AICA '86 / Lisbon - Portugal

39th General Assembly and XXth Congress

CALLIGRAPHY AND MODERN ART IN THE ARAB WORLD

by

JABRA I. JABRA

Calligraphy and Modern Art in the Arab World

by

Jabra I. Jabra

From a certain point of view, much of modern Arab art may be seen basically as the product of a cultural conflict: the artist seems to be torn in two between his consciousness of his times, so visibly and intellectually influenced by the West, and his consciousness of his past, so heavily weighted with a tradition which he feels he must accept, lest his identity should be lost. Over the last fifty years, the more conversant the Arabs became with Western art and history and ideas, the more they sought for a counterbalance in their own art and history and ideas.

Until the mid-forties, an Arab artist, no matter where he lived in the vast expanse of the Arab world, found that the political ideas of the French Revolution and all the literary, philosophical and artistic movements that as a result erupted in quick succession throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe, not only fed his own imagination and liberated his own spirit, they also made it possible for him to approach his own history and tradition with greater insight. Like the other intellectuals of the first half of the 20th century, he felt that no half-measures were possible in trying to achieve an open mind nationally: to belong to the times was

.../2

to acquire a cosmopolitan spirit, and national well-being, after several centuries of national loss, could only be realized through a liberal spirit that was part of what seemed to be going on everywhere. There was a general feeling then that tradition could only thus be re-activated into a guiding force in contemporary life: it would enhance it and give it a sense of direction, rather that provide an alternative which would obviously fail to meet the demands of a new age.

But a dichotomy was soon to set in. The closer the Arab world came to the West intellectually after World War II, the wider the political divergence seemed to become between them. As more and more Arab scholars and artists studied in London and Paris and Rome, an intellectual rift began to show, as an echo of the political stance, soon to become an obsessive issue: it became a question of identity. And the Arabs who for several centuries, until World War I, had lost political and economic control of their destiny to foreign rulers, began to sense, as one country after another achieved their independence as sovereign States, that a new kind of domination of their destiny was taking shape. It was the domination, some thinkers argued of an alien culture assuming the guise of a cosmopolitan spirit, which would finally negate the innate force the Arabs were trying to build up again.

.../3

There was an isidious feeling of being now undercut. Instead of achieving a fully integrated ethos propelled by its own inner impulse, what seemed to materilize, thus went the argument, was a crude imitation, a false image. The artists no less than the writers and thinkers were intensely aware of this disturbing possibility. Were they to be real contributors of ideas and visions to their times, or mere "consumers" of other peoples' ideas and visions?

In the fifties, in Iraq (as an example), a major group of artists called the S.P. (Societe Primitive) rejected such fears outright and were for a cosmopolitan spirit in style and outlook, so long as the content of their work derived its subject matter from local life and pursuits or from the local landscape. The question of a distinct style did not worry them much: skill and 'painterly' competence were more relevant to their aim.

However, another group, called the Baghdad Modern Art Group, was for something quite different: they called for a historical consciousness that would make of the whole of Babylonian and Arab tradition the matrix from which their style should emerge. For these artists, it was not quite a return to the ancients so much as an attempt to find an indiginous ground to strike their roots in, fully realizing that even such a ground meant a long succession of brilliant civilizations. But they contended that all through those

.../4

great periods of human inventiveness the view of life, even the style of expressing this view, was largely consistent, self-generated, and of powerful impact all around. And this provided a sort of psychological safeguard against being overwhelmed by Europe. In fact, there was the argument that European style and vision, as from the turn of the century, shifted for inspiration from the Greek and Latin models to the Mesopotamian and ancient Egyptian. And so, with a genuine understanding of the forces that went into making style and originality, the artist could come to terms with current trends, preserving at the same time the validity of his own vision. A synthesis of the historically indigenous with the stylistically 'foreign' should thus be possible which, for some time, seemed to obviate the conflict of opposites. The paradox of course was still there, but it was the artist's task to find an answer to the unavoidable riddle.

The Manifesto of the Baghdad Modern Art Group, published in 1955, stressed these very points: an awareness of the country's ancient civilizations, coupled with an awareness of current rapidly shifting world styles, in order to portray in a new way the life of the people by making use, at the same time, of local motifs for further emphasis.

.../5

The new interpretation of all ancient history in Mesopotamia and the rest of the Fertile Crescent, from the Sumerians and Babylonians to the Abbasids, as successive waves of Arab creativity — since they all stemmed under different names from the Arabian peninsula in the form of great human migrations overflowing northwards — has given an impetus to the idea that Arab tradition not only pre-dates Islam but actually goes back some 5000 years, and is still viable, Islam being simply one of its more recent manifestations. This led to the creation of a kind of formula, for which the members of the Baghdad Group were largely responsible, that the artist should strive for the merging of tradition with modernism. In no time, this deceptively easy-sounding injunction, perhaps because of its very vagueness, caught on all over the Arab world — and not only among artists. Poets, novelists, architects, critics — they were all taken up with this insistent thought to the point that there was bound to be in the course of thirty years of theorization a pretty strong reaction to it, which we are in fact witnessing now.

That is how calligraphy came into the picture at the start of the 1950s. Since writing was actually invented around the year 3000 B.C. in Mesopotamia, when iconographic signs were transformed into simplified verbal symbols, changing into syllables and finally into individual letters, writing as such remained an art of especial significance, in which craft and magic merged, with a great deal of hieratic wisdom which

.../6

was soon to be part of the aesthetic experience associated with knowledge and ritual. Babylonian and Assyrian sculpture, employed cuneiform writing, which communicated information about kings, their laws and their battles and conquests, in a manner which made the writing itself part of the visual composition. Centuries later Arab artists made calligraphy a major outlet of creativity: whether it was carved in bricks round the walls of mosques and public buildings, or simply employed for writing down the Qoran first and later all that the human mind could devise in distinguished language, it was always treated as an almost holy act. The amanuensis would perform his ablutions and offer his prayers before holding pen to paper, or to parchment.

As time passed so many artists employed calligraphy inventively and in endless modulations, governed by subtle rules, in order to express powerful aesthetic impulses usually associated with 'spiritual' feelings, largely because most of the phrases thus written were of a religious nature, or related to the 'beautiful attributes' of God. The words for those artists were sufficient unto themselves as 'content', the beauty of their meaning being reflected in the beauty of their configuration. Writing and floral or geometrical arabesque often fused into one pattern, however small or large the surface. A striking example can still be seen on the walls of Alhambra in Granada, which dates back to the 15th century. And for centuries

.../7

the illuminated manuscript became a medium of articulation for the best artists.

What the modern painter did now was to do away with the rules, to play around, as it were, with letters and phrases in an unprecedented way. A whole new movement started, in which calligraphy, interwoven with an abstract background of mostly local rug-motifs, acquired a freedom of form and significance which the old professional calligraphers would not consider relevant to their sacred conventional art. Shakir Hassan, for example, after six years of study in Paris, developed a traditional Arab style in iconography, especially common in Syria, into a naive style of his own, incorporating child-like writing with primitive drawing. Soon later, he abandoned any drawing which had the slightest figurative suggestion and devoted his entire attention to calligraphy as he wanted it for his purpose. It was actually a break-down of writing to its simplest, freest form of individual letters as such. For Shakir Hassan, a major artist and theorist of this school, the letter was not only charged with the possibilities of free form, but also with mystical connotations bordering on magic. The great mystic, Ibn al Arabi, had said centuries ago, "The lovliest image is the one that has no finite form." The scribble on an old derelict wall, with hints of older graffiti and the patina of time and oblivion, could become a state of mind akin to an intense vision. Shakir Hassan called this kind

.../8

of painting One-Dimensionist, meaning by the 'one dimension' that which connects man with God in infinitude. The result was works of originality and strange power. Also, a great influence on many artists, each of whom adapted the new letter-trend to his own technique and style. The trend spread throughout the Arab world in fantastic variations, and seemed for some time to be the dominant mode of expression, from which one might diverge only to prove further the essential significance of the word, or the letter, as the radial force in the completed work.

Artists of note, such as Dia Azzawi, Rafa Nasiri, Naja Mahdawi, and scores of others, have gone through this enriching process, each in his own way. One would use poetic phrases, even whole poems, another a religious phrase, or simply a couple of vowels, a third might divorce the calligraphic-looking writing from all meaning in order to stress the purely visual beauty of the constantly moving and involuted linear forms. The background plays an extra role: mostly abstract, it may suggest disjointed geometrical shapes, far-away horizons where night and day are symbolic reminders of the binary nature of man's basic experience, and so on. Haphazard numbers, crosses and circles are added, often suggestive of repressed agonies. The poetic undertones thus join forces with the purely visual sensation.

.../9

In the meantime some artists followed a circuitous process: instead of abandoning the figurative for the calligraphic, they made the figurative look like calligraphy. In fact, painter-sculptor Jewad Selim, one of the greatest and most influential Arab artists of the second half of this century, in his conscious quest and deliberate experimentation for a distinctive Arab style, had emphasised in his drawings and paintings the calligraphic qualities of Wasiti, the celebrated 13th century illuminator-cum-calligrapher of Abbasid Baghdad, whom he considered as his model. Like Wasiti, he often incorporated words and verses into the composition of his canvases, long before the one-dimensionists made a strict code of it. His greatest and last work, the 50-meter long Monument of Liberty (1960), was actually conceived as an Arabic verse in the usual distich form: the linear development and inter-connections of the 14 mostly flat bronze figures that make up the monument are actually pure though "embodied" calligraphy. Similarly many bas reliefs by sculptor Mohammad Ghani employ this style and achieve their peculiar power through it. It is significant that Jewad Selim was the founder of the Baghdad Modern Art Group, and Shakir Hassan and Mohammad Ghani were both members of it. Equally significant is that they studied in London, Paris and Rome.

In the meantime there were several other ways in which Arab artists tried to incorporate tradition into a modern vision.

.../10

But the 'Letterists', huroufiyoun, as they came to be called, gave the impression that they had succeeded in up-dating Arab heritage into a modernist form with a distinct personality, although the traditionalists themselves came to be outraged by what they saw as an undermining of their time-hallowed tradition by a western-inspired innovation. And the question of identity was raised again, this time, as the political conflict with the West was on the u rise, with even greater insistence. There was a renewed call for Arab originality, and certain difficult questions were asked that needed answers of some kind: what does it mean to be original? Where does originality exactly stem from? From tradition, folk beliefs and practices? Or from the self? From society? From the collective unconscious?

Obviously the need for self-expression had to assert itself despite all the theories of critics and historians and psychologists. Expression should come first, said the artists. You don't put down rules in advance as to your identity: identity should well up from the dark recesses of your soul into the open, and your expression is the way to achieve this. What the artists create driven by their unconscious urges should be the work by which they are finally to be judged: their collective effort, thus crystallized into visual form, should be the truthful indicator of their identity. Discovery will thus come afterwards, as a logical end, and no pre-judgement by ready-made yardsticks

.../11

should be allowed to interfere.

Much of this thinking, no doubt, is conditioned by the love-hate relationship that seems to continue between east and west. The shock of the modern assumes many guises. But contrary to what a lot of people in the West think, the Arab mind is not dominantly an isolationist mind. However much it looks inward, its actual orientation is always outward. Hence many artists, like many intellectuals, reject the notion that their work is merely a reaction to a European challenge. They come to the fore with fresh confidence: they have the courage and the vision to pose their own questions as dictated by the forces of their inner spirit. The conflict is indeed there — but it is not merely a conflict with an outside culture, it is a conflict with the self, with the inner psyche in a troubled phase of national change.

No wonder then that a new trend among the younger artists in the last few years is gaining momentum completely away from tradition, from calligraphy and the abstract. It is a kind of neo-expressionism which stresses not only the figurative, but also the personal, the odd, the exceptional. Style for these artists will thus emerge as a result of the new puzzlement, anger, desire — all in a personal sense. Identity becomes an individual passion, a personal heaven or hell.

.../12

May we not look on this as an upsurge of another conflict of culture? Perhaps we may. But one thing is certain: its vitality is not in question, and its rising current seems to be part of the turmoil of our times.

- Jabra I. Jabra

Baghdad,
August, 1986