Making Global Local

Greater Boston’s international cultural centers strive to enlighten.
by NELL PORTER BROWN

Clockwise, from upper right: Cooking lessons, a discussion with guest speakers, and the children’s library at the French Cultural Center; German class and a festive dinner at the Goethe-Institut; and workshops in traditional art forms at the Turkish Cultural Center of Boston.

Our library has 30,000 volumes and a children’s room, we hold 50 to 60 events a year—wines tastings and cooking demonstrations, discussion groups, and concerts,” Barbara Bouquegneau, executive director of the French Cultural Center, said while leading a tour around the 1860s Beaux Arts-style Back Bay mansion that has housed the center since 1945.

There’s a new “Behind the Scenes” fashion series kicking off on November 16 with a cocktail reception, fashion show, and guest speakers, and the annual Marché de Noël—quality nibbles, stylish gifts—on December 9. “And,” she notes, “we teach French to 700 students a year, starting from age one, until you can’t take it anymore.”

The center is among many such international educational organizations in Greater Boston—the Iranian Association of Boston, the Irish Cultural Centre of New England,
ALL IN A DAY: Historic-ish Holidays

The colder months might be the ideal time to visit Old Sturbridge Village. The craftspeople—blacksmiths, tinniers, potters, and coopers—ply their trades as other costumed interpreters bring early American history “to life,” yet the crowd of visitors has thinned. What’s more, Thanksgiving is celebrated throughout November, and for Christmas, there are carolers, Yule logs, roasting chestnuts, and candlelight tours.

The museum, an hour’s drive from Cambridge, highlights daily life in New England communities between 1790 and 1840. Even then, Thanksgiving was a big deal. “The Puritans and their descendants didn’t celebrate Christmas, so this was the time people got together,” says village communications director Michael Arnum. Visitors can watch preparations for feasts of turkey, and meat or squash pies.

Two new exhibits are also open during November. “Armed & Equipped: Firearms and the Militia in New England, 1790-1840” highlights the village’s collection of weaponry, uniforms, and other artifacts. “Planed, Grained, and Dovetailed: Cabinetmaking in Rural New England” delves into the critical nineteenth-century industry through woodworking tools, techniques, and stories of prominent woodworkers, like Samuel Wing and Tilly Mead. Rare furniture is on display, along with cradles, coffins, drumsticks, boat frames, and beds.

That Puritan disdain for Christmas—not always celebrated as a Christian holiday back then, and often marked by drunkenness and dancing—prevailed in some semblance through several generations, slowly softening by the 1820s. (December 25 was officially named an American federal holiday in 1870.)

But Old Sturbridge Village fully decks the halls in December, resembling more of a Victorian town. It’s open Friday through Sunday, from 3 until 9 p.m., and the whole community is lit only by electric candles and strings of outdoor tree lights. There’s live music, along with horse-and-carriage rides, sing-alongs, children’s games, holiday food, a gingerbread-house contest, and traditional craft workshops. A model train set chugs along tracks in one gallery, and a miniature-sized “Little Town of Bethlehem” is on display at the Quaker Meeting House, where guides read the story of Christmas. They also lead village tours and talk about how modern Christmas traditions developed. Roasting chestnuts, for example, was already popular by the 1830s, but caroling came in later, says Arnum. “We also have a heavenly tree-lighting ceremony—and, of course, Santa.” —N.P.B.
CURiosities:

Getting High at Houghton

Houghton Library is letting it all hang out. “Altered States: Sex, Drugs, and Transcendence in the Ludlow-Santo Domingo Library” offers pornographic comics and French erotica, along with glimpses of psychoactive drug use by Thomas De Quincey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge through their books and letters. Or, attend the show just for the sensational graphics for pulp-fiction books like Marijuana Girl and Hippie Sex Communes.

The 120 objects on display through December 16 are from private collector and jet-setter Julio Mario Santo Domingo, who died in 2009. Over many years, he amassed more than 100,000 items reflecting a range of fascinations: drugs, social taboos, sexuality, counterculture rebellion, nineteenth-century French culture and literature, the occult, and “the juxtaposition of ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures,” says show organizer Leslie A. Morris, curator of modern books and manuscripts. “He was very rich and he collected everything, not just from the 1960s and 1970s in America. He was interested in botany, how poppies were grown, the medicinal uses, legal constraints.”

Still, she believes it’s the first time Houghton has posted a “parental discretion” disclaimer at the door.

Harvard received more than 50,000 of the items in 2012 and dispersed them, by subject, among several of its libraries. A separate exhibit of Santo Domingo materials at the Schlesinger Library, “Altered Gazes: Sex, Drugs, and Rock & Roll” (October 2-January 19), explores women’s roles in making and using counterculture products.

The Houghton exhibition reflects the unwieldy scope of the original collection and takes a broad view of humans’ age-old search for a “high”—something, anything, that’s more enticing than quotidian life. Orgy Town, a 1961 paperback, promises “a wild weekend of jazz and junk in a hotbed of sex.” A section on cocaine includes the decadent-looking collector’s edition of Snowblind, by Damien Hirst, Howard Marks, and Robert Sabbag; it features mirror covers, an AmEx card to cut the nose candy, and a dollar bill rolled up for snorting it. These objects, and the early cartoons of super-sized sex organs and hyperbolic public campaigns against drug use seem funny, in hindsight.

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The Iranian Association of Boston, based in Watertown, runs Farsi classes as well as popular holiday gatherings. Students range from curiosity-seekers and those studying the Middle East to Iranian-American children “whose parents want them to understand the Persian/Iranian traditions,” says center president Saeed Pirooz.

The nonprofit association was established in 1989 specifically as a nonreligious, non-political group to “promote Iranian cultural exchange,” he says. Anyone can attend events. “The only things not welcome,” he adds, “are any kinds of religious or political statements, or agendas. IAB is not the venue for those discussions. The focus is on culture and art.”

“Folk-dancing Iranians are loud and fun,” he says, cheerfully. “And they try to really have a good time at parties. Everyone gets out on the floor.”

October marked Mehregan, a harvest festival featuring Persian-related poetry and live traditional music, he says. Participants can share poems they love, recite their own, or just come to listen and enjoy Persian food. (There are at least five year-round places for Persian fare in Watertown itself: Molana Restaurant, Shiraz Persian Cuisine, Tabrizi Bakery, Roksana’s, and Dizin FruttiBerri ice cream.)

On December 16, the association hosts a Yalda Night party to celebrate the longest night of the year. “There are discussions about what families do on this holiday, what kinds of foods are eaten—food is a huge part of the culture, and I think it’s the best-tasting food, it was [developed] over thousands of years. But I may be biased in that,” he says. There’s also music and dancing. “Folk-dancing Iranians are loud and fun,” he says, cheerfully. “And they try to really have a good time at parties. Everyone gets out on the floor.”

—Nell Porter Brown