

GALERIE BRIGITTE SCHENK

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PRESS RELEASE

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FOCUS ORIENT

Orientalist Photography from the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries Thomas Walther Collection

The exhibition is presented by the Department of Culture and Information, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, The Sharjah Art Museum, Gallery Brigitte Schenk, Cologne, Germany

Opening: October 15, 2008

Duration: October 16, 2008 - January 10, 2009

Focus Orient is a unique collection of 220 original orientalist photographs from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Of the seven states comprising the United Arab Emirates, Sharjah is the only one that is home to a museum of contemporary art, which has been hosting regular exhibitions since 1995, as well as a Biennale.

Focus Orient, curated by Thomas Walther and Brigitte Schenk, has been made possible with the generous support of Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, the daughter of Sharjah's ruler, His Highness Dr. Sheikh Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi. Since 2003, the art collection of the 28 year-old Sheikha has been curated by Brigitte Schenk in Cologne, Germany.

Thomas Walther, an internationally renowned art collector who has staged major exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and at the Museum of Modern Art in Sydney, is an esteemed authority on photography. This is the first time he is displaying his unique selection of orientalist photography in one of the regions where the photographs were actually taken.

At a highly artistic level, the exhibition features people in everyday life as well as examples of Middle East and North African architecture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this cycle of 220 prints, early photographers such as Francis Frith, Émile Béchar, Felix Bonfils, Lehnert & Landrock are displayed in a complex retrospective featuring albumenprints, gelatine silverprints, saltprints from paper- and glass negatives.

Photographs from this period, which once kindled the imagination of Europe's painters and writers, capture the physical appearance of a vanished world. For the occidental observer of the time, these images often reflected the artists' romantic perception of the Arab world, their motifs based on fantasy and legend. While notions of religiosity, desert life, the harem, and the covered woman were mysterious and unfamiliar to the artists, they represented inherent aspects of Arab culture and tradition.

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For today's Arab audience, these photographs open windows into the true experience of their own ancestors. Just as today's recitations of classical Arabic odes bring life to the legends of traditional life in the desert, these photographs revive the memory of a bygone era that witnessed the birth of modernity.

Focus Orient is under the gracious patronage of H.H. Dr. Sheikh Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, the directorate of Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, and the Department of Information and Culture in Sharjah.

The curators of the exhibition are Thomas Walther and Brigitte Schenk.

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