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By Salwa Mikdadi

In the early 1900s one could name several Palestinian families known for their artistic skills. Among the families whose names were coupled with traditional Palestinian art forms were the Bishara family (mother of pearl), the Qazaz family (glassblowers), and the Nustas family (sculptors). The Badran family's unique legacy lies in its passion to preserve traditions and advance Arab, Palestinian, and Islamic arts. Their contributions span a century of artistic production. The Badrans Exhibition¹, scheduled to open in Jerusalem at the Palestinian Art Court – Al Hoash on October 25, will highlight the work of the three generations of this talented family. On view are examples of work by Jamal Badran, artist and expert in Islamic decorative arts and crafts; his son, the architect and artist, Rasem Badran; his daughter, the visual artist, Samira Badran; his grandson, architect Jamal Rasem Badran; and his granddaughter, the costume and set designer, Ola Badran.

Jamal Badran was born in Haifa (1909-1999) into a family of pioneers who dedicated their talents to further art education and Arab Islamic decorative arts in Palestine and other Arab countries. In addition to his uncle, Abdel Rahman Badran – who worked in Egypt in illuminating and transcribing manuscripts – the family was blessed with three artists; each excelled in one or two forms of decorative art. A family friend introduced Jamal Badran to painting on canvas and encouraged him to study art; eager to start, he travelled alone to Cairo at the young age of thirteen to study at the School of Applied Arts and Crafts where he specialized in the art of leather work, design, and surface decoration on a variety of media.

His brother, Abdel Razak, studied in Egypt and specialized in the art of glass decorations. A second brother, Kheiry, also studied applied arts in Egypt and

did further studies in England, specializing in weaving, painting, and printing. In the early 1930s, Kheiry was the first Palestinian with formal training to teach textile weaving and design in Majdal, which was a famous centre for weaving. After graduating from Egypt in 1927, Jamal started working on the first twentieth-century restoration of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. In 1934 he was awarded a scholarship to study applied arts in England where he specialized in book binding and leatherwork, textile painting, pottery, sculpture, and design, graduating in 1937 from London's Central School of Arts and Crafts.

He returned to teach at the Arab College and Rashidyeh School in Jerusalem and established the foundation for art education in Palestine. He inspired his students to appreciate art, encouraged them to draw freely from nature, and nurtured in them a keen understanding of Arab-Islamic abstraction. One of his students at Rashidyeh was the prominent artist, poet, and art critic, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, who described Jamal as "... my favourite teacher who taught me the principles of perspective and light and shadow in painting which guided me in my work as an artist; he also taught me the appreciation of Islamic decorative art.²"

In the late thirties the Badran brothers opened "Studio Badran for the Arts" on St. Paul's Road in Jerusalem to advance local craftsmanship while maintaining the highest standards in their respective work. Their goal was to establish a national art that combined recent advances in technology with authentic Islamic artistic traditions.³ After losing their studio in 1948, Jamal returned to teaching, first in Syria and later as a UNESCO expert of ornamental arts and crafts to teach at the higher teachers' training colleges in Libya.

In 1962, Jamal opened his own studio in Ramallah where he worked on several major commissions, including the second restoration of Al-Aqsa Mosque mosaic, producing twenty-three drawings, each 100cm by 50cm,

of the original Suret al Isara (Quranic verse) in the old Kufic script embellished with vegetal decorations. These full-size colour drawings reached 23 meters long. He also designed and supervised the construction of the decoration of Jordan University Mosque. However, his crowning achievement was the restoration of the original designs for Minbar Salah al Din in Al Aqsa Mosque. The 12th century minbar was burned down in 1969 by an extremist intent on demolishing the mosque to make room for building the Third Temple. It took Jamal Badran four years, logging in 2,250 hours, to recreate the original decorations on thirty-three drawings in 1:1 scale, drawing directly on paper without tracing the patterns. He used photographs from archival sources and the remains of charred pieces from the original minbar to reproduce the original designs. Although Jamal completed the project in 1976, it was not until February 2007 that the new minbar was finally restored and installed in Al Aqsa Mosque.

The construction of the new minbar could not have been achieved without Jamal Badran's drawings of the original designs; unfortunately he was not duly recognized for his contribution to the minbar's restoration. We hope that this exhibition will be the first of many initiatives to rectify this injustice and give credit to his contributions.

Throughout his career, Jamal Badran's skill remained true to the principles of Islamic surface decoration that applies to all types of mediums. He displayed mastery in the design of Arab-Islamic decorative patterns and in the art of calligraphy on a range of surfaces including leather, parchment, fabric, canvas, marble, stone, tiles, Hebron glass, mosaic, plaster, and wood. Badran's art works on exhibit are a testament to his skills; their surface decorations are set with harmony and symmetry, which are the hallmark of his designs. His calligraphy is interlaced with geometric and intricate vegetal motifs as well as figural drawings.

Jamal Badran's son, Rasem (b. Jerusalem 1945), started drawing at the age

of five and won his first award in painting at the age of twelve in India. He learned painting and decorative arts from his father, assisting him in his studios in Jerusalem and Ramallah. Soon after graduating with a degree in architecture from the Technical University of Darmstadt, he established his own firm – Dar Al Omran in Amman – now recognized as one of the most innovative international architectural firms.

Rasem's buildings range from low-cost housing, realized in 1972 in Bonn, Germany, to single-family homes (Villa Handal, Amman), grand mosques (State Mosque, Baghdad), museums (National Museum, Riyadh, and Qatar Islamic Arts Museum), a library (Damascus University Library), and heritage centres (Qasr Al-Hokm, Riyadh). His designs combined traditional Arab Islamic architectural materials and styles with modernism, reinterpreting the past to serve the future. In designing buildings, Rasem follows his father's principle of working from within the local environment and tradition to create spaces sensitive to modern social and ecological demands. Rasem defines his architecture as a continuous dialogue between contemporary needs and inherited traditional values. He received numerous awards including the 1995 Aga Khan Award for Qasr Al-Hokm in Riyadh, which was praised for Rasem's "reinterpretation" of traditional Najdi architecture and for "a deep understanding of the culture of the area.⁴" Selections for this exhibition were made from several working periods to include drafts and drawings that display examples of his diverse skills.

Rasem's sister, Samira (b. Libya, 1954), attributes her success to her father Jamal who introduced her to the art of drawing and painting and encouraged her to pursue higher education in the arts. She graduated in 1976 from the Academy of Fine Arts in Cairo and studied photography and painting at the Accademia Delle Belle Arti in Florence from 1978-1982. Although living in Spain for over twenty years, Samira did not distance herself from Palestine. She frequently returns to her home in Ramallah carrying her trusted camera and taking thousands of photographs on each

visit. These photographs form the basis for future composition. Samira's photo images are disfigured and manipulated then appropriated in her new work. Symbolic destruction of these images and the birth of new work are central to her oeuvre of destruction and resurrection. In contrast to her father's drawings, which are grounded in symmetry and harmony, Samira's images are at first glance jarring and disconcerting, full of contrasting bold colours that reflect anger and turbulence – a reflection on the psychological state of Palestinians under occupation.

In her piece almost five meters long, *The New Walk*, meandering images of artificial limbs reflect on the universal conditions of oppression in face of the onslaught of man-made tools and barricades, which result in all forms of incarceration. In this work the prosthesis is a metaphor for the indomitable spirit of the Palestinians who seem always to find alternate routes to crossing barriers. The congested artificial limbs – some broken, others bandaged – do not beg for sympathy, instead their seemingly frenzied march portrays boundless determination and resilience, a tribute to the Palestinians' steadfastness in the face of military and political domination, and that despite all constraints, they continue to cross artificial boundaries and barricades.

The third generation of the Badran family, Rasem Badran's children, Jamal and Ola, continue the family tradition. Jamal Rasem Badran studied architecture at London's Bartlett School of Architecture and joined his father's firm in 2004. In a short span of time he realized several projects in the Arab World, including the court house in Abu Dhabi, Al Waha Project and Mohammad Bin Rashid University in Dubai, and several housing projects. The exhibition presents these and other projects in a video installation.

Ola, an accomplished painter, received the K. Talhouni Award for Islamic Art for her installation of *Molten Element* (2002). Her talent in realizing three-dimensional arts led her to the field of costume and set design. She

graduated in 2007 from London's Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design with a degree in theatre design for performance. The exhibition presents a speculative project for costume and set designs including a 3-D model for a stage set.

It is clear from this exhibition that Jamal Badran encouraged free expression in the visual arts; irrespective of his own preferences he did not discourage his children's pursuit of other forms art. In Palestine of the early 1900s, art was not yet classified as high or low art. Whether painting icons, portraits, or decorating glass, the artists were valued for their creations of beautiful objects. Jamal Badran practiced his art free from such hierarchies. He was adept in paintings and drawing on all surfaces whether on canvas or on glass; it was all art.

He believed that the younger generations of Palestinian artists were limiting their options to only Western sources of art and neglecting their cultural heritage – particularly the Arab-Islamic decorative arts. He advocated the revival of Arab-Islamic arts not through static replication but through innovations inspired by Palestine's artistic patrimony and by pursuing the highest standards of art practice. His principles are still of great significance today for Palestinian artists who can benefit from searching for meaning in their own cultural heritage. For a true artist finds inspiration from all sources without favouring one over the other.

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1 The exhibition was assembled from several sources, primarily the Badran family and a local Palestinian collector. We are grateful for their support and the fiscal sponsorship of the Consulate General of Spain and Spanish Cooperation Office in Jerusalem, which made this exhibition possible. The exhibition runs through December 14 at al Hoash; it will travel to Birzeit

University's Ethnographic and Art Museum, opening on January 8 and ending on February 9, 2008.

2 Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *al-bi'er al awal: fusool min sirah zateyah* (Beirut; al Muassasah al Arabiyah lil dirasat wa al nasher, 2nd ed., 2001), 189.

3 Kamal Bullata, "Jamal Badran in al fan al tashkeely al filastini." *Majaler Mawaqef*, special issue no. 22•23, Haifa: al Muakeb Institute, 2002.

4 Peter Davey, "Aga Khan Awards," *The Architectural Review*. Nov. 1, 1995.

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