



Saudi Arabia's Cultural Renaissance: Societal Codes and Embrace

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Introduction

Saudi Arabia, a country known for its historical and cultural heritage, is currently going through a [cultural renaissance](#) – as often described – surpassing traditional norms and cultivating a new wave of talent, particularly among its youth.

Riyadh, the capital city, serves as a prime example of this cultural transformation and the forefront of Saudi Vision 2030, an ambitious plan aimed at diversifying the economy, promoting social development, and nurturing cultural vibrancy. Evolving from a desert oasis to its current form of a metropolis, Riyadh displays the kingdom's commitment to transforming into a hub for arts, literature, and entertainment, while reflecting the diverse facets of Saudi society.

Saudi artists, musicians, and architects are playing crucial roles in pushing boundaries and challenging conventional notions. The establishment of art schools and music institutions has been [instrumental](#) in encouraging local artists and musicians to engage in the kingdom's societal endeavors. Noteworthy institutions such as the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture ([established](#) in 2018), Prince

Mohammed bin Salman College of Business and Entrepreneurship ([founded](#) in 2016), and the Prince's Foundation School of Traditional Arts ([established](#) in 2005), have all played significant roles in nurturing artistic talent, underscoring Riyadh's commitment to fostering creativity.

Importance of Nurturing Local Talent in Vision 2030

Riyadh is witnessing a surge of talent, orchestrating some of the most captivating exhibitions in arts, literature, and culture in the recent years. One of the driving tools of this cultural promotion is the [Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale](#). This year, the second edition of the biennale is taking place at the JAX District in Diriyah, with the new theme "[After Rain](#)", featuring approximately 100 artists from 43 countries, including Saudi artists who showcase their interpretations of the theme.

Last week, I had the opportunity to briefly visit the 2024 edition of the biennale and gain insights into how Saudis perceive the arts and cultural developments in their country over the past few years. In a conversation with a local guide at the biennale, Sarah (27)

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expressed, " Saudis are enthusiastic about this artistic boom; however, they're not entirely new to art itself. Yet, now they have the chance to showcase their talents and expressions through these events, resulting in a significant increase in Saudi artists compared to two years ago."

Saudi artists see art not only as a means of self-expression and promotion of their country's history and culture but also as a platform to explore various themes such as gender roles, identity, and societal change. Artists like Manal AlDowayan, Dana Awartani, Sarah Abu Abdallah, and Asma Bahmim have gained international recognition for their thought-provoking works, effectively reflecting the evolving status of women in Saudi society.

[AlDowayan](#) often focuses on Saudi women in her works (such as "The Emerging #6") and their experiences amidst the social and cultural transformations the kingdom has undergone in recent years. AlDowayan has been [selected](#) by the Saudi Ministry of Culture to represent the Kingdom at the 60th International Venice Biennale 2024, marking Saudi Arabia's fourth participation in the event. Another noteworthy talent is [Alia Ahmad](#), the youngest artist in this biennale. Her work displayed in the B3 gallery of the biennale reflects the talent of youth and the participation of women in the arts and cultural spheres.

The 2024 biennale features six exhibition halls, each centered on a

specific theme under the overarching theme "After Rain". When asked about the significance of this theme, Sarah explained, "It metaphorically refers to the aftermath of rain, symbolizing rejuvenation and freshness. It mirrors the new era unfolding in Saudi Arabia, with these artists akin to drops of rain falling into the desert." The theme "After Rain" not only delves into the region's intricate human history and natural landscapes but also symbolizes the kingdom's progress in the realms of art and culture, viewing art as a catalyst for rapid societal change and a flourishing cultural landscape.

Both of the 2022 and 2024 biennales are part of the Diriyah Biennale Foundation, [established](#) by the Ministry of Culture in 2020 that plays an essential role in supporting and accelerating creative expression across arts, culture, and music through public events.

Saudi Women Niche in Cultural Scene

In recent years, in line with the Vision 2030 agenda, Saudi Arabia has undertaken efforts to promote Saudi women's presence in the cultural arena. Historically, women were [restricted](#) from various professions, includes singing and performance, in the public. Nevertheless, even when unable to pursue their music and arts ambitions within in the kingdom, Saudi women continued to pursue their [dreams outside](#) the country. Today, they have

become the driving force behind the cultural initiatives. For example, Sawsan al-Bahiti became [first professional opera singer](#) in the kingdom. In 2019, she [took the stage](#) at the King Fahd Cultural Center to celebrate Saudi Arabia's 89th National Day and [made history](#) as the first Saudi women to perform Saudi royal anthem in an operatic style. Her performance was received with enthusiasm and became the voice of the changing society.

Last week, I also watched a stage performance by a female Saudi singer at the international Women's Day [reception held](#) at the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)'s General-Secretariat in Riyadh. This could be unthinkable a decade ago, reflecting how the society and the decision-makers have accepted the women's presence in the cultural scene.

Meanwhile, kingdom is set for the first-ever Opera house in the historic area of Diriyah, a project that aims to create a new stage for future generations of performers. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site, Diriyah, an ancient city located on the outskirts of Riyadh, holds immense importance for the Saudi leadership, which tries to turn the site into a "[cultural capital](#)."

The Riyadh Season Initiative, [launched](#) in 2019, has further amplified the city's cultural vibrancy and has become synonymous with the city's openness to diverse cultural experiences. Within the season, a series

of events and festivals, including music concerts, fashion shows, and sporting events, have been hosted to attract both local and international audiences.

Motives Behind Raising Cultural Awareness

Saudi Arabia is witnessing an increasing cultural and artistic movement with the emergence and growth of the art scene, marked notably by the opening of new art institutions and events signify a significant cultural shift in the country and hold several key implications. Firstly, through these art events, Saudi Arabia aims to change the narrative of its own and create a platform where society could engage with both local and international audiences. Secondly, the emergence of art openings in Saudi Arabia provides local artists with opportunities for visibility, recognition, and professional development. The development of the art sector can also serve as a catalyst for the growth. By nurturing artistic talent, this new policy can contribute to the broader economic diversification efforts within Saudi Arabia. The kingdom can achieve economic benefits from these by attracting tourists, and boosting the cultural tourism industry. Last but most importantly, promotion of art and music challenges societal norms and encourages critical reflection on issues such as identity, gender, and tradition.

About the author

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About the Gulf Insights series

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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