

AUTHENTICATION
IN ART

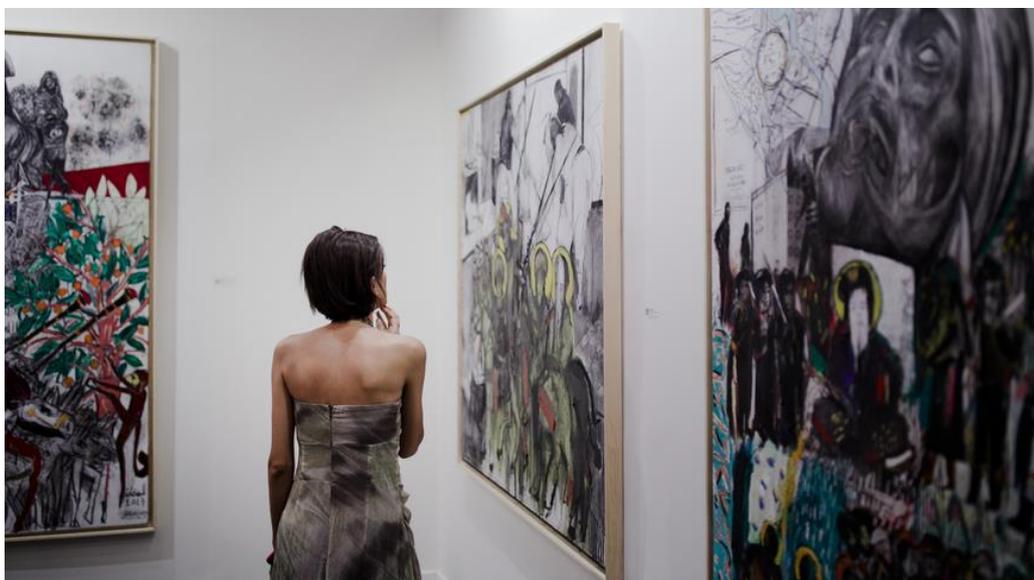
AiA Art News-service

ALMONITOR 
THE PULSE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

LEBANON PULSE

Collectors hunt down forgeries as Arab art market flourishes

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ARTICLE SUMMARY

As Middle Eastern art experiences an international boom, Lebanese collector Basel Dalloul is leading a drive to expose forgeries and follow more stringent standards for authentication.

Beirut Art Fair

A visitor at Beirut Art Fair 2017, one of the largest platforms in the Middle East art market, Beirut, Lebanon, Sept. 21, 2017.

For as long as art has commanded high prices, it has attracted forgers. In 1945, Dutch artist [Han van Meegeren](#) was arrested and charged with selling a painting by Johannes Vermeer to Nazi leader Hermann Goring. Fearing a death sentence, he shocked the art world when he admitted that the painting was a forgery, one of more than a dozen he had produced over several decades.

The ingenious forger is thought to have tricked buyers out of the equivalent of more than \$30 million. In today's globalized art market, such astronomical sums regularly change hands — sometimes for a single work — and forgeries remain a lucrative source of income for unscrupulous artists and dealers. As prices for work by Arab artists have risen over the past decade, forgers have taken notice.

Having [uncovered several forgeries](#) in his own collection, Lebanese-American art collector Basel Dalloul, managing director of the Dalloul Art Foundation, is on a mission to promote more stringent controls across the regional art market, which is still relatively young and facing issues like forgery — both of artwork and of certificates of authenticity — for the first time.

“In Europe there is 600 or 700 years of experience of dealing with that,” he told Al-Monitor. “Here in this region, we’re on a very sharp learning curve.” Added to the lack of experience is the problem of regional conflicts, which have left archives and records — particularly in [Iraq](#) and [Syria](#) — damaged, destroyed or missing.

Dalloul's campaign comes roughly a decade after Arab art experienced a boom. “The rise of forgeries, if I had to tag it to something,” he said, “it would be around 10 years ago when Christie's and Sotheby's and Bonhams and all the big auction houses started coming to the region when there was a resurgence of [interest in Arab art](#) and the value started going up.”

The Dalloul Art Foundation's extensive collection was started by Dalloul's father, Ramzi, 45 years ago. Today, it includes more than 4,000 works by Arab artists and constitutes “the largest collection of its kind on planet Earth in private hands,” according to Dalloul.

The family plans to open a museum in Beirut in 2020 to showcase the collection. In preparation, Dalloul is creating a database containing details for each work, including the chain of provenance that establishes authenticity. To date, his digital archive contains 32 terabytes of information, including biographies, press clippings and video and radio interviews with artists.

As part of this process, he began isolating artwork whose provenance he found suspicious and subjecting them to rigorous investigation. Tests include checking the age of the canvas and taking paintings to a local hospital, where he scans them in the MRI machine.

“Sometimes forgers will buy an old canvas by some unknown artist and then they’ll paint over that canvas, so when you test the canvas it tests proper for the right age,” he said. “However, there’s another painting hidden underneath it that you can only see when you take it to an MRI machine and go through the layers.”

In a collection of just over 4,000 works, Dalloul came across 30 that he believes may be forgeries — a rate of just under 1%. “We were expecting it. In any massive collection you’re going to find that a few pieces are suspect,” he said. The works in question have been “quarantined” while tests are carried out.

Together — if authentic — they are worth over \$1.25 million.

Most forgers don’t attempt to copy existing works, as duplicates would be easy to uncover. Instead, they learn to mimic an artist’s aesthetic to create a new piece that claims to be part of the oeuvre.

“In this part of the world, it seems the method du jour is to go and find two or three old paintings, real ones, and take elements out of them and create a hybrid painting in the style of that artist,” he explained.

To date, Dalloul has returned pieces deemed suspect to “all the big auction houses.” He has also returned several works to art dealer Saleh Barakat, having been unconvinced by the chain of provenance.

A Beirut-based gallerist, Barakat says the controversy has marred his reputation. In an interview with Al-Monitor, he maintained that there is no proof that the works are forgeries, but said that the artists in question are among the most problematic when it comes to establishing provenance.

The works in question are by Lebanese painters [Saliba Douaihy](#) and [Aref Rayess](#) and Syrian artist [Louay Kayyali](#), all of whom are deceased and lack a family estate able to vouch for the authenticity of works attributed to them.

Barakat, who has worked with the families of half a dozen prominent Lebanese modernists to establish estates in the past few years, told Al-Monitor that great progress has been made in creating foundations that can safeguard artists’ legacies. “But this is a long-term work, especially because most of the Arab artists have not been very systematic in archiving everything they have produced,” he acknowledged.

In the meantime, he fears that Dalloul’s drive to weed out fakes will affect the international market for Lebanese and Arab art.

“He is defending his collection and that’s his right and I respect that, but I am defending Lebanese modernity,” he said. “I want people to be confident about it. I can tell you that the market has collapsed. ...

It is very dangerous, what is happening. Out of the 4,000 pieces he had, 30 of them are problematic. It's not worth creating a panic."

The biggest problem in the Lebanese art market is posed by the work of Saliba Douaihy, a modernist abstract artist whose works have risen dramatically in price in recent years. After the artist died in 1998, his wife and daughter disappeared, taking all his papers with them. "They have all the archives, all the photos," said Barakat. "So what do you do in the absence of that? You deal with the best documentation you can get."

He said he is confident the works he sold Dalloul are authentic, citing a letter written by Douaihy in 1977 confirming the sale of several paintings to the collector from whom he sourced them, along with other documents that he maintains establish provenance. But the only way to definitively prove the works are genuine, he said, is a new form of testing that claims to be able to establish the age of a work to within five years. However, the process costs in the neighborhood of \$120,000. "Who's going to pay?" he asked.

To avoid the need for such costly measures, Dalloul hopes to fight forgeries in the region through establishing what he calls an "authentication board" made up of international specialists in Arab art. Using their combined expertise and the foundation's archives, he hopes to establish a reference point for buyers seeking to establish the authenticity of artworks.

"We have samples of materials that these artists have been using. We have samples of palettes, we have samples of details," he said. "We can visually discern whether something is way off base or whether it's similar enough that we need to do further study, like testing the pigments or testing the canvas or taking the whole piece to an MRI machine."

Dalloul's database should help further the process of establishing points of reference for regional modernist artists. In the past decade, the families of prominent artists including Shafic Abboud, Michel Basbous, Saloua Raouda Choucair and Paul Guiragossian have established foundations to monitor sales and provide certificates of authenticity. As these practices catch on, forgers may find they have their work cut out for them.