

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

by *Hind Al-Soufi Assaf*,
Instructor, Balamand
University and the Lebanese
Academy of the Fine Arts

Prior to the Middle Ages, history did not record the names of many individual artists, whether men or women. Women began to be known as artists only towards the end of the sixteenth century. During this period, women dealt primarily with subjects such as still lifes or portraits, which were considered to be subjects for less talented artists. In the Orient, meanwhile, history records a few names of women calligraphers active in Northern Africa during and after the Middle Ages. Women's artistic creativity in this era was restricted mainly to tapestry and embroidery, which were considered crafts rather than fine arts.

Women artists in the Arab world did not achieve fame until the 20th century. In the West, however, Artemisia Gentileschi gained early recognition for her artistic talent, and her fame eventually surpassed Italy, her home country, to reach all of Europe. Artemisia dealt with subjects that no women had ever dealt with before, and thus succeeded in capturing the attention of a wide audience. The audience of that era was intrigued by erotic and violent themes, and Artemisia's work focused on Judith, the biblical heroine who saved her people by murdering the Ashourian leader. Through her art, Artemisia is said to have expressed her own urge for revenge upon her teacher, who allegedly had raped her when she was fifteen years old. She chose the brave character of Judith to express the inner drama of her own life; blood dominated all of her paintings.

In order to understand Arab women's role in the fine arts, we must first understand the historical context of the arts in the Arab world. Here, we shall limit our focus to sculpture and drawing. We will first survey the Arab plastic arts movement from the end of the nineteenth century up until today, and then we will address the Arab woman's contribution to the arts during this period of time. In the second section, we will shed light on women's qualitative impact on the field of art, noting the relationship between



"Going Back", 1974, Oil on canvas. Jumana Hussein

feminine art and feminist art. In both sections, the comparison will concern the Lebanese art world, since we have more first-hand and scholarly information about art in Lebanon than in any other Arab country. The question which concerns us here can be summarized as follows: Does women's art exist in the Arab countries, and if so, what are the distinguishing characteristics of this art?

Plastic arts, in the western sense of the term, did not appear in the Arab world until relatively recently. In 1799,

Napoleon led a campaign to Egypt during which he was accompanied by French artists, some of whom may have had an impact on indigenous artists and crafts people. Later, artistic influences stemmed from the French occupation of Northern Africa and the impact of foreign missionaries who were sent to various Arab countries, most notably Lebanon. Following the occupation came mandatory rule, which resulted in the aesthetic acculturation of the local population. All of these factors led to a new Arab artistic awareness and creativity which was supported by the lively intellectual and academic atmosphere during the Arab Renaissance. An indigenous Arab modern art tradition began to emerge in Cairo, Baghdad and Beirut, especially in the 1950s.

The traditional arts inherited from Islamic civilization are predominant in the Arab countries. However, this art tradition began to stagnate during the Ottoman period. Thus, a cultural vacuum was waiting to be filled. Of all of the Arab countries, Lebanon in particular was open to the influence of various forms of Western art. However, the evolution of an independent and free art in the Arab World started only after Al-Khidawi Ismail's visit to France. Ismail was the first Arab to attempt the westernization of Eastern thought and art. Arab artists could not adopt all of modern art, though, because many of its themes were culturally unacceptable in the East. Hence, Arab artists were primarily interested in acquiring the technical classical skills from the West. Since Arab art was constrained by a cultural heritage that opposes mimetism, as well as by a conservative social ethic, the first generation of artists found themselves torn between the Western influ-

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ence and the Eastern reality. Their mission was difficult, and unfortunately they failed to advance a form of art that had its own distinctive style.

The next generation of artists was more prepared to face modernist challenges. It was then that the Arab woman entered the field of art and changed her historical role from that of “model” to active artist. The Lebanese woman, who was especially eager to acquire the Western woman’s image, faced fewer difficulties than other Arab women. An important factor that enabled Lebanese women’s artistic development was the presence of universities and foreign missionaries.

The Turkish and foreign women in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq helped to advance the Arab Art Movement in the beginning stages. The efforts of these women coincided with Taha Hussein’s liberal ideas. Hence, it was a fertile era for artists, and many women artists became prominent in Egypt. Among them were Khadija Riyad, Jazibiyya Siri, Tahiyya Halim and Inji Efflatoun. In Syria, too, there were women artists who stood out, such as Josephine Rajer, Mnawwar Morly and Ramziyyeh Zunbarkji. Among the women in Lebanon who participated in an exhibition of works by pioneer artists in 1930 were Mary Haddad, Blanche Ammoun, and Gladys Shukeir. Mary Haddad held the first exhibition of works by an Arab woman artist in both Beirut and Paris. In Iraq, Madiha Omar, who had received her art education in Beirut, London and America, became very well known.

In Northern Africa, conversely, women’s participation in arts was relatively delayed. Among the pioneers were Radiya bint Al-Hussein and Khadija El-Azrak in Morocco. In Jordan, there were no prominent women artists before the 1940s. The Palestinians, however, had been active since 1948. In the Gulf, artistic development started with the arrival of Egyptian and Iraqi professors in the 1960s. Parents started to send their sons to study abroad and their daughters to the Lebanese American University (formerly Beirut University College), where

Fine Arts was a popular major.

The number of women artists gradually increased in many Arab countries, and several names became very well known in the 1960s. Among the prominent names in Lebanon were: Salwa Rawda Chocair, Nadia Seikali, Juliana Saroufim, Yvette Ashkar, Helen Khal, Etel Adnan, Mifriz Rawda, Destia Manoukian and Nicole Harfouche. In Syria, the leading women artists were Leila Naseer, Asma El-Fayyumi, Maysoun El-Jazairi and Khazima Ulwani. In Palestine, Leila Shawwa and Mona El-Saoudi were the most accomplished; while in Iraq, Leila El-Attar, Suad El-Attar, Nuha El-Radi, and Sajida Ulwan led the artistic scene. In the Gulf countries, Safiyya Bin Sakr of Saudi Arabia, Suad Issa Youssef of Kuwait, Badriyya Jassem and Wafika Sultan of Qatar stood out as pioneering artists, Tania Wehbe and Safiyya Abdul-Rahman of Egypt, Amina Farhat of Tunisia, Aisha Haddad of Algeria, and Latifa Tijani and Mariam Mizyan of Morocco were the leading women artists in North Africa.

It is not possible to mention the name of every Arab woman artist. Fortunately, though, we were able to find names of many artists in Dr. Afeef Bahnasi’s study, from which we can compile the following statistics:

A cursory reading of these statistics reveals the prominence of the Lebanese woman artist, followed by the Egyptian, Jordanian, Palestinian and Iraqi artists. However, this chart is not very indicative of reality because there are many women in the Gulf countries who studied art in Lebanon, Europe or America. It is very difficult to obtain information about them since the policy in their countries is not to document the names of women artists. In fact, during one of my visits to the commercial galleries in the Gulf, I was attracted by a contemporary painting. When I asked about the talented artist who did not sign his or her name on the canvas, the gallery’s owner whispered into my ear, “the artist is a Saudi woman.” Most of the colleges in the Gulf do not even offer a degree program in Fine Arts.



“Prison”, 1960, oil on canvas. Inji Efflatoun



Returning our focus to Lebanon, Helen Khal notes in her 1987 study that the percentage of active Lebanese artists is considered high not only in comparison to the other Arab countries, but also on the international level. In the same study, Khal reports that among the twelve most famous Lebanese artists, four are women. Moreover, most of the students entering Lebanese schools of art

are women. In fact, women art students outnumber men by a ratio of 3 to 1. According to the latest statistical study in 1996, the number of women joining the Lebanese Committee for Drawing and Sculpture is 82 members compared to 81 men members.

To explain this phenomenon, we must note the following factors:

- The Lebanese woman is not expected to earn her own living.
- Art allows the woman to express her feelings indirectly, without words.
- The Arab Renaissance encouraged women to educate themselves and to emphasize their equality with men.
- Western culture was more readily accepted by Arab women than by Arab men, especially Lebanese women.
- Initially, artists used to teach young women from wealthy families. With the advent of specialized colleges, the admission into art institutes was not difficult; it was considered a field suitable for those who were not qualified to enroll in serious majors such as law, medicine and engineering, and arts did not require a high school certificate. The Beirut College for Women also played a significant role in encouraging women to study art, as it attracted girls whose parents did not approve of co-education.
- The non-Lebanese Arab women, particularly the Palestinians, were very daring and ready to experiment with the plastic arts.
- The foreign cultural centers in Beirut offered venues for exhibition and were ready to support the local artists.
- According to Helen Khal, exhibiting art was easy in Lebanon because of the abundance of exhibition spaces and the fact that criticism was rather subjective.
- Arab art initially did not have a political dimension.

On the contrary, woman's art embraced and appealed to those people close to centers of political authority. Lebanese women played a significant role in advancing

and publicizing the arts, especially during the 1960s. Among those worth mentioning were Janine Rubeiz and Samia Tutunji. Rubeiz was the director of the Center for Art and Literature, and she actively encouraged the artists, eventually establishing a gallery. Amal Traboulsi is the owner of the gallery "*Epreuve d'Artiste*", and managed to maintain a high standard for art during and after the civil war. Helen Khal notes that one-third of Lebanese gallery owners were women, and reminds us that the Lebanese women have always been particularly active in the field of art.

However, one has to acknowledge the presence of daunting obstacles confronting women artists. Among these obstacles are:

- Family barriers, especially in the villages and remote areas. The Arab woman still suffers a lot in order to attain some freedom.
- It is difficult for a woman to devote herself to art since she has to fulfill her duties as a wife and mother. Hence she is caught in a conflict between modernism and the role set for her by the society.
- Our patriarchal society forbids women to feel equal to men in any domain, including the arts.

Khal cites a review of an exhibit before the war for its clear emphasis on the achievements of women artists: ".... Another observation is that the only local painters who succeed in being very good, and who have done interesting things and remain original, are the women. We say this without hesitation...." One must note, however, that it is very easy to gain the sympathy of Lebanese art critics and the media, especially if the artist is a woman, because criticism in the Arab countries is rather weak; it is more akin to a literary description than a rigorous scientific evaluation.

Nevertheless, most art critics have noted that the Arab woman artist does not fear experimentation. She does not shy away from new techniques, and indeed appears eager to try all the various styles. We point here to Seikali, who used mixed media, and to Choukair, who was the first woman to introduce abstract art to the Arab world.

Thus, Arab women artists were indeed pioneers in the field of the plastic arts. But was this art feminine or feminist? Arab women artists categorically refuse any differentiation between women's art and men's art. They believe that art is asexual; art is either good or bad, according to them. Women's use of the paint-brush is no different from the man's. While some women passionately express their feelings, some men use the paint brush very tenderly. Someone has said that men are draughtsmen while women are colorists; however this has been



"Tapestry", 1959-61, hand
loomed wool.
Saloua Rowda Choucair

statistically disproved. In general, the Arab woman strives to translate her deepest feelings, which most often revolve around family and relationships. Women's drawings are more thematic than men's. Moreover, women are not as subject as men are to the weight of their cultural heritage. The woman tends to be unconventional and rejects all limitations on her liberal thought and aspirations for equality. She is not always convinced by those who call for a return to our traditional cultural inheritance. One cannot separate the reality of the Arab women's movement from the expression of the Arab artist. In Lebanon, for example, women's struggle was not a social and political movement, as it was in the West. The Lebanese woman was keen to imitate the Western woman in her appearance, but not necessarily in her behavior. One of the artists notes: "I would like to be a woman, but

to also have equal rights." Artist Juliana Seroufim says, "consciously, I want to portray a woman's world and how important love is to a woman. Few men understand the quality of love that a woman seeks."

"A woman should remain a woman" is woman's motto in Lebanon. The Lebanese woman tries to achieve her rights in a gentle manner. Helen Khal observed in her book that, "uniquely, the Lebanese woman has been able to utilize the path of the traditional woman to arrive." The Arab woman artist must work and struggle in order to have her skills acknowledged and appreciated in her own society. In art, the Arab woman has often chosen the abstract style, perhaps because it harmonizes with her indirect and subtle manner of tackling controversial issues. Yet, there are many women who present the Arab woman's concerns in a very daring and direct way. We conclude that the Arab woman artist has played a pioneering role in changing not only the art world, but also women's overall condition. However, the Arab woman's obligations as a wife and a mother still constitute obstacles to her artistic development and achievement. She has yet to attain prominence on the international level.

(Translated from Arabic by Ghena Ismail)

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Country	No. of Artists	No. of Women Artists
Egypt	193	15
Syria	150	8
Lebanon	73	14
Iraq	83	8
Jordan	28	6
Palestine	47	7
Libya	17	2
Sudan	14	1
Saudi	23	0
Kuwait	25	3
Bahrain	19	1
Emirates	11	0
Qatar	16	2
Tunis	46	2
Algeria	41	2
Morocco	63	3