

Meet 5 Middle Eastern Collectors Shaping the Emirati Art Scene, From a Presidential Advisor to a Retired Pharmaceutical Magnate

These collectors have been quietly driving the burgeoning art scene in the Gulf.

Rebecca Anne Proctor , November 24, 2021

Over the past decade, a dedicated cohort of long-time UAE residents and Emirati collectors have been driving the Gulf's burgeoning art scene and solidifying the Middle Eastern modern and contemporary art market. These collectors—many of whom reside in the UAE away from their native countries—are committed to putting their purchasing power behind artists from their home countries of Iran, Syria, Palestine, and the UAE, and encouraging the development of the wider Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) art scene.

In recent years, the UAE's art scene has become the hub for arts and culture in the Middle East, thanks to vast public and private initiatives to build institutions and a vibrant homegrown arts ecosystem. The UAE, like its art scene, is still young but rapidly developing thanks to a handful of players. The country will celebrate its 50th anniversary next week.

At the 13th edition of Abu Dhabi Art, which ended on November 21, the fair announced the formation of Friends of Abu Dhabi Art. The initiative, created to “facilitate new models of public cultural philanthropy and help support the dynamic art eco-system in the UAE through Abu Dhabi Art” exemplifies the nature of the region's community—and often—collector-driven art scene.

The movers and shakers of this regional scene are notoriously modest about their contributions and often prefer to remain behind the scenes. Below we reveal who some of the most important collectors are, what they are buying, and their passion for uplifting and expanding the Middle Eastern art scene.

Zaki Nusseibeh



Nationality Emirati

Occupation: Cultural advisor to the president of the UAE and the chancellor of UAE University. Nusseibeh has been active in the UAE government since its formation in 1971.

Age 75

What's in the Collection: His expansive art collection includes over 400 works of modern and contemporary art in mediums spanning prints, lithographs, major paintings, and sculpture. It includes a breadth of work from local emerging Emirati artists such as Rawdha Al Ketbi to mid-career artists like Egyptian Huda Lutfi to the pioneering late conceptual works of Emirati Hassan Sharif, as well as established Arab modernists like Syrian Louay Kayali, Lebanese Paul Guiragossian, Algerian Baya Mahieddine, and the trailblazing late Lebanese painter and poet, Etel Adnan.

Distinguishing Factor: Nusseibeh's vision for his collection is to include work from the MENASA region (the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia) that both reflects the cultural histories of the region and its more contemporary movements, as well as his own personal tastes.

Where He shops: At auction, directly from galleries and artists, and at Abu Dhabi Art and Art Dubai. Nusseibeh also occasionally buys from international fairs, such as ArtInternational Istanbul in Turkey when his daughter, current fair director of Abu Dhabi Art, was its director. Frieze London is another place he sometimes shops since he also has a home in London.

Fun Fact: Nusseibeh has one of the most extensive libraries in the region, featuring thousands of books spread across three homes and in each of the seven languages he speaks fluently.

Fairouz Villian



Fairouz Villian and her husband, Jean Paul Villain.

Nationality: Syrian-French

Age: 67

Source of Wealth: Her husband, Jean-Paul Villian, is director of the strategy and planning department at Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), where he has worked since 1982.

What's in the Collection: An Abu Dhabi-based collector and art patron, Villian's collection features modern Arab art with a particular focus on important works by Syrian artists—her country of birth—including modernists Louay Kayyali and Fateh Moudarres. She and her husband, Jean Paul Villain have been collecting art for over 30 years.

The couple began collecting in France by acquiring European artists but have since focused predominantly on Middle Eastern artists when Villain moved to the UAE to join her husband in the 1980s. In recent years they have made acquisitions of key contemporary Middle Eastern artists from the UAE, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon and also from Turkey and Pakistan. Emirati artists in her collection include the late conceptualist Hassan Sharif, Mohammed Kazem, Najat Makki, Sheikha Al Mazrou, and Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim (who will represent the UAE at next year's Venice Biennale). From Lebanon, she has works by Ayman Baalbaki and Hussein Madi, among others.

Distinguishing Factor: One of her great passions is to support Syrian artists—particularly those living in exile in France—by buying their work. She is president of Friends of the Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi Art Association, a founding member of the Louvre Abu Dhabi's Patrons Circle, and sits on the patron committee of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. At the moment she is focused on collecting more art to build her collection with the aim of one day creating a foundation. In 2012, she was awarded the title of "Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres" by Frederic Mitterand, the French culture minister under president Nicolas Sarkozy, for her "significant contributions" to the arts.

Where They Shop: Mostly at art fairs, especially at Art Dubai and Abu Dhabi Art and also from Christie's, Sotheby's and Bonhams. She and her husband bought five works from this year's Abu Dhabi Art: two sculptures by Egyptian Adam Henein, Lebanese Paris-based Chaouki Choukini, Emirati Sarah Almehairi and Lebanese Fatima El-Hajj.

Fun Fact: Villian is currently following her passion for collecting work by young Emirati artists.