Marvellous Creatures

Art in the Making

Illustrations inspired by fables from the Islamic world
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It is a great pleasure to present the winning entries of the Marvellous Creatures Art Competition held by the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in Doha. The competition took place alongside MIA’s special exhibition Marvellous Creatures: Animal Fables in Islamic Art (3 March to 11 July 2015), which explored the real and mythical animals in the legends, tales, and fables of the Islamic world. These creatures introduce us to the stories in which they appear – including well-known and beloved classics like Kalila wa Dimna and One Thousand and One Nights.

Animal fables have long featured in the artistic production of Islamic civilisations. These tales are connected through their celebration of the imagery and messages contained in the stories, and have been shared across history through storytelling, public performance, and visual illustration.

These historic traditions inspired the development of this competition to encourage and engage young illustrators in Qatar and beyond. Participants aged 16-25 years old were invited to submit illustrations depicting selected animal fables from Kalila wa Dimna and One Thousand and One Nights. The winning entries were chosen for their artistry, imagination and narrative skill.

It is particularly inspiring to see the works of this generation of illustrators today. In their own words, each person expresses the meaning they have drawn from fables of the past, and their own creative responses. They follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before – artists through the centuries who have illuminated stories for pleasure and learning, using their own artistic and literary heritage to communicate and better understand the world, and their place in it.

These new illustrations provide beautiful, fanciful insights into these timeless tales. Through the artwork featured in this book, we hope other young artists too will be inspired to draw on these enduring stories, to share and carry their messages into our lives today.

Ashia Al Khater –Director, Museum of Islamic Art
Dr Thalia Kennedy –Deputy Director (Education), Museum of Islamic Art
Dr Sabrina Puppin –Head of Art Education, Museum of Islamic Art
MIA congratulates the 10 winners for their artistic skill, dedication, and passion; we would also like to thank all the other competition participants and the MIA team for their support of the project.

Winners:
Amna Mohammad Abdul Rahman Al Ne‘ma
Muneera Al Qahtani
Noura Adnan Mousa Al Saa‘i
Shamil Ashraf
Gabriel Bullen
Hadia Hassan
Aaliya Jaleel
Se Hee Jang
Nimrah Kabiruddin
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The winning illustrations were on public display at the Museum of Islamic Art’s Education Centre from 30 April to 1 June 2015.

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الماء

water
There were once three fish living in a remote, cool pool of water. Two of the fish were wise and clever by nature, but the third was foolish. One day, two fishermen came across the pool and, seeing the fish, decided to return the next day with their nets. Hearing the fishermen’s conversation, that evening one of the wise fish left the pond without telling the others and reached a stream nearby. The next day, when fishermen came with their nets to the pool, the second clever fish floated to the water’s surface and pretended to be dead. The fishermen caught the fish and threw it aside. The clever fish managed to wriggle across to the nearby stream and was saved. But the third fish, the foolish one, was overcome with fear and swam in panic up and down, from right to left, until it was caught by the fisherman, and cooked.
'What attracts my attention in this story is the intelligence of the wiser fish... The wiser fish taught me how we can wisely use our intelligence and good disposition without surrender to fear... this wiser fish helped me to understand how to resolve problems that come across my life without escaping from them.'

Amna Mohammad Abdul Rahman Al Ne‘ma, 16 years old - Qatar
The story is about three fish, one smart, one wise, and one foolish. The three fish are playing in a pond far from the river. I chose a slim body for the smart fish, a circular geometric body for the wise fish, and a plain body for the foolish fish, to reflect its simplicity and stupidity.
The three fish notice the fishermen; the smart fish jumps and quickly swims to the river. The wise fish is unable to escape so it pretends to be dead and floats; the fishermen are disappointed so they throw it in the pond.
...the foolish fish didn’t use its mind to save itself, so it was caught by the fishermen. The fishermen were happy to catch the foolish fish.
‘Colours impress me. Will my life be interesting without colours? No, probably not. Fun in life is explored through colours. Colours are experienced through art. Even a dab of colour makes a difference. I believe that my painting could also make a difference. If our life is tiring and harsh, why not create something that is playful, bright, and yet meaningful? From day by day, my perspective as an artist matures as I learn more about the world of art. It is truly fascinating to experience the colourful process of becoming an artist.’

Se Hee Jang, 19 years old - South Korea
Two fishermen come across the lake and discover three fishes swimming. The three eye colours of the two clever fish and the foolish fish reflect their different personalities. Eyes are one of the most important elements in presenting our values and personal traits.
One of the fish silently swims away, leaving the other two behind. When actions happen under water, countless yet fascinating bubbles appear to leave a trace behind - the bubbles represent the actions of the fish. The use of colours is more vibrant than the other two paintings, to give a magical appearance.

Se Hee Jang
Oil on canvas

When actions happen under water, countless yet fascinating bubbles appear to leave a trace behind - the bubbles represent the actions of the fish. The use of colours is more vibrant than the other two paintings, to give a magical appearance.
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Oil on canvas

The foolish fish is overcome with fear, making it move helplessly in panic. In this painting, the main focus was to show the fast movement of the fish and how it can be compared to the struggles of humanity to survive in the world. Although the ending does not seem too idealistic, the fish’s attempt to hold onto the last hope and to survive is what makes it seem beautiful. It is not always about the outcome. Sometimes the beauty of process dominates the final result.
fire
.student: من حكايات ألف ليلة وليلة 

خصص جزء شهير من كتاب ألف ليلة وليلة لحكايات المغامر والبحار البغدادي الشهير سندباد. انطلق سندباد في رحلته على متن سفينة تجارية أوصلته إلى جزيرة رائعة الجمال مليئة بالخيرات. فتن سندباد بجمال المنظر لدرجة أنه فوت موعد السفينة وتقطعت به السبل في الجزيرة، فأخذ يتجول هنا ويناك في الاشغال إلى أن رأى ما ظن أنهما سحابة تحجب أشعة الشمس، حين اقترب منها اكتشف أنها ليست سحابة بل طائر سيمريغ، وهو طائر ضخم جميل يولد من النار، كان سندباد يتوق لمغادرة الجزيرة، وكان يعرف المسافات الطويلة التي يمكن للسيمرغ أن يقطعها، لذا انتهز فرصة هبوط الطائر في عشه القريب، فربط نفسه بقدمه، وحين أقع السيمريغ مدخلا إلى الأراضي البعيدة حصل سندباد على رحلة جوية أوصلته إلى صحراء جرداء، تملكة الكوثر في بداية على أن تجوب السواحل ونجومها يشعلانها، بدأ بخليفة أدرع عدد من الجواهر على ملاقيه متجناً أفكاره، فهاك السراي nghiêmاً يسكرغ ووجهونه بحكام وشجاعة، تم وصوله إلى الأردن، اجتمع إليه زعماء المدن التجارية، فقد نثر سندباد عماله من ماس برحلة أخرى أعاده إلى بغداد، احتفالاً بعودته إلى الوطن أعطى سندباد العددا من جواهر وأموال على إصداقته وإفارة وإمتعهم برواية حكاياته ومغامراته.

Sinbad’s Second Voyage 
One Thousand and One Nights

A well-known part of One Thousand and One Nights recounts the tales and voyages of Sinbad, an adventurer and sailor from Baghdad. On his second voyage, he set out as a trader aboard a merchant ship, arriving at an island of great beauty and abundance. So enraptured was Sinbad with his surroundings, that he missed the departing ship, and was stranded. Wandering through the lush jungle, he saw what he thought to be a cloud blocking the sun’s rays. As it came closer, he realised it was not a cloud, but a simurgh—a huge and beautiful bird-like creature. Keen to escape from the island and knowing the vast distances travelled by such birds, as the simurgh landed in its nearby nest, Sinbad rushed to tie himself to its leg. The simurgh soon took off and flew to distant lands, taking Sinbad along for the ride. On landing, Sinbad found himself in a desert. At first he was frightened, but he was soon distracted by the soil, which was made of diamonds and other precious stones. Sewing what gemstones he could into his clothes, Sinbad avoided the serpents and beasts of the desert with wit and bravery, and arrived in a merchant town. Using the diamonds he had stored, he bartered his safe passage back to Baghdad. In celebration of his return home, Sinbad gave gemstones and money to his friends and relations, and entertained them with the amazing stories of his adventures.
I have always been interested in art and have attended art classes, exhibitions, and galleries around the world. The art that I like to create myself includes painting, animation, the graphic novel genre, film, and digital illustration. I am building up my art portfolio and currently maintain four types of sketchbook, focused on contemporary art, travel, identity and graphic novels.

Gabriel Bullen, 15 years old - Canada
So entranced is Sinbad by his surroundings that he forgets everything else - and his ship leaves the island without him.

Gabriel Bullen
Graphite, pen and ink, watercolour, and digital colouring on paper
Sinbad walks through the island’s dense and lush jungle and encounters the simurgh, a giant mythical bird with feathers of many colours.
Sinbad arrives in the merchant town, after having collected gemstones from the lands through which he has travelled. In the merchant town scene, he is shown here bartering with the locals for his passage back to Baghdad.
‘I used watercolour to create blocks of colour where I planned on placing the contents of the artwork. When creating the bird made of fire, I used warm colours such as red, orange, and hints of yellow. The abundant island was embellished by including various flowers, vines, and the sea in the background. By adding multiple layers of color to the paper, depth was created. Each of the final paintings was detailed by strokes using black ink pen and using it to define the most prominent features of each small painting, keeping the most detail on the focus of each illustration. Through the use of the ballpoint pen, I was able to create a more realistic image, despite the fact that the illustration were made from imagination, and using the references within the story of Sinbad.’

Hadia Hassan, 17 years old - Pakistan
Sinbad first arrives at the extravagant and abundant island.
The simurgh appears as a silhouette against the fiery red background. Its outstretched wings indicate that the simurgh is in flight through the sky. This illustration depicts the moment when Sinbad mistakes the simurgh for a cloud.
Sinbad comes to the desert where he finds gemstones in the midst of the desert soil. Sinbad can be seen picking up some of the blue gemstones, which he sews into his clothes and escapes from the desert.
‘Art is my passion or rather a part of my life of which I have always dreamt to take up a career. A dream that I believe is on its way to being fulfilled. When I first took art as a subject in my school, I realised how art and I share a strong bond together. This was the time when I started to see art as a major part of my aspirations. At present, I am developing a deep interest in the rich culture and heritage lying behind the Islamic world. Through this, I am sure I have found a door to endless influence and motivation.’

Nimrah Kabiruddin, 18 years old - India
Sinbad set out on a merchant ship, intending to make a good trade. On their route, they stopped to explore it for a while. It was an island like no other. Its beauty outweighing anything they’d ever seen before. So last was he in its beauty and bountifulness, that he didn’t realize when his ship departed, leaving him all alone on the island. Searching high and low for a way to escape, Sinbad spotted what appeared to be a ball of fire blocking the sun.
“But wait, isn’t that a simurgh!” exclaimed Sinbad. From what he knew about the bird, it traverses through distant lands. Right then, he knew it could be his way to freedom. He quickly built a ladder and climbed up to his majestic nest where he tied himself to it. Once the thread of dawn was visible, the simurgh flew off to what looked like a lifeless desert. Upon landing he realized it was more of an ocean of precious stones than a desert. He quickly fell on his knees and sewed as many of them onto his clothes as he could manage.
So happy was Sinbad that he overcame all obstacles. After a tiring search he found his way to a distant village. He exchanged his gems with the first people he met for a ride back to his homeland, Baghdad. His people were glad to have him back and became extremely joyous upon being gifted by the gemstones from him. They also took great delight in the tales of adventures that he related. Thus, is it the tale of Sinbad that will be narrated for generations to come?
I have always had an interest in art and philosophy since a young age. I grew up in a country where cultures diverse greatly. I have always been fascinated by how distinct cultures interact and produce something unique, which has shaped me as a more liberal and open-minded person. It is interesting that although cultures differ from each ethnicity, artistic culture works harmoniously.

Tham Chin Soon, 19 years old - Malaysia
While stranded in an island, Sinbad wandered through the lush jungle. Suddenly, something was blocking the sun's ray - he thought it was a cloud. As it came closer, Sinbad realised it was not a cloud, but a huge, beautiful bird - a simurgh.
Sinbad was keen to escape the island. Knowing the vast distances travelled by simurghs, Sinbad rushed to tie himself to its leg as the simurgh took off and flew to a distant land.
On landing, Sinbad found himself in a desert. At first, he was frightened by the giant serpents, but he soon noticed diamonds and precious stones on the soil. Sinbad quickly collected the gemstones into his bag to trade his way back home.
الأرض

earth
Long ago, many animals lived together in the forest. They all feared the lion, who was famous for his anger and ferocity. Frightened for their lives, the animals agreed to pacify the lion by bringing him a platter of meat every morning, drawing lots to choose the unlucky victim each day. Many animals were sacrificed until one day it was the turn of a clever hare. The hare thought all night how he could save his life. Suddenly an idea struck him. The next day, panting heavily, he reached the lion. He found the lion impatiently waiting for his food. ’Oh king, I am sorry to be late. There is another lion who is threatening to capture your territory, and who took the other hare with me, for I took him to warn you. The hare was swallowed up in the waters. The hare rejoiced and went back to tell all the animals that they had nothing to fear anymore.
I have drawn since childhood and love art. I practice many artistic styles and make short animations. I draw and paint on many different materials, but my favourite is paper. I hope to be an accomplished international artist and to make my family and country proud. I would like to produce Arabic animation of the highest standards.'
This illustration has sense of darkness and evil shown by black clouds, blades of grass that are not green, and trees that are leafless - to express drought and fear. The lion is fierce and wild. The animals agreed to pacify the lion by bringing him a platter of meat every morning.
Noura Adnan Mousa Al Saa’i
Watercolour, marker, and pastel pencil on paper

This drawing reflects the beauty of the forest, in contrast with the harsh location of the lion, where there is moonlight, shooting stars, reflection of stars on the water, and the sounds of the forest animals. The hare thinks through the night about how he can save his life. Suddenly he is struck by an idea.
The clever hare leads the lion to a well filled with water. When the lion peers in, he sees his own reflection in the water. Mistaking the image for his enemy, the lion becomes very angry and attacks his own reflection. This drawing expresses the lion’s anger — with his fangs and claws — when he sees his rival, the other lion.
'As an artist I work hard to develop paintings that speak both to me and to others about the beauty that exists in ancient stories. I like to capture the image with colourful strokes. Art makes me feel complete. I found this story interesting because it links us to nature, the environment and forests – it is a story that also tells us that wisdom is stronger than any physical strength!'

Shamil Ashraf, 16 years old - India
The hare cleverly tries to convince the lion there is a rival lion in the jungle who took other hares as his meal.
After convincing the lion that there is another lion in the jungle who claims to be bigger and stronger than him... the clever hare leads the lion to a well filled with water. And when the lion peers in, he sees his own reflection in the water and, mistaking the image for his enemy, the foolish lion jumps into the well.
All the animals rejoiced at what happened... they had nothing to fear anymore.
'My art is influenced by many aspects surrounding me. I enjoy drawing and painting and interpreting things in a stylistic way. I see my art as a means of escape and I take great pleasure in finding ways to improve myself through it.'

Aaliya Jaleel, 15 years old - USA
The lion, having terrorized the jungle, is greatly feared. To keep more animals from being sacrificed, the hare comes up with a plan to get rid of him.
The lion, upon seeing his reflection, believes that there is another lion threatening his position.
The lion, having been tricked by the clever hare, jumps into the well to try to attack 'the other lion'. Doing so, he drowns, ending his rule of the jungle.
الهواء

air
قصة من كتاب ألف ليلة وليلة تحكي عن السحر وآثاره. تبدأ القصة بزواج أحد تجار البصرة ويدعى أبو محمد الكسلان من شابة جميلة هي ابنة شريف القرية. في ليلة الزفاف دخل أبو محمد غرفة الفتاة، لكنه كسر دون قصد تميمة تحميها من غضب المارد الشرير. خطف المارد الفتاة واتمها في ذهول. ظهرت أمام أبو محمد مجموعة حميمة من الجن تخبره عن مكان المارد. ساعدت مجموعة الجن أبو محمد على الهروب ثم أتقتلت في أحد البحار الغريبة حيث أنقذته سفينة تجارية عابرة.

أخبره بحارة السفينة أن محبوبته مسجونة في مدينة براس الشهيرة في الصين. بناءً على خطابه وحازم المدينة، وجد أحد التجار الموثوق به محبوبته عن تميمة سحرية مصنوعة على شكل نسر. تبع أبو محمد إرشادات عروسه وخرج بحثًا عن التميمة، ووجدوها في مكان قريب. رش عليها الرائحة، واتقتلت، وأتقتلت أيضًا أبو محمد وعروسه بالقرب من الأسر، وعادا إلى المدينة حيث عاشا في ثبات ونقاء.

Abu Mohammad Lazybones
One Thousand and One Nights

A tale from One Thousand and One Nights begins with the marriage of a Basra merchant, Abu Mohammad Lazybones, to the beautiful young daughter of a local Sharif. On their wedding night in the girl’s room, Abu Mohammad unwittingly broke a talisman protecting her from the unwanted attentions of a marid—a large and powerful jinni (supernatural spirit). The marid carried the girl off, leaving her family distraught. A group of kindly jinn appeared before Abu Muhammad, telling him they knew where the marid was hiding. With their help, he flew far through the air, before being dropped into a foreign sea, where he was rescued by a passing merchant ship. The sailors aboard told him that his beloved was held in the famous City of Brass in far-off China. Continuing his difficult journey, Abu Mohammad reached the city, where he found his love in a beautiful underground chamber, surrounded by gold, pearls, and jewels. His bride told him about a magical talisman crafted in the shape of an eagle. Following her indications Abu Mohammad found it in a nearby cave. He sprinkled musk onto the talisman, releasing a smoke that drew a group of friendly jinn to its presence. The jinn agreed to chain up the marid, allowing Abu Mohammad and his bride to escape safely from captivity. Taking the eagle talisman with them, the couple returned happily to Basra, where it brought them much good fortune and wealth.
في صغرى، اعتبرت الفن طريقة للتحرر من التفكير في هموم المستقبل والماضي وغيرهما من الهومن، جعلني الفن أعيش في الحاضر وأركز على ما لدي. فكان بالنسبة لي، طريقة للتحرر والانطلاق. لفتت "قصة أبو محمد الكسلان" انتباهي لأن أحداثها بدت مألوفة جداً، وكأنني سمعتها في صغرى. كان عالم السحر والجن بالنسبة لي، كطفلة أشبه بمنطقة محرمة. عالم لا يسمح لي برؤيته بل أكملت بخيالي. تسارعت أفكار الرسوم الثلاثة إلى ذهني أثناء قراءة القصة فأمسكت بالقلم وبدأت الرسم.

منيرة القحطاني، 25 عاماً - قطر

‘When I was young, I saw art as a way to just let go of the future, past, and all other worries I had. Art made me live in the now and focus on what I have. It was, to me, a way to let my mind wonder off and let go. “A Tale of Abu Mohammad Lazybones” captured my interest the most, as its events sounded so familiar; as a story I once have heard when I was young. The world of magic and jinn to a child was like a forbidden land, a world we cannot see, but can only imagine. The idea for the three illustrations just came running into my mind as I was reading the story. So, I just lifted the pen and started the drawing process.’

Muneera Al Qahtani, 25 years old - Qatar
The girl is imprisoned by the marid. The girl is wearing green, the colour of wedding dresses in the old days. The hand of the marid is holding the frame and his cat eyes looking to show him having control over her. The gold color of the background behind the girl is used as a symbol of the marid’s golden treasures that surround her.
In this illustration we can see the broken talisman that was protecting the girl from the unwanted attention of a marid - a large and powerful jinni (supernatural spirit).

منيرة القحطاني
خشب، الوان مائية، زيت وطلاء على ورق
نرى في هذا الرسم التعويذة المكسورة التي حاولت تحمي الفتاة من اهتمام المارد الشرير بها، والمارد هنا هو جني كبير وقوي.
Muneera Al Qahtani
Wood, watercolour, oil, and window paint on paper

This illustration shows the marid coming to steal the girl away.