

An Investigation of the Situation of Contemporary Arab Art Today

By Karin Adrian von Roques

Introduction

The Arab art scene has gone long unnoticed by the Western world. Until three or four years ago, hardly anyone mentioned modern and contemporary art from the Arab region. Negative political events were fore grounded and the Arab world was more readily associated with terrorism and religious fanaticism than with art and culture.

Arab art has meanwhile caught the attention of the international art world. More and more, collectors and aficionados are occupied by the increasing prices for works by Arab artists. This has certainly been affected by the recent changes in the Gulf Region, which has undertaken grand projects to bolster and expand its cultural infrastructure. The Emirate of Abu Dhabi has set aside over a billion U.S. Dollars for satellite museums of the Louvre and Guggenheim. More than 100 billion U.S. Dollars are to be invested over the next five years for the expansion of the nearby Saadiyat Island into a world-

class cultural center. The master plan that was completed in January 2007 includes construction of five museums as well as a biennial park with pavilions for art and cultural events as well as conventions, a performing arts center, hotels and galleries. Prominent architects including Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel and Tadao Ando were won for the projects. In Qatar, the Museum for Islamic Art designed by I.M. Pei opened at the end of 2008. Further museums are being planned.

Sharjah, whose art-loving Emir already erected museums such as the Sharjah Art Museum more than a decade ago, has notably stocked its art collections with contemporary art in particular and is continuing expansion of the Sharjah Art Museum. Sharjah was also the first emirate to establish an (eponymous) art biennial, which has long proven itself as an international event.

Dubai, which has already made a name for itself as the ultimate tourist destination, has now turned to major projects in art and culture. Here, as well, great sums are flowing into cultural tourism. Ten billion dollar funds are to be invested in the development of an “Academic City”. The establishment of an international art fair was welcomed to promote the inner emirate cultural life. In 2007 a representative of the Dubai International Financial Centers (DIFC) in cooperation with London art dealer John Martin founded the Dubai Art Fair. Although the first fair got to a slow start with the participation of 40 international galleries, the outcome of the second fair this past spring was clear indication of its international status gained.

Dubai as a location also aroused the interest of Christie’s. The renowned auction house opened an office there in 2005 and in May of the following year held a well-regarded auction featuring modern and contemporary Indian, Iranian, Arab and Western art. It was the first time that Arab artists received an international platform in the art market. The results surpassed all expectations. Following auctions were able to sustain the momentum. Sotheby’s arrived shortly thereafter with a satellite in Qatar last year. Its Modern and Contemporary Arab and Iranian Art auction in October 2007, however, was held in London. Still, it served to test whether good auction results could be achieved with Arab and Iranian artists unknown in the West. Here as well, the results positively exceeded the expectations. The auction was a success.

It is these auctions by Sotheby’s and Christie’s – Bonhams and Phillips De Pury have since joined them – as well as the Gulf States’ ambitious projects that have fostered the growing interest in modern and contemporary art from Arab countries and Iran. Although the Gulf States can be seen as the starting point for the growing appreciation for Arab art, art from all Arab countries is included, such as from Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Iraq.

It is curious that the international eye for art from Arab countries has taken so long to awaken. In contrast, contemporary Russian and Chinese art found their way into galleries and museums and into the art market in the early 1990s. Visits to international art fairs such as Art Basel, Art Cologne or the FIAC revealed that, despite the existence of excellent works by Arab artists – which this author has been able to experience through numerous studio visits throughout Arab countries – they were hardly represented. Art from Arab countries has until recently almost exclusively been presented in ethnological museums and “ethnically” oriented galleries. And the works on view vary enormously in quality.

The Market

The reasons for this situation were explored in detail more than ten years ago by this author. Research included a survey of leading gallerists at art fairs. At the time, such a systematic investigation had never before been undertaken. The results revealed the ambiguity surrounding notions of Arab art from its quality to its stereotypes, which existed until only a short while ago.

The investigation further revealed the dilemma facing contemporary Arab art. On one hand, because of the dominance of Western artistic criteria, there is apparently no demand worth mentioning for works by Arab artists. On the other, the modern art of Arab countries is confronted in the West with many prejudices, stereotypes and clichés, nor are there any clearly defined ideas as to the quality of creative art from the Arab world. Often the question of why Arab artists are not represented here was countered with: does contemporary art in Arab lands even exist? And if so, is it any good? Don’t the artists there imitate Western art styles? Can art develop at all given Islam’s prohibition of images?

Some quotations from this survey may clarify the problem. On the issue of the dominance of Western market criteria, Pierre Huber of the Art & Public Gallery in Geneva stated: “A market for visual arts has developed above all in the U.S. and in Central Europe. Because a tradition of investing in art exists, a market could be established. Nothing comparable exists in the Arab countries because painting, for instance, is not part of their tradition.” A representative of the Galerie Lelong in Paris underlined this: “Market structures don’t exist in Arab lands. There is no market on either side. In Japan, for instance, they have begun to collect European art, and Japanese art is sold here. Thus an exchange takes place.” And Ole Christian Koch from the London Marlborough Gallery added: “We have no collectors from Arab countries for contemporary art.”

“In the end, Western curators and collectors determine the market,” Thaddaeus Ropac from the gallery of the same name in Vienna and Paris concluded. Marketability is thus an important factor helping to determine which artist and which expressive means participate in the global discourse. The question then arises as to why the art market doesn’t create a market for Arab artists. To which Thaddaeus Ropac responded: “Because they come from a totally different cultural environment. You need the necessary background knowledge. You have to familiarize yourself with the foreign culture. That demands an enormous effort, which galleries alone cannot accomplish. Normally museums take over the groundwork,

specialists such as art historians or curators.” He pointed to the role of the Guggenheim in the case of Chinese art. Other gallery owners, such as Victor Gisler of the Zurich Mai 36 Galerie and Ole Christian Koch, concurred with this view. But Dr. Christine König, of the Christine König Galerie in Vienna expressed reservations: “I am opposed to [Westerners] choosing and defining what art is or is not, what should be shown in museums or not. We should approach another culture with care and observe what emerges there.”

The Western Eye

This raises another question, namely what do Western eyes regard as art. The implicit danger it encounters with foreign cultures is that we superimpose our habitual reflective patterns on the things that we see or experience. Thus the West asks what is authentically Arab in a work of art while in fact searching for elements that serve the cliché of exoticism – or, given the usual media coverage of the area, political statements. What is unfamiliar and foreign to us is not always obvious at first sight and needs a sensitive approach to open up its complex meaning.

What characterizes contemporary Arab art and what distinguishes it from Western art? Is there a pictorial world that can only emerge against a background of Islamic traditions? What are the sources of inspiration for Arab artists? What role do Islam, the history of the region or the after-effects of Europe’s colonial policy play for them? How much do they reflect biographical situations such as exile or global nomadism?

Understanding of another culture develops with a willingness at times to leave behind habitual ways of seeing and dare a change in perspective. Yet alien cultures are often received without reflection and without any deeper understanding. The Muslim East provides an historical example. For centuries it fired the imagination of Europeans to the wildest of fantasies, leading to whole waves of different oriental fashions. These had little in common with the “actually existing” East. Various motives lay behind these historical fantasies: for example, the longing for an intact world or archaic cultures, or the quest for new meaning in times of crisis.

In the 19th century, as Europe’s influence grew with industrialization, so did its interest in the economic development of the East. This proved detrimental to some crafts, such as carpet weaving. Since the demand for Oriental carpets had risen, Western forms of production were imported into Eastern workshops, and designs were introduced that corresponded

with Western taste. The result was a so-called “pattern decline” in designs that had been handed down over centuries.

The Slanted View

A widespread prejudice exists in the idea that the Muslim world is “backward and backward-looking” and has not continued to develop. According to this view, modernism never took place and consequently no modern or contemporary art has evolved. Islamic modernity is negated or ignored according to the motto: “the more Western, the more modern”. This kind of thinking reduces the Muslim East to classical Islamic art, the art of the arabesque, of miniatures and calligraphy, which were felt to be typically Oriental. A no-man’s-land that no one wants to know about in any detail somehow lies between this epoch and the present.

As a survey published in the Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper in September 2004 under the heading “The Clash of Civilizations” showed, Germans now associate concepts such as “the oppression of women”, “fanaticism, radicalism” and a “backward-looking orientation”. There is little left of the fascination that the East for centuries exerted on the West, influencing art, literature and architecture, from Gothic cathedrals to Dresden’s Tobacco Mosque. Yet in Muslim countries, just as in Europe, processes of development and change have taken place: Combating political and social conditions, struggling with global political power constellations and – above all since the 19th century – with the increase in Western influences and new technologies. These transforming processes also affect art.

There has never been any history of art in Arab countries, any development in art comparable to the West. Painting and especially sculpture – for centuries an integral part of European art tradition – are for Arab culture uncommon forms of expression. Instead, it is poetry that occupies a central place within Arab consciousness. The word enjoys high prestige and high esteem. For one, this is linked to the Koran, the Islamic book of revelation, whose poetic language and especially its rhythm were meant to be heard rather than read. And secondly, for people that lead a great part of their nomadic life in the desert, the word, for example, the language, makes for light baggage.

The Islamic prohibition of images also played an important role in the fact that the visual arts have developed quite differently in Arab countries from the way they have in Europe. Many Europeans understand this Islamic ban on images as

meaning that fundamentally no images may be produced at all.

Forbidden Images?

The assumed “hostility towards pictures” is part of the same bias as the allegation that Islamic artists are not capable of painting properly since they have no knowledge of the most elementary rules of painting and drawing. Yet pictures, even ones representing figures, exist in Islamic art. Islam does not forbid artistic activity per se; the ban on images exists within a religious context.

However quotations from certain Suras may be interpreted, the Koran itself has no explicit or binding prohibition of pictures. Nowhere is there a concrete image ban referred to. The Hadith, the corpus of the prophet Muhammed’s transmitted words and deeds – addresses the subject of images. As a source of Islam’s religious faith and law, it distinguishes what may or may not be represented. According to that, only inanimate beings or objects may be portrayed: plants and trees but not animals. The circumstances in which Islam arose in Mecca led to the prohibition of living (or animate) creatures being portrayed in mosques or prayer rooms. During prayers, nothing was to distract attention from God or tempt one to the worship of idols.

Moreover, an artist making a picture could think of himself as a creator and be tempted to imitate God. The fear was that pictures could lead to thoughts of creative power, for in Islam creation is the privilege of God alone. To portray animate beings in a picture is equal to a creative act, and this is the context in which the quotation from Hadith is to be understood: “Whoever makes a picture in this world will be asked to breathe life into it on the Day of Resurrection, but he will not be able to do so. Woe to you! If you absolutely must do so, then portray the trees or any object that has no breath of life.”

The prohibition of images must not be seen as a fixed law existing for the worldwide community of Muslims. It is more an “ideological” standpoint that is accepted by the majority. But this standpoint has changed through time and been interpreted in various ways by the different schools of Islamic law. Thus the restrictions on pictorial depiction have been applied differently by the orthodox Sunnis and more conservative Muslims, who keep more strictly to the rules, and by the Shi’is, who have cultivated a more liberal interpretation. From the 13th century on, Islamic art flourished. Against a background of forbidding the portrayal of living creatures,

it consciously developed a new aesthetic, which did without perspective, corporeality, similarity to living persons, light and shade, as seen in the example of miniature painting, and did not try to imitate the world of appearances in the Aristotelian or Platonic sense. Within the flowering of the art of the arabesque, it refrained from holding a mirror to nature. Above all, it avoided sculpture altogether, since this was equated with making forbidden idols.

The Ban on Images Today

The image ban with its complex and contradictory interpretations is still at work today. Despite a meanwhile hundred-year painting tradition, in many places problems still face an artist who practices his art pictorially and figuratively. From the author’s survey among Arab artists to find out how far the ban on images affected their output, it became clear that whereas for many the question simply didn’t arise, for others the prohibition was still effective. For example, Khalil Abdul Wahed from Dubai in the United Arab Emirates stated: “I know that in my religion, sculpture – that of a human figure or an animal – is forbidden. I therefore avoid what’s forbidden.” And he added: “I believe there are reasons for religious prohibitions. For some things we have an explanation, for others we are still searching for one [...] I sometimes believe that restrictions get people to deal more creatively with what is permitted.” A female artist from Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates said: “Our teacher explained to us that when we make sculptures or pictures, we take over the role of the creator. In the first place, there should be no images in the mosques or where one prays, because one would be praying to the picture or a statue. Islam is not visual like Christianity. Everything is for the ear – prayers, Hadith, Koran recitations – and not for the eye. Listen first, then write, this is what calligraphy demands. Artists who are religious are influenced by this.” The female artist Karima Al Shomely from Sharjah said: “I know about the image ban. God created nature and when I depict it, I am like the creator. But as an artist, I must study nature, draw figures. I can’t say ‘No, Islam forbids it.’ In the meantime I think that, as an artist, I am allowed to do this. Art is to me my message; my installations visualize my ideas.”

Global Modernism and Inner Conflicts

The development of an Arab art in the sense of global modernism began early in the 20th century, as a direct result of the increase in reciprocal influences between East and West. The profound changes of the period made themselves felt in all areas in the Western as well as the Eastern world, up to

and including the art scene. While in the West, the evolving abstraction in painting was viewed as a revolutionary development, artists in the Muslim world turned more and more to figurative painting. The ideal of contemporary European art, i.e., the rejection of merely reproducing the world of appearances, corresponds to the aesthetics of Islamic works of art. The aesthetic revolution in Islamic art, if you like, had already taken place many centuries earlier.

In Arab countries artists began to paint in the style of European painting. Many had been in Europe and come into contact with, and been influenced by, different art movements such as Impressionism or Expressionism. Artists from Lebanon, Egypt, Syria and Morocco became the trailblazers for other Arab artists. In the 1930s in cities like Beirut, Cairo and Damascus, but also in Rabat, the first groups of artists formed that became engaged with the currents and techniques of European art as well as with their own cultural background. Without the influence of foreign cultures, above all of the Muslim East, European modernism would not have been conceivable, in the same way that the development of Arab modernism is inconceivable without the various influences from the West.

The trend towards modernism and the development of the visual arts in Arab countries did not run their course without tensions and conflicts between different groups. Some wanted to hold on to the cultural heritage such as classical calligraphy; others wanted to demonstrate that modernization and renewal were necessary and that the modern Arab world was conscious of the global aesthetic discourse. Conflicts sharpened when tradition was newly interpreted or criticism of the system became noticeable. In such cases, confrontations with conservative movements that opposed the new ideas occurred, and in worst-case scenarios governments sought to prevent the new developments in art or even suppress them by force. Some countries promoted sanctioned state art, and this made the production of modern, contemporary art into a perilous undertaking, which could often only be carried out underground.

Not least, a deep-seated mistrust towards the colonial and imperialist West played a role in the conflicts, not without reason. These misunderstandings arose partly from the experience of colonialism. On the one hand, Western art was admired. But certain circles saw a kind of "neocolonialism" in the new forms of expression. In the field of art, as elsewhere, a fear of a loss of one's own tradition and one's own identity existed, and artists who were assumed to be too much influenced by Western culture and Western moral concepts were looked at with

suspicion. On the other hand, in the West these same artists were accused of being imitative. This dilemma has continued up to the present. Time, as well as global aesthetic correlation, will be needed before contemporary art finds acceptance in the culture of the individual Arab societies.

Arab Modernism

The Arab artists who were experimenting with modernism soon fell between two stools. Their art was recognized neither in their own country, nor really in Europe. Even those who lived in the West had difficulty getting their art seen and accepted. In their native land they could not reach a wide public because they had few opportunities to exhibit, since museums and galleries were scarce. In many Arab countries even today the infrastructure that would make it possible to give contemporary artists more widespread publicity is lacking. In addition, educational opportunities are scarce, and few collectors focus on building up a collection of contemporary Arab art. Despite all these difficulties, modern Arab art is asserting itself. The artist Khalil Abdul Wahed from Dubai gave a perhaps representative answer to the question of what difference he saw between the way Western and Arab society treated artists: "I studied in the U.S. There I came into increased contact with art. The difference I see is that in the West you see art everywhere; art museums are everywhere. When at home art is discussed, you still think primarily of Western art. Many don't even notice the art that is done here. But we do have our own art here. The question is how many people recognize it as art and appreciate it."

After World War II the situation changed in favor of a freer association with the "forbidden" picture. Artists experimented more, tried out new forms, techniques, materials, became increasingly liberated from European models, reflected their own history critically, their own circumstances. They took up traditional genres and modes, such as calligraphy or the ornamental, interpreting them in a new way, translating them into a contemporary vocabulary of forms and symbols. They likewise began to do work involving the human figure. Artists reproduced it in all possible variations, rendering the question of "figurativeness" or "abstraction" obsolete.

Finally the 1990s brought about a crucial development. Marked by new technological advances such as mobile telephony and the Internet and the possibilities these offered, a new era was rung in. All at once broad sections of society had unlimited access to the world and a whole generation of young artists in Arab world – now that they could be well informed

about the Western art scene even at a great distance – turned intensively to video art, installation and photography with remarkable results. These media were up to then, not very widespread, and it lasted quite a while before the new means of expression found general acceptance in the countries. In the 1990s in Arab countries – and not only in this part of the world – a break in the generations is quite tangible. The very young artists are more successful in making personal use of a greater individual liberty as a response to the historical changes. But also in this young scene there are enough artists who are occupied with the themes of origin, tradition, affiliation, exclusion and identity.

The question I posed at the beginning, namely whether contemporary Arab art is distinguishable from Western art implies the question of what a work of art is expected to accomplish. The French impressionist painter Pierre Bonnard believed that a work of art should depict an autonomous world. In this spirit the Emirati artist Ebtisam Abdul Aziz says: “Art is a visual, nonverbal language. It is an international language, transcending space and time, and expressing our existence and style. This projecting of aesthetic consciousness, in a unique, modern and universally comprehensible presentation, renders the visual language of plastic arts a link between cultures and nations, and the vessel of an international artistic infusion.” The crucial aspect is how something is depicted rather than what. The issue here is the autonomy of the work, and Arab artists are as much at pains as Western ones to achieve this. *Vis-à-vis* its Western cousin, the sole distinction of contemporary Arab art would then be its thematic context. Its social, cultural, political and religious environment plays a role in the choice of means, the composition of a picture, the configuration of a video, a sculpture, and an installation. To understand a work of art we must ask what the artist is formally and thematically undertaking. With the new media and the technical possibilities art now has, the emphasis has shifted today. The question as to a national identity seems no longer to make sense. The new communication media, for example the Internet and globalization, facilitate the crossing of borders. Yet even though the world has shrunk, an individual access to life still remains, the confrontation of the single artist with himself, his society, the problems of his time and place, all of which he will formulate in his works. A work of art is communicated not least through a universal language.

Arab artists, like their colleagues in Europe and the U.S. would like to take part in global discourses on art at eye level. Arab artists have begun to defend themselves from becoming “ethnicized” or “exoticized” or being labeled as “third world” or “African” or “Arabic” or “Islamic”. Some artists do not like

to be included in exhibitions with titles that reference their ethnic or geographic origins. Many had a problem with the subtitle that specified “Contemporary Art of the Gulf” or “Contemporary Art of Egypt”. As for plausible reasons, may the answer suffice that was given by an artist who withdrew his participation in an exhibition because of the subtitle: “I am worried about the misunderstandings and the fact that presenting my work this way will limit it to a very one-dimensional interpretation [...] I believe that for a fair presentation to take place all artists must be treated equally regardless of where they come from.”¹

As a curator the author could only agree with, but found herself, as it were, at a dilemma, which lies on both sides and is formulated in the above statement. What is wrong for example about the tag “art from Egypt” if the artists are Egyptian? It is not the intention to “ethnicize” or “label” anyone. An important aim of exhibition series is to introduce art that, as the study has shown, is inadequately known and additionally burdened with prejudice, and to do so in order to contribute to an eye-level perception of it.

The art scene in the Arab countries deserves an effort on our part to insure an approach with a new and sensitive attitude. It is also time that, from an art-historical perspective, a new form of reappraisal and reception of modern and contemporary Arab art is undertaken. If Arab artists came into contact with Western art, it does not automatically mean that they imitated western styles. They picked up trends that represented the contemporary art in Europe at the time, and from them created independent works. This is a factor that has not been sufficiently acknowledged.

Establishment of New Galleries

In the some ten years since this author’s survey was conducted, the situation of Arabic art has dramatically changed in a relatively short period of time. The demand for Arab art is a growing trend. Not only the mammoth projects to expand the Gulf region’s cultural infrastructure and the success of the auction houses have contributed to the growth of worldwide interest in Arabic art; other factors have also been key. Especially after September 11, 2001, Western interest in Islamic and Arabic themes greatly increased. After this, it became possible to realize exhibitions with Arab art that had previously encountered resistance by museums. Recent years have witnessed exactly that which gallerists addressed in the earlier art fair survey: the work of the museums that would pave the way to the art market. Major exhibitions over the last five years in London and Paris, in Bonn, Frankfurt, Aachen und Berlin, in Abu

Dhabi and Dubai as well as elsewhere have contributed to the growing interest of the art world for Arab art.

With this growing interest, new galleries have been established not only in the Gulf region, but growing demand along with a heightened sensibility for its own art has made the process easier for new galleries than it was for the “pioneer” galleries in the Arab States. Lucy Topalian, for example, owner of the Dar Al Funoon Gallery in Kuwait, an important source of modern and contemporary art, thus describes her experiences as such: “My partner and I founded the art gallery in 1994. It took us ten very difficult years in Kuwait to even awaken an interest and awareness for art of the Middle East. I have clients of all nationalities, but most of the collectors are Kuwaitis. The last few years in contrast have gone well thanks to the interest of international auction houses for modern and contemporary Arab art. Also the media, especially Canvas Magazine, the art fairs and certain museum shows have been instrumental in bringing the art of this region into the international market.”

Pioneering galleries include the Majlis Gallery in Dubai, Agial Gallery in Beirut, Atassi Gallery in Damascus and Zamalek Gallery in Cairo. Also in Cairo, the Townhouse Gallery opened in 1998 has played a key role in the development of the contemporary art scene. Recently, new galleries have emerged mostly in the Gulf States, such as the Third Line Gallery, the B21 Gallery and the Total Arts Gallery in Dubai; the Waqaf Arts Center in Doha, Qatar; and the Ghaf Art Gallery in Abu Dhabi – to name a few. The Third Line Gallery, founded in 2005, has meanwhile opened a satellite in Doha. Its mission includes the support of young artists. “We want to offer a high quality platform for young artistic talents and Middle Eastern culture. We are concentrating on showing young unknown talents as well as established artists from this region, but we would also like to exhibit artists from the Middle East who live in the West. In addition, the Third Line offers alternative non-profit programs to foster interest and discussions in the region. This includes a literary circle and a documentary and [Arab] feature film series. We also established an international multimedia forum for artists and designers called “Pecha Kucha Night Dubai,” explains the gallery director Claudia Cellini.

Naturally it is not only the Gulf States that play a role in the art market, even if they do seem to have become a hub for the international art world. Art has been produced in countries such as Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco for well over 100 years. The museums for modern Arabic art in Cairo and Kuwait for example, offer a good overview of creative production of the times. Painters and sculptors of earlier eras are in equal

demand as contemporary artists on the art market. In Saudi Arabia and especially in Qatar there are high caliber collections of the Classical Arab Modern compiled over decades by their collectors and which will soon be on display in forthcoming Museums for Modern Arab Art such as that in Qatar.

And how is the presence of Arab artists in Western galleries? The most recent Art Basel offered the usual picture. Although the booming Indians have been picked up by a few galleries, the Arabs are brilliantly underrepresented. A renewed survey of leading gallerists revealed that many wish to introduce their own artists into the Arab world and create a market there, but will otherwise wait to see how the market for Arab art develops.

Despite the repeated emphasis of the importance of the art market’s role in the growing interest in Arab art, one should not ignore the fact that art has more than material value. Art with its universal appeal gives us the possibility to understand more about ourselves and explore a deeper sense of being. Art also allows us to learn more about other cultures. It conveys aesthetic, ethic and spiritual values. Art has never kept to a single country or nation, and throughout the centuries, art has always surpassed boundaries.

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Partial translation occurred from German to English by Alisa Kotmair.

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