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Photos show Iraqi Christian Karjiya Baqtar embroiders a precious prayer shawl using golden thread, to gift to Pope Francis during his upcoming visit to her Iraqi hometown Qaraqosh. — AFP photos



Gift for Francis, handmade shawl tells story of Iraq's Christians

Pulling golden thread with her frail fingers, elderly Christian Karjiya Baqtar has embroidered a precious prayer shawl to gift the most cherished visitor to her Iraqi hometown-Pope Francis. Francis will visit the northern town of Qaraqosh, ravaged in 2014 by the Islamic State jihadist group, on the third day of his history-making trip to Iraq. Baqtar, a petite woman with veiny hands and wisps of hair gently brushed back from her face, has worked with other Christians in Qaraqosh for two months on the stole vestment.

The two-meter (6.5-foot) stole is entirely locally produced-from the checkered red and black fabric to the Syriac prayers hand-stitched along its edges in glimmering gold. It was designed by Ammar Yaqa, the priest at the Al-Tahera Church in Qaraqosh. "Khaya Baqtar wove the fabric, while Karjiya and Miss Adhrra Daaboul embroidered it," Yaqa told AFP proudly. The "Our Father" and "Hail Mary" prayers are carefully stitched on either side in Syriac, a dialect of the language spoken by Jesus Christ and still used in Qaraqosh. "This is the first time this kind of stole has been produced in Qaraqosh, and it represents the heritage of this town,"



said Yaqa. Also known as Bakhda and Hamdaniya, Qaraqosh has a long pre-Christian history and is also one of Iraq's oldest Christian towns. It was largely destroyed in 2014 when the Islamic State group swept through the surrounding province of Nineveh, but its residents have trickled back since 2017 and slowly worked at rebuilding their hometown. The security situation remains tense, with state-sponsored armed groups deployed in large numbers in nearby plains.

'Everything is local'

The prayer stole features Christian emblems, including grapes used for wine-which for Catholics represents the blood of Jesus-and wheat for bread, or his body. There are Iraqi emblems, including date fronds, for which the country is well-known, and even symbols of Qaraqosh. "It features three crosses, which were designed to look like the crosses atop the Al-Tahera Church in the town, which was smashed by IS," Yaqa said. Christians in

Qaraqosh have rehabilitated the church but opted to leave the cross as it is, as a memento of the jihadist onslaught they survived. "The fabric, the embroidery, everything about this stole is local," Yaqa added. "It was made specifically for the Pope and will be presented to him during the mass."

It's not the only handmade garment the Pope will be gifted on this trip. Kurdish Muslim designer Shanaz Jamal has stitched an ornate cross, inlaid with semi-precious turquoise and emerald stones, onto a burgundy fabric. In 2019, Jamal sewed interfaith symbols onto a white ecclesiastical cloak using 3,000 beads, including the same bright stones. The 40-year-old artist told AFP at the time that she hoped her artwork would be offered to Pope Francis as a "symbol of peace and harmony in the world". Just a few months later, President Barham Saleh formally invited the pontiff to visit Iraq, saying it could help heal the country's scars after years of "strife." — AFP



Four of the 14 pieces of "The Way of Suffering", sculpted plaques representing the stations of the cross by late Iraqi artist Mohammed Ghani Hikmat, are displayed at the Chaldean Catholic Church of the Ascension in the Mashtal district of the capital Baghdad.

Francis will take a piece of Iraq with him

Capping his first day in Iraq, Pope Francis was gifted a miniature of an extraordinary work of art depicting a stage on the path to Christ's crucifixion, designed by a Muslim artist. It was a touching welcome gift from President Barham Saleh, who invited Pope Francis to visit Iraq in 2019 — hoping it could help the country "heal" after years of strife. The bronze plaque received by Francis is a potent symbol of the struggles of Iraq's ancient Christian community, as well as the country's exceptional interfaith links.

It is a small replica of the sixth "Station of the Cross", where a woman named Veronica wipes Jesus's brow as he makes the torturous 14-stage journey up the hill to be crucified. Fourteen stone plaques of the journey were designed by Mohammad Ghani Hikmat, one of Iraq's most celebrated sculptors who passed away in 2011. Work on the replica crafted in the Lebanese capital Beirut was personally overseen by his son Yasser, who kept its existence a secret until it was presented to Francis. "It's very symbolic of Iraq, because my father was an Arab Muslim sculptor who recounted through his works the passion of Christ," Hikmat told AFP. "It represents all of Iraq in that there's no difference between any of the sects," he said.

'Unlike any other'

The original stone works-imposing at two meters (yards) tall by a meter wide-indeed tell the story of Iraq. In 1993, as Iraqis faced crippling global sanctions targeting then-dictator Saddam Hussein, an elegant church was being painstakingly built on the outskirts of Baghdad. The original Chaldean Church of the Ascension had been expropriated by the state under Saddam, so the parish decided to build another branch in an agricultural district known as "Mashtal." The 5,600 Catholic families living in the area pooled together donations for several years to build the church, designed with traditional Iraqi mud bricks.

For the Stations of the Cross, the parish chose Mohammed Ghani Hikmat, who had designed most of the major statues at the heart of the capital's many roundabouts. He was already lauded at the time as the "sheikh of Iraqi sculptors," and having a top Muslim artist design such a central piece for a church was exceptional. "It's unlike those in any other Chaldean Church in the rest of the world," said Fadi Nadheer, the young bespectacled priest who has headed the Church of the Ascension since he was ordained in 2017. To make them, Hikmat locked himself away in his studio and entered what he would later describe as a "mystic trance".

'We must stand by Iraq'

Hikmat sourced the stone from the northern plains of Nineveh province, the heartland of Iraq's minorities and where some Christian villages still speak a modern dialect of the language used by Jesus two millennia ago. Little did he know that nearly three decades later, the head of the world's Catholics would travel to those very villages to encourage their dwindling residents. But the sculptor did carve little symbols of Iraq into the corners of each



Iraqi artist Yasser Hikmat (right), son of sculptor Mohammed Ghani Hikmat credited for some of Baghdad's most famous landmarks, works on a piece at a workshop in Lebanon's capital Beirut.

stela: a woman and child, representing the people suffering under the international embargo at the time.

The exceptional pieces are rarely seen. The church's imposing architecture and brightly-lit crosses along its external walls are hidden behind concrete blast walls, installed in 2007 during sectarian infighting in Iraq. Of the thousands of worshippers who attended the church three decades ago, just 400 families remain, most of whom dream of exile. But after living in the shadows for so long, Nadheer is thrilled that the work of Iraq's artists-and

the plight of its Christians-would finally be brought to light.

"I didn't know how to express my joy... that copies of the works present in our church would be given to his Holiness the Pope as a gift from the Iraqi state," he told AFP. "Pope Francis is telling the word: 'This country that is called Iraq, we must take care of it. We must stand in solidarity with it. We must turn our attention and our thoughts towards it.'" — AFP



A sculpted plaque by late Iraqi artist Mohammed Ghani Hikmat is displayed alongside 13 others as part of his work "The Way of Suffering", at the Chaldean Catholic Church of the Ascension.



Iraqi artist Yasser Hikmat, son of sculptor Mohammed Ghani Hikmat credited for some of Baghdad's most famous landmarks, displays a finished piece at a workshop in Lebanon's capital Beirut.-AFP photos

'Nomadland' China release in doubt after nationalist backlash

A nationalist backlash to Golden Globe-winning American road movie "Nomadland" has cast doubt over the film's China release after social media users and state media questioned its director Chloe Zhao's loyalty to her birth country. Zhao became the first Asian woman in history to win the best director Golden Globe and the first woman to win best drama with the semi-fictional film, which stars Oscar winner Frances McDormand alongside a rag-tag bunch of non-actors living on the open road in the American West.



In this file photo US-Chinese, director Chloe Zhao poses during a photocall to present the movie "Songs My Brothers Taught Me" in the French northwestern sea resort of Deauville, during the 41th Deauville US Film Festival. — AFP

Zhao's win last week was initially celebrated in China, with state media calling the Beijing-born filmmaker a "Chinese female director" and "the pride of China." Chinese film authorities approved the film for a domestic release on April 23 through the government-backed National Alliance of Arthouse Cinemas, the organization announced on Monday. But major online box office apps removed the release date from their platforms after a controversy erupted over years-old comments by Zhao, leaving the film's release in Chinese cinemas uncertain, entertainment magazine Variety reported Friday.

The NAAC did not immediately respond to AFP's request for clarification. Social media users had dug up old media interviews with Zhao soon after her historic win in which she appeared to criticize China. A screenshot of Zhao's 2013 interview with Filmmaker magazine, in which she reportedly called China "a place where there are lies everywhere," as well as another interview with Australian media in which she allegedly said "the US is now my country," circulated on Twitter-like Weibo last week.

The comments prompted online users to call her a "traitor" and social media in China was awash with posts questioning her nationality. Neither quote remained on the online versions of the two interviews. The Weibo hashtag for "Nomadland" was no longer searchable on Saturday, although discussion of the film and Zhao did not appear to be censored in any other way. The state-owned tabloid Global Times covered the backlash, saying Zhao had made "controversial comments" a day after lauding her as "the pride of China." But others online defended Zhao.

"She's a director, not a politician, and has never been involved in political activities, and her work has nothing to do with China," one Weibo user wrote on Saturday in defense of Zhao. "Isn't this too harsh, regardless of whether she has Chinese nationality?" Another user agreed that China's entertainment circle was "a party venue for hypocrisy." China's cinemas have almost returned to normal after the country successfully contained domestic Covid-19 infections, a stark contrast with theatres across the US that remain mostly shuttered as the virus continues to ravage the country. — AFP