

Crafting connections, empowering women

Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council debuts its first product collection as official Guest Country of London Design Fair

19–22 September 2019



Irthi artisan practicing safeefah leather bag weaving. Photography by Moez Achour.

From its base in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council operates a pioneering programme of creative, cultural and commercial initiatives designed to empower women through craft.

Spanning the Middle East, North Africa and South-East and Central Asia, Irthi's activities centre on the preservation and promotion of indigenous craft heritage, the engagement of young generations and the development of new international market opportunities. As part of its mission to educate young practitioners on the cultural importance of Emirati heritage crafts, Irthi aims to nurture and nourish creative connections between renowned global designers and artisans with the next generation of female makers in the UAE.

With this in mind, the Council is preparing to unveil the first exclusive Irthi product line, with a special exhibition at London Design Fair on 19–22 September 2019. As the Fair’s official Guest Country Pavilion, Irthi’s showcase will represent the craft and design talent of women in the UAE, giving the country’s craft practitioners their highest-profile international platform to date.

Irthi’s first range of crafted design objects is the result of two initiatives: Design Labs and Crafts Dialogue, both of which are founded on the creative potential of collaboration. Although based in the Emirates, both programmes are thoroughly international in outlook, and the UAE pavilion will feature contributions from Pakistan, Japan, the US, the UK, Spain, Italy and Palestine, alongside regional artisans.

Ranging from sculptural totem-like chair stacks to landscape-inspired hand-blown Palestinian glass, the works on display include four collections from the Crafts Dialogue programme, and eight from Design Labs. Each collection includes 3–10 items, all made by hand by the 40+ female artisans employed by Irthi’s Bidwa Social Development Programme. Based in the Sharjah city of Dibba Al Hisn, Bidwa aims to give Emirati women practising traditional handicrafts such as talli (hand braiding) and safeefah (palm-frond weaving) the training and market access they need to generate a sustainable income and achieve professional and social empowerment.

Inspired by the forms and materials of the UAE’s natural landscape, Irthi’s Guest Country pavilion will be designed using wood and camel leather to create a distinctly organic display environment. The exhibition design will take London Design Fair visitors on a journey from raw material to the process of design and making, incorporating details of the rich handmaking heritage of Sharjah and the United Arab Emirates on the way.

“Each year we nominate a Guest Country, drawing special attention to activities and creatives in the chosen region. We have long since been intrigued by the Middle East, nowhere more so than the UAE with its ambitious plans to develop its creative sector. The establishment of Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council focusing on female artisans in the UAE, MENASEA and Central Asia is just such a great initiative and we are honoured to host the UK launch of their first product line at the Fair. ”

– Jimmy MacDonald, founder & director, London Design Fair

Crafts Dialogue

Founded on a firm belief in the creative potential of collaboration, Crafts Dialogue provides an opportunity for international and local designers to form working relationships and create products that fuse Emirati and European material resources and approaches to craft. The four Crafts Dialogue collections are the result of a collaboration between Irthi and Creative Dialogue, a non-profit organisation based in Barcelona. All products featured will be available as limited editions.



Irthi artisans practicing safeefah techniques. Photography by Moez Achour.

Emirati Clay x Italian Murano Glass

Fatima Al Zaabi x Matteo Silverio

Vase, lamp and phone charger

Al Zaabi and Silverio's product collection is the result of an experimental exploration into how Murano glass – an inherently fragile material – and Emirati clay – by nature, sturdy and hardwearing – might be combined to form a single object. As well as its innovative material combination, the collection also seeks to enrich craft practice by merging handmade and computerised techniques – tradition and innovation working in harmony. Parametric design and digital fabrication tools were used to create

moulds while artisans used their hands to manipulate the form of the glass and clay within them.

Safeefah

Ghaya Bin Mesmar x Mermelada Estudio

Chairs and seating

A single image of a desert house inspired Ghaya Bin Mesmar and Mermelada Estudio's design for a new chair. The traditional areesh house – made from palm fronds – had been blown down by the wind, making it look like a majestic cone. Taking this conical form, the chair allows for both privacy and protection from the elements. It combines traditional and modern safeefah (palm-frond) weaving techniques and its vibrant colours are inspired by traditional spices.

Emirati Clay x Safeefah

Abdallah Al Mulla x Pepa Reverter

Stools and tables

Pepa Reverter and Abdallah Al Mulla's clay stools and tables have been designed to create totem-like sculptural forms when stacked. A decorative belt wraps around the clay stools and tables, incorporating the Emirati safeefah palm-frond weave. The furniture, however, goes beyond visual novelty: the sheer scale of the objects – more than 60cm in diameter and 100cm high – pushes clay design to its limit.

Spanish leather x Emirati Talli

Adrian Salvador Candela x Shaikha Bin Dhaher

Fruit bowls

Embracing the natural, mouldable qualities of leather and the subtle expressiveness of talli weaving (traditional hand-woven braids), these sculptural, curvilinear bowls are reminiscent of both desert dunes and the drapery of women's veils, while the colours and textures, which form naturally when exposed to water and sunlight, evoke images of weathered hands weaving leather threads.



Spanish Leather x Emirati Talli, fruit bowls in progress by Irthi, Adrian Candela and Shaikha Bin Dhafer.
Photography by Moez Achour.

Design Labs

Similar to artist residencies, Irthi's Design Labs programme pairs trainee artisans enrolled in the Bidwa Social Development Programme with regional and international designers. These collaborations provide an opportunity for the exchange of knowledge, disciplinary approaches and production techniques, and consequently the creation of innovative new products.

Products created through the Design Labs programme include:

Tapestries by Irthi and Kazuhito Takadoi

Safeefah x Japanese grass

These Japanese washi paper tapestries are the fusion of two traditional crafts: Emirati safeefah and Japanese grass weaving. This tapestries were made in collaboration with Kazuhito Takadoi, a UK-based Japanese artist who specialises in

the weaving and embroidering of natural materials. Takadoi's work has been acquired by the V&A Museum and, in 2019, he was shortlisted for the 2019 LOEWE Crafts Prize.

Bags by Irthi and Jennifer Zurick

Safeefah x camel leather

This collection of sculptural handbags created using traditional safeefah weaving techniques to braid strands of camel leather is the result of a collaboration with Jennifer Zurick. A self-taught ARTIST based in Kentucky, Zurick specialises in black willow bark which she has been harvesting and weaving into baskets since 1980. Her work has been acquired by the Smithsonian Museum and she has been commissioned by luxury fashion house LOEWE.

Vessels by Irthi and Dima Srouji

Oud x Palestinian glassblowing

Palestinian architect and designer Dima Srouji collaborated with glass-blowers from the UAE, employing traditional techniques to develop contemporary forms. The Bidwa trainees involved produced perfume and oud bottles alongside small glass beads – forms inspired by the natural Palestinian and Emirati landscapes and by textures such as cactus, coral stone and jellyfish. Glass-blowing is one of the oldest and most technically complex craft skills in Palestine, where glassware is traditionally produced from sand and sodium carbonate from the Dead Sea.

Misbah jewellery by Irthi and Lél

Talli x Misbah

To create these collections, Bidwa trainees collaborated with Pakistan-based Lél whose workforce consists of displaced Afghani artisans. The collections focus on misbah prayer beads as both pieces of jewellery and sculptural designs for the home. For the jewellery, Bidwa trainees employed traditional talli weaving techniques to create interlacing of gold and silver thread finished with beads of lapis lazuli. Intended for the floor, to be hung on walls or simply displayed on a dining table, the decorative misbah were designed by Lél's stone artisans using Emirati door motifs as inlays, while the Bidwa artisans combined talli methods with macramé to create 3–8m misbahs of engraved and inlaid stone, resin and wood.

Midkhans by Irthi and Adi Toch

Oud x metalwork

Used to burn incense and spread its fragrance around the home, midkhans are among the most common objects found in Emirati households. Working with the V&A and LOEWE–shortlisted artist Adi Toch, Irthi’s Bidwa trainees mastered metalsmithing, hammering, and using organic materials to dye metal to create a new modern family of unique midkhan designs.

Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council will debut its first product line as the official Guest Country Pavilion of London Design Fair in the Old Truman Brewery on 19–22 September, 2019.

All products shown at London Design Fair are made to order, by hand, and will be available through Irthi, via irthi.com.

Notes to editors

For more information, images and interviews with Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council, please contact Emma Collins at emma@zetteler.co.uk or on +44 (0)20 3735 5855.

Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council launches first product line at London Design Fair.

The four **Crafts Dialogue** collections are:

- Emirati Clay x Italian Murano Glass (vase, lamp and phone charger by Fatima Al Zaabi x Matteo Silverio)
- Safeefah (chairs and seating by Ghaya Bin Mesmar x Mermelada Estudio)
- Emirati Clay x Safeefah (stools and tables by Abdallah Al Mulla x Pepa Reverter)
- Spanish leather x Emirati Talli (fruit bowls by Adrian Salvador Candela x Shaikha Bin Dhafer)

The eight **Design Labs** collections are:

- Safeefah x Japanese grass (tapestries by Irthi and Kazuhito Takadoi)
- Safeefah x camel le
- ather (bags by Irthi and Jennifer Zurick)
- Oud x Palestinian glassblowing (vessels by Irthi and Dima Srouji)
- Talli x Misbah (misbah jewellery by Irthi and Lél)
- Oud x metalwork (midkhans by Irthi and Adi Toch)

- Safeefah x sand casting (stools by Irthi and Architecture and Other Things Studio)
- Safeefah x gold casting (gold cast weaves by Irthi and Alia bin Omair)
- Embroidery x camel leather (screens by Irthi and Khuloud Al Thani's Atelier)

About Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council

Based in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, and representing both traditional and modern crafts across the MENASEA and Central Asia region, Irthi exists to support the professional and social empowerment of women through craft.

Working with partner organisations around the world, the Council aims to provide a fresh narrative for women, by developing new market opportunities and sectors, delivering social development programmes and vocational training, as well as preserving the skills and rich cultural heritage of the UAE for current and future generations through its five initiatives.

- **Bidwa Social Development Programme** employs more than 40 artisans, provides them with vocational training and helps them find new markets for their skills.
- **Artisan Skills Exchange Programme** enables the development of technical capacity and fosters social connections through skill exchanges within the MENASEA region.
- **Hirfati Youth Programme** seeks to train and engage the next generation of designers and artists through a combination of traditional and contemporary craft activities.
- **Azyame Fashion Entrepreneurs Programme** aims to develop the next generation of UAE-based fashion designers through training, mentoring and business development.
- **Crafts Dialogue** brings together the Council with Barcelona-based Creative Dialogue to marry Emirati and international crafts and develop contemporary designs.

Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council is an affiliate of NAMA Women Advancement Establishment, a UAE-wide drive dedicated to the societal and economic elevation of women established under Amiri decree by His Highness Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, Member of the Supreme Council and Ruler of Sharjah, and chaired by Her Highness Sheikha Jawaher bint Mohammed Al Qasimi, wife of His Highness the Ruler of Sharjah.

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About London Design Fair

Located in Shoreditch, the creative heart of London, the London Design Fair is a four-day industry event that brings together 550 exhibitors from 36 countries, including: independent designers, established brands, international country pavilions, features and exhibitions. Launched in 2007, the London Design Fair has earned itself the reputation as the go-to trade show during the annual London Design Festival, hosting the single largest collection of international exhibitions, designers, brands, country pavilions, features and galleries throughout the festival. Each year, over 29,000 influential retail buyers, producers, architects, designers, interior designers, press and design-savvy public, will attend to see the very latest in furniture, lighting, textiles, materials and conceptual installations, from all around the world.

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