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LEBANON

MUSEUM SEASON IN BEIRUT

BY HG MASTERS



Special Exhibitions Hall entrance of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut. Copyright Nabú Productions. Courtesy Nicolas Sursock Museum.

While Lebanese artists have exhibited widely across the globe in the last two decades, back in Beirut the support for the arts had remained scrappy and independent, always more shoestring than lavish. There is total political gridlock within Beirut, and this summer a popular campaign—dubbed around its central cry, “You Stink”—took to the streets to protest the government that, as symptomatic of its broader dysfunction, had allowed mountains of garbage to accumulate in the city. Yet in spite of that and the effects of the civil war in neighboring Syria, a development boom across the Lebanese capital, and heated debates about the privatization of common spaces and **destruction** of heritage buildings, Beirut’s cultural infrastructure is also undergoing a new round of potentially transformative expansion, led by civic and private initiatives.

A mainstay of midcentury Beirut’s cultural life, the **Nicolas Sursock Museum**, a lavish Ottoman-Italianate mansion in Ashrafiieh, reopened on October 8, after eight years of renovation and expansion. It now boasts more than 7,000 square-meters of newly created exhibition space, as well as a research library and auditorium, carved out from within the original structure and underneath the courtyard. Under director Zeina Arida, who had guided the nonprofit Arab Image Foundation until 2014, the museum is not only displaying its own collection of seminal modern Lebanese artists (Chafic Abboud, Etel Adnan, Michel Basbous, Saloua Raouda Choucair and Paul Guiragossian, among many others) from the time just before and after its 1961 opening, but is also looking at the present through its new programming. An inaugural film series, organized by Roy Dib, features works that explore the sea’s deep connection to life in Beirut, with films by Joe Namy, Walid Raad, Mounira al-Solh and Akram Zaatari.

In October Beirut received another private museum, with this one built in the 21st-century style. On October 25, just north of downtown Beirut on the coast in Jal el-Dib, collector and retail magnate Tony Salamé and his wife Elham opened the Aishti Foundation. Part of Aishti By the Sea, a large-scale retail and lifestyle complex designed by British architect David Adjaye, the foundation has 40,000-square feet of exhibition space that will show works from the **Salamé’s collection** of more than 2,000 works by 150 artists, primarily from the 21st century. “New Skin,” the first exhibition of 50-plus artists curated by Massimiliano Gioni of the New Museum in New York, focuses on contemporary painting with connections to some of the Salamé collection’s midcentury Italian monochrome and *Arte Povera* works. A collector mentored by American art dealer Jeffrey Deitch, Salamé was the primary sponsor of

Gioni's 2014 survey of Arab art, "Here and Elsewhere," at the New Museum, as well as the latter's 2013 edition of the Venice Biennale.

In the years leading up to Aishti Foundation's launch, Salamé had been running the [Metropolitan Art Society](#) out of a rented villa in Ashrafieh (near the Sursock Museum), and had invited international galleries, such as Kamel Mennour and Franco Noero, to open exhibitions or pop-up displays there. In October, Deitch curated a separate selection of art from the Salamé's collection in a show at the Metropolitan Art Society called "The Extreme Present."



A view of the future site of "Beirut Contemporary" project, headed by the Lebanese patronage group, the Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon. The National Museum of Beirut is on the left. Photo by Roger Moukarzel. Courtesy APEAL.

There are more initiatives in the works beyond 2015. On October 1, the Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon (APEAL) announced a design open call for an institution dubbed "Beirut Contemporary," on a site owned by the Université Saint-Joseph, across from the National Museum of Beirut. The selection committee, dubbed "[A Museum in the Making](#)," is headed by Lord Peter Palumbo, chair of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, with international curators and architects Hans Ulrich Obrist, Zaha Hadid, and Julia Peyton-Jones joining recognized local figures Rodolphe Khoury, Lamia Joreige and Fares al-Dahdah. Submissions are due January 2016, with the winner to be announced later in the same year. A charity auction organized by Christie's in March already yielded more than USD 500,000 in proceeds.

A fourth group is looking to launch a private museum. [Artistic Cultural Events \(ACE\)](#), with the backing of the Saradar Group, has an advisory committee including Saleh Barakat (founder of Agial Art Gallery), Catherine David (deputy director of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, at the Centre Pompidou, Paris), Sandra Dagher (co-founder and co-director of Beirut Art Center), Jessica Morgan (director of Dia Art Foundation, New York), Christine Tohmé (founding director of Ashkal Alwan) and Lebanese art critic Joseph Tarrab. With a similar timeframe of a 2020–21 opening, ACE is eyeing a 2,000-square-meter space in a commercial-residential development designed by Christian de Portzamparc in the Karantina district, already home to the Beirut Art Center, Homeworks Space and Sfeir-Semler Gallery.

Along with these ambitious development projects—all contingent on relative continued stability—are also new initiatives working closer to existing communities. [Tandem Works](#), founded by sisters Alia and Mayssa Fattouh, has launched the three-part project "Hammoud Badawi," for which they are working with the Other Dada (tOD) Integrated Architecture Lab, which was commissioned by the Lebanese government to rehabilitate the polluted Beirut River—today, a concrete canal of wastewater—and surrounding areas. Tandem Works, in turn, has commissioned artist Vartan Avakian to create a sound installation on each side of the river, in advance of a pedestrian bridge that is part of the renewal package, in addition to working on a campaign of civic outreach as well as a publication. Avakian is also having his first solo exhibition, "Collapsing Clouds of Gas and Dust," featuring crystals made from the Barakat Building (also known as the Yellow House, an infamous sniper post along the Green Line during the Lebanese Civil War) at the newly opened gallery [Marfa'](#), which means "port" in Arabic. The Barakat Building is itself being fixed up as part of the [Beit Beirut](#) project, a joint initiative between the Beirut City Government and the City of Paris to create a new cultural center, which is expected to be completed by the end of the year.

On the academic front, the city's leading university, the American University of Beirut (AUB), received a cash donation from Lebanese hedge fund tycoon Philippe Jabre, purportedly in excess of USD 3 million, to endow a chair for art history and curating. Jabre is a patron of the Beirut Art Center who had donated the former factory in Karantina that is now Ashkal Alwan's Homeworks Space. In 2012, AUB presented more than 60 modern Lebanese artworks from the Saleeby collection, including more than 30 by *fin-de-siecle* realist Khalil Saleeby himself, and

opened two new exhibition spaces. More recently, AUB is creating a permanent museum space on its campus that is expected to open by 2020.

Capping off a busy 2015 for the Beirut art scene, in November, Ashkal Alwan held its seventh edition of [Homeworks](#) (11/11–24), one of the enduring platforms that first returned post-civil-war Beirut to the international stage in the 2000s.

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