



Tehran launches MENA's first paper-based art fair

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's Culture and Islamic Guidance Ministry on Friday opened 'Open Paper,' the first paper-based art fair in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), at the state-run Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults. The event, organized by the Art Galleries Association and coordinated by the ministry's visual arts office, drew senior cultural officials and dozens of exhibitors from across the country, IRNA reported. Mohammad-Mehdi Ahmadi, the ministry's acting deputy for artistic affairs, toured the fair and called paper a "powerful" medium that still shapes public taste and keeps the commercial side of visual arts turning. He said the material's appeal reaches "both the imagination and the market."

General Director of Visual Arts at the Culture Ministry Aydin Mahdizadeh, noted the fair is designed as a specialist platform. He said the ministry only offered advisory support, adding that the launch marks the "first step" towards regular art fairs tailored to different media. More than 40 galleries from Tehran and provincial cities have taken part, joined by Iranian Illustrators Society, the Iranian Graphic Designers Society, and several publishers and studios active in paper-based work. Their stands range from paintings, drawings and handmade prints to photography, illustration, collage, artist books and papier-mâché sculptures. Curators say the focus on paper blends heritage with pragmatism. Lower production costs and easier transport help artists price their

work more competitively, opening the market to a wider pool of buyers at a time when many households are watching their spending. Exhibitors also argue that the lighter ecological footprint of paper pieces puts the fair in line with global sustainability standards. Alongside sales, Open Paper is staging panel discussions, artist talks and hands-on workshops on topics including the economics of art, paper techniques, archiving and professional development. Tehran art fair plans to run several themed "episodes" each year, with Open Paper serving as its inaugural edition. Officials hope the model will offer a steady, accessible and transparent structure for Iran's visual-arts market and lay groundwork for stronger institutions in the sector. Open Paper runs until December 12.



ECO puts Aras in frame for future tourism capital slot



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Aras Free Zone will join the shortlist for future ECO Tourism Capitals, Jandos Asanov, deputy secretary-general of the Economic Cooperation Organization said on December 5 during a visit to the enclave in northwest Iran. He called the zone's position "strategic" and pointed to its spread of heritage sites as grounds for its inclusion, ISNA reported. Asanov told the third coordination meeting for the 2026 ECO tour-operators' forum, jointly planned by Aras and the nearby metropolis of Tabriz, that the bloc had a tradition of naming one host city each year. Sari took the title in 2022, Ardabil in 2023 and Tabriz in 2018. Turkey's Erzurum is lined up for 2026. He said ECO would "seriously examine" Aras for the following years, adding that the enclave's six UNESCO-listed assets and its borders with Azerbaijan, Turkey, Armenia and Nakhchivan gave it rare leverage in regional travel. He welcomed the Aras-Tabriz move

to take on major ECO duties, calling it "an important step" that could stitch together the region's fragmented tourism links. Asanov pressed for a professional network of tour guides to serve as a joint platform for ECO states and said broader cooperation would "open the door to new corridors of exchange". Iran's foreign tourism chief, Moslem Shojaei, said Aras remained the country's only free zone in the UN World Tourism Organization. He called the membership "no small feat", arguing that managers in Aras had read global trends correctly by steering their outreach towards ECO. Tourism, he said, was a "driver" in an economy that moves 1.4bn people a year. Iran holds 30 of the 350 seats in the ECO Tour-Operators' Association, which is due to meet in Aras and Tabriz in May 2026. Shojaei said Aras was one of the three most engaged free zones in Iran's partnership with the ministry, adding that the enclave's stance towards global co-operation suggested "a bright future" for its tourism sector. East Azerbaijan's provincial heritage chief, Ahmad Hamzadeh, said the joint 2026 hosting bid showed that the region was ready to play its part in what he called "dialogue among nations". With more than 4,800 registered heritage sites, including the vaulted Tabriz Bazaar, a string of inscribed monasteries, the Aras geopark and the troglo-

dyte village of Kandovan, the province held "a rare blend" of cultural and natural capital. Strengthening ECO travel, he said, would "anchor peace and stability" in a region shaped by intertwined histories. Hamzadeh said tourism diplomacy needed to "come before" political tracks, arguing that shared customs could bridge gaps still visible among member states. Tabriz and Aras, he said, stood ready to host ECO ministers and a regional tourism fair. Aras Free Zone's tourism deputy, Mohammad Masoudinia, said the enclave had tabled a package of operational proposals to ECO, including plans for an ECO tourism corridor and a pilot scheme making Aras the hub for free-zone tourism across member states. The area's position at the junction of east-west and north-south routes, he said, gave it the potential to become a regional center for travel, trade and logistics. Masoudinia listed cross-border trails such as Aras-Nakhchivan-Kars and Aras-Baku-Astana as potential first steps. He said Aras would host an ECO cultural festival and an international food fair, while offering sites for joint infrastructure projects, from lodging to transport links. He also floated a training center for tour guides and shared tourism standards. He called the Aras geopark a promising field for cross-border work with Azerbaijan and said the enclave aimed to take "an active and responsible role" in ECO's long-term agenda.

Iranian stage production claims four prizes at Oman festival

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Iran's stage production 'Today, I Will Become a Tree', directed by aramorz Gholamian, swept four awards at the Al-Den International Theater Festival in Muscat, securing top slots for directing, music, acting and stage design. The festival, held in the Omani capital earlier late November, handed Gholamian the prize for best directing after jurors praised what they called his "precise" handling of a narrative built around identity and loss, ISNA reported. He also walked away with the festival's music award, credited for weaving a sparse score into the performance's tightly-drawn scenes. Saghar Tizrou was named best actor, with judges citing the "charged stillness" she brought to the central role. Ali Faridani took the stage-design award for what organizers described as an inventive mix of props, hand-built structures and puppetry that framed the production's shifting moods. The production, led by Teh-



ISNA

ran-based producer Mohammad Dindashti, had travelled to Muscat after a short domestic run. Iranian theater groups have in recent years pushed to expand their presence across Gulf festivals, which have become a prominent showcase for regional works as cultural budgets in some Arab states rise into double-digit growth. Festival officials did not release audience figures, though Muscat's annual theater gatherings typically draw troupes from across the Persian Gulf, North Africa and parts of Europe. Participation offers smaller companies a chance to tap into regional circuits, often

securing invitations to winter seasons in Kuwait, Doha or Abu Dhabi. Gholamian's team said the four wins would help the production secure fresh bookings. "It gives us room to negotiate," one crew member said after the awards night, noting that international exposure can lift revenues by 20% if a play is picked up for touring. The troupe is expected to return to Iran later this month to begin preparations for a possible spring rerun in Tehran's mid-town playhouses, which have recently seen a modest rebound in ticket sales after two difficult seasons.

Iranian video artist takes 2015 work to Algiers festival



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Iranian video artist Armin Amirian sent a 2015 piece ti-

led 'Coalition' to the ninth International Festival of Contemporary Art in Algiers, where it opened on November 29 at the Mufti Zakaria Palace of Culture. The short work, considered one of Amirian's signature pieces, has travelled through several European and Asian collections over the past decade and picked up a handful of prizes on the way, ILNA reported. Its companion video-art edi-

tion, 'More than Coalition,' produced in the same period, has now been given an exclusive slot at the Algiers event after curators earmarked it as "a core work" for this year's program. Festival managers said the screening was arranged jointly with Janet Rady Fine Art, a British contemporary-art house that represents Amirian's portfolio abroad. The London gal-

lery has been steering his overseas engagements, tapping into markets where digital installations have gained ground. Algeria's Ministry of Culture is staging the festival under the banner Beyond Boundaries, with Algerian curator Hamza Bounoua at the helm. The week-long gathering, which runs until December 6, is hosting artists from the Middle East, Africa and Europe, many

of whom are showing experimental works that blur lines between video, performance and installation. Amirian's piece, built around themes of cooperation and rupture, sits comfortably within the festival's attempt to "push borders". One organizer said the Iranian work "carries a tension" that suited this year's brief, noting that audiences in the capital have responded well

to its pared-back structure. The Algiers festival, now in its ninth edition, has been expanding its program to draw in more non-Maghreb voices. Amirian, who has been steadily building his international profile since the mid-2010s, is expected to continue touring his video-art series next year as institutions court works that plug into digital-first exhibition formats.