

Syria's heyday: Artist exhibits 1950s Damascene glory



Art connoisseurs have been bewildered by Khaldoun Chichakli's exhibition in Dubai. (Photo courtesy: Green Art Gallery)

By Dina al-Shibeeb | Al Arabiya News
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Art connoisseurs have been bewildered by Khaldoun Chichakli's exhibition in Dubai of Syria's capital Damascus in its heyday in the 1950s.

"I was trying to document Damascus with these historical paintings to remind people of the old beautiful Damascus, most of which unfortunately doesn't exist today," Chichakli, who could not exhibit his artwork in Damascus, told Al Arabiya News.



Khaldoun Chichakli poses with his art. (Photo courtesy: Dina al-Shibeeb)

Chichakli criticized modernization efforts during his childhood following Syrian independence in 1944, saying old buildings were replaced with “ugly ones with no soul.”

He said he was “deeply infatuated with Damascus,” adding: “In central Damascus, the beautiful buildings were all destroyed... under the pretext of expanding the city. These are all lies... They just wanted to make profit.”

Chichakli said the expansion could have been done on the outskirts of Damascus and keep “the old city, which people felt proud of.”

Details and patience

Each of his artworks took three to six months. “If I have one mistake I’ll lose it immediately, destroy it, because my mistake will be clear and I won’t be able to correct it,” Chichakli said.

His focus on intricate details – from the architecture to the old flag, clothing, or the tram that operated from 1902 until 1956 – is part of his effort to document history, which he started 15 years ago.

“I was also planning to publish a book containing 125 paintings of old Damascus, but unfortunately the war started [in 2011] before I could print the book,” he said, adding that the book is still in the pipeline.

“Not everyone can afford a painting, but a poor person can buy a book and will see every painting,” he said. “Damascus was the cleanest and most beautiful of all Arab cities, and most refined and richest in its variety of cultures and the products that Damascus was known for.”

The artist used Chinese ink for the colors, as it “gives me the ability to make it transparent and make more layers.”

At the exhibition, he showed duplicates of his drawings, one black and white, the other in vibrant colors.

“I always dream to see it with another vision and another color, with brown, red, sunset or at night, I love it in every time and everywhere,” he said of Damascus.

Before exhibiting his work, he had some of his paintings decorating his living room in Syria. “Sometimes my wife would be watching TV, but I’d be looking at the paintings.”

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