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Islamic and Other Influences on Art and Design Education in the Middle East and North Africa

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Art and design education, as known through Western art forms, began to have its influence in the Middle East and North Africa around the end of the nineteenth century, mostly as a result of several developments relating to modernism in the arts; as a consequence, modernism began to predominate, and sometimes replace, the traditional arts in these countries. The Ottoman empire served as the main bridge between what we often call the West and East, at a time when “much of the Arab world was part of the Ottoman Empire, which established cultural and political ties with the West” (Al-Sadoun 1999: 9).

“With the advance of Western colonialism in the Middle East and North Africa,” argues Al-Sadoun (1999: 9), “modern art was introduced as a universal model to non-Western cultures.” Because of the geographical position of Turkey as a land that bridges Europe and these countries, Turkey (the center of the Ottoman empire) was the first Islamic country to experience Western traditional and modern art. Consequently, Turkey was “the first country in the region to found an academy of fine arts along European lines” (Bisharat 1989: 271 cited in Al-Sadoun 1999: 16).

Adal (2009) argues that modern Egyptian history began when Napoleon Bonaparte crossed the Mediterranean and defeated the Mamluks to become ruler of Egypt in 1798. Al-Sadoun (1999) adds that Egypt can be considered the first Arab country in the Middle East to adopt modern art. Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt was noteworthy because it exposed Egypt to at least some limited Western influence. A large number of artists and scientists were brought with Napoleon and some of them remained in Egypt after the campaign was over. Egypt was a magnet for many Orientalist artists, and they played a