Modern Arab Art

FORMATION OF ARAB AESTHETICS

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Modern Arab Attitude Toward Art

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the preceding overview of the history of modern Arab art in terms of its value. First and foremost, there has been a fundamental change in attitude toward the arts from that held during the Islamic period. This change is related to its aesthetics and not its forms. Whether it was the result of an intellectual need or was imposed by Western influences is a matter of debate. The fact remains that whereas Islamic aesthetics responded to an Islamic religious ideal, modern Arab aesthetics responded to an Arab national secularized ideal. The new visual signs, forms, compositions, and attitudes toward art applied by Arab artists in the course of artistic creation as an expression of their ideas, emotions, and visions emanate from contemporary Arab cultures. Thus, modern and contemporary Arab plastic arts are not an extension, continuation, or revival of the old Islamic forms of art. Rather, they represent an innovative means of self-expression formulated in response to Arab artists’ psychological and social motivations, as well as their intellectual understanding of the arts.

Although it must never be forgotten that modern Arab art has its roots in Western and not Islamic art, it is nevertheless true that, as was the case in the formation of Islamic art, modern Arab artists were confronted by a complex visual system they admired. Unlike the Moslems of the seventh and eighth centuries, who were in a position of power and would only accept what was in accordance with their way of life, modern Arabs had been colonized and were consumed with a feeling of inferiority. Thus, they did not have the luxury of being choosy, particularly since they were beginning the process of shaping their own identity following liberation, a time of uncertainty and revaluation of culture, history, and tradition.

It has been argued that learning and imitating Western art was a necessary step to compensate for the lack of artistic creativity Arab artists faced. It was a means of liberating themselves from a restrictive, stagnant tradition. Iraqi
critic Farouq Yousif has concluded that turning to European painting at the beginning of the twentieth century was one of several solutions by Arab artists to revitalize their artistic imagination. According to Karnouk, Western aesthetics helped Arab artists bypass their ethnicity, particularly after embracing the idea of nationality.

Once Arab artists had attained a certain degree of comfort with respect to the new media and language of Western art and had achieved a sense of individual freedom, they began to voice their dissatisfaction with their own artistic expression and endeavored to search for an art that could better represent their identities and national consciousness—a task they shared with all artists of formerly colonized nations. This discontent led them to modern art, which, in turn, forced them to recognize their own artistic inheritance, offering them a modern model of nonrepresentational art by means of which they might reconcile their present with their past. As Kamal Boullata has written:

The pentacle works of Picasso, Klee and Matisse had pointed the way to a new generation of Arab artists who were to look into the Arabs’ inner realms of vision... The imitator was caught up by his own shadow and the only way left was to dig down to deeper levels of the ground upon which the Arab stood.

Once they had re-presented their historical heritage, Arab artists followed a methodology similar to that followed by their Moslem ancestors, namely, the appropriation of signs, forms, and techniques. Since the rules that governed their lives had changed from religious to secular, they freely adopted what they needed to suit their new vision of the world—without any restrictions—from ancient pre-Islamic civilizations and Islamic art as well as from Western art. From that point onward, Arab art developed in different directions as a result of a number of different experiments. Since the end of World War II, Arab art has been characterized by two broad schools: the figurative and the abstract. Both derive their inspiration from the local visual heritage of the region. Artists of the first school primarily adopted themes involving nationalist or mythological subjects by converting the oral tradition into stylized visual narratives. Artists of the second school acquired a formalist outlook that, according to Boullata, “is somewhat alien to a localized definition of Arab vision.” In the second school, form can alternate between a geometric pattern inherited from a traditional Islamic design and a cursive characteristic of Arabic script. This trend of abstract painting continues to attract younger
Arab artists thanks to its endless possibilities; through it they can establish some degree of continuity with their heritage.

By accepting and emulating Western representational aesthetics at the end of the nineteenth century, Arab artists were freed from the prohibition against images. One might argue that Arab artists accepted modern Western aesthetics in a creative manner only after it turned its back on naturalism and the realistic approach to art; in other words, that it was acceptable because it did not conflict with an attitude ingrained in the Arab/Moslem consciousness. However, this was not the case. The artistic experience of the first half of the twentieth century had transformed the initial public rejection of naturalistic art into a tradition where—similar to the European experience—modern non-representational art trends were now rejected by the public and denounced as meaningless, static, and devoid of talent. This attitude was encouraged by the bourgeois ruling classes, which made the Arab artists’ transition to abstract art more difficult. Works such as Abdil Kadir al-Rassam’s *Cows on the River Tigris*
(fig. 4) and Tawfiq Tariq’s *The Caliph’s Audience* were chosen over works such as Naziha Salim’s, *One Night’s Dream* (pl. 2), or Ahmed Cherkaoui’s *Talisman no. 3*.

There was thus no longer a preoccupation with the notion of religious prohibition against images. Despite its brief history in modern Arab art, figurative art became a tradition rooted in the public taste. Typical examples include Mahmoud Said’s *Dancer with Musicians* (fig. 5), and Ahmed Sabri’s *Lady with Oud*. An Arab would accept the two-dimensionality of Islamic ornamentation as a form of traditional decoration, but he would reject the formal vocabulary of nonrepresentational Western art, even following the death of naturalistic

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**Figure 5.** Mahmoud Said, *Dancer with Musicians*, 1949. Oil on canvas. Museum of Modern Art, Cairo. Courtesy of Dr. Wijdan Ali and the Royal Society of Fine Arts, Jordan.
renderings advocated by the West. This signified the public’s acceptance of an art whose reality is materialistic and worldly, which contradicted the spiritual reality of their established tradition of Islamic art. Given the lengthy history of Islamic art, ironically it merely substantiates the change in Arabs’ attitudes toward art.

Changes and Challenges

A number of other changes can be identified that are manifestly distinct from the Moslem’s attitude. In the transition to easel painting, this medium was accepted as an entity unto itself; it thus lost its connection to the “book.” Miniature painting—with its perceived artistic freedom of expression that allowed for articulations and elaborations of features beyond the written text and consequently ensured their autonomy—had been developed specifically to illustrate manuscripts. Moreover, throughout the history of Islamic art painting was almost always connected to literature. Individuality and freedom became important factors in modern Arab art, confirmed by the appearance of signatures on the works of art to identify the artist. Conversely, in Islamic art individuality was not recognized; the identity of the Moslem artist remained absent from his work. In the few cases where the artist was acknowledged, his name was preceded by a self-deprecating statement such as: “On this stone wrote the painter that this life lacks perfection” or “painted by his transient hand, the humble slave.” The viewer also played an active role. The artist Shakir Hassan Al Said has written that a work of art is created on three levels: the artist’s intention, or what the artist wanted to express; the public/viewers, or what they want to receive from it; and the work of art, or the ability to speak for itself even in the absence of the artist.7

The concept of a museum/gallery became the norm for modern Arab societies, and exhibiting works there remained the goal of every artist. During the Islamic period, art formed part of the people’s daily life. It surrounded them, appropriate forms appeared on the walls of their mosques, on their furniture, and in the books they read. Along with its spiritual function, Islamic art had a utilitarian function as well, based on the concept of the totality of arts and crafts. Moslems had easy access to their art and did not need to go to a museum to view it. Thus, by adhering to the concept of a museum, the separation of fine arts and crafts was now observed. In fact, according to Shirbil Daghir,
the Ottomans of Turkey, who had been introduced to the Western concept of the fine arts before the Arabs, included them under the category of *sinʿat nafisa* (precious crafts), thereby preserving the unity of art and craft. Arabs, however, abandoned the term during the nineteenth century, replacing it with the word *fann*, meaning “art” when applied to the modern arts of painting and sculpture and “craft” when applied to the traditional arts of calligraphy and ornamentation. As such, the fine arts belonged to the elite, while the masses decorated their houses with reproductions of Islamic artifacts, which have now become part of the folklore. This situation continues today.

This shift in aesthetics generated a number of other changes. Daghir explains that the disconcerting and belated introduction into the Arab world of modern plastic arts, along with its unfamiliar references, was manifest in

the contradiction and separation between a technical inclination and a dogmatic or ideological aptitude. In the first, the Arab artist is not limited by any local elements and approaches art without any retained memories. In the second, the artist believes that a work of art is an expressive carrier which has its needs and circumstances in a continuum. Arab plastic arts demonstrate this separation or exchange.

Furthermore, many Arab artists still find the concept of “a painting” problematic. The Palestinian artist Tayseer Barakat has written:

> We, as Arabs and Easterners, did not know this [easel painting] until the beginnings of the twentieth century. Before we knew the aesthetic work only through architecture, through ornaments and calligraphy; through the aesthetic work being either an ornament on wood, or a beautiful chair, a beautiful costume... etc. We were not accustomed to a hanged painting on a wall. From its foundation, this idea which is based on something not Arabic nor Easterner, demolishes the whole creative act for us.

**Tradition or Modernity?**

The main difficulty involving Arab art since the second half of the twentieth century has been in defining its “Arabness” (a problem shared by Arab cultures in general). How could Arab artists produce an art that would be fundamentally Arabic? The discourse surrounding a national identity for art that