



Four books that every Arab art fan should read

We review four books that cover subjects as diverse as contemporary Arab art's early years and a decade of Dubai's Tashkeel space



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Summer in the UAE is like reverse western winter: a time to hurry from the car into your home, chuck another wadge of electricity at the air conditioning, and curl up with a good book.

The UAE art scene is awash with great art books at the moment: looking back, forward and all around. A number of organisations, such as Tashkeel and the Sharjah Museums Authority, are celebrating recent milestones. New books have also been published on Arab art history, reflecting the growing scholarship in the field. Here are our top picks for the hot months ahead.

'Primary Documents: Modern Art in the Arab World'

In 2002, the Museum of Modern Art in New York initiated the Primary Documents series, translating and publishing artists' writing, such as manifestoes, statements, interviews and debates in the press to help art movements beyond the US and Europe reach English-speaking audiences. This edition turns the focus to the Arab world for the first time. It is edited by three scholars of modern Arab art – Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers and Nada Shabout – and is produced in partnership with Saudi Arabia's Misk Art Institute. It comprises 127 excerpts of key pieces of artists' writing, from the early 1880s to 1986.

The texts shed light on that intense period of artistic activity in the Arab world, during which the Ottoman Empire collapsed, European powers carved up the region and Palestine emerged as a unifying cause among Arab peoples. From the beginning, artists negotiated among a number of solidarities in their attempt to move their work forward – cultural, religious, national, pan-Arab, and international – and the documents show the public debates as they happened.

There is the extraordinary discussion about degenerate art in the pages of Egyptian literary magazine *Al Risala* in 1939, which was sparked by a show of solidarity among Cairene artists with those European artists labelled as degenerate by the Nazis, and which became a reflection on the state of Egyptian politics and society, and the license of art to address it. Other writings show the artists as they looked

back into their cultural pasts to celebrate indigenous forms, and the moments of surprising public resistance to these enquiries.

You can map the transformations, too, whether in individual careers, such as that of Shakir Hassan Al Said, one of the founders of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, who in the 1960s began to draw on Sufism for what he called “contemplative art”, or across the region, such as the rise of Arab biennials in the 1970s. The book’s section on this period, with the discussion at the first Arab Biennial in Baghdad in 1974 – among Ismail Shammout, Badr Al-Din Abou Ghazi and others – is worth the read alone for those investigating exhibition histories. And the beauty of some of the texts, such as ones by Khalil Gibran and Etel Adnan, is also a reminder of the importance of writing in the modern Arab tradition, both in terms of contributions to intellectual debate and, as poetry for Gibran and Adnan.

Being primary material, this book is orientated towards the specialist, though various commentaries throughout keep hold on the bigger picture. A great essay by Ussama Makdisi leads off the discussion, situating the unrolling of Arab modernisms within the historical framework of the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the struggles against colonialism (which does not dominate discussions throughout), the rise of the Palestine question, and – though beyond the documents’ timescale – the eclipsing of that issue among young Arabs after the Arab Spring protests.

The translation and publication of these documents is particularly important for scholars. A problem with studying 20th-century Arab art has been lack of access to primary materials. Many of them are still in the hands of artists or their families, and have not been well-catalogued nor digitised – or are in Arabic and inaccessible to an English-dominated field. As study of Arab modernisms grows, projects like this allow artists’ voices to be heard, rather than others speaking for them.

‘Paul Guiragossian: Displacing Modernity’

Edited by Manuella Guiragossian, the artist's daughter, and Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, who curated a comprehensive Paul Guiragossian exhibition in Beirut in 2013, this is the first monograph of the Armenian-Lebanese artist’s life. Born in exile in Beirut to parents who had fled the Armenian genocide, Guiragossian is known for a signature style of thick vertical lines out of which endless figures appear: standing figures, sitting figures, and most of all, maternal figures.

This book contains paintings from throughout the five decades of his work, as well as biographical material: images of him with his family, or in coat and tie and thick moustache at various exhibitions; newspaper clippings; and the elegantly worded invitations to the openings of his many shows.

Bardaouil and Fellrath's essay give an authoritative account of his life, and theoretically situates him within the idea of Arab art's many modernisms, against a monolithic idea of all Arab scenes and all Arab artists exploring the same concerns, or in comparative analysis with western artists. This is as much an attempt to avoid reducing the painter to an East versus West binary, or modern versus art-historical, as it is to come to grips with the artist himself. The curators show that Guiragossian navigated his own way: in dialogue with his contemporaries in Beirut, Baghdad and Cairo, while also engaging with Soviet Realism, or bypassing Surrealism to go straight to the issues of life, rebirth, and magic that have animated artists since, as he writes, the Pharaonic times.

It's a project complemented by his works: from the extraordinarily proficient watercolours and drawings – it's such a delight to see these – to the transformation of those around him into colourful forms greater than themselves.

Read more:

Celebrating 10 years of the pioneering arts hub Tashkeel

The UAE pays homage to Beirut modernist Paul Guiragossian

Art Dubai to partner with Saudi Arabia's Misk Art Institute

'Sharjah Art Museum: 20 Years of Art and Culture'

It is two decades since the Sharjah Art Museum was established, and this book offers a retrospective glimpse at the incredible array of exhibitions the museum has held. Its first show, in January 1997, was by Iraqi artist Rafa Nasiri, and within that year alone the museum staged exhibitions of Omani, Sudanese, Palestinian, Finnish and Lithuanian work. Later, they showed works by Andy Warhol (2001), Suleiman Mansour (2004), Andreas Gursky (2007) and Ahmed Morsi (2017), plus an exhibition in 2000 based on the art of the postcard – that dying, winged messenger of friendly greetings.

An essay by the museum's architect, Brian Johnson – who also designed the Dubai Creek Golf & Yacht Club clubhouse that appears on the Dh20 note – provides an explanation for the building's long thin space: it sits on top of an elongated former roundabout, a site restriction that Johnson turned into an advantage, with the museum's now well-known long galleries. The book reads forwards and backwards in English and Arabic, reflecting Sharjah's even-handedness towards different populations. I wish, though, they had invested in some better Photoshopping skills – the image quality, particularly of the Sheikh's many visits to the openings, varies dramatically.

‘Reference Point: A History of Tashkeel and UAE Art’

Ten years ago, Sheikha Lateefa bint Maktoum turned the site of her former art college in Nad Al Sheba, Dubai, into studio spaces where artists and designers could form a community and work in common after graduating from college. Tashkeel has since then grown organically into a number of other roles, from exhibition site to quasi-master’s course holder, responding to the needs of the art scene of Dubai that has grown alongside it. This symbiosis is at the core of this publication. The book, I must admit, is edited by myself, with Ismail Rifahi as Arabic editor, and brings curatorial, artistic, academic, and anecdotal voices to bear on the past decade, setting into print the oral histories of how the art scene in Dubai came to be.

The Photobook show on at Gulf Photo Plus right now

Gulf Photo Plus, the agency devoted to photography at Alserkal Avenue, has collected a huge array of photography books from across the Arab region, putting them on show to browse through or to buy. The exhibition is a testament to the range and creativity of the photobook as an artistic project in itself.

“I’ve been wanting to put this show together at GPP for a number of years,” says Miranda McKee, curator of The Photobook Show. “The sequence of the photos and text featured in a book make it very clear to the viewer how the artist intends the story to unfold.”

The offerings move from photojournalism – such as Hosam Katan’s images of life during the conflict in Aleppo and Tanya Habjouqa’s images of life in Palestine – to portraiture, such as Denis Dailleux’s images of beefed up Egyptian bodybuilders posing with their mothers in uncharacteristic moments of tenderness. Calcified impressions fall like dominoes through these photobooks. The photojournalist Thomas Dworzak collected remarkable glamorous shots from photo studios in Afghanistan, showing Taliban members with eyeliner and scarves artfully arranged over their shoulders.

Other projects are touching; Bahman Kiarostami brought together images of Iranian workers abroad, who have superimposed their pictures onto stock photographs of Iran or onto those of their families, which they then carry around as fictionalised mementos. And shoestring DIY projects are included alongside more well-known ones, such as Ahmed Mater’s Desert of Pharan: Unofficial Histories Behind the Mass Expansion of Mecca.

“People tend to spend more time with a book than they spend walking around the gallery,” McKee notes. “The book draws them into a new, and potentially less intimidating space, where a story is given the opportunity to unfold in its entirety at whatever pace the viewer chooses.”

The Photobook Show is at Gulf Photo Plus, in Alserkal Avenue, Dubai, until August 31.

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Where to buy art books in the UAE

There are a number of speciality art bookshops in the UAE.

In Dubai, The Lighthouse at Dubai Design District has a wonderfully curated selection of art and design books. Alserkal Avenue runs a pop-up shop at their A4 space, and host the art-book fair Fully Booked during Art Week in March. The Third Line, also in Alserkal Avenue, has a strong book-publishing arm and sells copies at its gallery. Kinokuniya, at Dubai Mall, has some good offerings within its broad selection, and you never know what you will find at the House of Prose in Jumeirah. Finally, all of Gulf Photo Plus's photo books are available for sale at their show.

In Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi has a beautiful selection of catalogues and art books, and Magrudy's – across the Emirates, but particularly at their NYU Abu Dhabi site – has a great selection in art, fiction and cultural theory.

In Sharjah, the Sharjah Art Museum sells catalogues and art books at its museum shop, and the Sharjah Art Foundation has a bookshop that offers reads on art, theory and cultural history.

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