Collecting and displaying contemporary Middle Eastern art and design at the V&A : a comparative study of museum practice

Author (full names): Carlo Rizzo
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Carlo Rizzo _____

Abstract
The thesis examines the emergence of contemporary Middle Eastern art collections across three national museums in London: the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum and Tate Modern. It traces the history of the collections — how they have been assembled, funded and displayed over the last two decades — whilst analysing the impact of different institutional approaches on the representation of contemporary Middle Eastern cultures. The thesis argues that British collections have served as an important instrument of cultural diplomacy at a pivotal moment in history, particularly following the geopolitical shift caused by the New York attacks of 11 September 2001. This was activated by a serendipitous alignment of foreign policy, museum strategy and private interests, the latter playing a fundamental role in enabling museums to acquire and display works through donations and the creation of an active Middle Eastern art market. The thesis also argues that a vision of the Middle East as a cohesive region and 'area of influence' persists in British institutions today, and that the resulting frameworks of representation are increasingly unable to reflect the diversity of cultures and creative practices connected to the region. Museums, however, continue to evolve. The recent emergence of 'transnational' research practices at Tate Modern signals a shift away from predefined geopolitical boundaries and towards the exploration of cross-border, dynamic, networked relationships in cultural production. Future research will establish if this new approach has the potential to redefine the way British museums engage with non-Western cultures.

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Introduction

The most significant national collections of modern and contemporary art from the Middle East today in the UK are in London's British Museum, Tate Modern and the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A).[1] This thesis examines the development of these collections over the last three decades, tracing each institution's approach to acquiring and displaying them. In the case of the British Museum (the first museum to start such a collection) and the V&A, contemporary and historical collections have come together to continue a tradition of representing non-Western cultures that can be traced back to the imperial origin of both institutions.[2] Tate Modern, through its practice of collecting and displaying individual artists and art movements within the context of Western modernist traditions, embarked on an extensive collecting programme dedicated to non-Western art — not limited to the Middle East — only just over a decade ago.

Despite taking different paths, the museums discussed in this thesis have much in common today. As national museums, the institutions are all to a certain extent funded by the state and report to the UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, even though for all three of them the importance of private funding in their engagement with the Middle East will become evident throughout the thesis (particularly in Chapter Four). Since the start of this century, peaking at the turn of the first decade, across the three museums there is also a marked convergence of interest in the Middle Eastern region and more intense collecting activity — and instances of collaborations between curators across institutions. A particularly significant year is 2009, seeing the establishment of dedicated acquisition committees at both the British Museum and Tate Modern, and the launch of the Jameel Prize at the V&A. In each institution, these events represent the most important pivotal points in the development of contemporary Middle Eastern collections and their presentation to the public. Together these three institutions have contributed in major ways to the definition of public taste in relation to modern and contemporary art from the Middle East and thus in the perception of cultures from these regions in the eyes of British and international audiences. They have also significantly shaped the careers of many of the artists they collected (many are present in the collections of all three museums), as well as public perception and professional perspectives on their practice, but not without controversy as some of the interviews in the following chapters — e.g. with artist Afruz Amighi — will show. The recent developments towards a 'transcultural' research and curatorial approach at Tate has created a platform for new creative voices that are shifting the power dynamics in a 'global' art world. These new developments are likely to shape museum practice in years to come and will therefore be the ending point of this study.

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[1] Throughout the thesis, the abbreviations BM, VA and T will refer respectively to object records in the British Museum, V&A and Tate.

[2] The boundary between public and private collecting was less defined at this time. See Herrmann, 1972; Elsner, 1994; Whitehead, 2005; Stourton and Sebag-Montefiore, 2012 on the evolution of personal and institutional practices of collecting in Britain from the sixteenth century onwards.

I. The shifting role of national museums in the twentieth century

The new, sustained engagement with contemporary Middle Eastern cultures over the last three decades at the heart of this study, lives within the context of a broader shift in the role of national museums in the UK — and more broadly in the Western world. This took shape primarily in three, interrelated ways: an expansion of the museums' pedagogical role; a new 'cosmopolitanism' driven by globalisation in the cultural sector; and a renewed interest in contemporary cultural expressions from the region.

In terms of the museum's pedagogical role, traditional models of collecting, displaying and interpretation drawing on conventional museological methods (such as labels, catalogues, guided tours or lectures) have been making space for more participatory approaches, many of which aim to reach more ethnically and socially diverse audiences. Curatorial staff have also become increasingly open to external collaborations and to more experimental ways of engaging their audience.[3] Where for the most part the aim of the three museums has been to represent the diversity of creative outputs connected to contemporary Middle Eastern cultures and to illustrate the historical and contemporary interconnectedness of the region with the West, in practice they have often been active parties to a more complex political process which largely validates the status quo of diplomatic relationships between the UK and Middle Eastern nations. This is despite the visible shift in the way the institutions present their own educational role publicly. Neil MacGregor (b.1946), former director of the British Museum, argued in 2005 that a large encyclopaedic collection like that of the British Museum can offer the public new opportunities for interpretation and help them engage with how the world works as a whole and the different ways in which it can be understood.[4] Whilst in part attempting to build a case against the repatriation of objects of controversial historical provenance, MacGregor also attempted to reposition the British Museum's role (and that of encyclopaedic museums in general) away from one of authoritative global cultural understanding to one which offered a unique shared platform for the comparison of multiple perspectives. Sociocultural anthropologist Jessica Winegar argues that, despite these new efforts, methods of presenting art from the Middle East in the wider museum sector have seen an increasing politicisation in the acts of selection, evaluation and interpretation of objects, especially after the events of 11 September 2001. Specifically, Winegar points to Western narratives promoting the idea of "good Middle Eastern art" as a category that emphasised "past Islamic achievements, benign religiosity, and critique of contemporary Islam", a perspective that preserves a clear alignment with

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[3] On the evolution of the pedagogical role of the museum see Hooper-Greenhill, 1991, 1994 and 2007; Kavanagh, 1991; Hein, 1998; Crane, 2000; Silverman, 2009. Specifically on the development of participatory practices in museums see Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Simon 2010; Stein, 2012; Also a number of studies exist in relation to the representation of cultural heritage and multiple identities in a museum context such as Karp, 2006; Sherman, 2008; Golding, 2009; Falk, 2009; Carbonell, 2012; Hill, 2014; Smith and Iversen, 2014 and Note, 2017. Finally on the engagement of ethnic and racial minority audiences cfr. Nightingale, 2011; Keith, 2012; Heal, 2019; Wajid and Minott, 2019

[4] MacGregor and Williams, 2005. See also Curtis, 2006 for a critique on the role of encyclopaedic museums.

the broader political relationship between Britain and the region.[5] Albeit more participatory, diverse and multidisciplinary, the new shared platform proposed by MacGregor — and with it that of other national museums — continued to reinforce such narratives and to play an active role within the wider context of this political relationship.

The socio-political context in which museums have operated since the 1990s also witnessed a growing globalising trend in the wider cultural sector that has placed institutions within a newly expanded network of intercultural dialogue. Prita Meier notes how, at the turn of the twenty-first century, this has significantly affected the development of Middle Eastern art history, particularly through the work of important contemporary art curators, including Venetia Porter at the British Museum. Meier argues that "Middle Eastern artists, once invisible in art historical narratives, are now celebrated as transcultural cosmopolitans".[6] The shift is visible in museum practice as much as in scholarship. Early publications on modern and contemporary art from the region adopted different, comparatively reductive frameworks. Wijdan Ali for instance, frames contemporary artists from Muslim-majority countries within a continuum with Islamic Art traditions, whilst Sherifa Zuhur looks at contemporary production in Egypt within the frame of folk traditions.[7] Meier offers a critical perspective on the work of curators such as Porter, suggesting that albeit challenging established dynamics of cultural inequality by extending the geographical reach of national collections, museum narratives remained anchored to a Western-centric curatorial framework.[8] These 'globalising' trends in collecting practices certainly established the Middle East within an expanded art historical canon, however they remain problematic as the 'Middle East' itself remains a reductive geopolitical designation.[9]

The recent shift of focus towards contemporary cultures also deserves to be examined more closely. Until three decades ago, institutional interest in the Middle East had been confined largely to Islamic Art. Museums in the UK had last engaged with contemporary culture from the Middle East in the late nineteenth century, leaving a wide gap of enquiry and understanding which lasted over a century before efforts to engage with contemporary

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[5] Winegar, 2008, p.671

[6] Meier, 2010, p.13. Nikos Papastergiadis also offer a broad discussion on the increasing cosmopolitanism of the cultural sector over the past three decades (Papastergiadis, 1995 and 2020).

[7] Ali, 1989; Zuhur, 1998. Ali's work is especially significant as one of the earliest examples of scholarly research in the field of Middle Eastern art history and will be further discussed in the next section.

[8] Meier, p. 14. Also cfr. Mercer, 2005 for a discussion on the influence of modernism on the growing cosmopolitanism of the cultural sector.

[9] Ibid, p. 36. Also cfr. section on Terminology below. Interestingly, despite her focus on the influence of modernism on the representation of Middle Eastern art, Meier's analysis does not include the experience of Tate Modern, which more than other institutions relies on the modernist paradigm in its curatorial approach.

cultures started again.[10] This renewed interest was driven by a range of endogenous and exogenous factors. The most significant endogenous factor is the active effort of specific individuals working for museums or supporting them financially, driven by personal initiative. The most significant amongst them are Venetia Porter, Mohammed Jameel, and the founding members of Tate's Middle East and North Africa Acquisition Committee (MENAAC). Their role will be discussed extensively throughout the thesis, and in particular in Chapters Two and Four.

Of the exogenous factors, the first and most obvious is the strategic prominence of the region in contemporary geo-politics: attention towards the Middle East increased dramatically following the New York events of 11 September 2001 (9/11). The cultural and political crisis following the events called for new narratives that could provide a counterpoint to fear-based stereotypes promoted by many Western media commentators and be better able to reflect the perspective of those who belonged or identified with the cultures of the region. The British Museum and the V&A have been particularly sensitive to this issue and defined a role for themselves in this effort. Records of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum from 29 September 2001 (the first meeting after the events) include a suggestion by trustee (later to become chairman) Sir John Boyd "that in the wake of events on 11 September the Museum would have an important cultural role to play in presenting moderate Islam to the public".[11] In the context of a national museum holding a significant collection of Islamic art, Boyd's statement reflected the British Museum leadership's belief that the institution could play a fundamental role in shaping its audiences' perception of Islamic cultures. From their perspective, in a post 9/11 world order where Islam became associated with terrorism, a renewed sense of institutional responsibility needed to be encouraged to present audiences with narratives that would discourage that association. Along similar lines, the V&A stated the intention to launch the new Jameel Prize as a way to promote "cultural understanding" and to "revitalise" Islamic traditions in the context of contemporary artistic production.[12] Contemporary culture as such became a way for museums in Britain to develop a discourse in support of a 'moderate' view of the Islamic world, which nonetheless rested on stereotypical and arguably neo-Orientalist notions of order and beauty intrinsic to Western perceptions of Islamic aesthetics.[13]

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[10] Ethnography is a notable exception in this regard, even though it is a framework of cultural understanding that existed separately within the organisational structure of the museums (especially at the British Museum, but also to a certain extent at the V&A) and has not been applied to the type of objects discussed in this thesis.

[11] British Museum, 2001. The Terminology section below will also further expand on the relationship between the notions of 'Islamic' and 'Middle Eastern' as adopted in museum practice over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

[12] Victoria and Albert Museum, 2009 (Jameel Prize 09, press release)

[13] Abdallah quotes from an article in *Museum News* noting "Even as the media was broadcasting reports of violence directed at people from the Middle East, exhibits at museums and libraries across the nation served as reminders of the beauty inherent in Islamic and Arab culture" which recalls the Trustee's statement made only a couple of months earlier. (Abdallah, 2010, p.103).

Having considered the above, a fundamental question arises as to what enabled national museums in the UK to develop such an organised effort dedicated to contemporary Middle Eastern cultures after 9/11? The answer is, unsurprisingly, financial resources. A significant number of wealthy individuals from the region or from Middle Eastern diaspora communities invested heavily in supporting contemporary cultural expressions and funded museums to offer them a platform. They are collectors, philanthropists and organisations that, like artists themselves, often have a stake in the effort to reclaim their own identity from Western stereotypes.[14]

The desire to make national museums more accessible, cosmopolitan and in tune with current affairs reflects also the expectations placed on these institutions by the UK government to respond to the cultural needs of the nation, and to raise their standing as agents of cultural diplomacy and promulgators of 'soft power'.[15] Engaging with contemporary Middle Eastern culture in such a context is therefore part and parcel of the multifaceted diplomatic relationship between the UK and the region, where foreign policy and cultural policy subtly interact. As this thesis will show, this is reflected in collecting and exhibition practices alike, where the role of art as agent of political and social change is often emphasised.

Before looking at the specifics of each museum, this introduction will discuss some of the key terms used throughout the thesis and offer a brief overview of relevant literature. The final section will then include a summary of the thesis' chapters.

II. A note on Terminology

Some recurring terms in museum language require clarification, as the context of their usage reflects the legacy of their origin. Sometimes they have fallen out of use or their meaning has evolved, as part of the historical evolution of disciplines and institutions.

The first term that affords a brief discussion is 'Oriental'. As far as London museums are concerned, it is especially relevant for the British Museum and the V&A. The term was commonly used in museum terminology throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century to denote objects sourced from areas of direct or indirect influence of the British Empire in the African and Asian continents, where trade relationships enabled private and state-sponsored acquisition trips in relative safety. Throughout the thesis the term 'Oriental' will be used when discussing the origins and early collections of the British Museum and the V&A, to reflect the terminology used by them at the time when their collections were

[14] Their support to our three museums will be further discussed in Chapter Four. Alongside support for British institutions, parallel investments in cultural production and institutional development were also being deployed in the region, particularly in the Gulf, where oil revenues have been channeled into the creation of a new, sophisticated cultural infrastructure. The development of the cultural infrastructure in the Gulf however is outside the scope of this research. For an extensive research on the subject and more key references, see Kazerouni, 2013 and Wakefield, 2020.

[15] On museum's role as agents of cultural diplomacy see Grincheva, 2013; Nisbett, 2013; Davidson, 2019

formed, even though the classification is no longer relevant today. In relation to Tate, the term is only relevant insofar as Tate Britain"s collection and exhibitions of ‘Orientalist’ paintings are concerned.[16]

More germane to the key concerns of this thesis, from the early twentieth century the term ‘Islamic Art’ begins to emerge in Western scholarship and museums as a more discernible subsection of ‘Oriental Art’. Despite early references to the term being found in the first two decades of the century, it only acquired popularity in scholarship as a more defined art historical category after the Second World War.[17] As it became more widely used, the distinction with ‘Oriental’ also became clearer and the latter became associated predominantly with East Asian art.[18] In scholarship and museum practice alike, artefacts referred to as ‘Islamic’ have typically included acquisitions of objects generally produced over a period that begins with the Prophet Muhammad (Seventh Century AD/CE) and ends with the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War. The term ‘Islamic Art’ might seem to presuppose that objects have a connection with the Islamic faith, in the same way one would infer from the terms ‘Christian Art’, ‘Buddhist Art’, or ‘Jewish Art’. However this is not the case in Islamic art collections, where many non-religious objects can be found.[19] Its generally accepted use — as at the V&A and British Museum — is in reference to a cultural realm and geopolitical space in which Islam is the religion practised by its rulers. There are more frequent instances of the term ‘Mohammedan Art' at the turn of the twentieth century, to refer specifically to religious objects, and in some respects this can be seen as related to the term ‘Islamic Art’.[20]

The geographical reach implied by the term has also shifted, initially including only territories associated with major Islamic empires — from Spain to India — however today also extending to the large concentrations of Muslim populations in countries further east, such as Indonesia. The gradual broadening of the geographical scope implied by the term can be seen especially at the British Museum today, as reflected in the institution’s new galleries of the ‘Islamic World’, which host the most recent (2018) redisplay of national Islamic Art collections in the UK. The new arrangement arguably shows that the Museum is recognising the historical significance of the diffusion of Islamic religious practices and culture in new parts of the world. At the same time, however, the broader historical perspective encompassing a wider ‘Islamic World’ brings the contemporary ‘Middle Eastern’ art collections into a new and even more complex set of relationships.

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[16] These will be briefly discussed in Chapters Two and Three

[17] Cfr. Strzygowski, 1908 and 1911 for some of the earliest published instances in the use of the term.

[18] A term in itself deserving further discussion, which is however outside the scope of the thesis.

[19] For a more in-depth discussion around the use of the term “Islamic Art” see Grabar, 1983, 2003; Ali, 1998; Blair and Bloom, 2003; Hottinger, 2008; Flood, 2012; Shalem, 2012; Carey and Graves, eds. 2012; Graves, 2014.

[20] Cfr. Hankin, 1905; Fry, 1910; Dimand, 1928.

The application of the term ‘Islamic’ to contemporary art is particularly problematic. Curator Fereshteh Daftari tackled the question specifically in conjunction with an exhibition of contemporary art from the Islamic world held at Moma in 2006 — *Seventeen Ways of Looking* — arguing that applying the term Islamic to contemporary art produced across such a wide geographical span was necessarily reductive.[21] The complex combination of cultural, religious and geopolitical connotations that the term implies may also be either in part or altogether rejected by artists and makers. In a world where artists are highly mobile and connected with different networks of influence — often international and interdisciplinary in nature — any association with such a loaded term would need to be unpicked in order to fully appreciate the significance of individual objects and the specificities of individual artistic practices. More simply, it is perhaps more productive to dismiss geopolitically-defined curatorial frameworks — such as deeply Euro-centric notions like ‘Islamic’ art — and oppose the persistence of a neo-Orientalist gaze through the encouragement of scholarship and the creation of platforms where artists can participate more actively in the presentation of their own practice in an institutional context.[22] This will be further discussed in Chapters Two and Three in the context of collecting and exhibition practices respectively.

Whilst in the case of both the V&A and the British Museum the term 'Middle East’ evolved from a connection with ‘Islamic Art’, its wide adoption in museum terminology and the centrality of the term for the purpose of this study deserves a greater interrogation. Adopted from post-Second World War socio-political discourse, the term reached some degree of obsolescence already by the 1970s when, according to historian Nikki Keddie, it was no longer suitable in the face of rising national identities.[23] The term has remained widely accepted in literature nonetheless, and in museum terminology it began to be adopted in reference to a range of countries centred around the Arabian peninsula and neighbouring Mediterranean countries, often also stretching to include Iran and Turkey. The term also survived in common usage and began to be adopted in art historical discourse at the start of this century, bringing with it some of the contradictions already pointed out by Keddie.[24] Tim Stanley, Senior Curator for the Middle East at the V&A, suggests that despite its imperfection the term remains useful and - importantly - it is widely used in the region itself, thus making it still a valid geographical reference for use in

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[21] Cfr. Daftari, 2006. The exhibition *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, from 26 February to 22 May 2006, focused on artists from the Middle Eastern diaspora and presented their work as part of a contemporary response to Islamic Art, as well as exhibiting Western artists such as Bill Viola and Mike Kelly alongside their works. Cfr. Daftari in Keshmishekan, 2015, p.189-192

[22] Cfr. Keshmirshekan, 2015

[23] Keddie, 1973

[24] And others: also cfr. Ali, 1989; Shabout, 2007; Mikdadi, 2008. The proceedings of the conference ‘Middle of Where, East of What’, organised by ICI Berlin in 2016, also offer a range of more recent perspectives on the ‘Middle East’ as a place of ‘otherness’ and points to its constant definition and redefinition on the basis of conflicts and competing Western interests (Institute for Cultural Enquiry, 2016).

an art historical context.[25] The generic nature of the term, nonetheless, both in usage and meaning, makes it inevitably problematic.

The three UK museums discussed here use the term ‘Middle East’ today to define the scope of a collection or an administrative function within their organisation (as in the ‘Middle East Department’). Yet, in the case of the V&A and the British Museum, a substantial body of objects in their collections today referred to as ‘Middle Eastern’ were acquired and displayed for over a century prior to the term being found in common usage. The history of museum nomenclature attached to such objects, therefore, can only be appreciated by looking at wider and often interrelated categories of historical and geopolitical determination. Broadly speaking, as we see in academic discourse and institutional records, these were either geographical (as in the notion of ’the Orient’), historical (as in the notion of ‘Antiquities’), or qualitative (as in the notion of ‘Ornamental’). The ‘Middle East’ existed in embryo in all three of these categories: it can be found in spaces (such as Mediterranean cities, deserts or holy sites), civilisations (e.g. the Assyrian or the Persian empires) or styles (e.g. ‘Mohammedan’, ‘Saracenic’ or ‘Islamic’ designs). These are all possible archetypical categories on which the definition of the term ‘Middle East’ in national museums today has drawn.

As knowledge developed through academic research and the development of collections and exhibitions, the use of the term became more common in a museum context.[26] Today the museums — despite taking different approaches to collecting and displaying art from this region — do not publish a specific geographical definition of the term, even though they provide some indication of the broad geographical area it covers. For instance, the ‘Islamic Middle East’ at the V&A is defined as follows: “The area covered stretches from Spain in the west to Uzbekistan and Afghanistan in the east, taking in important centres of artistic production in the Arab lands, Turkey and Iran”.[27] The origin of this definition is arguably a reference to the provenance of the majority of objects in the collection, which from the 1950s were categorised under the term ‘Islamic Art’ and became further specified as ‘Islamic Middle East’ only with the redevelopment of the galleries in 2006. The Museum collection, nonetheless, includes significant holdings from South Asia and North Africa, as the definition itself suggests. With the opening of the new Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World in 2018, the British Museum expanded the geographical focus of its public displays to give more prominence to objects from South and South-East Asia, going as far as Indonesia and Malaysia, even though from an administrative point of view the department in charge of the collections — also established in 2006 — is stilled referred to

[25] Stanley, 2013, p.398

[26] This went in parallel with greater engagement of Western cultural institutions with the politics of the region. On museums’ engagement with the geopolitics of the Middle East also cfr. Rey, 2019. For a broader discussion on visual art and the subject of political struggles in the region see Khatib, 2012.

[27] The definition appears on the V&A website in reference to the ‘Islamic Middle East’ gallery (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2006)

as the ‘Department of the Middle East’.[28] Whilst this may generate confusion when referring to historical collections, contemporary collections have broadly remained focused on the regions more traditionally associated with the term ‘Middle East’, as in the V&A definition above. This applies, in fact, to both museums. In this respect, however, one country — Israel — remains an exception. Both institutions have included works by Israeli artists in their contemporary collections, even though these have been one off acquisitions so far, and there is no record of curators looking to systematically include contemporary art from Israel in the scope of contemporary ‘Middle Eastern’ art collections.[29]

Finally, Tate Modern does not formally specify the geographical remit of its acquisition committee at all. The name of the committee — Middle East and North Africa — is the only indication of where collecting activity may be directed, even though in reality the committee has also been called to support acquisitions in other areas, such as Sudan, where important modernist traditions developed in the twentieth century. Overall, as departmental names and collecting remits have become largely geographical in recent decades, the term $Middle East" has become a useful shorthand for grouping works from a wide range of countries.

This leads to a final, yet no less important clarification. The terms ‘Oriental’, ‘Islamic’ and ‘Middle Eastern’ have always been used not only to define cultures and geographies per se, but also in relation to European and Western art. Collections of Western art and design in British national museums tend to be organised in groups that are stylistically homogeneous and historically contained within periods that dot a straight line from ancient Greece to the Victorian period. This is a significantly different approach compared to non-Western collections. The term ‘Western’ itself is rarely used to describe artefacts and museum objects, even though it describes the dominant intellectual framework which has established the ‘East’ as a cultural counterpart.[30] Whilst recognising the diversity that exists within Anglo-Saxon and European cultures, the term ‘Western’ will also be used throughout the thesis, specifically in reference to collections and scholarship originating from these cultures and hence in relation to the cultural identity underpinning the museological frameworks of the British institutions featured in this study.

This basic but important glossary provides a necessary prelude to understanding the construction and organisation of the founding collections of all the institutions discussed in this thesis and the evolution of their administrative structures. A signifier that all terms discussed above have in common, is how they reflect the desire of these organisations to

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[28] Cfr. Bowring, 2012, p. 5. The Department emerged from the Ancient Near East department, which brought together expertise from around the Museum based on this specific geopolitical categorisation.

[29] Cfr. Chapter Two and Three (sections 2.3 and 3.3)

[30] This is further discussed in the next section.

represent a certain culture.[31] As such they embody an unresolved struggle between the convenience of historical categorisation — its necessity for the purpose of scholarship and museum organisation — and the difficulty in applying these very categorisations to the permeable and complex reality characterising the cultures they wish to represent today.

III. Relevant Literature and Theoretical References

National museums contribute to a network of practices for the creation and diffusion of cultural knowledge to a mass public. Such practices include, amongst others, art historical research, state diplomacy, and information and communication media.[32] Together with these, the practice of collecting and displaying museum artefacts has given shape to patterns and histories of intercultural dialogue between the institutions — alongside their state sponsor — and the cultures they choose to represent. There are three main areas of contextual enquiry that are relevant to collecting and display practices focused on modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art in UK national museums: first, the broader question of how Islamic and Western cultures have been perceived as competing systems of thought; second, the dynamics of cultural production in a postcolonial context; and last — perhaps most importantly — the conditions enabling museums to develop the authority and capability to represent other cultures, that is cultures that are different from those in which the institution originates.

National museums in the UK operate within the broader dynamics of the cultural encounter between the West and the Middle East. In particular, the dichotomy of Islam versus the West has deep historical roots. Salvatore Armando — a leading historian of comparative religion — traces back the origin of the self-other polarity between Islam and the West in medieval Christian Europe. He argues that as Europe started to believe its own fate as one of progress and world dominance, absolutist assumptions developed in Western thinking, making the creation of a counter space necessary for its own definition. Such counter space became a fundamental constraint to cross-cultural understanding.[33] With the dawn of the so-called ‘Age of Enlightenment’ in Europe in the eighteenth-century, museum collecting became part of an effort at eastward-looking cultural understanding, which served the purpose of celebrating new discoveries and supported the definition of the political identity of the state and the Empire.[34] Partha Mitter also points out that, in the

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[31] Cfr. MacDonald, 2010 and Karp, 2012 for a broader discussion on cultural representations in museums. Also Barringer and Flynn, 2012 for a specific discussion on cultural representation and post-colonial museum narratives.

[32] Cfr. Moore, 2000 and Landsberg, 2015 on museums and mass culture and Sandell, 2003 in particular for a collection of essays on museums’ construction of historical narratives of social inclusion and cultural diversity.

[33] Armando, 1996

[34] MacDonald, 2006

Victorian period the rise of Evangelism as the dominant ideology of the British Empire came with an assumption that %the material superiority of the West [implied] the moral superiority of Christianity [over Islam]".[35] This historical moment was a crucial time in the development of institutional identities for UK national museums.

Following the demise of the British Empire and the rise of Arab nationalism after the Second World War, Hichem Djait — writing in the late 1970s — suggested that a new "confrontation of civilisations" between Islam and the West was becoming inevitable. It was driven by the increasing pre-eminence of Arab cultures within the Muslim world, which were creating a unified cultural and sociopolitical front in direct competition with the West.[36] Different factors were at play here. On the one hand, the rise of national consciousness for states that had found independence in the new geopolitical landscape following the Second World War.[37] On the other hand, a new geopolitical order saw the US imposing a new concept of economic globalisation that merely shifted the status of newly independent states from colonies to economic dependants.[38] The situation, which evolved dramatically into the Gulf Wars from the early 1990s, with sustained military and political intervention in the region, reached a new apex with the 9/11 events. The signs of a 'clash of civilisations' appeared to become self-evident. After this point, philosopher Akeel Bilgrami suggested that a new $cold war" was under way — arguably continuing to this day — as two radically different systems of thought (the West and Islam) continue to confront each other. Importantly, Bilgrami suggests that the politicisation of culture is an integral part of this new 'cold war'.[39] Chapter Two, in relation to this, will discuss briefly how the British Museum in particular attempted to position the engagement of the institution with the region in the wake of the events of 9/11.

The diplomatic role and reach of national museums inevitably implicates them into this confrontation, particularly as institutions wishing to promote intercultural dialogue and understanding. In the case of the British Museum and the V&A in particular, where historically the aim of collections was explicitly to represent several different cultures — over which the British Empire had influence — under the same roof, the 'politics' of such cultures are a necessary context to their collecting or displaying practices. Britain's colonial history has provided the foundations on which much of these politics rest. Edward Said (1935-2003), one of the leading scholars to have examined the impact of colonialism on cultural representation, introduced the notion of 'Orientalism' as an intrinsic form of academic and institutional bias originating in the colonial period. In his seminal book,

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[35] Mitter, 1992, p.238

[36] Djait, 1978 (tr.1985), p.6

[37] Cfr. Fanon, 1963, a seminal work discussing the rise of national identities in a postcolonial context.

[38] Lazarus, 2011

[39] Bilgrami, 2006, p.381

Orientalism, published 1978, he argued that such bias contributed to a pervasive set of assumptions about the 'Orient' that became an integral part of the imperialist machine, especially as the political influence over the affairs of the Middle East expanded after the end of the First World War. Importantly, Said argued that the dichotomy East-West — as a circumscribed and identifiable difference between self and other — has entered nearly all fields of cultural production.[40] This applies, naturally, also to the history of art. Drawing on Said's ideas, art historian Oleg Grabar proposed a reconsideration of art historical practice, suggesting that as a culturally constructed activity, art history relies on prejudices around the universality of Western art that should be countered by further problematising its assumptions.[41] More specifically, Grabar suggested that the study of Islamic Art was prone to dangerous generalisations and subject to arbitrary selections in scholarship as to what constitutes the totality of 'Islamic art', ultimately a scholarly effort that took shape in the late Victorian period and to which Muslims did not have a chance to contribute.[42] Arguably, similarly arbitrary assumptions complicate — if not make impossible — any attempt to define what constitutes the totality of 'Middle Eastern art', especially in reference to contemporary art where scholarship is still not significantly developed.[43]

The position of Middle Eastern objects — historical and contemporary — in national UK collections, is therefore conditioned by the historical relationship between Britain and its former colonies. The possibilities of cultural production in this 'encounter' have also been discussed in pioneering studies by post-colonial scholars Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. Bhabha argues that imperial power, in order to preserve its authority, has historically denied the traumatic effects of its own imposition on the colonised whilst promoting its domination as a necessary, universalist sign of political and historical progress, thus creating opportunities for conflict.[44] Spivak presents an even more radical argument: that the very definition of a group as subaltern is an issue that cannot be overcome by mediation, especially if such mediation is the product of imbalanced alliances of political or economic interests that perversely act on the subaltern to impose on them

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[40] Said, 2003 (1978). Other authors have also debated the question of the cultural encounter between West and East. Abdul JanMohamed argues that the dynamics of colonialism have by and large precluded the possibility for cultural understanding between East and West (JanMohamed, 1985). Taking a softer stance, Jonathan Rutherford suggests that a place seen at the 'margins' of culture can also be the space from which this culture can be undone, thus suggesting a more active self critical effort on the part of the West in the experience of cross-cultural encounter (Rutherford, 1990, p.10).

[41] Grabar, 1982, p.282. Arguably since the time of Grabar's writing, the field of history of art has indeed expanded significantly and many valid challenges have been presented against universalist assumptions linked to Western art. See also Mignolo, 2012 for a discussion on modernism as a cultural project that attempted to universalise western ideas and more specifically its link to new forms of colonialism.

[42] Grabar, 1983, p.2

[43] Philosopher and political commentator Aijaz Ahmad criticises the ethnocentricity and myopia of Western (in particular US) academic practices also beyond the East-West dichotomy and in reference to the wider geopolitical area defined as 'Third World', challenging the "positivist reductionism" behind the categorisation of generic bodies of work defined for the purpose of Western academic enquiry as "'internally coherent object[s] of theoretical knowledge" (Ahmad, 1987, p.4).

[44] Bhabha, 1985

their own inferiority.[45] And whilst Spivak maintains that the subaltern voice can only be heard within the boundaries defined by the dominant historiography — and therefore will always be treated as secondary — Bhabha takes a softer stance by introducing the idea of 'hybridity'.[46] In his later work, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha suggests that construction of meaning in cultural production and representation takes place in the)articulation of cultural differences" and that such articulation provides opportunity for constructing the idea of a society as made up of new, more complex identities, collaborations and conflicts.[47] Post-colonialism is presented here as a resistance to holistic forms of social explanation and a recognition of the complex cultural and political boundaries between opposing political spheres. The production of culture in the colonised space — and by extension in a not fully decolonised post-colonial space — results from the combination of heterogeneous identities and a permeable geopolitical boundary containing multiple identities in constant exchange. This is, in essence, what Bhabha calls 'hybridity:' a condition in which cultural artefacts "inhabit an intervening space".[48] When these cultural artefacts enter the museum, and particularly a national museum, their hybrid identity is framed first and foremost within the history and politics of the relationship between the 'representing' and the 'represented' culture. One of the key achievements of recent cultural initiatives within the region — such as Art Dubai (discussed in Chapter Four) or the Sharjah Art Foundation (discussed in the Conclusion) — was to reframe the presentation of contemporary art along a new axis defined by the shared colonial experience of post-colonial nations (the 'Global South'), rather than by the relationship between post-colonial nations and their former rulers. Whilst the project remained problematic, it certainly enabled a deeper understanding of 'hybrid' cultural practices from the Middle East and other 'Global South' nations.

In reference specifically to the production of modern and contemporary artefacts, additional layers of complexity also ought to be considered, specifically in relation to how the notion of modernity has influenced perceptions of non-Western art and the significance of artistic production in a diasporic context. Both questions will be discussed extensively throughout the thesis, but it is worth acknowledging here the influence of some important commentators. Silvia Naef for instance, proposes that the influence of Western art filled a

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[45] Spivak, 1985. Spivak's position has been extensively debated and criticised. Benita Parry, for instance, criticises the author for assuming that the imperialist agent induces the colonised to participate to its own process of recognition of itself as 'other' and voiceless. Parry believes that this does not give adequate recognition to instances of native agency and discourses of resistance (Parry, 1987). Jenny Sharpe partly agrees with Spivak's position, bust suggests that the establishment of the colonial power and its structures, although they may now allow reversal (as in a direct influence of the coloniser by the colonised) they still allow resistance (Sharpe, 1989, p.146)**.** Yet Spivak's position is strongly endorsed by Said in *Orientalism* who echoes Spivak's idea of the limited possibilities of the subaltern voice when he writes that 'because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action', thus implying that the opportunity for the Orient to 'speak' only exists with the West's 'permission' (Said, 2003, p.3).

[46] Bhabha, 1994

[47] Bhabha, 2012, p.56

[48] Bhabha, 1994, p.10

vacuum in artistic culture in the Middle East during the first half of the twentieth century, thus implying that modernity was fundamentally an imported idea.[49] A more dynamic stance is proposed by Partha Mitter, who suggests that despite modernism having shaped global perceptions of contemporary art, multiple local possibilities explain the global processes of modernity more effectively than a grand globalising, Western-centric narrative.[50] Sussan Babaie also further questions the assumption (as a direct consequence of the 'cultural vacuum') that there has not been an authentic modernity in the Middle East. Babaie introduces the idea of 'cultural zones' — akin to the local possibilities suggested by Mitter — as a sort of new scholarly unit of measure to understand the context of artistic production. That said, whilst recognising the urgency of a challenge to a Euro-centric view of art history, Babaie also acknowledges that often artists themselves find such perspective appealing, and see validation by European scholarship and the Western public in general as a way to be recognised as 'international' and thus avoid ethnic or religious stigmatisation.[51] This especially applies to artists living in diaspora communities, where the conditions for cultural production oscillate between acquired and remembered — or often imagined — identities. In his essay *The Occasion for Speaking,* George Lamming reflects specifically on the relationship between modernity and the diasporic condition. The author proposes in 2003 that the Western model of modernity was created as a myth under political and cultural domination: an apparently paradoxical image of authoritarian and violent domination (negative) to resist on the one hand, alongside inspirational and superior attainment (positive) to emulate on the other. According to Lamming, the diasporic artist lives at the center of this paradox: provided with a myth as a colonised subject first; yet situated as an exiled subject in a local environment that leaves little space for their voice to be heard.[52]

The tension of such a paradox is discussed by Anna Malik in relation to the work of New York-based, Iranian artist Shirin Neshat (b.1957). Malik defines the artistic product of this condition as 'diaspora aesthetic': a reflection of the tension between global and local cultural production.[53] In Malik's view, Neshat's use of iconography and narratives that are familiar to the West are presented as a means to 'translate' and simplify an Iranian iconography that is otherwise unintelligible to her Western audience. As interpreted by the latter, in Neshat's *Speechless* (Figure I.1) the woman's veil is likely to be seen as a symbol of oppression, the creeping gun as a symbol of violence, the use of calligraphy as a

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[49] Naef, 2003. The notion of a cultural vacuum in the Arab and Middle Eastern world following the fall of the Ottoman Empire is also proposed by Nada Shabout (Shabout, 2007), whose work will be discussed further below.

[50] Mitter, 2008, p.541

[51] Babaie, 2011, p.133 and p.144

[52] Lamming, 2003, p.37-42

[53] Malik, 2007, p.195. The notion of 'diaspora aesthetics' was previously introduced by Floyd, 1998 and also discussed in Cherry, 2003.

familiar visual signifier of Middle Eastern cultures, and the suggestive title as another allusion of Western stereotypes of oppressed Muslim women. The work plays with preconceptions of what to the Western eye is recognisable as 'authentically' Middle Eastern, in what is arguably more than a 'translation' but an indirect critique of the stereotypes themselves.[54]

Having examined aspects of the ‘East-West’ ideological dichotomy and its implications for cultural production, the final set of key theoretical references required here deal with questions of authority and the representation of ‘different’ cultures and politically charged topics in the context of UK national museums. Such references are especially relevant to understand the experience of the British Museum and the V&A, given their nature as ‘encyclopaedic’ museums with an active interest in Middle Eastern cultures and their important role in cultural diplomacy for the nation. More importantly, it will become evident throughout the thesis that, across all three museums, many of the collections and exhibitions of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art often deal with what could be defined as ‘political’ art. In this context, ‘political’ art will refer to artworks that either specifically address events or narratives of political significance connected to the Middle East — most commonly related to conflict and post-conflict conditions — or that are interpreted as such by the museums (for instance, by association with other politically charged work or otherwise expressed in curatorial text). Understanding the ideological position of the museums is therefore essential.

On the very origin of the idea of encyclopaedic, cross-cultural museums in the West, Michel Foucault describes such institutions as “heterotopias”, or mirrors of utopias. As such, museums acquire authority as the imagined and real spaces where society’s aspirations come together. Characteristic of Western culture especially from the late eighteenth century (marked by industrial revolutions and imperial expansion), according to Foucault, is)the idea of accumulating everything, the idea of constituting a sort of general archive, the desire to contain all times, all ages, all forms, all tastes in one place”.[55] This perspective has determined the organisational structure and the perceived authority of such museums — which preserve up to this day geographical characterisations inherited from the colonial era — and offers the pedagogical basis of their audience engagement. Tony Bennet argues that the nineteenth century saw the emergence of state museums with a specific objective to ‘edify' the general public, which resulted in the institutions presenting themselves as moral champions of the state.[56] Whilst determined by far reaching moral and pedagogical objectives, the presumed authoritative representation of

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[54] It is also important to note here the special role of calligraphy. The latter featured prominently in some of the earliest exhibitions in London (before national museums became active in this area) as well as being the core motive in most of the pieces collected by the British Museum in the first two decades of collecting activities. This will be further discussed in Chapters Two and Three.

[55] Foucault, 2000, p.182.

[56] Bennett, 1988

subordinate cultures in this context suffered in fact from a chronic inability to represent other cultures in their real complexity, resulting in idealised and sentimentalised narratives filtered through Western imagination.[57] For Chris Wingfield, such representation was heavily determined by the notion of 'civilisation', which in the author's perspective constituted for the English their realm of geopolitical influence.[58] The very act of collecting, argues Brian Durrans, legitimised the knowledge and power acquired by the museums within an imperial context.[59] Paradoxically, however, such legitimisation has historically been dependent on the perceived autonomy of the museums from political influence, which creates a constant tension between the museums's public narrative and the political influences determining their policies. Today, much like in the nineteenth century, national museums continue to present multi-cultural collections and displays as though they are repositories of objective and authoritative knowledge. Editorial independence from political influence, Annie Coombes suggests, albeit the very basis of a national museum's authority, is nevertheless essentially impossible, considering that the very performance of a public function makes collecting and displaying practices in such contexts inextricable from politics and state policies.[60]

Furthermore, on the specific matter of representing different cultures, Daniel J. Sherman argues that a dialogic process takes place in national museums, whereby the institution itself (as embodied in a statement of identity), its audience (the perception of visitors), the collection (the objects and the implicit 'deferral' of their meaning as symbols of the past) and its curatorial practices (as manifest in the institution's collecting and displaying policies) come together to define difference and alterity in a constant negotiation.[61] This negotiation grants meaning to objects embodying different cultures and creates space for their interpretation. Along the same lines, Donald Preziosi argues that the museum object becomes concomitantly unique to its maker or source and deferring its meaning to a wider narrative to which it belongs.[62] The role of the museum thus becomes to realign multiple events in time and multiple perspectives in space, in a negotiation between multiple signifiers. Fiona Cameron, in this regard, suggests that museums should make this negotiation visible in their displays, by revealing in a transparent way competing narratives

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[57] Robert Rydell suggests that the ostentatious display of conquered cultures in world fairs - and at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in particular, the formative event at the origin of the South Kensington Museum - was in fact a reflection of)crisis of confidence" that characterised Victorian times and that continues to be manifest in British institutions well into post-modern times (Rydell, 2006, p.149).

[58] Wingfield, 2014

[59] Durrans, 1989. Paul Greenhalgh suggested that contemporary exhibition makers at the time of the Great Exhibition went as far as explicitly rejecting the possibility of a political role in the practice of exhibition making (Greenhalgh, 1989).

[60] Coombes, 2004, p.268

[61] Sherman, 2008, p.2-5. Peter Vergo offered a similar argument nearly two decades before Sherman, outlining the process of making exhibitions as a multi-party dialogue involving several stakeholders such as trustees, patrons, curators, scholars, the actual objects and the public (Vergo, 1989**).**

[62] Preziosi, 2006

and debates around their objects.[63] Moreover, such negotiation does not happen in a political vacuum. Amalia Mesa Bains argues that power and authority play a significant role in defining multiculturalism in a museum context and that museums bring pre-existing cultural values to 'transcultural' encounters.[64] Specifically in national museums, according to Gordon Fyfe, one of the defining values shaping the negotiation is the "definition of a public culture": a necessary process that promotes social stratification, creates a high-low culture dichotomy, and preserves the social order that guarantees a presumed cultural superiority of Western cultures over others.[65] For Ruth Phillips**,** a core value akin to Fyfe's idea of a "public culture" is that of the encouragement of an "informed citizenry", intended here as the development of a "geopolitical, historical and contemporary consciousness of its citizens", by virtue of the articulation of cultural differences.[66]

Hence, the crucial, final question in relation to the representation of different cultures is whether national museums can be seen as spaces of consolidation or reconciliation of said cultural differences. Robert Sullivan sees little hope in this respect, arguing that museums are racist and sexist institutions, not maliciously, but systemically and 'thoughtlessly', which should at best take responsibility and reveal the ethical issues intrinsic in their work.[67] Others, like Gabriel Koureas and Sarah Hughes, see the potential of museums as spaces of reconciliation.[68] The potential for the museum space as a space for reconciliation of cultural difference is especially relevant to the discussion around modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art. Several public statements in relation to the creation of the collections and the early exhibitions emphasise the intention of UK national museums to support cultural 'understanding', even though rarely the full context around the development of these collections and exhibition frameworks is in fact revealed. It is indeed one of the core objectives of this thesis to shed more light on this context, in the hope that it will inform future curatorial discourses.

While museum practice and scholarship are deeply entwined, it is also important to consider the broader networks within which museums function: specifically, the role of individual dealers, independent curators, as well as organisations, public and private. Some key individuals and organisations have in fact introduced modern and contemporary art from the Middle East to the London public already in the 1960s through to the 1980s,

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[63] Cameron, 2003. Cameron acknowledges the difficulty in achieving such transparency when debating themes that can be deemed 'controversial', especially in a national museum context. The author argues for museums to reveal more openly the process of exhibition making and the rationale of curatorial choices, and to admit their own subjectivity.

[64] Mesa-Bains, 2004

[65] Fyfe, 2006, p.41

[66] Phillips, 2013, p.547

[67] Sullivan, 2004, p.257

[68] Cfr. Koureas, 2015; Hughes, 2014

before national museums even started to consider their first acquisitions. Private and public institutions in the United States also began collecting and presented important exhibitions in the second half of the twentieth century. A brief history detailing such elements connected to the museums' ecosystem provides an essential background for the purpose of understanding collecting and displaying practices, and is presented in the first chapter of the thesis.[69]

IV. Thesis structure

Chapter One will review the activity of a number of dealers and cultural organisations active in London in the late twentieth century and how they played a role in the capital's museum ecosystem. Starting with a seminal exhibition from the late 1960s focusing on Arab art, the chapter will trace the progressive rise of interest in Middle Eastern contemporary culture, and highlight the crucial role played by independent curators and pioneering organisations like the Barbican Centre, which hosted the first institutional exhibitions of art from the region in the city. The following three chapters (two, three and four) are dedicated to the three national museums that form the core of this thesis: the British Museum, V&A, and Tate Modern. The chapters discuss respectively the influence of collecting practices, key exhibitions, and finally patrons and the commercial art sector on the development of a sustained engagement with contemporary Middle Eastern art.

Chapter Two looks specifically at collecting practices across the three museums, their evolution throughout history and the pivotal moments in the development of each collection. In relation to the British Museum and the V&A, the chapter traces the development of regional collections from the early days of the institutions until the establishment of curatorial departments with a specific focus on the Middle East at the beginning of this century. In the case of Tate Modern, a branch of Tate Gallery founded in 2000, the chapter briefly considers the slow and gradual international expansion of Tate Gallery's art collection beyond Western art since its foundation in 1897, to then focus on the establishment of regional acquisition committees at the beginning of this century. The chapter discusses the key criteria for the selection of acquisitions and introduces the perspective of some of the most influential players in each institution's development.

Chapter Three discusses exhibition practices using four important exhibitions as case studies: *Word into Art* at the British Museum in 2006; the first *Jameel Prize* exhibition at the V&A in 2009: *Light from the Middle East* at the V&A in 2012; and the retrospective of *Saloua Rouda Choucair* at Tate Modern in 2013. As well as being some of the earliest opportunities these museums had to display their recent acquisitions and newly-formed collections, these exhibitions are also the first examples in the UK of the formalisation and public presentation of a curatorial framework for modern and contemporary Middle Eastern

[69] cfr. also British Art Network, 2020 (conference proceedings) on the link between museums and academia in the so called 'Museum Ecosystem'

art in national museums. The chapter will look at elements of continuity and difference with the displays of historical collections at the British Museum and the V&A, versus the way that Middle Eastern contemporary art has been integrated into Tate's wider displays to further internationalise the institution's discourse around modernity and artistic production.

Chapter Four investigates the development and growth of a strong commercial sector and a cohort of collectors of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art and design, across the UK and the region. It focuses particularly on the relationship between London and Dubai as two epicentres of a commercial market for contemporary art. The role of Dubai is also further discussed as a locus for London-based art and museum professionals to make acquisitions and connect with artists and patrons. The chapter attempts to articulate the complex relationships and reciprocal influences between the museums and commercial art sectors. In particular, it aims to elucidate how the network of players in the latter have been able to provide our three national museums with essential access to the art scene across the Middle East, and how that scene has indirectly supported their private interests.

The conclusion of the thesis will bring together considerations on the future trajectory of the curatorial framework of UK national museums, and in particular in relation to the challenges faced by their regional approach to collecting and presenting contemporary Middle Eastern art. The thesis concludes with a brief discussion of a recent development at Tate Modern: the launch in 2019 of the "Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational", analysed in comparison with a similar 'transcultural' approach adopted by an important institution in the region, the Sharjah Art Foundation. By encouraging curatorial research that transcends established regional categories, Tate's new approach focuses on new, 'transcultural' narratives. In fact, despite using a term to name the new research centre that implies a focus on 'national' perspectives, Tate's approach in practice is founded on comparative research focused on local, more idiosyncratic cultural expressions.

The practice of collecting and displaying contemporary art from this region in the museums that are the subject of this research is still effectively emerging. This thesis is the first attempt to compare their approaches and document the origins of these collections and their context of development. With it I hope it paves the way for further research on the broader question of the representation of non-Western cultures through contemporary art in British (and generally Western) museums.

Chapter One
Contemporary Middle Eastern art in London: 1960s - 2000s

Before being ‘global’, ‘international’ or ‘universal’, UK national museums are first and foremost local institutions, rooted in the culture of their host nation and operating within the possibilities offered by such culture. This chapter looks at a series of initiatives related to contemporary art from the Middle East that take place primarily in London (with one exception in Oxford, discussed below) from the late 1960s to the early 2000s. The period in question precedes the pivotal 2006 *Word Into Art* exhibition at the British Museum, which marks a turning point as the first moment of widespread public visibility for a national museum in London as far as contemporary Middle Eastern art is concerned. The chapter will introduce key players, events and artists who entered the London scene well before national museums began to develop an interest in collecting works from the region. Importantly, some of them played an important role in introducing new artists to Venetia Porter (b.1955), the curator in charge of contemporary Middle Eastern art at the British Museum,[70] who went on to become the first curator to start a national collection of contemporary art from the region.[71]

The first initiative discussed in this chapter is that of Carreras Limited. In 1967, the tobacco company — who at the time owned a large manufacturing site in the heart of London —[72] set out to organise, sponsor and send on a ten-nation tour what was to be the first exhibition of modern Arab art in the city. The Carreras Craven ‘A' Arab Art Exhibition,[73] touring between 1966 and 1967, was shown in London from 31 May to 14 June 1967. It included fifty-six paintings by seven groups of artists, each representing a different Arab nation.[74] The opening remarks of the Chairman and Managing Director of the company, R.W.S. Plumley, emphasised the company's support for a wider recognition of contemporary cultural expressions from the Arab world, both in Europe and across the region itself (Figure 1.1). Despite being designed to enhance cigarette sales, the works exhibited were not on sale and the exhibition was free to visit. Hugh Scrutton (1917-1991) was invited to chair a committee deciding on awards to be offered to one winner in each national group.[75] In his “Impressions” essay — the only written piece in the catalogue —

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[70] Porter’s title today is “Assistant Keeper (Curator), Islamic and contemporary Middle East”. Her biography and background is published in Courtauld Institute of Art, 2020

[71] In talk to present a new publication from the British Museum on the contemporary Middle Eastern art collection on 24 November 2020, Porter refers specifically to Dale Egee and Rose Issa, both introduced later in this chapter, as the key figures who influenced her early interest in contemporary art (cfr. Porter, Tripp and Morris, 2020).

[72] The art deco building - still standing today in Camden, north London - was completed in 1928 and had several cultural references to ancient Egypt (Curl, 2005, p. 380). The association with Egypt is also connected to the importance of the countries as exporter of quality tobacco (Humbert, 2003, p. 108).

[73] The name Craven ‘A’ refers to one of Carrera’s most popular cigarette brands. These cigarettes had been in circulation since the 1920s and were very popular with British Soldiers during the Second World War (cfr. Science Museum collection, object number 1999-299/4).

[74] The catalogue of the exhibition does not specify the London venue. The countries represented in the exhibitions were the United Arab Republic (as Egypt was known officially until 1971), Syrian Arab Republic, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait and Bahrain (Carreras Limited, 1967, p.3).

[75] Scrutton had been the director of the Whitechapel Gallery from 1945 to 1952 (The Telegraph, 2001).

Scrutton noted how many of the works revealed inexperience and were derivative of Western aesthetics. By contrast he praised those artists who were able to express a)local spirit". He had particularly encouraging words for the Iraqi group, who he believed)expressed its roots while revealing at the same time a sophisticated awareness of international modern styles".[76] Besides his occasionally patronising attitude, Scrutton's observations revealed something much more significant: the absence of a framework within Western critical discourse — other than European modernism — that could be deployed in order to engage critically with artworks from the region. This was in part due to the very limited scholarly interest in the region's contemporary art scene at that time, as I will further discuss below.

The Iraqi group in the show included the first painting from the young Dia Azzawi (b.1939) ever to be exhibited in London, *Islamic Compositions* (Figure 1.2). The work explores Islamic imagery and references through a distinctively modern aesthetic. In this painting, the crescent and the *khamsa* are recurrent motifs for example, combined with other forms inspired by patterns in traditional carpets from southern Iraq and by the artist's own archeological studies and interest in pre-Islamic history.[77] In this painting, Azzawi displays one of his earliest reinterpretations of traditional and ancient motives and symbols which were to become distinctive elements of Arab modernism. In her influential book, *Modern Arab Art*, Nada Shabout argued that a new pan-Arab narrative significantly influenced artistic development in the region throughout the 1960s and 1970s.[78] This was also reflected in several artworks included in the Craven 'A' Exhibition. Born out of the independence movements after the Second World War, a shared 'Arab culture' developed fully in the 1950s and 1960s. Shabout argued that a new aesthetics reflecting this emerging culture filled a vacuum left by the decline of a broader, unifying Islamic culture following the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1922.[79] Before Shabout, other scholars had already looked for shared aesthetic or historical qualities to describe the region's artistic development and offered alternative solutions. For example, HRH Princess Wijdan Ali (b.1939) — an artist, curator and founder of the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts — in her pioneering publication *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World* supported the notion of a culturally united)Islamic World".[80] Similarly, Naef argued for the unifying power of Arabic script.[81] The discourse established by these publications ultimately reflected a search for a suitable framework, by which to understand the history of artistic development across a vast and complex region, where multiple identities converged.

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[76] Carreras Limited, 1967, p.7

[77] David, 2018. p.52

[78] Shabout, 2007

[79] Ibid. p.XV

[80] Ali, 1989. This publication is the catalogue of the homonymous exhibition at the Barbican Centre, discussed below.

[81] Naef, 1992. A broader discussion on calligraphy is included in the next section.

The pan-Arab narrative was the first representational framework to find an outlet in London, starting with the Craven 'A' exhibition in 1967. At this time Azzawi was organising several pan-Arab art shows in Baghdad.[82] When he moved to London in 1976 he was soon recruited by the Iraqi Cultural Centre (ICC), where he presided over a long and important series of exhibitions of Arab art in the headquarters of the Centre on Tottenham Court Road.[83] During our conversation in 2018, Azzawi recalled how he enjoyed remarkable creative freedom at that time, and received little direction or censorship from Baghdad.[84] During his time at the ICC, Azzawi presented shows on painting, craft, folklore, architecture, music and graphic arts. He was particularly active in the three years from 1978 to 1980, as some of his exhibition posters show (Figure 1.3). Azzawi recalls how many of these shows helped to connect Iraqi artists from the London diaspora with those working in Baghdad, as well as offering a platform for young talent. One of his most significant initiatives before leaving the Institute was the Third World Graphic Biennale in 1980, which brought together artists from the whole region but also Asia and Latin America.[85] Extending the initiative to countries outside the Arab world was particularly significant, as it showed how Azzawi's pan-Arabism developed into a more inclusive concept of art from the so-called 'Third World'. However, the concept did not gain momentum as a framework of representation and the biennale never went beyond its first edition.

In the spring of 1976, the same year Azzawi moved to London, the city hosted the *World of Islam Festival.*[86] It was a city-wide celebration of Islamic culture including hundreds of exhibitions, lectures, academic conferences, concerts and events.[87] In the two years leading up to the festival, the artist Ali Omar Ermes (b.1945) had acted as advisor to the festival director, Ahmed Paul Keeler (b.1942). Ermes was responsible for bringing to London representatives of the contemporary art scene.[88] The artist, whose work is primarily script-based, had already exhibited in London in 1968 at Africa House and in Plymouth in 1969.[89] For the Festival, he collaborated with artists Osman Waqialla

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[82] Several exhibitions took place in the late 1960s and early 70s at the Iraqi Artist's Society and at the Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad. Azzawi also organised the first biennale of Arab Art in Baghdad in 1974 (David, 2018. p.41).

[83] Ibid.

[84] Interview with Dia Azzawi, 2018

[85] Ibid. Also cfr. David, 2018 p.44. Further research on the activities of the ICC would be much needed, however it is unfortunately outside the scope of this thesis. Azzawi's own archive includes a substantial number of the Institute's publications, as well as several issues of the magazine published by the Institute, *Ur.* Azzawi's team is in the process of digitising the full set of the artist's personal holdings from the Institute's archive, which is already accessible to researchers by appointment.

[86] The 1976 festival was preceded by a smaller scale festival in 1971 which is less documented and included a presentation at the Institution for Contemporary Art (Lennsen, 2008, p.45).

[87] Key statistics for the festival, including details of events and partner organisations can be found in Sabini, 1976.

[88] Lennsen, 2008, p.45

[89] See Ermes, 1955-2015 for a full list of exhibitions.

(1925-2007) and Ahmed Moustafa (b.1943).[90] The Festival was a major undertaking, combining several activities including exhibitions, lectures, auctions and TV programmes. The British Museum contributed to the programme with a show called *Nomad and the City* at the Museum of Mankind and two further shows dedicated respectively to Indian courts and Isfahan, in the main Museum.[91] Whilst being a strong display of unity, the impact of the Festival has been widely debated.[92] It was partly financed by over thirty Muslim nations, predominantly in the Middle East, which demonstrated a willingness to come together as a joint voice and to reform and renew Western perceptions of Islam already in the 1970s.[93]

The character of the Festival, however, was also very much influenced by Keeler's ideas. Klas Grinel argued that Keeler's dream of Muslim unity was, more than anything else, the product of a countercultural fascination with mystical and foreign traditions developed in the 1960s, which Keeler embraced fully by converting to Islam in 1975 and changing his name to Ahmed. The Festival was a one-off event without much evidence of a tangible and significant legacy, which in Grinel's view came from a lack of 'authenticity'. The author argues in fact — in a statement echoing Grabar's critique of Islamic Art scholarship — that "the Festival by and large framed Islam as an historic civilisation outside of modernity, even in the contemporary arts section".[94] Although a catalogue of the contemporary art display has not been published, it is reasonable to assume that the work shown by Ermes, Waqialla and Moustafa would be calligraphy based (still today the foundation of their artistic practice) and that in the middle of the 1970s this would have been perceived as more connected to Islamic tradition than any modernist discourse.

The geopolitical situation in the region took a significant turn in the mid 1970s, which had important repercussions across the cultural world, including in London.[95] Besides the immense suffering and devastation it produced, the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 shut down the most liberal and culturally active hub of the region at the time, Beirut. The city was the place where many artists, dealers, intellectuals and others connected and traded artworks and ideas. The war meant exodus and exile for many artists, but also brought to London British nationals who had previously settled there, some of whom are discussed below.[96] Rose Issa (b.1948), an Iranian-Lebanese historian and curator, was in

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[90] Issa, 2015, p.23

[91] Bowring, 2012, p.41

[92] For an earlier discussion on the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the context of the Festival see Burckhardt, 1976 and Grabar, 1988.

[93] Grinel notes that is was predominately funded by the United Arab Emirates, a new nation state established only 5 years earlier. (Grinel, 2018, p.78)

[94] Grinel, 2018, p.74

[95] Paris was also an important hub and it must be mentioned, even if it remains outside the scope of this research.

[96] Juliet Cestar offers a useful parallel timeline of important cultural and historical events, including important pan-Arab initiatives, such as the art biennales in Morocco and Baghdad (Issa, 2015, p.306-311).

Paris at that time, translating into French the biographies of the mothers and daughters of Abbasid Caliphs for her PhD.[97] In 1982 she started working as a curator, initiating and organising in Paris the first ever Arab Film Festival in Europe, with support from the Libyan Embassy.[98] Issa argued that with large communities of artists and intellectuals already there and greater freedom to meet, trade and publish, London and Paris in the late 1970s became global meeting points of Middle Eastern and North African cultures (and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution also Iranian).[99] Alongside the intellectual bridge between Baghdad and London built by Azzawi, the link with Beirut was also particularly significant.

Dale Egee (1934-2017) moved from the U.S. to Beirut in 1968 and opened an atelier where she worked as a successful textile artist for a number of years. Egee was well connected in Beirut's cultural circles, where she met several artists living and travelling there from the region. With the outbreak of the war, she left Beirut and started dealing in art, travelling across the Middle East and North Africa to discover new artists.[100] Her business, Egee Art Consultancy, eventually settled in London, and included a showroom in Chelsea in Flood Street. There, Egee introduced Venetia Porter to the work of a number of artists from the region.[101] Porter — Assistant Keeper in the Department of the Middle East and responsible for the British Museum's Islamic collections — took charge in 1990 also of the modern and contemporary collections. The connection between Egee and Porter also goes back to Beirut, where the latter was born and raised and where her mother Thea Porter (1927-2000) lived and worked until 1964.[102] It is also important to mention that Thea Porter's brother, Patrick Seale (1930-2014), who worked across the Middle East as a journalist, opened in 1972 a publishing house and gallery in Belgravia. Seale's gallery showed several contemporary artists from across the region well into the 1980s, including Azzawi's first solo exhibition in London in 1978.[103]

Equally influential on Porter was Issa, who became an important figure in London in the late 1970s and 1980s, initially through her contact with Mohammed Makiya (1914-2015). Makiya was an Iraqi architect who wanted to open an architecture school in the al-Kufa district of Najaf with a strong focus on regeneration and heritage, but had to leave Iraq with

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[97] Interview with Rose Issa, 2018

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid.

[100] The New Town Bee, 2017

[101] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018

[102] Thea Porter was an established fashion designer in the 60s and 70s, well known for introducing Middle Eastern elements in her designs. She opened a number of boutiques throughout her life, in London, Paris and New York. The Fashion and Textile Museum in London held an exhibition on her legacy, *Thea Porter: 70s Bohemian Chic,* from 6 February to 3 May 2015 (McLaws Helms and Porter, 2015).

[103] David, 2018, p. 44

the advent of the Ba'ath regime.[104] In London he bought a substantial property on Westbourne Grove, where — with Issa's help — he opened in 1979 the first specialist Middle Eastern bookshop in the city (Al-Saqi books, still operating today).[105] Behind the bookshop, in 1986, he also opened the Kufa Gallery. Issa was the first artistic director of Kufa Gallery until 1988, where she curated important shows, including one on women artists who were part of the Middle Eastern diaspora in London and Paris (Figure 1.4).[106] At this time, Issa also collaborated on two shows with Dale Egee.[107] One of these shows, *Contemporary Artists and Calligraphy* (held in Egee's Flood Street space from 3 February to 31 March 1989), included a sculptural work by Azzawi, *Oriental Scene* (Figure 1.5), which was acquired in the same year by Porter for the British Museum's collection.[108] The flat sculpture of carved foam board shows a combination of Arabic letters without a specific meaning, its title ironically alluding to stereotypical Western imaginations of the Orient.[109]

Other private spaces were also showing modern and contemporary art from the region, including Harvey Blackman Gallery[110] — where curator Caroline Collier (b. 1952) collaborated on an exhibition of Arab Artists in 1985 —[111], Graffiti Gallery,[112] and the October Gallery, which opened in 1984 and is still operating today.[113] There are also records of shows in other galleries, such as Soni Gallery and Polisher Fine Arts,[114] as well as The Mall Gallery, which hosted an exhibition of Arab Contemporary Art in 1986.[115]

The individuals and organisations mentioned above made for a vibrant cultural scene in the British capital in the 1970s and 1980s. To some of them, Porter was connected personally and to others only professionally. As the British Museum was launching its contemporary collecting initiative, the curator was attending exhibitions and events and

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[104] Dabrowska and Hann, 2008, p.325

[105] Interview with Rose Issa, 2018

[106] Issa recalls that at that time she knew of at least seventeen women artists based in London. The show included artists who are very well established today, such as Laila Shawa and Mona Hatoum (Rose Issa Archive, 1988)

[107] Interview with Rose Issa, 2018

[108] Rose Issa's Archive, 1989. Cfr. BM1989,0419,0.1.

[109] Porter, 2008, p. 79. Cfr. BM1989 4-19 01

[110] Azzawi recalls how Blackman started his business as a framer and started doing exhibitions in 1982 following a commission for one of Azzawi's shows in Baghdad (Interview with Dia Azzawi, 2018).

[111] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018. Collier is currently the Director, Partnerships and Programmes at Tate. A printed booklet published in conjunction with the exhibition is held in Dia Azzawi's archive (Blackman Harvey, 1985).

[112] There are no official records indicating the gallery's opening date. Independent records indicate a print exhibition held there in 1978 (Kean, 2017).

[113] Established in 1979 (October Gallery, 2018).

[114] Ermes, 1955-2015

[115] David, 2018, p. 485

discussing new artists with Issa and Egee, which would have an important influence on her future acquisitions. Some institutional actors also started playing an increasingly important role, following the initiatives of the ICC and the *World of Islam Festival*. The Ismaili Centre in Kensington included an art gallery called Zamana, which hosted the exhibition *Uzbekistan* (from 9 November 1990 to 13 January 1991) curated by Issa, showing fifty-three Uzbek artists to the London public for the first time.[116] The gallery opened in 1985 with an official ceremony led by the Aga Khan and attended by the UK Minister for the arts Lord Gowrie. In his opening remarks, the Aga Khan called for)a more informed perception of other nations' cultures as one of the most effective gateways to better international relationships".[117] The opening of the Zamana Gallery, much like the activities of the ICC and — to a lesser yet no less significant extent — of the *World of Islam Festival*, promoted new expressions of contemporary culture from the Middle East and the Islamic world as instruments of cultural diplomacy already in the 1970s and 1980s.

The first example of significant institutional endorsement occurred not long afterwards. The Barbican Centre organised its first major exhibition opening on 15 September 1989, *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*, including objects from the Jordan National Gallery (henceforth referred to as the National Gallery) collection, curated by Wijdan Ali. This was followed by two significant exhibitions curated by Rose Issa: *Signs, Traces and Calligraphy* from October to December 1995, part of the *Africa 95 Arts Festival*; and *Contemporary Iranian Art* from April to June 2001.

Towards the end of the 1980s Ali had discussed the idea of touring the collection of the National Gallery with several London institutions and eventually found an enthusiastic and supportive response from the Barbican Centre. She was very aware that none of the artists represented in her collection had received any significant institutional endorsement in Europe.[118] The National Gallery in Amman aimed to establish a new curatorial framework. The director of the Gallery, Suhail Bisharat, described it as

> the first institution to promote the full spectrum of contemporary Islamic art in terms of its development, its appreciation and international recognition. [It] maintains the continuing effort to document and record artists and art movements from all the Islamic countries.[119]

The Gallery, therefore, gathered artworks produced by artists living, working or born in countries that were formerly part of Islamic empires or that today have a majority Muslim population, and that reflected contemporary Islam (thus stretching from Morocco to Malaysia). It had opened to the public less than ten years prior to the Barbican show in

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[116] Rose Issa Archive, 1990

[117] Ismaili Heritage Society, 2010

[118] The Institute du Monde Arabe in Paris, already active as an exhibition venue since 1987, is a possible exception, even though the remit of the Institute is well beyond that of an art gallery.

[119] Ali, 1989, p.IX

1980, so Ali was seeking an opportunity for the institution to gain some international recognition.[120] The exhibition at the Barbican included works from twenty-three different countries, the vast majority being paintings but also including works on paper, sculptures and ceramics. A notable example is a work on paper by Etel Adnan (1925-2021), the first time Adnan's work had been shown in London (Figure 1.6). Her folding book — or 'leporello' — called *Allah*, contains the word '*Allah*' repeated multiple times on coloured backgrounds. Adnan, who started her career as an author and later became a well-known painter and poet, had been working with folding books since the mid 1960s, as it allowed her to bring together painting and poetry.[121] Religious themes not being representative of her practice, it could be argued that the piece was acquired by the National Gallery because of the institution's specific interest in the work's reference to Islam.

In the context of the wider collection, Adnan's piece reveals the difficult and ambiguous relationship between Islamic cultures as a framework for artistic production and the inevitable religious connotations implied by the term. Ali's intention with her museum project and collection was to demonstrate that Islamic cultures had never stopped being cradles of creativity, despite the Western perception that Islamic Art had declined since the start of the twentieth century. Ali's concern with Western perceptions was reflected in museum practice particularly in two cases analysed in this thesis, the British Museum and the V&A. Having both amassed large holdings of Islamic artefacts, their collecting patterns reveal a clear break at the start of the last century in terms of their interest in acquiring contemporary objects from the Islamic world. As the next chapter will show in more detail, the institutions' interest in contemporary art is the first instance of contemporary collecting from Islamic countries (at least in the Middle East) for over a century. The substantial gap of knowledge, created over multiple generations of curators, made reengaging with contemporary artworks especially challenging. As Ali notes, referring to Western museums:

> They were still looking at carpets, glassware, ceramics. Things that we stopped manufacturing by the end of the Ottoman Empire […] people still connected art from the Islamic World with Islam. But art from the Islamic World didn't have to be Islamic.[122]

Her last point is important, as it addresses the specific issue around the association of 'Islamic Art' with religious art (as already introduced in the terminology section above). Not all the works in the National Gallery of Jordan had religious themes, or complied with a recognisable aesthetics that could be defined as 'Islamic'. Rather than proposing a new category, Ali sought to extend the Islamic Art category to incorporate the present and the recent past. Her objective with the Barbican show was to introduce this expanded yet

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[120] Interview with HRH Princess Wijdan Ali, 2018

[121] The Serpentine Galleries in London hosted a retrospective of Adnan's work in 2016 which showed several 'leporellos' (Lewin, 2016).

[122] Interview with HRH Princess Wijdan Ali, 2018

familiar framework to the West. By taking as its starting point a Western definition of Islamic Art, she positioned her show — and the entire Jordan National Gallery project — as a direct critique of Western institutional narratives. This is especially significant because the provenance of the National Gallery's modern and contemporary collections in the 1980s is comparable to that of historic and contemporary objects at the British Museum today. There, the new Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World, which opened in October 2018, more consciously and explicitly includes the cultural outputs of Muslim majority nations in South Asia and the Pacific, within the geographical scope of the collections and exhibitions programme, and includes contemporary culture. Whilst Ali's approach may have been seen as unfashionable by the rest of the contemporary (Western) art world in the 1980s, she was already collecting art from as far as Malaysia and Brunei and was interested in the history of artistic development in those regions.

Ali was very conscious of the diplomatic role the Barbican exhibition could play. She hoped it would succeed in fostering a new dialogue between Islamic and Western traditions and)consequently improve relationships among the people and countries of these two civilisations".[123] The educational value of the exhibition was essential to the diplomatic success of the project. The catalogue, in fact, was more than a simple *aide memoire*. It aimed to initiate a strand of scholarship that was until then practically non-existent. Ali had agreed with the director of the Barbican to write a catalogue that would not only tell the public more about the works on display, but would also act as a compendium on the recent art historical developments in the countries represented in the show. She enlisted the support of several researchers and historians from the region and, where she had the expertise, contributed herself.[124]

Ali's research continued and in 1992 she published a short article called *The State of Islamic Art in the Twentieth Century*.[125] Here she argued further in favour of defining a shared artistic identity, one in which artists from the Islamic world could recognise themselves: an identity that, in her view, acknowledged Western influence and adopted it to create new and innovative work, arguably along the principles of hybridity proposed by Bhabha.[126] In 1997 she wrote another very influential book called *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity*, where she built on the research presented in the Barbican catalogue.[127] Importantly, in her publications, and as early as the 1989 catalogue, Ali first propounded the notion of)contemporary Islamic art". The idea has often been debated since. It was rejected altogether by Shabout, who proposed in 1999 a new pan-Arab

[123] Ali, 1989, p.VII

[124] Interview with HRH Princess Wijdan Ali, 2018

[125] Ali, 1992

[126] Ali, 1992

[127] Ali, 1997. Sarah Rogers reviewed the book in 1999 and praised the usefulness of Ali's list of artists and references over the depth of her arguments (Rogers, 1999).

framework to describe the aesthetic development of a smaller, yet in her view more significant, region: the Arab world; a view she developed further in 2007.[128] Ali's notion was criticised in 2005 also by historian Monia Abdallah, who argued that seeing contemporary art as an extension of Islamic art implied a necessarily reductive representational framework.[129] More recently, Wendy Shaw proposed a new appellation:)modern art of Muslim-majority nations". Writing in 2012, Shaw argued that this appellation was relevant because negotiations between)tradition and modernity" and)religion and secularism" were defining aspects of the culture of these nations.[130] Whilst Shaw did not quote Ali directly, she gave new life to her ideas.

The common trends and traits shared by artists whom Ali defined as 'Islamic' can in fact be seen as the product of several negotiations: the balance between Western training and local traditions, the search for artistic identity in the space between their Eastern origins and Western influences, and the struggle to raise the status of liberal arts in religious societies. Ali's argument for an artistic rebirth in the Islamic world was also connected to the development of new political and national identities, thus not precluding ideas such as Shabout's pan-Arab aesthetics. She was also the first to argue — in an English language scholarly text — that in calligraphy resided a true opportunity for originality and for the creation of an artistic identity that could meaningfully compete with the dominance of Western modernism (as the work by Neshat, figure I.1, in the Introduction demonstrates). Silvia Naef in 1992, and subsequently Shabout, Issa, Porter and others upheld her argument in their publications.[131] All in all, the Jordan National Gallery project and Ali's arguments formed the cultural expression of what Moira Simpson called the 'political awakening' originating in the postwar independence movements in the region and spreading to Middle Eastern diaspora communities, where many artists — like Adnan, Azzawi and others — were based.[132] The creation of an identifiable group of contemporary Islamic artists, as fragile a category as it may seem to us today, reflected on the one hand this new dynamic, whilst on the other it arguably epitomised the complex relationship between curatorial and academic research in relation to the new institutional collections being built against the backdrop of Islamic art.

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[128] Shabout 1999 and 2007. Silvia Naef had already discussed the idea of an Arab modernity with specific reference to Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon in Naef, 1996.

[129] Abdallah, 2005. See also Firat, 2009 for a discussion on the notion of 'contemporary Islamic art' as a framework for politically committed artistic production.

[130] Shaw, 2012, p.33

[131] Naef, 1992 and 1996. Also cfr. Porter, 2004 and 2008 and Issa, 2015. Naef, however, also proposed the idea that artistic culture was essentially absent in the region after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and that Western art has filled the vacuum through influence and scholarship (Naef, 2003). A critique of this idea can be found in Babaie, 2011.

[132] Simpson, 2012, p.7

Issa's first Barbican show, *Signs, Traces and Calligraphy* (1995) was very much focused on the written word. Presenting the work of six artists from North Africa and Sudan, Issa noted this in her press release:

> In Islam, the belief that the Koran is the literal word of God meant that until the twentieth century, calligraphers were more highly esteemed than painters and calligraphy was the)Queen of the Arts". In North Africa however, the influence of Western languages hindered the development of calligraphy as an art form until the 1950s, when it appeared in paintings as a gesture of defiance against the colonial powers, and)painting with letters" became a dominant mode of expression. Within two decades, from the 1950s to 1970s, calligraphy became a powerful new form of modern artistic expression. The artists in this show inherited this legacy, and then created a fascinating one of their own.[133]

The use of the written word in fine art, outside the traditional practice of calligraphy, had been widespread across a large part of the Islamic World. It took shape in movements such as *Al-Hurrufiya* across the Arab world, and *Saqqa-Khaneh* in Iran.[134] *Signs, Traces and Calligraphy* (1995) positioned the idea of)painting with letters'' as an opportunity to create an alternative creative paradigm that could challenge Western cultural dominance.[135] The exhibition was installed in the Curve gallery, where the substantial ceiling height and long continuous wall space allowed Issa to hang side by side six large banners by Rachid Koraïchi (Figure 1.7). The works represented very eloquently Issa's curatorial vision: to reveal how the use of calligraphy together with signs and symbols from other cultures and traditions is a celebration of inter-cultural dialogue. Importantly, a new series of banners produced by Koraïchi in 2008 became the winning entry for the second edition of the Jameel Prize in 2011.[136]

Six years after *Africa 95*, Issa curated the exhibition *Contemporary Iranian Art*, also at the Barbican. It was the first exhibition presenting a significant body of works made by a group of artists who, according to the catalogue,)epitomise[d] most clearly aspects that have been central to the evolution of contemporary art in Iran".[137] The exhibition — a group show of twenty-eight artists — was held in the Art Gallery, the main space dedicated to temporary exhibitions at the Barbican. It included paintings, photography, works on paper and sculptures. Importantly, it included several loans from the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA). This Iranian institution was founded in 1977 by Empress

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[133] Cfr. press release in Rose Issa Archive, 1995.

[134] Al-Hurrufiya denotes the "painting with letters" mode of expression mentioned by Issa, adopted by several notable artists since the 1950s (including Ermes and Ali). Its development is further discussed by Naef, 1992; Shabout, 1999; Porter, 2008 and Issa, 2015. The Saqqa-Khaneh movement developed in Iran in the 1960s. It originally indicated a mode of expression incorporating traditional elements of the Shi'a tradition in modern compositions, however artists associated with the group often drew on pre-Islamic references too (see Issa, 2001, p.17-22, and Keshmirshekan, 2005).

[135] Interview with Rose Issa, 2018

[136] V&A Archive, 2011

[137] Issa, 2001, p.7

Farah Pahlavi; it contained (and still does today) a large and significant collection of Western and Iranian modern and contemporary art. The very purpose of the Museum was to position the work of Iranian artists within the context of the international (Western) art world, even though its activities were curbed by the Islamic Revolution only two years later.[138]

The curatorial vision of the Barbican exhibition similarly aimed to present Iranian art from the latter part of the twentieth century as a significant, 'alternative' form of modernity. Issa published as part of the exhibition catalogue a brief history of Iranian modern art, the first English language essay on the subject ever to be published in the UK, where she rightly noted the dearth of publications on the subject in Western scholarship.[139] In another catalogue essay, Daryush Shayegan placed the exhibition within the context of a new internationalism that had started to question Western-centric dominance in the creative fields.[140] He argued that art coming from the 'fringes' of the West brought new visions that have no equivalent in Western art and deserved attention for that very reason, as their visual language added to a new global post-modern civilisation characterised by an unprecedented level of hybridisation.[141] From Shayegan's perspective, the exhibition itself had a double function: an attempt not only to elevate a cultural product by asserting its independent originality despite Western influences, but also to bring the 'fringes' of art history closer to the centre, through new modes of institutional representation. The idea of cultural 'fringes' is not without its complications, especially when considering the diasporic status of several artists represented in Issa's exhibition. The interaction between the so-called margin and centre takes place in a necessarily contested space. Along these lines, Ali and Issa turned the Barbican into a testing ground for new forms of institutional representation, with the explicit intention to disrupt traditional Western representations of non-Western contemporary art.

After 2001, another noteworthy exhibition was held, this time outside London, at Modern Art Oxford. *Out of Beirut,* running from May to July 2007, offered a wide-ranging perspective on the contemporary scene of the Lebanese capital. It was significant because for the first time a publicly funded cultural institution in the UK engaged with contemporary

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[138] For a more detailed history of the TMOCA collection see Esbati, 2006; On the Museum's exhibitions see Yuki, 2013. For a discussion in the role of the Museum in building Iran's national identity see Eimen, 2013.

[139] Issa, 2000, p.28

[140] One of the co-authors of the exhibition catalogue, Shayegan (1935-2018) was an important Iranian cultural theorist and university professor. His book Cultural Schizophrenia (Shayegan, 1997) was very influential on Issa's approach. An earlier debate on this matter took place at the INIVA conference, "A New Internationalism" of 1994, held at Tate. The conference focused on curatorial practices and representation of different cultural identities. See Araeen, 1994 for the proceedings.

[141] Issa, 2001, p.9-14.

Middle Eastern culture outside a regional or national framework of representation.[142] It encouraged a more detailed engagement with a specific cultural context (in this case, a city) and its impact on artistic production. In particular, it focused on the work of artists who were working to reclaim their city, after the civil war had greatly diminished its cultural infrastructure. Walid Raad's installation *Part 1_Chapter One_Section 79: Walid Sadek's Love Is Blind* (Figure 1.8) evoked the presence of Lebanese painter Mustafa Farroukh by displaying labels of his paintings on an empty wall. This work commented on both the destruction of culture and the sense of withdrawal experienced by artists in time of war. In the exhibition catalogue, Suzanne Cotter — senior curator at Modern Art Oxford at the time and editor of the catalogue — argued that censorship and a lack of dedicated spaces had pushed artists to create new modes of engagement with art)in the context of resistance".[143] The notion of 'resistance' introduced in the Oxford exhibition recurs in the practice of several artists from the region who would eventually be collected by UK museums.[144] A notable example includes the striking self portrait of Raeda Saadeh, wrapped in newspaper in an odalisque pose, asking the viewer *Who will make me Real?* (Figure 1.9); or the entire artistic project — including publications, films, sculptures and archival displays — initiated and still being developed by Kader Attia around the idea of 'repair', some elements of which have been collected and exhibited at Tate Modern.[145]

The initiatives discussed above form the background against which national museums developed their own representational narratives. Since the start of this century, several new exhibitions, galleries and initiatives have come to prominence in London, however these cannot all be discussed in detail here. It is worth mentioning Edge of Arabia, a collaboration between British artist Stephen Stapleton and a group of Saudi artists including Ahmed Mater and Abdulnasser Gharem which started in 2003 — running an exhibition space in London from 2013 to 2016 — and was instrumental in introducing Saudi contemporary artists to curators in our three national museums. The Delfina Foundation was founded in 2007 as residency and exhibition space and initially focused specifically on bringing artists from the region to London. Another important organisation with a home in the city, The Mosaic Rooms, opened in 2008 and in fact today it remains the only permanent space in London entirely dedicated to contemporary Arab and Middle Eastern art. In 2013, the launch of the 1-54 African Art Fair played an important role in introducing North African artists to curators (and to the public) in London. And finally it is also worth mentioning the Shubbak Festival, a biennial festival of Arab culture including

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[142] Modern Art Oxford is a publicly funded art gallery that does not hold a collection. Also in Oxford, it should also be noted that two works, a print from Ali Omar Ermes and a sculpture by Alfred Basbous had been acquired and displayed at the Ashmolean Museum, respectively in 1992 and 1994 (cfr. Ermes, 1992 and Basbous, 1994). These works were acquired by James Allan, the Keeper of Eastern art (Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018).

[143] Cotter, 2007, p.26

[144] "Resisting" is one of the three sections (together with "Recording" and "Reframing", into which the exhibition *Light from The Middle East* is divided. This will be discussed in Chapter Three.

[145] Attia, 2013. 'Repair' is the central theme of Attia's recent retrospective, *Scars remind us that our past is real,* at the Joan Miro Foundation in Barcelona, which run from 15 June to 30 September 2018.

exhibitions of contemporary art to which both the British Museum and the V&A have participated regularly. The festival was founded by the Mayor of London in 2011 and continues today.

Alongside developments in London it is also important to briefly acknowledge some important initiatives in US museums, which in some cases preceded initiatives at UK institutions. The Grey Art Gallery, opening in New York in 1974, was based on an important private collection of Iranian, Turkish and Arab art built initially in the 1960s and early 70s by Abby Weed Grey (1902-1983).[146] There are also important public institutions that undertook collecting initiatives and exhibitions that provide a relevant background to this discussion. The Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (Smithsonian Institution) 1999 exhibition *Sevruguin and the Persian Image: Photographs of Iran, 1870-1930* and the acquisition of a work of contemporary calligraphy by Ali Omar Ermes in 1996 are early, if sporadic, examples of engagement of the institution with the Middle East.[147] The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) also developed a contemporary collection over the last fifteen years that aimed to draw a line from Islamic collections to contemporary practices, after the collection's curator, Linda Komaroff, was inspired by the 2006 British Museum's exhibition *Word into Art.*[148]

As a final, and perhaps most important example, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York built a substantial collection of contemporary art from the Middle East at broadly the same time as the British Museum, and hosted its first exhibition also in 2006, as briefly introduced in the Introduction.[149] The museum also supported important research projects, as evidenced in the publication *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*.[150] Glenn Lowry, the director of the museum, also appears as one of the earliest examples of institutional participation to the Art Dubai art fair's programme, as discussed in the Chapter Four. The British Museum and MoMA can be argued to maintain a joint position as pioneers in promoting articulate contemporary Middle Eastern art projects, arguably by virtue of the similar geopolitical position of the US and UK in relation to the region and informal professional connections between their respective curators. US initiatives are also relevant in that institutions like the Guggenheim are influencing museum policy at a federal level in the UAE, in particular when looking at the Saadiyat Island projects, where a "Global Collection with a Specific Focus on West Asia, North Africa, and South Asia" is

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[146] For a personal perspective on the collection see Grey, 1983. Also cfr. "Reflections on the Abby Grey Collection" in Balaghi and Gumpert, 2022, p. 17-19. and Gumpert, 2020. The Grey Art Gallery today is part of New York University.

[147] Cfr. Smithsonian online collection, object number S1996.40, https://asia.si.edu/object/S1996.40/, accessed on 30 March 2022

[148] Cfr. Kim, 2017. Curiously, the first acquisition on record by LACMA is a piece of the same edition by Ali Omar Ermes acquired by the Smithsonian a decade earlier. (Cfr. Lacma online collection, object number M.2006.131 https://collections.lacma.org/node/212772, accessed on 30 March 2022)

[149] Cfr. Keshmishekan, 2015 and footnote 21

[150] Lenssen, Rogers and Shabout, 2018

currently being developed by the Guggenheim franchise for a new site.[151] It is also interesting to note how today the ‘Middle East’ has been replaced by 'West Asia' in the narrative of the federal government when referring to modern and contemporary art, suggesting a shift and a rejection of Euro-centric categories.[152] Despite the parallels between the British Museum and MoMA and the influence of other institutions like the Guggenheim, British museums’ connection to the region remain primarily focused on Dubai and on relationships with patrons and the commercial sector developed there, on which Chapter Four expands.

Other important initiatives also developed in the region itself, even though a detailed discussion of their development is outside the scope of this thesis, whose primary aim is to look at British institutional representations of Middle Eastern cultures through contemporary art. Besides the Jordan National Gallery and TMOCA, already introduced above, it is worth mentioning the Sharjah Biennial (like the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, also in one of the emirates of the UAE) which showcased contemporary Arab art from the early 1990s and introduced international artists to the region. Since 2003 — under the direction of Sheikah Hoor al Qasimi (b.1981) — the Sharjah Biennial expanded its programme and its collecting activity to become an important counterpoint to western museums' collecting and exhibition practices focused on the region; its role in fostering a new transcultural discourse is acknowledged in the Conclusion of the thesis. Finally, Mathaf: the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha was founded in 2010, becoming the first public museum of modern and contemporary Arab art in the region. These institutions represent the culmination of important national histories of collecting and art-making within the region. Yet, despite often operating in parallel with British institutions, there remains little evidence of the latter engaging with them systematically in the definition of their new collecting and exhibition frameworks. Furthermore, besides the awareness of theoretical references such as those mentioned above and the efforts to build departmental libraries of relevant monographs and exhibition catalogues related to collecting research, there is also no significant evidence of scholarly research or sustained academic collaborations led by curators at the British Museum and the V&A in conjunction with the set up and early development of their initiatives focused on contemporary Middle eastern art. As chapter two, three and four will show, a lack of institutional checks and balances, together with the significant influence of private funders, meant that the development of curatorial approaches at these two institutions lacked the traditional rigour of scholarly engagement seen both in other collecting areas within the same institutions (including Islamic collections) and in other institutions collecting modern and contemporary art across Europe and the US. It also sets them apart from Tate Modern, which despite sharing in the importance of private funding, established more rigorous processes to ensure the independence of collecting choices, encouraged and participated actively in academic

[151] Abu Dhabi Culture, 2022

[152] More broadly, this shift also reflects a certain fluidity in the definition of a country’s cultural identity, as already argued by Sarah MacDonalad (MacDonald, 2003, p.1)

debate and more recently invested directly in research into transnational discourses in modern and contemporary art, as the final chapter of the thesis will show.

This brief overview of the international context demonstrates that British institutions did not develop in a vacuum. Not only they were not the first instances of interest in modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art in the Western world, but they also developed their respective approaches firmly outside of the cultural infrastructures of the regions they aimed to represent. London, at the same time, provided fertile ground for the development of links with the region. Clear lines of influence existed between Baghdad and London through Azzawi and the ICC, Amman and London through Ali and the Jordan National Gallery, Beirut and London through Egee and Porter, Tehran and London through Issa and the TMOCA. These, nonetheless, remained informal and based mostly on personal connections. Finally, the importance of the written word as a powerful aesthetic and political tool, which is undoubtedly a central theme in many early acquisitions and exhibitions, also cannot be underestimated. It became the starting point of more than one institutional collection, as discussed above, and for the British Museum it became also the chosen theme for their first exhibition. The next two chapters will look at these developments in more detail.

Chapter Two
Collecting history and practice

Introduction

This chapter is divided into three sections, each focusing on one museum, in chronological order according to the age of the institution. Although the focus of each section is contemporary museological practice, the history of the institutions is discussed to provide context and to draw parallels and differences across the three approaches. In particular, the existence of 'Oriental' collections at the British Museum and the V&A since their beginnings, shaped attitudes and instigated organisational changes, the legacies of which are still relevant today. This has generated acquisition practices that differ significantly compared to those of art museums such as Tate. The broader aim of the chapter is therefore to discuss contemporary acquisition practices in the context of their respective historical legacies, tracing the three institutional paths to the point at which they started to overlap more significantly just over a decade ago in their efforts to engage with the region. In relation to this — more recent — period, the chapter will then discuss some of the themes that emerge from new acquisition initiatives and the way artists' concerns are represented through these, with a view to better understand the wider implications of each collecting approach.

2.1 British Museum

This section introduces the principles behind the British Museum's collecting policy, the context in which it has evolved and — more briefly — the way it is expressed in its most recent incarnation throughout the new Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World. The starting point of the discussion is the genesis of the institution and the influence of individuals whose private collections were consolidated in the Museum over the first century of its existence. The aesthetic principles and values during this time and the practice of connoisseurship have significantly shaped the Museum's collections and the public perception of objects displayed in its galleries. As a national institution, the Museum's collections closely reflect Britain's imperial history, which in turn shaped significantly the attitude towards objects from non-Western cultures, including from the Middle East.

A formal acquisition policy in relation to contemporary art from the region has never been formalised by the Museum in a written policy document. The principles that underpin collecting activities are deeply connected with the work and personal initiative of Venetia Porter, whom we have already encountered in Chapter One. These principles will be analysed — together with insights from an interview with Porter undertaken specifically for the purpose of this research — in an attempt to compose a more coherent picture of how the acquisition policy has evolved in recent times. The timing of this chapter is also particularly important, as research for it is being undertaken only two years after the opening of the new Albukhary Galleries in October 2018. These galleries for the first time

include — and have done since their earliest design phase — a permanent display section dedicated to contemporary art.[153] As such they provide a meaningful insight into the way contemporary objects have become embedded in the collecting activities of Porter and her team, and more widely within the fabric of the Museum. Through a brief survey of some contemporary objects contained in this space, the section will conclude by exploring how these are presented in relation to historical collections and how they represent the most recent evolution in the Museum's collecting practices.

Art and artefacts from the Middle East have been part of the British Museum's collections since its inception in 1753. David Wilson (b.1931) — historian and Director of the Museum from 1977 to 1992 — notes that Oriental material, including objects from the Middle East, were already in the eighteenth century part of the private collections of Hans Sloane and other important collectors who bequeathed their estates to the Museum until the late nineteenth century. Sloane's foundational collection featured a number of objects defined as 'Orientalia', including — besides amulets and seals — Turkish and Persian bazaar paintings (typically images of busy market areas commissioned by shop owners) and an important medieval astrolabe.[154] The seventeenth-century amulet in figure 2.1 is one of the earliest objects to be catalogued in the Museum's collection. Made of chalcedony with an Arabic inscription including the words "Oh Forgiver", the object represented the important relationship between magic and worship in Islam. It is likely to have interested Sloane — a renowned physician and naturalist — not only for its fine craftsmanship, but also because of his interest in esoteric traditions, at a time when these were being challenged by the increasing secularisation brought by the Enlightenment.[155]

The amulet illustrates how private collections were driven by personal taste and interests, and also — more frequently than by direct acquisitions through travel — by the spending habits of collectors at London-based auctions.[156] Just as private collections were diverse and could be incoherent, no formal collecting policy or dedicated funding was in place in this early part of the Museum's history. This was until A.W. Franks made significant efforts in the second half of the nineteenth century to give more structure to the organisations of Oriental collections, also working closely with J.C. Robinson at the newly formed South

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[153] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018

[154] Wilson, 2002, p.15. These objects were in turn part of another private collection acquired by Sloane from Engelbert Kaempfer, a medical officer of the Dutch East India Company station in Nagasaki at the end of the seventeenth century. The catalogue 'Islamic Metalwork in the British Museum' provides further information about the astrolabe and other metal objects in the collection (Barrett, 1949, p.40. See also British Museum Collections online, object number OA+.369). The collection of Seals and Amulets is also discussed in Porter and Bakarat, 2004 and Porter, 2011.

[155] See Porter, 2011 and Porter, Saif and Savage-Smith, 2017 for an overview of the collection of seals and amulets and a broader discussion on magic in Islamic tradition.

[156] See Wall, 1997, Fletcher, 2011 and Lincoln and Fox, 2016 on the development of auction houses in London and their role in the emancipation of the emerging professional classes. See Bleichmar and Meredith, 2016 and Cowan, 2006 for a wider discussion on the development of the art market from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in London and across Europe.

Kensington Museum (the progenitor of the V&A established in 1852), where a new significant collection was taking shape.[157] Wilson suggests that the frequent exchanges between the two keepers marked a highly significant moment in the development of collecting (and display) practices at both museums.[158] In fact, it can be argued that the policy of both museums in these regard started to develop more formally around the 1850s and 1860s, despite the British Museum being founded a century earlier. Wilson also highlights the importance of Franks's more structured and research-focused approach to collecting as a way to better understand the relationship between Islam and Europe, which added an important scholarly dimension to the Museum's collecting activity. Despite this, collecting and curating within the Museum at this time continued to be guided by established principles of aesthetic connoisseurship. Few staff were trained in languages and history, or knew much of Oriental cultures and — as was common practice in the period — effectively learned about their trade after they joined the Museum. The objects they acquired — as for private collectors — also often came from auctions rather than fieldwork.[159] The practices of this time resulted in less targeted acquisitions, with objects being purchased not according to policy and research, but rather as they came up for auction without being specifically sought out.

Amateur scholarship and connoisseurship played a fundamental role in the development of early Oriental collections: both for private collections later bequeathed to the Museum, and for those acquired directly by the institution through the effort of Franks and his colleagues. Historian Ernst Gombrich notes how in Victorian times connoisseurship played a double role for the collector. Ostentatious display of foreign objects functioned first as a proxy for wealth: in the context of a private home, these were valued for their diversity, which in turn reflected the worldliness of their owner. Connoisseurship was however also an aesthetic method, "the vicarious participation in the artist's skill", which made knowledge of the possibilities of a medium as important as the realisation of the medium itself.[160] Christopher Whitehead notes how connoisseurship shaped not only early institutional models of British public museums, but also the experience of visitors who looked at these distant worlds through the eyes and aesthetic choices of few, interested and wealthy, individuals.[161] Art history was not to become a more fully fledged academic discipline until the early twentieth century, thus amateur connoisseurship remained an important source of knowledge and was the key determinant of collecting activity. The

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[157] Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826-1897) was a collector and medieval specialist whose career at the British Museum spanned 45 years from 1851 until 1896, first as assistant in the Department of Antiquities and from 1866 to 1896 as Keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography. John Charles Robinson (1824-1913) was appointed first Superintendent for the Art Collections at the South Kensington Museum in 1857 and stayed in post until 1863.

[158] Wilson, 2002, p.169

[159] Wilson, 2002, p. 229-230

[160] Gombrich, 1961, p.175-80

[161] Whitehead, 2009, p.3-37

context of amateur collecting and connoisseurship, however, was changing during Franks's tenure from the 1850s through to the 1890s.[162] Museum historian Arthur MacGregor places Franks within a new generation of collectors, at a time when the activity itself was shifting more and more from wealthy landed aristocrats to those supported by new industrial wealth.[163] Public collecting was also changing.[164] The success of state sponsored collecting in France — embodied by the growing, prestigious collections of the Louvre museum — also created pressure in British political circles, where the collections of respective national museums were perceived as a proxy for cultural dominance amongst the two largest European empires.[165]

A crucial aspect pertinent to the development of early collections from the Middle East during the time of Franks was the acquisition and categorisation of ethnographic objects. The thesis will not explore in detail case studies of ethnographic acquisitions because these sit separately — from an administrative and curatorial perspective — from contemporary Middle Eastern art. It is, nonetheless, important to briefly address the history of these collections in the British Museum, given that the practice of collecting ethnographic material continues today and objects in this category are included in the displays of the Albukhary Gallery. There is extensive research on the role of museums in the presentation of ethnographic collections within the context of imperial history as well as research on the value of such displays in recent museum practice.[166] Already present in Sloane's original collection, ethnographic collections largely included everyday objects and objects associated with popular rituals and traditions. Early experiences associated with such objects in a museum context suggest how they were perceived to be the product of inferior civilisations. In particular, Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden and Ruth Phillips highlight the contrast between the culture of museums as places where vision is the dominant sense of perception — associated with superiority of Western culture embodied in its colonial gaze — compared to the multi-sensory value of the collected objects in their

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[162] Friedländer, 1946 and Haskell, 1976 offer two early accounts on the on the evolution of taste and connoisseurship in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century whilst more recently, Chaney, 2003 looks at the fashion of buying Italian art during the Tudor and Stuart periods.

[163] MacGregor, 1997, p.6. Strong, 1906 offers one of the earliest published overviews of private holdings in England, mostly with a focus on old masters. The reviews of Bryant 1993 and Foster, 1998 can be seen for details on regional collections in estates throughout England. Whilst Brooke, 2013 offers a survey of London private collections and Howarth, 1985 and Brown, 1995 discuss collections in Royal and aristocratic circles.

[164] Herrmann, 2009 looks at the contribution of private bequests to UK museums and suggests that the second half of the nineteenth century saw a peak in large donations that were driven primarily by a philanthropic spirit, but that sharply declined in the twentieth century. MacLeod, 1986 also looks at the Victorian period but with a narrower focus on collections of British art, which emerged more significantly at this time (The Tate Gallery, founded at the end of the Victorian period in 1897, being the foremost example).

[165] MacGregor 1997, p9. Competition with France and the success of the Luxembourg Museum model was also a crucial motivation behind the creation of Tate Gallery at the turn of the twentieth century, as discussed below. See also Holger, 2010.

[166] See Frese, 1960; Chapman, 1985; for early studies on the subject. Also Putnam, 2001; Shelton, 2001

original context.[167] They argue that the assumed "reliance on the 'lower' senses […] led indigenous people to be likened to the blind by Western theorists."[168] Further, they suggest that this process enabled the justification of cultural superiority whilst leaving intact, and in fact reinforcing, the foundational principles of such culture, capable of acquiring and organising new knowledge. Despite often sharing provenance with other 'finer' objects of connoisseurship, ethnographic objects were not appreciated for their aesthetic value in the same way (if at all), but as part of a broader, often politically-motivated strategy of knowledge acquisition.[169] This created problems of categorisation early on in the Museum — affecting virtually every collection of colonial provenance — and effectively leading to two parallel and often overlapping systems for collecting from the same culture.

At the British Museum this was further complicated by a multilayered organisational matrix. The split of the Oriental Antiquities department in 1886 between Egyptian & Assyrian Antiquities and British & Medieval Antiquities (including Ethnography) meant that objects from the Middle East were subdivided at the same time along historical, geographical and typological lines.[170] Besides organisational complexity, Annie Coombes demonstrates how at this time the creation and display of ethnographic collections served to consolidate the perception of the British Empire as one dominating the 'primitive' cultures of the world[171]. These bodies of objects presented static perceptions of the cultures they claimed to represent, fixed in times that were of significance to their collectors, more than to the cultures themselves.[172] The issue remains unresolved today. As internationalism and cultural hybridity become common trends in museum practice, additional strategies for re-displaying or reorganising ethnographic collections are deployed. These include

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[167] Edwards, Gosden and Phillips, 2006

[168] Ibid. p.207. The authors point out that there was also a reciprocal aspect to this, embodied in a fashion of "going native", as "European collectors and travellers not only brought home specimens of the cultures they'd [is this how it is written in the text you are quoting, or 'they had'?] visited, they frequently had themselves represented as actually embodying those cultures" (p.205).

[169] Byrne at al.,2011. The authors suggest that ethnographic collections continue to this day to play an important role in supporting and reworking national identities in the West.

[170] Cfr. Bowring, 2012 for an overview of departmental changes at the Museum since its foundation.

[171] Coombes, 1994, p.112. See also von Oswald, 2020

[172] Ibid, p.117. Cfr. also Shelton, 2001. This is an issue that continued to be relevant for the Museum until more recent times, as with the much criticised use of dioramas in ethnographic displays, especially in the context of the Museum of Mankind. In fact the debate around ethnographic collections remains very relevant still today: increasing professionalisation in the museum sector and scholarly advances have not yet been sufficient to determine how to appropriately place these collections within institutions, triggering now popular debates such that of the "Decolonising the Museum" movement. Much of the current discussion focuses on unveiling hidden object histories and re-contextualising collections with the help of representatives of the groups and communities from which they were initially acquired. The debate also often intertwines with increasingly louder restitution claims put forward by the same groups based on (very often legitimate) claims of forcible or at times downright illicit appropriation. Well documented examples of such debates at the British Museum today centre around the Hoa Hakananai'a from Rapa Nui and the Benin Bronzes from Nigeria. Although this discussion is outside the scope of this thesis, it is important that further research is done so that the understanding we gain from these debates, especially on how to uncover the multiple stories and perspectives that exist behind objects - can positively affect considerations - and ultimately policy - related to the acquisition of contemporary art and design objects.

presentations of “reciprocal interpretative strategies", deconstruction of the museological process through which collections have become part of a museum's holdings, interventions of contemporary artists inspired by or connected to ethnographic collections, but also strategies involving the removal — and occasionally restitution — of objects from displays where sensitive political and cultural connotations can be found.[173]

In terms of display methods, the presentation of ethnographic collections in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often borrowed its methods from exhibitions of natural history, which added a further layer of hierarchy and controversy. After the founding of the South Kensington Museum in the second half of the nineteenth century, the term ‘ethnography’ was the subject of debates about differences in collecting remits between the new institution and the British Museum. Albeit not formalised explicitly in the museums’ acquisition policies, Ethnographic objects were clearly treated differently from fine and decorative art collections, thus effectively establishing a separate collecting scope between the two institutions. Craig Clunas pointedly argues in this regard that:

> the aim of completeness was qualified by the exclusion from the South Kensington collections of the material culture of those peoples, dubbed ‘primitive’, who had neither art nor history. They were consigned to the historic present of ethnography collections, represented in 1863 primarily by the British Museum.[174]

This distinction remains broadly in place up to this day, even through in time both museums have abandoned controversial Euro-centric adjectives to describe cultures today broadly referred to as ‘indigenous’. In the twentieth century the curatorial focus for ethnographic collections at the British Museum centred increasingly on rituals and folk traditions, rather than maintaining an attempt to comprehensively represent a specific culture.[175] The Museum also maintains an active programme of contemporary collecting under the rubric of ‘ethnography’. This is predominantly relevant to acquisitions managed by the Africa, Oceania and the Americas Department, but it also involves the Middle Eastern Department itself, as a recent acquisition (and exhibition) of Omani traditional jewellery demonstrates, which runs as a parallel effort to that dedicated to contemporary Middle Eastern art.[176]

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[173] Shelton, 2006 p.78. The Maqdala 1868 display at V&A (5 April 2018 to the end of July 2019) is a good example of a strategy of redisplay that focuses on revealing previously hidden aspects of the collecting process, which in this case, as in many other hidden cases, was characterised by violence.

[174] Clunas, 1994, p.326

[175] For a more detailed discussion around Ethnographic displays in a contemporary context see Sturge, 2014; Campbell, 2014 and Shelton, 2000. Specifically on early ethnographic collections at the British Museum see King, 1997.

[176] The exhibition *Adornment and identity: jewellery and costume from Oman* was held at the Museum from 21 January to 18 September 2011

The early part of the twentieth century saw further consolidation in the organisation of Oriental collections at the Museum. Scholarship on collections from the Middle East and the Islamic Empires developed especially following the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1922. As mentioned in the Terminology section of the Introduction, Islamic Art also began to spread more widely as an academic discipline. At the British Museum, this led to the appointment in 1949 of the first Islamic Art curator, Ralph Pinder-Wilson (1919-2008). The arrival of Pinder-Wilson and the large number of publications he produced signalled a newly-found focus on researching the Islamic history of the Middle Eastern region.[177] This eventually led to the recognition of the importance of Islamic Art holdings as a coherent body of objects, and to establishing a case for a new permanent display, eventually advanced and completed under the directorship of David Wilson in 1989 with the opening of the John Addis Gallery.[178]

Wilson became an important influence in the development of the Museum in the late twentieth century. He reflected on the importance of the Museum as a theatre of international diplomacy, and on the role collections from non-Western cultures play in this regard. He insisted that pursuing an agenda of global collecting was essential to the Museum to reflect its role as a key reference and aggregator in our collective attempt to understand global history. Wilson also regarded the practice of collecting from the developing world as something that brought first and foremost political and economic benefits to the countries involved, helped by the prestige of the Museum and the diplomatic connections enabled by such cultural exchange. He also believed, perhaps rather naively, considering the title of his book was *British Museum: Purpose and Politics,* that the separation of power between the board and the executive in the governance in UK museums would enable their trustees to make independent and fair collecting decisions outside political interference, despite an established history of alignment between such decisions and their geopolitical context at any given moment.[179] Wilson became one of the principal architects of the idea of the 'universal museum', a notion by which the British Museum today continues to assert authority as an institution able to represent multiple cultural identities by geographical areas, including the Middle East. Wilson's role is also especially of note as he was the first Director of the Museum, after nearly a century, to instigate a new collecting strategy focused on contemporary cultures. The Museum had, in fact, not collected contemporary material from the Middle East broadly since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, whilst continuing to focus on adding to and organising historical collections. The new venture in contemporary collecting marked a pivotal shift in the engagement of the Museum with the region, laying the foundations for the current

[177] Wilson, 1989, p.260. Pinder-Wilson spoke Farsi and had strong connections with the region, where he travelled frequently. He held posts at the British Institute of Persian Studies and left the museum to run the British Institute of Afghan Studies in Kabul in 1976. See Whitehouse, 2008 for a short biography and Ball, 2008 for Pinder-Wilson's years at the British Institute of Afghan Studies.

[178] John Addis (1914-1983) was a trustee of the British Museum, collector and scholar of Chinese ceramics. See Sheaf, 2012, p.42-43.

[179] Cfr. Wilson, 1989

collections of contemporary Middle Eastern art. In 1990, at Wilson's direction, curator Frances Carey (b.1948) founded the Modern Museum Group, a regular staff gathering which encouraged dialogue and exchange across all the curatorial departments of the Museum in the area of contemporary acquisitions.[180] A new specialist curator, Stephen Coppel, was also brought in shortly after the group was set up, with a view to developing the Museum's collection and expertise in twentieth-century material. Porter, the curator responsible for the development of contemporary Middle Eastern collections, was part of this group from the beginning. The initiative took place in conjunction with the opening of the John Addis Gallery, which was designed to include a dedicated space for small temporary displays in which modern and contemporary works — initially contemporary works on paper — could be presented.[181] All in all, the origins of the Modern Museum Group reveal how the intellectual foundations upon which a new architecture for engagement with contemporary Middle Eastern art was built were laid according to long standing assumptions of cultural superiority.

Carey and Coppel were both curators in the Prints & Drawings Department of the Museum at this time. Their expertise in contemporary art, therefore, resided primarily in the area of works on paper, which in part explains why the initial direction of the British Museum contemporary Middle Eastern collection focused on this medium (works on paper are also in general more affordable). The founding of the Modern Museum Group came also at a particular time in the history of the region itself. Instability and war — most notably the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, Lebanon’s Civil War running from 1975 to 1990, the Palestinian uprising starting in 1987, the Iran-Iraq conflict running from 1980 to 1988 and the Gulf Wars about to begin in 1990 involving Kuwait, Iraq and several other states — had seen a shift in intellectual activities from the region towards Europe, especially to Paris and London, where several intellectuals arriving or exiled from the region formed active and lively diaspora communities. As discussed in Chapter One, London became a place for them to exchange ideas, make and display work, enabling private and public art organisations to learn more about twentieth-century artistic production (until that point an area of the art world that was largely ignored by Western museums) and develop collecting ambitions.[182]

The contemporary collection of Middle Eastern art at the British Museum was developed against this background and so were the criteria that underpinned the acquisition of objects. As already discussed in the Introduction, geographical categories were established in a context characterised by the imbalance of power between the British Empire and its colonies, and as such were inevitably reductive. The legacy of that history — still reflected in the organisation of the institution’s departments today — remained a

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[180] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018

[181] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018

[182] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018; Interview with Rose Issa, 2018

limitation of the curatorial framework, affecting both historical and contemporary objects.[183] The relationship between the Museum and the region — rooted in colonialism, in the idea of the 'universal museum' and in strategies of cultural diplomacy — influenced acquisition choices significantly and shaped early collecting efforts.[184] The evolution of the Museum's approach, evolved (as discussed above) from Oriental connoisseurship and Islamic Art scholarship, also fundamentally influenced early acquisitions. Porter, from the beginning of her activity in 1990, was faced with the awkward task of establishing continuity in a context where not only collecting activity of contemporary objects had stopped for nearly a century, but also collecting practice and scholarship were not sufficiently developed to enable a frictionless entry of new contemporary objects alongside historic collections.[185] Museum attitudes were also debatable. Discussing the status of contemporary collecting in the early twentieth century at the Museum, Porter noted how ideas of 'glory' associated with the great Islamic dynasties of the past meant that historians and Museum professionals regarded contemporary production with suspicion and did not deem it to have any real value.[186] This, she argues, resulted in a substantial gap in collecting activities until the establishment of the Modern Museum Group, which remains today the cross-departmental committee that evaluates all acquisitions proposals in the area of contemporary art.[187] Porter notes that across various departments, the new initiative resulted in the acquisition of very disparate objects — from fine art works to craft and mass-produced objects — but that for the Middle East, under her direction, it focused specifically on art.[188]

Although a formal acquisition policy has not been published by the Museum**,** Porter has published a number of essays that provide specific insights into how collecting principles developed: first in the catalogue of the 1991 *Writing Arabic* exhibition; in 2008, in the catalogue of the *Word into Art* exhibition; in 2009 in an anthology of contemporary Arab art; and more recently in a new catalogue of the Museum's contemporary Middle Eastern collection, published in 2020.[189] Some of the first acquisitions criteria outlined by Porter were that objects had to be artworks on paper, that they needed to reveal artistic innovation based in some way on aesthetic traditions and that they "spoke of the

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[183] Wilson's beliefs would carry on influencing the British Museum until the pivotal declaration of universal museums of 2004 signed under Neil McGregor. Cfr. ICOM, 2004 for the text of the declaration.

[184] See Grincheva, 2013 and 2019 as well as Davidson and Pérez-Castellanos, 2019 for a broader discussion on the roles of museums in international cultural diplomacy. Also Maltzahn, 2013 for trends in cultural diplomacy within the region, particularly as defined along sectarian lines.

[185] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018.

[186] Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, and Shabout, 2009

[187] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018. For similar reasons the same gap in collecting activity was also experienced by the V&A, as discussed in the section 2.2.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Cfr. British Museum, 1991; Porter, 2006; Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, and Shabout, 2009; Porter, Tripp and Morris, 2020

region".[190] The latter criterion can be interpreted as meaning that works ought to have documentary value in the way they may reveal aspects of contemporary society and of the cultural identities they are assumed to represent.[191] Acquiring works on paper also offered a number of advantages in the early days of collecting activity. The Museum's limited financial resources meant that a greater number of works on paper — on average cheaper than other media — could be acquired, thus allowing more artists to be included in the collection. Furthermore, the Museum already had in-house conservation experience and expertise in this medium, unlike in other media frequently adopted by contemporary artists, such as oil on canvas or mixed media objects, which historically had not been collected by the Museum.

The first piece in the collection, acquired in 1987, was a set of prints by Egyptian calligrapher-artist Ahmed Moustafa (b.1943). The example shown in Figure 2.2 is a silkscreen print on paper showing a calligraphic composition of a verse from the Qur'an and entitled *The Heart of Sincerity* (1978). A painter trained in Western techniques, Moustafa had developed at this point in his career a style which brought together the visual language of traditional Islamic calligraphy with Western aesthetics. The piece was included in the 1991 *Writing Arabic* exhibition mentioned above.[192]

Discussing the origins of the collection in 1992, Porter described her approach to collecting contemporary art from the Islamic world in more detail:

> Faced with the increasing mass of work produced by modern artists from all over the Middle East, it was decided to limit the collection to works which had some connection with the museum's collection of classical Islamic art. In this way a thread of continuity with the past could be demonstrated. This conservative approach meant that more abstract works, in an 'international' style, were avoided. Instead, a collection of works centring on Arabic calligraphy was built up.[193]

Porter describes Moustafa's work as taking inspiration from medieval calligraphy, but with a remarkable "modernity".[194] Such combination of antique and modern, Islamic and Western, was a key principle in early collecting efforts. Innovative calligraphic work — often combining elements of Western artistic training with traditional techniques — acted as a gentle introduction to contemporary Middle Eastern aesthetics, not only for the benefit of Islamic art curators (who had influence over what was collected) but also for the public.

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[190] Crf. Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, and Shabout, 2009, p.31 and Porter, 2006, p.14

[191] The example of artist Manal AlDowayan discussed below perhaps best represents this concept.

[192] British Museum, 1991(Writing Arabic); Bowring, 2012. Also cfr. footnote 134

[193] Porter, 1992, p.26

[194] Quoted in Abdallah, 2010, p.31

This enabled Porter to find a space for contemporary art within the framework of pre-modern collections in the Museum and demonstrate elements of continuity that enabled the collections to find a space within an established institutional narrative. Continuity, nonetheless, is a particularly problematic matter, since the boundaries of Islamic Art were not always well defined. In this respect, Jessica Rawson — heading the Oriental Antiquities department in the early 1990s — argued in 1991 that whilst Islamic Art could no longer be considered a suitable generic category, Arabic calligraphy was an aspect of visual culture that brought together all Muslims.[195] In addition to this, as Porter notes, the written word as an aesthetic device has the potential to act as a gateway to a vast and very respected literary tradition which has distinguished Middle Eastern cultures over the centuries.[196] Script, therefore, with its appealing, recognisable aesthetic and its potential to embody meaningful signs of continuity between Islamic past and contemporary artistic production, became the most important collecting criteria for the Museum in the first two decades of its collecting activities.

The 2006 *Word into Art* exhibition brought together for the first time the fruits of this work and celebrated script in many forms.[197] Visitor number surpassed Porter's expectations by a wide margin.[198] Her efforts in building the Museum's contemporary collection became quickly recognised as a leading and pioneering venture in professional circles, and became a benchmark for other institutions, including Tate and the V&A.[199] Contemporary Middle Eastern art as a market and field of research was also growing substantially at this time.[200] Exposure and success were naturally followed by criticism, especially around the notion of continuity and the relationship between tradition and modernity. Monia Abdallah specifically discusses the complexity of building a coherent narrative when collecting and displaying modern and contemporary objects within the context of an Islamic Art department. Her core argument is that the very notion of "contemporary Islamic art" — which, as discussed in the previous chapter was introduced by Wijdan Ali in the late 1980s and used progressively more widely in the first decade of this century — is inherently problematic.[201] The context of historic collections at the British Museum implies that

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[195] Rawson (in Carey), 1991, p. 39

[196] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018

[197] The exhibition will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

[198] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018

[199] At this time the V&A was discussing the concept of the Jameel Prize with the Jameel family and Tate had started to collect the first pieces from the region, as discussed later in the chapter.

[200] See Novak and Razowksy, 2003 for an early example and also Eigner, 2010; Keshmirshekan, 2011, 2015; Downey, 2016; McDonald-Toone, 2019. At this time a number of private collectors, such as Saeb Eigner and Maryam Eisler - both connected to Porter - started to gain prominence, and the commercial market showed significant signs of significant movement with the creation of Art Dubai and the first successful auctions at Christie's and Sotheby's held in Dubai. The importance of patrons and the commercial sector will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

[201] Cfr. Ali, 1989

modern and contemporary expressions are an extension of Islamic Art in time and, in Abdallah's view, the presumption of a certain "Islamic essence" and the existence in the historical present of an Islamic civilisation. The author is critical of the discontinuity between the narrative and the reality of the public perception generated by this curatorial choice.[202] Whilst specifically focused on the British Museum, her argument echoes the wider discourse in identity politics introduced in the previous chapter, as seen for example in Shabout's response to Wijdan's notion of "contemporary Islamic Art" with the similarly problematic notion of pan-Arab aesthetics.[203]

Collecting focus and policy at the British Museum shifted significantly in 2009 with the creation of a dedicated patrons group in support of acquisitions. With the new influx of funds, restrictions on medium were relaxed and mixed media pieces and photography entered the collection, alongside an increasing number of three-dimensional objects. The new funds not only enabled growth in the collection, but also additional focus on that early principle of art that 'speaks' of the region. The latter criteria was always important, yet arguably just as much as aesthetic typology (works on paper featuring the Arabic script). Etel Adnan's *Nahar Mubarak (Blessed Day)* (Figure 2.3) is an example of early acquisitions that further illustrates this point. Using the leporello technique as a medium — as in her work *Allah* (Figure 1.6) — Adnan transcribed in this piece the poem *Blessed Day* by Lebanese poet Nelly Salameh Amri, written during the Lebanese Civil war. Adnan's elegant mark-making and colour symbolism is combined here with her handwriting and the intimacy of the folding book. The poetry and the allegory of war it contains express the impact of the conflict on a deep personal level for the artist and the Lebanese people. The work acts as a personal as much as historical document of an event that shaped and shook Lebanese society and therefore acquires particular importance within the collection for its narrative as much as for its aesthetics and choice of medium.[204]

The popularity of *Word into Art* also played a fundamental role in shifting acquisition policy away from paper and script. Issues of politics and identity pervaded the exhibition: not only in its dedicated section "History, Politics and Identity" but also in the other sections. Adnan's piece for example was exhibited in a section named "Literature". Despite the overarching focus of the exhibition being on script, it became obvious to Porter that the themes presented in this section resonated strongly with the public and were central to the practice of many artists who were being researched for the collection.[205] The focus of the collecting policy at this point turned increasingly to the historical significance of prospective

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[202] Abdallah, 2010, p.92.

[203] Shabout, 2007. Also cfr. Firat, 2009 on the politics around the notion of 'contemporary Islamic Art'.

[204] See Shoaib, 2003 on Adnan's leporellos. Also Accad, 1990; Ouyang, 2002 and Maja and Amireh, 2015 on her wider practice. A reference list of Adnan's own publication is also offered by the artist on her website http://www.eteladnan.com/publications/, accessed March 2020.

[205] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018

acquisitions, their documentary value and ability to tell an important story about the society (or community or individuals) they represented, regardless of medium or aesthetic choices.[206] It was a natural evolution according to Porter, as it allowed the collection to further consolidate its position firmly within the broader narrative of the historical museum. Furthermore, it provided the British Museum with effective proof that understanding contemporary concerns through art objects had the power to bring historical collections back to life and maintain the relevance of the Museum in contemporary discourse. From 2009 more audacious collecting choices followed. One such example was a series of photographs taken by Saudi artist Manal AlDowayan called *If I Forget you, don't Forget me* (Figure 2.4). AlDowayan's series could be almost described as a document of documents. Through photographic records of personal archives and interviews, the series explores the stories of "oil families": people from different parts of Saudi Arabia who became employed by the national oil company Aramco and witnessed firsthand the development of an industry that would change the course of Saudi history. Interestingly, whilst discussing her artistic practice more widely during our interview, AlDowayan mentioned that the British Museum has been interested in collecting only "works that they feel are documents of the moment", which echoes Porter's criteria discussed above.[207] The artist's work has been regularly collected by Porter for the British Museum and the Museum's collection includes twenty-four of her pieces as of January 2021.[208]

The new focus in collecting policy also brought Porter to reconsider the importance of her early collecting efforts. In her 2009 publication, the way the early museum policy is described shifts away from notions of continuity as intrinsic in the acquisition of works using the Arabic script. Nearly twenty years after the earlier published comments on the origins of the contemporary collection, Porter describes the impetus in contemporary collecting in the late 1980s and early 1990s as sparked by a recognition that contemporary art "demonstrated interesting and complex relationships with the region, its past histories and its arts".[209] The connection between the collecting policy and the broader remit of the Museum — expanding beyond calligraphy — is also restated, offering new insight into what are still today some underlying principles in the policy. In addition to the criterion of 'documentary value', the Museum took on a more engaged role in providing a platform for a group of artists who had until that point not enjoyed exposure to a large international audience of the kind that would visit the British Museum.[210] Porter suggests that the desire

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[206] Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, and Shabout, 2009, p.33

[207] Interview with Manal AlDowayan, 2018.

[208] Amongst these are two ceramic Doves which are currently on display in the new permanent galleries of the Islamic World (2016,6055.1 and 2). See Stapleton, 2012 and Bardaouil, 2014 on AlDowayan's wider practice.

[209] Porter in Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi and Shabout (eds.), 2009, p.30

[210] In relation to this Porter also notes in the article the importance of coordination across museums as successfully exemplified by the establishment of the Jameel Prize, for which she was widely consulted (Ibid, p.34. Also confirmed in Interview with Tim Stanley, 2018).

to be more inclusive also meant that the ideas of ‘continuity’ became secondary with respect to the historical significance and documentary value of acquisitions, which continues to be the case today.[211]

Contemporary Middle Eastern art collections at the British Museum have thus been repositioned away from a linear historical framework — defined by continuity between past and present expressed in the acquisition of script-based pieces — into a geopolitical one — defined by a desire to represent historical specificities concerning the region and its relationship with the Western world. This important shift is embodied in the new Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World, which, as mentioned above, opened to the public in October 2018. The transition from an aesthetic based on traditional script to one based on geopolitics however is potentially problematic: whilst giving more space to the historical context surrounding the artworks, it simply replaces one Euro-centric perspective with another. The display in the Albukhary Gallery (Figure 2.5) is organised according to a matrix structure that brings together objects and stories chronologically — through a series of display cases creating a path in the centre of the rooms — and thematically through wall cases on the sides. The latter complement and offer more in-depth perspectives on the collections: stories of pivotal points in the history of Islamic civilisations, important historical locations or specific aspects of a medium or craft techniques.[212] The gallery is the first reconceptualisation of the Islamic Art collections since the opening of the John Addis Gallery in 1989. Like its predecessor, it contains a section dedicated to temporary displays, however at the same time a small selection of objects from the modern and contemporary collection is integrated into the permanent displays as well as featured in a dedicated, large section at the culmination of the chronological path laid out through the two galleries.

The new galleries offer key insights into two important areas relevant for the purpose of this discussion: first, the position of the contemporary collections within the wider context of historical collections in the Department of the Middle East; second, the changing narrative deployed in the interpretation of these works. The gallery also has a distinguishing feature that sets it apart from most similar Islamic Art galleries in the Western world and in the Middle East: its expanded focus on the Islamic world as geographically defined in contemporary discourse i.e. including the cultures of Muslim-majority nations in South and South-East Asia as well as sub-Saharan Africa. Part of this shift is connected with the new partnership that the Museum established with the Malaysia-based Albukhary Foundation, the principal funder of the redevelopment project.[213] The new display, therefore, presents new challenges in relation to contemporary art. First, the presentation of a permanent display framing the emergence of contemporary practices as a pivotal point in the historical development of Islamic Art. Whilst being

[211] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018

[212] See also Knell, 2014

[213] A more in-depth discussion on the role of the foundation will be presented in Chapter Three.

successful in revealing the diversity of artistic practices beyond script-based works, the gallery precludes the possibility of contemporary works to belong to other histories: being those of the diasporas to which many of the artists represented belong, or those of the people and places beyond the Middle East that have influenced their practice. Second, extending the regional focus of the collections to the wider Islamic world has potentially an uncertain impact on future collecting policy. Any collecting initiatives focused on contemporary art from countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia are likely to result in reductive approaches and potentially misleading associations between these nations and the Middle East, should the curatorial framework remain anchored to the notion of shared Islamic heritage. For the moment however, the Museum's official narrative maintains that the contemporary collection remains focused on the Middle East.[214]

The modern and contemporary art section includes a thematic display case focusing on artists' books, which is preceded by a historical review of the art of the book in three separate display cases in the centre of the room. The books exhibited include Adnan's folded book discussed above, which has now been re-contextualised since its earlier presentation in the *Word into Art* exhibition. Where in the earlier exhibition it was presented as an example of interconnection between Lebanese literature, war and artistic practices, in the new display the focus is on the medium of the artist's book in the Middle East and its roots in book making and illustrating traditions from the Islamic world. Despite the great variety of themes — from personal to political — and aesthetic codes — from purely abstract to modernist-influenced aesthetics —, this collection display strongly emphasises continuity as well as presenting a relatively linear historical connection between traditional book making and contemporary artist-book practices.

A number of other objects from the contemporary collections are also displayed individually, such as AlDowayan's doves sculptures mentioned above (cfr. footnote 208) and a work by Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (b.1937): a linocut entitled *Who is this Hossein the world is crazy about?* (Figure 2.6). Zenderoudi's print — produced in the late 1950s — depicts scenes from the battle of Karbala in a 'coffeehouse' painting style, a traditional form of narrative oil paintings which became popular in Iran during the Qajar period and was often painted by untrained artists.[215] The artist is widely recognised today as a pioneer of Iranian modern art, even though he has been living in Paris most of his life. To celebrate its acquisition, the Museum hosted an event on 12 May 2013 with the artist present. During the event, art historian Marie Rivière Zenderoudi — also the artist's wife — argued that Zenderoudi's practice ought to be positioned within the context of, and in a continuum with, French modern art, rather than the Iranian tradition, mentioning Degas and Matisse as references during her talk.

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[214] Cfr. press release. British Museum, 2015

[215] Cfr. Zarei, Gholamreza, and Hamidimanesh, 2018

The debate that followed revealed an important tension that concerns several artists represented in the British Museum's contemporary collection today. On the one hand, the desire to be part of a prestigious institution; on the other hand, the positioning within a specific institutional framework — and its historical, geographical, cultural and religious connotations — in which they may not recognise themselves.[216] In Zenderoudi's case, the entire theme of the piece is connected to the history of Islam, and perhaps the question may not be its actual positioning within the gallery — which is thematically and historically coherent — but the way the display could effect public perception of his wider practice, which explores themes beyond Islamic history. Similarly, in the case of the artists' books display, the emphasis of Islamic history over other aspects highlighted in the work leaves little space for an appreciation of other historical, social and individual contexts in which the works were produced.

The new display ends with a site-specific commission from artist Idris Khan, *21 Stones* (Figure 2.7). The set of twenty-one hand-stamped works occupying — in a seemingly scattered fashion — an entire wall in the gallery, evokes the Stoning of the Devil during the ritual of *Hajj*. Each piece on display emulates the impact of the stone with the wall and the resulting energy that is released. Khan uses lines of poetry starting from the centre of each print to present the viewer with a double perspective, at the same time personal and performative, on the throwing of the pebbles in Mecca. Khan's installation is transformed into a ritualistic space where audiences have an opportunity to pause on their journey through the history of Islamic civilisation and consider their personal connection and place within it. The piece is significant not only for its symbolic power — expressed in the attempt to represent an aspect of a sacred Islamic ritual within the gallery — but also for its significance as the first contemporary commission of the Museum specifically intended for a permanent display. It reveals the confidence Porter and the Museum have built up over nearly three decades of collecting, and the prominence that contemporary art has gained in representing Islamic cultures within the Museum. Critical reviews of the galleries were generally very positive and in most cases mentioned Khan's piece as a highlight. They acknowledged the new perspective adopted by the expanded geographical reach and the rich diversity of objects and artefacts presented, with Jonathan Jones in *The Guardian* going as far as to suggest that the galleries "present an alternative history of the world".[217]

This section has shown how the principles of collecting contemporary Middle Eastern art at the British Museum have evolved over the last thirty years and continue to do so, reacting to developments in artistic practices as much as historical developments in the region. The most significant shift in the curatorial framework driving the collection was led by Porter at the start of this century. This saw the collection expanding beyond calligraphy and script into a broader scope highlighting more and more the documentary value of the artworks

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[216] A similar example will be discussed also in Chapter Three in relation to artist Afruz Amighi

[217] The Times, 2018. The Evening Standard, 2018; The Guardian, 2018

acquired and the historical significance of the stories they tell. In relation to historical collections, the discussion highlighted how, particularly in the nineteenth century, state policy in cultural and foreign affairs often aligned, influencing the curatorial choices of the museum and the type of objects it acquired. Non-Western objects arrived primarily along imperial trade routes and were presented as part of a wider strategy for geopolitical and cultural dominance. After a long hiatus in contemporary collecting following the fall of the Ottoman empire at the start of the twentieth century, a new contemporary collecting initiative was promoted by the Museum in 1990, which became a watershed moment and formed the basis of a broader reevaluation in relation to how the Museum represents Middle Eastern cultures. Porter was given the freedom to acquire works according to set criteria, with funding and influence coming from private patrons and collectors. She dedicated most of her efforts to collecting and exhibitions, rather than formalising a collecting policy or challenging the complex relationship between Islamic and contemporary art. Despite independent criticism, the new permanent galleries continued to perpetrate a vision of contemporary art from the Middle East as an evolution of Islamic art, a reductive regional approach reflecting an evolution of a colonial, Orientalist approach that had been established with the founding collections of the Museum. A similar dynamic was also at play at the V&A, where nonetheless more active engagement with contemporary art started much later — in 2009 — with the launch of the Jameel Prize. The next section will look at the history of the V&A's Middle Eastern collections from early 'Oriental' acquisitions until today.

2.2 Victoria and Albert Museum

This section will explore the evolution of collections of art from the Middle East at the V&A throughout its history. It will start by discussing early attitudes to art and design from the 'Orient' by key individuals that shaped the foundational principles of the Museum in the nineteenth century and the legacy of their later choices. In particular it will look at how Middle Eastern collections were represented within an administrative structure that for over a century only differentiated objects on the basis of material and technique. After introducing the context in which a dedicated Middle East team was created in 2002, the discussion will continue to outline key acquisition principles and processes focused on modern and contemporary art and design, through the analysis of internal records and interviews. Finally, the section will conclude with an overview of instances of short term displays and initiatives that have supported and complemented acquisitions since the appointment of a dedicated curator for the contemporary Middle East.

Following the commercial success of the Great Exhibition of 1851, the South Kensington Museum was established in 1852 first and foremost as a learning institution dedicated to the advancement of craft, design and manufacture.[218] Such ambition had a significant impact on acquisitions policy and on the organisation of the collections in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Oriental objects played an important role in the foundational

[218] The name Victoria and Albert Museum was adopted since 1899 (Burton, 1999).

collection of the Museum. Primarily, they functioned as illustrative examples of the application of principles of ornament considered aesthetically more advanced than British and European traditions.[219] Influential opinions at this time suggested that British design was lagging behind and losing international standing, as emphasised in Richard Redgrave's *Report on Design* and *On the Necessity of Principles in Teaching Design.*[220] The Department of Practical Art was then established in 1852 by the British government with the objective to improve art and design education in the country. It was headed by Henry Cole, with the assistance of Redgrave and Owen Jones.[221] The three officials were given a budget of £5000 to make acquisitions from the Great Exhibition of 1851.[222] The acquisitions were originally intended for the Museum of Manufactures, a museum connected with the Government School of Design, founded in 1837 also under Cole's direction and situated at Somerset House. No specific geographical criterion was formally adopted in the selection process, but the geographical remit of the Great Exhibition was already very specific, reflecting the span of the empire's control and influence, with a specific section dedicated to 'British Dependencies' (the largest exhibit of which was the one managed by the East India Company) and other national exhibits such as Egypt and Persia (Iran).[223] Nearly two thirds of these acquisitions came from India, Tunisia, and Turkey, with India's share being by far the largest.[224]

John Charles Robinson, appointed by Cole in 1853 as the keeper of the collections in the Museum of Manufactures, contributed to the development of an acquisition policy with a focus on materials-based categorisation, which was already reflected in the collections when they were moved to South Kensington in 1857. Anthony Burton remarks that there was resistance towards much policy formalisation at this point, even though some specific criteria were indeed set. These included "historical significance […] aesthetic quality; technical interest; […]; provenance; novelty".[225] There was tension between highlighting the functional value of objects and the need to tell a broader story through their context

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[219] Thomas, 2011, p.91

[220] Redgrave, 1852 and 1853

[221] Henry Cole (1808-1882) was the founding director of the South Kensington Museum. Richard Redgrave (1804-1888) was the Museum's first Keeper of Paintings. Owen Jones (1809-1874) was the author of *The Grammar of Ornament*, first published in 1856, a seminal book on decorative arts in which he dedicates ten out of twenty chapters to non-Western designs (Jones, 1868). He saw the Gothic Revival and Neo-classical forms as derivative and argued that a new aesthetic taking inspiration from the Orient would be more likely to generate original results (Thomas, 1999, p.96).

[222] Department of Practical Art, 1852. In today's money this is approximately £400,000 (crf. historical currency converter provided by the National Archives https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/, accessed March 2020)

[223] On the reach and influence of the British Empire at the time of the Great Exhibition see Low and Porter, 1999; Metha, 1999 and Dentith, 2006. Also the catalogue of the exhibition can be consulted digitally through Spicer Brothers, 1851

[224] Burton, 1999, p.254. Over 25% of the budget was spent on objects from India, and in total foreign - non British - acquisitions accounted for over 80% of the expenditure. See also Victoria and Albert Museum and Bryant, 2011, p.128 for views of the Indian, Turkish and Chinese courts inside Crystal Palace.

[225] Burton,1999, p.38

and history. In the first half century of the Museum's life, the former approach prevailed. The importance of aesthetic connoisseurship over scholarly research, as the prism through which objects were valued, deeply influenced the practice of collecting at this time, as already discussed in the context of the British Museum. Individual appreciation and access, therefore, had a great influence on what was collected, often resulting in a relatively unstructured process of acquisition research compared to what we may expect today. This is especially true of Oriental collections, where information on provenance of objects and the context of their production would not always be accessible or reliable, especially when objects did not arrive to the Museum directly from their location of origin but through auctions or the secondary market.

There is no doubt that the Museum was also an important political project. Cole saw technical education and the raising of 'public taste' as complementary foundations of his strategy and in fact a duty for a national institution.[226] Furthermore, ideas of cultural and economic advancement proceeded in parallel as they reflected the far reach of the empire's trade routes along which rich collections travelled to England. The dual perspective, the aesthetic and the political, were inextricably linked and embodied in the collections. To borrow Preziosi's term, acquisitions became "object lessons" where the lesson is not simply in their instructional value, but reflects the wider story of "aesthetic, ethical, political and historical worth" they embody.[227] Collections at the South Kensington Museum were effectively considered to be resources to be drawn from colonies and controlled territories with the view to advancing the industrial and economic capabilities of the state. The boundary between the art object and the object of trade was blurred. Whilst this blurring arguably aimed to elevate craft to a higher status of creative enterprise, it also offered an opportunity to connect knowledge acquisition and land control in pursuit of a more wholistic form of Imperialist dominance.[228]

It is therefore highly significant that the Museum's earliest acquisitions contained such a significant proportion of Oriental objects. The politics and aesthetics of the 'Orient' were reflected here in the acquisition strategy: by collecting Oriental objects merely for their aesthetic qualities, the Museum ignored their context of production and historical significance, thus confining them to a marginal space within the grand narrative of industrial advancement it was promoting. An example from this early group of acquisitions

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[226] The idea was influenced by Gottfried Semper. In *Science, Industry and Art* Semper calls public collections "schools of public taste". See 'Science, Industry, and Art', in: Harry Francis Mallgrave and Wolfgang Herrmann, eds, Gottfried Semper: The four elements of architecture and other writings, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. p. 160. Cole repeats this point in the introduction of the catalogue of the Great Exhibition acquisitions: V&A, 1852, p.iii.

[227] Prezioni, 2006, p.50. Also cfr. Barringer and Flynn, 2012 for a collection of perspectives on material culture in colonial times, and Mathur, 2007 with specific reference to India.

[228] See also Barringer and Flynn, 2012 and Leoni, 2014 for a broader discussion on the role of art as commodity in the context of the Great Exhibition.

are seventeen Tunisian textiles including scarfs, belts and carpets.[229] The original catalogue of the acquisition included a short description of each object focusing exclusively on their formal and aesthetic qualities. Whilst such descriptions are not generally reflected in contemporary object records, their focus remains predominantly on their aesthetic qualities.[230] The blanket in Figure 2.8, for example, is described in the Museum's database with references to the width of the parallel lines, the succession of geometric shapes and the alternation of its colours. In only two out of seventeen cases — the veil in Figure 2.9 and the sash in Figure 2.10 — contemporary records have been updated to offer additional context in addition to the formal qualities of the objects. Such context includes a brief explanation of how and when the veil would be worn by a woman in public, thus with a focus on function in its original context of use. In this instance it is about the workings of the traditional workshop of a *mu'allim* (teacher) and the production process, which extends the V&A's long-term interest in how its objects were made.[231] The new contextual information is the fruit of a Heritage Lottery Fund grant received by the Museum with the objective of giving greater visibility to African collections.[232] It is common for historical objects to be the subject of further research in connection with new opportunities for displays or for publications, such as in this case. As the following discussion will show, all new acquisitions today require more extensive contextual research prior to being approved.

Attitudes towards Oriental objects at the time of the Great Exhibition were evidently ambivalent: how could the sense of admiration for Oriental aesthetics and manufacturing skills coexist with the notion of Oriental civilisations as inferior? The answer is partly to be found in the complex relationship between official policy and individual curators.[233] Cultural policy, in this moment in history, developed through a political context where "imperial ideology assigned a marginal and subordinate, and yet essential, role to such material within the 'universal' Western canon".[234] Coombes further elaborates on this point, arguing that the "material culture from [Oriental] countries functioned primarily as signifiers of British sovereignty" and were part of a wider propagandistic effort that reinforced

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[229] V&A object numbers: 761-1852; 763-1852; 808-1852; 808A-1852; 809-1852; 829-1852; 830-1852; 836-1852; 837-1852; 838-1852; 1384-1852; 1385-1852; 1386-1852; 1387-1852; 1388-1852; 1389-1852;

[230] Department of Practical art,1852. Some contemporary records have a much shorter description compared to the original catalogue: some have only a single sentence stating the type of object, material and provenance.

[231] Cfr. V&A collections online: object number 830-1852 and 809-1852

[232] Interview with Mariam Rosser Owen, 2019. Stylianou, 2012, p.66 provides a description of these objects and is the contributor of the new information.

[233] Which throughout the second half of the nineteenth century would apply to South Kensington Museum and British Museum alike, especially considering their professional connection as discussed in the previous section.

[234] Mitter and Clunas, 1997, p.221

stereotypes of these cultures.[235] Therefore, despite claims of objectivity and an interest in form and manufacturing techniques, the space within which Oriental collections were built was not politically neutral.

The argument of a 'genuine curiosity' and admiration on the part of curators and connoisseurs was, on the other hand, proposed by Abraham Thomas, V&A curator and subsequently director of the Sir John Soane Museum in London. Thomas discusses early attitudes to Eastern manufacture and argues that a sense of deep admiration was supported by a genuine exchange and reciprocal learning between East and West.[236] He looks at the example of architecture and the case of Mirza Akbar's architectural drawings, acquired by the South Kensington Museum in 1875 through the initiative of Caspar Purdon Clarke (1846-1911), an architect himself and director of the Museum from 1896 to 1905. Akbar was an architect in the Qajar court of Persia at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the drawings from his studio suggest that he worked on assignments for large, opulent buildings. The acquisition, a small selection of which is displayed on a rotating basis in the Islamic Middle East Gallery today, included 256 detailed working drawings (Figure 2.11). Many show clearly the process behind the realisation of the final designs, suggesting that Clarke would have seen their educational value. Thomas argues that acquisitions such as this suggested a sense of respect in Britain towards Persian architectural tradition.[237] The argument, evidently, lacks an acknowledgment of the unequal relationship between Clarke and Akbar. It is also interesting to note that the acquisition was mostly the result of chance, as Clarke — stationed in Iran at the time of the acquisition, working on the refurbishment of the British Embassy — obtained it as a gift from the master builder he had employed, as a thank you for some lessons he had offered on European architectural traditions (a circumstance that cannot be described as the result of 'genuine curiosity'). Furthermore, following the gift, there is no evidence that Clarke further studied the designs of Akbar or that he sought to extend the acquisitions to other drawings or images that would have shown a complete building designed by the Iranian architect. Whilst Thomas argues that with figures like Clarke and Owen Jones "the status of 'Eastern' collections was elevated beyond simply the 'curious and exotic' to that of a practical and inspirational source of raw design material for contemporary manufacturers and students",[238] it must be noted how the interest that the Museum and its representatives had in such material was very narrowly focused on the decorative. This point is quite openly articulated by Cole himself, in the notes to the first catalogue of acquisitions, where he states that specimens "from the East, illustrate correct principles of

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[235] Coombes, 2004, p. 263. Rydell also argues that this attitude towards Oriental cultures was already embedded in the narrative of the Great Exhibition and the surrounding literature promoting the event, which provide context to the establishment of the South Kensington Museum (Rydell, 2006).

[236] Thomas, 2011, p.95

[237] Ibid. Also cfr. Carey, 2017

[238] Thomas,2011, p.97

ornament but are of rude workmanship; whilst others, chiefly European specimens, show superior skill in workmanship, but are often defective in the principles of their design".[239] The notion of superior workmanship was strictly linked to ideas of advanced civilisation and progress resulting from organised labour. In an 1922 paper on the relationship between art and guilds, architect and architectural historian William Lethaby argued that only the latter, together with extensive formal training of master-craftsmen, could generate quality artefacts.[240] The extent to which such progress was a result of the economic exploitation of the colonies was not (and arguably still is not) part of the Museum narrative.[241] Objects that may have been able to tell this story were not researched, acquired or interpreted in that way, and the influence of such narrow perception on the wider positioning of Islamic art as inferior to European art in the ranking of public taste proposed by the institutions also significantly influenced the framing of contemporary productions in later years.

The twentieth century saw an increased effort in organising the collection, which was expressed most notably in two significant rearrangements, in 1909 and 1950. The need for a reorganisation of the collection at the start of the twentieth century was mostly due to its relatively uncontrolled growth in the period between the foundation of the Museum and 1910. The collections from the Middle East also grew significantly during this time, mostly through large acquisitions such as the Iranian collection brought back to the UK by Robert Murdoch Smith in the 1870s and 1880s and the bequest of the George Salting collection in 1910.[242] The focus on consolidation and reorganisation also meant that proactive collecting efforts in the twentieth century, especially of contemporary objects, essentially stopped following the first rearrangement. Such effort reflected the focus on materials and techniques favoured by the nineteenth-century administrators of the Museum.[243] A formal arrangement by materials was in fact already introduced within the organisational structure of the Museum by Clarke, who created five departments — sculpture, woodwork, metalwork, ceramics, and textiles — run by staff specialising in each material.[244] The

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[239] Department of Practical Arts, 1852, p.IV

[240] Lethaby, 1922, p.206. See also Michele, 2014 for a more recent discussion on the relationship between civilisation and labour.

[241] For a broader discussion on ideas, ethics and aesthetics of civilisation see Hall, 2002; Clark, 2005; Carpenter, 2008 and Stephens and Stonard, 2015. On the relationship between the notion of civilisation and Imperial history see Braudel, 2002; Guest, 2007; and Fisk, 2005 particularly in relation to the Middle East.

[242] Robert Murdoch Smith (1835-1900) brought a very significant collection of Persian objects to the museum in the 1870s accumulated whilst stationed in Iran (Burton,1999, p.120). See Carey, 2017 on the V&A's Iranian collections. George Salting (1835-1909) was a wealthy collector and connoisseur of - amongst other things - Oriental ceramics, who bequeathed his collection in three parts to the British Museum, V&A and the National Gallery: see Victoria and Albert Museum, 1911 and Percival, 1949.

[243] Burton, 1999, p. 47

[244] Burton, 2015. The 'C' prefix on objects catalogued by the department of Ceramics indicated a very clear distinction made by the curators at the start of the twentieth century between porcelain and pottery, the latter indicating anything that was not porcelain (Interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019).

rearrangement of 1909 reflected these new categories in the collection displays, and the Oriental collections were scattered across the material-based displays with the only notable exception being the Indian collections. The latter were already a unified body of objects in the India Museum, which had been created by the East India Company in 1798 as the "Oriental Repository".[245] A significant section of the India Museum was transferred to the South Kensington Museum in 1879. In the lead up to the rearrangement there were calls for the aggregation of the Oriental collections together with the India Museum, since there was a wide recognition that the size and variety of the collection was unrivalled in the rest of the world; however, these calls were ultimately unsuccessful.[246]

As outlined earlier, the Middle East as a historical category simply did not exist in the nineteenth century, therefore there was no specific acquisition or display policy with a focus on the region as defined today. The scattering of the collections made the historical context of objects even more secondary. Material-based displays became maps for a geography of style rather than paths through the history of cultures. Keepers assumed that the public would either already have some knowledge of such history, or be inspired to find out more after their visit. In terms of the Museum's display strategy, the 'Orient' became a shorthand for a particular style, pattern, or technique. It became effectively equivalent to 'ornamental'. As mere aesthetic references, Oriental objects remained in the realm of the decorative and hence — as the 'other' in Said's terms — a realm on the margins. They were denied the opportunity to carry their own history and the interpretation of their own makers, whilst acquiring new significance as products of the empire. The 1909 ceramics galleries in Figure 2.12 show how these assumptions translated also into display practices. Geography and politics merged in the display: Middle Eastern objects at one physical extremity of the run of galleries and the East Asian ceramics at the other, as the two main traditions from which European ceramics derived; they flowed towards each other and culminated in the middle with the eighteenth-century British industrial ceramics at Staffordshire, suggesting that British ceramics surpassed the traditions that inspired them.[247]

The classification according to materials was much criticised in the interwar period and the Museum launched a new project after the Second World War to establish the most important pieces in the collection. This was at the basis of a new taxonomy which saw the display of 'primary' collections being separated by culture and 'secondary' collections remaining organised by materials. The first time this new binary arrangement was put into practice was not until 1950, when the museum reopened after the Second World War. In

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[245] Cfr. Guide to records in the V&A Archive relating to the India Museum and India Objects (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2020)

[246] Burton, 1999, p.120. Also cfr. Mathur, 2007 and Dohmen, 2018

[247] The description of the ceramic displays was provided during an interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen (Curator Middle East, V&A) in 2019.

these new ‘gateway’ galleries a decision was taken to split Western and Eastern collections.[248] At a time when the decline of the British Empire was all but certain, the Eastern galleries — with a certain nostalgia, I would argue — recreated a cultural map of its regions of influence. The rearrangement included a new Islamic Gallery, which at the time was the first of its kind (the John Addis Gallery of Islamic Art at the British Museum would not open until 1989) and showed to the public one of the most significant collections of Islamic artefacts in the world. The new display was organised chronologically and geographically, and presented to the public a new set of relationships between different forms of craft, highlighting characteristics of different styles and traditions within the Islamic world and bringing together in closer proximity the most valued pieces of woodwork, ceramics, metalwork and textiles in the museum’s collection. The text accompanying the opening of the gallery included a description of its geographical reach: “work done in those lands of Asia, North Africa and Spain whose civilisation was based on Islam”.[249] It provided new context on the historical links between the art of different countries, their distinctive as well as unifying characters. The new focus offered by the gallery, however, did not immediately translate into new collecting efforts directed at contemporary art or artefacts. The Museum appointed its first specialist curator of Islamic Art — Oliver Watson — in 1973 (focusing exclusively on ceramics). Watson is an interesting figure because alongside his work on the Islamic collections — where he contributed significant acquisitions of historical objects — he also developed an interest in contemporary production, but only specifically of British studio pottery. He collected several hundred pieces of contemporary ceramics from Britain, yet there are no records of interest or research focusing on contemporary art from the Middle East or any other part of the Islamic world.[250] It was only following the redevelopment of the Islamic Middle East Gallery, at the start of this century, that interest in the contemporary production of the Middle East started to grow. Curators focusing on regional collections were consolidated in 2002 into a new Asia department, under a broader administrative restructuring implemented by then-director Mark Jones (b.1951). This included for the first time a team of curators specialising in the Middle East. Such a shift had a major influence on collecting policy and allowed acquisition research to be undertaken from both angles (material and aesthetic as well as cultural and historical) and with a specific focus on the region.[251]

Much like the situation at the British Museum, the V&A Middle East team has never formalised a collecting policy for contemporary art, even though a set of agreed principles exists and is generally followed by curators.It should be noted that collecting activities focused on the Middle East are not centralised or controlled exclusively by the Middle East section of the Asia Department. Curators working here are usually consulted, yet

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[248] Cfr. Crill and Stanley, 2006 for a more extensive discussion on the history of the 1950’s galleries.

[249] Victoria and Albert Museum, 1908-50 (Press release, December 1949)

[250] Interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019

[251] Ibid.

acquisition proposals can be initiated from anywhere within the Museum. Mark Jones's new organisational structure had broadened the remit of the old material-based departments and created new centres of cultural expertise.[252] The Word and Image Department had in fact already made an acquisition of drawings by Egyptian artist Susan Hefuna in 2002 (Figure 2.13).[253] The drawings are inspired by traditional wooden window screens (*mashrabiyyas*) and are a comment by the artist on the home as a gendered space, where the screen allows those inside — usually women — to look outside without being seen.[254] At the same time, the aesthetics of the drawings connect with existing objects in the historic collection, which include photographs and architectural drawings of traditional wooden windows in Cairo in the nineteenth century as well as actual examples of *mashrabiyyas*. Hefuna's drawings raise questions of gender identity relevant to contemporary society (not only in Egypt) whilst creating a new liminal space between tradition and modernity. Such themes have recurred in more recent years and will feature prominently in future acquisitions, as well as in the exhibitions of the Jameel Prize, as the next chapter will show.

In its early days, the Middle East team focused primarily on the redisplay of the Islamic Middle East collections culminating with the opening of the Jameel Gallery in 2006.[255] With the exception of a contemporary commission to mark the opening of the gallery — discussed below — a more sustained focus on contemporary art came only with the encouragement and support of Mohammed Jameel (b.1956) and ultimately with the inauguration of the Jameel Prize in 2009, a competition for (living) artists interested in exploring Islamic tradition through their practice.[256] In relation to collecting, the creation of a new role, the Jameel Curator of Contemporary Middle East, shortly after the first edition of the Prize, was a key event as it created a specialised professional figure in the Museum, which today remains the only one of this kind in UK public museums.[257] The role was established in 2010 and the first appointed curator was Salma Tuqan, who was in-post

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[252] Ibid. The other newly established departments during Jones's tenure were Sculpture, Metalwork, Ceramics and Glass; Furniture, Textiles and Fashion; Word and Image; and Theatre and Performance**.**

[253] Over time the department also has built a significant collection of graphic material by North African artists: interview with Gill Saunders, 2019. Saunders is Senior Curator of Prints, in the Word & Image Department, V&A.

[254] V&A Collections Online, object record ME E.838-2002

[255] The opening of the gallery also became the occasion for the commissioning of a new work from artist Monir Farmanfarmaian, which will be discussed later in this section.

[256] Mohammed Abdul Latif Jameel is the founder of Abdul Latif Jameel, a Saudi conglomerate running several businesses in the real estate, financial services and automotive industries. As a philanthropist, Jameel is the founder of Community Jameel and Art Jameel, two non profit organisations dedicated to community and cultural projects respectively.

[257] The role is also funded by the Jameel family through an endowment (Interview with Salma Tuqan, 2018). Also worth noting how a similar role existed from 2008 to 2012 at the British Museum - the Eisler Curator of Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art - which was also funded by British Museum patron Maryam Eisler. However this role no longer exists as of 2019. The role of patrons in creating curatorial capacity within museums is further discussed in Chapter Four.

until 2019.[258] Initially, the role did not have a specific focus on collecting and was primarily established to curate the exhibitions of the Jameel Prize. Whilst the Museum has regularly collected from the shortlists of the Prize, a formal collecting strategy connected with the Prize has never been implemented.[259] The original vision of Mohammed Jameel was that the Museum would acquire the winning piece of every competition.[260] The piece that won the first edition of the Prize, *1001 Pages* (Figure 3.9) by Afruz Amighi was indeed bought by the Museum.[261] For subsequent editions however, the Museum opted for a more flexible approach and established a non-binding option to acquire any of the shortlisted submissions, depending on affordability and connections with the collection.[262] This was important because the winner is not decided by the V&A, but by a changing panel of judges including professional figures from the art world and experts with an interest in the contemporary cultures of the region, hence to enforce the acquisition of the winner would have effectively relinquished control over acquisition decisions.[263]

Tuqan noted how the V&A had a longstanding relationship with the region but that there was a gap in engagement with contemporary cultural expressions.[264] Whilst the situation was similar at the British Museum, the latter had focused all its resources on building the collection, and therefore had run a smaller number of talks and events, primarily in connection with displays and exhibitions. Tuqan's approach, her primary focus not being to build a collection, was to generate broader engagement with and a platform for conversations about the region before defining a collecting strategy. Her previous experience of working directly with artists in a commercial, fast paced context at Art Dubai, arguably also contributed to the shaping of a curatorial approach for the museum based on smaller, time-based events and initiatives. Nonetheless, Tuqan also invested in longer term projects. An important aspect of this was the encouragement of scholarship. Tuqan noted how many publications from the region were out of print and embarked on a project to expand the collection of the National Art Library (housed at the V&A since 1852), often reaching out to individuals, institutions and artists connected with the region to seek

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[258] Tuqan previously worked as Head of Artists' Projects for Art Dubai, the Dubai-based contemporary art fair. After eight years at the V&A she is now the deputy director of the Delfina Foundation and the Jameel Curator post at the V&A is currently held by Rachel Dedman

[259] Interview with Tim Stanley, 2018

[260] Ibid.

[261] More details on this piece are included in the next chapter as part of a broader discussion of the first Jameel Prize exhibition (V&A object number ME.1-2010)

[262] Interview with Tim Stanley, 2018

[263] Ibid. It is also important to note that the practice of changing panel members with each edition also meant that the interpretation of the broader criteria of contemporary engagement with Islamic tradition would be reinterpreted each time in a different way. Further research would be needed to study the relationship between the jury composition and the resulting shortlist in all editions so far, and assess the impact of this on the museum's engagement with contemporary artists.

[264] Interview with Salma Tuqan, 2018

suggestions or donations.[265] The Library today holds over 600 publications gathered through this initiative.[266] Scholarship and broader engagement with practitioners from the region was also encouraged through conferences and study days, such as those titled *Style Cities* in 2013 and 2014, which focused respectively on the architectural history of Beirut and Casablanca.[267]

Tuqan also initiated smaller scale events, collaborations and commissions that would bring practitioners from the region closer to the Museum's audience on a more frequent basis, thus complementing the more significant programme of exhibitions associated with the Jameel Prize. Examples include the Friday *Lates* programme organised in connection with the opening of the *Light From The Middle East* exhibition on 30 November 2012.[268] Several artists from the region contributed to the programme, including the Syrian collective Masasit Mati. The latter presented a film called *Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator* (Figure 2.14), a satirical finger puppet show criticising the Assad regime and its role in the ongoing Syrian civil war, which received particular attention from the public and was later included in the temporary exhibition *Disobedient Objects*, held at the V&A from 26 July 2014 to 1 February 2015. Another example was Babak Golkar's intervention in connection with the *Night of Norouz Lates* event on 30 March 2012. His piece, *Mechanisms of Disorientation: towards a fragmented understanding* (Figure 2.15), was a site-specific installation especially commissioned by the Delfina Foundation and Magic of Persia. Using light and reflection created by a moving sculpture resembling a half disco ball, the piece aimed to reflect on the relationship between history and contemporaneity by intervening with a contemporary piece in a gallery occupied by historical objects and transforming these into fleeting reflections in space. Golkar had already participated in the Jameel Prize in 2011 with a piece also reflecting on the relationship between contemporary culture and tradition. The piece, titled *Negotiating the Space for Possible Coexistences No.5* (Figure 2.16), presented futuristic skyscrapers emerging from the flat geometry of a traditional Iranian carpet and was aptly titled to encourage reflection on the friction experienced when modernity meets tradition. These projects did not lead to acquisitions, yet Tuqan highlighted how institutional collaborations and commissioning became especially important because of the rarity of similar platforms in the region itself.[269]

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[265] Ibid.

[266] Cfr. Victoria and Albert Museum, 2020 (V&A Middle Eastern Art and Design today: National Art Library collecting programme). Also the British Museum Middle East department library holds hundreds of books covering contemporary art, even though the exact number of publications is not disclosed by the Museum.

[267] Cfr. Victoria and Albert Museum, 2020 (Style Cities)

[268] The exhibition is discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Details of the programme are published on the Museum's Facebook page. See Facebook (Victoria and Albert Museum), 2012

[269] Interview with Salma Tuqan, 2018

As the next section will show, a similar approach was also being developed at Tate Modern since the establishment of the Middle Eastern acquisition committee in 2009. More than the British Museum, the V&A and Tate aimed to position themselves as catalysts to activate new connections and collaborations amongst practising artists and ultimately to stimulate cultural exchange with the region. The approach taken in relation to contemporary Middle Eastern art and design diverged from the more traditional approach of 'collect-display-teach' formula which historical collections adopted, where the focus of public engagement is the object in the collection itself and public engagement focuses on object research through the presentation of text or lectures. This has influenced — and is currently still shaping — the Museum's acquisition policy as it makes collecting contemporary objects less about building a collection as a body of objects and more about shaping a narrative through storytelling supported by artistic interventions. As such collecting activity has been and is likely to remain less the fulcrum of the Museum's audience engagement strategy, as a variety of new spaces and media are used to present Middle Eastern cultures that transcend established ideas of 'objects in cases'.

The new role the V&A is shaping in this way emphasises the shift of cultural institutions from elevated place of learning to popular space dedicated to educational entertainment.[270] Suzanne Oberhardt argues that museum professionals have to increasingly consider the role their institutions have in popular culture and that this deeply affects institutional policies. This is especially relevant in the context of cultural representation, whereby the traditional image of the institution as elitist, authoritarian instrument of oppression has contributed to the marginalisation of other cultures.[271] Oberhardt argues that traditional museum models have — since the start of this century — been supplanted by other, more popular platforms when it comes to shaping public perceptions of different cultures. Yet the author's perspective of a museum as a static 'object', satisfying the public's need for authoritative cultural representation, did not take into account the more structural changes of the last three decades. Mieke Bal and Edwin Janssen, in the introduction to their 1996 collection of essays on cultural analysis, had already proposed a critique of unidirectional interpretative narratives. In the authors' critical framework, the curator's discursive strategies and the visitor's reading strategies become part of a process of meaning-making validated by the whole community which can only be meaningfully analysed in an integrated way.[272] The richer and more varied public engagement programme at the V&A can be seen as an attempt to engage the public through multiple routes and influence popular culture more directly, thus breaking the barriers of traditional modes of engagement.

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[270] On the role of museums as places of entertainment see Foley and McPherson, 2000; Van Aalst and Boogaarts, 2002; Balloffet, Courvoisier and Lagier, 2014; Alexander, Alexander and Decker, 2017

[271] Oberhardt, 2001 p.3

[272] Bal and Janssen, 1996, p.7-8

The way the V&A presents this in its published communications is also significant. All Middle East related activities are summarised on the Museum's website according to categories highlighting not only public engagement opportunities, but also institutional relationships and diplomatic efforts, such as institutional collaborations with the Arab Image Foundation, the Iran Heritage Foundation, or the National Museum of Oman.[273] The Museum in this way is attempting to position itself as a cultural platform where Middle Eastern culture can be understood, experienced and developed further. This reveals a significant difference with the British Museum approach, where the priority is to present the Museum as an archive of creative perspectives which tells the history of the region and its peoples — very much an ethnographic approach — and documents the interaction of cultural identities within it and their relationship with the Western world.

The above is essential context to understanding the Museum's acquisition criteria. Developing scholarship, talent and institutional connections has been the key focus of the Middle East team since 2010: as a co-ordinated strategy, it facilitated acquisition research and brought new artists in contact with the Museum. It was a departmental effort more than the individual effort of a single curator.[274] This in turn encouraged discussion around acquisition criteria which, as stated earlier, were never formalised in a policy document but are nonetheless contained in internal memos which were discussed with curator Mariam Rosser-Owen as part of this research. Such criteria are: geographical provenance, the ability to reflect on prominent artistic trends and movements in the region, the relationship to the existing collection, and aesthetic quality.[275] As part of the initial discussions that shaped these criteria, curators in the Department also agreed not to duplicate acquisitions from initiatives focused on the region at the British Museum and Tate. For the V&A this meant that contemporary acquisitions would focus primarily on applied arts/crafts and objects of design or fashion. This has not excluded 'fine art' from the scope of the collection, but it is simply a principle that established broadly how the national collection of the V&A would differ from the national collections of the British Museum or Tate.

A more detailed look at the criteria also shows instances in which these have evolved over time. The original interpretation of the geographical provenance criterion for instance was meant to restrict acquisitions to works made by artists living and practising in the region, following a key criterion already in place for the South and South East Asian and East Asian sections of the Asian Department.[276] This implied that diasporic artists and artists

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[273] The Museum has a dedicated page on its website listing all the different forms of engagement with the region, which is also testament to how engagement with the region is an explicit and international 'regional' strategy. See Victoria and Albert Museum, 2020 (International Work)

[274] When Stanley curated the first edition of the Jameel prize, he encouraged all curators within the Asia Department to develop more in-depth knowledge of contemporary productions in their respective regions of expertise (interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019).

[275] Interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019

[276] Ibid.

living in the region but practising in Western artistic traditions would not be considered.[277] The acquisition in 2006 of a piece by Mounir Farmanfarmaian (1924-2019), on the occasion of the inauguration of the Jameel Gallery, exemplifies this criterion (in fact, it preceded its formulation in internal documents). The specially commissioned piece was the first contemporary acquisition of the Middle East team. Stanley, to celebrate the opening of the gallery, teamed up with Rose Issa and commissioned Farmanfarmaian to produce an installation.[278] *Variations on the Hexagon* (Figure 2.17) was produced in Tehran and the six panels that composed it were shipped over in time for the opening. The artist developed throughout her career a sophisticated technique based on traditional mirror mosaics (*ayinah-kari*) and reverse glass painting. Her V&A installation explored references to Islamic geometry found in mosques and palaces. It contained blue glass beads traditionally thought of as a talisman against misfortune, a reference to Sufi symbolism.[279] The piece represented a bridge between traditional architectural decoration and modern aesthetics, which importantly was also the premise on which Mr Jameel encouraged the establishment of the Jameel Prize.[280] Farmanfarmaian was based in Tehran at the time of the acquisition, even though she had been living between Iran and the US, including a period of exile following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Her story had parallels to that of many artists from the region who had trained abroad.[281] Therefore, given the importance of Middle Eastern diasporas in artistic production, it became apparent to the Museum's curators that to restrict the geographical criterion and exclude this group was very difficult to implement in practice.[282] In the following years, geography remained the main criterion driving two very significant collecting projects: the first focusing on photography, which was launched in 2009 and resulted in the exhibition *Light from the Middle East* in 2013; the second focusing on craft, which was launched in 2015 and resulted in an exhibition in 2021. The projects are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three and Four respectively.

The next principle, to represent in the collection wider movements and trends in art and design from the Middle East, is arguably an evolution of the principle of 'historical significance' already present in the original set of acquisition criteria established in the early days of the Museum. Today this does not necessarily refer to clearly identifiable, emerging artistic movements as intended in traditional Western art history. Rather, the

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[277] Ibid.

[278] Stanley had been at the forefront of the redevelopment project and had published two books about its realisation and the touring of the historical collections during the transition period (Stanley, 2004 and Crill and Stanley, 2006).

[279] Cfr. V&A Collections Online, object record ME.1-2006

[280] This is discussed more in detail in the next chapter.

[281] As discussed above, several artists were escaping conflict and therefore moving abroad to train and work. However, several had also trained abroad as a result of the lack of educational establishments offering fine arts training in the region. They are further discussed in Chapter Five.

[282] Interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019.

attention of curators focuses on narratives, themes and critical responses that are perceived as recurring in the practice of living artists. At the V&A — as in the British Museum and Tate — this has translated into acquisition choices that highlight often controversial socio-political themes. The *Soul Archive* of Iraqi artist Harim al Karim is a particularly interesting example. Karim's opposition to the Saddam Hussain regime in Iraq throughout the 1980s and his personal story as a dissident and exile within his own country made him both a witness and a victim of the political situation of this time. The *Archive* comprises paper notebooks containing notes the artist took between 1982 and 1991, which he subsequently destroyed through the process of transforming them into porcelain objects.[283] They are at the same time a document and an act of self-censorship; a commentary on how freedom of expression and artistic creation are affected by politics. Another example is a contemporary work in ceramic by US-based Iranian artist Taraneh Hemami. *Silent Tears* (Figure 2.18), a group of seven inscribed tear-shaped sculptures, also brings together personal and collective trauma for an artist exiled by the Iranian Revolution. The text in the Museum's object records offers a number of indications as to the focus of the acquisition research that justified its inclusion in the collection:

> The act of weeping has strong connotations when considering the part of the world Hemami originates [from]. It is common for Western news reports to accompany stories of violence in the Middle East with footage of wailing women mourning the death of a loved one. Hemami references this female emotional outpouring to express the mourning for the home she has left behind.[284]

Through the exploration of her diasporic and gender identity, Hemami is presented here not merely as an artist, but also as a witness-victim. The reference to Western news reports reinforces this framing by connecting the personal condition of the artist with popular beliefs constructing the region as a violent and oppressive place. Also in the case of al-Karim, the Museum collected the whole series of notebooks with only a few exceptions, suggesting an interest in preserving the documentary value of the series.[285] These specific collecting choices, I would argue, positioned the acquisition of the objects as an act of solidarity and the Museum as a 'guardian' of creative freedom. Here the Museum, as an institution in the 'free world', imagines itself as a safe haven for cultural expression where this freedom cannot be found in the regions whose cultures it represents.

A particular interest in themes of dissidence and resistance to oppressive politics makes works expressing such concerns very popular with the V&A, particularly evidenced by the

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[283] V&A Collections Online, object numbers ME.3 to 8-2009.

[284] V&A Collections Online, object number ME.28-2011. In V&A terminology, each acquisition proposal requires curator to write, in fact a 'justification' (Interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019).

[285] See also Sandhal, 2006 for a broader discussion on museums as vehicles for the implementation of state cultural policies.

shortlisted entries of all past editions of the Jameel Prize. They reflect the pervasiveness of these concerns with artists from the region, especially those in diaspora communities in the West, and to a certain extent respond to a series of traumatic historical events affecting the region in the last half century. Partly a consequence of this is also the slow development of collecting institutions in the region dedicated to contemporary art, which only over the last decade started to acquire works in a more sustained way.[286] The V&A has therefore found an important space in this particular ecosystem. Whilst promoting a narrative of resistance and emphasising the right to creative freedom, the Museum proposes to fulfil a 'soft' diplomatic role that supports a cultural emancipation of the region from the various oppressive forces that artists take up as their subject matter. Omissions, nonetheless, remain and the approach of the institution is at times selective. The example of the inclusion of an Israeli artist in the exhibition *Light from the Middle East*, as discussed below in Chapter Three (section 3.3) also shows the limitation of the diplomatic role of the museum, which at face value promotes inclusivity, yet without accompanying such inclusions by a reflection on the political stance of Israel in relation to Palestine.

The last two collecting principles, relationship to historic collections and aesthetic quality, are strongly connected with each other. As already seen with the acquisitions of Hefuna and Farmanfarmaian, an important link between new acquisitions and existing holdings is often found in the connection with traditional techniques or materials, a clear legacy of the Museum's founding mission. Another acquisition exemplifying this narrative of continuity is Ibrahim Said's *Double circle (light blue)* (Figure 2.19). The piece was inspired by ancient hand carved water filters, as in the example shown in Figure 2.20. It is a skilful and creative reinterpretation inspired by an ancient craft tradition — centred in the Fustat district of Cairo, the foremost centre for pottery production in Islamic Egypt — that already in itself brought together beauty and functionality in a remarkable way.[287]

The appreciation of connections between past and present is indeed an important aspect in developing the aesthetic sensibility of those involved in collecting decisions. The subjectivity of any aesthetic assessment makes it important to look at the decision-making process in more detail, in order to understand how the 'aesthetic quality' principle is implemented in practice. The senior curators' committee approving all acquisitions is composed mostly of staff specialising in historical material — not specifically from the Middle East — with only a few members having secondary experience in contemporary art and design. Their primary expertise, whilst valuable to assess the historical context of each acquisition, also implies a greater receptiveness to a perceived 'Middle Eastern aesthetics' — comparable to the notion of 'continuity' discussed in relation to the British Museum — that embodies specific ideas of what can be aesthetically or technically associated with the region: a code containing visual references that make objects look

[286] Notable early examples include the founding in 2010 of the Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar, and the establishment of the Sharjah Art Foundation in 2009.

[287] Cfr. V&A, Object Record ME.6-2013

‘Middle Eastern’. The notable implication of this is that acquisitions are prioritised according to their threads of continuity with the past, potentially excluding artists whose practice is less concerned with tradition and socio-political themes or whose technical innovations are unrelated to traditional techniques. The development of such distinct aesthetics is not necessarily a formal quality of artworks but the product of institutional development. Akin to Anna Malik’s idea of “diaspora aesthetics” discussed in the introduction, it involves the use of iconography and narratives that feel and look familiar, presented as a means to ‘translate’ — and inevitably simplify — iconographies that would otherwise be unintelligible to Western audiences.[288] The result is a collection with a hybrid character, whose implications for cultural representation are far from clear-cut. This is a specific issue faced also by the British Museum. In the same way as the Islamic past anchors the representation of contemporary culture at the British Museum — as argued by Abdallah — ‘tradition’ and the idea of a ‘Middle Eastern aesthetics’ perform a similar function at the V&A.[289] Historical collections therefore at once provide important context yet limit the capacity of contemporary objects to be perceived as innovative artistic products, and therefore ‘truly’ contemporary.

Similarly to the case of the British Museum, the legacy of historical collections is thus still very present in the V&A and it still (indirectly) shapes current contemporary collecting practices though residual museum structures and processes. In addition, nearly a century of disengagement with contemporary cultures from the region has made the task of curators embarking on contemporary acquisition projects today particularly complex. In recent years, new initiatives to engage audiences with the collection and with artistic practices connected to the region are attempting to address this gap, even though there is still no formal link embedding its outcomes into acquisition policy. Despite such limitations, the new approach is equipping curators with additional references and bringing them closer to individual concerns and themes explored by creative practitioners in the region and their diasporas. With time it is likely that these opportunities will gain more importance and influence policy. Ultimately, this could translate into acquisition choices that centre more around individual artistic practices and move past the need to seek continuity with historical collections or validate pre-conceived ideas of a “Middle Eastern aesthetic”. Tate’s approach, to which the next section is dedicated, has indeed already moved in this direction.

2.3 Tate Modern

Objects from the Middle East were not part of Tate’s foundational collection, and as a result, its starting point and evolutionary path is very different from that of the British Museum and V&A. Tate’s interest in contemporary Middle Eastern art stemmed from a

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[288] Malik, 2007, p.145-169

[289] See footnote n.196

slow process of internationalisation of the collection. Starting as predominantly British in the late nineteenth century, the collection gradually opened up to European and North American art throughout the twentieth century, and to non-Western art only with the opening of Tate Modern in 2000. This section will examine the acquisition principles adopted by curators there, that have led to a recent focus on Middle Eastern art. A number of acquisitions will also be considered to reveal an important link between artists from the region and Western modernist traditions, as well as more recent examples of important artists added to the collection, such as Mohammed Melehi (1936-2020) and Kaveh Golestan (1950-2003).

The creation of the National Gallery of British Art in 1897 (commonly referred to as the Tate Gallery since its foundation) had a rather reactive as well as reactionary quality to it: the clear reference to the Musée du Luxembourg model — focusing on living artists and supporting the French national school of art — was a sign that competition between the Royal Academy and the École des Beaux Arts played a part in the establishment of the institution. There was great pride in the National School of Art and a feeling that the wealth generated through global industrial dominance would be well spent in showcasing British artistic talent in a dedicated public space.[290] The feeling shared roots with the pride in British manufacturing advocated by the South Kensington Museum, though the resulting institutional narratives were quite different. Internationalism and the ability — through colonial domination — to absorb, learn and master the world's best manufacturing techniques was a key tenet in the craft and design world. Britain's fine art sector, instead, sought to celebrate first and foremost a distinctively national imagery and the products of a national school of art, the Royal Academy (established 1768). The different approach reflected an ongoing socio-political shift: the gallery's celebration of British identity was a response to the rising industrial class and the change in "the balance of cultural power" it represented, away from landed aristocracy.[291] The new gallery aimed to elevate British art to the status of internationally significant art, and entertain polite society with it, in the same way that Paris had managed to establish the products of its art schools as the finest examples of artistic achievements in the world (from a Western perspective). Historian Brandon Taylor argues that Tate wanted to project the image of "a nation at the height of its industrial and military powers, capable of virtually immeasurable 'progress' at home and abroad."[292] The concern for Britain's international standing was a cultural policy as much

[290] Spalding, 1998, p.13

[291] Fyfe,1995, p.5-41

[292] Taylor, 1994, p.10

as a foreign policy concern, at a time when the empire was threatened with instability in Europe and in the colonies.[293]

In the early years of the gallery, the 'Orient' was present exclusively as a subject of Orientalist paintings by British artists.[294] Throughout the nineteenth century, British artists had travelled East alongside collectors and diplomatic envoys on tourist and commercial routes. Their images fascinated the British public and contributed significantly to popular notions of the 'Orient'. Whilst not constituting acquisitions from the Middle East, the tradition of Orientalist paintings is an important reference giving insight into narratives around cultures from the region prevalent at Tate in the early years following its foundation.

Considered one of the most talented and admired Orientalist painters of his time, John Frederick Lewis lived in Cairo for a decade until his return to England in 1851, and is known to have immersed himself in the local lifestyle.[295] His study for *The Courtyard of the Coptic Patriarch's House in Cairo* (Figure 2.21), was one of the earliest Orientalist paintings to be acquired by the Tate Gallery, in 1900. It portrays a diverse group of local tradespeople and bystanders, and the setting of a public courtyard in great detail, with particular attention to the accurate depiction of traditional dresses. Nonetheless, the study appears carefully staged. It was executed in England from sketches Lewis brought back from Cairo and it is therefore likely to be a composite image. Scholarly debate on Orientalist art tends to focus on the extent to which these representations had political significance as opposed to the personal significance and intentions of the artists.[296] Some argue that both perspectives can co-exist.[297] In Lewis's picture the political and the personal certainly converge. The artwork reflected how 'Oriental' culture was reflected at Tate in its early years: within the context of a young national gallery of British art there was no space for the 'Orient' as agent of cultural production. Its absence as a creative product and mere existence as occasional subject is notable. The eyes through which it could be seen were exclusively Western eyes, which is a central tenet of Said's *Orientalism.* The subjects did not speak and the products of their culture were not physically present in the Museum. Their stories and ideas could only be imagined. As such, the lack of engagement with contemporary cultures from the region in the early decades of Tate's existence echoes the gaps in collecting at the British Museum and V&A discussed above. Even once

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[293] See Charmley, 2013. As the turn of the century approached, British foreign policy was often referred to as one of 'splendid isolation': in Europe a set of strategic accords became preferred to broader alliances, the main aim being to maintain core economic interests in the colonies and limit competing ambitions in Europe. An ambivalent relationship with France and a growing German empire, mixed with growing independence movements gaining ground in some of the most important colonies (especially Canada and South Africa), significantly threatened the stability of the British Empire at this time.

[294] Tromans, 2008. On early Tate collections of European art also see Alley, 1981 and Bonett, Holt and Mundy, 2012.

[295] Tromans, 2008, p.26

[296] Cfr. Said, 2003(1978) and Nochlin, 1983 on political significance and Rosenthal, 1892 and Ackerman, 1996 on personal artists perspectives.

[297] Weeks, 2008 and Said, 2000

Orientalist paintings lost their appeal — as the remainder of this section will show — the gap persisted for nearly a century, effectively preserving the Orientalist perspective of the institution.

The attitude of British artists was soon to change, influenced by the inward-looking, balance-seeking and pro-status quo politics of the early twentieth century. Orientalist painting as a genre lost its popularity after the First World War. Nicholas Tromans argues that, once occupied, the lands represented in the pictures were now no longer a symbol of "worldly experiences".[298] The value of Oriental imagery in the mind of painters became exhausted once such imagery no longer accompanied an act of discovery and, hence, a demonstration of power. The genre then lost its appeal and with it the 'Orient' (and subsequent subdivisions of it) ceased to be a matter of collecting interest until the early years of this century.[299]

The climate of cultural renewal in the years following the Second World War saw the expansion of collections and new displays, with greater attention being paid to European modern art. An exhibition of artworks by Pablo Picasso and Henry Matisse in 1945-6 could be seen as a statement of departure from an inward-looking attitude that had its roots in the nationalistic origins of the institution. Signs of progress included a decision in 1945 to dedicate a small room to abstract art and the positive reception of the Massey report of 1946, which recommended the division of Tate into two departments — British and Modern — under separate keepers.[300] This was the first step towards developing a collecting policy and programme of exhibitions dedicated to 'international' art, which eventually led to a specific interest in the Middle East over half a century later. Initially however, whilst formative in its character, the report also included provisions for all non-British paintings to be "transferred to the National Gallery, either when they had ceased to fit to the existing preconception of what 'modern' work would be, or at an earlier date if required by the Director".[301]

As the compass of the international contemporary art world started pointing to New York in the 1960s, the first collecting venture beyond Europe was undertaken in the United States, following an American tour of Sir Alan Bowness (Tate's Director at this time) and the establishment of the "American Friends" of the Gallery, a vehicle through which most of the early acquisitions of American art came to London. By the time the general collection catalogue of 1978 was published, Tate had undertaken a serious programme of collecting post-war art including a significant collection of American works. What Ronald Alley

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[298] Tromans, 2008, p.20

[299] Despite the decline of the subject in painting, interest continued to develop in other art forms. Bernstain and Studlar, 1997 for example, look at Orientalist representations in cinema. Also Jaikumar, 2017 offers an interesting account of developments in cinema across Great Britain and India in the last decades of the Empire. For Orientalist themes in British literature see Boehmer, 2005. In reference to photography, see Jacobson, 2007, Woodward, 2003 and Ryan, 2013.

[300] Spalding, 1998, p.89. Interestingly, Spalding notes that according to the trustees of the museum, interest in abstract art came about because of its strong influence on industrial design.

[301] Ibid., p.91

defines as an attempt to build a “fully representative collection of foreign art” from the first half of the twentieth century, however, was in fact based on an assumption that ‘foreign’ equalled non-British but Western.[302] Art beyond the West was not a matter of consideration and there are no records of collecting efforts in the area at this time.

The appointment of Nicholas Serota in 1988 brought to the Tate a new, outward looking director, with experience of working with and exhibiting international contemporary work during his tenure at the Whitechapel Gallery. He was a relative outsider to the English cultural establishment and kicked off a systematic acquisition programme that looked at specific, previously neglected, areas of the British and non-British collections, even though initially the latter remained focused within the Western world.[303]

Work on the creation of a dedicated gallery of modern art started in 1992 and the new site, which opened to the public in 2000, became the first meaningful opportunity to expand the reach of the collection and reflect the growing internationalisation of the art market. Iwona Blazwick and Frances Morris, writing for the first Handbook of the new gallery, criticise the practice of art history as defined in the West: a succession of tendencies — all with a beginning and an end, occurring in a linear sequence and in reaction to one another — that had created a closed circle, excluding other nations outside the Nato alliance.[304] They further argue that Tate’s collection has been built according to these principles, and that it required a new way to look at international art outside a traditional art historical (and art market) framework. They argued for stronger connections with artists and especially with the communities which were (or might be) part of the Museum’s audience.[305] There was a recognition at this moment that interconnectedness and multiculturalism in the art world as much as in society more broadly were generating new demands from Tate’s audience. A new way to engage with the public was needed, which was not simply about shaping acquisition and exhibition policies, but rather encouraging and promoting wider engagement at all levels, from research to community participation.[306] In relation to the Middle East, notable examples of such engagement include a joint project — *Nahnou-Together* — with the British Council in 2006 and an important conference — *Contemporary Art in the Middle East* — in 2009. The former brought together young people, artists and educators from London, Damascus and Amman to “explore each other’s culture through art”.[307] This led to an exhibition of work produced during the British Council-funded programme at Tate Britain in May 2006. During the January 2009 conference, participants debated “how the Middle East is defined, how interpretation affects understanding of art at

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[302] Alley, 1978, p.XVI

[303] Spalding, 1998

[304] Blazwick and Wilson, 2000

[305] A comparative study of contemporary art museums by Pedro Lorente explores the evolution of museum practice for Tate and similar institutions in more detail (Lorente, 1998).

[306] Tate, 2007 (Annual Report 2006-7)

[307] Cfr. Tate, 2008 (Nahnou-Together)

home and abroad, and the potential impact of new and emerging spaces for showing modern and contemporary art in the region".[308] The conference informed the development of Tate's approach in multiple ways. First of all, it focused Tate's attention on the challenges of looking at the artistic production of the region from a reductive 'Middle East' perspective. Second, it raised the issue of access to historiography and Arabic language sources as essential to curatorial research and the importance to allow English language research to be also available in Arabic in order to foster dialogue. Lastly, along similar lines, it also stressed the need to understand ongoing institutional developments in the region and their potential to develop new narratives that would go beyond an established West-East discourse. All in all, the conference created the basis for a greater focus on context, on the sites of cultural production that define those identities the museum aimed to represent. Arguably, it contained in embryo what was to become Tate's new 'transnational' approach, a development further discussed in the conclusion of the thesis.

As briefly introduced above, the opening of Tate Modern co-existed with efforts to collect outside Europe and North America. These were first recorded in Tate's Annual Report of 2000-02. A significant example is the acquisition of a group of works by Israeli artists "which comment both directly and obliquely on the political tensions in the Middle East", even though they seem to be an isolated early case.[309] The following report of 2002-4 contained details of the first acquisitions made with the support of a newly established Latin America Acquisition Committee. The committee was the first in a series of external advisory and fundraising groups that still today constitute the core acquisition infrastructure on which Tate relies to build collections of non-Western art.

The Middle East and North Africa Acquisitions Committee (MENAAC) was launched in 2009. It was preceded by another committee focusing on the Asia-Pacific region in 2007.[310] Like all external acquisition committees, MENAAC is constituted predominantly of contemporary art collectors and patrons with an interest in the region, who provide advice and acquisition funding. The composition of the committees is not published by Tate, but members join by invitation and there is a relatively steady turnover.[311] Early acquisitions supported by MENAAC included works from Algeria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran and Egypt.[312] One of these is a significant piece by Kader Attia which is currently on display in the Museum, *Untitled (Ghardaïa)* (Figure 2.22). The installation — resembling the model of a city — is made from cooked couscous and accompanied by three works on paper including a photograph of the French architect Le Corbusier. It is a commentary on the cultural exchange between France and Algeria, through which the artist suggests that

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[308] Cfr. Tate, 2009 (Contemporary Art from the Middle East)

[309] Tate, 2002 (Annual Report 2000-2) p.40

[310] The next chapter will look more specifically at the timing of the formation of the regional acquisition committees and the relationship with developments in the art market

[311] Interview with Clara Kim, 2019

[312] Tate, 2010

influence between interacting cultures is always reciprocal.[313] The piece creates a bridge between Western and Middle Eastern creative expressions, commenting subversively on how Modernism in French and European architecture was actually influenced by Le Corbusier's encounter with Berber heritage. This early acquisition is representative of the collecting strategy at Tate, in which cross-cultural exchange has come to be seen as a fundamental principle.

Like the V&A and the British Museum, Tate does not have a formally written acquisition policy for Middle Eastern art, even though the three museums acquire with this geographical focus. The geographical focus of MENAAC is not reflected in a specific list of countries but it broadly refers to artists from the Middle East, the Gulf region, North Africa and Sudan as well as their diasporas.[314] Two fundamental differences however set Tate's approach to collecting apart from its older counterparts. First, Tate Modern's focus on modern and contemporary art in general means there are no historical collections from the same region from which to unravel a thread of historical continuity. Second, whilst geography helps shape collecting areas (as reflected in the focus of the acquisition committees and staff specialisms), it does not determine the displays: there are no rooms dedicated to specific geographies or regional departments, and all collecting and curatorial activity related to non-Western art at Tate is dealt with by the full collective of Tate Modern curators, who are all — albeit with different specialism — considered 'international' curators. Both points are worth discussing in more detail.

In relation to the first point, the acquisition of Attia's work and its connections with Modernism exemplifies a recurring curatorial focus on the influence of Modernism and its manifestations outside the Western world. Other acquisitions that follow this trend are those of works by Saloua Rouda Choucair (1916-2017) and Mohammed Melehi. Choucair was identified by Frances Morris and Jessica Morgan at the beginning of the 2010s as an artist who had pioneered 'modernity' in art in Lebanon from the 1960s onwards and who had been previously undervalued by Tate and more broadly in Western art history. Following multiple studio visits, the collecting venture turned into a major retrospective exhibition which not only offered deserved — if late — credit and visibility to the artist, but also repositioned Beirut as a centre of Arab modernism.[315] The painting by Mohammed Melehi, *Casa* (Figure 2.23) from 1970 and acquired in 2018, shares similar themes. Its title is a shortened reference to Casablanca. Tate describes it as embodying a turning point in the Moroccan painter's career, in that it introduces a new technique of cellulose paint on wood that would characterise much of Melehi's most popular work in the following decades. The piece is also placed within the context of his travels and exchanges with

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[313] Tate Collection, object number T13179. The object description refers to "portraits of the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier (1887–1965) and of the French architect Fernand Pouillon (1912–1986) and a print out of the UNESCO Advisory Body Evaluation of the M'zab Valley as a world heritage site". For the artist statement in full, cfr. Attia, 2011

[314] Interview with Clara Kim, 2019

[315] Frances Morris was the director of Collections (International Art) for Tate Modern from 2006 to 2016 and Jessica Morgan was Senior Curator (International Art) from 2010 to 2014. Morgan led on Choucair's acquisition project and took part in studio visits across 2010-2012 (interview with Jessica Morgan, 2018). The exhibition is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

New York-based painters such as Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly, yet at the same time it is an important legacy of Melehi's time at the Casablanca Art School, where he taught from 1964 to 1969. His tenure is regarded as an experimental and innovative period in the history of the school (which has French colonial origins), when a new abstract aesthetics was developed and new ideas were tested to challenge post-colonial pedagogical models.[316]

The acquisition of these works by Attia, Choucair and Melehi reveal a sustained interest over nearly a decade in building a body of acquisitions that would allow Tate to present Modernism as a global phenomenon.[317] As such, as a framework of cultural representation, Arab Modernism also offered the Museum an opportunity to locate Middle Eastern collections within a narrative of 'historical continuity', much like Islamic Art did for the British Museum and the V&A. It should be noted, nonetheless, that Tate — in these early collecting years — showed limited engagement with scholarship related to the origins of Arab modernism, as well as with the broader discourse around modernity taking place within the region itself.[318]

In relation to the second point, the non-geographical approach to displays means that the focus of acquisition research (and policy) is not necessarily the region itself or countries within it. The geographical focus remains relevant primarily because of the geographical appellation given to Tate's major funding sources, the acquisition committees.[319] In fact, curators primarily seek artworks that are representative of the practice of singular figures as well as groups of artists they deem significant across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in order to develop cross-border narratives.[320] This expands on the notion of collecting by "movement", as was common practice in the twentieth century, to ensure that new acquisitions represented innovative artistic developments and the international confluence of creative outputs and events, regardless of where they originated from. Modernism continues to play a part in this, however curators are relatively free to set their

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316 Personal notes from curator's tour of exhibition "New Waves" at the Mosaic Rooms [dates of this exhibition; also give the full exhibition title], curated by Morad Montazami. Montazami worked at Tate Modern prior to curating this exhibition and was instrumental in securing the acquisition of *Casa* for Tate (Interview with Clara Kim, 2019).

317 Deliss, 1995; Choueiri, 2003; Winegar, 2006; Boullata, 2008; Meijer, 2014; offer some specific studies on modernist ideas in the Middle Eastern and North Africa regions and cultural exchanges with the West. Whilst Baker, 1999; Onians, 2006 and Weibel, 2013 look at the evolution of institutional practices of display and representation. A large number of broader studies also exist on the development of modernist ideas and their expansion into discourses of 'global' and international art. These include reviews on the evolution of the discipline of art history in this respect (Elkins, 2006; Edwards and Wood, 2008; Wood, 2013; Canid and D'Souza, 2014; Carter, 2018) and on the advancement of new narratives and centres of influence outside the traditional Western art capitals (Philipsen, 2010; Elkins, Valiavicharska and Kim, 2010; Harris, 2011).

318 Key references on the subject include Shabout, 1999, 2007, 2010 (Interventions) and 2010 (Modern Arab Art); Lenssen, Rogers and Shabout, 2018;

319 The role of the Middle East and North Africa Acquisition committee at Tate Modern will be explored in more detail in Chapter Four.

320 Interview with Clara Kim, 2019

own priorities and interests, which are ultimately coordinated and approved by the Director of Collections for International Art.[321]

Perhaps the most significant recent acquisition exemplifying the breath of curatorial interest in contemporary Middle Eastern art is the set of twenty photographs taken between 1975 and 1977 by Kaveh Golestan acquired by Tate in 2017 (including the image in Figure 2.24). Golestan was a pioneer of documentary photography in Iran and an influential figure for future generations of artists and photographers. His *Prostitute Series* was acquired from the the artist's estate, alongside important archival material documenting the violent destruction of the red light district in the Iranian capital during the 1979 revolutionary riots. In terms of museological practice, the acquisition is particularly important for two reasons. First, most importantly, from a collecting perspective the series is unique within Tate's collection: not just as an example of Iranian documentary photography, but also in that the acquisition included archival material connected to the images, which were researched and collected by Vali Mahlouji, an independent curator and the keeper of the Golestan Estate.[322] It could be argued that the 'object' of the acquisition in this instance was not only the photographic and archival material, but also the curatorial arrangement itself, highlighting the dynamic of these events and condemning the killings of women. Second, the acquisition was also important in that all the photographs acquired were displayed together soon after completing the purchase. Tate dedicated an entire room to the photographer, for nearly a year until July 2018.[323] Displaying a new acquisition so quickly after it is made is an unusual practice at Tate. The Golestan works and archives had already been exhibited in other museums and venues by Mahlouji, so arguably the exhibition concept was also ready to be transferred to its own spaces. The Museum also included a small selection of documents from the archive. This was a much reduced version of what had already been displayed by Mahlouji, and exhibited during Photo London in 2015, in Paris and in Rome. It contained very graphic images and detailed newspaper reports of the killings and destruction caused to the red light district by revolutionary groups. The reason why Tate chose to exhibit only a small amount of this material is difficult to ascertain given the lack of references to the exhibition in Tate's archives at the time of writing; it is possible that its explicit nature could have had negative diplomatic repercussions if displayed by a national museum. Despite its controversial content, the Golestan acquisition was detached from any contextual representation of Iranian or Middle Eastern culture. The separate display encouraged the public to consider it for its own documentary and artistic value, and the presence of the archive focused the narrative on the historical events and the personal stories of the photographer and his subjects. The display approach reflected the way in which the works told a very specific and unique story.

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321 Interview with Clara Kim, 2019. At the time of writing the post is held by Gregor Muir (b.1964)

322 Interview with Vali Mahlouji, 2018

323 Cfr. Archeology Of The Final Decade, 2017

This discussion has shown how interest in Middle Eastern contemporary art at Tate is a relatively recent phenomenon coinciding with the opening of Tate Modern. The Museum has not attempted to define a single, monolithic 'Middle Eastern culture', but maintains its focus primarily on individual artists, following broadly the same approach adopted for Western art. The existence of a regional acquisition committee is arguably more the result of external factors. The growth in the commercial art sector in the Middle East — which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four — created a new class of ambitious collectors and philanthropists based in the UK and in the Middle East, with a desire to further invest in cultural exchange with the region. Tate saw this as an opportunity to further explore new art scenes and used its status to attract wealthy individuals in support of acquisitions. Curators have remained relatively free to develop their own research interests and this has resulted in ambitious collecting projects like the Golestan photographs and archive. This approach has set Tate's acquisition strategy apart from that of the British Museum and the V&A and has led the organisation towards a new research and curatorial strategy which is today embodied in the new "Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational", which will be further discussed in the conclusion of the thesis.[324]

Conclusion

The history of collecting art from the Middle East in three national museums presented in this chapter has highlighted how in each case the legacy of historical collections and collecting practices played a significant role in new acquisitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art. Three distinctive paths have resulted from this: one centred on historical continuity at the British Museum; one on aesthetic and technical affinity at the V&A; and one of seeking to challenge and expand the notion of modernity and its contemporary significance at Tate. A significant difference in approach remains between the British Museum and V&A on the one hand, where the regional focus is reflected in the organisational structures of each institution; and Tate, on the other hand, whose recently developed funding strategy has a regional focus, but one which is not reflected in its displays.

British Museum and V&A audiences have so far experienced acquisitions and works from Middle Eastern artists only within the institutional context of historical Islamic collections, whether or not the works had been presented in close physical proximity to historical artefacts. At Tate, Middle Eastern artists have been presented according to the same framework adopted for Western artists, i.e. through solo, retrospective or thematic shows. A further difference that characterises Tate's approach is the existence of a broader institutional strategy that aims to expand the remit of the contemporary collections beyond

[324] The activities of the new research centre are not discussed in this chapter because as of the time of writing no acquisitions have been made as a direct result of its activities. Some early indications in this regard will be, nonetheless, provided in the conclusion.

the Western world**,** of which the Middle Eastern collecting initiative is only one part. The size and significance of contemporary Middle Eastern art collections at the British Museum and the V&A, on the other hand, make them a positive exception in terms of the institutions' engagement with non-Western contemporary cultures. Whilst both institutions collect contemporary objects from other parts of the world — notably amongst others are Indian, Japanese and Korean objects at the V&A and African, Aboriginal and Maori objects at the British Museum — the size, prominence and resources dedicated to contemporary Middle Eastern art collections far outweighs the others. The availability of external funds from wealthy patrons has made an important difference in this regard for all three museums, Particularly in the case of Middle Eastern collections, despite the veil of independent authority adorning these institutions, their remit in defining and shaping public taste can in reality be executed only under the constraint of private funding serving private interests, as Chapter Four will show.

Despite such differences, in the last decade it has been possible to observe an increasing convergence in approaches, as new collecting initiatives began to focus more on individual artistic practices and narratives than broader regional or cultural themes. Particularly in relation to narratives, acquisition choices have typically — with some of the early British Museum collections of calligraphic works being an exception — favoured artworks that tackle themes of identity, conflict, oppression and resistance. Today these are preponderant in all three collections. Such themes reflect the prevalent discourse of the community of artists, patrons, gallerists and other influencers that have shaped the collection through their connection with Porter. They also reflect the liberal principles which the institutions promote publicly, such as freedom of expression, peace and tolerance, which purportedly underpin — if not always guide — efforts in cultural diplomacy between the UK and Middle Eastern countries.

Finally, another common element across the three institutions is that they have all ultimately strived to create a platform for different creative voices to be heard and for previously largely-unknown artworks to be preserved for posterity. This has indirectly exercised some pressure on the cultural infrastructure of the region itself, and encouraged the development of new collecting initiatives there (such as Mathaf in Doha, Ithra in Dhahran).[325] These efforts and the increasingly dense network of relations between professionals within the region and those in UK national museums is testament to how these collections have been the foundation for a new effort in cultural diplomacy that continue to shape the relationship between the UK and the Middle East.

[325] The Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art has been already introduced above. The King Abdulaziz Centre for World Culture (Ithra) was founded in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia in 2017.

Chapter Three
Selected exhibitions since 2000

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to understand how national collections of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art in UK national museums have been presented to the public, through a selection of pioneering temporary exhibitions. In particular, I will discuss how curatorial choices have affected the representation of artists and artworks connected to the region; and how national museums, in their capacity as agents of 'soft' diplomacy, have developed narratives with a view to influencing the public's understanding of contemporary Middle Eastern cultures.

These exhibitions have been selected because they reveal a variety of approaches and strategies of representation, whilst sharing several important characteristics. First, they tested new, often experimental approaches in terms of display strategy and interpretation. In all cases, curators were tasked with introducing a new, previously untold story of the art world to a relatively uninformed public. Second, the planning process involved new and complex negotiations, intellectual as much as practical. Curators had to strike a difficult balance between depth and generalisation, and between historical and contemporary narratives. At the British Museum and at the V&A, given the presence of historical collections, contemporary Middle Eastern art had to be presented in the context of Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. At Tate, the very notion of modernity had to be put in conversation with new — equally 'modern' — narratives developed in countries across the Middle East and North Africa in the second half of the twentieth century, which challenged its Western-centric foundations. The chapter will look at how museums have tried to reconcile these competing influences within their representational frameworks.

The research relies primarily on two sources. First, a set of interviews, including the curators of all four shows; artists whose work was displayed in the exhibitions; and a number of external professionals who have been significant influencers. The chapter also refers to archives at each museum and, in addition, to the personal archives of artist Dia Azzawi and curator Rose Issa. In all cases, the chapter aims to identify pivotal decisions and discussions that have supported, constrained or otherwise shaped the dynamic that led to the final presentation of the exhibitions.

Before discussing the exhibitions in more detail, an important distinction needs to be made between temporary 'collection displays' — discussed in the previous chapter — and 'exhibitions', especially in the context of the British Museum and the V&A. The former term usually refers to presentations initiated and managed by the keepers and curators of a collection, that are smaller in scale and almost exclusively contain objects owned by the museum. They are often located within or in close proximity to permanent displays of objects from a collection managed by the same department. Temporary displays are a common feature throughout the history of the UK's national museums and often followed important acquisitions, bequests or archeological excavations. As an example, a small

section at the back of the John Addis Gallery of The Islamic World regularly hosted displays of recently acquired contemporary objects from the Middle Eastern collections, from the opening of the gallery in 1989 until its closure in 2018.[326] Some important temporary displays there include *Iraq's Past Speaks to the Present* (10 November 2008 - 15 March 2009) and *Modern Syrian Art* (4 July 2011 – 9 January 2012).[327]

An 'exhibition', in the contemporary sense of the term, can take different forms according to its location within the museum and the way in which it is produced. For the purpose of this chapter, the term will be used in reference to public shows that are temporary in nature. Museums often dedicate a separate, independent space to hosting temporary exhibitions: a room (or rooms) where shows can rotate in succession, regardless of their relationship to permanent collections. Such separation often elevates the exhibition's narrative compared to the more static permanent displays. Exhibitions are also typically larger in size and number of objects compared to collection displays, and have more sophisticated design and marketing concepts. They frequently involve object loans as well as more significant transportation and insurance costs. Therefore, usually they are more costly to arrange. Curators in these cases are often supported by project managers within a dedicated 'Exhibitions' team, rather than managing the full project independently. Finally and significantly, exhibitions may charge an entrance fee, which is something UK museums currently cannot legally do for collection displays, regardless of how or when objects were acquired.

The four shows discussed here are all considered temporary exhibitions by their respective host museums. Even so, the above distinction is important to make, since the introduction of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern collections challenged the traditional exhibition format of the three museums in multiple ways. *Word into Art*, for example, contained several loans, was free to attend and it was project managed independently by the Middle East Department at the British Museum. *Light From the Middle East* was effectively a collection display, also free to visit, but partly project-managed by the V&A Exhibitions team and presented in a dedicated temporary exhibition space. The *Jameel Prize* was managed as a departmental display with the help of an external project manager, but it did not show objects owned by the V&A. *Saloua Rouda Choucair* started as a collecting project, initiated by a curator, rather than an exhibition proposal initiated by a member of Tate's Exhibitions team, as would have been the norm for the Museum at that time. Beyond the organisational details of each exhibition, what this demonstrates is that the arrival of this new body of objects within the museums challenged existing frameworks of presentation.

The remainder of the chapter will explore further the context in which the four exhibitions developed. Together, they remain to this date the most significant early instances of the

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[326] The gallery is now closed and the collection has been relocated and rearranged in new Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World opened in October 2018, as discussed in the previous chapter

[327] Cfr. British Museum, 2008 and 2011

public presentation of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art in UK national museums.

3.1 Word into Art. British Museum, 18 May to 2 September 2006

Word into Art was the first large scale exhibition of modern and contemporary works from the Middle East, including several loans and special commissions, to be held in the British Museum. The Museum's public had already been introduced to certain artworks and ideas that were later to be re-examined and expanded in the 2006 exhibition. In addition to the 1976 exhibitions mentioned in Chapter One presented at the British Museum during the *World of Islam* Festival, there were further precedents of the *Word into Art* exhibition. The Museum's display *The Literature of the Turkish Peoples* in 1967 and the exhibition *Suleyman the Magnificent* in 1988 — first conceived and exhibited by the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC in 1987 —[328] preceded *Word into Art* in that they contained a substantial amount of script-based work.[329] Two displays at the British Museum's short-lived Museum of Mankind — *Arab Costumes of Palestine* and *Spinning and Weaving in Palestine*, running from December 1970 to May 1973 — contained newly acquired contemporary objects from Palestine, albeit in the context of the ethnographic collections.[330] In 1990, the year following the opening of the John Addis Gallery (which displayed the Museum's collection of Islamic Art), the Museum organised the *Collecting the twentieth Century* exhibition. Frances Carey, — who, as discussed in the previous chapter was the curator in charge of the newly founded Modern Museum Group — was the lead curator for the show. Importantly, she notes in the introduction to the catalogue that "from its foundation in 1753 as the first national museum in the world to be both public and secular, the British Museum has always included contemporary artefacts".[331] This was true, even though as discussed in Chapter Two, with the exception of its ethnographic collections, the Museum had stopped acquiring contemporary objects from the Middle East by the turn of the twentieth century. A display of *Arabic Calligraphy* was installed in 1991, followed later in the same decade by the exhibition *Writing Arabic,* which toured the UK from June 1999 to June 2000. This included the first acquisition of a contemporary object from the Middle East ever included in a British Museum exhibition, *Kaf ha ya ayn sad* by

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328 Atil, 1987

329 Ibid. The Exhibition, showing over 150 objects from the time of Suleyman I and titled using the Western appellation 'the Magnificent', was initially organised by the Center for Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. It was a considerable diplomatic success, in that it displayed for the first time outside Turkey 130 objects from the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul (Haldane, 1989).

330 Bowring, 2012

331 Carey, 1991

Osman Waqialla (Figure 3.1).[332] The piece is a calligraphic composition of the five Arabic letters in its title, with the nineteenth *Surah* of the Qur'an written around them. It has a direct link to historical collections as the letters are believed to have magical properties and are found in many amulets also in the Museum's holdings.[333]

In the footsteps of *Writing Arabic*, a new touring display was organised in 2003 called *Mightier than the Sword.*[334] It included a section dedicated to "The Contemporary Art of Writing and Calligraphy", featuring works by Ali Omar Ermes and Ahmed Moustafa (both mentioned in Chapter One and Two), as well as Nja Mahdaoui (b.1937), Ghani Alani (b.1937), Nassar Mansour (b.1967), Khalid Ben Slimane (b.1951), Rachid Koraichi (b.1947) and Laila Shawa (b.1940).[335] Shawa's lithograph, *Letter to a mother / The Walls of Gaza* (Figure 3.2) is one of the first examples of openly political work exhibited by the Museum.[336] The print reproduces pro-Fatah graffiti against the Israeli occupation four times on a purple background. The colour symbolises the paint used by the Israeli army to cover graffiti, so its function is subverted and reduced to mere background in an act of resistance.[337] The political nature of Shawa's work is echoed in the more subtle political undertone of the title of the exhibition. Inspired by a popular nineteenth-century English adage, "the pen is mightier than the sword",[338] the expression reconnects us in a contemporary context with ideas of war and ancient heroism, and lets us imagine and potentially romanticise a connection between stories of past struggles — in various forms told by objects in the Islamic collections — and the contemporary struggle for Palestinian liberation represented so forcefully by Shawa.

The displays introduced above suggest that the interest in calligraphy and script at the British Museum was already very established by the time *Word into Art* was planned. The exhibition remains nonetheless highly significant not only for its prominence within the Museum spaces and the focus on new acquisitions, but also because it coincided with the creation of a new department of the Middle East. The exhibition included over a hundred artworks — mostly works on paper, but also sculptures and mixed-media pieces — by seventy-five artists, was free to attend and was visited by around 90,000 people.[339] It was

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[332] Bowring, 2012, p. 76. British Museum, 2000. Cfr. BM1998,0716,0.1. Porter subsequently led a research project on the Museum's collection of Islamic seals and amulets, which culminated in the publication of the first comprehensive catalogue of the collection (Porter, 2011).

[333] Porter, 2008, p.28

[334] Amirsadeghi, 2009

[335] Ian Potter Museum, 2011. Koraichi's textile piece (1992.0303.01) was displayed in separate section alongside popular prints and objects.

[336] Cfr. BM1994,0726,0.2. Issa recalls that Shawa was one of 17 female artists in the Middle Eastern diaspora based in London when she organised her 1989 exhibition at the Kufa Gallery (Interview with Rose Issa, 2018).

[337] Porter, 2004

[338] This adage is generally attributed to Edward Bulwer-Lytton — an English writer and politician active during the central decades of the nineteenth century — even though a slightly different version, 'The Word is Mightier than the Sword', was found already in writings from 500BC Assyria and attributed to Ahikar (Matthews and Benjamin, 2006, p. 304).

[339] Porter, 2008

held in Room 35, a prominent gallery in the Great Court dedicated to temporary exhibitions, thus giving the exhibition a higher status compared to the smaller departmental displays in the John Addis Gallery. Most importantly, it introduced new acquisitions and related objects separately from the context of the Islamic collections. Despite there being strong references to the latter and to ideas of historical continuity in the connection between ancient and contemporary script-based objects, the exhibition's positioning encouraged the public to see the works within a broader context of contemporary culture. It was divided into four sections, "Sacred Script", "Literature and Art", "Deconstructing the Word" and "Identity, History and Politics".

Two imposing, specially commissioned sculptures, one by Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937) — *Red Heech* (Figure 3.3) — and one by Dia Azzawi — *Blessed Tigris* (Figure 3.4) —, welcomed visitors in the central court as they approached the entrance of the exhibition. Both works made strong political statements. Tanavoli is one of the founding members of the Saqqa-Khaneh movement and *Heech* encapsulated his philosophical interest in the space of transition between past and present. The word *heech*, a recurring motif in the artist's work, means 'nothing': in Porter's view it "symbolises for him both an ambivalence towards the past and a sense of meaninglessness or dissatisfaction with an inadequate present".[340] Azzawi's sculpture is named after a 1962 poem by Iraqi journalist and political activist Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri (1899-1997), which is inscribed at the base of the sculpture. The poem contains veiled political references, an evocative and melancholy piece about a river of great historical significance which has seen decades of suffering across its shores.[341] In addition to their value as political commentaries, the large sculptures were also an unexpected introduction to an exhibition focusing predominantly on works on paper.

Porter was adamant that the exhibition should not be described as a calligraphy exhibition. Whilst script was certainly the theme of the exhibition, only the first section focused specifically on calligraphy, as an important tribute and acknowledgement to a tradition that has shaped the practice of so many artists. The significance of script in her view was much more in the story the words were telling and in the creative use of the written word outside the strict rules of calligraphy. Porter recalled in our conversation the time when she was planning the show:

> I tried to understand what unified [the works…], you start to see the Qur'an, poetry, abstract calligrams, and all this other [work] which is not calligraphy. It is super political, it is artists venting. So if you use script as your prism, when you open that prism, what is it that the writing is telling us? Once I did that everything fell into place.[342]

Poetry and literature were brought alive by artists through script and offered the public a window onto a hugely significant literary tradition. Politics, and in particular themes of

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[340] Porter, 2008, p.57

[341] Ibid., p.8. The piece was commissioned for the show by Saeb Eigner, the patron of the exhibition, and is part of his own private collection (interview with Dia Azzawi, 2018).

[342] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018

conflict and exile, were tackled specifically in the last section of the exhibition. One of the works in this section, Walid Siti's (b.1954) *Moonlight* (Figure 3.5), has an interesting connection with Mohammed Makiya, one of the important figures in the London art scene discussed in Chapter One (owner of Al-Saqi Books and Kufa Gallery).[343] The print is part of a series called *Dark Interludes* and is a commentary on the Iran-Iraq war (1980-89).[344] Images of war and symbols of power, such as the flag, are visible and combined in dark, striking images that offer a glimpse of the devastation brought about by the war. The prints were made to accompany a text by Kanaan Makiya (b. 1949), son of Mohammed. His book *The Republic of Fear* was initially published in 1989 under a pseudonym, but after publicly revealing his identity in 1991,[345] the gallery became an important centre of the resistance to the Ba'ath Party.[346]

Calligraphy and politics, past and present mingled in the exhibition to create a sense of both familiarity and surprise for the public. The prominence of so many overtly political works provides a compelling reason to explore whether the exhibition had any value for the Museum as a tool of cultural diplomacy, or at least whether it was thought of as one. Porter, in our 2018 interview, stated unequivocally that there was no diplomatic ambition in her vision. During a presentation of the latest publication on the contemporary Middle Eastern collections in November 2020, however, she did suggest that the opportunity to see works that are politically engaged has helped audiences make sense of the current situation in the region, and as such — it could be inferred — has the potential to support greater cross-cultural understanding.[347] Her curatorial approach was driven primarily by a desire to broaden the public understanding of contemporary creative practices in the region. She was also adamant about bringing to light an important collection that had been built over more than a decade at that point.

An important document that helped further pursue this line of enquiry was the summary of responses in an externally commissioned audience survey for *Word into Art*, published by the Museum in 2010.[348] The survey included questionnaires and focus groups. Answers to the questionnaires offered some useful insight into the audience's expectations from, and reactions to, the exhibition. They revealed how a greater proportion of visitors compared to other British Museum exhibitions had visited because of a specific interest in discovering a culture different from their own. It also noted a recurring preconception that the region was associated with ideas of conflict and lack of freedom and security. Respondents frequently

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[343] Cfr. BM1991,0516,0.1

[344] The full set of 13 prints is also owned by the Museum (BM1991,0516,0.1-13)

[345] Padilla, 2007

[346] Interview with Rose Issa, 2018. Issa noted how the politicisation of Kufa Gallery was the main reason behind her departure.

[347] Based on own notes from Q&A session, cfr. Courtauld Institute of Art, 2020 (Reflections)

[348] Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2010

noted their desire to discover more about contemporary culture in the region and often thought of the exhibition just as a general introduction to the subject.[349] The consultants in charge of the survey concluded that the exhibition "surprised visitors with its emotional impact, challenging perceptions of the art of the Middle East and of the Middle East as a region".[350] It is notable how a substantial part of the survey focused on the audience's perception of the Middle East. In particular, one of two overarching topics discussed during the focus groups was "The Concept of the Middle East".[351] Questions aimed to draw out the participants' perception of the region, common ideas associated with it, and their views on how an exhibition of art from this region would fit within the overall perception they have of the Museum. They also tested how successful the exhibition had been in improving the audience's understanding of Middle Eastern cultures. The structure of the survey suggests that the Museum paid particular attention to the potential of the exhibition to challenge pre-conceptions about the Middle East. Despite Porter's statement, it seems that the Museum had full consciousness of the diplomatic role the exhibition could play. Shaping public perception of the region was as essential a component of the exhibition's narrative, as much as the opportunity to discover a new cultural scene and museum collection.

The weight of the political and diplomatic dimensions of the exhibition narrative made script a problematic common thread. Script is a recognisable formal element of the artistic production of the region primarily because the Western public is familiar with Islamic art. As shown in the previous chapter, it is indeed this very familiarity that enabled the birth of the contemporary collection at the British Museum, as it needed to be accepted by Islamic Art curators working in the Museum who had little or no knowledge of the contemporary art world. *Word into Art* presented script as a field in which some of the most significant artistic innovations of the modern Middle East took place. At the same time, it was offered as a prism to understand a wide variety of socio-political debates addressed by the artists in the exhibition. The artists included in the "Identity and Politics" section certainly have used script in their work, however I would argue that it was no longer a central theme as it had been in the other three sections. Some of the themes explored here included the Iran-Iraq war — as in Siti's *Moonlight* — where script is absent altogether, even though the prints accompany Makiya's text. Another was the existential threat faced by Palestinians, as in Khalil Rabah's (b.1961) mixed-media piece *Phi.lis.tine* (Figure 3.6). The piece is a collage made of an open copy of the American Dictionary *The New Merriam Webster* covered in nails, so that only the definition of the word 'Philistine' can be seen. This reads: "Philistine, inhabitant of ancient Philistia (Palestine): a materialistic person; esp. one who is smugly indifferent to intellectual or artistic values."[352] The work in this way comments on Western misconceptions and complicity in a slow and painful erasure of Palestinian identity. Another was the status of women in Iranian society: as in Shadi Ghadirian's (b.

[349] This also echoes Azzawi's criticism that the exhibition had only shown a very limited spectrum of the artistic production from the region (Interview with Dia Azzawi, 2018).

[350] Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2010, p. 3-11 (Summative report)

[351] Ibid. (Formative report)

[352] Porter, 2008, p.123

1974) *Qajar* portrait series (Figure 3.7), a playful take on the complex relationship between past and present representations of women, where script (present in a newspaper held by the subject in the portrait) is at best a secondary aspect of the work. Important socio-political events addressed by the artists in this group are also highlighted in the catalogue of the exhibition. These tend to focus on questions of identity and on the social repercussions of conflict and war as in the case of the Lebanese civil war, the Iran-Iraq war and the ongoing Palestinian conflict.[353]

When examined collectively, it becomes evident that these are themes where the views of the artists are broadly aligned with the Western critique of contemporary Middle Eastern societies, and occasionally with the West's own self-critique, as with the highly controversial 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. This perspective echoes Jessica Winegar's wider interrogation of Western narratives promoting the idea of "good Middle Eastern art" as art that represents "past Islamic achievements, benign religiosity, and critique of contemporary Islam".[354] A celebration of calligraphy and Middle Eastern literary traditions, combined with works telling stories of traumas and war in the last section of the exhibition, seemed to follow Winegar's framework. This would be an over-simplification, however, as it would assume that the only objective of the exhibition was to refresh the public's perception of contemporary Islam. The curatorial concept of the exhibition was broader and more ambitious, reflecting a desire to introduce the creative potential of the Arabic script. This also had its drawbacks, though, since using script as the dominant theme in the representational framework of the exhibition limited the chance for the public to place political and identity issues in their wider context.

Porter must be credited for bringing a new and much more focused perspective on the culture and socio-politics of the Middle East to a wider audience. Also for doing so through the works of little-known artists. As the collection changed its course after the *Word into Art* exhibition, shifting the focus away from script, so did the representational framework. After the exhibition, two new displays in the John Addis Gallery were designed to complement major temporary exhibitions. *Iraq's Past Speaks to the Present* (from 10 November 2008 to 15 March 2009), complemented and coincided with *Babylon: Myth and Reality* (from 13 November 2008 to 15 March 2009). It presented eleven artists whose work explores pre-Islamic history and archeological practices.[355] *Safavids Revisited: Sadegh Tirafkan, Muhammad Zeeshan and Khadim Ali* (from 23 March to 18 October 2009) complemented the exhibition *Shah Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* (from 19 February to 14 June 2009). It presented works from the three artists in the title, that explored and reinvented Safavid artistic traditions and themes within those traditions. A later display was also especially significant: *Modern Syrian Artists* (from 4 July 2011 to 8 January 2012) was curated by Louisa MacMillan (b.1982) and presented for the first time a national history of artistic

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[353] Porter, 2008, p.109

[354] Winegar, 2008, p.671. Winegar also noted how this also occurs due to the significant presence of diaspora artists in exhibitions, who are more likely to be exposed to Western narratives. Just over half of those represented in the Identity and Politics section of the exhibition live in the West.

[355] British Museum, 2008 and 2009 (Exhibition Booklets)

development in Syria and the distinctive characteristics of its modern art movements.[356] The show opened right at the moment the country was about to enter a long and devastating civil war, still ongoing today.

The renewed focus of departmental displays following *Word into Art* showed how Porter and her colleagues were exploring new ways to present the Museum's growing contemporary collection to the public, whilst at the same time maintaining a connection with historical collections and the wider programme of exhibitions in the Museum. Art inspired by past traditions and artistic techniques was an important theme, and one that *Savafids Revisited* explored only a few months before the opening of the first exhibition of the *Jameel Prize* at the V&A, in which Porter was also involved. The next section will look at how the V&A established its new contemporary art initiative based on a representational framework that celebrated Islamic heritage.

3.2 Jameel Prize. V&A, 8 July to 13 September 2009

As briefly introduced in Chapter One, the opening of the Jameel Gallery at the V&A in 2006 was marked with the commission of a new piece by Iranian artist artist Monir Farmanfarmaian (Figure 2.17), offering a contemporary take on traditional mirror mosaic techniques. The piece was especially praised by key figures present at the opening of the gallery, including the Prince of Wales and Mohammed Jameel.[357] The latter had been considering ways in which traditional crafts could be still be seen as a source of innovation. Tim Stanley recalls that Mr Jameel:

> …felt that the role of the art of the past in the development of contemporary production had not ceased […] he wanted to create something that highlighted that relationship, specifically to do with the Islamic past, so he suggested the Jameel Prize. I would say that it is entirely his idea.[358]

Stanley would subsequently become the curator of the first *Jameel Prize* exhibition in 2009.[359] The project was an experiment which aimed to invite artists and designers — regardless of ethnic, national or religious background — to present work inspired by Islamic traditions and to compete for a prize worth £25,000. Besides the Farmanfarmaian commission, the only instance of a display from a contemporary Middle Eastern artist prior to the exhibition was a selection of photographs and a screening of the film *Ta'ziyeh* by

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[356] MacMillan was the Eisler curator of Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art at the Museum from 2011 to 2012 even though she had been working as Assistant Curator in the Department since 2009.

[357] Interview with Tim Stanley, 2018. Charles, Prince of Wales (b.1948) is the founder of The Prince's Foundation School of Traditional Arts, the only educational institution in the UK offering postgraduate level courses in a range of practical skills associated with Islamic and other traditional arts.

[358] Ibid.

[359] Stanley has written a helpful article on the origins and workings of the Prize soon after its launch (Stanley, 2009)

Abbas Kiarostami (1940-2016) in May 2005,[360] during a very popular London-wide festival celebrating the work of the Iranian film maker. Thus, the Museum had relatively little experience with contemporary Middle Eastern art at this point and drew from the experience of both the British Museum and Tate. Porter was involved as one of the earliest advisors, given her experience with the contemporary art scene in the region. She was also a member of the selection panel for the 2009 edition. Stanley was also supported by Damien Whitmore, Head of Communications for the V&A at the time. Whitmore had previously held a similar role at Tate, where he was involved in setting up the Turner Prize. One could speculate that this might be the reason why, soon after the launch, the Jameel Prize would often be described in the press as the "Turner Prize" of the Islamic World.[361]

The idea of celebrating Islamic tradition through contemporary objects was a tribute to the origins of the V&A collection and the interest of its first Director (Henry Cole) and keepers in how techniques from craft traditions in the Islamic world could help British design and manufacturing. During the first decade of this century, the Museum was also trying to engage with a more diverse audience and to create a new connection with historical collections: one that would enable the V&A to show, in Stanley's words, "things which match the different cultures we represent as living bodies of material".[362] With the help of Art Projects and Solutions, a consulting firm introduced by Porter, Stanley set up a nomination system inviting experts, critics, academics, curators, journalists and others to nominate artists whose practice connected with the idea and purpose of the Prize. Nominators were expected to have knowledge of the contemporary art scene "as well as an appreciation of traditional Islamic artistic practice".[363] Nominated artists would then be selected on the basis of three criteria. Their practice needed to:

> Raise the profile and widen appreciation of Islamic cultural heritage; demonstrate an assimilation and appreciation of traditional Islamic craft techniques; demonstrate a high quality of artistic concept and production".[364]

The first selection panel included a mixture of art experts and individuals with strong connections in the region. Besides Porter and Stanley, artist Parviz Tanavoli was also invited, alongside Charles Merewether (an Australian art historian and curator who had previously served as Deputy Director of the Cultural District of Saadiyat Island for the government of Abu Dhabi), Ali Yussef Khadra (the editor-in-chief of *Canvas* magazine), and Khaled Azzam (CEO of The Prince's School of Traditional Arts). The jury was chaired by the V&A Director at that time, Mark Jones.[365]

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[360] One of the photographs exhibited during the Kiarostami Festival at the V&A was later acquired by the Museum's Photography department (VA E.461-2011). The V&A catalogue record for this acquisition contains details about the 2005 displays.

[361] V&A, 2009 (Cat.1633)

[362] Interview with Tim Stanley, 2018

[363] V&A, 2008 (Cat. 1639)

[364] Ibid.

[365] Ibid.

The Museum had published the first announcement of the Prize in early 2008. The announcement stated that the Prize aimed "to revitalise [Islamic art and craft] traditions by rewarding the best contemporary work from across the globe that has been inspired by Islam's cultural heritage".[366] The release also stated that the Prize "will be part of the V&A's ongoing programme to develop cultural links around the world and promote cultural understanding", thus stressing the diplomatic ambitions of the initiative.[367] Furthermore, it rekindled one of the Museum's origin stories to validate the relevance of the Prize in the context of its institutional identity. In the editors' note it stated that the V&A "was the first institution in the world to collect Islamic art in a systematic fashion [and that] in the late 1800s [it] … was very interested in contemporary practice in the Middle East particularly through the work of Rupert Murdoch Smith in Iran".[368] It then concluded by saying that "the V&A wanted to revive that interest and does so through the *Jameel Prize".*[369] Any further explanation or critical perspective as to why interest faded in the interluding period, however, was not provided. The initiative was meant to reward existing work but also to encourage contemporary practitioners to create new work. By the time the first shortlist was announced in January 2009, the press release no longer used the term "revitalise" and the aim of the prize was more broadly defined as raising awareness of the interaction between Islamic heritage and contemporary creative practices. The shift in narrative is noteworthy in that it took the primary focus away from a new appreciation of tradition (through 'revitalisation') in favour of a more dialogic exchange between past and present. Mohammed Jameel's original idea had thus been reframed and incorporated into a more articulate narrative, mirroring the wider institutional discourse.

The exhibition of the shortlisted artworks was very successful. It included pieces in a variety of media, often conveying sharp political messages, as in the artwork visitors encountered as they entered the exhibition. Hamra Abbas's (b.1976) *Please Do Not Step: Loss of a Magnificent Story* (Figure 3.8) is a delicate collage made of paper with the inscription "Please do not Step" on it and layered to form traditional geometric patterns. The collage was then cut into letters forming a text attached to the floor. The story told by the text is a lyrical tale of loss and displacement. Upon entering the gallery visitors were forced to walk over the installation in order to access the rest of the exhibition space, thus participating in the slow physical destruction of the artwork. The curatorial note accompanying the work suggested that the gesture was symbolic of the way "so many Westerners have intervened in the Islamic world over the last two centuries and more".[370] A quote from the artist is also found on the label: "The Work is inspired in part by the feelings of displacement, at personal and collective levels, that have arisen from

[366] V&A. 2008 (Cat. 1639)

[367] Ibid.

[368] Ibid. Murdoch-Smith was an envoy collecting and researching in Iran on behalf of the museum from 1873 to 1855

[369] Ibid.

[370] V&A, 2009 (Web archive)

increasing anti-Islamic sentiment in today's world".[371] It was a potent statement that invited every visitor to enter the exhibition with a self-critical attitude. It also arguably showed the intention of the Museum to engage in a self-critical discourse, even though at no point the exhibition text elaborated on how the institution's role in the British colonial project may have played a role in such sentiment. The connection with the Islamic tradition in Abbas's work goes far beyond its formal execution and technique. The paper layering mirrored the interconnectedness of layers of history, and the performative aspect of the piece — enacted wittingly or unwittingly by visitors — reminded us that how we operate in the present is often driven by careless disregard of the past.

The other artists included in the shortlist exhibition were Reza Abedini (b.1967), an Iranian graphic designer and scholar, with four posters combining calligraphy and human forms; Sevan Biçakçi (b.1965), a Turkish jewellery designer, with five rings incorporating architectural references in their design; Hassan Hajjaj (b.1961), a London-based Moroccan artist, with a multimedia installation juxtaposing Western commercial imagery in a contemporary Arab interior setting; Khosrow Hassanzadeh (b.1963), an Iranian artist, with mixed media prints bringing together script and images of traditional Iranian wrestlers; Susan Hefuna (b.1962), a German-born Egyptian artist, with a series of drawings inspired by *mashrabiyyas* (cfr. Figure 2.13) screens from Islamic Cairo; Seher Shah (b.1975), a US-based Pakistani artist, with a series of architectural drawings combining Islamic and Western architectural references; Camille Zakharia (b.1962), a Lebanese artist, with a book of photo collages creating geometric patterns from urban landscapes; and finally Afruz Amighi (b.1974), a New York-based Iranian artist, the winner of the prize.[372]

Amighi's work, *1001 pages* (Figure 3.9), does not shy away from politics either.[373] A large sheet of polyethylene — the same material used by the United Nations to build refugee tents — was laser-cut to create intricate patterns and hung in front of a light source that projected the patterned shadow on the wall behind the piece.[374] Having left Iran as a child, Amighi had been looking back at Iranian heritage throughout her practice. The piece also drew inspiration from the interior environments she grew up in: the intricate patterns of hanging rugs in the houses of the Iranian diaspora in the US.[375] Through the choice of materials and technique, Amighi's work brought together ideas of continuity between past and present with recent histories of displacement. Once again, as in Abbas's installation, her work problematised this idea of continuity and potentially subverted the official narrative of the initiative and its focus on form over subject. Nonetheless, the official statement by Mark Jones, on the occasion of the winner's announcement, broadly ignored

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[371] V&A, 2009 (cat. 1631)

[372] V&A, 2009 (Web archive)

[373] V&A Object number ME.1-2010

[374] Cfr. Kennedy, 2018 for a broader discussion of the piece in the context of Amighi's practice .

[375] V&A, 2009 (Web archive)

the political commentary present in the work and confirmed that Amighi's success was an aesthetic choice:

> Amighi has created something new, something that is skilful but which transcends that skill. The work is both striking and subtle, as well as being beautiful. Its use of projected light and shadow loosens the viewer's focus on the created object, marking a passage from the material to the immaterial.[376]

Jones's emphasis on the material quality of the piece, deceptively naïve in appearance, nonetheless cannot hide a tension between the aesthetic and political agendas of the Museum. It is clear that Amighi's aesthetics is, in itself, political. She appeals to the persistent relevance of tradition in contemporary societies to develop an aesthetics that can problematise the present by referencing a more stable past. In her own words:

> I think the idea of continuity between past and present is problematic in a similar way as is the notion of progress. We see these things in terms of a linear narrative, devoid of disruptions, devoid of periods of stagnation and regression. What I do appreciate about the co-existence of contemporary art and antiquities in institutional exhibitions and collections, is not some mythical thread that ties them together. Rather, it's the surprise I get when I am looking at an object made hundreds of years ago, and yet I feel that it has just been made yesterday. It feels fresh, relevant, of the moment. These moments are magical because they reveal how imagination has no expiration date. We can be transported by both the consciousness of past and present.[377]

It is often true that artists draw on past traditions irrespective of the culture they identify with and not always with a political agenda. Nevertheless, the idea of a formal, aesthetic thread linking Islamic art and design traditions and contemporary creative practices is not unproblematic. The political statements contained in Abbas's and Amighi's work (and in other works within the exhibition) must be properly considered within the wider context of the Museum, its colonial history and historical collections. At the core of this discourse is the way politics have shaped the representational framework that supported this narrative of continuity, and the way in which Islamic art can maintain its relevance in the context of contemporary practices. This, for Amighi, has important implications:

> My work has consistently been acquired by Islamic art departments of various Western Museums, as opposed to by the contemporary art departments of those institutions. I have mixed feelings about this. On one hand, I understand the compulsion to categorize and label as a general attempt to understand and organize. However, to assume that this process of labelling is apolitical would be extremely naïve. Categorizing art this way can sometimes reinforce artificial notions of race, identity and nationality. While I was born in Tehran, Iran, I was raised in the United States and I am an American citizen. Placing my work in an 'Islamic' section and therefore absenting it from the 'contemporary' section strengthens the chauvinistic notion that Americans are white, Christian and non first generation immigrants.[378]

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[376] Quoted in Art Daily, 2009

[377] Interview with Afruz Amighi, 2018

[378] Ibid.

Amighi's comments is a reminder that the modes of classification of cultural institutions can have a real impact on society's perceptions and on the expectations it places on artists and the cultures they represent, as well as on the potential to misunderstand or underestimate the meaning of creative practices by relying on reductive associations between aesthetics and race or religion. The V&A does not have a contemporary art department as intended by Amighi. Whilst it is a museum of art and design, its organisational structure still today includes a separate department for “Asia”, covering the Middle East and a substantial portion of the Islamic world. Contemporary art presented within this context will necessarily be presented and contained within the boundaries of a culture geopolitically defined *a priori* by the Museum. The V&A’s organisational structure, focusing on materials and particular regions (former colonial territories), serves an ideological purpose that can create resistance to an engagement with contemporary politics as pertaining to the Middle East.[379] As such, representation of artistic practices through this framework will result as necessarily reductive. Most importantly, the presentation of contemporary works within the frame of Islamic Art, a category with boundaries deeply embedded in a historical trajectory (as discussed in the Introduction) actually prevents an artist and their art to be perceived as contemporary.

The politics of the first edition of the Prize went beyond the shortlist exhibition. Another idea introduced — and funded — by Mohammed Jameel from the very start was an international tour of the show, which took place with support from the British Council. As mentioned above, the initiative was introduced with the aim that it would “promote cultural understanding” and the tour was organised with that ambition in mind. The importance and value of the touring initiative was stated at the time in internal correspondence between the Exhibitions department and the Press and Marketing department. The former described the *Jameel Prize* as a project

> …of a slightly different profile than the rest of our touring exhibitions. Beyond the theme of the exhibition and the collaboration with the very important Mr Jameel, the aim of the project is diplomatic: it will reinforce and foster the V&A links with Syria and Turkey […]. We are also hoping to build relationships with new territories such as Lebanon and Morocco. Tehran is more uncertain. […] The project is supported by the World Collection programme and by the British Council in each country. It is also a priority project in the Director’s agenda who follows nearly daily the developments of the tour and is keen to attend the openings in the different countries in the Middle East.[380]

The exhibition eventually toured between 2009 and 2011 to Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, Damascus in Syria, Beiteddine in Lebanon, Sharjah in the UAE, Istanbul in Turkey and Casablanca in Morocco. In total it was seen by nearly 50,000 visitors. A statement from the Museum highlighted that it was “the first V&A exhibition to visit Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, the

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[379] Cfr. Hetherington, 2013 and Hooper-Greenhill, 2020 on the construction of ideological narratives in museums and their impact on the interpretation of visual culture.

[380] V&A, 2009 (cat.1639)

UAE and Morocco".[381] The tour consolidated the Museum's diplomatic clout in those countries where valuable links already existed through its collection and with financial supporters. On the other side, the cultural organisations that received the exhibition perceived the Prize as the endorsement of an internationally respected institution and a recognition of the value of contemporary culture originating in their countries. The institutional channels pursued through the British Council clearly positioned the project as a 'British' initiative. It aimed to open new access points in important cultural hubs, which were also centres of influence where the country was investing significant political capital.

Despite the complexity inherent in its curatorial framework, the Prize encouraged and offered space for critical perspectives and discussions on complex sociopolitical matters.[382] Although an audience survey was not commissioned for the first edition, the Museum received substantial press coverage in London and in the Arab world, where the exhibition was acclaimed as a considerable success. Besides enabling its launch, the Jameel family secured the legacy of the Prize with an (undisclosed) endowment that — for as long as it is maintained — will cover the costs of organising the competition, the exhibition, its touring programme and the associated publications every two years. It has also made possible the creation of a permanent curatorial post in the Museum.[383] As mentioned already in section 2.2, Mohammed Jameel initially proposed that all winning pieces would be acquired for the Museum collection, but eventually a decision was taken that the Museum would decide on a case by case basis.[384] As such, despite its success as a programme of exhibitions, the Prize did not establish a framework for the systematic collection of contemporary objects. The first major collecting initiative was launched in 2011 by the Department of Photography, in collaboration with the British Museum, and would result in another highly significant exhibition, which is the subject of the next section.

3.3 Light from the Middle East: New Photography. V&A, 13 November 2012 to 7 April 2013

Soon after completing two rounds of acquisitions in 2010 and 2011, the V&A started planning for an exhibition of the new collection of contemporary photography from the Middle East. The new collection was a project initiated by the British Museum and supported by the Art Fund.[385] The two museums had built two photography collections according to the same geographical criteria, even though — broadly speaking and with some exceptions — the V&A sought to acquire more 'fine art photography' and the British Museum focused on images that were thought to have greater documentary and historical

[381] V&A, 2011 (Web Archive)

[382] For further details on how the Prize has evolved after 2009, see Stanley, 2016

[383] Cfr. note 251.

[384] Interview with Tim Stanley, 2018

[385] The background to the project will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

significance. At the V&A, the collection was also seen as building on the existing holdings of historical images of the Middle East.[386] Views of dramatic, desert landscapes of Egypt and the Holy Land were popular and highly desirable in the nineteenth century.[387] In the example of Figure 3.10, the trio of individuals in the centre of the frame create a sense of mystery and remoteness in this photograph. Religious people who could not afford to travel would, through those images, be able to visualise and imagine the Holy Land of the Bible.[388] From the Museum's perspective, these would not strictly be considered as 'Oriental' objects, since they were made by British photographers. However, in the same way as Orientalist paintings did at Tate, they acted as references to determine early perception of the region and hence provided context to collecting efforts then and now.

When the exhibition of the Art Fund collection was in its planning stage in 2008, it was taken for granted that all the images acquired would be exhibited as a group, thus mirroring in the exhibition the same geographical range of the collection, though this was not a contractual requirement from the funders. Marta Weiss, the V&A Curator of Photographs and curator of the exhibition, explained during our interview that the Museum would usually take three different approaches to photography exhibitions: thematic, monographic or geographical. Prior to *Light from the Middle East,* a show of South African photography in 2011 and an earlier show of contemporary Chinese photography in 2005 had been organised along geographical lines.[389] The Middle Eastern show was the first time a contemporary 'geographical' photography exhibition was initiated and curated by the V&A.[390] This is important because it reversed the usual relationship between the collection and exhibitions of photography: with limited acquisition budgets, the Museum in the past had usually worked to bring exhibitions to London first, and subsequently collected a small selection of pieces from these.[391] The opportunity granted by the Art Fund enabled a new model to be tested.[392]

The exhibition was installed in the Porter Gallery, one of the Museum's main temporary exhibition spaces, situated next to the Grand Entrance on Cromwell Road. It was a very prominent location and also an unusual choice for a display comprised primarily of the

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[386] Interview with Marta Weiss, 2018.

[387] Cfr. VA E.208:73-1994 (*The Pyramids of Dahshoor [Dahshur], from the East*). The photograph is part of a series of 20 images from Egypt, Sinai and Jerusalem held in the V&A collection. The V&A collection contains thousands of images of the Middle East. Alongside Frith, K.A.C. Creswell (1879-1974) also counts over 3000 images in the collection, which were predominantly records of architectural sites.

[388] Cfr. VA PH.6-1983

[389] Importantly, however, neither of these two precedent exhibitions was initiated by the V&A. *Figures and Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography* was curated by Tamara Garb. Cfr. V&A, 2011 (Web Archive). The Chinese photography was called *Between Past and Future* and was first exhibited at the International Center of Photography, New York, and Asia Society, New York, from June 11 to September 5, 2004. Cfr. V&A, 2005 (Web Archive).

[390] The British Museum objects were incorporated in the exhibition as loans.

[391] Interview with Marta Weiss, 2018

[392] The Art Fund was at this point headed by Stephen Deuchar, formerly at the helm of Tate Britain during an important show of Mona Hatoum's work in 2000, which will be explored in the next section.

museum's own collections. The exhibition was free and proved incredibly popular, with over 300,000 visitors in six months. It contained seventy-six works by thirty artists, divided in three sections: "Recording", "Reframing" and "Resisting". The sections reflected broad curatorial themes, which Weiss described in her catalogue essay. It is notable the great diversity of the images included not only across, but also within the three section, some of which are introduced here below. The first section explored the idea of the photograph as a document and raised questions about the authority of the photographic image. In this section, for example, we find Abbas Attar's (1944-2018) images of the Iranian revolution (Figure 3.11), Manal AlDowayan's (b. 1973) portraits of Saudi women representing their profession (Figure 3.12) and Tal Shochat's (b.1974) staged trees (Figure 3.13).[393] The second section explored how photographers created new narratives based on images of the past. It included Shadi Ghadirian's *Qajar* studio portraits (Figure 3.7) and Hassan Hajjaj's (b.1961) glamourised portraits of Moroccan women in *Jama Fna Angels* (Figure 3.14). Finally, the last section considered how photographic images could be manipulated in the context of censorship and propaganda, and the risks associated with the act of taking a photograph in difficult socio-political contexts. It included, for example, Nermine Hammam's (b.1967) digital collages of Cairo soldiers during the 2011 uprisings (Figure 3.15), and found images of the American Embassy from 1984, burned and manipulated by John Jurayj (b.1968) in his work *Untitled (Large Embassy with Red Mirror #1)* (Figure 3.16). It is evident, looking at just these few examples, that the range of ideas, techniques and themes presented in the exhibition was very wide and that the practice of several artists in the show was not easily confined by one curatorial theme. To bring the entire collection in this way was thus an especially hard task.

The geographical approach was problematic for Weiss. During our interview, she explained how the arrangement of the works in the exhibition came about:

> I am a photography expert and I'm not a Middle East expert, and I was […] aware of that throughout the whole process. […] I made it about photography. I organised [the images] into these categories: 'Recording' ,'Reframing' ,'Resisting', because that's what the photographs themselves are about.[394]

Specifically referring to the problems with a geographical approach, Weiss continued: "I was concerned about essentialising,[…] I think many of the artists exhibited in this exhibition would say 'I don't want to be a Middle Eastern artist, I want to be an artist'".[395]

It is evident that such geographical framing is considered limiting by at least some of the artists, for whom the notion of Middle East does not function as an identifiable framework to describe their cultural identity, let alone their artistic practice. The strictures of geography can also create a generalised perspective that fails to differentiate across multiple national, religious, cultural and ethnic-based signifiers that determine the diversity

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[393] Abbas Attar is known commonly and referred to from this point onwards as "Abbas".

[394] Interview with Marta Weiss, 2018

[395] Interview with Marta Weiss, 2018

of identities present in this broadly defined region. Yet the Museum — and Weiss in her role as curator of the exhibition — was limited in this respect by the decision to present this body of work together in one single exhibition.[396] The curatorial concept and strategy had evolved significantly over the previous two years, effectively since the collecting venture started. An early proposal from 2010 described the images as belonging to "some of the most urgent and visually experimental photographic practice today".[397] It also situated the works within a Euro-American photographic practice, dominant in Britain until that point, claiming that this practice had become too academic, self referential and not particularly innovative.[398] It emphasised the difference in the level of infrastructure supporting photographic practices in the Western world as opposed to the Middle East, and argued that the lack of such infrastructure in the latter resulted in a sense of immediacy and greater innovation. Artists in the region, the proposal stated, are "compelled to short-circuit to the emotive heart of an issue".[399] Despite the statement above suggesting that the images could be productively considered as part of the wider discourse of contemporary photography, the focus in the proposal shifted rapidly towards the geopolitics of the region. The photographers are subsequently described as "a selection of individuals grappling with the state of a region where tradition and modernity face each other and must relate to the wider world today".[400]

The work of Abbas (1944-2018), one of the world's most prominent documentary photographers, active internationally for over four decades since the 1970s, comes to mind when considering this statement. Abbas took some of the most iconic shots of the Iranian Revolution, images that have come to symbolise the violent transition of the Iranian state towards Islamic rule. As a journalist, Abbas had access to spaces regular civilians would not have access to. The revolutionary groups themselves wanted his work to be a document of their success, as images such as *The bodies of four generals, executed after a secret trial, Tehran, 15 February 1979* show (Figure 3.11).[401] Abbas had been a Magnum photographer for over three decades and was based in Paris for most of his life. Throughout his career he had documented social and political events of global significance from Northern Ireland to Vietnam. The subject of his work and the place it was given within the exhibition embodied much of the complexity surrounding the representational framework chosen by the V&A: images of traditions clashing with modernity, of Islam clashing with the Western world, of the meddling of regional and international politics. Abbas's position within the show exemplifies the limitations of the geographical framework adopted in the exhibition. It is impossible to define his work as that of a Middle Eastern

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396 This is further discussed in the next Chapter in relation to the influence of the Art Fund funding requirements associated with the collection exhibited in this show.

397 V&A, 2010 (Cat. 1470)

398 Ibid.

399 Ibid.

400 Ibid.

401 Cfr. BM 2010, 6034.8. This is one of 8 photographs by the artist included in the exhibition.

photographer without limiting the public's understanding of his practice, and of the subject matter of the works themselves.

Naturally, the issue did not apply in the same way to all artists in the show. Manal AlDowayan's work was first shown to the UK public in this exhibition, even though the British Museum owned a large portion of her work acquired through this collecting project. The piece included in the show, *I am an Educator* (Figure 3.12), is part of a broader project that aims to comment on the status of women in Saudi society and reclaim it from Western stereotypes that usually associated images of conservative Saudi women with ideas of oppression and gender inequality.[402] Whilst agreeing that using a geographically defined curatorial framework oversimplified the representation of images in the show, AlDowayan also interestingly pointed out that as a Saudi artist, this was less problematic for her. In her words: "I was part of that category […] so that was acceptable. [But at] this point in my career I don't think it's acceptable for institutions to use 'Islam' or 'Middle East' [in contemporary art shows]".[403] Weiss herself pointed out that the geographical approach was not going to work for every artist in the show. Yet, it is not clear why a non-geographical curatorial framework for the exhibition was not considered, such as a thematic approach which might have united the new acquisitions with other parts of the V&A collection, especially since the premise for an alternative approach was already present in the exhibition proposal discussed above.[404]

The structure of the exhibition shared one important characteristic with *Word into Art*: artworks more overtly political in nature were presented in the last section of both exhibitions. As the majority of visitors were new to the artists presented, it could be argued that the exhibition strategy incorporated a gradual crescendo towards more controversial themes. The editorial strategy of the official marketing video for *Light from the Middle East* also seemed to follow this pattern. It included interviews with five artists — Abbas, John Jurayj, Manal AlDowayan, Hassan Hajjaj, and Nermine Hammam — and concluded with a statement by Hammam:

> Maybe we're living in very turbulent and turmoiled times, photography is the best to show that because it's very close to reality, it goes between documentation and art. I think because of the political situation we're in […] it's the best tool to portray that.[405]

The parallel between the marketing and curatorial strategies seemed to suggest the importance for the Museum of building momentum towards a greater engagement of the audience with the geopolitical situation in the region. In the context of the visitors'

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[402] Cfr. BM 2009,6034.1-2

[403] Interview with Manal AlDowayan, 2018

[404] The issue was discussed during interviews with both Weiss and Porter (Interview with Marta Weiss, 2018 and Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018).

[405] Vimeo (Victoria and Albert Museum), 2012

experience, this process started with the very title of the show, another important component of the marketing strategy of the exhibition. Whilst Weiss made it clear that this was a reference to light in a photographic context, I would argue that the idea of "light from the Middle East" may suggest that the exhibition aimed to fulfil an emancipatory function.[406] It promised to shed new light onto a cultural space that was previously assumed to be in darkness, and to offer a new perspective on the socio-political context surrounding that space, through the eyes of the artists.

An earlier draft set of curatorial sections, before the final arrangement settled on "Recording, Reframing, Resisting", had a much more overt reference to issues of politics and identity. The four categories are listed here with examples of works proposed for inclusion in each of them:

1. "Transformation and Tradition": including Abdulnasser Gharem's (b.1973) *Siraat (the path)* (2009, Figure 3.17), a comment on the fragility of spirituality in the context of the rapid modernisation of Saudi Arabia.[407]
2. "Capturing Conflict": including Abbas's images of the Iranian revolution.
3. "The Body Politic": including Ghadirian's *Qajar* and Manal AlDowayan's *I am an Educator.*[408]
4. "Identity Photos", including Hassan Hajjaj's *Jama Fna Angels,*[409] where markers of local identity such as traditional dresses are subverted and framed alongside markers of Western identity.

All the images above eventually made it to the final cut of the exhibition, even if they were arranged differently. Despite political references being less overt in the final chosen sections, politics still inevitably entered the exhibition narrative, by means of less visible curatorial choices. Following the conclusion of the joint acquisition project with the British Museum in 2011, Weiss embarked on a new round of acquisitions for the exhibition, more limited yet still supported by the Art Fund. These included Nermine Hammam's "Sham El-Nessem (Spring)",[410] a comment on the vulnerability of soldiers in Tahrir Square, Cairo, during the 2011 demonstrations (Figure 3.15). Hammam took thousands of photographs during the demonstration and focused on young military men who seemed outnumbered and disoriented. Through the technique of digital collage, she removed the soldiers from their original context and placed them in idyllic natural landscapes. As a commentary against the injustice of war, the images tried to offer an alternative reality, one without conflict and unrest, in which these soldiers were temporarily allowed to reside. The Arab

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406 I offer a similar critique in Chapter Four in relation to the 2009 *Unveiled* exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery.

407 BM 2009, 6033.1

408 VA E.351 to 354-2010, E.361 and E.362-2010

409 VA E.360-2010

410 VA E.1131-2012

Spring had just happened and Weiss felt the need to include the artist's reaction to it in the exhibition, knowing it would be a topic that would resonate with the public.[411]

The new acquisitions also included Tal Shochat's series of fruit trees, *Persimmon (Afarsemon)* (Figure 3.13)*, Pomegranate (Rimon)* and *Grapefruit (Eshkolit).*[412] The latter series is described in the Museum's collection records with commentary on the artistic rendering of the photographic subjects and the studio setting. The interpretation angle eschews politics and focuses on the medium, stating that the "photographs present a view of nature that would never actually exist in a natural environment" and that the "work highlights the tensions in photography between reality and artifice".[413] Besides the possible political interpretation of the photographs itself, I would argue that its later addition to the collection and the seemingly non-political nature of the work indicate the desire of the V&A to include Israel within the exhibition's geographical remit without addressing the political tensions surrounding the country in a direct manner.[414] Adding a Jewish Israeli photographer to the Middle Eastern collection could in fact deter the possible criticism that Jewish Israeli artists were not considered to be part of the Middle East.[415] It is also significant that the works had been given particular prominence within the exhibition space, with the three photographs hanging on a separate wall within the "Recording" section. In the official video of the exhibition, Weiss also chose to stand by Shochat's work during the filming, arguably to emphasise her support for the inclusion of Israeli artworks in the show.[416] The careful staging of Shochat's inclusion in the exhibition — avoiding specific associations by placing the artworks on separate walls and using them as a backdrop in a promotional video — revealed how much the curatorial and marketing strategy of the exhibition had considered the diplomatic implications of including an Israeli artist.

Overall, the process of exhibiting the new photography collection was fraught with complexities and deeply embedded in a larger politics. In part this was a result of the acquisition process: the exhibition was essentially a snapshot of the art market as it was in the three years between 2010 and 2012. The Museum could only collect work that was available at that time. Importantly, Weiss was not involved in the process until 2011, which may explain her desire to add her choices to the collection. Her arrival brought valuable expertise as a photography specialist with a broader perspective to the initiative. Yet she was faced by difficult choices: first, she had to unify a heterogeneous set of images within

[411] Interview with Marta Weiss, 2018

[412] VA E.1126-2012 and E.1128-2012

[413] Cfr. Object Description in VA E.1126-2012

[414] Indeed Weiss explained that the main reason behind the inclusion of Shochat was to make the collection more inclusive (Interview with Marta Weiss, 2018).

[415] The collection included already a work by a Palestinian artist, Raeda Saadeh (VA E.356-2010), which was also included in the exhibition.

[416] Victoria and Albert Museum, 2013

a homogenising regional collecting remit; second, she had to strike a delicate balance between the artistic value and political value of the images in the show. In her catalogue essay, she attempted to find a common ground where political and artistic concerns could meet, arguing that "the immediacy, universality and accessibility of photography make it an ideal choice for artists confronting the social challenges and political upheavals of the contemporary Middle East".[417] However, the end point of her argument, as in Hammam's conclusion during her video interview, was that the artist's "choice of subject matter […] expresses current social and political concerns and addresses aspects of how Middle Eastern identity is experienced and perceived".[418] Whilst being a correct assessment of the evidence provided by the artworks, the argument does not reflect on the origin of the works selected. Evidently, acquisition choices had determined the core underlying narrative which would eventually place the political situation in the region at the forefront of the exhibition. In the afterword to the catalogue, Stephen Deuchar, then Director of the Art Fund, warned of the risks of looking through the lens of politics indiscriminately, inviting us to reflect on how agency, ambiguity and interpretation affect the politics of representation.[419] Encouraged by his invitation, I would argue that the relationship between tradition and modernity, presented emphatically (particularly in the "Reframing" section) as a chief concern for some of the artists represented in the show, turned out to be a double-edged sword for a museum that chose to venture into contemporary collecting for the first time after a century and a half, and which therefore had to reckon with its own traditions and knowledge gaps.

The relatively limited knowledge held by the Museum on contemporary photography from the region was even more evident when considering the interview questions submitted to all participating artists and included in the catalogue alongside their responses:

1. Have you been influenced by any particular photographs or photographer?
2. Would you describe your work as political? How does the politics of your country of origin affect your work?
3. Do you use photography on its own or in combination with other media? If you work in more than one medium, when and why do you choose to make photographs?[420]

The generic, basic nature of the questions was not only a reflection of the knowledge gap within the institution, but also of an assumption that the audience of the exhibition would know relatively little about the works exhibited. Interestingly, several responses to the first question highlighted the importance of Western influences on the artists' practice, therefore offering readers reference points they could more easily relate to. Abbas's answer, for instance, was: "Rembrandt, Goya, Velázquez, Caravaggio, Cezanne,

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[417] Weiss, 2013, p.7

[418] Ibid, p.28

[419] Ibid. p.157-8

[420] Ibid.

Picasso".[421] The second question demonstrated a very specific assumption about the reader's interest and, unsurprisingly, it generated a very diverse set of responses. Rather provocatively, Abbas's answer was: "Indeed. Should not a critic be asked this question instead of the photographer?"[422] The last question, more simply, tried to solicit brief explanations of the artists' techniques.

Exhibition visitors themselves were also questioned about their experience. An audience survey was undertaken by the Marketing department and summarised in an internal report in May 2013. The structure of the questions in the survey also supported the same assumptions made with the artists' interviews. The report stated that the top motivation for visiting the exhibition was)to find out more about the Middle East", one of three specific options offered to survey participants alongside finding out more about photography or contemporary art.[423] A significant part of the survey was an in-depth analysis of how, if at all, the exhibition had changed the audience's perception of the Middle East. Interestingly, nearly two in three respondents stated that the exhibition did not change their perception of the region.[424]

When jointly examined, the different components of the museum's strategy — the title of the exhibition, its curatorial themes, the marketing video, the artists' interviews in the catalogue and the audience survey — revealed two overarching issues. First, the difficulty faced by Weiss in trying to contain such a diverse range of practitioners within a rigid, geographical framework. Second, the difficulty in introducing the range of artistic practices from the region without making it about the politics of the region. Despite not being stated, the inevitable centrality of politics within the narrative of the exhibition is clear across all components of the representational framework. Visitors, artists, readers of the catalogue and viewers of promotional videos were all encouraged to look at the art through the double filter of politics and geography. Within the context of a 'museum of cultures', it is inevitable that any attempt to represent a culture would be affected by the current geopolitics shaping the relationship between those who represent and those who are represented. The very choice to define a culture as an identifiable whole — as in the notion of 'Middle Eastern photography' — implies the setting of boundaries around objects, which the latter continuously break by virtue of their complexity. Acknowledging the limits of the curatorial framework in the catalogue of the exhibition is a useful step to support the interpretation of objects and encourage further research, however the central issue remains the reductive nature of a curatorial framework defined by geography.

Such critique of the Museum's approach should be balanced with the recognition of the popularity of the exhibition amongst both participating artists and visitors. It offered many artists an opportunity to reach — often for the first time — a wider, international public; and

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[421] Ibid., p.139

[422] Ibid. p.146

[423] The other two options included a chance visit or 'other' (Bentley, 2013, p.7)

[424] Bentley, 2013, p.2

to achieve a greater level of recognition within the broader discourse of contemporary photography thanks to the endorsement of a respected institution. The exhibition also inspired many visitors to learn more about new artists and new ways to use photography as part of a creative practice.

The next section will look at how Tate exhibited the work of Saloua Rouda Choucair — relatively unknown to Western audiences before 2013 — through a very different approach, which was in part successful at sidelining such geopolitical considerations.

3.4 Saloua Rouda Choucair. Tate Modern, 16 April to 20 October 2013

As a museum entirely dedicated to modern and contemporary art, Tate Modern had a different — and arguably more established — mechanism for creating temporary exhibitions focusing on individual artistic practices and art movements. As seen in Chapter Two, the opening of the new galleries in Bankside in 2000 also inaugurated a new framework for collecting beyond the Western world. The Choucair retrospective was the first solo show in a British national museum dedicated to an artist living and working in the Middle East. Yet it was not the first exhibition at Tate to engage with a discourse concerning the Middle East. Prior to 2013, two relevant exhibitions took place: first, a solo exhibition of the work of artist Mona Hatoum in 2000; second, an exhibition of Orientalist paintings in 2008.[425] The two shows will be briefly introduced here before moving on to a detailed analysis of Choucair's exhibition.

Hatoum's show, *The entire world as a foreign land,* was installed in the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain from 23 March to 23 June 2000.[426] It included *Home* (Figure 3.18), a multimedia installation acquired by the Museum shortly after the show, which explored a theme Hatoum is well known for: the transformation of a space and objects supposed to offer comfort and reassurance into an ambiguous and threatening realm.[427] The installation — conceived by an artist who had lost her home as a result of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) — challenged traditional ideas of gender roles in the home, and the role of the home itself. In the foreword to the catalogue*,* Stephen Deuchar, then Tate Britain's Director, referred to the Palestinian origins of the artist and the influence of themes of "confinement and dislocation" on her practice. He argued that her exploration of "human and domestic themes [and] rigorous aesthetic" earned Hatoum a place in the

[425] Rose Issa recalled during our interview that Tate Liverpool had contacted her for advice in 1995, following her Barbican show, on North African artists, however this did not result in an exhibition or display (Interview with Rose Issa, 2018).

[426] Following this show, Hatoum's work - despite her status of British citizen - would predominantly be seen in Tate Modern, notably in her new major retrospective there in 2016.

[427] The acquisition was an earlier and smaller version of the arrangement exhibited in the Duveen galleries. Cfr. T07918.

wider international contemporary art landscape.[428] The catalogue also included an essay by Edward Said, who emphasised how familiarity and strangeness in the work of Hatoum are a sign of the irreconcilable struggle of dislocation:

> Her work is the presentation of identity as unable to identify with itself […] Her works enact the paradox of dispossession as it takes possession of its place in the world […] No-one has put the Palestinian experience in visual terms so austerely and yet so playfully, so compellingly and at the same moment so allusively.[429]

Multiple readings of the exhibition were possible — for instance in relation to gender roles or to the history of the Lebanese Civil War. As in Donald Preziosi's idea of the "object lesson", the materiality of Hatoum's objects could be broken down to present multiple layers where aesthetic, political, historical and ethical considerations converge.[430] Deuchar and Said's perspectives, however, contributed to a specific effort at 'narrative-building' undertaken by the Museum which positioned the exhibition within the context of the Palestinian-Israeli struggle. This happened at a particular historical moment when hopes for a resolution of the latter were growing, with the exhibition taking place in the lead up to the Camp David Summit of 2000.[431] Curator and author Amalia Mesa-Bains suggests that the role played by interpretation in the institutional context is as important as the display itself in developing an understanding of the "cultural expressiveness" of an identifiable 'group' external to Western discourse, which in this case can be identified as 'Palestinian artists'.[432] Through the lens of the institution, Hatoum's objects acquired cultural expressiveness in the politics of the moment and her exhibition is an important early example of the attractiveness of themes of identity, conflict and political narratives in art shows associated with the region.

While British Orientalist paintings lie outside the remit of this thesis, it is important to consider the impact of the 2008 exhibition *Lure of the East*. The exhibition reminded us how enduring the appeal of exoticised images of the Middle East still was, just over a decade ago, amongst British audiences. The show was indeed criticised for offering cliches, male-dominated views of the 'Orient', and for being simply about artists' fascination with an imagined realm rather than about the representation of identifiable cultures.[433] Whilst largely absent in the show itself, Tate encouraged critical engagement

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[428] Deuchar, in Said and Wagstaff, 2000, p.5

[429] Ibid., p.15-16

[430] Preziosi, 2006, p.50

[431] The Summit was between then American President Bill Clinton, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

[432] Mesa-Bains, 2004, p.102. Cfr. also Oberhardt, 2001, p.3

[433] Cfr. Guardian, 2008; Culture24, 2008; The Telegraph, 2008

with the subject in the exhibition catalogue.[434] Here, Rana Kabbani (b.1958) argued that the 2003 war in Iraq was undertaken due to the notion of the "civilising" mission much in the same way as the nineteenth century occupation of Egypt, which inspired many of the Orientalist works in the exhibition.[435] Kabbani argued that Orientalist works have never represented the markers of colonialism (with its violence and the turmoil it generated in these societies), instead preferring peaceful and idyllic settings; and that the idea that "the West knows more about the Orient than the Orient knows about itself" still holds true today.[436] Kabbani's argument echoed the notion of familiarity in the context of calligraphy discussed in Chapter Two: when 'institutionalised' (that is, validated through acquisitions or exhibitions) within the museum's narrative, recognisable images influence our idea of another people and the nature of our relationship with them. Calligraphy, as much as Wester-centric, romanticised images of the Holy Land or views of Cairo's colourful nineteenth century urban settings, can act as signifiers of established popular notions of the Middle East. If presented alongside contemporary material, these notions limit the audience's opportunity to engage with the full context of contemporary production. Oberhardt's argument is especially significant here when considering how the British Museum and the V&A — and to a certain extent Tate Britain, with the two exhibitions just discussed — had attempted to position their respective institutional narratives in direct relationship to popular, media-driven representations of the Middle East. Tate Modern's approach with the Choucair exhibition would be markedly different.

The first three to four years following the creation of Tate's Middle East and North Africa Acquisitions Committee (MENAAC) in 2009 were years of intense acquisition-driven research. Jessica Morgan, appointed The Daskalopoulos Curator, International Art at Tate Modern in 2010 was at the forefront of these efforts. In our interview, Morgan recalled how this new overture to non-Western art scenes radically shaped Tate's exhibition and display strategy. She also argued that it changed the way in which curators and the Exhibitions Department — at this time and still today separate divisions — worked together.[437] The speed at which knowledge was acquired and the sheer breadth of it was also significant, as staff were tasked with grasping the currents and undercurrents of vast regional art scenes over half a century in a matter of one or two years. As curators became closer to their exhibitions colleagues however, a more integrated approach was taken: the Choucair exhibition became a textbook example of this.

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[434] Richard Dorment in the Telegraph is very critical of the catalogue essays for their 'political correctness' suggesting that indeed these pictures are about the artist's imagination and should not be regarded as reportage or an attempt to represent a political situation (The Telegraph, 2008). An argument which not only underestimates and belittles the power of artistic representations in the formation of popular culture but also seems to suggest that museums should not be encouraging critical debate around their exhibitions.

[435] Tromans, 2008. Kabbani (b.1958) is a Syrian author and journalist who had written extensively on Muslim women and European's myths about the Orient. She is connected to Patrick Seale, the editor and gallerist mentioned in Chapter One, they married in 1985.

[436] Tromans, 2008, p.43

[437] Interview with Jessica Morgan, 2018. Curatorial and exhibitions functions within Tate at this time are separate.

Choucair had been active in Lebanon since the 1940s and has been credited with being a pioneer of abstraction in the Middle East. Her work is predominantly sculptural even though throughout her extensive career she worked with a variety of media including painting and textiles. Her interests were extremely varied, from engineering to poetry, from mathematics to Islamic geometry. Importantly, her work rarely dealt directly with issues of political, religious or gender identity and her interest in human progress transcended those concerns. Morgan's first trips to Choucair's studio in 2010 consolidated in a proposal to acquire a group of six works.[438] One of Morgan's earliest acquisitions was *Infinite Structures* (Figure 3.19): this is one of the works which Hala Schoukair, the daughter of the artist, referred to as her "siblings".[439] The modular structure of the sculpture is both a homage to Constantin Brancusi's (1876–1957) *Endless Column* and a reference to the way stanzas interlink in Sufi poetry.[440] The way the piece bridged between two cultures was symbolic of the role the exhibition was seen as playing.

Throughout the acquisition process, it became clear to Morgan and her colleagues that much more work was needed to build a meaningful understanding of Choucair's practice. The exhibition proposal came not long afterwards and was helped by the fact that a large body of works representative of virtually Choucair's entire career was more or less readily available in her studio in Beirut. Morgan recalls how the idea of a show was supported at an early stage and swiftly approved by Tate: "I don't remember having to fight particularly hard to get that one through, although I think it was surprising to everyone that it had a more general appeal".[441] Indeed it proved to have a very wide appeal, as it became the first exhibition Tate extended beyond its original dates.[442]

At the time of Tate's show, Choucair's Alzheimer's was relatively advanced and her daughter was acting as her representative. During our interview, Schoukair recalled her surprise at the choice of her mother's self portrait as the poster for the exhibition, rather than a sculpture.[443] The semi abstract, frontal portrait, shows a young Saloua looking directly at the viewer (Figure 3.20). In it she is wearing a white headpiece and her lips are painted red. Choucair considered herself a sculptor and had cared to show her paintings much less throughout her life.[444] She did not want her gender — or for that matter her Druze or Arab — identity to confine or dominate her practice. The choice of the poster, therefore, became problematic for the way in which it placed her mother's gender identity

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[438] To note a large retrospective of Choucair's work was organised by Saleh Barakat in the Beirut Exhibition Centre in 2011, which Morgan visited (Interview with Jessica Morgan, 2018)

[439] Interview with Hala Schoukair, 2018. Cfr. T13262

[440] T13262

[441] Interview with Jessica Morgan, 2018

[442] Holtam, 2013

[443] Interview with Hala Schoukair, 2018

[444] Ibid. In an article Shoukair published for Art Dubai, she recounted the time when her mother looked at her self portrait and judged it "so ugly" (Schoukair, 2017).

before her work. Schoukair conceded that her mother probably felt a sense of belonging to Beirut and the Arab world: she recalled how a few years before she died, she penned a will wishing to have one public sculpture in each Arab city. Nonetheless, she had always been adamant that her practice could not be defined by any single, narrow perspective.[445]

Despite the controversy around the poster, the Tate show, which included over 160 works, succeeded in presenting the variety and complexity of Choucair's practice and giving due credit to the range of influences that shaped it. The texts in the catalogue also showed a systematic attempt to release the artist from possible identity straitjackets. In it Morgan highlighted Choucair's two-way dialogue with modernist principles. Kristen Scheid reviewed early critical responses to her work, noting how Lebanese commentators had a problematic relationship with Western ideas of modernity, and that Choucair continued to develop a fiercely independent practice despite a local insecurity about the existence of a true Lebanese modernity.[446] Ann Coxon's text is also helpful in clarifying how her use of geometry was not a straight reference to the Islamic religion but one that ought to be seen as "spiritual in a post-modern sense".[447] Despite the valuable arguments proposed by these scholarly texts, however, the marketing communication of the Museum continues today to present the artist through the prisms of gender and geographical perspectives. The opening statement on Tate's website describes her as follows: "A rare female voice in the Beirut art scene from the 1940s onwards, Choucair's work combines elements of western abstraction with Islamic aesthetics".[448]

Despite the reductiveness of marketing communication, the exhibition was the first time in a UK museum that geopolitics were largely sidelined in the representation of a Middle Eastern artist.[449] The artist was included within an established — and arguably expanding — framework of modernism, which despite its Western-centric origins was, and continues to be questioned, by Tate. The Museum's approach as such differed from that of the British Museum and the V&A in that geography was not adopted as a container for organising the exhibition. Exhibition practice at Tate in the years since Morgan's appointment involved primarily the discovery and identification of what the curator calls "mini-narratives": pivotal points where important people and ideas converge.[450] The idea of specific, interconnected

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[445] Specifically, an enlarged version of one of her sculptures. Schoukair also recalled how her mother would introduce her sculptures as "maquettes" to visitors, and how she had always wanted to see her work in public spaces (Interview with Hala Schoukair, 2018).

[446] Morgan, 2013. Also cfr. the Introduction for a discussion around western-centrism in the history of art and Shabout, 2007 on the development of Arab modernisms in particular. Also, for a discussion around 'alternative' modernities and a critique of the centrality of Western Modernity see Gaonkar, 1999; Wachtel, 2001; Kelly, 2002; Friedman, 2006 and Ashcroft, 2009; Harney and Phillips, 2018.

[447] Morgan, 2013

[448] Tate Modern, 2018

[449] Following the Choucair exhibition, Tate Modern arranged several displays of new acquisitions supported by MENAAC, incorporating works in wider groups - on a thematic basis - across its permanent galleries. It also hosted a new retrospective of Mona Hatoum in 2016 and an exhibition of Fahrelnissa Zeid (1901-1991) in 2017.

[450] Interview with Jessica Morgan, 2018

narratives cutting across geographies (and disciplines and media) is a fundamental aspect of the new research direction taken by Tate Modern with its new “Transnational” research centre, which will be further discussed in the thesis’ Conclusion.

Conclusion

All four exhibitions discussed above — taking place between 2006 and 2013 — revealed how the three museums had to negotiate competing influences and objectives in developing new narratives dealing with cultural difference in a contemporary context. Curators and museum staff had to develop new interpretation strategies for artists and artworks that were not well known to scholars and museum audiences alike.

A fundamental aspect emerging from the discussion is the way in which the history and identity of the museums — and the histories of key individuals working there — influenced representational frameworks. It is shown to have been particularly evident at the British Museum and V&A, where exhibitions were clearly seen as an opportunity to influence public opinion about the Middle East. Both museums strove to present a wide spectrum of contemporary practices in order to broaden their audience's perspective, even though often the narratives in the exhibitions did not challenge traditional media conventions and the stereotypes they perpetuate. Nonetheless, this was the first time they had organised exhibitions of this scale and the content they presented was untested with their audiences.

What remains to be seen is whether the discourse around these exhibitions will change the way museums see themselves. Irit Rogoff has argued that when dealing with cultural difference, museums

> …+annot deal exclusively with that which has been lost, marginalised, or vilified. [They] must actually deal with the effects of those histories and dynamics on the cultures that perpetrated these elisions and remained seemingly inviolate in their wake.[451]

To exhibit artworks that are subtly critical of the West — as in Rabah’s *Phi.lis.tine* or AlDowayan's *I am an Educator* — is commendable, however it does not pose any significant challenge to institutional frameworks of cultural representation that are still rooted in colonial history. A number of questions, therefore, remain to be addressed. First of all, how can museums empower audiences to question the assumptions behind curatorial frameworks? More importantly, how can we reconcile contemporary expressions of non-Western culture with the long-established frameworks that Western museums adopt to represent such cultures? With future exhibitions, museums will need to develop strategies to incorporate a meaningful critique of those histories of elisions mentioned by

[451] Rogoff, 2002, p.64

Rogoff and develop new representational frameworks accordingly.[452] It is also possible that the answers to these questions will not be found in Western institutions, but in the narratives developed by other museums across the region itself, however elaborating on this would be outside the scope of this thesis.

The next chapter will continue with an analysis of the impact of funders and commercial operators on the development of institutional narratives in these three museums. Several examples have already emerged in the first three chapters, revealing the influence of such operators at different levels: in their capacity as influencers of institutional actors, as in the case of Porter; pioneers introducing artists to a new public, as with Issa; or enablers of new initiatives, as with the Jameel family and the MENAAC at Tate Modern. Their role and that of other important actors in the commercial art sector will be discussed now in more detail.

[452] Rogoff's argument is a precursor to the broader discussion on the decolonisation of museums that has developed significantly in recent years. A broad review of decolonisation narratives is offered by Craggs and Wintle, 2016. Specifically on museums cfr. Brulon Soares and Leshchenko, 2018; Abungu, 2019; Hicks, 2020

Chapter Four
Private Funding and Commercial Influences

Introduction

The last two chapters have demonstrated how our three UK national museums have dedicated and directed significant resources to building and displaying their collections of contemporary Middle Eastern art. In all cases, efforts have been enabled mostly by private donors and by the museums' staff ability to access and become familiar with a diverse array of artworks circulating through a growing secondary art market. In particular, the figure of the 'collector-patron', typically a private donor with a passion, knowledge and personal interest in collecting contemporary art from the region, will emerge as a key source of support for museums in this area. The chapter will look at the interaction between the museums and this sphere of private interest, to establish how the relationships between curators and private operators shaped the direction of the institutions.

The idea that private interest — whether commercial or personal — would shape and direct a public enterprise is not new. In Chapter Two I noted that the foundation of the British Museum and Tate was the result of substantial private donations. These were also not the first cultural institutions to be born out of private support in London. The Society of Artists of Great Britain mounted and paid for exhibitions starting in 1761 with the intent of supporting talented, yet unknown, artists.[453] It was with the profits of these exhibitions that the Royal Academy was founded in 1768, which, despite its Royal status, continued to rely on the commercial income from exhibitions to sustain itself.[454]

As far as the three museums discussed in this thesis are concerned, the interaction between public and private interests is so close that it is hard to establish clear boundaries. The main objective of the first section of this chapter is to outline the context in which this interaction developed. It was noted already in Chapter One that many of London's key early contributors to the arrival and discovery of contemporary art from the region were commercial operators, like Rose Issa, Dale Egee or the October Gallery. As pioneering dealers in contemporary Middle Eastern art, their importance and connections with the museums has been already highlighted. As institutional collections developed and curators became more and more embedded in the professional networks connected to the region, the influence of individual dealers diminished. This happened not only because curators sought to achieve diversity in their collecting and display efforts, but also to

[453] Batschmann, 1997, p.23-25. A similar, earlier example of organised private patronage preceding the Society of Artists of Great Britain was the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (know in short as Society of Arts), founded in 1754. The author in particular argues that the Society institute 'a new form of patronage, commissioning and sponsorship in one' which was an innovative model compared to more established forms of aristocratic patronage.

[454] Ibid. The Royal Academy continues to operate without public funding to this day, now with an expanded range of commercial income streams including shops, cafes, restaurants, space hire, merchandise, publications and more.

ensure that these relationships were not perceived as affecting the independence of the institutions.[455]

The second section of the chapter will highlight how the influence of private interests manifested within each institution. As far as the British Museum and Tate Modern are concerned, it will focus on the new committees that both institutions established to support acquisitions. For the V&A, it will focus on the support of the Jameel family and the Art Fund acquisition grants that have enabled the start of new collections of photography and craft objects. In all three cases, the key question addressed by the chapter will remain how private support shaped the possibilities and decisions of each museum, and what impact it has had in each case.

4.1 London, Dubai and the Contemporary Middle Eastern Art Market

This section provides some background to the development of private interest in contemporary art in two locations, London and Dubai. The two cities provided interconnected hubs for the gathering of professionals — artists, dealers, curators and influencers — and for the convergence of financial resources that ultimately enabled museums to build and share their collections. The strong ties linking the two cities make it useful to assess them in tandem. It will help us to understand the role UK museums play in the market for contemporary Middle Eastern art and, conversely, the role the market has played in the development of the museums' endeavours in the field.

4.1.1 London as a global art market

Private support has been essential to the development of our three museums since their beginnings in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In parallel with their collections growing, a thriving secondary market for artefacts and artworks also grew significantly with London at its centre.[456]

London in the Victorian period housed the world's largest art market, due largely to the economic expansion fuelled by imperial trade. Interest in luxury goods increased alongside the private purchase of art, as collecting became increasingly a way to symbolise status and worldliness.[457] The city hosted a complex infrastructure designed to make the market

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[455] Naturally, given the growing interest from collectors, more dealers have started trading in contemporary Middle Eastern art in the last twenty years. Some have established good relationships with London museums and are worth mentioning, such as Selma Feriani Gallery (est. 2007, London), Isabelle Van Den Eynde (est. 2006, Dubai) or Rossi & Rossi gallery (est. in 1985, London, even though it started to represent contemporary artists from Asia and the Middle East in 2005). Later in the next section a number of other galleries will also be mentioned in relation to the early development of Dubai's art market.

[456] See Wackernagel and Luchs, 1981 on established forms of patronage from Reinassance Florence; also Bayer and Page, 2015 and Macleod, 1996 on art patrons emerging from the new industrial class during Victorian times.

[457] This is further discussed in Chapter Two

in artworks flow and grow. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the relocated Crystal Palace became an important venue for commercial art exhibitions.[458] Since its foundation in 1768, the Royal Academy also remained throughout the nineteenth century at the centre of this market and a “a barometer of the state of contemporary British art”.[459] The two leading auction houses, Sotheby's and Christie's, also embodied the new social dynamics of London’s merchant classes.[460] Christie's in particular had created opportunities for a wide range of aspiring buyers to come together and compete for objects and status. As Cynthia Wall argues, “the stakes in most sales signified more than the transmission of property; they offered the apparent possibility of transmission of class”.[461] Whilst the private display of wealth became a more recurring habit of ambitious merchants and industrialists, a further step for some was to bequeath collections to museums, thus influencing their holdings and overall curatorial direction. Chapter One already highlighted how it was not uncommon for collections donated to the British Museum and the South Kensington Museum to have been built by private donors largely through secondary market purchases at auctions. The Tate Gallery, albeit in a different market — that of 'fine art’ — also developed an institutional model strongly in synchrony with the commercial art market. The Royal Academy directly influenced its acquisitions by supporting purchases of works by Royal Academicians for the national collection. A crucial difference, nonetheless, must be noted. Whilst interest in artefacts and objects from the colonies was high in the Victorian era and many enriched the collections of the British Museum and the South Kensington Museum, the ‘fine art’ trade at this point focused exclusively on British and European art. Despite the global reach of the Empire and some exhibitions initiated in London travelling to the colonies, very little art from its furthest points reached the capital.[462]

By the end of the nineteenth century, private collectors and commercial art market operators — through donations, bequests and targeted acquisitions — consolidated their influence on artistic production, institutional narratives and ultimately on ideas of public taste. The dynamic was to be altered, however, by two significant events during the first half of the twentieth century: the establishment of the National Art Collections Fund (today known as Art Fund) in 1903 and of the Arts Council of Great Britain in the 1940s. The National Art Collections Fund focused primarily on museum acquisitions and was an organisation supported by private donations and subscriptions from its inception.[463] Its creation took place at a time when the United States started to become a serious player in

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[458] Ibid, p.8

[459] Fletcher and Helmreich, 2011, p.6

[460] Sotheby’s was founded in London in 1744 and Christie's in 1766.

[461] Wall, 1997, p.21. On the development of the auction houses in London see Cassady, 1967; Solkin, 1993; Also see Bennet, 1995 for a more in depth analysis of the relationship between auction houses and museums.

[462] Pamela Nunn looks at the example of Australasian artists trying to establish themselves in London, yet these are returning British colonialists rather than ‘indigenous’ or local artists (Nunn, in Fletcher and Helmreich, 2011, p.276).

[463] National Art Collections Funds, 1953, p.5

the secondary art market and wealthy individuals from across the Atlantic started to acquire important pieces that contributed to a decline of British private collections. Pooling of resources, from collectors and less affluent yet passionate subscribers, was seen as a remedy to such exodus. The collective rescuing effort advocated by the Fund was rooted in the belief that collections were “the necessary background to any civilised way of living”.[464] This connection between ‘Western' and the notion of ‘civilised’ was also reflected in the type of acquisitions supported by the Fund. In the 1950s, the organisation still predominantly focused on acquiring British and European paintings. As it was common at the time, it also looked at craft and design objects originating from regions where Britain had historically exerted significant influence as ‘minor arts’, as in the example of 15 pieces of Islamic Pottery acquired from the Kelekian Collection and gifted to the V&A.[465]

The establishment of the Arts Council of Great Britain also did not hide a political agenda. In the post-war, reconstruction-focused society, accessibility and promotion of art as a basic need for social fulfilment were key principles behind the creation of the Council. However, despite the Council functioning primarily as a vehicle for state support, it introduced a significant innovation with its ‘arm’s length’ principle of disbursement, whereby decisions are deferred to ‘expert’ committees outside ministerial control. Embodying the values of Western democracy and recognising the positive impact art (as an entertainment activity) had on public morale, the Council set out to support arts organisations without too many prescriptions.[466] In doing so, it established the basis of editorial and curatorial independence that remains today a crucial line of defence in policies against conflict of interest that museums implement to regulate their dealings with the private sector.

But whilst the Arts Council was to lay the ground for a new, more open, framework to publicly support culture, the Art Fund remained still the most disruptive new model for private patronage. By the end of the twentieth century, public funding for the arts had all but dried up. A publication produced by the Art Fund for its 100th anniversary acknowledges how a century after its creation, government funding for new acquisitions had been almost entirely replaced by contributions from private collectors and benefactors.[467] The centenary report also points out how collecting was no longer the only budget item in the balance sheet of cultural institutions that required private support: educational programmes, exhibitions and other public engagement activities also could no longer be sustained by public funding alone.[468] Despite its undoubtedly significant impact,

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[464] Ibid, p.6

[465] Ibid, p.10. More details about Art Fund supported acquisitions at the V&A are discussed in the next section of this chapter.

[466] Shaw, 1993, p. 13

[467] National Art Collections Fund, 2003 (Conference Proceedings)

[468] Data from Arts Council-sponsored independent research shows in fact a steady increase in private support to the arts in the first decade of this century, growing more slowly and diversifying its reach outside London institutions in the second decade (CEBR, 2019)

this form of expert-led, broad-base, arms-length patronage did not translate into a more outward-looking attitude until the beginning of the twenty-first century. The first significant acquisition of non-Western art supported by the Art Fund on record for either of the three museums discussed here is a sculpture by Nigerian artist El Anatsui (Figure 4.1), acquired by the British Museum department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas in 2002.[469] The organisation also launched a new grant scheme in 2007 called Art Fund International to support organisations to build collections of 'international' art, which nonetheless did not have a specific focus on the non-Western world.[470] The first instance of a substantial set of non-Western works supported by the Art Fund after the Anatsui acquisition was in fact the joint V&A-British Museum collection of Middle Eastern photography discussed in Chapter Three. Until the start of this century, therefore, the focus of both the Arts Council and Art Fund remained almost exclusively to support Western art, whilst continuing to encourage the traditional role of 'encyclopaedic' museums.[471]

The context of the early twenty-first century is naturally more complex, especially as the funding structure of museums started to change. The simple provision of cash for acquisitions or donations of pieces became only one option in a portfolio of opportunities offered to private funders, as museums started to fundraise externally to cover a wider range of costs such as education programmes, specialist staff, research, and more. Public perception towards the private funding of culture was also shifting, in a society where government support of cultural institutions was largely taken for granted. One important vehicle in this regard was corporate sponsorship, which museum directors — as suggested by Neil MacGregor — began to recognise as a source of growing importance at the turn of this century.[472] Museum funding models were already evolving away from public support in the 1970s and 1980s, as exemplified by the establishment of the British Museum Company in 1972 and V&A Enterprises in 1985, two revenue generating entities running commercial activities linked to the museums.[473] Yet — despite the government introducing tax breaks for charitable support — the relative importance of corporate or private support in this period remained limited.[474]

In the last two decades, however, exhibitions have been increasingly recognised as ideal spaces where brands could be physically displayed and 'activated' through events run in

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469 British Museum object number Af2002,10.2. Also cfr. Art Fund, 2002

470 Art Fund, 2007

471 See Marr, Andrew in National Art Collections Fund, 2003, p.126-131

472 MacGregor, Neil in National Art Collections Fund, 2003, p.106-7

473 Casey, Dunlop and Selwood, p.111

474 Ibid, p.116-118. The authors for example note how only 2% of business sponsorship recorded in the UK in this period went to Museums and galleries.

collaboration with corporate supporters.[475] Chin-Tao Wu argues that this shift is marked by the rise of a new managerial class which sought to establish a deep, multilayered connection with cultural institutions for the sake of brand association.[476] A transition from individual philanthropy to corporate philanthropy is also connected — the author argues — to the change in the economic infrastructure of Britain, where the family-run capitalist system was progressively replaced by a more complex corporate system with multiple stakeholders and powerful managers.[477] From the perspective of museums, a related argument is advanced by Mark Rectanus, who argues that alongside Wu's new managerial class, a more entrepreneurial generation of museum directors — best exemplified by Tate's Nicholas Serota — took the helm of cultural institutions, on the back of policies encouraging greater financial self sufficiency in cultural organisations as promoted by the government of UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher.[478] In this new environment, companies had a significant impact on the cultural sector: from building large significant corporate collections (with the leverage to significantly impact the art market), to turning museum spaces into public relations vehicles and entertainment venues, to supporting prizes and awards that would give them a platform to showcase their brand.[479] Particularly relevant to this chapter is the rise of global corporate sponsorship in the visual arts, whereby brands seek to reach international markets through the support of 'multicultural' initiatives in museums. The sponsorship of British Museum and Tate exhibitions by BP is one such case, and amongst the most controversial.[480] These exhibitions become 'sponsorship products' that enable visibility to new prospective customers or that support the reputation of sponsors in communities where important components of their supply chain are located.[481] Rectanus argues further that this kind of sponsorship, instead of creating new bridges across communities, only reinforces 'identity politics' for the sake of securing customer loyalty.[482] Overall, whilst the basic motivations of corporate sponsors may have been similar to private philanthropists more than a century earlier — such as status, public reputation and seeking political influence — the new

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[475] Shaw notes how the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts was funded in 1976 and it was the first initiative that tried to formalise the distinction between patronage and sponsorship, in that it established the principle that businesses are entitled to reputational benefits in connection with their art sponsorship (Shaw, 1993, p.14).

[476] Wu, 2003, p.6-10

[477] Ibid.

[478] Rectanus, p.136. An interesting case in point is the capital campaign to build Tate Modern, which started in the late 1990s and eventually totalled £134m. This total was reached by a match funding amount of £68m awarded by the Millennium Commission (publicly funded) against the same amount of private donations.

[479] Ibid.

[480] As is the case of the "BP Exhibitions" series at the British Museum, such as "I am Ashurbanipal: king of the world, king of Assyria" (from 8 November 2018 to 24 February 2019) or "Sunken Cities: Egypt's Lost Worlds" (from 9 May to 27 November 2016). On BP's corporate sponsorship see also Chong, 2013; Holtaway, 2015; Motion, 2019 and Serafini, in Janes and Sandell, 2019.

[481] Rectanus, 2002, p.7

[482] Ibid., p.92

managerial class has a much more organised infrastructure behind them, which gives them greater power to influence cultural production and public engagement with it.

Besides broad-base private patronage and corporate sponsorship, another important phenomenon is the blurring of the lines between private and corporate interests and between museums and private collections, as exemplified by the rise in privately run art venues (sometimes referred to as 'private museums') that worked to position themselves as culture sector operators on a par with their public counterparts.[483] In London, and with a particular relevance for the development of contemporary Middle Eastern art in the city, this dynamic is observed in what is perhaps the city's most famous 'private' museum, the Saatchi Gallery.[484] After being credited as one of the most successful collectors in the UK for his role in supporting the careers of many members of the Young British Artists group, Charles Saatchi spent a number of years during the first decade of the century building an important private collection of contemporary art from outside the Western world. The Saatchi Gallery, which started in north London in 1985, moved in 2008 to a much larger venue in Sloane Square, one of London's wealthiest areas.[485] The new premises were launched with a focus on non-Western art, first with the exhibition *The Revolution Continues: New Art from China*, then a year later with a show of contemporary Middle Eastern art.

The latter exhibition, *Unveiled: New art from the Middle East,* ran from 30 January to 9 May 2009 and comprised over 100 works from Saatchi's personal collection. The exhibition had a particular significance for the founder of the gallery. He was born in Iraq and was especially passionate about the works he presented, believing that the Arab art scene was to take centre stage in the international art market.[486] In her introductory note to the catalogue of *Unveiled*, Lisa Farjam argued that the exhibition was a reaction to stereotypes and prejudices that had characterised public perception of the Middle East since the events of 11 September 2001, and aimed to show instead a thriving cultural scene.[487] In practice, I would argue, the exhibition did the exact opposite. A strong geopolitical thread runs through the narrative of the exhibition, starting with the chosen title and the cover image. Arguably the title of the show itself openly politicised the veil as a symbol of (perceived) cultural distance: presented as an obstacle to intercultural dialogue,

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[483] This is also not a new occurrence and an idea enacted and very much popularised by the Guggenheim family in the US since the 1930s. This section, however, will only focus on new players entering the sector in the last two decades.

[484] The gallery was founded by Charles Saatchi (b.1943), an entrepreneur and collector based in London and founder of the Saatchi & Saatchi Advertising agency.

[485] The gallery moved out of its historic North London premises in 2003 to settle in County Hall in Trafalgar Square, a hundred or so meters away from the Institute of Contemporary Art. It was then evicted from there in 2005 and forced to find a new location (Guardian, 2005). Saatchi at that point secured a deal with the Cagodan Estate, one of London's oldest and largest private landlords, to take over the flagship building of a luxury complex - formerly a school and military site - which Cadogan transformed into a high end shopping and leisure destination.

[486] The Guardian, 2008

[487] Saatchi Gallery, 2009. Farjam is the founder and editor in chief of Bidoun magazine, a well known publication covering contemporary art and culture from the region (Bidoun, 2018).

the title aimed to position the exhibition as a key to overcome it, through a metaphorical act of 'unveiling'.

Kader Attia's *Ghost* (Figure 4.2) — the work chosen to represent the show in marketing material and on the catalogue cover — whilst also referencing the veil, is in fact open to multiple interpretations. Occupying a large room within the gallery, the installation of over 150 aluminium foil sculptures represented a group of Muslim women praying and carried a strong political charge. From Attia's perspective, the use of a common material such as foil was a comment on the alienation felt by colonised people when touched by consumerism, and the negotiation between conflicting principles and beliefs that it brought about. However, the eeriness of the hollow figures and their military arrangement could also be seen as reinforcing Western fears of intense religiosity and militancy associated with the Islamic world. The title itself, and the vacuum of each figure may also refer to the West's inability to see the Muslim individual, particularly reflecting and reinforcing Western ideas of Muslim women as oppressed, brainwashed 'ghosts', lacking in individual agency. Several other works in the show were equally provocative and *Unveiled* was a hugely popular show, with over 360,000 visitors.[488] As much as its stated aim was to show the diversity of artistic production in the region, first and foremost this was an exhibition displaying the personal interest of the owner of the collection, an advertising mogul known for his keen interest in controversial artworks.[489]

Despite being a personal collection and privately funded venture, the Saatchi Gallery continues — to this day — to echo the structure of a public gallery: it is free, it organises curated exhibitions, it publishes catalogues with critical essays, it runs educational and community programmes. Yet it also generates value for its owner in that it builds a perception of cultural significance and public service that raises the resale value of the works exhibited.[490] More subtly, it also contributes to the reputation of its owner in the industry in which he operates (media and advertising), where his ability to attract large crowds to much debated art shows is seen as an expression of his business acumen and understanding of public relations and communications. The Gallery, as such, operates both as a public-facing cultural space and a private platform for financial and marketing investments. Yet, regardless of the different — arguably conflicting — interests, it became very influential as a platform for discovering non-Western art in London since the opening of its Sloane Square premises. At a pivotal time for the development of museums collections, Saatchi's powerful marketing machine further consolidated public interest in representations of Middle Eastern cultures as a lively arena for waging both political and intellectual battles, with artists introduced as creative reporters from the front line. The

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[488] It was the second most visited art exhibition in London for 2009 according to Art Newspaper attendance figures, preceded only by the *China Now* exhibition also at Saatchi (Saatchi Gallery, 2010).

[489] Saatchi rose to fame with the exhibition *Sensation* (Royal Academy of Art, 18 September 28 December 1997) in which he introduced new art from the Young British Artists to the London public and launched them on the international stage.

[490] Saatchi regularly resells works from his collection at auctions. As of 2020 the Artnet portal reports that four auctions of the gallery's holdings have taken place since 2013 (Artnet, 2020).

timing of the *Unveiled* exhibition was also significant: 2009 was the year when acquisition committees, involving several private collectors, were established at both the British Museum and Tate Modern.[491] These will be discussed in the next section, however it is worth mentioning here that this new group of patrons, often belonging to the Middle Eastern diaspora in Western capitals, followed in the footsteps of Saatchi in the way they sought to establish their status as members of a liberal elite supporting artists who tended to attract controversy and were critical of oppressive regimes and the lack of freedom of expression in the region. Museums showed a similar, keen interest in political works from around the same time, revealing a complex web of mutually reinforcing narratives across the public and private cultural sectors.

By this point the very distinction between a public independent narrative and a private, allegedly 'conflicted' narrative is hard, if impossible to make. Whether out of necessity or the result of a more open institutional attitude towards private funding, new forms of private patronage have led to new challenges as public and private interests converged on museums and other cultural organisations.[492] Today, London's networks of private and corporate support for contemporary Middle Eastern art acquisitions have reinforced the regional frameworks adopted by museums, whereas museums — through the authority expressed in their acquisition and display choices — have indirectly validated and increased the status of organisations and individuals who have funded the institutions in this area. This dynamic was soon to reach the region itself, and in particular Dubai, a city with deep historical ties with London and which at this time was rising fast as a regional centre for contemporary art.

4.1.2 Dubai as the regional hub for the Middle Eastern art market

Several cities in the Gulf have invested heavily in the development of their cultural infrastructure since the beginning of the century, with places like Doha, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh making headlines for the large sums of money invested in the production of cultural events and in the building of cultural venues and collections.[493] Whilst Dubai may not have deployed the same levels of financial investment, its unique ties to London and the advantage of being the first city in the Gulf to establish a network of very active cultural organisations since the mid 2000s, make it an essential component of this analysis. At this time, the city adopted a sustained strategy to diversify its economy away from the oil and energy sector. Two of the crucial industries in which the rulers of the emirate invested have been travel and tourism. And key to the development of the tourism industry was a focus on entertainment and culture, as a way to project an image internationally that would

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[491] It was also the year of the launch of the Jameel Prize, which will be discussed in Chapter Two. The press announcement of the Jameel Prize shortlist was released on 26 Jan 2009, 4 days before the opening of *Unveiled,* and the V&A show opened on 8 July.

[492] See Wu, 2003 for a discussion on the management of conflict of interest at Tate (Wu, 2003, p117).

[493] Cfr. Mikdadi and Shabout, 2018 for an edited collections of conference proceedings exploring developments in the UAE commercial art sector.

attract foreign visitors and persuade them to stay and explore the city and the area. Whilst a deeper analysis of the link between Dubai's tourism industry and the development of the cultural sector is not within the scope of this research, such connection provides the background to a discussion about the evolution of the art sector.[494]

The rise of Dubai as a hub for contemporary art took place first and foremost through the establishment of for-profit ventures, as part of an increasingly globalised commercial art sector. Such ventures imported into the city — more actively since the start of this century — forms of art dealership that were already well established in the Western world, at times by expanding geographically existing Western organisations (as in the case of regional offices of auction houses) or by replicating established frameworks — such as private galleries or art fairs (as in the case of Art Dubai). Erkki Sevänen argues that the rapid growth and globalisation of economic activity since the 1970s has 'fused' the contemporary art market with the capitalist economy.[495] The author sees the export of Western commercial models to other markets — such as Dubai — as an expression of this trend. This argument is also supported by Kevin Robbins, who highlights the problematic nature of the 'unequal encounter' of stronger versus weaker economic players — as is the case of the UK versus UAE relationship at this point.[496] Robbins argues that the process of 'globalising culture' in fact commoditises cultures in weaker economies and contributes to the consolidation of 'subalternity' of these new cultures in a wider international discourse.[497] However, many of the organisations who have started in Dubai — as the Art Dubai case below will show — were doing more than trying to imitate or subordinate themselves to established Western models. They actually created platforms from which the latter could be challenged.

In its early days, Dubai's contemporary art market was undoubtedly small. Prior to the first auction at Christie's Dubai in 2006, the sales volumes in Dubai were almost negligible compared to London.[498] Dubai was seen by the large auction franchises as a new and promising market that could be integrated into the global secondary market infrastructure over which they already wielded much power. The gradual homogenising of art collectors preferences around parameters of taste set by Western art dealers and intermediaries, as predicted by Robbins' analysis, partially played out in the city and contributed to the process. After all, despite the focus on regional artists, the market had already indirectly been tested with international collectors in London. The evolution of collectors preferences was, nevertheless, not as straightforward. Thomas DaKosta-Kaufmann and Michael North

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494 On the development of the tourism industry and its implications for the cultural sector in Dubai see Matly and Dillon, 2007; Stephenson, 2014; Zaidan, 2016

495 Sevänen, 2018, p.5

496 Robbins, 1991, p.25

497 Ibid, p.31. The concept echoes the seminal ideas on subalternity presented three years earlier in Spivak, 1988

498 An artprice 2006 report sees the 2006 auction sales turnover of the UK to be 26.9% of global trends, with Christie's having 43% of global turnover of art sales. A single auction in June 2006 in London generated £109m, which is approximately sixteen times the turnover of the first auction in Dubai on the same year (artprice, 2006)

argue that in a globalising discourse the evolution of taste in collecting practices is a two-way process: as a dominant Western cultural framework expands geographically, it certainly influences but it is also changed by the cultures it tries to absorb. In their words, "collecting objects across cultures could […] lead to a kind of cultural self-fashioning that involved the delimitation of one's own culture at the same time that it was being constructed".[499] The argument describes well the interconnectivity between the London and Dubai art sectors: British museums making acquisitions 'for the nation' and the London-based commercial organisations operating in Dubai as part of their strategies of global expansion laid the bases for new national collections of contemporary Middle Eastern art to be built. These in turn, as already seen in Chapter Two and Three, challenged the established narratives of the museums.

As interest in contemporary Middle Eastern art started to grow in London at the end of the 2000s, the dominant discourse promoted in Dubai's commercial circles — aimed at international and primarily Western wealthy audiences — has been one of 'discovery'.[500] Despite the use of such term, in the region itself the art sector had been thriving already for several decades. Art galleries in Beirut, Damascus, Istanbul, Tehran had already been very active and gaining prominence since the 1960s.[501] Other regional capitals, however, faced a number of constraints linked to geopolitical instability, which limited their capacity to build a sufficiently large market to attract an international cohort of collectors and dealers. Stable politics, an efficient transport infrastructure and the right mix of financial incentives to direct local wealth into the art market was generally missing. In Dubai, these three factors converged serendipitously in the first decade of this century. Commercial (both local and London based) organisations, therefore, saw an opportunity to develop a new contemporary art 'hub' that could support what they saw as a promising, emerging regional market, which in that moment did not have a clear locus in the region itself.

Prior to the arrival of international auction houses and dealers in the 2000s, the art scene in Dubai was relatively small. The Majlis Gallery was set up in 1979 by Alison Collins and is considered the first art gallery in the country.[502] Green Art Gallery started operating in Jumeirah (a wealthy residential neighbourhood near the historic centre of the city) in 1995. And the XVA gallery opened its door in the historic neighbourhood of Bastakiya in 2003. Both Green Art and XVA are still in operation today. The sporadic nature of these openings was given a new impetus in the early 2000s by the strong growth of Chinese and Indian art markets, which had already received significant interest in London.[503] The pivotal

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[499] DaKosta-Kauffman and North, 2010, p.4

[500] Art Dubai refers to itself as the "Fair of Discovery". Cfr. Art Dubai, 2016 (Economic Impact Report)

[501] Especially notable is Saleh Barakat, who was the first dealer to organise a major retrospective of Salua Rouda Choucair in Beirut before Tate Modern curators visited the artist's studio for the first time (Interview with Jessica Morgan, 2019).

[502] Cfr. Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, 2016, p.8

[503] Tate Modern established its Asia Pacific Acquisition Committee already in 2007, prior to the Middle East committee, driven primarily by the growth of the Chinese market.

moment in the development of the art scene in the city was the establishment of Christie's office in 2006. The office was set up in a recently formed free-zone called Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), established in 2002 with the intention of attracting financial institutions and third-sector businesses through a combination of zero taxes and high quality shared services. The inaugural auction netted US$8.5m and featured sixty-three lots, mostly by artists from the Middle East and North Africa (and the rest primarily from South Asia except a few American artworks). The first lot to be sold was a painting by Shakir Hassan Al Saïd (1925-2004): *The Peasant* (Figure 4.3). It sold for US$31,200, over three times its estimate.[504] Saïd, a founding member of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, was a very influential painter interested in the realm between the visible and the divine worlds.[505] His figure in *The Peasant* exists between a realist and an idealised representation, alone on the canvas and confronting the viewer with a striking and proud pose, reflecting the new aesthetic advocated by the Modern Art Group.[506]

Christie's first Dubai auction was a great success and encouraged new players to enter the market. At the same time, since Dubai in 2006 had no dedicated spaces for displaying art, it offered a rare opportunity for the public to view local art within the city (rather than having to travel to London to do so). As a makeshift-gallery in a city where professional art galleries were virtually absent, the auction introduced contemporary art to Dubai by 'curating' artworks based on their affinity to an emerging secondary market.[507] Christie's started a trend in Dubai that from 2006 until today has witnessed an incredible number of artworks changing hands. Whilst other auction houses did not establish themselves in the city until later (Sotheby's opened its office only in 2017), they have nonetheless hosted several auctions focused on artists from the region, particularly in London and New York.[508]

Building on the success of the first auction at Christie's, the DIFC established itself as a key player in the Middle Eastern art market with the founding of the first DIFC Gulf Art Fair in March 2007, a year later rebranded as Art Dubai, and still today the most significant commercial art initiative in the region.[509] Antonia Carver, director of the fair from 2010 to 2016, recalls how the fair had already been announced by its founders at the time of the

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[504] Christie's, 2016

[505] Saïd's biography can be found on Barjeel Art Foundation, 2020. Seven of Saïd's works are in the Barjeel Foundation's collection in Sharjah today.

[506] On the Group's aesthetics and influence cfr. Greenberg, 2010 and Sharifian, 2017

[507] This is a curious repetition of history to an extent: over the first half a century of its existence, Christie's had near monopoly in London with over 90% of sales in fine art auctions. Its preview shows became an opportunity for the public (including those not interested to buy) to view artworks in the absence of art museums and other public exhibitions (Bayer and Page, 2015, p.25).

[508] Christie's, 2016

[509] DIFC still today remains the majority shareholder of the fair. DIFC is also the location of the Dubai Edition of the British Museum Word into Art exhibition, as discussed in the previous chapter. Another art fair, Abu Dhabi Art, was launched under the name ArtParis Abu Dhabi in November the same year and rebranded as Abu Dhabi Art in 2009, however it did not achieve a similar international profile and today remains less influential than its Dubai counterpart.

2006 Christie's auction.[510] She notes how at that time, the idea of a unified commercial 'hub' for the Middle East was not at all established or taken for granted. In fact the idea that a commercial art fair could succeed outside the traditional circle of European and American capitals was seen with skepticism. At the same time, "there was also some push back in the region: that there isn't such a thing [as Middle Eastern Art], that you cannot look at this diversity in a homogeneous way".[511] Yet it was clear that outside the region this perception was prevalent and — as discussed in Chapter Two — by 2006 the British Museum and Tate had already started collecting under a Middle Eastern rubric. Museum and art professionals also recognised the benefits of having a single meeting place where different art scenes from the region converged. In the meantime, in London there was a recognition that cultural institutions had to reach out more proactively to the large diaspora communities from the region, including wealthy visitors from the Gulf, so Dubai sought to position itself as the place where the Western and Middle Eastern art communities could meet. Carver suggests that

> for those museums there was an understanding that this is a whole new demographics that has tremendous pride in their culture and their artists, that has disposable income and that London has a unique relationship with the Middle East, as maybe no other global city actually does.[512]

Art Dubai was not only innovative in being the first event of its kind in the region, but was set to become the most significant engine of growth in the city's wider cultural sector, spanning well beyond commercial activities and becoming a hybrid organisation offering both commercial and non-commercial services that complemented — or in some cases replaced — the role traditionally played by museums and public galleries. The influx of wealthy entrepreneurs and third sector professionals from other Arab capitals (and their families) created an audience and a group of stakeholders in Dubai that demanded sophisticated forms of cultural engagement. Representatives of Western museums participated in cultural events in Dubai in part because they could reach these groups. And Carver suggests that "they went about it very strategically, using Dubai as a meeting point but appealing to their emotional connection to [their country of origin]".[513]

The UAE already had a successful track record of temporary cultural events and a well established community of artists living in the city.[514] The Cultural Foundation in Abu Dhabi had already been established in 1981 and had since run a successful series of events and the Sharjah Art Foundation had run an art biennial since 1993. Dubai had also started a Film Festival in 2004. Hence, there was an established infrastructure for temporary cultural

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[510] The fair was the brainchild of two British entrepreneurs, a gallerist — John Martin — and a finance professional — Ben Floyd, who together brought the first international galleries to Dubai in the large halls of Madinat Jumeirah, a retail and hospitality complex on the shores of the city, a short distance from the royal residencies of Dubai's ruling family.

[511] Interview with Antonia Carver, 2019

[512] Ibid.

[513] Ibid.

[514] Ibid.

events, which probably explains why a push for a more permanent institution did not come until much later. The weather patterns of the city also significantly influenced the development of commercial activities, which were marked by seasonality and culminated in major events only during the milder months of the year. From the very start, Art Dubai established connections with cultural leaders already prominent in the region. Two notable names involved as members of the Fair's first Board of Patrons were Sheikha Hoor al-Qasimi, the president of the Sharjah Art Foundation and Mohammed Abdul Latif Jameel, whose financial support had only a year earlier enabled the V&A to establish the new Jameel Gallery, and who, two years later would be the initiator and funder of the V&A Jameel Art Prize.

The Fair also developed an education programme in collaboration with Sotheby's, which — despite not opening an office in Dubai — saw this as a way to test the city's market by leveraging its educational offering (embodied primarily in the Sotheby's Institute of Art). Interestingly, one of the sessions run by the auction house was titled "Public Collections - Defining Visions, Building Museums and Acquiring Art".[515] Arguably, the lack of an educational infrastructure dedicated to art in the region created a gap that the commercial sector attempted to fill by its own rules, offering 'market knowledge' where scholarship was lacking. It was also significant for Sotheby's to focus on institutional collecting — especially directed at Western institutions — because of the positive correlation between museums' endorsement of artists and their commercial value. Highlighting the importance of developing public collections focused on Middle Eastern art was thus a key component of the auction house's commercial strategy for the region. Nevertheless, besides the thinly veiled commercial interest, the Fair did trigger important debates about the role of public collections. At a conference organised by SALT and L'Internationale group in Istanbul in 2012, Carver and curator Charles Esche (b. 1963) publicly debated the role of Western museums in the region.[516] The two sides of the argument remain very relevant today: whether it is right to see the most important collections of Middle Eastern art being developed outside the Middle East, or whether they could be further developed within the region, especially considering the availability of financial resources. At the time of the discussion, very few collecting institutions had been established in the region. Carver herself today heads up one of more recently established ones, the Jameel Art Centre in Dubai, which offers free access to temporary exhibition and permanent displays of the private collection of the Jameel family.[517] From the point of view of artists and professionals however, Western museums and their strong international audiences and networks continue to offer a greater level of recognition compared to what local institutions are currently able to offer.

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[515] Gulf Art Fair, 2007

[516] SALT is a Turkish cultural think tank and L'internationale is a confederation of European museums to which SALT also belongs (SALT, 2012)

[517] Another interesting example is the Ishara Foudation, which focuses on South Asian art and is based in the Al Serkal district of Dubai.

In this context, Art Dubai tried to establish itself immediately as more than a commercial venture. The first review published in 2009 states that the fair was "launched in 2007, soon after the announcement of UAE's projects with the Guggenheim and the Musée du Louvre", clearly attempting to position itself as a cultural event of institutional significance.[518] Carver suggests that in order to attract collectors, institutions and professionals, the Fair had to lead on the development of a non-profit cultural infrastructure which was effectively missing in the city.[519] It did so by connecting and listening to the needs of cultural practitioners in the region which did not have the support network usually present in Western capitals: for example public galleries with a broad audience base, or the infrastructure (including grants schemes or dedicated studio space) needed to secure time and resources to make art. Through partnerships, educational programmes, prizes and community outreach projects, Carver led the Fair's contribution to the development of that infrastructure, turning the event into a meeting point for not just dealers and collectors, but also artists and professionals, and placing it at the centre of a series of seasonal activities attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors to the city during the month of March every year from 2009 until today.[520]

One of the fair's key programming platforms, designed to serve professional visitors in particular, is the Global Art Forum (GAF), a series of talks that take place each year in parallel with the Fair. The talks are curated with a targeted strategy aimed at bringing curators and museum representatives to the region. As of 2009, a Fair report on the first three editions counted over eighty museums and cultural organisations which had visited the event, a number that rose to over 130 by 2011.[521] The already small budgets for acquisition and research available in UK museums limited the ability of curators to visit the region in person for the purpose of meeting artists and develop the collections. With participation in a debates programme like GAF, the Fair essentially sponsored curators and museum professionals by supporting their travel expenses, and in turn connected them with galleries and artists exhibiting in its halls. Professionals were treated as VIP guests and were offered dedicated tours, events, entertainment opportunities and visits to collectors homes and artists studios.

The role of the Fair, and GAF in particular, as meeting point is exemplified by an exchange between a British Museum representative and the then curator of Doha's Mathaf Museum, Wassan Al Khudairy.[522] The discussion referred to the need to rapidly digitise known collections of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art, given the lack of scholarship on the subject and the urgent need for practitioners from around the world to have more

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[518] Art Dubai, 2009 (2007-2009 review). See Kazerouni, 2013 and Wakefield, 2020 on the wider issue of importing Western museum models to the Middle East, especially in reference to the Louvre's institutional 'franchise' in Abu Dhabi.

[519] Interview with Antonia Carver, 2019

[520] Which in turn fulfilled the ambitions of Dubai's government to develop culture as a driver of the economy, as evidenced by an economic impact report commissioned by the Dubai Culture & Arts Authority (Nielsen, 2019)

[521] Cfr. Art Dubai, 2009 and 2011

[522] Ibid., p.265. The name is not stated on the transcript but it is likely to be Venetia Porter.

opportunities to see works from Middle Eastern artists.[523] Porter already led an effort to this effect at the British Museum by digitising all early acquisitions in the online catalogue and making them accessible online.[524]

Significantly, the Fair in 2014 also launched a new section focusing on modern art, Art Dubai Modern. Whilst responding to a peak in market interest for modern works - Frieze Masters, a section focusing on twentieth-century art for the London art fair was launched in 2012 — the new section also supported new debates aimed at rooting contemporary presentations into non-Western modernisms.[525]

A publication from 2016 from the Dubai Culture & Arts Authority, aimed at showcasing the diversity of the cultural offering of the city, cites Art Dubai as the first major initiative that launched Dubai as an international cultural capital.[526] In less than a decade, the Fair had not only positioned itself as a regional rival to established Western art fairs, but it had established itself as an enabler for museums and public cultural institutions. It exemplifies perfectly the unique dynamic between the cultural and the commercial, and the nature of the dialogue between traditional institutions — such as museums — and new commercial ventures. This 'institutionalisation' of the commercial sector has since become a trademark of Dubai, as the development of other commercial ventures such as Alserkal Avenue shows. What began as an urban regeneration project only a year after the Gulf Art Fair — bringing commercial and non commercial art galleries to an industrial area traditionally occupied by car repair workshops — is today an important cultural hub where profit and non-profit galleries co-exist and where commercial profits from the real estate owner are channelled into artist residencies, commissions and research programmes.[527] All in all, the blurred line between cultural and commercial activities makes it virtually impossible to meaningfully distinguish the two sides when considering the cultural infrastructure of the city as a whole.

In their efforts to build and display collections of contemporary Middle Eastern art, the three UK museums discussed here have become an integral part of this infrastructure. They leveraged the access and resources provided by the commercial sector to broaden their knowledge base and visit the region to meet artists and local practitioners. In exchange, their presence offered a degree of 'cultural validation' to for-profit activities in

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[523] Ibid.

[524] During the time spent working as Porter's assistant in 2011, I was briefly tasked with organising the Museums' library of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern's art publications, which predominantly included artists' monographs and catalogues produced by galleries. The lack of scholarly texts was notable, with few notable exception of texts written by Rose Issa, Nada Shabout, Wijdan Ali and Hamid Keshmirshekan included in the Thesis Bibliography.

[525] The Fair in 2017 also launched a new talks series called Modern Symposium, complementing GAF (Cfr. launch announcement, https://www.artdubai.ae/modern-symposium-2017/ , accessed on 30 March 2022)

[526] Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, p.7. The mention is in the foreword note, written by Latifa bint Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, a member of the Dubai royal family and vice-chair of the authority.

[527] Alserkal Avenue, 2018

Dubai. The dialogue between the two sides was intensified by the multiple roles that professionals and collectors often occupied: curators — including for example Venetia Porter — would often be invited to participate to discussion panels whilst also visiting the city to discover new potential acquisitions; collectors — such as Maryam Eisler (discussed in the next section) — would build a private collection whilst funding curatorial posts and advising on the development of public collections. The porosity of this infrastructure was also reflected in the professional network (from both the non-profit and for-profit art sectors) that sustained it. The latter thrived and grew thanks to a symbiotic relationship between London and Dubai and between their public and private art sectors, based on reciprocal support and influence, which continues to this day.

4.2 The influence of patrons, dealers and commercial organisations on UK Museums

The network of private and commercial interests in London and Dubai outlined in the previous section forms a backdrop of relevant — if mostly indirect — influences on the development of Middle Eastern art initiatives in our three museums. This section will look at some of the specific, direct relationships that each Museum established over the years with patrons and dealers, and aims to discuss the impact these contributions have had on each institution's holdings of contemporary art from the region and the way these have been presented to the public.

4.2.1 British Museum

The British Museum today has a substantial fundraising ('Development') department, which raises millions of pounds in sponsorships and donations every year[528]. Acquisitions and displays of contemporary Middle Eastern art, however, have not typically been the subject of a centrally-managed fundraising campaign.[529] As discussed in Chapter Two, the Museum's engagement with contemporary art has been limited to a few departments and particularly tied to the personal initiative of individual curators predominantly in the Middle East, and in the Africa, Oceania and the Americas departments. The only exception to this is the Prints & Drawings department, where contemporary acquisitions are more regular. As far as contemporary Middle Eastern art is concerned, financial support came primarily through Porter's own personal and professional network, and as a result of her own

[528] Cfr. British Museum, 2019 (2018-19 Report), p.16

[529] As mentioned below, one of the most significant fundraising campaign relevant to this discussion is the opening of the new Islamic Gallery thanks to a gift from the Albukhary Foundation. There is no public record specifying whether this gift was secured by Porter herself or whether the campaign was actively supported by the central fundraising department, and this type of information is generally not shared publicly. It should be noted however that the Museum's board of Trustees reviews once a year (typically during the last meeting of the year) a report on all gifts received by the museum above £25000 (cfr. Trustees of the British Museum, 2019).

fundraising efforts. Since the first edition of the *Word into Art* exhibition in 2006, there have been four initiatives led by Porter that were made possible thanks to private support. The first initiative in 2008 was the opening of an expanded edition of *Word into Art* in Dubai's DIFC.[530] The second, later in the same year, was the creation of a funded post for a dedicated curator of contemporary Middle Eastern art. The third was the creation of the Contemporary and Modern Middle Eastern Art (CAMMEA) patrons group in 2009. Finally, the British Museum was able to secure substantial sponsorship for the redevelopment and expansion of the new Islamic Galleries from the Albukhary Foundation in 2018. These four initiatives are discussed individually below.

The opening of the second, travelling edition of *Word into Art* was a significant highlight of Dubai's cultural programme in 2008. The exhibition opened to the public from 7 February to 30 April. It coincided with the second edition of Art Dubai, as mentioned in the previous section. An important relationship for Porter at this moment was Saeb Eigner (b.1963), a financier, entrepreneur and public figure with significant influence over institutional stakeholders in Dubai. Eigner financially supported the exhibition and became the co-author — with Porter — of its catalogue. Dia Azzawi's sculpture (Figure 3.4), also seen in Chapter Three, was commissioned by Eigner for the exhibition and is now part of his private collection.[531] He also brokered the connection with DIFC in order to secure the exhibition venue in Dubai for the Museum.[532] His impact, as an enabler and influencer cannot be underestimated. He later also edited and partly authored one of the earliest publications that helped spreading awareness of contemporary art from the Middle East, Turkey and Iran, to which Porter also contributed.[533]

The Dubai exhibition made possible by Eigner had significant ripple effects. Most importantly, it consolidated Porter's position in the region as a pioneer institutional collector of contemporary Middle Eastern art. Porter came to be seen as the first curator to offer artists in the show the recognition of a venerable international cultural institution by exhibiting their work in two iterations of *Word into Art*. This in turn had a significant impact on the profile and careers of some of these artists. The most interesting example is that of Parviz Tanavoli, whose sculture *Heech* (Figure 3.3) was one of the most prominent pieces in the atrium of the British Museum, welcoming visitors to the 2006 exhibition. It was also included in the Dubai show in 2008. On the last day of the Dubai exhibition, 30 April 2008, Christie's hosted a major auction of contemporary Middle Eastern art. There are no available public records to confirm whether there was a formal arrangement between the Museum and the auction house in relation to the timing of the auction, however it can be

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[530] Cfr. updated exhibition catalogue, Porter, 2008 (2006)

[531] Interview with Dia Azzawi, 2018

[532] Eigner has been a member of the Higher Board of DIFC since 2004 and has recently been appointed the Chairman of Dubai's Financial Regulator (DIFC, 2020).

[533] Eigner, Caussé and Masters, 2010

safely assumed that the auction house decided on the date based on the exhibition calendar. On that occasion, Tanavoli broke multiple records with the bronze sculpture *The Wall (Oh Persepolis),* which sold for £2,841,000.[534] Tanavoli had been a very established figure for many decades, yet the exhibition and the timing of the auction undoubtedly gave him unprecedented international prominence and brought his work to the attention of a new class of collectors with significant spending power. A thriving market for contemporary Iranian artists, seeing a peak in Dubai during the final years of the 2010s, met the unstated, yet powerful validation offered by an exhibition held under the banner of a world leading cultural organisation. With a new collection built almost entirely through private patronage and under the direction of a single curator, such close interaction between the British Museum and the speculative commercial art world reveals a degree of reciprocal influence that blurs significantly the boundary between private and public collecting.

The success of two occurrences of *Word into Art* in London and Dubai and the development of a strong market for Middle Eastern artists raised the profile of the British Museum's effort amongst serious collectors with an interest in the region. The pervading sentiment amongst this group — much like that expressed by other key figures such as Rose Issa, Wijdan Ali and Porter herself — was that institutions, as much as the general public, had not sufficient knowledge of artistic practices in the region. One of the first initiatives to address this gap was the creation of the position of "Eisler Curator of Modern and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art", a post to which curator Louisa MacMillan (b.1982) was appointed in 2011.[535] The position was named after Maryam Eisler, the donor who funded the post.[536] In addition to her standard curatorial duties, MacMillan also supported Porter with the recruitment, cultivation and stewardship of a group of private collectors and prospective patrons. At this time I joined the British Museum as a volunteer curatorial assistant and researcher, working closely with MacMillan. One of my duties was to undertake country-specific research: particularly to identify leading commercial galleries, art-related initiatives and prominent artists and art professionals across the Middle East. The main purpose of this research was to enable the Museum to reach out to and leverage local knowledge. However, budget for travelling or to hire local resources was not available, especially considering the vast geographical scope of the collection. Art Dubai offered an opportunity to consolidate this effort and in March 2011 I attended the fair with Porter. One of her acquisitions from that trip was Monif Ajaj's untitled drawing (Figure 4.4). The drawing is a humorous rendering of a scene from daily life in Syria, showing two near

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[534] Christie's, 2008. This is a personal auction record for Tanavoli and also - up to this day - a record price for any artist included by the auction house in the "Middle Eastern Art" category. Other artists included in the BM collection went on to achieve record prices at auction, including Hossein Zenderoudi, Manal AlDowayan and Dia Azzawi (cfr. The National News, 2016; Christie's, 2016; Artsy, 2019)

[535] MacMillan had already been in post since 2009 as Assistant Curator.

[536] Interview with Louisa MacMillan, 2019. The post was funded for four years until 2012 and then terminated due to Eisler's grant expiring. As of 2020, the Museum has not yet appointed a specialist curator in this area, even though a temporary hire was advertised in 2019 to support Porter with a new exhibition and publication covering the latest acquisitions (Porter, Tripp and Morris, 2020).

life-size and rather satirical naked men in a relaxed pose, counting their rosaries.[537] As of 2020, the digital record on the Museum's database contains a description of the piece produced by the vendor, Damascus's Atassi Gallery.[538] During the trip Porter made several more acquisitions both from artists directly and from galleries. Like then, today it is still common practice for the Museum to acquire contemporary art from intermediaries. This is often due to the representation agreements that artists have with galleries, however galleries also encourage sales to public collections by substantially reducing their margins and offering discounted prices (and often even brokering outright donations). This is to acknowledge the value that comes with the inclusion of a piece in a prestigious public collection, which — as the Tanavoli example may suggest — usually results in higher prices for future sales. Galleries, therefore, consider discounts and donations to museums to be a form of long-term investment in the commercial value of the artist.

Some of the examples mentioned above, such as the appointment of a specialist curator with external funding or the presence of 'curatorial' text produced by a private art gallery on Museum records, point also to a lack of significant direct investment in resources on the part of the Museum. Having embarked on this collecting project relatively recently, Porter prioritised expenditure on acquisitions. Her principal 'case for support' with external funders has been to build the collection.[539] Private support was solicited almost entirely on this basis and in 2009, with the support of American philanthropist and collector Dounia Nadar (b.1965), Porter established the CAMMEA patrons group. Porter notes that Nadar had been especially significant: she had introduced Eisler to the Museum and was the first patron to join the group.[540] In 2006 the curators working on the Museum's Islamic collections were moved from the Asia Department to the newly established Middle East department. The restructuring meant that acquisition budgets were becoming more competitive, whilst at the same time the success of *Word into Art* motivated Porter to continue to build a contemporary collection. The Museum also recognised the importance of these works, so when she decided to create a dedicated patrons group she had the support of the institution.[541] Porter managed the group in a relatively independent way, 'ring-fencing' their support for new acquisitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art.

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[537] Ajaj relocated to France the following year and went on to produce more overtly political work in response to the Syrian revolution of 2011 and subsequent civil war. As exemplified by a more recent acquisition at the British Museum (2016,6007.1), which uses the language of graffiti in reference to 2011 street protests.

[538] Cfr British Museum, Object Record BM2011,6019.1

[539] This issue became even more pronounced when MacMillan left her post, leaving Porter essentially alone to manage all new acquisitions in addition to her daily job as keeper of the Islamic Collections. It was not until 2019 that Porter would have funding for a new post (only temporary) which is - at the time of writing - working on a catalogue of recent acquisitions.

[540] As already discussed in Chapter Two, the group was created at the same time as Tate's regional acquisition committee, which will be further discussed below. (Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018)

[541] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018

The patrons all had a significant personal connection with the Middle East, and most were active collectors themselves, usually with a base in London. Their appointment was managed by Porter, presumably with the approval of the Museum director, even though there are no public records outlining the appointment process and criteria. What they all had (and still have) in common is trust in Porter's acquisition choices. They recognised her pioneering role as a 'public collector' and had bought into her vision, leaving her virtually complete freedom to choose what to buy. Porter notes that many of her acquisitions are works on paper, artist books and editions, and often overtly political works. As she described them, "they are works that are very cultural", meaning that not all would have been popular in a commercial context, yet this did not affect the support she received from CAMMEA.[542]

The mechanism through which the patrons were involved in acquisitions has never been strictly formalised. As MacMillan recalls, prior to the launch of Art Dubai (and CAMMEA), patrons would often join her and Porter on visits to London galleries, such as Rose Issa or the Selma Feriani Gallery. After 2009, they would regularly join Porter in Dubai during the Fair.[543] As of 2020, Porter has still not established a formal written policy for acquisitions, but of course the CAMMEA group is consulted regularly on proposals. The group remains strong to this day and counts approximately twenty patrons amongst its ranks, including MacMillan, who after leaving her post went on to work in the studio of Dia Azzawi as Head of Research and Archives.[544]

The final example of significant private support to consider is the crucial relationship Porter built with the Albukhary Foundation. Since 2010 the Middle East department had loaned objects to the Malaysia-based Foundation, driven by the recognition that large and fast-growing communities of Muslims had gradually shifted the centre of the Islamic World further east. In 2018, Sayed Albukhary, in a recorded interview on the occasion of the announcement of the new Islamic Art galleries, claimed that his Foundation has spent nearly a billion dollars in charitable projects around the world and that the grant offered to the British Museum for the redevelopment of its Islamic Art galleries relies on his belief that "culture is the best way to [bring] together Muslims and non-Muslims".[545] Neil MacGregor, at the formal press launch noted that this was the largest grant ever received by the British Museum for the presentation of its permanent collections.[546] The relationship shows how the Museum and the funder shared a fundamental common interest: the need for the collections of the British Museum to be representative of *today's* Islamic world. The new display arrangements — which substantially enlarged the footprint of the space dedicated

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[542] Ibid.

[543] Interview with Louisa MacMillan, 2019

[544] The number of current patrons was confirmed by Porter in 2018 (Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018)

[545] Albukhary also points out that the Museum has never charged for the loans, which helped to build a stronger relationship based on shared purpose rather than transactional benefits. Cfr. YouTube (British Museum), 2015

[546] British Museum, 2015 (Press Release)

to these collections compared to the John Addis Gallery — also offered Porter for the first time the opportunity to showcase textile, paper and other light-sensitive material, giving space also for some highlights from the contemporary art collection. The opportunity was also taken for a new bespoke commission, awarded to Idris Khan with the support of CAMMEA (Figure 2.7), already introduced in Chapter Two.[547] It remains to be seen whether the expanded geographical presentation of the historical collections will also result in an expanded remit for contemporary art acquisitions.[548]

As these examples show, at the British Museums the relationship with patrons and the commercial sector is a crucial enabler of acquisitions and displays of contemporary art. It is also equally clear that the Museum, and Porter in particular, has maintained throughout the development of the collection a certain degree of curatorial control, despite the clear dependence on private funding for these initiatives. The relationship has been symbiotic and based on reciprocal influence, yet this has been shaped under the assumption that every private funder that offered support to the Museum shared the objectives of the institutions and agreed to support them.

4.2.2 Tate Modern

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Tate Modern started to look at artistic practices beyond the Western world, as discussed in Chapter Two. This reflected a broader recognition that the language of contemporary art was expanding and could not be understood by limiting the curatorial remit of the institution to Europe and the USA. As in other institutions, acquisition budgets were shrinking, and external supporters like the Arts Council and the Art Fund were still primarily focused on art and artists from the ‘old world’. To engage with new regions Tate had to devise a new structure that would allow the Museum to access more targeted sources of funding. London’s diaspora community — or at least its wealthier members with a passion for art — became instrumental in this endeavour. The result was the establishment of regional committees that would provide a new fundraising mechanism, whilst at the same time leveraging the knowledge and links to the region offered by private patrons and regional dealers. Entertaining close relationships with private collectors was certainly not a new experience for the Museum, not least considering the its first collection was sourced from the bequest of Henry Tate. Serota realised soon after his appointment as Director in 1988 the importance of the relationship between Tate and contemporary art collectors, many of whom had amassed significant private holdings as a result of the 1960s (and ongoing) art market boom. The Museum had arrived ‘late’ on several occasions, paying premium prices for artists who had already acquired market recognition thanks to powerful private collectors. The network Serota built over the years had therefore become an invaluable asset and included some very high-

[547] Victoria Miro, 2018

[548] The gallery contains a dedicated space for rotational displays of the Albukhary Foundations’ own collection in Malaysia. It is possible that this space may create an opportunity for new displays of contemporary art from South East Asia, however there are no known plans for this at the time of writing.

profile collectors. These individuals supported major acquisitions through a central acquisition committee, a model which was then expanded to regional committees, including the Middle East and North Africa Acquisition Committee (MENAAC).[549]

The founding member and chair of the committee was Maryam Eisler. As discussed in the previous section, she also had a leading role in CAMMEA at the British Museum, as a founding member and sponsor of a curatorial post. She thus played an influential role in both museums. Tate has never published the list of the Committee's members, however some of them have made their involvement public through other channels. It is interesting to note how many of the members of the committee were also involved with some of the key commercial organisations discussed above, especially Art Dubai and Christie's. Dina Nasser Khadivi, for example, an independent curator and consultant, was one of the early members of the Committee and at that time was also an advisor for Christie's.[550] Several other members, such as Fatima Maleki, Abdullah al Turki, Maya Rasamni, and Alia Al Senussi, were also members of other boards and committees set up by Art Dubai.[551] The relationship between Art Dubai and Tate was not a formal collaboration, however it is worth exploring further. Carver described Tate as the recognised leading institution for some of the key private collectors targeted by the Fair.[552] The members of MENAAC were regularly offered a bespoke programme of tours and activities when visiting the Fair and were reported as official 'institutional' visitors in the Fair's public reports.[553] When visiting the Fair, they were encouraged to suggest acquisitions for the Museum and of course they were also buying art for their own private collections.[554] It is clear that a potential for conflict of interest existed there. It should be noted that Tate's rules about this — and policies designed to recognise and mitigate them — applied only to Trustees until 2018, and not to members of acquisition committees.[555] This is primarily because the latter were recognised simply as performing an 'advisory' role, and do not have a formal or legal responsibility under Charity Commission rules. Despite this potential loophole in the earlier years of the committees' existence, Tate have of course been aware of the potential for reputational risk and have put in place a very strict process to ensure the Museum's

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549 The first regional committee was indeed one dedicated to North America and set up in 2002, even though acquisitions from North America had already taken place through the central committee beforehand. The Art Newspaper published an extensive article naming several of the members of the central and regional committees, even if those are not published on Tate reports or other public communications managed by the Museum. (Art Newspaper, 2016)

550 Cfr. DNK Art Consulting, 2020

551 Al Senussi was engaged by Art Dubai as a VIP relationship advisor whilst also undertaking research on the development of the Middle Eastern art market under the supervision of Charles R.H. Tripps, Professor fo Politics at SOAS, London (Tripp is also Venetia Porter's husband).

552 Interview with Antonia Carver, 2019

553 Art Dubai, 2011 (Five Year Report)

554 Interview with Antonia Carver, 2019

555 Tate caused controversy in 2006 and 2008 for two acquisitions respectively of work by Chris Ofili and Jeremy Deller, whilst they were members of the Board of Trustees of the charity (The Times, 2008)

acquisitions take place independently, including expanding the conflict of interest policy to acquisition committee members in 2018.[556]

Curator Clara Kim,[557] as of 2020 responsible for managing the relationships with members of MENAAC, explains that Tate curators across all departments meet every two weeks as part of a meeting called the International Monitoring Group (IMG).[558] The IMG is the forum where acquisition and exhibition proposals are discussed and importantly it is the forum that reviews solicited and unsolicited gift offers from private owners and collectors. This is also where curators highlight any potential issue with an acquisition, from its suitability for inclusion, to provenance, price and potential conflicts of interest. If a proposal passes the IMG discussion it moves up to another internal committee called the Collection Group, which includes all the directors of all Tate galleries plus the director of the Tate Group, who currently is Maria Balshaw (b.1970). This group reviews all proposals for acquisitions, regardless of provenance. Only when proposals are approved by this group, they are then presented to MENAAC and other regional committees, where relevant. The regional committees then vote on how they want to allocate their funds. They meet only twice a year and only once to discuss the allocation of funds for acquisitions, the other meeting being dedicated to a discussion on the collecting vision and ongoing curatorial research. The allocation proposals of MENAAC and other regional committees subsequently have to pass through another step, a final review and approval by the Tate Collection Committee, which includes not only Tate Directors but also a selection of Trustees. Kim points out that throughout this process each work is considered for its historical merit and exhibition history. Curators discuss the price of each acquisition and the negotiating strategy to secure the best possible price for the Museum, which is an area where, arguably, acquisition committees can add value given their connections to the commercial art world and their vested interest in maximising the reach of their donations.

Whilst seeking to maintain a rigorous series of checks and balances throughout this process, it is also evident that a certain level of convergence between art market trends and museum acquisitions can be evidenced in the recent history of Tate. An example of this relates to Iranian art in the early years of MENAAC. Iranian art featured prominently in Art Dubai for the first three to four years of the Fair and similarly at auctions.[559] The Museum made important acquisitions of Iranian art in the early years since the creation of MENAAC, such as Mahmoud Bakhshi Moakhar's *Air Pollution of Iran* (2004-2006, Figure 4.5).[560] The installation is made of eight large Iranian flags removed from public buildings

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[556] The most recent conflict of interest policy was published on 21 November 2018 (Tate, 2018)

[557] The Daskalopoulous Senior Curator, International Art (Africa, Asia & Middle East)

[558] Interview with Clara Kim, 2019

[559] Cfr. Gulf Art Fair, 2007, Art Dubai (Fair Report), 2008, 2009, 2010

[560] T13191, acquired in 2010 and highlighted in Tate Report 2009-10

in Tehran, where they represented allegiance to the Islamic Republic. Having been placed outdoors for several years, however, the flags darkened as a result of pollution and dirt. The symbolic number of flags, one for each year of the Iran-Iraq war and the equally symbolic meaning of pollution and dirt deteriorating a symbol of the nation, make this an openly political and critical piece, which was part of a larger body of work from the artist dealing with the Iran-Iraq war. The interest in Iranian art at Tate, as well as at other Museums and institutions, was also a reflection of the size and development of the Iranian contemporary art scene and related scholarly material. As seen in Chapter One, Issa had published on this and other researchers, in particular Hamid Keshmirshekan, had written extensively in the 2000s about the evolution of the modern and contemporary art scene there in the second half of the twentieth century.[561] Keshmirshekan also launched a periodical called *Art Tomorrow* which started to circulate more widely also thanks to Art Dubai, which since Carver became director in 2010 also included a section in the Fair dedicated to specialist magazines and periodicals from the region. The early issues of *Art Tomorrow* showed a thriving art scene that has not been in any way curtailed by the stricter cultural policies of the post-revolution years. It is likely that the availability of high quality published research also contributed to the development of commercial interest in Iranian art and consequently curatorial interest from museum professionals.[562]

Looking at all regional acquisition committees collectively, the expansion of Tate's geographical remit was mirrored by the desire of artists, collectors, galleries and institutions around the world to leverage Tate's prestigious platform for the purpose of launching their own art scene onto a more international stage. Despite the potential for conflict of interest and the ambiguous role played by private collectors and dealers as advisors to the museum, there is an important balance that Tate had to maintain: between restrictive budgets — and therefore the need to acquire early in an artist's career — and the pressure of an unregulated and aggressive commercial market which in turn was heavily swayed by the Museum's acquisition choices. The relationship between the institution and the market cannot, therefore, be simplified through reductive notions such as 'curatorial independence' or 'conflict of interest': Tate requires an understanding of the market in order to acquire early, whilst also remaining inevitably reliant on external support given the levels of funding required by acquisitions relative to its core budget. In this setting, private collectors become instrumental as they also hold the power to move the market. Sharing 'inside' information with Tate allows both sides to gain. Whilst this may be open to criticism, in the long run the greater interest of the gallery remains to build public collections and make them accessible, so managing the risk is arguably a better strategy than not taking it at all.

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[561] Keshmirshekan, 2005; 2006; 2007; 2010. Also on Iranian Modern art cfr. Daftari and Bhabha, 2006; Daftari and Diba, 2013; Babaie, 2015; 2017 and Babaie, Porter and Morris, 2017;

[562] This is despite research not substantially advancing in London. Scholarly narratives from the British capital at this time continued to use a different language loaded with Euro-centric undertones, as in Iain Robertson's 2011 publication arguing that a 'renaissance' was under way in the 'Persianate world' (Robertson, 2011). Robertson is a lecturer at the Sotheby's Institute and his publication is also interesting in the way it organises scholarly research according to 'markets'.

4.2.3 Victoria and Albert Museum

The V&A had a very different approach to engaging with contemporary Middle Eastern art, compared to the other two museums. The ways in which it established relationships with patrons and dealers was different too, even though the basic principle of reliance on external funding applies in this case too. In fact, as mentioned in Chapter Two, the very decision to display contemporary Middle Eastern art at the V&A was initiated by a patron. It was Mohammed Jameel who suggested the idea of a contemporary art prize in connection with the redevelopment of the Islamic galleries in 2006 (which he had already agreed to fund).[563] Before the Jameel Prize was launched in 2009, the Museum had only occasionally engaged with contemporary art. The first significant acquisition — a piece by Monir Farmanfarmaian (also discussed in Chapter Two, Figure 2.17) — was acquired with funds from Jameel and advice from Rose Issa, who brokered the relationship with the artist.[564]

The Jameel family, besides their continuous financial support of the Jameel Prize, also left an endowment to the Museum in 2017 that would continue to pay for the position of the "Jameel Curator", which is in charge of collection research and programming initiatives connected with contemporary cultures from the Islamic world.[565] In the period from 2009 to 2018, the preferred funding vehicle for contemporary acquisitions from the Middle East at the V&A had been grants, and in particular two acquisition grants from the Art Fund. The first between 2009 and 2011 focused on photography. The second, from 2015 and ongoing at the time of writing, is a New Collecting Award dedicated to contemporary craft from North Africa.[566] In 2018, before her departure, Jameel Curator Salma Tuqan initiated a new series of acquisitions for which she secured private donations through her own network of contacts.[567] The discussion that follows will look at these three initiatives in more detail.

The Art Fund award to collect Middle Eastern photography was a joint award secured by Porter and Martin Barnes, Senior Curator of Photographs at the V&A. The idea was initiated in 2008 by Porter in conversation with Francesca Geens, at the time the Head of Grants at the Art Fund.[568] Porter recalls how she was not able to show many photographs in *Word into Art,* but that — despite her desire to acquire more for the British Museum's

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563 Interview with Tim Stanley, 2018

564 Even though it should be clarified that Farmanfarmaian did not have a formal representation agreement with Issa (Interview with Rose Issa, 2018).

565 As also mentioned in Chapter Two, albeit Jameel suggested - and would have probably supported financially - the acquisition of all winning pieces, the Museum decided against it (Interview with Tim Stanley, 2018). The focus of the Jameel Curator, therefore, was not intended originally to be acquisitions. Also cfr. Victoria & Albert Museum, 2017

566 Research for this projects started in 2012 (Interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019).

567 Interview with Salma Tuqan, 2019

568 Ibid.

collection — she was prevented from doing so by conservation restrictions established in the acquisition policy of the institution.[569] One notable exception were the 2006 sun prints titled *Insecure* by Egyptian artist Moataz Nasr (Figure 4.6), which Porter acquired arguably because the technique used by the artist resulted in individually unique images that were more akin to prints on paper than to conventional photographs.[570]

Geens suggested that the British Museum could collaborate with the V&A on a joint collecting project focused on photographs, considering that the V&A already had responsibility for the national collection of photography and could lend conservation expertise.[571] Once the grant was awarded in 2009, each institution had approximately two years to make acquisitions with independent (and equal) budgets, and relative freedom in relation to acquisitions, even though of course there was regular consultation between Barnes and Porter.[572] These acquisitions were included as part of the *Light from the Middle East* exhibition. In Chapter Two and Three I discussed some of the issues related to the regional framework used to build and present this collection. It is worth restating here how much influence Art Fund requirements had on this process. The funder imposed a time limit of two years on the acquisition activity, thus limiting the options to what was available in the art market at that time. It also required the grantees to display their acquisitions publicly within a short period of time from when they were made, hence the decision to organise the *Light from the Middle East* exhibition more as a collection display than a curated temporary exhibition.[573] These requirements, combined with the geography-based criterion to source acquisitions had a substantial impact on the V&A's approach. Interestingly, the Museum has since changed its approach to photography acquisitions and has established an acquisition group akin to Tate's acquisition committees.[574] The group, however, does not collect specifically by region, and Marta Weiss pointed out that since its formation there has been only one acquisition that could be associated with the Middle East: a series of eight photographs from Gohar Dashti, a photographer from Iran, commenting on themes of displacement and war.

The Art Fund continues to support the Museum and has enabled a new round of acquisitions again following a geography-based approach, but this time focusing on craft from North Africa. The new award was given in 2015 to Mariam Rosser-Owen — Curator, Middle East (Asia Department) — who initiated the project and developed the proposal.[575] Before introducing the details of this latest Art Fund grant, it is worth noting the special

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[569] Unlike the V&A, which hosts the national collection of photography, the British Museum does not have as much specialist conservation expertise related to this medium (Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018).

[570] The piece was purchased during Art Dubai 2012 from Selma Feriani Gallery (Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018).

[571] Interview with Venetia Porter, 2018

[572] Ibid.

[573] Ibid.

[574] Victoria and Albert Museum, 2020 (Photography Acquisition Group)

[575] Interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019

relationship between the Museum and the commercial sector in the area of craft. It is in fact more widely accepted to see craft objects as (often) replicable and intended for wider commercial consumption. In line with its original remit as an organisation supporting the productive industries, the V&A in 2004 contributed to the foundation and hosted the first edition of the *Collect* design fair for contemporary craft and design, in collaboration with the UK's Crafts Council.[576] This went on to become one of the most established commercial events for craft and design in London, even though it is no longer hosted by the Museum.[577] When compared to the more ambiguous relationship between the British Museum and Tate on one side and Art Dubai on the other, the endorsement of a commercial fair in this case is clearly more explicit, given the nature of the objects being sold.

When discussing the new round of acquisitions of contemporary Middle Eastern craft supported by the Art Fund, Rosser-Owen notes that the V&A, like the British Museum, stopped actively collecting contemporary objects from the region at the start of the twentieth century, as already discussed in Chapter Two. Similarly, she points out that no dedicated curatorial team for the Islamic art of the Middle East was in place until the formation of the Middle Eastern Section — as part of the wider Asia Department — in 2002. The initiation of a collecting project on Middle Eastern contemporary craft was therefore a way to "play to the strengths of the V&A's historic collections", by prioritising areas where the the Museum already held designated national collections and important holdings of Islamic art (such as ceramics, furniture, jewellery, textiles).[578] The Museum already has a very strong collection and reputation in the field of contemporary craft, from the Western world primarily but also from East Asia such as Korea and Japan, which further justified the opportunity to build a collection of this kind from the Middle East.[579] The new collecting award from the Art Fund focuses on three priority areas in North Africa, that Rosser-Owen considered to be important hubs of contemporary craft practices: Morocco (where the curator notes 20% of the workforce operates in craft-related sectors), Tunisia and Egypt.[580] In these countries there has been a stable and continuous tradition of craft practices, albeit primarily for a local market, since the final decades of the twentieth century. Rosser-Owen points to a recent initiative, the craft atelier established by the Belgian artist Eric van Hove which employs Moroccan craftsmen, as an example of producers whose work focuses on materials and making skills, which she argues is very

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[576] Interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019. Also cfr. Craft Council, 2020

[577] Interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019. The fair is now hosted by the Saatchi Gallery. Rosser-Owen also notes that the Museum habitually makes acquisitions from it, purchased from central museum funds.

[578] Interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019

[579] For Asia, the contemporary craft collections are particularly strong for Japan, thanks to the vision and collecting activity of Rupert Faulkner, Senior Curator of Japanese ceramics, prints and contemporary crafts. Also Rosalie Kim, Samsung Curator of Korean Art, was able to build an important collection of contemporary objects from Korea with the aid of an acquisitions budget offered by Samsung (Ibid.)

[580] Ibid.

much in line with the V&A's collecting interests.[581] For instance, *Sculpture (V12 Laraki: Air Intake Manifold)* (Figure 4.7), made by the workshop, is one of the pieces acquired by the curator. It is based on Moroccan traditional metalwork techniques, applied to recreate an engine part from a historical car.[582]

The three countries targeted by the acquisition round are also notable in the Islamic world in that they are relatively stable from a political perspective.[583] The hope expressed by the curator is that the model established to source pieces from these countries can be later used to expand the collection to other important hubs of craft production in the Middle East, such as Syria and Iraq, when travelling there becomes possible again without significant risk.[584] As with photography, the craft collection aims to reflect a wider geographical reach including not only North Africa but other regions according to the Museum's definition of Middle East.[585] Unlike in the case of *Light from the Middle East,* the same requirement from the Art Fund to exhibit the work soon after acquiring it applies did not apply to this collection. A show of recent acquisitions from North Africa enabled by the New Collecting Award was planned, nonetheless, for Spring 2020 with a focus on ceramic art (Rosser-Owen's area of specialisation). However, the closures affecting the Museum and the wider sector due to the global Covid-19 pandemic have caused a postponement and the exhibition run from 19 May to 17 October 2021.[586]

The last example relevant to the V&A's relationship with private patrons is Tuqan's round of acquisitions, focused on design and fashion, and funded with the support of a group of private patrons. The funding model had some similarities with the acquisitions committee structure of the British Museum, in that like Porter, Tuqan leveraged her own professional and personal network to secure acquisition funding for the Museum. However, this was not organised in a committee, and given the curator's departure soon after the round of acquisitions, it is likely to remain a one-off event for the V&A. The initiative also came about by chance. Tuqan, in charge of curating the Jameel Prize together with Tim Stanley, has been primarily focused on temporary events and initiatives to build relationships with living artists and designers from the region, rather than on acquisitions. One of these initiatives was focused on Gulf-based designers and was funded by the British Council. The purpose of the initiative was — as stated in the call for applications — "to give the participants an opportunity to develop a broader network for their professional growth, and

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581 Interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019

582 V&A Collections, ME.1-2018. This piece is one of a series of 465 engine component recreated in the same way.

583 Despite a military overthrown of the Egyptian government in July 2013 following the election of the Muslim Brotherhood president Mohammed Morsi has strained international relationships for the country (The Guardian, 2013).

584 Interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019

585 Cfr. the Note of Terminology in the Introduction.

586 Interview with Mariam Rosser-Owen, 2019 (Updated by a note from the curator in January 2021 in relation to the new exhibition plans)

provide them with a platform that enhances their profile on an international level".[587] The initiative involved inviting practitioners to spend a short period of study and research at the V&A, to learn about the collection, develop collaborations and have a chance to present their work to V&A audiences. From the British Council's point of view, it was part of a broader diplomatic effort to engage with the Gulf, as the region was — and continues to be — perceived as an important area of influence for the UK. From the point of view of the V&A, the initiative sought new responses to the collection and new research avenues connected to materials and making skills represented within it. Tuqan pointed out that there was no stated intention to commission the participants to produce works for the collection but that the initiative became a good opportunity for doing so.[588] This not being a collecting initiative, however, also meant that there was no budget available and that it was her initiative to seek donations independently for a number of proposals presented by the participants.

The approach to selecting works was very much in line with the principles of the Jameel Prize. For instance, one of the acquisitions made by Tuqan is an outfit designed by Faissal El Malak (Figure 4.8). The piece by the Dubai-based Palestinian designer is inspired by motifs from the traditional Yemeni men's sarong called the *Me'waz* or *Futah*, thus bringing traditional techniques into contemporary designs.[589] Due to budget constraints there were no exhibition proposals connected to these acquisitions, however Tuqan mentioned her preference for each individual acquisition to be assessed in relation to its relevance to the Museum's future plans, with a view that objects may be integrated as part of future gallery redevelopments, temporary exhibitions or even, more simply, audience workshops.[590]

Overall, interaction with external funders at the V&A has had a significant — arguably long term — impact on the narrative and acquisition choices of the Museum. Its engagement with contemporary culture was initiated and directed by an external funder, a patron and collector with an established agenda related to the revitalisation of Islamic traditions. If anything, this was a sign that for the Middle East Department contemporary culture was not a primary area of interest, unlike for areas of the museum dealing with Western collections. This is especially notable also when considering the "Rapid Response" Collecting initiative, established to acquire particularly timely contemporary objects that aim to introduce new, diverse narratives to its audiences.[591] Objects collected through Rapid Response collecting rarely require a direct connection with historical collections, and certainly not as a matter of policy.

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[587] British Council Saudi Arabia, 2018

[588] Interview with Salma Tuqan, 2019

[589] V&A Collections, ME.4-2019. The piece was donated by Tashkeel, a charitable organisation in Dubai, connected with Dubai's Royal Family.

[590] Interview with Salma Tuqan, 2019

[591] Victoria and Albert Museum, 2020 (Rapid Response Collecting)

The Museum’s engagement with the Middle East has, therefore, remained focused on contemporary reinterpretations of tradition. Despite the critical response to *Light from The Middle East* pointed out the reductive approach of the regional framework adopted for the exhibition (and the collection), the organisation of the Museum’s staff and collections limits the ability of curators to challenge this approach. There is arguably a self-reinforcing mechanism at play between two relatively conservative perspectives: the Asia Department itself, comprised of staff who predominantly specialise in historical objects, and the Museum's external funders. Such funders in this area have included both a seasoned collector — Mohammed Jameel — with a passion for Islamic tradition, and an independent organisation — the Art Fund — which continues to situate the non Western world at the periphery of an Anglo-European centre. Acquisitions, exhibitions and programming initiatives of the Museum in this area continue, to this day, to visibly reflect this dynamic.

Conclusion

Throughout history, private and public interests have always converged in museums and have continued to do so in the last two decades, as funding models evolve. London’s Middle Eastern diaspora and wealthy collectors based in Dubai have positioned themselves as the most influential group of private supporters who provide funding to museums. They supported the majority of acquisitions and initiatives connected to Middle Eastern art in all three cases considered here. Through their independent collecting activity, supported by a thriving commercial art sector, these patrons have contributed greatly to the development of an active art market for contemporary Middle Eastern art and design. They recognised the important role London museums could play in building and preserving collections that would document the recent history of the Middle East and its contemporary cultural expressions. More importantly, they shared some fundamental values with the museums curators they supported, seeing collections as a way to tell the story of countries and people experiencing conflict, displacement and the negotiation of complex identities. For some of these individuals, especially members of the diaspora, such values were, and are, deeply personal.

The chapter has highlighted the role of London as a powerful cultural and financial centre hosting a sophisticated network of well-organised and -funded private operators, who have contributed to the creation of a regionally defined Middle Eastern art market. Their approach, based on commercial ideas of ‘emerging’ markets and promoting the values of novelty and discovery, reinforced — and arguably laid some of the ground for — similarly framed approaches adopted by museums. In parallel, Dubai established itself as the meeting point of choice in the region, where no other location had managed to attract as large an array of artists, professionals, dealers and supporters. It thus created an ecosystem that museums relied on significantly to develop their collections and other related initiatives for the benefit of their audiences.

Whilst developing different approaches, our three museums all maintained a near-complete reliance on external funding to support their efforts in this area. The British Museum channeled private money primarily towards acquisitions, and the support it received came from Porter's own network and was centred around her vision. Tate developed a more comprehensive strategy to expand the Museum's collection to non-Western art, through an organised system of regional acquisition committees which included one focused on the Middle East. Whilst also relying heavily on private funding, it established a process to incorporate advice from private patrons into formal decision-making processes involving all levels of the organisation, designed to ensure the independence of acquisition choices. At the V&A, private funding was the very reason the Museum engaged with contemporary art from the Middle East in the first place, as evidenced by the support of the Jameel family. Even the Museum's second major initiative, the photography collection supported by the Art Fund, was in fact initiated by Porter and the British Museum. The V&A's generally reactive approach suggests that in the absence of private funding its engagement with contemporary cultures from the Middle East through acquisitions would have not materialised in a significant way. There is evidence of this approach changing, however, since Rosser-Owen became the first curator to secure private funding for the first 'proactive' collecting initiative for the Museum in this area.

In summary, this chapter shows that public and private interests have interacted dynamically to shape museum narratives and choices. The context in which they have operated over the last two decades, represented in part (and significantly) by the interconnected ecosystems of London and Dubai, is characterised by a cultural infrastructure in which public and private interests cannot be easily distinguished. Whilst museums have broadly maintained their independence, they have also become an integral part of these ecosystems, recognising and elevating those who fund their activities.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has traced the development of contemporary Middle Eastern art collections and exhibitions at the British Museum, V&A and Tate over the last three decades. It has paid specific attention to their historical rootedness, the practices that defined the curatorial frameworks under which they have been managed, and the external factors enabling their development. First and foremost, it has highlighted how the museums' efforts materialised in the specific context created by their nature as British national institutions. Chapter One also specifically explored how London functioned as a stage for a growing number of initiatives dedicated to contemporary art from the region between the 1960s and the beginning of the twenty-first century. It revealed how some of the key players involved in these activities would later have a significant influence on the early development of museum collections, and that their initiatives have been fundamental in introducing museum curators to the breadth and depth of creative practices in the region as well as encouraging new research.

Chapters Two and Three discussed the evolution of geographically-focused curatorial frameworks at all three museums, with a view to understanding how they emerged from separate, yet connected histories and institutional remits. Chapter Two traced the history of collecting activities in the museums since their inception, with particular attention paid to their engagement with the region throughout the evolving geopolitical relationships between the UK and the Middle East over the last 250 years. At the British Museum and V&A, art from the region was part of a broad, diverse set of founding collections reflecting the span of the British Empire and intending to be encyclopaedic in nature. The two institutions' engagement with contemporary art over the last three decades, therefore, marks the latest turn of an evolving path in the British cultural sector's wider engagement with Middle Eastern cultures.

The two institutions developed different collecting strategies, even though they shared some fundamental values. Their differences amount, first, to practical choices: the British Museum initially prioritised collecting activity — the seeds of which had already been planted in the late 1980s/early 1990s — whereas the V&A focused on exhibiting work through competitions of loaned objects (the Jameel Prize, starting in 2009) and only began collecting more regularly after 2011. More fundamentally, the collecting choices of each institution have been determined by their core institutional remits: the former, a museum of history and ethnography, focused on the documentary value of objects as signifiers of cultural identity; the latter a museum of 'making', focused on the aesthetic and formal qualities of objects as expressions of material culture. Yet, what the two museums have in common in relation to contemporary Middle Eastern art is perhaps more significant: their engagement stemmed from a desire to challenge a static perception of Islamic Art and to establish an influential platform that would invite their respective audiences to reflect on contemporary politics and social questions affecting the region as well as its relationship with the Western world. At Tate Modern, on the other hand, the collecting project dedicated to Middle Eastern art was part of a broader internationalisation of the collection beyond the

non-Western world, which only started in this century and was aimed primarily at challenging Western-centric ideas of 'modernity'. Yet, despite the broader context of non-Western contemporary art within which art from the Middle East entered Tate's collection, acquisition choices there also focused on works that address similar themes to those in the other two museums, which can be broadly defined as 'politically engaged'.

Chapter Three examined exhibition practices through a critical review of four exhibitions: *Word into Art* (2006, British Museum); the opening exhibition of the *Jameel Prize* (2009, V&A); *Light from the Middle East* (2012, V&A); and *Saloua Rouda Choucair* (2013, Tate). The most significant finding across all four shows is that these new bodies of work entering the museums called for new ways of presenting contemporary art to the public. Museums tested new exhibition models because on the one hand the works had never been seen before, and as such success with the public was not guaranteed; on the other hand, it became an opportunity to find creative ways to introduce a new set of narratives into established, and arguably static displays. This was certainly the case in relation to Islamic Art displays at the British Museum and V&A, where no contemporary objects from the region had been acquired by either museum for nearly a century. To a certain extent, however, Tate's focus on Western modern art also remained stable throughout the twentieth century, offering a similar opportunity for renewal. The way contemporary Middle Eastern art disrupted traditional exhibition models — by introducing new exhibition formats and perspectives to existing collections in all three institutions — constituted more than museological innovation. It was evidence that the artworks themselves and the stories they told disrupted traditional Western-centric narratives, showing new possibilities for socially- and politically-engaged creative practices that reflect the complexity of contemporary society.

Chapter Four focused on what enabled, financially, the museums' efforts. It looked in particular at the impact of patrons and the commercial art sector on museum strategies and policies. Chapter One had already highlighted that many of the early 'influencers' who introduced contemporary Middle Eastern art to London were private dealers. Chapter Four focused on larger and more influential actors, especially auction houses and the Art Dubai fair, which became an important meeting point for London-based museum professionals and one of the principal opportunities for them to discover new artworks from the region. The chapter also looked specifically at the influence of private patrons in each museum, who in every case funded almost entirely all acquisitions and exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art. The vital role played by patrons raised issues regarding 'curatorial independence', which the chapter argues is fundamentally a red herring: throughout the history of all three institutions there has always been a dynamic relationship between public and private interests, which maintains its relevance today in the case of contemporary Middle Eastern art. The stories told by the museums in the nineteenth century reflected those told by private donors through the legacy of their bequests. In the late twentieth century, the rise of corporate sponsorship reflected a new set of private interests which became major enablers of cultural initiatives in museums and in the wider

cultural sector. More recently, alongside corporate sponsors, a new class of sophisticated private funders — as with the patrons funding acquisitions in our three UK museums — exerted influence through their collecting choices and by lending expertise to museums; or in other cases — as with the example of Charles Saatchi — built and operated competing private institutions functioning like fully-fledged art museums. The most important finding of the chapter is, therefore, not the extent to which patrons influenced museums' activities, but how their interests became reflected in collections and displays. What most private patrons discussed here have in common is that they belong to a class of international, wealthy individuals with direct connections both to the region and to London, where they often maintain personal and professional ties. Their status as members of a diaspora community mirrors the prominence of diasporic artists in the museums' collections, and with them, I would argue, they share a concern with the social and political issues highlighted by the artworks.

The history of collections and exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art discussed here has also revealed — over the last two decades especially — significant connections across the three British museums. First in terms of timing, the decade starting in 2006 — marked by the *Word into Art* exhibition and the opening of the Jameel Gallery — being a particularly active moment in relation to collecting activity, new exhibitions and the availability of private funding to support acquisitions and other related activities. Second, in terms of curatorial strategy: choosing to collect and exhibit artworks dealing with similar themes, from a group of artists of whom many belonged to diaspora communities. Finally, as well as developing important informal connections through participations in events such as the Art Dubai fair, museum professionals have also collaborated formally as in the example of the joint photography collection acquired by the British Museum and the V&A discussed in Chapters Two and Three.

The compressed timing and connections linking the institutions, therefore, makes the recent engagement with contemporary Middle Eastern cultures a phenomenon that deserves to be looked at holistically. Given the important role UK national museums play as agents of 'soft' diplomacy, it is in fact one that can be analysed as a proxy of the evolving diplomatic relationships between the UK and the region. The events of 9/11 created a backdrop of geopolitical instability that shifted public opinion in favour of stereotypes linking the region with ideas of violence and instability. By this time, museums were already developing a more open attitude towards contemporary non-Western art in its own right. The new political situation became a catalyst for a specific engagement with contemporary art that could highlight the role of the institutions as champions of freedom of speech, promoting diversity and narratives opposing oppression and conflict. The British Museum, which already had a history of engaging with the region through historic collections of Islamic Art, saw an opportunity for contemporary art to present and preserve works that documented the social and political changes affecting the region. The V&A, which had a similar history of Islamic Art collections, found in contemporary reinterpretations of the Islamic tradition an aesthetic tool to reveal the complexity of

contemporary Middle Eastern geopolitics. At Tate Modern, Western-centric notions of modernity were challenged by the introduction of new artists who had developed responses to modernist ideals reflecting their specific context of production within the region. Together, the three approaches reveal a desire to create new cultural ties with a region with which the UK shares not only an important history, but a crucial ongoing diplomatic and economic relationship.

Despite the variety of perspectives offered by each institution, the underlying curatorial frameworks remain today broadly anchored to an established definition of what constitutes the 'Middle East', not simply as a geopolitical space, but also as an imagined aesthetic framework still profoundly rooted in colonial and Orientalist approaches. As such they also significantly shape public perception of the artists and artworks featured in the collection: the V&A and British Museum ultimately denying them the possibility to be contemporary, Tate the possibility to be central in the transition from modernity to contemporaneity. The collections and the exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art in British national museums, therefore, whilst giving them new visibility, consolidate the position of these works at the margins of history and geography, at least until this moment.

Future directions: From Regional to Transnational (and Transcultural)

A departure from the rigidity and reductiveness of the curatorial frameworks upholding this notion has emerged recently, and in the context of this study finds a response in the new 'Transnational' research centre inaugurated by Tate Modern in 2019. The notion of transnational discourses has been for the last ten years central to institutions in the region, especially the Sharjah Art Foundation. The latter elaborated a complex curatorial framework around the notion of Global South and connections across countries in Asia, Africa and South America, which needs to be referred to here in order to provide context to Tate's latest efforts. A brief presentation of the Foundation approach will therefore be included in this final section of the thesis. The Tate's centre founding principles and current activities have also been discussed with one of its members, Nabila Abdel Nabi, the Curator of International Art specialising in Middle East and North Africa appointed by Tate Modern in September 2019.[592] The outcome of this last interview will complement a brief presentation of the objectives and principles of the Centre, and thus conclude the thesis.

The example of the Sharjah Art Foundation demonstrates that as a cohesive network of artistic practices and as subject of art historical enquiry, the Western notion of 'Middle East' does not reflect the nuances and evolution of cultural identities in the region as perceived from within. The history of the Sharjah Art Biennial and Foundation can be divided into two significant periods: during the first 15 years, from the late 1980s to 2003, efforts were led by individuals close to Sheikh Sultan al Qasimi (b.1939), ruler of the emirate of Sharjah. Sheikh Sultan prioritised the value of the Biennial as an instrument of cultural diplomacy, in an attempt to establish Sharjah as a regional hub which could reclaim Arab cultural

[592] Tate, 2019 (Tate Modern appoints curators specialising in African, Middle Eastern and South Asian art)

identities from their formulation in Western narratives. Sharjah's effort at this time stood in direct response to institutional discourses as witnessed in our three London museums' early years of engagement with contemporary art from the Middle East. Relying on an understanding of the region informed primarily by Western colonial history, British museums reflected the legacy of this perspective in an often reductive framework of representation. As outsiders, they developed collections and exhibitions that presented cultural identities connected to the Middle East as a broadly homogeneous group, primarily connected by a shared history determined by the West. Whilst being aware of its colonial history and the importance of the relationship between the UAE and the UK in particular, Sharjah developed a perspective that reflected its specific geopolitical stance in the region and internationally, developing a framework of representation based on different parameters: the need for political and cultural self determination, the search for solidarity between Arab nations and the desire to raise the profile of the local art scene on the regional and international stages. As a direct response to the pervasive influence of Western narratives, these early instances of representation of cultural identity remained, nonetheless, anchored to the very narratives they tried to oppose.

The second period is marked by a generational shift brought by the arrival in 2003 of Hoor al-Qasimi — a London trained artist and curator, and daughter of the Sheikh — at the helm of the Biennial. Al-Qasimi introduced radical — if progressively implemented — changes to the Biennial, and founded the Sharjah Art Foundation in 2009 in an attempt to expand the reach of the event and complement it with a year-round programme. Conscious of the limitations of this early approach, in the second 'era' al-Qasimi sought to position the Biennial at the core of an evolving discourse focused on the central place hybrid cultural identities could play within contemporary artistic expressions. The focus on Arab and Emirati identity became less of a priority, in an attempt to develop the Biennial as more than a regional or 'Arab' event: one within which artists who identified as Arab could find a new space that they created for themselves, rather than being predetermined by an established Western perspective. More importantly, and beyond the representation of Arab and Emirati cultures, al-Qasimi aimed to create a framework that could be better placed than its Western counterparts to reveal the interconnectedness of contemporary artistic practices across borders beyond the traditional West-East axis.

This new framework was not created in opposition to Western models, but initially in dialogue with them and later on in competition. Al-Qasimi's ambition went beyond a desire to emancipate the cultural history of the city from Western discourse, towards a broader attempt to reframe the whole discourse around non-Western art, that is — effectively — to de-centre Western-centrism. She did so, in the first instance, by shifting the Arab-focused approach of her predecessors into a wider comparative approach focused on the shared post-colonial condition across multiple geographies. Leaving pan-Arab ideology behind, her new parameters became the demographics of the city itself (hence bringing together Arab, South Asian and African cultures) and the personal experience of artists whose practice reflected complex, hybrid identities.

The initial result of this new approach was the emergence of a new, loosely defined, region called the 'Global South'. The formulation found some prominence since the 2013 (eleventh) Biennial, however it rapidly disappeared from the narratives surrounding the activities of the Foundation, in favour of the notion of 'transcultural'. Arguably, despite its appeal as a framework of resistance, the idea of the 'Global South' — as defined by the shared colonial experience — expanded but did not resolve the dependence on Western narratives already experienced by the earlier pan-Arab framework.[593]

Moving beyond its critical perspective on the post-colonial experience, the Foundation began to promote a self-critical analysis of the Biennial model in general, and the potential of Biennials as spaces for the representation of cultural identity.[594] The new 'transcultural' approach — currently still under development and reflected in the ambitions of the upcoming fifteenth edition of the Biennial in 2023 — highlights connections across different localities and shared experiences, whilst also emphasising the role of art in society as an enabler of change.

A recent exhibition organised by the Sharjah Art Foundation — a solo show by British artist Andrew Stahl running from June to September 2019 — is a particularly relevant example of the 'transcultural' narrative introduced by the organisation since the last Sharjah Biennial (2019). The Foundation had a number of solo exhibitions of artists from Europe, the US and Russia since 2014, however Stahl's is the first instance in which the accompanying curatorial text uses the notion in its terminology, describing the work as exploring "notions of transcultural interaction".[595] The British artist's practice specifically deals with questions of cultural influence across Asia and Europe. Several pieces he exhibited followed a period of research in the early 1990s where he was inspired by themes of war, conflict and cultural identity in countries like Vietnam and Thailand.[596]

Besides introducing new artistic practices from outside the region to local audiences, the idea of bringing the perspective of Western artists working on 'transcultural' themes arguably reflects al-Qasimi's desire to abolish the West-East hierarchy in discussions around intercultural dialogue and affirms the principle that transcultural experiences no

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[593] There is no clear evidence that the notion of the 'Global South' has informed — or is informing — directly the acquisition or display strategies at our three UK museums, however examples exists of conferences and workshops in the last three years during which the topic was discussed as part of broader discussions about the complexity of defining cultural identities. Cfr. Tate, 2019 (Where is South?); Victoria and Albert Museum, 2015 (Culture in Crisis Conferences)

[594] As of 2017, al-Qasimi also took the chairmanship of the International Biennial Association, moving its headquarters to Sharjah. The association brings together the founders and directors of the most important Western and non Western biennials, and aims to develop cross border research and collaborations on the role of biennials around the world.

[595] Own transcription of exhibition introductory text. It should be noted that an exhibition of the work of Frank Bowling, called *Mappa Mundi* (from September 2018 to January 2019) also explored similar themes, with a focus on "the artist's engagement with history, migration, memory and representation", however without a specific mention of the term 'transcultural'. Cfr. Sharjah Art Foundation, 2018 (Mappa Mundi). For reference purposes, other shows by artists from outside the region include Robert Breer, Enrico David, Yayoi Kusama, Arnulf Rainer, Eduard Puterbrot, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. Cfr. Sharjah Art Foundation, 2021 (Exhibitions).

[596] The National News, 2019

longer need to be framed within a ‘coloniser versus colonised’ paradigm.[597] The example of Stahl’s show also resonates with the notion of hybridity in cultural production as discussed in the introductory chapter. It effectively functions as a recalibration of power dynamics in matters of cultural representation, presenting a Western, hybrid approach curated within the context of a Middle Eastern institution. Taking place just as the new Transnational Research Centre at Tate was inaugurated on 24 January 2019,[598] This moment marks the beginning of a more conscious engagement by both the Sharjah Art Foundation and Tate with ideas of transnational and transcultural experiences, which I would argue today places the two institutions in parallel fields.

The work of the Foundation on transcultural narratives and that of Tate Modern on transnational research set the institutions on a new path in the representation of cultural identity through contemporary art. In London, Tate’s Transnational group today promotes a new way of working for the museum’s curators, which Abdel Nabi describes as a “cyclical process”.[599] The Centre is not a physical department, rather a core group of curators embedded within the wider Tate’s curatorial team. Its primary stated aim is to “redefine our existing collection of art and […] contribute to the reviewing and reframing of art histories […] beyond Western Europe and North America.”[600]

The Centre was created with the intention to develop research that would inform exhibitions, collection displays and new acquisitions across all four of Tate’s sites, even though Abdel Nabi specifies that most of its research concerns Tate Modern, Liverpool and St. Ives primarily, as Tate Britain maintains its focus on British art.[601] Its creation was not intended to replace the framework established by the Museum's regional acquisition committees (including MENAAC), but aims to work alongside it to add to and blur the boundaries of geopolitical frameworks, unlocking conversations across multiple regional specialists (and across the committees themselves) to add richness and complexity to those perspectives.[602] For the first two years of operation, the Museum's focus has been on migration, diaspora and indigeneity. The staff embedded in the Centre still brings culture- and region-specific specialties to the institutions, however the very purpose of the Centre is to generate cross-pollination amongst these to generate new — transnational — lines of enquiry. Dr Sook-Kyung Lee — Senior Curator, International Art — is currently at the helm of the Centre. Lee had previously (from 2012 to 2016) run another research centre established by the Museum with a focus on Asia. Abdel Nabi and curator Devika Singh — also an International Art Curator with a focus on South Asia — are both ‘embedded’ in the centre, and work with three adjunct curators, working respectively on

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[597] For a broader discussion on the subject see Macdonald, 2003; Petersen, 2017

[598] Tate, 2019 (Press Release: Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational)

[599] Interview with Nabila Abdel Nabi, 2021

[600] Tate, 2019 (Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational)

[601] Interview with Nabila Abdel Nabi, 2021

[602] Ibid.

Africa and African diaspora, First Nations and Indigenous Art, and Caribbean Diasporic Art. The staff's specialisms clearly reflect a mix of experiences and perspectives on cultural identity determined by geography, ethnicity or social condition. The group as a whole, however, comes together to look at creative practices in the non-Western world through the lens of "multiple modernisms", seeking what Abdel Nabi calls "transversal forces" connecting artistic developments around the world outside the traditional paradigm of Western modernism.[603]

The principles guiding the Centre have evolved from established practice at Tate. Frances Morris — Tate Modern's director — in a statement released as part of an introductory video produced for its launch, suggested that ‘‘although the idea of many modernities has underpinned [the] collection for many years […] to take that deep research and to make it manifest in programmes and acquisitions as part of Tate is truly extraordinary".[604] Abdel Nabi also suggested that an established "display typology" at the Museum, referred to as "constellational", was already in use in permanent displays at Tate Modern and Tate Liverpool. The constellational principle offers an opportunity to create connections between different artworks by treating a display as a network of interrelated ideas, without grouping artworks under a specific framework (based, for instance, on history, geography or identity). Abdel Nabi sees the establishment of the Centre as "a commitment to build on this methodology", and to offer "non-linear perspectives" that do not necessarily locate works temporally or geographically.[605] The notion of "non-linear" perspectives arguably refers to the idea — articulated in the research questions published by the Centre on Tate's website — of replacing "a single western-centric canon" with "multiple art histories", and specifically of replacing a monolithic notion of modernity with "multiple modernities and modernisms".[606] Other research questions of interest to the Centre relate to this foundational idea and expand it to issues such as how transnational perspectives can enable a reconsideration of British art and cultural identity, to the role migration and diasporas play in the development of creative practices, and to the possibility to reassess national cultural identities through the eyes of indigenous perspectives.[607] Specifically in relation to the idea of national identity, Abdel Nabi argues that a similar issue with the 'broad brush' of regional frameworks can also potentially remain when thinking "transnationally". A nation-based model for the articulation of cultural identity is also potentially reductive and rooted in Western-centric narratives. Therefore, the creation of the Centre — she argues — also enables the museum to think "trans-locally", that is to renounce any kind of geopolitical characterisation and instead embrace a new discourse

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[603] Tate, 2019 (Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational) and Interview with Nabial Abdel Nabi, 2021

[604] Extract from clip embedded in the Centre's homepage on Tate's website. Cfr. Tate, 2019 (Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational)

[605] Interview with Nabila Abdel Nabi, 2021

[606] Tate, 2019 (Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational)

[607] Ibid.

on the specific context of development and influences affecting artistic practices represented in the Museum's exhibitions and acquisitions.[608]

Amongst the voices invited to offer a view at the launch of the Centre was Salah Hassan, the current director of the Africa Institute in Sharjah.[609] Hassan argues that new avenues of research should be "about linkages that people forge across geographies around specific causes", and particularly around justice, equality and decolonisation.[610] Albeit stated in reference to the African experience in particular, the idea is echoed by other contributors, such as Iftikhar Dadi, who argues that "the most important development in the twentieth century is decolonisation, that really needs to be understood, it needs complexity, it needs depth";[611] and by artist Naeem Mohaiemen who looks at the shared colonial experience as something that has generated "solidarity across many countries with a definite progressive project behind it".[612] Morris herself, in the press release for the launch of the Centre, is quoted as saying that the "project acknowledges movement and exchange, forced and voluntary migration and the experience of diaspora as central to modern and contemporary art."[613]

Whilst the new curatorial framework of the Sharjah Biennial introduced by al-Qasimi after 2003 cannot be simply described as a case of one institution directly influencing the other, Tate's embracing of the notion of the shared colonial experience as an important basis for a new transnational discourse creates a strong intellectual link between the efforts of the two institutions. Arguably, this link places both institutions at the forefront of a new paradigm that challenges regional perspectives, including the validity and capacity for a meaningful representation of cultural identity of the very notion of 'Middle Eastern Art'. The importance of institutions outside the Western world in influencing the transnational discourse at Tate is also stressed by Abdel Nabi, who argues that one of the key objectives of the Centre is to build transnational networks and collaborations. The curator argues, in fact, that the Museum wants to be "transnational in practice", becoming present abroad to reach the communities where the histories that the museum aims to represent have been shaped.[614]

Specifically in relation to the ongoing research on modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art, the Centre is currently undertaking research for a forthcoming exhibition

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[608] Interview with Nabila Abdel Nabi, 2021

[609] Hassan was hired in this role by al-Qasimi, who is also the president of the Institute.

[610] Extract from clip embedded in the Centre's homepage on Tate's website. Cfr. Tate, 2019 (Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational)

[611] Extract from clip embedded in the Centre's homepage on Tate's website. Cfr. Tate, 2019 (Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational)

[612] Ibid.

[613] Cfr. Tate, 2019 (Press Release: Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational)

[614] Examples of this include the participation of Sook-Kyung Lee to a symposium held at Al Serkal Avenue in Dubai named *Temporary Spaces: Exchanges in Art, Architecture and Photography in the UAE, South Asia and Beyond,* held From 23 to 25 February 2019.

around the idea of the ‘city’. The objective of the exhibition is to look at different cities in the wake of independence movements from the 1950s-1970s across the Middle East, Africa (with a particular focus on North Africa) and South Asia. Developments in creative practices — across art, architecture and other disciplines — in cities such as Casablanca, Tehran, Baghdad, Lagos, Delhi, will be explored by taking the city as a “nexus of cultural activity”.[615] Some of the themes explored by the show will be the formation of new visual languages, the cross-pollination between art and architecture, and the entanglement of these new visual languages with nationalist narratives in each location. Whilst these core narratives are developed, other questions related to indigenous and first nation people are also being explored in parallel, such as the influence of Amazigh cultural traditions on the artistic development of Morocco — and in particular in the context of the Casablanca Art School — and in the wider West Africa region in the second half of the twentieth century. The deeper dive into the local context of the cities through a transnational comparative framework — leveraging the different curatorial specialisms available to the institution — will not only compare their shared post-colonial histories, but also bring shared histories of modernism together beyond the post-colonial experience, by thinking about the local singularities and historical rootedness of artistic practices that developed within these localities.[616]

The research for the exhibition is also enabling Tate Modern to think about new acquisitions, in particular of what Abdel Nabi describes as “transformative works” which the new perspective will allow the museum to place within its existing collection. An example mentioned by the curator is that of Farid Belkahia. Two works from the Moroccan artist are already in Tate’s collection, both produced in the early 1960s, for which Belkahia adopted an oil on paper and plywood technique (Figure C.1 and Figure C.2).[617] These acquisitions reflected a medium-specific notion of art prevalent in the Museum that established a boundary between art and craft. The new research undertaken by the Museum curators revealed the importance of other works by the artist after a period in which he experimented with stretched leather and henna ink as a replacement for the apparatuses imported from French ‘Beaux Arts’ education, thus responding directly to the longstanding tradition of leather manufacturing in Morocco (as in the example Figure C.3). The shift in the artist’s practice reflected the position he took, alongside the colleagues with whom he founded the Casablanca School of Art, to rethink the pedagogical framework of the School and re-orient it towards Morocco’s local material history.[618] Although a formal acquisition has not yet been made, Tate’s consideration marks a shift in approach that challenges an established hierarchy of mediums in the collection and instead looks at the transformative value of the piece itself within its context of production. For Abdel Nabi, this is critical as a way to bring together different voices that make up the specific context of a locality, and

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[615] Interview with Nabila Abdel Nabi, 2021

[616] Ibid.

[617] For an overview of Belkahia’s artistic development see Alaoui, 2020

[618] Interview with Nabila Abdel Nabi, 2021. Cfr. also Powers, 2015 and 2018

enables the curatorial framework of the Museum to move beyond American or European modes of seeing and presenting how artistic forms are defined.[619]

The examples above are indicative of the way in which the established Middle Eastern curatorial framework is being challenged. Nevertheless, the purpose of the Transnational Research Centre is not to replace it. The regional acquisition committees will continue to maintain a regional strategy for acquisition based on furthering the understanding of avant-garde groups and key moments of artistic transformation within each region, building on existing collections and curatorial skills that are already characterised by a regional focus. The 'transnational' approach becomes, therefore, a way to consolidate and further integrate the work of curators who already coordinate across the entire spectrum of regional specialism every decision for new acquisitions through the International Monitoring Group (as discussed in Chapter Four).[620] It is an attempt to further integrate the work of museum staff across all activities, including research, acquisitions, displays and temporary exhibitions. The desire to challenge the centrality of Western modernism, therefore, becomes a way — in Abdel Nabi's words — to understand how "key value systems and key timelines of artistic developments bring plurality into the fabric of the museum".[621] By investigating local and cross-border narratives, the Museum aims to present audiences with new perspectives that reflect the complexity of the context in which specific artistic practices develop. Moreover, the approach has the potential to reveal connections across artistic practices in different parts of the world as determined not just by geographical proximity, but by shared histories, values and concerns, as seen at the 'micro' level of individual artistic practices.

While the impact of this new approach to collecting and exhibition activities is not yet visible, it offers some insight into how Tate's practice in relation to Middle Eastern (and all non-Western) contemporary art may evolve in years to come. It may also offer a blueprint from which the British Museum and the V&A may reconsider the organisation of their collection and staff to move away from their established regional approaches and counter what remain in essence a neo-Orientalist perspective. Porter, during the launch event for her latest publication on the British Museum's contemporary Middle Eastern art collection, suggested that the Museum collections of contemporary art could be further centralised.[622] This would enable curators not only to consider new acquisitions from other parts of the world from which the Museum does not collect today, but also to develop new exhibition concepts that break regional boundaries. The new centralised photography acquisition group at the V&A, discussed in section 4.2.3, also creates a potential framework for transcultural discourse, even though so far the objects it acquired come almost exclusively from Western practitioners. The process of transformation in the two older museums is unlikely to be immediate. After all, their approach to the Middle East is rooted in the very

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[619] Ibid.

[620] Cfr. Section 4.2.2

[621] Interview with Nabila Abdel Nabi, 2021

[622] Based on own notes from Q&A session, cfr. Courtauld Institute of Art, 2020 (Reflections)

fabric of the organisation and in the specialisms of long serving staff. These aspects, combined with the increasing reliance on fundraising from private sources, suggest that their pace of change is likely to remain slow.

As a field of curatorial enquiry and activity, contemporary Middle Eastern art has nonetheless shown considerable dynamism over the past thirty years. Collections and exhibitions have been the focus of significant expansion and re-conceptualisation in this period. This process will undoubtedly continue in the years to come and is likely to further challenge established museum practices and result in new opportunities for audiences to engage with complex, evolving cultural identities.

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