Fables and Fairytales
Fables and Fairytales features illustrations of dynamic animal characters that for generations have captured the imaginations of children and adults around the world. Organized by the American Folk Art Museum in New York, Fables and Fairytales brings the wisdom of ancient fables to new audiences. The twenty-four vivid and playful drawings by artist and author Dr. Sabiha Al Khemir are at once timeless and culturally transcendent; more than imaginative illustrations, they are a testament to the universal and enduring power of storytelling itself.

The collection of stories that inspired and informed this exhibition, known as the Panchatantra, originated in India over two thousand years ago, and was circulated widely in the Near East before being further adapted and translated into more than fifty languages around the world. Inspiring and delighting audiences with each retelling, the Panchatantra is considered by many to be the most popular collection of stories ever written. Echoes of these fables can be found in Arabian Nights, the fairytales of the Brothers Grimm, the French fabulist Jean de La Fontaine, and countless other authors and folk traditions. For generations, these allegorical narratives have been reshaped and woven into the folklore of cultures around the world, bridging the legacies of disparate lands with their timeless wisdom and charm.
The Power of Fables

The three fables that come boldly to life in this exhibition derive from an early Arabic translation of the *Panchatantra* that became popular under another title: *Kalila and Dimna*, named for two jackal brothers who appear in many of the stories. The “fables genre” empowers animals—giving them voices, enabling them to teach from their own experiences, and revealing aspects of human nature that we might prefer to ignore. Learning these morals through the world of animals invests them with warmth and life, grounding their fantastical adventures in important life lessons about friendship, loyalty, bravery, and caring for others.

2. Dr. Sabha Al Khamei, Four Friends 2, c. 2016, Ink on paper. Image courtesy of the artist
Three Fish

The story of the three fish is about the benefits of alertness, cleverness, and wisdom. In it, three fish encounter fishermen preparing to cast a net. The first fish, ever observant, foresees trouble, and swims away before the fishermen can block the stream with rocks, preventing escape. The second fish, patient and thoughtful, swims to the bottom of the stream and covers herself in mud, pretending to be dead when the fishermen find her; they cast her away, and she swims free. The third fish foolishly ignores his plight, choosing to fall asleep at the bottom of the river, until it is too late and he is caught.
The story of the lion and the ox is about jealousy and the loss of friendship. In it, the lion, king of beasts, is terrified of a sound. Dimna, the jackal, counsels him to remain calm, and goes to investigate, only to discover that the noise is nothing but the joyful bellowing of an ox. Dimna introduces the ox to the lion, and the two become great friends. Dimna, seized with jealousy, lies to the lion, claiming falsely that the ox plans to kill the lion. Angered, the lion kills the ox; and shortly mourns the loss of his new friend. When the truth comes to light, Dimna is thrown into prison for his dishonesty.
Four Friends

The story of the four friends is about the importance of helping each other. In it, a mouse, a crow, a tortoise and a gazelle become good friends. One day, a hunter sets a trap and catches the gazelle. The mouse quickly chews through the ropes, freeing the gazelle. But just as the gazelle is freed, the hunter returns and traps the tortoise, who is too slow to escape. The gazelle and crow then devise a plan to distract the hunter, while the mouse successfully frees the tortoise—demonstrating the importance of friendship and collaboration.

7. Dr. Sahiba AlKhamis, Four Friends, c. 2016, Ink on paper, Image courtesy of the artist
About the American Folk Art Museum, New York

The American Folk Art Museum is the premier institution devoted to the creative expressions of self-taught artists, past and present. Since 1961, the American Folk Art Museum has been shaping the understanding of art by the self-taught through its exhibitions, publications, and educational programs. As a center of scholarship, and by showcasing the creativity of individuals whose singular talents have been refined through experience rather than formal artistic training, the museum considers the historical, social, and artistic context of American culture. Its collection includes more than eight thousand artworks dating from the eighteenth century to the present—from compelling portraits and dazzling quilts to powerful works by living self-taught artists in a variety of mediums.

Companion Book

Each of the three stories presented in Fables and Fairytales come to life in the exhibition’s companion book, Fables Across Time: Kalila and Dimna. Noted scholar, author, and artist Dr. Al Khemir has reinterpreted the fables’ earliest forms, bringing them to life in both English and Arabic. Forty-five colorful and compelling illustrations accompany the lively tales.

The American Folk Art Museum is pleased to publish this book in cooperation with the Sabiha Al Khemir Foundation and the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis.


8. Dr. Sabiha Al Khemir, Lion and Ox 4, c. 2016, Ink on paper, Image courtesy of the artist
EXHIBITION SPECIFICATIONS

Number of Works
24 illustrations

Organized by
The American Folk Art Museum,
New York

Requirements
Moderate security;
100–125 linear feet

Shipping
IA&A makes all arrangements; exhibitors pay outgoing shipping costs within the contiguous US

Booking Period
12 weeks

Tour
September 2021–September 2024

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