On January 3, 2019, Rashida Tlaib made her way up the stairs of the US Congress dressed in her mother’s intricately embroidered thobe. That day, she became the first Arab Muslim American woman to be sworn into the House of Representatives. By the time she made it to Capital Hill, Rashida had established her career as an attorney fighting for civil rights, affordable healthcare and raising the minimum wage. A single mother of four and the daughter of Palestinian immigrants, she’d arrived in Washington DC to represent the State of Michigan. That a powerful voice such as Rashida’s could emerge from the country’s Midwest came as no surprise to a region that’s home to the largest concentration of Middle Eastern immigrants in the country.

The first Arabs to arrive in the United States during the 1860s were referred to as ‘Turks’, because they came from a province of the Ottoman Empire that encompassed Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine. From 1888-1914, immigration peaked when more than 100,000 men and women left the region for the United States. The early immigrants fanned out across the Midwest to establish communities in Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, Ohio and Oklahoma. The country witnessed a second wave of immigration from the Middle East following World War II, which included Yemenis, Iraqis, Egyptians and Iranians.

Many settled in Midwestern cities such as Chicago, Illinois, the state with the largest Muslim population in the country. An important part of the city’s fabric today, their presence can be seen in charitable organisations dating back to the 1960s, as well as Arabic, which is taught to more than 3,000 students in Chicago’s public schools. From this once invisible minority has emerged a new generation of women, who are contributing to Chicago’s cultural and civic life through the power of reinvention. Each makes the point that to be a global citizen today means navigating complex geographies, while celebrating the bonds that link us together.

Words by ALEX AUBRY
Photography by SEBASTIAN BÖTTCHER

From left: Azadeh Hussaini, Vivian Khalaf, Khitam Masoud and Azeh Atout wearing looks and jewelry by Chicago designers Melissa Serpico Kamhout, Katrin Schnabl, Anke Loh and Gillion Carrara.
I worked 14-hour days over a span of three weeks to complete these in time for the opening,” says Azadeh Hussaini, while pointing to one of seven monumental art pieces at the new Marriott Hotel in downtown Chicago. Blurring the line between painting and sculpture, the artist reimagined the city’s skyline with vertical stacks of repurposed newspapers and magazines, which she painted over in vivid colours. “Chicago is one of the most beautiful cities in the world and I’ve spent a lot of time researching its architecture for this commission,” says Azadeh, who began incorporating paper reliefs and sculptural forms into her canvases in 2013.

The daughter of Iranian artist Reza Hossein, Azadeh was born in Atlanta, Georgia in the mid 1970s, where her father was studying for his BA in Fine Arts at Georgia Tech. “We ended up moving back to Iran when I was three years old, even though my parents initially wanted to stay in the US,” says the artist, whose family lived in Southern Iran before settling in Tehran when she was 13 years old. That same year Azadeh began to learn painting under her father’s guidance. “They were very informal sessions in his studio, where I’d observe him at work. It was then that I realised how much I enjoyed painting,” says Azadeh, who pursued a BA in Fine Arts at Tehran’s Azad University in 1995. During her first semester, she met her future husband who was a pre-med student at the university.

“I enjoyed my time at Azad and grew a lot as an individual while there. But I was also questioning whether a degree from an institution automatically makes one an artist,” recalls Azadeh, who had her first exhibition at the age of 19. Held at Tehran’s Daryabeigi Gallery, the artist found success that day when she sold all her paintings, in addition to winning five commissions. “That early experience encouraged me to pursue painting as a career, but I also knew that I still had to work hard to prove myself,” adds the artist, who began teaching art to elementary and high school students shortly after graduating in 1999. As demand for her classes grew, she left Tehran’s school system and continued to offer private lessons at her studio. “Teaching is my way of giving back, because an arts education isn’t simply about learning a drawing technique, but a way of seeing the world and developing critical thinking skills,” she says, while noting that she learns as much from her students as they do from her.

Azadeh and her husband moved to the United States in 2006, where they initially settled close to relatives in a suburb of Virginia. During those first months, she immersed herself in painting to deal with homelessness and navigating a new culture. She eventually overcame her feeling of isolation thanks to a chance encounter in a Persian grocery store. “I picked up a local Iranian newspaper and came across an open call for artists to take part in an exhibition. It was organised by a women’s group, through which I met a lot of amazing people,” says the artist, who decided to pursue an MFA at San Francisco’s Academy of Fine Arts a year later.

In 2008, Azadeh’s husband accepted a position at a Chicago hospital and the couple moved to the city, where their son was born a year later. “When we got here, I instinctively knew this is where I wanted to live, because it felt familiar and I bonded with me of Tehran,” says the artist the next day at her studio, where works in various stages of completion are propped up against walls. She points to stacks of Iranian newspapers and cardboard boxes that await her attention. Today, these materials form the basis for the artist’s wall-mounted sculptures that explore her journey as an immigrant.

“Compelling art doesn’t just ask questions, but also addresses universal concerns such as the refugee crisis, the immigrant experience and global warming,” says Azadeh, noting that over the course of her life she’s moved 22 times. Frequently packing her belongings between layers of newspapers in cardboard boxes, these materials eventually became the language with which she expresses her experiences. “All these materials represent my life as an immigrant because these papers hold my memories,” adds the artist, who in 2018 cofounded Didaar, an organisation supporting Chicago-based Iranian artists and art historians through lectures and workshops.

Today the group’s also focused on exposing larger audiences to Iran’s contemporary arts and culture. On June 23, Didaar will team up with Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art for a series of talks and film screenings by the late Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami. “We’re also showing short films by some of his students. It’s an opportunity to humanise our experiences as Iranians, because film is one of the most effective mediums to bridge cultures,” says Azadeh.

In addition to her love of painting, music has played a central role in her creative process. Having played the piano and the guitar from an early age, Azadeh shifted her focus to singing three years ago. “A friend introduced me to a group at the University of Chicago that organises free concerts of Middle Eastern music one year,” says the artist, who revises classical Persian songs using techniques learnt through a trained opera singer. “The most gratifying part of performing on stage, is connecting with audiences and seeing the emotion in their eyes,” adds Azadeh, who celebrated her 40th birthday by embarking on a walking tour of northwestern Spain with members of Chicago’s Theatre Y.

“I first found out about the theatre company when a friend invited me to a private performance in someone’s backyard. When I learnt about their trip to Spain, I immediately signed up. Shortly afterwards they invited me to become a board member,” says Azadeh, who in 2017 has also served as Theatre Y’s curator, where she organises exhibitions related to its plays. “They work with playwrights from around the world who touch on universal experiences,” says Azadeh, of an approach to sharing stories that reflects her own identity. “I’ve always believed that I can learn just as much from different cultures, as they can from me. It’s why I try to find the best in people no matter where they come from.”

“I TRY TO FIND THE BEST IN PEOPLE NO MATTER WHERE THEY COME FROM”
Azadeh Hussaini
The talking point

AZEH ATOUT

Jordanian-American HR consultant and volunteer firefighter

The dress by designer Azeh wears a jersey designed by Karina Schuld.

I saw the good side of people in the face of tragedy

Azeh Atout

In May 2002, Queen Rania of Jordan took to the stage at Pennsylvania’s La Roche University to deliver the keynote speech during its commencement ceremony. As she spoke, she singled out one particular student amongst the graduates that day. “I am quite sure that La Roche student Azeh Atout never dreamed she would someday be honored as the Firefighter of the Year. She became the first woman to win this award and I’m proud to say that she is one of 25 Jordanians participating in the Pacem in Terris Program,” noted Queen Rania, as Azeh listened quietly amongst the audience, while looking back on the journey that brought her to this moment.

“It was pretty surreal for me as a young Arab Muslim woman, because I never thought I’d be in the news let alone mentioned by a queen,” says Azeh, who was born in Amman to Palestinian parents. While growing up in Jordan, she looked up to her mother, a strong and independent figure who volunteered at Chicago’s annual Palestinian Film Festival, the longest running event of its kind in the United States. “In addition to its museums, running event of its kind in the United States. “In addition to its museums, La Roche University is located. She struggled to find a community to call her own until her sophomore year, when she took a position at the university’s public safety office and became a resident assistant at a dorm.

“One of the job requirements included going through fire safety training. When I told my boss how much I enjoyed it, she recommended that I apply for a volunteer position at the local fire station,” says Azeh, who hesitated as she didn’t know what her family would think, since they expected her to focus on her studies. She decided to apply for the position despite her initial concerns, knowing she’d be entering a new environment that was outside of her comfort zone. To become a certified firefighter, she underwent rigorous training sessions for 88-hours over the course of 11 weeks. “It wasn’t just physically challenging because I had to get back into shape. I was also juggling a job and trying to maintain a 3.0 GPA to retain my scholarship,” says Azeh, who found at the fire station a close-knit community that became her surrogate family.

“While a volunteer firefighter, Azeh responded to fire calls by either getting a ride in a friends’ car or jogging to the station, which was less than a mile away from campus.” Then September 11th happened and many firefighters died trying to save people at the Twin Towers. I worried about how I would come back. “They welcomed me with open arms and even asked me to stay,” recalls Azeh, whose absence was immediately felt by the station’s team and chief, who encouraged her to come back. They welcomed me with open arms and even asked me to write their names in Arabic on the station’s black board. That day I saw the good side of people in the face of tragedy,” says Azeh, who in 2004 received her masters in HR administration, before working her way up the corporate ladder as a compensation analyst.

A year later, she met her husband Nayan Shah on a flight from Pittsburgh to Delhi. “I’ve always been interested in culture and cities including Mexico, Istanbul, Sydney and Granada in Spain. Anybody who’s gone to college has realized you learn from an early age to build friendships and respect each other’s differences. You learn from an early age to build friendships and respect each other’s differences. You learn from an early age to build friendships and respect each other’s differences. You learn from an early age to build friendships and respect each other’s differences.

Azeh never dreamed she’d be in the news let alone mentioned by a queen. Her shoot to the top has been quite a success. She was named one of the top 100 most influential women in the world by Forbes Magazine.

I ultimately want them to know that they too are citizens of the world with a heritage that spans all these places.”
am passionate about helping women because of the adversities I’ve encountered throughout my life,” says Khitam Masoud, while looking out at the Chicago River from her downtown apartment. As the founder and director of Blessons for Women, a non-profit organisation, she’s spent the last three years helping women rewrite their stories. It’s an experience that she’s all too familiar with, having had to reinvent herself over the years. “Turning wounds or tragedies into wisdom and teachable moments can be a very powerful tool. It’s a way of navigating through life that took me a while to figure out,” says Blessons’ director, who was born the eldest of seven children to Palestinian parents in Sacramento, California.

While growing up in a strict household during the mid-90s, she read books about the late Princess Diana, a public figure she related to despite the worlds that separated them. “Here was someone who had constantly been told how to behave and dress in public, and her defiance cost her dearly. Despite that, she continued to be a humanitarian and help others, which resonated with me from a young age,” says Khitam, whose life would change at the age of 16 when her parents tried to marry her to an older cousin without her consent.

“After the court settlement my family never spoke to me again despite reaching out to them. But I’m at peace with it now, because I wouldn’t be the person I am today had I not gotten out of an abusive situation,” says Khitam, who found a sanctuary in high school, where she maintained a 4.0 GPA while serving as the president of the student body. “I was the only teenager there who wasn’t legally considered a minor anymore. I became eligible for a work programme and was able to rent an apartment and juggle two jobs while completing my senior year,” says Blessons’ director, who received a scholarship to California State University, where she pursued a degree in Corporate Communications and Marketing.

In 2007, as she struggled to maintain her grades while balancing two jobs, she was diagnosed with a rare cancer that would change the course of her life yet again. “I remember sitting in the doctor’s office thinking how could this happen to me? I was a 26-year-old who played sports and never smoked,” she says, noting that she spent four days in the hospital recovering from her surgeries, during which she thought about her future.

“I made the decision that if I beat cancer, I’m going to leave California to start over somewhere new and do all the things I’ve wanted to do in life,” says Khitam, who moved to Chicago in 2007, where she continued working in the restaurant industry while trying to complete her higher education. A few years after arriving in the city she joined Imerman Angels, an organisation that provides one-on-one cancer support to those fighting the disease. “I became involved with the charity because they bring people together, to make sure no one goes through cancer alone as I did,” adds Blessons’ director, who mentored a young woman going through a similar cancer as she had. In addition to meeting every week, Khitam accompanied her to doctor’s appointments for mental support.

“Her journey became part of mine, because we were able to talk about concerns that aren’t always easy to talk about with family and friends. It’s a very powerful tool,” says Khitam, noting that being a mentor was one of the most rewarding experiences of her life. Over the next four years, she also recruited the large number of runners for the charity’s team during the Chicago Marathon. In 2016 alone, she brought 200 runners together for the event, which raised close to $400,000 for Imerman Angels’ programmes.

Her experience with the charity gave her the confidence to establish her own non-profit organisation that same year. “When you’re able to view painful lessons as blessings, they become Blessons. So I started my charity to give women the opportunity to advance economically and better their lives, because I struggled to obtain a higher education with limited resources,” says Khitam of her organization’s mission, which has helped hundreds of women overcome difficult circumstances to achieve their dreams. In addition to providing scholarships, Blessons also organises free mentorship programmes, therapy sessions and self-care workshops for women.

“Many of our members have endured hardships such as cancer, mental health conditions, physical and emotional abuse or are first-generation immigrants. We want these women to know that no matter what happens to them in life no one can take away their dignity,” says Blesson’s founder, who also added that in the past there was a need to teach women how to love themselves regardless of their background. “When you acknowledge your self-worth, no one can walk all over you anymore. Yet young girls and women are seldom taught to love themselves, which is why we focus on mental health in many of our women’s only support groups,” says Khitam, who’s taken part in more than 200 speaking engagements to increase awareness of her charity’s work, and is currently preparing for a TEDx Talk next summer.

Since 2016, she’s fundraised over $100,000 through blessons.org, as well as taken part in the Bank of America Chicago Marathon. “I once ran six marathons in 12 months that took me to New York, Boston, London, Tokyo and Berlin,” says the cancer survivor, who continues to grow her charity. “My dream is to open a Blessons House that can serve as a safe space, where women can find encouragement and support to become their best.”
Born in Jerusalem, Vivian came with her parents to the United States as immigrants in 1967. Only six months old at the time, she settled with her family in Denver, Colorado. It was 49 miles away from the city of Gedley, which her father commuted to every day to pursue his doctoral degree at the University of Northern Colorado. With money from her maternal grandfather, her parents were able to purchase a small grocery store and they lived in the apartment above it. “I didn’t experience culture shock, but I always felt we were different because there wasn’t much of a Middle Eastern community in Denver, while growing up there in the ’70s and ’80s,” recalls Vivian, whose mother would open and run the grocery store throughout the day.

“When I came home from school, she’d have me stand on a milk crate behind the register and ring up customers while she cooked dinner upstairs. I was only ten or eleven at the time and she insisted a button I could push, that rang a bell if I needed her,” says the attorney, whose responsibilities grew behind in Ramallah with her grandparents before moving to Chicago to attend the University of Illinois. While there, she majored in political science with a minor in history, to better understand the colonial and geopolitical forces that shaped the map of the Middle East. Shortly before graduating in 1987, she landed a part-time job at an immigration law firm run by Irish-American attorney James Fenner. “He became my mentor and was well known in Chicago’s Palestinian community for providing free legal services to those who couldn’t afford them,” says Vivian, who was encouraged to pursue a law degree in order to give back to her community as well.

While attending the Chicago-Kent College of Law at the伊利诺伊大学，她在1993年开设了自己的律师事务所。自那时以来，她的事务所Khalaf & Abuzir在拉姆拉和伯利恒开设了分公司。自1987年，她一直在从事移民法的法律服务，并为那些无法支付服务费用的人提供援助。如今，她的事务所已经成为芝加哥主要的中东社区中的移民法律师。“我们一直被教导我们的投票不会产生影响，”维维安说，“但我们知道自己的选票是重要的。我们的选票可以影响政策，甚至可以改变整个国家的命运。”

“我们一直在努力改变现状，”维维安说，“人们应该知道，他们的选票可以产生影响。我们不能让那些有权投票的人忘记他们的选票的真正价值。”