

Narrating Syria Through Family-Run Arts Patronage

BY SHIREEN ATASSI

A patron is not simply a collector who gathers works of art for his own pleasure or a philanthropist who helps artists or founds a public museum, but a person who feels responsibility towards both art and artists together and has the means and will to act upon this feeling.

—Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

There has been a notable rise in the number of art consumers in the Middle East in the past few decades. Collections have become the topic of glossy books, magazine reviews and panel discussions, with almost all collectors fitting a standard personal profile. However, few debates address what makes a collector a true patron of art and culture.

Patrons serve a fundamental role in the development of art and culture at any given time or in any country. They are not merely consumers; they are also initiators, promoters of artistic freedom of expression and instigators of cultural discourse. It can be argued that an art patron possesses a certain sense of privilege, meaning that art acquisition is an activity usually reserved for those with the necessary means to afford it. But I strongly believe that with such privilege comes a great deal of responsibility to act appropriately, for the benefit of both artists and the art world. With the right cultural background and knowledge of art, one can act on this sense of responsibility, and make a transition from consumer to patron of art.

I was a teenager when my family's fascination with art began in the 1980s. I grew up in Homs in Syria, where little entertainment was available for those coming of age. Thus we resorted to reading, which was made possible by the abundance of books at home, for both my parents were avid readers. When my mother and my aunt wanted to set up a business, it was no surprise that they chose to establish a bookstore, which opened its doors in 1984.



In addition to selling books of all disciplines, they also used the store's attic space to exhibit decorative artworks. Those humble beginnings had far-reaching impact. The sisters eventually founded a full-fledged gallery in 1986.

In 1993, my mother set up Atassi Gallery in a quiet, residential neighborhood in Damascus. Shortly thereafter, the gallery became a beacon of cultural discourse and exchange. We exhibited Syrian and Arab artists, hosted panel discussions, symposiums and even performances. We published books and curated exhibitions in multiple cities, including Beirut, Amman, Cairo and, later, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. This was before the boom of the art market in the Arab Gulf countries; thus the gallery was managed as a cultural, rather than commercial, enterprise.

Arts patronage, in my family's case, started with the gallery and was extended to the way we live: passionately, freely and generously. Over the years, we acquired several hundred Syrian artworks of various techniques and mediums from the early 20th century until today.

In March 2016, Atassi Foundation for Arts and Culture was launched with the goal of preserving, promoting and even celebrating Syrian art and culture in order to counter current narratives of Syria and restore individual features that the world

no longer sees. The Foundation became our weapon to resist the pain and destruction that our country has faced. By creating the Foundation, we were no longer passive, but active initiators in maintaining the collective memory of artistic production in Syria.

In his book *The Museum of Innocence* (2008), Orhan Pamuk writes: "I'm afraid this museum craze in the West has inspired the uncultured and insecure rich of this country to establish ersatz museums of modern art with adjoining restaurants. This despite the fact that we have no culture, no taste and no talent in the art of painting. What Turks should be viewing in their own museums are not bad imitations of Western art but their own lives. Instead of displaying the Occidental fantasies of our rich, our museums should show us our own lives."

Our collection is by no means large by global—or even Middle Eastern—standards. However, it certainly stands witness to the real Syria; its strength stems from the story it tells. Every collection tells a kind of biographical story of its collectors, but ours takes on a nationalistic identity too. We started collecting not for the sake of simply building a collection, which is the case with many collectors these days, but with the intent of using it for a higher public objective.

We are a small family initiative and do not claim to have all the answers as to what or who is a true art patron. We do not even claim to be the only patrons of art and culture in Syria. Our story is made up of a number of events—some planned, others not—that make up our cultural history based on geographical, social and political stories. We believe in partnerships among private, public, commercial and nonprofit organizations. Together, we hope to bring Syria back into the light.

ILLUSTRATION BY CHLOE BENNETT

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