

Starting a Collection

| by Gregory Buchakjian

In 2012, I was invited to join an advisory committee in order to supervise the development of an art collection and museum. It was the initiative of the Saradar Group, a financial trust founded by a family of bankers. The Saradar Group had previously acquired artworks and supported artistic events here and there, but without a specific policy. These experiences led the CEO, Mario Saradar, to build a curated collection. He asked Lina Kiryakos to manage the project and assembled a board of experts.¹ The first meeting took place on 20 April 2012. That day, participants raised numerous questions that could be summed up by one single question:

How do you build a collection from scratch?

In my early twenties, I was studying for a Master's degree at the Sorbonne. The subject of my dissertation was a group of European old masters paintings in Lebanese collections. One day, I paid a visit to a lady whose husband had served as ambassador to the United Kingdom. During her stay in London, the diplomat's wife developed a passion for works on paper. She gathered hundreds of drawings and prints into a large album, following a tradition inaugurated by Giorgio Vasari, the sixteenth century painter and architect known for having written the lives of the great Renaissance artists. During the genesis of what was to become Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, considered to be the first book of art history, he amassed drawings spanning from Giotto to his contemporaries in the *Libro de' Disegni*, a portfolio he designed (today one could say curated) creating associations and compositions.² The lady's album was less sophisticated, although it was extremely interesting nonetheless, following her taste that was entirely off the beaten track. While carefully browsing the sheets, my eyes settled on a Renaissance engraving showing a winged figure. The lady removed the print and put it aside. When the visit ended and I stood up to leave, she said: "You forgot this!" holding up the print. "It's yours!" she added. I was extremely embarrassed. She insisted, saying that I was the first person who ever paid any interest to this stuff and that I deserved it. This is how I

¹ Quilty, 2015.

² Ragghianti Collobi, 1974, p. 11.

ended up with an *Allegory of Poetry* designed by Raphael and printed by Marcantonio Raimondi. It was the first piece in my own collection, and still the only one in the “Old Masters” section. And it didn’t cost me a penny.

Back to my research, the *pièce de résistance* was the Sursock-Cochrane mansion. It comprised many large 17th century Italian canvases. After he married Donna Maria Serra in 1920, Alfred Sursock visited crumbling Neapolitan palaces and, with the advice of his brother-in-law, selected mythological and religious paintings which he then shipped to Beirut. Most pieces were chosen regardless of their attributions. In 1968, Sursock’s daughter, Yvonne, and her husband, Sir Desmond Cochrane, visited an exhibition devoted to Guercino, a 17th century Italian master.³ After they saw a drawing that resembled one of their paintings, they contacted Denis Mahon, the top Guercino specialist. Mahon traveled to Beirut and identified the painting as one of Guercino’s masterpieces.⁴ Painted for Cardinal Serra, a papal legate, it had remained in the family and moved to Beirut after the Serra-Sursock marriage. When the Lebanese war started, the Sursock-Cochranes sold the painting to Charles Wrightsman who donated it to the Metropolitan Museum in New York.⁵ For two decades, the Guercino’s frame remained empty until Lady Cochrane commissioned a life size copy of the artwork to be hung in its place.

When I was writing my dissertation in the early 1990s little had been published about collectors. Times have changed and “collecting has become one of the keywords in contemporary art from the Middle East”.⁶ In 2013, the newly established AUB Art Gallery presented *Profiles: Collecting Art in Lebanon*. The most informative part of this exhibition was a series of filmed interviews conducted with a variety of figures including heirs (Anachar Basbous, Georges Corm), representatives of institutions (Zeina Arida of the Arab Image Foundation; and Dima Raad of the Ministry of Culture), and collectors (Saleh Barakat, Raymond Audi, Abraham Karabajakian, Cesar Nammour, Ramzi Saidi and Afaf Osseiran Saidi, and Tony Salamé) – some of whom also double as art dealers.⁷ These videos stand alongside the regular publication of fashionable portraits of art amateurs and collectors in magazines such as *Canvas*, and occasionally in coffee table books.⁸ While it is acknowledged that the private art collector has traditionally been “acting, for the most part, from behind [the] curtains”,⁹ this sudden mediatization is to be understood within a more global phenomenon spreading throughout the region:

“While the Palestinian territories have been transformed into an enclosed concentration camp and Baghdad is burning, new cultural capitals are shining: Doha’s Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Islamic Art, Abu Dhabi’s Louvre and Guggenheim, Dubai as the regional hub of the art market, Sharjah for its Biennial, and Muscat’s Royal Opera House. In *Luxury*, Martin Parr displays photographs of wealthy Arabs at glamorous parties and art exhibitions; Jeff Koons is a habitué of prestigious events on the shores of the Gulf; and Damien Hirst exports tons of items to that part of the world. Occasionally, some major publishing house or other launches a fancy book portraying patrons and

³ Guercino, *Dipinti e Disegni*, Palazzo dell’Archiginnasio, Bologna 1968.

⁴ Mahon, 1981.

⁵ Fahy, 2005, pp. 27-31.

⁶ Amaya-Akkermans, 2013.

⁷ Esanu, 2013.

⁸ Homayoun Eisler and Amirsadeghi, 2010.

⁹ Esanu, op. cit..

collectors posing in their posh apartments and mansions amidst their masterpieces.”¹⁰

While the most spectacular initiatives were rising in the Gulf, mainly in Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Island, Beirut was far from being a desert. Since the end of the war and emergence of the “new”, “post-conceptual” art practices, the art scene (including art spaces, commercial galleries and collections) has evolved considerably. By the time the Saradar Collection was up and running, the city was already hosting a number of public and private initiatives with very different attitudes and agendas:

- The Sursock Museum closed in 2008 for major renovation and expansion that saw a fivefold increase in its total surface area (from 1,500 square meters to 8,500 square meters), it opened in 2015 with a new team under the direction of Zeina Arida. Plans include growing the permanent collection through long-term loans (the first being the Fouad Debbas Collection), bequests and acquisitions.
- The Ministry of Culture holds a collection of Lebanese modern art that was never housed in a permanent exhibition space. Most pieces are in storage in the UNESCO building, while others are housed in government buildings. Minister Raymond Araygi took the initiative of developing a Virtual National Museum of Modern Art.¹¹ Launched in 2016, the website includes a selection of the collection’s 800 artworks and filmed documentaries, some from the archive of the national broadcaster, Télé Liban, others produced by ALBA students.
- The American University of Beirut (AUB) inaugurated two art spaces in 2012: The Rose and Shaheen Saleeby Museum on Sidani street, on the basis of a donation of Dr. Samir Saleeby to AUB; and the Byblos Bank Art Gallery on the university’s campus.
- The Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon (APEAL): After organizing group exhibitions in Washington (2011) and London (2012) and the Lebanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2013), APEAL launched the initiative to assemble a museum of Lebanese modern and contemporary art to be built on a plot owned by Université Saint-Joseph (USJ) near the National Museum. APEAL doesn’t have its own collection yet. The forthcoming museum could potentially include loans from the Ministry of Culture and from private collections such as the KA Collection.
- Aishti Foundation: Tony and Elham Salamé have surfaced in the international art scene through collecting, acting as patrons for major events such as the Venice Biennale, and art dealing (through the Metropolitan Art Society, an art space in Achrafieh, Beirut). In 2015, the Aishti Foundation inaugurated its space inside a shopping mall designed by starchitect David Adjaye. The vast majority of the artists are ‘hot’ international names with few Lebanese (who are all already firmly established).
- Private collectors such as KA collection (Roger Akoury and Abraham

¹⁰ Buchakjian, 2012, p. 107.

¹¹ Online [<http://artmodernmv.gov.lb>], accessed July 21, 2016.

Karabajakian) and Ramzi Dalloul who have transformed apartments into exhibition spaces. Apart from Lebanese art, KA also includes Armenians and members of the Armenian diaspora; while Dalloul, who plans to create a private museum, includes work from the entire Arab world.

- Photographic Collections: the Arab Image Foundation, the Bibliothèque Orientale's Photography Fund, and the Fouad Debbas Collection (on loan at the Sursock Museum).
- Not specifically contemporary art oriented institutions, such as Dar el-Nimer (opened in 2016), the National Library and Beit Beirut (both in development).
- Non-commercial art spaces without permanent collections such as Beirut Art Center and Ashkal Alwan. The Hangar at Umam was still operational during this period but has largely stopped its activities since then.

Beyond the big picture (the Beirut art scene), the bigger picture (the Middle-East/Arab World art scene) and the biggest picture (the global art scene), an even deeper question than "How do you build a collection from scratch?" was raised by the Saradar Collection committee members:

Where do we stand?

The Saradar Collection is corporate, and this means two things: The first is that it is supposed to make all its acquisitions from dealers, artists, auctions or collectors and cannot expect any donations (except from the Saradar family's own private collection). Accordingly, the second is that the collection is not accountable to any other authority or public. This liberty is simultaneously a privilege and a responsibility. It forms the fundamental difference between an institutional collection and an individual person who can do whatever they want with their money.

Let's go back to the example of the former ambassador's wife. Her collection has mainly been motivated by her love of the sense of humor and irony expressed by Thomas Rowlandson and William Hogarth. If this same collection were to be, let's say, curated by a board of experts, they would have needed to define a structural frame, "social satire in Europe during the age of revolutions", for example. So, returning to the committee meetings, precise directions needed to be settled before the initial acquisitions: Is it a collection of "International" or "Middle-Eastern" or "Arab" or "Lebanese" art? Does it follow a chronology and is it limited to "modern" or contemporary" or "modern and contemporary" or eventually "old masters" or even the "ancient world"? What kind of media and objects should be included: paintings, works on paper, sculpture, installation, video, performance, decorative arts, or archeological findings?

Building an "international" collection seemed like nonsense for various reasons. A scope as broad as the "Middle East" or "Arab world" was also out of reach, at least in the short or medium term. Not only because most of the committee members (including myself) had little or no expertise in most of those countries but, essentially, because superficial coverage of such a vast area would be ridiculous, especially in the face of an institution such as Doha's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. By the process of elimination, it became obvious that Saradar will essentially focus on or around Lebanon.

So, what does it mean, in the 2010s, to create such a collection? Is the aim to gather as many pieces from “important” and “recognized” Lebanese artists as possible? But according to which criteria? Auction results? Presence in international curated exhibitions and museums? How and why would you pick this and not that? In order to navigate this ocean of interrogations, the committee agreed to define a general theme. The theme that imposed itself most naturally was a portrait or a landscape of Lebanon. It needn’t be restrictive or limited to the classical landscapes of painting and photography, and would include social, political, historical or even intimate representations. It had the advantage of being broad enough to include a large variety of artworks. Nevertheless, it constituted a filter that would force us to choose the most appropriate pieces by the artists concerned.

Money Talk

The collection operates with a provisional annual acquisitions budget. That being said, what amount of money will be available and for what? And why? This issue is not brought up here as an accountant’s problem but as a problem of aesthetics and ethics. Prices are high and continue to rise. And this is nothing new. For example, from 1640 to 1700, the cost of a Nicolas Poussin, the champion of French classicism, increased fourfold.¹² Nowadays, nobody would consider paying millions for a Poussin crazy. Not only prices are high, but the market is also exceedingly volatile. This also is not new. In seventeenth century Rome, “pictures were bought, sold, inherited, speculated on and exchanged with bewildering speed so that biographers often no longer found it worth recording where a painter’s works were at the time of writing”.¹³ Four centuries later, things have become much more complicated, and the amounts of money poured into the business of art so important that one wonders how sustainable it can be. The global art scene looks like a game where every player tries to manoeuvre their own pawns:

1. Art dealer introduces artist they represent to influential curator.
2. Curator exhibits artist at biennial or (ideally) at documenta.
3. Prices rise.
4. Wealthy collector(s) acquire(s) piece(s) by the artist.
5. When wealthy collector(s) is/are influential enough and happen to be on the board of a museum, they may advise an acquisition or donate a piece by artist.
6. Prices rise.
7. Repeat.

As public funding dries up and museums rely more and more on private money for their acquisitions and special exhibitions, one can ask questions about the system’s legitimacy and sustainability, especially when a ‘hot’ young artist loses 80% of their value after a market bubble bursts.¹⁴ On the other hand, if someone is still wondering why there is so much money pouring into the art world – apart from the obvious answer that being

¹² Schnapper, 2005, p. 78.

¹³ Haskell, 1980, p. 10.

¹⁴ Kazakina, 2016.

an art patron is fashionable and often more honorable than whatever else they do – a less prosaic explanation lies in a reality many of us would rather disregard: art is the only business that isn't regulated, the others being illegal trafficking (drugs, arms, organs, slaves, etc.). As Luis Teixeira de Freitas brilliantly summed up in an intervention at the Sfeir-Semler Gallery: "We are in good company!"¹⁵

In response to this global hysteria, and as Lina Kiryakos regularly affirms, "We have a responsibility to regulate the market." In other words, to make acquisitions for what one considers a fair amount of money. People tend to forget that it is still possible to find interesting pieces at affordable prices. This is how I managed to build my own collection, discovering rare gems in galleries, artist studios and auctions. In a series of portraits of art patrons published by *Le Commerce du Levant*, I appeared as the "penniless collector".¹⁶ At that time, my latest acquisition was a photograph by Daido Moriyama I brought from Art Basel. Getting a print by such a famous artist, and getting something at an art fair that has the reputation of being limited to billionaires were equally unimaginable. Back in the 1970s, Deutsche Bank devised a concept that was not very far off:¹⁷

"The idea was that collecting for a corporation should not primarily be about financial investment. The average purchase is relatively inexpensive and could be made by most people working in the company. The aim is to use the corporation's offices as a way of engaging with the communities in which they are set, rather than creating ivory towers."

When the Saradar Collection's committee members discuss an acquisition, the price is always on the table. Not because the members are paying out of their own pockets, but because it's important that the price be appropriate. Defining what price is fair and what price is not is a tricky task that requires the evaluation of many parameters, some subjective (the auratic and emotional presence of the piece), and others more tangible (such as the availability or rarity of the artist's works on the market).

So where do we go now?

Making choices surpasses aesthetic and financial considerations. The advantage of the collection is not to proclaim, "We have the most beautiful Rayess, Charaf, Caland, Manoukian, Hatoum, Zaatari, Raad, Hadjithomas and Joreige!" (even if that might be the case), but to establish new readings and perspectives. More than a collection for show, or a collection as spectacle, we could say it's a critical collection or a collection worthy of study. It's about how the connections between artworks can contribute to an art history and, in a broader sense, to human and social sciences in Lebanon and the wider region. This is where collecting becomes a political act, in the same sense that making art is a political act. Even if this seems ambitious, it may lead us to reconsider the role of collecting and, eventually, museums as in the early 21st century:

"The museum establishes itself not as an archive but as a ritual in which the nation is staged – it is primordially theatrical, more than a form of documentary. The rise of new state-of-the-art regional museums and art institutions (particularly in Turkey and the Gulf states) elicits criticism about the absence of certain

¹⁵ Teixeira de Freitas, 2015.

¹⁶ Rozelier, 2014.

¹⁷ Hicks, 2016.

larger themes that have either dominated or shaped local histories, but this criticism is oblivious of the fact that in its Western setting, the museum was conceived as an ideological narrative that would present itself as an established political reality. This state of affairs is further confused by the rise of collecting practices and museums at a time when Western art has not only abandoned the trajectory of art history as a grand narrative but also eroded the role of the museum as the sole authority of what is being remembered, turning remembrance into an activity of the present tense rather than a structure of the past.”¹⁸

When back in the 1990s “new”, “post-conceptual” practices arose in Lebanon, there was a necessity to fill a gap produced by a postwar policy dominated by amnesia and the impossibility to write a coherent collective history. This situation led artists to deploy strategies, including the use of archives. In this precise case, memory was not seen as an aim but a means:

“I am not telling in order to remember; on the contrary, I am doing so to make sure that I have forgotten. Or, at least, that I have forgotten some things, that they were erased from my memory. When I am certain that I’ve forgotten, I attempt to remember what it is that I’ve forgotten.”¹⁹

A corporate art collection launched in 2012 can barely be comparable with a generation of artists who emerged two decades earlier (and who, moreover, “insist on not being considered a collective in any sense”).²⁰ Nonetheless, these two experiments share one thing in common: questioning how can art be, not just a symptom, but also what T.J. Demos terms an act of counter-memory:

“Counter-memory is a practice of memory formation that is social and political, one that runs counter to the official histories of governments, mainstream mass media, and the society of the spectacle. It involves the memorialisation—a collective practice of relearning—of forgotten, suppressed, and excluded histories, which then becomes an act of political subjectification.”²¹

From this perspective, the success and the uniqueness of the Saradar Collection will not necessarily be measured by its size and its financial weight, but by the discourses and debates it will succeed in triggering.

¹⁸ Amaya-Akkermans, op. cit.

¹⁹ Mroué, 2006.

²⁰ Rogers, 2012, p. 36.

²¹ Demos, 2012.

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Buchakjian's research deals with modern and contemporary art in Lebanon, focusing on city and history. From 2009 to 2016, he explored derelict buildings. Articulated around photography, the project encompasses mapping, architectural exploration, archive collecting and narratives. It generated a PhD dissertation: 'Abandoned Dwellings in Beirut. Wars and Transformation of the Urban Space. 1860-2015'. The relation between photography and urban and social narratives is also present in recent publications such as: Fouad Elkoury, *Passing Time* (Beirut, Kaph Books: 2017) and *Traversées Photographiques. Le journal du Docteur Cottard* (Beirut, Arab Image Foundation: 2017).

He is member of the advisory committee of the Saradar Collection and took part in many academic and artistic juries including Sursock Museum Salon d'Automne (2009), Villa Empain's Boghossian Prize (2012), Beirut Art Center's Exposure (2013) and Beirut Art Residency (2017).

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