



**TEXTILES OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND CENTRAL ASIA:
THE FABRIC OF LIFE** by *Fahmida Suleman*.
The British Museum. London: Thames & Hudson.
2017. Hardcover. 232 pages. \$40.00.

With 269 color photographs, this would make an impressive coffee table book, but it is far more than just a picture book. The textiles were selected from the collection of the British Museum by Dr. Suleman, Curator for the Modern Middle East at the museum, and come from a vast geographical area with a varied ethnic and religious population. The individual pieces date from the late 18th century through the next two centuries and into the 21st. Perhaps uniquely, they are not grouped according to typical themes of race, religion, class, or nationality, but rather according to the times of a person's life when textiles would have played a significant role.

The first five chapter titles reflect this emphasis: "Childhood," "Marriage and Ceremony," "Status and Identity," "Religion and Belief," "House and Homestead." Chapter six examines the effects of "Politics and Conflict," but also includes efforts to preserve textile traditions and expand outreach in the current fashion world. The items in each chapter come from across a region that includes not just the Arab states, but many areas of the former Soviet Union, as well as Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, Israel, Turkey, and other remnants of the Ottoman Empire like Armenia. And although the area is frequently thought of only as Islamic, Jewish, Christian and Druze, Zoroastrian artifacts are included. This arrangement allows cross-referencing and the recognition of both similarities and differences between cultures.

Besides large garments, there are photographs of many kinds of hats and face veils, children's dolls, and doll-size seamstress' samples, amulets, and even a pair of "stilted clogs," made of wood with inlaid mother-of-pearl. The clogs were worn by rich Ottoman ladies to keep their feet dry on a visit to the public baths. (The wearer required the arm of her servant in order to walk, as the clogs were about 12 inches high!) Household items included rugs, wall hangings, towels, bed coverings and bedding covers, all kinds of bags, from mirror bags to bags to protect the ends of the yurt's poles when travelling, various table cloths and food covers, and accoutrements for decorating horses and camels. It is a beautiful, colorful world.

This book should have wide appeal for it is both attractive and informative. The text is easy to understand yet scholarly, with both chapter notes and a large annotated bibliography for readers who are interested in further study. It will make a valuable addition to the library of anyone interested in handmade costume, Middle Eastern history, and contemporary efforts to preserve ancient techniques while employing women in earning a living for their families.

Reviewed by Gaye Elder
Alapaha, Georgia