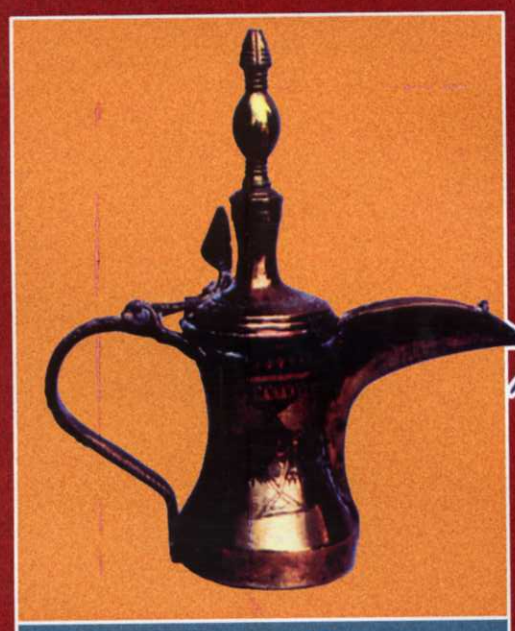

TRADITIONAL CRAFTS OF SAUDI ARABIA

John TOPHAM

Saudi Commission for Tourism & Antiquities

TRADITIONAL CRAFTS *of* SAUDI ARABIA

Weaving ~ Jewellery ~ Costume ~ Leatherwork
Basketry ~ Woodwork ~ Pottery ~ Metalwork

John Topham
with Anthony Landreau and
William E. Mulligan

Foreword by HRH Princess Haifa Al-Faisal

AL-TURATH / STACEY INTERNATIONAL

Traditional Crafts of Saudi Arabia

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The objects and pictures in this book were selected from approximately 500 illustrations. Information on date and place of acquisition of objects is given when available; the owners are listed on this page. Measurements of the larger objects are given in feet and inches, those of smaller items are in inches. All dates used in the book are AD.

Half-title photograph:
Classic Incense Burner. *The wooden body is decorated in brass tacks and mirrors and the columns covered with gilded sheet metal. It was probably made in the Eastern Province before 1950, and given to W.E. Tewell. This type of manufacture no longer exists; the same conformation is used but most contemporary incense burners are imported and often have plastic decoration.*

Title page photographs:
A weaver from Hofuf working at a pit loom, which has two harnesses. (Photograph by Joy May Hilden)

Camel Milk Bowl. A rare example of a decorated bowl. Small metal slugs are pounded into drilled holes in the wood to create this particularly elaborate decoration.

The Contributors

J.T. John Topham, a Virginian now living in New York, was educated at St Andrews School, Roanoke College and Duke University. He is a construction consultant and manager who spent several years working in Saudi Arabia, where he became interested in the weavings and other crafts of the Bedouin and villagers and built the collection on which this book is based.

A.L. Anthony Landreau, a leading authority on nomadic weaving, is a former Executive Director of The Textile Museum, Washington DC and Research Curator for the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh. He is well known as a lecturer and consultant on Oriental rugs.

W.E.M. William E. Mulligan spent over thirty years in Saudi Arabia as an Arabian-American Oil Company executive, where his government relations activities included historical and field research into Bedouin and traditional Arab culture. He contributed to *Aramco World, The Encyclopedia of Islam* and other publications. He died in 1994.

Acknowledgements to the First Edition

Interest in the project has been forthcoming from many sources; the author wishes to thank particularly the following for their kind and valuable assistance:

Dr Abdullah H. Masry, Assistant Deputy Minister of Education for Cultural Affairs, Saudi Arabia for his support of the exhibition and the book; Dr Muhammed Bakalla of the King Saud University for his enthusiasm and encouragement; Prince Sultan al-Sudairi of al-Jawf who lent magnificent weavings from his area, and who, with his father, is to be praised for his support of this craft; Colin Paddock, their assistant, especially for his help in obtaining a complete tent.

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Most items shown in this book belong to John Topham. Others who generously lent artefacts and photographs are: the Al-Nahda Philanthropic Society; Kimberley Ayers; Grace Burkholder; William Mulligan; Bonnie Ray; Anne Rhea; Folklore Museum, University of Riyadh; Mary Ellen Taylor; Frederick Taylor; Bedj and W.E.Tewell. The author is particularly grateful to Barbara Hawke for her help in Saudi Arabia and especially for acquiring the outstanding tent wall whon on page 30, as well as other items later acquired from her.

The author also wishes to thank those who took the photographs for the book: John Topham Collection: Tim Callahan assisted by Drew Hardy; Grace Burkholder and Tim Callahan; Anne Rhea Collection: Mark Hodgson; Mary Ellen Taylor Collection: Sharon White; Folklore Museum, University of Riyadh photographs supplied by M. Bakalla; page 14 and page 25 (top) by Wilhelm Büttiker. Other *in situ* photographs are by John Topham, Grace Burkholder, Earl Kage, Museographics, Rochester and 'Ilo the pirate'.

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Contents

Foreword

Throughout history, society has been peopled with adventurers, those uncommon individuals whose curiosity pushes them beyond the familiar to explore, discover and understand peoples and places as yet unknown. Their dramatic stories continue to populate our histories and capture our imagination.

But we fail, sometimes, to celebrate the quiet adventurers who recognize something precious and treasurable in what, to others, is commonplace, or simply old. It is to them that we owe a special debt, for as societies lay aside traditional customs, styles, and materials to make way for the modern, it is often these adventurers who gather them up and hold them in trust for the future. Such an individual is John Topham who, during his years in Saudi Arabia, listened to the echoes of Arabia that still reverberated in the everyday weavings, utensils, and clothing that were being relegated to its past.

I established a collection of Saudi material culture in 1986 for the principal purpose of providing future generations a window on the traditions and traditional life of Saudi Arabia. The foundation for it was the acquisitions of the collection of Mr Topham, which is represented here, and that of another "quiet" adventurer, Heather Colyer Ross. Since then, numerous small collections and individual objects have been acquired from individuals and auction houses in Saudi Arabia, Europe and the United States. In 2002, the collection was merged with the holdings of the Al-Nahda Charitable Society in Riyadh to form the SANA Collection. Today, SANA has more than 6,000 material artifacts and a research library, including maps and photographs, which provide a unique opportunity to research, study and share with others the material culture of Saudi Arabia and its people.

T. S. Eliot once referred to the material artifacts of a civilization as its "emissaries". My personal thanks to all the adventurers, and particularly to John Topham, who have helped keep the emissaries of Saudi Arabia safe for future generations.

Haifa Al-Faisal
July 2004

4. Percussion cap rifle. *Made in about 1850, this European gun has been modified and decorated in Saudi Arabia. The metal pins hammered in geometric patterns are typical of older Bedouin decoration. The stock has been altered by the addition of a protruding butt piece which keeps it from slipping from under the arm.*

Acquired in the Najd, 1970.

Preface

The Topham Collection was first exhibited in Rochester in 1982, under the same title as the book, *Traditional Crafts of Saudi Arabia*. It then circulated to eight museums under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution, and to six more museums by direct arrangements between Mr Topham and the museums. This makes a total of fifteen museums over a period of almost ten years.

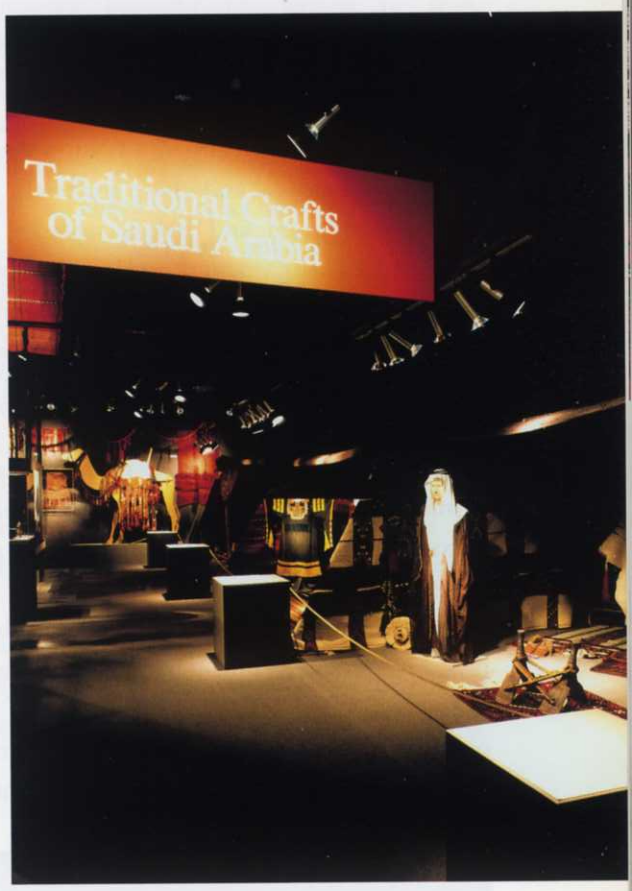
It attracted a considerable amount of favourable attention everywhere it went, with, according to the museums, higher than usual attendance for travelling exhibitions. It was the first significant exposure of the crafts and culture of the Bedouin and villagers of Saudi Arabia in the United States, and stimulated many other associated lectures and other programmes. Dillon Ripley, the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, spoke of the exhibition as a real 'eye-opener' for the West. Mr Topham also lent material to many smaller exhibitions in other institutions.

Major museums where the Topham Collection has been exhibited:

(*Under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution)

Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, 1982
Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, Colorado Springs, Colorado 1982*
Boston Museum of Science, Boston, Massachusetts, 1983*
The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C., 1983*
Science Museum, Dallas, Texas, 1983*
San José Museum of Art, San José, California, 1983*
Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada, 1984*
Hanson Memorial Museum, Logan, Kansas, 1984*
The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1985-87
Metropolitan Museum and Art Center, Coral Gables, Florida, 1987-88
The Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Illinois, 1989
Museum of Man, San Diego, California, 1989
Maxwell Museum of Anthropolgy, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 1990
Texas Memorial Museum, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, 1991
High Museum, Atlanta, Georgia, 1991

Objects were also lent to a number of other venues including the Seattle World's Fair and the *Palms and Pomegranates* travelling exhibition.



The exhibition at the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Illinois, 1989.

Introduction

My purpose in writing this book is to record the arts and crafts both of the Bedouin and of the villagers of Saudi Arabia before new practical and cheap materials, like plastic, aluminium and nylon, replaced the hand-crafted ornamental accessories of a traditional way of life. Very little research or identification has been attempted in this field, and, while this record, originally compiled for publication in 1982, is comprehensive, it is not complete. My hope is that it may serve as a stimulus for those trying to complete documentation of these fascinating arts and crafts.

Saudi Arabia occupies most of the Arabian peninsula, is about three-quarters of the size of India, and about one-third of the size of the old 48 United States. It is hot, dry and barren except in oases and in some mountainous areas. Its people have faced drought, famine and pestilence, but have overcome them, for the Arabs are a resourceful and hardy people. I spent most of the time from the spring of 1977 through to the summer of 1979 working in Saudi Arabia. The collecting and identifying of crafts, especially weavings, became my primary interest. These were the middle or late years of the great change from a dispersed and nomadic culture to an urbanized, semi-industrial and commercial way of life. Great numbers of people had moved to the cities and old tribal associations had become obscure. Although a pride in traditional values persisted, identification of the older material objects associated with them was no longer considered important. It was difficult to find people – even older people – who had an interest in or knowledge of any objects, beyond those with which they themselves had been familiar since childhood.

Although I spent nearly all of my leisure time with dealers and with anyone who could offer information about my subject, and even though I took every possible opportunity to travel – to Ta'if, the Asir, Yanbu, al-Kharj, Dilam, Hofuf, Qatif, al-Jawf and Tabuk – I did not learn in proportion to my efforts. I carried photographs of Saudi-made objects everywhere and showed them to anyone who had the patience to look through them, noting identifications offered and other pertinent comments.

As I assembled the information, I found extensive contradictions. I have made decisions about varying identifications where no consensus could be achieved; these I based on the most reliable information available. Regional identification is generally sound, but I have had to use the words 'probably' and 'possibly' for tribal attributions more often than I would have wished.

It may seem curious that most dates which appear in the book only represent a fifty-year span. It must be understood that drastic change has occurred since the late 1940s, accelerating incredibly since 1970, so that dates related to items have a real significance to those knowledgeable about this subject. Most objects were made in the same way and with the same materials for many generations before the Second World War.

Imported materials were certainly present earlier, but their use has accelerated too, so that now almost the only indigenous materials and work are to be found in weaving, pottery, leather work, basketry and perhaps embroidery, which also increasingly incorporate modern dyes, plastics and machine work. The other element which makes exact dating problematical is that the hard nomadic life and harsh environment ruin and distort many materials. The Bedouin did not want to be cluttered by possessions. He valued the few he had and repaired where he could, but when something became useless, it was discarded or incorporated into a new object.

5. Strip rug. *From western Arabia (probably Juhaynah tribe), this geometrically patterned rug consists of warp-faced plain weave stripes alternating with panels of warp-faced complementary warp-pattern weave. It has a striped band of twining at one end and a braided warp fringe. The wool is a combination of camel hair and chemically dyed wools and the edges are goat hair. Made in about 1960, it is 9ft by 2ft 4in. Yarns are 2 x spun, plied s. A detail is shown below.*

Acquired in Rabigh, 1979.

Several Western companies in Saudi Arabia use Bedouin crafts to decorate their offices and houses. This example is a fine camel saddle bag; it hangs with other items in Bechtel's guest house in Al Khobar.

The reader will find adequate examples of crafts which are illustrated in sufficient variety to serve as a basis for determining the origins of those objects for which I give no certain provenance. The details between these covers represents an honest interpretation of my present knowledge.

Collecting the traditional crafts of Saudi Arabia: a few experiences.
I became interested in Saudi Arabian crafts on my first visit to the Kingdom in 1977. I worked in the Dhahran area, and on Fridays would visit the market in Dammam to buy fruit and vegetables. There, I saw village and Bedouin women selling handwoven rugs of current manufacture on the sidewalk at the gold suq. Here I bought my first Bedouin rug. It was striped in bright colours and had several bands of camel hair. On return trips to Dammam and on visits to Qatif, I was able to acquire about twenty variations on the striped theme.

At this time I also went to Hofuf, in the al-Hasa oasis. On the first trip I was immediately greeted by a man who said, 'Antiques, follow me.' I did so, down a number of alleys to a place where there was an assortment of tent and camel gear, coffee pots and oddments, all exceptionally highly priced. The people were not inclined to bargain so I bought a few pieces of camel gear and left for the main *suq*. In a small corner shop, among stacks of folded factory-made rugs, I found an old twill weaving and bought it. I managed to convey to the shop-keeper that would be interested in more of this type and left him to search while I wandered through the *suq*. I returned to find that the shopkeeper had located three weavings which I also bought. He said one had come from the Najd, the others from al-Hasa.

Interested in learning something of the background of these rugs, I tried to find out where they were being woven and hoped that I could photograph the loom, if not the weavers. But I progressed slowly. Later, in the USA when I tried to research weavings and other crafts of the peninsula, I was frustrated by the lack of any information of consequence, for not only were there no books on the subject but no museums had any samples of the material. I returned to Arabia, determined to collect a variety of native rugs and to learn what I could of their designs and technical variations.

Jeddah. I spent most of 1978 in Jeddah and soon found the 'rug *suq*', about fifteen small shops opening onto a large square, which was a pilgrim trading center. In the early days of airplanes carrying in pilgrims to Makkah the air terminal was on the other side of this square. The merchants depended a good deal on the pilgrims bringing rugs and other artifacts with them from Pakistan, Persia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt and even Nigeria and Indonesia. They brought them to sell in Arabia to finance their trips, but this is now, generally, a thing of the past.

Among these shops I found a few older Persian rugs, but the rug dealers primarily handled great bales of new rugs from Pakistan and Iran. The most commonly found handwoven rugs were from Pakistan, frequently copies of Bokhara type patterns in different colours. Other handwoven rugs commonly brought in, woven in Iraq, Afghanistan and parts of Iran, were coarse pile rugs in Qashqai pattern, and long pile, with heavily corded edges, often called 'Arab'.

Although I had searched mainly for textiles, picking up only a few other items, I soon realized that the indigenous jewellery was also disappearing. I elected to collect jewellery, with an eye to variety of design motifs and tried to obtain jewellery made in Saudi Arabia as opposed to that brought in from the Yemen and Oman.

There were two shops in the old airport *suq* owned by Abdullah al-Zahrani and his six sons. They had more Bedouin jewellery than any of the other shops, but this, in the year spent in Jeddah, was reduced to a small stock with few remaining choice Saudi pieces. It became my habit in the evenings to go to the

Abdullah al-Zahrani in his shop in Jeddah.

A dealer in Ta'if, one of the few who deals entirely in equipment for the Bedouin, a sweet mannered man, now deceased.

al-Zahranis' shop to sit and talk with them. They and the 11 other shopkeepers were hospitable and very tolerant, and appreciated my interest in old Bedouin things.

Despite the wide variety of rugs available I did not see during my time in Jeddah more than 20 Arabian-made weavings in the entire *suq* except for the occasional modern novelty piece. There were a few embroidered coffee bean bags and some pieces of costume; the traditional Hijaz face masks were sought by Westerners and cost 600 riyals or more. I also bought there a few pieces of costume from the Hijaz, the best of which were older items identified as Bani Salim. Their work was characterized by careful embroidery on the dresses and head shawls and the use of a lot of soft metal beads. I also found intricate woven leatherwork which was also credited to the Bani Salim. The al-Zahranis had in their house some older costumes which they occasionally brought to show me. I bought most of the finer pieces. When they knew I was leaving Jeddah they gave me an exceptionally fine headdress (illustration 133, p.104).

One evening the al-Zahranis told me they were negotiating for a collection of jewellery, the property of a woman who had died. I was told it was very superior but that they would have to break up the group in order to sell it, which they did not like to do. They suggested I buy it from the estate instead, in order to keep it intact, which I did. It was better silverwork than any other indigenous pieces I had seen, and was believed to have been made by the silversmiths of Najran, whose work has a particular cachet among the dealers.

On another occasion the man who owned the shop next door had an old and worn little round wooden vessel for spice or coffee beans (with a conical top, hinged and decorated with metal tacks), which he had just brought from his home at Yanbu al-Nakhl, which I bought (illustration 245 p.175). The only other example I saw was in the Folklore Museum at Riyadh.

I also obtained several pieces of Makkah-made copper. I was told that copper work has not been carried out in Makkah for many years and that most trays and other metal work now sold there was brought in from Damascus, Baghdad and Pakistan.

Ta'if. On Fridays I would go from Jeddah to Ta'if, a town about 6,000 feet up in the mountains. It is a large town in which many old houses and the old *suq* area survive. There are about thirty shops specializing in rugs in the *suq*. Of these, only one large shop and two or three small shops deal in Arab-made things. The largest, which belonged to two brothers, was the one place in Arabia I found primarily in the business of selling traditional goat hair tents and tent parts. They also had a wide variety of locally-made flat weave Bedouin rugs – plain examples with a great variety of coloured stripes and braided ends. It was also in Ta'if that I found my best example of a tent wall – ending in a profusion of sashes – and an old camel feed bag decorated with beads and cowrie shells. I was friendly with the rug dealers, but when I tried to arrange to photograph someone weaving, or at least the loom, I was told 'We don't know where they come from, the men just bring the rugs in.'

In Ta'if some of the women would sit along the street, trying to sell water skins, which are now a thing of the past. Some would spin as they sat, and bought both sheep wool and goat hair yarn from them, in naturally dyed colours as well as undyed. In the *suq* was a man selling ghee, and a variety of Bedouin-made leather items. I bought several pouches and a sling. In a spice shop I obtained a brightly coloured modern coffee bean bag.

Yanbu. Yanbu is an old sea port. Most old buildings have been destroyed, but there is still a row of shops with the old shutters which retains much of the atmosphere of a hundred years ago. In one small shop was a very old man who sold Bedouin jewellery, neatly displayed, of which he was very proud. He bargained slowly and ceremoniously.

On the road from Yanbu to Jeddah is a town called Rabigh where I found a small old *suq*. Here I found a fine pair of simple camel bags in natural colours with well-made wrapped tassels. A local Arab guided me to an inland semi-settled area to find a long narrow

Inset right: *Weaving a pile rug on a ground loom in Sakaka, al-Jawf.*