



Visitors look at painting displayed during an exhibition at Christie's Auction house in Dubai on March 15, 2015 prior to a mid-week auction of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art including Turkish and Iranian pieces. AFP

The hunt is on for modern Middle East art

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The Turkish artist Fahrelnissa Zeid made a number of enormous canvases depicting explosive cosmogonies, but one seemed particularly important to her: *Towards a Sky*, painted in 1953, was one that she kept a picture of by her bedside. But from 1957 to 2012, the whereabouts of this painting were completely unknown.

"The last we had heard it was hanging in the garden of Lord's Gallery in London," says Elif Bayoglu, a Sotheby's consultant who worked on bringing the painting to auction. Then it disappeared.

It re-emerged 55 years later when the owners got in touch with Sotheby's to discuss a sale. It had been hanging in the corporate collection of an office - furniture company in Michigan, its long canvas floating in the atrium of the company's pyramid-shaped development centre.

"This has been the highlight of my career," says Bayoglu. "Its size, the intensity of the composition, the vibrancy of the colours – and the fact that it had become a huge mystery."

The work will go under the hammer at Sotheby's 20th Middle East sale in April in London with an estimate of £550,000 to £650,000 (Dh2,457m to

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Dh2,904m). Then, if the new owner agrees, it will go to the Tate Modern in June, where the London museum is mounting a much-anticipated retrospective of the artist's work. (A true-to-scale reproduction of the artwork is on view at Sotheby's new exhibition space in Dubai.)

For the canvas, which experts believe Zeid painted in Paris in 1953 before ultimately moving to Jordan in the 1970s – she had married into the royal family there – it has been a rapid ascent from obscurity to international prominence. "They didn't realise how important it was," says Bayoglu, referring to the Steelcase furniture company, in whose sizeable collection the painting had hung.

While extraordinary in itself, the sale also highlights the role that the art market plays in bringing to light major works of 20th-century Middle Eastern art. Buoyed by a huge demand for modern Arab, Turkish and Iranian work, auction houses and dealers are racing to uncover still available, lost, or unknown works of the period.

The hunt has been on since the mid-2000s, when 20th-century Middle Eastern art became sought-after on the market side and institutionally. The number of major exhibitions focusing on the work has spiked even in the past five years: the Lebanese sculptor and painter Saloua Raouda Choucair at Tate Modern (2013), the Iranian abstractionist Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian at the Guggenheim in New York (2015), the Lebanese writer and painter Etel Adnan at the Serpentine Galleries in London (2016), the Modernist holdings of Sharjah's Barjeel Art Foundation at the Whitechapel in London (2015–16), and Egyptian Surrealism at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (2016), to name a recent few.

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Auction prices are also climbing: a 1962 painting by Zeid, *Break of Atom* and *Vegetal Life*, sold for US\$2.3 million (Dh8.4m) at Christie's in 2013, while in October last year, Bonhams sold a work by the Egyptian painter Mahmoud Said for £1.2m. These are still short of the incredible amounts commanded by 20th-century western work, but they've risen quickly. And, setting them all into one category of "Middle Eastern" art rather than the predominantly national scenes that existed before, the Gulf has emerged as the centre for their sale: Christie's set up a permanent space in Dubai in 2005, and Bonhams did so in 2008; Sotheby's established a presence in Doha in 2008, and this year in Dubai. The fair Art Dubai, which ends today, was launched in 2007.

"Modern art of this region is not a new 'discovery' for the Arab world," says Salwa Mikdadi, a leading scholar and curator of Arab art and visiting associate professor at New York University Abu Dhabi.



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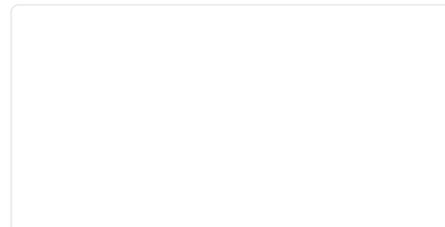


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