

## Bridging the Gap between Modern and Contemporary Arab Art and Arab People

Dina Lutfi<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

---

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the lack of exposure Arabs have to modern and contemporary art that is being created in their region specifically, and to underline the factors that contribute to Arab people's disjuncture from artistic production in their respective countries. Additionally, the paper will also highlight the ways in which Arabs may begin to gain awareness and knowledge about the artistic production that is taking place within their own societies, especially modern and contemporary art, which also needs support within K-12 and university educational institutions, and in the public sphere. It is imperative that art criticism, art history, and art education are reinforced and incorporated as a way of closely looking at Arab art critically, and understanding the dynamics of Arab societies and cultures through visual, written, and verbal communication. I recommend that change could take place gradually by familiarizing societies with Arab art through education, scholarship on modern and contemporary Arab art, and establishing art-viewing spaces that serve as platforms for dialogues and discourses on Arab art.

---

**Keywords:** Arab art, art education, art history, art criticism, modern, contemporary.

### 1. Introduction

I grew up in Saudi Arabia, in a culturally diverse and conservative society where I completed my K-12 education. Throughout my school education, art classes were centered on the same things: to make something that was beautiful, not to draw any living things, and to use drawing or painting as the usual media for making art. This was mostly due to the fact that many schools in Muslim countries, are religious, and strongly adhere to the belief that Islam prohibits the depiction of humans and other living beings (Grabar, 1973). This approach to art education also regulated what students were able to include as the subject matter of their artwork since there are only limited themes to choose from. My understanding of art and art making was very limited earlier on in my education. During my K-12 education, I learned that if you wanted to make art, the subject matter had to be something "feminine" or "traditional." In my art classes, we were told to make art from memory and to also draw inspiration from Islamic architecture, Arabian jewelry, and nature. I was not exposed to art history, criticism, any artists, or famous works of art until I traveled abroad and visited museums, and then later on at the college level.

In my first year as an undergraduate visual communication student in the United Arab Emirates, I welcomed with open arms the history of Western art. It was an overflow of knowledge about various artists, different forms of art, and what it meant to the world. But there was a burning question in my mind, "Where does modern and contemporary Arab art fit into our education?" Throughout my undergraduate years in the UAE, I learned about Western art and art making techniques, from Western professors, but I did not learn much about Arab art or artists. There was a lack of Arab art educators in my program, and there were no art educators from other parts of the world who had an interest in teaching art from the Arab region. It became apparent to me that there is a disjuncture between Arab societies, Arab people, and the artistic production happening in their immediate locale, and in the region.

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor at the College of Design, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, Saudi Arabia.  
E-mail: [dal2164@tc.columbia.edu](mailto:dal2164@tc.columbia.edu)

## 2. Understanding the scope of artistic production within Arab countries

In order to create discourses on modern and contemporary Arab art, it is important to understand that there are distinctions between the different types of art that exist within Arab countries. To begin with, there is Islamic art, which is described as the visual arts produced since the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the genesis of Islam, and created by people, not necessarily Muslims, who lived within the lands dominated by Islamic populations (Brend, 1991). Secondly, there is traditional art, which is also perceived by many as a form of Islamic art, since its distinctive characteristics are originally heavily based on calligraphy in fear of depicting the human form as a path to idolatry. In more contemporary times, it also includes the depiction of landscapes, Arabian scenery, jewelry, and it continues to shy away from figurative portrayals (Ali, 1997). Thirdly, there is the modern Arab art movement, which began in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It reached countries in Africa before the Arabian Peninsula (Ali, 1997). Modern Arab art movements have no fixed definition, but are generally characterized by using new forms of media, commonly perceived to have been borrowed from the West, to create art that is Arab conceptually and thematically (Bahnassi, 1985). Finally, most Arab countries identify with a contemporary movement in Arab art that began twenty to thirty years ago; the beginning of the movement varies depending on the geographical location in the Arab world. Most Arab art historians agree that what characterizes contemporary art is the use of new media to create art that is inherently Arab in its content and speaks to contemporary Arab experiences (Shabout, 2010).

## 3. The importance of criticizing Arab art

Regardless of the contextual and stylistic differences available in Arab art, the overarching issue remains, which is the lack of art discourses in Arab countries within educational institutions and in the public sphere (Massialas & Jarrar, 1987). In Western countries, for example, art criticism shares the responsibility of educating the public in understanding modern and contemporary art. Professional art criticism in the Arab world is rare; in fact, Arab art critics are generally either literary critics or artists, and are not trained in language of visual criticism (Zuhur, 1998). Given the absence of Arab art criticism; the Western model is the only available option. The contemporary art critic in general – and the Arab critic in particular – does not start with the work of art, providing an analysis of visual elements and the relationships between forms and colors, but rather with the artist's biography, relying on and repeating the work of other critics (Watriss & Roques, 2014). The lack of objective art criticism further exacerbates the lack of understanding of Arab art in the Arab world.

People have been discussing and writing about paintings, architecture, and sculpture for thousands of years. In the first century BCE, Strabo, the ancient Greek geographer analyzed the ancient temple of Artemis, and in his criticism of it discussed the size, the artistry, and well-designed details of the building (Pollitt, 1974). In the fifth century CE, Procopius, a Byzantine scholar documented his own thoughts about Hagia Sofia, “it does not appear to rest upon a solid foundation, but to cover the place beneath as though it were suspended from heaven by the fabled golden chain.” (Geanakoplos, 1984, p.196) Describing the way a work of art looks, analyzing its formal qualities, observing the relationships between its forms, and deriving meaning from it does not only develop critical thinking, but also provides opportunities for individual and collective reflection. Additionally, perceiving works of art not only offers the viewer the experience of recognizing different styles; it may also provide a historical or cultural perspective to which they may connect (Hamblen & Galanes, 1991).

Similarly, writing about modern and contemporary Arab art, and documenting the context in which these works of art were created gives readers the necessary exposure they may not have had for decades. These documentations and observations are significant because they are being provided with information about works of art they may never encounter themselves (Barrett, 2000). There are many aspects of the art itself that can be evaluated, such as, what consequences does this art have culturally, socially, and morally? These types of questions shift our perceptions, and may lead to the derivation of meaning from within ourselves; Harry Broudy (1951), a Polish educator, stressed that the “total burden of aesthetic communication is not wholly on the artist.” He was directing his message towards the viewer rather than solely professional critics. Barrett (2000), suggests,

Professional art critics would possibly not be in their line of work if they believed that art spoke for itself. Instead, they work for viewers of art and those members of society who want to think critically about the times and conditions in which we live. Critics, like artists, produce meanings, but they use the pages of magazines rather than the swatches of canvas. Critics, like artists, have aesthetic and ethical values that they promote through their writing.

When critics do their work well, they increase their readers' understanding and appreciation of the art they write about, the political and intellectual milieu in which it is made, and its possible effects on the world (Barrett, 2000, p.27).

#### 4. The Limited Number of Art Venues

The scarcity of galleries, museums, and art centers has also contributed to the problem of understanding Arab artistic production. The concept of art spaces and exhibiting works remains the goal of every artist in order to gain an audience that will make a connection with the artwork. During the Islamic period, art formed part of the people's daily life. It surrounded them, appropriate forms appeared on the walls of their mosques, on their furniture, and in the books they read (Atassi & Schwartz, 2012). Along with its spiritual function, Islamic art had a utilitarian function as well, based on the concept of the totality of arts and crafts (Hillenbrand, 1999). Muslims had easy access to their art and did not need to go to a museum to view it. Thus, by adhering to the concept of a museum, the separation of fine arts and crafts was now observed. In the Arab world there is little distinction between art as a profession and art as a hobby. Valuation is non-existent. Thus, today's local Arab art markets are still dominated by art that caters to the taste of the masses, including copies of Orientalist works and the popular *hurufiyyah* (so-called modern calligraphic works) acceptable to the religiously inclined (Shabout, 2007). Most professional Arab artists are only able to gain stature outside their countries through international exhibitions or migration.

During the 1990s new – mainly private – efforts to establish art centers were undertaken to facilitate interaction among Arab artists and audiences, and although many museums and art galleries are emerging in Arab countries in contemporary times, the public does not have much knowledge or interest in the developments of Arab art because they are not taught about the value of art throughout their education (Zuhur, 1998).

There is a growing interest in art galleries and museums in Arab countries; art spaces such as the Khalid Shoman Collection (Darat Al Funun), one of the earliest collections of contemporary Arab art, which began in the 1980s. Barjeel Art Foundation in the UAE also preserves and exhibits modern and contemporary Arab art from a private collection to create open-ended dialogue and inquiry into Arab histories and contemporary matters that pertain to Arabs beyond the realms of individual cultures. There are also large museums, such as, Qatar's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Arab Art, which offers a space for dialogue with its vast collections on art from the region. On the other hand, a universal museum such as the Louvre in Abu Dhabi focuses heavily on ancient art, Islamic art, or Western art, which begs the question of why there is not enough modern and contemporary Arab art on display for us to see and discuss, especially in museums that have the potential to attract larger numbers of visitors? Exposure to a range of different styles, contexts, and concepts is, without a doubt, vital to strengthening the understanding of the human qualities and expressions art puts forth, however, not having exposure to the art produced in one's own country or neighboring countries deprives societies of an awareness of matters portrayed in works of art that have the potential to bond societies together and plant the seeds for collective visual communication.

One of the challenges that face Arab artists in their homelands is in attracting larger and more diverse audiences to the spaces that feature their artistic productions. Many Arab artists, even those in progressive Arab countries, have found difficulty in communicating with Arab audiences within their societies (Ali, 1989). Opening nights of major art exhibitions draw essentially only the artistic community, the social elite, and the press. There has been a considerable change in the public's attitude toward art, but efforts to draw larger audiences normally succeed when other cultural activities, such as Arabic poetry readings, accompany the art exhibit (Amirsadeghi, 2009).

#### 5. The inclusion of modern and contemporary Arab art in educational settings

Discussing and criticizing art is of course not only open to those in the profession of art criticism itself; they often occur in classroom settings, and are often referred to as critiques, which are usually different from published criticism. Studio instructors often hold critiques as a tool for students to present their work while it is in progress, in addition to when it is completed or near completion (Barrett, 2000). Critiques provide a platform for students to receive feedback from their instructors and peers. However, many instructors may overlook the additional prospects of engaging in critical and interpretive dialogues. A lot of times classroom critiques are rather straightforward, a student presents and then awaits feedback. On the other hand, if students are also given opportunities to discuss art other than their own through exposure within their classrooms, through visits from established artists, and visits to art spaces, students will begin to think critically in relation to making and interpreting art.

Dialogues about art may also be reinforced by art history, criticism, and aesthetics and combined with studio practices; students' learning then becomes active rather than passive. They will also be more likely to draw connections between their own art and contemporary art that is being made within their communities (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001).

James Allan, a professor of Eastern art, commented on knowledge and education, "All too often, education is seen as synonymous with knowledge. But the acquisition of knowledge is only a part of education. For education is about training a student's mind: it is the opportunity a student has to examine and assess a particular body of information, and then draw from it valid and worthwhile conclusions." (Keshmirshekan, 2015, p. 105) He also encouraged art educators to be selective with what they teach students since there is a plethora of contemporary Arab art that exists,

Those who devise courses in contemporary Middle Eastern art must be selective. And the staff available at any one institution will inevitably impose their own selectivity, so that their own interests and enthusiasms can flourish to their own benefit and that of their students. This is surely both possible and appropriate, for we can still use that limited body of material to train students to assess evidence, to make judgments, and to come to conclusions. That is education. (Keshmirshekan, 2015, p. 105)

Discussions about modern and contemporary art enrich individual and collective understanding of past, present, and future artistic production. Art and cultural education require time and investment in the education system as a whole (Shabout, 2007). Midyine has argued, "What is needed is a critical and painstaking study of our self, society, and history. This means liberating art from all forms of censorship; from rigid canons imposed by congealed doctrines, whether of a political or religious nature. That is to say, art must be considered as a dimension of human tendency within the individual historicity of each nation and within a comprehensive global horizon." (Amirsadeghi, 2009, p. 42)

### 5.1 The need for written educational resources on Arab Art

In the context of the Arab region, art is rarely criticized in detail but is rather presented to audiences as general surveys. In addition, most of these writings are published in the United States and Europe, not in Arab countries, and take the form of coffee table books, or catalogues. Wijdan Ali, a Jordanian art historian, published a key publication, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (1997), which provided a brief survey of artistic developments in Arab countries, in addition to art in Turkey and Iran, images of the work, and presented artists' biographies. The book, when first published, was widely accepted as the prevailing chronology for the development of modern art in the region. Other books such as *Images of Enchantment: Visual and Performing Arts of the Middle East* (1998) edited by Sherifa Zuhur, a scholar of Middle East and Islamic Arts, begin to delve into the realm of art criticism as the chapters discuss different forms of visual and performance arts and contextualize them based on their conceptual and historical significance, geographical location, and social factors; as an example, a chapter titled *Contemporary Painting: Subject and Frame* includes a piece written about *Imagery and Invention* as it focuses on Sudanese artists at home and in the Diaspora. However, a book such as Zuhur's are rare.

*Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary art of the Arab World and Iran* (2010), presents images of modern and contemporary art from the region, in high resolution, and is divided into chapters, such as *History and Identity*, or *Portraiture and the Body*. The preface does mention that the book provides an overview, but the author also hopes that it may "contribute to the understanding and knowledge of contemporary culture in the Arab world and Iran." (Eigner, 2010, p.11) Although the book does provide artists' biographies in addition to captions of the art, what is still missing are critical discussions of the art itself. Similarly, a book called *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2009), which focuses on contemporary art in Arab countries although useful, is also limited in scope.

Books such as Ali's (1997) was published in the United States through a peer-reviewed university press, which means that it most probably took a few years to produce, and include a limited number of images that are not printed in color. On the other hand, books such as the previously mentioned *Art of the Middle East* (2010), and *New Vision* (2009), were published in Europe without a peer-review process, and took less time to produce. In *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses* (2015), Nada Shabout, an art historian, stated,

The speed of publication of these big, glossy, and highly polished books indicated the increasing market demand for any knowledge on the topic, as well as the publishers' consequent recognition of a profitable opportunity.

Equally, however, it sounded an alarm in relation to the research involved and the critical standards (or lack thereof) of their contents. Moreover, given the deficiency of traditional research-based and peer-reviewed academic publications like the ones mentioned earlier, another important concern has developed in the field based on the use of this literature in academia as well, which in effect alters the construction and framing of the field of teaching and study. (Keshmirshekan, 2015, p. 60)

It is important to note that these books and their authors are not being criticized because what they have provided does document an important array of existing Arab art, and documentation is crucial to the preservation of artistic production.

As Shabout explained, “these large, expensive books – beautifully bound, well designed and printed, and incorporating large, high-resolution color images – are necessary in an otherwise dismal collection of badly printed books with poor-quality black-and-white images of the works. The latter were mostly official publications of the various countries in the region, which nevertheless remain rare and important primary documents today given the lack of alternative resources.” (Keshmirshekan, 2015, p.61) These books can be a starting point to delve deeper and provide the intellectual framework behind the aesthetic façade of the art.

## Conclusion

Many modern and contemporary Arab artists have found difficulty in communicating with Arab audiences within their societies. The issue requires further research that may uncover more factors behind the disjuncture of art in educational curriculums and art being made by practicing artists outside of educational institutions. The past of Arab art weighs heavily on the present; uncovering some of the main reasons why modern and contemporary Arab art continue to be an enigma in Arab societies is a step forward in beginning to bridge the gap between Arab art today, and the Arab people. It is important to not dwell on the issues surrounding modern and contemporary Arab art, but to instead document and develop a history for Arab art that can be situated in a regional and global context. Working among the present day's artists, educators, historians, and critics will provide opportunities to enrich the minds of individuals inside and outside of classrooms.

## References

- Ali, W. (1989). *Contemporary art from the Islamic world*. London: Scorpion Publishing, on behalf of the Royal Society of Fine Arts, Amman.
- Ali, W. (1997). *Modern Islamic art: Development and continuity*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Bahnassi, A. (1985). *Rumwad al-Fann al-hadith fi-l-bilad al-Arabiya*. Beirut: Dar al-Ra'id al-Arabi.
- Ballengee-Morris, C., & Stuhr, P. L. (2001). Multicultural Art and Visual Cultural Education in a Changing World. *Art Education*, 54(4), 6. doi:10.2307/3193897
- Barrett, T. (2000). *Criticizing photographs: An introduction to understanding images*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Brend, B. (1991). *Islamic art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Broudy, H. S. (1951). Some Duties Of A Theory Of Educational Aesthetics. *Educational Theory*, 1(3), 190-198.
- Eigner, S. (2010). *Art of the Middle East: Modern and contemporary art of the Arab world and Iran*. London: Merrel Publishers Limited
- Geanakoplos, D. J. (1984). *Byzantium: Church, society, and civilization seen through contemporary eyes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Grabar, O. (1973). *The formation of Islamic art*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hamblen, K. A., & Galanes, C. (1991). Instructional options for aesthetics: Exploring the possibilities. *Art Education*, 50,75-83.
- Keshmirshekan, H. (2015). *Contemporary art from the Middle East: Regional interactions with global art discourses*. London: Tauris.
- Massialas, B., & Jarrar, S. (1987). Conflicts in Education in the Arab World: The Present Challenge. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 9(1), 35-52. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41857917>
- Pollitt, J. J. (1974). *The ancient view of Greek art: Criticism, history, and terminology ; student ed*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press.

- Richardson, J., Worlidge, T., & Walpole, H. (1792). Essay on the art of criticism. In *The Works of Jonathan Richardson: Containing I. The theory of painting. II. Essay on the art of criticism. III. The science of a connoisseur*. London: Strawberry-Hill.
- Shabout, N. (2007). *Modern Arab art: Formation of Arab aesthetics*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Shabout, N. (2010). *Interventions: A dialogue between the modern and the contemporary*. Milan: Skira Editore S.p.A.
- Watriss, W., & Roques, K. (2014). *View from inside: Contemporary Arab photography, video and mixed media art*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Zuhur, S. (1998). *Images of enchantment: Visual and performing arts of the Middle East*. Cairo, Egypt: The American University of Cairo Press.