

Keynote Address, September 28, 2010

## Cultural Change and Museums in the Arab World

By Barry Lord, Co-President, Lord Cultural Resources

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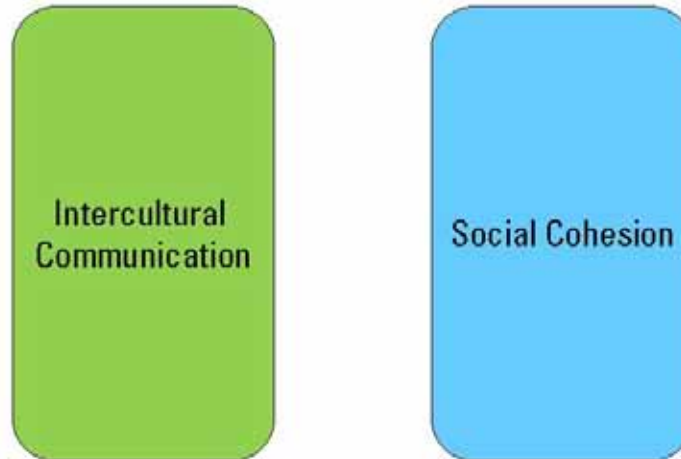
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[www.lord.ca](http://www.lord.ca) and [www.culturalchange.ca](http://www.culturalchange.ca).

**Lord**

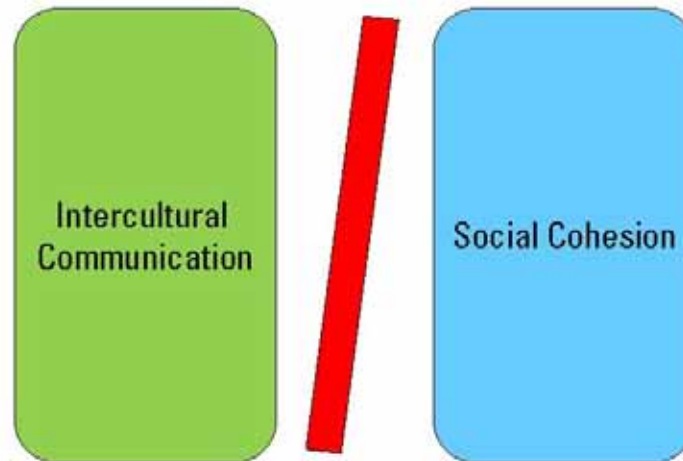
Chairman, distinguished representatives of ARADO, the University of Balamand, the Kuwait Fund for Economic Development, ICOM Arab, the Lebanese Ministries of Education, Tourism and Culture, and the Education and Culture Parliamentary Commission of the government of Lebanon, leaders of museums, museum projects and cultural agencies of the governments of Arab states, distinguished guests: thank you for inviting me to this important conference, and giving me the honor of addressing you today.

It is highly significant that this first conference of museums in the Arab world should choose to link two vital and dynamic concepts as its theme: “intercultural communication” and “social cohesion.”



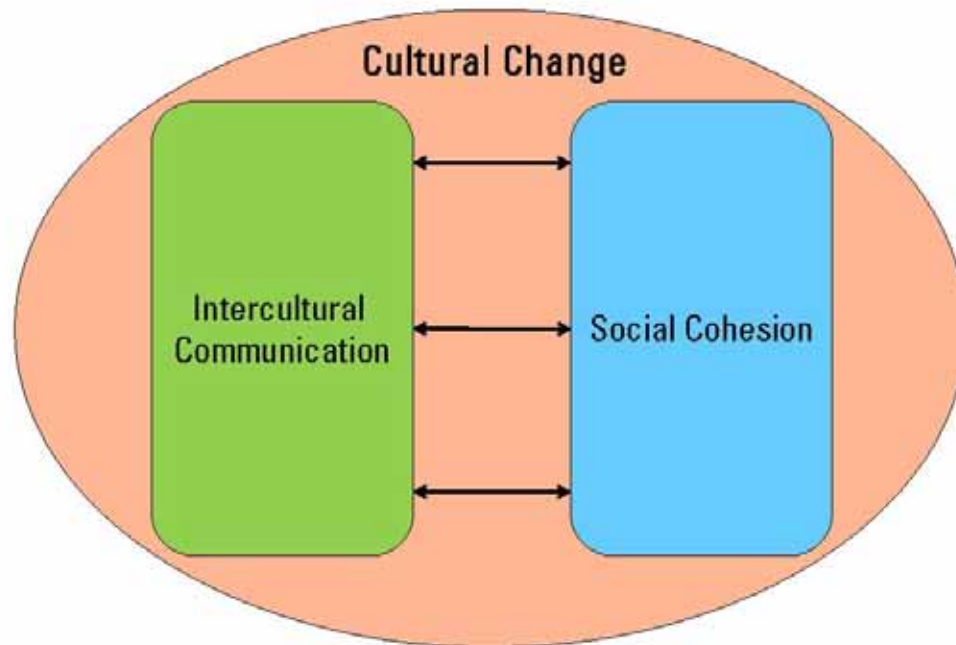
### Lord

Twenty years ago, had such a conference been convened, it would almost certainly have had a different theme. Some in attendance might have suggested that social cohesion in the Arab world should be considered as antithetical to intercultural communication – even seeing intercultural communication as a threat to social cohesion. So their idea of the role of museums would be to contribute to social cohesion by preserving one specific cultural heritage, ignoring others as far as possible – protecting social cohesion by restricting or eliminating intercultural communication.



Lord

Thus the theme of this conference challenges us to think about cultural change, how it is affecting museums in the Arab world, and how museums are contributing to it.



## Lord

Today our conference sees clearly that intercultural communication and social cohesion are integrally linked, and that museums can achieve more with their collections and their programs by bringing them together. Unlike the 'protectionist' approach in the past, many museums today are embracing intercultural communication as a positive force that can lead to greater social cohesion. This is a major cultural change.

Cultural change among museums in the Arab world has been ongoing over the almost 15 years that my company, Lord Cultural Resources, has been working with the museums of the region. Broadly, we have witnessed an exciting progression in this relatively short time span in the very concept of what a museum is.

Our company was founded 29 years ago, with the aim of bringing a systematic but creative approach to the planning, design, installation and management of museums.

## Lord Cultural Resources



**Creating Cultural Capital**

**Lord**

### Network Offices in:

Toronto

New York

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Paris

Madrid

Mumbai

Beirut

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Dhahran

Beijing

*Creating Cultural Capital* and sharing it with the global community is our mission. Based in Toronto, we have completed over 1,800 museum planning and management assignments in almost 50 countries, and currently have offices in New York, Paris, Beijing, Mumbai, **Cairo**, **Dhahran** – and a presence in **Beirut**, represented here by our Lebanese Senior Consultant, Samir Saddi. The fact that we have three centres of operation in the Arab world indicates the importance of this region to us.

We are also well known in the region for our books, the *Manuals* series, written or edited by my wife and partner Gail Dexter Lord and myself.

## Lord Cultural Resources Manuals

Published by AltaMira, distributed by the AMA

*The Manual of Museum Exhibitions* (2003)

*The Manual of Museum Planning* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1999)

*The Manual of Museum Management* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2009)

*The Manual of Museum Learning* (2007)

*The Manual of Strategic Planning for Museums* (2007)

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**Lord**  
Cultural Resources

We have been pleased to see our *Manual of Museum Management*, our *Manual of Museum Planning* and our other books being used throughout the region. ***The rapid development of museums in the area has created a growing need for training of Arab museum professionals.*** The Manuals, all published by AltaMira Press and distributed through the American Association of Museums, are contributing to this development.

Our most recent book, however, is even more directly related to the theme of this conference. It is entitled *Artists, Patrons and the Public: Why Culture Changes*, published earlier this year by AltaMira.

## Artists, Patrons and the Public: Why Culture Changes

AltaMira Press, 2010



**Lord**

In their new book, Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord focus their two lifetimes of international experience working in the cultural sector on the challenging questions of why and how culture changes.

Visit [www.culturalchange.ca](http://www.culturalchange.ca) to find out about your role and the role of museums in cultural change.

The new book is about cultural change, and that is certainly what we have participated in and what is still going on at a rapid pace in virtually all Arab countries. As you can see, the book's cover is a photograph of an oil field by the well-known Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky – an entire chapter is devoted to the importance of changes in the source of surplus energy as one of the motors driving cultural change. We show how the transition from coal to oil and gas shifts the locus of values in our societies from production to consumption, facilitated by the universalization of credit and resulting in a concern with the future effects of all of our actions, beginning with resource extraction itself – thereby paradoxically engendering our current environmental awareness as well as our heightened awareness of the value of our heritage and dangers to it. The oil field depicted is one in Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, and sure enough we have just started work on a major museum development there.

The new book, combining theory with examples drawn from our experiences around the globe, proposes seven principles that govern cultural change:

## Seven Principles of Cultural Change



**Lord**

1. Each social group has its own culture
2. The quantity of surplus controlled by a social group impacts the extent of its culture
3. Each social group seeks its own values in the art it patronizes
4. Culture changes in accordance with changes in access to surplus
5. Quantitative change in patronage leads to qualitative cultural change
6. Cultural validation and invalidation by dominant cultures affect all others
7. Intercultural aspects of cultural change offer new opportunities

These principles elucidate how social cohesion is related to intercultural communication. The first five are principles of social cohesion, the last two of intercultural communication.

The first one simply asserts the basis of social cohesion – that each social group has its own culture. The second observes that the quantity of surplus – of time, energy, resources – controlled by any social group impacts the extent of its culture. Another principle of social cohesion comes third – that each social group seeks its own values in the culture that it patronizes. The fourth concludes that culture therefore changes in accordance with each social group’s access to surplus time, energy and resources. And the fifth principle generalizes this analysis, introducing the concept of patronage – by royal families, government agencies, public organizations or private individuals – and observing that a quantitative change in the amount of patronage will result in qualitative changes in the culture. That is clearly what has been happening among museums in the Arab world in the past two decades, as the number of patrons and their activities have exponentially increased, resulting in the qualitative changes now all around us.

The last two principles of cultural change focus on intercultural communication. The sixth principle points out that the validation or invalidation of cultural phenomena by dominant social groups affects the culture of all other groups, including even the validation of their own cultures by the less dominant groups. In this region we are familiar with this principle from the history of colonialism, specifically of orientalism. On the other hand, the seventh principle completes the

picture, showing that intercultural communication offers new opportunities for social cohesion, in many instances on a global scale.

These last two principles, which are fully illustrated with examples in the book, clearly describe the dynamic we see in play in regard to the effect of intercultural communication on social cohesion in museums. If there are no museum programs deliberately fostering intercultural communication in museums, then the sixth principle – whereby a dominant culture effectively validates or invalidates all others – may prevail. In colonial or neo-colonial situations the culture of the regnant imperial power will be dominant, so that people living in that country will tend to devalue their own cultural heritage; in independent countries certain social classes or religious groups may exercise such dominance. But a museum that encourages intercultural communication can benefit from the seventh principle, offering new opportunities for developing social cohesion on the basis of mutual understanding and respect.

Our company's work among museums of the Arab world over the past 15 years has shown us many examples of these principles of cultural change at work. During that time we have seen the very concept of a museum being transformed.

The cultural changes we have seen are three-fold:

## Cultural Change among Museums in the Arab World

1. Increased access to collections of the heritage.
2. An enhanced educational role.
3. More equitable international partnerships.



First, we have seen a major change in opportunities for persons living in the Arab world to appreciate collections of their own cultural heritage. Whereas previously

people had to go to Paris, London or New York to see such collections, increasingly now they are able to see them closer to home. This reflects the growing number of patrons and their increased patronage activity as collectors, illustrating our fifth principle of cultural change.

Second, we have witnessed a stronger commitment to educational programs and both formal and informal learning in museums of the region. As a result, museums now see themselves as actively involved in the broader community, not only responsible for the storage, preservation and display of the heritage.

Third, international partnerships have become steadily more equitable, replacing former colonial relationships with active exchange programs among equals involving artifacts, exhibitions, archaeological digs, advanced education programs, and funding.

Before proceeding to analyze the underlying reasons for these changes, I would like to show you some examples drawn from our work over the past fifteen years. Originally, the role of museums in most Arab countries, particularly in those with a strong archaeological tradition, had been primarily to store the artifacts of each nation's heritage.

Tunisia

## Carthage, Jerba, Kairouan, Sousse

Heritage Site Development Plan, 2003–04



Lord

Much of this storage unfortunately did not provide an environment to museum standard. In 2003, as part of a World Bank heritage conservation project in Tunisia that included planning for the museum of Roman mosaics at Sousse, the folk life museum on the Isle of Jerba, and a new visitor center proposed for the historic

mosque at Kairouan, we worked at Carthage, which due to the sheer wealth of mostly Roman artifacts presents an intimidating demand for adequate archaeological storage, as my colleague Chedlia Annabi, President of ICOM Arab and Curator at Carthage, knows very well. ***The need for adequate storage conditions for collections in the area persists – it must be solved in the context of the broader concept of museums that we are describing today.***

In 1996, when we started work on planning and managing the production and installation of the exhibits in the new National Museum of Saudi Arabia (which opened in Riyadh in 1999), there was a heightened interest in the possibilities of more imaginative display. With the great Japanese-Canadian architect Ray Moriyama and Canadian exhibition designers RPDI we created walk-in environments that evoked the natural history and cultural heritage of the Kingdom.

Saudi Arabia

## Saudi Arabian National Museum

Riyadh, Exhibition Planning, Design & Project Management 1996–99



Lord

In 1998-99 we were privileged to work with the great Jordanian architect Rasem Badran on the initial concept and program for what became the Qatar Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, ultimately designed by the distinguished Chinese-American architect, I.M. Pei.

Qatar

## Qatar Museum of Islamic Art

Doha, Original Functional Program 1998–99



Lord

The QMIA is a landmark in museum development in the region in many ways: most importantly, it signaled a new and more direct approach to patronage by the royal family of Qatar, especially with regard to the formation of a collection. The Al Thani family proved that it is still possible in little more than a decade to assemble a relatively small but qualitatively outstanding collection of Islamic art.

Qatar

## Qatar Museum of Islamic Art: Collection Development

Doha



Alqubaa Head Ornament



Coins of the Abbaside

Lord

Along with the collection of the Sabah royal family in Kuwait, there is now for the first time a fully representative concentration of Islamic art of outstanding quality and range in the region. *Whereas Islamic art scholars formerly needed to go only to the Louvre, the Hermitage, the V&A, the British Museum and the Met to say that they had seen all the great collections, now they must go to Doha as well: this in itself is an important achievement, bringing some of the best of the region's heritage back home, and establishing a base for its study here.* Most significantly, the Louvre showed selections from the QMIA collection in Paris, even before the Museum opened.

The new Museum of Islamic Art in Doha also illustrates the second major cultural change – the heightened attention paid by the new patrons to museum learning. The QMIA includes a major Education wing, fulfilling the program for museum learning that we had originally recommended.

Qatar

## Qatar Museum of Islamic Art: Education Program

Doha



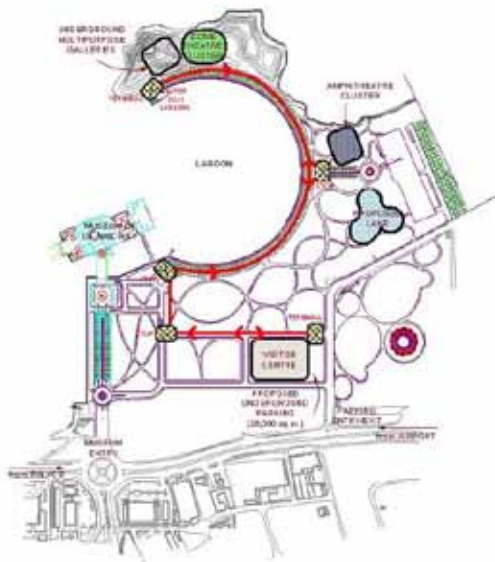
Lord

In 2007 we were invited back to Doha to plan cultural facilities for the park around the MIA, with the idea that these could attract more visits by residents, who might be interested first in a more approachable visitor centre, and then continue their experience in the Museum itself.

Qatar

## Qatar Museum of Islamic Art

Doha, Cultural Facilities Plan for QMIA Park 2007–09



Lord

This combination of an understanding of the collection-building role of museums along with the need to develop an education program from the beginning has been even more evident in the work we have been assisting with since 2006 in Abu Dhabi. Over the following two years we developed the Master Plan for the National Sheikh Zayed Museum and helped to organize the international architectural competition for it that was won by the renowned British architect Sir Norman Foster.

United Arab Emirates

## Sheikh Zayed National Museum

Abu Dhabi, Master Plan and Architectural Competition 2007–08



Lord

At the same time we produced a Master Plan for the proposed Maritime Museum in Abu Dhabi, working with the brilliant Japanese architect Tadao Ando.

United Arab Emirates

## Maritime Museum

Abu Dhabi, Master Plan 2006–07

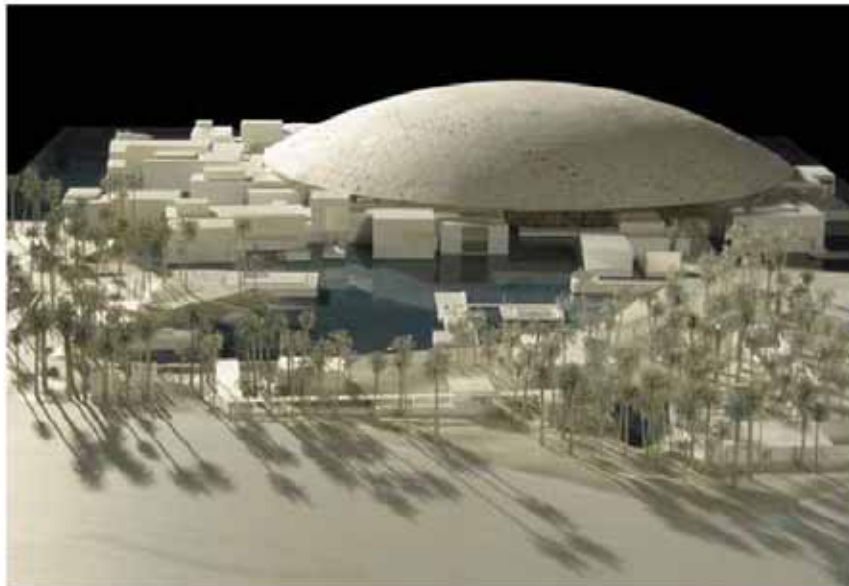


And we were privileged to work with the creative French architect Jean Nouvel on the Concept Plan for what became the Louvre Abu Dhabi, now under construction.

United Arab Emirates

## Louvre Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi, Concept Plan 2006–07



All of these projects include attention to collection building – the Louvre and the Guggenheim are both advising the Abu Dhabi museums on development of their own permanent collections while they enjoy both long-term loans and temporary exhibitions borrowed from their French and American partners. These museums exemplify the third major cultural change that we have noted – *a steadily more sophisticated and more equitable use of international partnerships.*

As for education, our Master Plans for the Sheikh Zayed National Museum and the Maritime Museum proposed interpretative plans that will be key to these museums' education programs as well as their permanent collection displays – for example, telling the story of Sheikh Zayed's commitment to environmental conservation as the basis for a natural history gallery of the U.A.E., or of his achievements in cultural heritage preservation as a basis for a gallery of the archaeological and ethnographic heritage of the nation that he brought together. Such thematic galleries will facilitate education programs correlated with the U.A.E. school curriculum.

United Arab Emirates

## Sheikh Zayed National Museum

Abu Dhabi, Master Plan 2007–08



Lord

But the Abu Dhabi Tourism Development and Investment Corporation (TDIC), which is directing all of these Saadiyat Island projects, has gone still further in setting a stimulating educational agenda with its outstanding exhibitions and associated educational programs, both in the excellent galleries established in a wing of the Emirates Palace Hotel, and now in the exhibition centre on Saadiyat itself. TDIC has emerged as a significant patronage agency, implementing the commitment to patronage of the Al Nahyan royal family of Abu Dhabi.

United Arab Emirates

## Manarat Al Saadiyat

Abu Dhabi



Starting with a major exhibition on the architectural concepts for the new museums, the Lebanese Director of TDIC's Cultural Department, Rita Aoun Abdo, has brought to Abu Dhabi an outstanding selection of Islamic art from the famous Khalili collection, followed by a Picasso retrospective from the Musee Picasso in Paris, and an ongoing series of high-quality exhibitions. Most recently TDIC commissioned its own original scholarship from well-established experts with an impressively curated exhibition of textiles from central Asia, shown at the new exhibition centre on Saadiyat Island. As our fifth principle of cultural change provides, quantitative increase in patronage is leading to qualitative cultural change.

Education in museums has also become a central concern in Egypt, as Supreme Council of Antiquities Secretary-General Zahi Hawass made clear in his article “A New Era for Museums in Egypt” in the UNESCO publication *Museums International* in 2005. A year earlier our Vienna-based Associate Claudia Haas had been asked to assist with planning the educational program for the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization that is now under construction in Fustat.

Egypt

## National Museum of Egyptian Civilization

Fustat, Cairo, Educational Program Planning 2004–05



Lord

This year we have joined the planning and management team led by Hill International for the Grand Egyptian Museum in Giza, where there is no shortage of collections, and where we are delighted to find again a strong commitment to education.

Egypt

## Grand Egyptian Museum

Giza, Exhibition Tender Management 2010



Lord

This huge new museum, which will be one of the largest in the world, includes plans for a Children's Gallery and a Special Needs Gallery. A Children's Gallery in such a major new museum in Giza, complementary to the existing Suzanne Mubarak Children's Museum in Heliopolis, will further strengthen the growing movement of children's museums in the region.

In 2008 we made a small contribution to this movement by observing, analyzing and advising on the education program of the Children's Museum in Amman, and now we are just starting to assist with the design of new exhibits there.

Jordan

## The Children's Museum Jordan

Amman, Education Program Review 2008



Lord

And since 2008 we have been working with Saudi Aramco on the planning and preparation for their new King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture in Dhahran, featuring the striking architectural concept of its buildings by the Norwegian architectural firm, Snohetta. Needless to say, the emergence of Saudi Aramco as a major new patron will continue to have a stimulating effect on the development of cultural institutions throughout the region.

Saudi Arabia

## King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture

Dhahran, Program Planning and Development 2008–ongoing



**Lord**

The architecture of the King Abdulaziz Center is astounding. The contents of the new Centre will be equally creative, engaging and impressive, ranging from a magnificent Great Hall and four galleries for major exhibitions and events through a library and archives to include a theatre and cinema, a children's discovery zone and a lifelong learning facility. Most important, the range of subjects will extend to all the cultures of the world. *The King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture now under construction in Dhahran brings us to our present theme, in which the concept of the role of museums and other cultural institutions is that they should embrace intercultural communication as a means of enhancing social cohesion.* The new Center in Dhahran will be one of the clearest examples of our seventh principle – whereby intercultural communication creates new opportunities for social cohesion.

Now that we have looked at examples of this cultural change that is still very much in progress, we need to ask why? What have been the sources of this massive cultural change, affecting the very concept of what a museum is and what it can do? One important answer is that over the past half-century the nations of this region have provided the basis for the remarkable development of museums and related cultural facilities by taking control of many vital activities.

## Arab Nations Take Control

Over the past half-century Arab nations have taken increasing control over their own:

- Natural Resources
- Airlines
- Cultural Tourism
- Archaeology
- Architectural Heritage
- Museum Collections
- International Partnerships
- Contemporary Art

### Lord

In terms of our seven principles, we may say that national control over these key 'surplus' factors has given patronage groups in the Arab world – Emirs, government agencies, private companies like Saudi Aramco and others -- the potential to patronize this widespread cultural change among museums and other cultural institutions:

- National control of the *natural resources* of each country has provided the material base for the development of a cultural infrastructure, particularly in those countries with important oil and gas reserves.
- Building national *airlines* has made it possible for cultural institutions in the region to begin serving not just a European and American public, but also (and even more important for the future) visitors from India and East Asia.
- Gaining control of *cultural tourism* and developing its potential has also been crucial in countries like Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. ***Cultural tourism depends on intercultural communication. It is also the most dynamic and least environmentally damaging kind of tourism – which has become the world's largest industry.***
- Taking control of each nation's own *archaeology*, rather than leaving it largely to foreign universities and museums, has been critical in making the new developments possible throughout the region.
- Similarly, taking a leading role in the preservation of *architectural heritage* has provided a powerful stimulus to museum development.

- As we noted in relation to Qatar and Abu Dhabi, developing their own *collections* of artifacts, specimens or works of art has added new sources of strength to many of the museums in this region.
- Currently, taking the lead in *partnerships* with foreign museums or universities offers new possibilities for intercultural communication in new alignments. Two weeks ago in Paris I saw the outstanding exhibition entitled *Routes de l'Arabie* at the Louvre, presenting for the first time in public remarkable large stone figures from Saudi Arabia that have never been exhibited in the Kingdom itself.

France

## Routes de l'Arabie

Musee du Louvre, Paris, 2010



Lord

- Most recently many Arab countries have been taking a leading position in presenting and championing the *contemporary art* of the region, a trend that is currently stimulating exciting new prospects of intercultural communication from Abu Dhabi to Venice, Dhahran to Paris, and Dubai to New York.

Italy

## Edge of Arabia

Venice Biennale, 2009



Lord

*Edge of Arabia*, the exhibition of Saudi artists at the 2009 Venice Biennale, went on to an international tour, and has just this month been succeeded by an even larger exhibition of contemporary Saudi Arabian artists that just opened at a museum in Shanghai, coinciding with the World Expo there. Both Abu Dhabi and the U.A.E. had pavilions at the 2009 Venice Art Biennale, and Bahrain has just won a prize at the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale. In Abu Dhabi itself TDIC's Rita Aoun-Abdo for several years brought selections from the art fair in Paris to the Emirates' galleries, and has now initiated Abu Dhabi's own Art Fair. The Sharjah Art Fair has been a major event in the Arab art calendar for many years now, featuring new, young and emerging artists from all over the region. Dubai has emerged as a commercial gallery centre, highlighted by dedicated art magazines like *Canvas*.

Predictably, with all this activity the prices at auction or in commercial galleries of Arab artists' work have risen impressively. Quantitative change in patronage is leading to qualitative change in the art that is being produced. Or as a New York art dealer once put it to me succinctly, "New art follows new money."

Serious challenges, limitations and issues remain:

## Challenges, Limitations and Issues

- Need for sustained peace and stability
- Lack of a museum-going tradition
- Relatively low levels of education for many
- Status of pre-Islamic history
- Need for training
- Need to publish and translate

### Lord

- The region needs a sustained period of peace and stability so that museums and other cultural institutions have a chance to contribute to social cohesion. This is true everywhere, but especially so in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.
- The lack of a museum-going tradition in many of the region's cultures results in low attendance by residents and a false perception that museums are primarily for tourists. In the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia a local museum and a library share a building in Dammam, but an honest appraisal of attendance at both indicates little or no participation by residents, aside from obligatory school tours to the museum. A few years ago the National Museum in Riyadh was attracting fewer than 20,000 visitors annually. ***The operation of many museums in the region is not yet focused on the visitor.*** Nor has the general public been able to appreciate their museums' potential for contributing to social cohesion, as programs aimed at inclusion of under-represented groups are still very scarce.
- Educational attainment is the most important determinant of museum participation, but levels of education, for both men and women, remain a concern. The school drop-out rate for young Arab men in many countries is particularly distressing, as is the large number of young women who are obliged to resign from budding careers when they marry.

- The status of pre-Islamic history is still a concern for some. The *Routes d'Arabie* exhibition at the Louvre reveals the depth and range of cultural heritage in the Arabian peninsula, surprising its Saudi visitors as well as many scholars of the region. Hopefully it will lead the way toward a greater acceptance and celebration of this heritage within the Kingdom as well.
- There is a pressing need for training of nationals to take over the management and operation of the museums from expatriates. We are currently assisting with training programs in Bahrain and Dhahran, but meeting this objective will take years of dedicated effort. We are also now offering recruitment services, aimed at attracting young Arab nationals to a museum career that they may not have previously considered.
- And there is an urgent need for publishing and translation of texts, from basic manuals to more advanced professional literature. The impressive translation and publishing program of the new Alexandria Library in Egypt should help. Still, the total number of books of all kinds translated into Arabic each year in all Arab countries together is said to be far fewer than the number translated annually into demotic Greek by that one nation alone. The Republic of Georgia is now translating their third book in our *Manuals* series into that small country's language, but translation of any of them into Arabic remains at the proposal stage only.

What of the future? It appears certain that cultural change among museums in this region will continue at a rapid pace. Who can help to meet the foregoing challenges? What is the role of artists, patrons and the public?

Museum associations can play a vital role in advancing the profession in this region. UNESCO, Arab ICOM and each nation's ICOM members contribute mightily to progress in the field. My colleague Dr Anna Paolini, now Director of the UNESCO office in Amman, showed me a brilliant little primer of museum practices that she and her staff had produced when she and I met some years ago in her UNESCO office of that time in Paris; its direct text and comic-book-style illustrations are undoubtedly of great assistance to isolated directors of local museums.

## Cultural Change and Museums in the Arab World

Barry Lord, Co-President, Lord Cultural Resources



**Lord**

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But this address concludes by suggesting that consideration could be given also to developing professional museum associations in each country. Museum associations that convene annual conferences where papers on museological subjects can be presented by their members, and that publish proceedings of conferences like this one, are important sources of professional development throughout the world. The Museums Association in Great Britain and the American Association of Museums in the U.S. are the best-known, but such associations are equally effective in countries like Canada, Australia, Korea and elsewhere. In Germany and many other countries such associations are simply the national ICOM membership, but ICOM membership is often limited to only a few representatives from each museum, so it may be necessary and more beneficial to have a separate national association that all museum workers can join.

Arab countries could benefit from the formation of such professional organizations in each country, as they provide a forum not only for established professionals to provide leadership, but also for young persons entering the field to show what they can do, and advance their careers. They constitute a professional body that allows museum workers to lift their heads above their often overwhelming local situations. Some of these associations could be regional, such as the organization of Science Centres in the GCC (Gulf Cooperative Council) countries that I recommended when I spoke at the first conference of such science centres in Khobar several years ago. But it would be best to see a strong network of national professional associations develop that can then establish regional exchange programs. Such a national association becomes a new source of patronage for the museum profession itself in each country.

With or without such assistance, museums in the region have clearly grasped the rhythm of cultural change. They are not only reflecting it, they are contributing directly to it. Intercultural communication is on the agenda, and its potential to contribute to social cohesion on a broader scale has only begun to be realized. The future is bright.