

## Book Review

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**Karen Exell, *Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Routledge, 2016). Pp. 216. £98.99 hardback, £35.99 paperback.\***

Since the 1970s, the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf have witnessed enormous oil revenues that fueled their economic development plans, and regional and international prominence. These developments that swept the region not only put the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf on the map, but also integrated them into the globalization of Western demotic and high culture. The aforementioned developments also made the rulers of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states feel that sub- and supra-state identities, which spanned across the Middle East, posed challenges for governance as such identities compete with state identity, inspire transnational movements, and constrain purely state-centric behavior.<sup>1</sup> Hence, GCC leaders have exerted extensive efforts to invest in crafting exclusive national identities that legitimize the state both domestically and internationally (Hassan 2018). *Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula*, given the on-ground extensive experience of its author Karen Exell, provides valuable insights on the role of museums in the Arabian Peninsula—an understudied topic—insofar as states' legitimization strategy is concerned. The book's clear presentation and rich examples make it a worthwhile read. In this book review, I start with providing a synopsis of the book, and then move on to discuss the coinciding and oppositional discourses around cultural production currently enunciated in the region.

In the central thesis of the book, Exell discusses the simultaneous and oppositional existence of the 'global' and 'local' cultural production in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, particularly through museums. She argues that both approaches, in their own way, are contributing to the crafting of the contemporary identities of the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. It is worth noting that Exell does not focus on Oman, because its history and state- and nation-building processes are very different from the other five Arab states of the Persian Gulf. The book is comprised of eight chapters that tackle issues around building nations in a modern Middle East; staging identity in a globalized world; universal art museums in the Arabian Peninsula; knowledge production in the realm of culture; narrative of purity and exclusion; private collections and museums; and the future of museums in the Arabian Peninsula. The eight chapters can be divided into three main sections: a contemporary analysis of the evolution of museums and heritage projects; the impact of the political and cultural conditions in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf on museums; and the future of museums in the Gulf.

With chapters two and three, the first section of the book begins with a discussion on the wave of establishing museums that started with state formation in the 1970s. National museums have been used in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf as epistemological technologies that stage national myths and identity. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the establishment of such museums aims to legitimize the ruling families to their respective constituencies only. In fact, these museums also aim to project a certain image to the outside world. Chapter four then turns to focus on art museums in Abu Dhabi, particularly the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. It argues that the establishment of such museums is part of a grand branding strategy the United Arab Emirates sponsors. By hosting globally renowned museums and embracing globalization and cosmopolitan ideals, Abu Dhabi claims a certain degree of cultural legitimacy and symbolic power both regionally and internationally. In chapter five, Exell engages with the discussion around the attempts of global experts and elite actors to vernacularize the assemblages presented in global museums of the Arabian Peninsula. Exell

argues that, in fact, global experts and elite actors resist vernacularization and hybridity as 'the value of the global museum lies in its elite Western culture credentials' (Exell 2016: 14).

The second section of the book starts with chapter six's discussion on 'cosmopolitanism' in the Gulf. Given that expatriates are the absolute majority of Gulf states' demographics, daily interactions are cosmopolitan by default. Yet, globalization and capitalism brought with them schemes of exclusion and inequity that, along with the exclusive and elitist national identities promoted by states, resulted in state-of-the-art urban spaces and developments that are significantly inaccessible to 'polluting bodies', such as the dominant South Asian community. The chapter also highlights efforts by states, such as Qatar's Bin Jalmood House: The International Slavery Museum, in subtly highlighting the cultural and ethnic diversity of their populations. This discussion leads to another type of museum, discussed in chapter seven; private museums and collections. Despite states' efforts to adopt western approaches in building museums and staging national myths, there have been also societal efforts to document and preserve traditional folklore and heritage practices. These spaces, instead of focusing on assemblages, tend to place social relations and communication at the centre of the story they are telling.

Finally in the third section, Exell shares her thoughts on the future of the global spectacular and indigenous private museums in the Gulf. She argues not only that each model will continue to evolve in its own way, there also might be an emergence of a third model that would appropriate the public norm with the contemporary world.

Exell's book perfectly highlights the modern/traditional dilemma that the Arab states of the Gulf face. Through her discussion on museums in the Arabian Peninsula one understands the predicament of the local versus the global insofar as cultural production is concerned, which are parallel articulated approaches in the Gulf despite their oppositional nature. This oppositional nature is apparent in both style and content. The dual cultural productions provide contrasted cultural experiences. While the 'global' evokes an internationally-recognized art world, the 'local' invites a submerged interaction with traditional regional productions (Exell 2016: 14). For example on the one hand, modern art is perceived as a byproduct of Western art history, which is not organic to the Arabian Peninsula. However, states sense the need to embrace modern art for branding purposes, particularly to be seen by the West as 'good modern global citizens'. On the other hand, traditional cultural practices are centred around oral histories and folklore practices of the region. Exell's book shows us how this indigenous type of cultural production, although steered by the community, is welcomed by the state for two main reasons. First, the state places itself at the centre of this identity to claim a historical right to rule. Second as mentioned earlier, this indigenous cultural production feeds into a consistent historical narrative propagated by the state. This narrative lies at the heart of crafting an exclusive national identity that keeps sub- and supra-state identities at bay. Exell also, through her book, provides the reader with a glimpse of the undercurrents of state-society relations in the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, particularly post the 2011 Arab Uprisings. She discusses how this parallel cultural production is perceived by the society. While the national identity project, that incorporates indigenous cultural production, has been at its zenith, the public starts raising questions about Western-style museums, and 'ruling families' overly autonomous decision-making powers in terms of state expenditure on projects that are not regarded as directly beneficial the local community' (Exell 2016: 204).

Overall, this book is a key book for students of museum studies and cultural production, especially those focusing on the Arabian Peninsula, as it keeps up with the fast pace developments Arab countries of the Persian Gulf are experiencing. The book coherently provides an overview of museums as an ever-evolving structure that adapts to political, economical, and social developments in *Khaleeji* societies. It also succeeds in maintaining a critical analysis of museums in the Arabian Peninsula, one that is not affected by misconceptions or pejorative perceptions.

Islam Hassan

Research Analyst, Center for International and Regional Studies,  
Georgetown University in Qatar

**References**

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Hinnebusch, Raymond A. and Anoushiravan Ehteshami. (2014) *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States: Between Agency and Structure*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

**Note**

- <sup>1</sup> The Gulf Cooperation Council was established in 1981 as a regional intergovernmental political and economic union consisting of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman.

For more discussion of identities and interstate relations in the Middle East please refer to Raymond A. Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States: Between Agency and Structure* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2014), 2.