



# Kamal Boullata's Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present

*By Maymanah Farhat*

Jerusalem-born painter Kamal Boullata has been writing on Palestinian art since the late 1970s. As an artist who has lived and worked in the Middle East and abroad, he has witnessed the various changes that have shaped Arab art over the last six decades. Thanks to his intimate knowledge of the many artists, movements and schools that have emerged since the birth of Palestine's modernist period, Boullata's writings on the history of Palestinian art are often derived from first-hand experience.

*Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present* (Saqi 2009) consists of twelve chapters, the majority of which were previously published as individual essays in various periodicals between 1989 and 2003. These essays are organized according to broader themes and appear as four separate sections.

The first section, "From Religious to Secular Iconography," includes a long-held theory of Boullata's that places the early roots of Palestinian art within the period of Christian icon painting that materialized in the late 19th century and was fostered by a number of Russian workshops and missions in Jerusalem. Here Boullata provides a history of art in the city, outlining a number of artists that contributed to a unique visual culture, influencing everything from religious painting

to interior design and crafts. Artists of distinction that are discussed are Mubarak Sa'ed, the iconographer/studio painter who is recognized as having set a precedent for others by branching out into non-religious themes, and Sophie Halaby, one of the country's first landscape artists.

According to the author, it was with the techniques introduced by foreigners that artists acquired the tools to document their surroundings through a pictorial language. While a number of pioneering Palestinian artists in the twentieth century, such as figurative painter Daoud Zalatimo, were nurtured by this Jerusalem school of icons, Boullata's theory remains disputed in Arab art discourse. Many of his detractors point to the rich history of painting that has influenced generations of artists and is found in earlier periods of art in the region, from Pharaonic wall paintings to Islamic book art, sighting a tradition that simply adapted to the artistic changes that emerged as culture cycled through various civilizations. While the history of easel painting is attributed to Westerners who brought the technique to centers such as Cairo, Beirut and Baghdad, the foundation needed for using this pictorial language had already long been in place.

Continuing with a discussion of the founding of Israel in 1948 and the loss of Palestine's artistic patrimony, Boullata outlines the gradual appropriation of Palestinian land during the British Mandate and the subsequent national catastrophe that devastated local culture. A brief mention of Palestinian painter and scholar Jabra Ibrahim Jabra is particularly noteworthy, as he later went on to become an important figure of Iraq's modernist art movement and one of its greatest literary champions. After returning to Jerusalem from his studies in Cambridge, Jabra founded the Arts Club at the YMCA in 1944, a destination for art and culture in the brief period that preceded the establishment of the Jewish state. This dynamic intellectual environment was abruptly suspended, however, when violence and destruction engulfed the city. While a full-page reproduction of Jabra's 1947 canvas painting "Field of Anemones" is reproduced, a more impacting example might have been his 1946 oil on paper work "Air Raid," an expressive depiction of two figures escaping a turbulent scene of fire and ruin.

The next section "Memory and Resistance" is comprised of several essays demonstrating the ways in which some artists have addressed the Nakba in exile while others have confronted the cruel reality of living in the territories or under the Israeli state. The chapter "Artists Remember Palestine in Beirut" examines the work of a handful of seminal figures that immigrated to Lebanon after 1948, including pioneering painter Ismail Shammout, who studied under Daoud Zalatimo during his early years as an artist in Gaza, master printmaker Mustafa al-Hallaj, and leading female artist Jumana Husseini. Here the author examines the differences between the experiences of those from refugee camps and those of urban centers, emphasizing the impact of their surroundings as they visually summoned their homeland.

Describing the politically-charged atmosphere of 1960s Lebanon, Boullata recreates its vibrant cultural scene by connecting the visual arts to the country's influential literary movement. As many Palestinians found themselves exiled in Beirut, the city's diverse intelligentsia was a defining force in the shaping of their transnational art scene. Palestinian painter Samia Halaby also identifies this in her book *Liberation Art of Palestine* (H.T.T.B 2001). A number of the artists Halaby includes are featured in Boullata's "Artists Remember Palestine in Beirut," in addition to several other significant artists that he overlooks such as self-taught relief painter Abdul Hay al-Musallam, painter and popular political poster draftsman Abdul Rahman al Muzayan, and pioneering female painter Tamam al-Akhal, who was married to Ismail Shammout. Although Boullata frequently refers to texts for further reading in the margins of

his book, he unfortunately excludes any mention of Halaby's publication. This oversight is a great disservice to the reader, as access to information on this important period of art is limited.

"Memory and Resistance" continues with a chapter investigating the important contributions of female artists yet does so through a text that previously appeared as a catalogue essay for the exhibition "Self Portrait: Palestinian Women's Art," which was held at the Israeli art space Hagar gallery in 2001. As such, the scope of Boullata's study is limited, examining the work of only four artists: early pioneering painter Zulfa al-Sa'di, who is credited as having had the first solo exhibition in Palestine in 1933, Sophie Halaby, Juliana Seraphim, and international superstar Mona Hatoum. His inclusion of Juliana Seraphim is redundant as she is already featured in the previous chapter on Beirut artists.

While his observations on their work are valuable, he opts to contextualize it within the greater realm of Arab culture, with a particular emphasis on its literary tradition, which women have contributed to immensely. A more enlightening discussion, however, would have been an extensive look at the contributions of Palestinian female artists from the twentieth century to the present. A long list of individuals are left out, including painters Laila al Shawa and Samia Halaby, photographers Rula Halawani and Noel Jabbour, ceramists Vera Tamari and Mervat Essa, and conceptual artists Emily Jacir, Raeda Saadeh, Jumana Emil Abboud and Rana Bishara. And although some are mentioned by name sporadically throughout the book, not discussing their work and its importance is a glaring omission, one that does not do justice to the chronicling of Palestinian art. In fact, Boullata is selective about who he includes overall, as his essays focus on a small number of artists and often repeat information. In a July 2009 article that appeared in *The National* he defended this approach by stating "I am not a historian, I am an artist that wanted to give some order to the chaos that Palestinians have been living through. I hope that the book will pave the way for historians." Yet his essays are often written from an art historical approach, evoking various art movements in world history and analyzing works according to aesthetic principles.

"Memory and Resistance" ends with lengthy essays on painter 'Asim Abu Shaqra and photographer Ahlam Shibili, contrasting the ways in which they negotiate the constraints of Israeli society through art.

The third segment "Art from the Ghetto" provides examples of how artists living under the Israeli occupation and state have

survived incessant violence, harassment and political instability, learning to navigate the unpredictability of everyday life. With examples of impromptu exhibitions in Ramallah after the second Intifada to the A.M. Qattan Foundation's Biennial Exhibition for the Young Artist of the Year Award, a competition that has launched the careers of some of Palestine's most exciting new artists, this final section on Palestinian art presents a mere smattering of art spaces and events that have been influential to the contemporary art scene. Although the book is titled as if including up-to-date analysis of Palestinian art (From 1850 to the Present), Boullata's narrative ends here in 2002. Since then, remarkable changes to Palestine's cultural and political landscapes have altered the local art scene forever, while developments abroad and the artists that have propelled them have had a considerable impact on the progression of its art as a whole. The title implies that it is a comprehensive text on the history of Palestinian art, but a more appropriate designation might have been "Essays on Palestinian Art."

The book ends with an entire section of the author discussing his own work as a visual artist.

While it is convenient to have some of the collected writings of a leading Arab artist/scholar in one place, *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present* is by no means the publication that will finally establish a cohesive history of Palestine's striking visual culture. Given that Boullata has been an active member of this vibrant art scene, has had access to innumerable texts in Arabic, English and French, and has straddled the Arab and international art worlds for decades, it is regrettable that this text merely grazes the surface, leaving countless artists and the very essence of Palestinian art buried in the shadows.