



Along the Path 150 Years of Palestinian Art

By George Al Ama and Nada Atrash



Along the Path: Milestones in the Palestinian Art Movement from the Collection of George Al Ama is an art exhibition that is being hosted by Bank of Palestine/Bethlehem Branch. The exhibition aims to shed light on the Palestinian art movement from the mid-nineteenth century onwards through a selection of more than forty pieces that represent the works of several Palestinian artists. This article aims to review the important milestones in the Palestinian art movement based solely on the artworks that are exhibited in Along the Path.

The Palestinian art movement emerged in Jerusalem during the second half of the nineteenth century. Two factors have played a major role in this movement: the Arab Melkite icon school, which



Samia Halaby, *The Return of Spring*, Acrylic on Canvas, 1991.



Ibrahim Nubani, *Cleopetra's Perfume*, Acrylic on Canvas, 2002.

emerged during the eighteenth century in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, and the variety of Islamic art in the city of Jerusalem. During the past 150 years, several stages in the history of Palestine have contributed to the formation and development of an art movement that reflects the common state of the nation rather than the personal experiences of the artists.

The emergence of Palestinian art during the second half of the nineteenth century came as a result of various socio-economic and geo-political transformations that affected the region, including the adoption of the Ottoman Reform Edict of 1856, which guaranteed equality in education and government appointments, and administration of justice to all, regardless of creed. As a result of this decree, Christian missionaries gained power and started to provide a number of services, including education and vocational training in various Palestinian towns. In taking a closer look at the art of this period, one cannot fail to notice that it represents a natural development of the various handicrafts that were popular in Palestinian towns

and villages, including mother of pearl and olivewood inlaying and carving, embroidery, and icon painting, in addition to other handicrafts.

This development is characterized by a transformation in the manner of production – from simple repetitive acts of artisans who produced works in order to meet the requirements of the market (whether for local consumption or for tourists and visitors) to complex, individual acts that reflect an artist's tradition and personality, and that result in a unique piece of art that represents an experience or state that has affected the artist during the period of its creation. The early pioneer artists in Palestinian art who are represented in *Along the Path* are Nicola Tadros, Jiries Jawharieh, Nicola Saig, and Khalil Halaby. They began their careers as iconographers but also painted non-religious subjects. The art of this period was influenced essentially by the techniques used in iconography.

Another important element in the evolution of the Palestinian art movement during the first half of the twentieth century is the fact that many



Abdel Rahman Al Muzayen , *Intifada against Fascism*, Ink on Paper, 1991.

artists had the chance to study art abroad and come back to Palestine. Artists such as Sophie Halaby and Nahil Bshara have reflected the European influence in their art, while Jamal Badran and Fatima al-Muhib, having received their education in Egypt, have contributed to integrating elements of Islamic art in their works. These various artists revealed the search for Palestinian identity in artworks that reflect the spirit of their time and specific context. Here it is worth mentioning that writer and art critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra played an important role in the formation of the Arts Club at the YMCA in Jerusalem. Jabra also made a significant contribution to the body of Palestinian contemporary artworks created before 1948.

The Palestinian *Nakba* in 1948 and the rapid succession of events in its aftermath undoubtedly left their mark on the various aspects of life in Palestine, including the literary and artistic

movements. As a direct result of the *Nakba*, a diaspora art movement began to emerge; artists' works reflected the dramatic experiences of displacement and the occupation of Palestine. Ismail Shammout is known for depicting the dramatic occupation of Palestine using the image of a Palestinian woman. His artworks represent anger, struggle, fear, and hope of return. Artworks that reveal nostalgia for life in Palestine before the *Nakba* include those by the self-taught artist Abdul Hai Musallam and Ibrahim Hazimeh, who depicted Palestinian towns and villages.

Other representations of the Palestinian struggle and dream appear in the artworks of Mustafa Al-Hallaj, whose works evoke Egyptian, Greek, and Roman mythology within a matrix that represents the aspirations towards a free Palestine. Al-Hallaj used masonite-cut and print on board as a means of presenting his art. During the same period, several Palestinian artists chose

to address other issues that are not related to the *Nakba*. Laila Shawa's work focused on the political realities, and became, in the process, a chronicle of the various events that affected Palestine. Mahmoud Taha chose to work with ceramics and Arabic calligraphy as a means to reflect Arab nationalism. Palestinian painter, draughtswoman, and engraver, Juliana Seraphim played a major role in the movement of parallel arts in Lebanon, including poster design.



Khaled Hourani, *Untitled*, Mixed Media on Wood, 1997.

The 1967 War and its aftermath, including the occupation of Jerusalem, have formed another tragedy for Palestine, but unlike the *Nakba* it has contributed to the formation of an art movement inside Palestine. Artists such as Taysir Sharaf, Abed Abdi, Bashir Al-Sinwar, and Walid Abu Shakra expressed their nostalgia – for Palestine before the occupation – through paintings that depict the scenery of various Palestinian towns and villages. Jerusalem, however, remained a subject that was addressed by most artists. Other artists of this period include Kamil Al Mughani, Abdel Rahman Al Muzayen, and Fathi Ghaben from Gaza, and Nabil Anani and Sliman Mansour from the West Bank. The works of these artists focus on resistance, representations of Palestine as oppressed women and martyrs, and portraits of Palestinian women and the village scenery. During the same period, Kamal Boullata used Arabic calligraphy and geometry to stress Arab belonging in Palestine.

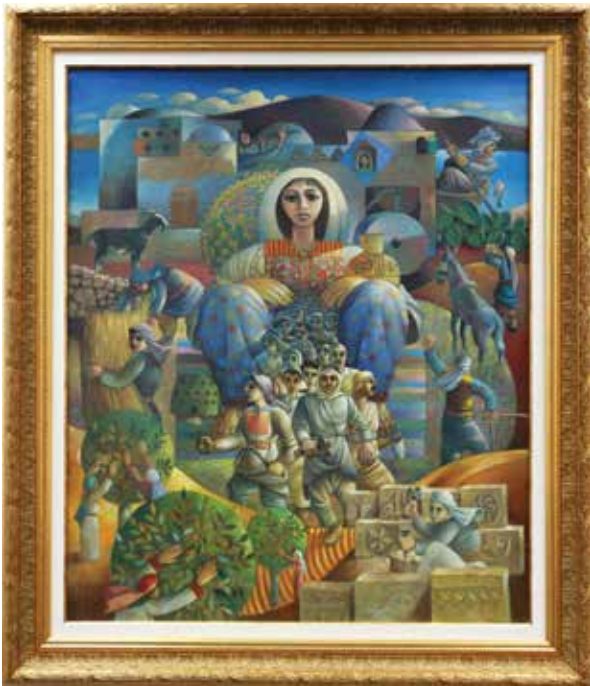
During the 1980s, the reproduction of artworks by these artists and others by the Unified Information Bureau of



Bashir Sinwar, *Sacrifice*, Oil on Canvas, 1982.

the Palestinian Liberation Organization played an important role in promoting Palestinian art as an art of resistance, or rather in promoting Palestinian art to raise public awareness worldwide about the Palestinian cause. Moreover the bureau organized several exhibitions in the Arab world, Europe, and beyond to reflect the cultural life in Palestine and draw attention to the Palestinian cause. As a result, the works of this period are considered an introduction to Palestinian art on an international level.

Other artists started to use various techniques and materials to address diverse topics related to the Palestinian reality – aspirations



Sliman Mansour, *The Village Awakens*, Oil on Canvas, 1987.

and nostalgia for village life before the occupation of Palestine. Khalil Rayan used bronze to sculpt figures and subjects of Palestinian life, and Vera Tamari went beyond representation in using ceramic as a tool to express the deliberate aggressiveness and injustice that the Palestinians have to continuously face.

During the same period, other artists were working from the diaspora. Although artists of this period tended to use materials and techniques that differed from those used by artists living inside Palestine, their artworks formed strong statements that reflect the various events of the occupation of Palestine and their memories of life there. Samira Badran disfigures her own photographs and uses collage and ink and watercolors to create artwork that reveals anger and turbulence – a reflection on the psychological state of Palestinians under occupation. In another example, Nasser Soumi creates installations through the transformation of ordinary materials into art objects.

The same period has also witnessed a parallel art movement that is centered on the search for identity on the part of Arab artists living in Israel, including such artists as Juhaina Habibi Kandalaft, Asad Azi, Ibrahim Al-Nubani, and Ahmed Canaan. A sense of alienation, dispossession, and lack of belonging has pushed these artists to find the balance of the juxtaposition they were experiencing in various representations that include the village, the agricultural fields, and village life. Despite his early death at the age of 29 in 1990, Asim Abu Shakra, another important artist who lived in Israel, highlighted the role of the cactus plant, which grew to designate territorial borders in peasant villages as a symbol of resistance and identity.

Many believe that the Palestinian art movement played an important role in the shaping of the resistance during the first Intifada that began in 1987. The Experimental Innovation movement, initiated by Nabil Anani, Sliman Mansour, Tayseer Barakat,

and Vera Tamari, sought to introduce locally made media to replace the Israeli products that were used in art production. Anani used leather and wood, Mansour used mud, Barakat used wood, and Tamari used clay to produce artworks that followed the Palestinian steps in boycotting Israel.

The Oslo Accords and their aftermath directly contributed to the emergence of a young art movement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Artists started to highlight issues other than land and resistance. These movements came as a direct result of the establishment of several academic institutions that focused on visual arts as a major subject of study. Khaled Hourani has had a vital influence in the growth of contemporary art in Palestine, and his artistic practice often responds to the surrealism and comic absurdity of current events. His late brother Hassan Hourani passed away while working on his whimsical children's book, *Hassan Everywhere*, in

which the character roams the world in search of the rose of love.

While several other contemporary artists who live in the West Bank and Gaza experiment with different themes and techniques to express their hopes for a brighter future, the search for identity has remained the major topic of Palestinian artists living in Israel, such as Ahmed Canaan and Rana Bishara. For artists living abroad, such as Hani Zourob and Bashir Makhoul, resistance and hope for a brighter future for Palestine have become the main focus. Moreover, the aftermath of the second Intifada, which began in September 2000, has been a turning point in the use of art as a powerful tool to promote the Palestinian cause around the world.

The art exhibition at the Bethlehem branch of Bank of Palestine is a direct result of the bank's belief in the importance of cultural life in Palestine; the art exhibition is part of a larger



Samira Badran, *Gate of Jerusalem*, Mixed Media on Paper, 1993.



Khalil Halaby, *Dome of the Rock*, Oil on Wood, c. 1930.

project through which the bank aims to build an art collection that represents the art movement in Palestine. *Along the Path: Milestones in the Palestinian Art Movement from the Collection of George Al Ama* is a result of the cooperation between Bank of Palestine and the Palestinian researcher and collector George Al Ama, who is also

the bank's consultant in art and culture. *Along the Path* is co-curated by artist Amer Shomali and researcher George Al Ama. The opening of the exhibition will take place in August 2015.

George Al Ama and Nada Atrash are researchers on Palestinian cultural heritage and art.



Abed Abdi, *Houses in Wadi en-Nisnas*, Oil on Canvas, 1988.