



# British Museum curator publishes new book on modern and contemporary Arab art

► We speak to curator Venetia Porter whose collection of works from the Arab region is now a book and an exhibition



Artwork by Huda Lutfi on the cover of 'Reflections' by British Museum curator Venetia Porter. Reproduced by permission of the artist

Feedback



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Last year, curator Venetia Porter was leading a tour of the new wing of Islamic Art at the British Museum for a group of Middle Eastern women. Long red and black scrolls hung in a case, painted by artist Golnaz Fathi, with lines of poetry by Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani. A few of the women on the tour recognised the verses, and – to the amazement of onlookers – began singing them aloud.

“It was a wonderful moment – to have the works live,” says Porter, curator of Islamic and contemporary Middle East art at the British Museum. “That’s why I love contemporary work so much – to see how people react to it. It speaks.”

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For the past 14 years, under Porter’s stewardship, the museum has been quietly assembling a collection of works on paper by key Modern and contemporary Middle East artists. These works are now celebrated in *Reflections: contemporary art of the Middle East and North Africa*, a book released this month and an exhibition currently scheduled for February, a set date still to be confirmed.

Like much else, the show, initially planned for October 1, was postponed, owing to the coronavirus pandemic. Porter edited the publication with scholar Natasha Morris and Soas professor Charles Tripp. It provides an insight into the experiments with figuration, calligraphy and politics that have marked the past century and a half of artwork from the Middle East.

Unusually for a museum collection, it can trace its roots to one event: the landmark calligraphy show *Word into Art*, which Porter curated at the British Museum in 2006. While Porter has been with the museum since 1989, the show opened what she calls a new world for her. “The focus of *Word into Art* was how artists use script in their work,” she explains.

“I became increasingly interested in what the writing said, whether it was to do with poetry or politics. I then realised that I needed to expand the remit of the collection in accordance with the nature of the British Museum itself, which I think of as a museum of history. I wanted to seek out works that spoke more broadly of

history and politics as well as cultural tradition in the broadest sense, but at the same time I realised we didn't have nearly enough money to fulfil this ambition."

Porter discussed her goals with colleagues, and arts patron Dounia Nadar proposed starting an acquisition group, which came to be known as Contemporary and Modern Middle Eastern Art (CaMMEA). Founding members included Iranian photographer and collector Maryam Eisler, Lebanese-born collector Maria Sukkar, and Dubai arts patron Mohammed Afkhami. There are now more than 20 members who meet regularly to review the holdings.

The British Museum



# Reflections

contemporary art of the Middle East and North Africa

Venetia Porter with Natasha Morris and Charles Tripp

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The British Museum's 'Reflections: Contemporary Art of the Middle East and North Africa' commemorates an important collection of art housed in London. The British Museum, artwork reproduced by permission of the artist



"The patrons aren't there to rubber-stamp," Porter says. "They're there for me to have discussions with. We talk about priorities and acquisitions, and discuss individual goals. They're a very, very knowledgeable group of people, and they're really fun to be with."

The collection benefited from the lower prices of works on paper, which meant it could acquire a broader selection of artists. It was also helped by the expansion of the British Museum as it navigates its role as a "world museum" in the 21st century. Though it might be expected that Britain's pre-eminent public collection of modern Middle Eastern art be housed at an art institution, it has ended up at a museum best known for its antiquities.

Much of this is down to the expertise of Porter, a kind, determined figure with unflagging energy for setting records straight. She lives in London with her family, but regularly visits major art events in the Middle East.



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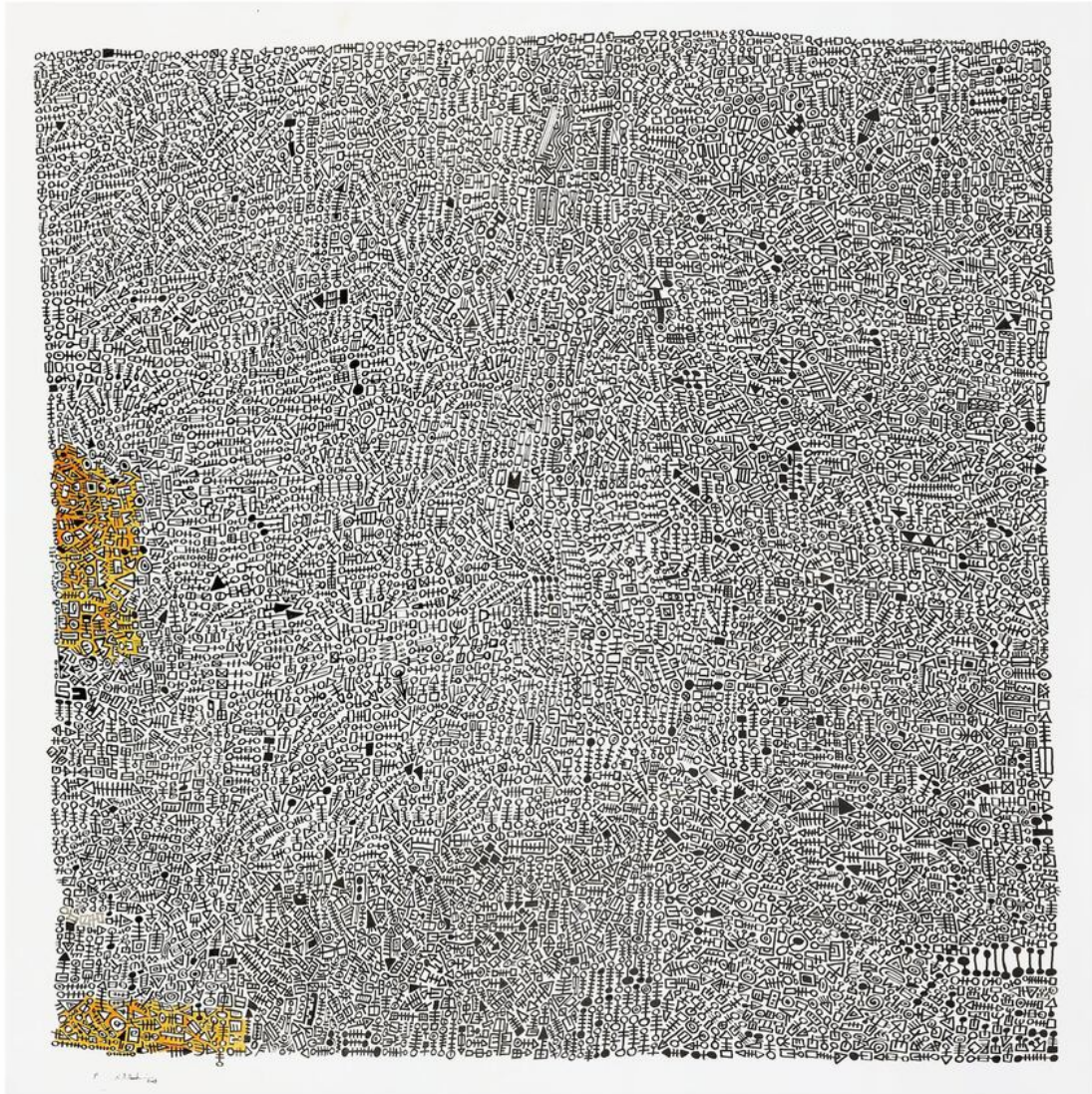
Porter grew up in Lebanon, where her father was an economist in the British diplomatic service, and her mother an artist and fashion designer who drew on her Syrian childhood. Last year, she published an homage to her mother, *Thea Porter's Scrapbook*, which shows Beirut in its heyday in the 1950s and '60s, as well as images from her mother's shop in London,

where she designed clothes for Barbra Streisand, Elizabeth Taylor and others. Porter did not stray far from the family history, earning a PhD on the medieval architecture of Yemen.

At the British Museum, she maintains a focus on contemporary and historical work, which perhaps gives this collection its feel of a long perspective. While a canon has recently formed in the Arab art world – and there is already a sense of the axes being ground to contest it – the collection avoids this path. It appears instead as a history of different markers and events, from the Palestinian struggle to the Tunisian revolution that sparked the Arab uprisings.

"I've been very reactive," she says about her acquisitions. "It's often that I'd see something and it tells a particular story and fits the scope of the collection. For the future, I need to strategise more in terms of filling gaps because there is no way this [current collection] is comprehensive. But this is just the beginning. There's so much more to acquire."

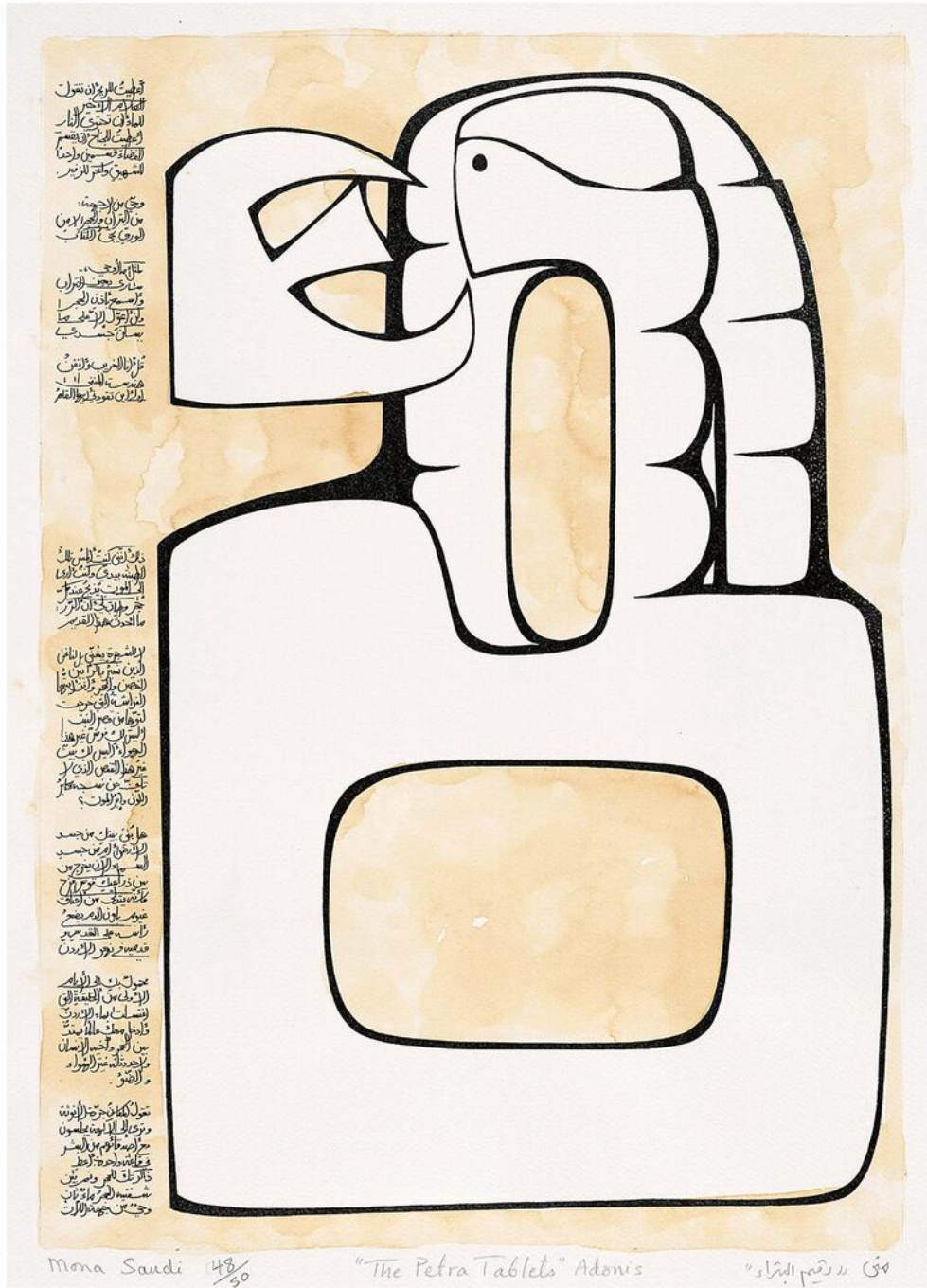
By Porter's own admission, Egyptian artists are under-represented, and she wants to make a further push for Yemeni art.



The spindly figures of Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim's 'Untitled II', 2008, are partly inspired by stone art that Ibrahim sees in mountain walks in his native Khorfakkan. Reproduced by permission of the artist

The collection is also given a particular character because of the nature of works on paper, which include drawings, screen prints, photography and less common mediums such as woodcut prints and etchings. In some cases, the works only give one dimension of an artist's practice. Beirut artist Mona Saudi, for example, is chiefly known for her smooth stone sculptures, but *Reflections* the book represents her via her screen-print series *The Petra Tablets*, which contain verses from Adonis's poem of the same name. Emirati artist Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim's work, which so exuberantly traffics in colour, appears via his more minute, monochrome drawings.





Jordanian-Lebanese artist Mona Saudi's series 'The Petra Tablets', 1995, contains lines from the poetry of Adonis. Reproduced by permission of the artist

But the focus on works on paper has one key advantage in the specific context of Arab and Iranian art: it powerfully conveys the connection to text that was the genesis of the collection. Iranian work of the past century is deeply inflected by calligraphy and, as Saudi's *The Petra Tablets* shows, modern Arab artists also

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frequently used poetry as inspiration or inscription in their works. The collection includes dafatir, or artists' books, another important form in countries such as Iraq and Palestine, as Iraqi artist Dia Al Azzawi's concerted *Colour-Light, Shadow of Speech* (2000) attests.



'Untitled' (2016) by Taysir Batniji. Reproduced by permission of the artist

To set out the book's structure, Porter and Morris pasted images of the works on to their office wall, shuffling them into groupings like they were organising a giant seating plan. The categories became topical and regional: such as "Figure and figuration"; "Faith" and "A female gaze". Topics of political struggle and revolution then were subdivided into specific countries. Exile and longing are also recurrent themes as in a drawing of a man dwarfed by his luggage by the Gaza-born artist Taysir Batniji.





Porter discovered that Paul Guiragossian's 'La mere douloureuse' (The Grieving Mother), 1984, commemorates his own mother's loss of a child. Paul Guiragossian Foundation

For each acquisition, they checked information with the artists and their families, uncovering new stories. *The Grieving Mother* (1984), an ink drawing in fat, black



lines by Lebanese-Armenian artist Paul Guiragossian was revealed to be heartbreakingly personal. It shows a mother cross-legged, holding a child in her lap. Porter learnt from the artist's daughter, Manuella Guiragossian, that the woman is most likely Paul's own mother. She lost a child during the Armenian exodus from Turkey that followed the mass killings that started there in 1915 – a family tragedy that was commemorated by her son 70 years later.

"Knowing the history of the region helps you to understand the meaning of the works," Porter says. She penned an art-historical essay, and asked Tripp, a professor of Middle East politics (and, her husband), to contribute an essay on geopolitical developments. Porter admits that many in the UK might be unaware of the basic facts of history that inspired so many of the works.



Curator Venetia Porter. The British Museum

While in the Arab region, the British Museum's holdings are to be celebrated as a rare public collection, in the UK, the art must still do the important job of introducing the region anew.

"I hope that what people looking at this book and coming to the exhibition will take away from this is that there are worlds in here," she says. "Brilliant, brilliant artists that people just don't know about."

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