

Liverpool Regional Museum

welcomes stories of community, endeavor, passion and significance for its permanent exhibition in Gallery 1:



Local Liverpool resident Yuhana Nashmi proudly showcases a taste of Mandaean cultural heritage based on his personal story, learnings and inspiring experiences about ‘boatbuilding’ – yesterday and today. By invitation, Yuhana coordinated the loan of silversmithed objects selected to reflect the theme of ‘boatbuilding’, as part of a display case ‘refresh’ within Resonances.



The last Mandaean boatbuilder of Southern Iraq.
Photo by Y. Nashmi 2008

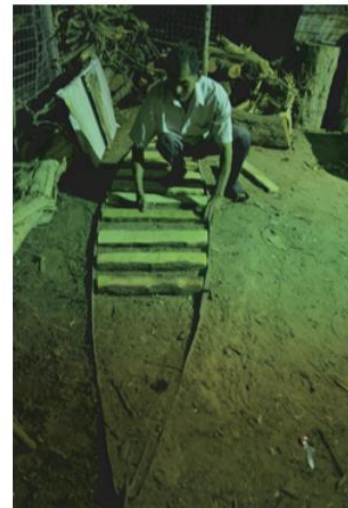
“In 2008 and 2015, while I was doing my field works in south of Iraq and west of Iran, I met Basheer who is the last boat builder from the Mandaean community (his picture with his boat featured in the display). Basheer lives in Amara city next to Tigris River, where his workshop located. He explained to me in detail the stages of building a boat as he inherited this knowledge from his father and ancestors who used to live in the marshlands of Gebaish. However, he said that many things have been changed through time, so he needs to be innovative and develop his boatbuilding techniques. He started to use materials lighter than wood to build his boats (recycled white goods).”

Yuhana Nashmi (Artist)

Yuhana reminds us that Societies have long sought to protect and preserve their cultural heritage, for reasons ranging from education to historical research to the desire to reinforce a sense of identity. **These six exquisite items in Gallery 1 are on loan, courtesy of Dr Ayar and Mrs Sharazad FARHAN. They are passionate antique collectors and Mandaecans from Iraq themselves.**

Also, a large collection (including the displayed items) was collected originally by a passionate Mandaean antique collector, Mr Karim JARI, who brought the objects from Iraq to Sydney through Jordan in an epic journey in 1995.

The timing of this Mandaean display to complement the Museum’s new Voyages of Camaraderie exhibitions in Galleries 2, 3 & 4 offers an engaging opportunity to raise awareness, value and celebrate this ancient ‘boat-building’ heritage. The following pages offer visitors a concise introduction to the rich history of Mandaean Boatbuilding and Silversmithing.



Basheer is in his workshop next to Tigris River in Amara - Photo by Y. Nashmi 2008

The Mandaeans: A History of Boatbuilding and Silversmithing in South of Mesopotamia (Iraq & Iran)



Photo by Corbis

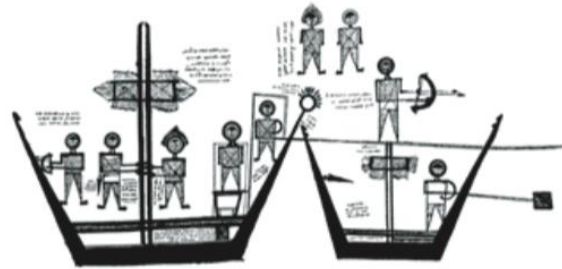
Boatbuilding

The Ahwar of southern Iraq – also known as the Iraqi marshlands – are unique, as one of the world's largest inland delta systems, in an extremely hot and arid environment. In 2016, UNESCO has named the Iraqi marshlands, once ravaged by Saddam Hussein, as a world heritage site.

People of the marshlands of southern Mesopotamia live in settlements on anchored floating platforms or on small natural islands in the midst of the marshes of the Tigris-Euphrates river complex. They do most of their travelling by canoe or small boat.

Early discoveries

The boat culture in Mesopotamia is the oldest documented. The reed boats constitute the earliest known evidence for deliberately constructed sailing ships, dated to the early Neolithic Ubaid culture of Mesopotamia, about 5500 B.C.E. The small, masted Mesopotamian boats are believed to have facilitated minor but significant long-distance trade between the emerging villages of the Fertile Crescent and the Arabian Neolithic communities of the Persian Gulf.



An illustration of sailing boats in the Mandaean manuscripts - Photo by Y.Nashmi

In 2001, while unearthing a Neolithic human settlement at Subiya, on the northern shore of Kuwait Bay, a group of archaeologists discovered the earliest fragments of boats ever found in the world. A British team of archaeologists, led by Dr. Robert Carter, believes that the small slabs of bitumen dug up in that area could prove that man first successfully built ocean-going boats up to 7,000 years ago.

Mythology

Boats are not only important in economic and social life but are also a significant part of Near Eastern mythologies. In the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh myth, Sargon the Great of Akkad is described as having floated as an infant in a bitumen-coated reed basket down the Euphrates River. Many boats have been featured in the Mandaean illustrated manuscripts showing the metaphoric aspects of boat culture as a symbolic figure in a person's spiritual journey. According to the Mandaean manuscripts, Zahrun is one of the seraphic light beings who, together with Shamish, ride in the sun-boat across the sky to observe the inner worlds of the human beings.

The Mandaeanans

The Mandaeanans lived and still live (in small numbers) in the south of Iraq for thousands of years. There is a materialistic and spiritual harmony and cooperation between the natural environment and the Mandaeanans.

In Iraq, the Mandaeanans have been known for their mastering in boatbuilding, silversmithing and blacksmithing. They were skilled craftsmen who served the surrounding villages with their products of boats, canoes, knives, shovels, axes, fishing tools (such as Falah) and silver works. The Mandaeanans started to migrate from southern of Iraq to bigger cities (especially Amara, Basra and Baghdad) after the establishment of the kingdom of Iraq 1921. Most of the young Mandaeanans started their education to become medical doctors, engineers, and teachers; however, some of them remained practicing silversmithing.



Falah (fishing tool widely used in the marshlands) and two knives made by a Mandaean blacksmith from Ahvas - Iran. Photo by Y.Nashmi 2015

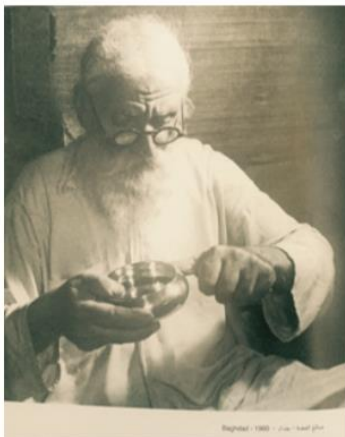


A Mandaean silversmith in his workshop in Baghdad 1932



From the book "The Marsh Arabs" by Wilfred Thesiger

Silversmithing



Thamin Hwezawie, a very well known silversmith in his workshop in Baghdad - Photo by J. Al'ani 1960

The River Street in the heart of Baghdad, by Tigris River, was known for hosting the silversmith stores that make unique silverware from Amara (south of Iraq). The vast majority of silversmiths were Mandaeanans who migrated from the south to Baghdad. Those silverwares were engraved with scenes from the marshlands and inlaid with mah-rag (black niello)*. This technique was peculiar to the Mandaeanans and it was called "the work of Suba" or "work of Amara" (شغل صبة أو شغل عمارة).

Viewers of the displayed items will notice the reflections of the Mandaean cultures and the nature of the marshes evident on their works. Most of these objects show landscape scenes, canoes (mash-hoof), sailing boats, palm trees, water buffaloes, emigrated birds and cathedral-like homes made from reeds.

Niello

Niello (mah-rag - محرگ) is made from black metal alloy consist of sulfur, copper, silver, and usually lead, used as an inlay on engraved metal usually silver or gold. It can be used for filling in designs of the engraved metal.

The Egyptians are credited with originating niello decoration, which spread throughout Europe during the Middle Ages and other areas such as Anatolia, Persia, and Mesopotamia

Niello was used on a variety of object including sword hilts, chalices, plates, horns, adornment for horses, and most prolifically, jewelry for women: necklaces, bracelets, rings, torques, pendants, buttons, belt buckles, headdresses, etc. Later, it entered into everyday items such as tobacco boxes, lighters, walking sticks, napkin holders, mastered, pepper and salt containers, picture frames and soap holders.

During the Mongol invasion from 1237 to 1240 A.D. the entire trade in the villages and workshops were burned and most of the craftsmen and artisans were killed. Afterwards, skill in niello and cloisonné enamel diminished greatly. However, Mesopotamia continued producing stunning items, as this art remained within the Mandaean community based at the south of Iraq and Iran. The recipe of the black niello endures as a well-kept secret until today. When the silversmith wants to apply the black niello to the silver, he needs to rely on the expert who specializes in making this mix. If the niello used to fill the grooves on an engraved silver piece succeeds to endure after a period of time, it is considered of good quality.



Ashtray from silver engraved and inlaid with scenes from the marshlands. Th. Hwezawie



A 22k gold ring with engraved portrait of King Ghazi of Iraq inlaid with niello. Work of Hussni Zahroon



A Mandaean silversmith is trading with a British soldier - South of Iraq. Photo source unknown 1918

Stages in the niello work process

- 1- The item is handmade as a whole (e.g. a cigarette box from silver sterling)
- 2- The item is hand-engraved on both sides
- 3- Black niello is applied and left to settle
- 4- The item is sanded, followed by the application of a first coat of polish
- 5- The parts of the item are assembled together
- 6- Final polish is applied to the item



Talib Doraji, one of the remaining master silversmiths, in his workshop in Ahvas - Iran. Photo by Y. Nashmi 2015

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