

Irthi's collectible, contemporary craft launches on Adorno



Participants from Design Labs (left) and Oud vessels by Dima Srouji (right). Photography by Moez Achour.

This month, the launch of two significant collections on the international digital platform for collectible design – **Adorno** – represents a landmark event for Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council, bringing craft traditions that have defined Emirati making for centuries to the attention of the wider world, and making Irthi products commercially available to its biggest audience yet.

The core aims of Irthi are to **preserve, champion and elevate** traditional Emirati craft practices, reaffirming their relevance in the context of modern global design. Adorno's mission is to showcase a rigorously curated selection of unique and limited-edition art, craft and design from global creative hubs. Thanks to Irthi joining Adorno's team of curators, the United Arab Emirates has now taken its place on the platform alongside the world's most exciting design communities from Belgium to Brazil. Featuring 70+ products, the UAE collection is the third largest on the platform (after Denmark and Iceland), and includes furniture, jewellery and decorative objects.

The UAE's contribution to Adorno is divided between two collections, each the result of Irthi's pioneering initiatives based at the Bidwa Social Development Centre in the Sharjah settlement of Dibba Al Hisn. Here, a group of more than 80 female artisans receives vocational training and help reaching commercial markets to earn them a livelihood for their skills. These highly skilled women are experts in Emirati handicrafts, including Talli (a hand-weaving technique akin to lacework) and Safeefah (weaving with khose palm fronds), both of which can be seen in the Adorno collections.

"Irthi is the first crafts institution to join the Adorno collaboration – a new path we are pursuing in 2020. The Crafts Dialogue and Design Labs collections give a fresh view into a crafts community – the United Arab Emirates – which has yet to be unveiled to many people. The project is also the first cross-cultural collection presented on Adorno, showcasing collaborations between artists from different localities, and the resulting pieces are outstanding. The high level of curation, collaboration, and craftsmanship has produced a range of strong concepts and beautiful stories that we are excited to communicate."
– Kristian Snorre Andersen, co-founder and CEO, Adorno

The regionally distinct textile crafts of Talli and Safeefah were a major reason why, at the end of 2019, UNESCO elected to add Sharjah to its official Creative City list – an honour given to those cities of the world that place art and creative culture at the heart of their development strategy. In Sharjah's case, the region's living heritage of craft and folk art – supported by Irthi – were instrumental in winning it the designation.

Curated by Irthi's assistant manager of curation and design – the architect and jewellery designer Farah Nasri – the collections featured on Adorno include products created through two of the initiative's programmes:

Crafts Dialogue sees pairings of Emirati and European designers working to create culturally hybrid works that unite the aesthetics, material resources and craft approaches of the Middle Eastern and Western worlds;

Design Labs brings a select group of international and regional designers into direct collaboration with Bidwa artisans and trainees under Irthi's creative direction.

Both programmes provide an opportunity for the exchange of disciplinary approaches and production techniques, and consequently the creation of innovative

new products, while drawing on a largely undocumented Emirati craft heritage that would otherwise be lost to history.

“The launch of Irthi’s first product line on Adorno is an important moment for the Council, for the female artisans it supports, and for the UAE as a whole. This not only offers people around the world the opportunity to acquire collectible pieces of exceptional Emirati craft, but it also gives us a prominent global platform to demonstrate how collaborations across borders and generations can empower female artisans, preserve ancient craft heritage and produce objects of extraordinary beauty.”

– Her Excellency Reem BinKaram, director of NAMA Women Advancement Establishment

Crafts Dialogue

Run in association with the Barcelona-based cultural agency Creative Dialogue, the Crafts Dialogue collection on Adorno features four collections derived from East-meets-West inspired design collaborations.



Safeefah x Clay collection by Abdallah Al Mulla x Pepa Reverter (left) and Safeefah Chair – Beige by Ghaya Bin Mesmar x Mermelada Estudio (right). Photography by Moez Achour.

Ghaya Bin Mesmar x Mermelada Estudio

Safeefah

In this chair collection, Barcelona’s Mermelada Estudio and Emirati designer Ghaya Bin Mesmar envisioned a new application for Safeefah: furniture. A single image of a traditional areesh palm-frond house inspired the design’s leaf-like form. Starting with the image of one such home, that had been knocked over by the wind into a conical form, Ghaya Bin Mesmar and Mermelada translated the shape into a seat using palm fronds, and Bidwa artisans combined Safeefah weaving techniques to create a chair in three colour/pattern variants.

Fatima Al Zaabi (Studio D04) & Matteo Silverio

Emirati Clay x Italian Murano Glass

In an exploration of how the fragility of Murano glass and the sturdiness of Emirati clay might be combined in a single object, two architects – Emirati architect Fatima Al Zaabi and Venetian Matteo Silverio – have created a vase, lamp and phone charger. Parametric design and digital fabrication tools are used to make moulds, then the artisans of the Bidwa centre manually shape the glass and clay – merging hand and machine-making techniques, bringing together clay and glass, the UAE and Italy, innovation and tradition.

Adrian Salvador Candela (ONESIXONE) x Sheikha Bin Dhafer (Abjad Design)

Spanish leather x Talli

Embracing the natural, mouldable qualities of vegetal leather and the subtle expressiveness of Talli, Spanish handbag designer Adrian Salvador Candela and Emirati Sheikha Bin Dhafer created a sculptural, curvilinear fruit bowl reminiscent of both desert dunes and the drapery of women’s veils. The colours and textures, which form naturally when leather is exposed to water and sunlight, evoke images of weathered hands weaving Talli threads in perpetual meditative movements.

Abdallah Al Mulla x Pepa Reverter

Safeefah x Clay

Barcelona designer Pepa Reverter and Dubai’s Abdallah Al Mulla have crafted a dining-furniture collection consisting of clay stools and tables that resemble a totem pole when stacked. A decorative belt wraps around the clay stools and tables, incorporating Safeefah woven at Bidwa. The furniture goes beyond visual novelty: the scale of the objects – more than 60cm in diameter and a metre high – pushes the material to its limits.

Design Labs

Irthi’s Design Labs programme puts the craft skills and production capacity of the Bidwa Centre at the disposal of a selection of international designers and regional talents, and in return introduces the Bidwa artisans to new crafts, design approaches and production techniques. This exchange of knowledge and expertise has resulted in eight product families rooted in Emirati culture, including intricate gold jewellery, sand-cast furniture and oud vessels in glass and metal, reflecting the social importance of scent in the UAE.

Irthi, Patricia Swannell and Kazuhito Takadoi

Safeefah x Japanese grass weaving

Made in collaboration with Patricia Swannell and Kazuhito Takadoi from the UK's Jaggedart Gallery, both of whom are inspired by organic materials and the natural world, these product ranges include hand-drawn artworks and washi-paper wall tapestries that fuse the traditional crafts of Safeefah and Japanese grass weaving. Artisans from Irthi's Bidwa Social Development Programme combined their knowledge of Safeefah weaving techniques with Takadoi's refined Japanese embroidery to produce delicate woven elements that reflect the landscapes of Sharjah through the eyes of Takadoi, using the thinnest possible palm fronds. In parallel, Swannell selected three tree species native to the UAE – Ghaf, Sidr and Palm – and created intricate graphite drawings portraying a cross-section of each.



Hajar Chair by Irthi x Architecture + Other Things. Photography by Moez Achour.

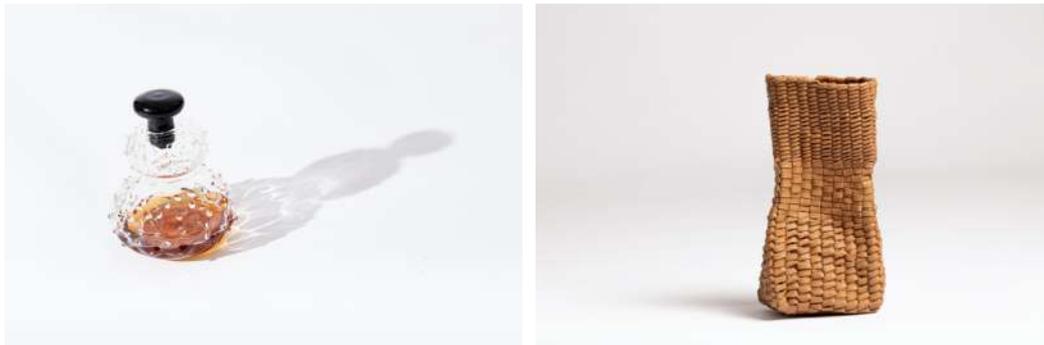
Irthi and Architecture + Other Things

Safeefah x sand casting

Working with Architecture + Other Things designers Nada Taryam, Faysal Tabbarah and Khawla Al Hashimi, Irthi has produced a collection of sand-casted furniture comprising the Harjah table and stools. The designers and Irthi's Bidwa trainees experimented with different combinations of water, sand, concrete, clay and soil to create a substance that can be set into a rock-like material, cast in sand-filled frames. Bidwa artisans then used their Safeefah skills to create woven detailing from camel leather, resulting in an exquisite and unique furniture family.

Irthi and Jennifer Zurick
Safeefah x camel leather

This collection of sculptural handbags is the result of a collaboration with the US artist Jennifer Zurick, who specialises in working with black willow bark, which she has been harvesting and weaving into baskets since 1980. Zurick worked with Irthi's Bidwa artisans and trainees to create fashionable and functional bag designs with a natural rustic aesthetic, using camel leather in place of palm leaf, taking the traditional Safeefah weave in an exciting new direction. By employing a combination of indigenous weaving traditions from both the United Arab Emirates and the United States, these finely woven contemporary handbags cross international borders and demonstrate the shared creative spirit of women and weavers from different cultures across the world.



Sadaf – Oud Oil Container by Irthi x Dima Srouji (left) and Linear Bucket Bag by Irthi x Jennifer Zurick (right). Photography by Moez Achour.

Irthi and Hollow Forms by Dima Srouji
Oud x Palestinian glassblowing

Glassblowing 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. Merging the UAE's culture of perfume with the craft of glass making from Palestine, Irthi collaborated with designer Dima Srouji and Palestinian glassblowers to create perfume bottles, vessels for oud oil, and midkhans (incense burners). Employing traditional techniques to develop contemporary forms, the Palestinian experts taught Bidwa trainees to create small, sculptural glass forms, which were used in the creation of this collection, inspired by the Palestinian and Emirati natural landscapes and by textures such as cactus, coral stone and jellyfish.

Irthi and Bint Thani

Embroidery x camel leather

Irthi collaborated with the Khuloud Al Thani's Atelier to produce a series of embroidered camel leather screens, adapting haute couture techniques into interior-design applications. The designs are inspired by the Emirati folktales (Al Kharrarif) told to children, revolving around mythical creatures and characters, and intended to convey a life lesson. This collection uses Talli braiding and embroidery to depict three such folkloric figures: Himarat Al Qaila ('The Afternoon Donkey', a half-woman half-donkey creature who preys on children who play outside unsupervised), Um Al Dowais (a siren-like seductress who lures men to their deaths) and Salama and her Daughters (sea creatures feared by fishermen and divers). Irthi's artisans created intricate Talli braids, integrated with various embroidery techniques, to bring the characters to life.

Irthi and Alia bin Omair

Safeefah x gold casting

UAE-based jewellery designer Alia bin Omair worked with Irthi to produce a collection of jewellery featuring gold-cast weaves. Bidwa's artisans elevated Safeefah weaves into wearable elements by casting the weaves in gold to produce a collection of necklaces, rings, earrings, and wearable perfume bottles. Once the artisan's had woven the palm fronds in accordance with bin Omair's vision, moulds were created by imprinting the Safeefah woven pieces in wax, and 18k gold was cast to create a unique collection of jewellery.

Irthi and The Lél Collection

Talli x Misbah

To create these two collections, Bidwa trainees collaborated with the Lél Collection, a Pakistan-based studio supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, with a workforce comprising Afghani male artisans displaced to Pakistan. One collection focuses on misbah (prayer beads) as jewellery, for which Bidwa artisans employed traditional 'sayr yaay' and single Talli weaving techniques to create interlacing gold and silver thread, finished with beads of lapis lazuli by Bidwa trainees. This use of precious metal is a tribute to times past when Emirati women would weave Talli with real gold and silver threads, as opposed to the synthetic metallic threads used today. The second collection focuses on the misbah as an element of home décor – placed on the floor, 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 trainees learned how to cut and engrave semi precious stones, marble and wooden beads, in addition to an array of resin inlay techniques. Their challenge was carving and setting inlays in a three dimensional format rather

than the traditional flat surface, and combining Talli and macramé techniques to create a collection of 'larger than life' misbah, ranging from three to eight metres long.



Oud Oil Container's by Irthi x Adi Toch. Photography by Moez Achour.

Irthi and Adi Toch

Oud x metalwork

Used to burn incense and spread its fragrance around the home, midkhans are common objects 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 midkhan designs, along with a range of metal containers for oud oil. The hand-made vessels combine traditional silversmithing techniques with experimental surface texturing and patination.

“These Irthi collections are rooted in the possibilities and opportunities that come from new, often unexpected connections across craft disciplines and creative approaches – they could only have come from collaboration. These two initiatives have brought together people from across the world that are masters at what they do and given them a platform to converse, design, collaborate, and be challenged. This has created greater diversity within the Bidwa community, opening up the artisans of a rural area in Sharjah to a wider range of age groups, ethnicities, cultures, and crafts. This has been invaluable, and the possibilities that have opened up as a result of these dialogues are truly boundless.”

– Farah Nasri, assistant manager of curation and design, Irthi

The products will be available for sale online soon (potential customers are invited to register their interest via Adorno), and will be presented as part of Irthi’s exhibition at the (now-postponed) Milan Design Week in June.

Visit adorno.design to view the Irthi collections.

For more information about Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council, its Adorno collection and the Bidwa Social Development Programme, please contact Sabine Zetteler (irthi@zetteler.co.uk) who will gladly assist.



Irthi artisan practising Safeefah (left) and participants from Crafts Dialogue (right). Photography Moez Achour.

Further selection of Irthi x Adorno images



Left: fruit bowls by Adrian Salvador Candela and Shaikha Bin Dhafer from the Crafts Dialogue collection.
Right: Spanish Leather from the Crafts Dialogue collection.



Left: Jais (Talli x Misbah) by The Lél Collection from Design Labs collection.
Right: Hajar Chair by Architecture + Other Things from the Design Labs collection.



Left: Safeefah chairs by Ghaya Bin Mesmar x Mermelada Estudio from the Crafts Dialogue collection.
Right: Safeefah Tote by Jennifer Zurick from the Design Labs collection.



Left: Haleema Earrings by Alia Bin Omair from the Design Labs collection.
Right: Sayr Yaay Misbah by The Lél Collection from the Design Labs collection.

To see the full collection of products and visuals, please visit adorno.design.
All photography by Moez Achour.

Notes for editors

About Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council | irthi.com

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 craftswomen, by developing new market opportunities and sectors, delivering social development programmes and vocational training, while preserving the craft skills and rich cultural heritage of the UAE for future generations through its initiatives.

- **Bidwa Social Development Programme** employs more than 80 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 workshops and events.
- **Azyame Fashion Entrepreneurs Programme** aims to develop the next generation of UAE-based fashion designers through training, mentoring and business development.
- **Crafts Dialogue** combines Emirati and international crafts by pairing UAE-based and international designers to develop limited-edition contemporary designs.
- **Design Labs**, much like art residencies, allow for a craft exchange between international or regional designers and the Bidwa artisans and trainees under the creative direction of Irthi.

About Adorno | adorno.design

Adorno was set up in 2017 by Copenhagen-based design lovers and tech entrepreneurs Kristian Snorre Andersen and Martin Clausen in order to give designers around the world a unique opportunity to present their work to the global market, and to provide design enthusiasts with a chance to discover and acquire unique and limited-edition work. By establishing a network of expert curators in key design destinations around the world, Adorno has been able to not only maintain rigorously controlled quality, but also to provide its community with a unique insight into the distinctive and evolving design cultures around the world. In January 2020, Adorno welcomed London Design Fair founder Jimmy McDonald as commercial director, with a view to broadening Adorno's worldwide scope and expanding its global exhibition programme.