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# In Art and Application: Pomegranates in the Middle East\*

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The pomegranate (*Punica granatum*) is to the Middle East what apples are to North America - readily available and ripe with multiple associations and purpose. Both fruits are widely symbolized and represented in Biblical and Eurocentric art, carry numerous and notable symbolic meanings, and have endured in the mythology and livelihoods of many cultures. However, it is the pomegranate, in the art, and culture of the Middle East, that inspires this geographic-graphic inquiry.

A series of paintings form the core of this research. While the first two series were created as a means to find my artistic equilibrium in a foreign culture, the other was considered research - paintings inspired by oral interviews conducted with respondents ranging from 25 to 80 years of age, representing Kuwait, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Iraq.

Together the three series represent a unique visual literature review and research method used to explore a common fruit with multiple associations.

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## Background of the Study

Since September 2004, I've been painting and researching pomegranates in the Middle East state of Kuwait, where I teach studio arts for Kuwait University. The first series evolved out of innate fascination with the fruit and the need to contextualize this bit of the Middle East with a larger need - a longing for the Pacific Northwest, which I had left to work in a country as flat and arid as my native land is mountainous and green.

In an improvised studio (the dining room table) in university faculty housing, I painted over and added pomegranates on each canvas. Working from life, pomegranates, which are plentiful in Kuwait's markets, substituted for inspiration I found in the landscape of my homeland. "Pomegranate Evolution" depicts my imagined and mythological story of how pomegranates came to earth - beginning as a celestial star, exploding, and in varied stages falling to Earth. This series of 24 paintings paved the way for a larger, bolder series (see Figures 1 and 2).



Fig. 1. Series #1



Fig. 2. Series #2

“Pomegranates Plus,” is a 30”x50” series of 40 acrylic-on-paper paintings. The paintings are abstract and symbolic - the colors and shapes found within the fruit when broken open express a range of feelings resulting from interacting with the infrastructure of an Islamic country (see Figures 3 and 4). An exhibition of over 30 of these paintings was held at one of Kuwait’s commercial art galleries, and drew a large number of viewers from all areas of the Middle East.



Fig. 3. Series #2



Fig. 4. Series #2

Viewers at this exhibit each had her or his own associations of the pomegranate in their lives and culture. Inspired by their stories, I wrote and was awarded a Kuwait University research grant to further study the pomegranate as it appears in Middle East arts and culture.

This research would combine a traditional literature review and oral interviews, with paintings to address the main research question: How is the pomegranate depicted in Middle East culture? I used my own first paintings as examples to illustrate further development of this inquiry, which relied on insights gained through oral interviews on the pomegranate’s significance in this culture. The aggregate body of work provides anthropological and artistic documentation of the use and significance of the pomegranate specific to the Middle East.

## Introduction: Symbols, Myths and Ritual

The pomegranate, one of the earliest fruits cultivated by humankind, can be traced back over 4000 years in the Tigris and Euphrates region, which comprises the territory of Iraq nowadays. The pomegranate has often been referred to as the 'fruit of paradise,' and it is speculated that Arab caravans carried the fruit as a replacement for water (1), among its various uses.

Biblical scholars believe it was the pomegranate - not the apple - which prompted original sin (1, 2), suggesting that it was a pomegranate, rather than an apple, that Adam gave to Eve, as depicted in biblical paintings of the Garden of Eden. The pomegranate's placement in European art, which uses the fruit as a symbol of unity or nourishment of the soul, conforms to other Biblical references to pomegranates, as well.

In Christian iconography, the pervasiveness of the pomegranate is evident in the Italian mannerist Alessandro Allori's *Madonna Enthroned with Child* (1535-1607); Mariotto di Nardo's *Madonna and Child with Saints*; Botticello's *The Virgin and Child with Five Angels* (1485-90), *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (1487), and *Madonna of the Magnificat* (1480-1); and Leonardo da Vinci's oil-on-panel, *The Dreyfus Madonna (The Madonna with a Pomegranate)* (ca 1469). In each painting, a woman draped in a blue robe cradles a child, both of their hands grasping an open pomegranate. The pomegranate is more seductively featured in Caravaggio's *Bacchus* (1595), in which a sole fruit lies cracked open in a succulent arrangement before a young Bacchus, who is in the early stages of intoxication.

In literature, most specifically Greek mythology, the pomegranate extends beyond the metaphor or symbol to take the place of an object with direct links to the changing of the seasons. In the story of Persephone, the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, Persephone's abduction and release by the God Hades was linked to the changing of the seasons. Before Hades released Persephone, he made her unknowingly eat pomegranate seeds, which would bind her to him for one-third of each year. Demeter, a grief-stricken mother who ruled the seasons, refused to let anything grow upon the Earth as long as Persephone remained with Hades (3, 4). Thus, during the winter each year, the Earth remains barren.

Greeks continue to celebrate the life-giving forces - immortality, resurrection and rebirth - symbolized by the pomegranate, by smashing a pomegranate under the foot on the doorstep on the first day of each new year (5).

Other myths about the pomegranate in the ancient and medieval worlds symbolically connect the fruit with birth, death and bleeding.

To ancient Persians, the pomegranate symbolized invincibility in battle

extending the fruit's authority over death. In India the goddess Mahadevi sits beneath a pomegranate tree distributing wealth and Kali's son the elephant-like Ganesha is often shown holding a pomegranate in his trunk or one of many hands (6).

Cross-cultural symbolism extends to Asia where pomegranates have been used to speed the delivery of a son (7). In India and Persia, rituals at places of worship are performed that include cutting, washing and pulverizing twigs from pomegranate trees (8).

## Arab Art

Pomegranates portrayed realistically are rare in Arabic art. In the Arab culture, particularly that of Arab Muslims, the belief that 'There is no divinity other than God,' suggests aniconism, or the absence of icons, in Islamic art resulting in the use of decorative patterns (including calligraphy) as opposed to figural or natural visual representation. On the other hand, images specific to the pomegranate appear as stylized ornamentation in other Islamic venues such as textiles, paintings and architecture (9).

However, it is in Persian, Mughal and Indian paintings that the pomegranate is shown realistically in scenes depicting the households and market places of the Middle East (10-14). Pomegranates are shown in a plate in the painting *Ladies around a Samovar*, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century painter Imail Jalayir; and in illustrated Persian manuscripts, they are shown in paintings of social gatherings where food is served (15). Pomegranates also appear in illustrations from the Khames of Nizami and the 14<sup>th</sup> century manuscript *Shah-nameh* (16-19).

Although both grown in and imported into Kuwait, none of nearly 200 paintings in the artist Ayoub Hussein Al-Ayoub's text *The Kuwaiti Heritage* (20), includes any reference to the pomegranate in the historical settings of old Kuwait, although numerous depictions of other foodstuffs and meals appear in these narrative paintings. This may be because "Pomegranate was very rare in Kuwait at that time, and it was probably brought by boats from Iran and Iraq," as one interviewee in this author's study, now in her 80s, recalled.

Pomegranate motifs are suggested in the medallion carpets (1600-1800 AD) from Ushak in Western Anatolia (21), and in a large, 16<sup>th</sup> century medallion carpet from northwestern Iran (see Figure 5), and in works from Asia and Turkey (19, 22).



**Fig. 5. Medallion Carpet LNS 25R,  
The al-Sabah Collection Dar al Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait**

It is interesting to note that before the advent of synthetic dyes, the red coloring used to represent pomegranates in textiles consisted primarily of madder or madder warty (23). The skin of the pomegranate was also used to produce yellow-ochre dyes.

The pomegranate is used less frequently as a symbol or decoration in the 'hard,' or plastic arts, i.e., ceramics and glass, and is only marginally referenced in symbolic interpretation in architectural facades (24-26). Branch and fruit motifs appear on unglazed earthenware from 8<sup>th</sup> century Iran; simple, single, repeated fruit motifs painted in luster on opaque white glaze date to 9<sup>th</sup> century Iran; and pomegranate motifs in brown, yellow, black and white slip with frit bodies painted in luster on transparent and white glaze appear on earthenware from 13<sup>th</sup> century Iran. A blue motif symbolic of a halved pomegranate is apparent on a Turkish flask (see Figure 6) from the 18<sup>th</sup> century and reappears in contemporary ceramics of modern-day Turkey (24).

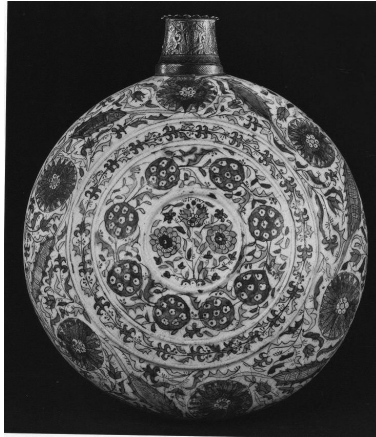


Fig. 6. Ceramic Vessel LNS 29C  
The al-Sabah Collection Dar al Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait.

Pomegranate motifs are prevalent in Turkish tiles and ceramics (25). They are also found in Tunisian mosaics, rendered as intact rather than stylized fruit (26).

Pomegranate imagery is perhaps less evident in ancient glasswork because of the difficulty involved in working in that medium, although there are fragmentary remnants of glass from 9<sup>th</sup> century Syria and 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century Egypt or Mesopotamia in which pomegranate imagery appears (27).

Pomegranate motifs are also evident in 13<sup>th</sup> century Iranian ceramics (28). However, specific designs attributed to 'poppy designs or motifs' could also be interpreted as pomegranate images in glass and ceramic ware from Syria (29).

A 19<sup>th</sup> century Iranian bronze ewer, or pitcher, is described as having a "pomegranate-shaped thumb rest" (17).

This is a rare artifact in that it represents the pomegranate realistically as opposed to stylistically (see Figure 7).

House decorations in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Tashkent often included ornamental wall paintings and carved *ganch* panels with trees, i.e., pomegranate trees, that symbolize life (30).

Clearly, a stand of raised gold images of open pomegranates adorns the stand of the reservoir of a traditional water-pipe (*huqqa*) (31).

## Methodology

The importance and role of the pomegranate in the arts and culture of

the Middle East surfaced during interviews conducted with representatives from this region. These stories provided background information not reflected in the literature review of the art and architecture of the past. Information gained during interviews offered me intangible information which I transformed into visual documents, to create a new series of pomegranate paintings.



Fig. 7. Vessel LNS 132M The al-Sabah Collection Dar al Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait

The method of data collection involved a series of set, oral interviews which were used to inspire a series of paintings based on information gained during an interview. After an interview was conducted the information was analyzed for content and meaning. Some interviews inspired the creation of two or more paintings, while others matched a single painting reflecting the main points of the interview. For example, two respondents remembered pomegranate husks were used to tan hides which were used to haul water during Kuwait's early history. As with the other paintings this remembrance was painted metaphorically and semi-abstractly (see Figure 8).



**Fig. 8. Pomegranate-Tanned Water Hide**

Over 30 interviews were conducted with subjects ranging in age from 25 to 80 of both genders representing Kuwait, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates. However, because of redundancy, just 30 of the interviews were used.

Prior to each interview, subjects signed a consent form (translated in English and Arabic) describing the research project and explaining that responses might or might not be transcribed and edited for possible inclusion in articles to be published in professional journals, in multi-media presentations and in other transmittable forms related to the project (see Appendix).

The interview questionnaire further described the purpose of the research and how it was to be conducted, as well as confirming that all interviews were voluntary, and that the interviewee should feel free to terminate the interview at any time. It further explained that information gained in the interview might or might not be used in the interviewer's visual art and supporting exhibition (see Appendix).

The questions asked were as follows:

1. What is your first memory of the pomegranate?
2. How was it used specific to your household?
3. How was it used specific to your culture or traditions?
4. How do you see it used or respected differently by other Middle East cultures?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Eating the fruit was mentioned by 100 percent of the participants,

followed in descending rank order by medicinal uses, cosmetic purposes, as sexual symbolism and as references in the Qur'an. Other responses included growing the fruit and using it to tan hides. Younger interviewees spoke mainly about eating the fruit and its health benefits, while older participants spoke about how the pomegranate was used medicinally and as a beauty aid, as well as in art, poetry, and being mentioned in the Qur'an (see Table 1).

Finding interview subjects was not difficult (considering how this segregated culture is unaccustomed to volunteerism). People freely volunteered their time to answer a structured interview questionnaire. The difficulty was translating these oral histories into visual statements representative of the verbal responses. Additionally, I faced a deadline for creating an exhibit of paintings based on oral interviews representing cultures easily and unintentionally offended by a Western interpretation given the fluctuations, misinterpretations and misunderstandings possible in a country where *sharia*, or Islamic law, is a major influence in constitutional law. Each respondent either read or had read to them a paper describing the research project and signed a consent form. Their responses were recorded on the actual questionnaires.

## The Interviews

Historically, Arab caravans carried the fruit because it contains up to 80 percent water, and supplies sodium, potassium, calcium, iron and phosphorus, which travelers lost in sweat as they crossed the hot deserts (1).

One older male and one older female interviewee each told me about either using or watching an older family member tan animal hides using a dried pomegranate husk. In one case, the pomegranate-rind tanned hides were used to create skin bags for hauling water. These memories came from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when water in the Middle East was much more precious and hauled over extensive, hot, dry terrain. In these two paintings, I wanted to give a soothing color and form to an arduous task performed under trying conditions, while honoring the pomegranate's caravan history (see Figure 8).

Before transcontinental trade became possible in the Middle East, commerce involved transport via overland caravans and ships. One woman recalled waiting for the *dhows* (wooden sailing vessels) to come ashore and off-load crates filled with pomegranates from Iran (see Figure 10). Another interviewee recalled there being a large pomegranate tree in the courtyard of her grade school in Jordan. Students anticipated the day on which the ripe pomegranates were plucked from the tree and placed in small piles to be distributed to the children. The older children who were asked to pick the pomegranates received bigger shares of the fruit (see Figure 10).



Fig. 9. By Sea



Fig. 10. By Land

The Niche Series is actually a sub-series in this series of pomegranate paintings. It was inspired by an interview with an older respondent who recalled that pomegranates were long ago stored in hay or straw inside clay *tanours* (ovens) or *roushinah* (depressions made in the walls of the old coral and clay houses). Her recollection opened my eyes to niches in historic buildings and incorporated into contemporary architecture later discovered in travels around the Middle East (see Figures 11 and 12).



Fig. 11. Niche Series



Fig. 12. Niche Series

Both younger and older respondents made reference to using every seed in the pomegranate. They cited the Islamic Holy Book, the *Qur'an* and the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), who said every seed of a pomegranate should be eaten because one of them was from Heaven.

Qur'an: Many respondents mentioned reference to the pomegranate in the Islamic holy book, the Qur'an. In particular, in *Sûrah 55 Ar-Rahmân*, verse 68 stands out: "In them (both) will be fruits, and date-palms and pomegranates" (34). Those who were interviewed made the following comments about the religious overtones associated with the fruit:

■ "There is a saying from the Prophet Mohammed that we should eat every seed or sack because one of them is from Heaven."

■ "Pomegranates are mentioned in the Qur'an. God, when he talked about kinds of food, he mentioned the pomegranate as a great food. When we go to Paradise in the afterlife, we will eat the pomegranate. Before I like[d] it as a fruit. Now I like it because of its religious thread. I can say it is a description of God's Qur'an. You feel it, and I have to say when I see the seeds of [a] pomegranate beside each other in a very organized way, God is great."

■ "In our religion, [the] pomegranate is mentioned in our Holy Qur'an, so we treat it as a holy fruit. Our Prophet said that every pomegranate has one seed from Paradise."

■ "Eating the fruit of heaven is greatly advantageous as mentioned in

the Holy Qur'an and holy narrations of the Holy Prophet Mohammad and his progeny.”

■ “You must eat even the very last seed sack as it may be the one that will help you get to Heaven.”

I created two paintings based on these interviews. Additionally, I altered the skin to appear in the shape of a shucked oyster shell, wherein the ruby-red seed could also serve as metaphor for a precious pearl, a symbol itself of some parts of the Middle East's historic past (see Figure 13).



Fig. 13. The Last Seed

Food: Respondents described how seeds were scraped out of the fruit, and then the fruit was mixed with sugar and a little water before refrigerating the mixture for later, chilled consumption. This fruit-sugar mixture was preferred over drinking the juice as a way of ingesting pomegranates (see Figure 14). The most common means of removing the seeds from the husk was said to be cutting the orb in half and hitting the outside with a spoon.



Fig. 14. Chilled Seeds

Medicine: One of the most commonly mentioned connections with the pomegranate, especially among the older respondents, was its medicinal attributes (Table 1). The fruit and skin, fresh or dried, were used to treat everything from bronchial maladies to anemia, intestinal ailments, skin and eye infections, jaundice, cholera and a range of other ills in addition to being used to dye hair, skin and fabric.

Almost all of the respondents referred to the pomegranate's antioxidant benefits. Antioxidants are thought to neutralize the impact of free radicals on cells and tissue, which may impact the development of disease, including some cancers. Pomegranates possess high levels of one specific type of antioxidant, polyphenols, which are thought to protect cells against damage from ultraviolet radiation, among other harmful agents (32). The dried skin, when mixed with salt or other ingredients, was reported to be used to prevent and cure gum disease, dysentery, bronchial conditions, and rashes; to stimulate the appetite; and to heal wounds. The moist skin and seeds were said to be used as hair coloring and in cosmetics.

The literature review found an obscure mention of the pomegranate's rare hallucinogenic properties produced by an infusion of crushed pomegranate, leaves and twigs. Such a drink was administered to the dying (33).

For me, creating paintings with allegories to types of healing was not inspiring. Consequently, I made only one painting only abstractly referring to the fruit's medicinal roots.

Sexual Symbol: In contrast to traditional aniconism, symbolic references were made to the pomegranate, e.g., "Your teeth look like the seeds of the pomegranate." "She has lips shiny as pomegranate seeds." "She has cheeks like pomegranates." "Her breasts are pomegranates."

Both female and male interviewees mentioned the use of pomegranates as symbols of female features deemed sexual, e.g., breasts and lips. For instance, one said: "Sometimes it [the pomegranate] is mentioned in Arab poetry in the simile of breasts. When men are asked about pomegranates, they see the breasts of girls." A 25-year-old male interviewee said: "We refer to pretty girls as having pomegranate cheeks," while a 60-year-old female commented that "It [the pomegranate] is usually used as a simile for a woman's bust in a sexual [way]."

One interviewee recalled that there was a song about the pomegranate. Several days later while teaching a drawing class, I mentioned the name of this song to my students. Within minutes, the studio concentration had been shattered as some of the students began singing, first in Arabic:

*Haila ya romana...*

Al-hiwa za' alana  
Minhn yirateeha?  
Aana aratheeha  
Ow eb rouhii  
Afdeeha....

and then later translating it into English:

Cardamom, romana  
The beautiful girl is sad  
Who'll make her happy  
I'll do that  
And give her my soul.

I made two paintings reflecting the dualistic roman and cardamom seed (see Figure 15).



Fig. 15 Cardamom - Pomegranate Song

### Conclusion

While the literature review provided a historical background to the pomegranate's role in art (mainly as a decorative motif) and culture (mainly culinary) in the Middle East, it was through the interviews and oral traditions that the importance of the pomegranate in these countries is reflected. Translating these interviews into a series of metaphorical, symbolic, narrative paintings, created a contemporary bridge between the past and the present, and provided a different perspective on the pomegranate in Middle East arts and culture.

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**Table 1**  
**Interviewees' Responses by Category**

<b>Response Category</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Food	30	100
Medicine	22	73
Qur'an Reference	4	13
Sexual Symbolism	6	20
Symbolism	1	3
Tanning Hides	4	13

NB: Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

## Appendix

Nationality \_\_\_\_\_

Time in \_\_\_\_\_

Time out \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE: POMEGRANATES IN MIDDLE EAST ARTS & CULTURE (WA0107)

The purpose of this interview is to gain an understanding of the pomegranate in the arts and culture specific to Middle East regions.

This interview will be conducted using a simplified questionnaire form and the responses may or may not be audio taped. This standardized, open-ended interview will be used by all volunteer research participants.

This interview is structured to gain information on a specific topic and will not include questions of a personal nature. Interview information may or may not be used in the interviewer's visual art and supporting exhibition. The interviewee may feel free to terminate the interview at any point.

1. What is your first memory of the pomegranate?
2. How was it used specific to your household?
3. How was it used specific to your culture or traditions?
4. How do you see it used or respected differently by other Middle East cultures?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

# فن الفن والتطبيق: الرمان في الشرق الأوسط

يوفون واك في ا

يعد (الرمان) في ثقافة بلدان الشرق الأوسط كما هو (التفاح) بالنسبة لأمريكا الشمالية، وفير ومرتبطة بمفاهيم متعددة ومستخدم لأغراض عديدة. إن كلاً من (الرمان) و(التفاح) يشير إلى رموز مختلفة في الكتاب المقدس والفن والثقافة الأوروبية، ويحمل معاني ومدلولات رمزية كثيرة ومهمة، وكذلك لم تخل منهما أساطير كثير من الثقافات الأخرى كما لامست الحياة المعيشية فيها. ومع ذلك فإن موقع (الرمان) في الفن - والثقافة الشرق أوسطية تحديداً - هو الملهم لهذا التحقيق والدراسة الجغرافية - الجغرافية (التصويرية)، حيث تشكل المجموعة الأولى من اللوحات الفنية محور هذا البحث، وأما المجموعتان الأخريان فبينما كانت إحداها وسيلة حاولت من خلالها خلق توازن فني ومحاكاة للثقافة الجديدة التي أعيش في خضمها الآن، كانت الأخرى بمنزلة بحث استوحيته من مقابلات أجريتها مع جملة من الأفراد تراوح أعمارهم بين 25 و80 عاماً من كل من دولة الكويت، وسورية، وإيران، ومصر، وفلسطين، ولبنان، والسعودية، والأردن، والإمارات، والعراق. وتمثل هذه المجموعات الثلاث من اللوحات الفنية مجتمعة أدباً مرئياً فريداً من نوعه، ووسيلة للبحث حول ثمرة تشاركها الثقافات فيما بينها، وتتعدد المعتقدات المرتبطة بها.