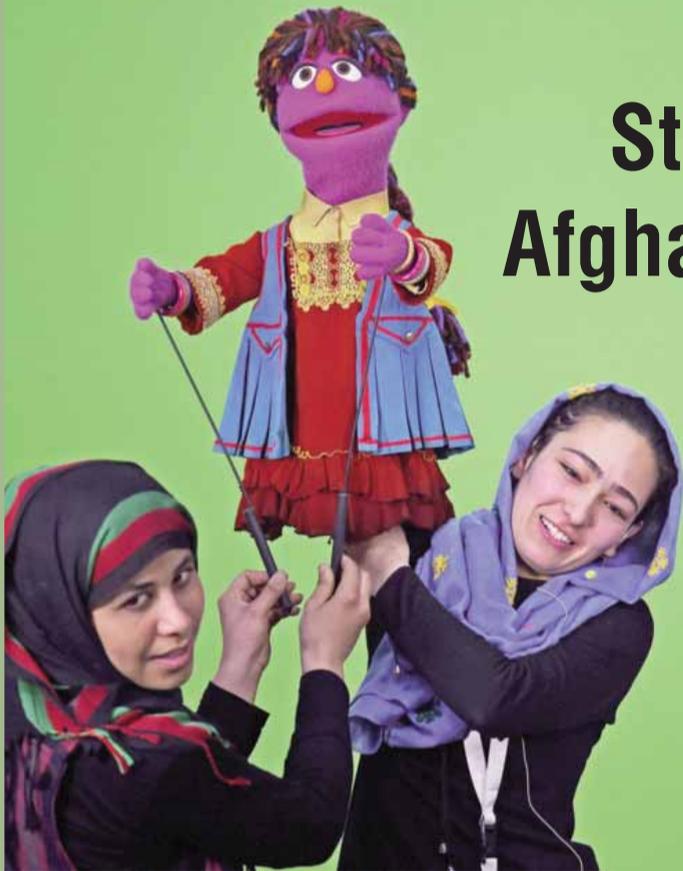


Sesame Street's first Afghan Muppet empowers girls



KABUL: Afghan puppeteer Seema Sultani (R) with her colleague Raziya Nazari work with a muppet named "Zari" for a recording at an Afghan television studio. — AFP

With purple skin and an orange nose, her multi-colored braids wrapped in a headscarf, Zari is Sesame Street's first female, Afghan muppet and she has a message: Girl power.

Producers hope the character, who debuted on the local version of the show this month, will provide a much needed boost to gender equality in a country where girls still trail behind boys across the board.

Dressed in traditional garb Zari, whose name means "shimmering" in Dari and Pashto, is confident and inquisitive. Afghan puppeteer Mansoor Shirzad says she hopes the muppet will become a role model for young girls and send messages of empowerment to kids in the country.

"Our goal is to entertain children and educate them," Shirzad told AFP at the Sesame Street recording studio. She said she hopes six-year-old Zari will "bring new colour to the show and enable us to convey our message", her eyes lighting up as she speaks.

Known in Afghanistan as "Baghch-e-Simsim", or Sesame Garden, the programme debuted in the country in 2011 and is the most popular children's series on television today. Partly funded by the US aid agency, the show features segments catered to local issues, and includes dubbed content from other Sesame Street versions including from Egypt, Bangladesh, Mexico and Russia. For her part, Zari—who debuted on April 7 and has appeared in three episodes so far—has a full agenda this season.

She'll promote the virtues of exercising and playing sports, she'll speak to a female paediatrician about how to become a doctor, and she'll remind Afghanistan's young people to use the traditional Islamic greeting with friends: "Asalaam Alaikum" (peace be upon you).

The idea of a female role model on television-muppet or otherwise may seem prosaic to outsiders, but in a country where millions of

girls were excluded from schools during the 1996-2001 Taliban regime, it remains a daring blow to the status quo.

And though progress has been made on some education fronts, girls still trail boys when it comes to school attendance, and women's literacy continues to trail men's — 24 percent of females can read compared to 52 percent of males, according to UNESCO.

"Being a girl can be very difficult in Afghanistan, you face so many restrictions in your life, and we have chosen girl character for Sesame Street (because) we wanted to show girls can be as good as boy and girls are key factor for promoting education," said Massood Sanjer, director of the TOLO channel, which airs the program.

For puppeteer Shirzad—one of the few women in Afghanistan's male-dominated entertainment industry—playing Zari provides a welcome escape. "When I play Zari I absolutely love it and have great fun," said Shirzad, who is also studying Fine Arts at Kabul University. "I forget any problems I'm going through and just enjoy it."

Now in its fifth season, Sesame Street is hoping to continue captivating young minds in the conflict-torn country, and some say it's likely to do so.

"TV plays a very big part of people's lives and with that you can easily teach kids... Sesame Street has worked throughout the world and definitely worked for the past four seasons in Afghanistan," Sanjer said. The show's creators are silent on whether Zari will be joined by other Afghan Muppets in seasons to come. But for now, children in Afghanistan can enjoy seeing one of their own on the screen for 26 new episodes this season. — AFP

More Western art on shopping list for Chinese tycoon Liu

He first stunned the auction world by snapping up hugely expensive Chinese antiquities, but now taxi driver turned tycoon Liu Yiqian is targeting Western masterpieces, saying it is his "social responsibility" to show them to China's younger generation.

Liu has become China's highest profile art collector, hitting headlines with record-breaking buys and an irreverent approach. His acquisitions have mainly been of Chinese heritage, most famously the tiny Ming Dynasty "Chicken Cup" for which he paid \$36 million in 2014 at Sotheby's before drinking tea from it, causing a social media meltdown.

But in a departure from his Chinese collecting spree, last year Liu splashed out on Modigliani's "Nu Couché" or "Reclining Nude" for more than \$170 million at Christie's, the second highest price ever paid at auction for a work of art.

Liu says he hopes the museum he founded in Shanghai, the Long Museum, where much of his collection is on display across two branches, will increasingly become a showcase for Western art as well as Chinese classics.

The Modigliani is due to go on show at the museum next year. "The world is globalised...our collection is mainly Chinese traditional works of art, (but) we are going to expand into Western and Asian works. I hope in my life time I can collect more from both China and the West," he told AFP in a recent interview at Christie's regional headquarters in Hong Kong.

Liu said he felt a "social responsibility" to enable Chinese youngsters to experience Western masters. "Other than Chinese traditional and contemporary works of art, younger generations in China have developed deeper recognition of Western works," he said, relaxing in an armchair and talking through a haze of cigarette smoke after cutting the ribbon on a preview ahead of Christie's spring sales in May.

"I hope top Western works of art can be exhibited in Shanghai or in our coun-

try. I think it's something someone has to do...it's cultural exchange."

'Being myself'

With a personal wealth of \$1.38 billion according to Forbes magazine, Liu is among the ranks of the new Chinese super-rich. Having made his fortune in real estate and finance in the 1990s, he now runs a huge conglomerate across several industries from chemicals to investments.

Liu's auction buys have not been without controversy—his \$8.2 million purchase of an "ancient" scroll of nine Chinese characters was derided as a fake by a group of respected Chinese experts but he brushed off the skepticism.

He also remains unapologetic over drinking from the valuable porcelain "Chicken Cup", depicting a rooster and hen tending their chicks. "I wasn't showing off," he told AFP, drinking this time from an ordinary tea cup. "I was just being myself."

While he is eyeing Western works, Liu is also still snapping up Chinese pieces. This month he bought a painting by Chinese master Zhang Daqian for \$35.93 million at Sotheby's—a new record for the artist at auction. Liu has said before that his moves to buy up Chinese antiquities are part of a bid to bring heritage back to the mainland. He paid a record \$45 million in 2014 for a 15th-century Tibetan "thangka" tapestry at a Christie's auction.

Beijing has ruled Tibet since 1951, a year after invading, and considers the Himalayan region an integral part of its territory. The Tibetan government in exile and some scholars dispute China's historical claims. "We should not be obsessed with how these things (Chinese antiquities) spread overseas," Liu told AFP. "It doesn't matter where they are. The most important thing is for them to be preserved." — AFP



HONG KONG: China's highest profile art collector Liu Yiqian (C) cuts a ribbon to open the Christies spring season. — AFP