

Toronto's Aga Khan Museum opens groundbreaking exhibition on Syria

By Rona McIntyre

Toronto – On Oct. 15, 2016, Toronto's Aga Khan Museum opened its world-premiere art exhibition *Syria: A Living History* along with extensive complementary programming including art, film, music, drama, lectures, and workshops intended to honour the rich cultural history of the troubled nation.

As we are inundated with reports on Syria's civil war and its ongoing humanitarian crisis, The Aga Khan Museum seeks to view the country through a new lens, focusing instead on Syria's unique place in history at the crossroads of culture, art, and civilization. The juxtaposition of ancient and modern works elevates Syria as a beacon of strength and resilience despite its current hardships.

In partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, the exhibition features Syrian arts and artifacts spanning five thousand years; from 3,200 BC to the present. Works were borrowed from the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the ROM, and the Atassi Foundation; a non-profit organization for Syrian art.

Contemporary Syrian artist, Tammam Azzam's *Storeys Series* depicts all-too familiar scenes of devastation and burnt-out buildings. The work is placed alongside ancient artifacts like an exquisite 5,000-year-old alabaster vase from Mesopotamia, making a strong statement about the perseverance of artists amidst horrific destruction.

Co-Curators Dr. Filiz Çakir Phillip and Professor Nasser Rabbat seek to challenge our perceptions of Syria's past and present, and open a dialogue toward understanding its future. Phillips said "it was important to organize it with a certain continuity, so we can talk about art and try to find new hope for the future of this place."

"Syria has made great contributions to the world's art and history," said Rabbat, "and it is the artists who are displaced today who will write, sculpt, and draw Syria's legacy for future generations. We need to see the whole picture."

Other highlights include Skye Fitzgerald's 2015 film *50 Feet from Syria* which was nominated for the 2016 Academy Award for Short Nonfiction, an international symposium entitled *Syria's Art and Architecture: A Multicultural History* and the Aga Khan Museum's Annual Lecture presented by Professor Maamoun Abdulkarim, Director-General of Antiquities and Museums, Arab Republic of Syria.

Syria: A Living History runs from Oct. 15, 2016 until Feb. 26, 2017 at the Aga Khan Museum, 77 Wynford Dr., Toronto, Ontario, M3C 1K1. For complete program information, visit <https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/>