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OMAN'S ARTFUL BEGINNINGS

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From a kingdom that once spanned from Africa to India, to the thriving frankincense trade that left traders high on hopes and aromas, Oman boasts both a storied and rich history, but oddly enough, it has long been a history without colour, that is, art has been missing — until now. Last in Muscat, I was fortunate enough to sit down with Hassan Meer, Work Partner and Artistic Director of the Stal Gallery, to better understand the artful Omani burgeoning.



With several museums hosting works and exhibitions from Omani art pioneers like Anwar Sonya (far left painting) an increasing number of interactive installations, and experimental public displays, the art scene in Oman is growing. Begun largely in the 70s and 80s, the growth has been slow but steady in the coastal gulf country.

Where has the Omani art scene come from, where did it begin?

We don't have what one would call a solid history of art, as such it's difficult to measure any sort of movement before the 70s and 80s. I can say at that time that we did begin with realistic and classical styles before moving along to more abstract pieces, but it's hard to say just how and where. We do have a number of artists in Oman who have dedicated their lives to art, however, and to establishing new movements in the Omani art community, but it hasn't always been like that. Before the 70s and 80s art was essentially an independent venture, and it never really gained traction in Oman as a movement or renaissance. When it did, however, it was largely due to one group of artists, namely, Anwar Sonya, Rabha Mahmood and Maryam Abdulkarim Al Zadjali who is currently the Director of the Omani Society for Fine Arts. These three kicked off the art scene before there were any communities, or an established art scene, and just sort of went with it. Ever since they got this art-centric ball rolling though, there has been a really exciting surge in Omani arts. Perhaps even more exciting is that our infancy allows us to continue to see some of these pioneers continuing to churn out their masterpieces.



Anwar Sonya, whose painting is featured here, is one of the foremost pioneers of the Omani art movement of the 70s and 80s. Before then, art was largely reserved to traditional motifs and designs, but with the small-scale artistic revolution, new colours, shapes and ideas began to seep into Omani culture.

“People were seeing photos in lightboxes and films on the old gate of the market and all kinds of cool stuff, it was sensational. And perhaps the best part is the feedback we got, people loved it.”

And since the scene didn't kick off until relatively recently, where would you say it is now?

We're at a very exciting stage right now. We're lucky enough to still have the pioneers of Omani arts around and producing, and they are beginning to mix with and influence the younger generation — notable artists like Budoor Al Riyami and Issa Al Mufarji. We're growing, that's for sure, but I don't think it's as fast as perhaps some of us would like. There is somewhat of a shortage of art galleries in Muscat, we only have about five, and people still need to turn to social media to get their fix of art and film. But we're also finding creative ways around this in terms of installation art and bringing art to the public.

In what way?

For example, 'The City & The Street' event — a foray into conceptual and experimental art — started in 2001. We started in a normal gallery space but in 2007 wanted to try something a bit more challenging, a bit more out there, so we took it to the streets. We had art all around Muscat, even in places like the old market. People were seeing photos in lightboxes and films on the old gate of the market and all kinds of cool stuff, it was sensational. And perhaps the best part is the feedback we got: people loved it. This challenge we had of taking art to the streets paid off, people started learning more, people started to get interested, they were having fun. So I think it's in these ways that we are trying to speed up the growth of art here in Oman, and I think it's working. Slowly but surely.



Oman is gaining ground in the Gulf by featuring works from not just local Omani artists, but those of international artists as well. Paintings done by Iraqi painter Sinan Hussein featured at the Stal Gallery in Muscat broadcast the growing art scene in the Middle East at large.

And what type of art is catching on right now in Oman, is it more abstract or realist or classical or a mix of styles?

Right now it seems to be a pretty healthy mix of a little bit of everything, but I would say the focus seems to be the newer mediums. Things like photography, video and installation art. We don't have a huge history of art obviously, which, in a cool way, allows us to not be boxed in by the traditional mediums. We are using these new tools to create, and we aren't necessarily influenced by certain ways of needing to do this or that. The youth, especially, are enthusiastic in using modern tools to create art. Part of that is because these tools are so readily available. Tablets, computers, smartphones, everyone has one, and now they are starting to unlock the artistic powers of these tools and it's fantastic to see. These tools, coupled with talents here, have the capability of being able to create compelling films and photography, and it is all easily shareable. It seems like the youth is also catching up in Oman — they are harnessing these technologies for art. So while there is still a thriving painting world that sees a lot of abstract and contemporary work, there is also quite a large section of the Omani art world that is experimenting and playing with the new mediums.

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So if one were to visit Muscat, where could they see some of this relatively recent Omani art?

We have several reputable galleries now in Muscat, and personally, I would recommend Bait Al Zubair Museum (the house that became a museum in Old Muscat, of which Gallery Sarah is a part), Bait Al Baranda in Muttrah overlooking the comiche, Bait Muzna Gallery which is housed in a three-storey traditional Omani house in the old city of Muscat opposite Al Alam Palace and, of course, the Stal Gallery in the modern Madinat Qaboos area. These galleries have both Omani and international artists' works on display, and regularly hold exhibitions. With everything from quite standard exhibitions to more contemporary, and even to the occasional experimental exhibition, these are all great places to start when seeking out the art scene in Muscat.



One of Muscat's galleries, the Bait Al Baranda, hosted the Opera Gallery, where Arab artists were featured amongst numerous well-known international artists. Featured paintings of His Majesty Sultan Al Qaboos and singer Um Kulthum by Stello Diamantopoulos are featured on either side of Bon Bon with Omani Flag by Laurence Jenkell and behind an Arman table. These shows are bringing an increasing buzz to Oman, and while still small-scale, it won't be long until the art scene begins to pick up steam in the Gulf states. (Photo courtesy of Bait Al Baranda)

And where do you think Omani art will go from here?

We still need to focus on building the art culture in Oman. I think it becomes increasingly important to focus on art in the schools and with the youth — that's where the future is. We've made a great start, we're only a 60-year-old community, but we're here, and we're growing, and that's the important part. The other exciting aspect is that people are enjoying it. People enjoy seeing the art and learning about the art, and with that positive social response, I think the only place we can go is up.

(Featured image: Hassan Meer, Work Partner and Artistic Director of the Stal Gallery in Muscat, stands in front of one of his paintings. Though the number of art galleries in Oman is still low, Hassan is excited with the growth that has been taking place since the 70s and 80s in the gulf nation.)

Tags: Anwar Sonya, Art Galleries in Oman, Bait Al Baranda, Bait Al Zubair, Bait Al Zubair Museum, Bait Muzna, Budoor Al Riyami, Gallery Sarah, Hassan Meer, Issa Al Mufarji, Maryam Abdulkarim Al Zadjali, Muscat Galleries, Omani Art, Rabha Mahmood, stal gallery

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Description	From a kingdom that once spanned from Africa to India, to the thriving frankincense trade that left traders high on hopes and aromas, Oman boasts both a storied and rich history, but oddly enough, it has long been a history without colour, that is, art has been missing—until now. Last in Muscat, I was fortunate enough to sit down with Hassan Meer, an Omani artist and owner of the Stal Gallery, to better understand the artful Omani burgeoning.
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