



Culture **Art & Design**

Trailblazing Saudi artist Safeya Binzagr dies aged 84

A graduate of St Martin's School of Art in London, she led the way for young artists and scholars of today in her country



Melissa Gronlund
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[Saudi](#) artist [Safeya Binzagr](#) has died at the age of 84. Born in [Al Balad in Jeddah](#) in 1940, Binzagr was a pioneering artist, holding her first exhibition in 1968. Her death was confirmed to *The National* by her family.

The artist grew up in [Cairo](#) and went to school in Egypt and the UK. She studied art at St Martin's School of Art in [London](#), graduating in 1976. Her childhood outside the kingdom meant that when she finally settled in Saudi Arabia, she looked on it with an outsider's eye.

"Because I was educated in Cairo, I needed to do a lot of research in the beginning," she told *The National* in an [interview](#) in 2018. "I didn't know the life in Saudi before it united as a kingdom."

Her interest translated into a lifelong subject. Her paintings depicted traditional life in Saudi, such as children's games, marriage rituals, and crafts such as spinning wool.

Many of the practices she portrayed were already old in her time, and she saw her role as documenting them before they – or their memory – passed away. She was keenly aware of the lack of written history of the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the misconceptions in the histories that did exist – which, she noted, were often written by those based in the West.

She meticulously researched the practices among the people who had performed them. Rather than being gauzy or nostalgic depictions of traditional life, each painting accurately documents life in the Gulf before modernisation, oil, or even the kingdom.





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Binzagr was also deeply interested in the diversity of the tribes on the peninsula and their different forms of traditional dress. She travelled around the country to research and buy exemplars of these clothes, and from 1997 to 1999, painted a long-running series of watercolours, each of an identical size, depicting the regional garments.

Although she was more keen to show visitors her paintings than these watercolours, it is the latter series – with their echoes of conceptual taxonomies – that brought her critical acknowledgement in recent years. Titled *Turathuna (Our Tradition)* some of the watercolours, like *After Rain*, were included in the last [Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale](#).

She worked in pastels, charcoals and etchings, as well as the oil on wood painting and watercolours she is now best known for.

In 1995, she opened the Darat Safeya Binzagr – at the time, the first and only art museum in Saudi Arabia. There she exhibited her work as well as the traditional attire, which she displayed on mannequins, and provided public access to a wide-ranging library. She also hosted art classes for young students and professional private classes for women, making it a crucial site for education during the years of social restrictions, and a monthly women's art salon.

Her determination to make art at a time when few identified themselves as artists made her an important figure in the emerging [Jeddah scene](#). She published her drawings in newspapers in Saudi from 1963 – a public showing for her work that predates the first [art exhibition in Saudi Arabia](#), by Abdulhalim Radwi, by two years.





She was also the first woman to show in Saudi, exhibiting in 1968 at the Dar Al Tarbiya girls' high school (together with the Saudi artist [Mounirah Mosly](#), who, like Binzagr, had just finished her training in Egypt), and regularly exhibited her work abroad. She returned to London to show in 1973, and toured her work through Paris, Geneva, and London in 1980.

"Safeya Binzagr opened the door for me as a [Saudi artist](#) by being our role model," says the [Saudi artist](#) and scholar Eiman Elgibreen, who wrote her PhD on the artist and now teaches at Princess Nourah University in Riyadh. "She gave me the gift of a lifetime when she agreed to sit with me in 2010 for an interview ... since that day, we have become very close and started a lifelong relationship."

In 2017, Binzagr was awarded First Class honours in the Order of [King Abdulaziz](#) for her efforts to preserve Saudi heritage.

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