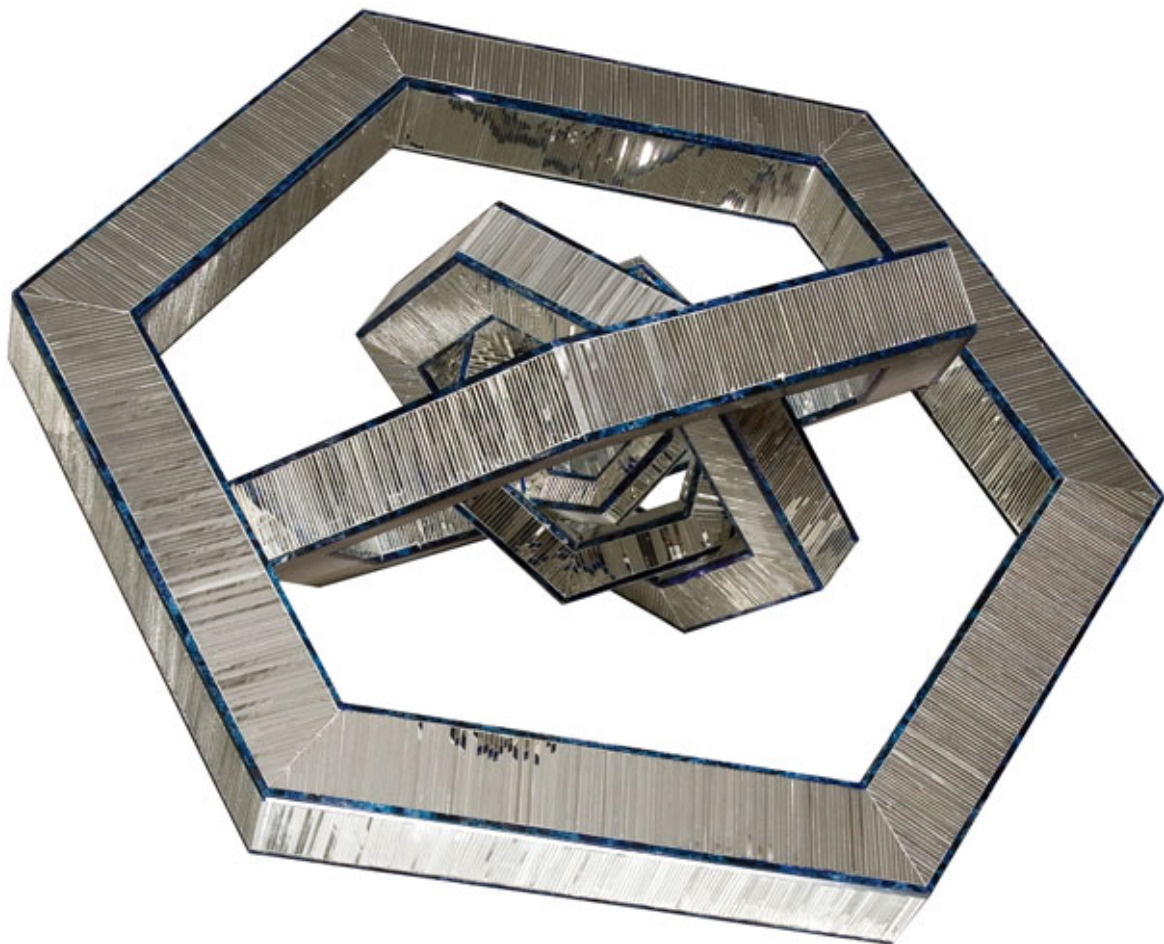


# Arab Spring: Modern Middle Eastern Art Finds a New Audience in the West

[Andrew Russeth](#)



[Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian](#), *Untitled (Sculpture 2)*, 2008.

©MONIR SHAHROUDY FARMANFARMAIAN/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE THIRD LINE, DUBAI

One recent morning, art historian [Nada Shabout](#) was telling me about her search for a graduate program two decades ago. “When I contacted universities and said I wanted to work on modern Arab art, they would say, ‘What is that? There is no such thing!’” Shabout said. Academics

pointed her to Middle Eastern studies or Islamic art departments. “Now, at least,” she said, “schools are not saying that.”

Shabout earned a Ph.D. in the humanities from the University of Texas at Arlington and is currently an associate professor of art history at the University of North Texas. She is one of a small band of curators and art historians in the West who specialize in [modern Middle Eastern art](#)—avant-garde art made in the region beginning in the middle of the last century, frequently in dialogue with peers in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere.

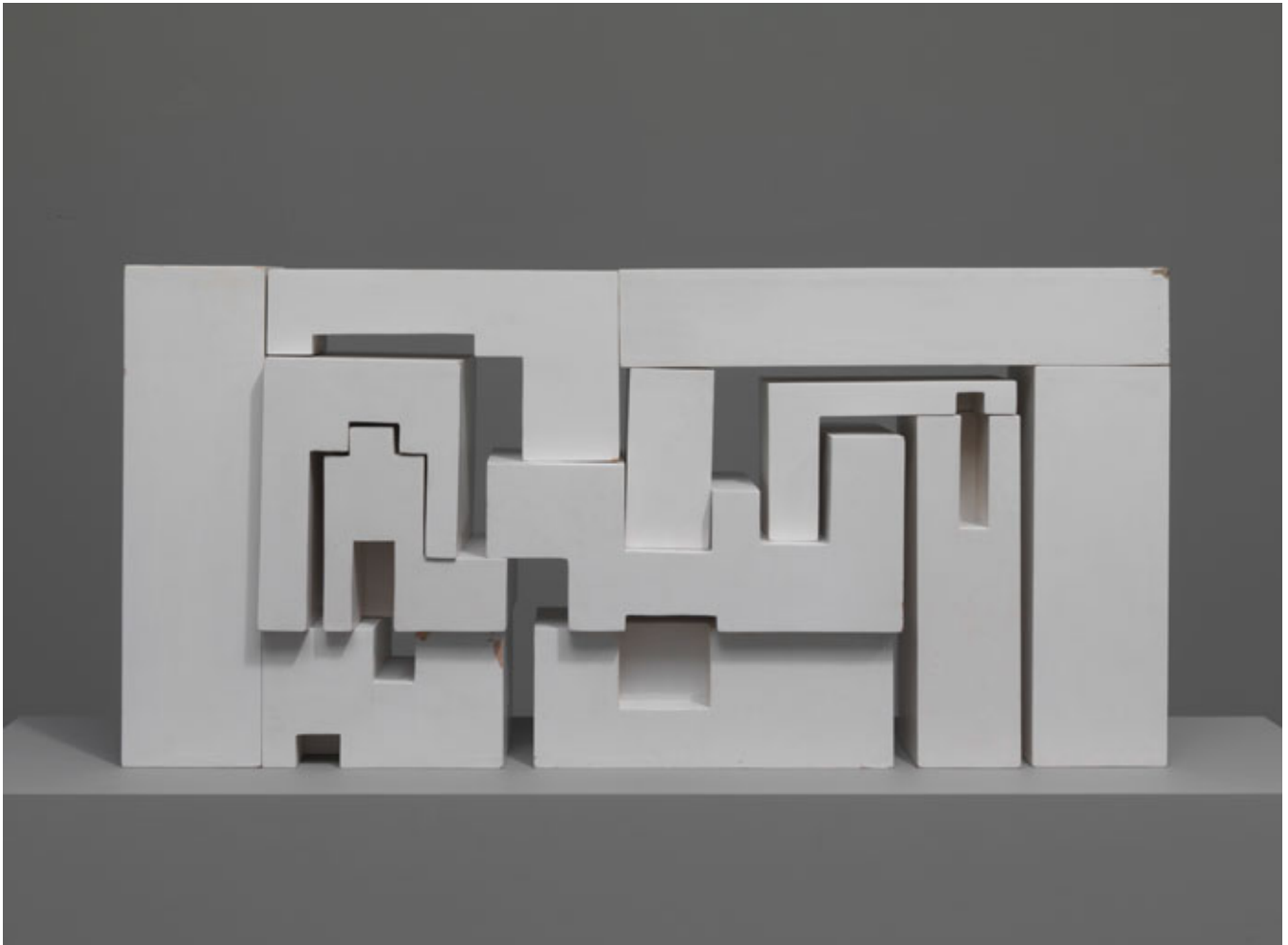
Though contemporary art from the area (the Middle East, MENASA, MENAM—picking a term is tricky) has recently received quite a bit of international notice, thanks to an ascendant market and generous governmental funding, there is still scant knowledge in the West of earlier, modern work. Nevertheless, despite daunting financial, political, and logistical hurdles, a picture of 20th-century Middle Eastern modernism is emerging, and the next few years will see a number of milestones.

“People would look at the work of the Arab modernists and say, ‘This is really pastiche. They’re just copying Picasso or Braque,’” said [Venetia Porter](#), the assistant keeper of Islamic and contemporary Middle Eastern art at the [British Museum](#), which has been a leader in the field.

“In fact,” she continued, “these Middle Eastern artists were going to Paris and Rome to study, sometimes on government scholarships, and of course they were picking up what everyone else was picking up. But the really interesting thing was that they were going back to their own countries and producing work that had new themes. So an Iraqi artist, for example, might be using Cubism to depict a Baghdad street scene.”

“There’s a burgeoning awareness that the story of art as we’ve known it and taught it and presented it is only one story, and that there are many

others," [Iwona Blazwick](#), the director of London's [Whitechapel Gallery](#), said. "There are multiple modernisms."



[Saloua Raouda Choucair](#), *Poem Wall*, 1963–65.

©SALOUA RAOUDA CHOUCAIR FOUNDATION/COURTESY TATE MODERN

The Whitechapel exhibition ["Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915–2015,"](#) on view through April 5, attempts to connect those modernisms, beginning in Moscow with Kazimir Malevich and charting the development of geometric abstraction around the globe over the past century. Included in the show is Lebanese artist [Saloua Raouda Choucair](#) (b. 1916), who studied in Paris with Fernand Léger around 1950 and developed a style of fluid, richly colored painting, both figurative and abstract, and totemic sculpture made of smooth, interlocking organic forms.

Tate Modern presented a [solo exhibition](#) of Choucair in 2013, when she

was virtually unknown in the West. “It really came out of a rather bizarre series of coincidences,” said [Jessica Morgan](#), who organized the show as curator of international art at the museum. “I saw a work of hers in a gallery in Beirut, and asked about the piece. I found out she was still alive and I said, ‘Can I go and see her?’ We went over to her studio, and her entire life’s work was there, basically, because she hadn’t really sold anything. It was a complete revelation.”

Morgan, who is now director of the [Dia Art Foundation](#) in New York, acquired Tate Modern’s first Choucair as part of a broader effort to collect work from the Middle East and the surrounding region. The museum also bought pieces by modern artists like the Iraqi abstract painter [Dia Al-Azzawi](#) (b. 1939) and Iranian sculptor [Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian](#) (b. 1924), whose kaleidoscopic glass mosaics on shaped supports add a new chapter to the history of hard-edge painting.

“Many of these artists were from countries like Lebanon or Iraq that have experienced a great deal of upheaval, and often the work had not been shown simply because there weren’t conditions for showing it,” Morgan said. “At the same time, all of this archival material was in danger of being lost or not taken care of, or the work itself was not necessarily in a safe place. I think there is a role for us to play in researching but also caretaking and conserving.”

Farmanfarmaian, who lived in New York in the 1950s and studied at Parsons, is having a late career surge in the West. She appeared in the [2014–15 Prospect 3](#) triennial in New Orleans organized by Los Angeles County Museum of Art curator Franklin Sirmans, and her first U.S. solo survey show, titled “Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Infinite Possibility. Mirror Works and Drawings 1974–2014,” just opened [at the Guggenheim](#), where it runs through June 3.

The Guggenheim’s Abu Dhabi branch, which is scheduled to open in 2017, has acquired “several dozen” examples of Arab and Iranian

modernism, including a Monir from the 1970s, Richard Armstrong, the director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim and Guggenheim Foundation, told me. The Guggenheim is also planning additional exhibitions of modern art from the region and scholarship projects about the artists who created it.

Why are Western museums showing so much interest? Armstrong noted that developments in culture often mirror those in the economic world, and since countries in the region have become powerful financial players over the past 25 years, it's to be expected that their under-appreciated art is now being given a close look. "Beyond that," he said, "two items have come up. One is cheap travel—it used to be a commitment to fly—and the other thing is, digital media allows us a kind of superficial familiarity with a range of information that wasn't available previously." Only now are Western institutions beginning to understand how much they are missing.



[Huguetta Caland](#), *Bribes de Corps*, 1973.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LOMBARD FREID GALLERY, NY

Also participating in P.3 was Lebanese painter [Huguetta Caland](#) (b. 1931),

with landscape-like paintings from the 1970s harboring racy images of butts and breasts. [Etel Adnan](#), the Lebanese American poet and painter of colorful abstractions that likewise refer to landscapes, has earned spots in [Documenta 13](#) (2012), the [2014 Whitney Biennial](#), and other international shows.

The Iranian-born sculptor [Parviz Tanavoli](#) (b. 1937), who spent time working in Italy in the 1950s and who makes elegant, intricate metal sculptures that recall David Smith's, is also experiencing an upswing; his first U.S. museum show is now [on view at the Davis Museum](#) at Wellesley College in Massachusetts through June 7.

"Exhibitions that are either regionally or thematically focused, or that are retrospectives of a single artist's work, is the direction we're going in now," said [Layla Diba](#), an independent curator and art adviser. Diba, a former curator of Islamic art at the Brooklyn Museum, cocurated ["Iran Modern,"](#) the first survey of modern Iranian art in the United States, at New York's Asia Society in 2013.





Parviz Tanavoli, *Neon Heech*, 2012, on view at Davis Museum at Wellesley College.

JOHN GORDON/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DAVIS MUSEUM AT WELLESLEY COLLEGE

Assembling such shows is not always an easy task. "Given the vagaries of international politics and the lack of diplomatic relations between America and Iran, we needed to be sure that there was enough museum-quality work of the period available outside of Iran for us to do this show, and that was the case," Diba said. "One of the upsides of international diasporas is that collectors emerge who have acquired art from the region that they came from." No works were borrowed from Iranian institutions for the exhibition, but the artist [Ahmad Aali](#) (b. 1935) did lend a self-portrait, which required special approval from the U.S. Office of

## Foreign Assets Control.

Scholars in the field are still few, but their number is growing. "One of the problems my students have is when they want to research something, they can't find the documents," Shabout said. "Even today, many of the books that are published in the Middle East are not available in the rest of the world." To amend this, Shabout and two colleagues are currently compiling a primary-source anthology that the Museum of Modern Art is slated to publish.

In stark contrast to other art-world entities, auction houses are playing a surprisingly vital role in research. "We're rewriting the history with [our auction] catalogues," [Hala Khayat](#), a specialist in Christie's department of modern and contemporary Arab, Iranian, and Turkish art, told me. While that might make some lay observers cringe, both Shabout and Diba acknowledged that the house had hired experts since creating the department about a decade ago. ("If you look at the history of modern art in Europe in the early to mid-20th century, auction houses and art fairs played a role then as well," Shabout pointed out. "They have the money; scholarship never has the money.") "I receive an email from a student almost every day," Khayat said. "The reality is that this information is not documented."

The market for Middle Eastern art is still minuscule, compared to the market for Western modern and contemporary art. The record for a work by an Arab artist is the \$2.55 million paid for a [1929 painting](#) of whirling dervishes by [Mahmoud Said](#) (Egyptian, 1897–1964), while [the record for a European artist is the reported \\$300 million](#) recently dropped by an anonymous buyer, probably the Qatari royal family, for a Paul Gauguin. But prices are rising for a number of Middle Eastern artists. Khayat mentioned the Lebanese artist [Saliba Douaihy](#) (1915–94), who made punchy, bright geometric abstractions, studying first in Paris and then settling in New York. "Only ten years ago, or even five years ago, you



could buy a piece for \$5,000 or \$10,000, because only a small group of intellectuals loved his work," she said. "But now his prices are at \$50,000, \$80,000, \$100,000."

And as has happened with Western modernism, rising prices mean that some museums are finding it increasingly difficult to compete for top-quality work. "It is an issue," said Porter. In the late 1980s, the [British Museum](#) was the first major Western art museum to venture into the field, starting with a collection of Middle Eastern works on paper. Then-director [David M. Wilson](#) questioned why many of the museum's international collections cut off in the 1800s. "'What is being produced now?' he was asking us," Porter said. "At that time there were only a couple of people who you could go to in London for answers. It was a very big learning curve for me.

"The more I got into it, the more I realized we were only seeing a fraction of what was out there," she said. "It's an amazing world. There's so much really, really interesting stuff, most of which we don't see here, because you have to go to Iran to study it, or Iraq, if you can go."



[Dia Al-Azzawi](#)'s *Arab Market* (2007) will be exhibited at [Whitechapel Gallery](#) in September.

COURTESY OF BARJEEL ART FOUNDATION

As a corrective, Whitechapel Gallery will host a yearlong, four-part show opening in September of the collection of the [Barjeel Foundation](#), which is based in the United Arab Emirates and focuses on modern and contemporary art from the Middle East. The exhibition will include scores of artists and artworks never before seen in the West. "I think this will be the first show in the UK to present, in a non-anthropological way, a modern Arab sensibility," Blazwick said. "Believe it or not. You think, 'What took us so long to get there?'"

That is a thorny, uncomfortable question. "Academia and the canon of art history have not yet been decolonized," Shabout said. "We have remnants of the colonial way of looking, particularly when it comes to modernism. We need to deconstruct the 19th and 20th centuries in order to have a better understanding of what modernism is, in order to open it

up to the rest of the world.”

*Andrew Russeth is co-executive editor at ARTnews.*

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