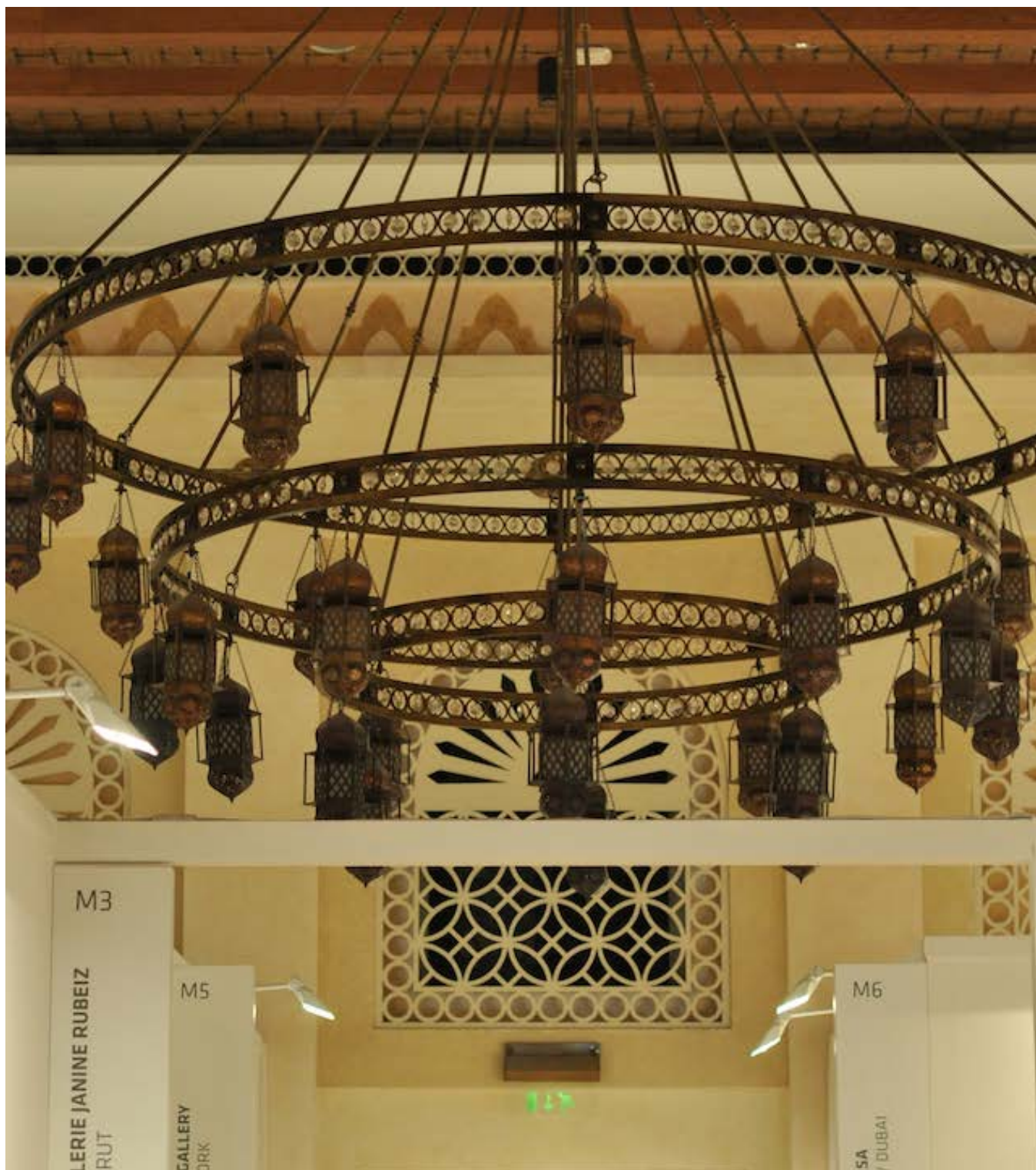


Art Dubai Modern: Historical Fragments

by Hrag Vartanian March 27, 2014 Print

[Hrag Vartanian](#) March 27, 2014





A view of the Modern section at Art Dubai 2014 (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — It might be hard to imagine that only a few decades ago the conventional history of modern art was overwhelmingly Eurocentric, but when I was in college in the 1990s the realms of art history still felt geographically suffocating. It was an era of identity politics, when academia was starting to open up to new facets of the same old story about the history of art — but eager minds were still forced to take courses outside of most art departments to give themselves a fuller picture of world art.



Huguette Caland, "Untitled" (1968), oil on canvas, 100 x 70cm, Galier Janine Rubeiz

Even today, the history of modern art may be a little more inclusive, with additions from Latin America and East Asia, but massive gaps remain. Modern art of the Arab and Islamic worlds is still largely absent from art history, except for the occasional sojourns by already enshrined Modernists, like Matisse in Algeria or Le Corbusier in Iraq. And while the history of modern art may have started later in Cairo or Beirut than Paris or New York, it is wrong to assume that it didn't — or doesn't — exist.

One of the notable achievements from this year's Art Dubai was the addition of the [Modern section](#). While other art fairs, like New York's Armory Show, already have robust sections devoted to modern art, visitors are rarely surprised by much, as galleries march out works by established names and reputations — nothing feels new.



Works by Rasheed Araeen at Grosvenor Gallery

At Art Dubai Modern, most of the names weren't familiar to anyone except for a few scholars and dedicated collectors in the field. The early 1960s hard-edge abstractions of South Asian artist Anwar Jalal Shemza look fresh, and Lebanese artist Huguette Caland's more organic canvases feel deeply personal and introspective. Even if some of the work, like Indian artist M.F. Husain's bright palette, can look largely derivative of Western trends, there's still a sense of the work being rooted in local sensibilities and approached with a directness that make the work appealing. "I am like a folk painter," Husain once told the BBC. "Paint and move ahead."

There are 15 artists in total that were on display in the Modern section, and each was allotted quite a bit of space making the Modern section as much an educational experience as an aesthetic one. Painters from Lebanon and Egypt, both countries that sowed the seeds of modernism earlier than their

neighbors, hang close to the work of Pakistani, Algerian, and Emirati artists.

A drawing by Ardeshir Mohassess from the 1970s
at Shirin Art Gallery.

The canvases of Hamed Abdalla were a revelation to me, and like many of the artists of his generation, the Cairo-born artist fled to Europe because of his opposition to some dictatorial regime or another. In Karim Francis Gallery's booth, you can see Abdalla's monumental forms of the mid-1960s give way to more gestural abstractions a few years later, until they become more serial and nuanced by the 1980s. "The true artist is the one who represents his time, who feels the strength emanating from the people and who expresses it in his work. The work of art is an individual expression

connected by its roots to the soul of the people," he once said. Modern art at its most basic was a utopian quest for universality for many of its practitioners and you see that in the work here again and again.

Why there is a renewed interest in modern art from the Arab and Islamic worlds is an interesting question, and like many matters of art reveal a complex web of interests that include collectors, museums, galleries, and ultimately artists. For too long artists in Egypt, Syria, Yemen, the UAE, and elsewhere have had to look elsewhere to find inspiration in modern art history, but fairs like Art Dubai Modern suggests that things are slowly changing. Art Dubai is certainly responding to the interest in Arab modern art that museums of the region are starting to institutionalize. Qatar's Arab Museum of Modern Art, Mathaf, is one of the first of its kind, and it has amassed a collection of modern art that you can even peruse, in part, on the [Google Art Project](#). Closer to Dubai, the emirate next door, Sharjah, has the [Barjeel Art Foundation](#), which is devoted to collection and making publicly accessible their growing collection of Arab art. This increased attention to local art history is certainly going to influence a new generation of artists who won't have to travel very far to find precedents, and between talents like Algerian painter Baya's fantastically bold drawings and blind Bahraini artist Nasser Al-Yousif's rough-hewn painted surfaces, you can easily see how this art history could lay the foundation for new movements and sensibilities.

There's also another element to the story of modern art in the Arab and Islamic world that might not be apparent to the uninitiated, and that this is a movement that has often been uprooted or disrupted after regimes fell and new rulers pushed progressive artistic voices to more welcoming places. There is something beautiful in seeing the work of artists long overlooked and almost forgotten excavated for new eyes and minds. Abdalla died in Paris in 1985, even though his son, who was present at the opening day of the Dubai fair, said Egypt was always on his father's mind. It's nice to imagine that this is part of a process of homecoming for many of these

artists who were not able to forge careers in art at home. At Art Dubai Modern, they seem to be firmly placed in a sense of regional history.

To better understand the role of collectors and institutions in this art ecosystem, I arranged for an interview with Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, the founder of Barjeel Art Foundation, who will be the subject of my next post.

Sculptures and drawings by Lebanese artist Michel Basbous at Beirut's Agial Art Gallery

Nasser Al-Yousif, "The Knight 'Antar wa Abla'" (1972), acrylic/mixed media, 120 x 100cm, at Albareh Art Gallery of Manama, Bahrain.

Artworks by Baya at Elmarsa gallery, which is based in Tunis and Dubai

A view of paintings by Hamed Abdalla and sculptures by Adam Heneim at Karim Francis Gallery.

A detail of Abdalla's "Al Shareda (Stray)" (1966), relief, acrylic on wood, 116 x 90 cm, at Karim Francis Gallery.

Detail of Abdalla's "Al Hawan" (1970), acrylic on paper on canvas, at Cairo's Karim Francis gallery

A view of the halls of Art Dubai Modern.

Works from the 1970s and 80s by Ardeshir Mohassess at the Shirin Art Gallery, Tehran/New York

An expressive drawing by Ardeshir Mohassess from 1997, Shirin Art Gallery

A display of works by Zahoor ul Akhlaq at Karachi's Artchowk gallery

Detail of a work by Zahoor ul Akhlaq

Works by Anwar Jalal Shemza from the early 1960s at Mumbai's Jhaveri Contemporary gallery

Detail of M. F. Husain's "Untitled (Female and Blue Figure)" (nd), oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in. at Aicon Gallery, New York/London

Sculptures by Rasheed Araeen at London's Grosvenor Gallery

Art Dubai Modern was part of [Art Dubai 2014](#) and took place March 19–22 at Madinat Jumeirah (Al Sufouh Road, Umm Suqeim, Dubai, UAE).

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