



History Department

## Female Presence in the Middle Eastern and North African Art Market

Andreia Helena Nascimento Pires

Project submitted as partial requirement for the conferral of  
Master in Art Markets

Supervisor:  
Doutor Luís Urbano de Oliveira Afonso  
Professor Auxiliar com Agregação  
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## Abstract

The present dissertation aims to show the strong presence of modern and contemporary female artists, and art businesswomen from the Middle East and North Africa, as well as providing possible explanations for the success of women in the art market of this region. It begins with a historical framework of the region's art, focusing on the influence and work of modern and contemporary female artists. Afterwards, it highlights women's activities in art patronage in ancient times, followed by the study of art businesswomen at the forefront of the region's art scene, ending this section with the analysis of female artists' best auction results. Finally, to give a better perspective, there is a comparison between women of the Middle East and North Africa and women of the West in the art field, ending with the presentation of hypotheses to explain women's success in the art market of the region. Our research was based on articles and interviews with important agents of the region's art market: Dr. Salwa Mikdadi, Amirali Ghasemi, Hala Khayat and Myrna Ayad. It shows that women in the region have a successful career in the arts due to a combination of factors. On the one hand, the underestimation of careers in this field, considered as an undervalued profession. On the other hand, the prevalence outdated stereotypes and misconceptions about the women's status and about a particular sensibility and interest from women in the arts.

## Keywords

Art Markets; Middle East and North African art; Female artists; Art businesswomen

## Resumo

A presente dissertação visa demonstrar a forte presença de artistas modernas e contemporâneas, e de mulheres no negócio da arte na região do Médio Oriente e Norte de África, bem como fornecer possíveis explicações para o sucesso das mulheres no mercado de arte desta região. O presente estudo começa com um enquadramento histórico sobre a arte da região, com maior foco na influência e no trabalho de artistas femininas modernas e contemporâneas. Posteriormente, são demonstradas as atividades das mulheres no mecenato nos tempos antigos, seguido de um estudo de mulheres de negócios na vanguarda da cena artística da região, terminando esta seção com uma análise dos melhores resultados em leilão de artistas femininas. Finalmente, para fornecer uma melhor perspectiva, encontra-se uma comparação entre as mulheres do Médio Oriente e do Norte de África e do Ocidente no meio artístico, terminando com a apresentação de hipóteses para explicar o sucesso das mulheres no mercado de arte da região. Esta análise foi realizada com o apoio de artigos e entrevistas com agentes importantes do mercado de arte da região: Dr. Salwa Mikdadi, Amirali Ghasemi, Hala Khayat e Myrna Ayad. Foi demonstrado que as mulheres desta região têm uma carreira bem-sucedida nas artes devido à combinação de uma subvalorização de uma carreira neste campo no século XX, tendo sido considerada como uma profissão subvalorizada; e também devido à prevalência de estereótipos desatualizados e conceitos errados no que concerne o estatuto da mulher e uma particular sensibilidade e interesse das mulheres na arte.

## Palavras-Chave

Mercados da Arte; Médio Oriente e Norte de Africa; Artistas femininas; Mulheres no negócio da arte

# Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
1. FEMALE ARTISTS IN THE MIDDLE EASTERN AND NORTH AFRICAN ART .....	3
1.1 Historical Framework.....	3
1.2 Modern Artists.....	4
1.2.1 Modern Art Groups .....	4
1.2.2 Individual Cases of Modern Artists .....	9
1.3 Contemporary Artists .....	12
2. WOMEN IN ART PATRONAGE AND ART BUSINESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA .....	23
2.1 Art Patronage.....	23
2.2 The Rise of Art NGOs Established by Women.....	26
2.3 A New Art Centre: The Gulf States .....	27
2.3.1 UAE.....	28
2.3.2 Qatar .....	31
2.3.3 Saudi Arabia.....	33
2.4 MENA Art Market: Auction Results .....	35
2.4.1 Introduction to the MENA Art Market from 2006 to 2017.....	35
2.4.2 Top Auction Results from Female Artists.....	36
3. FEMALE PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EASTERN AND NORTH AFRICAN ART MARKET .....	39
3.1 A New Perspective: MENA and Western Women in the Arts .....	39
3.2 Possible Hypotheses for a Strong Female Presence in the MENA Art Market .....	42
3.2.1 “Soft” Profession.....	43
3.2.2 Outdated stereotypes .....	46
3.2.3 Higher Interest from Women .....	50



CONCLUSION .....52

BIBLIOGRAPHY .....55

WEBOGRAPHY.....57

ANNEXES ..... I

    Annex 1 - Tables ..... I

    Annex 2 - Interviews ..... VI

## List of Graphics

### Graphic 1 - Middle East Auction Sales 2006 – 2017

Source: <https://arttactic.com/product/middle-east-north-africa-modern-contemporary-art-report-february-2017/> ..... 35

## List of Figures

### Figure 1 - *The Girl and the Beast* (1941), oil on canvas, 70 X 55 cm. (Left); Inji Efflatoun (Right)

Sources : <https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2016/egyptian-surrealists/img/inji-efflatoun> & <https://www.harpersbazaararabia.com/people/news/google-doodle-celebrates-egyptian-painter-inji-aflatouns-95th-birthday> ..... 6

### Figure 2 – Mona Hatoum, *Under Siege* (1982)

Source : <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/apr/17/mona-hatoum-interview-installation-artist-tate-modern-exhibition>..... 14

### Figure 3 - Emily Jacir, *Material for a Film* (2004-ongoing).

Source : <https://radiopapasse.org/en/archive/interviews/emily-jacir-material-for-a-film>..... 15

### Figure 4 - Shirin Neshat in *Rebellious Silence* (1994), from the series *Women of Allah* (1993–1997) RC print & ink, 118.4 x 79.1 cm

Source : <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/shirin-neshat/> ..... 16

### Figure 5 – Lalla Essaydi, *Bullet Revisited #3* (2012) from the series *Bullets Revisited* (2009 – 2014), chromogenic print triptych, 51.4 x 40.6 cm each

Source : <https://www.phillips.com/detail/LALLA-ESSAYDI/NY040219/56>..... 17

### Figure 6 – Manal al-Dowayan, *Esmi* (2012), maple wood beads with natural wool rope hand made by Bedouin women, each necklace is about 4 meters long

Source : <https://www.manaldowayan.com/my-name.html> ..... 18

### Figure 7 – Boushra AlMutawakel, *What if*, from the *Hijab Series* (2008 - 2012)

Source : <https://phmuseum.com/boushraalmutawakel/story/the-hijab-series-f9690da032>..... 19

### Figure 8 – Ghada Amer, *The Words I Love the Most* (2012), bronze with black platina, 152,8 x 152,8 x 152,8 cm

Source : <https://www.ghadaamer.com/sculpture?lightbox=dataItem-ikoezlh8> ..... 20

**Figure 9** - Hayv Kahraman, *Heads on Plate* (2008), oil on linen, 173 x 106.5 cm  
Source : [https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/hayv\\_kahraman\\_heads.htm](https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/hayv_kahraman_heads.htm).....21

**Figure 10** - Uskudar Yeni Valide Complex  
Source : <https://www.islamiclandmarks.com/turkey/yeni-valide-mosque>.....25

**Figure 11** - Farh el-Nissa Zeid, *Break of the Atom and Vegetal Life* (1962), oil on canvas, 210 x 540cm  
Source: <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/fahr-el-nissa-zeid-turkishjordanian-1900-1991-break-5728315-details.aspx>.....37

**Figure 12** - Shirin Neshat, *Whispers* (1997), ink on gelatine silver print, 124.5 x 193cm  
Source : <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/shirin-neshat-iranian-b-1957-whispers-5059537-details.aspx>.....37

**Figure 13** - Yvette Achkar, *Untitled* (1983), oil on canvas, 150x 100cm  
Source : <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/yvette-achkar-lebanese-b-1928-untitled-6192287-details.aspx>.....38

## List of Acronyms

GCA - General Culture Authority

MATHAF - Arab Museum of Modern Art

MENA - Middle East and North Africa/ Middle Eastern and North African

MENASA - Middle East, North Africa and South Asia/ Middle Eastern, North African and South Asian

MET - The Metropolitan Museum of Art

MoMA - Museum of Modern Art

NGFA - National Gallery of Fine Art

NGO - Non-Governmental Organizations

NY - New York

NYU - New York University

QMA - Qatar Museums Authority

UAE - United Arab Emirates

USA - Unites States of America

V&A - Victoria & Albert Museum

## INTRODUCTION

The choice for the theme of this dissertation started while researching for a project, which was about a profound analysis of the artistic path of Shirin Neshat, one of the most successful Iranian contemporary artists. During this research, I noticed that other female artists shared a similar success in the Iranian art field. For example, Shadi Ghadirian and Shirin Aliabadi are frequently present in art rankings, auction houses' sales highlights and collective art exhibits. In fact, this situation is common in many parts of the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region. My curiosity grew after reading Salwa Mikdadi's essay for the MET Museum, "West Asia: Postmodernism, the Diaspora, and Women Artists"<sup>1</sup>, and discovering that most art institutions and galleries are run by women. These observations led me to pose several questions: "why is the visibility of women artists so high in most countries of the Middle East and North Africa?" "Why are there so many women in the forefront of the art business?" "Why MENA women are leading the art scene in a region (unfortunately) famously known for women oppression and marginalization, while Western women struggle to be on the same level?"; to which my dissertation aspires to answer and elucidate these questions.

The present dissertation seeks to a) show and highlight the incredible influence of modern and contemporary artists from the Middle East and North Africa, as the great endeavours of art businesswomen; and b) provide possible explanations for such a strong presence of women in the art scene of the region. In order to accomplish that, in the first chapter of the dissertation, I start with an historical framework about the modern art of the region, by demonstrating the importance and influence of modern female artists in relevant art groups that contributed for the formation of modern Arab art. Afterwards, I shall focus mostly in individual accomplishments of more modern female artists that had prominent roles and were pioneers in modern art. Lastly, in order to provide a better perspective of the region's contemporary art, I transit to contemporary artists case studies with detailed biographies, highlighting their most iconic works. The chosen artists were selected in a combination of influence, country and personal taste.

The second chapter is about MENA women in art patronage and promotion. In the first part of this chapter, I start by briefly enumerating women patron responsible for the construction and

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dias/hd\\_dias.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dias/hd_dias.htm), consulted on September 2019

preservation of several iconic structures of the region in ancient times. After, I present the continuous interest of women in the arts by highlighting the activities of women regarding the establishment of the first art organizations. Subsequently, I present women that are thriving in the most vibrant art scene of the region, the Gulf States, particularly in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Since it is not possible to name all women directors or business owners, I selected women at the forefront of the art scene of the most important auction houses, museums, art foundations and galleries of the region. Finally, after a brief introduction to the MENA art market, I present the best auction results sales' of female artists of the region.

In the last part of the third chapter, with the purpose to give a better perspective of the women in the arts, either artists or businesswomen, I make a brief comparison between women in the art scene of the MENA and the West (namely, the USA and Europe). For that I shall make the analysis of artists represented in permanent collections of museums, artists represented in art fairs, percentage of artists in art rankings, and percentage of women in the art business. Lastly, in the interest to properly understand the significant volume of female artists and art businesswomen in the region, I present three possible hypotheses that might justify a strong female presence in the art scene. The hypotheses were developed with the support of news articles and reports, but most importantly interviews with professor and curator Dr. Salwa Mikdadi, artist and gallerist Amirali Ghasemi, former Art Dubai director Myrna Ayad and Hala Khayat, Head of Sales and Director of Arab, Turkish And Iranian Art Department in Christie's Dubai (the interviews' transcript may be found in the Annexes section).

With the present dissertation, I hope to contribute to the efforts of MENA art historians and intellectuals on giving a more informed perspective about MENA's female artists and breaking the current stereotypical image of the MENA women in the arts.

# 1. FEMALE ARTISTS IN THE MIDDLE EASTERN AND NORTH AFRICAN ART

## 1.1 Historical Framework

The Ottoman Empire reached its peak in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Following several European invasions later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century it started to decline, resulting into its extinction in the 1920s with most of the Arab speaking countries being under British and French occupation. This occupation caused more exposure of Western influences in several aspects (e.g. in economics, politics and military) in the MENA region, resulting in a demise of Islamic culture. In the arts, Islamic aesthetics declined and were replaced by the latest art trends from the West. In other words, Arab artists adapted to European traditions and art aesthetics, as they learnt the newest influences in art schools of the region, taught by European instructors. This teaching period allowed for local artists to develop portraits, landscapes and still life paintings in an academic Western style and being highly influenced by the Western culture.<sup>2</sup> Despite the forced adaptation to European culture, this period was crucial for the local artists in order to learn new art techniques and styles. Nevertheless, native intellectuals soon realized two important points: that they were losing their national identity; and there was a sense of discontinuity between their present and their past, regarding their artistic vision. Thus, Arab artists started to replace western ideologies for their own and began a search for a national artistic identity (Shabout, 2007, pp. 13-31).

When colonialism dissipated after World War II, artists fiercely started their search for a national artistic identity by rediscover their heritage, history and their roots. They depicted local scenes from their countries, used new materials (e.g. henna and saffron in painting), depicted scenes from ancient literature, executed portrayals of local people and sites (e.g. peasant women and bazaars), and at last, included Arabic calligraphy in their art. It is important to note that despite renouncing to Western ideologies, Arab artists continued to depict local subjects and themes without losing the international style, such as Impressionism, that they had learnt during the European occupation

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<sup>2</sup> Arab artists adapted to European traditions, leading them to execute portraits of society ladies, nymphs, landscapes, and still lives in the classical method of the Renaissance and Orientalism, per example. It was also frequent the portrayal of Western political ideologies, like the French revolution and Napoleon's Egyptian expedition, as well as the literary, philosophical and artistic European movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Mikdadi, 1994; p.73).

(Shabout, 2007, pp. 13-31). The search for a national identity resulted in an increase of number of art groups, in which their crucial role extended from the representation of art movements to new social, political and intellectual ideas of the time.<sup>3</sup>

## **1.2 Modern Artists**

### ***1.2.1 Modern Art Groups***

Modern Art groups became fundamental for the development and continuity of modern Arab art aesthetics, spreading new ideologies and techniques within the art scene from the region. Such groups were formed by prominent artists that helped shape modern art in the MENA region, and amongst these artists, some were women.

#### ***1.2.1.1 Egypt***

Egypt was one of the first countries to break away from the Western academic style. In 1919, the revolution in Egypt increased a wave of nationalism, as well as a wave of feminist movements and initiatives from important activists such as Huda Sharawi's (b. 1878-1947), an important Egyptian feminist. This allowed for more women to have further opportunities in economics, politics and arts. New schools also emerged and provide new opportunities for female students. Therefore, the art field became one of the first public jobs held by women in Egypt and by the mid-1930s women were active members of the countries' modern art movements (Mikdadi , 1994, p. 19).

As mentioned, their presence was also distinguished in important art groups that influenced modern Middle Eastern and North African art and its search for a national artistic identity. One of the first groups to seek such a feature was *Art et Liberté* group. Created by Georges Henein in 1938, it aimed to reject fascist art and supported Surrealism as its style. They provided Egypt with the introduction of trendy artistic styles with exhibitions of Surrealists, Cubists and Abstractionists works (Bardaouil, 2016, pp. 1-32). One important influence on the group was artist Amy Nimr (b.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Shabout (2007), most art groups of the time would be represented as art movements (Shabout, 2007; p.25).



1907 – 1974) who played a vital role in the groups developmental phases by providing a cultural ambience at her home, as well as introducing them to art trends that were surfacing in Paris.

Nimr studied in the School of Fine Arts in London and later moved to Paris where she exhibited in several important galleries, such as Galerie Vignon and Bernheim Jeune. This period was an important phase for Nimr's experimental stage in her artistic career, not only because she lived in one of the most vibrant artistic neighbourhoods in Paris, Villa Seurat, but also due to the direct contact with surrealist artists. This allowed Nimr to have first-hand Surrealism knowledge, the opportunity to study its ideology, as well as exchange ideas with young surrealist artists. Nimr returned to Egypt after this formative stage and started exhibiting frequently in *Salon du Caire*. She became a highly praised artist after gaining the recognition by Mahmoud Said, one of the leading members of *Art et Liberté*. She eventually became an important member of *Art and Liberté*, enlightening characteristics of the surrealist movement she had acquired abroad to the rest of the members of the group, such as Hussain Yusef, Ida Kar and Inji Efflatoun (Bardaouil, 2016, pp. 159-166).

Inji Efflatoun (b. 1924 – 1989) was an important artist who participated in several exhibitions of *Art and Liberté*. With an interest in painting at a young age, she started to have classes with the prominent surrealist artist Kamel el-Telmissany (b. 1950), who soon introduced her to the group. At only eighteen years old, she became a revolutionary part of the group by quickly asserting her political stance in it. In 1942, she exhibited for the first time in the group, showing one of the most emblematic works of her artistic career, *Girl and the Beast (1941)* [Fig. 1]. She frequently exhibited with the cooperation with Georges Henein, in which she beautifully produced a literary imagery from Henein's poems, that is, his poetry was incorporated in the artworks (Bardaouil, 2016, pp. 96-106).



**Figure 1** - *The Girl and the Beast* (1941), oil on canvas, 70 X 55 cm. (Left); Inji Efflatoun (Right)  
**Sources:** <https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2016/egyptian-surrealists/img/inji-efflatoun> & <https://www.harpersbazaararabia.com/people/news/google-doodle-celebrates-egyptian-painter-inji-aflatouns-95th-birthday>

Efflatoun, besides a painter, had a busy career as an activist for women's rights. She became the first woman to enrol at the University of Cairo, choosing to study in the art department. She worked as a teacher and a journalist and later fought for women's rights and peace in several activities, either in Egypt or in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Another Egyptian art group as equally important was Modern Arts Group, formed in 1947, by Zeinab Abdel Hamid, Hamed Ewais (b. 1919 – 2011) and Gazbia Sirry. The main objective of the group was to influence people and spread social ideologies of the time through their subject matter. They frequently depicted the working class and their daily chores, highlighting the current people's endeavour and essence in society.<sup>5</sup> As one can identify, the group would not have existed without the efforts of two important women artists: Zeinab Abdel Hamid and Gazbia Sirry.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/inji-efflatoun/>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/zeinab-abd-el-hamid-egyptian-1919-2002-chantier-6163314-details.aspx>, consulted on August 2019

Zeinab Abdel Hamid (b. 1919 – 2002) had her studies in the Academy of Fine Arts in Alexandria and expanded her knowledge by studying abroad in Spain and Mexico. She is considered to be a pioneer in Egyptian art, and a leading female artist due to her watercolours and work in oil techniques. Hamid was an important influence in modern Egyptian art since her first artworks permitted to pave the way for Cubism and Expressionism in Egypt, depicting the everyday life of people in the country. She is known for her depictions of Cairo's street views and the countryside (Mikdadi , 1994, p. 121) .

Gazbia Sirry (b. 1925) is considered to be one of the pioneers in modern art, not only in Egypt, but also in all the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> Born in an aristocratic Turkish family, Sirry studied in the *Institut Supérieur des Beaux-Arts pour Jeunes Filles*, in Cairo in 1948, where she later deepened her studies in Rome and London. In her return to Egypt, she continued to exhibit with Modern Arts Group. She is best known for her depiction of hieratic and pharaonic figures, as well as the Coptic tradition, often portraying women and the working class.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.2.1.2 Iraq

Similar to Egyptian art groups, Iraqi groups shared the same objective: to search a national artistic identity. This pursue started mostly in the 1950s, and one of the most important art groups to successfully shape modern Arab art would be Baghdad Modern Art Group.

In 1951, the Baghdad Modern Art Group was created by Jewad Selim (b.1919 – 1961) and co-founded by Shakir Hassan al-Said (b.1925 – 2004). It was one of the most significant art groups in the MENA region concerning experiments involving Arab art, and to successfully develop a local style. They sought inspiration in Islamic tradition and heritage. Jewad Selim was considered to be an added value to the group since he was one of the first members to break away from the Western academic style and had the ability to create a distinctive Arab art based on traditional heritage and modernity, while maintaining Western techniques. He was able to create the art movement *istilham al-turath* – seeking inspiration from tradition (Faraj, 2001, pp. 43-44).

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<sup>6</sup> <http://alsharekhcollection.com/product-category/gazbia-sirry/>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>7</sup> <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/gazbia-sirry/>, consulted on August 2019

One equally important member of this group was Suad Al-Attar (b. 1942). She studied at Baghdad University and California State University, as well as printmaking in London's Wimbledon School of Art. She also studied art under Jewad Selim, and soon became an active participant in the group in the early 1960s. Her artwork included Iraq's folkloric past, as well as Mesopotamian history. Al-Attar influenced the group's style by introducing them an introspective dimension to visual folkloric from Iraq. In 1965, she exhibited for the first time solo in the group.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, another female member of Baghdad Modern Art Group was Naziha Selim (b. 1927), Jewad Selim's sister. Naziha studied in the Baghdad Fine Arts Institution, continuing her studies and specializing in fresco and mural painting at the *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. After finishing her studies, she came back to Iraq, involving herself more in the modern Iraqi art scene and exhibit several times with the group. In her contemporary stylistic experiments, she often depicted Iraqi architecture structures, such as mosques, as well as portraiture, street scenes and Iraqi women. Jalal Talabani, Iraq's prior president, describes Naziha Selim as "*the first Iraqi woman who anchored the pillars of Iraqi contemporary art*".<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note that while women did succeed in pursuing a career in arts, the first generation of MENA artists getting formal education in the arts, as well as artists in art groups, were mostly men. The numbers however changed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where more women were graduating from art academies in North Africa, Egypt, Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon (*cf.* Interview with Salwa Mikdadi, see Annex 2.1).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/artist/iraq/suad-al-attar/>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/naziha-selim-iraqi-1927-2008-untitled-6128074-details.aspx>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>10</sup> "*Arab women artists practiced art since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, although limited to those who could afford to hire European painters to give private lessons and always in the privacy of the artists family home. [...] The first woman artist to have a solo exhibit was in Cairo in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Other women received government scholarships to study abroad. However, the artists collectives or groups, as they were referred to then, were mainly male. This all changed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with more women graduating from art academies and colleges [...].*" (*cf.* Interview with Salwa Mikdadi, see Annex 2.1).

### ***1.2.2 Individual Cases of Modern Artists***

Despite the importance of the previous groups in the art history of the region, it is important to mention the accomplishments of artists that performed more independently. Such examples are Dia al-Azzawi (b. 1939) and Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (b. 1937), who contributed for a contemporary depiction of the Arabic letter, or Farid Belkahia (b. 1934 – 2014) with his avant-garde geometric paintings. Additionally, the participation of female artists in the modern art scene in the MENA countries is not concealed in the art history of the region. A great number of modern female artists contributed as well for the progress of modern art, and their presence is indeed noteworthy<sup>11</sup>, particularly in Lebanon and Egypt in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, following Iraq and Algeria.

The first generation of female artists appeared in a group exhibition in 1931, in Beirut, organized by *L'École des Arts et Métiers*, where several works by women artists were amongst the leading artists at the time. Blanche Ammoun (b. 1912 – 2011), Marie Haddad (b. 1889 – 1973) and Gladys Shoukair were present in the exhibition, and their work was positively commented in the monthly publication of *Tout*. It was the first step to assert their presence in Lebanon. Other artworks by female artists were very admired in more publications, which was the case for Waddad Nassi when she was amongst the several female artists appearing in the *al-Maarad* publication, an important Lebanese newspaper, in July 1934. Marie Haddad became the first woman artist to have an individual exhibition, both in Beirut and in Paris in 1933, and was a writer as well. Blanche chose to go to law school, being one of the first female students to attend it. After a few oppositions regarding her enrolment, she later graduated in 1931, however, her passion for visual arts returned. She started to learn painting with her mentors Jean Kober and Habib Sour, and their training improved her technique to a more modern and expressive approach.<sup>12</sup>

A second generation of female artists appeared in the mid-1940s when the first fine art school, *Académie Libanaise des Beaux Arts*, was founded. The percentage of female students in the school

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that a great number of female artists became active in the art scene in their countries due to the immense opportunities in art education in the region. The influence of new art schools is an aspect to be examined subsequently.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.onefineart.com/articles/woman-artist-lebanon/en>, consulted on August 2019

was about 50%, a proportion that is still current today. Amongst the students were Helen Khal (b. 1923 – 2009), Naida Saikali (b. 1936) and Yvette Achkar (b. 1928). After Khal finished her studies in the *Académie*, she went to New York in 1949 to study in the Arts Students League. She had her first solo exhibition in 1960 in Galerie Alecco Saab, in Beirut. As of 1965, she exhibited in various locations within Lebanon, USA and Jamaica. Besides painting, she was also for a brief period, an art critic, professor and a writer. After Yvette Achkar graduated from the *Académie*, she had her first solo exhibition in 1960, in La Licorne Gallery in Beirut, and exhibited in Galerie Alecco Saab and Gallery One. These solo exhibitions led her to exhibit abroad, mostly in Europe, such as the Galleria Baraccia in Rome and the Grand Palais in Paris. She participated in several biennales between the 1960s and 1970s, in Alexandria, Paris and Baghdad.<sup>13</sup>

Established in 1924, American Junior College for Women was another important school. Saloua Raouda Choucair (b. 1916 – 2017), the pioneer of abstract art in Lebanon and one of the best sculptors in the MENA region, studied in this school between 1934 and 1936. However, she paused her artistic training afterwards and pursued a more academic career. In the beginning of the 1940s, she participated in debates about Arab art, in which she often refuted claims of Western cultural superiority by literature and philosophy professors. Choucair explored geometry and colour, as well as develop her own abstract art style. Besides art, she was deeply informed about a varied range of topics, such as physics, biology, philosophy and poetry (Mikdadi , 1994, p. 20).

In Egypt, contrary to other countries, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century already had a high and growing number of female artists who had been painting prior to the construction of fine art schools. Such examples are the mentioned women activist Huda Sharawi and sculptor Princess Samiha Hussein (b.1889 - 1984) (Mikdadi , 1994, p. 75). Encouraged by her family, Hussein started to paint and make clay sculptures at a very early age. She studied painting in the School of Fine Arts in London, and later continued her studies in Italy in order to learn sculpture. She built several busts from members of her family, like her father Sultan Hussein Kamel, as well as most of the Muhammad Ali dynasty. Hussein participated in the first major exhibitions in Egypt regarding modern art, as well as cooperating with leading artists of the time. She often contributed for the exhibition of other artists, by personally coordinating the exhibitions. The role of Samiha Hussein

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.onefineart.com/articles/woman-artist-lebanon/en>, consulted on August 2019

continued to be influential in establishing the first sessions of *Salon du Caire*. Besides Egypt, she participated in exhibitions in Europe.<sup>14</sup>

In the aftermath of Egyptian nationalism, the government started to have more interest in art, leading the Ministry of Education to invest more in structures dedicated to culture, such as schools and museums, and provide freedom of expression for artists in the 1920s. Moreover, the government started to promote art training to female artists, including drawing and painting lessons in schools' programs, as well as art schools for women, such as School for Women Artists and Higher Institute of Fine Arts for Female Teachers. One of the advantages of these programs were providing scholarships for young women to study abroad. One of the first students to benefit from these grants was Afifa Tawfiq in 1924, choosing to pursue her studies in England.<sup>15</sup> Other important artists to profit these prospects were Zeinab Abdel Hamid, Gazbia Sirry, Inji Efflatoun and Marguerite Nakhla, a pioneer and leading artist of modern art in Egypt. Thus, thanks to these opportunities in art education, women gradually entered the art scene (Mikdadi , 1994, p. 78).

Marguerite Nakhla (b. 1908-1977) studied in the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, continuing her studies in the Academy of the Arts in Paris during the 1930s, returning to Egypt to paint. She was known for creating vivid works of the Egyptian street market and horse races, but mostly her engagement with Coptic folkloric art style, coinciding with the period of the search of an artistic identity. One of her biggest legacies is her twelve religious' scenes about Christ, produced in Coptic style for the Coptic Orthodox Church (Mikdadi , 1994, pp. 135-136).

Iraqi artist Madiha Omar is considered to be a precursor of the *hurufiyah*<sup>16</sup> movement. Omar (b.1908 – 2005) studied in Sultaniyya School, located in Istanbul, being extremely admired by the artist Ali Riza, an important Turkish painter and art teacher of the time, for her skills in painting. In the 1930s, being the first female Iraqi artist to receive a scholarship, she went to London and

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.fineart.gov.eg/AllPics/Catalogs/PDF/171/files/basic-html/page235.html>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>15</sup> Students such as Iskandara Gabriel and Ismat Kamal followed the same steps, and in their return, would become teachers at the school, introducing modern teaching methods in art education. (Mikdady, 1994; p. 78)

<sup>16</sup> *Hurufiyah* is literally translated to “calligraphy”. In the 1960s, Iraqi artists followed the movement *hurufiyah*, which consisted in the experimentation of the Arabic letter. (Shabout, 2007: 75)

study at the Maria Grey Training College, later returning to Iraq to lecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad. It was in the beginning of the 1940s that Omar started her experiments regarding the use of Arabic calligraphy in the abstract form. Her method consisted in freeing the Arabic letter from its traditional form by incorporating it with a geometric design. She is considered to be the first Iraqi artist to incorporate calligraphy in abstract art form as of 1944. (Faraj, 2001, pp. 51-52;192).

In Algeria, an artist that must be mentioned is Baya Mahieddine. Baya (b. 1931 – 1998) was born in a poor family, later becoming orphan at five years old and adopted by a French painter who lived in Algiers, Marguerite Caminat. After her adoption, she began to paint and make sculptures in clay. In 1947, with only fifteen years old at the time, Aimé Maeght saw a few works from Baya and she was later invited to exhibit in his gallery Galerie Maeght, in Paris. Not much longer after her exhibition, the surrealist critic André Breton would describe her as a child prodigy. Later, Baya travelled to Vallauris, in order to work her skills in pottery and ceramics, leading her to meet an important artist of the time, Pablo Picasso. After working in sculpture, she changed to painting in gouache, upon which her works were based on dreams and the imagination of the child, cataloguing her style as “naive”. Depictions of multi-coloured animals, mostly birds, nature with vivid colours were recurring themes on her paintings (Mikdadi , 1994, pp. 92-93).

### **1.3 Contemporary Artists**

The creativity and influence of modern Middle Eastern and North African female artists in the art field had no boundaries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Women made the most of their opportunities in education and employment, drastically changing their role in the society. The progress of women in the region provided for them with the opportunity to start following roles and careers traditionally reserved for man, thus challenging their status as women in a man’s field. This supporting and rich atmosphere formed by women in the region provided for future generations of female artists to pursue their careers in the arts.



It is considered that the contemporary generation of artists from the region emerged during the 1980s.<sup>17</sup> Themes such as the veil, the body, heritage, history, war and identity are common aspects in the contemporary artworks from artists in the region. Female artists, besides embracing more traditional art practices, such as painting and sculpture, rapidly adapted to more contemporary practices within media, performances and installations. It was the case for Mona Hatoum and Emily Jacir, two very important performance and installation artists.

One of the most celebrated artists in the region, is Mona Hatoum. Daughter of Palestinian parents, she was born in 1952 in Beirut. After her studies in Beirut University, she continued her education in London, a place where her work would be highly acclaimed while a student. During the 1980s, her own body acted as a means for her art performances, shifting the common distance between artist, object and the viewer. A very celebrated performance artwork from the artist is *Under Siege* (1982) [Fig. 2], performed in Aspex Gallery, in which she spent about seven hours, naked, inside a transparent cube filled with black mud. While being in the box, often slipping due to the mud and leaving marks of her hands and body, there were recordings of revolutionary songs and local news of the Middle East. She referenced *Under Siege* (1982) to the civil war in Lebanon, which was the cause for her asylum (Fadda, 2007, pp. 70-71).

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<sup>17</sup> Online art platform Artsy, considers that contemporary art was “*created in the Middle East and North Africa since roughly 1980*”. (<https://www.artsy.net/gene/contemporary-middle-eastern-and-north-african-art>, consulted on August 2019)



**Figure 2** – Mona Hatoum, *Under Siege* (1982)

**Source:** <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/apr/17/mona-hatoum-interview-installation-artist-tate-modern-exhibition>

As of the 1990s, Hatoum changed from performance art to installation art, aiming to create a different impact to the audience. Her installations are mostly based on domestic objects and manipulated sizes and materials of the object, losing its ordinary scale and use. Her work *Grater Divide* (2002), for instance, represents a magnified kitchen grater, which its form resembles a partition. Many critics consider that her work explores exile displacement due to war conflicts (like the war in Palestine and Lebanon) (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009, p. 152).

Emily Jacir was born in 1970, in Palestine and later pursued her studies in Fine Arts at Memphis College of Art, located in Tennessee. The current themes in her art practices are comprised in historical narratives, confrontation and political issues. For example, in her work *Material for a*

*Film* (2004-ongoing) [Fig. 3], a series of multimedia installations and a performance, she addresses the assassination of Palestinian intellectual Wael Zuaiter by Israeli Mossad agents, in 1972.



**Figure 3** - Emily Jacir, *Material for a Film* (2004-ongoing). Emily Jacir in Sydney at a shooting range. She shot 1000 books with a .22 calibre pistol, the same gun used by the Israeli Mossad agents to kill Wael Zuaiter in Rome.

**Source:** <https://radiopapasse.org/en/archive/interviews/emily-jacir-material-for-a-film>

She explores the Palestinian resistance through its story, and shows concerns regarding freedom of expression in contemporary art. She has exhibited individually in Europe, USA and the MENA region and participated in several biennials, such as in Venice and Sydney. She has also won several prizes such as Hugo Boss Prize and a Golden Lion at the 52nd Venice Biennale (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009, pp. 170-171).

Accompanying the newest art trends, media and photography art has been a very adopted form of art in the last years. Shadi Gadirian, Shirin Alibadi, Jananne Al-Ani and Rameel al-Faisal are a few examples of extraordinary photographers and media artists that are currently internationally recognized in this field. One of the most successful is undoubtedly Shirin Neshat. Born in Qazvin, Iran in 1957, Shirin was highly supported by her parents to work in the art field. She was sent to study abroad in the University of California in 1983 and later, she moved to New York to work.

She only returned to Iran in 1993 to be completely shocked about the country's situation. Her early works, like *Women of Allah* (1993–1997) series [Fig. 4], address to femininity issues regarding Islamic fundamentalism and militancy in Iran.



**Figure 4** - Shirin Neshat in *Rebellious Silence* (1994), from the series *Women of Allah* (1993–1997) RC print & ink, 118.4 x 79.1 cm

**Source:** <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/shirin-neshat/>

She also portrays the oppositions in gender and society in her media installations *Turbulent* (1998) and *Rapture* (1999). She had her first solo exhibition in 1993, at Franklin Furnace in New York and continued to expose her art in European museums and galleries, as well as participating in several biennales, like Venice Biennale and the Biennale of Sydney. She won numerous awards,

among them are First International Prize at the Venice Biennale in 1999 and the Silver Lion for best director at the 66th Venice Film Festival in 2009.<sup>18</sup>

Lalla Essaydi, also considered to be a very prominent photography artist, was born in 1956, in Morocco, and later moved to the USA to study in the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in 2003. Her works are often combined with Islamic calligraphy along with representations of the female body in Orientalist style. In her work series *Bullets Revisited* (2009 – 2014) [Fig. 5] she addresses to the women in the forefront of protests during the Arab spring and the violent consequences that they had suffered after. The women's dresses, resembling the ones odalisques wore, and furniture are made from bullets. She covers the women's skins with (undeciphered) calligraphy, a male-dominated activity, with henna. Similarly to Shirin Neshat, she also portrays the complex reality of female identity from her own experience: the complex identity of being Moroccan and American. Essaydi has exhibited internationally, from the USA to Europe, Asia and the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 5** – Lalla Essaydi, *Bullet Revisited #3* (2012) from the series *Bullets Revisited* (2009 – 2014), chromogenic print triptych, 51.4 x 40.6 cm each

**Source:** <https://www.phillips.com/detail/LALLA-ESSAYDI/NY040219/56>

Working in a varied range of media, Manal al-Dowayan was born in 1973 in Saudi Arabia and shortly after taking her master's in systems Analysis and Design, she went to live in London and

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/shirin-neshat>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>19</sup> <http://lallaessaydi.com/1.html>, consulted on August 2019

studied Contemporary Art Practice in Public Spheres at the Royal College of Art. Her works focus mostly in gender issues of Saudi women. She has expressed this situation through installations, which is the case for her extraordinary work *Esmi* (2012) [Fig. 6]. She addresses to a recent occurrence with no religious or historical foundation in Saudi Arabia, in which men get offended or ashamed when women's name is spoken verbally, making them hide their unique identity. Her installation is composed by large wooden prayer beads, in which each bead has a woman's name, hung from the ceiling and woven by Bedouin women.



**Figure 6** – Manal al-Dowayan, *Esmi* (2012), maple wood beads with natural wool rope hand made by Bedouin women, each prayer bead is about 4 meters long

**Source:** <https://www.manaldowayan.com/my-name.html>

Though she is known for her installations, most of her works are in photography and media. For example, her work *I Am* (2005), she produced a series of black and white photographs, where she portrays women with objects often associated with male professions in Saudi Arabia.

Simultaneously, she places traditional jewellery on these women in an unusual and disruptive way, questioning the cultural traditions that avert women from evolve in their societal roles. She has showed her work in international exhibitions, such as the V&A and MATHAF, as well as important events, such as the Venice Biennale (2009 and 2011), and in the American Biennale, in 2014.<sup>20</sup>

Boushra Almutawakel, also a worldwide acknowledged photographer, was born in Yemen in 1969. She studied in Yemen and later went to the USA to get her BSBA in International Business at the American University in Washington DC. However, during her studies, she became passionate about photography. In 1994, she returned to her country and continued to work in her photography, leading her to participate in group exhibitions in Yemen, Europe and UAE. In 1999, she was honoured as the first Yemeni Woman Photographer. Her work is mostly about gender issues, particularly the hijab representation in women. Her series *Hijab: What if* (2008 - 2012) [Fig. 7] Almutawakel is present with her husband in several stages of different clothing. The series' first starts with the husband wearing normal male clothes, while she is using the hijab. As the photographs advance, the couple switches their clothing items, ending with her wearing a different male outfit, while he is wearing her hijab.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 7** – Boushra AlMutawakel, *What if*, from the *Hijab* Series (2008 - 2012)

**Source:** <https://phmuseum.com/boushraalmutawakel/story/the-hijab-series-f9690da032>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.manaldowayan.com/manal-aldowayan.html>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>21</sup> <http://edgeofarabia.com/artists/manal-al-dowayan>, consulted on August 2019

Despite the practice of painting and sculpture are becoming overshadowed by more recent forms of art, it is still a popular form adopted by artists from the North African region, and from a few parts of the Levant. Sara Shamma and Huda Lufti are examples of extraordinary painters from the region. Another recognized example is Ghada Amer, who is widely known for her embroidery paintings and sculpture. She was born in Egypt in 1963, but in the 1970s, her family relocated to France, which was a starting point in her artistic training. Her work consists on notions of female identity and feminine sexuality. In her work *You are a Lady* (2015), inspired by Liliana Shelbrook's book "Lantern in the Mist", she explores the female nude and its burden of the fixating male gaze through embroidery, a traditional craft for women. Besides addressing to gender issues, she is also interested in her homeland culture. For example, in her work *The Words I Love the Most* (2012) [Fig. 8], in order to diminish the Western idea that the region is full of violence and other negative connotations, and associate it with a more positive concept, she sculpted 100 words related to love in the Arab language in her iron egg-shaped sculpture. She now lives and works between New York and Paris and has exhibited among worldwide events, such as the Venice Biennale, the Sydney Biennale, the Whitney Biennale, and the Brooklyn Museum.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 8** – Ghada Amer, *The Words I Love the Most* (2012), bronze with black platina, 152,8 x 152,8 x 152,8 cm  
**Source:** <https://www.ghadaamer.com/sculpture?lightbox=dataItem-ikoezlh8>

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.ghadaamer.com/about>, consulted on August 2019



An extraordinary example in painting is Hayv Kahraman. Born in 1981, in Iraq, she studied in Italy and Sweden and specialized in art and design. Her works explore the aesthetics of beauty, cultural history and gender issues, while possessing Japanese, Islamic, ancient Greek and Italian art influences. For example, in her series of paintings related to the sacrifice of the lamb, a ritual from the Islamic festival of Eid al-Adha, she substituted the men for women. In her work, *Heads on Plate* (2008) [Fig. 9], she depicts the celebration of the fest, while appropriating the sacred masculine theme to assert feminist equality. The female figures are tall and elegant, resembling the female figures of Persian miniatures. She currently lives in USA, and participated in international events, such as the Sharjah Biennial, and exhibit internationally throughout Europe, USA and the UAE (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009, pp. 176-179).



**Figure 9** - Hayv Kahraman, *Heads on Plate* (2008), oil on linen, 173 x 106.5 cm  
**Source:** [https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/hayv\\_kahraman\\_heads.htm](https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/hayv_kahraman_heads.htm)

As a final note for this chapter, it is important to have in mind that as a consequence of political turmoil in a few countries from the MENA region in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, many artists felt forced to exile or dislocate overseas in an early age, ending up residing mainly in Europe and the USA. These relocations resulted in the propagation of diasporas, a term which is often associated with identity loss and cultural displacement.

A great number of these artists working outside their homelands were mostly from Lebanon, Palestine, Iran and Iraq and among such artists, as previously observed, were Mona Hatoum, Shirin Neshat and Ghada Amer. This situation was considered to be temporary, with the possibility of returning to their countries when the conflicts settled down. However, after the 1990s, artists became unconcerned with placement issues and freely worked between two or more countries.<sup>23</sup> Later on, discussions about diaspora artists emerged about which nationality, or even religion, to adopt. Many artists do reference the diasporic issues in their art, nevertheless, there are cases where artists embrace both or more cultures, resulting them to adopt a hybrid identity. Ultimately, there has been acts of defiance on omitting their birthplace in a way of challenging the need to trace artists and their productions (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009, p. 45).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> “The work of these transnational artists, along with a renewed Western interest in the region and in Islamic culture, have helped draw international attention to contemporary art” ([https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dias/hd\\_dias.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dias/hd_dias.htm), consulted on October 2019.)

<sup>24</sup> Emily Jacir, in an interview for the NY Times, responded “no comment” when questioned about her birthplace. “Jacir’s strategy enabled the body of the diasporic artist to challenge both art history trusty analytical category of the nation state and the contemporary art world’s capitalist need to localize artists and their production”. (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009, p. 45)

## 2. WOMEN IN ART PATRONAGE AND ART BUSINESS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

### 2.1 Art Patronage

The participation of women in the arts, particularly in art patronage, can date back since the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Yemen. During the Rasulid Dynasty and Ayyubid periods, the wealthiest women oversaw cultural heritage and invested in their community by patron constructions of mosques and madrassas, as well as donate to religious foundations. Documents show that from the 150 building endowments from the Rasulid Dynasty in Yemen, about 1/3 of the construction of the buildings were established by women. Besides their interest in the architecture, they commissioned illuminated manuscripts of the Qu'ran (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009, p. 24).

Another similar example was in ancient Persia. In the Timurid Dynasty, although Persian women were known to work in the art of carpet, textile weaving and embroidery, women from the royalty ordered the construction and patron major religious structures, essentially madrasas. Although most buildings are now destroyed, a few examples of architectural patrons are from Qutlugh Tarkhan Agha and Saray Mulk Khanum (b. 1343 – 1406) who commissioned important madrasas under their surnames (Hambly, 1999, pp. 203-209). In the Safavid Dynasty, Dilaram Khanum (b. 1595 – 1647) was the person responsible for ordering the construction of Caravanserai Jadda and Caravanserai Nim Avard in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as well as Sahib Sultan Begum who commissioned Ilchi Mosque (Hambly, 1999, pp. 411-412). During the Qajar period, members of the royal court not only were interested in preserving several religious structures, but also in enriching their knowledge in painting<sup>25</sup> and photography. One of the first examples of women in photography in Iran was perhaps the granddaughter of Fath Ali Shah, Ashraf-al-Saltaneh (b. 1863 – 1914). Fatemeh Soltan Banout (1873 – 1954) and her sister Ozra were also two examples of women interested in photography at the time, mostly due to their husbands which were photographers at the Naser al Din Shah's court (Modares, 2019).

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<sup>25</sup> Despite their freedom to work with photography, they were not allowed to attend to public art schools. Nevertheless, if such women were interested in painting, they were trained by tutors at the courts (Modares, 2019).

In the Ottoman Empire, early evidences also show that women's contribution in art patronage was quite extensive. For instance, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Hurrem Sultana (b. 1502 - 1558) commissioned a Complex in Uskudar and Istanbul with mosques, madrasas, soup kitchens, primary school and hospitals. Mihrimah Sultana (b. 1522 - 1578), Hurrem's daughter, followed the mother's steps by commissioning Mihrimah Sultan Mosques in Uskudar and in Edirnekapi. Eminou New Mosque, one of the most sacred buildings in Turkey, was commissioned by Turharn Hatice Sultana (b. 1627) (Ozgules, 2017, pp. 45-50). The high demand of constructions of these sorts of buildings from Ottoman women may be justified as a mean of self-representation and visibility, since in that period they were restricted to make public displays.

One of the most popular and important figures worth to mention in art patronage in the Ottoman period was Gulnus Emetullah (b. 1642 – 1715). The buildings she endowed helped her successfully legitimize her own power in the capital while simultaneously representing the glory and the might of the Ottoman dynasty.

Her peak<sup>26</sup> regarding personal deeds in art patronage was the commission of two important buildings during this period: the Galata New Mosque and the Uskudar Yeni Valide Complex. The Galata structure construction began at 1697 and was comprised with the mosque, imam's houses, fountains and cellars<sup>27</sup> (Ozgules, 2017, pp. 105-137). Her *magnum opus*, the Yeni Valide Complex [Fig. 10] at which still stands in Uskudar, began to be constructed in 1708 and has multiple types of buildings besides the mosque, such as soup kitchens, schools and water structures. Thanks to the construction of the Uskudar Complex, Gulnus is discreetly celebrated for architectural and interior decoration innovations in certain details of the Complex, and therefore shifting Ottoman

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<sup>26</sup> Gulnus previously started her patron legacy by ordering the construction of soup kitchens and hospitals in Mecca in the late 1690s, as well as bridges and shrines repairs at the pilgrimage road. She also commissioned water structures, such as fountains and aqueducts, so that all people had access to water. These actions showed her piety towards the Ottoman people and her devotion to religion. (Ozgules, 2017, pp. 87-98; 140-153)

<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, the mosque was demolished in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. (Ozgules, 2017, pp. 122-124)

architecture traditions<sup>28</sup> (Ozgules, 2017, pp. 157-182). Despite most of her patron legacy had been destroyed, it is important to highlight that the last buildings she had commissioned had a slight change in style regarding the Ottoman architectural taste, thus influencing the style of future buildings and decorations.



**Figure 10** - Uskudar Yeni Valide Complex

**Source:** <https://www.islamiclandmarks.com/turkey/yeni-valide-mosque>

Architecture was a powerful imperial imagery in these centuries and becoming an art patron allowed one to be powerful. Their patron activities showed that royal women were pious and involved with their people. These behaviours often demonstrated their engagement by leaving a strong legacy for the future generations to remember.

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<sup>28</sup> For instance, regarding the interior decoration of the Complex, besides the low use of tiles around the *mihrab*, their colours are green-blue colours tones instead of the abundance of tiles of deeper blue of traditional iznik. (Ozgules, 2017, p.170-171) If one compares the traditional style interior decoration of Eminou New Mosque, one may observe that it possesses a large number of traditional iznik tiles in red and blue, in comparison to the low use of tiles adorning Uskudar Yeni Valide Complex (Ozgules, 2017, p. 291)

## **2.2 The Rise of Art NGOs Established by Women**

The interest regarding the preservation and promotion of the arts by women is still current in the region. Despite political instabilities, as from the 1960s the establishment of Non-Governmental Organizations by women dedicated to the arts began to rise. For example, in 1967, one of the first initiatives to be founded in the region was the Lebanese house for the arts Dar el-Fan, an intellectual art centre of the time. The founder of Dar el-Fan, Janine Rubeiz, organized art exhibitions, lectures, poetry readings and performances, and had a space for art critics, intellectuals, writers and artists from Iraq, Syria and Palestine. However, due to political conflicts, these initiatives were obstructed by the government. It was not after the 1980s that the art scene in the MENA region started to blossom, where artists and influencers started to organize themselves in non-governmental organizations. These NGOs became a standard practice in the cultural sector of the region and created a solid structure to retain the artists and their art (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009: 25-26).

As one of the first safe cultural host in the 1980s, Jordan provided various activities and exhibitions for its neighbouring countries, becoming a vital cultural centre in the region. And is important to highlight the fact that the rehabilitation of the art scene in the MENA region was due to the efforts of two women: Wijdan Ali and Suha Shoman.

Ali, in addition to her becoming a successful artist, was an involved professional and a considered leader in the arts. She was the founder of one of the first NGOs in Jordan, the National Gallery of Fine Arts. The gallery aimed to spread artistic knowledge, promote art from the MENA region and to encourage cultural diversity. Established in 1980, it holds one of the firsts and largest collections of the region's art. Recently, the space was expanded by adding a museum and a library. The permanent collection includes more than 2,000 artworks by over 800 artists, mostly from Islamic or Arab countries, but also from other parts of the world (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009: 172).

Shoman's organization, Darat al-Funun, had a different approach. It focused on supporting Jordanian and other MENA artists creating one of the most interactive platforms for artists in the region. Darat al-Funun was inaugurated in 1993, in Amman, Jordan, and is considered a crucial platform for collaboration between artists and the public in the Arab countries. It also became an

important resource for scholars and curators in the education of modern art of the MENA region, with a library and an art history archive (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009: 113).

The number of NGOs increased from four to twenty-two, between the mid-1990s and 2008, with a higher presence in Egypt, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon, and recently in Morocco. New alternative spaces for experimental art were built, in which the majority of them were founded by young women art professionals (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009: 26). One successful example is Ashkal Alwan, founded by Christine Tohme and Marwan Reshmawi in 1994. Their main goal is to renew the intellectual and cultural scene in Beirut. These women promote and document contemporary artistic productions and activities, and support experimental works like installations, performances and mixed media. Ashkal Alwan's activities include exhibitions, lectures and worldwide gatherings (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009: 78).

The presence of these women provided a strong art scene in the region. Their efforts in establishing the first art NGOs in order to share the art from the region, to support emerging artists and provide art admirers activities and exhibitions of regional art was crucial for the development of the art scene in the Middle East and North Africa. They became leaders of art patronage and promotion and it is due to their initiatives that motivated people from other countries to pursue this path, expanding even more the number of art organizations.

### **2.3 A New Art Centre: The Gulf States**

The Gulf States, predominantly the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and most recently Saudi Arabia, contributed for the rise of new art organizations, such as galleries, museums, auction houses and new art schools. Since 2006, the Gulf peninsula has met an *art boom* which is justified by the following factors (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009: 6):

- Entrance of international auction houses, like Christie's, Bonham's and Sotheby's;
- Construction of recently well-recognized art institutions, such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi in UAE, and the Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar;
- Striving projects for the construction of new museums in the Gulf, for instance, plans for the development of Zayed National Museum and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi;
- New education facilities of art and design;

- A remarkable rise of artist residencies, for diaspora artists and for international artists that work in the region.

The position of the Gulf states to become a lucrative market for artists from the MENA region has been imperative, and it gains a wider dimension once the development of new local galleries and organized international events are increasing. The economic wealth of the UAE led to the emergence of a new generation of art collectors particularly interested in modern and contemporary art of the region. This generation propelled the market, particularly online sales, and urged major auction houses to establish in the region.

### ***2.3.1 UAE***

One of the first auction houses to establish in the in UAE was Christie's Dubai. Founded in 2005, it currently remains the leading auction house regarding sales of Modern and Contemporary Arab, Iranian and Turkish art category in the MENA region, possessing over 70% of the MENA art market. One of the leading figures of the auction house is Hala Khayat, Head of Sales and the director of the Department of Modern and Contemporary Arab, Iranian and Turkish since 2006. Khayat's role in Christie's is fundamental since she has been responsible for auction sales over \$215 million worth of Arab, Iranian and Turkish art.<sup>29</sup> Another auction house to begin its activities in Dubai was Sotheby's. It held its first auction in November 2017 with a different approach, by presenting a mix collection of Western and Middle Eastern artworks, from Pablo Picasso to Khalil Gibran.<sup>30</sup> The appointed director and head of Sotheby's Dubai office is Katia-Boueiz Nounou<sup>31</sup>. Possessing an Iraqi and Iranian background knowledge, Nounou presented a new strategy by gathering new Middle Eastern collectors and organizing exhibitions and lectures to show the myriad highlights from Sotheby's global sales.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.christies.com/locations/salerooms/dubai/>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/en/inside-look-first-auction-at-sothebys-dubai/>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.sothebys.com/en/slideshows/sothebys-celebrates-opening-of-new-dubai-gallery-and-office>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>32</sup> <http://hbarnes.london/tag/katia-nounou/>, consulted on August 2019



Besides auction houses, women are currently at the forefront of galleries. Many of these galleries are located in the Alserkal Avenue, a complex responsible for the tremendous growth in art galleries in Dubai, from about 10 galleries in 2005 to more than 60 in 2010.<sup>33</sup> Alserkal Avenue is located in the industrial area of al-Quoz and is a wide area that was established in 2007, with the purpose to encourage and support the region's contemporary art scene.<sup>34</sup> The growth of this complex is the result of the management of Director Vilma Jurkute. She supervised Alserkal Avenue's physical expansion in 2015 as well as the inauguration of Concrete<sup>35</sup> in 2017. As of 2019, in addition to managing Alserkal, Vilma also manages Alserkal Arts Foundation, a non-profit activity focused in the arts.<sup>36</sup>

Currently located in Alserkal Avenue, one of the pioneers to establish a gallery in Dubai was Mayla Attasi. With the assistance of her partner, Amna al-Dabbagh, they founded the Green Art Gallery in 1995. Their first exhibitions held were with modern Arab masters, like Dia al-Azzawi, Paul Guiragossian and Fateh Moudarres. In 2010, Yasmin Attasi, Mayla's daughter, started to manage the gallery and relaunched it by representing contemporary art from the Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey. The gallery has established several collaborations with foreign artists and curators, and it commits to record and archive artistic practices in the region. It was also the first gallery to represent Dubai in Art Basel in 2012.<sup>37</sup> An interesting exhibition that occurred in 2017 was in memory of modern female Egyptian artists, such as Inji Efflatoun and Gazbia Sirry, called "Modernist Women of Egypt".<sup>38</sup>

Another significant gallery is The Third Line. In 2005, Sunny Rahbar and Claudia Cellini, with the support of Omar Ghobash, opened the Third Line Gallery, considered to be one of the most well-

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<sup>33</sup> <https://gulfnews.com/business/retail/art-market-in-middle-east-gains-momentum-1.695065>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>34</sup> Alserkal Avenue has an area of over 46,000 square meters, occupied by not only several local and international galleries but art spaces, artists' studios, residency programs, concept stores and independent cinema as well. (<http://alserkalavenue.ae/en/about/index.php>, consulted on August 2019)

<sup>35</sup> Concrete is a new venue of Alserkal Avenue. It is a space with the capacity to present large-scale art exhibitions, symposia, conferences, conceptual fashion presentations, film screenings, and corporate experiences, as well as private functions. (<http://alserkalavenue.ae/en/venue/concrete.php>, consulted on August 2019)

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.weare museums.com/wam19/speakers/vilma-jurkute/>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.gagallery.com/gallery>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.gagallery.com/exhibitions/modernist-women-of-egypt/press-release>, consulted on August 2019

respected and important galleries in the UAE. They established the gallery at a time when the art market was slow, but soon changed the dynamics by supporting the careers of Middle Eastern artists and organizing non-profit and other alternative programs. In 2015 the gallery moved to Alserkal Avenue and currently represents more than twenty artists from the Middle East and North Africa region, included Hayv Kahraman and Shirin Aliabadi (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009: 270).

One could not analyse the growth of the art scene in Dubai without referencing to one of the most important events of the Emirati state, the Art Dubai Fair. This fair has been particularly interesting regarding the female directory board. As of 2010, when Antonia Carver became the Director of the fair, Art Dubai started to expand by providing a unique selling point and make it relevant to the region. The countries linked to it economically and culturally, from the North and East Africa, Middle East and Central Asia. Art Dubai includes several and varied speakers like artists, collectors, museum directors, curators, architects, businessmen, musicians, filmmakers and academics. In 2016<sup>39</sup>, Myrna Ayad became the new director of the fair and was an activist regarding the promotion of the art's region (Worrell, 2017). She focused in establishing international relationships within the MENA mostly with art galleries and collectors.<sup>40</sup> However, in July 2018, after Ayad leaving Art Dubai in order to create her own consultancy on cultural strategy and production, a new director occupied her place in December of the same year, and she is Chloe Vaitso. She had previously been the director of Frieze London, and her mission for Art Dubai is now to concentrate on VIP development in the region.<sup>41</sup>

Despite Abu Dhabi's exciting plans for a noteworthy art centre in the future, with Guggenheim and Zayed Museum, Sharjah currently hosts a few but equally important museums managed by Sharjah Museums Authority. SMA was inaugurated in 2006, with the objective to preserve collections and enhance an appreciation of culture and learning through their exhibitions, educational and

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<sup>39</sup> After working for 6 years, Antonia Carver left Art Dubai in 2016 only to become the Director of Art Jameel, an organization that supports artists and creative communities in Dubai. She is responsible for overseeing all art related programs in Art Jameel and is currently following a major project for Jeddah, the Hayy: Creative Hub. (<https://jameelartscentre.org>, consulted on August 2019)

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/myrna-ayad-to-step-down-as-art-dubai-director-after-two-years>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/new-international-director-of-art-dubai-announced-chloe-vaitsou-of-frieze-1.779144>, consulted on August 2019

community programs. The Sharjah Museums Authority manages 16 institutions, in which are included Sharjah Art Museum, Sharjah Heritage Museum and Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization.<sup>42</sup> The person responsible for overseeing all these museums is Manal Ataya. She serves on the advisory boards at several institutions, including the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sharjah and the Supreme Committee for the UNESCO World Heritage List file for Sharjah.<sup>43</sup>

Sharjah is also the host of the only local Biennale and it is considered to be one of the most recognized cultural events in the MENA region. In 1993, Sharjah Biennale was inaugurated, and since then it has created a cultural network among artists, art institutions and organizations in a local, regional and international range. Until 2003, the Biennale's strategy was focusing in traditional art practices, like painting, sculpture and graphic arts. But after that year they decided to modernize by encouraging new art practices, like installation and video, for example (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009: 265). This unusual edition was the first one directed by Sheikha Hoor al-Qasimi where she renovated a few spaces, like the national pavilion model, and has been the director of the biennale ever since (Worrell, 2017). Besides her activities at the Biennale, she is also the president and founder of the Sharjah Art Foundation. She established it in 2009, valuing the heritage and art history of the city. Its main activities include exhibitions with Arab or international artists, debates, performances, cinema, music, and art education programmes.<sup>44</sup>

### ***2.3.2 Qatar***

The al-Thani royal family is strongly trying to position Qatar as a cultural centre for the arts and education of the Middle East, and the city that is most experiencing this rapid cultural development is Doha. The local art scene is rapidly growing, with new and varied emerging artists, as well as the construction of innovative art infrastructures. Museums and art spaces devoted to their heritage

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<sup>42</sup> <https://gcdn.net/member/the-sharjah-museums-authority/>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>43</sup> <http://sharjahart.org/sharjah-art-foundation/people/ataya-manal>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>44</sup> <http://sharjahart.org/sharjah-art-foundation/about/mission-and-history>, consulted on August 2019

have become the main foundation of Qatar's art motivations and investments, thanks to the work developed by the Qatar Museums Authority over the last years.

QMA is an important government entity formed in 2005 and directed by Sheikha Mayassa al-Thani. QMA coordinates and administers purchases, arranges the preservation and interpretation of art collections and artefacts, and supervises all of its museums, which are the Museum of Islamic Art, the Arab Museum of Modern Art, the Orientalist Museum, and the National Museum of Qatar (Amirsadeghi, Mikdadi, & Shabout, 2009: 239). With an extraordinary budget of about \$1 billion, Mayassa al-Thani is also responsible for the overseeing of purchases of artworks in the country, and such works have been from Damien Hirst, Mark Rothko and Paul Cezanne.<sup>45</sup>

The National Museum of Qatar devotes to exhibit the country's history, with galleries full of historic objects, and with cinematic, oral and thematic displays. The museum also has a research centre and laboratories, and has a space dedicated to a food forum, where it preserves culinary traditions from Qatar.<sup>46</sup> The museum's inauguration was in March 2018 and the appointed director was Sheikha Amna al-Thani, with the objective of the museum being accessible for everyone.<sup>47</sup>

Regarding auction houses in Qatar, one that stands-out is AlBahie. It was founded in 2016, in Katara Cultural Village, located in Doha. The house has held almost twenty auctions since its inauguration, and it mainly consisted in Orientalist and Islamic art, carpets, jewels and Qatari artists' works. It contributes for the revival of Islamic art and support of authentic Arab and Islamic heritage<sup>48</sup>. AlBahie was managed by Corinne Lefebvre since the beginning, however, in 2017 the management changed and has been directed by Jennifer Bishop ever since.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the number of galleries is low in Qatar, they are currently growing, especially in Doha. Here, is located Anima Gallery, a gallery with an important role regarding the cultural scene in Qatar. It was established in 2012 by Ghada al-Sholy and currently represents contemporary artists, not only from Qatar, but in the Middle East and rest of the world. Besides exhibiting a wide range

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/profile/sheikha-mayassa-al-thani/>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.qm.org.qa/en/project/national-museum-qatar>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.claudinecolin.com/en/1863-inauguration-of-the-national-museum-of-qatar>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.albahie.com/>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.gulf-times.com/story/624063/AlBahie-Auction-House-mulls-art-fair-in-Doha>, consulted on August 2019

of artworks, it also provides art consultancy services<sup>50</sup>. Founded in 2012, East Wing gallery, is a platform devoted to photography exhibition and represents emerging and established artists from the region. Directed by Peggy Sue Amison, they are present in art fairs, such as Art Dubai, and provide educational events.<sup>51</sup>

### ***2.3.3 Saudi Arabia***

As a result of a series of improvements by Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's culture has been improving, especially due to the creation of "Vision 2030"<sup>52</sup> in 2016, in which a budget of circa \$ 64 billion was dedicated to culture and entertainment for the next 10 years.<sup>53</sup> Projects for new cinemas, opera houses, art institutions and music festivals are some of the infrastructures that are being and will be constructed to enhance Saudi's culture. This program will also be a benefit for artists to expose their work internationally.<sup>54</sup> And an important authority to help achieve Vision 2030 plan is General Culture Authority.

The GCA is the government body responsible for all cultural events and has been developing several sectors, such as film, literature, performing and visual art and theatre, in order to support creativity and talent in Saudi Arabia. Recently, the management of the Authority has been

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www.animagallery.com/about-us/>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>51</sup> <http://east-wing.org/about-us-ezp-1.html>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>52</sup> The program Vision 2030 aims to decrease the dependence to the oil in the country, as well diversify Saudi Arabia's economy and establish public sectors services, like health, education and culture. (<http://vision2030.gov.sa/en/foreword>, consulted on August 2019)

<sup>53</sup> <https://kawa-news.com/en/the-spectacular-rise-of-saudi-contemporary-art/>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>54</sup> <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/saudi-arabia-art-scene-survey-1231676>, consulted on August 2019

appointed to three women, Mona Khazindar, Maysa al-Sobehy and Haifaa al-Mansour, all responsible for the direction of the theatre and filming departments.<sup>55</sup>

Besides women presence in high positions in government entities, the same happens in the art galleries. Women have been in the lead of most galleries, art incubators and art schools in Saudi Arabia.<sup>56</sup> A very popular gallery in the art scene of the country is Naila Art Gallery. Established in 2012 by Naifa al-Farez, she aims the promotion of local and international art and captivate a wider audience, with art exhibitions, workshops, and art talks.<sup>57</sup> One more example is Hewan Art Gallery which was established by art collector Shatha Al Tassan, with the objective of sharing her knowledge and appreciation of art with other people. It hosts several solo exhibitions from local and regional artists, such as Nja Mahdaoui and artist Hanan Bahamdan.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Mona Khazindar is an imperative figure in Saudi Arabia's art scene. She was the first Saudi woman to hold the post as director general of the *Institut du Monde Arabe* in Paris. Furthermore, she is vice-president and co-founder of the "Al-Mansouria Foundation for Culture and Creativity", a non-profit cultural foundation that promotes Arab contemporary art.

Director Maysa al-Sobehy became known for her work in theatre and arts in Saudi Arabia. Her work has been acknowledged internationally.

And lastly, Saudi Arabia's first female director, Haifaa al-Mansour's work is celebrated in Saudi Arabia where she has been very praised about the importance of culture and film and became a pioneer in the film industry of Saudi Arabia.

(<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/life-style/art-and-culture/2018/04/06/Three-Saudi-women-become-part-of-newly-formed-General-Authority-for-Culture.html>, consulted on August 2019)

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-forget-women-forged-saudi-arabias-art-scene>, consulted on August 2019

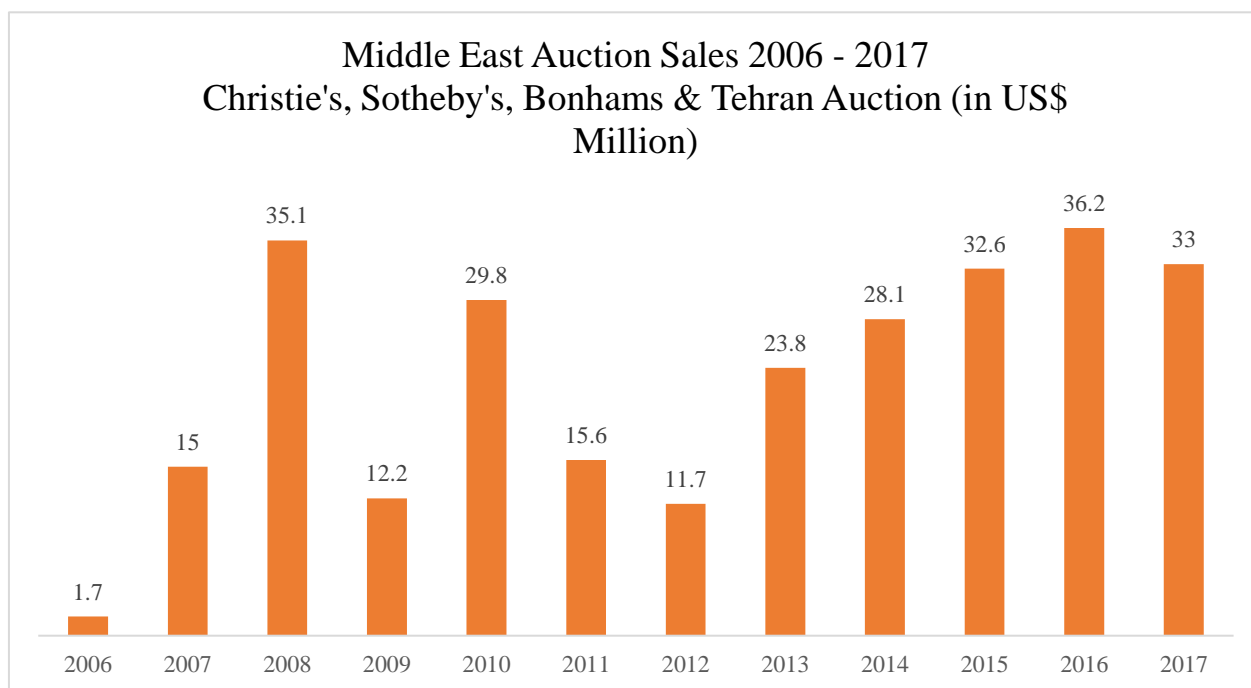
<sup>57</sup> <http://www.gallerynaila.com/about-us/>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/articles/work-in-progress-essential-galleries-of-riyadh-s-blossoming-art-scene>, consulted on August 2019

## 2.4 MENA Art Market: Auction Results

### 2.4.1 Introduction to the MENA Art Market from 2006 to 2017

The opening of international auction houses, the formation of art fairs and construction of new museums in the Gulf States, contributed to a higher flow and international visibility of this art market, as of 2006. Auction houses, like Christie's and Bonham's in Dubai and Sotheby's in Doha, influenced a dramatic change in the market by increasing from \$ 1.7 million in 2006 to \$ 35.1 million in 2008 in sales. Art fairs, as Art Dubai and Abu Dhabi Art Fair, were important in educating and engaging the audience interest into purchasing art in the region (di Torcello, Hoeltgen, & Petterson, 2011).



**Graphic 1** - Middle East Auction Sales 2006 – 2017

**Source:** <https://arttactic.com/product/middle-east-north-africa-modern-contemporary-art-report-february-2017/>

Yet, this growth was not stable, and the market volume reflects the instability in the region. The MENA art market suffered a decrease in 2009, topping not even half of the total sales in the previous year. The market recovered to \$ 29.8 million in 2010, but only to decline in the following two years - \$15.6 million in 2011 and \$11.7 million in 2012. From 2010 to 2012, auction sales suffered a decrease of 47%, with a difference of about \$20 million in three years. This decay was caused due the short stock of rare and high quality modern Middle Eastern and North African

artworks, resulting into fewer sales concerning this art segment. The market recovered in 2013, when their sales increase about 80%, since the demand for Lebanese, Egyptian, Turkish and Iranian modern and contemporary artists increased. (di Torcello & Petterson, 2013) In 2016, the total auction sales of modern and contemporary art from the Middle East grew to almost 12%. It was the best year regarding annual results, with a performance of almost \$37 million worth of sales. 2017 started with a solid performance, which increased to about 77% from the second half of 2016 (di Torcello & Petterson, 2017).

#### ***2.4.2 Top Auction Results from Female Artists***

Although the information about auction sales results in the Middle East is rather scarce, there are a few reports and news articles which highlight outstanding performances regarding auction results from either living or deceased female artists. A name that frequently arises is Fahr el-Nissa Zeid (b. 1901 – 1991). The Turkish artist is currently entitled with the best result concerning Turkish art. In 2013, she broke a world-record price for a painting from the region in her work *Break from the Atom and Vegetal life* (1962) [Fig. 11], the painting sold for about \$ 2.3 million (Joseph & Petterson, 2014). Zeid was also the artist with the highest hammer price in June 2017 for her work *Towards a Sky* (1953), with a value of almost \$ 1,3 in Sotheby's auction in Dubai.<sup>59</sup>

In June 2012, Iranian artist Monir Farmanfarmaian (b. 1922 – 2019) set the record for the most expensive work sold among the 113 artworks of Tehran Auction. Her mosaic mirror work *Untitled* (2018) was sold for over \$ 950 000.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, artists like Shirin Neshat, benefiting from dual nationality and residence in New York (and therefore more exposure to the major markets), have been featured in international auction houses since early 2000. (Joseph & Petterson, 2014) For example, Shirin Neshat's *Whispers* (1997) [Fig. 12] was sold for \$265,000, when its estimate was between \$80,000 and \$120,000, in 2008 Christie's Dubai auction<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup><https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/sotheby-s-middle-eastern-art-week-comes-to-a-successful-close-in-london-1.3753?videoId=5687993415001>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>60</sup> <https://en.mehnews.com/news/141417/96-year-old-female-artist-sets-record-high-at-10th-Tehran-Auction>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/shirin-neshat-iranian-b-1957-whispers-5059537-details.aspx>, consulted on August 2019





**Figure 11** - Farh el-Nissa Zeid, *Break of the Atom and Vegetal Life* (1962), oil on canvas, 210 x 540cm  
**Source:** <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/fahr-el-nissa-zeid-turkishjordanian-1900-1991-break-5728315-details.aspx>



**Figure 12** - Shirin Neshat, *Whispers* (1997), ink on gelatine silver print, 124.5 x 193cm  
**Source:** <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/shirin-neshat-iranian-b-1957-whispers-5059537-details.aspx>

In March 2015, Tahia Halim's (b. 1915 – 2003) work *Farhat Al Nuba (The Happiness of Nubia)* become the top lot in the auction, with a hammer price of \$ 749 000, settling a new personal record for the artist, and surpassing artists like Ayman Baalbaki and Ismail Shammout.<sup>62</sup>

Lastly, Lebanese artist Yvette Achkar is an artist to frequently set several records in auction houses. Per example, in March 2019, her painting *Number 19* (1982) was bid with the highest hammer price for \$88 500 in F.A. Auctions, Beirut.<sup>63</sup> At the same month in Christie's Dubai, Achkar was one of the artists with best auction results, establishing a hammer price of \$125 000 with her work *Untitled* (1983) [Fig. 13].<sup>64</sup>



**Figure 13** - Yvette Achkar, *Untitled* (1983), oil on canvas, 150x 100cm  
**Source:** <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/yvette-achkar-lebanese-b-1928-untitled-6192287-details.aspx>

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<sup>62</sup> <https://www.christies.com/modern-and-contemporary-arab--25684.aspx?saletitle=>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.lecommercedulevant.com/article/28987-premiere-vente-aux-encheres-pour-fa-auctions>, consulted on August 2019

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/yvette-achkar-lebanese-b-1928-untitled-6192287-details.aspx>, consulted on August 2019

### 3. FEMALE PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EASTERN AND NORTH AFRICAN ART MARKET

As analysed, the participation of Middle Eastern and North African women in the art field is relatively strong. For a long time, they have shown interest and engagement in preserving their heritage and proved to be key roles for the progress of modern art in the region. Currently, additionally to becoming more active and acclaimed participants in the art scene, women are also at the forefront of the art business. However, the portrayal of women in the arts by the West seems to be biased.

#### 3.1 A New Perspective: MENA and Western Women in the Arts

It seems to exist misconceptions created by the West that link the Arab woman into an oppressive, uneducated and men-controlled environment. These ideas have a habit of being amplified when the woman is veiled, which consequently, end up being often associated as an imprisoned and powerless creature. These misconceptions were strengthened, not only due to the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 but mostly by the media, which tends to distort the image of women in the region. Fortunately, a rising number of Arab art historians and intellectuals have been fighting against these stereotypes. This is currently being achieved through several tactics, one of them being art exhibitions in the West in order to raise awareness and provide a clearer perception of the region. Many of these exhibitions are also helping to break the outdated stereotypes by leaving better insights regarding equal opportunities for female artists in the region. Exhibitions like *Light from the Middle East: New Photography*, (see Annex 1.1), held in V&A in 2013, or *Here and Elsewhere*, (see Annex 1.2) held in the New Museum in 2014, which about half of the artists represented were women, a percentage which is rarely achieved in Western exhibitions.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> There are also numerous exhibitions focused on only women artists. One of the first to be held with only regional female artists was the exhibit “Forces of Change”, curated by Salwa Mikdadi, in 1994, where artworks from prominent artists, like Etel Adnan and Baya, were exhibited. (Mikdadi, 1994) A more recent exhibition called “I AM” premiered in Jordan, being furtherly showcased in England and in the USA in 2017. The exhibition was composed with more than 30 artists from 12 different countries, and amongst them were Lalla Essaydi and Boushra Almutawakel. (<https://www.oncaravan.org/i-am-exhibition>, consulted in August 2019)

This situation manifests in other circumstances, such as classification lists developed by online art data platforms, which reveal that MENA female artists are either ranked in superior positions<sup>66</sup> or represent a significant percentage within the artists selected. For instance, in the ranking from the report *Middle Eastern Titans*, developed by Artprice in 2014 (see Annex 1.3), it was selected 20 contemporary artists with the best auction results from 2012 to 2014, and amongst the 20 artists, 6 were women artists, including Ghada Amer, Shirin Neshat and Mona Hatoum. Another interesting example is in the ArtTactic report of 2018 (see Annex 1.4), where 55% of the artists from the list “*Next Gen Artists: Global Report 2018 – List of Top 20 Artists from Middle East and North Africa*” are women.

The position<sup>67</sup> or percentage of Western female artists is slightly lower when comparing to MENA female artists. For example, the 100 best all-time artists from the ranking *Top Living Artists* developed by ArtFacts database website (see Annex 1.5), it may be observed that only 15% are women artists, amongst them are Louise Bourgeois and Georgia O’Keefe. In the top living contemporary artists from 2011 to 2016 ranking produced by Artnet, only three female artists, Cindy Sherman, Cady Noland and Bridget Riley, are present. (see Annex 1.5).

The representation of MENA women artists in art fairs is outstanding as well. This may be seen in the 2016 edition of Art Dubai, where from the 500 artists represented, about 45%<sup>68</sup> of the artists represented were women<sup>69</sup>. In contrast, this condition is different in other major Western art fairs,

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<sup>66</sup> For instance, in a few rankings developed by Artprice, such as the *Top 10: the ten best auction results for Lebanese artists* in 2012, Mona Hatoum is in 1st place (<https://www.artprice.com/artmarketinsight/libanese-artists?from=search>, consulted in August 2019). And in the *Top 10 Results in Dubai* of 2016, Fahr el-Nissa Zeid is in 2nd place. (<https://www.artprice.com/artmarketinsight/the-top-results-in-dubai?from=search>, consulted in August 2019)

<sup>67</sup> It is important to reference that despite the number of Western female artists is low in art rankings, it has been growing. For instance, in the report of NextGen 2018, if one selects only western artists (about 65 out of 100), almost 40% are female artists (Rowntree & Petterson, 2018).

<sup>68</sup> “*Art Dubai 10<sup>th</sup> edition presented an extremely strong representation of female artists, particularly from the Middle East and South Asia region, with over 45% of the artists participating in the fair being women*”. (<https://www.artlyst.com/news/art-dubai-tenth-edition-closes-with-record-sales-and-attendance/>, consulted in August 2019)

<sup>69</sup> Another interesting observation is that, in the Modern Art section of the fair, about 30% of the artists represented were women, and despite being a low percentage, it is still a quite remarkable representation regarding female MENA artists in a period between the 1930’s and 1950’s. (<https://www.artslant.com/ew/articles/show/45471-art-dubai-modern-turns-the-tables-on-gender-stereotyping-in-the-middle-east>, consulted on August 2019)

such as Art Basel. For example, in the 2017 edition, only 28% of the artists represented in the fair were women.<sup>70</sup>

Many Western feminists have also addressed to the gender inequality of female artists in exhibitions in museums throughout the last years. One of the most controversial and known causes was from the Guerrilla Girls activist group, whereupon they analysed the number of female artists at the MET Museum in 1989. They produced a billboard in which they questioned: “*do women still have to be naked to get into the MET. Museum?*”, following with the percentage of female artists and female nudes at the museum. In 1989, they stated that about 5% of the artists were women. They repeated the same analysis in 2012 and concluded that the percentage had decreased to 4%<sup>71</sup>. Other museums, such as MoMA, the percentage of female artists represented is 3,5%<sup>72</sup>. In the Middle East, despite the number of art organizations is lower, there are still a few well-respected organizations that diverge these statistics. For instance, in MATHAF (see Annex 1.6), about 20% of the artists represented in the permanent collection, are women. In Darat al-Funun and in Jordan’s NGFA (see Annex 1.6), women represent 30% of the artists represented in the museum’s permanent collections.

As one may have observed, the female artist recognition and representation in the MENA region might be slightly higher than the Western female artists. This circumstance is even greater regarding the female professionals in the art business, such as gallery owners and directors. Approximately 80% of galleries and other art institutions in the MENA are either owned or directed by women<sup>73</sup>, as they simultaneously manage major budgets<sup>74</sup>. When comparing to the West

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<sup>70</sup> <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-women-dealers-represent-women-artists-crunched-numbers>, consulted in August 2019

<sup>71</sup> They developed this study three times – in 1989, in 2005 and 2012 – in which the percentage of female artists at the MET Museum was 5%, 3% and 4%, respectively. (<https://www.guerrillagirls.com/naked-through-the-ages/>, consulted in August 2019)

<sup>72</sup> In 2007, from the 400 works of art displayed at MoMA, 14 were by women, representing 3.5%. (<http://nymag.com/arts/art/features/40979/>, consulted in August 2019)

<sup>73</sup> “*Almost 80 percent of the art galleries and art institutions in the Arab countries of western Asia are founded or run by women*”. ([https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dias/hd\\_dias.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/dias/hd_dias.htm), consulted on September 2019)

<sup>74</sup> An example that we previously analyzed was from Sheikha Mayassa al-Thani’s, president of QMA, that manages a budget of about \$1 billion, dedicated for artworks purchases.

however, only 48% of the directors of art institutions are women.<sup>75</sup> The ranks of top Western gallery owners and art advisers are similarly male dominated as well.<sup>76</sup>

Despite this being a small comparison of the female representation between two different art markets, it helps one to understand and to give a wider perspective regarding MENA women in the art field of the region.

### **3.2 Possible Hypotheses for a Strong Female Presence in the MENA Art Market**

Modern art in the Middle East and North Africa evolved in a different way from the West. Following their independence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after being abruptly introduced to Western art and gradually adopting their respective components, a freedom wave of artistic expression rose, providing a safe and open environment for all artists.

This new atmosphere may have provided modern female artists to shape and ensure the future success of contemporary artists in the region. Thus, it is probable that contemporary female artists do not currently consider that their gender or their representation in exhibitions is an issue in the MENA art scene. For instance, Samia Halaby, an Israeli painter, considers that the region appears to be more open and at ease with women producing art, stating that the contrast is high between the MENA and the West. In her early career in the USA, she experienced rejection as much for being Arab, as for being a woman. Despite being welcomed by universities and museums in the Midwest of the USA, most of her opportunities in the New York art scene were denied. Nevertheless, her career shifted when she started to look for new prospects in the Middle East and noticed it was more welcoming.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> “While men continue to outnumber women in director roles, there has been a 5% increase in female directorships from 2013: out of the 210 directors included in the AAMD survey, 100 directors were female, with women representing 48% of art museum directorships in 2016 (compared to 43% in 2013).” (<https://aamd.org/our-members/from-the-field/gender-gap-report-2017>, consulted on September 2019)

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/14/arts/international/where-art-is-a-womans-world.html>, consulted on September 2019

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.artslant.com/ew/articles/show/45471-art-dubai-modern-turns-the-tables-on-gender-stereotyping-in-the-middle-east>, consulted on September 2019

Antonia Carver, former Art Dubai director, even affirms that the role of women in nurturing the art scene in Dubai has been so high, that came to a point where male artists are lacking in the art scene, which is an issue that is in need to be resolved. She addresses her debates about women discrimination in the art field when she was working in London and Sydney, and how different it is in the MENA.<sup>78</sup>

Hence, it is with this sort of statements that leads one to make the question: *why is the presence of women in the art scene of the Middle East and North Africa so strong?*

### **3.2.1 “Soft” Profession**

Before the formation of modern Arab art, art was seen as a woman’s realm. Ginanne Brownell Mitic, in her article for the NY Times, “Where Art Is a Woman’s World”, affirms that it was considered as an aesthetic fully focused mostly on decorating the home of their husbands’ or their fathers’ businesses.<sup>79</sup> In a similar observation, Sunny Rahbar, the co-director of the Third Line gallery in Dubai, stated in the Financial Times article “Women at the Top”, that the norms for patriarch social gender roles have been predominated for centuries. In the era before oil discovering in this region, men worked in traditional male considered professions, such as fishing, trading and pearl-diving. While women, in the other hand, dominated the traditional folk arts and practical crafts, such as weaving palm leaves and produce the *talli* - fashioning metallic knotted braids, to decorate clothing.<sup>80</sup> Taking these statements into account, the mastering of traditional art craft by women might have permitted a smooth transition to fine arts in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

While initially discussing the dissertation’s theme in the interview with Dr. Salwa Mikdadi, art curator and currently a board professor of the NYU Abu Dhabi, she justifies this lack of restriction

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<sup>78</sup> The importance of women in key roles has nurtured Dubai’s cultural success path, to the point where there is an absence of male artists is now emerging as a vital question to be resolved. “*When I worked in London and Sydney, we had a lot of conversations about how we could be positively discriminating towards getting women into the business,*” says director Antonia Carver. “*Here, we are talking to various partners about how we get more men involved! Now we’re having conversations about running special programs for men, making sure they have equal opportunities alongside the women.*” (<https://www.ft.com/content/6ce4e150-e460-11e5-a09b-1f8b0d268c39>, consulted on September 2019)

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/14/arts/international/where-art-is-a-womans-world.html>, consulted on September 2019

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/6ce4e150-e460-11e5-a09b-1f8b0d268c39>, consulted on September 2019

by stating that women were encouraged to enter the art field in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century since men felt that it was not a threatening profession. That pursuing their studies in arts was not like studying law or medicine, where these fields were considered to be a big challenge for men to have a female colleague. Hence, no one stood women against their participation in the art field (*cf.* interview with Salwa Mikdadi, see Annex 2.1)

While modern art in the region was flourishing and being accepted by its audience, it was rather considered as a soft and non-lucrative profession, especially for a man who intends to provide for his family. Thus, in a practical way, it was suitable for women since they could be entertained and take care of their home and children while painting. Besides being considered as a delicate profession, this career was supported due to the preference of the women artists' husbands or fathers so that they remained at home. Dr. Mikdadi further adds that a woman could be an artist inside her home, and not be outside in the street, reducing the chances of working with other people (*cf.* interview with Salwa Mikdadi, see Annex 2.1).

Alia Al-Senussi, a Libyan academic and consultant who does V.I.P. relations for the Middle East for Art Basel, shares a similar view to Dr. Mikdadi. She affirms not only was a safe profession to do, as it was a field that the male members of the family supported, in a patronizing way, underestimating its power.<sup>81</sup> In the interview with Amirali Ghasemi, artist and owner of Parkingallery, when asked his opinion regarding possible reasons for a strong presence of women in the art scene, he gives a similar observation, concerning the female artist in Iran. He affirms that in a more tradition society in the art field, contrary to law or engineering, there were more possibilities for women, as it was a field expected to have more women. He further adds that despite it might give a degrading idea, it turned out to be good an outcome for the present generation, since there are currently a lot of women in the Iranian art scene (*cf.* interview with Amirali Ghasemi, see Annex 2.2).

In a case study about women artists in Lebanon, Helen Khal in her article "The Woman Artist in Lebanon by Helen Khal"<sup>82</sup> for One Fine Art summarizes the influence and history of Lebanese women artists in the country, as she references conclusions that might justify a higher number of

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<sup>81</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/14/arts/international/where-art-is-a-womans-world.html>, consulted on September 2019

<sup>82</sup> This article is a summary of her book "*Women Artist in Lebanon*" published in 1987.



women artists in Lebanon, as their success, comparing to other Middle Eastern countries and the West. It was concluded that a career in the arts was considered as an underrated occupation, and similarly to Dr. Mikdadi's observation, women were not supported to pursue serious and male-dominated professions. Although this is not the case today, art was considered as an inoffensive occupation in the female domain, as music and embroidery were.

In a series of interviews with people in various different fields that Helen Khal performed, she was able to gather more potential justifications for a higher presence of female artists in Lebanon. In order to collect enough information, she asked the following question: *“Did you know that the proportion of recognized women artists to total number of artists is higher in Lebanon than in most other countries, whether in the Arab world or in the West; and that four out of the twelve leading artists in Lebanon are women? How would you explain this?”*. There were a wide range of different opinions from the interviewees, from women being naturally bolder and more spontaneous, to this situation simply being an aspect that is part of Lebanon's modern society.<sup>83</sup> However, I gathered the conclusions that focused more on my dissertation topic. In summary:

- Since women had more free time than men, art was seen as an easy and glamorous hobby for women to occupy their time with;
- The household income was provided by men, thus women did not have to be preoccupied in supporting their family. Therefore, they could afford the luxury to become an artist;
- And finally, it was a safe and indoor occupation where they could exercise it.

In contrast, most male artists were, and sometimes still are, discouraged to pursue this field, since it is not considered as a viable economic support.<sup>84</sup> Today, it is still the case that traditional families in the Gulf urge their sons towards more high-ending careers, rather than in the arts.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> <https://www.onefineart.com/articles/woman-artist-lebanon/en>, consulted on September 2019

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.onefineart.com/articles/woman-artist-lebanon/en>, consulted on September 2019

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/6ce4e150-e460-11e5-a09b-1f8b0d268c39>, consulted on September 2019

### 3.2.2 *Outdated stereotypes*

Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been more and more questioning and debating about gender inequality in the Western region. Generally, most of these discussions circle around the female-to-male ratio in professional careers, and the art field is no exception. There have been several activist groups to ensure that there is equality among genders and one of them was the previously mentioned Guerrilla Girls, that started their activities in the 1980s. Overall, there have been changes regarding gender inequality, since there are more women working in previously male-dominated professions. However, in the art field, although more women are active in it, their recognition still remains small. As a way to diminish this inequality and create more awareness, there have been more public discussions about this subject, female gender-oriented exhibitions or auction sales, and selections of only female artists for art rankings. Since the subject of gender has been rather prevalent nowadays, there is a tendency to replicate these questions and arguments outside the West. Therefore, it is common that when most Westerners observe the female presence in the MENA art scene, they become rather surprised. For example, in the article “The Women Taking Charge in The Gulf’s Rising Art Scene”, Dana Lorch references how Westerners often make the question “*How is it possible that women’s voices can be heard so loudly in the Middle East?*” when they realize the art scene is predominantly dominated by women.<sup>86</sup> This common amazement might be justified due to a perpetuated and outdated stereotype by generalizing that women from all countries in the MENA are submissive and oppressed. Despite these interpretations, which were mostly reinforced by the media, women from the MENA have been trying to change these beliefs.

In the article “The Women of the Arab Art World”, written by Lilly Wei, Lilly gathered interviews of several men and women that work in the art scene in the Middle East, and reports the issue of stereotyping the MENA. One of the interviewees, Karin Adrian von Roques, addresses to this situation with admiration regarding the Western behaviour towards women artists in the Middle East. Karin was the lead of “The View from Inside” for the 2014 FotoFest biennial in Houston, an

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<sup>86</sup> “*It is no secret that the art ecosystem in the Gulf is dominated by women. There are female royal patrons, experienced expatriates and homegrown professionals leading important institutions like Qatar Museums and Sharjah Art Foundation. Western observers often delight in pondering why so many women are at the forefront of this scene, a relative newcomer to the global art world. ‘How is it possible that women’s voices can be heard so loudly in the Middle East?’, they ask, through thinly veiled Orientalism.*” (<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/interview/sister-act-women-take-charge-in-the-gulf>, consulted on September 2019)

event focused on artists from the MENA region, where many female photographers of the region participated. During that event, she affirms that “*the West tends to take their values as a benchmark for judging other cultures*”. Additionally, she declares that there is a general idea that women in the MENA region are marginalized, with no opportunity of self-expression, to hold public positions, or even have a normal social life, and that it does not correspond to the reality.<sup>87</sup>

In the same article, it was asked to Massimiliano Gioni, the New Museum curator and artistic director, about the surprisingly large number of female artists in the “Here and Elsewhere” exhibit of 2014. He stated that a certain Western view believes that women in Arab countries are oppressed and left out of any cultural debate, but that in reality, women artists are doing great artworks. He explains how one of the aspects of the exhibition was to question and think about the current stereotypes connected to the region. He further affirms the choice of artists were not gender based but chosen for their quality, and it was merely a coincidence the fact that there were as many women as men.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi, the current president of the Sharjah Art Foundation and director of the Sharjah Biennial, also affirms that the locals do not focus in gender issues in the art field, as they do not differentiate on the basis of gender. She further declares that they analyse the artist’s practice and the artwork itself.<sup>89</sup> Etel Adnan, a modern Lebanese artist, refers that gender debates are not current in the region, considering it “*less theoretical in the Middle East than in the West*”. She says the number of women working in all fields is increasing, and so

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<sup>87</sup> Karin Adrian Von Rosques comments: “*There is the widespread idea that women in the Arab world are all oppressed, with no opportunity for self-expression, to hold public positions, or have social status—and that’s not true. It’s much more complicated, although many things do need to be changed.*” [...] “*I have met so many powerful Arab women artists over the years, especially in the Gulf region, and as Arab art becomes increasingly in demand globally, they will also benefit from that demand.*” (<http://www.artnews.com/2014/11/04/women-of-the-arab-art-world/>, consulted on September 2019)

<sup>88</sup> When asked if the surprisingly large quantity of women in the exhibition was intended, Massimiliano Gioni commented, “*It is one of the many stereotypes the exhibition tries to question. A certain Western view assumes that women in Arab countries are oppressed and left out of any cultural debate. We found instead that women artists were doing great works. We didn’t set out to show more of them or to use women and their work as some kind of example. It simply turned out that many of the works we found to be compelling were being made by women.*” (<http://www.artnews.com/2014/11/04/women-of-the-arab-art-world/>, consulted on September 2019)

<sup>89</sup> Hoor al-Qasimi further comments about women in high positions as hers: “*women are in some of the most visible and powerful roles within the art world—perhaps surprisingly so, given Western stereotypes.*” (<http://www.artnews.com/2014/11/04/women-of-the-arab-art-world/>, consulted on September 2019)

is their visibility. Contemporary Lebanese artist Lamia Joreige also addresses that it is not present a big difference in Lebanon regarding the treatment between female and male artists.<sup>90</sup>

Menachem Wecker similarly interviewed several artists and art businesspeople in order to break these stereotypes. One of the interviews was for Marika Sardar, an associate curator of South Asian and Islamic art at the San Diego Museum of Art. She is often surprised with the perception of the visitors of the museum regarding the topic of the women's freedom level of education, politics and intellectual activity that they have access to. Another interviewee, Amy Landau, associate curator of Islamic and south Asian art at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore adds that one cannot essentialize gender experience in such a broad expanse of geography and that situations change from community to community.<sup>91</sup>

During the interviews I performed for this dissertation, this aspect was widely mentioned and emphasized. For example, Hala Khayat, current Head of Sales and Specialist of Modern and Contemporary Arab, Turkish and Iranian art of Christie's Dubai, refers that she finds there are misconceptions from the West regarding the MENA region: *"I don't think the women artists have fewer opportunities in the Middle East as they do in other countries. I think the equality and all the recognition is fair in the Middle East"*. She stated that sometimes she is stunned of some beliefs of women in the region and how they are seen in other countries, that there is a tendency to link women to religion and politics. She further added that women do not have fewer opportunities in the Middle East as they do in other countries<sup>92</sup>. She continues by saying that gender equality in the art field of the Middle East has been present since the very beginning of the century: *"there were no problems in the Middle East in the art of somebody just because it was a woman"*. She however emphasizes that there are special religious keys in a few countries but that is not reflected in the other countries (cf. interview with Hala Khayat, see Annex 2.3)

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<sup>90</sup> <http://www.artnews.com/2014/11/04/women-of-the-arab-art-world/>, consulted on September 2019

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.deseret.com/2015/8/20/20570526/how-arab-women-are-fighting-negative-stereotypes-with-art>, consulted on September 2019

<sup>92</sup> Later in the interview, Hala Khayat addresses that opportunities for MENA women in art might be different in the West: *"I have a family, I have kids but if I were in London doing the same job, I would be in a very difficult situation because it is harder in Europe.[...] More things are demanded by women."* (cf. Interview with Hala Khayat, see Annex 2.3)

Myrna Ayad, former director of Art Dubai, shares the same opinion considering the misconceptions about the region: *“In all parts of the Arab world, I find a lot of women working in the art field: artists, gallery owners, collectors, directors, curators. We are not new. We come from a long line of women doing the same thing”*. In the interview, she stated that the perception of art coming from the Middle East is gender focused or country based, adding that *“women issues come up today in the news and it bothers how the perception of the art that comes from the Middle East”*. She later gives an example of Saudi Women: that when Westerners see a Saudi woman in the *chadur* and believe all art and women in the Middle East is women wearing it, and equally, that any art from the Middle East is inspired by displacement. She further affirms she doesn't think there has been proper understandings or studies about the gender issues in the art scene. She finally adds that the art scene from the region is not gender-focused, that there is more in the region than war and gender, and that the female presence has come from a long line of women doing art. (cf. interview with Myrna Ayad, see Annex 2.4)

Amirali Ghasemi also shares a similar observation by stating that there is a tendency for most people to fall into stereotypes and generalizing the whole region: *“there is a danger of generalizing. I think every case is unique and I know everybody has different agendas and different conceptions. If you keep labelling the artists for their nationality, it will be very reducing”*.

Taking these statements into account, women from the region have more freedom in the culture industry that the West might assume. It is also important to note that, in overall, MENA women have proven to be more independent, courageous, stronger and educated that the Western media tends to reflect, especially in the Gulf States. It should not be ignored that there are some conservative and traditional parts in the region. However, these cases should not be generalized for the whole region. In order to reduce the most widespread stereotypical image of women in the region, it is important to take these evidences into account:

- Most countries of the region do not require for women to wear a hijab<sup>93</sup>, however if women do personally choose to use it is either for their religious beliefs or pride of ethnic identity;

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<sup>93</sup> Only in Iran and in Saudi Arabia the use of the veil is mandatory. (<https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2015/01/28/saudi-arabias-dress-code-for-women>, consulted on September 2019)

- Women have proven to be strong and courageous in several situations, one example being in the Arab spring in 2011, where a great number of women protested alongside men, demanding freedom, equality, justice and democracy;<sup>94</sup> (Belhassen, 2012)
- That besides being at the forefront in art, they are at the forefront of other fields, such as military, media and science;<sup>95</sup>
- Women are educated and important members of society. There are as many, if not more, women than men in most Middle Eastern universities.<sup>96</sup>

### ***3.2.3 Higher Interest from Women***

As seen in the second chapter, women have been in the front-line of art promotion and patronage for centuries. They currently own or occupy high positions in important art organizations, from museums to galleries, and at the same time, they show a certain sensibility regarding the preservation of their heritage and history for the future generation. Hence, another interesting theory for this genuine behaviour from women might be due to an honest interest and preoccupation in preserving the culture of their own country.

Sheikha Mayassa al-Thani refers this preoccupation from women in her 2010 TED Talk. She affirms that women in the art business field consider that culture is a significant element to connect people both locally and regionally. Moreover, art brings people together, to discuss and share ideas as community, and that most of all, art becomes a very important role in the local national identity.

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<sup>94</sup> “*Women’s participation in public and political life, on an equal basis with men, is an essential condition for democracy and social justice, values at the heart of the Arab spring*”. (Belhassen, 2012)

<sup>95</sup> In 2015, Gulf Business developed a list with the most 100 powerful Arabs under 40. From the 100 selected, 40 were women. Amongst them there is Mariam al-Mansouri a fighter fire pilot; Noura al-Kaabi, CEO of the Media Zone Authority-Abu Dhabi and its commercial arm, twofour54; and Soha Al Qeshawi, software engineer for NASA’s Orion spacecraft programme. (<https://www.arabianbusiness.com/100-most-powerful-arabs-under-40-589646.html>, consulted on September 2019)

<sup>96</sup> “*Echoing the trend observed globally, women in the Arab world outnumber men in pursuing university degrees. The ratio of female to male tertiary enrollment in the region is 108 percent. This ratio is even more favorable to women in Qatar (676 percent) and Tunisia (159 percent)*” (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2015/03/12/unlocking-the-potential-of-educated-arab-women/>, consulted on September 2019)

She further adds that women in their society are becoming leaders, because they realize that for their future generations, it's very important to maintain their cultural identities.<sup>97</sup>

This opinion is also shared by Ginanne Brownell Mitic in her previously mentioned article for the NY Times, in which she addresses that women feel responsible for nurturing the art scene in the region. She affirms in a lot of areas women are the ones responsible for moving the art scene forward. In a personal statement by Sunny Rahbar, she affirms that women deliberately spend a lot of time of their work to comprehend her and the artists' work, as taking more risks in younger artists and spend a great proportion of their time to discover new artists. Finally, they look at the future of art, and from her experience, the businesswomen she had worked with simply spend more time understanding the work and are more curious about the artist.<sup>98</sup>

Arsalan Mohammed, from the article of the Financial Times, states that the stereotype of which art was a means to make women busy in the MENA region, is currently outdated and not considered as a hobby anymore and emphasizes the effort of them to ensure a future solid art scene: "*they are strong, determined women who spend most of their waking hours working, travelling, making waves*".<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> The rise of the Gulf art scene is mostly due to women as well. Sheikha Mayassa al-Thani in her TedTalk of 2010, stated that most people in the region leading cultural initiatives happen to be women. ([https://www.ted.com/talks/sheikha\\_al\\_mayassa\\_globalizing\\_the\\_local\\_localizing\\_the\\_global/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/sheikha_al_mayassa_globalizing_the_local_localizing_the_global/transcript), consulted on September 2019)

<sup>98</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/14/arts/international/where-art-is-a-womans-world.html>, consulted on September 2019

<sup>99</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/6ce4e150-e460-11e5-a09b-1f8b0d268c39>, consulted on September 2019

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation intended to explore the women's participation and their role in the arts of the Middle East and North Africa region, which was proven to be noteworthy. They constitute the majority in the art scene of the region, and they show signs to continue to do so.

In the first part of the first chapter, we emphasized the presence of female modern artists since they played key-roles for the progress of the region's art, and we showed that their presence in the arts is not a recent phenomenon. When analysing two books for this dissertation, specifically *Strokes of Genius* (Faraj, 2001) and *Surrealism in Egypt* (Bardaouil, 2016), it was interesting to see how the authors underlined the importance and influence of female artists in modern art. Besides being avid participants in crucial art groups, women artists also pioneered in certain key elements of the modern art of the region, as we could see in the emblematic example of Madiha Omar in her avant-garde role in the *hurufiyah* movement, or Marguerite Nakhla and her Coptic art influence in the artistic identity search period. As for the second part of that chapter about contemporary female artists, it was possible to perceive how well they are currently thriving in the art scene of the region. The quality of their artworks is expressed in distinctive themes. Some artists use their art as a weapon and as a means to raise awareness of difficulties from the region, like Shirin Neshat did in her *Women of Allah* (1994- 1997) series in which she addresses the problem of the 1979s Iranian Revolution on women; or Emily Jacir's work *Material for a Film* (2004 – ongoing) addressing for war issues in Palestine. The issue of identity is current as well, since most of these artists are in diaspora, sometimes they question their own identity and portray their personal struggles in living in a different country, an aspect that Mona Hatoum often addresses in her works. However, there is more than war and gender issues in this region. Artists' works portray cultural aspects of their countries, from historical heritage to nature, an element present in the Persian women portraits in Hayv Kharaman's works, or Ghada Amer's traditional embroidery paintings. Nevertheless, an important element in common with all these artists is that they surely want to break the stereotypical image of their countries with their art.

In the second chapter, we showed that art patronage and promotion initiated by women are not recent events in the region. The first section of that chapter we showed how women from different parts of the region in the ancient period already had leading roles in architectural patronage. They had interest in building a legacy, not only for themselves, but for their people as well. The structures



they commissioned were as massive as they were elaborated, as we could see in Uskudar Yeni Valide Mosque, commissioned by Gulnus Ematullah. Despite their deeds were underestimated at the time, we see today how crucial their endeavours were in commissioning important structures, ensuring the preservation of the region's patrimony. Most of these structures are currently destroyed and despite their great endeavours, women from this time are rather overshadowed regarding the merit for their patronage. However, nowadays women are properly accredited regarding art patronage and promotion, which may be observed in the endeavours of Suha Shoman and Ali Wijdan by becoming pioneers in art promotion. They showed their concern in both preserving and displaying art to the public in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a period rather scarce concerning art organizations in the region. Their role was indeed vital since their art organizations were a starting point for the growth of the art scene of the region.

The Gulf States rapidly positioned themselves as the new contemporary hub of the region, especially in the UAE and Qatar, with Saudi Arabia aiming to be alongside them. The art market swiftly boomed with the appearance of new museums, auction houses, galleries and other art institutions, which are mostly either ran or owned by women. In this part of the second chapter, we observed that the arts are a female dominated industry, with women in the highest and more prestigious board positions, which is the case for Sheikha Mayassa al-Thani, the president of QMA, and Manal Ataya, the director of Sharjah Museums Authority. It is also stressed that women are acknowledged for owning most galleries in the region, including the most important ones such as Third Line Gallery and Green Art Gallery. To conclude, the representation of women in the art market business, I found it pertinent to refer to cases of female artists and their performance, in a monetary point of view, in auction results. Despite the information of artists results' in auction in this region is rather scarce, I observed female artists were frequently highlighted with record sales results, either personal or regional.

The combination of these chapters proposed to offer enough information and data to proceed to the analysis made in the last chapter. Indeed, before proceeding it was important to emphasize the participation of women artists historically, in art patronage and promotion. In the first section of the third chapter, I gave a new perspective by establishing a comparison between women in the art field in the West and in MENA. The choice of the Western Art Market was merely a point of reference to make this approach, since it is the highest grossing art market. I found it astonishing

the positiveness of the articles and reports about MENA women used to make this analysis. Women artists seem to be well-represented, either in museums or in galleries, as they are customary participants in art rankings from the region. It was interesting to observe that they are ranked in high positions of these rankings as well. Regarding art businesswomen, they represent the majority when it comes to directorship and ownership of art institutions, outnumbering men. Overall, MENA women do seem to be at the forefront of the arts in the region, in comparison to Western women.

The high number of women in the art field in the region might be mostly justified with the underestimation of pursuing a career in this field. Since this was considered a “soft” profession, the women artists’ family, predominantly fathers and husbands, supported this career in a condescending manner. This permitted for more and more women to gradually enter in art, at ease. However, it is important to refer that although becoming an artist was considered as a “soft” profession at that time, it is not the case anymore.

Regarding the MENA women stereotyping hypothesis, it is due to stereotypes and cultural misconceptions that eliminate the opportunity of truly understand and sympathize with the region. Unfortunately, there are still many incorrect stereotypes in the world, about women in MENA region. I hope to have contributed to shed some new light on this particular subject. One cannot ignore the fact that there are more conservative parts in the region. Nevertheless, it is not correct to select the negative characteristics of a few countries and generalize it to the whole region.

The last hypothesis is most focused on businesswomen in the arts of the region. Without their interest and preoccupation there would not be so many art organizations. Women in this region have key roles for the continuation of art promotion, and it is due to their natural involvement and enthusiasm in the arts that stimulated the existence of an extensive amount of art organizations today.

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# ANNEXES

## Annex 1 - Tables

### 1.1 Female artists represented at the exhibit "Light from the Middle East", held at the V&A in 2013

Artists represented at the exhibit "Light from the Middle East", held at the V&A in 2013	
Artist	Gender
Abbas	M
Abbas Kowsari	M
Abdulnasser Gharem	M
Ahmed Mater	M
Amirali Ghasemi	M
Atiq Rahimi	M
Bahman Jalali	M
Hassan Hajjaj	M
Issa Touma	M
Jananne al- Ani	F
Joana Hadji Thomas	F
John Jurayj	M
Jowhara AlSaud	F
Khalil Joreige Bier	M
Manal Al-Dowayan	F
Mehraneh Atashi	F
Mitra Tabrizian	F
Nermine Hammam	F
Newsha Tavakolian	F
Raeda Saadeh	F
Sadegh Tirafkan	M
Shadi Ghadirian	F
Sukran Moral	F
Tal Shochat	F
Taraneh Hemami	F
Taysir Batniji	M
Waheeda Malullah	F
Walid Raad	M
Youssef Nabil	M
Yto Barrada	F

Legend	
<i>F</i>	Female
<i>M</i>	Male

Data		
	Number	Percentage
Female artists	15	50%
Male artists	15	50%
Total	30	100%

Source : <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/exhibition-light-from-the-middle-east-new-photography/about-the-exhibition/>

## 1.2 Artists represented at the exhibit "Here and Elsewhere", held at the New Museum in 2014

Artists represented at the exhibit "Here and Elsewhere", held at the New Museum in 2014 (Part 1)	
Artist	Gender
Abdul Hay Mosallam	M
Abdullah Al Saadi	M
Abounaddara	*
Ahmed Mater	M
Akram Zaatari	M
Ala Younis	F
Ali Jabri	M
Amal Kenawy	F
Anna Boghiguiian	F
Basma Alsharif	F
Bouchra Khalili	F
Etel Adnan	F
Fakhri El Ghezal	M
Fouad Elkoury	M
GCC	*
Hashem El Madani	M
Hassan Sharif	M
Hiwa K	M
Hrair Sarkissian	M
Jamal Penjweny	M
Kader Attia	M
Khaled Jarrar	M
Lamia Joreige	F
Maha Maamoun	F
Marwa Arsanios	F
Marwan	M
Marwan Rechmaoui	M
Mazen Kerbaj	M
Mekhitar Garabedian	M
Mohamed Larbi Rahali	M
Mounira Al Solh	F
Rana Hamadeh	F
Rheims Alkadhi	F
Rokni Haerizadeh	F
Selma Ouissi	F
Sofiane Ouissi	F
Shuruq Harb	F

Artists represented at the exhibit "Here and Elsewhere", held at the New Museum in 2014 (Part 2)	
Artist	Gender
Tanya Habjouqa	F
Van Leo	M
Wael Shawky	M
Wafa Hourani	M
Yto Barrada	F
Ziad Antar	M
Simone Fattal	F
Suha Traboulsi	M
Susan Hefuna	F

Legend	
<i>F</i>	Female
<i>M</i>	Male

Data	Number	Percentage
Female artists	16	46%
Male artists	19	54%
Total	35	100%

\* not applicable, since it is an Art Association

Source: [https://235bowery.s3.amazonaws.com/exhibitionlinks/108/ArtistList\\_HereandElsewhere\\_V6.pdf](https://235bowery.s3.amazonaws.com/exhibitionlinks/108/ArtistList_HereandElsewhere_V6.pdf)

### 1.3 Top 20 Contemporary Middle Eastern Artists in 2012-2014

Top 20 Contemporary Middle Eastern Artists in 2012-2014		
ME Rank	Artist	Gender
1	Farhad Moshiri	M
2	Kemal Önsoy	M
3	Ahmed Alsoudani	M
4	Chant Avedissian	M
5	Canan Tolon	F
6	Ali Banisadr	M
7	Reza Derakshani	M
8	Ghada Amer	F
9	Ayman Baalbaki	M
10	Safwan Dahoul	M
11	Ahmet Oran	M
12	Tal R	M
13	Azade Köker	F
14	Mustafa Ata	M
15	Shirin Neshat	F
16	Rachid Koraichi	M
17	Mona Hatoum	F
18	Lalla Essaydi	F
19	Mohamed Drissi	M
20	Haluk Akakce	M

Legend	
<i>F</i>	Female
<i>M</i>	Male

Data		
	Number	Percentage
Female artists	6	30%
Male artists	14	70%
Total	20	100%

**Source:** Ehsani, E., & Rokhsari, H. (2014). Middle Eastern Titans: Top 20 Contemporary Middle Eastern Artists in 2012-2014. New York: Artprice.

## 1.4 Next Gen Artists: Global Report 2018: List of Top 20 Artists from Middle East & North Africa

Next Gen Artists: Global Report 2018 JLT & ArtTactic List of Top 20 Artists from Middle East & North Africa	
Artist	Gender
Tala Madani	F
Lawrence Abu Hamdan	M
Mohamed Bourouissa	M
Rokni Haerizadeh	F
Achraf Touloub	M
Ahmet Ogut	M
Iman Issa	F
Hayv Kahraman	F
Nadia Kaabi-Linke	F
Asli Çavusoglu	F
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros	M
Shapour Pouyan	M
Rayyane Tabet	M
Massinissa Selmani	M
Basma Alsharif	F
Stéphanie Saadé	F
Morehshin Allahyari	F
Nazgol Ansarinia	F
Diana al-Hadid	F
Hamza Halloubi	M

Legend	
<i>F</i>	Female
<i>M</i>	Male

Data		
	Number	Percentage
Female artists	11	55%
Male artists	9	45%
Total	20	100%

Source: [https://arttactic.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/MENA\\_Auctions\\_November2018\\_3-10-11.png](https://arttactic.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/MENA_Auctions_November2018_3-10-11.png)

## 1.5 Examples of classification lists from Contemporary Western Artists

	Rankings (Western Artists Only)					
	ArtNet: Top Living Artists (2011 to 2015) <sup>1</sup>		ArtNet: Top Living Artists (2012 to 2016) <sup>2</sup>		AskArt: Top Living Artists <sup>3</sup>	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
<b>Female Artists</b>	3	6%	3	6%	15	17%
<b>Male Artists</b>	50	94%	46	94%	73	83%
<b>Total</b>	53	100%	49	100%	88	100%

<sup>1</sup> Source : <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/100-collectible-living-artists-2015-346139>

<sup>2</sup> Source : <https://news.artnet.com/market/artnet-news-100-most-collectible-artists-717251>

<sup>3</sup> Source : [https://artfacts.net/lists/global\\_top\\_100\\_artists](https://artfacts.net/lists/global_top_100_artists)

## 1.6 MENA Artists represented in museums' permanent collections

	Artists represented in permanent collections					
	MATHAF <sup>1</sup>		Darat al-Funun <sup>2</sup>		JNGFA <sup>3</sup>	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
<b>Female artists</b>	11	20%	83	33%	217	27%
<b>Male artists</b>	43	80%	169	67%	582	73%
<b>Total</b>	54	100%	252	100%	799	100%

<sup>1</sup> Source : <http://www.mathaf.org.qa/en/collections/permanent-collection>

<sup>2</sup> Source : [http://daratafunun.org/?post\\_type=artist](http://daratafunun.org/?post_type=artist)

<sup>3</sup> Source : <http://www.nationalgallery.org/Artists/tabid/56/Default.aspx>

## Annex 2 - Interviews

### 2.1 Interview with Dr. Salwa Mikdadi

Skype Interview

Lisbon, August 13<sup>th</sup> 2018. Transcription approved in September 25<sup>th</sup> 2019.

Dr. Salwa Mikdadi, curator and professor at NYU Abu Dhabi

Duration: 43 minutes.

**Andreia Pires:** You are currently an associate professor of NYU Abu Dhabi, curator and you provided great insights about the art patronage and art NGO's in the MENA region in the book *New Vision*. You have an amazing career with about five decades of experience related do the Middle East and North Africa Art Market, thus you must have had contact with a lot of artists from this region. So given to your experience and general vision of this art market. I would like to know your perception about the ratio between female: male artists in the MENA region.

**Salwa Mikdadi:** I first would like to say that the Art Market does not have this long history in the region, it's relatively recent. The Art Market possibly began to expand beyond the few commercial galleries around twelve years ago in 2006 when Christie's established their Dubai office. Prior to that, there was no evidence of an Art Market in the way it functions today with art fairs, auction houses, and an exponential increase in the number of collectors of art from this region. The first auction of art from the Arab World took place in the early 2000 in Europe.

Arab women artists practiced art since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, although limited to those who could afford to hire European painters to give private lessons and always in the privacy of the artists family home. The first generation of artists receiving formal education in the arts were predominantly men. Still there a few women artists succeeded in taking up art practice professionally. The first woman artist to have a solo exhibit was in Cairo in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Other women received government scholarships to study abroad. However, the artists collectives or groups, as they were referred to then, were mainly male. This all changed in

the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with more women graduating from art academies and colleges in North Africa, Egypt, Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon.

There was a study done in the 1980s on the number on women artists in Lebanon and they were more women artists at that time than male artists. So what is the reason for that? Why were there more female artists leading in the profession of Fine Art? Well, one of the main reasons is that the women were encouraged to enter this profession because the men felt that this was not a threatening profession. It wasn't like women embarking on a career in the law or medicine which was deemed a male profession at that time. These challenges faced women in the West as well - That doesn't mean there weren't pioneer medical females in the profession, what I'm trying to say is that no one stood against the female participation in the art field. [...] She could be an artist inside her home and need not be working in public institutions. As the 1930's, Iraqi artist Madiha Omar received a scholarship to study in England, and many other follow-ups in Egypt and in other countries. So, the fact that now you see so many women in the field is not just a local phenomenon. Actually in the US there are many women art professionals particularly in the art Market but the leading positions, such as directors of museums and other institutions, are mostly men. It is also interesting to note that we are seeing more and more women in leading positions in the Arab world. Maybe it would be a good opportunity to see statistics here of how many art directors of museums in the Arab world versus the West. For example, Sheikha Hoor al-Qasimir in Sharjah is the President and Founding Director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, one of the largest art institutions in Western Asia. She is also the President of International Biennial Association. Sheikha Hussa is the founder and director general of the Dar Al-Athar Al-Islammiyah (DAI) which houses what could be considered the world's largest collection of Islamic art and artifacts. In Jordan, thirty years ago Suha Shoman established one of the first Arab foundations for the art housing a large collection of Arab art. In 1980, Princess Princess Wijdan bint Fawaz Al-Hashemi established the Jordan National Gallery of Art. There are many more examples that can be found online. So women have actually been active in this field for decades.

**AP:** Would you say that there are more women in art business than man, in the MENA region?

**SM:** Well, I haven't done my statistics but from those who I have contact within the field, at least in part, because most of the Art Market is heavily concentrated in the region in Dubai, Abu Dhabi,



I know that the majority are women, that includes gallery owner, managers of art institutions or art fairs.

**AP:** What about women artists?

**SM:** [...] There are more female students in the University, by far, more than men. Maybe about sixty percent of students at universities in the UAE and the Gulf region are women. Women are not waiting for an opportunity to be given to them, they are pioneers and now leaders in the art professions.

I did a project of one of the largest exhibits of women artists from the region in 1994 that exhibition aim was to present the facts on the pioneering role of women in the arts, which is the reason behind the title of the exhibition: Forces of Change. The exhibition was a timely introduction to the American public to redress pass stereotype of Arab women. Today, I may not curate a similar gender specific exhibition. Women are leading the way in the art field, and in many other fields as well, gender specificity of art practice or in the Art Market is not relevant anymore.

**AP:** I've also commented this situation with other people that work in the art market of the region, like Hala Khayat and Myrna Ayad, and they've told me that they do not look at the gender in the art. They focus more in the art of the region, rather than the gender. This got me thinking that I should address this situation on my thesis, that the West created a misconception and miscommunication in what is really happening in the Middle East. I hope that I can show in my thesis that this is not true.

**SM:** Yes, you have two very good examples. Hala Khayat started off a career with Christie's some time ago and now she has at least six, seven years of experience, and she's knowledgeable of the region's art and the experience. Myrna Ayad is also a pioneer in publishing, she started with the art magazine "Canvas" and was the editor there for many years.

**AP:** As you said, in Europe female artists struggled to have the same visibility as male artists. But the same did not happen with Arab female artists in the MENA region. So do you think there is a divergence in the visibility of female artists between the MENA region or the West?

**SM:** I don't think currently the gender issue is as much as it used to be. There has been a wrong done to women artists in the United States or Europe, which is being corrected by a new textbook in history now. Art history books in the past had fewer examples of art by women artists, so did most of the museum collections, this is being redressed, albeit not fast enough.

**AP:** So you would agree with Saeb Eigner, in his book *Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran*:

*"(...) the success of women contradicts the stereotypes that are prevalent in the west."* (Eigner, 2016)

**SM:** That is correct. [...] There's nothing gender specific anymore coming out of this region. If you see statistics of only female artists exhibits, there are many more in Europe and in the US of Arab female artists than the Arab world. [...] Woman artist do not have any problem exhibiting in the Arab world. Now when they're in "exile" it is mostly the stereotype from the museums they feel that such exhibitions draw a larger audience.

**AP:** Do you think there is a reason (or more than one) for the high female presence in the art market of the MENA region? Art talk

**SM:** Again as in all other art professions, and for all the above reasons, there is a higher female presence in the art market. In the beginning, it was a risk to invest in the arts but not anymore, and it requires a smaller capital investment, therefore more women took a chance, especially if they were not head of households. Now, the situation has changed art is a profitable investment, many new collectors are young couples investing in art and starting to collect and trade in the arts. Also, let us not forget that, like anywhere else.

### **Additional comments**

**SM:** [...] It might interest you to know that I am currently organizing the Art Talks for Art Dubai (Nov. 2018), with another women art historian for a fair whose director is also a woman.

**SM:** What you're doing is great and important. The role of women in the Art Markets of Western Asia and North Africa North Market has not had enough attention in academia. My general impression is that there are more women in the art market that includes galleries, but this is only an observation. Your research will garner much needed data and analysis of the history of the art market within the period you are focusing on. What would be making the dissertation interesting is to compare the data between the Western Asia and North Africa with Europe. [...] It's also interesting that there are so many female students in universities in the region. I look forward to reading your full dissertation.

## 2.2 Interview with Amirali Ghasemi

Skype interview

Lisbon, August 22<sup>th</sup> 2018. Transcription approved in October 5<sup>th</sup> 2019

Amirali Ghasemi, artist and owner of Parking Gallery

Duration: ~57 minutes

**Andreia Pires:** I would like to know your perception about the ratio between female: male artists in the MENA region.

**Amirali Ghasemi:** I think if you look at galleries or exhibitions, there are far more women active in the art field than man. If you're looking at the collectors, yes most of them are man, but apart from that, I think the gallerists, curators and other people involved in the art field are mainly women, on the contrary of what is expected. And also if you look at the graduate from the Arts, maybe 70% of the graduates are women. [...] I don't have the statistics, but I can tell you from the gallerists I know that 80% of them or around are ran by women, and some others were also initiated by women in a first-generation. [...] Some of the important galleries that we know were initiated by women.

**AP:** Do you think there is a contrast in the visibility of female artists between the Middle East and North Africa region and the West?

**AG:** There are some galleries that actually specifically work with artists coming from abroad, but I mean in comparison, I don't see any particular difference in terms of being successful between the men and women.

**AP:** Do you think that the West has a misconception or misunderstanding regarding gender issues in Iran?

**AG:** I think it's not necessarily misconceptions, but they're like falling into the stereotypes of clichés. Misconception is something that is built up when you pay too much attention to the stereotypes. But of course, every stereotype is created because there was some sort of truth in them and then they were exaggerated more. I have my opinion on the subject and in my way, you are you're free to do what you want. But in terms of what to show in here, there are things to consider.

There's like a red line and if you don't follow it, and I'm not supporting, then your liberty will be limited at some point. For example, in Italy if you saw something against Jesus Christ, or show something unethical, it would have a strong reaction from the church. Or about violence against children, nobody wants to see that, you know? They're different religious and traditional sensitivities that are in at work, in every context and without paying attention to those, you will be able to produce your own work. But then you will have consequences in order to show. [...] These are things that are happening, but apart from that, if you're smart enough you can do what you want.

In Iran, let's say that we are working in layers, layers of understanding, something to read within the lines. So everything is not very direct like the American or European way. You don't say things exactly what you mean, but you can actually use different layers of meaning, you can seal it in something different. I think that makes it kind of more attractive to me in order not to just represent anything as it is but also to try to fictionalize it. To have different strategies of how to express yourself. This is a challenge, and everybody has it, but I don't see there's different opportunities different inside.

There is a danger of generalizing. I think every case is unique because I also did a lot of interviews with artists and I know everybody has different agendas and different conceptions. If you keep labelling the artists for their nationality, it will be very reducing. [...] Everybody is interested in labelling and to accept how rare is this artefact, over there this subject, or this person, this artist in terms of producing benefit to whom. In this regard, I think if there were equal opportunity for many artists around the world, this label would not be necessary. Of course the issue of women very important and it should not be neglected, but at the same time you're labelling. It's a double labelling. It's female, and Iranian and this and that. I don't see this as a very constructive criteria to be honest.

**AP:** Do you think there is a reason (or more than one) for the high female presence in the art market of the MENA region?

**AG:** I'm thinking yes. A more traditional society thinks that art is a good thing for women. This can be degrading and a not very interesting idea, but it turned out to be good because there is a lot of women directors. And in the art, of all kinds, 3/4 of them are women. There was this traditional idea that they had fewer responsibilities to go to work. But now you see that they are more successful in a way that they are building their independence and they can make ends meet. So, I look at this generation and I think it's a lot has a lot to do with their own effort not necessarily to the agenda.

As far as I'm concerned, in terms of employment and etc., there is not a huge gap between men or women. It was once when, for example, if a man was married and he would receive something for the for the wife and children, if their wife didn't work. Now, there's a lot of opportunities for everybody. [...] But there are also a lot of problems that we should work better. We should not ignore the fact that there's work that needs to be done.

And, as I explained you before, about the presence of women in the art world, they are very active, but there's still a long way. So I see the past maybe ten years, there has have been a lot of changes. But many galleries have always been ran by women since the beginning that I know.

#### **Additional Comments:**

**AG:** The subject that you're talking about women and there is a very important subject and then we try to address that but in many of our projects we are not labelling it as female artists or women artists from Europe and always try to skip that. [...] Women artists don't really use their gender to succeed. I can see that there are a lot of females coming from Iran are generally more successful in terms of having exhibitions and having residencies than man.

**AG:** In term of pricing the artists' works there are equal and ideal situations. Sometimes, even I can say we hear that the art pieces by men are prices much higher in auctions (in Iran and abroad), I know that these are a global issues, but in Iran we have some exceptions like late Farideh Lashaei or late Monir Shahroudi.

## 2.3 Interview with Hala Khayat

Phone interview

Lisbon, July 17<sup>th</sup> 2018. Transcription approved in the 30<sup>th</sup> October of 2019

Hala Khayat, Head of Sales and Director of the Arab, Iranian and Turkish Art Department at Christie's Dubai

Duration: 33 minutes

**Andreia Pires:** You are, currently, the Head of Sales of Christie's Dubai and worked for a few years as the Director of the Department of Modern and Contemporary Arab, Turkish and Iranian Art. So, since You have an amazing career with about a decade of experience related do the Middle East and North Africa Art Market and probably had worked with a lot of artists, I would like to know your perception about the ratio between female: male artists in the MENA region.

**Hala Khayat:** To be very fair we never think of this. This is never a criteria. I can have a whole sale with only female artists or a whole sale with only male artists. This is not at all my worries because I don't think the women artists have fewer opportunities in the Middle East as they do in other countries. I think the equality and all the recognition is fair in the Middle East. It has been from the very beginning, from the beginning of the century. Like in Lebanon, women artists were very recognized in the 40, 50's. [...] I don't think these women had anything hard in their lives because they were women. there were no barriers in the middle east, [...] there were no problems in the Middle East in the art of somebody just because it was a woman.

At auction, my associates when creating a sale, we are looking at fair and best work of female and male artists. But we really don't care, we look at the work. [...] So the market is not an indication of how important the artist is, what we are selling is work by work, piece by piece.

We don't see, for example, in the auction of 100 pieces, that "70 are by men and only 30 by women. Let's change this. And then I send the specialists to look around for women artists." It doesn't work like this. And even male artists can sell one day for 50,000 or the next day 100,000 and the same thing can happen with female artists. [...] This is market, market doesn't have anything to do with academia of art or the importance of art.

**AP:** In your experience, is the ratio between female and male artists in exhibitions are close to parity like at Art Dubai 2015 Edition? Or was this a very particular year?

**HK:** I'm Middle Eastern myself and I don't notice if there are more female artists. [...] Art Dubai is something new. When women artists worked from the 40s, in Lebanon in Egypt, women artists were part of the evolution. [...] I want you to open your eyes and try to see what this is. Women are okay in the Middle East.

**AP:** Would you feel there are misconceptions from the West regarding the MENA region?

**HK:** Totally. I believe it 100%. You have to come here and observe.

Some countries have special religions keys, but this is not reflected on what people have been doing. We have literary Salons in Aleppo, in Cairo driven by women. We have works of women writers from the 1920's. That's almost 100 years. I'm sometimes choked of the behaviour of women and how they see women in other countries. I think politics like to play a key on it.

**AP:** Do you think that is a contrast in the visibility of female artists between the MENA region and the so-called Western Countries, Europe or United States for example?

**HK:** I really don't see this, no. [...] When I go to London or Paris or Spain, first thing I do is buy work. There is the same kind of amount [of female and male artists]. I don't think they see the female artist X or female artist Y or that there is an exhibition just for X or Y.

### **Additional comments**

**HK:** You must visit Lebanon, Istanbul and then visit the other countries in the Gulf. [...] [The UAE] is very new, it only has 45 years old. Go to Beirut. I don't think you'll see anything different from what you see in Madrid or other countries in Europe.



Second [...], we still have a long way to go, in the market context. I have kids but if I were In London, if I had the same job, I would be in a difficult situation because it is harder in Europe, it is more tough. More things are expected by women. [..] I feel like a lot of female artists are solo.

## 2.4 Interview with Myrna Ayad

Phone interview

Lisbon, August 9<sup>th</sup> 2018. Transcription approved in the September 29<sup>th</sup> 2019.

Myrna Ayad, former director of Art Dubai Fair

Duration: 37 minutes.

**Andreia Pires:** You were the director of Art Dubai for two years, and you published and edited various articles for big major newspapers, like The New York Times and art information platforms, like Artsy and Artnet. You have an amazing career with more than two decades of experience related do the Middle East and North Africa Art Market, thus you must have had contact with a lot of artists from this region. So given to your experience and general vision of this art market, I would like to know your perception about the ratio between female: male artists in the MENA region.

**Myrna Ayad:** In my career, I've never stopped to ask myself this question. I never thought about the ratio between men and women in the art world in Middle East North Africa and South Asia. For me this was a pursuit for our art. Women issues come up today in the news and it bothers me in how the perception of the art that comes from the Middle East. It seems to the length of being gender or culture seen. I cannot tolerate hearing about women being oppressed or people being surprised of actually in seeing women artists in the MENASA or to see a woman in the chador in Saudi Arabia, for example, and believe all art from the Middle East are women wearing chadors. Equally, that any art emanating in the Middle East is political turmoil or displacement. I do agree that these are things that are pertinent, and they do this in parts of the Arab world but that's not all that is. And I've actually written about that mostly about Arab artists, for CNN, where I said that there is more to the region than issues of gender or conflict.

In all parts of the Arab world I find a lot of women working in the art field, artists, gallery owners, collectors, directors, curators. We are not new. We come from a long line of women doing the same thing.

**AP:** Do you think there is a reason (or more than one) for the high female presence in the art business in the MENA region?

**MA:** I think every woman have different objectives. I don't know why they're very many of us working in the art field. I suppose that in many ways, the opportunities were there. I'm thinking it is a place I could see why there's a lot of empowerment. Countries like Lebanon and Egypt, where women do feel very empowered and they just feel that they could do this, and they could flourish, and they're set to be great.

**AP:** Would you say that more women work in the art business than men?

**MA:** In the Middle Eastern art scene, I don't want to play with names and numbers I don't know about, but I see a lot of women. It isn't that I don't see men, but I see a lot of women [...] Here in Abu Dhabi, we have Abu Dhabi Music & Arts Foundation ran by a lady, Huda Kanoo. In Sharjah we have Sharjah Art Foundation that founded by Sheikha Hoor al-Qasimi and is a very respected place. Manal Ataya is the director of the foundation. And Antonia Carver, the previous director of Art Dubai. A lot of Dubai's galleries are ran by women. [...] Even Alserkal Avenue is ran by women. So there's a lot of women operating in the local art scene here.

**AP:** Do you think there is a contrast in the visibility of female artists between the MENA region and the so-called Western Countries (Europe or United States, for example)?

**MA:** In my experience, as director of Art Dubai, I interacted with a lot of gallerists from all over the world. Our last issue in Art Dubai featured over 100 galleries. The exposure was incredible. I can't say there were more women or men, and I think galleries here in Dubai are getting more and more exposure because they are participating in art fairs, their artists are also being represented by other galleries that are international, represented in museums, their works are being acquired by collationers art institutions all over the world. [...] We would say that there is a lot of more women in the art scene.

As far as modern art in the MENASA is concerned, and I am talking about the artists working in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, maybe there are more works made by man. But in a more contemporary

scene I feel that there are more women than man. [...] I've noted that more women are also part of the contemporary art here.

I'm not sure what that comparison it's like the Western world because my reading is mostly in the MENASA.

**AP:** For me, in the beginning of my research, it found it surprising to find a contrast between the West and the MENA region during my research. For example, in the Middle Eastern Titans Report of 2014, in the top 20 artists from the MENA region between 2012 and 2014, six were women; or for instance, from the the Artprice ranking, which was developed in 2015, a ranking for the 25 most expensive artists in the MENA region between 2011 and 2015, in fifth place is ranked the artist Fahr-El-Nissa Zeid.

**MA:** Sometimes I have a bit of an issue looking at the rankings because they are Western engines looking at the Eastern market business. [...] Some of the female artists that are commanding incredible prices. People like Monir Farmanfarmaian and Saloua Raouda Choucair, both of these ladies have had major institutional interest all over the world, in exhibitions all over the world. [...] Actually Monir had a major exhibition in a museum in London. [...] Unfortunately the problem of the region is that the recognition comes later, either for men or women.

**AP:** So you would agree/not agree with Saeb Eigner, is his book Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran:

“(...) the success of women contradicts the stereotypes that are prevalent in the west.”

**MA:** I do agree with him. Think what is saying is correct, that the success of women artists in the MENASA contradicts the perception of the West.

**AP:** Do you think there is a reason (or more than one) for the high female presence in general in the art business in the MENA region?

**MA:** I would say that were opportunities and interest.

**AP:** I would just like to say that I do consider that Westerns, and even me in the beginning, that we even today, we created misconception of the female presence in the Gulf region. I think maybe we find it surprising the numbers I've told you because we lean into a stereotype that it's outdated and I think we committed the error of generalizing region due to maybe one or a couple of countries' actions. So I think in my opinion, with the conversations I had with other interviewees and the research that I've done, I think I think there is still a miscommunication regarding this region from a Western point of view.

**MA:** Yes, I don't think there have been a proper understanding or studies about women. I try not to think about men or women operating in the MENA region. When I started working in this field, nobody ever thought about it, in gender issues. We all did it for the sake of it. And if we look the region art scene and go back to into the modern era, so from the 1940s to the 1970s I think that you would actually find women pioneers. We have a lot of women modern artists, some very notable at the time. But there were more men at the time than there were women. [...] But we come from a long line.

**AP:** I just I think nowadays the gender issue is very popular, let's say, in the West. So we are questioning it a lot also in other regions.

**MA:** Exactly. And I know that we have a lot of concerns of how many women artists are showing in international museums. But we are a different art market. Some things are inapplicable. We don't have as many museums as the West, the UAE has one museum: The Louvre. We've just opened it up here, it's incomparable. For example we don't have as many museums as in New York. We are still a small and growing art market here. [...] The country is not even 50 years old yet.