

Report on the State of Culture

in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2019: Facts and Figures



Executive Summary



Message from the Minister

Saudi culture is experiencing a new golden age. Thanks to the active engagement of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, and His Royal Highness Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister of the Council of Ministers, and Minister of Defense, a cultural renaissance is gathering pace.

Cultural institutions, and those involved in the creative industries, have been empowered to carry forward the traditions and heritage handed down through the generations of our people. The result has been the flourishing cultural sector we see around us today.

Our beloved country is experiencing a wave of renewal and reform on all fronts. Culture in its multifaceted forms, is integral to this. Vision 2030, by recognizing it as "indispensable to our quality of life," has given Saudi culture greater prominence than it has ever enjoyed before.

Over the past year (2019), we have achieved many of our goals.

We did so thanks to the tireless work of the creatives, entrepreneurs, thinkers and workers from across the cultural landscape, all of whom have been our strategic partners since the establishment of the Ministry.

We set up eleven new commissions to manage the various cultural sub-sectors with greater efficiency, flexibility, and autonomy.

We also brought a number of cultural initiatives to fruition, enabling



citizens and residents to enjoy a broader and more inclusive range of cultural experiences.

And most importantly, we empowered the very people driving this transformation forward by providing platforms for Saudi talent to reach their full potential.

Much remains to be done, and with the continued support of our country's leadership and people, all our shared aspirations will be fulfilled.

Today we present to you our **Report on the State of Culture in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2019: Facts and Figures**. The report documents the achievements of the past year, including resolutions met, initiatives

delivered, and goals fulfilled, as well providing an overview of creative and artistic trends and patterns.

It also details the state of cultural production and its vital contribution to our economy, levels of community participation, and more. We believe in the importance of documenting this golden age of culture and in being transparent about where our ministry is headed.

We look forward to continuing this journey of innovation and creativity with you all.

**Prince Badr bin Abdullah
bin Mohammed bin Farhan Al Saud
Minister of Culture**





Introduction

Introduction



The cultural moment currently underway in the Kingdom is part of a long history of transformations experienced by Saudi society. It stands as a testament to the richness and diversity built up by thousands of trailblazers and intellectuals. It draws from the extensive literature left by Saudi historians and writers who have chronicled key facets of our cultural history. Nevertheless, this movement still has a long way to go, as many aspects of our culture still need to be documented. Such documentation is itself a form of creativity and adds to the value of the hard work already completed by our forebears. Systematic documentation, which in many areas of Saudi culture remains absent or sporadic, is of particular importance to this initiative.

Today, we are witnessing the revitalization of cultural institutions as a result of Vision 2030, through which the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia promotes culture as an anchor of identity, a central component of the quality of life in Saudi society, and an important contributor to economic vitality. A number of factors have emerged as part of the transformation of the local cultural ecosystem, including interactions between the public sector, relevant civil-society institutions, individuals engaged in the field, and everyday members of society—citizens and residents alike. The first three pillars of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 highlight the importance of culture, describing the “vibrant society” we aspire to as one that takes pride in “the historical and cultural legacy of our Saudi, Arab, and Islamic heritage”⁽¹⁾ and cherishes national values and identity. A “vibrant society” builds upon culture to expand and improve the quality of life, and the creative industry has helped to reinforce the second pillar of Vision 2030, the “thriving economy.” The Ministry of Culture thus espouses a vision centered on the promotion of culture: 1) as a way of life; 2) as a contributor to economic growth; and 3) as an opportunity for international exchange.

These ambitions account for the significance of this report, which intends to document, on an annual basis, the conditions and contexts of cultural activity, and the ways it is transforming. This report is more than a commemoration intended to enrich the cultural memory of future generations. Rather, it seeks to provide all those interested in cultural affairs today with an objective survey of the outcome of cultural work in general: that is, with a summation that exposes deficiencies, sheds light on new trends, and helps to satisfy the needs and aspirations of the Kingdom's citizens and residents insofar as culture relates to their daily lives.

The First Report of its Kind

As the first initiative of its kind in the Kingdom, the Ministry of Culture herewith presents its **Report on the State of Culture in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2019: Facts and Figures**. This is the first edition of what will be an annual report documenting Saudi cultural achievements. It establishes a qualitative and quantitative reference point to measure and make sense of the evolution of the cultural field in the Kingdom, taking into consideration both local understandings and international standards. The report has four main objectives. The first is to document government decisions related to

culture, activities of cultural institutions, events and forums, support and development initiatives, and infrastructure programs. It will also account for non-governmental cultural advancements made by individuals and institutions. The report is not limited to documenting new trends and patterns of cultural creation. It encompasses the data and analysis that highlights these changes, including innovation, adaptation, and adoption of cultural forms, whether local or foreign. The report also tracks the changes in the state of cultural production, the transmission and distribution of goods and practices, and the form and extent of cultural partic-

ipation, whether active or passive. Each chapter of the report provides a summary assessment of the ecosystem of each sector and the economic opportunities it offers. A final chapter will present key cultural indicators.

Many parties in the cultural sector will benefit from the availability of a comprehensive perspective that includes recurrent data on the state of culture. The primary beneficiaries are public institutions dedicated to culture. This report will help these institutions to interpret the circumstances that currently bear upon cultural programs and policies, and thereby make them more effective

as actors on the cultural scene and as entities working to achieve the cultural goals outlined by the Kingdom’s Vision 2030. The report will also benefit those interested in culture and creativity throughout the Kingdom—like intellectuals, practitioners, and scholars—by providing them with historical context and updated data. In addition, the report will highlight Saudi cultural activity by providing a reliable reference for those interested in Saudi culture in the Arab world and beyond, thereby expanding the horizons of cooper-

ation and communication. The report also hopes to offer citizens a panoramic view of the local cultural scene.

Methodology and Outline

Since culture is a fluid concept, the Ministry of Culture has tried to define it and delimit its scope in a manner compatible with local understanding. At the same time, it refers to international standards, in particular those outlined by the

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). On this basis, the Ministry of Culture has created sixteen sub-sectors to promote Saudi culture without excluding any of its manifestations. The Ministry is responsible for developing those sectors, fostering creative talent, and preserving its heritage through constructive and strategic engagement with public and private institutions as well as individual stakeholders in the field.

The cultural sectors include:



This report is divided into fifteen chapters, each of which examines one sub-sector. The one exception is the section that deals with cultural and archeological sites under the larger umbrella of heritage, whether tangible or intangible. Each chapter reports on the status of its sub-sector, including the most noteworthy cultural products or activities produced over the past year. It also monitors shifts in cultural creation and production, the state of cultural dissemination, and the level of cultural participation (i.e. the state of the “culture cycle” as defined by the UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics). Since this is the first report, it also contains a historical overview of the crucial inflection points that transformed

these sectors into what they are today. As a result, this first report is lengthy. In addition to the discussion of past and present trends, most sections report on measures of cultural participation, highlight important achievements and awards, and identify significant international partnerships and recognition. Finally, each chapter concludes with an overview of education, support, investment, infrastructure, and regulatory frameworks in that sub-sector — that is to say, the field’s support system.

Following the sub-sector chapters is a special chapter that tracks important cultural indicators, i.e. quantitative measures of the state of culture in the Kingdom. These

measures pertain to: 1) cultural production; 2) cultural dissemination; and 3) cultural participation. The data collected is for 30 Saudi cultural indicators. They are presented alongside indicators of nine other countries chosen for their influence, the success of their attempts at cultural development, and the availability of data. By tracking these indicators as accurately as possible, the report provides a sense of the Kingdom’s position with respect to the growth and development of the cultural sphere. The report integrates quantitative indicators with the qualitative narratives presented in the chapters in order to provide a precise and appropriately detailed overview of the state of culture.

Survey of Cultural Participation and Report Data

In its approach to the state of culture, the report draws on data collected from various sources during the last quarter of 2019. Foremost among these is the Cultural Participation Survey, based on a representative sample of 3,137 people from all over the Kingdom. The survey's goal is to provide accurate and comparable data on the extent to which the Kingdom's citizens and residents participate in various cultural sectors by measuring two dimensions of community participation: reception and engagement. The survey measures were designed according to international guidelines in order to establish standardized and comparable methods of measurement. Modifications and addenda were added as necessary to accommodate the report's needs as well as the local context.

In addition to the survey, the report relied on data and reports collected from over 50 governmental and non-governmental agencies. This data provided quantitative statistics and a record of cultural activities. To address aspects that may not have been highlighted in the reports, 83 interviews were conducted with practitioners, experts, and officials in the various cultural sectors as an additional resource to contextualize the situation on the ground. The report also used data from published reports, primary and secondary historical sources, and some journalistic and electronic sources in order to track the year's activities and events.

This report is the first attempt to systematically collect cultural indicators. Given the scarcity of data in this sector and the lack of a centralized information source at this time, it uses the available data as exten-

sively and accurately as possible. Considering its broad scope and its desire to provide a reliable account of the cultural sector – this report does not claim to be an exhaustive record of the vast and various elements of Saudi culture – which encompasses a legion of leaders, entrepreneurs, institutions, and businesses. In light of space limitations and specific methodological requirements, this report cannot cover every actor and activity occurring in the Saudi cultural sector. If it succeeds in promoting cultural exchange and paving the way for future study, it will have served its purpose.

Cultural Reality in 2019 and Future Prospects

This report covers a wide range of cultural activities, which, at first glance, may seem completely dis-



connected. They range from Saudi cuisine to nature reserves and from fashion shows to poetry collections. However, the chapters of the report as a whole demonstrate general patterns characteristic of today's cultural environment. The report's statistics reflect a growing and diverse public interest in cultural expression. The survey and review of cultural activities in the subsequent chapters show that cultural vocabulary and cultural practices have spread beyond the scope of elites to the public at large.

It is likely that this public interest is not merely the result of the current moment but of a longer trajectory spanning the past two decades. Young filmmakers' cinematographic experimentation at the beginning of the past decades, unique experiments by Saudi chefs during that period, and even the wave of contemporary Saudi art since 2010: what these have in common is

the presence of a generation with greater courage to experiment and interact with others in spite of the limited resources available to them at the time. This openness to the other and the desire to explore new contemporary spaces has continued to have an impact on the cultural sectors. The report places the current cultural moment in the context of a long history of Saudi creatives, and sheds light on the groundbreaking contributions of different generations in all their various circumstances.

Digitization and the internet have both played a role in creating an environment that privileges creativity and connection. Authors have found their way to the publishing world through the internet, and designers and artists have utilized digital platforms to publicize their creativity. With the spread of social media, digital spaces are no longer just channels for learning and communicat-

ing as an alternative to the limited institutional spaces of the past, but they have also become freestanding platforms for cultural exchange promoting literature, translation, and digital-lexical activities that display their final product online. The cultural scene remains interconnected with informal collective activities outlined in the report in sectors as diverse as networks of architects, culinary clubs, reading groups, theater troupes, and more. The list continues to grow, alongside the initiatives of formal cultural institutions. Literary societies and the branches of the Saudi Arabian Society for Culture and Arts (SASCA), among others, have continued to sponsor events and programs, with more institutions emerging. The chapters of this report review examples of their activities, which accompanied the visible presence of cultural practices and activities in the public sphere. The report documents a recent increase in the number of





cultural events of all types—from art exhibitions to musical and theatrical performances, heritage festivals, and other specialized events. In addition, a number of prominent cultural sites have witnessed development and rehabilitation work over the past decade. These endeavors have enjoyed wide support from a number of public agencies and the engagement of the private sector, both of which have participated in the organization of cultural events.

At the same time, an increase in participation and dissemination of products and practices in a number of fields (the two elements pertinent to the culture cycle) do not automatically translate to an abundance of cultural production or excellence in creativity (the other elements in the culture cycle). Key data points measuring cultural production, such as publishing and cinematographic production statistics,

remain lower than global averages, despite their recent growth. This discrepancy reflects the challenges faced by cultural institutions, including the development of regulatory frameworks and the provision of incentives, facilities, opportunities for education and training, and clear professional pathways, all of which will be addressed in the next chapters. Certain fields that were once purely consumer-oriented, including the fashion, cuisine, culinary arts, architecture, and design sectors, are undergoing a conceptual and organizational transformation that also brings into play a cultural and creative dimension.

Infrastructure and regulatory structures have witnessed important developments over the past few years, especially in areas that predominantly rely on facilities (such as museums and libraries). A number of prominent archeological and

cultural sites have benefitted from important development and rehabilitation projects, and the pace of museum openings has also increased. New regulations have been approved in the fields of publishing, environment, antiquities, museums, and the protection of intellectual property. Public libraries are still in desperate need of both improved functionality and facilities. The excellent work undertaken by leading libraries in the field can benefit others by serving as a model for public libraries throughout the cities and governorates of the Kingdom.

Finally, the current emphasis on preserving, documenting, and celebrating heritage informs the efforts to preserve intangible elements of cultural heritage, such as handicrafts, traditional arts, spoken dialects, and tangible heritage, such as archaeological and cultural sites. This impulse comes alongside greater



openness and communication with the world, as reflected in festivals and cultural events, architecture and visual arts, translation activity, and interest in global cultural production. The report also records the interaction of two trends: reimagining heritage in a contemporary manner, which goes beyond mere inventory and documentation, and expanding the impact of cultural tradition on design, culinary arts, and architecture.

The Ministry of Culture and Restructuring the Cultural Sector

2nd June, 2018 AD (17th of Ramadan, 1439 AH) marks the issue of Royal Decree No. A / 217. It stipulates the establishment of the Min-

istry of Culture as the authority for developing the Saudi cultural sector and representing Saudi culture nationally and internationally. One of the ministry's tasks is to lead the transformation of the cultural sector in a manner consistent with the comprehensive transformation outlined in the Kingdom's Vision 2030 plan, which depends on culture as a key component of the vibrant society it seeks to build. The most important event of the past year – the launch of the Ministry of Culture's strategy on 7th March, 2019 (20th of Rajab) – laid the groundwork for the development of our cultural sector. It includes suggestions for regulatory frameworks, international exchanges, and the recognition and sponsorship of talent, as well as strategies for the preservation of Saudi heritage and culture.

One of the most prominent features of the current cultural reality explored in the subsequent chapters is related to the reorganization that the cultural sector continues to experience. For five decades, a number of bodies – including the General Presidency for Youth Welfare, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Information – have been laying the groundwork for cultural institutions in the Kingdom. Since 2000, the Ministry of Culture and Information and the High Commission for Tourism has handled matters of cultural significance, with the assistance of many additional bodies that have made direct and indirect contributions. The establishment of the Ministry of Culture in 2019 marks the consolidation of a multitude of actors into one entity capable of developing comprehensive cultural

policies for the sector. For example, the Ministry of Culture has taken on responsibility for the Jenadriyah Festival – previously under the purview of the National Guard – as well as Literary Clubs, the Arabian Magazine, the King Fahd Cultural Center in Riyadh, and other venues across the Kingdom. In addition, the Ministry of Culture organizes book fairs and oversees a number of organizations, including the Saudi Arabian Association for Culture and Arts, the Saudi Society for Fine Arts, the Stamp Society, the Photographic Society, the Saudi Society for Cartoons and Animation, the Theater Society, the Arabic Calligraphy Society, the Saudi Publishers Association, and the Saudi Producers Association. Finally, the Ministry of Culture has also taken over responsibility for national heritage activities from of the Commission General of Tourism and National Heritage.

After the establishment of the Ministry of Culture, 11 specialized commissions were created under the purview of the Minister of Culture to manage, develop, and organize the cultural sector. Each commission is a corporate legal body and benefits from both financial and administrative independence. They are: the Literature, Publishing, and Translation Commission; the Fashion Commission; the Film Commission; the Heritage Commission; the Architecture and Design Commission; the Visual Arts Commission; the Museum Commission; the Theater and Performing Arts Commission; the Library Commission; the Music Commission; and the Culinary Arts Commission.

Although reorganization is still taking place, the Ministry of Culture set out to implement 27 of the ini-

tiatives announced in March 2019, including the establishment of the King Salman International Complex for the Arabic Language and the Numo Cultural Fund. This was in addition to launching the Red Sea Film Festival, the National Theater Group, the National Music Ensemble and the National Cultural Awards. The Ministry has also prioritized education by launching a cultural scholarship program, the creation of art academies, and the introduction of art education to the primary education curriculum in cooperation with the Ministry of Education.

In the year that has passed since the establishment of the Ministry of Culture, it has drawn up plans, built structures, and prepared to launch more detailed programs specific to each commission. It is also working on the necessary infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, and educational and cultural training options to support the creative industry. Ultimately, the creatives within the industry are the agents of innovative and revitalized cultural advancements.

(1) Document of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Vision 2030, p. 17.







Executive Summary

Language



The inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula have spoken Arabic since the pre-Islamic period. It gained significance during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and it went on to become the language of learning in Islamic civilizations. Today, Arabic remains an integral part of the Kingdom's identity; within its basic laws, in its official communications, and in its administrative functions.

An extensive network of Saudi educational institutions supports the work of governmental sectors engaged in the promotion of the Arabic language. Arabic is taught in all national schools; Saudi universities also offer programs in Arabic language and literature. These programs have led to Arabic retaining a powerful presence in daily professional life, however, the programs produced a surplus of specialists in the field. Saudi universities have also founded institutes for teaching Arabic as a foreign language as well as Arabic-language associations and educational institutes for teaching Arabic abroad.

Despite the special attention afforded to the Kingdom's native language, no institution was dedicated to its promotion until the establishment of the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Center for the Arabic Language. The Center aims to promote, teach, and preserve the integrity of the Arabic language. Nevertheless, the most important institutional step is the creation of the King Salman International Complex for Arabic Language as announced by the Ministry of Culture. The Complex is still in the initial phases of development.

There are several initiatives in the Kingdom to promote the use of Arabic in conjunction with modern technologies. For example, the King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an has carried out digital processing of the Arabic text of the Qur'an and enabled the use of Arabic script with modern software. Other institutions have established computing projects to enrich Arabic culture and content and to develop Arabic corpora to facilitate quantitative analysis.

Units working within state-supported and private academic institutions support the translation movement. Saudi universities house translation units and centers, although their activity is somewhat sporadic. In recent years, online translation has also been energized by online cultural and translation platforms, in conjunction with the significant Saudi presence on social media, whether in digital humanities, translation, or content development. This activity includes lexicography, as there is now a space for interested parties to discuss and debate language-related topics such as grammar, vocabulary, and translation.

Key figures

65

Universities, institutes, language departments, associations, units, and centers specializing in Arabic

5,463

Books translated since the unification of the Kingdom through 2016 as recorded by the Saudi Observatory on Translated Publications

149

The number of Arabic-language-related resolutions issued in the Kingdom through 2015

Literature





Saudi literature draws on a vast literary heritage. The literary arena is brimming with accomplished Saudi authors recognized locally and throughout the Arab world, especially in the genre of poetry and literary fiction. In recent years, the literary scene has welcomed young authors, particularly those operating in new literary mediums. Whether the use of social media as a medium for literary publication is substituting for conventional channels has been a subject of debate. However, it has facilitated communication between author and audience and has contributed to the emergence of several talented authors who had found it difficult to publish their works through conventional channels.

Saudi poets are prominent regionally and on social media, even if the local poetry scene continues to suffer from a certain degree of contraction. Minor and intermediate literary awards have become scarce, particularly after the discontinuation of several literary clubs' awards. Literary clubs' events have seen modest attendance numbers, especially for live readings. In contrast, the creative writing courses and workshops offered by some private institutions have enjoyed higher attendance, since no such programs are offered by universities.

Literary translation has flourished, as reflected in the high level of participation in the creative translation competition held as part of the Jeddah International Book Fair. Several private and governmental bodies, including the Ministry of Culture, have held courses and workshops to develop the field. This year, Saudi novels were the most published medium in the literary sector. There has also been continued interest in short stories at a number of high-profile literary events.

Several Saudi novels and short stories have been shortlisted and longlisted for Arabic fiction awards this year. However, both audiences and critics show a noticeable lack of interest in literature outside the context of literary prizes and media attention. This may be because creative work has not been matched by corresponding activity in the field of criticism.

Key figures

604

Books published in different literary genres in a single year (1441 Hijri/2018-2019)

161

Published Saudi Arabian novels (the leading form of literary publication)

3

Saudi novelists who have won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, the most prestigious Arabic literary award, since its launch

Fashion Design



In the wake of structural changes within Saudi Arabia's educational institutions, the fashion sector has been transformed from a teaching specialty into an artistic and creative one. Organizational and financial obstacles have hampered local designers. They also limited their output and confined the sector to the role of consumer. In recent years, however, cultural changes have made local products and brands more prominent in daily life. New outlets, such as seasonal shows and online social-media platforms, have become available in the Kingdom, facilitating communication between designers and both domestic and international consumers.

At the same time, the Kingdom has witnessed the rise of a new generation of male and female designers who have participated in international fashion weeks and have won several national and regional prizes. Furthermore, artistic fashion trends have shifted towards displaying national identity by drawing on elements of national heritage and cultural diversity. Going beyond academic attempts to preserve and document traditional costumes, this new orientation has integrated traditional elements into modern designs and developed products inspired by traditional dress to express local identity. In this way, the fashion design sector has become a part of the wider national cultural scene.

As a part of this shift, public and civil society institutions have provided support to the fashion sector by organizing events, forums, workshops, and training programs; and welcoming designers and their brands to festivals and seasonal celebrations. They have also fostered an interest in documenting traditional attire as part of national heritage, and have supported tailors and embroiderers by marketing their products and encouraging them to participate in local and regional exhibitions. The leading provider of support is the Ministry of Culture, which has organized the Fashion Futures forum and established a Fashion Commission.

Despite the demand for local products, the sector is still reliant on imports. The transformation of the fashion design sector into an industry and an integrated ecosystem for creative work faces a variety of infrastructural obstacles, including education, training, and the availability of production lines and outlets. These challenges drive some designers and brands to seek experienced labor from abroad or to pursue production abroad in order to achieve the desired quality at a reasonable cost.

Key figures

11

Saudi universities offering fashion design programs

4.3%

The portion of an individual's income spent on clothing, textiles, and shoes

925

The number of Saudi men and women in fashion-related professions

Film



Due to the decades-long absence of cinemas in the Kingdom and the paucity of educational programs specializing in visual production, film production in the Kingdom has remained modest. It rests mainly upon the individual efforts of amateurs. This affects the quality of production, most of which has focused on short films. Nevertheless, these amateurs have been able to make up for infrastructural weaknesses by attending film festivals outside the Kingdom and winning a number of awards. They have also attempted to build alternative platforms for local screenings through vigorous efforts to establish film festivals in several Saudi cities, which has led to film festivals gradually becoming common in the Kingdom. The most important of these is the Saudi Film Festival, which in effect has served as the Kingdom's main film platform for a number of years.

In the midst of these developments, groups of young filmmakers have emerged onto the scene, bringing with them new ideas. This culminated in the use of the digital platform YouTube, which provides an easy means of screening films and reaching audiences directly. Such productions have achieved high levels of viewership. This played a role in highlighting domestic talents who have strengthened local production, achieved a certain standard of professionalism, and established production companies specializing in digital content and dedicated to expanding film production. Some of these companies have succeeded in opening branches in other Arab countries.

Since the return of cinemas to the Kingdom, film production has increased. Interest in producing full-length feature films has grown, as has the participation of Saudi films in Arab and international film festivals. These films have received a growing number of awards from international festivals, such as the Venice International Film Festival and the Sundance Film Festival. Since the Ministry of Culture's establishment of a sub-sector for film, new organizations dedicated to developing the sector and supporting the film industry have emerged. These organizations include the Film Commission and the National Film Archive. Additionally, there are several initiatives to establish film competitions in order to cultivate domestic talent and to support improvement in production quality. These include the Red Sea International Film Festival Foundation, the Daw' Film Competition, which aims to support Saudi films through the Ministry of Culture, and the Ithra Center's Saudi Film Days Competition.

Transforming local production into a competitive film industry faces several challenges. An increase in the number and quality of academic specializations in film and visual production is needed to combat weak content and limited professionalization. Many professional specializations are absent from the Saudi labor market, which this sector requires to support its development. Despite the growth in the number of screening platforms in several regions within the Kingdom, Saudi films remain unable to reach local audiences because they are unable to compete for ticket sales. They also lack regulatory support to grant them access to commercial venues.

Key figures

12

Number of licensed commercial cinemas in the Kingdom

4 million people

Number of people who have visited cinemas from the time of their opening until the end of 2019

101

Number of Saudi films produced (including full-length feature films, short films, and documentary films) in 2019

Theater





Playwriting began in Saudi Arabia in 1932 and was soon followed by a number of individual attempts to establish Saudi theaters. Only when the Ministry of Education adopted theater as part of its program did it begin to flourish, in the 1970s and 1980s. Subsequently, theatrical production declined in the 1990s in most areas of the Kingdom, despite continued participation in Arab and regional forums. The Saudi Arabian Society for Culture and Arts was the main patron of the local theater scene. Festivals also played an important role in stimulating theatrical production, though several important festivals have since ceased to operate.

The changes accompanying Vision 2030 have contributed to an increase in the number of domestic theatrical performances. This applies particularly to the field of commercial theater, after it gained the support of the General Entertainment Authority. This growth coincided with the participation of a limited number of private sector institutions in the field. The existence of demand for theatrical performances is reflected in 2019 data such as attendance figures and the Cultural Participation Survey.

Although there are a number of halls and theaters in which performances have been staged, one of the main challenges facing the field is the scarcity of fully equipped theaters. Most spaces are primarily seminar or lecture halls and are therefore inadequately equipped. Additionally, there is a lack of professionalization. Because Saudi universities lack specialized institutes for the arts and degree tracks in theater and most of those involved in theatrical production in the Kingdom are amateurs. Initiatives intended to respond to these challenges and develop the sector include the establishment of the Theater and Performing Arts Commission and the National Theater. Furthermore, the Ministry of Culture has added theater majors to the Cultural Scholarship Program, launched to train professional cadres in different fields.

Key figures

155

Plays presented by the Saudi Arabian Society for Culture and Arts and the General Entertainment Authority

94,565

Total number of attendees of these plays in the first half of 2019 alone

300

International awards won by Saudi theater through foreign participation, at minimum

Music





Modern Saudi song began to take shape in the 1950s and 1960s at the hands of a generation of pioneers who had immersed themselves in different types of local music and been influenced by the broader Arab music movement. They were met with support by some early institutions, including Saudi radio and television bands and the Saudi Arabian Army Music School. Although institutional support subsequently declined, the rise of popular songs continued, spreading throughout the Arab world thanks to a number of leading artists. Simultaneously, folk songs maintained a presence in a variety of cultural milieus.

In the last few years, a number of public bodies in the Kingdom have shifted towards greater recognition of music and the vocal arts. This includes the recognition of music as a form cultural expression, in addition to its presence in social life and entertainment. Numerous international classical music evenings and international concerts have taken place in several regions. Music has become a part of public spaces.

One of the most prominent features of today's musical scene is the emergence of self-taught amateurs and independent youth bands who rely on experimentation and hold concerts in public or private spaces like cafes and restaurants. In comparison with other vocal arts, folk singing has remained resilient. It has always gained a level of official recognition and is an almost constant presence at national festivals and in social life. Expanding interest in cultural identity has also led to increased recognition of folk singing.

One of the most important challenges facing the music industry in the Kingdom, from recording and distribution to marketing, is the lack of music production companies. This results in a lack of local opportunities for artists and rising talents. The music sector in the Kingdom, as in the rest of the world, is experiencing a transformation in the modes of music production and consumption.

The high demand for recordings and live music performances indicates that there is fertile ground for creativity and investment, especially if the major challenges facing the field are addressed. These challenges include an insufficient number of theaters equipped for vocal performances and a significant shortage of studios equipped for recording and artistic production. A cadre of composers, instrumentalists, and distributors is also lacking. The most notable challenge in the field, however, is the total lack of educational infrastructure. This demonstrates the importance of the initiatives for musical education that the Ministry of Culture has announced. The availability of talent and the demand for education and consumption in the music field justifies the importance of establishing the Music Commission, an important step toward leveraging these elements on the local level.

Key figures

950

Members of folk singing groups in the Kingdom

240 million riyals

And more than 5.5 million listeners to music via streaming platforms in the Kingdom

Cultural Festival and Events





In recent years, cultural festivals in the Kingdom have made progress, in both quantity and quality. Once focused narrowly on national heritage, Saudi festivals have recently grown and diversified thanks to the involvement of several governmental institutions as well as the contributions of private-sector firms specializing in event planning and talent management.

Since the announcement of Vision 2030, the festival and events sector has gone through organizational and regulatory changes that have created opportunities for growth, development, and increased diversity. The most important national festivals have been assigned to specialized authorities and the "Saudi Seasons" program has been launched with the aim of developing domestic tourism by holding unique events and festivals connected to specific regions at particular times of the year.

Alongside the government and private sector, there has been an observable level of participation by local communities in the revival of seasonal celebrations that were no longer being observed. Furthermore, a number of civil society institutions and non-profit organizations have begun to offer cultural festivals as well as educational and arts programming for the community.

Among the many festivals are international events, which have been popular despite the high cost of organizing them, in contrast to small events that rely on the participation and direct involvement of community members for their success. Despite certain drawbacks, international festivals and events help attract investment, strengthen management capabilities, and enhance national expertise. This sector likewise contributes to job creation by charging young people with required logistical tasks.

The cultural festivals and events sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in the Kingdom and the large attendance figures indicate increased community demand. Such events have also attracted external participation and investment, which points to the necessity of developing this sector's infrastructure and auxiliary services. As festivals became more widespread throughout the Kingdom in 2019, new online platforms were created to publicize events so that prospective attendees could find them more easily. Additionally, although the number of workers in this sector is increasing, university programs, which focus on short training courses and certificate programs, remain limited.

Key figures

55%

The percentage of citizens and residents who attended at least one festival or event in the last twelve months

350

The number of events during Season Eid al-Fitr across over 90 Saudi cities in 2019

498185

The number of visitors to the 2019 Souk Okaz Festival

Architecture and Design





Saudi architecture has experienced numerous transformations over the years, as it has moved between the traditional and the modern, the local and the imported, and the rural and the urban. While simple building styles once prevailed, the period from the discovery of oil until the peak of the oil boom was a historical turning point, radically altering the Kingdom's architectural character. The early 1950s witnessed the introduction of a modern, imported architectural vocabulary, which might be termed the "pioneers' period," during which the first modern architectural experiments took place in the Kingdom. Beginning in the late 1970s, architects began to examine the compatibility of new styles of construction with the Saudi cultural identity. By the end of the following decade, identity and cultural reference became central questions for local architects, provoking debates between opposing camps. These attempts to find an authentic identity were limited to large, high-end projects, while minor projects, including housing, remained outside the scope of these conversations.

Despite the rapid pace of construction and development, the community of architects proceeded slowly on the path of professionalization towards becoming an industry with a cohesive identity. Additionally, the various regulatory agencies did not acknowledge architecture's cultural significance. Thus, bringing this field under the purview of the Ministry of Culture, along with the formation of the Architecture and Design Commission, is a substantial development that will hopefully provide the first comprehensive regulatory framework for architecture and its practitioners. On top of these structural developments in the sector, some cities have new Royal Commissions with programs that focus directly on the exceptional cultural and architectural value of those cities.

There have been several practical initiatives in recent years on a number of levels, including the "Humanizing Cities" initiative, as well as a push to develop new, environmentally friendly construction materials. However, these have faced some technical and financial difficulties. The field has also inspired community involvement as architecture steps out of its institutional framework through the formation of several active architectural discussion groups.

Meanwhile, Saudi urban centers have taken on a transnational character. In these "global cities," commercial centers are dominated by glass towers that make no stylistic concessions to local identity. The field faces many challenges, the most obvious of which are regulatory difficulties, the gap between education and industry, the absence of a single professional organization to represent local architects in the media and the regulatory sphere, and a lack of support for research and development.

Key figures

8

Projects in the Kingdom that have won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture

8,912

Saudis working as professional architectural engineers (2019)

13

Architecture departments and 17 interior design departments in Saudi universities

Heritage





The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is distinguished by its rich cultural heritage, including archeological treasures from civilizations stretching back millennia, architectural forms that are as diverse as the Kingdom's wide-ranging regions, and a combination of arts and knowledge passed down from generation to generation. Since the mid-twentieth century, pioneering scholars in the fields of geography, archeology, history, and literature have helped preserve and record this heritage. In subsequent decades, their efforts have been bolstered by the work of institutions.

Initiatives to preserve Saudi heritage are actively progressing with official support. Vision 2030 sets out measures to preserve and cultivate both material and non-material heritage. These new policies provide formal support for the continuation of excavation projects as well as the preservation and restoration of historic buildings and the documentation of intangible heritage. These efforts are on the cusp of a new phase, following the Council of Ministers' decision in late 2019 to transfer all activities related to national heritage from the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage to the Ministry of Culture, followed by the establishment of the Heritage Commission.

There has been a remarkable increase in the number of civil society organizations concerned with heritage, several of which were founded in 2019. A newfound interest in previously neglected topics, like industrial heritage, has emerged. In fact, the Ministry of Culture sponsors a competition in the field of industrial heritage as well as folk heritage. Such contests not only serve to document Saudi heritage but also to help strengthen community engagement.

These initiatives, however, were not the primary force behind the increased general interest in national heritage, as the public spontaneously engaged in cultural heritage activities. The numerous and diverse cultural festivals and events held in 2019 were also very well attended, most notably the Jenadriyah Festival. Several of these events were held at historical and cultural sites in an effort to foster connections with the community and create spaces for diverse cultural and social activities. However, there are still some infrastructure gaps. Many sites are not equipped to welcome tourists, which is reflected in the overall number of visitors.

Cultural heritage touches identity at its core and can also present opportunities for investment. The domain of traditional crafts has taken steps toward professionalization and there has been significant progress in marketing historical sites and equipping them to receive visitors. Nevertheless, the field is in need of substantial improvements in tourism-related services.

Key figures

1,985

Total number of recorded heritage sites

5

Number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites

7

Elements of Saudi culture included on the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Visual Arts





Since the first exhibitions in the 1950s and 1960s, the Saudi art scene has produced successive generations of artists working in different styles and genres. The educational system, as well as the General Presidency for Youth Welfare, provided institutional support for art and artists for decades. Despite periods in which institutional support was less forthcoming, development has continued, with practitioners sharing their experiences and attempting to revitalize artistic expression. Individual and collective efforts by Saudi artists persisted in building a community despite a paucity of resources and support.

Throughout the past decade, the art scene has witnessed a wave of contemporary art, reinforced by Saudi non-profit organizations. These institutions have promoted **avant-garde** artists whose work differs from that of their predecessors in terms of practice and the range of their networks, insofar as they have garnered significant international attention. Although this wave of artistic expression has attracted varying reviews from critics, it has created a dynamic situation that could stimulate critical attention to Saudi art.

The present-day art scene is characterized by an increase in new forms and means of visual arts that shared the scene with plastic arts, which have dominated Saudi artistic production since the mid-twentieth century. Today, installations, photography, and digital arts are well represented in major exhibitions.

Currently, the number of art galleries and art-related activities, as well as the growth of public art, attest to increased engagement in the field. Public art, including murals, spontaneous graffiti on neighborhood walls, and a revival of sculpture, has become a more conspicuous feature of public space. A number of non-profit organizations have also emerged, offering professional and emerging artists resources that were previously unavailable.

The Ministry of Culture's establishment of the Visual Arts Commission has been the most significant institutional development. The commission is responsible for regulating and supporting the field. The Ministry has launched a number of initiatives in the field of art education, which has undergone structural changes over the past decade. Foremost amongst these initiatives has been the prospective establishment of art academies. Today, various forms of support, such as the residency programs that have become increasingly common, are available for Saudi artists.

Key figures

255

Art exhibitions held in 2019 (minimum estimate)

329

Saudi men and women working as gallery guides

22.8%

Percentage of Saudi society involved in producing sculpture, paintings, or other works of art, as a hobby or a profession

Museums





Saudi museums have undergone a number of structural transformations throughout their history, which are linked to policy changes. After the establishment of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Cultural Heritage Program, interest in the museum sector increased. The program launched several projects to build and develop museums of different kinds as a way to strengthen national identity and stimulate tourism. Several initiatives by the National Transformation Program 2020 (NTP) engaged with this sector by planning new museums in different regions throughout the Kingdom as part of maintaining cultural facilities that help to improve quality of life for both citizens and residents. These policies culminated in the inclusion of the sector within those overseen by the Ministry of Culture, which established a Museum Commission dedicated to managing the sector's development and growth.

Due to an increase in the number of public museums in the last few years, every region in the Kingdom now has at least one museum. Nearly half of these are located in the Riyadh province. Licensed private museums have matched this growth, although many remain underdeveloped. Besides growing in number, museums have begun to undergo a qualitative transformation in recent years. For decades, local museums were closely associated with antiquities. Now, other types of museums, reflecting a more comprehensive understanding of what constitutes a museum, have been opened. Overall, however, the sector lacks qualified specialists, as there are no dedicated training programs, nor any museum degree tracks at Saudi universities.

One of the greatest challenges facing Saudi museums has long been the low level of public engagement and participation. A number of initiatives have sought to rectify this by transforming museums into community cultural centers. These centers hold events of various kinds, host school field trips, and offer opportunities for volunteer work. In addition, a number of historic palaces have been transformed into museums capable of hosting events and festivals. The various touristic seasons established in 2019 promoted cultural tourism, including a range of events held on museum premises, which drew in visitors by providing an attractive venue for recreational exhibitions.

Key figures

303,162

Number of visits to private museums (2018)

130,331

Number of visits to the National Museum of Riyadh (2019)

84

Number of public museums in the Kingdom

217

Number of private museums in the Kingdom

Libraries



Libraries have always been a part of Saudi culture, as attested by many long-established private and endowed libraries. Soon after the Kingdom was founded, libraries were overhauled to reflect modern concepts of organization, with properly equipped buildings and specialized services. These efforts not only preserved and developed existing libraries, but also led to the opening of new libraries of various kinds throughout the Kingdom. These include the King Fahd National Library in Riyadh, which has long been considered a model for the sector both locally and internationally.

Today the library sector continues to develop its facilities, sources of information, and technical capabilities as well as programming and community engagement. This development is due in part to the work of a number of leading public libraries, which have responded to - and driven - a growing interest in reading in Saudi society. Through their various activities and initiatives, these institutions have revived the role of libraries. Yet these positive developments have been limited to those libraries enjoying continuous support and organizational independence. Meanwhile, the 84 government-funded public libraries throughout the Kingdom's cities and governorates have been challenged with severe underperformance and lack of supplies, which resulted in low numbers of visitors.

Saudi university libraries are distinguished from others in the sector by the size of their holdings and their ability to keep pace with rapid technological development. Through early experimentation with "Learning Resource Centers," public school libraries have attempted to keep pace. Overall, several projects in the sector, notably the Saudi Digital Library Project, which primarily serves university libraries, have excelled in meeting the challenges of the digital evolution. Private libraries maintained by individuals in their homes but available to the public continue to exist in many cities in the Kingdom. Yet their number has decreased, and their development is limited due to the lack of resources and specialized workers, and the need for library technologies that lie beyond the means of private individuals. Distinct from these are the endowed libraries managed by the General Presidency for Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Dawah and Guidance, particularly the King Abdulaziz Complex for Endowment Libraries in Madinah, the Library of the Great Mosque of Mecca, and the Library of the Prophet's Mosque. These libraries house valuable collections that have grown over time through individual contributions from living donors as well as endowments made to ensure the proper management and preservation of private libraries after the death of their owners.

The key challenges faced by the library sector as a whole today are the digital evolution and the need for interlibrary networking, which require policies for digitization and standard criteria for cataloguing. The sector still lacks these key components despite the work undertaken by projects such as the Arab Unified Catalog and the Saudi Unified Catalog.

Key figures

35%

The percentage of Saudi families with a private library at home

479,773

Number of titles (books) held at the King Fahd National Library (as of 2019)

2,329

The total number of libraries in the Kingdom (including school, university, public, special, and national libraries)

Natural Heritage





The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia covers a vast geographical area whose natural heritage is rich in material, scientific, and aesthetic value. It includes mountainous, marine, desert, and tropical forest environments, and its biodiversity embraces numerous species of plants and animals. The Kingdom is home to a number of endangered species. It is also a major stopover for migratory birds on their way across Asia, Europe, and Africa.

The drafting of environmental laws and regulations did not begin until the late 1980s. It was then that the Kingdom began to discover the treasures of its natural heritage, designate protected habitats for wildlife, and sign several international agreements in that regard.

However, in the last two years, government entities concerned with environmental affairs have seen major restructuring. In that context, natural heritage, due to its cultural relevance, has become one of the sectors overseen by the Ministry of Culture.

Nevertheless, development has been hampered by threats to the environment that can be addressed only by large-scale institutional partnerships across different sectors. These threats include climate change, the degradation of pastoral lands, diminishing ground cover, the shrinkage of natural habitats, and water and air pollution. Research centers, particularly those concerned with marine diversity and fisheries, are working to address these issues. Yet many of the specialties needed to supply such centers with scientific and practical expertise are not being taught at Saudi universities, especially those directly related to natural heritage and conservation.

As research and academic institutions play an ever-increasing role in preserving natural heritage, there is a growing number of community initiatives aimed at raising awareness of environmental issues. The first step in creating such awareness is to promote sustainable ecological tourism that will open up nature preserves and introduce visitors to these attractions, especially since parks are among Saudi citizens' favorite recreational destinations. Yet the absence of a strong infrastructure for ecotourism and the lack of periodic development of natural heritage sites continue to limit the role that the natural environment might play as a part of an environmentally conscious local tourism.

Key figures

4.33%

Percentage of the protected areas in the Kingdom

26,967

Number of visitors to reserves from 2015 to 2018

16

Wildlife reserves in the Kingdom

Food and Culinary Arts





Saudi Arabian cuisine reflects the geographical and cultural diversity of the Kingdom. Although the country's diet consists largely of local grains, meats, vegetables, and fruits, the way these ingredients are prepared and combined varies in proportion to their abundance in each region of the Kingdom, which is vast in extent and diverse in its local resources. International trade has provided Saudi cuisine with new ingredients that have become a central component of everyday dishes. In addition, the various border regions of the Kingdom draw on the food culture of neighboring countries, as they share a similar climate and cultural roots.

Since recipes are seldom in writing, they have been passed down orally from one generation to another, with some contributions from cookbooks and online cooking shows. In the absence of a clear and accurate method of documentation, festivals, especially heritage festivals, have played a role in preserving and highlighting traditional dishes and establishing the identity of Saudi cuisine as one of the most important components of the country's cultural heritage.

The culinary arts sector has been developing since the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. In addition to activities undertaken by the hospitality sector, a number of non-governmental initiatives have emerged. Saudi chefs have made efforts to establish a private association and a few culinary academies. These efforts anticipate the formation of a professional milieu that will improve the way the culinary arts are perceived. The number of Saudi chefs has increased remarkably, particularly after several universities in the Kingdom started to offer culinary arts courses as part of the tourism and hospitality track. Institutes and colleges now offer diploma programs accredited by the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation, as well as a number of scholarships funded by different entities. The past two years have witnessed a major structural transformation in the food and culinary arts sector, including the formation of a Culinary Arts Commission, based on a recognition of the sector's importance as a constituent of culture.

Interest in the culinary arts as a form of culture is evident from the number of large formal events where modern versions of Saudi dishes have been served. These events include the World Economic Forum in Davos, the Indaba conference, and the cultural dinner held in conjunction with the visit of His Royal Highness Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the United States. Likewise, there have been limited attempts to modernize Saudi cuisine and enable such restaurants to offer a fine-dining experience.

Key figures

54

Male and female students sent abroad to study culinary arts

27

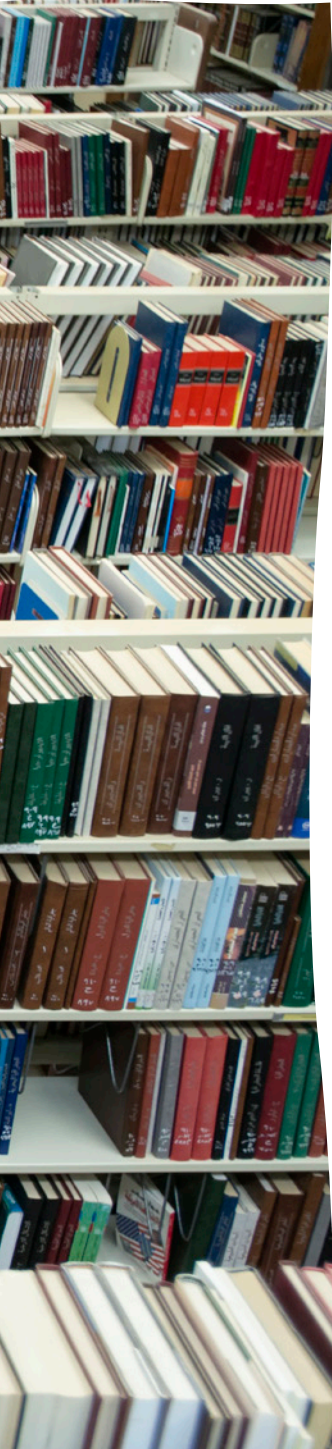
Registered Saudi executive chefs

34.99%

Percentage of revenue from catering and beverage services within the total operating revenue of tourist establishments in the Kingdom (in 2018)

Books and Publishing





The history of the printing press in the Arabian Peninsula dates back to the end of the eighteenth century. With the beginning of the Saudi era, the printing press took on different forms. In addition to publicizing state notifications and directives, it also began to play a commercial role. By the middle of the twentieth century, printing had come to serve as the infrastructure for Saudi journalism and the starting point for new forms of writing, especially literary writing. Over the past few years, publishing has been one of the cultural areas most affected by new technologies: the printed book is now competing with other formats such as the e-book and the audiobook. Although Arabic language commercial applications have had limited success in supporting these formats, e-books are now commonplace in the Kingdom. In general, public interest in reading is reflected in the relatively high rates of leisure reading in recent years. Accompanying this has been the proliferation of governmental and private initiatives and programs as well as community efforts to encourage and strengthen reading by facilitating access to books in public places.

Book fairs, like the Riyadh and Jeddah international fairs, exemplify the popularity of reading. The fairs constitute the strongest link in the Saudi book and publishing chain and provide a competitive advantage in which a thriving industry can grow. Young Saudi authors and entrepreneurs are increasingly active in the domain of publishing. New forms of the mass-market book have emerged, combining simple content with visual elements and e-marketing. There has been an increase in the publication of translated books, related to a wider growth in translation activities. However, statistics show that even though publishing in the Kingdom has reached its highest levels in 1440 AH (2018–19), it is still relatively insignificant when compared to the global levels of book production.

Statistics attest to the growing number of publishing houses and the large size of the Saudi publishing market, but size does not necessarily imply that the industry is efficient. A large proportion of Saudi publications are still produced abroad. This is partly due to regulatory hurdles, but also because of factors related to the domestic market, including higher production costs and poor distribution relative to overseas publishing houses that operate more efficiently. To overcome these hurdles, especially regulatory ones, the book and publishing industry in the Kingdom is undergoing structural changes. The Ministry of Culture has taken the lead by assuming responsibility for the growth of this field. Initiatives include the establishment of a Literature, Publishing and Translation Commission tasked with supporting and regulating activity in the field. The books and publishing sector also hopes to make progress in protecting intellectual property, including the rights of authors and publishers, which are protected by the Saudi Authority for Intellectual Property.

Key figures

4.5 billion riyals

Size of the Saudi publishing industry in terms of annual sales volume (2017)

7,687

Books deposited in the King Fahd National Library in 1440 AH (2018–19)

18.26%

Percentage of books translated into Arabic out of the total number of deposited books

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