

Bold Strokes

Mother-Daughter Duo May and Raya Mamarbachi spotted a niche in the Arab world's art market that could help expand the global reach of local artists and galleries.

BY SAMUEL WENDEL

Three years ago, Raya Mamarbachi gladly obliged when her mother, May Mamarbachi, asked her to help organize an art auction to benefit Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. As Syrians from Aleppo, the cause held particular significance.

Mamarbachi mère sits on the board of the Beirut-based Kayany Foundation, which delivers aid to thousands of Syrian children stranded in the country. In the fall of 2013, it asked artists to donate some of their works. In addition to a live auction at the Beirut International Exhibition and Leisure Centre, Kayany posted more than 100 lots on Paddle8, a five-year-old New York-based online auction house.

The auction raised \$1.1 million, an impressive amount, but Raya was astounded for another reason: roughly half came from online purchases. "I was sitting in the middle of the auction seeing all these people buying things on the phone and online," she says. "I thought there must be something there."

There is. Interest in Middle Eastern and North African art has grown in recent years—regionally and internationally. U.S. auction house Christie's saw sales in Dubai double between 2012 and 2014 to \$29.6 million. During the 2015 spring art season, sales of modern and contemporary art from the Middle East amounted to \$14.7 million, a 71.4% increase from spring 2014, according to market research firm ArtTactic.

Christie's and its competitor Sotheby's opened branches in 2005 and 2008 in Dubai and Doha, respectively. The region also boasts internationally recognized contemporary art galleries, such as Beirut's Sfeir-Semler, The Third Line in Dubai, and Athr in Saudi Arabia.

Still, good art galleries in the region are few and far between. "The big art institutions in the region are still few, or still in the process of opening," says Nayla Hadchiti of Creative Bridge Fund, a New York-based private art dealer focusing on Middle Eastern art.

At the same time, virtual art galleries, such as Artsy and Artspace, have emerged, allowing artists to expand their global reach. In 2014, online vendors sold an estimated \$3.7 billion

worth of art—up from \$2.8 billion in 2013, according to the European Fine Art Foundation.

With the exception of Christie's Dubai hosting occasional online auctions, no one was selling Middle Eastern or North African art over the Internet.

"I thought why not have something for our regional market," says 38-year-old Raya.

In January 2014, she and her mother launched Beirut-based Artscoops, an online marketplace, to introduce a new breed of consumers to contemporary and modern Middle Eastern art. Their website went live in September 2014, offering art aficionados a selection of more than 400 paintings, photographs, sculptures, and calligraphies by some well-known artists. Artscoops has featured works from Farhad Moshiri, Ayman Baalbaki, Safwan Dahoul, Shafic Abboud, and Paul Guiragossian.

Artscoops made its first sale in November 2014, and last year sold some 65 pieces, ranging in price from \$500 to \$50,000. The average purchase price was \$10,000.

It helped that the Mamarbachis were well versed in the world of art. May, who lived until the mid-1990s in London, where Raya was born, started collecting contemporary Syrian art 20 years ago, when she moved Damascus.

She holds a master's degree in Islamic art from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Until 2007, she owned Beit Al Mamlouka, a 17th century Damascene house she had converted into a luxury boutique hotel. She also operated a small travel agency in the Syrian capital, catering to the growing number of tourists in the Levant. The war forced her to sell it in 2011 and move to Beirut in 2012, where she helped found a high-end jewelry store.

Raya majored in management and Spanish at St. Andrews University, before earning an MBA at the University of Reading in 2008. After graduating, she embarked on a career in advertising, and moved to Beirut to work for Publicis Graphics. In 2013, she made an investment in a Berlin-based online travel company, acting as a marketing consultant.



The architects of Artscoops:
May (left) and Raya

The screenshot shows the Artscoops website interface. On the left, there's a sidebar with filters for 'Region' (Arabian Peninsula, Middle East, North Africa, United Kingdom) and 'Medium' (Calligraphy, Collage, Digital Art, Etchings / Drawings, Installation, Mixed Media, Modern Art, Painting, Photography, Poster, Print). The main area displays a grid of artworks. Some visible titles include 'Bug Soldier 59742 Painting' by Zena Assi for \$17,000 and 'Bouquet in autoportrait Painting' by Zena Assi for \$42,200. Other pieces shown are 'La Lecture Painting' by Fatima El Hajj for \$18,000, 'Ode Museum Sculpture' by Nabil Helou, 'Ode Factory Sculpture' by Nabil Helou, 'Crystals Installation' by Hanan Malalih, 'Forest with Laughter Painting' by Randa Al-Ahmed for \$8,000, 'Snow covers Sadness in the ... Painting' by Chaouki Chamoun for \$96,000, and 'On the Golden Sand Painting' by Chaouki Chamoun for \$72,000.

In March 2014, she quit her job to focus on the startup. "I thought, 'I can't be an entrepreneur part-time,'" says Raya. She and her mother put in \$150,000 of their own money.

"When Raya had the idea, which I thought was great and a niche that we are lacking in the Middle East, I thought why not help her," says May, who's 62.

Online art marketplaces, such as Artsy, had developed partnerships with galleries, which allowed them to gain access to well-regarded artists. In return, galleries widened their reach, initially paying Artsy a 3% commission on each sale. (Artsy also charges galleries a monthly subscription fee).

To produce a website that collectors would take seriously, the Mamarbachis needed to feature artwork from well-known contemporary artists; they sought to emulate Artsy's model. By partnering with galleries—as opposed to representing artists, they also avoid conflicts. "I'm positioning myself as a complementary service to them [galleries]," says Raya.

To make the experience informative and engaging for customers, Artscoops devotes a section of its website to artist interviews and biographies.

May tapped into her extensive contacts among galleries and artists, and in April 2014, the Mamarbachis snagged their first partner, a Beirut-based contemporary art and design gallery called Art Factum, followed by the Mark Hachem Contemporary Art Gallery.

A seasoned art dealer, with galleries in Paris, New York and Beirut, Hachem showcases works by Samer Mohdad, Mona Trad Dabaji, Ahmad Moualla, and Sabhan Adam, among others.

Mark Hachem says a younger clientèle that is more comfortable purchasing big-ticket items over the Internet convinced him to partner with Artscoops. "I've happily embraced this transition to the online market," he says. "I consider it a major breakthrough in the traditional perception of the art business."

Artscoops splits its revenue with galleries. It takes a 20%

commission on a sale, while the gallery's cut depends on its contract with the artist. "They see this as a win-win because they're not paying anything for it," says Raya.

The startup now works with 27 galleries from Lebanon, Jordan, Ramallah, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Turkey, France, the U.K., and Canada. It caters mainly to two sets of customers: serious collectors, ages 45 to 55 who fork out \$5,000 and up; and 30 to 35-year-olds, who are decorating their house and looking to buy art below \$2,000. Most are from the U.A.E., followed by the U.K., Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

To facilitate payment through PayPal, which isn't offered in Lebanon, Artscoops' website is hosted in the U.S. and registered in the U.K. For transactions exceeding \$2,000, customers prefer to pay via wire transfers; Artscoops even accepts checks.

This past July, the Mamarbachis sought outside investment for the first time. They resorted to crowdfunding, raising \$130,000 within five months on Eureeca from 49 investors. In return, they gave up a 15% stake in Artscoops. They are using the funds to add an online auction feature, a mobile app, and promotional videos, all tentatively scheduled for September 2016. They are also considering charging a small subscription fee for galleries.

Artscoops is no longer the only online marketplace for Middle Eastern art. Dubai-based startup Emergeast, founded within months of Artscoops, focuses on up-and-coming regional artists. Last year, Pavilion 33, also in the U.A.E., began offering Middle Eastern and African art. Prices typically range between \$500 and \$15,000.

Raya Mamarbachi isn't concerned—at least not yet, since the market is still nascent. Says Hadchiti: "I think that an online marketplace in the region will do well, because there is still room for growth in the art world in the Middle East."

Now Artscoops has to contend with the ups and downs of a market that closely mirrors the economy. F