

# French Foreign Legion

The Louvre Abu Dhabi leads the charge of new initiatives by France's decorated museums.

by Jason Edward Kaufman

Mohamed Samji



When Abu Dhabi, the oil-rich capital of the United Arab Emirates, decided to rebrand as a culture and tourism destination, the city sought a partnership with the most celebrated and most visited museum in the world. In 2007 the French state agreed to develop what would be called the **Louvre Abu Dhabi** (*louvreabudhabi.ae*), providing curatorial services and training, loans of artwork from major French museums, and advice on building a permanent collection. The museum, which opened in November 2017, is not technically a branch of the French flagship but an Emirati institution managed by French experts that will carry the Louvre name for 30 years. For all of this, Abu Dhabi is paying the French a stunning \$1 billion.

When plans were announced—shortly after the Guggenheim Museum signed a similar agreement for a fraction of that sum—the French intelligentsia blasted the scheme as a commercial sellout to petrodollars that would sully the dignity of French high culture.

Another concern was whether freedom of expression could exist in a conservative Islamic theocracy often cited for censorship. Others saw the collaboration as an inspired act of

statecraft that not only would enrich French museums but also strengthen ties between the Arab world and the West.

Differing opinions aside, the new Louvre is intended as a wonder of the modern world. Abu Dhabi reportedly spent more than \$700 million to build the complex that in aerial photographs looks like a spaceship hovering on the edge of the Arabian Sea. Designed by French architect Jean Nouvel, the building is covered by a dome, 590 feet in diameter, that rests on four columns above a village of 55 white stone buildings.

Steel and aluminum star shapes form the shell's latticework to create what's called the "Rain of Light" effect, allowing rays of sunlight to dapple the walls and pavement by day and make some 7,850 star shapes visible by night. The dome protects visitors from the searing desert heat, and avenues beneath the dome lead to views of the turquoise sea.

Extraordinary architecture aside, the real wonder here is the existence of an art history museum in a country aged fewer than 50 years. The region was divided among seven independent tribes focused on camel herding, date farming, fishing, and pearl diving—until the discovery of oil in 1958. By 1971, the ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, had consolidated the kingdoms and established the United

Arab Emirates. Abu Dhabi continues to control most of the UAE's oil reserves, nearly 10 percent of the world's supply, and has one of the largest per capita GDPs in the world.

As the price for oil has declined, the UAE has developed infrastructure and industry, created campuses for Western universities, and established retail and cultural attractions to drive tourism. The cultural centerpiece of Abu Dhabi's multibillion-dollar plan for its future is Saadiyat Island, the site of the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

Plans for the 10-square-mile Saadiyat (which means "happiness") Cultural District (*saadiyat.ae*) call for residences, hotels, and golf courses—some of which have already opened—and a cluster of museums designed by leading architects. The idea is to create a so-called "Billbao effect" in the gulf, with the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi designed by Frank Gehry, the Zayed National Museum by Norman Foster, a maritime museum by Tadao Ando, and a performing arts center by the late Zaha Hadid's firm.

Although it's been a decade since the plan was announced and construction of the others has barely begun, Abu Dhabi's Tourism Development and Investment Company, which has overseen planning, vows to complete them. Backed by the world's second-largest sovereign wealth

fund, estimated at more than \$800 billion, money is not the obstacle here.

Funding certainly did not hinder acquisitions for the permanent collection at the new Louvre. The UAE announced recently that it was the buyer of Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi*, which made headlines in late 2017 as the most expensive artwork ever sold.

Christie's auctioned the painting in New York for \$450 million (including fees). The heavily restored work may be a poor cousin to *Mona Lisa*, but the expenditure provided ample publicity for the new museum and indicates that Abu Dhabi will be a fierce contender in the art market going forward.

The museum and its growing collection demonstrate Abu Dhabi's ambition to become a modern international city. Still, the 600-plus artworks on display—about half from the Louvre and other French and Middle Eastern museums, and the rest recent acquisitions by Abu Dhabi—are no more numerous or remarkable than the collections of hundreds of museums around the world. (By comparison, the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Louvre in Paris display tens of thousands of objects at a time.)

The quality of art is relatively high, but an ad hoc assortment of objects within 65,000 square feet of total exhibition

space cannot narrate the sweep of art history from antiquity to the present.

The attempt is a thematic approach, divided into 12 chapters with titles like "Civilizations and Empires," "The World in Perspective," and "From the Mediterranean to the Atlantic." These broad categories allow curators to yoke together objects from disparate cultures and periods, such as in the introductory gallery, where glass cases hold trios of items from different civilizations: sculptures of mother with child from Egypt, Europe, and West Africa; equestrian statuettes from China, Iran, and Cyprus; and gold funerary masks from ancient China, Syria, and Peru. Cursory information on labels makes it difficult to learn much about the objects but serves to draw attention to the main idea: World cultures are linked by common threads. A dramatic expression of this notion occurs in a later chapter dubbed "Universal Religions," where examples of the Torah, Buddhist Sutras, and the Quran are spotlighted in a darkened space.

Manuel Rabaté, the museum's French director, describes the new Louvre as "the first universal museum of the Arab world." A tagline in advertisements reads, "We live by the same light." While officials have emphasized the benefits of mutual exploration of shared values, the

diplomatic dimension of the project was not lost on the French.

Directly across the water from the museum is a massive French naval base, one of several military installations in the UAE that enable France to exert its influence in the region. The hope is that the presence and appreciation of Western masterpieces in the Arab world can have an even greater impact over the long-term.

As yet, the museum displays few modern works by Emirati artists: mainly photographic pieces by Hassan Sharif. One hope of the new Louvre's broad acquisition strokes is that exposure to works from cultures around the world will stimulate new directions in Emirati art. Emirati officials believe the new museum will attract local audiences and visitors from neighboring Dubai, as well as growing numbers of tourists from abroad.

Abu Dhabi offers myriad attractions to this end, including the Ferrari World amusement park, a Grand Prix race hosted annually since 2009, the opulent Emirates Palace hotel, and the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. The mosque, which opened in 2007, is a gleaming white and gold structure with 80 domes modeled on the Taj Mahal's, a floral inlaid marble pavement, 1,000 columns, and the world's largest carpet. ▶

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# On the Home Front

Art shrines have popped up across France.



INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR CAVE ART

The renowned cave paintings of Lascaux in Montignac, discovered in 1940 and first opened to the public in 1948, are among our most compelling windows onto prehistoric human life. The images of wild animals were created 20,000 years ago, rendered in black, yellow, and red pigment, or incised into the stone walls and ceiling of the cavern. The astonishing murals attracted millions of visitors before archaeologists realized that breath and body heat were degrading the art. As such, the cave was closed in 1963, and 20 years later a facsimile opened on the site. Located adjacent to the original, it did not prevent further contamination. A second subterranean replica, Lascaux II, opened in 2016 a half-mile away. Now family-friendly tours include directive lighting and interpretation in six languages. The atmosphere in the half-buried building at the foot of Lascaux hill is kept dark and humid to enhance the authenticity of the experience, light and sound effects re-create the prehistoric environment, and digital tools help analyze the superimposed compositions. A temporary exhibition space brings contemporary art into relationship with the origins of image-making. [lascaux.fr](http://lascaux.fr)



Top and Middle: Luc Boegly + Sergio Grazia; Bottom: Eric Sol



YVES SAINT LAURENT MUSEUM PARIS

Although the chance to shop for the latest Yves Saint Laurent creations on the premises of the former couture house (1974–2002) at 5 Avenue Marceau has passed, one haute couture salon as well as Yves Saint Laurent’s studio have been kept intact and are now part of the museum, which opened in October 2017. Galleries present rotating displays of Saint Laurent’s work—outfits, accessories, sketches, and photographs—along with videos about his life and career. Visitors can admire a cocktail dress inspired by Mondrian, and an embroidered jacket inspired by van Gogh. Saint Laurent—whose pea coats, pant suits, and trench coats adapted male fashion to empower women—systematically archived everything he made: some 5,000 garments, 15,000 accessories, and countless drawings and photographs. When he died in 2008, he left everything to a foundation run by Pierre Bergé, his life and business partner. The sale of the Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé art collection fetched approximately \$440 million at Christie’s in 2009. Part of this amount was given to an endowment fund that financed research against AIDS. Another part enabled the foundation to carry on with its missions to preserve and promote Yves Saint Laurent’s work. [museeyslparis.com](http://museeyslparis.com)



INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR TAPESTRY

The small city of Aubusson in central France is renowned for the royal tapestry workshop that Louis XIV established there in 1665. In 1982, the Department of Creuse founded a tapestry museum, and decided to expand it after UNESCO in 2009 declared tapestry part of the world’s intangible cultural heritage. The expanded museum opened in 2016 in the former National School of Decorative Arts and is part of the International Center of Tapestry, a complex that traces the global history of the craft, celebrates the changing style of local weaving over six centuries, and teaches tapestry making. Visitors can see tools and implements used by weavers, view ancient tapestries from around the world, discover the workshop where the latest Aubusson creations are being woven on a 26-foot-wide loom such as the first-ever Tolkien tapestries, and design their own digital tapestries via touch screen. The centerpiece of the museum is a series of rooms tracing the history of Aubusson tapestry through immersive period-room-style installations that evoke the splendor of aristocratic interiors. The first piece in this chronology is the Millefleur with the unicorn (1480), the oldest known Aubusson tapestry, followed by a range of narrative and mythological ensembles. The circuit culminates with modern-era tapestries designed by Picasso, Braque, Man Ray, Calder, and others. [cite-tapisserie.fr](http://cite-tapisserie.fr)

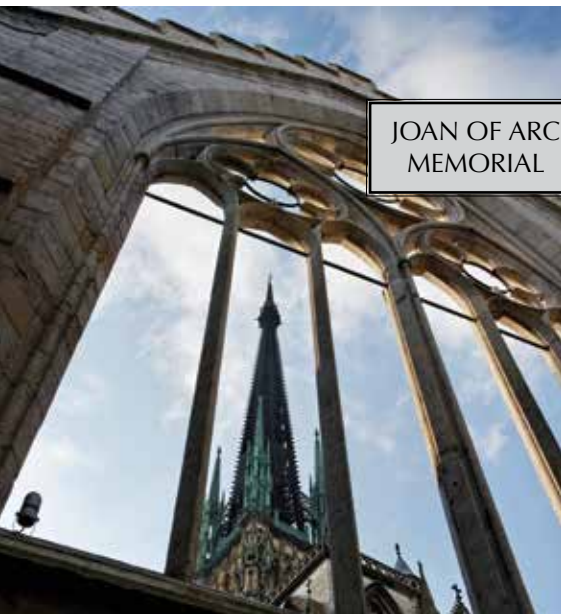
Middle: Beatrice Hatata





FRANCO-AMERICAN MUSEUM, CHÂTEAU DE BLÉRANCOURT

Celebrating the relationship between France and the United States, this museum in northern France was founded by Anne Morgan, a daughter of J.P. Morgan, following the First World War. The project was shuttered in 2005, in need of a multimillion-dollar renovation. Recent fundraising efforts from US donors and the French Ministry of Culture reopened the collection to the public in June 2017. Historic documents, memorabilia, and photographs explore several centuries of Franco-American relations, organized into three thematic sections: “The Influence of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution,” “Two World Wars,” and “The Arts.” Fine art galleries showcase French artists depicting American subjects, beginning with carved busts of American presidents by 18th-century sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon, as well as French portrayals of Native Americans, baseball, and New York. Representing American artists who studied or worked in France are paintings by Childe Hassam, John Singer Sargent, and Alexander Calder, as well as a poster advertising Jazz Age dancer Josephine Baker’s first tour in France. The inter-cultural alliance also extends to the museum’s grounds, where Gardens of the New World cultivate species native to America replete with a field of red, white, and blue flowers. [musefrancoamericain.fr](http://musefrancoamericain.fr)



JOAN OF ARC MEMORIAL

As a 13-year-old in the 15th century, Joan of Arc heard the voices of saints commanding her to lead the future king of France to Reims to be crowned and to liberate the French from English rule. The authorities took her seriously, enlisting her to spearhead an army in Orleans, but she was later captured and sold to the English who convicted her of heresy and burned her at the stake. A 3-year-old museum devoted to Joan’s story is situated in the 14th-century Archbishop’s Palace in Normandy’s capital Rouen, and uses audio-visual techniques to explore the myths that have risen since her canonization. A holographic docent—a jurist who oversaw the posthumous trial that overturned her conviction—guides visitors through exhibits in the Romanesque and Gothic crypts, the former kitchen, and other spaces in the historic palace. Projections of actors read actual testimony from the trial, part of which took place in the same building that houses the museum. A concluding section on Joan’s legacy, dubbed the “Mythothèque” (myth and médiathèque, or multimedia library), assembles reproductions of works of art, films, and objects inspired by the Maid of Orleans. [www.historial-jeannedarc.fr](http://www.historial-jeannedarc.fr)



Middle: Thomas Bovin

INTERNATIONAL CITY OF GASTRONOMY LYON

When UNESCO designated French cuisine part of intangible world patrimony, the French government decided to create a series of culinary cultural attractions. One in Tours is devoted to the science of food, one in Paris-Rungis explores iconic French cuisine, another in Dijon focuses on wine, and the International City of Gastronomy in Lyon is slated to open in July 2019 as a comprehensive survey of the art of eating. With 4,000 restaurants (one for every 334 inhabitants), many of them Michelin-starred, Lyon has long been associated with the delights of the table. The museum will take visitors on a world tour of alimentation—its history, products, refinement, healthfulness, and style. Still under development, the project will include exhibitions, cultural events, cooking demonstrations, and restaurants, promising to immerse visitors in a pedagogical and sensorial experience that engages taste, touch, and smell. According to officials, the organizing themes include “the art of table” and “better eating to live better,” but the thread that runs through the institution is “pleasure.” [grand-hotel-dieu.com](http://grand-hotel-dieu.com) ♦

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