

Word into Art

Artists of the Modern Middle East

18 May – 2 September 2006

Room 35

Admission Free

The cultural, political and religious history of the Middle East has long provided inspiration for the artists, poets and writers of the region. The British Museum, in partnership with Dubai Holding, presents, *Word into Art*, a new exhibition that highlights the contemporary art of the Middle East reflecting issues of identity and politics and the diverse artistic heritage of the region. The exhibition focuses on the different ways artists engage and experiment with Arabic script. This not simply because writing takes so many varied and interesting forms, but because grouping the works together thematically, and looking at what is written within them, gives an insight into the rich literary and artistic cultures of this region, as well as into the ways in which artists are affected by history and by current world politics.

Word into Art will feature works by over eighty artists from countries across the Middle East and North Africa. Although many of the artists still live in their countries of origin, a significant number have left the region and now form a Middle Eastern Diaspora. The majority of objects in the exhibition are from the British Museum's collection of contemporary Middle Eastern art.

The exhibition will be divided into four sections. The first, **Sacred Script**, explains the relationship between Arabic script and the religion of Islam, showing the enduring vitality of the Islamic calligraphic tradition today. It focuses on artists and calligraphers who use established styles of script but in contemporary formats, inspired by a belief in God and the holy texts. The innovative work of Ahmad Moustafa, Kamal Boullata and Erol Akyavas feature in this section. The powerful literary tradition of the Middle East, the enduring appeal of ancient and modern Arabic and Persian poetry, and the appeal of the work of Sufi writers is evoked in the second section, **Literature and Art**. Works by Hassan Massoudy, Etel Adnan, Abdallah Benanteur, Shirin Neshat and Farhad Moshiri reveal how artists seek to find ever more inventive ways of writing or illustrating these famous texts. The third section, **Deconstructing the Word**, examines the use of script in Middle East abstract art from the mid 20th century to the present day. Here the messages are more ambivalent and link with past or present identities in subtle ways. Letters and words are sometimes legible but more often they are not, having been turned into beautiful abstract patterns by artists such as Rachid Koraichi, Faisal Samra, Abdul Qadir al-Raes, Parviz Tanavoli and Ghada Amer. Finally, **Identity, History and Politics** looks at the ways in which the words embedded in these works can provide us with real snapshots of history and social commentary as well as revealing reactions to the region's devastating conflicts during the past few decades. Included here is the work of Sabah Naim, Kareem Risan, Walid Raad, Youssef Nabil and Khusrau Hasan-Zade.

In addition to the work featured in Room 35, a specially commissioned sculpture by well known Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi will be in the Great Court along with other sculptures by Iranian artist Parviz Tanavoli.

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Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum comments “This exhibition is the first of its kind in Europe and it reveals that the truths that need communicating to the world about the Middle East are not one but many. We are grateful to Dubai Holding for their help and support with the exhibition.”

Fadel Al Ali, Chief Operating Officer of Dubai Holding says “I’m glad that Dubai Holding has taken this opportunity to partner with The British Museum to host such an excellent exhibition. In the Middle East, Dubai Holding is committed to encouraging innovation in all aspects of our society and developing the talents of the artistic community in the region is a very important part of this goal. This exhibition demonstrates just how impressive these talents are.”

For more information or images please contact Hannah Boulton or Joe Edwards on 020 7323 8522/8583, hboulton@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk / jedwards@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk or Alex Robat on 020 7936 1296, arobat@brunswickgroup.com

Notes to Editors:

- A fully illustrated book to accompany ‘Word into Art’ written and edited by Venetia Porter will be available from British Museum Press. (Available at £16.99 in hardback and £11.99 in paperback)
- A wide-ranging public programme, Middle East Now , will accompany the exhibition. Highlights include an international conference on contemporary art in the Middle East (20 May) attended by artists and critics; a study day on Faith in the Middle East (10 June) with new perspectives by scholars and writers on the study of Islam, Christianity and Judaism; a series of high profile lectures covering literature, culture and politics of the contemporary Middle East as well as poetry readings, performances and artists demonstrations in the exhibition and the Great Court (19 and 21st May). In addition a film season showing the best of recent cinema from Turkey, North Africa and the Middle East. For more details contact the press office.

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