

# The Athens of the Arab World

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**In this EDA Reflection, Sultan Al Qassemi describes the contribution that Emirati art has made to the UAE's cultural diplomacy and soft power.**

"I hear them say 'The UAE is the Sparta of the region' and I don't entirely agree," one senior Emirati official told me; "I see the UAE as also being an Athens of the Arab world." What distinguished the ancient Greek city was its investment in culture, architecture, education and theatre as well as its radical democratic experiment. Today Abu Dhabi and the UAE match Athens in all these aspects save for the political structure. In fact in terms of culture the UAE has gone a step further by not only investing internally but venturing internationally from the very beginning of its foundation.

Emirati artists such as Abdul Qadir Al Rais participated as part of a solo effort in regional artistic events including exhibitions at the Free Studio in Kuwait in the late 1960s and in the Second Triennale-India in New Delhi in 1971. Other pioneering solo initiatives included artist Fatima Lootah's 1984 participation in Milan and Verona, Italy and Hassan Sharif who took part in the Cairo International Biennial in 1988.

However it wasn't until the UAE Fine Arts Society was founded in Sharjah in 1980 that a concerted effort was made to represent Emirati art as part of a collective. Following a series of exhibitions in regional cities such as Baghdad in 1982 and Kuwait in 1983 the UAE Fine Arts Society's first distant foray was the 1990 exhibition that was held at the hall of the Union of Soviet Artists in Moscow. In attendance was UAE diplomat [Ahmed Al Mail](#) who then served as chargé d'affaires at the embassy, a presence that indicated the importance of such initiatives to the UAE government almost three decades back.

Other milestones in the history of UAE arts and culture was the establishment of the Cultural Foundation in Abu Dhabi in 1981 in a building designed by Dr. Hisham Ashkouri of the The Architects Collaborative (the building's roots date back to 1973), the launching of both the Sharjah Biennial in 1993 and the Abu Dhabi Music & Arts Foundation in 1996. Although these institutions were initially responsible for bringing major artists, both from the region and internationally to exhibit in the UAE, they acted as important bridges of cultural diplomacy with some venturing to organise international exhibitions and events.

In 2007 the UAE embarked on a groundbreaking plan: it would be the first Arab Gulf State to participate in the Venice Biennial, the celebrated artistic festival that started in 1895 and attracted over [500,000 visitors](#) in 2015. The UAE's participation in 2009 in the Venice Biennial – known simply as La Biennale – was a milestone development and constituted a tipping point in the country's course of cultural diplomacy. As a sign of recognition of the significance of the participation in the Venice Biennale the UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs, His Highness Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, attended the opening. Perhaps a reflection of the times, the first UAE participation included a [dual representation](#), one initiated by the Ministry of Culture and another by the Abu Dhabi Authority on Culture and Heritage (now replaced by the Tourism and Culture Authority). However this issue has since been rectified and the UAE has since 2011 been represented solely by one entity.

That participation was initiated by both the UAE's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and by Dr. Lamees Hamdan, a Dubai based graduate of the Royal College of Surgeons, who was awarded the Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity by the Italian president for her efforts. Dr Lamees went on to serve as Commissioner of the UAE Pavilion in Venice for three consecutive cycles. Other Gulf States followed the lead of the UAE by hosting pavilions in Venice, including Bahrain in 2010 (winning the Venice Architectural Biennale Golden Lion Award) and Saudi Arabia in 2011. By 2013 the UAE succeeded in obtaining a 20 year lease for a pavilion in the Arsenale side of the Biennale following efforts by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Community Development and the Salama bint

Hamdan Al Nahyan Foundation, thereby ensuring a more sustained representation.

From the outset the UAE's participation at the event was an inclusive phenomenon that reflects the welcoming mantra of the country. In the 2009 participation, works by Kuwaiti artist of Palestinian descent, Tarek Al-Ghoussein, were featured alongside Emirati artists Lamyia Gargash and Ebtisam Abdul Aziz. It was curated by Tirdad Zolghadr with input by British writer Shumon Basar. In its 2017 participation in La Biennale the UAE Pavilion featured artists Vikram Divecha, Lantian Xie and Sara Al Haddad in addition to Emirati artists, reflecting the diversity of the country.

Additionally a number of private and semi-government organisations have taken it upon themselves to promote culture not only from the UAE but also from the region, adding a further dimension to the UAE's foreign policy goals. For instance, the Sharjah Art Foundation, which is headed by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, has contributed to the revival of an almost forgotten era of Egyptian surrealist paintings from the 1930s and 1940s by staging a major exhibition of these works in Cairo in September 2016. Some of the paintings had been stored in the vaults of the Egyptian National Museum of Modern Art for many decades without being seen.

Not only did Sharjah Art Foundation exhibit and document these works but they have also contributed to the refurbishment of the Palace of Arts in Cairo where the show was held, complementing the support given to the Egyptian state by the UAE government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This historic exhibition later went on to be shown in South Korea and will eventually be shown in the UAE.

Since its inception the Barjeel Art Foundation has curated a number of exhibitions regionally and internationally, from Kuwait City to Amman and Alexandria in Egypt. It has also curated shows in Singapore Art Museum and Toronto's Aga Khan Museum, (both attracted around 60,000 visitors in total) and London's Whitechapel Gallery which attracted over 330,000 visitors. More significantly, Barjeel Art Foundation has also mounted the very first exhibition of modern Arab art in Iran, which was held in the fall of 2016 at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, drawing over 20,000 visitors. The show was held at a time of mounting regional tensions between the Gulf States and Iran. The exhibition which showcased 40 artworks from the Arab world including artists from the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, attracted Iranian opinion leaders including intellectuals, journalists and researchers and was covered in The Guardian, The Independent and The Financial Times as well as local Iranian media.

In 2014 the UAE Embassy in Washington, DC organised an exhibition titled *Past Forward* which included 50 artworks by 25 contemporary Emirati artists. The exhibition was facilitated by the Meridian International Center in Washington, DC that specialises in cultural exchange as well as policy programs. The goal of *Past Forward* was not only

to showcase Emirati art in population dense cities such as Washington DC, Chicago and Los Angeles but also to take it to less familiar grounds such as Fort Worth, Texas, Lexington, Kentucky and Spokane in Washington state. Amongst the many thousands of visitors to this exhibition was a special contingent of 1,450 from the US government-sponsored International Visitor Leadership Program, which includes leading individuals in various fields drawn from around the world.

In 2012 Sharjah Art Museum hosted what was perhaps the first ever modern art exhibition to originate from the Arab world and travel to the West. *Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist* was a solo exhibition of the leading Sudanese and African painter that was organised by the Sharjah Art Foundation and was later shown at London's Tate Modern, making it the very first solo exhibition dedicated to an African artist in the British institution, attracting over 33,000 visitors.

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Another exhibition that travelled from the UAE was *Islamopolitan* which highlighted the dialogue between Islam and design. Launched by the Sharjah-based Maraya Art Centre, *Islamopolitan* travelled to six locations including the prestigious Dutch Design Week in 2016 and was featured at the opening of the Milan Expo 2015. In 2006 Dubai Holding supported a groundbreaking exhibition at the British Museum titled *Word into Art* which addressed issues of identity and politics through artworks inspired by calligraphy. The exhibition was a major success having attracted over 87,000 visitors before traveling to the Dubai International Financial Centre.

Over the past few years the UAE has come to realise the importance of soft power, to counterbalance its "Little Sparta" hard-power reputation. It has launched media networks including Sky News Arabia, hosted a CNN global bureau, streamlined its once scattered foreign aid programs, branded its cities, organised numerous sports events and sponsored athletic clubs internationally. It invested in arts and education including the construction of the Louvre Abu Dhabi and a campus of New York University and expanded its foreign diplomacy by opening up numerous new embassies and signing accords with an increasing number of countries to grant visa free entry for UAE passport holders. The UAE's numerous cultural diplomacy initiatives, organised both by the state and non-state entities no doubt contribute to the visionary concept of an "Athens of the Arab world".