



THE CANVAS OF A NATION

The UAE's art and culture scene serves as its vibrant heartbeat, echoing the everyday life of a transient and diverse population through the themes of identity, nomadism and impermanence. By Christabel Lobo

ART HAS ALWAYS played a central role in life in the United Arab Emirates, going back centuries. From the discovery of ancient petroglyphs in the expansive Hajar mountain range to the contemporary cultural hub blossoming on Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island, the nation's unique art is a testament to its transient and ever-shifting demographic.

Today, art galleries like the Third Line and Carbon 12 in Dubai's vibrant Alserkal Avenue, along with Manarat Al Saadiyat and Warehouse421 in Abu Dhabi, continue to redefine what it means to create art and be an artist in the UAE.

Folk Art

The Trucial States functioned primarily as a tribal society in the 19th and early 20th centuries. While Western art forms may not have been commonplace, the region did have its own unique forms of artistic expression, deeply interwoven with rich cultural traditions and everyday life.

The practice of oral tradition was highly valued throughout the emirates and served

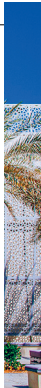
as the primary way of storytelling and passing on historical events from one generation to the next. Nabati poetry, in particular, played an essential role in conveying emotions, preserving heritage and social commentary in the region.

Traditional folk dance and music, such as *ayyallah* and *al-harbiya*, were important forms of artistic expression, often incorporating singing and poetry. When it came to visual arts, it was crafts like weaving, pottery and metalwork that took centre stage.

Contemporary Art

By the 20th century, traditional art forms started to intersect with global art movements, giving rise to a blend of styles that touched on the notions of identity – both self and national – impermanence and nomadism.

Exhibit brochures of pioneering UAE artists in the 20th-century indicate that photography, painting and sculpture were the primary traditional artistic mediums of choice. Art shows, which were few and far between, often occurred in private



FROM LEFT: AM MASTERTON/ALAMY, LIVE NEWS © PHOTODISC/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

residences and other ephemeral creative spaces.

However, it wasn't until a decade later that art initiatives started to gain momentum, first with the formation of the Emirates Fine Arts Society in 1980 and then the Sharjah Biennial in 1993.

Pioneering contemporary artists like Hassan Sharif began exploring themes tied to their changing realities, from societal shifts due to urbanisation and the effects of the oil boom on the UAE's emerging identity after achieving independence in 1971.

Fast forward to 2023, and the turn of the millennia's technological advances have wholeheartedly been adopted by 21st-century artists in the region; you'll find emerging local artists like the Al Najjar brothers, Talal and Ziad, seamlessly coalesce traditional mediums with digital ones in their works.

Sharjah

Often seen as the cultural heart of the UAE, Sharjah's Biennial has been attracting international artists and visitors since first launching three decades ago. Spearheaded by the Sharjah Art Foundation, the Biennial showcases the work of artists and curators from around the world.

Through the years, its editions have seen a shift from traditional arts to more contemporary expressions, including everything from gallery exhibits and art installations to theatrical performances and film screenings, challenging the notions of identity and culture in the 21st century.

Dubai

Dubai's creative landscape transformed in 2008 with the opening of Tashkeel, a multi-disciplinary art and design incubator. The brainchild of Her Highness Lateefa bint Maktoum bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Tashkeel pushed the boundaries of what it meant to create art and be an artist in the UAE. It was the first mixed-gender, open-access art centre that not only promoted a sense of belonging in Dubai's emerging creative community but also provided a space where artistic resources abounded.

Head 20 minutes south of downtown Dubai and you'll wind up in Al Quoz, a gritty industrial neighbourhood that houses the

city's renowned artistic and cultural hub: Alserkal Avenue. This 4600-sq-metre cultural quarter features artists' studios, home-grown businesses and art galleries showcasing regional and international artists, including two that played a significant role in developing the city's contemporary art scene: the Third Line and Carbon 12. Situated in the heart of Al Quoz for close to two decades, they've helped dynamise the UAE art scene by offering platforms for discourse, creativity and cross-cultural exchange.

Beyond these burgeoning culture hubs are spaces like Bayt Al Mamzar, where art drives community and vice versa. Opened in 2021 by Emirati brothers and patrons of the local arts scene, Khalid and Gaith Abdulla, this beautifully restored one-storey house in Al Mamzar – it was once their grandmother's home – serves two main functions. First, it exists as an evolving community arts space, complete with a gallery, co-working space, library and artist studios. And second, the restored facade and interiors exude a nostalgic appeal that's now much harder to find in the skyscrapers and glitz of New Dubai.

Abu Dhabi

No longer confined to traditional forms, art in the UAE embodies the nation's forward-looking spirit and embraces a global, inclusive vision. The up-and-coming arts offerings on Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island perfectly represent this progressive transformation.

The first art and cultural space to open in Saadiyat's Cultural District was Manarat Al Saadiyat in 2009. Translating to 'place of enlightenment', this expansive space is all about cultivating and sustaining a creative artists' community in the nation's capital through year-round curated art exhibits, performances, film screenings and workshops.

From the preservation of Bedouin folk art to the showcasing of avant-garde art installations, the spectrum of artistic expression in the UAE unveils a nation balancing its respect for culture and heritage with a progressive outlook, shaping its creative future.