

## Oases of creativity

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I won't lie. When I first arrived in Dubai, fresh from London, the only sort of culture I encountered in the first few weeks was one of sheer, debilitating shock. As someone who thrives on "culture" – meaning galleries, film, theatre, music – I found the emirate's shameless opulence utterly underwhelming. From the merry round of five-star hotels and restaurants to the shiny, over air-conditioned malls and fleets of flashy cars careering down the six-lane motorways, everywhere seemed to scream money and little else. "Like Luton in the desert – but with less soul." My ex-boss's words of warning ricocheted round my head and I wondered whether it was possible to starve from lack of cultural stimulation.

But then I stumbled upon the art of the emirates. It became clear that a place with such a rich melting pot of nationalities, ideas and lifestyles could not possibly exist without a thriving creative outlet. Like everything else in the region, the UAE's idiosyncratic arts scene is developing at breakneck speed. Just as it must feel for an architect watching the astonishing structures shoot into the sky, or an entrepreneur watching their tax-free dirhams mount, witnessing a new arts scene blossom is even more invigorating than sampling a fully formed one.

Acknowledging the power art and culture can have when it comes to developing international relations, business and trade, the UAE has begun to do what it does best: importing the world's finest. And Abu Dhabi, the country's cultural hub as well as its capital, has been busiest. First up was last summer's deal with New York's Guggenheim Foundation to create Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (GAD). The latest and largest in the international art power brand, it will be designed by Frank Gehry, span 30,000 square metres and be located on Saadiyat Island (Arabic for "Island of Happiness").

Next on the ambitious list was a trip to Europe. Last month France's National Assembly approved controversial plans for a Louvre Abu Dhabi to be completed by 2012, despite a public outcry and accusations that France was selling its soul (for a reported \$1bn). Under a 30-year agreement, the Parisian arts centre will lend the new Jean Nouvel-designed Gulf branch selected items for up to 18 months.

Evidently developing a taste for French couture, Abu Dhabi's next masterpiece was artparis-abudhabi, a partnership between artparis – the international contemporary art fair – and the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH). Aiming to attract the original Grand Palais exhibition's prestige, the Middle Eastern leg was held at Abu Dhabi's Emirate's Palace Hotel at the end of November. A conservative valuation of the works on display put them at \$400m, but the focus was on educating, with an intensive three-day course from Sotheby's Institute of Art on collecting and investing.

Never one to be outdone, neighbouring Dubai is not only pumping dirhams into its "Culture Village", but it also hosted the inaugural Gulf Art Fair in March. More than 40 galleries showcased contemporary art from across the world, discussion panels debated on ways to encourage local art and an all-round celebration of culture overtook the city for three days. A runaway success, the event entered the black in its opening year.

"Dubai has positioned itself in every other centre as a bridge between east and west, and the same should go for art," says Wadi Ahmed of DIFC, chief sponsor of the fair. "The art industry is growing in India and China, and continues to do so in the west, but what is in between? The opportunity is there to be the hub that brings the regions together." (see overleaf)

It's an opportunity that has been pounced upon by Christie's, the international auctioneer. After setting up a Middle East office in Dubai two years ago, the branch set a staggering 62 new world records at its third auction of international modern and contemporary art in October. Among the works snapped up were the Egyptian artist Ahmed Moustafa's "Qur'anic Polyptych of Nine Panel", which sold for \$657,000, making him the highest-auctioning Arab artist ever.

But most of these headline-grabbing initiatives either have completion dates set far off in the future,

involve importing art from afar or take place for just a few days every year. Meanwhile, there are smaller, grass-roots endeavours taking shape in the area. Sharjah holds the popular International Art Biennial every two years, while Dubai has developed two unofficial art "quarters" somewhere along the lines of New York's Dumbo and London's Shoreditch. The former is located in the desert warehouses of Al Quoz, the latter lurks in the narrow passageways of old-town Bastikia. Art has even managed to desterilise malls and hotels such as the prestigious Fairmont Hotel which exclusively showcases the work of local female artists.

Other disciplines are no different in their liberal international imports or spectrum-spanning diversity. While the Middle East and Dubai International Film Festivals garnered global interest and Hollywood appearances, the regional Emirates Film Competition has begun to source promising local talent. Productions such as Cirque Du Soleil sell out whenever they trapeze into town, homespun shows such as Jumana: Secret of the Desert, a spectacular display of fireworks, holograms and awe-inspiring acrobatics, also consistently fill their amphitheatre pews. And while the music world might fling more and more global stars in the Gulf's general direction, from pop idol Justin Timberlake to Edinburgh Fringe Festival veteran Nick Pynn, the debut album by Dubai-bred soul band Abri has secured them a position in the international music charts. The UAE is even set to host the first Emirati opera this month on its National Day.

### Art attacks

Much more than glitzy hotels, labyrinthine malls and outlandish theme parks, the Gulf has got soul and plenty of it. Here's where to find it:

#### 9714

It's worth keeping tabs on this vibrant team of creatives who are responsible for a series renegade artful happenings. [www.9714.com](http://www.9714.com)

#### Culture Village

This AED50bn (\$13.6bn) development is due for completion in 2009. Plans include traditional wind towers and waterways, exhibition halls and museums as well as academies for art, music, dance, pottery and other crafts. [www.culturevillage.ae](http://www.culturevillage.ae)

#### The Cultural Foundation

Located in Abu Dhabi, this huge centre actively promotes artistic endeavours, regularly hosting musicians, lecturers and dramatic performances within its intricate courtyards. [www.cultural.org.ae](http://www.cultural.org.ae)

#### Saadiyat Island

A natural island located 500m off the coast, Saadiyat has been earmarked as the region's epicentre for all things artistic, with plans for museums, a performing arts centre and an expansive arts centre park. [www.saadiyat.ae](http://www.saadiyat.ae)

#### The Third Line

A local gallery that participated in the first Gulf Art Fair, this is Dubai's most groundbreaking contemporary art space, located in the edgy Al Quoz quarter. [www.thethirdline.com](http://www.thethirdline.com)

#### XVA

Located in the heart of Dubai's maze-like Bastikaya area, this unique gallery was recently taken over by 9714 and now boasts all-encompassing modern pieces as well as one of Gordon Ramsay's favourite cafés. [www.xvagallery.com](http://www.xvagallery.com)

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