

British Museum acquires new Middle Eastern photography with help of Art Fund

The British Museum has acquired photographs by nine artists from across the Middle East with support from Art Fund. This new acquisition takes the British Museum's Middle East art collection in new directions capturing moments in time and engaging with recent and current histories.

Syrian artist Jaber Al Azmeh (b. 1973), in his series *Resurrection*, invited his sitters to turn the Syrian government newspaper *al-Baath* upside down and make comments on it. These photographs are part of a free temporary display in Room 34 – *Living histories: recent acquisitions of works on paper by contemporary Arab artists*, until 22 October 2017. The work is shown together with recent acquisitions of posters, prints, drawings, photographs and artists' books. Many of the artists come from Syria, their work produced following the uprisings that began in 2011 that have since resulted in full scale civil war.

Four of the artists in this newly acquired group are from North Africa. Algerian-born Lydia Ouhrahmane (b. 1992) and French-Moroccan Leila Alaoui (1982–2016), focus on aspects of migration. Through the medium of Polaroids Ouhrahmane captures the caves where young Algerian migrants hide before making the crossing to Europe from Oran, while the brilliant photojournalist Leila Alaoui, killed in Burkina Faso, highlights the hope of young Tunisian migrants as well as the resignation clearly seen in the faces of refugees from Syria on the border with Lebanon. Tunisians Nidhal Chamekh (b. 1985) and H la Ammar (b. 1969) turn to events in their country prior to the revolution of 2011. Chamekh focuses on the Bread Riots of 1984, his subject Professor Fadhel Sassi, shot in Tunis, and Ammar on the conditions of prisoners in Tunisian jails.

Iraqi-Kurdish artist Jamal Penjwaney's darkly comic *Saddam is Here*, is intended to remind the viewer that Saddam's shadow still follows Iraqi society everywhere well after his demise.

There are two Iranian artists from different generations – Hengameh Golestan (b. 1952) captures a demonstration in 1979 by women against the wearing of the *chador*, while Newsha Tavakolian (b. 1981) in her photobook based on the idea of a childhood family album, reflects on the gritty, ordinary realities of everyday encounters in Tehran. Finally, in a direct connection with the Museum's historic collection is the work of Emy Kat (b. 1959) who depicts the now-derelict Jeddah house of Harry St John 'Abdullah' Philby, a British civil servant and explorer who became adviser to the first ruler of Saudi Arabia. His work is a direct counterpoint to the nearly 700 archaeological items collected by Philby on his travels, now held in the Museum.

This Art Fund support is part of an initiative begun in 2009, in which a capsule collection of photographs by Middle Eastern artists was created at the British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum. Many of the works acquired then were shown in 2012 at the V&A in an exhibition (13 Nov 2012 – 7 Apr 2013) with accompanying catalogue published by Steidl: *Light from the Middle East*. A version of this exhibition, entitled *True to Life: New Photography of the Middle East*, was later shown at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery in 2014.

Hartwig Fischer, Director of the British Museum, said: “We are hugely grateful for Art Fund’s support of important acquisitions like these photographs. It is through collecting contemporary art like this that the British Museum’s collection will continue to reflect the history of the world for future generations.”

Stephen Deuchar, Art Fund director, said: “Many artists today are using the medium of photography to engage with unfolding events across the Middle East. Art Fund’s establishment in 2009 of a special fund to facilitate collecting in this field by both the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum led to the formation of an important body of work, which this new group of acquisitions now joins. We congratulate the British Museum curators on this imaginative and successful progression of a pioneering initiative.”

Notes to editors

Jaber Al Azmeh’s photographs from the series *Resurrection* are part of the free display *Living histories: recent acquisitions of works on paper by contemporary Arab artists*, in Room 34 until 22 October 2017.

About Art Fund

Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art. In the past five years alone Art Fund has given £34 million to help museums and galleries acquire works of art for their collections. It also helps museums share their collections with wider audiences by supporting a range of tours and exhibitions, and makes additional grants to support the training and professional development of curators. Art Fund is independently funded, with the core of its income provided by 123,000 members who receive the National Art Pass and enjoy free entry to over 240 museums, galleries and historic places across the UK, as well as 50% off entry to major exhibitions and subscription to Art Quarterly magazine. In addition to grant-giving, Art Fund’s support for museums includes Art Fund Museum of the Year (won by the V&A, London, in 2016) and a range of digital platforms.

Find out more about Art Fund and the National Art Pass at www.artfund.org
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