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Quest for a Palestinian Museum

An idealistic lawyer hopes art can help forge a new identity for his people

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JERUSALEM — A muezzin calls to prayer from a nearby mosque as Mazen Qupty fills goblets with Israeli Cabernet Sauvignon, pops a disc of oud music into the stereo and starts to lay out his plan for the brilliantly colored paintings that fill his East Jerusalem home.

Creating a national art museum for an as-yet-nonexistent country is an ambitious if not quixotic goal. But that's what Qupty hopes to do with his growing trove of Palestinian paintings — the largest collection of its kind. The prosperous, silver-haired lawyer is also intent on emphasizing secular values at a time when the radical Islamist Hamas has gained the loyalty of many Palestinians.

"We want to show visitors and the media all over the world that we have a long heritage that goes back at least 100 years," he explains between bites of hors d'oeuvres served by his wife, Yvette, stylishly dressed in capri pants and high-heeled mules. The couple own 170 Palestinian artworks by some 50 artists from the 1920s through the present. Already Qupty has founded a nonprofit gallery with temporary exhibits and workshops in East Jerusalem and has helped create a Palestinian art academy in the West Bank city of Ramallah with European government backing.

Although Qupty and his wife have a keen aesthetic sense — they favor a diverse range of canvases created by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, within the current boundaries of Israel and in exile around the world — he also has a clear political agenda. Qupty aims to use art to help forge a new identity for a people he fears are primarily regarded as terrorists. "In the last few years, Palestinians have been shown in the media as suicide bombers. We want to show the Palestinians have a human face through art."

Talk of creating a national art museum might sound beside the point in view of the recent

open warfare between Hamas and its rival faction Fatah. Official Palestinian support for cultural initiatives fell into a deep freeze following the international embargo on aid to the transitional Palestinian Authority in response to Hamas' 2006 electoral triumph and its avowed threats to destroy Israel.

Yet operating privately, Quity has signed a letter of intent with the National Museum of Norway to provide curatorial and other technical assistance for setting up a full-fledged museum. The British Council, the governments of Spain and France, and the U.N. Development Program are also providing support for his 2-year-old gallery, which is intended as a forerunner to the museum and counts among its trustees the esteemed Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and the billionaire businessman Munib al-Masri.

"Mazen and Yvette Quity are making a major contribution to the dissemination of Palestinian art," says Hebrew University art historian Gannit Ankori, whose book on Palestinian art was published last year. In her view, their collection is particularly noteworthy since it includes works created before Israeli independence in 1948, giving evidence that a Palestinian art scene flourished before that year, a date Palestinians call the Nakba, or "catastrophe," referring to their dispersion and exile.

Other liberal Israelis also have welcomed Quity's plans for a museum. "This will give the Palestinians a sense of pride," says Dov Alfon, director of the Israeli publishing house Kinneret Zmora Dvir, who hosts a popular TV program on cultural affairs. "Entire families would visit a Palestinian museum. It is a huge step for the Palestinians to think about art outside of their religious dogma."

Few of Quity's works themselves are overtly political, he notes, getting up from a rose velvet-covered chair to approach one that is — a wall hanging crafted by Nabil Anani in 1995 after the first intifada uprising against Israeli rule. Joining in a Palestinian boycott of Israeli products, the artist forswore his customary Israeli-made oil paints to make a mixed-media work of wood, leather and henna depicting a woman who carries on her head a bowl topped by the Arabic word for Palestine. The letters were cut out of the lower part of her body — as if torn from her heart.

The less hard-hitting works in the collection are of higher caliber, such as a geometric abstraction by Ibrahim Nubani, an Israeli Arab accorded a retrospective at the Tel Aviv

Museum of Art in 2004. Others contain nostalgically rendered olive fields, orange groves and traditional garb. "These are the orange fields that we lost in Jaffa," Qupty says of a large canvas by Sliman Mansour. Sensuality trumps politics altogether in a nearby phantasmagoric painting by Hani Zurob, a rare contemporary Palestinian nude.

Coming to a haunting painting by Asad Azi of an old Arab man riding a donkey within a minimalist field of pale yellow, Qupty urges a closer look to discern the underlay of Hebrew lettering and military boots that appear to seep through the buttery background. Azi, the collector explains, is a Druze whose father was killed in service of the Israeli army, and the painting bears witness to multiple layers of the artist's experience and identity.

Qupty exhibits cosmopolitan flair derived from his own experience navigating divergent worlds. Born in the Israeli Arab city of Nazareth, he is a Christian who holds Israeli citizenship and studied political science at Hebrew University before earning a law degree at Tel Aviv University. He next worked in an Israeli law firm. In the 1980s, he helped teach a course at Harvard Law School on legal relations between Israeli Jews and Arabs.

Ironically, several of the artists in Qupty's collection were trained in Israeli art schools that arose in part from a desire to reinforce the collective identity of a Jewish homeland. Well before Israel became an independent nation, Zionist leaders sought to create Jewish art centers in Palestine. The most notable institution, the Bezalel Academy, founded in Jerusalem, celebrated its centenary last year. Israel's own national art collection, housed in the Israel Museum's 20-acre campus in west Jerusalem, grew out of a nucleus of works that were once part of Bezalel.

Qupty's collection had a more personal genesis. Pointing to his first acquisition, a whimsical painting of children playing by Taysir Barakat, which he bought in 1986, he says, "We did not have enough money to pay for it, so we paid the artist in three installments." Now that Qupty, 52, has his own thriving practice, he leads a lonely pack of private collectors of Palestinian artworks among Arabs in Israel and the West Bank and Gaza. "Very few people know about Palestinian art, so it's a hard target to educate the new generation. When you see these works on the walls of my house, you see the beauty, the humanity of the Palestinians. This is proof that we are humans."

In the 1970s, the Palestinian Liberation Organization sought to give itself a human face

through art at a time when PLO factions were hijacking airliners and attacking Israeli targets. The PLO's information department put together an art collection in Beirut, including works by celebrated foreign artists supporting the Palestinian cause such as Joan Miró, Edouardo Chillida and Antonio Tapies. But according to French-based Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata, the ensemble was dispersed and partly destroyed in Lebanon's civil war more than two decades ago.

More recently, the Palestinian Authority began work to establish an art museum after the PLO and Israel signed the Oslo peace accord in 1993. This came to an abrupt halt, however, with the second intifada against Israeli rule in 2000, says East Jerusalem curator Jack Persekian, who took part in the museum effort.

Persekian now runs the Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem's Old City. Funded by the Ford Foundation, the European Commission and the Open Society Foundation, it maintains an artist-in-residency program and has its own collection of works by artists, including Mona Hatoum and Emily Jacir. The disputed city has a diverse array of other galleries, but none regularly showcase Palestinian artists.

Qupty shares Persekian's belief in culture as a key tool in shaping national identity, while conceding that fine art is but one medium vying for the attention of today's Palestinian youth. "We're trying to compete," he replies wearily when asked about recent children's broadcasts on Palestinian television featuring a Mickey Mouse-like character espousing jihad and lauding suicide bombers. "We cannot change the society. We can influence some of the people to see things differently."

To this end, a dozen students were selected in April for the inaugural class of the new International Academy of Art Palestine in Ramallah, whose board Qupty chairs. The Norwegian government, which helped negotiate the now-failed Oslo agreement, is providing \$1.3 million. "In a few years, there will be young, talented artists, and we need to create a market with galleries and a museum to preserve their collective memory," says Henrik Placht, project manager for the academy.

Although the Hamas-led Palestinian Education Ministry recently caused an uproar by removing an anthology of folk tales from school libraries because they were deemed to contain sexual innuendo, Qupty voices confidence that Islamic militants will not succeed in

stifling free expression in the arts. (The decision was later rescinded after protests by writers and other intellectuals, but only after Hamas had destroyed some 1,500 copies of the book.) "Palestinian society is strong enough to stop any intentions of this sort," Qupty says, citing the trouble-free exhibition this spring at the Al Hoash Gallery he founded, which featured a video by Mona Hatoum showing her mother's bare breasts as the older woman candidly discusses her sexuality while showering. Al Hoash, meaning "courtyard," just north of Jerusalem's Old City, has presented over a dozen exhibitions since opening in 2005 and holds four art workshops per week for children at its modest quarters.

Qupty is looking for a larger home for the museum in East Jerusalem. In the meantime, he has registered his gallery as a nonprofit organization with the Israeli Justice Ministry. Operation of a museum would require additional approval from Israel authorities, so Qupty is keeping his distance from the Palestinian Authority, further arguing that this independence will give the museum greater credibility with both the public and potential donors.

As a counterpoint to the prevailing turmoil in the West Bank and Gaza, Qupty hopes that art can help guide young Palestinians away from the dead end of violence and hatred. "It's easier for young Palestinians to be attracted by fundamentalism and having the gun rather than the brush," he says. "Let's face the truth. Palestinians are not taken by their parents every second day to a museum. We live in the Middle East, not in the West. A museum is one way of educating the new generation about their art heritage and to be proud of that heritage. We are trying to help the new generation see that there are other things in this world, that you can do things differently."