

Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art

International News

WHEN SYRIAN ARTIST Fateh al-Moudarres painted his version of *The Last Supper* in 1965, he summoned forth apostles, idols, and goblets of table wine in an entirely unholy configuration. Now on public view for the first time in decades at the newly opened Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, the canvas is a nearly six-foot-tall concretion of oil paint, sand, and wax that makes an unapologetic argument for Christ's adjacency to conspiracy and consumption. The original buyer for the piece? The cultural attaché at the American embassy in Damascus, who, despite the unwieldiness of both size and implications, promptly toted it home. The achievement of al-Moudarres (1922–1999) is his particular claim on the smear and scratch of postwar painterly figuration, here appropriated to depict the life cycle of a messianic Christ as a modern Arab story of decolonization and a more open-ended struggle for liberation. Yet if contemporary art practices from the Arab world have, in the past decade, begun to enter critical discourse, crucial forebears like al-Moudarres remain almost entirely unexamined. Their legacies mainly circulate as gossip, rumor, and briefly recollected instances of kinship.

In opening Mathaf, the Qatar Museums Authority is making a serious bid to change all this. The word *mathaf* (pronounced "mat-haff") simply means "museum" in Arabic. The bold, paradigmatic name itself promises a robust investment in institutionality, in contrast to fly-by-night art fairs and short-burst biennial efforts, and proclaims its independence from the branded Louvre and Guggenheim projects elsewhere in the Gulf. The museum already has a more than six-thousand-piece permanent collection. Moreover, its curatorial mandate puts audiences in Doha face-to-face with precisely the kind of modernism that goes missing in the absence of

dedicated museological attention: artwork thought through in Arabic but generated in continuous commerce with the economic and political currents that shaped the transregional tastes of the twentieth century.





Fateh al-Moudarres, *The Last Supper*, 1965, mixed media, 70 x 35".

Of the opening three-exhibition sequence, "Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art" offers up the most uncommon material for delectation. Culling more than two hundred items from museum holdings, the show gives space to al-Moudarres's *Last Supper*. It also includes a clutch of early approaches to depiction, including an 1899 still life of melons by Lebanese Maronite painter Daoud Corm. Other highlight pieces make assured departures from the prototypical oil-on-canvas format: artists' books, resin sculptures, bronzes, archived graphic design (including Jawad Salim's 1945 cover prints for the Baghdad-based magazine *New Thought*), and a 1994 assemblage of rubber slippers by Emirati artist Hassan Sharif.

Walking through the exhibition's twelve galleries, one can even track specific historical movements, such as an art school revolution at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca. Under the directorship of Moroccan artist Farid Belkahia in 1962–74, the school's faculty took control of their own national arts education. Aiming to close the gap between craft and art and

to take art to the streets, Belkahia and others, such as Mohamed Melehi, replaced drawing lessons from Greek statues with the study of folk arts and Berber sign systems, and they focused student attention on geometric forms, object design, and types of calligraphic communication. The drama of this transformation reverberates in works across the exhibition.

The two special shows in the sequence bring historical trajectories into the present. The first, "Interventions," conceives of Arab artmaking in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as an iterative project. Nada Shabout curates a thematic take on five living artists—Sharif, Belkahia, Dia Azzawi, Ahmed Nawar, and Ibrahim el-Salahi—whose practices can be seen extending from midcentury to, in the case of work newly commissioned by Mathaf, today. For the second, curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath present "Told/Untold/Retold," a blockbuster show of new contemporary work by twenty-three acclaimed practitioners (Walid Raad, Hassan Khan, Lara Baladi, and Wafaa Bilal, among others) with ties to the Middle East.

So what exactly are the stakes of interpolating a cosmopolitan public for "Arab art"—an amorphous construct that, in its application at auction or at exhibition, too often privileges a teleology of national or ethnic exceptionalism? We know that Doha already has a landmark museum in the Museum of Islamic Art, a building designed by I. M. Pei and sited on an island off the Doha corniche. By contrast, Mathaf occupies temporary (though nicely designed) digs in a former school building in Education City. In this spatial and capital differential, the audience-driven aspect of Mathaf's mandate may prove less predictable than it appears from afar. In Doha, "Arab art" retains a demonstrated use-value outside the realms of high-end tourism and state building. Consider that an earlier version of the same museum already provided space and patronage for renowned Iraqi artists such as Azzawi and Ismail Fattah. In the 1990s, when United Nations sanctions against Saddam Hussein fractured cultural life within Iraq itself, the Arab Museum for Modern Art in Doha—then maintained by founder Sheikh Hassan bin Mohamed bin Ali Al Thani in two villas and not yet named

Mathaf—gave Iraqi artists recurring residencies. The Mathaf that just opened December 30 is a redesigned and rearticulated expansion of Sheikh Hassan's museum collections, placed under Qatar Museums Authority management. With it, privately cultivated commissions and sponsorship take a turn as a museum proper. As such, an important task for this venture may be to preserve the complex affiliations of its past. For if the shape-shifting alliances in which modern Arab art operated once ensured a certain obscurity, they also gave it a no less vital animation.

[*Anneka Lenssen*](#) is a critic and historian of Islamic and Arab art, based in Cambridge, MA.