



A slice of history

EXPRESSIONS IN TIME

As Dubai's heritage struggles for survival amidst the city's transformation into a glass-and-metal metropolis, the Majlis Gallery has retained its distinct old-world charm

COVER STORY

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DUBAI As the open doors of what used to be Villa No 19 in the Bastakiya quarter beckon, you walk into a bright courtyard with an old henna tree, its sculpted blue glass hangings instantly catching your eye. The warm autumn afternoon has three artists seated at a table by the tree, exchanging notes over cups of freshly brewed coffee.

It's a heartening sight, a sharp contrast from the compulsive hustle and bustle outside, with the villa-turned-Majlis Gallery living up to every bit of its reputation as an absorbing art house.

But as the gallery marks its 20th anniversary this week, it's a reflection

on not just how it has embraced art for what it is but also how it has preserved a unique charm and, with it, a slice of Dubai's forgotten past. The gallery's founder, Alison Collins, however, makes no such claims. An interior designer and avid art lover, she said the gallery has helped bring quality art closer to art aficionados in the UAE.

QUALITY ART

"It has been a process of building confidence among them. Till the 1980s, they did not expect to find quality art here and preferred the experience of travelling to the West for a purchase," she said. The rest, quite literally, is history.

In recent years, even as the shifting sands of Dubai have carved a glitzy, concrete niche for the emirate, the creek-side gallery has stood steadfast, surviving the vagaries of construction and time.

Collins recalled how the villa was among the few that were spared the sweeping demolition of the late 1980s when Dubai



"IT HAS BEEN A PROCESS OF BUILDING CONFIDENCE AMONG THEM [ART LOVERS]"
ALISON COLLINS

FOUNDER OF MAJLIS GALLERY

Municipality razed to the ground many of the sand-coloured wind tower homes of the Bastakiya, an area originally inhabited by traders from Bastak in Iran (see box).

The villa had been Collins' residence for 10 years since 1977 when she first moved to Dubai.

In 1988, she received an eviction notice following which she vacated the building along with her husband and three children. But as luck would have it, the landlord



OVER CUPS OF COFFEE: Artists exchange notes and discuss their work in the warmth of the gallery's courtyard

called them back within a year.

By now, Collins had settled down in her new home near Safa Park. But she missed the old-world charm of her Bastakiya villa where she cherished fond memories of soirées with friends, mainly artists, discussing their work in the warmth of the courtyard, even holding informal exhibitions on the premises. So she decided to lease it out again, but this time as the owner of an art gallery for which she procured a licence. Since the majlis ambience of yesteryears remained fresh in her mind, she called it the Majlis Gallery.



COLLECTOR'S DELIGHT: The Majlis Gallery, which has represented more than 50 high-calibre artists over the years, marks its 20th anniversary this week

240,000

DIRHAMS IS THE PRICE OF THE BIGGEST WATER COLOUR IN THE MIDDLE EAST BEING EXHIBITED AT THE MAJLIS GALLERY

Representing more than 50 high-calibre artists over the years, the gallery displays and sells their work, besides serving as a venue for those who wish to use its quaint surroundings for an occasion.

MEMORABLE MILESTONES

There have been many memorable milestones like the product launch of the Paloma Picasso perfume in 1992, the New Orientalists' show in 1997 and the exhibitions of the late Syrian artist Abdul Latif Al Samoudi whom Collins described as one of "profound intellect". "We miss him so much today," she said.

The artists who converge on the gallery echo the rare bonhomie that Collins shares with them.

Sue Casson, a painter from Oxfordshire, said, "I've been coming to this villa for the past 26 years and still remember how Baby William [Collins' son] played with two lion cubs under this henna tree." Casson, who paints traditional scenes in oils in pen and water colour and sketches in conte, said her works included five copies of old masters for a former minister in the UAE. Similarly, Lynette Ten

Krooden, a painter and researcher from South Africa, said she had been exhibiting her works for the past 17 years at the gallery. "This is a sanctuary space and we feel so cherished here," she said.

Painting apart, the art that is exhibited and sold at the gallery includes sculptures, artefacts, trinkets — anything that passes Collins' exacting standards. "I just have to like it," said Collins.

While the thrust is on exposure



COLOURFUL MIX: The Majlis Gallery exhibits and sells paintings, sculptures, artefacts and trinkets

LIMITED EDITION

The Majlis Gallery is launching The Majlis Collection, a selection of 20 signed limited edition prints from November 3 till December 31. Each of the artists behind these prints has played an integral role in the journey of the gallery, occupying a special place in its annals. Among these artists are Khalid Al Saai, Mostafa Darehbaghi, Trevor Waugh and Abdul Qader Al Rais.



WORKS OF BEAUTY: An artist shows her works which will be exhibited at the gallery



SANCTUARY SPACE: Art lovers love the gallery's quaint look and surroundings



ART SHOW: Various artworks, top and above, including handmade silver spoons, on display

DUBAI THAT ONCE WAS

The villa-turned-Majlis Gallery has one wind tower, representing one of the few restored wind tower homes of the early 20th century when traders who came from Bastak in Iran settled in the area around the Dubai Creek. The name Bastakiya owes its origin to them.

The sand-coloured homes, usually built from coral stone, with elegant courtyards, could be explored through a maze of narrow streets and alleys.

LEGACY OF WIND TOWERS

The facades have been restored to their original state, with Arabesque windows, decorative gypsum panels and screens. The wind towers themselves are reminiscent of the Dubai that once was, when they were used to cool homes before the advent of air conditioning and electricity.

"When families moved out of Bastakiya before its partial demolition, they left many of their old possessions to be bulldozed along with their former homes, moving into modern villas and apartments. For a time, it seemed only a few professionals and Westerners were interested in the old buildings and artefacts of

Dubai," wrote geographer Anne Colles and architect Peter Jackson in their book *Windtower*.

"Today, the same families take pride in the heritage of the wind towers which are as much a part of Dubai as the dhows that ply the Creek and the imagined modernisation that has transformed the Emirates," they document, adding that, "Modern Dubai exploded into the late 20th century but began to look back just before it was too late: enough of its earlier material culture remained to be restored."



A TOUCH OF NOSTALGIA: The wind tower at the villa-turned-Majlis Gallery

CELEBRATING TALENT: An artwork on display at the Majlis Gallery