

## Deeply dancing diversity of culture

### One of Lebanon's broadest asset bases grows further

CULTURE OVERVIEW 1 day ago by Thomas Schellen and Olga Habre



Photo by: Greg Demarque/Executive

Culture in Lebanon is a mosaic of many histories and identities, from the most ancient of civilizational triumphs—such as the sarcophagi exhibited at Mathaf, the National Museum—to the reconstruction and re-imagining of Beirut's urban core that began in the last decade of the 20th century and is still progressing in the Beirut Central District.

In 2017, a missing piece in the puzzle has finally been opened to the public with Beit Beirut's soft launch (meaning no big event, no big fanfare, no speech or drink). In the context of Lebanese museums and some showy—but not always vibrant—art spaces, such as the two-year-old Aishti Foundation, Beit Beirut stands out as an honest building that opens perspectives on local identities and the 20th century trauma of the Lebanese conflict.

Even if the museum's exhibition concept and content were to move onto other trajectories, the historic essence and presence of Beit Beirut is testimony to the potential for and repercussions of civil war. And just in a few more years, the Lebanese capital is scheduled to open another important window into contemporary culture, when the Beirut Museum of Arts (BeMA) will open in 2020, as envisioned by the Association for Promotion and Exhibition of Arts in Lebanon (APEAL).

The opening of a new museum in 2017 positions Beirut on a Middle Eastern cultural axis that has old and new anchor points, but that is overall still very much evolving. Along this axis—where ancient locales from Ugarit and Palmyra to Petra and Jerash testify to the region's overflowing heritage of diverse civilizations, and in 2017 newly appointed world heritage sites like Hebron in occupied Palestine, Yazd in Iran, and Aphrodisias in Anatolia, Turkey remind us also of the political importance of respecting cultures—there also are new museums with claim to global fame that have opened in the last quarter of 2017 or have been officially announced for 2018.

The first of the two mega-shrines to art and culture is the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which at last opened in November 2017, and the second the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), which is under construction in Giza, near Cairo, and is slated to partially open in 2018. Needless to say, these two edifices of human achievement—the future GEM is advertised as the world's largest archeological museum—are in a completely different league of financial expenditure compared to the Lebanese scale.

## APEAL

The Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon (APEAL) is planning to open the Beirut Museum of Art (BeMA) in 2020, and though construction has not yet begun on the edifice itself, an architect and a design

for the building were chosen in 2016. However, the building isn't the core of a museum, and while we wait for the space to be constructed, the museum's outreach program, one of several planned for BeMA, is carrying out APEAL's work supporting art around Lebanon.

The idea is to decentralize art and make it more accessible to people from all areas of Lebanon and all walks of life. This mission is being fulfilled with ongoing art residency programs, launched in 2016 at Ras Maska, followed by a theater project in 2016 in Baalbek and continuing in May 2017 with a residency in Jezzine. BeMA also organized a workshop called "Shoo Hayda" at the National Museum with artist Annabel Daou. The project engaged members of the community who wished to participate free of charge, giving them exposure to explore and interact with their cultural heritage.

Like many museums abroad that are shifting their strategies to become more inclusive, BeMA hopes to engage different communities. Nada El Khoury, vice president of APEAL, said in an interview with Executive Life earlier this year, "Art should not be intimidating. That's why we are going to people, to villages, and we are telling them you shouldn't be scared to step into a museum; on the contrary, [they should feel welcome]."

Also part of the outreach program is the newly launched Artists in Residency Program in the Lebanese public school system, in partnership with the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education. The first-of-its-kind program will see fourth and fifth graders from seven schools in different parts of Lebanon collaborate with artists, with the support of their art teachers, discovering the creative process, using their own methodologies, and working on specific art projects such as painting, ceramics, video, or other media, which will later be showcased during a public event. The number of schools engaged is set to grow in the future, and the aim is to let youth from different backgrounds widen their horizons by using art as a new form of dialogue and an opportunity to express opinions, ideas, and feelings toward social, cultural, environmental, or other topics, while awakening their sensibility to art.

In another component of its educational programming, APEAL chose two artists for its annual APEAL/Maria Geagea Arida Annual Scholarship Award: Natasha Gasparian, who is completing a Masters in Art History and Curating at the American University of Beirut, and Myriam Dallal, who will finalize her work toward a doctorate at the Paris 1, Pantheon-Sorbonne University in France in Arts Science.

*(Click on image to enlarge)*

### Culture is priceless

The construction, branding, and consulting cost of the Louvre Abu Dhabi is believed to be around \$2 billion, and GEM construction was estimated in late 2017 to be just shy of \$800 million. The creation of Beit Beirut out of the preserved Barakat Building and the construction of a new annex building, according to Beirut city officials, required some \$18 million, and no branding cost (or final use concept) has been heard of at the time of writing.

However, it is not important that Beit Beirut is a small edifice of culture that is dwarfed by the region's bigger museums. Culture is not quantifiable in any way. Culture has too many edges and too much volume to be a tradable commodity or asset. Even when passing on culture to close relatives, it will be reinterpreted by the new owner, who has a different way of seeing things, appreciating beauty, defining esthetic value, and organizing the personal cultural sphere and its contents.

When the passing of identity items and memories from the old to the new generation is disrupted by war and destruction, the transaction is made more difficult, and cultural value can be lost entirely, until somebody comes by 20, 30, 100, or 3,000 years later, digs through the rubble, and finds items deserving to be rescued and treasured. Then, a museum might be born and developed at considerable cost and long-term immeasurable reward.

### Bridging the gaps between past and present

On the level of communities and large social bodies, the cultural continuum of Lebanon, with all its disruptions and testimonies of disruptions, forms a treasure chamber for the mind where the here and now can interact with myriad moments in history and relive them. This Lebanese continuum, or cultural sphere, is one-of-a-kind, and allows one to step between today and different eras that reach back as far as four millennia or as near as 30 or 100 years.

One step, and there is Beirut's glitzy shopping mile; the next step, and there is a Roman ruin. One step, there is a digitally enabled office tower for the 21st century; the next step, and there is a Phoenician port. As a new space designed for cultural memory and public access, Beit Beirut offers the option to transition in one seamless step between today and the Lebanese past of the 20th century. With the quiet shift of the Barakat Building, located on the old Green Line in the Ashrafieh district, from restoration project into operations in 2017, it is now possible to dance between the present reality and a very specific and burdened part of the past. Moreover, thanks to the integration of old and new in the structure of the Beit Beirut, one can step-dance through this museum in a perfect dabke between the Beirut of snipers and the Beirut of artists.

Drawing upon similar intersections of violence and peace and of past and present, Ziad Moutakabbat represented Lebanon in front of a global art audience at the Venice Biennale this year with his project, *Šamaš*, a powerful installation that parallels the Arab region's violent history and present-day. Though Lebanon didn't participate in the prestigious event two years ago, in 2017, two other Lebanese artists also made it to Venice: Lebanese-Armenian Jean Boghossian exhibited in the Armenian pavilion, and living legend of feminine art and design Huguette Caland displayed her work at the Biennale's main exhibition, Viva Arte Viva. With the public sector granting only moral support to artists representing the nation, one wonders what Lebanese artists would create with the funding of more developed nations.

Zeina Arida, the director of Beirut's Sursock Museum, says the international art community is definitely paying attention to contemporary artists from the region, and specifically to Lebanon. In fact, she says they've been paying attention for over 20 years, but that the scrutiny has increased more and more. The evidence: Many Lebanese artists are present in prominent art collections and exhibitions worldwide, and are winning art-related awards.

This is one of the reasons Lebanon's film industry is trying to collaborate with other countries on co-productions: to benefit from foreign funding. In parallel, a funding scheme is still being developed to make cinema a viable sector for investors. Ultimately, it isn't just the funds backing a film that count, but the talent working on it, which is why the continuation of script workshops put on by the non-profit Fondation Liban Cinema (FLC) is so important, along with exposure to and interaction with talented filmmakers who have "made it," both locally and abroad, at film festivals held in Lebanon.

As far as other expansions of the Lebanese realms of culture in 2017, the continued development of design departments at noted universities such as the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts, the Lebanese American University, and the American University of Beirut (AUB) deserves acknowledgement. AUB launched a newly created Master's Program in Art History and Curating this year, while École Supérieure des Affaires, taking on culture from a financial perspective, began offering an Arts Management certificate.

## SURSOCK



Fabrik,  
Courtesy of the  
Sursock Museum

Lebanon's flagship art museum, Sursock, now open for over two years, has been continuing its rich programming in 2017 while looking forward to new goals. This year, it launched its first-floor collections gallery, a space where Sursock can pay tribute to artists in the museum's permanent collection. In addition, a total of ten exhibitions were held throughout 2017.

Attendance this year was almost as high as the first year of operation, at around 60,000 visitors. Zeina Arida, the museum's director, says it's not surprising that more people came during the first year, because they were curious about its novelty. Today, in addition to tourists and occasional visitors, many visitors return often. The museum's public events, which include talks, workshops, film nights, guided tours, and more, are still well-attended, and are often coupled with a tour of the museum's newest exhibitions.

The museum is getting a lot of school visits, mostly from private schools. Everyone is welcome to the free museum, Arida says, but private schools have been keener to take the initiative to visit. She admits the museum could attract public schools if its administration were more proactive, but explains they have not yet had the time or budget to address this. It is a priority for the coming year to develop Sursock's education department so that the museum's representatives can reach out to schools, encouraging them to visit, as well as train teachers, go to the schools and give talks, and initiate other activities. She says the museum aims to develop more inclusive programs and to target communities it has not previously engaged to widen its audience.

A museum is also an organization that needs to run smoothly, so Sursock is trying to create a committee of "friends of the museum" that would include a network of individuals, companies, and institutions who would be able to support it, financially and otherwise, while forming a community and sharing ownership of the museum. Arida says it's vital to have funding to maintain the quality and number of existing programs, and points out that fundraising also needs to be diversified. In addition, to start new programs and departments, further funding is needed.

The museum has also fostered creative partnerships in the Lebanese and international art scene. In Lebanon, it has collaborated with the likes of Beirut Art Residency, as well as universities like the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts and the American University of Beirut, and it is looking into collaborations with various art centers, non-profits, and artist collectives.

Among the activities scheduled for the coming year is the museum's bi-annual event, Salon d'Automne, planned for fall 2018, with the open call launching early to allow artists to develop projects specifically for the event. The museum also has an exciting collaboration with London's Tate Modern; an exhibition by Fahrelnissa Zeid that previously showed at the Tate will be coming to Lebanon in spring. Arida says the museum is working on more international collaborations like this. Also planned is activating the library and archive program, as well as the museum's online platform, which would give users remote access to the collection.

(Click on image to enlarge)

#### Showing off the talent

This rising wave of talent appreciation and development appropriately found further expression, both esthetic and financial, through the new Beirut Design Fair that was held for the first time alongside the Beirut Art Fair. Both events were successes beyond the organizers' economic expectations. Beirut Design Fair aims to firmly establish the Lebanese capital as a regional center of attraction for design, following the path pioneered by Beirut Design Week. Now in its fifth year, Beirut Design Week in May 2017 asked participants provocatively whether design was a need, and got responses ranging from mundane objects like utensils and street signs, to social-impact initiatives and cultural heritage preservation projects. The question encouraged the public to reconsider stereotypical definitions of design, looking at it as a problem-solving discipline instead, and it got organizers to ask themselves how their own event impacts the industry.

Held in September, the Beirut Design Fair's first edition was well received by the public, complementing the art fair next door. The 8th edition of the Beirut Art Fair, a place for discovering new artists, featured 51 galleries from 23 countries, and was attended by over 28,000 visitors. (All those figures climbed from previous years.) The fair's central exhibition, "Ourouba, The Eye of Lebanon," was made up of contemporary Arab art curated by Rose Issa, presented pieces from public and private collections in Lebanon.

Issa said the personal Lebanese art collections which she could access in the process of curating are "quite different from certain monumental institutional collections developed under ongoing censorship in the Gulf." The notion of authentic rather than flamboyant art treasures in private

Lebanese collections actually can strike the culture enthusiast quite unexpectedly, as in a small show exploring the relation between art and revolution in the Middle East that runs from late November 2017 through February 2018. The exhibition at the AUB on-campus gallery, curated by Octavian Esanu on occasion of the 100th anniversary of the communist "October Revolution," surprised with a portrait from the Mao Zedong series of pop art legend Andy Warhol, on loan from a "private collection" in Beirut.

Also of note is the rise in summer festivals, which have reached record numbers in 2017 and have spread far beyond the established festival brands of Baalbeck, Beiteddine, and Byblos, to small towns and cities like Tripoli and Zahle. While the high number of events are an indication of interest and community effort, they aren't necessarily good for festivals economically, as some festival organizers point out that their (already huge) challenges only increase when there are too many people trying to get a tiny piece of the same pie.

These festivals added to the growing appeal of other musical and performing-arts events seeking to widen awareness and popular appreciation of culture, such as the Beirut Museums Night in April and various multi-venue events such as the Fête de la Musique in June and Beirut Chants in December. Culture, despite all that could have disrupted its rise in 2017, underscored its resilience as a Lebanese asset with exceptional growth potential, which will likely continue to grow in the coming years .



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