



Women at Work: Intersection of Fine Art and Craft

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“You can make a strong case that the long-standing marginalization of the crafts—and the self-evidently crazy idea that painting isn’t one—was just the art world’s way of practicing sexism and racism, barely disguised as a policing of disciplines rather than people.”¹

Introduction

Women at Work: Intersection of Fine Art and Craft is an exploration of the innovative and intricate ways in which contemporary women artists from across the Arab world channel the creative force born at the intersection of fine art and craft. Working across media such as textiles, ceramics, metal, painting, photography, and drawing, these artists engage with materials and technical skills in ways that defy and question the need for boundaries between fine art and craft.

Societies across the world have traditionally assigned unpaid domestic, caregiving, and textile-related labor to women, reinforcing the view that these roles belong solely in the female domain. ‘Women’s work’ included practices such as weaving, tapestry-making, embroidery, pottery, and other forms of craft that often resulted in objects that were primarily functional and not solely aesthetically pleasing. In many of the pieces featured in this exhibition, the artists and artisans are reimagining and reappropriating these practices and turning them into spaces for intellectual, aesthetic, and innovative engagement.

The laborious processes across ‘women’s work’ were (and continue to be) considered ‘domestic feminine pursuits’ and therefore were looked down upon throughout patriarchal societies. At the same time, because these mediums have been historically tied to the women’s realm throughout history, they are often seen as especially useful for engaging with feminist issues.² Their deep-rooted associations with the feminine endow them with the unique ability to challenge stereotypes, convey varied experiences of womanhood, and subvert traditionally male-dominated spaces.³ Some of the artists in this exhibition incorporated craft practices, material, and techniques in tandem with the tools and mediums common to visual fine art (painting, drawing, photography, sculpture...) in order to create new and innovative works reflecting the narratives

¹ Glenn Adamson, “Why the Art World Is Embracing Craft,” *Glenn Adamson*, January 2020, <https://www.glennadamson.com/work/2020/artworldembracingcraft>.

² Ferren Gipson, *Women's Work: From feminine arts to feminist art* (United Kingdom: Frances Lincoln Publishing, 2022), 9.

³ Gipson, *Women's Work*, 9.



and issues of their own time. This allowed them to provide a new visual perspective as they subverted patriarchal norms and expectations as well as accessed different modes of expression.

Brief Historical Context

Up until the Renaissance in Western European culture, art and craft had never been separated. From Ancient Greece up until the Renaissance, crafts such as weaving, ceramics, and woodwork were not seen as belonging to a lower form of ‘artistry’; the visual arts and crafts were both on the same level.⁴ This perception shifted during the Renaissance period as painters became elevated beyond simply specialized craftsmen as their image changed “into that of a universal genius whose work synthesizes poetry, philosophy, and the sciences.”⁵ With time, that idea became cemented as visual arts rose in popularity throughout the next couple of centuries. This was aided by the commercialization of the arts, particularly during the Dutch Golden Age, when a thriving middle class and the decline of traditional patronage gave rise to one of the first open art markets, where artists produced works for public sale.⁶ By the eighteenth century, the transition of the arts (such as painting and sculpture) from apprenticeships in workshops to the academies also came with the separation of the two so that art would be elevated over craft.⁷

The Industrial Revolution further expanded this divide since mass production meant there is no longer a sense of authenticity or individual creativity to the produced object. Of course, there were serious and significant responses to this shift which had a major impact on the evolution of the arts, and what could be considered as belonging to that category. The Arts and Crafts Movement in the late 19th and early 20th century, aimed to revive traditional craftsmanship and promote the value of handmade work in response to industrialization.⁸ Women in particular were a major force in the development of this movement although there remained a clear division in the forms of practices women engaged in (textiles, jewelry, and decoration) compared to men (woodwork, metalwork, and printing).⁹ Although craft remained in the feminine realm, the Arts and Crafts Movement opened pathways for it to be respected if not yet considered ‘high’ art.

Continuing this worldview transformation, the 20th century avant-garde movements also helped push against this categorization. In particular, the Bauhaus School in Germany (1919) prioritized the erasure of distinctions between design, art, and craft, arguing for all art forms and discipline as equal. Furthermore, they openly welcomed female students, at least on paper although there is

⁴ Steven Blake Shubert, “The Decorative Arts: A Problem in Classification,” *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 12, no. 2 (1993), 77.

⁵ William J. T. Mitchell, “Art, Fate, and the Disciplines: Some Indicators,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 1024.

⁶ Michael North, *Art and Commerce in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

⁷ Albert William Levi, “The Humanities: Their Essence, Nature, Future,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 17, no. 2 (1983), 13.

⁸ Ralph Mayer, *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 24.

⁹ Wendy Kaplan, “What Can a Woman Do? Women in the Arts and Crafts Movement,” *Ransom Center Magazine*, February 28, 2019, <https://sites.utexas.edu/ransomcentermagazine/2019/02/28/23012/>.

some debate on that, since some workshops (like weaving) got designated as ‘women’s sections’.¹⁰ Regardless, this period produced important weavers such as Anni Albers who transformed this craft into an experimental high art form, proving the porousness of these boundaries. The feminist art movements of the 1960s and 1970s actively engaged with these rigid divisions as women artists incorporated craft techniques such as sewing, quilting, pottery, etc. into their artworks as a form of rebellion and subversion of male-dominated art canon.¹¹ This period included iconic projects like Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, 1979, which honored women and women’s work throughout history through its lavish display of embroidered table settings and ceramic plates.¹² Such interventions reclaimed the space for craft – the labor that women have historically worked at with little credit – to be seen as fine art.

In the Middle East and North African region, craft has historically been entangled in complex layers of perception shaped by colonialism, modernity, and evolving global discourses.¹³ In many non-Western contexts, craft is relegated to ‘folk art’ and is seen as an expression of ‘traditional’ cultures rather than individual artistic innovation, limiting its perception and capacity for genuine innovation.¹⁴

Crafts in the region responded dynamically to colonial incursions, industrialization, and modernist movements. Notably, movements such as the Casablanca Group and the Ecole de Tunis integrated vernacular traditions such as textiles, wood, plaster, and leatherworks into their artistic practice in order to forge a modernism that is distinct from Western paradigms.¹⁵ These efforts were political as well as aesthetic, often created with the aim of asserting post-colonial national identities.¹⁶ Additionally, women artists and artisans from across the MENA region worked in experimental and innovative collaborations rooted in traditional forms that paralleled the works of figures such as the aforementioned Anni Albers; the only difference is that they remain unacknowledged and underrecognized often both globally and locally.¹⁷

One such influential Arab artist is Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916 – 2017), a Lebanese sculptor, painter, and abstractionist. She was one of the early women forerunners of the region who had

¹⁰ Hyunsoo Kim, “Re-Framing Anni Albers and Bauhaus,” *International Journal of Art & Design Education* 41, no. 3 (2022): 414–426.

¹¹ Maura Reilly, “Curatorial Overview,” *The Dinner Party*, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/collection/dinner-party-components/curatorial-overview>.

¹² Reilly, *The Dinner Party*.

¹³ Tanya Harrod and Mariam Rosser-Owen, “Introduction: Middle Eastern Crafts,” *The Journal of Modern Craft* 13, no. 1 (2020), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496772.2020.1735803>.

¹⁴ Harrod and Rosser-Owen, “Introduction to Craft in the Middle East,” 2.

¹⁵ Harrod and Rosser-Owen, “Introduction to Craft in the Middle East,” 3.

¹⁶ Harrod and Rosser-Owen, “Introduction to Craft in the Middle East,” 3.

¹⁷ Jessica Gerschultz, “Women’s Tapestry and the Poetics of Renewal: Threading Mid-Century Practices,” *The Journal of Modern Craft* 13, no. 1 (2020): 37–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496772.2020.1735123>.

bravely experimented with different mediums and techniques, breaking away from the then rigid western academic standards and categories. She worked across a range of diverse media which included textiles, jewelry, painting, drawing, and sculpture to name a few.¹⁸ The history of Arab art, especially during the mid-twentieth century is filled with women artists who were crossing and transgressing the enforced expanse between experimental fine art and craft, such as Etel Adnan, Mona Saudi, Esther Cécil Bendaoud Boccara, and the aforementioned Saloua Raouda Choucair, to name a few. These women artists laid a solid foundation for contemporary Arab women artists, who continued to experiment and develop the potential of art within this space of intersection.

Layers of Materiality and Time

Women at Work privileges the process of making and the labor involved as a central element of each artwork, emphasizing both the meaning and the skill invested by the women artists and artisans. In many instances, the working relationship between the practitioners and the artists is deeply collaborative and reciprocal – the artist's vision evolves as it is placed in dialogue with the craftspeople.¹⁹ Sara Ouhaddou's work, and others across this exhibition, is exemplary of this process as she collaborates with local practitioners in order to preserve and/or revive past knowledge by reclaiming craft traditions that have been excluded from our understanding of the evolution of art history.

In some cases, the crafting aspect is paramount (textiles and weaving), while in others, the use of more generally agreed upon fine arts mediums (painting or sculpture) as though they were craft is brought forward. Some explore the textures of what they represent, such as Nadia Kaabi-Linke's work, as she integrates the physical material of historically significant buildings into her pieces – she does this by extracting the pigments from chipped wall surfaces of nearly 100-year-old building surfaces. These pigments are then applied to the square shaped canvases as a tangible representation of embedding a piece of memory into an art piece.

Other works in the exhibition incorporate fabrics associated with women's clothing, using them as central elements of the composition. For instance, by including pieces of women's religious garb into her artwork, artists such as Iman Toufaily not only highlight the material presence of textiles within the creative process, but also recontextualize its cultural significance, inviting a reconsideration of the roles these everyday textiles play in shaping identity and being. Throughout the pieces featured in this exhibition, a recurring motif emerges: the centrality of materiality and the traces of time.

¹⁸ Tate Modern, "Saloua Raouda Choucair," accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/saloua-raouda-choucair>.

¹⁹ Sara Ouhaddou, "Deconstructing the Code: The Woven/Unwoven Project," *The Journal of Modern Craft* 13, no. 1 (2020): 95–100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496772.2020.1735135>.

The tangible elements that are part of the formation of an artwork constitute its materiality.²⁰ The medium through which the artwork is created is inseparable from its meaning. Works like Fatiha Zemmouri's *Tay al Ard*, 2022, explores how the materials of earth (clay, plaster, charcoal, and soil) can become tools to explore the transformations of life as they burn, dry, crack, and disintegrate.

In paintings such as *Orbs I*, 2021, by Tunisian artist Nadia Ayari we encounter a visual language that is loose and organic. Ayari's paintings are labor-intensive and tactile. She applies oil paint in countless layered brushstrokes, building surfaces that shimmer with density and depth. From afar, her compositions appear smooth and uniform, but up close, they reveal a textile-like texture reminiscent of silk thread or embroidery. The work feels stitched, woven, and accumulated – a visual record of emotional labor.

Another example is Leila Jabre Jureidini's tapestries, created in collaboration with Iwan Maktabi, which force us to question the medium itself: the tapestries become a conduit for exploring memory, identity, and familial legacy.²¹ Drawing from her childhood experiences in her family's now-closed weaving factory, Jabre Jureidini integrates wool and cotton thread into her artworks, creating tactile pieces that resonate with personal and collective histories.²² The choice of material not only pays homage to her heritage but also underscores the physical and emotional textures of her past.²³ Conceptually, the tapestries reflect abstracted depictions of landmarks that continue to haunt the Lebanese collective memory after the Civil War (1975-1990).²⁴ Through this work, she transforms the act of creation into a meditative process of reconnection and storytelling, where each stitch and fiber embodies a fragment of both her personal and collective journey through time and memory.²⁵

Time is a theme that crops up over and over again not only across the works, but deep within their conception. Esther Cécil Bendaoud Boccara's giant rug carries the physical manifestation of the passage of time. Hanging from the ceiling and draped over a circular pedestal, this wool tapestry forms the heart of the exhibition, affirming craftsmanship not as background labor but as an artistic force in its own right. Rooted in textile traditions historically associated with domestic and often undervalued 'women's work', the piece evokes both continuity and change. Mouna Siala Jemal's work reinterprets a 4th century, small Roman mosaic into a monumental physical

²⁰ Regina de Con Cossío, "The Materiality of Art," *Sybaris Collection*, May 5, 2022, <https://sybaris.com.mx/the-materiality-of-art/>.

²¹ Selections Magazine, "Filiation: Leila Jabre Jureidini at Galerie Janine Rubeiz," *Selections Arts Magazine*, March 8, 2023, <https://selectionsarts.com/filiation-leila-jabre-jureidini-at-galerie-janine-rubeiz/>.

²² Selections Magazine, "Filiation: Leila Jabre Jureidini at Galerie Janine Rubeiz."

²³ Selections Magazine, "Filiation: Leila Jabre Jureidini at Galerie Janine Rubeiz."

²⁴ iwanmaktabiofficial and leilajabrejureidini.art, "Meet the Creatives series Episode 2," Instagram, February 25, 2025. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DGfS9TDo3to/?igsh=MW1tNW54dTh3MjV3OQ%3D%3D>

²⁵ Selections Magazine, "Filiation: Leila Jabre Jureidini at Galerie Janine Rubeiz."

piece that echoes the weight of history itself. The work was done during the COVID lockdowns, a period where time seemed to stand still long enough to reflect on its nature and patterns. This is best reflected in the contemporary addition the artist included: two landscape photographs which juxtapose with the distant past of the original mosaic, while insisting on the link with the present, as though insisting on the circularity of time.

Many of the works throughout the exhibition engage in serious and somber subjects, war, loss, violence, to list a few. Several, often simultaneously, offer a kind of coy and witty playfulness – a wink shared with the viewer. Katya Traboulsi's metalwork sculptures mimic the back of trucks seen across the roads of Lebanon and celebrate the vernacular culture of the society. Maha Malluh's use of plastic cassette tapes containing religious sermons aimed at women, which were widely available for Saudis during the 1980s, reflects a distinct cultural moment embedded in everyday consumer objects and reveals how such media helped shape the collective psyche of a generation. In similar fashion, Inaya Fanis-Hodeib celebrates the nostalgia of common Lebanese consumer objects, capturing an entire culture's memories in each piece. These works bring out a form of nostalgic collective resonance that also reflects the ways in which consumerism and daily objects are weaved together in the tapestry of time that we are all collectively attuned to.

Conclusion

The women artists and artisans featured in the exhibition are attending to the work that is required for their artistic practice. Their artworks foreground materiality and craftsmanship, reveling in the creation process itself, while offering new perspectives through a variety of mediums. These artists highlight how process is integral to meaning, where textiles, ceramics, found objects, and natural materials are not necessarily separate from painting, sculpture, and photography. Rather, they all belong to the realm of contemporary art, as they give room for work that is both rigorous and experimental in its very process. Women at Work ultimately invites viewers to reconsider their perception of practices historically associated with women, challenging the boundaries between art and craft prevalent in our cultural understanding. It affirms these practices not as peripheral, but as vital, innovative, and deeply embedded in the language of contemporary art.



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