



## The Gulf States' National Museums

by *Sultan Al Qassemi*

*Iconic buildings and collections battleground for future identity*

Much has been written about what French academic Alexandre Kazerouni terms 'visibility museums,' such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar. Elaborating in *Ibraaz*, Kuwaiti artist Monira Al Qadiri writes that visibility museums, rather than recreating the traditional heritage museums "filled with dioramas, maps, archeological artefacts and Arabic books" are conceived from the outset with recognized brand name architects and most certainly a significant budget. Aimed at preserving Gulf heritage and serving a slate of political ends, these national museums could emerge as a major battleground for identity and local viewpoints just as smaller, independent museums and galleries in the region experience exponential growth.

### The mega museum

In the coming few years, the Gulf will see the rise of

a multitude of 'visibility museums' designed and built by heavyweight architects. In 2017, Qatar will be inaugurating a major new museum designed by French architect and Pritzker prize winner Jean Nouvel. The \$434 million museum in the shape of a desert rose is built around the former palace of Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al-Thani who ruled Qatar from 1913 to 1949. In 1999, Saudi Arabia opened its National Museum in Riyadh, which was designed by Raymond Moriyama, a Canadian of Japanese descent. It comes with an accompanying building called the Darat of King Abdul Aziz, designed by Jordanian architect Rasem Badran. Danish architect Knud Holscher was invited in 1982 to design the Bahrain National Museum, while Frenchman Michel Ecochard (1905-1985) was the architect behind the Kuwait National Museum that opened in 1983, which is undergoing a significant makeover and expansion. The fact that the latter two countries were the first to create visibility national museums may be attributed to Bahrain and Kuwait being the first two Gulf states to discover oil, in 1932 and 1937 respectively. They were also the most politically developed and had the most advanced educational sector in the region at the time.

Lying on the eastern side of the Arabian Peninsula, the Sultanate of Oman has just inaugurated a National Museum in Muscat designed by Jasper Jacob Associates in conjunction with Arts Architecture International, both British based firms. Muscat is embarking on another major project called the Oman Renaissance Museum near the Al-Hajar Mountains designed by the Australian firm Cox Howlett & Bailey Woodland. The UAE has commissioned Foster + Partners to design the Zayed National Museum, which has yet to be awarded. Perhaps the most interesting of these will be the new \$132 million Etihad Museum in Dubai that was designed by Moriyama & Teshima Architects, who also designed the Saudi National Museum.

These planned mega museums contrast with past mini-national museums across the Gulf. Examples include Al Ain National Museum—which opened on November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1971, exactly one month before the UAE was formed—and

the aforementioned Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al-Thani museum in Qatar. These museums no longer align with the global ambitions of these Gulf states.

#### Heritage and visibility

But what factors drive these Gulf states to embark on such a major drive to build national museums?

First, these national museums are intended as domestic political messages to these states' citizenries. The museums are being built to instill a sense of pride in the citizens of these countries and to cultivate a sense of belonging and identity. They also showcase to citizens the governments' commitments to maintain national identity in a globalizing world. In almost all Gulf states, schools are required to take students—especially citizens—to visit national museums on guided tours. Many of these museums utilize the latest technologies, such as interactive panels, to capture the attention of the teenaged and younger visitors.

In 2012 Qatar Museums organized an exhibition titled *Mal Lawal* (translated as 'Belonging to the Past') in which Qatari citizens and residents were invited to share historic artefacts with the public, an event that was billed as 'Uniquely Local.' It was an ingenious way of uncovering private collections, some of which will no doubt end up in the national museum through donations, which Gulf citizens are making ever more regularly. The Zayed National Museum and Qatar National Museum have started to record the oral history of the older citizens who witnessed the transformation of their countries—these will presumably be broadcast when these museums open.

These museums are also political statements with their size, location, and contents to be carefully vetted. Often these museums will exclude certain categories such as minorities or even the slave trade. That said, Qatar should be commended for its inauguration of the Bin Jelmood house, which is the first museum in the Gulf dedicated to the slave trade in the region. It is, however, unknown if slavery will be featured in the National Muse-

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um down the road or if it will be compartmentalized into Bin Jelmood. These museums also tell history through the eyes of the victors, who are traditionally the ruling families of the Gulf and their allies. There is, for instance, little or no mention of those who have been vanquished or defeated in the past.

#### Windows to the Gulf

These national museums are also means to educate the millions of foreigners who live in or visit the Gulf states about the original inhabitants of the lands, whom foreigners seldom have a chance to interact with. Signing up major architects also helps Gulf governments to make these museums appealing to international visitors. A famous architectural brand would come with certain expectations of quality and standards.

Despite their grandeur and important collections, national museums will face challenges. In addition to omitting certain segments of society, there is a genuine risk that these museums will become museums of static historical relics rather than a reflection of the dynamism that these states are experiencing. Only the Etihad Museum in Dubai has an explicit mandate to cover the years between 1968 to 1974, and for good reason, since it is a museum dedicated to an event. The other national museums would do well to avoid becoming fortresses for the past instead of beacons of an evolving vibrant culture. The Gulf states are in a race against time, with demographics and rapidly accelerating globalization of their youth challenging efforts to preserve traditional identity. In this struggle, national museums have emerged as major battlefields.

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