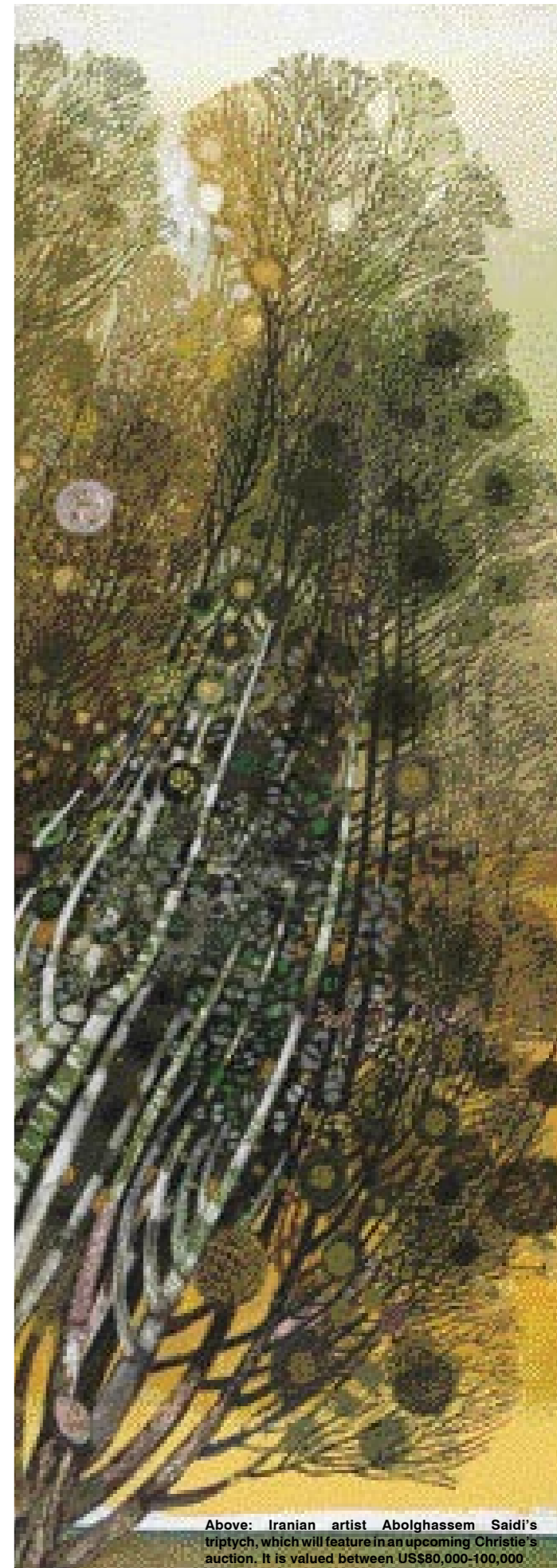
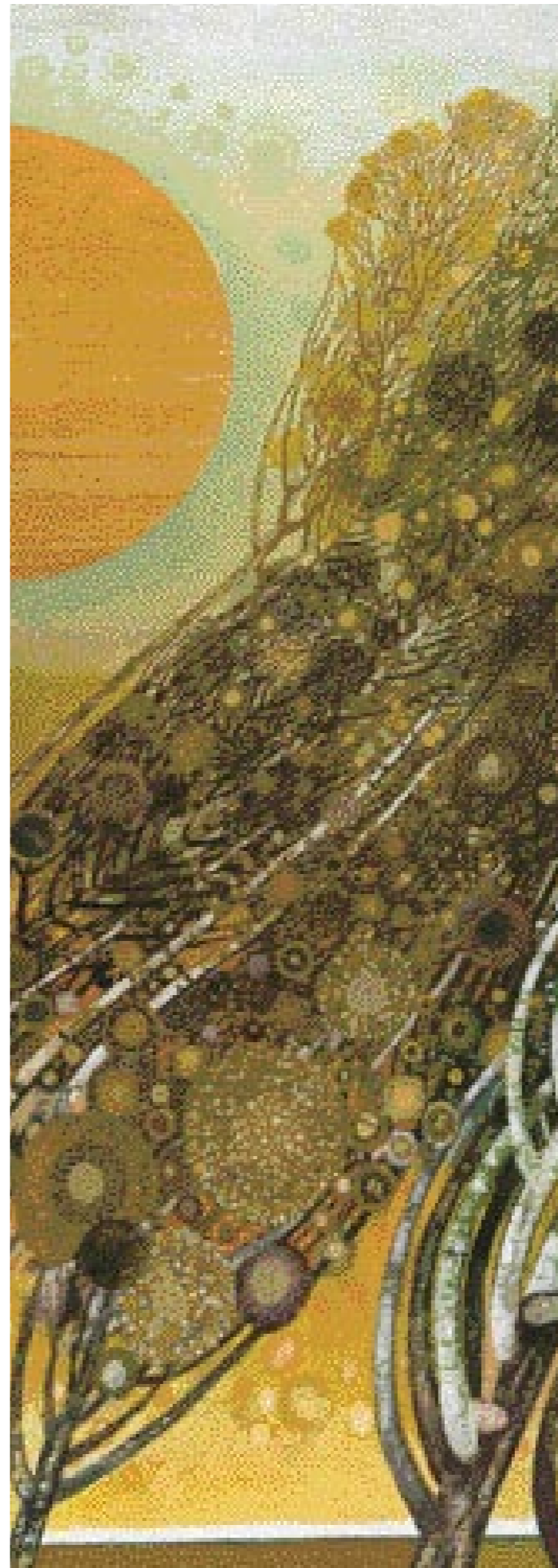


From the Louvre to the Levant

IN LINE WITH ITS BOOMING ECONOMIES AND ASPIRATIONS FOR GREATER STATUS IN THE WORLD, THE MIDDLE EAST IS EXPERIENCING AN ART REVOLUTION AND PUTTING MODERN IDEAS UNDER THE HAMMER



Above: Iranian artist Abolghassem Saidi's triptych, which will feature in an upcoming Christie's auction. It is valued between US\$80,000-100,000.



“CHRISTIE’S SOLD US\$2.2 MILLION BACK IN ITS FIRST SALE IN MAY 2006. SINCE THEN IT HAS SOLD US\$115 MILLION WORTH OF ART.”

The marble corridors of the Musée du Louvre in France have some stories to tell. King Louis XIV used to parade around its halls in his coronation robes before the sun would set over Notre Dame on the Left Bank of the Seine. Years later, during the French Revolution, Le Palais du Louvre fell under the guidance of the National Assembly and was used to house the nation’s masterpieces. Later, Napoleon narcissistically insisted on renaming the place Musée Napoléon; he lost the Battle of Waterloo shortly afterwards in a brush stroke of karma. But it was throughout the reigns of Louis XVIII and Charles X – when the Louvre gained around 20,000 pieces – that the museum blossomed like one of Claude Monet’s water lilies and turned itself into the *fleur de lis* of the art world.

Today, curators and tour guides tread the Richelieu Wing’s royal staircases and hallowed archways; the walls are draped with tapestries from Normandy, Flanders and Bergamo; Etruscan and Roman antiquities lurk in shadows; the *Venus de Milo* loiters in the Denon Wing and da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* curls her everlasting smile at more five second tourists and Japanese paparazzi than any other museum in the world. It is part palace and part spiritual home for artists and artisans around the globe. But what has this got to do with the contemporary Middle Eastern art industry? More than a budding Cézanne or Gauguin would first think.

The dots between I M Pei’s iconic glass pyramid in the Louvre’s central courtyard and the great Middle Eastern pyramids and deserts of the Arabian Peninsula are starting to connect. On 6 March 2007, the French and UAE governments signed an agreement to work together on the Louvre Abu Dhabi. The news may have triggered a sharp rise in blunt pencils and pastels in studios across France but there was rejoicing across the Gulf. Designed by the French architect Jean Nouvel, the museum will resonate within its Islamic cultural context and act as a beacon for the region’s burgeoning art scene. A shallow dome will even cap the composition, recalling the geometric motifs found in Islamic Art. But the Louvre Abu Dhabi will be a museum like no other; located on Abu Dhabi’s ambitious Saadiyat Island project, it will be a permanent 8,000 square metre facility that will become the capital of the Middle Eastern art industry.

The Middle East is no stranger to the arts. The rich heritage of Arabia has for generations fuelled a myriad of artistic traditions. It has sourced the glorious architecture of southern Spain and northern Africa, and is responsible for beautiful artefacts in Southeast Asia and rare manuscripts in Muslim China. Historically, the trade in the Levant between Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire was of great economic importance – and this is a trend that is set to continue from Damascus to French Dijon: only now the silver and spices have traded places with pastels and acrylics. And, now that the Louvre is being packed up and shipped across the Levant in wooden crates, the eyes of collectors with equity and the doors of the historic auction houses are opening up to the UAE, Qatar and their Arabic brethren.

“There is clearly an increasing appetite for modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art throughout the region and the rest of the world,” says Michael Jeha, managing director of Christie’s Middle East. “We sold US\$2.2 million worth of Middle Eastern art in our first sale back in May 2006, and then rose to around US\$4.5 million in the next sale after that. This figure rose again to more than US\$15 million in our sale earlier last year, so it’s certainly increasing. From Christie’s perspective, we have sold around US\$115 million worth of art since May 2006 in the UAE. Those are our figures, but it’s a similar story elsewhere.” The fact that 50 percent of the buyers were from the Middle East has not gone unnoticed either.

Today, Christie’s record sale for Middle Eastern art is for Iranian artist Parviz Tanavoli’s *The Wall (Oh Persepolis)*, which sold for US\$2.8 million. Not only did the sale establish a new world record for any Iranian artist at auction, but it is currently the world record price for any work by a Middle Eastern artist globally.

Clockwise from top left: Dr Najat Makki’s *Sunrise*; Dia Azzawi’s *Morning Light*; Lamy Gargash Salim on display at Emirati Expressions. Below: Azzawi’s *Man and dove*



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Charles Hossein Zenderoudi’s *Tchaar-Bagh*, which was painted in 1981, also sold for US\$1.6 million, a world record price for any Iranian painting at auction. “Three or four years ago, there were only a handful of galleries here,” says Jeha. “But now there must be more than 40. The area is booming with activity.”

Of course, collectors in the Middle East have been in the business for decades, but the monetary dial has turned up at a dramatic rate and the focus is now on more contemporary works. In Christie’s/YouGov Siraj Survey released last year, 40 percent of 100,000 GCC residents polled anticipated that their spend on art would increase over the next five years. A recent work by the UAE’s Abdul Qader Al-Rais, for instance, demonstrates this transformation. *Bishra*, a large and powerful calligraphic triptych painting, far outperformed its pre-sale estimate and sold for US\$385,000. There is a hunger for a new generation of artists and easels, sculptors and scalpels.

Elsewhere, another key member of the international art network, Sotheby’s, paints a similar story. Despite a relationship with the region dating back to 1755, it has continued to dip its brush deeper into the Arabic paint pot. In 2007, its Arts of The Islamic World sale raised more than US\$26 million. “For us, it is very much an exciting emerging market in terms of a fabulously strong and growing interest in art,” explains Henry Howard-Sneyd, Sotheby’s international director for emerging markets. Off the back of this success, there has been an evident increase from businesses, including Barclays Capital and Emirates Bank, to attach themselves to regional art fairs to leverage their own corporate awareness. The old masters of London, Paris, New York, Hong Kong and Moscow will remain for now, but Abu Dhabi and Doha are becoming increasingly vital components to the global exhibition programme. But why is this evolution happening now?

One hour westwards, the sun is waxing lyrical over the new Museum of Islamic Art in Doha. It is the flagship project of the Emir of Qatar’s vision to mould the nation state into a capital of culture; and in a twist of fate, the groundbreaking museum is designed by the Pritzker Prize laureate I M Pei – the man behind the Louvre pyramid. “There are plentiful studies on European and Chinese art but Islamic Art is often passed over,” states the director of the museum, Dr Oliver Watson. “Yet there is a unity here across the 1,000s of kilometres from west to east, north to south, partly because the art has been produced under Islamic control and in countries ruled by Muslim rulers. Because of that there has been a cultural link that brought unity to the art produced here. The collection we have here is of extremely high quality. It can stand alongside anything in the Metropolitan, the Hermitage or any of the great art galleries of the world. The museum is part of a much bigger cultural and educational vision developed by the Emir. We will be launching the education wing later this year.”

And that’s the key word there: education. Across the whole Arabian Peninsula, education has been lacking both at an institutional and grass roots level, and it is only now that the issue is being formally addressed. Support for the arts is being witnessed at all levels across the region, from government authorities and institutions to the corporate sector and private individuals. It is a revolution in the head. 🗨️

Emirati Expressions, a reflection of the growing indigenous art scene in the UAE, has been designed to do just that. Featuring works by 64 local Emiratis, it has been curated by Anne Baldassari, the director of the Musée National Picasso in Paris, with a hope of unearthing the next Damien Hirst or Francis Bacon. Housed at Gallery One at Abu Dhabi's Emirates Palace, the transition from 2008's Picasso exhibition to the new offering is as clear as the pop art lines on an Andy Warhol print.

"For the first time we are seeing the whole state standing behind the artists," explains HE Mubarak Al Muhairi, director general of Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority. "Art hasn't taken its place in Abu Dhabi. We're now trying to institutionalise it at a local and international level to support what is going on. Since the first moments that Abu Dhabi declared interest in Saadiyat Island, there have been so many views regarding our relationship with museums and organisations from abroad. However, what's behind all the ideas is for the benefit of Emirati artists. This is not imported art. The museums bring us their experience and paintings but this will help transform the art scene in the UAE, creating a culture of creativity from which the whole region can learn from."

The exhibition itself is a unique prospect. The paintings and installations are mounted in a black box gallery, a 100 square metre tunnel dressed in monochrome. Prominent works draped from the walls include Dr Najat Makki's *Sunrise*, Abdul Qader Al-Rais's *Abstract* and a black and white mixed media work by Abdul Rahim Salim; it looks like *Guernica* put through a washing machine. "This is a laboratory," says Baldassari, walking through the gallery. "It's important to consider the art through the generations and how the different artists, young and old, bring together their own stories. We live in an age that has experienced a cultural breakthrough and there has been a huge increase in the understanding of art in this region." On display, there is a splash of Pollock here and a hint of Kline there; it is a cultural exchange of integrity.

On the dusty streets of Abu Dhabi 15 years ago it was a very different story. The year is 1994 and Lebanese artist and curator Salwa Zeidan has just opened her first gallery. "At that time, we didn't have the same atmosphere, the art scene was much slower," she recalls. "We couldn't survive." How times change. Zeidan has returned to the country from her homeland to open a new gallery and act as a mentor to talent from across the region. In a recent exhibition she was selling works by Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, Mohammed Kazem and sought after works by the siblings Hassan and Hussain Sharif.

"There is something to respect here as an artist," she explains. "Art has been oppressed all over the world but here it is flourishing. Lebanon, my country, doesn't even have a museum for art. It breaks my heart." Zeidan is now getting involved with creating a series of monumental free standing sculptures commissioned by the Sheikh Zayed University. It will commence in October and will transform Abu Dhabi into a capital of art. "I want to use my passion for art to contribute to this evolution," she

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Above: an untitled mixed media work on canvas by Lebanese artist and curator Salwa Zeidan, now based in Abu Dhabi

says. While Zeidan may be on the look out for another Hassan Sharif, the auction houses are on the hunt for the next Dia Azzawi.

Azzawi is perhaps the most respected artist from the Middle East. He did what Matisse did in Morocco, but the other way round; while Matisse took European sensibilities to the streets of Tangiers, Azzawi travelled from Iraq to Europe with his artist's tools. Although exiled in London for 30 years, his work is still dominated by folk motifs, arabesque patterns and Assyrian figures. To symbolically complete the region's art industry growth, it will return as part of the 6th Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Festival. Picasso would've been proud.

If the experts are right, the next generation of young talent to put their histories down on to silk screens and stones will come from the heart of the Levant. "Last year in Syria there was great art from local artists," says Zeidan. "The Ayyam Gallery in Syria is backing the local artists." Auction house Christie's also has its eye on the Eastern Mediterranean. "Syrian art is definitely one of the strongest in the region," adds Jeha, "We've seen a number of emerging artists from there."

Back at Gallery One, a video message left by a young painter is on constant repeat. "As far as I'm concerned the quill and brush are my friends," it says, "because they have never let me down." The meaning is clear: it's just that this time the rest of the world is watching; and waiting for the paint to dry in the midday sun. ✚