

“One of the Best Tools for Learning”

Rethinking the Role of ‘Abduh’s Fatwa in Egyptian Art History

Dina A. Ramadan

Introduction

In late 1903, Imam Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905), Egypt’s grand mufti (foremost interpreter of Islamic law) from 1899 to 1905, embarked on an extended trip to Europe at the end of which he spent time in Sicily.¹ Throughout his travels ‘Abduh visited monuments, museums, churches, cemeteries, botanical gardens, archives, and libraries. The imam wrote a series of lengthy articles, anonymous letters about his adventures, which appeared in *al-Manar* (*The Lighthouse*), the journal edited by ‘Abduh’s close friend and associate Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935).² In his letters ‘Abduh conveyed a great admiration for what he saw, and was particularly impressed by the libraries and museums he visited.³

By far the most quoted of ‘Abduh’s writings from this trip – which was by no means his first to Europe – is an entry titled “al-Suwar wa-l-Tamathil wa-Fawa’iduha wa-Hukmuha” (“Images and Statues, Their Benefits and Legality”) which has generally been considered his fatwa (legal judgment) in support of representational art. In it he addressed the question of image-making and idolatry rather directly, assuring readers that if they were to approach an imam with questions regarding the issue, specifically

the *hadith*⁴ “those people who will be the most tortured on judgment day are the painters” and the like of which is said in the *sahih*,⁵ he will probably say to you that this *hadith* came during the days of paganism. Images were taken up during this time for two reasons: the first was distraction and the second was to seek blessing from the image of whichever of the righteous ones is depicted; the first [reason] religion detests and the second Islam came to wipe out. The painter is in both cases a distraction from God and a facilitator of polytheism. If these two obstacles are removed and the benefit pursued then the depiction of people is the same as the depiction of plants and trees or objects.⁶

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Just over a century later, in April 2006, Egypt's current grand mufti 'Ali Gom'a issued a fatwa that "declared as un-Islamic the exhibition of statues in homes," basing the decision on the very same *hadith* cited by 'Abduh in the above quote.⁷ Outrage ensued, and 'Abduh's fatwa was immediately recalled and referenced in response. Novelist and former editor of Egypt's leading literary magazine *Akhbar al-Adab*, Gamal al-Ghitani, reflected the view of many within cultural circles that 'Abduh's fatwa had "closed the issue, as it ruled that statues and pictures are not *haram* (forbidden under Islam) except idols used for worship."⁸ This most recent example points to the enduring importance of 'Abduh's fatwa within the narrative of Egyptian (and to a great extent Arab⁹) art history; the fatwa continues to be cited as marking an important shift, "clos[ing] the issue," at least on the level of institutional orthodoxy, with a prominent figure like 'Abduh reinterpreting Islam's long-standing position on representational and figurative art once and for all.

However, despite being particularly emphasized in the historiography of modern Egyptian art as a turning point, 'Abduh's fatwa remains a text remarkably understudied by art historians. While the literature on modern Egyptian art is in resounding agreement as to the importance of 'Abduh's intervention – Egyptian art historian Samir Gharib, for example, has "no doubt that this *fatwa* played an important role in supporting the fine arts and artists and encouraging research in the arts and writing about it"¹⁰ – the details of this intervention are skirted over with extreme brevity, and what limited discussions exist are disappointingly similar in their simplicity. Ultimately what we are offered is a series of wholesale celebrations of 'Abduh as "one of the most enlightened men of the Muslim religion"¹¹ and "a connoisseur of the arts, a lover of artistic creativity."¹² This chapter is an attempt to readdress the dearth in critical engagement with a text as formative as 'Abduh's. Rather than dismiss the dominant narrative as merely limited, I offer a reading that strives to incorporate and utilize the existent sources and their presumptions as a point of departure for understanding the full extent and implications of 'Abduh's intervention. Since much of the writing that currently exists on the fatwa focuses on 'Abduh as "a connoisseur of the arts," I suggest we take his assigned role as connoisseur seriously and consider the nature and framing that inform his admiration, while examining some of its underlying assumptions.

This chapter begins by outlining the ways in which 'Abduh's fatwa has been presented in the existent histories as a means of understanding its role and importance throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Previous scholarship has largely neglected or underplayed the fatwa's specific connections not only to 'Abduh's larger revisionist (*tajdid*) program, but also to the particular set of travel writings of which it is a part. I suggest that considering the fatwa alongside other texts from the Sicily trip allows us to better recognize reasons for the timing of (and inspiration for) 'Abduh's intervention.

The first exhibition of Orientalist painters in Egypt took place at the Cairo Opera House in 1891 and was sponsored by Khedive Isma'il (r. 1863–1879), 15 years prior to the publication of 'Abduh's fatwa.¹³ The exhibition included works by Théodore Jacques Ralli, Rasengy, and Bogdanoff and was attended by a number of dignitaries who, along with the khedive, purchased several works.¹⁴ Thus, figurative and representational art had increasingly become part of Egypt's visual landscape by the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly given the almost ubiquitous erection of commemorative statues in Cairo, Alexandria, and other major cities that began as part of Khedive Isma'il's modernization and urban planning projects. However, most of these commissions had been primarily undertaken by foreign artists; it was not until

the establishment of the Fine Arts School by Prince Yusuf Kamal in 1908 that Egyptians themselves were producing such works on a wide scale, perhaps making it now necessary that such practices be addressed and legislated. Scholars have suggested that 'Abduh had the future of the Fine Arts School in mind when issuing his fatwa and that this was his response to "popular and religious factions [who] considered an art school to be antithetical to the principles of Islam." This is quite likely as discussions surrounding the importance of the school predated its establishment; "the idea of an art school was contemplated alongside that of a university."¹⁵ However, 'Abduh never directly mentions the school and therefore considering the fatwa as immediately related to it is a hypothetical assumption at best. On the other hand, we do know that he chose to address the matter while traveling in Sicily. The significance of this point is substantive to the formulation of the argument within the fatwa.

The larger part of this chapter is devoted to a return to the text of the fatwa, a text that is riddled with tensions and reveals a more complex narrative than has been previously acknowledged. By taking a closer look at the fissures within 'Abduh's argument, it becomes evident that a moment which has been exclusively presented in the literature of the field as one of expansions in the understanding of artistic production and its role in Egyptian – and (as 'Abduh himself states several times) Muslim – society is actually far more restrictive in nature than has previously been considered. That is to say, rather than merely celebrating 'Abduh's fatwa as a gesture toward the acceptance and inclusion of representational art, "a historic stand in defense of Islam and arts [*al-funun*] and beauty [*al-jamal*],"¹⁶ it is more productive to pay closer attention to exactly how this "defense" was articulated. Upon closer examination it becomes evident that 'Abduh's acknowledgement of the merits of pictorial representation is inseparable from, one could say limited to, their "benefits"; throughout this chapter I refer to the "images and statues" of the fatwa collectively as "pictorial representation" rather than "representational art" or "fine arts" – as is the case in existent scholarship – to stress the very specific nature of 'Abduh's engagement with the subject matter. The acceptance of pictorial representation cannot be read separately from 'Abduh's larger understandings of *ijtihad*, his project to "reform Islam by regulating its doctrines and ridding it of all that was seen as superstition and myth ("innovation") in favor of its "reasonable and rational message."¹⁷ The issuing of this fatwa is more nuanced than simply the freeing of art and artists from the shackles of tradition; instead the fatwa legislates a new and different set of restrictions, ones that approach pictorial representation first and foremost as "one of the best tools for learning."¹⁸ In fact, it is possible to recognize the ways in which the fatwa has been both simplified and misappropriated and made to say something about representational art that it in fact never said. Understanding 'Abduh's intervention as multilayered is a crucial step in a reassessment of the early moments of the foundational narrative of modern Egyptian art, and a move away from the teleological discourses of progress and liberation in which the narrative has been grounded.

Art, Islam, and the Imam

It is difficult, if not impossible, to tackle the subject of 'Abduh's fatwa without recognizing that one is walking into a minefield of Orientalist fascination; Islam's position vis-à-vis the graven image¹⁹ is a subject that has long captured the Western imagination, and indeed

continues to do so. This chapter does not seek to engage in debates on Islam's assumed historic incompatibility with representational art, or the persistence of such hostility in the contemporary moment. Nor does it attempt to attend to the validity of 'Abduh's arguments regarding artistic production from the standpoint of Islamic law. Instead my concern here is with 'Abduh's formulation of his argument, the rhetorical maneuvers he employs to make his case, and how these may serve as indicators of his broader interest in the subject. Even though most of the literature presents 'Abduh's intervention as merely a loosening of Islam's restrictiveness, such a reading is very much in line with an Orientalist discourse. By privileging representational art over other forms of visual art, and by valuing its acceptance as a step forward in an historical progression, previous literature fails to see that this intervention could be restrictive or limiting in its own right.

The *Nabda* narrative regarding the fine arts in Egypt and the larger Arab world certainly falls victim to such assumptions, as Nada Shabout in *Modern Arab Art* explains:

While the Arab renaissance (*al-Nabda*) represented a period of revival in literature and poetry, it was basically a total Westernization process in the case of the plastic arts. To add to the pressure on Arab artists, the intellectuals of *al-Nabda* insisted that one of the main reasons for their cultural deterioration was that their arts did not advance along lines similar to those in Europe. They thus affirmed the superiority of European art.²⁰

Advancement along European lines was largely reduced to the prevalence of representational art forms. Arab art is distinguished from its Western counterpart first and foremost through its lack and limitations. Attending to these prior limitations becomes just one of the many ways in which Muslim theologians and intellectuals sought to "reform Islam" to make it better suited to the ways of modern life. Islamic art historian Stephen Vernoit neatly summarizes this narrative of progress and development:

with the exception of the fundamental issues of idolatry and the lawfulness of images, discussions about the visual arts did not really preoccupy Muslim scholars, jurists or theologians; inquiry into the nature of art was in this respect a manifestation of the more secular preoccupations of Europe. Nevertheless, there were some significant developments during this period that provoked a reassessment of the traditional position. They included the introduction of new forms of mechanical reproduction, i.e. typographic printing, lithography, and photography; the introduction of new practices in education and science; and the new notion of the evolutionary history of civilization.²¹

According to this reading, the "significant developments" of the nineteenth century push Muslim scholars to reconsider images, a subject neglected for centuries as largely one of the "secular preoccupations of Europe."

Similarly in his 1991 *al-Islam wa-l-Funun al-Jamila (Islam and the Fine Arts)*, Egyptian scholar Muhammad 'Imara echoes this assessment of the long silence on questions pertaining to the visual arts; while much of 'Imara's text attends to Islam's position vis-à-vis music, on which there seems to be a great deal more debate, the book ends with a final chapter on drawing, painting, and sculpture. This section begins with the Qur'an and *al-Sunna al-Nabawiyya* (the Prophet's practices), and references some early theological debates. It then suddenly transitions from the elev-

enth to the nineteenth century and onto ‘Abduh’s intervention. In a section entitled “In the Modern Era,” ‘Imara opens with the following introduction:

When the school of religious renewal and revival began removing from Islamic thought the dust of periods of stagnation and civilizational regression – the Ottoman dynasty – we find the most prominent engineer of this renewal, the sheikh imam Muhammad ‘Abduh, knocking on that door through his *ijtihad* and renewal. He announces Islam’s sanctioning of the fine arts [*al-funun al-jamila*] calling attention to the role of the visual arts [*funun al-tashkil*] – drawing, sculpture, painting – their beneficial and indispensable role in recording the traces of life and preserving them and refining tastes and senses and bringing mankind closer to the attributes of perfection.²²

It is worth noting that nowhere in his fatwa does ‘Abduh use either the term *al-funun al-jamila* (the fine arts) or *funun al-tashkil* (the visual arts). Both ‘Abduh’s omission of these terms and ‘Imara’s subsequent inclusion of them is extremely telling. ‘Imara is certainly not alone in this embellishment, which demonstrates the consistent misappropriation of the fatwa within the narrative of modern Egyptian (and Arab) art. Similarly, in one of the most recent surveys of modern art in Egypt, painter and critic Mustafa al-Razzaz identifies ‘Abduh as part of a group of “enlightened religious men” who played a crucial role “in establishing an awareness of the importance of an interest in the arts (*al-fann*) and teaching the fine arts (*al-funun al-jamila*), considering it one of the main entry points to civilization and progress.”²³

In examining these recurring references to ‘Abduh’s intervention, we are able to identify a number of motifs. Firstly, the descriptions of ‘Abduh reiterate that as this new kind of religious man, he was able to seamlessly combine both an enlightened world view and a commitment to religious belief. Consequently not only does he not oppose the fine arts, but in fact “the imam converses about art (*al-fann*) as someone who understands and appreciates.”²⁴ Juxtaposed against this “prominent engineer of [this] renewal” is “the dust of periods of stagnation and civilizational regression,” namely the Ottoman rule, a period of “religious staidness and constraint.” Time and again ‘Abduh is described as having bravely conquered this stagnant past by “knocking on [the] door” of revival and renewal and finally ending the “troubled thoughts” regarding painting, drawing and sculpture. Finally, several authors rightly point to some of the main concerns expressed by ‘Abduh in the fatwa: ‘Imara for example identifies the imam’s interest in pictorial representation as “beneficial and indispensable” tools of preservation, improvement and progress, al-Razzaz specifically mentions his focus on the importance of museums, while Vernoit calls the fatwa “a plea for the preservation of artifacts for their historical value.”²⁵ However, even while identifying these central concerns, these narratives elide crucial questions. What are the repercussions of conflating discourses of education and preservation with ideas about artistic production and what does this tell us about the broader significance of the fatwa?

An Insightful Traveler’s Observations

‘Abduh’s travel writings first appeared in the December 20, 1903 issue of *al-Manar* under the title of “Balerm Siqilliya: Mulahazat Sa’h Basir” (“Palermo, Sicily: Insightful Traveler’s Observations”). These entries were lengthy expositions that often extended

over 10 pages of the journal and took the form of a travelogue in which the imam commented in varying detail on things of note throughout his trip.²⁶ Each of ‘Abduh’s pieces was peppered with a combination of historical commentary and a sort of cultural anthropology. This was a writing style that had become increasingly popular amongst Arab writers throughout the nineteenth century and that ‘Abduh knew from the writings of the Egyptian *Nahda* thinker Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi (1801–1873).²⁷ These “observations” come with a tone of informality, relaxed yet informative. The combined casualness of the *mulahazat* (observations) with the acute awareness of the *sa’ib basir* (insightful traveler) reflects the particular note that the author is trying to strike. There is no doubt that entries are thoughtful and thought out; with a specific message in mind, ‘Abduh’s relaxed delivery (the way in which he weaves historical commentary with his advice for fellow travelers²⁸ as well as the banal details of travel and accommodations) intentionally subdues a heavy didactic quality. The anonymity of the traveler (although it is likely that readers recognized the author as the imam) further ensures this tone is maintained. In other words, ‘Abduh presents himself as a fellow tourist but one more informed than most. This may be his first exposure to these particular destinations; however, he is a seasoned traveler with a discerning eye. This perhaps makes him the most fitting guide; he balances the authority that is often so crucial to travel writing, as the reader is lead through a new geography by a knowledgeable escort, with a tone that allows the reader to feel like they could be making this journey. This becomes particularly apparent in the fatwa itself.

This specific set of writings was born of a rerouting; ‘Abduh has to return to Egypt through Italy rather than the usual Marseille route. It is as a result of this changed itinerary that ‘Abduh begins to write his travelogue. We know the imam was no stranger to European travel; Albert Hourani comments that “he went to Europe whenever he could, to renew himself as he said, and because it revived his hopes that the Muslim world would recover from its present state” of colonial occupation.²⁹ However, there is clearly something noteworthy about this particular trip that he wishes to share with his readership. In his first letter to *al-Manar* ‘Abduh is presented with two routes through Italy and his subsequent explanation for his chosen travel route demonstrates the connections between the Muslim world and Europe that are always at play for him and that reveal something of his underlying interests during his trips. ‘Abduh explains that the first itinerary would have taken him to Palermo followed by Naples, where he would have stayed for four days before moving on to Messina, his final stop before heading back to Alexandria. The second, however, would have taken him to Palermo where he would spend five days before going directly to Messina. Initially, ‘Abduh states his preference for the first option, explaining that it would have allowed him “to see many cities and great monuments that would have expanded my knowledge a great deal, of which I do not know to this day.” However, he ultimately opts for the second route, explaining that he had been informed by a friend that “Palermo was the capital of Sicily, and it has Arab monuments that would be important for an Arab to see and two libraries neither of which lack in old Arabic books . . .”³⁰ Here ‘Abduh’s European travels take on another dimension, for he is not only in search of personal revival and inspiration in the European cities he visits, but is also consciously experiencing his travels as an “Arab,” looking to make connections between the places he is visiting and an Arab past.³¹ Throughout his travels in Sicily ‘Abduh highlights to his readers the Arab influence and presence in Europe, while mourning the current state of the Arabs.

"And They Do Not Spare Any Effort in Preserving These Things"

In the March 18, 1904 issue of *al-Manar*, immediately preceding the fatwa, 'Abduh's entry is entitled "Dar al-Athar wa Basatin al-Nabat" ("Museums and Botanical Gardens") in which he presents in great detail the sheer variety of the contents of the museums and gardens he has visited. He begins by crediting the Sicilians for having learnt an important lesson (one he thinks they learnt from "their brothers, the people of northern Italy and the rest of Europe") "the preservation of relics, old and new," usually in museums.³² 'Abduh further elaborates on the make up of these collections:

The people preserve in their museums all that was found of artifacts from their ancestors, objects, trees, stones. And they do not spare any effort in preserving these things. So if you find the name of something in a history book for example, or you are presented with a term in one of the sciences that had a meaning in a previous era, you are able to find out the meaning by examining and inspecting and ascertaining the validity of the explanation and definition. For whatever the ancients used by way of instruments, tools, kinds of clothes, varieties of boats, and the like, you will find some of them in one of the museums or palaces or churches . . .³³

His fascination with the processes of collecting, archiving, and cataloging cannot go unnoticed. In this passage, he is struck by the scope of these preservation projects, the expanse of what they come to include and what is considered worth keeping from the natural to the man-made, from the historic, to the scientific, to the domestic. Of course what 'Abduh is noting is a very particular relationship to a narration of the past, or what Vernot earlier referred to as "the new notion of the evolutionary history of civilization" and an array of spaces – museums, churches, and palaces – and a set of apparatuses through which such narratives come about. This is of course at a time when such structures are being established in Egypt and he likely has the future of these institutions in mind during his travels.³⁴

Similarly, he identifies an empirical approach that extends to the fields of both "history" and "science," one structured around processes of analysis based on observation and examination, of "assessing the validity of the explanation" and finally reaching a conclusion. Research in both fields depends on a particular rigor and accuracy as well as a volume of evidence; 'Abduh repeatedly impresses upon his readers the scope and comprehensiveness involved in these processes of preservation. Here the imam's attachment to a Comte-inspired positivism, which insists on observation as the only legitimate approach to investigation and knowledge production, is evident.³⁵ However, it is important to remember that this positivism was never entirely dominant but instead was coupled with a seemingly dichotomous romanticism that focused on "the search for (national) origins, the overvaluation of the experience of nature, and [even] the notion of the social reformer as creative catalyst of social change . . ." ³⁶ 'Abduh's interest in the museological practices he encounters is an apt example of the influence of both approaches; while he constantly insists on the importance of observational practices, his very interest in embarking on a trip to Sicily is embedded in the discourses of "the search for (national) origin."

Al-Suwar wa-l-Tamathil: A Fatwa without Fine Arts

A serious examination of the fatwa's title provides us with a key to understanding its function and the role it was expected to play. It is from the title "al-Suwar wa-l-Tamathil wa Fawa'iduha wa-Hukmuha" ("Images and Statues, their Benefits and Legality") that we are able to glean invaluable clues as how to best approach the fatwa as well as what aspects might have been overlooked in previous readings. With just four words 'Abduh is able to neatly frame the parameters of the discussion. However, despite the title's brevity, it is also quite complex, as we can see by the multiple ways in which it can be broken down. To begin with the title can be divided into two main parts. The first half designates the subject of discussion, while the second points us to the particular aspects on which the fatwa focuses. There is something balanced, almost symmetrical, about these two parts. However, once separated into its components, the title begins to betray some of the tensions present in the text at large. What the divided title demonstrates is the coexistence of both an opening up and a closing off of meanings, an attempt at being simultaneously expansive and restrictive. This seemingly unsustainable contradiction is central to the nature and mission of the fatwa and how it functions.

In order to make such tensions more evident, we should start by unpacking each of the coupled terms, beginning with the subject of the fatwa. In the first phrase, "*al-suwar wa-l-tamathil*," "*al-suwar*" draws on a whole range of meanings in Arabic, allowing it to be a somewhat flexible and all-encompassing designation. Translations can include any of the following: pictorial representations, illustrations, images, pictures, likenesses, figures, statues, replicas, copies, or duplicates.³⁷ It is a fairly broad term with a range of subtle differences in its meanings, a term that is not medium specific but rather emphasizes the element of visual representation, a copying of an original that exists in the real world, or, more specifically, of one of God's creations. The material nature of the image is not stipulated. However, there is an assumption of a relationship between two elements: an original and its representation. Because of its range of meanings, it is possible to understand and translate *al-suwar* differently at different moments in the fatwa (and elsewhere in 'Abduh's writings), depending on the varying degree of specificity that can be inferred from the text at that moment. This is in fact what makes the term effective within the title; 'Abduh is always very broad in the description of his subject matter.

Al-tamathil (sculptured images or statues) neatly complements *al-suwar*; by referencing three-dimensional objects it adds an element of specificity while also allowing for an expansion in the range of representations 'Abduh is talking about.

The strength of this part of the title seems to be its capability of being inclusive and, indeed, within the body of the fatwa 'Abduh draws on a wide range of examples. However, similarly worth noting is that by electing to use such general and broad terms 'Abduh is simultaneously choosing *not* to use particular words. For example, he uses *al-tamathil* rather than *al-asnam* (idols) which has historically had connotations of idolatry. More striking is the complete absence of the word *fann* (art) or *funun* (arts). These words are also missing entirely from the body of the text; instead 'Abduh uses a number of other terms such *al-suwar*, *al-taswir* (painting), *al-rasm* (drawing), and *al-nuqush* (engravings) when talking about pictorial representation. Given the overlapping and multiple meanings of these terms, it is often difficult to infer or "visualize" exactly the form of pictorial representation that 'Abduh is talking about.

This lack of specificity is indicative of the nature of ‘Abduh’s engagement with the forms of pictorial representation he is discussing; his interest in them is based first and foremost on their representational quality and its presumed accuracy. Further details, ones perhaps concerning the particular nature or medium of the representation, details that might approach them as “art” forms, are entirely absent. Therefore while ‘Abduh’s use of *al-suwar* and *al-tamathil* seems to strive for broadness and inclusiveness, it in fact restricts the possibility of referring to *fann* or *funun jamila* (fine arts). From the title, the intentions of the fatwa become immediately clear; to address pictorial representation on a technical level, in both its two- and three-dimensional forms, without addressing it as expressions of artistic production.

Between the Educational and the Legal

The second part of the title (*fawa'iduha wa-bukmuha*) equips us with the paradigms through which to approach the objects of the fatwa; the title moves us to greater specificity as we are directed to focus on their benefits (*fawa'iduha*) and legality (*bukmuha*). Again, the range of meanings that ‘Abduh is drawing on here is important. *Fawa'id* (benefits) has connotations of utility, a sense that some sort of moral or useful lesson can be gained. Implied here is an element of educational merit or worth. The second term is a consequence of the first; in other words the judgment regarding the images and statues depends on their benefits as will soon become apparent. The term *bukm* draws on a range of meanings – judgment, decision, verdict, legal provision – that are all connected to legal concepts. Also, there is an element of “regulation” or “rule” to the word *bukm* that is noteworthy, as there is a concern with monitoring or controlling these forms of representation.

The combination of *fawai'd* and *bukm* here, with all the meanings they connote, is particularly significant when used by ‘Abduh; the concepts related to legality on the one hand and useful lessons (or utility) on the other bring together two important aspects of ‘Abduh’s career and concerns: the law and education. Both areas were undergoing tremendous change in Egypt, change that ‘Abduh himself was instigating, as both an educator and a judge.

‘Abduh began his professional life as an educator. Hourani emphasizes that ‘Abduh always saw himself as a teacher and a scholar:

In 1877 he finished his studies with the degree in *‘alim*, and started the career which was always to be the most congenial to him, that of teacher. He taught at the Azhar, but also held informal classes at his own house. Soon afterwards he began to teach at Dar al-‘Ulum, a new college established to provide a modern education for students of the Azhar who wished to become judges and teachers in government schools.³⁸

Abduh’s commitment to education, particularly Egyptian national education, goes back to his articles in the early 1880s in *Waqa’i’ al-Misriyya*.³⁹ Education, in its numerous forms, remained a central concern for ‘Abduh and even after his appointment as mufti he continued to be involved in both the establishment of private schools and teaching at the Azhar University.⁴⁰

His legal career came later. ‘Abduh was “made a judge in the ‘native tribunals’ set up in 1883 to dispense the new codes of positive law, and this was the beginning of a

new public career which lasted until his death in 1905.” In his position as grand mufti, ‘Abduh’s “fatwas on questions of public concern helped to reinterpret the religious law in accordance with the needs of the age.”⁴¹

The use of these terms in this part of the title (*fawa'id* and *hukm*) brings together the dual prisms through which ‘Abduh was approaching the question of pictorial representation and they are very much embedded in the prevalent discourses of the time. The use of the word *fawa'ida* immediately brings to mind a related term, *naʿf* (useful) which had considerable currency during this period. In 1868, Jam'iyat al-Ma'arif li-Nashr al-Kutub al-Nafi'a (Society of Knowledge for the Publication of Useful Books) was established by Muhammad 'Arif Pasha, a graduate of the Egyptian school in Paris.⁴² Mitchell situates this society as part of a larger network – “the school, the political assembly and the press” – through which a new understanding of education or *tarbiya* was being developed.⁴³ ‘Abduh’s own definition of *tarbiya* focused on “the necessary political role of the intellectual, who would use as his particular ‘school’ the new organs of the press.”⁴⁴ This certainly makes sense when we see how ‘Abduh uses the pages of *al-Manar* as a tool of education at a time when the nature of fatwas themselves were changing; “they were now printed and had an international rather than a local audience,⁴⁵ not to mention the ways in which *tarbiya* was a central concern of the journal from its very first issue. From the title of the fatwa, readers would not only be able to recognize ‘Abduh’s interests, but also have a sense of how the argument will unfold.

The Fatwa’s Five Parts

At this point I would like to give an overview of the fatwa, thinking about how the text works as a whole and about the relationship between its different parts. The fatwa can be roughly divided into five sections, and the progression of ideas and central logic are clearly indicative of ‘Abduh’s main concerns. Briefly stated, before looking at each part in greater detail, the sections of the fatwa can be summarized as follows: (1) museum collections and their acquisition, (2) poetry and drawing as a means of historical preservation, (3) Islam’s position on images, (4) the benefits of preservation, and, finally, (5) the lack of interest in preservation in the Arab world. Looking at this breakdown it is obvious that the third section on Islam and images, what is considered to be the *hukm* (judgment) element, sits at the center, making up about a third of the entire text, and that it appears to be the climax of the fatwa. However, it is also noteworthy that it is sandwiched between two sections on preservation and this could be the most telling clue as to the real focus of the fatwa. Keeping the title of the fatwa in mind, it seems as though the *fawa'id* (benefits), a word that appears in one form or another throughout, feature most prominently in the text, but particularly in the latter sections, while the *hukm* (judgment) is largely confined to a specific section. And through the discussions of the *fawa'id* (benefits) it is here, in the second half of the fatwa, that ‘Abduh elaborates on preservation as a primary concern, echoing the interest he expressed in his previous writings from this trip. In isolation the structure of the fatwa might seem quite surprising. However, when read as part of ‘Abduh’s Sicilian travelogue, the emphasis on preservation in the fatwa provides a comfortable companion to the pieces that preceded it, and in it he merely continues and elaborates on this previous conversation about the benefits of preservation with readers. It is

difficult to deny that 'Abduh's immediate reflections, colored by his experiences in Sicily, played a significant role in the fatwa's final shape.

'Abduh's tone in the fatwa is also very much in line with his other travel pieces, that is to say there is a similar casual, conversational style to the writing, an imagined back and forth as he addresses the reader directly throughout, sometimes preempting concerns the reader may have: "Maybe you were confronted with a question while reading these words,"⁴⁶ or by posing a question he then goes on to answer: "Have you heard that we have preserved anything, even other than paintings and drawings, despite our severe need to preserve a lot of the things our ancestors had?"⁴⁷ Throughout the fatwa, as elsewhere in his travel writing, 'Abduh continues to conceal his identity and goes as far as referring to himself in the third person several times, presenting a hypothetical response that could be offered by a mufti: "Either you understand the judgment yourself after the case became clear, or you raise a question to the mufti."⁴⁸ This approach is not entirely unexpected; anonymity was a common feature of the printed fatwa as was the dialogical tone that addresses the practical concerns of the believer.

However, perhaps most noticeable and surprising about 'Abduh's tone is that it betrays an irritation or lack of patience at certain points that seem to increase as the fatwa progresses. He ends the section in which he is discussing the merits of drawing as a means of preservation with surprising bluntness: "If you understood anything from this, that was my hope. But if you did not I do not have the time to explain to you in greater length than this."⁴⁹ This irritation seems to be brought on when he addresses the question of Islam and images. While 'Abduh talks endlessly about the contents of collections and the possibilities of preservation, he seems short on patience, almost uninterested, when addressing the question of Islam and images. Thus he states abruptly, "Muslims do not inquire except about that for which the benefit (*fa'ida*) has become evident, so as to deprive themselves of it."⁵⁰

'Abduh opens the fatwa with a brief section, his reflections on how "these people," by whom he means the Sicilians, "have a strange desire for the preservation of pictures (*suwar*) drawn on paper or woven fabric" and that their museums are full of such objects.⁵¹ This provides an almost seamless connection to his writing preceding the fatwa, "Museums and Botanical Gardens" in which he similarly marveled at the interest in preserving and cataloging. So great is the Sicilian desire to acquire such objects that a rivalry develops. As a result their prices increase dramatically so that "one piece of Raphael's paintings (*rasm*) for example might be worth two hundred thousand in some museums" but collections are considered to be important and "the older the heritage the more valuable its worth and people desire it more."⁵²

In the following section on poetry and drawing as a means of historical preservation, the imam asks his readers why it is that Sicilians are so invested in collecting objects from their pasts, especially ones that involve figurative representation. 'Abduh assures readers that while the notion might seem foreign, this is not the case. The answer can be found by thinking in terms of a more familiar medium:

If you know the reason for your ancestors' preservation of poetry, rendering it precisely in divans and going to great lengths to record it, especially pre-Islamic poetry, and what trouble the forefathers (may they rest in peace) went through collecting and organizing it, then you are able to recognize the reason for a people's preservation of these objects such as pictures (*al-rusum*) and statues.⁵³

Here ‘Abduh develops his comparison further, suggesting that in fact poetry and drawing are one and the same thing: “Drawing is the kind of poetry that is seen but not heard and poetry is a kind of drawing that is heard and not seen.” Both have sought to capture and record what he calls “people’s conditions in different ranks and communities’ conditions in different places, what is worthy of being called ‘the divan of mankind’s societies and conditions.’”⁵⁴ He then focuses at length on benefits of drawing over poetry, for even though they both record human experience, drawing, or the image, is able to convey a “truth” that the written word is not capable of; whereas the exact difference between anxiety (*al-jazaʿ*), panic (*al-fazaʿ*), fear (*al-khawf*), and apprehension (*al-khashiya*) might be difficult to immediately express in writing “if you look at drawing (*al-rasm*) – which is that silent poetry – you will find the truth marked for you, for you to enjoy, just as your senses would delight in looking at it.”⁵⁵ Pictorial representations possess an accuracy that exceeds that of the written word.

What is immediately striking in this comparison is that even while ‘Abduh is praising both forms of expression, he is flattening them into a means of documentation, emptied of any kind of aesthetic worth, measured in terms of accuracy and ability to capture “truth.” For ‘Abduh the attachment to such “art” forms can be simply summarized as follows: “The preservation of these monuments is in fact a preservation of knowledge and an acknowledgment of the craftsman for excelling in it.”⁵⁶ Preservation and knowledge here are the immediate concerns and while the skill of the craftsman is acknowledged, there is certainly no celebration of creativity or aesthetic pleasure. Reading passages such as these, it is difficult to recognize ‘Abduh the “connoisseur of the arts,” the “lover of artistic creativity” that ‘Imara so definitively praises.

This omission is all the more evident when looking at the final sections following his justification of the figurative. Despite the examples of different forms of preservation that he includes here, most of them do not involve any form of pictorial representation. Instead, he discusses extensively the merits of preserving currency and measuring units from our predecessors that “estimate the minimum amount of property liable to *zakah* tax” and “what must be given in *zakah* from the crop yield after the changing of measures.”

‘Abduh ends the fatwa with a section in which he laments and berates readers for their failure to fulfill the requirements of religion:

If you look what religion obligates us to take care of, you would find these things innumerable and we do not preserve any of them. We neglect them like those before us have neglected them.⁵⁷

Unlike the Europeans who not only collect and preserve things from their past, but also from other cultures and civilizations, “we do not take an interest in preserving anything so we can retain its benefits for those who have not yet come,” and on the off-chance that something is preserved, there is no gratitude shown by its recipient.⁵⁸ ‘Abduh summarizes his argument by ending with the notion that national characteristics and qualities too are inherited:

The gift of preservation is not a part of what we inherit, instead what is inherited are the gifts of malice and resentment, which are passed on from fathers to sons until they corrupt men and ruin countries.⁵⁹

In response to the questions of Islamic law's judgment on such forms of representation, namely ones "depicting human forms in their emotional reactions or physical postures," 'Abduh responds with the following: "I would say to you that the painter painted and the benefit is unquestionable, undisputed. The idea of worship or the exaltation of pictures or statues has been wiped from [people's] minds." He assures his readers that the judgment against representation "came during the days of paganism," a time that has long passed.⁶⁰ Ultimately, 'Abduh's position can be summarized by the following extracts:

If these two obstacles [distraction from God and polytheism] are removed and the benefit pursued then depicting people is the same as the depiction of plants and trees or objects . . . In general, it seems to me that Islamic law is far from prohibiting one of the best tools for learning after it has been established that it is not a threat to religion either with respect to doctrine or practice . . . There is no doubt that they [Muslims] cannot couple this belief with the belief in the unity of God but they can combine monotheism and the drawing of images of people and animals for the fulfillment of scientific purposes and the depiction of mental images.⁶¹

'Abduh's formulation of his argument in the above passage is demonstrative of the centrality of the "benefits" of representation, of their importance as "tools of learning," and in the "fulfillment of scientific purposes." First and foremost, he calls on readers to recognize the advantages depictions and representations can offer, urging them not to forego these in the name of religion. The benefits he identifies clearly echo the positions taken by the founders of the museums, archives, and libraries.

Once again, the absences or silences betray 'Abduh's concerns: here as elsewhere in the fatwa there is very little engagement with these forms of representation beyond their accuracy and usefulness. There is no mention of them as artistic production, only as valuable pictorial representations, with their producers described in literal or technical terms, as makers of objects and images but never as "artists" as the term would have been understood in early twentieth-century Europe, and just a few years later in Egypt with the establishment of the School of Fine Arts. Questions of aesthetics are ignored entirely, and appreciation is confined to the realm of accuracy, preservation, and their benefits.

Conclusion

With such a reading of 'Abduh's fatwa in mind, one is left wondering what the nature of his intervention is, and if it is possible to continue to approach it as "a historic stand in defense of Islam and arts and beauty" when very little attention is given to either "arts" or "beauty." Whatever his engagement with pictorial representation, the imam sees only its potential as a tool of preservation and conversation. So while it is easy to assume that 'Abduh opens up a space for the practice of representational art to exist, closer examination of the fatwa, and its accompanying writings, demonstrates a much more prescriptive outcome, one which posits an understanding of these forms of pictorial representation only in terms of their benefits. There is little doubt that representational and figurative art in the Arab and Muslim world preexisted 'Abduh's fatwa. Rather than merely sanctioning their production and display, the fatwa lays out parameters which ultimately limit pictorial representation to

functioning as an educational tool. That such a prescription has never been questioned within the historiography of Egyptian art demonstrates a continued, unexamined understanding of art as a means of education.

Notes

- 1 The religious scholar and jurist Muhammad ‘Abduh is considered the leader of the late nineteenth-century Islamic modernist movement. As grand mufti of Egypt ‘Abduh was head of the whole system of Islamic law and effected a range of reforms, issuing around 1,000 fatwas on numerous subjects. The three articles quoted in this chapter were all published anonymously, but everyone was aware of who the author was.
- 2 Rida launched *al-Manar* in 1898 and continued to publish the journal regularly until his death. ‘Abduh’s influence on *al-Manar* can be seen in the extensive essay following his death titled “Islam Is Afflicted by the Death of the Honorable Imam,” which extended over two issues.
- 3 Social Darwinism informed ‘Abduh’s travels and writing. For a rigorous study of the influences of social Darwinism on Arab intellectuals since *al-Nahda*, see Massad (2007).
- 4 An act or a saying ascribed to the prophet Muhammad.
- 5 A collection of *hadiths* considered authentic and trustworthy.
- 6 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36). All translations are my own.
- 7 Agence France Press (2006).
- 8 Agence France Press (2006). However, it is not entirely true that the issue was “closed”: Muhammad Rashid Rida argued in his work on the caliphate that statues were forbidden, partly because they involved wasting the people’s money on useless things and partly, as he says in one of his *fatwas*, because they belonged to European culture which was not to be imitated. He fought against the erection of a statue for Mustafa Kamil Pasha, the leader of the nationalist movement, who had died in 1908. According to Rashid Rida, statues belonged to pagan ceremonies and were therefore forbidden. Kreiser (1997, 114).
- 9 Narratives of modern Arab art history often take Egypt as their departure point. An example is Shabout (2007). Studies that frame their subject as modern “Islamic art” often start with Turkey, for example, ‘Ali (1997).
- 10 Frequently referenced histories of modern Egyptian art include Iskandar and al-Malakh (1991). For a source in English that relies on much the same material see Karnouk (2005).
- 11 Gharib (1998, 68).
- 12 ‘Imara (1991, 136).
- 13 ‘Ali (1997, 23).
- 14 ‘Ali (1997). ‘Ali suggests that these dignitaries bought works to please the khedive rather than out of “pure appreciation.”
- 15 ‘Ali (1997, 23). Cairo University (called the Egyptian University at the time of its founding) was opened the same year as the School of Fine Arts and, while the histories of the two institutions repeatedly intersect, studies of education in Egypt have largely ignored the latter.
- 16 Gharib (1998, 68).

- 17 Massad (2007, 12).
- 18 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 37).
- 19 An idol carved in wood or stone, prohibited by all three monotheistic religions.
- 20 Shabout (2007, 16).
- 21 Vernoit (2005, 20).
- 22 ‘Imara (1991, 136).
- 23 al-Razzaz (2007, 4).
- 24 Gharib (1998, 69).
- 25 Vernoit (2005, 32).
- 26 ‘Abduh’s pieces were not the only travel pieces included in *al-Manar*; this genre was quite popular and involved writers reporting back on travels in countries with a significant Muslim population or historic presence. This suggests an understanding of the traveler as a sort of diplomat, spreading *al-Manar*’s message and reporting back on the situation of Muslims worldwide.
- 27 Rifa’a al-Tahtawi was a writer, teacher, and translator who was among the first group of Egyptian students to be sent to Paris as part of Muhammad ‘Ali’s educational missions. al-Tahtawi recorded impressions of Paris in a famous work entitled *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz*, translated as *An Imam in Paris: Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric (1826–1831)*, a sort of *Description de l’Egypte* in reverse (al-Tahtawi 2004).
- 28 For example, in his January 19, 1904 entry he includes a subsection entitled “The Tourist’s Need to Have Knowledge of Languages, and Which of Them is Most Useful,” in which he expresses a frustration at his limited abilities to communicate without a translator.
- 29 Hourani (1995, 135), quoting Rashid Rida.
- 30 [‘Abduh] (1903, 737). An interest in a historic Muslim influence that extends beyond the Arab world is a recurring focus in *al-Manar*. For an article on Muslims in India see “The Renaissance of Muslim Indians” (1898, 20).
- 31 ‘Abduh repeatedly refers to the Muslim conquest and rule of Sicily starting in the ninth century as “Arab.” Similarly the “we” of the community he is addressing is never clearly defined; it could be Egyptian, Arab, or even Muslim.
- 32 [‘Abduh] (1904b, 34).
- 33 [‘Abduh] (1904b, 34).
- 34 These included the national archives which were first established in the Citadel in 1828, the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities in 1835, the National Library in 1870, and the Giza Zoo with an onsite taxidermist’s building, housing many endangered species and a selection of endemic fauna in 1891.
- 35 For a more detailed explanation of Auguste Comte’s influence on ‘Abduh see Hourani (1995, 139–140).
- 36 El Shakry (2007, 11).
- 37 When referring to the title, *al-suwar* is translated as “images” to best capture the broadness of the term.
- 38 Hourani (1995, 132).
- 39 Hourani (1995, 133).
- 40 Hourani (1995, 134–135).
- 41 Hourani (1995, 134).
- 42 Mitchell suggests that “it was perhaps modeled on the Lord Brougham’s Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, the organization set up to teach the values of self-discipline and industriousness to the working class of England” (1991, 90).

- 43 Mitchell (1991, 90).
 44 Mitchell (1991, 90).
 45 Vernoit (2005, 31). The “Transvaal fatwa” issued in 1903 addresses questions related to the situation of Muslims in the Transvaal (South Africa), and is perhaps ‘Abduh’s most famous fatwa.
 46 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36).
 47 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 38).
 48 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36).
 49 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36).
 50 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 37).
 51 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 35).
 52 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 35). This is the only moment in the fatwa when ‘Abduh makes a specific reference to an artist, or an artwork (although he does not describe it as such) and the choice of Raphael, celebrated for his draftsmanship, is a telling choice, particularly as ‘Abduh develops his understanding of drawing and painting.
 53 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 35).
 54 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 35).
 55 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36).
 56 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36).
 57 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 38).
 58 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 38–39).
 59 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 39).
 60 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36).
 61 [‘Abduh] (1904a, 36–37).

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