

Striking women's art from the Islamic world

Women from Islamic countries shred others' veils of ignorance about their culture in a St. Catherine University exhibit.

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For decades, the primary image that Americans have been offered of women in Islamic countries is of veiled figures striding through open-air markets, waiting in doorways or peering warily through slits in their head coverings. Their lives have remained mostly blank slates suggesting nothing of their education, aspirations, home life, travels, political sentiments or religious views.

Such stereotypes were particularly grating to the cosmopolitan women of the Middle East who found their own identities obscured by misconceptions and ignorance. To set the record straight, a Jordanian princess, Wijdan Ali, and an artist friend, Aliko Moschis-Gauguet, organized a show of more than 50 paintings, drawings and works on paper by women from predominantly Islamic countries. On loan from Jordan's National Gallery of Fine Arts, the exhibit has traveled throughout Europe and Australia for the past five years and is now on view at St. Catherine University in St. Paul through April 1.

Its title, "Breaking the Veils," alludes not only to the garments worn by some Islamic women, but metaphorically to the ignorance and prejudices that often cloud perceptions of them. Participants in the show include Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and adherents of other faiths as well as Muslims. Religion doesn't appear to figure much in the art but, perhaps surprisingly, figurative imagery does.

"The presentation of human images in Islam is only prohibited in mosques and places of worship to keep the Muslims from going back to worshipping idols," Wijdan Ali explained in a 2008 interview. Even then, she added, the opposition to depicting humans is an "extreme interpretation" of the Quran's strictures.

The art is strikingly modern and sophisticated in its vibrant color, sociopolitical themes and incorporation of European influences. A handy world map shows why: the 21 Islamic countries from which the artists hail include Algeria, Egypt and Morocco in Africa and extend as far east as Malaysia and Bangladesh. The artists' bios are strikingly international. Besides training in their homelands, many have studied at art schools and universities in Paris, Florence, London, Moscow and throughout the United States, from Harvard and Berkeley to the University of Minnesota.

Islamic critiques

One of the few religious pieces is an accordion-fold book in which Lebanese artist/writer Etel Adnan has repeatedly colored the Arabic word "Allah," turning it into a poetic meditation. The veiled garments that so often mystify and intrigue Westerners recur, however. Meriam Bouderbala of Tunisia offers a stark, hooded silhouette against a sand-textured ground, the "face" enigmatically replaced by a playing card. Fahda Bint Saud of Saudi Arabia suggests the emotional isolation of her culture by depicting three veiled women in a desert landscape, hands covering respectively their eyes, ears and mouths. But Rabha Mahmoud of Oman portrays veiled women swirling through a dynamic abstraction, anonymous but engaged in the action.

The extent of Western stylistic influences may be surprising. In a vivid pink and blue triptych, Algerian painter Houria Niati scribbles over Matisian nudes as if attacking European, especially French, stereotypes of her homeland as a voluptuous paradise. Palestinian painter and textile designer Sami Zaru collages bits of traditional embroidery and fabric into her colorfully angry images of a broken land where body parts -- hand, foot, eye -- stand in for a dismembered culture.

Most powerfully, Laila Shawa, another Palestinian, expresses outrage about her people's plight by silk-screening dollar signs and flag colors over photos of the graffiti-laced walls on which her countrymen protest. According to exhibition consultant Kelly Povo, the \$\$\$ are painted in tar by Israelis to assert that American money and power will obliterate Palestinian self-expression.

While all of the "Veils" art is skillfully executed, it's the sharp-edged imagery that packs the most wallop and testifies to the lively intellectual and cultural life that thrives "behind the veils" so commonly associated with Islamic societies.

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