the desert are bustling oasis towns where Bedouin lifestyle overlaps with that of settled communities. Despite their allegiance to the desert, Oman's Bedouin communities do, of necessity, maintain strong links to these towns. They make periodic visits to sell livestock, tribal rugs and trappings, desert-palm basketry and other Bedouin products, and to purchase the work of market-based silver- and coppersmiths, silk weavers, embroiderers and other town-dwelling artisans, many of whom cater specifically to a Bedouin clientele.

#### DATE PALMS AND SOUKS:

##### OASIS TOWNS OF THE INTERIOR

Oasis town settlements bring life and an unexpected tableau of green to a landscape that is otherwise desolate and brown. The largest of these towns are characterized by elaborate systems of defense that incorporate watchtowers, perimeter walls, fortified gates, and massive, multi-towered fortresses. These protect inhabitants and the sources of water vital to settlement and the extensive cultivation of date palms.

The date palm is, without question, the most versatile of Oman's natural resources, and for good reason it is known throughout the Arab world as the "tree of life." Beyond its obvious value as a provider of food, shelter, and fuel, it is the greatest source of craft material in the country. It has useful applications in seafaring, fishing, farming, herding, trading, and general housekeeping.

Virtually every part of the date palm is utilized by artisans. Leaflets are plaited into



long strips and joined to make mats, baskets, and food covers. Fibrous material found at the base of fronds is plied into rope and used to cushion loads on donkeys and camels. The central ribs of fronds are made into clothing fumigators or bird traps, or are lashed together to form panels for constructing dwellings, workshops, and livestock enclosures. Date stalks are split and made into rigid containers, while the dates themselves are added to indigo dye vats and leather tanning solutions. Sharp spines projecting from the sides of fronds are used as needles by embroiderers. Trunk sections are hollowed out to make cattle troughs, mortars, and beehives, or cut lengthwise into quarters and used as ceiling beams. Any surplus material can be used by potters for firing pottery.

A focus of most oasis towns is the souk (marketplace), which serves as a base for both the production and marketing of crafts. Carpenters, silversmiths, coppersmiths, and blacksmiths typically have permanent workshops within the souk itself, while leather crafters set up temporary sunshades under which they work and offer leather goods for sale. The indigo dyers of Bahla, among the last in the Arab world to use natural indigo, continue to work in traditional workshops with large dyeing vats set into earthen floors and dyed fabric drying on the rooftops. Souk-based crafts are characterized by a high degree of specialization and are typically learned through apprenticeship. Those artisans who work outside the souk—potters, basket makers, weavers of camel and donkey trappings, and rose-water producers—sell their finished goods in the souk directly or through middlemen.

Artisanal communities in oasis towns depend upon and support each other. For instance, leather tanners and indigo dyers use earthenware vats made by potters. Large copper cauldrons are used for making *halwa*, which is packaged in palm baskets, and also for distilling rose water, which is collected in other copper vessels and poured from highly ornate silver sprinklers. The workshops of carpenters, silversmiths, and potters abound with palm-frond mats and hand-forged iron tools, creating webs of exchange among craftspeople that help maintain the viability of traditional artisanry in oasis towns.

The date palm is, without question, the most versatile of Oman's natural resources, and for good reason it is known throughout the Arab world as the "tree of life."

[69]



MOHAMMED AL MAWALI



## COASTAL CRAFTSMANSHIP AND GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

[70] Oman's seafaring heritage is legendary, and boat building—perhaps more than any other craft industry—has had a fundamental impact on the course of Omani history. The earliest written reference to the country, recorded on Akkadian clay tablets dating to 2520 BCE, pertains to maritime trade and the emergence of Oman (then known as “Magan”) as one of the world's first seafaring nations. Based on the export of copper from the north and frankincense from the south, early trade activity was a major catalyst for advances in boat-building technology. From these early times, Oman's boat-building industry grew as part of a regional development of seafaring capability throughout the Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean, a development characterized by transfers of technology and trade in wood and other raw materials.

Oman's early boat-building traditions have been perpetuated in Musandam, where the sterns and bows of double-ended vessels

continue to be stitched together with palm-fiber rope and decorated with goatskins and cowry shells. Boat yards in the coastal entrepôt of Sur also remain active, with traditional boat builders receiving commissions for vessels with the elegant transoms favored by local fishermen. Virtually all of the tools and equipment used are of extremely ancient lineage. Among the most important of these are the adze and the bow-drill.

Oman's port cities have a history rich in seafaring tradition. For centuries, dhows set sail from Sur, Suhar, and Muscat fully laden with merchandise from Oman—dried fish, dates, limes, copper, frankincense, horses, skins, honey, and pomegranates—as well as Gulf pearls and Yemeni coffee. In the 18th century, more than 60 percent of the total Gulf trade and half the produce of Yemen passed through Omani ports. In return, traders brought commodities that were in short supply in Oman: wood, spices, rice, precious metals, silks, textiles, iron, horn, and fine porcelain ware. They also brought new ideas and technologies.

At a boat yard in Al-Ashkharah, a bow-drill is employed to fit ribs to the planked hull of a *shu'i* commissioned by a local fisherman.



PHOTO BY/COURTESY NEIL RICHARDSON



PHOTO BY/COURTESY NEIL RICHARDSON

[ 71 ]

A Bahla blacksmith, assisted by his sons, employs hot-forging techniques to make a steel knife blade.

Many of the materials were imported to supply coastal craft industries. Bronze and iron contributed to the development of metalworking—particularly tool making and weaponry production—while the gradual adoption of silver and gold as regional currencies encouraged the development of refined decorative techniques for weaponry and jewelry. Fine hardwood brought a degree of sophistication to the boat-building industry and permitted a volume of production that would have been impossible on the basis of indigenous wood alone. The precious value of wood encouraged the development of woodcarving into a fine art form that maintains its pride of place in doors, windows, and other decorative features of monumental and vernacular architecture. Embroiderers and pit-loom weavers benefited from the import of silk and other threads that add color and diversity to local costume.

Towns such as Suhar, Muscat, Sur, and Salalah along Oman's coastline emerged as major entrepôts that boast a rich mixture of people, a decidedly cosmopolitan air, and a lively and varied collection of craft traditions. They have

been gateways for new ideas, materials, and technologies, which have not only enriched the craft heritage of coastal communities but also filtered inland via overland trade routes. At the same time, Omani artisans, employing indigenous materials, techniques, and designs, have brought their own interpretations and customs to the practice of their crafts. The result is a captivating synthesis, within which are discernible Arab, Asian, and East African influences. The resulting whole is a vibrant and unique craft culture that is resoundingly Omani.

The souk in the capital city and port of Muscat has a broader role than those in the interior. Although a center of traditional crafts production, the souk also gathers craft products from all over the country—Bahla pottery, basketry from the Batinah, Suri embroidery and pit-loom weaving, tribal rugs and trappings, and Nizwa copper and silverwork. All find an outlet in the capital-area marketplace. Local women sell incense in the heart of the souk, their mixtures spread before them to entice customers. Hand-embroidered *qimmahs* (men's caps), made in the privacy of the home or courtyard, are also



Although the old is making way for the new, progress is still a mantle worn lightly by a society that retains a strong commitment to tradition, culture, and heritage.

on offer, and special commissions are accepted for work to order. Contiguous with the various souks are artisanal workshops, where silver- and goldsmiths, weaponry makers, blacksmiths, leather crafters, carpenters, tailors, and halwa makers may all be found hard at work. It is evident, particularly in the gold and silver souks, that mercantile prosperity and the cosmopolitan character of the capital have done much to encourage the production of luxury goods.

The souks of the capital are outlets not only for consumer goods but also for a broad range of imported raw materials used by urban and rural artisans. Textile sellers offer fabrics from the Far East, the Indian subcontinent, Africa, Europe, and the Americas, together with threads, trims, and other costume materials used by embroiderers and pit-loom weavers. Suppliers in the alleys behind the gold and silver souk provide jewelers and *khanjar* (Omani

ceremonial dagger) makers with imported metals in ingot or nugget form, wire and sheet metal in various gauges at highly competitive prices, dies, tools, scales, and crucibles from Pakistan and India, Omani leather, Indian teak, and a range of burnishing, soldering, and casting compounds. For the incense makers, perfume and spice sellers offer fragrant ingredients from the far corners of the world—aromatic oils, woods, resins, rose-scented water, fixatives, and burners. The spice stalls also offer henna powder and paste as well as dried limes, which are used as a fixative in henna mixtures.

Although the old is making way for the new, progress is still a mantle worn lightly by



MOHAMMED AL MAWALI

The secrets of one of the world's most ancient crafts are contained in a small workroom in Bahla, one of the last corners in the Arab world where indigo dyeing is still intertwined with local culture. Successive generations of Omanis continue to be captivated by the allure of the precious dyestuff.

a society that retains a strong commitment to tradition, culture, and heritage. The extent to which Omani craft products continue to have utility in daily life is quite remarkable, as is the extent to which craft producers continue to equate challenge with opportunity in the practice of their craft. Craft skills continue to be passed down from mother to daughter, father to son, and Oman remains among the few nations in the Middle East with a living heritage that remains relevant to both local populations and visitors. There is every hope that the country can continue to broaden its horizons without forfeiting its past.





An embroiderer is resplendent in her own hand-stitched finery in Bilad Sur. She uses silk and metallic threads from India and Asia, and silk fabric woven especially for the Omani market.

#### SUGGESTED READING

Richardson, Neil, and Marcia Dorr. 2003. *The Craft Heritage of Oman*. Dubai: Motivate.

MARCIA STEGATH DORR earned degrees in fine arts and education from the University of Michigan. She taught art and established an interior design firm in Ann Arbor before going to live in The Gambia with her family in 1983. While there she created a West African artisans' co-operative. In 1986 she moved to the Sultanate of Oman, where her work in cultural preservation continued with a United Nations project to revitalize traditional pottery production. Ms. Dorr is presently advisor to the government for the adaptive re-use of historic forts and castles

NEIL RICHARDSON was born in London and later moved to Australia, where he graduated from the University of Western Australia with a degree in business and marketing. He has worked in Oman since 1989, specializing in heritage management and the preservation of traditional craft industries. In addition to his work on the documentation of traditional craft industries, he was a co-founder of the Omani Heritage Gallery, a not-for-profit organization linking traditional Omani artisans with contemporary markets for their products.

*All photographs courtesy of the Omani Craft Heritage Documentation Project unless noted otherwise.*

## THE OMANI CRAFT HERITAGE DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

Rich and diverse, the craft industries of Oman are among the most important cultural traditions in the Arabian Peninsula. Until recently, however, there had been little research into this subject. When it became apparent that the rapid modernization of the Sultanate would challenge the survival of the country's craft industries, the Omani Craft Heritage Documentation Project was initiated in 1996 by His Highness Seyyid Shihab bin Tariq Al Said. Its aim has been to identify and document the different types of crafts in all parts of the country. From the *jiirz* (ceremonial small-bladed ax) makers of Musandam to the potters of Dhufar, hundreds of craftspeople have been interviewed, and their techniques and products have been carefully documented and photographed.

An important result of this project, the extraordinary two-volume work, *The Craft Heritage of Oman*, is a tribute to Oman's artisans and the traditions they create. Authors Neil Richardson and Marcia Dorr document the origins and development of the country's craft traditions and artisan communities. They provide a comprehensive region-by-region record of the design and production techniques of the many and varied crafts found across the Sultanate. This wide-ranging catalogue of artifacts concludes with a review of the changing role of craft industries in a rapidly modernizing society, making it the most significant publication on the traditional craft heritage of southeast Arabia.