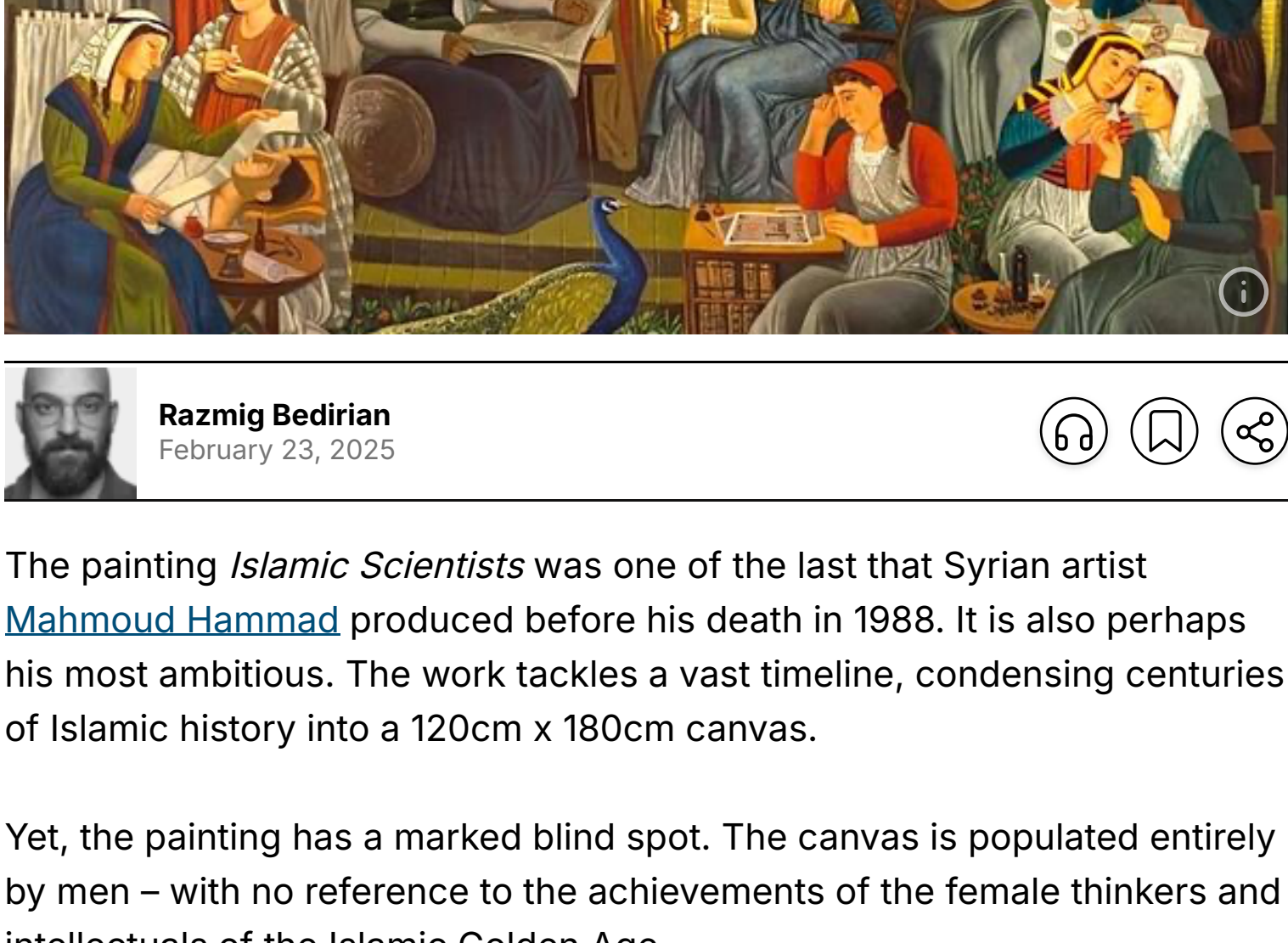


Culture **Art & Design**

Queens, warriors and thinkers – painting honours Islamic history’s greatest women

Sharjah foundation commissions artwork inspired by Islamic Scientists, which hails male leaders from the past, to celebrate female achievement



Razmig Bedirian
February 23, 2025

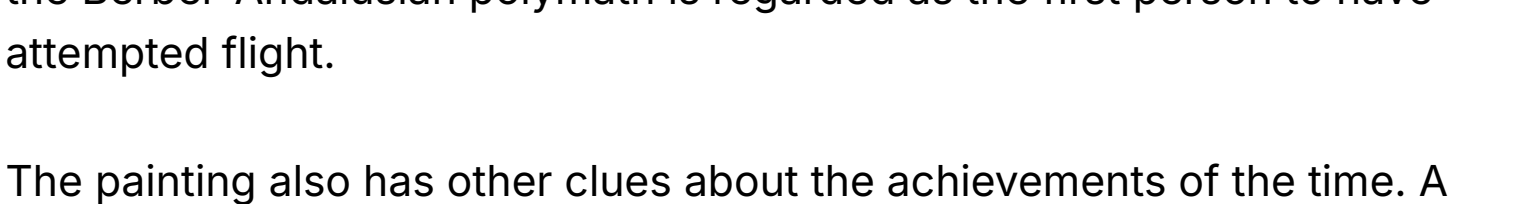
The painting *Islamic Scientists* was one of the last that Syrian artist [Mahmoud Hammad](#) produced before his death in 1988. It is also perhaps his most ambitious. The work tackles a vast timeline, condensing centuries of Islamic history into a 120cm x 180cm canvas.

Yet, the painting has a marked blind spot. The canvas is populated entirely by men – with no reference to the achievements of the female thinkers and intellectuals of the Islamic Golden Age.

A new companion piece, *A Wonderful World*, by Iraqi artist [Afifa Aleiby](#) aims to address this oversight. Commissioned by the [Barjeel Art Foundation](#), it will be officially unveiled during a ceremony at Sharjah's [House of Wisdom](#) on Sunday. *A Wonderful World* will be displayed beside Hammad's *Islamic Scientists*, which is also part of the foundation's collection and has been displayed at the [Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilisation](#) since 2014.

Hammad's *Islamic Scientists* brings together 16 influential thinkers and scientists from the [Islamic Golden Age](#), which is generally dated between the eighth and 13th centuries. Besides its artistic virtues, the painting is a formidable reference point for those wishing to learn more about the intellectual achievements of the medieval Islamic world.

[Ibn Rushd](#) is in the centre of the canvas with a copy of his book *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* in hand. The Andalusian polymath is huddled beside Al Farabi and [Ibn Sina](#), the latter who holds his influential work, *The Book of Healing*. Jabir, meanwhile, holds his *The Secrets of Chemistry* as he watches the group from afar, alongside the Persian polymath Razi.



There is also, of course, [Ibn Khaldun](#) with his book *Muqaddimah*. Al Kindi, famously regarded as the Philosopher of the Arabs, holds a scroll as he looks towards the distance. Al Biruni beside him holds an astrolabe. In the upper left corner, meanwhile, Abbas Ibn Firnas takes to the sky with wings strapped to his shoulders. Besides being a poet, physician and inventor, the Berber-Andalusian polymath is regarded as the first person to have attempted flight.

The painting also has other clues about the achievements of the time. A horoscope wheel touches on the astrological studies by medieval Arab scholars. In the upper right corner, the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, built in the early eighth century, reflects on architectural contributions.

Suheyla Takesh, director of the Barjeel Art Foundation, says *Islamic Scientists* was evidently an ambitious undertaking by Hammad. "There was quite a detailed and meticulous study period that led up to this large-scale piece," she tells *The National*.

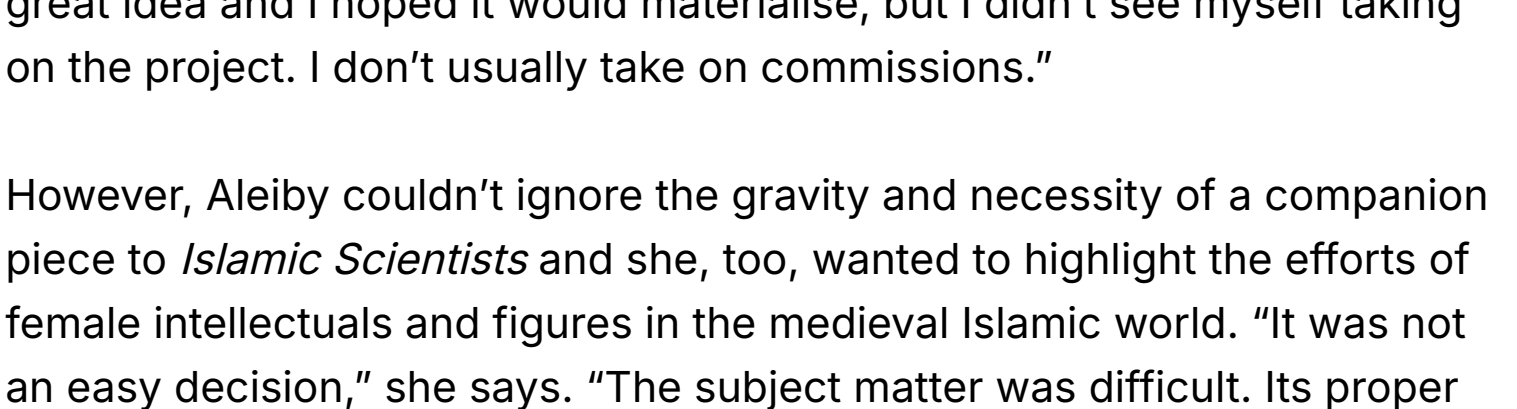
Yet, *Islamic Scientists* represents only a part of the achievements of thinkers during the Islamic Golden Age, and the foundation wanted to highlight the prominent female thinkers of the time, launching an open call in 2023.

"The open call laid the framework for the painting," Takesh says. "It had to be the same size, and it had to have 16 figures. It was up to the artists to find who they would like to represent, research them and then come up with a piece."

The initiative was part of the foundation's ongoing efforts to expand its collection of works by women artists from the region. "We also started reflecting on the fact that the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilisation receives a lot of school groups who come and look at *Islamic Scientists*," Takesh says.

"Young women come and look at this painting, and we really wanted them to have a more comprehensive picture of our collective history. To have role models that were not only men but also learned women."

Though the open call yielded several "wonderful proposals", Takesh says: "None fully aligned with our vision for the project at that time." Finally, in March last year, the foundation reached out to Aleiby.



"We already had a few of her works in the collection," Takesh says. "She has an incredible technique and very unique painting style. She is an established artist and has already achieved maturity in her approach and style. She seemed like the perfect fit for this project."

However, Aleiby was initially hesitant to accept the proposal. "I initially saw the open call on social media," she tells *The National*. "I thought it was a great idea and I hoped it would materialise, but I didn't see myself taking on the project. I don't usually take on commissions."

However, Aleiby couldn't ignore the gravity and necessity of a companion piece to *Islamic Scientists* and she, too, wanted to highlight the efforts of female intellectuals and figures in the medieval Islamic world. "It was not an easy decision," she says. "The subject matter was difficult. Its proper execution was difficult."

Yet, within a few months after taking on the project, and after strenuous research aided by the foundation, Aleiby completed *A Wonderful World*. The sprawling painting, much like the work that inspired it, brings together a group who come from various parts of the world and with disparate intellectual interests and contributions.

In the upper left portion of the canvas is Fatima Al Fihriya, the ninth-century Arab figure renowned for establishing Al Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fes, Morocco. The mosque eventually became a university, which has been regarded by Unesco as the world's oldest continuously operating educational institution. Al Fihriya's sister, Mariam, is depicted beside her. She is celebrated for founding Al Andalus Mosque, which was a centre of education and learning.

Queen Amina is also portrayed in the painting. The Hausa warrior queen sits almost at the centre of the canvas, a shield is propped up beside her. Ruler of the city-state Zazzau in modern-day Nigeria, Queen Amina was renowned for her military campaigns and for fortifying her cities with lofty walls, many of which survive today.

“I want to show how these women played a role in our lives and in the creation and development of our culture

Afifa Aleiby,
artist

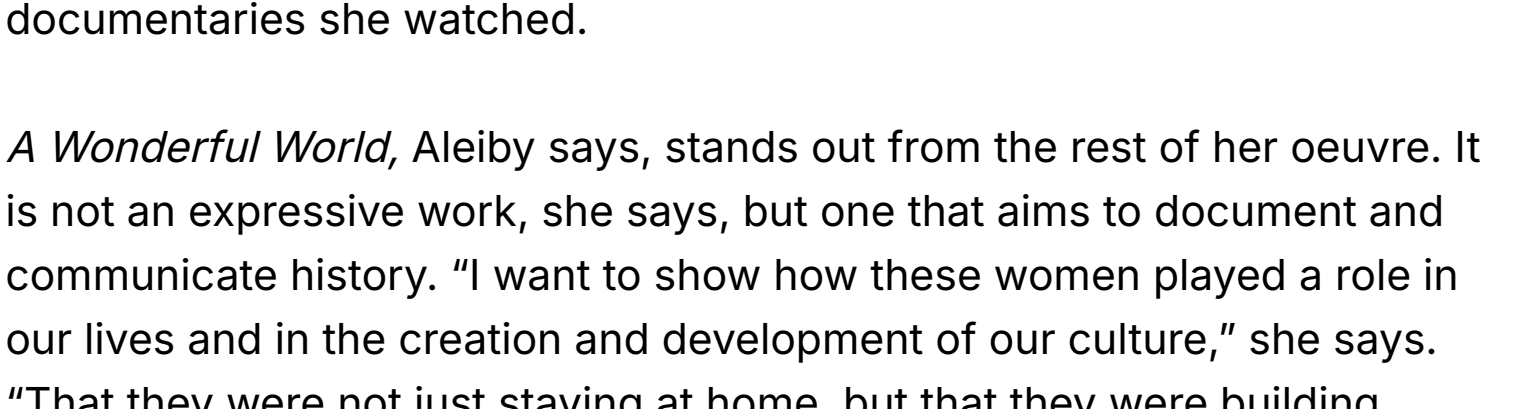
Facing Queen Amina is Dayfa Khatun, a former princess of Aleppo. The Ayyubid royalty was the regent of Aleppo from 1236 to 1242. She is famous for having protected Aleppo's autonomy during a period of marked political and regional turmoil. She was also a patron of architecture, having commissioned several notable structures, including Al Firdaws Madrasa and the Khanqah Al Farafa.

Zubaydah bint Ja'far Al Mansur has a starring role on the canvas, standing in the centre of the throng with her palms upwards. On her left, a mosque looms, symbolising Baghdad, whereas the Kaaba is depicted on her right palm.

The Abbasid princess, who was the wife of Caliph Harun Al Rashid, was celebrated for her philanthropy as well as her intellectual pursuits. Among her most famous acts was commissioning a series of wells, reservoirs and pools along the pilgrimage route from Baghdad to Makkah and Madinah to provide water for pilgrims.

Razia Sultana, meanwhile, is depicted in the upper left portion of the painting. She was the first and only female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate in India, having ascended to the throne following her father's death in 1236. The sultana's rule was marked by significant improvements to Delhi's infrastructure. She was also known for her efforts in promoting trade and education.

Two figures in the painting even precede the Islamic Golden Age and lived in the time of the Prophet Mohammed. These include Rufaida Al Aslamia, the first female Muslim nurse and surgeon, and Al Shifa'a bint Abdullah, who was a distinguished companion of the Prophet Mohammed and whose medical expertise earned her the title of "The Healer".



While viewing the painting, it is clear the 16 figures hail from different parts of the world and different eras. Aleiby says she wanted to represent these nuances through their clothing. Andalusian figures, such as Lubna of Cordoba and Fatima de Madrid, are dressed in garbs that are European. Khatun's headdress and vest, meanwhile, bring to mind medieval Syrian styles and are notably distinct from Razia Sultana's.

However, there were notable gaps in the research, meaning Aleiby had to take some liberties with her depictions, she says. Her figures of Rufaida Al Aslamia and Al Shifa'a bint Abdullah, for instance, are based on documentaries she watched.

A Wonderful World, Aleiby says, stands out from the rest of her oeuvre. It is not an expressive work, she says, but one that aims to document and communicate history. "I want to show how these women played a role in our lives and in the creation and development of our culture," she says. "That they were not just staying at home, but that they were building infrastructure, going to wars and writing poetry."

A Wonderful World will be displayed at the House of Wisdom alongside *Islamic Scientists* until the end of Ramadan. The two will then hang next to one another at the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilisation. "We would very much love for the pair to remain together," Takesh says.

Updated: February 24, 2025, 4:21 AM

Art Sharjah

Read next...



All you need to know about Xposure International Photography Festival 2025

How war has cast a 'dark shadow' over Gaza-based artist's work

Most popular today

- | | | | |
|---|--|----|--|
| 1 | How to holiday in Saudi Arabia like Cristiano Ronaldo and wife-to-be Georgina Rodriguez | 6 | French President Emmanuel Macron calls Israel's Gaza offensive a 'disaster' |
| 2 | Rio Ferdinand on decision to move to Dubai, Man United's prospects and the pros and cons of social media | 7 | Daring diamond heists in Dubai: From swallowing gems to ramming jewellery stores |
| 3 | UAE companies offer signing bonus, golden visas and wellness packages to attract and retain top talent | 8 | UAE school calendar 2025: What new term dates mean for public holidays |
| 4 | Cartoon for August 21, 2025 | 9 | UAE school pupils look to the future with strong GCSE results |
| 5 | Real Madrid salaries 2025/26: Kylian Mbappe, Vinicius Jr and Jude Bellingham among top earners | 10 | Review: Can Mattel's new Brick Shop line compete with Lego? |

The Arts Edit

A guide to arts and culture, from a Middle Eastern perspective

Enter email address

By signing up, I agree to The National's [privacy policy](#). This form is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

Sign up

The National

ipso. Regulated

News

Business

Opinion

Future

Climate

Health

Culture

Lifestyle

Sport

Weekend

Living in the UAE

Podcasts

Newsletters

App

Video

Alerts

Read E-Paper

Print Subscriptions

About Us

Contact Us

Work With Us

Advertise With Us

Terms & Conditions

Privacy Policy

Cookie Policy

Sitemap

Archive

Registration FAQs

Rosalynn Carter Fellowship

Follow us