

Islamic ornate window shades on display at the Museum for Art in Wood

The mashrabiya is a staple of Islamic architecture since the Middle Ages. The show features six female artists.



The Mashrabiya Project, on view at Old City's Museum for Art in Wood, features six artists who transform a traditional piece of architecture into social and political statements. John Carlano

The *mashrabiya* is essentially an ornate window shade, a staple of Islamic architecture since the Middle Ages. As a ventilation screen between one's home and the outside world, it controls light and curbs noise, allowing one to see out without the neighbors seeing in. In hot and dry places, the *mashrabiya* cools incoming air, an ancient take on air conditioning.



Museum for Art in Wood was first known as the Wood Turning Center, founded by twin brothers Albert and Alan LeCoff in 1986, and then as the Center for Art in Wood starting in 2011. “The Mashrabiya Project,” currently on view, is the first show under the new name and expanded mission. [Read more](#) John Carlano

“The Mashrabiya Project” on display at Old City’s Museum for Art in Wood, features six artists who transform a traditional piece of architecture into social and political statements. All the artists are women with roots in the Muslim world, from the Middle East to North Africa.

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Aesthetically, the *mashrabiya* dazzles: crisscrossed layers, interwoven lines, interlocking shapes. The patterns and designs come from both nature and sacred

Islamic geometry. Math has always been prized and promoted in Islamic culture, used to solve both practical and religious problems.

“The *mashrabiya* is a contextual and historical object, but it is also new — so you have this throughline between ancient and contemporary,” said curator Jennifer-Navva Milliken, also the museum’s director. “It tells the story of the continuity of craft.”

This show’s artists probe the metaphorical richness of the *mashrabiya*, looking at how it protects and divides, provides and deprives, welcomes and expels. By nature, it’s a two-sided barrier fraught with duality. The works call attention to the role of barriers, walls, and separators in modern life, both in the East and the West. The show’s centerpiece, in terms of size and splendor, hangs from the ceiling and partitions the gallery into two sides. Artist Hoda Tawakol assembled this imposing *mashrabiya* from nearly two dozen store-bought garden trellises, each coated in a rich brown stain and arranged to form a massive screen.

“There is order, design, and composition. It divides space, but still offers visibility to the other side — whichever side that is. She has left that ambiguous,” said Milliken.

Susan Hefuna, who grew up in Egypt, also composed a *mashrabiya* from individual parts, but hers are pinned to a wall. Each handcrafted piece is a circular ring of wood, stained in black ink, with a large letter or number embedded into its geometric design. Taken together, the piece reads “WOMAN CAIRO 22,” calling attention to the gender dynamics often disguised by the object’s decorative beauty. Three of Hefuna’s *mashrabiya*s have been acquired by the British Museum, an institution that has publicly confronted its colonial history in recent years.

Majida Khattari presents a slideshow of photographs on a flatscreen monitor, with a *mashrabiya* placed in front of it. It’s a double “screen” — traditional and high-tech. When seen from a distance, the *mashrabiya*’s geometric pattern chops the photographs into mosaic tiles, creating a stained-glass effect. Khattari photographed the images in Philadelphia, sourcing her models from the city’s art scene.

The *mashrabiya*, in all its sophistication and grandeur, reminds us with graceful force that the Middle East and Africa have always been a site of complex cultures and arts. This show reminds us that these regions continue to grapple with a universal set of stubborn problems: patriarchy, violence, intolerance, and a resistance to breaking old habits. By obscuring our view for a moment, the artists help us see these things a little more clearly.

'The Mashrabiya Project' runs through July 23 2023 at the Museum for Art in Wood, 141 N 3rd St., Phila. Free. <https://museumforartinwood.org/exhibition/the-mashrabiya-project/>

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