

# Arab Cultural Mural, the Oasis Comes to San Francisco

BY FAYEQ OWEIS

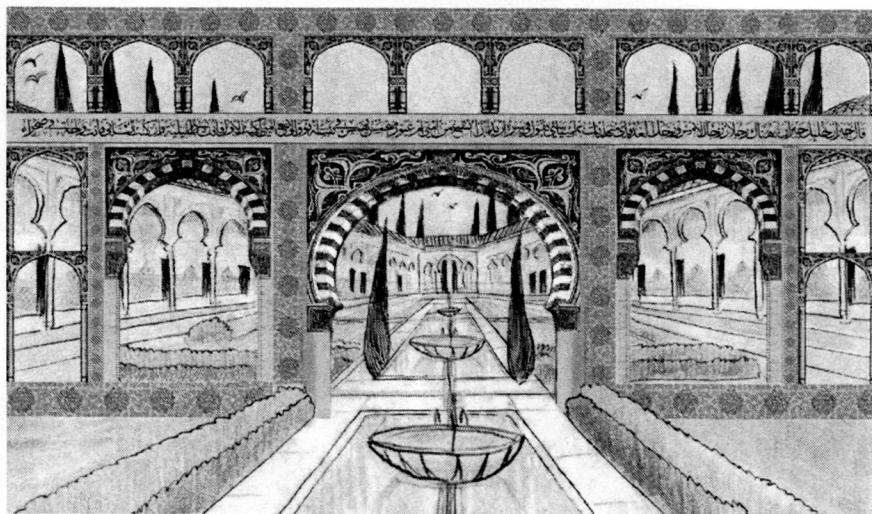
If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a mural, especially in the heart of San Francisco, is worth 20 thousand words; one word for each member of the Arab community in San Francisco. Just such a mural, celebrating the Arab community and Arab culture, was dedicated on November 14, 2003, after more than a year of planning, design, preparation, and painting. The mural measures 54 feet wide by 30 feet high and is located on a facade that faces Market Street in downtown San Francisco. This was a true community project which was sponsored, organized, and painted by over 200 members of the community with the leadership and participation of four major community organizations.

The idea of a mural representing the Arab community in San Francisco was initiated by Mayor Willie Brown through a member of the Neighborhood Beautification Fund and then presented to the Arab Cultural and Community Center (ACCC). A community meeting and a call for artists was held at ACCC to announce the project, solicit ideas, and secure a location. All agreed that the mural should be a collaboration project with the community involved in all stages of the mural, from concept to implementation. A mural committee was formed, and an artistic team consisting of Khalil bin Dib, Said Nuseibeh, and myself, was commissioned to present a design.

Locating a building to host the mural was a challenging and crucial issue. The Arab and Muslim community had had many bad experiences with vandalism and hate crimes that targeted buildings that were identified as either being owned by members of the community, or had some identification that represented an issue related to the community. The vandalism of the "Our Roots Are Still Alive" mural,

which was the only mural in the U.S. dedicated to the Palestinian struggle, proved a tragic example. The mural was

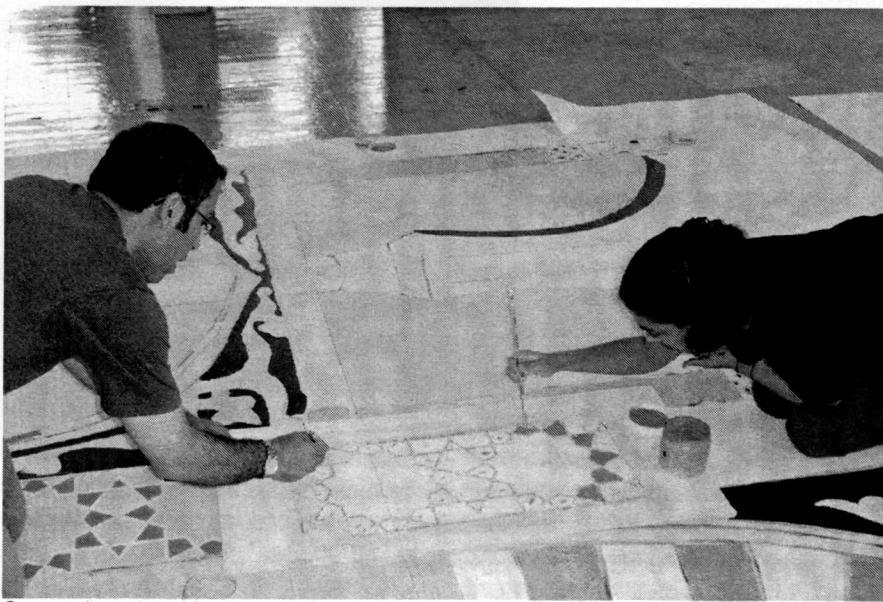
boarded up in 2001 because it had been the victim of a series of attacks that left the building owner, tenants, and the artists afraid the entire building might be burned to the ground. This, and other instances, like the vandalism of the Alex Odeh memorial statue in Southern California, led to the reluctance of many community members to host the mural on their buildings.



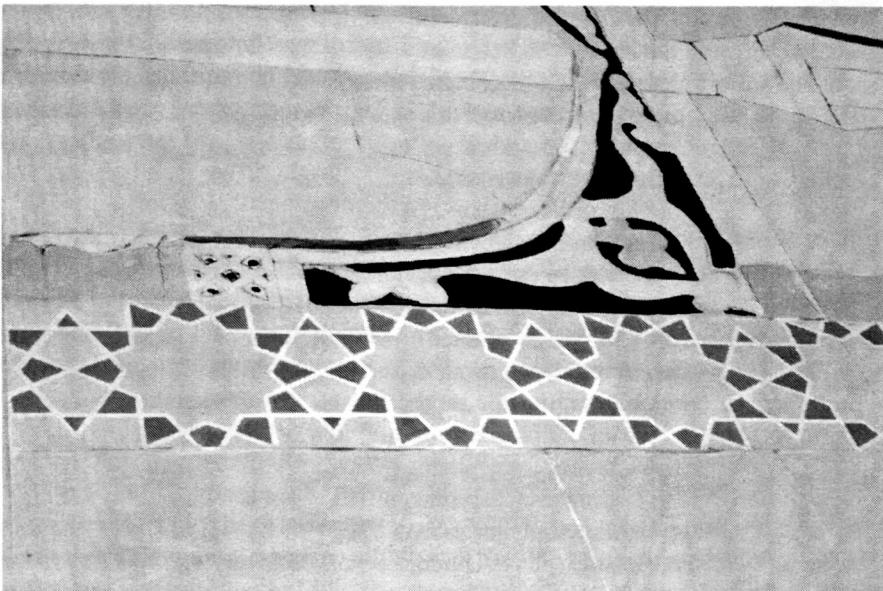
Mural Design: A final computer composite of the mural design. Artists: FayeQ Oweis, Khalil binDib, Said Nuseibeh



Wall before mural: The actual wall before the painting of the mural. Photo by Said Nuseibeh



Community-paint: Members of the community working on the mural. Photo by Fayeq Oweis.



Painting Detail: A detail of the process of painting the plywood panels. Photo by Fayeq Oweis.

After months of searching for a site, we learned that a member of the community recently purchased a building that houses a mosque in downtown San Francisco. We approached the building owner and the tenants (the Islamic Society and Masjid Dar as-Salaam) and were very pleased that they agreed to host the mural. Vandalism was not an issue for this site; the building had experienced several episodes including the broken doors, graffiti, and other acts, especially after 9/11.

At the beginning of the project, ACCC distributed a brochure to the community that included an introduction to the mural and asked community members to list up to six important elements that depict the Arab culture that they would like to see represented. The responses fell just short of a complete picture of what the community wanted to see painted on the mural, so I carried on the research myself, asking many community members the same question.

In the end, the results provided a clear vision of what the community thinks in regard to visual elements that represent the Arab culture. The elements included Arabic language and calligraphy, Arabic and Islamic art and architecture, landscape and garden, contributions of Arab Americans, representation of women, contributions of Arabs and Muslims to Western civilization, and cultural elements including music, food, coffee, clothing, embroidery, and pottery.

The Arabic language and calligraphy received the highest number of responses. Some responses were very specific. The contributions of Arab Americans included names like Khalil Gibran, Edward Said, Alex Odeh, Naji Daifullah, and Hala Maqsoud. Arab women like al-Khansa and Rabia al-Adawiyya were mentioned. Arab and Muslim contributions to Western civilization included medicine, art, architecture, literature, mathematics, and astronomy. Community members also mentioned historical figures like Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sina, Maimonides, and al-Matannabi. Architectural monuments such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and AlHambra Palace in Spain gathered attention as well. Some responses were very general and included phrases such as: "something peaceful," "something to show diversity and unity of the Arab people," and "something to show that the Arab land is the cradle of civilization and the origin of the three major religions."

The final design had to match the specification of the wall and be sensitive to the tenants of the building. The artists started with sketches representing two main parts: A scene of gardens, and mirroring irrigation pools, inspired by the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain, and arcades that included Arabic calligraphy, horseshoe arches, arabesque motifs, and geometric patterns.

The garden represents an idyllic scene in Arab cultural consciousness; it is peaceful, beautiful, and filled with spirituality. Geometric patterns and floral motifs represent major elements of Arabic and Islamic art. Symmetry is a feature of

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## Arab Cultural Mural

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these elements and in Arabic and Islamic art in general. Additional columns helped achieve that symmetry and balance.

Arabic calligraphy is a major and unifying element in Arabic and Islamic art, and it enjoys a special status in Arabic culture. It provided an identity to the entire mural. The words in the calligraphy band are the words of the Arab-American poet and philosopher, Khalil Gibran (1883-1931). In a paper written in 1925, entitled "The New Frontier," Gibran wrote:

*There are two men: one of the past and one of the future. Which one are you?*

*Are you a secretive politician asking what your community can do for you*

*or an enthusiast asking what you can do for your community?*

*If you are the first, then you are a voracious weed; if you are the second, then you are an oasis in a desert.*

After the design was approved, the painting started with a series of community painting days. Because of the decision to involve the community in painting the mural and the involvement of scaffolding and swing stages, parts of the design were painted on wood panels and then installed on the wall. This allowed all members of the community to be involved. One technique that was used in the transfer of the design, especially on the wall, was the use of stencils. Repeating units of the geometric patterns and Arabesque motifs were cut and made into templates that made the painting process very fast and easy.

When members of the community and community organizations work together, many positive things can happen. The Arab cultural mural in San Francisco is a testament to such collaboration. It will be there for many years to come, educating the community about the Arab culture and the contributions of Arabs and Muslims to art and architecture. It is also an inspiration to future generations of Arab Americans, providing a sense of pride and belonging. As one member of the

community said, "It's very important to our community. It's only a mural, people can say, but something like this makes us feel included." **AJ**

## Changing Names

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Ladies Aid Society), founded in 1917, which is still active today.

"Arab-American Faces and Voices" includes dozens of photographs that depict the lives of Arab immigrants in the early part of the 1900s, as well as maps of the Ottoman Empire, Lebanon, and Worcester, all of which are helpful in contextualizing her work. One of the book's strongest features is the multitude of interviews she conducted and which are quoted at length; here are Arab immigrants, ranging in age from their late 80s to one 106-year-old interviewee, telling the story of arriving on American shores and forging a living. While the book could have included more information on the discrimination and other problems these immigrants encountered, Boosahda does a great service in preserving their voices and memories. As mentioned earlier, this book concentrates on one particular community of Arabs in Massachusetts; it can only be hoped that such exhaustive, detailed documentation projects are conducted on Arabs in other regions of the United States to build up a broad body of history about one of the nation's most dynamic communities. **AJ**

## Financial Aid Opportunities

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from the former Soviet Republics, the Middle East, the Asian Subcontinent, and the Far East.

The directory includes listings for financial opportunities at many levels, from high school, to postdoctoral and professional. It is divided first by types of awards: scholarships, fellowships, loans, grants, awards, and internships. None of the programs described in the directory award a cash endowment of less than \$500.

In the back of the directory is a series of indexes that allow the user to find their way to financial opportunities that would be most appropriate to them. Looking at the subject index under Language, one finds numerous opportunities for speakers of Arabic, Pashto, Urdu, Farsi and Turkish. In addition, there are a great number of scholarships and fellowships available for area studies in the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as South Asia. However, the directory is by no means limited to opportunities in the humanities; there is a great many listings for financial aid to Asians Americans of all national origins in the fields of biology, engineering, and other scientific disciplines.

The directory is well organized and broad in its scope. It is an excellent resource for individuals wanting to tap into those billions of dollars available for scholarly or professional pursuits. **AJ**

– By Bobby Gulshan

## Zareh

### Drawings & Paintings

at Harvest Gallery

Oct. 15-25, 2004

### Artist Reception

Oct. 15, 7-10 pm

938 North Brand Blvd.

Glendale, CA

Tel 818 546-1000