



Shirin Neshat's
I Am Its Secret



Damien Hirst shows
off his famous
formaldehyde animals



Lebanese artist Nadine
Kansa, who lives in Dubai

Join the

ART

Glittering price tags, show-stopping artworks and the world's most influential art titans – Middle Eastern art is hotter than ever

By Carrie Buckle

POWER PLAYERS

Fashion and art go hand in hand and, with the Middle East's fashion presence steadily growing, the region is now fast cementing its status at the vanguard of the art world. Art impresario Charles Saatchi's new protégés are hand-picked from the Middle East, auction houses are fetching record-breaking prices in the region and Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince has just been named one of the most powerful movers in the art industry alongside the world's richest living artist, Damien Hirst, who takes the top spot.

At number 30 in *ArtReview* magazine's Power 100 list 2008, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan beats Lucian Freud, in 66th place, and Miuccia Prada, at 87. At no other time has the region's art been so talked about by collectors and fans – and the works have impressive price tags to match.

Saatchi, famous for launching Hirst in the 1990s by buying his iconic shark in formaldehyde, is championing this new

wave of talent from the Middle East. He plans to exhibit their work at his new gallery, which opened in London's Chelsea last month, after accumulating the work from galleries such as B21 in Dubai, which shows the likes of Lebanese artist Nadine Kansa.

Iranian-born Sara Rahbar is one artist Saatchi has invested in. "The work of these

"The best Middle Eastern art is witty, hair-raising and as sharp as a scalpel"

SAYS CHARLES SAATCHI

artists from the Middle East looks very different to the art we are used to seeing from America, Europe and China," says 45-year-old Saatchi. "Some of this Middle East art is witty, some is hair-raising, and the best works are as sharp as a scalpel."

The boom has been fuelled by buyers in the Middle East, following Christie's first

auction in Dubai in 2006. Since then, Sotheby's and Phillips have opened branches in the region. The investment has paid off, with the volume of modern Arab and Iranian art sold at auction each year increasing from Dhs6.3 million in 2006 to Dhs108 million in 2008, according to ArtTactic. Average prices have increased by 260 per cent. When a sculpture by Iranian artist Parviz Tanavoli sold for more than Dhs10 million at Christie's in Dubai earlier this year, it was a defining moment. The most expensive work ever sold by a modern Iranian artist at auction, it was symbolic of the importance of Middle Eastern art.

With auction houses heading to Dubai, the region's art scene has been gathering worldwide attention from renowned collectors. Tanavoli was one of 15 artists showcased at the groundbreaking Routes show (Artroutes.com) at Waterhouse & Dodd in London last month. It was the largest "selling exhibition" of contemporary Middle Eastern art London has ever seen.

THIS PAGE: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY WATERHOUSE & DODD; SHALIN CURRY/AFERGETTY IMAGES; COURTESY B21 GALLERY; OPPOSITE PAGE: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: COURTESY WATERHOUSE & DODD (2); COURTESY ART PARIS-ABU DHABI; PASCAL LE SEGRETAINGETTY IMAGES FOR RFW; COURTESY WATERHOUSE & DODD; COURTESY XVA GALLERY

Alongside this ran Crossroads, the first UK exhibition of photographs by celebrated Moroccan artist Lalla Essaydi. “The response has been astounding,” says Waterhouse & Dodd’s Jemimah Patterson. “The Middle Eastern art market is witnessing a great surge of growth.”

Aside from auction houses creating awareness in the region, why is Middle Eastern art in the spotlight now? “The Middle East is obviously topical,” says Patterson. “We continue to hear news about developments happening here. With that comes a desire to understand more about it. Through art and culture coming out of that region, we are given a privileged insight.”

Contemporary art fairs such as Art Dubai and Art Paris-Abu Dhabi are giving Middle Eastern artists the chance to show alongside the likes of Picasso, Dali, Matisse and Warhol – as well as luring worldwide collectors. Waterhouse & Dodd will show its Routes artists at the art fair at Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi from November 17

to 21. The line-up will include Iranian-born Shirin Neshat, whose work explores women in the Islamic world, with a single photo fetching up to Dhs970,000. Then there’s Farhad Moshiri – hailed as the Middle East’s answer to Hirst, he was the first Iranian artist to achieve a price of more than US\$1 million (Dhs3.67 million) at auction, and his Swarovski-crystal-studded map of the world fetched Dhs2.2 million – seven times its presale estimate. The gallery will also show Iranian artist Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, who holds the auction record for a Middle Eastern painter at Dhs5.87 million.

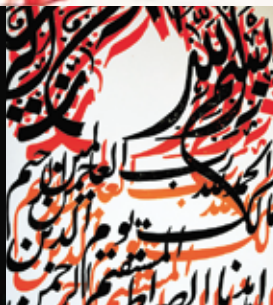
All this comes at a time when Abu Dhabi is planting itself firmly on the art radar – helped by Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, second in line to the throne. As the world’s 30th most powerful art player, he beats titans of the art scene such as Russian tycoon Roman Abramovich (in 54th place). The latter owns art worth Dhs980 million, an interest that seems to be inspired by his girlfriend, Daria Zhukova, who is opening a gallery in Moscow.

The Crown Prince made the list thanks to his plans for Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, a luxury resort that will feature a Louvre and a Guggenheim museum designed by Frank Gehry. There’s no denying its international impact. “The only expression I can think of to describe it is pharaonic,” director Thomas Krens said earlier this year.

The Middle East is certainly ramping up its presence in the international art world, and setting in motion an engine that will be running for years to come.



Art lover Daria Zhukova, girlfriend of Roman Abramovich and a powerful art player



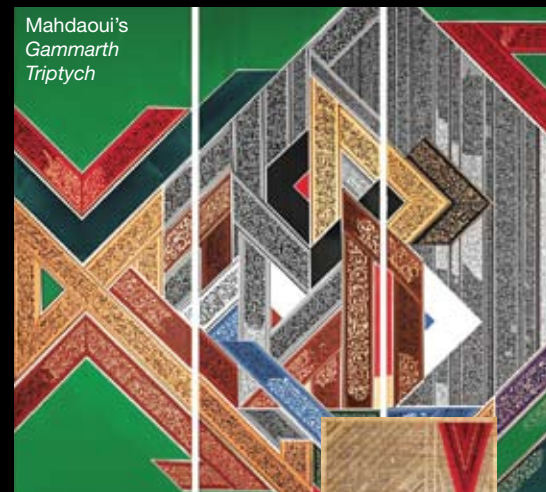
Work by Iranian art pioneer Charles Hossein Zenderoudi



Last year’s Art Paris-Abu Dhabi exhibition attracted a wealth of interest

Hot Property

With Art Paris-Abu Dhabi kicking off this month, Bazaar meets four Middle Eastern artists to watch



Mahdaoui's Gammarth Triptych

NJA MAHDAOUI

One of Tunisia’s most renowned living artists, Mahdaoui’s breathtaking mazes of colour are well known in the art world, selling for more than Dhs184,000 each. His work is in prestigious museums including the British

Museum in London and the Museum of Modern Arab Art in Qatar. A master of calligraphy, he has been described as a “choreographer of letters” and is famous for his detailed work in ink on parchment.

Still living in his home country, its cultural traditions, such as textile arts, are a big inspiration. “Being Tunisian, I feel like the heir of the Euro-Mediterranean and African cultures, and in particular the Arabic culture,” he says. “All my being is permeated with these heritages.”

His works have been described as visual melodies, so it’s no surprise to hear that his favourite artist is Russian-born abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky.

Mahdaoui is holding a solo exhibition at Dar Al-Funoon Gallery in Kuwait City until November 13, and then Waterhouse & Dodd will showcase his work at Art Paris-Abu Dhabi. “I plan to go to Abu Dhabi,”



Calligramm on Papyrus

PARVIZ TANAVOLI

Hailed as the father of modern sculpture in Iran, Tanavoli's works fetch record prices. His 2007 sculpture *Standing Heech* has a price tag of Dhs349,000. He has been cultural advisor to the Queen of Iran and as fast as he creates sculptures, they're snapped up.

But when he started out in Tehran in the 1950s, there was not much of a scene to break into. "The country had no famous sculptors, only monuments made by other countries," he says. "I thought Michelangelo was the only sculptor."

Nowadays there are countless Iranian sculptors and Tanavoli, who was director of sculpture at Tehran University for 18 years, is credited with influencing two artistic generations. "My work is inspired by Islamic architecture and Iranian poetry," he says. "As a child, I used to visit local shrines with my mother. I was



Two pieces from Essaydi's *Converging Territories* collection



LALLA ESSAYDI

Her beautiful photographs of veiled and unveiled Arab women, inscribed by hand with henna, have been garnering fans across the globe, and now Lalla Essaydi's first UK solo exhibition has planted her firmly on the art world's hot list. Visitors to Waterhouse & Dodd in London have marvelled at Essaydi's artworks – and it's easy to see why, with a single photograph commanding up to Dhs130,000.

Born in Marrakech, Morocco, and one of five girls and 11 siblings, she grew up in a conservative Muslim family that praised her brothers "because they were boys". She later lived in Saudi Arabia before studying in Paris, and now resides in New York. Her childhood, and her conflicting

roots, provide artistic inspiration. "As an Arab artist living in the West, I have an extraordinary perspective from which to observe both cultures," she says. "I feel I inhabit a crossroads, where the cultures merge and sometimes clash."

The Middle East will get to see art from her recent series at Art Paris-Abu Dhabi. "It is a privilege to be showing there," she says. "I have a lot of respect for all the artists, as they're pioneers of modern art."

While Essaydi won't name-drop, she says: "I believe there are few celebrities that own my work, but I promised not to tell." With her following growing at such a fast pace, she's flying the flag for Middle Eastern art in true style.



Tanavoli's *Poet In Love* and (right) *Standing Heech*

touched by the quality of workmanship, and this can be seen in my work."

His favourite artists include David Smith, known for his large steel abstract sculptures ("I admire how he handled the metal"), and Roy Lichtenstein – "I like his sense of humour, creativity and the way he was such a novel artist."

Tanavoli visits the UAE this month to unveil a unique bronze at Art Paris-Abu Dhabi, created for the fair. "I'm a guest of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan," he says.

He is thrilled at the current focus on art from this part of the world. "It's been too long that Middle Eastern artists have been in the darkness," he says. "This is the time for them to be recognised."

WIJDAN

As Jordanian ambassador for Italy, HRH Princess Wijdan Al-Hashemi, whose professional name is simply Wijdan, moved from Amman to Rome two years ago. But her Jordanian roots are never far away from her thoughts – or her work.

Her paintings use what has been coined 'calligraffiti' – modern Arab calligraphy. "It comes from my heritage, which is what defines my identity," she says.

Her art, which sells for more than Dhs110,000 per painting, has proved a success; Queen Rania of Jordan owns several of her works and she has exhibited in galleries such as The National Museum of Women in Art in Washington DC, alongside the likes of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. And after taking part in the Routes exhibition in London, collectors will be able to see her work at Art Paris-Abu Dhabi.

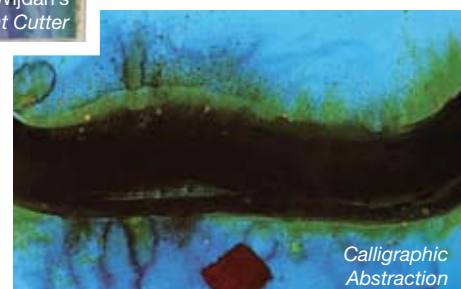
So why does she think Middle Eastern art is getting such recognition? "Because people are becoming more educated about it," she says. "I love it. It's high time." n



Love Series 2



Wijdan's *Night Cutter*



Calligraphic Abstraction