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Art Market 75

Dubai

First design fair for the Middle East

Director hopes to boost local awareness

DUBAI. The first design fair in the Middle East and South Asia, Design Days Dubai, launches next month (18-21 March) in downtown Dubai. Rather than relying on brand names for its debut, the fair's director, Cyril Zammit (below), wants to focus on the quality of objects.

He hopes to create a "hands-on" experience to boost the local awareness of design as a collectible art form. "People have the perception of design as an end product. It is important for us to situate it as art, and not as purely commercial interior design," he says.

Zammit says that there has been a recent "cultural awakening" in the region, pointing to newly developed design courses at institutions including the American University of Sharjah and the University of Qatar. A public programme aims to encourage this by offering workshops, including a mentoring scheme for young designers by established names such as Beirut-based Nada Debs, while the Seoul-based designer Kwangho Lee is due to hold workshops using traditional Emirati fabrics and camel leather from Al Khaznah, a local tannery.

Education is also needed to boost the idea of design as collectible. One of the events designed to reposition it as such is a talk by the London-based

architect, furniture designer and gallerist Rabih Hage on investment. Dubai is well-placed as a collecting hub, Zammit says. "It is a melting pot — we have more than 200 nationalities in the city, including a powerful and wealthy Indian community, which owns a lot of businesses and buys a lot," he says. "Other communities include the Pakistanis and the Iranians. Certain houses in Kuwait belong to some of the most sophisticated buyers internationally, and people in Saudi Arabia are very aware of the market."

The area is beginning to recover from the recession. "Hotels are raising their prices — which is a good sign. You can feel that people are looking forward to the next steps for the city," Zammit says. "People here like to think about what is next, what is new." Aiming to capitalise on this, public events include a talk by the trend forecaster Li Edelkoort, who is due to present her design predictions for 2014. "Vintage design will be more of a challenge," Zammit says. Nonetheless, La Galerie Nationale, which specialises in 20th-century designers including Le Corbusier, is due to open an office in Dubai later this year.

The gallery is one of 23 taking part. "There are two from Korea, one from South Africa, one from São Paulo, one from New York, lots from Europe and four from the Middle East — so we're well covered," Zammit says. ■

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