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## What does the future hold for the MENA art market?

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The Mathaf Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in Doha, Qatar



The contemporary and modern art market in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region has shown signs of improvement in recent years, with a flourishing of galleries, museums, auction houses, and art fairs, combined with a growing demand for Middle Eastern artists. Since the 2000s, Arab and Iranian artists have made a marked entry into the international art market. But while local networks are taking off around the region, the beating heart of the MENA art scene remains in Europe.

In recent years, in cities like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Riyadh, and Marrakech, dozens of art galleries and spaces have launched. The Gulf is the most attractive area, partly due to its geographical location and partly due to the growing attention that Gulf governments are paying to art and culture.

The two famous galleries Emmanuel Perrotin and Galleria Continua both opened a space in Dubai in November 2022. Newer galleries are taking a bolder approach by focusing on local artists. Hunna Art gallery, founded in 2021 by Océane Saily, champions a new generation of women artists native to the Arabian Peninsula or living there. The gallery is based in Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).



attracting all types of buyers: collectors, locals, art lovers, and outside speculators.

This new generation of artists would not have been possible without the government investment in art education and training. While Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Syria, and Morocco have had schools of fine arts since the beginning of the 20th century (the Cairo School of Fine Arts was founded in 1908), the UAE and Saudi Arabia waited until the beginning of the 21st century to open their own.

In March 2023, over 100 high-profile experts, policymakers, and civil society representatives from the Arab region met at the initiative of the Government of the Sultanate of Oman and the UNESCO Office for the Gulf States and Yemen to discuss ways of building a shared vision on culture and arts education across the Arab region. In early 2024, the UAE will host the UNESCO World Conference on Arts Education, focusing on policy to promote cultural and artistic education. However, although artists can be trained locally, the heart of the market and its institutional prestige remain in the hands of Western countries.

A case in point is the Menart Fair (formerly Beirut Art Fair), which is moving to Paris after ten years in Lebanon. Its founder, Laure d'Hauteville, explained her decision to Tamooda: "Artists have always loved coming to Paris, the art capital of Europe," she said." What's more, there have been many exchanges between French artists, teachers and the Beaux-Arts from the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, and this continues to this day. International projects in Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia showcase French expertise. France has always been close to artists [from this part of the world], organizing major exhibitions for them in Paris. For instance, the Arab World Institute in Paris offers a wide range of events showing Arab artists. France has long loved the Arab world."

The economic difficulties that Lebanon is going through and the financial and material support available to Menart Fair in France (where it falls under the patronage of the French Ministry of Culture) was simply too good to ignore. The reality is that major art market centers such as Paris, London, and New York, remain essential stages for artists from the MENA region to gain visibility on the international art scene.

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