

# Mazen Soueid's 20-Year-Old Art Collection Covers Over 40 Middle-Eastern And International Artists

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*Loulia and Mazen Soueid standing beside their art collection. Painting, top right: Bengt Lindstrom. Saint George and the Dragon. Oil on canvas. 90x74cm; Sketch, centre: Youssef Abdelke. Still life with Fish. 2006. Charcoal on paper mounted on board. 84x190cm; Painting and sculpture, on the sideboard: Hussein Madi. Birds. 1969. Oil on board. 25x35cm; Bird eating apple. 1993. Wrought Iron. 50x29x18cm. Sculpture, on the table: Polles. Woman. Bronze edition 3 of 4. 60x30x30cm.*

By now focusing our collection on the work of a few artists, we feel like we're on a journey with them," says [Beirut-based Lebanese collector, economist and entrepreneur](#) Dr Mazen Soueid. Two years ago, Soueid and

his wife Loulia Berbir, an artist, changed their approach to collecting. Their 20-year-old collection of over 300 works encompasses over 40 modern and contemporary Middle Eastern and international artists, covering mostly Lebanon and Syria. Among these, is an extensive collection of work by the Syrian artist Fateh Moudarres. “Moudarres was a great avant-gardist,” says Soueid, whom I interviewed alone.



*Abed Kadiri. Al Maqama. 2015. Oil and charcoal on canvas. 140x150cm.*

Today, the [collector couple](#) have narrowed their scope to a handful of artists whose work they follow more closely. “We discovered that we had grown to love a few of these artists, and wanted to enjoy a more concentrated approach,” says Soueid. An untitled red abstract painting from 1963 by Moudarres hangs in Soueid’s living room. “It feels so contemporary and almost like a prophecy when you look at Syria today.” Berbir’s mother is a Syrian from the Moudarres family.

Alongside Moudarres, the other modern artist to receive Berbir and Soueid’s attention is the [Lebanese painter and printmaker Hussein Madi](#), whose large abstract painting *Birds* (2013) hangs next to Moudarres’

abstract work. “Madi is a complete artist. He’s so diverse in media and subjects, yet there is a unifying philosophy behind his work,” says Soueid, “He is faithful to his Islamic and Eastern roots, but his language is universal.”

Meanwhile, the couple has also focused their collecting on contemporary Lebanese artists. “If we catch them while they’re young then we can grow together.” The Lebanese artist Ayman Baalbaki’s *Al Mulatham* (2012), from his series of expressionist depictions of fighters, also forms part of their collection.



*Ayman Baalbaki. Al Mulatham. 2012. Acrylic on canvas. 150x100cm.*

Forging relationships with the artists they collect is important to Berbir and Soueid. “I know it’s important to separate the artist from their work,” says Soueid, “but I like to know the artists very well.” In a portrait of the

couple entitled *Dear Art Lover* (2015) by Lebanese artist [Mohammed Rawas](#), Berbir appears as both the muse and the artist, surrounded by icons from world art history, while painting an image of her husband. The piece is based on Rawas' earlier painting *Posted Letter* (1974), expressed as a letter to a former girlfriend, which is also part of the collection.

“Rawas was revisiting his old works and asked if I could recommend a model. I proposed my wife who considers him a mentor and adores his work.” While collectors have become increasingly involved in creative collaborations with artists, Soueid prefers to support without trying to influence. “Good artists don't like to talk about their art. They like us to discover the work ourselves,” he says, “Good art raises questions.”

Travel, both regional and international, has always had a profound influence on Soueid's approach to collecting. As a child, his parents often brought back art objects from their trips around the world. When Soueid joined the [International Monetary Fund in D.C.](#) in his 20s, he built his first collection based on his travels to developing countries. “My father encouraged me to buy local artworks and craft pieces,” he recalls.

“I really owe a lot to my parents,” says Soueid. Ahead of his return to Beirut in 2006, his mother encouraged him to look at Lebanese artists. “She wanted me to support Lebanese art and took me to meet Rawas,” Soueid recalls. The first two pieces that he bought were a result of that visit to Rawas. “After I met Loulia, we started to build the collection more seriously together.”



*Fernandez Arman. Maquette for End of War. 1993. Cement and steel. 60x40x40cm.*

For Soueid, collecting is primarily a personal lifestyle decision. “I enjoy art and I want my two kids to be surrounded by art,” he explains. “Art allows

you to understand how you've changed as a person. It is a form of self-discovery. That's why I keep going back to Madi (Le grand Maître). With age I understand that less is more." He speaks openly about buying art as an investment. "Art has an emotional and monetary value.

While investment is not my primary goal, I won't deny that I like that duality," he explains, "leaving art behind for your children also tells them a lot about you." Soueid also views art and collecting as an important social tool. "When you are surrounded by beautiful things you tend to be more civilised, peaceful and creative. So art has yet an important role to play in Lebanon and the Middle East," he says.

While regional instability makes the headlines, sceptics believe that it also drives the [Middle Eastern art market](#). Yet Soueid generally avoids artwork that is overtly political or explicitly addressing conflict. "I want to appreciate art for its own sake," says Soueid. "Often, art is great just because of its beauty. All art makes a statement. What is not explicitly political is sometimes political."

Nonetheless, the couple's most recent acquisition is *At Sea* (2015-16) by [Abed Al Kadiri](#) and it depicts the recent refugee crisis. "It took me forever to convince the artist to sell it to me. Kadiri is the best of his generation in the way he is documenting these defining moment in Arab history," says Soueid. The pair owns another painting by the artist depicting the destruction of cultural heritage in Mosul by IS. "These are defining moments in the era in which we lived," explains Soueid.

Beirut's lively art scene relies on privately-owned collections and foundations due to the country's weak public institutions. "Collectors play an important role in supporting these artists," says Soueid. Artists from Syria and Iraq, fleeing conflict or persecution in their own countries, have chosen to base themselves in the city.



*Hussein Madi. Generale 2. 1972. Oil on board. 50x70cm.*

Hanging by the dining table is an enigmatic [charcoal sketch by the dissident Syrian artist](#), Youssef Abdelke. Executed in 2006, it portrays two plates, one empty, the other with three fish. “Abdelke’s still lifes are economic and political landscapes of the Arab world,” said Soueid, “I view the full and empty plates in that painting as a comment on the inequalities of income distribution. Maybe that’s the economist in me.”

Yet more can be done to support culture in Lebanon and the Middle East, argues Soueid. “We need more art in public spaces. As collectors in the Arab world, maybe we’re compensating for the lack of public art and museums. We build cocoons in our apartments.” Governments and big businesses should also contribute, he says.

“Western cities often invest a lot in art in public spaces. Behind these public works are the decisions of smart governments and strong corporate social responsibility from big businesses. They understand that art contributes to peace, which also grows business,” says Soueid, who also lectures at the [American University of Beirut](#). “I wish we had more of this



in the region.”



*Mazen Soueid amidst artworks by Hussein Madi. Sculpture, front: Rooster at sunrise. 2011. Wrought iron. 90x50x25cm; Paintings, left to right: Woman. 1989. Mixed media on paper. 100x70cm; Autumn leaves*

*at sunset. 1997. Acrylic on canvas. 150x160cm. Sculpture, back: Bird. 2010. Wrought iron. 110x60x35cm.*

Meanwhile, the couple's decision to focus on an artist's life work could make important contributions to knowledge about Lebanese and Middle Eastern art historical canons. Soueid hopes to publish a book about his collection in the future. "It's too early to think about a legacy, I'm still in my 40s," he says. "I might open a small Mazen and Loulia Soueid public museum one day.