

The Arab Weekly

Online platform breaks new ground for selling art in MENA



May and Raya Mamarbachi, the mother-daughter duo founder of Artscoops online platform for selling arts. (Artscoops)

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Beirut - Like any industry, the art world comes with its own set of rules. Buying art traditionally was a rather formulaic experience in which prospective buyers would pass through the established routes of galleries, art consultants and dealers, live auctions and collectors.

Crucial as those options remain, the internet has modified the way art is consumed and how its business is conducted. In response to growing global demand, the last few years have seen a rise in online platforms specialising in selling art. With an expansive digitised collection of paintings, drawings, photographs and sculptures catering to varying budgets, the online experience has become seemingly effortless and comprehensive.

Despite the success of online platforms Artsy, Artspace and Artnet, little headway had been made within the Arab art world until the emergence in 2014 of Artscoops, a Beirut-based curated online platform focusing on Middle Eastern and North African contemporary and modern art.

Along with digital marketplaces such as Dubai-based Emergeast and Pavilion 33, Artscoops is paving a new way for how art is accessed and sold in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The platform also organises live and online auctions annually and curates online exhibitions.

The site was begun by mother-daughter duo May and Raya Mamarbachi. The concept came about in 2013 shortly after May Mamarbachi, who sits on the board of the Kayany Foundation, which offers aid to displaced Syrian children, enlisted Raya to organise an art auction for the foundation.

The success of the live auction, which raised \$1.1 million, led Raya Mamarbachi to consider the potential for an untapped art niche online.

Although she was working in advertising at the time, her introduction to art collecting happened early on.

"I started collecting at an early age because my parents are collectors and I always found that interesting. They started with carpets and Islamic art and then they moved on to contemporary art," Raya Mamarbachi said.

This familiarity with collecting coupled with her experience as a marketing consultant for an online recruitment company motivated her to follow her hunch.

"I think that, today, the first thing that people do is go on the internet to look at (the artworks). Whether it is on a gallery's website or (different) platforms, it's the first touch point that people make before going down to a physical gallery and auction...," she said.

"We're taking a neutral stance. We're not an online gallery. We position ourselves as a platform so the galleries can put up their own artworks and we can work with artists who don't have their own galleries."

May Mamarbachi said the e-commerce aspect acts as a buffer for buyers who may find the act of approaching a gallery daunting.

"The young generation, sometimes they are slightly uncomfortable (approaching) a big gallery. Our way seems more approachable for the younger generation," May Mamarbachi said.

Since its launch, the startup has worked with 38 galleries from across the region.

"I think it's quite an ambitious project to try and get galleries, artists and collectors involved," Raya Mamarbachi said. "It's a lot of different fronts to work on so maybe this is why it hasn't been tapped."

Doing so allows for a symbiotic relationship that facilitates the potential for a wider range of sales while also advancing the visibility of emerging and renowned artists towards an eclectic spectrum of online audiences. While such partnerships help expand the reach of the galleries and artists, Raya Mamarbachi reckons that purchasing art online will never completely replace more traditional methods.

"I think it's going to be complementary," she said. "People have different sources and ways of finding their artworks but Artscoops will become a point of preference. I think what we will see maybe is consolidation in the market between the different websites, so to have one or two major players instead of eight or nine smaller ones."

Although the market is dictated by the highs and lows of the economy, there continues to be steady growth as Artscoops builds a virtual bridge between MENA artists and international collectors.

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