

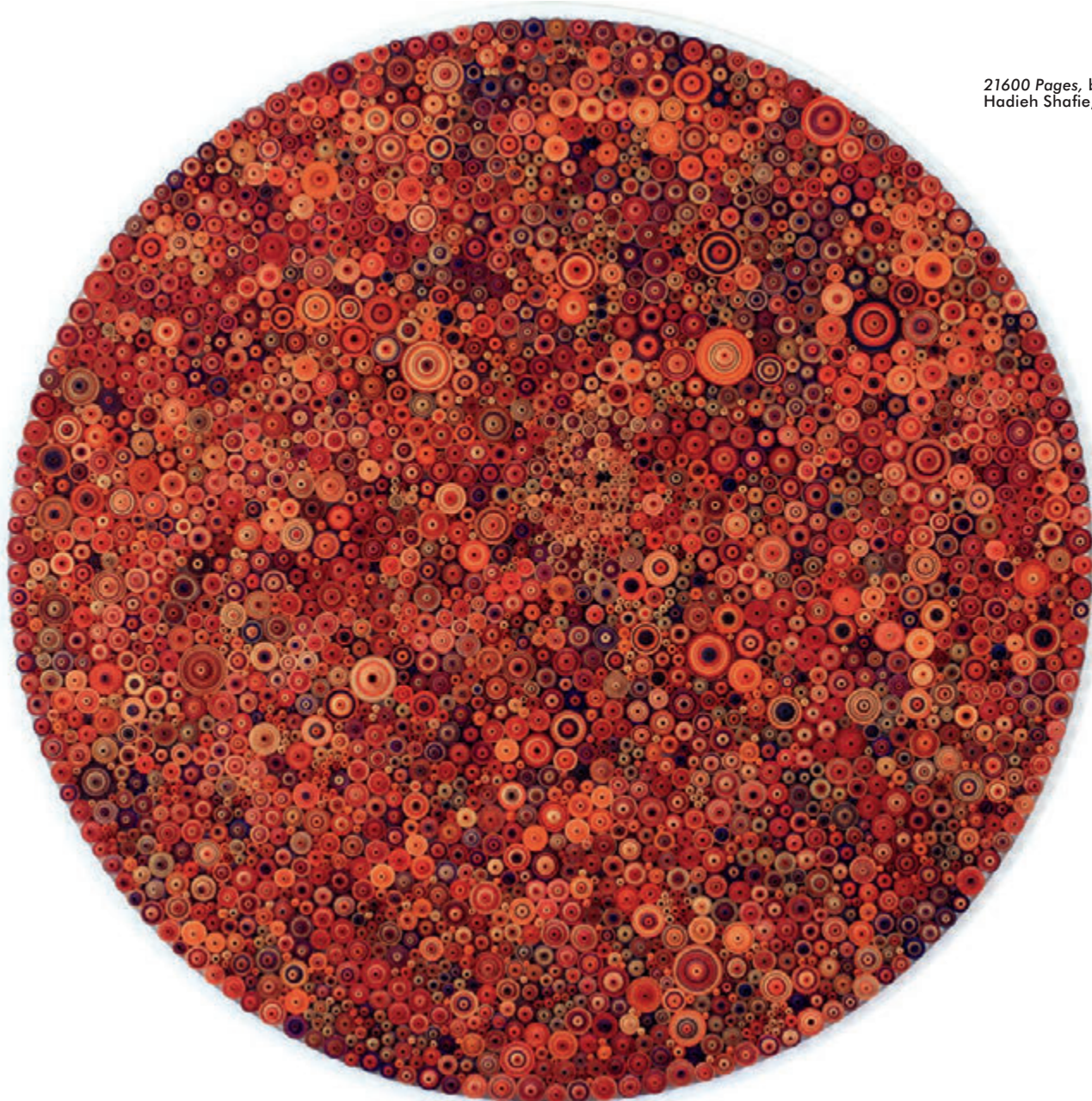
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# No Longer a Man's World

Women are bringing about the biggest changes in the growing Middle Eastern art market. *By Robin Pogrebin*

**W**hen Leila Heller started her New York gallery 30 years ago, it wasn't easy to get collectors to consider buying Middle Eastern contemporary art.

"Most of the audience had zero interest," Heller recalls. "I was lucky if I sold to some oil company in Houston. The artists of the Middle East have always been great artists. Attention given to them has changed."

Indeed, that attention has steadily escalated over the last few years, making the Middle East market one of the fastest growing. From New York to London to Dubai, collectors, galleries, museums, and

art fairs are all showing a greater appreciation for art from the region; Middle Easterners are showing a increased interest in buying art; and once-marginal Middle Eastern artists have developed important international reputations.

Like Heller, many of the key figures fueling that growth are women. They include museum

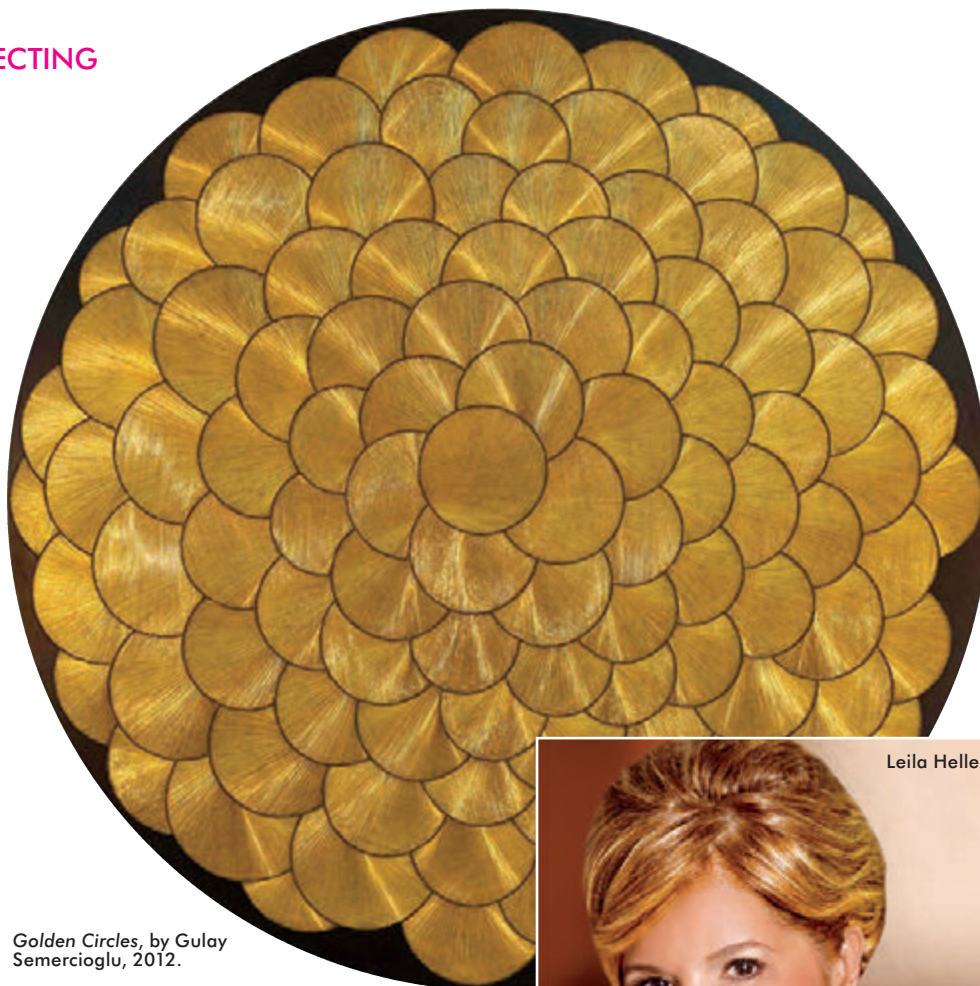
professionals like Sheikha Mayassa Al Thani, head of the Qatar Museums Authority; Aisha Al Khater, director of the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha; and Rita Aoun-Abdo, the executive director of the cultural department of the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Cultural Authority, which oversees the museum projects.

At one point, more than 90 percent of cultural institutions in Palestine were headed by women," says Reem Fadda, an associate curator for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation's Abu Dhabi Project.

In addition to Heller, galleries with women at the helm include Egeran Galeri in Istanbul

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—REEM FADDA



*Golden Circles*, by Gulay Semercioglu, 2012.

(Suzanne Egeran), the Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Berlin, Beirut and Lebanon (André Sfeir-Semler), and Rampa, also in Istanbul (Leyla Tara Suyabatmaz).

In 2009, the Metropolitan Museum of Art appointed Sheila R. Canby as the curator in charge of its department of Islamic art; she had previously served as curator of Islamic art and antiquities at the British Museum. Last year, the Met also signaled its commitment to Islamic art in square footage, opening the new Islamic wing (the Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia) after eight years of renovation.

The Sfeir-Semler Gallery, which focuses on artists working in the Arab world, has mounted one-person exhibitions in the region by Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, MARWAN, and others. In a recent interview with *San Francisco Arts Quarterly*, Sfeir-Semler said Westerners still have misconceptions about Middle Eastern artists. “You should know that many artists from the Arab world are not Muslims. Many of them are Christians, a few others are Jewish, even though they’re Arabs,” she told the interviewer, Andrew McClintock. “So it’s very wrong to formulate Middle Eastern art by religion. You don’t speak of art in the Western world by referring to it as Christian art, do you? This is probably the biggest failure of viewing the art in the Arab world. We should formulate it around the language and the culture because they all speak Arabic, and that is the main link.”

Female curators and artists in the field are also ubiquitous, creating what some of them describe as a sense of sisterhood around Middle Eastern art, with



Leila Heller

women mentoring one another.

Fahrelnissa Zeid, for example—a Turkish artist known for her abstract mural-like paintings who died in 1991 at age 90—tutored a generation of artists in Jordan. Among her protégés is Suha Shoman, an artist and collector who founded Darat al Funun, a home for Jordanian art and artists.

Women have achieved prominence at the most prestigious institutions, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where Linda Komaroff is the curator of Islamic art, and the British Museum, where Venetia Porter is curator of the department of the Middle East.

Women are often working together. The curators deciding what art will fill the galleries of the high-profile Abu Dhabi Guggenheim, for example, includes a team of three women: Suzanne Cotter, Fadda (also curator of the UAE National Pavilion for the Venice Biennale 2013), Valerie Hillings, and Sasha Kalter-Wasserman. “It’s a very female-dominated industry,” says Antonia Carver, who runs the Art Dubai international art fair. “A lot of very strong women are cultural leaders. There



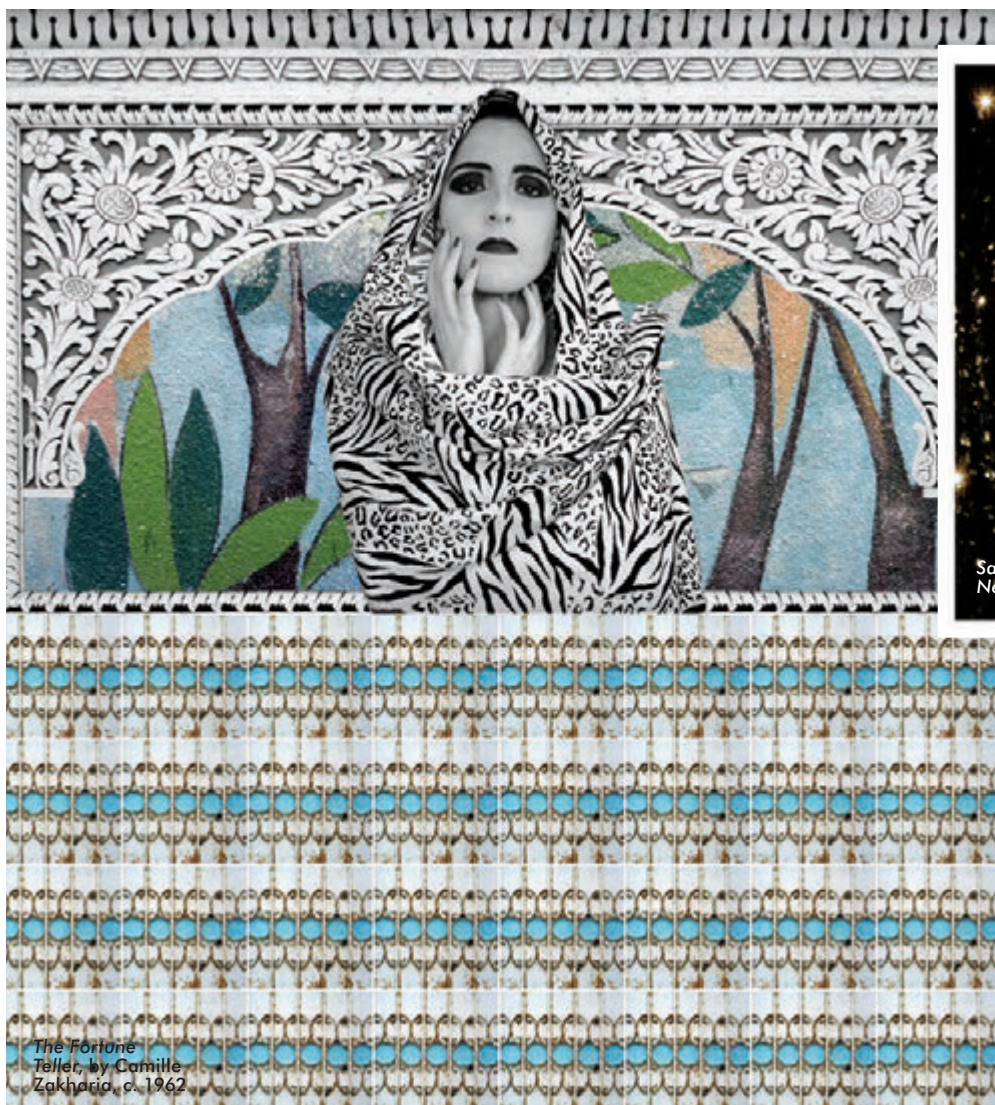
*Ibrahim*, by Shirin Neshat, 2012.

are a lot of very positive role models.” Women have also distinguished themselves as patrons and collectors, like Sheikhha Salama Bint Hamdan Al Nahyan, who has her own foundation that bears her name, and Sheikhha Hoor Al-Qasimi, director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, which oversees the Sharjah Biennial.

And there is a long and growing list of female Middle Eastern artists, both established and emerging, who have captured public attention, like Lara Baladi and Susan Hefuna from Cairo; Mona Hatoum from Palestine; Yto Barrada, the founder and director of Cinémathèque de Tanger in Morocco; Lamia Joreige, who founded the Beirut Art Center; and, maybe most well known in the United States, Shirin Neshat from Iran.

“A lot of people say to me, ‘Why do you have so many women who are artists?’” says Heller, who represents those such as Reza Derakhshani and Negar Ahkami. “It wasn’t by choice, but a lot of the good artists are Middle Eastern women.” Heller makes a point of juxtaposing these artists with more established Western artists, as she did last summer in “Rock, Paper, Scissors,” an exhibition that featured Hadieh Shafie alongside Louise Bourgeois, Louise Nevelson, and Jackson Pollock. “I try to not marginalize my artists by doing the niche shows,” she says. “It shows the quality and the level of how good these artists are that they can hold their own in a show like that.”

Perhaps ironically, it is the very sexism entrenched in Middle Eastern culture that has allowed women to thrive in contemporary art, experts say; because



*The Fortune Teller*, by Camille Zakharia, c. 1962

culture is widely considered women's work, it is one sphere in which they are largely left alone and allowed to function with relative freedom. "Culture is a realm in which women are able to do well," says Melissa Chiu, director of the Asia Society Museum in New York. "In some environments, it's seen as being okay for women to be in that arena."

Indeed, some female artists have taken that freedom to considerable lengths in their artwork. Women artists in Saudi Arabia are now estimated to outnumber the men, according to *The Economist*, which also noted how various artists at the most recent Art Dubai fair tackled discrimination head-on. Nadia Kaabi-Linke, a Tunisian artist, addressed the clothes many women are forced to wear; Newsha Tavakolian, an Iranian artist, took photographs of women doing what is forbidden to them in Iran, from singing in public to swimming; and Maha Malluh of Saudi used religious extremists audio tapes from the 1980s to illustrate the tight controls and overt hostility women face from radicals.

At the same time, some cultural adjustments are required. Art Dubai, for example, doesn't show explicit nudes or any art for that matter that might be perceived "as being overtly offensive to any religion," Carver says, "not only Islam, but also

Christianity and Hinduism."

Perhaps the most striking area of growth in Middle Eastern art has been among galleries, experts say; about 40 have sprung up in Dubai alone over the last several years. Janet Rady was inspired to start her London gallery representing Middle Eastern artists after seeing "Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East," a 2006 exhibition at the British Museum that explored writing as a method of communication and an art form in ancient and Islamic cultures. At first, there was "a feeling of being out in the wilderness," Rady says. "Nobody wanted to know about the artists, nobody understood them." But little by little, people started to hold exhibitions of Iranian art in London, she says, and now there are several galleries that focus almost exclusively on Middle Eastern art.

The increasing consumer interest is quantifiable. The first Art Dubai in 2007 included 40 galleries and drew 5,000 people; the last such fair in March included 75 galleries and more than 22,500 people attended. The fair is seeing an influx in young collectors and people are coming from all over the Middle East—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, India, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates.

"People are invested emotionally as well as



*Sahar Lotfi*, by Newsha Tavakolian.

## Is the very sexism entrenched in Middle Eastern culture what has allowed women to thrive in contemporary art?

financially because it reflects on their identity as Middle Easterners," Carver says. "Even the most loyal of us have been surprised by the level of interest and the fact that it hasn't waned."

American and European art institutions—like the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, MoMA PS1, the Aspen Art Museum, and the British Art Museum—have jumped on the bandwagon, in part because they are responding to their patrons and curators, who want to learn more about the region. Galleries and museums are also trying to help educate the public with panel discussions, lectures, and exhibitions. Often lost in the excitement over Middle Eastern art, experts say, is a deeper knowledge of the field and an understanding of its long-standing traditions. To highlight this storied past, in 2010, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art opened in Doha, Qatar, with a collection of more than 6,000 works from the 1840s to the present. An Abu Dhabi outpost of the Louvre is expected to open in 2015, followed by the Guggenheim's branch there, slated for 2017. "The frenzy of the market is only recent," Fadda says, "but anchors itself on a vivid and historical art scene which goes way back."

The Asia Society has for the last four years been developing "Iran Modern," a comprehensive survey of works from Iran between the 1950s and the 1970s. "It's an argument for multiple modernities," Chiu says. "Modernism didn't just occur in Paris in the early 20th century. It occurred in other places. Iran was an international player in the '60s and '70s. It's a story that really hasn't been told." **ABMB**