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*How Princess Nauf Bender Al Saud put Middle Eastern art on the map
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PIONEER PRINCESS

HH Princess Nauf Bendar Al Saud is founder of the Lahd Gallery, representing new wave Middle Eastern artists, but a career in art wasn't a foregone conclusion for the royal rule breaker.

BY LORNA DAVIES



“Ever since I was little I have loved an Andalusian princess called Wallada bint al-Mustakfi. She was the daughter of one of the last Umayyad Cordoban caliphs in the 11th century,” says HH Princess Nauf Bendar Al Saud, as we settle down on a comfy armchair after her photoshoot at Sotheby’s.

Wallada, born in 1001, was a poet, an ideal beauty of the time – blonde, fair-skinned and blue-eyed – intelligent and cultured. She was also somewhat controversial, walking out in public without a hijab and wearing transparent tunics with her verses sewn into the trim. “This woman always struck a chord with me,” Nauf says, “because people thought she was the rebel, the black sheep, but all she did was bring culture and made Cordoba the centre for knowledge.”

Nauf draws more than a few modern-day parallels. A Saudi Arabian princess, she is an Imperial PhD graduate in clinical medicine with a speciality in ectopic fat, a fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine and the founder of Lahd Gallery. In 2005, at the age of 20, Nauf broke the royal tradition by working full time as an employed genetic researcher at the King Faisal Hospital in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

“I told my father: ‘I want to work as an employee,’ but in my family you don’t really do that. My hours were from 8am-6pm, I was a normal genetic researcher, because I was an undergrad. They really were the best years of my life because I learned so much and I made really true friendships.”

It was through these valued friendships that the idea for Lahd Gallery as a focal point for women artists from the Gulf came to fruition, opening in Riyadh in 2005.

“I wanted to prove that Middle Eastern art wasn’t all calligraphy and camels,” Nauf, who also paints, explains. “I met a lot of like-minded people at the hospital, especially women like me who really enjoyed going to cultural openings, who loved art, or were artists. The problem was there was no space to promote their art. Even if they did, they had to go through a sort of clique of old-fashioned artists that were there from the 1950s. This was just 10 years ago, and there were no contemporary art spaces to promote these women.”

The gallery soon became a well-known exhibition space on the Saudi Arabian contemporary art scene, representing emerging and established artists, both male and female.

In 2006, Nauf began to promote her artists in

Princess Nauf, Distinguished Honoree, receives the Millennium Development Goals 2015 Progress Award from Nana-Fosu Randall, founder and president of Voices of African Mothers



neighbouring countries. “At that time in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman, there were cultural centres for art, but in Qatar and United Emirates there wasn’t anything, which is really funny because now there are art fairs, museums, collections and auction houses. Now Middle Eastern art is the fashion.”

Today, the gallery brings together contemporary works from the MENASA (Middle East, North Africa and South Asia) region, representing artists such as Asli Erel, Anas Honsi and British photographer George Lewis, who lived in the Middle East for 15 years. Nauf, who speaks five languages, has taken her artists across the world, from Sweden to Korea, and now has a space in Hampstead, launched in 2010.

“London is an amazing, beautiful hub. I think it’s the perfect scene for art, for sciences, for the social scene, because it’s all cultures in one, and that’s the beauty of London.”

Nauf lives in Battersea, but says Mayfair is her spiritual home. She met her husband at Down Street tapas restaurant El Pirata.

“We go every year and have a little dinner,” she smiles. “I love the Arts Club, I live there! I also like Sketch, Delfinos and Hakkasan.” Her favourite galleries include the Royal Academy, David Gill and Barakat. A jewellery fan, Nauf enjoys shopping on Bond Street, Mount Street and South Molton Street – “It reminds me of the Parisian shops with all the cafés. I like Liberty and Fenwicks too.”

There’s not been much time for shopping, with Nauf graduating in May and picking up a Distinguished Honoree 2015 Progress Award for UN Millennium Development Goals in June. In October, she is hosting Le Salon de Lahd, an event to celebrate ten years of MENASA creativity with art, jewellery, music, fashion and design from the Middle East.

With the Middle Eastern art market on the way up, the Knightsbridge soirée is sure to draw some attention. But Nauf believes in taking things slowly.

“I’m a big believer in organic progress. It takes time, energy and work to get excellence and mastery – you’re a doctor after 12 years, not two.”

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Ten years on from starting the gallery, Nauf says it’s all been worth it. “If I had done the gallery and not seen the life changing results of my artists, especially my women artists, I wouldn’t have done it.”

Her immediate family are now very proud: “I wouldn’t have done it without their support, it would have been a very lonely road. But it has been difficult, definitely,” Nauf admits.

People often expect Nauf to specialise in one of her passions – science or art – but she’s a modern-day Michelangelo. “I want to do both. I don’t see it as a conflict of interests. People want to put you in a box, but I think it’s really about breaking the mould.” My sentiments exactly.