# Visual Arts Forum (VAF)

# Highlights Newsletter 2025

In a year marked by immense loss, pain, destruction, and relentless uncertainty, the Visual Arts Forum remained steadfast in its commitment to art, education, and community. Despite the devastating conditions endured by our people in Gaza and the ongoing daily attacks across the West Bank, we continued to keep our spaces open for learning, expression, and creativity, while sustaining art as a space for hope, dignity, connection, and resilience.

Throughout 2025, the Forum expanded access to arts education, supported children, young people, and artists, strengthened partnerships, opened a new branch in Kufr Aqab, and delivered programs that demonstrate the transformative role of art in individual and collective life. This newsletter offers a reflection of the year's key activities, achievements, and milestones.

## School of Visual Arts

In 2025, across the first and second academic semesters as well as the summer term, 352 students enrolled in courses at the School of Visual Arts.

Despite the devastating conditions endured by our people in Gaza and the ongoing daily attacks across the West Bank, the Forum remained committed to its educational mission. Guided by the belief that art is both a message and a social responsibility, as well as a space for free expression and hope, the Forum continued providing opportunities and creative spaces throughout the year.

We extend our deep appreciation to our trainers and staff, whose dedication made it possible to keep these spaces open under extremely difficult circumstances.
During the same year, the Forum provided nearly 50 scholarships to talented students, most of them from public schools. We are especially grateful to the United Palestinian Appeal (UPA), as well as to our supportive friends and individual donors, whose generosity enabled these students to access quality arts education and continue developing their talents.

## Student Scholarships through VAF's Student Fund

The Visual Arts Forum continued to strengthen its Student Fund to ensure that art education remains accessible to talented students who are unable to cover tuition fees.

Thanks to the support of the United Palestinian Appeal UPA, and contributions from individual donors and friends, the Forum was able to offer partial scholarships to 50 students, majority of whom attend public schools. These scholarships enabled students to enroll in the School of Visual Arts and continue developing their artistic skills in a nurturing learning environment.

## Talks and Learning Encounters

Throughout the year, the Forum hosted a series of artist talks and learning encounters for students and the wider artistic community.

In January, Youssef Hussein from Zawyeh Gallery met with around 40 students from the School of Visual Arts to discuss artistic practice, exhibitions, opportunities for participation, and how artists can professionally engage with galleries.

In April, the Forum hosted Italian artist Paolo Ghezzi, who shared reflections on the arts from an international perspective, drawing on his experiences in Italy, Lebanon, and Palestine. The Forum also coordinated an additional talk by the artist at Birzeit University.

In May, artist Mohammad Saleh Khalil joined the Forum for a session focused on artistic practice and lived experience, including his journey as an artist who studied in Germany and later contributed to the establishment of the Forum with a group of fellow creatives. The visit concluded with a studio-based acrylic painting session under his guidance.

## Artist Residencies

### Milky Way House Residency with Italian Artist Paolo Ghezzi

In April, the Visual Arts Forum organized a seven-day residency with Italian artist Paolo Ghezzi, from the artistic duo Antonello Ghezzi, bringing together more than 25 artists with the support of Forum trainers Majd Masri and Reem Masri. During the residency, participants created interactive installation works centered on the idea of human unity under one shared cosmic sky.

The residency included the creation of the Milky Way Embassy, the Office of Lost Dreams, and a live star-drawing project tracing meteors over the city of Ramallah and connecting them through an illuminated network, presented during the opening event on 24 April in the courtyard of the Ramallah Recreational Complex. Visitors received "Milky Way Passports" and launched their wishes into space as part of an immersive artistic experience.

In collaboration with the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music, six students performed a musical composition created especially for the National Anthem of the Milky Way, by musician Yousef Sakhnini.

The residency carried a deeply artistic and humanitarian message, affirming art's power to cultivate hope, strengthen solidarity, and transcend borders. We extend our thanks to Anna Lindh Foundation for supporting this residency.

### Midas Touch Residency with Dutch Artist Aljawhara "Jeje"

Over the course of one month, twelve artists took part in the Midas Touch Residency, receiving training in the delicate craft of traditional gilding and the Japanese practice of kintsugi at the Forum's branch in the Old Town of Kufr Aqab, under the guidance of Dutch artist Aljawhara "Jeje

This process culminated in the project Wandering Stones, through which participants transformed matter into meaning, creating a collective public artwork installed in the outdoor courtyard of the A. M. Qattan Foundation.

## Wandering Stones ...What do you see when you see me?

This public art installation invited viewers to look again at what is often overlooked. The gilded stones symbolized uprooted and displaced lives, while also expressing transformation, movement, and resilience. By placing an object traditionally associated with permanence into a condition of wandering, the work created a powerful tension that encouraged reflection.

## "What's on Saturday?" Open Art Workshops

The Forum continued its open weekly workshop series, "What's on Saturday?", designed for anyone seeking artistic experiences that fit the pace of everyday life.

This initiative offers a flexible space for experimentation across diverse themes and media, encouraging people to engage with art without requiring previous experience or long-term commitment, workshops included:

- Watercolor workshop with artist Hiba Tannous
- Painting completion workshop with artist Mohammad Saleh Khalil
- Mosaic panel production workshop
- Candle-making workshop

## Accreditation of VAF's Certificates by the Ministry of Education

In June 2025, the Forum held a series of meetings with officials from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education to explore avenues for cooperation aimed at coordinating artistic activities in schools and integrating the arts into educational contexts.

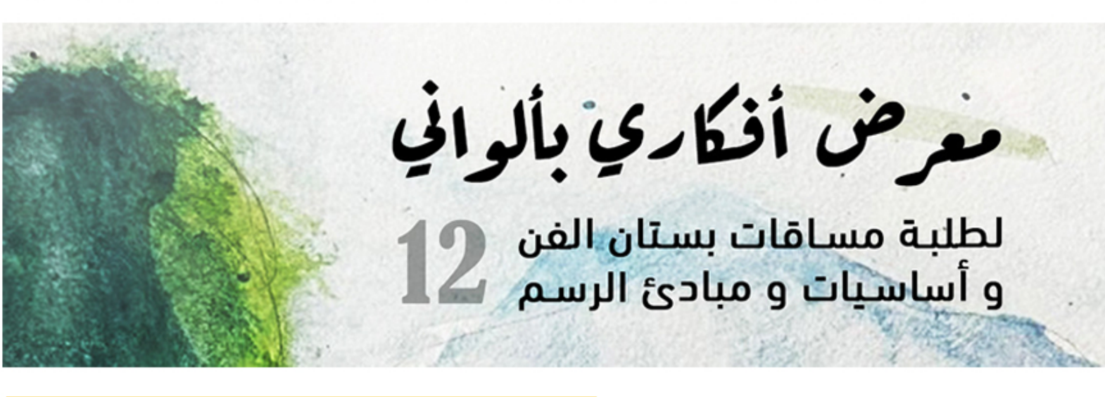
As a result, the Forum was accredited as an approved training center by the Ministry, and the certification of the Forum's academic course certificates for 2025 was officially recognized.

## Three children's exhibitions in 2025

In 2025, the Forum presented the 10th, 11th, and 12th editions of the children's exhibition "My Ideas in My Colors," held in January, June, and August at the Forum's headquarters in the Ramallah Recreational Complex.

These exhibitions featured the works of students aged 5 to 11 enrolled in the Forum's School of Visual Arts. More than 300 artworks were displayed, reflecting the students' creative journeys throughout the academic year.

The exhibitions celebrated the achievements of these young artists and concluded with graduation ceremonies and certificate distribution.



## Inauguration of the Forum's Branch in the Old Town of Kufr Aqab

On 23 June 2025, the Visual Arts Forum officially opened its new branch in the Old Town of Kufr Aqab, marking a major step in its vision to bring art to communities with limited access to cultural opportunities. The opening took place in the presence of representatives from the Ministries of Culture, Education, Tourism, and Antiquities, following a preparatory process that spanned five years.

The Kufr Aqab branch focuses on craft-based arts and vocational skill development through specialized studios in ceramics and pottery, stained glass, jewelry design and production, mosaic, and more. It also serves as a site for psychosocial support programming through the arts, using creative practice as a tool for expression, healing, and social cohesion.

To mark the opening, the Forum organized a three-day exhibition showcasing works by the students of the School of Visual Arts in a space that brought together learning, creativity, and achievement.

The building was restored by Riwaq and furnished by VAF through support from the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, Muna and Basem Hishmeh, the Ghiath and Nadia Sukhtian Foundation, the United Nations Development Programme, and friends from the Palestinian diaspora.

Today, the branch stands as a hub for traditional and contemporary crafts, expanding the Forum's presence in Jerusalem and its surroundings while offering a professional environment for artistic learning and production.

## Psychosocial Support through the Arts

Building on its longstanding experience in arts-based psychosocial support, the Forum implemented a wide range of specialized interventions throughout the year, working with diverse groups in different settings. These activities focused on strengthening safe emotional expression, self-awareness, and coping skills.

Programs included psychosocial support interventions through the arts in Beitunia Prison; workshops for female students in Social Work and Counseling at Al-Quds Open University; activities in Kufr Aqab for women on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the General Union of Palestinian Women; and psychosocial support workshops for students from SOS Children's Villages in Bethlehem.

The Forum also worked with individuals recovering from addiction, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health in Bethlehem, through therapeutic art activities that supported mental health, recovery, and a sense of belonging.

## Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Labor

On 30 June 2025, the Forum signed a memorandum of understanding with the Palestinian Ministry of Labor to strengthen cooperation in technical training and artistic qualification within the arts and culture sector.

The partnership aims to support promising young people, connect artistic initiatives with vocational training and employment pathways, and create opportunities for projects that generate jobs and promote professional specialization in the visual arts.

دولة فلسطين
وزارة العمل

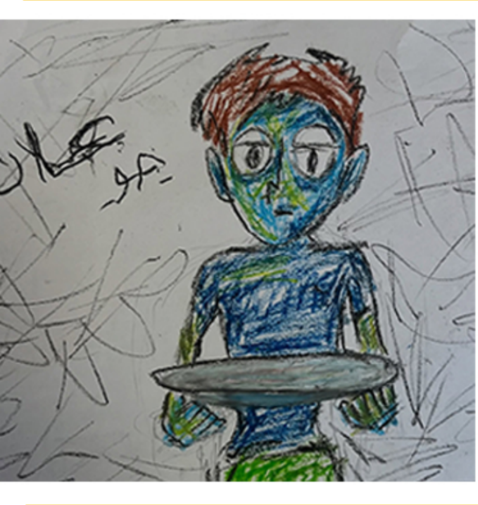
## Election of the New Board of Directors (2025–2027)

The Forum held its regular annual conference on 26 July 2025 at its new headquarters in the Old Town of Kufr Aqab, with the required legal quorum of General Assembly members in attendance.

The conference included the presentation and discussion of the administrative and financial reports, followed by the election of the Board of Directors for the 2025–2027 term.

The newly elected Board is composed of:
- Eng. Khulood Jarrar, Chairperson
- Nisreen Shioukhi, Vice Chairperson
- Samia Al-Wazir, Treasurer
- Ruba Jaafreh, Secretary
- Members: Nour Hamayel, Jessica Sarsour, and Hiba Al-Omari

## The Forum's Children Expressed Solidarity with the Children of Gaza



Throughout the year, the Forum organized a series of artistic activities and initiatives with its students to express solidarity with the children of Gaza.

Through artworks and drawings carrying messages of love, support, and hope, the children engaged in acts of empathy and collective expression. These works were documented and shared as part of the Forum's broader commitment to amplifying children's voices through art.

## Summer Art Boot Camp

During the summer holiday months, the Forum welcomed 40 children to its Summer Arts Camp at its headquarters in the Ramallah Recreational Complex.

The camp offered a vibrant environment for discovering and developing children's talents through activities ranging from painting and handicrafts to collage, installation, clay, mosaic, and recycling-based art practices.

The Forum also partnered with Rise Academy to provide art classes as part of their summer camp, in addition to workshops focused on visual storytelling through drawing.

## Participation in the Storytelling Arts Festival and Conference Kufr Aqab

The Forum participated in the Storytelling Arts Festival and Conference led by Siraj Libraries Association in Kufr Aqab, where children were invited to expand their imaginations by drawing fictional characters inspired by folk tales.

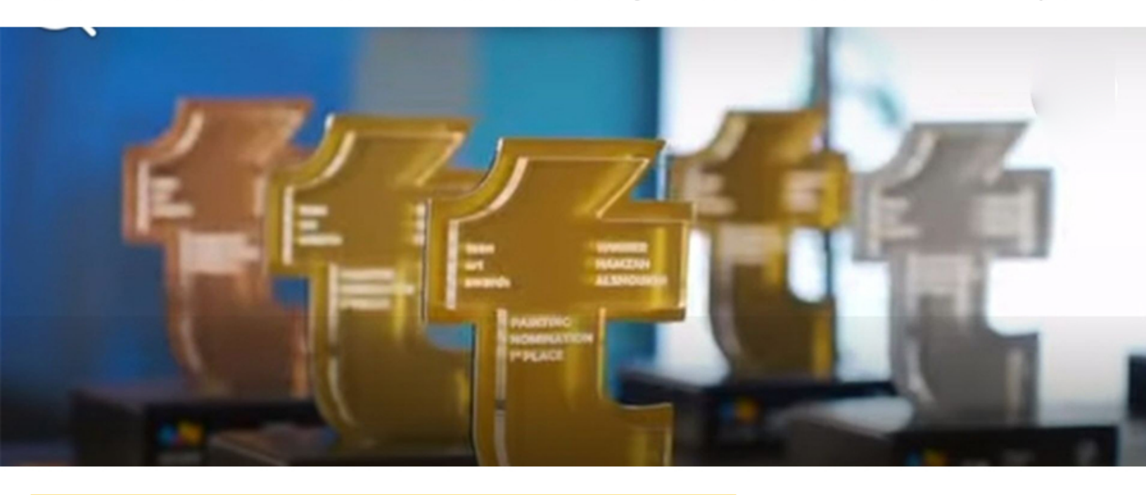
The festival celebrated Palestinian heritage while also engaging with the painful stories of the present. It traveled across different areas of the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, with the participation of Palestinian and international storytellers.

## Palestinian Students' Participation in the Teen Art Awards in Qatar

In partnership with Teen Art Awards in Qatar, and in collaboration with Qatar Museums for the program's third season, the Visual Arts Forum helped open the door for Palestinian students aged 13–17 to participate in this international art award under the theme "Your Art. Your Voice."

The season explored themes such as heritage in the age of technology, bridging the past and the future, and encouraging young people to express their dreams and roots through art.

In coordination with the Palestinian Ministry of Education, students from Palestinian schools were able to apply and participate. The initiative received around 300 submissions, including 70 from Palestine, with winners expected to be announced during 2026. Awarded students will have the opportunity to exhibit their work at Basel Qatar 2026 and join online summer workshops.



## The Arabic Calligraphy Exhibition "Letters Touring the Homeland"

The Forum participated in the Arabic calligraphy exhibition "Letters Touring the Homeland" in partnership with Al-Bireh Municipality and the Ministry of Culture.

Works by Forum students were exhibited alongside approximately 180 artworks by 70 calligraphers from across Palestine and the Palestinian diaspora.

تحت رعاية وزارة الثقافة
حروف تجوب الوطن

The exhibition offered a distinctive cultural experience that brought together heritage and contemporary creativity, reaffirming Arabic calligraphy as an essential expression of Palestinian identity, belonging, and resilience.

## Participation in the Maraya Foundation Exhibition in Sharjah - UAE

The Visual Arts Forum participated in an exhibition organized by the Maraya Foundation in Sharjah by sending reproductions of several Arabic calligraphy artworks incorporating embroidery elements.

This participation aimed to showcase Palestinian art, strengthen its visibility, and present cultural heritage in a contemporary artistic form.

## Workshops with Takumi – ArtPreneur Program

The Forum's branch in Kufr Aqab hosted the ArtPreneur program through two workshops for children.

The workshops combined art, creativity, and entrepreneurial thinking in an engaging and accessible format, offering a safe and inspiring environment to nurture Palestinian talent and encourage artistic expression.

## Closing Note

At the Visual Arts Forum, we believe that art is not a luxury, but a deeply human need; a space for expression, learning, healing, dialogue and connection. This belief shaped our work throughout 2025, from courses and workshops to exhibitions, partnerships, and artist residencies.

We extend our sincere gratitude to our students and their parents, trainers, artists, staff, partners, supporters, and friends, whose presence and commitment made it possible for this work to continue. Because of your support, the Forum was able to keep reaching children, young people, artists, and local communities with meaningful artistic opportunities, even under devastating conditions.

As we look ahead, we remain committed to keeping art alive as a space for hope, expression, and collective strength, and to continuing our work to expand access to the arts, nurture cultural life in Palestine, and invest in the creativity, resilience, and voices of our people.

**Locations:**
Ramallah - Recreational Complex
Kufr Aqab - Old Town
Beitounia

منتدى الفنون البصرية
VISUAL ARTS FORUM

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