UPROOTED:
The Art of Refugees
In this exhibit, you will view the work of six individuals who moved to the Washington, DC metro area as refugees.

When you hear the word “refugee,” what image comes to mind? Do you imagine people in an encampment in a foreign land? Do you envision people you know or strangers?

The fact is that Maryland is home to over 40,000 refugees. It’s possible that you encounter people who moved to Maryland as refugees when you are at the grocery store, or picking up your children from school - ordinary activities that are a daily part of life.

One of the purposes of this exhibit is to show the ordinary and the extraordinary. People who moved here as refugees are trying to create ordinary lives. But in our ordinary lives, each of us has the capacity for the extraordinary as well.

In the case of these six individuals, their ability to create art is extraordinary.

While all arrived here as refugees, they have built homes in the United States, obtained jobs, raised children, and became active members of their communities. They are our neighbors, friends, and colleagues. No longer refugees, they are permanent residents and citizens.

But their identity as artists goes much deeper. The person who was an artist in Bagdad is still an artist in Riverdale. This exhibit celebrates the creative spirit that is left unchanged despite the upheaval of relocation.

Worldwide, millions of people are refugees and the numbers are growing every year. But as often happens when we use numbers to describe human crises, we lose site of individuals - the moms, the dads, the kids, the college graduates, the aspiring artists. People who were just like you and me, living perfectly normal, uneventful lives. Until they weren’t.

Do you know any refugees personally? Do you think of refugees as fundamentally different from you? Or do you subscribe to the thinking of the 16th century religious martyr John Bradford who said, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” Bradford acknowledged life’s vagaries and the possibility that anyone’s circumstances could change in the blink of an eye.

When you hear the word “refugee,” what image comes to mind? Do you ever picture yourself?

Allison Weiss
Executive Director
Sandy Spring Museum
Mohamed Abdurahman was born in 1953 in Marka, Somalia. While growing up, he watched his creative father invent household items in his spare time.

Abdurahman was inspired by his father’s inventiveness. From a young age, he enjoyed drawing on the walls inside his home with leftover charcoal, while many of his friends played soccer or baseball instead.

In 1993, during the Somalian civil war, Abdurahman moved to Kenya with his wife and six children. To support his family, he became a foreman on a construction site. Three years later, the family, now with a newborn child, migrated to Maryland. Abdurahman became a substitute teacher at a local middle school, and there began to paint murals, recalling the wall drawings he made at home as a child. He also exhibited paintings at local art shows.

To finance the college educations of his eight children, Abdurahman worked as a repairman for the Soccer Dome, an indoor sports facility. He has not steadily painted since his teaching days at William Wirt Middle School, more than twenty years ago.

Abdurahman’s ideas and body of work are inspired by the everyday lives and struggles of those he encountered during the family’s time in Kenya. He recently started painting in acrylic, which affords him a palette of vivid colors, to express the strength and character of the African people.

“I take inspiration from an old man who plants a date tree, and when asked, ‘Why a date tree? That will take a period of time to grow,’ the man replied, ‘It was once planted for my generation to benefit from; it is time that I plant for the next generation to benefit too.’ ”

Photography courtesy of D. Mendick
Khalid Alaani began drawing as a child growing up in Iraq. His parents supported his interest by purchasing art supplies and displaying his work on the walls of their home. Alaani supplemented his practice by reading about art techniques. He found visits to his older cousin’s art studio to be especially inspiring.

While in his twenties, Alaani took summer workshops in watercolors, oils, and abstract art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad. He studied with Iraqi artists Abdulameer Hamad and Dhiah Hassan.

In 2006 Alaani had to leave Baghdad because of the war in Iraq. He subsequently sought refuge in Syria, where he remained for six years. While in Syria, he was welcomed into the art community and participated in a number of exhibitions.

In 2012 Alaani relocated to the United States, first to Maryland, then finally settling in Alexandria, Virginia. He works as a pharmacy technician at Inova Hospital.

For Alaani, “Art is an endless process of searching and exploring, and above all, pleasure.” Through acrylic painting, and some mixed media and collage, he focuses on landscapes that capture the life of small towns and villages. He tries to portray the universal similarities among people in spite of their geographic differences. In addition to Syria, Alaani has exhibited in venues in California, Michigan, and New York.

“A book about impressionism opened the world of the beauty of colors for me [and the] vibration, dynamic, and freedom in those paintings.”

Photography courtesy of A. Claire Vision
Alemzewd Alemu was born and raised in Ethiopia. He developed an interest in art as a high school student, and recalls drawing in notebooks.

In 1994 Alemu left Ethiopia due to political unrest and the increasing lack of freedom of speech and artistic expression. Upon relocating to Kenya as a refugee, he began to paint on canvas. Workshops he attended in casting, etching, and painting helped him to develop his techniques and articulate his ideas. From the 1990s until the early 2000s, Alemu exhibited his art in Nairobi, Kenya and the Netherlands.

Alemu uses mixed media techniques on canvas and sometimes creates sculptures. Curved objects and shapes, which for him explain life, light, and motion, are themes in all of his works.

Alemu believes the world has no beginning or ending, and that all things are bound to be in motion and to come out of it. “Everything is in motion according to the very existing conditions based on geometrical law.” Art has been his way to perceive and express the world’s wisdom, and has helped him through life’s difficulties.

Alemu has resettled in Maryland, and works in maintenance at the apartment complex where he currently resides.

“When I paint, I connect to the core of my being and it is a beautiful feeling.”

Photography courtesy of A. Claire Vision
Ahmed AlKarkhi

Born and raised in Baghdad, Iraq, Ahmed AlKarkhi graduated from the University of Baghdad, College of Fine Arts, in 2001. He worked as an artist in his home city until 2006, when violence forced him to flee to Syria.

During the three years he spent in Damascus, AlKarkhi sold hundreds of paintings at some of the city’s best known galleries. In 2010 a prominent art collector put AlKarkhi in touch with a retired diplomat and art aficionado who connected him with sponsors and arts organizations.

Later that year, with help from French and American United Nations officials, AlKarkhi relocated to the United States. Now resettled in Maryland, he works in maintenance at the apartment complex where he and his family reside.

Much of Alkarkhi’s new work depicts dreams and memories of his homeland. His portraits and depictions of town life and sunny landscapes are rendered in vividly colored oils, acrylics, and watercolors. Alkarkhi’s work captures the tranquility and beauty of Iraq, which he means to keep alive in spite of the images of rubble and violence that most Americans see.

AlKarkhi tries to convey a sense of adventure and discovery in his art, similar to the way he felt about arriving in the United States. He believes it is the responsibility of every Iraqi to contribute to humanity, in spite of suffering or hardship. In his new homeland, Alkarkhi continues to make that contribution.

“I want people to see my city . . . I want them to see it through my painting . . . and to tell the story that is Iraq.”
Fetun Getachew was born and raised in the northern part of Ethiopia. She was encouraged to draw at an early age by her mother, who was a teacher. Through art club activities, Getachew began to develop an independent style in her middle school years. Biology and geology were her favorite subjects because of all the images.

As a teenager, Getachew submitted her work to contests and exhibitions, experiences that prepared her for art school. She went to Addis Ababa to study art and graduated from the Alle School of Fine Arts and Design.

Getachew was a founding member of the Ethiopian Art Studio and exhibited regularly in solo and group shows at the Makush Art Gallery in Addis Ababa. Her work is also in the collection of the National Museum of Art in Bahir Dar.

After an extended effort, Getchew and her son were relocated to the United States in 2011. Since then, she exhibits her works in the Del-Mar-Va area and teaches art to children and adults.

Getachew works in acrylics and oils, using a cubistic structure and figurative elements to document contemporary Ethiopian life. She became inspired to portray the Ethiopian market, a place of gathering, trading, and fellowship, rich with colors and movement. Her art also recalls the weekly market in her hometown of Wollo where many walked for hours to shop, sell goods, and enjoy the camaraderie.
Rand Talal Shihab was born and raised in Iraq. From a young age, she was inspired to pursue art by her mother and several aunts who were all artists. Shihab graduated from the University of Bagdad College of Fine Arts with a degree in graphic design and a strong interest in fashion.

Because of the dangerous conditions that developed in Iraq after the 2003 military invasion, Shihab was forced to flee to Jordan where she lived for two years before gaining entry to the United States with refugee status. Here she began a new life as a single mother. After a period of adjustment, feelings of nostalgia for Iraq led Shihab to use art to reflect on and express those sentiments through mixed media and textile pieces.

Shihab’s colorful mixed media pieces utilize acrylics and a variety of materials. Some of her works incorporate the beliefs and symbols of ancient Babylonian and Mesopotamian civilizations, for example, amulets with seven eyes that were believed to protect people from evil.

Her textile creations, made to be worn, combine contemporary style and graphic designs that recall traditional Iraqi architecture.

Shihab is a human rights activist, reporter, journalist, editor and news anchor. She works at Alhurra-Iraq, a US-based public Arabic-language satellite TV channel.

Shihab believes that art is the most common language among people, and the way to realize peace for humanity. Says Shihab, “I use art to build bridges between cultures.”
UPCOMING MULTICULTURAL PROGRAMS

World Refugee Day
Wednesday, June 20 at 7 pm
Show your support of new comers to our region by honoring World Refugee Day. This evening will feature a panel discussion of artists whose work is part of Uprooted: The Art of Refugees, and organizations that provide services to refugees.

Salsa Lessons and Open Dance
Thursday, June 14, July 12 and August 30 at 7 pm
Learn salsa from a master teacher and then practice your moves during an open dance.

Women and Islam
Friday, August 10 at 6:30 pm
There are many misperceptions about women’s rights in Islam. Learn from a panel of experts what the Koran says women can and cannot do. You will be surprised by what you learn.
Enjoy chai and light refreshments.

Summer Beer and Wine Garden
Friday, August 31 at 6:30 pm
Live music by La Colombopercutiva. Enjoy a summer evening with food trucks, beer and wine, and a picnic on the grounds of the museum.

For more program information, visit www.sandyspringmuseum.org/calendar
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