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Worth Their Salt Too

Colleen Whitley

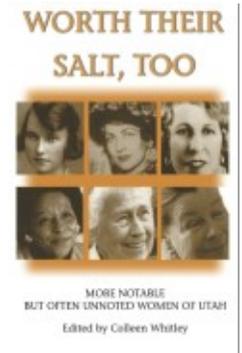
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LOLA ATIYA

Adventurer of the Mind

Kristen Rogers

Kristen Smart Rogers holds a degree in university studies from Brigham Young University and a master of fine arts in creative writing from the University of Utah. She has extensive background in writing and editing and currently works as the associate editor of the Utah Historical Quarterly. A native of Salt Lake City, she grew up just up the street from Aziz and Lola Atiya and was impressed with their wide experience, their great skills, and their graciousness in sharing both with others. When she learned this book would be published, she seized the opportunity to learn more about her former neighbors. In this article she examines the long and fascinating path that led Lola Atiya to settle in Utah and contribute so much to the state.

“As a young woman, I was living balanced between two stools, rather than falling in between. One of the stools was a liberated woman, and the other was a conventional woman,” says Lola Atiya.¹

She’s speaking of a time sixty years past, and of a place thousands of miles away. Now, in 1997, Lola Atiya sits in her comfortable old home on a quiet street near the University of Utah. She wears a long skirt and an orange blouse, and her salt-and-pepper hair is pulled tightly back into a bun. As always, she looks elegant. In the room are old tapestries and ceramics, painted landscapes, antiques from Cairo, and a porcelain statue of Joseph Smith—a gift from Avard Fairbanks. There is also a vase of fresh flowers, poised between blooming and wilting.



Lola Atiya's remarkable scholarship and tenacity have given several universities precise organizations and labels for their collections of Middle Eastern texts and artifacts. Photo courtesy of Narya Atiya.

What was true of Lola Atiya as a young woman has remained true: Lola has spent her life creating balances. Since her girlhood between convention and liberation, she has negotiated her way between different cultures, between compliance and rebellion, between faith and disbelief, between several widely differing scholarly projects, and through dozens of countries. Although she lives in a Salt Lake neighborhood, she considers herself not so much Egyptian or American as a member of the world community. Her enormously curious mind has led her to visit much of the planet and to devour hundreds of books. Now in her eighty-first year, she has just completed her latest project, an index to the massive *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church*.

The project is just one indication of Lola's ability to use and synthesize whatever comes her way into something new. Raised a Coptic Christian, she has used her background to make large contributions to Coptic scholarship. She chose to marry an internationally respected medieval scholar so that she could travel, study, and learn. She chose to leave her native country, and she has woven together her two cultures into the tapestry of her generous world view.

Ordinarily, a girl born in Egypt eighty years ago would have had few choices and few opportunities to create balance. Girls were not greatly valued; in fact, whenever a girl was born into Lola's family, her grandmother would wear a band around her head as a sign of mourning. Significantly, however, when Lola was born, her grandmother wore no band. "Catrina [Lola's mother] doesn't have a girl," the grandmother explained, "and this one will be her friend, her beloved." So even in her birth, Lola was poised between old stereotypes and new attitudes. In fact, as Lola likes to point out, she was born in November of 1917, the very month the Russian Revolution began.

This little girl grew up adored. Her family lived in an upper-class neighborhood that included palaces, villas, streets lined with huge wild sycamore trees, and beautiful gardens. Lola remembers clearly the garden of flowers and trees that her mother grew on the family's large balcony. "I loved flowers from very early," she says. "I bought lots of flowers for friends and sick people. But more than anything else I loved blue roses," a specialty of Egyptian flower shops in that time. On Sundays the family would visit Lola's artist uncle, who lived in a large house on vast grounds, for lunch in the gazebo, films, and games with her cousins.

It was an idyllic life, and Lola was loved and pampered by the whole family. The attention—coupled, no doubt, with the material abundance—shaped her character and gave her self-assurance.

Probably even more important to her self-assurance was the kind of family she was born into. Although many of her relatives were strictly traditional, Lola's own parents were progressive. In fact, Catrina was almost avant-garde. Lola describes her mother as an adventurer who thought nothing of taking her children to Europe while her husband traveled elsewhere. She would take her three small children climbing on Alpine glaciers, and when they crossed mountain passes, she would jump from rock to rock.

Lola's mother was multitalented, and adventure permeated everything she did. Raised in a very well-to-do family by a father who took her to the opera and who sent her to a Greek school, Lola's mother could "do anything": fix an electric switchboard, paint, embroider, do carpentry. She was also devoted to the Coptic religion, and she never missed a mass.

Lola acquired her mother's devotion. But she could never pretend to have her mother's love for physical adventure. With a heart that had been weakened by an almost fatal pneumonia at age two, Lola couldn't exert herself without great strain. She tried tennis and Swedish gymnastics, but sports simply wore her out. Still, she says, she came out of childhood with her own sense of adventure. "I can face changes in my life without being upset. It was my sense of adventure that brought my husband and I to the United States. And I always have an urge to travel."

She also developed an adventurous, questioning mind. "I felt very early an embarrassment of the aristocracy. . . . I thought social classes were very bad. I didn't like them. Why? I don't know. I thought the way [the lower classes] were treated wasn't right." Today, she regrets how she and her family once used servants. She feels remorse when she remembers how they would make the servants stay late during parties, sitting in chairs in the kitchen until the guests had all gone home.

Most of the servants who tended Lola and her brothers were from Nubia. These nannies, she says, were "truly part of the family." Not long before, however, they had been slaves; Lola's grandfather had bought one for each of his children. When, in the 1890s, the slaves were freed, they were given the opportunity to leave the family or to stay. Many chose to stay.

When Lola was quite young, an incident occurred that deeply affected her views of social classes. She loved an aunt who lived in the same apartment building and who owned a little slave girl, nine years old. "I used to pretend to teach her, when I was four, myself. Sometimes I would become rough. My aunt would reprimand me: 'You must not treat her like that. She is your slave'—a word that now sounds horrible to my ears. This little girl died when she was nine years old. Her death affected me very much. I started to see how embarrassing and wrong it was to have servants and demands. But I couldn't do anything about it. I accepted the status quo—and tried to be as good to the servants as possible."

Although she says there was no shattering poverty in Egypt at the time, there was a peasant class, and as a young girl, Lola realized that many people had far less than her family did. She remembers that in Old Cairo there was a huge banyan tree where a woman had carved herself a home. The woman slept in the hole—something Lola can never forget.

At age thirteen, Lola started driving, and five years later she received one of the first driver's licenses given to a woman in Egypt. She had learned to drive at the insistence of her father, a strong-willed, forward-thinking man. Although he had received only a high school education, Lola's father wrote and spoke many languages, played the piano by ear, and before his retirement from the government reached the position of controller of the Ministry of Finance. Determined to give his daughter the best of educations, he sent her to a French lycée—a school in Cairo run by the French government. This was an unconventional act; usually, Christian girls had to go to religious schools run by nuns. But Lola's father went even farther: most women and girls weren't even permitted to go out alone in public, but he let his daughter travel alone on public transportation the fifteen kilometers to school.

Lola is grateful for the relative freedom she enjoyed and the confidence it gave her. Her confidence had been growing since she was a young girl, making her bold enough to clash regularly with her father over the freedoms that she still lacked—she too was strong-willed. But she could also be winningly persuasive. In fact, whenever her brothers wanted anything from their father, they sent Lola to ask.

In school, she learned ideas that added fuel to her restlessness. She knew that, compared to girls from other families, she had a lot of freedom; for instance, she was allowed to mingle with both boys and girls.

But she still chafed under those traditional restrictions that her father did impose. Most of the girls at the lyc ee enjoyed more liberties than she. Her dearest friend was allowed to go swim with boys, but she couldn't. It made no sense to her.

So she revolted—sometimes. “When my parents tried to impose rules, I was very harsh. I had lots of encounters with my father. I won sometimes, but he was strong-willed.”

As she sought to move beyond her protected world, she found an escape in Hollywood, that exotic and glamorous world. As a child, she'd loved those Sundays when the family saw films at her uncle's house; now, as a schoolgirl, she devoured everything she could about American movies, actors, and actresses. The movies were magical to her, and Lola escaped to them as much as she could.

But the enchanted world of film was one more forbidden fruit. Lola fought with her parents over the movie magazines she loved, and eventually she began to hide them in her desk. She hated to ask permission to go to the movies. When her parents said no, she sometimes slipped off to the show anyway. “To sneak out was to do something *very bad*,” she says now.

Still, she did it. She was probably seeking alternate worlds, restlessly looking for new ideas and new people. Ironically, the fantasy of Hollywood was Lola's first and only significant impression of the United States—an impression that lasted until years later, when the opportunity to live in Washington, D.C., arose. Although at that time she didn't know much more about the country than the names of its former movie stars, she jumped at the chance to go, driven no doubt by her unquenchable hunger to experience different people and cultures.

During her school years, movies weren't the only avenues of exploration, however; Lola loved to read. “When I look back, I see how poor our libraries were,” she says, rolling her r's with her slight Egyptian accent. “I remember how I'd wait for Saturday to come so I could check out books. I would read everything they had,” especially historical novels, romances, and French magazines. She also loved music and studied piano at the Conservatoire. And she caught fire with a passion for archaeology.

From the time that Jean-Francois Champollion had discovered the key to hieroglyphics in 1822, the French had maintained a strong connection to Egyptian archaeology, and the lyc ee capitalized on this

interest. Lola was able to go on school-sponsored digs during vacations. She explored the great pyramid at Giza at a time when no tourists were snapping photos and nobody was selling souvenirs at the entrance. In fact, nobody else was in the pyramid at all. It must have been exhilarating for her to step outside her traditional world into this other “magical” world.

Perhaps so she could connect with other peoples and places, Lola learned languages. They have served her well in her travels around the world and with her diverse group of friends; when she answers her phone, she can—and does—begin speaking in any of several languages. Of course, she learned to speak fluent French among her schoolmates. She also learned English. To prepare for her baccalaureate, she needed to solidify a third foreign language. She wanted to continue with Italian, but her father told her no—she should take Arabic. This time she obeyed his wishes, studying Arabic after her regular school day. Now she’s very grateful that her father insisted; the language connected her more firmly with who she was. “It was silly to be completely Westernized. In geography we talked about France as if it were our country—which was stupid. For a while I didn’t feel a part of my own culture.” She didn’t stop with school, however. From a journalist she learned German, and she studied Italian in classes taught at the Italian consulate. Later, after coming to the United States, she took it upon herself to learn Spanish so that she could travel and communicate in South America. “I’m interested in people,” she explains.

As time went on, she “liberated” herself from the imbalance of feeling like a French citizen; it was not in her nature to lean on one stool more than another. As she began to follow Egyptian politics more closely, she learned to bitterly resent Westernization and the British occupation of Egypt. She remembers clearly an incident that woke her into awareness: she was once arrested for some small offense by an English constable. He was so arrogant and domineering that she became indignant—inwardly, at least. “What are these people doing here?” she asked herself.

But her anger did not propel her into the extreme of political action, even though many of her family members were active in the push for independence. She remembers how, in the middle of the night, a family member who was part of the revolution once smuggled some papers to their house and gave them to Lola’s mother for safekeeping.

When Lola was around fourteen years old, other relatives, members of the Nationalist party of Egypt, were put on trial. The events impressed her deeply.

So Lola became a young woman who was keenly aware of politics, justice, and injustice, but who still led a privileged life. Educationally, she had eagerly learned all that she could, but for no objective other than the pleasure of learning. It was at this point, when she had graduated from the lycée, that she first encountered her future husband, Aziz Atiya.

She had gone to consult her cousin, a doctor, when a man came into the office. She did not pay any attention to him, but he noticed her. After she had left, he asked the cousin who she was and how he could meet her. The cousin offered to bring her to Atiya's upcoming lecture at the Royal Geographical Society.

Dr. Aziz Atiya, a medieval scholar who had just returned to Egypt from Germany, was several years older than Lola. Even now, Lola doesn't know why she made an impression on him. But she went with the cousin to the lecture, found it interesting, met the lecturer, and went home unchanged. "He was a good lecturer," she says, "and I'd seen an impressive book he'd written, but from feeling anything toward him, not really. It was like any stranger. It was not love at first sight."

Dr. Atiya persisted, however. He asked the cousin if he could invite Lola and her parents for tea. Prevailing social standards forbade him from asking directly, but the indirect invitation worked. Lola and her parents came to his house—and this time, it *was* love at first sight.

He had so many books! Dazzled, Lola instantly fell in love—not with Aziz Atiya, but with his library. Without those books, she says, the courtship probably wouldn't have gone anywhere. Having won some part of her adoration, Aziz got serious. He sent the cousin as an emissary to make his intentions known to Lola's parents. The cousin also came to Lola in Aziz's behalf. "I like that man," he said. "Give him a chance; get to know him."

Lola shrugged. "I don't mind," she said.

But when Aziz brought her presents, she refused them. "I'm not committing myself to you," she told him. "I simply want a normal friendship. If after a certain period we think we can get along, the story will be different."

They began going out—without a chaperone, since Lola wouldn't accept a chaperone any more than she would accept an arranged marriage.

She remembers a place they often visited, “a very lovely place on the road to the pyramids.” The road was almost empty, with very old trees lining it and few houses. In one of the houses, an English bungalow, lived an Englishwoman who raised chickens and served tea. Many times, the couple spent peaceful hours at a table on her porch.

After some time, Lola agreed to marriage. She had weighed matters and decided that they did “get along.” Besides, he had interesting connections with the outside world that she was drawn to; she could see that “tying my life to his would give me the opportunity to travel. I never knew if I would have the same opportunity with another person.”

Then, of course, there were his books.

They were married on 31 July 1941. She was twenty-four years old; he was forty-two. Aziz had had a fancy suit of clothes made for his wedding, but that was before he knew his bride. Lola wouldn't accept one of the big conventional celebrations with their long guest lists, big banquets, and huge appliquéd tents pitched in the gardens of the homes to provide space for everything. It was partly embarrassment and a desire to be out of the spotlight that made her resist tradition, but it was also her distaste for the whole idea of lavish weddings. Even today, she's appalled by most weddings. “They should be focused on love,” she says, “not show.”

For her own wedding, she insisted on a small, home ceremony with a priest, and she got her way. She wore a plain, off-white dress; he wore a simple suit. The only guests were immediate family, and the wedding banquet was a simple family dinner.

At first, for Lola anyway, the marriage was based more on good logic and the fact that she got along with Aziz than it was on love. “It's very funny,” she says now. “After a while, love can develop from friendship.”

There followed an “interesting period” in Cairo. Marrying Aziz had indeed opened doors for Lola. She was able to indulge her passion for archaeology through Aziz's connections to people who did excavations. She also became interested in ancient beads. Finding beads became a consuming passion for her, and she would explore the old quarters of the city, bargaining with dealers. Now, it's illegal to deal in antiquities, but at that time she was able to begin what became a significant collection.

Every new find was exciting. In particular, she loved scarabs. Ancient Egyptians worshipped the scarab beetles, and when they removed a mummy's heart, they filled the cavity with scarabs carved

from faience and stone. Lola says there were millions of these carved stones in Egypt. She remembers the excitement of acquiring one particular scarab. She was in Luxor with her grown daughter Nayra and her cousin Suzy as guests in a house on the Nile. One morning when the others went to visit some tombs, Lola decided to go see an antique dealer she knew on the east bank of the Nile. She walked to his shop and greeted him.

“Do you have anything to show me?” she asked.

“To tell you the truth, there’s nothing anymore these days,” he replied. “But if you want to look . . .” He brought out a tin box full of junk. Idly, she went through it—and found a beautiful ivory scarab. She’d take it, she told the dealer. What did he want for it?

He shook his head. It was Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, and he couldn’t even offer her a cup of coffee, he said. Therefore, he wouldn’t ask much.

This was true excitement for Lola, going home with such a find. Both beads and scarabs remained a prime interest of hers. Later, when she and her family were living in Ann Arbor, she put her knowledge of old beads to use for the University of Michigan, where she meticulously catalogued each bead in the Kelsey Museum’s collection. These beads had come from the ancient town of Karanis, south of Cairo, discovered during an excavation conducted by the university in the 1920s and 1930s.

The early interesting period of hunting for antique beads in Cairo was short, however. Aziz, one of the founders of the University of Alexandria, was asked to come and teach there. “This was a big tragedy in my mother’s life,” Lola says. “Although we were only 150 miles away, it was very, very hard on her. It was hard on me, too; I was so close to her. But I always thought that I wouldn’t stand in my husband’s way whenever it was in his interest to change.”

A second tragedy occurred when Lola’s father was killed in an accident in 1943. At the time, her brothers were abroad, trapped in England and France by the war. So Lola returned to Cairo to be with her mother, taking her eight-month-old daughter, Nayra, with her. In 1945, the brothers returned, and Lola moved back to Alexandria with a new baby, Ramez, leaving Nayra with her grandmother.

In 1951 Aziz was asked to participate in a symposium called “The Town Hall Meeting of the Air,” which was organized in order to

encourage public discussions between countries and to create better international relations. As he established contacts with scholars from the United States, other opportunities arose. He was invited to head a U.S.-sponsored expedition between the University of Alexandria, the Library of Congress, and Johns Hopkins University to microfilm the valuable manuscripts at the Monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai. This was followed by simultaneous invitations to come to the United States. One of these was from the Library of Congress to edit the Arabic manuscripts microfilmed during the Sinai expedition; the other was to visit as the first Fulbright scholar from Egypt. Aziz hesitated, unable to convince himself that the move would be a good idea. But when he raised the subject with his wife, she had no doubts; of course they should go!

They did. It would be a watershed decision in their lives. The couple crossed the Atlantic on the *Queen Mary*, arriving in New York shortly after the new year.

“Why did we come to the U.S.?” Lola wonders now. “For us, it was as far away as Mars.” A few minutes later, she adds, “You don’t do anything about your own destiny. Events guide you. Sometimes things happen to you that just direct you to your destiny.” Maybe that’s true. But it does seem that Lola has taken those events and shaped her own destiny.

Aziz was ill when the ship docked, but Lola immediately began investigating the country that she had known only through celluloid. She recalls that her very first impression was an ugly one; on the way to Penn Station, the taxi driver stopped and asked for his tip in advance.

Other impressions were more benign, but they were puzzling. In many ways this seemed like a very strange country. For instance, when Lola asked the steward on the train to Washington for a newspaper, he brought back a whole stack of papers. She thought the man was crazy, but he’d merely given her a single Sunday edition of the *New York Times*. At the hotel, she put her shoes outside the door to be polished, as was the custom in Europe. In the morning there was a knock on the door: the puzzled hotel manager had come to ask why her shoes were in the hallway.

Aziz was still ill, so Lola went out alone to explore. When she went into a small grocery store to get a drink for her husband, the woman clerk asked her, “What can I do for you, honey?” Lola was startled at such

informality. Then there was the Waldorf salad she ordered in the hotel restaurant, thinking to get something special. Instead, she got apples in a sweet and sour dressing, and she didn't like it at all. "Imagine how they serve salad here," she wrote home. "With sugar and vinegar mixed together!"

Another jolt came when she and Aziz rented an apartment. The landlord had a beautiful fourteen-year-old daughter. Lola asked her mother about her school studies. "Oh," the mother said, "for the moment there's nothing but her boyfriend in her life."

"That bewildered me," Lola says. "A boyfriend at that age?" For, although her "avant-garde" parents had allowed her to mix with both boys and girls, it would have been unthinkable that she should have a boyfriend so young. Again, she found herself between traditional and current ideas.

The whole American experience was one adjustment after another, and on the whole Lola enjoyed the challenge. But when it came to racial prejudice, she refused to adjust, nor would she take the middle road. The racism she encountered shocked Lola greatly. When she and Aziz rented an apartment behind the Supreme Court and close to the Library of Congress, the people at the Egyptian embassy were scandalized. "You've rented one block away from the Black community!" they exclaimed in horror, and they urged the Atiyas to find another neighborhood.

In turn horrified at such prejudice, the Atiyas refused to change apartments. Lola had never encountered such narrow-mindedness in Egypt, and it troubled her to find her own countrymen so intolerant of race. In fact, in all her travels, she says, she had never encountered discrimination. It was true that there had been slaves in Egypt, but both white and black people were used as slaves. And, as she is quick to point out now, her own family's freed slaves were like part of the family: they went to church with the family and were later buried in the family vaults. But the U.S. seemed to be full of bigotry. There were the segregated streetcars, for instance, which Lola simply couldn't understand.

One day, Lola herself felt the direct effect of prejudice. A cosmetics firm called her asking if she would host a luncheon—provided by the company—to showcase its products. But when the woman caller found out that Lola was Egyptian, she withdrew the offer. "This

will never work,” the woman said. “We can’t put cosmetics on black people!”

“You are ignorant,” Lola replied, and informed her that most Egyptians aren’t black. But even so, she refused to host the luncheon: “I won’t promote a firm that is biased,” she told the woman.

Lola says that she and Aziz never encountered discrimination in this country—but they usually associated with people who recognized them as honored guests. When on her own, Lola felt completely safe as she explored the city. She went to concerts and museums and to the library, where she loved to listen to recorded music and poetry; she strung her antique beads and went shopping. “There was only one thing I truly missed,” she says, “my two children [who had stayed behind with their grandmother]. It was very, very hard.”

As a visiting scholar, Dr. Atiya was invited to lecture at universities across the country. To Lola, seeing a new country from east to west was a delight. So were the people they met. She and Aziz found “a lot of goodness.” Perhaps they found that goodness because Lola tends to look for it, and she remembers even modest acts of kindness. For instance, when they visited Indiana University, they checked into a motel, got freshened up, then called Dr. Velorus Martz, a friend they had met in Egypt.

“You’re at a *motel*?” he cried. “That’s impossible! You’ll stay in our home.”

The Atiyas explained that they had already used the towels and may as well stay where they were, but the professor drove over and talked to the motel owner. The owner kindly let them leave without paying anything. It was a small thing but, Lola says, “Instances like that leave an imprint you can’t forget. We have seen nothing but kindness since we set foot in this country. . . . Our lives have been touched.”

After nine months, the Atiyas returned to Egypt. Three years later, however, they returned to the U.S., where Aziz had been invited to come as medieval professor of Islamic studies at the University of Michigan. This time they brought the children and enrolled them in school.

There were still new things to be learned about this country. “I was bewildered when I saw the library in the junior high school. A whole library, with cards! I was stunned!” Lola’s lifelong love of books had found a new object of admiration: American libraries. American

skyscrapers never moved her, she says, but the books did. She was amazed at the bookmobiles that came to the farmers' market every Saturday, and she marveled that ordinary people could have such liberal book-borrowing privileges.

In one way or another, Lola has stayed intimately connected with books throughout her life. Later, she and Dr. Atiya would work strenuously to acquire and process forty-five crates of books to take from Egypt to the University of Utah collection. And, of course, the Atiyas always kept a library of their own. Now she sighs as she looks around at the bookshelves in her house. "There are books in every room!" she exclaims. "I can't possibly move from here!"

After the year in Ann Arbor, Dr. Atiya was invited to spend a year at Columbia University, and it was there that Lola got a hands-on experience with books through a course in bookbinding. She approached the course the way she has whenever she has encountered anything new, with a sense of excitement.

Around this time, the Atiyas renewed an earlier acquaintance with Dr. A. Ray Olpin, president of the University of Utah. He, like Lola, had been impressed by Aziz's books, and also by the Atiyas themselves. He invited Aziz to come to Salt Lake City and deliver the commencement address in the summer of 1956, and then to teach a summer term.

Dr. Atiya spoke at commencement in 1956, but he and Lola didn't come for a summer term until 1958. Lola felt an immediate connection with this new "alternate world"; she loved both the mountains and the many Utahns who opened their doors to her and Aziz. But then, she loved all the places she had been. So it was strange that, as she and her husband returned to Egypt by freighter at the end of the summer, while they were sitting on deck, Lola casually remarked, "If I will die somewhere outside Egypt, I would like to die in Salt Lake City."

She can't explain that remark now, whether it was a premonition or just a coincidence. But when Dr. Olpin began to urge Aziz to come to Utah to set up an Institute for Intercultural Studies, Lola was more than willing. She liked Utah, and she thought it might be a good place for the children to finish their schooling; after that, the children would go to college somewhere else, and she and Aziz would go home to Egypt. Neither of them had any idea that Salt Lake would become home or that both children would choose to go to the University of

Utah. In fact, both of their children married Utahns and settled in Salt Lake City.

Although they were planning a relatively short stay, when the Atiyas arrived in Salt Lake, both of them plunged into the community. Willima Mulder, Dr. Atiya's co-director at the university's Middle East Center, asked Lola if she would like to work on any projects there. Knowing that the university had some old documents of papyrus and paper that needed to be restored and preserved, she offered to do it.

So she moved into an office on the fourth floor of the Park Building then set about figuring out how to restore the papyri. In Egypt she had watched dealers trying to open papyrus scrolls by putting them between layers of clover to soften them. So, with only this knowledge, she invented her own method. She would place the papyrus between pieces of damp blotting paper, then watch it carefully; the document couldn't stay inside the blotting paper for too long or it would disintegrate. Then she used blunt needles to open the papyrus and special brushes to clean it. The work was tedious and painstaking, but she did it well. Over the course of two years, she restored and sealed behind glass more than eight hundred pieces of papyrus and eight hundred pieces of old paper—and she didn't lose any of them.

When that project was done, Lola knew so much that she could have written a book on restoring papyrus, she says. She learned even more when she went to Washington, D.C., to take a course in paper-making and restoration at the Library of Congress. It wasn't because she was planning to become an expert restorer; she just wanted to learn. "Anything I did was not with any thing in view for the future [as a career], but more for volunteer work that gave me pleasure," she says now.

Next, she became aware that the university library needed to do some Arabic cataloguing, so she offered to help with it. Working with librarian Marian Sheets, whom Lola calls brilliant, witty, and pleasant, Lola learned how to transcribe Arabic into English characters, and then she transliterated Arabic titles so the books could be catalogued. That skill would prove valuable later during the preparation of the *Coptic Encyclopedia*.

At the same time, Lola was raising her children. Previously, the children had gone to private schools, but in Salt Lake the Atiyas were

advised to send them to public schools; the children went to East High. Her daughter, Nayra, a scholar and writer now living in New York, says, “The wonderful thing about how we were raised was that there was no difference in how boys and girls were treated. We had the same responsibilities and were given the same expectations.”² Lola had seen gender injustice, and she was determined to do her part to change it.

Lola’s sense of equality, justice, and acceptance extends to all situations. Often she had the opportunity to travel with her husband all over the world, and she sees herself now not as a Utahn or Egyptian, but as a world citizen. “I feel an affinity with any community I’ve been in. I never feel like a stranger. I believe strongly in the community of mankind rather than in barriers.”

She travels out of curiosity about other people and places, but the main thing she loves is to make contact with people. Several incidents stand out vividly in her mind. Once, in Norway, she and Aziz went in search of a Coptic cross they had heard about. They went into a church to ask about the cross, and the wife of the pastor took them to see it. When the woman learned they were from Egypt, she insisted that they come and have lunch. Lola was delighted. Aziz, however, felt that they couldn’t impose on a stranger.

“But she insists with such warmth,” Lola argued.

In the end, Aziz prevailed, and the Atiyas told the woman they couldn’t stay. But the woman made them sandwiches anyway.

“Something like this touches me very much,” Lola says. “Of these stories I have very many. Something draws me to them—to people who believe in the community of mankind.”

Actually, people are drawn to her; people from all walks of life seek her out, maybe because Lola has a rare ability to make and keep friendships in many different situations. On a recent trip to Alaska, she chose not to follow the tour group one day. Instead, she explored Seward and ended up having coffee at the Senior Citizens Center. There she met an Aleutian woman who could hardly speak English and was the only survivor in her family of the earthquake of 1964. This meeting was the highlight of her trip—and Lola plans to stay in contact with the friends she met there.

In the late 1970s, at age eighty, Dr. Atiya began work on the *Coptic Encyclopedia*, a huge project that would take years to complete. Lola worked by his side for the pay of (one dollar a year). She began by

merely “helping out” a little, but she gradually became more involved in the encyclopedia until she was completely immersed.

“The more I worked, the more work I found I needed to do,” she later told Everett Cooley in an oral history. “I’m glad I was involved, because it made me aware of every aspect of it, aspects that probably nobody else but Aziz and myself knew.” When Aziz died before the project was completed, it was Lola who knew what to do to carry it forward to completion. She did this despite some serious health problems. But Lola is strong-willed, and she pushed on.³

Even before her husband died, her strong opinions influenced the project. Donna Smart, who also worked on the encyclopedia, remembers often hearing Lola in the office with Dr. Atiya saying, “La la la la [no, no, no, no], Aziz!”⁴

“I contested some of his ways,” she admits. “He was too courteous, and I didn’t think when you do scholarly work that you should be courteous just because people were helping materially. I thought he should keep certain standards and say no [to requests for special favors]. I was able to stand up against the men in Egypt; they resented me very much. They wanted to enter their relatives in the encyclopedia, but they didn’t get in. The editors agreed with me. Aziz agreed also, but with some reluctance.”

In many ways there seems to have been a creative tension between the two of them: Aziz with his gentle ways and Lola with her forcefulness. There seems also to have been a difference in their views of life, religion, and death. Aziz had faith, Lola says, probably more than she, but he wouldn’t admit it, so she doesn’t really know. They never discussed religion.

But Lola is willing to talk about her views. This woman of balance dislikes the differences that people make between belief systems and says that, although she herself doesn’t believe, she respects all religions.

“I was so religious as a child. . . . But the more I thought about it, the more I had my doubts. For me, religion is a way of life and a way of dealing with the people around you. And religion hasn’t done that at all. We do all kinds of evil things in the name of religion. I believe in the teachings of Christianity.” She also believes in “moral standards,” the old fashioned virtues. “The whole world would be better off if young people would consider some ways of life other than to be absolutely free to do whatever they want,” she says. She hates violence,

and wonders sometimes after reading the news “if we are human beings.”

Along with advancing years have come an assortment of physical ills, but Lola shrugs off her pains. Whenever anyone asks her how she is, she says, “I am very fine.” Once when a friend asked why she claims to be fine even when she really isn’t, she replied, “It doesn’t make me feel any better if I complain, and it doesn’t make anyone else feel better, either.”

Despite her challenges, she recently finished a much-needed index for a reference work, the twelve-volume *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church*, which was written in the tenth century and added to during subsequent centuries. The index didn’t take quite so long, but it did take Lola four years to complete. It includes Arabic names, transcriptions of the names, and annotations in English. It was “tedious but interesting work.”

Now that she has finished it, Lola says she has no plans for another project—no plans, that is, unless she decides to “make something” of her copious notes on Coptic analogies, customs, and miracles. “The arts are endless, but life is short,” she says with a shake of her head, quoting a Latin saying.

“My trouble is, I’m flighty. I don’t stick with things,” she says. Perhaps it could be better said that Lola Atiya isn’t someone who is prone to choose just one “stool.” She is a multifaceted woman. She has contributed to scholarship in many fields, but everything she has done has been for the pleasure of it. She hasn’t even taken credit for much of her work.

Her days are now filled from morning to night. As always, her door is open to her many friends and family members, and she still tries to travel. She recently went to Egypt to visit a beloved cousin who was ill. But she keeps returning here, to her quiet old house. And her premonition on the steamer so many years ago has proved true. She will be buried here. That decision wasn’t made until Aziz died in 1988.

Dr. Atiya had made careful arrangements to be buried in Egypt. In Old Cairo there is still a tomb with his name on it. But when he died suddenly, Lola decided that she didn’t want to take him back to Egypt. He had lived a long time in Salt Lake, and she was here now. So she buried him here, in the Salt Lake City Cemetery. “I like where I’m going to be buried,” she says now. “I go and sit there and tell Ramez, ‘Isn’t the view beautiful?’”

Death doesn't frighten her. Everything has a beginning and an end, she says. "I don't have a belief or a disbelief in an afterlife, but nobody has come from the other side and told us what happens. I don't tell people to put away their beliefs. It's something totally personal."

So as she has journeyed between a beginning as a girl-child in Cairo and the last years in Salt Lake, she has maintained this middle approach. She accepts the ways and beliefs of others but does not hesitate to offer her opinions and gifts. She has clearheadedly chosen her path but at the same time recognizes the element of fate working in her life. She has moved through her days with a kind of naturalness tempered by artfulness and acceptance.

In a way, Lola resembles the blue roses that she loved so much as a girl in Egypt. These were flowers that, although they had been artificially colored, were still live, still subject to the large forces of mortality. "I don't like artificial flowers in my house," she says decidedly. "I like live flowers; I like to see them die and then to put them in the garbage. I think it's something absolutely natural. . . . Our lives are like flowers too."



Gean Miller FarmanFarmaian wears the Kurdish regalia of her husband's Iranian royal family. Photo courtesy of Gean FarmanFarmaian.