



Conservation through Art

By **VIOLET ASTOR**

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION ARTIST



VIOLET ASTOR is a UK based wildlife conservation artist who collaborates with governments and NGOs around the world to celebrate their native wildlife as well as raise awareness and funds for their endangered species. She is a self-taught artist who taught herself how to draw during the years she was chronically ill with Lyme disease. In 2019 Violet was voted one of Oman's 'Top Ten Nation Builders' as a result of her work raising the profile for the Sultanate's endangered wildlife.

I knew very little about Oman when the idea of holding an exhibition in Muscat was presented to me in November 2018. I knew even less about its wildlife; however, brief research revealed a plethora of unique species that enflamed my desire to travel Arabia's hidden gem. A few months later I found myself on an adventure of a lifetime; from trekking the vast jebels of the Dhofar mountain range at sunset in search of the elusive Arabian leopard, to trudging the pristine beaches of Ras al Jinz in the dark to watch Green Sea Turtles lay their eggs before sunrise. I certainly was not let down by the striking beauty of the Sultanate's breath-taking landscapes.

With the support and generosity of the many people I encountered along my journey, my quest led me to a project tagging Steppe Eagles in Salalah. It was such an honour to join the team from the Office for the Conservation of Environment and other biologists, who were capturing and fitting this critically endangered species with satellite transmitters to record their behaviour and flight patterns. It was a humbling, and at times unsettling, experience to look into the eyes of a powerful wild raptor. Yet, the reality of the Steppe Eagles' vulnerability was never more present than being surrounded by a team of scientists frantically

measuring, taking blood and tagging in an effort to save them. My part to play in this endeavour was to study the intricate detail of their feathers and the sheer power and stretch of their wingspan in order to bring the species to life through my artwork. My hope was to rouse enough awe to motivate public interest and action into protecting the natural environment and all those species living within it.

Inspired by the wildlife I encountered, I created a series of large and detailed charcoal artworks depicting the fauna from Oman's skies, mountains, deserts and oceans. My desire was to immortalise species such as the charismatic tool-using Egyptian Vulture, the comical Arabian Tahr and Oman's elegant Unicorn of the Desert; the Arabian Oryx. These species' survival is in the balance and they may not be around long enough for future generations to enjoy. In the case of the uniquely non-migratory Arabian Sea Humpback Whale, of which fewer than 100 are left off the coastal waters of Oman, the species' survival is essential in the maintenance of the ocean's ecosystem. Whales help regulate the flow of food by helping to maintain a stable food chain and ensuring that certain animal species do not overpopulate the ocean. Even whale excrement plays a large role in the environment by

Opposite page:
Gold leaf leopard

Right:
Golden Eagle art in
progress

Far Right:
Creating the eye of the
Arabian Leopard



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helping to offset carbon in the atmosphere.

I have always felt very passionate that my work draw attention to endangered species and raise awareness and funds to support their survival. So, with sponsorship from Land Rover and the Anglo-Omani Society, I was able to hold an exhibition in collaboration with the Environment Society of Oman and the Ministry of Heritage and Culture to highlight the work being done to protect Oman's most at-risk wildlife. One distinctive piece of artwork was bought by a generous bidder in a silent auction during the opening event, with 100% of the proceeds being donated towards the Environment Society of Oman's Raptor Project.

In an effort to make the exhibition environmentally conscious, I made sure to use sustainable and natural materials in not only the creation of the work but everything surrounding the exhibition - from lighting the exhibition venue with candlelight, to using Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) paper for all print advertising material. For the artwork itself, I used soil collected from the Dhofar mountains and charcoal created in my own fireplace. The art paper used was recycled from coffee cups, which I chose specifically to raise awareness about the 16 billion disposable cups that are wasted each year. Annually, the manufacture of this single-use item is responsible for the consumption of 6.5 million trees, 4 billion gallons of water and enough energy to power 54,000 homes. My hope is to model to others the creative ways that we can support the environment.

Getting the community involved through a series of public lectures was one of my favourite facets of this project. As I watched a stream of young Omani children come into the Natural History Museum

Celebrating Oman's unique wildlife

In November 2019 Conservation Artist Violet Astor held an exhibition to celebrate Oman's striking natural heritage under the patronage of HH Sayyida Dr Mona Fahad Al Said, welcomed by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture in support of the Environment Society of Oman.

Oman's large diversity of habitat reveals some of the most spectacular and unique species on the planet. This artists' paradise attracted the attention of wildlife conservation artist, Violet Astor, who visited Oman over the period of a year to explore the different landscapes in search of the Sultanate's striking fauna. Her mission- to foster a sense of pride amongst the Omani population, to draw attention to this hidden gem from an international audience and to inspire the protection of the Sultanate's natural heritage.

to hear me talk about wildlife and conservation art, I gained a real sense of why this endeavour was so important to not only Oman's natural heritage but also to the future generations of Oman. To witness the swell of pride in learning about the wildlife in their own backyard and to see their passion for conservation, shown through a number of subsequent pupil-initiated environmental assignments, left me with the feeling that the project had been all I had hoped and dreamed it to be.

The exhibition was opened in the Ministry of Heritage and Culture on 4th November and went on tour to Bait Al Baranda until 15th December 2019. **F**



Opening of 'Wild Oman' exhibition under the patronage of HH Sayyida Dr Mona Fahad Al Said at the Ministry of Heritage and Culture