

## A Diaspora Collection

By Fatenn Mostafa

***I have learned and dismantled all the words to construct a single one: Home***  
**Mahmoud Darwish**

Art collecting isn't something we grow up with in the Arab world. At school, at home, in the street, children are not encouraged to draw or appreciate the beauty and importance of art. This is unfortunate because, as Edward Said put it, artists, like poets and novelists, "embody the historical experience of their people in aesthetic works."

I was privileged to study in various European cities. *The Kiss* by Austrian artist Gustav Klimt provoked my love for the arts. As a late teen, I was mesmerised by the intensity of the embrace and the vibrant colours and was proud of the pharaonic inclusions. From that day on, I set myself to learn more about the arts. Despite studying business, I attended many art-related lectures at Viennese universities - free of charge. Together with my Austrian friends, we would go to museums and galleries, activities they'd regularly do on weekends. It is this Western experience, and not an Arab one unfortunately, that ignited my passion for the arts more than 20 years ago.

The voyage of learning about art while in Europe was easy, accessible, and affordable. In Egypt, the experience was devastatingly the opposite. It was the mid-90s; galleries were few and collectors were hidden or hiding. Two major stumbling blocks arose: a difficulty in accessing the limited, outdated, poor-quality printed materials and an intimidating, closed, un-inviting circuit of local gallery owners and collectors.

At the early stages, one buys art based on aesthetic likeability, wall availability, and how the piece fits overall within the house. As the interest turns into an addiction, collecting overtakes mere buying and all the above rules perish. Some of the early works I bought turned out to be of no value. Others turned out to be significant pieces, one of which is female pioneer Tahia Halim's *Al Quds - Jerusalem*. When I acquired that work, I simply couldn't tell my parents the price I had paid. They would have been horrified. One of the reasons for purchasing this piece was the encounter with a Palestinian man, who later became my husband. His presence in my life triggered the pan-Arab woman inside of me.

Gradually, my interest in questioning the art from the entire region arose. At that time, the second Palestinian Intifada was intensifying and Ramallah was under siege. It was 2001. There was no Gulf state yet competing to be the cultural centre of arts in such a significant way as is the case today. There were no regional art fairs to visit or regional biennales worthy travelling to. Hence, the Internet became my discovery tool, helping me travel the region from my couch, with a click of a button. This was when I stumbled upon the works of Emily Jacir, Mona Hatoum, Hassan Hourani, and Laila Shawa.

For decades, the modern pioneers established Egypt as the cultural centre of the region. They had witnessed many significant historical, social, and political developments which they conveyed on their canvases. Artists united for a cause. With Gamal Abdel Nasser in power, revolutionary art peaked, but so did the role of the government. In my mind, Egyptian arts and artists' minds were nationalised following the July 1952 revolution. The establishment became intrusive and its role turned destructive rather than supportive. A void was created. Today, fortunately, matters are changing, not only in Egypt but across the Middle East. There is an art renaissance taking place in Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon, with each single country trying to put its name back on the map. In parallel, we are slowly witnessing the rise of regional Arab collectors.

It is clear that most Arab countries followed similar patterns of emergence, void, and resurgence throughout their art history. They were all searching for that lost or unknown identity. And it is this constant identity struggle that puzzles the collector inside of me.

I will only collect and want to solely focus on artists from the Middle East. They talk to me. They shake my emotions and my soul. Our Arab identity, with its roots, pains, past, longings, religious anxieties, fears, and exiles, is what drives my collection. It is a very personal journey, as I live in a utopian Arab dream and the art I collect revolves around that dream. Arab artists, whether they live in the region or in the diaspora, who shy away from their roots or claim to be "universal" and get offended when asked to join a Middle Eastern show, bother me. They don't belong in my universe. I choose artists who are proud to represent me, to represent us and who seek to leave a stamp, a legacy of who we are.

With the Arab spring engulfing the entire region, there is a lot of hope for that dream to come true, to finally materialise. In fact, I have never witnessed this passion in support of Palestine that we see today amongst the Egyptian youth, some of whom sacrificed their lives while protesting in front of the Israeli Embassy in Cairo a couple of months ago.

While the entire region is diverse and complex, I still see many connections and commonalities. And that is the thread that ties the collection together. And that should tie all of us Arabs together, in search of freedom, equality, and sovereignty.

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