

Culture



Much to see. Sculptures on display at Beirut Art Fair.

(Samar Kadi)

Cultural frenzy sweeps Beirut with international art exhibits

Samar Kadi

Beirut

From Picasso to Arab and international artists and designers, Beirut lived to the beat of cultural manifestations in September, offering art enthusiasts exclusive experiences in museums and cultural spaces.

Beirut Art Week, which includes the Beirut Art Fair and Beirut Design Fair; special exhibitions, including "Picasso et la famille" at the Surssock Museum, in addition to shows in various art galleries, electrified the city's cultural scene.

Tours were organised to transport art lovers around museums and art destinations with multiple stops at art exhibitions and foundations.

More than 50 Lebanese and international galleries from 18 different countries, featuring artists from 35 nationalities, participated in Beirut Art Week to bring even more art, colour and beauty to mark the tenth anniversary of the most awaited annual art event in Beirut.

"This momentous anniversary marks a decade of accomplishments and growth, establishing the fair as a flagship event of the MENA region's artistic calendar, one consistently expanding in artistic scope and international reach," said Beirut Art Fair Founder and Director Laure d'Hauteville.

While it plays the role of an international cultural incubator through discovering emerging artists and rediscovering historical ones, the fair's tenth edition above all paid homage to Lebanon.

"Unexpected Trove – the Unseen Works" shed light on a recently rediscovered body of paintings produced by Lebanese painter and sculptor Hussein Madi in Italy. The collection was lost for al-

most 40 years and only recently discovered. It includes the works that Madi painted from 1965-70.

"A Tribute to Lebanon – an Orientalist Voyage" explored Western creations inspired by Lebanon from the 18th century to the present day through artworks and historical objects.

The exhibition revealed more than 100 artworks and rare objects resulting from travels, such as dolls, postcards and photographic and watercolour albums. Artworks include historical Orientalist paintings of Lebanon's mountain and main cities, Beirut and Tripoli, as well as works by 20th-century major artists Andy Warhol and David Hockney and photographs by Don McCullin.

In addition to classic galleries representing renowned



Creative talents. A painting on display at Beirut Art.

(Samar Kadi)

artists, one section of the fair dubbed "Revealing" was dedicated to emerging artists from the MENA region. The platform offered ten artists, selected from 400 applicants, privileged access to collectors and fairgoers.

"Beirut Art Fair is devoted to the discovery of the young international contemporary art scene," said Joanna Abou Sleiman-Chevalier, the artistic director of the fair. "We're very pleased to present a number of promising young galleries, some of which have been operating for less than a year."

Next to the Beirut Art Fair, Beirut Design Fair featured modern and contemporary furniture and objects by regional and global creators with approximately 30 exhibitors from more than ten countries from the Middle East, Europe and the United States.

Landscape architect and furniture designer Christian Zahr's creations, including an aluminium candlestick, a wine bottle holder made from concrete and a coffee table in galvanised metal, can very well be taken as sculptures. "Using galvanised metal and concrete is mainly inspired by the Lebanese vernacular construction," said Zahr, who has been designing furniture for three years.

Lama Khayat Salloum, an interior architect turned furniture designer, introduced pieces from her new collection specially designed for the fair – an armchair from bleached wood, a coat hanger in the form of a musical note made from brass and a wood and marble table.

As an emerging designer, Salloum said she was happy with the exposure she got at the fair. "It is huge (exposure) because of the quality of people visiting the fair who are interested in design and designers and appreciative of the creativity, history and modernism we have in Lebanon," she said.

Karim Gallery, a leading Jordanian

gallery, displayed paintings by Arab artists in the diaspora in its first participation in Beirut Art Fair. These included "Immigration" by Syrian artist Khaled Takriti, who lives in France, and "Alienation" by Bahram Hajou, a Kurdish Syrian living in Germany.

"The works are about migration, wars and destruction that swept the region," said Moin Khoury, a Jordanian collector and art patron. "It is very important to show the diversity in Arab art and to have the public get to know us through our sufferings and traumas. At the same time, we must open our eyes to other cultures and ideas. It is about exchanging experiences, getting to know each other and coexist."

"It is good to show that the region is not only about war and destruction but we have arts and creativity," Khoury said.

From photography exhibitions to paintings, installations and modern designs, art lovers had plenty of choices.

One multidisciplinary exhibition was Surssock Museum's "Baalbek, Archives of an Eternity," which narrated the story of Baalbek with time and included photographs, paintings, live documentaries, stone ruins and old posters that reveal the city's 10,000-year history.

Another exhibition was "10 Stories from the Surssock Museum Collection," which provided glimpses into certain movements that dominated the Lebanese artistic heritage through the collective works of prominent Lebanese artists.

At Janine Rubeiz Gallery, the first solo exhibition by British-Iranian artist Farhad Ahrania "Art in Another Language" featured four bodies of work, including "A Woman in Arabia" showcasing black-and-white photos of the Middle East taken by Gertrude Bell, the English archaeologist also known to be a spy in the early 20th century. Ahrania transferred the photos to the textile and added embroidery on top, "travelling through

the image with a needle."

"I was interested in Bell's documentation of the region and I wanted to react to them and deconstruct them because she was instrumental in cutting up the Middle East," said Ahrania, who was also present at Beirut Art Fair.

"The timing (of the exhibition) is very special because there are lots of people making the effort to be here. There is a lot of excitement," he added.

More than 50 Lebanese and international galleries from 18 different countries, featuring artists from 35 nationalities, participated in Beirut Art Week.

Art aficionado Rima Khodor noted that "having the fairs, exhibitions in galleries and museums all overlapping, sets the art mood in the city."

"You have people going from one exhibition to the other. It is the cultural season, an important moment for artists who want to show their art and for galleries introducing new artists," Khodor said.

She stressed, however, the discrepancies in levels and quality of art displayed at the various locations. "While you have established artists represented by serious galleries, you have some independent artists that you can tell that they are beginners, not even emerging artists," she said.

"Nonetheless, it is a cultural movement that is encouraging the public at large to get a taste of contemporary and modern art and learn to appreciate it," Khodor added. "It is contemporary art the voice of the moment. 'Picasso et la famille' at Surssock, to bring Picasso to Lebanon is a major event in art."



Celebrating heritage. Artwork by artist Farhad Ahrania.

(Janine Rubeiz Gallery)