

17 lost art exhibitions

Over the past few years, Palestinian artists have participated in a number of exhibitions outside Palestine. Unfortunately, a significant number of these exhibitions are now effectively lost, and the paintings they contained remain unaccounted for. Speculation about the fate of these important works of art abounds; so too do the fingers of blame pointed at various groups and individuals. In interviews recently conducted by the Palestinian Museum, artists have agreed that the loss of many of the works was largely due to a combination of bad organisation and opportunistic misappropriation. If we add this to the shows confiscated or irrevocably damaged by the Israeli authorities, we find ourselves facing a situation that urgently needs to be rectified: these lost works represent an important part of the Palestinian visual history, and it is an enormous shame that they remain inaccessible to the Palestinian public.

In this edition of the Palestinian Museum's bimonthly newsletter, we try to recall some of the vanished collective exhibitions. The newsletter does not cover the single-artist exhibitions mentioned in the interviews, nor the individual works of art that went missing in the occupations of 1948 and 1967. It is simply an initial step towards drawing attention to an issue deserving of far deeper investigation.

London Exhibition - 1976

London was host in the 1970s to one of the first collective exhibitions in the Western hemisphere to focus on Palestinian art. Held on the Tattershall Castle yacht on the River Thames, the show was organised by activist Leila Mantoura and encompassed 30 works in total, by artists including Sliman Mansour, Nabil Anani, Isam Bader, Khalil Rayan, Leila Al-Shawa, Kamel Al-Mughanni, Isma'il Ashour, and Khalil Dadah. When the exhibition closed the works were moved to a traditional dress shop owned by Queen Dina, wife of the late King of Jordan, to be kept there until a way could be found to return them to Palestine. After a while the shop closed, and despite repeated attempts the artists have been unable to discover what happened to their works.

[Nabil Anani and Sliman Mansour at the entrance of the Tattershall Castle yacht, London 1976. Image from Nabil Anani’s personal archive]

USA - 1977

This was the first US exhibition to include work by Palestinian artists from the occupied territories, and it was organised in collaboration with the Arab League across 8 different American states. 15 artists took part, including Jamal Badran, Samira Badran, Isam Bader, and Sliman Mansour. The works on show in the exhibition were never returned to their authors, and the whole exhibition has disappeared entirely.

[A painting by the late artist Issam Bader]

International Exhibition for Palestine - 1978

Organised in Paris on the initiative of the PLO representative there, Ezzeldin Kalak, this exhibition was to travel around the world as the nucleus of a permanent Palestinian museum. 177 Palestinian and international artists donated 194 paintings and a number of sculptures for participation in this museum, including works by the French artist Claude Lazar. The exhibition opened at Beirut Arab University, after which some of the works were displayed at the Palais de Tokyo Contemporary Art Museum in Paris, and others at the Tehran Museum. During 1981 and 1982 two further shows were held in Norway, both involving works from this collection. During the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982, the PLO media office was bombed and even the documents pertaining to the exhibition were lost, along with all its other components. Afterwards, accusations regarding the fate of the artworks were fired off in all directions: some artists claimed to have seen the works in the care of a certain group of people, others thought they had been sold in Paris, and so on. The mystery has never been solved.

[A rare image of the exhibition catalogue]

Gaza Exhibition - 1979

The late political figure Dr Haidar Abdel, was the driving force behind this exhibition, held at the Red Crescent Association in Gaza to celebrate Palestinian Child Week. The show brought together 40 works by different artists, including Karim Dabah, Isam Bader, Nabil Anani, Fathi Ghaben, Rihab Al-Nammari and Sliman Mansour. The night before the exhibition was to open, the works were placed in the Association library, to be moved to the exhibition hall the next day - but in the intervening period a Muslim Brotherhood demonstration broke out in Gaza. In the course of the demonstration hotels and other tourist attractions were burned down, and so was the library itself. According to Sliman Mansour, his well-known work ‘Lina Al-Nabulsi’ was lost in the blaze: when the artists arrived all they could find was the charred frames of the paintings.

[An artwork by Sliman Mansour, lost in this exhibition]

Palestine Exhibition in Moscow - 1979

This exhibition was organised by the PLO in collaboration with the Palestinian-Russian Friendship Society; Mustafa Al-Halaj, Kamel Al-Mughanni, Ismail Shammout, Tamam Al-Akhal, Ibrahim Hazima, Sliman Mansour, and Nabil Anani all took part. After the Moscow show the exhibition was moved to Beirut, but there the works disappeared; they were never returned to the artists.

[A painting by the late Mustafa Al-Halaj]

Karama Gallery in Beirut - 1982

The late Palestinian artist Ismail Shammout organised this exhibition, which contained work by a number of artists including Sliman Mansour, Nabil Anani, Zuhdi Al-Adawi, and Yassir Dweik. During the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut the building housing the exhibition was bombed, and all the works of art were subsequently lost. Khaled Hourani claims later to have seen by chance the works by Sliman Mansour, Zuhdi Al-Adawi and Yassir Dweik hanging in a house in Beirut, without the knowledge of the artists. According to Shammout’s widow and fellow-artist Tamam Al-Akhal, meanwhile, a second group of paintings, belonging to artists from Japan and East Germany and exhibited in solidarity with the Palestinian cause, was salvaged from the rubble by Ismail Shammout. 'These 25 or so paintings were then housed temporarily with someone called Ali Al-Gharib in Al-Faihaa Building in Beirut, since our own house had been damaged by the bombing', Akhal explains, 'But when we wished to get them back Mr Al-Gharib denied knowing where they were, and claimed they had been stolen'.

[A Yassir Dweik painting]

Kuwait Exhibition - 1986

This Kuwaiti exhibition was held as part of 'Jerusalem Day' and was organised by the late Palestinian politician Faisal Hussein. According to Sliman Mansour, 'We heard that the show was a success and that several of the paintings were sold – but we never received the money for them, and those that were not sold were not returned. Some time later I was surprised to see one of my paintings, which had been in this exhibition, sold at auction!'

Italy Exhibition - 1988

This show was hosted in Rome and was the brainchild of well-known Italian activist Luisa Morgantini, along with a group of Italian artists calling themselves 'Kuffiyeh' in solidarity with Palestine. It contained 30 works by Palestinian artists such as Taysir Barakat, Vera Tamari, Karim Dabah, Adnan

Al-Zubeidi, Taleb Dweik, Awad Abu Armaneh, and Taysir Sharaf. The exhibition went on to tour a number of Italian cities, but today the fate of the works involved is unknown. Considerable effort is now being made to find them.
[A Taysir Sharaf painting]

Palestine Week Exhibition at Hebron University - 1989

Held at Hebron University, this exhibition was part of a group of other shows focusing on Palestinian heritage. It contained works of art by a number of Palestinian artists: Khaled Hourani, Issa Abeiduh, Nabil Anani, Sliman Mansour, and Taleb Dweik. These works were confiscated by the Israeli occupation forces that broke into the exhibition, on the grounds that they were 'inflammatory'; the soldiers also arrested artist Khaled Hourani and then-president of the Hebron University Student Council Jibril Bakri as a result. Artist Issa Abeiduh was able to get some of his paintings back after complaining to Zamir Shimesh, the temporary Israeli mayor of Hebron at the time, but we still do not know what happened to the rest of the works.
[A Khaled Hourani painting]

Palestinian Fine Art Exhibition in Tunis - 1990

This Tunis exhibition was organised by the Association of Palestinian Fine Artists, under the supervision of the PLO, as part of the celebration of the first Palestinian Culture Day, whose inauguration was presided over by Palestinian president Yasser Arafat. It contained works by several Palestinian artists (some of whom were then resident in the UAE), including Bashir Al-Sinwar, Nasser Abdel Aziz, Sobhi Murad, and Ahmed Heiluz. Some of the paintings were sold and the money transferred to the artists, but the fate of the remaining works is unclear. According to Nabil Anani, a box containing a number of the remaining paintings was sent to the Palestinian Ministry of Culture a few years later. These paintings were hereafter considered the property of the ministry, and Anani has apparently seen several of those hanging in the Prime Minister's offices.
[A Bashir Al-Sinwar painting]

Geneva/Italy: 6X2 Exhibition - 1990

The exhibition was the product of two artists' workshops held in Ramallah and Gaza, and was organised in Geneva before being moved to Italy under the supervision of Nimer Hammad, the PLO representative there, to be shown in the town of Magione. 30 artworks were sent over, including pieces by Khaled Hourani, Sliman Mansour, Hosni Radwan and a selection of works by Italian artists. But the exhibition never returned, and the artists still do not know what happened to their work.

Doha/Qatar Exhibition - 1996

During Palestine Week in Qatar in 1996, this exhibition, alongside a photo gallery, a cartoon exhibition and an exhibition of children’s drawings, was organised by Faisal Al-Husseini as a fundraiser for Jerusalem. It contained 40 artworks, including some by Sliman Mansour. Only 10 paintings from the exhibition now remain, and no one knows what happened to the remaining works; the same goes for the contents of the photographic exhibition, though all of the children’s drawings were returned.

Self-Portrait Exhibition - 1996

Organised at the Al-Wasiti Centre for Arts in Jerusalem in collaboration with the band ‘Sabreen’ and the French Cultural Centre, this exhibition brought together paintings by a group of artists including Sliman Mansour, Nabil Anani, Taysir Barakat, Jawad Al’Malihi, Fayez Al-Sirsawi, Khalil Rabah, and various others. The exhibition later moved abroad, and no information is now available about the paintings or their whereabouts.
[The exhibition catalogue, from Nabil Anani archive]

‘Made in Palestine’ Exhibition - 2003

Designed to tour the United States of America, this exhibition involved 23 Palestinian artists, including Zuhdi Al-Adawi, Taysir Barakat, Rana Bishara, Mirvet Issa, Ashraf Fawakhiri, Samia Halabi, Mustafa Al-Halaj, Jawad Ibrahim, Emily Jaser, Vera Tamari, and others. The exhibition, which contained sculptures, ceramics and photographs as well as oil paintings, opened in Houston before moving on to San Francisco, and was feted by critics as one of the strongest US exhibitions of the year. Though it was scheduled to tour through more than one state, logistical problems prevented the full tour being completed, and the exhibition actually ended in The Station Museum. According to the artists who took part in the exhibition, some of the paintings were sold off cheaply, but most are still in storage at the museum.
[An art work by Rula Halawani]

Exhibition in Martini in Switzerland: Palestine, Key to Culture & Peace - 2005

This was a collective exhibition to which various Palestinian artists participated with around 40 works. Among the artists were Ra’ed Issa, Muhammad Al-Hawajiri, Muhammad Abu Sal, Khaled Hourani, Taysir Barakat, and various others, in addition to a solo exhibition featuring the works of Hosni Radwan. Afterwards, however, the organisers were unable to return the works to Palestine due to the fact that they had not been registered with the Israelis before they were taken out of the country. According to Hosni

Radwan, the art works are now in a gallery in London belonging to Yahya Zalum, where they will be kept until their return to Palestine can be organised: 'There is now no effort being made to return the artworks, though, and we have no information about them.'
 [Artist Hosni Radwan at the opening of the exhibition, a photo from his personal archive]

Beirut Exhibition - 2009

The Palestinian Ministry of Culture, in collaboration with the Lebanese Ministry of Culture, organised this exhibition as part of the Beirut celebrations of Jerusalem as the capital of Arab culture. Held at the UNESCO in Beirut, it brought together 20 works by 5 Palestinian artists: Sliman Mansour, Samir Salameh, Hosni Radwan, Khaled Hourani and Muhammad Saleh Khalil. None of these works have been seen since, despite the fact that two of the participating artists were actually employees of the Palestinian Ministry of Culture. According to Muhammad Saleh Khalil, 'The works are at the Palestinian embassy in Beirut, but money and organisation are needed to return them to Palestine!' Radwan added that for their part they had tried, with the Finance Ministry, to provide the money necessary for transporting the paintings, but that the funds simply weren't available. 'So the art works are still in the embassy, and they'll be kept there until whenever we are able to return them.'
 [An artwork by Samir Salameh]

Ministry of Culture Collection

In the years following its foundation in the 1990s, the Ministry of Culture worked to build up a collection of works by Palestinian artists, pledging to buy at least one work from each exhibition it sponsored. The Ministry's collection soon contained more than 50 works, including older ones by pioneering artists brought over from Beirut from the PLO collections there. The collection contains pieces by Kamel Al-Mughanni, Taleb Dweik, Awad Abu Armaneh and Sliman Mansour, as well as original art posters and a section of the Palestinian archive returned from Tunis, none of which were ever counted, classified or formally documented. The looting and destruction of the Ministry building by Israeli forces during the 2002 occupation left them unharmed – rather, artist Muhammad Saleh Khalil has suggested that the works disappeared from the Ministry storerooms later on, without anyone knowing anything about it.
 [An artwork by Kamel Al-Mughanni]

Should you have any information about the fate of any of the works or

collections mentioned in this newsletter, please contact us by email at info@palmuseum.org

We are also collecting information on the Israeli army's appropriation of works of art from Palestinian homes when it occupied them in 1948, again a subject on which little information is available. Should you know anything about any works that disappeared during this period, please contact us by email at the address mentioned above, or by phone on: [+972 or +970] 2 2974797

In the face of possible genocide, what use is a museum? On Gaza by Omar Al-Qattan

As the world watched in horror the vicious destruction visited upon the people of Gaza over the last weeks, most of its energy was understandably focused on the provision of humanitarian relief and the desperate need for an unconditional ceasefire. At the Palestinian Museum, a project launched a few of years ago by the Welfare Association (an independent organization dedicated to sustainable development and humanitarian assistance in Palestine), we were left feeling numb and powerless in the face of this carnage. The Association poured all its energy into emergency relief, but our role as a cultural institution was less clear.

In fact, the Museum team was inevitably left asking itself what a museum could possibly do in the face of such events, and what its role should now be. The Palestinian Museum endeavours to narrate Palestinian history as a means of preserving part of our national collective memory, while reflecting upon, and hopefully learning valuable lessons from, that process. Unfortunately, the Palestinian narrative is one in which examples of attempted social and cultural genocide against our people abound, particularly during the last sixty five years: the Nakba of 1948, in which

Israeli forces expelled over three quarters of a million Palestinians from their country and destroyed their villages and towns; the occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and the expulsion of a further 250,000 Palestinians in 1967; the 1982 war in Lebanon that killed thousands of Lebanese and Palestinians civilians and ended with the Sabra and Shatila massacre, in which Israel colluded in the murdering of between 800 and three thousand civilians by its Phalangist allies; the brutal suppression of two popular uprisings; confiscation of Palestinian land and water resources; the relentless building of illegal settlements, walls and checkpoints across our land and, last but not least, three military onslaughts on the Gaza Strip since 2008. But is the study and preservation of these historical crimes a guarantor that they will never occur again? And if not, then why build a museum to mark them?

One possible answer lies in the notion of sumud, or steadfastness, which has profoundly influenced Palestinian cultural and political discourse and is essential to the thinking behind the Palestinian Museum. The logic of this notion is that we as Palestinians must continue to build our lives and our institutions in the face of Israeli military might: it is the simplest and most vital form of resistance, a way of asserting our physical presence and cultural vitality on our land, in a situation where the political balance of power is overwhelmingly against us. Part of that process is the preservation of the past, particularly the injustices perpetrated against our people.

Yet we have seen in recent weeks that what this quiet defiance cannot do is eliminate the possibility that genocide and ethnic cleansing will be contemplated again - in a dark corner, perhaps, of the Zionist movement, faced as it is with its signal failure to rid historic Palestine of its Arab inhabitants and yet still staunchly refusing to recognize their rights within the framework of a just and equitable peace. One can even see the war on the people of Gaza, and the open calls by senior Israeli politicians for the

expulsion and even extermination of Gaza's Palestinians in recent weeks as a brief, if brutal, dress rehearsal for such a scenario. And of course, this is not something a museum can do very much to avert. All it can attempt is to raise awareness among both Palestinians and the world at large that what happened in 1948 can happen again, only this time on a much more cataclysmic scale. It can hope, too, that such awareness might just act as a deterrent to further horrors.

The Palestinian Museum must also, surely, provide a platform for Palestinians to reflect upon our own responsibility for the events of the past and present. After all, how history unfolded in the way that it did, and what we might or should have done to change it, are questions that every museum of culture and history would surely like its visitors to ask themselves. Such questions are profoundly empowering: they remind us that we are not merely victims of history, but also, potentially, its agents. And so museums also, in this sense, end by offering hope. In our case, that the Palestinian people are still here, that at home and in exile we continue to make our voices heard and to gain support and solidarity, that our culture is celebrated the world over when a few decades ago it was denigrated and dismissed - surely all this means that the future belongs to us, not to those who seem determined to eliminate us.

While the Palestinian Museum's responsibility now is first and foremost to bear witness to the moral outrage of the Gaza War and honour its victims, it cannot neglect its more complex duty to analyse these events, to question them, and to seek eventually to make sense of how the catastrophe happened at all. We must wonder how it could have been prevented, and why it was not. To record the crimes of the past and present is essential, but to ask how a society can resist attempts to eliminate it, and how it may build an equitable and peaceful future for its citizens - that is surely the most arduous task confronting all cultural institutions serving a people threatened by genocide.

*Omar Al-Qattan is a member of the Welfare Association and chair of The
Palestinian Museum Task Force
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