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Print edition

Art in Qatar

A Smithsonian in the sand

With the opening of Mathaf, the first Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar is racing to turn itself into the cultural hub of the Middle East

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QATAR'S ambition to become the Gulf's most important cultural destination took its first step with the opening of the Museum of Islamic Art in 2008. The stark white dome of travertine slabs, overlooking the waters of Doha bay and visibly Islamic in aesthetic, was designed by I.M. Pei, the Chinese-American architect who built the glass pyramid for the Louvre in Paris. For more than 20 years the al-Thani, Qatar's ruling family, had been buying the best Islamic objects that came on to the market, including glass, carpets, astrolabes, Korans, manuscripts and miniatures. With its unusual interiors, its magnificent display cases and its clever lighting, Mr Pei's creation quickly (and rightly) took its place as one of the great museums of the world.

The al-Thani will reach their next major cultural milestone in 2013 when Jean Nouvel, like Mr Pei a winner of architecture's most prestigious honour, the Pritzker prize, unveils his National Museum of Qatar. The pearl-shaped emirate was little more than a string of nomadic tents 50 years ago, so no one is saying what will be on display inside the building. But hoardings along the huge construction site on the Corniche show that Mr Nouvel was inspired in the design of the museum itself by the rose-shaped encrustations of salt crystals that are to be found in the desert.

In between there is Mathaf, an embryo project opened on December 30th that aims to give modern art a wider audience in the Arab world. Mathaf, after the Arabic word for museum, is based on a collection, mostly of paintings, that dates back to the 1840s. It has been given a temporary home by Doha's Education City, in a former school (pictured above) that has been refurbished by a practical French architect, Jean-François Bodin.

The project took less than a year to complete and cost just €8m (\$10.5m), according to Mr Bodin. But the al-Thani's aims for the museum are ambitious. "With the opening of Mathaf", says Sheikha al-Mayassa al-Thani, the emir's daughter who chairs the Qatar Museums Authority (QMA), "we are making Qatar the place to see, explore and discuss the creations of Arab artists of the modern era and of our own time."

Modernist art for public display in the Middle East has long been something of a paradox.

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studied in the *beaux arts* schools in France and Italy and then spent their lives mostly teaching—and painting camels and donkeys, markets and peasants in an accomplished if often undistinguished manner. The chief value of these paintings today is as a record of a way of life that has long gone.

From the interwar period a number of schools sprang up in Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo, Damascus and Tunis. Artists were trying to make sense of modernity, the end of colonialism and the struggle for independence, but the work they produced was often derivative and the collections in which it was shown patchy or transient. Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art, for example, gathered, among other things, fine work by Jackson Pollock, Alberto Giacometti and Henry Moore. These, together with its modernist Iranian works, were on show for a while after the museum opened in 1977 but have hardly been seen since the revolution two years later.

The Museum of Modern Art in Cairo shows only work by Egyptian artists, yet some of the country's best pieces are in a private museum in Alexandria which is devoted to the work of Mahmoud Said, a lawyer who painted folklorist scenes as a hobby, and the canvasses of Adham and Seif Wanly, two brothers who worked together and exhibited in Venice and São Paulo. Most of the best work in the region is held in private collections that are rarely seen unless they are auctioned off. When Mohammed Said Farsi, a former mayor of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, recently sold his collection at Christie's in Dubai, some of the works fetched more than \$2m.

Then in 1986, a young member of the Qatar royal family bought his first picture, an upside-down pyramid by Yousef Ahmad, a Doha-born painter trained in Cairo and California. Twenty-five years on, Sheikh Hassan al-Thani's collection has grown to over 6,000 works and is now the most extensive gathering of modern Arab art in the world. In 1994 Sheikh Hassan opened a private museum, but the plan had always been to give it to the Qatar Foundation and build a new home for it. "We want this museum to become the home of Arab modern art in the Middle East," he says.

The formal opening of Mathaf, by the emir, was attended by Dominique de Villepin, a former prime minister of France who is on the QMA board, and Jeff Koons, the world's most successful sculptor, on his sixth visit to Qatar in a decade. The museum's lobby was hung with a double portrait of the emir and his wife by a fashionable Chinese painter, Yan Pei Ming. Sheikha al-Mayassa had commissioned the paintings as a surprise for her parents.

Three exhibitions fill the museum and a sister lot built in the grounds of the Museum of Islamic Art for a show planned for 2012 by the Japanese pop artist, Takashi Murakami. The first, "Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art", from Mahmoud Darwish's poem, *Sajjil, ana arabiy* ("Record, I am an Arab"), shows a selection of the works that Sheikh Hassan has bought over the years, including four of the key pieces from the first Farsi sale, among them the top lot, Said's 1934 work, "Les Chadoufs".

In a second show, "Interventions", the curators asked five living artists who are well represented in Sheikh Hassan's collection to create new pieces. The drawings of life behind bars by Ibrahim Salahi, a Sudanese artist, hang alongside his most influential work, "Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams", that dates back to 1962. The painting was kept rolled up in Khartoum during Mr Salahi's years of imprisonment and exile and is on public display for the first time in more than four decades. Dia Azzawi, a Baghdadi artist living in London, has placed white roses made of resin and representing the Iraqi academics dead or missing since 2003 around the hooves of two bronze horses, symbols of the military defeat of Iraq. "Told, Untold, Retold", the third show, brings together work by 23 contemporary artists. Among the most interesting are Jerusalem-born Steve Sabella's photographs of Israeli and Palestinian men hardly distinguishable in their boxer shorts and the paintings on paper by Marwan Sahmarani, a Lebanese painter who was inspired by a famous 16th-century engraving by Albrecht Dürer.

More interesting than the inaugural exhibitions, though, is what Sheikh Hassan is trying to



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invasion of Kuwait and the first Gulf war, he also began supporting Iraqi artists who could no longer sell their work at home, sending them canvasses and paints and even bringing two or three every year to live and work in Qatar at his expense.

When he began buying Arab art a quarter of a century ago very little proper research had been carried out on the region's artistic movements: there were almost no books.

The al-Thanis believe that teaching young Qataris about their history and artistic heritage is important. A far bigger gap exists between generations in Qatar and other conservative Arab countries than in the West.

But the road to understanding will not be simple. Artists challenge boundaries and sex is a particular barrier. Ghada Amer, an Egyptian artist who lives in New York, carved an amorphous sculpture with 100 Arabic synonyms for love rather than try to persuade the Qataris to exhibit her better-known work which is often pornographic.

Nearby Abu Dhabi has invited the Louvre and the Guggenheim to build offshoots of their museums in the Middle East, and is funding their acquisitions. Qatar prefers a more home-grown approach. It is considering a number of ways of using its collections of photography, weaponry, orientalist art, natural history, Mughal jewellery, stamps and traditional costumes.

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