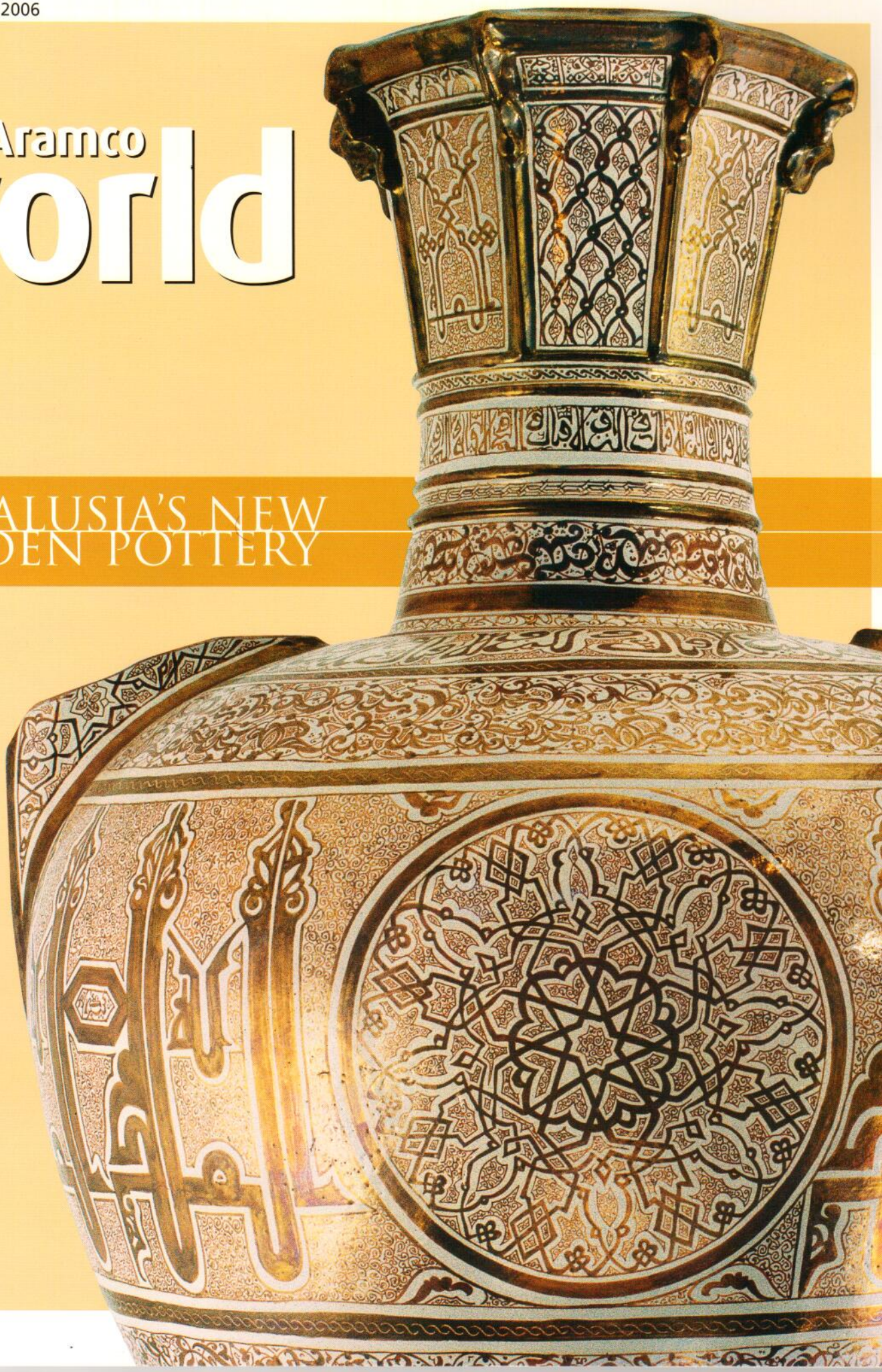
January/February 2006

Saudi Aramco world



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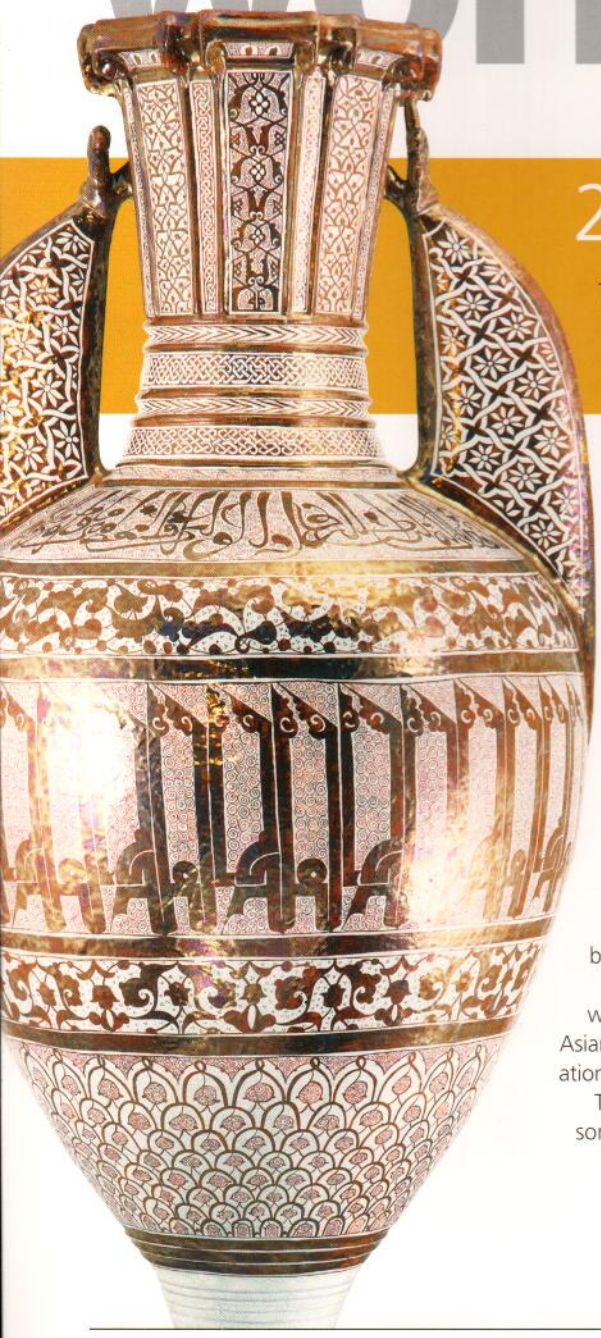
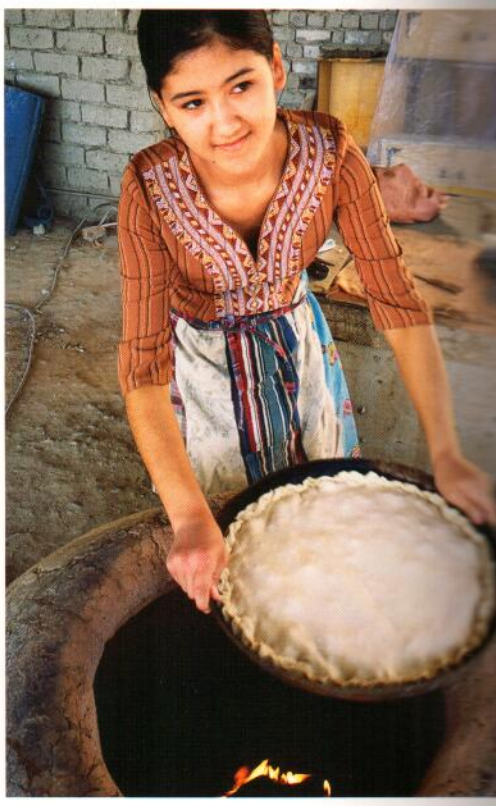


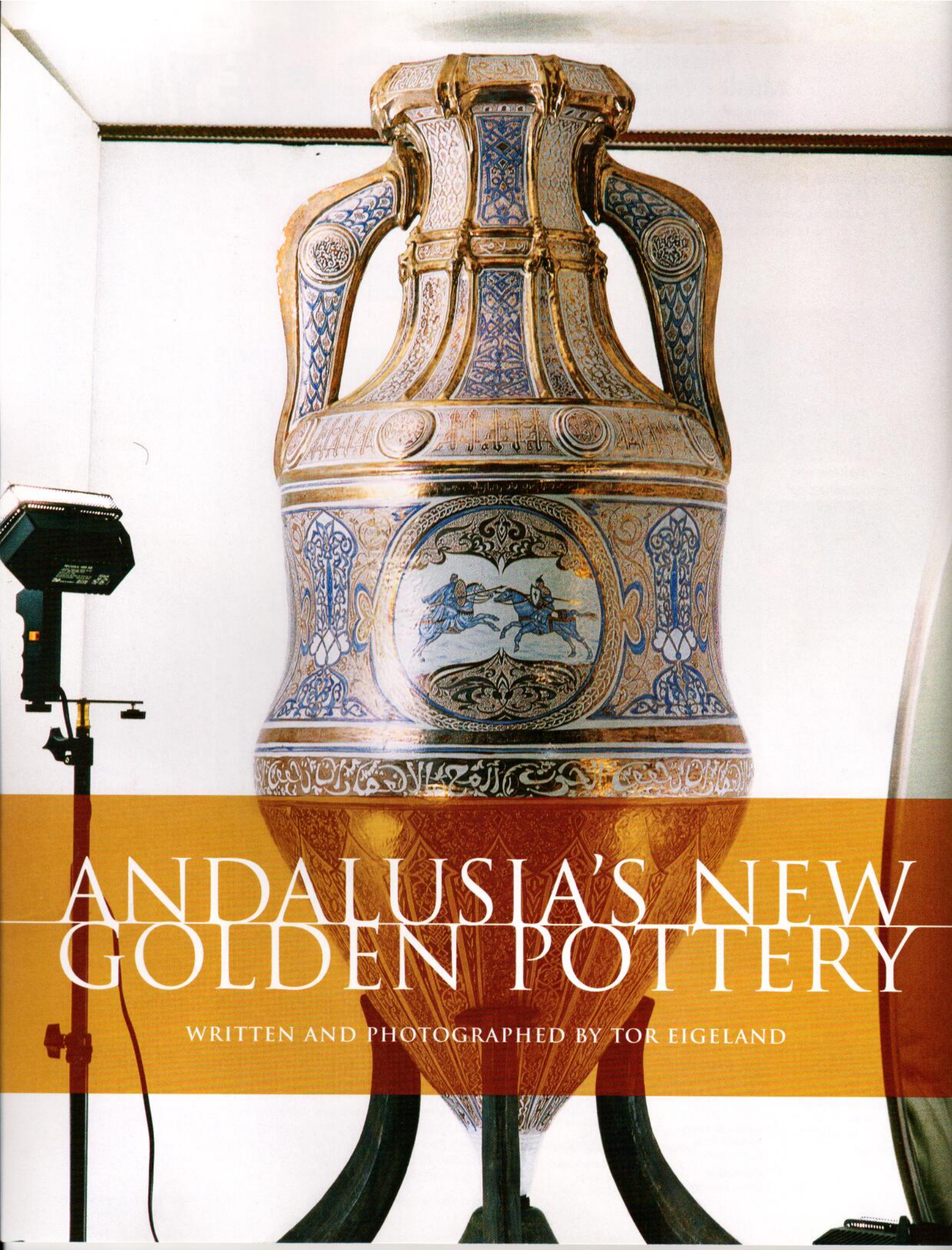


Cover:

A luster glaze in tones of gold, copper or bronze is the final touch on an imposing urn that may take weeks, or even months, to design, throw, fire, glaze and fire again. As many as six successive firings may be needed to get the luster's metallic sheen right. To Miguel Ruíz Jiménez, his craft—recreating Nasrid ceramics as they were made at the artistic apogee of Andalusian Spain—is a constant dialogue with "oxygen, earth, water, fire and time." Photo courtesy of Miguel Ruíz Jiménez.

Back Cover:

At Tolkuchka, the largest biweekly market in Ashgabat, capital of Turkmenistan, a woman sells fresh *ishlekli*, a flat meat pie usually baked in a clay *tandoor* oven. Ishlekli may be eaten alone as a snack or a meal, with any of several of the country's favorite yogurts, or perhaps with a hearty soup of mutton broth and chickpeas. Photo by Ergun Çağatay.



ANDALUSIA'S NEW GOLDEN POTTERY

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOR EIGELAND

JUST A SHORT DRIVE NORTH FROM THE DAZZLING PALACES AND GARDENS OF THE ALHAMBRA, THERE IS A SMALL TOWN CALLED JUN, WHICH HAS A LITTLE PALACE OF ITS OWN. EVERYONE KNOWS ABOUT THE ALHAMBRA. HARDLY ANYBODY HAS HEARD OF JUN, EVEN IN GRANADA. THAT'S TOO BAD.

Jun's palace is called *Pabellón de las Artes*. And what is the connection?

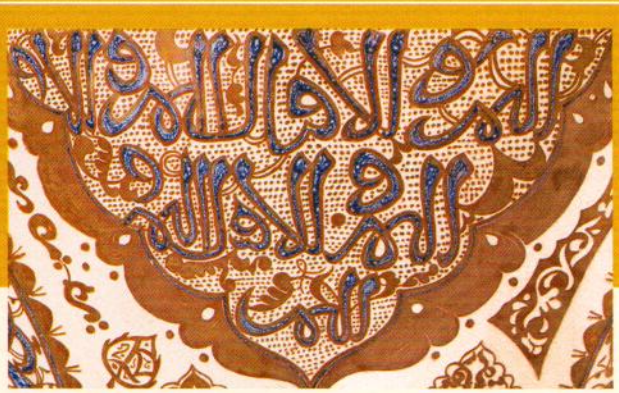
We'll have to enter Jun's Pavilion of the Arts to find out.

A massive iron door slides open easily, and we enter a bright, spacious museum that, in the distance, curves to the left, leaving the last part out of sight.

Lining the walls and filling the floor-space are more than a hundred ceramic vases, jars, jugs, plates, oil lamps and chests, from the gigantic to the diminutive. Gracefully shaped, colored and gilded, decorated with intricate geometric, floral and calligraphic designs, all are in the 14th- and 15th-century style of the Nasrid period when the Alhambra was built: the last 200 years of Muslim rule, when the arts in southern Spain flourished as never before.

Anyone with an interest in Andalusian history entering here would rub his eyes in disbelief and delight. Nearly all these ceramic pieces are lusterware, made by a complicated process that was gradually lost from this land after 1492, when the Muslims were finally expelled from Spain following the Christian conquest of the Kingdom of Granada.

In the 14th- and 15th-century Nasrid court of Granada, monumental lusterware vases were consummate expressions of artistry and royal prestige. Their modern counterparts, shaped and glazed by the hands of Miguel Ruíz Jiménez, are comparable masterpieces by the pre-eminent living practitioner of a nearly lost art.



LUSTERWARE

Ceramics with this transparent, metallic overglaze are called *loza dorada* ("golden pottery") in Spanish, though, strictly speaking, the pieces may be any of several tints—both silver and gold tinged with green are common. The earliest lusterware was created at the beginning of the ninth century in Basra and Chuff, in what is now Iraq. Soon afterward, the artisans of Samarra, 125 kilometers (75 mi) north of Baghdad on the Tigris River, started to create large quantities to supply the courts of the Abbasid Caliphate, from India in the east to Al-Andalus —Muslim-ruled southern Spain—in the west. The technique also soon flourished in Egypt. From there, some two centuries later, artisans of Al-Andalus learned enough to start their own production, reaching their apogee of beauty and sophistication in the period of the Alhambra.

At first, lusters were made by applying pure metals like gold, silver, platinum, tin and copper—each for its distinctive color—to fired and wholly or partially glazed clay ("bisque"), which was then refired at a lower temperature. The resulting combination of glaze base and metallic sheen enhanced the lines and colors of the decoration. Later, the technique was refined by using metal oxides, which were also applied on top of the glaze base with a fine brush. (In a different, far less expensive process, pigment-based lusters, developed in the 19th century, often characterize commercial ceramics and porcelains up to the present day.)

Jiménez explains his Alhambran luster technique in his typically exuberant fashion, which itself may be a legacy from the Moorish past. "I'm in a constant dialogue with all the elements of the cosmos: oxygen, earth, water, fire and time.... The process consists in converting metal into oxide and then oxide back into metal. Metal plus oxygen produces oxide. So if we now remove the oxygen from the oxide we added previously, we again get metal—a luster. The Arabs had this down to a fine art."

Complex lusters, he says, may require firing more than once—and some as many as six times.

color is achieved through a complicated, even arcane process. (See "Lusterware," page 4.)

"He has followed the authentic Arab tradition in the making of Alhambran glazed pottery," says Ana Carreño, editor of *El Legado Andalusí*, a cultural magazine based in Granada. His research is "serious and accurate," she says, "and his determination and effort over 25 years has led to recognition here in Spain and in the Gulf Arab countries through exhibitions, television programs and workshops."

Son of a simple *granadino* potter, Jiménez got clay on his hands as soon as he could crawl. By seven he was throwing pottery. What set his artistic passions afire more than 30 years ago was the discovery of the sensual loveliness of the old Andalusian art. "When I contemplated the vases of the Alhambra, I decided that I wanted to do this, and I started to research and study," he says. The path he took was very different from that of his father.

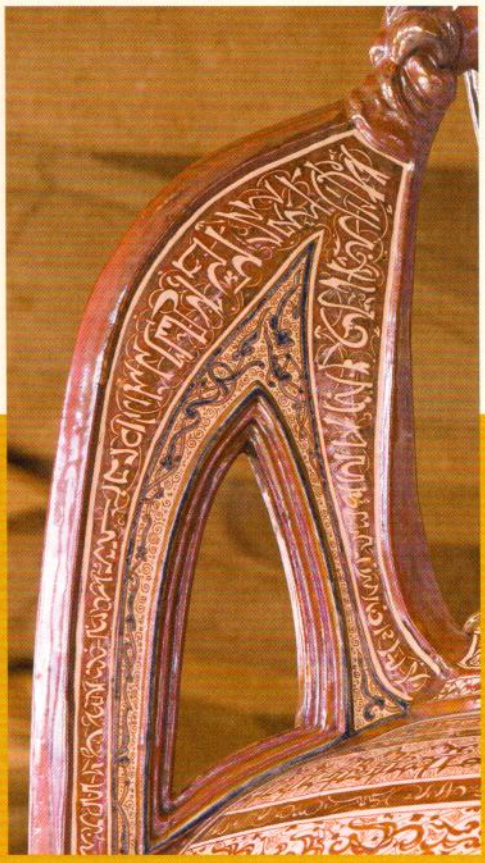
The task was gigantic: Jiménez studied chemistry, and he visited Nasrid masterpieces worldwide. There are, he says, no original, firsthand written sources. From Nasrid times, only the bare names of a few ceramists have been found—Suleiman Alfaqui, Sancho Almurci, Hadmet Albane, Felipe Frances, Abdul Aziz, Abel Allah Alfogey. Of their techniques, there is nothing.

In 1990, Jiménez published the story of his research and struggle to recreate, experiment by experiment, the period's ceramics in a self-published book titled *The Epic of Clay*. Here, his mystical streak comes out in prose as florid as his Nasrid arabesques: "Formulae and excessive pretension of technical precision are at times superfluous," he writes, "for meeting the complex challenge of combining substance and space in pursuit of an intuitive art and dreamed shapes when confronted by a series of subtle factors, as unforeseeable, as variable, as those that determine the tonality, texture, coloring, and metallic intensity of the tones and, more specifically, what is going to be the singular identity of the masterpiece."

A little further on he writes of the *duende*, the spirit or soul, required to make lusterware. "We must feel intensely and with the greatest profundity those indefinite factors that, although they take us to a foreseen outcome, oscillate during the whole process in a wide abyss of contingency."

To recreate the Nasrid masterpiece style, he found clays and minerals both locally and as far afield as China, South Africa, England and France. Over four decades he studied the materials, built Arab-style kilns and fired them to reach temperatures up to 1040 degrees Centigrade (1904°F). (Examples of Arab-type kilns can still be found in ceramics centers such as Paterna and Manises.) For as long as anyone knows, the potters of this region have used "mountain wood"—thyme, rosemary and gorse—to achieve high temperatures and just the right kind of smoke. Jiménez used the same, varying his materials, varying his temperatures, shifting the placements of objects inside the kiln.

He also taught himself to draw the intricate



Smaller pieces also show Jiménez's interpretations of Nasrid styles. "You have to assimilate the [known] pieces, interpret them and then reconstitute, adding some of yourself," he says. Left: **His "Plate of the Ovals" (59 cm/23" dia.) uses cobalt blue and gold to trace its intricate, Nasrid-inspired motifs, as do** (top, from left) **a round tureen, a covered bowl and a pitcher.** Right: **Detail of decoration on the handle of a large vase.**