

MAKING ART POPULAR
THE USE OF FOLKLORIC ELEMENTS IN MODERN ARAB PAINTING
(1950-1990)

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This paper will try to give an overview on how elements inspired by popular arts and life were used until a decade ago in modern Arab painting and point out some main trends which can be detected in spite of important local differences between single countries. Painting, like literature, although being the product of a specific context, participates in broader intellectual debates affecting the whole cultural area in which Arabic is the main vehicle of exchanges.

A brief historical survey

In most countries of the Arab Middle East a local version of easel painting in Western style began to appear between 1880 and 1930; in the Maghreb - with the exception of Tunisia - this happened later. By then, the traditional art forms, i.e. what we usually call "Islamic art" were replaced by an academic painting of typical scenes and landscapes which was quite conservative compared to contemporary Western standards. The painters of this first generation, called "pioneers" (*ruwwād*), had either been taught by European teachers - mostly Orientalists - installed in their countries, or had studied in Europe, mainly in Paris and Rome.

This way of painting was overthrown after the Second World War, when most countries of the region reached independence. Different factors concurred in this change: first, the newly created states needed to build a new identity. This identity had to be "Arab", i.e. rooted in tradition and at the same time modern, compatible with international cultural standards. Secondly, for what fine arts were concerned, Arab artists became now conscious of the important changes that had happened in Western art since the beginning of the century, where linear perspective and imitation of nature had been replaced by less naturalistic styles and trends. Another important element of 20th century art was the reevaluation of non-European art and the reference to it. When European styles and techniques had first been adopted in the Arab world, Islamic art had been relegated to the category of "non art" following the Western definition¹. The fact that since the beginning of the century European artists were referring to extra-European works of art led Arabs to look at their local tradi-

¹ Some authors today criticize this term. Cf. Irwin 1997:12-13.

² Cf. Strauss forthcoming, as well as Naef forthcoming.

tions in a different and positive way. These traditions were now perceived as a main element allowing to create an Arab modernity. As the manifesto of one of the first groups of modern artists in Iraq, the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, expressed it:

“Iraqi artists do not ignore the spiritual and stylistic bond that ties them to the dominant artistic evolution in the world; however, they want to create forms which give to Iraqi art a specific character and a distinct personality.”

Since the late forties, modernity (*ḥadāṭa*) became, thus, deeply tied to the “local character” (*at-tābi‘ al-mahallī*) as it was first called; it would later on be known as “authenticity”, *aṣāla*. *Aṣāla* was to be found in local heritage, *turāt*. *Ḥadāṭa* and *aṣāla*, modernity and authenticity, became the two terms around which most of the discussion about art turned around between 1950 and the end of the eighties, in spite of relevant changes in their definition and use.

What did “heritage” exactly mean? It is quite hard to find a somehow precise definition, but what can be deduced from most writings and statements is that it includes any type of art existing in the Arab world before the beginning of Western influence in the 19th century. This means that from Preislamic forms (for instance Pharaonic or Mesopotamian) to Islamic art everything could be considered to belong to heritage³.

The whole realm of popular art was another important element used by this movement, especially when it started in the late forties/early fifties. This had two reasons: first of all, art was figurative at that time, which meant that the use of the more abstract elements characterizing Islamic art was not yet conceivable. The second reason was the wide success socialist and communist ideals had then among intellectuals in many Arab and Middle Eastern countries. The use of elements taken from the “low arts” and despised by “high culture” was a way to take part for the disadvantaged. In addition to that, since the lower classes had been less westernized, it was a means of re-discovering the “real” essence of Arabness which in the view of many intellectuals had been lost in the more affluent parts of the population, too eager to adopt Western habits.

The multiple use of popular art and folkloric elements: the first generation

If elements of popular art could sometimes be found in previous decades, the first painters to make an affirmed use of it were the members of the Modern Art Group (*Ġamā‘at al-fann al-ḥadīṭ*), founded in 1946 in Cairo. Since the foundation of the School of Fine Arts in 1908 and the successive development of an institutionalized art, exemplified by the yearly Salon du Caire since 1922, an appreciated and strong local academic tradition had established itself in Egypt. This tradition had already

³ For the discussion of this question, cf. Naef 1996:352-369.

been challenged by the Surrealist Group⁴, which had been active in the forties. But the Modern Art Group introduced a concept that would become one of the priorities for many Egyptian painters: the reference to heritage.

The most prominent members of the Modern Art Group, ‘Abdalhādī al-Ġazzār (1925-1966) and Hāmīd Nadā (1924-1990), who both came from poor neighborhoods in Cairo, made a large use of symbols and elements from popular art like wall paintings, tattoos, symbols used for magic rituals. In contrast with academic painting where popular elements were romanticized, these painters referred to folklore in order to denounce the hardships of the living conditions of the underprivileged. Under their brush, it became as violent and brutal as real life could be. As an Egyptian art critic had put it in 1951:

“The public is confronted with an original work of art, a work expressing the truth about the people’s feelings, about evil afflicting it, about its desires. For the first time the public applauds an Egyptian artist who regards art as an expression of the people’s consciousness” (Roussillon 1990:75).

However, if social criticism was in the foreground, one should not forget the important anti-academic momentum in the work of these artists. This appears clearly when we look at some portraits, like the one that shows Ġazzār’s wife, painted in 1960 (ill. 1). Here the artist represents a persons who does not belong to the popular classes, but he portrays her in traditional dress, in contrast with the whole bourgeois and academic portrait tradition in the Middle East, where the members of the upper classes were shown in European dress in order to mark their difference. The break with academic painting was therefore double: in content and in form.

Only a few years later and some thousand kilometers eastwards, the already quoted Baghdad Group for Modern Art adopted the same principles without having a direct contact to the Cairo artists. In the eyes of its founder Ġawād Salīm (1919-1961), an aristocrat with a cosmopolitan education who had studied art in Paris, Rome and London⁵, Iraqi artists had to rediscover themselves in order to attain international recognition: “First of all”, he said on the opening of the group’s first exhibition in 1951, “we have to improve our understanding of foreign styles, secondly, the one we have of the local character. This character, that most of us ignore today, will allow us to obtain a place within universal thought” (ill. 2).

Many painters of the fifties and early sixties followed this lesson and folkloric elements were largely used at that time (ill. 3). In the first half of the sixties however, abstraction became popular, especially in the younger generation. To many of these painters, the experiences of the previous decade seemed “old fashioned” and were rejected.

⁴ Cf. Ġarīb 1986.

⁵ On this artist, cf. Āl Sa’īd 1991 and Ġabrā 1974.

Folklore and political commitment

The shock of the Arab defeat against Israel in 1967 re-actualized the search for "Arabness". Arab identity, that many considered to be threatened, had to be strongly affirmed, as did the Baghdadi group "The New Vision" (*ar-Ru'ya al-ġadīda*) in 1969. In a manifesto published the same year, the artists of this group expressed their will to produce a kind of art which should be modern and express at the same time the will of resisting the threads they thought were challenging the Arab nation. Heritage had to play a role for them; however, they did not want to follow blindly the experiences of their predecessors, they wanted to explore new paths⁶.

For other artists, using popular elements, representing popular scenes became an act of resistance. Thus it is not astonishing that they are to be found very often in Palestinian exile painting of that period. There are two means employed to affirm the identity of a people having had to leave its country and to perpetuate the memory of what Palestine was or was thought to be⁷. The omnipresence of Palestinian handcrafted products in the background, or of traditional fabrics, is striking. Even in paintings doubtlessly presenting an incitement to revolt and revolution, handcrafted products or embroideries on napkins and dresses are there to give a strong local touch, as we can see in a painting by Burhān Karkutlī (b. 1932), with the title "A Palestinian family" (1979) (ill. 4). Together with this goes the representation of women in traditional dress. Having been less touched by social changes, they are thought to have remained closer to traditions and to the real "essence" of land and people⁸. While in the seventies some Palestinian artists represented women as fighters, most of them preferred to paint them as "Mother Earth" or "Mother Palestine", dressed in the traditional, long, black dress with embroideries, sometimes going as far as showing them giving birth to the whole nation. This is patent in a highly symbolic painting (1988) by Sulaymān Mansūr (b. 1947), where a mass of people comes out of the belly of a sitting woman in traditional dress⁹. A similar message is given by a 1979 composition of ʿAbdarrahmān al-Muzayyin (b. 1934): in this case, a peasant's couple rises from the head of a woman wearing the typical black robe with embroideries; around her neck, she has a chain representing the Dome of the Rock. The background shows an Arab town. There is no doubt that she represents "Mother Palestine" perpetuating her people (ill. 5).

⁶ For the Arabic text of the manifesto cf. Āl Saʿīd 1973:31-35; for a French translation, Naef 1996: 375-380.

⁷ On arts in Palestine, cf. Šammūt 1989.

⁸ On the representation of women in Arabic painting, cf. Naef 2001.

⁹ Reproduced in Šammūt 1989:179, ill. no. 5.

Very different was the situation in North Africa, and in Tunisia especially. In this last mentioned country, where easel painting did go back to the beginning of the century¹⁰, the representation of folkloristic elements and scenes from traditional life was used in the sixties and seventies to reassert the importance of traditional culture in a country which was changing with extreme rapidity. However, traditional elements were idealized, glorified and gave an image of a peaceful and harmonic life which had disappeared, in total contrast for instance to the Egyptian representations due to 'Abd alhādī al-Ġazzār and Hāmīd Nadā (ill. 6).

An original experience was attempted by the Iraqi painter Šakir Hasan Āl Sa'īd (b. 1926). Āl Sa'īd had been one of the founders and promoters of the calligraphic abstraction movement (*hurūfiyya*), a very widespread and authentically Panarab trend during the seventies and eighties¹¹. In his paintings he referred to the walls of the popular quarters of Baghdad, where words were scribbled down spontaneously and in great disorder. His purpose was not the representation of old traditions and crafts, but to give an impression of the expression of popular life in our times (ill. 7).

In the eighties, authenticity became again a big issue in art critique. However, calligraphic abstraction and some kind of "Arab realism" being dominant, folkloric elements tended to become secondary, though not absent. Since the nineties, the affirmation of a distinct Arab identity has lost its priority, younger artists being less concerned by the question. Art has become less specific, more global. The opening of Western markets to experiences from outside also helped to reinforce this trend: since one decade, the awareness for the existence of non-Western modern art has increased, as proves the multiplication of exhibitions on this topic¹².

Final remarks

What precedes leads me to think that the use of folkloric elements in the Arab world is a phenomenon that can be situated between 1950 and 1990. It was an attempt to give a response to different questions:

1) the search of a new identity. This term can have more than one meaning:

¹⁰ Cf. *Anthologie* 1998.

¹¹ On the *hurūfiyya* movement, cf. Dāġir 1990; *Croisement* 1989 and Naef 1992:33-65.

¹² See for instance *Total Global, Umgang mit nicht-westlicher Kunst*, Basel, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, May-November 2000 (with catalogues on Turkey, Cuba, Senegal and South Africa, China, South Korea); *Kunst-Welten im Dialog: von Gauguin zur globalen Gegenwart*, Museum Ludwig Köln, 5 November 1999 - 15 mars 2000 (catalogue: M. Scheeps et al. (eds.), Cologne, 1999); *Inklusion, Exklusion: Versuch einer neuen Kartografie der Kunst im Zeitalter von Postkolonialismus und globaler Migration*, Graz, Künstlerhaus, 22 September - 26 October 1996 (catalogue: P. Weibel (ed.), Cologne, 1997); *Il Sud del mondo: l'altra arte contemporanea*, Marsala, Galleria civica d'arte contemporanea, 14 February - 14 April 1991 (catalogue: Milan, 1991).

a) it means the identity of Arab art in general, and underlines its specificity compared to Western art.

b) Folkloric elements can be used to affirm a specific identity, as the Palestinian one for instance.

2) It can also be a means of expressing a nostalgic and idealized view of the past in societies where changes were rapid.

3) By referring to people's art, some artists wanted to express their solidarity with the classes that produce this kind of art and, secondly, make art, generally reserved to an elite, more accessible to them. However, like in similar experiences elsewhere, it is doubtful that this latter purpose was reached.

More generally, the use of folkloric elements was a part of a much broader movement, which wanted to give a more authentic touch to art, to confer it a new identity and a place in the international movement. It marks a problem Arab culture in general, and artistic production in particular, had had to face in the second part of the twentieth century, i.e. the attempt to create an identity which would be modern but less alienated from its origins than it had become through the adoption of important panels of Western culture.

However, if introducing non-Western elements might have given a specific character to Arab art, the danger of folklorization was strong. Thus, the considerations the French scholar Alain Roussillon made about the Egyptian painter 'Abd al-Hādī al-Ġazār could easily be extended to this whole trend:

"This poses the question of the fundamental ambivalence of the identity approach. While identifying the ways and means of a possible resourcing, the 'promotion' of identity entails the risk of perpetuating the backwardness to which the unaltered Egyptian society is confined" (Roussillon 1990:77).

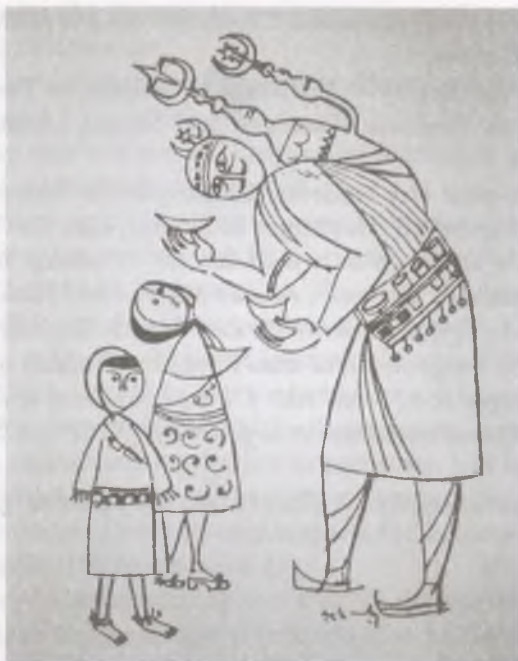
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1. 'Abd al-Hādī al-Ġazzār (Egypt),
Contemplation
(Portrait of the artist's wife), 1960



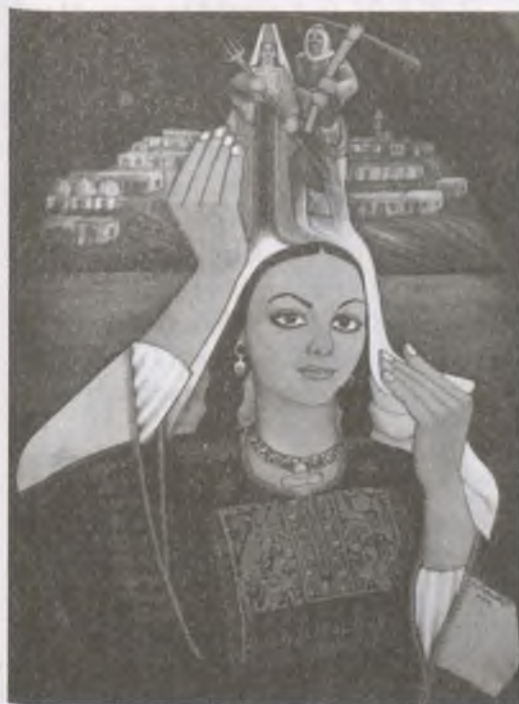
2. Ğawād Salim (Iraq),
The water seller, n.d.



3. Sayyid ʿAbdarrasūl (Egypt), *Composition*, 1961



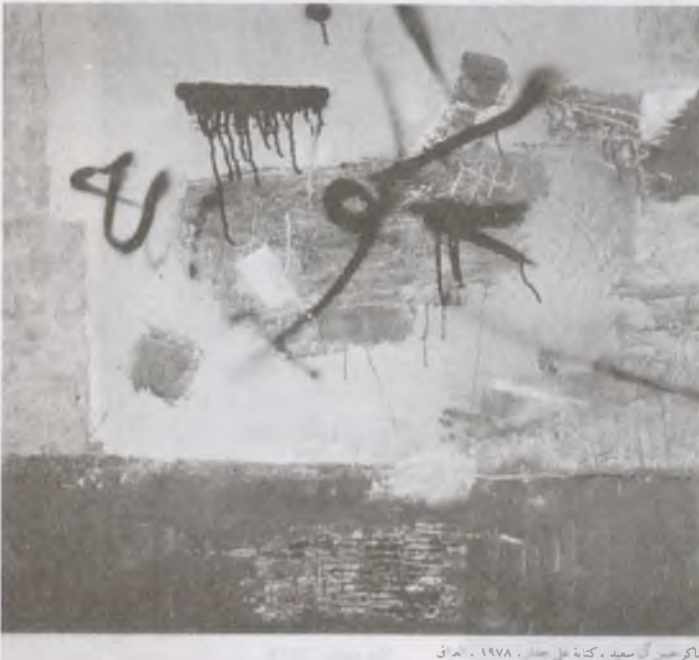
4. Burchan Karkutli (Syria),
Palestinian family, 1979



5. 'Abdarrahman al-Muzayyin (Palestine),
No title, 1979



6. Galāl Ben 'Abdallah (Tunisia), *Dying with henna*, 1969



7. Sakir Hasan Al Sa'id (Iraq), *Writings on a wall*, 1978

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