



Naseer Yasna carves by first drawing freehand on to wood; right, the artist at work on one of his impeccable creations Photos Naseer Yasna

# CARVING A NICHE FOR HIMSELF WITH WOOD

► From a studio on the banks of the Thames, a gifted craftsman is keeping the 1,400-year-old Islamic art of woodwork alive, finds **Mary Murtagh**



Originally from Afghanistan, the then teenage Naseer Yasna learned his beloved craft, in Iran, from an Iraqi master woodcarver.

Regarded as one of the most accomplished woodworkers of the Islamic world today, his work appears at the World Economic Forum in Davos, the Smithsonian museums in the United States and Qatar's Museum of Islamic Art.

He is now turning his talents to help save the Nurestani carving tradition from extinction. His hand glides over a woodworking bench smothered in chisels. It hovers for a moment, then moves on, still searching for the perfect tool with which to make his mark – like a surgeon choosing a scalpel.

At last the perfect tool makes itself known and Yasna clasps it and sets to work. The noise of mallet on chisel is, at first, deafening as he takes big chunks from a plank of American walnut. A change of tool is followed by a change of pace in carving, which is now rhythmic, measured and precise, and a tall skinny figure starts to emerge.

Gentle woodpecker-like taps see the geometric man take further shape. Designed with straight lines and primitive looking, this sculpture is inspired by the chip-carved images of pagan gods found in remote villages in Nurestan, eastern Afghanistan. Its straight lines lend it a distinctly primitive appearance.

These statuesque figures, hewn using simple tools and timber from surrounding forests, decorated the homes of the ancient tribespeople who made them. "These figures were often decorative or symbolic and used to identify key people in the village, such as the baker or chief," explains 41-year-old Yasna, who is also known by the name Mansouri in his native Afghanistan.

"But these Nurestani traditions are being forgotten and knowledge of how to do this kind of carving is getting lost." In a bid to stop this tradition from disappearing altogether, Yasna has created exquisite modern interpretations of these effigies in a new collection that includes free-standing clan statues as art pieces as well as side tables that turn into chess and backgammon sets.

Setting up Lazo Studios, in London, is the latest chapter in Yasna's



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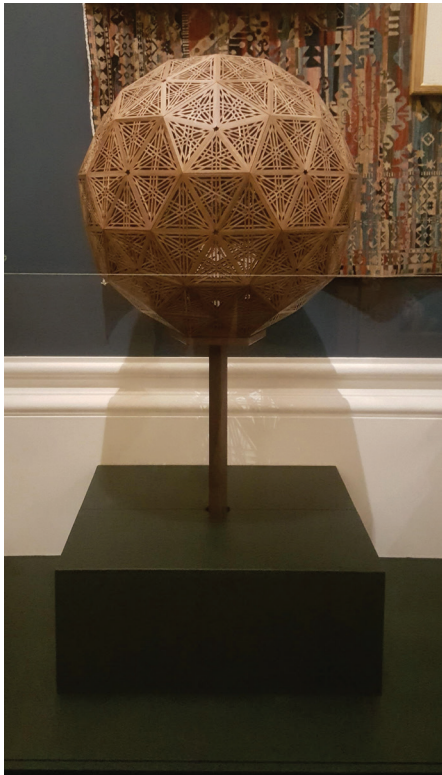
career, which has taken him from the streets of war-torn Kabul and life as a refugee in Iran to Buckingham Palace and world-class museums.

At just 13, he became the protege of renowned woodcarver Hassan Khondani and spent six years under his tutelage in Tehran. "Hassan was a very quiet, hardworking, but strict man, and many apprentices didn't last," Yasna says. "His work was impeccable and I had the best training possible. I learned to design and draw freehand on timber. Hassan detected I had a talent for woodcarving and encouraged me until I became his right-hand man."

When the master had nothing left to teach his student, Yasna spread his wings, setting up his own business in the Iranian capital, producing the highest-quality artisan furniture – ranging from dining sets to doors and panelling to pagodas – with expertly carved, intricate detailing.

With the fall of the Taliban in 2001 Yasna's father was able to fulfil his dream of taking his family back to their homeland. He returned, albeit with a heavy heart, to a Kabul with destroyed buildings and shattered infrastructure and started all over again from a roadside workshop. From there, he embarked on a journey of discovery with maverick expeditions to many of the old city's buildings destroyed by 30 years of war. He clambered over walls and cleared rubble by hand, often





Far left, side tables that become chess and backgammon sets; centre, an intricately carved cedar wood pavilion at the Smithsonian in the US; above, a wall-mounted bookcase inspired by the Islamic sunburst design, Shamsa; above right, 'Lovers' sculptures in Afghanistan's classic Nurestani style

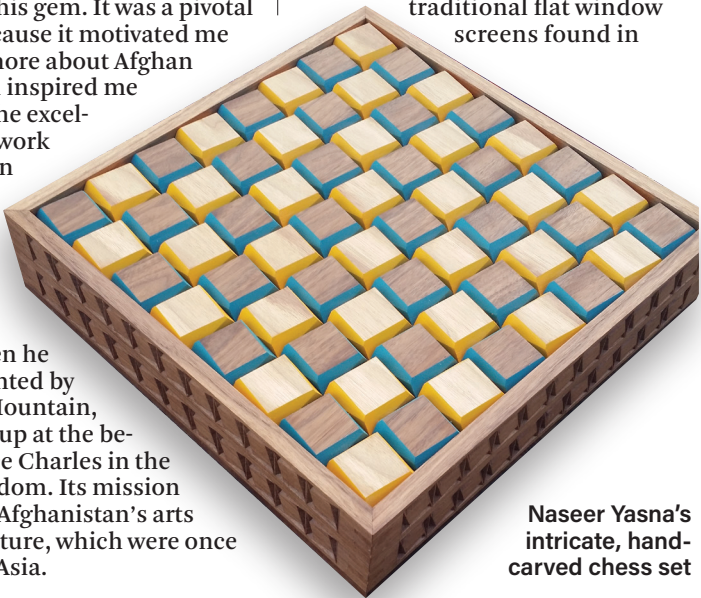
discovering 250 to 300-year-old wood carvings.

Driven by professional curiosity and a desire to learn from, be inspired by and preserve these relics, Yasna travelled across Afghanistan drinking in the artistry he found.

"I knew very little about Afghan traditional and historic designs up until then," he says. "I remember discovering a piece of woodcarving, the likes of which I'd never seen before, and which demonstrated a level of mastery I had not expected. I found it in a dilapidated building called Peacock House in the old city, which had become a slum.

"In the midst of all that ugliness, I discovered this gem. It was a pivotal moment because it motivated me to find out more about Afghan heritage and inspired me to emulate the excellence of the work by old Afghan masters."

Yasna got to put what he'd seen and learnt into practice when he was headhunted by Turquoise Mountain, a charity set up at the behest of Prince Charles in the United Kingdom. Its mission is to restore Afghanistan's arts and architecture, which were once the pride of Asia.



Naseer Yasna's intricate, hand-carved chess set

Islamic culture, into a geodesic spherical sculpture. The geometric lattice design was created from hundreds of individual pieces of wood joined by hand. This work formed part of an exhibition which then travelled to Leighton House, in London.

By 2016, the security situation in Kabul had deteriorated, prompting Yasna to relocate to London and launch his own business. The distinctive jali balls soon followed him when they appeared in the Prince and Patron exhibition at Buckingham Palace to celebrate Prince Charles's 70th birthday this year. They were displayed alongside an intricately carved cedar wood pavilion made by Yasna and Turquoise Mountain colleagues.

While he still counts presidents as clients and princes as champions, the new Lazo Studios venture widens Yasna's customer base by opening his work up to the general public with artwork, bespoke commissions and a new line of furniture, interior design pieces and homeware.

The latest collection showcases Yasna's mastery as a carver, designer and joiner and is on show at a pop-up shop, in Mayfair, and a private exhibition, in Kensington, and for everyone to see via Lazo Studio's Instagram feed.

"My aim is to connect to this wonderful woodcarving heritage and add to its lineage," he concludes. "I'm pushing myself to generate work that is rooted in tradition yet clearly of our own time.

"Ultimately, I want my work to exhibit the beauty of Afghanistan to the rest of the world."

Left, 'jali balls' that turn traditional Islamic window screens into a spherical sculpture, on show at the Prince and Patron exhibition, Buckingham Palace



The traffic in Dhaka is some of the worst in the world, and 3.2 million man hours each day are spent waiting in the streets AFP

# Congested roads and crowded houses: battling overpopulation in Dhaka

There are quite a few people in Dhaka. The city itself, located in central Bangladesh on the eastern banks of the Buriganga River, has a population of nearly nine million, while the Greater Dhaka Area is home to about 19 million people. That's just over 23,000 people per square kilometre.

"The city is growing faster than we can come up with ideas [to deal with this growth]," Dhaka architect Marina Tabassum told me at the Al Burda Festival in Abu Dhabi last week, where there was a series of discussions about the future of Islamic art and culture.

And the population of Dhaka is only going to increase. There are jobs there. In 2016, the World Trade Organisation reported that Bangladesh has a 6.4 per cent global share of the clothing market. Nearly all of the factories are in Dhaka. "These factories are like magnets," says Tabassum, who won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2016 and the Jameel Prize in 2018 for her design of the Bait Ur Rouf mosque. "They pull people from all different parts of the country to Dhaka, where they live in a dire situation. This was not necessary."

A policy of decentralisation, Tabassum argues, could have relieved the pressure on Bangladesh's capital. "[We could] have taken certain things out of Dhaka, grown one city, let's say in the north, as an education city," she says. "We have two major port cities, so even the garment industry could have been taken out of Dhaka. There is no reason why the factories should be in Dhaka.



Award-winning architect Marina Tabassum Kunal Panchal

It is only because the owners live there."

As a result, factory workers in Dhaka are being forced to rent single rooms to share with their families. "It's really sad and crazy," says Tabassum.

Of course, a shortage of housing is not the only problem that arises when such a large population is crammed into a relatively small area. The infrastructure of a city also becomes overwhelmed. The traffic in Dhaka is some of the worst anywhere in the world. Tabassum explains that 3.2 million man hours are spent waiting in the congested streets each day. "It's such a waste," she says. "Mass transport would really help us." The Dhaka Metro Rail is currently under construction and due to open in 2019.

Tabassum is also concerned that the number of people in Dhaka will impact on the history of the old part of the city. "The buildings in old Dhaka are mostly privately owned, so unless the government makes an acquisition, it's impossible for them to do anything about it," she says. "Everybody wants to have apartment blocks, you cannot help that, people want a better life. But I think at least part of the architecture can be preserved for the sake of history."

Rupert Hawksley



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