

Collecting

Beirut | The Aishti

Foundation's shopping mall-cum-museum is a sign of the Lebanese capital's growing art scene. By *Georgina Adam*

Lebanon's capital Beirut, the most cosmopolitan of Middle Eastern cities, still bears massive scars of the 1975-90 civil war, with pockmarked buildings and bombed-out wrecks standing alongside recently constructed tower blocks. Many government services are paralysed, notably rubbish collection; the country is struggling to cope with more than 1.3m Syrian refugees, and sits in a region marked by unrest and insecurity.

Yet a powerful affirmation of the Lebanese capacity to overcome, or ignore, these obstacles came with the recent opening of the Aishti Foundation, a luxury shopping mall-cum-art space founded and funded by the retail magnate Tony Salamé. Before the glamorous inauguration that drew some 2,500 guests, from bejewelled Lebanese socialites to fashion retailers, art dealers, curators and artists, Salamé declared: "We have no government, nothing works, no one has a watch here and contractors won't give a delivery date! And yet we managed to complete the project in under three years!"

Just 24 hours before the opening, the site was still a work in progress, with workmen scurrying to tuck away dangling wires and finish the flooring. On the morning of the party torrential rain turned some streets into rivers, carrying still uncollected rubbish, and in what must have been a heroic operation, the whole dinner was shifted from the sculpture garden outside the mall to a hastily cleared retail space.

This defiance and resourcefulness characterises the growing art scene in Beirut, where two more museums are planned as part of the redevelopment of Martyrs' Square. In what is currently a wasteland on the waterfront, the non-profit, shiny silver Beirut Exhibition Centre offers shows of contemporary art. And shortly before the Aishti inauguration, the Surssock Museum, housed in a 19th-century mansion, was reopened after an extensive refit and expansion. The Aishti opening sent a wave of confidence through the city's community, showing that its art scene is vibrant despite all these troubles.

The Aishti mall, sited in the northern suburb of Jal el Dib, has cost Salamé more than \$100m. The architect is



Consumer culture

Clockwise from top: Urs Fischer's sculpture 'Dunno' (2012) and his aluminium panel 'Mashed' (2012) at the Aishti Foundation; Carol Bove's 'Prudence' (2013) flanked by Enrico Castellani's 'Superficie rossa' (2004) and 'Superficie bianca' (1998); mall interior designed by David Adjaye

Guillaume Ziccarelli



David Adjaye and he has enveloped the 4,000 sq metre space in an outer "skin", a wine-red metal structure. Inside, the mall is an eye-bending mix of black and white, with glass, mirroring, neon and angular marble flooring. At one end, in contrast to the flashy retail area, are the bare concrete walls and white cube exhibition rooms of the foundation, which showcases some of the 2,500 works of art Salamé has acquired in a voracious spending spree that started 15 years ago and has accelerated in the past 10. On two floors, large sliding glass doors enable shoppers to peek through to the artworks on display: at the opening, it was not made clear whether visitors would be allowed to stroll freely through from the temple of marketing to the temple of culture, nor indeed whether they would have to pay to do so.

Massimiliano Gioni, artistic director of New York's New Museum, curated *New Skin*, the opening show devoted to abstraction, which ranges from Italian modernists such as Lucio Fontana and Agostino Bonalumi to the contemporary American artists Sterling Ruby, Wade Guyton and Richard Prince. All the works are drawn from Salamé's collection. On the day of the inauguration, in a visit billed as a "surprise in a secret location", he unveiled an installation by Suha Traboulsi and Walid Raad inside



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the storage unit for his holdings. Here, piled high, were the crated artworks, each marked with the name of the gallery they had been acquired from. As a retailer, Salamé is accustomed to buying in bulk, and he acknowledges that this impacts on his acquisition of art; Gioni joked that he is Salamé's "dietologist", tasked with slowing down the purchases and editing them.

Compact and charismatic, Salamé is charming and sociable. He was like quicksilver at the opening, greeting a minister, pressing a falafel wrap on to a guest then posing for photographs with his glamorous wife Elham and four children. His self-made fortune derives from the luxury department store Aishti (which supposedly means "I love" in Japanese) and 20 monobrand shops in downtown Beirut, as well as other interests; he drew on his large holdings of Richard Prince works to unveil 20 of the artist's "Instagram" series in these shops at the same time as the opening.

But is this overlap between art and fashion a dangerous path, further blurring culture with consumption? Gioni, diplomatically, thinks not: "The fashion industry has been an incredible amplifier and is a better communicator than art," he says. "The media responds to fashion more reactively than to art, and that's become a defining phenomenon since the 1990s. I don't find this problematic. Fashion opens up the art world, and this centre will do this for a bigger audience." He waved at glass door dividing the art space from a Dior store. "Behind this wall, Tony makes money; here he spends it."

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Trophies of a golden age

Continued from page 1

two of them hung as loans on museum walls. The third should hang on one. More interesting, perhaps, is what they reveal about the contemporary dislocation between market value and museum priority.

Most spectacular is Orazio Gentileschi's "Danaë" (1621). Ever since the reopening of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's new European paintings galleries in 2013, this seductive, more than two-metre-wide canvas has captured and beguiled viewers. The mythological heroine is the daughter of King Acrisius who, on consulting the oracle at Delphi, was told that he would be killed by his daughter's son. Consequently, Acrisius had the virginal Danaë locked away in a subterranean chamber, but Zeus, king of the gods, desired her and came to her in the guise of a shower of gold. The fruit of their union was Perseus, who did, inadvertently, kill his grandfather.

It is not only the perfection of Gentileschi's reclining nude Danaë that seduces, but the artist's astounding handling of the lush materials of her gilded prison – the fall of light on gleaming satin, crisp linen, rich velvet, the gold of the threads woven into her diaphanous draperies, as well as soft feather and flesh and cold hard metal. A wonder, too, are the cascading ribbons and shavings that fall amid the coins.

A twist of fate has seen Orazio Gentileschi's fame overshadowed by that of his daughter, the painter Artemisia. Few

artists rival Orazio in terms of the sheer beauty of his painting, and his cooler, classicising interpretation of Caravaggism was to prove influential, not least in France.

It may well be that the dangerous and visceral humanity of Caravaggio, Orazio's slightly younger contemporary, is more to today's taste; he is certainly regarded as a more important artist. But Orazio's refined style was widely admired in his lifetime. He ended his days in London in 1639, court painter to Charles I.

One of a series of three paintings commissioned by Giovanni Antonio Sauli for his palazzo in Genoa in 1621, "Danaë" appeared on the market for the first time only in 1975, with the Brit-

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ish dealer Thomas Grange. It was eventually secured by the tenacious New York dealer Richard Feigen, who fought off a legal challenge from the famously litigious collector Norton Simon who insisted that he had first refusal. "Danaë", by now appropriately dressed in a period frame, remained in Feigen's remarkable private collection until 1988 when he placed it in a family trust. "I had seven paintings that I was anxious to get out of my estate because I anticipated they would become very valuable," the 85-year-old explained. "All went on loan to the Met or to Yale. The trust decided that I had to sell one of them to fulfil certain obligations."

The painting was initially offered to the Met which, like most US museums,

has little in the way of Italian baroque. The price proved prohibitive, however, and Christie's and Sotheby's competed for the picture. Christie's hoped to place "Danaë" in its Artisti Muse sale last week (see page 7). But Sotheby's New York was able to offer a guarantee on a \$25m-\$35m auction estimate, and "Danaë" will go on sale on January 27. Only one Old Master painting has ever made more at auction: Rubens' "Massacre of the Innocents", which changed hands for £49.5m in 2002.

There are only a handful of institutions with access to these kinds of funds (one, the J Paul Getty Museum, owns Rubens' "Lot and his Daughters" from the same series). More to the point, not all institutions would be prepared to pay

From top: Jan Gossaert's "The Virgin and Child" (c1520) and John Constable's "The Lock" (c1824), at Sotheby's London sale of Old Master & British Paintings on December 9

Sotheby's



a premium price possibly in excess of the picture's art historical value. In an market now driven by private collectors, the traditional synchronicity between price and importance seems to have disappeared. At this estimate, the kind of private buyer "Danaë" will attract is less an Old Master collector than one of today's super-rich trophy hunters. Before the auction, "Danaë" will tour to Los Angeles (November 17-18), Hong Kong (November 22-24) and London (December 5-9).

Subtract one nought from the estimate of the cover lot of Sotheby's London evening sale of Old Master & British Paintings on December 9. It is a jewel of an early 16th-century panel painting by the Flemish master Jan Gossaert. This small and beautifully preserved Virgin and Child (estimate £4m-£6m), which has been in the same family for 85 years, hung in the National Gallery in London from 1993-2012. It was included in the monographic show on the artist in 2011, organised in association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Gossaert was the first Netherlandish artist to paint classically inspired mythological and Biblical nudes. Here we see him assimilating what he had learned of antiquity and the Italian Renaissance, not only during his trip to Italy in 1509 but also from Michelangelo's marble Bruges Madonna. There is something of that Madonna's long oval face in this panel, while Gossaert has exaggerated the twist of the Christ Child to resemble an infant Laocoön. The Virgin's sweet expression is as appealing as the meticulous detailing of the gold threads and pearls, offset by a rich ultramarine.

The top lot of the sale, however, is a second version by John Constable of one of his celebrated "six-footers", "The Lock". As the auction house is at pains to point out, this is not a slavish imitation

but a revisitation intensifying the drama of the scene, and certainly the artist's sparkling bravura paintwork is full of life.

When the prime version of this 1824 masterpiece was offered at Christie's three years ago with an estimate of £20m-£25m, it sold on a single bid to its guarantor. There ought to have been institutional competition: this is an iconic image by an artist who was to transform European landscape painting, but £20m is a great deal of money. Perhaps the estimate of £8m-£12m will prove more alluring.

sothebys.com

Wearable Old Masters

Tattoo artist Susannah Griggs's rendering of Artemisia Gentileschi's "Judith Slaying Holofernes" (c1614-20) for an art teacher client has been a hit on social media susannahgriggsart.com

