

***Art and the Arabian Peninsula:
Abu Dhabi***

Abu Dhabi is the capital of the United Arab Emirates. The mover and shaker behind the unification and transformation to the 20th century of the Emirates was Sheik Zayed who ruled from 1966 until his death in 2004. He has been described as, "compressing 600 years of economic growth into just forty."¹



Photo by Wilfred Theisger, British explorer, 1950.
His traveling party passing a watchtower in the
channel separating Abu Dhabi from the Arabian Peninsula.



Sheik Zayed circa 1950



Abu Dhabi 2014²

Change accelerated at an even faster pace in the first four years following his death; Abu Dhabi saw more construction and development than had been achieved in the previous 40 years.³

Sheik Khalifa bin Zayed, successor and eldest son, has led the effort to forge a new identity for the country. Inspired by history, in particular, the Islamic Golden Age which saw the establishment of cultural cities such as Córdoba and Baghdad, the Sheikh believes,

¹ Tatchell, Jo, *A Diamond in the Desert*, p. 278

² Photo courtesy wikipedia

³ Tatchell, Jo, *A Diamond in the Desert*, p. 29



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“art creates influence”⁴. The ultimate goal, build an “intellectual and cultural empire.” With this ambitious objective in mind steps were taken to designate an area that would be dedicated to the arts, hence Saadyat Island (“Happiness” in Arabic) was born. The complex, a 30-year cultural plan, is designed to collaborate with noted art institutions and universities, featuring renown “starchitects.”

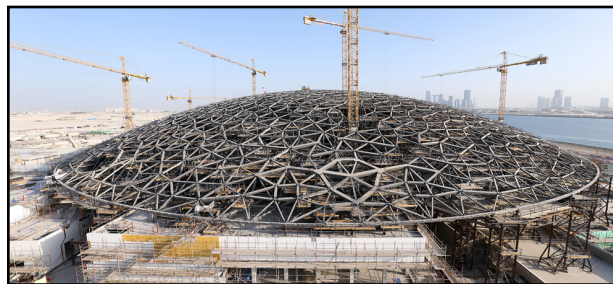


Model of Saadyat Island

The project includes Jean Nouvel’s design for the Louvre; the Guggenheim, designed by Frank Ghery www.guggenheim.org/guggenheim-foundation/architecture/abu-dhabi; the Maritime Museum designed by Tadao Ando; the Performing Arts Center (theater, music, dance) by Zaha Hadid and Norman Foster’s Zayed National Museum to honor the late Sheih Zayed and the history of Abu Dhabi.

The first and only project to have a completion date, sometime in 2015, is the Louvre-Abu Dhabi.

Current construction of the museum



In 2007 Abu Dhabi entered into a partnership with the Louvre in Paris to create a branch of the museum called Louvre Abu

Dhabi www.louvreabudhabi.ae, (the UAE has purchased the right to use the name “Louvre” for 30 years and six months⁵). The Louvre will loan works for 10 years while Abu Dhabi begins to create its own permanent collection with the help of France-Muséums, a collection which will be almost encyclopedic in scope.

⁴ Ibid, p. 280

⁵ ArtPrice article, *Il Veronese-Paul Gauguin-The Louvre Abu Dhabi*, March 21, 2014



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Osman Hamdi Bey (1842-1910)⁶
A Young Emir Studying, 1878
Oil on canvas

While Abu Dhabi has been successful in acquiring various works of art, the project has been delayed due to numerous factors. Greatest amongst these are labor problems involving 'fair labor practices.' There is also the awareness that once this and the other museums are complete and the art is made 'available' to all people of the Emirates, there will need for an "education of [the] people." Other concerns, but it is too soon to know, if falling oil prices will in anyway affect the funding of this complex or if the political problems now plaguing the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula will touch on these white sands. Only time will tell...



Giovanni Bellini (c1438/40-1516)
Madonna and Child
Oil on panel



Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894)
Game of Bezique, 1881
Oil on canvas

⁶ The artworks on these pages are a selection of what has been acquired so far for the permanent collection.



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Rene Magritte (Belgian, 1898-1967)
Subjugated Reader, 1928
Oil on canvas



Let's look at the numbers:

- Abu Dhabi holds 94% of UAE oil reserves or 92.2 billion barrels.⁷
- Abu Dhabi 2.0, as the Saadiyat Island project has also been called, estimated completion date 2030.
- Approximately 40,000 laborers have been hired to transform the island.
- Saadiyat island is 27-square kilometers (just over 10 square miles) of sand.
- \$1.3 billion promised for the rights to use the Louvre brand name, take works on loan and "secure advice from curators for 30 years."⁸
- Between 2007 and 2013 the UAE/Abu Dhabi acquired 400 major works of art.
- The acquisition budget is \$550 million over ten years.
- They have spent approximately \$55 million a year since 2009.
- Over 72,000 square feet will be dedicated to the Louvre-Abu Dhabi's permanent collection, while over 25,000 square feet will serve temporary exhibitions.



Join me for the next installment of ***Art and the Arabian Peninsula***, as we examine the city of Dubai...

⁷ Figures from www.uaetrade-usa.org

⁸ Official publication of Garuda Indonesia, September 2010, p.168