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Beyond Borders

BY **Daniel Grant** POSTED 01/25/12

International demand for contemporary art from the Middle East is rapidly expanding

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NEW YORK—The market for contemporary art from a wide range of Middle Eastern countries has been rapidly expanding in recent years, both in concentrated regions there as well as in the U.S. and Europe. The growing ranks of commercially successful Middle Eastern artists, increasingly featured at international galleries, auctions and fairs, provides a rough benchmark by which to measure the growth of the market.



Kezban Arca Batibeki's *Hairy Tale* 2011, mixed media, embroidery and collage on canvas

COURTESY OF LEILA HELLER GALLERY, NEW YORK

The number of visitors to last March's Art Dubai art fair, now in its sixth edition and held each year at the Madinat Jumeirah resort in Dubai, reached 20,000, surpassing the 2010 total of 18,000 and the 2009 result of 14,000 visitors, organizers said. The 2011 edition also saw 60 museum groups in attendance.

Christie's two-part Modern and Contemporary Arab, Iranian and Turkish art sales, held in Dubai in October, earned a combined \$7.3 million and saw 43 new auction records, 22 of which were for artists under 35 years of age. According to Isabelle de La Bruyère, director of Middle Eastern art at Christie's, since 2006, when Christie's held its inaugural auction in Dubai, "85 percent of our buyers were from the region"—that is, were collectors in the Middle East. At Christie's most recent Dubai auction in October, that number was down to just 60 percent, "and the rest is international. I think that 60-40 division is our greatest success, because we have increased the buyer

base substantially, which has made the market sustainable.”

For the first couple of years that Christie’s held sales in Dubai, she noted, collectors mostly purchased on the basis of nationality—Turkish collectors bought Turkish artists, Egyptian collectors bought Egyptian artists, and so on. “Clients tended to buy names they know whose work was focused on the societies they lived in,” she said.

After 2008, however, there was “an enormous amount of cross-buying,” with buyers from South America, North America, Europe, Africa and Asia all competing for artworks. “Our client base has grown 500 percent. The collectors we are sending out announcements to number in the thousands.”

The work of contemporary Middle Eastern artists is being sold more frequently not only in the Middle East, but in galleries and auction houses in London and New York. The highest auction price to date—\$1 million for an oil and acrylic painting by Iranian artist Farhad Moshiri—was achieved at Bonhams Dubai in 2008.

Sotheby’s has also achieved strong prices for Moshiri’s work at its London sales of contemporary art. These include £337,250 (\$672,170), for Moshiri’s *Kennedy Salt and Pepper Shaker*, 2005, sold at a July 2008 auction, and £397,250 (\$641,670), for his *Cowboy and Indian*, 2007, which was sold in October 2009.

The highest auction prices for works by Iraq-born painter Ahmed Alsoudani include £713,250 (\$1.1 million), for *Baghdad I*, 2008, sold at Christie’s London in 2011, and £289,250 (\$463,615), for an untitled 2007 painting in 2010 at Sotheby’s London.

Peter Sumner, head of contemporary sales at the London office of Phillips de Pury & Company, said that since 2008, the auction house has “successfully integrated” the work of Middle Eastern artists “into a Western sale context alongside artists from all over the world.”

Said Sumner: “Many Middle Eastern and Iranian artists are expatriate artists who also have very well established collector bases around the world, predominantly in Paris, London and New York. A strong percentage of these collectors are Western collectors, while many others are expatriate Middle Eastern collectors.” He added that most of the auction house’s Middle Eastern contemporary art consignments “come from either London or Paris.”

As part of its effort to promote work by well-known and emerging Middle Eastern artists, Phillips is exhibiting the work of 21 Azerbaijani artists in London (Jan. 17–29) in a show titled “Fly to Baku: Contemporary Art from Azerbaijan.”

Contemporary work by Middle Eastern artists has been an area of growing collector interest around the world. Many of the most noted artists are from Iran, the most populous nation in the region.

Leila Heller, whose Manhattan gallery exhibits the work of a number of expatriate Iranian artists, said that Iranian artist Shoja Azari’s videos have doubled in price, from \$12,000/20,000 to \$22,000/40,000, within the past three years. “It’s not just collectors in Iran. There are buyers all over the world,” says Heller.

She noted that the prices of several other artists she represents—including Iran-born artists Shiva Ahmadi and Reza Derakshani, as well as Turkish artist Kezban Arca Batibeki, who creates acrylic and embroidered images on canvas—have all jumped considerably within the past five years. For instance, Derakshani's work was priced \$5,000/35,000, “when I started working with him” five years ago, and now his work is priced \$25,000/150,000. Last year, a Christie's sale in Dubai featured an auction record of \$146,500, compared with an estimate of \$80,000/120,000, for his *Prelude in Pink*, 2010–11, an oil and enamel on canvas.

The work of conceptual artist Mahmoud Bakhshi Moakhar, who won the 2009 Magic of Persia prize—was exhibited at the Saatchi Gallery in London in 2010.

Work by Y.Z. Kami, who was born in Tehran and currently lives in the U.S., was featured at the Istanbul Biennial (2005), New York's Museum of Modern Art (2006) and the Venice Biennale (2007). With works already in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he is represented by the Gagosian Gallery in Manhattan.

Work by Shirin Neshat, a filmmaker and photographer who was born in Qasvin, Iran, and lives in New York City, has been acquired by the Tate Gallery, London, the MoMA and Solomon R. Guggenheim, New York. She won the international award at the 1999 Venice Biennale for her video work and the Silver Lion in 2009 at the Venice Film Festival for her film *Women without Men*. Neshat has been represented by New York's Barbara Gladstone Gallery since 2000.

In 2000, the artist's still images sold for \$2,000/3,000, but have reached \$200,000 in the secondary market, according to Max Falkenstein, a director at Gladstone Gallery. At a Christie's sale in Dubai in 2008, Neshat's ink on gelatin silver print, *Whispers*, 1997, reached \$265,000, far surpassing the \$80,000/120,000 estimate.

New York-based Sundaram Tagore Gallery also has a focus on contemporary art from the Middle East. Gallery owner Sundaram Tagore told *ARTnews*letter: “the interest in collecting contemporary Middle Eastern arts is growing by leaps and bounds.”

He credits the growth, in part, to the fact that “a number of major museums [are] being built in the Middle East in conjunction with some of the world's leading museums, such as the Guggenheim, the Louvre and the International Center for Photography. These same institutions have started buying art for their forthcoming institutional venues.”

His gallery represents 28 contemporary artists from around the world, but among the Middle Eastern artists who have garnered growing collector interest are Syrian painter Ahmad Moualla, whose untitled mixed-media on canvas, 2011, sold for \$36,000 (estimate: \$30,000/40,000) at Ayyam Auctions in Dubai in 2011, and Iraqi artist Hassan Massoudy, whose untitled ink and pencil on paper, 1996, was sold at Christie's Paris in 2009 for €1,500 (\$2,066), compared with an estimate of €800/1,200.

Massoudy was one of the artists featured in the gallery's recent exhibition "Written Images: Contemporary Calligraphy from the Middle East," which ran Nov. 10–Dec. 3 and also included works by Tunisian artist Nja Mahdaoui, Qatari artist Yousef Ahmad and Syrian artist Khaled Al-Saa'i.

Other galleries showing contemporary art from the Middle East include Rose Issa Projects, Waterhouse & Dodd, Berardi and Sagharchi Projects and Osborne Samuel Gallery in London.

Experts expect the number of collectors of contemporary Middle Eastern art to keep growing and, with it, prices. "Traditionally, Iranians have bought carpets as an investment," said Mamak Nourbakhsh, owner of Tehran's Gallery Mamak. "Today, we see many rich Iranians buying artwork and in rather large numbers."

Gallery owner Rose Issa noted that prices for a number of artists have gone up dramatically. Seven years ago, she says, Moshiri's work was priced at \$2,500, but jumped to \$15,000/25,000 within two years of that, "and now everything starts at \$100,000."

The prices for another artist that she represents, Iranian photographer Farhad Ahrarnia, have jumped from \$4,000/6,000 five years ago, to \$30,000 today. At Sotheby's London sale in 2009, her embroidered digital print *The Flesh of Words*, 2008, earned £15,000 (\$24,505), against an estimate of £12,000/18,000.

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