

## **Developments in Arts and Culture in the GCC and Migratory Flows**

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### **Executive Summary**

Over the last decade, the UAE has made significant investments aimed at transforming the country into a cultural hub in the Middle East and beyond. Starting with the construction of branches of museums that are internationally recognized for their vast collections of artworks (Louvre Abu Dhabi, Guggenheim Museum Abu Dhabi—still in progress) to the organization of international festivals in art and literature, as well as creating gallery spaces that harbor artists in residence, there is an ever-growing presence of artistic endeavors across the emirates. Given this interest, some of the emirates are facilitating long-term residence for foreigners who work in creative industries, shaping the UAE's role as a global curator of creative arts.

The last decade witnessed a boom in creative arts industries across the United Arab Emirates, especially in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. With purpose-built strategies and continued investment in the arts sector, the UAE has been realizing the vision of becoming not only a regional but a global center for creative arts. In November 2017, the Louvre opened a branch in Abu Dhabi, the first large-scale project in the Saadiyat Cultural District that harbors, among others, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (set to open in 2025) and Zayed National Museum (opening date TBC). The first two museums reflect the international status of the UAE's cultural achievements, solidifying the country's role as a center for the arts on par with Western counterparts. The investments dedicated to the expansion of the sector are noteworthy, with Louvre Abu Dhabi alone having cost more than USD 1 billion in execution and agreements and prohibiting the creation of a similar project in other emirates and countries in the region (Assemblée Nationale, 2007). The cost of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi has been reported to amount to another USD 1 billion (Arab News, 30 September 2021). Dubai invested in the Dubai Opera, a state-of-the-art facility designed for international performances that opened in 2016. An innovative Dubai Art Museum structure is slated for completion by 2030 (Open Space, 17 October 2024). In addition, the Sharjah Art Biennial has been held in Sharjah since 1993, and the Sharjah Art Museum opened its doors in 1997.

Indeed, infrastructure helps to facilitate the enriching exchanges that occur during international events. The UAE has a long-standing tradition of organizing international book fairs in Abu Dhabi (since 1981) and Sharjah (since 1982), but in the recent decade, the Emirates has been committed to the organization

of many more large-scale events with a global appeal to enrich the annual cycle of seasonal festivals. In Dubai, the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature was launched in 2009 and has included appearances by various Nobel Prize laureates in literature. International art fairs such as Art Dubai, founded in 2007, Sikka Art & Design Festival, organized for the first time in 2011, and Abu Dhabi Art, established in 2008, are part of the yearly cultural events gathering art exhibitors from all over the world. Popular culture is represented through the Middle East Film & Comic Con (MEFCC), which was inaugurated in Dubai in 2012 and recently transferred to Abu Dhabi. The area of classical music is also well represented through the Abu Dhabi Festival, running yearly since 2003, and in Dubai, by the repertoire of the Dubai Opera. The ambitions of the UAE to become a global hub of creative arts are also illustrated by the Culture Summit Abu Dhabi. The annual event, which began in 2017, aims to evolve into the “Davos of culture” (Al Aidroos, 2019), a global gathering of the most prominent figures across the wide spectrum of arts.

These governmental strategies have created an enabling environment for the private arts sector to grow to support the creative arts development agenda. In recent years, the UAE has experienced a rapid expansion of galleries, art spaces, cultural forums, and workshops that are open to the wider public. Alserkal Avenue, located in Dubai’s industrial district, is a good example of this. It has been developed into an area ideal for hosting galleries and cultural events; it also houses an art cinema and shops dedicated to arts and crafts. Some reports state that, as of 2025, Dubai is home to more than 200 galleries (Smartsrapers, 2025). In line with the Dubai Public Art strategy, the city ought to turn more of its spaces into public art galleries as this would enhance its appeal to residents and tourists (Government of Dubai, n.d.). Some cultural organizations offer various types of fully-sponsored fellowships that enable international talent to relocate to the UAE for a limited period of time to produce creative artworks, for example, Alserkal’s artist and researcher in residence program (Alserkal, n.d.). Artists can also apply for training programs sponsored by the authorities (Jalal, 25 January 2025). The expansion of the arts scene is visible in the official cultural guide, ArtMap, which details art galleries, exhibitions, and key festivals, events, and artistic activities across the UAE (Government of Dubai, n.d.).

The growing arts sector has also provided new job opportunities for artists and curators in order to meet the new demand. Various institutions have been established offering dedicated diplomas related to the arts. For example, Sharjah Performing Arts Academy, which opened in 2019, offers programs in theater, music, and dance. In Dubai, SAE University College has been training graduates in an array of arts, from graphic design to sound production, since 2005. In Abu Dhabi, Berklee Abu Dhabi Center offers a variety of programs dedicated to music education. Similarly, as part of a broader educational and cultural strategy, New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) established a cultural program that combines educational events and performances open to the public that run throughout the year (NYUAD, n.d.). The approach to the development of the cultural sector is thus holistic, combining state-of-the-art venues with a rich calendar of large-scale international events, as well as educational and training opportunities.

The rapid growth of the culture sector in the UAE is part of the governmental strategy to diversify the economy through tourism, MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions), and services; to attract international talent to relocate as well as to build and support the creative arts base among the Emirati community and the broader Middle East. The Ministry of Culture launched the 10-year National Strategy for the Cultural and Creative Industries with the aim that both sectors would contribute 5% of the GDP over the next decade (Cabral, 5 December 2021). These sectors combined ought to become one of the ten most important pillars of the economy. In order to firmly anchor the UAE in the global creative

arts hub network, the sector requires continuity. Consequently, the emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi provide, through their Golden Visa scheme, long-term residences for practitioners in the arts to establish themselves in the UAE (DCT Abu Dhabi, n.d.). The duration of both the Abu Dhabi Golden Visa for Creatives in Arts and Culture and Dubai's Cultural Visa is ten years. Dubai started the initiative earlier in 2019, while Abu Dhabi followed suit in 2021. The visas are offered based on meeting the required criteria and include an evaluation of the applicant through the local cultural authorities, such as Dubai Culture & Arts Authority or Ministry of Culture, and Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism. The visas, if granted, cover the applicants, their spouses, and children, allowing families to relocate together to the UAE. It is not possible to know the exact number of applicants who have received the visas thus far; however, in the first year of availability, Dubai granted this opportunity to 120 individuals (Zawya, 2021). By 2021, this number had increased to 1,000 (WAM, 2021). Talented individuals may be selected by the relevant authorities in the UAE and offered a visa. For example, the General Directorate of Residency and Foreigners Affairs awards the Golden Visa yearly to a distinguished Arab literary figure in conjunction with the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature (Government of Dubai, n.d.). Some notable recipients include Giorgio Armani in 2021, Shah Rukh Khan, and Elissa (Rashwan, n.d.).

The strategic approach to the development of the arts sector in the UAE focuses on attracting representatives and supporting the development of both Arab culture and the cultures originating beyond the MENA region. In addition, Al Qassemi (2021) noted in recent years a considerable shift from the focus on primarily Western art towards the art of the Indian Peninsula, for example, from where the majority of the UAE residents originate. Consequently, the UAE art scene has been increasingly reflective of the multiple cultures of the UAE residents. At the same time, there is a focus on the growth of the Emirati artists whose works have been gaining recognition on display at international exhibitions (Al Kaabi, n.d.). As in other GCC states, art is considered an important vehicle of national identity (Proctor, 13 January 2023), hence the authorities support the growth of the local art scene in conjunction with attracting international talent. The multiple events and displays that celebrate art do so from a cross-cultural perspective, a vision embodied by the Louvre Museum (Abu Dhabi Media Office, 29 August 2024). Major events such as book fairs (Abdelsattar, 7 November 2024) and literature festivals also strive to maintain a balance between showcasing Arab culture and cultures of other regions. The opportunity for foreign talents to relocate to the UAE helps maintain a vibrant calendar of cultural events that, in turn, attracts tourism.

A long-term strategy of the UAE has firmly anchored the country on the cultural map of the region and beyond. Backed by continued large investments in the sector of creative arts, an enabling environment that offers state-of-the-art venues and facilities, as well as the opportunity to relocate for a 10-year period, renewable based on meeting certain conditions, provides the necessary basis for a flourishing sector. The key to the successful growth of the creative arts scene is this holistic ecosystem. Nonetheless, the continuity of the future growth of the sector relies on the careful evaluation of the elements making up the 10-year strategy throughout its completion and planning for its continuation beyond 2031 to attract further investments and migratory flows. So far, the UAE has managed to secure a head start over other GCC countries. While Saudi Arabia has begun to reinvigorate its arts sector, which was subdued during the decades preceding the leadership of HRH Mohammad bin Salman, the UAE is ahead of the curve, having already been recognized as a creative arts hub thanks to its cultural ecosystem (Ayad, 1 March 2023). Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia also aims at becoming a cultural hub with the launch of the Red Sea Film Festival in 2019, the creation of outstanding spaces for art exhibitions, among them, Maraya in Al Ula, and the organization of various art festivals around the Kingdom. Like the UAE, Saudi Arabia launched a Premium Residency program that includes a category of Gifted Residency for international

talent in 2024, with a residency validity of 5 years. But, as of now, the UAE does not face major direct competition in the region in terms of cultural developments and the migratory flows that follow.

However, the strategies related to investments must also be evaluated based on their financial viability and return on investment that can be measured through their indirect positive impact, such as growth in MICE and tourism, and the number of relocations to the UAE. As some of the initiatives are government-sponsored, while others rely on a combination of private sponsors and profits from tickets and merchandise sales, not all may prove to be financially sustainable. Such may have been the case for the Abu Dhabi Film Festival phased out in 2015, and the Dubai Film Festival, which met its end in 2018 (Vivarelli, 2018), as well as other galleries that are reported to have closed down due to financial difficulties (Al Qassemi, 2021). Governments should thus evaluate and support initiatives that are deemed valuable to the country whenever their existence is at risk. Secondly, the arts sector is especially vulnerable during an economic downturn; hence, securing a contingency plan for future economic shocks is necessary to mitigate negative effects that could threaten the sector and reduce the number of residents involved. Finally, the long-term residence of people contributing to the sector of creative arts depends not only on securing a visa, but also on their ability to sustain themselves in the country through their work. Consequently, the affordability of residence comes into play.

In conclusion, the UAE gained the status of a cultural hub in the Middle East and has been working towards firmly anchoring itself as a global cultural hub. Once the ten-year strategy has been completed in 2031, it will be possible to evaluate its full achievements and the way forward.

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