

Canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

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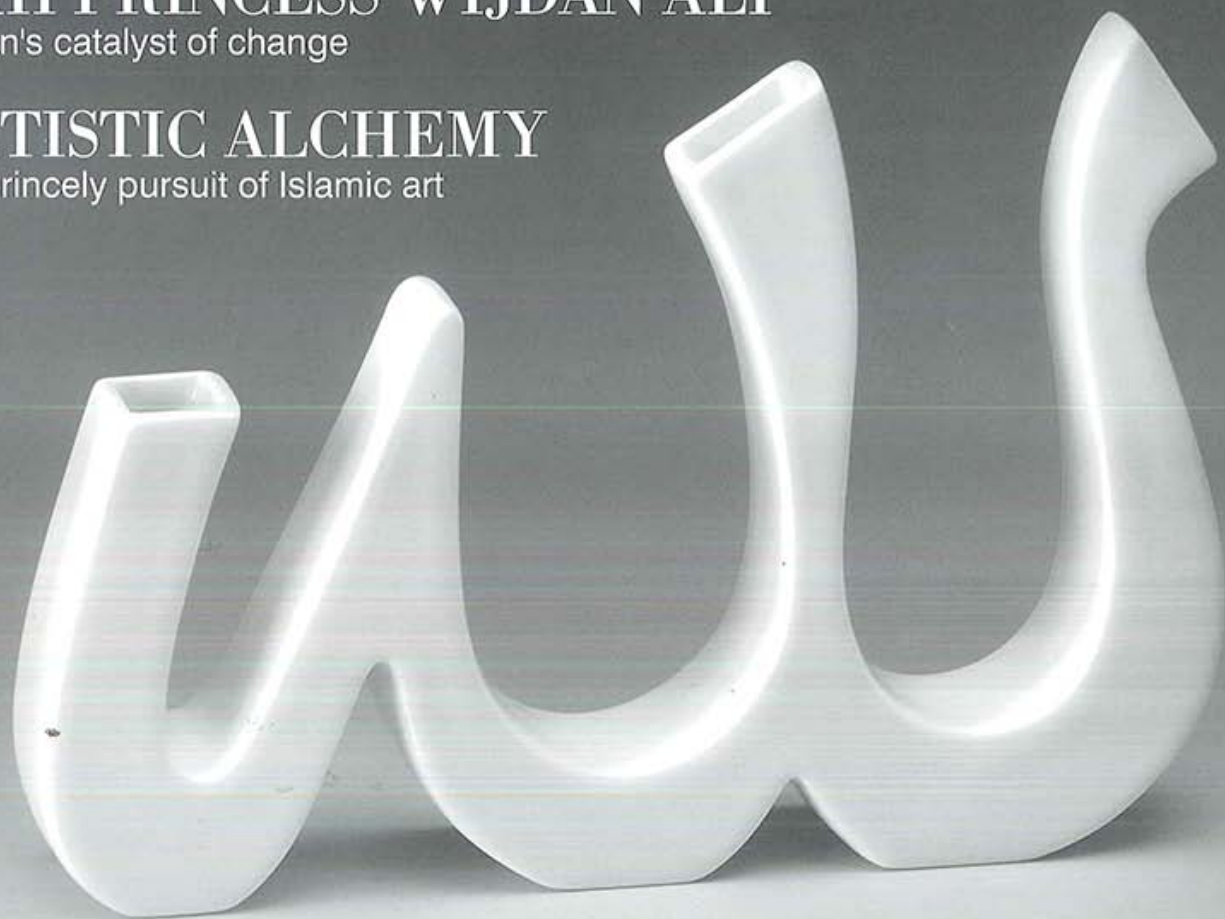
The rebirth of devotion

HRH PRINCESS WIJDAN ALI

Jordan's catalyst of change

ARTISTIC ALCHEMY

The princely pursuit of Islamic art



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Designing a revolution

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artistic alchemy

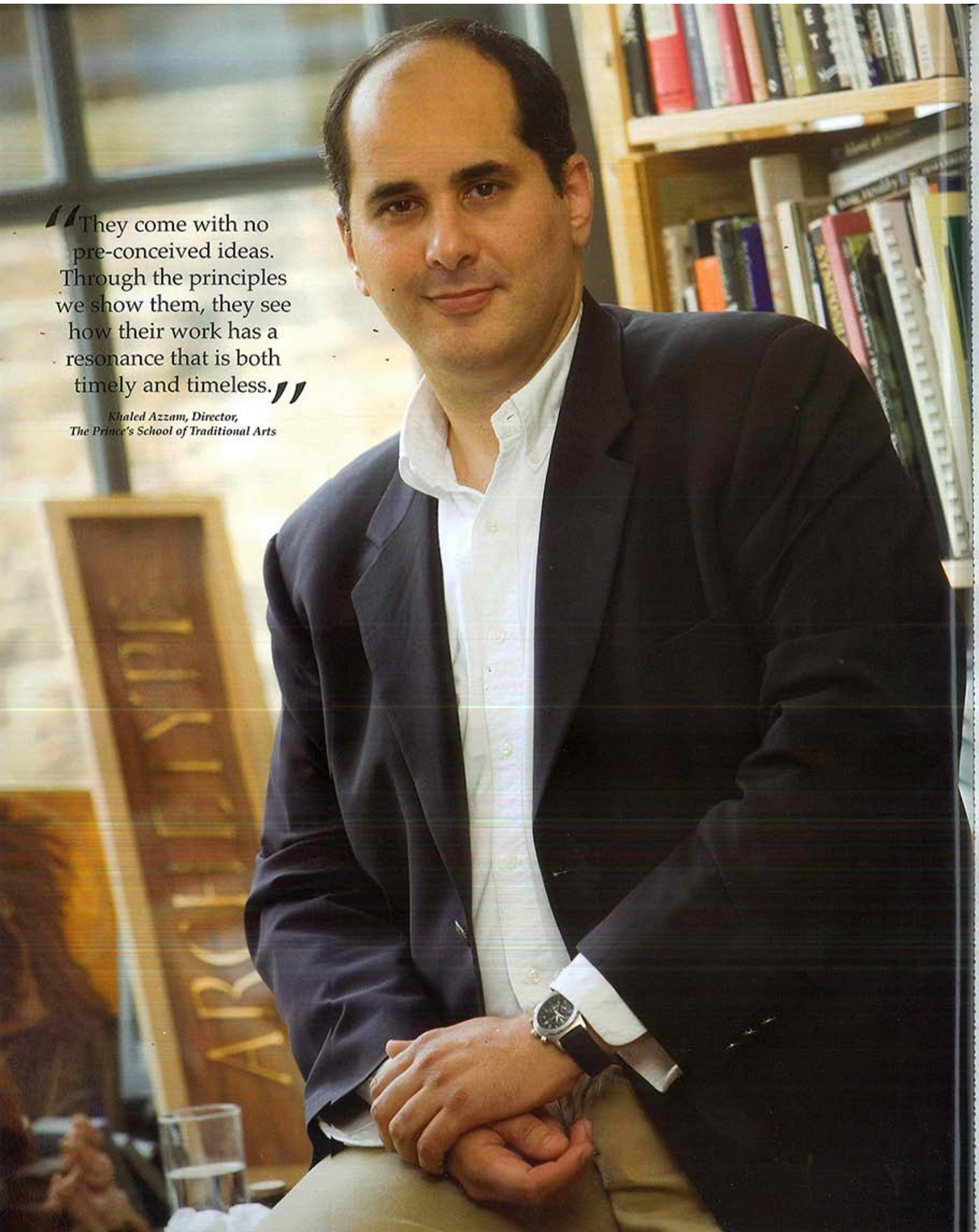
the prince's school of traditional arts

The East End of London is a far cry from the Islamic-inspired architecture of the palaces of Morocco, the mosques of Egypt or the khans of Syria. Nevertheless, The Prince's School of Traditional Arts is shifting the world's opinion on Islamic art and practice. Thanks to HRH The Prince of Wales, an unflinching commitment to tradition, a devotion to excellence and a determination to facilitate continuous creative development has made the school a world leader in its field.

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*Khaled Azzam, Director,
The Prince's School of Traditional Arts*

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Enter the Prince's School of Traditional Arts (PSTA) and a contemplative atmosphere instantly envelops you. This is a school of learning in the truest sense of the word. Forget the mindless recitations, the lengthy monologues of lecturers and the never-ending slide-shows of abstract art works. Welcome to a world where one can explore, absorb, experiment and evolve, and in the end attain a level of understanding that embraces the bigger picture as well as the finest detail.

Founded 22 years ago at the Royal College of Art, the Visual Islamic and Traditional Art programme (VITA) is now based at The Prince's School. A pioneer of practical post-graduate education of the arts, VITA is the beating heart of the PSTA's programme. Established to create a world-class hub of expertise around the art and architecture of Islam as well as of other civilizations, VITA expresses the universality of the principles of Islamic art. "So many of the world's sacred traditions have been destroyed," says Khaled Azzam, Director of the PSTA. "The VITA programme is saving those skills that balance aesthetic pleasure with profound beauty." By studying the basics of form, pattern and colour within a curriculum that blends ancient philosophy with contemporary practice, the school is not only restoring momentum to the Islamic arts but to other practices around the globe.

No one denies the value of modern teaching methods, but there is something to be said for the age-old practice of apprenticeship training. VITA marries the two together. With access to state-of-the-art equipment, students enjoy a curriculum that is deeply-seated in the Liberal Arts (Arithmetic, Music/Harmony and Astronomy/Cosmology). After all, if it was good enough for the great philosophers of the world, such as Plato and Erasmus, then it is good enough for the budding artists and craftsmen and women of The Prince's School.

From calligraphy to ceramics, Persian miniature paintings to mosaics and stained glass, the school's rooms are artistic

incubators which have already established a formidable track record. "Our work here is not just about recreating the Islamic arts but making them relevant so they can exist within their traditional context in a contemporary setting," says Azzam. With globalism penetrating even the darkest corners of creative practice nowadays, Azzam is perfectly content that the ancient practices taught at the school can flower in a 21st-century world. "The thing that knits the traditional arts together is its universality. From one part of the world to another, whether Islamic, Hindu or Persian, there exists the overriding principle of unity in form, pattern and colour," he explains. Azzam proceeds to illustrate this with a lotus leaf, the eternal symbol of Asia. "Look at its shape. The geometry that lies behind its form possesses the same underlying philosophies as in traditions from other parts of the world." This internationalism is reflected in the school's intake of 35 handpicked students each year. "They come with no pre-conceived ideas. Through the principles we show them, they see how their work has a resonance that is both timely and timeless," adds Azzam as we tour the students' ateliers.

The school's own interior design exemplifies the marriage of classic and contemporary; whitewashed Victorian brickwork fitted with modern lighting and fashionably minimalist wooden floors. Despite the open plan design, each student has a personal space in which they can experiment. Furnished with innumerable books, materials, works-in-progress and finished pieces, the mini-aterliers stand as testament to the teaching principles of the school.

Azma Salman moved from Pakistan to study at the school. Having just returned from four weeks of intense study in Turkey under Huja Hassin Jallibi, one of the great masters of illumination, she is now refining her skills with the patience and precision of a maturing practitioner. Another student, Hitomi Yasuda from Japan,

Established under the auspices of The Prince's Foundation, practicing architect, Khaled Azzam, leads The Prince's School of Traditional Arts into the 21st century.

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is undertaking a fascinating comparative study of the form and proportion of calligraphy from Japanese to Arabic and Latin. "The programme gives students the chance to sample different practices and to enter into contemplative study and establish a disciplined approach," says Azzam.

While the more delicate pursuits of miniature painting, calligraphy and manuscript illumination are practiced upstairs, students of The Prince's School get to grips with the more physical pursuits of tile making, wood carving and moulding in the bowels of the foundation's building. Here lie the industrial kilns, the glass-blowing equipment and the plaster moulds. "It is a Montessori school for adults," quips Azzam as we weave our way around the blocks of unfinished ceramics and wooden panels that bear the initial carvings of a geometric pattern. The school's philosophy is firmly based on the belief that the very

essence of traditional practice can be carried forward to embrace new materials and machinery. "We are always looking at expressing the principles in different ways and exploring just how they sit within a new context," explains Azzam as we negotiate our way past a huge wooden screen that

Above: Students enjoy an atelier-oriented education which allows them to understand the essence of Islamic art.

Right: The annual degree show of the Visual Islamic and Traditional Art programme demonstrates how students have channelled their creativity.









served as the template for six panels which now regale one of the royal palaces in Jordan.

Relevancy is key to the preservation and continuation of traditional practice. Alumni, such as architect Salma Samar Damluji and urban designer Waeil Samhour, to the current teaching staff (all of whom are professional practitioners in their chosen disciplines), are evidence of how ancient craftsmanship can be applied in a modern day environment. From Saudi Arabia, to Malaysia, Morocco, Lebanon and Jordan, institutions across the Middle East and Arab world are eager to bridge the gap between ancient and modern in partnership with The Prince's School and its VITA programme.

Earlier this year, the school launched a 12-month programme in Cairo with the Arab Academy and the Egyptian Ministry of Culture to provide workshops for those involved in the ministry's built heritage conservation programme. "Craftsmen in many countries have been taught by rote learning for generations,"

explains Azzam. "The mistakes of 300 years ago continue to mutate as they pass from one to another." So not only does this method of teaching suppress creativity and experimentation but the knowledge passed down is not faithful to its original source. "What we aim to do is re-establish the ancient principles and techniques in their entirety so that craftsmen today can progress on a firm foundation. By retracing the steps, and by understanding the journey, one can uncover the 'original' in the truest sense of the word," he says.

However, the evolution of some artistic practices within the genre of Islamic art ground to a halt many years ago. Can they really be resuscitated? Azzam is optimistic, taking the Iznik tile work of the seventh and eighth centuries as a perfect example of a skill that could be resurrected. "Our aim is not just about artistic discourse; it's about adding value to both the process

Contd. on pg 134

Left: The principles of geometry play a key role at The Prince's School of Traditional Arts, as portrayed in students' prototype designs from ceramic to wood and tilework.

Above: A combination of classical academic research and contemporary artistic practice help create the craftsmen and women of the future.

For further information on The Prince's School of Traditional Arts, please call +44 (0)207 613 8500 or visit www.princesschooltraditionalarts.org