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SOLLER

Photo Alejandra Cifre Gonzalez

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WIDE ANGLE

THE MEDITERRANEAN DREAM

The Mediterranean stands as the epicentre of the museum world, having given rise to major cultural institutions — guardians of civilisations and memory, observatories of peoples and their histories. Even today, Mediterranean museums remain at the heart of significant geopolitical issues.

Beneath its intricate concrete latticework, MuCEM [see box p.17] gazes across the water. Unique in its kind, the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations, which opened in Marseille in 2013, is far more than a bold architectural statement or yet another iteration of a folk art museum. Through its social and cultural anthropological approach, it has introduced a fresh perspective to the museum world — one not defined by geographical or chronological boundaries but by the development of a concept: What is Euro-Mediterranean culture?

"Creating — or recreating — a museum is a profoundly symbolic and deeply political act," declared Michel Colardelle, MuCEM's first director, in *The democratic calling of a museum*. "Within the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations, the collections, as reflections of cultures, reveal that everyone's origins — regardless of nationality or the 'tradition' they believe they belong to — are mixed, the result of successive waves of migration, often quickly forgotten. The outcome is a culture in constant transformation, enriched and embellished, a composite, a synthesis in which some elements blend and seem to disappear, while others precipitate or remain suspended, sometimes forming the basis for a renewed sense of identity." His words still resonate as a call for solidarity and altruism, especially at a time when terms like "civilisation" and "cultural heritage" are all too often manipulated for nationalist and political ends. "Giving citizens of Europe and the Mediterranean — whether French or from elsewhere — an awareness of both their diversity and the profound, often unsuspected, depth of what unites them is now a necessity, even an urgent one. Europe, still searching for itself, conceived as a space of peace and fraternity after the disasters of two world wars, needs to examine itself," added this heritage curator, one of MuCEM's founding fathers, who previously directed the Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions and championed the idea of relocating — and transforming — MNATP in Marseille.

For this is the true purpose of a museum: to stir the melting pot of history, to recognise that influences never flow in just one direction and to preserve both past memories and living history. In this light, the Mediterranean cannot be seen as a monolithic entity, but rather as a shifting reality — neither entirely geographical nor purely historical — a perpetual adventure of movement, transmission and millennia-old exchanges. Exploring the typology of Mediterranean museums thus prompts us to question the very nature of this Mediterranean space, considering both its ancient and contemporary components.

— Carine Claude

Children of the Muses

A brief look back at history proves essential, for the concept of the museum remains inseparable from Greco-Roman antiquity and its spread around the Mediterranean basin. Children of the muses — the Greek goddesses of the arts under Apollo's patronage — the Mouseîon of ancient Greece began as temples dedicated to them. Shrouded in legend, Alexandria's Mouseîon remains the most famous. Ptolemy I Soter, Alexander the Great's successor on the Egyptian throne, built his Mouseîon around 290 BC, establishing within it the renowned library, a university and an academy that brought together the intellectual elite of his era. This Alexandrian model foreshadowed the encyclopaedic mission of modern museums by combining theoretical knowledge with material artefacts. In Rome, while the term museum initially referred to a place for philosophical contemplation, both the Republic and the Empire developed a true culture of collecting, particularly through picture galleries of the Roman elite such as Cicero's at his villa in Tusculum. From then on, collecting became inseparable from the concept of the museum, as it would later take shape during the Italian Renaissance.

The Italian crucible

As chance archaeological discoveries multiplied, European elites — especially in Italy — developed a passion for antiquities throughout the Quattrocento. In Rome, the Capitoline Museums began to house their first collections of antiquities as early as 1471, though they only opened to the public in 1734 under Pope Clement XII. The Cinquecento saw the birth of the Uffizi in Florence. Designed by Giorgio Vasari at the request of Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, the galleries were initially intended for the grand ducal administration — *uffizi* meaning offices or bureaus — but his son, Francesco I, began transforming part of the building into a museum from 1581 onwards. Although it was possible, even then, to admire the Medici family's extraordinary collection by special request, the Uffizi Gallery did not officially open to the public until 1769. The site quickly became an essential stop on the famed Grand Tour. Another powerful dynasty of patrons, the Borghese, left another major collection to posterity and built its setting, the Villa Borghese, constructed between 1607 and 1616 on the orders of the influential Cardinal Scipione Borghese, nephew of Pope Paul V. This vast complex, with its immense gardens and numerous monuments in the heart of Rome, also houses the Villa Medici, home to the French Academy in Rome.

Yet it is in the eighteenth century that a true scientific and museographic revolution unfolds, sparked by the discovery of the buried sites of Herculaneum and Pompeii. The principles of archaeology, developed by Comte de Caylus (1692-1765) and J. J. Winckelmann (1717-1768), bring a scientific dimension to the classical culture of Grand Tour travellers. Museums undergo a profound transformation. No longer mere cabinets of curiosities, they become instruments of scientific knowledge. The Royal Museum of Naples, founded in 1777 to house the Vesuvian discoveries and the Farnese collection, exemplifies this shift with its rigorous classification and scholarly catalogues. "Italy, as one might expect, played a pioneering role — papal Rome with the collections of the Capitoline and Vatican Museums, Bologna with the Clementine Academy, Florence under Grand Duke Peter Leopold and the Kingdom of Naples enriched by the treasures of Herculaneum," recalled historian Claude Michaud at the 1995 symposium "Museums in Europe on the eve of the Louvre's opening" directed by Édouard Pommier to mark the Louvre's bicentenary.

The golden age

The nineteenth century marks the golden age of Mediterranean museums. Emerging nation-states use ancient heritage to legitimise their territorial and cultural ambitions. In Greece, the National Archaeological Museum of Athens (1829) celebrates the continuity between classical antiquity and the young Hellenic nation. Unified Italy multiplies its regional institutions: the Archaeological Museum of Florence (1870), Palermo (1866) and Bari (1875). European archaeological missions spread along the southern and eastern shores of the sea: the French School at Athens (1846), the German Archaeological Institute in Rome (1829), the French School in Rome (1875) or the British School at Athens (1886) to name but a few. These institutions create a transnational scientific network, encouraging the circulation of objects, ideas and methods. A genuine Mediterranean cultural diplomacy emerges through museums, reaching its peak with European colonial expansion in the

Photo Mariano Ferrer

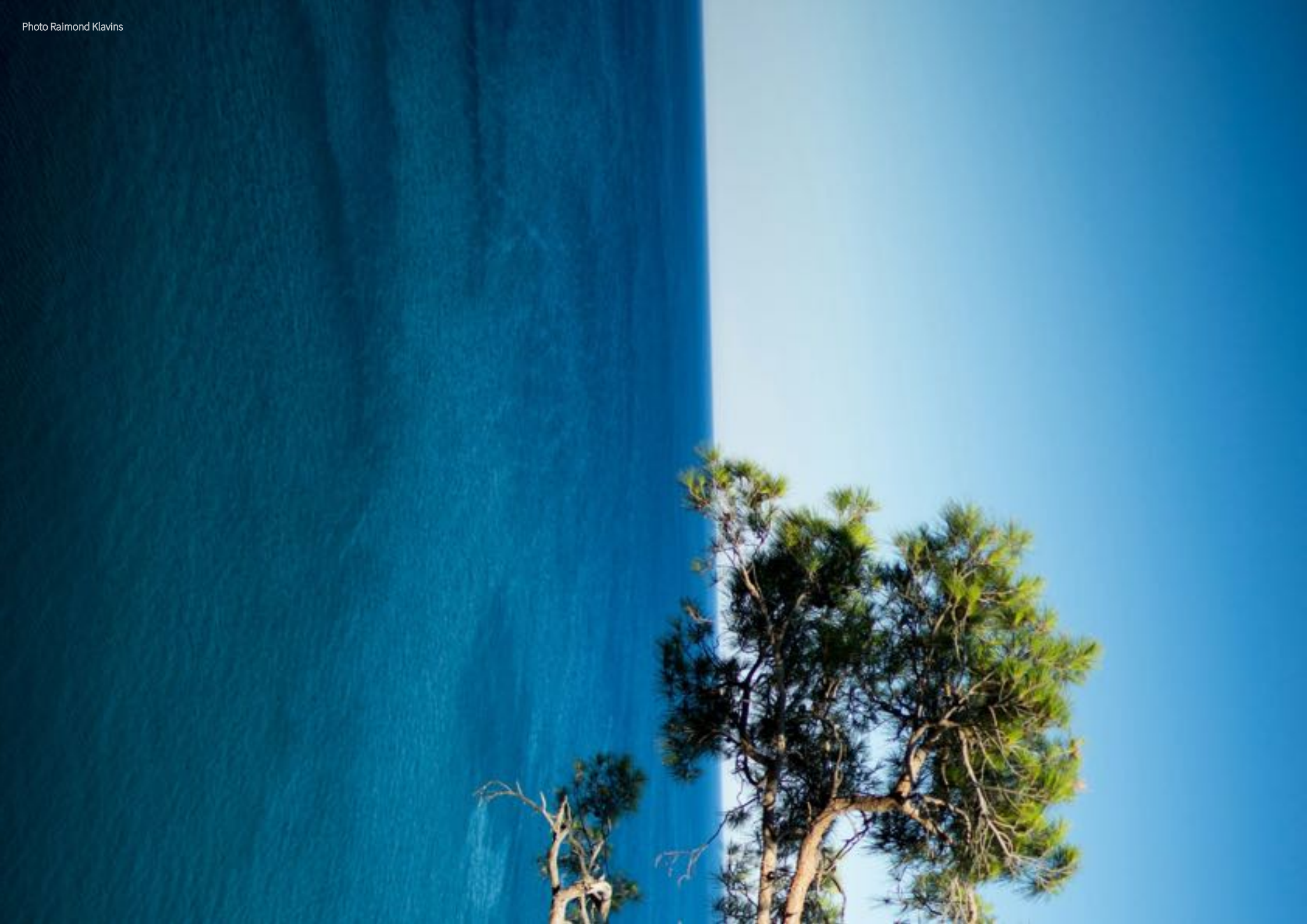

Photo Raimond Klavins

MuCEM

Photo Baptiste Buisson

eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. This period sees the creation of new institutions such as the Bardo Museum in Tunis (1888), the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria (1892) or the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul (1891). These institutions reflect the ambiguities of the colonial era, balancing scientific preservation with cultural appropriation.

Decolonisation and museum reappropriation

The twentieth century upends this entire colonial Mediterranean museum ecosystem. Two world wars, movements for self-determination and regional geopolitical shifts reopen the debate over the ownership and circulation of cultural heritage. National independence, particularly the decolonisation of French North Africa, brings with it a process of museum reappropriation. Algeria establishes the National Museum of Antiquities, Morocco develops the Archaeological Museum of Rabat and Tunisia expands the Bardo Museum. These institutions support the construction of post-colonial national identities, highlighting pre-Islamic civilisations as the foundations of indigenous historical continuity. The millennia-old history and wealth of ancient heritage had already served the economic and cultural ambitions of these territories. “From the early twentieth century, colonial authorities in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia recognised that the entire built heritage — from ancient cities to Islamic-era monuments and towns — could attract tourists and thus serve as a tool for economic development,” noted the 2013 symposium “Archaeology and tourism in the Mediterranean” at the Institute for Research on Contemporary Maghreb in Tunis. In the Maghreb, the revival of museums now contributes to the assertion of state soft power in a political context shaken by the Arab Spring.

At the crossroads of African, Mediterranean and European worlds, Morocco draws on its historical heritage and the vibrancy of its contemporary scene to position itself as a key player in cultural and diplomatic relations between continents. In the 1950s, Tangier and Marrakech already served as strongholds for dissident intellectuals and the Beat Generation, teeming with a multitude of museums and private foundations, such as the Omar Benjelloun Foundation or the Yves Saint Laurent Museum in the Majorelle Gardens. “The interplay between private and public initiatives now stands as a central theme in the debate on tourism and archaeology in the Maghreb,” the Tunis symposium also noted. In response to the proliferation of private initiatives, the Moroccan government took back control of museum policy in the 2010s, most notably with the opening

MuCEM: Head in the stars

From 9 July 2025 to 5 January 2026, MuCEM hosts the exhibition “Reading the sky – Under the stars in the Mediterranean”, which explores humanity’s enduring fascination with stars since the dawn of antiquity. From the earliest Mesopotamian sky charts to the current vogue for astrology, *via* medieval Arab astronomy and the Galilean revolution, societies around the Mediterranean have looked to the heavens to find their place in the cosmos and organise daily life — whether for navigation or to establish calendars. Celestial phenomena have also been interpreted as signs or omens: eclipses, comets, lunar cycles… Knowledge and beliefs have circulated across the region, shaping a shared culture of the sky.

Conceived as a dialogue between art and science, astrology and astronomy, “Reading the sky” brings together archaeological, scientific and ethnographic objects with artworks, manuscripts and oral heritage in a transdisciplinary approach. To connect these questions to present day, MuCEM invites around fifteen contemporary artists to create works in response to the exhibition, including Juliette Agnel, Abdelkader Benchamma and Clément Cogitore. The latter will be welcomed by MuCEM this December for his exhibition-creation “Ferdinandea, the ephemeral island” dedicated to a volcanic island that suddenly emerged from the waters of the Sicilian channel in the nineteenth century, sparking the curiosity of scientists and the ambitions of European powers, before sinking back beneath the waves.

“Reading the sky – Under the stars in the Mediterranean”
From 9 July 2025 to 5 January 2026
MuCEM
1 Esplanade J4. Marseille
www.mucem.org

of the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMVI) in Rabat in 2014. Since 2021, the National Museums Foundation has awarded a "museum label" to new institutions, providing a legal framework and strict guidelines on heritage protection and the fight against illicit trafficking of cultural goods. Announcements of new museum openings follow one after another, chief among them the Cité de la culture africaine – Musée du continent, currently under construction in Rabat. This new institution will feature a conservation centre, a laboratory, an artist residency and a pan-African training centre for conservation and restoration professions, all set to become operational in 2026. "This ambitious project will help strengthen the soft power of Morocco and Africa, and will offer a range of programmes to showcase the richness of African creativity," stated Mehdi Qotbi, president of the National Museums Foundation, in an official release. This soft power strategy forms part of a policy of partnerships and joint exhibitions with major European museums: "Medieval Morocco: An empire from Africa to Spain"with the Louvre, "The Mediterranean and modern art" with the Centre Pompidou, "Morocco — Russia: A shared ancient history" with the Pushkin Museum, and "Contemporary Morocco" with the Institut du Monde Arabe. Such collaborations represent a form of validation by prestigious peers.

Weakened by political instability, Tunisian museums are slowly recovering. After suffering from the 2015 terrorist attacks, Bardo Museum closed abruptly in 2021 following the dissolution of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People. Reopened in 2023, the museum — housed in a former beylik palace — has been completely revamped, with a new museography to showcase its world-renowned collection of Roman mosaics. Nearby, the National Museum of Carthage, renovated this year by German architecture firm Bez+Kock Architekten with €12 million in European funding, is set to welcome visitors again at the end of 2026, displaying some 100,000 artefacts from Punic, Greek and Byzantine archaeology. This offers a unique panorama of Phoenician civilisation. The need is urgent: beyond the museum itself, the entire Carthage site faces threats from haphazard urban development on the outskirts of Tunis. "We are very close to a major metropolis, and there is the issue of sometimes illegal construction," observed Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO, during an official visit.

On the contemporary Maghreb art scene, Algeria has faced a series of setbacks. In Algiers, uncertainty hangs over the fate of MaMa, the National Public Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, which now appears to have closed its doors for good [see p.46]. This is all the more disappointing given its once-promising programme. Despite its ambition to break free from post-colonial artistic narratives, MaMa — caught between official dogma, administrative inertia and politico-religious pressures — has drawn the curtain after twelve years in existence. "Under the dual control of the Ministries of the Mujahideen and Religious affairs, the museum's administrative and legislative status never allowed it to become a hub for visual insubordination, a beacon for the buccaneers of anti-establishment art," remarks art sociologist Farid Saadi-Leray, writing bitterly in *Le Matin d'Algérie*. His verdict is unequivocal: "Absent from Africa's artistic influence, this vast country seems to cling to a self-imposed cultural autarky, isolating its visual artists and forcing its creative orchestrators to play their part outside the concert of modern nations or even the echo chambers of major contemporary art fairs."

Museums: political instruments of the 21st century

Whether through the exercise of soft power or by openly fuelling grand national narratives, twenty-first-century Mediterranean museums serve as both cogs in international diplomatic relations and instruments of propaganda for those in power. Hagia Sophia in Istanbul — by turns a Byzantine church, a mosque, a museum and, since 2023, once again a place of worship — demonstrates the emblematic significance Mediterranean museums can assume in turbulent geopolitical contexts [see p.32]. In a highly symbolic move, Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, decided in 1934 to convert the place of worship into a museum. Reimagined as a universal institution, Hagia Sophia became a symbol of Kemalist secularism and the most visited site in the country. But in 2020, President Erdogan secured a ruling from the Council of State to reconvert the museum into a mosque. "The event symbolises the re-Islamisation of the country, a process underway for several years," notes The Conversation. UNESCO expressed its concern: "Hagia Sophia is an architectural masterpiece and a unique testimony to the meeting of Europe and Asia over the centuries. Its status as a museum reflects the universality of


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its heritage and makes it a powerful symbol of dialogue," declared at the time Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of the organisation. Ankara ignored appeals from the international political and religious community and went a step further by announcing that, from January 2024, entry to the former Byzantine basilica — now a mosque — would become chargeable for foreign visitors, with the proceeds funding the building's preservation. And, in effect, keeping them at a distance.

In Cairo, soft power takes centre stage with the imminent opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum [see p.22]. Everything about the project is ambitious and on scale. While the aim is to reinvent museum experiences and reaffirm Egypt's central place on the international cultural, scientific and diplomatic stage, the project above all represents a major priority for President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who personally oversees operations. The inauguration promises to be nothing short of pharaonic, reminiscent of the "Golden Parade" that, in 2021, transferred twenty-two royal mummies from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo to their new resting place at the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation. "It will be a spectacular event, showcasing Egypt's rich historical and touristic potential," says Ahmed Ghoneim, head of the GEM, who is preparing to welcome the world's most prominent leaders, with Donald Trump at the forefront. Here, the museum becomes the ultimate vessel for the grand national narrative — on an XXL scale.

Mediterranean identity in question

Globalisation and contemporary migration flows challenge traditional identity narratives. How do these institutions, long focused on the "prestigious" ancient civilisations of Greece, Rome or Egypt, now incorporate the cultural heritage of contemporary populations? The question of Mediterranean identity now runs through museum policies, challenging the sacralisation of antiquity in favour of a dynamic, contemporary vision of Mediterranean cultures. The EMΣT (National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens), for example, pursues an innovative curatorial approach under Katerina Gregos, reaching out to audiences distant from the arts and supporting local artists [see p.38]. The same applies to many museums across the islands of the *mare nostrum*, which open themselves to dialogue and the deconstruction of colonial narratives [see p.54].

International cooperation and UNESCO's pivotal role also drive efforts to preserve heritage and energise contemporary art. In Lebanon, the Sursock Museum reopened in 2023, having recovered from the devastation of the 2020 Beirut port explosion. The extensive rehabilitation project, funded by the Italian government through the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS) to the tune of one million euros, forms part of UNESCO's LiBeirut initiative, launched in the aftermath of the disaster to support the restoration of schools, educational institutions, historic heritage buildings, museums, galleries and the creative industries — all severely damaged by the deadly blasts.

On the front line

When destruction is not accidental, museums become prime targets in times of war. Across the Levant and the southern Mediterranean, institutions, monuments and archaeological sites have suffered the full force of destruction and looting during contemporary armed conflicts — exploited and publicised for terrorist purposes by Islamic State but also by regular armed forces. Libya, Syria and now Palestine… To destroy or vandalise a museum, to loot its collections, is to eradicate memory, erase history and annihilate heritage. Some stolen cultural goods, trafficked on the black market, have been laundered through entirely legal art markets, highlighting the scale of the "blood antiquities" trade and prompting states to legislate against money laundering and terrorist financing (AML/CFT), while reigniting debates on the protection of Mediterranean heritage. It is a stark warning to the international community — one that, so far, too often goes unheeded.

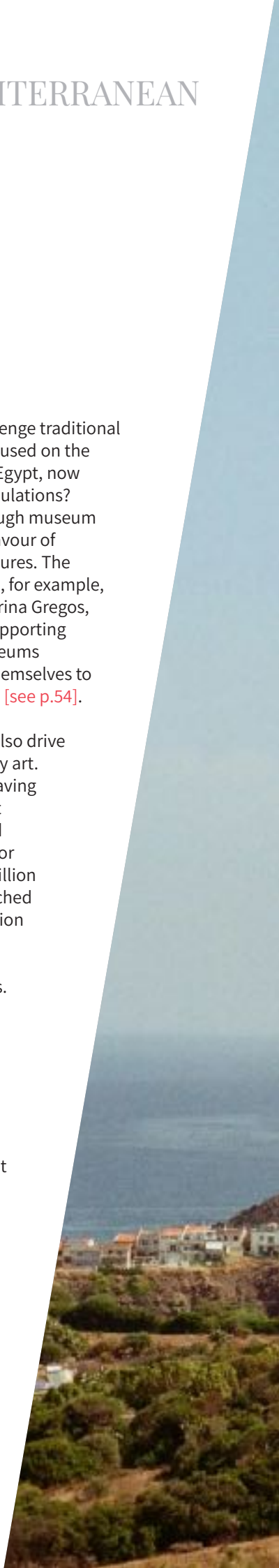
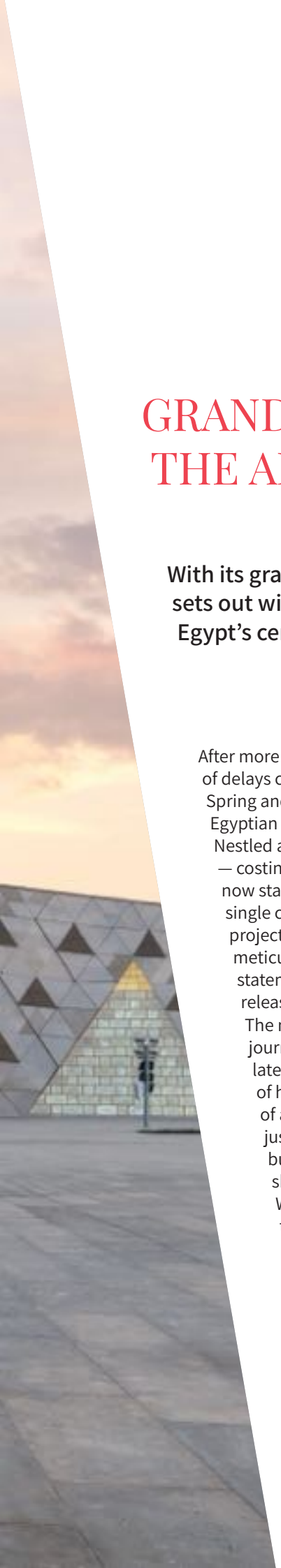


Photo Oscar Scannell

OPENING

Grand Egyptian Museum

Courtesy GEM



GRAND EGYPTIAN MUSEUM: THE ART OF GRANDEUR

With its grand opening scheduled for 3 July 2025, the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) sets out with a bold ambition: to reinvent the museum experience while reaffirming Egypt's central role on the international cultural, scientific, and diplomatic stage.

After more than two decades of construction and a series of delays caused first by the political upheavals of the Arab Spring and then by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Grand Egyptian Museum prepares to open its doors on 3 July 2025. Nestled at the foot of the Giza pyramids, this colossal project — costing $1.2 billion and spanning 500,000 square metres — now stands as the world's largest museum dedicated to a single civilisation. Touted as the most ambitious cultural project of the 21st century, the GEM benefits from a meticulously orchestrated communications strategy: statements from its director Ahmed Ghoneim, press releases and carefully crafted teasers on social media. The museum promises visitors a fully immersive journey through pharaonic history, powered by the latest innovations in museography. Yet, this narrative of heritage renewal relies in part on a vast transfer of artefacts from Cairo's historic museums — a move justified by the promise of improved conservation, but one that risks relegating these institutions to the shadows, eclipsed by the sheer scale of the GEM. Why invest in a new building rather than renovate the existing ones? Beyond scientific and heritage concerns, the GEM above all serves as a tool for cultural and political influence, at the heart of Egypt's diplomatic ambitions. The aim is to revive the country's tourism industry, battered by recent crises, and to assert Egypt's authority through a threefold promise: a museum as a knowledge hub, immersive architecture and a spectacular museographic experience [see box p.24].

Cultural showcase and diplomatic tool

The Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) embodies a multifaceted ambition. Officially, it aims to relieve the overcrowded Egyptian Museum in Cairo's Tahrir Square, provide better conservation for the collections and modernise the visitor experience. Yet, it also acts as a strategic lever to reposition Egypt at the centre of the global museum map. At the helm, Ahmed Ghoneim — former director of the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation (NMEC) — brings to the GEM a formula he has already tested: combining international exhibitions, scientific partnerships and diplomatic events to transform the museum into a global cultural player. "The idea here is to link history to the future, to connect technology with all kinds of traditions," he explains. The museum thus goes beyond simply narrating the past; it positions itself as a platform for influence, blending cultural diplomacy, museographic innovation and tourist appeal.

— Sarah Héquette

> I am determined to further strengthen our collaborations and to make the GEM not only a celebration of Egypt's past, but also a dynamic cultural institution, set to play a vital role within the international community. — *Ahmed Ghoneim*

Covering nearly 500,000 square metres — almost twice the size of the Louvre — the GEM boasts 24,000 square metres of permanent galleries, designed to showcase a selection of over 100,000 artefacts spanning nearly seven millennia of Egyptian history. The museum's opening will notably see the permanent installation of Tutankhamun's funerary treasure — nearly 5,000 objects, including the iconic mask, sarcophagus, ritual beds and golden chariot. Long displayed in the narrower rooms of the Tahrir Square museum, these pieces will finally benefit from a space worthy of their significance. The GEM will also house the solar boat of Khufu, transferred in 2021 from its former dedicated museum, now dismantled. Not to mention the imposing 12-metre statue of Ramses II, once standing in a Cairo square and now greeting visitors in the museum's grand hall. By bringing together the masterpieces of Egypt's collections under one roof, the goal is clear: to elevate the GEM to the ranks of the world's leading museum institutions. This centralisation, while raising questions about the future of other Cairo museums — such as the Tahrir Square museum or the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation — also meets scientific imperatives. Beyond its touristic ambitions, the GEM aims to become a major centre for research and conservation. Half of the collection will feature in the permanent exhibition, while the other half will undergo restoration

3 questions to... Róisín Heneghan

Róisín Heneghan is the Director of Heneghan Peng Architects.

How did you design the architecture of the GEM to harmonise with its environment while meeting contemporary museographic requirements?

The museum's identity is rooted in its geographical setting, in direct dialogue with the pyramids of Giza. The aim was never to compete with this mythical landscape but rather to integrate with it subtly. The site itself has a distinctive topography: the western, desert side sits about 30 to 40 metres higher than the Nile's alluvial plain to the east. We decided that the museum would never rise above the desert level, in order to preserve the silhouette of the pyramids. Its main architectural expression lies in a long façade facing the desert, conceived as a new edge to the landscape. From a museographic perspective, as architects, we made large-scale choices while also striving to provide a degree of flexibility for the exhibition designers.

What were the priorities regarding conservation, lighting and environmental sustainability in the museum's design?

Environmental stability was an absolute priority. The museum was conceived as a massive, heavy concrete structure, able to regulate temperature changes slowly — much like a cathedral. The exhibition spaces were designed with indirect natural lighting, oriented to the north, allowing for soft but controlled light, which can be completely blacked out if necessary. This strict control of light aims to limit excessive solar gain. The approach to the galleries is layered, enabling us to develop progressive levels of control: visitors do not move directly from the outside into the permanent galleries; the route is quite ceremonial — intentionally so, as these distances allow for gradual control of environmental conditions.

As for environmental sustainability, it was integrated from the outset. Among the strategies implemented: reducing interior spaces to what is strictly necessary (the entrance courtyard is an outdoor, shaded area, naturally tempered without mechanical systems); using a heavy structure that acts as a thermal regulator; and rigorous management of daylight, with reinforced solar protection on all openings.

What kind of experience did you want to offer visitors through the museum's architecture?

We wanted to convey two powerful emotions. On the one hand, we hope visitors feel the sheer scale of the pharaonic civilisation — three to four thousand years of history, which is truly extraordinary. On the other, we aimed to create a connection between this civilisation and its land, so that visitors sense how Egypt's geography and unique conditions have shaped its culture.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Grand Egyptian Museum

Courtesy GEM

and study on site, within a vast scientific hub comprising 17 state-of-the-art restoration laboratories, as reported in *Envols* magazine. Among key partners, the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology (IFAO) plays a prominent role, particularly through the Imhotep project, which links up with the restoration campaign at the GEM for a major collection of polychrome wooden coffins.

Balancing heritage showcase, research centre and tourism engine, the GEM is betting on a winning formula, as reflected in its visitor forecasts. According to *L'Écho touristique*, the museum expects 4,000 visitors per day at launch, with a capacity for up to 13,000 visitors at any one time, and a long-term target of six million annual visitors — almost double the current attendance at the Tahrir Square museum. Behind these figures lies Egypt's desire to project an image of modernity, stability, and forward-looking ambition. But this vision comes at a cost: $1.2 billion has been invested — twice the initial budget of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which stood at $600 million. The latter, already criticised for its hefty price tag, had until now represented the Middle East's most ambitious museum project. Described as the "first universal museum in the Arab world" by Éric Chaverou and Lise Verbeke on France Culture, Louvre Abu Dhabi primarily sought to foster dialogue between East and West, notably through a close partnership with France. The GEM, however, follows a very different logic: it positions itself as a lever of symbolic power, a tool for international influence fully integrated into Egypt's geopolitical strategy.

It is difficult, then, to confine the GEM to the traditional definition of a museum. Conceived as a global cultural hub, it goes far beyond the usual functions of exhibition and research. Conference facilities, a cinema, restaurants and shops all reinforce its multifaceted purpose, embodied in the very architecture of the building.

"Landscape-architecture" in dialogue with the pyramids

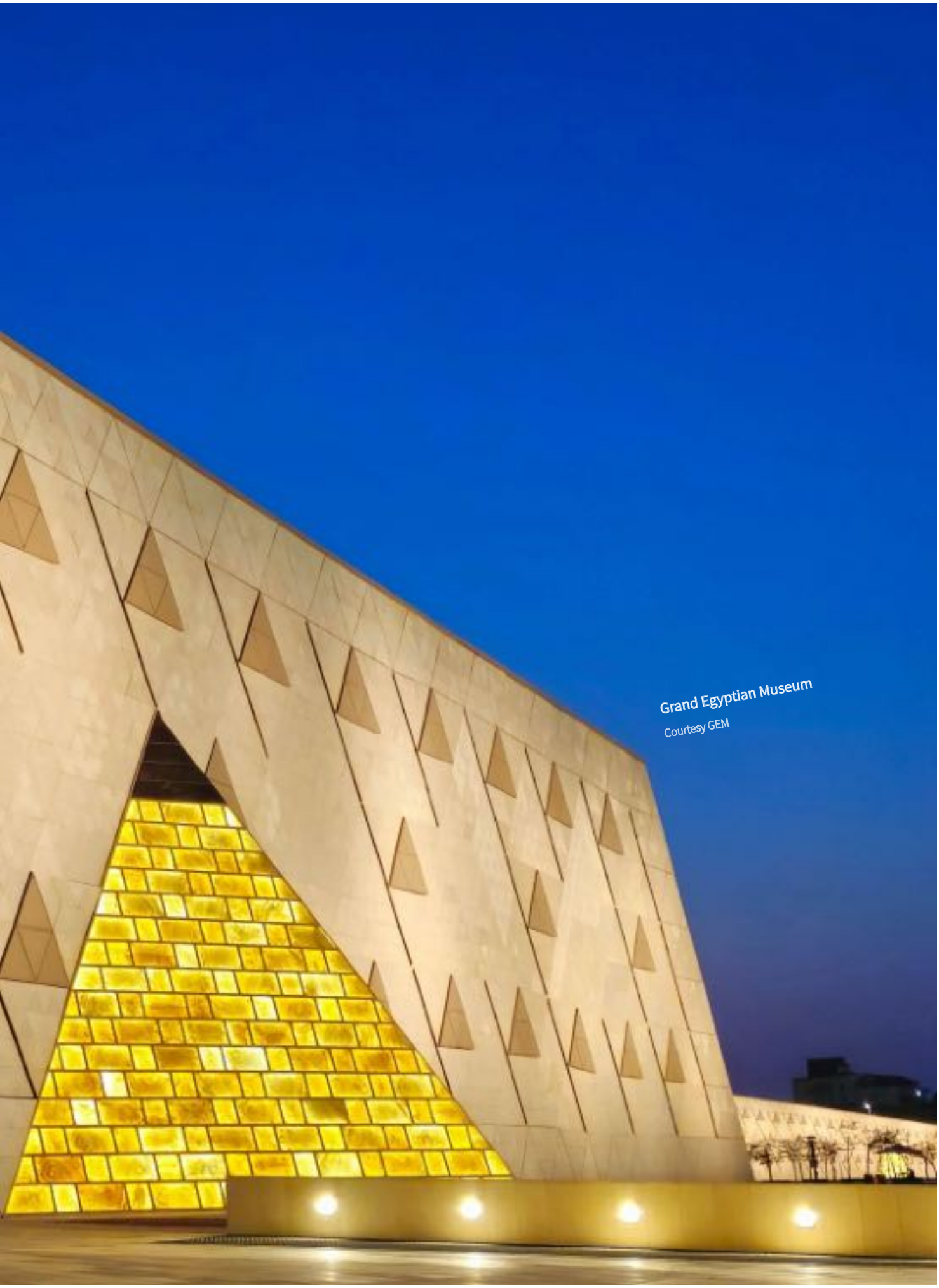
Long before the first stone was laid, the museum's identity began to take shape with the launch of an international architectural competition under UNESCO's patronage on 7 January 2002. The initiative sparked worldwide enthusiasm, attracting 2,227 entries from 103 countries. In 2003, the jury selected the Irish firm Heneghan Peng to design a monumental structure that would address the site's climatic, heritage and museographic challenges. Rather than competing with the pyramids of Giza, the Grand Egyptian Museum aims to "create a connection with them," as Róisín Heneghan explains. From the outset, Heneghan Peng's architects sought to anchor the building within the ancient landscape of the plateau, opting for an architecture that is discreet yet expressive. The structure stretches horizontally along the plateau, "like a fold of sand, draped in a translucent stone veil that captures the desert light," as Yasser Mansour, professor at Ain Shams University in Cairo and general coordinator of the project, described in his 2005 article, The Grand Museum of Egypt Project: architecture and museography. The gently sloping roof follows the natural contours of the land, creating a fifth *façade* — a horizon line that echoes the verticality of the pyramids. This architectural choice fully embraces the role of "mediator between past and present," the guiding principle behind the project.

From the moment visitors enter, the tone is set. Bathed in natural light, the atrium is dominated by the monumental statue of Ramses II, a symbolic guardian and the starting point for a journey conceived as an ascent towards knowledge. This ascent takes shape in the museum's monumental staircase, rising from the hall to the permanent galleries above: 64 metres long, 24 metres high and 85 metres wide. More than a simple thoroughfare linking galleries and conservation workshops, it becomes an exhibition space in its own right, where statues, sarcophagi and columns are arranged to trace the sculptural history of ancient Egypt. It also serves as a central landmark, helping visitors navigate the vast collection. At the top, a glass wall opens onto a panoramic view of the pyramids, a reminder of the continuity between the artefacts and the landscape from which they emerged.

Two visitor routes for an interactive museography

At the GEM, immersive architecture is matched by a museographic approach that combines technological innovation with personalised storytelling. The museum offers two main, complementary visitor routes: a chronological itinerary, tracing the history of ancient Egypt dynasty by dynasty and a thematic route, structured into five broad "bands" — a term used by Yasser Mansour — exploring the foundations of pharaonic civilisation: Land of Egypt, Kinship and Monarchy, Man, Society and Work, Religion and Culture, Scribe and Knowledge. A sixth, vertical axis — the monumental staircase — runs through the museum, serving as the backbone of the historical narrative. This dual approach allows visitors to craft their own journey, avoiding the classic linearity of traditional museums.

The museum space, located on the upper floor, has been designed as a fluid network: the thematic bands are punctuated by "hypertext nodes" — interior courtyards, dedicated galleries and resting areas — that provide transitions between different sections and allow for intersecting routes. The courtyard dedicated to



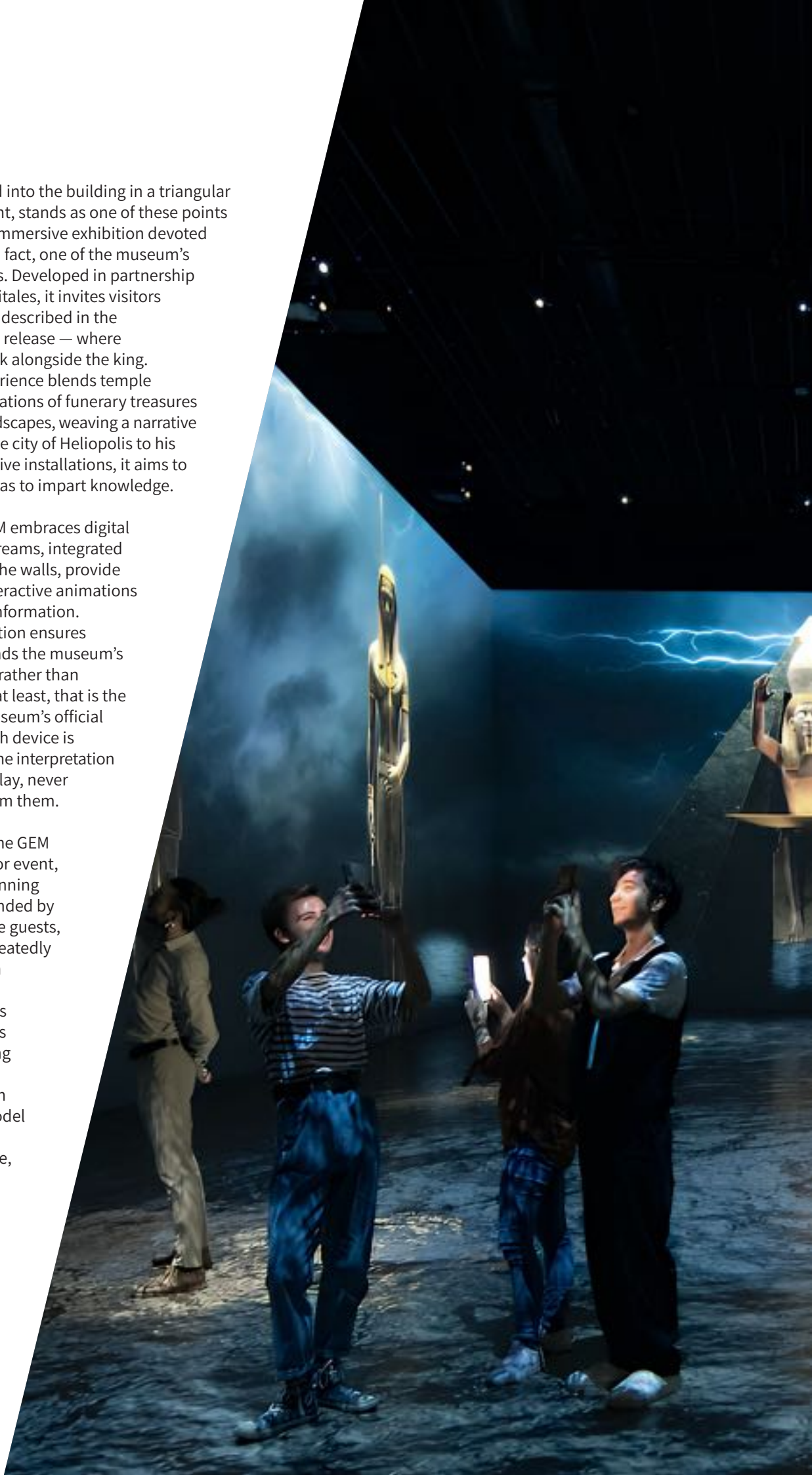
Grand Egyptian Museum

Courtesy GEM

Tutankhamun, carved into the building in a triangular shape open to the light, stands as one of these points of convergence. The immersive exhibition devoted to Tutankhamun is, in fact, one of the museum's most popular features. Developed in partnership with Madrid Artes Digitales, it invites visitors on an "odyssey" — as described in the November 2023 press release — where they symbolically walk alongside the king. This audiovisual experience blends temple reconstructions, evocations of funerary treasures and mythological landscapes, weaving a narrative that stretches from the city of Heliopolis to his tomb. Like all immersive installations, it aims to stir emotion as much as to impart knowledge.

More broadly, the GEM embraces digital technology. Digital streams, integrated almost invisibly into the walls, provide enriched content, interactive animations and supplementary information. Their discreet integration ensures that technology extends the museum's educational mission, rather than distracting from it — at least, that is the claim made in the museum's official communications. Each device is designed to support the interpretation of the objects on display, never to divert attention from them.

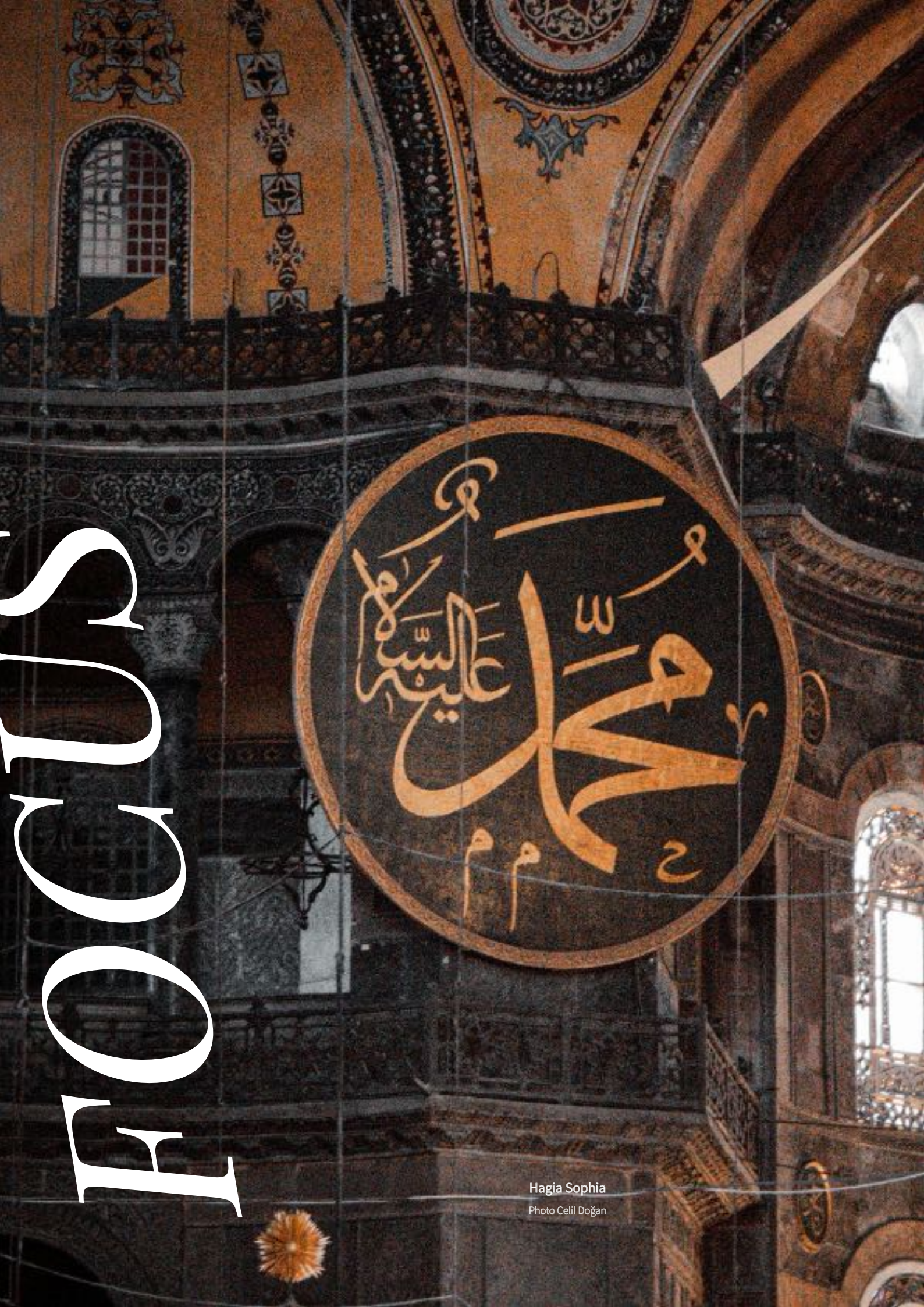
The inauguration of the GEM promises to be a major event, with celebrations spanning several days and attended by numerous high-profile guests, as its director has repeatedly emphasised. Through its communications, the museum makes its ambitions clear: this is not simply the opening of a new institution, but the unveiling of an Egyptian museum model intended to shine on the international stage, deploying colossal — sometimes almost excessive — resources to deliver an immersive experience that meets the expectations of an increasingly global audience.



Grand Egyptian Museum

Courtesy GEM

FOCUS



Hagia Sophia

Photo Celil Doğan

CATCHING UP WITH THE HAGIA SOPHIA

Since officially being re-designated from a museum back to a mosque in 2020, the Hagia Sophia has become even more of a source of fascination for Istanbul's secular tourists.

The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul is one of the oldest, and many argue the most impressive, religious buildings in the world. Completed in 537 AD atop the ruins of a pagan temple and a successive series of earlier churches, it was originally built as a Byzantine Christian church. It was the biggest building in the world at the time and remained so for nearly 1,000 years until the Catedral de Sevilla in Spain was completed in 1519.

Back then, Istanbul was known as Constantinople. Its name was changed after it was conquered in 1453 by the Ottoman forces of Sultan Mehmed II. As much of the rest of the city was being sacked, the Sultan decreed that the Hagia Sophia should not be destroyed but rather transformed into a mosque. Its unique features, such as its impressive central dome, subsequently went on to inspire the architecture of many other important mosques throughout the Ottoman Empire. Meanwhile, over the course centuries, minarets were added to the Hagia Sophia and most of the original Christian mosaics and decorations were covered up or replaced by Islamic iconography.

After Turkey transformed into a secular parliamentary republic in the early 20th century, the Hagia Sophia was officially reclassified from a mosque to a museum. Renovations to the interior resulted in the restitution of some of the earlier Byzantine decorations and the building thus became one of the only places in the world where both early Christian and early Islamic art co-exist. Meanwhile, contemporary Turkey has become less secular. Among the many changes that have been instituted by the country's current administration was the re-re-classification of the Hagia Sophia from a museum back into a mosque in 2020.

When this announcement was first made, it sparked criticism from many Europeans. With a population of around 16 million, Istanbul is, after all, the most populous European city (although a third of its people technically live in Asia). And the Hagia Sophia is a designated UNESCO World Heritage site. Many people outside of Turkey believe it is fundamentally un-European to take such an important piece of public heritage and turn it into something religious. Some voices, particularly those of Orthodox Christians in Greece, express outrage at the designation since the Hagia Sophia is such an important landmark within their spiritual tradition.

What these critics are missing in the debate are the various nuances at play within this latest re-designation of the Hagia Sophia. Even after the building was

— Phillip Barcio

designated as a museum in 1935, there was still a place within it where Muslims were able to pray. Technically, did it ever stop being a mosque? And even now that it has officially been called a mosque again, members of the secular public, including foreign tourists, are still welcome to tour the building. So has it really stopped being a museum? The current rules only designate the main floor of the building as a space for Muslim prayer. Secular visitors are granted access to the upper levels, from where much of the building is still visible. While it might be frustrating to some visitors not to be granted full access, it is not unusual for some parts of a cultural heritage site to be off limits to the general public. Sections of the Vatican are set aside strictly for religious purposes. The same can be said about Notre Dame. The question thus becomes, how is Hagia Sophia different?

Another point of contention voiced by some secular visitors is that they are now required to adhere to an Islamic dress code while in the Hagia Sophia, even if they are not Muslim. This means, for example, that women are required to cover their heads. Some people see this as oppressive and argue that a UNESCO World Heritage site should not be allowed to enforce such impositions on the public. There might, however, be a double standard in that point of view. When members of the public visit certain parts of the Vatican they are also required to adhere to a dress code. Many other cultural heritage sites, like the Taj Mahal or many Buddhist temples, do not enforce strict dress codes but do actively entreat visitors to dress modestly out of respect.

If someone is truly secular, should they not look at the Hagia Sophia's evolution from an objective point of view? There are many other buildings in the world that are public cultural heritage sites ("museums") that simultaneously

Three important Turkish contemporary art loci

Istanbul Modern

A sprawling, modern steel and glass compound on the shores of the Bosphorus, Istanbul Modern bills itself as "Turkey's first museum of modern and contemporary art", though this is disputable. The museum was designed by renowned Italian architecture firm Renzo Piano Building Workshop and has received numerous awards, including the 2024 Architecture MasterPrize. The collection is international in scope but centres Turkish artists, with a notable focus on abstract works. On view this summer are solo exhibitions of the work of vanguard Turkish painter Ömer Uluç, a protagonist of Tachisme and member of the so-called Attic Painters group, and Japanese installation and performance artist Chiharu Shiota.

Istanbul Contemporary Art museum (iS.CaM)

Established in 1997, predating Istanbul Modern by seven years, iS.CaM also lays claim to being Istanbul's oldest contemporary art museum. The difference is that iS.CaM does not operate permanent exhibition facilities IRL. It is predominantly a digital entity or, as it calls itself, an online Kunsthalle. The institution was the founder of the Web Biennial, an early net-based international art exhibition. Nonetheless, by appointment only, visitors have the opportunity to meet the founder — Turkish conceptual artist Genco Gülan — at the institution's physical office on the European side of the Bosphorus in Istanbul. Currently on view at iS.CaM are exhibitions of the work of Turkish-born, Amsterdam based jazz composer Oğuz Büyükberber, and Brazilian-born, Barcelona based artist Davis Lisboa.

Contemporary Istanbul

Each autumn, the Contemporary Istanbul art fair welcomes tens of thousands of international visitors to the city for what, by today's standards, could be called a boutique contemporary art fair. Whereas Art Basel Miami's 2024 edition featured more than 250 galleries, only 53 galleries participated in the 2024 edition of Contemporary Istanbul, nearly half of which were Turkish. The intimate nature of the fair is its strongpoint. The curation consistently argues that Turkish artists are among the most pioneering and imaginative in the world today. The 2025 edition will take place from 23 to 28 September and will again be hosted by the stunning Tersane Istanbul, an elegant brick venue overlooking the Golden Horn inlet in the historic Ottoman shipyards on the Asian side of the Bosphorus.

Hagi Sophia scaffolding

Photo Zhang Xuan Jun

support other functions within their community. For example, Druids still come together to perform rituals at Stonehenge during the solstices and equinoxes. Their traditions do nothing to inhibit secular tourists from enjoying the site. Objectively speaking, to be able to tour the Hagia Sophia at a time when it is also actively being utilised as a sacred space is extraordinary. It is a chance to observe how a physical building contributes to human understanding of divinity and to contemplate how the seen interacts with the unseen, regardless of personal beliefs.

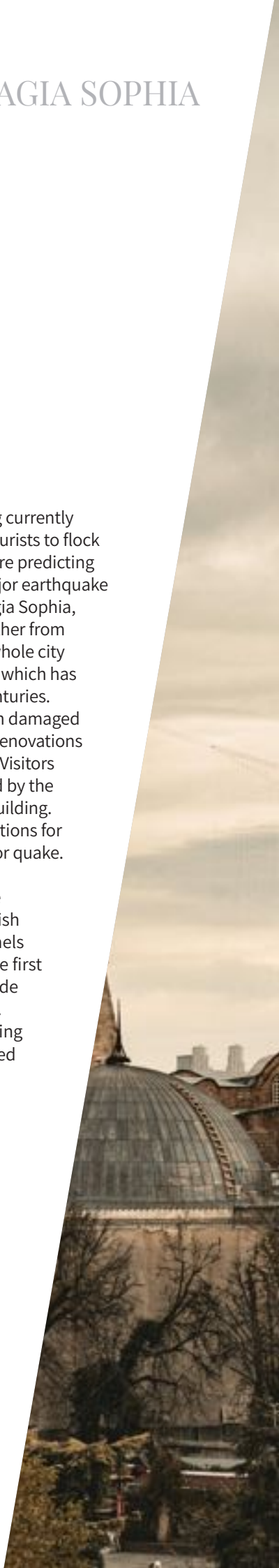
In any case, Turkish authorities appear to have no interest in robbing the secular public of their enjoyment of the Hagia Sophia. They even recently allowed secular audio engineers to come into the building and run acoustic tests so they could try to ascertain how choral music once sounded in the space. No one has been allowed to sing in the Hagia Sophia since it fell under the control of the Ottomans in the 15th century. The acoustic qualities of the building are literally the stuff of legends. Researchers recorded the sound of a balloon popping in the main liturgical space and used that recording to create an audio filter that could be applied to any other sound. They then applied the filter to recordings of Byzantine songs sung by a contemporary choir. The recordings, which can be heard online, are chilling, giving credence to the notion that the Hagi Sophia is a place of transcendence.

An extraordinary time to visit

Regardless of whatever spiritual affiliations the building currently advertises, there are multiple compelling reasons for tourists to flock to the Hagia Sophia right now. The first is that experts are predicting a high probability that Istanbul could be struck by a major earthquake in the coming decade. There is a real possibility the Hagia Sophia, and the rest of Istanbul, could suffer serious damage either from the earthquake itself or from a resulting tsunami. The whole city of Istanbul sits adjacent to the North Anatolia fault line, which has caused thousands of earthquakes over the past two centuries. The domes and minarets of the Hagia Sophia have been damaged repeatedly by these quakes leading to dozens of small renovations and several major renovations of the building's history. Visitors to the Hagia Sophia this summer will, in fact, be greeted by the strange site of scaffolding wrapping large parts of the building. The domes and minarets have been undergoing renovations for more than a year to stabilise them in the event of a major quake.

Another compelling reason to visit Hagia Sophia in the near future is the recent announcement from the Turkish government that the building's vast underground tunnels and chambers will soon be opened to the public for the first time. These mysterious spaces, which are said to include tombs, were only rediscovered in the mid-20th century. They have since largely been inaccessible due to flooding and incursions of mud. They are currently being cleaned out and prepared for public visits. The work will supposedly be completed within this year.

The third reason this is a great time to visit is that just down the road, a second museum has opened that celebrates the Hagia Sophia's incredible history. The Hagia Sophia History and Experience Museum takes visitors on a multi-media journey through the building's entire 1,700 years of history. In addition to audio, video and digital exhibitions, an impressive number of authentic artefacts from the Hagia Sophia are on view here for the first time ever. Among those artefacts are a Quran from the 15th-century and select Byzantine Christian liturgical objects — relics from two distinct yet interconnected traditions that speak again to the multifaceted history of the building and the various cultures that consider it sacred.



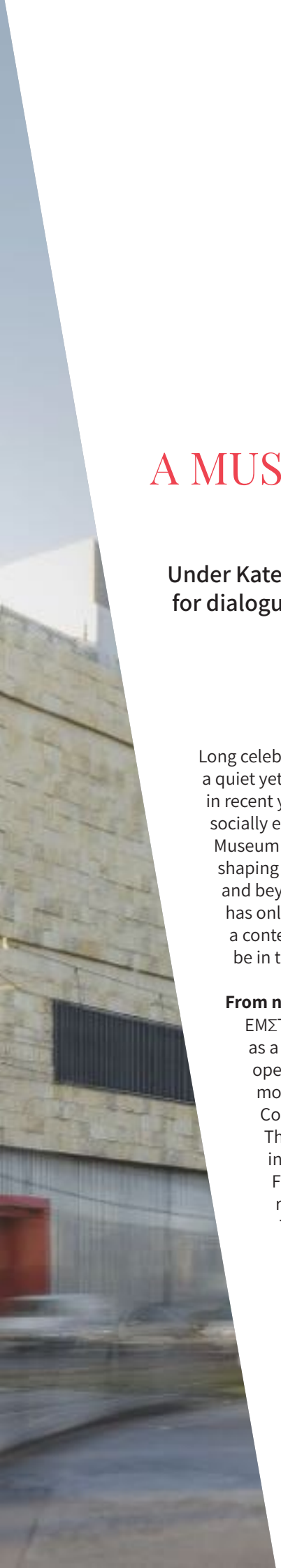
Hagia Sophia

Photo Zafer Erdoğan

ZOOM

ΕΜΣΤ

Photo Stephie Grape. Courtesy ΕΜΣΤ



A MUSEUM OF THE FUTURE

Under Katerina Gregos's leadership, EMΣT is a living organism for dialogue, experimentation and artistic transformation.

Long celebrated for its ancient heritage, Athens has undergone a quiet yet powerful transformation in contemporary culture in recent years. With an innovative curatorial practice and socially engaged artistic discourse, the EMΣT — National Museum of Contemporary Art — is at the heart of this shift, shaping a new future for contemporary art in the region and beyond. Though its history began in 2000, the museum has only recently come into its own, rethinking what a contemporary art institution can and should be in the 21st century.

From nomadic origins to a cultural powerhouse

EMΣT was founded in 1997 and formally launched in 2000 as a non-profit institution under Greek law. The museum operated without a permanent home in its early years, moving between temporary venues such as the Athens Conservatory and the Athens School of Fine Arts. The transition to a permanent location materialised in 2015, when EMΣT moved into the renovated FIX brewery — an iconic industrial structure redesigned in the 1950s by modernist architect Takis Zenetos. In 2017, Documenta 14 activated the space, putting it on the international radar. Financial instability and the Greek economic crisis delayed the full operational launch until January 2020, aided by crucial funding from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. However, it was not until Katerina Gregos's arrival as artistic director in 2021 that EMΣT established a distinct identity and mission. Taking advantage of its position,"EMΣT is uniquely positioned to become a leading museum in the region; one that explores the rich multicultural, historic and socio-political connections of the Mediterranean, Southern Europe and the former Levant, while connecting with international contemporary art practices and dialogues," states Gregos.

A reform strategy

In the context of institutional crises and the rise of standardised global franchise museum models, EMΣT is actively reshaping its programming, collection policies and institutional identity. Under the direction of Greek curator Katerina Gregos, EMΣT has adopted an innovative approach rooted in socio-political inquiry, artistic diversity and community engagement. "EMΣT takes a measured approach to cultural production, Gregos notes, allowing time for artistic creation and contemplation, striving for sustainable practices and generating spaces for public discussion. The museum is a space where social and political issues are negotiated through the unique transformative lens of contemporary art and culture." Gregos brought not only her

— Nahir Fuente

> EMΣT believes art and culture are vital to "thinking the world", creating new values for the future and imagining it otherwise. — *Katerina Gregos*

extensive experience but also a distinctive curatorial approach rooted in architectural thinking and narrative cohesion. Rather than disjointed exhibitions, EMΣT presents a flagship thematic group show that serves as the core narrative, around which related exhibitions orbit. This integrated vision allows for deeper exploration of contemporary themes and enhances coherence across the museum's spaces. "New, more diverse and inclusive narratives now need to be unearthed, including those that reflect the roots of Greece's own tumultuous history and the cosmopolitanism of its diaspora. Ethnic myths need to be dismantled and minority voices need to be heard," she explains.

Whether addressing digital alienation in "Modern love" (2022) or exploring the historical marginalisation of female voices in "What if women ruled the world?" (2023), the museum ensures its exhibitions resonate beyond the confines of the art world. Thanks to Gregos and her curatorial boldness, both recognised among the top ten exhibitions worldwide in the past two years, according to *Frieze* and *Artforum*. Continuing this momentum, the most recent exhibition cycle, "Why look at animals?", which opened to the public on 16 May 2025, presents over sixty artists that fills all seven museum floors, leaving no space untouched by art. Also curated by Gregos, this sweeping exhibition interrogates humanity's relationship with non-human life, exploring animal rights while probing their sentience and personhood. The show is highly personal and the culmination of over a decade of research. "It has been a huge labour of love," she reflects.

Radiating from this thematic core "We betrayed the horses" by Greek artist Janis Rafailidou [see box p.43], explores the absence of the animals and also "critiques the broader systems that shape how we manage and exploit animal bodies for human purposes — from sport to factory farming", the artist explains. Sammy Baloji explores cultural identity, colonial history and industrial exploitation within his homeland, the Democratic Republic of Congo, in "Echoes of history, Shadows of progress". Meanwhile, Kasper Bosmans transforms the museum's entry walls with *The fuzzy gaze*, a large-scale mural investigating the history and development of the animal-human gaze. Lastly, Emma Talbot presents a newly commissioned work for EMΣT, *Human/Nature* (2025). This monumental textile installation is made of painted silk and accompanies an animation film, *You are not the centre (inside the animal mind)*. In its collection-based exhibitions, the museum presents Greek sculptor Theodoros Papadimitriou's work for the first time after his death, while "WOMEN, together" is the first rehang of the museum's collection, exclusively featuring women artists. With thematic and group exhibitions, the museum's programme speaks to the present, reflecting a commitment to social and political realities. The themes are not abstract exercises; they are grounded in everyday concerns, such as gender equity, technology's impact, ecological consciousness and geopolitical identity.

Support and visibility

With Greece lacking support structures and funding institutions, EMΣT has taken on the role of fostering international visibility for Greek artists. Through EU-funded initiatives, the museum has launched residency programs in collaboration with institutions like Cité internationale des arts in Paris, Bethanien (Berlin) and WIELS (Brussels). Further extending its international reach, EMΣT co-produces exhibitions with leading cultural institutions, strengthening its global presence and highlighting Greek voices. A notable collaboration was with the Philharmonie de Paris, resulting in a large-scale exhibition dedicated to Greek composer and architect Iannis Xenakis. This cross-disciplinary project bridged the worlds of contemporary art, music and architecture. At home, the museum also supports the local scene by commissioning new works, often giving young or underrepresented Greek artists their first solo museum exhibitions. However, the institution condemns ageism in the art world, resulting from the market's tendency to prioritise young emerging artists. In response, EMΣT is committed to providing equal opportunities and visibility for mid-career and older artists disadvantaged by years of economic crisis and lack of support.

View from Sammy Baloji's "Echoes of history, shadows of progress"

Photo Paris Tavitian. Courtesy Sammy Baloji. Imane Farès

Janis Rafailidou

ARR

Community-centred institution

Gregos has also redefined EMΣT's collection policy through a strategic regional focus. Acknowledging the challenges of building a truly global collection from scratch, she turned her attention to Greece's geopolitical neighbourhood — the Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, Balkans and the Middle East. This approach positions EMΣT as a flagship institution for a rich yet often underrepresented cultural region. The collection particularly emphasises women artists, aligning with the museum's broader feminist ethos. "The museum aims to foster an understanding of our present condition, how the past has shaped it, and how each of us might play a part in improving or changing it," Gregos explains. "EMΣT believes art and culture are vital to 'thinking the world', creating new values for the future and imagining it otherwise."

EMΣT actively works to democratise art, placing accessibility and inclusion at the heart of its mission. Public programmes are free and emphasise education, community outreach and engagement with school groups. The museum also invests in audience development, particularly targeting younger demographics and non-art-affiliated visitors, who are increasingly becoming regular attendees. This commitment is no easy feat in a country where contemporary art has often taken a back seat to classical heritage. Drawing around 3,000 visitors to each exhibition opening, EMΣT contributes to a shift in that paradigm by establishing itself as a space for learning, curiosity and cultural experimentation.

Best practices

Beyond its expansive exhibitions, an evolving collection and pioneering approaches, EMΣT is also pioneering sustainable and

3 questions to... Janis Rafailidou

Born in 1984 in Greece, Janis Rafailidou works with sculpture, video art and film, and was featured in the 59th edition of La Biennale di Venezia.

Your work often explores the boundary between human and animal grief. What draws you to these liminal spaces?

Growing up around animals taught me the depth of non-verbal communication. Over the past 15 years, I have been developing a visual language that brings the human and non-human, particularly animals, into proximity. My early interest was in how society overlooks non-human death, and through my practice, I honour these "unregistered" deaths. While grounded in research, my methodology is primarily visual rather than textual. Much of the work emerges from my understanding of specific landscapes and their invisible inhabitants, especially stray animals, both living and dead. These explorations eventually led me toward a more cinematic approach, where my narrative is guided by instinct, gesture and presence (or absence) of animals. I am interested in how they exist as individuals and collectives, and mirror human values and structures. I do not aim to inform viewers about animals per se, but to use their presence to expose human fears, desires and contradictions. I resist reducing the animal to a symbol; instead, I want them to exist as they are, in their physical and emotional reality.

How has EMΣT impacted your practice?

It marked a significant turning point, as it was my first institutional solo exhibition in Greece. Instead of retrospectively exhibiting older works, I proposed creating a new piece that would expand my practice conceptually and spatially. EMΣT supported this vision, allowing me to create an immersive installation centred around a single theme. "We betrayed the horses" focuses on the absence of the animal, allowing me to explore how human-made artefacts, architecture and objects like saddles and reins reflect our use and control of animal bodies. These beautiful and brutal tools represent a complex mix of love, domination and efficiency. The show also incorporates neon text, which might reference a human-to-human relationship, playing with themes of power, control and intimacy. But when re-read as coming from the animal to the human, it reveals a non-consensual dynamic rooted in domination. The installation is designed to evoke this tension between affection and control, care and coercion. EMΣT's financial and curatorial support enabled me to take risks, push boundaries and evolve my practice meaningfully.

Your work has been shown widely internationally. How are your themes received in Greece?

Although I was born in Greece, I have spent most of my life abroad, studying in the UK and the Netherlands. Support from institutions abroad has been foundational to my career. My inclusion in the Venice Biennale, for example, came through the Netherlands, where the curator discovered my work. That said, I have always returned to Greece to work. The landscape and the layered, chaotic coexistence of urban and animal life continues to offer powerful inspiration. While Greece has always been part of my artistic DNA, it is only recently that I have felt recognised and supported on a national level. Across different contexts — whether in Greece or abroad — my approach remains the same, though the systems of support and audience interpretations may vary. International platforms have afforded me freedom and recognition, but I am positive about the evolving cultural landscape in Greece.

ethical institutional practices. The museum is now plastic-free and collaborates with the NGO Archipelagos to reduce its environmental impact. Internal workshops train staff in sustainable methods and exhibitions are designed with a greener footprint in mind. In a further nod to inclusivity, EMΣT is also pet-friendly and continually explores new ways to operate sustainably and contribute to environmental protection and conservation. Equally groundbreaking are its labour conditions. The museum is setting new standards in Greece by ensuring all artists and cultural workers are paid fairly — a practice still not uniformly adopted in the region. "Art is labour and deserves recognition and respect, says Gregos. EMΣT enforces fair pay for artists and cultural practitioners and does not condone the precarious labour practices that are still widespread in contemporary visual arts. It commits to paying all artists and arts professionals who work with or exhibit in the museum."

For Gregos and her team, success is not measured solely by attendance figures, although these have grown significantly. It is about whether visitors leave with new questions and excite their imagination. EMΣT has become a model for how contemporary institutions can engage with local communities while participating in the global cultural conversation. For them, it is not about ticking all the boxes but about reimagining how a museum should be.

EMΣT

Courtesy EMΣT

REPORT

MaMa

Courtesy MaMa

IS MAMA COMING HOME?

The National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Algiers (MaMa), one of the Mediterranean's most exciting contemporary art museums, shuttered during COVID. Will it ever open again?

Art is a potent vehicle for self expression. And of course the best type of self expression is honest self expression. Lately, however, forces on both the left and right of the political spectrum have been pressuring artists to moderate the ways they express themselves. Many artists feel as though they must hold back their real opinions or, in some cases, avoid expressing themselves completely, lest they say something career ending, or even life threatening.

As the most important platforms for contemporary artists, art museums are on the front lines of this cultural battle. Curators are being hired and fired based on their cultural and political backgrounds and beliefs; exhibitions are being green lighted or mothballed based on their inclusion or avoidance of political statements; most chillingly, artists are either self-censoring in order to stay in the spotlight or artificially claiming their work is political or activist when clearly it is not, just to associate themselves with some trending agenda. Yet, as maddening as it is to witness this phenomenon, it is also a sign that contemporary culture is alive. Cultural death comes when people cease to debate the value and meaning of art. It is better to live in a place where contemporary art exhibitions are shocking people or being protested than somewhere with no contemporary art exhibitions at all.

The latter is what the people of Algiers are currently experiencing. Their contemporary art landscape has been fundamentally reshaped in the aftermath of COVID-19 and a series of social and political upheavals. What was once their premier contemporary art museum — the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Algiers, colloquially known as MaMa — closed during COVID and appears perhaps to have been mothballed for good.

During its dozen years of existence, MaMa was one of the most vibrant, beautiful and inspiring contemporary art museums in the Mediterranean. It exemplified the promise of Algeria's hard-fought right of self-determination and gave the country's artists hope that they could start new cultural conversations. There are questions about why it sits shuttered and about the condition of its collections, which include a substantial number of important works from key Algerian artists. Since MaMa's future is uncertain, the best that can be done for the moment is to talk about its past.

Birth and death of MaMa

The year was 2007, three years before the so-called Arab Spring would sweep across North Africa and the Middle East, bringing hope of a cultural revolution to tens of millions. The Arab States

— Phillip Barcio

Broadcasting Union, one of the most influential media organisations in the Arab world, has just named Algiers the "capital of Arabic culture". The moment is highlighted by an announcement by Khalida Toumi, Algerian Minister of Culture at the time, that a new contemporary art museum will be opening in the heart of Algiers. It will be located in an early 20th century Neo-Moorish building originally designed by French architect Henri Petit. The grand, five storey building's first tenant was a luxury department store called Galeries de France. Occupying an entire city block, its interior featured a wide open mall on the ground floor, surrounded by five elegant, stacked balconies.

Toumi contracts Chafik Studio to undertake an extensive renovation of the Galeries de France building. Run by award-winning French registered architect Chafik Gasmi, the firm specialises in creating unique public spaces such as hotels and retail environments. They successfully transform the building's interior into a white-walled masterpiece, with pristine galleries on each of the ascending balconies overlooking a grand interior plaza that can accommodate large-scale temporary installations, performances or luxurious events.

Algerian curator Nadira Laggoune is among the visionaries brought on board to help establish MaMa's early reputation. Under her curatorial leadership the museum develops into a cultural powerhouse. It establishes The International Festival of Contemporary Art of Algiers (FIAC), an event that promotes Algeria as a locus of vitality and freedom in the international contemporary art field. FIAC is lauded for welcoming open discourse and propelling Algerian contemporary artists to the forefront of the global conversation. Laggoune goes on to curate multiple groundbreaking exhibitions that highlight marginalised artistic voices, such as "L'art au feminin", which spotlights female artistic production in North Africa and the Middle East [see box p.51].

In 2019, MaMa hosts the 7th edition of Al-Tiba9, an international event that promotes awareness of "intersections between the Arab world and the western in the field of visual arts, performance and fashion design". The show includes the work of 20 internationally renowned artists and focuses, among other topics, on "the reconciliation of opposites". The event is glamorous, edgy and energetic, attracting attention from vanguard artists and cultural influencers the world over. That same year, however, MaMa's future comes under threat. A wave of protests called the Hirak erupts in Algeria. Born of outrage against official corruption, the Hirak results in the then-four-term president being forbidden to run for a fifth term and many power brokers in his circle being arrested. Among those jailed for alleged corruption is Khalida Toumi, the Algerian Minister of Culture who inaugurated MaMa and oversaw the evolution of what was becoming the most exciting contemporary art scene in the region.

The Hirak protests lead to the election of Algeria's current president, Abdelmadjid Tebboune. His leadership coincides with a period of official neglect towards Algeria's contemporary art institutions, including MaMa. The museum is then shuttered during the early days of COVID. Years later, when most of the pandemic-stricken world has reopened to the public, a sign still remains on the doors of MaMa saying the building is closed for repairs. MaMa's telephone number leads to a message that says the call cannot be completed and the official website redirects to an cryptic, empty landing page. No public contact information is listed for museum officials on the Minister of Culture's website, and when asked for comment on MaMa's future, no one from the current office of the Algerian Minister of Culture responds. Other than a small entry on the website for the Directory of Tourism and Handicrafts, a cone of silence seems to exist over MaMa. Meanwhile, is the museum's collection of important Algerian contemporary art still being preserved? Has it been disposed of, or worse, looted?

Arabic cultural capital

The word capital has two meanings: it can refer to a city but also a currency. The cultural capital of a place has something to do with the perceived value of the community's cultural contribution to human history. In this context, it is historically fitting that a cultural institution in Algeria would take the name of MaMa. Algeria has been responsible for many of human civilization's most significant cultural births and rebirths. It is an ancient cradle of art and home to some of the world's oldest aesthetic artefacts. It is also one of the birthplaces of agricultural society and was a centre of politics, literature and religion during every major human epoch — from the Roman Empire to the Byzantines to the caliphates.

Officially speaking, today's Algeria is a relatively new entity. It was established in 1962 after

MaMa

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Photo Saidani Moussaab

revolutionaries won a war for independence against French colonial powers, which had occupied the territory since 1830. From the start of its modern manifestation, Algeria has been marked by two persistent struggles — that between those who want democracy and those who prefer authoritarianism and that between those who want a secular society and those who prefer Islamic rule. At times these debates have turned violent. Every side has accused the others of corruption and intimidation.

Remarkably, throughout these decades of continuous debate, Algeria's artists have continually produced novel work. They have a knack for positioning themselves on the global vanguard, while simultaneously referencing their homeland's internal struggles. The problem these artists have consistently faced is not intellectual or creative — it is operational. They lack physical opportunities to show their work to the Algerian public. Maybe this makes sense. If a government is constantly under siege and ever-evolving, how can it be expected to nurture stable cultural networks and institutions like museums?

The wave of optimism that followed Algier's naming as the Arabic cultural capital convinced many Algerian artists that a better day had finally come. MaMa was supposed to be one of the bedrocks upon which the country's contemporary art future could be built, where the unique artistic heritage of Algeria could be spotlighted and celebrated in front of the world. Its decline and seemingly indefinite closure is its own tragedy. It is also a symptom of a larger illness that dogs Algeria and much of the world today. It is an illness that stops artists from having the courage to express themselves honestly by de-platforming them and robbing them of official support. Many Algerian artists and art workers have left for other countries in the last half decade. Algeria's capital of culture might still be Algiers. But the future of its cultural capital lies in its willingness to give real support to the free and honest self expression of its artists.

Groundbreaking exhibitions at MaMa

"L'Art au féminin"

This group exhibition featured the works of 25 female artists with roots in the Arab world. In addition to five artists from Algeria, it featured artists from the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, France and the United States. Curated by Nadira Laggoune, the exhibition threaded a cultural needle. On one hand, it only featured the works of female artists and was thus defined by what the artists "are". On the other hand, it demanded these artists be recognised not for what they are, but what they do. The work addressed many of the social, political and sexual taboos and preconceptions that often pigeonhole female Arab artists, causing them to become exoticised and diminished in the eyes of the public.

"Planète Malek"

One of the last major exhibitions at MaMa before closing for COVID was a retrospective of the career of Algerian artist and composer Ahmed Malek (1931-2008). A graduate of, and later professor at, the Algiers Conservatory, Malek was considered a crucial link between traditional and modern Algerian music. He was a master of traditional instruments such as flute, piano and accordion and also a pioneer of digital technologies such as synthesisers. He composed for television and the cinema. His soundscapes were on the cutting edge but also unashamedly Algerian, which made him an important cultural protagonist for Algerian independence. In the post-colonial period, his soundtracks often gained even more acclaim than the films for which they were composed. He later became one of the main composers for Algerian public broadcaster Radio Télévision Algérienne.

Al-Tiba9, 7th edition

Al-Tiba9 is a multifaceted platform connecting the Arab and Western worlds. It manifests as a gallery and a magazine, and supports artists at international fairs and in the digital realm. Beginning in 2013, it organised an annual festival bringing together artists from North Africa and the rest of the world. The festival continued in physical form for seven years and then manifested in a digital format in 2020. Its final physical edition was in 2019 at MaMa. It featured 20 international artists, performers and fashion designers, and addressed what were considered to be the most pressing issues of relevance to contemporary artists in the Arab world at the time.

ALGER. — Les Galeries de France

Galeries de France

ARR

Alycastre (2018), Miquel Barceló

Photo Camille Moirenc. © Miquel Barceló. Fondation Carmignac

ART ANCHORED IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

From Ios to Mallorca, these island museums combine history, nature and creativity, making each destination a lively hub of art throughout the Mediterranean's isles.

Donnaregina Contemporary Art Museum. Vibrant heartbeat

The Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donnaregina, commonly known as the Madre Museum, is a cornerstone of contemporary art in southern Italy. The three levels of the 19th-century Palazzo Donnaregina on via Settembrini showcase works by Jeff Koons, Jannis Kounellis, Cindy Sherman, Anish Kapoor and Marina Abramović, alongside Italy's own Francesco Clemente and Mimmo Paladino, highlighting the museum's international influence and commitment to local heritage. As southern Italy's leading institution for contemporary art, MADRE is crucial in decentralising the Italian art map, drawing attention away from the northern strongholds of Milan and Venice. Its presence communicates that creativity can flourish beyond urban centres.

FRAC Corsica. Art serving the public

As part of France's nationwide network of FRAC, the Corsican branch has the mission to democratise access to contemporary art and embed it in the island's everyday life. Since its funding in 1986, one of its most distinctive features has been the nomadic spirit. Rather than confining itself to a typical white-cube museum, the institution frequently brings art into villages, public spaces, schools and community centres across the island. A notable example is the 2024 exhibition "Arcanes, Rituels et Chimères", which celebrated the centenary of the Surrealist *manifesto*, featuring works by Leonora Carrington and other contemporary artists. Moreover, FRAC Corsica supports young creations, with particular attention to artists from Corsica. From performances in nature to pop-up exhibitions in remote towns, the institution ensures that contemporary art becomes a shared experience, not a distant luxury for a few. To further its mission, the institution has recently launched the podcast series "Fréquence FRAC".

Fondation Carmignac. An oasis of art

Renowned artists like Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Roy Lichtenstein, Gerhard Richter or Keith Haring are housed within a restored Provençal farmhouse on the Île de Porquerolles off France's southern coast. Founded in 2018 by Édouard Carmignac, a French entrepreneur and art collector, Fondation Carmignac encompasses

— Nahir Fuente

2,000 square meters of subterranean exhibition space beneath the villa, illuminated by a water-covered ceiling that casts dynamic reflections throughout the galleries. Surrounding the villa is a 15-hectare sculpture garden that integrates contemporary artworks within pine forests and site-specific commissions that resonate with the island's natural environment. True to its founder's vision, Fondation Carmignac resists the noise and spectacle of the commercial art world. Instead, it prioritises intuition, emotion and direct engagement. The foundation restricts daily visitor numbers to maintain a sense of intimacy, encouraging guests to disconnect and deeply engage with what they see.

Es Baluard. The cultural engine of the islands

"If we wish to benefit from quality tourism in Mallorca, culture is the path to follow," said former Spanish King Juan Carlos I more than thirty years ago. That vision took architectural form in 2004 with the opening of Es Baluard Museu d'Art Contemporani, a symbol of the island's cultural evolution. Overlooking the Bay of Palma, the museum is housed in the 16th-century Renaissance bastion within the old city walls. Once a military outpost defending the island from seaborne threats, the site has been reimagined as a space for artistic experimentation and public engagement. Minimalist concrete corridors and expansive glass panels contrast with original limestone ramparts, while open terraces offer panoramic views. The design respects its historical weight while it invites contemporary art to inhabit it. Es Baluard's collection also reflects its geographic and cultural context. With over 700 modern and contemporary artworks, it highlights artists linked to the Balearic Islands such as Joan Miró and Miquel Barceló, alongside international names like Picasso, Rebecca Horn and Ana Vieira.

Grupo Ibiza 59

Right in the midst of the Franco regime, a collective of artists founded Ibiza 59. Formed by Erwin Bechtold, Hans Laabs, Egon Neubauer, Antonio Ruiz, Carlos Sansegundo and Bob Munford, among others, the group became a figure in the evolution of *avant-garde* art in Spain during the mid-20th century. As an artistic group, they were not tied to a single aesthetic but unified by the need to push boundaries and foster a modern artistic dialogue. Their work encompassed abstract expression, geometric abstraction and experimental art. Following the lead of Emil Schillinger, who opened a hotel with a gallery, the group established its own exhibition space, connecting Ibiza's emergent art scene with broader European currents. They also helped establish the island as an inspiration for artists before it became internationally known for its nightlife and tourism. Although the group eventually dissolved, its legacy symbolises artistic freedom and cross-cultural collaboration. Grupo Ibiza 59 remains a foundational chapter in modern Spanish and European art history. In June 2023, Spanish ceramist Antonio Ruiz died; he was the last living artist from the group.

Where are Costantino Nivola's horses now?

Costantino Nivola created several monumental public artworks in the United States, especially while living and working in New York. Among them were concrete reliefs and sculptures featuring stylised horses — a recurring motif in his work symbolising both Sardinian heritage and universal themes of strength, movement and mythology. One prominent work was in Wise Towers on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Designed initially as playful public art for a housing complex's plaza, the 18 concrete sculptures suffered damage over the years, including vandalism that removed and general wear from environmental exposure. In 2021, contractors removed the sculptures during emergency water repairs by cutting them off at the legs, leaving only their hooves in the plaza. This action sparked outrage among preservationists and the local community. Restoration efforts were undertaken by Jablonski Building Conservation (JBC), commissioned by the PACT Renaissance Collaborative. The process involved meticulous conservation treatments, including creating the moulds from similar Nivola's sculptures. The restorers aimed to preserve as much of the original artwork as possible, matching the appearance of the existing concrete and ensuring the sculptures could withstand future wear and tear. After extensive restoration, the Nivola horses were reinstalled in their original location in early 2024.

Nivola Museum

Photo Giuseppe Cristiano Musa

Palais Fesch

Courtesy Palais Fesch

Nivola Museum. A legacy of art and activism

In the rocky heart of Sardinia, lies a museum unlike any other. Founded by Costantino Nivola (1911-1988), this former washhouse complex is now dedicated to his work and legacy. Nivola was a bridge between different worlds: a Sardinian shepherd's son who became a key figure in New York's modern art scene, working alongside friends like Le Corbusier, Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. He was known for inventing the sandcasting technique and for large-scale public artworks, often infusing his creations with abstraction, humanity and Mediterranean warmth. The museum celebrates this legacy with an extensive collection of his sculptures [see box p.56], drawings, architectural models and design objects, alongside contemporary artists who share Nivola's experimental spirit and interest in public art. From 2025 to 2026, a new cycle of exhibitions curated by Giuliana Altea, Antonella Camarda and Luca Cheri will continue the discussion on contemporary sculpture, celebrating the Foundation's 35th anniversary, alongside three decades since the Nivola Museum was founded.

Museo de arte Contemporaneo de Ibiza. Art in layers

As one of Spain's oldest contemporary art museums — opened in 1969 — MACE Ibiza has quietly shaped the cultural conversation in the Balearic Islands for decades. Its mission is to showcase cutting-edge art while staying deeply rooted in the island's identity. Since the 1960s, Ibiza has attracted *avant-garde* artists, writers and thinkers. The museum pays homage to the legacy of Grupo 59 [see box p.56], featuring artists who lived and worked on the island, such as Erwin Bechtold, Eduard Micus and Will Faber. At the same time, MACE opens its doors to the world with international exhibitions, multimedia installations and collaborations with contemporary art institutions across Europe, bridging local and global dialogues. Located inside a historic military building with views over the Mediterranean sea and Ibiza's old town, the museum's recent renovation blends ancient stone with minimalist design. Glass floors expose archaeological remains beneath the surface, offering a multi-layered experience where past and present coexist, just like the island's enduring artistic spirit.

Palais Fesch. Italian masters in Napoleon's hometown

Where Napoleon Bonaparte once strolled as a boy, stands the Palais Fesch – Musée des Beaux-Arts in Ajaccio. The museum was founded by Cardinal Joseph Fesch (1763-1839), Napoleon's maternal uncle and a passionate art collector, to house his vast art collection. Construction of the Palais began in 1827 and concluded in 1852, after the cardinal's death. Beyond its elegant façade lies one of France's most important fine arts museums, renowned for its Italian masterpieces, second only to the Louvre in scope. The collection spans the 14th to 18th centuries, featuring works by Botticelli, Bellini, Titian, Veronese and more. French, Flemish, Dutch and Corsican artists also find a place in its extensive holdings, hosting over 16,000 works. The Chapelle Impériale, part of the complex, holds the tombs of Cardinal Fesch and Letizia Ramolino, Napoleon's mother, adding a historical layer to the museum. A Napoleonic wing displays intimate family portraits, busts and rare documents — not to glorify conquest but to reflect on the complex legacy of the Bonaparte family and its intellectual and artistic ambitions.

Museum of Modern Greek Art. From medieval walls to modern halls

Located within the walls of the medieval city of Rhodes — a UNESCO World Heritage Site — the Municipal Gallery of Rhodes, now known as the Museum of Modern Greek Art, is housed in a restored historical building at the entrance to the old town. This has been its home since the museum's early beginnings. While efforts to establish the museum began in the early 1950s, it officially opened its doors in 1964. Over the years, the museum has steadily expanded. In 2000, it inaugurated an additional exhibition space within the medieval city, focused on showcasing works by local and emerging artists. Two years later, a new building opened in the heart of modern Rhodes, where a significant portion of the permanent collection and the museum's workshops were relocated. This venue now serves as the main cultural hub for the institution, positioned at the centre of the city's tourist and civic life. The expansion continued in 2010 with the construction of the New Wing of the Nestorideion Melathron — a contemporary cultural space that forms part of the museum complex. It regularly hosts exhibitions and events, including recitals, book presentations and conferences.

MICAS. Where global meets local

Just outside Valletta, MICAS — Malta International Contemporary Arts Space — is the first national museum dedicated exclusively to contemporary art. With partial funding from the EU, this €30 million initiative spans more than 8,000 square meters and includes indoor galleries, outdoor sculpture gardens, a *café* and a shop, all overlooking Marsamxett Harbour. Housed within a restored section of Malta's 17th-century fortifications, the museum opened in October 2024 with an exhibition

by Joana Vasconcelos. Since then, MICAS has hosted works and site-specific commissions from renowned global artists such as Ugo Rondinone, Cristina Iglesias and Pierre Huyghe, while spotlighting homegrown Maltese talent. This balance between the international and the local is central to its mission. Moreover, the museum encourages international collaboration through artist residencies, workshops and partnerships with institutions such as the Tate and Centre Pompidou. This forward-thinking approach positions Malta not only as a destination for sun-soaked holidays and ancient architecture, but also as a player in the evolving discourse of global creativity.

Gaitis-Simossi Museum. **Modernism on the Aegean**

Situated above the whitewashed alleys of Chora on the island of Ios, the Gaitis-Simossi Museum is a tribute to painter Yannis Gaitis and sculptor Gabriella Simossi, two of Greece's most compelling postwar artists. The museum, designed by Loretta Gaitis — the artists' daughter and a museologist — along with her husband Jacques Charrat, mirrors the essence of their practices. The complex consists of two main exhibition buildings, a *café* and an open-air amphitheatre, all arranged along a central road that opens onto expansive views of the Aegean Sea. Within the Gaitis Building, visitors can follow the artist's evolution from his early surrealist and abstract works to the emergence of his faceless, bowler-hatted "little men". Across the courtyard, the Simossi Building offers a serene counterpoint with twelve monumental white resin sculptures on marble pedestals framed by whitewashed walls and floors. After years of partnership with the municipality of Ios, the museum was completed in 2009 and officially opened in 2024, representing a vision of art deeply rooted in place, memory and modernity.

Ibiza 59

Photo Julio Herranz

PORTRAIT

Icon of Saint George

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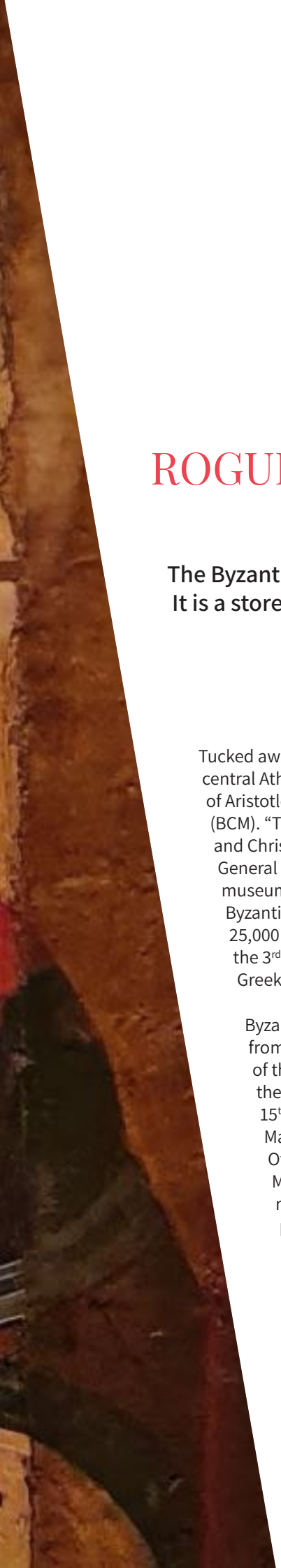

ROGUE SPIRIT

The Byzantine and Christian museum in Athens holds more than artefacts. It is a storehouse of legends, intersecting histories and a rogue spirit.

Tucked away in a former mansion on the Vasilissis Sofias in central Athens, a stone's throw from the archaeological remains of Aristotle's Lyceum, is The Byzantine and Christian museum (BCM). "The BCM is the only thematic museum for Byzantine and Christian art in the world, says Katerina Dellaporta, General Director of the BCM. It is one of the most important museums internationally for the art and culture of the Byzantine and post-Byzantine periods. It has more than 25,000 objects, organised into collections, which date from the 3rd to the 20th century and come mainly from the wider Greek, Asia Minor and Balkan area."

Byzantine Christianity is normally described as something from the distant past. The last surviving Eastern portion of the Roman Empire, which fell in the 5th century AD, the Byzantine Empire was ultimately overthrown in the 15th century AD by the forces of the Ottoman Empire. Many Byzantine Christians converted to Islam under Ottoman rule. Others adjusted to life as Dhimmi, or non-Muslim citizens of an Islamic state. Dhimmi had some rights, but their religious activities were somewhat prohibited. For example, they were not allowed to repair their old churches or build new churches. Nor were they allowed to openly recruit new converts.

In some remote parts of Greece that were never conquered by the Ottomans, small groups of Byzantine Christians kept their ancient faith alive. It took nearly 400 years, but eventually the descendants of those holdouts mounted a revolution that, with the help of French, British and Russian forces, liberated the rest of Greece from Ottoman rule. To this day, this is seen by believers as one of Christianity's greatest historic victories. Since then, the heritage of Byzantine Christianity has survived and even thrived under the mantle of the Greek Orthodox Church.

"Yesterday's customs and orthodoxies are preserved today in modern Greece as a continuation of Byzantium," says Dellaporta. That mixture of past, present and future is being nurtured within the collections and exhibitions programme of the BCM. Among the BCM's most extraordinary historic holdings, Dellaporte says, are "early Christina sculptures such as a representation of Orpheus as Christ, 4th century sculptures from the Christian Parthenon and 13th century mosaic icons." The collection also includes a substantial number of works from the Creton School, a Post-Byzantine tradition in icon painting that flourished from the 15th through 17th centuries.

Although BCM mainly focuses on art, worship objects, icons and frescoes specifically related

— Phillip Barcio

to Orthodox Christianity, part of the museum's mission is also to act as a keeper of the various legends and histories that intersect within its own walls. The most intriguing of those legends and histories converge under the mantle of the woman who funded the construction of the property that houses the BCM — Sophie de Marbois-Lebrun, the Duchess of Plaisance.

Marbois-Lebrun was an early version of wheat we would now call an influencer. To begin with, she had international, intercultural and inter-religious roots that gave her appeal with a great number of people. She was born in America to a father who was an influential French politician and a mother who was the daughter of the Governor of Philadelphia. She then married a French Dignitary who served under Napoleon Bonaparte. The marriage was unhappy and eventually Marbois-Lebrun left her husband, but she never divorced him. Instead, she used their fortune to move to Greece with her daughter, where she became an influential member of Greek high society. During and after the Greek War of Independence that led to the establishment of modern-day Greece, she rubbed shoulders with Greek political players and business leaders and became one of the largest landowners in what would eventually be known as Athens.

Marbois-Lebrun's religious roots were in Christianity, but she eventually turned against the Christian church and converted to Judaism. She later left the Jewish religion as well and formed her own hybrid religious practice. According to Danish-German diarist Christiane Lüth, another European expatriate who happened to be her next door neighbour in Greece for a time, Marbois-Lebrun wrote a pamphlet in French describing the tenets of her personal religion. She supposedly made copies of the pamphlet, which she distributed to people in her social sphere. Marbois-Lebrun also hosted salons at her various properties, establishing herself as a leading intellectual. Yet, she was always considered a rogue even by those who befriended her. It was strange enough that she was living separated from her husband and was a devotee to a personal religion. But there was also the pack of aggressive Great Pyrénées she kept as pets, and which rode around town with her in her car.

Perhaps most odd in the opinion of her contemporaries was that when her daughter died of pneumonia, Marbois-Lebrun is said to have had the body encased in a glass coffin filled with preservative alcohol, which was then placed in the basement of one of her homes. Marbois-Lebrun would supposedly go down to the basement and spend time beside her daughter's remains whenever she missed her. When that house later caught fire, legend says that Marbois-Lebrun desperately tried to pay one of her neighbors to go down into the basement and save her daughter's remains. Since there were evidently no takers, the coffin must have burned along with the rest of the house, making it difficult to prove the veracity of the story.

That house, however, was only one of Marbois-Lebrun's houses. She had contracted the renowned architect Stamatis Kleanthis to build six buildings for her on the various plots of land she had purchased in the early days after the Greek Revolution. The most elegant of these houses was built on a compound nearby the Ilisos river and thus became known as Villa Ilisos. Constructed from marble in a mixture of Classicist and Romantic styles, Villa Ilisos was completed in 1848, and Marbois-Lebrun lived there until her death in 1854. After she died, her survivors sold the property to the Greek government. Officials used it for a time as a military facility, then in 1926 Villa Ilisos became the new home of the recently established Byzantine and Christian Museum. Today, Marbois-Lebrun's "presence is alive in the museum", Dellaporte says.

It is notable that after her death a building Marbois-Lebrun had built came to house the world's only museum dedicated to Orthodox Christianity, a religion she walked away from during her life. Prior to leaving the Jewish religion, Marbois-Lebrun was also responsible for funding the building of a Jewish synagogue in Athens. It seems the only religion she followed for which she did not eventually provide a physical home in Greece was the religion she herself invented — the details of which remain shrouded in history, unless someone comes forward with one of the information pamphlets she supposedly handed out.

In keeping with the rogue spirit Marbois-Lebrun embodied, Dellaporte says that today's BCM follows an "extroverted", not a "unilateral" curatorial policy. "The museum hosts exhibitions of Modern and Contemporary art and is currently hosting an exhibition on Italian fashion inspired by Byzantine Italy, Ravenna and elsewhere," she says. The BCM also actively collaborates with outside institutions. "The museum, together with the museums of Venice, co-organised the major exhibition "L'ORO DIPINTO" which is presented at the Palazzo Ducale and will last all summer with the participation of a large number of works from the Byzantine Museum," Dellaporte says. She notes that the museum is also undergoing a modernisation in its governing structure, transitioning from a fully controlled state entity to one that is autonomous in the management of its resources. As for the future of the BCM, Dellaporte says the plan is simple and straightforward: to continue to be "a museum open to the challenges of the times but which will preserve its values."

Sophie de Marbois-Lebrun

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Byzantine and Christian museum

Photo Mathias Völzke. Courtesy documenta 14

ECOLOGY

GREENART on Osaka 2025 World Expo

Courtesy BeWarrant

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WHEN ART MEETS COSMETICS: GREENART AT THE OSAKA EXPO

From 3 to 5 May, European GREENART project takes centre stage at the Osaka World Expo, showcasing how green technologies can transform both art restoration and the cosmetics industry.

At the heart of the Osaka 2025 World Expo, the European Union Pavilion presents GREENART at the beginning of May. This flagship project, funded under the Horizon programme, aims to produce sustainable solutions for conservation-restoration and preventive conservation of heritage. The team develops low-impact, environmentally friendly materials, sourced from renewable natural resources or recycled waste.

Visitors, young and old, spend three days experimenting with innovative, sustainable restoration techniques developed by GREENART. They handle green nanomaterials, manufacture bio-based cleaning gels and dust models of artworks. The project's researchers lead practical workshops, allowing everyone to discover these cutting-edge methods first-hand. The demonstration, entitled "Sustainable materials: From art to cosmetics", pursues another goal as well: to prove how green technologies can revolutionise two sectors that, at first glance, seem unrelated — cultural heritage conservation and the beauty industry. In partnership with global cosmetics giant Shiseido, the GREENART workshops highlight international collaboration between European and Japanese partners, and reveal the potential for new interdisciplinary applications. The event explores the parallels between restoring paintings and the science of skincare.

"I had the good fortune to meet Professor Piero Baglioni, Director of the Centre for Colloid and Surface Science (CSGI) at the University of Florence, who stands as a leading figure in my fields of research. Without hesitation, when he launched the GREENART project, I decided to join him," says Taku Ogura, principal researcher at Shiseido and visiting associate professor at Tokyo University of Science, specialising in surfactant science and surface chemistry [see box p.70]. "Moreover, the European Union is developing some truly fascinating initiatives in the preservation of art and paintings, which is highly stimulating for research." Author of hundreds of publications and dozens of patents, Piero Baglioni has indeed pioneered the application of bicontinuous microemulsion technology to the conservation of cultural heritage — having worked in the laboratory of Pierre-Gilles de Gennes, Nobel Prize winner in Physics in 1991. "Through Piero, I also learned from Pierre-Gilles. So, this is a continuation towards the new generation," the Japanese researcher notes, visibly moved and proud.

The microemulsion revolution

A sophisticated technology with surprising applications,

— Carine Claude

microemulsion stands as a key focus of research and development at GREENART — and in the cosmetics industry. "This technology enables the selective removal of stains, both from the surface of artworks and from the skin," explains Taku Ogura, an expert in the field. "For example, when restoring paintings, we want to remove only the stains without damaging the paint layer itself. Previous technologies sometimes accidentally removed parts of the painting."

This surgical precision resonates within the cosmetics industry. "People want to remove stains, makeup and foundation while preserving the skin's natural moisturising factors, which are essential for skincare, continues the Shiseido researcher. Microemulsion technology can gently eliminate only the targeted substances." The same technological backbone adapts to different applications. "To remove a black, grimy layer from a painting, we select specific surfactants and oils, he explains. For cosmetics, when we work with lipstick, we also choose different surfactants and oils. It is the same technology, but we must select the right ingredients." Cleansers, lotions and serums — microemulsion technology plays a "very important" role in the products developed by Shiseido, renowned for its luxury ranges. The researcher also leads one of the GREENART introductory workshops, demonstrating how the same materials and technologies used in art restoration find applications in the cosmetics industry — and *vice versa*.

A pop-up laboratory

Like a pop-up laboratory, the GREENART space at the Osaka Expo offers three interactive workstations for visitors of all ages, turning science into hands-on experimentation. Alongside Taku Ogura and Isao Yotanda, associate professor in the Department of Advanced Chemistry at Tokyo University of Science, the European team gets involved in designing and running the programme: Andrea Casini and Rachel Camerini, young postdoctoral researchers specialising in nanoparticles and biopolymers; Giovanna Poggi, an expert in hydrogels and organogels; Silvia Lob, a specialist in physico-chemical interactions at the nanoscale and Isella Vicini, director of European funding development. All work under the scientific coordination of CSGI (Centre for Colloid and Surface Science), the renowned Italian centre of excellence led by Piero Baglioni, who heads the international consortium of museums and universities that make up GREENART.

For adults, the alginate sphere workshop offers the chance to create the flags of Italy, Japan and the European Union. Made from a natural polymer extracted from brown seaweed, mixed

3 questions to... Taku Ogura

Taku Ogura serves as principal researcher at Shiseido and at the MIRAI Technology Institute.

How did the Shiseido Group decide to get involved in GREENART? After all, skincare and artworks seem to be very different fields…

It is actually a scientific connection. Our project focuses mainly on using hydrogels to remove stains from artworks and paintings. This technology involves microemulsion cleaning, which is also highly important in the cosmetics field. One of Shiseido's flagship products is a microemulsion cleanser for the skin. We need to master this peeling technique and combine it with the "green" aspect of GREENART — that is, sustainable, natural and biocompatible approaches, which are crucial in cosmetics. That is why Shiseido joined this project.

Does sustainability form part of Shiseido's corporate philosophy?

Yes, Shiseido's policy and philosophy revolve around a key concept: "Art and science", which has been in the group's DNA since its founding in the late nineteenth century. This means we focus on developing cosmetic technology while considering the face as a canvas. We always strive to advance technologies, combining art and science.

How does your laboratory at Shiseido work with the GREENART project?

I focus on how the results of the GREENART project can be used for industrial applications, particularly in cosmetics. I also work at the University of Tokyo in an academic role, integrating this technology into other industrial fields, such as the metallurgical industry. The GREENART project centres on the sustainability of technologies and "green" materials, which can also be applied beyond heritage preservation. Cosmetics have already made progress in terms of eco-responsibility but other sectors of the chemical industry still rely on petroleum and hazardous products.

Taku Ogura

Courtesy Shiseido

Teresa Guaragnone from CSGI

Courtesy CSGI

with coloured liquid and a calcium chloride solution, these small beads — with a liquid core and a soft shell — provide a hands-on demonstration of the principles of gelation and encapsulation.

For younger visitors, researchers guide children in making rheopectic slime — a viscous, starch-based paste that turns solid when pressed. Fun and completely safe, this excellent educational tool helps explain the properties of complex fluids and gels developed by the GREENART project, showing how certain materials can change their behaviour depending on how they are handled. The activities use specially prepared models that reproduce abstract artworks in the style of Pollock, samples of traditional paintings and even Japanese manga illustrations covered in earth, which the children must patiently clean.

“The exhibition aims to raise awareness of the social relevance of restoration, the importance of scientifically supported methodologies and the potential for new interdisciplinary applications,” the organisers emphasise. The societal implications of these green technologies are wide-ranging: sustainable museum practices, art education, skin protection, cleaning and regeneration and the development of a circular economy. This holistic approach reflects the spirit of the Osaka World Expo, whose theme — “Designing future society for our lives” — encourages reflection on innovations that serve humanity.

Osaka 2025 World Expo

Courtesy Osaka World Expo

ECOLOGY

Anna Cooper preparing mock-ups based on Bridget Riley's *Fall* and *Hesitate*

Photo Katey Twitchett-Young. © Tate

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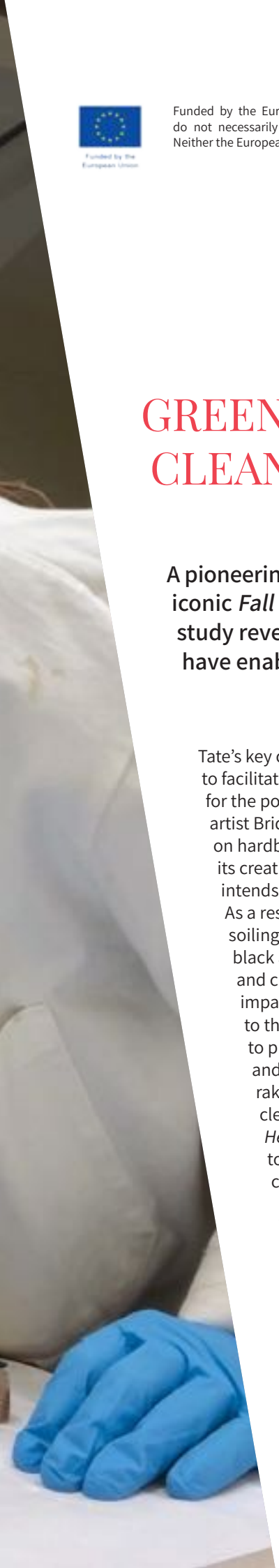


GREENART AT TATE: SURFACE CLEANING BRIDGET RILEY'S *FALL*

A pioneering conservation project at Tate preserves the visual impact of Bridget Riley's iconic *Fall* (1963) using innovative GREENART hydrogel cleaning systems. This case study reveals how scientific research, technical analysis and a rigorous approach have enabled the safe removal of decades of accumulated surface soiling.

Tate's key contribution to the GREENART project has been to facilitate a low-risk, appropriate conservation treatment for the popular mid-20th century painting *Fall* (1963) by British artist Bridget Riley. *Fall* is a polyvinyl acetate (PVAc) painting on hardboard and was purchased in 1963, shortly after its creation, and has been displayed regularly as the artist intends — unframed and unglazed — across the last 60 years. As a result, the painting surface had a light, but persistent soiling layer which dampened the contrast between the black and white painted lines, obscured painterly detail, and created an overall grey-yellow tone which somewhat impaired the powerful, visual effect of this work. In addition to the soiling layer, *Fall* was noted as being sensitive to pressure which manifested (though cumulative scuffs and marks) as gloss changes that were clearly visible in raking light. Thus, *Fall* had been earmarked for surface cleaning (soiling removal) for many years, alongside *Hesitate* (1964), also in Tate's collection, which together were proposed as challenging, important, case studies for the GREENART project.

Tate has been developing and refining a methodology designed to embed case study conservation treatments (where appropriate) into science-lead research. This featured in the NANORESTART project, and was employed once again for GREENART. Tate's project consisted of several investigative research streams which were naturally inter-dependent. These included: identifying case study artwork(s); exploring context through art historical and conservation documentation, as well as artists interviews, painting technical examination and analysis, the creation of mock-ups to understand the making of *Fall*, as well as creating substrates for cleaning treatment assessment and development, informing treatment risk through explorations into the constituents and properties of polyvinyl acetate paints, comparative cleaning system evaluation using GREENART and established cleaning systems, cleaning system optimisation for each case study painting, exploring cleaning system residues, the execution of conservation treatments (wet surface cleaning) and the evaluation of the painting surface pre- and post-treatment.

Several interviews with Bridget Riley are available at Tate (and elsewhere) and a range of art historical and conservation documentation informed the history and wider contexts of these two key works. The team also had the privilege of meeting the artist in early 2024 to discuss *Fall* and *Hesitate* which helped clarify the aims of the conservation treatment, explore their making and to understand which aspects of these paintings Riley views as fundamentally significant.

— Bronwyn Ormsby

Photographic and microscopic examination as well as extensive scientific analysis (of both works) confirmed that the paints are based on a polyvinyl acetate (PVAc)-polymer medium, and that *Fall* has no traditional size or ground layer. Interviews revealed that house paints were deliberately used and that the white paint was by Della Robbia and the black paint was by Ripolin. *Fall*'s hardboard panel was prepared with the white Della Robbia paint in several layers (the initial layers were diluted with water) to achieve opacity, then sanded to a smooth finish. In person, Riley described the consistency of the white paint as being like "single cream".

This combined information enabled the Tate team to prepare mock-ups for *Fall* and *Hesitate* using contemporary materials. Mock-ups serve several functions within conservation treatment research, such as enhancing our understanding of the materials used by the artist and the making processes involved, providing similar surfaces for evaluating and fine-tuning cleaning systems, and facilitating knowledge and skill acquisition around the novel GREENART materials. In this case, contemporary Lefranc Bourgeois paints were used with similar, though not identical compositions and aesthetic qualities, as were similar hardboard supports. The mock-ups were then light aged for the equivalent of about 30 years display in a museum environment (which about equals the cumulative display of *Fall* since its acquisition in 1963), followed by artificial soil application and ageing again for a short period to approximate the level of soiling imbibement noted on the paintings.

In parallel, we carried out a range of activities to identify any risks associated with the conservation of PVAc painted works of art, including a literature review of current knowledge on the analysis and properties of polyvinyl acetate paints, fine-tuning a pyrolysis gas chromatography-mass spectrometry analytical method to optimise the detection of PVAc paint additives, as well as paint extraction and swelling studies using aqueous systems and solvents commonly employed for modern painted surfaces. These studies informed the types of polymer and additives present in the paints, the likely materials at risk from solvent extraction within these paints, formulation changes over the years and new information about the effects of aqueous pH and conductivity on the swelling potential of PVAc paints.

The next stage was to use the carefully constructed mock-ups to evaluate and ultimately design a surface cleaning system for *Fall*, which would; remove the imbibed soiling layer evenly, not disturb the pencil lines and artist adjustments, and would not cause any swelling, blanching or other unwanted changes to the painting surface. Thus, we began an extensive comparative cleaning study after carrying out discreet aqueous and solvent tests on the painting surface, which confirmed that an aqueous system was required for optimal soiling removal. We began by using swabbed free liquids on the aged and soiled mock-ups, exploring the effects of aqueous pH and conductivity on the cleaning and paint response, followed by the gradual introduction of chelating agents and non-ionic surfactants at relatively low concentrations to enhance cleaning power. Empirical observations were made of each test and recorded using Excel spreadsheets and radar charts (also known as star diagrams), augmented using microscopic examination and photography. In this phase, it was quickly established that the action of swabs on the mock-up paint surfaces resulted in unacceptable pigment pickup and gloss changes and that any aqueous system was likely to require additional agents to enhance cleaning power.

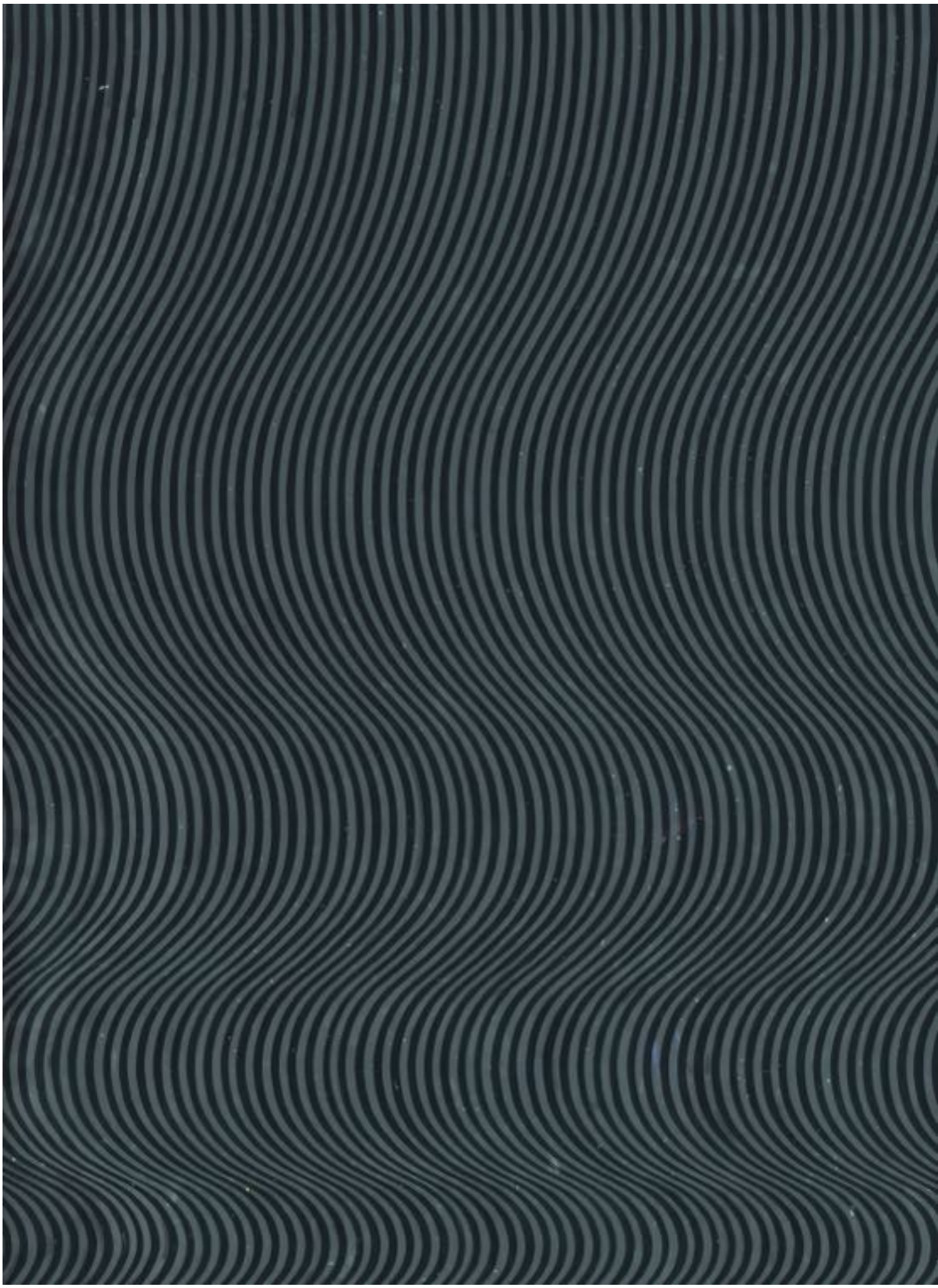
Based on previous experience and knowledge of the painting condition we expected that "gels" would pose less risk to Fall, hence we embraced a range of "contained" systems where the solvent is thickened/held in a polymeric material (thickeners, tissues, hydrogels, emulsifiers) which offer more controlled release of the aqueous liquid onto the paint surface. Many of these (e.g. xanthan gum) required mechanical action during application, removal and clearance, which once again unfortunately caused unacceptable change to the mock-up paint surfaces. Finally, we moved onto more rigid hydrogel systems such as agarose, gellan, as well as the semi-rigid hydrogels Peggy 5 and Peggy 6 from the Nanorestore Gel group, all of which offer the possibility of reduced mechanical action, as well as the new group of GREENART hydrogels: PVA-SA, PVA-SU, PVA-AD, Peggy Plus 3 and a few more!

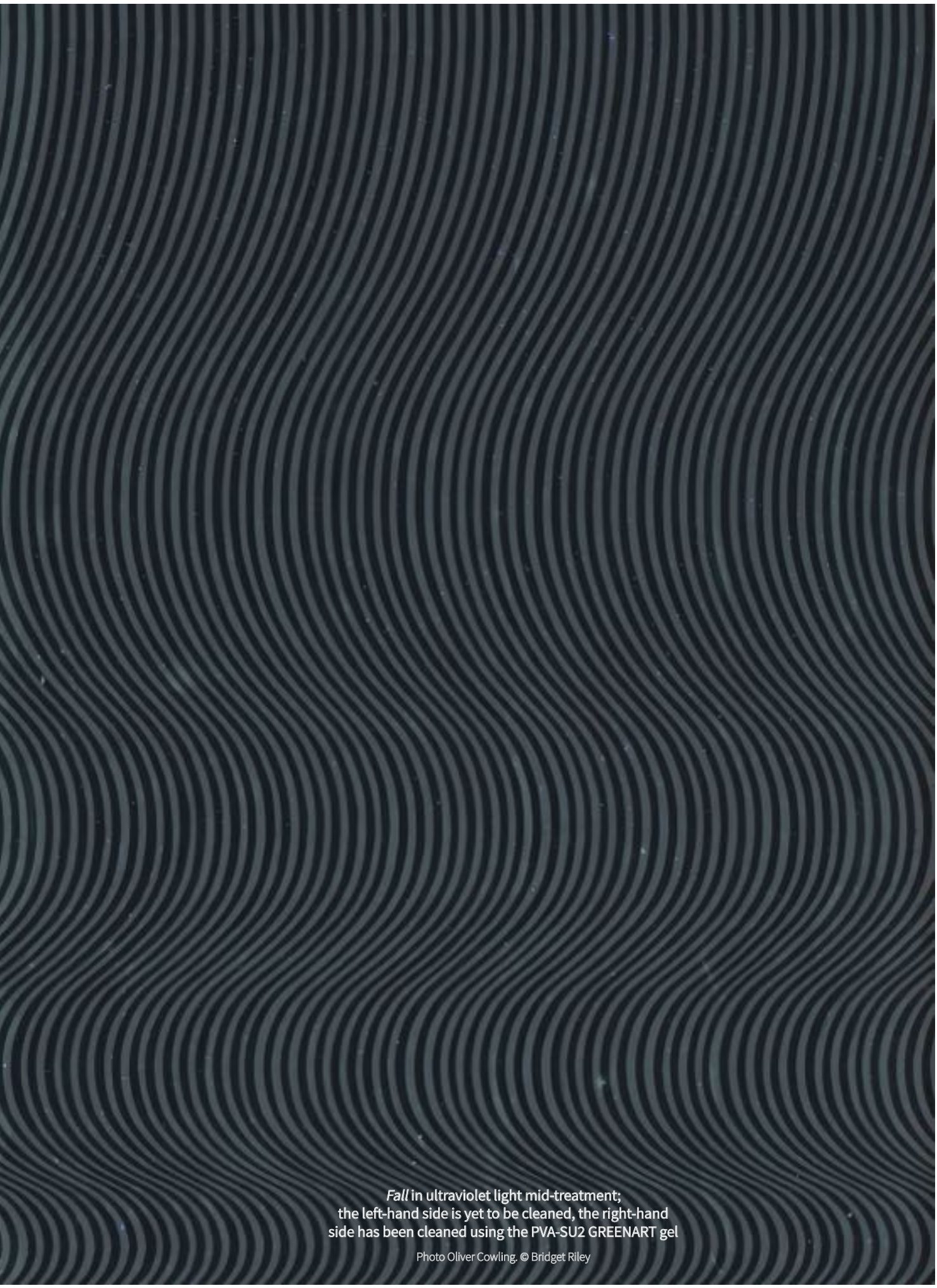
There were several iterative phases during this final comparative stage where the hydrogels were optimised and some were then ruled out due to inefficient soiling removal/uneven cleaning, etc. Towards the end of this phase, the polyvinyl alcohol-based Peggy 6 and the two GREENART gels PVA-SA and PVA-AD (also polyvinyl alcohol based, modified with diacid chains) were proving the most promising of the more rigid hydrogel group (offering an even and efficient cleaning action) with the additions of low concentrations of triammonium citrate chelator and/or non-ionic surfactant ECOSURF-EH6.

The optimal GREENART gel systems were then taken to the painting surface to assess their cleaning action and other effects. These options were augmented with two additional versions of PVA-SU (PVA-SU2) and PVA-SA (PVA-SA2) provided by CSGI which were also put through their paces on the mock-ups and in discreet tests on the painting. The chosen optimised system — PVA-SU2 (polyvinyl alcohol decorated with succinic acid) with

Tate Modern

Photo Kevin Mueller





Fall in ultraviolet light mid-treatment;
the left-hand side is yet to be cleaned, the right-hand
side has been cleaned using the PVA-SU2 GREENART gel

Photo Oliver Cowling. © Bridget Riley

added triammonium citrate and ECOSURF-EH6 — was then evaluated on the painting to determine the final application time of 2 minutes to achieve an even, efficient removal of the soiling layer. The final steps involved exploring how the gels could be optimally applied to avoid over- or under-cleaned areas which, in this case, involved making a cleaning window with Mylar polyester film which was designed sympathetically with the painting composition in mind, then carefully and systematically moved across the painting as the cleaning treatment proceeded.

After many months of examination, analysis, evaluations and treatment design, the treatment of *Fall* was completed in around 12 days. It was important to have the gel preparation and blotting station set up, and to have two people moving the Mylar template and applying the gels across the painting surface according to strict timings. Consistency and planning was key to the success of the treatment, which is evident in the evenness of the cleaning result seen in ultraviolet light. For this treatment, the GREENART gel PVA-SU2 offered the most efficient, even cleaning action, where the gel conformed well to the (in this case relatively flat) painting surface, the soiling layer was efficiently absorbed into the gel and the cleaning and clearance steps did not require problematic mechanical action.

Post-treatment evaluations documented changes such as a reduction in the yellow tone and a slight overall increase in gloss which results from the removal of the light scattering, yellowed soil and thus far, though some studies are ongoing, no residues of the cleaning systems have been detected. This highly successful treatment has resulted in visibly enhanced contrast between the black and white lines, the removal of the overall yellow-grey tone, reduced the risk of the accumulated soiling becoming more permanently imbibed, and has hopefully contributed to the recovery of the intended visual energy of this impactful painting.

A GREENART hydrogel test piece placed on a black painting mock-up

Photo Annette King. © Tate

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