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Faculty of Arts & Humanities
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Module Title:	Research Approaches and Dissertation
Module Code: (e.g. 5AABC123)	7AAICM01

Assignment: (may be abbreviated)	Research Proposal
Assignment tutor/group:	Alexandra Antonopoulou
Deadline:	13 April 2026
Date Submitted:	13 April 2026
Word Count:	2150

Your assignment may be used as an example of good practice for other students to refer to in future. If selected, your assignment will be presented anonymously and may include feedback comments or the specific grade awarded. Participation is optional and will not affect your grade.

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Made Together, Displayed Apart: A Creative Research Inquiry into Al-Qatt Al-Asiri in Asir, Saudi Arabia

What happens to a practice that was never meant to be made alone?

My mother's generation knew how to turn a wall into a story. White from limestone, green from clover, blue from the indigo plant, red from red stones: the colours of Al-Qatt Al-Asiri came from the mountains of Asir, and so did the women who painted them (Al-Hababi, 2012; Alawad and Alsobahi 2021) For generations, women in the village of Tamniah and across the wider region prepared their pigments by hand and painted the inside of their houses with shapes drawn from the world around them, in a practice that was not only decoration but belonging, made by women who invited one another in to paint together and to teach the next generation. UNESCO recognised it in 2017 as enhancing "social bonding and solidarity" within the community (UNESCO, 2017). Since the inscription, Al-Qatt has moved into a moment of intense visibility: national institutions including the Royal Institute of Traditional Arts (Wirth) now offer formal training programmes free to Saudi citizens, framed within the language of the creative economy (Wirth, n.d.; Al-Shahri, 2025), while the same motifs have appeared on hotel interiors, branded merchandise, commercial and public-facing surfaces (Hesham, 2019).

This proposal sets out a Creative Research Project investigating what happens to a women-led, hand-transmitted practice when government recognition, institutional safeguarding, and commercial circulation arrive at once. It asks how the women themselves understand this moment, and what is gained, altered, or held across it. The research is structured in two phases with ten women across five intergenerational family pairs in Asir: individual painting sessions producing five diptychs, followed by a single collective canvas painted by all the women together, reflecting both the contemporary, increasingly individualised condition of the practice and the historical, collective ritual that once defined it. This inquiry speaks to the

concerns of Arts and Cultural Management around the ethics of heritage representation and the responsibilities of cultural institutions toward source communities.

Research Question

How do women practitioners of Al-Qatt Al-Asiri in Asir experience and make sense of the commodification of their practice, and what does this transformation mean for them?

Sub-questions:

- How do younger and older practitioners in Asir differ in how they understand the meaning and place of Al-Qatt in their lives today?
- What can a creative research approach reveal about the practice that conventional heritage research methods cannot?

Literature Review

This research sits at the intersection of three bodies of literature: critical heritage studies, scholarship on heritage and globalisation, and the small but growing body of writing on Al-Qatt Al-Asiri itself.

A central insight of critical heritage scholarship is that the act of designating something as "heritage" is never neutral. Smith (2006) argues that heritage is not a thing but a discourse, a process through which meaning is authorised and produced. Building on this, Smith and Akagawa (2009) describe the construction of heritage lists as a performance of meaning-making, in which practices are framed and assessed against predefined criteria, and new meanings are written onto them in the process. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) describes intangible heritage as a metacultural production, observing that world heritage is first and foremost a list, and that everything placed on it is positioned in a new relationship with the other practices it sits beside. Hafstein (2009), in the same volume, shows how UNESCO's lists function as a prestigious form of display that channels resources but also transforms how

communities relate to their own practices. Kearney (2009) extends this critique by foregrounding Indigenous and community ownership, arguing that current legal arrangements leave intangible heritage under the control of the state rather than the communities who hold it. This proposal argues that the current moment of institutional recognition and commercial circulation around Al-Qatt Al-Asiri is neither simply a story of preservation nor of loss, and that it must be understood from inside the community of practice, through the voices of the women who continue to hold the knowledge.

Long and Labadi (2010) extend this argument into the global frame, showing that the international heritage movement is inherently implicated in processes of globalisation rather than standing outside them. They demonstrate how heritage is increasingly mobilised by governments in tourism and urban development strategies that openly accept its commodification, while simultaneously functioning as a symbol of cultural vibrancy and an economic development resource. The dual function of preservation and circulation operating as the same movement, rather than as opposed forces, is precisely the dynamic this research investigates in the Saudi context.

The literature specifically on Al-Qatt Al-Asiri remains limited in scope and largely descriptive. Al-Qahtani (2019) and Hesham (2019) provide useful ethnographic groundwork on the practice's motifs, colours, and the women who hold the knowledge, while Alawad and Alsobahi (2021) synthesise the field of Al-Qatt design applications across contemporary architecture, interior design, textiles, and souvenirs. Al-Ahmari offers an anthropological study of the women practitioners themselves, examining the motives and aesthetic rules that shape their work. However, most of this literature approaches Al-Qatt primarily as a source of design inspiration or as an object of ethnographic documentation. Hesham (2019), in particular, proposes the application of Al-Qatt motifs to commercial interior design as a strategy for stimulating Saudi tourism marketing, and in doing so becomes itself an artefact of the very moment of commodification under investigation here. Almost no existing

scholarship approaches Al-Qatt from inside the community of practice, asks the women themselves how they understand its current transformation, or treats it through the critical heritage frameworks established above. This proposal intervenes in that gap by centring the women's own voices and analysing the practice through the frameworks developed by critical heritage scholars.

Methodology

This research is a Creative Research Project in which the creative work is not an illustration of the findings but the findings themselves (CMCI, 2022). A conventional written dissertation is not adequate to the practice under investigation. Al-Qatt Al-Asiri lives in hands, walls, and the relationships between the women who paint. To approach it only through interviews and textual analysis would reproduce exactly the distance this research is trying to interrogate.

Theoretical justification:

The project draws on the framework of arts-based research developed by Barone and Eisner (2012) and Leavy (2015), and on Borgdorff's (2012, p. 146) account of artistic research as inquiry in which artistic practice is "not only the result of the research, but also its methodological vehicle" and the research "unfolds in and through the acts of creating and performing." Borgdorff argues that pre-reflective artistic actions embody knowledge that is not directly accessible through other means, and that the methodological power of an enacted approach lies in its capacity to investigate from inside what is at work in art (Borgdorff, 2012). To understand what Al-Qatt holds for the women who hold it, the research must take place in and through the act of making.

Research design; two phases:

The project will be carried out with ten women practitioners in Asir, recruited as five intergenerational pairs drawn from the same families: mother and daughter, aunt and niece,

grandmother and granddaughter. My own mother and I will form one of the pairs. The fieldwork is structured in two phases that together embody the central tension of the research. In **Phase 1**, each woman will participate in an individual session in which she is invited to paint her own canvas in response to a single open prompt: what Al-Qatt means to her. The two canvases from each pair will be displayed side by side as a diptych, and the five diptychs together will read as a portrait of the contemporary, increasingly individualised condition of the practice. In **Phase 2**, all ten women will come together to paint a single collective canvas of approximately two metres, recreating the historical ritual in which Al-Qatt was made by women gathered in the same room, mixing pigments, talking, teaching, and painting alongside one another. The location of this session will be determined in consultation with the elder participants to ensure their convenience. The two phases produce two creative outputs displayed together: the wall of diptychs and the collective canvas, the present condition of the practice and the inherited one.

Recruitment and data collection:

Participants will be recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, drawing on personal family networks in Asir and facilitated where appropriate by the Asir Heritage Commission, which will function as an introducer rather than a gatekeeper of content. Alongside each individual session in Phase 1, I will conduct a semi-structured audio-recorded interview with each participant, exploring what she has painted, why she chose those motifs and colours, how she first encountered the practice, and how she feels about its transformation into institutional training programmes and commercial circulation. The Phase 2 collective session will also be audio-recorded, capturing the conversation between the women as they paint together.

Analysis:

The ten individual canvases will be analysed semiotically and visually, with attention to motifs, colour, composition, and the moments where generational canvases converge or diverge. The collective canvas will be analysed in dialogue with them, asking what emerges when the women paint together that does not emerge when they paint alone. The interview recordings and the recorded collective session will be thematically analysed. Together, these layers speak to one another: what the women paint, what they say, and what shifts when the act of making itself becomes collective again.

Positionality:

My position in this research is layered and shifts within encounters. I am a cultural insider, a woman from Asir, of the Al-Qahtani tribe, raised in between Tamniah and Abha where Al-Qatt was part of the visual landscape of childhood, and I am also an artist, which connects me to the participants as a fellow maker. At the same time, I am a generational outsider, as transmission of the practice broke at my generation, and an educational outsider encountering Al-Qatt now through Western academic frameworks at King's College London. As Bukamal (2022, p. 345) argues, positionality is not a binary but a continuum, and "any researcher can experience insider-outsider ambivalence." Lu and Hodge (2019) similarly describe positionality as multidimensional and dynamic, shifting across the different axes of identity a researcher brings into the field. Following Kamlongera (2021), I treat this layered position not as a problem to be resolved but as a methodological resource, held through reflexive practice throughout the research (Leavy, 2015).

Limitations

Scale: ten women across five families is a small purposive sample, and the findings will speak to these specific transmission lines rather than to Al-Qatt practice across Asir as a whole.

Access and consent: asking women in Asir to be recorded and have their creative work displayed publicly is a significant request, and some may decline. This will be mitigated by offering full anonymity, the option to withhold audio or image, and the right to withdraw at any stage. A reserve pair will be identified during recruitment in case the diptych structure is disrupted.

Distance and language: I am currently based in London and the fieldwork is in Asir, which limits trust-building time. Preliminary conversations will be conducted remotely through family networks, and the in-person sessions concentrated into a single visit in summer 2026. Interviews will take place in Arabic and the Asiri dialect; original transcripts will be retained alongside translated extracts, and a second Arabic-speaking reader will review sensitive passages.

Finally, emotional proximity and craft knowledge are two sides of the same insider position. I care about this practice and what has happened to it, which carries a risk of what Gelir (2021) describes as the researcher being overtaken by familiarity, seeing only what confirms what they already feel. At the same time, although I am a cultural insider, I am not an embodied practitioner in the way the older women in my study are. I will address both by approaching the sessions as a learner and treating my limited craft knowledge and emotional investment as part of the reflexive material of the research.

Ethics and Access

This research is low risk under the KCL framework. It involves recorded interviews and painting sessions with ten adult women in Asir, who are not vulnerable participants and will not be asked about sensitive or distressing subjects. No faces will appear in the creative output; participants are represented through their canvases and, with consent, their voices. Each will receive an Arabic information sheet, give written informed consent, be offered anonymity, and retain the right to withdraw at any stage. Access is facilitated through

personal family networks. Ethical approval will be sought through REMAS in advance of fieldwork in summer 2026.

Timeframe

April 2026	Submit REMAS ethics application. Begin remote recruitment. Literature review (ongoing).
May 2026	Confirm ethics approval. Continue literature review. Supervisor meeting (end of month) with draft sections.
June 2026	Finalise literature review. Preliminary online conversations with participants.
July 2026	Two-week visit to Asir. Individual painting sessions and recorded interviews. Collective Phase 2 canvas session.
August 2026	Assemble the five diptychs. Semiotic and thematic analysis. Draft critical commentary. Editing and proofreading.
September 2026	Submit research by 2 September 2026, 14:00.

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