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## On Preserving A Middle Eastern Art History: Part II



Paul and Juliette Guiragossian at the Galerie du Journal de L'Orient exhibition in Hamra, Lebanon in 1966. © Paul Guiragossian Foundation and Courtesy of the Paul Guiragossian Foundation.

# How have authentication issues in Middle Eastern modern art resulted in a market rife with controversy? Tim Cornwell and Rebecca Anne Proctor look at past woes and future rectifications

## The Catalogue Raisonné

Another driving factor is the milestone publication last year of the first catalogue raisonné for an Arab artist, the Egyptian Mahmoud Saïd. While the catalogue raisonné, by Valérie Didier-Hess and Dr Hussam Rashwan, authenticated some 400 oil paintings, it also rejected 40 or 50. One was a work that hung in the Museum of Mahmoud Saïd in Alexandria, and appeared in dissertations on the artist—but was signed by a woman painter, who clearly had gifted it to him. It underlines the claim that the situation is improving, but also just how painful it can be. For nearly two decades after Saïd's death in 1964, it was hard to find buyers for his works; in 1977 they were commonly priced at around \$1,000. By 1999, they were fetching \$50,000; in April 2010, his pictures sold at Christie's for \$2.5 million. Artists from across the region have acquired value they've never had before.

A second catalogue raisonné is now in the works from the same partnership for El-Gazzar. While El-Gazzar died young, in 1966, like Saïd—who actually marked paintings as replicas if he reproduced a work—the archives for his work are relatively good. But there is still a Facebook page called 'Fake Gazzar', and the number of genuine oil paintings is said to be less than 100. Seif Wanly, on the other hand, is one of those for whom archives are much weaker; though the power of the artist's genuine works makes fakes easier to spot, notes an undisclosed Egyptian expert on the artist.



*Seif Wanly. NOCTURNE. 1953. Oil on panel. 58.5 x 71 cm. Courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation.*

The Paul Guiragossian Foundation is also publishing this March the first comprehensive monograph of the artist's work, edited by Bardaouil, Fellrath and the artist's daughter, Manuella Guiragossian. "We established the foundation in 2011 because we felt the need to protect our father's work," says Guiragossian "When Christie's opened in 2005, prices went up for many artists including my father and this opened the doors for a lot of people who wanted to purchase more paintings. It also opened the door to a lot of fakers."

When she would visit the homes of collectors and see fakes of her father's work, it was devastating. "He was a brilliant man and painter and he doesn't deserve this. I thought we have all this material that my father collected over the years—documents, slides and tons of images—he was a great photographer and had a giant collection of images—so we began creating the first catalogue raisonné (still to be published), which would give us an idea of what is real and what is not real. This is how you start narrowing things down."

### **The Authentication Process**

As in the case of Guiragossian, many family foundations are emerging in the Middle East, welcomed and supported by Sotheby's, Christie's and other auction houses. In Lebanon, in one example, the family of Aref El Rayess is now monitoring and weeding out the work of 20th century artists, with the support of DAF. Typically

families charge up to \$2,000 for certificates of authenticity. There may be conflicting pressures between building a legacy and cashing in; but almost all agree that families must be the first resort.

Catalogues and printed records are critical to the growth of the market, says Sotheby's specialist Ashkan Baghestani. "There needs to be more transparency about publications. There needs to be a better database and a better online platform for these artists, and galleries have a role in that as well. There should be a broader collaboration. People really need to work together to make sure we all have the same process, the same due diligence. At the end of the day, it's all one market and we are all actors within it." At Christie's Modern sale in Dubai this spring, the works of Guiragossian and the still-living French-Iranian Charles Hossein Zenderoudi have all been signed off by their family foundations.

American art historian Nada Shabout warns of a "culture of suspicion" where every picture now appears to be challenged by someone. "It's one thing to acknowledge fakes, it's another thing to call everything fake, without specific reasonable knowledge," she says. Shabout is president of the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey, and also runs the Modern Art Iraqi Archive, an ongoing effort to track down and document the missing work from the Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad. Shabout is alive to the issue of fakes. "I find it impossible to try to mount an exhibition for the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, Jewad Selim and Shakir Hassan Al Said, and the others, without running into a whole plethora of suspicious works," she says.

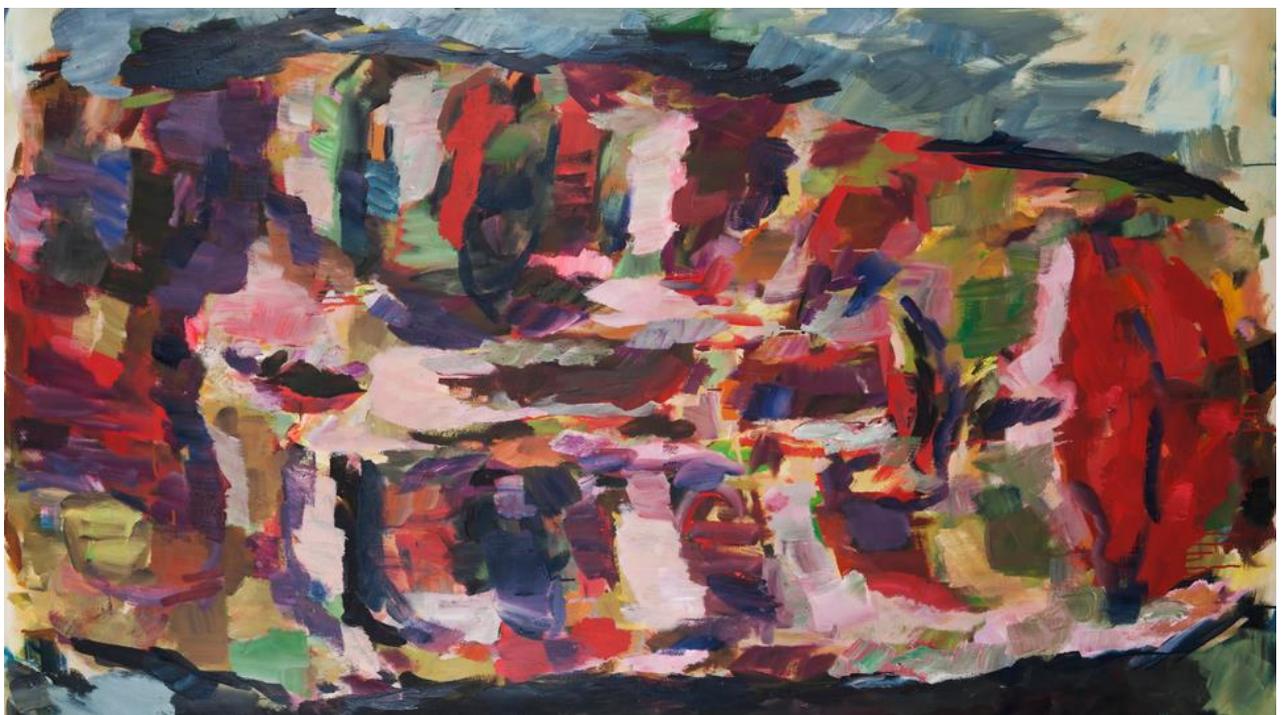
In Baghdad, soon after the 2003 looting, Shabout was taken to a district of the city where she was told both galleries, and forgers, were busy. "If you want a new Picasso, this is where you put one together," she says. In another startling piece of information, she learned about a group of 120 faked Selims waiting for shipment out of Iraq. "We don't have the luxury in the scholarship of our region as European art does. We don't have, say, the equivalent of 50 experts on Picasso that we can consult. We don't have that. No one is an expert to authenticate. Everyone needs to understand that no one is an expert, what needs to be done is a collaborative effort, a consultation, a consortium of sorts, where the gallerist who works with the artist, the family of the artist, the young scholars who are working on the artist, all come together and decide what is happening."

Shabout has raised the much-needed question: how does one define an expert on modern Arab art? One who is not just knowledgeable as to the aesthetic formalism of these artists and the history of the region, but one who can scientifically prove if

a work is reproduced or not. Is there anyone in the Middle East properly certified to authenticate a work by an Arab modern artist? Surely, there are many “experts” in the field. But who, which institution or scientific lab, has deemed these people experts in authenticity?

Pascal Odille, artistic director of the Beirut Art Fair, also echoes the message that the Middle East has lacked expertise and archives. “At the beginning it was not a fake, just a copy to please someone,” he says of the early days before a “real” market for Middle Eastern art. “It happens anywhere, at any time. We are really in a new market, things are recent, we just need to work on this properly, we need to push research, we need to have more biography, and we need to have more catalogue raisonné to make the market stronger.”

“The general message before buying is: make sure you do your research and don’t be bluffed by the price,” says the same Lebanese collector. “A big majority of Lebanese artists have foundations and family experts that can validate a painting. Ask about the provenance and for a certificate. Ask as many questions as you can to make sure of the authenticity of the painting.” Guiragossian states that fakes of her father aren’t selling as much as they used to because the foundation is now offering certificates that are impossible to duplicate.



*Marwan Kassab Bachi. July. 2006. Oil on Canvas. 130x195 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Barjeel Foundation.*

“We are doing a lot of research; one authentication may take a year or two years to create,” she says. “We are not taking this lightly. We have made special certificate papers with multiple security measures on them so they cannot be reprinted, duplicated and given to someone else.” The certificates are signed by three members of the foundation’s committee, made up of art historians who were close friends of the artist’s, family members as well as advisors. “In terms of expertise it is primarily my family. The research is most important: once you can find an image of a painting you have evidence right there.” Guiragossian regularly gives Christie’s, Bonhams and Sotheby’s archival images when a work is up for auction and then issues a certificate.

For auctioneers and dealers increasingly aiming to take modern Middle Eastern art beyond the region to international collectors and institutions, the first question seasoned buyers will ask is about authenticity and provenance. Art Dubai has a committee vetting works that includes a “stellar line up” of scholars and academics, says director Myrna Ayad. Participating galleries are asked to provide certification and documentation of provenance for works. But conflict has fed problems, such as the looting of Iraq’s Museum of Modern Art to the horrific Syrian war.

Ayad remembers visiting one Beirut gallery and seeing families arriving with folded canvases; the war appears to have brought an exodus of Syrian work. The lack of documentation happens “when conflicts erupt. These are artists who didn’t get married, don’t have children, and don’t have a next of kin. This [the interest in fakes] has a lot to do with the fact that modern art from the region is gaining more momentum, not just locally regionally but internationally, institutions are acquiring modernist art, collectors have a greater appetite now for art,” says Ayad. “It’s a genre that’s developing still and people are appreciating it more. I’m not at all surprised that the issue of authenticity of provenance and pricing is coming up.”

## **Stories from Egypt**

Last year, the ground breaking exhibition Surrealism in Egypt: Art et Liberté 1938–1948, also curated by Bardaouil and Fellrath, toured from the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Tate Liverpool. Focusing on the evolution of the Egyptian Surrealist group, an important and hitherto uncelebrated segment of Egyptian modernism, from the late 1930s to the early 1960s, the exhibition marks just how Arab modernists are now being both exhibited and collected, on a truly international level.

Cairo-based lawyer Yasser Hashem, a leading collector of Egyptian modernworks, concentrating on the period from 1925-70, was a lender to the exhibition. He is

offered fakes “unfortunately too frequently” he says. “The problem is not small, it’s not huge either. The problem is that people all are looking for a certain era, or certain painters, and there is limited supply of that era or that painter and it results in fakes being produced to satisfy the demand in the market. It’s difficult to say, but at least 25 per cent of what I see I don’t trust at all. I am not the entire expert on many of these artists, but as I have collected for more than 35 years, I have a little bit of an eye.”

The problem is less with well-documented artists, and greater with those who produce a huge volume of work, he notes. El-Gazzar painted only perhaps 100 oil paintings; the fakes that circulate are much easier to spot. In his life Wanly may have painted 2,500-3,000 works. Add a few hundred fakes, and it would increase the number in circulation to 4,000 or more.



*Maternité (Langes). 1965. Oil on canvas. 105 x 98 cm. Abraham Karabajakian collection, Lebanon.*

When Hashem uncovers a fake among his own purchases—and as a young man, he says, his eye was much less refined—he offers to return it to the gallery, or he destroys them, rather than let it go back into circulation. “I think it’s very good to get this out in the market, and people will clean their portfolios and also start pursuing these fake works in order to minimise this as much as possible. When you hear that with European museums, more than 25 per cent of their stock are fake, you realise it’s a global problem, not so much locally.”

It is the collectors in the market since the 2000s who may have been most at risk, after high prices seemed to draw the fakes out, says Hashem. Most fakes are original works, rather than copies of existing ones. For novice collectors, he advises, don't go to dealers and ask for artists that are difficult to get; that's an invitation to be sold a fake. Use a good gallery, but carry out your own research into a painting's history. The region needs better technology, to analyse pigment and X-ray paintings.

Things are changing. There is hope on the horizon. "A new generation of home owners are looking at new artists in Egypt, who may make up in expression what they may lack in old-fashioned technique," he notes. "We have a lot of young people, they are all looking for new artists and new paintings and they want these new guys. Fakes will fade away I think because the production of the new generation is quite impressive and it's large as well."

## **Preserving a History**

We can report these stories over and over again. But what good will it do? The discussion isn't merely about the financial investment made through a work of art—it's about preserving a history through proper documentation and research. The modern masters of the last century constitute a major part of Middle Eastern history—they offer us memories from the past that is as rocky as it is glorious. They cannot be forgotten. "We are all responsible to make things clear," says Barakat. "We are the first people who should be concerned about this issue. Fakes are our biggest enemy. We must deal with it wisely, analytically, historically and in the most serious manner. This requires a collective effort."



*Marwan Kassab Bachi. Portrait of Eduard Erdle. 1977. Oil on canvas. 81 x 100 cm.  
Courtesy of the artist and Barjeel Foundation.*

The recent “shake-up” is important for the continuity of an art scene that only recently began receiving the international recognition it was due. “Everyone in the art ecosystem has a responsibility to act collectively with integrity and diligence to clean up the market. This includes the artists and their families, the patrons, collectors, foundations, and their dealers, experts and gallerist,” says Dalloul. “Fake art and their unscrupulous creators and distributors cast doubts on the market, as a whole, and put the cultural heritage of the region in doubt.” And we continue to learn. As Baghestani rightly says, “We are all actors within it.” There’s a joint responsibility to preserve the works of these modern Arab artists with integrity. Modern art is our history, and if we forget our history, our future will not be as bright.