

WRITER

Elspeth Dehnert

PHOTOGRAPHER

Alisa Reznick



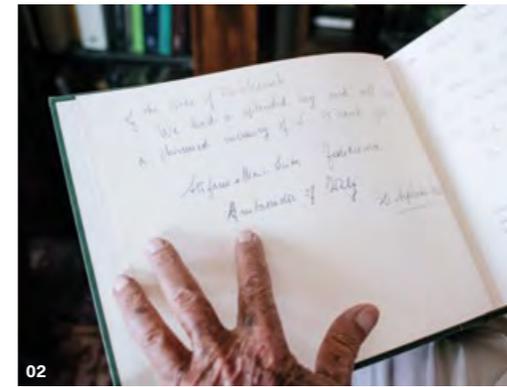
Duke of Mukheibeh

Inside the Jabal Jofa home of Mamdouh Bisharat





01



02



I'm very basic about art, I just have an eye for things

ممدوح بشارت

'All the people that come and admire what I'm doing or listen to what I have to say, they're all my children somehow,' says the Duke of Mukheibeh, 78-year old Mamdouh Bisharat, as he lifts a cigarette to his lips.

A Jordanian art collector and gregarious cultural icon, Bisharat is referring to those who visit him and the collection housed in his 84-year old home in Amman's Jabal Jofa neighbourhood.

Today is like any other day. Bisharat is hosting a gathering of admirers and friends on his terrace, which offers a 180-degree view of the city, from the downtown area to the Roman ruins. Between chatter, they eat cake and observe the crowded rolling hills in the distance as they sit among unassuming furniture, stone sculptures, randomly strewn artworks and a homemade fire pit containing flattened cardboard boxes.

'His house is a little museum and a great school for people,' says Dr Mohamed Rabie, an accomplished author and professor of political economy who has known Bisharat for over a decade. The other guests include Mostafa

Salameh, the first Jordanian to summit Mount Everest, and an activist visiting from San Francisco, who met Bisharat just a day earlier and says, after taking a sip of lemonade, 'He shares people with other people.'

Bisharat's house – built by his father in 1932 before the formation of modern-day Jordan – is not only a social space and home that he shares with his wife, it's also an informal art gallery and cultural exhibit encompassing paintings, sculptures and historic artefacts that he has collected across the span of his lifetime.

His favourite pieces hang in the dining room, which houses a long wooden table with metal chairs, Bohemian rugs and red velour seating. Squeezed between other artworks above a gothic-inspired sofa are individual portraits of himself, his mother and his father. Bisharat's portrait – a colourful and bold abstract piece – was painted by the famous Turkish artist Princess Fahrelnissa Zeid in 1988 when he was 50 years old. 'It was the last one she ever made,' he says.

'She had arthritis and rheumatism and had to

01 Mamdouh Bisharat in his house in Amman

02 Bisharat's guests sometimes leave notes for their host

03 Modest furnishings and eclectic artworks fill the inside of his home



03



04

lift her right hand with her left hand,' he remembers. 'She insisted on doing my portrait before she died, so it has a special place in my heart and my house.'

Upon entering the home, the foyer is perhaps the space that most resembles a gallery – it's where he displays the majority of his portraits of family members and Jordanian royalty. Sketches and ancient stone sculptures spanning various genres and eras also fill the room, from the mosaic-tiled floor to the inconspicuous ceiling. The individual spaces are so cluttered, the blush-coloured walls appear to be gasping for air from beneath the never-ending maze of rectangles and squares.

'I'm very basic about art. I just have an eye for things,' Bisharat says matter-of-factly. 'It's not based on intellectualism or great art history, or any phenomenal background.'

This sentiment is evident when he shows you around his home. In an indistinct, dimly-lit room

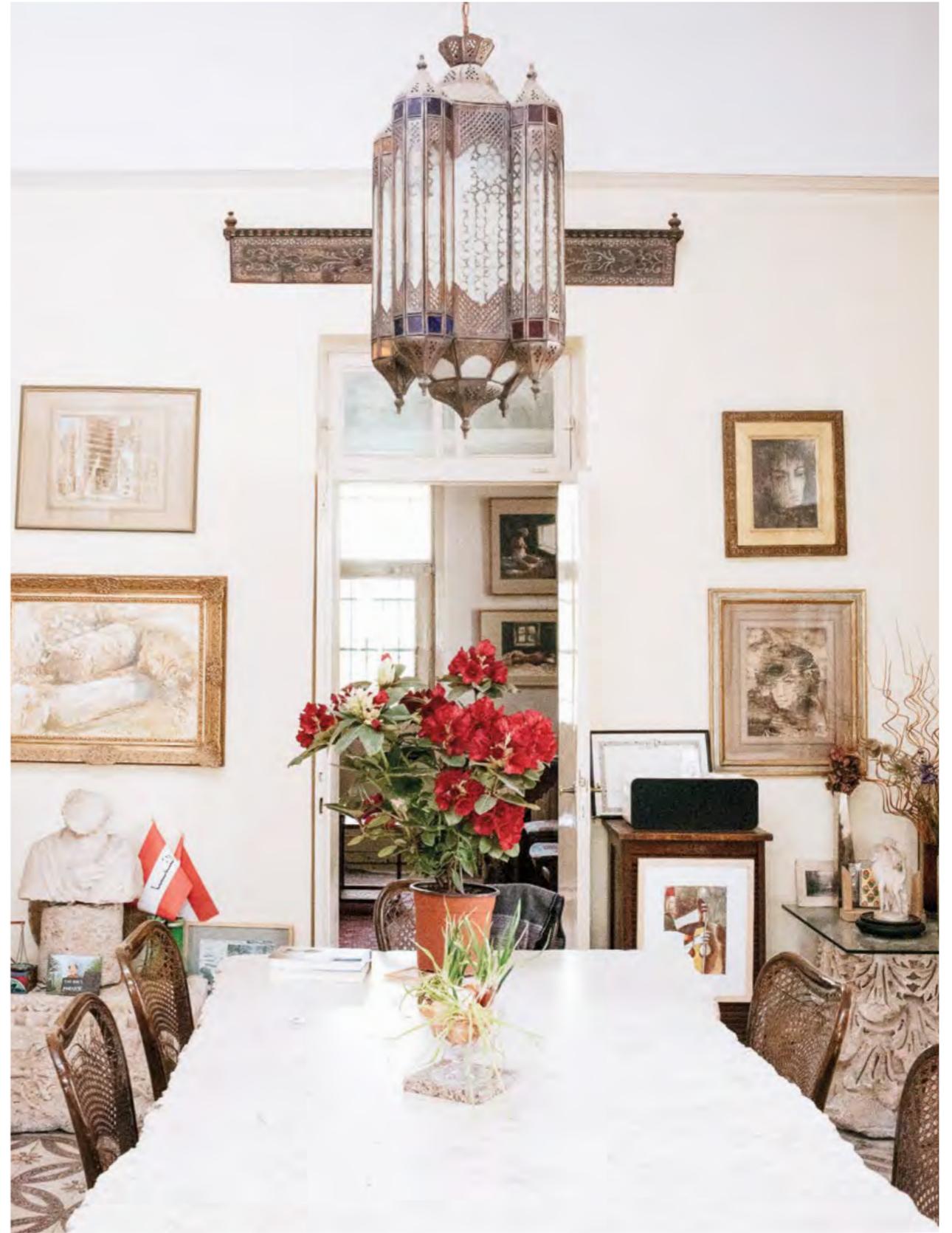
adjacent to the dining area and located at the base of a long hallway is a giant slab of polished, yet rough-edged stone perched atop pockmarked stone columns. It's a piece that gives him great pride. Bisharat salvaged the stone from a nearby quarry and had a table made from it by his own design.

'I enjoy everything Jordanian,' he says, running his weathered hand across the stone's surface. 'I try to enhance everything Jordanian, be it vegetables, fruits, material made here and so on.'

Bisharat's mission to preserve his beloved country's heritage began after he returned to Jordan from Egypt, where he attended the American University of Cairo and ignited his passion for antiquities. He made the exodus back home in order to manage the properties owned by his father, whose health was failing at the time. The lands were later developed into a handful of farms, including one in the north-west of the country in an area called Mukheibeh. He says his friend,

04
Painted portraits of Bisharat line many of the walls

05
His terrace overlooks the Roman ruins in downtown Amman





05





Owing its name to the ancient Ammonites, Amman, like Rome, is believed to have been initially built atop seven hills

the late King Hussein of Jordan, gave him the official title of 'Duke of Mukheibeh' in 1974 in recognition of his conservation efforts there. 'Mukheibeh is the only entity in Jordan that has not been urbanised or subdivided into small plots for sale,' Bisharat says, 'and it's the only farm that still has its original identity.' †

From farming, Bisharat made his way into the Jordanian art world. He helped start the Royal Society of Fine Arts and assisted with the creation of the Jordan Folklore Museum next to Amman's Roman Theatre, which is within comfortable eyeshot of his terrace. He's also promoted many local artists over the years, saying he uses his social connections to open doors for people. ‡

Bisharat's proudest achievement to date, though, is the Duke's Diwan – a historic townhouse in downtown Amman that he saved from demolition and turned into a cultural salon in 2001. Like his home, his diwan has an open-door policy and boasts an impressive collection of art and cultural artefacts highlighting the history of Jordan.



'I have an open house at home, I have an open house in my diwan and my farm in the north is open to visitors,' Bisharat says. 'The whole idea is to bring people together.'

At home in Jabal Jofa, he exchanges a few words with a Sudanese man who has worked with Bisharat for 27 years before making his way into his favourite room – the den. Once inside, he lights another cigarette and sits upon a small daybed adorned with embroidered red fabric and white-and-black accent pillows as BBC News hums softly from an old phone-clock radio. He looks comfortable and at peace here. It's a rare place of solitude where he can go to escape the daily buzz of social interactions that he invites upon himself.

There are many paintings of Bisharat throughout the den. Pointing to one, he says, 'This was done by one of my disciples.' Before long, he scans the rooms as though admiring his own life's worth of collecting. 'I always think I will live forever,' he says. 'It's like the Chinese philosophy where the river flows by itself – the water has to flow somehow.'

† Mukheibeh is located in the north of Jordan along the country's western border

‡ Amman's Roman Theatre dates back to the second century AD. It was built facing north to keep the sun off its 6,000 patrons