

The Arab World:
A Sum of Its Parts

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi

Weaving a story of a region through its art is always going to be a challenging task. The population of the Arab world has reached 370 million, with as many differences in its demographic make up as there are similarities. The region is a vibrant mix that includes numerous ethnic, religious, regional and nationalist identities. But what do people in the Maghreb have in common with those in the Gulf? How culturally similar are the Levantines and the Sudanese?

The Arab world is a region in flux. It has seen its borders redrawn every few years, from the times of the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916 to the 2014 ISIS takeover of parts of Iraq and Syria. As borders shift, so do national identities. The Arab governments, people and non-state actors have for decades been part of a struggle over who controls the narrative of legitimacy. These struggles are played out using hard power but also soft power, of which the media, theatre and fine art are essential components.

The notion of Arab art can be seen as problematic if one considers that many people who live in or come from Arab states aren't 'Arab' at all. These different non-Arab ethnicities include Kurds, Amazigh Berbers, sub-Saharan and east Africans, Turkmen, Jews, Persians, Armenians, and the Baloch, amongst numerous other ethnic groups. Although a large number of them are well versed in Arabic, many choose to communicate in the language associated with their ethnicity.

The notion of what the Arab world exactly is also needs addressing. Is the 'Arab World' merely a language-based affiliation? Or is it an affiliation related to the 22 states that constitute the Arab League, founded in Cairo in 1945 in the dying days of the Second World War? Additionally, Arab nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s was partly responsible for the mass migration of many of these countries' Jewish, Greek and other European populations.

Perhaps one way of looking at Arab art is to consider it in the same manner as one would consider the art of the Soviet Union. The USSR attempted through various

means, including the fine arts, to form a single coherent group out of a variety of ethnically diverse nations. Soviet art encompassed artists from numerous states that did not necessarily include a majority Russian-speaking population, from the Georgian-Armenian artists Alexander Bazhbeuk-Melikyan and Dmitriy Nalbandyan¹ to Baltic states artists such as Juris Dimiters, Leonhard Lapin and Vladislovas Žilius.²

Gamal Abdul Nasser, Egypt's strongman president of the 1950s and 1960s, employed art in the service of his socialist ideals. Musicians, filmmakers, and painters including Hamed Ewais and Abdul Hadi El Gazzar were amongst the artists whose work reflected Abdul Nasser's message. Although some Arab governments such as Egypt and Syria had an active state programme for collecting historical objects and documents, many other countries in the region, such as the Gulf states, relied on private collectors. In these countries, some of which were the last to gain their independence from Western colonial powers, private collectors (sometimes associated with the ruling families) took the initiative to collect art from across the Arab world.

While it has no art museum, Saudi Arabia is home to Princess Jawaher bint Majed's Al-Mansouria Foundation as well as the Kinda collection, founded by Riyadh-based businessman Adel al Mandil. The latter includes some of the great masterpieces of Arab art and was exhibited at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris in 2002, at what was possibly one of the first pan-Arab art collections displayed in the West. Arab artworks purchased by Qatar's Sheikh Hassan Al Thani, beginning in the 1980s, formed the core of the collection of Qatar's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art when it opened in 2010 with several thousand artworks (Figs. 1–2).

Numerous Kuwaiti households still own collections of Arab art today, although a significant number were lost during the occupation of the country in 1990 and 1991. Kuwait's Arab Fund owns the largest collection of corporate Arab art, with several hundred works from giant murals to smaller sculptures. The Sharjah Art Museum inaugurated in 1997 has a dedicated wing

for Arab art, including modern and contemporary artists. Kuwait's Museum of Modern Art, which opened in 2003 in a converted 1930s school, dedicates the lower floor to Kuwaiti artists and the upper floor to artists from the rest of the Arab world. Although not exclusively an art museum, Bahrain's National Museum owns a collection of pan-Arab art.

Outside the Gulf most major art collections – both state and hybrid – tend to focus on local artists; however there are some exceptions. Jordan's National Gallery of Fine Arts holds a collection estimated at 2,000 works that includes international as well as Arab artists from Egypt, the Levant, the Maghreb and the Gulf. Jordan is also home to Darat al Funun, a major private foundation established in 1994 and currently run by Suha Shoman, that collects and exhibits modern and contemporary Arab artists' work.

There are a number of private individuals across the region who collect Arab art, such as Dr Ramzi Dalloul who plans to establish a museum of modern Arab art in Beirut to house his collection of 3,000 plus artworks. Today, one can argue that the Arab world is witnessing a revival of interest in art and its institutions. Egypt has started reopening its long shuttered art museums, Beirut is home to a number of private initiatives and Algeria and Morocco are investing heavily in art.

While modern art in the Western tradition arrived earlier in North Africa and the Levant, in the Gulf it took root in Kuwait and Bahrain around the 1930s, along with modernist architecture, design, education and wider infrastructure. Artists drawing fishing and pearling dhows on the Gulf as well as rough designs for local houses using everyday charcoal eventually gave way to modern methods. Unfortunately the vast majority of these drawings, that represented the early beginnings of the art movement in the late 19th century, were discarded after the projects were concluded.

With the discovery of oil, the Gulf states started sending students to study art in Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Cairo. Upon their return, many co-founded the fine art societies and academies that still exist in



Fig. 1 Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar



Fig. 2 Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar

the Gulf today. Amongst the earliest Gulf artists were Kuwait's Mu'jib al-Dosari and Mohamed Al Damkhi, both of whom tragically died young. The year 1958 was a turning point for the Gulf states, as it saw the first public modern art exhibitions in Kuwait and Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. The advent of Palestinian and Egyptian teachers in the Gulf cities in the 1950s meant that students no longer had to travel long distances to study art, although many continued to do so. The 1960s witnessed the opening of the first commercial art gallery in the Gulf when the Sultan Gallery was inaugurated with a show by the Kuwaiti artist Munira Al-Kazi and Iraq's Essam El Said.

I am often asked to explain why I founded the Barjeel Art Foundation, and in particular its dedication to artists from the Arab world. Certainly, art is borderless and there are intertwining narratives and ethnic groups at play. However, in addition to the obvious matter of a shared language there are also common causes, at the forefront of which is the Palestinian cause that permeates across all cultural and artistic expressions in the Arab world. For instance, a common theme amongst Arab artists can be seen in the *Naksa* (Loss/Arab Defeat) of 1967, which resulted in the collapse of the Pan-Arab ideal following the defeat of the Arab armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria by Israel in the Six Day War. The 1982 massacre at the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon was tackled not only by many Palestinian artists but also by Iraq's Dia Azzawi, Kuwait's Sami Mohamed and Egypt's Omar El Nagdi amongst others. Palestine as a cause is constantly present in the works of Egypt's Helmi Touni, George Bahgory and Adil Rizkallah, Syria's Louay Kayyali and Fateh Moudarres, Morocco's Mohamed El Kacemi, and the UAE's Abdul Qadir Alrais.

Algeria's Musée National des Beaux-Arts includes a number of artworks that were donated by artists from across the Arab world during the nation's struggle for independence from the French occupation in the early 1960s. More recently, when revolutions erupted in what became known as the Arab Spring, artists from across the region reflected the aspirations and

later the disappointments of many of the Arab world's youth. Arguably, when seismic events take place in the region, one witnesses a unanimous reaction to the events by Arab artists.

When considering the various Arab art movements it is essential not to measure them according to a Western art historical timeline. Arab art movements were and continue to be influenced by local and regional political struggles and changes. However, throughout the past century these artists have gone through various movements not unlike their peers across the Mediterranean and in South Asia. These include the Cubism of Seif Wanly, the Surrealism of Inji Efflatoun and Samir Rafi, the abstraction of Ahmed Cherkaoui and the iconoclasm of Paul Guiragossian. The Arab context however has also engendered its own unique movements such as Hurufism (Letters), a movement that started to spread across the region in the 14th and 15th centuries, taking inspiration from Sufi tradition, and became inter-connected with a modernist tradition in the work of the Baghdad Modern Art Group in the 1950s.

It is my hope that through a comprehensive chronological exhibition such as this, a common thread may be defined that binds the artistic narrative of the Arab world together to celebrate not only its unifying artistic tradition, but also, equally, its varying practices, dissonances and contradictions.

1 Matthew Cullerne Bown, Brandon Taylor (eds), *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917–92*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993)

2 Works featured on cover of Alla Rosenfeld, Norton T. Dodge, (eds). *Art of the Baltics: The Struggle for Freedom of Artistic Expression under the Soviets, 1945–91*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press)