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Rania Matar and one of her photographs in Singapore's Sana Gallery. The gallery showcases Middle East contemporary art. Frederik Balfour/ Bloomberg News

Singapore acts as arts link from Asia to Gulf

Once travellers used the Silk Road. Now what can be called the Silica Route, which relies on 21st century communications, is fusing ancient regions and cultures. **Umej Bhatia writes**

Can Singapore help to reconnect Asia and the Middle East through art? This aspiration is a small but important aspect of a larger, historical rediscovery that is reconnecting the regions, cultures and peoples of the Middle East, the Near East and the Far East.

Why a journey of rediscovery? Well, Asia has had a long history of engagement with the Middle East. Historically, traders travelled via the overland Silk Road or the maritime Silk Route centred on the Indian Ocean basin.

Extending back as far as the 7th century, these criss-crossing routes linked East Asia with South Asia, South East Asia, Central Asia, and the Arabian Gulf.

The earliest Arabic source to describe these networks is the Akhbar al-Sin wa'l-Hind or "News of China and India". In this 9th-century account, a merchant named Sulayman describes his travel from Oman through India to South East Asia and then China.

Traders such as Sulayman brought cultural and artistic influences from the Middle East to Asia and vice versa. By the 8th century thousands of Arabs, lived, worked and played in China's Guangzhou province. In other words, *tijara wa ziya-ra* – not trade alone.

But these natural connections between two ancient regions were disrupted by the large and unpredictable forces of history. A series of "black swans" surfaced to twist and tangle the cords of the maritime silk route.

To cite one example, Britain's imperial navy and western steam-powered merchant navies overcame the

seasonal monsoons that dictated the natural pattern of Arab, Persian and Indian dhow trade on the Silk sea routes.

This disruption and disconnect lasted several centuries. But now the tide of history is turning once again.

First, the rise of China and India has shifted the global economy's centre of gravity back towards Asia. Today, the continent has become one of the Middle East's biggest trade markets.

Asia's share of total trade with the GCC countries jumped more than threefold over three decades from just 10 per cent in 1980 to 36 per cent in 2009.

If this level of trade growth continues, Asia will be the GCC's biggest trading partner by 2017, accounting for a greater volume of trade than the western developed countries.

Second, with the end of colonialism, the historical linkages between Asia and the Middle East were revived and expanded. Countries and regions once belonging to different European empires are rediscovering one another. East-east cooperation is a new and fascinating phenomenon.

Third, new forces of communication are driving the mutual revived interest of countries in Asia and the Middle East. This convergence is made possible by the technologies of a new era of globalisation.

What we may call globalisation's "silica route" is helping to renew the ancient Silk Route. Silica forms the optical fibres that transmit reams of data across the globe in seconds.

Silica also composes the semiconductor material that hosts the inte-

grated circuits used in all electronics today, including smartphones, which powers our new communications revolution.

The Silica Route relies on 21st-century communication and networks to fuse together ancient regions and cultures. Instead of the monsoon that facilitated long-range seafaring in ancient times, computer servers and cloud computing drive today's rediscovery.

Behind the display of every painting or exhibit is a trove of compressed bits and bytes that bring artists, exhibits, organisers and gallery viewers together.

Singapore is an ideal location for facilitating the Silica Route reconnection. Collectors from the Middle East and the Gulf will find in Singapore a promising market to raise awareness of art from the region.

First, Singapore is the original global city, with world class high-tech infrastructure and a regional hub for trade, services and exhibitions.

Second, it has a vibrant visual arts scene anchored by flagship events such as Art Week and Art Stage Singapore.

Third it hosts a bulk of the region's high networth individuals and arts connoisseurs.

Ahead of Singapore's inaugural Arab Art Exhibition, called Terms and Conditions, this coming summer, which will feature art loaned from this region, several promising exchanges have already begun.

Let me just briefly cite three representative examples from the past three years that augur a revival of ancient linkages through the new Silica Route.

First, in April 2010, the Abu Dhabi

Authority for Culture and Heritage organised an art exhibition for the acclaimed UAE-based Singapore artist and Zayed University professor Leon Chew at the National Theatre in Abu Dhabi.

Second, last October, Sana Gallery, South East Asia's first Middle East contemporary art gallery opened its doors in Singapore.

Third, last August, Vincent Leow, a Singaporean artist and professor at the College of Fine Arts and Design at the University of Sharjah, launched his solo exhibition, Resembling Imaginary Creatures in the Chan Hampe Gallery in Singapore's Raffles Hotel.

This triptych of examples I have offered; a Singapore artist exhibiting in the Gulf, a Middle East contemporary art gallery in Singapore, and a UAE-based Singapore artist exhibiting on the island, together forms a tableau highlighting the diversity, vitality and promise of Singapore as a bridge for the budding arts linkages between Asia and the Middle East.

To be sure, the rediscovery of ancient cross-regional contacts is a journey that is in equal measures virtual and physical. However, the actual destination points squarely to Singapore's potential as a key "server" in the new Silica Route that connects Middle East art with Asian collectors, and tropical East Asia to temperate West Asia.

Indeed, Singapore understands the art of cross-regional business and is well placed to know the business of cross-regional art.

Umej Bhatia is the ambassador of the Republic of Singapore to the UAE