

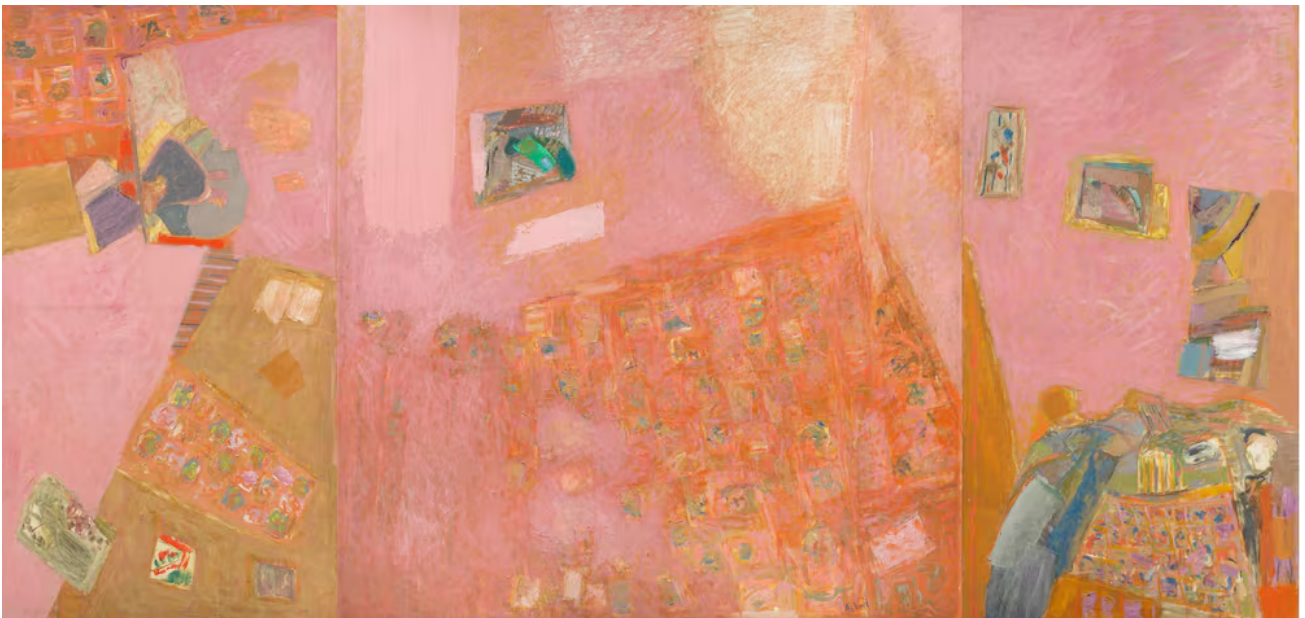


ART & DESIGN

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How much will the Middle East art market be affected by political events?

► Sotheby's weathered a tough sale but strength in the market remains



Shafic Abboud's incandescent Villa des Iris (1984) is leading Bonhams's November Middle East sale. Photo: Bonhams



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Amid a region in conflict, [Sotheby's](#) held its Middle East sale on Tuesday, securing high prices for some key lots, though achieving only a 54 per cent sell-through rate. How much this will calm the

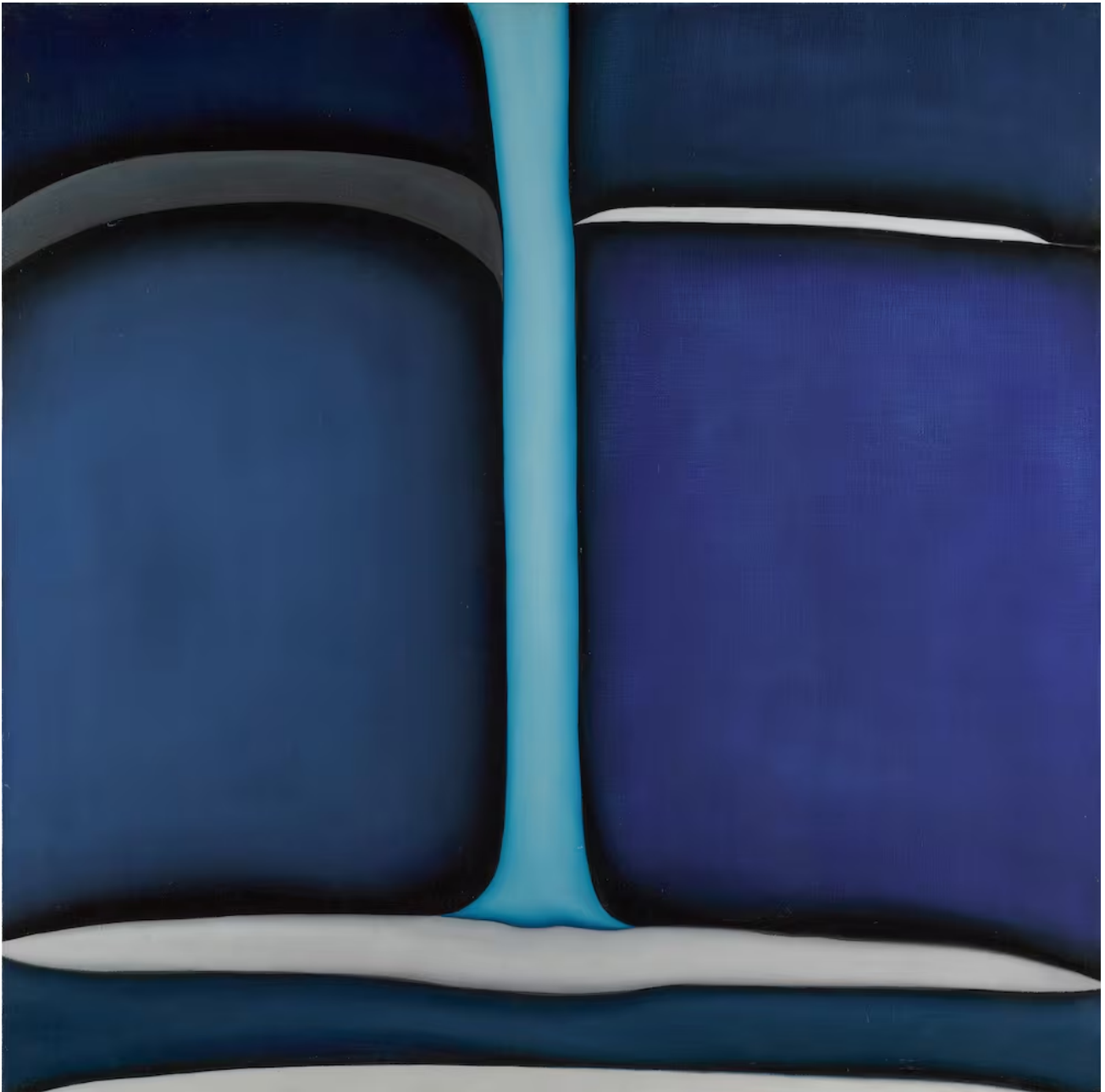
nerves of Middle East art market watchers, who are bracing for the shocks of the [Israel-Gaza war](#), is unclear and largely depends on how far the political events will spread.

“Understandably, the mood of some buyers has been impacted by the devastating turmoil we are all seeing,” says Mai Eldib, Sotheby’s Middle East head of sales. “That said, since we opened the doors to the exhibition last week, we have seen good footfall, with people happy to celebrate the plethora of art from this rich region.”

The timing of the auction, coming less than three weeks after the start of the Israel-Gaza war, was hard to ignore. Works by modern masters, such as Shafic Abboud and [Adam Henein](#), failed to move, and the [Fahrelnissa Zeid](#) piece that Sotheby’s had billed as the headline lot of the auction barely beat its low estimate of £350,000 (\$424,392), selling for £355,600 – despite including a handwritten dedication from Zeid to her granddaughter on the back of the canvas. In perhaps an indication of how heavily the political events weighed on buyers, all works by Palestinian artists were sold, bar one, which also suggests the solidarity of collectors in the Arab market around the issue.

At 123 lots, the sale was also larger than most and achieved a total of £4.8 million, which is the highest for a Sotheby’s Middle East sale in [London](#) since 2016 – largely led by top lots. A beautiful, luminescent work of nestled blues by Lebanese modernist [Huguette Caland](#) justifiably surpassed its estimate of £200,000-£300,000 to bring in £445,000, marking an auction record for the artist. An equally strong work by the Palestinian artist [Samia Halaby](#), whose retrospective is currently up at the Sharjah Art Museum, went for £381,000, well above its estimate of £100,000-£150,000. Painted in 1969, the voluminous geometric painting *Seventh Cross No. 229* is from what is often considered one of the artist’s best periods of work.

The high sale total and records achieved suggest that strength in the market remains, particularly for established artists and top-tier works.



This 1980 work by the late Huguette Caland achieved a record for the artist, at £445,000. Photo: Sotheby's

The Mena market's upward trajectory is markedly different to results elsewhere. As patchy sales at the [Frieze](#) fairs and Saturday's Sotheby's auction indicated, the mainstream modern and contemporary market is finally feeling the pinch of the Ukraine war, the interest rate hike and the cost of living crisis. The general market had been largely insulated from these shocks because of a series of rare single-owner collections that came to auction over the past year, which kept prices falsely inflated.

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But the market, as always, has been on a different path. This autumn, all three of the major auction houses – Sotheby's, with its sale on Tuesday; Christie's, coming on November 9; and Bonhams, on November 15

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– have put together impressively robust offerings. Sotheby's large auction comprised parts of some major collections, including those of Maya Rasamny and Rana Sadik. Christie's has a tranche of the famed [Dalloul Art Collection](#), and Bonhams is bringing to market works by blue-chip modernists such as Shafic Abboud, Omar El Nagdi, and Shakir Hassan Al Said.

Generally, this strength in terms of supply demonstrates that sellers feel it is a good time to put works up for auction. A large part of the optimism stems from the growing share of Saudi buyers, both individual and institutional. Increasing numbers of Saudi modernist works are appearing on the auction block: Artists such as Mohammed Al Saleem, who was the founder of the Saudi Art House in Riyadh in the 1980s, used to be relatively infrequent at auctions; yesterday an Al Saleem work from 1986 blazed past his auction record, going for £889,000, from a £100,000-£150,000 estimate. Perhaps even more significant, again from Sotheby's, were the sales of three works by Abduljabbar Al Yahya – Saudi modernist born in 1931 – that all went above estimate despite his art not having a huge market and it being his first time at auction.



This painting by Saudi modernist Mohammed Al Saleem went for more than 10 times its estimate. Photo: Sotheby's

“While auction houses always keep the identity of their buyers confidential, heated bidding for particular works has coincided with the entry of new bidders to the market from across the region” says Meagan Kelly Horsman, managing director of Christie's Middle East.

“Over the past few years we have seen instances of extremely competitive bidding that can suggest to the market the involvement of regional institutions. There is a few factors to consider when looking at this: One, that when a work sells significantly above its estimate, that there is not one, but a minimum of two parties who are deeply engaged with the acquisition of the work. Secondly, what is it about the content that is engaging clientele to bid competitively? We have seen exceptional examples of modernist works obtain high prices due to the scarcity on the market, such as Dia Al Azzawi’s 1964 work on paper *Gilgamesh Epic No 4*, which realised \$119,700 against an estimate of \$15,000-\$20,000 in our Dubai online sale in May of this year.”

Horsman, who took over from long-time Dubai head Michael Jeha, comes from a market background in the UAE and has helped Christie’s lift its faltering results from two years ago, when they dropped the Middle East sale from their calendar. That spring fixture has now reappeared as a Dubai online auction. Its first edition in this format was held in May and had a 90 per cent sell-through rate.

Sotheby’s did not disclose the buyer of the untitled Al Saleem painting, which takes inspiration from the Riyadh desert, but it seems likely that a Saudi collector or one of its new institutions would have bid so ferociously for the work by one of the country’s pioneers.

Palestinian artist Samia Halaby's 1969 painting *Seventh Cross No 229* surpassed its estimate to achieve £381,000. Photo: Sotheby's

Saudi collectors have made their presence felt at the sales in other ways too. Some watchers note that there has been less nudity and fewer political works, as the sales tailor themselves to the tastes of a new and more conservative group of buyers – much as they did in the early days of the Dubai sales.

And more Saudi collections are coming to auction. The Sotheby's sale included work from Shatha Ibrahim Al Tassan, an important early Riyadh collector who founded the Hewan Art Gallery in the Saudi capital in 2006. Al Tassan's works were included among three other female collectors in the sale – including the late Rasamny, the widely admired collector who was an important supporter of Middle Eastern art, as first chairwoman of the Royal

Academy and member of both the Tate and the British Museum's Middle East and North Africa acquisition committees. Sotheby's also offered works from Sadik, the Palestinian collector who lives in Kuwait and has also put together a hugely respected collection of Middle Eastern and international art.



Ibrahim El-Salahi, Palm Tree. Photo: Christie's

The high quality of the Christie's and Bonhams sales will probably lead to similar results. From the Dalloul collection – totalling 48 works – Christie's has as its top lot *Fille a l'imprime (Girl in a Printed Dress)* (1938) by [Mahmoud Said](#) with an estimate of £350,000-£550,000. As an aside, Dalloul bought the same work in 2018 at Bonhams for £512,750 (including premium). An incandescent blue Kamal Boullata carries an estimate of £20,000-£30,000 but should probably go higher given the beauty of the

work, and *Palm Tree* (2001), an extraordinary geometric painting – almost verging on the Casablanca School in style – by Ibrahim El-Salahi is on at £30,000-£50,000.

Lots in their various owner sales, to be held the same night, include a large-scale photograph from the *Desert of Pharan* series by Saudi artist Ahmed Mater (estimate £40,000-£60,000, from an edition of three plus an artist's proof) and a softly geometric Etel Adnan (*Untitled*, 2003, with an estimate of £60,000-£80,000).

Bonhams's top lot is a triptych from the Lebanese master Abboud from 1984, with an estimate of £300,000 to £500,000. An oil on wood panel by Kadhim Hayder, *The Martyr* from 1969, is given an estimate of £120,000 to £180,000, while *Tekrarre* (1985) by Charles Hossein Zenderoudi – one of a number of Iranian artists in the sale – carries an estimate of £80,000 to £100,000.

Though political events are shifting, the expanding base of buyers in the Middle East market – and the race for masterpieces – is set to carry the market forward.

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The Arts Edit

A guide to arts and culture, from a Middle Eastern perspective



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