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Patricia Araneta head of outreach at the Prince's School for Traditional Arts

Schooling the masses in art

Walk down Charlotte Road, an unassuming, narrow side-street on the edge of London's financial quarter, and you will find much you might expect: old brick industrial buildings, now converted into loft apartments, cool cafés and trendy offices. There's a modern, urban chic feel to it.

What you might not expect to find here is one of the world's leading centres for traditional Islamic arts, preserving crafts that go back hundreds, even thousands, of years. A school that is a centre of excellence for the ancient skills of geometry, design and calligraphy, and which attracts students from around the globe, as well as taking its teaching to places as disparate as Cairo, Japan and Burnley, a former industrial town in northern England. And the next stop is Abu Dhabi.

Even less expected, perhaps, is the fact that this organisation is backed by Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, and even carries his name. It is the Prince's School for Traditional Arts.

At first glance, the heir to the British throne – whose family are part of the old European establishment and lead the Church of England – might seem an unlikely champion of Islamic traditions. But the school's leaders are quick to correct that idea.

"He developed an interest in Islamic art from a very young age," said Dr Khaled Azzam, the director of PSTA. "He is interested in the natural arts and the sacred arts. And there is something about what we do – in terms of understanding the order of nature and trying to express it through art and architecture – that he is very interested in."

The basis for the school goes back 25 years, when people with an interest in Islamic traditions met at the Royal College of Art in London. "We never sat down and said we are going to establish a school. If you look at the development, it was created by a series of individuals who had certain interests – a group of people who gathered around an idea. It just grew," said Dr Azzam.

Then, 10 years ago, the Prince suggested they leave the RCA to become one of his charities. That move led to the creation of the current school.

Now with neighbours that include Start fashion boutique, Kemistry art gallery and the trendy Bricklayers Arms pub, the school is housed in what used to be a furrier's warehouse. When they moved in a decade ago the building had been unused for years and, in the basement, there were still the large fridges where raw pelts used to hang. Now, of course, like most of the street, it has been carefully renovated. The industrial heritage is still evident in some of the floors and the windows but it is a thoroughly modern space with a light and airy gallery on the ground floor and workshops, meeting areas and offices above.

The school has a core of 35 students – who come from places as far-flung as Russia, the US, Colombia, Ghana, Pakistan, UK, Germany, Nepal, Japan and the Arab world. It runs MA courses, which last two years, and PhD courses that can last five years or more. At the centre of its work is a focus on the traditional skills of Islamic art and architecture, and particularly on important areas of geometry and discipline.

"We try to explain and research and help students understand there is a universal principle that underlies civilisation and humanity," said Dr Azzam. "There is an order of nature. All we try to do is understand that order."

The school takes students back to basic principles. They make their own art brushes and grind their own pigments. And, according to Dr Azzam, there is more to this than simply preserving old skills.

"It helps them understand the quality of materials. And it's a link to nature."

"But more importantly, it slows them down and gives them a moment of contemplation. Most painters just squeeze paint and start painting. There isn't an element of slowing it down a little bit to understand what you are doing. The students don't really appreciate this at first, but that moment of slowing the pace down, of making them sit there and do all their grinding, creates an attitude that changes the way you approach your work. It is not just a pure knee-jerk reaction of 'Now I am going to paint and I'll just get a canvas and I'll get some colour and I'll start.' It's about preparation – and that preparation happens inside them."

The announcement of a centre in Abu Dhabi of the Prince's School for Traditional Arts highlights the growing awareness among young Emiratis of the strong need to keep alive their cultural heritage. **Terry Ramsey reports**



Top, Dr Khaled Azzam, director of the Prince's School of Traditional Arts. Above, Sabah Bapir, an Iraqi civil engineer and calligrapher who will graduate from the school this year. Ian Jones for The National. Left, Prince Charles with Sara Salman, a student from Lahore, Pakistan. Royal Rota Photo

The school's concentration on teaching ancient skills has been criticised in some quarters as old-fashioned. But Dr Azzam – usually quietly spoken and considered – is uncharacteristically scathing in his response.

"Most art schools now don't teach art anymore. They don't teach technique. They say, 'You are a creative genius, get on with it' and then they just leave you in a studio. They set you up, but they never give you an education. They never teach you what it's about."

He explains that after art school he assisted an architect who was ruthlessly strict about teaching all techniques. "When I asked him why, he said, 'Maybe when you are 40 or 45 you will have a good idea. But if you don't have the technique to bring that idea into the world you will be frustrated.' Which is what we say to our students all the time: don't worry about ideas, get your technique right."

He also believes that the school is helping to preserve skills that might otherwise be in danger of dying out. To help promote these traditional arts, PSTA has an extensive outreach programme, taking

its teaching around the world.

Patricia Araneta, head of the programme, explains: "We work with different institutions or schools overseas and here in the UK. We work with different age levels and different backgrounds. For example, we work with secondary schools in Burnley, we work with a college in Saudi Arabia, we work with municipal designers and architects in Riyadh. So it is different audiences, but all of them are interested in exploring the principles of traditional art and how it relates to their own cultural heritage."

She said interest is particularly high among young people.

"Most of our students here are young people and when we go overseas we work with young people. I think a lot of people – especially in the Middle East – have suddenly realised they have this cultural heritage that they have to revisit and reacquaint themselves with."

The idea that the school's work is stuck in the past is a mistake, she said.

"We have been promoting different traditional arts because our belief is that tradition means renewal – it is art that is continually renewed,

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it is living art. We don't preserve art, we promote art. And we help to generate contemporary expressions of traditional art because if people understand the principles then they are able to make designs that are quite contemporary."

One student doing just that is Sabah Bapir, who graduates from his MA course this summer. A former civil engineer from Iraq, he is a skilled calligrapher who came to the school to expand his knowledge. "I wanted to understand all aspects of Islamic art."

He has worked within the traditions, but has developed his own style by producing lettering in various colours, not just conventional black.

"Always there is a discipline. There is a set of rules we must obey and a certain responsibility, which means that whatever the old masters did, we have to follow the same path. But what we are able to do is change a little bit. I can't change the shapes of the letters, but I am able to change the colour."

This deviation from the traditional may seem controversial to some people, but it has been a huge success. His work – including some stunning calligraphy on ceramics – has sold out and he was won prizes in Algeria, France and Abu Dhabi.

"I have learned a lot at the school. Keeping the Islamic traditions alive was one of the main things for me, but also putting my own fingerprint on it. It has been an amazing journey."

However not all Islamic experts are so enthusiastic about the work of PSTA.

Dr Salma Samar Damluji lectures at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London on Islamic Art and Architecture and is the author of several books, including *The Architecture of The United Arab Emirates*. She said: "They are qualifying students in doing the work of craftsmen. I am all for having an institute for Islamic arts and architecture but I don't believe in qualifying students with a PhD for doing the work of master craftsmen in Morocco and Syria and elsewhere."

"If you are a proper architect, like myself, there is no choice between what proper craftsmen are doing in Morocco, Damascus, Istanbul, wherever, and what these students are doing and reinventing as 'art'."

But she does admit that PSTA's latest scheme, to run courses in Abu Dhabi, could provoke interest in traditional styles in a region that has never cared much before.

"In the Gulf they are completely blinded by style architecture, so doing something like this might be a useful exercise to help people there understand the value of something they have never had but they have seen imitated in a very pastiche way in hotel lobbies and so on."

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Dr Azzam said the region has embraced western culture and forgotten its own.

"People are conscious of how far down the line they have gone. And they are saying: What have we left behind? And what are we teaching our children?"

"One of the first things I said to the people there was: 'You are buying all these things in – the Louvre, the Sorbonne, the Guggenheim – but what are you investing in your own youth?' If I were a young person growing up in Abu Dhabi I would subconsciously feel that I have no culture or relevance at all."

Now he, and the Prince's School, are setting out to change that. It's a big task and no one is more surprised that he's doing it than Dr Azzam himself.

"It's strange," he said. "I never thought I would end up in education. I was such a bad student myself"