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Painting by Sophie Halabi.

Building a Legacy of Art in Palestine

By TWIP

If you're an art enthusiast, you probably already know about Mazen Quity. Together with his wife Yvette, he has spent the last 25 years amassing the world's most definitive collection of Palestinian artwork, and has been its most visible exponent at home and abroad.



Painting by Assad Azzi.

Today his Jerusalem home is a shrine to the talents of past and present, a walk-in montage of vibrant colours. The walls are lined with elegantly framed paintings, and no surface is untouched by tasteful adornment. Quity, a successful lawyer by trade, has now acquired around 220 pieces charting two centuries of evolution.

The Quitys took their first steps down this path in 1985, the year of their marriage. Yvette, born into a family of artists and goldsmiths, had studied art for a year before her teacher poured cold water on the hope of becoming a professional, telling her, "If you are not successful, you will not eat."



Painting by Tayseer Barakat.

Yet their partnership rekindled a passion, and together they made their first investment in a piece by Taysir Barakat, a painter from Jabalia Camp. It took them two years to raise the \$700 price and thereafter they were insatiable. "We were crazy at that time," says Mazen. "Every time we heard of an exhibition with Palestinian art we would go there. Paris, Stockholm, anywhere."

The Quitys are patriots as much as art-lovers. Mazen describes his motivation to show the world "the beautiful face of Palestine" and in doing so reverse the damaging stereotypes of militancy. He takes pleasure in the surprise he often encounters when showing his collection to Palestinians and internationals alike, many of them unaware that Palestine had produced such treasures.

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Painting by Sliman Mansour.



Painting by Sophie Halabi.

Their collection also serves as unique documentation of Palestine's social history. It is possible to see the evolution from biblical icons, through an expressionist period, to the still lifes of Sophie Halaby and the surreal delights of Suleiman Mansour. Such a journey highlights the richness and depth of Palestinian cultural life long before this land was ever "disputed."

Mazen has made a crusade of bringing this to popular attention. At the time of writing, several pieces from the collection are on loan at two exhibitions. He and his wife are so committed to the creation of a comprehensive museum of Palestinian art that they are willing to sacrifice their entire collection to an embryonic project led by Al-Hoash Gallery in Jerusalem. "We can provide work from over 60 artists, which would be a good start," says Mazen.

The couple agree that they will miss their paintings, but Mazen feels it is a duty to make them available to the public. "When they were painted, the artists intended them to be displayed." He is confident that the museum will come together and succeed, but not without "time, money, and more crazy people like me!"

His vision of the future is not limited to the museum. As chairman of Palestine's International Art Academy from 2004-2009 he implemented new wide-ranging courses for students that are beginning to bear fruit. In June, the academy produced its first six graduates, a proud moment for all concerned.

Mazen is fascinated by the emerging concepts of modern art. "If you go back 20 years, there was no art but painting. Since then a new generation have grown up in the West and in Israel. Now we are seeing more experimentation, more video art and installations."

While he is supportive of new art forms, he wants young people to take the time to master the techniques. "My advice is always to persist with education," he says. "Some geniuses don't need it - Khaled Hourani and Mohamad Fadel never went to art school. But most people have to study, read, practise, and go to exhibitions. I want artists to express themselves, but they must have enough skill and know the form."

For Mazen, art has always given him balance and respite from the pressures of a career in law. For him the collection is not a luxury, more a guarantor of quality of life. Sitting in his lounge surrounded by the masterpieces, with the lilting accompaniment of classical music from another room, it is easy to accept his perspective that an "artistic environment makes us more sensitive, more human, more ready to accept others." He is proud to recall that when his youngest child first left the house ten days after birth, it was for the purpose of visiting a gallery, a passion now shared by his whole family.

The process of collection has its own fascination. The Quptys have become renowned for their passion and regularly field calls from dealers, friends, and people with chance discoveries. Mazen was able to acquire an original by nineteenth-century legend Nicola Saig, after an out-of-the

blue call from Jifna Village, and a pawnshop owner from Jerusalem was able to supply him with a stunning collection of works from the late Sophie Halaby for the knock-down fee of \$5,000. “She had no family (to take them),” says Mazen. “They would have been lost.”

I ask if he is frustrated by the lack of government interest in preserving Palestinian heritage. Surely it is too much responsibility for a busy lawyer? “I accept that culture is a low priority here,” he says. “But in most Western countries (art) is driven by private funding. This way there is less censorship, less involvement from politicians.”

He is confident that other Palestinian collectors are taking responsibility and following his lead. “The art economy is growing here. I know friends who have 30 to 40 pieces and more who are getting involved. In 40 years I want us to be where Britain was 50 years ago.”

Still, the journey of the Picasso masterpiece recently arrived at the International Art Academy is a reminder of the maintenance required to preserve artworks. Experts were brought in to create the ideal humidity levels and millions were spent transporting it. Mazen acknowledges that private collectors cannot call on such resources but feels that with a little ingenuity artworks can be kept in pristine condition. With a carefully created environment and skilled restoration he has been able to keep even his old and delicate treasures intact.

At a time when artworks are becoming increasingly commodified, so that a single Jackson Pollock can sell for \$140 million, with a market that has become dominated by businessmen and investors with little appreciation of masterpieces beyond their re-sell value, it is refreshing to hear that the Quptys have no idea of the financial worth of their collection.

“To me they are priceless,” Mazen says, gazing at a piece by Assad Azzi. In it stands a horseman in the desert, a lonely icon in a backdrop of mystic unpredictability.

One can see why he finds such resonance in the character, isolated in a mission of epic scale without a clear route or any prospect of a conclusion. Yet for Mazen that journey is its own reward, and the onerous responsibility of emancipating Palestinian art is to be warmly embraced.

He has achieved notable successes already but these have whetted his appetite. Establishing the national museum would be the greatest triumph yet, providing a legacy of inspiration for the next generation of students and artists. And when the doors open, and all of the Qupty collection is hanging on a public wall, Mazen and Yvette will simply start another one.



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