

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Rachel Donadio, “Aishti Foundation Puts Shimmering Works Amid the Turmoil of Beirut,” *The New York Times*, 4th December 2015



Tony Salamé, center, and his wife, Elham, left, at the opening of the Aishti Foundation in Beirut.
Photographs by Bryan Denton for The New York Times

BEIRUT — On a warm evening this fall, the cultural scene here was in full bloom. Members of the international art world, Lebanese government ministers and fashion executives had gathered to celebrate the grand opening of the Aishti Foundation, a private museum showcasing the growing contemporary art collection of Tony Salamé, the founder of Aishti, a Lebanese luxury retailer.

The star power burned bright. The architect David Adjaye had designed a \$100 million building with a facade of red ceramic tiles, combining a high-end mall and a separate exhibition space. [Massimiliano Gioni](#), the artistic director of New York’s New Museum, curated the inaugural show of abstract art. Mr. Salamé, 48, in a soft blue suit, mingled while his elegant wife, Elham, glided across the mall’s black-and-white zigzag marble floors in a revealing black-and-red dress with a long train.

Some art [critics](#) said displaying the collection in a wing of a mall eroded the line between art and commerce. Others wondered who would shop there and how Mr. Salamé could have become so wealthy selling luxury items in a small country in economic crisis. But the evening made one thing clear: Mr. Salamé and his foundation have managed to put Beirut on the global art map, reinforcing the city’s place as a dynamic hub in a troubled region.



Guests taking a selfie at the during the opening gala.
Bryan Denton for The New York Times

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Just two weeks later, [a pair of suicide bombings](#) claimed by the Islamic State struck the edge of Beirut, a day before the attacks in Paris. Killing dozens, the violence set this vibrant waterfront city on edge. The effect on tourism — and the new center — is not fully known.

The foundation, which is busy planning arts programming and a library, is one of the most ambitious of [several new museums](#) to open here recently, where luxury towers rise from what was once the rubble left by the civil war. It is the only one dedicated to contemporary art from abroad and for now will exclusively feature Mr. Salamé's collection.

“Tony has undoubtedly become a highly visible and thriving force in the contemporary art world,” said the New York gallerist Friedrich Petzel, who has sold works by [Wade Guyton](#) and others to Mr. Salamé and attended the October opening. “However, more compelling than his perceived status is the fact that here is a man trying to articulate a very positive message in the middle of an actual war zone.”

The inaugural exhibition, which showcased 170 works from a collection of more than 2,000, was well received locally. It mixed Italian artists of the '50s and '60s like Lucio Fontana and Enrico Castellani with recent work by Carol Bove and Urs Fischer. Also on view were abstract paintings by Josh Smith, Laura Owens and [Kerstin Brätsch](#), with videos by Camille Henrot and Akram Zaatari, featured artists in the 2013 Venice Biennale curated by Mr. Gioni. An entire room was dedicated to works by Glenn Ligon exploring African-American identity and history, along with a single piece from Danh Vo's “We the People,” in which the Vietnamese-born Danish artist recreates parts of the Statue of Liberty.

Rayyane Tabet said he loved how the show juxtaposed Lebanese artists like himself with international artists rather than confining them to the category of “art from the Arab world.” “This is the closest to a contemporary art museum that we're going to have for the near future,” he said.

How Mr. Salamé went in a few years from relative unknown to underwriting exhibitions at New York's Museum of Modern Art and making this year's [Art News Top 200](#) collectors is a testament to his persistence, checkbook and key advisers: the Italian curator [Germano Celant](#); the New York-based curator and dealer [Jeffrey Deitch](#); and Mr. Gioni, who has signed on to curate the first of several rotations of the collection, scheduled quarterly.



The Aishti Foundation, which shares a building with a large retail space for luxury brands, was designed by the architect David Adjaye.
Bryan Denton for The New York Times

“He’s a real Phoenician,” Mr. Gioni said, referring to the ancient civilization of Mediterranean traders. “I told him, “That’s where he makes the money,”” he said, pointing to the mall, “and here’s where he spends it,” he added, pointing to the gallery.

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Mr. Salamé got his start importing Italian jeans and clothing to Lebanon during the civil war, when he was still a student. In 1990, he founded the retail store Aishti, Japanese for “I love you,” which has the Lebanese franchise for 150 luxury clothing brands, many of them Italian. After 2000, Mr. Salamé who had been collecting carpets and antiques, shifted to art, encouraged by a business associate, Dino Facchini, the founder of the Italian label Byblos.

Through Mr. Facchini, Mr. Salamé met Mr. Deitch, who became an informal adviser and who now has a formal arrangement. He steered Mr. Salamé toward what Mr. Deitch calls “popstraction,” a mix of Pop Art and abstract art.

“In the past five or six years, Tony has been the most active collector of emerging art in the world,” Mr. Deitch said at the Metropolitan Art Society, a private club in an upscale Beirut neighborhood where Mr. Salamé invites foreign gallerists to host temporary shows with works for sale. (Mr. Salamé pays the shipping costs and takes a cut of the proceeds.) For the foundation’s opening weekend, the space was dedicated to a show of art from the Aishti collection curated by Mr. Deitch. Called “The Extreme Present,” it included works by Ian Cheng, Korakrit Arunanondchai and Alex Israel.

Some international art world figures, including Marc Spiegler, the director of Art Basel, who attended the opening weekend, laud Mr. Salamé for helping drum up local interest in art buying. Yet a few Beirut gallerists counter that Mr. Salamé has helped encourage novice collectors to spend six figures on foreign art at auction in Dubai rather than investing in less costly work by Lebanese artists, who struggle to find enlightened collectors.

Mr. Salamé said that at first, some gallerists were reluctant to sell to him out of concern that he was a speculator who would buy works to resell at auction, inflating prices. Eventually, he was able to buy works by painters like Christopher Wool, whose gallerists carefully control his market.



The architect David Adjaye, who designed the building that houses the Aishti Foundation and a luxury mall, greeting guests at the gallery's opening.
Bryan Denton for The New York Times

Art dealers cite Mr. Salamé’s enthusiasm and warmth and his willingness to take risks on young artists, adding that he likes to buy at lower prices and invest in an artist’s career. He is known for buying a work sight unseen. When the art was being installed ahead of the opening, Mr. Salamé was excited to see some of his purchases for the first time.

“I think he’s the fastest collector in history,” said Miguel Abreu, the New York dealer, from whom Mr. Salamé has bought work by the artist Pamela Rosenkranz. “We’ll walk through the gallery and just talk, and then he’ll walk out and you realize he’s just bought everything.”

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The main exhibition at the foundation is called “New Skin,” after a work by the British artist Alice Channer: a cascade of blue, printed by ink-jet onto a swath of white crepe de Chine, hung from the ceiling. “I’m at a very early stage in my career,” Ms. Channer said. “He’s extraordinarily confident about what he chooses and buys.”

It was in 2010 when Mr. Salamé decided he needed a building to showcase his collection. He began with a Beirut architect but was persuaded to aim bigger. Mutual collector friends put him in touch with Mr. Adjaye, who had lived in Beirut for several years as a child of diplomats. After a weekend touring Gio Ponti architecture with Mr. Salamé in Italy, Mr. Adjaye put together a proposal in 10 days.

He said Mr. Salamé never gave him a budget.

Mr. Salamé said the building cost \$100 million, for which he had borrowed from banks. He estimated that he had spent around \$170 million on art in the past 15 years, although some gallerists placed the figure higher. Mr. Salamé said that Aishti’s annual revenue had been \$250 million a year in recent years, up from \$100 million in 2006. Aishti, which also handles distribution for many brands in the Middle East, is a private company, and its finances could not be independently verified.



The model Kristen McMenamy with a friend and her boyfriend, the art dealer Ivor Braka, right. Bryan Denton for The New York Times

(By comparison, the Louis Vuitton Foundation, a Paris exhibition and cultural venue that opened in 2014 in a building designed by Frank Gehry, was reported to have cost \$143 million; last year, the annual revenue of Louis Vuitton’s parent company, [LVMH](#), was 30.6 billion euros, or \$32.7 billion.)

In Beirut, economists have questioned for years how Aishti can generate such high revenues in a country of 4.4 million people with an average annual income of \$12,000. Lebanon has a pronounced luxury market and is awash in cash — its underground economy is estimated at 30 percent of its gross domestic product of \$49 billion.

Nassib Ghobril, the chief economist of Byblos Bank Group in Beirut, said he thought that annual revenue of \$250 million was “an impressive figure for one department store, especially if you’re talking about the past four years in Lebanon.”

“Who comes and buys from the store?” Mr. Ghobril asked, adding that economic growth in the country had plummeted since 2011. “Demand for luxury goods definitely has declined in Lebanon,” he said.

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Local newspapers have raised questions about whether Aishti is laundering money.

Mr. Salamé says his detractors are jealous of his success. “I’m not laundering money,” he said.

In addition to the new foundation building with its retail space, Aishti also has a flagship store in downtown Beirut and construction is underway for a new luxury mall on the waterfront, designed by Zaha Hadid.

In Beirut, always at risk of unrest, Mr. Salamé keeps his art in secure bunkers. In a rare move for a collector, he invited visitors to tour his storage space during the opening weekend, where the artists Suha Traboulsi and Walid Raad, who currently has [a show](#) at the Museum of Modern Art, created an ingenious installation of art painted onto the wooden crates.

While artists and arts organizations in Beirut generally welcomed the Aishti Foundation, they also wondered how it would fit into the city’s rich cultural ecosystem. Some said they were concerned that Mr. Salamé would stop funding local arts organizations now that he had his own museum. (Mr. Salamé concedes that his philanthropy is now focused on the foundation.)

Christine Tohme, the director of [Ashkal Alwan](#), Beirut’s pre-eminent arts nonprofit, was keeping an open mind. “Maybe it will live to become a great, great artistic project,” she said. But even if that doesn’t happen, “this is still very good,” she added, “because this is bringing resources to the country.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/arts/design/aishti-foundation-puts-shimmering-works-amid-the-turmoil-of-beirut.html?_r=0