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The bourgeoisie, real estate & nation-building, or how the Egyptian & Middle Eastern art markets operate

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For Mada Masr, Ahmed Naji writes about the rapidly evolving art market in Egypt. Read the fascinating text below:

In 1989, Egyptian billionaire businessman Nassef Sawiris walked in to a trade fair at the Marriott Hotel in Cairo. Various luxury goods were exhibited alongside high-end furniture and expensive antiques. An exhibition of works by important artists of the period occupied one corner. The portraitist and still-life painter Sabry Ragheb was the most prominent member of that group. The exhibition organizers, Shahira Idris and Ghada Shahbandar, were venturing their first steps into the world of collecting, buying, and selling art; Ragheb had loaned them one of his favorite paintings as a gesture of appreciation.

Sawiris fell in love with the work, a still-life of a red rose, and as with any love at first sight, the world was no longer the same. He asked to buy the painting. Shahbandar and Idris responded that the work was not for sale, but Sawiris insisted. At his urging, Shahbandar contacted Ragheb, who was angered by the request and refused. Still, Sawiris persisted. In response, the artist demanded a then unheard of sum for the work, equivalent to three times the standard market price: LE 10,000. Sawiris's response was quick and decisive: "Agreed."

The sale set a new benchmark. According to Shahbandar, Ragheb's painting represented the most expensive painting sold at the time by a contemporary Egyptian artist. In this period the market was in flux and prices, which previously had settled in the hundreds of Egyptian pounds, reached into the thousands. Urban sprawl led to the establishment of new satellite cities outside of Cairo. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990

edged the last remnants of an ideal of Arab unity toward collapse. Maps were changing, and the Arab art market was taking its first shaky steps.

The world before 1989

In the 1950s and 1960s, the state nationalized artistic life in Egypt; the cultural administration was restructured and most significant artistic initiatives and cultural spaces operated under state supervision. In the 1980s, only a handful of private galleries were operating in Cairo. Prior to the sale of Ragheb's work in 1989, says Shahbandar, the maximum amount paid for a painting was no more than LE 3000. According to her, the Safar Khan Gallery and Tareq al-Marsafi's Arabesque Gallery represented the most prominent art spaces at the time. The audience for art was limited primarily to a short list of names of collectors who confined their purchases to the works of already prominent, well-established artists. Nevertheless, economic liberalization policies were already having an effect and art's relationship to the market was beginning to change, witnessing a gradual increase in prices and the emergence of a broader public interest in the arts.

In this period, the state largely withdrew from the cultural sphere. In partnership with her friend Shahira Idris, Shahbandar invested her energies in interior design and dealing antiques and paintings. The two also began visiting art shows and meeting with artists. At the time, many contemporary artists in Cairo had work spaces in Wikalat al-Ghoury, a caravanserai constructed in the early 16th century, or in one of the several other historic buildings the state had restored and lent to artists as studios. Visiting such places helped Shahbandar develop a wide network with artists of all generations.

Despite its many flaws, the state system worked well in many ways, and was comprehensive, providing artists with an overarching framework of support. In addition to offering studio spaces, the state sponsored galleries and ran an acquisitions committee, as well as juries that awarded prizes to artists. In the 1980s, however, Egypt was transitioning to a free market system, efforts were made to "re-organize" the public sector, and state spending was cut from all sides. As international corporations entered the Egyptian market, private exhibitions were held at Cairo's five-star hotels for the country's new economic elite. It was at these shows that Shahbandar and Idris displayed works by contemporary artists for the first time. Their exhibitions attracted the attention of a segment of the public, and the two branched out, organizing shows lasting just over a week in private residences, often in the empty apartment of an acquaintance. Their clientele grew as a result, as did the circle of artists they worked with.

Shahbandar and Idris exhibited works by artists who had come to prominence after 1952 including Salah Taher, Hussein Bicar, Gazbia Sirry, Maurice Farid and Nagy Basilios, as well as younger artists active in the period, some of whom went on to pursue high profile careers such as Samir Fouad, while others, such as Huda Khaled and Fatima Rifaat, remained relatively obscure. Other artists, such as Hassan Soliman, refused to work with the duo because he objected to exhibiting in makeshift gallery spaces. He did, however, recommend artist-colleagues with whom he thought Shahbandar and Idris might be interested in collaborating.

Shahbandar was active in the art world from 1986 through the mid-1990s, making a name for herself as one of the scene's most prominent figures. Nevertheless, the material returns were modest, and she was unable to lease a place permanently and transform it into a fully equipped gallery. She continued to work on her own and began receiving various requests for consultancy services. The influx of international corporations to Egypt introduced new work habits and marketing strategies. These companies recognized art's ability to serve as a foil for the identity of the company or corporation and as a long-term investment. The international corporations that had recently begun operating in Egypt, approached Shahbandar for assistance in selecting art for their

offices. She chose works and arranged them in the local headquarters of several large companies including those of American Express and Carpet City. On occasion, she was asked to work on a smaller scale: for example, acquiring paintings for the office of a company executive or installing works on a single floor.

In 1990, Stefania Angarano arrived on an exploratory visit to found Mashrabia Gallery in downtown Cairo. Previously, she had worked at a number of Italian galleries specializing in contemporary art. Angarano recalls how, when she arrived in Cairo, some galleries were displaying and selling paintings paired with couches and other pieces of furniture. Her primary aim in coming to Cairo was to establish a space that presented art as an integrated whole, rather than as an element of interior design chosen to match the drapes.

Art enters the free market

The factors contributing to the transformation of the art market in the late 1980s were not limited to the entrance of international corporations. In this period, the government expanded construction projects and support for the capital's new satellite cities, resulting in significant growth in the real-estate market, especially to the west and east of Cairo, with the construction of 6th of October City and areas around Nasr City and the Fifth Settlement. Within the city's existing bounds, villas were being torn down to make way for apartment buildings, while on the margins, opulent mansions sprang up. An economic elite that had emerged on the back of the open-market, or *infitah*, policies introduced by President Anwar Sadat in the 1970s took to buying art as a means of generating (and flaunting) class distinctions; hanging original paintings and works of art in the home became a marker of social exclusivity. This was a period of great extravagance.

At the same time, many works by leading artists of the early 20th century, which had previously remained out of sight, became available during this period, including sculptures by Mahmoud Moukhtar and paintings by Mahmoud Said: perhaps the most celebrated of the "pioneer-generation" artists credited with founding a modern Egyptian art movement. In an emerging market lacking sufficient legislation and institutional oversight, counterfeits proliferated. Soon, Shahbandar found that in addition to her role as art dealer she was also compelled to act as an investigator: examining the authenticity of each painting. She tells the story of one incident in which she was asked to appraise a painting by Hussein Bicar. When she brought the painting to the artist for verification, he smiled slowly and told her that it was a good painting, but it wasn't his; someone had imitated his style.

"Nude with the Golden Bracelets" and "The Reciter"

This hothouse climate in the art market tended to foster the sale of certain kinds of works over others. The depiction of nudity represented one of the primary factors informing the kinds of works circulating in the market after 1989. Sultan al-Qassemi, chairman of Barjeel Securities and founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, recalls that images of nude paintings by Mahmoud Said published in an auction house catalog of the period were censored. At the same time Karim Francis, director of the Karim Francis Gallery in downtown Cairo, defends this approach, which he frames as a response to laws in Arab countries regulating the display of nudity rather than any rules imposed by the auction houses themselves. Shahbandar, for her part, believes that the moral basis for an assessment of the value of a work of art or the tepid reception of paintings of nudes can be attributed to the predominance of specific social values.

In the early 1990s, Shahbandar exhibited a painting by Said, which was priced at less than LE 100,000. The Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris had turned down the work — titled *Nude with Gold Bracelets* (1946) — preferring, instead, she reports, to purchase and display Said's *The Reciter* (date unconfirmed). Representatives of the Institut claimed that the painting of the pious reciter of the Quran was more

representative of Egyptian art than a painting of a nude, dark-skinned woman. According to Shahbandar, "In the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s, a general social climate prevailed that rejected paintings of nudes. This was not just due to the spread of Islamism; it involved all sectors of society." Sitting in her home, Shahbandar gestures toward a painting by Sabry Ragheb depicting a girl applying makeup in front of a mirror and wearing a short, black nightdress. The painting had been purchased by a woman from a middle class, Coptic family. A few days later, the client returned, asking to exchange the work because her daughter would not tolerate having a painting of a nude in the home. What Shahbandar describes as mutable social mores came to inform the practices of cultural institutions, such as the Institut du Monde Arabe, that played a prominent role on the international stage and sought to influence perceptions of Arab identity abroad. The same values came into play in even the most basic forms of social organization, such as the family. Shahbandar tells of how she would use her own exhibition space to display nude paintings by Georges Sabbagh from private family collections because the children of the owners refused to display the works and approached her for help in selling them.

Others, such as Mohamed Talaat, the director of Misr Gallery in Cairo's upscale neighborhood of Zamalek, believe that those social values that discouraged the exhibition of nudity have since changed. In 2012, for example, Misr Gallery exhibited various works created by Nadine Hammam over the course of the period following the January 25 revolution of 2011. The exhibition, titled *Tank Girl*, was composed of acrylic paintings representing the eponymous female nude who confronts the viewer from atop a tank with her legs spread, transforming the barrel of the gun into a larger than life size phallus. An explanatory booklet accompanying the exhibition framed the work in the following terms:

Through her work, which she has titled Tank Girl, the artist sets out to reconfigure stereotypes and established beliefs. Simulating this reformulation a combination of power inversions, a woman controls one of the most vicious war machines, the tank, as a symbol suggesting 'woman's' ability to impose her power and prevail in the battle to assert their existence.

The booklet closes with a paragraph that explains: "Through her treatment of these complex symbols, the artist hopes to locate a more active role for modern women in the political and social scene. Here, *Tank Girl* represents every Egyptian woman." According to Talaat, those collectors with an interest in buying art today are attracted to the more contemporary works in various media and don't have a problem with works that contain nudity or even erotic content, such as works in the *Eros* collection by el-Dessouki Fahmi, a portion of which was also shown at Misr Gallery.



A painting by Sabry Ragheb

New adventurers

Until the mid-1990s, there were no clear laws on the art market for setting prices and confirming the authenticity of works of art. An ethical code existed, but no supervisory body. Artists set their prices and the galleries exhibited their works, earning a percentage on sale. Some of the artists active in the 1980s harbored misgivings about this system and asked galleries to purchase their works instead of handing them over directly for consignment. At the same time, artists were not immune to questionable behavior, and cutting out the middleman by selling work at a lower price than that advertised in the gallery constituted one of the worst possible violations of the ethical code. Yet, apart from the latter, Egypt has no laws in place regulating the art market.

A case brought against the Aida Ayoub Gallery in 2005 (Case 2238/3) laid bare some of the flaws in Egypt's art market. Aida Ayoub began working in the art world in the early 1990s, and sold her clients dozens of paintings forged by the late artist Yousri Hassan. After opening her gallery, Ayoub quickly established a broad network in Egypt's art world and was awarded the honorary title "patron of the arts" by the Minister of Culture. The forgeries were only discovered when May Zaid, one of Ayoub's clients, tried to insure some of the paintings she had purchased, only to discover the deceit. Due to the absence of Egyptian laws penalizing art forgery, the courts dealt with the case as an act of fraud.

The uptick in activity in the Egyptian art market stemmed from the drive among the new upper middle class to acquire artwork. Some of these individuals were encouraged to enter the market based on a business approach that relied on a logic of quick gains. Until the mid-1990s, most owners of private galleries in Egypt were women whose interest in art had prompted their entry into the field; the need to make a profit proved a secondary consideration. Sherwet Shafie represented another prominent art world figure. Shafie had opened the Safar Khan Gallery after leaving her position as a program presenter on Egyptian television in the 1960s. While Safar Khan Gallery still operates today, Shahbandar stopped working in the field in the mid-1990s due, she claims, to the type of clients who were beginning to take an interest in art. She recalls standing with the artist on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition she had organized, when they overheard a client saying she wanted to buy a painting because the colors matched her living room interior. The artist was insulted and pleaded with her not to sell the painting to that client. In 2005, Shahbandar would found Shayfeencom (We are watching you), a movement that aimed to uncover the corruption and electoral fraud of the Mubarak regime. She would later become one of the most prominent names in political activism, especially after the 2011 revolution.

Shahbandar withdrew from the field just as the new adventurers were entering. At the time, Karim Francis was embarking on a journey of self-discovery which took him from working in the import/export business to tourism, and, finally, to art. Francis devoted three years to reading about art and familiarizing himself with artists and various artistic practices before opening his own gallery. He held his first show in 1995 in an apartment he owns on Sherifein Street in downtown Cairo. The group exhibition, titled Identity, included works by artists such as Mohamed Abla, as well as literary works, displaying manuscripts belonging to the celebrated novelist Sonallah Ibrahim.

Sitting in his gallery, surrounded sculptures by Sobhy Guirguis, Francis recalls his beginnings:

When I started working in the art world, most buyers were receptive to works by the older, well-established names. Quite simply, each buyer felt in touch with the artists of their generation. However, motivated by my own passion, I wanted to put new names and new ideas in art out there that had not yet been seen in the market. I held a series of group shows titled New Talents to introduce artists whose work was being shown for the first time, as well as to show artistic modes and experimentation that went beyond paintings hanging on a wall, including installation artworks and video art.

This spirit of innovation and embrace of the unfamiliar would come to define the direction of the art scene in the late-1990s and early 2000s. Francis, alongside other gallerists active in the period and espousing similar ambitions, helped provide a platform for the emergence of a number of artists who are often referred to collectively as “the 90s generation.”

**Translation courtesy Michelle Henjum. This project was carried out in the framework of MHWLN, a research and writing group dedicated to the history of contemporary art in Egypt. MHWLN's website features this piece in its entirety in both Arabic and English with relevant images. The second, final part will be published on Mada within the coming week.*

[karenarchey](#) 2015-05-13 16:39:06 UTC #2



Architectural rendering of Mataraf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha

Part two of Naji's essay has just been posted on Mada. Check it out below, and thank you to [MHWLN](#), a research and writing group dedicated to the history of contemporary art in Egypt.

The joy of the sale

In the 1990s, state financial policies continued to liberalize so as to integrate Egypt into the new world market, and Egypt signed many partnership agreements with the European Union. These agreements included articles explicitly referencing cultural cooperation; a number of foreign cultural institutions became active in Egypt. Initially, these institutions were viewed with a great deal of suspicion, and were boycotted by art critics: most prominently Osama Afifi, who understood the activities of foreign cultural and arts organizations to represent a form of interference with Egypt's natural course and part of a larger plan to destabilize Egyptian national identity. From the Ford Foundation to the Townhouse gallery (to borrow Afifi's examples), the arts organizations that played an important role in supporting contemporary artistic practices were subjected to attacks of treason and suspicion, to the extent that art critic Sobhi el-Sharoni described the role of these organizations as malicious in his book *Encyclopedia of Egyptian Fine Arts in the Twentieth Century*.

This model of arts organization does not rely on selling art but, rather, approaches art within a developmental framework, operating according to different economic rules. Despite various drawbacks, this approach proved to be an effective stimulus for contemporary art practices and provided young artists with the space to branch out and experiment with installation and video art. These media are difficult to sell, and works in this vein have not been well-received historically by government arts institutions; the 1990s generation of artists was marginalized and alienated from official institutions that continued to show and display art that was considered more representative of "Egyptian identity."

In the midst of this struggle and the changes taking place in the art world, Karim Francis was attempting to create a third model, closer to that espoused by Stefania Angarano, the director of Mashrabia Gallery, who refused to work with artists teaching in arts academies or exhibit the paintings of deceased artists, preferring to focus instead on contemporary Egyptian art. Francis declined the opportunity to convert the gallery into an establishment that relied on outside funding and preferred to pursue his own path. He made this choice not

because he believed that accepting funding would make him a “traitor,” as per the widespread accusations against institutions that relied on these sources, but for other reasons, which Francis enumerates as follows:

First, I'm not convinced by the idea of organizations that fund the arts. Personally, if I was given money, I wouldn't work and struggle so hard to show and sell art. Also, the issue of "selling" in itself is the job of a gallery owner, not only for the sake of material gain but also because it lends the work an added sense of value. I feel a real joy when I sell a work of art. Second, the work model of funding organizations turns the artist and the gallery owner into employees who receive monthly funds. Selling art grants you a greater freedom. Third, working with these organizations is demanding, there is a lot of paperwork, routine procedures, and funding applications to fill out that contain questions that are, in my opinion, meaningless, yet you're forced to answer them and say what the funders want to hear, or to clothe what you're doing in their concepts and development terms. In a private gallery all you need is a license and commercial registration.

At the same time, Francis does accept funding from these organizations for the work of certain artists, especially for costly video art which cannot be sold afterwards.

The Karim Francis Gallery was one of the first places that opened its doors to the 1990s generation, many members of whom have now become internationally celebrated artists and whose works can sell for hundreds of thousands of pounds. Francis mentions that, in the 1990s, he showed a work of Ghada Amer priced at LE5,000, and no one was interested in buying it. Now the same work sells for US\$165,000. He laughs, remembering the surprise on the faces of gallery visitors when they encountered works of installation art: "There were very few sales. So I thought, why don't we open things up to new experiments and practices? The visitors did not understand what was going on and I was showing these experiments and works in an attempt to understand and absorb and to create a dialog around these new ideas."

In this period, Karim Francis Gallery, Mashrabia Gallery and Townhouse played a vital role in posing alternatives and new paths for art practice. In 2000, the three locations collaborated to put on the Nitaq Festival; a second festival was held the following year and was designed to correspond with the launch of the Cairo Biennale. Negar Azimi (a former employee of the Townhouse) describes this event in an article as: "the most palpable sign that the Egyptian art scene as we knew it had been shaken up." According to Azimi, the festival was significant for:

the view it provided as to the tendencies of a new generation of artists working within idioms that defied prevailing notions of contemporaneity. Engineered to start on the very day of the 2001 Cairo Biennale's opening, the second Nitaq in particular served as an 'off' version in every sense of the term. While the Biennale was characterized by a reliance on tradition both in concept and curation, Nitaq would prove most unconventional, shaking up stagnant conceptions surrounding the use of space, medium and the potential for dematerialization of the art object. Like true post-modernists, the preferred avenue of expression for the artists at Nitaq was multi-media installation executed with conceptualist tendencies. A number of the Nitaq artists, Lara Baladi, Amina Mansour, Hassan Khan, Wael Shawky and Mona Marzouk among them, have since gone on to exhibit widely internationally.

The event would come to represent a landmark in the history of contemporary art in Egypt: signaling the entrance of a new coterie of artists and institutions, and, with them, new practices and understandings of art. At the same time, the market horizons for this work were expanding.

Auctioneers in the cities of the desert and bourgeois gold

In a recent interview, Sultan al-Qassemi noted the absence of a healthy demand for Egyptian art in the 1990s: "There was art, even in the 90s, but there wasn't a market for art in Egypt, and there was a near total absence of Egyptian art outside of Egypt. Collectors of Egyptian art could be counted on one hand, most prominently Mohammed Said Al-Farsi, the mayor of Jeddah, and the emir of Qatar, Hassan bin Mohamed Al Thani." Nevertheless, with the beginning of a new century, cities in the Gulf were rapidly acquiring international status, and the skyscrapers rising in Doha competed with those of Dubai. The entrance of auction houses at this particular moment would have a significant effect on the market for works from Egypt and the region.

Francis relates that at the start of the new millennium, he began to receive invitations and friendly advice to go to Dubai, where the art market was already strong and expanding as a result of the rapid growth of the real estate market. After ten years of involvement in the art world, he had made a name for himself both locally and internationally. During this period, Francis met a European interior designer working in Dubai and she began working with him in selecting art for her projects. In 2005, he was visited by members of a delegation from Christie's auction house who sought to familiarize themselves with Egyptian and Arab art and art markets. Francis accompanied them to a number of studios, including those of the prominent artists Adel el-Siwi, Mohamed Abla, and Adam Henein. The auctioneers were undertaking their first exploratory visits of the Arab art market by visiting a number of Arab cities in preparation for the inauguration of branches in Dubai and the wider Gulf region.

In a 2012 study of the Middle Eastern art market, *The Rise of the Middle Eastern Art Market Since 2006*, author Taymour Grahne quotes Philipp Hoffmann, executive director of the Fine Art Fund Group, as setting the total value of the Middle Eastern art market at US\$10 billion; this value was expected to triple in coming years. By the end of 2005, Christie's had opened its first branch in the Middle East. Sotheby's and Bonhams followed suite. The establishment of these auction houses had a transformative effect on the status of Arab art. Qassemi describes some of these changes:

These houses employed art scholars and experts to study and appraise Egyptian art and did reports to verify the proposed numbers. Sometimes, we'd hear about works selling for outrageous amounts but we had no way to verify these numbers; the houses worked to verify them. The auction houses reduced the number of fakes threatening the Arab art market, due to the passing off and sale of art forgeries without verifying their authenticity or history. The houses produced authenticated catalogs of Egyptian artists. There is a catalogue raisonné documenting all of the works of Mahmoud Said, Ramses Younan, and other greats, which became essential references for their work."

When I asked Syrian artist Youssef Abdelke recently why people in Dubai, the Gulf and Cairo buy art at these prices, he replied, "everything the bourgeoisie touches turns to gold" — attributing the statement to Karl Marx. If auction houses aim primarily to generate more and more "gold," a law governing the art market must first be established for pricing works of art. In a market where opinions and critical judgments are up for debate, the auction is one of the few institutions that leaves the task of determining the price of a work of art to the free market. On this basis, the work of a particular artist is assigned a monetary value that becomes, as Mohamed Talaat says, a reference point for future sales.

At the same time, Talaat explains that the art market and its main site of exchange in the Gulf-based auction houses possess blind spots which leave them open to manipulation. He tells of how some galleries might offer the works of young artists they represent to auction houses, only to turn around and purchase the same works

for a high price at auction through an agent. As a result, the value of an artist's work increases and art collectors are encouraged to seek them out. After prices have multiplied, the gallery re-exhibits and resells the artist's work. However, Qassemi takes a different view regarding the manipulation of auction bidding to increase the price of an artist's work: "This might have occurred at the beginning, but now it would be difficult for such a thing to happen because the market is very narrow, and if a gallery did such a thing it would be discovered immediately, because the market is small and we all know what's out there."

While warning against the misuse of the auction system, Talaat also complains of national biases perpetuated by gallerists in the region, claiming:

Iranian businessmen and millionaires mostly reside in Dubai, therefore, they buy works by Iranian artists, who have come to represent a large portion of the art market shared by Arab art. And the Iranians aren't satisfied with just acquiring art; they also support projects promoting Iranian art in Dubai and the Arab countries. Galleries in Syria and Lebanon also have a clear bias against Egyptian art, to the degree that the director of a Syrian gallery announced a while ago in an interview that the only artists on the market are Syrian artists. On the other hand, there are galleries in Egypt that do not coordinate with each other at all.

Francis holds a different opinion, stating that he has held shows for Egyptian artists in Lebanon and Syria. He adds, "galleries might collaborate on a given project, but we can't work together or coordinate with each other because, frankly, we're competitors in the same market." Whether at the auction house or in the gallery, the value assigned to works of art is often determined by a system that rewards the self-interest of those with a profit to make from the sale of work.

Ultimately, the market is supported by art collectors who invest heavily in particular names, acquiring the works of these artists with the goal of building savings and investing in property, as a painting that is worth "ten" today might reach a hundred in a few years. Such individuals seek to protect the market and enforce the rules governing it, so as to guard the value of their investments. The collapse of the market or any fundamental change in the laws of appraisal and pricing that regulating it, translates into a loss in the assets of art collectors and a collapse of their investments.

Modern art in the museum

Outside interest in acquiring modern Egyptian art originated in the 1960s, as students from Gulf states moved to Egypt to pursue advanced education or for various other reasons, and were exposed to the works of modern and contemporary artists. As Qassemi recounts, there were four major art collectors in the Arab Gulf as early as the 1980s. The most significant of these belonged to Mohammed Said al-Farsi, the mayor of Jeddah, and owner of the largest collection of works by modern Egyptian artists. The private art collection of Qatar's Sheikh Hassan Al Thani would serve as the seed of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. Currently, he claims, the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art still possesses the largest collection of modern and contemporary art in the region comprised of some 12,000 pieces. At the same time, the museum operates within an extremely limited annual budget of LE 2 million. While the National Public Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Algiers (MAMA) stands in second place with a collection of some 8,000 works, Doha's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art is quickly closing in from behind.

Talaat graduated from Cairo's College of Fine Arts in 1999. In addition to his work as an artist, he took an interest in organizing exhibitions. In 2005, he was appointed director of the Arts Palace at the Cairo Opera House, where he worked with the artist Mohsen Shaalan who was serving at the time as the head of the Fine

Arts Sector in the Ministry of Culture. Talaat relates that in the period in which he served as director of the Arts Palace there was something of a boom in the art market in that a new breed of collector interested in young artists appeared on the scene and new Arab markets opened up, while state institutions continued to lag behind.

Gradually, however, the state began opening its doors to the so-called 1990s generation, which had been excluded from exhibiting their work at national venues in the years prior. This move represented a point of contention for artists of previous generations. The latter understood the works of these artists as alienated from the national identity of Egyptian art. In other instances, younger artists were accused of crossing red lines. Thus, for example, a number of artists and art critics demanded that Khaled Hafez and Wael Shawky be investigated for tatbia, or normalization of relations with Israel, as well as insulting national values.

The state's newfound interest in these artists stemmed, in part, from the esteem their works enjoyed abroad, and was fueled by an attempt to recover its original position of influence in the arts sphere. Galleries such as the Townhouse served as international authorities on contemporary Egyptian art and were called upon regularly to nominate artists to participate in initiatives outside of Egypt: a role historically monopolized by the Ministry of Culture. However, despite breakthroughs and attempts at change initiated by Shaalan, the Fine Arts Sector's performance in this regard was limited by its restricted budget, and continued to weaken after 2010, Talaat claims. Eventually, Talaat grew discouraged with the rejection of many of his project proposals. His experience in the state arts' administration qualified him to pursue work as an art consultant: developing collections for a number of real estate and tourism companies. He also launched plans to open his own space.

While the Egyptian government sector was scaling down its involvement in the arts, Gulf-state governments, and, in particular, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Qatar, were becoming increasingly active players in the field and initiating construction on various museum projects. Yet, in doing so, they have pursued distinct aims and cultivated varying approaches. Thus, each state in the region pursues a different policy in acquiring art. According to Qassemi:

*In the UAE, the government purchases and acquires works of art through a museums authority, which has a board of specialists who study paintings and determine what to purchase. There are regulations governing acquisitions, and certain museums don't buy art from auction houses. In Qatar, the decision to purchase a work is instantaneous and is made quickly depending upon the market and what is on offer. Qatar also buys from auction houses. The most significant purchase it made at an auction was the painting *Les Chadoufs* by Mahmoud Said, which sold for more than US \$2.4 million.*

Likewise, in a study titled *Re-Inventing the Museum in Abu Dhabi and Qatar?*, Laura Damême explains how these particular governments have used museums to achieve various objectives. In both Abu Dhabi and Qatar, the number of foreign workers and residents in 2010-2011 stood at over 80 percent of the total population. In Abu Dhabi, Damême claims, the government uses museums to present itself as a global capital offering international-brand museums such as the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and Louvre Abu Dhabi. Meanwhile, in choosing to build the Museum of Islamic Art and Mathaf, Qatar approaches museums as a means of asserting the cultural specificity and Muslim-Arab identity of its citizens, which account for no more than 15 percent of the total population.

Qassemi adds another possible explanation for the considerable investments made by Gulf countries in the art market: Building museums carries a clear political message. The erection of important new centers of cultural

and artistic preservation and display projects an image of these governments as capable of meeting the needs of their citizens, in addition to bolstering the terms of national and cultural identity.

The art market in the Arab world: At the intersection of real estate and oil money

Wealth in the Middle East is concentrated primarily within two markets: real estate and oil. Those familiar with the contemporary history of the arts and the art market in the region can see clearly how the money pouring in from these sources has played a key role in shaping and altering the market. The relationship of art to real estate originated in an understanding of art as an element of interior design. The separation of art from interior design required gallery owners to take significant risks on less conventional works of art. Art's autonomy from the realm of décor also relied on the subsequent development of a greater appreciation amongst many buyers for the immaterial, as well as the material value of art. With the expansion of the real estate market and urban sprawl in the satellite cities popping up outside of Cairo, the interest of the Egyptian economic elite in acquiring works of art steadily increased. Art, and the acquisition of art, became important markers of social status amongst the upper and upper middle classes.

The relationship of art to real estate became salient again when art was taken up as a vehicle for re-branding the city of Dubai. In the past decade, art has played a central role in the formulation of the image of Gulf countries, which compete to acquire art collections in a race to establish museums that reflect a progressive image of these states, while also converting art into material assets, or a form of investment and savings.

However, despite the surge occasioned by this outside interest in the Egyptian art market, exhibition halls in Cairo have tended to privilege modern art over work by contemporary artists. Moreover, local cultural and social mores inform the processes of selling and appraising art. Works with sexual, religious or politically sensitive content are particularly likely to be excluded from the market. Nevertheless, the market's relative upswing is related to the appearance of young art collectors who no longer possess the same inhibitions as their predecessors and who are more receptive to purchasing contemporary works of art that reflect some of the spirit of the present moment.

**This project was carried out in the framework of MHWLN, a research and writing group dedicated to the history of contemporary art in Egypt. MHWLN's website features this piece in its entirety in both Arabic and English with relevant images. Translation courtesy Michelle Henjum.

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