

# Palestinian Visual Arts (II) Pathfinders (1955-1965)

The earliest signs of a resumption of Palestinian painting did not appear until a full decade after the country's fall in 1948. 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 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 where 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 human relations to his latest abstract paintings reducing body details to vigorous slashes of

thick paint, Guiragossian's figures emerge from the repertoire of Christian iconography. A series of his paintings depicting upright figures recall icons honoring Christ's apostles. Huddled together, Guiragossian's people also 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 (1934–2005) and Ibrahim Ghannam (1931–84). Born in Jaffa, Seraphim was fourteen when she fled by boat with her family to Saida. She ultimately settled in Beirut, where she worked in refugee relief and attended art classes with the Lebanese painter Jean Khalifé. 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, glistening fragments of nature on the beach become interchangeable with the features of a woman's body. In colloquial Arabic, Jaffa is likened to a "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 Tal al-Za'atar refugee camp and after polio confined him to a wheelchair, Ghannam resumed his childhood hobby. Thanks to an UNRWA 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 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 Hazima (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 Palestinian villagers had been evicted, Ain Hawd was preserved as an art center. Patronized by leading Israeli artists, al-Qarra won grants to study art in Paris and New York.

Living on the edges of Jewish art circles, al-Qarra in his art expressed his groping for his Druze 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 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 before settling in Berlin.

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: Ismail Shammout (1930–2006), Mustafa al-Hallaj (1938–2002), and Naji al-Ali (1937–87). All three were reared in refugee camps. Shammout 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 Salama and al-Shajara were demolished. Both Shammout and al-Hallaj received study grants to Egypt; al-Ali was self-taught.

Among the three, Shammout 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 use words. His remarkable twenty-five-year career was abruptly ended when he was assassinated on a street in London.

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*Note: This Highlight is drawn from Kamal Boullata's entry "Art" in Philip Mattar, ed. The Encyclopedia of the Palestinians (New York: Facts on File, 2005).*

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