

## Lifestyle | Features



Painter David Kryemadhi, 32, poses for a photograph next to portraits painted with coffee in his studio in Durres, western Albania. — AFP photos



Painter David Kryemadhi chats with girls as he paints a portrait of one of them.



Painter David Kryemadhi paints a portrait with coffee in a coffee bar in Durres.

## ALBANIAN ARTIST OFFERS 'THERAPY' WITH PORTRAITS PAINTED IN COFFEE

Albanian artist David Kryemadhi douses his brush with coffee and carefully sketches the face of a cafe customer, hoping the offer of a free portrait will bring cheer amid the anxiety of the pandemic. Many Albanians regard cafes as a vital institution and punctuate most days with caffeinated outings—the country of 2.8 million reputedly has one of the highest numbers of cafes in the world per head of population.

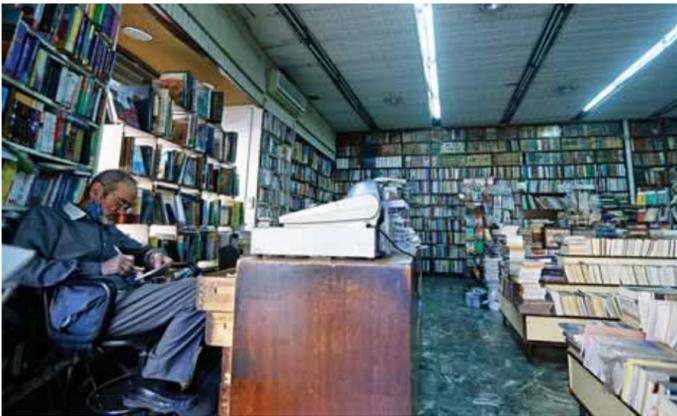
"Art and coffee help a lot of people," Kryemadhi told AFP in the seaside city of Durres. "The moment of calm and reflection while painting a portrait helps the other person gain self-confidence and see the world with a positive synergy, a more open eye." Kryemadhi uses coffee like watercolor paints, composing portraits with a rich, brown patina-adding water to create different shades. In the cafes of Albania, he has found a natural setting for

his brand of art therapy. To find subjects to paint, he strikes up conversations with customers before offering a free portrait. "It did me so much good," said student Alexandra while waiting for her portrait to dry. "I find in this painting all my emotions, my torments, my thoughts."

**'Successful therapy'**  
Eva Allushi from the University of Durres explains that cafes in Albania are

"an essential form of social life" where people feel free to express themselves. "The novelty in David's art is the fact that he builds bridges with his fellow travellers in this Albanian institution," she said. According to Albania's Institute of Statistics, the country has roughly 600 cafes per 100,000 people—one of the highest in the world. Kryemadhi said he hoped his portraits would help alleviate some of the stress caused by coronavirus in

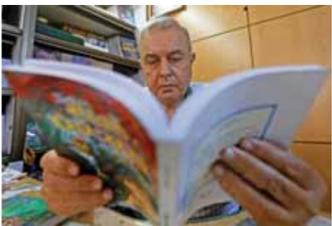
Durres, an area still recovering from a devastating earthquake in 2019 that killed dozens and left thousands more homeless. "Coffee art is one of the most successful therapies," said Kryemadhi. "It helps to overcome difficult situations such as those experienced with this pandemic or with the earthquake." — AFP



An employee checks a book at the Al-Nouri bookstore, which was founded in 1930 and is threatened with closure, in the Syrian capital Damascus. — AFP photos

## Damascus bookshops disappear as crisis hits culture

The Damascus bookshops and publishing houses that once stood as beacons of Syria's intellectual life are being replaced by shoe shops and money changers, as culture falls casualty to crisis. Syria is home to some of the Arab world's literary giants, and Damascus boasted an abundance of busy bookshops and publishing houses printing and distributing original and translated works. But the city's literary flare has faded.



Khalil Haddad reads a book at the Dar Oussama publishing house in the Syrian capital Damascus.

A decade-old civil war, a chronic economic crisis and a creative brain drain that has deprived Syria of some of its best writers and many of their readers, have compounded worldwide problems facing the industry, such as the growing popularity of e-books. "People can't afford to read and bookstores can't cover the expenses of staying open," said Muhammad Salem Al-Nouri, 71, who inherited one of the capital's oldest bookshops from his father.

Last month, the iconic Nobel bookshop in Damascus, founded in 1970, closed its doors. The Al-Yaqza bookshop, founded in 1939, shut seven years ago, with a shoe store now taking its place. A money exchange office has replaced the Maysalun bookshop which was open for four decades. The Al-Nouri bookstore, founded in 1930, is at risk of meeting the same fate. "We wanted it to remain for our children and grandchildren," Nouri told AFP. "But the Al-Nouri bookshop is threatened with closure, as are other bookstores."

### 'Luxury'

The Nouri family currently runs two bookshops in central Damascus. Three years ago, the family was forced to close a third bookshop they had opened in the capital in 2000 because of poor sales and growing costs. Its stock remains in place, gathering dust on fully stacked shelves. On

a wooden desk, old photos of celebrity customers, including politicians, artists and poets, are placed on display. For Sami Hamdan, 40, the cultural heyday of the 1950s and 1960s is long gone. "The war has destroyed what was left" of a cultural scene that was already in retreat, said the former owner of the Al-Yaqza bookstore.

With 90 percent of the population living below the poverty line and prices skyrocketing in the face of the plummeting value of the Syrian pound, "no one is going to invest in a bookshop during conflict," Hamdan told AFP. For Khalil Haddad of the Dar Oussama publishing house, books have become a "luxury" for Syrians. Surging printing costs and logistical difficulties linked to power cuts have combined to make books too expensive for most, the 70-year-old told AFP. "People's priorities are food and housing," he said.

### 'Lost our readers'

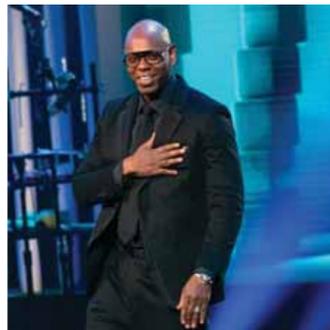
Six years ago, Amer Tanbakji converted his publishing house in Damascus to a stationery store in the hope of attracting new business. The publishing house, founded in 1954, couldn't afford to print new editions, while the currency free fall and sanctions on trade with Syria hampered imports. The switch to stationery failed to turn the business around, and the store is now up for sale seven decades after it opened its doors. "It would sadden me if it is converted" into something other than a bookstore or publishing house, Tanbakji said.

Syria used to import 800 publications a day before the conflict, but the number has now dropped to just five, said Ziad Ghosn, the former director of the main state-run publishing house. Printing costs have increased by at least 500 percent over the past two years as transport and labor costs have soared, he said. Newsstands have been virtually empty since the COVID-19 pandemic prompted authorities to halt the printing of all newspapers in government-held areas last year.

The flagship dailies of the state-run press are now available online only. Despite mounting difficulties, Samar Haddad said she was not willing to give up. She moved the Dar Atlas publishing house, founded by her father in 1955, to a basement to cut costs. From an original staff of 13, Haddad has kept just one employee, who works part-time. Haddad said she can still print seven books a year, down from 25 before the war. — AFP

## Chappelle 'more than willing' to meet LGBTQ groups over special

Comedian Dave Chappelle has offered to meet with the transgender community and thanked Netflix for standing by him after he was accused of stoking transphobia with his stand-up special "The Closer." Chappelle said he is "more than willing" to meet LGBTQ groups, after his show sparked protests outside the streaming giant's Los Angeles office last week at which demonstrators said the comedian had refused to speak with them. "That is not true. If they had invited me, I would have accepted it, although I am confused about what we would be speaking about," Chappelle said in a video from a recent show in Nashville that he posted to Instagram Monday. "I said what I said, and boy, I heard what you said. My God, how could I not?"



In this file photo comedian Dave Chappelle arrives on stage at the Kennedy Center for the Mark Twain Award for American Humor in Washington, DC. — AFP

Chappelle provoked anger with a stand-up routine released on Netflix earlier this month in which he asserted that "gender is a fact" and accused the community of being "too sensitive." LGBTQ groups condemned "The Closer" and warned that stereotypes about minorities can lead to real-world harm. Netflix content chief Ted Sarandos defended the show, telling staff in a leaked email that "content on screen doesn't directly translate to real-world harm" and that the company would "support artistic freedom." While the co-CEO later apologized for failing to acknowledge the pain felt by LGBTQ employees, he still insisted the show should not be taken down or have any disclaimer added. "Thank God for Ted Sarandos and Netflix, he's the only one that didn't cancel me yet," said Chappelle in the video.

Speaking to an arena filled with cheering fans, Chappelle said his issue was not with the LGBTQ community but with "corporate interests," noting that film festivals "began disinviting me" from airing his upcoming documentary film soon after the controversy erupted. "Do not blame the LGBTQ community... Everyone I know from that community has been nothing but loving and supporting, so I don't know what all this nonsense it about," he said. "To the transgender community, I'm more than willing to give you an audience," he added. "But you will not summon me. I am not bending to anybody's demands." — AFP



In this file photo statues of the Royal treasures of Abomey are displayed at the Musee du quai Branly in Paris. — AFP photos

## Final show in France for looted Benin treasures

Paris museum yesterday exhibited over a dozen colonial-era treasures taken from Benin, the last time they will be shown in France before being handed back in a landmark gesture. The 26 pieces, from a trove of objects snatched by French forces in 1892, are being shown for just six days at the Quai Branly museum before being shipped to the West African country later this month. The decision to return them follows growing calls in Africa for European countries to return the colonial spoils from museums.

The move is part of a drive by French President Emmanuel Macron to improve his country's image in Africa, especially among young people. The treasures are from the kingdom of Dahomey in the south of present-day Benin and include the throne of Dahomey's last king, Behanzin, as well as three totemic statues, four palace doors, several portable altars and three warrior dance staffs. Macron will visit the exhibition today afternoon.

The Elysee said Macron's commitment for Africans to be able see their cultural wealth at home and not just in European museums "marks an important step in building a new relationship between France and Africa". Earlier this month, Macron announced that a "talking drum" cherished by Ivory Coast's Ebie people, also at the Quai Branly, would be handed back as well. Some museum directors have criticized the move to return works they deem of "universal" interest. But Quai Branly president Emmanuel Kasarherou said he welcomed the "soul-searching" that those calls had triggered about the provenance of artworks.



In this file photo palace doors and statues (left) of the 'Royal treasures of Abomey kingdom' are displayed.

### 'Ripped from their cultures'

The Quai Branly, which has a vast trove of African artefacts, has begun a sweeping review of its collection of 300,000 objects. The aim is "to identify works believed to have been taken through violence, without the owners' consent, or as war booty or through the coercion of the colonial administration," he told AFP. "Not all objects that are in European collections have been stolen," he emphasized, but "what proportion were? Our objective is to find out."

Since his election in 2017, Macron has gone further than his predecessors in admitting to past French abuses in Africa. In a speech to students in Burkina Faso soon after taking office, he vowed to facilitate the return of African cultural heritage within five years. An expert report commissioned by Macron counted some 90,000 African works in French museums, 70,000 of them at the Quai Branly alone.

The restitution calls culminated last year in a vote in the French parliament, where lawmakers overwhelmingly backed returning a group of artefacts to Benin and Senegal, another former French colony. Macron has predicted that the 26 objects taken from the Abomey palace will be "the pride of Benin" when they are handed back at the end of October.

They will be exhibited at various sites in Benin, including a former Portuguese fort in the city of Ouidah, once a slave-trading hub, while awaiting the completion of a museum in Abomey to house them. Benin's President Patrice Talon has previously said he was "not satisfied" with the "small steps" taken by France and called on Macron to go further.

Experts estimate that 85 to 90 percent of African cultural artefacts were taken from the continent. But establishing how an object came into European hands can be very tricky. Some were seized by colonial administrators, troops or doctors and passed down to descendants who in turn donated them to museums in Europe. — AFP