

Crock of gold

[Rania Khallaf](#) explores an artistic goldmine

The art scene in Egypt has flourished and expanded remarkably over the last ten years. This sudden growth both in the number and quality of artists and galleries has been an unexpected and extraordinary feature of life in Cairo's more elegant quarters, where art galleries and collectors have created a tangible cultural movement in a city that is one of the world's most crowded capitals.

This eclectic surge has also helped create new initiatives in art marketing and collection. One of these promising artistic initiatives is Artalks, created in 2006 by Fatenn Mustafa, an energetic, highly educated businesswoman.

Mustafa graduated in 1988 from the Vienna Campus at Webster University in St Louis, Missouri, with a degree in economics. She worked for more than 15 years in international corporate management at Procter and Gamble in Austria, PepsiCo International in Egypt, and as CEO of Gianaclis Vineyards for Beverages and a member of the executive committee of Al-Ahram Beverages Company.

As the daughter of the late ambassador Ahmed Shafiq Mustafa, Mustafa was raised in different parts of the world and enjoyed an atmosphere of cultural diversity. While growing up she lived and travelled in European capitals including Paris and Vienna, where she lived for eight years. "In Vienna I learnt the love for arts in general, because my colleagues in school used to spend their weekends in museums. This seemed a bit weird to me in the beginning, but I got used to it," she told Al-Ahram Weekly. She attended extensive classes in art history in Austria as well as Middle-Eastern curatorial workshops in Egypt.

"When I was working for Gianaclis I found out that wine and art were an intertwined businesses," she said with a smile. Mustafa started a special project that entailed the company's printing a chosen painting on wine bottles and commissioning paintings from artists to form the company's art collection. "This procedure increased the company's sales and pushed me forward in the art collection zone," she says.

This was a smart way to kick start Mustafa's business in art collection. In 2006 she founded ArtTalks, the first independent Educational, Advisory and Artist-Promoting Initiative in Egypt.

"What grabbed my interest as a teenager was that the study of art history was available for free in Austrian universities," she told the Weekly. "It was in 1994 when I returned to Egypt and started

my career in marketing. I was shocked by the fact that the art field in Egypt was so closed, and art education was so limited in the academic field and there was a scarcity of quality books on art."

There was also a limited number of art galleries. "All this posed a big question mark on the future of art in Egypt," she says.

Mustafa began her career as an art collector in parallel with her marketing job. It was a difficult mission, entailing her winning and losing opportunities for good paintings and risking buying fake works until she became an expert in the field.

One of the motivators that pushed her further into the field of plastic art was a historical incident.

"Back in the 1920s, Al-Ahram Institution appealed to the People of Egypt to donate money for Mahmoud Mokhtar to complete his unique masterpiece sculpture Nahdit-Misr (The Awakening of Egypt). The government no longer wanted or no longer had the means to do so. However, money poured in from citizens in all walks of life in an unprecedented way, and finally in 1928 King Fouad attended the unveiling ceremony of the now symbolic sculpture of Egypt in front of Cairo University," she said.

Despite that one striking and emotionally charged example, such a nationwide private engagement of that magnitude has never been repeated in Egypt's contemporary history.

Following the 1952 revolution, she added, the intellectual mind of the nation was nationalised along with its landed property and companies. "Art became a government mouthpiece, losing its vital freedom and independence," she says.

As Egypt now struggles to regain a leading regional position in the visual arts scene, ArtTalks, together with similar passionate art loving groups and individuals and new commercial and non-profit art ventures spreading across Egypt, aims to change the status quo.

Arttalks aims at increasing the number of Egyptian art collectors and patrons. To realise its promising mission, Arttalks provides regular educational and art appreciation seminars and offers advising services to private and corporate art lovers on art acquisition and collection-building.

Arttalks also considers the publishing of top quality books on the most significant late and living artists' works as one of its priorities. Supporting emerging talented artists is also one of its prime goals.

Arttalks also provides fund-raising to finance projects of promising and established artists work production and participation in international fairs, biennales and competitions.

Mustafa believes that a healthy, free civil society will surely thrive through a healthy and vibrant arts scene.

"Over the last ten years there has been a boom in all fields of art, and this is due to a glimmer of awareness on the part of the Ministry of Culture, and the appearance of independent art houses such as the TownHouse Gallery in Downtown, Cairo, which has created a renaissance for exploratory Egyptian artists such as Lara Baladi, Hoda Lutfi, Wael Shawqi and others who are now known and recognised worldwide.

Mustafa dreams of establishing an annual art fair in Egypt to resemble the well-established International Annual Dubai Art Fair, held in March, and the Abu Dhabi Art Fair held annually on October. "It is a hard mission, though; there are many obstacles in my way, but I hope to start building this project in the near future.

"I also hope that Arttalks will be a famous and expert in the field of plastic arts. We need to establish a database for contemporary art in Egypt, and this is one of our missions."

A mother of three and herself an avid art collector, Mustafa believes in the power of art to change people's lives, pushing them deeper into the rosy and cheerful space on earth.

Caption: Fatenn Mustafa

C a p t i o n : Fatenn Mustafa

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