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Journal

Muqarnas, 34(1)

ISSN

0732-2992

Author

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Publication Date

2017

DOI

10.1163/22118993_03401P009

Peer reviewed

Muqarnas

An Annual on the Visual Cultures
of the Islamic World

Editor

Gülru Necipoğlu

Managing Editor

Maria J. Metzler

VOLUME 34

Sponsored by

The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture
at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute
of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts



BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

2017

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BRILL



ANNEKA LENSSEN

ADHAM ISMA'IL'S ARABESQUE: THE MAKING OF RADICAL ARAB PAINTING IN SYRIA

This article was the winner of the 2014 Margaret B. Ševčenko Prize, awarded by the Historians of Islamic Art Association.

In the final days of 1951, the painter Adham Isma'il (1922–63), a quiet but ambitious artist in Syria's nascent national art world, sat down to compose a letter to an Iraqi colleague, the artist Jamil Hamoudi (1924–2003), who was then studying in Paris.¹ Isma'il had been following Hamoudi's frequent dispatches to Beirut's *al-Adib*, a leading Arabic-language cultural journal, which gave detailed reports on the main players in postwar Paris and the city's ascendant trends in abstract art.² Hamoudi, who claimed the role of both patriotic participant-observer and promoter of Arab artists in the metropole, had even issued a call to artists of the Arab countries requesting that they send him reports and photographs of their work for compilation into a survey text.³ Isma'il, meanwhile, as he wrote to Hamoudi that December, had just weathered a distressing national salon in Damascus, the country's second annual. He had exhibited the large and startling painting *The Porter* as the public debut of his new method of composition in "unending, spontaneous line" and "inspired" colors (fig. 1).⁴ But despite the fact that the work thrilled the more avant-garde ranks of intellectuals who, like Isma'il, yearned for a transformation of the Syrian cultural order, it had failed to move the exhibition jury, which awarded all prizes to academic genre works. This outcome, Isma'il notes in his letter, confirmed the unfortunate truth of the salon's bourgeois character: it was functioning to procure decorations for ministerial offices, not to cultivate meaningful modern art.⁵

Isma'il's letter testifies to the ongoing struggle to produce a modern art appropriate to an Arab region of newly independent states, and to do so by some measure of collective, interlinked effort. But it also takes a second step, namely outlining a programmatic approach to this desired collectivity—and this step, a crucial one for the international formation of an idea of Arab modernism, is my focus here. As Isma'il relates in the opening paragraph of his missive from Damascus to Paris, he and his cohort of "cultured youth" had committed to pursuing meaning in a realm apart from that of the state and its materialistic concerns, industrial conditions, and reactionary fears of change.⁶ They had come to perceive that "the genius latent in the people," which had persisted in a potential state for years and years, was beginning to vanish and die. And against that suffocation, they called for a turn towards an encompassing, creative Arab life as a reservoir of energy, containing not only the means to reclaim and reshape the status quo, but also the fountainhead of meaningful art. As Isma'il puts it to Hamoudi,

We want to resurrect this originary genius, setting it forth within the currents of international art, coloring them with its spirit, and making the Arab East into a source for abiding, vital art.⁷

This particular confession of commitment to a living dynamism in resistance to the deadening effects of mechanization resonates in numerous ways with the influential vitalist thought of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, which helped to shift critical artistic discourse, in the early twentieth century, to matters of bodily and affective experience.⁸ Yet in proposing his collective artistic program in this way, and in speaking



Fig. 1. Adham Isma'īl, *The Porter (al-Ḥammāl)*, 1951, oil on canvas, 80 × 100 cm. National Museum, Damascus. (Photo: Anneka Lenssen)

of a resurrection of collective genius, Isma'il also insists on a specificity of cultural access to immanence and experience. He and his cohort recognized the Arab East (rather than spirit in general, or God, or the nation-state) as the procreative source of their living art; this specificity regarding the basis of unity mattered dearly during the region's first decades of independence.⁹ What follows in this article is an exploration of the implications of Isma'il's artistic and political recourse to the Arab collective. My reading of his theory and practice highlights the radical charge it holds for the Syrian context in particular, since Isma'il desired not only to bring about change through his painting, but also to effect a structural transformation in relations and values.¹⁰ In aiming to disidentify his art from the ordered representational categories of Syria's ministries and wealthy officials, Isma'il organized it instead as an interaction with, and even an extension of, an unbounded reservoir of Arab popular energies.

In point of fact, the Syrian state held no monopoly on national culture in these years. Political conditions were highly unstable; in 1949 alone, citizens witnessed a succession of three military coups d'état, which removed the civilian president Shukri al-Quwatli and installed Colonel Adib Shishakli at the head of the army and in shadow control of other government functions. Furthermore, most new cultural discourses emanated from the ideological opposition parties that had emerged as forces in Syrian politics—including the Communist Party, the Ba'th Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and the Muslim Brotherhood—and were organized against the corruption and narrow-mindedness of the National Bloc, the party of the land-owning elite.¹¹ These opposition parties drew the bulk of their membership from a new generation of upwardly mobile youth educated in the French *brevet* system, who read both the Arabic and Francophone press avidly, debated the current ideas about society and civilization, and demanded more comprehensive social change as a basis for a transformed national future.¹² They also represented a significant audience for the country's young, self-identified artists. These artists, many of whom maintained affiliations with the parties, had organized into cultural circles and civic organizations in support of their work.¹³ In these forums for cultural debate, the government's au-

thority was not necessarily taken as a given, nor was the Syrian nation-state reified.¹⁴ In Isma'il's case, it was the cultural arm of the Ba'th Party, which included his brother Sidqi Isma'il (1924–72) as well as Wahib al-Ghanim, Sulayman al-'Isa, and Youssef Shaqra, that provided the crucible for his politically engaged practice.¹⁵ Their movement espoused pan-Arab unity and socialist property reform while contesting the authority of the National Bloc.¹⁶

The Syrian Ministry of Education and Directorate of Antiquities had organized the first national art salon, held in December 1950, under the uncertain circumstances of Colonel Shishakli's new regime.¹⁷ The result, perhaps unsurprisingly, failed to present a fully cohesive view of the national arts. Though sympathetic Damascus newspapers had heralded it as a step toward "our modern artistic resurgence,"¹⁸ no sooner had the exhibition opened than journalists and citizens raised spirited critiques of the jury's decisions and the government's motivations. To observers attuned to world prestige politics, Syria's adoption of a version of a modern European salon model—looking to Paris's Salon d'Automne, among others—signaled a welcome commitment to international norms.¹⁹ Yet the same group also worried about the failure of the event to uphold those norms, most notably within the expansive "Exhibition of Hand Painting" structure the organizers adopted, which featured calligraphy, carving, and textiles alongside beaux-arts painting and sculpture.²⁰ As the cosmopolitan critic for *al-Naṣr* lamented, event organizers had focused on quantity, not quality.²¹ Very few of the pieces would have been competitive in Paris, he asserted, and some, such as drawing exercises from an old schoolbook and copies of postcards, even failed to qualify as art at all.²² Artists on the other side of the divide voiced concerns as well, with calligraphers and craftsmen critiquing the jury's preference for oil paintings, which they decried as a bias toward the "individualistic" format of European art over works of an "Oriental spiritual" character.²³ No one yet felt that the question of the nature of Syria's modern art had been settled. Furthermore, the execution of the exhibition raised questions about leadership: Who should be entrusted with the responsibility for cultivating taste, spiritual health, cultural development, international recognition, and other imperative but elu-

sive outcomes accorded to the modern art object? These questions are reflected in Isma‘il’s contribution to the inaugural salon as well, for he took the event as a forum in which to wage a critique of the state’s failure to fulfill its obligation to its citizens. His *Family of Refugees in Abu Rummana Street* called visitors to witness an allegorizing depiction of the titular refugee family, left to huddle in a park in Damascus’s new, upscale Abu Rummana neighborhood (figs. 2, 3).

When the second salon was held, in November 1951, opening as an elevated “Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture” and a society affair, Isma‘il was ready to use its space to stage a counter-demonstration of the national self, bringing the full force of his aesthetic convictions to bear in *The Porter* as a public work.²⁴ In his selection of content for *The Porter*, he expounded on the theme of social neglect he had raised the previous year by inflecting it into an economic register as well. The work’s titular porter is a day laborer, engaged in a Sisyphean effort to haul materials for new villas in the urban milieu and climbing over the broken bodies of his own family members in order to do so. Similar themes had appeared in the work of other leftist Syrian artists, including Subhi Shouaib’s *A Mistake in Distribution*, which also used a porter as a central figuration of class antagonism (fig. 4). At the level of its compositional mode, however, Isma‘il’s painting asserts its exceptionality by undermining its own representational status and calling forth impulses of liveliness and animation. To make *The Porter*, Isma‘il began by tracing the outlines of the porter’s body and the city background in a continuous line. Having thereby flattened the relationship between figure and ground into an armature of side-by-side shapes, he then filled the spaces with oscillating, non-illusionistic color. Employed thus within what might otherwise be illusionistic space, the mode works to disperse the original structure into attenuated color patterns—with surreal, even anti-artistic results. One sees melting, biomorphic forms. A clutch of fingers and cloth, when filled with candy-red pigment, becomes a beating heart. The dull gray façade of the city eats into a child’s face like acid.

Syrian critics later settled upon the term “arabesque” to describe the technique Isma‘il employed in *The Porter*, thereby invoking both a heritage-oriented commit-



Fig. 2. Adham Isma‘il, *Family of Refugees in Abu Rummana Street* (*Usra min al-Lāji‘īn fī Shāri‘ Abū Rummāna*), 1950, oil on canvas, 65 × 85 cm. Samawi Collection, Dubai. (Photo: provided by the Ayyam Gallery)



Fig. 3. Abu Rummana Street, 1940s, photographic view through new suburbs toward Qasiyun Mountain. (Photo: courtesy of Syrianhistory.com)

ment to Arab-Islamic modes of ornamental expression based on twisting, doubling, and mirroring lines and, at the same time, the modern prestige of the technique in the world’s canon of formal devices.²⁵ In the moment of its 1951 debut, however, descriptive responses varied widely as newspapers reported that it grabbed attention,



Fig. 4. Subhi Shouaib, *A Mistake in Distribution (Khaṭā' fi-l-tawzī')*, 1951, ink and watercolor on paper, 32 × 24 cm. (Reprinted from *Said Tahseen, Subhi Shouaib, Syrian Plastic Arts Series 2* [Damascus: Salhini Printing and Publishing, 1989], 21.)

astonishing onlookers with its vivid content and unclassifiable style.²⁶ The elitist critic at *al-Naṣr*, for example, lauded the modern conceptualism of Isma'il's approach, writing that the literalism of preceding efforts had finally been overcome with a mode of distillation in accordance with the "rational scientific age."²⁷ Meanwhile, the newspaper *al-Ishtirākiyya*, the mouthpiece of the Arab Socialist Party, celebrated Isma'il's apparently populist mode of address: the use of bright points of color (such as the red sparks in the porter's head, thigh, and foot and the yellow in his face and spinal cord) to convey the "shining" physical and mental effort of his struggle directly to viewers, including those who were not "well-studied."²⁸ In the main, Syria's newspaper critics were fully engaged in emphasizing Isma'il's break

with academicism and stressing his commitment to an underlying concept or theory. Very few, however, went so far as to articulate the parameters or stakes of said theory. This hesitancy of articulation mattered to its meaning, I would like to suggest. As Isma'il conveys to Hamoudi as well as (in more coded fashion) to his Damascus audiences, his guiding concept is the totality of the Arab East, as a nonrational, timeless vitality.²⁹ As such, it necessarily evades verbalization or other conventional representation, manifesting instead in the matching of moving color to moving forces and acting upon a realm of apperception. Furthermore, its mechanism of manifestation, as we shall see, parallels the collective political mechanisms embraced by the Ba'ṯh movement intellectuals. As the artist's brother, Sidqi Isma'il, who was then the cultural editor of *al-Ba'ṯh* newspaper, liked to assert, they saw their political program as a lived resistance bearing little relation to electoral representation in parliament.³⁰

To put Isma'il's "arabesque" painting within a broader art-historical perspective, the artist, like many other painters in the penumbra of the Francophone art world after the Second World War, conceptualized his painting as a site of potentially free experience—including the artistic freedom of separating the joy of artistic means from service to a representational end.³¹ As I shall explore in the final section of this article, the many influences and sources engaged by Isma'il form a dense intertextual matrix of associations with the arabesque, including European studies of Islamic art, the modern art of the early twentieth century, drawing pedagogy, and comparative cultural analysis. Within this intellectual field, the phenomenon of abstract composition in unending line and inspired color could be recognized as a transhistorical phenomenon at work in medieval Arab-Islamic ornamentation as well as in the pictorial inventions of the Fauves. Accordingly, we see Isma'il playing with capricious twists of line in ways that rework the relationships among multiple civilizational inheritances. In the late 1940s, his drawings sometimes betray an interest in Picasso, forming faces from the overlay of red and green tracery, but others emphasize the Eastern spirituality of the dancing line (figs. 5, 6). The caprice of his lines can even exert an anti-artistic effect on his pictures, mapping processes that evade



Fig. 5. Adham Isma'il, no title, 1948, gouache on paper. Private collection, Damascus. (Photo: provided by Issam Darwish)



Fig. 6. Adham Isma'il, *Warm Breeze (Nasama Hārra)*, 1948, watercolor on paper. Private Collection, Nicosia. (Photo: Anneka Lenssen)

closure as picture—as if to signal their allegiance to a different force (fig. 7). As such, Isma'il's body of work invites closer exploration of the tensions implicit in the Eurocentrism of the postwar historiography of modern painterly arts, which placed Paris-based modernists such as Henri Matisse at the head of a single continuous development into ever more perfect abstraction.³²

Finally, given the complexity of Isma'il's negotiations with art-historical genealogies, constructions of Arabness, and state cultural policy (with the latter two in frequent conflict), his work must also be taken as a challenge to the nation-state framing that has hitherto structured the literature on the region's modernism. In seeking to forge a coherent narrative arc, many of the foundational studies of modern art in the Arab countries place it squarely within a notion of a vertically integrated state, with the result that individual artworks have been analyzed as affirmative contributions to nation-building projects.³³ These readings resonate at the broad interpretative level of world political and economic history, particularly given the authoritarian cast of the military regimes that seized power in the region in the 1960s. In the 1970s, for example, when the legacy of *The Porter* was consolidated in Syria, the leading critics emphasized its early deployment of Arab heritage and an ethos of Arab resistance, which were the cultural mantras of that era's Ba'ath Party state.³⁴ As Tariq al-Sharif puts it in a 1972 study, Isma'il first "spoke" the word "arabesque" in *The Porter* and thereby linked a modern idiom to national culture and shared social concerns.³⁵ Such readings do not, however, allow for considerations of painting practice in Syria as contingent, dissonant, and even oppositional. I do not, in the main, disagree with al-Sharif's suggestion that the artist aimed to forge a newly activated visual language as a means to a populist goal; however, I propose a shift in focus. Let us consider the arabesque in these paintings not as a nativist motif but, rather, as the project of activation that Isma'il proposed in his own testimony. I return to the archival record of personal letters, writings, and journalism to uncover a concept of Arab painting that is at once more pointed and more ambitious than subsequent discussions have allowed: Arab painting as a means to address and enact an uncoerced political unity.³⁶



Fig. 7. Adham Isma'il, no title, 1952, gouache on paper. Agial Gallery, Beirut. (Photo: Anneka Lenssen)

ABSTRACTING THE ARAB HOMELAND

Isma‘il formed an intellectual bond with his party cohort long before the inauguration of the Ba‘th movement in the early 1940s. The group hailed from the same neighborhood in Antioch, a city in the administrative district of Alexandretta (present-day Hatay Province).³⁷ This natural port region located between French Mandate Syria and republican Turkey formed part of a strategic trade route to Aleppo and beyond, into British Imperial South Asia. For most of the duration of the French Mandate, the district was administered as part of Syria. Beginning in the 1930s, however, Alexandretta became the subject of a Turkish irredentist campaign that culminated in its annexation in January 1939.³⁸ As Turkish and Arab groups made competing claims to Alexandretta, the crisis of sovereignty broke along highly ethnicized lines, which—among other sociopolitical effects—raised the concept of Arabness to a meta-category meant to establish a shared basis for territorial rights. The Isma‘il family, who were native Arabic speakers and ‘Alawites (lit. “followers of ‘Ali,” a syncretic branch of Twelver Shi‘ism), volunteered for the politicized Arab cause with great dedication.³⁹ When it became clear in 1938 that Turkish claims would prevail, however, Isma‘il’s Antioch group left for Syria proper, going first to Aleppo, then Hama, and eventually Damascus. They brought the bitter experience of having lost the battle with them, which gave lasting shape to their political subjectivities.⁴⁰ Many continued to draw on the memory of the Arab cause for years, making Arabism a source of identity and community as well as a basis for progressive politics and a framework for creative activity. In Damascus, they banded together to form the first nucleus of a political movement that went on to grow, diversify, and incorporate as the Arab Ba‘th Party in 1947.⁴¹ As the Iraqi historian Hana Batatu notes in his examination of the class origins of the Ba‘th, the Alexandretta stream contributed the distinctive ardor of “injured people” to the movement.⁴²

Bearing in mind Isma‘il’s personal experience of displacement, his first contribution to the national salon in 1950, *Family of Refugees in Abu Rummana Street*, takes on a heightened poignancy (fig. 2). The painting presents destitution as if it were a holy virtue, showing its

human subjects within the compositional schema of the Christian Holy Family. Made both timeless and timely, the family stands in for the entire series of tragic losses of homeland suffered by Arabs, which by 1950 included not only Alexandretta but also Palestine after the 1948 creation of the state of Israel and the wars that followed it, uprooting nearly a million people and sparking an ongoing international quarrel over obligations to provide for such stateless persons.⁴³ At the same time, Isma‘il’s scrupulous attention to detail adds a strong class dimension to his depiction of Arab loss, highlighting the wealthy, hostile environment: the manicured shrubbery of the new al-Madfa park, the interior warmth of the expensive villas, and the U-shaped string of electric streetcar lights extending up the foothills of Qasiyun Mountain. In *The Porter*, the very same Abu Rummana backdrop once again provides the frame for a commentary on acute class divisions in Damascus, but the details of place are transposed into a condensed plane of color oscillation, with a transformative effect. The city façades become a pattern of splicing tones that not only cross the central figure but also strip him of matter, making him unreal as a body. The political charge of the work manifests in its compositional dissolution via the internal life of its component line and color.

So as to better understand the political stakes of this artistic pivot from objects to rhythms and from Syrian stasis to Arab immanence, it is necessary to consider the Alexandretta crisis of 1936–39 in more detail. Under the Ottoman empire at the turn of the century, the district had been a remarkably diverse one in terms of linguistic, religious, and racial difference, home as it was to communities of Muslims, ‘Alawites, Arab Christians, Armenian Christians, Kurds, Circassians, and others, most of whom spoke several languages each.⁴⁴ Following the First World War and the defeat of the Ottomans, however, a new rubric of national self-determination came to bear in international disputes over territorial sovereignty, and with it the corollary concern of extending sufficient protection to the minority cultures within these new nation-states.⁴⁵ The Treaty of Versailles, for example, created states for certain aggrieved nationalist groups and revised European borders to accommodate the demands of others.⁴⁶ In the case of France’s administration of its “mandate” over Syria, as granted by the

League of Nations, a colonial version of ethnic territorial determination was applied: Lebanon was separated from Syria on religious grounds and within Syria itself, there were further communal and religious subdivisions into Druze, 'Alawite, and Arab regions. Alexandretta presented a particular challenge to this dispensation, however. Faced with a complex population of intermarried ethnic and linguistic groups with no apparent "national" majority in the district, authorities treated Alexandretta as an exception. It was designated a semi-autonomous entity within the state of Syria, with its own appointed government and tariff system and special provisions for the schooling and cultural protection of its Turkish residents.⁴⁷ At the time, this hedged solution to an administrative problem was recognized as provisional, with a renegotiation of the territorial terms of trade anticipated in the eventual independence of a "mature" Syrian nation-state.

France's administrative vision of an intact Syria was not the only one promulgated as rightful under the principles of the League of Nations, however. As the Turkish state agitated for control of the district during Isma'il's adolescence in Antioch, it did so on the basis of the same legal concerns for self-determination and minority rights.⁴⁸ This point proved particularly salient to the eventual shape of Isma'il's commitments. On the ground in the Alexandretta of the 1930s, as the Turkish irredentist cause worked to render racial identity into the determinant of self-rule, the obverse characterization—Arabness—was reinforced, and also operated as a performative cultural framework. Both the Turkish and Arab identities became supra-religious categories that contained any number of other subgroups within them, and both entailed a more complex commitment than the simple ascription of national affiliation.⁴⁹ A turning point came in 1936, when the Popular Front rose to elected power in France, which returned the question of Syrian independence to the diplomatic table and brought a Syrian delegation to Paris to draft a Franco-Syrian independence treaty.⁵⁰ When politicians in Ankara saw how the treaty presumed to keep Alexandretta as a territory of the future Syrian nation-state, they moved quickly to contest it. Initially focusing their campaign on the cause of the Turkish residents, they argued to the League of Nations that those residents would be

left vulnerable to Arab persecution. The ante was upped over the course of the following year, as some began to advocate for a vote to determine popular will, with the cause reaching a fever pitch in November 1936, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk gave a speech claiming that the district's population was "purely Turkish."⁵¹ By then, activists on both sides had brought the dispute to organizations on the ground, seeking to code the citizens who belonged to various minority communities into the master categories of Turkish or Arab. As the social order in Alexandretta deteriorated under the stress of these developments, the League of Nations entered the fray. It dispatched a five-person commission to the district on January 1, 1937, which precipitated large-scale demonstrations by both Turkish and Arab Syrian nationalists, each trying to assert majority status (fig. 8), which in turn spurred violent clashes and gunfights.

In Antioch, the Isma'il family—which included a father, 'Ali; mother, Amina; four brothers (Adham, Sidqi, Na'im, and 'Aziz); and one sister, Rafiqa—actively embraced Arab identity as the rubric for their future self-determination and got involved in pamphleteering. Their choice was informed by everyday experience: Adham and Sidqi, for example, felt their Arabness acutely during the walk to their French preparatory school on the other side of town, passing through increasingly hostile and predominantly Turkish neighborhoods.⁵² But their self-recognition was equally driven by an already existing aspiration to renew the cultural collective. Their middle-class 'Alawite neighborhood in Antioch, 'Afan, had lobbied successfully to establish an Arabic-language primary school. And at the city's French high school, Zaki al-Arsuzi (1899–1968)—a nationalist leader, a Paris-educated teacher of 'Alawite origins, and a future co-founder of the Ba'th Party—had also launched an Arab renaissance club soon after his return from studies in Paris in 1930.⁵³ This club, which reinvented a former Christian-run Fine Arts Club as an Arabist platform, was an act of radical incorporation. It posed a mirrored response to the Turkish youth clubs that had sprung up in the region, while also aiming to foster unity against French sectarianism.⁵⁴ Such initiatives laid the groundwork upon which the Isma'il brothers (as well as many other students in their neighborhood) were mobilized for the Arab cause. In the early days of the crisis, they



Fig. 8. Photograph of protests staged in Antioch for the January visit of the League of Nations commission. The captions read “Protests of Arab Antioch” and “Syrians Depend on the League of Nations.” (Reprinted from Committee for the Defense of Alexandretta, *Irādat al-‘Arab Taḍmanu Ḥuqūqahum: al-Iskandarūna ‘Arabiyya Raghma Kull Quwwa* [Damascus: Ibn Zaydun Printers, 1937].)

joined the youth brigades of the League of National Action, a pan-Arab movement that Syria’s more activist Arab nationalists had formed out of frustration with the National Bloc, and which al-Arsuzi, a founding member, used in Alexandretta as a network for material support.⁵⁵ Isma‘il’s work as a scout included helping to organize strikes and rallies, to which he contributed his calligraphic skill and ideas for stage décor.⁵⁶ Al-Arsuzi also launched the newspaper *al-Urūba* and created an

Arabism Club as a community rallying point, which offered evening lectures and Arab plays in the squares and sports clubs.

When the commission from the League of Nations began to issue its recommendations for managing the crisis of representation it had witnessed in Alexandretta, the idea that ethnic identity ought to determine national status became reified. In late January 1937, the commission proposed to maintain the autonomous status of the district and to treat it separately from the rest of Syrian territory. Four months later, the League ratified a new Statute and Fundamental Law for Alexandretta, which was intended to make communal differences more distinct and legible through a system of parliamentary representation based upon the relative size of each recognized community (Turkish, ‘Alawite, Arab, Armenian, Greek Orthodox, Kurdish, and “other”).⁵⁷ So as to implement this distribution of legislative power, the Fundamental Law in turn called for a comprehensive registration of adult men. In March 1938, the registration policy was clarified, so that it was now based upon personal disclosure: each man in the district would be required to appear before a board and declare his affiliation with one community to the exclusion of the others.⁵⁸ These developments intensified the work of the youth brigades, who traveled the countryside as foot soldiers in a campaign to promote the racial abstraction of “Arab” over “Turk,” imploring peasant communities to think and feel like Arabs.⁵⁹ One tactic was to make unlettered Arab persons “whole” as political subjects by teaching them to read and write Arabic, a strategy whereby the shape and sound of the common language was first incorporated in individual bodies and then mapped onto territory and rights. The students ventured into the villages and used elementary reading and writing exercises as an occasion to present their philosophy of Arabism.⁶⁰ The project was not unlike the alphabet modernization efforts in Turkey that had recently concluded, but with the distinction that the Arabic language could be claimed as a natural symbolic product of Arab life rather than a break with historical modes.

As others have shown in detail, the communal registration process proved singularly useless as a mechanism for due process in Alexandretta, with collusion and coercion being the standard practice at registration

stations.⁶¹ Moreover, the outward display of the vote had already been undermined, for Turkey had struck a secret agreement with France to ensure that the results would clear the way for annexation. By the time Alexandretta was incorporated as the Turkish province of Hatay in January 1939, some fifty thousand people, including Isma'il's group, had already left the district to resettle elsewhere in Syria.⁶² The students among these migrants hoped to complete their degrees in the Syrian Arabic system, yet Isma'il's group found itself bouncing from school to school, for the French authorities viewed their politicized status as a threat to the administrative order (a fear that was buttressed by French intelligence reports about ongoing student protests against the colonial presence, many of which noted that Alexandretans played leadership roles).⁶³ At the end of the year, Isma'il and his group tried to return to Antioch but were turned back at the border, after which time they made their way to Damascus (while others went to Iraq). In Syrian parlance, the Alexandretans were called the *liwā'yyūn*, or "people from the *liwā'*"—with *liwā'* being an Arabic term used in Ottoman administration, meaning a part or subdivision (i.e., *Liwā' Iskandarūna*). Fittingly, the term gave recognition to their status as citizens of a detached territory—a place that had once been part of Syria but was no longer legally so—and as a bracketed populace consisting of persons who were of Syria but not completely within it.

In Damascus, the *liwā'yyūn* from Isma'il's neighborhood reunited with a similarly uprooted al-Arsuzi, and the group spent the difficult war years of 1940 to 1944 together, with many sharing an unheated house in the neighborhood of Sha'lan while the students among them tried to complete their preparatory and university studies.⁶⁴ Organizing their life collectively, they maintained a keen sense of the alterity of the Arab ontology—its difference from the indignities of their daily grind, and its principled separation from the hegemonic Syrian state. The group followed a regular schedule that included preparing shared meals, completing school lessons, passing time in nearby cafés, and then listening to al-Arsuzi deliver an evening lecture, followed by debate into the night.⁶⁵ The themes of these evening gatherings tended to be either historical or metaphysical, with al-Arsuzi speaking to the past strengths of Arabic and the

Arabs, mechanisms of revolution and nationalism in the world, and the genius of the Arab *umma*.⁶⁶ One early witness to their brotherhood described the group as a kind of "Sufi order" in recognition of their organization around a search for internal, immanent knowledge.⁶⁷ This collectivism also foregrounded the capacity of Arabism to be an animating force, buttressed by al-Arsuzi's readings of German Romantic philosophy and Bergson's theories of creative *élan*, which al-Arsuzi had studied during his time in Paris from 1927 to 1930.⁶⁸ Theirs was a powerfully allusive version of vitalism, one that brought notions of religious illumination into alignment with a belief in the latent popular energy of the Arabs as a people. At times, the project also took on a secularized messianic cast, as al-Arsuzi reminded the group that their suffering carried the responsibility for liberating seventy million Arabs.⁶⁹ Finally, in 1941, at the end of that year's extraordinarily cold winter, al-Arsuzi called for the formation of a political movement, one that would give a new organizational structure to their solidarity in dispossession. Members went out into the city and scrawled an inaugural declaration of existence in chalk on an urban wall, writing: "We are here living under a great Arab socialist state" and "We are here under a single Arab homeland."⁷⁰ With these declarations, they not only enunciated their existence as a solidarity movement (understood as a "state" responding to a unity of cultural and class interests), but also located the movement in a "here" that transgressed territorial boundaries. Their space of politics, in other words, would manifest as a recuperation or renaissance (literally *al-ba'th*) of an Arab self, correlated to an encompassing Arab nationalism.

Over the next few years, the movement pursued outreach via a person-to-person system of networked enlightenment, bringing awareness of their version of Arabism to new elements of the community. The movement expanded significantly in 1942 through a merger with a student movement directed by Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar. In these years, their imagination of Arab political change became integrated, to a certain extent, with other registers of civic agitation for independence. Prior to 1946, Ba'th members attended discussions held at the Café Moulin Rouge on tactics for ousting the French, and also joined a volunteer gendar-

merie to counter France's monopoly on military force.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the *lwā'yyūn* intellectuals remained ever conscious of the difference between their version of patriotism and that of their national politicians. In Sidqi Isma'īl's voluminous correspondence with friends and comrades, he expresses his alienation with moving ardor. One letter, dated July 1944, describes his feeling that dictatorship had persisted in the world in spite of Allied successes, with oppression simply moving from individual rulers to entire governmental systems.⁷² Another, from 1945, expresses ambivalence regarding his instrumentalized work for the party's Cultural Committee, confessing to feeling nostalgic for the nights they had spent listening to al-Arsuzi teach, eyes "aglow" with the light of Arabism.⁷³ Yet another, written on Evacuation Day in 1946, deems the participation of Egyptian, Iraqi, and Hijazi troops a hollow display of unity, made meaningless by a lack of commitment to Arabism on the part of Shukri al-Quwatli and other elites.⁷⁴ Even the official party documents to which Sidqi Isma'īl contributed, such as their April 1947 constitution as the Arab Resurrection Party (*Ḥizb al-Ba'th al-'Arabī*), acknowledge a current condition of "strife" in the service of a reawakening Arab nationalism.⁷⁵ The rhetoric is oriented to a future amelioration of alienation, including a promise that all the "artificial" differences found among the members of the Arab nation will disappear once the Arab consciousness is awakened. Further, the 1947 party constitution again emphasizes the individual act of electing into the whole without recourse to the state and its mechanisms. It defines "Arab" as an identity that can be believed in and performed, extending the status to "anyone whose language is Arabic, who lives in the Arab homeland or aspires to live therein, and who believes in his connection to the Arab people."⁷⁶

In his role as an intellectual within a movement professing creative power, Sidqi Isma'īl frequently directed his attention to artists and artistic theories, and particularly so in letters to university colleagues. One of the most telling letters, dated October 5, 1947 (six months after the Party congress), discusses his and his brother's convictions regarding the role of an animate and animating imagination (*khayāl*) as a basis for art.⁷⁷ The letter, which is written to a female colleague, discusses the visionary nature of Leonardo da Vinci's approach to his

craft, the achievements of modern French artists, and then finally the greatness of Picasso and his "astonishing" recent drawings. The "strongest possible" definition of art, he writes, is the one a critic had formulated in a reading of Leonardo da Vinci's process: that art is a "mental thing," *une chose mentale*.⁷⁸ The mental aspect is derived from the synthesizing and abstracting work of composition, work that the inspired artist performs in recognition of the underlying, abiding imagination of human existence—making any one work of art a slender phantasm of the whole. Sidqi Isma'īl goes on to write about the same liberated understanding of painting in Renoir and his glowing version of Impressionism, the genius of Corot's use of light and shade, and Cézanne's capacity to reveal emotional heat even within the whiteness of snow. By his account, the genius of free dynamism can also be discerned in true contemporary art, even in movements (such as Cubism) that emphasize deformation and incongruity. He describes how he and his brother Adham had devoted two hours of contemplation to one of Picasso's recent pictures, a painting of a woman and cat depicted with virtuosic red, green, and white lines (fig. 9).⁷⁹ The work had come under criticism in Europe for its perceived ugliness, they knew, but after immersing themselves in the whole, they came to perceive its underlying harmony of color and flowing lines, and its "eternal plastic value" in such passages as the white linear variegation (*raqsh*) on the woman's breast. Ultimately, such a work seemed to Sidqi Isma'īl to demonstrate Picasso's greatness. The artist answered to no god other than the "omnipotent god" of the imagination. His lines, unencumbered by a relationship to material things, work in the realm of internal motivation, there producing eternally resonant form.

Sidqi Isma'īl chronicles his brother's painting, too, most frequently with descriptions of the metaphysical effects of color or the act of deploying it. One letter, from August 15, 1949, describes how Isma'īl's use of vivid colors effects an inverse condition in his own body: as volatile reds appeared in the skies he painted, conveying "revolution, fire, blood, and tragedy," a pallor seemed to overtake Isma'īl himself.⁸⁰ The letter was composed by Sidqi Isma'īl on the day after the second of the three coups d'état of 1949, yet it makes no direct mention of that event. Instead, it seems, he transposes national



Fig. 9. Pablo Picasso, *Dora Maar with Cat* (*Dora Maar au chat*), 1941, oil on canvas, 128.3 cm × 95.3 cm. Private Collection. (Artwork: © 2017 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: courtesy of Sotheby's, Inc. © 2006)

uncertainty into a consideration of mortality and immortality in painting. When he does write reflectively about the calamities of 1949, in an end-of-the-year poem that he composed for circulation among party comrades, he folds the life-to-death inversions of Isma'il's painting into a broader account of the Syrian government's procedural undoing of their natural talents.⁸¹ One friend lives without a salary, another is a navigator without a boat, another has been passed over for the military, another gambles in politics for sport, another is a poet who has lost his voice, and so on, with his "painter brother" (Isma'il) left to listen to his own colors "weep" in the lightlessness of their world. In every case, Sidqi Isma'il writes, the succession of "coups, upturned things, and overturners" has changed very little, for,

while the government builds glorious things from the people's money, the people are left to live in pens. Finally, in a poem written in 1951, he makes the painter's struggle to extract art from the world into a struggle for legibility as himself:

I have a brother who gave his life to art. Neither fame nor a few dirhams beguiled him. Those who saw him, know him but deny it, saying with curiosity: "Is that Adham?" His brush approached exhaustion, painting upon every wall in the streets.⁸²

Here, Sidqi Isma'il's conception of art fully parallels the movement's conception of Arabism—its source is a living inspiration that drew from and gave to bodies.

We can now consider these attitudes alongside the drawings and paintings Isma'il made after 1947, a year that marks not only the normalization of the Ba'ath Party but also Isma'il's decision to normalize himself as a professional artist by completing the credentials necessary for teaching art in Syrian high schools.⁸³ Much of the work he produced during this time takes the form of exercises in technique and follows two paths of experiment. The first path consists of paintings depicting landscapes, often recollected ones from Alexandretta. In these, Isma'il takes an expressive turn, using rough dots and touches of color to make abstract fields (fig. 10). Daubs of dark, opaque pigment appear in flat arrays of texture, from which glints a surface pattern of brilliant yellow marks that, by their lack of mediation, claim a garish presence in the eye (fig. 11). In this sense, they manifest vital qualities that are akin to the ones Sidqi Isma'il recognizes in Vincent van Gogh's paintings, where "living yellow color" seems to manifest the very sense of "greater blessedness" that is also to be found in the music and poetry in the East, in Japan and beyond.⁸⁴ Insofar as each component mark in the landscapes shows itself to be an illuminating presence, we might describe them as evincing a Ba'athist notion of inspiration. In the second path Isma'il follows in his exercises, he concentrates on faces as the central subject, including riffs on the styles of other artists. One particularly fascinating gouache sketch from 1948 (already referenced earlier) appears to respond to the very composition of the Picasso painting of woman and cat to which he had responded with Sidqi Isma'il (figs. 5, 9). Rendering it into an elegant visual study in rose and green line,



Fig. 10. Adham Isma'il, no title, 1940s, acrylic on paper, mounted in an album. Private collection, Nicosia. (Photo: Anneka Lenssen)



Fig. 11. Adham Isma'il, no title, 1940s, oil on canvas. Private collection, Damascus. (Photo: provided by Issam Darwish)

Isma'il retains the ambiguous internal relationships between facial profile and full-face rendering that make eyes, nose, and lips into floating signifiers. Yet he emphasizes the movement of the line over any sense of human personality, attenuating its twists and turns into a trace of movement or music. Heightening the impression of its self-contained suspension in space, Isma'il uses only washed tones of cream and pink beneath the painted lines and adds a hint of biomorphic energies in the final curling of the line into a shell or breast. If Picasso's woman suggests animal presence, then Isma'il's is an immaterial entity: curtains that flutter in the breeze, color that twists into dance, and a body that indexes a creativity that extends beyond either thing or self.

Such would seem to be Isma'il's personal preoccupations as an artist. But after having taken on teaching work in the schools, which were still a hotbed of ideological activism, he now also faced the new challenge of mobilizing the conjunction of performative Arab identity, creative spirit, and political solidarity that the *liwā'iyyūn* had first proposed a decade earlier. In 1950, he landed a coveted teaching position in Damascus at the preparatory high school in Maydan, a neighborhood where the Ba'th Party enjoyed wide support among both educated youth and their middle-class trader fathers.⁸⁵ From all reports, Isma'il took his work as an educator as an opportunity to put egalitarian ideals into practice, and he taught with the spirit of noncoercive self-realization that the movement pursued elsewhere.⁸⁶ He even managed, in May 1951, to arrange a counter-exhibition to the national salon, securing permission to install an exhibition of student work in the very same museum hall that had hosted the 1950 event. The party's *al-Ba'th* newspaper devoted a page of coverage to the achievement, detailing its demonstration of faith in the potential of the country's youth against the state's bourgeois mores and reprinting Isma'il's short speech from the opening, which takes a prophetic tone.⁸⁷ As "fruits" of Arab talent, the pieces on display give an indication of a great fertility that promises to soon overflow and return them all to the helm of their fate. Their creative forces, he proclaims, would "spread their wings" in the faraway skies, driving them in the direction of immortality.⁸⁸ He concludes his remarks by emphasizing the need to push onward and to "cover hundreds of years in a few leaps," but with the assurance that the resources for doing so include the richness of both external and internal material:

We have the advantage of the Western art movements lying before us and the flames of individual talents burning within us, ready to burst into fire and light, destroying every obstacle and illuminating every path.⁸⁹

A vision of almost supernatural rejuvenation, this conclusion serves to ratify a mode of political change that relies on the capacity of art to tap into and mobilize a living Arab culture.

In light of Isma'il's invocation of the abstract power of Arabism as a pre-representational force, we can return to consider what he may have understood to be at

stake in his submission of *The Porter* to the 1951 salon, coming as it did only five months after the Maydan counter-exhibition. In the previous year, his *Family of Refugees* had offered visitors a mournful genre scene, showing the uprooted families who haunted daily normalcy in Syria. It had also tendered a view on class antagonisms, showing the luxury façades of the new homes aglow with the light of inaccessible comfort. In *The Porter*, these impulses assume a different appearance, as Isma'il isolates line and color in ways that dissolve its subject rather than preserving it in paint. As we have seen, in 1951 the critics developed various interpretations of this visual difference: *al-Ishtirākīyya* gave a particularly socialist-realist value to the mechanism of such a transfer, suggesting that *The Porter* reconfigured the academic devices of painting so as to reach the everyman.⁹⁰ The critic from *Al-Naṣr* was more concerned with the need to keep step with the times, praising Isma'il's abandonment of literary illustration and his use of painting as a plane of inquiry. But by Isma'il's own assessment, as I shall now explore through a closer study of his engagement with the art movements of the Parisian metropole, it was insufficient simply to put form forward as an autonomous event. If we place Isma'il at the center of the catalytic creation of Arab feeling that he forecasts in his May 1951 speech, we can understand his desire to transcode the arabesque from a formal element to an active entity, which is to say into a means to instantiate a natural unity.

NATURALIZING ARAB UNITY

At the same time that Isma'il was carving out the role of a quiet activist amid his more obstreperous comrades in the Ba'ath movement, he was also working to cultivate his skills and recognition in the painterly arts.⁹¹ He undertook these latter tasks in the company of artist friends outside the party circles, many of whom possessed greater social capital in Damascus than did the displaced Alexandrettans. Soon after his arrival in Damascus at the age of seventeen, he had gotten to know Mahmoud Hammad (1923–88) and Nasir Shoura (1920–92) in the arts room of the Damascus National Club near Marja Square.⁹² Through Hammad, Isma'il sometimes also at-

tended Studio Veronese, which had been established by Damascus artists in 1941 as the first dedicated painters' circle in Syria and which featured figure-drawing sessions as well as theoretical debates.⁹³ In its earliest days, the group's approach to training also involved an effort to compensate for a lack of museum access by collecting color reproductions of paintings from journals. For this endeavor, the French mass-circulation picture magazine *L'Illustration* served as a particularly reliable source.⁹⁴ In this section, I examine Isma'il's readings of different modalities of modern painting and their use of arabesque line for greater insight into the radical aspects he developed in his work.

For the artists of Isma'il's generation in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 had the effect of bringing heightened visibility and importance to the artistic craft. As the Iraqi artist Jewad Selim later put it, "Paris and Europe stopped producing beautiful work, but Baghdad did not," and meanwhile its artists labored to "prepare the public to appreciate and understand art."⁹⁵ Buttressing the local efforts to boost artistic activities, there was a flood of Allied cultural propaganda following the July 1941 victory in the Middle East theater. The Free French established radio offices in the Near East and North Africa from which they broadcast texts celebrating the spirit of youth, courage, cheer, and hope as the living forces of the country.⁹⁶ They entered the field of art criticism as well. In its first year of operation, 1942, Beirut's *al-Adīb* published essays on French art and values by Jacques Lassaigne—a critic who was working for the Free French in the Near East—which detailed the liberal values for which Paris had once stood as a kind of civilizational currency.⁹⁷ And Allied networks even brought foreign artists into the region, including a contingent of Polish painters attached to the Polish II Corps, who were stationed in Baghdad.⁹⁸ These artists—several of them Paris-trained—joined their Iraqi colleagues in café debates and even exhibitions, with one, Józef Jarema (1900–1974), also coming to Damascus to install a goodwill exhibition of work at the Orient Club.⁹⁹ Jarema visited the Studio Veronese, engaging its members in discussion about the tenets of post-Impressionism as well as new problems of comparative national aesthetics. These exchanges, which were intensified by the uncertainties of wartime, contin-

ued to echo after the Liberation. Once Lassaigue returned to Paris, he acted as a conduit for Arab artists into the city's reopening circles of exhibition and criticism. He introduced Hamoudi to the abstractionists of the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, the preeminent international forum for concrete, nonfigurative, and abstract artists.¹⁰⁰ As for Jarema, after he shipped out through Palestine and Egypt to Italy in 1944, he converted the aspirational commitment to life and hope of the war years into the institutional form of an international association of Art Clubs, which he dedicated to facilitating direct contact between artists without regard for national borders and toward the goal of renewing universal culture in the shared language of "shapes and colors."¹⁰¹ Settling in Rome, he and his Art Club provided an exhibition home for a new Italian avant-garde of young geometric abstractionists, with Jarema himself also "converting" to abstraction in 1948.¹⁰² Club branches were even established in Egypt and Turkey, but not in Syria, which was still fighting for independence and liberation.¹⁰³

In this way, one kind of international threshold materialized for Isma'il in his understanding of his mission as a modern Arab artist. By dint of the Mandate occupation, the immediate modernist legacy in Syria was markedly French and was also universalized as an open and cosmopolitan platform (characteristics that were the opposite of those of the Vichy years) in defense against the catastrophic racialized regionalism of the Second World War.¹⁰⁴ Crucially, as we have observed, although Isma'il developed his work in the 1940s from the very conceptual heart of the Ba'ath party's cultural programs, he never acted as a party artist in the strict sense of depending on its patronage for a living or upholding any prescribed style (such as socialist realism). Indeed, his comrades would never have expected him to do so. Like many other thinkers in the aftermath of the war, they privileged a model of creation that was free, autonomous, and essentially unmotivated. These points of discursive affinity make it all the more important to consider the expanding field of international modernism in the postwar years of decolonization as a basis for understanding the ambitions of Isma'il's local group, which endeavored to create a movement and to push their world forward. As the art historian Natalie Adamson

carefully shows, while critics in Paris were announcing the "return" of modern art after the Liberation, they also set about reinventing the memory of the city's dynamic and heterogeneous art world as an *École de Paris*.¹⁰⁵ René Huyghe, a curator for the Louvre and consultant to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), for example, mobilized a con-fected memory of how all artists—whether foreign-born or not—had contributed to the universal heritage of this *École*, making openness and assimilation the very definition of the French modern tradition.¹⁰⁶

These promotional schemata directly affected the reception of Arab artists in Paris, where critics had begun to invoke a "nouvelle *École de Paris*" for the postwar era. As the anthropologist Kirsten Scheid writes regarding the reception of the Lebanese abstract painter Saloua Raouda Choucair, who studied and exhibited in Paris from 1948 to 1951, Parisian commentators took the work of Arab aspirants in the city as proof of the renewed viability of the *École de Paris*. In Choucair's case, positive reviews highlighted the presence of an Eastern genius, tradition, and "magnanimous spirit" even in her hard abstractionist paintings.¹⁰⁷ Lassaigue, the critic who had formerly contributed Free French content to *al-Adib*, actively promoted the "nouvelle *École de Paris*," writing exhibition essays in 1950 on young artists from Iran, Turkey, and Egypt who found the city of Paris to be conducive to "their national genius."¹⁰⁸ Hamoudi, too, upheld this position in his narratives about modern Iraqi and Arab art, describing a dynamic rapprochement between the natural resources of bright color and evocative poetry and the "new" preoccupation with abstraction at the Parisian center.¹⁰⁹ In 1950, Hamoudi wrote a guest article for the French journal *Arts* that described how a select few artists in the country—his colleagues Selim, Fahrelnissa Zeid, and Faiq Hassan—had undertaken to recover tradition as a basis for their contributions to the world's modern art, doing so with the knowledge that their traditions included a lineage of accomplished abstract elaboration in Baghdad and Andalusia, where Arab artisans had applied their minds and hands to constructing dazzling monuments.¹¹⁰ Hamoudi's own application of these convictions in painting manifested in compositions of zigzagging black lines derived from Arabic letterforms, punctuated by bright, flat color,

which he exhibited in the 1950 Salon des Réalités Nouvelles (fig. 12). He also enthusiastically championed the work of Zeid, the Turkish-born painter who had become an Iraqi princess through her marriage to Iraq's Prince Ra'd bin Zeid (of the Hashemite dynasty). Reporting to his countrymen about Zeid's 1949 solo exhibition at Paris's renowned Galerie Colette Allendy, he describes how her oil paintings and assemblages of stones produce a "forest garden" experience that impressed famous abstract artists such as Francis Picabia, while

transporting other viewers (fig. 13).¹¹¹ In Zeid's case, he writes, the lines and color of the works seem to float on a ground of Eastern sensibilities.

Here is where the term "arabesque" enters, the mode or "structure" of surface design that Islamic art scholarship has long upheld as exemplary of the Islamic religious-cultural system, but which also plays a role in the historiography of the École de Paris and Romantic literature and music (though I will not address that here).¹¹² From the viewpoint of the first centuries of Is-



Fig. 12. Jamil Hamoudi, *Don Quichotte*, 1950, oil on canvas. Private collection, Baghdad. (Photo: provided by Ishtar Hamoudi)



Fig. 13. Photograph of Fahrelnissa Zeid's home studio, 1949 or 1950. (Reprinted from Jamil Ḥamūdī, "al-Amīra al-'Irāqīyya Fakhr al-Nisā' Zayd," *al-Adīb* 9, no. 3 [March 1950]: 9–12.)

lamic art, as Oleg Grabar notes in his landmark study *The Formation of Islamic Art*, the arabesque might best be understood not as an innovation per se but rather as a way of treating forms syntactically and of producing ornament through the endless repetition and modification of shapes. As Grabar also notes, the ambiguity of the arabesque creates a fundamental challenge for interpretation: as it seems to present both iconographic and ornamental meaning simultaneously, it is experienced as a "parallelism of contradictory sorts of meanings."¹¹³ Whereas Grabar offers his description of this parallelism in a cautionary way, the artists of the nouvelle École de Paris milieu often courted the ambiguity of arabesque as a sign of artistic progress, wherein a representational motif might be distilled into pattern and vice versa. We see this in Hamoudi's commentaries on work in France, certainly, in which the term "arabesque" signals a revival of native resources and a rapprochement with Parisian modernism.¹¹⁴ And we also see it in his selection

of self-promotional texts, such as the two essays he solicited for his solo debut at Galerie Voyelles in April 1950: a French-language introduction from Lassaigue and an Arabic one from Bishr Farès (1906–63), the Lebanese-Egyptian scholar and historian of Islamic art who lived and worked between Cairo and Paris.¹¹⁵ Lassaigue's text invokes the already recognized "superior expressive value of the arabesque line" as evidence of a shared affinity for abstract synthesis among modern artists of both Eastern and Western origin and goes so far as to invoke as evidence scholars' "most recent discoveries" of how the Arab tradition of nonfigurative art emerged from a long process of synthesis rather than a prohibition on human representation.¹¹⁶ Farès's notes, by contrast, position the origins of abstracted Arab ornament in a religious episteme, making the Islamic art of Baghdad "an art that expresses the transience of the object in the path of an understanding of eternity."¹¹⁷ Taken together, this pair of texts enacts the parallelism of contradictory interpretations associated with the arabesque, thereby keeping open the possibility of affinities between Iraq and France without actually resolving them—and rendering Hamoudi's abstractions into an ambivalent project of neither solely formal nor fully conceptual aims.

In these mid-century oscillations, we also see reflected elements of a longer and more varied history of the arabesque as a keyword in cultural analysis. The word "arabesque" itself, as the art historian Roger Benjamin has shown, seems to derive from Italian rather than Arabic origins. It first came into use in the Italian Renaissance as *rabesco*, a description of the scrolling ornamental frames in ancient Roman wall painting, which reminded contemporary viewers of Islamic designs.¹¹⁸ But the heyday of the term "arabesque" as a movable descriptor for a particular mode of decorative composition came in the nineteenth century. This usage of the word was buoyed by a proliferation of research in ornament studies, which in turn was supported by a concern for the modular analysis of applied arts and industrial design. As early as 1850, the term "arabesque" had come to be mobilized in discussions of such varied instances of ornament as Renaissance scrollwork, the "Moorish" style of decorative program at the Alhambra, and even

the characteristic ornament of the Gothic period, with its scroll-cut forms that burgeon forth from the architectural masses themselves, fusing together animal figures and foliage.¹¹⁹ As Gülru Necipoğlu demonstrates, this wide-ranging engagement with ornament took shape around a search for universal design principles in Europe, which overlapped with an equally ahistorical Orientalist discourse.¹²⁰ One outcome of the intersection of formal and civilizational studies for the emerging field of the history of Islamic art, then, was a kind of interpretive narrowing, with scholars seeking to match a characteristic form to a particular cultural tendency or spirit. Most influential in this regard is the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl's pioneering comparative ornament study, *Stilfragen*, published in 1893. Riegl identifies the "full-fledged Islamic arabesque" by its characteristics of infinite planar correspondence and denaturalized, intertwining ornament, linking it to the locomotive force of the Oriental spirit.¹²¹ A half century later, when Ernst Kühnel published his definitive pamphlet-length study *Die Arabeske* (1949), he maintained a similar civilizational remit for the arabesque's impetus. Kühnel presents the arabesque as an expression of Arab character and analyzes its reciprocal reflection and unbroken interlacing (with its subsidiary effects of eschewing the individual ego and avoiding three-dimensional illusionism) as an index of the abiding monotheism of Islam.¹²² In the 1970s, Syria's cultural critics started from a similar take on the arabesque as symbolic form and developed it into a postcolonial call for an authentic Arab art based on natural faith and unity. As the Syrian critic and arts administrator Afif Bahnassi formulated it in 1974, the Arab artist employing the arabesque places neither worldly men nor things at the center of art, and never resorts to *trompe l'oeil*. The impetus for his arabesque lies in "creating a beautiful subject rather than expressing the beauty of the object itself."¹²³

For other art critics, however, the civilizational valences of the arabesque as a compositional element are decidedly different. Concurrent with the specialized inquiry of the Islamic art historian, a second discourse on the arabesque developed from the nineteenth century's considerations of ornament and decoration—and it took form within an art-historical model based on individual volition and sensation, on the opposite side of

Bahnassi in terms of schemata of intent. This is the arabesque of French modernist painting, which, as Roger Benjamin has shown, arose from the new modes of landscape painting adopted by Fauvist artists and other advanced painters in the first decade of the twentieth century. These painters, who rejected the Impressionist practice of transcribing the fleeting feeling of a landscape, turned instead to the task of elaborating a fully decorative composition by means of determined, abstracting devices. For their purposes, the "insistently artificial twist" of the arabesque S-curve served to maintain a new space of rhythmic relations between figure and ground.¹²⁴ In this context, the term "arabesque" works to bundle already existing concerns for the *figura serpentinata* and other pleasing arrangements of the curve, and to anchor them in the two-dimensional concerns of modern painting, including excessive outlining and exaggerated elaboration.¹²⁵ Thus, for the quasi-mystical band of French painters known as Nabis, who were active from 1888 to 1900 and followed Gauguin in seeking to establish a symbolic idiom of decorative painting, the arabesque offered a tool for treating wall painting as a decorative object, refashioning space altogether.¹²⁶ And for the Fauves who followed after them, the arabesque twist provided a device for pure composition, as in Matisse's celebrated *Le Bonheur de vivre* (*The Joy of Life*, 1905–6), with its tree-branch arabesques that work to establish a dance-like visual rhythm.

In these instances of the arabesque as a decorative structure in painting, importantly, the arabesque is brought to bear within a *French* tradition of pictorial improvement. Certainly, its sinuous curve can deliver a frisson of alterity, particularly in the context of a growing commercial trade in Islamic art and the occasional high-profile exhibition.¹²⁷ Yet, as the art historian Alastair Wright points out in the case of Matisse's overtly Eastern modes of composition in his Morocco paintings of 1912, much critical writing worked to characterize even those works as an exclusively French enterprise.¹²⁸ Wright shows that a wide swath of critics viewed Matisse's Morocco paintings as discomfiting precisely because they seem to slip too fully into actual Eastern abstraction.¹²⁹ What the slippage threatens is not a purely formal sensibility regarding the best way to put a picture together; rather, the propriety of racial standards

is at stake as well. Indeed, rightwing French commentators had already matched the foreign characteristics of Arab art to the purported characteristics of Arab people: the arabesque's "gentle glare of raw colors" and "undulating lines" were construed as the product of an Arab desire to rest and prolong pleasure.¹³⁰

Finally, and perhaps ironically, given the turn-of-the-century fear of the dilatory effects of Arab pattern, a third component of the contradictory and parallel meanings of the arabesque in Syria arises from its perceived disciplining function as a process of synthesis. We know that Isma'il made use of Arab designs in the drawing classes he taught at Maydan High School, where such designs would have held a nationalist charge as object lessons in cultural history.¹³¹ (He likely assigned patterns such as the one shown in fig. 14.) And further, we know that the lessons in Arab ornament in the Syrian

national curriculum followed a long-established French precedent of using world ornament in instruction. As the art historian Molly Nesbit shows, practical ornament studies had been introduced to France's primary school curriculum at the start of the twentieth century in response to an anxiety about industrial readiness.¹³² This was a single, systematic curriculum that moved pupils forward from classes on line and geometry, through ornament and perspectival renderings of things, to idealized leaves, and so on.¹³³ Furthermore, as Nesbit demonstrates, these abstracting exercises in design also occupied the crux of the modern project to construct a universal subject: a single, standardized French child-subject at every point of the educational and industrial system, whether in Marseille or Paris or—adding in the colonial expansion of the Mandates in 1920—Beirut, Antioch, or Deir ez-Zor. Concomitantly, in Syria the

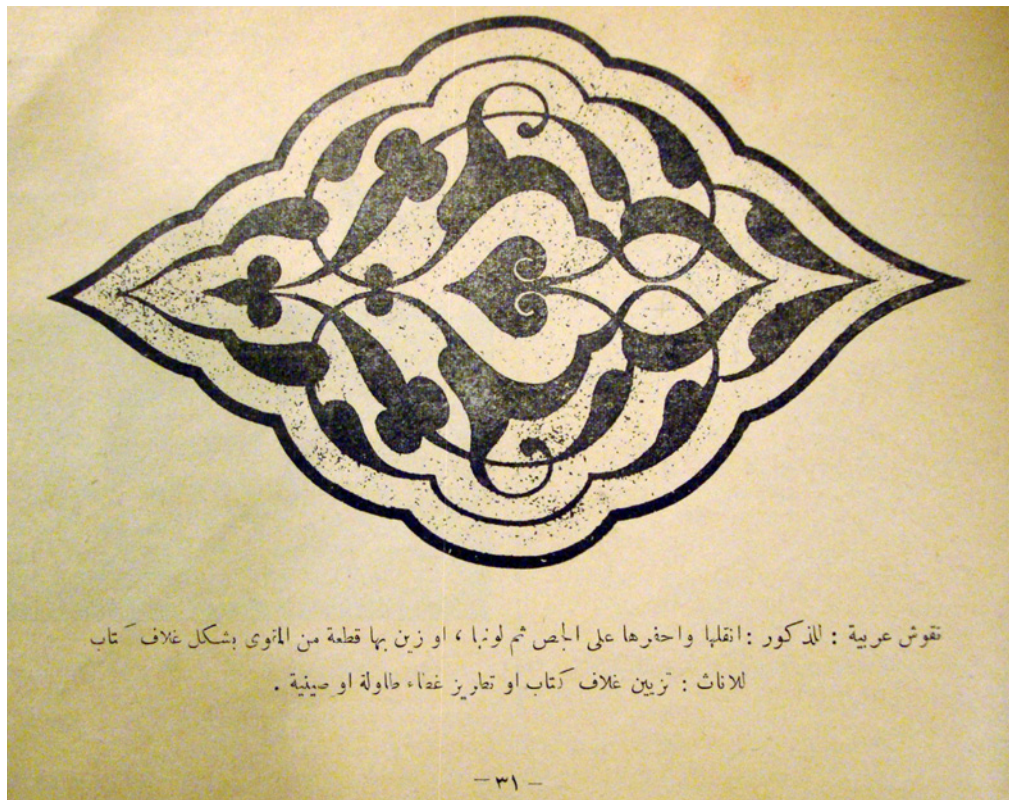


Fig. 14. Page from the fifth-level *Workbook for Boy and Girl Students* (*Ashghālī li-l-Talāmīdh wa-Tilmīdhāt*) (Damascus, late 1940s). The instructions say, "Arab engraving. For boys: Transfer and carve it on wood, then color it, or use it to decorate a piece of cardboard for a book cover. For girls: Decorate a book cover, border of a tablecloth, or china."

Mandate administration included steps to codify local crafts, with the intention of stimulating commodity production, taking a page from colonial administration in North Africa.¹³⁴ This included the establishment of a short-lived School of Modern Arab Arts attached to the French Institute in Damascus from 1926 to 1930, overseen by the Orientalist scholar Eustache de Lorey, who was then the director of the Institute. The school admitted a handful of local students to help with the tasks of tracing and distilling six types of replicable Arab patterns, running the gamut from *Nour-eddin* (inspired by the ornamentation in the Maristan of Nur al-Din in Damascus and on the minbar of Nur al-Din in Hama) to *Comnenus* (created by de Lorey from Byzantine sources).¹³⁵ In pairing ornamental studies with productivist goals, the project upheld a comprehensive French approach to artistic education that, as Nesbit notes, devoted its lessons to the production of objects and yet at the same time considered the object only in its most highly realized form—that of decorative art.¹³⁶ (The same easily collapsed line between objects and decorative schema would also manifest in de Lorey's other projects, many of which were promotional rather than scholarly.¹³⁷ After presiding over the 1928 rediscovery of the mosaics of the Umayyad Mosque, for example, he employed students to produce full-size color drawings of the mosaics and then sent the drawings on a world tour as fine art objects in themselves.¹³⁸)

Whereas the colonial treatment of the arabesque had raised questions of racial difference in French North Africa and problems of educational stewardship in the Mandate Arab East, however, the neocolonial treatment of the arabesque in the 1940s tended to limit its scope to a formal and universal (rather than epistemological) device. The Paris offices of UNESCO (to which Syria became a signatory in 1946), in particular, disseminated this understanding of the arabesque.¹³⁹ In 1948, for example, when UNESCO worked with Huyghe to organize a traveling print exhibition of high-quality color reproductions of modern painting from Impressionism to the present day, the exhibition catalog offered a narrative of artistic innovation versus illusion, in which abstracted versions of formal strategies were the primary driver.¹⁴⁰ Huyghe's introductory essay enshrines the arabesque as the defining operation in the development of modern

painterly art, invoking Toulouse-Lautrec's use of "boldly stylized arabesques," followed by the Nabis' use of "arabesques and splashes of color" to mediate between tradition and innovation, and so on.¹⁴¹ Huyghe's presentation of the arabesque as a formal feature drawn from ornament and music limits its function to altering a motif and achieving a more harmonious composition. Of course, even this flatly formal version of the arabesque performed ideological work for the postwar era. It was used to tout the capacity of Paris in particular to incorporate the best insights of others and then, as Huyghe claims outright, to "radiate" its modernism back over the whole world.¹⁴² Considering the show's exclusive focus on European achievements, even Huyghe's brief references to foreign influence, such as his note that "Matisse's feeling for colored arabesque attracted him to the East," serve to buttress the French center.¹⁴³ The Matisse painting in the exhibition, *Woman in White*, was a relatively recent composition from 1946 in which Matisse had most likely adapted the brilliant color effects of Egyptian tent piecework into appliqué-like white gaps between gold skin, violet couch, and violet zigzag lines (fig. 15).¹⁴⁴ In the narrative of a continuous French development toward abstraction as set forth by Huyghe, however, there is no space for understanding these compositional moves as signifying the kind of intercultural play that others recognized in Matisse's oeuvre.¹⁴⁵

UNESCO intended its exhibition of reproductions to act as a kind of equalizer, providing those citizens of the world who had no easy access to great works of painting with an opportunity to inspect them. In 1950 the exhibition traveled to Syria and Iraq as well as to Bolivia, Columbia, the Dominican Republic, New Zealand, and Pakistan.¹⁴⁶ And when it arrived in Damascus, the educational community did by and large receive it as the instructional aid it purported to be. Huyghe's essay was duly translated into Arabic and published in the secondary school teachers' bulletin *al-Mu'allim al-'Arabī*, with Badi' al-Kasim, a scholar of philosophy and member of the Ba'th party, completing the translation.¹⁴⁷ Overall, al-Kasim remains quite faithful to Huyghe's prose, save for redacting a few minor art-historical asides. But from al-Kasim's particular treatment of the term "arabesque," we can glean some insight into the cultural recoding of



Fig. 15. Henri Matisse, *Woman in White* (*Dame à la robe blanche*), 1946, oil on canvas, 96.5 × 60.3 cm. (Photo: Rich Sanders, courtesy of Des Moines Art Center)

the moment, for he takes liberties with its function as an analytical term and puts greater stress on its significance as a form of Arab identity. For example, he opts not to print the term in Roman characters (as the journal did for the artists' names), nor to transliterate it (as Syrian critics would do in the 1960s), nor to make use of the term *raqsh*, from the verb *raqasha*, meaning to variegate or make multicolored (the coinage that Farès officially proposed in 1953).¹⁴⁸ Instead, al-Kasim uses the phrase *tazayyunāt 'arabiyya*, which has the very literal meaning of "Arabic decoration." Relating more to the modalities of artisanal work than to those of fine arts, this phrase casts French artists who employ the arabesque—Toulouse-Lautrec, the Nabis, and the like—in the role of composers working with the codified forms of Syrian

crafts and design education. Indeed, the only other time al-Kasim breaks from his convention of leaving French names in the Roman script is with his translation of the group name Nabis. Here he uses the Arabic word *al-anbiyā'*, the conjugated Arabic plural word meaning "the prophets," which has the effect of Arabizing the history of modern art and naturalizing its resulting aesthetic forms to the Syrian setting.¹⁴⁹ In other words, al-Kasim casts the Nabis' arabesque as prophetic revelation rather than an Orientalizing motif.

Given this matrix of arabesques and varying modes of subjectivity and objective presence, how, then, are we to position the work of Isma'īl, an artist we know had come to recognize Arabism as a first cause in his creativity? I have endeavored to convey the multitude of intentions that the arabesque afforded those artists who used its expansive repetitions of line and color. Isma'īl knew the practical applications of Arab design from his classroom. He had engaged the Arab line as a symbol of spiritual subjectivity, if not through the analysis of Riegl and Kühnel then through the art-historical and critical studies of Bishr Farès. He had read and viewed the French painterly take on the arabesque as a compositional twist as well, and may even have discussed the problem of its translation with al-Kasim. The record shows that, not long after the UNESCO exhibition opened in Damascus, Isma'īl wrote about Matisse's work for *al-Ba'ṭh* newspaper, upholding the notion of pure composition as the central concern of the paintings.¹⁵⁰ Isma'īl's article proposes a pan-cultural basis for Matisse's insights, attributing the strong, unadulterated colors in the paintings to Eastern inspiration; he also highlights the synesthetic aspect of the interplay of colors and spontaneous line, calling it the "artist's music."¹⁵¹ Yet Isma'īl does not use the word "arabesque" in his article, nor in any of his other published works from 1950.¹⁵² Rather, his reading of the legacy of the Fauves and other French moderns would seem to recognize their success in reminding the world of the power of repeated, sinuous line and bright color. This is not to suggest that they had definitively established the origin of that power, however. For Isma'īl, there remained the question of the underlying source of meaningful artistic experience.

In order to interpret the conceptual (and non-visible) aspect of Isma'īl's practice, it is crucial to recall that his

first formal training in the use of decorative line came as a colonial subject in Alexandretta and not as a student of the fine painterly arts. In such a setting, academic divisions between ornament, design, and art could easily be collapsed into a practice of free drawing. These lessons, as I have discussed, were meant to instill a sense of separation between line and things and to produce a kind of industrial subject. To Isma'il's childhood psyche, however, the same separation also opened up vistas for the expression of anti-rational feeling—of mystical subjectivity over tangible object. Even while still a schoolboy, he began to activate the line's more automatic or pre-aesthetic qualities as a means to free other truths. His Antioch friends later recollected how he liked to use the schoolroom's portable blackboard as a site for releasing his imagination, running his chalk into "every corner," producing images of "marvelous energy."¹⁵³ He was also remembered for sometimes manipulating his dancing lines in ways that contested French authority. When, for example, he played drawing guessing games with cousins, he would draw a line or two and then ask them to guess what image he intended (for example "duck" or "sheep"), asking again after he had drawn another line or two ("house") and so on, until a correct guess was made—and the lines sometimes channeled latent anti-colonial feeling into image.¹⁵⁴ One day, his cousin reports, Isma'il's drawing coalesced into the image of an arrow, and then the arrow came to pierce a French soldier. The resulting image became a talisman for the group, and they used "piercing arrow" as a secret password phrase at their school. Notably, in these activities, the lines themselves (and not Isma'il per se) are made agents of unfurling a truth about the collective condition. Giving expression to the latent desire of lines to form eternal shapes could also serve to solidify an oppositional community.

Once Isma'il came to Damascus and got to know other young intellectuals there, his work with instinctual line intersected with literary efforts to convey a Romantic notion of transformative natural experience, producing another phase of drawing. In 1942, for example, he worked with his Damascus friend Badi' Haqqi, a law student and eventual Ba'th adherent, to create images to accompany Haqqi's free-verse evocation of a wintertime snow flurry in the city.¹⁵⁵ Haqqi wrote

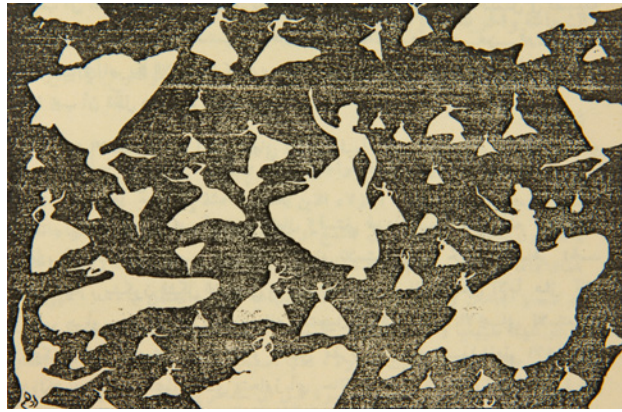


Fig. 16. Adham Isma'il, *Snowfall (Thulūj)*, 1942, originally ink, here shown in surviving reproduction. (Reprinted from Badi' Haqqi, "Thulūj," *al-Ma'rifa* 134 [April 1973]: 80–82, at 80.)

"Snowfall" as an account of synesthetic impressions: jagged pieces freezing against the blue sky; jasmine exploding in a heavenly smell; and the twice-repeated phrase "from the whiteness of snow, dreams of a bride scatter, shadows scatter."¹⁵⁶ As a gift to his friend, and as a testament to the inspirational force of snow, Isma'il responded to the bridal tropes of the poem in an ink drawing of anthropomorphized snowflakes: the white silhouette of a dancer set within a dark ground, spiraling in a fractal-like recursive sequence of inversion and reflection (fig. 16).¹⁵⁷ Elements of this drawing, such as the cinched waist, bouffant hair, and tapering limbs of the dancer, recall the motifs of French graphic design in *L'Illustration*, including popular advertising for perfumes (fig. 17). But any cultural specificity of the referent is ultimately encompassed by the suffusing impression of flowing, febrile femininity achieved by the floating twists of outline, arranged in an exploding pattern of optical whiteness.

Another of Isma'il's drawings from this early period, the colored-pencil work *Solitude*, reveals a complementary interest in those compositional models Isma'il identified as Eastern (fig. 18). The drawing shows a woman clad in a black dress beneath a single, twisting tree branch amid a landscape suffused by colored mist and golden sky. It would seem to enfold the romantic pan-Asian visual lexicon that the Indian artist Abanindranath Tagore devised in the first decades of the twentieth



Fig. 17. Print advertisement for Lancôme perfume, “Conquête,” in *L’Illustration*, November 15, 1941.

century, distinguished by the watercolor wash techniques that imbue the spare compositions with atmospheric luminescence.¹⁵⁸ One 1902 Tagore watercolor, which depicts the Mughal king Shah Jahan in solitary reflection in his garden, where he sits beneath a tree branch gathering a cloud of delicate mist, circulated widely in Europe in the 1920s as an illustration of V. C. Scott O’Connor’s exotic travelogue *The Charm of Kashmir* (fig. 19).¹⁵⁹ Isma’il’s *Solitude* drawing employs a modal composition of person and atmospheric blankness that is akin to Tagore’s image of noble asceticism, albeit with the further stylization of its elements into a rounded S-curve of the branch against bright striations of color in pink, green, blue, and gold. Amid such fugitive visual qualities and their suggestion of Eastern metaphysics, this S-curve becomes more an abstraction of ephemeral energies than a depiction of things. The artist

would return to such linear distillation, too, in compositions less explicitly related to any Eastern source. In the 1948 watercolor *Warm Breeze*, for example, Isma’il works directly with the theme of nature as a source of the spirits embodied in the arabesque line; a surface pattern of reeds, birds, and pure graphic marks appears to breathe out elegant loops that hint at an entrelac or other Arab-Islamic motif but do not finally resolve as such (fig. 6).

For Isma’il, the ultimate reconciliation of the arabesque’s multiple possibilities comes not by electing one or the other side of its parallel genealogies, Eastern or Western, but rather through the populist element of the Ba’th cultural equation and its claim to the creative genius of an uncoerced, natural collective. Recall how, during the registration drives in Alexandretta in 1938, the Arabic mother tongue had provided the basis for a transcendent unity. To physically practice Arab identity in speech and writing in that context was to embody this unity. After Syrian independence in 1946, and the challenges to the representational authority of the National Bloc mounted by the ideological parties, Isma’il’s work sought out additional pathways to the greater imagination of Arabism. In his arabesque experiments, he plays with models of Arab embodiment in culture, associating its visual form with other poetic and musical forms. The 1947 painting *Syrian Zajal*, for example, takes its title from a form of colloquial poetry performance associated with feast days, often involving percussion and song (fig. 20).¹⁶⁰ Isma’il’s evocation of its extended, temporal form moves several vectors of energy into visual overlay: a sky containing both day and night; a vision of ancient trees with foliage that dissolves into clouds; a central cruciform shape that appears to conduct electricity into curling forms of genie-like life; and a skein of colored arabesque lines that, in the far right corner, appear to outline a fawn, a woman’s eye, and other hallucinatory beings. Another painting in this vein, *Dabke* (1950), takes its title from the Arab folk dance that is customary at weddings and celebrations, where whole communities perform its syncopated foot movements in rhythmic coordination. In this case, the experience is evoked by short flecks of contour lines in atmospheric space, which hint at (female) bodily form as if it were a distillate of the fertile atmosphere of the Eastern landscape (fig. 21). Although all these works include clear markers of an



Fig. 18. Adham Isma'īl, *Solitude (al-Wahda)*, 1945, colored pencil on paper. (Reprinted from Na'im Ismā'īl, *Adham Ismā'īl: Ḥarqat Lawn wa-Khaṭṭ Lā-Nihā'ī* [Damascus: al-Jumhuriyya Press, 1965].)



Fig. 19. Abanindranath Tagore, *Nasim Bagh*, 1902, watercolor. (Reprinted from "Les Jardins du Kashmir," *L'Illustration* no. 4103 [October 22, 1921]: 382–84.)



Fig. 20. Adham Isma'il, *Syrian Zajal (al-Zajal al-Sūrī)*, 1947(?), oil on unknown surface. (Reprinted from Na'im Ismā'il, *Adham Ismā'il*, 14.)



Fig. 21. Adham Isma'il, *Dabke*, 1950, oil on unknown surface. (Reprinted from Na'im Ismā'il, *Adham Ismā'il*, 27.)

Arab cultural identity, they are not ethnographic in purpose. Instead, each manages the relationship between idealized form and folk practices by means of (imagined) rhythm, letting rhythm act as a mediating presence as well. That relationship, established across nested realms of being, is at once natural, replicative through the body, protean, and transcendent.

By the time Isma'il debuted *The Porter*, then, his own assessment of the possibilities of the "arabesque" hinged upon his recognition of the timeless metaphysical as-

pects it held in common across its many instantiations, and its internal coherence as energy. For his extended circle, the term "arabesque" itself came to describe "the permanent movement" within any work of art, its constitutive animating force.¹⁶¹ Some of the drawings Isma'il made after *The Porter* produced beautiful results from the search for this kind of plenitude. We can, for instance, consider the 1953 watercolor drawing shown in fig. 22. As an image, it is the result of a single physical interaction by the artist on his paper support, involving Isma'il pushing a single continuous line through a sequence of loops and points so as to articulate the internal and external forms of a face in profile, not unlike the method employed in *The Porter*. The resulting enclosures have been filled in with flat hues of local color: bright, acidic hues oscillate with naturalistic skin and hair tones as well as neutral mauves. But a difference here is the open surface of the paper, which allows the image so produced to register as a being in active transformation. As Isma'il traced the outlines, he exploited the capacity of his line to elicit different states of living, and even to produce other beings. In the areas where Isma'il's lines accrue around the particularly detailed passages of the human visage, the color variations become so dense that a transubstantiating effect is achieved: flowers sprout and a hummingbird appears at the crown. Here in its final resting form, the arabesque expresses an internal propensity to Islamic ornament. To use the categorical terms of the history of Islamic art, we can say that the extremities of this drawing have become "floriated."¹⁶² Again, the impetus is not to conform to a determined heritage motif, but rather to set a collective energy free into new, fecund forms.

In other drawings, by contrast, the push and pull of Isma'il's slicing line against the brightness of the color produces such defamiliarizing effects that the images verge on ugliness. These images are particularly telling of the conceptual process, for they leave no sense of the pleasures of play, instead making the moment of representation into a subject of dark reflection. One gouache, dated 1952 (discussed above), allows the tracing of objects to transport the image into a space of unstable color relationships (fig. 7). Beginning from one drawing—probably again the drawing of a head—Isma'il



Fig. 22. Adham Isma'il, no title, 1953, gouache on paper. Samawi Collection, Dubai. (Photo: provided by the Ayyam Gallery)

adds an overlay of what may be a standing figure, filling in the resulting structure with color. By doubling the scenes depicted, and then suturing them again into a field of shifting colors that hint at living beings but do not show them, the image breaks not only with representation but also with formal satisfaction. Second and third heads sprout in the place where a nose might once have been, while the eyes have become flowers and the forehead a swamp. The drawing as a whole would seem to offer a disturbing image of stripped human features. But more properly, we might say that it succeeds in disturbing the presumed purpose of drawing. Rather than offering a satisfying composition in which relations between signifier and signified are roughly coherent, the meandering line and punctuating color work to disclose an underlying flux. Vision comes to feel nearly impossible; one cannot look at the drawing and see any one thing. Quite unlike either Hamoudi's or Zeid's paintings in Paris, both of which traced abstract entities with a heavy black line, Isma'il's drawing uses line as a means to disperse appearances. His "arabesque" here manifests in a refusal of objects or their permanence.

Having now thoroughly tracked the range of Isma'il's use of sinuous and unending line, it becomes possible, finally, to clarify the goal of resurrected unity that the Ba'th movement pursued at the same time, a unity that they located somewhere between the "purely" cultural and the "naturally" political. Beginning in the 1940s, the artist used the apparently autonomous energy of the dancing line to invoke the natural synthesis of Arab national feeling, in which form and identity are equivalent. It is not by accident that Isma'il's turn to Arab vitality took place precisely as political conditions in Syria seemed to move in a conservative direction, under the consolidating power of the National Bloc, in the years 1946 to 1949. His opposing version of an ideal national artistry—one that is vivifying in its location in the unadulterated self—came to wield a contestatory power. But the radicalism of Isma'il's arabesque did not lie merely in its capacity to undercut appearance. Rather, the *liwā'yyūn* intellectuals conceived of the Arab totality as a perfect congruence between the imagined future and the communal past, which politicized their creative claims in the present and set the activated line to the task of revealing rhythmic, felt arrangements of refract-

ed, distributed color. Thus, Isma'il's method renders the urban poverty of the present, along with other daily details, as mere historical anecdote. Interior outlines of things are made to dissolve their own exterior boundaries; façades become provisional. The red flashes on the painting's surface communicate feeling, but they also serve as visual punctuation in the meandering line of a boundless arabesque—a conceptual total that may be sensed, but not seen. As an abstracting force, such painting remained antagonistic toward the visual illusions proposed by the parochial Syrian state, whether parliament assemblies or bourgeois neighborhood planning. Linking the experience of a dissolving picture plane to the active production of a restorative unity, and linking the consciousness of the audience to the "here" of an alternative Arab totality, Isma'il and the Ba'th movement located modern Arab painting in a future-oriented socialist Arabism. Their arabesque performed a fundamentally anti-mimetic demonstration of the cultural awareness that the Arab people already contained within themselves.

EPILOGUE

The dissonant qualities of Isma'il's work did not achieve the radical ends they might have seemed to promise in this uncertain period of struggle for sovereignty. At the end of 1952, Isma'il received the first Syrian state fellowship to study in Italy at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, an opportunity secured by a bilateral agreement with an Italy eager to present itself as a cultural sponsor of Arab rebirth in a Mediterranean mold.¹⁶³ The fact that Isma'il received the honor is itself an index of changing politics, for it was likely the result of special arrangements by the politician Akram al-Hawrani, a fiery advocate of property and agrarian reform who had managed to forge alliances with Colonel Shishakli as well as the Ba'th Party.¹⁶⁴ Once Isma'il arrived in Rome, he studied fresco painting and developed a more schematic use of arabesque lines as a mode of graphic testimony to the political plight of the Arab people. The students who had witnessed the debut of *The Porter* did not forget its powerful call to a new integrity of inner national vision, however. On the occasion of a 2008

retrospective of the Syrian modern art movement, as part of Damascus's designation as the Arab Capital of Culture, the Syrian artist and critic Elias Zayyat composed a semi-fictional vignette about the 1951 salon that captures the mixture of self-effacement and visionary assertion in Isma'il's painting practice and articulates its political stakes. For Zayyat, *The Porter* announced the end of the era of a deadening European vision. Adopting the perspective of one of the Maydan students who would have attended the opening, he writes:

We four in the Maydan Secondary School who loved drawing followed our teacher Adham to the Damascus Museum to see the painting *The Porter*, which he had created especially for the Autumn Exhibition. Beside it, we saw our teachers' paintings decorating Qaṣr al-Ḥayr, and were drowned in the light of color. And in the Museum's garden stood a painter, of foreign appearance and language, who was drawing the ancient garden with the minarets of the Takiyya al-Sulaymāniyya in paints of gray.¹⁶⁵

In Zayyat's staging of the momentous turn toward sovereignty enacted in 1951, it is Isma'il who leads the way to terminating a long tradition of Orientalist "views" of Syrian antiquity. The tables have been turned against the stifling academic model, and it is the foreign visitor whose painting becomes colorless and drained.

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NOTES

Author's note: This article is drawn from a book in progress tentatively entitled *Beautiful Agitation: The Mobilizing Arts of Painting in Syria and the Arab East, 1920–1967* and is based on research undertaken in Damascus, Beirut, Cairo, Rome, and Paris as part of my doctoral dissertation (made possible by support from the U.S. Fulbright Commission and the Social Science Research Council, International Dissertation Research Fellowship). The argument took form first as a paper for the 2013 College Art Association panel "Abstraction and Totality," chaired by Ara H. Merjian and Anthony White; it was further developed as a lecture at the University of California-Berkeley in December 2013; and was workshopped at the MENA Colloquium at the American University in Cairo, May 2014. I thank Robin Greeley, Caroline A. Jones, Ellen Kenney, Gülru Necipoğlu, Stefania Pandolfo, Nasser Rabbat, Nada Shabout, Adam Talib, Lisa Wedeen, and especially the anonymous *Muqarnas* reviewer for their questions and sug-

gestions. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the generosity of the families of the artists here discussed—including in particular Alma Isma'il, Lubna Hammad, and Ishtar Hamoudi—in giving time and care to this project of recuperation.

1. Adham Isma'il to Jamil Hamoudi, December 27, 1951, private archive of Ishtar Hamoudi, Baghdad, Iraq. Consulted via photographic scan. All translations from Arabic by the author, unless otherwise noted.
2. Articles by Jamil Hamoudi include "al-Amīra al-'Irāqīyya Fakhr al-Nisā' Zayd," *al-Adīb* 9, no. 3 (March 1950): 9–12; "Ṣālūn al-Ḥaqā'iḳ al-Jadīda li-Sanat 1950," *al-Adīb* 9, no. 9 (September 1950): 25–32; and "al-Fannān al-Ḥamūdi," *al-Adīb* 10, no. 1 (January 1951): 66–67. For a relevant discussion of the immediate postwar abstractionist trends, see Tom McDonough, "The Mercurial Monochrome, or the Nihilation of Geometric Abstraction," in *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society, 1915–2015*, ed. Iwona Blazwick et al. (New York: Prestel, 2015), 243–51; Nancy Jachec, *Politics and Paintings at the Venice Biennale, 1948–64* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2007); and Marcia E. Vetrocq, "Painting and Beyond: Recovery and Regeneration, 1943–1952," in *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943–1968*, ed. Germano Celant (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 20–31.
3. Jamil Ḥamūdi, "Ilā Jamī' al-Fannānīn fī al-Bilād al-'Arabiyya," *al-Adīb* 9, no. 1 (January 1951): 63.
4. These descriptions appear in Nāqid al-Ishtirākiyya al-Fannī (Ishtirākiyya's Art Critic), "al-Ishtirākiyya fī Ma'raḍ al-Funūn al-Jamīla," *al-Ishtirākiyya*, November 3, 1951. The Arabic title of the painting is *al-Ḥammāl*. In later studies of Isma'il's work, the title is sometimes given as *al-'Attāl*, which is synonymous with *al-Ḥammāl*, but with a more colloquial tone.
5. Isma'il to Hamoudi, December 27, 1951.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. As we will see later in this article, Isma'il's cohort studied Bergsonian notions of the creative spirit in the early 1940s with their philosophical mentor Zaki al-Arsuzi. For discussions of Bergson's impact on modern movements and modern artists, see Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); and Todd Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). For a consideration of these ideas in a postcolonial literary context, see Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
9. On competing schemes of unity in this era, see Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics, 1945–1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).
10. My definition of "radical" here draws on Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global*

- Radicalism, 1860–1914* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010).
11. Philip Shukry Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); and Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
 12. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 423. Patrick Seale gives additional details on the charged atmosphere within the schools in *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 25–26.
 13. For a discussion of such groups as constitutive of the middle class of the Arab East, see Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). Discussions of the nongovernmental art associations in particular may be found in Ghāzī al-Khāldī, “al-Jam‘iyyāt al-Fanniyya fi Sūriyā mundhu ‘Ām 1925 ḥattā al-Yawm,” *al-Ba‘th*, December 11, 1968; and Elias Zay[y]at, preface to *Revival of Plastic Art Memory in Syria*, 4 vols. (Damascus: Capital of Arab Culture, 2008–9), 1:n.p.
 14. For a model analysis of artists’ negotiations with a similar slippage between nation and state in Pakistan, see Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
 15. The intellectual atmosphere of the group is best described in Sulaymān al-‘Īsā, “Bidāyāt al-Ba‘th al-‘Arabī fi Ḥayāt al-Shā‘ir Sulaymān al-‘Īsā wa-Dhākiratihi,” pt. 1, *al-Munāḍil* 84 (April 1976): 52–73.
 16. Details about the Ba‘th Party’s opposition to the National Bloc are given in Fā‘iz Ismā‘il, “Adham Ismā‘il fi Darb al-Niḍāl,” in *Adham Ismā‘il: Qirā‘a fi Thalāth Ab‘ād*, ed. Khalīl Ṣafiyya (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1991), 143–55, at 151. See also the letter of Sidqi Ismā‘il to a friend, November 14, 1945, in Ṣidqi Ismā‘il, *Rasā‘il Lam Tunshar*, ed. ‘Abd al-Nabī Aṣṭif (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 2009), 102–3.
 17. My account of this exhibition is informed by the following sources: journalistic coverage in *al-Nuqqād*, *al-Naṣr*, *al-Ba‘th*, *al-Fayḥā’*, *al-Iṣlāḥ*, and *al-Inshā’*; organizational memos contained in the uncataloged archive of the modern art wing of the National Museum, Damascus (hereafter NM-D Modern); and a report in the national teachers’ journal, *al-Mu‘allim al-‘Arabī*.
 18. “Naḥḍatunā al-fanniyya al-ḥadītha.” See [no author] “Iqāmat Ma‘raḍ Kabīr li-l-Rasm wa-l-Funūn al-Jamīla,” *al-Inshā’*, December 4, 1950.
 19. The Salon d’Automne is mentioned in the French diplomatic correspondence gathered in “Échanges Culturels 166 (1948–53),” Direction Générale des Relations Culturelles, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, at Paris-La Courneuve. A letter from the French ambassador in Damascus dated January 15, 1951 relays a request received from the Syrian government to examine the statutes for the Salon d’Automne.
 20. *Ma‘raḍ al-Rasm al-Yadawī*. The phrase connotes a general notion of dexterous artistry and is not limited to two-dimensional painting. The inclusion of decorative objects in exhibitions appears to have been relatively common at least since the 1930s, perhaps as a colonial inheritance from the Universal Exhibition of the nineteenth century. Design specimens also appeared in an exhibition of the Women’s Cultural Forum held in Damascus in May 1950.
 21. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Dahanī, “Jawla fi Ma‘raḍ al-Rasm li-l-Ma‘ārif,” *al-Naṣr*, November 25, 1950.
 22. Ibid. Similar criticisms were also leveled by Sulaymān al-Khish in “al-Fann fi Ma‘raḍ al-Rasm al-Yadawī,” a two-part article published in *al-Nuqqād*, December 25, 1950, and January 1, 1951.
 23. “Kalima Munṣifa li-Wizārat al-Ma‘ārif,” *al-Naṣr*, January 1, 1951.
 24. The organizing committee even put together a tea party for the opening (memo from the President of the Exhibition Organizing Committee and General Director of Antiquities to the Council of Ministers, October 23, 1951, NM-D Modern). The coverage in both *al-Naṣr* and *al-Ishtirākiyya* makes explicit mention of the fact that Isma‘il’s friends and sympathizers had eagerly anticipated his submission, which suggests to me that he had shared in advance his intention to make a shockingly new work. See “al-Ishtirākiyya fi Ma‘raḍ al-Funūn al-Jamīla”; and “Dunyā al-Fann,” *al-Naṣr*, November 4–5, 1951.
 25. The earliest instance I have found of the term “arabesque” being applied to Isma‘il’s technique is in the 1964 volume his brother Na‘im Isma‘il published after the artist’s premature death in 1963, *Adham Ismā‘il: Ḥarqat Lawn wa-Khaṭṭ Lā-Nihā‘ī* (Damascus: al-Jumhuriyya Press, s.n., 1964), 22–25. As Na‘im Isma‘il notes in that discussion, “arabesque” was more a European term than a native one. He writes that numerous painters, from Tintoretto to Paul Klee, had made use of it, but that Isma‘il’s work, by contrast, emerged from within it. Later in this article I discuss the many different pathways by which the idea of an Arab-inflected European modernism circulated to Syria in the 1940s and 1950s and bore upon Isma‘il’s conception of his practice. (Because I discuss several members of the Isma‘il family in this article, sometimes even in the same paragraph, I have opted to differentiate them by using the family name Isma‘il to refer to Adham Isma‘il and using both first and family names for his brother Sidqi Isma‘il, brother Na‘im Isma‘il, and cousin Fa‘iz Isma‘il.)
 26. “Al-Ishtirākiyya fi Ma‘raḍ al-Funūn al-Jamīla” and “Dunyā al-Fann.”
 27. “Dunyā al-Fann.”
 28. “Al-Ishtirākiyya fi Ma‘raḍ al-Funūn al-Jamīla.”
 29. Isma‘il’s one published statement on the subject seems to have been a short speech he delivered in 1951 that was reprinted in al-Nāqid al-Fannī (The Art Critic), “Jawla fi al-Ma‘raḍ al-Fannī li-Thānawīyyat al-Maydān,” *al-Ba‘th*, May 26, 1951, 5 and 8. (I discuss this later in the present article.)
 30. Sidqi Isma‘il, letter to a friend, March 12, 1951, in *Rasā‘il Lam Tunshar*, 159–60. See also Sidqi Isma‘il’s letter to a

- friend from March 28, 1950, identifying the presence of life as “deeper and stronger than struggle”; *ibid.*, 156–57. Of the brothers, it was Sidqi Isma'īl who was most publicly involved in the party, contributing to both its political and cultural arms.
31. See the periodized institutional accounts in Natalie Adamson, *Painting, Politics and the Struggle for the École de Paris, 1944–1964* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009); and Jachec, *Politics and Paintings at the Venice Biennale*.
 32. This attitude is exemplified by René Huyghe, introduction to *UNESCO Travelling Print Exhibition: From Impressionism till Today* (Paris: UNESCO, 1949), 5–10, which was designed for dissemination to the developing world, and which I discuss later in this article.
 33. Foundational studies that preserve the nation-state container, to varying degrees, include 'Aḥīf Bahnassī, *al-Fann al-Ḥadīth fi al-Bilād al-'Arabīyya* (Tunis: UNESCO, 1980); Silvia Naef, *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe: L'évolution des arts plastiques en Égypte, au Liban et en Irak* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1996); and Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997). These all build on the art scenes' own telling of their national histories, as beginning with independence as states and continuing through staged attempts to recover artistic authenticity.
 34. On the consolidation of the late 1960s and early 1970s, see Anneka Lenssen, “The Plasticity of the Syrian Avant-Garde, 1964–1970,” *ARTMargins* 2, no. 2 (June 2013): 43–70.
 35. Ṭāriq al-Sharīf, *Ishrūn Fannānan min Sūriya* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1972), 19.
 36. For Sidqi Isma'īl's explicitly political discussion of this mode of Arab unity, see “al-'Arab wa-Ittijāh al-'Aṣr al-Ḥāḍir,” *al-Ba'th*, August 3–4, 1946, reprinted in Sidqi Isma'īl, *al-Mu'allafāt al-Kāmila*, 5 vols. (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1977–81), 1:69–73.
 37. Due to the multilingual population of the administrative district of Alexandretta (al-Iskandarūna in Arabic and İskenderun in Turkish), place names are often multiple and contested. For the sake of simplicity, I here use the place names favored by the French Mandate administration in Syria (1920–46), the period corresponding with Isma'īl's childhood years.
 38. For an archival account of the crisis, using French and Turkish sources, see Sarah D. Shields, *Fezzes in the River: Identity Politics and European Diplomacy in the Middle East on the Eve of World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). The Arabist politics of the conflict are carefully analyzed in Keith D. Watenpaugh, “Creating Phantoms: Zaki al-Arsuzi, the Alexandretta Crisis, and the Formation of Modern Arab Nationalism in Syria,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 3 (1996): 363–89.
 39. Fa'iz Isma'īl, “Adham Ismā'īl fi Darb al-Niḍāl,” 148; and Na'im Isma'īl, *Adham Ismā'īl*, unpaginated biographical summary.
 40. Fa'iz Isma'īl, “Adham Ismā'īl fi Darb al-Niḍāl”; and al-Īsā, “Bidāyāt al-Ba'th.” For an invaluable summary of the life of Zaki al-Arsuzi, which details the Alexandretta struggle and the youth movements it sustained, see Hiroyuki Aoyama, “A Biography of Zakī al-Arsūzī,” revised by Malek Salman, in Hiroyuki Aoyama, Wafiq Khansa, and Maher al-Charif, *Spiritual Father of the Ba'th: The Ideological and Political Significance of Zakī al-Arsūzī in Arab Nationalist Movements*, trans. and revised by Mujab al-Imam and Malek Salman, Middle East Studies Series 49 (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, Jetro, 2000), 1–35.
 41. This group joined forces with another group, led by the teachers Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, in the mid-1940s. I return to this merger later on in the article. For a variety of reasons, this early history of the party was later contested, with some voices emphasizing the contributions of the group from Alexandretta and others emphasizing Aflaq and al-Bitar. The most comprehensive account of the Alexandretta “stream” of the party may be found in Aoyama, “A Biography of Zakī al-Arsūzī.”
 42. Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 723.
 43. The two fateful decisions, the one surrendering Alexandretta in 1937 and the one surrendering Palestine in 1947, shared the single calendar date of November 29. In 1950, large student demonstrations against this double surrender were staged in Damascus. See “Tazāhurāt al-Ṭullāb bi-Dhikrā al-Taqsīm wa-Salkh al-Liwā',” *al-Inshā'*, November 30, 1950. In 1949, the United Nations's count of Palestinian refugees outside Israel was 726,000. The Syrian press closely covered the creation of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East in 1949, as well as its operations in Beirut.
 44. According to figures collected by the French High Commission in 1936, the district held a population of two hundred and twenty thousand, with 39 percent consisting of ethnic Turks, 28 percent 'Alawite, 11 percent Armenian, 10 percent Sunni Arabs, 8 percent Christians, and the remainder divided among Kurds, Circassians, and Jews (Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 495).
 45. Shields, *Fezzes in the River*, 59.
 46. *Ibid.*, 242–47.
 47. Watenpaugh, “Creating Phantoms,” 266.
 48. *Ibid.*, 370; Shields, *Fezzes in the River*, 59.
 49. For a discussion of a comparable instance of performative nationalism in Pakistan, see Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 30.
 50. Shields, *Fezzes in the River*, 28.
 51. From the address by Turkish President Mustafa Kemal to the Grand National Assembly in Ankara. See “Turks Cheer Demand for Rights in Syria,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 1936, 12.
 52. Details from Na'im Isma'īl, *Adham Ismā'īl*; and Fa'iz Isma'īl, “Adham Ismā'īl fi Darb al-Niḍāl,” 143–55. Both of these accounts, written long after the fact, use the meta-categories established in the struggle, designating the hostile

- neighborhood as Turkish without reference to a particular religious or communal composition.
53. Watenpaugh, "Creating Phantoms," 366. Al-Arsuzi, too, was an 'Alawite with ties to the Isma'īls' neighborhood of 'Afan.
 54. Watenpaugh demonstrates how the Arab clubs established by al-Arsuzi in many ways mirrored Turkish initiatives to foster national affiliation in the same period, such as the Turkish sports club *Gençspor Kulübü* established in Antioch in 1926.
 55. Dalal Arsuzi-Elamir, "Zakī al-Arsūzī and Syrian-Arab Nationalism in the Periphery: The Alexandretta Crisis of 1936–1939," in *From the Syrian Land to the States of Syria and Lebanon*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Christoph Schumann (Beirut: Ergon Verlag in Kommission, 2004), 307–27.
 56. Details of the scouting initiatives come from Watenpaugh, "Creating Phantoms"; Arsuzi-Elamir, "Zakī al-Arsūzī"; Fa'iz Isma'īl, "Adham Ismā'īl fi Darb al-Niḍāl"; al-Īsā, "Bidāyāt al-Ba'th"; and Muḥammad 'Alī Zarqa, *Qaḍīyat Livā' al-Iskandarūna: Wathā'iq wa-Shurūḥ* (Beirut: Dār al-'Urūba, 1994).
 57. As Watenpaugh points out ("Creating Phantoms," 369), these community designations were highly idiosyncratic. They divided Arabic speakers on the basis of religious affiliation while maintaining the "Turkish community" as a single voting group. Moreover, Sunni Muslims would have comprised the majority in either the "Turkish community" or the "Arab community" if religious affiliation had been made the sole determinant. Nor does a linguistic basis for the separation hold across categories, as many Armenians in the district spoke Turkish dialects rather than Armenian.
 58. Shields, *Fezzes in the River*, 172.
 59. Fa'iz Isma'īl, "Adham Ismā'īl fi Darb al-Niḍāl," 148.
 60. Ibid. Shields cites French surveillance reports that corroborate these initiatives (*Fezzes in the River*, 123, 151).
 61. Shields, *Fezzes in the River*, 204–31.
 62. Ibid., 235; and Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 513. The elder Isma'īl brothers opted to take advantage of an agreement France had made with Turkey allowing non-Turkish inhabitants of Alexandretta to acquire Syrian or Lebanese passports and to emigrate over the newly policed border. See Watenpaugh's description of citizenship options in "Creating Phantoms," 377.
 63. Fa'iz Isma'īl, "Adham Ismā'īl fi Darb al-Niḍāl." Reports include Direction de la Sûreté Générale, Beirut, Information No. 223, 10 Jan 1939, and Information No. 1982, 20 March 1939, folder Cabinet Politique No. 873, 2nd versement, Instruction Publique, Fonds Beyrouth, MAE-Nantes.
 64. Fa'iz Isma'īl, "Adham Ismā'īl fi Darb al-Niḍāl"; al-Īsā, "Bidāyāt al-Ba'th"; and 'Abd al-Khāliq al-Naqshbandī, "al-Bidāyāt fi Dhākirat al-Duktūr al-Rafīq 'Abd al-Khāliq al-Naqshbandī," pt. 2, *al-Munāḍil* 100 (August 1977): 6–16, at 8. The artist himself did not sleep in this house, but his brother Sidqī did stay there from time to time.
 65. Isma'īl Marwa, "Sulaymān al-Īsā: Ḥulm 'Arabī Damuhu wa-Nabḍuhu wa-Fikruhu al-'Urūba," *Bayt Filasṭīn li-l-Shi'r*, April 2012, <http://www.ppbait.org/>.
 66. A critical discussion of the gist of the lectures may be found in Sāmī al-Jundī, *al-Ba'th* (Beirut: Dār al-Nahār, 1969). I also draw from Fa'iz Isma'īl's list of the topics the group published in their handwritten newsletter, in "al-Bidāyāt fi Dhākirat Fā'iz Ismā'īl," pt. 2, *al-Munāḍil* 102 (October 1977): 37–57, at 39.
 67. Designation in al-Jundī, *al-Ba'th*, 27. The term "Sufi" was used to designate not membership in an institutionalized *ṭarīqa*, or way, but rather a practice of seeking internal knowledge. Tellingly, al-Arsuzi considered Henri Bergson to be a Sufi. See Salīm Barakāt, "al-Fikr al-Qawmī wa-Ususuḥu al-Falsafīya 'inda Zakī al-Arsūzī" (master's thesis, Damascus University, 1979), 79.
 68. Al-Arsuzi often mentioned his debt to Bergson; he is said to have quoted passages from *L'évolution créatrice* from memory. Many historians have cited this Bergsonian influence, alongside other borrowings from European thinkers. See Watenpaugh, "Creating Phantoms," 365; Barakāt, "al-Fikr al-Qawmī," 31; Eric Rouleau, "The Syrian Enigma: What Is the Baath?" *New Left Review*, 1st ser., 45 (September–October 1967): 53–65, at 56; and Antoine Audo, *Zakī al-Arsouzī: Un arabe face à la modernité* (Beirut: Dar al-Machreq, 1988), 20–21.
 69. al-Īsā, "Bidāyāt al-Ba'th," 68–69.
 70. "Naḥnu hunā na'īsh fi zill al-dawla al-'arabiyya al-ishtirākīyya al-kubrā" and "Naḥnu hunā fi zill al-waṭan al-'arabī al-waḥīd." See al-Īsā, "Bidāyāt al-Ba'th," 72.
 71. Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 41; and al-Naqshbandī, "al-Bidāyāt fi Dhākira," pt. 1, *al-Munāḍil* 99 (July 1977): 5–18, at 14. Volunteer gendarmes from the group included Sidqī Isma'īl, Youssef Shaqra, and Mas'ud al-Ghanim.
 72. Sidqī Isma'īl to friend, July 14, 1944, in *Rasā'il Lam Tunshar*, 95–96.
 73. Sidqī Isma'īl to friend, November 14, 1945, in *ibid.*, 102–3.
 74. Sidqī Isma'īl to friend, April 17, 1946, in *ibid.*, 106–7.
 75. Leonard Binder, trans. and commentary, "The Constitution of the Arab Resurrection (Ba'th) Socialist Party of Syria," *Middle East Journal* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1959): 195–200. Most likely Isma'īl attended the congress that ratified this document.
 76. Ibid.
 77. Sidqī Isma'īl to friend, October 5, 1947, in *Rasā'il Lam Tunshar*, 116–18.
 78. Ibid. He writes the sentence in French in the letter, "L'art est une chose mentale." Sidqī Isma'īl does not indicate the source of the quote, but I suspect that it was Henri Bergson's 1904 essay, "Notice sur la vie et les oeuvres de M. Félix Ravaisson-Mollien," which had been reprinted in *La pensée et le mouvant: Essais et conférences* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1934). The essay considers a passage from Leonardo da Vinci's *Treatise on Painting*, which states that art must endeavor to capture the "undulous or serpentine line" within each living being. Ravaisson's summary of the practice is that "la peinture est chose mentale." Sidqī Isma'īl seems to have all of this in mind in his letter, for he also mentions the artistic production of "living pictures of our souls."

79. It is not entirely clear to which Picasso painting Sidqi Isma'il refers. His description of the placement of the eyes in the face, red tinged with black at the woman's seat, and the pattern of white-in-green on the breast would seem to match the painting now known as *Dora Maar with Cat* (1941), which was auctioned in 2006 and is in a private collection. I have not been able to confirm that a color reproduction of the painting was circulating in 1947, however.
80. Sidqi Isma'il to friend, August 15, 1949, in *Rasā'il Lam Tunshar*, 145–46.
81. Sidqi Isma'il, "al-Shallāl," in *al-Kalb: Jarīdat Sidqī Ismā'il* (Damascus: al-Idāra al-Siyāsiyya, 1983), 422–24.
82. Sidqi Isma'il, "Malḥamat al-ʿĀm li-Sanat 1951," in *ibid.*, 438–39.
83. Na'im Isma'il, *Adham Ismā'il*, 109.
84. Sidqi Isma'il to friend, November 8, 1944, in *Rasā'il Lam Tunshar*, 97–98.
85. The best description of the atmosphere in Maydan in these years, including a reference to the Isma'is, may be found in 'Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf, *Marwān Qaşṣāb Bāshī: Riḥlat al-Ḥayā wa-l-Fann* ([Damascus]: M. Q. Bāshī, 1996). Prior to this position, Isma'il taught at a private elementary school in Damascus and at the state preparatory high school in Aleppo from 1948 to 1950.
86. Art Critic, "Jawla"; and Eid Yakoubi (artist and former student of Isma'il), interview by author, Paris, June 13, 2011.
87. Art Critic, "Jawla."
88. *Ibid.*
89. *Ibid.*
90. This is Boris Groys's analysis of the operation that defined both art and politics in Stalinist Russia, in *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 43.
91. Fa'iz Isma'il ("Adham Ismā'il fī Darb al-Niḍāl," 151–52) describes the artist as only sporadically attending meetings but acting as a "natural" and trusted participant in their underground work. Isma'il worked with members to design the party's first logo (an image of a tiger under a palm tree), for example.
92. Maḥmūd Ḥammād, "Dhikriyātīma' Adham Ismā'il," in Ṣafiyya, *Adham Ismā'il*, 175–86, at 175.
93. *Ibid.*; and al-Khāldī, "al-Jam'iyyāt al-Fanniyya."
94. Reference to *L'Illustration* in Mamdūḥ Qashlān, "Maḥmūd Ḥammād wa-Ibdā' al-Ṣiyagh al-Jadida," in *Nisf Qarn min al-Ibdā' al-Tashkīlī fī Sūriya* (Damascus: Iblā li-l-Funūn al-Jamīla, 2006), 69–77. They also consulted the British journal *The Studio*, as mentioned in Isma'il's letter to Jamil Hamoudi, December 27, 1951.
95. Cited in Nada Shabout, "A Dream We Call Baghdad," in Zainab Bahrani and Nada Shabout, *Modernism and Iraq* (New York: Wallach Art Gallery and Columbia University, 2009), 23–40, at 34. From quote in Shākīr Ḥasan Āl Sa'īd, *Fuṣūl min Tārīkh al-Ḥaraka al-Tashkīliyya fī al-ʿIrāq* (Baghdad: Ministry of Culture and Information, 1983), 100.
96. Bruno Paoli, "Jean Gaulmier le Syrien," *Les carnets de l'Ifpo* (Hypotheses.org), April 24, 2012, <http://ifpo.hypotheses.org/3334>.
97. I have located five of these essays in total, with four appearing between February and October 1942 and the fifth in 1945. The most comprehensive presentation of French modernist art is Jacques Lassaigue's "al-Fann al-Fransī fī Mi'at 'Ām," *al-Adīb* 1, no. 7 (July 1942): 9–11. This article introduces Lassaigue as the director of publications and radio for the Free French in the East and notes that he had organized an exhibition in Palestine on the topic of one hundred years of French art. Lassaigue subsequently moved to Algiers, where he would cofound the literary journal *L'Arche* in 1944 with the Algerian writer and poet Jean Amrouche, with support from André Gide. For a contemporaneous account of those developments, see Hélène Bokanowsky, "French Literature in Algiers," *Books Abroad* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1945): 125–30.
98. The Second Corps was commanded by General Wladislaw Anders and consisted of the Allied units of the exiled government of Poland. After fighting alongside Russia on the Eastern Front, it had retreated through Persia to British-held Baghdad and would subsequently transfer to the Apennine Peninsula to fight against the Germans in the battles for Monte Cassino. The artist contingent is described in detail by Jan Wiktor Sienkiewicz in his book, *Artyści Andersa: Continuità e novità* (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Kucharski, 2013) and his pamphlet, *Polish Artists in Beirut 1942–1952*, trans. Adam Kunysz (Beirut: Embassy of the Republic of Poland, 2013), 7.
99. Details about the Polish artists' intellectual contributions in Baghdad can be found in diary entries by the Iraqi artist Jawād Salim, reprinted in *Hiwar* 2, no. 2 (Jan.–Feb. 1964): 99–100. Works of the Polish painters were even collected by the Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities. See *Dalīl Qā'at al-Rusūm al-Waṭani* (Baghdad: Government Press, 1944). A discussion of the visit to Damascus can be found in Qashlān, "Maḥmūd Ḥammād wa-Ibdā' al-Ṣiyagh al-Jadida."
100. Hamoudi details Lassaigue's help in "al-Fannān al-Ḥamūdī," and describes the importance of the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles in "Ṣālūn al-Ḥaqā'iq al-Jadida li-Sanat 1950." Lassaigue had also helped to facilitate introductions for the Lebanese painter Shafic Abboud in Paris in 1947. See Shafic Abboud, *Rétrospective: peintures 1948–2003* (Paris: Claude Lemand, 2011).
101. Transcripts of the founding documents may be found in Gabriele Simongini et al., eds., *Art Club, 1945–1964: La Linea Astratta* (Parma: Galleria d'arte Niccoli, 1998), 96–105. "The universal language of forms and colors" is cited in Edmond Muller, "L'Art Club est fondé au Caire," *L'Égypte Nouvelle*, February 1, 1946, and Ahmed Rassim, "Le journal d'un peintre raté," *L'Égypte Nouvelle*, March 1, 1946.
102. Conversion reported by Michel Seuphor, *Dictionary of Abstract Painting, with a History of Abstract Painting*, trans. Lionel Izod et al. (New York: Paris Book Center, 1958), 194.

103. The Cairo branch was launched in Alexandria in late 1945 or early 1946. See notice in *Valeurs* 4 (January 1946): 128. Mention of the Turkish national branch of the Art Club appears in Nurullah Berk, *La peinture turque*, trans. Münevver Berk (Ankara: General Directorate of Press and Tourism, 1950). The Syrian artist Hammad indicates knowledge of the Club and also mentions that the Studio Veronese had exchanged letters with Jarema circa 1945, in Qashlān, “Maḥmūd Ḥammād wa-l-bdā’ al-Ṣiyagh al-Jadida.”
104. For a discussion of Vichy’s treatment of modernist movements such as Fauvism, see Michèle C. Cone, *Artists Under Vichy: A Case of Prejudice and Persecution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 47–55.
105. Adamson, *Painting, Politics, and the Struggle*, 73. Much art-historical attention has been paid to the ideological rivalry between the French promotion of the École de Paris and the American “New York School” of abstract expressionism. The classic polemical account is Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
106. Adamson, *Painting, Politics, and the Struggle*, 75. The important interwar history in France of a highly racialized construction of the foreign (read Jewish) membership of the École de Paris is detailed in Romy Golan, “The ‘École Française’ versus the ‘École de Paris’: The Debate over the Status of Jewish Artists in Paris between the Wars,” in Kenneth E. Silver and Romy Golan, *The Circle of Montparnasse: Jewish Artists in Paris 1905–1945* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1985), 81–87.
107. Kirsten Scheid, “Distinctions that Could be Drawn: Choucair’s Paris and Beirut,” in *Saloua Raouda Choucair*, ed. Jessica Morgan (London: Tate Modern, 2013), 41–55, at 53.
108. Jacques Lassaigue, “Il Est,” in *Jamil Hamoudi: Un Artiste de Baghdad* (Paris: Voyelles, 1950), exhibition booklet in private archive of Ishtar Hamoudi, Baghdad, Iraq, consulted via photographic scan. “National genius” is also repeated in R. V. Gindertael, “Hamoudi,” *Art d’Aujourd’hui* 3, nos. 3–4 (Feb.–March 1952): n.p.
109. For example, in his article “al-Amīra al-‘Irāqīyya Fakhr al-Nisā’ Zayd,” Hamoudi recounts taking pleasure in alerting French abstract artists to the fact that Arab artists had already devised the form centuries earlier.
110. Jamil Hamoudi, “L’Art en Irak,” *Arts: Beaux-Arts, Littérature, Spectacles* (April 28, 1950): 8.
111. Ḥamūdi, “al-Amīra al-‘Irāqīyya Fakhr al-Nisā’ Zayd.”
112. The characterization of arabesque as a structure is from Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 204. But the French postwar milieu also included work in aesthetic philosophy that synthesized these strands of artistic history and instantiated the arabesque as a structural feature. See Étienne Souriau, *La correspondance des arts: Éléments d’esthétique comparée* (Paris: Flammarion, 1947), which uses the term “arabesque” to designate “first-order” arts of nonderivative sense experience, as opposed to “second-order” arts of representation.
113. Grabar, *Formation of Islamic Art*, 190, 204.
114. Hamoudi even uses the term in articles dealing only with Paris artists, such as his “Joseph Csaky wa-l-Naḥt al-Bāriz,” *al-Adīb* 8, no. 12 (December 1949): 26–28, discussing Csaky’s work with sinuous line in relief sculpture. Interestingly, Hamoudi here includes a footnote giving *al-zakhrāfa*, which means “embellishment” or “ornament,” as the Arabic translation of the French “arabesque.”
115. Lassaigue, “Il Est,” and Bishr Farès, no title, in *Jamil Hamoudi: Un Artiste de Baghdad*. This exhibition publication identifies Farès as a member of the Institut d’Égypte in Cairo; he was also a consultant to UNESCO, although this is not mentioned in the publication. Farès had long been a leading cultural voice in the Arab region, having served as editor-in-chief for the venerable cultural magazine *al-Muqtaṭaf* since 1941, then published in Egypt. Fa’iz Isma’il reports (in “Adham Ismā’īl fi Darb al-Niḍāl,” 148) that the Isma’ils read *al-Muqtaṭaf* in Alexandretta. Farès already knew Hamoudi and had contributed to at least one issue of *al-Fikr al-Ḥadīth*, the cultural journal Hamoudi had published in Baghdad before relocating to Paris.
116. Because Lassaigue does not cite any particular scholar, one is left to wonder which recent works he had in mind. More than Lassaigue, it was Farès who actively participated in the international community of Islamic art historians. Farès had already published the widely read *Une miniature religieuse de l’école arabe de Bagdad* (Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 1948). The German historian of Islamic art Ernst Kühnel, who published his own study *Die Arabeske: Sinn und Wandlung eines Ornaments* in 1949 (Wiesbaden: Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1949), reviewed the Farès volume for the journal *Oriens* 4, no. 1 (1951): 171–73. Farès also lectured on Islamic ornament in Cairo, Paris, and Beirut, finally publishing his own study in 1952: *Essai sur l’esprit de la décoration islamique* (Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 1952).
117. Farès, no title, in *Jamil Hamoudi: Un Artiste de Baghdad*.
118. Roger Benjamin, “The Decorative Landscape, Fauvism, and the Arabesque of Observation,” *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 2 (June 1993): 295–316, at 297.
119. See, for example, the entry on “arabesque” in “A Biographical, Technological, and Topical Dictionary of Art (Continued),” *Bulletin of the American Art-Union* 5 (August 1, 1851), 76–78, at 77. Citing Owen Jones’s *Details and Ornaments from the Alhambra* (London: Jones, 1845); Wilhelm Zahn’s *Ornamente aller klassischen Kunstepochen* (Berlin: Reimer, 1843); and Ludwig Grüner and Jacques Ignace Hittorff’s *Descriptions of the Plates of Fresco Decorations and Stuccoes of Churches and Palaces in Italy during the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (London: J. Murray, 1844), the article traces various iterations of the “arabesque style” across time and space.
120. Güllü Necipoğlu, *The Topkapı Scroll—Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture: Topkapı Palace Museum Library MS H. 1956* (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995), 61–71.

121. Ibid., 65; Finbarr Barry Flood, "The Flaw in the Carpet: Disjunctive Continuities and Riegl's Arabesque," in *Histories of Ornament: From Global to Local*, ed. Gülru Necipoğlu and Alina Payne (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 82–93, at 83.
122. I have relied on the Ettinghausen translation: Ernst Kühnel, *The Arabesque: Meaning and Transformation of an Ornament*, trans. Richard Ettinghausen (Graz: Verlag für Sammler, 1977).
123. Afif Bahnassi, "L'Arabesque Contemporaine," in *Consultation collective sur les problèmes contemporains des arts arabes dans leurs relations socio-culturelles avec le monde arabe* (Hammamet, Tunisia: UNESCO, March 1974), 3–4. This text was published again, with minor modifications, in UNESCO's 1977 *Cultures* bulletin.
124. Benjamin, "Decorative Landscape," 297.
125. Ibid., 309–10. Benjamin notes that Gustave Moreau's discussions of the arabesque, for example, usually employ examples from sculpture, and that Matisse, too, recognized precedents in statues by Michelangelo and Giambologna. He also sees evidence of Matisse's "sculptural investigation" in the heavy outlines of *The Joy of Life*.
126. Gloria Groom, *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890–1930* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2001), 21.
127. A number of exhibition catalogs have explored points of overlap between Islamic art and European modernism at the level of the object, its display, and its reception. See Markus Brüderlin, ed., *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between Non-Western, Modern, and Contemporary Art* (Basel: Fondation Beyeler, 2001); Rémi Labrusse, ed., *Purs décors? Arts de l'Islam, regards du XIXe siècle, Collections des Arts Décoratifs* (Paris: Musée des Arts décoratifs/Musée du Louvre, 2007); and Chris Dercon, León Krempel, and Avinoam Shalem, eds., *The Future of Tradition, The Tradition of Future: 100 Years after the Exhibition Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art in Munich* (Munich: Prestel, 2010).
128. Alastair Wright, *Matisse and the Subject of Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).
129. Ibid., 201–9.
130. Ibid., 209.
131. Details of the curriculum of these drawing courses in the years 1947 to 1950 are available in Ghazi al-Khaldi, "Abdul-Wahhab Abou al-Sououd," in *M. Jalal, A. A. Al Sououd, K. Mouaz, A. A. Arnaout* (Damascus: Salhini Printing and Publishing, 1991), 26–29; and 'Alī Ghālib Salīm, "Iṣlāḥ Manhāj al-Rasm," *al-Mu'allim al-'Arabī* 3, no. 5 (March 1950): 526–29. Target skills included a practical understanding of the construction of different ornaments (*zakhārif*) in both plant and animal forms.
132. Molly Nesbit, *Their Common Sense* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000).
133. Ibid., 29–39.
134. For the history of applied art instruction in Morocco, see Hamid Irbouh, *Art in the Service of Colonialism: French Art Education in Morocco, 1912–1956*, rev. ed. (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012). See also the discussion of British colonial applied art pedagogy and commodity production in Arindam Dutta, *Bureaucracy of Beauty: Design in the Age of Its Global Reproducibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
135. The School of Modern Arab Arts is thoroughly discussed in Loreline Simonis, *Les relevés des mosaïques de la grande mosquée de Damas* (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2012). For my dates and details, I also draw on archival documents: Réunion du Comité de rapprochement de la science française et de la culture arabe, April 10, 1928; Supplemental report Sur l'École des Arts Arabes Modernes, Damascus, April 23, 1928; and Licenciement du personnel du Palais Azem, June 2, 1930, all in Institut d'archéologie et d'art musulman folder, Carton 77, Instruction Publique 2nd versement, Fonds Beyrouth, in Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Archives Diplomatiques-Nantes. Further information about students at the school comes from Renaud Avez, *L'Institut français de Damas au Palais Azem (1922–1946): À travers les archives* (Damascus: L'Institut français de Damas, 1993), 35–36; and 'Ādil Abū-Shanab, *Ḥayāt al-Fannān 'Abd al-Wahhāb Abū al-Sa'ūd* (Damascus: al-Fann al-Ḥadīth al-Ālamī, 1963), 37, 103.
136. Nesbit, *Their Common Sense*, 153.
137. Complaints about de Lorey's lack of focus and rigor appear in Jean Gaulmier, "La «section des arabisants», 1928–1929, berceau de l'IFEAD," in *Jean Gaulmier, un orientaliste: Recueil des textes publiés dans le Bulletin d'études orientales (1929–1972)* (Damas: Presses de l'Ifpo, 2006), 10–14, also available at <http://books.openedition.org/ifpo/2429>.
138. Simonis, *Les relevés des mosaïques*, 17–18. The initiative can be compared to the full-size copies of wall frescoes from the 'Alī Qapu in Isfahan, which MoMA exhibited in 1932 (Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013], 127–38). In both cases, the press response follows a template of pseudomorphic play, likening the non-modern pieces to the aesthetics of modernist painting.
139. Although there is not enough space to discuss it further here, cultural journals in the Arab East also engaged with the formalist version of global heritage that the French critic André Malraux promulgated via UNESCO's event and print forums, including his concept of the *musée imaginaire* (a dematerialized "museum" of black-and-white reproductions that would enable all persons to engage in a comparative analysis of global heritage). The June 1947 issue of Hamoudi's Baghdad cultural journal, *al-Fikr al-Ḥadīth*, printed translated excerpts from Malraux's 1946 UNESCO speech, "L'Homme et la Culture Artistique." One can also trace the discussion in Cairo's French-language periodicals, including Gerald Messadié, "Notes sur la naissance et le symbolisme de l'arabesque," *La Femme Nouvelle* (December 1951): 35–36.
140. *UNESCO Travelling Print Exhibition: From Impressionism till Today* (Paris: UNESCO, 1949).
141. Huyghe, "Introduction," 7.
142. Ibid., 10.
143. Ibid., 13.

144. Matisse's study of these Egyptian fabrics is discussed in Avinoam Shalem, "Leggere tra le righe: Attraverso i papieri découpés di Matisse," in Ester Coen, ed., *Matisse Arabesque*, exhibition catalog (Milan: Skira, 2015), 55–63.
145. The term "intercultural play" is used in Benjamin, "Decorative Landscape," 296. Wright proposes a complication of this "play" as an actual, felt risk of the loss of Western clarity. Studies that give serious consideration to Matisse's affinity with Islamic composition include Rémi Labrusse, *Matisse: La condition de l'image* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), and Catherine Bock-Weiss, *Henri Matisse: Modernist against the Grain* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), which links Labrusse's study to the phenomenon of the "Byzantine Matisse."
146. List given in United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, *Some Suggestions for Co-Operation between Youth Organizations and UNESCO* (Paris: UNESCO, 17 February 1950), 12. In 1949 it had traveled to Australia, the British colonies in Africa and the Far East, Ecuador, Haiti, India, Iran, Mexico, Norway, Tunisia, and Uruguay.
147. Badī' al-Kasim, trans., "Madhāhib al-Rasm al-Ḥadīth," *al-Mu'allim al-'Arabī* (April 1950): 605–12.
148. In 1947 Farès delivered a lecture in Cairo, in French, about the spirit of Islamic decoration. The lecture was followed by a bilingual volume on the theme in 1952, including a French-Arabic glossary of specialized vocabulary. There, Farès suggests that the art of the arabesque be translated as *al-raqsh*, and that a single arabesque be rendered as *raqsha*. A summary of his talk and glossary appeared in the journal of the Arabic Language Academy in Damascus as well as Bishr Fāris (Farès), "Sirr al-Zakhrāfa al-Islāmiyya," *Majallat al-Majma' al-'Ilmī al-'Arabī bi-Dimashq* 27, no. 3 (July 1953): 479–83.
149. Huyghe's essay explains the term in the following way: "This was the oriental name (meaning 'prophets') which at the end of the century a group of young painters, influenced mainly by Gauguin, gave themselves" ("Introduction," 7).
150. Adham Isma'īl, "Henri Matisse," *al-Ba'ṭh*, July 8, 1950.
151. This would seem to be a reference to Matisse's famous 1947 profession that his colors had "come from the East." See "Le chemin de la couleur: Propos de Henri Matisse," *Art Présent* 2 (1947): 23.
152. The article was part of a series of introductory columns to the painterly arts as a field, commissioned from Isma'īl by Sidqi Isma'īl. Other artists profiled by Isma'īl are Picasso, de Vlammick, Chagall, and Braque.
153. Fa'iz Isma'īl, "Adham Ismā'īl fī Darb al-Niḍāl," 145.
154. *Ibid.*, 146.
155. Reprinted in Badī' Ḥaqqī, "Thulūj," *al-Ma'rifa* 134 (April 1973): 80–82. I have not been able to determine the chronology of Haqqī's connections to the Ba'ṭh movement, but note that he dedicated a 1947 poem titled "Arabism" to Michel Aflaq. See Badī' Ḥaqqī, "Urūba," *al-Adīb* 6, no. 1 (January 1947): 24.
156. See also Badī' Ḥaqqī, *Al-Shajara allatī Gharasathā Ummī: Sīra Dhātīyya* (Damascus: Ittihād al-Kuttāb al-'Arab, 1986).
157. Ḥaqqī, introductory remarks to "Thulūj," 80.
158. Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New "Indian" Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 242–69.
159. V. C. Scott O'Connor, *The Charm of Kashmir* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920). Two color illustrations and a report on the book appear in *L'illustration* in 1921, under the title "Les Jardins du Kashmir," *L'illustration* no. 4103 (October 22, 1921): 382–84. It would appear that literature of this type circulated widely in Syria in the 1920s, as the Aleppo-born artist Fateh al-Moudarres mentions reading books about the "Maharaja of India" as a child. See Samar Ḥamārna, *Kayfa Yarā Fātiḥ al-Mudarris?* (Damascus: S. Ḥamārna, 1999), 10.
160. The context for Isma'īl's attempts to bring poetic and other aural structures into the space of his painting warrants more investigative work. It should be mentioned that *al-Adīb* published several studies of the Lebanese *zajal* in the 1940s, including a two-part historical study by Adib Nakhla in 1945. These likely provided the impetus for Isma'īl's painting.
161. As explained by Na'im Isma'īl in *Adham Ismā'īl*, 23. He suggests that the arabesque is *daymūma*, or continuous and permanent. Isma'īl's articles in *al-Ba'ṭh* advance a similar view about art's internal drive toward abstraction, including his profile on Henri Matisse, which describes the artistic process as distilling the heart of the matter (*jawhar al-mawḍū'*).
162. As, for example, in contemporaneous studies of the development of the floriated variety of Kufic calligraphic script in epigraphic inscriptions. I am thinking of the catalog of Syrian specimens of this type that the French art historian Janine Sourdél-Thomine compiled, as in *Les monuments ayyoubides de Damas*, vol. 4, *Épigraphes coufiques de Bâb Saḡhîr* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1950).
163. Direzione Generale per gli Affari Politici e di Sicurezza, "Appunto," Sept. 3, 1951, Buste 1092 (Medio Oriente), Affari Politico 1950–1957, Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome.
164. Mamdouh Kashlan, interview by author, Damascus, February 25, 2010.
165. Zay[y]at, preface to *Revival of Plastic Art Memory in Syria*, 1:n.p.