

## Culture

## Viewpoint



**Dr Haitham El-Zobaidi**

is an Iraqi writer based in London. He is the Executive Editor of Al Arab Group.

# What should intellectuals expect from ministries of culture in the Arab world?

Being a minister of culture in an Arab country, especially in one with limited means, is an exacting job. Nobody knows exactly what a minister of culture should be doing.

Everywhere in the world, government ministries are public service institutions whose essential role is to provide services to the population. How does this logic apply to the ministry of culture? Should artists and intellectuals expect the ministry of culture to provide them with an income?

To fulfil its role, the ministry of culture needs the services of men and women of culture. They are its means for providing cultural services to society. A writer enlightens the population by writing and an artist entertains.

A library is a must in a modern society while cinema allows exceptional relief for the eye and the mind. Our daily life is taken up by work, reading and watching television. Except for the news, anything shown on TV, even a cooking show, counts as culture.

Another major role of the ministry of culture is that of shielding society from the endless flood of extremist ideas. The ministry can cooperate and coordinate with citizens and intellectuals alike to turn its programmes into engines for raising awareness and re-examining social norms and values.

Societies immunised through culture can safely withstand the onslaught of ideological or religious intolerance. When the cultural fibre becomes weak in a society, it makes it easy for dubious ideas to gain the upper hand in a gullible environment. All we have to do in the Arab world is look around to realise the total absence of ministries of culture and of intellectuals.

The cultural renaissance of the 1950s through the 1970s is history and yet it was thanks to the dynamics of culture that the Arab world extricated itself from the Middle Ages and ushered in the age of modernity. That same world is back in the Middle Ages with an added dimension of violence and savagery unwitnessed before and coming from the availability of new weapons and technologies. This descent to the depths of hell was made possible by eclipsing over long stretches of time the role of culture in society.

Intellectuals in the Arab world have a long list of complaints about ministries of culture in their countries. Most of those complaints are justified but the real problem emanates from the lack of clarity about the role of the ministries.

Ministries of culture have never been employment offices. They are there to support cultural activities for the benefit of the society as a whole, not for the material benefit of only intellectuals and artists.

Allocating subsidies and financial awards to artists and intellectuals cannot be seen as an obligation for the state. These are forms of generosity from the state and society.

a source of income and Shakespeare has his festival.

Charities also participate in this financing effort. Thanks to generous donors, artists and intellectuals can continue to work and produce without worrying about their next meal. Wealthy people deliberately pay premium prices for works of art and compete in sponsoring cultural events without expecting a profit in return. When it comes to finding donors, churches must be quite jealous of theatre houses. In this system, the state is there to just keep an eye on the organisational side and prevent corruption.

In this kind of system, the main role of the minister of culture is to find the right balance between the cultural needs of society, the state's resources and the productive capacities of artists and intellectuals. To succeed in that role, should the minister of culture come from the world of art and culture or should he or she be a shrewd politician? This is a question that remains unanswered in the Arab world because its governments have yet to determine what they want from culture.

Artists and intellectuals in the Arab world need to look objectively at their demands from the state. They can be egocentric when it comes to their work but need to be objective when it comes to deciding which role national culture should play.

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Governments can do a lot to support intellectuals and artists. In a rich country, such as Britain for example, the government is not able to subsidise all cultural events. Quite often, a government initiative to restore a historic theatre or building using public funds gets blocked in parliament. So the government has turned to indirect financing through the creation of a national lottery dedicated to financing cultural activities and non-profit cultural programmes. Thus, everybody wins; theatre people and restoration artists have

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## Timo Nasser's show, an imaginative quest for the infinite

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Sharjah

History, myth, science, math and artistic imagination combine in Timo Nasser's first UAE solo exhibition, "All the Letters in All the Stars," presented at the Maraya Art Centre in collaboration with the Sharjah Islamic Arts Festival.

The Berlin-based German-Iranian artist is not unknown in the United Arab Emirates, having been one of the winners of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize in 2011 for "Gon," a shiny lattice of steel rods, in a nod to Islamic geometrical forms and architecture.

It took Nasser a long time to have a solo show in the Emirates because he was looking for "the right institution" where an exhibition of this scale could be accommodated, he said. He was represented through the Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Beirut so "did not feel absent from the region," Nasser added.

Having began his artistic career as a photographer, the switch to sculpture in 2004 and later to Islamic calligraphic forms proved to be "a difficult transition initially."

"For me, it started with a certain kind of curiosity about certain aspects of Islamic architecture and especially about the construction of the muqarnas, a form of ornamented vaulting in Islamic architecture," Nasser said.

"It was then that I realised that mathematics is the theme that holds it all together and the geometry that was used for it was based on a combination of three triangles. I started this research in 2009-10. Once you figure out how this particular geometry works, you can use it and it becomes like a toolbox to explore Islamic geometric forms."

Born and brought up in Berlin and with no knowledge of Arabic, Nasser applied a very logical, Western methodology with the imaginative curiosity of an artist



**Grasping the infinite.** Timo Nasser's "Unknown Letter I."

(Maraya Art Centre)

to his subject. In 2006, during his transition to sculpture, he said, he "always felt the need to get close to his subject to get to its core."

Nasser came upon noted Arab calligrapher of the Abbasid age, Ali Muhammad bin Hasan ibn Muqala (circa 885-940) and his system of Arabic cursive writing and the aesthetics of proportioned script when his father presented him a small book on calligraphy.

"I was fascinated that he (Ibn Muqala) was trying to approach the script through mathematics so I

**The exhibition shows Nasser's disciplined practice of Arabic lettering in the method of Ibn Muqala.**

did a sculpture on this proportion called 'Alif' in 2009."

About three years ago, Nasser read the tragic life story of Ibn Muqala and his theory of four missing letters in the Arabic alphabet. Ibn Muqala said he had found four letters that were missing from the Arabic language. He did not reveal the letters, despite immense pressure, including physical mutilation and incarceration, and his notes on

their discovery are missing.

Nasser searched for where the calligrapher could have found the letters, deducing they were hidden in the constellations. In artistic terms, it was indeed a mighty leap of the imagination and brought together many strands of Nasser's recent exploration.

"So being fascinated by Ibn Muqala's missing Arabic letters, I started to research and then I started this fantasy about where these letters are," he said. "This was actually the starting point for this exhibition, 'All the Letters in All the Stars.'"

"When I started to look for where the letters could be and being always interested in the stars, I tried to imagine that Ibn Muqala must have looked up at the night sky in Baghdad and found the patterns for those missing letters up there."

With "Alif" starting the series, "Unknown Letter I" and "Unknown Letter II" – the second and third missing letters – were done in 2015 and the last letter was created for the present exhibition.

Consequently, the exhibition, which includes four sculptures of the resulting forms – made of walnut and steel – as well as drawings and wood pieces outlining the process, is a result of the artist's in-depth research and investigation of this theory. It shows his disciplined practice of Arabic lettering in the method of Ibn Muqala and applying it to a recreated star chart from Baghdad in 934.

"All the letters in All the Stars" has won over viewers and critics. Laura Metzler, Maraya Art Centre curator, said the exhibition has been extended to April 5 so art lovers across the Emirates could enjoy and familiarise themselves with Nasser's work.

"The show is a dialogue between structure and fragmentation and the inability in these two veins to fully grasp the infinite. There is a kind of two segments – some older and some newer work – in dialogue here," Metzler said.

N.P. Krishna Kumar is an Arab Weekly contributor in Dubai.