

## CONTEMPORARY ARAB ART FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract.** *This paper investigates the status of contemporary Arab art in terms of its relationship with Globalization. Recently, Globalization as a new world order has become the subject of many discussions and debates in intellectual circles and academia. Very often the discourse of Globalization is complex – for reasons probably related to its rapid growth as a new phenomenon with positive and negative effects on many economic, social and cultural fields, including contemporary art. Thus, this paper addresses the function, approaches and concepts of contemporary Arab art in this global age. Further, this paper also examines the impact of Globalization on the quest for local identity by Arab artists, an identity that is closely linked to the cultural heritage of the Middle East.*

**Keywords:** *globalization, modernism, post-modernism, orientalism, formalism, miniatures, identity.*

### *Introduction*

In the past two decades I have visited a large number of cities in the world, and lived and worked in some of them as a professional artist. I've come to realize that most major world cities are largely similar in terms of urban construction, social life and cultural experience, amongst other things. This homogenous global development, particularly in countries with ancient civilizations, raises a lot of anxiety – especially among opponents of Globalization – because it is perceived to pose a threat to cultural identity.

John Tomlinson states that “Globalization, so the story goes, has swept like a flood tide through the world's diverse cultures, destroying localities, displacing peoples, bringing a market-driven, ‘branded’ homogenization of cultural experience, thus obliterating the differences between locality-defined cultures which constituted identities.” He goes further by arguing that “We may live in places that retain a

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high degree of distinctiveness, but this particularity is no longer – as it may have been in the past – the most important.”<sup>1</sup>

Given this paper’s concern with the impact of Globalization on contemporary art, let me focus on some issues which I think are significant to this topic. It is obvious that Globalization as an economic phenomenon has a growing and expanding impact upon the art world on a global scale. That is to say that the emerging global art markets, art auctions, big art projects, international art fairs and biennales in many countries are good examples of the globalization of art. At this point I should state that Globalization is not a trend in art or an art movement. When we are talking about a major art movement in modern art, such as Impressionism, the primary characteristics that draw our attention are the effect of light, short brush strokes, and the role of color in the composition of the picture.

The fascination with light drove the Impressionists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, specifically the 1870s, to make outdoor landscape paintings. But when we attempt to similarly define “Global Art,” the first thing we realize is that Globalization does not represent a style or movement in art in the same way. So what is meant by “Globalization” as it relates to art? There are of course many attempts to define “Global Art.” I have chosen the following by Marcinkiewicz:

“It is the art directed to global audience, disseminated via global communication tools and whose topic has global dimension. None of the above elements can exist without the other and none of them can exist without networking or grid-way thinking.”<sup>2</sup>

### *Globalization, Modernism and Post Modernism*

To identify the impact of Globalization on contemporary art, I think it is important to examine its relationship with the previous trends in art such as modernism and post-modernism as there has been overlap between these entities.

Modernism in art is a major development of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century linked to the industrial and scientific revolution taking place at that time in the West in all aspects of life, including art.

Modernism sought a universal style. In this view, art was a unique phenomenon held to universal standards, being judged or interpreted according to its physical qualities such as shape, color, texture and so on.

‘Formalism’ was one of the main premises of modernism as a theory. Developed by the critic and aesthetician Clive Bell, who coined the term “significant form” to refer to a combination of formal elements which can evoke an aesthetic emotion, Formalism stressed the importance of formal elements. If a painting was deemed to have been deficient in value, it was “because the artist had failed to create a visual balance of the formal painterly elements.”<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the main objective of formal analysis is to describe and analyze the formal elements of art

<sup>1</sup> John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Cultural Identity*, Polity, Oxford, 2003, p. 269.

<sup>2</sup> Olga A. Marcinkiewicz, *Defining Global Art*, Perve Galeria, October, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Justin Wolf, *Modern Art Concept: Formalism* [Online].

such as line, color, shape and texture while ignoring other factors such as the cultural context and content of art. In the early 70s, formal analysis was subjected to both severe criticism, which pointed out its limitations and shortcomings, and (eventually) apostasy.

As also happened in areas such as literature, music, cultural theory and philosophy, a major shift in art as a theory and practice took place in 1970s with the emergence of postmodernism. This new trend stressed the importance of cultural factors in the interpretation of art.

According to Efland, Freedman and Stuhr (1996), "Art is a form of cultural production and reproduction that can only be understood within the context and interests of its culture of origin and appreciation. The postmodernist attempts to dissolve the boundaries between high and low art and condemns elitism."<sup>4</sup> The analysis and interpretation of art, according to this new concept, is not confined to the formal analysis of art, but transgressed to include other factors such as religion, race, age, gender and other cultural factors. In short, the art, in terms of postmodernism, is the idea in the first place.

Given this historical context, we should determine the relationship between modernism, postmodernism and Globalization. Is Globalization an extension of modernism and postmodernism, or does it represent a new or perhaps different direction? Moghadham answers this question, saying that,

"The modernism and post-modernism views come along with a cultural sub-structure, and aim at creating fundamental economic, social and political change in developing countries and advanced countries. Globalization should be seen as a continuation of modernism and post-modernism."<sup>5</sup>

It is my understanding that Globalization has a strong impact on the art world in the areas of investment, art auctions and the art market, not on art itself. It is primarily a matter of business. And, of course, this economic focus raises old concerns and presents new challenges. As Dan Zimmerman argues,

"What must be examined is the notion that if art's value is determined and defined by the economy then in the event of a market collapse, does the value of art also decrease? If the market value becomes the great arbiter of what is valuable within art and what is not, does the work become worth less, or even worthless?"<sup>6</sup>

### *Art and Technology*

One of the most prominent manifestations of Globalization in the fine arts, particularly the visual arts at present, is the use of technology. Artists today use

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Efland et al, *Postmodern Art Education: An Approach to Curriculum*, National Art Education Association, Reston, 1996, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Abdolmajid Arfaei Moghadham, *Three of Concepts: Modernism, Post Modernism and Globalization* [Online], Academia.edu., 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Zimmerman, *Art as an Autonomous Commodity within the Global Market* [Online], New York, Art & Education.

computers and technological devices such as computers to produce art. Some think that the use of technology in art is a positive development because it provides opportunities and means to help artists to express, communicate and share their myriad issues, concerns and ideas. Martha Barksdale states the following:

“There’s no question that technology is changing art. Computers have given us new ways to create music, paintings, poetry and sculpture. Thanks to the internet, artists can share their works with millions of people – far more that would have ever seen an exhibit in a gallery. But no matter how we use technology, the human mind will always be at the center of art, guiding the tools to create the artist’s vision.”<sup>7</sup>

I think the excessive use of technology in art may harm the concept of art. In fine arts, the role of artist as an author or creator is something substantial that should be maintained. In their paper entitled *The Use of Technology in Contemporary Music*, Barbara Becker and Gerhard Eckel state, “We assume that the artist should remain the author of a work. Consequently, we consider computer systems for artists to function as tools rather than as a medium.”<sup>8</sup>

The use of technology in art will continue to the point where it is difficult to predict what the future relationship between art and technology will be. In other words, the extreme use of technology in art requires a re-definition of art as a purely human activity.

### *The Role of the Middle East in Global Art*

Globalization has paved the way for the emergence of new global art markets in a number of countries such as China, Russia, the United Arab Emirates, and other countries as well. In the UAE alone, construction continues of massive art projects such as Louvre Abu Dhabi and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. In addition to these two museums, there are two other projects – the Zayed National Museum and the Performing Arts Centre – to open on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi. They are expected to play a major role in the dissemination of cultural and artistic development in the United Arab Emirates in particular and the Middle East in general. Louvre Abu Dhabi will be unique. Its museographic approach – displaying objects and art chronologically – will explore the connection between seemingly disparate civilizations and cultures around the world. This will make the museum truly universal, “transcending geography, nationality and history.”<sup>9</sup> Louvre Abu Dhabi is expected to open in 2015.

The Arab world is witnessing a decline of some Arab cities in terms of their role as hubs for cultural events and fine arts and the emergence of new cities. Sharjah, Dubai and Abu Dhabi have recently become very active in hosting large international exhibitions such as Abu Dhabi Art, the Sharjah Biennial, and others.

<sup>7</sup> Martha Barksdale, *How is Technology Changing Art?* [Online], Discovery Communications.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Becker and Gerhard Eckel, *The Use of Technology in Contemporary Music* [Online], Graz, Institute of Electronic Music and Acoustics.

<sup>9</sup> Overview, *Louvre Abu Dhabi* [Online], Abu Dhabi, TDIC (Saadiyat Island), 2010.





Christo also revealed that *The Mastaba* – unlike most of his temporary works such as *Wrapped Reichstag* in Berlin, *The Running Fence*, *The Surrounded Islands* and others – will be a permanent large scale monument. It will be located in Al Gharbia desert near the oasis of Liwa.

The impact of Globalization on the art world in other Arab countries is less pronounced for economic reasons, or as a result of instability, conflicts and crises. For example, the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003 set in motion the looting of the art collections of Iraqi art museums that represented the march of modern Iraqi art over a century.

The escalating violence has forced large numbers of Iraqi artists to leave their homes and live in exile. The status of art in Syria and Lebanon is somewhat similar to the status of art in Iraq at the present time, for the same reason.

### *Modernism, Colonialism and Orientalism*

Between the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, French Orientalists depicted the life and culture in North Africa in an ethnographic way that reflected many illusions, misconceptions and assumptions. From an orientalist perspective, Arab culture is “primitive” and “exotic.”

In his famous work *Orientalism*, Said addresses the cultural and political misinterpretation of the Orient. Here a question arises: what does Said mean by Orientalism?

“According to Edward Said, Orientalism dates from the period of European Enlightenment and the colonization of the Arab World. Orientalism provided a rationalization for European colonialism based on a self-serving history in which “the West” constructed “the East” as extremely different and inferior, and therefore in need of Western intervention or “rescue.”<sup>11</sup>

Said believes that Orientalism emerged as a result of the Western desire to dominate the Orient. For Said, “the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experience; now it was disappearing; in a sense it had happened, its time was over.”<sup>12</sup>

He views Orientalism “as a Western style for dominating, restricting, and having authority over the Orient.”<sup>13</sup> Orientalist artists were driven by historical and ethnographic curiosity as well as a romantic escapism that led them to search for an exotic and primitive world. A close look at Orientalist art shows that it was limited to traditional daily tableaux such as the bazaar, the harem, scenes with slaves, and so on.

The political and cultural intervention in the region extended to the introduction of French culture, language and art as superior forms. Several cultural and art

<sup>11</sup> What is Orientalism? Blog, [online].

<sup>12</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Pantheon Books; London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books; London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 3.

institutions such as the Tunisian Salon (founded 1894) and the College of Fine Art in Algeria (founded 1920) were established to introduce Western art.

During that period traditional arts and crafts came under attack as artificial boundaries were drawn between high culture and low culture, and some people and organizations such as the Moroccan Association of Decorative Art turned against local artistic traditions. Al-Haydari (1981) reports as follows:

“Many modern Arab artists subscribe to this point of view, and many of them consider the search for classical Arab techniques or the utilization of folk art and other primitive methods as a real danger to the Arab artist. Such a trend, they feel, would amount to the Arab artist subscribing to the Western artist’s pertinacious search for gimmicks. The Moroccan Association of Decorative Art considers folk art as a backward form which imperialism sought to perpetuate... The Association feels that any artistic production which ignored folklore would automatically transcend the parochial frameworks. In this way the Association condemns folk art to a position of inadequacy and irrelevance to the modern age.”<sup>14</sup>

In Egypt, Mahmoud Mukthar (1891-1934) succeeded in establishing a strong sculptural movement. Despite the brevity of his life, many art critics and art curators believe he was able to create a national identity for modern Egyptian art that was closely related to ancient Egyptian art. Some art critics and art historians argue that Mukthar developed a truly nationalist. According to Seggerman (2013), Mukthar, still in Paris and working briefly as the sculptural director at the Grévin Wax Museum, was inspired by these events and creates the first version of his most famous sculpture, *Nahdat Mis (Egypt’s Reawakening)*, a nationalist work blending modernist technique and pharaonic motifs. It receives honorable mention at the 1920 Salon of the Société des Artistes Français<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 3).

Modern Egyptian architecture witnessed something similarly significant led by well-known Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy (1900-1989) who received international recognition for his work, in particular *New Gourni*, the village he designed in the 1940s. In *Architecture for The Poor*, Fathy wrote “Gourni was for me at once an experiment and an example. The village would, I hoped, show the way to rebuilding the whole Egyptian countryside.”<sup>16</sup>

Fathy rejected Western building design and materials, opting instead for traditional materials such as mud bricks that were common in the traditional Egyptian architecture of the country side. In this respect Gargiulo and Bergamasco (2006) state that:

“The Egyptian architect was intellectually stimulated by the art of the pharaonic period and was directly influenced by vernacular architecture. He studied the buildings of the old city of Cairo and Nubia in order to create a national architectural language based on the employment of traditional elements and building techniques.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Haydari, *The Influence of Arab Culture on Contemporary Arab Artists*. [Special issue] Ur, 1981, pp. 10-20.

<sup>15</sup> Seggerman, Alexander Dika (2013) *Al-Tatawwur (Evolution): An Enhanced Timeline of Egyptian Surrealism* available [online].

<sup>16</sup> Hassan Fathy, *Architecture For the Poor*, New York, Pantheon Books; London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978 [online].

His projects are based on the use of a narrow vocabulary made of morphological and structural elements taken from tradition: parabolic arches, square spaces covered with domes, rectangular rooms or narrow spaces with vaults, courts, balconies wind towers.”<sup>17</sup>



**Fig. 3**

Mahmoud Mukhtar, “Egypt’s Renaissance”, 1919-1928

Like Mukhtar, the Iraqi pioneer artist Jawad Salim drew also on an Arab folk heritage.

In 1951, Salim founded the Baghdad Group for Modern Art. The group issued an important manifesto expressing its point of view regarding the search for a local artistic identity. In this manifesto the group defined its artistic objectives, opening a window on the values, beliefs and concerns that were important for Iraqi artists in the 1950’s and the kind of challenges and difficulties they faced. The document also emphasized – emphatically – the importance of cultural heritage, folk art and the audience.

Members of this group were inspired by the famous miniatures of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Arab Islamic artist Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti who illustrated the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri. They also were fascinated by the outstanding achievements of the famous Mexican artist Diego Rivera whose art is profoundly tied to the rich cultural heritage of Mexico.

Also during that period, Baghdad witnessed a new cultural and artistic renaissance. New art groups were founded such as the “Pioneer Group” and the “Impressionists.” In addition, a number of internationally renowned architects

<sup>17</sup> Maria Rosaria Grgiulo and Bergamasco Immacolata, *The Use of Earth in the Architecture of Hassan Fathy and Fabrizio Carola: Typological and Buildings Innovations, Building Technology and Static Behaviour*. [Online]

visited Baghdad such as Frank Lloyd Wright (who was invited to design the Baghdad Opera House), Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius. These factors, and others, had a profound impact on the Baghdad Modern Art Group's artistic vision, and on their quest for a modern local artistic identity.

Arab artists from different generations and time periods routinely employ traditional signs, symbols, folk arts and letters and other local Arab visual vocabulary in their art. Of course, the use of Arabic characters is one of the main trends of the most prominent contemporary Arab art. It appears in the work of many Arab artists, including prominent Iraqi artist Shaker Hassan Al Said and Tunisian artist Nja Mahdoui who is well known for his Arabic calligraphy on Arab commercial Airplanes.



Fig. 4

Guhbar, 2011, Nja Mahdoui

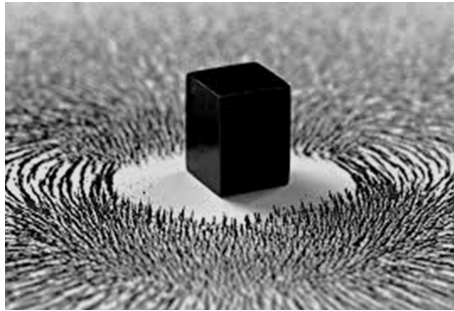
In her article *Signs and Art Patterns Charm in North Africa*, curator Salwa Mikdadi states that “Artists also make use of traditional signs and symbols as a metaphor for colonial policies that imposed foreign languages and cultures and the subsequent curtailment of liberties in the postcolonial era. An imaginative discourse of signs often undercuts, disrupts, and subverts the rational dictum of language that has become a forbidden medium for free expression.” She adds that “by combining signs with magical numbers or stylizing traditional symbols, contemporary artists tap the unconscious to create abstract work that references the past and present.”<sup>18</sup>

In response to the new reality known as the Arab Spring, many Arab artists have found themselves confronted with new issues that require new materials and techniques as well as serious commitment. Artists have become more interested in social and political themes as art curator Ehab El Labben states:

“The Arab world is now experiencing considerable and radical changes, and the artists are keeping abreast of – and taking an active part in–these changes. Artists, who consider themselves part of the collective conscience, are playing a full and active role in public debate; and, particularly when this concerns cultural

<sup>18</sup> Mikdadi, Salwa, *The Magic of Signs and Patterns in North African Art*, in Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.

matters, they become involved in political debates to much a greater degree than their 20<sup>th</sup> century predecessors. Some have even gone so far as to represent political issues in their works, in a surprisingly direct way.”<sup>19</sup>



**Fig. 6**

Ahmed Mater, 2011 “Magnetism”, digital print

Today, like many of the emerging Arab artists in other parts of the world, young artists find themselves under the influence of global multi-sourcing. At this point it should be noted that there has been a major shift in the concept and the philosophy of art since the beginning of the 1970s as a result of global developments and the ensuing transformation. Conventional methods in art are no longer able to express the new challenges facing the Arab world. Thus, many Arab artists have turned away from the traditional approaches.



**Fig. 7**

Mohammed Al-Sadoun, “United” 2013, steel, 54” x 22.5” x 20”

<sup>19</sup> Ehab El Labben, *25 Years of Arab Creativity*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2013.



In short, contemporary Arab art, like contemporary Arab life itself, faces many global challenges, echoing oppositions between past and present, East and West, regionalism, internationalism, and more. Out of such realities, contemporary Arab artists have developed their own artistic language in which their artworks respond strongly to national and global issues.

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