

# tughra the signature of syrian style

A London bus transports James Parry to Hadba Kabbani's oasis of Middle Eastern delights.

TEXT BY JAMES PARRY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LEVENSON

Travelling on a London double-decker bus remains one of the great adventures of life in the British capital. Sitting on the top deck, one can enjoy an unparalleled view of the city sights and view familiar places from a new and revealing perspective. Venturing West to Wandsworth Bridge Road, not far from fashionable Chelsea, the shopping parades still have plenty of everyday stores, such as glazing merchants, sofa-bed sellers and car insurance brokers. Amid the mundane is an extraordinary shop called Tughra. Peering through the window, an unexpected and eclectic mix of objects from the Middle East - from textiles to tiles, furniture and jewellery - stand resplendent.

Pushing open the door, one can see Hadba Kabbani is busy at the rear of the shop. From behind a Manhattan-style backdrop of towering mother-of-pearl chests of drawers, the owner comes forward to offer a warm welcome. As Kabbani begins to reveal her story, it becomes clear that these disparate objects are in fact inextricably linked. They are the culmination of one woman's remarkable journey.

Kabbani hails from Damascus, where she spent her early life. Her father, Nizar, was a celebrated poet and well-travelled. The family home was full of objects gathered from overseas,

"I have absorbed the arts and cultures of both East and West. Beauty transcends political and cultural boundaries."

Hadba Kabbani.

and this soon rubbed off on her. "I grew up surrounded by beautiful, interesting things and soon began collecting myself. When a perfume bottle was empty, I would add it to my collection. And I used to take this stuff everywhere with me. At one point I even had one of those old-style BOAC bags full of my junk!"

The family patriarch always encouraged his children to make the most of themselves and of the opportunities that came

their way. "He used to tell me, 'Hadba, you have a brain so use it!'" she laughs.

And so she did, graduating from the American University of Beirut and moving to Dubai with her husband. For a cultured, educated woman she found it all something of an eye-opener. "At that time

there was so little to do in Dubai. I felt as though I was drowning intellectually. However, I found enough of interest in the local souqs, and would buy bits and pieces to add to my collection. Often, when I took something home, my husband would say, 'But we don't need this!' To which I would always reply, 'No, but it is beautiful, and life is not just about eating and working. We need beauty too'."

Facing page: Iznik tiles were used to build the Blue Mosque in Istanbul as far back as the 16th century (or possibly earlier) until the 19th century. These tiles vary in size, but the classic is 20 x 20 cm.

Following pages: Hadba Kabbani among her extensive collection of Islamic antiques, including mother-of-pearl chests of drawers, mirrors, tables as well as painted and calligraphically adorned Ottoman textiles and tiles.



“Rumours have got back to Syria that local antiques can fetch huge prices in Europe... It often takes a long time - and many cups of tea - to bring them down to reality. ”

*Hadba Kabbani*

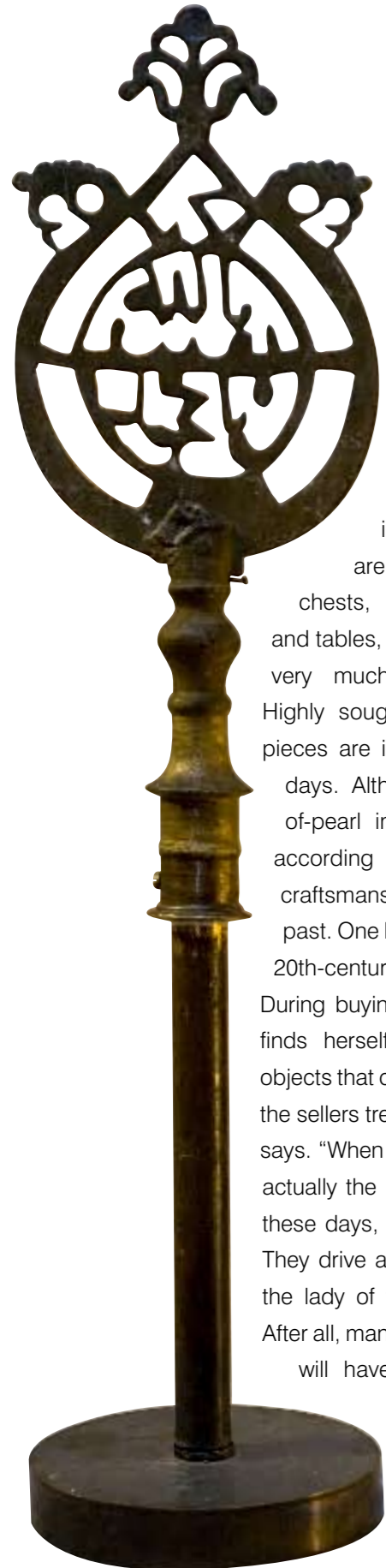
From the UAE Kabbani moved to Lebanon, but with the country descending into civil war she decided to leave there with her children in 1984. She came to England, where she has remained ever since. By this time the collecting bug had definitely gathered apace. “It’s like a virus, really, it takes hold and starts to govern everything you do.” Kabbani’s main love is Islamic art and artefacts, but she takes a broad view of her experience and interests. “I’m very Damascene at heart, but having lived in both Lebanon and England for so long now I feel I have absorbed the arts and cultures of both East and West. In any case, beauty transcends political and cultural boundaries. This is particularly so with Ottoman art and the West - there was always so much interchange going on.”

In England, Kabbani found greater outlets for her love of art and culture. At the same time London was busy developing its role as an international centre of Middle Eastern art dealing. With interest in her favourite subjects growing, and with the market burgeoning, the time seemed right for the inevitable.

Tughra was born. “The shop is really the culmination of all my collecting,” she says. “I had filled my home with so many objects, and my children said ‘Enough!’, so I decided the only way forward was to set up a shop.” In 1999, Tughra opened its doors for the first time amid mixed feelings on the part of its owner. “I bought no extra stock for the opening. I simply took things from my house and put them in the shop. All of them meant something to me, so after I had sold the first object I couldn’t help crying! But then an elderly man I knew reminded me that new things always spring from old, and so I decided to be positive and to continue looking for new and beautiful objects.”

Kabbani soon began making regular trips to Syria to purchase items for Tughra. She would visit the markets and antique shops, seeking out objects of interest, beauty and great craftsmanship. But she was not always capable of casting a purely commercial eye over what she saw. “I suppose if I was a born saleswoman I would have only bought items that I





knew would give me the highest mark-up. But I never did that. I purchased things I would have been pleased to keep myself and have around me," she says. Furniture was by now one of her great loves, especially the Ottoman pieces that are so much a part of traditional Syrian domestic interiors. Foremost among these are the exquisite mother-of-pearl chests, cupboards, *armoires*, mirrors and tables, all of breathtaking intricacy and very much Kabbani's hallmark today. Highly sought after by collectors, quality pieces are increasingly hard to find these days. Although the tradition of mother-of-pearl inlay continues in Syria today, according to Kabbani the standard of craftsmanship is not as good as in the past. One has to look to late 19th and early 20th-century pieces for real excellence.

During buying trips to Syria, Kabbani often finds herself in protracted dealings over objects that catch her eye. "Down in the souq the sellers treat me like one of the boys," she says. "When I am in private homes, which is actually the best place to find quality items these days, it is an entirely different matter. They drive a hard bargain, and it is always the lady of the house that dictates terms. After all, many of the items we are discussing will have come to the household as part of her wedding dowry." Kabbani also buys objects

at auction in London, often lots that no one else has noticed. Yet she has mixed feelings about high profile sales. "In some ways, they've messed things up for me!" she exclaims. "Rumours have got back to Syria that local antiques can fetch huge prices in Europe and often the would-be vendors have an unrealistic view of what they can get for something. It often takes a long time - and many cups of tea - to bring them down to reality." Many of Kabbani's customers are interior designers and decorators, some of whom regularly turn up in a panic, desperate to find one superb object to complete the 'look' of a space they are about to finish. More often than not, Tughra has just the thing they are looking for. The timelessness of good quality art and antiques means that they can work anywhere, even in today's voguish minimalist interiors. "I have some clients who are earning a fortune in the City and live in vast lofts in converted riverside warehouses," says Kabbani. "The large mother-of-pearl pieces are very popular with them, as one of those is all you need to set off an interior beautifully." Strangely, Arab customers do not loom large on Kabbani's client list. "It is mostly English people that come here; often those who know the Middle East and appreciate its diversity and the quality of good craftsmanship." Some of the objects possess unexpected links to the past and, in some cases, to a lost world altogether. Kabbani picks up a



Left: A metal stand known as 'Allam' (flags). Dated 18th to 19th centuries. Height 45 cm. Inscribed with 'La ilaha illa Allah' ('There is no God but Allah'), from the Islamic prayer call. These were originally used as stands to carry banners when convoys travelled to Hajj. Only the top of each Allam is original. The original wooden stands have been replaced with metal replicas.

Above: Ottoman dresses. Velvet and satin with golden embroidery known as 'sarma'. Dated 19th century. The pink dress was used as a wedding gown.

square-shaped, flat object, obviously designed to be hung. "This is called a *ta-wiza*," Kabbani says. "It was hung by the Bedouins in their tents to protect the inhabitants from harm and to bring good luck and fortune." It is a fascinating object, with different components of various dates, some doubtless 'cannibalised' from other pieces. One can only speculate on its exact origin. The quality of workmanship is high, and within the frame sits a beadwork panel, adorned with silk tassels, painted cowry shells and a small brass mirror. An eye-catching spray of ostrich plumes crowns the top of the *ta-wiza*. Despite having seen decidedly better days, they manage a lively display. At first sight, the feathers seem incongruous, but like most interesting objects, they call for

considered attention. Until the turn of the last century, ostriches were a common sight in the Syrian desert, but are now sadly extinct. Could these feathers have come from one of the last Arabian ostriches? Regardless, what the *ta-wiza* reveals is that the most surprising artistic object can speak volumes; both connecting us with the past and reinforcing the Tughra idea that through art comes understanding. And through that, just perhaps, we can touch our soul. □

**Tughra is located at 82 Wandsworth Bridge Road in London. For more information, call +44 2077312090 or visit [www.tughra.net](http://www.tughra.net)**