

# Shafik Gabr *and* *The Art of Dialogue*

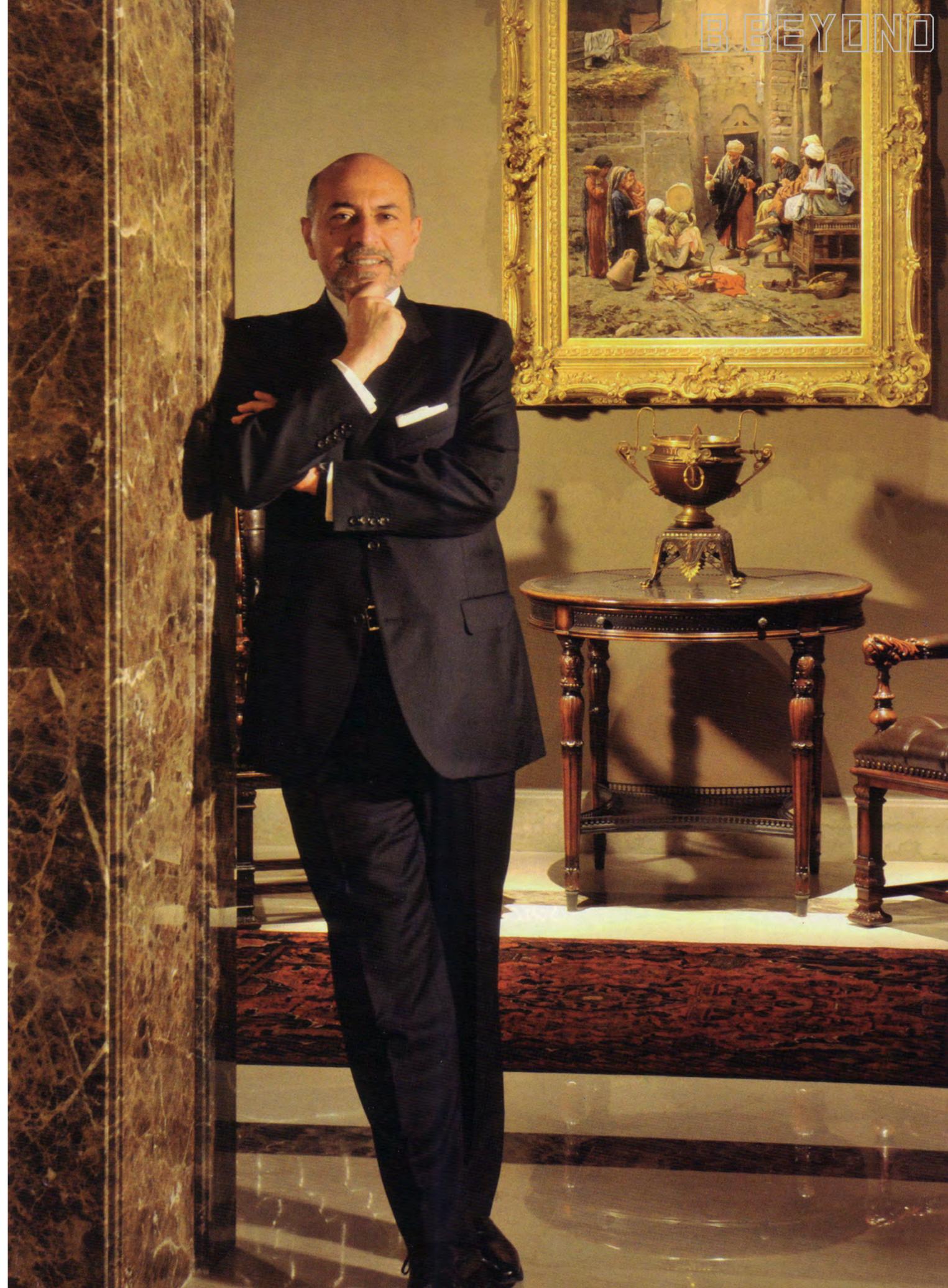
MEETING SHAFIK GABR IS A MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE. A VASTLY SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSMAN WITH GLOBAL AND VARIED INTERESTS, A PUBLISHER, AN ART COLLECTOR AND A PHILANTHROPIST, HE IS ALSO A MAN OF CONSUMMATE CHARM, WIT AND A QUICK REPARTEE.

GABR HAS BUILT ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT COLLECTIONS IN THE WORLD OF ORIENTALIST ART WHICH HE IS CURRENTLY DEPLOYING AS A LAUNCH PAD FOR A NEW CULTURAL EXCHANGE INITIATIVE, THE ART OF DIALOGUE: EAST/WEST INITIATIVE.

IF YOU TAKE THE VIEW WE TAKE, NAMELY THAT THE ART OF CONVERSATION HAS ERODED THROUGH THE DECADES, WITH THE ADVENT OF MASS MARKET ENTERTAINMENT AND VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION DEVICES, YOU WOULD SEE YOUR FAITH RESTORED TO A LARGE DEGREE SHOULD YOU CROSS GABR'S PATH.

NOT ONLY IS HE PASSIONATE ABOUT DIALOGUE AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE, HE IS ARGUABLY ONE OF ITS MOST ACCOMPLISHED GLOBAL DIPLOMATS – BY WAY OF PERSONAL EXAMPLE, SHEER FORCE OF PERSONALITY AND NO LITTLE CHARISMA.

*B BEYOND* HAD THE PLEASURE OF HIS COMPANY FOR AN EXTENDED CONVERSATION.





JOHN FREDERICK LEWIS, R.A., *An Arab of the Desert of Sinai*, 1858, oil on panel, 17 x 12 in (43.5 x 30.5 cm.)

Shafik Gabr and Prince Max of Liechtenstein



Mr Shafik Gabr and The Right Honourable Tony Blair, London Launch event



Mr and Mrs Gabr with Ms Mishana Hosseinioun and Mr Jim Zoghby, Washington Launch event

**BB:** Please tell us about ARTOC.

SG: ARTOC is a 41 year investment holding company with subsidiaries, affiliates and investments in emerging and developed economies. Presently ARTOC is invested in automotive, airport terminals, energy, consumer goods, publications, steel structures, construction material and real estate sectors.

**BB:** How long has ARTOC invested in publications?

SG: ARTOC invested in publications in mid 90's and in 1998 published the first English lifestyle magazine. A second business and political magazine was published a few years later. Both magazines are presently in transition to be published outside Egypt.

**BB:** Do you think that production quality is important today?

SG: The world is going digital but at the same time I still think quality print publications have a market.

**BB:** Does print publishing have a future?

SG: Print has three things going for it: we still have people who want to read in print; depending on the quality and the content, there are things that you don't want to see on your iPad - you want to hold and touch; print publications are going to reinvent themselves in terms of quality and content. Ultimately, there will be a 'marriage' between print and digital - it's already taking place.

**BB:** Egypt is seldom out of the news these days. What are your thoughts on 'The Arab Spring'?

SG: It is yet to determine if it is 'a spring' or 'an autumn' - the jury is still out on that one.

It is more appropriate to talk about the 'Arab Uprising'. I am a big believer in evolutionary change. For the world we live in today and with the speed of change that we are going through, it's very important for political leaders, business leaders and social leaders to understand the needs of their people and be ahead of the curve so that there is continuous positive evolutionary change. It is when matters stagnate and coupled with unmet legitimate needs that you have uprisings such as this. Uprisings can be very costly and before they are resolved they can take on a very different direction. We still don't know what the end result will be in the Arab uprisings that have taken place in several countries.

**BB:** Can we talk about Egypt specifically?

SG: Egypt is going through a major turmoil right now - turmoil between different political aspirations. It is my opinion that unless the political leadership is inclusive of all the different political aspirations then there will be continued divisiveness. And divisiveness for a country like Egypt which has always been moderate, tolerant and united is of great concern.

Egypt has been a nation for 5000 years. I'm confident that, while it

is going to take some time, the conflict will be resolved positively. In terms of the wider Arab uprising, it started in Tunisia, followed by Libya, and Egypt. Libya had a civil war. In Syria there is a civil war right now. Egypt is the only country where the leader did not escape or run away like the Tunisian leader. He did not get killed in a civil war and he did not start a civil war. He stood in front of everyone and said 'if the people don't want me, I'm stepping down'. Regardless of how people judge him - good, bad, ugly, corrupt - for me, that is a reflection of what Egypt is - a moderate and tolerant country.

When we had the 1952 revolution and the king was deposed, Gamal Abdel Nasser took the King to Alexandria, gave him a 21 gun salute, and put him on a ship to Italy. That is the way you keep a cohesive society. If we constantly create boundaries and conflicts between religious adherences, social or financial status, we engender the break-up of society. We are not, nor can we all be the same. For society to succeed, we need to have a common interest and a common ground within diversity.

**BB:** So, are the Egyptians the diplomats of the Middle-East?

SG: I think in terms of diplomacy and in general terms, Egypt has been a leader since the days of the Pharaohs. When Egypt, for example, embraced Islam, Egypt's neighbours embraced Islam; when Egypt embraced peace, other countries started to embrace peace; when Egypt embraced market economy, other countries in the region embraced market economy. Egypt is the largest country in the Arab world, with over 85 million people. Geographically, it is in the heart of the Arab world. Most importantly, Egypt has always been the media, music and film cornerstone of the Arab World. Our movies and songs have been all over the Arab world and because of that, everyone there understands the Egyptian language whilst Egyptians find it difficult to understand other Arabic dialects.

More importantly, culture being vastly influential, it made the country very influential too.

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It's not the wealthiest, nor an oil-rich Arab country, but what happens in Egypt, as people say, impacts the rest of the Arab world. That is why it is so important that Egypt succeeds in its transformation.

**BB:** You remind me of an old French advertisement: 'Nous, on n'a pas de petrol mais on a des idées'.

SG: It's true. What makes the United States of America today the most powerful economy? Remember, it is no longer the strong manufacturer it once was. It is no longer a major service economy. The only key asset that keeps the United States a powerful economy is its creativity, ideas and innovation. Even though things are manufactured in China, they are created in the U.S. The edge the United States still has is its ability to attract young people to their universities, as well as the willingness to put money and technology in new ideas and creativity. If it loses that, then I think the U.S. will suffer dramatically in terms of its economy. So ideas are critical in my opinion.





Mr. Shafik Gabr, centre, with (left to right): Kemal Dervis, Admiral William J. Fallon, Senator Joe Lieberman and Representative Darrell Issa, Washinton Launch event



Alec Wildenstein and Georgette Moschbacher, New York Launch event



JEAN-LÉON GÉRÔME, *Jeune Fille égyptienne, (Egyptian Girl)*, oil on canvas, 18 x 15 in, (46.7 x 38.1 cm.)



GUSTAV BAUERNFEIND (1848–1904), *A Street Scene, Damascus*, oil on panel, 20 x 26" in, (51.4 x 68 cm.)

**BB:** *Are the Americans aware of that, do you think?*

SG: I think the people in Silicon Valley are very aware plus the research centers all over the US.

**BB:** *What about the people in politics?*

SG: I am concerned that politicians often take decisions without the required degree of understanding. The United States of America, for example, had a President who had only travelled two times outside America in his entire life when he was elected. The leader of the most powerful nation and he took his country to two wars in two countries - both major mistakes.

Communication by digital means (Facebook, twitter, email and different social networks) is important but it does not in many cases improve understanding. But if I come to your home, and you come to mine, and we share food, we talk and we get to know each other, this is a whole different level of communication that promotes understanding - understanding of values, customs, social attitude and interests.

In today's world, everything is happening with tremendous speed. You sit in a room with a number of people and instead of having a conversation they are either on their Blackberry or their iPad. Communication is taking place, but there is no understanding.

My fear is that politicians make knee-jerk reactions without understanding and the world is paying the price. In the year 2012, we've been arming rebels in countries, thinking that we are going to bring peace and prosperity to their people. That is totally illogical. What of discussion, negotiation and conflict resolution? Nobody is attempting that in a serious win-win framework.

**BB:** *Do you think that the West is often trying to impose its own concept of democracy on countries that don't really understand it or are not ready for it?*

SG: It took the United States 200 years to have democracy. Until 1965, the US had no civil liberties. African Americans were called Negros. And in 1966, in different places in the United States, they were hanging Blacks from trees. How can you impose democracy on countries which don't have the institutions to underpin it? Democracy is not instant coffee, it takes time.

It needs to evolve, it needs education. For example, in Egypt today people believe democracy equals total freedom. Freedom and democracy are much more difficult than dictatorship. In dictatorship we know exactly what to do, but in democracy you need to understand your obligations and responsibilities as you exercise your rights. This, of course, is very new for emerging democracies that sometimes think freedom comes with no strings.

This understanding and acceptance will take time and requires leadership with vision that is inclusive.

I have a friend, Tom Friedman, who writes for the New York Times. He once said 'if two countries have McDonald's, they won't go to war'. I believe if two countries have a large number of people knowing each other, then they won't go to war because even though they may disagree on things, they would have common understanding and interests.

**BB:** *Do you not think that the art of dialogue is dying, that such are the times we live in?*

SG: We are human beings, not machines. Do you know what is amazing? Since I launched the East/West Initiative in London on the 15th of November I have received a huge number of emails from people that I have never met in my life - reasonable people that are speaking out in favor of face to face dialogue. To me this is amazing because what I am saying is so basic.

The art of dialogue cannot be allowed to die. I am quite a stubborn, persistent and persevering person and have tried many

other things at bridge building - when they failed, I thought, there has to be an alternative. I was inspired by my art collection of some 20 years. I thought, today we have Twitter, Facebook, Blackberry, iPad, iPhone, satellite... you name it, and we communicate 24/7 but often the communication is flawed. One of the reasons I was successful in business is that I always need to know the people I am working with - I need to know about their families, their life, I need to know what they like or dislike. I would fly for a meeting to get to know the person I am dealing with for a day, rather than just do the business on the phone.

I am inspired by the Orientalist traveler painters. At a time of no television, no satellite, no phones, no photography, there were these American and European artists who resolved to go to the Middle-East, on a trip that would have taken them 6-8 weeks to accomplish.

They were carrying their canvases, paint and brushes; they didn't speak the language; they didn't know the culture; they didn't understand the traditions and customs, yet they went. I can't imagine them landing and starting to paint the very next day. They would have first had to get to know the local people and have acceptance from the society, which would have enabled them to work there. Then they would have needed to understand a little bit about the culture and the traditions.

At a time of very limited communication and often erroneous perception, this would have been a feat to accomplish and to me, that is truly inspiring. We need to communicate by understanding, by sight, and by the touch, not just electronically. You may have read the story of a family being stranded with no electricity during hurricane Sandy for five days. The man went on television and said, 'In those five days I got to know my wife and family much better because we had to sit and talk.'

**BB:** *Let's talk a little bit more about the East/West initiative. It must have been a long time evolving - was there a particular moment when it crystallized into a concrete plan of action?*

SG: It is, as you say, the crystallization of a thought process that has evolved over a long period of time. If I look back on my career from the very beginning, I have always been a believer in bridge building which to me has been a way and a method of moving towards success.

Here is a story that helped shape this philosophy: once, as a very young entrepreneur I was in a position to have a significant contract and as I was working on it, my late father walked by. I was very happy and excited telling him that I was going to get this whole contract.

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He looked at me in an odd sort of way and said, 'you eat the whole cake and you may have stomach trouble and many envious competitors.' I spent all my day mulling this over and the following day decided to take half the contract and give half to others that were competing. That allowed me to secure the contract over the next four years and taught me a valuable lesson: that creating an environment of mutual interest on a win-win basis is important. This lesson has been instrumental in my life.

I used to think that as I grew older the world would be a better place. Instead, I have seen more conflict, more clashes, more wars. I always questioned why and to me, it ultimately boils down to the fact that communication between us is more disrupted than ever.

I have experienced countless examples of sitting amongst people - that are, talking to each other at meetings, then standing up and shaking their hands, thinking they have reached an agreement yet not agreeing on a single point. Successful communication is an art that is not focused enough on in a world going at very high speed.

**BB:** *How will you be able to measure success in terms of the East/West Initiative and what will you do other than organizing panel talks such as the symposium that took place in London?*

SG: My foundation is sponsoring the 2013 exchanges that start in May where young emerging leaders from Egypt from the areas of art, science, media, law and both social and business entrepreneurship shall visit the US for the two weeks on an intensive program to work with counterparts from the US. The reverse shall take place with young emerging American leaders visiting Egypt a month later.

After both exchanges the fellows from Egypt and US shall work together for 90 days to complete joint projects that can leverage their exchange experience to their peers and communities.

Once a year in the East and once in the West a conference shall be held to showcase the exchanges' experiences and the joint projects, and to reflect upon the bridges of understanding that have been created.

**BB:** *Who is going to decide who fits the criteria or not?*

SG: Humanity in Action, an NGO will administer the program. Also a committee that is going to be from both the Middle-East and from the West will provide advisory input. My only request is that candidates meet the qualifications. Approved candidates will then travel for two weeks to the United States. They are going to go certain cities in-

FRANZ KOSLER, *The Elder*, 1895, oil on canvas, 31.5 x 23.6 in. (80 x 60 cm.)







LUDWIG DEUTSCH, *The Philosopher*, 1905, oil on panel, 21 x 14 in. (55 x 37.5 cm.)

cluding New York and Washington but also Middle America, which is very different to either the East or West coast.

There they are going to learn about religion, about values, about business, about politics - directly from their counterparts. So if I am an Egyptian artist, my counterpart will be an American artist. If I am an Egyptian media person, my counterpart will be a media person.

Each group will travel on the understanding that within 90 days from the completion of their respective trip, they have to come up with a joint project. The joint project will leverage their experience in both places and they will be able to put that experience to their peers and to their community in order to create a ripple effect. That ripple effect is key to the success of the project. My dream is to turn this ripple into a tidal wave of bridge building.

These conferences showcasing the projects will be once a year in the West and once in the East, by the participants in front of other young emerging leaders and both policy makers and business leaders who, I hope will be willing to do similar type of exchanges in their own domains.

I have made a commitment for two and half years for this program and I will fund that. But I need others to join me in growing the initiative and that is why I am addressing people in the business community and other foundations.

If I am Exxon or British Gas, for example, and I am working in Saudi Arabia or Qatar, or wherever else I would likely be funding social development and corporate responsibility - but if I really want to keep doing business in that part of the world, my priority should be to encourage young emerging leaders in that area to develop a better knowledge of the West, and vice versa. Westerners would benefit equally from developing their knowledge of the Arab world.

I propose to first show by example that this is a sound and constructive initiative in the hope that others will embrace it too. If, in two or three years a few thousand people have experienced this fellowship exchange project, then I would consider that my investment has been very well placed indeed.

*I'm a big believer in the following wisdom which I have also applied in business: even if I have the opportunity to jump ten stairs in one step, I wouldn't.*

**BB: Will you be expanding the initiative further east, towards Asia?**

SG: I've been asked this by a number of people but I can only take on so much and besides, I need to show success before expanding. I'm a big believer in the following wisdom which I have also applied in business: even if I have the opportunity to jump ten stairs in one step, I wouldn't. I prefer doing things step by step and build them up, so that, God forbid, if something goes wrong I fall one step rather than fall 20 steps. This is just the beginning.

**BB: Do you have any plans for your art collection?**

SG: The collection is in a trust and I keep adding to it. I'd like to keep introducing people to Orientalist paintings. What we should celebrate about the Orientalists is that they didn't come to my part

of the world to colonize or find oil or conquer - they came to paint and I think that's the beauty of it. One day I wish I could show that every painting has not only a visual message but also an articulated message. You could almost see the different aspects of the Middle-East in these paintings.

The collection has gone on to New York and Washington from London and was very, very well received. Travelling with it is nerve-racking, however, as I keep worrying about the works getting accidentally damaged - until this last trip to the Metropolitan when we used a professional shipper, I used to travel personally with the paintings.

**BB: Where is your main residence?**

SG: I have residencies in Egypt, UK, Canada and the US. I also visit Prague regularly.

**BB: Why Prague?**

SG: In 1990, at the time of the first Gulf war, I made a decision to diversify and I went to South Africa, Syria, and to Central and Eastern Europe. As I arrived in South Africa, I spotted the segregated lavatories at the airport - I'd never seen anything like it in my life. I spent five days in the country and while people were nice, I felt I couldn't do any work there at the time. I then went to Syria which was 25 years behind Egypt. I went to Romania, to Hungary and finally I got to Prague where, by sheer accident I met the then minister of finance over lunch. Everything clicked for me there and I have had offices in Prague since 1993.

The Czech industrial base is very diversified and successful. ARTOC is involved in automotive, aviation, sugar plants, power generation and engineered equipment exporting to Egypt and several emerging economies.

**BB: Do you think there is a kind of disconnection between major philanthropists; that there is no cohesion between what they do, however admirable? That even though they talk extensively to the world at large, they seldom talk to one another? Do you think there is a need for more cohesion and dialogue between philanthropists themselves?**

SG: I agree. And that is why I feel strongly that before we do things together, we need to know one another. That's my point. There is this very old Arab saying: before we break bread together, we can't really communicate.

Philanthropy is not about proselytizing but about making things happen. You've probably heard this story which exists in all cultures with small variations: God sees this man who does nothing all day but pray while his brother works all day to provide for them both. God rewards the man who works rather than the man who does nothing but pray.

Life is about doing. ■



Washington Symposium venue at the Mellon Auditorium



Mr Shafik Gabr and Princess Michael of Kent

