

UNESCO-Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture

Every year, the UNESCO-Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture honors two laureates for their contribution to the promotion of Arab art and culture, while fostering intercultural dialogue

Call for Applications: 21st UNESCO-Sharjah Prize !

UNESCO is pleased to announce the launch of the call for communications for the **21st edition of the UNESCO–Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture !**

Established in 1998, the Prize is awarded each year to individuals, institutions or organizations that have made an outstanding contribution to the promotion of Arab culture, intercultural dialogue, and the dissemination of UNESCO's values.

The Prize laureate receives an award of 30,000 dollars (USD).

Deadline for the submission of applications: 28 February 2026.

About

Established in 1998, the UNESCO-Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture rewards, each year, two laureates – individuals, groups or institutions – who, through their work and outstanding achievements, endeavour to disseminate greater knowledge of Arab art and culture.

A Prize inspired and funded by the Emirate of Sharjah

In order to commemorate the designation of the city of Sharjah as Cultural Capital of the Arab Region in 1998, the Government of the Emirate of Sharjah and His Highness Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al-Qasimi proposed the establishment of a prize to UNESCO. By mutual agreement, it rewarded two individuals from within and beyond the Arab world who, through their work and outstanding achievements, endeavour to disseminate greater knowledge of Arab art and culture.

Established under these favourable circumstances for a cause that had become urgent, the UNESCO-Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture has, since 2001, crowned the efforts of 16 outstanding individuals from across the world. They have been honoured either in recognition of their contribution – in their respective disciplines – to Arab art and culture, or for participating in the dissemination of the latter outside the Arab world. Together, the prizewinners have come to represent a new generation of researchers, artists, philosophers, authors and translators with a profound desire to achieve a genuine dialogue between Arab culture and other cultures [...].

Excerpt from the address by Francesco Bandarin, former UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture, on the occasion of the eighth award of the Prize (2009)

The Patron Ruler

The Emirate of Sharjah may appear to be a small dot on the map, but thanks to its ruler it has played and still plays a cultural role worthy of the world's envy. Sheikh Al-Qasimi is more than the Ruler of Sharjah: he is an extremely cultured man who holds two Ph.Ds (in history and in the political geography of the Gulf) from British universities. He is the author of several historical and literary publications.

Through his publications, His Highness has greatly contributed to the spread of Arab culture [...]. His vast knowledge of the history of French orientalism, manifest in his acceptance speech upon being named Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters, has enriched research in the history of ideas, inherited from the Renaissance: Arabic printing, introduced to France by Savary de Brèves, Herbelot de Molainville's *Bibliothèque orientale*, the *Description de l'Égypte* commissioned by Napoleon Bonaparte, Volney's *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte*, etc.

The Sheikh, a man enamoured with words and books, unhesitatingly made Sharjah a shining cultural centre – at the regional and then international levels, notably by creating, with UNESCO, this Prize dedicated to developing the prestige of civilization in which he was born and raised and his determination to chart and bring to life its history in the spirit of al-Andalus and in full respect for the written word.

From a presentation by the Permanent Delegation of the United Arab Emirates at the official ceremony of the eighth award of the Prize.

Sharjah: the Emirate of Sharjah

Bordered on the west by the Arabian Gulf and on the east by the Sea of Oman, the Emirate of Sharjah has been able to affirm its unique character thanks to a subtle alliance between economic development and the desire to preserve its authentic culture.

Take the cultural heritage for a start. Significant investment has permitted the establishment of museums and heritage centres. Historical sites and monuments have been preserved or restored throughout the city. [...] Similarly, the city enjoys the significant artistic and educational activity. The Sharjah Biennial is an event which attracts artists from the four corners of the world. Moreover, the Emirate's Department of Information holds each year several cultural events, including the Book Fair which takes place in November. It also plans various instructive and technical festivals for children.

To understand better what Sharjah is all about, you should visit the arts and heritage districts.

The former is located just off the Corniche and on the north side of Burj Avenue (Bank Road). [...] Here you will find the Sharjah Art Museum, the Sharjah Art Centre, art galleries and the Emirates Fine Arts Society. The Art Centre is a discreetly restored building and the former residence of the British Commissioner for the coast of Oman, which was later turned into the missionary hospital. The Centre offers classes by qualified art teachers for all ages and abilities. Nearby is the Art Cafe, a meeting place for artists interested in local issues. At the far end of the area, numerous art studios provide artists a place to work. On the opposite side of the square is

the Sharjah Art Museum. It has a total of 32 exhibition rooms, of which eight are dedicated to the private collection of the Ruler who has donated them to the museum. [...]

On the other side of Burj Avenue is the heritage district with its collection of local markets, meeting places and small museums. This area is an example of Sharjah's commitment to heritage and culture that was instrumental in earning it the UNESCO title of the cultural capital of the Arab world. It is home to the Museum of Islamic Civilization which contains a collection of rare Islamic manuscripts as well as items of Arab art. [...]

No sooner have you left the old souks, restored buildings, and tourist sites than you come across new Arab-style constructions. They are surrounded by parks and gardens which have sprung up lately in this desert region. You also find there luxury hotels, restaurants and numerous green spaces catering to tourists. Sharjah has 27 gardens. Trees have been planted on some 729,000 m² by the municipality under a two-pronged initiative concerned with both the environment and beautification-. To fight heat, wind, storms and humidity, the municipality is actively seeking to surround the city with green belts. The vegetation is perfectly suited to the desert climate. It is selected for its resistance to high temperatures and the high levels of water and soil salinity. Three kilometres from the international airport lies the Sharjah National Park, covering an area of more than 600,000 m². [...]

Exploring these immense green spaces one might forget that this ancient city is built in the desert. [...] As exploration is within everyone's reach, the landscapes and heritage of Sharjah will always have something to reveal to us.

Excerpts from the June 2003 issue of the magazine Le Message des Émirats.