

The new Silk Road

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Reflecting a consistent, clear vision and an understanding of the importance of art in development and growth, in its 12th round Art [Dubai](#) (21-24 March) remained the eminent regional forum for art from the Arab world and South Asia. With 105 galleries from 48 countries including traditional hubs like [London](#), [Vienna](#), Paris, [Madrid](#), [Cairo](#) and [Beirut](#), the fair was comprehensive. Contemporary art had the lion's share with 78 galleries from 42 countries, through which emerging and established artists presented painting, sculpture, installation, video and photography. The fair also hosted the 10th Abraaj Group Art Prize and the Global Art Forum on the theme of automation.

International interest in modern art from the Arab world — examples of which were auctioned by Christies on 22 March — is growing. And, with support from the Misk Art Institute (part of Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman's Philanthropic Foundation, which allocated \$60 billion to culture in the coming years), in the modern section 16 galleries include both solo and group exhibitions, and a symposium addresses the work of leading 20th-century masters from South Asia and Africa as well as the Arab world. Another Saudi connection: the Art Jameel foundation, which partnered with Delfina in [London](#) to develop programming and residency initiatives, is set to open in [Dubai](#) Creek on 11 November. Also in the modern section, curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, the exhibition "That Feverish Leap into the Fierceness of Life" (which takes its title from the 1951 manifesto of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art) included work by members of five modernist schools from five Arab cities: The Contemporary Art Group in [Cairo](#) (1940s-1950s), the Baghdad Group (1950s), the [Casablanca](#) School of Art (1960s-70s), the [Khartoum](#) School



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(1960s-70s) and Dar Al-Funun Al-Saudiah or House of Saudi Arts in [Riyadh](#) (1980s).

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Together with relevant individuals and groups Collectors' Circle members were treated to private visits to collections and institutions including the Louvre [Abu Dhabi](#), while the [Sharjah](#) Foundation and Museum organised — in addition to its Paul Guiragossian and Timo Nasser Barjeel

Foundation exhibitions at the Maraya Art Space — a series of solo exhibitions by Mona Saudi, Anna Boghigian, Latif Al-Ani, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim and Zineb Sedira. Curated by Karim Sultan, “Ishara” at the Sarkal Gallery featured new work by 10 UAE-based artists in addition to visual poetry by guest artists Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian. The exhibition, which focused on the idea of language, was the result of a vision shared by UAE Unlimited founder Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan bin Khalifa Al-Nahyan and Alserkal founder Abdelmonem Alserkal. Organised by Selections Magazine and supported by Ramzi & Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation and Ellie Khouri Art Foundation, another exhibition, “Cultural Narrative Selections”, had artists from [Lebanon](#), [Syria](#), [Iran](#), Tunisia, [Egypt](#), [Sudan](#) and Palestine present small works reflecting their cultures but transcending geographic boundaries. It is part of a wider vision to exhibit 1001 works, 100 from each country in the region, Europe, the Far East and the Americas. “While we started with mapping the Middle East,” says Dalloul, “it has now turned to mapping the art of the Silk Road.”

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Art [Dubai](#) 2018 inaugurated a new gallery section, Residents, which welcomes spaces whose artists will complete a residency in the UAE with work created during this period exhibited at the fair; this, in addition to the Children section with the Sheikh Manal Little Artists Programme. Notable trends include the rise of African galleries, which rose from six last year to nine. According to Rakeb Sile, co-founder of Addis Fine Art, the first Ethiopian gallery to exhibit at Art [Dubai](#), interest in Sub-Saharan art is growing across the Arab world and the UAE has invested a lot in Ethiopia in recent years. This is in part thanks to [Sudanese](#) modernists being popular with such collectors as Lebanese-Palestinian Ramzi Dalloul and [Sharjah](#) Foundation President Hoor Al-Qasimi. Alongside the [Sharjah](#) Foundation, events like the Marrakesh edition of 1-54 Contemporary Art Fair have contributed to raising awareness of African art as a tremendous and as yet untapped resource. There is curiosity and interests, yet, it needs time to develop in the Middle East.

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With state-of-the-art organisation the [Dubai](#) Art Fair has earned a major position as a market hub for art in the Middle East and North Africa. Indeed, with the region's cultural hubs under pressure — Baghdad and [Damascus](#) have serious security issues, while for economic reasons [Cairo](#) has had to downsize cultural activities and institutions like the [Cairo](#) Biennale and the Museum of Modern Art — over the last decade [Dubai](#) has often come to the rescue. As of now it is expected that Saudi expenditure on art will rise significantly as well. Sadly, while [Egypt](#) is in a position to play the greater role in bridging art from Africa to the Gulf and the world — backed by heritage and history — the lack of a clear strategy has so far prevented it from doing so.

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