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Art (excerpts from the Encyclopedia of the Palestinians)

For centuries, the mythical and historical events of Palestine have been a major inspiration for generations of European painters. Palestinians themselves, however, did not develop a visual art tradition before the second half of the twentieth century. Since then, however, the uniqueness and diversity of Palestinian creativity have been expressed by the studio arts. Therefore, in the following essay, the term Palestinian art refers only to the studio arts of drawing, painting, and printmaking.

The history of Palestinian art may be divided into three phases. In the first phase (1885-1955), icon painting was developed as one of the country¡s earliest traditions of picture making. The possibility of an indigenous art was aborted as a result of the uprootedness of Palestinian society, leading to the second phase (1955-65), in which pioneers, mainly raised among the refugee population, forged a new Palestinian art. The third phase (1965-95) includes art created both in exile and on native soil.

Palestinian artists came from Christian, Muslim, and Druze backgrounds. Some received academic training; others remained self-taught. Trained and untrained artists both contributed to the creation of a national Palestinian art. The nature and quality of each artist¡s contribution were frequently determined by the individual¡s proximity to political confrontation.

Characterized by fragmentation and discontinuities, the leading innovations in Palestinian art were created by men and women who were destined to be dispersed. In their exile, artists were mostly unaware of the other art created by their generation, and yet work by each artist attempts to repair the damage done by national disinheritance.

The First Phase: Beginners (1855-1955) Icon painting, derived from the Byzantine tradition, was the major form of visual art practiced by Palestinians. A distinguished iconographic style had been elaborated as early as the eighteenth century. The first practitioners commonly associated with the Jerusalem School were probably apprenticed to Greek and Russian monks serving in the Holy Land. The tradition was later perpetuated by Palestinian adherents of the Orthodox church.

Icons produced by the Jerusalem School painters found an eager market. Small icons were originally sought by pilgrims as portable relics for their distant homes. Larger icons were usually commissioned to commemorate a site in one of the country¡s many sanctuaries. The reputation of the Jerusalem School painters spread throughout nineteenth-century Syria and Lebanon, where their icons continued to adorn remote monasteries.

Although these icons followed the Byzantine tradition, details developed by the Jerusalem School suggest naturalization: the almond-shaped eyes and rounded facial features of one patron saint recall the characteristic features of the Arab folk hero in popular miniatures of the period. The saddle of Saint George¡s horse, usually painted in a plain red, turns in the hands of a Jerusalem painter to a crimson gilded in delicate stars and crescents befitting the turban of an Ottoman sultan. At times, Greek may be the alphabet used to identify the icon¡s liturgical title; all other words, however, were usually painted in Arabic.

The tradition of associating the icon painter¡s name with Jerusalem appears to have been established by a certain Hanna al-Qudsi, whose signature was composed of his first name, Hanna, followed by his title, al-Qudsi, meaning "the Jerusalemite." Later painters followed suit by adding to their full names "the Jerusalemite." Icon painters who continued this tradition through the second half of the nineteenth century included Mikha¡il Muhanna al-Qudsi, Yuhanna Saliba al-Qudsi, Nicola Tiodoros al-Qudsi, and Ishaq Nicola al-Urushalimi. At the turn of the century, the remaining apprentices carrying on the tradition included the Jerusalem natives Nicola al-Sayigh (d. 1930), Khalis al-Hakim (d. 1963), and Khalil Halaby (1889-1964).

During the early decades of the twentieth century, as Palestine slipped out of Ottoman control, its cultural life gradually began to fall under Western hegemony. Easel painting as practiced for centuries in Europe was imported by a steady influx of veteran travelers. Under the British Mandate, easier access was granted to newcomers. In addition to the transforming presence of the British, a growing number of Westerners associated with Christian missionaries or with Jewish colonies began to secure for themselves a more permanent residence in Palestine. Many of these resident communities hosted painters who were commonly seen with their portable studio equipment painting in the open air. After the 1906 establishment of Bezalel, the first Jewish art school in Jerusalem, the settler community¡s public premises began to host exhibitions that displayed genre paintings alongside traditional handicrafts.

In the meantime, a few Palestinians exposed to the new method of painting began to dabble with the imported media. Unlike their peers in neighboring Arab countries, who had had access to Cairo¡s prestigious Fine Arts Academy since 1908 or to that of Beirut since 1937, the few Palestinians who embarked on painting were mainly self-taught. Two leading talents developed their own style by using the new tools for their customary method of painting; the icon painter Khalil Halaby and the Haifa traditional craftsman of Islamic art Jamal Badran (b. 1905). Using photographs for their models, Halaby and Badran painted landscapes of their respective hometowns.

As admission to the local school of Bezalel was denied to non-Jews, most of the younger generation of untrained students learned by observation and crude experiments. These untrained artists included the Jaffa artists Jamal Bayari, Khalil Badawiyya, and Faysal al-Tahir.

Two young women belonging to this generation did manage to attain a limited art education. Both from Jerusalem, they were Nahil Bishara (d. 1997) and Sophie Halaby (d. 1997). Through the intervention of a British official, Bishara was allowed to attend a limited number of classes at Bezalel, where this young cousin of an icon painter received a grant to pursue her art education in France. Her paintings mainly depicted genre figures in native robes. Halaby, by contrast, depicted vacant landscapes of stormy skies and olive groves dotting the Jerusalem countryside.

As the embryonic stages of a Palestinian art were gradually evolving in urban centers, violence between Jewish and Arab forces was escalating, ultimately leading to the war that sundered the country. Growing affiliations among the few local artists were abruptly suspended. With the establishment of Israel, Palestinian arts found themselves facing the predicament of their own people, who were now either reduced to a minority in their country of birth or herded into refugee camps in neighboring countries. Under these conditions, promising talents aspiring to careers in art were thwarted.

For example, the naive painters Badawiyya and Thair were killed in the battle for Jaffa. By the late 1950s, the young Bayari, who had created memorable paintings of Jaffa¡s neighborhoods after the Arab exodus, died at home, a penniless man. His colleague, Hanna Ibrahim Hanna from Rayna, whose exhibitions were thronged by his compatriots, lost hope of making a living in Israel. He emigrated to the United States, where he died a few years after his arrival. A number of painters abandoned their vocation altogether. The self-taught Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1920-94), from Bethlehem, and Ghassan Kanafani (1936-73), from Acre, continued to paint even after Jabra settled in Iraq and Kanafani in Lebanon; each, however, made his true career in writing.

The earliest signs of a resumption of Palestinian painting did not appear until a full decade after the country¡s fall. The main trends were shaped by those few painters who found themselves refugees in neighboring Arab countries. Unlike their predecessors, most of them did succeed in attaining some form of art education and elaborating a personal style. Tempered by the experience of exile, some refugee artists strove to recapture the memory of a place; others addressed themselves to the visual heritage of Palestinian culture. A few were recognized as major contributors to the wider movement of contemporary Arab art, and some of their works were sought by museums in the region and abroad.

The Second Phase: Pathfinders (1955-1965) The two decades after Palestine¡s fall were characterized by radical political and cultural changes in the Arab world. The visual arts enjoyed an unprecedented presence in the cultural arena, which had traditionally been dominated by the oral arts. Baghdad and Cairo witnessed a boom in the state patronage of artists, but it was in Beirut, which became the region¡s cosmopolitan art center, that major refugee artists from Palestine made their debut.

The earliest artist to claim Beirut¡s critical attention was Paul Guiragossian (1926-93). Born in Jerusalem to a blind Armenian fiddler, Guiragossian was taken up at the age of three by Catholic missionary institutions. The cloistered experience of being raised by monks and of serving as an apprentice to Italian icon painters exerted a profound influence on Guiragossian¡s art. After the fall of Palestine, Guiragossian settled in Beirut. Over four decades, during which he became a Lebanese celebrity, Guiragossian¡s work reflected a relentless struggle to summon the images of his formative years in Jerusalem.

From his early academic canvases portraying intimate relations to his latest abstract paintings reducing body details to vigorous lashes of thick paint, Guiragossian¡s figures emerge from the repertoire of Christian iconography. Series of his paintings depicting frontal groups of upright figures recall icons honoring Christ¡s apostles. Huddled together, Guiragossian¡s people convey the artist¡s efforts to integrate his Armenian identity and his Palestinian experience. Recurring themes of exodus and exile were borrowed from biblical sources to elucidate the artist¡s personal world, a world in which disinherited Palestinians shared Armenian destitution.

Two other Palestinian artists living in Beirut also delved into their personal memories to restructure the world they lost: Juliana Seraphim (b. 1934) and Ibrahim Ghannam (1931-84). Born in Jaffa, Seraphim was fourteen when she fled by boat with her family to Sidon. She ultimately settled in Beirut, where she worked in refugee relief and attended art classes with a Lebanese painter. Years later, Seraphim was awarded grants to study in Madrid, Florence, and Paris.

Seraphim¡s paintings teem with evocative elements of fantasy. They bring to life imaginary orchards in which sculpted buds and wild petals swirl alongside seashells and winged beings. The translucency of her visionary landscape uncovers sensuous forms that suggest a personal paradise. Recalled from a lost childhood once enjoyed between seashore and orange grove, Seraphim¡s curvilinear forms are transformed into erotic objects. Glistening fragments of nature on the beach become interchangeable with the ultimate features of a woman¡s body. In colloquial Arabic, jaffa means "bride"; in Seraphim¡s painting, the bridal features of an ethereal woman dominate the landscape, boldly suggesting the artist¡s face.

Unlike Guiragossian and Seraphim, both refugees from urban centers, Ibrahim Ghannam was born and raised in the coastal village of Yajur. After he arrived in Beirut¡s Tall al-Za¡tar refugee camp and after polio confined him to a wheelchair, Ghannam resumed his childhood hobby. Thanks to an UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Words Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) nurse who provided him with painting supplies, Ghannam could vividly depict images of the countryside his bare feet had once walked.

Ghannam painted a splendid visual narrative of life in Yajur. Living on a rationed subsistence of canned foods, in a cubicle overlooking open sewers, Ghannam painted golden fields of harvest, thriving orange groves, and jubilant peasants at work. Painted with the meticulous precision of an Islamic miniaturist, all details within his frame claimed equal attention. Through his naive vision, Ghannam laboriously preserved for a generation born in the camp the legends of one of the villages demolished after the Palestinian exodus.

Two artists of Ghannam¡s generation who were outsiders to the cultural mainstream of their immediate environment are Abdallah al-Qarra (b. 1936) and Ibrahim Hazime (b. 1933). Al-Qarra¡s work evolved at home; Hazima¡s in exile.

Born in Daliyat al-Karmil, al-Qarra was introduced to painting when he was working as a gardener for a community of Israeli artists who had settled in the neighboring village of Ayn Hawd. After its people had been evicted, Ain Hawd was preserved to accommodate an art center. Patronized by leading Israeli artists, al-Qarra won grants to study art in Paris and later to reside for extended periods in New York.

Living on the borders of Jewish art circles, al-Qarra in his art expressed his groping for his Druze (a medieval offshoot of Shi¡a Islam) identity. His earliest works were improvisational ink drawings whose delicate birds and miniature patterns were reminiscent of the decorative motifs ornamenting Palestinian Druze garments. Years later, his large canvases, composed of coarse interlaced brush strokes, repeatedly portrayed vultures devouring blood-stained prey and the obscure face of a man cloaked with a mask.

In a world no less alien, Ibrahim Hazima molded images exalting his own cultural roots. Born in Acre, Hazima was fifteen when he fled by boat to Latakia. For years, he worked as a docker in the Syrian port city to help support his refugee family. Hazima¡s talent for painting won him a grant to study in Leipzig, where he decided to stay and work on his art.

Indifferent to the German realist art admired in Leipzig, Hazima employed glowing imagery that abounded with lyrical metaphors and pastoral references. Painted in autumn colors with childlike simplicity, his works repeatedly depicted the upright figures of slender women peasants carrying cup-shaped baskets on their heads, their solitary bodies echoing the nearby parasol pines and olive trees scattered among frail village dwellings. In Hazima¡s iconography, vertical and curved details representing flesh and stone seem to be visually interchangeable. They seem to allude to Palestinian folk poetry, in which the tree is often addressed as a person and the homeland is visualized as a betrothed woman.

Whereas Hazima¡s visual metaphors may have recalled poetic imagery, other Palestinian artists assumed the conventional role of the political poet and employed visual expression to refurbish political rhetoric: Isma¡il Shammut (b. 1930), Mustafa al-Hallaj (b. 1938), and Naji al-Ali (1937-87). All three were reared in refugee camps. Shammut settled in a Gaza refugee camp after journeying on foot from his Lydda home. Al-Hallaj and al-Ali ended up in camps in Damascus and Sidon after their respective home villages of Salma and Shajara were demolished. Both Shammut and al-Hallaj received study grants to Egypt; al-Ali was self-taught.

Among the three, Shammut won the highest official recognition for assimilating conventional verbal allegories into visual images. Color reproductions of his didactic paintings became household icons within refugee camps and Palestinian institutions. Al-Hallaj¡s lithographs were more personal. Surreal images of men, women, and beasts imaginatively communicated elusive narratives. To reach people throughout the Arab world, al-Ali turned to the satirical art of political cartoons, in which he could actually use words. His remarkable twenty-five-year career was abruptly ended when he was assassinated on a street in London.

The Third Phase: Explorers (1965-1995) In the wake of the 1967 war, many Palestinians were displaced and entire

segments of the population fell under Israeli military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. Over the next three decades, despite a protracted struggle for self-determination, Palestinians¡ national aspirations remained unfulfilled. Wherever they lived, emerging Palestinian artists sought to articulate their personal predicament in relation to the collective dream of regaining their homeland.

Palestinian artists of this era lived primarily in four regions: Arab countries; the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which were under Israeli military occupation; Galilee and the Triangle (a predominantly Palestinian region of north-central Israel), which had been incorporated into Israel; and in exile beyond the Middle East.

Palestinian artists who grew up in Arab countries generally remained on the periphery of local cultures. After the establishment of the Union of Palestinian Artists in 1969, group exhibitions of works by Palestinian artists traveled throughout the Arab world and abroad. Photo silkscreens by Layla Shawwa (b. 1940), stylized engravings by Abd al-Rahman Muzayyin (b. 1943), and experimental paintings by Imad Abd al-Wahhab (b. 1950) represented the leading innovative trends.

Jordan, which was the haven for several consecutive waves of Palestinian refugees, was a home for a number of Palestinian artists whose work also helped mold the character of Jordanian art: Fatima Muhib (b. 1931), Ahmad Nawash (b. 1934), Afaf Taha (b. 1942), Suha Shoman (b. 1944), Aziz Amura (b. 1945), and Fu¡ad Mimi (b. 1949).

After the West Bank and the Gaza Strip fell under military occupation, the region turned into a cultural ghetto. Insulated from the Arab world, a new generation of artists, both trained and untrained, emerged: Karim Dabbah (b. 1937), Taysir Sharaf (b. 1937), Nabil Anani (b. 1943), Kamil Mughanni (b. 1944), Vera Tamari (b. 1945), Fathi Ghabin (b. 1947), Isam Badr (b. 1948), Sulayman Mansur (b. 1948), Taysir Barakat (b. 1959), Fatin Tubasi (b. 1959), Samira Badran (b. 1959), and Yusif Duwayk (b. 1963). In 1973 the group established the League of Palestinian Artists, whose exhibitions were the first group manifestation of Palestinian art on native soil.

Under military occupation, such exhibitions constituted a new form of political resistance. Located in schools, town halls, and public libraries, art exhibitions had a transformative effect, becoming a community event that drew ever-larger crowds from all segments of society. Because Palestinian art was an expression of collective identity, Israeli authorities began to impose military censorship on all exhibitions. Even the combined use of the four colors that made up the Palestinian flag was banned, and an attempt to establish a local gallery was aborted. Unauthorized exhibitions were stormed by troops, with the public ordered to leave and paintings confiscated. Palestinian artists were often subjected to interrogation and arrest. The harsher the measures enforced, the more politically empowered the artists became. Eventually their plight aroused the protest of some Israelis and numerous international nongovernmental groups.

The untutored Fathi Ghabin is one of the artists whose paintings made him a political celebrity within his community. Born in Gaza, Ghabin painted as an intuitive by-product of his daily involvement with community activities protesting the state of siege. Full of popular cultural symbols, Ghabin¡s narrative art led to his repeated incarceration. His painting of his seven-year-old nephew, who was shot dead at a demonstration, caused Ghabin to spend six months in jail for having painted the child dressed in the forbidden colors of the Palestinian flag. Upon his release, Ghabin painted the image of a mass demonstration. Above the demonstrators, the sky is framed by two raised arms from which hang broken chains. Between the raised arms, a white horse, wrapped in the flag, gallops into the sky. Among the miniatures faces of the demonstrators is the face of Ghabin himself.

Whereas Ghabin¡s work represents a vernacular art, the work of Taysir Barakat, another Gaza artist, expresses a more personal narrative. Barakat was born and raised in a refugee camp and went on to study in Alexandria. He paints in pastel shades hazy forms that evoke a web of allegorical associations. A rooster announces sunrise to a violet sky; the sun turns into a golden ball for camp playmates; the moonlight casts bluish tones on the flesh of a slender woman, her

chaste bosom recalling the lilac sand dunes appearing in the distance; fledgling doves nap in their nest, with a barefoot child flying at twilight over the camp¡s barren earth.

The devastating effects of military occupation and the systematic policies of repression were central to the works of a Palestinian woman who received her art education in Alexandria and Florence. Samira Badran was born in Tripoli, where her refugee father, master craftsman Jamal Badran, went to teach Islamic crafts. Two years after the family reentered the West Bank, the region was invaded by Israel. Badran¡s imagery is inspired by apocalyptic visions. Spread with whirling flames in lush colors, Badran¡s painting is full of odd machinery pieces, twisted steel cogs, spikes, barrels, and clogged wheels. The fragmentary debris and inanimate objects of destruction are scattered among dismembered human limbs. The only living beings are caged, strapped, or muzzled. In the distance, the scaffolding of blown-up buildings reaches out metallic skies.

Sulayman Mansur was born in Bir Zeit. A leading Palestinian artist, he was the only well-known artist of his nationality to study at Bezalel. Mansur¡s work oscillates between photographic realism and quasi-abstract style. In either case, it is full of metaphoric imagery. For example, in one figurative work, a rainbow pours through the bars of a prison window; once inside, the rainbow breaks into the colors of the national flag. Another work shows bent prison bars and a checkered dove with flaming wings dashing into the sun. Mansur¡s abstractions explore color and earthy textures. Their titles reveal that they represent traces of the ancestral villages that were demolished and whose names were wiped off Israeli maps.

A new generation of artists also arose among Palestinian citizens of Israel: Abid Abidi (b. 1942), Walid Abu Shaqra (b. 1946), Khalil Rayhan (b. 1946), As`ad Azi (b. 1954), Da¡ud al-Hayik (b. 1955), Kamil Daw (b. 1956), Bashir Makhul (b. 1963), and Ibrahim Nubani (b. 1964).

Born in Haifa, Abidi worked as a blacksmith and illustrated Arabic publications that appeared in Israel. After studying in Dresden, Abidi became the first Palestinian to build monumental art on native soil. His allegorical monuments in Galilee, honoring human fortitude and resistance, include a narrative mural depicting Elijah¡s defiance and survival and a bronze monument dedicated to six Palestinians who were shot on Land Day.

In contrast to the urban Abidi, Abu Shaqra Â born in Umm al-Fahm, and a London art graduate Â was possessed by his rural background. His engravings depict landscapes haunted by human absence and native displacement: an uprooted olive tree lying in the sun; a ploughed field in the moonlight; bushes, thorns, and wildflowers growing in cracks of the remains of abandoned homes; cactus that once defined village borders, outlasting the villages that have been erased.

As Abu Shaqra expressed his closeness to the land, exiled Palestinian painters were creating an abstract art that represented their distance from it. These exiles include Jumana al-Husayni (b. 1932),Samia Halaby (b. 1936), Sari Khoury (1941-98), Vladimir Tamari (b. 1942), Kamal Boullata (b. 1942), Munira Nussayba (b. 1942), Samir Salama (b. 1944), Nasir al-Sumi (b. 1948), and Nabil Shehadeh (b. 1951).

Despite minimal contact, Halaby, Khoury, Tamari, and Boullata all share visual concerns that recall their common experience of exile. All four artists were born in Jerusalem. After Palestine¡s fall, Halaby and Khoury emigrated to the United States with their families. After each completed an art education there, Halaby settled in New York and Khoury in Michigan. After Jerusalem¡s annexation, Tamari, who had studied in Beirut and London, established his residence in Tokyo, and Boullata, who had studied in Rome and Washington, D.C., continued living in the American capital.

Halaby¡s early abstractions explored the visual interplay of spatial ambiguities. Her paintings might be composed of cyclical helices or of repeated bands of straight diagonal lines. Color is applied in linear monochromatic stripes in precise

transitional gradations. Contrasting areas of light and dark are elaborately interwoven. Undulations from each extremity meet and gradually fade into each other. Spatial ambiguity is created by the way foreground and background appear ceaselessly interchangeable. Later she portrayed two squares whose position appeared to shift diagonally. Halaby¡s spatial ambiguities suggest Islamic arabesques. Her work questions the notions of order and continuity.

Tamari¡s pastels and watercolors offer fluid layers of gleaming transparencies. Fading into a background often composed of improvisational spreads of paint, Tamari¡s amorphous forms recall the haphazard patterns of ancient walls. Prismatic colors filtering through his angular shapes glow with poignant contrasts that are reminiscent of being within a sanctuary and looking out through stained glass. Textured areas are generated by short, delicate brush strokes that emulate the manner in which Byzantine icon painters molded stylized form. Tamari¡s abstractions allude to the landscape, often presented in the form of a cross. As it highlights the dynamic opposition between vertical and horizontal, Tamari¡s cross simultaneously suggests Golgotha and his own personal home.

Halaby, Khoury, and Tamari all grew up in homes adorned by Byzantine icons. Likewise, Boullata¡s early apprenticeship with Jerusalem icon painter Khalil Halaby had a marked effect on his development. For years, he was fascinated by the square, geometric rendering of Arabic script. He composed fragments of text from Christian and Muslim sources in translucent colors and angular shapes, creating mandalas of Arabic in which reading becomes interchangeable with seeing. In his later acrylics, all association with script disappeared. Geometric compositions, still based on the square, were generated by doubling and dissecting quadrangles. Oppositional color contrasts heighten the ambiguity of seeming symmetries, and the fragmentation of angular forms reveals prismatic refractions. Colors thrusting forward and backward in shifting sequences traverse illusionary distance. The eye-crossing demarcations between inside and outside transcend simple reciprocities. Through geometry Â whose Greek roots mean "measurement of land" Â the exiled artist, half a world away from Jerusalem, relentlessly charts the transition from memory to imagination.

From the Jerusalem School of icon painters to the Jerusalem painters in exile, bridges connect Palestinian works of art, transcending the distance separating the artists. Discontinuities notwithstanding, Palestinian art in many locations continues to interweave the artist¡s memory of place with the inspiring images retained from a communal culture: The vernacular art created by Ghabin in Gaza completes the narrative picture painted by Ghannam in Lebanon, just as Badran¡s dark world of the West Bank reveals the other side of the same world Seraphim remembered in Beirut. Similarly, Barakat¡s metaphoric allusions mirror those implied by Hazime, while Mansur¡s allegorical imagery suggests the iconography popularized by Shammut. In the same way, Abu Shaqra¡s landscapes tracing the remains of Arab villages in Israel become the natural sequel of Sophie Halaby¡s haunting landscapes of Jerusalem, as Guiragossian's Beirut abstractions prefigure the modern icons Tamari created in Tokyo.

Despite these profound connections, the orchestral fullness of Palestinian art has never been seen under one roof. The complete story of this cultural journey has yet to be written.