

A Brief Guide to the Cultural Scene in the United Arab Emirates

United Arab Emirates

The UAE is an elective monarchy formed from a federation of seven emirates, consisting of Abu Dhabi (the capital), Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah. Each emirate is governed by a Sheikh and, together, they form the Federal Supreme Council; one of them serves as President of the United Arab Emirates.

The United Arab Emirates was formed in 1971. The unification was led by the then ruler of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan who is considered the Founding Father of the Nation.

The UAE population is estimated around 10 million. Emiratis constitute roughly 20% of the total population, making UAE home to one of the world's highest percentage of expatriates from over 200 nationalities.

Arts and Culture in UAE

The federal Ministry of Culture and Youth sets the vision for culture in the UAE and is led by Her Excellency Noura Al Kaabi, a driving force in protection and promotion of the UAE's cultural heritage. MCY's vision strives for "...the United Arab Emirates to be a hub of excellence in culture and knowledge, and a pioneering model for a society which is proud of its national identity and culture globally..."

This vision is realised through cultural departments and authorities in each of the Emirates. The largest and most active are in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah who approach and lead cultural development in their Emirates.

Key Arts and Culture organisations / institutions / events in UAE

Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi Art

Abu Dhabi Art expands beyond the notion of a traditional art fair in placing emphasis on a diverse public engagement programme, including art installations and exhibitions, talks and events, that take place in different locations throughout the year. The culmination of this year-long programme is the Abu Dhabi Art event in November, which provides an important sales platform for participating galleries whilst also offering these galleries an opportunity to showcase ambitious installations and site-specific works by their artists to a wide audience.

<https://www.abudhabiart.ae/en>

Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation

The Cultural Foundation is located in the heart of Abu Dhabi and was built as the UAE's and the region's first dedicated cultural centre since it opened its doors to Abu Dhabi's residents in 1981. The foundation is a home to Abu Dhabi Children Library which runs many programmes to connect children with knowledge, arts and technology,

The Foundation also runs a visual arts programme of exhibitions and performing arts programme including music, dance and theatre.

<https://culturalfoundation.ae/>

Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation

Through arts education, community arts and special projects, Abu Dhabi Music & Arts Foundation (ADMAF) has been nurturing creativity across the UAE for more than two decades. Since its establishment in 1996, it has been at the forefront of the UAE's arts sector, inspiring young people, the public and artists, enabling creative expression through a wide range of programmes and projects. By bringing together audiences and institutions, the Foundation has helped embed arts and culture in the heart of the nation.

<https://admaf.org/>

Manarat Al Saadiyat

Manarat Al Saadiyat contributes to the art scene in Abu Dhabi through exhibitions, workshops, performances and drop-in art studio spaces. The site for the annual Abu Dhabi Art show, Manarat Al Saadiyat includes an outdoor events terrace, three galleries for temporary exhibits, a photography studio, an art studio and a 250-seat auditorium. Meaning 'place of enlightenment', Manarat Al Saadiyat opened in 2009 and today hosts an ongoing series of activities for the local community, including workshops for children and adults in topics such as printmaking, self-portraits, figure drawing and robotics.

<https://manaratalsaadiyat.ae/>

NYUAD Arts Center

The NYUAD Arts Center is a new beacon of inspiration at New York University Abu Dhabi where performance, education, and community come together in a vibrant, state of the art setting to enrich the cultural life of both the campus and the city. The Arts Center comprises an expansive complex of performance venues, technical resources, exhibition spaces and educational facilities.

<https://www.nyuad-artscenter.org/>

Warehouse421

Warehouse421 is a home-grown arts and design center dedicated to showcasing and nurturing creative production from across the region. Working in collaboration with local, regional and international entities, they seek to aid the development of the UAE's creative ecosystem through learning, research and commissions.

<https://www.warehouse421.ae/en/>

Dubai

Alserkal Avenue

Alserkal is a socially responsible and forward-thinking arts and culture enterprise based in Dubai dedicated to developing homegrown initiatives, cultural production and events, while supporting creative minds and contemporary non-profit research. Founded in 2007 by Emirati businessman and patron Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, Alserkal is renowned for our ground-breaking artistic productions, experimental approach, and for the creation of culturally meaningful spaces that inspire and shape communities.

<https://alserkal.online/>

Art Dubai

Over the past 15 years, Art Dubai has cemented its role in being a major catalyst in the local, regional and international conversations on art from the Middle East and surrounding region (MENASA – Middle East, North Africa & South Asia), and putting art from these territories onto the global map. As one of the world's most international art fairs, Art Dubai has further expanded its commitment to cultivating a culture of discovery, offering exciting new global perspectives and broadening conversations about art beyond traditional western-led geographical scopes and narratives.

<https://www.artdubai.ae/>

Cinema Akil

Cinema Akil is an independent cinema platform that brings quality films from across the world to the audiences in the UAE. Showcasing directors and filmmakers across the decades, Cinema Akil aims to create awareness and interest in film and the cinematic arts. In September 2018, Cinema Akil opened its first permanent location in Al Quoz, Dubai making it the GCC's first arthouse cinema.

<https://www.cinemaakil.com/>

Emirates Literature Foundation

The Emirates Literature Foundation, home of the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature, is a not-for-profit non-governmental organisation that supports and nurtures a love of literature in the UAE and across the region through a programme of varied cultural initiatives. Recognising the distinctive contribution that literature makes to children's lives, the Foundation focuses on introducing and cultivating a spirit of reading while acting as a catalyst for writing and cultural exchange.

<https://www.elfdubai.org/en/home>

Expo 2020

Expo 2020 is a World Expo, currently hosted by Dubai in the United Arab Emirates from 1 October 2021 to 31 March 2022. The expo will have a theme called "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future". The expo will also have three subthemes: opportunity, mobility and sustainability, each with its own pavilion. The arts and culture programme at Dubai Expo includes Al Wasl Opera and a diverse range of installations, artistic creations, workshops and performances.

<https://www.expo2020dubai.com/>

Jameel Arts Centre

Jameel Arts Centre is an independent institution dedicated to exhibiting contemporary art to the public and engaging communities through learning, research and commissions. Founded and supported by Art Jameel, the Centre is located in Jaddaf Waterfront, Dubai. Jameel Arts Centre aims to be a leading contemporary art institution for the UAE, the Middle East and South Asia region, and beyond.

<https://jameelartscentre.org/>

Tashkeel

Tashkeel seeks to provide a nurturing environment for the growth of contemporary art and design practice rooted in the UAE. Through multi-disciplinary studios, work spaces and galleries located in both Nad Al Sheba and Al Fahidi, it enables creative practice, experimentation and dialogue among practitioners and the wider community. Operating on an open membership model, Tashkeel's annual programme of training, residencies, workshops, talks, exhibitions, international collaborations and publications aims to further practitioner development, public engagement, lifelong learning and the creative and cultural industries.

<https://tashkeel.org/>

Sharjah

Sharjah Art Foundation

Sharjah Art Foundation is a contemporary art and cultural foundation based in Sharjah, founded in 2009 by Hoor Al Qasimi. Located in Sharjah's historic Art and Heritage Areas, Sharjah Art Foundation activities and events take place throughout the year and include exhibitions featuring the work of Arab and international artists, performances, music, film screenings and artist talks as well as extensive art education programmes for children, adults and families. The Foundation hosts the annual March Meeting and every two years presents the Sharjah Biennial.

<http://www.sharjahart.org/>

Sharjah Book Authority

SBA aims to attract relevant bodies and figures operating in the cultural sector around the world to support book publishing, printing, translation and documentation in particular. The SBA has jurisdiction over several important cultural projects in the UAE, including Sharjah Publishing City, the very first publishing free zone in the Arab World. The authority is also responsible for Sharjah Public Libraries; the Sharjah International Book Fair (SIBF) - the fourth largest in the world; Sharjah Children's Reading Festival; and the Translation Grant. SBA also organises the Publishers Conference, which is the first free training programme for publishers in the Arab World, and is also responsible for an annual joint conference with the American Library Association

<https://sba.gov.ae/>

House of Wisdom

The House of Wisdom is Sharjah's new iconic cultural hub. It was commissioned in honor of the Sharjah World Book Capital 2019 title by UNESCO and is the living legacy of the promises made then, namely to continue to promote reading and ease access to knowledge to all members of society and in doing so, become a progressive society that are the catalysts of harmonious coexistence.

<https://houseofwisdom.ae/>

Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council

Representing both traditional and modern crafts across the MENASEA and Central Asia regions, working with partner organisations and championing artisans and designers, the Irthi Contemporary Crafts Council is looking at the empowerment of women professionally and socially. The council aims to provide a fresh narrative for women, by developing new market opportunities, and sectors, delivering social development programmes and vocational training, as well as preserving the skills and rich cultural heritage of the UAE for current and future generations through various initiatives.

<https://irthi.com/>

Maraya Art Centre

Established in 2006, Maraya Art Centre is a non-profit creative organization that offers innovative programmes through its multifaceted initiatives, and public outreach activities including workshops, lectures, talks and other art related events. MAC strives to support emerging artists and designers in a comprehensive way, providing opportunities for continual growth through research, exhibition and project development across its initiatives including: The Maraya Art Gallery, 1971 Design Space, Maraya Art Park, Maraya Residencies, Jedariya and Maraya Project Space.

<http://www.maraya.ae/>

Fikra

Fikra is a design-led educational platform that comprises a co-working space, design studio, café, gallery, and library. Fikra Campus fosters community engagement, cross-disciplinary exchange, and cultural production. It is a catalyst for design thinking and cultural production in the region. It is a physical and intellectual space that investigates culture and identity and speculates about technology and the future.

<http://fikradesigns.com/>

Ras Al Khaimah

Ras Al Khaimah Fine Arts Festival

Ras Al Khaimah Fine Arts Festival is a nonprofit community arts festival designed to showcase the work of local and emerging artists, photographers, and filmmakers and engage the community through a diverse calendar of cultural and creative programming. RAKFAF was established to bring the community together to celebrate art, create opportunities for cultural exchange, and support the creative and artistic sectors of the emirate. An initiative of the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research, the Festival is an integral part of the Foundation's mission is to contribute to the cultural development of Ras Al Khaimah.

<https://www.rakfinearts.ae/>

Art programmes at UAE public and private universities

Most of UAE Universities offer arts degrees in different disciplines. The main universities are:

- Zayed University
- American University Sharjah
- American University Dubai
- American University Ras Al Khaimah
- NYU Abu Dhabi
- Paris Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi
- Heriot-Watt University Dubai
- UAE University
- Abu Dhabi University
- Middlesex University Dubai
- Curtin University

For more information about the upcoming arts and culture events in UAE, please visit:

<https://magpie.ae>

<https://www.visitdubai.com/en/whats-on/dubai-events-calendar>

<https://visitabudhabi.ae/en/events>