



Art in Qatar

A Smithsonian in the sand

With the opening of Mathaf, the first Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar is racing to turn itself into the cultural hub of the Middle East

Dec 29th 2010 | DOHA | from PRINT

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QATAR'S ambition to become the Gulf's most important cultural destination took its first step with the opening of the Museum of Islamic Art in 2008. The stark white dome of travertine slabs, overlooking the waters of Doha bay and visibly Islamic in aesthetic, was designed by I.M. Pei, the Chinese-American architect who built the glass pyramid for the Louvre in Paris. For more than 20 years the al-Thani, Qatar's ruling family, had been buying the best Islamic objects that came on to the market, including glass, carpets, astrolabes, Korans, manuscripts and miniatures. With its unusual interiors, its magnificent display cases and its clever lighting, Mr Pei's creation quickly (and rightly) took its place as one of the great museums of the world.

The al-Thani will reach their next major cultural milestone in 2013 when Jean Nouvel, like Mr Pei a winner of architecture's most prestigious honour, the Pritzker prize, unveils his National Museum of Qatar. The pearl-shaped emirate was little more than a string of nomadic tents 50 years ago, so no one is saying what will be on display inside the building. But hoardings along the huge construction site on the Corniche show that Mr Nouvel was inspired in the design of the museum itself by the rose-shaped encrustations of salt crystals that are to be found in the desert.

In between there is Mathaf, an embryo project opened on December 30th that aims to give modern art a wider audience in the Arab world. Mathaf, after the Arabic word for museum, is

based on a collection, mostly of paintings, that dates back to the 1840s. It has been given a temporary home by Doha's Education City, in a former school (pictured above) that has been refurbished by a practical French architect, Jean-François Bodin.

The project took less than a year to complete and cost just €8m (\$10.5m), according to Mr Bodin. But the al-Thani's aims for the museum are ambitious. "With the opening of Mathaf", says Sheikha al-Mayassa al-Thani, the emir's daughter who chairs the Qatar Museums Authority (QMA), "we are making Qatar *the* place to see, explore and discuss the creations of Arab artists of the modern era and of our own time."

Modernist art for public display in the Middle East has long been something of a paradox. Painting is not part of the Arab tradition and museums are a Western invention. Arab art from the 19th and early 20th centuries has a very European feel. A small artistic elite studied in the *beaux arts* schools in France and Italy and then spent their lives mostly teaching—and painting camels and donkeys, markets and peasants in an accomplished if often undistinguished manner. The chief value of these paintings today is as a record of a way of life that has long gone.

From the interwar period a number of schools sprang up in Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo, Damascus and Tunis. Artists were trying to make sense of modernity, the end of colonialism and the struggle for independence, but the work they produced was often derivative and the collections in which it was shown patchy or transient. Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art, for example, gathered, among other things, fine work by Jackson Pollock, Alberto Giacometti and Henry Moore. These, together with its modernist Iranian works, were on show for a while after the museum opened in 1977 but have hardly been seen since the revolution two years later.

The Museum of Modern Art in Cairo shows only work by Egyptian artists, yet some of the country's best pieces are in a private museum in Alexandria which is devoted to the work of Mahmoud Said, a lawyer who painted folklorist scenes as a hobby, and the canvasses of Adham and Seif Wanly, two brothers who worked together and exhibited in Venice and São Paulo. Most of the best work in the region is held in private collections that are rarely seen unless they are auctioned off. When Mohammed Said Farsi, a former mayor of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, recently sold his collection at Christie's in Dubai, some of the works fetched more than \$2m.

Then in 1986, a young member of the Qatar royal family bought his first picture, an upside-down pyramid by Yousef Ahmad, a Doha-born painter trained in Cairo and California. Twenty-five years on, Sheikh Hassan al-Thani's collection has grown to over 6,000 works and is now the most extensive gathering of modern Arab art in the world. In 1994 Sheikh Hassan opened a private museum, but the plan had always been to give it to the Qatar Foundation and build a new home for it. "We want this museum to become the home of Arab modern art in the Middle East," he says.

The formal opening of Mathaf, by the emir, was attended by Dominique de Villepin, a former prime minister of France who is on the QMA board, and Jeff Koons, the world's most successful sculptor, on his sixth visit to Qatar in a decade. The museum's lobby was hung with a double portrait of the emir and his wife by a fashionable Chinese painter, Yan Pei Ming. Sheikha al-Mayassa had commissioned the paintings as a surprise for her parents.

Three exhibitions fill the museum and a sister lot built in the



grounds of the Museum of Islamic Art for a show planned for 2012 by the Japanese pop artist, Takashi Murakami. The first, "Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art", from Mahmoud Darwish's poem, *Sajjil, ana arabiyy* ("Record, I am an Arab"), shows a selection of the works that Sheikh Hassan has bought over the years, including four of the key pieces from the first Farsi sale, among them the top lot, Said's 1934 work, "Les Chadoufs".

In a second show, "Interventions", the curators asked five living artists who are well represented in Sheikh Hassan's collection to create new pieces. The drawings of life behind bars by Ibrahim Salahi, a Sudanese artist, hang alongside his most influential work, "Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams", that dates back to 1962. The painting was kept rolled up in Khartoum during Mr Salahi's years of imprisonment and exile and is on public display for the first time in more than four decades. Dia Azzawi, a Baghdadi artist living in London, has placed white roses made of resin and representing the Iraqi academics dead or missing since 2003 around the hooves of two bronze horses, symbols of



So much to take in

the military defeat of Iraq. "Told, Untold, Retold", the third show, brings together work by 23 contemporary artists. Among the most interesting are Jerusalem-born Steve Sabella's photographs of Israeli and Palestinian men hardly distinguishable in their boxer shorts and the paintings on paper by Marwan Sahmarani, a Lebanese painter who was inspired by a famous 16th-century engraving by Albrecht Dürer.

More interesting than the inaugural exhibitions, though, is what Sheikh Hassan is trying to do with the Mathaf project. Buying art quickly brought him in contact with artists. Mr Salahi spent much of his exile in Qatar with Sheikh Hassan as his patron. After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the first Gulf war, he also began supporting Iraqi artists who could no longer sell their work at home, sending them canvasses and paints and even bringing two or three every year to live and work in Qatar at his expense. He has extensive holdings of two of the best Iraqi artists, Ismail Fattah, a realist sculptor from Basra, and Shakir Hassan al-Said, who studied in Paris and co-founded with Jewad Salim the Baghdad Modern Art group in 1951. Since the looting of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, Sheikh Hassan's collection of Iraqi art is the biggest in the world.

When he began buying Arab art a quarter of a century ago very little proper research had been carried out on the region's artistic movements: there were almost no books. By acting as a patron and bringing artists to Doha, Sheikh Hassan has made the city an artistic centre. He now plans to publish an encyclopedia of modern Arab art. Already he has begun to build up a library that he wants Mathaf to develop so that it becomes a research centre for Arab art in the region.

The al-Thanis believe that teaching young Qataris about their history and artistic heritage is important. A far bigger gap exists between generations in Qatar and other conservative Arab countries than in the West. Mathaf wants to create joint programmes with the Doha Film Institute, to encourage young poets to write about the art that inspires them and to set up a programme of teenage guides who will take their peers around the museum.

But the road to understanding will not be simple. Artists challenge boundaries and sex is a

particular barrier. Ghada Amer, an Egyptian artist who lives in New York, carved an amorphous sculpture with 100 Arabic synonyms for love rather than try to persuade the Qataris to exhibit her better-known work which is often pornographic. Two Iranian artists, Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh, had to flee their homeland after their erotic montages of mullahs appeared in a 2009 exhibition in London's Saatchi Gallery. Although they now live just down the road in Dubai, the brothers were not invited to participate in Mathaf's inaugural shows. Whether Mathaf continues in this timid vein remains to be seen.

Nearby Abu Dhabi has invited the Louvre and the Guggenheim to build offshoots of their museums in the Middle East, and is funding their acquisitions. Qatar prefers a more home-grown approach. It is considering a number of ways of using its collections of photography, weaponry, orientalist art, natural history, Mughal jewellery, stamps and traditional costumes. Even if only half of these get off the drawing board, Doha may well become the cultural hub that Sheikh Hassan dreams of.

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