



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

## Workshop 9

# Visual Culture in the GCC

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## Abstract

Since the 1960s, the Arab Gulf has witnessed major transformations on the economic, political and social levels. The oil economy, demographic change, as well as recent processes of internationalization and globalization had an impact on visual culture and have led to a new visual identity. The proposed workshop will focus on the diverse manifestations of visual culture in the Gulf in the post-oil era. It will address the relationship between visual identity and socio-economic realities. Among the suggested themes are: Visual rhetoric and identity; Modernity and tradition; Current trends in the production and consumption of visual culture. Through the use of cultural theory and adopting 'the image' as a tool for the production of meaning, the workshop will reflect theoretically on the multiplicity of readings and interpretations. Papers will address the official visual rhetoric, as well as the everyday media and low visual culture, taking into account the multifaceted aspects of visual expression in the Gulf region.

## Workshop Description and Rationale

The study of the visual culture in the Gulf is important in an era when heightened visualization has become a defining attribute. However, this cannot be separated from the multiplicity of socio-economic circumstances. Since the 1960s, the Gulf region has witnessed a period of major economic, political and social transformations. The

formation of independent states and the post-oil economy provided for major urban developments and a clear change in social structure and lifestyle. The last decade saw further modernization, coupled with an internationalization of demographics and a globalizing effect. These processes have become culturally embodied in the visual narratives of the Gulf as well as the layers of projection and representation; a visual rhetoric and a flux of visualization, projection and internal identifications at the level of media projection, art and architectural production, consumption modes, urbanization patterns and social relationships.

Since the 1960s, a process of visual production and representation developed in a number of GCC states. For instance, the period following independence in the UAE saw major transformations through the massive visual re-construction of a newly formed state. A new visual identity was in the making: flags designed, money minted, stamps printed. Another example is the urban expansion and modernization in the Saudi Arabia of the 1970s. The negotiation between modernity and tradition in recent UAE projects and the visualization of Qatar's 2022 World Cup projects is already predicting a future role and identity.

The proposed workshop will examine the above processes as well as the motivations, causes and implications of visual representation and the construction of identity in the Gulf. The workshop will address the following questions:

- What is the significance of visual studies in the context of the Gulf?
- What are the underlying links between visual culture, social structure and economic processes in the GCC?
- What defines the visual identity of the Gulf? And how is it expressed in a globalizing world?
- What defines the sensibilities, aesthetic values and expressions of Gulf culture(s)? And what are the symbolic meanings behind these expressions?
- What are the commonalities and differences in the modes of expressions and representations between the various GCC countries?

Presentations will address a diversity of theoretical approaches and rely on 'the image' and its underlying meaning as a focal point through which identity is conveyed; the image as a tool for the production of meaning. The intention is to reflect on the multiplicity of readings and interpretations in a constructed identity through visual material produced in and about the Gulf. Identity will be discussed in relation to the diverse manifestations of visual culture. Papers will address the official visual rhetoric, as well as the aesthetic and cultural values implied in everyday media and visual representations, taking into account the multifaceted aspects of production that equally echo high and low culture.

## **Scholarly Contribution**

The workshop will offer a better insight on the politics of representation in the Gulf. Contributions will analyze the multifaceted aspects of Gulf visual culture and its position as a cause, a reflection, or a response to social, political, and economic processes. Through a multi-disciplinary approach, workshop participants will exchange knowledge and interlink positions on the specificity of Gulf nations' visual production and identity. The workshop will recognize common patterns, categories and modes of representation as they are practiced in the GCC. Another contribution in this workshop is that it answers the need for a discussion on an underrepresented area of research in the Gulf region. By framing this in the wider debate on visual studies, the workshop will introduce and interrogate the intersections between visual culture, art, architecture and media in the socio-economic realities of the GCC.

## **Anticipated Participants**

We are seeking paper submissions from academics, researchers and postgraduate students who are doing research in art theory, research by design, media studies, visual culture, and visual anthropology as well as architectural and urban studies. Papers must focus on the Gulf region and will explore new perspectives on the visual culture of the Arab Peninsula. The expected theoretical input may epitomize a variety of positions and new interpretative strategies including those developed by semiotics, anthropology, sociology and cultural theory.

Workshop contributions include but are not limited to:

- Theoretical perspectives and methods of analysis on visual culture in the Gulf
- Case studies on Gulf art and architecture and their cultural implications
- Case studies on visual design of official artifacts such as stamps, currencies, books
- Studies on contemporary living from the standing of the consumer of culture
- Applied methods for the analysis of media, film or literature and their symbolic cultural meaning

The framework of the workshop will explore a wide range of themes including but not limited to:

### **1. Visual representation in the post-oil Gulf region**

- From trade to oil-economy: imported imagery and new aesthetic values
- The impact of oil economy on urban developments in the Arab Gulf

### **2. Visual rhetoric and identity in the Gulf**

- Media and the visual identity in the Gulf
- Attitudes towards gender in the visual representation of the Gulf
- The rise of expatriate demographic and its impact on local representations of the self

- Understanding the consumer's reception, perception and response to visual media

### **3. Modernity and tradition in the Gulf**

- Modernity in the Gulf: a reaffirmation of local culture or a foreign implementation?
- Bedouin culture, transient settlements and modern cities
- Storytelling and the Gulf narrative traditions
- Representations of the past and the command of the stereotype

### **4. Current trends in the production and consumption of visual culture**

- The politics of representation in the Gulf
- Contemporary processes of production in art, architecture and design in the GCC
- Visual culture and art production in the Gulf within a global and local context
- Projection and consumption of elements of contemporary Gulf culture

## **Workshop Director Profiles**

**Nadia Mounajjed** holds a Ph.D. from Sheffield University, and a Master's in Architectural Design from the University College London. Prior to her academic career, she trained as an architect in Damascus. Since 2004, she has been actively engaged in education and research. Nadia is currently working as an assistant professor of architecture and design at the American University of Sharjah. Working in an interdisciplinary capacity, she is currently engaged in research projects on visual culture and design. In 2010, she joined the Sharjah Art Foundation as a research advisor for their project entitled: An Archeology of Visual Identity.

**Sharmeen Syed** studied Architecture and Urban Design at the American University of Sharjah and is currently working as architect and researcher at Sharjah Art Foundation. Syed is a researcher on the project An Archaeology of Visual Identity; and is part of the architecture team for Sharjah Art Foundation Art Spaces and Sharjah Biennial among other projects since 2010. She is also engaged in independent research and artistic projects investigating subject matter in the fields of cultural geography and visual culture --particularly photographic practices, urbanism and architecture. She has worked in the mediums of photography, video, and text.

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