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sheikh sultan sooud al-qassemi

As a child, Sheikh Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi would spend endless hours reading. With the annual Sharjah Book Fair, his literary scopes widened and he became increasingly mesmerised with the arts in general when a Shakespearian theatre troupe performed in Sharjah. "Those plays have stayed in my mind since," he says. In 1994, Al-Qassemi enrolled at the American University of Paris to pursue a BA in International Business Administration. "It was easy for me to adapt to the Parisian lifestyle because I loved the cultural life." Unbeknownst to him then, Al-Qassemi's visits to the theatre, opera, museums and galleries informed his art collecting opinions, but it was only in 2001 that he bought his first Contemporary Arab artwork – a

Despite his reservations on pursuing an MS from the European School of Business in London, he realised "that working in my family business is what would allow me to do all the things I love: collecting art, writing in international newspapers, teaching at university and helping young kids." He has written for *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and the *Financial Times*, among others, covering topics such as education, politics and corruption. He recently taught at the Dubai Men's College and hosted a local radio show about business in the UAE. In 2006, Al-Qassemi co-founded Dubai's Meem Gallery whose roster of artists include Ali Omar Ermes, Dia Al-Azzawi and

Latest acquisition:

The Coffee Shop by Iraqi artist Faisal Laibi.

My top three art fairs:

Art Dubai, Abu Dhabi Art and Frieze.

The museum piece I stare at endlessly:

Any artwork by Edward Hopper.

The Middle Eastern art scene needs:

More patrons who open up their collections on a permanent basis and who are willing to fund art residencies.

My Art Motto:

Create a representative collection of Arab art that can be displayed internationally and expand understanding of the region.

My favourite artworks from my collection:

Abdullah Al-Muharraqi, Dia Al-Azzawi and Loss by the late young Palestinian artist Layan Shawabkeh.

Nja Mahdaoui (*Canvas XX*). 'Hectic' is an understatement! "I am restless. If I am not doing something, I get tired and anxious. I feel like there is so much to do and so little time."

Inspired by the objectives of the Kinda Foundation, which houses a large collection of Contemporary Arab art, Al-Qassemi created the Barjeel Art Foundation, which offers the public access to his own collection of Contemporary Arab art. About 50 works will be exhibited during Art Dubai 2010 at the Maraya House of Arab Arts in the Al-Qasbah Canal in Sharjah. A UAE government body had agreed to host the collection for a minimum of three years. "Of course I will continue buying," says Al-Qassemi, "and if the collection continues to

Range of backgrounds and different cultures. I still treasure the friendships I made in those days."



I fell in love with it right away. My eyes were drawn to the narrative within the picture – in this case, the lavish life of Napoleon and his empire.

grow, I want it to be on permanent loan."

How can art in the region be developed?

One way is patronage from a large, wealthy family that would act as patrons of the arts, just as the Medicis, the powerful and influential Florentine family, had done from the 14-18th centuries. Such patronage, along with other private initiatives, would accelerate the development of the arts in this region. Government support is simply not enough.

Is there a particular art genre that you favour?

I love Impressionism above all other painting styles, but it is not my forte, it is not my region and it doesn't tell my story. Contemporary art from the Middle East and Arab world tells my

story and I like that. I would love to tell the story of the Arab world through my own art collection and I hope to do so by buying one piece from every major Contemporary Arab artist.

Do you adhere to any process of buying art?

It's a very personal process. Sometimes I buy from artists who are just at the beginning of their careers... there are some artists who are very popular but whose works I don't like and refuse to buy. I buy mostly from galleries, especially from those that I have longstanding relationships with. Sometimes I buy at auction because these pieces would not be available elsewhere. Currently, I have over 250 works

from both established and emerging artists and I buy in a very spur-of-the-moment way, based purely on an emotional response.

Do you buy from your own gallery?

Yes, but I have also bought from nearly every gallery in Dubai. I feel that they are my colleagues because in the end, you all want to spread awareness about Contemporary Middle Eastern art. We all have to support each other. I have also bought from galleries in Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar.

What are your intentions with regard to exhibiting your collection?

Showcasing my art is a form of philanthropy. Opening a collection means allowing



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school children to see it that will broaden their horizons and maybe even encourage one or two students to take up art. You never know who the next Abdul Qader Al-Rais or Sami Mohammed will be.

Do you enjoy meeting the artists?

I love meeting the artists. This is why I try to go to the openings because usually the artist is there. I make it a point to ask the gallery manager to let me know if the artist will be visiting, even long after I have bought his or her work.

Do you feel there is a downturn in the Middle East art market?

I am happy that there is a pause [due to the recession] because one reason why I stopped buying is because artworks became ridiculously expensive. It was artificially inflated and you just wanted to pull out of that chaos. In the end, artists want to sell.

What are your thoughts on the Gulf art scene?

I think Dubai, and the rest of the Gulf, have been really impressive. We have hidden gems here that people don't know about. We have beautiful art collections in Qatar and Kuwait. The Sharjah Art Museum is amazing. In Dubai, the fact that we have had exponential growth in the number of art



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galleries is something that we are all proud of. I hope that only the best survive and that the smaller galleries focus on up-and-coming artists. We have also had private initiatives by people who personally finance art, like Tashkeel for instance, where artists are given the products that they need to create their art. This is a wonderful opportunity; I am very much encouraged by this. I think the future of art will be very bright because of these initiatives.

With so many things on your plate, how do you relax on weekends?

I have five adorable nieces and three nephews and I take them with me to all the exhibitions taking place. Some of the shows have included the JP Morgan Collection and the British Museum's *Word into Art* exhibition at the DIFC and The Nasser David Khalili Collection [of Islamic artefacts] in Abu Dhabi.

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