

canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

WHERE IS HOME?

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WENDY GOLDSMITH

After a stellar career at the auction house Christie's, **Wendy Goldsmith** set up her own independent art consultancy business. In an exclusive interview for *Canvas*, she explains how building an art collection is a long-term commitment and why her passion for the Middle East always brings her back to the region in search of new treasures.

How did you and art first meet?

In a sense there was no escape for me, as my father was an art dealer and I grew up surrounded by art – crawling about on the floors at Christie's and Sotheby's in New York as a toddler and later being dragged to seemingly endless exhibitions and auction sales as a teenager. Then, as I got older I rebelled and didn't go near art again until I went to university in Boston. That was when I took my first art history course, and where my early exposure to art started to make sense and fall into place. I then secured a coveted internship at Christie's in London and incredibly after three weeks they asked me if I was interested in staying and taking up a permanent position there. Once I completed my degree, I went on to spend 15 years of my career working at the auction house.

When did you first encounter a Middle Eastern perspective in your work?

After over a decade in London, I was appointed International Head of 19th Century European Art at Christie's in New York and that

of course included a major focus on Orientalist works and the idealised Western vision of the Middle East. I found it fascinating to look at the paintings of artists who travelled and spent time in the region, people like John Frederick Lewis, Jean-Léon Gérôme and Ludwig Deutsch, especially in terms of their social documentation of those times. Equally captivating were the splendid topographical views by artists such as David Roberts of sites in Lebanon and Egypt, seeing how they have since changed – or not, in some cases. Since then I've developed a keen interest in modern and contemporary art from the region, which is a constant source of fascination to me as it is so fast moving and diverse.

You eventually left the auction world and set up your own art advisory consultancy. What prompted the move?

I spent 15 really enjoyable years auctioneering, dealing with some of the best people in the business, before I decided to set up my own art consultancy. One of the main reasons for the change was because I was increasingly frustrated by the system itself, with too





Lalla Essaydi. *Harem Revisited #33*. 2012. Chromogenic print. Image courtesy of the artist

much time spent on administration and not enough focus on the individual clients and collectors. I was finding myself ever further away from the people and the paintings, which is what I enjoyed most. So it felt like the right time to make the move.

You will also have seen major changes in the art market during that period?

It's almost unrecognisable. The art world was really a lot more academic back then than it is today, when, sadly, artworks have almost become commodities. We're increasingly using the "I" word – investment, which was somehow frowned upon before, at least in an overt sense. Now it's often all anyone can say. All the time one hears "I want one work by this artist, and here's the rest of my list." I feel that people are buying for monetary reasons instead of artistic appreciation, which is so frustrating. That's where I come in.

How do you approach advising clients?

For those without experience in buying art, my first suggestion is that we don't purchase any work for six months, for the simple

reason that it takes that long to explain the big picture to a client of what we should be looking at and why. If I try and present the whole scenario to them on day one, it's often too overwhelming. It's crucial to take proper time and do careful walk-throughs of the museums and galleries, attend auctions just to observe initially, as well as arrange private views and studio visits. Visiting art fairs with clients is especially productive, as the sheer level of exposure to so many different works enables me to gauge very quickly what a client's interests might be. They also need to understand their own tastes, and that is not always a fast process. You do need time if you really want to collect properly. Overall I'd say that building a collection is not simply a case of buying, it's as much – or even more – about education. It's a long, but very rewarding, process.

Has the profile of collectors changed over the years?

It's changing in some ways all the time, but in other respects there are ever-present constants. The art market has seen so many ups and downs, with different groups, demographics and nationalities coming to the fore and then receding again. Often those shifts



Lateefa bint Maktoum. *The Last Look*. 2009. Colour digital print. 100 x 149cm. Image courtesy of the artist

are directly connected to the relative economic strength of a particular country. Nowadays of course there are more younger-generation collectors, a change fuelled in part by the popularity of technology, including digital art. Two things I have noticed from the Middle Eastern perspective is how some Western collectors of Orientalist works have made the leap into contemporary work from the region, and also how there has been a big increase in people from the region who are buying Orientalist paintings once again, which used to be mostly the domain of collectors from North America and Europe. Both these changes show how passionate individual collectors can be about the region, and this nationalistic pride is wonderful to see.

Does your own collection include works by Middle Eastern artists?

Yes, I have works by several artists from the region and have been drawn to them for different reasons. I really admire the work of photographer Lalla Essaydi, as for me she harks back to the Orientalist concept of the odalisque but very much in her own way and on her own terms. By making it modern she has created a very particular aesthetic and identity that I find so interesting. I love the media that she uses, the unusual surface and textures. Hassan Hajjaj's compositions are also so striking and very hip. The example I own evokes a contemporary *Gérôme*. I always look forward to visiting the region for events such as Art Dubai and Abu Dhabi Art, and used to especially enjoy the Bastakiya Art Fair, where I always



Ali Banisadr. *The Devil*. 2012. Oil on linen.
40.64 x 40.64 cm. Image courtesy of the artist



found new and interesting work by artists such as Sheikha Lateefa bint Maktoum. Ali Banisadr's *The Devil* is a favourite painting in my collection. Ali is a great talent, and a perfect example of the strength of the Middle Eastern and Iranian artistic diaspora.

How do you see the future of the art market and of collecting generally?

Anyone who says they have a crystal ball and can see how the market will move in the years ahead is just not telling the truth! It's impossible to predict. Take NFTs. They're so much of the moment but doubtless will be replaced by something else before too long. As for prospective collectors, in many ways it's harder than ever for them. If you wanted to simply buy a painting, where would you start? I think many people are understandably intimidated by the minefield that is now the art world. It's all very well to look on the internet or Instagram, or listen to friends etc, and definitely very easy to spend money on art, but what's really difficult as a non-specialist is getting the right sort of advice and – critically important – insider access to galleries and artists.

I have a library of auction catalogues from over the years and I keep meaning to look at some of them and see how many of the artists from just a few years ago are still relevant today. I suspect that I'll find that only a handful are still big names, which underlines my point that the right sort of knowledge and taking the long view is always going to pay dividends when it comes to art.