

Arab Art, Royal Patronage and the Search for Definition

Arte árabe, patrocinio real y la búsqueda de una definición

OLIVER LEAMAN,
University of Kentucky, Lexington, USA

Recibido: 18/11/2011

Aprobado definitivamente: 10/12/2011

ABSTRACT

At the start of the twenty-first century there has been a rapid development of art museums in the Arab world, especially in the Gulf. This is reflected in a renewed interest in trying to work out the parameters of Islamic art and especially what an Arab art might be and how it should be defined. What makes that task so difficult is the fact that Arab art is to be characterized in a way that is aligned with what it is to be an Arab in this period, and that is also a complex issue, especially given the wide variety of cultural contexts in which Arabs now live. Various types of Arab art are discussed and some are criticized for being stereotypical and not grasping the challenge of modernity and what lies beyond it, while others are part of what could be called world art. The sudden growth of museum building is not really a reflection of anything especially new in Arab art but more of the ways in which very wealthy rulers compete for status and recognition on the world cultural stage. Nonetheless, this outburst of creativity in both Arab art and its museums, however they are defined, is an indication that these art traditions are joining the mainstream art world.

KEYWORDS: ART, ARAB, MUSEUMS, 21ST CENTURY, PERSIAN GULF

RESUMEN

A inicios del siglo XXI ha habido un rápido crecimiento de museos de arte en el mundo árabe, especialmente en el Golfo. Esto se refleja en un renovado interés en abordar los parámetros del

arte islámico y especialmente en qué consiste y cómo se define el arte árabe. Lo que hace dicha empresa particularmente difícil es el hecho de que al arte árabe se le tiende a caracterizar de modo afín a lo que se entiende por árabe en nuestra época, lo cual es asimismo una cuestión compleja, sobre todo dada la gran variedad de contextos culturales en los que viven los árabes actualmente. Se discuten varios tipos de arte árabe y algunos se critican por ser estereotipados y por no captar el desafío de la modernidad y de lo que hay más allá de ella, mientras que otros casos son parte de lo que podría llamarse arte del mundo. El repentino crecimiento de edificios de museos no es en realidad una reflexión sobre algo particularmente nuevo en el arte árabe sino sobre los modos en los que gobernantes muy poderosos compiten por el estatus y el reconocimiento en el escenario cultural mundial. Sin embargo, este impulso de creatividad en ambos, el arte árabe y sus museos, como quiera que se les defina, es un indicador de que estas tradiciones artísticas se están uniendo a las corrientes dominantes del mundo del arte.

PALBRAS CLAVES: ARTE, ÁRABE, MUSEOS, SIGLO XXI, GOLFO PÉRSICO

IN RECENT YEARS THERE HAS BEEN AN EXPLOSIVE GROWTH in new museums and art galleries in the Gulf concentrating on Arab and Islamic art. The first International Biennial in Sharjah took place in 1993 and much of the Gulf has developed a system of cultural support and patronage. Today in 2011 there are at least fifteen museums, two art colleges, and the 10th Biennial has taken place in Sharjah. This phenomenon is intriguing, and it is worth comparing and contrasting some of the different museums that now exist in the Arab world, and discuss the whole notion of whether we can talk usefully about an Arab art at all. To a certain extent the topic is linked with the even more complex one of whether we can really talk about an Islamic art, and this is where it gets really complicated. There is every reason for a region of the world that finds itself much wealthier than in the past to celebrate its culture, or what it regards as its culture. This has had some interesting results in what is regarded as authentic Arab art, and art about and by Arabs.

The first place to start is by looking at the religious difficulties, if any, in art when carried out in an Islamic society. There certainly have been countries that interpret the Qur'an to forbid many of the depictions of major religious characters or at least not without some veiling, and the whole idea of sculpture given the ban on idolatry is a difficult topic for many Muslims. On the other hand, the modern world is a very visual environment and it is not easy to restrict people from using technology to explore the visual. What sorts of visual material should Muslims avoid? Pornography certainly, but then as we know it is often very vague what counts as pornography, and a good deal of art which flourished in the Islamic world is at the very least erotic. Given the full range of aesthetic language dealing with the body that artists use today, it is not going to be easy to restrict Muslim artists from subject matter that includes the naked human body. The whole idea that one can avoid sculpture is perplexing, since even art which is not sculpture often depends on sculpture to a degree

for its structure. It is not a matter of chance that so many painters, for example, have also been sculptors and vice versa, since we should not necessarily see the different art forms as different forms, but more as part and parcel of the same activity, carried out in various ways. So were an artist to say that he or she avoided some form of artistic expression for religious reasons we would wonder what the quality of their work as a whole was likely to resemble as a consequence.

This is not to say that art does not flourish at times of great repression and restriction on forms of expression. It certainly does, and some of the most exciting times in cultural history have occurred precisely when there has been very little freedom. For one thing, the setting of strict limits can stimulate creativity in that it may focus the artist more precisely and give him or her the ability to use those limits to establish the structure of what they do, in much the same way that the grammar of a language fixes the boundaries of poetic expression, to a degree at least. Poets cannot say just anything they want, since unless they want their work to be totally obscure they have to abide by certain rules of language, and the same may be said of graphic artists also. Although in recent years the vocabulary of art has certainly been radically extended, within each of the art forms it is fairly well understood what is going on and how the various moves that artists make fit into earlier and contemporary work. That is not to say that there is often general agreement, and as we know the nature of art has always been a controversial issue, particularly when artists seek to stretch the limits of the activity as they have in recent times. However, we are not today in most art looking for expertise in particular technical forms of expression, but rather in broader efforts to encapsulate ideas within a graphic form. The concentration on craft has been embraced by conservative forces in the art world, which does not prevent it from looking passé and nostalgic whatever the level of skill that is involved in it. Its constant harking back to the past is more of a nervous reaction to modernity and postmodernity than a confident attempt to reassert the tradition that is constantly praised and used as a justification for emphasizing craft products.

I. WHAT IF ANYTHING IS UNIQUE ABOUT ARAB ART?

This brings us to a feature about Arab artists which is very significant and that is that on the whole they are indistinguishable from any other kind of artist. Art education in the Arab world is based on Western art education, and art education in the West is entirely secular. We should avoid these terms of West and East here since they obscure more than they demonstrate, since today the Islamic world is the whole world, in the sense that Muslims live everywhere. Yet in what is often referred to as the West, Europe and the United States,

a particular style of art education has developed which certainly contains practitioners and theorists who are committed to religion, and whose work is suffused with that religion, but it is far from the norm. In fact, it is so unusual that the Prince of Wales, in a profoundly mistaken attempt at recreating a nostalgic past when religion and art were fused, he thinks, founded an institute in London to recruit «traditional» artists to continue what he sees as the long tradition of religious art. It stands as a sharp contrast with the rest of the art world for its glorification of archaism, craft techniques and a vague mysticism that generally conceals an absence of clarity and purpose in design. What is important about the institute is not what it represents but that it is so unique, in aesthetic terms it is uniquely bad in refusing to answer any of the questions that modern art poses. The feature of modern art that is worth noticing is that it is a profoundly thoughtful activity, perhaps too thoughtful on occasion, and unless one is taken up with the problematic that it sets itself, the consequent product will be entirely out of the loop of what is going on. And no artist wants or should want to be in that position.

II. ARAB ART IN THE ARAB WORLD

The growth of Arab art in the Arab world itself has been a matter of ups and downs. During the period of colonialism some skilled Arab artists moved to be trained in the cultural centers of Europe and the United States, or worked in local art schools very much based on those in Europe. Then as the colonial authorities gradually left the Middle East some of these local colleges continued in existence, while talented young people continued to train outside of the region. A new trend was initiated in the seventies, linked with the rapidly rising price of oil and the development for the first time of the concept of orientalism as a negative expression through the work of Edward Said. The increase in the wealth of some countries with small populations, which meant that rulers had large sums to play with and not much to spend it on, led to increasing popularity in exactly the sort of work that Said criticized as exoticizing and romanticizing the mysterious East in the auction market. The rulers of the small Gulf states were entranced by the images of a lost past and also, it has to be said, by the extreme craftsmanship of the execution of much orientalist art, and were staunch bidders for such work that would be exported to the region where it had originally been painted, albeit generally rather further east, and were admired as part of private royal collections. Although the price of oil fluctuated quite widely, it did continue to bring a lot of wealth to much of the Gulf and the plans for expansion, in particular cultural expansion, gradually came to dominate the area, perhaps in part as a measure of friendly competition among the different royal authorities. A need to define each country, which were predominantly occupied by foreign workers, and to establish some link

with the wider culture of the Arab world, seems to have inspired each country to try to establish an intellectual presence of their own, and this had become part of a huge educational project of construction of universities, art galleries and museums.

It has to be said right from the beginning that the Gulf is largely empty of cultural creativity apart from craft activities, and there has for a long time been a tendency to import anything that is thought of as significant. There is no reason why art should be any different. So Abu Dhabi is financing the development of divisions of the Guggenheim and the Louvre, and a number of museums and exhibition centers are in the process of being developed by some of the best known architects in the world. Sharjah got into the act early by holding a regular art fair some time ago, while Qatar has a museum of Islamic art and in general there has been a building explosion of museums and galleries throughout the region. The major European auctioneers have set up a presence in Dubai in the realistic expectation of attracting local buyers and there is no doubt that for some time the notion of collecting has become fashionable and quite affordable given the high level of disposable income available. The Abraaj prize for artistic work in Dubai itself is a bold attempt at stimulating a form of cultural expression in the small country that has up to now been almost totally absent. Many of the rulers of the Gulf countries have their own enormous collections, and they are well able to finance their enthusiasms wherever these may lead. This is uncannily similar to the ways in which the predominant Muslim rulers in the Ottoman, Persian and Mughal empires vied with each other to attract the best artists to their courts, in competition with each other for status and respect. There has also been a rapid development of private art galleries throughout the Arab world, while in the more established cultural centers such as Cairo and Beirut galleries have long had a presence, perhaps reflecting more accurately where most of the Arab artists actually live, work or at least originate.

III. ARAB ART AND THE ARAB SPRING

It will be interesting to see if the Arab Spring leads to a slowing down of the growth of the cultural sector, perhaps to direct the money more to paying off the local population and inspiring more loyalty. On the other hand, since one of the motivations of the revolts seems to be to end the apparent isolation of life in the Arab world, the linking of the Gulf with the rest of the world at least culturally might fit in nicely with the aspirations of the educated elite. On the other hand, the religious community is probably rather suspicious of all this artistic activity, seeing it as profoundly secular and attempting to orient their countries more towards the secular than the Islamic world. At the moment of

writing in the autumn of 2011 there is no sign that the determined move to expand the art sector in the Gulf is not continuing on its original course.

One of the points of this expansion is to establish the Gulf as part of the normal civilized world, and what is that world without the culture that defines it? The Gulf Arabs travel regularly to Europe and perhaps the United States, and are often educated in those regions, and so are certainly aware of the pivotal significance that modern art plays in modern Western culture. Then there is the fact in the Arab world affected by the gravitational force of the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia a noted hostility to art is part and parcel of ordinary sentiment. The basis of this is not going to be discussed here since it is a complex aesthetic and legal topic far beyond the scope of this account. One of the points of the religious reformation brought about by Ibn al-Wahhab was to oppose the various ways in which objects came to take on some spiritual significance in the Islam of the region, and he sought to emphasize the basic belief in God by interpreting quite widely the scope of shirk or idolatry. Almost anything can become an intermediary between us and God, and art is a particularly good example, especially as in *jahali* Arabia, its pre-Islamic culture, objects did have a significant religious significance. Even today of course some sites like the Kaba in Mecca continue to be significant despite their earlier idolatrous role, and any religion that sees itself as contrasting with the earlier state of affairs, both within and without the practice of the faith, is going to take a critical line on much of what preceded it. It has to be said that what takes place in Saudi Arabia is nothing to do with a suspicion of images, since there are a lot of images in the Kingdom, especially of the King. But there is nothing like the explosion of images which is to be found quite close by, in Iran, and it is difficult not to think that one of the motives behind the determined lack of interest in images is to contrast with the proliferation of images in the neighboring and competing Islamic culture of Shi'i Iran.

IV. PERSIA AND THE ARAB WORLD

The Gulf has a complex cultural relationship with Iran. In religious terms there has been much intermingling of the Arab and Persian communities, and significant Shi'i communities exist even in Saudi Arabia, and certainly in Bahrain. There also are large numbers of citizens and others who originate from Iran and are part of the Persian cultural world, and Iraq of course contains many of the main shrines in the Shi'i world. During the many centuries of conflict between the Ottomans and the Safavids those sites became difficult to reach, and so other sites within Iran suddenly came to be developed and emphasized, yet in the normal course of things there is no doubt that the center of gravity of Shi'i Islam is firmly within the east of the Arab world, In contemporary times

this has extended to Syria and Lebanon, hardly surprisingly, since in the early days of Iran becoming Shi'i it was missionaries from these regions who played a large role in the campaign to produce a distinctive form of Islam in Iran and its empire. One of the ways in which Iran seeks to project its culture has often been through its art, originally through the great displays of calligraphy and miniatures created for the royal palaces and their patrons, and now through the sophistication of Persian culture and its ways of suggesting that the country from which it came should be respected precisely because of its cultural character. It is worth noting that even the Islamic Republic with its often difficult relations with its artists sought to support the local film industry and has done little to oppose the growth of the local art industry. It recognized that this was both a useful escape valve for the middle class, made very little difference for the mass of the population, and projected a sympathetic image of Iran and its culture widely overseas, in particular perhaps with the Islamic world.

Nowhere is this image more significant than in the Gulf, and it is not surprising that the museums and galleries in the region have much Persian art on display. The Gulf countries are very much on the periphery of the Persian world, both geographically and culturally, on the periphery of the Arab world because of their wealth, and the aspirations of many of their citizens which place them firmly on the periphery of the European and American worlds where they often have homes and educate themselves. The theme of periphery, diaspora, exile and dislocation is very much a theme of art that identifies itself as Arab yet this just goes to show how mainstream that art has become, since these have become common themes of modern art everywhere. Quite naturally Arab artists will seek on occasion to link up with local issues, as they see them, but it is far from the case that they are dominated by such issues in any way that distinguishes them from other artists. It is also difficult to distinguish between Arab and other artists even nowadays by looking at nationality, since many Arab artists are citizens of countries outside of the Arab League and are firmly part of the culture of the countries in which they live. Even if they live in the Arab world, the intellectual and cultural world which they inhabit is far wider than that, as it is for all artists, and this has nothing especially to do with the ubiquity of modern communications. It has always been the case in modern times that art has seen itself as having far wider scope than just the local and this is probably one of the bases on which we distinguish between Art with a capital A and what Goethe called the *halbkünste* which actually has always been practiced with a high level of achievement in the Arab world, the craft activities of textiles, jewelry, ceramics and so on. These are often local in the sense that they work with local materials, they seek to attract a local market and are continuations of previous forms of production, very much based in a certain center of operation. This is not to deny that many of these craft acti-

vities reflect far wider developments elsewhere, and they change in line with influences that enter the region, either through the movement of people and ideas or through the sudden availability of new materials, yet one can often define a craft product quite confidently in terms of an area or even an artist, whereas this is generally much harder to do for art. A minimalist artist from Egypt, or Iran, or Qatar, for example, will no doubt have his or her own stylistic identifying marks, but these will not be regional.

V. THE QUESTION OF DEFINITION

There are difficult questions to answer on the nature of Islamic art, if it has a nature at all, but these are just as tough for Arab art. Throughout the great period of Islamic civilization Arab art was rarely significant, by contrast with Mughal, Persian, or Central Asian art, and the centers of collecting and art production tended to be outside the Arab world in any case. Only in the case of theology was the Arab world important, and even there it quickly became outdone by work that was carried out on what might be seen as the periphery of the Islamic world. One of the features of Arab creativity that did persist was in calligraphy, and there are many references to this in modern Arab art, where letters are played around with as parts of collages, poems attached to pictures, or where text is an integral part of the work itself, in ways that are said to reflect the central role of language, and in particular the Arabic language, in Islam. Yet we should be very careful here about accepting that there is any especial status for letters in Arab art, since letters and language are also very important in the art of the West, and many paintings and installations have writing as an integral part of the construction. The idea of an Arab or Islamic exceptionalism here, a special link with writing as a form of aesthetic creativity, sounds highly plausible until it is confronted with the evidence that artists in general tend to link text with images, particularly in modern times.

One might cynically suggest that the use of letters in Arab art is an attempt at reaching out to an audience in the Middle East that might be suspicious of what is being done and so represents an attempt at «Islamicizing» the product. This makes it more acceptable to the local art market, and in the wider art market it exoticizes the artifact, or attempts to do so, and differentiates it from other styles of representation. The idea that letters are being used because they are the only permitted forms of art for Muslims will hardly wash for painters and sculptors, since they also create other sorts of work which seem to break the rules. Trying to find or even create an audience is a crucial aim of many artists and one can see the difficulty that arises when an audience in the Middle East is sought where traditionally collecting art is rare. Walls are bare in many of the domestic interiors in the Arab world, and persuading

their owners to hang paintings on them might be easier if the representations are at least of letters in Arabic script. Then they will resemble the occasional Qur'anic extracts that are to be found in homes and on people in the form of jewelry, perhaps, and so will fit in more than would be the case otherwise. The question of audience is always problematic and rewarding at the same time, since in some ways an artist creates his or her audience through the strength of their work, yet on the whole many jobbing artists are not remarkable in their output and they do need like the rest of us to think of how they are going to earn an income and achieve some form of commercial success. The approach of shocking the bourgeoisie which works so well in the West is less likely to be effective in the Arab world, where until recently shocking the authorities would lead to more literal shocks being applied in response. The attachment of many countries in the Middle East to some religious and social standards of acceptability and of course the widespread nature of censorship indicates the obstacles in the way of garnering an audience.

On the other hand, the optimism surrounding the Arab Spring may suggest that a new art could now arise and art itself may take root more securely in the Middle East. It seems unlikely, though. The arrival of a single Picasso picture in June 2011 in the main art museum in Ramallah and the fanfare surrounding it has far more to do with the campaign by Palestinians to achieve statehood and the recognition that their country is a place where pictures could be viewed, like anywhere else, than with a general local acceptance of painting as an important part of culture. The picture is welcomed not because of what it is but more because of what it shows, that the recipients are a civilized people like everyone else and deserving of equal respect. Part and parcel of the campaign for statehood meant that no Palestinian artist was prepared to participate in a show in Israel which consisted of art work from the Middle East in general, and the Islamic world in particular. An Arab exceptionalism?

This attitude is incompatible with the idea of an Arab exceptionalism, of an aesthetic orientation which is profoundly aniconic and «other». Here we enter the complexities of defining the Arab, the closeness of the link between Arabicity and Islam, if there is such a link, and what it says about the contribution that is often made at least in theory to local art and that of the *jahaliyyah*, the pre-Islamic period. Many Egyptian artists draw a good deal of inspiration from Egypt's great civilizational past, as do Iraqis, and of course many Arabs are not Muslims, but Christians and until recently, Jews also. Many Muslim artists are Muslim in name only and share no religious beliefs with anyone, although their Islamic heritage could always be a profound source of inspiration for their artistic work. We always need to be cautious about listening to people talk about how important their religion or culture is to their work, though, since this could mean almost anything. The English engraver Eric Gill wrote

at length on how important his Catholicism was to him as an artist, and how religion is closely linked with art in general, yet much of his art would shock the Roman Catholic Church, consisting as it does of many highly erotic images of naked women¹. Are we to believe that had Gill not become a Catholic then he would have designed different sorts of images? It is not an unreasonable assumption that the art he went on to produce is the art he would always have engaged with and his writings on why and how are merely explanations which he finds satisfying for what he would have done anyway. This is not a cynical view according to which the views of artists are irrelevant in understanding their work, but it is a realistic view that acknowledges that artists often do not themselves know why they work in the ways they do and where it is tempting for them to identify some larger metaphysical or theoretical framework within which their work is to be situated.

When the Arab Museum of Modern Art opened in Doha at the end of 2010 it called itself Mathaf or Museum, as though it were not really one among many but one by itself which represents the whole genre. And of course in a sense it is since although there has been a plethora of new galleries in the Middle East, but especially in the Gulf, the concept of a museum which deals in modern art is always a controversial one. What is controversial is not the art but its reception, since in an attempt at doing what artists normally do, *épater les bourgeois* and so on, not only are feathers ruffled but highly authoritarian regimes feel themselves challenged and react in the normal sorts of ways by repressing what they perceive as hostile. So Jack Persekian, the curator of the Sharjah Biennial was summarily dismissed due to an entry that offended local sensibilities by appearing to be critical of the Prophet of Islam, something that exhibiting artists were forbidden from doing. He had for some time led a precarious existence as curator since there were all kinds of political protests at local events in the Arab world on top of artists based elsewhere intent on testing the limits that they would have to accept as constraints. Yet of course the artists of Middle Eastern origin working in the West, or in the Western tradition, are just as if not more hostile to forms of authority, including religion, than are their peers who do not share their background. How could it be otherwise? Modern art has a long tradition of confronting tradition, and sometimes this cannot always be channeled into forms of expression that the state, or powerful groups in it, find acceptable.

The very convoluted name for a new gallery of the Metropolitan Museum in New York suggests how difficult issues of definition are here. It is called «Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and

1 CRIBB, R. & J., *Eric Gill*. London: British Museum Publications, 2011.

Later South Asia». And yet the attempts at finding some common label for very diverse work continues despite this. For example, the recent (Fall 2011) exhibition at Mathaf in Doha, Qatar, called «Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art» does raise the question throughout of the nature of a shared identity for art from the Arab world within the last century or so. In her article «Mideast Cool» Juliet Hight talks nicely about the recent exciting developments in the art of the Middle East and then she claims «Amid this diversity, four common characteristics of Middle East contemporary art stand out: beauty, craftsmanship, meaning and spirituality»². But many of the artists she discusses have their origins in the Middle East and are now firmly ensconced elsewhere, and much of their work makes no reference at all to the Middle East or familiar images from that region. Most artists would lay claim to those four common characteristics in their own work, at least as desiderata. We have this idea that something must unite these very diverse artists who live in the Middle East, or who have come from there, in ways that we would be embarrassed to admit to were we to be discussing European artists, for example, or even the artists from any one country or region. It has to be admitted that the very concept of Arab art is just as problematic today as it ever was. This is by no means a bad thing or a demeaning comment to make about it. On the contrary, it suggests that we have here a level of cultural work of great complexity, and our first duty is to respect that complexity and not try to obscure it with pleasing but false generalizations.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ALI, Wijdan *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*. Essex: Scorpion Press, 1987.
 AL-AZZAWI, Dia, *Dia Azzawi*. Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe, 2001.
 BLAIR, Sheila, *Islamic Calligraphy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.
 CRIBB, R. & J., *Eric Gill*. London: British Museum Publications, 2011.
 FARAJ, M. (ed), *Strokes of Genius, Contemporary Iraqi Art*. London: Saqi, 2001.
 AL-HAIDARI, B, «The influence of Arab culture on contemporary Arab artists». *UR*, 1981, pp. 10-27.
 HIGHT, J., «Mideast Cool». *Saudi Aramco World*, May-June, 2011, pp. 2-11.
 KHATIBI, A., *L'art contemporain arabe*. Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe, 2001.
 LEAMAN, Oliver, *Islamic Aesthetics: an Introduction*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2004.
 PORTER, Venetia, *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*. London: British Museum Press, 2006.
 SAID, Edward, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.
 SHABOUT, Nada, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007.

2 HIGHT, J. «Mideast Cool». *Saudi Aramco World*, May-June, 2011, p. 4.

