

Karin Adrian von Roques

The Situation of Contemporary Arab Art

Contemporary Arab art is little researched. In recent years, the author has visited many studios in Arab countries to get to know it. She discovered that a lively art scene exists there, of which the West is almost unaware. In contrast to contemporary Russian or Chinese art, which found their way into galleries and museums and on to the market in the early 1990s, art from Arab countries has up to now almost exclusively been presented in ethnological museums and «ethnically» oriented galleries. And the works on view vary enormously in quality.

The Market

As visits to events such as Art Basel or Art Cologne have shown, art fairs hardly feature works by Arab artists, although excellent ones exist. A systematic survey of leading international gallery owners enquiring about the reasons for this revealed the dilemma facing contemporary Arab art. On one hand, because of the dominance of Western artistic criteria, there is apparently no demand worth mentioning for works by Arab artists. On the other, the modern art of Arab countries is confronted in the West with many

Karin Adrian von Roques, Historian of Islamic art, specialised in contemporary Arab art; commissioned exhibitions of contemporary Arab art, most recently «Languages from the Desert: Contemporary Arab Art from the Gulf» (Bonn, 2005; Paris, 2006; Abu Dhabi, 2007; Catalogue published by DUMONT); now preparing exhibitions of contemporary Arab art in Bonn, Barcelona, Tokio, Miami, Washington und New York.

prejudices, stereotypes and clichés, nor are there any clearly defined ideas as to the quality of creative art from the Arab world. Often the question of why Arab artists are not represented here was countered with: does contemporary art in Arab lands even exist? And if so, is it any good? Don't the artists there imitate Western art styles? Can art develop at all given Islam's prohibition of images?

Some quotations from this survey may clarify the problem. On the issue of the dominance of Western market criteria, Pierre Huber of the Galerie Art & Public in Geneva stated: «A market for visual arts has developed above all in the U.S. and in Central Europe. Because a tradition of investing in art exists, a market could be established. Nothing comparable exists in the Arab countries because painting, for instance, is not part of their tradition.» Monsieur Grimbaud of Galerie Lelong in Paris underlined this: «Market structures don't exist in Arab lands. There is no market on either side. In Japan, for instance, they have begun to collect European art, and Japanese art is sold here. Thus an exchange takes place.» And Ole Christian Koch from the London Marlborough Gallery added: «We have no collectors from Arab countries for contemporary art.»

«In the end, Western curators and collectors determine the market», Thaddaeus Ropac from the gallery of the same name in Vienna and Paris concluded. Marketability is thus an important factor helping to determine which artist and which expressive means participate in the global discourse. The question then arises as to why the art market doesn't create a market for Arab artists. To which Thaddaeus Ropac responded: «Because they come from a totally different cultural environment. You need the necessary background knowledge. You have to familiarize yourself with the foreign culture. That demands an enormous effort, which galleries alone cannot accomplish. Normally museums take over the groundwork, specialists such as art historians or curators.» He pointed to the role of the Guggenheim in the case of Chinese art. Other gallery owners, such as Victor Gisler of the Zurich Galerie Mai 36 and Ole Christian Koch, concurred with this view. But Dr. Christine König, of the Galerie König in Vienna expressed reservations: «I am opposed to [Westerners] choosing and defining what art is or is not, what should be shown in museums or not. We should approach another culture with care and observe what emerges there.»

The Western Eye

This raises another question, namely what do Western eyes regard as art. The implicit danger in encounters with foreign cultures is that we superimpose our habitual reflective patterns on the things that we see or experience. Thus the West asks what is authentically Arab in a work of art while in fact searching for elements that serve the cliché of exoticism – or, given the usual media coverage of the area, political statements. What is unfamiliar and foreign to us is not always obvious at first sight and needs a sensitive approach to open up its complex meaning.

What characterizes contemporary Arab art and what distinguishes it from Western art? Is there a pictorial world that can only emerge against a background of Islamic traditions? What are the sources of inspiration for Arab artists? What role do Islam, the history of the region or the after-

effects of Europe's colonial policy play for them? How much do they reflect biographical situations such as exile or global nomadism?

Understanding of another culture develops with a willingness at times to leave behind habitual ways of seeing and dare a change in perspective. Yet alien cultures are often received without reflection and without any deeper understanding. The Muslim East provides a historical example. For centuries it fired the imagination of Europeans to the wildest of fantasies, leading to whole waves of different oriental fashions. These had little in common with the «actual existing» East. Various motives lay behind these historical fantasies: for example, the longing for an intact world or archaic cultures, or the quest for new meaning in times of crisis.

In the 19th century, as Europe's influence grew with industrialization, so did its interest in the economic development of the East. This proved detrimental to some crafts, such as carpet weaving. Since the demand for Oriental carpets had risen, Western forms of production were imported into Eastern workshops, and designs were introduced that corresponded with Western taste. The result was a so-called 'pattern decline' in designs that had been handed down over centuries.

The Slanted View

A widespread prejudice exists in the idea that the Muslim world is «backward and backward-looking» and has not continued to develop. According to this view, modernism never took place and consequently no modern or contemporary art has evolved. Islamic modernity is negated or ignored according to the motto: «the more Western, the more modern». This kind of thinking reduces the Muslim East to classical Islamic art, the art of the arabesque, of miniatures and calligraphy, which were felt to be typically Oriental. A no-man's-land that no one wants to know about in any detail somehow lies between this epoch and the present.

As a survey published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper in September 2004 under the heading «The Clash of Civilizations» showed,

Germans now associate concepts such as «the oppression of women», «fanaticism, radicalism» and a «backward-looking orientation». There is little left of the fascination that the East for centuries exerted on the West, influencing art, literature and architecture, from Gothic cathedrals to Dresden's Tobacco Mosque.

Yet in Muslim countries, just as in Europe, processes of development and change have taken place: combating political and social conditions, struggling with global political power constellations and – above all since the 19th century – with the increase in Western influences and new technologies. These transforming processes also affect art.

There has never been any history of art in Arab countries, any development in art comparable to the West. Painting and especially sculpture – for centuries an integral part of European art tradition – are for Arab culture uncommon forms of expression. Instead, it is poetry that occupies a central place within Arab consciousness. The word enjoys high prestige and high esteem. This is linked to the Koran, the Islamic book of revelation, whose poetic language and especially its rhythm were meant to be heard rather than read. The Islamic prohibition of images has also played an important role in the fact that the visual arts have developed quite differently in Arab countries from the way they have in Europe. Many Europeans understand this Islamic ban on images as meaning that fundamentally no images at all may be produced.

Forbidden Images?

The assumed «hostility towards pictures» is part of the same bias as the allegation that Islamic artists are not capable of painting properly since they have no knowledge of the most elementary rules of painting and drawing. Yet pictures, even ones representing figures, exist in Islamic art. Islam does not forbid artistic activity *per se*; the ban on images exists within a religious context.

However quotations from certain suras may be interpreted, the Koran itself has no explicit or

binding prohibition of pictures. Nowhere is a concrete image ban referred to. The Hadith, the corpus of the prophet Mohammed's transmitted words and deeds – addresses the subject of images. As a source of Islam's religious faith and law, it distinguishes what may or may not be represented. According to it, only inanimate beings or objects may be portrayed: plants and trees but not animals. The circumstances in which Islam arose in Mecca led to the prohibition of living (or animate) creatures being portrayed in mosques or prayer rooms. During prayers, nothing was to distract attention from God or tempt one to the worship of idols.

Moreover, an artist making a picture could think of himself as a creator and be tempted to imitate God. The fear was that pictures could lead to thoughts of creative power, for in Islam creation is the privilege of God alone. To portray animate beings in a picture is equal to a creative act, and this is the context in which the quotation from Hadith is to be understood: «Whoever makes a picture in this world will be asked to breathe life into it on the Day of Resurrection, but he will not be able to do so. Woe to you! If you absolutely must do so, then portray the trees or any object that has no breath of life.»

The prohibition of images must not be seen as a fixed law existing for the worldwide community of Muslims. It is more an «ideological» standpoint that is accepted by the majority. But this standpoint has changed through time and been interpreted in various ways by the different schools of Islamic law. Thus the restrictions on pictorial depiction have been applied differently by the orthodox Sunnis and more conservative Muslims, who keep more strictly to the rules, and by the Shi'is, who have cultivated a more liberal interpretation.

From the 13th century on, Islamic art flourished. Against a background of forbidding the portrayal of living creatures, it consciously developed a new aesthetic, which did without perspective, corporeality, similarity to living persons, light and shade, as seen in the example of miniature painting, and did not try to imitate the world of appearances in the Aristotelian or Platonic sense. Within the flowering of the art of the arabesque, it refrained from holding a mirror to nature. Above all, it avoided

sculpture altogether, since this was equated with making forbidden idols.

The Ban on Images Today

The image ban with its complex and contradictory interpretations is still at work today. Despite a meanwhile hundred-year painting tradition, in many places problems still face an artist who practises his art pictorially and figuratively. From the author's survey among Arab artists to find out how far the ban on images affected their output, it became clear that whereas for many the question simply didn't arise, for others the prohibition was still effective. For example, Khalil Abdul Wahed from Dubai stated: «I know that in my religion sculpture – that of a human figure or an animal – is forbidden. I therefore avoid what's forbidden.» And he added: «I believe there are reasons for religious prohibitions. For some things we have an explanation, for others we are still searching for one [...] I sometimes believe that restrictions get people to deal more creatively with what is permitted.» A female artist from Sharjah said: «Our teacher explained to us that when we make sculptures or pictures, we take over the role of the creator. In the first place, there should be no images in the mosques or where one prays, because one would be praying to the picture or a statue. Islam is not visual like Christianity. Everything is for the ear – prayers, Hadith, Koran recitations – and not for the eye. Listen first, then write, this is what calligraphy demands. Artists who are religious are influenced by this.» The female artist Karima Al Shomely from Sharjah said: «I know about the image ban. God created nature and when I depict it, I am like the creator. But as an artist, I must study nature, draw figures. I can't say 'No, Islam forbids it.' In the meantime I think that, as an artist, I am allowed to do this. Art is to me my message; my installations visualize my ideas.»

Global Modernism, Inner Conflicts

The development of an Arab art in the sense of global modernism began early in the 20th cen-

tury, as a direct result of the increase in reciprocal influences between East and West. The profound changes of the period made themselves felt in all areas in the Western as well as the Eastern world, up to and including the art scene. While in the West, the evolving abstraction in painting was viewed as a revolutionary development, artists in the Muslim world turned more and more to figurative painting. The ideal of contemporary European art, i.e., the rejection of merely reproducing the world of appearances, corresponds to the aesthetics of Islamic works of art. The aesthetic revolution in Islamic art, if you like, had already taken place many centuries earlier.

In Arab countries artists began to paint in the style of European painting. Many had been in Europe and come into contact with, and been influenced by, different art movements such as Impressionism or Expressionism. Artists from Lebanon, Egypt, Syria and Morocco became the trailblazers for other Arab artists. In the 1930s in cities like Beirut, Cairo and Damascus, but also in Rabat, the first groups of artists formed that became engaged with the currents and techniques of European art as well as with their own cultural background. Without the influence of foreign cultures, above all of the Muslim East, European modernism would not have been conceivable, in the same way that the development of Arab modernism is inconceivable without the various influences from the West.

The trend towards modernism and the development of the visual arts in Arab countries did not run their course without tensions and conflicts between different groups. Some wanted to hold on to the cultural heritage such as classical calligraphy; others wanted to demonstrate that modernization and renewal were necessary and that the modern Arab world was conscious of the global aesthetic discourse. Conflicts sharpened when tradition was newly interpreted or criticism of the system became noticeable. In such cases, confrontations with conservative movements that opposed the new ideas occurred, and in worst-case scenarios governments sought to prevent the new developments in art or even suppress them by force. Some countries promoted sanctioned state art,

and this made the production of modern, contemporary art into a perilous undertaking, which could often only be carried out underground.

Not least, a deep-seated mistrust towards the colonial and imperialist West played a role in the conflicts, not without reason. These misunderstandings arose partly from the experience of colonialism. On the one hand, Western art was admired. But certain circles saw a kind of 'neo-colonialism' in the new forms of expression. In the field of art, as elsewhere, a fear of a loss of one's own tradition and one's own identity existed, and artists who were assumed to be too much influenced by Western culture and Western moral concepts were looked at with suspicion. On the other hand, in the West these same artists were accused of being imitative. This dilemma has continued up to the present. Time, as well as global aesthetic correlation, will be needed before contemporary art finds acceptance in the culture of the individual Arab societies.

Arab Modernism

The Arab artists who were experimenting with modernism soon fell between two stools. Their art was recognized neither in their own country, nor really in Europe. Even those who lived in the West had difficulty getting their art seen and accepted. In their native land they could not reach a wide public because they had few opportunities to exhibit, since museums and galleries were scarce. In many Arab countries even today the infrastructure that would make it possible to give contemporary artists more widespread publicity is lacking. In addition, educational opportunities are scarce, and few collectors focus on building up a collection of contemporary Arab art. Despite all these difficulties, modern Arab art is asserting itself. The artist Khalil Abdul Wahed from Dubai gave a perhaps representative answer to the question of what difference he saw between the way Western and Arab society treated artists: «I studied in the U.S. There I came into increased contact with art. The difference I see is that in the West you see art everywhere; art museums are everywhere. When at home art is discussed,

you still think primarily of Western art. Many don't even notice the art that is done here. But we do have our own art here. The question is how many people recognize it as art and appreciate it.»

After World War II the situation changed in favour of a freer association with the «forbidden» picture. Artists experimented more, tried out new forms, techniques, materials, became increasingly liberated from European models, reflected their own history critically, their own circumstances. They took up traditional genres and modes, such as calligraphy or the ornamental, interpreting them in a new way, translating them into a contemporary vocabulary of forms and symbols. They likewise began to do work involving the human figure. Artists reproduced it in all possible variations, rendering the question of «figurativeness» or «abstraction» obsolete.

The question I posed at the beginning, namely whether contemporary Arab art is distinguishable from Western art implies the question of what a work of art is expected to accomplish. The French impressionist painter Pierre Bonnard believed that a work of art should depict an autonomous world. In this spirit the Emirati artist Ebtisam Abdul Aziz says: «Art is a visual, nonverbal language. It is an international language, transcending space and time, and expressing our existence and style. This projecting of aesthetic consciousness, in a unique, modern and universally comprehensible presentation, renders the visual language of plastic arts a link between cultures and nations, and the vessel of an international artistic infusion.» The crucial aspect is *how* something is depicted rather than *what*. The issue here is the autonomy of the work. And Arab artists are as much at pains as Western ones to achieve this. Vis-à-vis its Western cousin, the sole distinction of contemporary Arab art would then be its thematic context. Its social, cultural, political and religious environment plays a role in the choice of means, the composition of a picture, the configuration of a video, a sculpture, an installation. To understand a work of art we must ask what the artist is formally and thematically undertaking. With the new media and the technical possibilities art now has, the emphasis has shifted today. The question as to a national identity seems no longer

to make sense. The new communication media, for example the Internet and globalization, facilitate the crossing of borders. Yet even though the world has shrunk, an individual access to life still remains, the confrontation of the single artist with himself, his society, the problems of his time and place, all of which he will formulate in his works. A work of art is communicated not least through a universal language.

A particularly interesting case are the artists of the Gulf States. Often the specific situation of their countries, whose most characteristic features are ongoing, rapid changes, is in the centre of their artistic work. With the discovery of oil at the beginning of the last century, the world of the Gulf was yanked into modernity. The coexistence of tradition and modernity was established that is visible not only in much architecture, where elements of modern styles have been fused with traditional Arab ones.

It also includes the maintenance of older habits, traditional rites and customs alongside a new, Western lifestyle. These past years have seen the Gulf region increase its efforts to build museums and galleries as well as gigantic university campuses, in the wake of which artists everywhere have also become organized. In the meantime the demand for science, art and culture is one of the urgent concerns of many ruling sheikhs. As far as contemporary art goes, the Emir of Sharjah has seen to it that a museum of modern art was built, where changing exhibitions present regional as well as Western artists. He has also initiated the Sharjah Biennial, which is set to attain a worldwide reputation. In Doha, the capital of Qatar, too, contemporary art is deliberately promoted, and great care is being taken to build museums in which excellent art collections will soon be on view.

The parallelism and co-effects of such different circumstances appear to be having a fruitful influence on artistic creativity in the Gulf region. It seems that this special environment provides artists with fertile ground to develop. «The changes taking place in my country are enormous and unbelievably fast», said the artist Khalil Abdul Wahed from Dubai. «I think it has a positive ef-

fect on the art scene here. It has drawn more people from different fields, including art, to my country. Yet despite all these rapid changes, I hope we won't lose our identity.»

Along with all the positive effects, the disconcertment and the fears that such a radical break carries with it should not be underestimated. The fears refer, above all, to the disappearance of familiar contexts and traditional values like family ties. If identity has up to now been fed by membership in a group or family, then concepts taken as a matter of course in the West like «doing your own thing» and maximum fulfilment of the individual – also meaningful in Western art production – may seem at first disturbing to many an Arab. Integration into a religious tradition plays just as large a role, something the mostly secularized West has difficulty understanding. Besides this they concerned with the regional and international political context, and its effects on how the world views the Arabs.

Avant-garde and tradition

At any rate, the artists of the Gulf states are far freer from European influences than their colleagues from the Mediterranean Arab countries, who have often studied in European art schools and whose countries, in any case, have had far closer ties with Europe.

In amazing variety, the works of contemporary Arab artists reflect all these networked concepts across personal, social and political ranges. However, their recourse to their own traditions and their formation by the surrounding desert remain in place and shine through their works. Their artistic works make clear, an artistic avant-garde has been established that in its engagement with its own and with foreign cultures has gone its independent way, according to which artists follow the postulate of artistic autonomy as represented in the context of Western art.

There is no educational price to pay for access to the visual discourse of our Arab contemporaries. What it requires is aesthetic and personal assurance on eye-level terms. We see expression as a globally recognizable quality.