

**Modern Arab Art:  
Formation of Arab Aesthetics**

*Nada M. Shabout*

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This book endeavors to define a specific term for modern Arab art, which is most often considered a continuation of *Islamic* or *ethnic* art or a subordinate copy of western trends. This academic text, which targets audiences interested in contemporary art or the Arab world, or both, is divided into three parts: “Background and Definitions,” “Modern Arab Aesthetics,” and “The

Arabic Letter in Art.” It contains forty images within the text and thirty-two plates of contemporary works of art by Arabs.

The first chapter, an analytical approach to modern Arab art and an investigation of the background factors leading to the need for such a term, is promising. While this term is defined in contrast to *Islamic* art at one point because of the significant shifts in motivating factors, Islam’s influence is not denied; rather, it becomes one of many, such as the resurfacing of pre-Islamic themes from various Arab cultures, western influence, and the different political situations in each country.

Western influence began with colonialism and continued into the early twentieth century with the spread of patronage via European artists and architects in the Arab world and the establishment of art schools based on European models and with European instructors. This influence was further emphasized via the dissemination of new forms (e.g., easel painting, sculpture, and figurative art), all of which resulted in a negligence of traditional art (classified as “crafts for tourist production”). The political situations in the individual Arab countries that propelled and shaped the production of art varied from government propaganda to rebellious expression. With this diverse argument, the author makes a clear case for the need to define modern Arab art.

The second chapter deals with the public’s reaction. Modern and non-representational art was rejected as “meaningless, static, and devoid of talent” (p. 37). Moreover, the author notes that with the shift to modernity, art works were located in museums and galleries, rather than in mosques and manuscripts (as was the case with Islamic art), and thus was limited to the elite. Oddly, this chapter contains several very brief paragraphs about the Arab world’s influence on such contemporary western artists as Matisse, Picasso, and Klee. Pursuing this topic would have resulted in a very interesting chapter or appendix. However, Shabout returns to describing how consumers view contemporary art in the Arab world. Some artists were able to negotiate between the worlds of “tradition” and “western modernism,” in a reconciliation between the “self and the other” (p. 49).

In the chapter’s final section, the author discusses the role of society and politics on art with a focus on “Palestinian defiance” and “Iraqi compliance.” Although the material presented is comprehensive, the chapter could have been much tighter with a consistent focus on the initial premise: modern Arab aesthetics.

The third chapter is divided into two parts: the development of Arabic text in art and case studies of two particular artists and how they use text.

This latter section is well researched and contains accounts of the types and development of Arabic calligraphy (Islamic art) throughout history and the shift to modernity with its secular and deconstructed use.

I was, however, disappointed with the chapter's second part. With the theoretical base set and the volume of discourse summarized, I was looking forward to a deeply analytical application of these ideas in exploring the two case studies. Unfortunately, the author's voice was suddenly lost, as if each artist was, in his own voice, summarizing himself with extremely long – and tedious – explanations of personal visions and interpretations. Although these two artists, Shakir Hassan Al Said and Dia al Azzawi are both undoubtedly important in the milieu of modern Arab art, a simple description of their history and work did not fit into the text's analytical structure and style. I was looking for the author's voice, a connection and application of her intelligent argument on the expression of a new term in art. In addition, by focusing on two case studies, both from Iraq, the political influence on art became singular and the rest of the factors discussed barely surfaced. As a result, the case studies were prevented from becoming part of the larger genre.

The conclusion summarizes the important roles of culture and nationality on the unique production of modern art in the Arab world. Oddly, the author discusses how the architecture of the city and the urban landscape influenced the artist with such unexplained statements as “it is culture that gives a city its identity and not its physical form” and “a city is a product of time” (p. 146). This is the first mention of such influences, and it came so late in the book that it certainly stood out. Shabout then goes on to reemphasize how the shifts in history and colonialism severed modern Arab art from Islamic art with another blanket statement: “Just as the modern façade of an Arab city hides its identity, so does that of modern Arab art” (p. 148). Again, not only is this statement unsupported, but it is far from the rest of her argument and simply irrelevant. She ends with a summary of the points made in the first chapter defining the unique quality of modern Arab art.

The conclusion was quite disappointing, with many odd and new references as well as the cursory summary of singular parts of the book. The constant emphasis on the distinctive definition of modern Arab art was not only repetitive, but at one point became obsessive – the case was made, and she should have accepted this and moved on.

The author's attempt to broadly define a relevant term by leaping from many diverse examples in the first two chapters to a focus on two artists in

the third left out a great deal of what contemporary Arab artists located all over the region have contributed. Major artists were briefly – if at all – mentioned. This book should have been either appropriately comprehensive or purely theoretical (with a summary). The former would have been far more satisfying for those with a background in art and for Arab readers in general.

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