

Culture beneath the dome

Louvre Abu Dhabi celebrates one-year anniversary with new edition of archaeological treasures exhibition

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On the southwestern tip of Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi sits a dome. From the skies it could be mistaken for a giant tortoise, sunning itself on the beach along the waters of the Persian Gulf. Underneath the shell — 180 meters in diameter and made up of a million latticed steel-and-concrete stars that allow the natural light in — is a museum.

It is only a year old but has already caught the attention of the cognoscenti for the unconventional-style display of its relatively small (over 600 pieces) collection, not counting works on loan from some of the world's top museums. It also hosts standout, world-class exhibitions.

Louvre Abu Dhabi is the result of a cultural collaboration between the governments of France and Abu Dhabi, and it enjoys the support of some of France's heavyweight museums.

For example, the massive statue of Ramesses II (circa 1279 BCE) in its main hall is hard to miss. The Egyptian pharaoh figure is on long-term loan from The Louvre in Paris.

Imported from Paris' Musee d'Orsay are the paintings *Egyptian Woman Smoking a Tombac* (1900) by Emile Bernard, and *The Ballroom at Arles* (1888) by Vincent van Gogh.

Roads of Arabia: Archaeological Treasures of Saudi Arabia debuted at The Louvre in Paris in 2010 and has seen 14 iterations across Europe, the United States and Asia before arriving where it probably most befittingly belongs. This new edition of the show, launched to mark Louvre Abu Dhabi's first anniversary, is being held from Nov 8 to Feb 16, 2019.

Indeed, a museum that looks as if it is suspended on the waters of Abu Dhabi is, strategically and metaphorically, a super location for a show that throws light on the art and archaeological history of Saudi Arabia, and by extension the Arabian Peninsula.

As Mohamed Khalifa Al Mubarak, chairman of the Department of Culture and Tourism, Abu Dhabi, remarked at the opening ceremony, the *Roads of Arabia* show "embodies a significant friendship and convergence between the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and France".

The exhibits cover roughly 10 millennia. One of the exhibition's prime attractions, the Ka'ba door from The Holy Mosque in Mecca, is dated circa 1635, while fragments of horse figures from 8100 BCE are among the oldest evidence establishing the antiquity of Arabian civilization.

The show will help scrape off the



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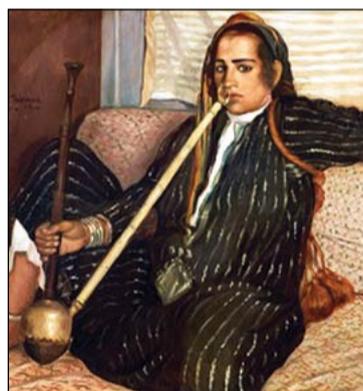
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Bronze head of a man from Qaryat al-Faw, 100-1 BCE.

patina of prejudice that the Arabian culture is sometimes viewed through. For example, a funerary stele from the ancient Arabian capital of Qaryat al-Faw, dating between 300 and 1 BCE, is shown to have been commissioned by a woman who preferred to have the names of her female ancestors inscribed on it, giving the men in her family short shrift.

The most generic showpiece from Qaryat al-Faw is the bronze head of a man (100-1 BCE) who is probably the *Mona Lisa* of ancient Arabian art. The pronounced damage to the right side of his nose has added to the enigmatic expression on a face with a tiny mouth, overshadowed by healthy, smooth, near-feminine cheeks. Rows of thick-set curls



Emile Bernard's *Egyptian Woman Smoking a Tombac*, 1900.

around the head indicate a touch of Greek influence.

In stark contrast to this soft, androgynous appearance are the three colossal red sandstone statues, from 4th to 3rd century BCE, modeled after the kings of Al-Ula, capital of the ancient Lihyanites. The monarchs have lost their faces over time but their figures stand tall, robust with broad shoulders tapering down to a firm, sculpted middle.

On the morning of Nov 9, children scampered around a sprawling lawn close to the museum, playing with cardboard prisms inspired by the square-and-triangle motifs woven into the museum dome, designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Jean Nouvel. Before long, the children had arranged these to make original designs, with one of them resembling a bison head.

Inside the main exhibition hall,



Safwa Hashim recites a poem inspired by a circa. 1200 Iranian ceramic jug.

where items are on display across its 12 galleries, unsuspecting visitors in Gallery 6, charting journeys "from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic", turned around to listen to a young man passionately advocating the merits of travel.

It was a welcome distraction from trying to locate one's homeland on a Celestial Globe from circa 1080 Morocco, or on a circa 1690 map on a pair of folding screens from Japan, adding a fresh layer of urgency to the necessity of connecting with people from another time and culture.

A while later, in Gallery 5, dedicated to "The Asian Trade Routes", a young Sudanese woman recited a poem inspired by a circa 1200 glazed ceramic jug with verses inscribed around the circumference.

"I was born from calloused hands and a dying heart," said Safwa

Hashim, one of the pop-up poetry performers of the day.

"My maker/ wrapped his favorite words around my neck/ Tattooed them on my body/ lest he forget the verses/ That housed his bones," she said, pouring out the emotional surge she had felt on first seeing the lines crafted on the jug by an anonymous Iranian poet more than 800 years ago.

Louvre Abu Dhabi's display of works is arranged to highlight the commonalities between cultures, cutting across time and space. For instance, golden funerary masks from 100 BCE to 700 CE Peru, 600 to 300 BCE Lebanon (or Syria) and 907-1125 China are presented as a cluster.

The visitor's eye is easefully piloted from a canvas of black and white ritual drawings by the Australian indigenous artist Ningura Napurrula to a 2013 installation by Maha Maluh of charred cooking pots used by nomadic tribes in Saudi Arabia.

As the first among four museums planned as part of the cultural district in Saadiyat Island, Louvre Abu Dhabi already houses priceless specimens of art, ranging from pre-Christian-era stone Buddha heads from China, India and Pakistan, to works by contemporary giants Jean Tinguely and Cy Twombly.

It is a good start for the capital of the United Arab Emirates, which can afford the very best when it is looking to build on its growing culture of museum visits and art appreciation.