

# Deconstructivism as a Pedagogical Intervention: Teaching Heritage through Contemporary Art in Oman

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## Abstract

This study analyzes deconstructivism as a pedagogical intervention in heritage education in the Art Education Department at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in response to the need for contemporary education attentive to heritage as required by national policy set forth by the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation, and Oman Vision 2040. Specifically, it analyzes thirty-four survey responses evaluating the final project of the Modern and Contemporary Painting Course for forty-two students in the fall of 2022; this project tasked students with researching, drawing, deconstructing, and reassembling a self-chosen article unique to Omani cultural heritage. The purpose of this investigation was to explore the relationship between culture and deconstructivism as a pedagogical intervention in the teaching environment at Sultan Qaboos University within one continuous semester of study (4 months). The findings of this study suggest that contemporary art interventions in heritage education are one way to newly engage students already well-versed in Omani heritage while also answering the demands of national directives and suggestions of past art education research for a rigorous art education curriculum inclusive of both heritage and contemporary art and its theories.

## Keywords

Art, Deconstructivism, Culture, Oman

## 1. Introduction: Oman Vision 2040 and the Importance of Art

While the Sultanate of Oman is wholly committed to cultural heritage preservation in its traditional sense, leading the ratification of UNESCO conventions on the illicit trade of artifacts, funding material preservation projects domestically

and internationally, and housing art and artifacts in a state-of-the-art preservation lab in The National Museum of Oman, Oman is most exemplary for its unique attention to cultural preservation by way of heritage education. Oman's dedication to educating the public on its heritage is cited in the national decree and is widely credited as having fostered a society uniquely attentive to its heritage (Gugolz, 1996; Sachedina, 2021). One such decree is Oman Vision 2040—the Sultanate of Oman's plan for sustainable development in the face of increasing globalization, changes in the world's resources, and technological innovation.

Oman Vision 2040 defines the government's vision for the nation's future and asserts the importance of preserving the heritage, culture, and identity of the Sultanate of Oman through education. Specifically, Oman Vision 2040 argues for the development of the national educational system with “educational curricula that reinforce values, take into account the principles of Islam, and the Omani identity, and are inspired by Oman's history and heritage...” as singularly necessary to counterbalance necessary changes brought about by a rapidly changing global landscape (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-Up Unit, 2020).

## 2. Art Education in Sultanate of Oman

Unsurprisingly, the aforementioned intent is in line with the vision of the Department of Art Education at Sultan Qaboos University. Established in 1991 and guided by the policies of the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation in the Sultanate of Oman, the primary aim of the department is to prepare qualified Art Education teachers for all grade levels across the country. Among other goals, students will know how the fields of fine arts can be used to “transmit one's culture and appreciate one's heritage” (Statement on the Art Education Department, n.d.).

Is this compatible with the directive to advance educational curricula as stated in Oman Vision 2040? Many researchers assert a tension between globalization and the progress of development on the one hand, and the need to preserve the distinctive identity of artists from a region or country on the other hand (Al-Yahyai, 2017a). For instance, some scholars and art practitioners have suggested that globalization leads to an erosion of specific cultural identity in art (Al-Saadi, 2020; Abu-Zaid, 2013; Yousuf, 2008; Hameedh, 2013). In another vein, some scholars argue that, far from eroding distinctive cultural identities, globalization might coerce, through economic, social, or other means, non-Western artists to adhere to an ethnic, social, or cultural identity colonially invented and imposed that does little to serve a people or authentic notion of culture (Meier, 2010; Moridi & Ebadifar, 2021; Almamari, 2020; Gabrael, 2017). However, an increase in artworks that identify with identity across the Middle East suggests that preparing for the future and preserving the heritage of centuries past is not impossible (Al-Yahyai, 2017b), and some argue that cultural heritage—in its preservation and education through art and other spheres—can positively contribute to sus-

tainable development within this region (Hassan et al., 2008; Abdul-Ghani, 2006; Almamari, 2015; Al-Saadi, 2020; Nasr & Khalil, 2022). This notion appears most relevant to the ideology espoused in Oman Vision 2040 which seeks “a sustainable investment in heritage, culture, and arts to contribute to national economic development” (Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-Up Unit, 2020).

While student artworks in the Art Education Department at SQU reflect Oman’s dedication to heritage education, being highly inclusive of dimensions of national identity (Al-Amri et al., 2022), the curricula have been shown to be insufficient in teaching theory (Al-Amri, 2010) and modern and contemporary art (Doubleday et al., 2016). Nasser (2020) stresses the relationship between sufficient curricula in Oman, teaching methods, and student success after graduation. In addition to needed changes in curricula, the lack of private fine art institutions (Al-Yahyai, 2017a) certainly contributes to this gap in pedagogy, but it stands to reason that the opposite is also true—balanced art education curricula emphasizing both practical and theoretical knowledge and attending to more artistic styles and periods will support a richer “art scene” (Al Saadi, 2022), contributing to the profusion of creative industries as desired by Oman Vision 2040. This is supported in the research of Ismail (2014) who found that art education could help raise students’ awareness of craft industries in Oman, and Hemmy and Mehta (2021) who found that liberal arts education, including the arts, can contribute to the development of a skills economy in Oman.

Consequently, this study seeks to bridge multiple gaps in art education in Oman through testing the perceived success of an art project both inclusive of heritage and contemporary theory and practice, and which resulted in student artworks of the standard of a public exhibition.

### 3. Deconstructionism and Primitivism

Deconstructivism is a term coined by Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Originally applied to language and meaning, deconstruction, or deconstructivism, has come to broadly refer to an approach which eschews the ordered whole to lay bare the contradictory constituent parts, and has widely been applied to describe the visual arts, in particular architecture (Wigley, 1993; Brunette & Wills, 1993). A 1988 MoMa exhibition popularized the term and synthesized deconstructivism as an architectural style, and featuring architects Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Bernard Tschumi, Coop Himmelblau, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, and Zaha Hadid, determined its preeminent practitioners. The same comprehensive cannon cannot be offered for artists working in the fields of painting or sculpture, for example, but four artists were included in the exhibition: Kazimir Malevich’s “Supremacist Composition: Airplane Flying” (1915) and “Supremacist” (1916-1917), El Lissitzky’s “Pronoun 19D” (1920 or 1921) and “Composition” (1922). As a practice of inquisition, deconstructivism is evident in the work of many artists of renown. In fact, many of the art-isms ascribed the 20th century, both preceding and following Derrida’s 1967 book *Of*

*Grammatology*, including but not limited to cubism, futurism, surrealism, and Dada, all likely contributed to and were influenced by the philosophical tenets of deconstructivism.

At the same time, within the post-modernist impulses of 20th Century artistic movements, an experimentation of the material and immaterial heritage of ‘primitive’ societies came into vogue in the West. Primitive concepts, techniques, and forms inspired many artists at this time, which is sometimes referred to as the “Primitive” period in art. Common examples include works by Pablo Picasso, Paul Gauguin, or Henri Rousseau, but less incendiary works, such as those from German neo-expressionist A.R. Penk and American feminist artist Nancy Spero also borrow language from “primitive” society in the development of their distinctive styles (Elsemary, 2001). While fraught with imperialist enterprise, this period also witnessed indigenous artists living in their ancestral homelands and in diaspora reclaiming their cultural heritage within and alongside this trend of “primitive” art. Phillips (2015) writes “Primitiv-ism fostered explorations of form and content by encouraging artists to revisit ancestral traditions—their own and other peoples’—which had previously been condemned as childlike, pagan or doomed to disappearance” (p. 6). Evidence of the influence of this movement in the “Arab world” and its emerging modern art scene is evident. In Iraq, the aptly-named artists group, “The Pioneers”, who introduced Iraqi society to modern art in the 1940’s, was formerly named Société Primitive, or the “Primitive Group”. The origins of modern and contemporary art therefore is intimately tied with cultural heritage, both as a necessary commission to establish legitimacy in a global art scene markedly imperialist, as well as an effect of innate artistic impulse.

#### 4. Contemporary Art in Oman

Oman is indelibly marked by its thousands-year-long history, and boasts a cultural heritage replete with tangible and intangible heritages that have endured colonialism, war, and globalization to remain relevant to the present day. This cultural heritage has proven fertile ground for modern and contemporary craftspersons and artists in search of inspiration (Al-Wahaibi, 2021). Notable Omani artists such as Anwar Sonya, Alia Al Farsi, Salim Sakhi and numerous others are explicit in their influences from Omani cultural heritage, particularly in their subject matter. In one study, Oman’s cultural heritage was also found to be a key motivator or point of inspiration for art education students at Sultan Qaboos University (Al-Yahyai, 2009; Almamari, 2017), although this may be, in part, attributable to interest and affinity—both as is written into curriculum and as is felt by students who have been raised within the sultanate—for heritage-centered student artworks. Nevertheless, despite a demonstrated relevance and relationship between Omani cultural heritage and modern and contemporary art, there remains a common perception of cultural heritage, and artworks which engage with cultural heritage, as antiquated.

At the same time, the lack of contemporary art education, particularly contemporary art theory, and institutions has, generally speaking, led to a scarcity in familiarity and literacy in contemporary art in Oman (Doubleday et al., 2016; Johnson-Perkins, 2019; Al Saadi, 2022) and subsequently impeded the kind of creative industries and art market that would contribute to a diversified economy (Methuku & Adel, 2021; Ismail, 2014; Kothaneth, 2021). Compared to other countries in the Gulf, Oman's art scene is fledgling (Johnson-Perkins, 2019), as was discussed by pioneering contemporary Omani artist Hassan Meer: "Countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have invested in the younger generations and added a strong infrastructure by building new galleries, art foundations and Museums, giving artists the freedom and imagination to create" (Al Badi, 2020). Nevertheless, alongside Oman Vision 2040, there is evidence that modern and contemporary art and artists are gaining recognition in Oman. In 2022, Oman had a pavilion at the Venice Biennale for the first time in the global art exhibition's 128 histories, curated by a young Omani art historian Aisha Stoby who was subsequently responsible for curating The Khaleej Modern at NYU Abu Dhabi (Morelli, 2022). The clear intent of the Sultanate of Oman towards cultivating creative industries and creatives stresses the importance of comprehensive art education inclusive of modern and contemporary art theories.

Given the requirements of national art education policy and that of the Art Education Department at SQU, how can educators create curricula that newly engage students already well-versed in Oman's cultural heritage? In this study, we turn to the post-modern art theory of deconstructivism as pedagogical intervention in the Modern and Contemporary Painting Course to reframe engaging with Omani cultural heritage in a contemporary light, not only for students, but also for the scholars, artists and public who viewed artworks produced by students in the ARD 3110 Modern and Contemporary Painting course in an annual art exhibition on the campus of SQU.

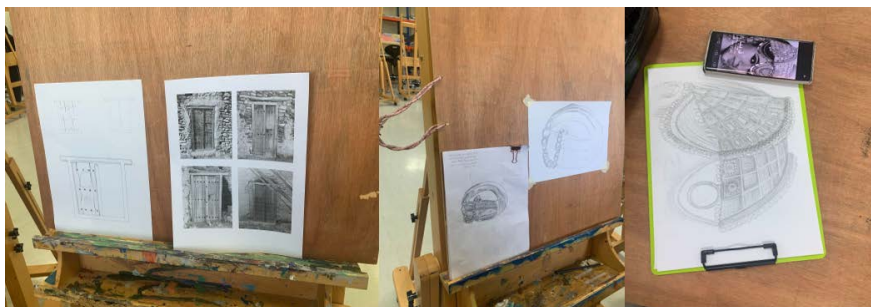
## 5. Methodology

In the fall semester of 2022, forty-two undergraduate students at Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat, the Sultanate of Oman enrolled in the Modern and Contemporary Painting Course taught by Dr. Ayman Elsemary. For their final project, students were tasked with identifying, researching, and sketching an artifact from Omani history in pencil (Figure 1).

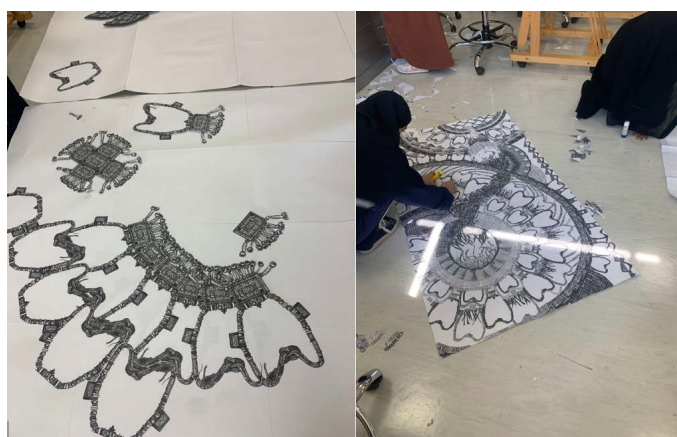
They then copied, cut, and reassembled this self-chosen artifact from Omani cultural heritage into an abstract collage measuring 84 × 150 cm (Figure 2).

Classroom observation and student surveys were employed to determine students' perceptions on the success of the project in integrating Omani heritage in a project based on contemporary art concepts and theory (Figure 3). Survey methodology in this project targets instruments or procedures that ask questions to students involved in this project after finishing the art practice project of each participant. That may or may not be answered. Researchers carry out statistical





**Figure 1.** Samples of students' drawings and application in the selected course (photographed by researchers).



**Figure 2.** Students copied, cut, and reassembled self-chosen artifact from Omani cultural heritage into an abstract collage measuring  $84 \times 150$  cm (photographed by researchers).



**Figure 3.** Teacher observation and supervising students' projects (photographed by researchers).

surveys with a view towards making statistical inferences about the population being studied; such inferences depend strongly on the survey questions used.

Classroom observation took place across two sections over the course of the fall semester, and included informal conversation with students as they proceeded through the stages of the assignment. It was evident from classroom conversa-

tion that students were generally unenthused at the prospect of sketching an article from Omani heritage, being a common assignment, but began to be challenged and convinced of the idea of the project as they began to deconstruct and reassemble individual components and details of their chosen artifact into a large-scale abstract collage. Collaboration between students was also widespread, and students were inspired by their peers' approaches to deconstructing and reassembling the individual components and details of their respective articles.

Regarding the student survey, 38 responses were recorded from 42 total students. The survey contained the following questions (in Arabic):

- 1) What is your chosen article?
- 2) What is the importance of this article to Omani cultural heritage?
- 3) What is the significance of this object? Why did you choose it?
- 4) Did you understand the goal of the project clearly?
- 5) What is the goal of this project?
- 6) Describe in detail the steps that you undertook to transform your chosen article into a contemporary art composition.
- 7) Do you believe that this project achieved its intended goal?

## 6. Results and Suggestions

Responses revealed a diverse array of chosen Omani artifacts, with particular articles of traditional jewelry, like the Banjri, or bangle, as well as Alsamt, or amulet, as popular choices alongside coffee pot, as another common choice. Few students chose articles specific to a region in Oman, such as a coffee pot from Nizwa or the lighthouse in Sur. The breadth of chosen articles suggests that students already had an understanding of which articles might constitute material heritage. Most students ascribed the importance of the article to Omani heritage in broad terms, writing about the function of the object, such as the beautification of women. Notably, answers to the second and third questions were similar, suggesting an implicit belief in Omani heritage as important—most students reported choosing an article because of its relevance to Omani heritage, not for external motivations such as a personal connection to the article. Most students asserted that they understood the goal of the project, with very few (4) stating that they were unsure in some regard. All but one respondent characterized the intent of the project as a task to transform an article from Omani cultural heritage into a contemporary artwork, even those that reported some confusion at the intent of the project; one student did not respond to this question. The level of detail in which students described the steps of the assignment varied, but responses showed an emphasis on the latter steps of the assignment in which the original drawing was copied, cut, and pasted. Only five students mentioned the research component of the project, suggesting that a greater emphasis on research prior to selecting an article from Omani heritage is an area for improvement, especially research on ways to employ their artifacts in contemporary composition. However, students generally believed that the project achieved its goal, with the exception

of three respondents stating that the project achieved its goal to some extent, one stating that it “somewhat” achieved its goal, and one suggesting that the undertaking of the project was complicated in some regard. The original drawings and resultant contemporary art compositions are included for each of the 42 students in **Appendix 1**.

The resultant art compositions demonstrate original thought and innovation in the deconstruction of traditional articles from Omani heritage into contemporary compositions. This is most evident in comparative cases between student artworks that utilize the same article from Omani heritage, but result in highly individualistic contemporary art compositions through the operationalization of deconstructivism; this is despite the widespread collaboration across students witnessed in classroom observation. Given that the majority of survey responses support the notion that the project achieved its goal, as well as the quality and diversity of the final compositions, the pedagogical intervention of deconstructivism appears to be one useful tool in integrating contemporary art theory alongside heritage education in the Art Education Department of SQU in the Sultanate of Oman. Future steps include possibilities of local or international exhibitions of the resultant student artworks and possible applications of student artworks in sellable goods in support of creative industries in Oman. The integration of innovative and authentic artwork reflecting local heritage in marketing is already benefiting Omani products, and, with the support of the government, the works of art education students could be used in various products, from clothing (Hassaan, 2021) to Omani sweets (Al-Moteey, 2021).

Future studies might undertake the intervention of deconstructivism at a lower level of education, in a different university in Oman, or further afield, or employ different contemporary art interventions to teach about heritage. A similar intervention employed in a classroom of students claiming different heritages would also lend valuable insight into the replicability of this pedagogical intervention to other countries with ethnically-diverse populations. Overall, we posit this study, and the pedagogical intervention of contemporary art theory, as a lesson in good practices for heritage education. We suggest further research into the field of heritage education more broadly, particularly at the intersection of heritage and contemporary studies, to continue to disseminate best practices for art educator’s intent on teaching art traditions of the past and present, and developing the fine arts and creative industry in their respective countries.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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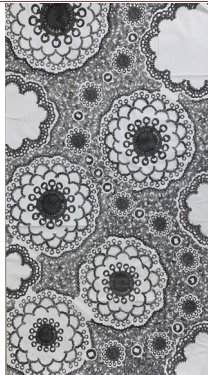




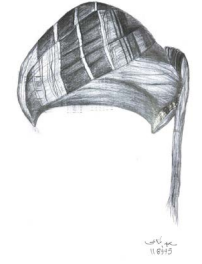

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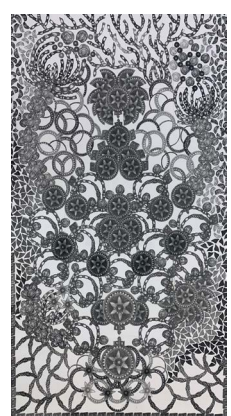
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## Appendix 1

List of artworks made by students in the research's practices.

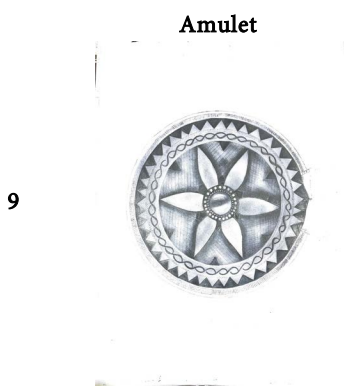
| Number | Article  | Student Name        | Dimension—<br>Technique—Material                | Artwork—Final Composition   |
|--------|--|---------------------|---|---|
| 1      | <p><b>Silver Pendant</b></p>              | Marwa Khamees       | 84 × 150 cm<br>Black and White<br>Paper Collage |    |
| 2      | <p><b>Omani Khanjar</b></p>              | Abdulrahman AlJafri | 84 × 150 cm<br>Black and White<br>Paper Collage |   |
| 3      | <p><b>Omani Coffee Pot</b></p>          | Nadal Masmoud       | 84 × 150 cm<br>Black and White<br>Paper Collage |  |
| 4      | <p><b>Omani "Massar" Headdress</b></p>  | Said AlMaani        | 84 × 150 cm<br>Black and White<br>Paper Collage |  |

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|   |   |                  |   |   |
|---|---|------------------|---|---|
| 5 | <p><b>Perfume Dispenser</b></p>  <p>36</p> | Marwan Khamis    | 84 × 150 cm<br>Black and White<br>Paper Collage |    |
| 6 | <p><b>Anklet</b></p>  <p>35</p>           | AlMaatz AlQatiti | 84 × 150 cm<br>Black and White<br>Paper Collage |   |
| 7 | <p><b>Bangle</b></p>  <p>32</p>          | Galia Al Nasria  | 84 × 150 cm<br>Black and White<br>Paper Collage |  |
| 8 | <p><b>Amulet</b></p>  <p>37</p>          | Ibtisam AlHtalia | 84 × 150 cm<br>Black and White<br>Paper Collage |  |

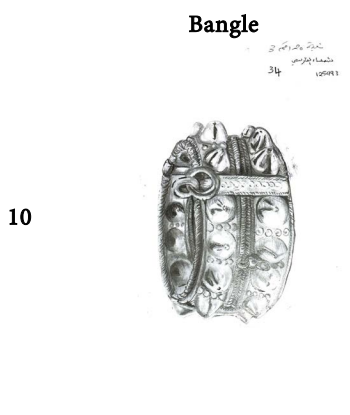


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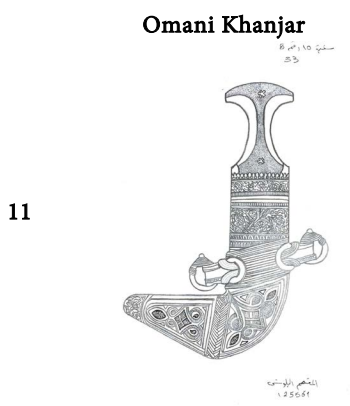
Salim AlHatami

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



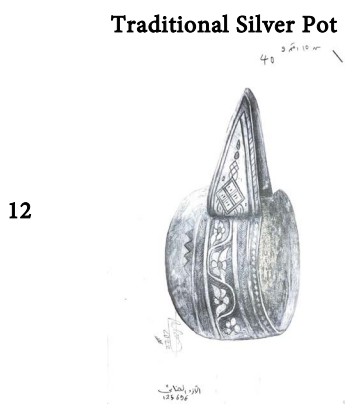
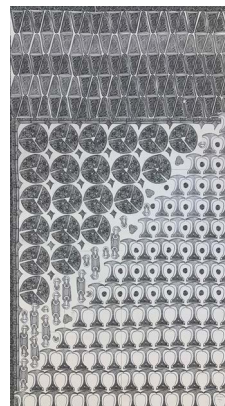
Shamsa Alfarisi

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



AlMatism AlBalushi

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



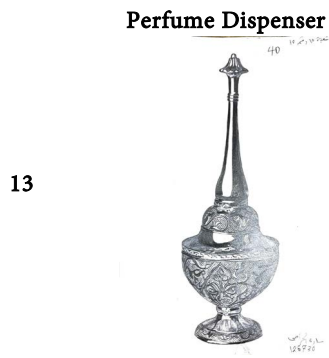
Alazd AlHinai

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



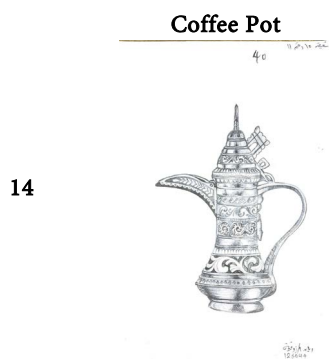
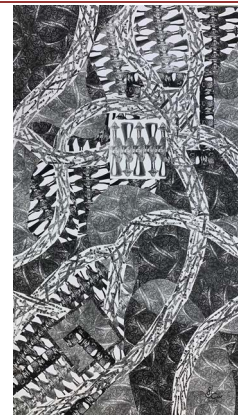


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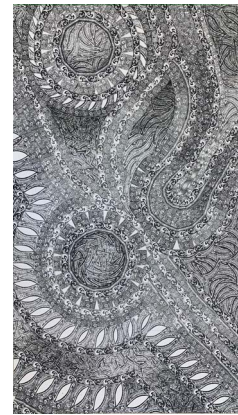
Sara AlHrasi

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



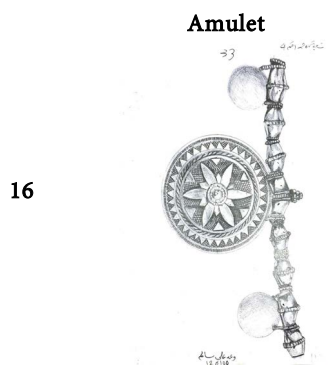
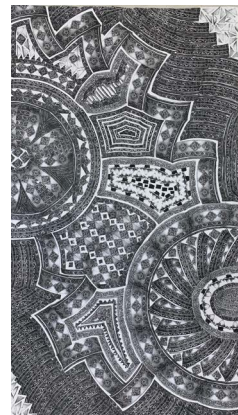
Rian AlMarzokia

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



Ibtihal Said

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



Waad Ali Salim

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



Continued



17

AlWarith Ali AlHosni

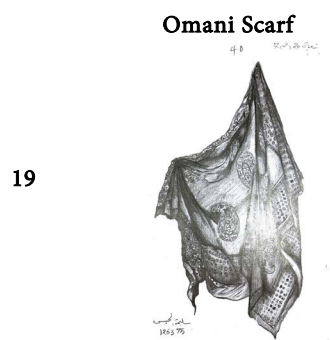
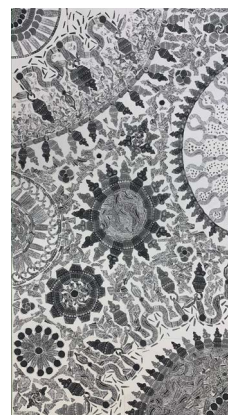
84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



18

Aisha Said

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



19

Salmia Alhobsi

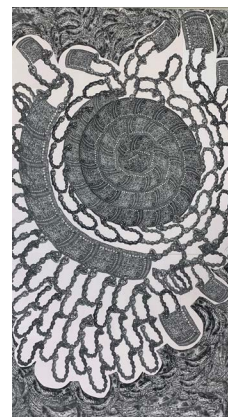
84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



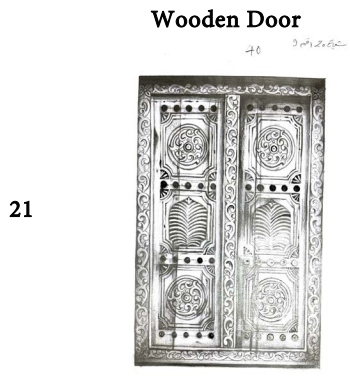
20

Waad Shamis

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage

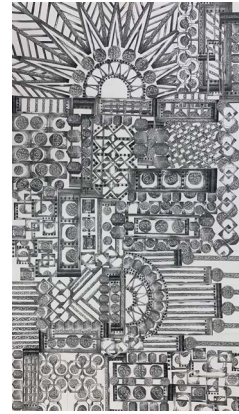


Continued



Sofia AlRajibi

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



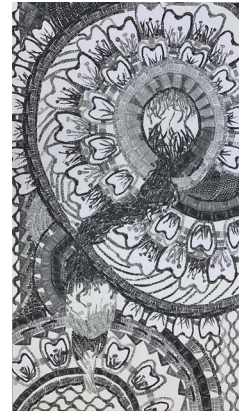
Rawia Khalfan

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



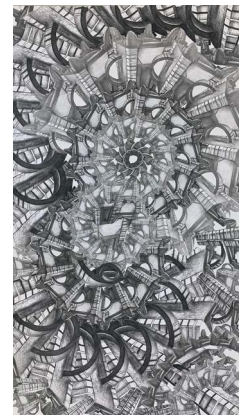
Shahd AlMasqria

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



Saud AlMaamari

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage





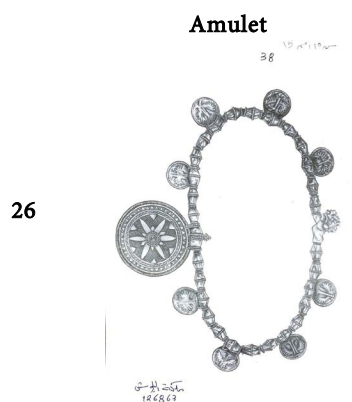
Continued



25

Maha Amr Jaid

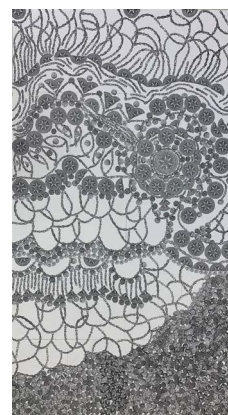
84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



26

Mamlika Al Balushi

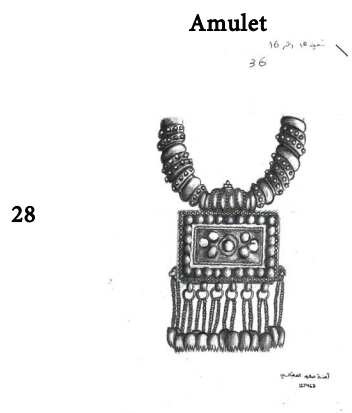
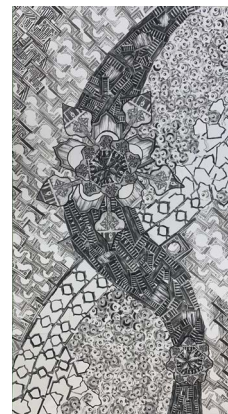
84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



27

AlRian Rashid

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



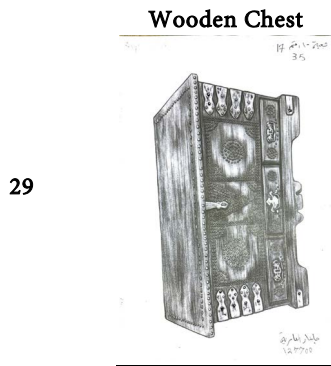
28

Amna AlMaqbali

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



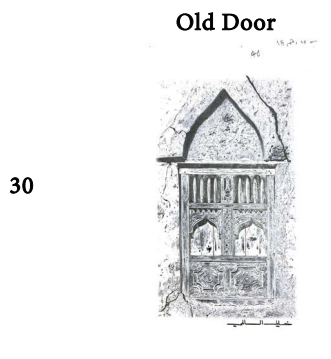
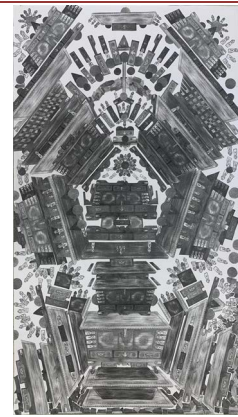
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29

Jilnar AlAmri

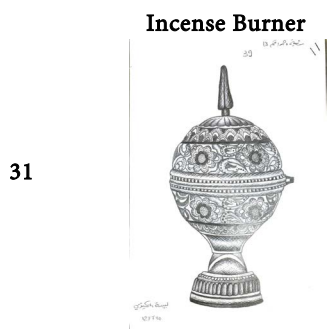
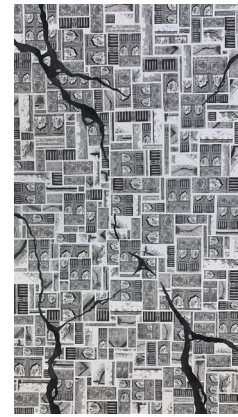
84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



30

Khalil AlSalimi

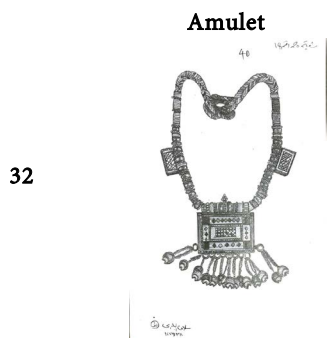
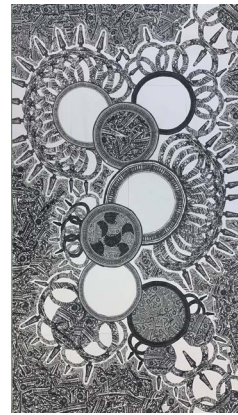
84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



31

Labiba AlKiomia

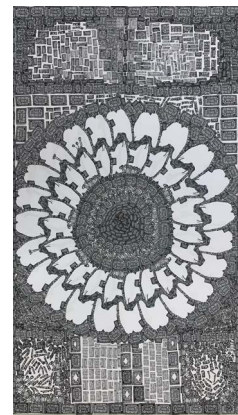
84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



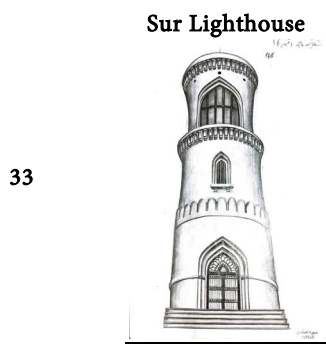
32

Sulaf Albadria

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage

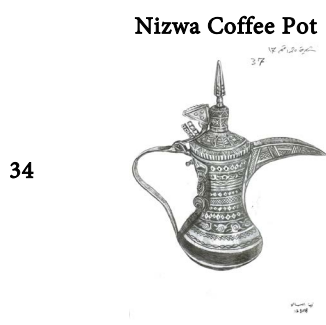
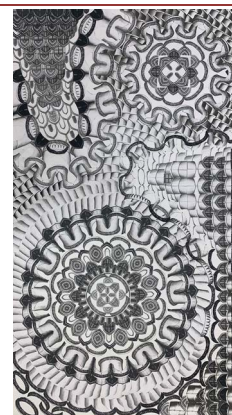


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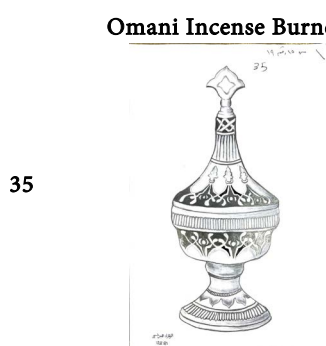
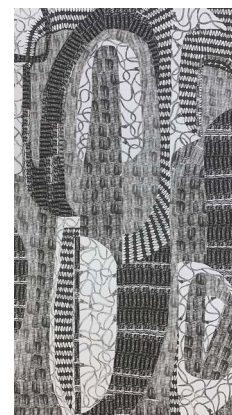
Moza Salim

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



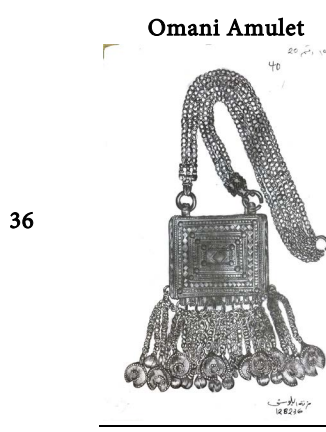
Aya AlSiabi

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



Zahra AlMajrfi

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



Mozna AlBalushi

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage





Continued



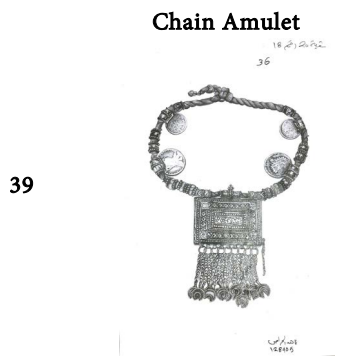
Rawia AlRiami

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



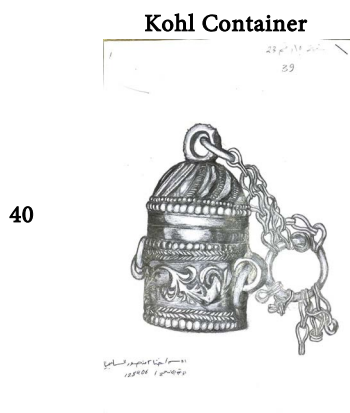
Wajdan AlBariki

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



Nahid AlHirasi

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



Khatim Mansour

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White Paper Col-  
lage



Continued

Omani "Kima" Cap

39

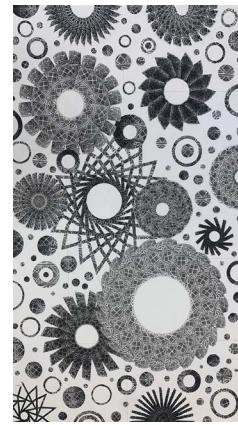
41



128113  
12799

Zamzam Alshamlia

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage



Prayer Ring

39

42



12799

Reem AlKiomia

84 × 150 cm  
Black and White  
Paper Collage

