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Ustadh Nasser Manouri of the Turquoise Mountain Institute with an artwork on display in the "Ferozkoh" exhibition. Photo: Turquoise Mountain Institute

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Afghan artisanship reborn

by [Peter Pennoyer](#)

On the Turquoise Mountain Institute and the revival of classical craftsmanship in Afghanistan.

No American embraced South Asian woodwork more than Lockwood de Forest. Born in 1850, de Forest was from a prominent New York family, which brought him into the orbits of such nineteenth-century cultural luminaries as Frederic Church. It was at Church's Olana that de Forest browsed the books that inspired his love of exotic ornament. On his two-year honeymoon he became fascinated by the elaborate woodwork in Indian architecture. This vision fit perfectly into the American Aesthetic-movement style of exotic, complex patterns, rich colors, and handwork. Seeing an opportunity to make the wood components for both his projects and a broader market, he and a local partner established the Ahmadabad Woodcarving Company. A display of the company's work at the World's Columbian Exposition proved popular. Commissions in New York included interiors in Andrew Carnegie's mansion on Fifth Avenue (now the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum) and a townhouse for his parents in New York City's Greenwich Village.

As part of Associated Artists, a collaborative design group that included Louis Comfort Tiffany, Samuel Coleman, Stanford White, and Candace Wheeler, de Forest contributed to public rooms at the famed Seventh Regiment Armory on Park Avenue, where the elaborate carved woodwork is a frame for the equally exotic metalwork, glass, and ceramics. For these artists, architects, and designers, Islamic geometric patterns, vegetal patterns, and even calligraphy offered an alternate language to classical artistic and architectural principles, an enriching layer that was an essential part of a truly American style. While a deep understanding of geometry was a prerequisite for the use of Islamic patterned woodwork, sometimes exotic emblems were used without regard for meaning. The Arabic calligraphy on Olana's doorframes, for example, is gibberish. But in general, American designers rose to the difficult challenge of understanding Islamic geometric pattern-making in order to be able to incorporate it into their own work. But in the recent past it was rightly feared that these traditional forms that so enraptured de Forest and his colleagues might be lost forever.

In 2005, Hamid Karzai, the then-Prime Minister of Afghanistan, took time on a visit with the Prince of Wales to see the Prince's School of Traditional Arts in London, a program that reflects the Prince's long-held belief that the training and practice of traditional arts leads to cultural renewal and vitality. A core part of the curriculum in this school, as it had been in the Prince's Institute of Architecture, was instruction in geometry. Here students were learning the common lessons of Euclidean geometry, but more remarkably they were introduced to Islamic geometry and

pattern-making. Karzai was reportedly saddened as the sight of students in London recapturing these traditions, which made him think of his own nation where decades of war and struggle had eviscerated a rich cultural heritage of artisanship.

The Prince's program, a rare exception in arts education, made Karzai wish that Afghanistan had a similar school.

In the vast majority of art schools, fundamental skills such as drawing based on careful observation, underpinned by an understanding of anatomy and geometry, have been devalued by the ever-changing fashions in the visual arts. Beauty, proportion, and representation have been deemed either irrelevant to artistic expression or anachronistic in a world where traditional measures of artistic achievement have been turned upside down. The Prince's program, a rare exception in arts education, made Karzai wish that Afghanistan had a similar school. Prince Charles—who has been described as a serial entrepreneur in his charitable ventures—agreed, and the two men put their significant imprimatur on a project that has become the greatest success in urban regeneration in the troubled country.

Prince Charles entrusted the creation of Turquoise Mountain, the British non-governmental organization that would bring back crafts to Kabul and regenerate the old city, to his trusted friend Rory Stewart, who had served as a coalition deputy governor for two southern provinces in Iraq. Stewart knew about funding projects in war-torn regions: as a deputy governor in Iraq he was given \$10 million of coalition funds in sealed packets monthly to dispense for the restoration of schools and hospitals, and for myriad other projects that would rebuild Iraq and diminish the insurgency. These included training in governance and anti-corruption seminars and other staples of the well-intentioned policies of many ngos.

On the Prince's suggestion, Stewart backed a project that many ngo experts did not like: establishing a school that employed members of a union banned because of its ties to Saddam Hussein to teach carpentry to street children. Of all of the projects he initiated, none was so enthusiastically embraced by the Iraqis and none had such tangible results: these trainees all landed jobs and local officials vied to address the students.

He followed this posting by spending almost two years walking from Turkey to Bangladesh. His exposure crossing Afghanistan left him with a love of the country.

Starting in early 2006, in Kabul, Stewart was confronted by extensive challenges. Traditional art and artisanship had been lost in the maelstrom that extended from the 1979 Soviet invasion, when the country saw a third of its population flee the strife between the Russians and the mujahideen, and later from the ascendant Taliban. Woodwork, jewelry, gem-cutting, calligraphy, miniature painting, and ceramics had all but disappeared. With significant population loss came a collapse of the internal markets, and continued conflict shut off foreign trade. The Taliban suppressed all artisanship, shutting down small workshops, stealing tools, and restricting women to their homes. The general physical decline of Kabul meant that basic services—water, sewage, and electricity—gave out. The city was a pale specter of its former self. Even the trees, which once gave Kabul shade and greenery, had been cut and burned for heating fuel by the Soviets.

Turquoise Mountain, named after Firozkoh (the Turquoise Mountain), the capital of Central Afghanistan which was destroyed by invading Mongols in 1220, and which is still considered the capital of Afghan culture, was conceived to accomplish both the reestablishment of the great arts of Afghanistan through vocational training and to save the core of the old city of Kabul known as Murad Khani. Rebuilding the center of the old city was Stewart's first challenge.

Politically, the city was the scene of intractable rivalries among tribes and sects. The corrupting influence of the rich heroin producers added to the confusion. Starting with seed money that had been raised by Prince Charles for six months' worth of operations, Stewart rented a space at the back of a tailor's shop. His first step was to enlist the residents of Murad Khani in the reconstruction of their city—with the goal of regenerating this important part of Kabul's history and built environment. Additionally, he engaged the residents in the creation of permanent quarters for the Turquoise Mountain Institute for Afghan Arts and Architecture. The local authorities, however, were hostile to Stewart's vision of reconstruction and restoration; their idea was represented in a rendering from the '70s: a modernist cityscape of concrete blocks, designed by Soviet planners, to replace the old city. At every turn the authorities opposed the restoration of Murad Khani, even objecting to the removal of the two-meter deep layer of rubbish that had engulfed the old buildings.

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Stewart's weapon against all of the obstructions was the enthusiasm of the people of the old city for their heritage. Weaving together staff from the various sects and tapping into the pride of place shared by the few stalwarts who had remained in the derelict houses, Stewart and his group directed the removal of over 15,000 truckloads of rubbish, unearthing the remains of the city and setting the stage for the massive restoration. Working with a paid staff and foreign volunteers, Turquoise Mountain proceeded to restore the mud-brick houses and, most important, to restore and recreate the woodwork that gives the district its character and beauty. Because Kabul sat on the Silk Road, the influences of India, Persia, and Asia can be read in the wood walls and screens that form the courtyards of Murad Khani, from the vegetal Persian ornament of the spandrels to the Mughal geometric patterns of the jali lattice screens. The restoration project, which encompassed over 112 buildings, included infrastructure—Turquoise Mountain dug and refilled all of the trenches for water, sewer, and electric lines. The result took this area from the World Monument Fund's watch list to its list of award-winning projects in two short years. The work of the restoration had also trained hundreds in skills that were marketable and returned abandoned houses to families who had been in the old city for more generations than they could count. As the old city was burnished and repopulated, the drug dealers fled.

With the restoration well underway, the Institute began to train men and women in crafts that would resurrect artisanship and lead to sales both within Afghanistan and outside. Since there was no remaining community of artisans, Turquoise Mountain had to search for masters of the crafts who had drifted away over the decades. These missing individuals were—in most cases—the last remaining link in the chain of knowledge and skills in each art. Abdul Hadi, the wood carver to King Zahid Shah, the last king of Afghanistan, was found selling oranges in the market. He returned to teach his craft—almost everything that has been accomplished by Turquoise Mountain in woodworking can be traced to his hand, his teaching, and his students, among whom some happen now to form the next coterie of teachers.

All of this was accomplished without the typical ngo working groups, studies, or commissions. Turquoise Mountain simply worked within the complex and challenging tapestry of the surviving communities of Kabul. Instead of typical résumé credentials, trust was the guide to hiring decisions. Stewart's boldest stroke was to encourage members of once-hostile sects to join together by vesting each group in the mission to restore their city and to create the Institute. By 2007, the classes in woodwork, calligraphy, miniatures, ceramics, jewelry, and gem-cutting had begun, and Turquoise Mountain was connecting the unemployed with training and experienced artisans with pupils and trade.

While continuing to fundraise to support the nascent operation, Stewart and Shoshana Clark, who took over as managing director in 2009, expanded their mission to fill community needs, establishing a school for boys and girls that saw 160 students enroll in the first week, many of whom had never been to school. They also opened a clinic for the Institute and its community, which has grown to serve thousands of residents. Taken as a whole, Turquoise Mountain has created a multifaceted enterprise that addresses the future of Kabul while resurrecting its past. Turquoise Mountain is essentially setting up its graduates to go into their own businesses. The demand for their products is growing, from major retailers buying jewelry to hotels ordering miniatures and woodwork. The local energies released by this model were perhaps so successful because Turquoise Mountain seeks to create economic independence and freedom for individuals, including women, the opposite of what the Soviets and Taliban had in mind.

At the heart of the Institute are the artisans who were able to dust off their tools, just as the old city had been restored, and to connect a generation that had known nothing but war and occupation. Some, like Abdul Hadi, were brought back from the streets to pass on the knowledge of former generations. Others were among the millions who returned to Afghanistan once the coalition had driven the Taliban away.

Among these was Nasser Mansouri, a refugee who became a pillar of the Institute's faculty. Mansouri and his family had followed the exodus from Kabul in 1989, when he was six years old, settling into a community of refugees in Iran. He recalls living in the streets until an Iraqi wood carver took him in as an apprentice. Working every day, he wondered why he couldn't play soccer like other boys. But Mansouri's years of apprenticeship and innate talent made him an impressive carver. When he was eighteen, his mentor told him that he was ready to go out on his own. Modest about his own skills, he lacked the confidence to name a price for his commissions in advance but would let each customer decide what to pay, if anything, when the piece was complete. He gained commissions, mostly pieces in Western styles, yet he yearned to return to his native land.

In 2002, after the Taliban had been routed, Mansouri returned to Kabul, a city he could not claim to remember and that in any case had been savaged beyond recognition. He recalls that he could find only one band saw in Kabul, down by the Kabul River, which was usable only when electricity was available. Mansouri soon discovered that the raw material of his trade was missing: in the entire city, there was no wood for sale. Traveling north, where he heard there was lumber, he found none and resorted to buying a walnut tree, which he then had to transport back to Kabul.

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Joining Turquoise Mountain in 2006, he learned from Abdul Hadi, who directed him in the wood shop. But, more important, Hadi sent him to find remains of significant original wood carvings within the derelict buildings of the old city. Seeing traces of Kabul's glorious architecture inspired him and gave him models to emulate. Mansouri now teaches in the Institute, focusing on jali, the screen panels that are emblematic of architecture in South Asia and the Arab world. He has also taken time, with a team of forty-five, to create a complete caravanserai, or courtyard, which was shipped to Washington, DC, where it anchors "Turquoise Mountain: Artists Transforming Afghanistan," an exhibition that contains jewelry, carpets, wood carving, calligraphy, and miniatures—all made within the Institute in Kabul.¹ At this point Mansouri is selling his work directly, hiring his own employees and thereby contributing to the economic and cultural life of the city that he was forced to leave when he was six years old.

Turquoise Mountain woodwork offers architects a rich source of inspiration and the challenge of

incorporating elements that reflect handwork into modern buildings that are composed of machined components. Based on geometries that are derived from the square and the circle, the jali displays complex star patterns of a density that makes residual spaces as important as the figures of the wood. These screens, sometimes carved in stone, act as windows and allow air circulation and even, as stronger breezes force the air to be compressed entering the screen, cool the air temperature. Modernists who normally eschew specific ornament and cultural references in their work have been known to embrace the geometric pattern-making of the Islamic world, as Jean Nouvel and his team did at Centre du Monde Arab in Paris in 1987, where an entire wall of metallic brise soleil is inspired by mashrabiya, another type of Islamic lattice screen. But a more resonant, less abstracted approach is found in late-nineteenth-century American architecture and decorative art when great architects and designers were drawn to sources from outside the Western canon and specifically from the Islamic and Arab worlds. The artisans of Turquoise Mountain are creating works that offer today's architects the possibility of reengaging with the rich world of Islamic patterns and craftsmanship.

Inspired by the example of the Associated Artists and architects like Stanford White, who were masters of classicism yet catholic in the inclusion of a range of stylistic influences, my firm has attempted, at a more elementary level, to find ways to enrich our projects by understanding and then embracing the exotic. Mansouri's jali clearly fit this category. The fact that we are supporting this extraordinarily talented artisan in a war-torn country, the fact that our clients are sending dollars to Kabul—dollars that are neither a grant nor charity—adds to our feeling that this is a good collaboration, but we would order jali regardless.

I believe that Lockwood de Forest and Stanford White understood that, as designers, their imaginations and skills were stretched by embracing unusual sources and that their designs would be better and more resonant when they confronted and reinvented known forms. The incorporation of a complex geometry in a scheme that has its own underlying matrix is a complicated task. Architects are used to principles like the golden section which guide the proportions of finite elements and whole designs, but Islamic pattern-making consists of a system of generating shapes that has no end. Indeed in the Western canon we see the world within the sweep of the figure of the Vitruvian man—set in a circle—while in Islamic geometric patterns there is no one center, but multiple centers suggesting infinity.

While the Western humanist scheme puts man at the center, Islamic geometry leaves him in a maze. Making these evidently contradictory ways of looking at the world into a coherent design is the challenge of making a symphonic experience from potentially dissonant notes. Paradoxically, because the geometry of the jali is generally created by the artisan, not by the architect, it can be regarded as an imported element—theoretically easy to use—while it is in fact quite the opposite.

Jali also offer a tool for making the separation between rooms more porous than solid partitions or even windows. Using jali between two rooms or spaces allows clear spacial definition while offering layered views from room to room. The play of the pattern of the jali against the architecture of an adjacent space makes the space seem deeper and, when handled deftly, somewhat mysterious.

Finally, because jali and other Turquoise Mountain carved building elements are hand-made, they have a material character that is simply impossible with machine-made products. So while architects, including my own office, are beginning to use three-dimensional printing to create prototypes for building elements, the hand-made has a fundamental and timeless appeal.

¹ “Turquoise Mountain: Artists Transforming Afghanistan,” opened at the Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C. on March 5, 2016 and remains on view through January 29, 2017.

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