

# NO BORDERS HERE

Canadian artists from the Arab world find inspiration in 1,001 sources.

For Nadine Ltaif, a poet of Lebanese origin who has lived in Quebec for more than 25 years, “there are no limits to inspiration.” In a recent lecture at a cultural symposium in New Delhi, Ltaif noted that some critics believe that *The Thousand and One Nights*, the classic collection of Arabic tales, originated in India. Small wonder, then, that for Ltaif and many artists of Arabic origin who have made Canada home, anything goes.

Canada’s Middle Eastern community is a mix of Arab and other ethnic groups, Jewish, Muslim and Christian religions, English and French languages, and cultures spanning North Africa, the Gulf states and the Levant. The resulting broad spectrum of approaches and concerns has given birth to a vibrant arts community that draws on its origins, its new homeland—and all points in between.

Two musical artists who appeared at last year’s Festival du Monde Arabe in Montreal illustrate the fluid play between cultures. Born in Libya, Sam Shalabi plays instruments as varied as guitar and *oud* (lute) in a dozen or so Montreal bands, producing psychedelic pop that is flavoured with Middle Eastern sounds. Quebec singer Lynda Thalie performs music that fuses what she calls the “honey” of her native Algeria with the “maple syrup” of Canada.

The first exhibition of Arab-Canadian visual artists, called *The Lands Within Me*, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, showcased the work of Canadian artists originating

from across the Arab world in a variety of media including calligraphy, contemporary painting and jewellery.

Many artists from the region work in more than one discipline, expanding artistic—as well as cultural—frontiers. Born in Egypt to Armenian parents, Atom Egoyan has become one of Canada’s most celebrated filmmakers. In addition to writing his own scripts, he has adapted several novels to the screen, including *Where the Truth Lies*. This fall, he will direct Wagner’s *Die Walküre* at the Canadian Opera Company.

Egoyan co-produced *Sabah*, the first feature film of Ruba Nadda, who was born in Montreal but spent her childhood moving between Syria and Canada. Nadda published short fiction in literary journals and produced more than two dozen short films before *Sabah*—the story of a 40-year-old Muslim woman who falls in love with a non-Muslim, non-Arab man.

*Veils Uncovered*, a recent short documentary by Canadian filmmaker Nora Kevorkian, examines the lives of



women in Damascus, Syria. Like Arsinée Khanjian—Atom Egoyan’s wife, creative partner and the star of *Sabah*—Kevorkian is of Armenian and Lebanese heritage.

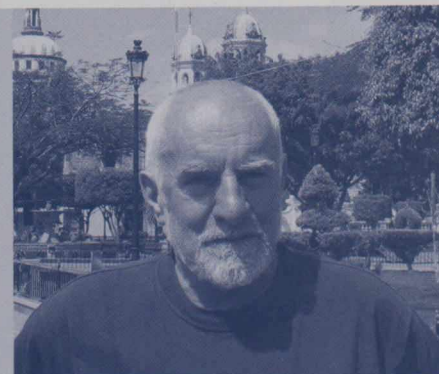
While the Arabic influence is strong in English-Canadian culture, it is especially pronounced in Quebec. In *Voices in the Desert*, an anthology of Arab-Canadian women writers, editor Elizabeth Dahab points out that most Arab-Canadian writers work in French. Her anthology features poetry and prose that often address questions of identity, cultural exile and gender inequality.

One of the writers, Abla Farhoud, settled in Quebec during the 1950s.

Canadian director Ruba Nadda, who was born in Montreal but spent her childhood moving between Syria and Canada, published short fiction in literary journals and produced more than two dozen short films before working on the film *Sabah*.

## Mexico honours Quebec sculptor

René Derouin, an engraver and sculptor from Quebec, has been awarded Mexico’s Order of the Aztec Eagle, a first for a Canadian artist. Derouin describes himself as a “latino del norte,” and has held several exhibitions of his work in Mexico, including at the renowned Rufino Tamayo Museum of Contemporary Art. He said that the award “strengthens the special relationship that I have had with Mexico, its people and culture throughout my career.” The Order of the Aztec Eagle is the highest award that the Mexican government gives to foreign artists in recognition of their contribution to the country.



Québécois engraver and sculptor René Derouin has received Mexico’s Order of the Aztec Eagle.

photo: courtesy of the Mexican Consulate, Montreal