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The Nakba and Palestinian Painting

Documenting Palestinian art starts with the Nakba.

interview with [Suleiman Mansur](#)

Palestine-Israel Journal: Maybe we can start by talking about the importance of the Nakba in Palestinian art and how, in turn, the Nakba was portrayed in Palestinian art.

Suleiman Mansur: The Nakba greatly affected Palestinian art. Even now when we want to document the history of Palestinian art, we start with the Nakba. All Palestinian art historians, including their doyen, Ismail Shammout, start their documentation of Palestinian art movements after 1948, because the year 1948 has impacted on Palestinian lives on all levels.

After 1948, Palestinian painting had for subject, naturally, refugees, the dispossessed living in a tent or in the open air. At the end of the 1950s, another trend took place: artists started to paint nostalgic subjects, such as the good life they had led in the villages prior to the Nakba, the homeland, working the fields, wedding scenes. Later, the hero of Palestinian painting became the fighter, the proud Palestinian, and so on.

One of the important aspects of the Nakba was the dispersion of the Palestinian people and the loss of their land. The trend in Arab countries, at the time, was to wipe out Palestinian identity. So it became the most important thing in Palestinian painting, to emphasize this identity and to make it into a major issue. To recreate Palestinian identity, painters started to use symbols, such as scenes from Palestinian villages, dabke dancing, as well as the colors of the flag, the flag itself, barbed wire, prison bars, etc. So much so that in 1981, the Israeli authorities passed a law forbidding the use of the Palestinian flag in all contexts. I was once summoned to the military governor in Ramallah, and was told by the officer that we were not allowed to use the colors red, white, green and black in our works.

All the artists' thinking was influenced by political problems, by daily incidents under occupation, the commemoration of historical events, martyrs. Looking back at this, I think it was something normal for people living under occupation, and who had national aspirations. After the 1993 Oslo agreement, political works ceased to have such an import. Many Palestinian artists stopped working for good because their knowledge and experience had been seeped in politics. Nowadays, they are facing a lot of problems trying to deal with the new reality.

The most important issue now has become the question of quality: how good an artist one is, not how good a political or nationalistic painter. Because these artists have been so much confined to local subjects, they are, as a consequence, ill-informed about universal art, contemporary art or the various art movements. They feel lost. We were 70 painters; now only

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around 20 are still working. **There are no art institutions in Palestine in order to promote Palestinian art, give artists knowledge and know-how or connect them to the world.** I think that Palestinian art is now going through a crisis. The only hope I can see is from Palestinians living in Israel. There are a lot of young Palestinian artists in Israel and I think they will be the future of Palestinian art. Here in the West Bank, very few young good artists are emerging.

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Every Palestinian artist expressed the Nakba from his/her own perspective. How has painting affected the coverage of the Nakba itself? Some were trying to show refugees, people uprooted from the land. Is this the only subject or has it gone beyond?

As I mentioned earlier, Palestinian art passed through certain distinct stages — short ones. At the outset, painters painted refugees and the dispossessed, then came the nostalgic period, with the orange groves and villages in nice romantic settings. Next came the influence of the PLO and the growing feeling of power among the Palestinian people, expressed in the strong, proud and fighting Palestinian. In the 1970s, Palestinian art tried to get out of this political circle and to produce art that could transcend the local and be part of universal art movements. They went back to origins and chose their subjects from Canaanite, old Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian motifs, as well as Islamic art, Arabic calligraphy, ornaments, embroidery, etc.

Speaking of all these stages, I noticed that the young artists in the 1970s and 1980s went through all the above-mentioned stages in their paintings, all in the span of two years. Then these artist moved on to their own personal experimentation, but the political influence was always there; the political atmosphere was all-pervading.

Were Palestinian painters aiming merely at popularity, because it was political and nationalistic subjects that gave them popularity and fame, albeit on the local level?

That is true, but also on another level, they wanted **to create a Palestinian art with the aim of recreating and emphasizing Palestinian identity.**

Suleiman Mansur, for example, had he not dealt with these political issues, would he have been known or popular? Would you have had any input in the Palestinian national movement? Do you consider yourself as someone who has contributed to the national movement through your painting?

Yes, but maybe **I would have been a much better artist had I not limited myself to those subjects.** Artists do not rely solely on popularity, appeal to the masses; nowadays, they want to be known in art circles, among museum curators, galleries, etc.

You wanted to be part of the Palestinian national movement.

I am **part of it and it is reflected in my work.** At this point, I would like to mention something about the relationship between Palestinian and Israeli artists.

In 1974, we decided to create the Palestinian Artists' League. We went to the military governor for a permit and were denied one. To this day, we are operating as an illegal union, in confrontation with the Israeli military authorities. But we decided to go ahead with the union. To reach as many people as possible, and due to the lack of galleries, we decided to print our work in the form of postcards and posters. The Israeli authorities started confiscating the posters, fining the sellers, confiscating works from exhibitions, even from artists' homes. Then in 1981, they revived a British

law that called for the censorship of anything that was presented to the people. We, of course, were against sending our work to the censor. That same year, an exhibition for a Palestinian painter was held in Ramallah. Three days later, the authorities came and closed the gallery. The accusation was that the paintings were inciteful, but the real reason was that they wanted to fight and suppress Palestinian culture, in light of their denial of the existence of the Palestinian people. Thus, in the West Bank we were subjected to all kinds of raids, even imprisonment. The situation became quite dangerous. The only places left open to us, free of “problems,” were Jerusalem and Israel, in towns like Nazareth, Haifa, and Acre.

In the wake of all these developments, some Israeli artists came to us in a show of solidarity. We decided to establish a working relationship with them, to protect Palestinian art and artists through them. We organized a joint exhibition at the end of 1981. At the time, they refused to call us Palestinians: we were instead referred to as “Arab artists from the West Bank.” They even rejected the name of “occupied territories” on the invitation cards. In 1984, we had another exhibition. This time, with their agreement, we used the name “Palestinian” and the title of the exhibition was “For Freedom of Expression.” The next year, we had another exhibition, calling for an end to occupation and with the title “Stop the Occupation — For a Palestinian State.” Every year, the tone grew progressively stronger. It is interesting to note that, at the time, the work of Israeli artists was more political than ours. Our main concern was to show good art.

Now let us go back to the Nakba. You started talking about the development of the artist’s thought relating to people’s causes. You mentioned Ismail Shammout, who had the most important impact on the painting of the Nakba and also documented the Palestinian history of art.

I think the reason is that Ismail Shammout was himself a refugee. He was old enough to know what was happening. He had studied art before the Nakba happened. He became a refugee, lost his lands and lived in a refugee camp. For him, to be a refugee was a physical reality. His work was inspired from his experience. His political ideas were with the people who started the PLO. They were in Egypt and he met with Arafat, Abu Jihad — he was one of the group. There were other artists who lived the experience, like Mustafa Hallaj, Kamal Bullata (from Jerusalem), Ibrahim Hazzimeh, to mention only a few.

Do you think their works managed to introduce the Nakba to the rest of the world?

I can’t say to the whole world, but certainly to the Arab world and to a certain degree to the Islamic world. Ismail Shammout’s works were taken in the early 1950s to the UN and, I think, it was the first time that the Nakba was shown in such an international context.

Most importantly, Palestinian art affected the Palestinian masses many of whom had not experienced the Nakba first hand, so it was important to create an awareness. We tried to reach the people through realistic art. We wanted our work to have an impact so we painted works that people could understand and relate to, from Nakba to occupation. We wanted people to move and to be moved by our works and to take a stand. Our paintings aimed mostly at the creation of a national identity.

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