

A new show in Tripoli looks at 70 years of Libya's consumer culture

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A new show in Tripoli looks at 70 years of Libya's consumer culture. [Photo By Najlaa Elageli]

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The Libyan Pantry Project in Tripoli's old city recovers the forgotten histories associated with Libya's consumer culture from the early 1960s to the late '90s. It opened on 27 February at the Old Turkish Prison in Signora Maria Square. Aiming to help recover forgotten stories and histories associated with the North African country's consumer culture, the show presents a series of products that bore witness to the evolution of Libyan society starting in what was the golden era of Libyan industries after independence and the discovery of oil.

The show includes representations and reproductions of company brands, industry logos, posters and advertising graphics. It aims to preserve and document Libyan visual memory for future generations.

"When we thought about the project four years ago, it was a time when the country was really divided by the civil war, and we wanted something that united all Libyans," the show's curator Najlaa Elageli told me. "We wanted to tie Libyan legacy to modern heritage, despite what has been happening in the country for the past sixteen years."

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The idea for the show started with conversations between the London-based Elageli and Tripolitanian artist Hadia Gana. The two observed that Libyans loved using social media to share images of products made in Libya in the past, and the comments were nostalgic and heartfelt.

However, the idea really came to fruition when Gana became part of the board for the conservation of the old city, and a former shop owner approached her asking for help with his storeroom. "We found a huge treasure trove of Libyan products from the past," Gana recounted. "These are products that made Libyans feel proud. They were things like a fizzy Cola drink, a rug, school exercise books, homemade candy and pieces of cloth. I started thinking that it would be a pity to keep it hidden away from the public eye, so we decided to organise the items and research each one of them."



The storeroom provided the base for the exhibition, which included a number of pieces realised by artist and graphic designer Alla Budabbus, whose artistic practice has always been based on Libyan popular culture. "The products clearly show what happened in

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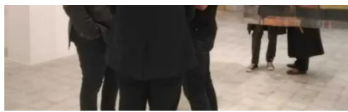
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Libya in terms of society, politics and culture, and the impact they had on Libyan collective psyche," said Elageli.

One example is the evolution of the design of a tomato paste produced in Libya, which was done straight after Libyan independence. The graphics

went from a colonial-inspired Italian style to a much more Libyan design and wording during the Gaddafi era, when all private enterprises were taken over by the regime and nationalised. "You could really see visually how the propaganda of a certain ideology was conveyed on these food products and how it changed over the years," Budabbus pointed out.

Collective memory and the importance of the archive

This exhibition will be particularly relevant for Libya's younger generation, as young Libyans have many blind spots when it comes to their own identity. "Because of the history of the country, there hasn't been much communication across the generations," said Gana. "We don't have archives, and if we do, these are well hidden. It feels like a general amnesia."

Budabbus added that people in their 20s and early teens have no idea that a number of industries existed in Libya because right now everything is imported. "During the 1980s Libya used to produce a lot of its own products. In the 90s, after we opened up to the international economy, we started relying more on importing goods rather than producing them ourselves."

Thanks to the show, though, new ties with the younger generation of Libyans have appeared. A group of young Tripolitanian designers stepped in with their own independent research on Libyan logos, and they were invited for a talk as part of the show's collateral programming.

The public response

Budabbus believes that this show is right out of the box compared with what they are used to having in galleries and art centres in Libya. "It has this interactive aspect where people touch the objects and get touched at the same time. It was really amazing to see families, young people, teenagers, grandmothers, get affected the way they did. We succeeded in triggering memories, looking at these products that we grew up with."

Indeed, the exhibition was meant to reach a cross-section of the Libyan public. According to Elageli, the show was intended to be as friendly, democratic and inclusive as possible. "The aim of the project is not just to have a one-shot exhibition, but also to gather as much information as possible from the public. It's very important to open up the conversation to create a database of this material that can be accessible to all."



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The trio plan to have The Libyan Pantry Project as a travelling show, and move it to Benghazi, Misurata and the south of Libya so that they can collect more reactions and memories from different sections of Libyan society. A publication collecting the graphics and their history is also bound to be compiled. "The hope for the show is that it can elicit a feeling of common ground in Libya," concluded Elageli. "This whole project is about a nation's identity, and about the strength that comes from knowing one's own history. Opening new alleyways for people to understand their past will make them hopeful about the future of Libya, despite the fact that the infrastructure is still pretty messy."

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Budabbus is happy that the show put a smile on people's faces in the hardest of times. "I saw tears in people's eyes. I saw hands on hearts. It means a lot, as Libyans are still suffering from their previous experiences of war. Visitors left the exhibition with a smile. What else we can ask for?"



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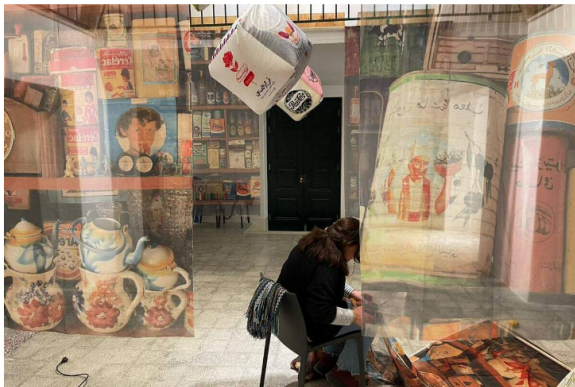
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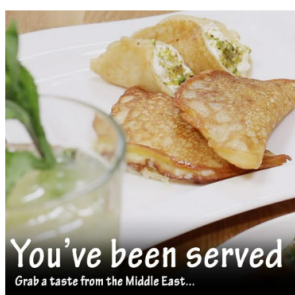
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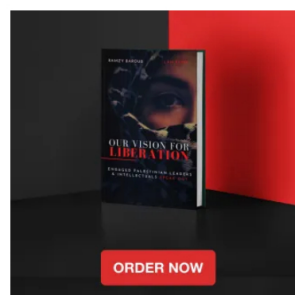
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