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Reexploring Islamic Art: Modern and Contemporary Creation in the Arab World and Its Relation to the Artistic Past
Author(s): Silvia Naef
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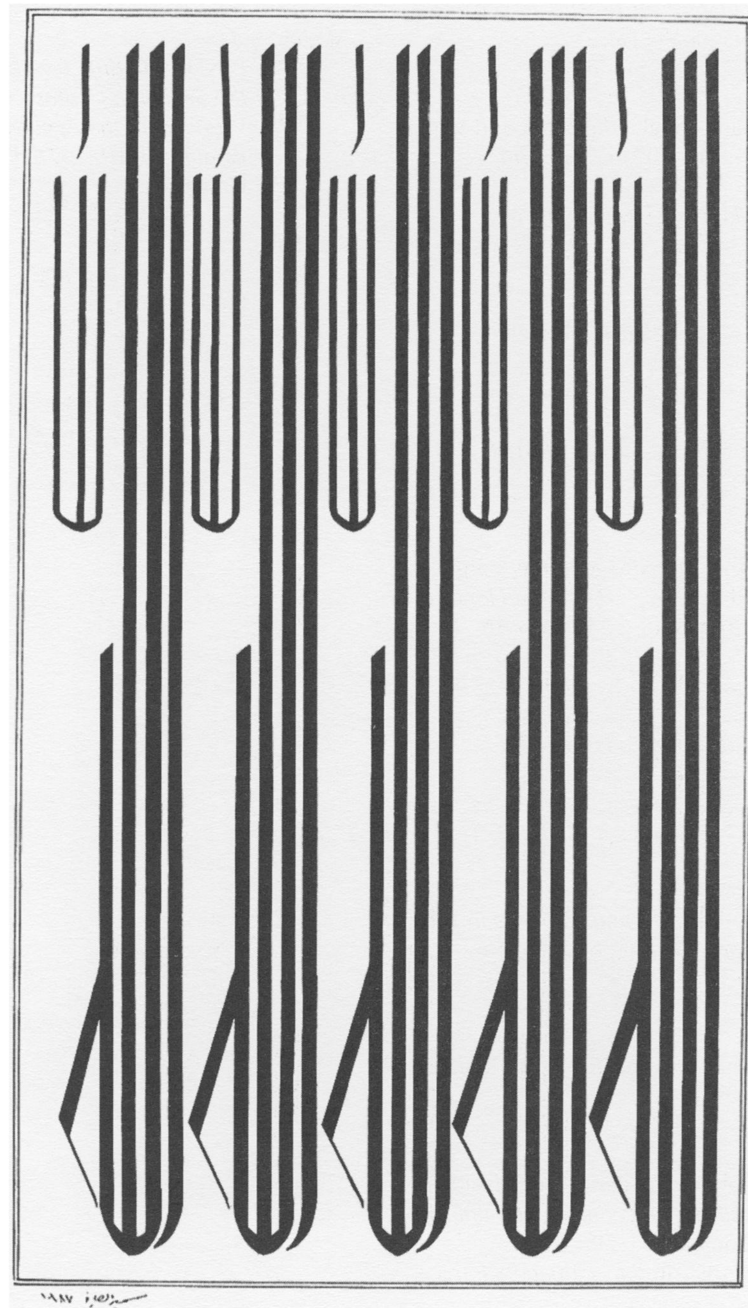

Figure 7. Samīr al-Ṣā'igh (Lebanon), *Composition,* 1987.

Reexploring Islamic art

Modern and contemporary creation in the Arab world and its relation to the artistic past

SILVIA NAEF

Introduction

This article will try to outline how and why "Islamic art" was replaced by Western art between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, then rediscovered in the second half of the twentieth century when it became an identity issue in the art production of the Arab world. To avoid confusion, I would like to specify what I mean by "Islamic art." In the last decades, scholarship has rightly criticized this term as too vague and too general to describe a reality extending through fifteen centuries and through an immense and varied geographic area.[1] Here the expression "Islamic art" will be used in the sense many artists in the Arab world have given it (mostly without defining it explicitly), i.e. as meaning the art production of their countries before the strong impact of Western civilization in the nineteenth century. In order to stress this specific meaning, it will be put in quotes.

The Arab Orient, or *Mashriq*, will be taken as a peculiar case of a general evolution which can be observed throughout the Islamic world. Thus, European arts began to influence Ottoman miniature painting as early as the eighteenth century: Western painting had been taught in Istanbul's military schools since the nineteenth century and an Academy of Fine Arts, directed by Osman Hamdi, a disciple of the French Orientalist painter Jean-Léon Gérôme, was opened there in 1883.[2] In Iran, one finds copies of Western paintings made as early as the sixteenth century, and the Western tradition is perceptible in Qajar painting.[3]

The situation in what we now call the Arab world was slightly different from what happened in the capital of the Ottoman Empire or in independent Persia, even if it is difficult to generalize. The Arab lands were provinces, often lacking the necessary infrastructure for the development of a high standard of art production. The earliest centers of Western-type art production in the Arab East are found in areas such as Egypt and Mount Lebanon, where contact with the West was more developed due to historical reasons that I will not elucidate in this paper.

In the Christian communities of Greater Syria, Western art had an impact as early as the seventeenth century, when icons were painted in an Italianate style;[4] however, this painting did not affect secular art production. In the nineteenth century, when oil portraits became very fashionable in Beirut, the new bourgeoisie liked to be portrayed by Western-trained artists who did not have any ties with the ecclesiastical painters of previous times.[5]

In Egypt, the change in art production came from above. It was, as in other fields, an autocratic change. Although a few young Egyptians were sent from Egypt to Europe as early as 1835–1836 to study drawing, sculpture, and etching,[6] and many Orientalist painters chose Egypt as their place of residence, the date of birth of "modern," i.e. Western-style art (*al-fann al-ḥadīth*), is generally considered to be May 13, 1908, when the School of Fine Arts (sponsored by Prince Yūsuf Kamāl and directed by the French expatriate Guillaume Laplagne)[7] opened in Cairo.

1. For a discussion of this question, see for instance Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art,* New Haven and London, 1973, pp. 1–18.

2. Cf. Günsel Renda [et al.], *A History of Turkish Painting,* 2nd ed., Geneva, 1988.

3. Cf., for example, two recent catalogues: *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar epoch, 1785–1925,* ed. by Layla S. Diba with Maryam Ekhtiar, Brooklyn, 1998, and *Qajar portraits,* catalogue written by Julian Raby, London, 1999.

4. Cf. Bernard Heyberger, "Entre Byzance et Rome: l'image et le sacré au Proche-Orient au XVIIe siècle," in *Histoire, Economie et Société,* 4 (1989), 527–550; Sylvia Agémian, "Ne'meh al-Musawwir, peintre melkite, 1666–1724," *Berytus,* 34 (1991), pp. 189–242 and, by the same author, "Œuvres d'art melkite dans l'Eglise des 40 Martyrs d'Alep," *Etudes Arméniennes,* 1 (1973), pp. 91–113.

5. Cf. John Carswell, "The Lebanese Vision, A History of Painting," in *Lebanon, The Artist's View, 200 Years of Lebanese Painting,* London, 1989, pp. 15–19.

6. Gaston Wiet, *Mohammed Ali et les Beaux-Arts,* Cairo, n.d., p. 409 mentions Ḥasan Wardānī, Muḥammad Murād, and Muḥammad Ismā'īl. After their return to Egypt in the 1830s, Wardānī taught drawing, Murād etching and drawing and Muḥammad Ismā'īl sculpture and drawing (Wiet, p. 409).

7. Very little is known about this sculptor. Bénézit does even not give a birth date.

The adoption of Western art

Before analyzing how and why "Islamic art" became relevant as an element in the art production of the Arab world during a period grossly circumscribed between 1950 and 1990, we have to explain why it first disappeared.

To introduce this question, we will start with a quote from one of the major modernist leaders of the Middle East in the first half of the twentieth century, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Though not an Arab, he indirectly influenced many thinkers in the Arab world and his way of thinking is representative of that time. In 1923, the founder of the Turkish Republic declared: "A nation that ignores painting, a nation that ignores statues, and a nation that does not know the laws of positive sciences does not deserve to take its place on the road of progress."[8] Herewith Atatürk clearly formulated what many thought: adopting modern art was a necessary condition to become a "civilized" nation. Adopting it was equivalent to studying the sciences, a compulsory step on the way to progress, a point almost all intellectuals of the East would have subscribed to at that time. Western art symbolized progress, Islamic art did not.

Another point is perceptible only implicitly in Mustafa Kemal's statement: for him, the East at that time ignored painting and, more generally speaking, "art." This idea was very broadly shared, not only in Turkey, but also in the Arab lands. Most painters of the first generation, symptomatically called "pioneers" (*ruwwād*), were deeply convinced that they came from a surrounding in which not only painting, but art in general, simply did not exist. We shall quote here from the writings of two of the major artists of this generation, the Lebanese Muṣṭafā Farrūkh (1901–1957) and the Egyptian Muḥammad Nāǧī (1888–1956). In his memoirs, Farrūkh reports the astonishment of his teachers at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Rome in the 1920s when they discovered that their talented young pupil was a Muslim, a native of a country that was, as Farrūkh himself put it, "devoid of any form of artistic stimulation."[9] Originating from such a desolate environment, Farrūkh interprets his desire to become an artist as resulting from "inspiration" and devoid of any rational explanation since, as he says, until the age of ten, he had seen images only on playing cards.[10] In the same mood, in one of his writings, Muḥammad Nāǧī expressed his despair about the faculty of the Egyptian *fellah* to produce art, saying "the Nigger [sic] in Congo and the Aboriginals of the Sundae Islands have more to tell us about this topic."[11] Islamic art had been internalized as a "non-art" by this generation of artists because it did not fit Western conceptions.[12]

If Islamic art did not belong to the category of art, there was another point which particularly touched the Arab East. At the end of the nineteenth century the debate about the congenital capacities of "Aryans" and "Semites," theorized by intellectuals like Ernest Renan,[13] led to the conclusion that the Arabs, as "Semites," had a somehow natural "repulsion" for figuration, i.e. art in the West at the time. Therefore, art pupils first had to prove their physical capacity to produce figurative art in the Western way. The debate arising a few years after the foundation of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo, reported by the French-language periodical *L'Egypte contemporaine,* is an illustration of this.[14]

The French sculptor Guillaume Laplagne, the first director of the Cairo School of Fine Arts, rejected the idea of a natural incapacity of the Egyptians in producing art, arguing that some of the students he had been teaching for two years had "a real talent" and that what they had been missing until then was adequate teaching. In his eyes, pretending that there were no

8. Quoted in Klaus Kreiser, "Public Monuments in Turkey and Egypt, 1840–1916," *Muqarnas* 14 (1997), p. 114.

9. Muṣṭafā Farrūkh, *Ṭarīqī ilā al-fann,* Beirut, 1986, p. 109.

10. Farrūkh, op.cit., p. 31.

11. Mohamed Naghi, *Un impressionniste égyptien/Muḥammad Nāǧī, Al-fannān al-ta'thīrī al-miṣrī* (French/Arabic), Cairo, 1988, p. 47.

12 This idea was very widespread and resisted for a long time. Thus, the 1960 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* in an entry written by Hermann Goetz, a specialist of India and director of the Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery from 1940 to 1953, stated: "Islamic art is essentially an art of ornament," vol. 12, p. 708. Even Claude Lévi-Strauss during a trip to the Indian subcontinent at the beginning of the 1950s, reported this idea of Islamic art as a "non-art": "Sur le plan esthétique, le puritanisme islamique, renonçant à abolir la sensualité, s'est contenté de la réduire à ses formes mineures: parfums, dentelles, broderies et jardins." In Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques,* Paris, Collection Terre Humaine, 1955 (1st ed.), p. 481.

13. Too many of Renan's writings treat this question to be listed here; however, the opening lecture he gave at the Collège de France in 1862 gives a good general overview of his thought: Ernest Renan, "De la part des peuples sémitiques dans l'histoire de la civilisation," in Ernest Renan, *Mélanges d'histoire et de voyages,* Paris, n.d., pp. 4–25.

14. The idea of modernization through art in the case of Turkey has been studied by Deniz Artun in a DEA-thesis with the title "Politiques de modernisation/Pratiques d'art, Une approche anthropologique des artistes boursiers de l'Etat impérial et républicain de Turquie à l'Académie Julian," Paris, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2001; for Lebanon, Kirsten Scheid is preparing a Ph.D. thesis at Princeton on the same theme. Scheid presented a paper on the use of landscapes at the 2001 MESA: "Borrowed Locality: Landscapes Made Lebanese and Lebanon Landscaped," Presentation for MESA, non-circulating, November 20, 2001.

artists in Egypt was like affirming that there were no poets in a country where children could not learn to speak.[15] Max Herz, a Frenchman in charge of the conservation of the monuments of Islamic Cairo, and Aḥmad Zakī, one of the personalities of the local "Renaissance" movement, saw things in a different way. Every nation had a different character, each of them said, and art was the expression of this very character. Therefore, teaching Egyptians European art was a waste of time; it would be more useful to introduce them to the authentic principles of their local arts, to make artisans and not artists out of them.[16]

However, the modernization process proved to be stronger than individual reluctance. "Islamic art" (or, more generally speaking, the traditional art production of the region) would be replaced by Western figurative art.[17] Western academic art produced by local artists became a sign of progress, as a 1932 report about the Cairo Salon, which had become the yearly institutional exhibition, states: the French teacher Morik Brin, secretary general of the "Association des Amis de la Culture Française," spoke of the "progress" made by Egyptians in this field, in a country where "everything had still to be created."[18]

Changes in paradigms

Thus, by the middle of the twentieth century, the major centers in the Arab region had adopted Western forms of art. Academies or schools had been founded all over the region: in Lebanon in 1937 (Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, ALBA), in Iraq in 1941 (*Ma'had al-Funūn al-Jamīla;* an Academy would follow in 1962), and in Syria in 1959 (*Kulliyyat al-Funūn al-Jamīla*). Before the foundation of these institutions, scholarships had been granted to young artists who went to study in Europe, mostly France and Italy. These institutional changes signaled the adoption of the Western way of conceiving art, art production, and teaching.

During the 1940s and 1950s some artists began to question the dominating trends of the time: the prevailing old-fashioned representation of landscapes, genre painting, and still lives. Two occurrences lead to this change: first of all, the new experiences of Western artists since the beginning of the century became better known. These experiences rejected academicism and integrated, among other elements, traditions and forms inspired by the artistic traditions of the Islamic world. Matisse and Klee are the most famous examples. Therefore, local traditions—formerly rejected as "non-art"—recovered the status of art for most actors on the scene.

Another contributing factor was the explosion of nationalisms and the building of new identities after the post-World War II independence of most states in the region. In all cultural fields, this required modernity to be compatible with the cultures of the region. Modernity (*ḥadātha*) and authenticity (*aṣāla*) became the two terms of a difficult equation. The concept of "modernity" in itself was also evoked for the first time: whereas in the first half of the century, being modern meant essentially to adopt Western forms and concepts, now a real reflection on this topic started. In opposition to the Western experience, where modernity was perceived as a break with the past, in the Arab world (as in other non-European countries) modernity was, from the beginning, a way of *reconquering* the past.[19]

I will give here two examples which arose independently from each other. In Egypt, the first challenge to institutionalized academic art came in 1946, when the Group for Modern Art (*Jamā'at al-Fann al-Ḥadīth*) exhibited in Cairo's Lycée Français. The group included young artists who had studied under the instruction of Ḥusayn Yūsuf Amīn, an art teacher who had lived in Europe and Latin America. 'Abd al-Hādī al-Jazzār (1925–1966) and Ḥāmid Nadā (1924–1990), the two main artists of the group, had a new style and used elements taken from popular arts of the country.[20] The same procedure was adopted, a few years later, by the Baghdad Group for Modern Art (*Jamā'at Baghdād li-l-Fann al-Ḥadīth*), which exhibited for the first time in

15. Guillaume Laplagne, "Des aptitudes artistiques des Egyptiens d'après les résultats obtenus à l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts," *L'Egypte contemporaine,* 1 (1910), p. 434.

16. For a more detailed presentation of this debate, see S. Naef, "Peindre pour être moderne? Remarques sur l'adoption de l'art occidental dans l'Orient arabe," in B. Heyberger/S. Naef (eds.), *La multiplication des images en pays d'Islam (17e–21e siècles), De l'estampe à la télévision,* Istanbul/Beirut, 2002 (forthcoming).

17. Therefore, Louis Massignon had to explain to his Parisian audience, in a conference he gave in 1920, that "art" as such existed in the Islamic world (L. Massignon, "Les méthodes de réalisation artistique des peuples de l'Islam," *Syria,* 2 (1921), p. 47.

18. Morik Brin, *Peintres et sculpteurs de l'Egypte contemporaine,* Cairo, 1935, p. 53. The Cairo Salon was created in 1922.

19. For a more detailed discussion, cf. Silvia Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe, L'évolution des arts plastiques en Egypte, au Liban et en Irak,* Geneva, 1996, Chapter 4.

20. On Jazzār, see Alain and Christine Roussillon (eds.), *Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar, Une peinture égyptienne/An Egyptian Painter* (French/English/Arabic), Cairo, 1990.

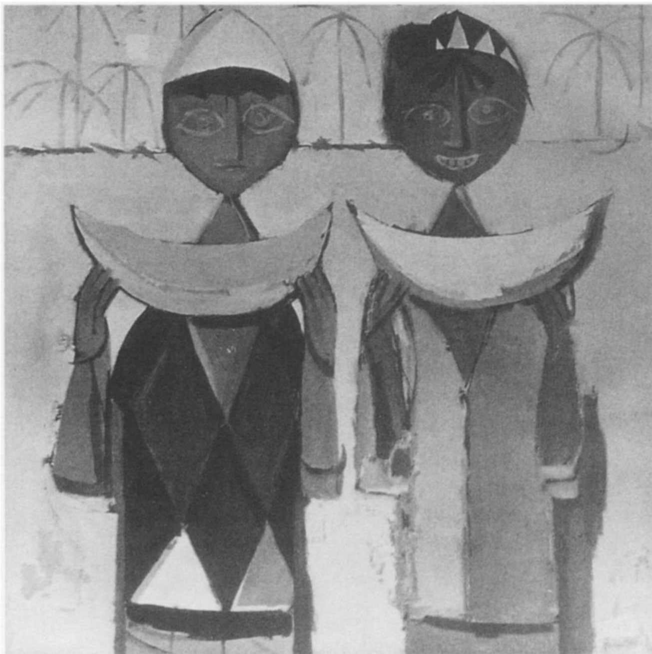

Figure 1. Jawād Salīm (Iraq), *Water Melon Eaters,* 1950s.

the Iraqi capital in 1950. Its founder, Jawād Salīm (1919–1961), a knowledgeable man and a polyglot, who had studied art in Italy and England, thought Iraqi art could not earn the international consideration it deserved until it had developed a character of its own. This peculiar character had to reveal itself through the modern art language of the West combined with what he called the "local character" (*al-ṭābi' al-maḥallī*). How should this principle be expressed through art? First, art was, at that time, figurative. Very few painters went into abstraction before the 1960s. Secondly, some of the newly created Arab states were aiming to build a secular or even socialist national identity. Therefore, the religious aspects of the local cultures were put into the background; the heritage of pre-Islamic civilizations, e.g. Pharaonic in Egypt and ancient Mesopotamian in Iraq, were reevaluated.

Jawād Salīm was a painter and a sculptor and the author of the Freedom Monument (*Naṣb al-ḥurriyya*), erected in Baghdad in 1962 to celebrate the fourth anniversary of the Republic. He went back mainly to the folkloric patterns that could be found in carpets, tapestries, ceramics, and tattoos. Another "Islamic" motif was the half-moon he abundantly used as a basic element through which he structured bodies, heads, and palm trees in his compositions. From the tradition of miniature paintings, he took the black ink pen stroke (fig. 1). In Egypt, Ḥāmid Nadā also borrowed from the popular tradition, in addition to open references to the Pharaonic heritage shown clearly in the painting *The Liberation of the Suez Canal* (1956), fig. 2.

"Islamic art" as such was not yet popular. One could question why, for instance, there was no reference to miniatures. The only example of such a use is found in colonial Algeria, where since the 1920s Muḥammad Rāsim (1896–1975) successfully painted miniatures representing scenes of Ottoman Algiers. And Algeria never had a tradition of miniature painting! Nevertheless, in the early thirties he was the only Arab–Algerian recruited as a teacher to the Academy of Fine Arts in Algiers, which did not otherwise accept Muslims.[21] In Iraq, where the thirteenth-century miniaturist Yaḥyā al-Wāsiṭī was an often-quoted reference for many artists, miniatures were never a viable means of expression. Possibly this was due to the peculiar esthetic concept of this painting genre, probably considered incompatible with modern art.

Subsequently, we can conclude with the following statement: as long as art remained figurative, the reference to "Islamic art" was not a real issue. This was due to technical reasons, but was also because this heritage was not considered compatible with modernity.

The rediscovery of "Islamic art": *Ḥurūfiyya* and calligraphy

In the 1960s, abstraction became a larger trend in the Arab world. The first painters who dedicated themselves to it pursued a Western-inspired abstraction, but found it difficult to be accepted by an audience who had just discovered and started to appreciate figuration.

Since the late 1940s, artists like the two Iraqi expatriates Jamīl Ḥammūdī (b. 1924) and Madīḥa 'Umar tried to exploit in their paintings the esthetics of calligraphy, the major art in the Islamic tradition. In the 1960s, the Lebanese Ethel 'Adnān (b. 1925) began to draw Arabic poems on what she called "Japanese exercise books."

In 1970, another Iraqi, Shākir Ḥasan Āl Sa'īd (b. 1926), who had earlier belonged to the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, issued a manifesto with the title "The One Dimension" (*Al-Bu'd al-Wāḥid*). Āl Sa'īd had explored Sufism and had discovered what he thought to

21. Cf. *Mohammed Racim, Miniaturiste algérien,* exhibition catalogue, Paris, Institut du Monde Arabe, 1992.

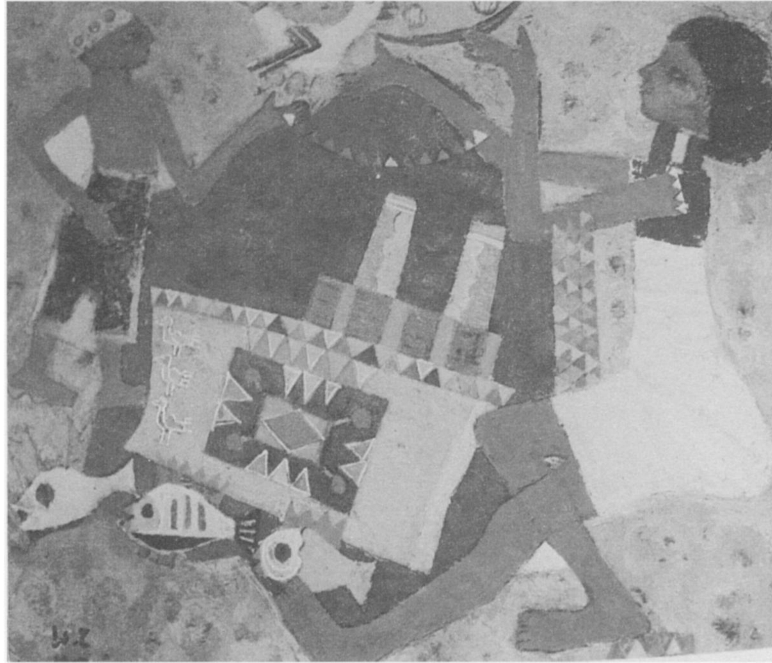

Figure 2. Ḥāmid Nadā (Egypt), *The Liberation of the Suez Canal,* 1956.

be the essential modernity of Arab script.[22] This could, in his eyes, become *the* form around which Arab artists could build their work. Until then, the manifesto explained, artistic expression had been understood only through the technical aspect. Through the use of the letter, which was form and content at the same time, art would once again become the expression of a philosophical concept, of the artist's attitude toward existence. Together with the arabesque, the calligraphic ornament had been the major form of expression of Arab civilization. Its re-employment in modern art would therefore reconcile the Arab artist with his most important and significant heritage.[23]

Nevertheless, there was no thought of going back to the patterns of "Islamic art." On the contrary, the use of the Arabic script (not of the art of calligraphy) should give to the works a fundamentally contemporary *and* Arab character. The artists using Arab writing considered themselves artists rather than calligraphers, in the modern sense given to this word (in Arabic, *rassām*). They called themselves *ḥurūfī* (and not *khaṭṭāṭ,* the Arabic word for calligrapher). The term plays with the Arabic word *ḥurūf* (letters) but also refers to the adherents of a mystical movement of the Islamic Middle Ages. The recovering of heritage took a double meaning that was both formal and intellectual.

At the same time, as the manifesto already pointed out, the use of Arabic letters in modern abstract works of art was not an Iraqi concern alone, but extended to the Arab world as a whole. In fact, the movement launched by Āl Sa'īd became the only pan-Arab art movement since the beginning of the century. Artists everywhere adopted the *ḥurūfīyya* to express their identity.

What is the relation of *ḥurūfīyya* to Islamic heritage? As previously mentioned, the artists referring to it did not want to go back to the art of calligraphy, but aimed at being painters in the full sense of the word. Therefore, they have to be distinguished from artists like the Paris-based Iraqi Hassan Massoudy or the Tunisian Lassaâd Métoui,[24] who practice what they call a modern form of calligraphy.

22. For the work of this artist, cf. *Croisement de signes,* exhibition catalogue, Paris, Institut du Monde Arabe, 1989.

23. For the Arabic text, see Shākir Ḥasan Āl Sa'īd, *Al-Bayyānāt al-Fanniyya fī l-'Irāq,* Baghdad, 1973, pp. 39–40. French translation in Silvia Naef, *L'art de l'écriture arabe, Passé et présent,* Geneva, 1992, pp. 58–59. Another text by the same author has been translated in *Croisement de signes,* op. cit., pp. 55–58.

24. Both have published several books, for instance : Hassan Massoudy, *L'ABCdaire de la calligraphie arabe,* Paris, Flammarion, 2002 (with Isabelle Massoudy); *Calligraphie arabe vivante,*

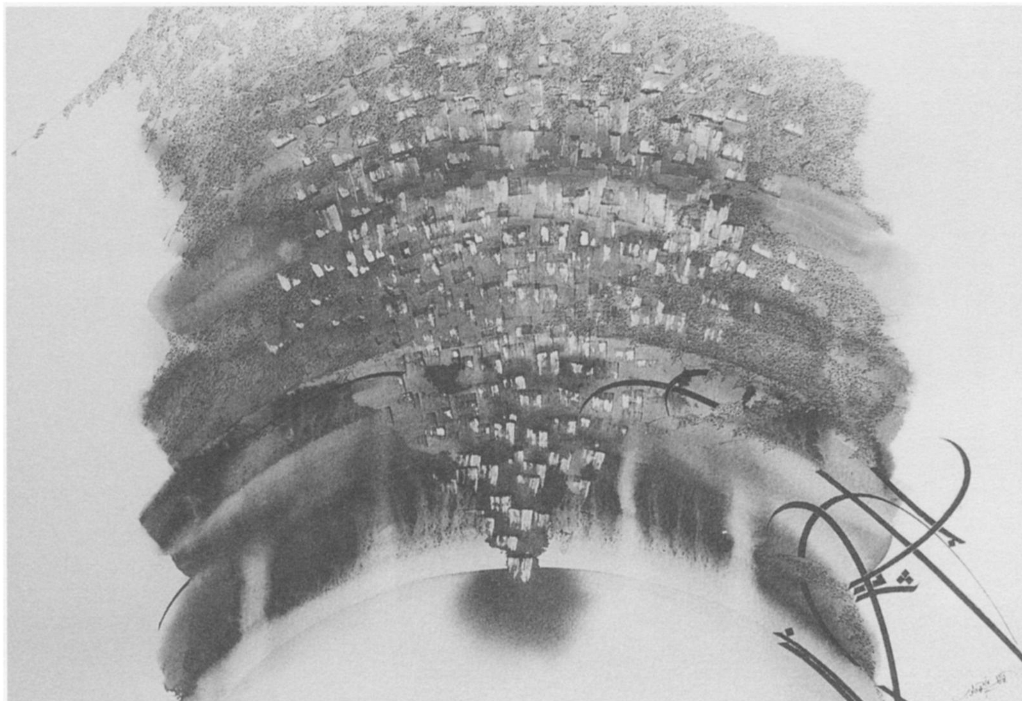

Figure 3. Nja Mahdāwī (Tunisia) with Wolfgang Heuwinkel (Germany), *Composition,* 1991.

Hurūfī can mean different things. The Tunisian Nja Mahdaoui [Najā Mahdāwī] (b. 1937) focuses on form: his purpose is to reproduce the "gesture" of the calligrapher. His paintings are built on shapes that resemble Arabic letters but are not Arabic letters. In a more recent exhibition that he held in Paris in 2000, he started to explore Japanese writing.[25] In spite of its fundamental difference, in the sense that the signs Mahdaoui uses are not letters of the alphabet but mere strokes of the pen, most of his work is close to traditional calligraphy (fig. 3).[26]

Other artists play with the letter and take it simply as a basic form of composition, like the Egyptian Ṣalāḥ Ṭāhir (b. 1912)[27] or the previously mentioned Jamīl Ḥammūdī, who sees himself as the father of the *ḥurūfīyya*—his first compositions with letters date from the 1940s. With the exception of some early works, most of his production—the bulk of which was painted in the 1970s and 1980s—was basically figurative, with some forms developing into Arabic letters. Sometimes, the presence of letters seems quite forced: the feeling given by the composition is that of a juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements. The relation to the visual tradition of Islamic art is almost completely lost. Ḥammūdī has a thoroughly Western conception of the work of art, in spite of his reference to the miniatures of al-Wāsiṭī[28] (fig. 4). Ḥammūdī sees himself as one of the major exponents of this trend, which was very popular in Arab art production of the 1970s and 1980s—popular to the extent of becoming inflationary, or, as the Algerian painter and art critic Muḥammad Khadda remarked, an easy recipe and fashionable on both sides

republished in 1999 (1st ed. 1981). On Massoudy: Jean-Pierre Sicre, *Hassan Massoudy, Le chemin d'un calligraphe,* Paris, 2001 (1st ed. 1991). Lassaâd Métoui, *Danse avec le vent, Calligraphie arabe contemporaine,* Paris, 2001; *L'atelier du calligraphe,* Paris, 2000; *Calligraphie arabe: dans le sillon du calame,* Paris, 1998, with a preface by the former minister of culture Jack Lang. Their calligraphies illustrate many books on poetry and other subjects published in France.

25. In an exhibition held at Comptoir des Ecritures from November 4, 1999 to January 8, 2000.

26. On Mahdaoui, cf. *Nja Mahdaoui* (French/Arabic), Tunis, 1983.

27. Cf. Sobhi El-Charuni, *Salah Tahir,* Cairo, 1985.

28. It was after he happened to see the work of Yaḥyā al-Wāsiṭī while reading a French magazine in Paris that Ḥammūdī had the idea to use letters in his paintings: André Parinaud, *Jamil Hamoudi,* Paris, 1987, p. 6.

of the Mediterranean: easy, but including a danger, the danger of exoticizing Arab painting.[29]

In other words, *ḥurūfīyya* could be defined as the use of forms inspired by Arab letters and employed in order to "arabize" painting. It has to be distinguished from the revival of calligraphy initiated in recent years by the IRCICA, the Istanbul-based Research Center for Islamic History, Art and Culture, founded in 1976 as a "subsidiary organ" of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The center aims at the research and organization of activities on the "Islamic legacy," as well as the establishment of "training courses to promote skills and techniques relevant in the fields of Islamic arts and culture."[30] The IRCICA organizes exhibitions and courses in calligraphy[31] as well as international calligraphy contests. The first of these contests was held in 1986, the fifth in 2001.[32] Prizes ranged in 2001 from $2500 to $150 (a book about calligraphy). Participants came from all over the world, as an article claimed,[33] but most of them belonged to countries of the Islamic world, as the list of prizes by nationalities shows.

The IRCICA sponsors traditional styles and has an agenda that focuses on conservation rather than innovation, as the categories—one for each of the most important classical styles—in the calligraphy contest show.[34] Modern calligraphers like Hassan Massoudy are looked at with suspicion: the director of IRCICA, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu, says Massoudy's work is not art.[35]

Figure 4. Jamīl Ḥammūdī (Iraq), *Gilgamesh/Ishtar,* 1971.

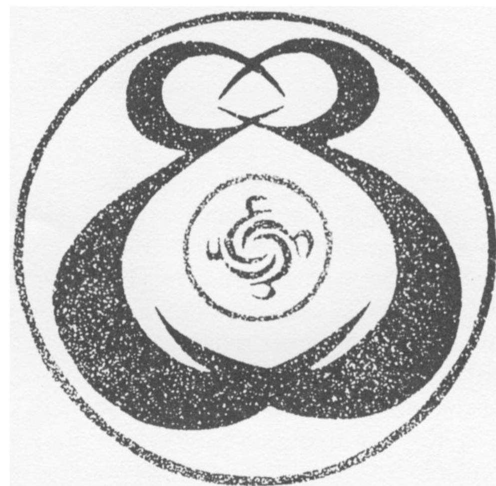

Figure 5. Ḥusayn Māḍī (Lebanon), *The letter 'ayn,* 1973.

Seeking the "spirit" of "Islamic art"

A few artists tried to go back to what they considered to be the "spirit," or the essence of "Islamic art." For them, the mere reproduction or quotation of forms borrowed from Islamic heritage was not satisfactory. They wanted to give back the basic concept of Islamic art in a modern shape, compatible with our age. This

29. Mohammed Khadda, "Calligraphie et modernité," in *Nouveaux enjeux culturels au Maghreb* (Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord 1984), Paris, 1986, p. 135.

30. http:/www.oic-oci.org/english/main/ircica.htm.

31. Cf. for instance *Bulletin d'information de l'IRCICA,* 53 (December 2000), "Présentation de diplômes en calligraphie," pp. 40–41.

32. "Le cinquième concours international de calligraphie au nom du calligraphe égyptien Sayyed Ibrahim et le prix de l'IRCICA pour la distinction dans la calligraphie," *Bulletin d'information de l'IRCICA,* 54 (April 2001), p. 22. The IRCICA also publishes catalogues reproducing the winner plates (1987, 1993, 1995, 1997).

33. "Le jury a noté que des œuvres avaient été reçues de certains pays où cet art venait de commencer à se développer, et décidé d'exprimer [sic] son encouragement aux artistes de ces pays, recommandant que des prix d'encouragement soient accordés aux auteurs de certaines bonnes œuvres reçues de Corée, du Japon, de la Thailande et en particulier de la Chine, d'où cinq calligraphes ont participé . . ." Ibid., p. 23.

34. The categories are: *jali thuluth, thuluth, naskh, jali talik, ta'lik, jali divani, divani, koufi, muhaqqaq, reyhani, ijaza, riqaa, magrebi, khurde ta'lik.* Ibid., pp. 27–31. I use the spelling adopted in this publication.

35. Quoted in Paul Amman, Roger Canali, and Thomas Widmer, *Meisterschreiber, Zeitgenössische arabische Kalligraphie und ihre Künstler,* Berne, 1998, p. 97.

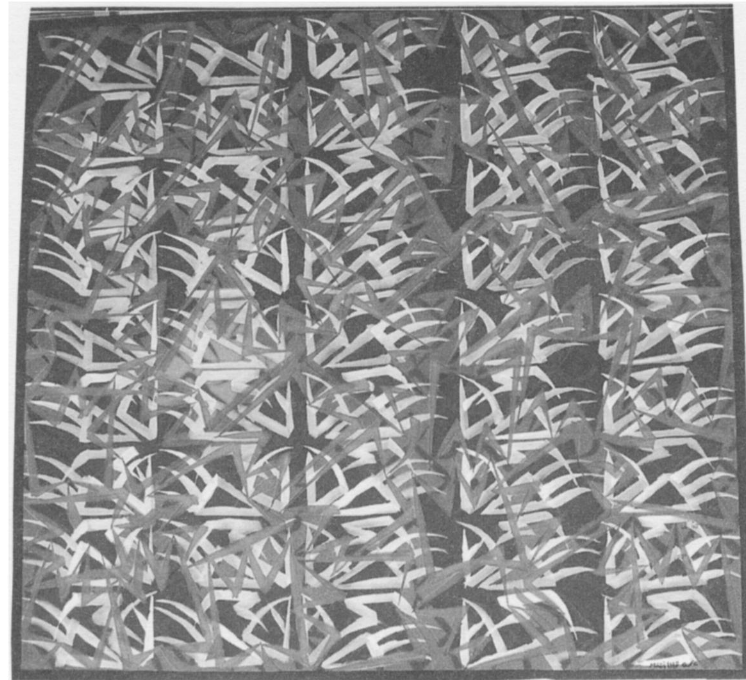

Figure 6. Ḥusayn Māḍī (Lebanon), *Composition,* 1997.

was the case with Ḥusayn Māḍī and Samīr al-Ṣāigh, both Lebanese.

Ḥusayn Māḍī (b. 1938), who lived in Italy for many years, started to paint shapes of birds or women in a continuous repetition, like arabesques. In 1973 he created a series of etchings called Arab alphabet, in which he drew the twenty-eight letters (plus the word *Allah* and the combination *lām alif*). In this work, his reference to the concept of "Islamic art" was strong: the letter was embedded in an inner circle, then surrounded by others (fig. 5). Māḍī sees himself as a modern artist trying to revive, in a form more suitable to our age, what he considers to be the intrinsic force of "Islamic art" (fig. 6).

Samīr al-Ṣāigh (b. 1945) aimed at going back to the esthetic understanding of Islamic art by trying to seize its peculiar ways of expression. In his critiques of the attempts to create an Arab modernity by going back to the past, to the "heritage," al-Ṣāigh noted that the disappointment generally prompted by this type of work comes from a superficial understanding of Islamic art. This disappointment, he said:

> originates from a limited and superficial understanding, in which heritage has been read through disconnected esthetical pieces and factors. The works which sought inspiration from the Arabic script, or from icons and miniatures or the ones which came back to ancient civilizations, stopped at the formal aspects of these vestiges and creations and forgot or ignored the esthetical point of view, as well as the comprehensive artistic view they conceal. [. . .] The esthetical or artistic value of the letters in calligraphy exists only with its proper logic which derives from a comprehensive Arab view of the world and of art.[36]

Samīr al-Ṣāigh also was one of the advocates of a modernity not only rooted in the Western tradition, and of an art independent of Western concepts. Indeed, in 1992, when the concept of plural modernities was not as current as today, he rejected the capability of the West to be the only source capable of defining the criteria of modernity[37] (fig. 7).

As we said in the beginning, this article concentrates mainly on the Arab world; however, parallel experiences, developing at about the same period, can be found elsewhere reflecting what we think to be not specifically an "Islamic" trend, but rather part of a

36. Samīr al-Ṣā'igh, "Thamānīnāt al-fann al-lubnānī wa-l-as'ila al-ṣa'ba," *Funūn 'Arabiyya* 1 (1981), p. 52.

37. Samīr al-Ṣā'igh, "Al-ḥadātha āb khā'in," *Al-Mulḥaq,* no. 10, 16 May 1992, p. 10.

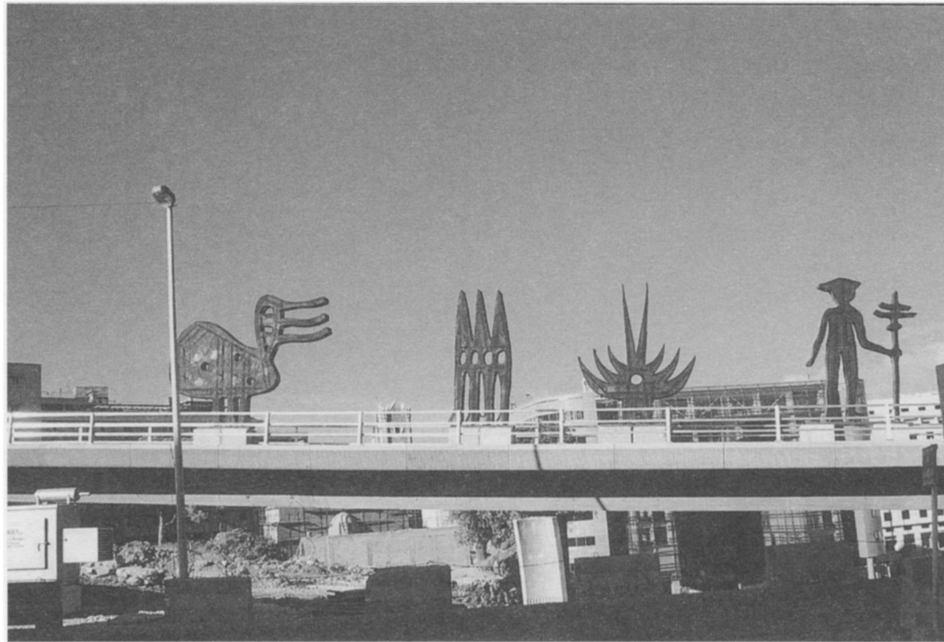

Figure 8. Nadīm Karam (Lebanon), *The Archaic Procession,* downtown Beirut, 1997. These shapes accompanied the reconstruction of downtown Beirut and moved from one spot to the other.

global "back to the roots" movement.[38] In Iran, for instance, the "Saqqakhaneh" group of artists, who became famous in the 1960s, used talismans, script, and other items taken from folk art.[39] Hossein Zenderoudi (b. 1937) and Mohammad Ehsai (b. 1939) made calligraphic compositions in the 1960s and 1970s. Even in Turkey, where the reform of 1928 had reduced the Arab alphabet to a mere relic of the past and where Atatürk ordered the closing down of several calligraphy schools,[40] Erol Akyavaş (1932–1999) introduced the Arabic script among other references to Islamic art. Like Ḥusayn Māḍī and Samīr al-Ṣāigh, Akyavaş's reference to Islam as a cultural tradition was very strong. He made a series of lithographs inspired by the *Mirājnāmeh* (*Miracname*), which was a big success when it was exhibited in Ankara in 1987. Akyavaş considered his painting to be religious, breaking with the Sunni tradition of non-representation.[41]

38. On contemporary art in the Islamic world, cf. Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity,* Gainesville, 1997, as well as *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World,* ed. by Wijdan Ali, London, 1989.

39. Rose Issa, "Borrowed Ware," in *Iranian Contemporary Art,* exhibition catalogue, Barbican Centre, London, 2001, pp. 17–19.

40. *Die Meisterschreiber,* op. cit., p. 14.

41. Erol Akyavaş *His Life and Works,* Istanbul, 2000, p. 150.

Islamic references in contemporary art since 1990

With the beginning of the 1990s, new media such as video and installations appeared. At the same time direct reference to "Islamic art" as a means of cultural affirmation diminished. This had less to do with the new media than with a change in priorities. Younger artists were less interested in identity questions. Even if some artists now strongly refer to "Islam" and incorporate cultural symbols taken from the heritage, they do not use them to express a concern with a national character or to show a national specificity, but rather to report the daily reality of life in countries where culture is permeated by "Islamic" elements. Art has become a particular, individual experience in a given context. Artists today express their reality, their life in an Islamic society—whatever this might mean—as a reflection on self within this society (figs. 8 and 9a & b).

To conclude, we could say that the specific references to Islamic art in the Arab world coincided with a precise period. To relate it to some historical references, we could say that this period was between 1967 (June War) and 1991 (Gulf War). It was a time of the radicalization of nationalism after the Arab defeat in the Six-Days-War. Artists, like other intellectuals, pleaded for stronger ties with tradition, with "Arab" culture, and

Figure 9a & b. Aḥmad 'Askalānī (Egypt), *Men in Prayer,* installation, Townhouse Gallery, Cairo, April 2002.

for less influence by Western trends as a form of resistance.[42] In the 1980s, with the strengthening of religious pressure, even a secular sector like art could not escape from such an influence, and "Arabness" in art became nearly an obligation.[43] The 1991 Gulf crisis marked the end of this sort of nationalism. Globalization on the one hand and the new interest in art from outside the West on the other hand also concurred in orienting artistic production in the Arab world in another direction.

If contemporary art has abandoned its concern for the Islamic heritage, then what about the "rebirth" of calligraphy: is it not a lively tradition, as the success of Massoudy or Métoui in France[44] and the participation in the IRCICA contests show? In my opinion, these are only epiphenomena, the signs of the "reinvention" of a tradition that has already disappeared rather than proof of its renaissance. In 1995, the Paris-based Iraqi calligrapher Mohammed Saïd Saggar noticed that since the introduction of printing, calligraphy had lost its vitality and was "ossified" in formal research and creativity.[45] And this is probably the status of Islamic art today: the specific contexts that produced it have disappeared, and it cannot survive in its traditional form. However, elements inspired by it will regularly appear as an expression of a cultural belonging, but through genres which are not in themselves "Islamic." Anything else is little more than folklore.

42. See the manifesto "Naḥwā al-ru'ya al-jadīda," issued by a group of Iraqi artists in 1969. Arabic text in Shākir Ḥasan Āl Sa'īd, *Al-Bayyānāt al-Fanniyya . . . ,* op. cit., pp. 31–35. French translation in Silvia Naef, *A la recherche . . . ,* op. cit., pp. 375–380.

43. For an overview of art in this period, cf. Abdelkébir Khatibi, *L'art contemporain arabe, Prolégomènes,* Paris/Rabat, 2001.

44. Their calligraphy is reproduced on postcards and sold in souvenir shops near the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

45. Mohammed Saïd Saggar, "Introduction à l'étude de l'évolution de la calligraphie arabe," in G. Beaugé & J. F. Clément (eds.), *L'image dans le monde arabe,* Paris, 1995, p. 106.