

ARABIAN RHAPSODY



A BRITISH-BORN PAINTER, NOW BASED IN DUBAI, TALKS TO MUHAMMAD YUSUF ABOUT THE MULTI-CULTURAL EFFLORESCENCE THAT HAS INFLUENCED HER ART



The paintings of British-born Dubai-based artist Melanie Gissing is witness to her checkered life, lived between the UK and the UAE. She is a water-colourist, who specialises in painting carpet designs.

"I was born in Liverpool," she recalled. "And moved to Abu Dhabi soon after. My father was in the Defence Force, based in Abu Dhabi, during 1969 – 73. He went commercial later and flew for Gulf Air for 25 years."

Her family moved to Bahrain when she was five years old and she went to a boarding school in the UK in North Wales when she was nine. "It had a fantastic arts department," she said. "I did a lot of weaving on proper big looms and printing was a great introduction for me." The art experience at school decided her life direction: she knew she would be involved with textiles thereafter.

After school, she did a arts foundation course that led her to textiles. "I loved fabric and weaving," she said. In college, she opted for a three years degree course in "constructed textiles," which, according to her, is an intersection between fashion and interior design.

Growing up in the Middle East among its markets and souks and admiring the beauty of everything from dhows to doors, developed an appetite in her for "old stuff" carpets. She also realised that textiles, to which she had hitched her star, covered a huge range that included carpets.

"But I don't like brand new, silk carpets," she said. "It is the old stuff that has sustenance and history." Her paintings are viewer-friendly and do not need an in-depth art background to be appreciated. "Original art should be accessible to all," she said, summing up her art philosophy.

In a tete-a-tete with Time out, she spoke about her art. Here is what she said.



As a worker in the decorative arts and as a long-time resident in the Middle East, do you think there is a conflict between Islam and the arts?

Conflict is a word that has never entered my mind in the world of the arts. On the contrary, I think that the arts can bring people together under an umbrella of common understanding in appreciation of the arts and creativity and expression on so many different levels. While I don't pretend to be any kind of expert on Islam, I do know that there is truly wonderful art, creativity and design deriving from Islamic foundations particularly in calligraphy.

What facets of a carpet inspire you?

I'm not entirely sure! I think that carpets, or more specifically, textiles generally, inspire me through the richness of colour, through design, through touch, through history — I particularly like old textiles, and each piece having its own story of how and where created and by whom and the utility of some pieces — such as saddle bags for horses or camels, things used for warmth like rugs on beds and for adornment and decoration around doorways. I love the imperfectness of pieces which show the handmade and human element.

My inspirations are not limited to textiles, though. I enjoy old Arabian architecture, the carvings of wooden doors and doorways, the wonderful old silver jewellery, old Arab wooden benches, the aroma and sight of huge sacks full of spices and nuts in markets and souks that invigorate the senses and dusty passageways that take you on a journey of visual delights.

Baskets woven from palm leaves, traditional dhows built by hand, traditional fishing traps built from twine, and it goes on and on! All of these elements have contributed to my appreciation, on many levels and over time, probably since I was a child.

From which region do your favourite carpets come from? Iran? Turkey? Central Asia? Caucasus?

I have seen wonderful carpets and textiles from all of the regions you mention, but I do find that I am particularly drawn to textiles from the Caucasus region — perhaps because they have a combination influence from Europe, Asia and the Middle East. And particularly Turkey, Russia and Iran.

According to you, is the market for hand-made carpets shrinking or booming globally?

I am no expert on the market for handmade carpets so I couldn't really say. But in a world of what



would seem to be an emphasis on increasingly automated and technical advancement, it would lead to a suggestion of a decrease of handmade craft, sadly. I hope that there will always be those that appreciate handmade goods and therefore keep a market going for a long time to come in the future.

Westerners usually look on carpets as utility and not as art products. How far have you been able to educate them that it can also be otherwise and how have you done it?

In my humble opinion, regardless of nationality, colour or creed, some will see and appreciate artistic elements in anything, more than others and not just for carpets. Perhaps in a person, a book, music, a painting, or an ordinary every day utilitarian object such as a knife and fork will be object d'art. One might argue that artistic appreciation can only be attained by education, or by upbringing. Or another might argue that artistic appreciation is perhaps a luxury not extended to or afforded by those less fortunate.

I do think that the results of my own upbringing in a multicultural society in the Middle East in combination with education and travel have afforded me exposure to so many cultures, flavours and experiences — all of which have moulded my own artistic appreciation, and continue to do so. I think it is something that continues to evolve.

Do you buy the carpets you paint or do you visit carpet stores or look at books for guidance?

All of the above! I began in a little carpet shop in Bahrain called

Bradrans pulling out pieces to paint. I will always be thankful to the owner of Bradrans to allow me to do so. I have built up a collection of my own carpets and textiles to use as reference, but I also have many books. In this day and age, reference exploration is limitless with the Internet too.

Have you learnt the basics/higher skills of carpet-making?

I was lucky to have been able to do weaving at school on full-sized floor looms, and then again during my textiles degree course, and so I have a certain amount of knowledge of what is involved in creating a woven textile from scratch, from spinning wool, to colour dyeing wool, cotton, silk, linen, etc., to threading a loom and weaving in different techniques from thicker wools for fashion fabrics to much finer fabrics for interiors. I can't say that I have ever woven a carpet, but I do understand the basics of what would be involved!

Which country has a better market for art — Bahrain or the UAE?

I am not aware what the market is like in Bahrain now, as I was involved in selling my paintings 15 years ago. The world was a slightly different place then. I sold work privately and through a gallery — Private Collection. People would come to the gallery or contact me directly by phone. The tools available to anyone in business these days are entirely different. Internet, websites, email, facebook, twitter, etc. And so you naturally will be able to reach more people, not necessarily limited to the country you live in.

I think Dubai (and Abu Dhabi and Sharjah) has a thriving arts scene with many galleries showing a great diversity of traditional and eclectic art — both local and international, which is wonderful to see, and I'm excited to be able to be a part of it. There are many artisans in the UAE and I know particularly in Dubai there are many arts and crafts fairs to be part of such as ARTE which I am part of (strictly *handmade* arts and craft only) and other fairs that I have been a part of, such as Bastakiya — a wonderful cultural and heritage place in Bur Dubai, full of small galleries and cafes tucked away in a maze of traditional streets and traditional Arab architecture.

I hope to soon be showing my work in a fabulous gallery called Showcase Dubai in Jumeirah which has a wonderful collection of artwork, antiques, jewellery and other interesting artefacts. So I would probably have to say that UAE has the edge for diversity of work, more galleries and arts fairs and therefore a better market.