

Galerie Michael
Modern Cultural
Explosions in
Ancient Lands—

the Amazing Changes in China
and the Middle East

From the Desk of Michael Schwartz

In the art world, like everywhere else, change is a constant. And like everywhere else, the pace of change is ever-increasing. Economies rise, and they fall. Nations grow and then retract. The effects of geo-politics can be felt in all corners of the globe, including in the art world, which by definition impacts all economies, all nations and all cultures.

Cultures have developed over the millennia and typically change very slowly. Yet even in previously slow-changing cultures, momentous changes are now occurring. Two of the world's oldest cultures, China and the Middle East, have suddenly and dramatically risen to leading roles in cultural development. At first blush, these two, very divergent nations' growth seems unrelated, yet they are in fact integrally related—if not directly, certainly indirectly in terms of underlying forces at play.

Begin with the availability of money. China's economic expansion quickly brought it from a position of insignificance to the second-largest economy in the world. As a part of that growth, the Chinese leadership felt the need to showcase their achievements in non-economic

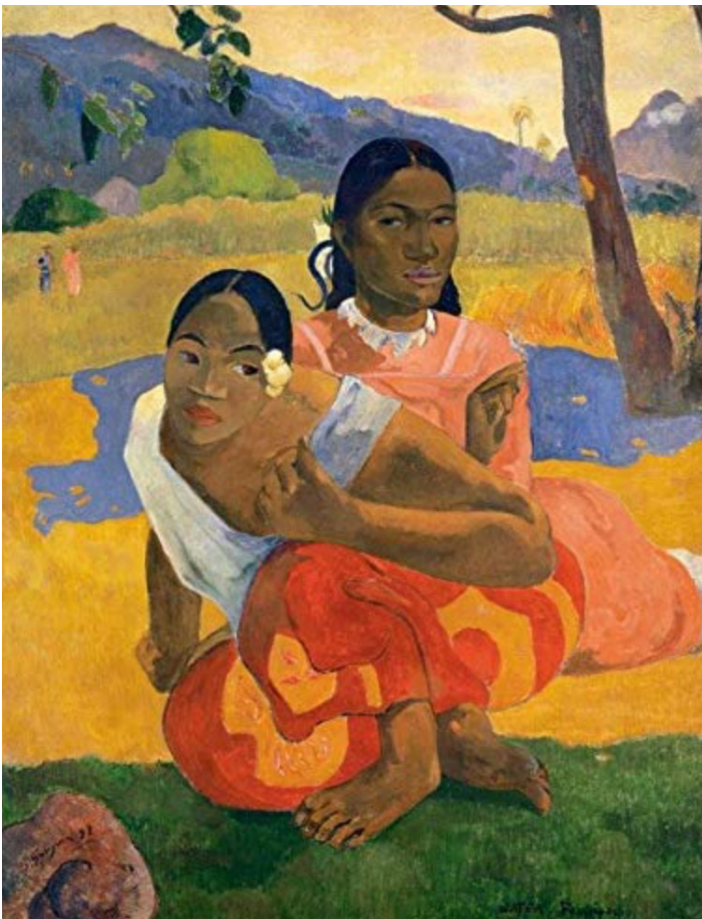
ways in an attempt to bring them into leadership roles that were previously not desired or were unattainable. The hosting of the 2008 Olympic Summer Games, and the imminent 2022 Olympic Winter Games are examples. Yet it wasn't enough simply to host the games, they had to be the most memorable, ostentatious ceremonies ever held. China's economic growth and strength were the foundation of its loud declaration that it is a force to be reckoned with, and it has the wherewithal to do as it pleases. China announced that its thousands-year-old culture was strong and now is simultaneously changing. Similarly, the Arab nations in the Middle East grew at a prodigious rate as the price of, and demand for, oil grew. With the 2022 World Cup being held in Qatar, a tiny nation with immeasurable monetary resources, the world was again put on notice that the thousands-year-old Arabian culture was strong, and also exploding with change.

It may be cliché that art unifies seemingly unrelated people and cultures, yet it is true. It is also true that as nations grow into powerhouses, they seek to expand their cultural development and reach. The differences between the strict underpinnings of China and those of the Arab

world are profound, yet there is a great deal they have in common. One major shared component is the establishment of monumental art galleries and museums. China's in terms of numbers of galleries across their vast nation, and the Arabian Peninsula's in terms of the sheer size of their new galleries. China tends to embrace certain artists and subjects very different from the Arabian nations.

Both eschew Christian themes while those nations with an Islamic base typically reject nudity and other themes deemed to be inconsistent with Islamic values.

Yet both areas have one fundamental commonality—they both need vast quantities of art to fill the walls of their museums. Largely as a result of those with the nec-



Gauguin, *When Will You Marry?* 1892



Cézanne, *The Card Players*, 1890

essary means and influence wishing to leave behind a cultural legacy, China has opened more than 4,000 museums in recent years. The story is only slightly different in the Middle East, particularly in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Both nations are experiencing rapid change of some very long-held religiously-based cultural tenets, with Qatar being significantly more ahead of all other Middle-Eastern Muslim nations. As a result, it was the Qataris who purchased Gauguin's *When Will You Marry?* for \$210,000,000 and Cézanne's *The Card Players* for \$250,000,000. And not to be outdone, it was a very prominent Saudi who set a new world-record for

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an art purchase when he bought Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* for an eye-popping \$450,000,000, despite the very obvious fact that the work depicts Jesus Christ, and nothing else.

While those acquisition costs are difficult to comprehend, they are perfectly reasonable when one views the investment the Arab nations are making in building galleries and museums. It is estimated that the newly-opened,

breathhtaking, 430,000-square-foot (ten acres of floor space) National Museum of Qatar cost \$1,000,000,000 to construct. Then there is the 59,000-square-foot Arab Museum of Modern Art and the I.M. Pei-designed, 480,000-square-foot (eleven acres of floor space) Museum of Islamic Art, both also in Qatar.

Saudi Arabia is on the same path, though slightly behind their neighbor, Qatar. The Saudi Museum of Modern Art is now being planned in Riyadh. The United Arab Emirates opened the Louvre Abu Dhabi two years ago, and the Guggenheim is set to open its \$680,000,000 museum in the UAE in 2023. Planning is underway for the \$270,000,000 Zayed National Museum. Then there is the Museum of the Future, in Dubai, with its \$300,000,000 budget.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Salvator Mundi*, 1500



National Museum of Qatar

So how does all of this activity, involving billions of dollars of acquisitions affect our Galerie Michael clients? The answer is fairly straightforward, and involves one of the most basic rules of economics—supply and demand. Within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, there is less demand on the Modern Masters, but a great deal more demand for Barbizon art, because it is non-controversial in terms of subject matter and extremely important in the context of art history, especially as a foundation upon which the schools that followed (starting with Impressionism and going all the way to modernity) were built. Galerie Michael is on the ground level of the building of Barbizon collections in the Kingdom, and as a result, we have a spectacular view of developments—well before they become public.

Qatar's progressive culture means that they are attracted to a myriad number of styles, including Barbizon through to the Modern Masters, and even beyond. China is a different story in some respects, but identical in others. They too have demonstrated a profound interest in Barbizon artists—and art, however they have also quickly grown to be highly discerning collectors of the Modern Masters, particularly Picasso. A new museum dedicated to Picasso and Giacometti will be opening in Beijing next year. This is no small undertaking and boasts the support of both Paris's National Picasso Museum and the Giacometti Foundation, who are under contract to manage the new endeavor for at least five years.

France is also involved in another major undertaking, this time in Shanghai. The Centre Pompidou is collaborating with the Chinese, having just opened a museum in the West Bund, a Shanghai district now known for its up-and-coming arts scene. French President Emmanuel

Macron was on hand in early November, 2019 to inaugurate this 27,000 square-foot museum. More than \$3,000,000,000 has been spent to date to develop a cultural hub on the waterfront.

What these museums bring is interest, then appreciation, then demand for new collectors and collections. Next to the United States and the United Kingdom, China is the largest art market. As the number of collectors grows, they will certainly move up into either the number two or the top spot. Their goal is to cast off any notion of provinciality in favor of universality—and universal approval and respect.

Similar to the Middle East, Galerie Michael is also on the ground floor in China, having already completed a number of Barbizon exhibitions and now working to develop exhibitions for Picasso.

The trends can be summarized simply: with future burgeoning demand and a fixed supply, there will be significant upward acquisition-cost pressure on the buying of art—from Barbizon to the Modern Masters. It is now a great time to come into Galerie Michael to see how our offerings might fit into your current and future plans.

We look forward to your next visit to Galerie Michael, and stand ready to serve!