

Women Artists in Arab Countries

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed in the Arab World a limited number of artists most of whom were men; but the period between the fifties and eighties marked the birth of many women artists, especially in Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and other countries — some of them with important affiliations, others with none — but they all had one thing in common: self-assertion and the struggle for more social and economic independence, after a long period of imposed absence. Some of them have liberated themselves from traditional dictates of their societies, others are still striving to achieve recognition.

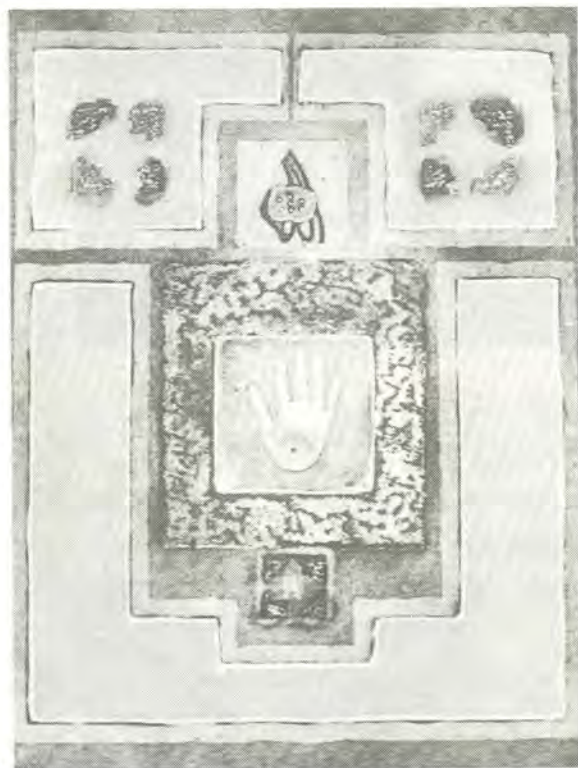
In Egypt many women painters distinguished themselves such as: Jazbia Sirri, Anji Aflaton, Watfa Midani, Zeinab Sachini and others. Among the pioneers is Anji Aflaton whose work dates back to the forties and early fifties when Egypt was struggling for its independence. Anji conveyed a real image of the socio-political situation in her country by painting the hard working farmers and public demonstrations of women against the occupation. She was a real advocate of human rights, freedom and equality, which led her to be imprisoned for four and a half years. Thus she was the first female political prisoner in the region. In prison, Anji missed nature very much and that led her to substitute nature for personages in most of her paintings.

Iraqi women play an important role in the art life of their country, not only in painting, but also in other fields of plastic arts such as: sculpture, ceramics, calligraphy, graphics, ornamentation, and others. Among those are Suad al-Attar, Leila al-Attar, Maheen al-Sarraf, Widad al-Hakim, Siham al-Saudi, Ishtar Jamil, Abla al-Azzawi, Najah al-Jader and others.

Suad al-Attar, a prominent painter conveys the mystery and charm of the orient through canvases, reminding us of the dreamy legends of childhood. Suad is strongly influenced by the ancient Assyrian art, regarded by many as the background of the Iraqi civilization. She held exhibits in Baghdad, Beirut, London and other Arab capitals.

Among the Kuwaiti artists are: Munira al-Kazi, Suad Issa al-Yusuf. In Saudi Arabia: Safia Ben Zaqr, Najah Naji Mufti, Mona Munajed, Noura al-Hamdan, Fatima Bayazid and others.

Najah Naji Mufti studied art in London. She paints everyday life in Saudi Arabia such as wedding ceremonies. Najah designs book covers and cards. Mona Munajed paints on silk the warm colors of the orient.



1. Suad Issa al-Yusuf (KUWAIT)
2. Suad al-Attar (IRAQ)
3. Fatima Bayazid (KUWAIT)



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In 1987 the Saudi Arabian Embassy sponsored an exhibition in Washington consisting of thirty-six paintings executed by thirty-six Saudi women artists. The aim of this exhibit was to introduce to the West the Saudi women's involvement in the social, educational and cultural development of their country through their art. Most of the paintings were done in 1986, eight of them in 1985 and only one in 1984. The themes depict Saudi Arabian culture and traditions. The colors used are warm and bright. An outstanding characteristic of the paintings is the use of ornaments and Arabic calligraphy.

Among the Syrian artists are: Aysha Mansouri, Shalabia Ibrahim, Leila Nseir and Asma Fayoumi. Asma Fayoumi was born in Damascus in 1943, she studied in the "Fine Arts College in Damascus". Her work shows great interest in women and landscapes.

Shalabia Ibrahim, born in Damascus in 1944, studied art privately. Her work shows a romantic relation between women, birds and flowers.

4



4. Asma Fayoumi (SYRIA)
5. Shalabia Ibrahim (SYRIA)

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Leila Nseir, born in Lattaquieh in 1941 studied art in Cairo. Leila paints human emotions and sufferings.

The Tunisian Government encourages artists both morally and financially. Consequently many women artists have distinguished themselves. Among them is Saïda Ja'far who specialized in Japanese art. She paints on silk and exhibited in Tunisia and Tokyo.

Jordan has many women artists, some of them are Palestinians who acquired the Jordanian citizenship after the exodus of 1948. Among the Jordanians are Fahrelnissa Zeid, Princess Wijdan Ali, Suha Noursi, Mona Saudi, Samia Zaru, Afaf Arafat, Najah Khayat, Da'ad et-Tal, Nelly Costandy. Among the Palestinians are Samia Halaby, Jumana Huseini and many others.



6. Afaf Arafat (JORDAN)

Princess Wijdan Ali was born in Baghdad, graduated from Beirut University College. Founder and President of the «Royal Society for Fine Arts», she has been exhibiting since 1960 in both Arab and Western countries, revealing the vastness, tranquillity and the brilliant colors of the desert. (See Al-Raida Vol.VII Nos. 27-28)

Suha Noursi, born in Amman in 1942, studied at "Corcoran School of Fine Arts" in the United States. She paints in acrylic on big canvases. Her abstracts are derived from nature and she has a vibrant colorful technique.

Mona Saudi, born in Amman in 1945, graduated from the "Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts" in Paris in sculpture, then she went to Rome for further training. Mona lived in Beirut and Amman. She exhibited her drawings and sculptures in Beirut, Paris, Moscow, Berlin, Warsaw and Oslo.

Samia Zaru, born in Nablus in 1938 and graduated from the American University of Beirut, continued her studies at Corcoran Art Gallery and at the American University of Washington, D.C. in painting and sculpture. She held exhibits in major Arab capitals, Europe and in the United States as well. Her work includes metal sculptures, figurative images on canvases and textile collages.

Afaf Arafat, born in Nablus, got her art diploma in England. She had her M.Sc.Fine Art in the U.S.A. in 1966. She was elected as a member of the "American Art Society." Afaf's work includes paintings and ceramics.

Although the number of women artists in the Gulf is not large, yet they are taking big steps to follow their fellow artists in other Arab countries. In most Gulf countries, the State offers help to the artists without any discrimination.

Some women artists in the Arab World have already taken their place in the international art movement while others are still working to assert themselves on the local scene. Arab countries through the Arab League are requested to play a bigger role in presenting Arab Art to the world. The "Alif" gallery in Washington D.C. was a major step in that domain but unfortunately it was closed due to lack of funds. We sincerely hope that it will be reopened to regain its role as the door through which our culture passes to the Western world.

Another important event was the foundation of the "Institut du Monde Arabe" in Paris, which is a museum of Arab-Islamic Civilization and Art, with a special department for Arab contemporary art.

Will the future years witness the birth of Arab Women Artists who will leave an outstanding mark on the art movement in the world?

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