



The mother OF ART

The founder of Saudi Arabia's fine art movement, Safeya Binzager has forged a path of opportunity for so many artists that follow

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LEFT HERITAGE IS WEALTH 2 (1990) PASTEL ON CANVAS BELOW MEMORIES (1987) OIL ON CANVAS



In the year 1940, in the old city of Jeddah, Harat al Sham gave birth to an artist that would forever change the course of art history in Saudi Arabia and shape generations of artists to come. The place of birth of the now legendary Safeya Binzager is forever an extension of her spirit – there was no separation between place and artist. It is a bond that has only beckoned brighter with time. “My home country is my favorite place on earth,” she states simply.

At 80, Binzager is a graceful and soft-spoken woman. She loves classical and opera music, cats, birds, and orchids. Her hair is glossed with henna and often adorned with a distinguished headdress, traditionally worn by the women of Hejaz. Her paintings, like herself, capture scenes of Saudi Arabia's history; intimate moments like a ceremony in which a groom is shaved while his mother places a gold coin on the barber's forehead and wedding musicians entertain him. There is a rarely depicted scene from the 1920s of Al-Mahmal, the ceremonial procession, carrying the *ka'ba* covering through Jeddah before the Hajj, a woman sitting on the floor combing her hair, and young boys playing the marble-like game of Al Kubush, which makes use of bones from the joints of goats or camels.

Binzager first made history in 1968. Along with her friend Mounirah Mosly, she was one of two female artists to ever hold an art exhibition in Saudi Arabia. “I thought, I will do the exhibition; they will receive it or they will object. If they do, I will try again,” she remembers from her home in Jeddah. The exhibition was held at the girls' school Dar Al Tarbiah as no show spaces or galleries existed in the country. Due to the restrictions of their time, Binzager and Mosly were unable to attend their exhibition. The men of their families represented them, and went to their opening in celebration of their works. It wasn't until almost 10 years later, in 1976, when Saudi Aramco held a private exhibition of Binzager's work that the artist was able to attend her own exhibitions in Saudi. “Don't stop, don't let obstacles be an excuse to give up,” remarks the artist, and reveals that her life motto is, “If you have the will, you will.” She considers that, “Hard work always pays off and pushes you to be in the beginning of the line.”

Binzager continued making history by becoming the first internationally exhibited Saudi artist with shows in Paris, London, and

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Geneva, as well as attaining the respect and recognition of museums globally with her art found in the permanent collections and exhibitions held at the Victoria & Albert, the British Museum, and various others across the globe. She was also recognized by the UN Environment Programme for her works contributing to the protection of national heritage, the GCC in the field of culture during the meeting of the Gulf ministers of culture in 2013, as well as bestowed with first class honors in 2017 in the order of King Abdul Aziz from King Salman bin Abdul Aziz, in appreciation of her contribution to Saudi culture, which the artist hails as her proudest moment. “I loved art but I never thought that I would become what I am now,” she marvels of her journey.

Her family and history are unique to the women of the time. In pursuit of an education in 1947, Binzager moved to Cairo, graduating from high school in 1960. She later moved to London where she enrolled in finishing school, and went on to graduate from Central Saint Martins with a degree in drawing and graphics. Even as Binzager lived abroad, she was never fully separated from her heritage and birth place; the old allies of Jeddah lingered in her memory, and her yearning for the past brought her back home. As Jeddah grew beyond its ancient allies and ornamented doors, residents exchanged cemented relationships with

cemented walls. Modernization left behind the world Binzager held so close to her heart. Her only means of bringing those memories back to life was through her strokes of determination. Her strong resolve to unequivocally fulfil her purpose – reconstructing in her paintings the old city and its people as she had known them, offering the country and the world a unique catalogue and archive of Saudi history. “My aim was to document the history of our culture. It implies for men and women; I’m writing the story of every day,” comments Binzager when asked about her intentions behind the painting *Al Nassah* (1975).

Prior to Binzager, the most exported imagery of Saudi Arabia was through the lens of orientalist; the access into the world of women was like a beautifully kept secret. The artist offered a window into their lives and most intimate rituals, and gave women agency over how their stories should be told. Binzager’s paintings are meticulously researched through her conversations with older women about their lives, using photographs, historic documents, and folklore passed on through generations. Her work ranges from oil, watercolor, pastel, drawing,

a recreation of the very doors and windows of her childhood home in Harat Al Sham. Binzager, who owns a library of 7 000 books, including many rare editions, traveled across the country and studied the history of costumes, curating a collection of rare garments from multiple families in the Hijaz region. The antique costumes she accumulated include rare ornate headdresses, shoes, and adorned jewelry. All are depicted in her watercolors and displayed in her museum.

In 1973, Binzager decided to stop selling her art, which had resulted in an unparalleled contribution of more than 450 artworks, over 35 exhibitions, and her standalone museum. She has dedicated her long life to breaking barriers and capturing the essence of traditional Saudi life, its people, its colorful traditions, and deep heritage. “I’m proud of our ambitious artists; we have a true art movement in Saudi,” she says. “I thank God that I’m still watching the harvest of pioneers who started the art movement in the Kingdom. And in this short period, we’ve reached international ground. I hope that as an artist, I did what was expected of me for my society.” □



LEFT THE OPENING DAY OF THE FIRST EXHIBITION AT DAR AL TARBIAH AL-HADITHA SCHOOL IN JEDDAH, 1968 **BELOW** DOOR B (1987) WATERCOLOR **OPPOSITE** ZABUN (1969) OIL ON BOARD



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and etchings as mediums to bring those stories to life. One of her most famous pieces is known as “The Mona Lisa of Hijaz” and originally titled *Al Zaboon*. Adorned with vivid colors and textiles, it is a painting that captures an intimate portrait of a Saudi woman. Her work features intricate details of Saudi fashion history of that period, shedding light on fashion being a powerful means of expression for women at the time. The artist served not only as a painter, but as one of the most important archivists of Saudi fashion heritage.

Binzager brings parts of her to everything she does. Her sentimental nature and nostalgia stretches across the canvas of her works as well as the fabrics she wears and traditions she adorns on her head. Her proudest achievement to date is encapsulated in the opening of the Darat Safeya Binzager gallery in 2000, the first and only privately held museum by a Saudi artist. The museum’s architecture echoes the great facades of Nabataean Mada’in Saleh. Its minimalism is accented with

