

# CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS OF ISLAMIC ARTS IN THE UAE, MEANING AND REPRESENTATION

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## ABSTRACT

The Emirates Palace hotel in Abu Dhabi triggered much debate due to its revival of clearly referenced forms to the Mughal Dynasty in Islamic India, thereby by passing local building traditions. The over whelming display of diverse arts and crafts of Islam compressed in time and space, stand in contrast to Qasr al-Sarab with its clear reference to local heritage such as Al-Jahili Fort in Al-Ain. In both cases they represent a form reconstructed heritage with clear lineages Arab/Islamic architecture without attempts of reinterpretation or abstraction. These hotel/resorts and the architectural manifestations they emanate are intrinsic parts of a trend in Abu Dhabi to search for an architectural identity in a rapidly growing modern Arab city. In both cases motifs of an Arab/Muslim referendum have been imported from a spectrum of Islamic arts and crafts, to be displayed in situ, as subjects with conscious semiotics to dynastic Arab/Muslim pasts. This study addresses representations of contemporary Islamic forms emerging in the UAE and juxtaposes Qasr al-Sarab with its integration of desert/adobe forms to the Emirates Palace with its display and acquisition of arts of the Muslim world. In many ways both hotel/resorts replace the museum as an institution that is not yet fully developed in Abu Dhabi, and thereby are part of a strategy to create a collective memory for the city as the capital of an emerging modern Arab Nation State.

*Keywords:* Abu Dhabi, Islamic Architecture, Arab Culture, Emirates Palace, Qasr al-Sarab

## INTRODUCTION

The balance between modernity and tradition and the search for a modern Arab/Islamic style that represents Gulf heritage represents a challenge for contemporary architects. Rapid urbanism and the availability of funding, advanced technologies and transnational styles that transgress boundaries further accentuate the challenge. Initially much of the vernacular expression in the Gulf might have

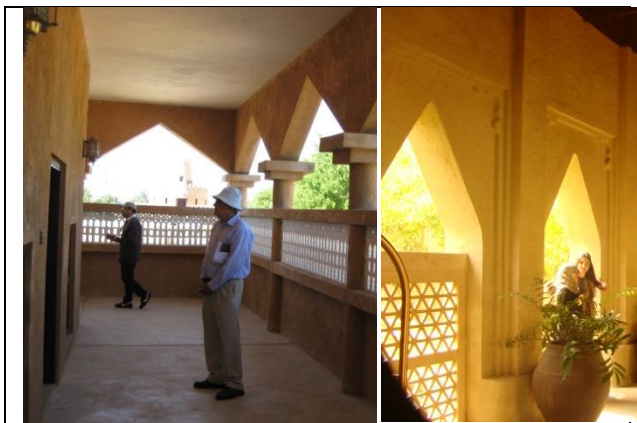
relied on the thick walls common of adobe architecture and portico's circumambulating each house locally known as *liwan's* that provided shade on the walls, social spaces of gathering and a passive cooling system. However, the scarcity of the remains of adobe building traditions make it difficult to use existing historic forts as a reference to build on a new vocabulary that satisfies the need for rapid urban expansion witnessed by Gulf cities. In the search for an urban identity forms and fragments of architecture from the Muslim world are collaged, namely due to the lack of documentation of the socio-cultural structure of the past. Existing heritage only represents the physicality of what may have existed but not how a building was used. In the past two decades alone, much of Abu Dhabi has changed leaving only Qasr al-Husn and sporadic monuments in the hinterland city of Al-Ain as living proof of Abu Dhabi's past. The collective memory of the city is constantly changing with the urban shifts of the city center and newly acclaimed shorefront developments. In the 1970's Abu Dhabi opted for an 'International Style' to construct its image as contemporary city, modernist designs and pre-fabricated tower like structures shaped its urban fabric and represented a practical solution for the increase of its urban population. Currently much of the city's urban fabric and architectural identity is changing through a master plan that advocates cultural monuments and piecemeal implantations of extravagant architectural icons that manifest fragments of historic remains. The pluralistic choice of 'Traditional/Arab/Islamic' styles for Abu Dhabi reflect the diversified expatriate population of the living city and the multiple stakeholders affecting the vision of the forthcoming modern Arab city. Abu Dhabi's master plan known as the 'Abu Dhabi 2030 Master Plan' does not target mass tourism, but rather attempts to transform the city beyond its current urban identity as a transit city for expatriate workers, to a settler city with spaces for cultural events, entertainment and tourism. The aim is to transform the from a city that had scarce landmarks in comparison to Dubai to a Capital of the UAE shaped by tradition and modernity. This is manifested by emerging mega projects such as the international museums in Saadiyat Islands that include the Desert Louvre, Guggenheim, Manarat Al-Saadiyat and Sheikh Zayed Museum all of which represent a multiple array of interpretations of regional traditions and Islamic Architecture.

Parallel to the neo-interpretations of Islamic architecture another group of projects is also emerging in the UAE, this group reconstructs the past through assemblies of local and transnational Arab/Islamic forms and fragments. Located outside the city these desert resorts such as Qasr-al-Sarab, Al-Maha and Bab Al-Shams build on the desert/eco architecture, with adobe walls, tent-like structures, *liwans*, arcades, and stucco screens. Within the city the Emirates Palace Hotel and Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque search for an Islamic identity through their adherence to well known motifs of recognizable origin in the Muslim world namely Indo-Islamic/Mughal domes and Moorish-Hispanic arches and tile mosaic assemblies. The latter display on their walls and floors gold glass mosaics, tile mosaic, and marble inlay, that are all reconstructed in classical patterns so that the visitor create the visual lineage of the past and the present. Much has been debated within the scholarly realm with respect to the creation of Simulacra and hyper-real spaces that only resemble the past physically and do not retain its socio-cultural aspects and collective memory. However, here it can be argued that the need for both forms of interpretations of the past are needed especially taking into consideration that the UAE is a relatively new nation and that much of its urban fabric has been lost the modernist style of the 1970's-80s. The aim of this paper is to address the multiple representations of contemporary forms and crafts of Islamic architecture emerging in the Abu Dhabi and juxtaposes Qasr al-Sarab with its emphasis on the integration of desert/adobe forms to the Emirates Palace with its manifestation of transnational arts and crafts of Islam from a broad geo-national spectrum. We aims to establish a methodology to better understand heritage monuments in Abu Dhabi, through field surveys with students of the school of architecture in Abu Dhabi University to the adobe forts and built heritage and their modern reconstructions as exemplified by Qasr al-Sarab and monumental examples within the city such as the Emirates Palace Hotel.

In the design of contemporary hotel/resorts such as Qasr al-Sarab there seems to be an agreement that regionalism specifically Arab/desert architecture should emerge with clear notions and linkages to Al-Jahili Fort and the Sheikh Zayed Palace Museum

in Al-Ain. In parallel the revival of Islamic classicism in Abu Dhabi is only part of a nation state policy to assure the community of their Arab/Islamic identity in a rapidly developing world. This does not mean that classical forms and fragments of Islamic art are dominant in shaping the identity of Abu Dhabi rather they form the foundation for contemporary interpretations of Islamic forms. Qasr al-Sarab juxtaposed to the Emirates Palace Hotel and the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque manifests a clear references to forms in local tradition such as Al-Jahili fort in Al-Ain. The desert resort's slanted rounded towers flanking the entryway, triangulated crenellations forming the parapets, and scalloped/cusp arches remind and form clear linkages to the visitor of the resort to Al-Jahili Fort. Reconstructing the past through clear references to local heritage is not only confined to Qasr al-Sarab, but has been tested on a smaller scale in the desert resorts of Bab Al-Shams and Al-Maha in the Dubai desert. It is interesting to compare these notions of what constitutes the identity of a modern Arab Nation, notions arguably imbedded in the processes of modernization itself which provokes a system producing and consuming of spaces of neo-heritage in a country where the scarcity of local heritage is noted due to its rapid urbanization. It seems that Qasr al-Sarab and the Emirates Palace hotel though different in styles and design approaches agree in context on reconstructing the past or rather multiple past in the UAE within the context of a global context of richness, refinement and comfort that display arts and crafts of an Arab/Islamic history in the wake of extravagant interior designs, infinity pools, and terraces with framed views of the desert/or shorefronts, orchestrated to create diversified perspectives of the emerging modern nation state. The interest in reconstructing the past through such museological hotel resorts can be understood due to the lack of appropriate exhibition spaces in museums and modes of exhibition that are now confined limited spaces in heavily restored structures that lack the appropriate facilities to retain the visitor beyond short periods of time such as Al-Ain Museum and Sheikh Zayed Palace Museum in Al-Ain. Nonetheless from an environmental perception, the shaded liwans and stucco screens seen in the Palace museum in modest form were replicated in a much more elaborate spatial environment in Qasr al-Sarab. (Figure1) Here the hyper-real not only surpasses

the real as argued by Jean Baudrillard but takes on a new role of reviving an interest in the historic/local/traditional built environment (Baudrillard, 1988) Thereby, these new museum like hotel/resorts offer through their manifestations of accurate replicas learning experiences and an appreciation of the past that is constructed within and ‘Arabian’ context. (Urry, 2002)



*Figure 1. Sheikh Zayed House Museum, Qasr Al-Sarab—screens & triangulated arches*

### **LOCAL HERITAGE, RE-CONSTRUCTING THE PAST—QASR AL-SARAB**

Completed in 2009 Qasr Al-Sarab hinges on local build traditions such as the covering of its walls in adobe plaster, the use of fort like parapets and wooden beams and reed mats to create authentic interiors. The rooms and suites in Qasr Al-Sarab suites vary in size with all with modern entertainment systems of large flat screen televisions, digital video disc players and Internet connections. The relatively aesthetic exterior juxtaposed against an extensive use of carved wood, scalloped arches and pierced metal chandeliers, not only link such resorts to local tradition, but also help us better understand the use of Umayyad desert palaces such as Qasr al-Hayr Al-Sharqi, Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi and Khirbet al-Mifjar. The exact use of such forts in the Jordanian desert and the Gulf remain ambiguous, they can be better understood as resorts or retreats from the urbanism. Their

interiors which exhibit decorative fragments in luxurious compositional formations are revived in contemporary desert retreats such as Qasr al-Sarab, Bab al-Shams and Al Maha resorts. In both contemporary and historic context the need to preserve the role of privacy in the Bedouin lifestyle and temporary distancing from the city is and was achieved through this iconic fort like structures to confirm traditional identity in period(s) of communal shifts from nomadic to urban. In both cases of the Umayyad desert fort like structures (8<sup>th</sup> century) and Al-Jahili Fort in al-Ain 1891, the high walls, crenellated parapets and rounded tower, and multi-lobed arch ornamenting the entrance conveys only an image of a traditional fort, that has been subjected to restoration which may have added layers to it that may have not existed. Its usage as a reference in Qasr Al-Sarab builds on Viollet-le-Duc's 19<sup>th</sup> century restorations in Paris which advocated that that all layers of history need to be included, an initiative that is controversial among many architectural historians that prefer to restore heritage to its initial form (Figure 2)

Today these luxurious desert complexes are not only open to the royal elite such as Al-Walid II, and Hisham ibn Abdul Malik and their entourages but rather to broader social group namely the elite tourist. Qasr Al-Sarab, Bab al-Shams and Al-Maha resorts illustrate an Arabian styled space based on historical references to a past where Muslim rulers expressed riches and communal change through adopted arts and crafts of earlier dynasties. Stone and gold glass mosaics, combined with secluded gardens, pools and audience halls all created facades of the cohesive yet fragmented functional living spaces and a strong contrast between ecstatic exterior and extravagant interiors. Another example of the stark contrast between exterior and interior is exemplified by the Fortified like palatial complex of Alhambra which as outlined by Lisa Golombek connects the inspiration for the interlacing stucco walls of Alhambra to the centuries earlier intersecting arches at Cordoba (Golombek, 1988). In Qasr al-Sarab these same references are made different motifs from distant and near pasts are combined under the penumbra of revival of the architecture of local desert forts such as Al-Jahili.



Figure 2. Al-Jahili Fort, its towers and arches replicated in Qasr al-Sarab

As highlighted by Oleg Grabar, symbolically rich cultural traditions but could only preserve symbols which were not religiously charged, and therefore especially in secular architecture it is easy for ornaments to travel freely in time and space, to be copied and imitated in a contemporary context (Grabar, 1980). Nasser Rabbat on the other hand mentions that contemporary attempts to create Arab/Islamic architecture cannot escape the realization that in this age of globalization many of its motifs, forms and fragments are used in different forms to claim a certain nation hood status and represent the identity of communities (Rabbat, 2002). Qasr al-Sarab's strategy to create a collective memory for the resort links communal identity to local heritage, not only through its gates, walls and ceilings but also through many of its interior spaces such as the *majlis* which was for the past centuries a socio-political space. However, the usage of *majlis* space here has been mostly faithful. On the surface the scale, furnishings and lighting systems of the new *majlis* are different from their initial precedents which were limited by the building materials that availed, yet they retain some of the cultural aspects with the objective of re-establishing a socio-cultural environment as it would have existed in the past (Ryan & Stewart, 2009). As highlighted by Grabar, heritage and historical monuments representing age value in the form incomplete ruins are easier to accept because it is presumed that architects, planners and craftsmen in the past could not design something ugly and while these visible monuments maybe critiqued as simulacra's attempting to emulate palatial fragments of the past, they remain essential spaces of display of some aspects of local

culture and identity(Grabar, 1994). The interpretative version of vernacularism is referred to here as neo vernacularism which has emerged as an approach to bringing a new life to vernacular heritage for new and contemporary functions. The widest area of the application of this approach is obviously the architecture for tourism and culture (Ozkan, 1985). Here attention to detail, and the decor also includes the exhibition of artifacts, including the historic swords, weavings, and artworks. Such cultural tourism complexes call for interpretation through appropriate equipment and furniture, and, by extension, via the activities conducted in and around the structure (Gonzalez, 2003). Here, the activity of remaking an historic building introduces the powerful experience of living a history, and represents an inviting experiment for subsequent presentation of place other than those experienced in restored forts and Heritage villages. Here authenticity becomes a tricky concept, and there is plenty of room for purists to criticize both the presentation of individual specimen buildings and the impression created by relocating them in artificial relationships to each other (Young, 2006).

## **RE-INTERPRETING THE PAST-THE ARTS OF ISLAM AND THE EMIRATES PALACE**

Qasr al-Sarab and the Emirates Palace have much in common despite their different styles and locations since they both with varying extents manifest new and more elaborate expressions of chosen arts and crafts of Islam. They are representations of the new 'orient' emerging in oil rich states that aim to compete on the map of world cities through constructing an identity of modernity and tradition that builds on interpretations of fragments of well known monuments (Corbin, 2002). In the process arts and crafts of Islam spanning the artistic realm from the Maghreb to Mughal India is visually orchestrated on the architectonics of both the Emirates Palace and Qasr al-Sarab, can be understood as contemporary attempts to create the identity of Abu Dhabi via collages of Islamic and Arab Architectures. There is also another aspect here related to the geographic location of the Gulf as a center for cross cultural interaction between East and West, which represents a broader debate about the universality of architecture especially in recent decades all over the Arab World. Emirates

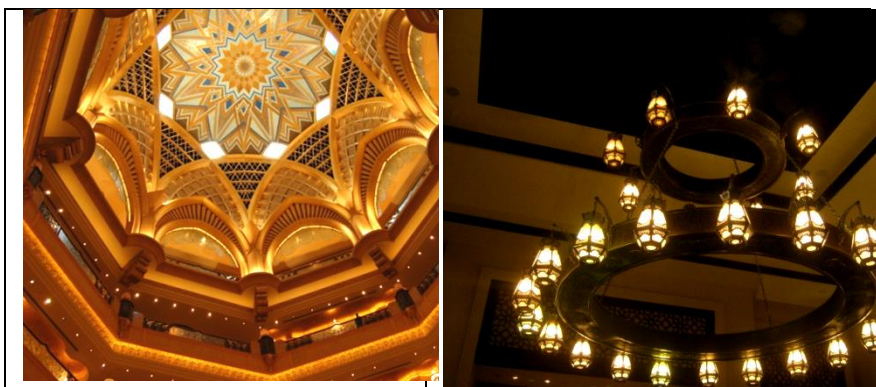


Palace Hotel, opened in 2005, as a wholly owned enterprise of the government of Abu Dhabi, the hotel is sited in perhaps the most important location in Abu Dhabi, and its setting affirms at once its landmark status in the urban context of Abu Dhabi and its importance as an architectural expression of national pride. It is not incidental that the hotel is commonly called simply 'The Emirates Palace'. Many first time tourists visit the monument expecting not a commercial hotel but a royal residence open to the public. The hotel has a total area of 850,000 square meters set in 1,000 hectares of neo-Mughal landscaped park complete with palms, domed pavilions and fountains. The carefully assembled landscape around the hotel closely resembles historic Islamic sites, not only because of a shared design vocabulary, but also because, like its precedents, the hotel's landscape is arranged as if it were to function as a setting for historical ritual. This same neo-Mughal theme of décor is used on the hotel's interior, which although dominated by Mughal inspired domes and scalloped or multi lobed arches (Figure 3). The strongest critique of the Palace Hotel is its extensive use of gold leaf walls. This critique not new but was also subjected to Umayyad structures such as al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock due to their extensive use of gold glass mosaics on the pendentives under the main dome and the spandrels of the arches. Following Duncan, it might be tempting to consider such an eclectic assembly of forms, images and treatments a 'composite space' (Duncan 2005), but it will become clear that the overall effects of extravagant ornaments in the Emirates Palace hotel most certainly exceed any notion of hybrid spatiality, rather reflect a manifestation of the richness of Abu Dhabi as the capital of the UAE.



*Figure 3. Moorish/Hispanic arched niches—Emirates Palace & Qasr al-Sarab*

The Emirates Palace represents the culmination of architectural manifestations for a community whose aesthetic taste reached a high degree of sensibility due to the considerable economic prosperity, the long evolution of Moorish/Hispanic arts culminated in Alhambra and the presence of well documented texts and drawings for the palatial complex aided in the displacement of many of its arts, crafts and fragments in interior designs. In the Emirates Palace the comforts offered by this hotel – climate control, modulated lighting, elegant dining and recreational facilities, helpful staff, non-threatening and accessible displays of cultural and aesthetic works – play an important role in the way the Emirates Palace encourages and facilitates local and expat communities, as well as tourists, to experience Islamic architectural and cultural heritage without feeling intimidated and without any need to venture beyond the hotel’s walls. All of this takes place within an architectural design delivered by a strategy that incorporates fragmentary replication and reassembly of iconic references and well-known images from the history of Islamic architecture, landscape and urban design.



**Figure 4.** Interior ceilings, netted pendentives & interlacing woodwork—  
*Emirates Palace & Qasr al-Sarab*

The wooden ceilings of Qasr Alhambra with their interlacing geometric patterns were interpreted as a form spatial representation of the celestial order in relation to the ruler, especially via their placement in the throne room (Gonzalez, 2003). Likewise the placement of the dome over a tomb in Humayun's tomb, the Taj Mahal held similar interpretations that were further accentuated with presence of inscription bands that linked and explained the intentions of their designers, however, in the Emirates Palace and Qasr al-Sarab these forms are namely decorative, yet can be also understood within the broader context of creating a narrative to reconstruct the past of a modern Arab Nation with references to an Islamic past. Whatever the morality of its collecting of architectural fragments in one building, the resulting contemporary monument is tainted by the aura of the traditional monument it references. For example the highlight of the Emirates Palace hotel is its magnificent central dome which covers an atrium 60 meters high and 42 meters wide, mimicking the scale of the dome at Humayun's tomb. From the interior, the hotel's dome is clearly reminiscent of that of Humayun's tomb, but here the dome has been made much more visible, largely through the use of modern lighting techniques (Figure 4). As perhaps the most recognizable of all architectural elements of Islamic architecture, the dome is here rhetorically emphasized, its size and prominence effectively reasserting the hotel's deep roots in Islamic architectural history. Taken all together, these aesthetic fragments, decorative elements, surface treatments and building

forms function as an explicit and clearly recognizable set of references to the broad history of Islamic architecture.



*Figure 5. Gold glass mosaic panels and marble inlay flooring—Emirates Palace*

In the Emirates Palace hotel displays of facsimiles of crafts from across Islam, include gold glass mosaic tiles, marble inlay (Figure 5) and, interestingly, a revival of an iconic mosaic recreated as a mural depicting seven horses around the representation of an orange tree full of fruit. This mural can hardly go unnoticed, as its central motif, the fruit tree, explicitly references the iconic Umayyad Lion Gazelle panel in Khirbet al-Mifjar, famously commissioned by the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid. (Behrens-Abouseif, 1997). What is important here is not whether the Emirates Palace mural is a faithful representation of the original mosaic, but rather the simple fact of the iconic work's dominance in the hotel, the original's central importance in the canon of Islamic art, and the work's immediate recognizability, here in the form of a magnificent rendition. As outlined by Salma Damluji the need for a polemic on Arab/Islamic Style has become desperately acute in countries where there was little original reference to formal Islamic Architecture, which is most evident in surface treatments, the eclectic forms used in the expression of facades (Damluji, 2006) Here modernity, Islam and tradition have become a triad to legitimize the ruling state in a rapidly developing world that has a need to establish a modern Emirati identity. The closer Abu Dhabi's newly constructed heritage come to the originals from which they draw inspiration, the more direct and true they become. The fascination of reconstructing the

power of the aesthetic and the choices made by new countries in constructing new cities can no longer be assessed within the narrow confines of each locality or in isolation from a complete opus of an Islamic or Arab architectural and vernacular urban heritage. (Damluji, 2006) In other words they offer a post-modern expression of tradition for a city that targets to emerge as a global competitor on the world map of modern cities. Thus architecture today finds itself more and more having to function within the confines of complexities as its defining edges. (Rabbat, 2002) Rather than appearing as merely derivative and superficial – rather, that is, than appear to function as flat and weak collages from a once meaningful system of Islamic symbols and symbiotic signs (Jameson 1990) – these monuments recoup a deep sense of authenticity by virtue of their deployment of sign fragments that have never lost their charge as elements akin to Anderson’s ‘emanations of reality’. Almost as much as the ideographs of Arabic, the aesthetic fragments redeployed in these new monuments still appear to retain the truth of Islam. Recalling what might be described as a form of dynamic in communal identity across Islam, hovering uneasily as it does between nation state and modern communities of diverse background, it does not take much reflection to see that the temporal and geographic distance that characterizes the predominantly expatriate Muslim population of Abu Dhabi only helps to over-determine the power of these monuments in the popular imagination. To the degree that nationalist bonds of affiliation within a predominantly expatriate community come under stress, it can be expected that many will seek to strengthen their bonds to Islamic community ‘beyond’ the nation and within a system of sign fragments that have never lost their intrinsic meaning.

## **CONCLUSION**

During the past decade Abu Dhabi has emerged on the global map as the Capital of the United Arab Emirates. Supporting this image is a plan to create iconic institutions namely mega museums but also hotels and desert resorts and projects that emphasize the city’s Arab Muslim identity, the vacuum of presence of international museums with their exhibition spaces and audio visual mediums. The restored fort or courtyard house

is no longer sufficient to offer a strong role in the narration of national history and heritage, thereby newly emerging institutions especially the Emirates Palace have hosted several international exhibitions such as the Khalili Collection of Islamic Arts, the Nomadic Textiles Exhibition, the Picasso Exhibition and currently the Da Vinci Exhibition. Such exhibitions which have attracted large audiences could not have been hosted in the restored heritage forts and houses due to the constraints of space. However, the important role currently played by the Emirates Palace as a museum/hotel may change once the Desert Louvre by Jean Nouvel, and the Guggenheim by Frank Gehry have been constructed. Already the exhibitions of Manarat al-Saadiyat is beginning to attract attention as it opened its doors to the public, which may reduce or support the role the Emirates Palace and Qasr al-Sarab as part of the cultural projects recently completed or underway in Abu Dhabi. Indeed, these museum-hotel-resorts operate to reinforce the notion that Abu Dhabi is to be seen as a new center for an emerging multi-faceted Islamic world. They can also be understood as different manifestations of a strategy of identity reinforcement that is also supported by the building's location—urban or desert/distant. No longer quite so simply hotels these new constructed heritages are part of a strategy that helps further consolidate the hotel as a museum of sorts, and an important cultural venue in Abu Dhabi. Coupled with the hotel's architectural strategy of gathering references and symbolic fragments from across Islam, as well as a landscape design that suggests the iconic gardens of Mughal India and Cordoba and Granada, the Emirates Palace Qasr al-Sarab need to be understood as no less than a highly ambitious and multi-layered 'condensation' of the manifold cultural expressions of Islam itself, and a multi-ethnic expatriate community that have lived for decades in Abu Dhabi.

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