

Arab art chronicles of the 20th century

Barjeel Art Foundation's largest show so far looks at how artists responded to the socio-political and cultural shifts that shaped the region during this period

Art lovers have the unique opportunity to view a large and important collection of modern art from the Arab world in "The Short Century", an exhibition presented by the Barjeel Art Foundation at the Sharjah Art Museum. The show's title refers to a way of thinking about the 20th century, popularised by British historian Eric Hobsbawm.

In his book "The Age of Extremes" Hobsbawm looked at the dramatic changes in Europe between the beginning of the First World War in 1914 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. From an Arab perspective, significant historical events that can similarly define the 20th century are the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1920 and the Gulf War in 1990-91. This is the framework used by the show's curators, Suheyda Takesh and Karim Sultan to tell the story of the history and art history of the 20th century in the Arab world.

As in Europe, in this region too, the 20th century was an era of violent wars, large-scale human migrations, rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, the birth of new nations, and the rise and fall of various ideologies and leaders. The exhibition, featuring more than 100 paintings and sculptures by leading artists of the era, looks at how modern Arab artists responded to the socio-political and cultural shifts that shaped the Arab world during this period.

It also explores important 20th century art movements in the region such as the development of modern *hurufiyya*, and the advent of abstraction (*tajreed*); and offers insights into the impact of modernism on contemporary artistic practices in the region.

The Barjeel Art Foundation is an independent UAE based initiative established to manage, preserve and exhibit the personal art collection of Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi. It aims to contribute to the intellectual development of the arts scene in the region by building a prominent, publicly accessible art collection in the UAE, and to foster critical dialogue around contemporary art practices with a focus on artists of Arabian heritage. This is the Foundation's largest-ever exhibition, and the first one to focus exclusively on modern Arab art.

Rather than displaying the works chronologically, the curators have developed the narrative around various themes relevant to the time. "The massive changes that took place in the region during this period provide a backdrop for the artistic development and cultural trajectories of the region. The concept of using a broad historical framework allowed us to follow the directions taken by artists at the beginning of the century, and to explore how they developed over the following decades. This provides viewers an entry point for understanding modern art from the Arab world over the past century, and a rich and diverse context for the contemporary art currently produced in the region and beyond," Takesh says.

The exhibition is spread across an entire wing of the museum. Placed at the entrance is a bronze sculpture by Egyptian sculptor Ahmed Abdel Wahab, titled "The Key of Life". Conceived in 1987, the work is inspired by Egypt's ancient pharaonic heritage, but has modern, minimal lines and geometric references.

“During the 20th century many nations gained independence from colonial rule. This led to the need to develop a new national mythology, for which artists delved into the distant past. Also many artists who studied or lived abroad started working with Arabic letters as a way of reconnecting with their roots. But their work was very different from traditional calligraphy because they were interested in exploring the formal aspects of the letters to create new worlds and psychological states, leading to the development of modern hurufiyya, one of the most important art movements in the region. This sculpture by Wahab conveys the essence of the show because a big part of the 20th century was about merging Modernism with national heritage and history,” Sultan says.

The show begins with an introduction to painting from the early 20th century. The salon-style display reflects how artists of the salons and studios in Egypt depicted idealised scenes of travel, landscapes and people. During Ottoman times many of the artists belonged to aristocratic families and were educated in Europe, while many European artists worked and lived in this region. The European influence is clearly visible here in paintings such as a 1914 landscape by Egyptian artist Mohammed Naghi, titled “Paysage d’Italie”, Mahmoud Said’s rural Egyptian landscapes; Saad Al Khadem’s paintings of the Nile and Atta Sabri’s Iraqi landscapes.

The visual narrative continues with a selection of portraits and landscapes from different decades and different parts of the Arab world that indicate how quickly the artists moved to a more accurate depiction of their own culture and surroundings. The eclectic collection includes works that are significant in the personal journeys of the artists or in the art history of this region, such as an early portrait by Syrian artist Marwan Kassab Bachi, painted soon after he moved to Germany, and depictions of the changing urban and rural landscapes by masters such as George Sabbagh, Saliba Douaihy, Yousef Kamel and European Egyptian artist Clea Badaro.

A highlight of this section is a portrait from 1970 of a Palestinian woman in a refugee camp painted by Emirati artist Abdul Qader Al Rais. This work is rare and significant because it documents the aftermath of the exodus in 1967, and also because the artist later stopped doing portraits.

The next section looks at how Arab artists began to combine influences of modern Western art and their own history to develop a unique visual language and to explore new themes in the mid-20th century. The influence of Cubism and abstraction can be seen in the works, however the themes are distinctly Arabian, such as Inji Efflatoun’s painting about the Ezba farm system in Egypt, Tahia Halim’s interpretation of a Nubian souq, Faik Hassan’s depiction of a Bedouin tent, Jewad Selim’s portrait of two sisters in traditional Arabian garb and Dia Azzawi’s abstract figure incorporating references to his experiences as an archaeologist in Iraq. Tunisian artist Hatim Ekmakki’s painting of a woman holding a rooster uses a traditional Arabian symbol to herald the new beginnings in the region, and Seif Wanly’s “Nocturne” reflects the atmosphere of uncertainty as urbanisation brought changes in the traditional rural way of life in the region.

The political and cultural shift in the latter half of the century, when the region was devastated by wars and conflict is marked by artworks that address themes of “National Tragedy” and “Lament”. Iraqi Ismail Fattah’s bronze sculpture from 1965 blurring the borders between a human figure and a chair, and his compatriot Faisal Laibi Sahi’s 1978 monumental painting depicting the funeral procession of young martyrs convey the mood in the country and the region; but they are also timeless and universal laments about the tragedy of war.

Capping the chronological timeline of the show are works from 1991 by two women artists, from opposite sides of the Gulf War. Both Iraqi Afifa Aleiby’s “War Painting” and Kuwaiti Thuraya Al Baqsami’s etching “The Parting” speak about the suffering of ordinary people and are a grim reminder that artists continue to deal with these themes in contemporary times.

Other works look beyond the battle lines and war zones at the “Home Front”. Syrian master Louay Kayyali’s portrait of a solitary woman, perhaps a war widow, pays tribute to the resilience of the people, and Mahmoud Sabri’s anxious midnight scene of a food vendor on the streets of Baghdad conveys the fears of ordinary people. Mohammad Issiakhem’s painting shows a ghostly female figure standing in front of a wall covered with symbols and slogans of the liberation movement in Algeria. The sense of foreboding is palpable in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s painting of a street scene in Palestine done just before the Naqba. The famous Palestinian artist and writer subsequently moved to Iraq, and this painting becomes particularly significant as it is among his few works that survived the American bombings of Baghdad.

Another important artistic theme in the 20th century was the idea of Pan-Arabism and nationalism. Syrian Mahmoud Hammad’s 1958 painting “The Arab Unity” conveys this spirit and big hope of the region through images of a strong man embracing two children. Egyptian artist Hamed Eweis’s painting “Le Gardien de la Vie”, done a decade later, captures the fear and uncertainty after the Arab defeat in the Arab-Israeli War. It shows a larger-than-life armed man shielding a group comprising children, young people, a newly wed couple, scientists, farmers, factory workers and even animals. Images of factories and new construction in the background assert the spirit of nationalism, reassuring the people that the country is still strong enough to protect them and their way of life.

Later works introspect on the failures and the harsh realities of the time, such as Kuwaiti artist Ibrahim Ismail’s sculpture from the 1970s of a lost looking astronaut, which has been displayed alongside famous Syrian poet Mohammad Al Maghut’s poem “An Arab Traveller in Space”, where he begs for a ticket to space to escape from his tearful country.

The show then focuses on the experiments with abstraction that began across the region in the 1960s. This section features various styles of abstraction, such as an expressionist portrait by Marwan Bachi, which garnered a lot of attention in Europe; Samia Halaby’s early forays into geometric abstraction; a sculpture of an owl by Adam Henein; Sudanese artist Ahmed Shibrain’s explorations of Arabic letters in the style of the Khartoum School of Hurufiyya; Salwa Choucair’s architecture and maths inspired constructivist paintings and Shakir Hassan Al Said’s works influenced by Sufi philosophy and postmodern deconstruction.

Another group of works looks at how artists were beginning to delve into their own histories and traditions to revive and reinterpret indigenous motifs to express themselves. The closely packed figures and religious icons in a painting by Fateh Moudarres reflect his move from Aleppo to overcrowded Damascus, and Dia Azzawi has used Babylonian icons and cuneiform symbols in his work. Also included here are works by woman artist Madiha Omar, who was a pioneer of the hurufiyya movement, and Moroccan artist Mohammed Melehi’s gestural studies of letters.

Another major theme in the show is the response of artists to nation-building activities such as the construction of the Aswan Dam in Egypt. Many of these artists were commissioned by the governments, such as Abdul Hadi El Gazzar, who documented the building of the Aswan Dam in his “Scientific Progress” series, and Effat Nagi, whose illustrations capture not just the massive construction site, but also the people who worked on it, the landscape, the textiles and other cultural elements of the area. The ancient symbol of the cockerel appears once again in the artworks as a symbol of modernity in the Arab world.

In the final section, the show looks for parallels in the Gulf region, where modernisation began in the 1970s. The centrepiece here is Bahraini artist Abdulla Muharraqi’s well-known 1988 painting, “Eternal Torment”, depicting a pearl diver trapped in his net and shackled to his grounded, dilapidated dhow, while steamships and oil rigs loom large in the background. The painting depicts the eternal struggle of coming to terms with rapid modernisation, and resonates with Kuwaiti artist Ibrahim Ismail’s 1983 sculpture of a man shackled to a stake, titled “The Challenge”. Also included is a 1989 landscape painting by Al Rais, documenting buildings in Dubai’s Shindagha area that have since been demolished.

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