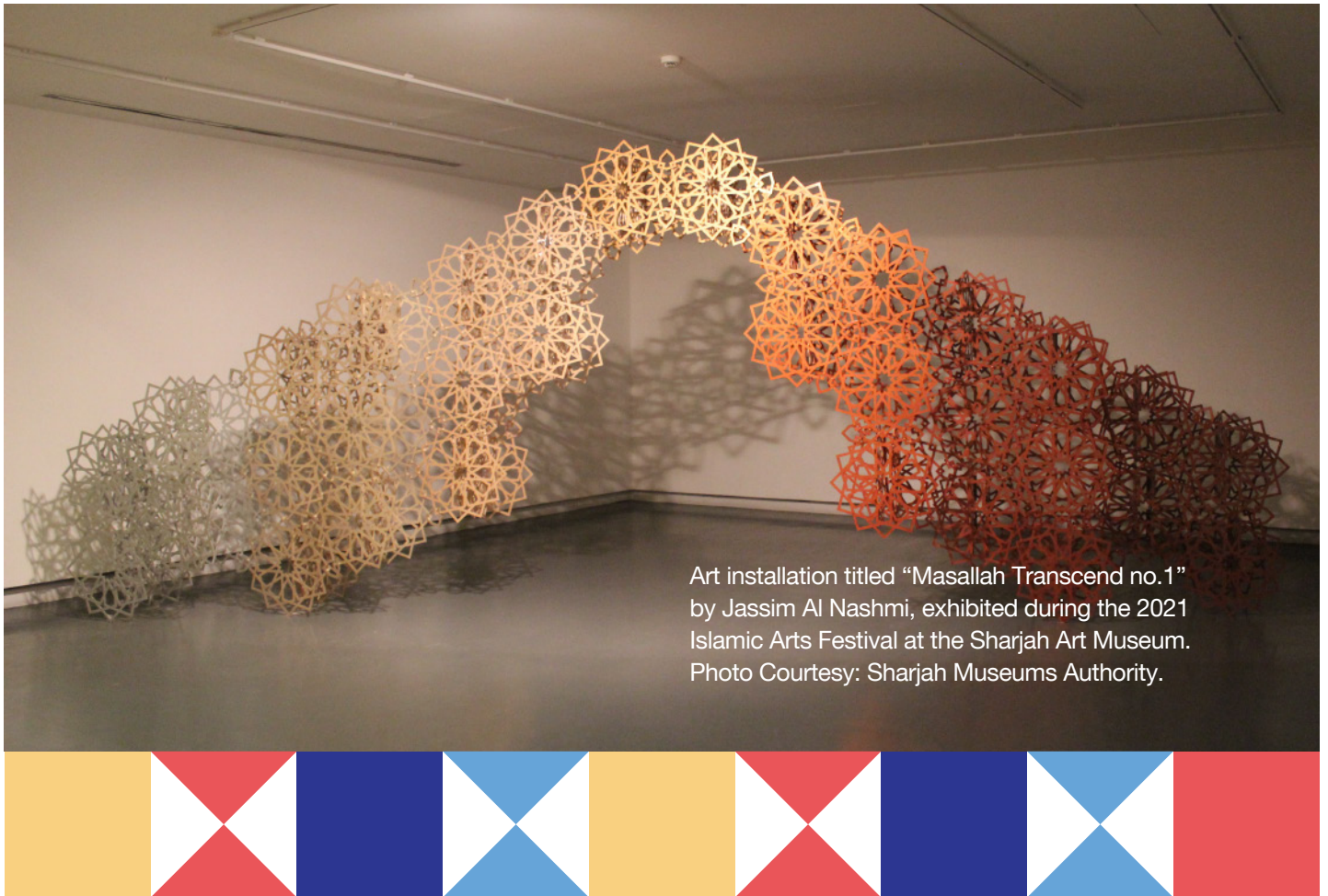


How Sharjah's Museums Are Driving Cross-Cultural Dialogue and Social Progress

Manal Ataya





Art installation titled "Masallah Transcend no.1" by Jassim Al Nashmi, exhibited during the 2021 Islamic Arts Festival at the Sharjah Art Museum. Photo Courtesy: Sharjah Museums Authority.

For decades, the emirate of Sharjah has been renowned for its commitment to culture, and its celebration of art, heritage, and literature. The emirate has been internationally recognized for its pioneering role, having been named Cultural Capital of the Arab World in 1998, Capital of Islamic Culture in 2014, and most recently, World Book Capital in 2019.

Sharjah's successful three-decade-long cultural trajectory is a direct result of the passion and personal interest of the scholar and historian, His Highness Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, the Ruler of Sharjah, and his

vision for advancing intellectual growth not only in the country, but in the wider region as well. Museums have always played a central role in the realization of His Highness' vision. They operate not only as enablers of social change and progress, but also as active agents in cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue.

When I began working at the Sharjah Museums Authority over 16 years ago, a strong foundation for the arts already existed in the emirate, which included Sharjah's Department of Culture and the Sharjah Art Biennial, as well as several well-established heritage and

theatre festivals. The creation of the Sharjah Museums Authority was a natural progression in the emirate's journey, and has, since its establishment in 2006, been responsible for building seven new museums, and refurbishing a handful more to improve collection displays and visitor experience.

Today, the authority manages 16 museums in total, with collections and exhibitions that highlight the United Arab Emirates' archaeology, heritage, and maritime history, in addition to Arab and Islamic art and architecture. All our projects combine national, regional, and international outlooks, which spring from an inherent identification with, and understanding of, issues that are critical to both local and global audiences.

As the museum sector in Sharjah developed over the years, starting quiet literally with the roots of communal life through the Archaeology Museum, it has become apparent that the collections and exhibitions in the emirate have organically mirrored the preoccupations of its diverse community, reflecting what is dear to its people, while also innovatively addressing their needs, questions, and concerns. Our museums, in this regard, have evolved into vital spaces that allowed citizens and residents in Sharjah to reflect on their past and proactively engage with their collective present and future.

Sharjah's museums also continue to play a critical role in the promotion of inclusive education in the emirate. We understand



The Sharjah Art Museum aims to promote representation of contemporary Arab artists in the global art scene. Photo courtesy: Sharjah Museums Authority.

the great responsibility we hold as curators to advance understanding of the human experience, and to foster an environment that enriches the process of learning, exploring, and critical thinking for our audiences. This is why a significant focus of our of emirate-wide museum strategy includes designing education programmes that champion inclusion and accessibility. We have witnessed first-hand the complexities of engaging diverse audiences in meaningful learning experiences, and this allowed us to use various tools to address those challenges, including new technologies and self-directed learning, in addition to the removal of physical, economic, and intellectual barriers in our museums.

We also look at museums as key vehicles that drive social progress, responsibility, and change, and we are glad to have seen this echoed more recently in other regional museums as well. The impact that museums have on socio-cultural values should not be underestimated. These spaces have the unique ability, through interpretation and representation, to push audiences to confront, and come to terms with, their own biases and prejudices. These experiences, whether at an individual or collective level, enable communities to unlearn many subjective opinions that they have regarded, for far too long, as unquestionable truths.



Sharjah Museum Authority regularly hosts community workshops to encourage interactive learning and engage audiences in the creative process. Photo Courtesy: Sharjah Museums Authority.



Bronze figurine from Mleiha, circa 250-150 BC, on display at the Sharjah Archeology Museum. Photo courtesy: Sharjah Museums Authority.

We have seen through our work at the authority that museums can, and should, empower their audiences not only by providing them with knowledge and awareness, but also by facilitating effective cross-cultural dialogue and exchange. We aim to illustrate to our audiences a greater understanding of the world as a vast place with diverse peoples that maintain views, ideas and opinions that are different from our own – and that should be both encouraged and celebrated. While this has not been an easy task, we have found it valuable to explore historical contexts that enabled positive interfaces between our region and the wider international community.



The Sharjah Museums Authority is committed to promoting inclusivity in museum spaces, and regularly organises educational workshops for both children and adults. Photo Courtesy: Sharjah Museums Authority.

Some of our successful endeavours include our joint exhibition with the Vatican Ethnological Museum in 2014, which brought together Sharjah and the Vatican in a groundbreaking project that symbolized interfaith friendship and understanding. Another example is our partnership with the Berlin Museum of Art in 2018, which highlighted significant cultural exchanges between both the Islamic civilisation and Europe throughout different time periods. We also have an upcoming exhibition later this month in collaboration with the Turin Museums in Italy, which will focus on the historical relationship between Muslim traders and the city of Venice.

I believe that fostering effective cross-cultural dialogue should also include addressing the struggles of underrepresented regions, which are often overlooked during international curatorial processes. This is why we are keen on providing multiple platforms to showcase contemporary Arab art practices that enrich and give greater balance to the representation of regional artists in global artistic settings. Local museum leaders in the region, as architects of public discourse, have greater power than they may recognize when it comes to increasing awareness of Arab art in modern and contemporary times. At the Sharjah Art Museum

in particular, we decided to permanently display work by Arab artists, and to provide a museum wing for the long-term display of the Barjeel Art Foundation's outstanding collection of modern Arab art. We have also committed to curating and hosting annual exhibitions that promote Arab artists in their first shows. This includes the annual Emirates Fine Arts Society group exhibition, the Islamic Art Festival and, additionally, the "Lasting Impression" series which showcases the significant careers of Arab artists including Dr Najat Meky, Abdulqader Al Rais, Ibrahim Al Salahi, Baya Mahieddine, Ismail Shammout and Tamam Al Akhal.

It is my hope that our audiences will continue to use our museums as open and safe spaces to advance critical conversations, as we continue to build more inclusive and diverse platforms going forward, and to further promote their role as vehicles of long-lasting change and progress.



About the Author

Manal Ataya is the Director-General of the Sharjah Museum Authority. She was awarded the Order of Art & Letters by the Republic of France in 2018 for her contributions to culture.

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