

Art and Freedom

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History tells us that slavery existed from early times in ancient Mesopotamia, Pharaonic Egypt, ancient Greece and other cradles of civilization. It continued throughout the Middle Ages and the modern period, during which it diminished, beginning in the United States of America with the Civil War (1861-1865) that abolished black slavery. Although the efforts of the United Nations has somewhat succeeded in eradicating this evil in other parts of the world, slavery continues to exist in a variety of forms such as the trafficking of women and children in Thailand, India, south Asian and other countries in the world. Prostitution and rape, which may also be considered as historical forms of slavery, whereby women are subjugated to a lower existence, continue to thrive in many parts of the old and new worlds.

In the Middle East, women slaves existed in pre-Islamic Arabia and other neighboring countries as erotic dancers and singers. There were thousands of such women at the courts of the caliphs and other rulers in the Arab empire particularly during the Abbasid period, 8th-12th Century A.D. Slave dealers would recruit them from all over the Empire, train them in singing, dancing and lute playing and then sell them at high prices to

wealthy men and women.

Unlike the so-called 'free women' who were kept inside their homes and forbidden contact with men other than their close relatives, slave women did not have to wear the veil. They were free to mingle, and to sing and dance in cafes and other public places. Many of them became famous for their skills of entertainment. In addition to singing, dancing and lute playing, they recited poetry. They could improvise original poems and dances, as well. A book on the history of Arab singers, called "al-Aghani" by al-Isphahani, gives detailed information about distinguished women singers and musicians in the Omayyad and Abbasid periods, which saw the florescence of Arabic music. Up till now, women in the Arab and Moslem world, are encouraged to learn and practice dancing and singing, even if they do not become professional performers.

Why have the above artistic skills been emphasized and encouraged more strongly than the plastic ones like painting, sculpture, designing and architecture for women? On one hand, it would seem that the latter do not comply to women's sub-serviant roles towards men, including entertaining them. On the other hand, painting and sculpture

did not flourish in Moslem countries, except in Persia (Iran) where Persian miniatures attained a high degree of development. Like the Jews, the Moslems did not encourage the crafting of portraits of people and nature from fear that the people might grow to worship images.

Times have changed. We now live in an age of freedom. Women and men in the Arab and Moslem world are encouraged to develop in all the fine arts without restriction. Art in all its forms continues to develop and to be a source of enjoyment. Modern art is undergoing a drastic evolution which, to some people, seems to be shocking. It does not accent enjoyment, relaxation or 'catharsis', but requires deep thinking, meditation and interpretation. Obscurity and suggestiveness supposedly form its chief constituents. If you ask a modern artist about the trends of modern art, he or she will tell you it is primarily based on creativity, which requires complete freedom. In other words, it is a complete revolt against the past. In poetry, it means pure inspiration, and freedom to write about any subject in any form.

Only in an atmosphere of freedom can art and science, the two pillars of civilization, develop and flourish.

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