

AUTHENTICATION  
IN ART

AiA Art News-service

BAZAAR <sup>Harper's</sup>  
ARABIA

On Preserving A Middle Eastern Art History:  
Part I



Seif Wanly. Russian Ballet. 1967. Oil on board. 30x41cm.

22 March 2018

# 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 scene is familiar to many. A major London auctioneer receives an email offering a collection of modern Iranian work: scanning the images, the specialist can only think: fakes. In Beirut, a group of dealers and connoisseurs are invited to view a prized collection of paintings by Saliba Douaihy and Shafic Abboud: glances between them ask the question, who is going to speak first? From Baghdad, a leading art historian hears reports of a stash of fakes concerning the artist Jewad Selim, waiting to be shipped out.

There's been a lot of tiptoeing around the issue of authenticity in Middle Eastern modern art—lots of whispers, silent stares and secret agreements. Honourable reputations are at stake as speculations have been raised and accusations made. And for many it has been heart-wrenching to witness, especially for the artists and their families, and also for the collectors, new and established, who are losing faith in the market. The stories offered in the following aren't new; they have been circulating within Middle Eastern art circles for the last few years. What you read here is based on information received by those who have agreed to participate in the discussion for the purposes of this article. Indeed, there are many other stories waiting to be told.

What is the Middle East without its artists? Artists, living and deceased, form a crucial part of the cultural identity of any given society. It's often through the artist's eyes that we understand a historical era's zeitgeist. The call goes out to the entire Middle East. Family members of the artists being copied are passing on and there isn't an infinite amount of time to grow expertise. And for the Middle East, with its rich ancient lore and prospering artistic front, there couldn't be a better time than now to raise such questions and find solutions.



*Marwan Kassab Bachi. The Three Palestinian Boys. 1970. Oil on canvas.  
130x162cm.*

## **Fakes and honest copies are as old as humans**

Art market scandals seem to come in waves and forgers of different generations play remarkably similar games. Since the turn of the 21st century, and particularly in the 12 years since Christie's chose Dubai as the site for the first major art auctions of the region, the market for Middle Eastern artists has changed beyond recognition. In less than 20 years the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia (MENASA) region has staged a galloping catch-up with Europe and the US in terms of price and fame for modernist artists whose names were little known beyond their own countries. "Art history shows that any time there is a boom in a certain market you get people faking it," says Bendor Grosvenor, the leading London artdealer and writer who was a specialist for the first five series of the television series Fake or Fortune. And that "boom" has taken place in the Middle East.

Unhindered by the wars that were happening in their homelands, Arab artists continued creating their art, but it remained largely undiscovered by the outside world. The fakery may have begun with a few honest copies—a work was reproduced simply to please someone, and then it ended up in a museum or private collection. Now, years later, collectors and specialists in the field are spotting these copies and the issue of authenticity is now at the top of the agenda as major collections from Beirut to Dubai take a more careful look at purchases.

Is the Middle Eastern art market, which has been building in momentum over the last 10 years, going through somewhat of a shake-out? In London, a contentious

legal battle continues between Sotheby's and Sheikh Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, founder of Sharjah's Barjeel Art Foundation. The claim is over a £725,000 (\$1.1 million) sculpture by the modern Egyptian artist Mahmoud Mokhtar Al-Qassemi bought in April 2016, and whether it was cast before the artist's death, or after it.

"The answer is not easy," says Beirut-based dealer Saleh Barakat, owner of Agial Art Gallery and a new eponymous space in Clemenceau. "I am a very serious gallerist who over the past 27 years has always been trying to bring the market into the highest transparency." Barakat comes to Art Dubai this year with a show in the Modern section that is a dialogue between two Sufi artists, Shakir Hassan Al Said and Gebran Tarazi. "The development of the market and the prices have gone up only in the past few years," he says. "Until 2007, the prices were really much lower, so people were not buying art as it was not a serious investment. It was more of a passionate thing because the prices were low. Those who were interested in art was only because prices were not moving, really. You were buying an Abboud or Guiragossian for \$5,000 and it was selling for \$5,000."

*Saliba Douaihy. Kannoubine Valley (Fake). 1972. Acrylic on canvas.  
156.5x124x4.8cm. Courtesy of Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation.*

## **A Beirut Saga**

Also in Beirut, collector and family art foundation managing director Basel Dalloul has launched a drive to bring new technology and knowledge to weed out fakes in his family's collection of over 4,000 works before it goes on show in a new Beirut museum. It all began when Dalloul started rooting through his family's art collection of works assembled in large part by his father, Ramzi. In total, some 32 pieces valued at about \$1.25 million were singled out as fakes.

The Dalloul Art Foundation (DAF) said it identified seven imitations attributed to Aref El Rayess, and two to Lebanese Saliba Douaihy as well as works by Syrian artist Louay Kayyali. Other works in the collection referred to as highly-copied include the Egyptian Seif Wanly, Palestinian Mustafa El Hallaj and Iraq's Ismail Fattah. Fakes continue to come into the foundation, Dalloul says, as people bring their pictures to be assessed. "They are so sloppy it's unbelievable. All the auction houses are really tightening the screws."

Dalloul and his team believe that the fakes are variously sourced in Syria, in the case of Kayyali, and Lebanon, for Douaihy and El Rayess. "It's important to protect

the art, the artist, collectors, patrons and institutions, which the entire region will indeed benefit from. It will also document and preserve Arab art for the ages. That's why we're doing this important and tedious work at DAF," he says.

The problem of fakes arises especially when there are artists with no legal heirs, like Douaihy, whose paintings have also been invoked in the dispute. "There's an enigma around the life of Saliba," says Barakat, which makes it even harder to ascertain what is real and what isn't. As the story goes, the artist's wife and daughter disappeared with the artist's archives when he died. This requires a group of people to sit down and say there is a problem with this artist and find a solution or we decide not to deal with the artist anymore, adds Barakat.

"Basel doesn't believe in the paintings I sold him," remarks Barakat. "I personally believe in the works I sold him, and in the absence of a legal estate we can only wait to resort to scientific methods. Like a very honourable dealer or gallerist, I proposed to him to buy back the pieces and continue the research. We are all concerned today to find the absence of legal estates in the cases of artists like Kayyali and Douaihy." While the situation is alarming and requires measures, it is still under control, adds Barakat. "This is something they find interesting to talk about. Social media that can make out of everything something."

Dalloul takes issue with Barakat: "If the 50-year-old Saliba Douaihy paintings he believes in were real, they wouldn't be as sloppy as they are. They're stretched on brand new pine in some cases, with no signs of ageing on the wood. The canvases are clean, unstained, and don't even have any evidence of the previous nail holes on them, in the event the frames were changed, as Barakat insisted."

The dispute was the talk of the town during the Beirut Art Fair in September 2017. It created a stir with the return of a set of works to Barakat that same year, including some by Kayyali and Douaihy. "No reputable or honourable gallery would acquire works whose provenance are two questionable drivers," says Dalloul. "Barakat finally admitted to doing this, after giving me multiple versions of how and from whom he acquired about 40 very problematic works of Aref Rayess, seven of which my father trustingly bought from him. That's just shady." What this has prompted is an investigation into how the issue of fakes is being handled and there are many holes in the process.



*Marwan Kassab Bachi. Munif Al Razzaz. 1965. Oil on canvas. 100x81cm.*

## **Tales from Iraq**

The issues with forgeries differ country to country in the Middle East, but the problems with Iraqi artists in particular have come home to Art Dubai. A highlight of the Modern section this year is an exhibition looking at five regional schools of Arab art, entitled *That Feverish Leap Into the Fierceness of Life*, curated by Sam

Bardaouil and Till Fellrath. The title is taken from the 1951 manifesto of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art. Supported by Saudi Arabia's MiSK Art Institute, it includes modern artists who were based in Cairo, Khartoum, Casablanca and Riyadh. But finding authenticated work by Iraqi artists for the show became a bone of contention. Three works by the Iraqi master Jewad Selim were pulled out after they were challenged. Selim's daughter Miriam and his artist wife Lorna have won high praise among the family foundations who are emerging across the Middle East to document and archive 20th century artists, but his work by all accounts has been widely faked.

The legacy of Iraqi artists, including Selim's contemporary Shaker Hassan Al Said, continues to suffer from the looting of the Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad after the US invasion in 2003, when not just the museum's approximately 8,000 works, but also its archives, went missing. It's just one case in which war and conflict have complicated the regional picture. One must remember, says an important Lebanese collector, that "until 15 years ago, art from Lebanon and the Arab world was hidden due to conflict and war. People didn't know about many of the artists. Now they are discovering them as the market has developed and prices have increased. If there was a mistake made it needs to be corrected and systems should be established so it does not happen again."

## **Countless Reproductions**

It's important not to panic about fakes. In 12 years since they launched in Dubai, Christie's have sold over 3,000 works of art by Middle Eastern artists, says Michael Jeha, Deputy Chairman of Christie's Middle East. "If you look at the number of works withdrawn for authenticity issues ahead of the auction, you are still talking about an extremely low number." Again, archives, estates and technical expertise have been lacking, worsened by tragic and destructive 21st century conflicts. "The missing tool for art historians in the Middle East, and those researching Middle Eastern art, is indeed documentation," says Jeha. But the message from Jeha and others is that things are getting better; if there's a watershed moment, it's because standards are rising and Middle Eastern works are getting wider exposure through loans and purchases by international collectors.

But how many fakes are there? Charles Pocock, the Meem Gallery owner, says the Barjeel Art Foundation, which he advises on purchases, has probably screened out 300 suspected fakes over the years prior to acquisition and successfully cancelled the sales before purchase. It has returned just a handful post sale, including works by El-Gazzar and Gazbia Sirry and currently has issue with a work by Seif Wanly, all bought from auction. Pocock estimates loosely that up to ten

percent of works across Middle Eastern collections may be fakes. While an institution like Barjeel has expert advisers, it is middle market collectors who may be most at risk, especially if they try to snap up a big name artist at a bargain price from a local dealer.

No artist, it appears, is immune to fakery: Pocock was offered a piece by the late great Marwan Kassab-Bachi for \$5,000 through an online seller, which he quickly dismissed. The old rule applies: if a deal is too good to be true, it probably is. A serious faker will fake a painting's provenance as well: he has been offered pictures where images have been scanned into catalogue pages, printed to look like a newspaper copy like with the Algerian artist M'hamed Issiakhem. "People who are selling fakes and forgeries are damaging my business. They are physically damaging the art market," says Pocock. He would like to see a code of conduct for galleries on handling faked and indeed looted work.

