

Middle East Institute *Arts and Culture Program*



2016 Impact & Activities Report





“The Middle East Institute is dedicated to the promotion of Arab arts and culture through this unique program, highlighting the experiences and expertise of Arab artists.”

- Ambassador Wendy Chamberlin, MEI President



PROGRAM

Established in May 2014, the Middle East Institute's (MEI) Arts and Culture Program grew in size and scope with the generous support of our partners and donors, which allowed the program to reach broad audiences by hosting:

- Conversations with cutting-edge artists
- Readings by novelists and poets
- Screenings of films and documentaries
- Panel discussions and conferences about the role of the arts and the importance of preserving culture and heritage in the Arab world

In addition, MEI built a webpage devoted to articles and analysis about the growing impact of the arts in the region.

MEI's Arts and Culture Program provides a window into the art, film, literature and music of the region, while also amplifying the role of Middle Eastern artists as key civil society actors.



IMPACT

MEI's program, the only one of its kind in the nation's capital, builds people-to-people connections between the cultural and political communities of the Middle East and the United States. The program promotes cross-cultural dialogue to build trust and understanding between the U.S. and the Middle East.

In 2016, MEI programmed 16 arts and culture events, including an international conference held in Amman as part of a Regional Task Force formed to combat the looting of antiquities. Over the course of the year, MEI's Arts and Culture Program directly touched nearly 1,000 people.

Cultural Heritage Protection

Highlights

Regional Antiquities Conference in Amman, Jordan

Culture Under Threat: The Security, Economic and Cultural Impact of Antiquities Theft in the Middle East

In conjunction with the Antiquities Coalition, MEI hosted the Middle East and North Africa Task Force Against Cultural Racketeering for their inaugural meeting in Amman, Jordan.

The conference convened leaders in the fight against antiquities looting from 10 Arab countries, to compose a five-part action plan for the coming year in regard to growing destruction, looting, and trafficking of antiquities across the Middle East. The conference produced “The Amman Communique” in which the Middle East signatory countries reaffirmed their commitment to cooperate in the fight against cultural crimes.



Panel Discussions and Artist Talks

Highlights

Politics, Revolution, and Art: A Theatrical Symposium

Art and Activism



With the Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics, Woolly Mammoth Theater Company, and the Global Theater Initiative, MEI hosted a half-day symposium exploring the relationship between theater, political activism, and global politics through an in-depth panel discussion, a film screening and an excerpt from Calderon’s play, “Neva.”

The symposium took place during the closing weekend of the Woolly Mammoth production of internationally-celebrated Chilean playwright Guillermo Calderon’s *Kiss*, a play about the conflict in Syria. *Photo courtesy of Woolly Mammoth*

Live Art and the Everyday

Tania El Khoury Series

In partnership with the National Building Museum, and with the support of the British Council, MEI presented the interactive sound installation “Gardens Speak” and a program of talks with the artist, Tania El Khoury.

Her art documents everyday life and provokes discussion about current issues, personal histories, and the politics of public and personal space. El Khoury is co-founder of Dictaphone Group, a Beirut-based research and live art collective aiming at reclaiming public space.



Ahmed Mater Series: New Voices, New Visions

The Impact of the Arts in Saudi Arabia

MEI, in partnership with Art Jameel, hosted a panel discussion on the impact of acclaimed Saudi artist Ahmed Mater's art. The panel presented new perspectives of Saudi Arabia and its role in shaping fresh narratives reflecting the growing aspirations of the Kingdom's youth.

Mater's work explores the narratives and aesthetics of Islamic culture in an era of globalization, consumerism and transformation with a focus on the changes underway in cities like Mecca and Riyadh. He was joined by scholar Kristin Diwan and British artist Stephen Stapleton.



The Art of Immigration

How Immigrant Artists Enrich America

MEI, the Institute for Immigration Research (IIR) at George Mason University hosted a discussion about the contributions immigrant artists make to the United States' rich cultural fabric, the challenges they face, and the entrepreneurial approaches they take to resettle and create art in a new environment.

Devon Akmon (Arab American National Museum, Dearborn), joined Huda Asfour (Musician & Composer), Anne-Marie McGranghan (UNHCR), and James Witte (George Mason University) for this panel discussion.

Migration and the Arts

Martin Keil's Exhibition on Migration

MEI and the Goethe-Institut in Washington D.C. hosted visual artist Martin Keil and artist and gallery director Salameh Nematt for a conversation on the theme of migration in the arts.

The panel explored the reasons behind Keil's choice of the topic of migration in his art, and the manner in which Middle Eastern artists are reflecting on the trauma that they experience on a daily basis.



Panel Discussions and Art Talks

Highlights

Art for Humanity and Peacebuilding: Stories from Syria

Tania El Khoury Series

MEI, together with National Building Museum and the British Council, hosted a panel discussion with Tania El Khoury, J.J. El-Far, Bassam Haddad, and Natasha Hall.

Panelists analyzed the role and impact of the arts in providing insight into the causes of conflict and their ability to provide alternative realities. They highlighted the role of the arts as a tool of soft power within the fields of international relations and cultural diplomacy.



Art in Response to Conflict

Tania El Khoury Series

MEI co-hosted a panel discussion with the Media Lounge exploring the value and impact of the arts in conflict zones,

The panel brought together artists, scholars, policy-makers, and experts from NGOs, international organizations, and the media to discuss the role of the arts in response to conflict, the positive impact art can have on affected communities, and its ability to give voice to despair.



Occupied Pleasures: Women of Gaza and Life Under the Occupation

Tania Habjouqa



MEI and International Arts & Artists' Hillyer Arts Space hosted award-winning Jordanian photographer and journalist Tanya Habjouqa. The program is presented as part of the exhibition, *She Who Tells A Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World*, on view until July 31st at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

In her series, "Occupied Pleasures and Women of Gaza", Habjouqa showcases life under siege and occupation, exploring how these circumstances affect people's personal space and aspirations. *Photo courtesy of Tanya Habjouqa*

Art Exhibitions

Highlights

“Gardens Speak”

Tania El Khoury

MEI, in partnership with the National Building Museum, and with the support of the British Council presented the interactive sound installation “Gardens Speak” and a program of talks with the artist, Tania El Khoury.

“Gardens Speak” features the oral histories of ten Syrians who died and were buried in private gardens during the early years of the uprising. Each narrative has been carefully constructed with the friends and family members of the deceased to retell their stories as they themselves may have recounted them. The stories are comprised of found audio that reveals the victims’ final moments. *Photo courtesy of Jesse Hunniford.*



Music

Highlights

A Homage to Umm Kulthum: Star of the East

Concert

MEI and the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington honored Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum. Considered to be one of the greatest and most influential Arab singers of the 20th century, Umm Kulthum’s music transcended geographical and political boundaries, and to this day she is revered as an icon across the Arab world.



Institutional Partnerships

Highlights

In just a year and a half, MEI’s Arts and Culture program has built relations with important cultural institutions and foundations. Our most prominent supporters, collaborators, and potential partners include:

- The Antiquities Coalition
- Arabian Sights Film Festival
- Art Jameel
- The British Council
- Busboys and Poets
- The Goethe-Institut
- George Mason University Institute for Immigration Research
- Georgetown University Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics
- The Media Lounge, The College Art Association
- The National Building Museum
- Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company



1319 18th St NW
Washington, D.C. 20036
Telephone: 202.785.1141
Fax: 202.331.8861

www.mei.edu

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