

# canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

**XVA GALLERY**

Art in the heart of Dubai

**DECADENT  
DAMASCUS**

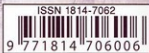
Ancient heritage restored

**PAUL  
GUIRAGOSSIAN**

The modern maestro of colour

**MANAL  
AL-DOWAYAN**

The inquisitive eyes of Saudi





from the urban chaos of beirut  
to the rural tranquility of  
chekka. jawad adra's impressive  
collection is a tribute to the  
creativity of the region

# the guardian of memories

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Previous pages: The main entrance to Jawad Adra's residence in Chekka, Northern Lebanon.

Above: Ismail Fattah, 'Homage to Picasso'. Bronze.

Facing page: Entrepreneur and cultural custodian, Jawad Adra.



*J*awad Adra prefers the label art 'custodian' to that of collector, someone whose responsibility is to safeguard works of art rather than to accumulate them. Possessing an impressive collection of paintings, sculptures, rare books and archaeological artefacts - all from or on the Middle East - the entrepreneur from Northern Lebanon says it was all acquired as a result of passion, not obsession.

"It is more about an appreciation of culture than anything else," says Adra from his home in Beirut where paintings by Amine El-Bacha, Fateh Moudarres, Saliba Doueihy, Helen Khal, Dia Al-Azzawi and Paul Guiragossian - among many other Arab artists - are on display. "It is also an attempt to enhance and preserve it." Yet, he continues, there is an inherent problem







in collecting art, regardless if one's motivation happens to be altruistic rather than proprietorial. "How much can one person collect and what do you do with it in the end? I mean, you only have so many walls in your house to hang things on. Eventually it can all become too much of a burden, not to speak of the fact that you are also depriving others from seeing and enjoying it." One solution to the problem would be to set up a foundation that would oversee and manage the collection and, eventually, arrange for it to be exhibited in a public setting. This is precisely what Adra, with the help of legal advisors and in partnership with an international bank, is doing right now. He is attempting to find a viable structure that can develop and expand upon his initial aim; that of preserving at least part of the heritage of a volatile and unstable region, where culture

is not always a priority either for governments or, indeed, for the general public. "When governments aren't doing what they are supposed to do as regards the preservation of art and culture in general, it becomes incumbent upon those who can to do their part," argues Adra. "Even so, I don't think we're doing enough. There is either total neglect of the issue or those who do care become like an exclusive clique and seem more interested in showing off than appreciating art." Nevertheless, a passion such as this, no matter how unselfish the reasons behind it, would not necessarily compel someone who possesses it to spend days scouring art galleries and antiquarian bookshops around the world if a love for all things beautiful did

Above: Dia Al-Azzawi. 'Eshtar'. Oil on paper stretched on canvas.

Facing page: Ismail Fattah. 'The Worker'. Bronze.







Above: Palmyran funerary relief. Dated 170 AD. Limestone.

Facing page: Early Christian symbolism, perhaps depicting Christ as a shepherd carrying a lamb. Marble.

not underline it? "It is difficult for me to say what is beautiful and what is not," replies Adra. "There might be a painting I don't like but that certainly doesn't make it any less interesting. It could be representative of something and be authentic and genuine and that is what gives it its value. When an artist is at one with himself as he creates, it is inevitable that we will appreciate his work."

This is a lesson about beauty and truth that Adra learned many years ago. While pursuing his studies in political economy in the US, he happened, one day, to walk into an art gallery. "I was in Boston in 1973 and went to see an

art exhibition for the very first time. The paintings were mostly of views of the sea and I was astonished that the artist had depicted the water using all sorts of different colours - brown, blue, gold and green. When I approached him and told him that I had always seen the sea as blue, he said that one has to look at it for what it really is and not simply see what one has been told to see. From that moment on, I realised that it is possible to learn from and enrich one's spirit through art."

After graduating, Adra returned to the Middle East and went on to work in Yemen, a country whose traditional architecture fascinated him. He then moved to Iraq where he met many of its up-and-coming artists - some of whom would later gain international acclaim - and became familiar with and grew to







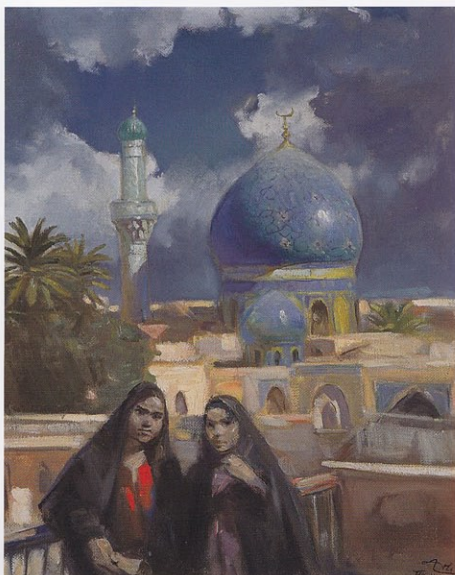


Left: (Detail) Amine El-Bacha. Untitled. Oil on canvas.

Right: Faik Hassan. Untitled. Oil on canvas.

Facing page  
Left: Paul Guiragossian. Untitled. Oil on canvas.

Right: Nazih Afash. Untitled. Oil on wood.



admire their work. After Iraq, Adra spent 15 years in Saudi Arabia before returning to Lebanon in 1993, which is when, he says, he was able to begin collecting seriously. "It was a sleeping passion until I was able to afford to indulge it," he says with a smile. Adra visited galleries (he does not like to bid at auction) and asked friends with more experience in the field to advise him about the art he should buy. Through them, he says, he gained a sense of focus, although ultimately the exercise became more of an intuitive than deliberate one. "I never thought about the art and objects that I bought in terms of their monetary value; I chose what I felt was genuine. Later on,

once I began to read about the things I collected, I found out about their artistic value. When I looked back on what I had acquired, I discovered that it was all from this area. I realised then that I had ended up cherishing all the things that I felt I belonged to."

The desire to safeguard past

glories also fired Adra's interest in books written and illustrated in the 18th and 19th centuries by travellers to the region from Europe. Referred to in academia as 'Orientalists', these men, many of whom were also missionaries, came to explore the Middle East on expeditions from Germany, France and Britain, and recorded their discoveries in great detail. Their engravings and accompanying texts provide an invaluable insight into what places and people were like 300 years or so ago. "I like to read these books because one can learn a great deal about our history from them," says Adra. "Maybe there is a measure of nostalgia about it, but I do think that these accounts can help us to preserve a culture which we are now in the process of destroying."

On a coffee table in Adra's living room is a large-format book published in 1873 on the ancient city of Palmyra in present-day Syria and the Roman ruins of Baalbeck in Lebanon. The illustrations of both these ancient sites show monuments that have clearly suffered very serious damage since then. The





book, Adra argues, regardless of the prejudices its creator might have harboured against people in the Middle East, is testament to a rich past even as it is now being disregarded and neglected by the very people to whom it belongs. Adra hopes eventually to have some of the books he owns translated into Arabic to serve as reminders to people here of their past and to give them an idea of what others once thought of our part of the world.

As he closes the volume, carefully readjusting the tissue paper that protects the intricate illustrations, Adra admits that he tends to savour his books more than he does the paintings he has acquired. Perusing the delicate and sometimes musty pages of old tomes is a more palpable experience, he explains, engaging more of one's senses - touch, sight and even smell - so that a reader feels he is sharing not only the thoughts and visions of the author but also of all those who have had access to the book in the past. There is a sense of continuity here, a sense of history that a painting does not necessarily possess.

In addition to over 500 rare books, Adra has collected some 1000 artefacts made in different countries in the Middle East. These include Phoenician, Sumerian, Roman and Egyptian (among other ancient civilisations) pottery, figurines, glass and silverware, which he has for the most part bought from the West with the express purpose of returning them to their place of origin.

Even as he is in the midst of plans to develop his collection, Adra is concerned that a great deal more effort needs to be made to fill a cultural vacuum and to ensure a brighter future. As Managing Partner of Information International, an independent research firm, Adra has access to some troubling statistics. In Lebanon, fewer than 25 percent of adults have visited the country's national museum, and even less - approximately 14 percent - actually read books beyond formal education. "With numbers like these one can argue that there isn't much demand for culture in this country. However, once people learn to appreciate art through exposure to it, galleries and museums then become desired destinations." □



THE MOKBEL  
ART COLLECTION