

How Painting Came East

By Charbel Dagher

A painting, in its most basic form, is a piece of colored canvas pulled taut across a wooden frame. The history of canvas painting has yet to be told, for while we can identify the beginnings of painting in the Italian Renaissance, we still do not have an account for its spread to studios, homes, and various other venues where it is housed around the world. Indeed, the painted canvas has spread among so many cultures and peoples that, today, it has come to represent the most widely accepted understanding of painting.

How did oil painting, or what we call Western painting, find its way into the Arab world? Did it arrive by itself or collectively with other art forms? Was it through private or state channels? What do we even mean by “Western painting”? Is it a type of art, or a technique in painting? Does it refer to something widely understood without necessarily being specified? Can we even differentiate between something called “Western painting” and something else called “Arab painting”? Art, like the people who create it, follows its own path. Indeed, art delineates its own route through the world, much like silk and spices. The presence of such movement and linkage is confirmed when we find a cloud decorating a copper pot from the Mamluk, depicted in the style of drawing practiced by Chinese and other Asian people centuries before. Such connections are likewise confirmed in the presence of Arabic calligraphy and ornamentation on the walls of a 13th century church in southern Italy.

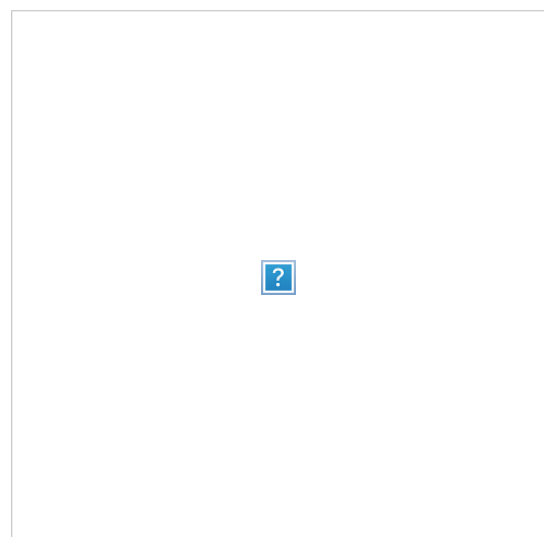
What exactly do I mean by “Western painting?” During the Renaissance, oil painting on canvas – of a size that was suitable to be displayed in a house – emerged. This kind of painting was based on imitation and utilized the principles of shading and perspective. Different artists executed these paintings according to personal whims, while others such as amateurs or art collectors bought them.

One will not find separate classifications for “Western painting” or “Arab painting.” Certain artists may be clustered together based on style, the monetary value of their work, or other common attributes. However, this does not mean that oil painting on canvas (as opposed to a drawing) arises out of a particular culture or location before spreading to other places. No matter the location or the artist, painting carries with it, on its surface, its own particularities, treatments and functions. This is true even as the art form migrates to another environment or artist, though it is true that certain elements may be modified or transformed. Thus, we can say that oil painting has risen out of Italian origins and spread among various places in the world, becoming, with all its artistic transformations (such as the use of water colors, etchings, and so on), the epitome of painting itself. According to such an understanding of painting, one can use “Arab painting” merely as a descriptive term that denotes both an individual and a collective Arab approach to painting. What, then, can we say of painting in the Arab world?

Painting’s Emergence in the Arab World

Prince Fakhr al-Din (1572-1635) was the first Arab to

obtain the type of paintings we have been discussing. In 1613, this Lebanese prince traveled to Tuscany. There, he was reportedly awed by the wonders of the Italian artistic spirit that had given rise to such painting. Unsatisfied with simply seeing this type of art, the prince, upon his return to Mount Lebanon, brought with him a number of Italian artists and builders whom he had commissioned to build him a palace in Beirut. Modeling their work



By Antoine Berberi (1944) from "One Hundred Years of Plastic Arts in Lebanon, 1880-1980," Vol. 1. Edition

on the Tuscan style of architecture, these Italian artisans decorated the

Richard A. Chahine. "Chahine Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon, 1982.

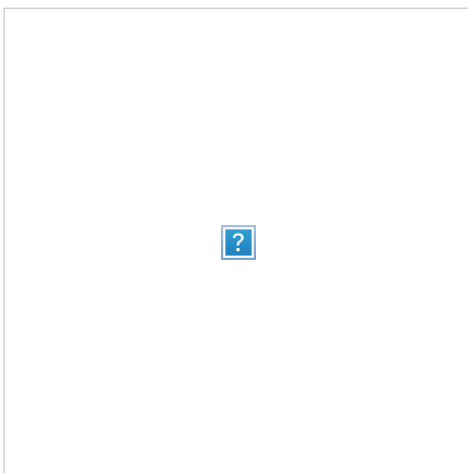
palace walls with oil paintings and adorned its surrounding gardens with statues. No trace of this palace remains beyond descriptions preserved in books. Likewise, these books have preserved the role of this prince as the first and leading figure to import Italian art into the Arab world.

Prince Bashir II (1767-1850) not only followed in Prince Fakhr al-Din's footsteps, but surpassed him by appointing Italian artist Constantino Giusti as the official painter of the ruling family. According to many accounts, the Lebanese prince Fakhr al-Din seemed content simply with building his palace. Egyptian Muhammad Ali, however, went much further, inviting European artists to design and beautify multiple buildings, paint portraits and erect statues. According to one Egyptian critic, "Egyptian taste was overtaken by baroque and rococo art." Similarly, the Khedive Ismail, who visited Paris and became acquainted with its arts, promoted French culture throughout his life and encouraged French artists to come to Cairo. He attended their exhibits, including the first art exhibit in Cairo in 1891, and purchased their work. Consequently, many wealthy and distinguished individuals followed his example. In 1902, those personalities set up a gallery in a commercial establishment, and the Khedive himself frequented the gallery and purchased several paintings, encouraging others to do the same. All of the paintings exhibited at this gallery were consequently sold; the least expensive piece went for 25 gold Egyptian pounds and the prices climbed from there.

Oil painting appeared sporadically in the Arab world, dependent on the whims of a particular Arab ruler, who may or may not have valued or aspired to imitate European models. In rare instances, oil painting extended beyond the personal domain of a wealthy ruler, and made inroads into the general culture. This phenomenon, however, was slow in developing. For example, Sultan Muhammad II (1429-81) commissioned oil paintings of his heroic deeds, which he displayed in the many rooms

and halls of his palaces. However, he neither made the principles of this artistic approach available to the general public, nor advertised it, out of deference and consideration of Islamic arts, especially calligraphy and ornamentation. Oil painting did not become widely available or popular until the early 20th century, when a number of Arabs and Muslims began pursuing their education at European universities and institutes. There, they became familiarized with oil painting as an art form and began to assimilate some of its aesthetic and formal elements. Cultural, economic and aesthetic conditions favorable to the assimilation of oil painting in the Arab world developed at around the same time, along with the onslaught of colonialism, a development that overturned many local traditions.

Regional Developments in Painting



By Habib Srour, "Bedouin Girl, c. 1990" from "Lebanon -The Artist's View," published by the Lebanese British Association, London, 1989.

The history of painting in Lebanon differs enough from that of other Arab countries to merit its own discourse. In fact, the British Council in Lebanon chose well when it titled its book/brochure “Lebanon – The Artist’s View: 200 Years of Lebanese Painting” (1989). In support of its claim, the council referenced an oil painting belonging to the Maronite patriarch, Mikhail Harb al-Khazin. This painting, dated 1787, was found in a Lebanese monastery and attributed to the artist Moussa Deeb. In fact, the council might have explored further back in time to determine that the art form existed in Lebanon as early as 1587, if not before. In his general history, Maronite Patriarch Istefan al-Duweih (1630-1704) speaks of a certain Ilias al-Shidyiaq al-Hasrouni as the first known Lebanese to have painted, in 1587, the interior of a church. Father Anton al-Gemayel commissioned al-Hasrouni in 1587 to paint the Church of Mar Abda in Bikfaya. Yet, Joseph Abu Rizq speculates that al-Hasrouni was not the first

Lebanese painter. He writes that Father al-Gemayel's request to have his church painted suggests that "the adorning of churches with oil paintings was already popular in Lebanon."

Such a discovery is not surprising, for Maronite church history shows a common artistic approach throughout the centuries. In Lebanon and elsewhere, churches and monasteries abound with religious paintings. The roots of such religious practices date far back in time and indicate a Syriac influence. However, the manifestations of this style of painting in Maronite churches today clearly indicate an Italian influence. Such influence developed through the relationship between the Maronite church and the Vatican. This centuries-old relationship extends as far back as 1215, when the Maronite patriarch participated in the Fourth Ecumenical World Congress. The ties between the Maronite church and the Vatican were strengthened with the establishment of a Maronite Institute in Rome in 1584. Although clearly Italian in influence, the oil paintings associated with the Maronite church remained strictly religious in nature. Their display was confined to the walls of churches and monasteries. Although offering an historic timeline to the appearance of Western painting in the Arab world, the Western artistic presence had no significant influence upon the broader artistic developments in Lebanon or elsewhere in the Arab world.

Eventually, however, the connection between Lebanon and Rome blossomed and grew beyond the religious realm. The expertise of artists such as Shidyaaq al-Hasrouni, Moussa Deeb (d. 1826) and Youssef Istefan (circa 1800), many of whom were beginners, amateurs, or self-made artists, remained isolated within the monasteries, but one artist became the first professional and secular artist in the area. Daoud Corm (1852-1930) was the first Lebanese – the first Arab – to study the principles of painting and to dedicate his life to practicing art.

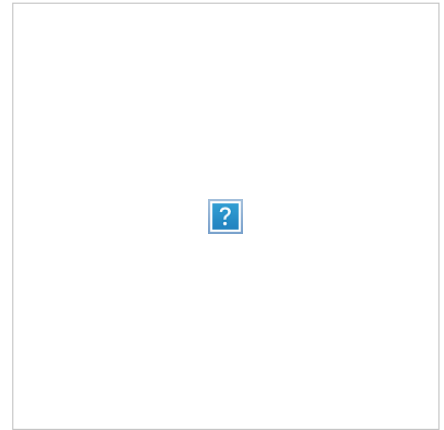
Daoud Corm, born in Ghosta, displayed from his earliest years a clear talent for art. The Jesuit priests were so impressed with his natural ability

that they asked him, when he was only 10 years old, to teach art in their newly opened school. In 1870, Corm went to Rome and enrolled at the Fine Art Institute. There, he studied under the direction of Roberto Pompiani, the royal family artist. Corm soon became famous for the delicateness of his drawings and the softness of his forms. He became especially noted for portrait painting, an art he brought back to the Arab world and practiced in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon.

Corm also stands out as the first Lebanese art teacher. His students in Lebanon included Habib Suroor (1860-1938) and Khalil Salibi (1870-1928). Suroor followed in Corm's footsteps and left for Rome in 1876, followed in turn by Philip Mourani (1875-1973), and later, in 1902, by Youssef al-Houeik (1883-1962). Those early art students who studied art in Rome, Paris and other Western cities were able to pursue their artistic vocations, thanks to the financial and emotional support of foreign artists and patrons. Sometimes their institutions provided the sponsorships that these individual artists received, as in the case of Corm and the Jesuit priests, and sometimes an individual patron came forth, as was the case for Khalil Salibi, who received support from John Singer Sargent. This support enabled Salibi to study art first in Edinburgh in 1890, and then the United States. British oriental artist John Lagri spearheaded the individual sponsorship of the early Moroccan artist Muhammad Ali al-Rabbati (1861-1939); in Tangiers, al-Rabbati had worked as a cook for Lagri.

Orientalist Influence

An ironic twist of fate made it practically impossible for an Arab living in Fez, Qairawan, or in Egyptian or Ottoman areas to learn painting from



By Aref Rayess (1928) from "One Hundred Years of Plastic Arts in Lebanon, 1880-1980," Vol. 1. Edition Richard A. Chahine Gallery," Beirut, Lebanon 1982.

“orientalist” artists since the extremely religious and non-touristic character of these cities deterred Western artists coming to the East to paint Arab scenes and people. One should have expected that the first opportunity for Arab artists to learn their craft arose in Beirut. Since the beginning of the 19th century, artists and photographers flocked to Beirut. By then, Beirut had also become well-known for foreign missions and the new schools that were being established.

In their turn, Tangiers and Cairo experienced the same developments as Beirut. Unlike other Arab and North African cities, Tangiers enjoyed a special position, as it was placed under international protection. Control of the remainder of North Africa was divided between France and Spain, with Spain taking the northern region and the desert, and France taking the southern region. Tangiers, which had housed Western ambassadors since the 18th century, was thus particularly well-positioned to welcome orientalist artists. In fact, Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) first arrived in Tangiers from France. From there, he was joined by the French ambassador on his travels. Similarly, French orientalist Alfred Delacour (1822-82) often visited Tangiers. Other Western artists who visited include the Italians Stefano Ussi (1822-1901) and Cesare Biseo (1843-1909), American Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933), Belgian Henri Jacques Edouard Evenpoel (1872-1899), Swiss Frank Buchser (1828-1890) and English Hercules Brabazon (1821-1906), who traveled there multiple times between 1868-1884. Tangiers was a truly cosmopolitan city. According to the 1921 French “Blue Book” census of North Africa, Tangiers’ inhabitants numbered about 50,000, with the population comprised of 30,000 Moroccan, 12,000 Jews, 6,000 Spanish, 1,800 French and 200 of various other European nationalities.

Like Tangiers and Beirut, Cairo was yet another Arab city that welcomed many orientalists who flocked there to work or visit. During the reign of Muhammad Ali, Egypt was undergoing Europeanization. European builders and artists erected many palaces, public gardens, fountains,

statues and squares. A great number of the orientalist artists lived in Beit al-Sinnari, a section of the city that bears the name of the French scientist Gaspard Monge (1746-1818), assistant to the scientist Antoine Laurent de Lavoisier (1743-1794), who in turn was head of the scientific contingent during Napoleon's conquest.

Egyptian artist Ragheb Ayyad (1829-1982) would pass by this district each day on his way to and from school. Since the artists' studios also functioned as their galleries, Ayyad frequently visited them. Eventually, he became their student when he began to study at the first Arab School of the Arts, which opened in 1908. Ayyad not only attended classes, but also worked as a translator between the students and teachers, thanks to his knowledge of French.

The same type of mentor relationship that played out between Ayyad and orientalist artists happened in many other Arab cities, especially in Lebanon. For example, Kanaan Deeb (d. 1873) studied art under the Italian artist Constantino Giusti, the same artist who had been appointed by Prince Fakhr al-Din as the royal family portraitist. Similarly, Lebanese Ibrahim al-Jarr (1837-1936) studied in Jubeil under an Italian artist whose name is unknown.

In Iraq, artists like Jawad Salim (1919-1961) and Faiq Hassan (1914-1992) experienced a similar relationship with a number of Polish artists who had fled to Iraq after the Second World War. These Polish artists followed the Impressionist school; their subsequent influence can be seen in many Iraqi works.

These associations also took place in Morocco. Bin Allal (1928-1995), for example, was encouraged to study art by the artist Jacques Azema, for whom he worked as a servant. Similarly, an artistic Swiss family that lived in Morocco encouraged Moulay Ahmad Drissi (born in 1924). Ahmed Yaqoubi (1931 - 1985), on the other hand, found support from the American writer Paul Bowles. Among those self-made artists we find the

names of the earliest practitioners of the development of “Naïve Art” in Morocco, a movement that later reached its peak in the folk arts.

Colonization and the Establishment of Art Schools

In Cairo, the Opera House exhibited the work of French artists as early as 1891. Eventually, French sculptor Guillaume Laplagne, who was then residing in Cairo, had the idea for an art school that could team both Arabs and Westerners alike. Laplagne urged the wealthy Egyptian, Prince Youssef Kamal, to open an art school that would promote the arts and immortalize his name. The prince quickly agreed, donating one of his palaces to the school in a district called Darb al-Jamameez, close to the residential district where most orientalist artists lived. The Arab School of the Arts opened on May 12, 1908. Within a few days, the number of students, both Western and Egyptian, reached 400. Under Laplagne’s direction, the school had four branches of study: painting, sculpture, architecture and ornamentation. The four teachers at the school were, naturally, all Western. The Italian Paolo Forcella taught drawing; the other instructors were all French, with Laplagne and Biardin teaching sculpting and James Colon, ornamentation. Many Egyptian youths enrolled in the school. Among them were Mahmoud Mukhtar (1891-1934), Ragheb Ayyad (1892-1982), Muhammad Hassan (1892-1961), Youssef Kamal (1891-1971), Ahmad Sabri (1889-1955) and Muhammad Naji (1888-1956).

This art school was the first ever in the Arab world, including countries like Lebanon where the art of painting had been known for a long time. Curiosity alone could not have driven 400 students to the institute. Rather, the atmosphere among Egyptian society, including people outside the wealthy classes, must have been ripe for its reception. The atmosphere, too, must have changed from the previous hostile environment that many orientalists had encountered and mentioned. Delacroix, for example, remarked in his journal entry of February 8, 1832, 14 days after his arrival in Tangiers, “I am slowly getting used to the customs of the land, and I’m

able to comfortably draw the visages of Moriscoes (the Arabs of North Africa), except that their previous customs are adversarial to painting... even to the point where getting up on the rooftop exposes us to stones and rifle fire.”

Egypt was able to set up its own art institute thanks to the permissive local rule under the Khedives. Other Arab countries, like Algeria and Lebanon, could only establish such institutes with the approval of the occupying rulers. In Morocco, the Spanish did not set up the Elementary School for Fine Arts in Tetuan until 1946. Years later, the French established the Institute of Fine Arts in Casablanca. Recognizing the immense popularity of the art institute in Cairo, how, then, can we explain such a delay in establishing art schools in those countries?

In fact, the idea for establishing an art school in the Spanish-occupied territory went back to the year 1916, when blueprints were drawn up to establish a School of Arts and Industry in Tetuan. This plan later changed in favor of an art school for the native inhabitants which would specialize in local arts. One of the hotels in Tetuan was converted into this school, beginning on August 30, 1919.

The establishment of a school dedicated to the fine arts was realized in Tetuan 30 years later on November 27, 1946. However, this was only a preparatory school that readied its students to pursue their studies in Spanish schools in such cities as Madrid and Valencia. The artist Muhammad al-Sarghini was the first Moroccan to attend this school, actually graduating from the art institute in Madrid in 1952. He became the Tetuan school's first principal after Morocco attained its independence, and the school produced a pioneering generation of Moroccan artists including Muhammad al-Malihi and Muhammad Shibaa, who attended in 1954-1955, as well as Makki Mughara, who attended in 1956-1957.

Early Iraqi artists found a way to obtain their art education in the early 20th century by traveling to Turkey to study at the War Institute in

Istanbul, where drawing was part of the curriculum. A number of Iraq's military officers attended the school, including Abd al-Qadir al-Rassam (d. 1952), Muhammad Saleh al-Zaki (1888-1974), Assem Hafiz (1889-1976), al-Haj Muhammad Salim (an officer in the Ottoman army, born in the last quarter of the 19th century) and Hassan Salem (1914-1992). After the establishment of royal rule in Iraq, the officers were excused from military service and allowed to teach art in the local schools. Abd al-Qadir al-Rassam (1882-1952) was the only one among them who dedicated himself to painting, "perhaps due to his old age," surmised writer Shakir al-Hassan al-Saeed.

The Egyptian model of art education was re-enacted in Morocco and Algeria only after some delay. As one would expect, the fine arts were not a priority of the colonial powers that had overtaken the Arab world. The French and British were primarily occupied with laying down roads, building bridges and expanding ports, endeavors that were necessary for promoting their network of investments. Their overarching concerns were military rule and political dominance; cultural influence was secondary. Maréchal Lyautey, Consular General of Morocco, focused on subduing local opposition. Any cultural concerns that he may have had were limited to the propagation of the French language.

There is a widely held misconception in the Arab world regarding the experience of Western, especially French, colonial rule, which deems the Napoleonic conquests as an exemplary model of Western designs in the Arab world. In fact, while colonial French rule, like Napoleon's earlier occupation, imposed its will upon the region by virtue of its military might, it did not follow the example of Napoleon in his earlier expeditions in Egypt and attempt to impose an ambitious and complete "civilizing" mission upon the native population. Napoleon worked toward his ambition of establishing as his legacy institutes of learning. Such institutes, however, did not emerge in areas outside of Egypt for quite some time. By comparing Napoleon's expedition into the Arab world with others that

followed, we can see that Napoleon had paved the way for a long series of repressive occupations. Yet, when Napoleon conquered the East, he still enthusiastically endorsed the ideas of the French Revolution, especially the civilizing and modernizing missions that the West took toward “barbaric people.” By the 19th century, however, such ideas had lost their potency. All that remained was disdain and the belief that the “natives” were incapable of achieving what the West had accomplished. Painting did not take on greater importance during the process of annexation and subjugation; rather, the space for this art form remained limited and inaccessible to the general population.

After some time, however, Arab painting was able to find a means for overcoming such political obstacles. Even while under the shadow of occupying forces, many Arabs found avenues for learning the art of painting. They adopted the practice of sending groups of young people to study in Europe; they established places where art could be made accessible to its audiences, connoisseurs and collectors; and they found sponsors through local individuals and institutions.

Adapted and translated from a longer Arabic text by Pauline Homsy Vinson

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