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SHORT BIO: NADIA A. KHAWANDANA AH is a lecturer of English Literature in the Department of English at Umm Al Qura University in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. She is a member of Makkah Cultural Club, Jane Austen Society in North America, Thomas More Institute and McGill Community for Lifelong Learning, Board of Trustees of Ousha Al Swaidi Poetical Award, Dubai, ACFF Film Festival Judges Committee, Montreal, Canada. Her book *Connotations: Studies in Saudi Narrative* was published in March, 2019. She has participated in several literary conferences. She has given various literary and cultural public lectures in Saudi Arabia and at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. She is included in *The Saudi Women Encyclopedia*. She is a published translator in Arabic, English, and German. *A Man from No Man's Land* is her translation of a collection of Dr. Zainab Al Khudairi's collection of short stories. She collaborated with a group of Arab writers to translate an anthology of poetry, *Candles of Colors*, which was published in March, 2019 in United Arab Emirates. Another collaborative book will be published soon. It is a translation of a collection of poems into Arabic of the Indian poet. O.N.V. Kurup. At present, she works on a translation of poetry of the distinguished Emirati, Ousha Al Swaidi in collaboration with Dr. Rafia Ghubash.

SAFEYA BINZAGR: AN ICON OF SAUDI ART & HERITAGE

It is really an honor to talk about this noble lady who dedicated her life and resources to the best interest of her homeland, its past, and present.



Mrs. Safeya Binzagr wearing King Abdulaziz Medal

Mrs. Safeya Binzagr (1940) is one of the pioneer artists in Saudi Arabia who paved the way for the subsequent generations to enjoy art. She did not depend only on her born artistic gift, but she also developed it by studying in England, spending two years in Saint Martin Art College in London. She was the first Saudi female artist to get a specialized education in Arts. She is quite well-known but still I would like to shed some more light on her diverse contributions during her fifty years of activity in the fields of art, culture, and preservation of Saudi heritage in the way she has been maintaining a continuous mission of instilling love of art and its appreciation in the hearts of the Saudis. My paper will address the following points:

- 1- Legacy.
- 2- The Pioneer Artist.
- 3- The Intellectual.
- 4- Darat – Safeya Binzagr.
- 5- International Fame.
- 6- Awards and Appreciations.
- 7- Current Projects.

Legacy:

Many important references about the history of art in Saudi Arabia as well as many academic studies have tackled Safeya Binzagr's biography and works as a key, inspiring figure in the country along with other pioneers like Abdul Haleem Ridwi, Ali Alrizazah, Muneera Musli, Nabeelah Al Bassam, while some academic studies have been entirely dedicated to her, such as:

- 1- Abdul Rahman Al Sulaiman's historical book *The Journey of Saudi Fine Art*, which was published celebrating Riyadh as a capital of Arabic Culture in 2000.
- 2- Nadia Muhammad Sadeque's MA thesis, *Social Implications in Safeya Binzagr's Works*, Umm Al Qura University (2009).
- 3- Dr. Muhammad Ar-Rusayys' book *History of Fine Arts in Saudi Arabia* (2010).
- 4- Dr. Eiman Elgibreen's PhD thesis, *Image Making: Representation of Women in the Art and Career of Safeya Binzagr from 1968 to 2000*, University of Sussex. UK. 2014.
- 5- Maha Alkhudair's PhD thesis, *Life Stories of Saudi Female Artists*, University of Ottawa, Canada. 2018.

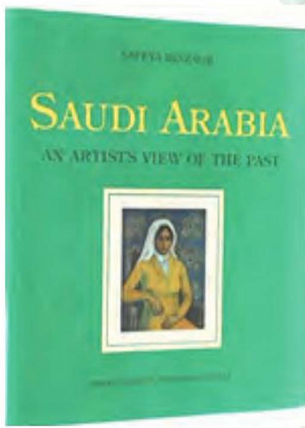
The Pioneer Artist:

In 1968, Safeya Binzagr and her friend, the late Muneera Musli, had the first female art exhibition in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It was a historical milestone. It was inaugurated by His Royal Highness, Prince Mishal Bin Abdulaziz and his patronage showed the official support for the Saudi women's participation in the cultural public life. On the other hand, the joint exhibition itself, which was held at Dar Atarbiyah Al Haditha School was an audacious action by the two artists at a time when art galleries did not exist and finding the necessary art materials was difficult. We must also mention that that exhibition took place four years after the first male art exhibition in the Kingdom, which had been organized by the artist Abdul Haleem Ridouy in Jeddah, 1964. In 1970, Mrs. Safeya Binzagr had her solo art exhibition held in Dar Alhanan School, in Jeddah. After this cultural event, more exhibitions were held in other parts of the Kingdom, solo or with groups in Jeddah, Riyadh, Jubail, and Dhahran. The success and acclaim with which her exhibitions were received, especially her visual images of Saudi various scenes and folk art were decisive in the artist's career. This became a distinct feature of her art. She was also one of the early active members in the *Society of Arts and Culture, House of Artists and House of Photographers*.

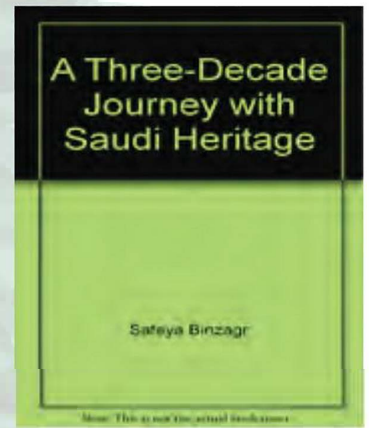
The Intellectual:

Another venue in which Binzagr participated was delivering some lectures in Jeddah and Riyadh and writing some articles in local papers. Besides, she published two books: *Saudi Arabia: An Artist's View of the Past*, (in English and French, 1979) and *A Three-Decade Journey with Saudi Heritage*, (in Arabic and English, 1999). The significance of her books actually lies in the fact that there are two valuable references about Binzagr and her works. More important, they are very informative about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; its religion, history, society, art, and legacy. To elaborate more about *A Three-Decade Journey with Saudi Heritage*, one may emphasize the fact that it takes the reader into the vast world of Binzagr. It introduces him to the details of a 30-year-journey of painting and folk art showing how these two domains have become beautifully interwoven together like the sun and the moon do in their eternal and limitless connection. The book also includes a critical reading on Binzagr works, her style, the artistic schools, and the masters she was influenced by, and her use of Arabic calligraphy. This appraisal was written by Dr. Muhammad Abdul Majeed Fadhl of King Saud University in Riyadh. His academic expertise and aesthetic sense enabled him to provide an in-depth analysis of her art. On the other hand, Dr. Muhammad Ar-Rusayys of King Saud University, contributed to the book where he traced back the evolution of museums in Europe, USA, and the Arab World and discussed their educational and cultural roles.

This was an introduction where he highlighted the significance of Darat, Safeya Binzagr's art, its historical and cultural roles in Saudi Arabia and the way it shows the Saudi contemporary art to the world. In the final part of the book Binzagr gives a comprehensive description of her Darat and an adequate analysis of her paintings. Personally, I was attracted to the painting *Meshlah¹ Maker*, among other paintings. It pictures a craftsmanship that has its weight and historical significance in the Arabic tradition, especially in Saudi Arabia where citizens are keen and proud of adhering to the national dress code as a way of emphasizing our identity. Besides, wearing the Meshlah in special occasions this is one of the most authentic social practices that will never be conquered by modernity. A closer look to the painting shows us the artist's art in capturing the man's concentration on his fine work. The painting is bathed in a glowing light caused by the beautiful harmony between the white thobe and the creamy *meshlah*, adorned by the golden threads. Another attractive detail in this painting is the man's head cover, locally called *kufia*, fine strokes pictured the small geometric shapes of the crochet work.



Safeya Binzagr - Meshlah Maker.



Darat - Safeya Binzagr:

Darat Safeya Binzagr was officially inaugurated in 2000 under the patronage of Prince Abdul Majeed Bin Abdul Aziz of Makkah Region. Beside its being a museum of her works, it can be considered a cultural institution including a library, a monthly Salon, and the Darat hosts art workshops and training programs. For Mrs. Binzagr, Darat was a dream which became true. She speaks about it with much compassion: "After I had stopped selling my paintings, it was necessary to find a suitable place to exhibit my works and art objects which I have collected over the years and my private library as well. Hence, I had the idea of building the Darat. With the help of my brothers, we started looking for a piece of land. I wanted it to be in a unique location that connects Jeddah's past with its present. Thank Allah, patience paid me off. In 1992, I drew the first sketches of the Darat by myself to express all my needs and expectations. Then I hired a young Saudi architect to design it professionally, but still under my personal supervision. I even supervised the errands of the construction materials. So you may say I built it with them, brick by brick. As the construction was coming to its end, it energized and revived me a lot despite my weakness due to some health issues at that time. It was finalized in 1995."²

The Darat contains for about 300 paintings which present the Saudi heritage in the last 70 years. Her latest work is the mural "The Three Mosques: The Holy Destination".



Mrs. Binzagr with her latest mural

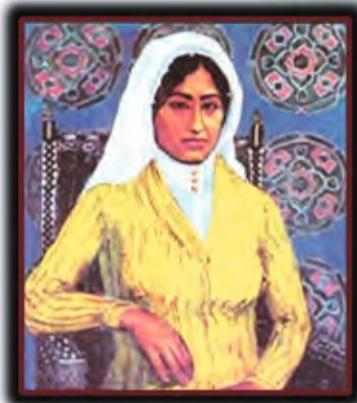
The paintings are categorized into groups according to their subjects: The Nuptial Series, Daily Activities & Occupations, Fishing and Hunting, Architecture. Traditional Costumes and Pastel. For example The Nuptial Series "includes 11 paintings which depict the Hijazi customs from 70 to 100 years ago" (Binzagr 1889, 1999). It is obvious that Mrs. Safeya Binzagr has preserved and documented many social rituals that show in their turn some social values such as the strong familial ties, women's role in family life, the concern of the society members to meet its expectations and acceptability by conforming to its standards and traditions.

Entertainment contains 12 paintings, that hint to the social memory, entertainment in the past, and some popular games. They reveal the simple life before the oil economic boom, satisfaction, and happiness, strong human relationships in the neighborhood, safety and security that neighbors provide for their families and children.



From her collection of Architecture

Al Zaboon painting is the most famous and the symbol of the artist's works completed in 1969. This eternal, fabulous, charming portrait has reserved the prestigious, elegant Hejazi dress, its accessories, and jewelry. On the occasion of its inauguration, Darat displayed only nine traditional customs. Now there are for about 46 pieces from all the regions of Saudi Arabia and 130 relevant accessories and embroidery samples. Most of them were obtained by the artist after a lot of search, while some pieces were donated by some generous friends of the Darat. Others are loaned. It is characteristic of Binzagr, either in painting or in preserving the traditional costumes, to give adequate concern to documentation, thus certifying her data. She took a lot of interviews from old people, she read scholars' Orientalist books, she gathered photographs or traced necessary information from international libraries or on web sites. "That is because I am documenting a cultural history with my brush; I like to register it as truthfully as possible," Binzagr asserted (Binzagr 1979, 3). Mrs. Safeya Binzagr has always been keen in enriching the content of her museum by adding new items such as a collection of traditional fans which were introduced in a special event in 2013. *From the Olden Days* exhibition, various antique objects were added to her collections.



Traditional Costumes:
Mrs. Binzagr's most famous piece,
Al Zaboon

The Library = Motivated by the intellectual and cultural mission of her Darat, Mrs. Safeya Binzagr devoted a large hall for the library. Its kernel was Binzagr's private house library which she started collecting at a young age. Now the library at the Darat contains 5400 books of Arts, Literature, Anthropology, History and Costumes, and many other fields of science. Darat is an invaluable center of resources for researchers. Most of the documentation is available in Arabic, English, and also in a digital format, mainly concerning international visual artists and museums. There is also a section for children books in both languages.



The Youth Annual Art Competition is one of the activities that has proved Binzagr's commitment to transfer artistic appreciation to the younger generations. Since 2000 the Darat has organized an annual contest to encourage promising talents and to promote a passion for heritage by positive interaction with the elements of the cultural environment. Therefore, we find that the themes of this contest are carefully chosen from the Saudi and Islamic heritage. For example: 1) King Fahd's Accomplishments in the last 20 Years (Drawings on the Kites, 2002). 2) Traditional Saudi Doors, 2005. 3) Islamic Decorative Art, 2008. 4) The Saddle, 2013. 5) Decorative

Arabic Calligraphy, 2018. 6) Decorative Book Binding, 2019. In short, the Darat has established itself as an active cultural institution representing the beautiful Saudi Art. At the same time, it has become an attractive international cultural platform of Saudi Arabia, welcoming tourists from around the world.

International Fame:

The fact that Mrs. Safeya Binzagr's participation in international galleries, or that some international museums show her works, or that her work is a significant topic for academic research at well-known universities, illustrates her contribution to bring the Saudi art and heritage to the world's path of fame revealing our cultural wealth. She exhibited her works in London 1973, Paris and Geneva in 1980. She participated in an art gallery in Neuilly Sur Seine, near Paris celebrating Saudi National Day in 1997. She was honored by the United Nation Environment Program in 1997 for her role in preserving our national heritage. For two consecutive

years 2006 and 2007, the Darat hosted two Islamic Art workshops in collaboration with Effat University and Prince Charles Foundation, School of Traditional Arts. In 2015, Mrs. Safeya Binzagr participated in the exhibition “From the Figurative to the Abstract: Modern Art from the Arab World”. The exhibition was held at the British Museum in 2015. Then the museum bought one of her participating works and an album with 38 pictures of Saudi traditional costumes. The website of the British Museum offers an entry of Binzagr’s biography and works. In the Green Box Museum, which is located in Amsterdam, we shall see the same thing: to cast light on Saudi contemporary art, history, and the legacy of Saudi Arabia. This museum works together with some Dutch universities, e.g., Utrecht and Leiden. It offers art lectures and workshops. The museum’s index contains entries of some Western artists who were interested in picturing Saudi Arabia in their paintings. David Douglas Duncan and Bob Landry are only two outstanding examples. It also includes 156 Saudi artists, males and females, from different domains, calligraphers, photographers, painters and sculptors, senior and young artists. The pioneer Binzagr’s adequate biography is available and her book *Saudi Arabia: An Artist’s View of the Past* is among their important references.

“One Belt and One Road Exhibition” is a unique exhibition of Chinese porcelain. It was held at Darat Safeya Binzagr and it displayed artworks made by 7 renowned modern Chinese artists in November, 2019.

Awards and Appreciations:

Mrs. Safeya Binzagr’s art and contributions have been acclaimed and acknowledged by many cultural organizations both in the area and at an international level. The most significant recognition she received was King Abdul Aziz Medal from the Custodian of the two Holy Mosques, King Salman Bin Abdul Aziz in Janadryyah Cultural Festival in 2017. This graceful gesture shows the King’s focus to strengthen Saudi women’s artistic creation, his appreciation for arts, and the efforts for the deep-rooted heritage preservation. Other institutions that honored Binzagr are: Cooperation Council of Gulf States, 2014; The National Festival of Culture and Heritage, 2006; King Abdul Aziz Foundation for Talents, 2005; Al Miftaha Award from HRH Prince Khalid Al Faisal the Governor of Aseer, 2003; Arab Society for Arts and Culture in Riyadh, 1998; Grolla Dora in Italy, 1982 for her poster “Wealth of the Nation”.

Current Projects:

Five decades have passed but the spark of passion is still shining and the perpetual desire of caring about heritage and sharing knowledge with the others is still actively intact. Mrs. Safeya Binzagr’s third book is in the editing process and it will soon be published. She proudly announces that “it will be an informative reference about all pieces in my collections, paintings, costumes, artifacts, jewelry, and accessories. I worked hard over the years to search for documents and keep safe this artistic reservoir.” As busy as she is with the upcoming book, she put aside the work of two murals after she had finished their sketches. One will depict the landmarks of all regions in Saudi Arabia, while the other will be about the folklore dances in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

I hope I have succeeded in bringing you some glimpses of the Lady and icon of the Saudi Art and heritage, whom we, Saudis, are very proud of for all her efforts and endeavor of giving the best ideal fulfillment of social responsibility, inspiration, and representation of the Saudi values at their utmost, transmitting to the world the hidden treasures of Saudi Arabia.

¹ It is like a special cloak, worn by men in ceremonial occasions.

² From a private interview with Mrs. Binzagr by the researcher.