

You Won't Believe How This Man Impacts the Middle East

Prior to coming to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) for a one-year communications internship with OM, Jacob said he'd already been interested in photography and photojournalism.

With a college degree in international relations and a resume full of volunteer experiences abroad, he was well aware of the wider world. But when a friend told him about the opportunity to travel, take photographs, create videos and do design projects for OM, it was the first time "that anyone told me about actually being able to use art and use photography not only as a way to serve others but also to express creativity in a setting like this," he remembered.

According to Jacob, art is "all about making connections with things, taking things you see ... whether it's colours or coffee, and connecting them in a certain way to create an original idea."

Creativity

One of his year-long projects, a "found item" series, was originally inspired by a well-known department store's Instagram posts, which often combined individual items into creative, cohesive advertisements. When Jacob first arrived in the Near East city where he was based, he saw trash strewn all over the ground.

"I wonder if I can make something aesthetically pleasing," he wondered.

So he walked around and picked up items he found lying on the ground—a handful of feathers, a few leaves, a pack of Chicklets gum, a row of bottle caps, and a used SIM card recharge voucher, among other things—and arranged them neatly

on a colored background.

“I liked the way it looked and the idea of it,” he said.

As he travelled to different countries in MENA, he repeated the process, not always using trash for his creations but also drawing on regional specialties and produce.

“One of the things for me that’s important about being over here is realising that we have a lot of power in what we put out,” he said. “I want to portray the normal scene of life here. ... Making a gradient of olives or putting a bunch of dates on a piece of paper, those are important things for people to see because the everyday here is a lot like the everyday anywhere else.”

Mosaic tiling in North Africa, street art in the Near East, colours and patterns prevalent across the Arab world—all have influenced the way Jacob produced art for MENA. From a design standpoint, minutiae matter.

“You can’t help but see things in all these countries, even a restaurant logo, even the way they do a font or an Arabic script,” Jacob explained. “When doing videos, I’d be going back through pictures to get subtle ideas of a pattern or a design or a detail.”

Some encounters were not only different but also challenging. Visiting refugee camps in Kurdistan, northern Iraq, for instance. “You’ve never seen anything like that before,” he stated. “It’s also been really challenging in how to think about humans and images and videos and how emotion and emotional exploitation can affect an image.”

Collaboration

Both connection and collaboration are crucial for developing artists, Jacob stated. “One of the biggest things I learnt is that working with others, especially when doing art, is often

a catalyst to make you more creative.”

Living with four other media professionals expanded his creativity this year, as did meeting with other people involved in art across the MENA region.

“You see what other people in the field are doing, and it inspires you to think more outside the box you’re in,” he said. “The best art that gets created is created collaboratively because it’s people sharing ideas and bouncing them off each other and having those ideas sharpened by each other.”

In the Near East, the physical place where Jacob lived also sparked new creativity. It’s “a really unique city because it’s full of art and full of artists. You can go anywhere and see street art. When you’re around people doing the same kind of work as you in a different part of the world, it inspires you to do things differently,” he described.

In fact, making connections with local artists should be a priority for creative people moving to the region, he suggested. Not only was it fun, but befriending artists in his city also helped him get to know locals better—casually and on a deeper level.

“People want to know things about the way I live,” he explained. “For one reason or another, they find out I’m religious in some way.”

“Is this something you actually take seriously? Do you actually pray? Do you actually go to church?” others asked him.

“Yeah, I do,” he responded.

In an art scene where many have written off all religion, as well as God, “they’re fascinated by this idea,” he said. Other questions he received, however, were more direct.

“The fact that I was having these conversations with people was encouraging to see how God can use any situation and any moment to shed light on people who don’t know truth. It’s a good reminder that all are in need of the gospel and all are in need of salvation,” Jacob said. “God meets us where we are, and He puts people in our lives for a reason.”

Looking back over the past year as an artist in the Arab world, Jacob said, “One of the biggest things I’ve learnt is that God can use any skill and any person to bring about glory to the kingdom. ... God can use anything you do to help others in some small way.”

Looking forward, he said he’s more open to continuing to produce art.

“Now that I’m able to see practically how I’m able to use art in a context like this, it makes me want to get better at it and do something like this again,” he explained. “You should use the things you’re passionate about because God can use those things.”