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Art Dubai Modern to explore historical Soviet influence on Global South

► The art fair will take place at Madinat Jumeirah from Friday to Sunday



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Untitled (1927-2012) by Mahmoud Sabri. Photo: Meem Gallery

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The Cold War had a cultural frontier, and it had a marked impact on the art of the [Global South](#).

The Modern section at [Art Dubai](#) this year is highlighting connections that formed in this era, specifically between artists from the region and the former Soviet Union.

The geopolitical landscape following the Second World War was dominated by an ideological binary, as western powers and the Soviet Union scuffled to bring in as many countries as they could into their fold. While arms, science and ideology were the most apparent grounds for this face-off, art was not exempt.

Initiatives, scholarships, grants and group exhibitions were organised in hopes of luring artists to the West – to the US and its allies – or on the other side of the spectrum, the Soviet bloc. Ideology sometimes trickled into the works of artists as they were influenced by either side of this geopolitical tension and were swayed either towards socialist notions or the more individual-centric ideas of the West.



Hakim Al-Akel's Dialogue in the Market. Photo: Hakim Al-Akel and Hafez Gallery

However, politics was by no means a definitive drive. Global South artists who travelled abroad went to places where opportunities arose for them, and as a consequence, they were inspired by the art history of these new destinations. A creative dialogue took hold as they merged their own cultural backgrounds with artistic movements they encountered. This paved the way for experimentation and resulted in works that upended expectations, blending disparate influences in novel ways.

However, today many are more familiar with how artists from the Global South responded to the influences that arose from countries such as the US, UK and France. Their Soviet counterparts have been left largely unexplored. This has a lot to do with how the Cold War ended, [Christianna Bonin](#), curator of the Art Dubai Modern, says.

“How the various sort of global superpowers tried to engage with the Global South, the non-aligned countries in the 1950s and 1960s, the US was a huge part of that,” Bonin, who is also an assistant professor of art history at the [American University of Sharjah](#), says. “We know more about that history because of the outcome of the Cold War, because the Soviet Union collapsed.”

Bonin has been researching the topic for more than a decade. Her research focuses on the artistic interactions that have formed from the 19th century onwards between Europe, Russia and Central Asia. Her scholarship was pivotal to how she approached the curation of Art Dubai Modern. The section features nine galleries, each of which is presenting artists from the Global South who had ties with the Soviet Union, whether directly or indirectly.

“Each of the artists that are in the section come from their own particular cultural backgrounds so they were affected by this new context in a different way,” she says. “It's really interesting because it plays out in many ways, so differently.”



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Samuel Kakaire's Warriors, Mask and Cow. Photo: Samuel Kakaire and Afriart Gallery

Among the artists featured at Art Dubai Modern is Samuel Kakaire, a Ugandan artist who took cues from the Byzantine wall paintings and iconography that he encountered during his studies in Saint Petersburg. Kakaire's work will be exhibited at Art Dubai by Afriart Gallery.

"In Uganda, it was really through music – through sound rather than through the visual – that things like hopes aspirations fears, social memory, were communicated," Bonin says. "But Samuel Kakaire goes to Leningrad, he studies mosaics, goes to the Hermitage, sees icons, he's learning how to paint with oil, learning how to restore gold leaf."

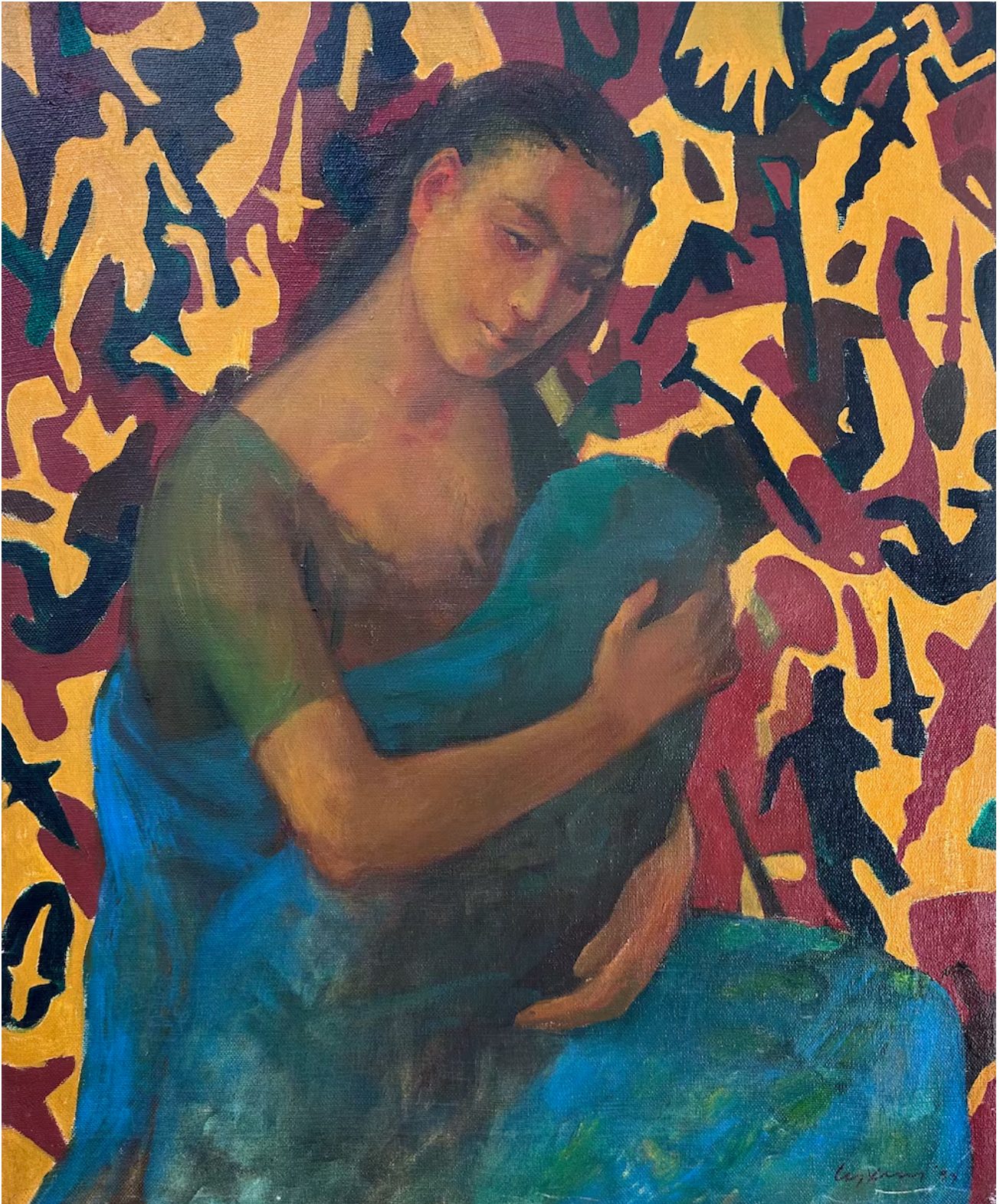
For Kakaire, these are totally foreign materials that he encounters, and influenced by his own cultural background, begins to reimagine new ways of adapting iconographic approaches, producing, as Bonin says, "a totally different material world".

Another artist who was inspired by icon paintings was [Chandraguptha Thenuwara](#). The Sri Lankan artist studied at the Surikov Academy in Moscow from 1985 to 1992.

"Some artists went to the Soviet Union in the 1980s and into the early 90s, they went right before it collapsed, and then they stayed. Chandraguptha is one of them. His tenure in the Soviet Union bridged its collapse, which is a different experience than an artist like [Mahmoud Sabri](#), who goes there in the 1960s when there's much more of a sense that Soviet Union is forever, nobody thought that it would collapse," Bonin says.

"Chandraguptha Thenuwara talks very openly about Perestroika, the kind of openness and dynamism of the place. He talks about the chaos of the collapse, the poverty that he sees. Thenuwara is similar to Sabri and Kakaire. He becomes fascinated with the icon as a way of expression. He uses it in his own work in very personal ways. He uses it not as religious

image, but as something that he uses to talk about pain and suffering in his own country. It becomes a kind of visual vehicle for that.”



Chandraguptha Thenuwara's Mother and Child. Photo: Chandraguptha Thenuwara and Saskia Fernando Gallery

While Kakaire, Sabri and Thenuwara found inspiration in iconography, others were drawn to realism, such as Yemeni artist [Hakim Al Akel](#), who studied at the Moscow State Academy in the years around the collapse of the Soviet Union. The artist, Bonin says, was drawn to the idea “that you

could represent the human figure to tell a historical narrative. These types of expressions are really new to them". Several other artists were drawn to the realism that was an artistic pillar in the Soviet Union, including Syrian artist Abdul Mannan Shamma, whose work will also be displayed in the Modern section. Shamma, like Thenuwara, studied at the Surikov Academy of Fine Arts in Moscow. However, he attended the academy decades before, studying there between 1958 and 1966. Since then, he has become renowned for his murals and social realist paintings.

Then there were artists who sought to break away from traditional materials and approaches altogether, such as in the case of Marcos Grigorian, whose work will be exhibited by [Leila Heller Gallery](#). The Iranian-Armenian artist is known for incorporating materials such as clay and straw in his works, alluding to the mixture used to build houses in Iranian villages.



Marcos Grigorian's Untitled. Photo: Marcos Grigorian and Leila Heller Gallery

"He's still kind of engaged with abstraction, because a lot of the shapes he uses are very basic shapes, but Grigorian's work is a lot a lot about place. It's connected to his native Iran," Bonin says. "He has an incredible story. He's Armenian-Iranian, born in Russia, lived in the United States for a while, he's really the kind of consummate global migrant artist of the 20th century."

Like Grigorian, Ukrainian artist Fedir Tetianych also sought to break from traditional approaches in painting. "They were both very interested in just escaping oil on canvas as a medium," Bonin says.

Tetianych, presented by Voloshyn Gallery, was an artist who didn't really fit "in any of the typical academic boxes in Kyiv". He made art from found materials, scraps of paper, and earth, something along the vein of Arte Povera, an Italian artistic movement prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s that sought to use recycled and common materials to challenge the commercialisation of art. "It's not because he couldn't paint, he did make some paintings, but often they were on cardboard, some of those will be in the fair also," Bonin says. "It's just he was searching for different materials and really thinking about [...] how Earth is the material, it doesn't have to be limited to a particular canvas."

Also featured in the Art Dubai Modern is [Dia Al Azzawi](#), represented by Dubai's [Meem Gallery](#). Unlike most of the artists being exhibited at Art Dubai Modern, the Iraqi artist did not study in the Soviet Union. But his presence in the section is vital, particularly as it signifies the Soviet Union's interest in the artworks that were emerging from the Middle East and Africa in the mid-20th century.



Dia Al Azzawi's Figures in Red. Photo: Dia Al Azzawi and Meem Gallery

"Meem is doing a really interesting booth that is focused on Iraq, including Mahmoud Sabri as well," Bonin says. "Iraq in the 1960s was such a dynamic place for the arts. A character like Azzawi was not someone who studied in the Soviet Union, but whose work was included in exhibitions of Iraqi art that were organized by the Soviet Union. There were a few major exhibitions of Iraqi art – and one was in the late 1950s. There was another that circulated around a few cities in the 1960s. [Azzawi's] work was featured in publications as well."

These works, Bonin says, are still important today, as they present some of the first publications that were made about regional artists.

“There was a huge interest in art from all over Arab countries and from African countries,” Bonin adds. “It was a part of the Soviet knowledge production about new places, newly independent countries or countries going through periods of unrest, upheaval, shifts that defined so much of the decolonizing world in this period.”

There are several other artists being highlighted in the section, each of whom gleaned specific aspects of the art prevalent in the Soviet Union and those exhibited in its museums. These include Lebanese artists Wahib Bteddini and [Fatima El Hajj](#), Azerbaijani artist Ashraf Murad, as well as Saudi artist Abdulsattar Al Mussa.



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Fatima El Hajj's Yellow. Photo: Fatima El Hajj and Mark Hachem Gallery

It is worth noting that most of the artists being exhibited at Art Dubai Modern are men. In fact, the only female artist exhibited in the section is El

Hajj, but that just touches upon the gender imbalance that was prevalent during that time.

“Fatima El Hajj is an exception, and I’m happy Mark Hachem is bringing her work. She studied painting in in Moscow, landscape painting, and she has these incredibly, like, vibrant, impressionistic paintings,” Bonin says. Nevertheless, her solitary presence as a woman poses certain questions about the opportunities, or lack thereof, presented to women artists from the Global South.

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“It’s interesting just to reflect the names we know, whose artworks were being promoted, what is the gender also the people who were going right, and who do we know about?”

Bonin says. “The issue of gender is a question that’s of interest to me. Was it really mostly men who were going to these academies? Looking at the pictures, and the research that I’ve done, it is mostly men who you see going to the art academies or architecture schools.”

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