The Asahi Shimbun Display

Making their mark
women silversmiths from Oman
This guide provides all the display text in large print.

For any queries about access at the British Museum, please email access@britishmuseum.org
Introductory text on the wall opposite the entrance:

Making their mark: women silversmiths from Oman

Oman is renowned for its tradition of silversmithing. Although Omani silversmiths are usually men, highly skilled and empowered women silversmiths have flourished for over a century. This display, the result of an international research collaboration, celebrates three Omani women silversmiths. The technical skills of the three women and intricacy of their pieces are revealed through scientific research conducted at the British Museum. The creativity and adaptability of these silversmiths have sparked renewed interest in Omani silver in the region and beyond.

Map caption:

The Sultanate of Oman, on the south-eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, has been at the centre of Indian Ocean trade routes linking Asia, the Middle East and Africa for millennia.
The names and designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the British Museum.
Text on the stand to the right of the mannequin:

Festive dress and jewellery from southern Oman

In Oman, women adorn themselves for religious and national holidays and weddings literally from head to toe. Dress and jewellery are markers of status, regional identity and belief. The 1950s silver jewellery on display is typical of the southern region of Dhofar. It represents a married woman’s personal wealth and offers her amuletic protection. The handcrafted work of three generations of women designers in the surrounding displays draws inspiration from these older forms and motifs.
Dhofari woman’s dress and jewellery

Dress with long train (abuthail, ‘father of the tail’)
Head shawl (shayla)
Headdress ornaments (dara)
Nose ring (khashafa)
Hoop earrings (halaq) with floral pendants (huruf)
Body chain (manjad)
Plait ornaments (‘athaqil)
Necklace with agate bead (‘aqayid bil-soma)
Necklace with Indian rupee pendants (‘aqayid bil-rubiya)
Quran case necklace (hirz al-sadr)
Scarf weight (sils)
 Anklets (habus)

Visitors can handle examples of silver jewellery from Oman at the Hands on desk in Room 43.
Dhofari woman’s dress and jewellery

The rectangular cut of this southern dress features a long train and an embellished square neckline.

The dress and head shawl are paired with intricately designed ornaments for the head and hair plaits, a nose-ring, earrings with floral pendants and three necklaces – the largest one with a rectangular case holding protective verses from the Quran on paper. Also featured are a triangular scarf weight, anklets with bells and a body chain worn under the dress (just visible on the shoulder).

Dress and head shawl: Dhofar, Oman, 1990; jewellery: Dhofar, Oman, 1950s
(1) * and (2) 2011,6003.46–7, donated by the Ministry of Tourism of the Sultanate of Oman; (3) 2012,6010.156.a–k; (4) 2012,6010.163; (5) 2012,6010.119–120 and 2012,6010.142 and .144; (6) 2012,6010.84; (7) 2012,6010.110.a–j; (8) 2012,6010.367; 9) 2012.6010.361; (10) 2012.6010.352; (11) 2012,6010.90, all with contributions from the Ministry of Tourism of the Sultanate of Oman, Brooke Sewell Permanent Fund, Modern Museum Fund, and Friends of...
the Ancient Near East; (12) 2009,6023.133–4, Modern Museum Fund.
*The numbers in brackets correspond to the numbers on the drawing.
Text on the left-hand wall as you face the mannequin:

‘Accuracy is in a woman’s nature. A man also works well, but women are known for making delicate objects.’
– Tuful Ramadan

Tuful Ramadan

For almost sixty years, Tuful bint Ramadan Awadh Bimkhalef (1949–2021) was a highly skilled and successful silversmith running her own workshop in Taqah, Dhofar. She married into a family of silversmiths and learnt the craft from her brother-in-law. Widowed in her mid-twenties, she raised her three sons through her trade, receiving prizes for her dedication and hard work.

Tuful’s ingenuity and resilience allowed her to adapt her craft to a rapidly changing economy and to shifting tastes in fashion. She remarked: ‘For me, silversmithing was a passion, not something I did for fame or reputation.’
On the other side of the case in front of the wall text on Tuful Ramadan:

Jewellery made by Tuful Ramadan

This group of finely produced finger rings, flower-shaped pendant and bracelet were handcrafted by the late Tuful Ramadan. They comprise many small, silver components made of sheet and wire. Tuful first hammered silver sheet and cut it into shapes. She then decorated these shapes in relief by hammering them into metal dies. Finally she assembled all these elements and soldered them together with great precision.

Taqah, Dhofar, Oman, about 2018

A close-up image of the back of Tuful’s bracelet taken with a digital microscope shows the minute accuracy of her silverwork.

© Trustees of the British Museum
Tuful used a variety of silversmithing tools (left to right): scales, crucibles, drawing plates, punches, hammers, stamping dies, doming blocks, pliers and brushes.

© HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tariq Al Said
Photo: Neil Richardson and Marcia Dorr

Tuful decreased the diameter of a silver wire by pulling it through the hole of a drawing plate.

© HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tariq Al Said
Photo: Neil Richardson and Marcia Dorr
Label for the film next to the wall text on Tuful Ramadan:

**Tuful Ramadan**

Footage from 2019 shows silversmith Tuful Ramadan twisting silver wire to produce a toe ring.

**Fatma al Najjar**

Designer Fatma al Najjar talks about the inspiration for her jewellery and brand RAHINA.

Duration: about 2.5 minutes

The film contains Tuful and Fatma’s voices and the sound of hammering.
One day, I was sitting with my sister and her husband came to me and said ‘Tuful, do you want to work?’ I said ‘Yes.’ He replied ‘Come tomorrow and bring one or two silver coins.’ I asked ‘Why?’, and he replied ‘If you like silversmithing, then it won’t be difficult.’ ‘But if you aim for fame, then you won’t be successful.’ So I said ‘Why wait till tomorrow? Let’s start now.’

I worked until I mastered all the silversmithing techniques, including embroidery with silver thread. It’s like a hobby for me. If you have the desire to do something as a hobby, then nothing is difficult. But if it’s something you do for fame and reputation, then you won’t accomplish anything. I do wish to have my own museum to give the handicrafts of Dhofar the value they deserve.

Sadly, Tuful passed away in 2021. Her son established a museum of Dhofari craft heritage in her honour, fulfilling her lifelong dream.
My love for jewellery started when I was quite young. I would sit in my mother's room and watch her prepare herself for special occasions. I would get so excited when she would bring out this family heirloom, a traditional Dhofari necklace called the rahina that has been the inspiration behind my jewellery brand. And to me, it’s a lot more than just jewellery. It’s a lived experience.
It’s going off-road, creating opportunities for myself, choosing a life I want to lead, conducting business in my own terms and digging deep beyond the ‘I can’t’ and tapping into the creative life force within.

It’s the merging of the past and the present and the future. It’s the delicate art of storytelling. It’s an ode to my ancestors’ wisdom and my heritage and the gift that keeps on giving. And ultimately it’s my platform where I can freely express.

Film: Waleed Al Kaabi

© Fatma al Najjar
To the right on the same wall:

‘My jewellery is a living experience, a conversation between me and my ancestors. It embraces a truth within me and the women I am surrounded by.’
– Fatma al Najjar

Fatma al Najjar

Fatma al Najjar (born 1992) is an innovative designer who draws inspiration from centuries of Omani cultural heritage, interpreting it for contemporary audiences. Fatma is Dhofari, like Tuful, but grew up in the capital city Muscat, where she runs numerous artistic projects, including her jewellery business RAHINA.

Fatma incorporates semi-precious stones in her silver pieces to harness their positive properties for the wearer’s well-being. She describes her jewellery, which she sells locally and around the world, as ‘authentic, grounding, playful and meaningful’.
Jewellery designed by Fatma al Najjar

Fatma describes the design of her amuletic belt and matching earrings as ‘inspired by the moon, an important natural element intertwined in the daily lives of women and Muslims’. For her, ‘the crescent patterns represent renewal while the rose quartz embodies powerful healing properties’. A concealed container behind the central amulet can hold infused oil, a positive affirmation, or a prayer. It rests over the womb, which Fatma describes as a woman's ‘creative centre, reminding us of our inner power’.

Muscat, Oman, 2022

A model wears a belt and earrings made of silver and pink quartz designed by Fatma al Najjar.

Muscat, Oman, 2022

© Fatma al Najjar
Silver strips hammered into dies shaped like beaded wire and crescent moons are applied as embellishments on Fatma’s earrings. Image taken with a scanning electron microscope.

© Trustees of the British Museum

The dangling pendants on Fatma’s earrings are hollow and made of hemispherical silver sheets soldered together. Image taken with a scanning electron microscope.

© Trustees of the British Museum
Mahfoudha al-Balushi

Mahfoudha al-Balushi (born 1965) is a successful businesswoman from the northern coastal town of Al-Khabura in the Al-Batinah region. She specialises in the design and manufacture of silver-embellished accessories for Omani men. A professional silversmith for over forty years, she comes from a family of silversmiths and was taught the craft by her father.

Mahfoudha produces sumptuously adorned daggers (khanjars), including their sheaths, and intricately embroidered leather belts that are worn by Omani men on special occasions. She is also known for her beautifully decorated ceremonial sticks for men.

Images:

Photos © Trustees of the British Museum
On the other side of the case in front of the wall text:

Men’s accessories by Mahfoudha al-Balushi

When talking about the embroidered patterns of her dagger (khanjar) belts, Mahfoudha explains: ‘First I draw the pattern outlines on leather. Then I stitch silver wire by hand following these outlines and fill them in with silver strips.’

Ceremonial sticks are held at festive occasions. This example is decorated with stamped silver sheet, tightly coiled wire, and the Omani emblem of crossed swords and a dagger under a royal crown.

Al-Khabura, Al-Batinah, Oman, 2022


© Trustees of the British Museum
Mahfoudha uses a metal die with two floral patterns to create three-dimensional embellishments on silver sheet.

Photo: Fahmida Suleman

Mahfoudha punched stars and rosettes into a silver sheet shaped into the hook that attaches the khanjar to the belt. Image taken with a scanning electron microscope.

© Trustees of the British Museum
On the other side of the case:

Man’s dagger and belt

The silver-decorated curved dagger (khanjar) is a symbol of Oman’s national identity. It represents a man’s honour, wealth, status and masculinity. It is worn attached to a silver-embroidered leather belt.

This historic belt, with its steel khanjar and decorated sheath, is similar to Mahfoudha’s example displayed nearby. It highlights the continuity in style and silver-working techniques over the years.

Oman, 1950s

Donated by the Ministry of Tourism of the Sultanate of Oman
2011,6003.3.a–d

An Omani gentleman in ceremonial dress holding a stick. Fastened to his belt are a silver dagger, tweezers, kohl container, knife and pouch.

Nizwa, Oman, 2023
Close-up details of the belt by Mahfoudha that is displayed on the other side of the case

Mahfoudha creates the spiral and tear-drop motifs on her leather belt with embroidered borders of chain-stitched silver wire tightly filled with silver strips. Images taken with a scanning electron microscope.

© Trustees of the British Museum
Film label:

Mahfoudha al-Balushi

Excerpts from a 2022 interview with silversmith Mahfoudha al-Balushi, who specialises in the manufacture of men’s accessories.

Duration: about 1.5 minutes

The film contains Mahfoudha’s voice and background sounds.
Film transcript:

Mahfoudha al-Balushi

We, as women, make things in a unique style, very meticulously. We make the dagger (khanjar) a work of art. Men often lack the artistry, with all due respect. Regardless, I’m proud of our men and their work. I, as a woman, have loved this work and practised it, competing with men.

No one can achieve this precise work unless they have learnt it from a very young age. The khanjar is not made by one person. That’s impossible! No silversmith will say that they made a khanjar by themselves. The khanjar requires much work. First, it has wood. Someone needs to work the wood. Then there is the silver. These are the silver pellets. Here is the silver wire. We start with it. We put it through the rolling press to flatten into a strip. Then we cover the khanjar sheath with silver embroidery and it becomes a full piece.

Special thanks to Mahfoudha al-Balushi
Interview conducted in 2022 as part of an international research project led by the British Museum

Film editor: Lee Roberts

© Trustees of the British Museum
Find out more

To find out more about this international collaborative project on Omani women silversmiths and the scientific research conducted at the British Museum, visit britishmuseum.org/women-silversmiths-oman or scan the QR code.

Scan the QR code for a large print guide of the display text.
Events

Explore the themes of this display through related events. For the full programme visit britishmuseum.org.

Related galleries

More Omani silver jewellery is on display in Room 43: The Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic world, where visitors can also handle examples of jewellery from Oman at the Hands on desk.

Join in online

The Museum has endeavoured to obtain consent from the rights holders of all content used in the exhibition. If you have concerns that any content has been used in the exhibition without the rights holder’s permission, please contact the Exhibitions Department at exhibitions@britishmuseum.org.
The research team of Making their mark: women silversmiths from Oman includes:

Marcia Stegath Dorr, Independent Scholar, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA
Fahmida Suleman, Curator, Islamic World, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada
Moza Sulaiman al-Wardi, Assistant Director General for Museum Affairs, Oman Across Ages Museum, Manah, Oman
Aude Mongiatti, Metals Scientist, British Museum

Acknowledgements

In collaboration with the National Museum, Sultanate of Oman, and the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada

We are grateful to the following for their support of the ongoing project:

The late Tuful bint Ramadan Awadh Bimkhalef and family
Mahfoudha al-Balushi
Fatma al Najjar
HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tariq Al Said
HE Jamal Hassan al-Moosawi
Polly and Felix Gedney
Shurooq Mohammed Jawad Najwani
Kimberly Meechan
Ibrahim al-Ghammari
Neil Richardson
Ghaliya bint Ali al-Bas
Lubna Farraj
Anne Malin
Hanan Sultan
Muhammad, Jamal and Tariq al-Balushi
Ian McLeish
Alan and Denise Costley

The British Museum also wishes to thank the following organisations for their assistance in making this project possible: The British Omani Society, Omani Women’s Association of Taqah, Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman, London, and the Ministry of Tourism of the Sultanate of Oman.