

ESSAY



A SHIFT OF CULTURE EASTWARDS LED BY ARAB GULF STATES

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In 2013, long before the opening of the Louvre Abu Dhabi or the launch of major arts projects in AlUla, I suggested in an article in *Al Monitor* that as a result of significant investment in art, infrastructure, academia, and commerce, Gulf cities are emerging as centres of culture in the Arab world.¹ The theory met with support from the likes of the UAE University political science professor Abdulkhaleq Abdulla.² But it was also refuted by a number of individuals who found the prospect unlikely due to constraints that can be found across the Gulf states.³ Indeed, there is no doubt that shortcomings, such as limited freedom of expression and an underdeveloped legal framework, do exist in the Gulf Arab states – but these are not insurmountable obstacles. In fact, the Gulf states can aspire to be even more than centres of regional cultural production and custodianship. In this dynamic and fast-moving world they have the potential to induce a shift of culture from its established Western base to the East.

A parallel transposing of cultural hubs happened a century ago within the Western world in two waves. In the late 1800s, US industrial barons became newly wealthy and presided over a growing country. Both individuals – such as Henry Clay Frick and Andrew Carnegie – and institutions acquired a significant number of artistic works from Europe. Today, due to the buying activity of that time, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, holds one of the largest collections of Claude Monet's work outside of France. Later, Europe became engulfed in fascism and war, and art in the US again flourished under state- and private-led cultural initiatives. Artists such as Fernand Léger and Henri Matisse travelled to the US to execute site-specific works. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) was founded in 1929 – three years before the National Socialist Party took power in Germany. Under the directorship of Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the museum went on to acquire hundreds of paintings from Europe.

A convergence of factors – acquisitions; a rigorous scholarship, research, and publishing program; and museum-building projects in New York City, Chicago, Boston, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, and Los Angeles – paved the road for US cultural dominance. It would take London, Milan, Berlin, and Paris decades to make up lost ground vis à vis their US counterparts. By then many European artists, such as Piet Mondrian, Max Ernst, and Marc Chagall, had emigrated to the US seeking artistic and academic opportunities as well as funding. Furthermore, in the 1910s, the US tax code was revised and gave tax breaks to donors who set up major museums. Museums such as MoMA and the Whitney Museum of American Art (founded in New York in 1930), the Guggenheim (founded in New York in 1939), and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (founded in 1937) benefitted from the private patronage of wealthy donors who received incentives from reformed tax codes.

US citizens then started a process of backing their national artistic creativity. Major exhibitions were staged, such as the group exhibition *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*, at MoMA in 1951, and a posthumous show for Jackson Pollock, also at MoMA, in 1956–57. The US embarked on a cultural diplomacy tour of European cities showcasing the best of American Abstract Expressionist art, with exhibitions such as *The New American Painting*, which went to London, Paris, Berlin, and elsewhere from 1959. According to observers it ‘spelled the end for Paris as the hub of contemporary art and the emergence of New York at its epicentre’.⁴ This transformation of the US cultural landscape, coupled with soft power exercised through Hollywood globally, complemented the economic and military rise of the US throughout the 1900s, turning it into what many label as the ‘American century’.



LOUVRE ABU DHABI.
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NEW EPICENTRES

Could it be possible that through a concerted effort and with the right strategies, the Arab Gulf states can effect a change so large in this century that it can have the potential to induce yet another major shift – almost one century after the shift of influence from European cities to the US cities? If so, how can the Arab Gulf states accomplish such a major and improbable feat? At the outset it must be made clear that merely replicating the US model in acquiring European art is not enough. Instead, the Gulf states' museums must adopt a three-tier strategy when it comes to collecting art: local, regional, and global. Firstly, Gulf museums must look to the rich field of contemporary art that is being created in their countries, and build upwards both from that and from the equally extraordinary modernist period. This focus on the local art scene should include artists from different parts of the countries, as well as non-citizen long-term residents who call these cities their home. Extensive collections should be built from the work of these exciting practitioners.

Secondly, Gulf states must situate themselves as major guardians of the region's artistic production. For instance, French museums collected Italian art, Spanish museums collected Dutch art, British museums collected German art, and so on. Similarly, Gulf museums must adopt a strategy to have a wide selection of regional artists in their collection.

The question may be posed: what is 'the region' when it comes to Gulf cities? The GCC countries are strategically located on the border of three major water bodies: the Arabian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean. This means countries as varied as Iran, Ethiopia, and India are in geographic proximity. Furthermore, the Gulf cities belong to a wider 'Arab world' which can introduce Arabic, a linguistic element, to the collection, along with a mandate to collect works from countries such as Tunisia and Syria. Finally, the religion of Islam, whose origin is rooted in the Arabian Peninsula city of Makkah, introduces an added dimension, encompassing countries as far westwards as Senegal and eastwards as Indonesia. These three dimensions – the geographic, the linguistic, and the religious – can become general markers when deciding what a 'regional' collection can be.

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We should also remember how geographic regions are knitted together by the migration of people. In the 1950s the Gulf states started a process of providing opportunities for educated Arabs who immigrated from the Levant and North Africa. One need only take the modernisation of the urban landscape as a measure of this phenomenon. Urban planners such as Egypt's Abdulrahman Makhlouf left an indelible mark on places like Makkah and Abu Dhabi. The same goes for Palestinian Hisham Qaddumi and Doha's Corniche, and Lebanon's Saba George Shiber in Kuwait. Countless other Arab immigrants to the Gulf became advisors, heads of authorities, diplomats, and business leaders. The naturalisation of these individuals proved to be of great benefit to the Gulf states and in many ways the process mirrors the US's embrace of foreign talent.

NEW INSTITUTIONS MEAN NEW COLLECTIONS

Finally, Gulf museums have the opportunity to create a global art collection that is diverse in gender, era, and medium. Although Western museums have accumulated many Old Masters, they no longer have the funding to extensively acquire works by now canonical artists of colour such as the US artist Aaron Douglas and photographer Gordon Parks, or women classical painters, including Artemisia Gentileschi and Lavinia Fontana from Italy, Élisabeth Louise Vigée-Le Brun and Mary Cassatt from France, Clara Peeters from what is now Belgium, and Judith Leyster from the Netherlands. With a sharply defined acquisition focus, Gulf institutions can position themselves as custodians of overlooked Old Masters that the West did not invest in.

Examples of diversified global art collections already exist in the Gulf, including Qatar's Flour Mill, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, and Saudi Arabia's Royal Commission for AlUla. For too long, modern art from the Arab world was either dismissed or relegated to a subset of Islamic art. Dr. Nada Shabout takes the example of how, during the US-led war on Iraq in 2003, US soldiers guarded the museum of antiquities, while the modern art museum was left to looters. As a result, 7,000 artworks were lost.⁵ However, over the past two decades there has been a great deal of investment in scholarship, collecting, and interest in modern Arab art, mainly driven by patrons and institutions in the Gulf as well as Western museums. Today Lebanese artists such as Etel Adnan, Huguette Caland, and Saloua Raouda Choucair have become household names in the region.

Arab modernism in art is also a manifestation of Al Nahda, or the Arab Renaissance, and its ideals of Islamic reformation, independence, and an emphasis on rights and cultural transformation that developed in the last century with figures such as Gibran Khalil Gibran of Lebanon, Mahmoud Said of Egypt, Tawfik Tareq of Syria, and Abdul Qadir Al Rassam of Iraq. Gulf museums can be a platform by which to educate a new generation of Arabs and the wider world about this history.

The Arab world has witnessed the power of patronage before. Egypt had ambitious royals who believed in the power of art to transform society. Khedive Ismail Pasha (1830–1895), who oversaw the inauguration of the Suez Canal, laid the foundation for the establishment of the Museum of Islamic Art in Bab Al Khalq, Cairo, while his grandson Prince Youssef Kamal founded the Egyptian School of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1908. These developments were complemented by major projects and art acquisitions, including paintings by Manet, Monet, and Rodin. Egypt inaugurated its Museum of Fine Arts in 1904 in Alexandria and the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art in Cairo in 1927. Around then the 'Egyptian Parliament passed laws at that time to guarantee artists their freedom of expression and confer(ed) on the arts official protection'.⁶

One of the earliest of the Gulf states museums dedicated solely to art is the Sharjah Art Museum, which was founded in 1995 and has since presented a large number of exhibitions, including the collections of Qatar's Sheikh Hassan Al Thani and solo exhibitions of the likes of Samia Halaby and Aref El Rayess. Saudi Arabia has also seen a number of important art



THE MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC ART OPENED IN CAIRO IN 1903, PART OF A FLURRY OF INSTITUTION-BUILDING IN EGYPT THAT STARTED IN THE 1900S. © Getty Images



THE SHARJAH ART MUSEUM, INAUGURATED IN 1995, IS THE FIRST MAJOR ART MUSEUM IN THE UAE. © Sharjah Museums Authority

initiatives, including the Dar Al-Funoon Al-Sa'udiyah, or the Saudi Art House, founded by Saudi artist Mohammed Al Saleem in 1979; the Kinda Foundation for the Arts, established by Adel Al Mandeel in 1983; Al-Mansouria Foundation, founded in 1999 by Princess Jawaher bint Majid Al Saud; as well as Art Jameel, founded in 2003. These institutions and others play a vital role in establishing the Gulf region as a major player in the world of arts.

In order to broaden their holdings Gulf cities should also look at collecting collections rather than merely relying on acquisitions of individual artworks. This has occurred before in 2002 when Qatar deftly acquired the entire collection of 400 Islamic art objects from the renowned Kuwaiti scholar and collector Jassim Yousef Al Homaizi (1939–2004) for \$140 million, which formed a significant part of the collection of the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha.⁷ Many artworks from the collection of Sheikh Hassan bin Mohammed bin Ali Al Thani seeded the collection of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, and the inaugural Islamic Arts Biennale in Jeddah devoted a whole section to important Islamic art collections.

Additionally, the Gulf states should focus on acquiring a number of key works from established names that would anchor the collections as they grow them in number and diversity. For instance, the acquisition in 1939 of Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. K. R. Version O)* (1907) and in 1941 of Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* (1889) were pivotal moments for MoMA and helped catapult it into an elite group of modern art collecting institutions. Already Gulf institutions and individuals have acquired iconic and high-calibre work. This includes the *Salvator Mundi* (c. 1499–1510) by Leonardo da Vinci, in an as yet unidentified collection in Saudi Arabia; *Head of Christ* (c. 1648) by Rembrandt in the Louvre Abu Dhabi collection; and *Femmes d'Alger (Version 'O')* (1955) by Picasso in the private collection of former Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jaber Al Thani.

Furthermore, in terms of competition to the ascendancy of these Gulf museums, observers should not discount countries like Iran, Turkey, and Egypt that have significant collections of local and Western art, including the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, the Sakıp Sabancı Museum in Istanbul, and the Mohamed Mahmoud Khalil Museum in Cairo. Finally, and in order to succeed in this endeavour, one may ponder whether the Gulf states are willing to make leaps such as guaranteeing the freedom of expression of artists. Will they tolerate artworks that some may consider contentious? Will they reform their tax laws? The answers to these questions can help determine if Gulf cities can grab this opportunity to reshape the global art scene, much like post-war America changed the world's understanding and appreciation of modern art.