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Private Collections of Modern and Contemporary Iranian and Arab Art – Passion, Practice and the Public Sphere

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"Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror."

~ Khalil Gibran

—

"If we do not realize ourselves through art, as well as in all other spheres of thought, we will be unable to take the feverish plunge in to the fierceness of life."

~ Shaker Hassan Al Said

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Declaration Statement

This dissertation is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts. This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work of others except where specifically indicated in the text. Date: 16 June 2024

Abstract

This thesis explores the pivotal role which private collectors and their collections of modern and contemporary Iranian and Arab art play in preserving this art niche, promoting it on the global stage and facilitating public interest and understanding. With the purpose of providing a multifaceted picture, the first section of the paper sheds light on three key areas: Firstly, it considers the complex cultural, political and art historical context of modern and contemporary art from Iran and the Arab world, highlighting the geographical areas most relevant to the collections discussed later on. Subsequently, it delves into the practice of private collecting and its relation to public collecting, heritage preservation, the promotion and public access to the collections, and the various means by which this can be achieved. Finally, modern and contemporary art of Iran and the Arab World and its collectors are analysed in the context of the international art market. The second section is formed by three case studies of private collections from Iran, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates. This selection offers insights into the rich diversity of art of the Middle East. Each collection is discussed in relation to the perspectives given by the first section, namely the (art) historical context, the collector's role and mission, and the global art market. For each collection, some exemplary works are highlighted and further examined. Particular focus lies on the various ways by which private collectors aim to make their collection publicly accessible and intelligible for educational and promotional reasons, by which value is created for both parties.This research is based on extensive review of interdisciplinary scholarship on these topics, and relies heavily on available material of interviews with the selected collectors, as well as on available data from the art market. Overall adopting a primarily vertical perspective, this case-study based approach offers both a panoramic view of private collecting practices of Iranian and Arab Art and an in-depth analysis of representative cases.

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1 Introduction

Art patrons, collectors and individuals who drive artistic and cultural heritage through their own means, have always been a powerful force within the artistic advancement of humanity. As Hossein Amirsadeghi, editor of one of the most seminal publications about art collectors of the Middle East, puts it: "There can be no questioning of the centrality of art in the human experience. Art is a universal language, a language through which we can best define the progressive nature of a society–its cultural quotient. It is a powerful tool for raising social awareness and inducing political change."[1] Patronage in a historical sense has resulted in artistic and architectural monuments that constitute the cultural foundations of modern society and still define the 'cultural quotient' of many regions across the globe. The political and social factors mentioned by Amirsadeghi can be best observed over the course of the past centuries, when the foundations of the modern art world and art market developed primarily in Europe. Without questioning the quality of the works that emerged from this evolution, it is worth remembering that this generally happened against the backdrop of colonization. Seen from this perspective, art collectors and patrons from traditionally underrepresented regions in this 'art world' built on eurocentric foundations bear a great responsibility for the 'cultural quotient' of their countries and thus for the positioning of their countries within this global framework. This particularly holds true for situations in which public institutionalization of art and culture has been thwarted by political unrest and social struggles. In this dynamic, the role of private collections is twofold: showing artistic talent–which would otherwise go unnoticed–on the local and international stage, and on the other hand, employing artistic advancement for identity building in a postcolonial setting, and for raising the 'cultural quotient' of their home. As Amirsadeghi pointedly summarizes, "[i]f there is to be lasting progress made in the social, political, cultural and economic spheres in the Arab world, Iran, Turkey and the Maghreb, it has to have firm creative foundations."[2] As this statement underscores, art and political stability have a mutually correlated relationship. On

[1] Amirsadeghi, Hossein, and Maryam Homayoun Eisler (eds.). *Art and Patronage, the Middle East*. United Kingdom, TransGlobe Publishing Limited, 2010, p.6.

[2] Ibd., p.6

one side, there is little space for artistic and cultural advancement without peace, on the other side, however, art can play a crucial role in the building of community, education and tolerance, which in turn can mitigate or prevent conflict.

In the current dynamic in the Middle East–as also in many other regions worldwide–art often embodies a strong bond with the homeland at a time when other connections, like the possibility of physical presence in the home country, are unfeasible. Moreover, the support of the modern and contemporary artistic production of the Middle East of art is key to fostering and preserving artistic heritage for the future. It is out of question that these philantropic motivations are not the only ones which drive private collectors, and that economic, socio-political and reasons of status (conspicuous consumption)[3]–or more dramatically put, *folie de grandeur*[4]–are in many cases present among the reasons for modern art collecting. The exploration of outreach and accessibility among the collections discussed in the following chapters aims to address the role of philantropic motivations, while the art market perspective serves to call the economic aspects to mind.

To summarize, we can say that the reasons, modalities and personal inclinations of private collectors are manifold, and in the course of this thesis several of them are more closely examined. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that art collecting is deeply personal and all aspects of it are closely linked to the collector. Therefore, no generalisations or deductive conclusions are to be made, and the best representation of the broad variety can be achieved through exemplary and illustrative case studies.

The various facets of private art collecting practice, the relation of the collectors and collections with the public, and the meaning of such interactions in the concerned region specifically constitute the core of this explorative and interpretative analysis. However, this approach necessitates a closer look on the artworks that are desirable to private collectors and that are part of their collections. The artwork represents an asset in at least three separate spheres of meaning: as a possession with respect to material aspects, provenance, intrinsic

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[3] Vermeylen, Filip. "The India Art Fair and the Market for Visual Arts in the Global South." Olav Velthuis, and Stefano Baia Curioni (eds.). *Cosmopolitan Canvases: The Globalization of Markets for Contemporary Art* Oxford, 2015. doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198717744.003.0002. Accessed 2 May 2024, p.32.

[4] Amirsadeghi, Eisler, 2010, p.6.

value and financial value; as part of a larger concept, the collection, where each work of art is related to the entire collection and acquires additional meaning within this network, but each work also potentially represents a niche (geographical, temporal, stylistic and so forth); and as a conceptual asset that encompasses both these perspectives. It is evident that the theoretical and practical activity of art collecting is inextricably linked to the physical artwork with the many dimensions and meanings referred to above. As a result, the primary elements of analysis regarding private art collectors are closely entwined with art historical background on the art works in their possession.

1.1 Aim of the work

The scope of this thesis is the examination of the practice of art collecting by private individuals in Iran and the Arab World–and among the Iranian and Arab Diaspora–concentrating on collections that exclusively, or at least principally, contain modern and contemporary art from the region of origin of the respective collector.[5] The evolution of art collecting in modern times reflects the rich diversity of art itself. This gives rise to the question which approach to art collecting would lead to the best understanding of the collections. At Art Basel, "the first question collectors ask each other has gone from 'What's in your collection?' to 'What's your collection's focus and mission?'."[6] This statement underscores the growing importance of the social positioning of private collectors within a network of fellow collectors, art professionals, and art enthusiasts. Following this trace, this paper aims to shed light equally on both of these aspects by pursuing two parallel lines of enquiry: First, it aims at a presentation and subsequent deeper understanding of the physical, material side of the art collections, i.e. which artworks are collected and why. For this purpose–and to

[5] This choice is based on the still insufficiently meditated representation and display of modern art (and art from all times) from the Middle East in the West and by individuals from the West, which perpetuates colonial structures and perspectives: There is a "colonial logic that continues to guide the collection, organization, and display of objects in European museums, wherein non-European modern art is represented as artistic curiosities and as derivative reproductions of European masterpieces" (Bahoora, Haytham. "Locating Modern Arab Art: Between the Global Art Market and Area Studies." Review of Middle East Studies, vol. 54, no. 1, 2020, pp. 25–36. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/26977990. Accessed 30 March 2024, p.29.)

[6] Irene Kim, Head of VIP Relations at Art Basel. Art Basel website. www.artbasel.com/stories/art-patronage-in-the-21st-century. Accessed 20 April 2024.

emphasize the value of the collection–significant artworks of each collection will be more closely examined and put into perspective of the art history of the respective country and the international art market. The second line of thought concerns the semantic level of the collection. Here, particular attention is given to the ways in which private collectors engage with the public and open their collections to research, education and interest, and thus facilitate a meaningful contribution to cultural heritage and art history. In conjunction with a cultural and political contextualization, this paper hopes to lead to a deeper understanding of art collections of collectors from the Middle East through case studies concerning Iran, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates, of their position in the art market, of their motivations and sense of responsibility for their collection and its impact, including their goals for public engagement and accessibility of their collection, and the different means by which this can be achieved.

1.2 State of research and literature review

This research topic builds on the strong encouragement by Silvia Naef to not only study Middle Eastern modern and contemporary art from a purely art historical perspective, but also the networks of circulation of this art in the service of a "global art history".[7] One of these elements of circulation is private art collecting as a means of preserving art, bringing together artistic heritage and the economic possibilities of affluent individuals, who ideally invest in the accessibility of their collection to a wider audience.

The methodology employed in this thesis draws heavily upon existing literature to establish a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. A thorough review of academic journals, books, and other scholarly sources was conducted to gain insights into the existing discourse surrounding the topic. The literature review served as the foundation for identifying key themes, theoretical frameworks, and gaps in knowledge within the field and led to the definition of the research area that this thesis explores. The limited availability of specialized literature which reflects the confluence of themes that lie at the core of the present

[7] Naef, Silvia. "Writing the History of Modern Art in the Arab World: Documents, Theories and Realities." Julia Allerstorfer and Monika Leisch-Kiesl (eds.). *'Global Art History'. Transkulturelle Verortungen von Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft*. Transcript Verlag, 2017, pp.109-126, p.110

enquiry determined the interdisciplinary nature of this paper, and also necessitated the inclusion of journalistic texts into the research process. While this interdisciplinarity naturally leads to a wide range of consulted literature, a few names stand out that are of foundational importance for this study: Silvia Naef has extensively researched various aspects of the art world and market of the Middle East, and she also stands out as having conducted research in close collaboration with local scholars, and thus represents a highly sensible voice with a deep understanding of the obstacles, challenges and nuances of the field, and of working across borders and cultures. Naef (1996; 2014; 2016) provides crucial insights into the art of the Arab World and its ecosystem, and in other instances (Naef 2003a; 2003b; 2010) discusses the complex relationship between modern art of the West and in the Arab world. Naef extends these themes to research highlighting Iraq (Schroth, 2013; Sharifian et al. 2017). Further in-depth research into the modern art of Iraq has been primarily conducted by Nada Shabout (2006a; 2006b 2012; 2013; 2016). Her work also extensively featured in major exhibition catalogues of Arab art (Amirsadeghi, Eisler, 2010; Lenssen et al., 2018; Takesh et al., 2020;), contributions which highlighted a wide range of themes such as abstraction, diaspora and political dimensions. Expert research into modern art of Iran has been conducted by Hamid Keshmirshekan and Fereshteh Daftari. Keshmirshekan's work extends over a wide range of topics, including modern art, museology and trans-cultural understanding of art and heritage. His research further provides foundational insights not only into the art historical dimensions (2006; 2007; 2023), but also into the relationship with European art, the political dimensions of modern Iranian art, and its role on the global stage and within international networks (2010; 2019). Fereshteh Daftari's analysis of modern and contemporary art of Iran, its history and global circulations, particularly emphasizes the socio-cultural environment and pays attention to political shifts and provides the most nuanced insights into this complex matter. Of major importance is her publication *Iran Modern* (2013), but she has also contributed to numerous anthologies and catalogues on the topic, and is involved in major projects regarding modern Iranian art. For particular works from the Middle East, two publications are of fundamental importance: Porter (2020) and Eigner (2015) both not only provide biographical information for a wide range of artists, but also offer an excellent overview of the range of modern and contemporary art from the Arab World and Iran.

While modern and contemporary art has been increasingly well researched in the past decades, the collection practices of this art, which are ultimately foundational for its dissemination and integration into the international art scene and canon, still require extensive attention. Private art collectors play a vital role in this dynamic. They are key drivers of the art market, of the development of taste, and regularly outperform public investment in the art market.[8] They are at the core of the art world's glamour and receive extensive attention from the media and the public. Patrons and private collectors historically represent the economic foundations of any artistic production. By financially supporting artists, they have always exerted great influence on artistic development, style, content and the first networks of artistic circulation. However, while the study of private collectors of past centuries usually falls into the academic field of museology and has until now heavily focused on Western art collections, modern collectors and their collections, especially from traditionally underrepresented and less researched regions often receive little academic attention. Concerning art from the Middle East in particular, research into 'Islamic art', which dates to pre-modern times, still overshadows the critical engagement with modern art from the region, and this is particularly true for collections and the art's international reception.[9] This paper represents an attempt at contributing to filling this gap. Seminal work in the study of art collecting in the region has been presented by Mejcher-Atassi and Schwarz, in 2012. The importance of private collections is best understood against the backdrop of the growing, but complex sphere of public collections in the Middle East, which often faces challenges on many fronts and in the economic and political field of tension. This area has been examined primarily by Exell and Wakefield (2016) who focus on museums, and Daher and Maffi (2014) with a broader perspective on cultural heritage in the Middle East. A viable alternative source of key information on art collecting are publications by collectors themselves. A sort of primary document, they demonstrate the many layers of collecting: the actual collection–whose structure can provide major insights into the collection practice of the collector; the meta level of discussion of the collection published under the supervision of the collector, or even from her

[8] Kolbe, Kristina J. et al. "The global rise of private art museums a literature review." Poetics 95, 2022, p.1.

[9] Cf. Bahoora, 2020.

or his pen; and the implied projection of the collection to the public audience. Therefore, the catalogues which were available for the case study collections (Babaie, Porter, 2017, and Schroth, 2013) served as primary source on the collections, but also on the collectors, their strategies and missions. In addition, the analysis relied on online information published by the collectors or by external parties.

The art market perspective on modern and contemporary art from the Middle East is a separate large field of research, and has only been touched upon in the present context. However, important insights have been gained from the reports on the international art market provided in collaboration between UBS and Art Basel and for which Clare McAndrew conducted the research (2017-2024). Other valuable resources for an overview of the global art market are Vermeylen (2015), Komarova and Velthius (2017), Bahoora (2020), and Zarobell (2021).

1.3 Methodology

The framework of the thesis necessitates selectivity on many fronts: while the broad lines of the insights drawn from this research could be expanded to the entire MENA region, the decision to limit the analysis to three countries in the Middle East was based on the case study nature of this paper. The geographical area selected for this thesis (which excludes North Africa, and instead includes Iran) is commonly treated as a separate entity in the world of art and collecting.[10] The theoretical implications for this decision are further outlined in chapter 2.1. The case study selection of Iran, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates on one side reflects the emphasis in extant literature, but is on the other side based on the interest of the author, and solely represents case studies, whose lines of thought could and should be extended to other countries of the region in a next step of research. Given the limited frame of this thesis, the selection of case studies was deemed an ideal attempt at providing an overview, while allowing for detailed analysis of selected cases. The three case studies have been carefully chosen such that a wide range of artistic styles (both geographical and chronological) and of art collecting practices, especially regarding the efforts of public engagement, can be ob-

[10] For instance, cf. Eigner, Saeb, et al. *Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran.* United Kingdom, Merrell, 2010.

served. The first collection, by Iranian collector Mohammed Afkhami, represents one of the largest collections with a strong focus on contemporary voices of Iranian art, and employs innovative means to make the collection publicly accessible. Of these efforts, the virtual museum *iii* stands out, not only through its enhanced way of engaging with an international audience through the removal of a locally bound art experience, but also because it features new approaches to certain art works and puts them in a new perspective. The second collection, by Iraqi architect and designer Hussain Harba, who belongs to the Iraqi diaspora and resides in Italy, is characterized by high quality and range of the collection from the very beginnings of modern art of the region, and has been brought to the public via the publication of a catalogue, and there are (until now unfortunately unrealized) plans to create a private museum. The last case study, the collection of Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi, operates along the boarder between private and public collecting, as the owner has created an art foundation, Barjeel, to adequately attend to matters of public engagement, research, community building and care of the artworks. This collection features hundreds of artworks from the entire MENA region and extends to artworks from international artists, but primary attention in the present context is given to the artworks from the UAE and their meaning in the local and international environment.

The original plan of conducting interviews specifically tailored to the resent research could not be carried out due to the busy schedule of the collectors. However, previous interviews with the three collectors were readily available, both in their own publications (print and online) about their collections, and in scholarly and journalistic material. It is a priority of this study to reflect the intimate emotions that art evokes and the profound meaning art has for collectors. Therefore, these very personal insights into collecting have been given preference among the material consulted for this research.

Section 2.4 gives an overview of the development of the market for modern and contemporary art from the Middle East, spanning from the beginnings in the 20^{th} century to the current situation. This is an important angle if we consider that art collecting always also has an economic facet and one of competition on the market for the best works available. This section relies on two major sources, also taking into consideration the annual report published by UBS and Art Basel, available from 2017. The second important source is the

data available upon subscription on the platform Mutual Art, which gives insights into variables of art market performance such as artist turnover over the years, starting from 2007, median prices, sales by country and others for in total 748,000 artists worldwide. While several platforms such as Artsy or Arnet offer analyses of artists' performance on the market, Mutual Art has been selected as the primary resource. This is due to its wide range and nuanced data collection which allows for a better understanding of the relations of specific artists with their peers and on the global stage. This source widely contributed to the analysis of key artists from each collection, and aids an understanding of the economic value of these collections–a variable that contributes to the positioning on the international stage, and can give valuable information about the recognition of this art niche in the global art scene.[11]

A limitation of the historical and art historical elements of this enquiry is the lack of access to literature in Arabic and Persian. Although an effort has been made to include literature available in translation from local research institutes, and in a second step, studies by researchers with a strong personal connection to the region to provide an as little eurocentric view as possible, it is, unfortunately, still the case that "methodologies and terminologies often remain stubbornly grounded in Western frameworks".[12] Silvia Naef explicitly points out that the 'Western gaze' is a fundamental problem in this academic field,[13] and one must pay particular attention to avoid the problems it can pose if no sufficient critical analysis is conducted. It is equally important to keep in mind that any analysis of art from the Middle East–as from any non-western context requires knowledge of the historical and political environment that the art emerged from. For example, the art production of certain regions is, "in its own context, truly contemporary and neither self-indulgent nor anachronistic. It is also capable of addressing socially important questions, although it uses 'old fashioned' media like painting".[14] The significance of this angle has at all times been considered during the present research, and chapter 2.2 particularly addresses this matter.

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[11] The drawback of this data base is that it provides market performance insights only for artists with an extensive track record of sales, a circumstance which is not given for most artists from the collection of the third case study due to their recent careers.

[12] Takesh, Suheyla et al. *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s-1980s.* Hirmer Publishers, 2020, p.8.

[13] Cf. Naef, 2017.

[14] Naef, 2017, p.122.

Another challenge is the clear definition of terms across cultural and temporal distance and a cohesive framing of the topic. One examples is the variety of meaning of theoretical terms such as 'modern', or the uncertainty of identification of artists and collectors in the diaspora of the countries addressed in this thesis. There are many aspects that have to be taken into consideration and a great amount of sensitivity ought to be displayed. Subsequently, a separate subsection is dedicated to definitions (chapter 2.1).

A drawback of the present careful selection of the three private collectors is that they are all male. This is not representative of the demographics of private collectors of Middle Eastern art, and such a domination of the male gender was not intended by the author. This constellation results solely from the suitability of the collections to discuss a broad range of art and modalities of public accessibility to private collections. For instance, one particularly important collection of modern Iranian art has been established by by Mana Jalalian. Unfortunately, no contact could be established and there are only scarce resources open to public accessibility of the content of this collection.[15]

1.4 Terminology

'The Arab World and Iran' is a collective term which often appears in scholarly contributions, and even more so in art publications, exhibition catalogues and the press.[16] In many cases, this seems to refer less to a geographical region, and instead more to a conceptual cultural space, an *idea*. Suheyla Takesh, curator of the Barjeel Art Foundation, points out that while the term 'Arab World' accurately presents neither a geographical nor a demographic area, it is "useful in evoking the period of decolonization of the 1950s and 60s as well as in pointing to the historical moment in which Pan-Arabism peaked in regional politics."[17]

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[15] The collection first entered the international spotlight after the opening of the exhibition "The Mana Jalalian Collection: A Rare Collection of Iranian Modern Art", which ran from 2021 to 2022 at the Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai. See *Leila Heller Gallery*, www.leilahellergallery.com/exhibitions/the-mana-jalalian-collection-a-rare-collection-of-iranian-modern-art. Accessed 10 April 2024. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue, which is available on the gallery's website.

[16] See, for instance, seminal works such as Eigner, 2010.

[17] Takesh et al., 2020, p.14.
Pan-Arabism is an ideology which developed in the late 19th century and involves the nationalist and socialist concept of unifying all Arab nations to one state, spanning North Africa, with Mo-

The term 'Arab World' stands in the company of two other terms, which are sometimes used synonymously: MENA and the Middle East. MENA, which stands for 'Middle East and North Africa' is mostly used in a political context, and is the most wide description for this region. It is inclusive of all countries referred to as 'Arab' (which in this context means that the primary official language is Arabic) or 'Islamic', the meaning of which varies from context to context, but mostly refers to countries whose politics and culture are today or were historically structured according to the laws, beliefs, traditions and customs of Islam.[18] 'Arab' can, in other instances, also denominate exclusively countries belonging to the geographical area of the Arabian Peninsula, which includes Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan, Oman, Iraq and Yemen. This is the understanding of the term in the present analysis. The 'Middle East' is perhaps the term which is interpreted in the widest range of ways. It is still widely accepted in literature from various disciplines, which is also why this paper will use this term. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the term emerged from a eurocentric perspective and in its roots describes the region between Europe and the 'Far East', meaning Central and South-Eastern Asia–"East of what? … not Asia, not Europe, and so 'East'? … Near East, Middle East, Far East."[19] A historically variable term is the 'Levant'. 'Levante'–'rising', which implies the rising of the sun and thus East–originally described the entire Eastern Mediterranean during the European Middle Ages. In the 20th century, 'Levant' ceased to describe the broad region, and was used to more specifically refer to the countries adjacent or close to the eastern Mediterranean Sea: Lebanon, Israel, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Cyprus. This term overlaps with 'Mashreq', an Arabic synonym of 'Levant'. In the strict understanding, Mashreq refers to Syria, Lebanon,

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rocco as the most Western country, and the Arab Peninsula, with Iraq marking the Eastern border. Although this movement has declined towards the end of the 20th century after reaching its peak at the century's middle, some elements of Pan-Arabism are still very alive–for instance, in the regional organization of the Arab League–and find their way, among other areas, into art and culture. See chapters 4 and 5.

[18] 'Islamic World' is another term frequently used in this context, and often used synonymously with 'Arab World and Iran', but of course, given the large Islamic communities all around the world and in particular in South East Asia, this term, too, is highly problematic.

[19] Artist and writer Judith Barry qtd. in Buchloh, Benjamin, et al. "Questionnaire: In What Ways Have Artists, Academics, and Cultural Institutions Responded to the U.S.-Led Invasion and Occupation of Iraq?" October, vol. 123, 2008, pp. 3–184. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40368525. Accessed 25 May 2024.

Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq and Kuwait.[20] While Israel is part of these terms in contexts of geographical or political understanding, the country is rarely implied in art historical terminology, since it doesn't share the cultural heritage of its Arab neighbouring countries. Iran, on the other hand, is geographically located in West Asia, however, it shares the traditionally Islamic heritage of the 'Arab World', and does so in an accentuated way in contrast to its eastern neighbours Pakistan and Afghanistan, and is also more connected to the Western art world. Therefore, most art publications consider not only the 'Arab World', but also Iran, and include it usually by mention and not by geographical description.[21] To conclude, there are various terms which are sometimes used as synonyms of each other, and in other occasions one of them is preferred over the other, considering context, postcolonial perspectives, or personal preferences.

[20] "Levant", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/place/Levant. Accessed 25 April 2024 and "Mashriq", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/place/Mashriq. Accessed 25 April 2024.

[21] Few publications use the term 'West Asia' (eg. Takesh et al., 2020, p.13.). The reason for this can most likely be found in a European general understanding of 'Asian' as exclusively referring to East and South-East Asia. West Asia, however, seems like the most adequate.

2 Theoretical Framework

This chapter provides the background necessary to delve into the analysis of the collections selected as case studies. First of all, some controversial key terms are explained within the specific context of the topic of this paper to enhance a sensible understanding. Subsequently, an art historical, historical and socio-cultural synoptic overview of the regions relevant to this analysis is provided, highlighting the three countries which are more closely regarded here: Iran, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates. The third section discusses the practices of art collecting, and the relation between private collections and the public sphere–in general, and in the specific geographic and temporal environment. Finally, the art market dynamics in the Middle East are regarded in the context of the global network. While collectors rely on the entire art market network of galleries, auctions, direct sales from artists and private sales, auction houses provide the only data about sales which allow for conclusions of trends, prices and positioning of artists and their art niche. Therefore this market resource is more closely examined and taken into consideration in the case studies.

2.1 Definitional issues

First of all, it is crucial to clarify that the meaning of the term 'modern' significantly differs in context of art in the Middle East from its usage regarding art in the West. European modernity developed its foundations during the late Middle Ages, experiencing a range of key moments of its evolution during the Renaissance, and laid the theoretical, aesthetic and technical foundations for the art of the 20th century (which is sometimes denominated as 'modern' art, a term that is historically not completely accurate), and for what we call 'contemporary' art from the perspective of the present day.[22] In contrast, the art of the Middle East for a long time developed mainly in the field of applied arts, calligraphy and illumination, before opening to and incorporating Western art styles in the 19th century. Silvia Naef

[22] While it is generally accepted that 'contemporary art' refers to art from the second half of the 20th century onwards, it has also been pointed out that 'contemporary' implies a specific subversive, provocative and innovative approach to art which can manifest in a range of different approaches and is no longer bound to specific stylistic traits or content. *The Collector Magazine*, www.thecollector.com/contemporary-art/. Accessed 25 March 2024.

pointedly summarizes the meaning of modern art in the Middle East: "The term 'modern art' [...] covers the art form practised since the end of the nineteenth century in all countries of the region [author's note: the Arab World], and which derives from the adoption of Western art."[23] This 'modern art' belongs to the realm of what Hans Belting calls 'global art history'. 'Global art history' implies art production after the "opening of the formerly uniquely Western art scene to the planet as a whole" and stands in contrast to 'world art history' which describes the inclusive understanding of art practised around the globe from the beginning of history.[24] This adoption of Western style, of course, emerged in the environment of colonialism and fight for independence in the Middle East, and there have been attempts at returning to more traditional art in a postcolonial reality, with the aim of nation building, as well as strengthening of identity and awareness of traditional cultural heritage.[25] However, modern art with all its different schools and approaches to depiction had already established itself as primary artistic expression. This popularity and perseverance of Western styles may have various reasons, apart from the apparent advantages of an international network of artists, for whom Modernism grew to be a common language, across borders and cultures. One of them has been pointed out by Ahmad Ravanjoo and Shahin Pedram, who conducted an interesting comparison between Islamic art and Western 'modern' abstract art, stating that they both seek to detach meaning from material subjects and instead represent the metaphysical. They argue that this alignment in philosophical content makes the traditionally Islamic environment more susceptive to abstract elements that were foundational in early stages of modern art, such as Expressionism.[26] Modern art can thus be regarded as an art form which allows visual art making without interfering with traditional beliefs

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[23] Naef, Silvia. " 'Hidden Treasures'? Museum collections of modern art from the Arab World (1891-2010)". Irene Maffi, Rami Daher (eds.). *The politics and practices of cultural heritage in the Middle East: positioning the material past in contemporary societies*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014, pp.270-289, p.272.

[24] Belting, Hans. "From World Art to Global Art: View on a New Panorama". *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*. MIT Press, 2013, pp.178-185, qtd. in Naef, Silvia. "Visual Modernity in the Arab World, Turkey and Iran: Reintroducing the 'Missing Modern'. "Asiatische Studien-Études Asiatiques 70.4, 2016, pp.1005-1018.

[25] Cf. Naef 2014.

[26] Cf. Ravanjoo, Ahad, and Shahin Pedram. "A Comparative Study of the Concept of Abstraction in Islamic and Western Art (Based on the Traditionalist Theories)". The Monthly Scientific Journal of Bagh-e Nazar, 18, 97, 2021, 79-92. doi: 10.22034/bagh.2020.199617.4290.

and religious perspectives. The Iraqi painter Asim Hafidj (Mosul, 1886-1978), for instance, was one of the first modern painters who sensed this tension between the art he encountered during his studies in Paris and his own beliefs and environment. His works display a tendency towards impressionistic elements, which allowed him to distance himself from detailed depiction of reality, an element often regarded as not compatible with Islam.[27]

Modern art in the Middle East developed in a broad variety of ways, sometimes through parallel developments across states, sometimes through a unique evolution in a specific region. Key artists initiated and developed certain approaches and styles, founded schools and groups, influencing generations of artists after them. There are widespread misconceptions about how this new art production is interconnected with traditional styles and aesthetics, a notion which sometimes results in the misleading term 'modern Islamic art', coined by the art historian Wijdan Ali in 1989.[28] Curator Fereshteh Daftari argues that this term not only mirrors the Western view on Middle Eastern art developed in the 19th century, but that it also does not align with the self-identification of many modern and contemporary artists.[29] Naef further points out that modern art directly derives from Western styles and there is no ontological development in the local scene, and that the term falsely implies a connection to the historically Islamic heritage.[30] Sussan Babaie adds that

> "artists who hail from the Islamic world—those countries whose national identity is still deeply rooted in local cultural variants of Islam–are often at pains to detach their art, its motivations, and sources of inspiration from the fifteen hundred-year prominence of the artistic histories of Islam in the region."[31]

This observation, however, does not stand in contrast with prolific integration of and entwin-

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[27] Cf. Schroth, Mary Angela (ed.). *Longing for Eternity: One Century of Modern and Contemporary Iraqi Art: from the Hussain Ali Harba Family Collection.* Skira, 2013, pp.24-25.

[28] Keshmirshekan, Hamid. "Parameters of 'Modern' and 'Contemporary' Art from the Middle East: An Alternative Art Historical Account." Julia Allerstorfer and Monika Leisch-Kiesl (eds.). *'Global Art History'. Transkulturelle Verortungen von Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft.* Transcript Verlag, 2017, pp. 127-150, p.133. Ali bases her argumentation mainly on the continuity between Islamic Art and Modern Art that can be observed in the calligraphic elements. This, according to Naef, is, however, not sufficient for a general validation of this perspective. (Naef, 2016, p.1008.)

[29] Daftari, Fereshteh. *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking.* Museum of Modern Art a New York, 2006, p.10.

[30] Naef, 2016, p. 1006.

[31] Babaie, Sussan. "Voices of Authority: Locating the 'Modern' in 'Islamic' Arts." Getty Research Journal, No. 3, 2011, pp. 133-149, p.136.

ing with traditional elements of the indigenous art scene. One great example is the artistic movement *Hurufiyya*, which developed in the Arab world. The confluence of a modern aesthetic and the traditionally highly significant art of calligraphy is exemplary of an 'Islamic' approach to modern art. More conservative voices in the local scientific community still regard traditionalisms such as the use of calligraphy in modern art as a display of resistance against 'Westernization' of the art scene.[32] However, Nada Shabout extensively confirms that *Hurufiyya* should be understood primarily in terms of the aesthetics of calligraphy and the Arabic script and as integration of elements of Arab identity, and in almost no cases as act of rejection of content deriving from international modern artistic language.[33]

Parallel to the art historical development stands the significance of art for politics in a region which suffered from turmoil, colonial rule and struggle for independence, and later on from unrest despite of the establishment of sovereign states. Modern art in this context is always also a means of self-expression, of rebellion and identity building. As Silvia Naef points out, "[s]erious art was expected as part of the political struggle to build new independent Arab nations",[34] to name one example. Later on, the "notion of social responsibility in connection to patriotism was further transmitted to the market and collectors, and consequently fostered and supported assigning higher value to Iraqi art in the local market",[35] building the foundation for a new, in this case Iraqi, consciousness of self-hood and nationhood. Also in Iran, targeted promotion of a Fine Art that would study and incorporate traditional aesthetics, but at the same time embrace European style and technique, would play a key role in nation building under the Pahlavi rule and serve as an important strategic element in the modernization of Iran. At the same time, this fostering and active promotion of modern art, later on particularly by Farah Pahlavi, the third wife of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, served as a construction of a 'cultural quotient' which could exist independently

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[32] Cf. Amani, Hojat et al. "Islamic Calligraphy, a Symbol of Resistance to the Process of Westernization (Based on the Theory of Postcolonial Studies)". Bagh-e Nazar 18(100), 23-34, 2021, pp. 23-34.

[33] Shabout, Nada. *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics.* University Press of Florida, 2007, pp.94-96.

[34] Maffi, Irene, and Rami Daher (eds.). *The politics and practices of cultural heritage in the Middle East: positioning the material past in contemporary societies.* Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014, p.202.

[35] Ibd.

from the West, while offering the possibility of close ties to and acceptance by the international community. However, while it is correct that the revision of and engagement with political struggle and trauma does play a vital role in many works and movements, it is important to note that a generalized understanding of non-Western art as *a priori* political and 'traumatized' only reflects residues of a colonial perspective of 'otherness' and is not accurate in modern times.[36]

2.2 Art historical and socio-political background

A deeper understanding of the world of art and art collecting is necessarily grounded in a knowledge of the society and political context from which it emerges. To contextualize, a brief summary of the events of the 20th century in the Middle East is provided, in conjunction with a cursory glance at institutions driving the cultural scene, followed by a more extended discussion of the situation in the countries which are connected with the three case studies: Iran, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates.

In this brief introduction, as throughout this paper, it is essential to remember that two regions, Iran and the Arab World, are juxtaposed. Due to their geographical proximity and a history that partially overlaps because of their shared main religion, Islam, these countries exhibit some similarities. Nevertheless, particularly in contemporary times, these countries have developed in significantly different ways and have discovered distinct cultural expressions of their identities, a difference that is also evident in their arts. Therefore, the historical background will be approached with a synoptic view.

The Middle East's political evolution from the beginning of the 20th century has been profoundly influenced by a combination of colonial legacies, resource wealth, and internal socio-political dynamics. At the beginning of the century, until 1922, large parts of the Middle East–specifically, the northern Mashreq–were under the control of the Ottoman Empire, which had dominated the area for more than seven centuries. Its end was marked by the increasing influence of colonial powers. One particularly influential moment was the Sykes-Picot-Agreement of 1916, which divided the Levant, northern Arabian Peninsula and parts

[36] Keshmirshekan, 2017, pp.128, 130.

of Turkey into spheres of influence between Britain and France. This agreement laid the groundwork for the creation of modern-day countries such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. In parallel, the discovery of oil dramatically influenced the political and economic development of Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. Post-World War II, the region saw a wave of independence movements, leading to the formation of various political systems ranging from monarchies in Saudi Arabia and Jordan to republics in Iraq and Syria. The Cold War era further complicated the political landscape, as the United States and the Soviet Union vied for influence, often backing different regimes and exacerbating regional conflicts.

Iran's political trajectory took a significant turn with the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which replaced the pro-Western Shah with the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini. This shift had a lasting impact, precipitating the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and ongoing tensions with Saudi Arabia, fuelled by ideological and geopolitical rivalry. The early 21st century brought further upheaval. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq toppled Saddam Hussein's regime (who had controlled the country since the 80s), creating a power vacuum that fuelled sectarian violence and the rise of ISIS. The Arab Spring of 2011 ignited widespread political unrest, leading to civil wars in Syria and Yemen and continued political instability in countries such as Bahrain and Egypt.

In an environment of war and conflict with only temporary periods of peace and growth in many regions of the Middle East, culture and art can unsurprisingly not develop at a steady pace. However, despite this challenging situation–to say the least–culture and arts have always played a vital role and served, among others, as expression of identity and provided continuity amidst political turmoil. Building on the foundations of museums and institutions which mainly promoted and preserved artistic heritage of the pre-modern period,[37] the second half of the 20th century brought with it the emergence of significant cultural institutions focused on modern and contemporary art. Notable among these are the Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar, which showcases contemporary Arab art, and the Louvre Abu Dhabi in the UAE (fig. 5), which includes significant modern Middle Eastern works. The Sharjah Art Foundation also plays a crucial role in promoting contemporary

[37] See Naef, 2014 for important examples.

art through exhibitions and events, while the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art holds one of Iran's most significant collections of modern art, featuring both Western and Iranian artists. These institutions not only preserve the region's rich cultural heritage but also foster a deeper understanding of its contemporary artistic expressions. Their mission is supported by an active academic environment and highly engaged institutions such as the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the American University of Beirut, several art faculties and academies in Iran, especially in Tehran (College of Fine Arts at the University of Tehran, Soore University, Tehran University of Art) and Isfahan (Isfahan University of Art), the Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Baghdad, and several foreign universities which opened locations in the UAE. In parallel, private and community initiatives are particularly engaged in the arts education, conservation, support and promotion. In this branch, private collections and their engagement with the public stand out as local and international strong voices.

2.2.1 Iran

The 20th century in Iran is marked by several significant political shifts with direct effect on the arts and cultural production. At the beginning of the 20th century, Iran was under the rule of the Qajar dynasty. The art of this time relied on and still predominantly aligned with the preferences of the court during the 19th century, which was coined by an increasingly close contact with Europe.

> "The pendulum to and away from the West begins to swing in late Safavid Persia, in the seventeenth century, and continues on through most of the Qajar period (1785-1925). During these years, artists oscillated between a perceptual approach concerned with volume and space, which was identified with European conventions, and the more conceptual or idealized depiction characteristic of local practice."[38]

This observation pointedly summarizes the tensions in artistic practice which accompanied the development of art in Iran towards modernist practice.

The court saw art mainly as a tool for the distribution of royal images and the celebration of the monarch, which aimed at idealized portraiture, and could not be preoccupied with realism. At the same time, the artistic community was confronted with the beginnings

[38] Daftari, Fereshteh. "Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective." Shiva Balaghi, and Lynn Gumpert (eds.). *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution.* United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Academic, 2002, pp. 39-87, p.41.

of photography and a new view on realistic depiction. The increasing understanding that the dynasty could not only legitimize their rule through celebration of tradition and heritage, but also had to display openness to innovation, led to the acceptance of modern technologies, including photography and lithography, which would become a crucial instrument of newspaper printing from the mid-19th century.[39] In 1851, under the rule of Nasser ad-Din Shah (ruled 1848-1896), the first polytechnic institute of the country was established: *Dar al-Funun*, which originally served to educate members of the military. The focus on art developed only some decades later, and the institute came to be foundational for modern Iranian art. Art and other disciplines were taught by European academics, a fact that is certainly responsible for the great influence of European academic painting on the artistic development in Iran. In the framework of these dynamics, 'sober observation' as opposed to abstraction was, contrary to its meaning in Western art history, a significant step towards modernism.[40] Realism as key element would become particularly important for Mohammed Ghaffari, commonly known as Kamal ol-Molk, who was educated at *Dar al-Funun*. One of his most celebrated works is *Mirror Hall*, a painting which depicts the famous representational room at the Golestan Palace with Nasser ad-Din seated at its center (Fig. 1). As the court painter of Nasser ad-Din, he exerted great influence on the artistic landscape of the time and coined a generation of artists who followed his lead. After continuing his education in Europe, ol-Molk founded the art institute *Madreseh-ye Sanaye-e Mostazrafeh*, which provided the first comprehensive art curriculum of the time in Iran. Kamal ol-Molk highly appreciated realism and apart from official commissions mostly engaged in detailed observation of the real world, a practice which led to increasing popularity of genre paintings. These developments were decelerated during a time when the Qajar dynasty was weakened and soon Reza Khan, a former military commander, emerged as new ruler in 1925. During his government, once again the primary focus in the cultural sector lay on aiding the creation and stabilization of Iranian identity and understanding of national heritage. In this environment, renewed interest emerged in traditional arts, and it remains unclear why efforts

[39] *The Metropolitan Museum*, www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/irmd/hd-irmd.htm. Accessed 2 May 2024.

[40] Daftari, 2002, p.41.

Figure 1: Kamal ol-Molk: *Mirror Hall* (1896). Creative Commons, Wikimedia: commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mirror_Hall.jpg.

of modernization under Reza Shah were not reflected in the arts.[41]

The tendency of modern European art to diverge increasingly from this kind of content, and instead of gravitating towards abstraction and 'free' art led to conflicts within the artistic community and with administration responsible for the development of art. However, during the time from the 1930s, many artists set out to visit Europe and acquired knowledge and skills of Western (modern) art. This development, paired with significant foreign political influence, had a profound impact on the Iranian arts scene: the first Academy of Fine Arts, *Honarkadeh*, was founded in 1940, swiftly followed by a Department of Fine Art at the University of Tehran in 1941, which particularly exposed students to Impressionism and Expressionism.[42] Arts curricula at universities and academies were established, the infrastructure for art and its display were extended, and the understanding and appreciation of art steadily increased among the population, in particular of course, among members of the intelligentsia. In 1941, British and Soviet forces occupied Iran, and together with the coming and going of troops from many European countries, including Austria and Poland, the breeze of international ideas and perspectives blew amidst a complicated polit-

[41] Ibd., p.44.

[42] Eigner, 2010, p.26.

ical situation. In 1941, Reza Shah was forced to abdicate, and was succeeded by his son, Mohammadreza Pahlavi. Between 1941 and 1953, when the coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq paved the way for the coronation of Mohammadreza Shah, the country first experienced democracy. This took shape in a critical questioning of politics and history, which did not go unnoticed by the arts. In this field, emerging artists opposed the academic teachings instated by Kamal ol-Molk and experimented with new methods of painterly expression. The *Honarkadeh* welcomed these initiatives, and one of its graduates, Jalil Ziapour, later became known as first important figure of Modernism in Iran. After 1953, art was again employed in the service of nation building, but the strong aim of the new Shah to modernize Iran until it could keep pace with Western countries, strongly favoured innovation, also in the arts. Art at this time was immersed in many conflicting layers of ideas and political debates, for instance, the dilemma of how to best preserve identity while giving up traditionalism in favour of Western modernity.[43] Between 1962 and 1979, a new stylistic and semantic artistic vocabulary developed. The critic Karim Emami first introduced the term 'Saqqakhane' for this art, a term which originally denominated public fountains.[44] In the context of art, the term is used to describe art which incorporated elements of Iranian folklorism, ornamental motifs from folklore art such as patterns from carpets, talismans, religious motifs, calligraphy, elements of miniature painting, and hints towards ancient Persian art.[45] Gisela Fock emphasizes the nuanced relationship between religious elements and the art of the Saqqakhane. Rather than indicating a resurgence of religious beliefs, the inclusion of such elements reflected a deeper societal longing for a connection to Iran's cultural heritage, which had largely been suppressed or marginalized in the face of rapid modernization efforts.[46] Furthermore, artists inspired by this movement reclaimed subjectivism after

[43] Cf. Daftari, 2002, pp. 55-65.

[44] Emami first attributed this term to the art of Hossein Zenderoudi (*1937).

[45] Keshmirshekan, Hamid. "Neo-traditionalism and modern Iranian painting: The Saqqa-khaneh school in the 1960s." Iranian Studies 38.4, 2005, pp. 607-630, p.614. Keshmirshekan extensively wrote on the subject, and further categorized the painters of *Saqqakhane* into two categories, the first of which mainly employed elements of folklore, while the second group mainly followed the aesthetics of Qajar painting, which displayed beauty and frontal and idealized human representation. Cf. Keshmirshekan, 2005, 2006, 2023.

[46] Fock, Gisela, and Parviz Tanavoli. *Die Iranische Moderne in Der Bildenden Kunst: Der Bildhauer Und Maler Parviz Tanavoli: Werk Und Bedeutung.* Sitzungsberichte (ÖSterreichische Akademie Der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-Historische Klasse), vol. 815, 2011, p.162.

a period of strict realism starting from Kamal ol-Molk, and this subjective angle entailed a decoupling from political events and an emphasis towards emotions and inner understanding of the world.[47] This is exemplary for the very different takes on reality expressed by artists at that time, ranging from strong political engagement to distancing themselves from the situation surrounding them. This further underscores the complex interplay between tradition and modernity in Iranian society at the time.

The peak of Pahlavi's modernization project, the White Revolution, which consisted of a series of reforms starting from 1963, not only further advanced artistic production and saw an expansion of art institutes, galleries, museums and competitions, but above all enhanced the very foundations upon which any art production is built: literacy levels dramatically increased, economic stability and wealth were improved, education underwent reforms. This gave rise to an expanded middle class, from which artists, art enthusiasts, collectors and patrons emerged. Pahlavi strongly supported international networking, which resulted in Iran's participation to the arguably most important arts event in the West, the Venice *Biennale* from 1955, on whose example the Tehran Biennial and the Shiraz Arts Festival were conceived, in 1958 and 1967, respectively. A key figure in the arts scene of the 1960s and 1970s was Pahlavi's third wife, Shahbanu Farah Pahlavi. Educated in Paris, she strongly supported art production and circulation in constant exchange with the West, and became a key patron of modern arts of the country, and responsible for the establishment of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, which was inaugurated in 1977.[48] Architect and director was Kamran Diba, cousin of the Empress (both in fig. 2), who aimed at bringing together international masterpieces of modern art as well as highlights of the artistic talent of Iran.[49] The collection, which features international highlights alongside a vast selection of Iranian art, was impressive. The strong economic growth favoured such an undertaking, and, as Kamran Diba said, there was almost no competition in collecting in the region.[50]

At the time, economic growth resulted from increasing oil revenues; for instance, in 1963-

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[47] Ibd., p.7.

[48] Pictures of the exhibition were shown at *Box Freiraum* in Berlin in 1977. *FreiRaum Berlin*, www.freiraum-berlin.org/tmoca-opening-1977/. Accessed 3 May 2024.

[49] Ali, Wijdan (ed.) *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World.* Scorpion Publishing, 1989, p.155.

[50] Daftari, Fereshteh, and Layla Diba. *Iran Modern.* Asia Society, 2013, p.23.

Figure 2: Empress Farah Pahlavi (center) and her cousin and architect Kamran Diba (right) at the Museum of Modern Art Tehran, which Diba designed, 1977. Owned by Kamran Diba.[53]

64, oil revenues amounted to $555 million, while in 1968-69, they had climbed to $958 million.[51] The consequences of Farah Pahlavi's strong engagement with the arts are apparent even today: Iranian modern art reaches top results in international auctions and early Iranian modern artists are well-known on the global stage.[52]

The Revolution in 1979 caused a massive emigration of artists and a temporary standstill of the arts.[54] Modernism was targeted as part of what left-wing politicians called *gharbzadegi*, a strong fascination with the West, and what they saw as primary weakness of the monarchy.[55] Art now had to follow and endorse revolutionary and Islamic ideologies to be accepted.[56] The post-revolutionary period saw a broad engagement of arts and culture

[51] Keshmirshekan, Hamid. "Historiography of Modern Iranian Art." Fereshteh Daftari and Layla Diba. *Iran Modern.* Asia Society, 2013, p.82.

[52] Doherty, Emily. "The Ecstasy of Property: Collecting in the United Arab Emirates." Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and Pedro Schwarz (eds.). *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World.* Routledge, 2016, pp. 183-196, p.187.

[54] Keshmirshekan, Hamid. "Discourses on Postrevolutionary Iranian Art: Neotraditionalism during the 1990s." Muqarnas, vol. 23, 2006, pp. 131–57. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/25482440. Accessed 26 April 2024, p.131.

[55] Daftari, 2002, p.65.

[56] Keshmirshekan, Hamid. "Modern and Contemporary Iranian Art: Developments and Challenges."

from the new regime, which sought to eradicate modern art as it was practised during the monarchy, art considered too 'Western' and which the regime feared would disseminate ideologies contrary to its political program. The regime instead promoted new artistic approaches which would serve as propaganda on one side, and general tendency away from Western modern art on the other. This dynamic intensified during and after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). The country experienced a growing sense of nationalism, which resulted in extensive employment of art for propaganda.[57] Wall paintings and posters replaced the central position formerly held by canvas painting.[58] Stylistically, this period was heavily influenced by *Pardeh* painting ('coffee-house painting'), which has its roots in the Safavid period (1501-1736) and primarily consisted in the creation of enormous canvases with overlapping scenes for narration of historical events–a pictorial technique which was ideal for the dissemination of revolutionary content on street posters and in newspapers.[59] After the end of the war, propaganda art decreased, and instead, a new art practice emerged, which Hamid Keshmirshekan calls 'neo-traditionalism'. This art, *honar-i mardumi* (demotic art), primarily revolved around Islamic and revolutionary themes and motives, and mirrored the works of the *Saqqakhane*.[60] However, many artists of the time tried to find a common ground between these motives and contemporary art. [61]

From the 1990s to today, Iranian art evolved in many diverse directions, embracing contemporary new mediums and practices. The arts scene grew to become a global network of emigrated Iranian artists, who often express critique of the current government, while trying to reconcile their longing for their homeland and thus often celebrate and incorporate elements of Iranian heritage as expression of their Iranian identity. Chapter 3 will expand on the rich contemporary art landscape and provide examples of its diversity.

Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art. Transglobe, 2009, p.26.

[57] Chelkowski, Peter. "The Art of Revolution and War: The Role of Graphic Arts in Iran." Shiva Balaghi, and Lynn Gumpert (eds.). *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*. United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Academic, 2002, pp. 127-141, p.135.

[58] Cf. Keschmirshekan, 2006, p.135.

[59] Chelkowski, 2002, p.129

[60] Cf. Keshmirshekan, 2006, p.132.

[61] Cf. ibd. p.136.

2.2.2 Iraq

The art history of Mesopotamia goes back to the very roots of civilization. Iraq's artistic heritage is perhaps one of the most important documents of human engagement with artistic expression. Due to the political events of the past decades, many Iraqis had to search for a new home outside of their country, a development which deeply influenced artistic endeavours. From this imprint of history,

> "an innovative body of artworks by Iraqi artists has emerged and taken shape. Many of these address contemporary themes informed by the complexities of the artists' lives, be it outside Iraq, in the distressed position of being an 'other', or indeed within Iraq, where day to day survival has become for many an enormous struggle and an unprecedented burden."[62]

Modern art in Iraq began to form in the early 1900s in a quite surprising way: Iraq, which was still part of the Ottoman Empire at the time, sent soldiers to Istanbul for military training. There, they received an education which included drawing and painting of pictures for military purposes. Technique and style of this military painting, however, had previously been transferred to Turkey from Europe, and thus relied on the Western art traditon. Abdul Qadir al-Rassam, Asim Hafidh, Haj Mohammed Slim, Mohammed Salih Zeki, Hassan Sami and Nasir Awni were part of the group of soldiers which became eager students of fine arts and acquired knowledge available in the Ottoman capital, which was heavily influenced by contemporary French art. After World War I, this new generation of academic artists returned to Iraq and further developed their style, mainly utilizing landscapes, archaeological sites or war scenes as their subjects. All this came at a time when the artistic production of the country had been reduced to traditional Arab calligraphy after centuries of cultural decline following the Mongol Invasion in the 13th century and, in particular, the destruction of Baghdad in 1258. However, the art of calligraphy flourished and is still today an important component of Iraqi art.[63] While the upper classes where highly intrigued by the artistic innovations brought to the country by the returning soldier-artists, the public was still reluctant

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[62] Faraj, Maysaloun. *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art.* Saqi Books, 2001, p.15.

[63] Established modern artists who work with calligraphy are especially Mohammed Said al-Sakkar and Hassan Massoudy.

to accept anything that contradicted social conventions and conservative religious views.[64] Artists, too, were partly hesitant in accepting a new understanding of the world through realism; Asim Hafidh (1886-1978), an important pioneer artists, avoided portraying reality and the human body too closely following his beliefs.[65] After World War I, Iraq became a mandate of the League of Nations, and was administered by the British from 1920 to 1932. In 1921, King Faisal I (1885-1933) was instated by the British as ruler of Iraq, and in 1932, the country reached independence. However, in 1941, the British invaded Iraq, where they would retain military presence until 1954.[66] During the monarchy from the 1920s to 50s, culture and art not only officially received attention, but also developed into an institutionalized field: In 1931, the first public exhibition took place in Baghdad. Emerging artists of the time–like Akram Shukri, Faiq Hassan, Jewad Selim, and Atta Sabri, to name but a few–had received further education through scholarships in centers of artistic production in Europe, granted by the government, which had, of course, strong interest in the cultural participation of Iraq in the international arts discourse. In 1939, the first Painting Department opened under the direction of Faiq Hassan, followed by a Sculpture Section under Jewad Selim. At the beginning of the 40s, these schools were merged into the 'Institute of Fine Arts'.[67]

The society quickly came to accept art as an integral part of social life, resulting in the first Art Society, *Jam'iyat Asdiqa' al-Fen* (1941), founded by a group of artists, including the ones mentioned above. This society, which was highly engaged in promoting and disseminating art and artistic innovation through dialogue, exhibitions and events, existed until 1974. The post-World War II era's struggles and societal depression can be well traced through the art of the time: Artists sought to capture the fragile existence in a time of poverty and uncertainty. These works reached the audience through events like the Cairo International Exhibition (1947), the UNESCO Conference in Beirut (1948), or a large show in Baghdad honouring the 11th century philosopher Ibn Sina (1951). Perhaps the pinnacle of exposure of Iraqi artists to an international audience was, at that time, an exhibition of Arab

[64] Faraj, 2001, p.21.

[65] Schroth, 2013, p.24f.

[66] "Iraq", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/place/Iraq/Independence-1932-39, www.britannica.com/place/Iraq. Accessed 24 May 2024.

[67] Faraj, 2001, p.22.

artists in Rome in 1953. In the following decades, artists with different educational backgrounds separated into different schools of artistic thought. The perhaps most influential of them formed under Faiq Hassan–the *Société Primitive* or *Al-Ruwad* ('The Pioneers')–and included members like Jewad Selim, Issa Hanna or Mahmoud Sabri.[68] One core element of their artistic practice was to trade the studio for nature–to engage with the real-life subject and train careful observation. In this environment, the artists experimented with very different artistic directions, including Impressionism, Expressionism, Realism and Cubism. However, they mostly followed an academic line of thought, which resulted in the detachment of Jewad Selim from the group in 1951, who then founded the group *Jama'et Baghdad lil Fen al-Hadith* (Baghdad Group of Modern Art). In particular, Selim was concerned with the overwhelming influence of the West on Iraqi cultural life and identity, and he regarded the preservation and strengthening of a national identity as a key responsibility of art. In parallel, he aspired to create a solid theoretical foundation for Iraqi contemporary art, which he saw as extension of the rich artistic heritage of past millennia, such as the Babylonian and Assyrian reliefs or the miniatures created in the 13th century.[69] In order to achieve such a close and seamless connection, these elements of the past had to be incorporated in modern art to create art that was genuine and true to Iraqi identity. As art historian Ulrike al-Khamis explains, Selim was

> "committed to creating a synthesis of indigenous, historical and folkloristic art forms and contemporary Western trends, in charting his country's contemporary social and political realities and encouraging a newly confident, national conscience through his art. In this, he was undoubtedly the most influential individual in the formation of the modern art movement in Iraq at the time."[70]

Such revival of indigenous and historical elements included, for instance, the adaptation of symbols from Mesopotamian reliefs such as the crescent moon and the simple geometric shapes typical of cuneiform inscriptions.[71]

An important element in Iraqi and Arab art, which is worth highlighting here, is the use

[68] Ibd. pp.22-23.

[69] Ibd. p.24.

[70] Ibd., p.25.

[71] Takesh et al., 2020, p.12.

of letters of the Arabic script. While the origins and history of this artistic style is contested,[72] it is generally understood that Iraqi painters Madiha Omar and Jamil Hammoudi were the first artists to extensively explore the possibilities of this approach. Nada Shabout coined the term *Hurufiyya*, which means 'letter' in Arabic. The art of this movement explores the aesthetics of the Arabic letters, but also often includes words or phrases belonging to the realm of Islamic religion and mysticism. It is important to note that this art form did not originate from calligraphy, and instead represents a modern take on identity and heritage. While art historian Wijdan Ali understands any artistic employment of the Arabic script as an approach to the religious discourse and interprets these works of art as expressions of Islamic identity, Shabout points out that for Arabic speaking countries, the script goes beyond religion and reaches the realm of the every-day life. Starting from the 19th century, the script had lost its sacredness and came to designate identity inclusive of, but not necessarily exclusively connected to Islam.[73] Shirbil Daghir summarizes the essence of the art movement in two principles: "The first entails a complete break with the styles of traditional Arabic script, letters being viewed as plastic elements. The second principle involves the construction of a modern work of art capable of expressing a cultural particularity."[74] Of the artists discussed in the context of the collections, works by Iranian artist Parviz Tanavoli can interpreted as belonging to the first approach to letters, while Iraqi artists Jamil Hammoudi and Shaker Hassan Al Said as belonging to the second category.

The political turmoil of the 50s which saw an increased reluctance to support Western imperialist influence in Iraq–as in the wider Middle East–resulted in the revolution of 1958. The monarchy, which had been instated and backed by the British, had to give way to a socialist government.[75] This new government strongly supported contemporary artists, once again profiting from art's ability to transcend momentary turbulence and provide a sense of unity, identity and continuity. These were certainly aspects which were welcomed by the

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[72] Wijdan Ali extensively discussed the position of letters in art from the Middle East in general and in the context of calligraphy, while Nada Shabout took a focused look at the diverse use of Arabic letters in modern art and does not see a connection to calligraphy. Cf. Shabout, 2007 and Ali, 1997.

[73] Shabout, 2007, p.70.

[74] Ibd., p.90.

[75] Faraj, 2001, p.25.

Figure 3: Monument of Freedom, Baghdad, picture taken in 1961. Wikipedia, modernbaghdad.tumblr.com/post/163130901774/liberty-monument-and-umma-park-baghdad.

young state. In particular, many public sculptures and monuments were commissioned at that time, such as the famous 'Nasb al-Hurriya' (Monument of Freedom) (fig. 3) by Jewad Selim and architect Rifat Chaidji, which celebrated the revolution and was unveiled in 1960.[76] Jewad Selim, who had by then become a major influence among artist of Iraq, less with regard to style and technique, and more because of the ideological foundations of his work, passed away unexpectedly in 1961. Young artists strived to continue his legacy and eagerly looked for innovative ways to reconcile tradition with modernity. Key figures in this context are Fa'iq Hassan, Kadhim Haydar, Shaker Hassan Al Said, Faraj Abbo, and Salim Al Dabbagh. The tools through which they aimed at a modern understanding of heritage is depicted in figure 4. Another highly influential emerging artist of that time was Selim's student Suad al-Attar (*1942), who became the first female artist to actively participate in any Iraqi arts group and gain national and international attention. During the 60s, many new art institutions emerged. The Academy of Fine Arts, established in 1959 as 'Institute for Higher Education', shifted its focus on the arts; in 1962, the Museum of Modern Art was opened, which built an extensive permanent collection of Iraqi art from 1900 to the 1950s, and regularly hosted contemporary temporary exhibitions. Private galleries and art venues of various kinds began to populate

[76] Ibd., p.26.

Baghdad.[77] During the late 60s and 70s, the Iraqi art scene and community opened to a more international perspective. This included increased attendance at international exhibitions and biennials, with government-sponsored participation of Iraqi artists. Baghdad saw an influx of Arab artists at its numeral art events, for instance the First Arab Biennial in 1974, which took place in Baghdad. But the Iraqi arts scene did not exclusively concentrate in the capital, and larger cities like Basra and Mosul also experienced a rapid evolution regarding their arts community. The artistic evolution during the 1970s included the exploration of new mediums: printmaking, posters, lithography, ceramics were only a few of these. Al-Khamis summarizes the achievements of these decades as follows:

> "By the end of the seventies Iraqi art had gained in artistic complexity and diversity, encompassing numerous approaches and styles. Large numbers of newly emerging artists supplied the movement with a constant flow of new impulses and challenges to established thought. Frequent interaction with artists and art trends from the 'Third World', the Middle East and Europe provided the artists with continuing stimuli, to be digested and combined with each individual's explicitly Iraqi contribution."[78]

The 80s brought an abrupt end to the prolific activities of this wide-spun artistic network. Following the ascension to power of Saddam Hussein in 1979 and the invasion of Iran, the Iran-Iraq War and later the Second Gulf War inflicted poverty, instability and sanctions on the population. Although the arts scene did not completely bend under the weight of these hardships, it was especially the extreme difficulty of interaction with the outside world which ultimately strongly impacted the artistic community. Many artists who had not yet settled elsewhere did so now. These artists employed art as a way to bring meaning to a new life outside their homeland, and tackled themes such as migration, exile, and identity. Artists active in Iraq were facing the extreme difficulty of finding materials, and beyond that were confronted with the task to express emotions in a deeply chaotic and unsettling environment.[80] The sanctions and their impact on life in Iraq persisted until 2003, which meant that Iraqi artists "missed almost two decades of global aesthetic and intellectual developments," which also led to a shift of Iraqi cultural production from those living in Iraq to those living

[77] Ibd., p.26.

[78] Ibd., p.31.

[80] Faraj, 2001, p.31f.

Artist name	Cultural heritage source			Addressing type		
	folklore	Pre-Islamic	Islamic	folklore	Pre-Islamic	Islamic
Faiq Hassan	✓			Nomadism, horse herding and jockey		
Kadhim Haydar			✓			Good and evil content, Karbala incident
Jewad Salim	✓	✓	✓	Iraqi woman's clothing, water sellers and street performers	Diamond-shaped eyes	Calligraphy, cart, Islamic architecture and the crescent symbol
Shakir Hassan Al Said	✓		✓	Illustration of folk stories, The walls of abandoned buildings of Baghdad neighborhoods		Calligraphy and Arabic letters
Faraj Abbo			✓			Calligraphy and geometric patterns
Salim Al Dabbagh	✓		✓	Nomad tents		Kaaba symbol

Figure 4: Instruments of reconciliation between Iraqi heritage and modern art. Sharifian et al., 2017, p.52.[79]

elsewhere.[81] In 2003, the extreme tensions between the United Nations (and in particular the United States) and the government of Saddam Hussein, who had become president in 1979 and during the 80s and 90s partially also took on the role of prime minister, culminated in the invasion of Iraq by the US. Many major cultural institutions fell victim to this invasion: the archaeological Iraq Museum (founded 1926), the Pioneers Museum (which collected works of the first generation of modern Iraqi painters), and the Museum of Modern Art (originally Saddam Center for the Arts) suffered heavily and registered significant losses. While extensive international attention was paid to the looting of the Irak Museum, which resulted in the successful recovery of a large part of the stolen items, the lootings of museums concerned with modern art history drew little interest from the global community.[82] Especially in the case of the Museum of Modern Art, a large part of its modern and contemporary collections was lost and until now efforts of recovery have been only partially successful. From the orig-

[81] Nusair, Isis, and Nada Shabout. "The Cultural Costs of the 2003 US-Led Invasion of Iraq: A Conversation with Art Historian Nada Shabout." Feminist Studies, vol. 39, no. 1, 2013, pp. 119–48. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23719300. Accessed 12 May 2024, p.120.

[82] Naef, 2017, p.119.

inal collection of 8500 works, only around 2300 could be saved.[83] A lack of international reporting and awareness, scholarship, research and funding certainly magnified the extent of destruction and saw a piece of history get irrevocably lost.[84] This event had a lasting impact on the modern arts of Iraq: "The museum had acted as the main repository for Iraq's visual memory."[85] The position of Iraqi modern art on the international scene became very complex: Due to the looting, demand for Iraqi modern artworks increased dramatically, which, in turn, led to forgeries of the looted works.[86]

Nowadays, the museum environment in Iraq is slowly recovering, but the resources available are still not adequate. Initiatives such as the Modern Art Iraq Archive (MAIA), to which Nada Shabout and Dia al-Azzawi contributed significantly since 2011, is an attempt to collect images of lost artworks from the Museum of Modern Art, to research the dispersed works, and to offer a digital access to the art present in the museum.[87] The Ruya Foundation is another valuable resource that engages in the promotion and research of Iraqi modern and contemporary art. It was founded in 2012 by author and curator Tamara Chalabi, who lives in London. A major enterprise by the foundation was the organization of the Iraq Pavilion at the Venice Biennale since 2013. The gallery landscape in major cities of the country is steadily growing, especially in Baghdad. Private initiatives strongly support the Iraqi modern and contemporary art scene, but are mainly located outside the country. One example is the Ibrahimi Collection, founded by Hasanain al-Ibrahimi, which is located in Amman, Jordan–the " 'liaison region' for Iraqi artists worldwide".[88] To conclude, it is evident that the motivation among Iraqis interested in art to promote, research, collect and exhibit art from their native country is very strong and feelings of belonging and identity are closely connected to these endeavours. Nonetheless, the situation still holds many obstacles

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[83] *Ibrahimi Collection*, ibrahimicollection.com/node/1128.

[84] Schroth, 2013, p.13; Shabout, 2007, p.154.

[85] Nusair, Shabout, 2013, p.121.

[86] Ibd.

[87] Kansa, Sarah Whitcher, Nada Shabout, and Saleem al-Bahloly. "The Modern Art Iraq Archive (MAIA): Web tools for Documenting, Sharing and Enriching Iraqi Artistic Expressions." DH. 2010.

[88] Amirsadeghi, et al. *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century.* Thames Et Hudson, 2009, p.41. For a detailed analysis of the relation between Iraqi eimgré artists and Amman, see Shabout in Amirsadeghi, 2009, p.41.

for the art scene, and often forces the initiatives to operate from outside Iraq.

2.2.3 United Arab Emirates

In the early 20th century, the area that is now the UAE was known as the Trucial States, a group of sheikhdoms under British protection. This relationship was formalized through the General Maritime Treaty of 1820, which emerged from efforts by Britain to protect its trade route with India. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the region's economy was predominantly based on pearling, fishing, and limited agriculture. However, the pearling industry faced a severe decline in the 1930s due to the production of cultured pearls from Japan, and the Great Depression. The discovery of oil in the 1950s was a pivotal moment for the Trucial States. The first commercial oil discovery occurred in Abu Dhabi in 1958, and oil exports began in 1962. This newfound wealth fundamentally altered the economic landscape, providing the financial resources needed for extensive development and modernization. The rulers of the Trucial States began to invest heavily in infrastructure, education, and healthcare, laying the groundwork for future growth. The political landscape also underwent significant changes. From the 60s, plans were made to form a nation independent from the United Kingdom. Initially, the plan was to create a federation that included Bahrain and Qatar, along with the seven Trucial States. However, disagreements led to Bahrain and Qatar becoming independent nations, while the remaining Trucial States moved forward with their plan for unification. The state United Arab Emirates was officially established on December 2, 1971. Six of the Trucial States—Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, and Fujairah—joined together to form the new nation. Ras Al Khaimah joined the federation in early 1972. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the ruler of Abu Dhabi, was elected as the first president of the UAE, playing a crucial role in the unification process and the subsequent development of the country.

The post-1971 period saw the UAE embark on an ambitious program of economic diversification. While oil revenue provided the initial impetus for development, the government strategically invested in various other sectors, including aviation, real estate, tourism, and finance, to reduce reliance on oil. Cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi transformed into global hubs for business, tourism, and innovation, boasting world-class infrastructure and services.

Figure 5: The Louvre Abu Dhabi. www.louvreabudhabi.ae/en/about-us/architecture.

Dubai, in particular, has become a symbol of rapid development and modernization, known for its iconic skyline, luxury tourism, and as a major center for international trade. Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi has balanced its oil wealth with investments in culture, education, and sustainable development. A key element in these efforts of diversification is arts and culture. Particularly the insertion of the state into the global fine art market successfully positioned the UAE in the global arts discourse. A highlight in this development was the establishment of auction houses by internationally acclaimed companies such as Christie's and Sotheby's from 2006 onwards. However, the lack of an established art production and the absence of historical cultural hubs in the region necessitated immense efforts of sensibilization towards the arts, the establishment of a viable infrastructure, including art education, and networking with the global scene. Sensibilization is yet to reach its full potential: A particular challenge is the ethically correct framing of art in a particularly fast-growing consumer culture.[89] Fostering a deeper understanding of art above all required the adequate education within the country: Institutions like the College of Fine Arts and Design at the University of Sharjah (founded in 2002) and the College of Arts and Creative Enterprises at the Zayed University in Dubai (founded in 2010) provide higher education in the arts (both theory and practice) following American models, but are closely interconnected with the local arts scene.

An example of cultural diplomacy and networking is the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which opened in 2017. This landmark museum, a collaboration between the UAE and France, rep-

[89] Cf. Doherty, 2016, pp.194 and Naef, 2014, p.284.

resents a significant step in the UAE's aspiration to become a global cultural hub. The Louvre Abu Dhabi houses an extensive collection of artworks from around the world, spanning various historical periods and cultures, and is designed to promote cross-cultural understanding and dialogue. Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, on which the museum is located is undoubtedly the core of UAE's plan for art. In 2006, the plans were announced and contained projects for four other museums. In the same year, Christie's opened its location in Dubai, the first international auction location in the country and, indeed, in the entire Middle East. This was a crucial step for the interconnection with the global art world and has since grown to be a fundamental element in the entire region's art discourse.

The UAE follow a peculiar strategy to reconcile its values with those of the West, whose artworks it is importing. While it is clear that compromises have to be made regarding certain works of Western art in accordance with Islamic values, the rhetoric of the responsible entities focuses on bringing different civilisations, cultures, religions and value systems into a dialogue. Laurence des Cars, the curatorial director of Agence France-Museums overseeing the Louvre Abu Dhabi project said, "[w]e want this to be a collection of masterpieces that make sense together, that have soul and that will form a dialogue with different civilizations".[90] This approach to (modern) art reflects a society in which Emiratis constitute a mere 9% of the population[91] and the society has adapted to the confluence of an unusual amount of different nationalities and cultures. However, the authoritarian government of the federal monarchy imposes rules that are meant to protect the cultural and Islamic identity of the country. Nonetheless, especially the Arab population struggles with a sense of identity loss.[92] Emily Doherty particularly points out that both private and public art collections entail a tendency towards structure which can be extended from the realm of art to societal dynamics: "To collect and then catalogue (anything) establishes a sense of order. For a young country with a focus on nation building, structure is crucial: it creates order out of disorder."[93] Doherty further quotes Susan Pearce, who wrote that "all societies need

[90] *Mercury News*, www.mercurynews.com/2009/05/29/construction-starts-on-louvre-abu-dhabi/.

[91] Data from 2023. *Government of Dubai*, www.dsc.gov.ae/en-us/Themes/Pages/Population-and-Vital-Statistics.aspx?Theme=42. Accessed 25 May 2024.

[92] Doherty, 2016, p.183.

[93] Ibd., p.186.

to use objects to help create the social categories without which organized life would fall apart, so functionalist and structuralist analyses support and illumine each other".[94] Structure, heritage, legitimization and identity are thus closely entwined and in this context, the artistic and cultural efforts of the UAE have to be regarded from a holistic point of view. Several projects focus on these issues of cultural reconciliation of tradition and globalized innovation. In 2008, plans for the MOMEMA (Museum of Middle Eastern Modern Art) were announced. However, as of today, this project has not been realized. The major museums in Abu Dhabi seem to have taken its place in the UAE's plans for large-scale museum projects. While the Louvre Abu Dhabi focuses on pre-1900 works, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, which is set to open in 2025, is projected to contain major modern and contemporary works from the MENA region and South-East Asia, and it is possible that a focus will lie on the nation's own modern and contemporary art.

Abu Dhabi has emerged as the primary hub for arts and culture in the country, in particular with regards to the global scene, focusing on blue-chip artists to underscore its legitimacy as cultural capital in the global context. In contrast, Dubai's art scene revolves more around local and Arab art and is overall more oriented towards the present than the past. The first initiative was the Sharjah Biennial, established as early as 1993. In 2009, the official institution, Sharjah Art Foundation, was established by curator and daughter of the ruler of Sharjah, Hoor al-Qasimi. The foundation has since been instrumental in supporting contemporary art and artists in the region. The overarching guiding body of these initiatives is the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, which was established in 2008. This authority is responsible for positioning Dubai as a global, creative, and empowered city. For instance, it oversees numerous initiatives, including the Sikka Art Fair, which supports emerging artists from the UAE and the Gulf region, and the Al Fahidi Historical Neighborhood, which preserves and promotes the cultural heritage of Dubai.

The UAE's art history is relatively young, reflecting the nation's rapid development. Early art practices in the region were heavily influenced by traditional forms, including Islamic art and architecture, calligraphy, and handicrafts. However, as the country developed, interest grew in contemporary art forms, especially art projects which blend traditional

[94] Susan Pearce: *On Collecting*. Qtd in Doherty, 2016, p.186.

themes with modern techniques and perspectives, and thus offer an indigenous perspective on the present in a globalized context. In the past decades, several Emirati artists have gained international recognition for their innovative approaches and unique voices. Not only the increasingly vibrant art scene in the UAE itself, but also international participation at fairs and biennials is vital for putting Emirati artists on a global map. For instance, since 2009, the UAE Pavilion is a constant in the Venice *Biennale*'s program. In 2015, a particularly ambitious show, "1980–Today: Exhibitions in the UAE", was set up in Venice to showcase the history of Emirati art since the beginnings of the young state.[95] It is important to note that the understanding of local art seems to frequently follow ideals of Pan-Arabism. Museums, exhibitions, events, and even private collections, often feature 'Arab art' without particularly emphasizing the differences between the states. The reasons could reach from a strategy to emerge as primary art hub in the entire region to compensating for a relatively young and historically less rooted art history than the art history of other Arab countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

2.3 Art collecting practices–on the interface between private and public, past and future, local and international

This section aims to touch upon three aspects that are crucial in the world of private art collections. The first one is perhaps most obvious: Why do private individuals collect art? What are their motivations and what is their ultimate goal? It is apparent that the reasons are endless and in most cases personal and specific to each collector. However, a few main tendencies stand out. This is followed by a brief discussion of how these collectors approach their interaction with the public, and what measures they take to open the collection to the public, in case they decide to do so. Thirdly, some insights into the relation between private collections and public institutions are provided.

Private art collections usually fall into one of the following categories: They can be private to a point that they are not known to the public or to art professionals, perhaps the only point of contact with the art world being an advisor or family office, and the auctions during

[95] *National Pavilion UAE*, nationalpavilionuae.org/art/2015/1980-today-exhibitions-in-the-uae/. Accessed 28 May 2024.

which art gets added to or sold from the collection, usually with the note 'from a private collection'. The second group opens the content of their collection and perhaps the thoughts behind its compilation to a public audience by means of publications or similar material. The physical artworks, however, are largely inaccessible to external audiences. One exception are loans from the collector to museums or art institutions for specific exhibitions that require niche art featured in the private collection. In this case, collectors may choose to stay anonymous or to add a note stating their name. Lastly, collectors may regard their collection as an important contribution to art preservation, and offer various ways for the public art world to engage with their collection. This, of course, is tied to the financial means to do so, and for the environment to allow such an accessible approach, which is, unfortunately, as we will see later, not always given. This latter group of collectors often establishes private museums.

2.3.1 Why collect art?

Art and culture–like all aspects of social life–can be seen as a togetherness of actions by individual 'poetic' actors.[96] As such, collectors play a role on the same level of importance as, for instance, artists or art institutes. The creativity and resourcefulness which ultimately leads to the establishment of an (ideal) art collection should not be underestimated. The entrepreneur and art collector Sam Lewison went as far as calling collecting an art in its own right: "The collector who 'hangs' [...] a room has the satisfying experience of an interpretive artist who creates a new aesthetic cosmos."[97] Collecting art can indeed be called a form of art itself, in so far as both the practice and the material and conceptual outcome constitute a new meaning, convey a message, and arise from a specific personal motivation and need for expression by the collector. An art collection is never only the ensemble of individual works of art–it acquires a new dimension through the composition, suggests a meaning of its own, and each of the works gains a new perspective through relations to other works of the collection. Collecting is the careful construction of a network that leads to new meaning. In

[96] Maffi, Daher, 2014, p.1

[97] Lewisohn, Sam. "Is Collecting an Art?" Parnassus, vol. 6, no. 5, 1934, pp. 14–15. JSTOR, doi.org/10.2307/770868. Accessed 14 May 2024.

other words, the collector becomes a "curator/patron"[98]–the collector takes on the role of a curator, who selects artworks in order to achieve a certain vision.

Serious collectors are defined by a thorough knowledge of the art environment they are most interested in, a passion for aesthetics and the drive of growing their collection in one way or another. Many collectors also experience the 'adrenaline kick' of fighting for an artwork at auction and 'winning', a reason that for instance Bahraini collector Sheikh Rashid al-Khalifa quotes as main fascination.[99] However, motivations of competition, rarity and price usually do not satisfy private collectors. Following a survey, Emily Doherty subsumes that "[i]f a piece is purchased as property for property's sake, it is often later considered to be a mistake."[100] Other driving factors for collectors include the implications of a well-built collection: for instance, these collections share an important attribute with well-established museum collections: the aura of immortality. The idea that art somehow transcends time is widely accepted.[101] Doherty affirms that "[t]he passing on of artworks to future generations suggests that some of this magic can rub off on the individual or individuals assembling the work and projecting its importance to future generations."[102] This is closely connected to the desire of leaving a legacy which often accompanies large-scale projects by wealthy individuals. However, this idea can also impact the overarching project of the collection, its development, accessibility, and structure.

The structures of private collections vary from case to case and align with the collector's vision of what a hypothetical 'complete' collection should look like. For collectors who build their collection with the aim of displaying it to the public, either during their lifetime or after their death in the form of a private museum, this implies that they identify how their collection can contribute to knowledge and the education–both on a historical and aesthetical level–of the visitors of the collection. The same is true for a scholarly oriented, 'philological' approach: it constitutes a creation of informational value, allows for an innovative understanding of the art in the collection, and brings a certain structure into it. In the

[98] Coates, Rebecca. "The curator/patron: Foundations and contemporary art." emaj, 3, 2008, p.1.

[99] Amirsadeghi, Eisler, 2010, p.230.

[100] Doherty, 2016, p.194.

[101] Ibd., p.185.

[102] Ibd., pp.191f.

Middle East, collections along the entire spectrum of collecting practices are present. Farhad Farjam is a great example of a collector who follows a chronological approach and sees his collection as contribution to the art scene of the UAE. His collection strives to contain art from the 'Islamic World' from the beginnings until today and aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the artistic evolution of the region, "reflecting over a thousand years of history."[103] Farjam, who regards collecting an enterprise with "social responsibility,"[104] made his collection accessible to the public in the form of the Farjam Foundation in Dubai. A great resource for understanding the various approaches is the volume "Art and Patronage: The Middle East". From this selection of major collectors of Middle Eastern art around the world, it is evident that for most of them, the art they collect is a highly personal matter, which connects them to their heritage. This motivation is reflected in the choice of collectors represented in the following case studies.

Most private collectors act according to a sound philosophy. There are, however, private collections mainly built on economic speculation. The dynamics of the art market allow for significant gains, when the buyer holds the right knowledge of value, expected value development and trends of society and the market.[105] And this is especially true for emerging art niches, such as modern and contemporary art from Iran and the Arab World. Another negatively connoted reason for collecting art is a demonstration of wealth and prestige, a reasoning which aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's observation about the consumption of cultural capital as fundamental part of social hierarchy.[106] The innate human desire for greatness undoubtedly is responsible for at least a minor contribution of such a reasoning to collecting which is apparent in many collections. Collections of this kind are built following 'big names'–very common is the chase for blue-chip artists–and the search for internationally recognized value.

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[103] *The Farjam Collection*, www.farjamcollection.org/the-farjam-collection/. Accessed 15 April 2024.

[104] Forbes, Alexander, et al. *The Seventh BMW Art Guide by Independent Collectors.* Hatje Cantz, 2023, p.262.

[105] Although it is difficult to counteract art flipping, sometimes measures are put in place to prevent it. For instance, Christie's in 2020 established a contract with buyers of Black art that stated that the buyer would not resell the work on public auction within five years from the sales. See "Anti-Flipping." *Artquest*, artquest.org.uk/artlaw-article/anti-flipping/. Accessed 20 May 2024.

[106] Maffi, Daher, 2014, p.204.

In light of this perspective, an insight arises from the examination of numerous specialized private collections in the Middle East: Numerous collections which are publicly known and accessible in one way or another and are concerned with art of the Middle East have an additional, often not as substantial, collection of international blue-chip artists.[107] The international section of the collections is often not as easily accessible, and not as intensely promoted on the media.[108] It is open to speculation whether this falls in the category of genuine interest in those artists, whether this section of the collection rather follows a speculative approach, or whether this section aims to position the owner on the international blue-chip collector stage. Perhaps one must consider that until recently, Middle Eastern modern and contemporary art did not represent an internationally recognized value–in the sense of both prestige and economic value–and thus did not aid a high positioning of the collector in the framework of international competition.

2.3.2 The mission of public access to private collections and its instruments

Collectors who regard collecting art as social responsibility are certainly interested in disseminating information about their collection and their efforts of contributing to artistic advancement and scholarship. There are several ways in which this can be achieved: the publication of a catalogue of the collection, the casual opening of the exhibition to interested individuals, the establishment of a foundation, or (what is in effect similar) the establishment of a private museum.

The collection catalogue is a publication issued at a certain point that does not claim completeness of the collection, but perhaps rather mirrors the collector's feeling of having achieved his collection goals to a wide enough level to present the collection to a public audience. Often, several decades have passed since the founding of the collection, and the catalogue not only provides information about each artwork or each artists with feature high-

[107] See, for instance, the collections of Sultan Sooud al-Qassimi, Mohammed Afkhami, Farhad Farjam, Ramin Salsali, and the Emirati collectors Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan bin Khalifa Al Nahyan and Zaki Nusseibeih, to name a few.

[108] For example, the Barjeel Foundation divides the collection into the publicly accessible Arab part of the collection, while the international works are collected in a separate category which is not open to the public. This perhaps already clearly states the lesser importance of the works for the interest of the public. See *The Barjeel Foundation*, www.barjeelartfoundation.org. Accessed 2 April 2024.

lights of works from the collection, but also gives insights into the evolution of the collection, the philosophy which the collector follows. This approach particularly highlights the importance of the entirety of the collection, and aligns with an understanding of the collection as an art work in its own right. An introductory note often contains details of the personal history and life of the collector, a dimension which aids an understanding of the personal connection of the individual to his or her collection. Most of these catalogues are meticulously executed, implementing prestigious materials and design. This undoubtedly is meant to appeal to the taste of individuals interested in art, and to reflect the exclusive quality of the collection itself. The drawback of such an edition is the price, which does not necessarily support the broad accessibility across social environments. In reality, this is only a perpetuation of a major critical and controversial point of fine art and art collecting– in its roots, and due to its high economic requirements, it remains an elitist activity.

Some collectors choose to keep their collection private, and enjoy the artworks in their home. This rationale aligns primarily with collecting as aesthetic pleasure. This approach could, in some cases, also arise from the extensive financial means required to make a collection accessible, be it in the form of a foundation or a museum. This, however, often does not stand in contrast with the collectors' willingness to share their passion for art and their collection. Casual openings and private tours are the most apparent next step. In this context, journalism plays a vital role. Press articles about private collections are often based on interviews at the collector's home and accompanied by pictures and observations made by the journalist. Similarly, most collectors are open to scholarly research and interest in their collections.[109]

If the circumstances allow it, and the financial means are available, collectors often establish foundations which contain their collection. It is important to acknowledge the administrative and financial advantages of such a foundation: Not-for-profit private foundations are eligible for exemptions from various taxes, varying according to the local legislation.[110] These tax advantages are justified through the fact that these private initiatives bring a value

[109] In the course of the present research, Hussein Ali Harba kindly offered the possibility to visit his home, an opportunity which unfortunately had to be missed for personal reasons.

[110] Heilbrun, James, and Charles M. Gray. *The economics of art and culture.* Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.9.

to society which otherwise the government would have to provide.[111] Furthermore, by constituting a legal entity which differs from the private entity of their founder, foundations offer increased potential regarding legislative and administrative aspects.[112] However, private foundations do not receive funding from external parties, and the founder is the only financial source.[113] The activities of a private foundation usually go beyond the mere display of the collection in a designated space. In many cases of privately established art foundations in the Middle East, a major component is the organization of events, the provision of funds for the support of artists and engagement with local communities. Art foundations can be held by a private individual, for instance in the cases of the Barjeel Foundation Art Foundation (Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi) or the Farjam Foundation (Farhad Farjam), or else emerge from collaborative initiatives such as in the case of Sharjah Art Foundation, which builds on the Sharjah Biennial and is now directed by artist and curator Hoor al-Qasimi. In public relations, private foundations are sometimes foregrounded as owner of the works, leaving the private collector behind it in the background. Perhaps this serves a deeper legitimization of the activities on the international stage. In other cases, the foundation is rarely mentioned and operates in the background on an administrative and legal level. The spectrum is wide and the implications of collectors' choices undoubtedly impact how they and their collection is understood.

The most extended initiative of private collectors to open up their collection to public interest, research and thus integration into the local or international art discourse, is the establishment of a private museum. Private museums largely follow the ICOM museum definition, which states:

> "A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge shar-

[111] McCarden, Khrista. "Private Operating Foundation Reform and J. Paul Getty." Pittsburgh Tax Review, 17, 2, Spring 2020, pp. 387-412, p.387.

[112] Cf. Subesar, Haris. "Reconstruction Of The Concept Of A Foundation As A Non Profit Oriented Legal Entity." Jurnal Ilmiah Dunia Hukum, 2024, pp. 17-32.

[113] McCarden, 2020, p.387.

ing."[114]

A key difference between private museums and private foundations is that museums often focus on implementing their responsibilities for care and conservation, an engaging display and appealing exhibitions, while foundations tend to concentrate on educational efforts and artist engagement, for instance through panel discussions, opportunities for schools and universities, internships and scholarships, publications, artists residencies, to name but a few.[115] However, these responsibilities can fluctuate and vary from collection to collection and within one collection over time.

2.3.3 The role of private collections in relation to public collections and museums

Private collections are not necessarily democratic institutions at a first glance. However, contrary to this, "private museums can develop swiftly according to the changing desires and interests of the individuals who own them. The latter is not necessarily a problem, but it does raise the question of how collections are shaped over the long-term and how they are intended to address the interests of diverse publics across generations"[116] This stands in stark contrast to public institutions, whose decision making process is guided by committees, and, not rarely, by the wishes of funding bodies. Kristina Kolbe particularly highlights the problematic aspects and potentially negative impact of public policy, government control and censorship.[117] The independent nature on a financial level of private initiatives leads to independent decisions by the owner/founder. While this may have negative effects in some cases, the majority of collectors who open their collection to the public audience is driven by a strong wish to contribute to the education and well-being of the community, and is thus highly interested in the community's engagement with the collection. Another advantage

[114] "Museum Definition", *ICOM*, icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/. Accessed 15 March 2024.

[115] In this particular instance, a comparison between the Salsali Private Museum in Dubai and the Farjam Foundation in Dubai was conducted, whose outcome reflects tendencies in institutions of the region.

[116] Brown, Kathryn. "Private influence, public goods, and the future of art history." Journal for Art Market Studies, 3, 1, 2019. doi.org/10.23690/jams.v3i1.86. Accessed 1 May 2024.

[117] Kolbe et al., 2022, p.3.

of this independence is the freedom to make more radical and experimental artistic choices than public institutions.[118] Private collections can also focus on themes and artistic directions that are particularly important to the collector, and thus represent the mission of his or her collecting activities. Unfortunately, public museums still tend to invest more intensively in their internationally recognized collections of Western or traditionally important art, and often neglect niches of underrepresented art. All of the collectors analysed in this paper had this aspect at the very core of their decision of opening the collection to the public: the mission of collecting, archiving, studying, promoting and showing the art of the 20th and 21st centuries of their native countries–to fill a gap left by the overlooking of these niches by public institutions.[119] Targeted loans can prevent such a distorted perspective. Thus, private collections and foundations counteract the lack of representation by advocating for the acknowledgement of modern art from underrepresented groups of artists on the international stage, especially through loans and exhibitions organized in collaboration with institutions all around the world. The practice of loaning works from private collections to public institutions furthermore is a powerful tool for directing the relationship between private and public from a competitive dynamic into a positive and collaborative direction.

2.4 The art market perspective on modern and contemporary art Iran and the Arab World

One way of understanding the dynamics of the art world is from a network point of view. 'Actors' or 'agents' in this network are responsible for the production, promotion and appraisal, circulation, and ultimately the canonization of artworks. One of the 'knots' of this network is the art market, which stands for the entirety of points of contact between various agents

[118] Cf. Bechtler, Cristina, and Dora Imhof. *The private museum of the future.* JRP Ringier, Les Presses du reel, 2018.

[119] This mission also addresses the aspect of correct representation, and artists from the Middle East are in many cases eager to be acknowledged as contemporary artists belonging to the international community, and do not necessarily define their art exclusively through their identity. As Ziba Ardalan, curator of the Iranian show at the Venice Biennale 2019, points out: "when Iranian artists are shown in Western museums, they are either included in exhibitions of contemporary Iranian and Middle Eastern art, or in exhibitions of Islamic art. They are not usually invited as 21st-century artists, and this is very bothersome." *Kayhan Magazine*, kayhanlife.com/culture/art/venice-to-host-major-exhibition-of-iranian-art-curated-by-ziba-ardalan/. Accessed 4 May 2024.

like artists, dealers, specialists, and collectors. The financial aspect of this is self-evident. What may, however, not be immediately apparent are the extensive ramifications of the economic dimensions of art within the market. It's clear that artists need financial backing to bring their creations to life. However, in a society where economic worth frequently serves as a simple gauge of attractiveness and, consequently, 'value', the influence of financial dynamics on art on the global art market extend far beyond these fundamental considerations. They reflect and directly impact the intricate interplay of cultural significance, individual perceptions, prejudice and misconceptions, the residues of colonial structures and the fight against them. It is therefore vital to consider the 'numbers' of the art market to gain better insights into certain developments.

The international art market has seen a delay in interest in modern and contemporary art from the Middle East, a dynamic whose effects are still visible today,[120] but ultimately experienced a rapid growth in the past decades. A few events stand out as having contributed to this explosion of interest in Middle Eastern art of the 20th and 21st centuries. Naef mentions the revolutionary exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin and held the the Centre Pompidou in 1989, as a turning point in the perception of global international art that embraced otherness in modern art and challenged the traditionally ethnocentric understanding of art in the West.[121] The same year saw, of course, other remarkable changes:[122] the fall of the Soviet Union not only gave rise to shifts in the political landscape, but also impacted the partaking of the 'East' to global discourses, one of which being the art market. The increase of wealth of emerging countries after 1989 contributed to this development. In the Middle East, this year also marked a breath of relief after the Iran-Iraq war and the beginning of the gradual rehabilitation of the affected countries in the international art world.[123] On the global stage, not only the Middle East, but also China joined

[120] For instance, among 'core artists', which refers to artists whose work has been sold more than 30 times in a 24-month period, from the Middle East are only Etel Adnan and Marjane Satrapi, cf. www.artmarketresearch.com/all-art-family/.

[121] Naef, 2017, p.120.

[122] Hans Belting's work was seminal for the understanding of 1989 as demarcating the 'global turn' in the art world. See Belting, Hans, and Andrea Buddensieg (eds.). *The Global Art World. Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, Ostfildern, 2008.

[123] Babaie, 2011, p.137.

the global–previously mainly Western–art market. These regional developments coincided with a worldwide recovery of the economy, which resulted in an average tripling of art price indexes for contemporary art[124]–a good measure of the boosted circulation of assets in the art market.

The next milestone in the development of the art market for Middle Eastern modern and contemporary art was the establishment of art market infrastructure within the region. International auction houses opened locations in Dubai from the early 2000s.[125] In parallel, several high-profile museums were planned and opened in the UAE, a development which further contributed to the popularity of modern Arab art and helped draw international attention to this emerging environment.[126] Dubai's aim to become a globally renowned hub for arts and culture had its origin in the region's combat against dependency on oil and the effort to instate a sustainable source of income, such as tourism. Perhaps the emergence of an art market infrastructure in the Middle East that operated with the expertise of locals, albeit being internationally connected, entailed a new perspective on local art altogether: It's quite plausible that a self-aware approach to promoting and disseminating art on the market, one that steers clear of the traditional dominance of Western perspectives, has played a significant role in fostering increased interest in Middle Eastern art. The contrast between a region advocating for its own art and former colonizers promoting it is substantial in terms of perception and emotional resonance.

A key moment was the first auction by Christie's in the region, *International Modern and Contemporary Art*, which was held in 2006 at the Jumeirah Emirates Towers Hotel in Dubai. The great interest in this auction led to the opening of a branch of the auction house in the city in the following year. The highlights of 2006 did not go unnoticed by the international art market: In 2007, the Annual Report by Artprice mentioned the Middle East for the first time as "generating artists and players with centre stage positions on the international art scene."[127] The upwards trend concerning the interest in modern art from the

[124] *The Artprice Annual Report 2006/2007*, imgpublic.artprice.com/pdf/fiac07en.pdf, p.4.

[125] Christie's Dubai in 2006, Sotheby's MENA category etc. cf. McAndrew, 2017-2024.

[126] Bahoora, 2020, p.27.

[127] *The Artprice Annual Report 2007/2008*, imgpublic.artprice.com/pdf/fiac08en.pdf, unpaginated.

Middle East continues to this day,[128] and articulates in high sell-through rates and regular sale records.[129] Moreover, a diverse interaction with local art events such as the fair Art Dubai or the Sharjah Biennial have developed, resulting in acclaimed events such as the yearly Art and Tech Summit in Dubai held by Christie's. Sotheby's entered the market for this niche in 2016 by establishing regular *20th Century Art/Middle East* specialized sales in London, and has since grown to be the leading expert in the field. Similar to Christie's ten years prior, the success of these sales resulted in the opening of the Sotheby's Dubai office in 2017.[130] Other international auction houses joined in organizing sales which presented modern and contemporary art of the MENA region, or with more specific focus, such as the Bonham's Sale entitled *A Century of Iraqi Art and Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art*[131] in 2015, or Phillips's *New Now – Highlights From the Middle East and South Asia*[132] in 2020, to name but a few.

The UAE's plan to emerge as nodal point in the international art market succeeded. It is important to note that because of its liberal climate and good connection to the West, Dubai–and other Emirates–also became home to many emigrants from countries in the region, most notably Iranians, who also contribute substantially to the gallery and art landscape of the United Emirates.[133] Dubai has certainly become the most international art centre of the Middle East. However, other countries joined the effort of constructing a modern art market environment. While the political circumstances in Iraq have not allowed for auction houses to enter the country up to now, Iran has established a leading auction house for the

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128 Cf. Christie's Annual Report, 2021, 2022, 2023.

129 *Sotheby's*, www.sothebys.com/en/departments/contemporary-arab-iranian-turkish-art.

130 *Sotheby's*, www.sothebys.com/en/slideshows/sothebys-celebrates-opening-of-new-dubai-gallery-and-office.

131 *Bonhams*, www.bonhams.com/auction/23058/a-century-of-iraqi-art-and-modern-and -contemporary-middle-eastern-art/. Accessed 24 April 2024.

132 *Phillips*, www.phillips.com/article/67889908/new-now-highlights-london. Accessed 24 April 2024.

133 Some examples are the Farjam Foundation by Farhad Farjam, *The Farjam Collection*, www.farjamcollection.org, and the Salsali Private Museum by Ramin Salsali, *Salsali Private Museum*, www.salsalipm.com. According to the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the UAE occupies the third place on the list of countries with the highest percentage of the Iranian diaspora after the USA and Canada. See: *Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, iranian/mfa.ir.

regional market, Tehran Auction, in 2012,[134] as well as a steadily growing number of art galleries. Some of these galleries hold internationally accessible auctions, the perhaps most well-known of which being Artibition.[135]

It would exceed the scope of this analysis to delve deeply into the expansive and rapidly evolving gallery landscape in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq, Iran, and the UAE. However, in summary, there is a growing number of galleries, mainly situated in Baghdad,[136] for instance, the Akkad Gallery[137] or The Gallery. [138] Iran has witnessed a significant increase in its gallery count over the past decade, going from a 'handful' to over 150 in Tehran alone,[139] with a foundation built upon pre-revolutionary establishments such as the notable eponymous gallery established in 1966 by art dealer Masoumeh Seyhoun, making its art scene one of the best established in the region. Meanwhile, the UAE has experienced remarkable growth across various sectors, including the arts, offering abundant opportunities for both local and international galleries within its vibrant market.

In conclusion of this cursory glance at the art market in the Middle East, it is important to ask: who are the participants in this network? The growth of the MENA art market is also reflected in the demographics of the participants of buyers and bidders. In most cases however, it is challenging to fully understand the demographics due to the strict privacy practices in the field. For instance, Alain Quemin points out that an undetermined, but without doubt substantial percentage of the international buyers of art in this niche are in fact expatriates.[140] The few statistics available on this information, however, are telling: Sotheby's, for example, has seen a consistent increase by more than 50% in buyers and

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134 Cf. *Tehran Auction*, tehranauction.com/en/about-us/. Accessed 2 April 2024.

135 "Modern Art Collection on Show at Artibition", *Tehran Times*, www.tehrantimes.com/news/489632/Modern-art-collection-on-show-at-Artibition.

136 "After Decades of War and Political Instability, Is Baghdad's Art Scene Seeing Glimmers of a Revival?" *Artned News*, news.artnet.com/art-world/baghdad-art-revival-2086156.

137 *Akkad Art Gallery*, mohit.art/network/akkad-art-gallery/.

138 *The Gallery*, thegalleryiq.org/index.php/about/.

139 "For Iranian Collector Mohammed Afkhami, Art Reflects His Country's History and Future", *Artsy*, www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-iranian-collector-mohammed-afkhami-art-reflects-countrys-history-future. Accessed 20 May 2024.

140 Quemin, Alain, and Zahra Jahanbakhsh. "A Comparative Review of the Iranian and Egyptian Art Market." In *Art Tomorrow*, 7, 2012, pp. 14-22, p.17.

striking 70% increase of bidders from the Middle East over the past five years.[141]

Certainly, many of the private individuals participating in these auctions are collectors, situated somewhere along the spectrum of art acquisition and appreciation. In the following chapters, three collectors will be discussed. Against the backdrop of this overview, their collecting practices can be understood as entwined with the growing interest in the art they buy and collect. This will be even more evident from the art market statistics of selected artists from these major collectors.

[141] *Sotheby's*, www.sothebys.com/en/departments/contemporary-arab-iranian-turkish-art.

3 Mohammed Afkhami

Figure 6: Collector Mohammed Afkhami in front of Farhad Moshiri's *Yek Donya (One World)*. Cultured Magazine, 24. Sept. 2021.
www.culturedmag.com/ article/2021/09/24/cultured-collections-with-mohammed-afkhami.

3.1 About the collector and the collection

"Collecting is in my blood."[142] This is how Mohammed Afkhami introduces the catalogue of his collection, published in 2017, twelve years after he embarked on the journey of collecting modern and contemporary Iranian art. Afkhami's connection to art is indeed quite personal and has its roots in the history of previous generations of his family. On his maternal side, the passion for art collecting began with Senator Mohammad Ali Massoudi, who amassed one of the at the time world's largest collections of pre-modern Islamic art in the 1970s.[143] Afkhami's mother, Maryam Massoudi Kashefi, joined her father's endeavour. The 1979 revolution resulted in the exile of the family, whic also had catastrophic consequences for the art collection: 98 per cent were lost, and could only be partially recovered in the fol-

[142] Babaie, Sussan, and Venetia Porter. *Honar: The Afkhami Collection of Modern and Contemporary Iranian Art*. Phaidon Press, 2017., p.12.

[143] Ibd, p.10)

lowing decades.[144] Maryam started from the beginning in her new home in London, which is also where Mohammed Afkhami's interest in art matured. His father's family included several artists, such as Effat al-Muluk Khwajeh Nouri, who was a descendant of Mohammad Shah Qajar (1808-1848), and one of the first female artists of the country. She and her sister, Shokat al-Muluk, studied with Kamal ol-Molk. This artistic education was highly unconventional in Iran, especially for women of the aristocracy. Effat and Shokat later founded the first art institute for women, the *Honarestan Dokhtaraneh Khwajee Nouri*.[145] Together with his mother Maryam Massoudi, Afkhami is featured in the important publication *Art and Patronage: The Middle East*, edited by Hossein Amirsadeghi and Maryam Homayoun Eisler.

Mohammed Afkhami grew up in London, studied Economics at the University of Pennsylvania, and Middle Eastern politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. He pursued a professional career in finance and trading.[146] His collection started with a visit to Iran in 2005, during which he bought two artworks, one by Sirak Melkonian, and the other by Massoud Arabshahi. Afkhami quotes the "irreversible re-connection with Iran"[147] and the conciliation of "a sense of lost identity common to so many members of the Iranian diaspora"[148] as primary factors for his dedication to art collecting. He further states that "An inexplicable feeling of closeness with the art made me realize that one could have a relationship with Iran in more abstract terms, an maintain a connection with its greatest legacy, its rich cultural heritage."[149] The beginnings of his collection took place during a time when Iranian modern and contemporary art was nearly unknown to the West, at least with concern to physical circulation of the art and its part in the art market. This meant that even artworks by masters of modern Iranian art were relatively affordable. This is perhaps a factor for the fast growth of the collection in the first years, which resulted in the amassment of several

[144] "For Iranian Collector Mohammed Afkhami, Art Reflects His Country's History and Future", *Artsy*.

[145] Babaie, Porter, 2017, p.12.

[146] Amirsadeghi, Eisler, 2010, p.170.

[147] Babaie, Porter, 2017, p.12.

[148] Ibd.

[149] Ibd.

hundred works within the course of three years.[150] Today, there are around 600 artworks, of which 450 are from Iran or Iranian artists living outside the country.[151] The main thread of the collection is the establishing of a chronological archive of Iranian art from the middle of the 20th century to today.[152] In 2022, Afkhami launched the *iii* museum, a virtual space which not only hosts a great number of artworks from his collection in the form of digital twins, but also secures free of charge access to the collection for the public, regardless of their physical location.

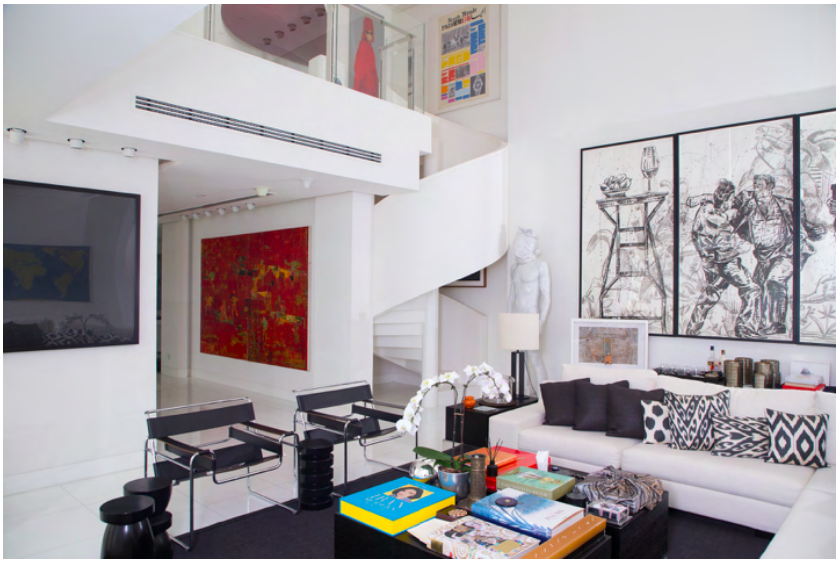

Figure 7: Afkhami's living room in his home in Dubai. The image features *Red Hunting, No. 1* (2006-2009) by Reza Derakshani (background, left) and *Yesterday/Today, Triptych*, 2012 by Nicky Nodjumi[153] (right). *Cultured Magazine*.

In the mid 2000s, when Iranian art could mainly be found in Iran, Afkhami often resorted to personal connections in the country to buy art from private owners. In parallel, the already vast number of art galleries, primarily in Tehran, were an important source. During this period, a few pieces stand out as having been purchased on the international auction stage: the first, and perhaps most sensational of them is *Yek Donya* by Farhad Moshiri in 2007 (Fig. 6). An added dimension to the importance of this work is the implication of this

150 Ibd.

151 As of 24. Sept. 2021, "Cultured Collections with Mohammed Afkhami", *Cultured Magazine*, 24. Sept. 2021, www.culturedmag.com/article/2021/09/24/cultured-collections-with-mohammed-afkhami. Accessed 20 May 2024. However, the virtual museum mentions around 800 works as of 2022, and it is not clear how many of them art of Iranian origin. See iii.art/afkhami-modern-and-contemporary-art-collection.

152 Ibd.

sale: the price of $ 601,000 set a new record for an Iranian artist at auction, strongly in excess for the $80,000 high estimate of the work. Jussi Pylkkanen, President of Christie's Europe, stated that "this was the night when the young market here in Dubai came of age."[154]

At this time, and until now, Afkhami entertains residences in London, Dubai and Tehran–a spacial distribution with also optimizes access to important sources for Iranian art: the auction hub London, the newly emerged focal point for art from the Middle East Dubai, and Tehran as the original sales point for most Iranian art, especially in the vast gallery landscape. During the years after 2005, Dubai's art infrastructure grew from almost nothing to over 50 galleries, and in parallel, international auction houses established their presence in the country, and in Doha, Qatar, not far away.

3.2 Selected artists and their works

It is challenging to select highlights from a collection which is meant to represent a whole series of highlights across a century of Iranian art. The Afkhami Collection not only features key artist of Iranian modern and contemporary art, but it is also apparent that careful attention was paid to select works that are representative of the artist's œvre and artistry. To be clear, this 'representational' value does not necessarily coincide with a particularly high market value, and thus the selection of artists has followed Afkhami's philosophy rather than the market records. However, in some cases, there is a clear correlation of quality and impact with a particularly high volume of sales or record prices at auctions, like in the cases of 'superstars' like Parviz Tanavoli or Shirin Neshat. Particularly influential artist figures from the 20th century present in this collection are–apart from the two mentioned above–Sohrab Sepheri, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Bahman Mohasses, Charles-Hossein Zenderoudi, Sirak Melkonian, Nasser Ovissi, Abbas Kiarostami, Khosrow Hassanzadeh, and Kamran Diba, while major emerging artists of the 21th century are Farhad Moshiri, Nazgol Ansarinia, Reza Aramesh, Mahmoud Bakhshi, Ali Banisadr, Reza Derakshani, and Shiva Ahmadi. Each of them has contributed significantly to the evolution of modern and contemporary art of Iran, and many of the artists who coined the development of art in Iran in the

[154] Amirsadeghi, Eisler, 2010, p.170.

Figure 8: Exhibition hall "Exclusively Female" at the iii museum. The room brings together works by the most influential modern and contemporary female Iranian artists. View from video on the exhibition by Fereshteh Daftari. www.iii.art.

past century continue to develop innovative artistic comments on the present times.

Mohammed Afkhami states that he envisions to have rotating exhibitions in the *iii* museum every few years. Until now, the exhibition can be seen in its original form dating from 2022. In her selection from the collection, curator Fershteh Daftari included fifty artists, of each of which one or several works are shown. As she states in her comment on the exhibition on the virtual museum's website, this selective exhibition is only meant as a first step in the exposure of the collection, and aims to connect groups of works around a specific topic.[155] In doing so, she highlights not only the works as representatives of meaning, but also sheds light on the *relational* potential of the works as seen in synergy with each other. Daftari underscores that these works do no longer stand for themselves, but by entering the collection become part of something bigger, and–if we want to return to the concept of 'collecting as art' (chapter 2.3.1)–part of a new work of art.

The catalogue of the Mohammed Afkhami Collection, *Honar* lists 94 artists, each represented by one or more artworks. The curation of the museum by Fereshteh Daftari seems to follow the traits of Afkhami's collection style and emphasize less the 'most famous' or 'most expensive' works of the collection, but rather the pieces that best *represent* something beyond their own meaning. For instance, while Tanavoli's *Lovers VIII* (2003) or *Untitled* (1962) are undoubtedly more *valuable* than his 'heeches', the fact that the latter are exhibited

[155] iii.art/museum.

alone in a room particularly dedicated to them points towards a deep understanding of their *representational* value for the collection–as will be further discussed in chapter 3.2.3–and their *relational* value within the collection. To conclude, while the catalogue aims to give extended information on all of the artists and their works present in the collection, the *iii* museum draws thematic lines and focuses on works that stand out as bringing a particular message to the visitor, while also emphasizing the synergy between all the works in the museum. The best way to describe it is perhaps to say that the works of each room are engaged in a dialogue with each other.

The following selection of five highlights of artists and their works in the Mohammed Afkhami Collection and, in particular, in the *iii* museum, is meant to give insights into the vast range of styles, techniques, philosophies, and creative comments on the world which makes sure that this collection is not only a casual chronological line-up of Iranian artworks, but actually stays true to the fundamental purpose of an art collection: to develop new meaning through careful discrimination of the works and through the skilled creation of a network between them.

3.2.1 Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (1922-2019)

Monir Farmanfarmaian, also known as Monir, received her art education in New York. From the beginning, she worked across disciplines, founded on her fashion education. In the 60s, she learned from important artists like Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, Joan Mitchell, Alexander Calder or Milton Avery, and focused particularly on the inclusion of traditional Iranian arts like the inlay of glassworks, *ayneh-kari*. This technique has been a defining element of Persian interior design from the Zand (1751-1789) and Qajar (1789-1925) dynasties, and was used for the lavish decoration of rooms and shrines. A particularly impressive example is the Mirror Hall at the Golestan Palace in Tehran.[156] Upon returning to Iran in 1957, she opened her studio in Tehran. She intensively explored traditional arts from various disciplines and developed a unique artistic language that reflected her education in 'international modernism', but bursts with her appreciation for traditional Iranian heritage. Her

[156] It is widely accepted that this technique developed upon the contact between Iranian artists and Venetian glassmakers who were invited by the court in the 17th century. See "Aina Kari", *Encyclopedia Iranica*, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/aina-kari-mosaic-of-mirror-glass.

work rose to international acclaim when she was celebrated at the Venice Biennale of 1958 and at her first solo exhibition in Tehran in 1963. Between 1979 and 2004, Monir lived in New York, during which period she intensified her work with mirrors. Her most important exhibition took place at the Soloman R. Guggenheim Museum New York in 2014, titled "Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Infinite Possibility: Mirror Works and Drawings 1974–2014".[157] In 2017, the Monir Museum was opened in Tehran to display her work.

The collection includes four of her works. The first work, *Untitled*, dates back to 1975, and is defined through a repetitive geometric pattern, constructed with glass, mirrors, steel and paint, and resembles the geometries of *ayneh-kari*. In *Yazd: Variations on Triangle* (2005) (Fig. 8, top right), Monir pays even closer attention to detailed geometry, in particular the shape of the triangle, a recurrent theme in her work, explainable as follows:

> "If you divide a circle at three points, it will be a triangle. In Islamic design the triangle is the intelligent human being... that involves three points, three lines and infinite possibilities for combination. More concerned with the impact of geometry on the eye and the body than on the mind and the soul... the triangle is a quotation of the human body in first and a symbol second, and a distant second at that."[158]

. This work is showcased in the section 'Exclusively Female'. The second work featured in the *iii* museum is *The Lady Reappears* from 2007 (Fig. 9). This work stands out as highly figurative:

> "Farmanfarmaian's subject suggests a woman clad in sensual, body-hugging drapery. [...] Pointedly, she has cropped the composition so the figure is headless, thus avoiding the need to depict the mandatory headscarf women must wear when appearing in public. Displaying a curvaceously shimmying body in shimmering clothes evokes an ambiguous presence, both tantalizing and ghostly."[159]

It is plausible that this work is a quotation of the first stage of her profession as an artist, in the fashion industry.[160] In the *iii* museum, this work is located in the intimate room

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[157] Cf. "Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/biography/Monir-Shahroudy-Farmanfarmaian; and Babaie, Porter, 2017, p.188.

[158] Obrist, Hans Ulrich (ed.). *Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Cosmic Geometry.* Damiani Editore, 2011, p.22.

[159] *Asia Society*, asiasociety.org/new-york/meet-women-contemporary-persians. Accessed 25 May 2024.

[160] Ibd.

titled ‘A Room of One’s Own’ (in reference to Virgina Woolf’s eponymous novel), which is accessed through the large hall entitled ‘Exclusively Female’. Here, the *Lady* is placed in dialogue with works by Avish Khebrezadeh, Afruz Amighi, and Nazgol Ansarinia. Although Farmanfarmaian’s work is the only figurative work among these, the atmosphere transmits a sense of intimacy, femininity, sensuality and safety.

Figure 9: Monir Shahroudi Farmanfarmaian: *The Lady Reappears* (2007), Mirror on plaster and wood, 150 x 80 cm. www.iii.art.

The art market for Monir’s work has seen a strong increase, in particular in the past few years. Her work first entered the international auction environment relatively late, in the mid-2010s. Her auction record was established in 2002, when her work *Shiraz (Drawing in Glass)* (2009) fetched over $3,000,000. This year, 2024, marks the highest median price of her art at auction, with two pieces sold at nearly $2,000,0000 and over $1,000,000 respectively, both at Tehran Auction. Comparable pieces still only fetch a few hundred thousand US-dollars at venues in the US and Europe. Therefore it will also come as no surprise that Iran is her primary marketplace, totalling $13,000,000 for a 100% sell-through rate of 22 works, followed by the UK ($4,000,000 with 34 of 38 lots sold since 2007) and the United Arab Emirates ($2,000,000, 13 of 15 lots sold). It is, however, worth acknowledging her high gallery representation all around the world, with 32 exhibitions in the past two decades–a circumstance which undoubtedly implies extensive private sales.[161]

[161] “Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian”, *Mutual Art*, www.mutualart.com/Artist/Monir-Shahroudy-Farmanfarmaian/7435583058814893/Exhibitions?organisationType=4E562B2333CCD71B. Accessed 10 May 2024.

3.2.2 Bahman Mohasses (1931-2010)

Bahman Mohasses, who is sometimes referred to as the 'Persian Picasso',[162] is a pivotal figure in Iranian modern art. Born in Rasht, Iran, in 1931, Mohasses developed an early interest in art, and studied Fine Art at the University of Tehran, where he was also introduced to the avantguarde movement led by Jalil Ziapour and his group *Anjoman-e Khorus Jangi*, which was profoundly shaped by elements of Futurism, Surrealism and Cubism–movements whose strong impression on Mohasses is visible across his œvre. After 1953, he went on to study at the prestigious Accademia delle Belle Arti in Rome, a city where he would spend a large part of his life. His time in Italy significantly shaped his artistic vision, blending Western modernist techniques with his Iranian heritage.[163] Upon returning to Iran in 1963, his biggest supporter and patron was Empress Farah Pahlavi.[164]

Mohasses was a multifaceted artist, working as a painter, sculptor, translator, and theater director. One of the defining aspects of Mohasses's art is his exploration of mythological and literary themes. He drew inspiration from Persian mythology, Western literature, and contemporary political events, creating a unique and thought-provoking body of work. His sculptures, many of which were destroyed or lost following the Iranian Revolution, were known for their monumental scale and emotional intensity. Mohasses himself destroyed many of his works that were deemed 'decadent' by followers or the revolution,[165] which makes his art extremely rare.[166]

Therefore, it is quite extraordinary to see three of his works side by side in the *iii* museum. The room 'Archaically Modern' presents two works, both showing the Minotaur: *Minotauro* (1966), painted oil on canvas, contradicts any Persian connotation on purpose, both in style and content; the bronze sculpture *Minotauro* (1972) can perhaps be understood as an expression of isolation and contempt for Iran, as Mohasses at that time was torn be-

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[162] Babaie, Porter, 2017, p.186.

[163] Porter, Venetia (ed.). *Reflections. Contemporary art of the Middle East and North Africa.* The British Museum Press, 2020, p.52.

[164] Eigner, 2010, p.385.

[165] Porter, 2020, p.52.

[166] Babaie, Porter, 2017, p.186.

tween Iran and Italy.[167] The third work, *Les Amants* (1974) is displayed in the hall dedicated to 'Gender: Male-Male Bodies/ Male Communities'. Afkhami points out that the genders of these bodies are ambiguous[168]–there seems to be a fine line between a loving embrace and wrestling.

The auction market for Mohasses' works has dramatically increased since around 2015, with yearly turnovers above $1,000,000 since then. However, the fact that a large part of his works does no longer exist, does not go unnoticed by the market: the maximum amount of lots offered in a year was in 2016, with a mere 14 lots offered–and sold. The auction record for Mohasses was established this year, in January 2024, with a hammer price of around $1.7 m for the sculpture *Seated Faun* (1978).[169]

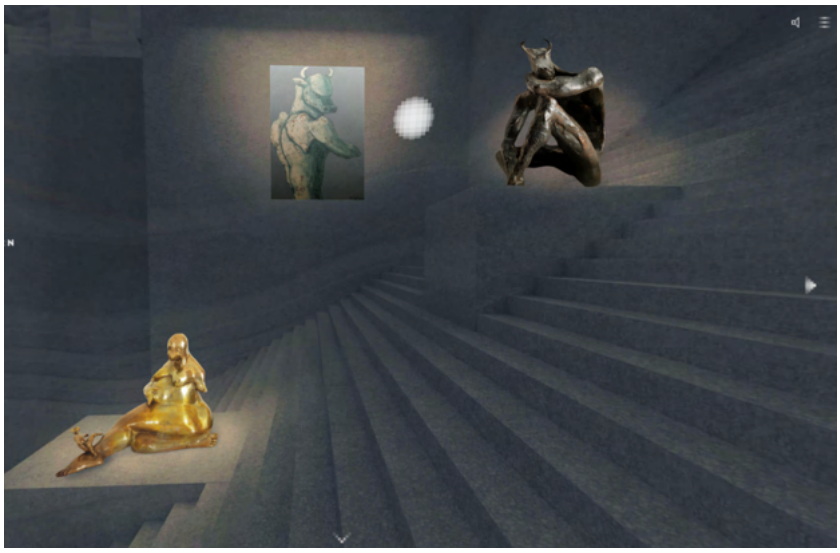

Figure 10: Bahman Mohasses: *Minotauro* (painting, 1966) and *Minotauro (Seated Minotaur)* (1972), installation view. www.iii.art.

3.2.3 Parviz Tanavoli (*1937)

Parviz Tanavoli is one of the most widely known and acclaimed Iranian contemporary artists. Although his œvre ranges from paintings to carpets, he most intensively worked on sculptures, which brought him national and international fame. Born in Tehran, he received his

[167] *iii museum*, iii.art/archaically-modern. Accessed 3 May 2024.

[168] Ibd.

[169] "Bahman Mohasses", *Mutual Art*, www.mutualart.com/Artist/Bahman-Mohasses/42C51B327AD8154C.

art education in his hometown, followed by studies at the academies in Carrara and Milan, before returning to Iran to teach. He closely collaborated with fellow artists like Sohrab Sepehri or Sirak Melkonian. During the revolution he was accused of following 'wrong' artistic directions and ceased his teaching and working activities. Since 1985 he lives and works in Vancouver, Canada.[170]

Tanavoli's works, like the works of most of the artists of his generation, art part of the *Saqqakhaneh* movement. The material he drew inspiration from includes motifs of Shi'ism and talismans, but what is particularly apparent in Tanavoli's works is his concern with calligraphy. It was the misuse of this art form that specifically sparked his interest in it and resulted in the ironical 'heech' sculptures.[171] The letter *he do cheshm* which is shown in many different variations of shape, colour and material in each of the works of the series, is the beginning letter of the word 'heech' which means 'nothingness' or 'void' in Persian.[172] The almost anthropomorphic and sometimes human-scale large sculptures evoke a whole range of feelings and associations. Kamran Diba in the interview displayed at the *iii* museum jokingly comments: "You could [do] a tango with *heech*!"[173]

The 'heeches'-sculptures executed in fibreglass or bronze, are without doubt his most frequently sold and also most distinctive works with signature-character. This is perhaps the reason for which we find a room dedicated to two of them, *Blue Heech* (2005) and *Yellow Heech I* (2000). No other works are within sight, as if 'nothingness' deserved an isolated space it could fill. In the background–like in several frames of this virtual space–we see sand being blown past by a breeze, accompanied by a whispering sound. Opposite the sculptures, there are a number of anthropomorphic, robot-like objects which serve as 'frames' for video clips: The artist himself, Kamran Diba, Fereshteh Daftari, and others express their understanding and interpretation of these artworks.[174]

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[170] Fock, 2009, p.269.

[171] Porter, 2020, p.20.

[172] Saeb Eigner points out that following a conversation with the artist, 'nothingness' resulted as the better option than 'nothing', the most common meaning of the word. Eigner, 2010, p. 208.

[173] *iii museum.* Clip from the documentary *Parviz Tanavoli: Poetry in Bronze*, Calendar Films Ltd, 2014.

[174] All clips are taken from the film *Parviz Tanavoli: Poetry in Bronze*, Calendar Films Ltd, 2014.

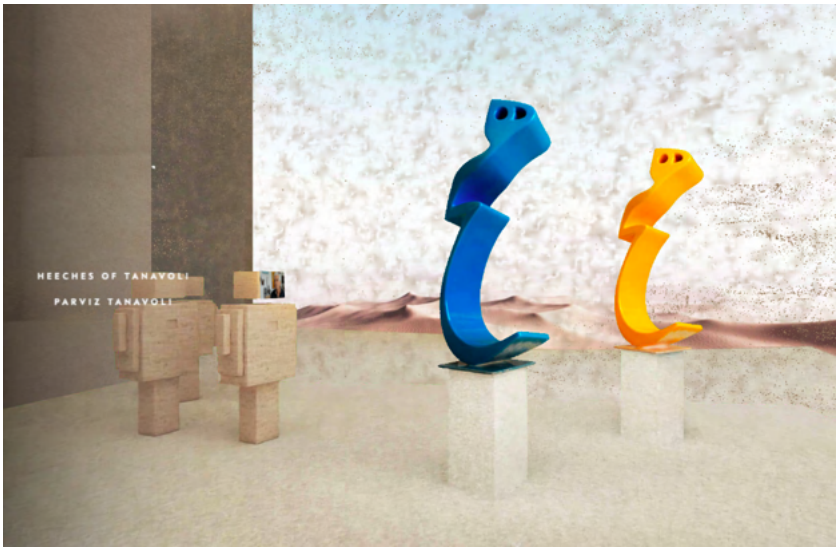

Figure 11: Parviz Tanavoli: Two *Heeches*, installation view. www.iii.art.

Circulation at auction has seen a positive trend in the past two decades. While the sales until 2006 stayed within the range of the low estimates (a few tens of thousands of US-dollars), the year 2006 brought, as mentioned before, the opening of Christie's Dubai. At all auctions held in Dubai in 2007, Parviz Tanavoli's works reached prices multiple of the high estimate, with a record of $307,000 against a high estimate of $160,000 for *Standing Poet* (2006). During the following years, this trend continued, and 2008 brought the surprising record of $2,841,000 for *The Wall (Oh, Persepolis)* (1975), against a high estimate of $600,000. It is worth noting that all these auctions took place at a venue in Dubai (Christie's or Bonhams), while in the same year, venues in London still only reached the region of the high estimate, which was set remarkably low, similar to pre-2006 sales. These data from the art market give direct insight into the stark difference of the understanding and appreciation of art between collectors *with* an assumed personal connection to the work and those *without*. In this context, it is worth remembering the high number of Iranian nationals in Dubai, and although the location of an auction does not necessarily reflect the heritage of its audience, the geographical radius of auction audiences, particularly in the early 2000s tended to be rather small. The post-Covid era saw an extreme increase of Tanavoli's auction prices. In 2022, the overall auction record of around $3.4 million was set at a sale at Tehran Auction.[175]

[175] "Parviz Tanavoli", *Mutual Art*, www.mutualart.com/Artist/Parviz-

3.2.4 Shirin Neshat (*1957)

Shirin Neshat is best known for her poignant exploration of identity, gender, and cultural displacement, and works across various mediums, in particular photography and, more recently, film. Born in Qazvin, not far from Tehran, in 1957, Neshat moved to the United States in 1975 to study art at the University of California, Berkeley. Following the Iranian Revolution, she was unable to return to her homeland, a separation that deeply influenced her artistic journey and is reflected in most of her works.[176]

Neshat's work primarily focuses on the complexities of life in post-revolutionary Iran and the experiences of women within Islamic societies. One of her most renowned series, "Women of Allah" (1993-1997), features black-and-white photographs of women adorned in traditional Islamic dress, overlaid with Persian calligraphy. These images poignantly address themes of martyrdom, identity, and the role of women in Iranian society. Her films, such as *Women Without Men* (2009), further explore these themes, blending poetic imagery with political commentary and offer a complex critique of Iranian society.[177] *Women Without Men*[178] won the Silver Lion for Best Director at the 1999 Venice Film Festival, cementing her reputation as a filmmaker of international stature. Exhibited globally, with over 200 exhibitions over the past two decades, Neshat's work has been showcased at prestigious institutions such as the Tate Gallery in London, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the Venice Biennale–but remains rather unknown in her native country. While she returned frequently until 1996, she did not travel back after this and became more radical in her political expression and criticism of the country's government. This certainly explains that her primary sale locations are auctions in the UK, the USA and the United Arab Emirates, and no sales nor exhibitions are known in Iran. Her prices move along a rather low line, which perhaps stems from her focus on film since the 2000s.[179]

Tanavoli/F1BFCBAC2C9D9DFE. Accessed 2 May 2024.

176 Porter, 2020, p.142 f.

177 Eigner, 2010, p.92.

178 Neshat also produced a photographic series with the same title.

179 "Shirin Neshat", *Mutual Art*, www.mutualart.com/Artist/Shirin-Neshat/F5798EF58156DF39/Graphs. Accessed 2 May 2024.

Six works by Neshat are part of the collection. *Innocent Memories* (1995) is the first work in chronological order, and is a portrait of Neshat's infant son. The fabric around his little body and head is over-painted with calligraphic text, a practice which is defining of many of Neshat's black-and-white photographs. The texts featured in her works often are by Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967), an Iranian poet who wrote about themes of feminism in a surprisingly modern and uncensored way for her time. *Untitled* (1999), from the *Rapture series*, *Whispers* (1997) from the *Turbulent series*,[180] *Untitled (Hands)* (2005), and *Untitled* (2010) also feature this technique, and engage with the human body (either cropped as the four works last mentioned, or multiplied, transmitting anonymization through strict Islamic women's clothing, as in *Untitled* (1999), which is a still from the film *Rapture*. The work *Faezeh & Amir Khan* (2008), also stands in dialogue with a film, and discusses the story of a religious woman who was a victim of rape.[181]

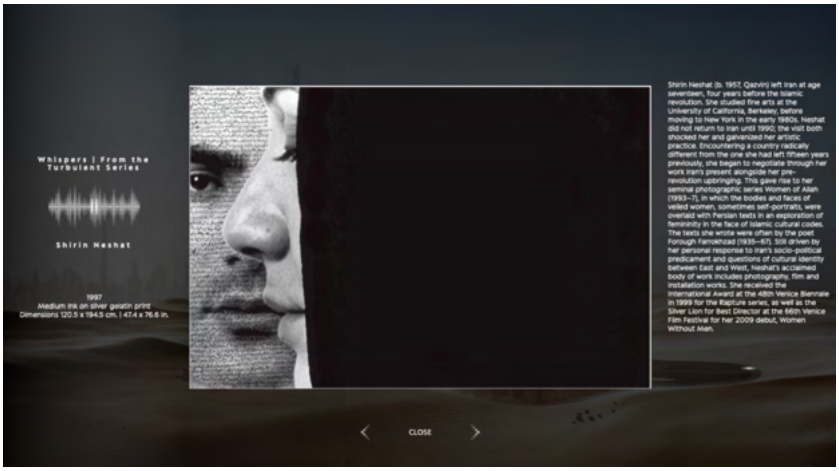

Figure 12: Shirin Neshat: *Whispers I* (1997), explanation window. www.iii.art.

Two of these works by Neshat are shown at the *iii* museum. *Whispers* from the *Women of Allah series* is part of the hall dedicated to female artists (see Fig. 8, bottom left). Notably, in this photograph, direct eye contact can only be established with a man standing in the background, an element of unease or surprise in this female-dominated environment. Fig. 12 shows the work as displayed when the explanatory page is open (by clicking on

[180] This series perhaps best explains Neshat's use of black and white and intense contrast to underscore the contrasts between Male and Female. Rapture captures the differences between male and female singing, the latter being officially banned in Iran. See Eigner, 2010, p.122.

[181] Babaie, Porter, 2017, p.212.

the artwork). Here, audio and a text introduce the audience to this very particular work, highlighting the complex problem of female sexuality and its suppression in conservative Islamic environments and the contradictory result of an elevated sexual tension in the public sphere.[182] The second work appears in a smaller room entitled 'Migration'. *Untitled* (1999) is mirrored by a water installation which covers the floor. On its left side, an abstract work by fellow internationally acclaimed artist Ali Banisadr, *Trust in the Future* (2017) tackles human suffering, while maintaining a positive outlook. On the right side, *Untitled* (2019) by the Ghasemi Brothers shows a boat in distress carrying migrants. Opposite Neshat's work, *Untitled from the Metamorphosis series* (2009) by Alireza Dayani mirrors the choice for black-and-white by Neshat. Overall, this room is filled with a concern for exile, migration and the catastrophic impact it can have on societies and individuals alike. The curatorial choice of adding water emphasizes the common thread in all these works, the element of the sea–not necessarily as something beautiful, but as something dangerous and as element of divide.

3.2.5 Farhad Moshiri (*1963)

Farhad Moshiri works across a wide range of mediums are well-known since around 2000. However, he had his international breakthrough when his work *Yek Donya* sold for $601,000 in 2007–to Mohammed Afkhami. As mentioned before, this was the overall auction record for an Iranian modern artist, and was bound to bring Moshiri's œvre into the international limelight.

Born in Shiraz, he began his art education in California at age eighteen, where his teacher was John Baldessari. Under the guidance of this important conceptual artists, Moshiri developed an artistic vocabulary that ranges from the humorous aesthetics of luxury and kitsch to the skilled integration of Iranian motifs.[183] At least nine works of his are part of the Afkhami collection. *Red Pot* (1999), *Big White-based Pot* (2003) and *Negative Black* (2002) best illustrate the first years of his career, and tell stories of an intense engagement with Iranian heritage. *The Colour of God* (2001), *General Misunderstanding* (2006), *Magic*

[182] *iii.art*, iii.art/exclusively-female.

[183] Babaie, Porter, 2017, p.193.

Figure 13: Farhad Moshiri: *Flying Carpet* (2007), installation view. www.iii.art.

White Horse with Gold Saddle (2008) and *Yek Donya* (2007)–all visually striking pieces made with unconventional materials such as beads, glitter or Swarovsky crystals–are concerned with ironically commenting consumerism, capitalism and the world of luxury. The juxtaposition of kitsch and tradition in his work make it particularly relevant at a time when humans need to navigate an increasing cultural divide between the two. *I'm so Fucking Happy* (2010)–an installation of colourful knives in a wall–is perhaps the most brutal representation of this tension. *Flying Carpet* (2007) is a cut-out in the form of a fighter jet out of a stack of 32 Iranian (machine-made) carpets, which are a symbol of identity and domestic life. Afkhami understands this piece as a powerful allusion to the violent intrusion of war into the home of people, seemingly cutting out something from a peaceful life. The piece has become increasingly relevant with tensions over nuclear deals between Iran and the West.[184] In a humorous turn, this piece gained the ability to fly in the virtual space of the *iii* museum, conducting a trip around the museum.

3.3 Analysis: mission and public engagement

The *iii* virtual museum, established in 2022, is the primary point of contact between the collection and the public. The museum structure, called 'Specific Form', goes beyond the mere digital storage of artworks. In collaboration with the renowned architectural studio *ASA NORTH*[185] and *The Open Create*, a firm specializing in digital renderings of private

[184] *iii.art*, iii.art/around-the-sphere.

[185] *ASA NORTH*, asanorth.com. The studio is active in Iran and internationally, with projects in Europe, the USA South and Middle America. One of the recent most prestigious projects is the renovation of the structure that now hosts the ARGO MUSEUM in Tehran, which contributed to the winning of the Agha Khan Prize for Architecture in the 2019-2022 cycle.

collections,[186] Afkhami envisioned and realized a spherical structure, which is located in a virtual world which represents the desert against the skyline of Dubai.[187]

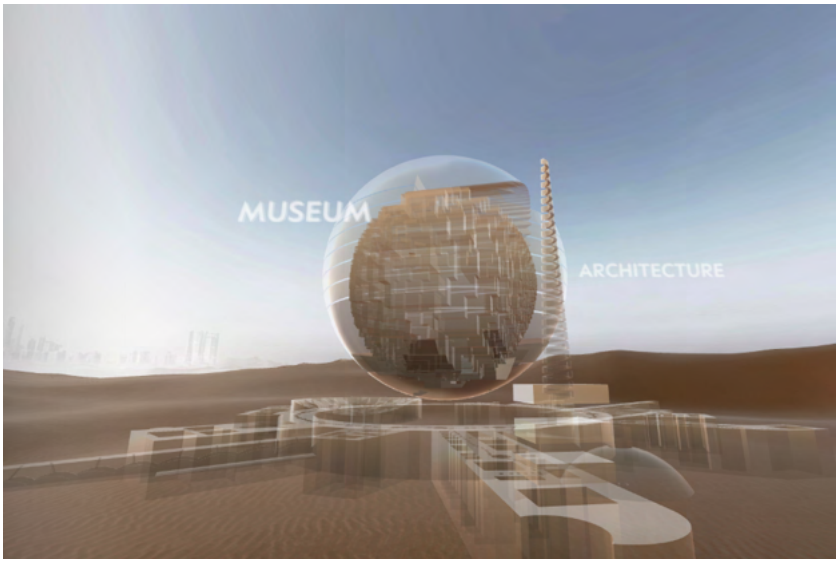

Figure 14: The iii museum seen from outside. www.iii.art.

The user enters either the side designated 'museum' or the other side, 'architecture', which leads to further information about the conception of this virtual space:

> "The sphere, shaped in a uniting planet is composed of elements found in the stars and in the museums around the world. A continuous ramp, centred on a colossal atrium, wraps around the double inner surface of the sphere–and leads the way to different size galleries. The architectural language of this atrium is a modern adaptation of the traditional Islamic *muqarnas* and taps into the DNA of its geometry and reinvents it as modern exhibition spaces."[188]

Afkhami's strategic decision positions this museum within the lineage of renowned international museums, while maintaining a distinctive modern aesthetic that borders on the futuristic. As further stated on the website, "form follows collection", [189] allowing for an uncompromising accommodation of the spatial, stylistic, semantic, relational and aesthetic needs of each artwork. The artworks are arranged in fourteen rooms with thematic focus, curated by Fereshteh Daftari. Daftari, who is also an independent scholar, published widely

[186] *The Open Create*, www.theopencrate.com/en.

[187] The page states that the virtual museum can 'travel' to different locations, and Dubai only represents the inaugural first stop in the virtual space. iii.art/site.

[188] Explanatory note, iii.art/sphere.

[189] 'Architecture', www.iii.art.

on Iranian art history, and contributed to catalogues of major collections and books about modern Iranian art. Daftari first engaged with the collection during the exhibition *Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians–The Mohammed Afkhami Collection,*[190] held between 2017 and 2022 in three venues across the US. Daftari comments on the problems of spatial restriction and on how inspirational the work on the *iii* museum has been.[191] Indeed, the space of this museum allows for creative play with the artworks and their presentation to the audience, the creators–arguably led by Daftari's vision for the exhibition, increased the size of the artworks in many cases to gigantic versions of the original, a fact which emerges from tiny human silhouettes in the exhibition space. Furthermore, in almost all cases, there is no 'floor' that we as viewers stand on. All these choices combined result in the annihilation of the viewer's feeling as a conventional visitor standing in front of an average sized painting or sculpture, but reduces all concepts typical of museums–like space, place, dimension and visitor-artwork relation–into abstract shadows of themselves. This virtual space arguably takes the most out of the virtual potential for the display and engagement with art.

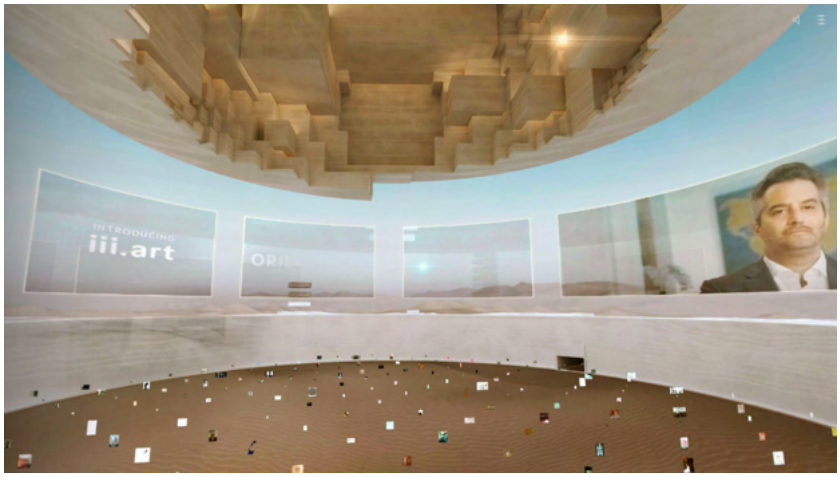

Figure 15: The entrance hall of the iii museum. www.iii.art.

All this implies an enhanced accessibility, around the world and for visitors with different needs. The museum is, within the frame of its possibilities, multisensorial, meaning that educational notes are available both in audio and written format. Mohammed Afkhami explicitly mentions the efforts for increased accessibility that were made during the devel-

[190] See "Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet", *Asia Society* asiasociety.org/new-york/exhibitions/rebel-jester-mystic-poet-contemporary-persians-mohammed-afkhami-collection.

[191] The Exhibition: Comments by Fereshteh Daftari. iii.art/museum.

Figure 16: Mahmoud Bakhshi: *Tulips Rise from the Blood of the Nation's Youth* (2008), installation view. www.iii.art.

opment of the *iii* museum, even on the back-end level: The digital renderings have been made in a way to minimize the bandwidth required to load and navigate them. He also opted against utilizing virtual reality due to the requirement of expensive devices for user access–an obstacle which would significantly impact and reduce the accessibility of the museum.

With concern to the relation between the museum and the collection, it is important to acknowledge the exhibition-nature of the current display. This means that the visitor of this virtual space could well see other works from the collection, in a new arrangement. It is clear that this museum represents a skilled compromise between opening up an exhibition to the public and keeping it private. Mohammed Afkhami points out that the idea for the museum emerged from the pandemic, when physical museum visits suddenly ceased to be an option and other solutions needed to be found. However, while the *iii* museum is a great tool for education and a well-curated experience of some artworks from the collection, it does not allow for a direct physical interaction with the works of art. The physical aspect, in other words, remains privilege of the owner.[192]

It remains interesting to ponder upon the influence of this changed environment on the artworks. Daftari and the team displayed a high amount of creativity–in collaboration and

[192] It is open to speculation whether this choice was to intentionally keep the works permanently within the private sphere of Afkhami's domiciles or in vaults, or whether this was a financial choice. While this virtual museum was doubtlessly created with a high amount of care and attention to detail, and certainly did require high amounts of financial investment, it can nevertheless surely not be compared to the investment of a physical private museum.

with authorization of the artists–in rearranging the works. *Yek Donya* is shown as rearranged to form an actual globe, that can be turned manually by the 'user' of the museum. Mahmoud Bakhshi's *Tulips Rise from the Blood of the Nation's Youth* (2008), a neon sculpture with a powerful political message, has been multiplied to fill an entire hall (Fig. 8). Daftari points out how this is meant to "amplify the message of the work".[193]

Figure 17 shows the work *Becoming* (2015) by Morteza Ahmadvand, the first time as featured in Venice in 2019, while the second installation is located in the virtual space of the *iii* museum. This example perhaps best highlights the way in which this virtual environment is able to add another dimension and layer of meaning to an artwork. *Becoming* engages with the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and puts them in dialogue in a three-dimensional installation of screens, centred around a sphere placed in their midst. In the virtual context, the work is surrounded by a room designed in traditional Islamic architectural style and flooded with sunlight, creating a warm and aesthetically pleasing atmosphere, and at the same time seems to allude to the common origin of the three religions, reminding the viewer of their similarities. The environment of this room somehow takes away the unwelcome 'techy' aspect that usually adheres to the work and adds a spiritual, ethereal and contemplative aura.

a b

Figure 17: Morteza Ahmadvand: *Becoming.* (2015), exhibited in Venice in 2019 (a) and exhibited at the iii museum (b). Video installation (3 single-channel videos) and fiberglass sphere, 100 cm (sphere diameter), overall dimensions variable. www.iii.art and associazionegenesi.it/en/opere/becoming/.

Mohammed Afkhami's involvement with the promotion and international dissemination of modern and contemporary Iranian art began as soon as 2010, five years after he first started

[193] The Exhibition: Comments by Fereshteh Daftari. iii.art/museum.

collecting. Together with gallery-owner Leila Heller, curator Dina Nasser and philantropist and founder of the initiative 'Magic of Persia'[194] Shirley Elghanian, Afkhami visited major museums in the US to give talks about the modern art of their motherland, an undertaking which led to a wide-reaching network of people interested in Iranian modern art. This first tour was followed by panel sessions in London and at Art Basel.[195]

By establishing a collection that is proof of a deep understanding of the development of Iranian art and features many important highlights which represent milestones on this journey, Mohammed Afkhami also gained a place among specialists on the topic. He is founding member of the Middle East and North Africa acquisition committee of the British Museum,[196] and was active as co-chair of the Middle East and North African art acquisition committee at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.[197] Afkhami is furthermore engaged in a network between his collection and international institutions, and regularly loans works to museums.

The catalogue of the collection, which was published at Phaidon in 2017, is another valuable resource for public access of the works of art and the collection in its entirety. It features a foreword by Parviz Tanavoli and an introduction by the collector himself in which he gives the background information about his family, how he started collecting and the political circumstances of these aspects. A highlight for the understanding of the collection from a scholarly point of view is the essay by Sussan Babaie and Venetia Porter, "Global in the Local: Iran in Art & History" (pp. 25-48). The corpus of the explanations of the artists and their works featured in the collection has been written by Natasha Morris, and gives both a great overview and focused key insights into certain aspects of Iranian modern and contemporary art history and its artworks. The catalogue further features a section with recommended reading on the topics and an index of names, which makes the rather large volume with a multitude of illustrations easy to navigate.

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194 'Magic of Persia' is a foundation and major platform for promoting Iranian art, and was established in 2004. See *Magic of Persia*, www.magicofpersia.com.

195 Babaie, Porter, 2017, pp.16 ff.

196 Amirsadeghi, Eisler, 2010, p.170.

197 "Top 200 Collectors: Mohammed Afkhami", *Artnews*, www.artnews.com/art-collectors/top-200-profiles/mohammed-afkhami/.

To conclude, Mohammed Afkhami demonstrates a high awareness of his collection in the framework of Iranian art history. The pillars of the engagement with the public are his personal interaction in the form of museum and institution boards, talks, loans to museums and collaboration in organizing exhibitions that feature works from his collection, the publication of a catalogue, and the establishment of a private virtual museum. With the *iii* museum, he was perhaps one of the first collectors to exploit the potential of digital solutions in an attractive and engaging way to make parts of the collection accessible to the public. The exhibition of the works is curated with a deep understanding of relevant topics and the works' connection to them, an aspect which can be seen as an effort to comply with private museums' tendency to include a sensibility of public interests into the experience for the audience. The museum is conceived as interactive and educational, but also inspires awe at grand architecture and digital twins of the artworks in impressive scale. Although there are many elements of self-representation and grandeur, the service to the international public is certainly invaluable.

The collector Mohammed Afkhami certainly belongs to the group of collectors, who see the sharing of their collection as a social responsibility, and the construction of their collection as an activity which requires not only passion, but also knowledge and a goal. His collection is built with the aim of creating an overview of Iranian modern and contemporary art, and therefore the selection cannot be based only on aesthetic pleasure for the collector. Perhaps sacrifices have to be made, perhaps purchases have to be completed which do not fully adhere to the collector's personal taste. The fact that the dimensions of collecting discussed previously always overlap and cannot be clearly separated, emerges from Afkhami's collection style: The surprising auction record of *Yek Donya* bears the traits of 'chasing and winning' a work of art at all costs–private passion for a work seems to exist side by side with the fascination of international fame, the 'adrenaline kick' of getting the work in the end, and the not negligible fact that this record impacted the entirety of the market for Iranian modern and contemporary art. The establishment of a private museum–even in a virtual format–further entails the establishment of a legacy in the international art world. However, Afkhami approaches both the collection and its public accessibility from a thought-through, almost academic perspective, and heavily relies on expert knowledge by curators and special-

ists. This demonstrates the genuine interest in building a collection with a distinct identity, which contributes to the discourse of modern art and Iranian art, in particular. While the critical reception of the collection in magazines, journals and in scholarship also entails a celebration of the collector himself, his choices concerning the collection and the accessibility underscore that an authentic philantropic purpose lies at the core of his collecting practice.

4 Hussain Ali Abbas Harba

4.1 About the collector and the collection

In light of the complex situation of modern and contemporary Iraqi art–polarized between an incredibly prolific and fascinating artistic production on one hand, and the tragic circumstances of recent history on the other–any efforts of preservation, appreciation and promotion of Iraqi art is of immense value. Hussain Harba's private collection is part of this effort, and is currently the worldwide largest private collection of modern and contemporary Iraqi art.[198]

Hussain Harba was born in Babylon in 1961 into a family of date farm owners. In 1980, Harba moved to Italy to study architecture at the University of Turin, from which he graduated despite the troubles deriving from the Iran-Iraq war and the challenges of the new environment. The complex political situation prevented Harba to travel back to Iraq until 2002. Harba lives with his family in Turin, and works in architecture, industrial design and fashion design. However, art collecting has been a significant part of his life for several decades, to which he devotes considerable energy, thought, and financial resources.

Figure 18: Hussain Harba in his home. Amirsadeghi, Eisler, 2010, p.220.

The beginning of his art collection traces back to his childhood. As early as the mid-

[198] Amirsadeghi, Eisler, 2010, p.218.

70s, Harba received a painting by Fa'iq Hassan as a gift from his father. The painting is now lost, but Harba's family bought art on a regular basis in Baghdad, since Babylon did not have any galleries at the time.[199] A childhood in an environment supportive of the arts certainly fostered Harba's passion for the arts. In Italy, Hussain Harba became part of circles of Iraqi artists of the diaspora. But he also retained close connections to and in Iraq, not least because his siblings, some of whom are equally passionate about art, remained in the country. These cultural connections beyond borders are important factors in the collector's very strong bond with the country of his birth and its art landscape. The collector particularly emphasizes the ability of art to unify communities. In the case of his collection, this applies to several contexts: First of all, we can speculate that art provides a patriotic sense of belonging to the Iraqi community, in Italy and worldwide. Secondly, his collection physically establishes a community of Iraqi works of art, which are, too often, dispersed and scattered around the globe. This also implies a community of Iraqi art regardless of its geographical location of production, focusing on the shared cultural background and heritage among all artists identifying as Iraqis. This is of particular importance given the divide which emerged from the decades-long separate evolution of Iraqi art within and outside the country. Lastly, community lies at the core of Harba's project to open his collection to the public by establishing a private museum in Iraq. This would not only bring back the art to its geographical origins, but also offer access to a community whose collective identity, memory and cultural development has been heavily affected in the past decades.

The collection consists of over five hundred works (as of 2013), all exclusively by Iraqi artists, living in Iraq and all over the world. The collection features works by the most renowned Iraqi painters and sculptors, but also includes numerous works by less well-known artists. Harba states that the collection cannot–despite its vast numbers–be regarded as exhaustive of Iraqi modern and contemporary art and that there are many other artists, whose work he would like to acquire, but has not been able to for various reasons. The catalogue *Longing for Eternity* projected the publication of a second volume in future to present works bought since 2013.[200]

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[199] Schroth, 2013, p.17.

[200] Ibd., p.21.

Harba is a highly intuitive and emotional collector, and among great collectors of Middle Eastern art perhaps one of the most genuinely passionate.[201] He declares to be interested in "works that are honest, authentic and that are created by artists with culture and education."[202] He regards art as something that fills an emotional void and provides support for the soul. In his interviews, he underscores the personal connection he entertains with artists, who also often serve as first-hand source for artworks. However, Harba also purchases the works of art from galleries, fairs and auctions, but claims not to be as interested in auction results as perhaps many collectors would be. While the collection is not systematic and was built with a highly personal touch and emotional approach, it still contains works from a vast chronological and geographical range. His primary criteria are emotional connection and quality. Being surrounded by paintings and sculptures within the spaces of one's home on an every day basis undoubtedly requires a deep understanding of and admiration for these works, their messages and histories. Assessing the quality of works within the framework of their art historical context is, then, only a small step away, and is deeply linked to extensive objective knowledge which underlies passion. Harba particularly emphasizes that "the artists in the collection have been chosen with no distinction of political or religious creed; it includes Iraqi Jews, Iraqi Muslims, Iraqi Christians, Iraqi Kurds, Iraqi Arabs, Iraqi artists born abroad. The only guideline for us in making the selections is the quality of the work."[203]

The collection is presented to the public by means of a catalogue, entitled *Longing for Eternity* and published in 2013. Editor of this volume is Mary Angela Schroth, an American curator specialized in delving into underrepresented modern art, a focus which she particularly proved as director of *Sala 1* in Rome. In 2011, she took on the challenge of curating the Iraqi pavilion at the Venice Biennale–the first Iraqi pavilion at this key event after 35 years. Schroth chose to bring together twelve artists under the title "Wounded Waters". Notably, half of these artists are active in Iraq, while the other half belongs to the international Iraqi diaspora. This decision furthermore seems to counteract the general development that Iraqi

[201] Amirsadeghi, Eisler, 2010, p.218; Schroth, 2013, p.20.

[202] Ibd., p.17.

[203] Ibd., p.21.

artists living outside the country are frequently seen as sole representatives of the country in the international environment.[204] While the situation for artists within the country was certainly at the time extremely challenging, and still is in many aspects, artists were always present and active in Iraq and perhaps provide a different artistic take on the world than their co-citizens in the diaspora.

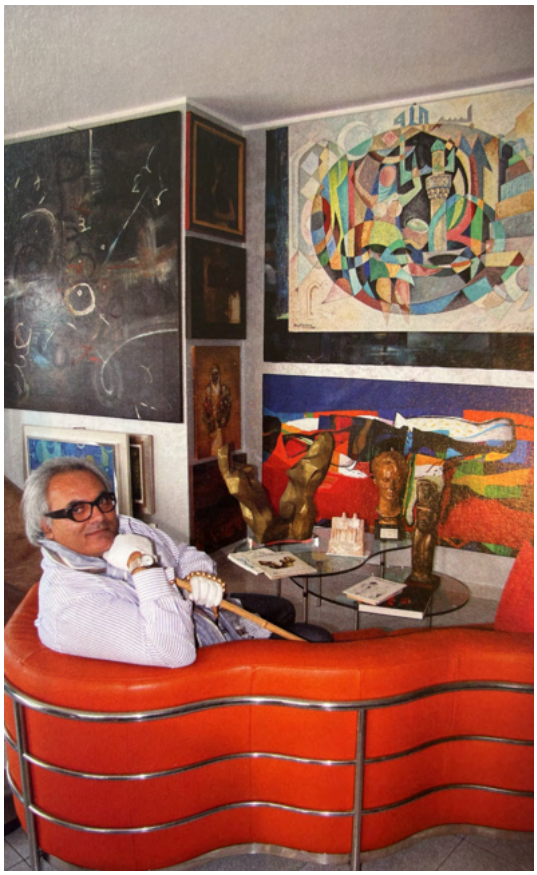

Figure 19: Hussain Harba in his home. In the background: *The Night* by Shaker Hassan Al Said (top left) and *L'homme et la civilisation* by Jamil Hammoudi (top right). Amirsadeghi, Eisler, 2010, p.221.

4.2 Selected artworks

Iraqi modern and contemporary art is, as mentioned before, still highly undervalued by the international market. While in some cases the rarity of works by early Iraqi modern artists caused by the destruction of major collection and the dispersion of art amidst war and migration contributed to rising prices, in other cases it resulted in a very restricted dissemination

[204] Shabout, 2012, p.42.

of these artworks, and thus a lack of knowledge and appreciation in the non-Iraqi community. This in turn is responsible for the low prices of many Iraqi modern and contemporary artists. It is, however, important to note that the prices appear low only compared to international standards, and have risen significantly since the 1990s.[205] The dramatic seizures in history did not allow for a decades-long extensive build-up of international renown–as, for instance, in pre-revolutionary Iran. The short periods of stability and vivid international participation on the art stage left a deep impression of Iraqi art. However, this has been preserved primarily among the scholarly and international Iraqi community, and got lost in the generally short collective memory of the public. Thus, only a few names of Iraqi modern artists are familiar to the international audience. Perhaps the most well-known Iraqi artists today is Dia al-Azzawi, who was largely active in London. Jewad Selim, an early pioneer of Iraqi modern art, is widely credited with initiating a modern art movement in the country, and thus has been extensively researched. However, as touched upon earlier in this paper, there were a great number of important artists who shaped art in Iraq and influenced generations of artists. The close collaboration and intense exchange of ideas between these artists, who predominantly organized themselves in groups according to stylistic and technical, semantic or political ideas, makes it very difficult to narrow down the selection to only a few leading artists. The selection was made of five individuals who exemplify the diversity and rich spectrum of art in Iraq and its diaspora, and whose works are prominently featured in the collection: Jamil Hammoudi, Shaker Hassan Al Said, Dia al-Azzawi, Hassan Massoudi, and Hanaa Mal Allah.

4.2.1 Jamil Hammoudi (1924-2003)

Jamil Hammoudi was part of the new generation of Iraqi artists who were educated by the academies established after World War II, but who eventually overcame the ideologies of the first generation of Iraqi modern artists and who ventured to discover new means of artistic expression beyond the academic approaches. Hammoudi is perhaps best known for his paintings, which cover a wide range of artistic explorations. However, he also made signif-

[205] Shabout, Nada. "In between, Fragmented and Disoriented Art Making in Iraq." Middle East Report 263, 2012, pp. 38-43, p.42.

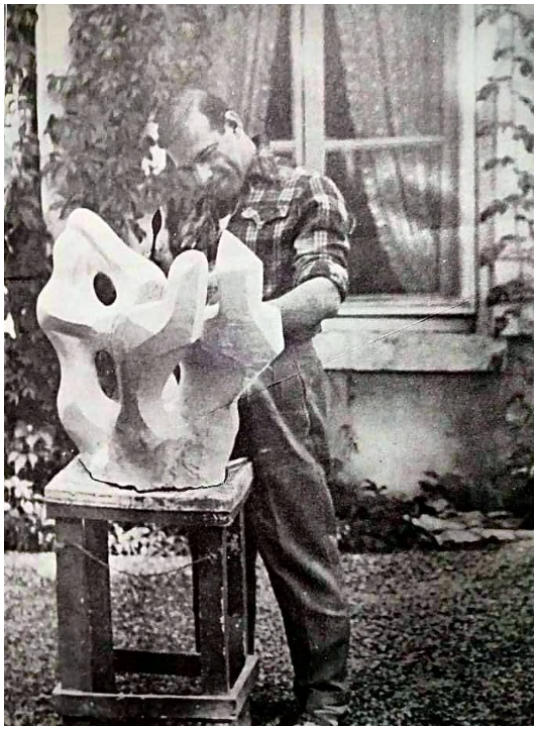

Figure 20: Jamil Hammoudi, working on the model for *Dialogue des civilisations, Orléans* (1958). From the photo archive of the Ibrahimi Collection. ibrahimicollection.com/old-photos-gallery.

icant contributions to the development of sculpture in Iraq. Hammoudi graduated from the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad in 1942 and continued his studies in Paris on a scholarship after 1947. In Europe, he extended his activities to art criticism and founded a cultural magazine. Upon returning to Iraq in 1962, he was actively involved in the Society of Plastic Arts and the Union of Iraqi Artists, and was furthermore supervisor of Art Affairs in the ministry. [206]

Hammoudi's greatest artistic accomplishment is the pioneering work in the artistic approach to the Arabic script.[207] Hammoudi's extensive use of *Hurufiyya* perhaps originates from his studies in Paris, where he came into close contact with the legacy of Cubism, a movement which first proclaimed the aesthetics of merging word and image in Europe.[208] While the artist initially mainly followed Surrealism, he abandoned this trail during his studies in Europe, and *Hurufiyya* became an integral part of his artistic practice. Shabout sees in his

[206] Eigner, 2010, p.381; Schroth, 2013, p.78.

[207] Alsop, Joseph. *The Rare Art Traditions: The History of Art Collecting and Its Linked Phenomena.* Princeton University Press, 1983, p.130; Shabout, 2007, p.70.

[208] Shabout, 2007, p.71.

Figure 21: Jamil Hammoudi: *Basmala* (1975), oil on canvas, 47 x 88 cm. Schroth, 2013, p.79.

embrace of the letter as main element of his paintings as a way of overcoming his "desperation and fear of losing his sense of identity" and as "national and intellectual reaction to the European culture."[209]

The collection of Hussain Harba features 23 works by Jamil Hammoudi, as of 2013.[210] Five of them are sculptures, eight are works on paper or cardboard, and the remaining ten are oil paintings. The works range from Hammoudi's early years in Baghdad in the 40s to works from around 2000. His bronze, resin or wood sculptures are particularly appreciated. One of the sculptures in the collection, *Dialogue des civilisations, Orléans* (1958), can be seen at the studio while the artist is working on it (fig. 20). While early works such as *Les echos de la montagne* (1943) or *Oummoul Abaya* (1948) testify to Hammoudi's exploration of Surrealism, the collection also comprises seven canvases, painted between 1975 and 2000, which are great examples of the artist's work on *Hurufiyya.* A particular highlight is the work *Al-Basmala* (1975, fig. 21) which depicts this important Muslim invocation of God in a colourful way, reminiscent of cubist aesthetics.

While Hammoudi's art is of major importance for Iraqi art of the 20th century, and also gains recognition in the West as major artist of Iraq, his works rarely find their way to the international market. Since 2007, only 44 auctions of his works took place. The lots were sold predominantly in the UK, followed by venues in France, the UAE and Qatar. His auction

[209] Ibd., p.73.

[210] Schroth, 2013, pp.78-89.

record was set in 2015 in London, with a drawing sold for GBP 23,750, more than twice the high estimate. The scarcity of his works on the international market allows the speculation that collectors of his works, such as Harba, have a very stron feeling of connection to this artists, know his value for Iraqi art history (which is far above the market value) and do now easily part from his works. Currently, some of Hammoudi's works are shown in Paris at the major exhibition "Arab Presences: Modern Art And Decolonisation: Paris 1908-1988", which focuses on Arab modernism, a fact which further underscores his key position not only for his own country, but for the entire region.[211]

4.2.2 Shaker Hassan Al Said (1925-2015)

Shaker Hassan Al Said was one of the Iraqi artists who worked on a very broad spectrum of modern art and developed a particularly sophisticated approach to art which would influence the Iraqi art scene for decades. During his studies at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, from which he graduated in 1954, Said collaborated closely with his teacher and colleague Jewad Selim,[212] and they co-founded the Baghdad Modern Art Group. At the core of this group lay one of the most progressive efforts of negotiating the localization of modernisms and a search for Arab identity within the discourse. The manifesto published by Said and Selim proclaimed the importance of consolidating modern movements such as Impressionism, Expressionism and Cubism–alongside a general openness to abstraction–with traditional elements which expressed Iraqi and Arab identity and heritage.[213] Furthermore, the movement was highly aware of the social aspect of art and the importance of individual expression in a modern society.[214] At the peak of Iraqi artistic innovation, during the 1950s, Al Said's works strike with vibrant colors and stylized animals and humans, plants and objects. During the 1960s, coinciding with significant political shifts after the revolution, the artists turned to more and more non-representational subjects. Said embraced elements of Sufism and Western existentialism in his philosophy, a development which culminated in his

[211] "Jamil Hammoudi", *Mutual Art.*

[212] Sharifian et al., 2017, p.50.

[213] Takesh et al., 2020, p.20f.

[214] Shabout, 2007, p.98.

publication "Contemplative Art Manifesto" published in 1966. In this work, he discusses art production which focuses on contemplation and less on creation and which "tends towards formless form and non-abstract abstraction."[215] This understanding of art also impacted the materials and technique, which began to include scratching, burning, carving and punctuating–resulting in an extremely rich and diverse artistic expression. In 1971, Said founded the group "One Dimension", in which he further explored the unity of thought and image, also through experiments with *Hurufiyya*.[216] Especially between 1958 and 1965, letters were an important element in Al Said's works, aiding his experiments with abstraction and the field of tension between abstraction and figure.[217] In the following decades, his work was shaped by his research into the relation between the dimensions, the object-ness of art and its philosophical, 'one-dimensional' foundations, achievable only through "Spacial Reduction", which was closely tied to the letter as subject.[218]

Al Said's work is represented in its full breadth in the collection, ranging from early experiments with Cubism and traditional subjects during the years of his studies to mature results of his concern with abstraction and material expression of thought in the late 90s. *Il mercatino del giovedì* (1953) and *The Victims* (1957) incorporate elements of Cubism, Symbolism and folklore. An important work in this collection is *The Night* (1974, Fig. 19), which displays clear characteristics of the one-dimension, playing with contrasts in colour, texture and shape, while including elements of script and symbols. *Untitled* (1997), reveals the deeply mystic aspects of Al Said's œvre, showing cryptic symbols. A similar work, created in 1995, is entitled *Talismanic Rectangles*, a title which seems to further underscore the importance of such elements.[219] *Untitled* (1980), *Untitled* (1994) and *Untitled* (1980, fig. 22) all exemplify the results of Al Said's artistic development. Bearing the traits of burning, collage, ripping, cutting and etching, these works represent an intensive research of form, shape and content. One particular common feature are holes cut into the surfaces.

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[215] Ibd., p.21.

[216] Ibd., p.22.

[217] Shabout, 2007, p.99.

[218] Ibd., pp.111-119.

[219] *Mutual Art*, www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Untitled-Talismanic-Rectangles-/285FB4F85252DAA60064EC9587F5EFFF. Accessed 25 May 2024.

Figure 22: Shaker Hassan Al Said: *Untitled* (1980). Schroth, 2013, p.122.

Alongside with elements of the abovementioned 'talismanic' shapes and Arabic texts taken from newspapers, these works leave ample space for interpretation and exploration against the background of the one-dimension and Al Said's philosophical approach to art.

Said's works occupy a special position in Iraqi modern art and its market. Tamara Chalabi, founder of the Ruya foundation for modern and contemporary art,[220] points out that "[t]he works of Shaker Hassan Al Said are extremely valuable as far as Iraqi modern art goes as well as art from the Middle East."[221] This is reflected by the auction performance of Al Said's works. After the conclusion of the war in 2011, turnover of his works exploded, with a peak of offered lots in 2015, and a rise in median prices from $31,000 in 2006 to $171,000 in 2015. The UK is the leading marketplace for his works, followed by the United Arab Emirates, which further underscores his importance for the entire Middle East.[222]

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220 *Ruya Foundation*, ruyafoundation.org/en/about/.

221 "Iraq's prized modern art plagued by forgery and trafficking", *The Natonal News*, www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art-design/2023/06/29/iraqs-prized-modern-art-plagued-by-forgery-and-trafficking/?utm_source=mutualart&utm_mediumreferral.

222 "Shaker Hassan Al Said", *Mutual Art*.

4.2.3 Dia al-Azzawi (*1939)

Dia al-Azzawi is internationally recognized as one of the major artists of the Arab modernist movement. Born in Baghdad, the artist lives and works in London since 1976, which perhaps adds to his prominence in the West as representative of Iraqi art. But from the beginning, al-Azzawi regarded international connections between artists as fundamental for artistic practice and later engaged in the activities of the Iraqi Cultural Center in London.[223] His works span a wide range of subjects and techniques and cover painting, sculpture, printing, drawing, and the publication of artists books. In Baghdad, al-Azzawi studied archaeology and received his degree in 1962, before switching to the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, from which he graduated in 1964. This development of his career highly impacted his art: "I began to depend on my heritage and to make use of historical forms–especially Sumerian art–as a consequence of my study of archaeology. That is why I know what is out there in history."[224] Al-Azzawi's early work followed the philosophies of the Baghdad Art Group, however, the artist later joined the Impressionist group led by his mentor, artists Hafidh al-Droubi.[225] The main thread in his work was an understanding of art history as continuity which necessarily preserved elements that construct the population's identity.

> "The major effect of this art history on his developing practice however was that it expanded his sense of the field of possible forms he could work with, opening his eyes to the expressive possibilities of popular culture. In his early paintings, al-Azzawi drew on visual motifs found in everyday life, on the shrine as a site of social activity, and on legends such as those of Gilgamesh and the Imam Hussein. Though motifs from rugs and talismans would persist for years in his work, it was his early interest in legends (*asateer*) that shaped his future work, by bringing his practice increasingly into a relation with text."[226]

During the 1960s, al-Azzawi increasingly included politics and ethics into his artistic practice, seeing art as an expression of truth. In 1967, he published a manifesto, "The New Vision", which was signed by five other artists, and which responded to the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War with Israel. This group subsequently formed the New Vision group, *al-*

[223] Faraj, 2001, p. 27.

[224] Shabout, 2007, p.121.

[225] "Dia Azzawi", *MATHAF*, www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/bios/Pages/Dia-Azzawi.aspx. Accessed 25 May 2024.

[226] Ibd.

Figure 23: Dia al-Azzawi*Wounded Soul, Journey of Destruction* (2010), Bronze, 64 x 57 x 27 cm, edition of 7. Artist's proof, 2/2. 'Dia al-Azzawi', *Mutual Art*.

Ru'yya al-Jadidah, which primarily focused on sentiments of Pan-Arabism and the longing for a unity of Arab people. With an increasing concern for present-day reality, al-Azzawi replaced symbols drawn from the ancient past with elements of his environment. Particular importance is given to the condition of Arabs in times of war and conflict, especially of Palestinians, which led to "a new method of expression based on reduced color, sharpness of details, stark outlines, spontaneity of composition, and a relative abandonment of ornamentation.[227] In 1975, the artist moved first to Salzburg, Austria, and subsequently to London.[228] In London, al-Azzawi had access to Islamic manuscripts, which resulted in an intensified interest in the book as medium of artistic expression. In the artist's books which he subsequently created, he espouses text to image in a symbiotic way, which requires the viewer to grasp both aspects synoptically.[229]

The collection of Hussain Harba encompasses works from all stages of Dia al-Azzawi's artistic evolution. The twenty-five works perhaps constitute the largest group of works by an artist in this collection and span the years between 1965 and 2011. The oldest of these works, *Religious Symbol* (1965), strongly reminds of the approach proclaimed by the Bagh-

[227] Shabout, 2007, p.129.

[228] *Mathaf*, www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/bios/Pages/Dia-Azzawi.aspx.

[229] Shabout, 2007, pp.134-135.

Figure 24: Dia al-Azzawi: *Portrait of Ancestor no. IV* (2007), Bronze, 22 x 11.5 x 5 cm, one of three in the collection. Edition of 7 + 2 Artist's proofs. "Dia al-Azzawi", *Mutual Art.*

dad Art Group, giving preeminence to elements of folklore, Islamic mysticism and elements of ancient Iraqi heritage such as stylized eyes found in Sumerian sculptures. The connection to ancient Sumerian art becomes even more evident in a number of later works: *Sumerian Image no. 2* (1978) merges the vibrant colors typical for Iraqi folklore with the static expression of an ancient sculpture. In *I see you in my dreams* (1970), symbols of modern folklore, ancient epic and surrealistic realms merge. In other works, the political context is explicitly addressed. For instance, *Red Rose for Missing Friend* (2009-10) tackles the tragedy Palestinian oppression and integrates elements of the *keffiyeh*. The sculptures *Bird's Watcher* (2011) and *Portrait of Ancestor no. IV* (2007, fig. 24) call to our attention the importance of al-Azzawi's archaeological sources, especially the Sumerian figurines he so closely studied in Baghdad. Indeed, in many of his recent sculptures–such as *Wounded Soul, Journey of Destruction* (2010, fig. 23) or the *Babylonian Goat[s]* of 2010, this three-dimensional aspect of art seems to play a role of increased importance. Moreover, the collection features three artist's books: *Cities of Salt* (1994), *Improvisation* (2002), and *Um Hussain* (2011). The intensity of the storytelling by means of an inseparable confluence of text and image is striking.[230]

Dia al-Azzawi's works experience a much larger turnover on the international market than

[230] See Schroth, 2013, pp.160-177.

the works of his fellow Iraqi artists. One reason for this might be his popularity due to a closer connection to the Western art world, another the localization of his art production in London from the 1970s, where his artistic practice and his works were protected from the turmoil in his native country. The turnover increased from around $400,000 in 2007 to over $1,000,000 in 2023, with an average 50% of lots sold above the high estimate. Unsurprisingly, his primary marketplace is the United Kingdom, followed by the United Arab Emirates, where the auction record of $235,500 was achieved in 2016.[231]

4.2.4 Hassan Massoudy (*1944)

Hassan Massoudy's interest in calligraphy emerged at an early age. Due to political circumstances shortly after the revolution and in the early 60s, he was unable to pursue his studies in Baghdad and instead moved to Paris, where he studied at the École des Beaux-Arts. While he is primarily a calligrapher–often regarded as the most important living calligrapher–he also works on the interface between calligraphy, music, dance, poetry and performance.
Calligraphy is another art form concerned with the aesthetics of letters–and Massoudy is the perfect artists to represent this important art form in this collection. Before Nada Shabout clearly theoreticized the distinction between calligraphy and *Hurufiyya*,[232] art historian Wijdan Ali proclaimed any sort of art concerned with letters as an evolution from traditional calligraphy–an art form which for many centuries had been at the core of Islamic belief and culture. Shabout and other scholars have since emphasized the fundamental differences between the two visual art forms and increasingly focused on the research into both. Shabout writes that "[c]alligraphy fundamentally differs from painting in terms of its relation to language. Irrespective of intentions, the calligrapher is an artist who copies a text that already exists."[233] There are several distinct forms of calligraphy, depending on medium, intensity of connection between image and meaning, and the form of writing. Traditional calligraphy utilizes the letters and words of poems or religious writings to construct the 'image'. Some calligraphers, however, have broken this convention and experimented with the relationship

[231] "Dia al-Azzawi", *Mutual Art*.

[232] Cf. Shabout, 2007.

[233] Shabout, 2007, p.77.

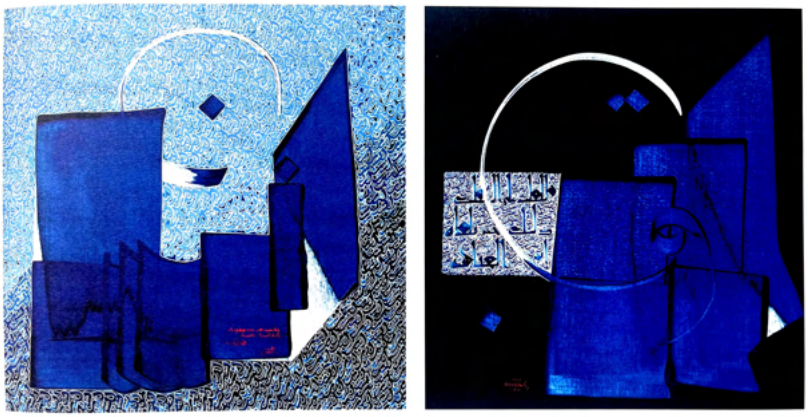

Figure 25: Hassan Massoudy: *Untitled* (2010) and *Untitled* (2010), acrylic on canvas, 105 x 105 cm and 109 x 109 cm. Schroth, 2013, p.205.

of the aesthetics of letters with abstraction. In this context, the letters used can have no meaning at all: This means that the letter or letters undergo a process of abstraction.[234] In addition to *Hurufiyya* and 'traditional' Calligraphy, there is a third form of art that is based on the Arabic script: 'calligraffiti'. This term describes the hybrid between calligraphy and graffiti, or scribbling, and refers to art where the handwriting of the artist is part of the work.[235]

Massoudy extensively practised traditional calligraphy. However, he revolutionized this art with his own style: In his most innovative works, a word or letter is picked from a text–usually by famous Arabic writers, scientists or academics, but also proverbs–and occupies the majority of space. The rest of the text is then written along the lower edge, and appears almost as a commentary to the work itself. The central element on the page often conveys a modernist aesthetic–a result of the skilled merging of traditional styles and modern elements.[236] Massoudy also engaged in the use of Calligraffiti, adding his personal handwriting to many of his works, either standing for themselves or in addition to traditional elements.

Fifteen of Massoudy's works are featured in the collection. While some of them, such as *Untitled* (2000) and *Untitled* (2004) bear the traits of traditional ink calligraphy developed over centuries, others are remarkably modern. A great example is a pair of works, *Untitled*

[234] Scholars Abdelkebir Khatibi and Mohammed Sijelmassi see in this use of calligraphy primarily a presentation of cultural identity (ibd., p.78), however, these abstracted letters can sometimes open up a wide range of interpretations (for instance, if we think of Parviz Tanavoli's *Heech*).

[235] Ibd., p. 80.

[236] Eigner, 2010, p.78.

(2010, fig. 25); one of them combines a laminar spread of script with prominent broad strokes, which almost allude to cubist shapes, while the other features contrasting broad strokes against a plain dark background and a delineated space for more traditional kufic script. In both works, hues of blue are dominant, and only small elements of red and yellow can be found. This perhaps adds to the highly modern appearance of the works. While these works belong to Massoudi's continuation of traditional calligraphy and 'depict' meaningful text, the overall composition reminds more of a modernist painting with contrasting elements and monochrome elegance. In *Untitled* (2007) and *Untitled* (1994), the dominance of a central word or letter is even more striking and appears against the plain white background of the canvas. While these works, again, have a strong calligraphic character through the small text at the bottom or side of the space, the fact that the main elements of the works are painted with acrylic on canvas positions these works at the interface of calligraphy and *Hurufiyya*.[237] While several artists in the collection include elements of *Hurufiyya*, and works by artists such as Mehdi Moutashar and Issam El-Said belong to the realm of calligraphy, Massoudy is the primary representative for this important Arab art form in the collection.

Massoudiy's presence in the art market is steady. While most of his works are sold for prices below $5,000, the demand for them is active, with most lots sold above or within the estimate. The main marketplace for his works is France, his home in Europe, followed by Qatar, the Netherlands and the United Arab Emirates.[238] Galleries across Europe and the United States offer works by Massoudi, with significantly higher prices than at auction.[239]

4.2.5 Hanaa Mal Allah (*1958)

Hanaa Mal Allah was born in Dhi Qar in Iraq and currently lives and works in London. Mal Allah studied art at the Academy of Fine Arts, where Shaker Hassan Al Said was among her teachers.[240] At the University of Baghdad, where she earned a PhD in 2005, Mal Allah followed the path laid out by the previous generations of modern Iraqi artists and extensively

[237] Cf. Schroth, 2013, pp. 204-212.

[238] *"Hassan Massoudy", Mutual Art*.

[239] "Hassan Massoudy", *Artsy*, www.artsy.net/artist/hassan-massoudy.

[240] Ali in Faraj, 2001, p.13.

studied the art of ancient Mesopotamia, and further developed her philosophical approach to artistic practice. In 2006, she left to Paris and then to London, where she settled.[241]

Mal Allah was active in Iraq during the heavy restrictions of artistic practice due to the socio-political circumstances such as sanctions. The period between 1991 and 2003 has particularly influenced her development as artist, and let to her mediating the difficult conditions with philosophical enquiry and practical solutions to restrictions.[242] "During sanctions, using found objects almost became a necessity as art materials become increasingly scarce. The burnt-out cinders of her charred canvases are shards of found objects, salvaged from the Baghdad streets bombed out by US air strikes."[243] A technique which originally emerged from the every-day context, later developed into a complex artistic exploration of death, destruction and the human condition.

> "This reflection on destruction has drawn on Mal Allah's research on semiotics, and on the material culture of ancient Mesopotamia, but more recently it has shifted its focus from objects to landscapes, and it has explored the 'virtual' aspects of destruction: the temporality of decay, the survival of material, and the paradoxical appearance of invisibility within the visible. Her research on the virtual has led her more recently to examine the relationship between spiritualism and technology."[244]

Mal Allah was also influenced by Dia al-Azzawi's work on artists' books.[245] The concept of art as storytelling can be seen in her work *Baghdad Circle City* (2007): Many 'leaves' of canvas form an album with a deeply archaeological nature where 'layers'–or 'strata'–tell stories of construction and destruction. The collection contains thirteen more of Mal Allah's works. *Baghdad City Map*, also from 2007 (fig. 26), is a great early example of the artist's 'ruins technique', conceptualized in that same year–the theoretical formulation of her concern with destruction as part of life, of being human. This work exemplifies her technique of burning

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241 "Biograhy", *Hanaa Mal Allah*, www.hanaa-malallah.com/biography. Accessed 15 April 2024.

242 Alkizwini, Mohsen Reda, and Noor Almahal. "The form system in Hana[a] Mal Allah's drawings." PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology, vol. 18, no. 7, Apr. 2021, pp. 632- 47, archives.palarch.nl/index.php/jae/article/view/7782, p.635.

243 "Iraqi contemporary art influenced by experiences of war and exile", *Mutual Art*, 9 Dec 2010.

244 "Biography", *Hanaa Mal a Allah*.

245 "Paper, Politics and Artists Books", *The Art Newspaper*, www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/11/07/paper-politics-and-poetry-why-artists-books-from-the-middle-east-north-africa-and-south-asia-deserve-a-closer-look?utm_source=mutualart&utm_medium=referral.

Figure 26: Hanaa Mal Allah: *Baghdad City Map* (2007), Mixed media and oil color on canvas, 180x180cm. Schroth, 2013, p.245.

layers of mixed media, and includes symbols that inform about the context: Five stars placed prominently at the upper center of the work allude to the invasion led by the United States, and the title of the work is written in the bottom right corner, indicating the terrible extent of the destruction of Iraq's capital. *Fabric Map I* (2007), *Fabric Map II* (2007), *Omen I* (1995) and *Omen II* (2007) all tackle geographies of destruction.[246] Notably, many of her works feature a series of numbers. The numbers represent letters following a system developed by the artists and based on ancient Mesopotamian scripts. The connection of numbers to letters result in the attribution of mathematical values to names, and was used for divination and talismanic practice since antiquity, and overall has a deep spiritual meaning.[247]

It is worth mentioning that out of the fourteen works of Mal Allah in the collection, six are from the year 2007 which had such a big impact on the artist's œuvre. This focus allows to understand the genesis of her signature technique and witness the culmination of her decades-long academic and practical examination of destruction. While we can assume that this choice by the collector implies a personal admiration of these works, it undoubtedly also demonstrates his discriminating eye for quality and meaning.

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[246] Schroth, 2013, pp.245-255.

[247] See 'Numbers", *Hanaa Mal Allah*, www.hanaa-malallah.com/copy-of-artist-s-statement, and Alkizwini, Almahal, 2021, p.637.

Mal Allah's work is widely exhibited and part of major museum collections, especially in the United Arab Emirates and in London. She frequently takes part in exhibitions across the US and Europe. However, only the Center for Arts in Baghdad exhibits the artist's works in Iraq, which again testifies for the lack of access to contemporary art and underscores the importance of private initiatives such as the present collection.

4.3 Analysis: mission and public engagement

The collection owned by Hussain Harba and his family is currently divided between private residences in Turin and Babylon, a region in the vicinity of Baghdad. The overarching vision is to consolidate the entire collection in Iraq, making it accessible to the public through a private museum. This museum would aim to serve not only the general public but also a specific audience: the Iraqi people. While Harba is actively involved in promoting Iraqi modern and contemporary art in Western countries, his primary ambition for the collection appears to be focused on benefiting the people in his homeland. This intention is particularly evident in the choice of his home, Babylon, as the location for the private museum, a site that does not necessarily facilitate easy access for international visitors, unlike, for instance, centres like the UAE. One might argue that establishing a private museum in Italy, for instance, would attract a larger audience and serve as a more effective means of introducing Iraqi art to the global community. However, such an argument overlooks the fundamental goal of the collection, which is to restore a piece of Iraq's heritage and culture to its rightful place, thereby educating Iraqis about their own artistic legacy.

The primary source of information accessible to the public is the catalogue *Longing for Eternity.* Published by Skira and edited by Mary Angela Schroth, the catalogue comprises of two sections: one is dedicated to introductory notes and expert essays, the second shows the works present in the collection in 2013. This part is structured chronologically according to the year of birth of the artists and spans works from the early 40s to 2011. Each artists is introduced either by a statement by themselves, an excerpt of scholarship on the artist or a short biography. However, the book is not meant to give extensive background information, but rather focuses on large depictions (many cover an entire page) of the artworks. It is clearly less a 'who's who' and more a 'what is what' and in this case: what is Iraqi modern

and contemporary art? The Preface is authored by Salam Atta Sabri, director of the Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad and son of pioneer painter and ceramist Atta Sabri (*1913-1987). Sabri quotes the high quality of Harba's collection and the collector's dedication to building a collection that contributes to the cohesive and consistent conservation of Iraqi modern art. Sabri, too, expresses the hope that the collection will be accessible to the public in future.[248] Following an editor's note, expert and scholar Silvia Naef examines the history of the collection and the historical background in her essay 'A Museum in Exile: The Hussain Ali Harba Family Collection of Modern and Contemporary Iraqi Art'. Subsequenetly, Hussain Harba is interviewed by Schroth, a dialogue which touches upon topics such as the collector's personal approach to his collection, his buying practice, and his vision for the future of the collection. Finally, Iraqi scholar, art critic and artist Assim Abdul Amir provides valuable insight into the art history of modern Iraq and contextualizes the artists present in the collection.

Hussain Harba's overarching vision for his collection is to be publicly displayed in a private museum in his hometown Babylon. This vision is shared with his entire family, and before 2013, significant effort was put into the project from all family members. The construction of the museum was started on a piece of land in the center of Babylon. *Longing for Eternity* shows a few pictures of the construction: a spacious room concept with three floors, topped with a dome, evokes the imagination of a flourishing modern museum (fig. 27). It is no surprise that this project serves as ideal unification of Harba's talents in architecture and art connoisseurship and collectionism. This leads back to the concept of collecting as an art form in its own right: Collecting is always a personal expression of the thought and taste of the collector, and as such results in a unique 'Gesamtkunstwerk'. Harba took this a step further and extended the personal note from the collection itself to its future home.

Unfortunately, the project was halted because of the uncertain situation of the country during the Iraq War until 2011 and its aftermath in the years which followed, and has not been taken up again until now, in 2024. Harba further quotes the shift of mindset in the country–from a secular, progressive society to an environment which is heavily influenced by fundamentalist

[248] Schroth, 2013, p.7.

ideologies.[249] This is perhaps an additional obstacle for the realization of such a museum: While the economic and political circumstances may inhibit the physical work necessary for the construction of a museum of modern art, the lack of understanding for such an enterprise among decision makers poses a risk to the very idea of the museum–the idea of a contemporary space which is open to the investigation of the past and is concerned with community building and heritage preservation, as well as the task of creating an ongoing archive of Iraqi art. However, Harba seems optimistic that, in some way and in a more adapt moment in future, the museum will become reality. "So, our family's collection awaits its own building, whose goals will be to keep and conserve these works of Iraqi modern and contemporary art and promote its outreach to the public at large."[250] To quote Hans Ulrich Obrist's positive attitude towards (yet) unrealized projects: "I see unrealized projects as the most important unreported stories in the art world. It is urgent to remember [...] certain roads not taken in an active, dynamic and non-nostalgic way, transforming these into propositions and possibilities for the future."[251]

It is evident that the vision for the collection is clear to the collector and has already been partly acted upon, in the framework of the possibilities allowed for by the political circumstances. While the collection will ideally be shown to the public in some way, it is still a collection built on private motivations such as passion and sense of belonging. The collection comprises of all the most notable artists of Iraq from the 20th and the present century, and it is perhaps viable to presume that the collection has grown significantly since the publication of the catalogue over ten years ago, and that perhaps more contemporary artists of the youngest generation of Iraqi artists have found their way into the collection. Hussain Harba does not follow trends. While major artists such as Dia al-Azzawi and Shaker Hassan Al Said do achieve high prices on the market, they are primarily important for the art history of the country. While some collectors, as discusses before, might build a collection *for* the public and a prestigious reputation on the international market, Harba seems to focus on his personal taste. This circumstance does not stand in contrast with an exceptionally broad

[249] Ibd., p.19.

[250] Ibd.

[251] Amirsadeghi, Eisler, 2010, p.86.

Figure 27: The private museum by Hussein Harba under construction. Before 2013. Schroth, 2013, p.19.

spectrum of techniques, aesthetics, artistic commentaries of the past and present–and perhaps the collector's approach even supported this outcome. The collection features all key artists of Iraq, and the works range from innocent landscapes to explicit political works. As seen in the previous sections, the works present in the collection allow for an understanding and comparison of particularly important art forms of Iraq, such as modern Arab calligraphy or *Hurufiyya*.

Harba and his collection are featured in Amirsadeghi's *Art and Patronage: The Middle East.* However, few other publications discuss his collection, and there is little reception in the press. This leads to the conclusion that Harba gravitates towards the category of collectors who put their private passion for the works before the desire of being known and celebrated. At the same time, the efforts for a lasting legacy are present, although they have not yet come to fruition. The involvement of the family, including his wife and daughter, who is now in her twenties, also points towards a shared passion across generations and opens up the possibility of future endeavours when the circumstances are perhaps more adapt to giving the collection the space and the position in the international discourse it deserves.

To conclude, the collection is meant to be accessible to the public in future, but not primarily to the broadest possible public, but instead to the most affected public, the people of Iraq and the collector's hometown. Thus, for the time being, the collection is a private collection in a rather conservative sense, but with an underlying progressive, engaged and passionate mission.

5 Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi

5.1 About the collector and the collection

Figure 28: Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi at the Barjeel Art Foundation. Jeffrey Biteng, the National, www.thenationalnews.com/arts/sultan-al-qassemi-taking-a-warrior-s-break-1.697754.

Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi, born in 1978, is an Emirati scholar, educator, entrepreneur, columnist and philanthropist. He first gained international attention because of his analysis of the Arab Spring, primarily on Twitter. Al-Qassemi is a member of the ruling family of the Emirate of Sharjah, a detail he typically does not disclose or foreground. He received his academic education at the American University of Paris and at Regent's College London. Particularly his four years in Paris, where he studied International Business Administration, sparked a strong fascination with the arts, which would result in his first art purchase in 1999. This interest was further encouraged during his time in London, where he pursued a graduate degree in Global Banking and Finance. In 2002, al-Qassemi started to collect art. While al-Qassemi has worked in finance and investment in the UAE, his work has increasingly shifted towards the arts after he started collecting.[252] His mission seems to be located at the interface between art and politics–with a constant underlying dialogue between these fields. In hundreds of talks all over the world, he tackles pressing issues such as youth unemployment, politics of the Middle East, in particular the Arab Spring, Middle Eastern

[252] Amirsadeghi, Eisler, 2010, p.40.

art in a global and political context, and the emergence of Gulf cities as important hubs for regional and international economy and culture.[253] Since the late 2000s, he has been active as regular columnist for the UAE newspapers Gulf News and The National.[254]

In 2010, al-Qassemi established the Barjeel Art Foundation.[255] From the very beginning, the foundation did not only serve the management of the private collection, but also developed an active engagement in art education, scholarship, and international networking, acting from its physical location, Sharjah. The collector himself became the main voice of the foundation and since 2010 maintains a multifaceted participation in the collection's local and global presence. He describes himself as the 'custodian' of the collection, and admits that he has modified his "interests to suit the uniqueness of the foundation."[256] Moreover, he explains that he regards "collecting and displaying art as a further extension of [his] written social commentary on Middle Eastern developments."[257]

" '[A] private collection for the public good'. That is how I see Barjeel."[258] With this, al-Qassemi outlines the very foundation upon which his collection and foundation is built. He claims that his vision for the collection had from the very beginning included the access to the public and the positioning of the collection within the wider discourse of modern and contemporary Arab art. A particular concern for the collector is the adequate inclusion of Arab art and art from the MENA region in modern global art history. His efforts aim to support that Arab art history will be soon "taught on a par with other art histories".[259] This thread is visible both in the endeavors of the foundation, but also in al-Qassemi's further engagement as scholar, advisor and columnist.

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253 *Sultan al-Qassemi, CV,* www.sultanalqassemi.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/SultanSooudAlQassemi-CV.pdf.

254 Ibd.

255 Barjeel is the Arab word describing the traditional wind towers common in the Gulf region.

256 "Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation", *Christie's*, www.christies.com/en/stories/kawaba-highlights-from-the-barjeel-art-foundation-8a1457215d58408ead418602bce4bf1d. Accessed 3 June 2024.

257 "Top 200 Collectors", *Art News*, www.artnews.com/art-collectors/top-200-profiles/sultan-sooud-al-qassemi/.

258 "Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation", *Christie's*.

259 Ibd.

The collection contains over 1200 works by 400 artists from the Arab world.[260] The corpus of works includes mainly works by Arab artists, both from the MENA region and from the Arab global diaspora, but al-Qassemi also points out that ethnic and religious diversity play an important role in the collection's identity: "We have works from various ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds, by artists of Arab, Amazigh [Berber], Armenian, Circassian, Jewish and Turkish descent."[261] The collection further emphasizes the importance of women in the arts, highlighting female artists from the UAE who challenge the traditional male-dominated socio-cultural environment and drive the country's development towards a modern society.[262] This topic seems to be of particular importance for the collector, whose work in the arts particularly focuses on social injustice, prejudices and misconceptions of the Arab world in the West, and gender equality.[263]

5.2 Selected artworks

As already mentioned, the collection contains works from the entire MENA region and beyond, and focuses on Arab art. This is due to a strong Arab identity of the collector and within his native country, as well as the fact that the relatively young Emirati fine art tradition is embedded in a larger context of Arab modern art which emerged over half a century before the state was established. The lack of a fine art tradition in the modern 'Western' sense prior to the establishment of the United Arab Emirates and the creation of the necessary infrastructure places the first Emirati works in the collection in the 1970s. The more historical corpus of the collection contains works by artists from other Arab countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Morocco and Syria. Out of approximately 400 artists featured in the collection, only 36 are from the UAE. However, this selection allows for a comprehensive understanding of

[260] Kelly, Mary. "Barjeel Art Foundation: Cross-National Bridge Building and Decolonization of the History of Art." The Museum Journal, vol. 66, 1, 2023, pp. 59-83, p.67.

[261] "Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation", *Christie's*, www.christies.com/en/events/kawkaba-highlights-from-the-barjeel-art-foundation/about.

[262] Amirsadeghi, Eisler, 2010, p.40.

[263] In January 2024, I had the pleasure of attending a talk by Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi at the SOAS London (where he is currently a research associate), which discussed a large number of significant females artists from the Arab world and their foundational contributions to the art history of the region.

Figure 29: Hassan Sharif: *Garden 4* (2007), Oil on canvas, 100 x 70 cm. www.barjeelartfoundation.org/collection/hassan-sharif-garden-4/.

Emirati modern, or rather, contemporary art and gives insights into the works of the most influential artists. To understand the importance of the collection's works in the context of Emirati identity and art history building, we will regard a selection of Emirati artists only.

From the following examples of important artists of the UAE it emerges that large exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale are particularly adapt at showcasing emerging talent of a young state. It is no coincidence that the artists mentioned here all took part in the Biennale in Venice–in fact, they represent the multifaceted contemporary art scene of the UAE in a particularly nuanced and encompassing way.

5.2.1 Hassan Sharif (1951-2016)

Any account of contemporary art in the UAE necessarily begins with Hassan Sharif. After a training as caricaturist and the completion of his fine art degree in London in 1984, he returned to Dubai with an incredible artistic energy and somehow acted as a "shock with

lasting side-effects".[264] Together with the group The Five and other colleagues of emerging artists, he founded the Emirates Fine Art Society and only a few years later the Art Atelier, another important institution for the growing art scene. As early as 1982, he started experimenting on the interface between painting and sculpture, an approach which soon led to a deep questioning of various art practices as adequate means of expression for his view on civil rights, suffering and political wrongdoings. This resulted in the development of a pioneering conceptual practice, inclusive of performative elements, which was not only very personal and unique, but also a certainly revolutionary force within the young Emirati art discourse.[265]

Between the 1980s and late 1990s, Sharif experimented with performance, painting, artist books, handmade boxes, and looked for alternatives for traditional art making practices.[266] During that time, Sharif also engaged with the found-object-approach, which would remain a major theme in his art. This is also closely connected to the socio-cultural and environmental context in which his works were created: The incredibly fast development of cities in the UAE caused a field of tension between welcome innovation, globalization, optimization and urbanization, and the fragility of rural ecosystems and the very livelihood of many Emiratis. Thus, the consumer objects which started dominating the reality of cities like Dubai or Abu Dhabi take on a significant role in Sharif's artistic research into reality and identity:

> "Consumer objects were the abiding obsession of Hassan Sharif, the foundational UAE artist, who, in his lifetime, saw disposable consumerist items replace the handmade items of the Bedouin and Dubai port people. His obsessive wrapping and altering of mass-produced items suggested an attempt to detourne them from their mass-produced state. The UAE's younger artists are arguably continuing this interest in consumer goods, though without Sharif's violent or anguished reaction."[267]

Four works by Sharif are part of the collection at the Barjeel Art Foundation. Unlike

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[264] Shabout, Nada M. *Interventions: A Dialogue between the Modern and the Contemporary*. Arab Museum of Modern Art, Exhibition Catalogue. Milan, Skira, 2010, p.77.

[265] Ibd.

[266] Ibd., p.79.

[267] Gronlund, Melissa. "Add Oil to Art: Kitsch in the UAE Art World from 2003 to 2018." *Experiences of Oil*, 2022, pp.138f.

the selection of works by other artists, this selection is not as representative of Sharif's broad range of approaches as it could be. However, with regard to painting, it demonstrates his wide interests, ranging from early impressionistic studies like *Man* (1980) to *After Press Conference* (2008)–a work clearly reminiscent of his training as caricaturist and highly political in its content. *Black and White* (1985) is a work which points towards his strong fascination with conceptual examinations of material and space, reality and void, as well as with time.[268] The fourth work, *Garden 4* (2007, fig. 29) reminds of his interest in objects and their relation to nature–what seems like a colorful glimpse into a garden with a foot-stool or table, bears the burden of a controversial transformation of a predominantly rural and slow-paced life into a major cultural and economic hub.[269] The artist is not very present in the international auction market, but widely exhibited across the globe since the 80s and often represents the foundations of Emirati art in the global discourse, including at the exhibition "1980 – Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates" at the Venice Biennale 2015.

5.2.2 Abdul Qader al-Rais (*1951)

Al-Rais was born in Dubai two decades before the establishment of the UAE as an independent state would begin to offer the stability necessary for an arts and culture ecosystem. He came in contact with art when he moved to Kuwait as a teenager, and since the young state of Kuwait (founded in 1961) supported the development of modern art,[270] his talent could emerge in an environment which offered the necessary education and funds. Especially important for the artist was the availability of books on Renaissance art history.[271] Upon returning to the UAE, al-Rais studied Sharia Law at the United Arab Emirates University at Al Ain, but soon returned to painting as his profession–a decision which was revolutionary at a time where 'artist' was not yet regarded as valid profession in the UAE. He became a founding member of the Emirates Fine Arts Society in Dubai, which was established in

[268] Shabout, 2010, p.80.

[269] See "Hassan Sharif", *Barjeel Art Foundation*, www.barjeelartfoundation.org/artist/uae/hassan-sharif/. Accessed 14 May 2024.

[270] Kuwait reached independence in 1961 at a time where already a vibrant artistic discourse had formed under the British protectorate. In the 50s and 60s, Kuwaiti artists travelled to Europe and acquired knowledge and skills of modern art of the time. Al-Qassemi in Takesh, 2016, p.107.

[271] "Abdul Qader Al Rais", *ADMAF*, admaf.org/artists/abdul-qader-al-rais/.

1980, and is since regarded as one of the founding fathers of Emirati modern art.[272] The first decades of his career were marked by a distinct modern interpretation of classical style which he developed in the context of his admiration for Impressionism–a direction which he revisited in recent times. His watercolor paintings engage with both rural and urban surroundings in the Emirates, and became an important tool for him to explore elements of cultural identity, heritage and nature. A notable element is his fascination with doors and windows.[273] An abstract version of these architectural features later became a signature element of his works in the form of rectangles which floated first around the main subject of his works–in a frame–and in more recent times across the entire plane of the work. From the 90s onwards, al-Rais began working with elements of *Hurufiyya*, a development which would lead to his widely acclaimed contemporary style. His work pursues various kinds of aesthetics. The artist states: "When I am painting I look for that beauty. Sometimes you find it in landscapes, sometimes in a piece of wood such as a door. When I put something on the canvas, I try to bring out the beauty; to emphasise it."[274]

The Barjeel's collection holds six works by al-Rais. Proof of the careful curation of this collection is the balance between the artist's internationally famous contemporary works featuring abstract geometry and Arabic script and traditional subjects and techniques, showcasing the entire spectrum of his œvre. The earliest works featured are *Hope* and *Waiting*, both from 1970, and depict women and children. *Decay* (1989) is a document of al-Rais' impressionistic oil paintings which depict the traditional environment of the UAE, in this case a traditional building which almost seems to belong to ancient forgotten times, a subject which is perhaps a commentary on the rapid changes in the urban landscape of the country. Two works, *Untitled* (1988) and *Untitled* (without date) are examples of the artist's contemporary abstract style, with squares featured prominently in both works. The collection, however, does not contain works by al-Rais which focus on *Hurufiyya*. *Untitled* (2002, fig. 30), lastly, is a watercolor painting which depicts several doors in a *mise-en-abyme* constellation which draws the viewer's gaze into the painting, into the building. Several squares

[272] *Leila Heller Gallery*, www.leilahellergallery.com/artists/abdul-qader-al-rais.

[273] "Abdul Qader Al Rais", *ADMAF*.

[274] Ibd.

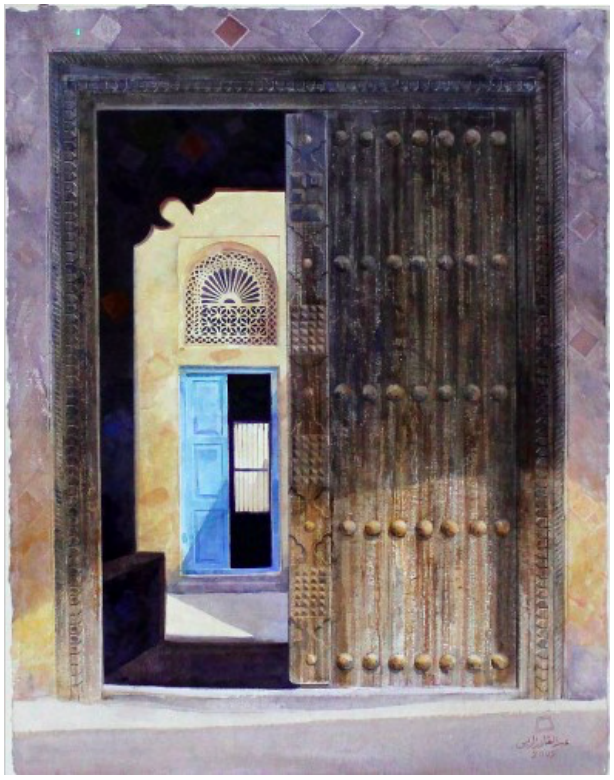

Figure 30: Abdul Qader al-Rais: *Untitled* (2002), Watercolour on paper, 76 x 58 cm. www.barjeelartfoundation.org.

are visible outside of the central subject of the painting, in a frame, which demonstrates this hybrid stage in the artist's work between realism and abstraction.

The incredible range of al-Rais' work across traditional, modern, contemporary styles and subjects, as well as his development of a truly unique artistic language makes him one of the most well-known Emirati artists worldwide. His work as been exhibited not only in the UAE and its neighboring countries, but also in the USA, East Asia, Europe, with his perhaps most notable appearance at the Venice Biennale in 2015.[275] His work does not often appear on the internationally auction market, perhaps due to his wide representation by UAE based galleries. In 2008, however, one of his large abstract works featuring elements of *Hurufiyya* fetched the auction record of $ 385,000 at Christie's Dubai.[276]

[275] "Abdul Qader al-Rais", *National Pavilion UAE*, nationalpavilionuae.org/artists/abdul-qader-al-rais/.

[276] "Abdul Kader al-Rais", *Mutual Art*.

5.2.3 Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim (*1962)

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim was born in Khor Fakkan in the Emirate Sharjah. Artistic dialogue with nature had emerged as a necessity for him at a young age. While Ibrahim could not formally study art, he developed his style autodidactically, in parallel to his studies of Psychology at the Al Ain University.[277] Towards the end of his degree, he was introduced to artist Hassan Sharif through a classmate, an encounter which subsequently profoundly shaped Ibrahim's practice and career as artist: "Until then I was painting more traditional subjects such as portraits and landscapes but this was not my vision; this was not what I wanted to say", he states in an interview in 2018.[278] Ibrahim became part of the group of pioneers which included Mohammed Kazem and Hassan Sharif, and went on to take part seminal exhibitions of modern Emirati art–the perhaps most significant of which being "5 UAE" in Germany in 2002. This exhibition can be regarded as key step in the global awareness of Emirati contemporary art.[279] In 2007, the five artists and friends founded the group "Flying House", which exerted major influence on the contemporary art scene of the UAE.[280]

Figure 31: Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim: *Khorfakan 4* (2008), paper and glue, 71 x 66 x 43 cm. www.barjeelartfoundation.org.

Ibrahim's art is created in synthesis with the nature which surrounds his home, Khor

[277] "A visit to Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahims Khorfakkan Studio", *Harpers Bazaar Arabia*, www.harpersbazaararabia.com/culture/art/artists/a-visit-to-mohammed-ahmed-ibrahims-khorfakkan-studio. Accessed 27 May 2024.

[278] Ibd.

[279] "Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim", *Gulf News*, gulfnews.com/friday/art-people/mohamed-ahmed-ibrahim-art-is-living-as-environments-are-1.2315149.

[280] Porter, 2020, p.92.

Fakkan. Earth and other organic materials and stone play an important role in his work. Especially the mountains which engulf the city can be seen as major inspiration and are responsible for certain recurrent aspects of his works:[281] "From the time I was born I only ever saw the sun rise. [...] When it started to set, it went behind the mountain so I never saw sunset throughout my childhood. Instead, the final hour of the day was wrapped in a grey shadow and it affected me deeply. I felt that I had been robbed of the colours of sunset and this encouraged me to discover colour; you can see a lot of colours in my work because of those early years."[282] Although Ibrahim's work spans many techniques and approaches, he is most known for two branches of his practice: On one side his organic sculptures, on the other inscription-like patterns on paper and other surfaces. His sculptures are a primary example of his combine experimental and conceptual approach, which involves testing of materials such as papier-mâché, coffee, or leaves.[283] The paintings and drawings which involve signs spread over a large space in an almost meditative way can be seen as an extension of his art made of organic materials. It is not a language, the artist emphasizes, but rather a move towards what he describes as "ultimate abstraction and simplification of forms".[284] He subsumes his technique as land art–an artistic practice which holistically engages with the imminent environment of his home. Recently, site-specific installations in the UAE have underscored the importance of the native land to Ibrahim.[285]

Again, the Barjeel collection demonstrates a hightened sensibility to the artist's wide range: it features one sculpture, *Khorfakan 4* (2008, fig. 31), and one painting, *Untitled* (2008), works which excellently represent the artist's œvre. Ibrahim's work is primarily sold by galleries. His work is widely exhibited, most importantly at the Venice Biennale in 2020 with the exhibition "Between Sunrise and Sunset".[286] It is worth noticing that Ibrahim takes his role as representative of the Emirati contemporary art scene very serious. This

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[281] "Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim", *Lawrie Shabibi*, www.lawrieshabibi.com/artists/159-mohamed-ahmed-ibrahim/.

[282] "A visit to Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahims Khorfakkan Studio", *Harpers Bazaar Arabia*.

[283] "Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim", *Gulf News*.

[284] Ibd.

[285] Porter, 2020, p.92.

[286] *Contemporary Art Library*, www.contemporaryartlibrary.org/project/mohamed-ahmed-ibrahim-at-pavilion-of-the-united-arab-emirates-venice-24451. Accessed 2 June 2024.

is perhaps underscored by the fact that his art and its presence literally involves bringing earth, clay and stone from his homeland to the place of the exhibition. It is a deeply personal connection to the nature of the UAE and prominently displays the closeness to the native land which many Emirati artist have.

5.2.4 Mohammed Kazem (*1969)

Mohammed Kazem was born and raised in Dubai at the very beginnings of the modern state of the UAE. He received his formal art education at the University of Arts in Philadelphia, from which he graduated in 2012. However, since the 80s, Kazem was artistically active. Originally gravitating towards music, he was soon introduced into the pioneer art environment of the country by Hassan Sharif, who would become his mentor until Sharif's passing in 2016. Kazem is part of the group "The Five" and developed his artistic language primarily through the instruments of photography, installation and performance,[287] and became one of the first Emirati artists to incorporate new media into his practice.[288] His work is deeply concerned with the effects and problems of the rapid development of the UAE, and in particular of the city Dubai. He states: "I am from Dubai and I used to know the place by heart, but now I am often lost and confused in my own city."[289] This branch of his art is primarily captured by installations and photography.

Scratch on Paper (2008, fig. 32) is part of a larger body of works which is concerned with minimal and subtle interactions with the environment: "Using a pair of scissors, Kazem scratches into textured paper to create Braille-like marks that suggest a delicate poetics of form. Kazem's scratches are a visualisation of a composition, not in the sense of a musical score but rather as a fundamental and intuitive form of expression."[290] The Barjeel collection in total features seven works by Kazem. Two of them, *Tongue* (1994) are photographs of performances, four paintings showcase his wide range of painting techniques. His figurative works *Even the Shade does not Belong to Them* (2018) and *Windows* (2020) can be

[287] Porter, 2020, p.115.

[288] *Barjeel Art Foundation*, www.barjeelartfoundation.org/artist/uae/mohammed-kazem/.

[289] *Louvre Abu Dhabi,* www.louvreabudhabi.ae/en/Explore/art-here-2021/mohammed-kazem.

[290] *Sharjah Art Foundation*, sharjahart.org/sharjah-art-foundation/projects/scratches-on-paper.

Figure 32: Mohammad Kazem: *Scratch on Paper* (2008), Scratch and ink on paper, 152 x 152 cm. www.barjeelartfoundation.org.

understood as commenting on the fast-paced city development. Kazem's work is less well known internationally than his colleagues' mentioned above, however, his name appears on the international secondary market with modest numbers but an increasing interest coming from the UAE, the UK and USA. In recent years, sales spiked and reached a high in 2023.[291]

5.2.5 Moosa al-Halyan (*1969)

Moosa al-Halyan discovered his passion for painting during his high school education. He later developed a style in his paintings which is close to Surrealism. A recurrent theme in his works is the horse. The artist understands the horse as one of the traditionally closest companions to humans, a facet which mirrors the pre-contemporary times of the UAE as a predominantly rural environment, where horses as means of transport for goods and humans were crucial for survival. He further sees the employment of non-human subjects in his works as a way of escaping the dilemma of depicting not humans, but humans with a particular race or physical aspect.[292] His work is less known internationally, but rose to prominence by taking part in the UAE exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2015.

[291] "Mohammed Kazem", *Mutual Art.*

[292] "Moosa Al Halyan", *Sharjah Art Foundation*, sharjahart.org/sharjah-art-foundation/people/moosa-al-halyan. Accessed 2 May 2024.

The Barjeel Foundation houses three paintings of the artist. *Horse Painting* (1996, fig. 33) is reminiscent important surrealist landscapes and motifs, with an almost dystopic scenery. *Takween* (1996) is a take on the horse motif which shows major traits of abstraction, but also contains elements of Cubism. *Untitled* (1996), with its vibrant colours, a space scenery similar to the first work mentioned here, concludes this selection of works, all from the same year, showcasing the artist's multifaceted way of tackling–in its core–the same motif.[293]

Figure 33: Moosa al-Halyan: *Horse Painting* (1996), Oil on leather, 65 x 90 cm. www.barjeelartfoundation.org.

5.3 Analysis: mission and public engagement

In Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi's engagement, art is intricately entwined with politics and international relations. The focus of his understanding of Emirati and Arab art and of his activities concerned with is the place of this niche of modern and contemporary art in the global discourse. This aligns with the cultural policy in his home state: Since the 1980s, the Emirates regard art as a key asset in its diversification strategy and employ it as element of international relations and economy. But of course, the importance of art in the region goes beyond these political reasons and concerns the rather socio-cultural problem of heritage

[293] See "Moosa Al Halyan", *Sharjah Art Foundation*.

and identity in a globalized society–a theme visible in many of the works of the collection as well as in the activities of the foundation, locally and internationally.

The Barjeel Foundation and its founder, Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi, are closely connected and overlap in their activities, and it can be said that the foundation serves as practical expression of al-Qassemi's thought. The Foundation is managed by a small team which comprises the curator, Suheyla Takesh, registrar Sarah Adamson, and administrative coordinator, Noor Tannir. The collector's own strong engagement outside the 'brand' of his foundation suggests that he himself directs the foundation's activities. The collector's profound knowledge of the field of Arab modern and contemporary art, after all, was built through two decades of practical experience, ranging from board memberships of major museums and cultural institutions to fellowships and residences in academic or practical art environments, journalistic investigation of the current art scene and market, and academic appointments. In the case of al-Qassemi and the Barjeel Foundation, it is perhaps appropriate to speak of a collector-curator, as discussed in chapter 2.3, in an enhanced way: the roles of collector and key driver of the mission of the collection converge in one person. However, al-Qassemi chose to foreground the foundation and present it as quasi-separate entity from his own endeavours. This can be regarded as instrument of separating his scholarly endeavours from activities in conjunction with the foundation, which could be understood a promotion in his own interest. However, the foundation is a philantropic mission, and while the promotional aspects can in certain cases translate into financial gain, the main thread follows the benefit of the Arab and Emirati community.

From the establishment of the foundation in 2010, multiple branches have emerged which serve the purpose of the collection's mission. As discussed previously in this paper, foundations can be an ideal instrument for extending beyond the mere management of a collection, while the collection undoubtedly works as primary point of traction for interest, public relations and endorsement for other activities. The foundation's activities span across a broad range: temporary exhibitions, talks, events and prizes are just a few of them.

Temporary exhibitions of works from the Barjeel Foundation have been held at the Katzen Art Center of the American University Museum in Washington D.C., the Jordan National Gallery in Amman, the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, the Bibliotheca Alexan-

Figure 34: Exhibitions of works from the collection of the Barjeel Foundation across the world until 2021. Blue dots indicate loans to external institutions, orange triangles indicate exhibitions organized or co-organized by the foundation. www.barjeelartfoundation.org/loans/all-art-exhibitions-and-loans/.

drina, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, the Whitechapel Gallery in London, and the Grey Art Gallery at the New York University, to mention but a few. An exhibition cycle which created awareness for the collection in the UK was *Imperfect Chronology*, which was held at Whitechapel Gallery from 2015 to 2017. The four displays of the cycle had each a different focus, with two of them considering Modernism in the Arab world, and two dedicated to Contemporary Art. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue and talks, with speakers that included the collector himself.[294] From 2018 through 2022, the seminal exhibition *Taking Shape: Abstraction From the Arab World, 1950s-1980* travelled across the United States. Alongside the exhibition, an extensive catalogue was published, which was edited by scholar and curator of the exhibition Suheyla Takesh. In 2023, an exhibition at Christie's in London, *Kawkaba: Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation*, drew particular attention to the collection and the foundation's global engagement. While the foundation organizes exhibitions for thematic parts of its collection across the world–with shows in Canada, the USA, Europe, Middle East with the most Eastern exhibition in Tehran in 2016, and even Singapore, loans to external institutions are also a valuable way for the foundation to fulfill its mission of-literally-putting modern and contemporary Arab art on the map (fig. 34).

[294] Kholeif, Omar, and Candy Stobbs. *Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary: Works from the Barjeel Art Foundation.* Whitechapel Gallery, 2015, and "Barjeel Art Foundation Collection", *Whitechapel Gallery*, www.whitechapelgallery.org/barjeel-art-foundation-collection/.

In recent years, Barjeel has intensified its collaboration with the Sharjah Art Museum, where parts of Barjeel's collection are hosted since 2018 in a semi-permanent exhibition.[295] The first exhibition in this constellation, which is projected to be the first in a series, was entitled "A Century in Flux: Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation: Chapter II" and ran from 2019 to 2021. Notably, the exhibition featured an equal number of male and female artists.

In 2019, the Rifat Chadirji Prize for Architecture was held in collaboration with the Barjeel Foundation and invited proposals for a museum of modern art for the Barjeel collection.[296] While this project is conceptual and it does not emerge from the documentation whether Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi played a major role in the establishment of the theme for the competition, the project presentations give rise to speculation about a future realization of the project and a museum exclusively dedicated to this collection.

Prizes, awards and financial support in the arts connected to Arab heritage is an important pillar in the foundation's engagement. In 2019, the foundation announced the establishment of a poetry competition which revolves around Arab heritage and language. In 2018, the Barjeel Global Fellowship was opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, which aimed at offering a curator from the MENA region the opportunity of contributing to the museum with insights from a traditionally underrepresented group.

The many branches of the foundation's ways of showcasing the collection result in a good accessibility of the artworks. Since 2018, according to the foundation's website, "a selection of key modernist paintings, sculptures and mixed media artworks" from the collection is displayed at the Sharjah Art Museum.[297] However, it is not specified how large this selection is in comparison to the entire collection, if the collection is still growing, if loans are offered exclusively from the exhibited works or from the rest of the collection, and if the entirety of the collection is involved in global exhibitions or not. The foundation's private status allows it the flexibility to set its own priorities and operate at the collector's

[295] It seems that initial plans projected an exhibition in a five-year cycle, however, the initial exhibition still seems to be mounted.

[296] See: *Tamayouz Award*, tamayouz-award.com/rifat-chadirji-prize-barjeel-museum-for-modern-arab-art-in-sharjah-winners-announcement/.

[297] "Contact Us", *Barjeel Art Foundation*, www.barjeelartfoundation.org/contact-us/.

discretion, which contributes to its approach to transparency. While the dissemination of the collection's works is well established through exhibitions and loans, the online presence of the collection and its digital accessibility is not extensively developed. While works from the collection can be seen on the foundation's website, it is not clear whether these works constitute the entire collection or not. The website does not provide in-depth information and details on the works and offers only a moderate experience of the collection.

Overall, the private collection is structured with a specific purpose and has a unique identity which makes it a valuable contribution to the global and local discourse of modern and contemporary Arab art. Especially the section of the collection dedicated to Emirati artists is thought-through and represents the highlights of the past forty years of art from the region. It is clear that the collector invests significant personal resources (of time, knowlegde, and financial means) not only to grow a collection which would one day leave a legacy, but also to provide adequate space and visibility to the collection. The focus seems equally divided between the purpose of supporting the local heritage in the UAE and the aim of familiarizing the global discourse with Arab modern and contemporary art. The mission of the collection is heavily supported by the private foundation in which the collection is embedded, and both the mission and the promotion of the collection is emphasized through the collector's public and scholarly engagement.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Analysis

The present study investigated private collections of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art. It shed light on different aspects of collecting, including its motivations, positioning in the context of global art history, its role in local and international art scenes, its relation to the secondary art market, and the relation between private collections and the public. Following a general analysis which considered the broad geographical space of the Arab World and Iran, three case studies were selected to illustrate the aspects highlighted and to provide the foundations for an more in-depth analysis. This examination of representative collections demonstrated the wide variety of activities and roles in the international framework as well as structures which private collections can have. This paper not only considered private collections and modern and contemporary art from a generally underrepresented and under-researched area, but also provided a present-day perspective which takes recent primary material, events, and auction market data into account. This methodological approach allowed for a better understanding of private collections in a rapidly changing and evolving environment, particularly against the backdrop of the complex socio-political interconnection between the Middle East and the West. Moreover, the postcolonial perspective adapted here is not only crucial for a correct interpretation of the collections considered and the artworks they contain, but also leads to a nuanced awareness of the complexity of the contemporary art discourse in which these collections are embedded.

The three case studies differ by several key aspects: geographical location and focus, mission, interaction with the public, and accessibility. The collections were selected with the scope of providing a diverse picture of private collections of modern and contemporary art from Iran and the Arab world, and thus demonstrate the range of possibilities and creative approaches. To demonstrate the importance of the collections, artworks from each collection were regarded in detail. This also served to understand the broader context of the collection, not only from an (art) historical point of view, but also from the a socio-cultural perspective which surrounds each artist and their artistic practice.

The geographical focus and framing of the private collections of modern and contemporary works from the Arab World and Iran is a complex and sensitive topic. In the present study, particular attention was paid to collections which feature works by the native country of the collectors. It is evident from the selection that nationally focused collections are multifaceted: they resemble curated exhibitions which tell the story of a nation, or a regional art history; they appeal to national pride, but also to the sentiments of longing for a lost home in the context of emigration and diaspora; but above all they can close a gap in the global art history which often does not adequately regard art from nations which have not always been closely connected with the West–which dominated the art world and discourse until not long ago. In this regard, private collections from and in the Middle East take on a responsibility which ideally results in an extensive dialogue with the international public. Equally important, however, is the awareness of the importance of the collection to local communities: Hussain Harba notes that he wants to 'give back' to the people of Iraq, not only on a personal level, but also on the material level: works in his collection–like in many collections of art from the Middle East–have often left their country of 'production' under circumstances of colonization, war, or other political and economic turmoil. It is therefore important to understand that the choice of geographical focus always also implies facets of a decolonization of the art world and of a sensibilization of the global community. The political consequences are apparent. Private collections with affluent owners and a good network frequently develop into a cultural megaphone in the international art world. This is true for all three collections regarded here, and in particular for al-Qassemi's and Afkhami's collections. These two collectors are highly engaged in the public sphere which surrounds their collections and use this exposure for messages in favour of their communities, through talks, exhibitions, loans and other events. For al-Qassemi, in particular, (political) mission–his own and, in extension thereof, of his collection–and focus are closely entwined. In fact, for several reasons, he chose not to limit the collection to works from his home state, but from his home 'region' or 'culture': the Arab World. Thus, the collection becomes an advocate for ideals of Arab community and collaboration, as well as a representative of Arab aesthetics, values, dialogues, differences and similarities among Arabs of different origins, in the global sphere.

With concern to the geographical location it is important to note that the private collections considered here are split between different locations, which can also change and rotate. The Mohammed Afkhami collection is physically not accessible to the public and is located in the collector's homes in Tehran, Dubai and London, as well as in safes. The collection of Hussain Harba is located in his home in Turin, but partly also with his family in Babylon in Iraq. The private collection of Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi left the private spaces of a home to be exhibited in Sharjah and in the form of loans and exhibitions around the world. It is notable how accessibility is not necessarily tied to physical accessibility of the works: in the case of Harba and Afkhami, extensive catalogues provide access to images of the works. This form of accessibility brings with it the advantage of permanence and easy distribution around the world, as well as the accompaniment of explanatory notes and even scholarly essays which embed the collection in a context difficult to recreate in that extent in physical exhibitions. Physical accessibility in the case of the Barjeel collection allows for a more personal interaction with the audience and also provides the possibility to rearrange–an option which leads to new perspectives through new arrangements, new thematic focuses. In this context, the collection as work of art becomes dynamic: it moves, it adapts to the necessities of the community and audience, it can show different aspects of the works which constitute it. Private foundations or museums are undoubtedly a choice of accessibility which allows the public to come into close contact with the artworks. However, it necessarily implies the sacrifice of the 'private' aspect of the collection in the strictest sense: collectors who might amass their collection founded on the pleasure of possession might prioritize the *exclusive* access to their collection. The virtual museum chosen by Mohammed Afkhami as strategy of opening the collection to the public represents a middle ground: while the physical works remain in the limited access space of the private home, their digital twins are available to everyone, at all times, from all locations.

Accessibility, in any case, is a matter of sharing. While the collector, of course, retains all rights and can even orchestrate the collection's presence in the public sphere with more or less personal engagement, he does so on the public stage. The sharing of the collection also implies that the public can establish a closeness with the collection which can lead to claims made in its regard: this means that the collector might end up not only working

in his or her own interest, but rely on the public for feedback. For instance, the Barjeel collection is undoubtedly a substantial part of Sharja's and the UAE's cultural landscape and as such belongs to the community in some way. Equally, the Harba and Afkhami collections represent an important cultural asset for their entire communities, a facet they allowed to emerge by making the collection publicly known and in some way accessible.

However different the collections, their collectors and all aspects of the collecting practice and network are, these collections share significant similarities. First, all three collections focus on art from the native country or region of the collector. This leads to a highly personal connection which strongly impacts the collections' structure, the vision of the collector, the positioning in the art discourse and ultimately affects the collections' importance for a truly global art history. This aspect is particularly underscored by the selected artists in each of the collections. These five artists for each of the cases studies exemplify particular elements of the respective art history, and place the collection in the context of modern and contemporary art history. They demonstrate how a well-designed private collection can be a major asset for the understanding of traditionally underrepresented art, and that access to these collections is fundamental for further engagement and research.

Secondly, while the collections belong to the realm of three distinct and–as pointed out above–very different countries, they share traits which perhaps could be equally recognized in collections concerned with other countries in the region and their art histories: Iraq and the UAE share the history of colonialism which impacted all Arab countries in one way or the other in the 20^{th} century. While this facet does not represent the identity of artists and artworks from this geo-political region, as is often wrongfully observed, it certainly constitutes a prominent theme in the works of most artists who worked in the region between 1900 and today. Even beyond the geographical limitations, the work of artists in the Arab diaspora frequently tackles the implications of colonialism.

Another important theme, which is strictly connected with what was just discussed, is identity. Art at all times has served also as a tool to understand the artist's identity and the identity of the people who surround her or him. Thus, artworks, artistic tendencies, groups of languages can emerged as important means to understand identity in the context of heritage, a fast-paced political landscape with multiple significant shifts such as wars, rev-

olutions or regime changes. The sensibility of art to the events which accompany its creation also makes it an important tool for identity building which is imposed by an ideology or a government. All these aspects are shared among the three collections and constitute perhaps their most apparent shared characteristic. It is obvious that the network revolving around art is everything but immune to the art's content and therefore, collections bear all traits exhibited by its constituent artworks. The Mohammed Afkhami collection of Iranian art traces Iranian modern art history from the beginnings of a monarchy which was controlled by a foreign colonial power. From there it follows the evolution of Iranian art across a century marked by major cultural and political shifts: the initial close connection to Europe under Mohammadreza Pahlavi brought to life a modern art scene which emerged in dialogue with European art, within which Iranian artists particularly focused on the mediation between heritage and modernity and the establishment of Iranian modern identity; the schism following the Iranian Revolution and its 180 degree turn away from the young modern Iranian art history, and a tendency towards censorship and oppression of art; the diaspora which significantly increased since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and which only increased the role of art in the search for identity. The collection of Hussein Harba tells the story of Iraqi modern art from the first half of the 20^{th} century to today.

Similar to Iran, Iraq, too, experienced the government of a monarchy which looked at Europe regarding modernization and nation-building, a circumstance which led to the emergence of modern art which stood in dialogue with the West. The establishment of the Republic of Iraq in 1958 underscored this tendency of the arts and supported artists' participation in the global art world. The increased destabilization through several wars over more than three decades led to the formation of a large diaspora (of which the collector himself is part), the isolation of the country from the international art discourse and, in recent times, the establishment of an Iraqi art scene which spans across the globe. It is apparent that in this context, too, art plays a key role in the negotiation of identity. The third collection is concerned with the (art historical) identity of a very young state, the UAE. While its history does not reach back more than half a century and thus the art it produce mainly belongs to the realm of contemporary art, the theme of identity is particularly strong. The lack of a national identity which could rely on millennia-old history–such as the Persian

or Sumerian heritage–paired with the major global influx in the young state creates space for the development of a modern identity which finds itself negotiating Arab and Islamic heritage, globalization and the international community which makes up the majority of the country's residents.

The common ground for all three collections is thus a strong awareness of identity and the aim of representing this identity–alongside all its fluctuations and developments–through a broad spectrum of art from the respective nation, considering both a chronological and a geographical range which is representative of the region's modern (art) history. All three collectors are conscious of the importance of their collections in a context where adequate artistic representation of identities from the Middle East cannot be taken for granted. While recent times have seen increased engagement of major public institutions in the region itself and in Western art centers, public collections are scarce and moreover lack the deeply personal note which is inherent to each private collection. It is worth noticing that the private collectors examined in this paper all show engagement in the shaping of public collections, either through personal involvement or the networking between their collection and the global art scene, for instance through loans or exhibitions.

6.2 Facit

The present study has demonstrated that the approaches to art collecting and accessibility of the collections varies widely. In the context of collectors from and in the Middle East, and collections of Arab and Iranian modern and contemporary art, the implications of all choices–from the development of passion for art of the collector to the establishment and growth of a collection to the modalities of presence in the public sphere–are wide-ranging and bear major implications. These concern above all socio-cultural questions of identity, representation and visibility on the international stage, but also the (re-)construction of an art canon and history inclusive of its diverse constituents. Private collections are withdrawn from direct public influence which can under certain circumstances impose restrictions or lead to misconceptions and under-representation. The implications also reach the political sphere, which makes these private collections important voices in the global art discourse. Choices made by private collectors regarding the accessibility of their collections heavily im-

pacts their position as cultural ambassadors and decision-makers. The collectors regarded in this study all demonstrate a high level of awareness of their responsibilities towards their communities, which results in creative, diverse, innovative and progressive approaches to their collections. A special aspect which unites these collectors is that they provide a deeply personal answer to globalization, emigration, diaspora and conflict in a field of tension between digitization and physical presence.

This analysis provides opportunities for a point of departure for future research: a valuable extension would be the focus on quantitative instead of qualitative analysis. In a situation of explosive cultural and economic growth of the region in question, a comprehensive examination of private contributions to the art world would be invaluable for a deeper understanding of the developments. The importance of such investigations is hightened by dynamics of globalization, digitization, the quest for peace in the region and internationally, the search for cultural dialogue, inclusion, questions of heritage and identity and–above all–the establishment of a truly global approach to art and its history.

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