Casa Árabe: a space for the Arab arts in Spain

by Nuria Medina, Coordinator of Cultural Programmes, Casa Árabe

Casa Arabe Headquarters

Casa Árabe: a space for the Arab arts in Spain
Nuria Medina, Coordinator of Cultural Programmes, Casa Árabe
Casa Árabe was founded in 2006, its objective being to contribute to knowledge of the Arab and Muslim world in Spain and to serve as a link in the multidimensional relationship which Spain has with countries from this extensive geographic region. To achieve this objective, from its very beginnings, Casa Árabe established

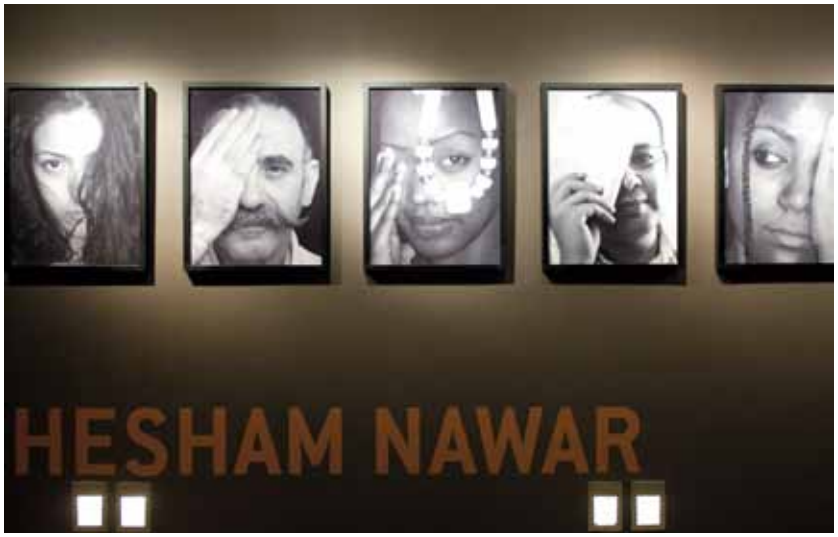
and has carried out a range of activities through an ambitious programme of both research and public events in diverse disciplines, aimed at a broad public largely uninformed about the contemporary cultures which make up the Arab and Muslim world. In fact, one of Casa Árabe'smain challenges stems from this lack of knowledge and the need to bridge the gap, so that our fellow citizens have more information available to construct a vision of this "other" culture, one which is closer to reality and free of the prejudices and stereotypes typically based on the splendour of the past and the decadence of the present.

This work is being carried out thanks to the strong support provided by the public institutions which have formed the Casa Árabe consortium since its inception: we are referring, first, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation (and particularly to its Minister, Miguel Ángel Moratinos), as well as to the municipal governments of Madrid and Córdoba and the regional governments of Madrid and Andalusia. Without the support of these five entities, this initiative would never have been possible. It was carried out in our two locations (Madrid and Córdoba) and through a multiplicity of programmes launched across Spain as well as through collaboration with institutions in the Arab world and in international settings. It must also be mentioned that the director general of Casa Árabe, Gema Martín Muñoz, is a distinguished academic, with great knowledge of the multiple realities of Arab and Islamic countries.

Without a question, cultural programming can be tremendously effective for achieving these objectives and increasing interest in issues related to the Arab and Muslim world. The diverse languages used in different creative fields and academic disciplines help in providing a wide array of perspectives on a cultural reality which is often foreign to our fellow citizens. A documentary film, a concert, the presentation of the work of an artist, etc., all form part of the tools which enable Casa Árabe to bring the heterogeneous, plural and contradictory cultures of the contemporary Arab and Muslim world closer today.

Using this approach, Casa Árabe's programme of exhibitions follows two basic objectives. First and foremost, to organize exhibitions in which new contemporary Arab productions and their creators are introduced. In these exhibitions, the criteria for selection have to be broad in order to accommodate the great diversity of current Arab creativity, instead of being limited to the works of artists who, although little known in our country, are already established in the world of modern and contemporary art. Our space also exists to show the works of younger artists, those who are just developing their art, so that they can share with the Spanish public the vital and aesthetic concerns which they communicate.

In many cases these artists raise the question for us, already raised in many forums, of the definition of what is "Arab" and therefore, of "Arab art". Our institution was created with the mandate to transmit the cultural realities of the Arab and Muslim world. But this does not mean that we should necessarily be confined to a limited geography and therefore work exclusively with artists who come from that area. What does it mean today in identitarian terms to come from somewhere or to have a specific nationality? If it is now difficult to define "Arabness" in this globalized, transnational and expatriated world. It is even more so in the field of artistic creation which so rapidly tends to express itself in a universal language, without however, stripping it of identity and cultural meaning.



Exhibition What´s happening now

Thus, our "mandate" is decidedly broad and not only in terms of artists. We also understand that a series of other actors exist in the contemporary creative field whose knowledge is equally important in order to achieve a wide perspective, or rather, a sociological perspective on the contemporary world of Arab art and culture. We are referring to the so-called experts, curators, academics, etc. who work and reflect on the processes that have been taking place in the Arab world since the early decades of the 20th century. Their analyses are fortunately gaining more space, both in publications and forums worldwide. One of our challenges is to involve Spanish experts in this process, with the aim that critical debate and exchange with the Arab world will come to be a normal reality and not only an exceptional activity, often seen as exotic.

In this sense, we also consider it to be of enormous interest for the public to learn about not only the work of these experts on this matter, but also the work developed by museums, galleries, artist collectives, biennials, fairs, magazines,

prizes, etc., which define, to a great extent, the conditions for the production of art in the Arab world and the position of its cultural institutions and industries. We want our programme of exhibitions to also serve to explain how artist collectives in Arab countries work; to analyze what criteria and strategies lead an institution to programme its events in one way or another; to understand its management styles; to learn about the cultural policy of a specific country and the changes it has undergone, etc. These and many other issues of interest are highlighted through cultural cooperation between institutions and it is for this reason that Casa Árabe values working in collaboration with institutions which are beyond our own borders.

For instance, one of the exhibitions held in 2010, with the title "What is happening now?" and curated by Mohammed Talaat. This exhibition was initially shown in the Palace of Arts in Cairo and became an ambitious project initiated in 2007 by the general direction for the Fine Arts of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. The celebration of this exhibition in Cairo was, without a doubt, an important event in the recent history of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. As the general director, Mohsen Shaalan wrote in an article published in this journal 1, the challenge was to bring together in one exhibit a significant number of young artists whose creative language included the use of new archive. To mark its opening, an international seminar was held with the objective of reflecting on the usefulness of multimedia libraries as new spaces for communication and creation in an era in which the image and the internet are breaking down borders, establishing new forms of interculturality and diversifying the possibilities for creation. One of the premises

1- Reforming Public Cultural Institutions in Egypt", Contemporary Practices. Volume IV, 2009

TransArab

upon which Casa Árabe's multimedia library was established is precisely that, far from being a simple depository of audiovisual stock and documents, it is to be integrated in a dynamic manner in the development and programming of activities, both through the use of its collection as well as in the process of its growth. The video exhibit "TransArab, contemporary video" held by Casa Árabe in collaboration with the OVNI archives in Barcelona for the inauguration of the multimedia library, is an example of how to enhance a collection of videos through thematic showings (daily lives, migration and borders, gender and transgender, mysticism, alter Islam, experimental and colonial, etc.). This initiative, organized in the form of an exhibition in the halls of Casa Árabe was intended to introduce this video collection –currently part of the multimedia library catalogue-, by revealing the multiple itineraries that the user can follow when consulting the collection.

Favouring a sociological approach to the art coming from Arab countries, as well as contributing to increasing the body of scientific and theoretical production on matters of contemporary culture, are both objectives that are also beginning to be incorporated into the research and development efforts of the International Institute of Arab and Muslim World Studies, pertaining to Casa Árabe and established in Córdoba. The close interrelation which today exists among the diverse disciplines which form the broad sphere of social sciences means that issues such as the formation of stereotypes about Arabs, the identities of Arabs and Muslims in Europe or the perceptions on Europe held in the Arab world – a cornerstone in the work of our researchers – are also today of

poster of the exhibition- From Salahdinne to Sherezade

great relevance in the discourse of contemporary art. For this reason, the doors are open to mutual exchange and influence among experts and researchers from different disciplines.

OUR HISTORY…

While, as stated, one objective of Casa Árabe's programme of exhibitions has to do with the field of contemporary creation, our second and no less important objective is focused on projects of a more educational, informational and pedagogical nature. It is through these exhibitions, that stereotypes and prejudices which still exist in Spain and Europe regarding the Arab and Muslim world can be examined.

In this sense, the multicultural character of our cities is an increasingly visible and present reality, above all with the arrival in the last two decades of many immigrants from the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America. This reality is what is captured in the exhibition project "Nosotros" (Us), launched over 2009 and which arose from the Ramadan Nights Festival held by Casa Árabe each year in Madrid's neighbourhood of Lavapiés. "Nosotros" consisted of an exercise in participation by the neighbours of this area, who were encouraged to contribute photographs from their personal photo albums to produce a collective album with which everyone could (we could) identify (ourselves). Juan Valbuena, photographer and director of this project said, "isn't it true that all of us, wherever we come from and independent of our cultural origins, have very similar relationships with our own photos? We safeguard them, we care for them, we place them in albums… We have all been married at some time, we have all visited some place, we have had

a child, we have celebrated a birthday, etc. and all of us – Senegalese, Moroccan, Bangladeshi, Spanish, etc. – we end up collecting these moments in our photos". The end result of the project was an exhibition in Casa Árabe as well as the publication of a photo album, edited with the same care that each one gives to the images in his/her life.

Another recent exhibition project in Casa Arabe focused on stereotypes and how they have crystallized, not only through literature or Orientalist painting of the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, but also through much more contemporary languages, such as the comic strip. In the exhibition "From Saladdin to Scheherazade: the Orient in comic", the purpose was to reveal a clear and explanatory path of these visions of the Orient through one of the most popular artistic means, labeled as such due to its accessibility and its greater influence on media: comic. As indicated in the introductory text of the exhibit, "comic, as a form of graphic communication and instrument of entertainment and artistic expression, has delved on the Orient on numerous occasions, creating its cast of Olympian heroes and heroines whose adventures unfold in a dreamlike world of princesses and warriors, tyrants and wise men. Yet this Orient is also found in the streets of our cities because of immigration, enriching our daily lives or awakening primitive fears of the other." This exhibition ended in May 2010 and stirred up enormous interest in the public as visitors discovered, in a simple language, the origin of many of the stereotypes we hold.

View of the exhibition From Salahdine to Sherezade- Orient in comic