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Andrée Sfeir-Semler receives the ART COLOGNE 2025 prize

Koelnmesse and the Bundesverband Deutscher Galerien und Kunsthändler (German association of galleries and art dealers) announce Dr Andrée Sfeir-Semler as this year's ART COLOGNE prize recipient.

Berlin/Cologne August 2025

As a gallery owner, Andrée Sfeir-Semler has rendered great services to intercultural mediation between contemporary art of the West and the Middle East. As an early discoverer and promoter of visual artists from the Arab world, she possesses outstanding expertise and is highly appreciated in the art scene. This year, she celebrates her 40th anniversary as a gallery owner in Hamburg and the 20th anniversary of her gallery in Beirut.

The beginnings

Andrée Sfeir-Semler (*1953) grew up in a liberal, francophone family in Beirut. Her father worked as an architect, building entrepreneur and urban planner. Interested in art, rebellious, politically active and engaged for women's rights on the street, she was known as a teenager, in her own words, as an "enfant terrible". She first studied Fine Arts at the American University and subsequently at the National TV and Film Center in Beirut before she moved to Munich in 1975 with a DAAD scholarship.

Her next station led to the University of Bielefeld, where Andrée Sfeir-Semler was influenced by Jürgen Kocka, the co-founder of Social History - and later by Pierre Bourdieu at the Sorbonne in Paris. The knowledge of the young art historian revolving around the significance of social history influences and her intensive involvement with the painters of the Paris Salon of the late 18th and 19th centuries led to a brilliant study that examined the societal, political, economic, geographic and competitive contexts of the French art business with all its facets.

Kiel

With a doctorate in her pocket, Andrée Sfeir-Semler had the opportunity to continue with her scholarship. However, "after years of research in the dust of the archives", she decided to open a gallery in Kiel in 1985. Life in the most extreme north of Germany had private reasons after she met a German journalist in 1973, with whom she is still married today.

Up to this point, Andrée Sfeir-Semler had had no practical experience whatsoever as an entrepreneur or with art education. The opening of a gallery in "the middle of nowhere was like jumping into cold water". The self-confident newcomer had a look around and simply called those she found interesting. For example, Ian Hamilton



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Finlay (†2006), to whom she dedicated her first exhibition and who still plays an important role in her programme today.

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He was followed by Lucebert, Robert Barry, Barbara Camilla Tucholski, Hans Haacke, Michelangelo Pistoletto and many others. This outlined where Sfeir-Semler's interest lies to the present day: primarily, but not exclusively, in Conceptual and Minimal Art; in political thought that takes a clear position with aesthetic means in relation to art itself, to society and to one's own efficacy.

Hamburg

In 1998, Andrée Sfeir-Semler moved with her gallery to Hamburg, where she continues to exhibit German and internationally known artists, starting with wax objects by Herbert Hamak, a scriptural installation by Robert Barry and isometric wall paintings by Sol LeWitt.

The "quality barometer" of the multilingual gallery owner is high, and the radius of her network in the institutional cultural sector has continually grown over the years. She describes the moment when she is successful in placing artworks in high-profile exhibitions, collections and museums - and that worldwide - as the best aspect of her work.

At around the turn of the millennium, a decisive reorientation took place resulting from an encounter with Walid Raad. The artist, born in Lebanon and living in New York, mobilised the self-conception of Andrée Sfeir-Semler to "rediscover her own homeland again: the Arabian region".

The trigger for this was the Atlas Group, an archive project on the history of Lebanon and of the civil war (1975-90), which Walid Raad had developed over several years. It encompasses authentic documents and materials he has created himself, which artistically process historical events. Excerpts of this extensive convolute consisting of letters, collages, photo albums, notebooks and journals were shown in numerous exhibitions. To the present day, the collection forms the foundation for the impressive works of this outstanding artist.

The collaboration with Walid Raad provided the beacon for Andrée Sfeir-Semler, prompting her to concentrate on cultural happenings in the Middle East. Before she commenced with her mission, there were "no galleries, no art business, no museums and no art schools akin to those of the West in the Arabian region". Since then, she has helped many artistic positions of this region find recognition. The artists she represents, like Etel Adnan, Aref el Rayess, Yto Barrada, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Rabih Mroué, Marwan Rechmaoui, Akram Zaatari and Wael Shawky, have expanded the contemporary canon of the documenta, of biennials and of museums: "The art world became round".

The biographies of nearly all her artists are shaped by the enduring history of violence of the Middle East. Although several of them have not been living in their countries of origin for years, this history of violence forms the lynchpin of their artistic work - sometimes more, sometimes less directly. It was thus only logical for Andrée Sfeir-Semler to show her colours at a central location of events.

Beirut

On 9 April 2005, she opened a gallery with 1,400 m² of exhibition space in a former factory in Beirut "at the edge of the city between the harbour, mountains of trash and the slaughterhouse. It was the first White Cube in the Arab world with an international programme. To be seen here are works of the Atlas Group, by Elger Esser, Alfredo Jaar, Emily Jacir, Till Krause, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Hiroyuki Masuyama and Akram Zaatari. The Prime Minister of Lebanon at the time, Rafiq al-Hariri, had been murdered only two months previously. This was followed by the gravest dislocations. The country once again fell into a state of instability.

However, Andrée Sfeir-Semler refuses to give up on her project - it is not the first and will not be the last to be achieved in a state of extreme tension. The gallery was bursting at the seams on its opening day - and even today has more visitors than her Hamburg gallery. The need to occupy herself with works of art that have "human rights and sociopolitical convulsions and struggles as their theme" is gigantic. Andrée Sfeir-Semler's gallery offers a space for this. It has become an "oasis for the spirit outside of politics and militia".

In 2010, Andrée Sfeir-Semler organised the first major exhibition for Etel Adnan in Beirut. Two years later, the at that time already 87-year-old artist became known to a broad public at DOCUMENTA 13. In 2021, the year of the death of the cosmopolitan poet and artist originating from Beirut, Sfeir-Semler published a wonderful catalogue raisonné of the tapestries of Etel Adnan. "The grand old lady" is a venerated fixed star of the gallery owner, a paradigm of a "subtle and universal political artist", who, although highly poetic, at the same time engaged in entirely real "struggles for women's rights and lived openly as a lesbian, when this was still frowned upon in Lebanon".

Andrée Sfeir-Semler has made it her mission to focus attention on the convulsions of the present with her exhibitions. Like her artists, she herself also works in an extreme field of tension between political chaos and artistic ideas, between East and West. The pioneer is thereby able to attract the greatest possible attention for her artists and to place their works in "the best collections and museums". In the past year alone, two artists of the Galerie Sfeir-Semler contributed to pavilions at the Biennale in Venice: Mounira Al Solh (Lebanon) and Wael Shawky (Egypt). Another handful - including the classic of Lebanese painting, Aref El Rayess (†2005) - were represented there in the main exhibition "Foreigners Everywhere".

Even under the most adverse circumstances - political unrest, war and chaos, disasters and obstacles of all kinds: Andrée Sfeir-Semler defies all boundaries. The charismatic and extremely courageous gallery owner is among the small circle of experts that are regularly invited to comment on the situation in the Middle East and its impact on culture. By facing the public, she also personally and perfectly does justice to her idea of the "gallery as a space for thought".

The Rise of Arab Art

In September 2025, the future standard work on the development and significance of contemporary Arab art will be published by Hatje Cantz. Andrée Sfeir-Semler is

the editor of the around 600-page anthology, which fills a major gap with its reflections on the art of the Orient.

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The authors of "The Rise of Arab Art" are internationally active and contribute their perspectives on both the Arabian and the Western art world - as museum people and curators like Richard Armstrong (Guggenheim Museum, NYC), Bilal Akouche (Tate Modern, London), Zeina Arida (Mathaf - Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha), Sam Bardaouil (Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin), Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (DOCUMENTA 13), Hans Ulrich Obrist (Serpentine Gallery, London), Christine Thomé (Istanbul Biennale) and Sheikha Al-Mayassa Al Thani (Qatar Museum Authority).

With Antonia Carver (Art Dubai and Jameel Art Centre), Andrée Sfeir-Semler was able to attract a personality that has also contributed decisively to the establishing of an Arab art market. These are joined by many primarily multidisciplinary artists who are as much linked with the Arab world as with Europe or the USA, for example, the British-Lebanese artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan, the Algerian Kader Attia, the French-Moroccan artist Yto Barrada or the Saudi Arabian artist Dana Awartani. Last but not least, a contribution from Wael Shawky will appear in the publication. He has been one of Sfeir-Semler's most important artists for quite some time and was recently appointed head of the new Art Basel Qatar.

Upcoming

Andrée Sfeir-Semler's life's work manifests itself in the publication "The Rise of Arab Art". It is her gift to an art world that she has decisively "carried into the public eye". Her unique engagement is generating an especially positive response in this special year - not only through the ART COLOGNE Prize.

After Andrée Sfeir-Semler acknowledges her 40th anniversary in Beirut on 21 August with a big celebration, the "Ode to Care" will be completed in September: a monumental pyramid of steps made of marble europallets in the inner courtyard of the new building for the depots and workshops of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Rayyane Tabet won the art in architecture competition with this design. The Lebanese artist has been represented since the beginnings of the Galerie Sfeir-Semler and was a participant in the sponsorship programme New Positions of ART COLOGNE in 2014.

In October, Andrée Sfeir-Semler will fulfil a heart's desire with an exhibition by MARWAN and Giacometti in the Fondation Giacometti in Paris. The artist originating from Damascus came to Berlin in 1957 to study painting with Hann Trier. In 1980, MARWAN himself became a professor at the now Berlin University of the Arts, but received far too little attention in the German art scene with his idiosyncratic painting. Andrée Sfeir-Semler, on the other hand, already exhibited his works in her Kiel gallery in 1987. Today she administers the artistic estate of MARWAN (†2016), who was also considered a builder of bridges between Oriental and Western art.

The ART COLOGNE Prize

The ART COLOGNE Prize for art communication is endowed with 10,000 Euro and is presented annually by Koelnmesse and the German association of galleries and art dealers (BVDG).

The prize will be awarded on Friday, 7 November 2025 in the historic city hall of Cologne. The laudatory speech will be held by Mirjam Varadinis, Curator at Kunsthaus Zurich.

Previous winners of the ART COLOGNE Prize (selection): Arnold Bode (1975), Ileana Sonnabend (1988), Harald Szeemann (1989), Annely Juda (1993), Rudolf Springer (1995), Otto van de Loo (1999), Frieder Burda (2002), Nicholas Serota (2004), Harald Falckenberg (2009), Michael Werner (2011), Fred Jahn (2013), Rosemarie Schwarzwälder (2014), Günter Herzog (2017), Gaby and Wilhelm Schürmann (2020), Monika Sprüth (2022), Walther König (2023) and Christian and Karen Boros (2024).

ART COLOGNE opens on Thursday, 6 November 2025 with the preview for invited guests. This is followed by the public days from 7 to 9 November 2025.

Text: Birgit Maria Sturm, BVDG

The quotes originate from conversations and the following sources:

"What kind of a life is that when one risks nothing?" Interview of Andrée Sfeir-Semler with Petra Schellen, taz, 19 December 2010

"Because for me it's about art." Interview of Andrée Sfeir-Semler with Karl Friedrich Schröer, Eiskellerberg.tv (February 2025)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Worth reading

The Rise of Arab Art. Ed. Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Berlin 2025 (Hatje Cantz Verlag).

In cooperation with internationally renowned authors, Andrée Sfeir-Semler with this publication presents the first comprehensive synopsis of the development of the art scene in the Middle East since the 1990s. The Rise of Arab Art will appear in September 2025.

Worth listening to

The Lebanese-German gallery owner Andrée Sfeir-Semler. The conversation was broadcast in the Deutschlandfunk series "Mikrokosmos" on 6 August 2021 - on the first anniversary following the devastating explosion in the Beirut harbour, in the course of which the Galerie Sfeir-Semler was also seriously damaged (45 min.).

Worth seeing

A Passionate Advocate for Artists. In this online lecture at the invitation of the Barjeel Art Foundation (UAE, Sharjah), Andrée Sfeir-Semler provides insight into her personal biography and her work as a gallery owner. The presentation can be found with a great deal of image material and short clips about the exhibitions of Galerie Sfeir-Semler both in Hamburg and in Beirut. (Autumn 2020, 60 min.)

Further information about Galerie Sfeir-Semler in Hamburg / Beirut: [here](#).
Please find attached images of the prizewinner, Dr Andrée Sfeir-Semler.

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