

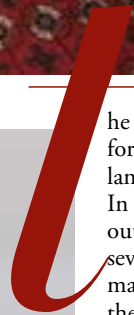


*Minister of State in the UAE Government
Zaki Anwar Nusseibeh's vast MENASA
art collection forms a sublime space where
cultures and generations convene*

*Words by Laura Cherrie Beaney
Photography by Mohammad Adel Rashid*

Art & Humanity

An interior view of the art-filled TV room downstairs which features works by Ismail Al Rifai, Rokni Haerizadeh, Ahmad Amin Nazar and more



The art-filled home of collector and Minister of State, Zaki Nusseibeh forms a visual register which chronicles the shifting social and political landscape of the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia (MENASA). In the context of his home, his artworks take on lifelike form, flowing out from every cranny amidst the cultural advisor's extensive library of several thousand texts which span the seven languages that he has mastered. H.E. has been central to culture and the arts in the UAE since the 70s; holding a series of high-ranking positions in government, leading up to his current role in the UAE Cabinet, but he has been a passionate collector of art since his youth.

The art of the region has often been portrayed as monolithic yet H.E. Zaki's collection overturns this notion, providing a nuanced and eclectic insight into the perspectives of artists spanning generations and cultures. Walking through it you're struck by the early work of pioneering Syrian expressionist Louay Kayali, before being confronted by the searching meditations on power and memory of contemporary Palestinian visual artist, Hazem Harb. Moving on through the hallways the fusion of Western pop art with the Egyptian-Armenian cultural heritage of Chant Avedissian is displayed, followed by giant hanging prayer beads by Saudi feminist artist Manal Al Dowayan. It's an environment which compels cultural contemplation.

Over the last half-century, H.E. Zaki has amassed a significant collection of modern and contemporary works, stimulated by family, friendships and cross-cultural exchange but always selected through intuition. During the 50s the walls of his childhood home in Jerusalem were populated with Orientalist pieces by the likes of 19th century Scottish artist David Roberts. At the same time, however, his exploration of the churches and temples within the Old City walls formed a lasting imprint. In the 60s H.E. Zaki moved to England to attend boarding school and whilst there, paid a visit to his sister, Munira, who was studying painting at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Together they



A sculpture by Alaa Edris



An interior view of the library corridor with works by Kamal Boullata



An interior view of the living room featuring works by Farhad Moshiri, Samir Rafi, Louay Kayali, Shakir Hassan Al Said, Vessela Farid and more



H.E. Zaki Anwar Nusseibeh sits in his home office amidst his vast book collection

navigated the capital's cultural hubs, moving from the Louvre to the Parisian gardens which enclosed Rodin's sculptures:

"I remember the Jeu De Paume Museum in particular, which in those days held major Impressionist artworks now housed in the Musée d'Orsay," recalls H.E. Zaki. "This was really an awakening - to look at Impressionist art in the museums, to start seeing the galleries and visit the Latin Quarter in Paris. It went on from there - when I returned to England, visiting the National Gallery soon afterwards, was a mind-blowing experience."

While studying economics at Cambridge University, H.E. Zaki was immersed in the Fitzwilliam Museum's remarkable collection of classical and post-classical art as well as the quirky and idiosyncratic world of Jim Ede's Kettle's Yard - the latter evincing a refreshing open door philosophy. As a student H.E. Zaki began collecting Orientalist pieces but when he left England to return to Abu Dhabi he shifted direction and sold these works to begin a collection with a much more radical focus: one dedicated to modern and contemporary MENASA art. Today, his collection is estimated at 400 works; collectively they form a lens through which complex insights into his region can be framed. Its visual language is for him "sublime" and art itself is a transformative universal language which knits humanity together.

"It speaks to you; it makes you think of the sublime," he expresses. "Art is important for one's personal development. Every artwork has a message, it tries to tell you its story. A story can make us rise above ourselves, whether it's found in literature, poetry or novels, music and especially art. People who are impacted or moved by the art that they see, cannot but feel some sort of empathy toward other human beings."

The UAE, in the 70s, lacked formal galleries yet H.E. Zaki decided to carve out his own cultural space. He became involved in organising exhibitions as President of Alliance Française and became a friend to the artists he admired, who were mostly drawn from the ever-shifting communities of the Emirates: Iraqi, Syrian,

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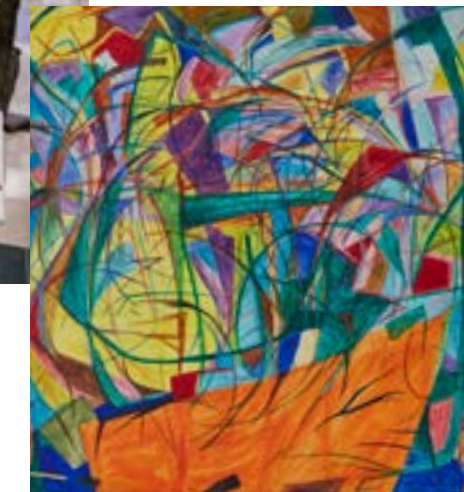
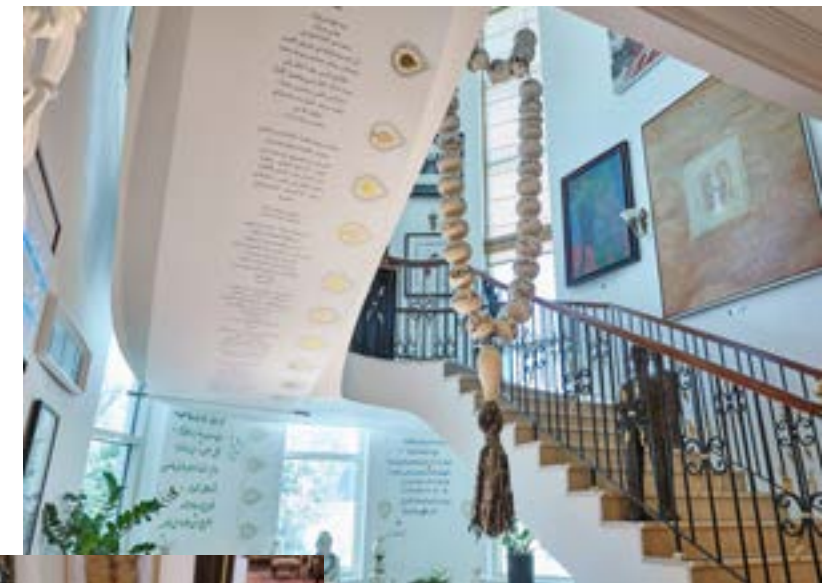
A work by Roland Van Meerbeeck displayed in the downstairs hallway

Jordanian and Lebanese. "One of the first MENASA works that I bought was in 1968, after I attended a gallery exhibition in Beirut," he recalls. "I remember carrying the painting by hand on the aeroplane back to Abu Dhabi! I still have that painting at home." He supported both established and emerging artists. His first work by Iranian artist Farhad Moshiri, for example, was a jar purchased at one of the earliest Abu Dhabi Art fairs in 2009.

"I met Moshiri through one of the participating galleries at the fair and he became a friend," recounts H.E. Zaki. "I remember going to The Flying House and seeing Hassan Sharif who also became a friend. The artists who were there would introduce me to other artists - the community was a small but accessible one. By going to the fairs and visiting artists you ended up meeting most of the community."

It was an emerging movement which quite quickly gave birth to the present international dynamism of MENASA art. Through his immersion in this scene H.E. Zaki has been influential in extending this culture to a broader public. In 2019, he opened his personal collection up to student curators at NYU Abu Dhabi. Their exhibition of his works entitled *Go Back to Move Forward* saw H.E. Zaki's artworks take on a new social context, forming a starting point through which to explore the sociopolitical landscapes of the Arab world.

These endeavours, which connect the creative expressions of one generation of artists to the next, are part of a lifetime's mission to make art central to the ramifying debate about meaning and existence across MENASA societies. "It's important to have art in our lives and to introduce it to children early on," he professes. "Children should be able to look at beauty, to look sometimes even at pain as expressed through a painting that tells you a story. Art can sublimate our thoughts and enable us to focus on the things that define us, that make us human beings."



H.E. Zaki Nusseibeh's home features works by various artists including Adel Abidin, Farideh Lashai, Fadi Yazigi, Laila Shawa and more



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