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BETWEEN THE SEARCH FOR "AUTHENTICITY" AND THE TEMPTATION OF NEO-ORIENTALISM: ARABS PAINTING ARABS (1950-1990)

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1. Introduction

So-called modern or contemporary art in the Arab world goes back 100 or 120 years, when Western academic style painting was adopted and slowly replaced traded artistic forms, or what we quite generically and imprecisely call "Islamic Art".

In earlier work,[1] I distinguished two periods, one of *adoption* of the Western understanding of art production, going from the early beginnings to about the 1950s and a second one of *adaptation*. During this second period, attempts were made to adapt this alien art to local traditions (or, more precisely, to introduce elements of these traditions into the Western artistic tradition). I will now add a third phase, a *globalization phase*, in which we are in the present: styles and experiences are more integrated in what we could somehow call a "global art scene", extending from Tokyo to New York, from Beirut to Johannesburg.

We will consider here the second phase, adaptation, which I would roughly situate between 1950 and 1990 or 1991. This period is crucial, because it is one of rapid modernization and building of national identities in the frame of the newly created states. The question of going "back to the roots" and using the Arab heritage was then at the center of the cultural and political debate and the fine arts could not escape. This had an important consequence on production: many artists chose figurative painting, abstraction being considered as "bourgeois".

Before speaking of this period however, it is necessary to take a quick look at the previous one. In this phase, it was essential for young artists to show that they were *technically* able to do as well as their European models.[2] Artists followed their teachers without much questioning. In this sense, one might say that what they represented were Arabs seen with the eyes of the Westerner, looking

1 NAEF, 1996.

2 Cf. NAEF, 2003 (forthcoming).

for exoticism and strangeness. This is a common anthropologic phenomenon: when a new language is taken over, the borrower has to learn it first before he or she can make any changes [fig. 1].[3]

2. Ways of Representing Arabs – 1950-1991

The second phase, adaptation, was a reaction to this. The exaggerated alien criteria that had been taken over without discussion by the first generation, or the "pioneers" (*ruwwād*) as they were called, started to be criticized. What was now looked for was "authenticity" or, in other words, a way of coming out of this kind of alienation which was the result of the simple adoption of a foreign language and its contents. This questioning has to be considered in the general context of the predominant ideologies of the time: Arab nationalism and socialism in its different (and sometimes contradictory) forms. What is relevant to our purpose is that artists sought to produce what they thought to be an "authentic" *(aṣīl)*, i.e. "Arab" art, freed of an overly strong Western influence. However, this new "authentic" form of art still wanted to express itself through the language taken over from the West, there was no question of going back to "Islamic art".

Therefore, one might ask slightly provokingly, how were Arabs represented in this "authentic" Arab painting? If generalizations are to be avoided, certain trends may nonetheless be underlined. I will show here some examples from the first period, when the idea of going back to roots was launched, then show some typical paintings of the 1960s and 1970s when it became a dominating trend.

The question of authenticity came up at the same time as that of modernity, in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Therefore, authenticity and modernity, *aṣāla* and *ḥadātha*, became two tightly tied terms. The first painters who introduced this concept wanted :

1) to oppose academic and old fashioned painting;

2) to give their painting the originality which they deemed necessary in order to be recognized on the international scene. As Jawād Salīm (1919-1961), generally considered as the founder of modern art in Iraq, expressed it in the manifesto of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art *(Jamāʿat Baghdād li-l-fann al-ḥadīth)* written in 1951:

3 See for instance THÉVOZ, 1980:21.

> We have to improve our understanding of the foreign styles and, secondly, our knowledge of the local character. It is this character which will allow us to find a place in the international context.[4]

Going "back to the roots" was not thought of as a way of closing Arab artists into the ghetto of a specific identity, but rather as a way of breaking out of it. On another level, representing people from the lower classes was a way of giving them a presence in the world of culture, which mainly excluded them. Many artists at that time felt politically committed to an idea of more social justice: this also explains the choice of their subjects.

For Jawād Salīm and the artists of his group, going back to certain forms was also a way of resuming a relation with some specific characters of the artistic tradition of the Islamic world, mostly in its popular form: using the specific colors of carpets and other textiles and the black ink used in miniatures [fig. 2]. At about the same time, the Group for Modern Art *(Jamāʿat al-fann al-ḥadīth)* in Cairo tried to explore similar possibilities. The group, whose leading figures were ʿAbd al-Hādī al-Jazzār (1925-1966) and Ḥāmid Nadā (1924-1990) exhibited for the first time at the Lycée Français in 1946. They wanted to break away from the academic tradition which had developed in the country since the foundation of the Cairo School of Fine Arts *(Madrasat al-funūn al-jamīla)* in 1908. They wanted to be modern and yet give what they thought to be a more realistic expression of life in the popular districts of their town, which both al-Jazzār and Nadā knew personally for having grown up there. They also wanted to express criticism of the present situation of the poorer classes in their country [fig. 3].[5]

This rather complex discourse was taken over, mainly during the 1960s and 1970s, by several painters who all too often adopted it as an easy recipe to be applied on a superficial level. For them, representing village people, market women, and so on, was enough to make both an "authentic" and a "modern" work of art, modern being understood here as non academic in style. This led to a simplification and even folklorization of this thought. In fact, folkloric elements were used and understood as a merely decorative question. At a 1972 conference of the Union of Arab Artists, the Moroccan Abdallah Stouky said, already criticizing this trend: "We have to make modern works. We cannot succumb to the lure of a bazaar authenticity."[6]

4 ĀL SAʿĪD, 1973:27, French translation in NAEF, 1996:239. On Jawād Salīm see ĀL SAʿĪD, 1991.

5 On Jazzār, see ROUSSILLON, 1990.

6 STOUKY, 1973:169.

The often-represented theme of the family confirms what has been said. Even a painter like the Lebanese Paul Guiragossian (1926-1993) known for his stylized representations of human silhouettes, gives a very traditional representation of it,[7] in a 1962 painting called "The family" [fig. 4]. The same could be said of a 1973 painting with the same title by the Syrian artist Fātiḥ al-Mudarris (1922-1999): even if the persons are schematized, it is obvious that they are wearing traditional dress and the women's heads are covered by scarves.[8]

Another theme is to be found in paintings by Palestinians. Here, the quoting of typical elements and people was a way of remembering their land and at the same time, underlining the struggle against occupation. This might explain why, in the production of Palestinian painters also, traditional dress, mostly decorated with embroideries, is more common than modern dress. What has to be added, is that the people represented are seldom real people, but symbols: of land, of peasants, of "Mother Palestine" [fig. 5].

"Official" art, sponsored by the authorities, developed for instance in Iraq from the 1970s to the 1980s, when the state invested a lot of money in artistic activities, new museums in the capital as well as in the provinces and in publications (books and magazines) on art.[9] Paintings and sculptures were made to glorify the Ba'athi regime and its conquests. Even in this official genre, folkloric elements were not absent like in the *Nationalization* fresco by Nizār Hindawī (1947-) [fig. 6].

The extreme reaction is a kind of neo-Orientalism practiced by some artists like Fā'iq Ḥasan (1914-1992) in the 1970s and which can also be found (for very different reasons) in Algeria [fig. 7]. Ḥasan, one of the most prolific Iraqi artists of the century, went through very different periods during his life: academic, modernist, abstract. In the latter part of his life, he developed a painting of Bedouin life, mainly for clients in the Arabic Gulf.[10] Whereas in his

(cont. p. 363)

7 On Guiragossian, see GUIRAGOSSIAN, 1991.

8 See AL MOUDARESS, 1996.

9 Cf. NAEF, 1996:275-290. In the 1980s, the Iraqi Cultural Centre in London, for instance, published *Ur*, "The International Magazine of Arab Culture", in English, whose art director was the well-known London-based artist Dia Azzawi; the Iraqi embassy in Paris distributed the more openly propagandistic periodical *Lettre de Bagdad* (in French) which contained many articles on fine arts. With the worsening of the economic situation in the country, they were replaced, in 1989, by a Baghdad published magazine: *Gilgamesh*, "A Journal of Modern Iraqi Arts".

10 Cf. al-KHALIL, 1991:97.

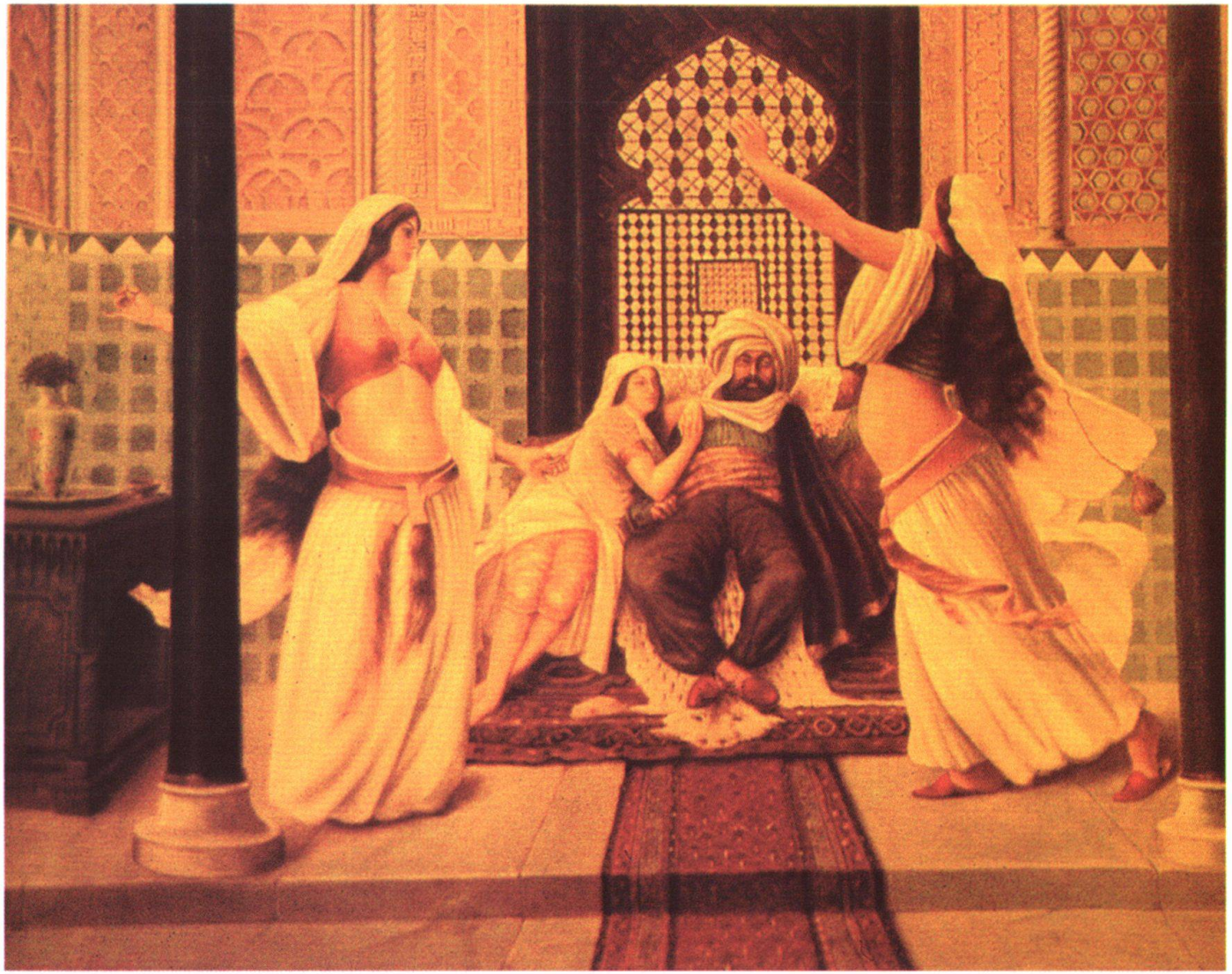

Fig. 1: Tawfīq Ṭāriq (Syrian, 1875–1940), *Boabdil (Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Ṣaghīr)*, no date.

Fig. 2: Jawād Salīm (Iraqi, 1919–1961), *Water melon eating children,* 1950ies.

Fig. 3: ʿAbd al-Hādī al-Jazzār (Egyptian, 1925–1966), *Contemplation* (Portrait of the artist's wife), 1960.

Fig. 4: Paul Guiragossian (Lebanese, 1926–1993), *The Family,* 1962.

Fig. 5: Sulaymān Manṣūr (Palestinian, 1947–), *No title,* 1988.

Fig. 6: Nizār al-Hindawī (Iraqi, 1947–), *Nationalization,* 1974.

Fig. 7: Fā'iq Ḥasan (Iraqi, 1914–1992), *The Maḍyaf,* 1975.

Fig. 8: Lu'ayy Kayyālī (Syrian, 1934–1978), *Fishermen*, 1977.

younger years he tried to follow a modernistic style, he became, even formally speaking, more academic in his last period.[11]

It would be wrong to say that all Arab artists who have represented popular life or village scenes have done it in a folkloristic form. The Syrian Lu'ayy Kayyālī (1934-1978) succeeded, for instance, in representing traditional activities without falling in this bias, as these "Fishermen" painted in 1977 show. However, his experience is more of an exception in the production of this period [fig. 8].

3. Final Remarks

Is it possible to sketch out some general remarks? In spite of differences, there is one striking feature: Arabs representing Arabs during the period considered showed them mostly as Bedouins, market women and horsemen, dressed in traditional dress, whereas they themselves belonged to the intellectual spheres and – by their very profession – were representatives of the ongoing modernization process. In a period where emancipation of women was a priority in most countries, women were shown in very traditional roles and professions: mothers, sellers, etc. This has been a constant character of painting, since the beginning, where portraits of urban, professional women (but also men) were non-existent.[12]

Therefore, the question we would like to ask here is: why use this way of representing oneself in a phase of history in which modernization was the main theme in many countries?

The rush towards modernization and Westernization in itself could be a reason, painting thus becoming the safe haven of tradition. As Edward Said has expressed it in *Culture and Imperialism*, the Arabs, like other people having experienced foreign domination, needed to take possession of their land and their culture again: "One of the first tasks of the culture of resistance was to reclaim, rename and reinhabit the land."[13] This could be reached, at least symbolically, through the representation of "traditional" Arabs in works of art.

A second reason is tied to the language of pictorial representation itself. While painting remained figurative, subjects were often chosen in lower classes, peasants and workers. For the bohemian painters of Paris and elsewhere in the

11 On this artist, see al-RUBA'Ī, 1982.

12 See NAEF, 2002:221-235, and NAEF, 2001:53-61.

13 SAID, 1994:273.

19th century, representing the poor was a way of showing their refusal of bourgeois life.[14] The glorification and self-representation of the higher classes was no longer the main function of art. As the poor classes of the West, who were the first "Other" to be represented, otherness could be found in everything exotic: the Arab, the Oriental, the Chinese, the Native American. Then, abstract painting appeared and other possibilities of figuration were hardly explored, with the exception of socialist realism which for contradictory reasons, tended also to represent the lower classes and people in so called "authentic", i.e. "non bourgeois" activities.

Therefore I would be inclined to say that the apparent impossibility of representing the self otherwise than in stereotyped clichés of Bedouins and veiled women is, besides a choice of the artist, to be explained by the difficulty of creating a new language of pictorial expression allowing to represent the self in a way more compatible with the time in a media (figurative painting) often considered in itself old-fashioned. Some works show that other paths could have been followed, but the majority probably did not want to go further and took over old stereotypes, which, however, in the eyes of a larger audience, and as the success of Western Orientalist painting in the Arab states shows, had become the true symbol of "Arabness" itself.

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14 GRIGNON; PASSERON, 1989, have shown this phenomenon in the literary field.

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