





# masters of the orient

**mathaf gallery**

The heady world of Orientalism spawned some of the most glamorous and dramatic artistic depictions of the Middle East. From desert landscapes to street scenes and tantalising views of the harem, Western artists articulated their various takes on the Arab world. Nowhere is better placed to guide one through this gilded world than the Mathaf Gallery, which has been dealing in Orientalist art for over 30 years.

Previous pages: Gina and Brian MacDermot in the gallery. On the wall, from left to right: Charles Willda. *The Watercarriers* (see overleaf); F Liger. *Fountain in a Moorish Courtyard*. Circa 1900. Oil on canvas. 90.5 x 68.5 cm; Rudolphe Ernst. *The Harem* (see overleaf).

Below: Rudolphe Ernst. *The Harem*. Circa 1880s. Oil on panel. 61 x 49.5 cm.

Facing page: Brian MacDermot at the entrance to Mathaf Gallery.

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Even in times of economic downturn and financial uncertainty, some places always appear reassuringly insulated from the harsh realities of life. Seemingly secure from the currently turbulent seas outside, London's elegant Belgravia is one such island of well-heeled continuity. Here, a few steps from Harrods and other favoured haunts of the international jet-set, is the Mathaf Gallery, arguably the world's leading Orientalist art dealer. Run by Brian and Gina MacDermot, the Mathaf continues to offer the same high levels of service with which it has served its clients for over three decades now. And here it is decidedly "business as usual."

Brian MacDermot was born in Paris and educated at Oxford. After several years in the army, including periods of service in Egypt and Jordan, he returned to Britain and embarked on a career in investment banking. He travelled extensively to the Middle East with his job, travels that further cemented his love for the region and its culture. "I first got to know that part of the world during my army years, and so it was wonderful to be able to go back and develop the relationship further," he recalls.

As a result of his work MacDermot became acquainted with some of the region's rulers, and it was through one such contact that he was tempted into the world of art dealing. Always interested in art, and particularly attracted by the Orientalists, he had already acquired several paintings for

himself. Hanging on the walls of his home, three in particular attracted the eye of an important Middle Eastern house guest. "I could see how taken he was by them, and so I gave him one as a present," MacDermot recalls. That was the beginning of what proved to be a most productive and enduring contact, for, as MacDermot freely admits, "If you make a gift, it comes back tenfold!"



## The Journey Begins

The next milestone for MacDermot was the World of Islam Festival, held in London in 1976. The first major celebration of its type, the preparations for the festival marked a new stage in the recognition of the cultural achievements of the Islamic and Arab worlds. Never had there been a better time to establish an art gallery specialising in art from that region, or so it seemed. MacDermot opened the Mathaf Gallery in 1975, initially specialising in Contemporary Arab

art. "We started off showing just Arab artists, with each Middle Eastern embassy providing us with examples of work by their top artists. It went alright, but we weren't really making enough money to stay afloat, so had to think again."

As a result, MacDermot decided to move into selling Orientalist paintings, at that time distinctly undervalued, both in terms of their financial worth and artistic merit. "In the mid-1970s you could pick up a Gérôme for \$15,000. You'd now be looking at a million at least for a good example, so it



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was definitely a good time to buy.” Even so, the market was slow, and MacDermot recalls how he was able to purchase whole collections then, something that he could not easily contemplate doing now. Meanwhile, he concentrated on developing a good relationship with those people who were buying, helping them identify particular artists or subject areas in which they wanted to specialise and working over the long-term with clients to build up collections that are now of international importance. One of the most famous of these is the Najd Collection, containing 150 examples of the very best Orientalist works. “We have always prided ourselves on personal service, and so have worked hard to cultivate and assist collectors and especially clients from the Arab world itself,” says MacDermot.

#### Voices Off

In recent years Orientalist art has increased greatly in value and attention, a phenomenon both generated by, and responsible for, an accompanying debate on its so-called political dimension. MacDermot has little truck with the criticism of the genre that has been voiced by certain figures on the Left in particular, who view it as a skewed and neo-colonialist commentary that serves to demean the Middle East and its people. “I feel that a lot of political nonsense has been uttered about Orientalism, and that the debate has not been fair, at least in the sense that critics have been allowed to hold sway at the expense of any alternative viewpoint. At the end of the day, these [the Orientalists] were artists working within the social and political conditions of their time and there is



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little, if any, point in judging them according to current political correctness.”

MacDermot’s knowledge and years of experience dealing with Orientalist works has made him one of the foremost experts in this complex field. He is especially skilled at picking up forgeries and fakes, of which there are an increasing number in circulation. He tells the story of a recent incident involving a woman who visited the gallery with a painting she claimed was

by Ludwig Deutsch, today one of the most highly sought-after of all the Orientalists.

“I was already aware of several bogus works by Deutsch popping up in Europe, so was immediately suspicious. Closer

examination of the work in question revealed the tell-tale signs of a fake, including the use of techniques such as drying which forgers use to create an aged look.” MacDermot dismissed the woman from his gallery and threatened her with police action, but the incident served to underline his contention that never has it been more important for collectors to take proper, independent professional advice. “It is imperative these days to do so. The auction houses are fine, but they represent the market place and the vendor, whereas we’re on the side of the purchaser. We offer added value, in the sense that every work we sell comes with a guarantee of authenticity and price, and we pride ourselves on excellent after-sales service.”

The recent trend of vendors rushing straight to auction is

Above: Tadeusz Ajdukiewicz. *The Road to Bizerte, Tunisia*. 1909. Oil on canvas. 99.5 x 165 cm.

Facing page: Franz Xaver Kosler. *An Arab Market Scene*. 1896. Oil on canvas. 62 x 95 cm.



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of understandable concern to MacDermot, as to all gallerists. “There’s a clear trend right now to go to auction without taking any advice en route,” he observes, “but there are big risks attached with doing this. A vendor may or may not be lucky in the auction room, as it all hinges on who’s there on the day. The current state of the market makes it all the more chancey.” Time then, perhaps, to take stock. Sound advice is worth even more when times are uncertain, and never more so when an imperfectly known work comes to light. There are undiscovered treasures still out there, according to MacDermot; “There’s undoubtedly quite a lot sitting in people’s attics, and we often get works brought in by people who are completely unaware of what they have or what it might be worth.”

#### Modern Moves

Although Mathaf is most renowned for its unparalleled expertise in the field of Orientalism, the gallery has always continued to deal in Contemporary art. This side of the business is handled largely by Gina MacDermot, who formerly worked at Sotheby’s and who has overseen a shift in focus from what was largely a portfolio of landscape views from the Middle East to an increasingly innovative and varied range of works. Over the years the gallery has sent out many artists to the region, or commissioned their work, including June Bartlett, Mike Donnelly, Terry Gilbert, Peter Upton and Harold Wood. A regular programme of exhibitions in the London gallery is supported by frequent visits to the Middle East; “Our strongest market is





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undoubtedly in that part of the world, and we go there several times each year to meet with clients”, says MacDermot. So well-regarded is the Mathaf that its reputation goes before it; “We used to attend a greater number of overseas art fairs and events, but I guess we’re now in the fortunate position that people know who we are and what we do, and so they tend to come to us rather more than was the case in our early days,” says MacDermot.

A highly successful recent initiative was the exhibition of Orientalist art held by the Mathaf at the Waqif Art Centre in Doha in Qatar, during November/December 2008. Inaugurated by HE Sheikh Hassan Bin Mohammed Bin Ali Al-Thani (Vice Chairman of Board of Trustees of the Qatar Museums Authority), it was timed to coincide with the opening of the new Museum of Islamic Art in Doha (see *Canvas* Volume 4 Issue 6). Praised locally as an important cultural and educational event, the exhibition was also a successful commercial venture and confirmed the Mathaf’s close relationship with the region. As MacDermot recalls, “My first visit to Doha was 25 years ago! We were honoured to be exhibiting in Doha and delighted, as always, with the warm welcome we received here.”

The Mathaf’s sense of continuity is underlined equally well by the gallery’s association with Ahmed Moustafa, who in September/October 2008 held an exhibition, *Seeking an Immutable Essence*, in the

gallery exactly 30 years after his first show there. “Ahmed is an old friend, and rightly revered by all the top calligraphers. It’s always an honour to show his work,” says MacDermot, going on to explain that whereas selling calligraphy used to be quite hard work, the genre is now enjoying greater market appeal and is constantly increasing in value. “There’s certainly a much wider range of people interested in buying calligraphy now,” he observes, “and a much more discerning type of collector, too.”

The recent vagaries of the art market have undoubtedly got the chattering classes in a state of excitement, but MacDermot is sanguine about the current climate. His advice to would-be buyers remains constant: “Buy what you like, but always buy the best you can afford. And if you’re thinking of buying several pieces, make a plan. Are the works for decoration, or do you want to form a serious collection, united by subject matter or based around one artist?” In terms of investment, paintings by the best-known artists, be they in oil or watercolour, should consistently hold their value, according to MacDermot; “David Roberts is always solid, for example, but don’t be surprised when you find another one out there!” Armed with that set of advice, one would be unlikely to go far wrong. 

**For further information, call +44 2072350010 or visit [www.mathafgallery.com](http://www.mathafgallery.com)**

Facing page: Charles Wilda. *The Watercarriers*. 1886. Oil on panel. 56 x 38.1 cm.

Above: Charles Théodore Frère. *Camels Crossing Water*. Circa 1870. Oil on panel. 47 x 149 cm.