

AN OASIS IN LONDON

THE PARK GALLERY

A tireless protagonist of the Middle Eastern art scene for two decades, Robin Start of London's The Park Gallery speaks to **Anna Wallace-Thompson** about Orientalist painter-travellers, Modern Arab art and the importance of understanding our own history within the region.





This page:
Exterior view of The Park Gallery.
Photography by Sam Pelly.

Facing page:
The Park Gallery's Robin Start with
works by (left) Omar Onsi. *Une
Vue du Liban*. 1931. Oil on panel.
40.5 x 32.5 cm and (right) George
Cyr. (Detail) *Le Bal Musette*.
1953. Oil on canvas. 88 x 117 cm.
Photography by Joe Start.

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alf-hidden at the back, it hangs on the wall like a vision in a dream: a view of Lebanon's mountains, seen from a hilltop crowned by two graceful, slender trees. Works by some of the Middle East's greats are displayed at the gallery's forefront – Louay Kayyali's 1974 *Maaloula*, serene in its earthy browns and beiges; on the opposite wall, a striking oil on canvas by Fateh Moudarres in various shades of red holds pride of place. Yet here, amongst the grandeur of large-scale works by the likes of Paul Guiragossian, Adam Henein and Georges Sabbagh, it is this small piece, barely larger than 40 x 30 centimetres, hanging modestly above a small book case, which draws attention. The aptly titled *Une Vue du Liban* features Omar Onsi's bold strokes, the depth of colour bringing to life a verdant valley, giving way to rolling blue and purple hills. This work, so perfect in its execution and resonating with life and beauty is utterly unique, a true gem. Rather like The Park Gallery itself.



“The art market is always changing and as a dealer, you have to be prepared to adapt to and change with it.”

The gallery is a snug little space, nestled on a leafy street just off London’s famous Edgware Road. This is no large, industrial white cube, but a traditional gallery in every sense of the word, from its green exterior awning to the artworks displayed on easels. Inside, however, a treasure trove awaits. Alongside an extensive selection of Orientalist works, as well as British 18th and 19th century art, the Modern and Contemporary Arab collection also includes pieces by Saliba Douaihy, Hussein Madi, Omar El-Nagdi and more. More recently, a focus on a younger generation of Middle Eastern artists has seen Iraqi Hanaa Malallah join the gallery’s roster. Behind The Park Gallery is its founder Robin Start, whose background includes co-curating the inaugural Saudi Pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale and the cataloguing of the National Art Collection of Qatar in the early 1990s.

ROADS OF ARABIA

Start’s affinity with the Middle East, and particularly Saudi Arabia, goes back many decades. With a Saudi wife, regular trips to the Kingdom resulted in a 1993 solo show for Jeddah artist Maha Mufti and his involvement with the Saudi scene has continued unabated since. The gallery, however, was conceived in 1990, when Start sought to leave behind a financial career in London’s stock exchange to focus on his young family. Experience in dealing Orientalist works gave him the idea to set up a gallery and the following year, The Park Gallery opened its doors. Initially co-founded with an anti-

quarian friend, Start soon took over and has run it ever since.

In its early days, the space's focus was squarely on Orientalism (a genre Start credits the London-based Mathaf Gallery's Brian MacDermot with reviving, alongside authors and academics Lynne Thornton, Briony Llewellyn and Sarah Searight). From the greats such as Eugène Delacroix and David Roberts to lesser-known – yet no less significant – artists, Start painstakingly researches each work to put it into its historical context, sometimes with fascinating and illuminating results. "What particularly interested me were the painter-travellers," says Start, "the ones who really went out there and brought back – to a very hungry public – images of a part of the world that was only just beginning to become known to them."

Subsequently the gallery's shift to Modern Arab art happened "in tandem", alongside Start's foray into 18th and early 19th century British paintings and prints whilst still dealing in Orientalism. From 2000 onwards, Modern Arab art became firmly on the gallery's agenda. "The

art market is always changing and as a dealer, you have to be prepared to adapt to and change with it," he explains. However, promoting art purely for the sake of its investment potential is something Start tries to avoid, placing the work itself at the forefront and encouraging his clients to think outside of the box. "You must love the work, because you have to wake up the next morning and see it on your wall and still be in love with it. Otherwise, I haven't done my job properly," he smiles. "So, rather, as a gallerist you're attuning your client's eye to yours to a degree."

ALL IN CONTEXT

Start's extensive travels around the region, from the Atlantic coast of Morocco to Aleppo in Syria, have introduced him to countless artists and art world protagonists in locations that, sadly, are now impossible, or much more difficult to access. In a sense, Start was one of the few aware of the potential of the Middle Eastern art market before the Contemporary Middle Eastern market arrived on the international arena with a splash. "I wouldn't claim to have been the only one to



This page:
Abdullah Murad. (Detail)
Untitled, 1990. Mixed
media on canvas.
50 x 62 cm.

Facing page:
Hanaa Malallah.
(Detail) *My Country Map*.
2008. Layers of burnt
canvas with oil paint.
200 x 200 cm.

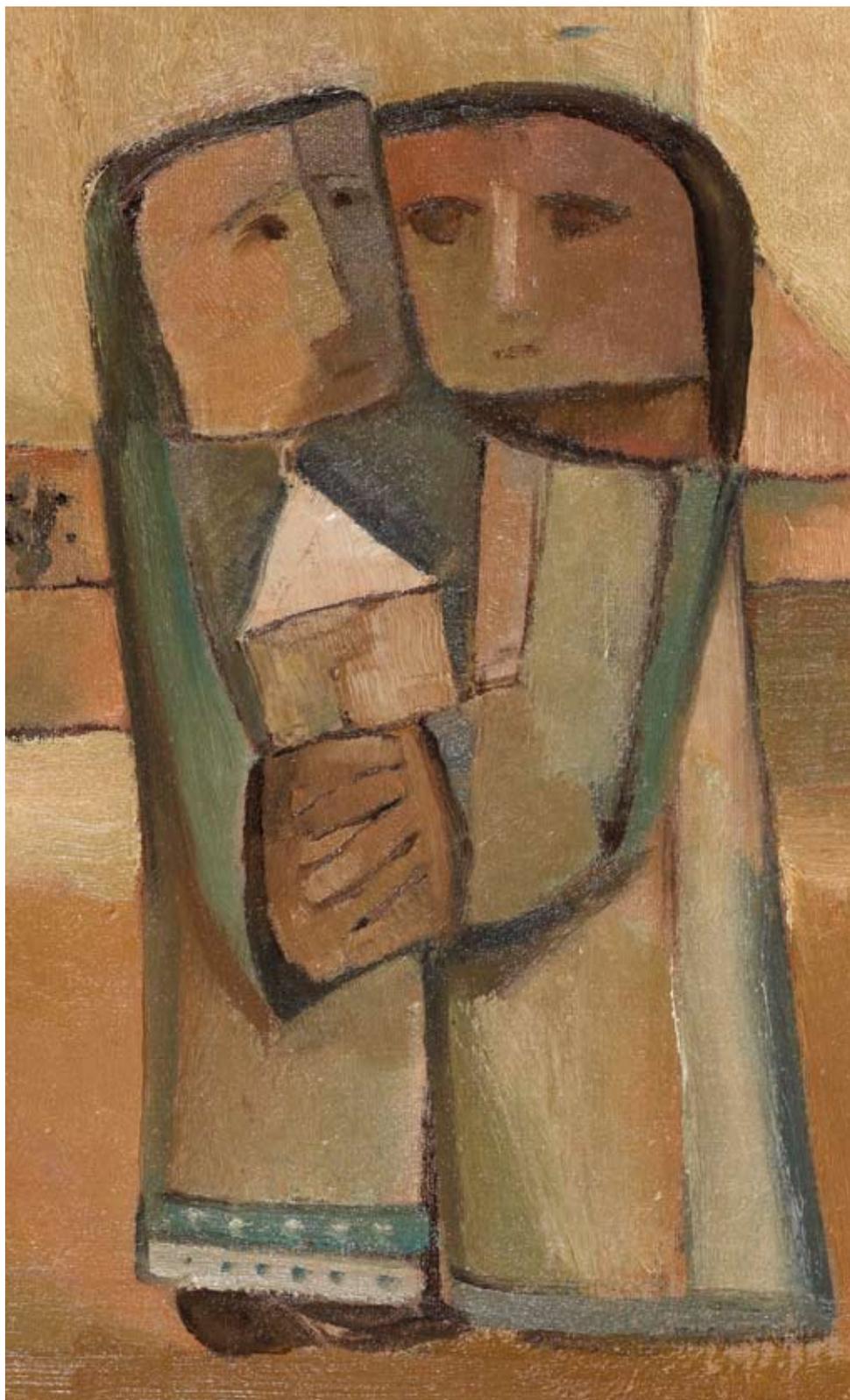


“It’s a very exciting time – the market is slowly being created and this generation is going to be the one which cements it and takes it forward.”

have gotten the timing right, but certain things were beginning to stir and other people were beginning to recognise that this was likely to become a market,” he muses. Indeed, for the gallery, acquisitions come through Start’s extensive and continuing travels in the Middle East, along with “a network of historic connections combined with detailed research.” Start also keeps a close eye on works that appear on the open market. “The aim is to identify and secure important works by major artists and present them in a way that describes their importance in relation to the period of their creation, both culturally and

socially,” he explains. “It is not enough to simply acquire a work by a highly regarded artist; the search is always for the work that best describes why the artist has received such recognition.”

While Start credits sales such as the groundbreaking Christie’s Dubai auctions of the Farsi Collection – which saw Modern Arab works set world records – he is keen to point out that, though the larger market is beginning to recognise Modern Arab art, “it is important to know that the Contemporary art scene hasn’t just sprung out of nowhere.” He stresses the need for “a history of art in the region” but is concerned



This page:
Ahmed Durak El-Sibai. *Notre Foyer*. 1979. Oil on canvas.
40 x 50 cm.

Facing page:
Georges Sabbagh. (Detail)
Lebanese Landscape. 1974.
Oil on canvas. 47 x 55.25 cm.

with “a rush to buy without actually asking where this has come from.” There is no question, however, about the role that auctions have played in bolstering the market, although there are a variety of reasons that Modern works are sold in such platforms. “Of course, it is also at times of great social upheaval that owners, for very practical reasons, sometimes find themselves compelled to sell,” says Start. “The other very simple reason is that with an increasingly visible art market, owners can easily see the value of their artwork increase in an appreciating market and may then choose to sell. Yes, there has been an increase in the amount of Modern work being sold, many the result of the current upheavals but this flow, especially of the finer works where supply is very limited, will quickly subside and I do not expect it to affect the continuing rise of the underlying market.” In fact, Start believes that this encourages new collectors to “engage and embolden existing ones.”

What then of the Arab Spring and its ramifications for the Middle Eastern art scene? “Currently the market for both Modern and Contemporary Arab art is growing and maturing; understandably and for very good reasons, there has been a focus of interest on the brilliant creativity and diverse technical ability of those artists now working,” he says. “The growth of demand for artistically creative expressions describing the seismic changes taking place in the Arab world, indeed the entire region, is mirrored by the increased flow of immediate information illuminating these changes. It is hardly surprising therefore, that given the desperate scale

GALLERY

and pace of such changes, we are seeing great and invariably thought-provoking artworks being created." Within this cultural renaissance, Start praises those that raise questions, yet points out that "the greatest works that will stand the test of time are the subtle ones. In my view, there has to be an aesthetic element – to be able to stand in front of it and know nothing about the artist or what the works means, and think 'isn't it wonderful!'"

For the future, Start plans to include Saudi art within the gallery roster, a long overdue move after that first show so many years ago. He also plans to participate in more fairs, and the gallery marked its first foray into the Arab art fair circuit at Abu Dhabi Art in 2011. "Fairs are almost a courtship, a meeting of minds," he says. The gallery has also weathered the financial crash, partially because Start believes that people have "recognised that art had the potential to be an asset class." Where traditional markets have crashed, art has thrived. "But what artists really need," stresses Start, "are collectors who are passionate enough about work to buy it because they want to have it on their walls."

The past 20 years have allowed Start to witness the Middle Eastern art scene come of age, something he finds extremely rewarding. "It's a very exciting time – the market is



This page:
Louay Kayyali. (Detail)
Maaloula. 1974. Oil on
Masonite. 95 x 95 cm.

Facing page:
Interior view of The Park
Gallery. Artworks, left to right:
Fateh Moudarres. (Detail)
Faces on Red. 1973. Oil on
canvas. 100 x 120 cm;
Paul Guiragossian. *Groupe*.
1981. Oil on canvas. 100
x 73 cm; Louay Kayyali.
*The Sweetcorn Vendor at
his Brazier*. 1974. Oil on
chipboard. 89.5 x 90.2 cm.
Photography by Sam Pelly.

All images courtesy The Park
Gallery, London.



slowly being created and this generation is going to be the one which cements it and takes it forward," he says. Two decades in the business have entailed many great moments, but one story comes to Start's mind – years ago, he bought a small oil painting of a souq in Cairo by little known British Orientalist William James Müller and displayed at a major London art fair. A lady who "hadn't bought anything of significance before was absolutely smitten by it," says Start. "She was retiring and living in a small house in West

London but did not hesitate and bought it." That was that, until three months later, when his telephone rang early in the morning. "She simply called to say 'I just wanted you to know that I've come downstairs and I'm having a cup of coffee and I'm looking at your painting,'" says Start. "If you can engage somebody with a piece of work in this way, then it's not about the money. It's what I really enjoy most about this business." 

For more information visit www.theparkgallery.com