

Shafik Gabr, the Egyptian investor, art collector and philanthropist has set up a new foundation to foster the art of dialogue, with the aim of allowing each to understand “the other”, writes Rhona Wells.

## “East-West: the Art of dialogue” aiming to create a tidal wave of understanding

**A**S A YOUNG MAN, GABR TRAVELLED FROM Egypt to Europe, then on to India and Africa. He feels strongly that although we communicate, and in the modern world we do communicate constantly via Twitter, face book and emails, we still do not always understand each other. It is with this in mind that he established the Shafik Gabr Foundation, with the aim of promoting mutual understanding between the peoples of the Middle East, Europe and US through dialogue and the exchange of ideas. “As gaps in understanding between East and West open up at many levels, there is a need for significant bridge building and new platforms for people-to-people communication, perhaps more than any other time in modern history”

Next spring, Gabr’s philanthropic foundation in conjunction with an independent US-based human rights organisation, Humanity in Action,

will sponsor exchanges between young and emerging leaders in the arts, sciences, law, media, business and social entrepreneurship drawn from the Arab world and the West. The selected ‘fellows’ will participate in two-week exchange programmes. Gabr hopes it will be the beginning of an endeavour that will result in other East-West exchanges over years to come. The aim is to develop from a small ripple to a huge wave of cultural understanding.

“I have a very strong feeling about the importance of bridge building,” Gabr said. “I’ve had huge concerns as I’ve witnessed the world spiraling into more conflict, that there would be more misperception, more conflict and clashes between East and West. The Orientalists inspired me. I call them early globalists.”

The initiative is being launched at a series of panel discussions held in London and Washington – accom-



**“IF YOU TALK TO A MAN IN A LANGUAGE HE UNDERSTANDS, THAT GOES TO HIS HEAD. IF YOU TALK TO HIM IN HIS LANGUAGE THAT GOES TO HIS HEART.” NELSON MANDELA**



Top: Shafik Gabr  
Right: Street scene in Damascus by Gustav Bauernfind (1887)

panied by the publication of a new book “*Masterpieces of Orientalist Art: The Shafik Gabr Collection*.” These panel discussions will be followed by events in 2013 in Paris, Cairo and Istanbul.

The inaugural event in London on 15 November included a conversation between Gabr and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, as well as panel discussions involving leading figures from the diplomatic, art, business and media worlds chaired by the journalist and



television presenter Nik Gowing. Panelists included Sir Sherard Cowper Coles, former British ambassador to Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, Lord Poltimore, Deputy Chairman of Sotheby's Europe and Hussein Fahmy, actor and former President of the Cairo International Film Festival. The panels discussed the influence of the Orientalists on the art of dialogue as well as the East-West challenges the world currently faces.

The Orientalist painters were early communicators, offering the West images of the East; however, their depiction of the East sometimes led to increased stereotyping. Art is a social engagement that opens up new horizons and the traffic of ideas, according to Dr Anthony Downey, Director of the Masters' Programme in Contemporary Art at Sotheby's Institute of Art.

"Orientalism is the most extensive record of East-West

relations and all art can be reinterpreted in today's world. Art captures key moments and produces knowledge. Visual culture is key to the common wealth of understanding," Downey observed.

The landscape for communication, all panelists agreed, has changed considerably over the last few years. However, this has not necessarily led to greater understanding, just more interaction.

In Gabr's own words: "In today's world we have instant access to immediate global communications of every type, but even so we don't understand each other. As a result, I'm afraid we are on a trajectory that can lead to more conflict rather than resolution.

"I hope that by giving emerging leaders in the Arab world and the West the opportunity to know each other, and to talk to each other, rather than at each other, as well as collaborating in joint projects, will create better understanding. Such positive developments can have a ripple effect across time and space, and give the next generation better opportunities than we have given them so far".

According to Rose Issa, a leading London art gallery owner, artists from the Arab world have kept the dialogue going. As she explained "leading museums, such as the Tate and the British Museum in London are now paying attention to Arab art, buying it and displaying it, thus furthering the understanding of diverse cultural ideas."

Hussein Shokoshbi, President of the Shokoshbi development and trading company from Saudi Arabia feels that although "there is frequently contact between East and West, each party is often stubborn and although talking, they are conducting parallel monologues; this situation must evolve to become a dialogue," he insisted.

In the same vein, Wendy Goldsmith, Christie's former International head of 19<sup>th</sup> Century European Art, feels strongly that "from little acorns oak trees grow and we must accept that the art of other cultures can only change things very gently. But with initiatives such as Edge of Arabia, participating in the Venice Biennale, the Sharjah Biennale and also exhibiting in London, the world is becoming more familiar with Saudi modern art for example, thus fostering growing understanding, but", she emphasised, "it will be a slow process".

Hussein Fahmy, actor and Goodwill Ambassador to the Special Olympics, said: "We have been talking to each other for many years but it has actually been a monologue, not a dialogue. Through a dialogue we can achieve a better world for our children and our future".

According to Downey, "dialogue does exist but art is about new ways of looking; the Orientalists offered Europe a vision of the East before Thomas Cook started organising tours out there in 1869. Art is a social engagement, with new horizons and traffic of ideas; in many cases women are flying the flag of art in the Middle East and there is a considerable pool of talent coming from Iran as the Magic of Persia prize highlights every two years. Contemporary culture is key to a people's emergence; the orchestras that unite Israelis and Palestinian musicians are just an example of how music can bridge differences," he noted. ■

Below: The muezzin by Jean Leon Jerome (1879)

