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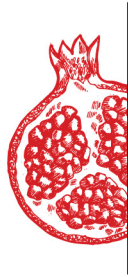
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WHAT'S PHOENICIAN ABOUT *THE PHOENICIAN SCHEME*?

Helen Dixon

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Abstract

This study examines how Wes Anderson's *The Phoenician Scheme* (2025) invokes Phoenician-ness. While the term references a first millennium BCE coastal Levantine cultural group, this is not the setting for the film. Instead, Anderson evokes "Phoenicia" in three ways: as heritage, as a fictional 20th century place, and as aesthetic. First, the film's dedication to Anderson's father-in-law highlights modern "Phoenician" identity as a component of Lebanese heritage, tied to narratives of mobility, entrepreneurship, and resilience. Second, the fictional setting of "Greater Independent Phoenicia" reimagines mid-20th-century Middle Eastern geopolitics, echoing Mandate-era Palestine through artificial borders, infrastructure schemes, and conflict between Western opportunists and regional stakeholders. This constructed geography underscores the persistence of imperial power dynamics beneath the language of investment and development. Third, the film's visual style produces a "Neo-Phoenician" aesthetic, blending Egyptomania, Orientalism, and eclectic references reminiscent of how ancient Phoenician art has historically been interpreted (as hybrid and derivative). Situated within reception history, Anderson's use of "Phoenicia" reflects both intentional and unconscious engagements with ancient and modern identities. Ultimately, the film uses "Phoenicia" as a flexible and fictional cultural framework to explore colonialism, memory, and familial relationships rather than as any direct representation of the ancient world.



Cette étude examine la manière dont le film «The Phoenician Scheme» (2025) de Wes Anderson convoque la «phénicianité». Bien que ce terme désigne un groupe culturel de la côte levantique datant du premier millénaire avant notre ère, le film ne se déroule pas à cette époque. Anderson semble plutôt évoquer la «Phénicie» selon trois axes principaux: en tant qu'héritage, en tant que lieu fictif du XXe siècle et en tant qu'esthétique. Premièrement, la dédicace du film au beau-père d'Anderson met en lumière l'identité «phénicienne» moderne comme une composante de l'héritage libanais, associée à des récits de mobilité, d'entrepreneuriat et de résilience. Ensuite, le cadre fictif de la «Grande Phénicie indépendante» réinterprète la géopolitique du Moyen-Orient au milieu du XXe siècle, évoquant la Palestine de l'époque du Mandat à travers des frontières artificielles, des projets d'infrastructure et des conflits opposant opportunistes occidentaux et acteurs régionaux. Cette géographie construite souligne la persistance de dynamiques de pouvoir impérial sous le discours de l'investissement et du développement. Troisièmement, le style visuel du film produit une esthétique «néo-phénicienne» mêlant égyptomanie, orientalisme et références éclectiques, rappelant la manière dont l'art phénicien antique a été historiquement interprété (comme hybride et dérivé). Dans le cadre de l'histoire de la réception, l'utilisation de la «Phénicie» par Anderson reflète à la fois des rapports intentionnels et inconscients, aux identités antiques et modernes. En somme, le film utilise la «Phénicie» comme un cadre culturel fictif et malléable pour explorer le colonialisme, la mémoire et les relations familiales, plutôt que comme une représentation directe du monde antique.



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WHAT'S PHOENICIAN ABOUT *THE PHOENICIAN SCHEME*?

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Introduction

As academic specialists in Phoenician history and culture, my Phoenicianist colleagues and I were excited to learn the title of Wes Anderson's most recent film, *The Phoenician Scheme* (2025),¹ and we also cautiously wondered if it would be about residents of Phoenix, Arizona (as so many of our news alerts for “Phoenician” are). Academically, the term “Phoenician” is used to refer to inhabitants of coastal Syria, Lebanon, and Israel/Palestine in the first millennium BCE, who wrote in a specific Northwest Semitic dialect of the same name and worshipped a polytheistic pantheon led by the goddess Ashtart. They are perhaps best known for seafaring, purple dye production, and the colonies they

¹ The official distributor is Focus Features (<https://www.focusfeatures.com/the-phoenician-scheme>). The film was cowritten with Roman Coppola, but he is not credited on the distribution page. The film is now available streaming on many media platforms.

established across the Mediterranean world, including Carthage and the Punic culture it engendered. This certainly is not the kind of historical setting in which Anderson typically does his directing! And of course, the film is not set in the first millennium BCE, but in an alternative past in which a new “Modern Greater Independent Phoenicia” was being built by colonial Western powers somewhere in the Middle East. Nevertheless, there was more to say about the Phoenician-ness of the film than I expected.

Critical analysis of the film is already robust, with emphasis on the redemptive elements of the main character’s storyline, including uses of (sometimes quite biblical) near-death and resurrection scenes to underscore the potential for atonement and transformation.² But there has been relatively little analysis of the film’s title, *The Phoenician Scheme*, and setting, a business venture placed in a twentieth-century “Phoenicia.” In this short work of analysis, I argue that Phoenicia is evoked in the film in three main ways: as a heritage, as a fictionalized place, and as an aesthetic. The first two—heritage and place—were undertaken deliberately and likely represent the extent to which Anderson intended the film’s title to be what it is. The third, aesthetic, generated by the colonial references the film makes, may be a coincidence, but these visual references end up deepening the significance of the film’s title, given how Phoenicians are known (or remain unknown) to most Western audiences. I intend this suggestion as a work of reception history—how I as a specialist see the historic cultural group I study reflected in the decision-making of the director, both consciously and unconsciously, in ways that he may not have intended but which have interesting resonances for those who study the ancient eastern Mediterranean world. While I will not spoil any surprises in the film (since Anderson’s movies are more about mood than plot), I will also not narrate the entire storyline in the analysis that follows, though I encourage interested readers to watch the 101-minute film to form their own impressions.



² See, for example, Tallerico 2025.

Heritage

First, Anderson explicitly dedicates the movie to his father-in-law, Fouad Mikhael Maalouf, with the following text appearing for seven seconds over the final scene of the film: “In memory of Fouad Mikhael Maalouf. Born in Bethlehem, died in London. Shaded in life by the cedars of Lebanon” (Fig. 1). Fouad Mikhael Maalouf³ is the father of Anderson’s wife, Juman Malouf, who was herself born in 1975 in Beirut at the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War. Juman’s mother and Fouad’s wife is Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh (b. 1945); she and Fouad met at a party in Beirut in 1968, before the Lebanese Civil War, and eventually moved to Saudi Arabia and London together. Anderson’s dedication of the film to Fouad Maalouf reflects Maalouf’s life as a businessman, often spending long periods of time away from his family while working to



Figure 1: Dedication of the film to Wes Anderson’s father-in-law (partial screenshot from 1:35:54; all timestamps are taken from the runtime on Peacock+, including opening logos and credits).

³ The “Maalouf”/“Malouf” spelling of the family name is associated with Lebanese and Syrian (largely Christian) families, descendants of the Bani Azad of the Ghassanid tribes. “Maloof” is the spelling adopted by Maloofs International, an organization dedicated to preserving the history of the family (established in 1967). See Maloofs International 2026.

build something larger than himself (and perhaps always somewhat out of reach).

In addition to explicitly connecting Palestine (through Fouad's birthplace in Bethlehem) and Lebanon as shapers of Maalouf's identity, the film dedication's poignant nod to Maalouf's heritage likely encapsulates the core of Anderson's intention in evoking "Phoenicia" in the film. Phoenician heritage has become a meaningful component of modern Lebanese identity, especially among Maronite Christian, Druze, and wealthier Sunni communities living in Lebanon and in the diaspora. Scholars like Asher Kaufman (2001) have traced this development to the early twentieth century, when origin stories set in the ancient world were used to legitimize newly demarcated nation-states after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. Positive stereotypes of Phoenicians as highly literate, adventurous, and mobile, and as excellent businessmen⁴ have found resonance in the contemporary world for many Lebanese.⁵



Maalouf embodied these values as a Lebanese construction engineer based in Saudi Arabia but born in the West Bank.⁶ While there is no doubt that Maalouf identified primarily as Lebanese, Anderson seems to evoke Maalouf's birthplace indirectly, using "Phoenician" in ways that the term "Palestinian" was used under the British Mandate throughout the film, as I explore below. The main character of Anatole "Zsa-Zsa" Korda (Benicio del Toro) is based on Maalouf not only in little details like the shoeboxes in which he kept important records, but also in larger themes like his relationship with his daughter (see, e.g., Sims 2025). It might also be relevant that the Maalouf family is Maronite, a primarily Lebanese Christian denomination with unique Levantine history but in full communion with the Catholic Church

⁴ And nearly always "men," as Bärbel Morstadt (2017–19) has rightly pointed out.

⁵ One could draw comparisons with novels like *The Lives and Deaths of Jubrail Dadboub* (Norris 2023), which tells the story of the "merchants of Bethlehem" as heroes of trade and transmitters of global knowledge in the nineteenth century. I thank Izaak de Hulster for this insightful observation.

⁶ After leaving Lebanon in 1975 at the outbreak of the civil war, the family lived in London for two years and then Khobar (Saudi Arabia) for six years, before moving back to London.

(Harmon 2025). This Catholicism is likely the context through which the film's heavenly scenes should be understood.

In the film, Korda is constantly surviving assassination attempts undertaken by business competitors, foreign governments, and perhaps even family members, offering a caricatured nod to the ways Lebanon is often caught in the midst of regional violence.⁷ His major infrastructure project in the film is called the “Korda Land and Sea Phoenician Infrastructure Scheme,” consisting of four parts: a canal, a tunnel, a dam, and a hotel, each a large-scale building project designed to reshape the landscape for future commercial enterprises in the fictional state of Modern Greater Independent Phoenicia. The full project is visualized on a map behind Bjorn (Michael Cera) late in the film (Fig. 2), but it is taken for granted throughout the storyline. This is the second



Figure 2: A map of the four-part “Phoenician Scheme” (partial screenshot from 1:17:50).

⁷ A shocking real-world example is the high-profile assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in Beirut in 2005, which was variously blamed on the Syrian government, pro-Syrian Lebanese generals, a lone-wolf suicide bomber, and ultimately a Hezbollah operative, who was convicted *in absentia*. See, for example, United Nations 2005.

way “Phoenicia” is evoked in the film—as a place that does not correspond to any modern nation-state, but that evokes geographies and historical realities in the twentieth-century Middle East. The story is set in the year 1950. Though it is never mentioned in the film, this choice evokes the 1948 declaration of Israel’s independence, which was enacted eight hours before the termination of the British Mandate for Palestine.⁸ In *The Phoenician Scheme*, the term “Phoenicia” appears in places and phrases where “Palestine” did under British colonial control. Prior to the Mandate period, several regional surveys were carried out and funded by British institutions, including the Palestine Exploration Fund’s Survey of Palestine (1872–1880), which became tools of development and control of the region. But the imposition of the boundaries of a fictional Modern Greater Independent Phoenicia are revealed as aspirational when we encounter three distinct regions throughout the film, presented on section cards as we meet three of the project partners:



I. Sacramento Consortium section card (30:42): “Upper Independent Phoenicia (lat/long: 33°N 36°E)”

Tunnel Sign: “Welcome to the Trans-Mountain Locomotive Tunnel” and “Territory of His Majesty the 7th King of Lower Western Independent Phoenicia” (each line followed by a direct translation in Arabic).

The coordinates for this imaginary tunnel, when placed on a modern map, are to be found in Syria, west of Jasim, not far from the contested Golan Heights.⁹ This is the section in which we meet the dashing Prince Farouk (Riz Ahmed), who is quite literally pulled into a game he has never played before (basketball). Though he wins, the advantage is all Korda’s. The names of Prince Farouk and his father, King Hussein,

⁸ The Mandate for Palestine was established by the League of Nations, for British administration of the territories of Palestine (1920–1948) and Transjordan (1921–1946) following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire after World War I (1914–1918).

⁹ The world’s nations, with the exception of the United States and Israel, view the Golan Heights as Israeli-occupied Syrian territory.

in the film are taken from twentieth-century Egyptian and Jordanian dynasties but with only ambiguous biographical references to their namesakes.

II. Newark Syndicate section card (50:03): “Lower Independent Phoenicia (lat/long: 26°N 36°E)”

Canal Sign: “Welcome to the Trans-Desert Inland Waterway” and “Principality of Lower Middle Independent Phoenicia” followed by Arabic translations and the added note, “No food or lodging next 155 nautical miles.”

These real-world coordinates find us in the Red Sea, off the coast of Al Wajh, Saudi Arabia. This project is likely meant to conjure major colonial undertakings of the past, like the building of the Suez Canal (completed in 1869) or the Panama Canal (completed in 1914). In fact, Tanjil Rashid (2025), in his review for *The Guardian*, productively compares the character of Zsa-Zsa Korda to Ferdinand de Lesseps, builder of the Suez Canal, designer of a (failed) plan for the Panama Canal, and developer of various mines and railways in Africa.¹⁰ But the film's Trans-Desert Inland Waterway might also be intended to reference the long-proposed (never executed) Ben Gurion Canal, another plan to connect the Red Sea to the Mediterranean as an alternative to the Suez (Musmar 2024).



III. Cousin Hilda section card (58:00): “Eastern Independent Phoenicia (lat/long: 29°N 47°E)”

Dam Sign: “Welcome to the Trans-Basin Hydroelectric Embankment” and “Domain of the Hilda Sussman-Korda Private Utopian Outpost, Middle Independent Phoenicia,” followed by direct translations in Hebrew.

¹⁰ As Rashid (2025) goes on to point out, the character's name directly references Zoltan Korda, a Hungarian Jewish émigré who directed colonial adventure films in the 1930s.

With the shift to Hebrew and the language of “private utopian outposts,” Anderson makes the parallels between his imagined “Phoenicia” and the historical “Palestine” more direct—this is a reference to Israeli *kibbutzim*, collective agricultural or industrial settlements run through shared governance and profit. A modified translation of Exodus 15:8, “Lo, the current stood firm,” is inscribed on the dam itself.¹¹ Even cousin Hilda (Scarlett Johansson)’s name, Hilda Sussman, seems selected to represent a German Jewish immigrant to Israel.

It is all the more interesting that the dam’s coordinates are to be found near the border between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. One might think the scope of the dam would point to the Aswan High Dam (completed in 1970) as a reference point, but I think that the Ruafa Dam near Abu Ageila in the north of the Sinai Peninsula (close to Egypt’s border with Israel and site of several significant battles between the two states) is more salient to this imagined construction site.

In this political landscape, “Modern Greater Independent Phoenicia” is a colonial proposal that contains factions with very different goals and cultural identities. Despite the dream of modern technological “improvements” that could connect its regions, it is clear to the viewer that they will perpetuate existing hierarchies of power, still dominated by European businessmen and the US government. Anderson seems self-aware of the impossibility of the project of “Modern Greater Independent Phoenicia,” since the coordinates given in the title cards do not at all match the constellation of sites as given in the Figure 2 map, which shows the three sites together with the hotel (whose coordinates are never given) on a single landmass, traversed by a river. The section cards function to introduce the different sects or parties, each motivated by distinct worldviews, who are being pushed to invest in the Phoenician scheme. The hotel serves as the place where the fragile agreement is articulated, brokered, and then disintegrates (perhaps



¹¹ The closest published translation I could find is in the 2004 Holman Christian Standard Bible: “The currents stood firm like a dam” (“Lo,” common in the 1611 KJV translation, typically translates Biblical Hebrew *hinneh*, which is not present in the verse).

suggesting historical referents like the King David Hotel in Jerusalem or the Phoenicia Intercontinental in Beirut).

In terms of landscapes, while the movie was filmed entirely at the Babelsberg Studio in Potsdam, just outside Berlin, Germany, constructed outdoor sets draw inspiration from Egypt, Jordan, the Sinai, and even Turkish monumental art. Most of the glimpses we get of “Phoenicia” are of flat desert settings, very unlike modern Lebanon with its coastal cities, cedar forests, and mountain villages. Instead, Anderson has deliberately placed the characters among Ozymandias-like monuments (Shelley 1818) when Korda waits with his daughter Liesel (Mia Threapleton) by the train tracks (Fig. 3). These shots appear reminiscent of photography at the turn of the twentieth century, with staid composition and low color saturation, as the sun and desert sands create a sepia-like tone, as if the film had been hand-colored. The visible sculpture heads in these scenes (one bearded, one beardless, both in conical hats) are a direct homage to the monumental fragments from Mount Nemrut in Kahta in southeastern Turkey. The original heads come from a royal tomb and sanctuary built near the summit of the mountain by King Antiochus I of Commagene (a Greco-Iranian kingdom that lasted about 235 years) in 62 BCE (Fig. 4). Nemrut Dağ was made a UNESCO



Figure 3: Left: Korda with Liesel, waiting for Prince Farouk; Right: a view of the train tracks (partial screenshots from around 31:00).



Figure 4: Image of the Nemrut Dağ UNESCO heritage site today (Wikimedia; u/Efekan06).¹²

World Heritage Site, acknowledging one of the most colossal undertakings of the Hellenistic period that “is evidence of the dual origin of this kingdom’s culture” (i.e., both Persian and Greek iconographies are represented at the site; UNESCO 1987). Taken out of their mountainous context, these heads are never referred to by the characters who walk and do business beside them. They are both mysterious and banal, something left behind that also points to the mythical importance of the landscape in the minds of those who wish to control it.

The final location for the film’s business negotiations is the “Royal Majestic Imperial Calouste Korda Desert Oasis Palace” hotel, sold to an American conglomerate (“who ruined it, of course,” as Korda says). The lobby and ballrooms of this hotel are used for the “signature-signing ceremony” for the “Association of Infrastructure Philanthropists.”

¹² Available online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Nemrut#/media/File:Nemrut_mountain_and_blue_sky.jpg (accessed August 20, 2025).

Korda describes the venue as “situated on a precarious border among three fiefdoms, two of which remain under martial law after a military coup.” Seated at the table are King Hussain Fouad of Lower Western Independent Phoenicia (Mardini Abdulaziz); Leland, a representative of the Sacramento Consortium (Tom Hanks); Marseille Bob of the Savarin-Montrachet gang (Mathieu Amalric); Marty from the Newark Syndicate (Jeffrey Wright); Hilda Sussman-Korda for the “Private Utopian Outpost” (Scarlett Johansson); a cardinal representing the Roman Catholic Church (Johannes Krisch); along with Uncle Nubar (Benedict Cumberbatch). These complicated national, corporate, and religious leaders are brought together (along with the American “handlers” watching them) in a set drawn straight out of American Egyptomania.¹³ The setting and ceremonial dress Korda puts on for his presentation represent the third and most indirect way in which Phoenician-ness shows up in *The Phoenician Scheme*.



Aesthetic

There is what I will call a kind of “Neo-Phoenician” aesthetic identifiable especially in scenes that take place in this final project location, the hotel. While Anderson is primarily engaging late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century Egyptomania¹⁴ (or “Egyptian Revival” style) in these scenes, added contextual elements like Korda’s ceremonial dress, the audience of representatives of the various regions of “Phoenicia,” and the interest in Egyptian (and other) cultural elements in first-millennium BCE Phoenician art work together to convey a unique—but still Orientalizing—aesthetic in the culmination of the negotiations in the film. In Edward Said’s articulation of the term,

¹³ The term “Egyptomania” refers to a cultural phenomenon whereby interpretations of Egyptian art, religion, and culture are incorporated into the fashion, interior design, or other elements of a non-Egyptian group. For historical context, see, for example, Humbert et al. 1994; Colla 2007. For examples of American Egyptomania, see Brier 2004.

¹⁴ For more on Egyptomania, see the series beginning with Elniski 2024.

“Orientalism” refers to Western depictions of the East that reductively construct an alluring and threatening “other.” Anderson’s sets and costuming reject simple interpretations of this aesthetic (the threatening Uncle Nubar always appears in a Western-style suit, for example), instead offering a complex pastiche of modern and ancient imagery the characters register and navigate in unspoken ways throughout the film.

Wes Anderson’s mother, Texas Anne Anderson (née Burroughs), studied archaeology in graduate school at Rice University after divorcing Wes’s father in 1977.¹⁵ One wonders if she would have had a copy of something like Sabatino Moscati’s *The World of the Phoenicians*, which had been translated from Italian to English in 1968, around the house for Wes to stumble upon. Whether or not this kind of direct exposure is traceable, “Phoenician art” has long been (problematically) described as eclectic, a mix of iconography that could be seen as drawing on Egyptian, Achaemenid Persian, and Greek elements (see, e.g., Martin 2021). The major collections of Phoenician art are also the products of colonial rule in the Levant: the collections at the Louvre in Paris, the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, and the British Museum each compete with the collections at the Beirut National Museum and have introduced Phoenician art to museum-going publics outside of the Levantine coast.

In the film, the ballrooms at the “Royal Majestic Imperial Calouste Korda Desert Oasis Palace” hotel are similarly eclectic—fantastic gold and pastel renderings of Egyptian Revival architecture (Fig. 5), with papyriform patterns rendered in Art Deco style along dramatic curtains at center stage (Fig. 6). Of course, these Egyptianizing and Art Deco elements could be interpreted as the gaudy and eclectic self-presentation of an American entrepreneurial and industrial milieu in the early twentieth century. For example, a similarly Orientalizing aesthetic can be found in historic 1920s American buildings like the Fox Theatre in Atlanta, built in 1928 as the grand headquarters for Atlanta’s Shriners and explicitly inspired by the Alhambra in Granada, Spain, and the

¹⁵ The full obituary is available at <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/houston-chronicle/name/texas-anderson-obituary?id=56465591> (accessed August 20, 2025).



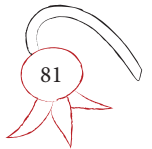
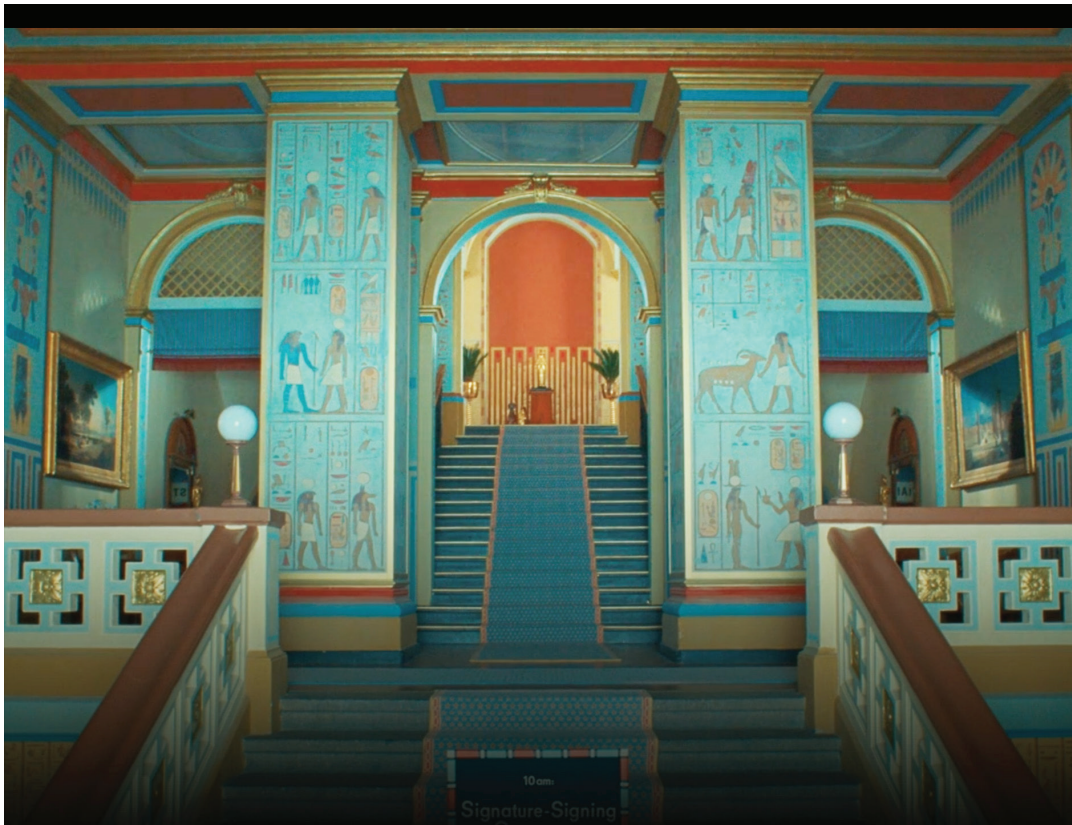


Figure 5: The entrance to the ballroom at the “Royal Majestic Imperial Calouste Korda Desert Oasis Palace,” hotel where the signing of the agreement will take place (partial screenshot from 1:17:30).

Temple of Karnak in Luxor, Egypt.¹⁶ But the Anderson presentation is not cartoonish or clashing—the effect is curated, pulled from a specific palette of ancient and colonial referents.

In particularly striking scenes, Uncle Nubar’s executive suites feature canopic jars and pharaonic statuettes alongside Orientalizing paintings (Fig. 7). But this interest in all things Egyptian is also traceable to the Phoenicians themselves—two kings of the city-state of Sidon had themselves buried in Egyptian sarcophagi (King Tabnit and Eshmunazor

¹⁶ Fox Theatre 2026. The Shriners are a fraternal Masonic organization that was established in New York in 1872, originally known as the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (AAONMS). The organization still contributes to a network of nonprofit children’s hospitals and medical facilities throughout North America. See Shriners International 2026.

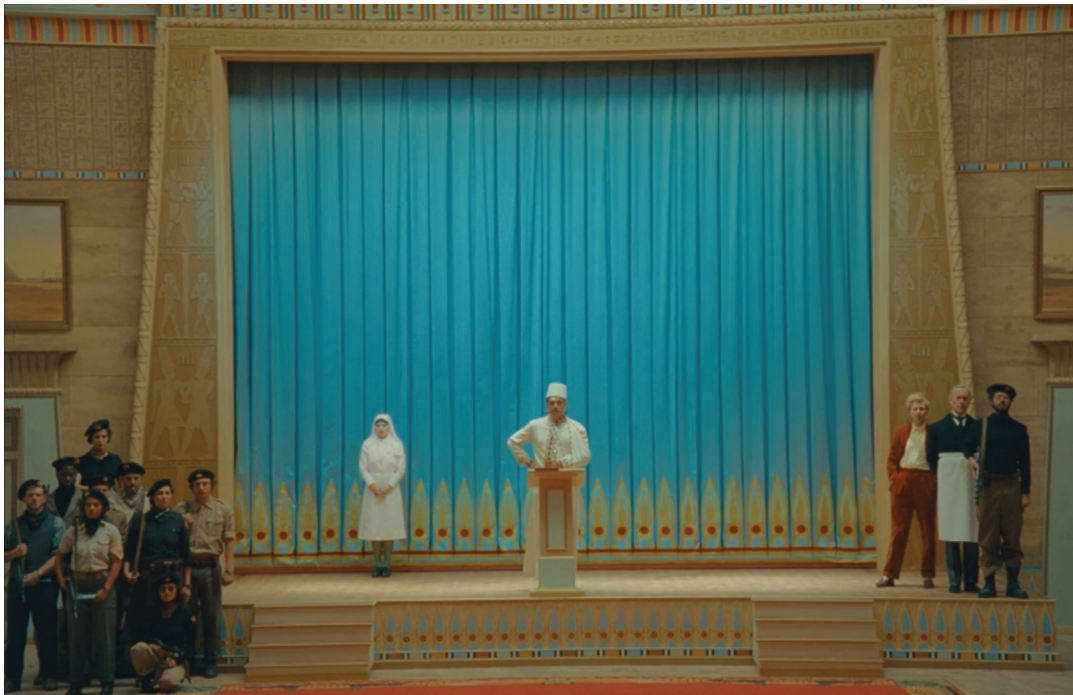


Figure 6: The presentation stage in the “Royal Majestic Imperial Calouste Korda Desert Oasis Palace” hotel ballroom, with Korda at the podium (partial screenshot from 1:17:33).

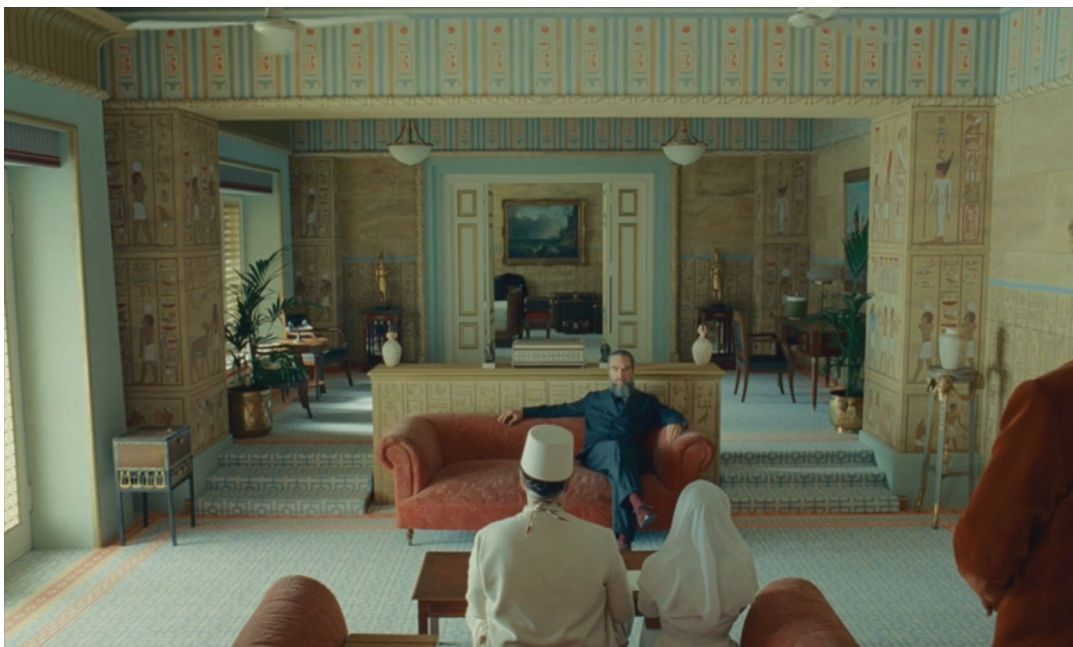


Figure 7: The interior of the executive suites in the “Royal Majestic Imperial Calouste Korda Desert Oasis Palace” hotel, where Uncle Nubar is staying (partial screenshot from 1:20:56).

II),¹⁷ and Egyptian hieroglyph-shaped amulets were the preferred grave good for the inhabitants of Amrit, Tyre, and Sarepta in the first millennium BCE. I have no way of knowing if Anderson was informed by light research on Phoenician art and architecture or simply embraced his own eclectic vision of the early-twentieth century cultural interest in the past, but the result is (perhaps accidentally) an intriguing neo-Phoenician aesthetic. The “Phoenician-ness” of this Egyptomaniacal dreamscape is emphasized when Korda puts on a long white garment with stylized papyrus fronds woven into its edges. The white fez is perhaps a nod to Druze leaders / initiated men (in modern Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and elsewhere), who often wear a red fez wrapped in a white band or cloth (Textile Research Center Leiden 2018). We first see him in this outfit alongside the Catholic Liesel and secular Hilda in the ballroom, all in completely different white ceremonial attire (Fig. 8). Much ink has been spilled over Anderson’s fetishization (across several films) of the Ottoman fez as a symbol of un-self-aware colonialism.¹⁸ But this white



Figure 8: Liesel, “Zsa Zsa” Korda, and Hilda dressed in white in preparation for the formal signing of the final agreement (partial screenshot from 1:17:58).

¹⁷ Louvre AO 4806, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010120357>.

¹⁸ For example, Ed 2025; Rashid 2025.

fez sets Korda apart from even other fez-wearers at the negotiations and in sharp contrast with Uncle Nubar's Western, dark pinstripe suit in their fight scene.

Before ending my analysis, it is worth reflecting more globally on *The Phoenician Scheme's* appearance at this historical moment. In a fictional op-ed published by *The Onion* just after the film's theater release, Anderson himself asks "You Sure You're in the Mood for Another Wes Anderson Film with Everything That's Going On?" (The Onion 2025). This humorous fake column is about the collapse of American civil liberties and democracy, a jarring time for Anderson's quirky fare. But we might ask the same question about the ways in which Phoenicia in this film covers for the colonial "Palestine," a term now inseparable from a contemporary world in which famine, humanitarian crisis, and violence in the region are ongoing while the US president openly threatened to "own" the Gaza Strip (Liptak 2025). The film certainly acknowledges the broken and reactionary people who were responsible for devastating decisions and technologies made in the mid-twentieth century and the insidiousness of Western interference in the Near and Middle East. It is only the man targeted for assassination after assassination who repeats "myself, I feel very safe," and it is the next generation who finds themselves reeling at the inhumanity of the world as they inherit it.

The Phoenician Scheme is being pitched as "the story of a family and a family business" (Focus Features 2025), and Anderson's dedication of the film makes it clear that in some way it is also a story about his own family. Further, Phoenicia as a construct is not Palestine:¹⁹ Phoenicians are appealing ancestors precisely because they survived many powerful empires and precede the divisions brought on by monotheisms. As I have emphasized above, I do not mean to imply that the points I have



¹⁹ The etymological root of the word "Palestine," *p-l-s-t*, is instead associated with the Peleset group (likely from the Aegean world), which arrived in the Levant during the migrations at the end of the Late Bronze Age, becoming known in the Hebrew Bible by the Northwest Semitic term "Philistines." For more on the Philistines as depicted in the Hebrew Bible, see, for example, Dothan and Cohn 1994; and the bibliography in Ehrlich 2000. For more on the study of Philistine material culture, see Aja 2009; Shai 2011.

laid out here form the only correct interpretation of Anderson's use of the first-millennium BCE adjective. Instead, these resonances might have made their way into the film through Lebanese and American impressions of Phoenicians, and are made more powerful through the juxtapositions of past and present (Anderson's own contributions to reception history) that happen throughout the film. While the historical inhabitants of Sidon and Tyre are not in any direct way the subject of this project, the legacy of the Phoenicians and the hold they have on the imagination of modern groups gives Anderson a different kind of stage on which to enact an exploration of a daughter's influence on her unfeeling father. Colonialism is no less evil in *The Phoenician Scheme*, but in Anderson's micro-expressive way, "Phoenician"-izing the history seems to offer a less direct way to explore the evolution of power and performance in our glorified-but-shameful interconnected past.



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