

Benefactors give Beirut art scene a fillip

By Ferry Biedermann

Published: July 19 2010 18:03 | Last updated: July 19 2010 18:03

[Print](#)


With the prospect of conflict receding – for the time being at least – and an economy growing despite the downturn in the rest of the world, Beirutis are turning to less worldly matters.

During the years of conflict, the city kept producing interesting artists – such as Hady Sy, pictured above in front of one of his works – but there was a shortage of galleries, museums and schools.

Now a combination of international [attention turning to Middle Eastern art](#) and renewed interest among Lebanon's wealthy in collecting works and sponsoring artistic institutions is slowly beginning to remedy the deficit.

The opening of several galleries, commercial and otherwise, and the establishment of an art school mean that the [art scene](#) in the city is experiencing a resurgence.

"The Middle East has 5 per cent of the art galleries it should have. I would not be surprised if this year and next another 10, 11 galleries open in Beirut," says Khaled Samawi, a successful Syrian businessman who owns Ayyam gallery. Ayyam has branches in Damascus, Dubai and, since the beginning of this year, Beirut. Mr Samawi plans to open his next gallery in Cairo before the end of this year.

Ayyam, located opposite Beirut's marina, and Q, a sister gallery next door, are examples of the new commercial galleries that have opened in Beirut, although Mr Samawi dislikes the term. "Commercial is something else, like selling souvenir art, copies of oriental art, camels etc. That is commercial. If there is pop art and collectors pay thousands of dollars, that is not commercial."

But Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, a Beirut-based art critic, says the relationship between galleries such as Mr Samawi's, wealthy collectors and Beirut's [established contemporary art scene is underdeveloped](#) and has to change for all to benefit. "There is a big disconnect between the [wider] art community and the commercial galleries, some of which have been around for a long time," Ms Wilson-Goldie says.

Beirut has no museum of contemporary art to foster local talent and had no real non-commercial space to exhibit works until the opening of the Beirut Art Centre, a private initiative sponsored by a wealthy collector. It is located in an industrial area near the Souk al-Ahad, Beirut's flea market, and is attracting other art ventures.

Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese association for plastic arts, is starting a postgraduate artists academy, called Home Works, nearby later this year. The academy will be housed in a grand old industrial building that has been made available for five years by the Jabre family foundation.

The BAC and the Home Works academy are the clearest signs yet of the local community sponsoring significant contemporary art institutions in Beirut.

But Christine Tohme, who heads Ashkal Alwan, says it remains a struggle to get local companies to contribute. "Not many banks, for example, care about associating their name with art, they care more about associating it maybe with racing events. But it is coming."

Ms Tohme says that rich collectors and contributors must be cultivated, but is ambivalent about the art market represented by galleries such as Ayyam. "We'd like to converge with the art market but not lose the serious content and lose the artists."

She notes that much of the art coming out of the Middle East has a commercial value, regardless almost of its artistic value, because of the increase in interest in the region over the past decade.

Motaz Kabbani, the owner of Q gallery, does see the importance of a connection with the local art scene. "It is very important in terms of research to push the next generation that is coming up." But he does not have any concrete ideas yet on how to develop talent.

Whichever way the art scene and galleries develop, they are largely on their own, because government policy hardly plays a part. Lebanon's culture ministry did not even send a representative to the first regional conference on cultural policy in the Arab world held in Beirut last month.

Basma El Husseiny, of the Egyptian Al Mawred Al Thaqafy organisation, which took the initiative in organising the conference, says: "Most Arab countries have no concept of cultural policy." Where they do, such as in the Gulf, "it is often dictated by economic or political considerations".

The question of whether Beirut can be an important art centre in the Middle East remains moot, says Ms Wilson-Goldie, the art critic. "No matter what, even with all of the money swirling around, Lebanon is too small to exist as an independent market but only as a market that is tied in to others: Dubai, Istanbul, London, New York."

In that sense, Ayyam seems to have the right idea.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2010. Print a single copy of this article for personal use. [Contact us](#) if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

"FT" and "Financial Times" are trademarks of the Financial Times. [Privacy policy](#) | [Terms](#)
© Copyright The Financial Times Ltd 2010.