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Role of Museums in Gulf's Cultural Diplomacy

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Summary

- Leaders in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, especially in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Saudi Arabia, are embracing a new promising art industry with some of the most exquisite museums and art institutions in the world. The three states are very interested in the humanities aspect of this industry to achieve their states' economic and foreign policy targets.
- Each state is building its own art empire to drive economic diversification and growth. The arising cultural districts, global museums partnerships, art dialogues, exchange programmes and home-grown art in the Gulf will allow nations, art stakeholders and international investors to understand the region's markets and consumers' orientation that will result in what cultural researchers call "cultural understanding".
- The GCC governments are emphasising the importance of cultural understanding and promoting tangible and intangible cultural heritage as effective tools to enhance cultural diplomacy and positively impact community development, expand life-long connections and promote global collaborations.
- This Insight argues that the art and cultural production in the Gulf is a leading element for soft power and cultural diplomacy, and a resource that will strengthen future cooperation with countries. It explains how museums will transform into interconnected spaces that empower cultural diversity and how they have become a social and economic priority in line with GCC states' future national visions.
- Nonetheless, GCC states differ in their commitments to developing their museums. For example, states with a long history of art, such as Kuwait, need to embrace artefact-driven approaches not just to conserve heritage, but to promote Kuwaiti art and culture on a global scale and turn the local into a global. Moreover, to further leverage their art and cultural positions, all GCC states need to improve their infrastructure across their art institutions and museums by setting high global standards that will help enrich their collections and content, and activate their engagement programmes and commitments.
- The Insight concludes with a set of policy recommendations on how GCC governments can develop their cultural diplomacy strategies to empower the art economy, shape their future cultural policies and strengthen foreign relations. These include:
 - devising a Gulf-wide policy of moving artefacts;
 - enhancing existing international cultural programmes using technology;
 - furthering intra-GCC cooperation and funding;
 - developing a cultural diplomacy oriented strategic communication.

The Issue

With the rise of specialised museums in the GCC states, the political, economic and socio-cultural function of museums is becoming essential for effective cultural diplomacy. Due to the great interest in the GCC states for enhancing cultural diplomacy, museums are now vehicles that bring communities together, reflect the economic development of countries and are considered a powerful cultural platform that feed governments' foreign policy agendas. The logic is culture empowers the exchange of knowledge across borders and pushes our global society forward.

In today's world, arts and culture transcend national borders. Cultural diplomacy, as a result, builds connections and is considered a powerful tool that can help develop bilateral relations between countries. Just like art, cultural diplomacy has traditionally been an instrument and a way of interacting with the outside world. The GCC states are heavily focusing on and strengthening ties within the region and around the globe through their rich cultural agenda.

New government policies, government funding and ministries of foreign affairs' involvement in cultural diplomacy efforts have created a shift in the art scene and formed a new definition of what museums represent. Today, cultural diplomacy efforts are used to position museums as cultural treasures and a subtle peddler of influence that promotes heritage and national interest to the world.

Nonetheless, the GCC states differ in their commitments to developing their museums, and hence, their cultural diplomacy practices. For example, states with a long history of art, such as Kuwait, need to embrace artefact-driven approaches not just to conserve heritage, but to promote Kuwaiti art and culture on a global scale and turn the local into a global. Moreover, to further leverage their art and cultural positions, all the GCC states need to improve their infrastructure across their art institutions and museums by setting high global standards that will help enrich their collections and content and activate their engagement programmes and commitments.

Defining a Museum

Society enables humans to think more critically about the origins of objects, stories and their connection to people. The concept of museums developed in response to the human need to understand the world better by using collections of objects as abstractions of the real world, as well as analyse and bring meaning to events around them.¹ The practice of collecting objects and

art was viewed by historians as an important aspect of human society.

Throughout history, the museum has managed to position itself as a place of dialogue and debate between cultures, a tool that empowers diversity and decreases systematic misunderstanding. Manuel Castells observed that rather than the rise of an identical global culture, what we notice as the main common trend is historical cultural diversity: fragmentation rather than convergence.² In other words, museums are keys that open doors to other groups, new perspectives and nations.

It is believed that the art of collecting started in Africa and Arabia. The Sumerians were considered the creators of civilisation and were fond of new inventions, designs and architecture. It is known that one of the earliest documented collections dates from ca. 530 BCE in the ancient Sumerian city of Uruk, located in present-day Iraq.³

Collections came before the formation of museums, which means that the definition of the word 'museum' is rooted in 'collections'. The term collection was first used by Caesar, a Roman emperor, who defined the word as the gathering of different objects together. People in Ancient Greece and Rome would gather various objects such as shells and trophies from their hunting journeys to decorate their houses. Yet the earliest evidence of collecting is utilitarian objects and grave goods that were part of the material culture of early humans.⁴

Public museums fully developed during the 17th and 18th centuries through a private collection that was exhibited at Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, the first public museum that opened its doors to the public and became the modern university museum in 1683. As museums grew larger in the 18th century, they began to transform into specialised institutions such as art, ethnographic, history, military, natural history, technology museums based on the characteristics of their collections.⁴

With the help of new mechanisms, archaeologists are discovering many historical artefacts in different parts of the world. These artefacts are examined by museum professionals, documented and presented to the public as part of each region's civilisation. Today, museums are pushing for a broader learning society, which is a perspective that transforms the idea of a museum being just a building with artefacts into a learning institution. There is a growing need to embrace new forms of knowledge that capture more cultural and contextualised ways of learning and knowing, which is an approach that creates an impact on contemporary living.⁵

Throughout history, governments and museum experts discussed the important values that museums hold – historical, cultural, societal, and educational. The definition of a museum changed various times associating it with generic terms such as society and preservation. In 1896, George Brown Goode, the deputy director at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., defined a museum as an institution for the preservation of those objects which best illustrate the phenomena of nature and the works of man, and the utilisation of these elements to increase knowledge, promote culture and enlighten people.⁶ Goode highlighted the cultural importance of the object itself and the idea of learning.

In 2007, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) defined a museum as a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, a building that is open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity including its environment for the purpose of education, study and pleasure.⁷ During the general assembly of ICOM in Kyoto in 2019, many critics, scholars and cultural policymakers had different opinions regarding the definition that ICOM set and proposed another definition stating that “museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures.”⁷ They felt that: museums are also spaces that acknowledge and address the conflicts and challenges of the present; they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society; they safeguard diverse memories for future generations; and they guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. This is a more specific definition that indicates the broader commitments that the museum must represent and accomplish.

Critics argued that there are social and political aspects that should be considered when defining the responsibilities of a museum. They also emphasised how the definition of such an institution is very important because it should reflect a country's link to world values such as peace, social integration and sustainable development.

With the powerful presence of museums globally, art and culture became linked to important world events. It is a tool that is defined as a social and political commentary focusing on the experiences of communities and events across different regions of the world. Museums experts and political scientists have indicated that art can alter and affect the world we live in through the interpretation of various mediums of art that forces audiences to confront their own bias and humanity.

Such an interpretation makes museums potent agents of cultural diplomacy.

Diverse Societies and Museums

A few years back, museums in the Gulf aimed to reach the expectations of their people through the art of storytelling, especially in the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The role of national museums was to present a depth in its cultural context and document the story of each state's civilisation, historical events and artefacts. Gulf societies are very attached to the history of their land and the stories of their ancestors. Since they preserve memories from the past, the GCC nationals admire and appreciate national museums. In recent years, the museums industry is focussing on contemporary art, which is both a new form and has witnessed a dramatic social and cultural change worldwide. This new genre of art articulates the relationship between humans, their emotions and what surrounds them, which also redefines the role of museums in developing a diverse society that can easily form a connection with the different groups in society and other nations.

Societies are in constant change, which is linked to attitudes, behaviour, trends and new forms of learning. According to Bloomer & Hodkinson, dispositions can transform in a short span and that such transformations are usually linked, in complex ways to wider social, economic and cultural contexts.⁸ Society in the Gulf views the concept of a museum as a cultural space for a voyage of discovery and a learning space that opens its doors to everyone in the community. Yet, due to the socio-demographic change, the museum has transformed from being an entertaining space to a cross-cultural learning environment.

Museums did change the way people learn in Gulf societies through enabling them to look at different perspectives through art and culture. Leaders in the GCC states do believe that museums are designed intentionally for the purpose of effective learning. According to museum education specialists, learning spaces must empower learning and transform it into an activity and a formal practice.⁹ Such form of learning empowered cultural diversity in the GCC region, with cross-cultural connections.

Museums in the Gulf aim to build cross-cultural discussions for their local community through lectures, collaborative educational programmes with universities and family programmes for the public. Museums perform their most fruitful public service by providing an educational experience in the broadest sense: by fostering the ability to live productively in a

pluralistic society and to contribute to the resolution of the challenges we face as global citizens.⁹

Powerful Presence

As a result of the GCC region's urban development and the progressiveness of the museums sector over the last 13 years, there has been a great growth in cultural tourism, economy, tolerance, and the development of social solidarity and cohesion. The GCC's vision regarding the museums industry is to expand their projects that focus on heritage preservation and respective global governance.



UAE

During the formation of the UAE in 1971, the founders were very interested in preserving the history and culture of their land and showing them too. They cherished every artefact and fort and wanted to tell their stories through documentation and national museums because they believed that culture is a strong link to any land's past, present and future. The first museum that was established in the UAE was the Al Ain National Museum in 1971 under the guidance of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. In the same year, the Dubai Museum opened its doors to the public, and displayed the story of the people of Dubai.

Throughout the years, the country emphasised on the importance of documenting the chronology of events that culminated in the unification of the country and its development including a dedicated Women's Museum located in the old Gold Souq in Dubai. The UAE today is building bridges and is increasingly seeking to capitalise on already established brand names and harness their power to quickly gain prominence, legitimacy and credibility.¹⁰ It is embracing powerful national and international museums such as Dubai Future Museum, as well as the Louvre Museum and the Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi, which are collaborative cultural diplomacy projects with France and Germany, respectively.



Qatar

Qatar embraced people from all over the globe during the FIFA World Cup in 2022. The opening ceremony at the Al Bayt Stadium displayed the story of the Arabian tent that not just honoured Qatar's culture but also told the story of hospitality and respect and their fundamental existence in Arabian culture. Qatar also emphasises the importance of coexistence and cultural understanding through initiating the "Years of Culture" in 2021, an international cultural exchange programme that deepens understanding between nations and their

people. Qatar's ultimate aim is to "be a cultural instigator for the creation generation" by using art and culture as a regional and global force.

When Qatar won the bid to host the 2022 World Cup in 2010, Qatar Museums joined forces with important international museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the British Museum and the Tate to create cultural narratives. In 2012, Qatar celebrated the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations with Japan and hosted the first official cultural programme through the Years of Culture initiative. It developed a 1,200 square metres specially-built village featuring a historical representation of a Qatari souq in Tokyo along with cultural programmes that enabled people in Japan to experience Qatari food, music and broaden their understanding of the country's history¹².



Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom, a land of historical importance and energy resources, is now transforming itself into a global cultural hub. Saudi Arabia has experienced a major cultural shift after Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud unveiled Vision 2030, which includes promoting intercultural and inter-religious dialogue and cultural diversity. The leadership's focus is to reconstruct historical districts to treasure history and develop modern destinations drawn from Saudi Arabia's diverse local culture so that it could be shared with the world. One of the major important heritage districts is Diriyah, which is the birthplace of the first Saudi state and the home of the Saudi royal family from 1727 to 1818.¹³ The district includes numerous historical sites and forts such as a mosque, a bath house, an Arabian Horse Museum and Al-Turaif, which is a 300-year-old UNESCO World Heritage Site. Today, Diriyah is a global sustainable and cultural destination that attracts travellers, museum and culture experts from all over the world to experience Saudi Arabia and its treasures and most importantly its sustainable projects.

Future Vision

The UAE is a leader in promoting international cultural awareness through art education, cultural exchange, cultural diplomacy and social entrepreneurship. The government is keen to implement art education in its schools and create collaborative programmes with universities across the seven emirates and foreign universities. In 2018, the UAE established the Office of Public and Cultural Diplomacy (OPCD) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It focuses on three pillars – cultural appeal, political values and norms and foreign policy. One of OPCD's important plans is to empower the exchange of information and ideas, promote the UAE's

cultural attractions overseas and encourage Emirati diplomats to use cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool to further its foreign policy agenda.

The UAE proclaimed 2019 as the Year of Tolerance and used museums as a major tool for dialogue and coexistence. This step reflected the country's emphasis on the importance of building a narrative between diverse cultures. In 2021, the Ministry of Culture and Youth launched a 10-year National Strategy for the Cultural and Creative Industries to encourage the creative economy by 2031 and attract international institutions.¹⁷

Qatar has an active national vision that holds a big role in empowering its cultural diplomacy agenda. Qatar Vision 2030 is a roadmap developed by the General Secretariat for Development and Planning in 2008 to ensure the development of four pillars – economy, human development, environmental development, and social development – on a national scale. Using this plan, Qatar has been able to use its local museums, universities and national library to implement education diplomacy with foreign institutions that positioned Qatar as an educational hub for international higher education.¹⁴ Qatar uses a new form of international connectivity that helps increase its diplomatic engagements and redefine its global footprint.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, on the other hand, is a transformative economic and social reform blueprint that focuses on its citizens. It includes a cultural strategy that is designed to empower research, academic and art institutions in the kingdom. The Saudi Ministry of Culture has published a document that indicates the direction of the kingdom, which is creating opportunities for global cultural exchanges. And "creating opportunities for culture to contribute to the country's economy" that is being established through the country's participation in important global events such as international art forums, Venice Architecture Biennale and the Cannes International Festival, which is a platform that encourages Saudi creativity through films.¹⁵

Saudi Arabia is keen to expand the country's network of museums and art projects to increase tourism and collaborate with other countries. In 2023, the country will be the home of a unique museum of modern digital art called Teamlab Borderless Jeddah, developed by Japan's Teamlab. The museum's aim is to promote more diverse Saudi cultural values, an approach that partly reflects Vision 2030 goals.¹⁶

The GCC states' future visions target using soft power to inaugurate world-class specialized museums as part of an enormous cultural diplomacy effort to bring together people from different continents in celebration of cultural heritage and art. This transformation of museums presents a national expression that resonates on the international stage.

Unequal Commitment

While the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are making headway and establishing impressive museums and cultural districts, Kuwait has lagged behind. Kuwait has a long history in this domain and some unique collections, such as the Al-Sabah Collection. It has the oldest modern arts movement in the Arab Peninsula that emerged in the 1930s. The Al-Sabah Collection is a collection that belongs to Shaikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah and his wife Shaikha Husa Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah who were well-known collectors and members of the royal family of Kuwait. The dynastic collection consists of more than 18,000 pieces. To manage these prestigious pieces, Shaikh Nasser and Shaikha Husa established the Dar Al-Athar Al-Islamiyyah, a local cultural organisation, in 1983. It is recognised internationally because of its commitment to cultural exchange programmes.

The state, however, lacks international collaborations with local museums. For instance, the new Kuwait National Cultural District, a multibillion-dollar development project, was not promoted enough internationally. While Kuwait focuses greatly on Al-Sabah Collection, local museums, such as the National Museum, receives less attention. Though it was established in 1983, the museum focuses on the oil discovery in the 1950s, pearl diving era and traditions of Kuwaitis. There are important and valuable pieces that the national museum owns, but they are not visible on international platforms and the museum seems to be disconnected from international institutions, programmes and diplomatic agenda.

The art sector in Kuwait must be an ally and a collaborator that reflects the country's vision, social development and a platform for exchange and dialogue. The art sector should activate the art institutions' important role in cultural diplomacy by creating a link between Kuwait and the international community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In today's cosmopolitan context, museums in the GCC states are broadening their perspectives. They are emphasising the importance of developing stories from their past, developing learning resources for audiences in their local communities and on a global scale. There is also an understanding of the urgency of developing stronger ties with international cultural institutions. This rise of cultural and creative industries in the GCC region has created a shift in Gulf societies and led to the appreciation of cultural diversity, thus increasing cultural tourism.

The GCC states' commitment for cultural promotion and national heritage preservation gives museums an opportunity to have stronger connections to humanity and other nations. The GCC states do believe that by presenting the region's art and culture to the world, cultural diplomacy will be an effective tool that improves relationships between people and countries through dialogue.

To increase the GCC states' cultural presence on a global scale and tap the full potential of cultural diplomacy, the following recommendations could be considered:

1. Gulf-wide policy of moving artefacts

Moving valuable artefacts from one country to another requires funding, time management and trust, which should be moderated by the GCC secretariat. This also requires developing international loaning and security processes so that such artefacts could be exhibited outside their home museums. The circulation of such treasures will enable nations to view valuable preserved artefacts in a contemporary culture, an approach that will promote mutual understanding and appreciation of cultural heritage among international communities, which is the essence of cultural diplomacy.

2. Enhancing existing cultural programmes using technology

The region must speed up the process of using new digital approaches in the museums domain. There is a rise in digital cultural exchanges, which includes sharing collections online and developing new online educational programmes with international museums. These new technologies help educate the public, enhance audience engagement and maintain strong connections internationally.

3. Intra-GCC cooperation and funding

Increasing funding and permanent endowments should be set for the flagship cultural exchange programmes. Infrastructure investment and developing a unified

cultural strategy between and among the six GCC states will empower their foreign policies with other countries. The aim is to emphasise bilateral engagement and cultural exchange. An important aspect of such programmes is creating robust cultural events throughout the year such as lectures, exchange of artists, scholars, and art administrators.

4. Cultural diplomacy-oriented strategic communication

Facilitating a constructive intercultural dialogue on the global stage through art fairs, cultural festivals, art biennales and international celebrations is an important element in cultural diplomacy policies. The GCC states must have a strategic communication policy to expand networking and enrich policy conversations.

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