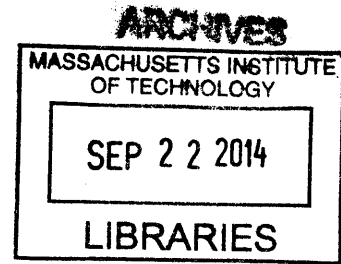


The Shape of the Support: Painting and Politics in Syria's Twentieth Century

by

Anneka Lenssen

B.A. Studio Art
Kenyon College, 2001



Submitted to the Department of Architecture
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Architecture: History and Theory of Art

at the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

September 2014

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Signature of Author: Signature redacted

Department of Architecture
August 8, 2014

Certified by: Signature redacted

Nasser Rabbat
Aga Khan Professor of the History of Architecture
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by: Signature redacted

Takehiko Nagakura
Chair
Department Committee on Graduate Students

Dissertation Committee

**Nasser Rabbat, Aga Khan Professor of the History of Architecture (dissertation supervisor)
Massachusetts Institute of Technology**

**Caroline Ann Jones, Professor of Art History
Massachusetts Institute of Technology**

**Robin Adèle Greeley, Associate Professor of Latin American Art History
University of Connecticut**

**Lisa Wedeen, Professor of Political Science
University of Chicago**

[Handwritten signature]

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Abstract

This dissertation offers an intellectual history of painting in Syria in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s that accounts for new regimes of political representation, from French Mandate rule to the mass mobilizations of youth-oriented ideological parties to Cold War cultural diplomacy. After an extended introduction that lays out the conditions for the emergence of modern art in Syria, each subsequent chapter situates an artist or artists in a specific institutional setting that provided new terms for critically evaluating the stakes of painting against new ideas about art and its social activation. Chapter Two reads the work of Adham Ismail (1920-1963) against the Ba'ath political movement of the 1940s, as he mobilized an aesthetic theory of the arabesque to produce radical paintings meant to inculcate Arab modes of cognition supporting a Arab polity. Chapter Three chronicles the Syrian artists who traveled abroad to the Italian art academy system in the early 1950s, detailing the patronage networks that produced "modern Arab art" as an identity category while promoting a conception of Mediterranean aesthetics as a shared milieu of free exchange. Chapter Four analyzes Fateh al-Mouardres's (1922-1999) transgressive critique of heritage ideals in Syria, an interrogation of regional identity that brought surrealist automatic painting methods into coordination with the modernist cultural project of *Shi'r* (Poetry) magazine in Beirut. The final chapter explores the debate about painterly abstraction that was centered around the College of Fine Arts at the University of Damascus in the 1960s and conducted against the waxing and waning of enthusiasm for different tenets of artistic responsibility. Taken together, these case studies of Syrian painting practices and their politics not only shed light on a little-understood formation within the expanded field of modernist practices, but also support a historiographical investigation into the writing of history from the periphery of centralizing market activity. Here, the political party, foreign fellowship, literary magazine, and national university are recognized as generative institutional supports, such that the European bourgeois norms of gallery, museum, and free press are not presumed as a necessary condition for modern painting.

Thesis Supervisor: Nasser Rabbat

Title: Aga Khan Professor of the History of Architecture

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation only came into being through the generosity of others who freely contributed their time, energy, and ideas.

Foremost, I wish to thank Nasser Rabbat, my advisor, for taking a chance on admitting me to the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture and for his unwavering support and guidance. I am grateful to my committee Caroline Jones, Robin Greeley, and Lisa Wedeen for their clarifying criticism. Caroline taught me how to make an argument, Robin listened to my disparate hunches and told me I needed a theory of the state (an insight that gave new direction to my study), and Lisa showed me that one can love Syria while at the same time unflinchingly analyze it. I would never have pursued a PhD in this field at all if not for the mentorship of David J. Roxburgh. Once in it, wise counsel from Nada Shabout, Heghnar Watenpaugh, Kirsten Scheid, Sussan Babaie, and Hannah Feldman helped to keep me on course.

While researching this dissertation over the period 2007-2012, I aspired to make Syria a second home. That particular Syria is now lost, a casualty of cruel and ongoing wars. The lives and dreams of the many Syrians who helped me have been interrupted. I thank the Arida family for giving me my first introduction to Damascus, especially Amer and Amro. I thank all the many artists, gallerists, and writers who patiently answered my questions about their distant memories, including Afif Bahnassi, Leila Nseir, Abdullah Murad, Elias Zayyat, Mamdouh Kashlan, Shoukran al-Mouddarres, Mouna Atassi, Khuzaima Alwani, Ghassan al-Sibai, Youssef Abdelké, Khaldoun Shishakli, Assem Zakaria, Nazem al-Jaafari, Ghayas Akhras, Aziz Ismail, Issam Darwish, Abdul Aziz Alloun, Nazir Ismail, Asma Fayoumi, and Said Taha. I benefitted from the help of the staff of Dar al-Watha'iq in Damascus, the staff at the National Museum and in particular Ramia Obaid, the Rafia gallery team (Rafia Qadamani, Lina Ashi, and Randa al-Azmeh), my archivist bookseller Salah Salouha, the staff at Ayyam Gallery, and Mayssa Harwil. And I am indebted to the friends who ensured I found my way on the ground: Ahed Alahmar, Daa Warad, Samera Zagala, Nour Farhat, Issam Eido (my Arabic tutor), the brilliant and kind Zena Takieddine, Rania Ghosn, and Khaled Malas. I thank Rasha Salti, who introduced me to Orwa Nyrabia, and Orwa for teaching me to think about history, art, and being human differently. I extend gratitude to Kristine Khouri, who made it fun to think about possibilities for digital posterity. And I send love and respect to Abir Boukhari and the others who were creating AllArtNow: Nisrine, Muhammad Ali, Orfan and Ghada. Finally, I am forever grateful to the relatives of artists who trusted me with the legacy of their parents and shared photographs,

correspondence, and memories: Fadi al-Mouddarres and Suad Jarrous, Bassel Shoura, Lubna Hammad, and Lilliana La Regina and her niece Silvia La Regina. I hope they feel I have done some justice to the legacy of their loved ones.

For help and guidance during my research trips to Egypt, I thank Aissa Deebi, Emann Abdou, Ola Seif, Mustafa al-Razzazz, Kristin Fabbe, and Georges Fahmi. When the January 25, 2011 revolution prompted me to leave Egypt for Jordan and Syria, I was rescued with by Sarah Rogers and Marzouq Qubti, Suha Shoman, Kristine Khouri, Abir Boukhari, and Marwa Arsanios. In Jordan, I met with Faisal Darraj and Muhanna Durra. In Paris, Aisha Arnaout, Eid Yakoubi and his wife Duha, Mohamad Al Roumi, and the remarkably generous Chérif Khaznadar. In Rome, I interviewed Julianos Kattinis. And in Beirut, gallerist Saleh Barakat gave me access to his peerless collection of works.

I have received financial support for this project from the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at M.I.T., the Fulbright U.S. Student Program, the Social Sciences Research Council, and the P.E.O. Scholar Awards Program. I drew intellectual support from the comments of respondents and audience members when I presented versions of this work, including at the 2010 AMCA conference at Mathaf in Doha, the 2012 AMCA conference in Beirut, and the Abstraction and Totality panel at 2013's CAA conference. An earlier version of part of Chapter Five appeared as "The Plasticity of the Syrian Avant-Garde, 1964-1970" in the June 2013 issue of *ARTMargins*, and was greatly improved by the comments of anonymous reviewers.

The camaraderie of incredible friends and role models gave me daily strength: fellow Fulbrighters Anthony Edwards and Beverly Levine Tsacoyianis; my HTC cohort, including Deniz Turker, Christian Hedrick, Razan Francis, Winnie Wong, and especially Stephanie Tuerk and Iris Moon; and my comrades in the field, Aissa Deebi, Sarah Rogers, Saleem Al-Bahloly, Clare Davies, Kristine Khouri, Samah Hijjawi, Holiday Powers, Alex Seggerman, and Jessica Gerschultz. Kiri Miller and Christina Linklater showed me that this could be done. Program administrators Anne Deveau, Kate Brearley, José Luis Arguello, and Renée Caso ensured that I *did* get it done. My final two years of work on this manuscript were spent in Egypt, where I was an assistant professor in the visual arts department at the American University in Cairo. My students never ceased to amaze me with their raw energy and sincere questioning. I thank them for forcing me to think and speak about modern art and visual culture in new ways.

Finally, I thank my husband Shibben, who gives me more in a day than I thought possible in a lifetime. I dedicate this dissertation to him, and to my sister Elisa, mother Debra, and stepfather Joel. I just wish that I could have also shared it with my father Mark.

Notes on translation and transliteration

Arabic

All translations from Arabic into English are mine except where otherwise noted.

In making decisions about my method of translation and transliteration, I was guided by a desire to facilitate the general readability of the text while also preserving sufficient accuracy for specialists to locate and consult my archival sources.

- When a title of an artwork or poem appears in the main body of the text, I opted to translate it into English. Only for those titles for which there was no clear English equivalent have I left a title in transliterated Arabic.

- When the publisher for a book is a government office, I have translated its name into English. I hope this will allow readers to better track the ideological grounding for the publication.

- I have based my method of transliteration on the system adopted by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*, albeit with the following considerations and modifications:

I opted to write the Arabic names of artists and politicians according to the most commonly used transliteration rather than according to IJMES rules. Those who wish to confirm the Arabic spelling of a name may consult my Appendix.

I fully transliterated the titles of books and articles in both footnotes and bibliography, including using macrons to indicate long vowels and dots to indicate emphatic consonants. This includes the names of artists whenever they appear as part of a book or article title (i.e. Fāṭiḥ al-Mudarris rather than 'Fateh al-Mouddarres,' which I use elsewhere).

- Christine Cuk reviewed and edited my Arabic transliterations. I am extremely grateful to her for her dedicated work. Any remaining mistakes are my own.

Other languages

- All translations of the French-language materials cited herein are mine.

- I made use of Italian sources as well, and my translations of those materials are also my own, albeit produced with the help of online translation software. Whenever I felt that a more fully interpretive understanding of an Italian text was necessary, I sought assistance from Davide Stefani. Any errors of translation or transcription are mine.

Chapter One

Ciphers of Resistance, an Introduction

In early February of 1961, an artist working in Idlib, an agricultural town to the west of Aleppo, received a memo informing him he had been selected to participate in the upcoming São Paulo Bienal.¹ The artist was Fateh al-Moudarres (1922-1999), one of the country's leading painters. The memo had been dispatched from the Damascus office of the Ministry of Culture and National Orientation for the United Arab Republic (UAR), the short-lived presidential republic uniting Syria with Egypt under Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser.² It conveyed exactly four stipulations:

- 1) That the number of paintings not exceed five
- 2) That the style be "modern innovative"
- 3) That the paintings arrive at the Ministry before February 20, 1961
- 4) That the paintings are colorful

When read today, the brevity of these four points can surprise. The impossible proximity of such disparate qualities as finitude, innovativeness, timeliness, and colorfulness might even elicit uneasy laughter.³ The memo, with its set of clearly stated but not entirely cogent directions, seems to resist coordination with the actual painted objects it solicited, or the ambitions and intellectual convictions with which it interacted. We might see its apparent impossibility as

¹ Secretary General of the Ministry of Culture and National Orientation to Fateh al-Moudarres, Damascus, 7

² The UAR lasted from February 1958, when it was ratified by plebiscite in both countries, until September 28, 1961, when it was dissolved by a military coup in Damascus. I discuss it and some of the institutional effects of its nearly four-year existence in Chapters Three and Four.

³ With "uneasy laughter," I mean to reference Michel Foucault's discussion of Jorge Luis Borges's invented Chinese encyclopedia in the preface to *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1989), where it provides an exaggerated example of an encounter with another, apparently impossible system of thought that is nevertheless historically possible.

symptomatic of a historiographic gap: the unfamiliar conditions of possibility in a nationalist, socialist Syria located on the periphery of expanding world markets and popular culture. It marks a disjuncture in our awareness of the art world of the early 1960s, which is to say it marks a point where the ambitious prerogatives of a government office intersect with the presumptive universality of an international exhibition such as the São Paulo Bienal, but do not fully align.⁴

Wherever the archive offers precious little traction, attempts at historical interpretation can founder. Virtually no recognition has been extended to Syrian paintings as bearers of historical change where elements of old and new knocked against each other in the field of modernism at-large, let alone as points of intercourse with audiences with the power to affect, persuade, or develop a national subjectivity (all powers readily accorded to art within Syria).⁵ The elusiveness of a ground for studying modern Syrian painting within modernity rather than behind or outside it can be partly attributed to Syria's political history as a nation-state and the highly regulated character of its eventual socialist caretaker government. During its first two decades of recognized sovereignty after 1946, Syrian political history is marked by fitful discontinuities in government. During its subsequent five decades, it is defined by the increasingly vise-like rule of the Ba'ath Party state. Indeed, only seven months after Fateh al-Moudarres received his letter from the Ministry of Culture and National Orientation, a military coup d'état felled the UAR. Two years later, members of the military executed another coup, this time to install the leadership of the Ba'ath Party at the head of the state, an arrangement that in the 1970s turned into a quasi-dictatorship under Hafiz al-Asad that remains in place even today

⁴ For a discussion of the biennial exhibition as world-making, and as constituted from the placement of art objects within a world picture (with determining effects for both the picture and the object), see Caroline A. Jones, "The Historical Origins of the Biennial," in *The Biennial Reader*, eds. Carlos Basualdo, Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Ovstebo (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 70.

⁵ The term "modernism at-large" is from Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986). Huyssen argues that modernism always has a transnational character, with modernist practice migrating and transforming through contact with what he calls indigenous national cultures.

under his son Bashar al-Asad. Once observers started to see this trajectory toward authoritarianism as a teleological one, the country gained a reputation as an impenetrable black box, foreclosing further interpretation of its artistic production. It has even become possible to ignore the historicity of Syrian artistry altogether, as in a recent entry in a textbook of global contemporary art, which recounts that,

European cultural models—including Orientalist perspectives on the “Middle East” as an exotic domain—were introduced into the region, but with varying impact. Baghdad and Beirut became vital centers of modern art and literature, whereas Damascus proved largely resistant.⁶

The insufficiency of this gloss on the diffusion of modernism in the Arab East may be recognized easily, for it not only ignores the richly varied, indubitably modern artistic practices that emerged in Syria in the twentieth century, but it also supposes a unidirectional pattern of diffusion from Western centers outward into regional derivatives. And yet, although the hollowness of this textbook summary is easily observed, its rhetorical effectiveness in the case of Syria in particular can hardly be ignored. The statement that “Damascus proved largely resistant” not only conforms to popular expectations regarding the fate of European modernism in a predominantly Muslim region, but it also reflects the political scientific literature on modern Syria, which sees the ruling Ba’th Party regime as the most hardliner of participants in the overall Arab movement in the 1950s and 1960s to reject bourgeois values as coercive impositions and offer national-cultural and socialist ones instead.⁷ Thus, a temporal narrative of belatedness remains the dominant analytical framework, making modernism out to be a

⁶ Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011), 236. The quoted passage appears in the opening paragraph for the “Western Asia” chapter.

⁷ Kevin W. Martin, “‘Enter the Future!’ Exemplars of Bourgeois Modernity in Post-WWII Syria” (PhD, Georgetown University 2005), 3. This trope of resistance remains significant to foreign policy debates, as in the early stages of the Syrian uprising in 2011, when certain Arab critics on the left were thought to be withholding their support for it because of their reverence for the Syrian regime’s image as a last bastion of resistance to U.S. and Israeli imperialism. See Bassam Haddad, “For Syria, What is ‘Left’?” *al-Jazeera online* (29 August 2011).

European export that can either “take” in its adopted setting or not, depending on existing levels of cosmopolitanism.

As this dissertation explores through an examination of new artistic practices in Syria in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, modernism does not move in that way nor necessarily require those conditions. I take a different approach to Syrian modernism vis-à-vis the international field and its topographical expanse of attempts to transition into a more modernized world.⁸ My dissertation offers an intellectual history of painting and painted form in Syria that is situated, to the greatest extent possible, in the many networks of resources that provided painters with immediate support for the painterly enterprise. In the decades under consideration here, Syria held a contestatory tangle of ideologies, with the decolonization process sparking crises in subjectivity and representation while also producing competing mass political parties, each espousing a different mythopoetic identity. These competing national visions included the practical nationalism of the Syrian state, the expansive pan-Syrian solidarity imagined by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), the equally expansive Arabism of the Ba’th Party, which imagined that all state boundaries would be subsumed to a shared Arabic language and history, and the anti-nationalist vision of the international socialist project, all cross-hatched by the international art world’s first forays in development politics in the form of exchanges of expertise and biennial pavilions. In each of my chapters, I hone in on a particularly productive constellation of activity within these pulsing dynamics, situating an artist or artists in a specific and new institutional setting that gave shape to their work and excavating its surrounding intellectual strata. Specifically, my Chapter Two situates Adham Ismail (1920-1963) in the Ba’th

⁸ In stating my definition of “modernism” as a practice of recognizing a differential, I draw from Andreas Huyssen, “Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World,” *New German Critique* 34 no. 1 (Winter 2007): 189-207; Charles Harrison, “Modernism,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed., Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds. (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 2003), 188-201.

political movement of the 1940s, showing how he mobilized an aesthetic theory of the arabesque to produce radical paintings devising new modes of cognition in the service of an Arab polity and the effort to overturn the corrupted power of the traditional elite.⁹ Chapter Three chronicles the Syrian artists who traveled abroad to enter the Italian art academy system in the early 1950s and the international patronage networks for that sojourn, which produced “modern Arab painting” as an identity category while formulating a conception of Mediterranean aesthetics as a shared milieu of free exchange. In Chapter Four, I link Fateh al-Moudarres (1922-1999) and his use of modes of surrealist automatic composition to the modernist cultural project of the *Shi‘r* (Poetry) magazine in Beirut, through which he developed his critique of the increasingly dogmatic heritage ideals of the Syrian cultural apparatus. And in my final chapter, I examine the debate about painterly abstraction that was centered at the College of Fine Arts at the University of Damascus in the 1960s and was conducted against the waxing and waning of enthusiasm for different tenets of socially responsible and national art. As I explore through these four loosely chronological chapters, as set into nodes of particularly dense and activated practice, modern painting in Syria – as elsewhere – entailed making use of resources both intimately familiar and culturally estranged, and new and old, with the results registering as significant and up-to-date precisely because of the novelty of the synthesis.¹⁰

Although my emphasis is on shared and coordinated activity, it must be said that the impulse to resist imposed forms does remain central to this history. As we will see, the legacy of colonial rule in the Eastern Mediterranean, and particularly its creation of statelets and

⁹ I say “movement” to reflect the protean nature of the early iterations of the Ba‘th Party with which Ismail was involved. See the Ba‘th entries in my Appendix for a further explanation of the distinction.

¹⁰ Perry Anderson made the influential suggestion that modernism emerged through the interplay of new, revolutionary currents with the language of a highly developed old “academy” or “regime” in his article “Modernity and Revolution,” *New Left Review* (March-April 1984): 96-113. Subsequent works that have taken the implications of Anderson’s model for the study of non-Western modernisms into account include Kobena Mercer, ed., *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005) and Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2010).

minoritarian communities, meant that Syrian artists responded to the images of artistic modernism that circulated through the foreign popular press by also assessing their political utility, looking to art to help revise the balance of a changing world order. During the period of the French Mandate, 1920-1946, the educated elite accorded the specialized technical practice of academic oil painting a role in the struggle to secure independence. As a paradigm of universalized high culture, it could be mobilized in defense of Syria's civilizational standard, and, therefore (by colonial logic), political autonomy. Thus, when the independent Syrian state began to sponsor an annual exhibition of "hand painting" in 1950, it was motivated by the need to consolidate a modern patrimony, and its initiative privileged what journalists readily saw as the individualistic objects of "Western" rather than "Eastern" aesthetic practice.¹¹ But even here the operative conceptualization of the work of fine art would diverge from the European bourgeois model, as the artists who worked in the oil-on-canvas format held little concern for the object as a concretized piece of valuable property, nor for the medium itself as a special area of competence. Instead, they engaged with their task as an image-based practice. They prepared for their work by training their eyes, scanning French magazines such as *L'Illustration* for image precedents and collecting clippings of all its full-color reproductions.¹² They also, as citizens of a country that possessed no dedicated fine art museums, became the recipients of traveling

¹¹ This distinction between Eastern and Western formats is mentioned in Sulayman al-Khash, "al-Fann fī Ma'raḍ al-Rasm al-Yadawī," a two-part article in *al-Nuqqad*, 25 Dec. 1950 and 1 Jan. 1951. Syria was already home to a long tradition of icon painting as well as a nineteenth-century trend for decorative wall painting on home interiors. These were seen as professional rather than fully aestheticized traditions, however, and were not immediately activated as precedent by the first generation of exhibiting oil painters. The official titles given to the first national exhibitions are revealing of the still-developing category of fine art painting, as the Arabic title for the first such exhibition was Ma'raḍ al-Rasm al-Yadawī (literally Exhibition of Hand Painting), which suggests a notion of dexterous artistry in general. Subsequent iterations of the exhibition used the more narrowly descriptive title of Ma'raḍ al-Rasm wa-l-Naḥt, or Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture, which presumably eliminated many of the handicrafts that had been submitted to the 1950 exhibition. Subsequently, the name became simply Ma'raḍ al-Funūn al-Jamīla. In 1958, when a dedicated Ministry of Culture was created under the UAR, the exhibition was named Ma'raḍ al-Kharīf, or Autumn Exhibition, with a Spring Exhibition established in Aleppo.

¹² Syrian artists' reliance on the color images in *L'Illustration* in particular in the 1940s is mentioned in Mahmoud Hammad, "Dhikrayātī ma' Adham Ismā'īl," *Adham Ismā'īl: Qirā'a fī Thalāthat Ab'ād*, ed. Khalil Safiya (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1991), 175.

exhibitions of color reproductions from Unesco, the educational and cultural arm of the United Nations, including *From Impressionism Till Today*, which Unesco prepared in 1948 and Damascus received in 1950.¹³ Importantly, Syrian discussions of modernist efforts focused on underlying social intentions, and artists were admired for having deliberately produced communicative, replicable pictures of a modern outlook above and beyond existing conditions. By this narrative, Syrians valued easel painting for its deferred social effects, a valuation that ultimately kept the notion of the transferrable possibilities of the modern picture activated throughout the 1950s and 1960s even as a new generation of thinkers began to critique the ideological premise of “ivory tower” artistic autonomy. To advocates of national cultural programs and intellectuals waging critiques of capitalist hegemony alike, the modern painted image offered a site for assessing the values and capacities of the community. These parameters for evaluating the progressiveness of painting are not entirely analogous to those in the United States or Europe in the 1960s, where properly critical works opposed the market and its cooptation of newness (but only in the absence of any alternatives to it). In Syria, economic alternatives not only seemed real, but they were also implemented as the state policies of Arab socialism and neutralist non-alignment.¹⁴

For all of these reasons, when I examine the complex historical conditions of modern painting in Syria as a component of the transnational movements of new modes of representation, I do not fix artists and their audiences into positions as either fully resistant or conformant to international norms. Rather, I treat these creative actors as participants within the systems of cooperative interaction that comprise and sustain what we call the “art world.” Here,

¹³ *UNESCO Travelling Print Exhibition: From Impressionism Till Today* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 1948). I return to discuss the details of this exhibition later in this chapter.

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that such policies were embraced by artists. As I discuss in Chapter Five, they were not. My point is simply that socialist policies really existed in Syria, to borrow the phrase from Russian political discourse of the late 1960s, while an art market did not.

my understanding of the art world as an extensible terrain of resources and strategies draws on sociologist Howard Becker's classic study of artistic labor, which saw art worlds as consisting of "all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art."¹⁵ It is the fundamentally self-reproductive quality of this formulation that proves key here, for it removes the idea that an art world has a fixed boundary, as the chain of participants can always be traced outward into larger circuits. A similarly reflexive definition emerges from sociologist Peter Bürger's now canonical 1974 study of European avant-garde movements, which proposes that the institution of art encompasses both "the productive and distributive apparatus" and the "ideas about art that prevail at a given time and determine the reception of works."¹⁶ To recognize this highly extensible art world is to also suppose that it can be contested as an institution, and from multiple points. Bürger studied historical concentrations of European avant-garde activity such as Dada, surrealism, and the post-revolutionary Russian avant-garde of the 1920s, but these certainly do not represent the only possible location for conducting a critique of modernism's material apparatuses, or its ideology of autonomy. As curator Okwui Enwezor and others have been arguing for over a decade, the decolonization movements that were inaugurated after the Second World War also reshaped modernism by undermining its claim to perpetuity, both "in" and "out" of Europe and North America.¹⁷ The art world that provides my matrix for tracking transformations in the institution of modernism necessarily encompasses these broader shapes of critique as well, with the

¹⁵ Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), 34-6. Pamela Lee's recent *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012) also uses the concept of "the art world" as a discursive setting for analysis within the otherwise uncontainable globalized exchange of the contemporary moment. Lee (curiously) makes no mention of Becker, however, instead reviving a version of Arthur Danto's philosophical concept of the art world as a shared terrain of specialized judgment.

¹⁶ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), 22.

¹⁷ As in *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994* (Munich: Prestel, 2001), and "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2009), 213.

ideological and philosophical contestation of Western imperialism particularly crucial, including the European modernist concerns that new educational and development initiatives were working to universalize in the period following the Second World War.

I base my study of painting in Syria, in other words, upon a relatively open notion of painting that includes its multiple immaterial supports, such that the bounded, aestheticized object is treated as one component within a “world” constituted in social commerce with painterly objects. I interrogate the work of art in Syria as a discursive object, one with a necessarily political aspect having to do with the problem of how to live together and how to manage difference. Moreover, by writing the intellectual history of painting in Syria from within networks of coordinated activity, as always ultimately extended beyond the borders of nation-states, several of the more vexing points of writing a history of recent art in the non-West may begin to be addressed. This approach allows me to proceed from the assumption that artists who worked in the Syrian context were continually engaged in articulating the significance of their craft, and to judiciously interpret their intellectual positions even when no written testimony may be found. I also presume that the decisions and actions of artists are by definition “contemporary,” meaning that they worked in a condition of being alive to and alongside other moments, artists, and objects, which de-emphasizes questions of belatedness.¹⁸ My approach proposes to extend recognition to a thicker field of precursors and continuities as resources that were available to artists and audiences, thereby capturing more nuance in the multi-directional movements of influence and exchange. And finally, it offers a way to bypass the political nationalism that can often encumber studies of modernism at-large, in which the sovereign nation-state provides the necessary and definitive basis for the creative sovereignty that is

¹⁸ This is Richard Meyer’s felicitous definition of “the contemporary” in *What Was Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

promised by the ur-category “modernism.” Surveys of modern art from formerly colonized countries and regions often tie the reading of paintings’ meanings too tightly to the nation-building project, assuming a responsibility to justify the state as a legitimate entity in international negotiation.¹⁹ Only by engaging painters and painting practices *in situ* can we avoid the empty designations of “modern” and “innovative” that are endemic to the now discredited but still pervasive Cold War model of cultural competition, which determines historicity by means of a territorial framework of mutual exclusivity pitting Damascus against Baghdad and Beirut, São Paulo, Paris, and New York (and usually moving in the other direction).

To forge this historical narrative via situated negotiations is to respect the nature of the archive that may be constituted for Syrian painting in these decades. The particularities of this archive enable me to pursue a historiographical question about the possibility of art historical analysis without presuming the inevitability of property rights and public sphere in parallel with my historical questions about formations of postwar modernism in the non-West. In Syria, one finds almost no register of testimony that may be credibly seen as “unmotivated.” Newspaper columns were often purchased, artists spoke with the assumption that colonial or neocolonial auditors were listening, and museum galleries were programmed by party loyalists rather than qualified technocrats. In effect, Syrian artists conducted their negotiations in the art world from locations outside the tripartite system of private galleries, public museums, and independent journalistic criticism that is familiar from the liberal democracies that have set the norm for the modern. It is simply not possible to follow the models established within the Eurocentric historiography of art in the twentieth century, which tend to treat institutions such as the party

¹⁹ Studies of modern Arab art that preserve the nation-state container, to varying degrees, include Afif Bahnassi, *al-Fann al-Hadīth fī al-Bilād al-‘Arabiyya* (Tunis: Dar al-Janub li-l-Nashr / Unesco, 1980); Silvia Naef, *A la recherche d’une modernité arabe, L’évolution des arts plastiques en Egypte, au Liban et en Irak* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1996); and Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997).

and the state-run school as epiphenomenal to a required (but always absent) bourgeois institutional base. Nor should it be seen as indisputably desirable or necessary to do so. A more sociologically-informed framework of historical inquiry allows me to attend to coordinated conventional understandings, as embodied in common practice and frequently used artifacts, without needing to posit the presence of analogous institutions at each node of activity. In this way, it becomes possible to account for the ways that paintings took form within a centralizing state apparatus that was also linked, seemingly paradoxically, to an emphatically international art world.

Syrian sovereignty and the artistic profession

As the Syrian critics who were charged with producing summaries of their national art movement never failed to note, the period when the nation's art could be free to come into its own was very short.²⁰ Whether under the rule of the late Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century or the period of French "tutelage" from 1920-1945, the greater Syrian region remained under the control of a foreign power until national independence in 1946. For this reason, before I return to discuss the methodological parameters for my study of international modernism (and its demise) in more detail, it is important to supply an overview of the political history of the Syrian nation-state in the twentieth century and its impact on the professional lives of artists and perceptions of the value of their artistic production. This history provides a general context for the ways that modernism would be re-theorized after independence. Different understandings of the political relationship between Syria and Europe emerged over these centuries of subordinate geopolitical standing, eliciting multiple and not entirely convergent experiences of

²⁰ Afif Bahnassi, *al-Funūn al-Tashkīliyya fī al-Iqlīm al-Sūrī, 1900-1960* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture and National Orientation, Syrian Region, 1960), published in his capacity as the Director of Plastic and Applied Arts under the UAR government. His opening observation is about the brevity of their independence as producers.

governmentality. Accordingly, the meanings attributed to illusionistic easel painting and its attendant concept of aestheticism also changed.²¹

The populations of the Eastern Mediterranean occupied a subordinate geopolitical position in relation to the imperial capitals of Istanbul and Paris, but this did not functionally preclude members of the upper and middle-classes from gaining familiarity with European modes of painting and drawing. In the nineteenth century, well-to-do families commissioned painted oil portraits as well as murals for the walls of living and reception rooms of their private homes, and the modernized school curricula instituted under the Ottoman Tanzimat (Reorganization) included instruction in drawing.²² The collection of the National Museum in Damascus includes one such portrait of a man from the Zananiri family, completed by Daoud Corm (1852-1930) in 1899. By the turn of the twentieth century, the region's elites were also familiar with the notion of modernism as a discourse of innovation with a rhetorical center in the Parisian milieu, as well as its status as a civilizational benchmark.²³

This modest recognition for the bourgeois institution of fine art does not mean that the region's few practicing fine artists were equally recognized by the imperial milieu, however.²⁴ Artists experienced significant discontinuities in patronage and social standing, an instability that would be exacerbated by the changes in the structures of regional governance in the run-up to the First World War as well as its fall-out. In fact, the meaning of most objects underwent significant change in the region, responding to new classificatory concepts for describing the ontology of

²¹ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 17. By "aestheticism," which I discuss further in the final section of this introduction, I mean Bürger's definition: a discourse that emerged in European bourgeois societies and which made the category of the aesthetic a properly separate category of experience.

²² Wendy Shaw, *Ottoman Painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic* (I.B. Tauris, 2011); Stefan Weber, "Images of Imagined Worlds: Self-Image and Worldview in Late Ottoman Wall Paintings of Damascus," in *The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire*, eds. Jens Hanssen, Thomas Philipp, and Stefan Weber (Beirut: BTS 88, 2002), 145-171.

²³ Stephen Sheehi, "Modernism, Anxiety, and the Ideology of Arab Vision," *Discourse* 28, no. 1 (2006): 72-97.

²⁴ Shaw, *Ottoman Painting*, 52.

the region as well as new debates about self-rule. For example, as Heghnar Watenpaugh has traced, the category “Arab” had been an ambiguous ethnic term for the nineteenth-century Orientalists, but for the European and Arab writers who used the term in 1920, it had come to function as a unified identity category which presupposed a right to sovereignty.²⁵ Moreover, as governmental institutions had become “Arabized” after 1918 as part of the short-lived Arab Kingdom of Faisal bin Hussein bin Ali al-Hashemi, language became a means to confront the next round of colonization under the French, 1920-1946.

The ensuing struggle to define and achieve statehood could often have an immediate effect on the use-value of the painterly arts. The example of Abdulwahab Abu al-Saoud (1897-1951), an actor, teacher, and painter who began his adult life just when the Ottoman Empire’s influence over its Arab territories began to wane, is particularly illustrative because of his interest in painting as a civic instrument rather than as an intellectualized formalist object. Abu al-Saoud first became interested in art as an adjunct to his admiration for the coffeehouse theatrical productions he watched as a boy in Saida, in what is now Lebanon.²⁶ He picked up his early training in theatre and painting while enrolled in the Sultaniye preparatory school in Beirut. His father (an Ottoman officer) subsequently sent him to Cairo to pursue religious studies at Al-Azhar, which Abu al-Saoud abandoned in order to apprentice with theater troops in Egypt before returning to Saida in 1914. As the Ottoman Empire began its preparations for war, the family relocated to Damascus. Abu al-Saoud began work as a painter and scenographer for the city’s theater, but was soon drafted as part of the Ottoman military government’s mass conscription programs in Syria. He then defected, working as an arts teacher in Damascus while contributing

²⁵ Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh, “An Uneasy Historiography: The Legacy of Ottoman Architecture in the Former Arab Provinces,” *Muqarnas* 24 (2007), 35.

²⁶ Adel Abu-Shanab, *Ḥayāt al-Fannān ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Abū al-Sa‘ud* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture and National Orientation, 1963).

to the activities of the anti-Turkish underground. In 1917, he joined a new cultural club called the Club of Union and Progress, which claimed an interest in art as a cover for more dedicated activist work in the name of the Arab cause.²⁷ When the war ended, Faisal made a triumphal entrance into Syria on October 3, 1918 to declare Damascus the capital of an Arab state and himself as king. The Club of Union and Progress could make its nationalist sympathies explicit, renaming itself “Arab Club,” flying the Arab flag atop its offices, and producing events that endeavored to promote enthusiasm for Arab sovereignty.²⁸

During the Arab government’s brief reign in Syria, Abou Saoud wrote and starred in the hugely popular play *Jamal Pasha the Butcher*, which dramatized the atrocities that the Ottoman governor had committed – including the public hanging of twenty-one nationalists in Beirut and Damascus for their participation in the Great Arab revolt of 1916. Arab sovereignty would not last for long, however. France, Britain, and Russia had already discussed ways to divide the Middle East into spheres of influence and, in 1920, the Council of the League of Nations entrusted France with a Class “A” League of Nations mandate over the Syrian territory, meaning that it was charged with the “duty of rendering administrative advice and assistance to the population” with the ostensible purpose of preparing Syrians in modern statehood. Essentially a structure for temporary, non-settler colonization, the Mandate would be administrated by a French High Commission and enforced by ranks of colonial officers, the Army of the Levant (drawn from North Africa, Senegal, and other longer-term French Imperial holdings), and the *Troupes Spéciales* (composed of native volunteers). France pursued a colonial

²⁷ Ibid., 30. Note the similarity of the club’s name, *Nādī al-Itihād wa-l-Taraqqi*, with that of the Young Turks’ Committee for Union and Progress (CUP).

²⁸ M. Jalal, A. A. Al Sououd, K. Mouaz, A. A. Arnaout, Syrian Plastic Arts Series 3 (Damascus: Salhini Printing and Publishing, 1991), 23. About the Arab Club system in general in this period, see James Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 74-5 and 84.

policy in Syria and Lebanon that was relatively aggressive in terms of reorganizing Syrian society.²⁹ Its administrators introduced novel concepts of national citizenship where once there had been only a loose, provincial organization of a multi-ethnic populace. They also emphasized specifically modern modes of knowledge, representation, and display – museum exhibition, urban planning, history writing – and new techniques for research such as archaeological excavation, aerial photography, and cadastral surveys.³⁰

In support of these activities, the Commission established the French Institute of Archaeology and Islamic Art in Damascus in 1922, which it intended as a structure for facilitating the work of French archaeological experts. The Institute's approach to fulfilling its obligation to tutor the natives tended to favor initiatives to revive indigenous arts rather than to encourage Syrians to enter into the ranks of beaux-arts oil painting. It initially opened a School of Decorative Arts on its grounds that focused on industrial and applied arts. In 1926, the High Commissioner converted the school to a dedicated School of Modern Arab Arts, which would operate in various guises until 1930, when the Institute was again reshuffled. The appearance of the word "modern" in its title indicates an interest in the commercial applications of Damascene craft in the modern market; its mandate included housing model specimens of Arab crafts and offering re-educational training to local craftsmen.³¹ Under the direction of Eustache de Lorey, the French archaeologist who directed the Institute, personnel at the school identified and codified six types of replicable Arab pattern, which were applied to furniture commissions for

²⁹ Keith David Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 212.

³⁰ Zeitlian Watenpaugh, "An Uneasy Historiography," 33.

³¹ Réunion du Comité de rapprochement de la science française et de la culture arabe, 10 April 1928, and Licenciement du personnel du Palais Azem, 2 June 1930, Institut d'archéologie et d'art musulman folder, Carton 77, Instruction Publique 2nd versement, Fonds Beyrouth, in Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Archives Diplomatiques-Nantes (hereafter MAE-Nantes).

government buildings.³² In instituting this ostensibly tutelary program, the French administrators assumed a universal juridical framework of property rights. Not only did the school aim to activate artisanal design sensibilities in the non-industrialized crafts sector as a means to commoditize its products, but it also proposed to use its library of crafts specimens to establish and police a monopoly on their production.³³

If French officials did little to promote Syrian fine artists as such, their educational policies did have the effect of making the profession of artist into a viable career linked to government stewardship of collective development and achievement standards. The subjects of art and art history remained a piece of France's universal education curricula, and the expansion of the state preparatory school system meant that teaching posts multiplied. Abu al-Saoud was able to secure a position teaching drawing and painting at the prestigious Maktab Anbar, a preparatory high school established under the Ottomans.³⁴ His lesson plans in the late 1920s included studies of Fatimid and Abbasid decorative patterns that were then being codified at the French Institute. The artist also paid personal visits to mosques, tombs, and ancient palaces in search of motifs, sometimes with Khaled Moaz (1909-1989), a student at the School of Modern Arab Arts.³⁵ Abu al-Saoud's expertise would then be called into question in 1933, when the

³² Supplemental report Sur l'École des Arts Arabes Modernes, Damascus, 23 April 1928, Institut d'archéologie et d'art musulman folder, MAE-Nantes. The designs were Nour-eddin (inspired by the ornamentation in the Maristan of Nour-eddin in Damascus and on the minbar of Nour-eddin in Hama), Fatimid and Gazelle (based on ornamental motifs in the Cairo Museum), Musician (from decorative arts in Islamic Spain), Geometric (from decorative motifs found in the school's own Azem Palace), and Comnenus (created by de Lorey from Byzantine sources).

³³ Ibid. As Arindam Dutta has outlined, in the colonial context, this kind of central authority and its preservationist impulses provide the foil for the decentralizing strategies of late imperialism. Without the protection of an employment contract, the artisans who are located outside the metropole become all the more susceptible to superexploitation in the central market. *The Bureaucracy of Beauty in the Age of Its Global Reproducibility* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 2-4.

³⁴ He did, however, spend a few years on the lam from the French authorities because of his nationalist activities, only returning to public life some time before the Great Revolt of 1925-7.

³⁵ Abu-Shanab, *Ḥayāt al-Fannān 'Abd al-Wahhāb Abū al-Sa'ud*, 37 and 103. The French administrative assessment of Abu Saoud's participation in the revival of native arts may be read in Renaud Avez's summary history, *L'Institut français de Damas au Palais Azem (1922-1946): à travers les archives* (Damascus: Institut français de Damas, 1993), 35-36.

Syrian Ministry of Education determined that secondary school teachers would be required to hold certification from an advanced institute. The artist opted to personally finance a year of study in France, where he took a degree from the Académie Julian. The cadre of recognized, working artists in Syria remained tiny through the 1930s, with Tawfiq Tariq (1875-1940) and Michel Kurché (1900-1973) at its forefront as freelance painters boasting more extensive credentials from foreign bodies. Tariq was the leading “realist” oil painter, having received training at the Ottoman military academy in Istanbul, followed by supplemental training in Paris around the turn of the century.³⁶ Kurché was known as Syria’s first Impressionist painter, and had studied at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1923-1925. These artists competed fiercely for recognition, even attempting to undermine the credibility of the others. After Abu al-Saoud won a prize at one of the Mandate-endorsed painting competitions, Kurché accused him of submitting a painting he had purchased in Paris rather than his own work.³⁷

The state-funded art world in France itself in this period functioned as a quasi-institutionalized structure of tripartite cooperation between the faculty of the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, the Salon of the Society of French Artists, and the Fine Arts section of the French government, and the Fine Arts section did make use of the Institute in Damascus as a node in its coordinated activity.³⁸ At the invitation of High Commissioner Weygand in 1924, it dispatched Jean Charles Duval to Syria as the first pensioner painter. Duval stayed at the Institute for at least a year, traveling around the country to sketch its monuments, and occasionally

³⁶ He may have studied with Ivan Aivazovsky, a Russian-born Armenian artist who was a favorite of the Ottoman Court between 1857-1890. See *M. Jalal, A. A. Al Sououd, K. Mouaz, A. A. Arnaout*, 44.

³⁷ Abu-Shanab, *Hayāt al-Fannān ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Abū al-Sa‘ud*, 55.

³⁸ Michelle C. Cone, *Artists Under Vichy: A Case of Prejudice and Persecution* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), xxiii-xxiv.

teaching drawing at the still-nascent School of Decorative Arts.³⁹ Other pensioners came in the following years, even contributing works to the Syrian Pavilion at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Vincennes.⁴⁰ Syria received a steady stream of French civil servants, soldiers, and amateurs as well, many of whom arrived without clear ties to the Mandate mission.⁴¹ A painter named Georges C. Michelet, whose name appears in Syrian recollections of the Mandate-era art world, maintained residence in Lebanon and Syria and apparently scraped by on occasional sales of paintings to Mandate officials.⁴² For these French-born artists, their positions vis-à-vis the French national network of patronage would remain contested and unstable. The matter of the source of Michelet's support came up as a problem in 1943 under Free French administration, for example, when Gabriel Bounoure (the head of the Service de l'Instruction Publique) declined to continue to fund Michelet's atelier in Beirut.⁴³ Bounoure's letter is brutal, describing the artist as talentless and a laughingstock and casting the Commission's previous decisions to purchase Michelet paintings as an act of charity. The Syrian landscape had been established as a periphery in every administrative system that intersected with it. If Mandate administrators expected colonial subjects like Abu al-Saoud, Tariq, and Kurché to maintain a certifiable continuity with Parisian institutions but to operate in an entirely separate sphere of visibility, then the French-

³⁹ Rene Dussaud, "La mission du peintre Jean Ch. Duval en Syrie," *Syria* 8, no. 3 (1927): 248-253.

⁴⁰ The 1928 document Réunion du Comité de rapprochement de la science française et de la culture arabe mentions painter Jean-Hippolyte Marchand and a sculptor, M. Pimienta.

⁴¹ For example, when soldier Lucien Cavro was stationed in Syria he was assigned to restoration work at Azem Palace, then subsequently was appointed a drawing instructor for the School of Modern Arab Arts. See *Sur l'École des Arts Arabes Modernes*, 9.

⁴² Michelet is even mentioned in Abu-Shanab, *Ḥayāt al-Fannān 'Abd al-Wahhāb Abū al-Sa'ud*, 38, as a member of the jury for an exhibition held at the Syrian University sometime around 1940, joined by Lebanese artists Mustafa Faroukh, Habib Surour. He showed in the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris. In 1941, he would write to the new Vichy-appointed Captain in the Levant to offer him a variety of paintings. Michelet to Le Capitaine Levant, 25 March 1941, Atelier Michelet folder, Carton 164, Ambass série b, Fonds Beyrouth, MAE-Nantes.

⁴³ Gabriel Bounoure, 14 April 1943, in *Archeologie. Beaux Arts* folder, Carton 182, Instruction Publique 2nd versement, Fonds Beyrouth, MAE-Nantes.

born artists who came to the Levant to draw support from colonial institutions also occupied a marginal place in the hierarchy.

Damascene natives did not fail to note that the foreigners in their midst were obsessed with capturing *souvenir* views in the Syrian cities, nor that such practices could be income-generating. In 1933, an article by Nafiz al-Ghannam entitled “How the Westerners See Us,” appeared in *al-Thaqafa* and proposed that the foreign point of view be treated as a business opportunity rather than an incursion.⁴⁴ Founded and published in Damascus by young and mobile *littérateurs*, *al-Thaqafa* was a monthly cultural magazine with a modernizing and socially engaged viewpoint.⁴⁵ Its pages featured an eclectic mix of visual illustrations and amusements: from a sculpture by Antonio Canova to a woodcut version of Millet’s *The Sower*, cartoons illustrating the dehumanizing aspect of modern life, and artfully composed photographs of nude women with bobbed, blonde hair.⁴⁶ Al-Ghannam’s polemic had to do with changing the prejudice that Damascenes felt against the painters who sat on “low chairs in a corner of the shaded alleyway corners, painting the dilapidated arches, ruins, or ramshackle homes in our old neighborhoods,” and against the Westerners who carried cameras and moving picture equipment on the street in search of an “ancient spirit mixed with poetic and imaginative meanings.” As he exhorted his countrymen, they had no need to be ashamed that foreign eyes had fixated on outward disarray. Al-Ghannam argued that they should encourage these foreign habits of

⁴⁴ Nafiz al-Ghannam, “Kayf Yanẓar Ilaynā al-Gharbiyūn,” *al-Thaqafa* (August 1933): 450-455.

⁴⁵ Its editors were Khalil Mardam Bey, Jamil Saliba, Kazim Daghestani, and Kamel Ayyad. From prominent families, members of the group would go on to hold government posts in education and letters during the first decades of Syrian independence.

⁴⁶ In the context of the journal and its modernization platform, the nude represented an up-to-date artistic genre, and the capacity to appreciate its aesthetic value a modern skill. For example, a report on a painting exhibition in Turkey described how nudes and surrealist pictures had begun to appear in Istanbul, citing it as evidence of the dramatic success of the country’s recent drive to modernize. “Big Painting Exhibition in Turkey,” *al-Thaqafa* (April 1934): 932.

viewing the world, for it would help attract even more visitors to spend great sums of money on tours of Syrian antiquity.⁴⁷

The painterly arts also found support in forums other than self-consciously liberal journals. A key institutional setting for this was the growing, middle-class Arab Scout movement in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁴⁸ As anthropologist Kirsten Scheid has demonstrated in her study of easel painting in Lebanon, the Muslim Scouts in particular – a youth program of regimented outdoor activity that two Indian Muslim students had launched in Lebanon on the model of the British scouting organization established in Britain in 1908 – would play an important supporting role for artists during the 1920s and 1930s, providing a vested audience for oil painting as a modern genre of production.⁴⁹ The movement aimed to instill character into the rising cadres of youth in the region, and, because its vision of social improvement emphasized the cadre form, it had the effect of changing ideas about the scale of political enfranchisement.⁵⁰ Because native civic leaders in the colonial settings of Lebanon and Syria felt that any strong and new generation would have to appreciate high artistic culture, these improvement schema also carried notions of cultural uplift with them. Thus, to produce exemplary national subjects came to also entail inducing new types of respect for easel painting. Troops could be called to attend openings, and to receive the work on display favorably. By the end of the 1930s, the Scouts, along with a number of similar clubs emphasizing engagement in sports and culture as a source of productive collective action, had become a significant body within the amorphous civic sphere

⁴⁷ Damascus in this period was indeed being promoted as an “Oriental” and “traditional” capital, particularly as contrasted with Beirut’s emerging identity as modern, European, and capital-driven. See Sarah A. Rogers, “Postwar Art and Historical Roots of Beirut’s Cosmopolitanism” (PhD, MIT 2008), 120.

⁴⁸ See discussion of this movement as a middle-class phenomenon in Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East*, 292-298.

⁴⁹ Kirsten Scheid, “Painters, Picture-makers and Lebanon: Ambiguous Identities in an Unsettled State” (PhD, Princeton University 2005), 87-88 and 239.

⁵⁰ Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), 397-433.

of relations with and between the urban elite. Many such clubs even used the word art in their names. The term signaled an interest in promoting music, theater, and art as well as a recognition of the radical political implications of engaging in self-directed cultural activity.

In the same period, one finds another directed use of the arts as a site of modern self-realization in the city of Antioch in the District of Alexandretta, a northern port district situated between the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and the Syrian-Turkey border. A story of anti-colonial agitation, it begins with isolated acts of radical incorporation.⁵¹ In 1930, a Sorbonne-trained high school philosophy teacher named Zaki al-Arsuzi (1899-1968) took control of an existing Fine Arts Club run by Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox students and remade it as an Arab renaissance club open to students of all sects.⁵² In 1933, al-Arsuzi joined fifty other pan-Arab nationalists in establishing the League of National Action with the intention of spearheading the struggle against the French, and soon began to use the format of a youth-oriented culture club in a far more programmatic manner to promote a modern unity platform. When, between 1936-9, Turkish president Mustafa Kemal began to make belligerent claims about his country's right to annex Alexandretta, exacerbating tensions between ethnicized groups in the district, al-Arsuzi and his colleagues responded to the threat of Turkification by redoubling efforts to energize the Arab cause, making use of civic organs like publications, clubs, and schools to do so. Al-Arsuzi established the Arabism Club (*Nādī al-ʿUrūba*) in Antioch as a center of these activities. It staged Arab plays in town squares and sports and culture clubs,

⁵¹ Hiroyuki Aoyama and Malek Salman, "A Biography of Zaki al-Arsuzi," in *Spiritual Father of the Baʿth: The Ideological and Political Significance of Zaki al-Arsuzi in Arab Nationalist Movements*, Middle Eastern Studies Series 49 (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economics, Japan International Trade Organization, 2000), 1-35; Muhammad Ali Zarqa, *Qaḍīyyat Līwāʾ al-Iskandarīna: Wathāʾiq wa-Shurūḥ*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-ʿUruba, 1994), 209.

⁵² Keith Watenpaugh shows that there is good reason to see this Art Club as a response to Turkey's initiatives to foster national affiliation and feeling in the same period, particularly the sports club *Genç Spor Klubu* it established in Antioch in 1926. See "Creating Phantoms": Zaki al-Arsuzi, the Alexandretta Crisis, and the Formation of Modern Arab Nationalism in Syria," *Int. J. Middle East Studies* 28 (1996), 366.

opening each event with a patriotic Arab song.⁵³ The League of National Action also sponsored troops of Arab Scouts, recruiting educated youth such as (future) painter Adham Ismail into its fold. The program worked by sending those whose “awakening” was complete into the popular classes; its youth cadres were expected to apply themselves to the study of literary and artistic culture, and then canvass the countryside to spread the word.⁵⁴

As I will detail in depth in Chapter Two, Ismail’s important idealized Arabist paintings of the early 1950s track back to the nationalist ideas and tactics generated within the struggle to determine Alexandretta’s sovereignty. Here, I want only to emphasize that the values of cultural independence and modernity originated well before the day that France evacuated on April 17, 1946. As is the case for almost any postcolonial context, these patterns in fact took their most recognizable forms during the twenty years of colonial rule.⁵⁵ When France finally evacuated its troops and ceded control of the Syrian educational system, national army, trade agreements, and fledgling unified economy to Syria, there already existed a great deal of institutional material to support transforming ideas about modern painting. The preconditions for recognition as a Syrian artist also changed again. After 1946, the official story of modern art in Syria would be composed around artists who had been interpellated into the state as Syrian subjects, particularly those in the capital, where they could be counted, employed, and promoted by the national ministries.

⁵³ Dalal Arsuzi-Elamir, “Zaki al-Arsuzi 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*, eds. Thomas Philipp and Christoph Schumann (Beirut: Orient-Institut der DMG, 2004), 321.

⁵⁴ Watenpaugh, “Creating Phantoms,” 379-380.

⁵⁵ This point is brilliantly argued by Elizabeth Thompson in her ground-breaking book *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2000).

The Studio Veronese and the nationalist imperative

In 1941, a small group of aspiring painters established Studio Veronese in Damascus.⁵⁶ The club, which is the first recorded civic institution devoted exclusively to painting, provides an important institutional starting point for tracking the recalibration of modern painting in Syria transversally, from its colonial formations to its postcolonial disputation. The Studio emerged out of the short-lived Andalusia Symposium, an art and literary circle affiliated with the House of National Music, an arts club with loose ties to the Scouting movement (Fig. 1.1).⁵⁷ Its members included Mahmoud Hammad (1923-1988), Adham Ismail (who had just immigrated to Damascus from Antioch), Adnan Jabasini, Nasir Shoura (1920-1992), Salah al-Nashef (1914-1971), Rashad Qusaibati (1911-1995), Mahmoud Jalal (1911-1975), and others, many of whom had already gone to Italy or France for a year or two to acquire arts training.⁵⁸ The group met in a hardware store owned by Jabasini, at the end of the well-to-do Salihya quarter, coming together to paint from a live model they had recruited from the local population of street urchins.⁵⁹ They would also use their meeting time to debate issues having to do with the relationship between the painterly arts and modern countries, including the conflict between old and new modes of thinking, between what is art and what is not art, and the meaning of contemporary art

⁵⁶ Ghazi al-Khaldi, "al-Jam'iyāt al-Fanniyya fī Sūriyā mundhu °Am 1925 ḥattā al-Yawm," *al-Ba'ith* (1968). The studio's name is an homage to the name of the brilliant green pigment in their professional oil painting sets. I have taken most of my information regarding membership and activities from al-Khaldi's article, which is composed of brief excerpts from interviews with participants. It should be noted, however, that I encountered discrepancies in names and dates. For example, although al-Khaldi's interviews name Rashad Qusaibati as an original member in the Studio Veronese, Mamdouh Kashlan indicates that Qusaibati had remained in Italy between 1938 and 1946 because the Second World War trapped him there. See "Rashad Qusaibati" in *Niṣf Qarn min al-Ibdā' al-Tashkīlī fī Sūriyā* (Damascus: Ebla Gallery, 2006), 97-102.

⁵⁷ The House of National Music shared space with the Damascus National Club (Nādī Dimashq al-Ahli).

⁵⁸ Al-Khaldi, "al-Jam'iyāt al-Fanniyya fī Sūriyā." Other, less well-known members included Abdelaziz Nashawati, Adnan Jabasini, Wasfi Shakuj. Other artists frequently joined the group for sessions, including Khaled al-Asali, Nazem al-Jaafari, Michel Kurché, and Fathi Muhammad (from Aleppo).

⁵⁹ Nazem al-Jaafari, interview by author, Damascus, March 25, 2010.

movements in the West.⁶⁰ These meetings quickly became a required stop on the itinerary of visiting painters, both Arab and foreign.⁶¹

It is not insignificant that the Studio Veronese came into being during the Second World War. The group represents not only an early, home-grown initiative in the name of the painterly arts, but also a semi-underground cultural project in a colonial catchment located within, but not entirely of, a second major war between the world's industrial powers. In 1941, Damascus was a contested territory in the extended front of the Second World War and, for those living in Syria, the experience of wartime was a contradictory one as far as narratives go. As historian Albert Hourani summarized in 1946, the general attitude of the population toward the war seems to have been one of mingled fear and apathy.⁶² After Paris fell to the Germans on June 20, 1940, the army command in Vichy took over French Mandate rule in Syria and Lebanon. Then, in June 1941, the Allies waged an offensive that took the Mandate territory back for Free France. Martial law was frequently imposed under both regimes, and there was press censorship throughout. And, whereas no locals were drafted into active duty, the exigencies of the Middle Eastern front nonetheless kept the population hostage as foreign troops mobilized across the regional terrain. From time to time, a British or German plane would airdrop propaganda flyers over the Syrian cities, each making empty promises to recognize national aspirations.⁶³ The attitude of the population toward its directly occupying government was not apathetic during this same period, however. From 1941 onward, citizens routinely organized strikes over the dearth of essential foodstuffs, and growing numbers of nationalist committees helped to direct these strikes into

⁶⁰ Mamdouh Kashlan, "Maḥmūd Ḥammād wa-Ibdā' al-Şiyagh al-Jadīda" in *Niṣf Qarn*, 69-77.

⁶¹ Among the other painters in the region who visited: Mustafa Farroukh from Beirut, Khalid al-Jadir from Baghdad, Abdul Aziz Darwish from Cairo.

⁶² Albert Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1946), 230.

⁶³ C.L. Sulzberger, "R.A.F. Raids Fields: Nazi Planes Destroyed at French Bases," *The New York Times*, 17 May 1941, filed from Ankara, Turkey; Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 232; and "Germans Claim Advance," *The New York Times*, 3 July 1942.

anti-colonial demonstrations. Emergent pressure groups of different types – Islamic populists, Communists, labor leaders, and paramilitary youth groups – picketed for relief and services, and began to achieve real successes.⁶⁴ Unlike in other regions during the war period, Syria saw an extraordinarily active period of social activism and political mobilization.⁶⁵

In March 1943, the National Bloc, a political bargaining coalition of native elites, managed to organize sufficiently large strikes to force the General Director in the Levant to reinstate the constitution and schedule elections for July. After the restoration of constitutional forms, the newly elected representatives to Syrian Parliament selected National Bloc politician Shukri al-Quwatli for the Syrian Presidency.⁶⁶ Over the same period of time, members of the Studio Veronese created the Arab Association for the Fine Arts (*al-Jamʿiyya al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Funūn al-Jamīla*), an organization with a more directed set of practical goals than the Studio followed. Its mission focused on promoting a role for the “hand arts” in the independent Syria of the near future, perhaps even positioning itself as a trusted partner of the state. Initiatives included setting up a small school to teach painting for free, creating carpet designs for a national carpet factory and designs for a future glass and pottery works, reviving Kufic calligraphy forms, designing patterns for the national fabric mills, and preparing plates for books, journals, and zincographic prints, including updating the available sets of Arabic scripts.⁶⁷ Members also designed schoolbooks and agricultural and medical textbooks.⁶⁸ The Arab Association eventually, in 1944, organized a large exhibition of paintings at the French Laïque School in

⁶⁴ Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 230-3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* It had the effect, as Thompson demonstrates, of expanding the colonial welfare state with the state assuming new financial commitments toward workers and the poor that exceeded anything previously seen in the region.

⁶⁶ Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon*, 279.

⁶⁷ Al-Khaldi, “*al-Jamʿiyyāt al-Fanniyya fī Sūriyā.*”

⁶⁸ Some of these plans seem to have come to gainful fruition, as the group devised rubrics for splitting the proceeds: 23% to the originating artist, 17% to a the group’s chest, and 50% distributed to the members of the association as an annual profit. The system is not unlike the one the French Mandate had instituted in its School of Modern Arab Arts venture.

Damascus.⁶⁹ The show featured a mixed docket of Syrian and foreign painters, which, as Syrian critic Tarek al-Sharif (1935-2013) later noted, conforms to the typical exhibition format of the period, as the Mandate authorities preferred to approve collaborative events with native partners as propaganda for their shared civilizational standards for art, literature, and political representation.⁷⁰

Studio Veronese's contacts were not limited to the immediate spheres of Mandate authority and nationalist imagination either. For example, the military traffic across the region could play the somewhat counter-intuitive role of enriching the Syrian artists' intellectual connections with art movements elsewhere. When the Second Polish Corps was stationed in Baghdad for most of 1943, its ranks included French-trained painters like Józef Jarema (1900-1974) and Zygmunt Turkiewicz (1912-1973), among other writers, musicians, and artists.⁷¹ The contingent of painters within it took the opportunity to sketch the landscapes, antiquities, and peoples of the region while also frequenting the city's cafés and making contact with local painter groups, including visiting the Baghdad art school.⁷² Jarema also organized an Exhibition

⁶⁹ The list of participating artists varies from source to source, but probably included Adham Ismail, Mahmoud Jalal, Nasir Shoura, Mahmoud Hammad, Dr. Jamil Masoud al-Kuwakibi, Wasfi Shakuj, Jabasini, Alfred Baccache (from Aleppo), Anwar Ali al-Arnaout, Khaled al-Asali, and the French artists Madglia and Chardar (sic?) as well as others from the ranks of foreign artists. A list given by Tahir al-Bunni in *al-Fann al-Tashkīlī fī Ḥalab* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1997), 34, includes Aleppine artists al-Moudarres and Ghaleb Salim. The date given for the exhibition occasionally vary as well. Hammad, "Dhikrayātī ma' Adham Ismā'īl," gives 1942 as the date.

⁷⁰ Tarek al-Sharif, "Contemporary Art in Syria," in *Contemporary Art in Syria, 1898-1998*, ed. Mouna Atassi and trans. H. Dajani (Damascus: Gallery Atassi, 1998), 289-307. It may even have been organized at the Mandate's behest. See Scheid, "Painters, Picture-makers and Lebanon," 141-150, for a discussion of a similar exhibition the Lebanese group L'Association des Amis des Arts organized in Beirut in 1941 under the aegis of the Mandate authority.

⁷¹ The Second Corps was commanded by General Wladislaw Anders and primarily 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. Throughout its commission it maintained a parallel "corps" of educational activity and sought to make it possible for soldier-artists to continue the development of their talents.

⁷² Details about Jarema's presence in Baghdad can be found in the diary kept by Iraqi artist Jawad Salim, reprinted in *Hiwar* 2 no. 2 (Jan-Feb 1964), 99-100. Salim describes the Polish artist as enthusiastic about a wide range of cultural achievements: "the great Italian schools," the artists Cezanne, Renoir, Van Gogh, and Goya, and "Eastern painting" and its miniature traditions. The Polish painters were even collected by the Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities. See *Dalīl Qā'at al-Rusūm al-Waṭanī* (Baghdad: Government Press, 1944).

of Polish Soldiers-Painters, which the Arts, Education, and Information Office of the Second Corps intended as a display of the living potential and “dynamics of our culture” in spite of its dispersion in exile.⁷³ The Exhibition opened at the British Institute in February 1943, after which it also went to Damascus, where it was installed in the city’s Orient Hotel. The members of Studio Veronese attended the opening, and invited Jarema to visit their meetings. The Polish painter proved an informative interlocutor. His credentials included a Parisian stint in the 1920s, where he had joined the studio of Pierre Bonnard and imbibed the techniques of post-Impressionism, and a period of intensive work with avant-garde theater in Poland in the 1930s. He gave the Studio members a demonstration of his Pointillist painting style and also answered questions about the major modern schools of interest to them, including Cubism, Expressionism, and abstract painting – precisely the styles that the official painter pensioners in Syria would have repudiated.⁷⁴ The Polish artists were particularly interested in applying the line and dominant brush marks of the post-Impressionist style to the people and landscapes of the Middle East, as can be seen in the works featured in a subsequent exhibition of Polish soldier work that was organized in Cairo in 1944 (Fig. 1.2).⁷⁵

Long after Jarema shipped off to Italy, the death throes of France’s imperial prestige continued to play out in Damascus. The Syrian government struggled to oust the French for another two years, as France insisted on making its departure incumbent on a treaty ensuring its

⁷³ Jarema, “Propagowanie kultury polskiej,” *Gazeta Polska* 12 (1944), 4. Translated and cited in Jan Wiktora Sienkiewiczza, *Polish artists in Beirut 1942-1952* (Beirut: Polish Embassy, 2013), 7. Sienkiewiczza has also published an extensive documentary study of the Polish artists affiliated to Anders and the Second Corps, which he kindly made available to me. *Artyści Andersa Continuità e novità* (Warsaw: Torun, 2013).

⁷⁴ Kashlan, “Maḥmūd Ḥammād wa-Ibdā’ al-Ṣiyagh al-Jadīda.” Hammad notes that Jarema was in fact a significant figure in international modernism as he went on to found the famous Art Club in Rome, which was influential in promoting free and open modern art in the immediate postwar period.

⁷⁵ Its sponsors were the British Council and the Egyptian Société des Amis de l’Art. See Sienkiewiczza, *Artyści Andersa*, 62-63.

privileged position in the Levant.⁷⁶ In February 1945, the Syrian government declared war on Germany and Japan; in March, it participated in establishing the Arab League as a founding member; in April, it was admitted to the United Nations. In May 1945, the Syrian president again appealed to France to transfer control over security and foreign affairs, but France continued to delay. Sporadic strikes against the French broke out, which prompted Charles de Gaulle to order French troops into Syria. On May 29, France bombarded Damascus with aircraft and field guns, even surrounding and shelling the Parliament Building, with hundreds of casualties. On June 2, Winston Churchill was convinced to order British troops to intervene, forcing France to hold its fire. Over the course of these skirmishes, and as a result of the continued expectation of national independence, the largely private nature of the Studio Veronese's mission accrued a more outwardly patriotic dimension. Members offered their talents for new commissions such as mural-size works for government institutions and administrative buildings. The frequent Studio Veronese visitor Khaled al-Asali even designed the new Syrian national emblem, an achievement for which Aleppine political caricaturist Abd al-Latif al-Dashwali depicted him as an artist-swashbuckler holding unsheathed pencil, brush, and fountain pen at the ready (**Fig. 1.3**).

In the summer of 1945, with France pacified and the question of the withdrawal of its troops passed on to the boardrooms of the European militaries, the Studio Veronese transformed itself into a full-time history painting workshop as each member contributed to the preparation of vast canvases depicting the recent clashes.⁷⁷ When France made its first major concession on August 1, 1945 and rescinded its control of the *Troupes Spéciales*, the Studio's artists unveiled their collaborative paintings at the day's celebrations. The last of the foreign troops only finally evacuated on April 17, 1946, at which time the Syrian government staged a second national

⁷⁶ Hourani, *Syria and Lebanon*, 282.

⁷⁷ Kashlan, "Maḥmūd Ḥammād wa-Ibdā' al-Ṣiyagh al-Jadīda."

holiday, the Day of Withdrawal. Schoolchildren sang the anthems of all the Arab countries, and Egypt, Iraq, and the Hijaz had sent contingents from their militaries to participate in the parades.⁷⁸ President al-Quwatli's speech outlined a bright future for the new country and its commitment to regional solidarity and common interest across the whole of the Arab community, declaring that from that day forward, "There shall be no flag flying over Syria except the Syrian flag and nothing shall be above it except the flag of Arab unity."⁷⁹ His words were meant to ratify the hope that the consequences of the divide-and-rule tactics that occupying governments had deployed on the region might be reversed, and a larger Arab polity fortified to represent a full constituent in the treaties and resolutions of the world government bodies. Unfortunately, very few of the paintings that were produced in the thrall of impending sovereignty, or hoisted at national days, seem to be extant any longer. They are also largely absent from the monographs that have been published for individual members of the Studio Veronese or Arab Association for the Fine Arts. Only a few works by Said Tahsin (1904-1985), a painter who had become friendly with the members of the Studio Veronese and briefly headed the Association before resigning his post in the disagreement over models in drawing classes, persist in reproduction.⁸⁰ His painting of the attack on the Parliament Building shows that he managed to convey the all-at-once terror of the experience by carefully depicting a smoky sky, planes circling around the Syrian flag, and the bright flares of individuated artillery fire (Fig. 1.4).

⁷⁸ Sidqi Ismail to unknown friend, Damascus, 17 April 1946, printed in *Rasā'il lam Tunshar*, ed. Abdel Nabi Astif (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 2009), 106-7.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ghazi al-Khaldi, *Sa'īd Tahsīn: 'Andamā Yuṣbiḥ al-Fann... Tārīkhān* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1994), 27; Afif Bahnassi, "Contemporary Art and Artistic Life in Syria," *Cultures* 4 no. 1 (1977): 167-186. Tahsin's naïve style won him favor with local authorities, who commissioned paintings to decorate a number of public buildings.

If viewed by the logic of international modernism and its emphasis on private bourgeois experience, the kinds of painting activities that are Tahsin's specialty – military murals and naïve portraiture – can hardly be seen as ascendant. On the eve of national sovereignty, the studio's members settled, albeit briefly, on the task of pictorial representation in the name of the nation rather than an aestheticist art produced in the name of humanity. In fact, the codes of abstract painting that they had previously sought to acquire during their meetings with Jarema and others could even become a point of ridicule. According to Hammad, he and Jabasini pulled a trick on their colleagues during their preparation of the murals for the August 1945 celebrations that, effectively, undermined the praise they had lavished on Jarema's paintings. When the two artists witnessed their 12-year-old assistant scattering black, red, and yellow paint over a piece of wood with unknowing aplomb, they decided to pass the piece off as a Jarema painting. They signed the corner to simulate authorship, framed it to assert its plenitude, and even went so far as to fake a letter from the painter and place it in one of the envelopes of a previous letter from him. After they placed the painting before their colleagues, complete with the bracketing devices to establish its significance, they were bemused to witness the Syrian artists produce dutiful praise for its “glorious harmony of color,” and “peerless plastic rhythm.”⁸¹ When the ruse was revealed the following week when the assistant saw the work hanging in the studio and revealed his authorship, the revelation split their membership as some left in an angry huff and others simply erupted into laughter.

The humor of this joke, based as it is on a pseudomorphic category mistake in which an uncivilized creation is presented as a rarified good, seems less charming now than it would have been at the time. The “surprise” of the lookalike relies a bit too heavily on class difference,

⁸¹ Kashlan, “Maḥmūd Ḥammād wa-Ibdā' al-Ṣiyagh al-Jadīda,” 72.

between the knowingness of the educated painters and the unknowingness of the uneducated assistant. When Hammad recounted this anecdote to fellow artist Mamdouh Kashlan (1929—) sometime in the 1980s, he seems to have intended it as an illustration of the *bonhomie* of their cooperative group.⁸² In retelling it again here, I intend it as an illustration of the ambiguity of the relationship between new governments and new formalisms. This is not to propose that form would matter very little to artists in Syria in the following decades. Entirely to the contrary, the debate over its significance can be seen to set the baseline for the institution of fine art in Syria. In this context of exhilarating newness and concomitant fragility in the available networks of cultural support, the subject of painting in particular generated an intensity of discussion. A new generation of educated and upwardly mobile youth all recognized it as a modern art form par excellence. Poets and novelists felt prompted to search for ways to write about it, and government personnel looked for ways to organize it.⁸³ Modern painting provided them all with a reason to pass judgment on the worth of new cultural production.

Evaluating resistance

I have been claiming that, in order to think through the emergence of new painting and possibilities for painted form in Syria in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, it is necessary to reassess the evaluative habits embedded in the largely Eurocentric historiography of twentieth-century

⁸² The interview is not dated in Kashlan's volume, but it almost certainly occurred between Kashlan's opening of Ebla gallery in 1984 and Hammad's death in 1988.

⁸³ One key strand of literary engagement with the visual arts can be traced through the 1946 collection of poems by Aleppo-based intellectuals Orkhan Muyassar and Dr. Ali al-Nasir, *Siryāl (Surreal)*, which featured poems devoted to Van Gogh and Max Ernst as well as an extensive essay about surrealist techniques of composition. The small journal *al-Qithara*, published from Latakia between 1946-1947, also printed surrealist excerpts and summaries from Muyassar. As I discuss in Chapter Four, these efforts can be traced into journalistic art criticism of the early 1950s, particularly Adonis's art criticism in the SSNP newspaper *al-Bina*. The organ for the countervailing trend, which lay emphasis on sociopolitical commitment in creative production, would be the Lebanese literary journal *al-Adāb*. Both *Siryāl* and *al-Qithara* have been reprinted: *Siryāl wa-Qaṣā'id Ukhrā* (Damascus: Union of Arab Writers, 1979) and *Majallat al-Qithāra: Silsilat Shi'r wa Fann* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 2006).

art. Specifically, because socialist economic reforms really existed under Abdel Nasser's UAR and subsequently the Ba'ath Party, and a profitable art market never did, the stakes of making new art in Syria drew from different understandings of the political trajectory of the collective. Indeed, it must be recognized that this history is animated by an at times dizzying oscillation between a sense of transnational artistic affinities and a perceived need to resist subjugation.

In Syria, as elsewhere, the modern dream of political liberation has often become intertwined with a notion of creative freedom. At those points of intersection, the notion of artistic autonomy, which provides the basic definitional value of the modern institution of art, is frequently deployed as a politics of emancipation and principled resistance. As Bürger's study of the emergence of modernism and the avant-garde reminds us, this is because art emerged as a category on the basis of two presuppositions: a relatively high degree of rationality in artistic production (i.e. the artist makes choices) and the free availability of artistic means (i.e. that stylistic decisions are not determined by external constraints such as feudal domination or religious belief).⁸⁴ It was the aestheticist doctrine espoused by the European artistic movements of the nineteenth century that established painting as a space of non-coerced expression, as artists themselves began to speak of the aesthetic as a distinctive sphere of experience and valorized the idea of *art pour l'art*.⁸⁵ But once that doctrine was established, it also, perhaps paradoxically, gained an activist usefulness that found application in multiple settings. The same claims of art for art's sake could be readily mobilized for other, non-aesthetic ends, including offering intellectual protection to the most vulnerable artists.⁸⁶ As in the case of artists working under conditions of quasi-dictatorship, for example, the autonomy principle can be a tactical choice in

⁸⁴ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, 17-18.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 37. I deliberately introduce the catchphrase *art pour l'art* because, as I discuss at greater length in Chapter Four, it became a significant term in debates about political commitment in Beirut and Damascus in the 1960s.

⁸⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), 40.

which the preservation of artistic autonomy have served as a placeholder for other types of freedom.⁸⁷ At other moments, a disadvantaged artist might invoke the autonomous principle to frame his independence from the economy as a matter of principled virtue rather than a judgment of quality. For much of recent Syrian history, both these types of utility for the principle of autonomy held strong, such that those artists who remained politically engaged recognized a link between ideas of personal autonomy and the condition of economic disengagement. Only recently, when an emerging auction market for contemporary art from the Middle East began in the 2000s to push sale prices up by orders of magnitude and changed the function of galleries in the country, did the activists who embodied the principles of autonomy perceive a threat to that ideal. As Syrian artist Youssef Abdelké (1951—) would write, for him and other artists in the 1960s generation who had served time in prison for their political activism, the new “power of capital” that seemed to reign in Syrian art scene now threatened to undermine the very independence they had always fought to extract from the power of dictatorship. Against the new kind of threat of alienation and expropriation, in other words, he sought to preserve a different notion of the protected, integrated self – one that emphasized the same autonomy that may seem intolerably bourgeois and foreign in other discursive settings.

My proposed focus on social commerce entails de-emphasizing the notion of art’s constitutive autonomy, as in fact do histories written with the aid of post-structuralist theory or in sympathy with contemporary institutional critique. However, because the value of aesthetic autonomy has factored so prominently at different points in Syrian intellectual history, the idea demands a bit more exploration here as a preface to the case studies in my chapters. As is widely

⁸⁷ Syrian artist Youssef Abdelké has ascribed this tactic to artists working in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Algeria in the 1990s. “‘Aqd min al-Qarn al-Jadīd fī Thaḳāfatinā: Fann bi-lā Ḥudūd,” *al-Safir*, 29 Dec. 2009. Cited in Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, “Contemporary Book Art in the Middle East: The Book as Document in Iraq,” *Art History* 35, no. 4 (September 2012): 816-839.

acknowledged, the social values historically accorded to the aestheticist art institution stem from the institution's emergence within the European Enlightenment tradition as a dualistic concept, comprised of one purely aesthetic component and one discursive and public component.⁸⁸ Following from Immanuel Kant's conception of the human faculty of aesthetic judgment as a free and disinterested act, not only was it possible to conceive of the arts as a categorical whole, but art could also be seen as productive of free and open public exchange.⁸⁹ Jürgen Habermas's 1961 study of the historical emergence of the public sphere in bourgeois society, beginning in the coffee houses of the seventeenth century, provides the most influential outline of the development of this dualism and its edifying social results.⁹⁰ Habermas suggests that these cafés for the first time gave host to a mix of upper bourgeois and noble clientele, and that the group began to engage in free and disinterested debate about aesthetic topics (as had begun to be presented as a subject of general interest at the annual academy Salon). From matters of aesthetics, the assembled public was able to move to "interested" topics such as economics and politics but retain the habits of objective debate they had already forged around topics of art, thus forming sound opinions in the public interest that, for the first time, represented a legitimately "popular" check on state power. This particular formulation of the implicit publicness of art has had tremendous appeal for artists and critics. Not only does it result in democratic political representation, but it also fortifies the modern aestheticist position regarding the need to maintain

⁸⁸ Alexander Alberro, "Institutions, Critique, and Institutional Critique," in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 3.

⁸⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, as glossed by Bürger, 42-3. As Bürger notes, systematic aesthetics came into being as a philosophical discipline at the same time as the new concept of autonomous art emerged (and both with the rise of the economic strength of the bourgeoisie and its seizure of power).

⁹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 40.

art's emancipation from vested, non-aesthetic interests, including the suggested possibility that the creative act can function as a site of emancipation.⁹¹

The question of whether this particular configuration of art and its public retains its validity in settings that are not European and bourgeois remains an open and in fact problematic one. As Alexander Alberro notes, its basic dualism ultimately produces art as a “form of self-imagining” that is integral to the constitution of bourgeois identity.⁹² The salience of this kind of imagination of the self is not only linked to the Enlightenment notion of aesthetic judgment but also to the rise of the economic strength of the bourgeoisie and its seizure of power. As a result, for those non-Western artists who are engaged in a collective struggle for liberation from hegemonic powers, the capitalistic and implicit imperialist origins of this dualist art institution render what might otherwise be a theoretical problem of the relationship between artistic and social phenomena into a practical one. In 1978, Syrian novelist Muhammad Kamil al-Khatib queried the vexed history of the relationship between modern formalism and modern capitalism in the literary register, asking his fellow writers to consider whether the fact that modern poetry emerged in simultaneity with the dominance of the petit bourgeoisie should properly be seen as a fortuitous, essentially coincidental relationship, or a dialectical one that should impact on any responsible assessment of the relationship between reality and art.⁹³ Indeed, many progressive intellectuals among the cadre of literary and art critics who came into force in the later 1960s recognized that it was insufficient to frame modernism as a mere act of recognition of the

⁹¹ The triumphalism of the Habermasian narrative is frequently critiqued, yet underpins almost all justifications for 1. public funding for art in Western liberal democracies and 2. The right of artists to freely create without any interference from elected officials or non-specialist taxpayers.

⁹² Alberro, “Institutions,” 3.

⁹³ Muhammad Kamil al-Khatib, Nabil Sulayman, Bu Ali Yasin, eds., *Ma‘ārik Thaḳāfiyya fi Sūriyā 1975-1977* (Beirut: Dar ibn Rushd, n.d.), 315. Cited and translated in Alexa Firat, “Post-67 Discourse and the Syrian Novel: The Construction of an Autonomous Literary Field” (PhD, University of Pennsylvania 2010), 31.

possibility of art for art's sake.⁹⁴ The nature of the relationship between art and material reality had to be considered, and the implications of that relationship weighed in the context of the objective of emancipation.

Al-Khatib had posed his question in the context of a call to revive the program of socialist realism in Syria, but it is just as possible to pose it in terms that are not so explicitly politically Marxist. For example, how might we interpret the meeting between Jarema and painters in Baghdad, or between Jarema and Mahmoud Hammad in Damascus? When they spoke about new art trends in Paris, was it an open discussion among equals for whom French provided a lingua franca of advanced artistic training, or a baseless transfer of a programmatically foreign aesthetics?⁹⁵ In the later 1950s, nationalist critics in Iraq contended the latter, pointing out that the universalized Impressionism that the Polish artists had favored was in fact native to a country with a changeable, cloudy atmosphere such that its techniques proved fundamentally unsuitable for the clear blue skies of a desert location.⁹⁶ In the early 1960s, Syrian critic Afif Bahnassi (1928—) propounded a similar conviction that a setting might override aesthetic training, but he directed his contentions toward a different end. He developed a reading of European modernism that credited those artists' firsthand exposure to both Arab ornament and Arab climate during their tours of the Near East as the source for their radically new approaches to pictorial composition.⁹⁷ Such narratives, which add a national inflection to the relationship between Arab artists and European modernism, emanate from a context of decolonization and ideological contestation and seek to revise the unevenness of the cross-cultural history of modernism. In the

⁹⁴ I use "progressive" as it was used in Syria in the 1960s where it had the political-ideological resonance of class struggle and particularly a commitment to undermining and/or overcoming bourgeois interests.

⁹⁵ Jawad Salim, *Hiwar* 2, no. 2 (Jan-Feb 1964), 99-100. Salim explicitly mentions that his knowledge of French art served as an icebreaker with Jarema.

⁹⁶ Khaldun el Husri, "The Wandering: A Study of Modern Iraqi Painting," *Middle East Forum* 33, no. 4 (April 1958): 23-27. He even describes how Iraqi painters would look out into their landscapes and produce visions in the colors of France.

⁹⁷ Afif Bahnassi, *L'Influence Arabe sur la Peinture Moderne Occidentale* (PhD, University of Paris 1964).

standard account of the painterly innovations in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century that they had learned at first, the shocking new styles of painterly expression associated with the Fauves and the Cubists came about partly in response to the artifacts of “primitive” cultures.⁹⁸ The same narrative, of course, typically occludes the possibility that the artists who lived and worked as “artisans” in these primitive non-Western settings might actively participate in the encounter with the new, and instead makes them passive agents who require protection from the creeping market tastes of the metropole and the corrupting materials and methods of a foreign artistic tradition. Bahnassi’s history of modernism in effect turn the narrative of authenticity on its head, claiming the materials of what would become recognized as modernism as the autochthonous resources of the Arab region, and thereby restoring primacy to Syria while freeing its modern artists from the binds of historical association with European imperialism.

Because of the apparent retributive justice to be found in tipping the scales, Bahnassi’s argument has proven enticing to both local and international audiences, eventually appearing not only in the Syrian cultural ministry’s publications but also in Unesco journals engaged in promoting sympathy for cultural difference.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, as a subsequent body of critical postcolonial studies from the 1990s has elucidated, the mobilization of an idea of exceptionality is a classically ineffective one in terms of securing true liberation for a formerly colonized people rather than mere conditional independence. Partha Chatterjee’s studies of nationalist thought in colonial India during the struggle for independence, for example, drew on and extended the insights of Edward Said and Anwar Abdel Malek to demonstrate how that

⁹⁸ As most infamously asserted in ‘Primitivism’ in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, the 1984 exhibition curated by William Rubin at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Also see the first chapter of Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor’s Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960-1995* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004), for analysis of the new use made of this modernist version of primitivism in the Negritude cultural movement.

⁹⁹ For example, *Athar al-‘Arab fi al-Fann al-Hadith* (Damascus: High Council for the Support of Art, Literature, and Social Sciences, 1970), and his article “The Spiritual Perspective of the Orient and Western Art” published in the Unesco magazine *Cultures* 4, no. 3 (1977): 93-109.

nationalist discourse inverted the objects of Orientalism without deconstructing them, such that it placed an essentialized East above or equal to the West, leaving essentialism itself in place.¹⁰⁰ This is the same exceptionalist outlook that motivated the programming at the School of Modern Arab Arts in Damascus, wherein artisanal production was established as a parallel field of formal but not artistic autonomy. Although Bahnassi has reclaimed that difference and inverted the assignment of primary and derivative aesthetic formations so as to restore his national art to the status of a replete and whole art, his underlying argument for exceptionality can ultimately only mirror and therefore reinforce the colonial calculation of a differential. Art critic Geeta Kapur has phrased this insight in another way in her discussion of art from the conditions of the Third World. In her introduction to *When Was Modernism*, she suggests that the postcolonial formation of modernity may be recognized in the intellectual attempt to place the self within the grand universal narrative, a move that produces a vexed knotting of metaphysical identification and ideological explanation for which the folded space of nationalism provides a shelter.¹⁰¹ Her point is a methodological one. Insisting on carefully unpacking the claims about modernity that issue from this fold, she reminds that the claims that are uttered as if utopian and ahistorical must still be engaged as historical, motivated, and particular.

Indeed, as has been amply explored in the series of revisionist histories of postwar painting trends in Europe and the United States published in the 1970s onward, the nationalist matrix also provided shelter to the artists and critics of former colonial powers.¹⁰² As is now

¹⁰⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993), 18.

¹⁰¹ Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), xiii.

¹⁰² Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the War," *Artforum* (May 1973); Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* (June 1974); Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997); and Nancy Jachec, *Politics and Paintings at the Venice Biennale 1948-64: Italy and the 'Idea of Europe'* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2008).

widely recognized, after 1945, the ideal of aesthetic autonomy and the emancipatory promises of political and economic liberalism it entailed took an overtly propagandistic form as a type of soft power, as befit a changing understanding of the world order. At first, European critics seized upon the prewar cosmopolitanism of the School of Paris as an exemplar of the desirable institutional dualism of artistic and attitudinal superiority, which audiences in newly independent countries were invited to emulate. As already mentioned, Unesco opted in the first few years of its programs to package the School of Paris as a major conceptual export to developing countries, including Syria. When the office of the Unesco Director-General in Paris organized a travelling exhibition of high-quality color reproductions of modern European paintings in 1948, it billed it as an educational aid to the great majority of the world's population that had no access to a museum collection of original masterworks. René Huyghe, the chief curator of paintings and drawings at the Louvre, served as the lead expert on the project, selecting the Impressionists' attack against the "cult of reality" as the inaugural moment for modern painting as a recognizably new category of artistic production.¹⁰³ In his narrative, once art had been so liberated, any subsequent artistic movement was to be inaugurated only as the product of free and open artistic experimentation. Huyghe even outright named Paris as the capital from which modern art radiated out to the rest of the world, concluding his celebratory account by urging every thinking man to "reduce his indigence" by accepting every known tradition – including Egyptian, Byzantine, and also modern art – as a valuable product of its place and time that was equal with the products of other places and times.¹⁰⁴ Damascus received this Unesco exhibition

¹⁰³ René Huyghe, "Forward," *UNESCO Travelling Print Exhibition*.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

in 1950, and the Syrian Ministry of Education duly translated Huyghe's text for publication in its teachers' journal *al-Mu'allim al-'Arabi*.¹⁰⁵

Within only a few years from that early promotion of the School of Paris in the formerly colonized countries, the economic influence of the United States would grow so decisively that artists in New York instead of Paris began to set the terms of artistic progress, laying claim to the helm of art's development as an aesthetic and social enterprise. Over the course of the 1950s, it was the American view that would be broadcast to Paris, London, and the capitals of Third World countries, the latter via dedicated field offices for foreign aid. The now infamous 1960 essay by American art critic Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," for example, was first delivered as an United States Information Agency (USIA) radio broadcast intended to reach nascent liberals worldwide, from Latin America to the Arab countries and Russia.¹⁰⁶ When the newly dominant American critics talked about artistic autonomy, theirs was technical in character, i.e. an autonomy of means and a purity of aspiration. Greenberg argued that a modernist painting proper was a painting that mobilized of its own painterly operations to determine, distill, and make felt the qualities that are exclusive to painting.¹⁰⁷ Serious painting, in other words, constituted a contribution to human progress that was to be apprehended in positivist terms: as a ratification and consummation of the irreducible elements that ensured its

¹⁰⁵ Badia' al-Kassem, "Madhāhib al-Rasm al-Hadīth," *al-Mu'allim al-'Arabi* 6 (April 1950): 605-612. The journal seems to have been similar to France's *manuel general*, a biweekly magazine for the nation's teachers that aimed to help with the implementation of new legislation in a classroom. It frequently carried news of Unesco initiatives in this period.

¹⁰⁶ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," a radio talk first commissioned, recorded, and published by Voice of America, 1960, then broadcast in February 1961. See Francis Francina, "Institutions, Culture, and America's 'Cold War Years': The Making of Greenberg's 'Modernist Painting'," *Oxford Art Journal* 26, no. 1 (2003), 69-97, for details on the essay commission and plans for its dissemination.

¹⁰⁷ The implications of this formulation would be further adumbrated by Michael Fried in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999), especially "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons" from 1966.

formal purity.¹⁰⁸ When Greenberg recorded this argument, world-wide investments in the institutionality of painting's constituent autonomy abounded in the form of high-profile international exhibition programs, including the São Paulo Bienal (est. 1951) and its model the Venice Biennale (reopened in 1948), but also a number of other new biennials enshrining the rhetorical link between modern art and modernized economies.¹⁰⁹

In spite of the international spread of an exhibition framework devoted to autonomous fine art, there remained a palpable ambivalence regarding the desirability of constituting the field of fine arts as an autonomous field outside the West. In Syria, the prospect of autonomy carried different and even conflicting valuations with regard to different ideological commitments to the pursuit of freedom. From the viewpoint of the postcolonial liberation cause, to have evaded a bourgeois institution could seem to be a feat of productive resistance in the face of an otherwise expropriating economic system. From the viewpoint of national pride, however, to assert the absence of the very same institution could smack of the chauvinism of Mandatory rule, which set all its own institutions as the norm for all modernity. These divergent assessments may again be traced to the circumstances of postcolonial nationalist discourse. Whenever a nationalist cultural program is articulated in the context of decolonization, it will come into being as fundamentally conflicted.¹¹⁰ Because the framework of modernity provided colonial powers with a way to intellectualize their dominance, the proclamations of nationalist leaders regarding the modernity of their own countries also remained fused to the colonial question. One result of these rhetorical conditions is that, in Syria in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, claiming art as an autonomous field in

¹⁰⁸ Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008), 136.

¹⁰⁹ Other exhibitions include the Mediterranean Biennial in Alexandria (est. 1955), Documenta in Kassel Germany (est. 1955), the Paris Biennial (est. 1959), and others. For a contextual reading see Jones, "The Historical Origins of the Biennial."

¹¹⁰ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 15.

the face of colonial neglect wielded a terrifically persuasive power. But so did the denying of its validity in the continued revolution of Syria's socialist regimes, as well as the reclaiming of art's autonomy as a harbinger of an even more transcendent space of revolutionary freedom. Each one of these claims holds incontestable value as a polemical statement, with one result being that the problem of their possible mutual exclusivity was deferred and Syria's art world maintained them all in productive dissonance.

It is my contention that the critique and dissolution of normative institutional forms of modernism can be best understood in a zone of fragile institutionality like Syria, where the state's parameters were always under dispute and governance uncertain, and the politics of artistic form were constantly shifting. This is not to suggest that I can know whether the protagonists I track actually wished to remain resistant to bourgeois modernism, however, nor that any single painting worked in such close cooperation with a political platform that it remained ideologically "smooth." These final caveats may seem obvious, but their validity has rarely been acknowledged in the case of Syria. The artists, intellectuals, poets and writers, activists, students, and political leaders participating in the Syrian art world did at times act on a desire to subvert European cultural imperialism, with that subversion becoming the new first condition for progressive culture. At other points, they claimed autonomy for their art and the right to a place it into exhibitions of work from sovereign liberal nations. With the destruction of any one institution, others were constituted. Whether a painting is thought to be "modern," "innovative," or "colorful," its painted forms require a convention for viewing and apprehension. Those shapes are the focus of the following chapters of historical study of modern painting in Syria.

Chapter One Figures



اول تجمع فني للفنون التشكيلية في دار الموسيقى الوطنية
نصير شوري — عبد العزيز نشواتي — عدنان جصاصيني
صلاح الناشف وآخرون

Fig. 1.1 The first artistic gathering of plastic artists in the House of National Music: Nasir Shoura, Abdelaziz Nashawati, Adnan Jabasini, Salah al-Nashef, and others. Source: Ghazi al-Khaldi, "al-Jam' iyyāt al-Fanniyya fī Sūriyā mundhu ʿAm 1925 ḥattā al-Yawm," *al-Baʿth* (1968): 6.



Fig. 1.3 Abd al-Latif al-Dashwali, drawing of artist Khaled al-Asali and politicians Sabri al-Asali and Faysal al-Asali (his relatives). Source: Abd al-Latif al-Dashwali, *Marāyā* (Damascus: 1947), 80.



Fig. 1.4 Said Tahsin, *Bombing of the Parliament*, oil, 1945. Collection Military Museum, Damascus.

Chapter Two

Adham Ismail and the Radical Arabesque, 1936-1952

In November of 1951, *The Porter* appeared in the exhibition hall of Syria's national museum (Fig. 2.1).¹¹¹ The occasion was the country's second annual national exhibition, a juried affair with government patronage and the full attention of the national press. Nothing about *The Porter* is easy to look at, however, and nor is its political content affirmative to the Syrian state. In fact, as I will argue in this chapter, its artist Adham Ismail (1923-1963) conceived the appearance of this painting in an antagonistic relationship to its governmental host. *The Porter* addresses an Arab public that had not found representation within the state apparatus. It highlights class antagonisms in Damascus, showing the eponymous porter laboring to carry material for the city's new villas, a task that requires him to make a Sisyphean climb over the top of the broken bodies of his family unit. In the picture itself, this critique of the exploitative social dynamics of the Syrian city has been amplified by the introduction of corrosive pictorial elements. Ismail composed *The Porter* by unleashing an arabesque—a mode of linear surface design in which repeating lines bend and double back upon themselves—across the picture plane, using it to entrap material form and thereby make way for tangles of punctuating color. As the sinuous trace of the arabesque records the volumetric spaces of rags and muscle, it produces an armature of side-by-side shapes. Then, once these shapes are filled with arbitrary local tones, line is subsumed to conjunctions of oscillating color, with surreal effects. The painting's figures refuse to resolve as imaged bodies. The viewer sees melting, biomorphic forms. A clutch of fingers and

¹¹¹ The Arabic painting title for "The Porter" given in the exhibition program is *al-Ḥammāl*. In some later studies of the work of its artist Adham Ismail, however, the synonym *al-ʿAttāl* is used as the titular reference.

cloth, once colored in candy red, becomes a beating heart. The dull gray façade of a heartless city eats at a child's face like acid. In short, rather than depicting the world, line and color dissolve it.

The Porter is a problematic painting in almost every sense of the term. For one, it was nearly rejected from the national exhibition.¹¹² The previous year, the inaugural opening of the exhibition had sparked mild controversy, with the jury coming under fire in some circles for failing to uphold an appropriate level of selectivity, with some reporters criticizing its indulgence in having accepted inferior works – including paintings that were obvious copies of other works, works that had been shown elsewhere before, and works that were not even fine art painting but rather decorative and ornamental handwork.¹¹³ Some artists, too, had criticized the selection process, albeit from the opposing “traditional” quarter when a small contingent of calligraphy artists were passed up for prizes and complained that the jury had not selected enough works of an Oriental spiritual character.¹¹⁴ By 1951, however, this kind of squabbling over questions of standards and bias had faded away to reveal new problems for modern painting. Attention turned to the difficult appearance of *The Porter*, and the boldness of its intervention in the exhibition milieu. Syrian viewers immediately understood that Ismail was offering them a radicalized picture. Newspapers reported that the painting had grabbed attention, astonishing onlookers with its vivid content, searing colors, and unclassifiable style.¹¹⁵ With the painting, as I will explore, Ismail announced his intent to challenge existing habits of cognition.

¹¹² Aziz Ismail (younger brother of Adham Ismail), interview by author, Damascus, April 4, 2010.

¹¹³ These details about the first exhibition are drawn from the uncatalogued archive of the modern art wing of the National Museum, Damascus (hereafter NM-D Modern). Materials include a carbon copy of its foundation document, marsūm 1140 (5 July 1950), and newspaper clippings, including al-Khash, “al-Fann fī Maʿraḍ al-Rasm al-Yadawī”; Unsigned, “Kalima Munṣifa li-Wizārat al-Maʿārif,” *al-Nasr*, 1 Jan. 1951; and Salah al-Din al-Dahani, “Jawla fī Maʿraḍ al-Rasm li-l-Maʿārif,” *al-Nasr*, 25 Nov. 1950. The inclusion of decorative objects in exhibitions was a relatively common practice; design specimens appeared in the exhibition of the Women’s Cultural Forum in May 1950, and as part of the high school art exhibition that Ismail had organized in May 1951, for example.

¹¹⁴ Al-Khash, “al-Fann fī Maʿraḍ al-Rasm al-Yadawī.”

¹¹⁵ Ishtirakiyya’s Art Critic, “al-Ishtirākiyya fī Maʿraḍ al-Funūn al-Jamīla,” *al-Ishtirakiyya*, 3 Nov. 1951; “Dunyā al-Fann,” *al-Nasr*, 4-5 Nov. 1951.

In this chapter, I closely study the pictorial and political tactics on display in *The Porter* and in particular the use of a particular Arab nationalist discourse against the authority of the state. Ismail's biography gives some hint of the impact he intended his painting to make. The artist, like most of the educated men in his generation, was an unabashedly political subject who looked to the tactics of collectivization as a means to achieve social progress. He had been involved with the first group of youth to institute the Ba'ath Party and who pledged to realize its vision of pan-Arab unity and redistributed wealth. By 1951, he had been involved in the party's activist work for nearly a decade. Moreover, the same systematic class exploitation that is the overt subject of *The Porter's* social critique was also, in this period, fueling the efforts of other youth-oriented movements, foremost among them the Communists and the Muslim Brotherhood in addition to the Ba'athists.¹¹⁶ And yet, although these categorizing details may hint at the political framework in which Ismail's effort may have been interpreted, they do not yet get at the source of its particular radicality. In *The Porter*, content is less important than the process of its composition. Not only did Ismail endeavor to imbue line itself with a capacity to dissolve bourgeois artifice, but he also, as I will argue, sought to move from jarring dissolution to a constructive end, that of instituting a new type of polity. By the use of unending lines and color rhythms associated with an Arab-Islamic episteme, the artist conjoined two different types of holistic thinking in his paintings: the metaphysics of the pan-Arab identity, and the pure pictorial logic of aniconic abstraction. The conjunction of these two abstractions offered Ismail a means to interpellate viewers into a more abstract space of the collective Arab nation and enact an alternative polity. As he and his comrades understood the mechanism of his densely theorized nationalist-formalist work of art, once these derivations of Arab patterns of lines and color were

¹¹⁶ Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 605. What unites these movements is their common opposition to the National Bloc and its policies.

mobilized in a contemporary picture intended for public display, then line and color in themselves could become affective instruments for reviving and remaking Arab consciousness.

In order to grasp the full intellectual freight of Ismail's intention in such a painting and what it reveals for the Syrian art world in the first few years of its nationally defined institutionality, it is necessary to examine the patterns of local activism, Arab nationalism, and idealist aesthetic theory that animated his practice. Two caveats are in order before I delve into that history. The first is to again acknowledge that the burden of demonstrating innovation and critical capacity falls particularly heavily upon artists who work in the once-colonized periphery.¹¹⁷ Whereas Ismail himself is largely unknown, many of the techniques he explored are already familiar from the annals of European modernism, particularly Paul Klee's linear, process-based drawing.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, I insist on exploring Ismail's practice as a radical one. I am not interested in sustaining the fictions of world historical firstness, nor in arbitrating ownership of the title of the avant-garde. My subject is the interplay between art and its value to makers and audience, as it intertwined with questions about the nature of the civic order in Syria. In order to investigate that interplay, I proceed from the premise that the new types of relatively broad-based parties and movements that emerged as political forces in the 1940s made it possible for Ismail to work as an artist in the way that he did, and I develop my reading of Ismail's practice in the context of his work for the Antioch resistance movements and their subsequent iterations in the early Ba'ath movement.

¹¹⁷ Kapur, *When Was Modernism*; Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2006), 3.

¹¹⁸ Later studies on Ismail frequently cite Paul Klee as a major influence, albeit as a sustaining rather than inaugural influence because, as the argument goes, the Swiss artist had himself taken inspiration from Arab art. See Naim Ismail, *Adham Ismā'īl: Ḥarqat Lawn wa-Khaṭṭ Lā Nihā'ī* (Damascus: al-Jumhuriyya Press, 1965); Tarek al-Sharif, *ʿIshrūn Fannānān fī Sūriyā* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1972), 18. It is not clear how familiar Ismail would have been with Klee in the late 1940s, when he first began working with arabesque line. One Klee painting, *Traveling Circus* (1937), was included in the exhibition of high-quality reproductions that Unesco sent to Damascus in 1950.

Once recognizing these politics, I must cut through them, and hence my second caveat is that this approach requires me to navigate a literature of doctrinaire writings about favored artists that began to emerge after the March 8, 1963 “revolution” by which the Ba^ˆth Party came to power in Syria. Ismail and his brothers would subsequently be elevated to the level of national heroes, with their mentor Zaki al-Arsuzi (1899-1968) receiving recognition as the party’s “spiritual father” and Sidqi Ismail (1924-1972) and Naim Ismail (1930-1979) ultimately garnering positions in the cultural administration.¹¹⁹ Ismail himself, however, died suddenly on December 24, 1963, less than a year into his party’s rule in Syria. His practice can thereby be preserved as a liminal realm, a space of possibilities that may be inspected outside the Ba^ˆth teleology. Over a brief lifetime, Ismail produced future visions that opposed rather than furthered existing state powers.

Locating the Arab Homeland

Ismail came to Damascus from the district of Alexandretta in 1938, at the age of sixteen. His experience of the crisis of political representation in his hometown of Antioch between 1936-38 serves as one crucible for his artistic use of “Arabism” as an abstracted and supervening category of origin. His subsequent experience as an internal refugee is the other, for he would bounce around from preparatory school to teaching appointment and university program until 1952, when he finally received a government fellowship to travel to Rome to study art and entered the ranks of fully credentialed and nationally recognized Syrian artists. As I mentioned briefly in my

¹¹⁹ In this chapter I discuss different members of the Ismail family, often in the same paragraph. For the purposes of clarity, I will follow the convention of using the family name Ismail only to refer to the artist Adham Ismail, and using full names whenever referring to another member of the Ismail family. Relevant members include the four brothers Adham, Sidqi, Na^ˆim, and Aziz, all born in Antioch to Ali and Amina Ismail, and their cousin Faiz, who was a close comrade during childhood and in Damascus. Regarding their future appointments, Sidqi Ismail was named secretary of the Higher Council for Art, Literature, and Social Sciences in 1968 and Naim Ismail became Director of Fine Arts in the Ministry of Culture in 1970.

introduction, Ismail first came into political consciousness when he joined the Scouts organization that the League of National Action had established in Antioch. This group frequented the Arab Club, became devotees of Zaki al-Arsuzi, and, for nearly two years, contributed body and mind to the attempts to organize Arabs in the countryside into a single voting bloc. Their effort came to a halt in 1938 when it became clear to them that Turkey would succeed in its cynical attempt to annex the district. Because this cadre of Arabist youth still hoped to complete their degrees in an Arabic-language rather Turkish-language school system and to avoid the coming Kemalist order, they made preparations to migrate to other Syrian cities. Opting to take advantage of an agreement that France made with Turkey that allowed non-Turkish inhabitants to acquire Syrian or Lebanese passports, Adham and Sidqi Ismail collected their Arab identity cards and joined a group of other students in emigrating over the newly policed border.¹²⁰ Their student group may have numbered two hundred strong.

The intellectual and political contours of the Arab cultural program that this group developed in Syria warrant exploration in detail as they provide the basis for Ismail's Arabist aesthetic as well as give context to his opposition to government officials. The new population of Alexandretta émigrés was given a particular designation in Syrian parlance. They were the *liwā'iyūn*, or people from the *liwā'* (the Arabic term meaning district or banner, used as the equivalent to the Ottoman administrative term Sanjak, as in *Liwā' Iskandarūna*). Fittingly, this term preserves their status as citizens of a detached territory, a place that had once been part of Syria but was no longer legally so, and a bracketed populace consisting of persons who were *of* Syria but not completely within it. From the moment the Ismails' student group crossed the border, they presented a challenge to local administrative systems. They were refused permission

¹²⁰ Watenpugh describes the citizenship options in "Creating Phantoms," 377.

to enroll in the preparatory high school (*tajhīz*) in Aleppo, and had to move onward to Hama.¹²¹ The residents of that second city initially extended help to them, granting them a room to sleep in and attempting to pressure the school administration for their admittance such that Ismail was able to enroll in the Hama high school for the 1938-1939 school year. He was forced out subsequently, however, because the French Mandate authorities viewed the group as a security threat. The French surveillance reports from Hama contain descriptions of large-scale student strikes. In March of that year, the city's high school students picketed to demand that France honor a treaty that it had brokered with Syrian leaders in 1936 that promised it would grant Syria its sovereignty by 1939.¹²² It then staged a procession along the Orontes River, where it was a student from Antioch who led the group in cheering about Arab unity, repeating, "Down with colonization, long live independence."¹²³ French surveillance officers had also been tracking al-Arsuzi as a leader of the countrywide student protests, and they intercepted telegrams that the Hama students had exchanged with him (then in Damascus).¹²⁴ At the end of the 1939 school year, the *liwā'iyūn* were ousted from their temporary quarters in Hama and made refugees anew.¹²⁵

Students from the Ismails' old Antioch neighborhood of °Afan stuck particularly tightly together in their foreign environs after 1939. For the duration of the war years, they remained

¹²¹ Faiz Ismail, "Adham Ismā'īl fī Darb al-Niḍāl," in *Adham Ismā'īl: Qirā'a fī Thalāthat Ab'ād*, ed. Khalil Safiyya (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1991), 143-155; Sulayman al-°Isa, "Bidāyāt al-Ba'ath al-°Arabī fī Hayāt al-Shā'ir Sulayman al-°Isā wa-Dhākiratihu," pt. 1, *al-Munāḍil* (April 1976), 52-73. For an invaluable summary of Zaki al-Arsuzi's life, as culled from the full series of recollections by early Ba'ath members that *al-Munāḍil* printed from 1976-78, see Aoyama and Salman, "A Biography of Zaki al-Arsuzi."

¹²² Representatives of the Syrian National Bloc completed a draft treaty with Leon Blum's new Socialist government in Paris in September 1936, but it was never ratified.

¹²³ Direction de la Sûreté Générale, Beirut, Information No. 1982, 20 March 1939, folder Cabinet Politique No. 873, 2nd versement, Instruction Publique, Fonds Beyrouth, MAE-Nantes. The report does not give the name of the student.

¹²⁴ Direction de la Sûreté Générale, Beirut, Information No. 223, 10 Jan 1939.

¹²⁵ At that point, Adham and Sidqi Ismail attempted to return to the district for the summer. When they reached the border, however, they were repulsed by Turkish fire. This dispersed the group still further. Some went to Iraq where there were rumors of employment through the Baghdad branch of a Committee for the Defense of the *Liwā'*. Others, including the Ismails, returned to Syria.

marginal figures who struggled to eke out an existence on lentils and water. Some even shared an unheated flat with al-Arsuzi, located in the Sibki quarter of Sha°lan in Damascus. Their rented quarters held only a single army bed that was dedicated to their teacher, leaving the others to sleep piled on the floor amid their hoard of Arabic and French books.¹²⁶ The group sustained their spirits by dedicating themselves to honing their doctrine of Arabism, with the immediate goal of restoring Alexandretta to Syria. They followed a regular schedule: preparing the meals, completing their school lessons, taking in al-Arsuzi’s philosophy lecture, followed by debate about its implications.¹²⁷ One early witness to this Damascus brotherhood has reported that al-Arsuzi thought of the group as a Sufi order more than anything else.¹²⁸ When historian Hanna Batatu interviewed al-Arsuzi in 1958, the teacher claimed that there had been but one condition of membership in his youth movement: to write or translate a book contributing to the resurrection of the Arab heritage.¹²⁹

At the end of the winter of 1941, this small band of *liwā’iyūn* declared the foundation of a new political movement. Their first public proclamations in Damascus now represent one of the origin myths for what would, in 1947, become the Ba’th party.¹³⁰ Having no printing press with which to produce a broadsheet, nor rights to hold a rally, they took chalk to a wall and scrawled out declarations of an alternative polity. They wrote, “We are here living under a great

¹²⁶ Abdel Khaleq Naqshbandi, “al-Bidāyāt fī Dhākīrat al-Duktūr al-Rafīq °Abd Khālīq al-Naqshbandī,” pt. 2, *al-Munāḍīl* 99 (July 1977), 8.

¹²⁷ Ismail Marwa, “Sulayman al-°Isā: Ḥulm °Arabī Damuhu wa-Nabḍuhu wa-Fikruhu al-°Urūba,” *Bayt Filasṭīn li-l-Shi°r*, April 2012, <http://www.pp bait.org/>.

¹²⁸ Sami al-Jundi, *al-Ba’th* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1969), 27.

¹²⁹ Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), 724.

¹³⁰ Sulayman al-°Isa, “Bidāyāt al-Ba’th al-°Arabī.” They had first organized the party in January 1940 under the direction of Wahib al-Ghanim, with the blessings of al-Arsuzi, and first operated as a network of underground cells. Their structure represents one stream of the eventual party. The other begins with a group established by Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar around the same time that also published numerous circulars and pamphlets about Arab unity and was then named al-Ihyā’ al-°Arabī.

Arab socialist state,” and, “we are here under a single Arab homeland.”¹³¹ This silent speech act not only inaugurated a new youth movement in the name of resurrection (*al-baʿth*), it also located it in a “here” that transgressed all existing political boundaries. It claimed a space of politics that no state form had yet delivered to them.¹³² When the *liwāʾiyūn* proclaimed, “we are here,” they were locating themselves in time and inside Syria only insofar as Syria lay inside the Arab nation. Batatu’s authoritative study of the origins and composition of the Baʿth emphasizes the unique zeal that the *liwāʾiyūn* possessed as advocates of this platform, noting that their main contribution to the party’s efforts was an “ardor possessed only by injured people.”¹³³ In maintaining sworn fealty to Arab nationalism, they occupied a place of principled opposition to the policies of the Syrian state. Their platform was also forward-looking, offering not only the salve of a transcendent Arab nationalism but also a commitment to contemporaneity. They would discuss how they needed to broker an entry into the present through “one’s own skin” rather than via the readymade ideology of international movements such as the Communist Party, and to live their “resurrection and new renaissance in the light of modern civilization.”¹³⁴ Al-Arsuzi motivated the group by reminding them that they carried the responsibility of liberating seventy million Arabs upon their shoulders.¹³⁵

Although Ismail likely did not attend many of these meetings, he did continue to maintain strongly affective relationships with comrades in Alexandretta, sending and receiving encrypted letters from the *liwāʾ* that sustained his existence in a similarly displaced “here.”¹³⁶ Moreover, as

¹³¹ “Naḥnu hunā naʿīsh fī ḡill al-dawla al-ʿarabiyya al-ishtirākīyya al-kubrā,” and “Naḥnu hunā fī ḡill al-waṭan al-ʿarabī al-waḥīd.” See al-ʿIsa, “Bidāyāt al-Baʿth al-ʿArabī,” pt. 1, 72.

¹³² As the 1947 Party Congress program would put it: “This [pan-Arab] nation has the natural right to live in a single state and to be free to direct its own destiny.”

¹³³ Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, 723.

¹³⁴ Aoyama and Salman, “A Biography of Zaki al-Arsuzi,” 15; al-ʿIsa, “Bidāyāt al-Baʿth al-ʿArabī,” pt. 1, 68-9.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Hammad, “Dhikrayāti maʿ Adham Ismāʿīl,” 177. He recalls Ismail coding these letters with a system of dots, which recipients had to connect to bring out a secret message.

his brother Sidqi and cousin Fa'iz took on leadership roles, he remained intimately connected to the movement's inner circle and was considered a "natural" and trusted participant in their underground work.¹³⁷ As per al-Arsuzi's design, specific roles in the party were meted out to individuals within a semi-secret cellular structure and it cannot be known if Ismail was involved in early recruiting in the university and *tajhīz* high schools. We do know that he designed the party's first symbol: an image of a tiger under a palm tree, with the tiger ripping through a curtain to reveal an illuminating dawn.¹³⁸ The design took its final form by a process of group collaboration, as Ismail rendered possibilities and his comrades gave direction regarding the shape of its eye, or the best shape of tail to represent a revolutionary attitude.¹³⁹ The artist also contributed the calligraphy on the title flag to the group's first broadsheet, a hand-written weekly circular titled *al-Ba'th*.¹⁴⁰ For reasons of both economy and security, the group produced only a single copy of this "publication," which was to be handed from one sympathizer to another. It typically contained sections devoted to caricature, which Ismail may have drawn, politics, and matters of national orientation such as reflections on the authentic character of the communal Arab nation, the strength of the Arabs in history, popular heritage in Arab history, social freedom, and other topics.¹⁴¹ In the summer of 1941, the group expanded its recruiting into other

¹³⁷ For discussion of Ismail's natural involvement, see Faiz Ismail, "Adham Ismā'īl fī Darb al-Niḍāl," 152. As for Sidqi's involvement, several accounts say he actually lived in the Sibki house, although this clashes with the recollections of others. Faiz Ismail suggests that the apartment was home to only al-Arsuzi, brothers Wahib, Masoud, and Adib al-Ghanim, and Sulayman al-Isa, but that he and Darwish al-Zuni sometimes crashed there and Sidqi Ismail and Ali Muhsin visited every day. See Faiz Ismail, "al-Bidāyāt fī Dhākīrat Fā'iz Ismā'īl," pt. 2, *al-Munāḍīl* 102 (October 1977), 40.

¹³⁸ Ismail, "al-Bidāyāt fī Dhākīra," pt. 2, 44. I have not yet been able to track down a picture of this logo. For some period of time it was added to the cover page of the party's weekly circular.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Faiz Ismail, "Adham Ismā'īl fī Darb al-Niḍāl," 151; al-Isā, "Bidāyāt al-Ba'th al-'Arabī," pt. 1, 62. The actual scope of Ismail's artistic contributions to the newspaper is not entirely clear. In general, he is recalled as having been the go-to visual artist for the group, which has given the impression of omnipresence at gatherings (but which may not have been the case).

¹⁴¹ Al-Isā, "Bidāyāt al-Ba'th al-'Arabī," pt. 1, 62-64, specifies that they were most interested in national orientation, as they were "a message (*risāla*) and not a politics." The summary of thematics appears in Faiz Ismail, "al-Bidāyāt fī Dhākīra," pt. 1, 39. They also produced a samizdat publication entitled *al-Minshār* (*The Saw*), which Sidqi Ismail

parts of Syria, beginning with Latakia, where they saw the problems of poverty and sectarianism to loom the largest under French control, followed by al-Qalamun, Jabal al-Druze, Aleppo, al-Bab, and elsewhere.¹⁴²

Over time, and as the French hold over political life lessened so that organized political activity became more permissible, the group began to flirt with the idea of joining forces with another group of university and secondary school students in Damascus led by teachers Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, and which was also interested in the concept of Arab rebirth as a radical political platform.¹⁴³ In this period of anxiety and hope that the colonial occupation might truly come to an end, student groups would meet regularly in semi-public venues such as the Café Moulin Rouge and discuss tactics for contributing to the ouster of the French.¹⁴⁴ The Ba^cth succeeded in recruiting hundreds of youths to volunteer for a national gendarmerie to oppose French power, among them the *liwā³iyūn* Sidqi Ismail, Youssef Shaqra, and Masoud al-Ghanim (all natives of the ^cAfan quarter in Antioch and leaders in the new movement in Damascus) (Fig. 2.2). Sidqi's voluminous correspondence from this period, much of it composed for circulation from person to person within his group, reveals a sense that the group represented a lone voice of

oversaw. It was satirical and featured several genres of critical content, including caricatures and Halamantishi poems (humorous poems written in a mixture of standard and vernacular Arabic that had been popularized in Egyptian popular press in the 1930s). Al-^cIsa relates that the masthead named Sidqi Ismail and listed other "brother" collaborators using first names, i.e. "Sulayman Ahmad [al-^cIsa], Masoud [al-Ghanim], Wahib [al-Ghanim], Youssef Shaqra, and Jamil Seif Eddine.

¹⁴² Again dates and details for recruiting activity are not entirely consistent across memoirs. A summary is given in Aoyama and Salman, "A Biography of Zaki al-Arsuzi," 17, with more detailed information in al-^cIsa, "Bidāyāt al-Ba^cth al-^cArabī," pt. 1, 72-73.

¹⁴³ Sidqi Ismail's letters support the idea that the groups had drawn close. One that he wrote from inside Café Brazil, a well-known political café, quotes from "the circulars of Aflaq." See Sidqi Ismail to unknown friend, Damascus, 14 July 1944, in *Rasā'il lam Tunshar*, 95.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.; Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study in Post-War Arab Politics, 1945-1958* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1987), 41; and Naqshbandi, "al-Bidāyāt fī Dhākira," pt. 1, 14. Sidqi Ismail's letter describes how the foreign magazines have finally begun to carry American commentary on the predicament of Syria and Lebanon, such that "our issue" – national independence – had gained sufficient foreign attention to become an international issue.

opposition.¹⁴⁵ Letters from 1945 describe how the group was struggling to advance their political project, which they recognized required them to both sow seed *and* create the fertile ground required for it to grow.¹⁴⁶ Increasingly, their frustration was exacerbated by the complacent patriotism of the general populace, which seemed to continue to accept the same National Bloc politicians who had waged the protracted battle against the French in the 1930s as their leaders for the coming order. As the young party tried to work systematically to achieve the humanitarian goals they saw as necessary “before there will be a parliament,” they witnessed the power and influence of the veteran nationalists rise. In one letter, Sidqi Ismail complains, “Shukri Bek grows day after day.”¹⁴⁷ In using Ottoman honorific Bek without adding the president’s last name, he was marking the statesman as a figure of privilege and the archaic order.

In other words, the *liwā’iyūn* continued to hold the National Bloc politicians and their stewardship of the country in extremely low regard, even after national independence had been secured. Not only had the Syrian state failed to provide a mechanism for their entry into the school system in 1939, but the nationalist politicians in Damascus had also refused to protect Alexandretta from Turkish annexation. In one of the more dramatic episodes of disregard for their cause, on November 29, 1937, Saadallah al-Jabri, the National Bloc’s minister of interior and foreign affairs, had addressed a crowd of 2,000 youths who were chanting, “We will keep Alexandretta or we die, we sacrifice our souls for Alexandretta. Alexandretta is Arab,” by commending their zeal but then telling them the loss of Alexandretta was a *fait accompli*, as the

¹⁴⁵ See the editor’s footnote about the circulation of the letters, *Rasā’il lam Tunshar*, 95.

¹⁴⁶ Sidqi Ismail to unknown friend, Damascus, 14 November 1945, in *Rasā’il lam Tunshar*, 102-103.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

House had already taken its vote.¹⁴⁸ Such procedural excuses, particularly as made from on high, rankled the Alexandretan cadre, and underscored their sense that the ruling elites were criminally neglecting the Arab cause. Sidqi Ismail's letters even express a certain ambivalence about the events of the Evacuation Day holiday on April 17, 1946 because he felt that not everyone had sufficiently rallied to a comprehensive structure of Arab feeling. Writing to a friend in Egypt, he described his elation in the long deferred consummation of a Syrian state and his happiness to see the great number of Arab unity flags, but he also described a worrisome class divide within their expressions of patriotism.¹⁴⁹ Only the poor really love and believe in Arab unity, he wrote. He had even heard some of his wealthier countryman express the wish that the British would have remained as sources of knowledge and guidance. On that day of national celebration, it seemed to Sidqi Ismail that the celebration was a hollow one. Arabism remained trapped in an entrenched class struggle, one that might render their self-realization impossible.

Over the next few years, multiple opposition parties came into force to jockey for influence over the emerging generation of national subjects. The schools of the Syrian cities, which were the primary site for recruiting new cadres, became noisy with political argument. As historian and journalist Patrick Seale recounts, school boys distinguished friend from foe by asking one another, "*Shū dīnak?*" literally meaning 'what's your religion' but intended as a request for the coordinates of the other's affiliation.¹⁵⁰ From within this arena, the Ba^cth Party emphasized its ideal of a united Arab nation over any other platform, offering it as the site where the conflict between "our glorious past and shameful present" might be resolved, and a unified

¹⁴⁸ Direction de la Sûreté Générale, Beirut, Information No. 721, 29 Nov. 1937, MAE-Nantes. The group included students from different groups, including the League of National Action, Communist Party, and SSNP. Wahib al-Ghanim, a friend of the Ismails and an Antioch native, was present and spoke on behalf of the Antioch branch of the League of National Action.

¹⁴⁹ Sidqi Ismail to unknown friend, Damascus, 17 April 1946, in *Rasā'il lam Tunshar*, 106-7.

¹⁵⁰ Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1990), 25-26. Seale names Communist, Ba^cthist or Syrian Nationalist as the top three options.

Arab subject be resurrected.¹⁵¹ The language of shame used here is significant, for it gives an indication of the group's progressive sensibility and its attentiveness to the great disparities in class and enfranchisement in Syrian society. There seemed to be a perpetual crisis of governance, brought about by a diffident leadership that knew only how to marshal personal obligations rather than political alliances to retain influence.¹⁵² As if to prove the accusations of corruption, President al-Quwatli changed the Syrian constitution in November 1947 so as to make his re-election to a second term possible.¹⁵³

As political and military skirmishes played out across the region, all part of the fall-out from the termination of the Mandates in the Middle East and the scramble to establish spheres of influence, many in the emerging generation did come to regard the Ba'ath vision of a revival of a pre-ordained Arab unity as a necessary platform for sovereignty. On November 29, 1947, when the General Assembly of the United Nations approved the plan to partition Palestine into independent Arab and Jewish states upon the expiration of the British Mandate, demonstrations immediately broke out in Syria. The Arab League rejected the plan. When David Ben-Gurion declared the establishment of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, the countries of the Arab League sent troops into Palestine the following day. The fight ended quickly, and badly; on June 10, 1948, the United Nations forced Syrian President al-Quwatli to accept a cease-fire in Palestine. Nothing was regained, tens of thousands of additional Palestinians turned up in Syrian cities as refugees, and the fighting had also revealed the extent of the Syrian army's weakness, thereby turning military officers against their political leaders.¹⁵⁴ Aflaq and other leading

¹⁵¹ Speech by Michel Aflaq, "In Memory of the Arab Prophet," delivered on 5 April 1943 at the University of Damascus. Translated by Ziad el Jishi and posted on <http://albaath.online.fr/English/Aflaq-00-In-Memory-of-the-Arab-Prophet>

¹⁵² Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 24-28.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 33-4.

members of the Ba^cth Party generated numerous screeds protesting this turn of events and denouncing the Syrian government's failures to uphold its responsibilities to the Arab people.¹⁵⁵ They also organized a massive strike on the year's anniversary of the United Nations vote, petitioning Parliament with demands that included the resumption of hostilities with Israel. The crowds would ultimately be dispersed by tear gas and a state of emergency was declared over all the country, with the army moving into Damascus to police the capital in armored vehicles.

The following year brought no relief from political crisis, and in fact exacerbated the separation of the state and military apparatus from any mode of popular political representation. The Syrian military would execute three different coups in 1949 alone, each conceived and carried out without civilian consent, thereby ushering in what would be called "the era of military coups" and facilitating a more extensive intrusion of the military into political life.¹⁵⁶ The first removed President Shukri al-Quwatli. The second and third removed his replacements in equally unilateral fashion, to conclude with Colonel Adib Shishakli, a career military man, on the seat of power.¹⁵⁷ Under his regime, the government in Syria verged on dictatorship, albeit one that weathered a series of parliamentary crises that may have been intentional as a way to sap the old National Bloc parties of strength.¹⁵⁸ Every civilian cabinet that Shishakli sought to form fell apart within months, with seven different cabinets formed in just over two years. Through it all, many of the youth who were affiliated with the ideological opposition parties came to feel that the drama of the changes enacted in the executive branch had merely served to distract Syrians from the fact that the entire governmental apparatus continued to betray its people with impunity. As Sidqi Ismail observed in a long poem he composed in 1949 for

¹⁵⁵ Aflaq was arrested in September 1948 for circulating tracts that denounced the failure of the government.

¹⁵⁶ Martin, "Enter the Future!," 5.

¹⁵⁷ Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 39-45.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

circulation to his comrades, the succession of “coups, upturned things, and overturners” had really changed very little in Syria, as the government built glorious things from the people’s money while leaving them to live in sties.¹⁵⁹ Over dozens of grimly satirical lines, he describes a country (*balad*) that had become engulfed in waves of aberrations, tragically undoing each person’s talents: a friend living without salary, another keeping his suitcases packed for the next sudden move, another who is a navigator without a boat, another passed over for a spot in the military, another turned to gambling and politics as a form of sport, a poet among them who has lost his voice, and so on. In this sketch of the Syrian dystopia, his brother the painter [Adham Ismail] is said to have found that his colors “cry” in the lightless black that overtakes them. In this account, it is clear that the unity of national feeling is seen to be completely and perhaps irrevocably dislocated from the state apparatus. The homeland represented both a goal and a receding memory.

Ismail’s own oeuvre of paintings does include one depiction of the same existential torture that his brother set into verse, as it had been enacted upon the Arab populace by the continued crisis of governance and shirking of national obligations to the Arab totality. In 1950, Ismail submitted *Family of Refugees in Abu Rummaneh Street* to the very first national exhibition (**Fig. 2.3**). The painting depicts a family who huddle together in the most upscale of the modern Damascus neighborhoods, as were then under construction just to the west of Sha°lan (**Fig. 2.4**).¹⁶⁰ In it, Ismail dramatizes the tragedy of the neglected family unit against the stage set of new urban construction; the mother wears a pious white head covering while the father figure lies motionless with fever. A flat band of dusky gray pigment literally separates the

¹⁵⁹ Sidqi Ismail, *al-Kalb: Jarīdat Sidqī Ismā‘īl* (Damascus: The Political Administration Press, 1983), 422-424. The poem is titled Waterfalls in reference to the waterfalls in Alexandretta and dated 1949.

¹⁶⁰ Christa Salamandra, *A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2004), 38.

family from the rest of the composition, emphasizing their double alienation from the foreign surrounds of Damascus and from the warmly lit interiors of the city's elite, thereby according them the status of a Pietà. As a still intact but homeless unit of familial mercy, they comprise a holy family. As such, they are the figuration of a consuming lamentation for the sins of humanity and an embodiment of the catastrophe that uprooted nearly a million people from their homes and jobs and sparked an international quarrel over who was obligated to provide for such stateless persons, and who was not.¹⁶¹ This Christological theme would have been familiar to Ismail from his childhood in Antioch as well as his studies of European masterworks at home among his peers and in the Fine Arts Club that al-Arsuzi had commandeered (which, recall, had been fashioned out of an already existing Christian youth club). Moreover, because Antioch held Biblical significance as the ancient city where the early community of believers first called themselves Christians, Ismail's modern version of a lamentation over Christ's death by betrayal would have been doubly significant as a depiction of the Alexandretan catastrophe within the Palestinian one.¹⁶² Finally, the class dimension of the picture's rebuke is clear as well, with the manicured spaces of Abu Rummaneh appearing in painstaking detail, including a ring of shrubbery corresponding to the park on the new boulevard and a U-shaped string of electric lights to indicate the streetcar track that extended up into growing neighborhoods on the foothills of Qassioun mountain. *Family of Refugees* is not intended as a history painting in the sense of

¹⁶¹ In 1949, the UN's count of Palestinian refugees outside Israel was 726,000. The Syrian press had covered the attempted international resolutions regarding provisions for the care of Palestinian refugees closely, including printing photographs of then-president Shukri al-Quwatli taken during a visit to makeshift facilities. The 1948 Unesco conference, held in nearby Beirut, devoted extensive attention to resolutions regarding refugees and the December 1948 issue of *al-Mu'allim al-'Arabi* printed a summary. UNRWA was created in 1949 and began operation from Beirut in 1950. By 1957, the number of registered refugees totaled 934,000 (185,000 families) with four fifths of these in the Gaza Strip and West Jordan with the remaining fifth in Syria. Those in Jordan had been made subjects of the Kingdom.

¹⁶² Acts 11:22-25. Saint Paul had come from Tarsus to live in Antioch for a year, and it was there that the people who became disciples of the Lord he was describing were first called Christians. As I discuss in Chapter Four, the literary links between the sacrifice of the historico-mythical figure of Christ and that of the collective Arab body of modern Palestine in 1948 would become even stronger in the following decade.

depicting a specific battle or even a temporal event. Rather, the history it shows is defined by a continuity of crisis, with the rapacious order of elite class interests identified as the cause. The painting documents the intolerable disjunction between Syria's standing ethical obligation to members of the Arab nation and the absence of any functional legislative or civic provisions for them.

In placing such a document into a space of otherwise triumphant governmentality, Ismail was making a declaration of sorts about the misalignment of his cultural vision and that of the Syrian state and the narrow focus of its governance. In 1947, Ba[°]th Party leader Michel Aflaq had stated that the fundamental problem of the Arabs had been a problem of national leadership, proposing that the “men of the Arab Ba[°]th” were united by their awareness of that problem.¹⁶³ In the years of activism that followed, the party published front page articles in its newspaper accusing the political elite of selling the Arab trinity of causes – “Faisal, Alexandretta, and Palestine” – out on the basis of their class interests, and in blatant disregard of the opinion on the street.¹⁶⁴ Given the boldness of these accusations, one might expect Ismail to have rejected the entire national exhibition as unabashedly bourgeois (its organizing committee had requested permission to hold a “modest tea party” at the opening events).¹⁶⁵ No outright rejection of the institution itself was forthcoming, however. If the Ba[°]th Party opposed the masters of the event, it nonetheless viewed the premise of a national exhibition as a positive development. Sidqi Ismail's review in *al-Ba[°]th* gives voice only to a mild critique, expressing doubts about the government's approach to artistic stewardship insofar as it was using the event to speedily form a

¹⁶³ Michel Aflaq, “Kalima fī Iftitāḥ al-Mu[°]tamar al-Ta[°]sīsī,” *al-Ba[°]th*, 5 April 1947.

¹⁶⁴ Coverage of the first sort includes “Wizārat al-Ma[°]ārif Tuḥarib al-Ma[°]ārif!!,” *al-Ba[°]th*, 24 Nov. 1951.

¹⁶⁵ Director of Antiquities to the Offices of the Heads of the Council of Ministers, 23 Dec. 1951, NM-D Modern.

permanent national collection.¹⁶⁶ Ismail in fact enjoyed some success at the proceedings; he was awarded an improvised purchase prize.¹⁶⁷

Continuing his focus on the crisis of the stewardship of the Arab nation was Ismail's *The Porter*, submitted the following year. As I have suggested, this painting makes a more comprehensive critique and declares its existential discontent by means of a completely different pictorial language. Significantly, *The Porter* is set against the same Abu Rummaneh backdrop that appears in *Family of Refugees*, repeating the use of villas to establish the shocking contrast between wealthy Damascenes and the city's destitute refugee population. And yet the visual effect is pronouncedly different than the resigned sadness achieved in *Family of Refugees*. Once translated into the flattened space of *The Porter* and its sweeping linear passages cum modal color units, the façades of the Abu Rummaneh villas become a pattern of spliced colors that cut across the central figure, stripping its brain of matter. Here, the struggle is no longer allegorical in nature but rather embedded in a machinery of urbanized exploitation. The newspaper reviews that covered the painting all informed readers that the climb upward to the ever more grand buildings of the cityscape had literally been built upon the bodies of the women and children in the family unit.¹⁶⁸ These readings of a troubled nuclear relation extend and amplify the already existing visual trope of a porter as an archetype of the underclass. For example, in a contemporaneous caricature by Subhi Shouaib (1909-1974), entitled *A Mistake in Distribution*, the very same figure appears as the symbol of the exploited majority and his brow drips with the same line as the figure in *The Porter* (Fig. 2.5). Shouaib's sketch also passes judgment on the ruling elite. The satirical punch of the drawing derives from its depiction of a fat cat member of

¹⁶⁶ Sidqi Ismail, "Hawl Ma'raḍ al-Rasm al-Yadawī fī Maḥaf Dimashq," *al-Ba'ith*, 23 Dec. 1950, 7.

¹⁶⁷ "Views and News," *al-Mu'allim al-'Arabi* 3, no. 2 (December 1950): 251-252. This short article reports that the jury had decided to arrange for other ministries and directorates to acquire several paintings that had not been selected for awards but were nevertheless very worthy works. Ismail's was one of these.

¹⁶⁸ "Al-Ishtirākīyya fī Ma'raḍ al-Funūn al-Jamīla," "Dunyā al-Fann."

the *effendi*-bourgeois classes as the embodiment of greed. Having eaten away all economic surplus, the man willfully ignores the porter who has been left to carry the burden. The irony is underscored by the thinness of the tassel that dangles impotently from his *tarbūsh*.

The presence of familiar, locating details in *The Porter* allowed spectators to recognize that the artist had opted out of depicting the subject of a lost homeland with full illusionism, and had instead effectively dissolved the city's imagery into a composition in form. As the exhibition review in *al-Nasr* reported, the painting had adopted an approach to picturing that befit the "rational scientific age," such that every element was imbued with a conceptual essence.¹⁶⁹ When it was reproduced in 1953 in an issue of *al-Jundi*, a general audience magazine published by the Syrian military, the caption text described how the idea (*fikra*) of the painting was supported by the way it bestowed its "colors in distribution upon the surface, and [its] modernity in the intersections of interlacing lines that compose the scene" (Fig. 2.6). The audiences for *The Porter* were alerted to the fact that the painting called them to recognize the cognitive nature of its stakes. Less clear, perhaps, was the question of how its formal elements of interlacing lines and distributed color could be manipulated in the service of this knowledge. Given that Ismail's version of Arabism was as a deep, ordering concept, how exactly might it be understood to take shape in a picture, or in a community?

The Curse of Governmentality

In order to get at the more programmatic aspect of Ismail's practice, it is necessary to go even further back in Syrian history to first examine the formation of Ismail's understanding of the national totality. In particular, the performative aspect of Ismail's commitment to Arabism

¹⁶⁹ "Dunyā al-Fann."

requires closer attention, particularly because it emerges out of his early experience of colonial rule. The students who inaugurated a transcendent “here” of a political Arabism in Damascus in 1941 had all been galvanized by a crisis in Alexandretta that Turkish claims on the district had precipitated, the political interests of France had exacerbated, and sitting Syrian politicians had condoned. Crucially for understanding Ismail’s ontological conception of Arab identity and the support this gave to his vision of new political and cultural creations, Turkey had trumped up racist grounds to support its desire to annex the region, arguing that residents were “purely Turkish” and therefore naturally subject to Turkish rule.¹⁷⁰ And, just as crucially for the eventual shape of the Arabist movement, these irredentist campaigns mobilized the self-determination rhetoric of the League of Nations to bolster their claims.

The population that lived in the district had long been remarkably diverse in terms of linguistic, religious, and racial difference, giving home to communities of Muslims, °Alawites, Arab Christians, Armenian Christians, Kurds, Circassians, and others, most of whom spoke several languages. But, in the new period of government-driven international policing that followed the First World War, a distinctive theme of ethnically motivated national “self-determination” had come to prevail. The Versailles Treaty, for example, had created new states for certain aggrieved nationalist groups and revised European borders to accommodate the demands of others.¹⁷¹ Turkey gleaned its bargaining chip in the Alexandretta conflict from the corollary of that principle, “the minorities question” of how to extend sufficient protection to the minority cultures left inside such newly determined nation-states.¹⁷² After Syria’s National Bloc government had seemed to succeed in signing a draft treaty with Leon Blum’s government in

¹⁷⁰ 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*, 2 Nov 1936, 12.

¹⁷¹ 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 Univ. Press, 2011), 243-247.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 59.

Paris in September 1936, including the key promise that Syria would be granted sovereignty over the territories then under French Mandatory rule after a three-year “probationary period,” Turkish politicians immediately raised concerns about future Syrian rule in the district, arguing that Arab rule would render Turkish residents vulnerable to persecution.

By a process of tripartite interpolation, the Turkish-speaking community within the district of Alexandretta suddenly found itself as a ward of the international community. It had actually already gained numerous protections in the bilateral and multilateral treaties forged at the conclusion of the First World War, but the 1936 campaign to change international opinion quickly rewrote the premise of these previous agreements.¹⁷³ Against all demographic evidence to the contrary, the Turkish government began to maintain that the Turkish-speaking population actually comprised a clear majority of the region’s inhabitants.¹⁷⁴ It further argued that, given that the district represented an already semi-autonomous administrative region in which the majority of inhabitants would vote to express themselves as Turks, the treaty between France and Syria could not be justly applied there. Before the end of the year, President Mustafa Kemal himself had declared that the district was “in reality ethnically purely Turkish” and thus should rightfully be incorporated into the Turkish state rather than remain under Syrian sovereignty.¹⁷⁵ Turkish officials even began to describe France’s role in the district as an “occupation.”¹⁷⁶

Although France wished to retain Turkey as an ally against Italy and Germany and was therefore

¹⁷³ For example, when Turkey had signed agreements with France over the Turkish-Syrian frontier, France accorded the district the special status of an “administrative unity” and provided for the cultural and linguistic development of Turkish minority therein, including recognizing Turkish as an official language.

¹⁷⁴ According to the figures collected by the French High Commission in 1936, the district held a population of 220,000, with 39 percent of that ethnic Turks, 28 percent Alawite, 11 percent Armenian, 10 percent Sunni Arabs, 8 percent Christians, and the remainder divided between Kurds, Circassians, and Jews. From Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 495.

¹⁷⁵ Reported in “Turks Cheer Demand for Rights in Syria,” *The New York Times*, 2 Nov 1936.

¹⁷⁶ Comment of Turkish Minister for Foreign Affairs Tawfiq Aras on Dec. 14, 1936. See *NCR Political and Diplomatic History of the Arab World 1900-1967: A Chronological Study* (Washington: NCR Microcard Editions, 1972).

motivated to make concessions to what it otherwise considered an unwarranted request, it hesitated to concede any territory because its Mandate in the region required it to protect the integrity of the Syrian territory.

At this point in the skirmish, Ismail and comrades became deeply involved in the Arab cause, helping to organize literacy campaigns, strikes, and rallies.¹⁷⁷ Their assertion of their non-Turkish identity took on a more explicitly anti-Turkish cast. The frequently strident campaigns of both irredentist groups – those who sought to turn the district over to Turkey and those who sought to preserve its Arabness by attaching it to Syria – placed pressure on other segments of the population who wished to remain outwardly neutral, generating an atmosphere of imminent violence. Riots and gunfights became increasingly common in the district.¹⁷⁸ The trumped up crisis of representation threatened to turn into actual anarchy. France responded to these grave developments by agreeing to hand the entire inflated dispute to the League of Nations for diplomatic resolution. To the Arabists who were aligned with al-Arsuzi, the decision to transfer the issue to such an international forum smacked of a conspiratorial intent. As they recognized, once the problem had been raised to a “question” for the League of Nations, then whatever agreements Turkey would reach with France could promptly be rendered into an internationally valid resolution.¹⁷⁹

When the League of Nations’ own International Mission of Observers to the Sanjak of Alexandretta arrived to carry out a fact-finding mission it believed would initiate a process of diplomatic mediation, both the Syrian and Turkish nationalist factions worked to turn thousands

¹⁷⁷ Ismail was involved in the stage design for public events. See Faiz Ismail, “Adham Ismā’īl fī Darb al-Niḍāl,” 148, who recalls that they used lessons in Arabic reading and writing as a way to present the peasants with the philosophy of Arabism.

¹⁷⁸ In her book-length study of the crisis *Fezzes in the River*, Shields mines the French records of these events and relays them in scrupulous detail.

¹⁷⁹ Arsuzi-Elamir, “Zaki al-Arsuzi and Syrian-Arab Nationalism,” 313.

of supporters out into the street to make a show of their demands (Figs. 2.7). Turkish and Arab nationalists alike announced their identities with symbols and color codes, staging dueling manifestations of people and signs of identity.¹⁸⁰ The Arab youth brigades selected the *sidāra* (a soft triangular hat that King Faisal had popularized) as their headgear, and devised a special Arab hand signal as a greeting (Fig. 2.8).¹⁸¹ Other tactics of cultural were pursued as well. When a pro-Arab parade was staged, Arab nationalists in Aleppo sent a marching band to play while the National Bloc dispatched thirty members of its Steel Shirts paramilitary youth group in support.¹⁸² For the Turkish side, activists in Antioch handed out tins of gasoline to hired cars in a bid to bring people in from surrounding villages and cities. The League's Observers witnessed multiple gunfights between factions. They rendered their interpretation of the event from sartorial markers: a group of Turkophiles in "European clothing" fighting with a group whose members dressed in "local costume."¹⁸³ In this context, Ismail's ethnic identity commanded the hypothetical power of national self-determination *and* rendered him an object of dangerous realpolitik along a majority-minority divide.

The report of the Observers ultimately made no difference to the League's attempt to resolve the conflict. France and Turkey quickly reached a bilateral agreement on their own, which the League of Nations ratified in late January 1937 and which gave the district its own executive and legislative branch and made it subordinate to Syria only for matters of foreign policy, customs, and currency. The League of Nation's role in managing what it saw as minority sectarian violence accordingly turned to the task of quantifying the ethnic groups and disperse

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 63.

¹⁸¹ In the November 2, 1937 issue of *al-Urūba*, al-Arsuzi described the choice of the *sidāra* as an homage to King Faisal as the bearer of the message of Arab nationalism. The group also wanted to maintain uniformity in clothing as a means toward "the awakening of a common awareness and in the anchoring of emotions in the soul of the nation." Cited in Arsuzi-Elamir, "Zaki al-Arsuzi and Syrian-Arab Nationalism," 320.

¹⁸² Shields, *Fezzes in the River*, 71.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 69-70.

power among them, and it tasked a Committee of Experts with drafting a Statute and Fundamental Law. The implementation of the structure of governance it devised would prove even more disastrous for the lives and livelihood of the district's residents. The Committee eventually recommended a system of proportional parliamentary representation based upon the relative size of each recognized ethnic group, creating a Parliament in which a certain number of seats would be guaranteed to different groups – Turkish, 8; °Alawite, 6; Arab, 2; Armenian, 2; Greek, 1 – and the remainder filled by an indirect election in which seats were apportioned to each community in relation to their relative size in the population as a whole.¹⁸⁴ Even worse than the convoluted sectarianism of this kind of apportionment, however, was the process the Committee outlined for quantifying those apportionments. It proposed a large-scale registration process in which each potential voter would travel to a registration center to declare himself a member of one of seven communities: Turkish, °Alawite, Arab, Armenian, Greek Orthodox, Kurdish, or “other.”¹⁸⁵ In other words, the League of Nations made the decision to require every literate man in the district to appear before a board and declare himself a member of one community and abdicate himself from the others.¹⁸⁶ It ratified this system on May 29, 1937, and scheduled it to take effect in November of the same year. The registration process would prove violent, coercive, and completely futile. Before the process was even completed, Turkey struck a

¹⁸⁴ Tellingly, the particular “system of proportional representation” it devised for the parliamentary elections can be found under the “Minorities” section of the Statute of the Sanjak.

¹⁸⁵ As Keith Watenpaugh points out in “Creating Phantoms,” 369, the community designations on offer to registrants were highly idiosyncratic. They divided Arabic speakers on the basis of confession 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 sect had been made the sole determinant. Not even a linguistic basis for the separation holds across categories, as many Armenians in the province spoke Turkish dialects rather than Armenian (and at any rate, most °Alawite residents also spoke Turkish as a second language).

¹⁸⁶ The Fundamental Law actually stipulates that candidates must be literate, not registrants, but al-Arsuzi and the League of National Action interpreted it as meaning that everyone intending to register had to be literate. Given the widespread intimidation of Arab registrants, I imagine that literacy was frequently cited as reason to deny voter enfranchisement.

secret agreement with France and cleared the way for annexation.¹⁸⁷ Turkish troops marched into Alexandretta in July of 1938, ostensibly to “protect” the voting process. By the time the multi-stage elections had reached a conclusion to show the prearranged Turkish majority, not only had identities been hardened, but refugee populations had been created. In the two months following the official annexation of the district by Turkey in July 1938, some 50,000 refugees left for Syria.¹⁸⁸

Although they had suspected that the registrations were rigged, Ismail’s brigade nonetheless increased its activist work in 1937, traveling the countryside to promote the abstracted “Arab” identity over that of “Turk.” They were all from ‘Alawite families from a predominantly ‘Alawite neighborhood and could have registered as such, but their response to a crisis of citizenship that threatened to change the language of their education, business, and cultural history in one fell swoop was to identify with the meta-category of Arab.¹⁸⁹ They implored others in their communities to do likewise and to embrace the cultural solidarity that their common Arabic tongue offered them. They distributed circulars and staged speeches, with Ismail gaining admiration for the calligraphy he executed on their Arabist banners. The youth of the ‘Afan quarter also produced their own clandestine tracts about the Turkish and French conspiracies, reproducing small batches by means of carbon paper hand-made copies.¹⁹⁰ Ismail is remembered for having improvised a means to mechanically reproduce announcements for the

¹⁸⁷ Completed in March 1938, it was a secret promise from France that guaranteed the Turkish community a slim majority of twenty-two seats in the Alexandretta Assembly.

¹⁸⁸ Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 513; Shields, *Fezzes in the River*, 235. The group included traditional-minded Sunni Muslims, Armenians who feared massacres under Turkish rule, and other residents who could not buy into the Kemalist Turkish order.

¹⁸⁹ Al-Arsuzi, too, was an ‘Alawite with ties to the ‘Afan quarter and had experienced negative discrimination against the ‘Alawite community in the French preparatory school system. Arsuzi-Elamir, “Zaki al-Arsuzi and Syrian-Arab Nationalism,” 315; Watenpaugh, “Creating Phantoms,” 367.

¹⁹⁰ Naim Ismail, *Adham Ismā‘il*, unpaginated biographical summary. In this setting, all Arabic-language publications were strictly controlled. Newspapers could publish only with the permission of the French High commission, and the French authorities frequently suspended their publication. Press reporting on the issue was limited, with “inopportune polemic” about the Alexandretta Affair prohibited in Damascus papers as well.

League of National Action by writing onto gelatin slabs that he let harden for use as printing matrixes, which allowed more rapid production.¹⁹¹ The group even peddled instruction in literacy as a means to advance the cause, venturing with their fathers into rural areas to teach the Arab peasant population how to read and using the elementary exercises as an occasion to present their philosophy of Arabism.¹⁹²

These coordinated Arab drives were not successful in preventing the transfer of the district to Turkey. They did, however, set an early template for how to approach the task of consolidating a political community.¹⁹³ This early approach to converting stirrings of national feeling into a viable constituency group worked by moving from the figure of the enlightened individual outward into the lumpen collective. On this count, the Arabism Club in Antioch provided a characteristic mechanism for promulgating a conceptual basis for their cause and then outwardly conveying its fruits to a wider public. During its evening gatherings, al-Arsuzi addressed the crowds with news about the “revolutionary movement against the takeover of the Alexandretta province” that he was planning, as well as the themes of “Arab nationalist revolution, progressiveness and socialism.”¹⁹⁴ When al-Arsuzi launched the first issue of *al-‘Uruba* (Arabism) from this organizational base in November 1937, his opening editorial positioned the newspaper within the same tactical structure. The newspaper was to act as a motor in a profound social revolution that would move from their *liwā’* to the rest of the Arab world, with the first issue addressed to the Arabic-speaking inhabitants of their district as well as (rhetorically) the larger community of Arabs that had been fractured under colonial rule.¹⁹⁵ A

¹⁹¹ Faiz Ismail, “Adham Ismā‘il fi Darb al-Niḍāl,” 148. He uses the transliterated word “gelatin” to describe the technique; it is not clear to me to what product or substance he refers.

¹⁹² Ibid. Shields cites French surveillance reports that corroborate these initiatives. *Fezzes in the River*, 123 and 151.

¹⁹³ As argued by Watenpaugh, “Creating Phantoms,” vis-à-vis Zaki al-Arsuzi’s political biography.

¹⁹⁴ Sulayman al-‘Isa, “Bidāyāt al-Ba‘th al-‘Arabī,” pt. 1, 54.

¹⁹⁵ Arsuzi-Elamir, “Zaki al-Arsuzi and Syrian-Arab Nationalism,” 320.

photograph from a meeting of the fine arts club within its ranks emphasizes the extraordinary differentiation of interest groups to which the Arabism Club gave a common home (Fig. 2.9). Women in lipstick and skirts stand between soldiers, workers, and peasants in traditional costume as if to prove the liberating aspect of the Club's social position.

The extraordinary existential dimension of the Arabist struggle in Alexandretta exerted a formative influence on Ismail and his outlook onto identity and social activism. Long after the hotbox conditions of the district resulted in its loss in 1939, the sons of the °Afan quarter remained committed to the performative nature of their affiliation to the Arab nation, and saw the act of electing into their identity as an enabling force in their future creative activity. Their interest in the mechanisms of proselytization did have other less enabling dimensions as well, however, including casting the intellectual members of the group into the role of persecuted seers rather than integrated citizens. The movement's actual sphere of influence in Alexandretta had not only remained limited, but also tended to play out as embattled. Whereas the Ismail brothers followed their teacher from speech to meetings to rallies, others in the °Alawite community sought to block him from speaking in their name. When al-Arsuzi tried to stand to serve the °Afan quarter as a representative to the election registrations, a community leader expressed his opposition to the election board, stating "the man has publicly declared that he does not belong to the °Alawite community but to the Arab community" such that the people had no confidence in him as their representative. He and his followers gained a reputation for intolerance verging on paranoia, accusing members of spying and of treason.¹⁹⁶ Their tactics often heightened rather than ameliorated social anachronisms. For example, when the group brought unlettered peasants

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 307.

into adjacency with the “enlightened” capacities of its leaders, it propped those urbane leaders up as inspired exemplars in ways that proved polarizing.

The Work of the Artist

The model of the visionary and even prophet-like intellectual continued to appear through the cultural discourse of the Ba^ˆth movement, from its proto-formations in the political campaign in Alexandretta in the 1930s to its early instantiation as an educational program in Damascus in the 1940s. Because the theme of resurrection provides a defining term in the Ba^ˆth critique of the status quo, its members tended to understand the act of creation as an act that realized an essentially preordained order and thus helped to reestablish the national polity. This model is, of course, impossibly vexed as a basis for actual policies in Syria or the Arab region. Anytime a transcendent “homeland” is invoked, an entire chain of abstractions must be mobilized. The threat that a slogan, or an image, can make to the existing political regime arises precisely from the disjunction such abstractions enact – the comparison of the outward appearance of things against a future vision that supposedly aligns with an equally glorious past. These early intellectual positions found more fertile implementation in the Ismails’ creative production in arts and letters. Through them, a future process of national restitution was consistently foregrounded as a purpose for creation in the present, with the art object understood to have an a priori role in that process so long as it was brought into the world by a sincere and self-aware national subject. This particular characterization of the work of the artist sets the immediate interpretive ground for Ismail’s paintings. His comrades and many in his generation of activists maintained the figure of the creative artist (poet or painter) as an exemplary core for a national recovery – understood as both a cause and an effect of the fecundity of Arabism.

These foundational assumptions play out in the later biographies devoted to the cultural luminaries among the *liwā'iyūn*, which cite the fact that the group who grew up in 'Afan quarter in Antioch managed to cultivate a refined cultural sensibility even during the political upheaval of their adolescence as evidence for the righteousness of their political cause.¹⁹⁷ For example, according to Youssef Shaqra's eulogy for Ismail, which he delivered while holding the office of General Secretary for the Ministry of Culture and National Orientation, the Ismail family home in particular had provided their group with a refuge of fervently hopeful, creative activity. Although the sons of the quarter all had access to the French-administrated school system, attending it required them to traverse hostile Turkish neighborhoods on their way to the new French high school to the north.¹⁹⁸ The house provided an antidote to that external threat, serving as a hive of restorative self-directed activity, one person "painting, a second reading, a third pontificating, a fourth preparing the design of a magazine" with the others producing copy for circulars about the Arab cause which they intended to distribute to the neighborhood and city.¹⁹⁹ Shaqra's point in his recollections was not to suggest that the work of a visionary artist or otherwise talented genius could be eased by the protection of like-minded compatriots. In the case of Ismail, he viewed the painter as having been condemned to struggle in a sublime mission that ran counter to the mainstream. Calling Ismail the teacher (*al-mu'allim*), Shaqra described how he "boldly challenged inherited values and static views" so as to set followers onto the right path.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ For example, we are told about Ismail's precocious skills, with the young artist said to have sculpted a perfect copy of the Venus de Milo at age ten. See Sidqi Ismail, "Kalima li-l-Ustādh Siḍqī Ismā'īl 'an Usrat al-Fannān al-Rāhil," in *Adham Ismā'īl: Qirā'a fī Thalāthat Ab'ād*, 161. The text is a reprint of remarks made at a ceremony at the National Museum in 1964 to commemorate Ismail's 40-day death anniversary.

¹⁹⁸ Youssef Shaqra, "Kalima li-l-Duktūr Yūsuf Shaqra 'an Wizārat al-Thaqāfa," 157. For more about the hostile neighborhoods that surrounded 'Afan, see the introduction to *al-Kalb: Jarīdat Siḍqī Ismā'īl*.

¹⁹⁹ Naim Ismail, *Adham Ismā'īl*, 156.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

Moreover, precisely because the Ismail sons were educated and upwardly mobile figures cut in the mold of modern patriots, even their private activities could later be seen to command a quality of national allegory. The family in many ways embodied middle-class taste and expertise, as procured by dedicated effort and study.²⁰¹ They were respected for their investment in highbrow culture, including their collection of French literature, postcard reproductions of (European) artistic masterpieces, and a full catalog of Arab cultural and scientific magazines such as the Cairo-based journal *al-Hilal*. In fact, when Sidqi Ismail sustained a bullet wound in a 1937 protest, Faiz Ismail reports that Adham sat at the bedside to read a feature about Baudelaire and stories by Ibrahim Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini aloud from that journal.²⁰² These same emblems of educated taste would, of course, have performed a concomitant distancing function, defining the intellectual by means of his detachment from popular concern. And yet, to be “distinctly elitist” in Antioch was not yet to automatically be placed outside the pale of the populist movements. The crafting of a meaningful modernization process had two sides: stewardship over both illiterate fisherman and hyper-literate aesthetes.

Five years later, as the *liwā'iyūn* students began to finish their degrees in their adopted cities and the Ba^cth movement emerged with its recruiting networks, Ismail (and the others) had to establish themselves in the mold of useful patriots without the help of close family contacts or

²⁰¹ I use Khoury's description of “middle class identity,” i.e. a man who was educated, usually on the Western model, but not from the landlord class and therefore dependent on earning a salary through the liberal profession. See *Syria and the French Mandate*, 414. The Ismail family was relatively well-off in that their father, Ali, not only worked as a trader but he was also community sheikh. For these details, see Nabil Sulayman, “Šidqī Ismā'īl,” *al-Mawqif al-Adabi* 350 (2003). They should probably be considered “middle class °Alawites,” a category that Arsuzi-Elamir asserts only existed in Antioch; the city had an urban and therefore educated °Alawite population extending back to even before the French Mandate. The household also held at least one older half-brother, Ahmad, by a different mother. He worked as a professional calligrapher and taught Ismail aspects of the trade.

²⁰² Faiz Ismail, “Adham Ismā'īl fī Darb al-Niḏāl,” 148. These are precisely the emblems of educated taste in the period. See Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 423, for a characterization of the pretentious habits of the members of the League of National Action: a “young man in a sports jacket sitting at the League's favorite café, proudly displaying the latest available edition of the prestigious Cairo newspaper, *al-Muqattam*...or maybe *al-Hilal* and *al-Muqtataf*...in short, [he] lived in a world quite foreign to the one most Damascenes inhabited.”

professional reputations. In 1941, a year in which their political movement circulated unregistered newspapers and wrote slogans on walls, Ismail also actively sought entry to the nascent artistic institutions in the civic sphere of the Syrian capital. That year, he visited the House of National Music with his brother in tow and presented a collection of drawings to Mahmoud Hammad, who was then eighteen and presiding over the club's fine arts room.²⁰³ The three struck up a close friendship, with Hammad visiting the Ismails at the house they were sharing in the neighborhood of al-Jisr al-Abyad and joining them in debating whatever news on modern art they could glean from available sources, whether the writings of Egyptian journalist Salama Musa or the full-color art pages of *L'Illustration*, the popular French monthly.²⁰⁴ The Studio Veronese incorporated in the same period, with Hammad and Ismail among its members. In this institutional sphere, the national goal of modernization and self-restitution meant that member artists emphasized the need for technical fluency in the most up-to-date styles of a universal art history that featured the achievements of European critics and painters. When later Syrian critics looked back on the 1940s, they tended to characterize the war years before independence as a training period in which artists tried to acquire the full run of the modern trends in art, including surrealist, romanticist, and expressionist styles.²⁰⁵

Whereas in Antioch, accomplishment in artistic creation *qua* art could be recognized as an end in itself as well as evidence of the potential of the Arab nation to provide a civilized state-form to its people, in the context of the rising Ba[°]th movement in Damascus, the question of the artist's proper detachment from shared communal conditions did begin to appear as a problem. The issue often had to do with articulating the role and obligation to the party in particular as

²⁰³ Hammad, "Dhikrayāti ma[°] Adham Ismā[°]il," 175.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁰⁵ Tarek al-Sharif, "Adham Ismā[°]il 1922-1963," *al-Hayāt al-Tashkiliyya* 13 (October-December 1983), 40. Al-Sharif characterizes the period as one of diligent effort to acquire the full run of the modern European trends in art, involving broad experimentation in surrealist, romanticist, and expressionist styles.

opposed to the nation or society in general. As the goal of national independence approached, the movement's different streams had begun to structure themselves as a party and to fashion its leading members as professional politicians. In the run-up to the 1943 Parliamentary elections, both Aflaq and al-Bitar had announced the resignation of their teaching posts, declaring themselves committed to full-time effort toward creating a political movement.²⁰⁶ The groups also established a number of committees, introducing conceptual questions about the relationship between philosophy and tactics. A 1945 letter from Sidqi Ismail in Damascus, for example, laments that the party's cultural committee had had to instrumentalize culture, making it a means (*wasīla*) to an expedient end rather than a corrective revelation offered to humanity.²⁰⁷ As he notes, to do so was a terrible compromise for a group that had always believed that Arabism worked, to the largest extent, on the problem of life at the deepest strata, on what is "light and shadow" rather than the nuts and bolts of a Parliament. The letter even describes how Sidqi Ismail and a friend had become so filled with longing for the philosophical integrity of the nights they had spent listening to al-Arsuzi that they had petulantly broken the sofa on which they were sitting – all just to feel something snap.²⁰⁸ After 1946, when the restoration of parliamentary and political life in Syria made it possible for the al-Arsuzi stream to formally unite with the group led by Aflaq and al-Bitar, these issues only became more pronounced. The joint organization launched its registered newspaper, *al-Ba'ath*, in the summer of 1946, with al-Bitar as editor and

²⁰⁶ Aflaq also withdrew from the literary scene and his previous promise as a member of a new generation of writers. See Abdul Ghani al-ʿAtri, "al-Hayāt al-Adabī fī Dimashq," *al-Adib* 2, no. 11 (November 1943): 9-12. Al-ʿAtri notes "it appears that Aflaq has quit literature and the story, and has taken up working in the realm of nationalism (*qawmiyya*) and propaganda to organize the youth."

²⁰⁷ Sidqi Ismail to unknown friend, Damascus, 14 Nov. 1945, in *Rasāʾil lam Tunshar*, 102-103. The letter contrasts this state of affairs with the nights they had once spent with the *ustādh* (al-Arsuzi), when he had told them all with glowing eyes about the political responsibility of Arabism. Similarly, Sidqi Ismail notes, when one goes deeply into the philosophy of al-Arsuzi all the world seems to align and it appears to be the only path for the salvation of all humanity.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.* He notes that they then smoked a cigarette as the feelings drained away.

Sidqi Ismail as a cultural editor.²⁰⁹ It adopted the name Arab Resurrection Party (*Ḥizb al-Baʿth al-ʿArabī*), a constitution, and the slogan “One nation, bearing an eternal message” at a first party congress in April of 1947.”²¹⁰

In other words, for those leading figures in the party who had accrued legitimacy on the basis of their philosophical sensitivity, it was not always clear whether action could even be taken without the loss of integrity. In 1943, after he had failed to win a seat in the elections, Aflaq had proposed that the group’s intellectuals might do best to act as cleanly and visionary artists, declaiming that:

Our task is to open the road for the new generation, not to pave it; to raise thorns, not to plant roses; to sow the eternal seeds, not to reap the ripe fruits. Because of this we will not partake in government, and shall remain in the path of struggle for a long time.²¹¹

The early Baʿth’s approach to cultural nationalism is distinguished by this very dialectic, that is the oscillation between the task of offering ideal images of the Arab nation and actually wreaking change upon a resistant social fabric. Indeed, whereas al-Arsuzi had become more a guiding memory for the *liwāʿiyūn* than a tactical leader in the movement, his continued self-mythologizing provided an influential model of unimpeachable philosophical sincerity. Perhaps most famously, in 1930, he had asked himself the following question upon the conclusion of his studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne, “Am I resurrecting a nation or am I creating phantoms... Am I to be a prophet or an artist?”²¹² As a sentence scrawled in a notebook at the

²⁰⁹ Sidqi Ismail’s experience hewing to the schedule of producing the newspaper seems to have been similarly tortured. He describes one evening during which he and his brother were mourning the death of a friend who had drowned in the Orontes, only to be interrupted by an oblivious Salah al-Din al-Bitar who had come to collect the cultural pages for *al-Baʿth*. Sidqi describes preparing the necessary article on H.G. Wells “as if a machine,” dropping it off at the printing house without ever entering into full consciousness.

²¹⁰ Batatu, *The Old Social Classes*, 727. Ismail likely attended. Note that the Party only added Socialist to its name in 1952, when it merged with Akram al-Hawrani’s Arab Socialist Party.

²¹¹ This according to al-Jundi, *al-Baʿth*, 34.

²¹² Al-Arsuzi first mentioned this quotation in a 1965 article for *Jaysh al-Shaʿb*, and it was reprinted in his *Complete Works*. Watenpaugh quotes the phrase to open his article “Creating Phantoms,” 363. I use Watenpaugh’s translation

start of a journey home to Alexandretta and the curtailed intellectual space of Mandate tutelage, the query gave expression to his serious doubts about the role that his enlightened awareness might defensibly play there. It also, as he himself later noted, articulated a set of antinomies – literature or politics; contemplating the puzzle of existence or working to awaken the children of his nation; saving his own self or saving others – that he (and his protégées) understood to define the problem of activism.²¹³ In this influential formulation of the tensions found within the patriotic self, the defining act of an inspired figure is to produce a vision of truth. The question of the status of that vision in the world, i.e. prophecy or artistry, is a secondary one, and decided only when the artist determines the nature of his responsibility to others, as set by the immediate context of national circumstances and needs.²¹⁴

Ismail may have held radically nationalist social goals and assumed personal risk to pursue them, but he never acted as a party artist in the strictest sense of depending on the party's recognition of his artistic accomplishments for a living, or working in a prescribed realist style. My point here is to remind the reader that neither his writer brother nor his Ba'ath friends and admirers would have expected that any artist would do so. In both the visual arts and the political arts, they privileged a model of creation that was free, autonomous, and essentially unmotivated. Al-Arsuzi, Aflaq, and Sidqi Ismail saw these two categories of creative action – artistic work and political work – as philosophically discontinuous, and they became increasingly clearly

but do not necessarily follow his gloss on the choice presented, which is between working as a minor functionary in the colonial machine or joining the struggle to found an independent nation-state.

²¹³ Watenpaugh, "Chasing Phantoms," 366, mentions that al-Arsuzi later explained that his mind was oscillating wildly between these choices.

²¹⁴ Insofar as it casts doubt on the overall philosophical applicability of the "light and shadows" of artistry, this equation would seem to refer to Plato's thought experiment. If the enlightened philosopher were to act within the realm of representation and abstraction alone, it would be as an artist throwing shadowy phantoms up onto the cave walls of his mind. Only if he were to exit the cave and come into the world would the truth be pronounced in the role of a prophet. In other words, the prophet is a politicized figure of (re)creation who acts in the name of others, while the artist becomes its apolitical analogue who acts in the name of the self. In al-Arsuzi's case, as he would attest, the crisis of the district's claim to self-sovereignty actually intervened, to force him to take action within the political realm and thus to assume the role of prophet.

demarcated in Ismail's own life over the same period that the party articulated its political objectives. In 1947, Ismail opted to withdraw from law school and begin to "live for painting alone, no matter the cost," supporting himself by teaching art.²¹⁵ He found his first appointment at *Dawhat al-Adab*, a private girl's school where Salah-al-Din al-Bitar also taught, then (after passing the credentialing exams) began to work within the state preparatory school system, taking a post in Aleppo for two years before returning to Damascus in 1950 to teach art at Maydan High School. These activities retained tight intellectual ties to the Arabist ideal, but served as a realization of it almost entirely via analogical metaphor. The party's philosophy insisted that, if properly nurtured, the artist, artwork, and the networks of Arab youth with whom he worked, all proved the inherent fecundity of the Arab nation and resurrected it for the present day. Within this intellectual framework, the purity of the act of realization is what saves the artist from the falsity of fleeting illusion, and it unites him with the prophet as a perfect political being.

Until 1947 when Ismail declared himself a professional and full-time artist, much of his studio production had conformed to existing styles, as studied from magazines and books. The paintings he produced at the start of this new period, 1947-1950, appear to be more open-ended experiments with color and texture, often as a means to depict recalled landscapes. Ismail executed them on the canvas through heavy daubs of opaque pigment, with dark, flat textures that flatten the scenes into nearly abstract arrays (**Fig. 2.10**). The style is expressionist insofar as each individual mark appears to be the product of an unmitigated transfer from artist to canvas, thereby preserving the physical presence of paint itself. At the ready to appreciate the singularity of this expressive style was his brother Sidqi Ismail, whose constant discussion of Adham's paintings secured their immediate significance as original, authored products. Sidqi's focus of

²¹⁵ Naim Ismail, *Adham Ismā'il*, 109. I have found very little information about his plans or activities (political or otherwise) while in law school.

appreciation was metaphysical in nature, not stylistic. He would identify the presence of light, shade, and other chimerical energies within the paintings, interpreting them as transformative and quasi-autonomous presences that act upon both the artist and the audience. In one 1949 letter to a friend, Sidqi Ismail described how the vivid colors his brother used had an inverse influence on the body of the artist; as volatile reds appeared in the sky to convey “revolution, fire, blood, and tragedy” into the painting, a pallor overtook Ismail.²¹⁶ As noted previously, the poem Sidqi wrote the same year for distribution to *liwā’iyūn* comrades evoking the darkness of the year of coups described how Ismail was so attuned to his colors that he could hear them crying.²¹⁷ Another poem, composed in 1951, gives even greater admiration to this kind of artistic compulsion and its capacity to alienate even the artist 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.²¹⁸

Here the artistic enterprise has become so encompassing that the artist not only collects testimony from his paints regarding their collective fate, but he also pushes himself to such physical extremes that his own appearance changes along with his compositions. In other words, art is understood as if it were a presence in eternal need of a human host.

Importantly for my argument about the constructive component of the arabesque method that Ismail would soon devise, even as Sidqi Ismail extolled the power of his brother’s artistic work circa 1949 with a romantic poetics of dissociation that verges on the gothic, he also recognized the problem of “artistry” and its alienating effects as a problem in other domains. For example, in a letter dated January 1949, he had again noted a problematic gap between

²¹⁶ Sidqi Ismail to an unknown friend, Damascus, 15 August 1949, in *Rasā’il lam Tunshar*.

²¹⁷ *Al-Kalb: Jarīdat Şiḍqī Ismā’īl*, 424. From the 1949 poem Waterfalls, discussed above.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 438-439. Sidqi Ismail, “Epic of 1951.”

envisioned forms and their embodied application in the context of the Ba^ḥth Party's strategic meetings. Sidqi Ismail describes showing up at a meeting having just heard the news that 150 child refugees in Jordan had died from cold, his head filled with "crazy, fiery plans" to make the travesty right. When he looked to 'M' (almost surely Michel Aflaq) for visionary guidance, however, he found that the leader only placated him with a balm of "rich words," which returned him to "beautiful absorption in depression." M.'s behavior, Sidqi Ismail wrote, had shown he was "not a hero, but an artist."²¹⁹ This final statement regarding M.'s failings is particularly telling in terms of thinking through what Ismail's colleagues would have found laudable about a painted work of art and what would have been treated with suspicion. Sidqi here equates the duplicitousness of empty speech with the speciousness of artistry, positioning both at the line of disconnection between envisioned ideals and material action. The obverse of this instance of problematically disconnected artistry is, of course, productive engagement – as in the definition of art that Sidqi provides in his 1950 review of the first national exhibition, published in *al-Ba^ḥth*. As he put it there, the goal of an artistic painting is to move our souls with "unending feelings" such that a good painting awakens encompassing feelings of love in us, bringing the world closer to our souls and helping to achieve progress by means of a renaissance.²²⁰ Sidqi Ismail's reference to encompassing love, as an artwork might awaken in us, is the key to understanding the restorative role that visual art was thought to play within the Ba^ḥth platform, for it mobilizes the naturalized tropes of communal feeling that are the cornerstone of Arab nationalism.²²¹

²¹⁹ Sidqi Ismail to an unknown friend, no location given, 14 Jan 1949, in *Rasā'il lam Tunshar*, 102-103.

²²⁰ Sidqi Ismail, "Ḥawl Ma^ḥraḍ al-Rasm al-Yadawī fi Maḥaf Dimashq," 7.

²²¹ It is a longstanding trope. See for example Sati^ḥ al-Husri, as summarized by Maher al-Charif, "Zaki al-Arsuzi and his Contributions to the Arab Nationalist Ideology," transl. Mujab al-Imam, in *Spiritual Father of the Ba^ḥth*, 129-185. Also note that Michel Aflaq had issued a 1940 text titled "Nationalism is Love Before All Else."

Sidqi Ismail's prose gives voice to a number of productively conflicted expectations for artistry in the context of the Ba'ath cultural project. The artist himself, by contrast, remained relatively silent on the matter of the purpose of his painting.²²² In the summer of 1950, Ismail contributed a series of articles to *al-Ba'ath* that summarize key points from the history of painting, particularly the work of living greats such as Picasso, Henri Matisse, Maurice de Vlaminck, Mark Chagall, and Georges Braque.²²³ These are educational in nature and were commissioned by Sidqi Ismail in response to the uptick of art exhibitions in the country.²²⁴ As a whole, they primarily serve to remind the reader that true artistry always requires the artist to go beyond merely depicting a subject and thereby introduce something personal and new to art as a whole. Ismail consistently champions the quality of newness as a virtue, and itemizes the contributions that each artist has made to the broader flow of modern artistic progress. The pieces are also journalistic in that they mention recent events; Ismail's feature on Braque and Cubism mentions that the artist won a prize at the most recent Venice Biennale, the "greatest international exhibition undertaken today."²²⁵

Ismail's one public speech from this period reveals more significant detail regarding the nature of his investment in art as a contributing piece to the Arabist program. He delivered this short speech in May 1951, on the occasion of an exhibition of work by his students at the

²²² This silence is partly an artifact of the fragmentary archival record, partly a function of Ismail's youth, and partly a matter of the shyness of his personality. I have found relatively few statements from this period that can be attributed to him, as none of his letters or notebooks have been preserved, and no journalist seems to have interviewed him in the 1950s.

²²³ His articles in *al-Ba'ath* include, "Muqaddima fi al-Fann," 10 June 1950, 5; "From Da Vinci to Modern Art, 17 June 1950; "Pablo Picasso," 1 July 1950; "Henri Matisse," 8 July 1950; "Maurice de Vlaminck," 22 July 1950; "Mark Chagall," 29 July 1950; "Georges Braque," 25 August 1950. Ismail also contributed illustrations to the newspaper, including portrait drawings to accompany biographical articles about other figures in arts and letters.

²²⁴ Ismail, "Muqaddima fi al-Fann." Ismail's byline identifies him as "the artist Adham Ismail," and the first paragraph notes that "because of the activities that artists have recently begun in Syria, mounting different exhibitions of oil paintings, watercolors, and pastels, we have decided to open an artistic corner to deal with the general subjects that international artists have treated, from the Renaissance to the present day." The previous week, an author identified only as "art critic" had covered an exhibition sponsored by the Women's Cultural Forum.

²²⁵ Ismail, "Georges Braque." Braque had been awarded the foreign painter prize at the 1948 Biennale.

Maydan high school that he had managed to arrange to install in a hall at the national museum. *Al-Ba^ʿth* devoted extensive coverage to the event, extolling it as a triumph for artist, school, and Arabism, and even reprinting the text of Ismail's speech in a pullout box.²²⁶ The Maydan quarter was the home neighborhood of Michel Aflaq and al-Bitar and as such was a stronghold in the Ba^ʿth cadre system; the unidentified reporter makes reference to this fact by citing its Arab character and the good standing of its sons as the "essence of the true Arab people." Ismail's own remarks purposefully skip over a discussion of the content of any specific painting to speak more prophetically about the future of the Arab community. Adopting the naturalizing metaphors of fertility and fructification, he invites the audience to review the "fruits" on display and to see them as indication of the great fertility of their earth and the blessings buried therein. He foretold that these blessings would soon erupt forth, returning them all to the helm of their fate to direct it anew along the "path of eternity."²²⁷ Ismail's purpose was to invoke an imagination of an encompassing renaissance (*al-nahḍa*) and to consecrate it as the mechanism by which they would recuperate the "thousands of talents" lost to successive heartbreaks of the preceding dark age. Ismail further mentions a national need for an art academy. As he saw it, if the curriculum were based on ancient material, the school would be sufficiently anchored to train a new generation of Arab artists that would freely draw on the arts of the West while also imbibing the spiritualism of the East²²⁸ Thus mobilizing the "fire and light" of their already existent talents, they would succeed in creating a vitally contemporary Arab art. The proselytizing element of this rhetoric is amplified still further in the regular article text, in which the reporter notes that he hopes that other schools in Syria will follow the Maydan example, thereby advancing an "artistic

²²⁶ The Art Critic, "Jawla fī al-Ma^ʿraḍ al-Fannī li-Thānawīyyat al-Maydan," *al-Ba^ʿth*, 26 May 1951, 5 and 8.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

²²⁸ *Ibid.* He notes that Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon all enjoyed high institutes for fine arts as well as knowledgeable, dedicated ministries for its support. His comments also make an implicit critique of the borrowed nature of the curriculum at those schools.

renaissance to complement the national renaissance encompassing the Arab homeland from end to end.”²²⁹

A Plastic Unity

Five months after Ismail laid out a vision of a new academy of contemporary Arab production based upon ancient precedent, he revealed *The Porter* at the national exhibition. Soon to be hailed as the first exemplar of a national contemporary art, the painting deploys its unending rhythms of arabesque lines to shatter the illusions of the status quo. Critic Tarek al-Sharif would later describe that work as an inaugural speech event, writing in 1974 that Ismail first said the word “arabesque” at that 1951 exhibition. By this, al-Sharif meant that the artist had already been exploring unending Arab lines for a number of years, but it was only in *The Porter* that he managed to achieve the embodiment of his vision in a modern idiom connecting Arab heritage to artistic resistance.²³⁰ For al-Sharif, the baseline for (figuratively) speaking the arabesque was the production of a new understanding of art itself. If Ismail had once acted as a kind of liminal figure who worked ceaselessly in every possible style in order to gain expertise, then in 1951 he had assumed the role of rightly guided enunciation. But naming a new structure does not a renaissance make, particularly not in a setting of patriotic ardor. The final part of the catalytic equation featuring Ismail and his painting at the center involves transcoding the arabesque line as something other than mere formal element. As I explore in this section, its service to national alterity (as to be secured by pan-Arab unity) in opposition to the tragedy of existing nation-states (as was precipitated and upheld by a corrupt Syrian state) involves the arabesque’s theorized

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Al-Sharif, *‘Ishrūn Fannānān fī Sūriyā*, 19.

status as alterity in plastic form. As such, the arabesque produces disturbed pictorial effects in standard issue oil painting that may then be linked to the active production of a restorative unity.

The mechanics of how Ismail actually applied a meandering contour line as an agent of productive dissolution can be more easily grasped in his sketches than in his completed paintings, as in the 1953 watercolor drawing in **Figure 2.11**. The entirety of the drawing, which necessarily appears as the result of a single physical interaction between artist and support, involves Ismail 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. The enclosures that result are then filled with flat hues of local color: shockingly acidic brights oscillate with naturalistic skin and hair tones as well as neutral mauves. In the areas where lines have accrued around the particularly detailed passages of the human visage, the staccato color variations have 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 logic of capricious ornamentation that it can be seen to share with historical examples of design motifs. To use the particular categorical terms of Islamic art history, we can say that the extremities of this drawing have become “floriated.”²³¹

In other sketches, Ismail adopts a more agitated line and produces crooks rather than elegant swoops such that crevasse-like forms become elements in the overall surface design. The undated drawing in **Fig. 2.12**, for example, preserves the long, bisecting line by which the artist moved from paying attention to the hair to outlining the eye and brow. As a result, any illusion of three dimensions is negated in spite of the washy flesh tones that otherwise suggest

²³¹ As, for example, in studies of the development of the floriated variety of Kufic calligraphic script, which is considered one of the most elegant scripts for architectural epigraphy and exemplified by inscriptions from Fatimid Egypt as well as architecture in 11th century Syria and Palestine. The Syrian specimens of this type were in fact being compiled and published contemporaneously by French art historian Janine Sourdél-Thomine, as in *Les monuments ayyoubide de Damas*, vol. 4: *Épigraphes coufiques de Bâb Saghîr* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1950).

representational veracity. The same pictorial technique appears in *The Porter* as well. Not only does the artist fail to attend to the image as a gestalt, he actually subsumes the act of looking to the act of intuitive and non-ocular feeling. In a gouache from 1952, Ismail breaks completely away from representational illusion, allowing what might have begun as a portrait to be atomized by an overlay of additional figures (Fig. 2.13). In place of a nose, there appear second and third heads. Eyes become flowers, the forehead a swamp. It is literally impossible to look at the drawing and see any one thing. The more Ismail attends to the lines and colors the arabesque produces, the more he pronounces the arbitrary nature of the signifier-signified relationship. We don't have a representation of a person's melted and stripped features, we have an ideogram for a pre-existent Arab-Islamic creativity in which the armature of meanders and punctuating color that Ismail conjures forth becomes content in and *as* itself.

For Ismail to move from effecting this kind of pictorial disturbance – in which the picture is made irrelevant to its internal components – into actively restoring a more perfect unity, he made recourse to modern modes of artistic recognition of the line as a pure, autonomous presence. In order to understand the service of the arabesque to Ismail, and, more pertinently, to the political version of Arabism that the Ba'ath adumbrated, it is necessary to review the privileged status of the arabesque in European modernism and its theories. The actual term “arabesque” is a European rather than Arabic one, from the Italian *rabesco*.²³² It came into usage during the Renaissance as a description of the scrolling ornamental effects that were thought reminiscent of Islamic designs, and were applied to such diverse objects as bookbinding and mural paintings.²³³ Over subsequent decades of aesthetic appreciation, the term found use to

²³² *The Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art and Architecture*, eds. Jonathan M. Bloom and Sheila S. Blair (Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), s.v. “arabesque”; Roger Benjamin, “The Decorative Landscape, Fauvism, and the Arabesque of Observation,” *The Art Bulletin* LXXV no. 2 (June 1993): 295-316.

²³³ Benjamin, “The Decorative Landscape.”

describe a wide variety of meandering and twining patterns, in music as well as art. In the nineteenth century, when art history emerged as a discipline, and Alois Riegl undertook the project to compare different impulses to ornamental style in his 1893 study *Stilfragen*, the distinctive character of the arabesque was articulated as an exclusively Islamic form of denaturalized vegetal ornament in which leaf, stalk, and tendrils intertwine to extend in infinite correspondence as an unending plane.²³⁴ But, above all, the “arabesque” would emerge within the fine art institutions of Damascus in the twentieth century from a common ground in French modernist traditions of art criticism and historical analysis, which looked to the arabesque line as a painterly tool to achieve internal truth and completeness. For example, the arabesque lay at the center of notions of the decorative, which furnished a defining concept for the innovation-oriented modernist discourse of the 1890s, and would migrate with the Fauves into the twentieth century as a means to reformulate ideas of art itself.²³⁵ Most polemically with Gauguin, the pettiness of the contained canvas would be disdained in favor of working in the mode of a *decoreur* who designed, painted, and ornamented all materials in great wall-sized expanses. As art historian Roger Benjamin describes, the arabesque introduced an “insistently artificial twist” into a painting that provided the Fauves with a device for depicting landscapes as purely decorative compositions. French critics and artists even began to suggest that only those landscapists who “saw decoratively” had managed to introduce a sufficient degree of abstraction toward the purely pictorial to be said to see truthfully.²³⁶

After the Second World War, references to the use of the arabesque as a compositional device again abounded, and not just in studies of still-living masters like Matisse, but also in

²³⁴ *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E von Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (Brill Online, 2014), s.v. “arabesque.”

²³⁵ Benjamin, “The Decorative Landscape.”

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 299 and 297. Benjamin quotes critic Louis Vauxcelles writing in 1906.

reactions to new works and novel formats. For example, “arabesque” finds application in Continental art criticism in the period, primarily to denote the presence of a desired, plastic quality of caprice. The most famous examples other than Matisse’s widely reproduced decorative motifs would be Picasso’s 1940s still lifes, including the light drawings he performed for *Life Magazine* photographer Gjon Mili in 1949 (Fig. 2.14). In this last set of widely reproduced “drawings,” both pigment and paper have disappeared and the artist’s lines are made to appear as intuitive as taking a walk (albeit far more dramatically staged by the photographer). A survey of the magazines suggests that, in this period, “arabesque” proved equally applicable to the paintings of right-wing French painter Othon Friesz (1879-1949), the drip method of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), and to spatialist light installations by Lucio Fontana (1899-1968).²³⁷ By their reading of any popular art press publications they could find, Adham and Sidqi Ismail, too, had become highly attuned to Picasso’s habit of unleashing a twisting and turning line as a pictorial element. One of Sidqi Ismail’s 1947 letters describes how they had become captivated by a new Picasso painting of a woman and a cat that they had discovered in reproduction, devoting hours at a time to attending to its harmony of colors and the flow of the lines (Fig. 2.15).²³⁸ Noting the patterning of white linear variegation (*raqsh*) on the woman’s breast in particular, Sidqi Ismail pronounced Picasso’s painting to be a sovereign achievement of eternal

²³⁷ As in Pollock’s *Number 13A: Arabesque* (1948) and Fontana’s *Luce Spaziale* for the 1951 Milan Triennale. I include Othon Friesz because he was featured in *L’Illustration* (the journal that provided the Syrian artists with access to color reproductions of modern works) in 1949, and the article mentions the artist’s penchant for the arabesque, even identifying it as the source of his status as one of the *grande peintres français*, for having achieved reconciliation with the Baroque. “Othon Friesz: Un Grand Peintre Vient de Disparaître,” *L’Illustration*, 22 Jan. 1949, 84.

²³⁸ Sidqi Ismail to a female friend, Damascus, 5 Oct. 1947, in *Rasā’il lam Tunshar*. I have been unable to confirm conclusively the painting to which Sidqi Ismail refers, but it is likely the painting now called *Dora Maar with Cat*, which I have reproduced as Figure 2.15. It is consistent with Ismail’s descriptions of red tinged with black at the bottom of the woman, a pattern of white in green on the breast, and the placement of three eyes in the face. I have not been able to confirm by identifying a contemporaneous full color reproduction of this painting, however.

plastic value, with no antecedent other than “the omnipotent god” of free imagination.²³⁹

By 1950, the Ismails and their colleagues would have understood the term “arabesque” as a standard, textbook category of analysis for modern composition. The René Huyghe essay that accompanied the 1948 Unesco exhibition of modern painting reproductions, which I discussed in my introduction, repeatedly invokes it as a defining element of modern composition.²⁴⁰ Within Huyghe’s overarching narrative about artists emancipating themselves from the tyranny of realistic painting, Toulouse-Lautrec is said to use “boldly stylized arabesques” to transcend the observations of life on which he based his drawings.²⁴¹ The Nabis use the innovative simplification of “arabesques and splashes of color” to reconcile their traditional love of quiet subjects and nature-oriented poetry, and so on. When Damascus received this exhibition in 1950, it was Badi^c al-Kassem, a member of the Ba[’]th Party and a frequent contributor to its newspaper, who translated Huyghe’s text for publication in the teachers’ journal *al-Mu^callim al-^cArabi*.²⁴² Al-Kassem remained faithful to Huyghe’s prose, only lightly redacting a few of the minor art historical asides.²⁴³ His translation of the term arabesque itself is interesting, for he does not simply transliterate the term as Syrian critics would do in the 1960s, nor does he use the term *raqsh*, which Sidqi Ismail had used informally to describe the semi-autonomous linear elements

²³⁹ Ibid. The term *raqsh* comes from the verb *raqasha*, meaning to variegate or make multicolored. The word would, in 1952, be more formally proposed as the Arabic equivalent term for the art of the arabesque, after Egyptian art historian and theorist Bishr Fares delivered a series of lectures in Cairo about the spirit of Islamic decoration. Fares published the texts in a bilingual volume, which he supplemented with a French-Arabic glossary of the necessary specialized vocabulary. It suggests that the art of the arabesque be translated as *raqsh^c arabī*, and a particular arabesque be *raqsha*. The journal of the Arabic Language Academy in Damascus then published a summary of the talk as well as a glossary, “Sirr al-Zakhrifa al-Islāmiyya,” *Majallat al-Majma^c al-‘Ilmi al-‘Arabi* (1952), 482.

²⁴⁰ René Huyghe, “Forward,” *UNESCO Travelling Print Exhibition: From Impressionism Till Today* (Paris: Unesco, 1948). It was published in English and French editions.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 7.

²⁴² Badi^c al-Kassem, “Madhāhib al-Rasm al-Ḥadīth,” *al-Mu^callim al-‘Arabi* (April 1950): 605-612. Al-Kassem was a founding member at the 1947 Ba[’]th Party congress and a frequent contributor to *al-Ba[’]th*.

²⁴³ The other translation choices also provide insight into the Syrian readers’ relationship to the specialized terms of European modernism vis-à-vis the Orient. For example, where Huyghe’s text explains to the reader that Nabi is an “oriental name (meaning ‘prophets’),” al-Kassem’s translation simply dubs the group “al-anbiyā’,” which is the Arabic word for prophets (and which is related to the so-called “Oriental” word Nabi).

of Picasso's painting, and which Egyptian art historian Bishr Fares would in 1952 propose as the equivalent Arabic coinage for the notion of the art of the arabesque.²⁴⁴ Instead, Al-Kassem uses the phrase *tazayyunāt ʿarabiyya*, which has the very literal meaning of Arabic decoration.

In the same moment, other relationships to the arabesque were also sustained in the literary circles of the Arab world, ones that engaged more explicitly with its heritage aspects as a contributive element within universal heritage. In 1948, for example, Lebanese artist Saliba Douaihy gave a lecture in Beirut on the arabesque as a compositional form in European painting. His lecture, which was printed and circulated in the literary journal *al-Adib*, was intended to perform an educative function, highlighting the form's appearances in both European oil painting (as an S-curve composition) and the history of ornament as a key piece of training in arts appreciation.²⁴⁵ Douaihy argued for the term's broad applicability in formal analysis while still assigning an Arab origin to its abstract qualities of extensiveness and twisting repetition. Explaining to his audience that the arabesque represented but one form of the larger genre of ornament, i.e. pointing to it as one distinctive "shape among shapes," he described how its particular aniconic formations could be understood as the historical product of Arabs having responded to textile designs from India and China through their *métier* of Arabic calligraphy as accorded with local needs, including the pious desire to abstain from depicting human souls.²⁴⁶ His narrative, in other words, supposes that ornament operates as a kind of trans-cultural *langue*, such that with it the Arabs had expressed motivations of an abstract, aniconic nature. This comparative method of analyzing world art, in which each culture uses related, formal elements to accomplish whatever it internally wills, is characteristic of the immediate postwar period and

²⁴⁴ C.f. note 239.

²⁴⁵ Saliba Douaihy, "al-Arabīsk fi al-Şura," *al-Adib* 7, no. 3 (1948): 6-11. *Al-Adib*, a cultural journal based in Beirut, was very prestigious, and was read widely in Syria as well.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

its preoccupation with reconstruction and cross-cultural cooperation as means to keep the peace. The ideas of French critic André Malraux and his Musée Imaginaire concept – a dematerialized “museum” of black-and-white reproductions that would empower all men, women, and children to engage in the comparative analysis of global heritage – were also current, and percolating through the literature. In December 1951, the French-language Egyptian journal *La Femme Nouvelle*, which advanced the liberal viewpoints of the new cosmopolitan woman, published a short feature by Gerald Messadié, a twenty-year-old French Cairene and associate of the city’s surrealist literary circles, on the birth of the arabesque and its symbolism.²⁴⁷ Tellingly, Messadié began his treatment of the topic with a reference to the Musée Imaginaire. He then leveraged the authority of the comparative viewpoint to declare that the arabesque’s supremely abstract nature made it unique among all other art forms, and, by implication, superior.²⁴⁸

It is difficult to precisely prove how Ismail first accessed the arabesque as a means to achieve a critical effect on the viewer, and how he was led to revive or refashion this artistic concept. Ismail may have first engaged with the sinuous “Arab” curve as a basis for transformative composition not by the comparative study of ornament per se, but rather by his boyhood love of Michelangelo. As al-Sharif has related in a later biographical study of Ismail, the artist had recognized the twisting relationships between bodies and garments in Michelangelo’s compositions as an arabesque format of visual activation.²⁴⁹ He may even have been prompted to do so by his reading of Douaihy’s lecture in *al-Adib*.²⁵⁰ From there, he drew

²⁴⁷ Gerald Messadié, “Notes sur la naissance et le symbolisme de l’arabesque,” *La Femme Nouvelle*, December 1951.

²⁴⁸ He was in the circle of Georges Henein. In 1954, he contributed an essay to a volume published by Henein’s Éditions La Part du Sable.

²⁴⁹ Al-Sharif, *Ishrūn Fannānān fī Sūriyā*, 18, mentions that Ismail loved Michelangelo because he discovered an arabesque in his Sistine Chapel paintings.

²⁵⁰ As far as I have been able to ascertain, the identification of an “arabesque” within the twisting compositions of Michelangelo is not common. It is, however, proposed by Saliba Douaihy in “al-Arabisk fi al-Şura,” which was printed in *al-Adib* in 1948. I believe Ismail would have read this article; the memoir of Badi^c Haqqi, who was a good

lessons from Matisse and the arrangements of capricious line and color that comprised the heart of Fauvist “decorative” painting practice. When Ismail wrote his series of articles on modern artists for *al-Ba‘th* in 1950, for example, he reserved his highest praise for the Fauves and Matisse.²⁵¹ His discussion of Matisse’s achievements emphasizes the artist’s skill in pure composition and his strong, unadulterated colors. He also pays attention to the potential identity content in these artistic decisions, for he mentions that Matisse’s color palette is “Eastern” in inspiration (as Matisse had himself recently asserted).²⁵² And, although Ismail never uses the term arabesque in the article, he does identify a crucial synesthetic character of Matisse’s most decorative paintings, dubbing their interplay of colors and spontaneous line as the “artist’s music.”

In other words, circa 1951, the arabesque could represent either a lost heritage of former Islamic dynasties or an actionable practical skill – and in fact signified a mix of these differently valued concepts to the world’s network of trained artists. Ismail’s relationship to these keyword notions of rootedness, modernism, abstraction, and progress are too complex to be termed a mere borrowing of motifs. Moreover, he is too steeped in the universalized terms of European art appreciation to be seen as “secondhand” or “belated.” By the time Ismail debuted his own work with the unending twists of line and color that were associated with both Arab aesthetic traditions and European conventions of composition, he was tending to emphasize the timeless metaphysical aspects of their basis in arabesque: the internal consistency of its logic, and its conceptual totality. For him, the term described “the permanent movement” within any work of

friend of Adham Ismail, describes reading *al-Adib* in this period. See *al-Shajara allatī Gharasathā Ummī: Sīra Dhātiyya* (Damascus: Union of Arab Writers, 1986), 50-51.

²⁵¹ Ismail, “Henri Matisse,” 5.

²⁵² Ibid. The statement that his colors came from the East appeared in Henri Matisse, “Le chemin de la couleur: Propos de Henri Matisse,” *Art Present* 2 (1947), 23.

art, its constitutive animating force.²⁵³ It was not, in other words, confined to the scientific catalog of specifically Arab ornament, but rather provided a description of the perfect realization of the internal drive of any plastic composition.

This universalizing of the arabesque aligns closely with French philosopher Étienne Souriau's formulation in his 1947 study for the "elements of comparative aesthetics," the basis for a correspondence of the arts. In that study, the explicit term arabesque serves as a byword for a foundational distinction between first-order arts and derivative, representational art. For Souriau, works of a purely creative nature – a category that would include the repeating *entrelac* design associated with Muslim aesthetics, a Bach fugue, or the new technologically-mediated light works known as *lumia* – share the status of "arabesques" made from sensory *qualia*.²⁵⁴ In his argument for the practical transferability of artistic form across media, the philosopher and his followers offered the arabesque as an embodiment of a definitive separation from actual existing objects. The arabesque represents nothing; it is pure, unadulterated form. Its most defining characteristic is its synesthetic quality – a capacity for visual, aural, and rhythmic manifestation. Thus, the purest art forms, Souriau supposed, all have a temporal quality to them as opposed to a (cheap) gestalt. In the visual manifestation of the arabesque, the eye cannot lie still. It instead darts about endlessly, vainly trying to resolve the endlessness of the linear inputs

²⁵³ As explained by Naim Ismail in *Adham Ismā'īl*, 23. He suggests that the arabesque is *daymūma*, or continuous and permanent. This would seem to be a similar usage to Paul Signac's in his 1898 *From Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism*, which suggested that the properly composed canvas could achieve decorative value if anecdote is sacrificed to the arabesque, the catalog of empirical data is sacrificed to synthesis, and the fleeting is sacrificed to the permanent. In Ismail's own writings, he shares the view that art's internal drive must always tend toward abstraction, as for example, in his *al-Ba'ith* article "Henri Matisse," in which he describes the process as the distillation of the heart of the matter (*jawhar al-mawḍū'*).

²⁵⁴ Étienne Souriau, *La correspondance des arts* (Paris: Flammarion, 1947). I am using the review by George Boas in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 7, no. 4 (June 1949): 364-366 to capture the range of phenomena that Souriau's arabesque seemed to encompass. It was Boas who added *lumia* to the set as an example of a non-representational work made from light alone. *Lumia* was a name given to environmental artworks composed only from colored light, as made by Thomas Wilfred (Alfred Barr had acquired one of these compositions for MoMA in 1941).

into a bounded image. Similarly, the theoretical construction of the unending Arab line as an eternal embodiment of first principles ensures that any artwork produced with it can only ever exist as an original experience.

The densely intertextual associations with the arabesque that are contained in this historiography entered Ismail's reading of modernism and intersected with his practical work with the "Arab shapes" that were a mainstay in drawing classes in Syria's preparatory school curricula. He not only taught designs like the one shown in **Figure 2.16**, a page from a school workbook, in his Maydan classroom, but had been taught them himself in the French colonial schools of his native Alexandretta.²⁵⁵ In fact, in the intervening time, he had experimented with applying them to industrial textile, glass, and pottery design as part of the initiatives of the Arab Association for Fine Arts, 1943-44.²⁵⁶ This particular floriated motif, dubbed only an "Arab carving," could be derived from one of the types of tessellating pattern that Eustache de Lorey had catalogued in Damascus in the 1930s.²⁵⁷ The motifs had not only secured positive recognition from visiting experts but they also commanded real pedagogical use-value as vehicles for producing subjects in the schoolroom, whether in France or in its colonized territories. Even earlier, in the French metropole at the start of the twentieth century, as concerns about industrial readiness increased, administrators introduced drawing lessons to the universal curriculum with the dual purpose of instilling the *langue* of industry and promoting personal

²⁵⁵ Information on the nature of these drawing courses, 1947-50, available from Ali Ghalib Salim (teacher of painting in the Dār al-Mu'allimīn in Aleppo), "Islāh Manhaj al-Rasm," *al-Mu'allim al-'Arabi* (March 1950): 526-529; M. Jalal, A. A. Al Sououd, K. Mouaz, A. A. Arnaout, 29. The baseline skills in the Syrian art curriculum included a practical understanding of the construction of different ornaments (*zakhārif*) of both plant and animal forms. Additionally, Mahmoud Jalal, then inspector of art courses for the Ministry of Education, began to attempt to introduce an *abjad* system for childrens' drawing that used Arabic letterforms as the armatures for living creatures, with the letter *ṣād* forming a consistent stem for what becomes a menagerie of possible beings: ducks, turtles, peacocks, mice, a miner, a stooped old woman, etc.

²⁵⁶ Al-Khaldi, "al-Jam'iyāt al-Fanniyya fi Sūriyā"

²⁵⁷ See my discussion of the School of Modern Arab Arts in Chapter One.

habits of rational production.²⁵⁸ These lessons advanced pupils through regimented stages, from line and geometry to ornament, to perspectival renderings of things, to idealized leaves, and so on.²⁵⁹ By them, it was possible to produce the standardized French child-subject in Marseille or Antioch. The lessons in ornament in this curriculum, which were taught as exercises in precision, made for a central component of Ismail's French Mandatory tutelage. As such, they facilitated both his subsequent investment in European modernism and his equation of line with transcendent truth.²⁶⁰

But if this “pre-aesthetic” drawing system was intended to discipline the student in the appropriately productive subjectivity, then its more automatic aspects also provided the artist with a method to disperse and free his mind. Indeed, Ismail's keen interest in tapping the naturally creative intuitions of the child subject of the Arab nation (rather than the artificial thoughts of the colonial child subject of the Mandate) provide another conceptual source for reading an armature of lines, filled with fiery color, as a unity with the power to restore. Recall that the interiorized quality of the program of self-education that the Ismails undertook in their home contrasted with the imposed standards of French educational metrics with their claim to universalizability. As the recollections of Ismail's childhood friends make clear, the repetitive drawing exercises in that official curriculum could also have the effect of making the act of drawing lines an out of body experience. We learn that as a school boy in Alexandretta, Ismail used to sit at his straw chair with the portable blackboard they used in drawing class on his lap,

²⁵⁸ Molly Nesbit, *Their Common Sense* (Black Dog Publishing, 2000).

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 29-39.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 158-159, includes a discussion of the worldwide diffusion of educational programs that brought drawing, language, and manufacturing together to support industrialization, and which also served to foster the related modernisms of the international and constructivist styles. Under these circumstances, Klee and Kandinsky at the Bauhaus theorized the line anew and gave it a critical inflection, etc.

running his chalk into “every corner,” producing images of a “marvelous energy.”²⁶¹ On the weekends, he continued that type of automatism in the home, as his cousins gathered to watch him play guessing games with these chalk lines - drawing with a line or two and commanding the group to forecast the intended image: “duck,” “a sheep,” and, after a line or two, “a house,” and so on until a correct guess was made.²⁶² The same game of lines also provided an armature for channeling their latent anti-colonial feeling when, one day, Ismail’s drawing coalesced into the image of an arrow, and the arrow came to pierce a French soldier. Feeling moved by the surprise image, the group began to utter the phrase “piercing arrow (*al-saham al-nāfidh*)” to each other, writing it on items at school as if it held a mystical power, thereby spreading the slogan across the student population and spooking the French administration.²⁶³ In such an anecdote of automatic writing, the lines themselves spoke a truth about their collective condition. The artist’s natural impulse to push and pull lines around on a surface may therefore also be read ideologically. As Faiz Ismail insisted in his 1984 account of their childhood experience, the will to form lines into eternal shapes can also solidify an oppositional community.

As a mechanism for moving beyond the constraints of intolerably coercive state apparatuses – to which Ismail would also remain particularly vulnerable as an internal refugee – the “arabesque” emerges as a highly flexible and productive tool. By following it through the many intellectual and visual resources available to Ismail, we see how it draws from French culture and pedagogy to achieve transvaluation into a national heritage form that is defined by its replete qualities as infinite presence. In ways that would become significant to those artists who worked in Syria in the 1960s under conditions of increasingly narrow government definitions of

²⁶¹ Faiz Ismail, “Adham Ismā’il fi Darb al-Niḍāl,” 145.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁶³ The phrase seems to have caught the skittish eye of the French. Fa’iz suggests that the French “imagined” that the group of fighters behind the activity were under the employ of the director of the school, Sheikh Saleh al-Ghanim.

national feeling and expression, it also shows how modernisms that have been appropriated (in an Orientalist vein) from Islamic cultures as the Other of brilliant color and flattened spaces can be re-appropriated for self-actuating processes. Here, in other words, the very universalist claims that the French had made for their appropriated modernisms could then be wielded for an equally universalizing Arabism meant to override the nation-state.

For Ismail, the key to putting the reclaimed arabesque toward the goal of a transcendent Arabism was its potential for simultaneity and massiveness as a form that could, in fact, only be cognized as an experience. In this particular nationalist use of artistic form, a process of naturalization is invoked, such that prior abstract truth becomes encoded in present worldly form. Crucially for my argument, the powerful notion of a perfect contiguity of vision, sound, and body, which Souriau had theorized but which ostensibly lived in the collective consciousness of Arab school children, strongly resonates with the tactics of the Arabist movement with which Ismail was involved in Alexandretta. Recall that during the registration drives in 1938, the Arabic mother tongue provided the group with a basis for a transcendent unity. To physically practice it in speech, and in writing, was to embody a salvational totality. Similarly, the concept of embodiment emerges as a central concern in the years leading up to *The Porter*. Ismail began to introduce linear tracings as synesthetic elements in paintings beginning as early as 1945, often rendering accent lines into visual suggestions of a metaphysical arabesque. In *Perfume and Melody* (1950) and *Dabke* (1950), for example, contour lines provide a primary element of composition that also becomes content as it conveys the presence of an invisible but ever-potentially embodied Arab spirit (**Fig. 2.17** and **Fig. 2.18**). The *dabke* is an Arab folk dance that is customary at weddings and celebrations, where whole communities perform its syncopated foot movements *en masse*. In Ismail's rendering, anthropomorphic outlines seem to coalesce as

female form from a fertile atmosphere of Eastern rhythms and Eastern landscapes. Outwardly romantic, these paintings took shape through a brew of Francophone Oriental inspirations, including, according to Naim Ismail, the “spontaneity of Matisse, Japanese art, and Arab miniatures.”²⁶⁴ French graphic design conventions also seem to have offered a precedent, particularly the sinuous, gendered arabesques that appear in the advertising for luxury perfume and hosiery in *L’Illustration* (Fig. 2.19). The titles of this group of works all reference smell, sound, and rhythm, identifying their dancing lines as protean entities. And, quite unlike the base image for *The Porter*, their beginning contours are materially ephemeral: clouds and wind. In neither case does the thing depicted meet the material world. Rather, the pure entities of rhythm, smell, and sound are their own world.

Earlier experiments like the 1948 watercolor *Breath of Today* also worked 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 appear to breathe out elegant loops that hint at an *entrelac* or other motif of Islamic surface decoration (Fig. 2.20). Another, the 1947 painting *al-Zajal al-Sūrī* brings at least four vectors into overlay: a sky containing both day and night, a vision of massive old trees with foliage that dissolves into clouds, a central cruciform sign that has been activated through lines of energy (curling into tiny representations of genie-like women), and an overlay of colored arabesque lines that, in the left right corner, appear to outline a fawn, a woman’s eye, and other hallucinatory beings (Fig. 2.21). Its title also refers to a folk art form, in this case a colloquial poetry performance associated with feast days that would be accompanied with percussion instruments and a chanted chorus.²⁶⁵ Although they include clear markers of an Arab folk identity, these paintings are not at all ethnographic in purpose. Instead, each manages

²⁶⁴ Naim Ismail, *Adham Ismā‘īl*, 22.

²⁶⁵ Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, Ismail’s iconographies and titles in this period warrant more investigative work, particularly regarding the minoritarian aspects that may find expression in these folk practices.

the relationship between idealized form and folk practices by means of (imagined) rhythm, thereby claiming modernist universalism and acting as a mediating presence. That relationship, as the artist shows by his nested juxtapositions of realms of being, is at once natural, replicative through the body, magically protean, and transcendent. Similar engagements with holistic forms of Eastern consciousness can in fact be seen in the work of other Arab artists in the same period, as in an aquarelle by Egyptian artist Mounir Cnaan (1919-1999) meant to evoke the *zikr*, or the Sufi ceremonial practice of rhythmic supplication and collective recitation of Qur'anic phrases, that was reproduced in *La Femme Nouvelle* in the same period as an illustration to a poem by editor Doria Shafik (Fig. 2.22).²⁶⁶ Both poem and painting are entitled *The Zikr*, the former subtitled with the additional explanation "Muslim religious dance." Cnaan's impressionistic illustration is composed by means of looping lines in reds, greens, and yellows that subsume the figures in rhythmic pattern. Like Ismail's paintings, it charts a pictorial effect from within knitted rhythmic and musical inputs, which in this case links conceptually to the durational nature of the *zikr* itself. As a totality, it resolves the ethnically specific qualities of being Muslim and Arab into the ecstatic experience of contemplating and thus participating in an endlessly repeating and vibrating motion, coalescing into a single composition of dilated line and limb.

In Ismail's own experiments with unending and atemporal lines, the goal of resurrected unity is embedded somewhere between the "purely" cultural and the "naturally" political. As enlivened figures of arabesque abstraction, the drawn and painted lines he produces index the vitality of a pre-existing Arab totality. Ismail may have not yet mobilized such lines to dissolve the intolerable content of the Syrian class divide, but in these paintings he used them to depict a naturalized Arab nation in which form and identity are equivalent. To do so is to make the

²⁶⁶ "Le Zikr," *La Femme Nouvelle* (Summer 1951), 54-55.

whimsy of the meander into a purposive shape, a summons to another ontology. Once the sovereignty of the line is established, the meaning of the painting is moved into the subcutaneous register of rhythmic being. How then to analyze the meaning of a public painting like *The Porter*? Its abstracting effects, as I have been arguing, can only be fully assessed in relation to the artist's intimacy with Ba'ath cultural discourse as well as European attempts to grapple with multiple origins of abstraction in art. *The Porter* can be understood as a product of the party's nationalist poetics and a piece of its activist platform, as enacted in a pictorial realm, and drawing from "universal" aesthetic theories that privilege an Orientalized first cause. When we review the writings on artistic modernism that Ismail accessed in the postwar years of a restarted European art world, we see that the contemporary conception of a concrete approach to painting already held a lightly racialized idea of "arabesque" within it – the idea of design's essence as pure, linear existence, mapped with a civilizational history of aniconic tessellation as expressing a most advanced (and monotheistic) art form. Concurrently, over the years 1936-1952, the abstractions required for the "here" of the Ba'ath Party to emerge had rendered Ismail's work as an artist into a project of political consolidation that de-emphasized the individual even while it emphasized individual genius. The experience of a dissolving picture plane was to be linked to the active production of a restorative unity, which was in turn to be located in a future-oriented socialist Arabism that would (in theory) cure the class inequity represented. The mechanism of production in this sequence had to do with a theory of the arabesque that made it a fundamentally anti-mimetic display of an awareness that Arab youth already contained within themselves.

When *The Porter* appeared in the 1951 national exhibition, it served to render the poetics that the intellectuals of the Ba'ath movement had developed around the idea of a national essence into an artistic style that proposed to establish a new relationship between painter, painting, and

audience. The artist's expertise was thereby rhetorically secured, such that he had assumed the role of a teacher rather than a martyr or prophet. A semi-fictional vignette that artist Elias Zayyat (1935—) penned about the 1951 exhibition also captures the mix of self-effacement and visionary self-regard that motivated Ismail's painting practice and gave it political stakes in its immediate context. Adopting the imagined perspective of one of Ismail's students who attended the opening of the national exhibition in 1951, 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 Qasr al-Hayr [the gallery in the museum], 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 al-Tekiyye al-Sulaymaniyye in paints of gray.²⁶⁷

As Zayyat stages the momentous turn toward an authentic sovereignty that would be enacted that year, it is Ismail who leads the way to terminate a long tradition of Orientalist "views" of Syrian antiquity. The tables are turned, and it is the foreign visitor whose painting is drained of life-giving light and color.

In the patriotic Syrian press of the 1950s, the primary measure of any painting's value was its efficacy as a pedagogical instrument in the national interest (understood as "Syrian," or "Arab," depending on one's ideological alignment). The notion of "modern art" was almost entirely understood as an educational object lesson. What would be taught was either civilization in general or the specific practice of being a citizen. The newspaper critics who were closest to the artist tended to describe the artist's works as the fulfillment of his nationalist allegiances. It is their explanation of the mechanism of fulfillment that gives insight into the operative aesthetic philosophy for the ideological generation. The critic for *al-Ishtirakiyya*, the mouthpiece of the

²⁶⁷ Elias Zayyat, Preface, *Revival of Plastic Memory in Syria*, vol. 1 (Damascus: Secretariat General of Damascus Capital of Arab Culture, 2008), n.p.

Arab Socialist Party, offers the most intriguing interpretation of the formal elements of Ismail's *The Porter* in terms of its approach to social content. The critic wrote that he appreciated how one did not have to be "well-studied" to be moved by the work, as the bright sparks of color within the painting's otherwise opaque gray color scheme functioned nearly autonomously to signify the presence of physical and mental effort.²⁶⁸ For him, it was color in itself – the red spark in the head, thigh, and the bottom of the foot, and yellow in the faces and the spinal cord of the porter – that presented audiences with evidence of "shining" creative thought.²⁶⁹ Ismail took the consciousness-raising potential of his painting practice – via a coloristic vitality – completely seriously, most obviously so in his role as art teacher in the Maydan high school. The works he created for display in the state's new exhibition sequence attempted to address intuitions directly, thereby bypassing the need to decode illusionistic convention. As a result, the streamlined and modern design elements of line and color were placed in the service of what *al-Ishtirakiyya* described as comprehension without study. Rather than "showing" his theme as a literary exercise, he sought to plant it directly into spectators' perceptual apparatus through the haptic inputs of rhythm, color, and unending, repeating line. The reality Ismail proposed was intended to manifest as more real than the world around him and his community. It was intended to bring the viewer into the "here" of Arabism.

The intellectual support that the Ba'ath movement provided to Ismail lent still greater specificity to the ideological value of line and color within *The Porter*. Ismail and his fellow *liwā'iyūn* intellectuals understood the Arab totality as an idealized resolution of the region's

²⁶⁸ "Al-Ishtirākiyya fī Ma'raḍ al-Funūn al-Jamīla."

²⁶⁹ This notion of "shining thought" aligns with the categories of aesthetic appreciation that Leonid Heller has identified within the general corpus of Russian art writing in the Soviet socialist realist mode, 1948-1952. See "A World of Prettiness," *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, eds. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1997): 51-71. Heller quotes testimony from a "Soviet citizen" who has regarded his own land, experiencing both its liveliness and its unity, as if "every creative thought radiated its own hue of light."

historical processes. Because this totality was conceived as a perfect congruence between the imagined future and the communal past, it was politicized in the present. Accordingly, in this painting, an activated line renders the urban poverty of the present into fleeting, historical anecdote rather than fixed structure. The interior outlines of things dissolve their own exterior boundaries; surface façades become only provisional. The red “flashes” on the painting’s surface do 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, the painting is antagonistic toward visual illusion. It is a form with intention. Its purpose is to correlate the consciousness of Syrian audiences with the alternative place of an inhabitable Arab totality.

Chapter Two Figures

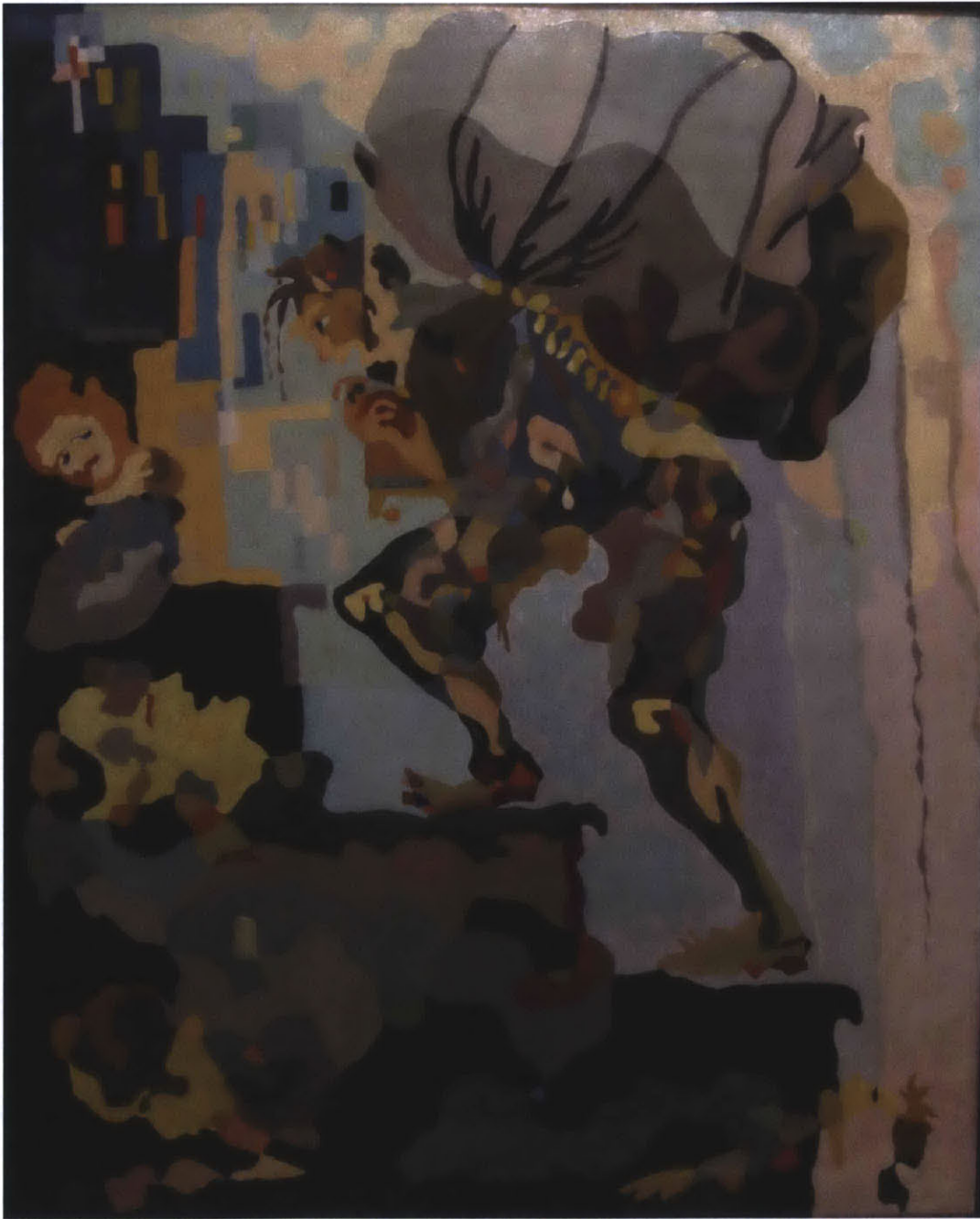


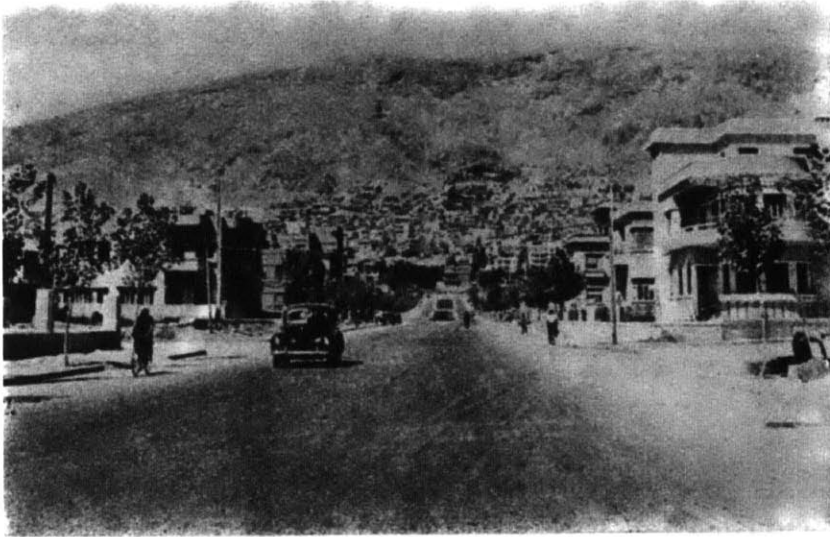
Fig. 2.1 Adham Ismail, *The Porter*, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm, 1951. Collection National Museum, Damascus.



Fig. 2.2 Volunteers in the national gendarmerie to resist the French (1945), from left, the author [Sidqi Ismail], Youssef Shaqra, Masoud al-Ghanim. Source: Sidqi Ismail, *al-Mū³allafāt al-Kāmila*, pt. 3 (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1978-81), n.p.



Fig. 2.3 Adham Ismail, *Family of Refugees in Abu Rummaneh Street*, oil on canvas, 65 x 85 cm, 1950. Samawi Collection.



Old Damascus

شارع أبو رمانة [شارع البريطاني] سنة ١٩٤٦.

Fig. 2.4 Abu Rummaneh Street, 1946. View through new suburbs toward Qassioun mountain.



Fig. 2.5 Subhi Shouaib, *A Mistake in Distribution*, Chinese ink and watercolor, 32 x 24 cm, 1951. Source: *Said Tahseen, Soubhi Shouaib, Syrian Plastic Arts Series 2* (Damascus: Salhini Printing and Publishing, 1989), 21.



Fig. 2.6 “Ma‘raḡ al-Jundī: al-Ḥammāl li-Adham Ismā‘īl,” *al-Jundi* 133 (1953), 33.



Fig. 2.7 A January 1937 protest organized by the League of National Action in support of the Syrian identity of the province. Source: Dalal Arsuzi-Elamir, *Arabischer Nationalismus in Syrien: Zakī al-Arsūzī und die arabisch-nationale Bewegung an der Peripherie Alexandretta/Antakya, 1930-1938* (LIT Verlag Münster, 2003), 329.



Fig. 2.8 Zaki al-Arsuzi (marked by a white circle) surrounded by his students in the *Līwa*³, raising their hands in the special greeting that the Arab combatants had selected to identify themselves. Source: Arsuzi-Elamir, *Arabischer Nationalismus*.

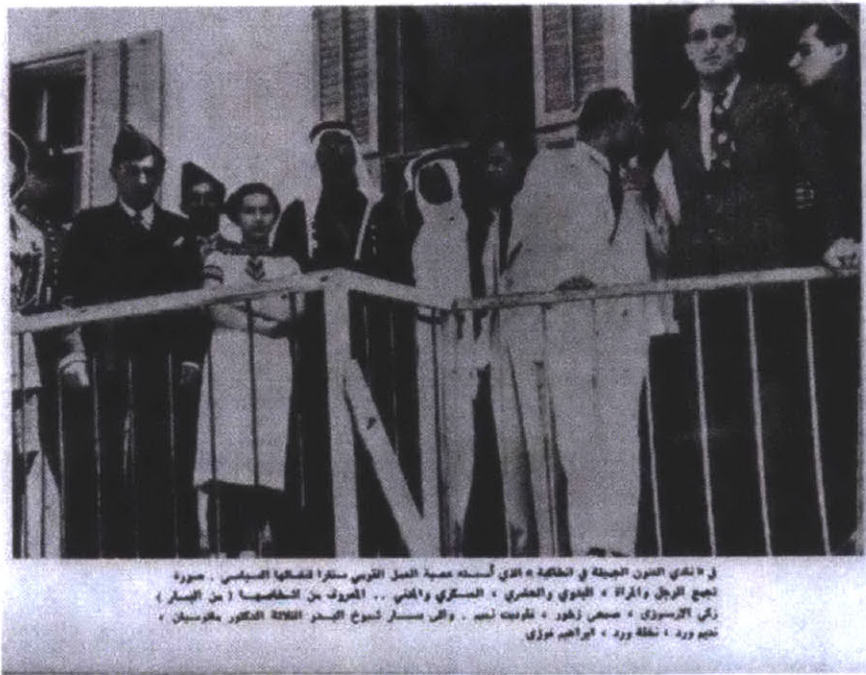


Fig. 2.9 “At ‘The Fine Arts Club of Antioch,’ which the League of National Action founded as part of its political struggle. The picture shows a gathering of men and women, Bedouin and city-dwellers, officers and civilians...” Source: Arsuzi-Elamir, *Arabischer Nationalismus*, 326.



Fig. 2.10 Adham Ismail, no title, oil painting, 1940s. Collection of Issam Darwish.

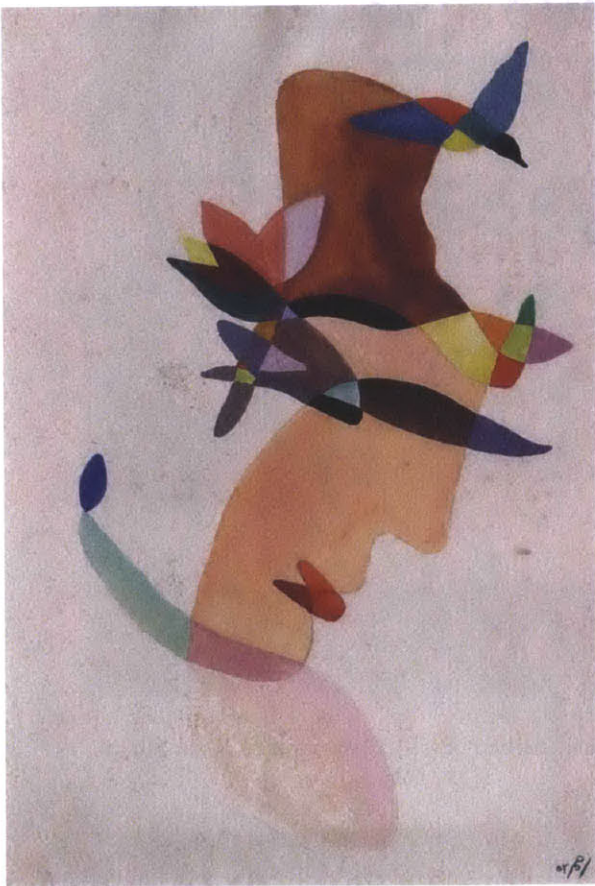


Fig. 2.11 Adham Ismail, no title, gouache sketch, 1953. Samawi Collection.



Fig. 2.12 Adham Ismail, no title, mixed media drawing, no date (perhaps 1959). Collection of Nizar Ismail.



Fig. 2.13 Adham Ismail, no title, gouache drawing, 1952. Collection Saleh Barakat/Agial Gallery

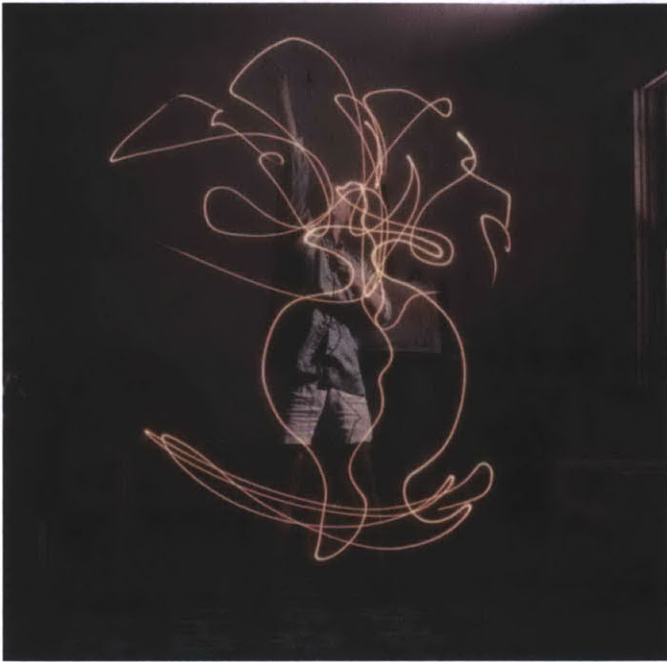


Fig. 2.14 Gjon Milli, *Picasso drawing a vase of flowers with light*, photograph, 1949. For *LIFE Magazine*.



Fig. 2.15 Pablo Picasso, *Dora Maar with Cat*, oil on canvas, 128.3 x 95.3 cm, 1941. Private collection.

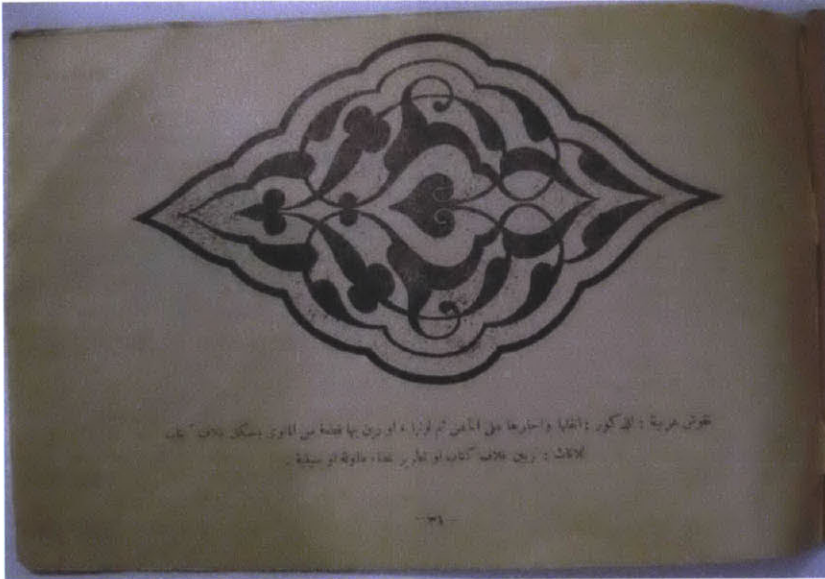


Fig. 2.16 Workbook page from the fifth level of *Ashghālī li-l-Talāmīdh wa-Talamīdhāt* (Damascus: Dar al-Mu^ʿalimin wa-Mu^ʿalimat, n.d.). The instructions say, “Arab engraving: For boys: Transfer and carve it on wood, then color it, or is it to decorate a piece of cardboard for a book cover. For girls: Decorate a book cover, border of a tablecloth, or china.”



Fig. 2.17 Adham Ismail, *Melody and Perfume*, 1950. Size and location unknown. Source: Adib Makhzoum, *Tayyārāt al-Ḥadātha fī-l-Tashkīl al-Sūrī* (Damascus: no publisher named, 2010), 49.



Fig. 2.18 Adham Ismail, *Dabke*, oil, size unknown, 1950. Location unknown. Source: Naim Ismail, *Adham Ismāʿīl: Ḥarqat Lawn wa-Khaṭṭ Lā Nihāʾī* (Damascus: al-Jumhuriyya Press, 1965), 27.



Fig. 2.19 French advertising from *L'Illustration* (5 June 1943).



Fig. 2.20 Adham Ismail, *Warm Breeze*, watercolor, size unknown, 1948. Location unknown. Source: Naim Ismail, *Adham Ismā'īl*, 17.

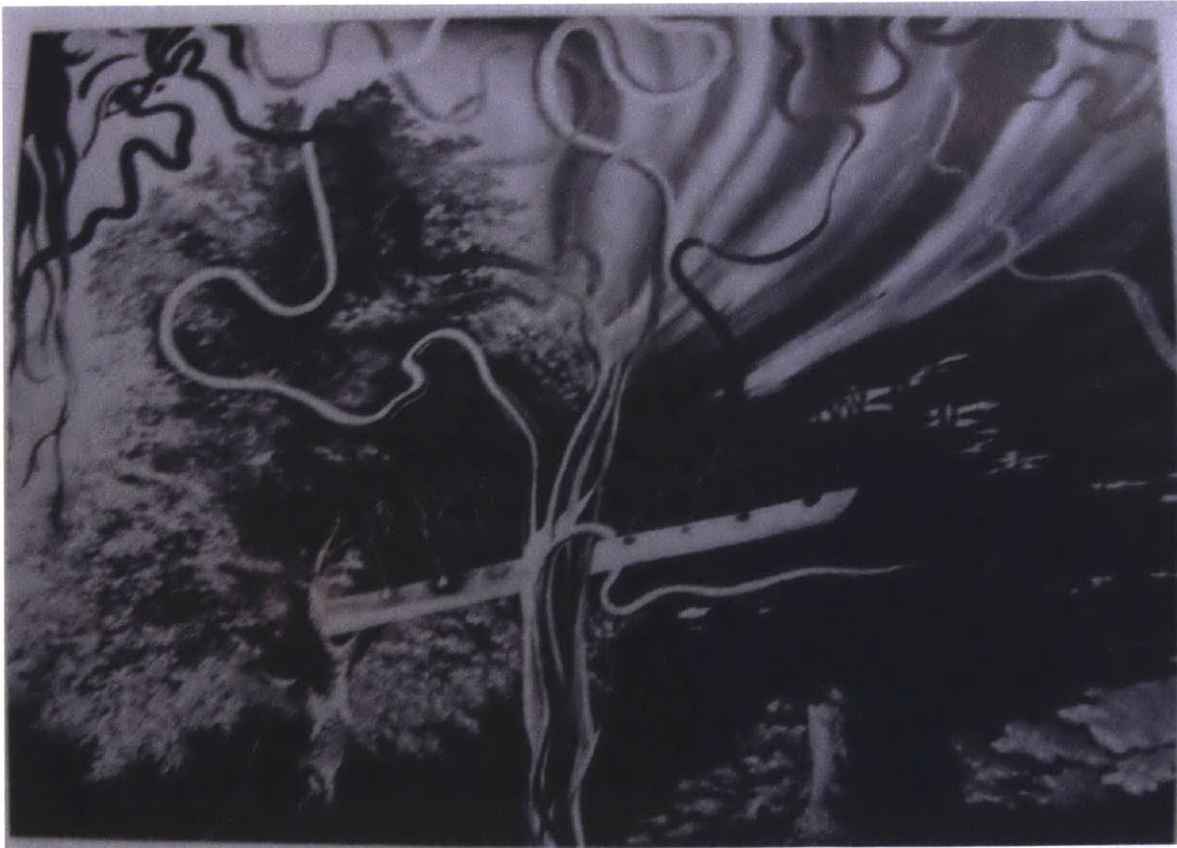


Fig. 2.21 Adham Ismail, *al-Zajal al-Sūrī*, oil, size unknown, 1947(?). Location unknown. Source for dating: Naim Ismail, *Adham Ismā'īl*, 14. Source for image: А. А. Богданов, *Художники Сирии* (Moscow: 1981).

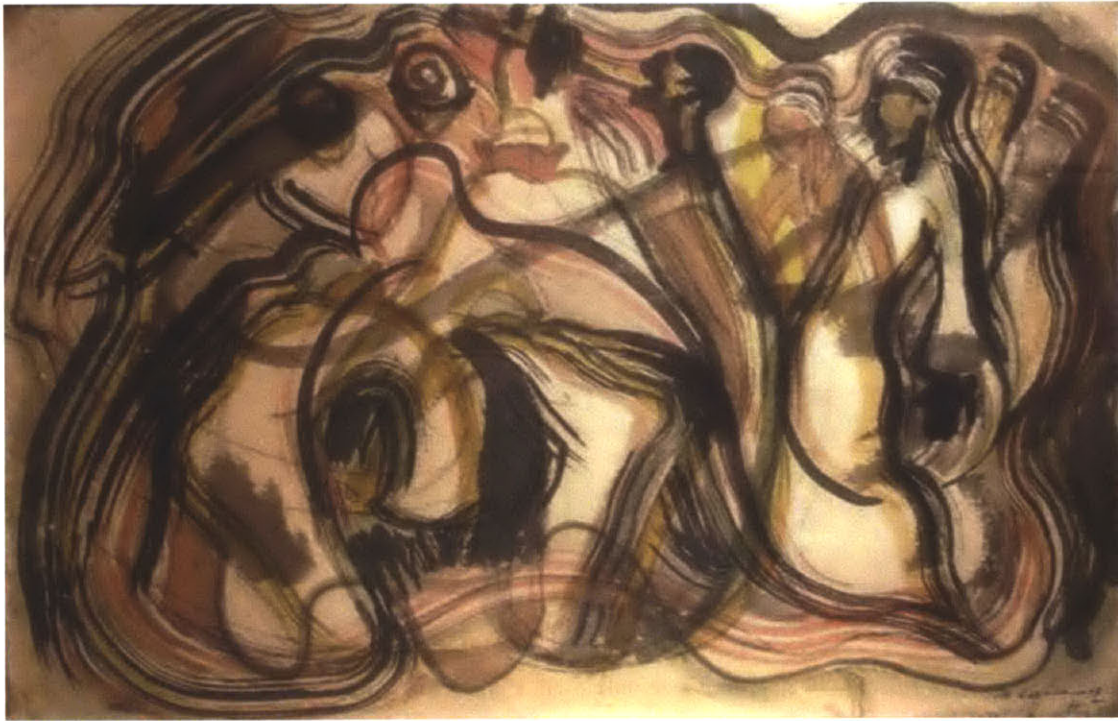


Fig. 2.22 Mounir Cnaan, *Le Zikr*, aquarelle on paper, 1949. Size and location unknown. Source: "Le Zikr," *La Femme Nouvelle* (Summer 1951), 54-55.

Chapter Three

New World Orders: Arab Artists at the Italian Art Academy, 1952-1960

Less than a year after Adham Ismail showed *The Porter* in Damascus, thereby using the institutional space of the national exhibition to contest the visions of the state, he set sail for Italy as a holder of a government fellowship for study at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome.²⁷⁰ Ismail received the first in a series of fine art fellowships that Italy had offered to Syria in a new bilateral cultural agreement, and his selection may have been the result of Ba'ath Party friendships with Akram al-Hawrani, a grassroots politician from Hama who at that time was closely associated with Shishakli.²⁷¹ Once Ismail arrived in Rome, the “eternal city” that had been the seat of both ancient imperial power and Renaissance religious humanism, and would soon become a center of postwar culture industries of cinema, household design, and tourism, the causes of class struggle and Arab unity seemed less tangible as goals for painting and ideas about its agency. He had to learn Italian, sit for entry exams, and search for inexpensive accommodations. He was also not alone in making a sojourn to the study the art and artifacts of Italy. In making the journey across the sea, he joined legions of other newly mobile, middle-class students of art on a postwar version of the Grand Tour that had them enrolling in the art schools and academies of depressed European capitals and absorbing bohemian life. In Rome, the art cafés were also frequented by former G.I.s from the United States, foreign fellows at the city’s international academies, sons and daughters of society families, and other travelers with funding

²⁷⁰ For the purposes of this dissertation, I have opted to leave the academy name in the Italian rather than translating to Fine Arts Academy of Rome so as to help distinguish it from the other academies I discuss.

²⁷¹ Mamdouh Kashlan, interview by author, Damascus, February 25, 2010. Kashlan suggested that Ismail had been selected because he “knew someone.” The actual competition for places was held only later, at which time Kashlan and Mahmoud Hammad won spots. The bilateral agreement detailing the Syrian fellowships is outlined in Direzione Generale per gli Affari Politici e di Sicurezza, “Appunto,” 3 Sept. 1951, Buste 1092 (Medio Oriente), Affari Politico 1950-1957, Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome (hereafter MAE-Rome).

to see Italian cultural treasures for themselves, including American painters Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg.²⁷²

Over the course of the 1950s, the Italian government would seek to take advantage of its symbolic capital as a historic cultural center to enhance its standing as a European power of vitality and consequence, and created dedicated programs meant to attract scholars from the Middle East, including young painters and sculptors from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, to its academies as an endorsement of its centrality. As invited guests of the Italian government, these Arab students drew a small stipend (with their home countries as guarantor) and received a grant for art supplies and subsidized time with a live drawing model, complete with a heater for winter-time sessions.²⁷³ They could also availed themselves of facilities that had been expressly dedicated to Arab students, including a Center for Italian-Arab Relations, which housed a club and library and organized outings and exhibition opportunities.²⁷⁴ By 1953, three other Syrian art students, Ismail Husni (1920-1980), Mahmoud Hammad, and Mamdouh Kashlan, had arrived in Rome and enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti.²⁷⁵ In 1954, when an Exhibition of Young Arab Artists was installed in the Palazzato Borghese, a total of twenty-three students from Egypt, Iraq, and Syria were featured.²⁷⁶ Such new settings of identity display worked to produce Ismail

²⁷² Twombly traveled to Rome in 1952 on a grant from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and brought Rauschenberg along as a companion.

²⁷³ Unsigned, "al-Akādīmīya al-°Ulīyā li-l-Funūn al-Jamīla bi-Rūmā," *Levante* 2, no. 3 (July-Sept 1954): 47-8.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.* The Center was inaugurated on April 3, 1952 under the auspices of the Istituto per l'Oriente, and was intended as a point of coordination for the state, institutional, academic, and personal relationships that were expected to stem from the resumption and intensification of trade.

²⁷⁵ Their cohort also included a music student, Husni al-Hariri, who attended the Italian conservatory. An additional Syrian art student, Fathi Muhammad, had already traveled to Rome on a fellowship from the city of Aleppo (rather than the Italian government) and enrolled at the academy in 1949.

²⁷⁶ Abdel Kader Rizk, "Namuww al-°Alāqāt al-Fanniyya bayn Misr wa-Italiya," *al-Sawt al-°Arabi* (Rome, July 1955). This rare publication, which was published 1953-1959 to accompany the Arabic-language *Voce Araba* programming produced by Italy's Office of Foreign Broadcasts, may be found in the Florence Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale. The Italian title of the publication is *La Voce Araba di Radio Roma*.

and his Arab colleagues as mobile subjects through whom the universality of technique and method might be tested, and onto whom visible differences of type could be projected.

The pattern of government-sponsored international exchange that brought these Syrian students to Rome comprises a key component of an increasingly global postwar art world entailing the exchange of people and things. Making sense of the stakes of foreign travel as a component of artistic practice, however, is not a straightforward task. This chapter is devoted to tracing the cross-cultural dimensions of the internationalism that took shape in Rome in the 1950s, with particular attention paid to the construction of foreignness as a component of the contemporary art world taking form after the Second World War. To do so, I look at the peculiar significance that politicians and critics accorded to the foreign students who had been recruited from the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean to serve as witnesses to the resuscitation of both city and nation after a devastating war. Several crucial vectors of international relations intertwined in Rome, and there they were activated by a city that claimed a long history as a pivot point between multiple continents. A study of Syrian artists in Rome helps to illuminate other parts of the new interrelations between actors and institutions that were then emerging. I argue that these intersections of policy and aspiration not only articulated a certain significance for the non-Western artist as a mobile, post-political figure, but also gave rise to new articulations of cultural difference, which eventually disrupted the universalist claims of both the academy and prewar modernisms and opened the way to conceptions of a contemporary art world of global scope and ever greater differentiation of experience.

Initially, in the early 1950s, the Italian bureaucrats who organized cultural events looked to Arab politicians and artists as guests who would bestow an international cachet on proceedings, with their mere presence in a location comprising a display of the diplomatic

bonhomie thought to be characteristic of the Italian capital (independently of the art they might have made). For example, when the artists' association in Rome's bohemian artist quarter of Via Margutta threw a party in 1953 to celebrate its successful campaign to protect the area from redevelopment, its president Vittore Querèl made sure to include a pack of "Arab diplomats" among the crowd of resident artists, society ladies, and fashion models that he assembled for the occasion (Fig. 3.1).²⁷⁷ Similarly, those who commented on the art produced by their Arab guests tended to derive pride from the salutary effects they saw Rome exerting on resident visitors, as followed the norm of openness and accommodation set by the prewar School of Paris.²⁷⁸ The journalists affiliated with Italy's vast cultural diplomacy who took stock of Arab student artists' work, for example, focused on the trope of adoption, highlighting how artists worked in nameable styles thought not to be their own as a point of entry into contemporaneity. The review of the 1954 Exhibition of Young Arab Artists that the English-language bulletin of the Italian Institute of Africa and the Orient published, for example, emphasizes the novelty of the show's subject – Arab artists in Rome – then reports with satisfaction that every new style in Italy had also reacted upon the "traditionally contemplative mentality of the Euro-Asians," thereby producing tremendous vitality in the offerings.²⁷⁹

As I will investigate here, this particular idea of activating consciousness would find enthusiastic implementation in Italian cultural initiatives devoted to neo-Mediterraneanism,

²⁷⁷ *A Difesa di Via Margutta* (La Settimana Incom, 20 November 1953), 1 min., 8 sec. in the online collection of Archivio Cinecittà Luce, <http://www.archivioluce.com/archivio/>. The voiceover identifies the group as "un gruppo di diplomatici arabi." Further details on the gathering may be found in "Cronache di Via Margutta," *Margutta* 1.1 (1953), 22, which reports that Iraqi Ambassador Malek Khedderi and officials of the Embassies of Egypt, Syria, and Pakistan attended.

²⁷⁸ Immediately following the fall of the Fascist regime, young Italian artists looked to Paris as the authority and tried to break their intellectual isolation by traveling there to access new trends at their source. Marcia E. Vetrocq, "National Style and the Agenda for Abstract Painting in Post-war Italy," *Art History* 12.4 (Dec. 1989): 448-471; Piero Dorazio, "Recent Italian Painting and its Environment" (1957), in *Roma-New York, 1948-1964: An Art Exploration*, eds. Germano Celant and Anna Costantini (Milan: Charta, 1993), 144. The impulse was shared across the political spectrum; the Communist Party even sponsored some Italian artists' trips to Paris.

²⁷⁹ "Italian News," *East and West* 5.2 (July 1954), 165.

which favored the metaphysical qualities of joy and spirit and which often assumed an academy format. Eventually, however, these discourses would be overtaken as Arab affairs grabbed headlines for reasons of North African liberation movements, oil speculation, and the nationalization of the Suez Canal. As the geopolitical terrain shifted, the longstanding Italian model of cultural dissemination, in which its masters and institutions conveyed inspiration to a consortium of visiting aspirants, was destabilized. When a follow-up exhibition of Arab artists was held in 1956, its organizers found that the Italian art critics no longer responded well to evidence of artistic assimilation and purely “internationalist” offerings, and instead sought evidence of atmospheric intonation and specificity.²⁸⁰ Journalists instead looked to Arab artists to deliver qualities that differentiated the work from local production: arid atmospheres, different spiritual frameworks, and alternative color schemes. In the art world of the postwar Mediterranean, existentialism became an ethic as well as an aesthetic, and the standing of individual artists would be increasingly circumscribed at the level of individualism.

In the historiography of a nationalist cultural movement, a four-year period of embedded training in the academic institutions of another country can make for an interpretive conundrum in an artistic career. This was acutely the case for a Syrian artist. Those students who traveled to Italy in the 1950s certainly carried the expectation that they would commune with the canonical artifacts of world they had studied at home, but also hoped to garner admiration from the taste-making, critical audience that covered gallery shows. What’s more, in the immediate Italian context of Marshall Plan funding and the commitment to free transnational exchange as a basic foreign policy, the two aspirations of the fellowship student often seemed to be mutually exclusive. Over the course of the decade, the Italian art scene moved from a politicized but non-

²⁸⁰ Vittore Querèl, “Ma‘raḍ al-Fannānīn al-‘Arab al-Muqīmīn fī Ṭaliya,” *Levante* 3, no. 2-3 (December 1956), 28-30, mentions a negative review by Bruno Morini in *Giornale d’Italia* and summarizes its critique.

hierarchical post-liberation climate toward a scene that was dominated by a single style – “aformal” abstract painting – as a sign of the resolutely individualistic character of avant-garde art in the nuclear age.²⁸¹ As has been extensively documented, artists elsewhere in the West began to profess an interest in mining the depths of subjective experience as a generative basis for creation, rather than outlining collective programs or stylistic schools.²⁸² Academic training therefore offered relatively little value to an artist attuned to these imperatives, making the academy doubly vexed for the Arab students who came to Italy to obtain artistic expertise. As young artists with personal investments in decolonization struggles at home, their exposure to academic curricula could also be seen as corruption by an unreflective process of Westernization.²⁸³ Whereas the opportunity to become “like” the Italians by means of shared training could seem appealing as a charitable proposition, it also implied weakness and undermined the claim to national exceptionalism that had motivated the independence struggle. As guests of a system that claimed its authority from the processes of liberal exchange, Arab students found themselves negotiating the ethics of the self differently than their European and American colleagues.

The Eternal City

²⁸¹ Vetrocq, “National Style,” 449. Vetrocq uses the term “aformal” to capture the period’s capacious non-figurative trend, which could also be called *art informel*, gestural painting, lyrical abstraction, or *tachisme*. Nancy Jachec uses “gesture painting” in her book-length study of this tendency and the Venice Biennali of the 1950s. See *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale, 1948-1964*, especially 16 fn46.

²⁸² Dore Ashton, “Review of The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors, MoMA” (1955), in *Roma-New York, 1948-1964*, 105. Also see Dorazio, “Recent Italian Painting,” in the same volume, 141-147.

²⁸³ As observed by Italian art critic Martina Corgnati in *Italy: Arab Artists between Italy and the Mediterranean*, eds. Martina Corgnati with Saleh Barakat (Milan: Skira, 2008), 22. As Corgnati notes, the nationalist historiography came to see the Italian manner as an unwanted coping mechanism, a “Freudian father” that had to be gotten rid of in order to be oneself.

In 1951, before departing for Rome, Ismail had described his hopes for the journey to his friend Hammad. He presented the sojourn as a foundational reconnaissance mission, during which he would “ladle” knowledge directly from the source, thereby gleaning the necessary material to stay on pace with “contemporary civilization.”²⁸⁴ Once in Rome, Ismail entered the academy, studied with the aging fresco painter Ferruccio Ferrazzi (1891-1978), took night classes in medal engraving, completed a road trip to Spain and its Islamic heritage sites, exhibited in showcases of Arab student work, and met friends in historic plazas.²⁸⁵ He did not adopt a markedly different approach to his actual painting composition, however, and continued to trace form through sweeping lines, out of which he picked patterns of color, as in a 1955 study of sun and shade on a rolling Italian landscape that converts landscape into a decorative interlace, complete with points of “shining” red in the clouds (Fig. 3.2).²⁸⁶ Although his apparent resistance to the Italian academic influences flouted the expectations of the fellowship program, his brother Na‘im would in 1964 claim it as a strength, writing it into the Ba‘th national historiography as evidence of his careful cultivation of an autochthonous self, such that the Italian academy could only offer him embellishments, not principles.²⁸⁷ And, indeed, the Ba‘th Party organization had also continued to impact on his activities, most notably when, in 1953, the exiled party leadership of Aflaq, al-Bitar, and Akram al-Hawrani (who had joined his Arab Socialist Party with the Ba‘th in 1952 when his alignment with Shishakli dissolved) showed up in Rome.²⁸⁸ They stayed for six months, adopting the city’s famed rituals – frequenting the famous Cafe Doney (where they meet

²⁸⁴ Hammad, “Dhikrayātī ma‘ Adham Ismā‘īl,” 178.

²⁸⁵ Ibid; Salman Qataya, *Hayāt al-Fannān Faṭḥi Muḥammad* (Damascus: al-Fann al-Hadith al-‘Alami, 1962), 73.

²⁸⁶ I am primarily interpreting the commentary of his family and friends here. Very few details regarding his paintings from this period survive, and only in reproduction at that.

²⁸⁷ Naim Ismail, *Adham Ismā‘īl*, 35.

²⁸⁸ Akram al-Hawrani, *Mudhākkirāt Akram al-Ḥūrānī*, vol. 3 (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1999), 1458-9. They stayed in Rome for six months, until November 1953. Al-Hawrani conjures an Italy that was a haven of sorts for Middle Eastern rulers who had come down on the wrong side of trends in their country; he describes sightings of the Shah of Iran as well as King Farouk.

with Syrian students they knew from home) and visiting cultural sites – amid their attempt to organize a return to a Syria that had been freed from Shishakli’s autocratic rule. It was Ismail who guided al-Hawrani through Rome’s masterworks, and he also, tellingly, tried to arrange a trip to Andalusia for him to help calm his despair, explaining that his own pilgrimage to the Arab ruins had strengthened his hopes and “certainty in the Arab genius.”²⁸⁹ The tenure of the group in Italy even saw the Syrian ambassador Haydar Mardam Bey filing false charges against them with the Italian authorities for a plot to bomb the Embassy.²⁹⁰ These incidents spooked Ismail, who remained beholden to the same Embassy while on fellowship, and perhaps contributed to the solipsistic quality of his continued recourse to arabesque line and bright color.²⁹¹ When applied to a foreign landscape, these arabesques lost their radical interest in efficacy.

Because of Ismail’s pre-travel position in an opposition party, his experience in Rome did not fully conform to objectives of the Italian exchange program as billed in the 1950s, nor to the intentions he had presented to Hammad prior to his departure. Indeed, the subsequent treatment of his journey as an act of resistance rather than acquisition is an atypical treatment of the significance of the foreign studies in the training of national pioneers. Thus, before I examine the changing postwar valences of shareable feeling and alienating being, as can be tracked through the Arab artists’ invited presence in Italy, I need first to further unpack the terms of the program that brought them there. This section explores the aspects of artistic study in Rome that would have been seen as typical, and desirable, in a period when the academy no longer offered its students a point of entry into a stepped professional progression, but notions of Rome as an

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 1549.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 1550-3.

²⁹¹ Faiz Ismail, *Bidāyāt Hizb al-Ba‘th al-‘Arabī fī al-‘Iraq* (Damascus: F. Ismail, 1997), 106. A few of Sidqi Ismail’s letters to his brother also offer a hint of the tensions, as in Sidqi Ismail to Adham Ismail, Damascus, 11 Oct. 1954, in *Rasā’il lam Tunshar*.

“eternal city” of culture continued to hold sway. To do so, I have endeavored in spite of my limited language ability to make extensive use of archival documentation in the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as other Italian sources. This proved necessary because, whereas some of the details of the Italian sojourns of Arab artists have been published in passing, there has never been any specific study devoted to the material parameters of these trips. Moreover, there have been few investigations of any cross-cultural dimension to the art scene in Rome, a lacuna made all the more surprising in light of popular representations of the corps of international diplomats and journalists as having introduced wildly various and entertaining foreign customs to the café and discos.²⁹² The narrative of developments in Italy’s fine arts, by contrast, has typically focused on the country’s internal rehabilitation efforts after twenty years of Fascism and a devastating defeat. At the start of the 1950s, young Italian artists, not unlike the Syrians, looked to the Parisian avant-garde, seeking to acquire knowledge of all its developments (as had been missed or misrepresented in the preceding years). Their feeling of living and working in an “aftermath” would not pass until the prosperity of the 1960s, which, as a result, has obscured the parallel history of the self-conscious internationalism fostered within the Italian academy system.²⁹³ And yet, that the Italian state as well as the municipal government of Rome invested heavily in maintaining a quorum of non-Western artists in its cultural apparatus points to the other, equally crucial interrelations between actors and institutions that emerged in this decade.

²⁹² Following Mark Nicholls and Anthony White, “Cold War Cultures and Globalisation, Art and Film in Italy: 1946-1963,” *Third Text* 26, no. 2 (March 2012): 205-215. They assess the tendency to fixate on American and/or Soviet productions and pose Italy as a site point for studying transnational art networks during the Cold War. The international dimensions of the city were significant to Italian self-mythologizing, as in the 1953 film *Roman Holiday*, which was directed by William Wyler for distribution by Paramount but using the Italian government as a de facto co-producer, and in debauched form in the nightlife scenes of Federico Fellini’s 1960 *La Dolce Vita*.

²⁹³ On the “aftermath” feeling, see Marcia E. Vetrocq, “Painting and Beyond: Recovery and Regeneration, 1943-1952,” in *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 20-29; Vetrocq, “National Style,” 448-71. The full-blown “economic miracle” in Italy is usually only dated to 1957, with hints beforehand with the production of the Fiat 600 in 1953, or the introduction of continuously broadcast national television in 1954.

What we know is that, by 1949-1950, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had forged bilateral agreements with fourteen countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that included provisions for study fellowships, with a significant number reserved for artists.²⁹⁴ The program was propagandistic in flavor; the Ministry's records on the Near East fellowships describe them as a "first step toward strengthening our cultural diffusion in those countries."²⁹⁵ Indeed, from their establishment, the Middle East fellowship programs had even included the stipulation that fellows would record testimonials for Radio-Roma's *Voce Araba* program, which would broadcast their positive impressions of Italy into the Arab world.²⁹⁶ Their conversations with Haydar Mardam Bey in 1951 about dedicating four scholarships for Syrian students in music, painting, sculpture, and engineering had also covered the radio initiative, with parties agreeing on its utility for correcting any "misunderstandings" about Italy and its friendly relations with the Arab world.²⁹⁷ The fellowship program would remain very closely keyed to the fine arts, and not only because artists would offer more colorful testimony about Italian sights. In fact, the fellowships that were dedicated to the Arab countries had initially also stressed training opportunities in technical fields such as industrial sciences and engineering, but the Arab governments were most interested in opportunities at the Accademia di Belle Arti, for, as the

²⁹⁴ Unesco, *Study Abroad International Handbook: Fellowships, Scholarships, Educational Exchange*, vol. III (1950), 91. It indicates that in that the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had made advanced study fellowships for either "persons holding a doctorate" or "sculptors, painters and musicians" to the following new countries in Latin America and the Near and Middle East: Argentina (3), Brazil (3), Chile (1), Egypt (1), Guatemala (1), India (3), Iraq (1), Jordan (1), Lebanon (6), Pakistan (3), Peru (1), Saudi Arabia (1), Syria (1), and Uruguay (1).

²⁹⁵ Direzione Generale delle Relazioni Culturali con l'Estero, "Iniziativa Culturali del Medio Oriente," 20 June 1949, filed in "1949 Politica Italiana in Medio Oriente" folder, Buste 1092 (Medio Oriente), Affari Politico 1950-1957, MAE-Rome.

²⁹⁶ Direzione Generale per gli Affari Politici, "Appunto," 3 Sept. 1951, MAE-Rome. About the program see "al-Şawt al-ʿArabi," *Levante* 2.3 (July/Sept 1954): 83-86; C.f. note 276.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.* The idea was not a novel one to either party. Syrian students in Rome had already recorded their impressions for broadcast. For example, internal Italian documents approvingly describe medical student Mohamed Saccal's radio testimony, which highlighted what "Italy has done in favor of Muslim peoples, and how it is the most suitable nation to guide spiritually the elevation of the Arab peoples toward a comprehensive evolution." Mardam Bey had already recorded an Arabic radio message on the importance of the historical ties between Italy and the Near East as well. See Secretary Generale Ministero degli Affari Esteri, "Appunto per la Dir. Gen. Affari Politici," 19 April 1949, Buste 1092 (Medio Oriente), Affari Politico 1950-1957, MAE-Rome.

Egyptian Embassy delegates had candidly confessed in 1953, the arts were the one area in which Italy still enjoyed an unrivalled reputation as a center of expertise.²⁹⁸

Even before the war, Italy had encouraged aspiring Arab artists to enroll in its art academies, including offering occasional fellowships. It had even granted Egypt land to establish its own Royal Art Academy in Rome in 1929, which Egypt maintained alongside the other foreign art academies in the Italian capital. In the later 1930s, a few Syrian artists – Wahbi al-Hariri from Aleppo, and Mahmoud Jalal and Rashad Qusaibati from Damascus – had also travelled to Italy to study, as had Iraqi artists Jawad Salim and Atta Sabri.²⁹⁹ But it was only after the war, as the Arab bloc was emerging under the leadership of Egypt (the home of the Arab League, established in 1945), that the geopolitical region of the “Middle East” accrued strategic importance as a Cold War battleground. At that time, Italy made a tactical decision to turn to the Middle East and to shore up its image there as an influential advocate. Although Italy was an original signatory to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949, it would not manage to gain admission to the United Nations until 1954, making for a deficit of prestigious representation that it sought to fill by other means. As a bargaining chip within NATO in particular, Italy began to tout its so-called “vocation” for dealing in Mediterranean affairs, as, they asserted, had been cultivated over centuries of experience bridging between East and West, and Muslim and Christian parties.³⁰⁰ This tactic for strengthening Atlantic alliances by means of leveraging its geographic and historical proximity to the Oriental Mediterranean would

²⁹⁸ Foreign Ministry to Italian Ambassador Jannelli in Cairo, 8 Sept. 1953, in Buste 873 (Egypt 1953), Affari Politico 1950-1957, MAE-Rome. The letter is alerting the ambassador to the public relations problem the Italian sciences were suffering in Egypt.

²⁹⁹ Qusaibati studied in Florence. Both he and Jalal were tracked by the French Mandate authorities during their studies in “enemy” territory. Fathi Muhammad had also won fellowship from the Italian government in 1938, but French authorities denied his visa and he was unable to go. Qataya, *Ḥayāt al-Fannān Faṭḥi Muḥammad*, 23-24.

³⁰⁰ Alessandro Brogi, *A Question of Self-Esteem: The United States & The Cold War Choices in France and Italy, 1944-1958* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 194. My account of tactical policies in this section draws heavily from this book.

later be dubbed “Neo-Atlanticism.”³⁰¹ In its earliest postwar iterations, however, the idea of a mutually beneficial détente between continents had more to do with the notion of a strategic Eurafrica project that had been revived with the 1949 formation of the Council of Europe, and which entailed not only pooling internal energy resources (as the “inner six” European countries agreed to do in 1951) but also cooperating to exploit the resources of the African continent.³⁰² To bolster its claim to the naturalness of these unities, Italy proposed to leverage its artistic prestige as both means and symbol of a common, Mediterranean heritage. After the Second World War and its redistribution of world power dynamics, in other words, Italy’s inspirational resources – ancient monuments, great churches, Renaissance frescoes, and academy studios – provided it with a renewable basis for asserting its regional leadership, and making the claim stick in spite of continued economic depression and ruin.³⁰³ Thus, and importantly for my argument, even as Italian artists turned to anti-academic models such as the prewar “School of Paris” as guides for their paths forward, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs looked to its art academies as a site for its equally forward-looking task of forging a Neo-Atlantic internationalism.

The Italian initiatives to revive the art academy format also aligned with the conceptual framework for intellectual exchange that Unesco was promoting as a foundation for a peaceful and prosperous world order. The Unesco directorship had assumed the task of converting the spirit of mutual beneficence that heads of state had professed to desire after the war into policies and norms, and in 1948 began to seek to facilitate “exchange of persons programs” as a tool to

³⁰¹ Brogi identifies the lifespan of Italy’s Neo-Atlanticist foreign policy to be 1951-1959. It was Italian Foreign Minister Giuseppe Pella who coined the actual term “Neo-Atlanticism” in 1957.

³⁰² Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, “A Statue to Nasser? Eurafrica, the Colonial Roots of European Integration, and the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 24.4 (2013): 5-18.

³⁰³ The devastation was extensive, particularly in the South. A letter from Cy Twombly to Leslie Cheek (director of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts), dated Sept. 6, 1952, describes docking in Palermo only to leave three days later because he was “unable to cope with a city of 300,000 in dire poverty.” Quoted in Nicholas Cullinan, “Double exposure: Robert Rauschenberg’s and Cy Twombly’s Roman holiday,” *The Burlington Magazine* 1264 (July 2008), 463.

engender more genuine international understanding and a sense of shared purpose.³⁰⁴ As it reported in a 1949 survey of world opportunities in this vein, the slate of study abroad programs tended to operate from two, paired convictions: knowledge is a “universal possession” and must therefore be shared and diffused, and the “most effective way to diffuse knowledge is to wrap it up in a person.”³⁰⁵ This framework for international exchange, in other words, made expertise a disembodied and transferrable quantity, with its ideal student-subjects maintaining a technocratic outlook on their subjects.³⁰⁶ For those Near and Middle Eastern countries pursuing what Unesco recognized as nation-building programs, this model proved highly attractive.³⁰⁷ Syria adopted its terms for participation in 1952 and these followed the Unesco terms, including placing limits on students’ mobility from one course of study to another (they required permission to switch degree programs), specifying future obligations to the Syrian state (returning fellows would be appointed to government posts for a period equal to the length of their fellowships), and seeking to ensure political neutrality (students were forbidden to join political parties abroad or otherwise enter the affairs of the host country).³⁰⁸ Once the Syrian art students began to return home with certifications in hand, they were duly assigned to work as art teachers in rural preparatory

³⁰⁴ Unesco, *Study Abroad: International Handbook, Fellowships, Scholarships, Educational Exchange*, vol. II (1949). The exchange of young people for educational purposes had captured interest at the 1948 General Conference held in Beirut, where it was recommended that Unesco inquire into supporting and coordinating these initiatives. That resolution was amplifying commitments made the previous year at the Mexico City Conference.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.* As the catalog states, funders for these fellowships hoped to make a good investment, so that candidates in the arts were expected to “possess specific gifts” in their field of expression.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-8 and 14. Countries from these region claimed a relatively high percentage of the total fellowship opportunities available.

³⁰⁸ Al-Marsūm al-Tishrīʿī 231, “Nizām al-Baʿthāt al-ʿIlmiyya,” 15 May 1952, Doc. 15/n/m, “Wizārat al-Maʿārif” files, Wathāʾiq al-Dawla, Markaz al-Wathāʾiq al-Tarīkhiyya, Damascus. Also see attached supplements, particularly al-Marsūm al-Tishrīʿī 236, 20 May 1952.

schools. In 1956, Ismail received a post in Daraa, an agricultural region to the south of Damascus, and Kashlan and Hammad joined him the following year.³⁰⁹

The art academy format would remain crucial to this institutionalized internationalism and its national implications, for it represented a sufficiently credentialed and technical body to verify the knowledge being diffused. Its continued significance requires us to pay closer attention to the status of the Accademia di Belle Arti in the art world of the 1950s. On the one hand, it was a discredited institution that Italian artists and critics associated with the preceding Fascist regime, and with undesirable state monopolies on artistic production.³¹⁰ On the other, it offered a foundation stone in an institutional apparatus that had not only survived but in fact continued to function robustly. Internal Italian promotions took the latter view, as in *La Scuola dei Pittori* (*The School of Painters*), a short documentary film that the Italian company Opus Films produced in 1954.³¹¹ Directed by Romolo Marcellini, who had recently produced several films extolling Marshall Plan programs for the Economic Cooperation Association Film Unit, it details the strict generational structure of Rome's art scene, only to present those hierarchies as a source of perpetual vitality. Its montage begins with shots from the Accademia di Belle Arti and its large figure drawing classes (Fig. 3.3), then moves outward to the French, American, English, and Spanish art academies, to emerging Italian artists who meet together in discussion groups, and on to new galleries like L'Obelisco, concluding in the shops that remain loyal to the members of the School of Rome (a prewar movement emphasizing simple figuration and local

³⁰⁹ They also, in the same period, had work in Damascus teaching art at the Dar al-Mu'allimin (the teachers' training college), which allowed them to travel into the city frequently. See Kashlan, *Nisf Qarn*, 72-3, for a discussion of their experience.

³¹⁰ For example, critic Lionello Venturi in 1957 described the academy as a retrograde institution functioning only to protect "property and monopolies" and proposed that adventurous private collectors and museum curators should instead assume the mantle of encouraging innovation. Venturi, "I romani comprano I mastri del Duemila," *L'Espresso*, May 5, 1957, translated and reprinted in *Roma-New York, 1948-1964*, 128.

³¹¹ *La Scuola dei Pittori*, dir. Romolo Marcellini, 1954, 10 min., 6 sec, in the online collection of Archivio Cinecittà Luce, <http://www.archivioluce.com/archivio/>.

themes). The resulting portrait is of a “school of painters” that extends well beyond the confines of the academy, with each progressive sphere of schooling set in a dedicated space: young Italians enter the academy; visiting fellowship students sit outside the façades of centuries-old buildings; young abstractionists gather on a picturesque rooftop on Via Margutta; members of the older figurative generation pass time together inside a shop on Via del Babuino; and so on.³¹² The guiding proposition is that the city itself played the role of incubator, giving space and inspiration to each type and station.

The actual Accademia di Belle Arti experience fell short of the ideal presented in *School of Painters*, with its earnest aspirants and venerable masters. Muhanna Durra (1938—), a Jordanian student-artist who studied in Ferrazzi’s atelier, 1952-1956, recalls that absenteeism among professors at the school was chronic and the academy was wracked by strikes.³¹³ If Syrian student-artist Kashlan’s diary entries from 1954 can be taken as representative, then the students spent little time at the drawing classes in the cavernous halls of the academy itself. Kashlan made weekly trips to the cinema and excursions with female friends, including travel around Europe to visit museums, but mentions his Accademia courses only a handful of times.³¹⁴ The influx of foreign students at the school likely drew down energy even further, for their fellowship obligations made the prospect of a professional career in Italy entirely remote. By 1957, it seemed that the places formerly filled with Italian students had become occupied by foreign bodies; it seemed to one Moroccan student that a full 60% of the students at the Accademia di Belle Arti hailed from the Middle East or Iran, all come to learn the laws of the “already dying

³¹² Among the group of abstractionists, Carla Accardi can be recognized though she is not named in the voiceover. There are also Concatto Maugeri and Giulio Turcato (both of whom are named). The group would seem to be some subset of the members of Forma 1, which was founded in the Via Margutta neighborhood in 1947.

³¹³ Muhanna Durra, interview by author, Amman, February 27, 2011.

³¹⁴ Kashlan permitted me to consult his entries in his 1956 calendar and part of 1954.

European academy.”³¹⁵ These students pursued multiple and not entirely defined ends, making sure to acquire as many technical credentials as possible, even pursuing certificates in medals and poster design at night, but also immersing themselves in the entertainments of Roman urbanity. Even the propagandistic copy that Italy produced for broadcast to the Arab populace often had a schizophrenic quality. For example, the Arabic-language magazine titled *al-Sawt al-‘Arabi*, which the Office of Foreign Broadcasts produced between the years 1953 and 1959 to accompany its Arabic programming, featured profiles on Arab student-artists but also circulated gossipy articles that matched reports of art exhibitions to an idea of modern social transgression. One such feature, “Revolution in the Art Street of Rome,” hyperbolically announces an inversion of gender roles on Via Margutta, describing how women (who had once been looked upon as models) had come to instead dominate the men.³¹⁶ Its account centers around the macho performance of artist and paparazzi darling Novella Parigini at a recent street festival, where she – although weighing “no more than thirty kilograms of skin and bones” – had managed to hold Mayor Salvatore Rebecchini captive on a chair and capture his likeness in only a few swipes of the brush (Fig. 3.4).³¹⁷

Fellowship studies at the Accademia di Belle Arti offered, in other words, both a promise of an inheritance of Renaissance perfection and an entry into carefree liberation, without forcing its fellows to decide between them. The *laissez faire* quality of the instruction at the Accademia

³¹⁵ Zakya Daoud, “Interview: Melehi, ‘nous sommes un peuple de silence,’” *Lamalif* 88 (May 1977), 50-55.

I have not been successful in my attempt to locate enrollment figures for the academy to confirm the percentage of Middle Eastern degree students. They were undoubtedly numerous, if not likely to comprise the majority. It should be noted that when artist Mohammed Melehi provided this estimate in 1977, he was deeply engaged in the intellectual-cultural project of decolonizing Moroccan art education and his testimony reflects a well-honed narrative in which his individual cultural dispossession preceded an attempt to achieve collective restitution.

³¹⁶ “Mahrajān al-Fann: Thawra fī Shāri‘ al-Fann bi-Rūmā: ‘Fiyā Mārjūttā,” *al-Sawt al-‘Arabi* (November 1955): 7.

³¹⁷ The article, which is signed only “Him (*huwa*),” is written from the perspective of a spurned man, referencing the monopoly “we” once held over the art world. Parigini had become a fixture in the press, known for her cropped hair, masculine way of dressing, beautiful pin-up body, and preference for painting in the nude. She had even been (spuriously) linked to the Aga Khan, Marlon Brando, and Gregory Peck. See “Che Fanno I Marguttiani?” *Margutta* 3.1 (May 1955): 16.

di Belle Arti reflects the protean quality of the moment, one without institutional consensus on the characteristics of international modern art, as well. Once students placed into a painting atelier, the expectation was increasingly that they would observe no preset stylistic dictates and would instead use the studio as a proving ground to develop a unique style as a consummation of the self.³¹⁸ For the Syrian artists who began their studies in the later 1950s, the atelier of Franco Gentilini (1909-1981), who had been recruited to the school in 1955, exemplified this ethos.³¹⁹ In the case of Fateh al-Moudarres, who arrived in 1956 and managed to gain entry to Gentilini's orbit, his first impulse in the studio was to work with his paints in a manic, unfocused manner, which garnered him nicknames like "painting mill," and an artist who "married paint."³²⁰ Only once he learned how to present his outpourings in an Eastern guise did he elicit grudging approval from Gentilini. The Italian teacher sanctioned his Syrian student's approach only after hearing al-Moudarres explain that he in fact drew very little influence from contemporary Italian art because his mind was "full with Eastern forms and judgments." Responding with a tenderness that came across as both distancing and supportive, Gentilini put a hand on his student's shoulder and addressed him by an incorrect name, averring, "Moondarres, you are on the right, tough path."³²¹

The Arab countries undertaking the nation-building process at home while sending artists abroad for training did not have their own academies in Rome (with the notable exception of

³¹⁸ Mamdouh Kashlan, interview by author, Damascus, Feb 25, 2010; Mamdouh Kashlan, *Risāla Lawniyya: Min al-Sharq ilā al-Gharb* (Damascus: Ebla, 2008), 65. Kashlan's experience may be typical for those who graduated in 1957. He had taken recourse in one of the several tendencies of the prewar avant-gardes to search for a contemporary spin, ultimately working out a neo-Cubist method, which garnered him parting praise from the school's director (identified as Mario Rivosecchi) for succeeding in achieving a contemporary analysis of space.

³¹⁹ Ibid. Gentilini was considered to be more modern than the other painting faculty. Kashlan in fact requested and received a switch from Melli to Gentilini for his final year at the school.

³²⁰ "Painting mill" mentioned in Hussein bin Hamza, "Laḥẓat Lawn 'alā Qumāsh al-'Alam" in *Simfūniyyat al-Lawn* ed. Ali al-Qayyem (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1999), 197. For the nickname "the artist who married color," see Elias Awad, "al-Ṣudfa Laysat Fann: Lawḥat Fātiḥ al-Mudarris," *Adab* 2 no. 3 (Summer 1963), 48.

³²¹ Samar Hamarneh, *Kayf Yarā Fātiḥ al-Mudarris* (Damascus: Tiba li-l-Tiba' a wa-l-Taghlif, 1999), 11.

Egypt, which had maintained its Egyptian Academy in Rome from 1929). To fill the gaps in amenities that might otherwise be met by national academies, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had established the Center for Italian-Arab Relations in 1952. In addition to its facilities for media and exhibitions, the Center received dignitaries from the Arab world when they visited Italy.³²² It created subsidiary organizations as well, including a School and Culture Mission, which was supposed to offer assistance to Arab students in Italy, and an Arab Students Circle, which served as an additional center for socializing.³²³ As Syrian artists gathered at these venues, they too became leverageable material for Italy's use in presenting itself as a strategic partner. The Center's special events served to convert a disparate group of Arabic-speaking students into a photo-ready unit of Arab subjects, which not only provided a backdrop during diplomatic visits but could also be circulated to Arab audiences via its bilingual journal *Levante*, or, *al-Mashriq*. The Center even, in 1954, worked with Radio-Roma to create the program *The Voice of Arab Youth in Rome* as a "direct connection" between the Arab students who had been selected, as it put it, to "drink from the fertile fountains of learning" of Italy's universities and academies, and their Italian brothers.³²⁴ When it was launched, Syrian painter Ismail Husni was among the first group to read cordial messages of friendship.³²⁵ As the Center itself explained in its *Levante* magazine, the decision to broadcast the testimony of students in their own local dialects was expected to make for a more effective message to Arab listeners.³²⁶ As these institutions had

³²² Antonio Roccabella, "Opera e Compiti del Centro per la Relazioni Italo-Arabe," *Levante* 1, no. 1 (July-Sept. 1953), 61-64. It describes a "house of culture and brotherhood" that welcomed not only students but also representatives of all Arab nations as well as members of the Arab League and visiting Somali dignitaries.

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ This is the promotional copy printed in "Şawt al-Shabāb," *al-Sawt al-ʿArabi* 3 (May 1954), 22.

³²⁵ *Levante* 2, no. 3 (July-Sept 1954), 39. He was joined by an Hon. Insabato for the Center for Italian-Arab Relations, and Jordanian student Sulayman Dajani from the University of Florence. The other Syrian students seem to have participated as well, although I have been unable to determine just how frequently. Kashlan's diary does mention recording a broadcast for the Arab section of Radio Roma on April 9, 1954, which he notes is intended for *Anā Sūriyā* (the Syrian national radio station).

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

ensured, the purportedly eternal and humanistic realm of fine art was also a display of strength, and located just beside the competitive arena of fairs and shows. The 1954 overview of the Italian institutions working in the service of mutually beneficial exchange, published in *Levante*, details “economic entities” such as the Levante Fair in Bari, the Milan International Fair, an exhibition of the Mediterranean Basin, a Tourism Fair, and even the Bank of Rome, beside “cultural entities” such as the literature program at the University of Milan, the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, and the Venice Biennale.³²⁷

The conceptual overlapping of commerce, art, and policy objectives was reflected administratively as well, sometimes even in the form of shared personnel. For example, the same man who was president of the Accademia from 1949-1964 – Stanislao Ceschi, a Christian Democrat – also held an elected seat in the Italian Senate, served on its Foreign Affairs committee from 1953-1958, and sat on the board of the Venice Biennale for even longer.³²⁸ In the case of the art academy fellowships, the interface between the Foreign Ministry and local art institutions only intensified as more students appeared, which generated further promotional initiatives at the interface of edification and entertainment, with a particular focus on outreach to the diplomatic sector in Rome and the Vatican. The key functionary at that juncture was Vittore Querèl, a journalist and former Fascist “moderate” who had in the 1930s reported on developments in Palestine, and in the postwar period converted himself into an editor, gallerist, and publicist.³²⁹ His portfolio directly influenced the careers of the resident Arab artists. Querèl first became involved in a variety of initiatives intended to reinvigorate the Mediterranean basin

³²⁷ Ibid., 45-88.

³²⁸ Ceschi was elected to the Senate in the June 1953 election. He was named to the board of the Venice Biennale in 1952 and served into the 1960s.

³²⁹ Several of these articles were collected in *Palestina e Sionismo* (Milano: Fratelli Bocca, 1939), which I have not procured. For content, I rely on a review by Virginia Vacca printed in *Oriente Moderno* (August 1939), 488. Vacca panned the book for its inaccuracies and poor editing.

as a unity strategy, a concept with fresh application for the new Arab states in post-independence conditions. This included an appointment to the Accademia del Mediterraneo, a think tank of intellectual, political, and economic elites who were invested in making Eurafrica a policy objective.³³⁰ Not long after, he began organizing promotions of the painterly and sculpture arts, including making direct appeals to the large diplomatic corps of educated foreigners who, during their tenure in Rome, sought exposure to Italian cultural experiences. He assumed leadership of the Via Margutta artists' association in 1953 and headed its international campaign to preserve the quarter as a historic district, even launching a small promotional magazine *Margutta* devoted to the group.³³¹ Then, in 1954, Querèl and his wife Derna established a gallery in the artists' district they had helped to create and dedicated it to the city's diplomatic community, i.e. the embassies, foreign academies, and collective organizations that comprised what they called the "foreign ambience of Rome."³³²

³³⁰ Gianfranco Alliata, *L'unità mediterranea: Atti del Primo Convegno Internazionale di Studi Mediterranei (Palermo – Villa Igea 11-13 Giugno 1951)* (Palermo: Accademia del Mediterraneo, 1953); Stéphane Mourlane, "La Méditerranée des élites italiennes aux lendemains de la Seconde Guerre mondiale: autour de l'Accademia del Mediterraneo," *Rives méditerranéennes* 32-33 (2009): 2-10. Querèl attended and presented at its very first congress in 1951 and a 1955 press release refers to him as an Academician. He also performed editorial duties; the Palermo Accademia Mediterraneo issued two different publications, *Rassegna Mediterranea* and *Bulletin Mondo Arabo*, with Querèl working on the former. When *Collaboration Mediterraneo* began publishing in 1956, he appeared on its masthead as well. An idea of a unified Mediterranean basin had been promoted in the 1920s and 1930s, but its mobilization after the war took a distinctly anti-isolationist cast such that a notion of natural unity was retained, but the stress was placed on cooperative negotiation. As Brogi puts it, Italy's "self-assigned mission was that of mediating conflicts in the area, becoming the ideal diplomatic bridge between the Arabs and the West." *A Question of Self-Esteem*, 192.

³³¹ The magazine's first issue appeared in December 1953. Its opening editorial introduced the Marguttiana as a group, calling them "the last representatives of a world of letters and arts, which for four centuries, has had its center in Rome's Margutta." I was able to access the magazine at the Library of the University of Rome-La Sapienza.

³³² Derna Muratori, "Gallerie Romane," *Margutta: Rivista Mensile Dei Marguttiani* 3, no. 1 (May 1955), 5. To try to understand the nature of the gallery, I also made use of the digital archives of the Madrid newspaper *ABC*, which seems to have been a press contact for Querèl. See for example "Actividades Españolas en la Capital de Italia," *ABC*, 22 Feb 1955. These articles emphasize that the gallery provided a service to the Vatican diplomatic corps and not just those at the Quirinale. Although I have been unable to corroborate the details, I believe Querèl held an appointment of some kind in the foreign ministry. The 1954 notice in *East and West* referred to him as "our colleague," and his cultural reports regularly appeared in the Center for Italian-Arab Relations' journal, *Levante*, including in its very first issue in July 1953.

The Querèls named the gallery La Feluca, after the Italian term for the bicorne hat that European diplomats wore as part of their formal dress, and which had become a slang term among Italian journalists to refer to the diplomatic beat.³³³ Its letterhead and advertising bore a small drawing of the feluca hat, where it affirmed the gallery's support for state-sponsored international exchange. Napoleon had worn a feluca, as France's academicians would also do once Napoleon reorganized L'Académie française in 1803. When Mussolini established the Royal Academy of Italy, 1926-1943, its academicians also donned the feluca. In the postwar period, the hat remained in use in the diplomatic sector at its formal functions.³³⁴ As an emblem, the feluca hat invoked Rome's importance as a political capital while also suggesting that the city managed to awaken the artistic spirit in its guests of every stripe and spirit. The gallery in practice offered a central venue for embassy-initiated exhibitions whilst also offering the neighborhood's Italian artists a location from which to seek commissions for public art projects abroad. Its first year of exhibitions included a show of fifty portraits of the "ladies of the diplomatic corps" by Paul Ghiglia, a group exhibition of six Italian artists whom Querèl had recommended to complete sculptures for a new palace of arts in the Dominican Republic, and a solo show of paintings by Egyptian artist Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar.³³⁵

Another product of Querèl's networks was the mobilization of these several different constituencies together in special exhibition projects. As I noted at the start of this chapter, Querèl showcased Arab diplomats at his Margutta events. When he organized the 1954 Exhibition of Young Arab Artists for the Center for Italian-Arab Relations, he secured

³³³ The word feluca has a second meaning, which is held in common in Italian and Arabic. It is the name of a small two-mast sailboat that is common in the Mediterranean and on the Nile. In spite of his good relationships with the Egyptian embassy and the rest of the Arab diplomatic corps, Querèl does not seem to have placed particular emphasis on this double signification.

³³⁴ The feluca hat even appears in the opening scenes of *Roman Holiday* (1953), where it signifies the stuffiness of the protocols that a young European princess (played by Audrey Hepburn) must follow during her goodwill tour.

³³⁵ Muratori, "Gallerie Romane." The el-Gazzar exhibition was co-sponsored with the Center for Italian-Arab Relations.

endorsements for it from such diverse entities as the Marguttiani, the Mayor's office, and the Egyptian Art Academy.³³⁶ He would then organize similar exhibitions in 1956, 1957, and 1958, as well as a 1957 Mediterranean exhibition, and a 1959 exhibition of Arab artists for the Center for Mediterranean Cooperation (among others). And although he did not limit his efforts to the Middle Eastern region, he seems to have been particularly successful with that constituency; the Egyptian reports about these initiatives unfailingly describe him as a "friend of the Arab countries."³³⁷ The positive response of foreign diplomats to Rome's riches, as facilitated by Querèl, would also be conveyed to the Italian domestic audience, as in a 1955 newsreel dedicated to the city's "palette diplomats." It showed charming vignettes from the lives of diplomats from Panama, Spain, Jordan, and Pakistan who, in between more official duties, pursued the craft of oil painting. Composed as a series of juxtapositions between official obligation and personal inspiration, it showed the wife of the Spanish ambassador throwing open the windows of the official residence to turn to a landscape painting filled with sun and light; a young Pakistani artist arriving at the Embassy, where the Pakistani ambassador is escorting dignitaries while a model scoots in the back for a sitting; and so on.³³⁸ And at night, these figures are shown attending openings at La Feluca. As each opposing pairing of industrious service and cultural pleasure plays out in the newsreel, it makes the argument that Rome and only Rome

³³⁶ Rizk, "Namuww al-°Alāqāt al-Fanniyya," 10; "Italian News," *East and West*, 165.

³³⁷ Ibid. Rizk, who was the director of the Egyptian Art Academy in Rome, uses the same phrase in a letter he sent from Rome to the Egyptian director of study delegations (*ba'ṭhāt*) in Cairo, April 6, 1955, now in the *ba'ṭha* folder "°Abd al-Hadī al-Jazzār," Ministry of Public Instruction files, Dar al-Wathā'iq, Cairo. More recently, the biographical essay in *Melehi* (Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe, 1995), 56, also mentions Querèl by name, describing him as having been "interested in the Arab countries."

³³⁸ *Tavolozza dei diplomatici* (La Settimana Incom 01327, 24 November 1955), 1 min., 12 sec., in the online collection of Archivio Cinecittà Luce, <http://www.archivioluce.com/archivio/>. A similar idea about the secret lives of diplomats is expressed in an article Querèl sent to the Spanish press the same year, describing how the diplomats in Rome who suffer from the insincerity that regulates international relations often turn to brushes, pens and chisels in their leisure hours to honor the more sincere ideals of culture and beauty. See "Los Diplomáticos Artistas en el Escaparate," *ABC*, 16 March 1955, 5.

exerted such a transformative influence in both realms ever more forcefully. The montage even includes footage of a member of the Jordan legation, a Mr. Sa'eb Barakat, sketching the columns of the Forum (i.e. the center of democratic public life).

A New Republicanism?

Syria was not the primary focus of Querèl's work, although his press materials do give recurring mention to Syrian diplomats and student-artists. Rather, it is Egypt that appears as central to the initiatives to showcase Arab artists in Rome. When Querèl's promotions gave expression to the Italian vision of a mutually beneficial détente across the continental blocs of the Mediterranean basin, for example, they often highlighted Egypt as an emerging republican democracy, and thus a like-minded partner in a more prosperous modernity. The centrality of Egypt in the frame of Italian policy had to do with the leadership role it was playing in the Arab bloc, and, after 1955, its leadership in the Afro-Asian alliance known as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the anticolonialist platform from which countries in the Third World claimed the right to set their own foreign policy without coercion by American or Soviet dictates. The question of Egyptian leadership in the larger region, which had often served as a lightning rod in internal Syrian politics of the 1940s and 1950s, became more material to Syrian artists in Italy after 1956, after Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal Company (until then controlled by Britain and France), which precipitated a retributive attack by Britain and France and an Israeli invasion of the Sinai Peninsula. Once the United States forced a ceasefire, and British, French, and Israeli forces were repulsed from Egypt, this demonstration of Egyptian strength sparked a wave of pan-Arab enthusiasm (and, in continental Europe, more anxious

concern about the safety of their Eurasian interests).³³⁹ These events held a promise of a truly strong Arab alliance, a dream that in 1958 gave birth to the UAR, a presidential republic under Abdel Nasser. The first appearance of Syrian artists at the Venice Biennale would be in 1960, when Fateh al-Moudarres and Louay Kayyali (1934-1978), who were both enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti, showed their paintings under the banner of the UAR and by the arrangement of an Egyptian commissioner.

Uniquely among the Arab and African countries, Egypt had already implemented the known, essentially Eurocentric formula for enhancing its national fine arts patrimony via Rome, as had been developed in the seventeenth century and enshrined in Italy's modern bureaucratic practice.³⁴⁰ Egypt had, since 1908, boasted its own fine arts academy in Cairo, and since 1929 maintained an Egyptian Academy in Rome, which serviced promising young Egyptian artists so that they, too, would benefit from exposure to Italian masters and masterpieces to produce master works of their own.³⁴¹ After the war, various Italian initiatives to restart its artistic centrality sought to secure the presence of Egypt, an Arab-African country with a Mediterranean shore, among them. For example, when the Venice Biennale reopened in 1948, its administration specially invited Egypt to exhibit, and promoted its participation as a rekindling of those "traditional cultural ties between Egypt and Italy" that had been interrupted by a period of war.³⁴²

³³⁹ Hansen and Jonsson, "A Statue to Nasser?" 7-8.

³⁴⁰ Although beyond the scope of this chapter, which primarily focuses on the diplomatic initiatives of the 1950s, it must be said that Egypt-Italy relations have a dense modern history of economic, religious, and cultural ties. At the start of the Second World War, some 50,000-60,000 Italians were living in Egypt.

³⁴¹ Egyptian official documents from the 1930s describe the academy in Rome as "a governmental entity affiliated with the Royal Egyptian Ministry of Education, which creates opportunities — through competitions — for Egyptian students to communicate with students from different countries and to study the history of Rome and classical Italian art." See Nagwa al-Ashri, "Facelift for Rome Art Academy," *al-Ahram Weekly (English)*, 13 Nov 2012. According to Corgnati, *Italy: Arab Artists between Italy and the Mediterranean*, 23, there were thirty Egyptian artists present in Rome in 1938.

³⁴² Legazione d'Italia in Egitto to the Commissario Straordinario dell'ENTE Autonomo della Biennale, Telespresso 1361, "Partecipazione egiziana alla Biennale di Venezia," April 5, 1948, in the Egitto RAU 1948-1962 files, Padiglioni, atti 1938-1968, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, Venice (hereafter ASAC-Venice).

Egypt then procured its own permanent national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1952.³⁴³ And, because the Director of Egyptian Academy in Rome also held the post of cultural attaché at the Embassy, which oversaw Egypt's representation at the Biennale, the artists featured in the Egyptian pavilion tended to be those who were resident in Rome.

Egypt's status as a participant in this shared cultural enlightenment project, within which art always worked in support of more perfect civic order, received emphasis in the articles on Egyptian art and artists in Rome that issued from the cultural apparatus around the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For example, an admiring profile of Abdel Kader Rizk (1912-1978), the director of the Egyptian Art Academy in Rome, published in Querèl's *Margutta* magazine, describes how, after the 1952 Free Officers coup overturned the monarchy and brought Muhammad Naguib into the new presidency, the nameplate on the Egyptian academy building was changed from "Royal Egyptian Academy to "Egyptian Cultural Mission in Italy" and officials began to plan to move the facility to a new location and expanded building to better rise to their new tasks.³⁴⁴ That the Italians expected Egypt to expand and enliven its academy after it instituted a presidential Republic reflects how deeply ingrained the norm of "free" academic exchange was in its discourse of civilizational perfection, as does their expectation that the Egyptian government would desire to uphold it.³⁴⁵ The article further sets up its shared enlightenment parameters by detailing at length Rizk's passionate taste for art, introducing him as a fanatic admirer of Piero della Francesca and recounting how he had once become so excited after reading breaking news of the discovery of a fresco in Perugia that he jumped into his car

³⁴³ Egypt purchased a pavilion that had been Switzerland's. In doing so, it became the first African and also the first Arab country to oversee a permanent pavilion. See the same ASAC-Venice files. Interestingly, this actually happened prior to the July 1952 coup.

³⁴⁴ Cesare Cossa, "La Repubblica d'Egitto sta nascendo sulle rive del Tevere," *Margutta* 3, no. 1 (1955), 7-8. I have been unable to find any biographical information for this author. It is noteworthy that the article continues to refer to Naguib as if a sovereign president, for Gamal Abdel Nasser had already for all intents and purposes taken control of the state.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

and raced off to get a view.³⁴⁶ It also notes that he (a trained sculptor) had begun work on a new sculpture that would be installed at home in a Cairo square: an allegorical monument to the Republic of Egypt. In emphasizing Rome's proximity to both Renaissance painting and the classical canon, the profile makes known the incomparable opportunity to imbibe the very origins of democracy and beauty that it offered to visiting artists.

That year's exhibition of fellowship artist Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar (1925-1965) at the Querèls' gallery La Feluca had been coordinated by Rizk with the Center for Italian-Arab Relations, with the explicit objective of generating positive interest in the country and its modern cultural achievement (**Fig. 3.5**).³⁴⁷ As Rizk reported to the Office of Study Delegations in Cairo, a number of Arab diplomatic personnel graced the opening, including the Syrian ambassador, the Syrian representative to the Vatican, and employees from the other Near East offices. He also noted with pride that visitors to the exhibition praised the works – twenty-one paintings and thirteen drawings – for their “spirit of newness” and engagement with modern trends.³⁴⁸ El-Gazzar had been among the original members of a collective called the Contemporary Art Group, which had formed in Cairo in 1946 around a shared interest in the street life of the city's non-elite quarters, particularly as a source of surreal imagery, and the majority of the paintings he showed in Rome depicted popular religious practices in a folkloric idiom (**Fig. 3.6**). Nevertheless, because of the heterodox practices they depicted, which implicitly conveyed a certain secular iconoclasm, they too could be strategically interpreted as an expression of

³⁴⁶ The article reads like a film treatment. Rizk is described as a “dark, strong, square man” whose physique suggests a swimmer or champion boxer.

³⁴⁷ Rizk to Egyptian Director of Ba^ʿthāt, in the *ba^ʿtha* folder “Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar,” Ministry of Public Instruction files, Dar al-Wathā^ʿiq, Cairo.

³⁴⁸ Ibid. Interestingly, the exhibition was not actually entirely well received. Querel, Ma^ʿraḡ al-Fannānīn al-^ʿArab al-Muqīmīn fī Ṭaliya,” 28-30, mentions these critical comments in passing as part of his assessment of his 1956 exhibition of Arab painters and questions about native style raised there. Some viewers had felt that the “folk quality” of el-Gazzar's paintings and their formulaic aspects detracted from their art.

Republicanism.³⁴⁹ The same *Margutta* magazine article makes reference to the works' transformative effect on the "Arab ministers who attended in force," whom, it suggests, had been productively destabilized by el-Gazzar's break with static, realistic art (as purportedly prevailed in their countries). It then goes on to suggest,

Our city is resolving the polemic over the need for new air in the difficult business of modern Arab art. And this is a valuable admission. At one time, the intellectuals and Arab artists looked to Paris. Today it is Rome that impresses them. At our Accademia di Belle Arti, Egyptian youth attend the classes of Maccari, Montanarini, Melli, or Guzzi. At the school of ceramics of Faenza, they follow the courses of our best potters, and equally to Urbino for engraving. Today Italy - for these Arabs - has resumed a tradition that lived in the time of the Renaissance.³⁵⁰

The "new air" that the el-Gazzar exhibition introduced to their modernizing milieu, in other words, offered evidence of the perfectness of the marriage between modern Egyptian aspiration and the savoir-faire of Rome. Such features worked to inscribe numerous promises – the reinvigoration of the country's best craft traditions, access to famous instructors, the creation of an artistic center to rival Paris, and (most stunningly, given Italy's recent past) a center of longstanding democratic principles – into the Italian academy system, and to offer it, via the Egyptian lead in the Arab world, as a crucible for a truly modern Arab art.

Soon, petroleum interests also play a role in Italian relations with Arab and Muslim nations, with friendships and affinities between countries providing Italy with a means to jockey for access to foreign oil reserves. For example, Italy's national oil and gas company, Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI), signed an exploration agreement with Egypt in 1955, followed by Iran in 1957 (at what at that time was considered a shockingly favorable 75/25 profit-share deal),

³⁴⁹ Regarding the connection between el-Gazzar and the desire to establish Egypt as a true republic after having ousted King Farouk from the throne, see Rizk's essay in the catalogue (filed within the *ba'tha* file for el-Gazzar) as well as the discussion of the exhibition by Cossa, "La Repubblica d'Egitto."

³⁵⁰ Cossa, "La Repubblica d'Egitto," 7. Notably, the institutes he names are those that the Center for Italian-Arab Relations listed in its overview of cultural exchange sites, as in *Levante* 2, no. 3 (July/Sept 1954). The entire piece gives the impression of having been composed from a press release.

Morocco in 1958, and Libya and the Sudan in 1959. ENI's president, Enrico Mattei, managed to secure these concessions in the Middle East by offering his partner countries more favorable terms than offered by any other European interest before. Concomitantly, Mattei made a splash in the international media by loudly proclaiming his support for Arab liberation movements, which he uttered with a combination of opportunism and sincere faith in the virtues of the nationalist aspirations of Arab states (as related to his own robust nationalism, since he had begun his career as oil minister by protecting Italian interests and blocking U.S. oil companies from drilling for phosphates in Italian soil).³⁵¹ His oil deals buttressed Italy's claim to a Mediterranean vocation while boosting the stance of the nonaligned countries and the possibility of a "third way."³⁵² Eventually, his efforts even began to force a split of sorts in Italian foreign policy, as the government in Rome claimed to follow NATO non-support for the Algerian liberation movement at the same time that Mattei wielded his own semiautonomous influence in contradiction to those policies.³⁵³ In 1961, Mattei's pro-Arab positions were so well publicized that Querèl approached him with an invitation to join the honorary board of an organization dedicated to contemporary Arab art and Italian-Arab rapport.³⁵⁴ Mattei accepted, and that ENI's corporate archives now contain dossiers of correspondence with La Feluca gallery.³⁵⁵

³⁵¹ Brogi, *A Question of Self-Esteem*, 198.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 205. Brogi indicates that after Iranian premier Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi completed the oil deal, he began to threaten the U.S. with the possibility that he would join the Non-Aligned Movement.

³⁵³ Mattei's position resonated with Italian public opinion, which tended to be pro-Arab (not to mention that the Vatican maintained an anti-Israel position). These opinions ran counter to the support for French colonial holdings that government officials professed, as followed from Italy's NATO alliance with France and Britain. In 1961, Mattei received death threats from the French dissident paramilitary group Organisation de l'armée secrète because of his political campaign in support of the Algerian liberation movement. In 1963, he died under mysterious circumstances when his private plane crashed.

³⁵⁴ Lucia Nardi and Mattia Voltaggio, "Impara l'arte e mettila da parte. La storia inedita del patrimonio artistico di Eni," *Il Capitale Culturale* 5 (2012), 31. The Italian name of the group was Convegno informativo sull'arte araba contemporaneo e i rapporti artistici italo arabi.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Further, Mattei later gave Querèl a sizable donation in support of the Premio San Vito Romano, an international art prize that Querèl had established and promoted in 1956 in conjunction with embassies and the tourism board of San Vito. The transaction was authorized only a few days before Mattei's death. I have not been able to access these archives, but hope to do so as a future project.

The Arab artists who arrived in the second half of the 1950s thus responded to a country undergoing an economic boom, but also a recalibration of strategic interests in culture as a basis for economic exchange. Soon, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with its institutional apparatus of the Accademia di Belle Arti, the embassies, the international academies, and even galleries, lost its firm monopoly on Roman savoir-faire, and its sponsorship of Egypt as a republican form of non-alignment. The fellowship artists who arrived in Rome after 1955 sustained more intensive contact with the gallery scene and its attendant nightlife than Ismail's cohort had managed to do. As a result, they negotiated an even more complex dialectic of assimilation and incommensurability. For example, when twenty-one-year-old Moroccan artist Mohammed Melehi left the Spanish art academy where he had been studying painting and came to Rome in 1957 to study sculpture at the Accademia di Belle Arti, he saw the Italian capital as his first exposure to a liberated urban center (as opposed to Madrid under Franco, or his native Tétouan under Spanish occupation).³⁵⁶ The democracy of the Italian capital thrilled him, but not because of a storied classical tradition, but rather by the absence of social stratification among its ranks of artists and intellectuals:

They were the last beautiful days of happiness after the last war, an open city, which put every cultural approach into question, where everyone was equal. I found myself in situations where I could meet Burri, Fontana, Accardi, Moravia, Pasolini, etc. Anyone could have. It was the atmosphere. In Paris, this would have been inconceivable. Do you see anyone shake hands with Sartre?³⁵⁷

Given this egalitarian spirit, which would soon be replaced by the stratifications of the market, he searched for sources for an authentic practice in the galleries, the street, and in private

³⁵⁶ Melehi spent his childhood in Asilah, a coastal town about 35 km from Tétouan.

³⁵⁷ Daoud, "Interview: Melehi," 54.

centers.³⁵⁸ He visited a docket of exhibitions of incredible heterogeneity: Jackson Pollock, the German expressionists, the English postwar abstractionists, 100 Years of Zen Art, the collection of Peggy Guggenheim, Rabindranath Tagore, and others.³⁵⁹ And although he had exhibited at the Center of Italian-Arab Relations during his first year in residency, showing alongside colleague Jilali Gharbaoui, he largely avoided the formal educational environment of the academy.

Reorganizing the Mediterranean Sphere of Influence

As I already noted briefly in my overview of Vittore Querèl's postwar affiliations, because the Italian bid for cultural influence placed notions of shared patrimony among the citizens of countries in the Mediterranean basin at the fore, it had yielded a number of postwar institutes and centers devoted to this idea. The Accademia del Mediterraneo, established in 1951 by Gianfranco Alliata di Montereale, a wealthy, landowning prince from Palermo with political ambitions (he would be elected to Parliament in 1952 as a member of the Monarchist Party), occupies one key node in this matrix of economy and culture. Its initial identification of the Mediterranean as a source of renewal reflects the dire conditions in Southern Italy in the early postwar years, when the locals' destitution was scaring away both tourists and foreign investment.³⁶⁰ Alliata made the fine arts central to his Mediterranean academy project. For the first Accademia del Mediterraneo conference, he convened artists, architects, and critics, and

³⁵⁸ Nadine Gayet-Descendre, "Mohammed Melehi, une vie," *Melehi* (Paris: Institut du monde arabe, 1995), 56. I have been unable to find any images of his work from the years immediately after 1958, but Gayet-Descendre suggests that Melehi worked in black rather than with expressive color, arranging shades of blackness into geometric variations.

³⁵⁹ Daoud, "Interview: Melehi," 54. Melehi suggests that all these exhibitions occurred in the single winter of 1957, but he is clearly exaggerating for effect. The Tagore show opened at Frances McCann's Rome-New York gallery in 1959, not 1957. And, the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome hosted the exhibition of Pollock works that MoMA had organized for the 1957 São Paulo Bienal from March 1-30, 1958.

³⁶⁰ C.f. note 303.

numerous presenters gave papers on art historical subjects.³⁶¹ In 1953, after they gained sponsorship from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they launched working groups devoted to matters of culture and tourism.³⁶² Throughout, Alliata recognized the need to maintain representation from around the Mediterranean basin in his consortium, including in 1954 recruiting Syrian politician and litterateur Khalil Mardam Bey to serve as its Vice President.³⁶³ He also invited Syrian art students to attend its signal cultural events, such as its 1955 Incontro d'Arte Mediterranea (Meeting for Mediterranean Art), the dedicated arts session it held at its fourth meeting in San Remo. The audience of invited guests at that event included Ismail and Husni, as well as Iraqi painting student Saad al-Tai, and Egyptian cinema students Khalil Shawki and Hussein Hagra Zeinab.³⁶⁴

The desire to realize a functional economic module of Mediterraneanism was not unique to Italians or to the “European” side of an imagined Eurafica. In Egypt as well, there were exploratory investments in Mediterranean culture as a framework for the display of holistic wealth. So, in 1954, the Accademia del Mediterraneo proposed that Palermo should create a program of biennial exhibitions of Mediterranean art, following the Venetian biennial model of exhibition in which participants and presentations were divided according to national origin, with

³⁶¹ Gianfranco Alliata, *L'Unità Mediterranea: Atti del Primo Convegno Internazionale di Studi Mediterranei*, 2nd ed. (Palermo: Accademia del Mediterraneo, 1953). Also see the various 1955 press releases in the “21. Comunicati stampa IV Session” file, Quarta sessione dell'Accademia del Mediterraneo, Sanremo (Luglio-Ottobre 1955), in Archivio Giovanni Alliata di Montreale, in the Archivio storico della Camera dei deputati, Rome (hereafter Alliata-Rome). These summarize and quote from the 1951 gathering.

³⁶² Ibid.; Murlane, “La Méditerranée des élites italiennes,” 5. Both Unesco and the Arab League had sent delegates to Accademia meetings and Alliata successfully recruited Jaime Torres Bodet, a Mexican intellectual who had just served as the second Director-General of Unesco, to the honorary board.

³⁶³ *Rassegna mediterranea 2* (1954-55). See Mardam Bey's biographical entry in my Appendix. By the time of his appointment to the Mediterranean Academy, the Egyptian and Iraqi language academies had also already given him honorary posts.

³⁶⁴ Press releases, “21. Comunicati stampa IV Session,” Alliata-Rome. List of participants may be found on item 5, “I Convegni dell'Accademia del Mediterraneo: Artisti e Studiosi Mediterranei a San Remo.” Abdel Kader Rizk attended.

selections determined by officials from each of the nations involved.³⁶⁵ And, in 1955, the Egyptian city of Alexandria inaugurated the Biennale of the Mediterranean, which showcased contemporary art from those countries with frontage on the Mediterranean Sea. Its first biennial opened on the third anniversary of Egypt's 1952 revolution and enjoyed the participation of eight countries, including Syria, serving to burnish Alexandria's cosmopolitan credentials and demonstrate its contribution to the new nationalistic objectives of the Egyptian state.³⁶⁶ One finds a range of keywords from 'Mediterraneanist' diplomacy in its catalog essays, including references to the need to re-establish friendly relations and the assertion that the participating artists share a "common denominator."³⁶⁷ As a whole, the event proposed that contemporary artistic expression be equated with peace and liberty, and therefore reclaimed as a product of Egypt's recent revolution.³⁶⁸ The same notion took graphic form in the commemorative medal that sculptor Gamal al-Sagini created for the occasion. It placed a small group of civilizational aspects – a bust of Nefertiti, ancient scrolls, an artists' palette – before a large Classical profile upon which the outline of the Mediterranean sea was imprinted, such that flesh becomes land and

³⁶⁵ Plans for a Palermo biennial mentioned in Tamborra, "Cultural Relations in the Mediterranean Basin" in *First Meeting of Directors of National Services Responsible for Cultural Relations, Unesco House, Paris, 1955*. The plan proved too difficult to realize, but a series of "meeting" exhibitions were planned instead, beginning with the first *Incontri* exhibition in Palermo in 1957.

³⁶⁶ *Biyannāli al-Awwal li-Funūn Duwal al-Baḥr al-Abyaḍ al-Mutawassiṭ, al-Iskandariyya* (Alexandria: Museum of Fine Arts, 1955), held July 26-September 15, 1955. The jury for the Egyptian section included the Consuls General in Alexandria for Greece, Italy, Syria, and France, and Commissioners for Spain, Yugoslavia, and Lebanon. The jury for the foreign sections included Egypt-based artists, critics, and foreign diplomats. President Abdel Nasser presided over the Biennale's opening. For more on the exhibition, see Jean Lacouture, "La première Biennale de peinture d'Alexandrie: un coup de maître," *La Revue du Caire* (August 1955): 158-162. It indicates that the exhibition was the brainchild of a group of painters and journalists in coordination with Hussein Sobhi, Director-General of the Municipality of Alexandria, who put it together in only two months. In order to secure French representation at short notice, the group resorted to compiling a collection of French works from local collections, gleaning specimens by Renoir, Derain, Rouault, Chagall, Dufy, Vlaminck, Carzou, and others.

³⁶⁷ *Biyannāli al-Awwal*, quoting from Hussein Sobhi, Commissioner-General of the Biennale, vii, and Hanna Simaika, the Director of the Museum of Beaux-Arts and Alexandria's Cultural Center, 8, respectively.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, statement from Abdel Latif El-Baghdadi, v. Al-Baghdadi was one of Abdel Nasser's closest aides and a prominent member of the Free Officers. In the catalog, he is identified as also holding the titles of "Commandant d'Aviation," and Minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs. Note that this argument is the same as the one advanced in the *Margutta* feature on Egyptian art of the same year.

the water becomes brain (Fig. 3.7). A sun can be seen to rise from the Egyptian coast, a sign of endless, shared illumination.

Within this larger trope of postwar Mediterranean culture, Alliata's investment in the shared qualities of the peoples of the Mediterranean basin derived its distinctive flavor as an applicable aesthetic from his religious conviction that stability could be achieved only through a commitment to both trade and spiritual values. In his 1951 address to his first group of academicians, not only did he invoke the Mediterranean as a space of meeting between Europe and Africa, and Muslim and Latin peoples, but also a center of a unifying spirit that he saw as a necessary supplement to heal the anxieties of the atomic age.³⁶⁹ In this, he further saw art playing a prominent role in overcoming what he saw as foreign forms of philosophical despair, i.e. the "contingent and decadent" forms of art and thought associated with existentialism and the leftwing politics of its exponents. The presumption of a shared monotheism in the Arab countries of the Mediterranean clearly enhanced their appeal for Alliata. He announced at that conference that he planned to hold a follow-up congress in Spain, Egypt and France that would include a session devoted to new currents of Mediterranean philosophical and artistic thought, as could be used in opposition to such inferior products of contemporary secular civilization.³⁷⁰ In 1953, Alliata even created a sub-institute of the Academy dedicated to the task of establishing the tenets of a new Mediterranean art, and named Carlo Belloli, a poet and critic working with the postwar legacy of Futurism, as a director.³⁷¹ He hoped that Belloli's scholarship would yield a

³⁶⁹ Alliata, "L'Unità Mediterranea," vii. Alliata's references to spiritual values would seem to align with the outlook of Italian Catholic interests, which had argued since the nineteenth century that the nation drew its identity and international role from its spiritual force rather than its material power. Brogi, *A Question of Self-Esteem*, 194.

³⁷⁰ Alliata, "L'Unità Mediterranea," vii. It is not clear whether this session was actually held as planned.

³⁷¹ I have not found any discussion of the reasons for selecting Belloli for the directorship. He did have a record of publishing on the topic, including a study titled *Arte mediterranea* published in Palermo in 1951, and the art poetry collection *Corpi di Poesia* which a "Mediterranean Publishing Company" located in Milan, Rome, and New York published in 1952.

“new manifesto for plastic art in the second half of the Novecento,” which could be distributed to artists around the ‘Mediterranean’ as an articulate reminder of the common denominator from which they had already drawn their inspiration.³⁷²

Belloli gave the keynote address in 1955, presenting an exegetical study of Mediterranean aesthetics. By then, the group had clarified the nature of the existential current that their Mediterraneanism would oppose and updated it for the politics of the moment. As was stated in both press releases and Belloli’s published text, Mediterraneanism represented an antithesis to Marxist rationalism – opposing both its “Nordic” birth and its implementation in the (presumably Soviet) East. Their Mediterraneanism represented the culmination of ancient Greek and Latin mentalities as well as the entirety of the Catholic tradition.³⁷³ Belloli’s hosts hoped that he would offer principles of sufficient appeal to inoculate the region’s artists against the fatalist incursions of existentialism, thereby convening an alternative intellectual community in support of the great numbers of artists they supposed had been left wandering alone after the war in search of eternal values.³⁷⁴ Alliata had envisioned the reclamation of artistic idealism as a balm for postwar ills, framing his Mediterraneanism as a means to overcome the nihilism of contemporary civilization, and Belloli followed that lead in pitting the Mediterranean in opposition to the mental tendencies of other regions.³⁷⁵ His remarks identified a defining tension between Enlightenment philosophers Immanuel Kant and Giambattista Vico in the genealogy of possible art criticisms, i.e. an opposition between a Nordic materialism that emerged from Kantian tradition and the inductive thinking that was key to Vico’s thinking about humanism and

³⁷² No author, “I Convegni dell’Accademia del Mediterraneo a S.Remo: Arte Cultura e Turismo nel Mediterraneo,” in “21. Comunicati stampa IV Session,” Alliata-Rome.

³⁷³ Office of Dr. Armando Troni, Chancellor of the Academy, “Primo Incontro d’Arte Mediterranea a San Remo;” draft copy of Carlo Belloli, *Per la nascita di una estetica neomediterranea* (San Remo: Accademia del Mediterraneo, 1955), both in “21. Comunicati stampa IV Session,” Alliata-Rome.

³⁷⁴ “Primo Incontro d’Arte Mediterranea a San Remo,” Alliata-Rome.

³⁷⁵ Belloli, *Per la nascita di una estetica neomediterranea*, n.p. I thank Davide Stefani for his assistance with this text.

the Renaissance, and he advocated for recuperating the latter. His neo-Mediterraneanism entailed making a return to Vico's version of expressive idealism as a threshold for a new advance into the future, thereby eschewing objectivism and art for art's sake and devising an art that encompassed emotion and full corporality.

True to its proclaimed ideal of intellectual exchange, the Accademia del Mediterraneo invited Husni, al-Tai, Shawki, and three other Arab intellectuals to deliver short oratories at the 1955 Incontro as part of a special closing session attended by the Italian academicians as well as selected other guests including a Spanish painter and a Romanian journalist.³⁷⁶ These pieces of Arab testimony were promptly transcribed, likely for propagandistic use to establish the robustness of the gathering's exchange of foreign views; the Accademia del Mediterraneo's press releases assert that these talks gave evidence of the "vibrant accent of the vitality demonstrated at the Academy."³⁷⁷ Husni's remarks on that occasion are of particular interest in assessing the stakes of this kind of exchange because they reveal that he critically engaged with the political implications of his presence at the gathering, and particularly the easy postcoloniality it might have seemed to signal to audiences. He took care to acknowledge the challenge of actually achieving an egalitarian unity in the Mediterranean Basin with equal enfranchisement for both Arabs and Westerners. As he notes, "friendly conferences like this" had been impossible until very recently, as colonialism had produced such uneven relations that it rendered the Arab side effectively mute. Thus, whereas he felt gratitude to those individual "righteous politicians,

³⁷⁶ Typescript statements attached to the press releases in the "21. Comunicati stampa IV Session," and Lidia Marino, "Conclusi a Sanremo I Lavori del Convegno dell'Accademia Internazionale del Mediterraneo," *Alliata-Rome*. These identify the Arab speakers as the following: Saad al-Tai (Iraqi painter), Prof. Ismail Husmi al Rahabi (Syrian writer and painter), Naber Ibrahim (Jordanian journalist), Murad Ousta (Palestinian), Shawki Khalil (Egyptian director), and Antoine Samaha (Lebanese journalist). Querèl was among the invited Italians.

³⁷⁷ Marino, "Conclusi a Sanremo." Also see the unauthored press release "La Rinata Coscienza Mediterranea ai Convegni Della Accademia Internazionale," which summarizes Husni's remarks as having given "thanks on behalf of the representatives of the Arab countries for hospitality received in Italy," and "pointing out the reasons determining the sincere friendship and friendly cooperation between the Arab World and Italy."

archaeologists, writers and artists” in Italy and across Europe who had defended the Arab cause rather than be swayed by political and economic interests, he also called for those assembled to commit to making the Mediterranean a truly communal space on the basis of human love rather than “individual and material interests.” Husni’s later Communist sympathies are known and this testimony may have provided a coded statement of a progressive political outlook. In the context of an academic gathering, however, his statement worked more like a ratification of the ideal of consensus, particularly the part-whole mechanism of the influence of an academy upon foreign policy.

Belloli’s proposed understanding of Mediterraneanist art as a space of emotion, reverberating color, and clarified senses in fact does appear in contemporaneous criticism, both internal and external, where it conveyed an interest in the transhistorical artistic qualities of the aestheticized expression of joy and pleasure rather than the Othered existentialism that seemed to auger the end of an idealized Mediterranean common. Pablo Picasso had famously taken refuge in Antibes in southern France just after the war, where he produced lambent, explicitly Mediterranean paintings of animate forms past and present, including shellfish, boats, satyrs and fauns, and the sea, that U.S. critic Clement Greenberg saw as evidence of Picasso’s inherent lyricism, and his new willingness to paint simply for the “sake of his joy in it,” rather than for the march of history (Fig. 3.8).³⁷⁸ These were precisely the properties of avocational joy that Allata’s Mediterranean project hoped to restore to eminence as a common property of the geographical site itself. A 1952 review of a work by Tunisia-born Italian artist Antonio Còrpora (1909-2004) in the journal of the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient, for example, cites the artist’s “abstract reverberations and colors” and the “emotional power derived from ‘sensational’

³⁷⁸Clement Greenberg, “Review of a Special Issue of *Verve* on Picasso,” *New York Times Book Review* (8 August 1948), in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian, vol. 2, *Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), 258-259.

impressions” as the product of the artist’s “native Mediterranean.”³⁷⁹ The Russian-born painter Nicolas de Staël (1914-1955), who in 1954-55 featured prominently in the gallery ads of the Francophone art press, had spent all of his professional life in France and had frequently toured Italy, Spain, and Morocco for inspiration, would also fit this rubric. Having moved his family to the south of France, he was composing his paintings of recalled colors and light using thick slabs of free-floating pigment, naming the pieces for the locations of these intuited visions (**Fig. 3.9**). The designation “Mediterranean” also occasionally figured in external promotions of Italy’s great modern painters, as in the self-description of aging painter Gino Severini (1883-1966), another former Futurist, in a touring exhibition organized for display in New York City.³⁸⁰ Severini, who had always moved between Italy and France, described himself as a thoroughly Mediterranean painter, explaining that he was “alien to all formulas and labels” and engaged in developing poetic paintings from his own experience of pleasure and emotion.³⁸¹ Belloli’s 1955 presentation of the neo-Mediterranean aesthetic, however, gives these qualities a distinctly nativist twist. By way of concluding his lecture, he invoked the qualities of blonde sun and sweet seawater that, he suggested, all Mediterranean peoples might be said to share in common. With this natural lightness comprising the denominator of Mediterraneanism, he suggested that a shared, future-oriented aesthetic could arise that ameliorated difference between North and South, and Occident and Orient.³⁸² If this model is overtly about consensus and collaboration, its implicit argument is something different: in Belloli’s final analysis, the future would resemble an Italianate utopia in which mankind had realized its fullest capacities.

³⁷⁹ Virgilio Guzzi, “The XXVIth Biennial Art Exhibition in Venice,” *East and West* 3, no. 3 (October 1952), 188.

³⁸⁰ Lionello Venturi, ed., *Painting in Post-War Italy, 1945-1957* (New York: The Casa, 1957). The exhibition, which was circulated by the American Federation of Arts, was installed at the Italian House at Columbia University.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

³⁸² Belloli, *Per la nascita di una estetica neomediterranea*. In fact, he suggested that the common denominator of the emotional Mediterranean could already be seen in the painting, sculpture, and architecture of the “Mediterranean West, Northern Europe, and North and South America.” The text devotes almost no attention to the Orient at all.

With the academic federation and neo-Mediterranean aesthetics assigned a buttressing function against the faithlessness of artistic deformation, they primarily found articulation as differentials rather than fixed creeds. Similarly, as can be gleaned from Alliaata's references to "mental tendencies" and Marxism, this Mediterraneanism had emerged against anxiety about an existentialism that was not consistently defined. At its most basic, the existentialist philosophical system that had caught art world attention revolved around a query into human freedom – defined as our capacity to reinvent our own meaning – as well as the anguish that accompanies our awareness of this capacity in the face of obstacles to its realization.³⁸³ Its major philosophical proponent was Jean-Paul Sartre, who had rapidly gained a following for his existentialist readings of modern artists, such as his 1948 essay about sculptor Alberto Giacometti for *Le Temps Moderne*.³⁸⁴ Sartre was also an atheist and a Marxist who voiced support for Communist political movements and colonial independence, which would have made his philosophy all the more threatening to Alliaata. Of the professional art critics in Europe who did adapt a Sartrean language of existentialism and popularized it as an aesthetic, French writer Michel Tapié (1909-1987) was the most influential. He promoted only those artists whom he felt had broken with the clichés of style, describing their work as "art of another kind."³⁸⁵ Tapié forcefully asserted that the contemporary world could no longer sustain any new academies or "—ism's," contending that work that expressed contemporary conditions needed to induce the perception that "one's

³⁸³ *Encyclopedia of Contemporary French Culture*, ed. Alex Hughes and Keith Reader (Routledge, 1998), s.v. "existentialism."

³⁸⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Search for the Absolute," *Le Temps Moderne* 3, no. 28 (1948). It must be emphasized that Sartre was a significant cultural voice for intellectuals outside Europe as well. His influence in the Arab world is widely acknowledged, particularly in literary circles, and was popularized in the early 1950s through the Beirut-based, pan-Arab journal *al-Adāb*.

³⁸⁵ As in Michel Tapié, *Un Art Autre Où il s'Agit de Nouveaux Dévidages du Réel* (Paris: Gabriel-Giraud et fils, 1952). The group included Dubuffet, Wols, Fautrier, Mathieu, Pollock, and many more, including Italian painters such as Capogrossi and Dova.

customary hold on the situation has been lost,” working directly on the spectator.³⁸⁶ Tapié also introduced the keyword *art informel*, literally meaning unformed or aformal art, into the critical lexicon of contemporary art writing, where it was used to describe those non-figurative paintings that were composed expressively (as opposed to the highly formed compositions of geometric abstraction or the figurative commitments of socialist realism).³⁸⁷ Thus, the loosely grouped set of ideas, values, and identities dubbed “existentialism” did exert real influence on the thinkers of the region, often supporting an interpretation of contemporary art that emphasized immanence and an ethic of individual responsibility.³⁸⁸ Further, many of the artists living in Italy who worked abstractly would pursue idiosyncratic study of Eastern religions, and especially the tenets of Zen as a kind of existentialism, seeking to imbue their painterly marks with vibrational significance as “signs,” as placed deliberately within the void of the canvas support.³⁸⁹ These existentialist ideas of the moment, which insisted on the inevitable failure of any search for absoluteness or permanence and explored Otherness as an aesthetic end, undercut the ideal of enlightened consensus altogether.³⁹⁰

As would seem to be foreshadowed in the strident quality of the rhetoric produced by Alliata’s academy, the consensus against existentialism would remain a fugitive goal. The aformal artwork, a visual metaphor of individual sojourning into the angst of postwar subjectivity, soon emerged as a new orthodoxy. Even France’s conservative art ministries began,

³⁸⁶ Ibid., translated and printed in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, eds. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2012), 44.

³⁸⁷ The Italian translation, *informale*, often appears in the criticism. Just as frequently, however, the term would be left in the French (presumably in reference to the movement’s perceived center in Paris).

³⁸⁸ A full examination of existentialist philosophy is beyond the scope of this dissertation. I am here more narrowly interested in assessing the uses of the term as a cultural reference in Italy, in sources as diverse as Alliata’s 1951 speech, the critical writings of Michel Tapié, and Mohamed Melehi’s autobiographical recollections.

³⁸⁹ Melehi recalls that gallerist Frances McCann, who opened the Rome-New York Art Foundation in 1957, gave him a copy of *Zen in the Art of Archery* in 1958, and that his attempt to adhere to its “austere, harsh, hard, and violent” tenets actually prompted an awakening of a long-lost sensibility of aniconic expansiveness having to do with his native Muslim social milieu. Daoud, “Interview: Melehi,” 52.

³⁹⁰ Stiles and Selz, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, 192.

in 1956, to recognize *informel* as a potential “second School of Paris” that they could use for their own national promotional purposes.³⁹¹ In the Italian art scene, the philosophy inspired a certain disdain for stylistic precedent. It also gave new justification for artists to engage with non-Western art forms such as ink painting and calligraphies as a buttress against academic values. By the 1958 Venice Biennale, the *informel* style appeared in what seemed to be the majority of national pavilions. As art historian Nancy Jachec has discussed, almost all the critics who visited wrote about the dominance of gestural painting, describing its proliferation from “India to Egypt, from Israel to Venezuela” as a universal sign of up-to-dateness.³⁹² Even Querèl’s promotional reviews of his Arab exhibitions make reference to the worldwide abstractionist trend. In an article he wrote for *Levante* about the 1959 Arab exhibition in Bari, for example, he deemed Melehi to be an “*informel* master” whose skills would best Pollock or any other “European or American abstractionist.”³⁹³

Models of Difference

The interests of Occident and Orient underwent constant rearticulation in the forums just discussed, and the paths to resolving the meaning of the identity of an artist or an artwork therein could often become competing. The programs that Unesco sponsored tended to focus on safeguarding the special aptitudes of a person, both as a carrier of knowledge and as a special creative being who deserved protection from exploitation or neglect by the new world order. However, an opposing tendency can also be seen in the cultural diplomacy scene, which, by its

³⁹¹ Jachec, *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale*, 9.

³⁹² “La XXIX Biennale de Venise,” *L’Oeil* 45 (1958), 34-5. Cited by Jachec, *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale*, 1.

³⁹³ Vittore Querèl, “L’Arte Araba Moderna in Italia,” *Levante* 6, no. 1 (March 1959), 60, and its Arabic translation in the same issue, “al-Fann al-‘Arab al-Hadith fi Itāliya,” 25. In the Arabic version, the transliteration for *informel* is used.

significance *qua* scene, in fact de-emphasized the individual (as we saw, observers read el-Gazzar's folkloric paintings as emblems of Egyptian republicanism, not as authorial decisions within a broader genealogy of modernist expression). In this last section of my chapter, I will examine the activities of Fateh al-Moudarres, who resided in Rome from 1956-1960, a period concurrent with the economic boom, the expansion of the private gallery system, the intensification of the Arab liberation movement in North Africa, and the attempt to make pan-Arabism into a premise of governance via the creation of the UAR. I do so as a way to trace the contradictory play of the existentialist currents then circulating in Rome, as would become central to strategies of self-realization.

Unlike the other Arab artists in Italy, al-Moudarres had brought a caravan of dependents – his young wife, two severely handicapped children, and his mother – with him from Aleppo. To support them, he counted on supplementing his meager fellowship stipend by selling his paintings.³⁹⁴ His production would be prodigious, and, for the first three years, extraordinarily various. When the critic for the leftist paper *Paese Sera* attempted to review the solo show that al-Moudarres arranged at Gallery Cichi in 1959, he struggled to identify a common ground in the outpourings of what he called a “volcanic” personality – academic Nudes, geometric compositions, a drip painting titled *Flowers and Lines* (**Fig. 3.10a**), depictions of peasant children (**Fig. 3.10b**), among other works – and the resulting review mobilizes a sliding set of stylistic categories, citing figurative abstraction, Art Brut, and even muralist Mario Sironi as a precedent for the monumentality of *Seated Nude* (**Fig. 3.10c**), before expressing the polite hope

³⁹⁴ Letters from Fateh al-Moudarres to Salman Qataya, dated May through August 1960. Private collection of Fadi al-Moudarres, Damascus. I am not aware of any other Syrian art students who brought dependents to Italy. The artist's family situation strongly affected his self-promotion, such that he would play the role of old world patriarch at times and an urbane intellectual at others. After his first year at the Accademia, he boarded his family out on a farm in the remote countryside while he spending more time in the city in short-term living situations.

that the painter would manage to identify his core, locating a “common denominator.”³⁹⁵ In the same period, al-Moudarres had also produced a number of works in a loosely constructed, abstract manner that may be characterized as *informel*. One small horizontal painting, dated 1958, takes form on the canvas as an dark composition of thick impasto paint, scraped away in long, horizontal passages and incised by short vertical carvings in yellow and white (Fig. 3.11). Another, painted in 1959, interprets the academic standby of still life subjects – flowers in a vase – as an Impressionist-Cubist composition in the thickly laid facets of color that de Staël had popularized (Fig. 3.12). Italian collectors acquired both, which attests to their charm as interpretations of the recognized international trends.³⁹⁶

Concurrently, al-Moudarres had begun working through a number of quick studies that were of a second aformal type. These used layers of waxy pigment and colored wax crayon on scraps of carton to create a luminous surface of variegated color, out of which tiny compositions of a self-consciously innocent nature could be excised: children and mothers, flowers, single isolated clouds or scrubby trees.³⁹⁷ This wax-on-cardboard format became a trademark of sorts in Rome. In al-Moudarres’s manic hands, it allowed for a kind of automatic writing, facilitating his transition toward the particular aggregative aesthetic that he would hone in the early 1960s, and which is the subject of my Chapter Four. He showed four wax drawings in the Cichi exhibition (they may have been the works that elicited the designation of “Art Brut” in the *Paese Sera* article). By then, he had already shown works in wax the previous year at his first solo exhibition

³⁹⁵ Marcello Venturoli, “Moudarres da Cichi,” *Paese Sera (Roma)*, 8 Dec. 1959. Clipping in file “Fateh Moudarres,” Archivio Bioiconografico e Fondi Storici, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Rome (hereafter GNAM).

³⁹⁶ Provenance information for Lot 115, Sale 8061, Christie’s Modern and Contemporary Arab, Iranian and Turkish Art Part 2, Dubai, 16 April 2013; and Lot 85, Sale 7895, Christie’s International Modern and Contemporary Art, Dubai, 26 October 2010.

³⁹⁷ My description is based on eight pieces of this sort that recently surfaced at Christie’s Sale 1014, Visions d’Orient – de l’Orientalisme à l’Art Contemporain, Paris, 4 October 2011. All came from a private collection in Rome, all dated 1960.

in Italy, an intimate showing at the studio of a doctor and socialite named Alberto Zannoni.³⁹⁸ Al-Moudarres had worked with wax in Aleppo as well, as part of the small circle of surrealist poets and artists active there at the end of the 1940s. The medium proved most compelling in Italy, however, because it allowed him to both assert a place in the genealogy of avant-garde automatist strategies and play off the vogue for anti-academic paintings in heavy, primitive materials.³⁹⁹ Thus, the atavistic style of these wax works easily aligned with the existential discourse of the period and its preoccupation with the solitary individual, and they also emphasized the mystical aspect of the void that Tapié's brand of *informel* painting aimed to open up in the viewer. For example, al-Moudarres frequently placed his tiny protagonists amid talismanic *sgraffito*: the word *Allah* in scrawled writing, a crescent moon, or a spiral (Fig. 3.13 and 3.14). The translucent copper tone of these pieces, when combined with their diminutive dimensions (some could fit in the palm of the hand), imbues the depicted scenes with a hauntingly cosmological significance.

The source of al-Moudarres's angst differed from the European socio-psychology of devastation associated with Tapié's *informel*. There was the element of personal tragedy – his sick children, the haunting memory of his father's death by assassination, the cycle of domestic violence in his maternal family line.⁴⁰⁰ There was also the problem of his responsibility as an Arab Syrian to the battles being fought on the other shores of the Mediterranean. The very start of his tenure in Italy was marked by the tripartite aggression against Egypt and an intensification

³⁹⁸ "Une 'personale' a Roma del pittore sirano Fateh Moudarres" *Corriere della Nazione-Roma*, 14 Jan. 1958. Clipping in "Fateh Moudarres" file, ASAC-Venice, where it is the only item in the folder. The exhibition was introduced by a British Institute fellow identified only as Prof. Harrison. After the opening, the group repaired to the Zannoni home. I have found no mention of this exhibition in any of al-Moudarres's autobiographical material and it is not at all clear what relationship he had forged to either Dr. Harrison or Zannoni.

³⁹⁹ Salman Qataya, "Tabalwar al-Falsafa al-Fanniyya li-Fātiḥ," in *Kayf Yarā Fātiḥ al-Mudarris*, 54.

⁴⁰⁰ I discuss these elements of al-Moudarres's biography, as well as his artistic relationship to them, at greater length in Chapter Four.

of the violence in the Algerian War for Independence. As critic Tarek al-Sharif argues, the artist's approach to his paintings would change in response to these events, as well as to the inexorable march of Arab political responses that followed, including the Arab Solidarity pact in January 1957 and the union between Egypt and Syria in February 1958.⁴⁰¹ Although nationalist historiographies count the Suez crisis as an Arab victory, in which Abdel Nasser succeeded in resisting the tripartite aggression without surrendering his right to pursue national development by any means necessary, the artist did not overlook the fact that it had entailed hundreds of casualties in the non-combatant population.⁴⁰² For al-Moudarres, any appearance of a wartime victory necessarily carried the concomitant reminder that the Arab population served as sacrificial lambs to the objectives of military power. One of his first interpretations of these existential conditions of defenselessness appears in the waxen drawing shown in **Fig. 3.15**, completed in 1957 or 1958, and unfortunately only preserved in a poor quality black and white reproduction. A child lies dead on the raked foreground amid a surreal assemblage of attendants: a mother and two enormous owls. The presence of the owl in the grim tableau, which al-Sharif suggests functions to enhance the "depth of the tragedy," makes reference to a folk belief that the human spirit emerges after a tragic death to circle the body as a shrieking owl. In combining a childish style and folkloric symbolism, al-Moudarres attempts to convey an abiding fatalism. The work bypasses the triumphalist themes of national resistance to instead engage the emotional paradoxes of mortality and martyrdom in the proxies of the helpless child, mourning mother, and embodied eternal spirits. It might also be understood as the declaration of estrangement, as made by an Arab son bearing heavy family burdens while seeking fame on foreign lands. For al-

⁴⁰¹ Tarek al-Sharif, *Fātiḥ al-Mudarris: Fann Hadīth... bi-Rūḥ Ta'birīyya* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1991), 71.

⁴⁰² Derek Varble, *The Suez Crisis 1956* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003), 86-88. After Egypt's air force was destroyed, Britain began Phase II bombing which targeted communications and transportation networks and was intended to terrorize the Egyptian people. Eventually, the transportation networks into Port Said collapsed, which left civilians without essential provisions.

Moudarres, the capacity to journey into the heart of Europe that he had gained as a fellowship artist was not to be understood as the equivalent of freedom from fear or want.

During the first phase of postwar Italian-Arab relations, Querèl functioned as the quasi-state collector of the Arab art students, treating them as guests requiring all the carefully managed decorum that befits diplomatic personnel. In the second, it is the figure of Sartre who is used to organize the possibilities of relations between blocs. For Moroccan artist Melehi, it was his easy access to intellectual giants like Sartre in Rome in 1957 that proved the beauty of those days, particularly in distinction from the colonial hierarchies of the French metropole.⁴⁰³ There is a richer ideological dimension to his reference to Sartre, however, for the French philosopher and his public support for the anticolonial movement in North Africa marks the possibility of non-official communion between those Arab and non-Arab intellectuals who held themselves to be morally outside nationalist imperatives. Decades later, al-Moudarres would also retrospectively articulate his awareness of his stake in national burdens through an accounting of his relationship with Sartre as well. At some point before 1959, he had encountered Sartre and posed for a photograph with him. Beyond that basic fact of proximity, the nature of their acquaintance becomes difficult to ascertain.⁴⁰⁴ When al-Moudarres assembled his booklet for his exhibition at Cichi, he added two documents attesting to his friendship with Sartre: the photograph, and a facsimile of a poem entitled *La Mer*, inscribed “a poem of Moudarres, 10.9.58 Roma,” and ostensibly written out in Sartre’s hand (Figs. 3.16 and 3.17). Later, the artist began to add detail about the anticolonialist hopes that Sartre enfolded for him in a series of anecdotes he related to

⁴⁰³ Zakya Daoud, “Interview: Melehi,” 54.

⁴⁰⁴ Over the years, the artist gave a number of conflicting, hyperbolic accounts to various interlocutors. My sense is that the two became acquainted through Zannoni and their circle. The poem reproduced in Figure 3.17 bears an inscription in the upper right-hand corner addressing a “Signora Zannoni.” That said, there would have been other opportunities to make the philosopher’s acquaintance, as Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir regularly attended exhibitions and artist soirees when they were in Rome. In October 1956, the Association of Artists of Via Margutta even organized a dinner in their honor.

friends and admirers. In 1987, al-Moudarres described how he had encountered a drunken Sartre staggering in the street, taking him home, feeding him spaghetti and instigating a discussion of the Palestinian issue.⁴⁰⁵ In another version of the story, recounted in 1999, they passed a full ten days together engaged in discussion of topics ranging from French and Italian art movements to the Algeria situation, which allowed al-Moudarres to alert Sartre to the fact that 800,000 lives had already been claimed in the Algerian war since 1955.⁴⁰⁶ By the artist's telling, that discussion jolted the philosopher to new insight into the immorality of French colonial rule. Later that same evening, after they had decamped to a hotel bar, Sartre disappeared to place a phone call to Paris, only to return to tell the artist to follow *Paese Sera* in the coming week. As al-Moudarres soon discovered from its pages, Sartre had spent the hour dictating an article on the upcoming referendum, "God needs people, but General de Gaulle does not need the French people."⁴⁰⁷ These recollections, whether true or invented, play upon Sartre's status as a committed writer and public intellectual in order to claim participation in a watershed moment in European leftist opinion regarding the Arab anti-colonial struggle. Al-Moudarres de-emphasizes the crucible of existential angst and abstractionist painting that could also bear the philosopher's name so that the Arab issue could return to the fore.

These more overtly political dimensions of the international milieu, as intersected with the personal status of the "Arab" in Europe, also gave rise to exhibition strategies that differed greatly from the national pavilion model of the 1950s biennial as had bloomed around the Mediterranean. When al-Moudarres presented his solo exhibition at Gallery Cichi, he organized

⁴⁰⁵ Scott Davis, *The Road from Damascus: A Journey Through Syria* (Seattle: Cune Press, 2000), 249-250.

⁴⁰⁶ Hamarneh, *Kayf Yarā Fātih al-Mudarris*, 11. The casualty numbers are given by al-Moudarres in this later text and cannot be taken as an accurate account of either actual casualties or their conversation at the time.

⁴⁰⁷ As always with al-Moudarres's memoirs, the "real" events have been compressed. The phrase that al-Moudarres recalls as the headline of the article actually appears in Sartre's article "The Constitution of Contempt" published in the French newspaper *L'Express* on 11 Sept. 1958. Reprinted in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer, and Terry McWilliams (London: Routledge, 2001), 88-95. Al-Moudarres also mentions that the article would influence the "best French lawyers" in their position on Algeria.

an opening party that offered visitors as a multimedia experience of the unassimilated East. As relayed by a reporter for *Momenta-Sera* who attended the opening relayed in his or her review, the evening began with an LP recording of a *muezzin*'s call to prayer (a 'musical' format that is diametrically opposed to Western harmonic modes), which set a scene of alterity for viewing the work that the *Paese Sera* viewer had found so heterogeneous.⁴⁰⁸ The non-Muslim audience responded as if it were attending an avant-garde happening, sitting on the floor so as to better attend to the atavistic musical structures, and observing the Syrian ambassador perform ritual ablutions from a touristic vantage point.⁴⁰⁹ In the statements al-Mouadarres made to his guests, he emphasized his unusual upbringing as the son of a deceased landed nobleman and a Kurdish peasant mother, which yielded him unique access to the semi-nomadic lifestyle of the northern steppes near his native Aleppo.⁴¹⁰ Al-Mouadarres's connection to that purportedly native life is stressed in the *Momenta-Sera* review, which erroneously calls him a "Druze" while suggesting that the few abstract geometric compositions he exhibited reflected the "life of the tribes," rather than the general trend toward abstract painting in the Italian scene.⁴¹¹ The same article also faithfully reports that the artist was a friend of French philosopher Sartre, and that they had recently traveled together to Syria. No trip East had actually transpired.

⁴⁰⁸ Unsigned, "Mouadarres alla Galleria Cichi," *Momento-Sera*, 7-8 Dec. 1959. Clipping in "Fateh al-Mouadarres," GNAM.

⁴⁰⁹ Similar but earlier representational modes, as produced the Orient as a picture in a modern European structure of semiosis, are discussed in Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988). In the case of the picture that al-Mouadarres offered, it is the "native" Syrian ambassador who becomes the Oriental display. The actual circumstances of the ambassador's performance are not at all clear. It is difficult to believe that his response to the sound of the *adhān* was as involuntary as the *Momenta-Sera* text suggests, i.e. that he would perform it without regard for location or context. Neither the society journalists in Italy nor al-Mouadarres shied away from exaggeration.

⁴¹⁰ The exhibition booklet includes a brief introduction from Salim Adel Abdul Hak, Director-General of Antiquity in Syria, which mentions that because the artist had suffered great pain in his adolescence, he sought refuge in Syria's Northern countryside such that nature was his "first teacher."

⁴¹¹ Much of the Italian postwar artistic discourse was structured around the opposition between abstraction and figuration, which also loosely mapped onto capitalist versus communist sympathies, so it is notable that a different origin of abstract expression is located here. Jachec, *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale, 1948-1964*, provides an exhaustive examination of the ideological treatment of abstraction in this period.

Al-Mouddarres's autobiographical recollections rendered other meetings into grist for assimilating the cultural zeitgeist into his personal biography as well. Eventually, the episode in Gentilini's studio, when he garnered praise for his recourse to his own Eastern experience, also became a parable of the focusing effect of the Western milieu, particularly its biases and blind spots. In 1998, when a dying al-Mouddarres completed an important series of dialogues with poet Adonis (1930—), he placed his greater emphasis on the political turmoil of his homeland in the period, claiming that Gentilini had first incredulously observed, "Mouddarres, you are carrying all of Syria on your shoulders and you've come to Rome!" before he had conceded the rightness of the decision to hew to his internal concerns and visions.⁴¹² Once this anecdote is interpreted as a kind of parable regarding the nature of the "right path" in art and life, its message is clear: regardless of the conceptual worth of the interchange between East and West, a Syrian artist could only find his authentic style by turning to his inner native Syria. It also provides the basis for interpreting al-Mouddarres's paintings from 1960 onward, when he began to hone his graphic repertoire in dedicated fashion.

In his works from 1960, al-Mouddarres explored the emotional capacities of figurative rather than abstractionist representation, and as a corpus represent the beginning of what became a sustained exploration of the capacity of highly schematized figures to communicate an immanent human mortality. In this body of paintings circa 1960, al-Mouddarres engages most closely with the family unit, using it as a modular form in which bodies could link up and overlap but also be consumed or abrogated. In *Face of a Girl*, the basic unit for the series appears

⁴¹² Fateh al-Mouddarres and Adonis, *Fāṭih wa-Adūnīs: Ḥiwār* (Damascus: Gallery Atassi, 2009), 130. These were hosted by gallerist and littérateur Mouna al-Atassi at a home in the Lebanese mountains, then transcribed and published.

as an isolated figure (Fig. 3.18).⁴¹³ The “face” is composed of a single misshapen circle, embellished by a patch of dark scumbled pigment suggesting hair and containing a single circle and line in the suggestion of underdeveloped sensory organs. Although the head-body pairing suggests an armature for future development, al-Moudarres realizes it within an airless atmosphere of heavily worked pigments, hatches, and stains that render it as already dead. Even when he would give the child’s face more definition or allow the scumbling to suggest volume in other paintings, the specter of death always remained close at hand. The painting in Figure 3.19, for example, repeats the same semi-circular face and squared body, elongating and stacking the subsequent iterations into an adolescent and a parent as might represent a family unit or foreshadow a future time. Using the connotational resources of his dark palette of reds and sickly yellows, al-Moudarres conveys the proximity of death, showing the florid rusty red of the child’s face to have drained away in the figures behind her. Similarly, the repetition of the red flower that the child holds in her hand in the recessional space behind renders it an accusatory stain of blood on the face of the parent. Another painting, completed on blue paper, stages an even more explicit double signification for the geometry of rectangle and semi-circular arc that comprises al-Moudarres’s shorthand “child,” with the very same shapes repeating as a tombstone behind the girl on the left (Fig. 3.20).

As a set, these pieces can be seen as a query of the idea of the self, and its constitution in a legacy of material death. Even in an ostensibly charming painting like that seen in Figure 3.21, which depicts a parent and child holding flowers in an open field, color can be seen to leach out from the lines of the figures (as in the orange of the child’s face), such that they seem mere futile

⁴¹³ It is unfortunately available only in poor black and white reproduction. I reproduce it here because it appears in al-Sharif’s monograph *Fātiḥ al-Mudarris* with a caption saying it won a prize from the Accademia di Belle Arti, so is likely the type of work that won Gentilini’s praise.

invocations of life rather than lifelike beings. The painting's animate presences appear in the humus of the landscape instead, with the bouquets appearing through an impasto record of the gestures and jabs of the artist. In each case, the paintings have been contrived as an exhibition of uncultured life. They are not, however, a formal paintings in the sense of appearing free or unbidden. To the contrary, the figures take shape as if through a deliberative and childlike process of representation. Moreover, their impacted quality refuse to bow to the spiritual expansiveness that characterized the paintings associated with abstract expressionism, *tachisme*, or the other strands of the European a formal painting as it flourished at the major biennials in the region. A description of that mode – signs within spaces of open signification – as a pan-regional formation appears in an article the French critic Michel Ragon published in his magazine *Cimaise* about his own version of an Atlanticist-Mediterranean tour, involving studio visits in Iran, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia, and (finally) Italy.⁴¹⁴ Amid his lyrical, travelogue descriptions of local color (the dust, oil, and prayer beads of Iran; and the olive trees, Phoenician ruins, and fluent French of Lebanon; etc.), he offered brief notes on the ambitious emerging artists who had already adopted the international standards: *informelles* compositions in Tehran, a “remarkable lyrical abstractionist” in Ankara, a Yugoslavian painter who had already shown in Venice in 1958, and others.⁴¹⁵ Gratefully concluding his tour in the more familiar city of Milan, where he visited a group exhibition of young Italian painters, he found that he could finally grasp the overarching tendency of the artworks he had seen on his tour. Whether by means of “oriental calligraphy” or “occidental graphites,” he wrote, these painters were engaged in making

⁴¹⁴ Michel Ragon, “Travel Notes: Iran, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia, Milan,” *Cimaise* 52 (March-April 1961): 60-77.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.* The Iranian painter whom he describes as an *informel* painter is Behjat Sadr, who had trained with Roberto Melli at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, 1950-52, then Naples, and in 1961 was dividing her time between Iran and Italy.

“‘empty’ and vast spaces.”⁴¹⁶ At the center of their emerging practices, he found gestures that were functioning as signs. In stark contrast with these sparsely painted expressions of the contemporary, existential Mediterranean, al-Moudarres in the same period constructed densely worked surface textures in which a vale of gestures became paintings of scenes and events, folded back into themselves as representational shorthand. The gestural signs that he added to their surfaces, in other words, also represented things: sprouting blossoms, shooting stars, or even textile decoration on peasant clothing.

Such were the pressures of national identity as a discursive position in Italy, a precarious position that was only exacerbated by the showmanship of the big biennial shows. In 1960, al-Moudarres accepted the invitation of Salah Kamel (1917-1993), the then-director of the Egyptian Art Academy, to join Louay Kayyali and five Egyptian artists in the UAR pavilion at the Venice Biennale.⁴¹⁷ The exhibition opportunity could have been a capstone of sorts for al-Moudarres, who was nearly finished with his fellowship and by then facing the question of his next professional step: either a full plunge into the European exhibition circuit, or, as required by his fellowship terms, back into the fold of a significantly altered Syrian state.⁴¹⁸ The presence of Syrian artists in the pavilion had a recognized propagandistic value for the newly established, pan-Arab political union.⁴¹⁹ Indeed, when Kamel composed his essay for the catalog, he began

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 76.

⁴¹⁷ He was probably asked sometime in late spring. See Fateh al-Moudarres to Salman Qataya, postcard, Rome, May 15, 1960, which bears a postscript conveying the happy news that the Ministry of Education for the UAR had invited him to represent the Northern Region [Syria] in the Venice Biennale. The Egyptian artists who exhibited were Abdel-Hadi el-Gazzar, Tahia Halim, Khadiga Riad, Salah Abdel Krim, Kamal Amin Awad.

⁴¹⁸ Fateh al-Moudarres to Salman Qataya, letter, Rome, August 19, 1960, expresses the hope that he could manage to remain and exhibit in Europe and ticks off a list of prospects on the horizon in Stockholm, Madrid, Paris, and Vienna. No visual record of al-Moudarres’s exhibited paintings remains, although the following titles are given in the biennale catalog: *Bambini Alla Festa Futre*, 1959; *Fanciulla Timida*, 1960; *Interno di Un Cortile Arabo*, 1960; *Gli Amanti*, 1960; *Composizione Umana* (no date given); *Due Sorelle: Aiscia E Fatima* (no date given); *Capo Saraceno* (no date given); *La Famiglia*, 1960.

⁴¹⁹ Salah Kamel, RAU section, *XXX Biennale Internazionale d’Arte* (Venice, 1960), 279-283. These remarks call the Biennale “the most important international art exhibition.”

much the same way that Rizk had in his 1955 essay for el-Gazzar's exhibition at La Feluca: he invoked the status of the sponsoring state as a young Republic. This time, however, the Republic was an amalgamated one without geographic continuity, and Kamel wrote that the works on display offered visitors compelling evidence of the congeniality of "the races that have become a single political organism."⁴²⁰ As he argued with poetic aplomb, their union was like the process of art itself. Both at last gave "face and figure" to a previously intangible dream. When viewed from the outside of that dream, however, the pavilion's declaration of the strength national identity communicated differently. In fact, most journalistic treatments viewed the pavilion through a strictly Cold War lens. The Soviet Union had only just reopened its pavilion in 1956 as part of the Khrushchev "thaw," which, in 1958, ensured the ubiquity of comparisons between liberal West and communist East in the popular press. That Egypt had enjoyed an expansion of military and development aid from the Soviet Union after the Suez crisis was sufficient to determine the reception of the works in the pavilion as variants of socialist realism.⁴²¹ The few references to al-Moudarres that appeared in the press were primarily concerned to fit his work under the rubric of figuration rather than abstraction, mentioning that the works showed "Syrian characters" and used colorful brushwork.⁴²² One of Rome's weekly news magazines even devoted a full-color spread to precisely this class of ideological figuration, entitled "La Biennale

⁴²⁰ Ibid. Because it uses ideas of race to naturalize the "community of cultural and human needs" that the Egyptian and Syrian "personalities" now fomed, it is a somewhat chilling piece of prose.

⁴²¹ Jachec, *Politics and Painting and the Venice Biennale*, 130.

⁴²² Francesco Coro', "Africa Atlantica e Mediterranea alla XXX Biennale di Venezia," *La Voce dell'Africa (Presso l'Istituto Italiano per l'Africa)*, 1-15 Sept. 1960, 10. He states that al-Moudarres and Kayyali abstain from the currents of abstraction and *informel* and instead work within a strand of interpretive figuration. Notably, these reception records directly contradict the gloss of Nancy Jachec on al-Moudarres and Kayyali, which describes them as gesture painters alongside Egypt's Khadiga Riad (and in distinction from el-Gazzar and Tahia Halim). *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale*, 173. Because there were no images of the actual Syrian works available, Jachec must have relied on al-Sharif's description of the two painters in *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*, ed. Wijdan Ali (London: Scorpion, 1989), 180, where he states that they are leaders of the Syrian abstract expressionist movement. As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Five, the terms "abstract expressionist" meant something other than gestural painting in the Syrian context.

della Retroguardia,” and reproducing an Egyptian folkloric painting of a bread seller’s urban cart by Tahia Halim (1919-2003) beside an Israeli painting of a Picasso-like figure and animal (made folkloric by the presence of tribal carpets) by Pinchas Shaar, amid more academic paintings by Russian artist Andrea Mylnikov and Romanian Gheorghe Petrascu (Fig. 3.22).⁴²³ Strikingly, the fully realist paintings from Eastern Europe depict scenes that can only be called bourgeois: a pleasure outing on the beach of the Baltic Sea and a finely appointed interior where a child takes painting lessons. In effect, the container of “rearguard figuration” rendered any commodity-object placed inside into a statement of political alignment, which the Italian audience would consume as a feature article accompanied by sumptuous photo reproductions.

Kamel’s catalog text in fact does enact a number of additional officializing procedures that suggest a kind of managed progressiveness familiar from socialist art writing. These in turn mix with the same Mediterraneanist metaphors that had been forged in the preceding decade’s diplomatic milieu, including a description of the art emerging from the UAR as having claimed a place on the same seashore as the other republics, with its artistic products representing its particular ontology as an inheritor of the characteristics of all the continental blocks that meet in the Mediterranean. For Kamel as well as for his government, the ultimate claim was that the creation of a United Arab Republic in itself had made it possible to consummate a new art that corresponded with its perfect synthesis of syncretic patrimony: a totally original entity, “exquisitely complete” in its forms, and distinguished as a distinct element in the overall panorama of world art. By 1960, the old concept map of Egyptian embassy boilerplate – a vision of the Mediterranean as a consortium of historically and racially determined nations engaged in mutually beneficial trade – no longer accorded with the other claims about cultured experience

⁴²³ “La Biennale della Retroguardia,” *Vita*, 7 July 1960. Clipping in 1960 Biennale file, GNAM.

and the East and West then circulating in the international art world, and with which the UAR artists all grappled in Italy. In fact, in an interview that al-Moudarres gave to Syrian art critic Abdul Aziz Alloun in May 1960, he mentions the heavy-handed nature of Egyptian state patronage as a problem for the careers of Egyptian artists, suggesting that Egypt kept such tight control of its cultural imperatives that artists such as Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar, whom he names as an otherwise excellent artist, were hamstrung by nationalist themes and requirements. As a citizen of the neglected Northern Region of the UAR, he had so far evaded such controls, but felt such policies could only result in shameful missed opportunities for the larger Arab scene. As he put it, even though Egyptian artists enjoyed access to a pavilion at every Venice Biennale, they perpetually produced “Battles of Palestine” and other obvious resistance narratives, to the detrimental effect of their fortunes on an international stage.⁴²⁴

Conclusion

As this excavation of the programmatic parameters that brought Arab artists into Rome’s version of internationalism reveals, Italy’s cultural apparatus cultivated a consortium-like internationalism that it projected outward as an argument for their centrality to the new world order and projected internally as a means for recuperating a feeling of eminence in the modern era. For the whole of the 1950s, the Italian foreign ministry saw the domestic art scene as a piece of its operations. Within that sphere of operations, Arab artists could be placed around the table at the Center for Italian-Arab Relations, Mediterranean Academy, Levant Fair, or the Alexandria Biennial with relative ease. And, in the jostling for position in the “beautiful days” of the city’s openness, the representatives of the Muslim-majority countries of the Eastern Mediterranean and

⁴²⁴ Abdul Aziz Alloun interview, “Fātiḥ al-Mudarris al-Fannān alladhī Bā’a Akthar min 300 Lawḥāt fī Urubbā,” *Sawt al-‘Arab*, 17 May 1960, reprinted in Alloun, *Mun’āṭaf al-Sittīnāt fī Tārīkh al-Funūn al-Jamīla al-Mu’āšira fī Sūriyā* (Damascus: Culture House for the International Daadoush Group, 2003), 114.

North Africa served as emblems of an imagined Mediterranean order that promised to correct the ills of colonialism and bilateral greed. At the same time, however, the market was emerging as a major force in shaping tastes and critical opinion across great expanses of terrain that had little to do with immediate governmental objectives. The programs just discussed were conceived to uphold the “mildly patronizing, post-colonial humanism typical of the 1950s” that compensated for the loss of European prestige in the Cold War world order, but they also had a great deal to do with establishing and promoting new markets for both goods and experiences.⁴²⁵

But as an examination of the different appearances of Arab art and Arab artists in 1950s Rome also reveals, multi-national organizations and events had the paradoxical effect of highlighting cultural difference as both necessary for and problematic to the new world order. When the functionaries of Italy’s vast cultural diplomacy networks were first called to regard the visiting Arab artists, they drew upon their longstanding Eurocentrism to extend recognition to those who best assimilated the lessons of the Italian art scene, such that the bulletin of the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient saw the variety of nameable modern tendencies that appeared in it as evidence that even the “abstractionist experiments of neo-realistic impressionism” had managed to enter the “traditionally contemplative mentality of the Euro-Asians,” prompting new leaps of accomplishment in an otherwise static population.⁴²⁶ In the second half of the decade, the air of self-evidence that surrounded this linear model of dissemination would be destabilized. It had been Querèl who organized the follow-up exhibition of Arab artists in 1956, only to find that artistic assimilation had become an issue of concern rather than celebration. As he would report in *Levante*, an interesting polemic arose in the media when an art critic for *Giornale d’Italia* showed up at La Feluca to take in a topical Arab exhibition, only to find

⁴²⁵ Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press), 5.

⁴²⁶ “Italian News,” *East and West*, 156.

“internationalist” offerings devoid of insight into the culturally specific experiences of the artists.⁴²⁷ These two, apparently divergent expectations regarding style as identity-content, I contend, in fact represent two sides of the same postwar coin. Between these antinomies of assimilation and authenticity as they were convened in Rome around the subject of “Arab painters” as a collective subject in the world’s corps of artists, one finds the imagined Mediterranean art world. Therein, the emergence of the art *informel* tendency as an existential philosophy of composition acted as a mediating but also coercive force. The desire for cultural exchange between East and West was, in the first half of the 1950s, conceived as active and consensual. In the second, it began to precipitate its own obverse: solitary emptiness in which artists represented only themselves.

⁴²⁷ Querèl, “Ma^crađ al-Fannānīn al-^cArab al-Muqīmīn fī İtaliya.”

Chapter Three Figures



Fig. 3.1 Stills from “A difesa di Via Margutta,” produced by *La Settimana Incom* (20 November 1953). On the left, the “group of Arab diplomats.” On the right, the Mayor of Rome addressing the crowd.

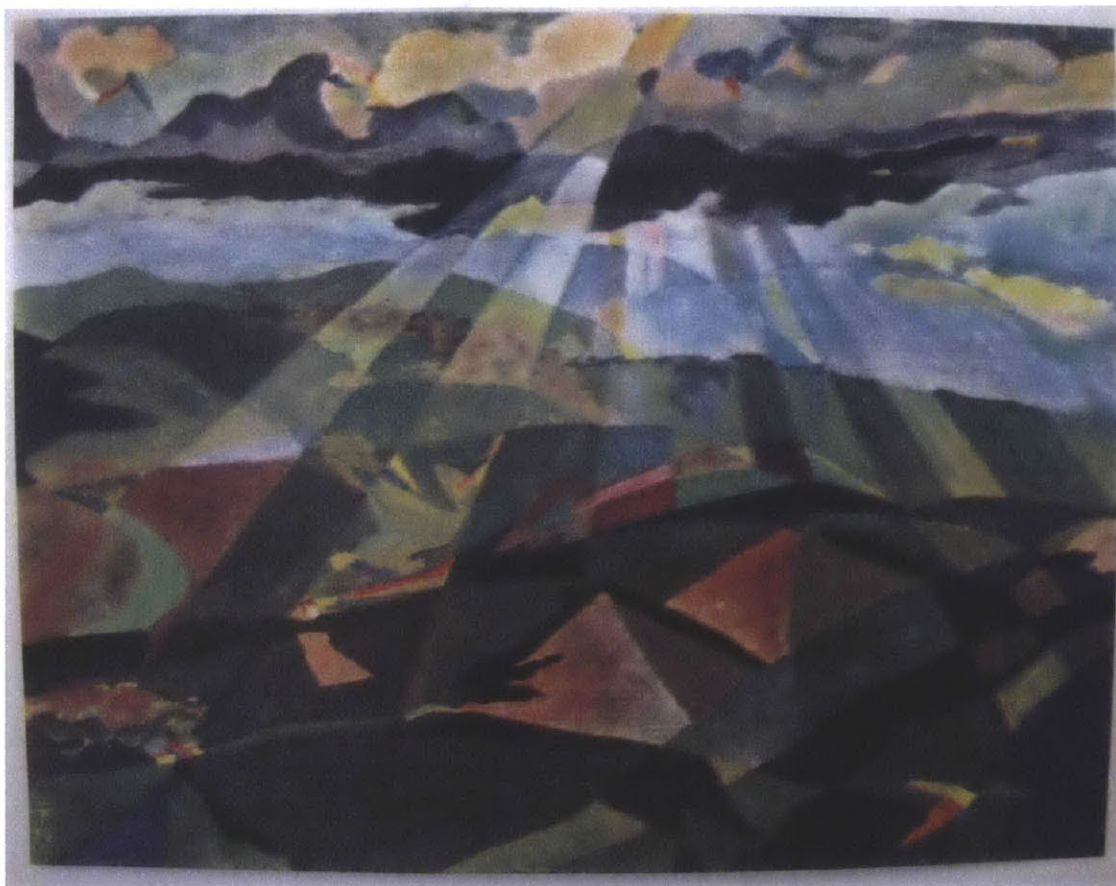


Fig. 3.2 Adham Ismail, *Landscape from Italy*, oil, dimensions unknown, 1955. Source: Naim Ismail, *Adham Ismā‘il*, 43.



Fig. 3.3 View of a drawing class in the Accademia di Belle Arti, Rome, as appears in *La Scuola dei pittori*, 1954, dir. Romolo Marcellini, 10', 35mm.



Fig. 3.4 Novella Parigini attracting a crowd at a Via Margutta street fair, 1954. Source: Fondo Vedo, FV00003946, "Mostra di pittori a Via Margutta," October 30, 1954.



Fig. 3.5 Artist Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar explaining his painting to a visitor at his exhibition at La Feluca in Rome, 1955. Source: Subhi al-Sharuni, *‘Abd al-Hadī al-Jazzār: Fannān al-Asāṭīr wa-‘Alam al-Fadā’* (Cairo: al-Dar al-Qawmiyya li-l-Tiba‘a wa-l-Nashr, 1966), 7.



Fig. 3.6 Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar, *The World of Love*, medium and dimensions unknown, 1952(?). Source: Color image unattributed, from online site: <http://drawingatduke.blogspot.com/2012/10/normal-0-false-false-false-en-us-ja-x.html>. Black & white reproduction appears in Cesare Cossa, “La Repubblica d’Egitto sta nascendo sulle rive del Tevere,” *Margutta* 3.1 (1955), 7-8.

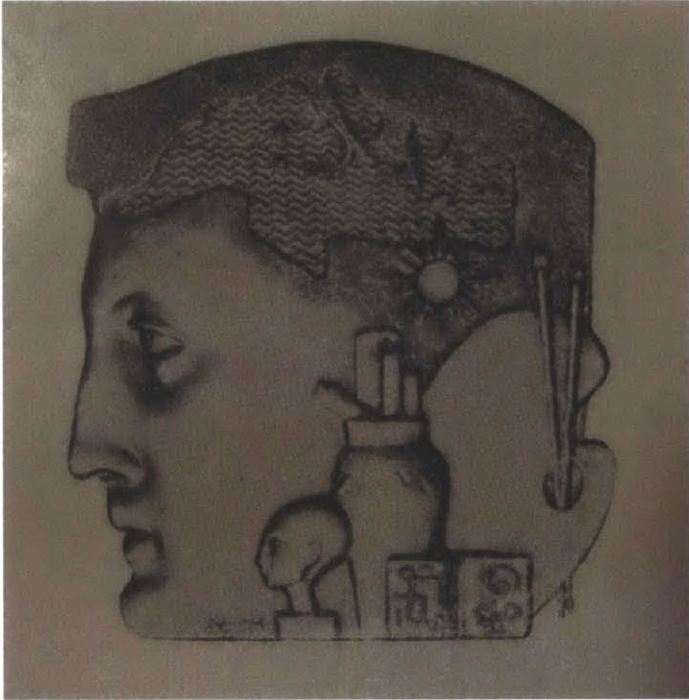


Fig. 3.7 Gamal al-Sagini, Medallion for the 1955 Alexandria Biennial. Source: *Biyannālī al-Awwal li-Funūn Duwal al-Baḥr al-Abyaḍ al-Mutawassiṭ, al-Iskandariyya* (Alexandria: Museum of Fine Arts, 1955).



Fig. 3.8 Reproduction of a Picasso Antibes painting, 1948. Source: *Verve* vol. 5 nos. 19-20 (Paris: Editions de la Revue Verve, 1948).



Fig. 3.9 Nicolas de Staël, *Ménerbes*, oil on canvas, 60 cm x 81 cm, 1954. Collection Musée Fabre, Montpellier, France.

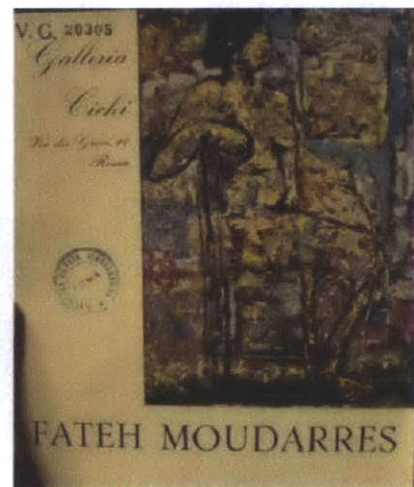


Fig. 3.10a *Flowers and Lines*

Fig. 3.10b *Bedouin Children*

Fig. 3.10c *Seated Nude*

All paintings oil on canvas. Source: Exhibition handbill, Fateh Moudarres, Gallery Cichi, Roma, opening 28 November 1959 (printed at Istituto Grafico Tiberino, Roma).



Fig. 3.11 Fateh al-Moudarres, *Abstract Composition*, oil on canvas, 35 x 50 cm, 1958. Formerly in the collection of Dr. Girolami, Rome. Sold at Christie's Modern and Contemporary Arab, Iranian and Turkish Art Part 2, Sale 8063, Dubai, 16 April 2013.

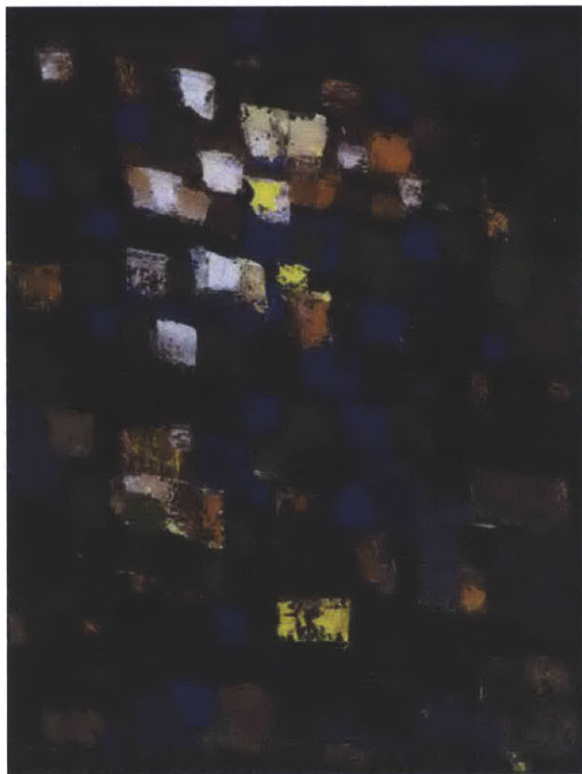


Fig. 3.12 Fateh al-Moudarres, no title, oil on black cardboard, 64.5 x 48 cm, 1959. Formerly in a private collection, Rome, and acquired directly from the artist. Sold at Christie's International Modern and Contemporary Art, Sale 7895, Dubai, 26 October 2010.



Fig. 3.13 Fateh al-Moudarres, no title, mixed media on paper, 11.5 x 13.5 cm, 1960. Formerly in a private collection. Sold at Christie's Visions d'Orient – de l'Orientalisme à l'Art Contemporain, Sale 1014, Paris, 4 October 2011.



Fig. 3.14 Fateh al-Moudarres, no title, mixed media on paper, 15.5 x 22 cm, 1960. Formerly in a private collection. Sold at Christie's Visions d'Orient – de l'Orientalisme à l'Art Contemporain, Sale 1014, Paris, 4 October 2011.



Fig. 3.15 Fateh al-Moudarres, *Painting After the War*, oil pastel, 40x50 cm, 1958. Source: Tarek al-Sharif, *Fātiḥ al-Mudarris: Fann Hadīth ... bi-Rūḥ Taʿbīrīyya* (Damascus: 1991), 77.

– or – *Judgment and Sacrifice*, wax crayon, exhibited in the Exhibition of the National Museum, Rome, 1957.

Source: Samar Hamarneh, *Kayf Yarā Fātiḥ al-Mudarris* (Damascus: Tiba li-l-Tibaʿa wa-l-Taghlif, 1999), fig. 8.⁴²⁸



Fig. 3.16 “Jean Paul Sartre and the painter Moudarres in Rome.” Source: Exhibition handbill, Fateh Moudarres, Gallery Cichi, Roma, opening 28 November 1959 (printed at Istituto Grafico Tiberino, Roma). Collection of the library of the University of Rome-La Sapienza.

⁴²⁸ These sources provide different titles, material description, and dates for the same image.

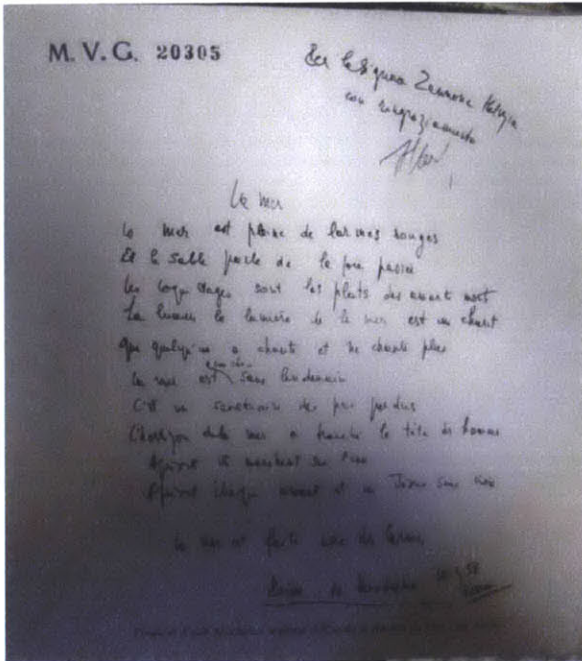


Fig. 3.17 “Poem of Fateh Moudarres translated from Arabic into French by Jean Paul Sartre.” Source: Exhibition handbill, Fateh Moudarres, Gallery Cichi, Roma, opening 28 November 1959 (printed at Istituto Grafico Tiberino, Roma).



Fig. 3.18 Fateh al-Moudarres, *Face of a Girl*, medium and size unknown, 1960. Source: Tarek al-Sharif, *Fātiḥ al-Mudarris: Fann Hadīth... bi-Rūḥ Taʿbīriyya* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1991), 87. Al-Sharif indicates that the work won a prize from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome.



Fig. 3.19 Fateh al-Moudarres, no title, oil on canvas board, 52 x 34 cm, 1960. Painted in Rome; Formerly in a private collection, Rome. Sold at Christie's International Modern and Contemporary Art, Sale 7895, Dubai, 26 October 2010.



Fig. 3.20 Fateh al-Moudarres, *The Line*, oil on blue card, 66.5 x 48 cm, 1960. Painted in Rome; purchased from the artist in Rome circa 1960. Sold at Bonhams Contemporary Art and Design, Auction 21095, London, 27 June 2013. In the collection of the Park Gallery, London.

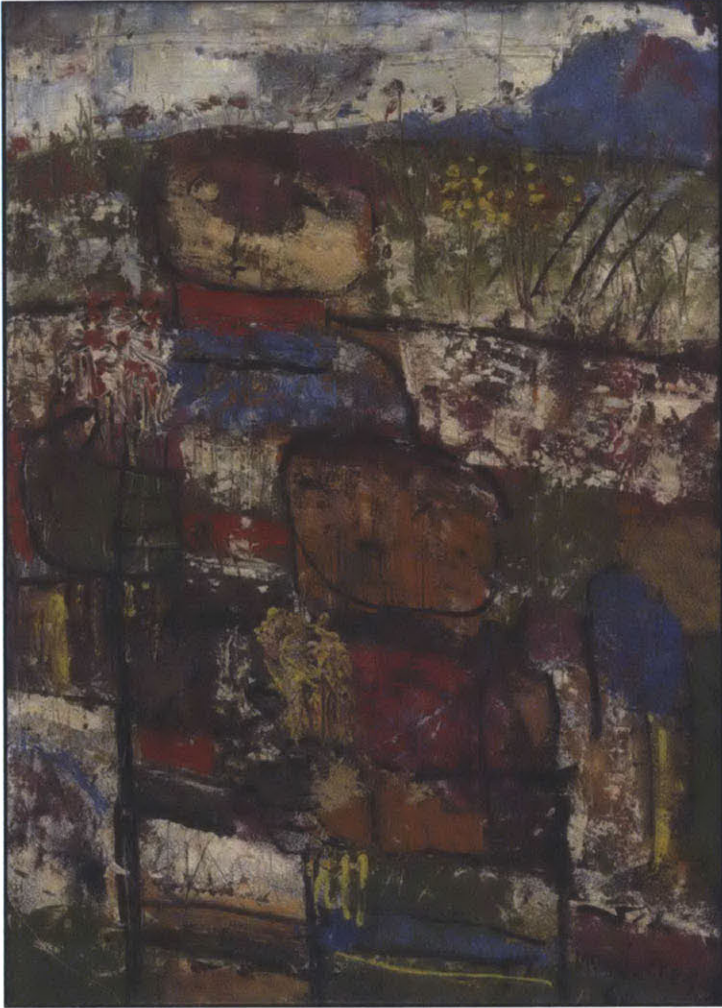


Fig. 3.21 Fateh al-Moudarres, *Untitled (Figures with Flowers)*, mixed media on paper on board, 69.9 x 49.5 cm, 1960. Formerly in a private collection, Los Angeles, California. Sold at Bonhams Modern and Contemporary Art, Auction 16980, Los Angeles, 4 May 2009.



Fig. 3.22 Spread from “La Biennale della Retroguardia,” *Vita* (7 Luglio 1960), showing paintings from the pavilions associated with the Soviet bloc countries.

Chapter Four

Fateh al-Mouddarres and the Heritage of Transgression, 1960-1964

The United Arab Republic was terminated on September 28, 1961. A small group of officers in the Syrian army staged a secessionist coup from Damascus on that date, proclaiming a restoration of Syrian sovereignty and political life and scheduling fresh elections for December. With the split, the preceding claims to have achieved a consummation of a natural Arab unity could no longer hold. For the country's cultural sector, the coup brought a mixture of relief and cynicism as politicians, bureaucrats, and artists began to reformulate their alliances within an uncertain political trajectory. And for the generation of artists who were returning from Italy to assume new expert positions in the state apparatus, emerging questions about identity quickly proved to be a practical as well as a thematic concern. In this chapter, I take the palpably fraught notion of national membership after the UAR as an occasion to interrogate Fateh al-Mouddarres's approach to aesthetic production in his native land, 1960-1964, and in particular its intellectual stakes within ongoing explorations of the Syrian identity in the literary and political spheres. Al-Mouddarres would soon gain recognition for the authenticity of his creation in full continuity with the Syrian land and its peoples from intellectuals in the region.⁴²⁹ But over these four years, he was still actively probing the question of the balance to be struck between artistic commitments to local character, Arab cultural affinities, and international success.

⁴²⁹ Al-Mouddarres rapidly became one of Syria's most celebrated painters, winning prizes abroad (including at the 1961 São Paulo Bienal) and sold work to an international collector base, but he was particularly revered by colleagues for the simplicity and inimitability of his images and his irreverence in the face of social convention. For summaries of his significance in Syria, see al-Sharif, *Ishrūn Fannānān fī Sūriyā*, and Zayyat, "Introduction." Also see the first-person account of Lebanese artist Amine el Bacha in *Simfūniyyat al-Lawn*, 204-205. El Bacha describes how, in the 1960s and 1970s, when Arab painters began gathering in Baghdad rather than Beirut (as in the al-Wasiti Festival) and working with hackneyed heritage motifs, al-Mouddarres held firm to his spartan pictorial language and focus on the features of man.

We can trace some aspects of these questions in al-Moudarres's strategies of self-presentation while he faced the prospect of a permanent return to Syria. For example, a 1960 newspaper profile advertising his first solo exhibition in Damascus made the bombastic announcement that he had sold more than three hundred paintings in Europe, but also characterized him as an alienated, prodigal figure who was returning to Syria bearing a "cross of the infidel," suffering the fate of the "blind and ignorant prophet," singing the sweetest of songs, and plumbing the lost depths of human genius.⁴³⁰ With the return of Syrian sovereignty in 1961, the question of nativity and its imprint on subjectivity took on even more importance for artistic production, an activity that al-Moudarres and his cohort understood as the expression of the psychical self. Al-Moudarres's assessment of the legacy of his own nativity, however, was distinctly ambivalent, and he questioned the turn to make filial solidarity into a basis for progress or national cohesion. As *al-Jundi*, the illustrated general interest publication of the Syrian Army, duly reported in its first feature on al-Moudarres in October 1961, the artist sought to position his work in the quotidian coordinates of his childhood in northern Syria even while he also saw a lineage of tragedy in them (Fig. 4.1).⁴³¹ It reported,

Fateh loves the mountains, small children, and simple-souled women with a deep knowledge of the human self without ponderousness, and loves those topics related to motherhood and love based on absolute sacrifice.⁴³²

⁴³⁰ Abdul Aziz Alloun, "Fātiḥ al-Mudarris al-Fannān alladhī Bā'a Akthar min 300 Lawḥāt fī Urubbā," *Sawt al-ʿArab*, 17 May 1960. Al-Moudarres was exhibiting at the new AMI Gallery in Damascus (*Ṣālat al-Fann al-Ḥadīth al-ʿAlamī*), which he arranged during a brief return visit to Syria in May 1960 to move his family back to his native Aleppo before returning to Europe. I discuss the AMI at length later in this chapter. Al-Moudarres separated from his wife in the same period, and, by late 1961, had settled in Damascus permanently.

⁴³¹ No author, "Fannān ʿArabī Sūrī Yafūz bi-l-Jāʿiza al-Ulā," *al-Jundi* (24 Oct 1961): 28-9. The ostensible subject of the feature was Syrian artistic success on the international stage, for the Syrian Ministry of Culture had just received the unexpected good news that al-Moudarres had won a jury prize from the São Paulo Bienal. The full headlines read: "Syrian Arab Artist Wins First Prize in the Biennale of São Paulo. Fateh al-Moudarres Says: 'Arab Art Will Join the International Procession.'"

⁴³² *Ibid.*

It is this final reference to absolute sacrifice as the basis of maternal love that hints at al-Moudarres's darkly critical concerns. By identifying this deeply symbiotic relation within his beloved untamed landscapes and unschooled people, he had also pointed to a torturous cycle of codependence. In al-Moudarres's Syria, a mother's love not only ensured the demise of her individual self but also condemns her progeny to the same violent reproduction.

This chapter explores the deconstructive inquiry into Syrian heritage that al-Moudarres conducted through his drawings, paintings, poetry, and social interactions over the period 1960-1964. In this period, Syrian artists faced a growing pressure to create work through visible recourse to a canon of authentic cultural forms termed *turāth*.⁴³³ These pressures had to do with the ongoing intellectual debate over the terms of Arab modernity, as was becoming more urgent as cultural practice took a central place in decolonization projects in the region. As art historian Silvia Naef has observed in her studies of modern art in Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq, the Arab thinkers who were concerned with theorizing modernity in the first half of the century had understood "being modern" as entailing adopting Western concepts and forms, but in the post-WWII independence phase, many argued that it was necessary to make modernity compatible with already existing local cultural practice and sought to reconquer the past rather than enact a break with it.⁴³⁴ In this context, *turāth*, understood as a patrimonial heritage of time-honored, edifying forms, would be invoked to oppose the perceived hollowness of an imported, universalized standard.⁴³⁵ But for al-Moudarres, who was deeply engaged in the struggle to locate and maintain a free and authentic artistic practice, the notion of *turāth* offered a solution to

⁴³³ Less than two years after the 1961 coup terminating the UAR and the installation of a civilian government, a March 8, 1963 coup brought the Ba'ath Party to power. In 1966, there would be an internal party coup by a more radical faction. For more detail, see the "coups d'état" entry in my appendix.

⁴³⁴ Silvia Naef, "Reexploring Islamic Art: Modern and Contemporary Creation in the Arab World and Its Relation to the Artistic Past," *RES* 43 (Spring 2003): 164-174. For a withering critique of the fixation on *turāth* as it arose in Iraq in the same period, see Samir al-Khalil (Kanan Makiya), *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity, and Responsibility in Iraq* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991), 69-100.

⁴³⁵ Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007), 16-29.

feelings of dislocation that was ambivalent at best. As we will see, his creative practice, which employed a suite of compositional strategies informed by surrealist techniques of free association, repeatedly represented the motifs of *turāth* in primitivized paintings, automatic drawings, and renderings of an animate Syrian steppe, but never accorded them the edifying power of an authority. Instead of presenting monumental or venerable features, his renderings made every marker of status, gender, or moral standing into merely provisional indications. Ultimately, I contend, al-Moudarres's reading of Syrian history and visual culture refuted the possibility of a centered or restorative national identity, the very ideal that was central to *turāth*. In this sense, his practice was a fundamentally transgressive one. It should be seen as a response to the fraught nationalist imperatives of the decolonization project, but it was not engaged in buttressing the nation-building project *per se*. Rather, the imaginary of national belonging that he pursued, with its themes of shared accursedness and vulnerability, offered a dissenting view of the teleology of the nation-state. His version of Syrian heritage was antithetical to state governance or the ideology of managed progress.

So as to better locate my analysis of the intellectual and social coordinates for al-Moudarres's critique, I also pursue a second, institutional history in this chapter. I track the emergence of new presenting art spaces and literary journals in Damascus and Beirut for the crucial support they gave al-Moudarres, particularly in creating audiences of poets and critics who ratified the significance of his project and installed him as a public intellectual. Importantly for this history, al-Moudarres's conception of national community extended across Syria's political borders to encompass the inheritors of a primordial "nation" maintained through the life processes of the fertile Mesopotamian regions. And, in the same period, the network of distribution for his work also crossed the line of the nation-state in a discursive community then

developing apart from the direct support of any state government, incorporating intellectuals in Beirut, Baghdad, and Damascus as well as diaspora readers in Paris, New York, and beyond. To foreshadow these institutional developments, Syria's first private gallery, *Ṣālat al-Fann al-Ḥadīth al-ʿAlamī*, or Art Moderne International (henceforth AMI), opened in October 1960, thereby consolidating the Damascus art scene and opening the possibility of commercial sales in Syria as well as beyond, in Lebanon.⁴³⁶ Subsequently, al-Moudarres won critical appreciation from Beirut's cultural salons, followed soon thereafter by interest from the city's modernist literary journals. The gallery scene in Beirut also intensified in these years, prompting the modernist poet Yusuf al-Khal (1917-1987) to incorporate the visual arts into the two "little magazines" he was publishing from Beirut – the revered title *Shiʿr (Poetry)* and its just-launched spin-off *Adab (Literature)*.⁴³⁷ In April 1963, al-Khal opened an art space in Beirut, launching Gallery One with his wife Helen (1923-2009), a painter and art critic. By that summer, al-Moudarres would be fully interpellated into this densely integrated intellectual milieu. He exhibited at Gallery One, published drawings in *Shiʿr* and *Adab*, received a long-form review of his exhibition in *Adab*, and even appeared on the masthead of *Shiʿr* as a Damascus editor.⁴³⁸

The years 1960-1964 were characterized by an ideological sparring as well, between capitalism and socialism and between liberal individualism and progressive communalism. The

⁴³⁶ My use of the acronym AMI follows the gallery's own conventions. When it produced bilingual exhibition booklets, it used the acronym for its French name, "Art Moderne International." I discuss the gallery in greater detail later in the chapter.

⁴³⁷ Yusuf al-Khal published *Shiʿr* from Beirut on a near quarterly basis for eight years, 1957-1964, editing it with a close-knit group of poet colleagues. He launched *Adab* in February 1962 as "a magazine of literature, thought, and art in the Arab world." Although this period proved to be the most intense for al-Khal in terms of promotional cultural activity, it also represents a kind of end. He would cease publishing both journals in 1964, *Adab* after the Summer issue and *Shiʿr* in the early winter. *Shiʿr* later reappeared between 1967-1970, but with significant changes to format and scope (I do not consider this period here).

⁴³⁸ Al-Moudarres's exhibition at Gallery One ran June 6-15, 1963. His published drawings appear in: Fateh al-Moudarres, "Arbaʿ Qaṣāʾid maʿ Rusūm," *Shiʿr* 27 (Summer 1963), 37-41, and as an appendix to Elias Awad, "al-Ṣudfa Laysat Fann: Lawḥat Fātiḥ al-Mudarris," *Adab* 2 no. 3 (Summer 1963), 45-50. As I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, this intensified involvement with al-Khal's magazines coincides with a shift in al-Khal's publishing interests that had sparked conflicts with other members of the *Shiʿr* editorial group.

cities of Damascus and Beirut are located only two hours apart by car but they were anchoring strikingly different political and economic regimes. For this reason, an additional prefatory note about Cold War politics as it impacted these artistic initiatives is in order. The privately operated galleries and journals that provided a primary forum for al-Moudarres to explore the issue of his Syrian nativity all tended to uphold an ideal of artistic autonomy and maintain spaces for aesthetic appreciation that were inured to political intrigue. *Shiʿr*, which al-Khal had established with his founding co-editor Adonis as a publication “just for poetry,” maintained a commitment to a discourse of art for art’s sake in spite of vociferous opposition from intellectuals who espoused a form of Sartrean commitment.⁴³⁹ Similarly, when Gallery One opened, it issued a founding promise to provide a permanent space of exhibition of “art only” without the distractions or caprice.⁴⁴⁰ Because Beirut gave home to such institutions catering to aesthetes and cosmopolites, Syrian artists saw it as an anomaly in the region’s intellectual geography where new and innovative work could capture the attention of serious collectors. By the end of the decade, however, the same institutions that had provided a professional boost to artists’ careers would attract derision for their perceived bourgeois capitalist values. Western-style “little magazines” in particular became targets for the animus of Arab nationalists, particularly so after it was revealed in 1966 that many such magazines had received financial support from the American Central Intelligence Agency via the Congress for Cultural Freedom.⁴⁴¹ That Congress

⁴³⁹ Al-Khal placed ads in existing cultural journals to announce the creation of a new publication “just for poetry.” In practice, “just for poetry” entailed a variety of types of texts, including regular sections dedicated to translations, criticism, and news and questions. In 1961, the Beirut journal *al-Adāb*, edited by Suhayl Idriss, began to attack Shiʿr’s apoliticism as well as its perceived ties to the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and its pro-Western profile (I discuss these ties later in the chapter). An insightful discussion of the 1961 dispute may be found in Robyn Creswell, “Tradition and Translation: Poetic Modernism in Beirut” (PhD, NYU 2012). Also see Ed de Moor, “The Rise and Fall of the Review *Shiʿr*,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 18 (2000): 85-96, and Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 603-4.

⁴⁴⁰ “Iftitāḥ Ghālirī Wāḥid: Awwal Muʿassasa Fanniyya min Nawʿihā,” *al-Nahar*, 18 April 1963.

⁴⁴¹ The New York Times had been investigating the CIA’s overreaches from as early as 1964, with “Electronic Prying Grows,” *The New York Times*, 27 April 1966, the first story to mention the CIA’s use of fronting institutions

had indeed underwritten several programs meant to influence hearts and minds in the Arab world, including an October 1961 conference on Contemporary Arab Literature, held in Rome, and the creation of *Hiwar (Dialogue)*, an Arabic-language version of *Encounter* edited by Palestinian poet Tawfiq Sayigh, who was a close friend of the *Shi'ar* circle.⁴⁴² The American government had also treated the Lebanese art scene as a host site for an artist residency program, even sending an abstract painter to reside in Beirut in 1964.⁴⁴³ For the purposes of this chapter, I acknowledge the existence of non-local influences in the operations of the new galleries and magazines, but wish to avoid fixating on them or their perceived challenge to the integrity of the ideas these institutions advanced. I do not see these covertly funded projects as solely a corrupting force upon an otherwise ideal, autochthonous art, nor do I see the “international” art trends in the region as a deviation from nature. My interest is in tracing the circulation of ideas and funding that formed a basic condition for the expanding art world of the 1960s, one in which Syrian artists participated. As I see it, al-Moudarres’s transgressive art should be understood as a response to precisely that condition of interconnectedness in all its contradiction.

to channel funds to magazines. It mentions CIA backing for *Encounter*. Subsequent stories revealed that the Congress funded other cultural magazines, also including *Preuves* (France), *Tempo Presente* (Italy), *Quadrant* (Australia), and others.

⁴⁴² *Hiwar*, published out of London, had also launched in 1962 and featured Arab artists as part of its editorial purview. For a discussion of the scandal, see Patrick Seale, “Cairo Bars Arab Journal, Charging CIA Link,” *The Washington Post*, 12 June 1966. Although we know the Congress for Cultural Freedom had attempted to recruit an anti-Communist editor for *Hiwar*, as far as I have been able to determine, Sayigh himself did not know of the connection between the Congress and the CIA. Sayigh’s initial response to the exposé is summarized in Issa J. Boullata, “The Beleaguered Unicorn: A Study of Tawfiq Sayigh,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 4 (1973), 69-93. For anecdotes about the Congress’s search for an editor, see Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002), 151 and 337, and Denys Johnson-Davies, *Memories in Translation: A Life between the Lines of Arabic Literature* (Cairo: The American Univ. in Cairo Press, 2006), 70. It is whispered that al-Khal’s *Adab* also received CIA funding. Although the circumstantial evidence for this certainly stacks up – al-Khal registered the journal in Beirut in October 1961, the same month that he attended the Rome conference sponsored by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the Instituto Italiano per l’Oriente, and *Tempo Presente* – I have not seen it mentioned in a reputable source.

⁴⁴³ For a careful investigation of the Cold War art programs in the Beirut art circa 1962 and the complicity of Lebanon’s diplomatic corps in them, see Sarah A. Rogers, “The Artist as Cultural Diplomat,” *American Art* 25.1 (Spring 2011): 112-123.

Early Associations

Al-Mouardres was born in 1922, making him a contemporary of Ismail and Hammad (whose work I discuss at greater length in the next chapter) in the generation that came of age when French colonial administrators were controlling the fate of the Syrian state. In terms of his background, however, he cut a different profile, and he sought out a different position vis-à-vis national political life. Born in the Aleppo countryside to a father from a notable Sunni Muslim family and a mother from Kurdish peasant stock, al-Mouardres might have enjoyed significant privilege by virtue of his family name and connections had it not been for an early tragedy.⁴⁴⁴ When al-Mouardres was still an infant, his father Abdel Kader was murdered in a dispute over family properties.⁴⁴⁵ When the remaining members of the al-Mouardres clan refused to recognize the father's marriage, his mother Aisha took her children away to live with her brothers, such that the artist spent the first eight years of his life in a semi-nomadic household on the Aleppine steppe where he explored the wild terrain by day and by night observed the patriarchal posturing of his uncles.⁴⁴⁶ His father's sisters only consented to recognize him as kin after he reached school age, at which time they finally made arrangements for him to reside in Aleppo and receive a standard preparatory education. This plunged al-Mouardres back into a relatively privileged lifestyle and they facilitated his entry to the best *tajhīz* high schools, supplemented by an extra year's attendance at the private boarding school Universal College in Aley, Lebanon.⁴⁴⁷ By the time he completed his education at these finishing schools in the 1940s, he had cultivated

⁴⁴⁴ Tahir al-Bunni, *Tajārib Tashkīliyya Rāʿida* (Damascus: Syrian General Organization of Books, 2008), 112-113. For a discussion of class and notable clans in Aleppo mentioning the al-Mouardres family, see Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East*, 181.

⁴⁴⁵ The precise nature of the dispute is not clear. Some biographies say the French killed him, or, that other "feudal lords" did because he supported the nationalist movement of Ibrahim Hananu. In *Tajārib*, al-Bunni quotes the artist as saying the "family itself" killed his father because he was a supporter of a peasant rebellion.

⁴⁴⁶ *Fāṭih wa-Adūnis*, 12-18.

⁴⁴⁷ Prior to Universal College, he had attended the American-run Aleppo College. Both were part of the network of American Protestant "diplomatic" initiatives in the Near East and were considered feeder institutions for AUB.

the persona of a *littérateur*. Although he occasionally participated in strikes against the French occupation, his intellectual circles were largely protected from the tumult of the war years.⁴⁴⁸ At Alep he adopted an attitude of cultivated disinterest and devoted himself to the intensive study of foreign literatures, including the German writers in the Romantic tradition such as Goethe, Schiller, and Hölderlin as well as texts about surrealism.⁴⁴⁹ He also began to explore the disassociative techniques of automatic painting in this setting, engaging in brush exercises meant to release “freed subjects...surreal subjects.”⁴⁵⁰ For the whole of his life, 1922-1999, he avoided voicing any outright commitment to organized mass politics.⁴⁵¹ If pressed to name a defining cause, he would often cite the unregulated wilds of the northern Syrian countryside.

Toward the war’s end, al-Moudarres returned to Aleppo to support his mother, and his command of English allowed him to secure a teaching position as a language instructor in the preparatory high schools. There, he witnessed an astonishing flourishing of café life after national independence, with “umbrellas, white tables with fresh linen,” beer, and new cars pouring into the streets, and bookstores opening, supporting new exhibition opportunities and attracting newly engaged audiences.⁴⁵² Continuing to abstain from organized politics, he saw the whole of the city as a field of possibility for expressing modern sensibilities. At that time in Aleppo, a circle of vanguard poets and writers led by Orkhan Muyassar (1911-1965) had begun to grapple with the tenets of surrealism as a means to enact bold changes in Arabic literary

⁴⁴⁸ He mentions the strikes in Hamarneh, *Kayf Yarā Fātīh al-Mudarris*, 32.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁵⁰ Al-Bunni, *Tajārib*, 116; al-Sharif, *Fātīh al-Mudarris*, 53.

⁴⁵¹ Al-Moudarres has to have enrolled in the Ba’th Party sometime in the 1970s or else he would not have been promoted in the College of Fine Arts or served on government committees. In spite of this eventual professional affiliation, he always gave the impression of speaking freely and without recourse to government boilerplate. In fact, one of his greatest talents was his verbal ability to lightly satirize social and political pieties without presenting himself as a sufficiently serious threat to the figures in power that he suffered reprisals.

⁴⁵² *Mudarris*, dir. Omar Amiralay, Muhammad Malas, and Oussama Mohammad (1995). Additional details on the spirit of the period may be found in al-Bunni, *Tajārib*, 118; *Fātīh wa-Adūnīs*, 57; Kashlan, *Nisf Qarn*, 120. Adonis recalls that Aleppo’s bookstores stocked volumes of experimental poetry by René Char, Max Jacob, and Lautréamont and there was vitality and worldliness in the street life on Baron Street and the newspapers.

mores.⁴⁵³ Al-Mouddarres frequented the group, joining them in their experiments with inducing direct, unmediated expression. In addition to their own circle, the group also enjoyed the presence of a sympathetic journal, *al-Qithara (The Harp)*, which had been established in Latakia by the “Group of New Poetry” with the stated purpose of cultivating the joys of artistic creation.⁴⁵⁴ It published several of al-Mouddarres’s early symbolist-surrealist poems, as well as pieces by Muyassar, Omar Abu Risha, Said Akl, Yusuf al-Khal, and even a teenaged Adonis (who was still using his given name Ali Ahmad al-Said, and was identified as contributing from “his mountain Qassabin”).⁴⁵⁵ It also boldly declared its support for the artistic autonomy of its contributors, reminding them in a May 1947 editorial that “*al-Qithara*, in the first and the last, is for art, and for pure art in its entirety.”⁴⁵⁶ In the same period, al-Mouddarres continued to pursue his surrealist experiments in painting, maintaining a frenetic pace of activity in multiple realms: painting, publishing, exhibiting, and spending nights out and about. He and his well-placed friends also indulged in the pleasures of illicit consumption. For example, whenever the renowned Lebanese critic Maroun Aboud (whom he knew from Aley) visited Aleppo, the two

⁴⁵³ As mentioned in note 83, Muyassar and al-Nasir published *Siryāl* in 1946, which featured an introduction to surrealist techniques of composition and poems devoted to Van Gogh and Max Ernst. An invaluable gloss on Muyassar’s ideas about surrealism may be found in Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, 513-515. The group tended to meet in either Muyassar’s home or the home of Omar Abu Risha, and they were also interested in the writings of Freud. For al-Mouddarres’s involvement see Hamarneh, *Kayf Yarā Fātih al-Mudarris*, 54.

⁴⁵⁴ Muhammad Kamil al-Khatib, introduction, *Majallat al-Qithāra: Silsilat Shi‘r wa-Fann* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 2006), 5-28. Other than the head of its editorial group, a lawyer named Abdul Aziz Arnaout, the names of the members of the Group are no longer known.

⁴⁵⁵ Qassabin is the name of the village near Latakia where Adonis was born. Contributions from Ahmed Ali Said appear Sept. 1946, Nov. 1946, and May 1947. Al-Mouddarres’s poems include “al-Wajh al-Sham‘ī (Waxen Head),” *al-Qithara* (Jan. 1947), 29, which the journal introduced as symbolist literature excerpted from al-Mouddarres’s book *Turāb min al-Sharq* that had just been sent out for printing (but which, to the best of my knowledge, never appeared); “Talāsh (Evanescence)” (Feb. 1947), 23; “Madīnat al-Shaytān (The Devil’s City)” (March 1947), 36-37; “Intiṣār (Victory)” (May 1947), 27-8; and “al-Amīra (The Princess)” (August 1947), introduced as surrealist literature from a soon-to-be-published book *Ibn al-Ard* (again, I do not believe it appeared). Al-Khal appears May 1947.

⁴⁵⁶ Editorial Committee, “Ilā al-Shu‘arā’ wa-l-Kuttāb wa-l-Fannānīn,” *al-Qithara* (May 1947), inner front cover.

visited a nightclub named Do Re Mi to drink and listen to a troupe of blind singers perform a mix of Arabic, Turkish, and Armenian songs.⁴⁵⁷

The artist's high profile in Aleppo did not always facilitate his entry to the national cultural patronage system centered in Damascus, however. Al-Moudarres would be passed over for the Italian *burse* every year he took the exam until he finally succeeded in 1956, for example.⁴⁵⁸ Although his name had appeared on the rolls of Syrian artists from very early on – for example, in 1947, he exhibited in a showcase that the Ministry of Education organized at the Damascus *tajhīz* and an exhibition for the first Arab Cultural Congress in Bayt Mari, Lebanon – Aleppo remained his center of gravity, which ensured that he occupied a somewhat marginal position vis-à-vis the state.⁴⁵⁹ The tendency to conceive of Aleppo as a remote outpost is apparent in the writings devoted to Ismail's career. Ismail had worked in Aleppo for the 1949-50 school year, overlapping with al-Moudarres as an instructor at Sayf al-Dawla high school, and his brothers emphasize how Ismail had taken the position as a favor for a friend before hastening back to Damascus.⁴⁶⁰ By the time that Sidqi Ismail arrived in Aleppo in 1952 for his own appointment at Sayf al-Dawla teaching psychology and civics, he described the city's placidity in striking contrast to the “fever of public life” in Damascus, writing to his brother about how he had not wanted to come, but had found that the tranquility helped him to concentrate on study and writing.⁴⁶¹ That letter would have arrived in Rome just as al-Moudarres's career gained a new degree of visibility in Syria. The artist won his first official recognition as a significant

⁴⁵⁷ Recollections of Hussein Raji in *Simfūniyyat al-Lawn*, 62 and 186. The troupe had christened al-Moudarres the “Jubran of Aleppo,” a teasing reference to Jubran Khalil Jubran.

⁴⁵⁸ Mamdouh Kashlan, interview by author, Damascus, June 9, 2010. The fact that he had an irregular high school diploma from outside the state system also created bureaucratic problems.

⁴⁵⁹ Al-Sharif, *Fātiḥ al-Mudarris*, 53.

⁴⁶⁰ Naim Ismail, *Adham Ismā'īl*, 109.

⁴⁶¹ Sidqi Ismail to Adham Ismail, Aleppo, 12 Nov. 1952, in *Rasā'il lam Tunshar*. His letter mentions that al-Moudarres sends his greetings and requests news from Italy.

talent at the 1952 national exhibition in Damascus, where he received the top painting prize for *Kafr Janna*, a painting of the Kurdish village near Afrin of that name that he completed in searing high-key color.⁴⁶² The audaciousness of the painting had also impressed members of the Union of Syrian Writers, and the group elected him to membership on the unprecedentedly scant basis of the painting and his three published short stories.⁴⁶³ And yet, although the artist had begun to gain positive attention in the capital, he continued to incubate his practice within his immediate Aleppo community, a group of intellectuals who worked well outside ministerial offices and neither paid heed to governmental stipulations nor actively opposed them.⁴⁶⁴ This biographical point is particularly significant given the erratic behavior of the Damascus government. By the time of the opening of the 1952 exhibition, President Shishakli had already exiled the Ba^ʿth leadership, outlawed all political parties, and started his own Arab Liberation Movement party. As criticism mounted from both the military and civilian politicians, the president resorted to mass arrests.

Against this backdrop of intrigue and struggle, the national exhibition had become a highly visible event in Syria, offering newspapers a proxy event for gauging the direction of the nation as a whole. Many publications generated long, taxonomic reviews of the variety of stylistic types in these exhibitions, praising al-Moudarres for his work in the styles of Van Gogh and surrealism (Fig. 4.2 and Fig. 4.3).⁴⁶⁵ The publications that hewed to more explicit

⁴⁶² The painting has unfortunately since been lost and no color reproduction remains.

⁴⁶³ Said Hawrani, "Muqaddima," *ʿUd al-Na^ʿna^ʿ* (Damascus: al-Arabiya li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi, 1981), 6.

⁴⁶⁴ For example, in 1952, Muyassar had been named the head of the British Council library in Aleppo and had begun to organize study circles and lecture series under its auspices, which proved formative for an entire generation of young intellectuals in the city. See Abdul Aziz Alloun, "Hiwār al-Arbi^ʿā" *al-Ba^ʿth*, 20 October 2010.

⁴⁶⁵ For these identifications of al-Moudarres's paintings in particular, see Munir Sulayman, "Ma^ʿraḍ al-Funūn al-Jamīla li-^ʿAm 1953," *al-Ḥawliyyāt* (1953): 165-167. Orkhan Muyassar would even published a dissenting view against this general trend, "Taqsīm al-Fann ilā Madāris...Gharīb ^ʿan al-Fann!" *al-Bina^ʿ*, 9 Dec. 1953. He argued that a "movement" is actually an organic convergence of interests and needs, and because it is produced unconsciously within a longer history of progression that unfolds independently of individual creators, it misses the point of creative development to try to name specific movements.

ideological positions, by contrast, used the exhibition occasion to formulate more prescriptive cultural views. Most important among these for al-Moudarres's intellectual life and future paintings is *al-Bina*,⁴⁶⁶ the Damascus mouthpiece for the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) and its vision of a united, pan-Syrian region. Adonis, who had joined the SSNP in 1943 while still a high school student, was in 1952 working as the newspaper's literary editor while he attended the University in Damascus.⁴⁶⁶ With Adonis leading, *al-Bina*⁴⁶⁷ cleared a particular intellectual ground for cultural criticism and reflections on the Syrian identity that provided a link between the autonomist contentions of *al-Qithara* in the 1940s and the more activist ambitions of the *Shi'ar* project of the 1960s. And although al-Moudarres never joined the party, as we will see, he formulated his aesthetic sensibility while in constant contact with those who did.⁴⁶⁷ Adonis's review of the 1952 exhibition is illustrative of the possibilities for critically applying party maxims in the cultural realm. It begins by parsing the Western artistic tendencies on display such as Impressionism, realism, surrealism, and "the modern trend," only to drop that tack and call for the development of a Syrian personality that would withstand being melted into other traditions.⁴⁶⁸ As he put it in the paper, "before we know the other, we must first know ourselves," requiring intellectuals to undertake a fresh review of the whole of art in Syria from depths of the civilizational record to the present day.⁴⁶⁹ The following year, he would devote all ten pages of the newspaper to the attempt to know the Syrian self and its art, publishing a special

⁴⁶⁶ The poet joined while enrolled at the *Lycée* in Tartous on a government fellowship. See Abdo Wazen, "Fī Ḥiwār ma' 'al-Ḥayāt' ..Adūnis," *al-Hayat*, 20 March 2010, for Adonis's recollections of this period.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.* Muyassar is the most important early influence who was an SSNP member. Later, in 1962, Muyassar would write a preface for a poetry diwan by al-Moudarres and Chérif Khaznadar (discussed at length later in the chapter), which emphasizes concepts of creativity and pure and endless giving that echo Sa'adeh's writings. I should also note here that Sofia A. Sa'adeh actually names al-Moudarres as one of the famous literati who were party members. See "Sa'adeh and National Democracy," *Antun Sa'adeh: The Man, His Thought – an Anthology*, ed. Adel Beshara (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2007), 538 fn133. I believe she is mistaken, however. I have never seen it mentioned elsewhere in the copious writings on or by al-Moudarres.

⁴⁶⁸ Adonis, "al-Madāris al-Fanniyya al-Arba' allatī Tuwajjah al-Fannānīn," *al-Bina*, 21 Nov. 1952.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

issue on the exhibition offerings that, by means of articles by key figures in the arts and archaeology, endeavored to place them within a longer history of Syria's arts and culture.⁴⁷⁰ To inaugurate the issue, Adonis selected a resonant quote from party founder Antun Sa'adeh's book *The Intellectual Struggle in Syrian Literature* for the masthead, printing, "The creative artist and the philosopher are the ones who have the capacity to escape from time and space, to plan a new life and draw the highest ideals for the nation as a whole."⁴⁷¹ In *The Intellectual Struggle in Syrian Literature*, Sa'adeh had made the bold proposal that artists should act as a lighthouse for their epoch rather than its mirror, and this contention would prove influential for an entire generation of poets.⁴⁷² As the inaugural statement to this 1953 issue of *al-Bina'*, the description of artists as leaders in the transcendent process of national reinvention served to consecrate the paper's attention to arts as a piece of the party program while identifying the standards it would apply in its criticism.

Adonis took his own article in the issue, "The Meaning of Painting," from a more sustained study he was making of contemporary art and its role in society.⁴⁷³ The excerpt begins by tracing the twists and turns of the emergence of the institution of modern art, from ancient Syrian art (described as embodying an essential, deep human meaning) to classical Greek art, the French academy, and anti-academic trends like Cubism, as well as those trends toward purely plastic composition that had completely freed themselves from content. Having assessed these available precedents and the history of their development, Adonis then argues that contemporary Syrian artistic developments are most in need of art that achieved an "evolution of thought (*al-*

⁴⁷⁰ *Al-Bina'*, 9 Dec. 1953. Contributors included Orkhan Muyassar and Adonis, as well as other figures from the national Syrian art scene: Salim Adel Abdul-Hak, Eleanora Chatty, Robert Mulky, and Sami Burhan.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.* The newspaper included the title and page citation "al-Širā' al-Fikrī fi-l-Adāb al-Sūrī, 41" as part of the quotation. Sa'adeh had published the first edition of the book in Brazil around 1943, and a second edition in Beirut in 1947.

⁴⁷² Creswell, "Tradition and Translation," 65.

⁴⁷³ Adonis, "Ma'nā al-Lawḥa al-Fanniyya," *al-Bina'*, 9 Dec. 1953. I have not been able to locate the full-length study; it is possible it was serialized in the newspaper or perhaps never materialized.

fikra) and an evolution of the point of view on life” and should not be content to merely manipulate formal values. Describing true art as art that reveals mankind’s ideal, he proposes that artists should attend to art as a whole and as an expression of “deep humanity” in the whole of thinking, behavior, and existence, without regard for superficial faces of style.⁴⁷⁴ The premise for his assessment, as he wrote, was that,

The art that we want is an art that issues from the human being (*al-insān*), and ends with him. It is an art that takes the human being as its source and purpose. In my opinion, if art has a meaning, this is its meaning.

The guiding supposition is that art must be understood as a humanistic activity, and it can achieve its potential only by transcending the minor concerns of everyday struggles and committing itself to revealing the unities within the past, present, and future.⁴⁷⁵

Although Adonis’s emphasis on the centrality of the human being in these passages may now seem to be a statement of universalizing humanism, it was not meant precisely in that spirit. Rather, he was drawing on Sa’adeh’s reading of the historical expression of the Syrian identity so as to see this basic, integrated humanity as a distinctive aspect of Syrian character in particular. When Sa’adeh founded the SSNP in the late 1930s, it had begun as a secret society devoted to a vision of secular nationalism that, like the Ba’th, recruited from the preparatory high schools and promised to provide a unity of purpose that would override class and communal stigmas by superseding the interests of class and sect.⁴⁷⁶ Unlike the Ba’th ideologues, however, Sa’adeh emphasized the abundance of the extensive natural geographic unity of ‘Syria’ – defined in his case as the geography and cultural imagination of the whole of the Fertile Crescent – as the

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid. As he notes in this same concluding segment, a study of the problem of time in art reveals that most artistic production today is impoverished and superficial.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid. Adonis concludes by suggesting that paintings that convey only an emotional moment do not have a life span beyond that moment, but great art offers an all-at-once revelation of the past, present, and future.

⁴⁷⁶ Wazen, “Fī Ḥiwār ma’ ‘al-Hayāt’ ..Adūnīs.” Its original name was the Syrian National Party. Sa’adeh himself had grown up in Brazil in the expatriate Arab community before returning to Syria in the 1930s.

basis for a coherent and inspired nation-formation. He based his nationalism on the valorized concepts of exploration, innovation, and exchange that he presented as a Syrian historical legacy. And, in support of his argument about these characteristics of the Syrian national character, Sa'adeh often drew on the archaeological evidence from the great civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia, which he understood as evidence of the ceaselessness of Syrian contributions to the elevation of human life by the production of great creative feats.⁴⁷⁷ For example, as evidence of the “majestic legends” with “philosophical coloring” that Syria had produced, he cited an ancient poem that had been discovered at Ras Shamra, written in cuneiform script on stone tablets and telling an old Phoenician epic about a god named Aleyan, who (like the Babylonian god Tammuz and the Greek god Adonis) symbolized the annual death and resurrection of vegetable life.⁴⁷⁸ The archaeologists working at Ras Shamra interpreted the material they found as evidence of a great literary imagination and a philosophical engagement with the entirety of material and spiritual issues in life, which had provided subsequent peoples (the Greeks, the Jews, and others) with the sources of their stories. As Sa'adeh saw it, the same mythic material once produced by the Syrian imagination could therefore be tapped again by the nation's contemporary artists as material for an emancipatory renaissance. His bold declarations about the immanence of Syrian creation would eventually spur new types of engagement with the nationalist trope of renewal. Sympathetic writers experimented with breaking down the

⁴⁷⁷ Throughout the 1930s, finds regarding the contributions of Syrian civilizations to fields of geography, science, literature, urbanization, civil code, music, and the form-based arts were regularly chronicled in Francophone and Anglophone archaeological journals. For example, the French teams working in Ras Shamra faithfully published their findings in the Paris-based journal *Syria*. Notably, in 1947, *al-Qithara* had published several reports on the finds at Ugarit with notes touting the philosophical prowess of the civilization that lived there, including a discussion of its Aleyan-Baal literature and its influence in the literature of subsequent civilizations. These articles reference the same articles that Sa'adeh had referenced in *al-Şirā' al-Fikrī*, including an illustrated February 1933 article in *National Geographic*. See “Ra's Shamrā Aw Madīnat Ugārit: Al-Fikr wa-l-Milāḥam al-Shi'riyya fī al-^cAlam,” *al-Qithara* (February 1947), 53-59.

⁴⁷⁸ Sa'adeh's interpretation cited and translated by Creswell, “Tradition and Translation,” 74. Sa'adeh makes reference to these finds in *al-Şirā' al-Fikrī* to support his critique of a long poem by Shafiq Maluf that used local superstition as literary material rather than the universal material of legend.

diachronic ordering of the historical past and reorganizing it as a poetic synchrony. In the case of the modernist poets who went on to become associated with *Shiʿr*, many worked with the idea of the cyclical movement of time, as personified in the historico-mythical figures that recurred in Syrian story-telling and whose deaths were thought to precipitate a rebirth of the world: Tammuz, Osiris, Adonis, Christ, and others.⁴⁷⁹

From the 1953 *al-Binaʿ* special issue, we can see that this conception of Syrian creative production as a mythic continuum also took on a visual dimension. In addition to featuring Saʿadeh’s statement on the visionary capacities of artists, the front page reproduced a photograph of an Ishtar figurine as the visual lead beside the list of contributing authors, where she served as the sign of the abundant earth and its cyclical temporality (Fig. 4.4).⁴⁸⁰ Inside, the editors used a variety of means to assert ontological connections between the mythic testimony of ancient art and the immanence of its applicability to contemporary civilization. For example, the newspaper posed six questions about recent archaeological finds and their testimony about the Syrian character in the Fertile Crescent to the Director-General of Antiquities, Salim Adel Abdul-Hak (1913-1992), printing the answers under the headline quotation from the interview, “the Syrian personality is unique among all the kinds in the world.”⁴⁸¹ That personality, as Abdul-Hak testified, was not to be seen as a fixed ontology but rather as a character of “always giving more than they take,” including an ability to synthesize artistic forms to produce the strong and noble

⁴⁷⁹ Creswell, “Tradition and Translation,” 76. For the use of Tammuz in Arab modernist poetry as it links to the figuration of Jesus Christ, see Wen-Chin Ouyan, “Text, Space, and the Individual,” in *Sensibilities of the Islamic Mediterranean* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 333-335. She looks at Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab in particular.

⁴⁸⁰ The figurine had been found at Maari and was held in collection of Syria’s Directorate of Antiquity.

⁴⁸¹ Salim Adel Abdul-Hak, “al-Mudīr al-ʿAm li-l-Athār fī al-Jumhūriyya al-Sūriyya Yaqūlu ‘al-Shakhṣiyya al-Sūriyya Shakhṣiyya Farīda min Nawʿha fī al-ʿAlam’,” *al-Binaʿ*, 9 Dec. 1953. The interview questions covered topics such as recent discoveries that suggested that the Fertile Crescent was indeed a civilizational unity, the discoveries at Ras Shamra, the possible influence of the Greeks, Byzantines, and Romans on the Syrian character.

statuary and innovative industrial arts that enriched all other civilizations.⁴⁸² Another argument for adopting a non-historicist evaluation of artistic achievement appears in the selection of images that stud the ten very dense pages of prose so as to present a visual canon – Umayyad mosaic work, Palmyrene tomb statuary, a Mesopotamian head from Nimrud, the Golden Bowl from Ugarit, an Assyrian relief, a Roman mosaic found in Antioch, interspersed by pages featuring the formal achievements of European painters Braque, Botticelli, Titian, Cézanne, Léger, Klee, Picasso (all pointedly compared with a tribal mask from Alaska), as well as a few photographs of contemporary Syrian paintings and sculpture – that is unmoored from any single temporality or geopolitical designation. Almost none of the tiny photographs extend beyond the width of a single column, making for a distinctly horizontal panorama of formal relations. This visual argument culminates in a final comparison between a 3,000 year-old Sumerian head and a piece labeled “head from contemporary art,” as paired beside each other in the lower right-hand of the final page, beneath Adonis’s article (**Fig. 4.5**).⁴⁸³ Altogether, the combination of ancient and contemporary evidence on offer – a kind of imaginary museum containing the apotheoses of the cosmopolitan Syrian character – provides the starting material with which to envision an art that holds past, present, and future together in a single discovered unity.⁴⁸⁴ My point in detailing the appearance of these themes in *al-Bina*⁷ is to demonstrate that their scope exceeded the

⁴⁸² Abdul-Hak made very similar statements ten years later at a 1962 symposium held for the Spring Exhibition. See Chérif Khaznadar, “Lettre de Damas: Dialogue avec les peintres en marge du Salon du Printemps” *L’Orient Littéraire*, 26 May 1962. There, and speaking in the context of the state’s continued flirtation with isolationism, Abdul-Hak mobilized the archaeological evidence to rebut any version of a Syrian national character that would require it to turn inward and shun external influence. He argued that the Syrian people had always voyaged in all directions, East and West, in search of the best art. Because of this traditional openness, a synthetic, international style in the contemporary moment would still be a naturally Syrian format, as a historical tradition of internationalism in fact represented its most defining feature.

⁴⁸³ *Al-Bina*⁷, 9 Dec. 1953. The artist of the contemporary work is not named, presumably to facilitate formal comparison.

⁴⁸⁴ As Adonis proposed in his article “Ma’ nā al-Lawḥa al-Fanniyya.” My use of the term “imaginary museum” is intended as a reference to André Malraux and his contemporaneous advocacy for compiling and circulating “le musée imaginaire,” or photographic reproductions of great artifacts, so as to facilitate a formalist comparison of their significant forms.

literary field alone, to be projected upon the physical objects of Syrian antiquity in Damascus's museums and into ideas about the mission of contemporary visual art in the Syria. The SSNP-led engagement with history as a set of attitudinal forms rather than formal templates gave important succor to artists as well as writers.

The ideas about myth and nationalism that Sa'adeh promoted in his writings continued to provide a connecting intellectual tissue between different groups of modernist writers in Syria.⁴⁸⁵ Even as these ideas circulated in the Syrian capital as a form of cultural critique, however, the space for their expression under the banner of the party itself was soon to be violently closed. The SSNP was not just a site of cultural theory, but also a leader in the organized mass politics that were undermining the old base of political power. By the mid-1950s, the split between the Ba'ath and the SSNP and the particular nationalist frameworks had become a major fault line in the post-Shishakli military corp.⁴⁸⁶ The parties represented different ideological positions regarding international geopolitics as well, with the SSNP known to be pro-West, anti-Communist, and anti-Arab nationalist and the Ba'ath espousing an ambition to throw off Western domination by uniting the Arabs. In 1954, after Shishakli's government unraveled and civilian politicians were returned to government, the country commenced a steady move toward the Nasserist vision of pan-Arabism that was bolstered by Egypt's successful alliances with the

⁴⁸⁵ Although I am primarily tracing thematic connections here, the actual patterns of SSNP membership are instructive as well. As noted by both friends and detractors of the *Shi'ir* project, almost all its early members had ties to the party. Al-Khal had joined the SSNP in Tripoli, Lebanon, in 1934, apparently leaving it in 1947. Even after his resignation, however, he maintained some ties, including printing the journal *Afaq* (which followed the SSNP cultural program) at his printing house between 1958-1961. Al-Salisi, *Yūsuf al-Khāl*, 73. As for *al-Qithara*, Muyassar, al-Khal, and Adonis were all still in the party when they published there. Moreover, although its first article on the Ras Shamra finds does not give an author, its two subsequent reports on these discoveries are attributed to Mufid Arnuq, another SSNP member.

⁴⁸⁶ Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 49-50.

Eastern bloc.⁴⁸⁷ These developments all served to cast the expansive 'Syria' of the SSNP imagination as a dangerous counter-politics. Tensions came to a destructive head when a member of the SSNP assassinated Syrian military officer Adnan al-Malki in April 1955, purportedly in collusion with party leadership and the American intelligence service. The party was outlawed, trials for treason were held, and Adonis was sent to prison as part of a countrywide witch hunt, where he served a six-month term because of his party connections.⁴⁸⁸ When Adonis was released in 1956, he received an invitation from al-Khal to come to Beirut to create and launch *Shi'r*. He accepted, and he and his wife Khalida Said (also a poet and party member) left the oppressive atmosphere of Damascus in October of that year. By their move, they transferred one of the centers of literary engagement with Syrian history to Beirut and removed the mythic theory that had inspired Adonis from its context of direct political activism. From Beirut, they pursued what they saw as a new and comprehensive cultural renewal project, involving not only loosening the hold of classical metric form over Arabic poetry but also destroying the shackles of mindless adherence to all cultural traditions. They also made the decision to draw creative authority from their membership in humanity rather than the political authority of a government or party.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁷ The Egyptian president had emerged as a particularly impressive regional leader in 1955, when he undermined the Baghdad defense pact by completing an arms deal with the Soviet Union. In the same year, Syria signed a defense treaty with Egypt.

⁴⁸⁸ The roundup of SSNP members was first sparked by an April 1955 scandal when a military police sergeant belonging to the SSNP assassinated Adnan al-Malki, a prominent military officer and an exponent of neutralist pan-Arabism with ties to the Ba'ath Party. By June, a bill of indictment had been produced that included claims of espionage and SSNP cooperation with the American information office in Damascus (one of the pieces of evidence implicated Hisham Sharabi, who had contributed a historical piece to the 1953 *al-Bina*' issue just discussed). After the trial, the SSNP was outlawed, members were arrested, its printing works were torched, and sympathizers were purged from the military. See Seale, *Struggle for Syria*, 238-246.

⁴⁸⁹ For this point, I am indebted to Creswell's brilliant analysis of the writing and thinking of the Arab modernist poets who were involved in its launch. He traces how the emergence of the figure of the unaffiliated man (*al-shakhs* or *al-insān*) is coeval with the emergence of Arabic modernism itself.

A new cultural movement took form around al-Khal and Adonis and their tightknit group of other associates, with the printed issues of *Shiʿr* helping to establish a federation of like-minded modern poets even further afield in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and beyond.⁴⁹⁰ Concomitantly, the magazine took a number of institutional measures to insulate their work and selves from hysterical critics or political coercion.⁴⁹¹ With their launch in January 1957, they launched a semi-private Thursday night salon, or *nadwat al-khamīs*, that was intended as a complementary space of discussion about poetry and which soon created an atmosphere of intimacy and conviviality.⁴⁹² As they described in a statement about the salon for the press, they conceived of their *khamīs* meetings as a “laboratory” in which members could freely experiment and exchange and develop ideas.⁴⁹³ They used the regular meetings to develop their editorial vision and to generate content that they subsequently offered for public consumption, with the salient points from internal debates published as notes in the magazine itself or in newspapers like *al-Nahar*.⁴⁹⁴ Finally, al-Khal also established a registered printing house, Dar Majallat *Shiʿr*, which gave the magazine legal standing and also allowed the group to publish and promote the modern poetry and translated modernist texts that they considered most important.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹⁰ Members of the group included Onsi al-Hajj, Khalil Hawi (in the beginning), Nadhir al-Azma, and Muhammad al-Maghout. Other poets who were not resident in Beirut but were closely associated with the journal’s mission include Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Isam Mahfuz, Tawfiq Sayigh, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, and others.

⁴⁹¹ Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, 603. Jayyusi was a contemporary of these poets and she relates that the group sometimes had a clannish spirit. She also sees them as protecting themselves against attempts to “vulgarize” their aims and methods and against “shallow, unlearned evaluations or hasty attacks from fanatics.”

⁴⁹² Ed de Moor, “The Rise and Fall of the Review *Shiʿr*,” 95, provides several recollected details from Fuad Rifqa.

⁴⁹³ Al-Salisi, *Yūsuf al-Khāl*, 71-2. Al-Salisi excerpts a description of the meetings from *al-Jarida*, 24 Feb 1957.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid. Onsi al-Hajj was an editor at *al-Nahar*, which made it easy to publish their notes there, apparently with the intention of educating readers in ways to approach the modern poetry.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 73-74. The earliest collections of poems it published include volumes by al-Azma, Halim Barakat, Layla Baalbacki, Yusuf al-Khal, and al-Maghout. An important translation is their collaborative translation of T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” published as Yusuf al-Khal, Adonis, Buland Haydari, Desmond Stewart, Munir Bashshur, and Ibrahim Shukrallah, trans., *T.S. Iliyūt, Tarjamāt min al-Shiʿr al-Ḥadīth* (Beirut: Dar Majallat Shiʿr, 1958). According to al-Salisi, al-Khal also used the press for other print jobs of works he found worthwhile, generally volumes that were “hostile to Communism, and supportive of the democratic system.”

Al-Khal gave early articulation to the vision of this movement in a 1957 lecture he gave to the Cenacle Libanais club in Beirut. His talk, which began by reflecting on the deficiencies of contemporary Arabic poetry to date, concluded with a list of ten points meant to adumbrate an alternative.⁴⁹⁶ He emphasized concepts like the unity of experience in poetry as opposed to logical progression, touting ideas of vitalism and insisting on the need to maintain openness to influence and the achievements of others. He also, importantly, affirmed that true poetic creation was an inherently and constitutively humanist endeavor. In words that echoed Adonis's 1953 statement, "the art that we want is an art that has its origins in man, and ends with him," al-Khal's sixth point stated,

The first and last objective of poetry is man, his pain and joy, sin and repentance, freedom and slavery, life and death. Any effort that does not have man at its center is artificial and banal.⁴⁹⁷

In other words, if any other entity – such as God, nature, or the collective – were substituted for man, then the resulting poetry would be rendered shallow and false.⁴⁹⁸ Further, the human experience as al-Khal invoked it was structured in cycles of pain and joy, sin and repentance, freedom and slavery, and life and death. As the poems of the group that had begun to publish in *Shi'r* make clear, the accommodating ground for the humanism that al-Khal declaimed would continue to be the mythic cycles that were native to the Fertile Crescent and which they saw as a literary gift to the world. When Jabra Ibrahim Jabra reviewed al-Khal's poetry collection *al-Bi'r al-Mahjūra* for the Summer-Fall 1958 issue of *Shi'r*, he coined the epithet "Tammuzi poets" to describe the group in recognition of its frequent invocation of Tammuz as a figure of

⁴⁹⁶ The points are given in translation in Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements*, 570-572.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 571. The movement's emphasis on the operation of replacement, in which God is replaced by humanity and revelation by reason, is also discussed in Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003), 54-55.

⁴⁹⁸ Creswell, "Tradition and Translation," 104-5.

resurrection, and the refraction of the same themes into imagery such as the phoenix, Christ, or Orpheus.⁴⁹⁹ It is not difficult to grasp the appeal of the cultural formulations of SSNP members and fellow travelers to the artists who wanted to achieve an authentic contemporaneity, for they purport to solve the problem that Geeta Kapur identified as a Third World or postcolonial one in which the operations that signal modernity never go on to live outside the confines of nationalism. By promulgating a conception of Syrian identity that made it a universal inheritance, this discourse made it impossible *not* to locate both the self and the whole of human progress within the national matrix. Their Syria was conceived as a continuum of time and space. It existed as an endless, native fertility that could be reclaimed by an act of creativity but never governmentally policed.

Business of Art in Damascus

While Adonis was in Beirut, the Syrian nation-state in the same period had continued to move into the orbit of Egypt, proclaiming a neutralist position while also courting military and development assistance from the Soviet Union. The presidency of Shukri al-Quwatli, who was brought back into office in August 1955, culminated in him abdicating his executive powers in 1958 to become “first citizen” of the UAR under Egyptian president Abdel Nasser. As Patrick Seale describes, during the period leading up to the February 1958 ratification of the UAR by plebiscite, the door was thrown open to the “full flood of Soviet and Eastern European blandishments – arms, trade, credits, exchange visits of all sorts” in Syria as Egyptian influence

⁴⁹⁹ *Shi‘r* (Summer-Fall 1958), 57-67. Jabra had already translated into Arabic the portion of James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* that detailed the common function of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis as a representation of the yearly decay and revival of life for peoples of Egypt and Western Asia. Frazer also sees the Christian story of the resurrection of the Messiah as a continuation of the Adonis myth in Syrian religious life.

grew spectacularly.⁵⁰⁰ This “flood” can be seen in Syrian cultural programming as well, as the national museum created a touring exhibition of art, folk art, and antiquities for circulation to Eastern European capitals and, in 1957, sent additional exhibitions to Moscow and India.⁵⁰¹ With the creation of the Egyptian-led UAR, this impulse to accent the popular arts and to conduct culture as an expression of commonality took institutionalized form. The “Northern Region” (Syria) underwent a period of dramatic government expansion, including the creation of new offices intended to support and orient national culture as a reflection of ideal national character. In Egypt, Abdel Nasser had already created the Superior Council of Art and Letters in 1956, the first of a series of institutions to “protect” artists while also retaining the ability to control and mobilize them.⁵⁰² In Syria, a Superior Council of Art and Letters was created in 1958, as was a central Ministry of Culture and National Orientation with subsidiary branches for Egypt and Syria.⁵⁰³ The following year, a Higher Institute for Fine Arts was established in Damascus (with an Egyptian artist appointed to the directorship), Aleppo received a new training center for painting and sculpture, and both cities saw the creation of centers for applied arts.⁵⁰⁴ Finally, local Arab Cultural Centers were planned for all cities in the country with the purpose of coordinating the cultural needs of local communities.⁵⁰⁵ As the cultural infrastructure expanded,

⁵⁰⁰ Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, 251.

⁵⁰¹ Afif Bahnassi, *al-Funūn al-Tashkīliyya fī al-Iqlīm al-Sūrī, 1900-1960*, 10. Also see remarks of Faz el Egel, The Syrian Consul in Alexandria, *Deuxième Biennale de la Méditerranée* (Municipality of Alexandria, 1957-1958), 69, about having difficulty gathering a quality exhibition because so many pieces had already been sent to Russia and India. Ultimately, he cobbled together a show of works by the Syrian students who were attending Egypt’s art academy.

⁵⁰² Richard Jacquemond, *Entre scribes et écrivains: le champ littéraire dans l’Égypte contemporaine* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2003), 31-32. As he traces, the Superior Council of Art and Letters was created after the ordeal of Suez, followed by the Ministry of Culture (1958), with the nationalization of the press and cinema coming later.

⁵⁰³ Both were established in November 1958. The Ministry of Culture included a Directorate of Plastic Arts and of Applied Arts as well as dedicated departments for exhibitions, popular arts, prizes and acquisitions, and monuments and statuary, among others. Al-Mouddarres interacted with these new state offices as patrons, as is evident from his correspondence with Salman Qataya in the summer of 1961 requesting that Qataya follow up with Ministry employees Abdul Hak and Afif Bahnassi about promised payments and sales.

⁵⁰⁴ Bahnassi, *al-Funūn al-Tashkīliyya fī al-Iqlīm al-Sūrī, 1900-1960*, 12.

⁵⁰⁵ Before the end of 1960, centers had been built in Suweida, Daraa, Latakia, Banias, Homs, and elsewhere.

however, so did state controls into other aspects of life, from business to the military to the home. One of Abdel Nasser's conditions for uniting with Syria was the dissolution of its political parties, which soon stifled Syrian political life. Instead, a vast and shadowy system of spies and informers was cultivated under the Syrian Ministry of the Interior and its head Colonel Abdel-Hamid Sarraj. By October 1959, when Abdel Nasser sent military Marshall Abdel-Hakim Amr, his close associate, to preside over Damascus, an atmosphere of simmering distrust had set in.

In spite of the ongoing centralization of the security state, Syria's first private gallery, the AMI gallery, managed to open on October 1960 with a full docket of programming that offered alternatives to the state-sponsored project of popular representation. Unlike *Shi'ar* had done in 1957 and Gallery One would do in 1963, the AMI opened without giving advance word of any programmatic vision. Its proprietor Muhammad Daadoush organized the very first exhibition in the space, a double bill featuring his younger brother Mahmoud Daadoush (1934-2008) and Italian artist Guiliano Paolozzi, as a welcome gesture.⁵⁰⁶ Both artists had just completed their degrees in Italy, and Daadoush, a 25-year-old provocateur of sorts who favored abstract drip paintings and/or outlines of female nudes, had convinced Paolozzi to travel to Damascus with him for the promise of exotic sights and new opportunities. By creating the AMI, the Daadoush brothers were able to stage a grand debut. They scouted out an office suite on the second floor of a building off Yusuf al-Azmeh Square, leasing it for the gallery and marking its entrance with a heavy, rusticated sign with the gallery name and logo (**Fig. 4.6**). The AMI was to be their mechanism for cultivating an audience for the spectrum of modern visual arts, from the sculptures made of welding flux and paintings of refracted street scenes that they exhibited in the

⁵⁰⁶ Alloun, *Mun'ataf al-Sittinat*, 1-29. Unless otherwise noted, I have taken my details regarding the day-to-day function of the AMI from this book, which Alloun wrote using the gallery's archives and his own recollections.

front room, to the décor, advertising, and printing services they planned to offer in the back.⁵⁰⁷ Their opening successfully drew hundreds of visitors, all thrilling to the novel atmosphere and leaving encouraging comments in the guestbook.⁵⁰⁸ Going forward, the AMI business plan revolved around maintaining a critical mass of people and events in the gallery. They gave two-week exhibitions to the country's other modernists: al-Mouddarres; photographer George Khouri; painter Naim Ismail; a two-person show of painter Julianos Kattinis and sculptor Khaled Jalal; and so on.⁵⁰⁹ They held lecture events and social nights. They even devised publicity stunts, as in a 1961 beauty contest that they pitched as a national search for "artistic inspiration," which gathered attractive, well-bred young women at a dance and dinner party at the Damascus fairgrounds to compete for the honorific position of muse to Syrian painters. Concomitantly, they courted recognition for the gallery as a new social hub, buying column inches in newspapers like *Sawt al-ʿArab* to report on their successes.⁵¹⁰ Before their first year of operations was up, they had even begun to tackle the question of an international profile, putting together several "international" exhibitions featuring foreign artists and also organizing a roundtable on the question of Syrian representation at the major *biennali*. Although they enjoyed occasional success as sales brokers, collectors were few and far between. Their printing press proved to be a more reliable source of income, and, after the end of the Union, they were able to pick up regular

⁵⁰⁷ This aspect is not emphasized by Alloun in his account of the gallery, although he readily discusses the printing press aspect of the business. Rather, the aspect of integrated applied arts comes across in the gallery's earliest brochures, such as the booklet for al-Mouddarres's November 13-23, 1960 exhibition, which touts the gallery's specialties as "décor, advertising, promotion, printing, engraving, sculpture, painting." *Taqayyam li-l-Fannān Fātiḥ al-Mudarris* (Damascus: AMI, 1960). Private collection of Fadi al-Mouddarres, Damascus.

⁵⁰⁸ For example, poet and lawyer Suhayl Ayoub wrote "this is a first step for the Syrian region, and it's a good step." *Mun'ataf al-Sittīnāt*, 10. Alloun also mentions that the Ministry of Culture had extended its patronage to the opening. It is not clear what the term "patronage" entailed at this juncture, but it seems to have been something like pre-approval rather than financial sponsorship. Similar requirements were in place in Syria during my fieldwork in 2010; it was forbidden to organize a private exhibition without Ministry approval.

⁵⁰⁹ Chérif Khaznadar, "Vingt-cinq ans de peinture en Syrie," *L'Orient Littéraire*, 29 July 1961, reports they produced sixteen exhibitions featuring twenty artists in their first eight months of operation alone.

⁵¹⁰ Abdul Aziz Alloun, interview by author, Damascus, July 11, 2010. The newspapers published their articles in exchange for guarantees on certain numbers of papers sold. They were also charged for any photographs that they ran with the articles they submitted. In 1962, they had a similar arrangement with *al-Fajr al-Jadid* as well.

contract work for the Ministry of Culture, doing jobs ranging from books about pioneer Syrian artists to translations of Marxist tracts.⁵¹¹ By integrating its operations with the needs of the state in innovative ways, and operating across the spectrum of high and low arts, the AMI ensured its own survival from one regime to the next.

When al-Moudarres held his solo exhibition in the AMI space in November 1960, it proved to be a public relations success, garnering coverage in Syrian newspapers, radio programs, and the new national television broadcasts, and even bringing some sales.⁵¹² Just as importantly, it allowed him to debut the persona that he considered modern, which is to say a free subject who was liberated from all obligation to “mirror” a picture of the world and instead channeled the depths of the earth to create hermetically truthful images. When the *Sawt al-‘Arab* reporter asked the artist to interpret the “nationalist and national mission” of art, he received a poetically evasive answer. As reporter Yassin Rajuh explained to his readers, when he showed up at the AMI, al-Moudarres had kept him spellbound by working the crowd, soliciting opinions, describing his aspirations, and disclosing his suffering.⁵¹³ And when Rajuh asked the artist whether he believed that art was a national mission, al-Moudarres sidestepped the premise that art could carry a specific patriotic mission, explaining that he saw art as a realm within the spiritual activity of a community, which made it possible to imagine the communal nation in the first place. For him, art could not be compartmentalized but rather was a piece in a storehouse of

⁵¹¹ Alloun, *Mun‘aṭaf al-Sittīnāt*, 26; Abdul Aziz Alloun, interview by author, Damascus, July 11, 2010. Alloun’s book suggests they had an agreement to print “one hundred volumes” for the Ministry, and lists eleven titles from the 1962-1964 period. When I interviewed him, he further described how the gallery’s bread and butter had been the cheap Marxist editions it printed for the government.

⁵¹² Yassin Rajuh, “Fāṭiḥ al-Mudarris Rassām, wa-Ādīb, wa-Shā‘ir,” *Sawt al-‘Arab*, 22 Nov. 1960, reprinted Alloun, *Mun‘aṭaf al-Sittīnāt*, 119, describes the frenetic pace of media requests in the gallery during the last days of the exhibition. As for sales, the acquisition records for al-Moudarres in the NM-D Modern suggest that the Museum purchased six paintings from the exhibition, which it added to a new Permanent Exhibition it was creating in its modern wing. The gallery took a 25% commission on sales. Commission discussed in *Ṣālat al-Fann al-Ḥadīth al-‘Alamī* to Dr. Salman Qataya, Damascus, undated. Private collection of Fadi al-Moudarres, Damascus.

⁵¹³ Rajuh, “Fāṭiḥ al-Mudarris Rassām, wa-Ādīb, wa-Shā‘ir.”

energies and love, such that true art consisted of “creation without fabrication.” As his interlocutor reported, al-Mouadarres’s own paintings tended to “spring forth like water from the ground,” and in making them, he saw himself as a worshipper of the earth who extracted material composed of the faces of the country’s people. As al-Mouadarres asserted in interviews such as these, he wished to approach Syrian heritage intuitively, seeing it as a category of authentic creation that could only take form as an unbidden presence, existing outside the regulatory processes of industrial or juridical “civilization.”

Al-Mouadarres’s 1960 painting *Child*, which manipulates folkloric motifs upon a thick impasto ground of white paint, offers a particularly unsettling demonstration of the problems of personal artistic creation at its intersection with the native conditions of Syria (Fig. 4.7).⁵¹⁴ In it, he has drawn a child, flowers, and tiny trees on a plaster-like surface, all contained within a shape of a house with a pitched roof. Rather than present this grouping of native subjects as a charming vignette, however, he introduced two elements that collude to problematize the act of creation altogether. Above the head of the child, he placed a rust-red handprint on the “wall” that resembles the handprints found among the Lascaux cave paintings.⁵¹⁵ And, above that indexical sign, he used blue paint to write a phrase that initially appears to be the pious expression *mā shā’ Allah*, literally meaning “what God has willed” or “as God has willed” and in conversation conveying a full gambit of reactions to events and objects in the world (from amazement to admiration to solicitation to resigned recognition of a preordained event). Upon closer

⁵¹⁴ I suspect that this painting was included in the 1960 AMI exhibition as *The Child and the Wall*. The painting can be seen in the background of a photograph labeled “opening for one of the artist’s exhibitions in the gallery” that appears in the 1961 *al-Jundi* feature on the artist’s São Paulo award. It has carried different titles at different times. It appears with the title *Child* in Khaznadar, “Peintres de Damas a Beyrouth,” *L’Orient Littéraire*, but Alloun later gave it the title *Mā Shā’ Allah* when he published it in *Mun‘aṭaf al-Sittīnāt*.

⁵¹⁵ In the 1950s, these had been seized upon as proofs of man’s naturally humanist propensity to create art in his own image, as in Georges Bataille, *Lascaux, or The Birth of Art* (1955), a luxury publication of photographs of the paintings. See also al-Mouadarres’s writing on Picasso and the meaning of “primitivism,” in “Kayf Nafham Bikāsū?” *al-Ma‘rifa* (June 1962): 112-124.

inspection, however, one notices that al-Moudarres has not written the saying and instead slightly altered it by inserting extra, ambiguous letterforms. What look to be a *kāf* and *nūn* are inserted into the verb *shāʿ*, spelling *mā shāʿ kāʿanna Allah*, or “the thing willed *as if* god.” If it were not for this transposition, the phrase might have turned the painting’s status away from sovereign human achievement and back to a divine intention or event. Because of the change, however, the rhetoric of subjective humanism becomes uneasily aligned with the subjectivity of a traditional religious episteme, problematizing both. The revised phrase reminds that the artist’s sovereign acts have in fact brought these representations into being, i.e. willed *as if* by a god. And yet, the longer one inspects the markings on the painted wall, the more the phrase *mā shāʿ kāʿanna Allah* also seems to become a despairing question, i.e. can *this* be the thing that God has willed? Elements in the painting begin to emerge to foreshadow senseless violence: a lone smear of red atop the horizon line, a passage of white scumbling that engulfs the child’s legs, the barrenness of the ground beneath the pitched roof. The red handprint, too, takes on a second meaning as the bloody trace of the ceremonial slaughter of a sheep, as would customarily be left on the exterior wall of a home on the joyful occasion of a marriage, a new home, or a holiday. As a result, the painting’s surface becomes a space of doubt about the effects of the rhythmic violence underpinning everyday life in Syrian cities. Indeed, it seems to question whether the outcome of national history may ever be seen as heroic. Through the AMI’s arduous effort to create an audience for Syrian modern art, large numbers of viewers came into contact with difficult and even transgressive paintings such as these and understood them as a challenge of their modern sensibilities. Al-Moudarres’s *Child* hung in the gallery itself (it may glimpsed in the background of the photographs from AMI in **Fig. 4.1**) as well as in the fine arts wing that the gallery organized for the 1961 Damascus International Fair (**Fig. 4.8**). It also, in 1962, appeared

in the Lebanese newspaper *L'Orient Littéraire*, the weekly cultural supplement to *L'Orient* (the Francophone paper of record), where it illustrated a feature on an upcoming exhibition of Syrian artists in Beirut (Fig. 4.9).⁵¹⁶

By the time al-Moudarres's painting received notice in Lebanon, the UAR had dissolved, which opened up several new instructor positions at the Higher Institute for Fine Arts, including one for al-Moudarres, who relocated to Damascus permanently. At the same time, the ensuing reversal of a number of protectionist trade policies made it possible for AMI to court recognition for its artists from further afield, and the gallery focused on the critics and collectors involved in Beirut's thriving art market in particular.⁵¹⁷ By the spring of 1962, more than a half a dozen galleries were operating in Beirut, including critic Nazih Khater's Alecco Saab gallery, gallery La Licorne, architect Michel Harmouch's exhibition space, and numerous exhibition corners in hotels and clubs.⁵¹⁸ In fact, when French critic Michel Ragon visited Beirut in 1961, he had marveled at the rapidity with which young artists were able to make sales. As he reported, young painter Juliana Seraphim had sold a staggering twelve paintings at her debut show at La Licorne.⁵¹⁹ As the Damascus gallery endeavored to break into that scene, it found a valuable ally in Chérif Khaznadar (1940—), an AUB student and aspiring writer who had grown up in Damascus. In the summer of 1961, Khaznadar was given a newly-established position as the Syria cultural correspondent for *L'Orient Littéraire*. He began returning to Damascus on the weekends, hanging out with al-Moudarres, Kayyali, and other artists and composing features

⁵¹⁶ Khaznadar, "Peintres de Damas a Beyrouth," labeled 'Enfant' par Fateh Moudarrès 'peinter, poète, musician.'

⁵¹⁷ Elias Zayyat, interview by author, Damascus, June 23, 2010.

⁵¹⁸ The Winter 1963 issue of *Adab* mentions exhibitions at Alecco Saab, the Michel Harmouch Gallery, The Contemporary Art Gallery, and a Gallery Art Form as well as exhibitions mounted in hotels Excelsior and L'Orient, and the seasonal exhibition of Lebanese artists at the Surssock Museum.

⁵¹⁹ Ragon, "Travel Notes," 62. He notes incredulously that Seraphim, a 25-year-old artist, had expected to sell even more works.

about their work.⁵²⁰ When the AMI partnered with the gallery Le Bateau Lavoir in Beirut's well-heeled Hamra district to exhibit a showcase of eleven Syrian artists, Khaznadar took the lead in the effort.⁵²¹ He threw himself into its promotion, not only publishing preview articles, but also overseeing the transport of the works and painting bilingual posters heralding the arrival of "Syrian Painters."⁵²² The other AMI initiatives in 1962 also focused on outreach. They hosted discussions toward creating an Arab artists' union and made a public statement of intention to create a biennial for the Arab artists of the Mediterranean in Syria.⁵²³ They had also proceeded with the second phase of the model contest, which took advantage of the state's recently created cultural infrastructure to send the winning "muse" to different Arab Cultural Centers around the country, then adjudicating the results (they ran two divisions: realistic and modern). The stunt, as expected, lent itself beautifully to photographic features and was covered in newspapers as far away as Lebanon and Egypt.⁵²⁴

Khaznadar's recollections of the great ambition and severe limitations of these years provide good insight into the fragile social dynamics around art in Syria. As he became more closely involved with the Syrian art movement and its leading painters, he remained highly conscious of his own hybridity as a witness. Born to a Syrian father and French mother, he had only attended French schools and thus navigated the Syrian cultural waters with pronounced self-

⁵²⁰ The first such article appeared in July 29, 1961, followed by a Sept. 9, 1961 feature on Daadoush; a Jan. 3, 1962 look at folk artist Abu Subhi al-Tinnawi as an inadvertently modern painter (co-written with Louay Kayyali); a March 1962 feature on al-Moudarres, etc.

⁵²¹ The exhibition opened March 22, 1962. The gallery name Le Bateau Lavoir refers to the building in Montmartre where Picasso, Kees Van Dongen, and others had lived in turn-of-the-century Paris. As this name betrays, the gallery's programming was primarily French-focused (see coverage in *L'Orient Littéraire*, 22 April 1961). The 1962 AMI opening there featured a cocktail party for an international guest list of diplomatic and business personnel. For the patriotic Syrian take on the show, which describes how Salah Stétié, critic and editor of *L'Orient Littéraire*, was forced to acknowledge Syrian talent, see "Tazāhura Fanniyya Sūriyya fī Lubnān," *al-Maʿrifa* (May 1962): 154-155.

⁵²² Chérif Khaznadar, interview by author, Paris, June 19, 2011. Also see Khaznadar, "Peintres de Damas a Beyrouth." The poster is in Khaznadar's personal archive; he provided me with a photograph.

⁵²³ "Naḥū Muʿtamar li-l-Fannānīn al-ʿArab," *al-Talīʿa al-ʿArabiyya*, 17 Oct. 1962, 3; Mahmoud Daadoush, "al-Ḥaraka al-Fanniyya al-Muʿāṣira fī Urubbā," *al-Fajr al-Jadid*, 14 October 1962, 2. The biennial plan was never realized.

⁵²⁴ Alloun, *Munʿaṭaf al-Sittīnāt*, 67.

consciousness, playing the role of an interpreter who passed from group to group. By the autumn of 1961, he had become a regular at the AMI offices and thus, when the end of the UAR was proclaimed, watched from its second-story window as crowds gathered in the square below. He and his compatriots saw the assembled mass cheering its termination, only to cheer again when Abdel Nasser made a radio address that temporarily repaired the Union, and to cheer again when the dissolution was made official.⁵²⁵ For Khaznadar, the absurd theater of these demonstrations, as acted by a populace that was too easily manipulated by political promises, only made his own recourse to the arts that much more vital and hopeless. He soon discovered that al-Moudarres shared his aversion to the participatory demands of Syrian political life, and his feeling of having been cast in a dark comedy. Khaznadar recalls travelling in a car with friends when al-Moudarres spied a flock of sheep, called for the car to stop, and alighted to address the animals with the pompous phrasing of a political speech, “Oh great people of Syria.”⁵²⁶ The same black humor manifests in the artist’s drawings at the country’s heritage sites as well. A 1963 ink sketch from Maaloula, for example, depicts the quaint hillside homes of the ancient Christian town, only to populate the space with a single, bleating sheep (Fig. 4.10). Al-Moudarres has written an onomatopoeic cry – “*baa‘bābā*” – into the composition, where it hovers as an indicator of pastoralism that also serves to mark the submissive character of the village.

⁵²⁵ Chérif Khaznadar, interview by author, Paris, June 19, 2011. Khaznadar may also be remembering the feeling of the six day period of coups and counter-coups, March 28 – April 2, 1962, when the same Colonel who had led the September 28, 1961 coup led another one to remove the president he had installed, which prompted a series of military mutinies both for and against Abdel Nasser and the UAR. The al-Qudsi presidency eventually recovered sufficiently to hold on until March 8, 1963.

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

Surrealist Readings

As al-Moudarres formulated his personal responses to the absurdity of contemporary social and political constraints in Syria, his artwork increasingly played with signifiers of religiosity in ways that rendered them meaningless and profane. He made frequent use of gold leaf, a material reminiscent of icon painting and holy presence, but applied it to surfaces without deliberation or piety. One 1961 painting of a Virgin Mary and child, for example, bears a single patch of gold leaf below the virgin's halo (which, by contrast, has been rendered in yellow paint) that, by its abraded quality, seems to add a prognostication of ruin to the automatic suggestion of veneration (Fig. 4.11).⁵²⁷ With the AMI exhibition at Le Bateau Lavoir, Beirut's leading cultural critics were invited to scrutinize al-Moudarres's work for the first time, and Lebanese critic Salah Stétié's devoted sustained attention to the strange destabilizing effect of al-Moudarres's sad children in his write-up for *L'Orient Littéraire*.⁵²⁸ Stétié identified a surreal quality in the works, describing an animist world illuminated by a "black sun" that emerged from the artist's unnervingly simple imagery.⁵²⁹ His allusion to dark light is surely a response to al-Moudarres's use of gold leaf on his paintings.⁵³⁰ In *Mother and Her Children* (1961), for example, the artist affixed bits of gilt to a grid of heavy black lines and to areas of a red-black sky such that they seem to represent both the bars of a cage and celestial light (Fig. 4.12). Stétié's reference to a

⁵²⁷ It may seem strange that a Muslim artist so frequently made use of Christian iconography. I have been emphasizing the discourse of comparative mythology because its central claim that one civilization's story of resurrection in Syrian history gave rise to the next civilization's myth of the same meant that no such venerated figures could be seen as the exclusive property of one religion. That said, it should also be noted here that Jesus is recognized in the Qur'an as one of the prophets before Muhammad and his virginal conception is affirmed in that account. The crucifixion, however, is partly disputed; the Qur'anic version suggests that although the Jews claimed they killed Jesus and in fact it appeared to them that they did, they did not in fact kill him (prompting later suppositions that God had first projected Jesus's likeness onto someone else, who was crucified in the belief that he was Jesus).

⁵²⁸ Stétié's reactions are quoted in "Tazāhura Fanniyya Sūriyya fī Lubnān," *al-Ma'rifa* (May 1962), 155. Al-Khal's *Adab* also published a short review of the exhibition event, which highlighted the compelling tension between primitivism and internationalism in al-Moudarres's works. "Akhbār al-Ayyām al-Adabiyya wa-l-Fikriyya wa-l-Fanniyya," *Adab* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1962), 158.

⁵²⁹ "Tazāhura Fanniyya Sūriyya fī Lubnān."

⁵³⁰ Unfortunately, no photographic evidence of the specific paintings in the show at Le Bateau Lavoir is still extant.

black sun was not meant merely to describe the peculiar inversions of light and shade in the work, however. By this phrase, he also made an apt acknowledgement of the surrealist ethos behind the artist's evasive imagery. As he knew, the region's café scene was witnessing a renewed interest in writing games based in automatism, with poets and artists using cigarette ash or coffee to draw strange fragments of sketches and poems on the paper tablecloths of their favorite haunts.⁵³¹ For the Parisian Surrealists of the 1920s, the black sun had figured prominently as a metaphor for the implosion of polarities, providing writers with a shorthand description of an alchemical condition of darkness in which light was not absent but rather inverted into dense "negative light." Max Ernst's painting *Soleil Noir* (1927-28), for example, represented its black sun as concentric orange circles that burn within a barren sky as a sign of the potency of crossed opposites, as in a union of male and female, or sun and moon (Fig. 4.13). The painting even appears in full-color in Herbert Read's 1959 study *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, a work that al-Mouadarres had praised only months before as an eye-opening primer in modern art criticism.⁵³² Al-Mouadarres's own work employs these thin layers of false gold as a sign of the instability of status. In a later 1963 painting *The Sun is a Little Child*, the artist would even attach a single circle of gold to the sky, such that it appeared to smolder through an airless depth of landscape populated by carnival entertainers – the popular cultural paradigm of mercurial change (Fig. 4.14).

Al-Mouadarres's recourse to surrealism in the 1960s represents a key return to the creative habits that he had honed in the Aleppo salons of the 1950s, albeit with an expanded audience for

⁵³¹ Chérif Khaznadar, preface, in Fateh al-Mouadarres and Chérif Khaznadar, *al-Qamr al-Sharqī 'alā Shāḥī' al-Gharb/Lune Orientale sur le Rivage Ouest* (Damascus: Capital of Arab Culture, 2008). The preface is printed on the inner flaps of the cover of the reissued edition.

⁵³² Fateh al-Mouadarres, "al-Madrassa al-Mustaqbaliyya," *al-Jundi* (2 January 1962): 23-25. In the article, al-Mouadarres recommends and quotes extensively from Read and even uses reproductions clipped from the book as its illustrations.

the results.⁵³³ In the surrealist sketches from that earlier period that have been preserved, we can see the artist carefully demonstrating that he is mining the realms of the unconscious and the irrational. In one 1953 declaration of surrealist filiation, al-Mouadarres hangs a Rorschach-like inkblot from two tensile poles (Fig. 4.15). Shaped like fountain pens, the poles seem to suspend the very matter that leaked from their nibs, such that the ink blot hangs like a piece of flayed meat. Around this modified scene of crucifixion, al-Mouadarres has created a metaphysical space in which every element, from the *memento mori*-like skull and flower in the foreground to the gathering crowd in the distance, cast long shadows upon a barren plaza. Several elements in this early al-Mouadarres drawing actually reappear in the serial works he produced as a member of the Damascus artistic set, where they take on a more transgressive meaning. For example, the far right horizon line of the 1953 sketch holds a tiny, standing stone monument resembling an altar, a grouping that recurs in his later suites of automatist drawings. It appears in the lower right of a 1961 monoprint on glass that the artist produced for friends at the AMI, for example, where its phallic qualities have been emphasized and its components detached so as to function as a sign of a threatening union between male and female, or – as drawn – a cowering mother and crying child (Fig. 4.16). The same composition has also been subjected to play with gender inversion. Whenever the rectangular passages of stippling that cross the surface pass over the faces of the captive figures, they create patches of stubble that masculinize the woman and add premature age to the baby. As was already suggested in the 1961 *al-Jundi* statement about the absolute sacrifice of the life-giving mother, al-Mouadarres in this period often drew thematic inspiration from an alchemical conception of the body that saw it as a container of sexual opposites. When applied to a drawing surface, this made the alliance of standing stone and recumbent spheres that

⁵³³ Max Ernst had been a touchstone for the earlier Aleppo Surrealist community as well; Muyassar dedicated one of his *Siryal* poems to Ernst.

littered the Syrian landscape into entities that were as surreal and violent as they were ancient and natural. As the artist had learned from the archaeological reports from Ras Shamra, the same finds that told the “universal” myth of Baal’s death and resurrection by the efforts of Anath (his sister, consort, and caretaker who is said to long for him “like a mother”) had also revealed what archaeologists saw as a cult of the dead: freestanding tombs built with elaborate channels for pouring offerings and massive, state-sponsored systems of animal sacrifice that were sublimated by the mythological stories of Baal and Anath.⁵³⁴

When al-Moudarres used the volumes of dual spheres and single phallus in his painted compositions of the 1960s, they were invested with endless recombinatory potential including rearrangement and inversion as female organs. Similarly sinister play with polarities of man and woman can be seen in *The Last Supper* (1962), which gives breasts to Christ’s disciples while marking the Christ figure itself with an ‘X’ to convey his status as a marked man while also suggesting a negation of sex or an absent phallus (Fig. 4.17). As already discussed, the theme of death and rebirth runs strongly through the poetry of the *Shi‘r* group, often by an invocation of the mythico-historical figures of Christ, Orpheus, and Tammuz that, by studies of comparative mythology such as James Frazer’s influential volume *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890, had been linked into a continuum of the same human need.⁵³⁵ In the case of al-Moudarres in particular, as I will discuss shortly, the repeated references to the Messiah in his paintings would also be understood as a reference to shared culpability, with the instance of crucifixion

⁵³⁴ Charles Virolleaud had published French translations of the Phoenician poems found on the tablets in *Syria* over a period of time, 1929 onward, and they contain lists of sacrificial practices that are ascribed to Anath and intended for incantation. Schaeffer’s early interpretation of the “death cult” at Ugarit proved to be wrong (what he thought were tombs were homes) but exerted influence on readings of that civilizational history nevertheless. For the whole of the twentieth century, Biblical archaeology had turned up evidence of child sacrifice as well, with cemeteries of infants in jars found around stone “High Place” altars. See R.A. Stewart Macalister, *The Excavation of Gezer, 1902-1905 and 1907-1909* (London: Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, 1912), especially 405.

⁵³⁵ C.f. note 499.

symbolizing the embodied unity of torturer and the tortured at the cross of the sacrifice. In this 1962 painting of the final meal before the crucifixion, however, al-Moudarres also gestures at the matrilineal line of giving that would liken the earth goddess Gaia to the Virgin Mary. The 'X' over Christ can suggest both virginal conception and the condemnation to death, and as such casts the Messiah as a surrealist site of sudden reproduction that has the power to undermine the logic of waking life.

The social aspects of the artist's interest in gender morphologies in this period may be further scrutinized, improbably enough, in a 1962 *al-Jundi* feature that journalist Siham Tergeman designed around the model contest that the AMI gallery was then hosting.⁵³⁶ For her feature, Tergeman invited al-Moudarres and six other artists to join her at the gallery to listen while she described what she called "the new Cinderella," meaning an ideal but elusive woman to whom only she had access, and to give face to that description using their personal style of artistic rendering.⁵³⁷ The resulting *al-Jundi* spread reproduced each of the artists' drawings beside the unseen original model, inviting readers to compare and to reflect on the nature of beauty and the imagination (Fig. 4.18). With the feature, Tergeman, who was already known for her feature articles about the lives and problems of women in Syria, seems to have intended to raise awareness about the lack of agency involved in contemporary marriage rituals, in which the mother of the groom held power over her son's destiny and tantalized him with impossible stories of a perfect woman who would one day be his. As the grid of finished drawings shows, every participating artist other than al-Moudarres opted to foreground the quality of fresh beauty and fine features that Tergeman had described rather than introduce an element of false

⁵³⁶ Siham Tergeman, "Sindrayla al-Jadida," *al-Jundi* (30 Jan 1962): 12-13.

⁵³⁷ The photograph is identified only as "the original, which has not been seen by those artists who painted." I cannot identify the sitter (I do not believe it is Tergeman herself, but it may have been one of the contestants or even winner of the AMI contest).

advertising or sexual frustration.⁵³⁸ Al-Mouddarres's drawing, by contrast, plays up the virgin/whore dialectic in the narrative of the Cinderella fairy tale about an elusive princess who is bound to the whims of mothers and men. Using heavy lines of brushed ink, he violently distilled the body of "Cinderella" into two circles for breasts that are penetrated by ornamental cruciform shapes (Fig. 4.18b). As he had done in his 1960 exploration of sacrifice and creation, *Child*, he again finished the work by invoking the phrase *mā shā' Allah*, this time manipulating the phrase by adding an additional dot on the *shīn* and extra *lam* characters in Allah in simulation of the letter magic of a talisman. Thus, as Tergeman would propose in her gloss on the results, al-Mouddarres's strange representation in fact possessed a strong realism if viewed from the vantage of the mother's search from house to house in order to betroth her son. In sealing his picture with the words *mā shā' Allah*, the artist used precisely the words that the mother would utter when she finally encountered the most beautiful girl in the land and took her for the prince. The drawing is a haunting one, and not only because it has concluded in a statement of fateful ownership. We also notice that only al-Mouddarres has given freckled cheeks to his Cinderella. If we compare these marks with the stippled fields of the 1961 drawing shown in Figure 4.16, it becomes clear that they signify more than guilelessness. They also mark the woman as a siren of sorts, a figure who might consume or contain man. Almost every element introduced into the drawing, from decisions of technique (washy fields of ink that have dried into patterns of their own) to components of the social-symbolic order (the phrase uttered by generations of matriarchs in the service of patriarchy), serves to show the lack of autonomy that sons possessed as national subjects.

⁵³⁸ Tergeman further describes "a fine nose," "pearly teeth," "hazel eyes," etc., as well as an optimistic outlook.

Concomitantly, al-Moudarres had returned to the use of surrealist compositional techniques as well, using them to undermine the integrity of his authorship still further. In May of 1962, for example, he adapted the *cadavre exquis* method for use in composing his paintings, surrendering a handful of canvases to Khaznadar with the instruction to finish them by writing on their surfaces.⁵³⁹ Later that summer, the two men also produced a small surrealist book using similar methods, meeting together for a long weekend session of *cadavre exquis* in Arabic and French and in text and image to produce *al-Qamr al-Sharqī ‘alā Shāṭi’ al-Gharb*, or, if the book is turned over and read the other way, *Lune Orientale sur le Rivage Ouest* (which would both translate into English as *The Eastern Moon on the Western Shore*).⁵⁴⁰ The two men had holed up in al-Moudarres’s Damascus studio to experiment with a process of collaborative composition around epic themes like love and loss, which produced page compositions like that reproduced in **Figure 4.19**. Its column of hand-written French verse about the fiery desert conditions that have been left by “they” who consume the world runs in parallel to its Arabic equivalent. Appending the texts, there are three small thumbnail doodles that link components of the poetic imagery, such as its evocation of an “eye of the sun” containing the dead truths of thousands of generations, to unsettling images of the contemporary nuclear age: a mushroom cloud surrounded by a tiny ring of stele, and a child holding flowers under a sun that seems to sprout mutant strands of hair. So as to fashion the loose pages they completed in a weekend into a printable diwan, al-Moudarres collated their unedited pages, added two items from his Gallery

⁵³⁹ He then exhibited the works as part of a show at the AMI. See Chérif Khaznadar, "Brefs," *L'Orient Littéraire*, 19 May 1962.

⁵⁴⁰ Fateh al-Moudarres and Chérif Khaznadar, *al-Qamr al-Sharqī ‘alā Shāṭi’ al-Gharb/Lune Orientale sur le Rivage Ouest* (Damascus: Salah Ayoubieh, 1962). The date of the text’s actual composition is not easy to ascertain. One of the poetic fragments inside bears the date March 17, 1962, but another drawing is dated 1961 (which suggests that the dates may refer to the events that inspired the images or texts rather than the date of composition). Khaznadar’s notes to the 2008 reissue of the volume mentions that they finished the book very shortly before he left for France in 1962, which would suggest that they got together in late spring or early summer.

Cichi exhibition booklet (the 1958 poem he had exchanged with Sartre and the abstract expressionist painting *Flowers and Lines*), solicited dual prefatory essays in Arabic and French from his old mentor Muyassar, and designed cover and title pages that played on the clichés of East and West (Fig. 4.20). Working with a local printer, he created 550 copies and wrapped each with a red paper title strip that made joking reference to the French publishing house Gallimard and its special editions of prizewinning titles. The final printed volume epitomizes the mixture of grandiosity and informality that was rapidly becoming al-Moudarres's trademark. Whereas the themes of its poems were sweeping and ambitious, its pages retained clear evidence of their unfinished status, including not only crossed out passages but also a faint, all-over grisaille pattern that is a vestige of an imperfect photographic transfer between the surfaces of the pages of their shared notebook and the final printing plates.

By design, the textual and visual allusions to the crossed opposites of alchemy (male/female, sun/moon, East/West) that al-Moudarres and Khaznadar produced in their surrealist mode did not cohere as a narrative message. The common denominator in their diwan is instead its simulation of a state of melancholy, the pathological response to loss that Julia Kristeva describes as “the blinding force of the despondent mood” – an excruciating and lucid affect that may come after the death of a loved one, as the self identifies with the one that has been lost and thus becomes subject to the inevitability of death.⁵⁴¹ In her exploration of that affect, Kristeva employs the same metaphor of the black sun that appears in al-Moudarres's writings and drawings, which she borrows from the poem “El Desdichado” (“The Disinherited”)

⁵⁴¹ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1989), 151. Recall that the Freudian version of melancholy is a pathology of the modern condition. The melancholic subject may be able to acknowledge the fact of loss but not the content of what is lost, i.e. if the mood is the result of the death of a person, the melancholic may know “whom he has lost, but not what he has lost in him.” Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia (1917),” in *The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 244.

by 19th-century French poet Gérard de Nerval. In that poem, narrated by a disconsolate prince, the speaker's lute (which takes the place of the loved one) bears the mark of what Nerval dubs the "black sun of Melancholia." At times, al-Mouddarres and Khaznadar even seem to make direct reference to Nerval's poem in the poetic feints and counter-feints that they produce in *The Eastern Moon*.⁵⁴² On the second page in from the Arabic side, for example, al-Mouddarres's verse invokes an image of planetary cavalry then issues the command, "Open your heart to the black sun. Open!"⁵⁴³ On the preceding page, his poem "The Face of Miss H. H." describes a broken glass wall, from which emit the cold sighs of Shahryar (the king to whom the stories in 1001 Nights are told). Their reference to a sighing Shahryar, a figure who is held captive by the stories of a woman, may be in dialogue with the final line of "El Desdichado," which concludes with the dualistic sounds "the sighs of the saint and the fairy's wild cry" as a description of the dangerously double nature of the lost woman.⁵⁴⁴ A tiny sketch that al-Mouddarres nestled in the uneven margins of his poem provides an illustration of the sentiment of treachery and loss: a Janus-faced female figure that proposes an oscillation between an upright woman adorned with jewels and her inversion in tranquil slumber (Fig. 4.21). Mythical references are, as always with the artist, immanent in the details of this image – the circle of beads around the figure's neck and her crown of hair may mark her as Ishtar, the lover of Tammuz, with the dividing line between night and day also marking her seasons of time spent in the underworld and in above ground as a deity of the earth. The origins of the intertextual references that motivate these images are not readily disclosed, however. Instead, all dividing lines between life and death, and wakefulness

⁵⁴² I have found no direct evidence that they were familiar with Nerval's poem, but feel comfortable making the suggestion nonetheless because French Surrealists such as Paul Eluard were known to admire Nerval, and because a line from "El Desdichado" appears in T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," which the *Shi'r* poets had translated and published under their imprint.

⁵⁴³ *Al-Qamr al-Sharqī*, 2008 reprint, 26.

⁵⁴⁴ Rosanna Warren, *Fables of the Self: Studies in Lyric Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 119.

and sleep, are purposefully blurred, and substitutes are constantly produced to obscure the absent items at their root. In Kristeva's terms, such esoteric and incantatory rituals comprise the anaphora of the unique but unnamable object.⁵⁴⁵ In this way, the use of surrealist devices of composition in *The Eastern Moon* also invites a diagnosis of melancholia, for the inability to entirely process the loss of a beloved may also lead to the constant production of substitute satisfactions and imaginary filiations.⁵⁴⁶

Not all audiences appreciated the slipperiness of *The Eastern Moon* meaning, for reasons having to do with the continued debate over the place of art in the national political order. Although the unnamed reviewer for *al-Jundi* gave the book a thoroughgoing review that assessed everything from the skill of its translations to its satirical overtones, he or she concluded that the project was a folly that failed to provide audiences with edifying content or even diversion.⁵⁴⁷ A more sympathetic review appeared in *L'Orient Littéraire*, written by the young Lebanese critic André Bercoff (1940—), which played along with the volume's mock-epic quality by describing the collaboration between Khaznadar and al-Mouddarres as if it, too, were a star-crossed pairing.⁵⁴⁸ As Bercoff described their encounter, Khaznadar had “sung all summer” of desert, arabesques, and stars from his Damascus, where he had eventually been beguiled by al-Mouddarres, a shaggy and carelessly dressed artist who plied him with his “child graffiti, his women-fruit, arterial arcades of lost mosaics and all the innocence of the world in the vigor of simple things.”⁵⁴⁹ Bercoff thus professed to see their symbiotic creation as a happy union, one

⁵⁴⁵ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 164.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ “‘Al-Qamr al-Sharqī ‘Alā Shāṭi’ al-Gharb’: Turfa ām Shudhūdh?” *al-Jundi* (17 July 1962): 28-9 and 33.

⁵⁴⁸ André Bercoff, “Lune Orientale sur le Rivage d’Ouest,” *L'Orient Littéraire*, undated clipping. Private archive of Chérif Khaznadar.

⁵⁴⁹ Bercoff's allusions in this description of al-Mouddarres could be parsed further. I wonder if his reference to women-fruit might allude to the floor painting of Gaia (a mother-goddess in Roman mythology that had been incorporated into the image cycles of artists working for this first Islamic dynasty) that had been discovered in the Umayyad palace Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi and was installed in the Damascus National Museum. The figure has been

that produced a household ruled by a “communal regime of poetic property.” The exaggerated romantic tone that Bercoff adopted for his review is particularly notable in light of the work’s melancholic displacements, for his fanciful frame story also serves indirectly to ratify apoliticism as a valid space of freedom to create and even procreate. His choice of the phrase “communal regime of poetic property” in particular seems to make reference to Syria’s continued flirtation with communalization and property reform. Equally, the dynamics of Beirut’s literary culture, in which a war between ideological factions had erupted after the respected monthly magazine *al-Adāb* accused rival groups of modernist poets of unpatriotic activity, made Bercoff’s notion of a protected quanta of “poetic property” into a fraught proposition. In a 1961 editorial, *al-Adāb* had rebuked a group of “other poets” who took inspiration from the idea of a Mediterranean rather than an Arab Lebanon – widely understood to be the *Shiʿr* group – for serving as secret agents of the ideological program of the SSNP and for undermining Arabism.⁵⁵⁰ The members of *Shiʿr* had, in turn, responded to the accusations by rejecting its premise altogether, emphasizing that they dedicated their journal to poetry and not politics, thereby rendering the political ties of any of its contributors entirely immaterial to a critique of the journal. By the time that al-Moudarres and Khaznadar published *The Eastern Moon*, a political scandal involving the SSNP had also rocked Beirut and hardened the positions of the literary factions. On December 31, 1961, members of the party leadership had made a failed attempt at a military coup that was thought to have been encouraged by Western imperialist powers, and which added new fuel to the fiery

described as wearing a welcoming expression (which is appropriate for its position in the reception hall), and the “fruits” that she is offering are depicted as round circular forms that cover her chest. I thank Nasser Rabbat for suggesting this figure as a possible inspiration for some of al-Moudarres’s drawings.

⁵⁵⁰ Creswell, “Tradition and Translation,” 49-61, offers the most concise and illuminating summary of the exchanges between journals in the 1961-62 period, and I rely on his interpretive account. Subsequent attacks from *al-Adāb* became ever more targeted against members of the *Shiʿr* group. When Adonis failed to contribute a poem in a special Algeria-themed issue of the magazine, the *al-Adāb* editorialists suggested he was afraid to speak out against his French patrons. And so on.

critiques of bourgeois aestheticism and the traitorous “rejectionism” of its proponents.⁵⁵¹ In this context, Bercoff’s imagined regime based upon art and its bountiful gifts must be seen to wield its own politicized power. On the opposite side of the debate from Bercoff, a publication such as *al-Jundi* held that culture should directly support an ideal regime and thereby fortify the cause of national progress.⁵⁵²

For the *al-Jundi* reviewer, the lack of fixity in al-Mouddarres’s deliberately marginal scribbles and the haphazard quality of the diwan’s stanzas made it an incontrovertibly modern endeavor. As he or she remarked, al-Mouddarres’s kind of modern art required its audience to cease to look to receive “kernels” of understanding and instead to watch their lives as if a river.⁵⁵³ Interestingly, if the act of translating those flows of experience and thought into peculiar artistic terms had long been associated with the assertive modernity of the surrealists (recall the coverage of this tendency within al-Mouddarres’s work circa the 1950s), then this same counter-idealist practice, with its basis in the suppression of will, had by the 1960s become associated with the unproductive attitude of the generation to which al-Mouddarres belonged, i.e. the disenchanting men who had come of professional age with the national independence movement only to witness the political impotence of their countries in the larger world order. One quite explicit instance of recognition for a melancholic link between the production of surreal “rivers” of imagery and the absence of political agency may be found in *Hunters in a Narrow Street*, a

⁵⁵¹ “Lubnānūnā,” *al-Adāb* (February 1962), 1, quoted Creswell, “Tradition and Translation,” 57.

⁵⁵² *Al-Jundi* stated its position in multiple ways, including by advertising itself to subscribers with the slogan, “The first of every month, read: the military magazine, the edifying cultural missionary (*rusūl*).” This advertisement in fact appeared on the same page as the negative review of *al-Qamr al-Sharqī*, and beside an article giving the latest scurrilous news from Beirut. See between “Khawāṭir min Lubnān,” and the conclusion of “al-Qamr al-Sharqī,” *al-Jundi* (17 July 1962), 33.

⁵⁵³ “‘Al-Qamr al-Sharqī ‘Alā Shāṭi’ al-Gharb’: Turfa ām Shudhūdh?” 28-9.

semi-autobiographical novel by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra.⁵⁵⁴ Set in Baghdad in 1949 and narrated by a recently arrived Palestinian professor, the book explores the pathologies of young and educated men who are struggling to escape from the “rows of political and social swords” that still remained in the country, circumscribing their action and development.⁵⁵⁵ Two of its protagonists are presented as surrealism enthusiasts, attempting to escape by dropping out of the system altogether, writing free verse poetry and haunting bordellos and cabarets while flirting with death. As one boasts to the narrator, who would become his friend,

I like to shock my readers. They hate my poetry but they read it all the same. I once recited one of my poems to a taxi-driver in the brothel, and do you know what he said? ‘I don’t understand a word of it, brother,’ he said, ‘but it makes me shiver all over.’ Now isn’t that the best definition of poetry?⁵⁵⁶

In Jabra’s novel, the speaker’s recourse to surrealism as a means to oppose old forms remains futile; he induces “shivers” without understanding and is left craving more substantial recognition. Throughout the book, intellectual aspirants hold forth about their flawed cultural positions, such that the novel’s conversations read as if a condensation of the debates of the Arab modern poetry movement. As revealed by Jabra’s retrospective reflection on the confused actions that his generation had initially taken in their attempt to claim their modernity, many Arab intellectuals had come to see the use of surrealism as another kind of impotence. It functioned as a sign of a laudably critical relation to the world, but it was also a symptom of a failure to perform that critique authentically. Too often it provided a mere outward show of rivers of melancholic free association.

⁵⁵⁴ Jabra I. Jabra, *Hunters in a Narrow Street* (London: Heinemann, 1960). Jabra composed this novel in English between 1953 and 1956, presumably with a Western audience in mind. The 1960 London edition was its first; there were attempts by members of the *Shi‘r* group to translate it into Arabic but nothing appeared until 1974.

⁵⁵⁵ Jabra, *Hunters*, 232.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

In the face of the continued deferral of the triumphant modernity they had imagined, Syrian artists working at the start of the 1960s would reconceive of their historical task as a struggle for decolonization. In this effort, the items of Syrian *turāth* they had at their disposal conceived of less as a gift to universal history and more as a resource for achieving self-actualization.⁵⁵⁷ Unlike the diwan of purposefully incomplete thoughts he published as *The Eastern Moon*, the journalistic articles that al-Moudarres published in Syrian outlets tended to highlight the alienation of the contemporary artist as a concern rather than a goal. In a January 1962 *al-Jundi* article, for example, al-Moudarres delved into the historical contours of art's development from the dawn of human history to highlight how, in the arc of the experience of a fearful human race, art objects had functioned as analogues of literary myth: the first works of art – ornamentation and charms, or monumental statues of gods and devils – all had apotropaic use, representing attempts by humans to make the powers that seemed to hold influence over their fate into more knowable presences.⁵⁵⁸ And yet, even though humans had themselves made these forms, once they began to venerate them, the creative capacities that should have given them power became estranged, leaving them even more disempowered than before. Worse, Syrians had later experienced a second kind of alienation from their own art as well, a disconnect in which the creative spirit was no longer heeded, leaving Syria with little other than civilizational ruins: “remnants of the Assyrian and Babylonian burial sites, Byzantine churches, and Arab

⁵⁵⁷ For some evidence of this, see the debate at the symposium for the 1962 Spring Exhibition in Damascus summarized in Khaznadar, “Lettre de Damas.” The following year, the AMI hosted a lecture by Dr. Ghassan Rifai on the subject “Contemporary Views on Freedom,” which discussed the question of progress and the possibility of its inauthentic content, with reference to Sartrean existentialism and Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. See Muhammad Haydar, “Risālat Sūriyā,” *Hiwar* 1.3 (March-April 1963): 99-101. As a number of studies of Arab intellectual history have argued, the notion of *turāth* as a key site in the struggle to achieve Arab modernity emerged in full after the defeat of the Arab forces in the 1967 war with Israel. These include Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, and Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2010). But as this chapter explores, 1960s intellectuals in Damascus and Beirut had in fact already begun to problematize the idea of heritage and the ownership of the past in their internal debates.

⁵⁵⁸ “Al-Madrassa al-Mustaqbalīyya,” 23-25.

mosques.”⁵⁵⁹ His point was that artists should free themselves from using heritage as if it were a sacred and fixed object. They instead ought to aim to reclaim the spirit of human innovation, i.e. the capacity to make one’s own sense. To fulfill their historical legacy of bestowing shape upon the bounty of their earth, Syria’s artists needed to steep themselves in the historical formal precedents but also conceive their work in interaction with local life.

Collective Displacement

Al-Mouddarres understood the content of visual art to be the impressions, feelings, and perceptions that could not be expressed in speech.⁵⁶⁰ Although he had long relied on his verbal talents to hook into audiences and advocates, his paintings proffered the obverse of loquaciousness: hermetic spaces of layered textures, smudges, and submerged identities. In his landscape paintings, he typically built up a continuously activated vertical texture of scraped pigments, as in the 1962 landscape painting shown in **Figure 4.22**. Against its activated surface, the several tiny daubs of unmixed red paint that sit upon its surface momentarily emerge to read as a figures, only to collapse back into shadowy traces of fauna in a thicket. If al-Mouddarres rarely allowed the figures that he added to his painterly representations of Syrian ground to become fully expressed as figures, then he was equally loathe to empty the grids of the nearly abstract paintings he made in his studio of the hint of the bodies of human beings that they still contained. In the case of the large encaustic painting that he sold to Rudolf Fechter, the German ambassador in Damascus from 1959-1963, the longer its viewers looked at the arrangement of oscillating hues within its mosaic-like registers of color, the more they started to see hints of the

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid. Interestingly, al-Mouddarres blames the rupture on Ottoman ruler in Syria, describing how the spirit of artistic innovation had moved from the plains of Iraq, Syria, and Asia Minor to Greece and then Europe, and then briefly back to the Ottoman East, only to be thwarted and expelled by close-minded rulers.

⁵⁶⁰ Mentioned in Awad, “al-Şudfa Laysat Fann,” 50.

twinned heads, stacked limbs, and crossed opposites that were familiar from his figurative works (Fig. 4.23).⁵⁶¹ As al-Moudarres stated in 1963, he felt although he was always moving toward abstraction and had not exhausted the wells of formal material in him, he continually remained on the edge of pure formalism without entirely giving up his impulse to represent human subjects.⁵⁶²

In this section, I examine how al-Moudarres used the magazines and community affiliated with *Shiʿr* to push his engagement with the problem of human freedom in Syria still further to the fore and to force it into consciousness as a shared concern. When al-Moudarres published his hybrid image-text composition “Four Poems with Drawings” in *Shiʿr*, which appeared in the Summer 1963 issue, it also offered readers visual depictions of beings of an ineffable type, existing in ambiguous relationship to their surrounding “ground.” The piece’s printed sections – five numbered segments of free verse filling four pages – describes a series of surprising actions and events in a city filled with treachery and murderous desire. If the two single-page drawings that are also part of the work are read against that narrative, they can be seen to depict the spectral inhabitants of a haunted present: figures who have come into being by a single brushstroke onto a white space, and who clutch their offspring as if apotropaic objects.⁵⁶³ The first such drawing, which appears between sections three and four, offers a nesting doll-like pairing of a placid mother and her isomorphic child (Fig. 4.24). The fugitive nature of their visual presence is apparent only at the seam between body and foot, where the artist’s line gave way to a super-saturated bloom of ink. The identities shown in the second drawing, which appears as a conclusion to the printed poem, are a more ambiguous and therefore

⁵⁶¹ The auction house notes for this painting, which are taken from Fechter’s writings about the artist, mention that “there is just a hint of figures in this painting, whilst their outlines are kept deliberately unclear.” Notes, Lot 8, Sale 7802, Christie’s International Modern and Contemporary Art, Dubai, 29 April 2009.

⁵⁶² Awad, “al-Şudfa Laysat Fann,” 48.

⁵⁶³ Fateh al-Moudarres, “Arbaʿ Qaşāʿid maʿ Rusūm,” *Shiʿr* 27 (Summer 1963): 37-41.

sinister pairing (Fig. 4.25). Two parental figures are shown whose necks bleed and bloom atop the original slick of pigment, coming to resemble priests' beards that absorb the children they hold. On the same page, the artist added a final, hand-lettered verse with a god-sign at the top that gives it the appearance of a talisman. If we take seriously the earlier declarations by Adonis and al-Khal that all art must take man as its source and purpose, then the artist's contributions to their magazine put a fearful version of human life forward, creating a representation of lives that exist in the absence of agency. A close reading of al-Moudarres's representation within the *Shi'ar* movement will help to show how the organs of that literary movement gave new shape to the artist's exploration of the dialectics of sacrifice and liberation.

Al-Moudarres's drawings were the first artworks *Shi'ar* had ever published, and their inclusion in fact reflects a quiet upheaval in its editorial leadership that began in 1961 and culminated when Adonis left the editorial board some time in 1963, necessitating changes in the circle of named intimates that eventually resulted in al-Moudarres appearing on the masthead of two issues (Summer and Fall 1963) as a "Damascus editor."⁵⁶⁴ Al-Khal had launched his second journal, *Adab*, which was devoted to an expanded field of literary culture including opinion pieces, art criticism and artist portfolios, and even reviews of cinema and television programs, in a period of mounting disagreement between editorial contributors over the direction of *Shi'ar*. For al-Khal and those who continued with him into the new enterprise, *Adab*'s promise to interact with a more heterogeneous artistic field seems to have been a logical update to their original focus on new poetry. The group had always insisted on describing *Shi'ar* as a comprehensive

⁵⁶⁴ De Moor reports that Adonis had felt the "cup was empty" after so many years of trying to realize their vision, and that the 1961-2 year had failed from an editorial standpoint. "The Rise and Fall of the Review *Shi'ar*," 86-87. When the Summer 1963 issue was published, a new board was listed consisting of the following: Yusuf al-Khal, Editor-in-Chief; Onsi al-Hajj, Editorial Secretary; and editorial board Shawqi Abi Shaqra, Fuad Rifqa, Issam Mahfouz, and Elias Awad, complemented by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra in Baghdad, al-Moudarres in Damascus, Muhyiddin Muhammad in Cairo, and Henry al-Qayyam in Paris.

movement rather than mere magazine or discrete stylistic “school,” and al-Khal’s inaugural editorial for *Adab* cast it as another organ in the propulsion of that movement.⁵⁶⁵ The new journal, he wrote, “like *Shi‘r* before it” was to be a “missionary magazine (*majalla risāliyya*)” encompassing everything in a “modern position in life and existence.”⁵⁶⁶ The drive to expand its engagement with modern positions may also be seen in a number of updates to the *Shi‘r* organizational format. In March 1962, it announced that it would select visual artists to attend its *khamīs* salon and to participate in the “rejuvenation of the cultural and artistic movement.”⁵⁶⁷ And, when Yusuf and Helen al-Khal launched Gallery One in April 1963, it too was seen to operate as a node in reactivating the movement in its expanded form.⁵⁶⁸ As Helen al-Khal outlined at the press conference she held for the gallery’s opening, the gallery would be a permanent and professional space devoted to quality art and sheltered from ideological or market pressures.⁵⁶⁹ It distinguished itself from existing private art halls in Beirut and Damascus by promising to invest in artists *qua* artists and by leveraging its existing community of litterateurs to endorse its mission.⁵⁷⁰ An ethos of cross-fertilization began to appear in the art that al-Khal featured in his magazines, as he tended to print portfolios of sketches and concept sketches rather than reproductions of finished easel paintings, which gave the impression of having been

⁵⁶⁵ The first issue of the journal appeared in February 1962.

⁵⁶⁶ Quoted in al-Salisi, *Yūsuf al-Khāl*, 73. The editorial board for *Adab* was of a pan-Arab composition, including al-Khal as editor, al-Hajj as Assistant Editor, and Muhyiddin Muhammad as the Egypt correspondent. Advisory editors were Albert Hourani, Salahuddin Munajjed, Yusuf Ghossoub, Georges Schehade, Tayib Salih, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Kateb Yacine, Salah Stétié, Joseph Abu Rizk, and Aref Al-Rayyes.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 72, quoting from in *al-Nahar*, 22 March 1962. The group of invited artists almost surely included Paul Guiragossian, Elie Canaan, and Aref al-Rayyes, who were featured in the first issues of *Adab*.

⁵⁶⁸ “Iftitāḥ Ghālirī Wāḥid.”

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.* Al-Khal announced four, manifesto-like principles for the gallery. It aimed to incubate a viable Arab modernity by 1. Ameliorating the “chaos” reigning in other exhibition and pricing schema; 2. Showing the true face of the art in the region and assisting audiences in appreciating and acquiring it; 3. Marketing this art in the “international art capitals;” and 4. Promoting known talents while discovering and nurturing emerging ones. When journalists attempted to position the gallery ideologically during the question and answer period, she replied that the gallery would show no preference for one stylistic tendency over another and that artistic quality was their only criterion.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.* *Al-Nahar* reported that it was “the first of its kind in the Arab East.”

generated among friends. For example, he included a portfolio of four semi-surrealist folk art drawings and freeform poetic writings by Hrair Diarbekirian (1946—) in the Autumn 1963 issue of *Adab*, two of which had been executed on Gallery One stationery.⁵⁷¹ As the gallery's name and address peeked out from beneath a rooster's tail feathers, the drawing asserted its affiliation with the movement and its multiple institutional settings (Fig. 4.26). Concomitantly, the gallery contributed new layers of social interactions and points of activation. The *khamīs* gatherings began to function to bring potential buyers into contact with the art in Gallery One.⁵⁷² Yusuf al-Khal also began to spearhead outings with mixed groups of artists, poets, and notables (*al-a'yān*) to sites such as Rashana, an art village that sculptors Alfred, Michel, and Youssef Basbous had created in the Lebanese mountains.⁵⁷³

Although al-Mouardres had published three poems in *Shi'ar* in the winter of 1963, it was his visual art practice and his critical engagement with the issue of *turāth* that secured him a standing in this revised cultural movement. Helen al-Khal gave him a solo show just two months after she opened Gallery One, featuring him in its space from June 6-15, 1963, and sparking *Adab* and *Shi'ar* to feature their own refractions of his themes. By then, al-Mouardres had already begun to capture the attention of Beirut's cultural salons, particularly those frequented by expat residents and Francophone writers. Most crucially, by means of his March 1962 appearance in *L'Orient Littéraire* and AMI exhibition at Le Bateau Lavoir, he had come to the attention of

⁵⁷¹ Jacqueline Jackomino, "Hrair Diarbekirian (Rusūm)," *Adab* (Autumn 1963): 41-59. The artist is Armenian, and the introductory text describes how he used Armenian imagery and techniques of Byzantine icon painting, including gold leaf. The text components that Diarbekirian worked into these particular drawings are in Arabic, however, presumably for the purposes of circulation in *Adab*.

⁵⁷² Yusuf al-Khal to Fateh al-Mouardres, Beirut, March 20, 1964. Private collection of Fadi al-Mouardres. Al-Khal had written to al-Mouardres to inform him that he was broke and needed to delay sending payment for paintings he sold in the gallery. The one mitigating piece of happy news in the letter is that someone who attended the most recent *khamīs* liked a work and would likely purchase it.

⁵⁷³ Yusuf al-Khal to Fateh al-Mouardres, Beirut, June 13, 1963. The letter, which is composed just after al-Mouardres's exhibition opened in Gallery One, invites al-Mouardres to join them on the outing to Rashana with "artists, poets, and notables" and to drink and laugh with them.

Simone Beaulieu (1917-2006), a Canadian painter with connections to the Parisian art world who lived in Beirut with her diplomat husband, 1958-1964.⁵⁷⁴ Al-Moudarres started attending her salon sometime in 1962, where he participated in its discussions about artistic authenticity and also began to organize tours for Beaulieu and friends to see the riches of the Syrian landscape and history.⁵⁷⁵ For his Gallery One exhibition, he opted to feature paintings inspired by these sojourns through the Syrian countryside, with several directly referencing the archaeological sites of Ras Shamra, Sumer, and Palmyra.⁵⁷⁶ The exhibited fruits from his on-site observation of ancient Syrian monuments hardly convey a thrill of discovery, however. To the contrary, the works overwhelmingly emphasize the quality of falseness and betrayal. The painting *Women at the Wedding* (1963), for example, represents its matrimonial subjects as the outlines of stacked heads, hands, and limbs within a gray miasma of sand and pigment that evokes the funerary statues of Palmyrene family crypts (Fig. 4.27).⁵⁷⁷ The blushing cheeks that might normally signify liveliness appear in the painting as gaudy spots of color that suggest the false adornments that might be added to an idol. By setting up a disjunction between the work's happy title and its deathly imagery, the artist proposes that the country's traditions in fact serve to bind and choke. Gallery One's promotion of al-Moudarres's show tended to stress the criticality underlying such works. The painting selected for the exhibition poster depicts two children who are made to symbolize both innocence and oppression; their heads and bodies join inside a thick paint

⁵⁷⁴ Khaznadar, interview by author, Paris, June 19, 2010. In "Travel Notes," Ragon mentions visiting Beaulieu's studio where she was working on monotypes in a surrealist vein. Her byline occasionally appeared in *L'Orient Littéraire* as well.

⁵⁷⁵ *Simone Aubry-Beaulieu* (Montréal: Les Éditions du Lion Ailé, 1982): 13-42.

⁵⁷⁶ Unfortunately, very little photographic documentation of the exhibition is extant. I am relying on the textual summary in Hassan Kamal, "Ma'raḡ al-Fannān Fātiḡ al-Mudarris," *al-Ma'rifa* (August 1963), 154-155. By combining it with details in Awad, "al-Ṣadfa Laysat Fann," I pieced together a total seven titles out of the twenty in the show: *Resurrection of Sumer, Resurrection of the Palmyra Cemetery, Painting from Ras Shamra, The Family of Hajj Ali, Jesus and the Child, Fish of Judah, and Honeymoon.*

⁵⁷⁷ The Gallery One exhibition almost surely included this painting or one very much like it. Awad mentions that weddings and their occasionally monstrous results recur as a theme in the works. See "al-Ṣadfa Laysat Fann," 49.

suspension that may be a grave site or a picnic blanket (Fig. 4.28).⁵⁷⁸ And, at the opening, it circulated statements from the artist that complicated the stakes of his images of afflicted innocence still further.⁵⁷⁹ As the artist wrote, he ultimately saw his paintings as expressions of the “optimistic side of himself” rather than of tragedy. As he explained,

Thus in them, you can see how much I love humankind (*al-insān*). I stand at the canvas beside him, sharing in the unlimited wave of indictment both fated and manufactured – endless obeisance, endless persecution – just as I also put the spectator in the position of the accused, as he is helpless in front of these faces cast from lead, love, and silence ...⁵⁸⁰

The faces that came into being in his paintings, in other words, showed viewers the accursed nature of the human condition. As the figures he cast into the material body of paint appeared *in front of* viewers, they also had the effect of placing those viewers *beside* other viewers. As a result, they placed artist, art, and audience together in solidarity, and thereby enacted what al-Mouadarres saw as a form of the humanist love that provided him with a source of optimism amid the gloom. The solidarity he was interested in was a positional one, and it resulted in a kind of intellectual liberation borne of witnessing the painful truth that everyone is composed of the same contaminated amalgam of “lead, love, and silence,” and thus taking a position outside the dyad of vengeful God and cowering faithful.⁵⁸¹

The visitors to Gallery One who recognized that al-Mouadarres’s paintings contained conflicted social testimony were well versed in those “modern” habits of lateral, associative

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid. Awad makes note of this dual symbolism of al-Mouadarres’s children.

⁵⁷⁹ I do not have an original text of his statement. Rather, I am extrapolating from the reports in Kamal, “Maʿraḍ al-Fannān Fātiḥ al-Mudarris,” and Awad, “al-Ṣudfa Laysat Fann,” Both reviews attribute similar and occasionally identical statements to the artist, leading me to conjecture a common press release or artist statement.

⁵⁸⁰ This quotation is printed on the back page of an al-Mouadarres exhibition brochure, Sultan Gallery, Kuwait, November 26 - December 26, 1969, and is captioned with the attribution “Gallery One exhibition, February, 1963.” Sultan Gallery Archives, accessed courtesy of Kristine Khouri. The ellipsis appears in the brochure’s quotation. Although this date must be incorrect (the gallery had not yet opened in February of that year), its reference to a text from Gallery One further supports the supposition that the artist had produced and circulated a statement.

⁵⁸¹ In the quotation attributed to the artist’s 1963 Gallery One exhibition, this dyad is evoked particularly strongly by the phrase “*la ḥudūd fī al-ʿibāda, la ḥudūd fī taqabbul al-itihām* (endless obeisance, endless persecution)”.

thinking that the critic for *al-Jundi* had assessed so warily in response to *The Eastern Moon*. Still not everyone approached the works in this way. When Hassan Kamal, Syria's curator for the modern section of the National Museum in Damascus, wrote about the exhibition and its success in Beirut for *al-Maʿrifa*, a cultural magazine published by the Syrian Ministry of Culture, he commended al-Moudarres for his interest in *turāth* and interpreted his themes as a straightforwardly patriotic set of foci: country, soil and traditions.⁵⁸² Kamal's commentary issued from the difficult conditions in Syria following the March 8, 1963 Baʿth Party coup by a military splinter group in the party, which soon conducted purges of opponents, bloodily suppressed civilian and military rebellions, and, after a coup attempt in July by Nasserists, tried and executed conspirators en masse.⁵⁸³ The review duly positioned its discussion of the artist within a recognizably nationalist and socialist framework, describing al-Moudarres as an "exemplary, actively working artist" who shares a populist quality with the Mexican muralists and is committed to drawing his forms from the country itself and firsthand study of "our heritage." Further, when Kamal endeavors to gloss al-Moudarres's perplexing discussion of the paintings as an "optimistic side of myself," he interprets "optimism" as a principled stand against nihilism, emphasizing how the artist eschewed complete abstraction and continued to use the figure as his means to present his "private philosophy, his society, his colors and his problems."⁵⁸⁴ It is clear that the artist's use of the term optimistic posed an interpretational challenge to other interlocutors as well, for it produced divergent statements about its source in the artist's imagery.

By contrast with Kamal's treatment for *al-Maʿrifa*, the long study of the exhibition in *Adab*,

⁵⁸² Kamal, "Maʿraḡ al-Fannān Fātiḡ al-Mudarris."

⁵⁸³ The July bloodshed was the result of yet another breakdown in attempts to join with Egypt under a pan-Arab unity program. The Military Committee that organized the coup had initially proclaimed a commitment to it and entered into talks with Egypt to create a framework for a union. The talks quickly dissolved, however, and tensions between the Baʿth and the Nasserists in Syria led to riots, a coup attempt, public hangings, and hundreds of casualties. On July 22, Abdel Nasser disavowed the framework they had purported to create and called the Baʿthists fascists and murderers." Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 75-85.

⁵⁸⁴ Kamal, "Maʿraḡ al-Fannān Fātiḡ al-Mudarris," 155.

which was written by artist Elias Awad, proposed that the “optimism” of al-Moudarres’s work was to be understood as an attempt to free audiences to recognize the perennial return of sunlight and Spring as a salvation from barrenness, including that wrought by war, sickness, brutality, and chaos.⁵⁸⁵ In this case, Awad’s conclusion that the paintings provide a statement on the optimistic truth that life always returned to the barren ruin is informed by the *Shi‘r* movement’s frequent recourse to Tammuzi imagery and themes of resurrection. In diverging from the greater emphasis that al-Moudarres himself had placed on positional solidarity, Awad gave further demonstration to the modernness of the work and its recipients. A major part of the shared ideological ground for the interlinked institutional forums of Gallery One, *Adab*, and *Shi‘r* circa 1963 was the notion that art properly engendered a divergence of interpretation.

Awad’s article, printed in a magazine devoted to a “modern position in life and existence,” functioned as both review and primer in recognizing this constitutive ambiguity in the meaning of visual art. His exegesis of the ways that exhibited paintings make meaning is worth considering at length for the way it plays upon the artist’s own statements about guilt and matches them to the phenomenological experience of a visitor to the exhibition setting. To open, Awad narrates his responses to the painting *Resurrection of Sumer* in sequence, as if he has just seen it on the wall after entering the gallery, and must try to process the basic emotional coordinates of its imagery and composition (**Fig. 4.29**).⁵⁸⁶ The work, which appears in black-and-white reproduced in the front pages of the issue of *Adab*, contains groupings of heads and hands and amalgamated bodies that are arranged as if seams in a scored ground. Awad describes having suddenly spied the figure of a child in one of its corners that seems to be staring at him, and how he realizes he is unable to say whether that face is sad in spite of concurrent indications

⁵⁸⁵ Awad, “al-Şudfa Laysat Fann,” 50.

⁵⁸⁶ Painting reproduced *Adab* 2, no. 3 (Summer 1963), 4, with note directing readers to the article on page 45.

of tremendous pain. He next notices how the component figures are locked into relations of accountability in the painting, with eyes that “appear as if they are watching us, or watching the furthest point of the room, or the entrance, or the face of another child in the painting.” A pattern of barbed wire seems to run over, or through them, without containing them. The figures appear sapped of strength, like victims, and he realizes he cannot tell if they are faces, or ghosts. In a dream, or in the light of the day? For Awad, even the colors in the painting perform doubly, as “leprous” colors that convey an element of joy nonetheless, thereby announcing both “the dirt of existence, and its purity.” The difference between his interpretive framework and Kamal’s can also be grasped from abundance of formalist descriptions he mobilizes to convey his perceptions: “lines intersecting on the canvas plane,” “the colored background arranged as a mosaic,” “a geometric balance between black and space,” “the liquidation of the paints into dispersed pieces” “the unity of the equilibrium of form and movement,” and so on.⁵⁸⁷ Awad’s discussion of his communion with the paintings even takes care to mark the separation between the viewing space of the gallery and life on the street. Awad describes moving from *Resurrection of Sumer* to take in the next painting, only to be distracted by a sunbeam that has passed through the door of the gallery to hit the tiles below, which brings him into awareness of the familiar street sounds just beyond the gallery door. The result, as he describes, is that “we feel a strong guilt, and [yet] we are innocent of it.”⁵⁸⁸ Awad’s assessment of his guilty innocence at the moment of his communion with these paintings is a play on the artist’s own references to accursedness. At the same time, it offers a key to the ideological stakes of the *Shi‘r* movement’s understanding of its

⁵⁸⁷ I have found relatively few details about Awad beyond his activities with the *Shi‘r* movement in 1963. A Winter 1963 feature on his artwork in *Adab* introduced him as a Palestinian artist resident in Beirut who had just returned from study in the United States. That piece emphasizes Awad’s status as a rigorous abstractionist, reproducing a portfolio of experiments with the placement of volumes on a page.

⁵⁸⁸ Awad, “al-Şudfa Laysat Fann,” 45.

humanist engagement. The contention is that the experience of art cannot take place *in life per se*, but neither can it transcend the matrix of human relationships out of which life is composed.

In the next part of the article, Awad moves from narrating his first impressions into a technical presentation of the mechanics of the artistic effects al-Moudarres achieved in the work. To do so, he introduces a diagram of the chains of communicative transference that necessarily obtain for any physically extant work of art (labeled “Painting x”) as it functions as a vector of mediation between “Intellect A,” a sender, who assembles and conveys an aesthetic expression, and “Intellect B,” a receiver, who also creates, albeit by re-assembling a meaning for that aesthetic expression (Fig. 4.30). At both points of interaction between an intellect and a painting, he argues, it is the painting’s syntax – its “symbolic grammar” – that conveys the meaning from one point to the other, which introduces a constitutive indeterminacy in meaning.⁵⁸⁹ The result for this painting is a condition of viewing in which opposites are held in the balance as simultaneously present. For Awad, the key to an appropriately complex interpretation is to move away from considering the painted object as the intentional art of the artist alone. Instead, readers were to recognize the contingency within the signification of a painting and to attend closely to its work upon each different “Intellect B” that received it, as in the refracted layers of response generated by *Resurrection of Sumer*. Awad’s article, although advocating a reader-response style art criticism, is in no way a statement of democratization. To the contrary, through his use of algebraic equations to dissolve the sole authority of the painting, or the artist, he also gave clear indication of the rarified disciplinarity of his article. As a title for the piece, either he or al-Khal took the phrase “chance is not art” from the text of al-Moudarres’s artist statement. In that context, it served as a piece of the artist’s assertion that worthy abstract paintings were not

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., 46. The semiotic aspect of the schema is intended; as he observes, the implicit ambiguity of communication in fact also occurs in language-based texts, from everyday speech to artistic and even technical writing.

achieved by randomly throwing paint and declaring oneself emancipated from figurative representation. For Awad, it also worked as an invitation to think more deeply about how paintings worked, and the ways in which they enfolded both artist and audience in a shared symbolic order.

The two pages that follow Awad's article are reproductions of two drawings by al-Moudarres in the same style as the drawings within "Four Poems with Drawings" in *Shi'r*. The first, which is given the title *The Departure*, presents an image of expulsion that seems to have arisen from the shape of a brushstroke with a peak that suggested to the artist a huddle of two stateless figures hauling their possessions on their backs (Fig. 4.31). The compositional technique is again an automatist one; al-Moudarres has first applied long inky brush marks to the resistant surface of tracing paper, then returned to their shapes as they unevenly dried so as to pull features – facial details, arms, feet, the outline of garments – out of the faint volumetric suggestions that appeared on their surface. Wherever the ink had not dried before receiving the second passage of finer detail, the later additions transform into anemone-like forms suggesting fringe, beards, and forms of unreal vegetation. The artist's final move was to set the scene into the bleached and barren landscape of surrealist intuition, adding an eye-like sun that rises to lead the refugees on their painful way. In the second drawing, titled *Twins*, the dual strokes of ink remain upright and the same twitching eyeball of a sun appears again, albeit higher in the sky (Fig. 4.32). It drips sparks that land on the ground to sprout as seedlings, or musical notes. These motifs are not affixed to the work as mere stylistic pastiche. Rather, because the drawings are composed "automatically" in response to unbidden changes in the external forms of drying brushstrokes, they too participate in the peculiar humanist ethic that al-Moudarres described, in which both images and image-makers stand "beside" human beings in a common position of

condemnation. Moreover, the informality of the work declares its origination in the prior social relations of the cafés and salons of Damascus and Beirut and their intersection with the offices of the Dar Majallat *Shiʿr*. As such, they configure the magazine pages on which they appear as a kind of “Painting x” between intellects, one that provides a vessel for momentarily capturing phenomena from much deeper cultural wells and matrices of meaning.

Finally, the shamanistic aspect of the kind of authorial alienation that al-Moudarres courted in his drawings is particularly accentuated in his hybrid work, “Four Poems with Drawings,” which appeared in *Shiʿr* in the same summer 1963 season. The first segment of printed poetry begins with bold statement of defiance against a carceral existence only to quickly become captive to a stutter pattern of movement and surrender:

1

Here is the world of prison cells

I spit on it

Like the rapid ticks of seconds

Hurry

With your silence

Without wanting, love came

Ascending the desert stairs

Climbing the walls to my kingdom

There’s a sign

Stop!⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁹⁰ Fateh al-Moudarres, “Arba° Qaṣā°id ma° Rusūm,” *Shiʿr* 27 (Summer 1963): 37-41. I give thanks to Orwa Nyrabia for assisting me with the translation.

The subsequent segments become more concrete and also more surreal, with the artist-poet wondering “what is the meaning of a piece of the sky; what do you mean by your expression bless you,” only to describe a terrible image that inverts both: “did you see the white pigeons dipped in blood; our graves are on the roof tops now.” A desolate city in which children throw dice and birds rip the air to shreds is described. By section four, “we the poets” have become the perpetrators of a moonlight crucifixion against “you,” an event that is staged as if it were a great illuminating miracle of love borne from pain. And, in the fifth and final verse, both the crucified figure and the crucifiers are abandoned to a continuous cycle of sacrificial violence on the altar of the hierarchical social order of cities past and present – “We continue to perpetrate the murder” – to conclude with an isolated line reading “Alone on the platform.” On the final page of the feature, printed text gives way to hand-drawn elements, and the platform that had provided a site of a political assassination (whether the crucifixions of 2,000 years ago or the public hangings of 1963 in the aftermath of the coup) also becomes the holy altar of Ugarit, as used some 4,000 years ago. On the page, the brush marks that have sprouted the pious accoutrements of ancient priests share space with the impotent incantations of those who seek protection from the gods (Fig. 4.24). A clumsy talismanic sign composed around the word *Allah* that contains an extra *lam* letterform serves to mark the scrawled verse as a supplication to the divine, and the lines that follow describe the same extreme vulnerability of the earthbound bodies that a talisman would give false promise to protect. Describing the “necks” of mankind, fragments of flesh, and the bereft remnants that huddle at a grave, it concludes,

Crying at the cemetery
Under the stone of the tomb
The last orphan deity
The heart of yesterday’s child

Yesterday.⁵⁹¹

In effect, as the artist pushed, pulled, and scratched the ink of these lines to express the final mourning rites for a sacrificial child, “poetry” as a category of noble *turāth* gave way to a murkier realm of the illicit supplications that provide a means of civilizational coping. In the poems and drawings that al-Moudarres produced for the magazines of the Dar Majallat *Shiʿr*, he treated human consciousness as a latent event held hostage to superstitions and fear. In this case, in spite of the visual recourse made to a mystified sign of god, which appears at the top of the handwritten verse as if it were the very sign that commanded “stop!” at the start of the poem, the poem’s narration concludes with the death of a child already past. In the context of *Shiʿr*, al-Moudarres’s closing reference to an orphan deity would have immediately called the myths of Tammuz and Christ to mind. The magazine’s precedent of engagement with cycles of condemnation and redemption as the structure of the region’s history gives heft to the artist’s exhibition statements about the optimism of his attempt to throw man outside of the circuit of false representation. As Awad wrote in *Adab*, drawing on his own intimacy with these writers’ contemporary mobilizations of myth, the recurrence of the figure of the Messiah in al-Moudarres’s paintings signified a continuum of torture and torturer, and repentance and condemnation to sin.⁵⁹²

In the Spring of 1964, a final discussion of this cycle of themes in relation to Syrian artists and their effort to realize their creative capacities received an airing in *Shiʿr* as a set of notes that al-Moudarres submitted to the journal from Damascus.⁵⁹³ Martial law had been imposed on and off across the whole of Syria in an effort to curb the clashes and popular

⁵⁹¹ The handwriting is very difficult to discern, so other transcriptions and translations are also possible.

⁵⁹² Awad, “al-Şudfa Laysat Fann,” 49.

⁵⁹³ “Qaḍaya wa-Akhbār,” *Shiʿr* 29-30 (Winter-Spring 1964), 128-9.

uprisings breaking out in a number of Syrian cities, and border crossings between Damascus and Beirut had become difficult.⁵⁹⁴ Unable to attend Lebanon's galleries and salons in person during this period, the artist announced that he would establish a salon in his Damascus studio, to be considered as an extension of *Shi'r* magazine's *khamīs* meetings in Beirut.⁵⁹⁵ The transcript from its first meeting, which al-Moudarres sent to al-Khal in March 1964, would be the last item he contributed to the magazine.⁵⁹⁶ Al-Moudarres had invited Abdel Karim al-Nā'im, a promising poetic talent from Homs, to present his work and to field questions. The published transcript of that gathering consists of a series of four questions and answers that al-Moudarres extensively edited if not outright ventriloquized for the purposes of *Shi'r*, and which presents the young poet as an exemplar of courage and mental acuity. In response to the first question, "what does the expression 'accursed man' mean to you?" al-Nā'im explains that he understands accursedness as a differential rather than a state of sinfulness, i.e. as the inevitable backlash after the "shackles of tradition and custom" in a given society are broken.⁵⁹⁷ In the next questions, al-Nā'im is implicitly recognized as an accursed figure himself, and his psychological attachment to that status is limned. When asked to give an immediate and unfiltered description of the face of the accursed man, al-Nā'im speaks of eyes that search the furthest horizon and a face that uncannily resembles the wrinkled men of his native village. After al-Moudarres calls the poet to consider

⁵⁹⁴ For a summary of the major battles in the Ba'ath Party's attempt to secure its regime, see Seale, *Asad of Syria*, 92-94. Evidence of a security crackdown of some sort appears in a letter Yusuf al-Khal wrote to al-Moudarres, March 20, 1964, which mentions that al-Moudarres had requested an official letter of invitation to visit the gallery in Beirut, so that he could show it to anyone who asked. At that time, they relied on a visiting Australian painter named Frank Beck to carry their correspondence back and forth on his trips between Damascus and Beirut.

⁵⁹⁵ In the same letter, al-Khal acknowledges receipt of the artist's news of the "khamīs majallat *Shi'r*" in Damascus.

⁵⁹⁶ The Winter-Spring 1964 issue would be the penultimate issue of *Shi'r* before its three-year hiatus, 1964-1967.

⁵⁹⁷ *Insān muttāham*. In this case, I translate the term *muttāham* as "accursed," akin to the French term *poète maudit* or "accursed poet," as used by Baudelaire and Lautréamont. Al-Moudarres had used the same family of terminology when he referred to "*taqabbul al-ittihām*," or acceptance of indictments, in his 1963 Gallery One text to invoke an idea of the endless suffering of indictments that is part of the human condition. In the case of al-Nā'im's response to the concept, he notes that the term has been used against both common murderers and Socrates, with the common denominator being the break with the rules that bind in the moment rather than the fact of rightness or wrongness.

whether he still possessed the “taste” of that land of his youth, the exchange then culminates in a request to the poet to reflect on the doctrine of aestheticism. His response, which offers a revision to the art for art’s sake position that had already given cause to other intellectuals in the region to discredit *Shiʿr*’s mission and contributors, rewards reading in full as a document from that continuing debate:

Q: Does your poetry take “art for art’s sake” as a goal?

A: My thinking on the problem of time springs from my sense that humans are bound to some time and some land. On the basis of this sense of limitations, to start off to raise man to the level of the absolute or achieve immortality are two impossible mandates. For this reason, the struggle must begin with the problem of time and the problem of history or the land. As for what you said about “art for the sake of art,” I think that the period (*al-zamān al-kabīr*) that encompasses all of us imposes upon us the principle of truthfulness as a base for all the processes that pursue it; There is not, in my opinion, what we call “art for art’s sake.” Every human is aware that he cannot escape commitment to his thought and his subject, and in this sense, we all become committed and art becomes one front in the struggle that we are fighting towards victory.⁵⁹⁸

Here, al-Nāʿim suggests that human existence in time, on the earth, is a kind of continuous struggle and as such the art that is created is necessarily politicized, existing as a component of that struggle rather than an individual act producing autonomous works. By suggesting that any artwork produced by a thinking subject does in fact contribute to and change the world, he argues that all true creation no matter the style should be seen as an art of commitment and engagement. Although this discussion of a valuation of art based on its status as creation rather than as a statement of its politics clears a space for the appreciation of artistry as art, there is also a clear affirmation of the goal of national progress. The appearance of the keyword “victory” at the conclusion of al-Nāʿim’s remarks brings the proceedings of the Damascus *khamīs* back into the fold of the Arab nationalism that the Baʿth had pledged to restore. In the opinion of the

⁵⁹⁸ “Qaḍaya wa-Akhhār,” 129.

young Homsī poet, a shared effort toward liberating victory was not only possible, but actually natural and necessary. This testimony from Damascus, which al-Moudarres prepared for publication in Beirut and the consumption of modernists throughout the Arab world, again demonstrates the subtlety of his critical participation in the region's cultural debates. On the occasion of his Gallery One appearance in May 1963, he had described mankind as a corpus of subjects who were rendered guilty by association, as bodies inhabiting a world in which accusations are hurled, resources depleted, and artists judged harshly for moving beyond their delimited place. Ten months later, he issued a transcript from his studio that also described art as a site of entry into a space of solidarity, but identified the source of that solidarity as the sheer impossibility of any person or program floating free of located obligation and ascending to a timeless ideal.

For al-Moudarres, the lastingly optimistic function of its art was its capacity to serve as an agent of anti-idealism, and his paintings became the materialized practice of negation, mutability, and doubt that contested any consensus around the question of progressiveness or preordained mission. As he saw it, visual presences were to be recognized as profane entities that worked within people to unite opposites and inflame desires. Many of the oil paintings he produced in these years took religiously motivated idealism on as a target of deflationary play, and the artist often highlighted how practices of veneration tended to produce simulations of power that alienated humans from their own creative resources. The artist's use of gold leaf, which critics often read as a reference to the Byzantine icon traditions that comprised a piece of national heritage, and which I see as a sign of crossed alchemical opposites, also acted on the works as a demonstration of the mendacity of representations of holiness. Paintings that he made for collector friends, such as *Sheikh of Ras Shamra*, completed in May 1963 as a birthday gift for

Fechter, lightly satirize cultic leaders as heavily decorated pillars of presumptuous judgment (Fig. 4.33). The artist also took steps to prevent audiences from extending idolatrous treatment to the visual presences that he himself created, which entailed undermining any potential claim to the kind of fixed truth that wields a god-like power over witnesses. The artist's strategies in this regard may be seen in paintings like that seen in Figure 4.34, a small painting on cardboard completed in 1966 that employs the same columnar figure of a sheikh as the 1963 gift, but also adorns it with telltale *turāth* motifs such as gilt flakes and Arabic writings. The result is anything but transcendent. The space is a dense and airless one, created by endless layers of pigment that are then ruthlessly scraped back to the bone. The surface of the central column, which has been created by layers of heavy black pigment over rust-red color, looks like an upright stone slab. Upon it, the artist incised a child-like drawing of the face of authority, giving the stone the almond-shaped eyes and heavy brow line of ancient Assyrian statuary. The result is a simulation of the standing god stones that had been invented by a frightened population as a form of collective hope, but worshipped idolatrously as a form of collective bondage. By placing the contemporary viewer in front of these false representations, al-Moudarres thus poses the question of the source of their continuance into the social order of the present. Finishing the painting by incising the first line from sura 108 in the Qur'an – "Indeed, we have surely given you abundance" – onto the headdress of the central figure, he both describes a condition of God-given plenty and hints at a betrayal of that promise. Because the other two sentences of the sura – "so pray to your Lord and sacrifice to him. Indeed, the one who censures you has been cut off" – are absent, the description of abundance is severed from the instructions to believers that are thought necessary to preserve the gift of rain and sun from above. Having performed a temporary

short-circuiting of the search for divine instruction, the painting creates a brief window of optimism in which the viewer might be moved to break from his regressive bonds altogether.

As the space that the cultural institutions in Damascus provided for such negations began to narrow in the years 1963-4, the artist's subtly iconoclastic approach had taken brief refuge in the *Shi'ar* movement, working within its networks at the same time that the movement underwent a transformation of its own. For the intellectuals of the Arab world whom al-Moudarres addressed in organs like *Shi'ar* and *Adab* and venues like Gallery One, an artist's location in national time and place could pose a quandary for contemporary artwork and its critical interpretation. For many, their ties to a particular place had produced a patrimony of historical traditions and art forms that could not be escaped or ignored – a *turāth* that exerted power over its contemporary inheritors. Al-Moudarres's signal contribution to these debates, which he made as an artist-subject who was equally committed to working within his located place, was a refusal to rally around a false stability or to create a rote representation of the national inheritance. As can be seen by the drawings and statements that the artist prepared for distribution in Beirut, where they served to supplement and therefore complicate his painted canvases, he built his practice around manipulations of the common condition of sacrifice and loss that ran like veins of ore within the Syrian landscape. The model of authentic work that he espoused could only be grounded in the instability of the earth and the lives it held upon it.

Chapter Four Figures



Fig. 4.1 “Fannān ‘Arabī Sūrī Yafūz bi-l-Jā’iza al-Ulā,” *al-Jundi* (24 Oct 1961): 28-9. Shows Fateh al-Mouddarres, *Children from the Northern Countryside*, medium and dimensions unknown, 1960.



Fig. 4.2 Fateh al-Moudarres, *Two Lovers*, oil, 61 x 45 cm, 1953. Collection National Museum, Damascus.



Fig. 4.3 Fateh al-Moudarres, *Quwayq River*, oil on canvas, 60 x 76 cm, 1953. Collection National Museum, Damascus.



Fig. 4.4 Detail from front page of *al-Bina*², 9 December 1953. Caption reads “The goddess of the fertility vessel. A marvelous status from the city of Mari.”



Fig. 4.5 *Al-Bina*², 9 December 1953, 10.



Fig. 4.6 Front door entrance to the AMI gallery circa 1960, 29 May Street, Damascus, Syria.
Source: Abdul Aziz Alloun, *Mun'ataf al-Sittināt fī Tārīkh al-Funūn al-Jamīla al-Mu'āṣira fī Sūriyā* (Damascus: Culture House for the International Daadoush Group, 2003), 8.



Fig. 4.7 Fateh al-Mouddarres, *Child*, unknown medium, 100 x 75 cm, 1960. Private collection/ Heward Gallery, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.



Fig. 4.8 Installation view of Fateh al-Moudarres, *Child*, in the AMI wing at the Damascus International Fair, 1961. Source: Alloun, *Mun'ataf al-Sittināt*, 75.



Fig. 4.9 Chérif Khaznadar, "Peintres de Damas a Beyrouth," *L'Orient Littéraire*, published March 1962.



Fig. 4.10 Fateh al-Mouadarres, ink sketch on paper, signed and labeled “Maaloula, September 30, 1963.” Private collection of Fadi al-Mouadarres, Damascus.



Fig. 4.11 Fateh al-Mouadarres, *The Virgin and the Divine Child*, oil, 49 x 70 cm, 1961. Collection National Museum, Damascus.



Fig. 4.12 Fateh al-Moudarres, *Mother and Her Children*, unknown medium, unknown dimensions, 1961. Source: *al-Ma^crifa* (December 1966), n.p.



MAX ERNST *Black Sun*. 1927-8

Fig. 4.13 Max Ernst, *Soleil Noir*, oil on board, 53 x 67 cm, 1927-28. Source: Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (New York: Praeger, 1959), 122.

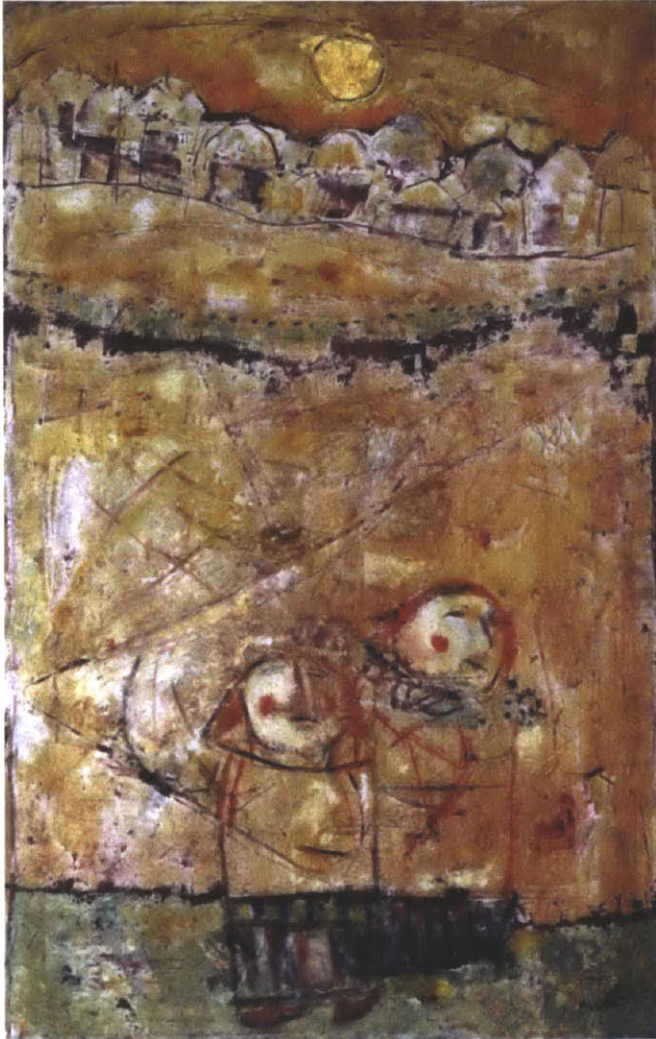


Fig. 4.14 Fateh al-Moudarres, *The Sun is a Little Child*, oil, 70 x 110 cm, 1963. Collection National Museum, Damascus.

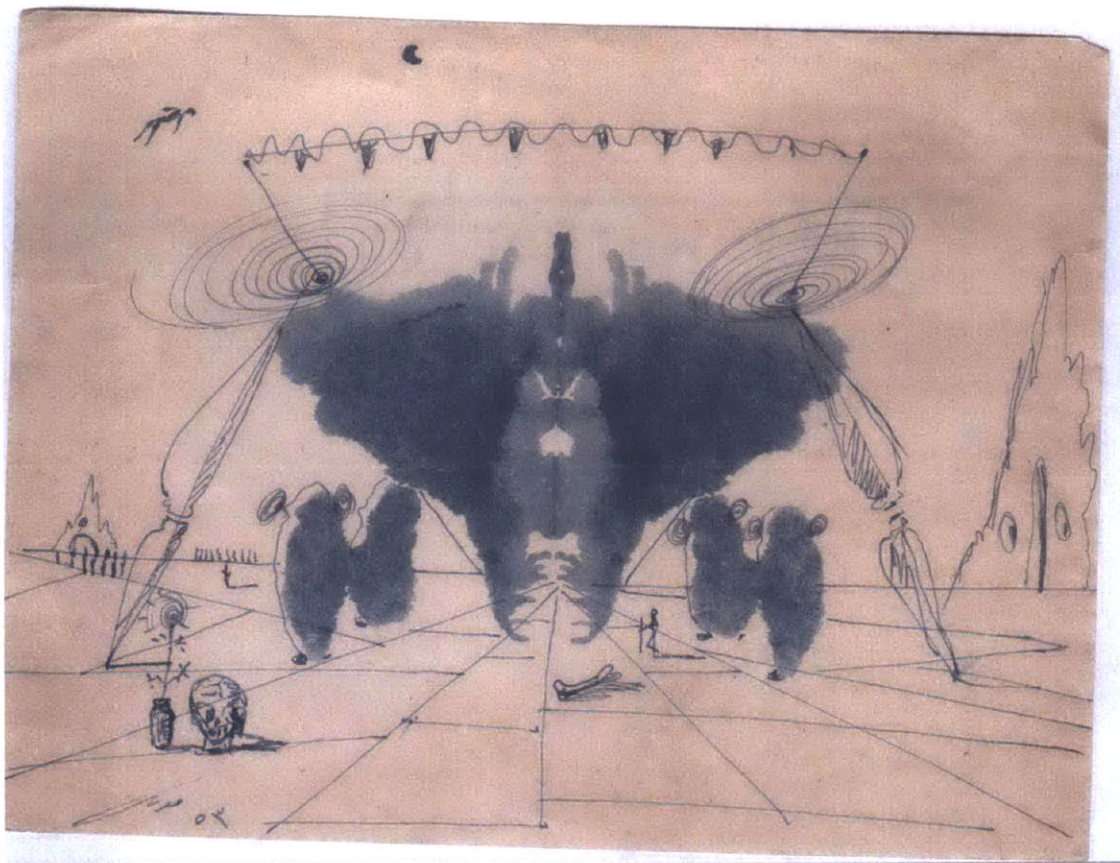


Fig. 4.15 Fateh al-Moudarres, ink sketch on paper, 1953. Private collection of Fadi al-Moudarres, Damascus.

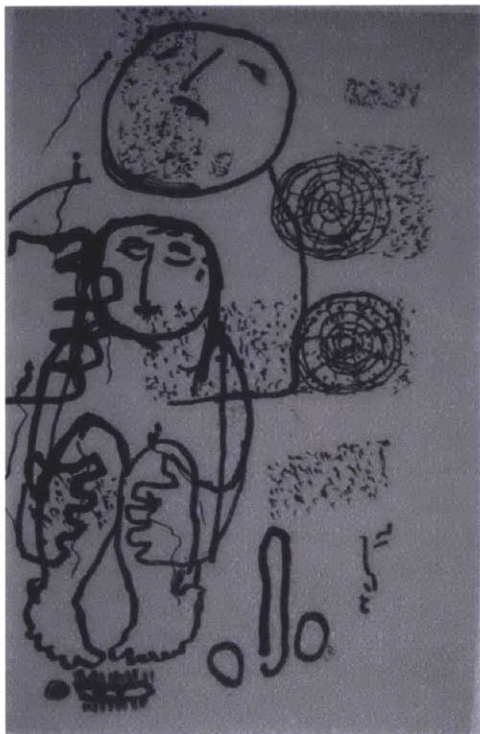


Fig. 4.16 Fateh al-Moudarres, untitled, print on glass, 13 x 20 cm, 1961. Source: Alloun, *Mun^ʿataf al-Sittināt*, 114.



Fig. 4.17 Fateh al-Moudarres, *Last Supper*, oil on canvas, 60 x 80 cm, ca. 1963. Collection Atassi Gallery, Damascus.



Fig. 4.18 Magazine spread: Siham Tergeman, “Sindrayla al-Jadīda,” *al-Jundi* (30 Jan 1962): 12-13.



Fig. 4.18b Close-up of al-Moudarres painting his “Cinderella.”

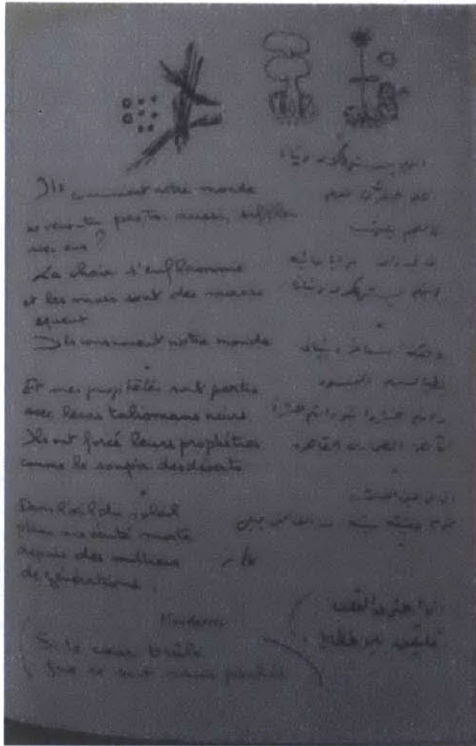


Fig. 4.19 Page from Fateh al-Mouddarres and Chérif Khaznadar, *al-Qamr al-Sharqī ‘alā Shāti’ al-Gharb/Lune Orientale sur le Rivage Ouest* (Damascus: Salah Ayoubieh, 1962).

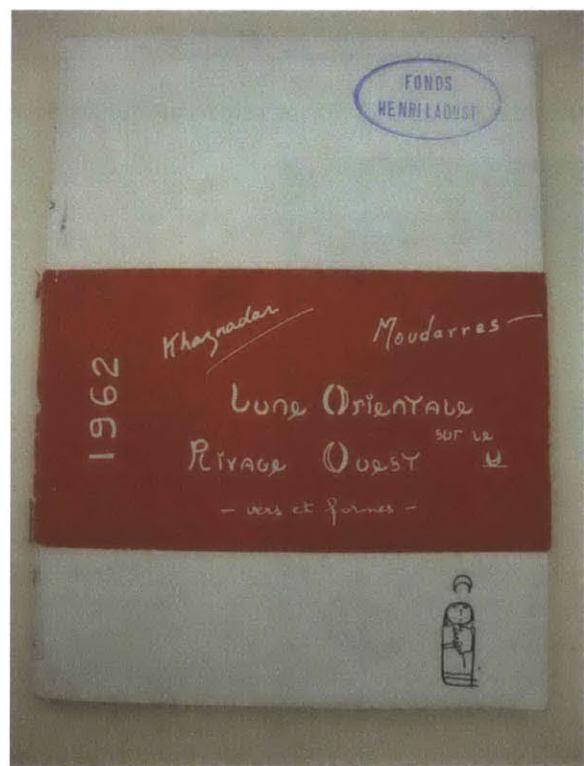
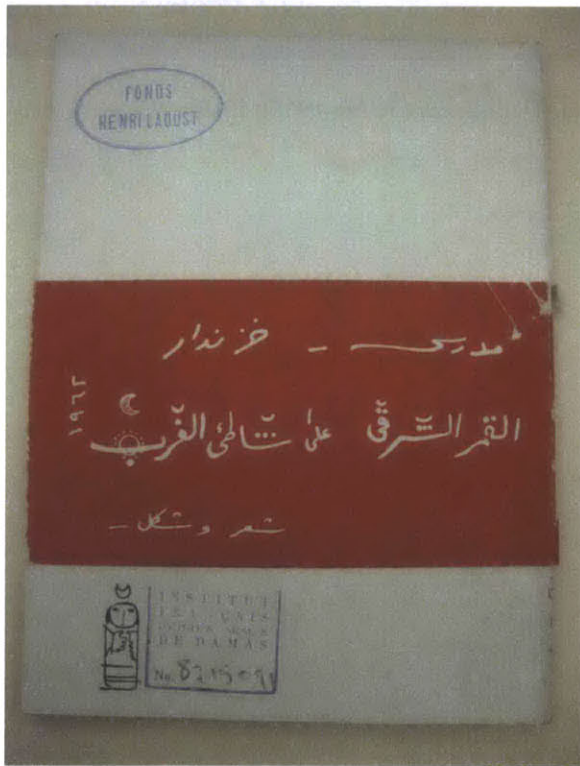


Fig. 4.20 “Arabic” and “French” covers, *al-Qamr al-Sharqī ‘alā Shāti’ al-Gharb*. Collection of Institut français d’études arabes de Damas.

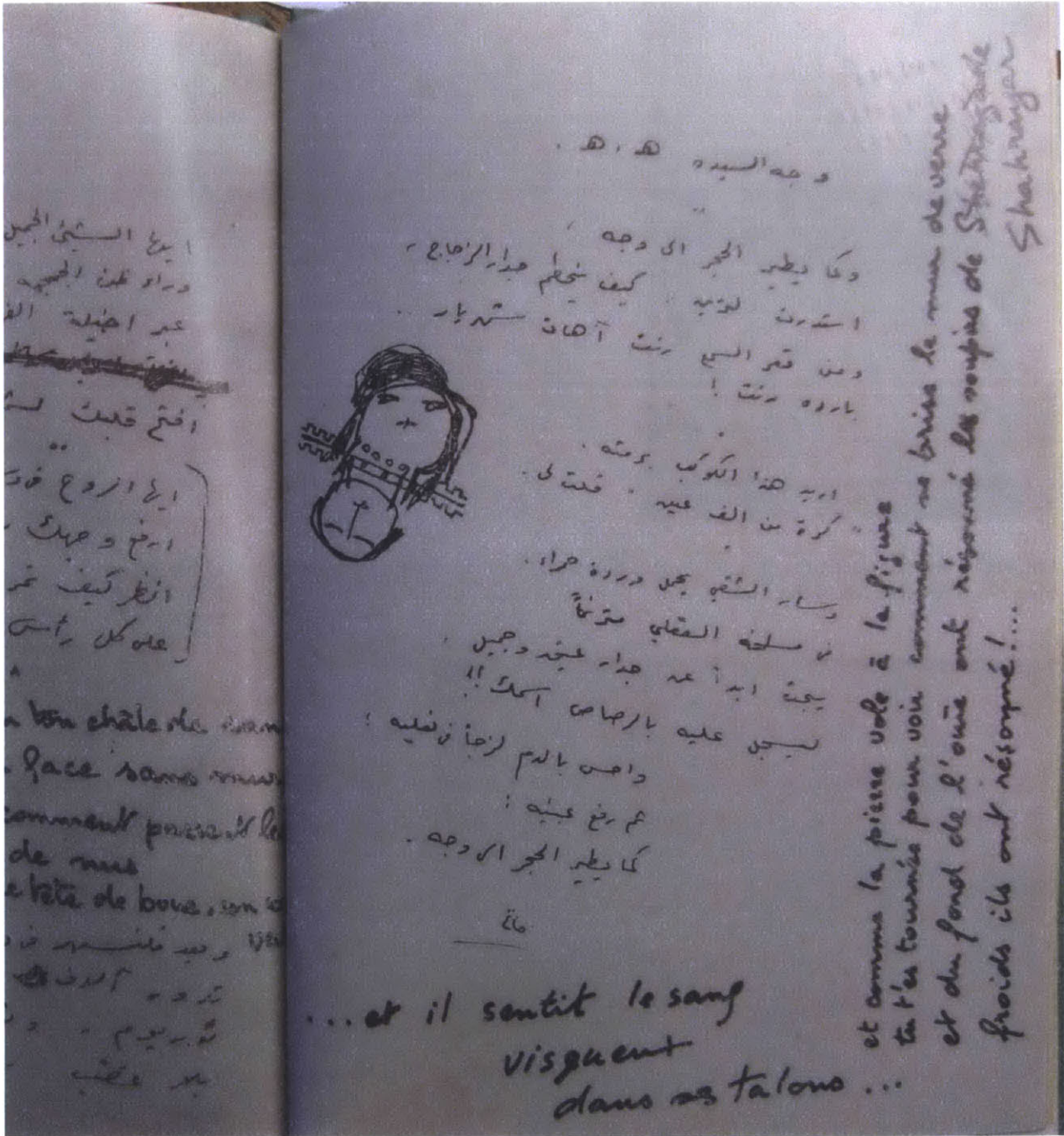


Fig. 4.21 Page from al-Moudarres and Khaznadar, *al-Qamr al-Sharqī 'alā Shātī' al-Gharb*.



Fig. 4.22 Fateh al-Moudarres, title unknown, oil on canvas, 68.3 x 49 cm, 1962. Collection of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar.



Fig. 4.23 Fateh al-Moudarres, untitled, oil and encaustic on canvas, 110 x 110 cm, 1963. Formerly in the collection of Ambassador Rudolf and Mrs. Maria Fechter, Bonn. Sold at Christie's International Modern and Contemporary Art, Sale 7082, Dubai, 29 April 2009.



Fig. 4.24 Fateh al-Mouardres, ink drawing in “Arba^c Qaṣā’id ma^c Rusūm,” *Shi‘r* 27 (Summer 1963): 39.



Fig. 4.25 Fateh al-Mouardres, ink drawing in “Arba^c Qaṣā’id ma^c Rusūm,” *Shi‘r* 27 (Summer 1963): 41.



Fig. 4.26 Hrair Diarbekirian, *Dreams of the Poet*, in “Hrair Diarbekirian (Rusūm),” *Adab* (Autumn 1963): 43.



Fig. 4.27 Fateh al-Moudarres, *Women at the Wedding*, oil and sand on canvas, 115 x 124.1 cm, 1963. Samawi Collection.



Fig. 4.28 Gallery One, poster for Fateh al-Moudarres solo exhibition, Beirut, June 6-15, 1963. Private collection of Fadi al-Moudarres, Damascus.

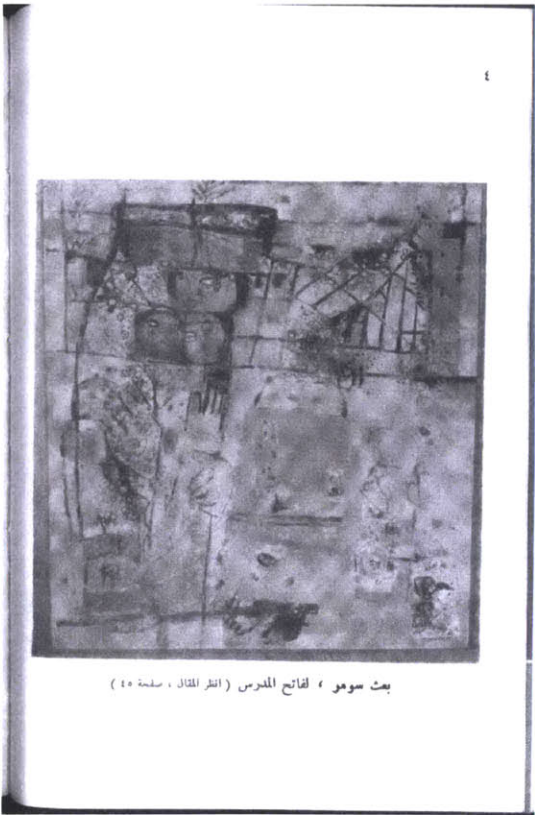
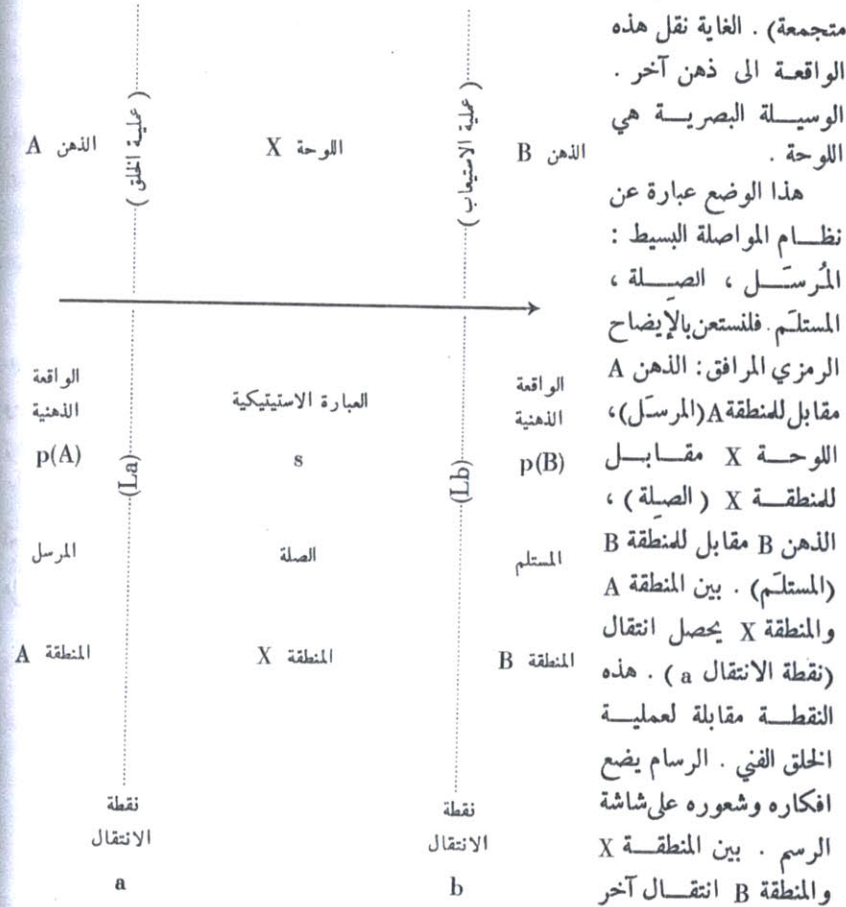


Fig. 4.29 Fateh al-Moudarres, *Resurrection of Sumer*, unknown medium, unknown dimensions, 1963. Source: *Adab* 2.3 (Summer 1963): 4.

ننتقل من اللوحة رقم ١٤ « بعث سومر » الى مشاهدة اللوحة المجاورة .

الصورة عبارة .

واقعة تحدث في الذهن (كفكرة ، كشعور ، كلحظة ألم ، كسلسلة اختبارات احساسية



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Fig. 4.30 Conceptual diagram from Elias Awad, "al-Ṣudfa Laysat Fann: Lawḥat Fātiḥ al-Mudarris," *Adab* 2 no. 3 (Summer 1963), 46.

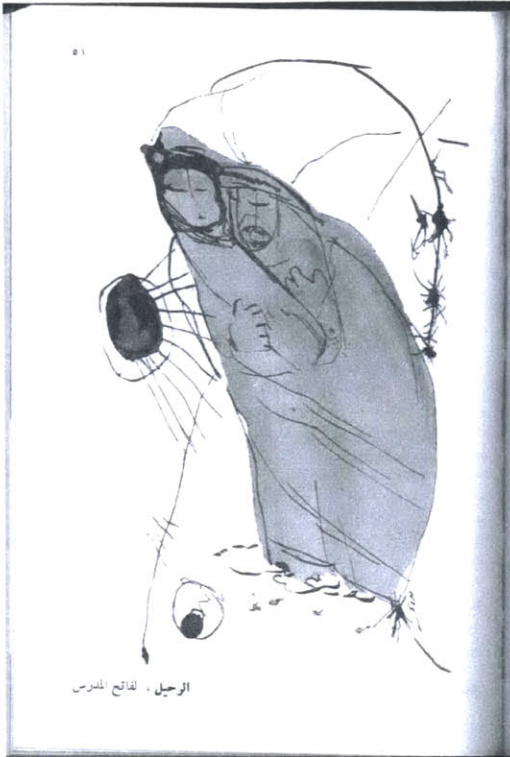


Fig. 4.31 Fateh al-Moudarres, *The Departure*, ink drawing in *Adab* 2 no. 3 (Summer 1963), 51.

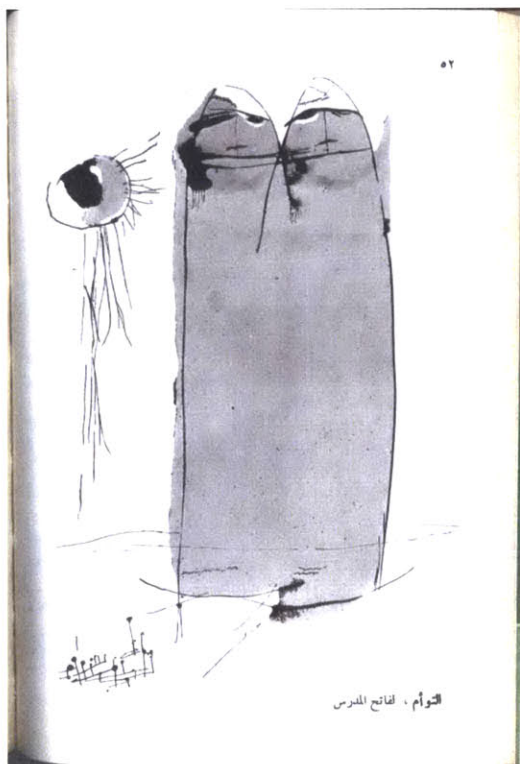


Fig. 4.32 Fateh al-Moudarres, *Twins*, ink drawing in *Adab* 2 no. 3 (Summer 1963), 52.



Fig. 4.33 Fateh al-Moudarres, *Sheikh of Ras Shamra*, oil on unmounted canvas, 69.5 x 49.5 cm, 1963. Inscribed "Happy birthday Rudolf 20/5/63." Formerly in the collection of Ambassador Rudolf and Mrs. Maria Fechter, Bonn. Sold at Christie's Tableaux Orientalistes et Art Moderne Arabe et Iranien, Sale 5613, Paris, 9 November 2010.

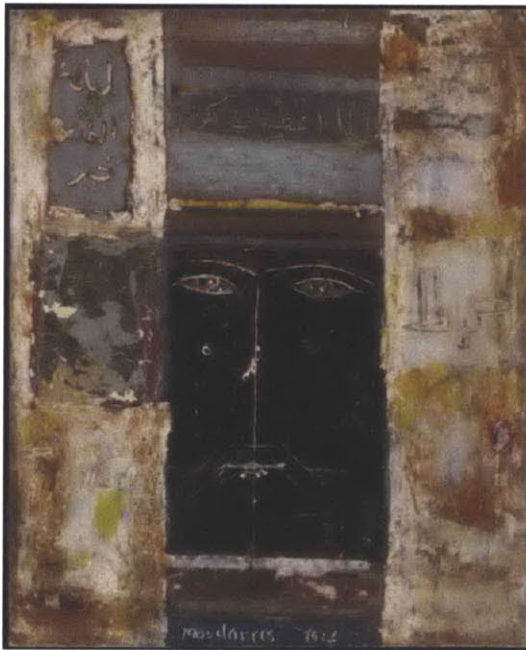


Fig. 4.34 Fateh al-Moudarres, untitled, oil on wood panel, 19.5 x 15.6 cm, 1966. Collection British Museum, London.

Chapter Five

The Longer 1960s: New Abstractions at the College of Fine Arts

In November of 1965, Mahmoud Hammad exhibited a painting in the Autumn Exhibition in Damascus that staked out another, new relationship to *turāth*, one promising to secure authentic creation by means of personal immanence rather than representation (Fig. 5.1). Titled *Oh Camels of the Ogres*, a lyric from a folk song about the impossibility of feasting in days of hunger, the painting's appearance had nothing to do with that theme.⁵⁹⁹ Instead, it was an abstract work – a tangle of dark lines against red pigment, arranged around a glowing interior of blank canvas – that Hammad had realized through the Arabic letterforms of its titular phrase, playing with lines, dots, and positive and negative space in ways that undercut legibility and left pure painted form. Hammad had been exploring the possibility of using the forms of his native alphabet in his paintings for several years, but had only begun to exhibit the results of his inquiry in 1964. When he did so, he found that viewers rarely welcomed the deliberate ambiguity of their status as Arabic forms without identifiable native content. At the symposium the Ministry of Culture held for the opening of the 1965 exhibition, one visitor stood up to demand an explication (*tafsīr*) of the work from Hammad, citing the lack of any proportional grammar in the calligraphic composition as a problem.⁶⁰⁰ And when critic Tarek al-Sharif supported the work, explaining that Hammad was seeking a contemporary application for the Arabic line apart from its

⁵⁹⁹ Title of this work, *Ya Jimāl al-Būba'a*, is mentioned in the summary of the opening events of the exhibition, "al-Naṣṣ al-Kāmil li-Munāqashāt Nadwat Ma'raḍ al-Kharīf al-Sābi'," *al-Ba'ṭh*, 16 Nov. 1965. I thank Lubna Hammad for explaining that the phrase comes from a traditional Aleppo song, which asks the "camels of the ogres" what they have had for supper, with the reply being the expensive fare "bread and cheese with salt," i.e. an equally out-of-reach entity.

⁶⁰⁰ "Al-Naṣṣ al-Kāmil li-Munāqashāt Nadwat Ma'raḍ al-Kharīf al-Sābi'."

traditional function of bearing literary content, this prompted archaeologist Qasim Tuwayr to deem the painting a failure at representation and thus reduced to mere decoration. Even after Hammad spoke about the crucial difference between the new types of artistic questions he was posing and the old ideas of Arab art as a historical Islamic form, the audience continued to fixate on issues of the decorative status of these heritage traditions.⁶⁰¹ This particular dialogue, which appeared in *al-Ba^ʿth*, made Hammad's painting into an object lesson about the risks involved in using the unfamiliar and bewildering languages of avant-garde art.⁶⁰² By submitting a difficult, specialized, work such as *Oh Camels of the Ogres* to such public scrutiny at the national exhibition, Hammad had entered into yet another contested juncture of relations between artist, state, and public.

Hammad, who was by then a senior painting instructor at the College of Fine Arts in Damascus and a respected advocate for the contributing role of the fine arts in national development, knew well that he and his colleagues were facing a crisis of professional governance. At the College, he and fellow instructors had been tasked with bringing the national art school fully up to date with contemporary curricula. At the 1965 Autumn Exhibition, however, they had suddenly been made subject to a blundering attempt by the Directorate of Plastic Arts to exert direction over their artistic progress.⁶⁰³ As just discussed in Chapter Four, the March 8, 1963 coup and the pronouncement of its revolutionary character by the Ba^ʿth Party

⁶⁰¹ Ibid.

⁶⁰² After the March 8, 1963 coup, the only newspapers that were permitted to continue printing were expected to uphold the values of the "nationalist method of socialist construction." Explained in Salam Kawakibi, "The Private Media in Syria," Working Paper 11 in the Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia (Amsterdam: Univ. of Amsterdam and Hivos, 2010), quoting from the 1963 Decree 48, which established *al-Thawra*, a second state paper created by the Ministry of Information.

⁶⁰³ I have written elsewhere about a short parodic account published by Syrian writer Mohammad al-Maghout the same year, which described both artists' failed avant-gardism and the state's failed attempt to produce a progressive literature and art. Anneka Lenssen, "Distances Greater than Between These Two Walls: On Ideals and the Constitution of an Audience," in *Arab Art Histories: The Khalid Shoman Collection*, eds. Sarah A. Rogers and Eline van de Vlist (Amman: Darat al-Funun, 2014): 93-96 and 137-151.

Command had already raised the question of state expectation for artistic production. But in 1965, the Directorate had for the first time designated a specific theme for the Autumn Exhibition. It announced that it would solicit entries within the theme of “national art” (*al-fann al-qawmī*), a nebulous category that, it suggested, encompassed both work that drew inspiration from the history of the nation (*umma*) and its struggle and heroes, and work that searched for personal style based on Arab art and its philosophy.⁶⁰⁴ This theme had proven unpopular with numerous artists, who published letters and mounted protests against it.⁶⁰⁵ As a result, the same 1965 symposium where visitors scrutinized *Oh Camels of the Ogres* had opened with a discussion of national art led by Director Afif Bahnassi, who attempted to defend his office’s policy by pitching it as a mechanism to enhance support for artists rather than to foreclose opportunities.⁶⁰⁶ Bahnassi’s claims met with some resistance even at the event itself. Fateh al-Mouddarres mentioned that he had submitted two portraits so as to abide by the theme, and he also, later in the event, upbraided Minister of Culture Sulayman al-Khash for admiring the propagandistic history paintings of Russia and China.⁶⁰⁷ These criticisms of Ministry intervention proved successful in heading off future attempts to delimit the themes at the Autumn Exhibition itself, thereby securing a kind of artistic freedom. And yet, the audacity of the Directorate’s intervention would remain in the air, reminding artists that the Syrian state did not consider the content of the arts to be entirely beyond its regulatory reach.

⁶⁰⁴ “Al-Naṣṣ al-Kāmil li-Munāqashāt Nadwat Ma‘raḍ al-Kharīf al-Sābi‘.” The description of the scope of “national art” given in the Ministry’s call is, “*bi-ma‘nā anna yastalhim al-fannān min tārikh al-umma wa-niḍāliḥā, wa-min ḥayāt al-abṭāl fihā... Wa-bi-l-tālī, ṭarāḥat mawdu‘ al-baḥṭh ‘an uslūb khāṣ yastamidd uṣūluḥu min al-fann al-‘arabī wa-min falsafatihi.*”

⁶⁰⁵ Elias Zayyat, interview by author, Damascus, March 23, 2010. Zayyat suggests he and others who opposed the obligation to make “people’s art” published their dissenting statements in the press. I have unfortunately not located any articles other than this *al-Ba‘th* account of both sides.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.* I discuss Bahnassi’s claims in greater detail later in the chapter.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.* Al-Mouddarres mentions that he had opted to submit two portraits to the exhibition because he wanted to be sure to conform to the exhibition concept.

In this chapter, the final one of my dissertation, I seek to unpack these debates over national artistic advancement, as had become so ideologically fraught after March 8, 1963. I wish to return to consider the period's dialectic of possibility and peril more seriously, and particularly the notions about the artistic avant-garde it generated. My focus for this inquiry will be the painting practice of Hammad and a small group of other Syrian artists, including Nasir Shoura and Elias Zayyat, who chose abstract painting as a means to resolve questions about their responsibility to national progress. Over the period 1964-1967, this group eliminated representation from their paintings and proposed a new mode of engagement with *turāth* as Syrian citizens and Arab subjects. As they saw it, the plastic problems of pure, concrete painting provided them with a new province of creative agency, and an improved means to contribute to the national development project. Hammad's corpus of work from 1965 exemplifies this model of advanced artistry.⁶⁰⁸ Many of these paintings presented audiences with flat configurations of jointed shapes and cutout pattern interlace that resembled circuitry, or plumbing. Although semi-mechanical in appearance, these too had been rendered through the organic shapes of Arabic letters. The painting in **Figure 5.2**, for example, originated from an aya in the Qur'an, reading "Peace, says a merciful Lord," with its dots and ligatures condensing into unrecognizable codes in flat, textured color.⁶⁰⁹ Another painting, appearing on the easel in the photograph in **Figure 5.3** so dramatically attenuates its characters that its originating phrase is no longer known.⁶¹⁰ Another, *Composition no. 14*, plays with ways to exaggerate the element of formal autogenesis within the process of abstraction. In it, patches of chiaroscuro become mere pattern, and a

⁶⁰⁸ Because of his leadership in the art movement and the duration of his experiments with Arabic letters, Afif Bahnassi later hailed him as one of "the first artists to stand the pillars of abstraction in Syria." Afif Bahnassi, *Rūwwād al-Fann al-Ḥadīth fī al-Bilād al-ʿArabiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Raʿid al-ʿArabi, 1985), 77.

⁶⁰⁹ Qur'an 36:58. In Arabic: *Salām qawlān min rabb raḥīm*. This title was provided to me by Lubna Hammad, who maintains an unpublished catalogue raisonné of her father's work.

⁶¹⁰ It was exhibited under the title *Arabic Writing* in the 1965 Spring Exhibition in Aleppo.

background rectangle of cerulean blue, painted in impasto, appears to strain against the masked borders of its final resting shape (Fig. 5.4). Each of these paintings achieves a peculiar interplay between “geometric” and “painterly” abstraction.⁶¹¹ They appear impersonal, but maintain no cool economy of means. In making them, I suggest, Hammad pursued a process of empirical research within the materially concrete, or “real,” aspects of painting.⁶¹² At stake was a new definition of national art. These paintings were to be sites where national perception could be captured or registered but never represented.

For the purposes of this chapter, I use the term “plastic abstraction” to describe this mode of abstract composition and its emergence in Syria. By qualifying “abstraction” with the term “plastic,” I wish to highlight the ethos of construction and material changeability that is crucial to this mode. In the annals of European modernism, the keyword “plastic art,” and its association with Piet Mondrian’s theories about the “direct” creation of universal beauty, has connoted the pursuit of an intuitive formal harmony. As it was operative in the abstract painting of the 1950s in New York and the European capitals, “plastic art” entailed the use of the elements of painting to directly elicit sensuous response.⁶¹³ For Hammad, Shoura, and Zayyat and their pursuit of a

⁶¹¹ These categories were named by Lawrence Alloway in 1957 as the two primary possibilities in the taxonomy of British abstract painting, cited in Nigel Whiteley, “‘Cultural Imperialism’? British Hard-Edge Painting in the 1960s,” *Third Text* 91 (March 2008), 209.

⁶¹² Here my term is meant to reference Theo van Doesburg’s 1931 manifesto of Concrete art. I find the term concrete to be apt here. Syrian artists and critics frequently spoke about their abstract work as exploration, conducted as a search or as research.

⁶¹³ See for example Hans Hofmann’s “The Resurrection of the Plastic Arts” (1953-54), reprinted in Sam Hunter, *Hans Hofmann* (New York, 1963). For a negative view of plasticity as a virtuosic property, see Barnett Newman, “The Plasmic Image,” *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O’Neill (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 138-155. As best as I have been able to trace, the Arabic term *al-fann al-tashkīlī* (literally “plastic arts”) first appeared in Syria in the terminologies of national arts administration in the 1950s as a direct translation of the French term *arts plastiques*, then in common use by Unesco and associated organizations such as *L’Association Internationale des Arts Plastiques*, an association first created in 1952 to represent artists internationally and to associate them closely with Unesco’s work. I found copies of the Association’s bulletins in the NM-D Modern. In the Syrian state’s own promotion of the arts, *al-fann al-tashkīlī* replaced *al-fann al-jamīla* (the fine arts) only during the time of the UAR, when administrative terms were standardized along the Egyptian model. At that time, the annual Autumn and Spring exhibitions adopted the term plastic arts and a Directorate of Plastic

plastic abstraction with local application, it was the anti-expressive possibilities of the act of arranging the material properties of a painting on a surface that interested them. Their work rendered the thingness of the artwork into a set of properties that they could manipulate freely as sensitive citizens of their community, with the result that pure creation could be framed as responsibility to national objectives. In this sense, the concept of art's formal malleability that lies within the Arabic word for plastic formation – *tashkīl* – is a particularly appropriate term. Literally describing the quality of having been formed (rather than the possibility of continual reformation, as in the English term plastic), the idea of plastic art would, after 1967, accrue a heroic quality.⁶¹⁴ Where once the forward-looking arts had been abstract, they became, by their reclamation by new liberation movements, plastic examples of total creative mastery.

The institutional home for Syria's plastic abstractionists is crucial to the political stakes of their movement. The College of Fine Arts, where Hammad, Shoura, and Zayyat all taught, had become a degree-granting faculty at the University of Damascus in 1963.⁶¹⁵ Thus, at the same time these artists developed their abstract painting strategies, they were involved in writing a new curriculum for the serious, advanced study of art in their country. Moreover, not only did the art school setting give rise to pedagogical debates with implications for individual practices, but it also contributed a key element of international validation to their efforts. In these years, the College of Fine Arts contained a distinctly international quorum of faculty, including Polish, Bulgarian, and French instructors, and, in 1965-1967, the abstract Italian painter Guido La Regina (1909-1995) whom they had actively recruited for a three-year appointment as the head

Arts was created. These terms were not always consistently applied even within the Syrian bureaucracy, however. For example, memos from 1967 refer to a Directorate of Fine Arts, not Plastic Arts.

⁶¹⁴ *Tashkīl* is the verbal noun form of the causative version of the verb to form, such that *tashkīl* literally means "making be formed," and *tashkīlī* in turn is the adjectival form of that product of causative action.

⁶¹⁵ Hammad and Shoura had been hired in 1960. Zayyat joined in 1962, when he was hired as an assistant instructor after his degree studies in Bulgaria and Egypt.

of painting (he would terminate his appointment early with the outbreak of war). As the abstractionist movement emerged from this complex institutional crucible – involving faculty, art students, government caretakers, and journalistic chroniclers – it was by definition a national concern. At the same time, it was rendered into a discrete benchmark, to be compared against the universal standards of “advancement” as technological progress represented by the external experts in the school. Finally, even as the school’s aspirations followed largely Italian and French coordinates, public discourse about art incorporated more points of nationalist revolutionary reference, which centered the aspiration to supersede the status quo on the figure of youth and the socialist cadre. As Hammad had attested in 1964,

The task of the artist in our country at this stage is the most difficult of any other time, for misconceptions and deceit (*dajal*) surround modern art, putting the young artist in a jam. I don’t know where he will put his foot down, but I am optimistic about the intelligence and sincerity of the Syrian artist, and to realize his mission he needs some time and a lot of effort and sacrifice.⁶¹⁶

Here, Hammad introduces the next generation as a collective of individual agents of the next “step,” and thus the bearers of progressive advancement. The national art movement was a kind of projection, with its progress to be measured forward and backward in stages.

This marching model of artistic progress as Hammad evoked it in 1964 must, in light of the sweeping decolonization project in the region, be recognized as an avant-gardism of a more thoroughgoing character than simply endeavoring to forge a new technique, or take the lead in an artistic movement. His version of artistic advancement also percolated through the Marxist tradition of deputizing poets, writers, artists, and other intellectuals to be scouts along the path to a progressive future. The Arabic term for avant-garde, *al-ṭalīʿa*, which carries the same dual connotation of forward military ranks and cutting-edge cultural innovation as its French

⁶¹⁶ Quoted in Ghazi al-Khaldi, “Maʿraḡ al-Rabiʿ li-l-Funūn al-Tashkiliyya, Ḥalab - 1964,” *al-Maʿrifa* (July 1964), 169.

equivalent, had found ample representation in state initiatives as well, serving as a title for cultural publications *and* as the Ba[°]th Party's name for its school youth brigades.⁶¹⁷ The question of matching art to social action was not merely a rhetorical one in Syria, moreover. To the contrary, with military preparations being continually conducted in the name of overturning regional hegemonies, including, after 1965, guerrilla attacks by Fatah (the Palestinian National Liberation Movement) against Israeli targets, the exponents of plastic abstraction valued the effort not by its aesthetic effects but rather by its expected contributions to future, collective liberation. As I examine in my concluding section, these institutional characteristics of plastic abstraction made the movement most decisive for the shape of Syrian art to come. After June 5, 1967, although artists ceased to call themselves abstractionists, they did not abandon these discourses entirely. Instead, plastic abstraction provided renewable material to Syrian artists, who mined it for humanistic resources for a reconfigured liberation struggle. The purview of the "plastic arts" in Syria opened dramatically outward, with articles in the state newspapers beginning to reference expansive notions like "our plastic life."⁶¹⁸ The act of formation took on the quality of a heroic endeavor. Plasticity provided the site for exercising mastery over any individual circumstance, i.e. *overcoming* bodily and emotional feeling rather than expressing it. By manipulating the deep plasticity of composition, it was thought, the artist could make the art object wield a constructive power over its own context, one that had become permeated by despair and outrage.

⁶¹⁷ For analysis of the emergence of the term in the French context, see Linda Nochlin, "The Invention of the Avant-Garde: France, 1830-1880," in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 1-17. I am aware of at least four relevant political-cultural publications in the Arab world that used the name *al-Talī'a*: a left-wing monthly published in the late 1930s in Damascus by French-educated student activists and writers (including Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar), a Communist newspaper in Syria in the 1950s and 1960s, a high-brow Leftist cultural journal established in Egypt in 1965, and the weekly political-cultural supplement that *al-Ba[°]th* published in the late 1960s.

⁶¹⁸ As in the subtitle to Nazir Naba'a, "Ma[°]raḍ al-Kharif al-[°]Ashir," *al-Ba[°]th*, 17 Nov. 1968.

Ground Rules

As we have already seen, the problem of “abstract art” and its permissibility recurred in the Syrian art world of the 1960s. At certain moments, critics who identified with the Soviet line might recognize its symbolic resonance as a product of bourgeois aestheticism, and thus threatening to the nationalist and nationalizing outlook of Ba[‘]th military rule and its socialist state agenda.⁶¹⁹ For example, Tarek al-Sharif, who would go on to serve as one of the more sensitive of the nationalist art critics in the 1970s to the 1990s (and whose writings on Ismail, al-Moudarres, and others have figured prominently in this dissertation), in this period espoused especially strident ideological opposition to abstract art as a capitalist product and to U.S. Abstract Expressionist style as an emblem of divisive self-interest. One such article, which presented a discussion of art’s work “in the service of the people,” published in the Homs newspaper *al-Yanbu[‘] al-Jadid* in 1965, even provided readers with illustrations of effective versus harmful work: a Käthe Kollwitz drawing of mother with children labeled “Defense of the collective” for the former, and a photograph of action painter Jackson Pollock in mid-drip labeled “Defense of bourgeois individualism (painting or what?)” for the latter (**Fig. 5.5**).⁶²⁰ At other moments, however, the same Syrian cultural apparatus might promote the plastic abstractionist painters at the College of Fine Arts as exemplary Syrian subjects. For example, the Ministry of Culture tapped Hammad, Shoura, and Zayyat to exhibit in the 1965 São Paulo Bienal, to which Hammad contributed more plastic manipulations of Arabic writing and Shoura sent works like *Composition no. 3*, which worked directly with internal relations without any

⁶¹⁹ Mentioned in “Nadwa Thulāthiyya ma[‘] Fātiḥ al-Mudarris wa-Maḥmūd Hammād wa-Ilyās Zayyāt,” *al-Ba[‘]th*, 28 March 1966. When Lebanese newspaper critics saw a 1966 painting showcase that the Syria’s Ministry of Culture and National Orientation organized for the Surssock Museum, which featured many abstract works, they asked in their columns how it was that the Socialist experiment (*tajriba*) could be reconciled with the concept of abstract art. I discuss this exhibition in detail later in this chapter.

⁶²⁰ Tarek al-Sharif, “al-Fann fi Khidmat al-Sha[‘]b,” *al-Yanbu[‘] al-Jadid*, 12 March 1965.

reference to identity (Fig. 5.6).⁶²¹ The Ministry's catalog text, written by commissioner Rashid Kabbani, emphasizes that the same abstract art based on concepts of pure creation that had caught the interest of contemporary artists was also always the province of Arab identity.⁶²² As he contended, insofar as historical arabesque surface designs had derived from a precise spiritual worldview, their new contemporaneity as plastic properties was in fact a specifically Arab creation.⁶²³

From their base at the College of Fine Arts, Hammad and his colleagues opted to generate a national value for abstract painting from an externalized, international perspective. They spoke of their path as leading toward international commensurability, meaning that a successful experiment in the studio might also succeed in designating new artistic values, opening a new path in front of the developed artistic styles.⁶²⁴ They also, as I mentioned, employed an array of foreign experts – artists from Poland, Bulgaria, France, and Italy – who taught alongside the Syrian instructors, all of whom also boasted European credentials. This group not only shared the responsibility of developing a new and advanced curriculum of training, but they also enjoyed sufficient authority to ratify its merits as universalized technical training. In the painting program, faculty members espoused the practice of total composition, posing it as a crucial and even revolutionary technological advance over the bourgeois standards

⁶²¹ It was a four-person showcase with al-Mouddarres as the fourth. He exhibited figurative paintings with some abstracted qualities, but cannot be said to have followed a composed, plastic style. Zayyat's works from the same period are not well documented, but a black and white reproduction of *Damascus No. 5* (1966) in *al-Taṣwīr al-Sūrī al-Mu'āṣir* (Beirut: Sursock Museum, 1966) suggests that he was reworking Arab ornament as a set of matrices of embossed texture.

⁶²² Rashid Kabbani, "República Arabe Siria," in *VIII Bienal de São Paulo* (São Paulo: Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, 1965), 357. Like so many of the texts that Syrian offices submitted to international biennali, Kabbani's seems to have been composed independently of the specific works. The text remains peculiarly mum, for example, on the fact that al-Mouddarres's painting is not abstract.

⁶²³ *Ibid.* I suspect that his assertion of a cross-pollination of historical Arab methods and contemporary concerns has come directly from Afif Bahnassi, who was then Director of Plastic Arts, had just filed his 1964 dissertation "L'Influence Arabe sur la Peinture Moderne Occidentale," and was developing the same ideas about the possible Arab national content of abstraction through his office in the Ministry of Culture.

⁶²⁴ This description of a "new path" in front of the preceding styles appears in al-Sharif, *'Ishrūn Fannānān fī Sūriyā*, 160.

of the art academy, and their studio instruction emphasized the use of materials with distinctly counter-illusionistic properties: powders, sand, inks, and blotting papers. They pushed their students to study the plastic qualities of painting, particularly its physical quality of being moldable by active formation and reformation. And, as the advanced artists at the College of Fine Arts targeted these problems of form as a contemporary problem, they also made form their site for fulfilling the national progressive values that they wished to present on an international stage.

So as to better understand the change within these developments, it will be helpful to review of government attitudes toward fine arts training in Syria. As I noted in Chapter Four, the country's first arts school, the Institute of Plastic Arts, opened in Damascus in late 1959 under the aegis of the United Arab Republic.⁶²⁵ Its first director was Egyptian artist Hussein Youssef Fawzi, who was dispatched to Damascus from a post in Alexandria to implement shared academic standards in its drawing, painting, and sculpture courses.⁶²⁶ The programs established in Syria in this period had a palpably bourgeois character, as reflected its presumption that the study of the fine arts could provide urbane citizens with a means for self-actualization, and thus aid in developing the country toward its eventual, more revolutionary social goals.⁶²⁷ The 1960

⁶²⁵ This is not to suggest that it was the first ever art school. As described in Chapter One, numerous private ateliers and "schools" had long operated in Syria. Additionally, the Armenian community in Aleppo had established an art academy in 1955, naming it after painter Martiros Saryan. Damascus's Institute of Plastic Arts is merely the first instance of government investment in beaux-arts instruction at an advanced technical, or "high," level (to borrow the terms of the French academic system).

⁶²⁶ I have found only scant reference to Fawzi's presence in Damascus and no information on the terms of his appointment. Fawzi's biography page on the website for the Egyptian Ministry of Culture's Fine Arts Sector mentions that he established the College of Fine Arts in Damascus in 1960 but offers no other information. A 1966 catalog essay by Afif Bahnassi in *al-Taṣwīr al-Sūrī al-Mu'āṣir* mentions that "Hussein Faouzi" was the first director of the Academy for Fine Arts, but the name appears only in the French text while the Arabic version gives no name. Alloun's *Mun'ataf al-Sittīnāt*, 15, meanwhile makes mention of a "Dr. Hussein Youssef Fawzi," identified circa June 1961 as the Director of the Art Insitute.

⁶²⁷ Crabbs, "Politics, History, and Culture in Nasser's Egypt." Crabbs identifies 1961 as a turning point in attitudes toward culture, with discourse veering sharply left. Also see Jessica Winegar, "Culture is the Solution: The Civilizing Mission of Egypt's Culture Palaces," *Review of Middle East Studies* 43.2 (Winter 2009); Samir Amin, A

newsreel on the school produced by the Egyptian Information Organization, “First Institute for Plastic Art in Damascus,” emphasizes its function as a site cultivating good taste and high aesthetic standards.⁶²⁸ Its montage captures the privileged status of the crowd, showing mixed gender groups drawing from a white plaster sculpture of a Nude; one glamorous student even sports a fur-trimmed coat (Fig. 5.7). A similar class identification for artists is maintained in the Egyptian television operetta *al-Jil al-Šāʿid* (*The Rising Generation*), an elaborate production illustrating the composite character of revolutionary Egyptian society that was created for broadcast in the inaugural year of state television in 1960.⁶²⁹ Before showing its artists springing into marching formation in time with all the other elements of society, it shows them in crisp white shirts and ties and engaging in *plein air* sketching in a manicured garden setting (Fig. 5.8). As the song’s lyrics describe, the role of the country’s artists is to help construct civilization for the nation and bring it life with spirit and hope.

The following school year, 1960-1961, both the Cairo and the Damascus art schools were transferred from the Ministry of Culture to the Ministry of Education, which enhanced and formalized their status. The Damascus institution was reclassified as a “High Institute,” courses of study in engraving, décor, and architecture were added to painting and sculpture, and its ranks of faculty deepened with more Egyptian hires as well as Syrian artists (Hammad, Shoura, and Mahmoud Jalal).⁶³⁰ This move toward a more professional orientation accorded with the

Life Looking Forward: Memoirs of an Independent Marxist (London: Zed Books, 2006), 97. Amin helpfully analyzes the bourgeois character of much of the Nasserist development project.

⁶²⁸ Awwal Maʿhad li-l-Funūn al-Tashkīliyya fī Dimashq – al-Iqlīm al-Shamāli 1960” (al-Hayʿa al-ʿamma li-l-Istiʿlāmāt, Egypt, 15 February 1960), 36 sec., in the online collection of the Alexandria Library, <http://modernegypt.bibalex.org>.

⁶²⁹ *Al-Jil al-Šāʿid*, dir. Muhammad Salam, 1960, 9 min. I learned of this piece from Ismail Fayed, “Reconstituting Identities: Performing Propaganda 1958-1965,” *The Arteeast Quarterly* (Winter 2014), <http://www.arteeast.org/2014/01/12/reconstituting-identities-performing-propaganda-1958-1965/>.

⁶³⁰ For the legal history of the college’s status and governance in Syria, see the summary on its website, <http://damascusuniversity.edu.sy/faculties/finearts/home/2013-05-15-08-03-49> It has proven difficult to trace the

emphases on development that international organizations such as Unesco continued to mobilize in their assistance decisions. Unesco viewed the economic productiveness of artistic endeavors as equally key to national development as other more baldly economic initiatives. Thus, when the Syrian Ministry of Education submitted an urgent request for art faculty to Unesco in the autumn of 1961 after the UAR had collapsed, it offered assurances that it counted on the graduates who went on to work in “architecture, decoration, publicity, graphic arts, industrial aesthetics, town planning, and all the rest of the applied fine arts” for help toward the “economic development of the country.”⁶³¹

After the sudden exodus of Egyptian faculty in 1961, the mission of the Syrian art school moved still further toward focusing on implementing international metrics rather than paying particularized heed to the spirit and hopes of the Arab nation.⁶³² As the Ministry of Education and Instruction sought to fill the gaps in its staff, it contacted foreign partners with requests to recruit credentialed artists from abroad.⁶³³ Bilateral cultural agreements swiftly yielded Polish artist Jerzy Srokowski to teach design, Bulgarian artist Stolu Todorov to teach sculpture, and three French artists – Jacques Ehrmann, Claude Gilbert, and Jacques Pascal – to teach

names of the Egyptian artists who taught in Syria, let alone the circumstances of their recruitment and their mission there. In addition to Fawzi, it seems that artist Egyptian Abbas Shohdi spent at least some time teaching in Syria.

⁶³¹ Jaime Renart, Representative of the U.N. Technical Assistance Board and Special Fund Programmes in the Syrian Arab Republic, to J.A. Correa, Director, Bureau of Relations with Member States, 26 March 1962, in “X07.21(569.1)AMS – Participation Programme in Syria – Part II from 1/1/57 up to 31/XII/66,” in the Unesco archives, Paris (hereafter Unesco-Paris).

⁶³² I find Samir Amin’s contextualization of this first impulse helpful, as analyzed in *A Life Looking Forward*, 169. As he sees it, in the time of the Non-Alignment Movement, for better or for worse the idea of a bourgeois-led national liberation was accepted in Third World settings as a viable model for eventual Socialist revolution.

⁶³³ Omar Shakhshiro, Secretary General of the Ministry of Education and Instruction, to the Director General of Unesco, 30 October 1961, and “Request from the Government of Syria,” 20 March 1962, both in “X07.21(569.1)AMS – Participation Programme in Syria – Part II from 1/1/57 up to 31/XII/66,” Unesco-Paris. This application is helpful as documentation of the preferred qualifications for instructors, including that experts speak French, English, or Italian, but it seems to have yielded no actual instructors. Unesco’s case officers prevaricated over the appropriateness of supplying teaching staff rather than the curricular consultants they preferred to provide. In the same period, the school also hired more of the Syrian artists who were then returning from abroad, including al-Mouddarres, Adham Ismail, and Zayyat.

printmaking and architecture.⁶³⁴ In 1964, Hammad and his colleagues had managed to recruit Italian painter Guido La Regina to their ranks as well, and, by the time La Regina actually joined the school at the start of 1965, they had also successfully lobbied to make it a full degree-granting college in the University of Damascus.⁶³⁵ This international group of experts then successfully proposed to dismantle the old academic divisions between theoretical and practical study, for the start of the 1965-66 year, building their curriculum on a dynamic process of discovery (Fig. 5.9). The College was conceived as a “field for all styles, approaches, and visions,” with its studios kept open around the clock.⁶³⁶ Those students who specialized in painting would perform a series of independent project modules, with the majority of their experiments entailing processes of abstraction.⁶³⁷

To make its case for this anti-academic, experimental approach to art as comprehensively productive, the group often pointed to La Regina as a standard bearer.⁶³⁸ The Italian artist boasted a sterling avant-garde pedigree. For the whole of the postwar period in Rome, he had

⁶³⁴ I take my information about Srokowski and Todorov from my interview with Zayyat, Damascus, March 23, 2010. I found the three French instructors mentioned in two archival documents: Le Ministère d'État Chargé des Affaires culturelles, “Plan de réforme de l'Enseignement artistique en Syrie, dressé par MM Jacques Ehrmann, Claude Gilbert, et Jacques PASCAL,” 8 May 1964, carton 11, 19780692, Archives nationales, Fontainebleau, France; and Ambassade de France en Syrie, “Elements pour le Rapport D'Activité de la D.G.A.C.T. Année 1964,” FR- Ministère des Affaires étrangères, binder 74, Direction Générale des Relations Culturelles, Scientifiques et Techniques (1948-1968), Ministère des Affaires étrangères -La Courneuve. These documents betray a Cold War flavor. The French ambassador to Syria notes that the three-person “technical cooperation mission” sent to Syria helped to further restore diplomatic ties (they had been suspended after the 1956 Suez Crisis) and demonstrate the respectful character of French development support, as contrasted with the character of American and Soviet assistance.

⁶³⁵ Khuzaima Alwani, interview by author, Damascus, March 17, 2010. Alwani stated that it was Hammad who pushed to make the school a full degree-granting faculty within the University.

⁶³⁶ Salah al-Din Muhammad, *Izz al-Dīn Shamūf: Hayātuhu wa-Fannuhu* (Damascus: al-Mustaqbal, 2000), 1-20.

⁶³⁷ Unsigned article [Ghazi al-Khalidi], “Fī Kulliyat al-Funūn al-Jamīla,” *al-Ba‘th*, 30 Nov. 1965. Although the article is unsigned, I have identified the author as al-Khalidi because of the in-text references to the author’s own experience studying art at the College of Fine Arts in Cairo. Al-Khalidi is the only regular arts contributor to *al-Ba‘th* in this period with that qualification.

⁶³⁸ Unsigned article, “al-Fann al-Ishtirākī Ta‘bīr Jamālī li-Raf‘ al-Mustawā al-Fikrī wa-l-Dhawqī ladā al-Jamāhīr,” *al-Ba‘th*, 7 July 1965. The precise mechanism for La Regina’s recruitment is not clear. The article I cite here includes an introduction by Hammad mentioning they had “contracted” La Regina. In the same article, however, La Regina relays that his country’s authorities had extended him the invitation to travel to Syria. Artist Ghayas Akhras chalks the recruitment up to the Italophilia of Hammad’s generation, explaining that Hammad had simply asked Italy to send a teacher and they received La Regina. Interview by author, Damascus, March 30, 2010.

honed his practice toward purified plastic composition.⁶³⁹ In 1952, he had signed Lucio Fontana's "Manifesto of the Spatial Movement for Television," which proclaimed that technological advances had freed art from bodily supports and thereby rendered space itself into a plastic material.⁶⁴⁰ By the early 1960s, he had begun working with the qualities of diffusion and atmosphere on geometric forms, as he elicited from layers upon layers of mixed media surface treatments (**Fig 5.10**). Once he joined the College of Fine Arts in Damascus, La Regina proved to be a confident and self-possessed personality who advocated for the pursuit of abstraction at all levels of practice and education, espousing the conviction that abstract painting represented the only viable platform for the shareable pursuit of the truly new. As he had conveyed in 1963, asserting that "abstraction is an international event; it poses the same problems to all peoples," he believed that all artists were obligated to remain in touch with the other experiments in the world's increasingly integrated collective.⁶⁴¹ Thus, when La Regina endorsed the work of his Syrian colleagues, he tended to frame the purpose of their plastic abstraction work as a process of discovery. A text he wrote about Hammad's paintings in 1965, for example, refutes the negative assertions being made about the trendiness of the Syrian artist's turn to abstraction by extolling Hammad's seriousness and the sustained nature of his inquiry.⁶⁴² For La Regina, the crucial significance of Hammad's use of Arabic writing as a basis for composition was not its connection to identity *per se*, but rather its possibilities as a research

⁶³⁹ Eugenio Battisti, *La Regina*, trans. Robert Enggoss (Rome: De Luca Editore, 1962).

⁶⁴⁰ This credential was important to his Syrian colleagues; Hammad mentions it in "al-Fann al-Ishtirākī Ta'cībīr Jamālī." For the English translation of the text of the manifesto see *The Italian Metamorphosis*, 716–17. The artist's involvement with the movement is documented in *Guido La Regina: Mostra Antologica* (Rome: De Luca Edizioni d'Arte, 1989).

⁶⁴¹ Victor Hakim, "La Vie Artistique: Guido La Regina," *La Revue du Liban*, 19 October 1963. Clipping in "Guido La Regina," GNAM.

⁶⁴² The original venue for this text is not known to me. Hammad reproduces it in French (likely the original language) in the booklet for his Jan-Feb 1968 solo exhibition at the Damascus Ornina Gallery (run by the Daadoush brothers), and in Arabic in the booklet for a June 1969 solo exhibition in Yerevan, sponsored by a Syrian-Soviet Friendship Association on the occasion of "Syrian Culture Week in Soviet Armenia." Both booklets in NMD–Modern.

question. As La Regina put it, the Syrian artist had used his paintings to put forward the hypothesis that a sign could become form, could transform into image. Hammad's experiments were thus framed as aspiring to probe an ontological shift of historical consequence, as could be likened to the transformation of landscape into architecture during the Renaissance, and architecture into decoration in the nineteenth-century Rococo.⁶⁴³

Although it now seems improbable that a non-Arabic speaking non-Syrian presided over activities in the national painting studios for nearly three years, 1965-1967, La Regina's standing in the Syrian cultural milieu was as overdetermined as it was (eventually) controversial. Several different cultural diplomacy initiatives had facilitated his posting to Syria as a technical expert and universalist who spoke in praise of transformative innovation. Because he had built his career in Rome in the postwar period as an abstractionist rather than a politicized realist, many of the Arab painters who had studied in Italy on fellowships knew him as such.⁶⁴⁴ Mahmoud Daadoush met La Regina in Italy and grew to admire his artistic positions, as did the Lebanese artist Aref al-Rayyes, who had engaged him in a conversation on concrete painting.⁶⁴⁵ As a result, La Regina became known to the Syrian scene as a proponent of non-figurative painting before his recruitment. When Daadoush had spoken to Chérif Khaznadar in 1961, for example, he mentioned both La Regina and the French *informel* artist George Mathieu as allies in the effort to give painterly expression to otherwise invisible vital sensations.⁶⁴⁶ The regional name recognition for La Regina consolidated further in 1963 when the Lebanese Ministry of Education

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁴ In postwar Italy, the defining ideological binary was also abstraction/figuration. C.f. note 411.

⁶⁴⁵ Chérif Khaznadar, "Enfin, 'Un Abstrait' de talent en Syria: Mahmoud Daadoush," *L'Orient Littéraire*, 9 Sept. 1961; La Regina, no title (about artist Aref al-Rayyes on the occasion of his exhibition at Gallery One, 2 March 1967), in the press files of Janine Rubeiz, Beirut, which I accessed by photograph courtesy of Kristine Khouri; and "al-Fann al-Ishtirākī Ta'bir Jamālī."

⁶⁴⁶ Khaznadar, "Enfin, 'Un Abstrait.'" The article mentions both artists by last name only. Mathieu had visited Beirut in March of 1961, and his visit had been reviewed in *L'Orient Littéraire*. It is not clear how or if La Regina had become known beyond Daadoush's immediate circle. According to La Regina's bibliography, Daadoush published an article on him in the Damascus newspaper *Sawt al-ʿArab*, but I have not located it.

decided to organize a major exhibition for an Italian abstractionist and chose La Regina for this honor (Fig. 5.11).⁶⁴⁷ A seventy-piece retrospective of La Regina's work debuted at the Surssock Museum in October of that year. La Regina traveled to Beirut to attend the opening and provided local critics and journalists with detailed commentary on contemporary painting.⁶⁴⁸ Finally, two months later, two more La Regina paintings appeared in Beirut as part of the traveling exhibition *Peintures Italiennes d'Aujourd'hui*, then toured the other Near and Middle Eastern capitals, arriving in Damascus in January 1964, followed by Tehran, Ankara, and Tunis.⁶⁴⁹ The synchronicity of these initiatives makes a testament to the dense circuitry of Cold War cultural diplomacy. As a result, Damascenes could inspect the relief textures of La Regina paintings such as *Trip to Zahle* in person (Fig. 5.12), regarding them alongside the dimensional punctum of Fontana's *Spatial Concept* and the maze-like procession of Capogrossi's trademark "comb" marks.⁶⁵⁰ Even before La Regina arrived in Syria, in other words, it had become incumbent on the region's intellectual elite to know his name and abstract methods.

As variations of propagandistic exercises, these exhibitions invited audiences in the Eastern and the Western Mediterranean to pass aesthetic judgments and to read them

⁶⁴⁷ The Fine Arts Department head at the Ministry of Education, Joseph Abou Rizk, took the lead in identifying La Regina as the subject of their Italian spotlight. He conceived the exhibition as a culmination of enthusiasm for things Italian, and as an educative example of the most advanced of the painterly arts. See the full-color catalog Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale and Musée Surssock, *La Regina* (Rome: De Luca, 1963). Also see "Un Italiano a Beirut," *Vita* (17 Oct. 1963): 52-53. Clipping in file "Guido La Regina," GNAM. This article places the La Regina exhibition in the context of Lebanon's enthusiasm for emerging Italian trends. Apparently the Beirut architect Michel Harmouch had hosted a major sampler of contemporary Italian art in his office and studio in 1960.

⁶⁴⁸ Hakim, "La Vie Artistique: Guido La Regina." La Regina's bibliography lists other interviews in Lebanon as well, but I have not located the clippings.

⁶⁴⁹ *Peintures Italiennes d'Aujourd'hui. Damas, 1964* (Rome: Istituto Grafico Tiberino di Stefano de Luca, 1964); documents in "Beirut Telespressi e Corr – Beirut – Damasco – Teheran – Tunisi 1964," ASQ II – Ente Carteggio B. 87, Archivio Biblioteca Quadriennale, Rome. The exhibition, which featured works by Antonio Burri, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Lucio Fontana, and Emilio Vedova and other "second generation" Italian modernists, was organized on behalf of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs by Fortunato Bellonzi, the Secretary General for the Quadriennale d'Arte in Rome, a municipal organization regarded as conservative.

⁶⁵⁰ La Regina likely finished this painting, one of two that he submitted, immediately after returning from Beirut. He titled it with the name of a Lebanese city, and La Regina's correspondence with the Quadriennale is dated just subsequent to his trip. La Regina to Fortunato Bellonzi, October 22, in "Beirut Damasco – Richieste di opere," ASQ II – Ente Carteggio B. 87, Archivio Biblioteca Quadriennale, Rome.

hyperbolically, as if expressions of the collective self. When the Lebanese Ministry of Education, organized its La Regina retrospective, for example, it promoted it not only as a ratification of Lebanon's capacity for advanced taste, but also as a censure to Italian audiences. By extending elaborate forms of institutional appreciation to non-objective painting, it was acting in contrast with the resurgent hostility toward it unfolding in Italy, where the "guidelines of the figurative order" were said to again hold sway.⁶⁵¹ In accord with this self-image of enlightened disinterest, the Lebanese press emphasized the lack of dogma in La Regina's career and quoted him on his admiration for Kandinsky as an exponent of complete freedom of formal decisions.⁶⁵² As critic Victor Hakim put it, the artist had transcended any single "manner" of painting, proceeding with various media and approaches as if he were a protagonist in a "fabulous opera."⁶⁵³ These professions of outlook all index continued concerns about national ideologies and the possibility of clashing between them. As we saw in Chapter Four, during the brief period of secessionist opening in 1962, the AMI had begun to craft a similar cosmopolitan projection for Syria and to advertise it to Beirut, as had the Syrian Ministry of Culture, which had subsequently invited critic Salah Stétié to serve as a guest judge for the 1962 Spring Exhibition and featured his approving remarks on television.⁶⁵⁴ After the March 8, 1963 coup, the same structures of ideological identification that prompted the Lebanese Ministry of Education to embrace abstract art had made it seem likely that the Syrian cultural tide would turn against it.

Once La Regina himself arrived in Syria, his emphasis on newness, freedom, and research in fact readily resonated with the interests of the revolutionary state. In July 1965, *al-*

⁶⁵¹ "Un Italiano A Beirut."

⁶⁵² Hakim, "La Vie Artistique."

⁶⁵³ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁴ "Ma'raḡ al-Rabīc 1962," *al-Ma'rifa* (June 1962), 174. Recall that the Syrians located the success of the AMI exhibition at Le Bateau Lavoir in its having prompted Stétié to endorse the work, as was reported in "Tazāhura Fanniyya Sūriyya fī Lubnān," *al-Ma'rifa* (May 1962), 154-155.

Ba'ath published an 'interview' with La Regina that probed him for opinions on subjects of its immediate interest, including Syrian art, popular art, and socialist art.⁶⁵⁵ Over the course of the interview, La Regina affirms the abundance of fine sensitivities and artistic riches in the Arab world and again emphasizes that only "the international contemporary language of art" would be up to the task of expressing the compelling content of Syria's peoples, atmospheres, and natural settings. He also provides a lengthy adumbration of the requirements of a truly progressive art, describing popular art and socialist art as broadly shareable aspirations for change that require alignment with technological innovation, leaving art's documentary function behind. He defined socialist art by its effects alone, such that the term designated anything that produced "beautiful expressions that work in the service of the improvement of society...the raising of the level of the public intellect and cultivation."⁶⁵⁶ The practical point in his definition was, as usual, that artists should dedicate themselves to exploring unknown values and aesthetic forms. In that way, he contended, they could avoid serving bourgeois taste, producing patterns and templates, or working for "Emirs and kings."⁶⁵⁷ To this last point about coercive interest in patronage of the arts, La Regina added an explicit castigation of Soviet-style socialist realism because of its lack of artistic value.⁶⁵⁸ Such false attempts to produce a counter-bourgeois work of art, he suggested, only recycled outmoded forms and made substitutions within the same old *mise-en-scene*, that is

⁶⁵⁵ "Al-Fann al-Ishtirākī Ta'bīr Jamālī." Hammad had facilitated the article and wrote a short introduction listing La Regina's relevant credentials, including the fact that his work had been exhibited in *Peintures Italiennes d'Aujourd'hui* in Damascus the previous year.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁸ *Ibid.* He connects this socialist realism to "Communist countries" and their dogmatism, as distinct from his understanding of the requirements of socialist art.

simply placing “exploited workers” into the martyr position of “the martyrdom of St. Sebastian” paintings of yore.⁶⁵⁹

The circumscribed nature of published speech in Syria complicates the authorial conditions for this La Regina interview in *al-Ba‘th*. Hammad or another colleague would have composed the submitted text, perhaps even actively generating La Regina’s opinions on matters of Syrian national interest based on what they saw as the progressive aspect of his approach to art.⁶⁶⁰ This interview with La Regina appeared in the party’s mouthpiece, but any promotion of the school’s successes or advancement in the art scene had to negotiate a tightly controlled media environment under the new Ba‘th regime, within which any publication could be suppressed or destroyed if judged incompatible with the populist-nationalist radicalism that characterized its revolutionary rule.⁶⁶¹ As had been conveyed on March 13, 1963, by a communiqué printed in *al-Ba‘th*, the government reserved the right to control newspapers, books, radio broadcasts, advertising, and television, and, as a subsequent decrees made plain, papers were expected to emphasize the themes of “renaissance, renewal and enrichment of the progressive Arab heritage in literature and science.”⁶⁶² Newspapers became filled with proclamations forecasting a future, collectivized modernity of still-unknown parameters. My intention in tracing La Regina’s appearances in the Syrian press is not to uncover his “true” convictions, but rather to his standing

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid. Interestingly, as support for his derision of such documentary art, he lingers on the 20-year period of Fascist rule in Italy, in which artists were made to depict the successes of a new Roman empire in a classicized, traditional language, which divorced art from any capacity to address social concerns.

⁶⁶⁰ It seems unlikely that La Regina would have voiced such sympathetic opinions on the relationship between art and the coming revolution in his native Italy; his primary professional advocate in Rome was the critic Lionello Venturi, who was known for his appreciation for American liberal ideals and for insisting on maintaining a depolitized status for art. Venturi had advocated for La Regina to receive the Michetti Prize in 1959 for *Spazio Blu*, an American-style drip painting. As already discussed, the appearance of this testimony in *al-Ba‘th* was necessarily highly mediated, requiring not only general conformance with the national platform but also translation between languages and “register,” i.e. from a casual conversation in Italian into formal Arabic prose.

⁶⁶¹ Kawakibi, “The Private Media in Syria”; Hashim Uthman, *al-Aḥzāb al-Siyāsiyya fī Sūriyā* (Beirut: Riad el-Rayyas Books, 2001), 51. Within the first week of taking power, the Ba‘th military command had suspended almost all newspapers. The two other papers that were allowed to operate were *Barada* and *al-Wahda al-‘Arabiyya*.

⁶⁶² Kawakibi, “The Private Media in Syria,” quoting from a 1963 decree, number 48.

in the historiography as a participant outsider to help me demonstrate the uniquely activated status of plastic abstraction in these years. Recall that in August 1963, the uptake of these new revolutionary imperatives into art criticism sometimes produced a rote quality, as when museum director Hassan Kamal identified a parallel between al-Moudarres's highly allusive paintings of martyred children and the heroic workers' art of the Mexican muralists, and, apparently followed a straight Leninist socialist line in aligning al-Moudarres with the figurative arts in opposition to "nihilistic" abstraction.⁶⁶³ By the end of 1965, however, such binaries had been superseded and abstract art accrued more fluid contextual meanings. As we saw, the Syrian Ministry of Culture even took the themes of formal abstraction and Arabism as an organizing principle for that year's São Paulo exhibition, and included al-Moudarres in that container. During the years of La Regina's prominence in the Damascus art scene, its debates constantly returned to the question of the possible uses of advanced plastic abstraction for radical state goals, with multiple and divergent resolutions produced.⁶⁶⁴

No attempt to limn the frame for progressive national culture could proceed without interruption, however. As I noted at the start of this chapter, the Ministry of Culture sometimes adopted a more activist stance in the name of national interest, even attempting to entice artists away from a wholly international style by the promise of jury prizes.⁶⁶⁵ Its brief for the 1965 Autumn Exhibition had stipulated the theme of "national art," and the defense of the policy that Bahnassi mounted on behalf of his Directorate of Plastic Arts is telling for its cooptation of modernist values such as autonomy. He defended his office's focus on national art by invoking

⁶⁶³ Hassan Kamal, "Ma'raḍ al-Fannān Fātiḥ al-Mudarris," *al-Ma'rifa* (August 1963), 154-155.

⁶⁶⁴ I see the permitted realms of artistic disagreement in Syria as similar to those in Egypt under Abdel Nasser, as discussed in Clare Davies, "Arts Writing in 20th-Century Egypt: Methodology, Continuity, and Change," *ARTMargins* 2.2 (June 2013): 19-42. Those intellectual matters perceived to be internal to the discipline (such as theoretical choices, systems of reference, and aesthetic models) were left a matter of choice and could be debated, but only if the container discourse – the contributing importance of culture to state goals – was respected.

⁶⁶⁵ "Al-Naṣṣ al-Kāmil li-Munāqashāt Nadwat Ma'raḍ al-Kharīf al-Sābi'."

the very same byword of freedom that had motivated artists like Zayyat to oppose it, returning to the value of autonomy to interpret it not as an absolute condition but rather as freedom from economic coercion. As Bahnassi argued, the policy provided the state with a mechanism to support those artists who wished to work in the mode of socialist realism or Arab art, leaving those who preferred the abstract art trends to draw their support from the private galleries who favored and supported abstract work. As was duly reported in *al-Ba^{ṭh}*, this dispute played out at the exhibition symposium without any clear resolution. Al-Mouardres was able to remind the crowd that, just because an Arab artist does not produce propaganda, it should not be presumed that they are disconnected from their land or their country (*waṭan*).⁶⁶⁶ But, at the same time, the Directorate continued to lay claim to the ideal of national feeling in instrumental ways. The following year, it established a parallel forum for works devoted to the task of mobilizing the populace, creating an exhibition on the theme of Arab art and its service to battle.⁶⁶⁷ Against this backdrop, the protected, technocratic discursive space of the College of Fine Arts provided an opportunity to locate national art otherwise.

Teaching Progressiveness

At the end of 1965, the College of Fine Arts was preparing to graduate its first class. Two weeks after the opening of the controversial Autumn Exhibition, *al-Ba^{ṭh}* devoted a lengthy feature to the art school.⁶⁶⁸ Its editors gave headlines to the piece that reference the school's "modern experiment" in teaching, and the seven photographs that flank the text – three student paintings, and four student-artists working at their easels – offer a glimpse of the seriousness of the

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁷ Afif Bahnassi, "al-Fann al-^ḥArabī fi Khidmat al-Ma^ḥraka," in *al-Mahrajān al-^ḥArabī al-Awwal li-l-Fann al-Qawmī al-Tashkīlī* (Damascus: The Syrian Fine Arts Syndicate, 1972), 6.

⁶⁶⁸ "Fi Kulliyat al-Funūn al-Jamīla."

resulting atmosphere. There are no fur coats or plaster casts on evidence. In fact, two students wear smocks that resemble lab coats (Fig. 5.13). As the article details, none of the graduating students were engaged in producing their paintings “directly” in terms of painting from nature or making expressionistic use of gesture. Drawing from life held little interest to them as an artistic end. Rather, they related to their live models as a tool in their personal creative process, i.e. as a means to access the ideas residing in “their spirits (*wijdān*) and unconsciousness.” Similarly, they related to color as something to be parceled out, exploring a single hue on an individual basis.⁶⁶⁹ It was La Regina who held primary responsibility for the studio, and who encouraged these practices. He had striven to implement a research-oriented approach to painting, including playing music to prompt students to explore the use of color to convey its sound. The point was to force students to transition from making work that responded to visible inputs to working with a realm of beyond-visible sensation.⁶⁷⁰

The *al-Ba‘th* article, authored by journalist and artist Ghazi al-Khaldi, was not uncritically celebratory of these new directions. It in fact set out to raise a suite of concerns pertaining to the school’s overhaul, including the three questions that became subheadings:

“To what extent can the College intervene in students’ works?”

“Is it true that the College is teaching the Abstract...and disregarding reality?”⁶⁷¹

“This year’s graduates...Did they fail...or did they make it?”⁶⁷²

As part of the answer to the first two queries about approach, al-Khaldi interviewed Hammad to press him to share the school’s general pedagogical principles and, in particular, to defend its emphasis on abstraction. Hammad responded to incredulous questioning about their decision to

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁰ Asma Fayoumi, interview by author, Damascus, March 6, 2011.

⁶⁷¹ “Fī Kulliyat al-Funūn al-Jamīla.”

⁶⁷² Ibid.

teach “the Abstract” by assuring his interlocutor that students still learned fundamentals and the fine points of anatomy and perspective. As he explained, they had taken a new approach to art education that did not involve disregarding the validity of realism as a practice, but rather admitted that laws of depiction could no longer be said to constitute the whole of “art.” As he explained, their new pedagogy of art required an understanding of the foundations of composition, but also the cultivation of the student, and creative acts of composing and constituting art (*khalq al-fann*).⁶⁷³ When Hammad was asked to compare the modern curriculum at the College of Fine Arts in Damascus to that in the Italian academies, he argued that the Syrian initiatives were in fact more modern, and pursued change in ways that the Italian faculty in Rome could only hope to one day model.⁶⁷⁴ Whereas the continued dominance of antique academic traditions in Italy had made flexibility within the spirit of the modern art impossible, in Damascus, the reigning ethos of *de novo* construction allowed them to launch their curricular project through a willingness to leap into the void of anti-illusionistic creation: “we have begun from a new step according with the spirit of new thought, new outlook, and the new Arab human.”⁶⁷⁵ In other words, Hammad located the authentic modernity of the Syrian plan in the pursuit of total creation as a social and political end. His invocation of a “new Arab human” at the center of this pedagogical program in fact aligns with contemporaneous declarations of Che Guevara, which served to locate the national liberation cause of the Third World within the field of contradiction between imperialism and its colonized peoples (rather than accept the simple dualism of bloc-based politics).⁶⁷⁶ In taking a stand against the “decrepit academicism” of socialist realism, Guevara had called on artists to sidestep the 19th century *and* the “decadent and

⁶⁷³ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid. One presumes that he is here drawing on his conversations with La Regina.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁶ Amin, *A Life Looking Forward*, 96. Amin describes the Bandung-era attempt to retheorize world politics this way.

morbid” twentieth century altogether and to instead pursue the task of creating a new and total individual, “the human being of the twenty-first century.”⁶⁷⁷ Hammad’s commentary also took care to connect the artistic act to the future age. He described a Syrian curriculum that was designed to open “distant intellectual horizons” before its students, from which they could launch into other spheres.⁶⁷⁸ The same aspiration set the standard in the statements that the plastic abstractionists made about their own work, particularly when they began to face attacks for their perceived lack of national feeling. As Zayyat insisted in 1966 in defense of the contributive nature of plastic abstraction, artistic investigations were to be conducted from the present toward the future, revealing the invisible and the not yet visualized.⁶⁷⁹

The in-progress graduation projects featured in *al-Ba‘th* did negotiate with those aspects of transforming social relations that students (and their teachers and critics) saw as harbingers of a future shape of Syrian life. In particular, the theme of uncertain integration between man and machine recurred, as in a student study of stone quarry workers that arrayed featureless, uniform figures into two horizontal registers as if a readable text or code, or another’s painted network of angular silhouettes of labor that float over fields of highly stylized flora (Figs. 5.14 and 5.15). As Hammad had promised, all these projects did begin with close study of the outward and visible shapes of figures, but, as al-Khaldī had also reported after his summary tour, the purpose in doing so was to launch an investigation of its interior, invisible qualities. The graduation

⁶⁷⁷ The letter was written during a visit to Algiers, then published in *Marcha*, an Uruguayan newspaper. For the text, see <http://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1965/03/man-socialism.htm> It would be immensely illuminating to trace the precise paths of circulation of Guevarist thinking in Syria in 1965. For example, the commentary against socialist realism attributed to La Regina in “al-Fann al-Ishtirākī Ta‘bīr Jamālī” also seems to echo Guevara’s critique. The writings of Frantz Fanon, which were presented at the AMI in 1963, would seem to be a crucial link. Patrick Seale has suggested that the more radical elements of the Ba‘th command tended toward a Maoism, which they had picked up via their involvement in the Algerian struggle. *Asad of Syria*, 106-7.

⁶⁷⁸ Hammad states, “*al-manhāj al-ta‘līmī hāliyyān yaftaḥ amām al-ṭālib afāqān fikriyya ba‘ida yanṭaliq ilā ajwā’ ukhrā.*”

⁶⁷⁹ “Nadwa Thulāthiyya ma‘ Fātiḥ al-Mudarris wa-Maḥmūd Hammād wa-Ilyās Zayyāt,” 6. He gave his statement in relation to a controversy over an exhibition of Syrian works that the Ministry of Culture sent to Beirut, which I discuss in the next section.

paintings of Asma Fayoumi (1943—), who would go on to present an acclaimed solo show at the AMI in 1966, achieved the fullest realization of these goals of self-referential painting (Figs. 5.16 and 5.17). She executed each one as if an instance from a longer process of continual technological rendering, from observation of the peasant women who worked in the Ghouta, the fertile ring of gardens and orchards that surrounded Damascus, toward fully plastic inputs. Syria's artists had long found signs of agricultural authenticity in the landscape and communities of the Ghouta, and in this sense Fayoumi's paintings share much with the celebrated oil studies that Shoura had completed during the Union period, such as *The Beautiful Flower* (1959) (Fig. 5.18).⁶⁸⁰ Whereas Shoura had depicted a barefoot woman using lush strokes of high-key blue and orange against a blanket of fertile green ground, Fayoumi converted the same perceived facets of surface color and light into a purely plastic idiom. Her tall canvases are dilations of the chromatic hues on viewable surfaces, composed as continuous fields of tessellating polygons of concentrated, velvety pigment (Fig. 5.19). As hybrids of Op Art, Purism, and other styles of technologized abstraction, these paintings propose an extraordinary approach to Social Realism as a total re-articulation of peasant life.

If al-Sharif had looked to the Ministry of Culture to bring artists to the threshold of their national responsibilities in their creative vocation, then the faculty of the College of Fine Arts had signaled an intention to bring students to an altogether new threshold of national subjectivity. Importantly for my argument regarding the formation of the avant-garde as a heroic enterprise in Syria, their discussions of the contemporary humanity they sought almost always took the self as the authentic locus. In the parlance of the time, it was the sovereign personality

⁶⁸⁰ In the 1940s, Michel Kurché had frequently gone to paint in the Ghouta, often bringing the younger members of the Arab Association for the Fine Arts with him. In the same period, Syrian historian Muhammad Kurd Ali published an entire history of the region, *Ghūta Dimashq* (Damascus: Arab Language Academy, 1949).

(*al-shakḥṣiyya*) that the artist brought to bear on the plastic qualities of his medium, doing so aside from, and, in fact, *before* any matters of content.⁶⁸¹ To achieve their aims of contemporaneity – the sheer, irreducible newness of the twenty-first century – they sought to implement a practice of solipsism that they saw as socially constructive. Hammad told al-Khaldi (and therefore the readers of *al-Ba^cth*) about the College’s commitment to cultivating each student individually, so that he or she could navigate the uncharted atmospheres of the future, accepting new artistic developments without hostility while continually seeking his contemporary personality. As he put it, the search for the contemporary self amid the changing surroundings of the present had to take precedence within the overall schema of artistic service to the people, for, if the artist succeeded in bringing his personality into being in the work, then the personality of his people would be present as well.⁶⁸² When al-Khaldi reported on his observations of the graduation projects, he gave further gloss to this basic insistence on the constitutive truth of the personality, writing that the students’ success in forging distinctive personal styles also constituted evidence of their authenticity (*al-aṣāla*) and understanding of the mission of art (*risālat al-fann*).⁶⁸³ We might compare this obsessive attention to the self at the center of artistic training to the discourse around the singular creative subject as a member of humanity (*al-shakḥṣ al-insānī*) in the critical writing by the *Shi^cr* poets, in which the person and his creation superseded any authority that could be derived from a government or party.⁶⁸⁴ When the College of Fine Arts stressed the artistic personality in the same years, it too recognized sovereignty as a precondition for artistic value, but it defended that sovereignty from the

⁶⁸¹ The term *al-shakḥṣiyya* appears at least twelve times in “Fī Kulliyat al-Funūn al-Jamīla,” often as a complimentary descriptor of a student’s style, i.e. as a fully-realized product of sovereign artistic vision.

⁶⁸² Ibid. Hammad states, “...*wa-bi-l-tālī yufattash ‘an shakḥṣiyyatihi mu‘āṣira, f-idhā wajaḍ shakḥṣiyyatihi, wajaḍ shakḥṣiyyat sha^cbihi.*”

⁶⁸³ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁴ Discussed in Creswell, “Tradition and Translation,” 60.

perspective of an artist's obligations to the community that provided the self with its site of empirical perception. Neither Hammad nor his colleagues ever expected the artist simply to uphold the characteristics and needs of his communal personality, as a strict interpretation of the socialist artwork might require. But nor did they suggest that the artist could be severed from that container of souls. As an Arab and a Syrian, the artist's own personality always entailed psychological continuity with his people – however attenuated and embattled. Crucially, they rejected the idea that the inescapable fact of their group existence required them to uphold representational continuity such as academic conventions of illusion or “sight.” Instead, they contended that the results they sought – the expansion of the possibilities that lay before the whole of their community – began with each individual's obligation to limn new artistic knowledge using the resources of his self.

When La Regina wrote about Hammad's paintings, he too stressed these points. Although he was a relatively silent witness to the confrontations between his Syrian colleagues and the state apparatus for arts patronage and did not show his work in national exhibitions, he nevertheless did engage with the dogmatic nationalist-activist aspects of the country's *turāth* discourse, and sought to redress them. In his discussion of Hammad's work with Arab writing, La Regina wrote against the need to assess an artist's intentionality vis-à-vis his ratification of the Arab identity and described the attempt to bestow an Arab character on the works as a futile one.⁶⁸⁵ In his view, the Arab character of Hammad's paintings came to pass as an ineluctable effect of the hardwiring of the artist's subjectivity, as found expression the interaction between compositional and conceptual decisions: the painting's manner of placing the sign in space, the quality of its colors, and its means of interpretation.⁶⁸⁶ To prove the point, La Regina suggested

⁶⁸⁵ La Regina on Hammad (1965), reprinted in *Ḥammād* (Damascus: Ornina Gallery, 1968), n.p.

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid.

that even if Hammad had inaugurated his paintings using Paleolithic signs instead of Arabic words, he would still have imparted an underlying Arab character to them. Given the context of the pan-Mediterranean *informel* that I discussed in Chapter Three, it is notable that La Regina makes reference to comparative types of signs and emphasizes their irrelevance to Hammad's work. Ragon had seen the "oriental calligraphic" and "occidental graphite" characters that appeared on the surface of paintings in studios both Eastern and Western as evidence of a shared interest in the production of pictorial space as a vast expanse of timeless being.⁶⁸⁷ As La Regina argued, Hammad's work with signs took precisely the opposite tack. The originating characters or gestures in his paintings provided only an extenuating circumstance that ultimately proved incidental to the work's character and its construction of space. These plastic abstract compositions took place around the mark, encompassing and transforming it by measured formations of color, outline, and texture.

As this Syrian avant-garde project developed an understanding of its work as a means to actualize a national postcolonial identity – in which the discovery of "future" art brought a people of the future with it – its key "shape" of support remained the College of Fine Arts and its institutionality as a national art school. As Timothy Mitchell has explored, in a colonial setting, the school in particular provides a locus and a paradigm for modern disciplinary power, a power that enters into local institutions to reassemble their parts and efficiencies and to re-produce "the individual" as a subject of the system.⁶⁸⁸ Disciplines, in other words, produce both sites of new collectivity (armies, factories, schools) *and* the modern individual, who is an "isolated, disciplined, receptive, and industrious political subject." When the Syrian art critics who published analyses in *al-Ba'ath* in the 1960s assessed their country's artistic progress, they

⁶⁸⁷ Ragon, "Travel Notes," 76.

⁶⁸⁸ Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, xi.

presumed a similar dialectic between self and system. In fact, they celebrated it, speaking of the systematicity that was a precondition for modern subjectivity as a well-managed and humanitarian system of state power. When al-Khalidi reported on the College of Fine Arts, for example, he presented its success in producing its students as independent creative subjects who possessed clear but internally-motivated direction as proof of the validity of master planning (*al-takhṭīf*) as a container for individual study.⁶⁸⁹ To support his assertion, he compared the soundness of the Damascus model to the unsatisfying system he had encountered at the Cairo College of Art, which he had attended from 1958-1962. In Cairo, students followed an inflexible academic curriculum that “killed in us the sense of personal responsibility to our own vision” while also having to confront disparate and irreconcilable teachings from master professors.⁶⁹⁰ In Damascus, by contrast, the College curriculum organized artistic possibilities and united pedagogical models between the teachers, allowing for the maximization of students’ genius and confidence in contemporary life. As he had described in the opening conceptual salvo of his article, a successful college of arts ought to contribute to reinforcing contemporary Arab society by turning out artists whose works would come to reveal the civilized (*mutamaddin*) status of Arab man, define the features of the personality of the Syrian Arab artist, and elevate the name of the country in the international artistic field. In the new academy that al-Khalidi recognized, as the artist conducted his study from the basis of his personality, such that his personality became inscribed even in the forms he generated from his observations of life, his study realized its complete meanings only as a synecdoche for the systematic objectives of a calibrated social system. As many participating members of the 1960s art world in Syria embraced the idea of just such a system, in which their desired modes of self-actualization would be formed *within* the

⁶⁸⁹ “Fī Kulliyat al-Funūn al-Jamīla.”

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid.

organizational terrain of the state, ideas of artistic resistance to hegemony – understood as both narrowly social resistance against traditional mindsets and broadly geopolitical resistance to Imperialism – were also constituted within it. By this dynamic of co-dependence, they had fully departed from the “special sight” discourse of the Ba‘th movement of Adham Ismail’s youth, which had looked to artists to contribute to emancipating their Arab energies *from* the state.

The Contagion of Ideology

Although La Regina occupies the center of the discursive responses to the significance of plastic abstract painting practices for Syrian interests, the documentary record of his actual paintings from the years he worked there is remarkably scant. When he wrote to the directorate of the Venice Biennale from Damascus requesting consideration for inclusion in the 1966 exhibition, he cited difficulties with photographic facilities that precluded him from submitting documentation of his most recent works.⁶⁹¹ And, although he did deliver lectures locally, he did not exhibit works at the AMI during his tenure at the College of Fine Arts. His only exhibition in the region was at Gallery One, in Beirut, in 1966. His hardedge painting *Work 027*, which plays with ways to divide and torque the internal area of a square, may emanate from that exhibition (**Fig. 5.20**). And yet, it was the methods that La Regina had devised for exploring full abstraction, particularly his technique of using surface imprints upon the picture plane, as in the muted fragmentary geometries he favored in the early 1960s, that provided the Syrian scene with its marquee signifiers for “abstract art” as a genre of internationalist artwork (**Fig. 5.21**). The memoirs by Syrian artists that deal with this period almost all describe the abstractionist trend in this period by reference to La Regina and his influence on other artists. Nazir Nabaa (1938—), a

⁶⁹¹ Guido La Regina to Director (Venice Biennale), Damascus, August 16, 1965, in “Guido La Regina” file, ASAC-Venice.

talented painter who had recently returned to Syria after four years of study in Cairo, for example, now describes having consciously resisted succumbing to the artist's methods. For Nabaa, the technique was "outstanding but cold."⁶⁹² He instead endeavored to use the Italian artist's discoveries for his own, less abstracted ends, and experimented with similar types of printed textures albeit as supporting detail rather than as a central question. For others in the art scene, La Regina offered a variety of shorthand pictorial devices to designate paintings as sites for clarifying intuition (as opposed to simple attempts to "make a picture").⁶⁹³ For example, he would often bracket his central "narrative" of encounters between granular pigment and translucent color stains by means of parallel bands of background color, with the result of simulating a kind of floating relief panel (Fig. 5.22). In Asma Fayoumi's graduation project, as well as her subsequent oeuvre, she too bracketed her central chromatic field of polygons, thereby setting it off as the product of an internal process of calibration and relations.

The use of these pictorial devices could also make for a sudden transformation in an artist's oeuvre, as in the case of Khaled al-Maz had (1938—), who, like Nabaa, had trained at the Cairo College of Fine Art. Upon his return, he first exhibited a massive 3-meter wide socialist realist painting of construction workers in a twilight worksite filled with scaffolding and phosphorescent cement dust in the 1965 Autumn Exhibition, even receiving a special feature in *al-Ba^cth* because the jury was impressed by the imaginary quality of its realistic depiction (Fig. 5.23).⁶⁹⁴ That same year, however, he began to produce a series of abstract works that related to their human geometries very differently, producing blackened squares composed of enfolded

⁶⁹² Youssef Abdelké, Introduction, in *Nazeer Nab^caa: An Eye on the World... An Eye on the Soul* (Damascus: Tajalliyat Gallery, 2009), 8, and Nabaa's biographical narrative in the same volume, 21. Nabaa had been enrolled at the College of Fine Arts in Cairo during the Union, along with al-Khaldi, Zayyat, and other Syrian students.

⁶⁹³ See La Regina on al-Rayyes (1967), in press files of Janine Rubeiz, for this distinction between seeking clarification of a state of the spirit or other invisible reality and merely "making a picture."

⁶⁹⁴ "Lawḥa," *al-Ba^cth*, 16 Nov. 1965. It appears on the same page as the symposium report, "al-Naṣṣ al-Kāmil li-Munāqashāt Nadwat Ma^craḍ al-Kharif al-Sābi^c."

bones and limbs. These all bracketed their melodramatic content by means of techniques familiar from La Regina's work: surfaces of dry-brushed textures and mottled stains on shallow layers of shape. In *Composition* (1965), a dark and knuckled shape appears inside a shallow ground of scored color, and *Composition* (1966) makes use of a floating frieze of blue pigment (**Fig. 5.24** and **Fig. 5.25**).

Of all the Syrian artists who pursued compositional tactics in common with La Regina, Shoura appeared to have made the most stunning conversion. Prior to 1965, he had exhibited paintings of particular Syrian types, such as *The Beautiful Flower*, and rural landscapes that he rendered in pastel tones (**Fig. 5.26**). By contrast with his colleagues Hammad and Zayyat, who in the 1950s often used elements of design as semi-autonomous devices in their compositions, Shoura had almost never incorporated color or line in his compositions in ways that were supplemental to the depicted scene. And yet, in 1965, he emerged as one of the most thoroughly abstract of the elder plastic abstractionists who taught at the College of Fine Arts. In fact, unlike Hammad and Zayyat, with whom he exhibited in both São Paulo and Damascus (there briefly banding together as "Group D" for an exhibition at the short-lived Gallery Estwani), he bypassed initial references to identity motifs and based his compositions solely on the interaction of notched colored shapes with wrinkled resist textures (**Fig. 5.27**).⁶⁹⁵ The pieces he showed in Brazil, which count among the first works in this mode that he exhibited, seem to explore a tension between hand rendering and automation, with the elements on the picture surface left to coalesce and intensify to the point of excess (**Fig. 5.6**).⁶⁹⁶ Although the piece is painted with oil, its shapes appear pasted on as if a collage, and the two small bands of red that provide visual

⁶⁹⁵ I learned of 'Group D' from Elias Zayyat, interview with author, Damascus, June 23, 2010.

⁶⁹⁶ The three compositions Shoura sent to São Paulo in 1965 are numbered 1, 2, and 3, apparently signalling that they be understood as an inaugural series.

punctuation remain so materially autonomous that their color literally beads up on the surface like ornamentation. Shoura's implementation of his decision to move into the space of technical exploration that La Regina had identified with "international problems" was bold, but its boldness also made him a target. The critics who sought to uphold the values of national art and comprehensibility saw his leap into the void as a symptom of performance anxiety vis-à-vis the international stage.

Because the Syrian Ministry of Culture in the same period frequently opted to promote Syria's abstract painters on the 1960s *biennali* circuit, the discomfiting supposition that these Syrian abstractionists were seeking a superficial salve for underdevelopment gained in strength.⁶⁹⁷ Tarek al-Sharif, for example, began to criticize the way the country's external representation of its art movements did not represent the distribution of artistic practices that were preferred internally.⁶⁹⁸ Observers began to describe abstract painting as a kind of dangerous contagion, one that manifested opportunistically and could undermine national interests. In point of fact, only a fraction of Syrian painters had taken abstraction as a *modus operandi*. Nevertheless, with the specter of total abstraction seeming to rise from the locus of the College of Fine Arts, there was a nagging feeling that the relentless search for up-to-date idioms might in fact represent a "problem" of self-representation, an absencing of the located self.

These concerns reached a flashpoint in March 1966, when the Syrian Ministry of Culture and National Orientation organized the exhibition Contemporary Syrian Painting for installation

⁶⁹⁷ Syria's arts administrators had curated an exhibition of abstraction in 1964 as well, when Syria was given space in the central pavilion of the Venice Biennale. Commissioner Safa al-Hakim selected six abstractionists and six figurative artists, albeit drawing from the pool of Syrian students resident in Rome. *XXXII Biennale Internazionale d'Arte Venezia* (Venice, 1964), 158-160.

⁶⁹⁸ Tarek al-Sharif, "Qaḍiyat Ma'raḍinā fi Lubnān," *al-Ba'ith*, 22 March 1966.

in the Surssock Museum in Beirut.⁶⁹⁹ In conception, the exhibition was entirely affirmative to the goals of buttressing national strength. A special subcommittee had been formed, which worked for months to secure the Surssock venue and to compile a 75-piece sample of recent achievements in Syrian plastic arts.⁷⁰⁰ For the Syrian planners, the display afforded them an opportunity to again address the Lebanese intellectual class and make a case for Syria's socialist model and the comprehensive support it gave to national culture.⁷⁰¹ The exhibition events even included a program of meetings between artists from the two countries, which was billed as facilitating discussion of the shared issues and problems of the day.⁷⁰² Bahnassi's catalog essay briefed readers on the material support his Ministry was extending to artistic activity: 220 students had enrolled in the College of Fine Arts, the Ministry of Culture had purchased more than four hundred paintings from artists, and the National Museum was posting a similar number.⁷⁰³ As he noted, the state planned to further expand its support for the visual arts, and anticipated a proportional further development as a result. For Bahnassi, who in his critical writing maintained that abstract art was a historical province of the Arabs, the work of Hammad and Zayyat was easily claimed for the benevolence of the state. They represented the group of artists who, in modern fashion, sidestepped the triple threat of academic rules, the limits of the public, and imported Western currents in the attempt to "discover an artistic world that would be their own."⁷⁰⁴ For al-Sharif, who covered the event for *al-Ba'ath*, however, the exhibition had failed in

⁶⁹⁹ The exhibition was open from March 17 – April 3, 1966. Notably, it opened just one month after an internal countercoup brought another faction of the Ba'ath Party into power. I have not been able to confirm whether this coup disrupted the schedule or contents of the exhibition in anyway. The event had been planned for months, with a notice releasing the initial list of participants appearing in *al-Ba'ath* as early as October 1965.

⁷⁰⁰ Al-Sharif, "Qaḍīyat Ma'raḍinā fī Lubnān."

⁷⁰¹ *Al-Taṣwīr al-Sūrī al-Mu'āṣir* (Beirut: Surssock Museum, 1966).

⁷⁰² Ibid. As in the introductory text by the President of the Municipality of Beirut Amin Beyhum, which describes Syria and Lebanon as two "fraternal" countries.

⁷⁰³ Afif Bahnassi, "Lamḥa Tārīkhiyya 'an al-Fann al-Tashkīlī al-Mu'āṣir fī Sūriyā," in *al-Taṣwīr al-Sūrī al-Mu'āṣir*, 3-15.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid., 10-11.

the way it approached its task of making a show of Syrian artistic strength. As he reported from the opening events, the critics in Beirut had admitted to being unable to reconcile the art on display with the professed socialist and Arab nationalist goals of the Syrian state. The reason, as al-Sharif saw it, was that more than half of the included works were in an abstract style, which was a percentage that no exhibition held within Syria had even approached.⁷⁰⁵ In other words, in pandering to the Lebanese taste for a the kind of abstract art that signified advancement rather than backwardness, the Syrian planners had in fact managed to successfully destabilize the hasty impression in Lebanon that socialism would always dictate style, but ultimately failed to deliver any appreciable statement about actual Syrian art.⁷⁰⁶ For him, this was a betrayal of the meaningful requirement of socialist art, which is that it be the offspring of social experience.⁷⁰⁷ The question raised by the Lebanese audience struck him as a valid one: how *were* the Syrian abstract artists, who had proceeded to “the abstract” so heedlessly, planning to reconcile their trajectory with their responsibilities and social ambitions? He supposed that it could only conclude in a dead end.

Contemporary Syrian Painting enjoyed only mixed success in impressing Lebanese intellectuals with the accomplishments of Syrian artists.⁷⁰⁸ Worse, it impacted negatively on the reputation of Hammad, Shoura, and Zayyat. Because the exhibition had aggregated their plastic abstract painting, it served to highlight an element of derivativeness in the work. Al-Sharif

⁷⁰⁵ Al-Sharif, “Qaḍīyat Maʿraḍinā fi Lubnān.” He counts forty abstract works out of a total of seventy-five pieces, a percentage that he suggests is inconsistent with the percentages in the exhibitions actually staged in Syria. Al-Sharif also contends that a similar policy had manifested at the previous year’s São Paulo Bienal, at which a majority “three abstractionist artists” exhibited.

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid. Al-Sharif says that the Syrians wished to show the cultured Lebanese audience that they had abstract painting too, and that “Syria is not backward” (“*wa-laysat Sūriyā mutakhallifa*”).

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁸ Mahmoud Hammad describes and then rebuts some of this criticism in an unpublished text, “Maqāl Baʿd Maʿraḍ fi Bayrūt min Qaṣr Sursūq Yuhājim fihi al-Ṣaḥāfa.” Personal collection of Lubna Hammad. Although this particular text is a handwritten manuscript, a version of it may have been circulated to *al-Baʿth*, as some same exact phrases appear in “Nadwa Thulāthiyya maʿ Fātiḥ al-Mudarris wa-Maḥmūd Hammād wa-Ilyās Zayyāt.”

reported that onlookers in Beirut had congregated around the works of Shoura and Hammad in particular, whispering derisively. When he gathered testimony regarding their crime from a director at the Sursock Museum, he learned that Beirutis felt they had already seen the originals, namely when they themselves had given La Regina a solo exhibition in the museum's galleries, and thus could not help but see his paintings in the work of Hammad, Shoura, and, to a certain extent, Zayyat.⁷⁰⁹ On the basis of this embarrassing incident, al-Sharif mounted a further critique of the enthusiasm for emptied-out abstraction over humanist social content. As he argued in *al-Ba^cth*, the tactical presentation of "Syria abstract" rather than "Syria backward" only projected a falsified self. He even threw the overall character of the Syrian abstractionists into question, adding the charge of elitism, writing that their abstract work "addressed people from above."⁷¹⁰

The following week, *al-Ba^cth* gave Hammad, Zayyat, and al-Mouddarres a platform to give their views on the exhibition in light of al-Sharif's attack.⁷¹¹ Hammad rejected the suggestion that the abstractionists were aligned with the remains of feudalism or bourgeois class interest. Taking the opportunity to respond to al-Sharif's charges directly, he asked,

Why do you want us positioned below? Rise, my brother, along with the intellectuals. Trust that we are not trying to address you from above, *ya 'azīzī*, but rather to enrich our artistic experience and to enrich the art of our country!⁷¹²

Hammad also composed a longer but unpublished version of this response that addressed the problem of influence as well, asking rhetorically "Can the artist be anything but influenced? All art and literatures in the world inform one another."⁷¹³ In it, he acknowledges that the name La Regina has become a name that critics constantly trot out, conveniently allowing them to ignore

⁷⁰⁹ Al-Sharif, "Qaḍīyat Ma^craḍīnā fī Lubnān."

⁷¹⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹¹ "Nadwa Thulāthiyya ma^c Fātiḥ al-Mudarris wa-Maḥmūd Hammād wa-Ilyās Zayyāt," 6.

⁷¹² Ibid., 7.

⁷¹³ Hammad, "Maqāl Ba^cd Ma^craḍ fī Bayrūt min Qaṣr Sursūq Yuhājīm fīhi al-Ṣaḥāfa."

the qualities of works themselves and to overlook the fact that the Syrian work had been following a logical progression from before the arrival of the Italian guest.

From the perspective of the present, it is possible to read this spat between al-Sharif and Hammad not as an instance of irreconcilable ideological difference, but rather as a symptom of the ideology of national development that prevailed in Syria. As Hammad himself wrote in 1966, the words “human,” “our pain,” “our hopes,” and “the pains and hopes of this communal nation” were ceaselessly repeated as mantras of national cultural content without care for their meanings. Novelist Abdul Rahman Munif (1933-2004) would express a typically dim view of the avant-garde efforts of the 1960s in a much later text devoted to the career of artist Nazir Nabaa (who now takes pride in having resisted that abstractionist trend).⁷¹⁴ Describing how artists in those years had busily devoted themselves to erecting illusions of accomplishment, Munif contended that their hastiness produced serious problems of authenticity that they failed to recognize, at the time mistakenly attributing the dissonance they experienced to problems of education and audience. Whenever a local audience could not appreciate a work, in other words, the artists would agonize over assigning localized blame – faulting the irresponsible artist or the backward public – rather than performing a systemic critique. Munif sees this alienated condition as a characteristic of the period before their cultural fall, as induced by the misguided drive to fabricate modernity.⁷¹⁵ As this periodization goes, these façades of sophistication would be decimated in 1967 by the defeat of the Arab armies by superior Israeli forces. Over a mere six days, June 5-10, 1967, the Israeli army defeated the military forces of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, occupying the Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula, and the Syrian territory of the Golan Heights and displacing an estimated 300,000 Palestinians and more than 100,000 Syrians into frequently

⁷¹⁴ Abdul Rahman Munif, “Rihla ma° Nadhīr Nab°a,” an undated text published in the 2000s on the Syrian promotional blog Discover Syria, http://www.discover-syria.com/blog_post/4/77.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid.

wretched refugee conditions.⁷¹⁶ As Munif has summarized, this rupture affected the nature of artists' efforts. Before June 5, 1967, they had conducted their search for an authentic and developed art as a set of abstract ideas and appeals to intellectual opinion. After the defeat, they found themselves needing to seek a visual language of direct communication and revitalized communal feeling.⁷¹⁷

“Art Before June was Abstract and After it Plastic”

At a 1969 roundtable of artists and critics convened by *al-Tali'a*, the cultural magazine published by *al-Ba'ath*, to discuss that year's Autumn Exhibition, artist Naim Ismail (1930-1979) expressed concern that debate over the new national artistic position had become too categorical, with critics asserting that art before the war had been “abstract” (*tajrīdī*), and art after it “plastic” (*tashkīlī*).⁷¹⁸ As Ismail had witnessed over the intervening two years, artists and critics had subjected the abstractionists to active rebuke. A new paradigm of directness had been established as early as June 5 itself, when artists brought posters and drawings down into Yusuf al-Azmeh Square in a spontaneous outpouring of emotion, presenting passers-by with their raw response to their agony over the news of surprise Israeli strikes on Egyptian airfields.⁷¹⁹ The desire to communicate clearly to the Arab community remained an aspiration, even after the magnitude of the loss became apparent. With artists effectively abandoning any ambition to “lead from above” in Yusuf Al-Azmeh Square, the experiments with non-purposive form that had previously

⁷¹⁶ For the purposes of this chapter, I refer to the war's negative outcomes for Arab communities by the euphemism “June 5, 1967,” a phrase that found frequent use in exhibition and newspaper texts as a way to encompass both outrage over Zionist aggression and despair over the refugee situation.

⁷¹⁷ Munif, “Rihla ma' Nadhīr Nab'a.”

⁷¹⁸ Al-Tali'a Arts Editor, “Nadwat al-Ṭalī'a: Ma'raḡ al-Kharīf al-Ḥadī 'Ashar,” *al-Tali'a* (22 November 1969), 42.

⁷¹⁹ Ghazi al-Khaldi, “al-Fannānūn al-Sūriyūn Yashhadūna al-Adwān,” in *al-Fannānūn al-Sūriyūn Yashhadūna al-Adwān* (Damascus 1970), n.p. In NM-D Modern.

represented the artistic vanguard gave way to a search for an idiom of activism.⁷²⁰ Syrian painters stopped showing abstract compositions in national exhibitions, and overtly national content irrupted back into the picture plane. By the time of the 1968 Autumn Exhibition, when Nabaa reviewed its offerings for *al-Ba‘th*, he explicitly denigrated the abstractionists for the pretentiousness of their effort, repudiating their attempt to chart a shortcut into the “classes of the avant-garde” as “buffoonery (*tahrījiyya*).”⁷²¹ And by 1969, it had become important to Ismail that his colleagues cease taking the mere fact of stylistic recalibration as sufficient to national needs. The key to making artistic responsibility meaningful would lie in evaluating it properly. As he told his colleagues at the *al-Tali‘a* roundtable in direct response to the comments of Tarek al-Sharif, who had giddily announced the extinction of abstraction in Syria, they needed to be sure to query the problem of connecting the artwork to society rather than settle on rooting out questions of style. As Ismail put it, it in fact remained possible for a fully abstract artist to forge stronger ties to society than a representational artist, and vice versa.⁷²²

In fact, June 5, 1967 launched a monumental historiographical project in the Syrian cultural apparatus, with its offices and directors actively working to interpret the country’s visual art as historical testimony. As al-Khaldi would assert in 1970, the date June 5, 1967 marked the end of a Syrian art history based on exhibitions or tendencies, and the beginning of an event-based art history inscribed within the fate of the Arab *waṭan*.⁷²³ For the period considered here, the Ministry of Culture constantly claimed the sincerity of the early artist protest initiatives as a vital material for its own strategic cultivation. Bahnassi published a series of summary articles in

⁷²⁰ Ibid. Also see Afif Bahnassi, “Authenticity in Art: Exposition, Definition, Methodology,” *Cultures* 6, no. 2 (1979), 78. Bahnassi describes how the response to the Imperialist aggression of the June war precipitated a spontaneous return to national commitment, as the Suez War had also done.

⁷²¹ Nabaa, “Ma‘raḍ al-Kharīf al-‘Ashir,” 7.

⁷²² “Nadwat al-Ṭali‘a, 42.

⁷²³ Al-Khaldi, “al-Fannānūn al-Sūriyūn Yashhadūna al-‘Adwān.” Al-Khaldi had just been appointed Assistant Director of Fine Arts for the Ministry of Culture.

the 1970s, for example, that recount how Syria's artists first reacted to the events of "imperialist and Zionist aggression" with a spontaneous demand for more commitment and freedom, doing so prior to any set ideology.⁷²⁴ As he saw it, the measured call for modern authenticity had become a yearning to achieve "national sovereignty free from the yoke of cultures and art forms imported from countries bent on annihilating the Arabs."⁷²⁵ After the Yusuf al-Azmeh Square protest-exhibition, the Ministry of Culture had immediately begun to amplify and direct the angry impulse to protest into its own exhibition programs.⁷²⁶ It sponsored numerous exhibitions of artist testimony to the plight of the nation, in the autumn of 1967 alone producing an exhibition titled *Aggression*, the Autumn Exhibition (it opened on schedule), and preparing another special exhibition titled *Mobilization*.⁷²⁷ These events featured works like Nazir Naba'a's *Napalm* (1967), which depicts the all-consuming terror of a woman at the very moment that her body is struck by a chemical attack (**Fig. 5.28**). Naba'a often used the bare, sacrificial body as a primary motif in this period, offering it as a synecdoche of the imperilment of humanity under the foreign capitalist regime and its military power, and his submissions to the national exhibitions revised and re-circulated the stricken figure (**Fig. 5.29**). By contrast, the Ministry of Culture generated talking points for the 1967 exhibition that skewed strongly toward strength and perseverance rather than vulnerability. The brief essay it inserted in the 1967 Autumn Exhibition catalog praises artists' efforts to record the "most serious events to have befallen the Arab nation (*umma*)," and also promises that the artists would continue to occupy the "front lines

⁷²⁴ Bahnassi, "Contemporary Art and Artistic Life in Syria"; Bahnassi, "Authenticity in Art."

⁷²⁵ Bahnassi, "Authenticity in Art," 79. The article identifies several avenues of annihilation, including the appropriation of their wealth and the trampling of their rights.

⁷²⁶ Bahnassi, "Contemporary Art and Artistic Life in Syria," 173. Bahnassi emphasizes that the desire to respond was "by no means imposed."

⁷²⁷ The roster of special exhibitions continued into 1968 with two more: *Steadfastness and Armed Struggle*, which was sponsored by the Ministry of Information, and *In Support of the Work of the Fidā'iyyīn*. There was also a *Mobilization* exhibition in Aleppo, as described in Ghazi al-Khaldi, "Fi Ma'raḡ al-Ta'bi'a," *al-Ma'rifa* 76 (April 1968): 186-190.

in realms of effort, work, and production” in every future stage of national action. Indeed, the recovery mentality so pervaded official discourse that newspaper articles use the euphemism *al-Naksa*, or the Setback, to reference the defeat.⁷²⁸ In this rhetorical framework, the battle was also a redemptive one set in the future, that is the return to the liberation cause with renewed strength and tactical brilliance.

Nazir Nabaa’s activity in the years 1967-1969 provides insight into how the periodization of the recent past would be reconfigured, with the faintly technological inquiry of the abstractionists reclaimed to secure collective, infectious emotion. A 1964 graduate of Cairo’s College of Fine Arts, upon his return, he completed a two-year teaching assignment in the secondary schools of Deir al-Zour, followed by service in al-Nabk. In 1966, after having first produced paintings exploring mythological subjects using stark blue tones, he had started exploring Oriental modes of being through their personification as isolated figures on stripped down terracotta surfaces.⁷²⁹ In *The Model* (1966), an award-winning work from that period, he arranged a nude priestess, spheres of ripe fruit, and plucked pomegranate plant on a single tonal ground (Fig 5.30).⁷³⁰ Nabaa had begun to play with the materiality of his tools; his use of raked brushstrokes on surface of this painting can be seen as a tactical borrowing of La Regina’s techniques for pitting surface against form, but he never went so far as to designate “texture” as a

⁷²⁸ For example, the headlines to *al-Ba‘th*’s coverage of the 1967 Autumn Exhibition even announce that thirty-five paintings out of the 132 exhibited treat the subjects of “the *Naksa* and the battle.” “Ma‘raḍ al-Kharif,” *al-Ba‘th*, 17 Nov. 1967.

⁷²⁹ Nazir Nabaa, “‘Andamā Tufjar al-‘Alam bi-l-Alwān,” published as an undated text on the Syrian promotional blog Discover Syria, http://www.discover-syria.com/blog_post/4/81. Although Nabaa was living outside the city, he did have a solo show at AMI in 1965 and remained active in Damascus art initiatives.

⁷³⁰ Nabaa submitted this work to an Arab art exhibition sponsored by a British cigarette company Carreras Craven ‘A,’ where it won the jury prize as the most “fully realized” of the Syrian works. See Carreras Limited, *Carreras Craven ‘A’ Arab Art Exhibition* (Crawley, England: Beric Press, 1966).

site of research in itself.⁷³¹ He also, in the same period, completed a few public commissions in a flatly heroic socialist realist style, including a mural painting in Damascus of a soldier and a laborer who raise their respective implements in solidarity.⁷³² But after June 5, 1967, Nabaa's fine art paintings seem to break open into protest, and in doing so turned the unstable division between abstract form and material body that was already emerging in the 1966 terracottas into an affective instrument. In a work like *Napalm* (1967), for example, the skin and the ground fuse together in ridges of plaster and tone that seem to float off the body, and the lines that mark exterior skin – flowing inky lines rather than brushwork shading – bloom on that surface into representations of vaporized paint and seared gashes. Where once Nabaa had placed a taut symbol of fertility, he here leaves an opened plane of human vulnerability. The surface of the painting registers the electrical, chemical nature of the shocks experienced by the Arab body.

The intellectual climate after June 5, 1967 did not long support images of vulnerability or non-purposive screaming, however. The experience of the war had been a disillusioning one for artists. After the June 10, 1967 ceasefire, Damascus citizens had witnessed their Syrian troops return to town with clean, unfired weapons and unscathed tanks.⁷³³ As the timidity of their military leaders seemed to snap into intolerable clarity, it made the imperative to forge a radically different liberation project into a search for a framework for redemption.⁷³⁴ Although the Ministry of Culture had spoken of the “front lines” in its autumn 1967 text, in fact the very notion of the shape of collective battle had been put under tremendous pressure. As part of a shared attempt among intellectuals to deal with shock, Nabaa soon began to try to adopt a

⁷³¹ Abdelké, Introduction, in *Nazeer Nab'aa*, 8. Abdelké mentions that Nabaa adapted some of La Regina's techniques in his own “laboratory,” for his own purposes. These were the surface imprint techniques, including using papers and fabrics with acrylic colors.

⁷³² The painting is reproduced in *al-Ma'rifa* (February 1967): 177.

⁷³³ Asma Fayoumi and Ghassan Jabri, interview by author, Damascus, March 6, 2011. Jabri has written a catalog essay referencing this turning point and the desire to remobilize. See *Asma Fayoumi* (Damascus: Ayyam Gallery, 2008).

⁷³⁴ Nabaa, “‘Andamā Tufjar al-°Alam bi-l-Alwān.”

stronger mission for his artistic activity.⁷³⁵ Toward that end, he, like many of his colleagues, looked to the figure of the *fidā'ī* in particular for an alternative model of resistance action.⁷³⁶ Unlike the military officers of the standing national armies, the *fidā'iyīn*, or guerrilla fighters, of the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah) had emerged from the war with the dignity of their mission intact. Having conducted raids inside the 1949 armistice line since January 1, 1965 without seeking permission from a nation-state, they seemed to offer a more immanent model of agency. As a result of these easily mythologized acts of individual courage, the armed resistance movement – *al-muqāwama* (“the resistance”) – acquired a moral imperative that promised salvation from despair.⁷³⁷ These hopes were further buoyed by a material victory in March 1968 at a Fatah base near the village of Karamah, when Fatah *fidā'iyīn* withstood an Israeli attack and, with the Jordanian army joining them in battle, ultimately repulsed their attackers. This solidified the *fidā'iyīn* version of resistance as an alternative to the state-directed battle for Palestine between armies.

Crucially, as the political imaginary underwent change, so too did expectations for the social agency of the artwork. With the emphasis placed on individual action as the means to break the chains of hierarchy and super-exploitation, the guerrilla fighter was figured as the catalyst in a humanitarian project that would encompass not only politics and territory but also social and cultural change. Artists articulated the new resistance possibilities as a desire for a kind of de-professionalized solidarity, and Nabaa sought to find a way to stand alongside everyone else as a compound entity – a human being *and* an artist (*al-insān—al-fannān*) – which

⁷³⁵ Munif, “Rihla ma° Nadhīr Nab°a.”

⁷³⁶ Nabaa, “°Andamā Tufjar al-°Alam bi-l-Alwān.” Also see Saleem al-Bahloly on the appearance of the same model of individual resistance in the self-conceptualization of Iraqi artists involved in the New Vision group in Baghdad, “The Persistence of the Image: *Dhākira Hurra* in Dia Azzawi’s drawings on the Massacre of Tel al-Zaatar,” *ARTMargins* 2, no. 2 (June 2013): 71-97.

⁷³⁷ Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 188-196.

entailed a renewed feeling of humanity, surety, and importance.⁷³⁸ Such conceptual shifts regarding the nature of the artist's work had a professional analogue as well. As the new version of collective struggle took a dispersed geographical form, playing out as a choreography of governmental and paramilitary actions, the groups circulated their pronouncements of alternative visions in a profusion of media forms: mechanically reproduced posters, leaflets, and even films and songbooks.⁷³⁹ Naba'a distributed his art in all these forms. In early 1968, he was appointed to an illustrator position for the Directorate of Schoolbooks and moved from rural al-Nabk to Damascus, beginning a new phase of graphic production. After his illustrations appeared in the first Damascus edition of the magazine *al-Thawra al-Filastiniyya* that year, they caught the eye of Fatah's leadership, and Naba'a became a major contributor of designs and drawings to international Fatah communications.⁷⁴⁰ He produced copious renderings of Kalashnikov-toting fighters for them, opting to use black ink on white paper as a way to convey his self-awareness of the functionalism of his images (Fig. 5.31).⁷⁴¹ As he continued to develop a visual identity for the resistance, he devised a more streamlined graphic style to invigorate their shared repertoire of motifs: the sun, the pistol, the *fidā'ī*, and the dove (Fig. 5.32).

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to analyze the aesthetics of paramilitary action

⁷³⁸ Munif, "Rihla ma' Nadhīr Nab'a."

⁷³⁹ See the enormous trove of the material visual culture from this period in the online archive The Palestine Poster Project (PPPA), <http://www.palestineposterproject.org/>, maintained by Dan Walsh. The archive even includes the songbook *Songs of the Fedayeen* (London: Bellman Bookshop, 1970), which is illustrated with some of Naba'a's (unattributed) illustrations. The pamphlet had been compiled for distribution in the UK with assistance from an organization called the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, so the graphics had likely come from its literature.

⁷⁴⁰ *Nazeer Nab'aa*, 20. Naba'a's autobiographical timeline states that Abu Jihad phoned him in 1968 to request poster designs for the Palestinian delegation to the World Youth Festival in Sofia, Bulgaria. Naba'a writes that the magazine that caught Abu Jihad's attention was *Filastin al-Thawra*, but that publication was not established until 1971. I believe he must mean the Damascus-based publication *al-Thawra al-Filastiniyya*, which, according to a January 31, 2013 online press summary issued from Fatah's Office of Culture and Information, was launched in 1968 after the Battle of Karameh and distributed it to the *fidā'īyīn* and their supporters. It had the permission of the Syrian government. <http://www.fatehmedia.ps/page-887.html>.

⁷⁴¹ Munif, "Rihla ma' Nadhīr Nab'a." For images, see Shafiq Radwan, *al-Mulṣaq al-Filastīnī: Mashākil al-Nasha'a wa-l-Taṭawwur* (Damascus: Fatah, 1992), 310-311, and the PPPA portfolio, <http://www.palestineposterproject.org/special-collection/artists-and-collectives/natheer-nabaa>.

that developed in the Middle East and the greater Third World as part of a Marxist-Socialist liberation platform. Here, I want only to emphasize the distinctively expansive pressures that June 5, 1967 placed on ideas about cultural action and art's service to the Arab nation. When Nabaa developed his graphic language for the face of the resistance, he sought to find a way to stand beside its *fidāʿī* members, and to be as if one of them.⁷⁴² Increasingly, he would also find a template for idealized life in the *fidāʿī*, with its ethic of personal action as communal responsibility providing an analogy for an actionable artistic avant-garde in which artistry would be integrated with communal life and consciousness. Accordingly, Nabaa began to pursue an expanded practice of artistic action: illustrating books, producing editorial illustrations for newspapers, designing sets for plays at the national theater and puppets for the puppet theater, and publishing exhibition reviews from a strong liberation-Leftist angle.⁷⁴³ He also explored ways to communicate across genres, most notably in his illustrations for *From an Occupied Land*, a collection of poems by Palestinian resistance poets, which the Syrian Directorate of Plastic Arts published in 1968.⁷⁴⁴ Nabaa's brief was to connect with the greatest number of people and make the greatest impression on them, and he approached the project by "reading"

⁷⁴² Munif, "Rihla ma^c Nadhīr Nab^ca." Munif's description of "beside" the revolutionary immediately calls to mind the cautions of Walter Benjamin against adopting the impossible, counter-revolutionary position of the ideological beneficiary. See "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 220-238. Also see the influential gloss of Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 171-203. Munif's point is a bit different, however, for he is interested in how the Palestinian identity was being adopted by others and universalized.

⁷⁴³ Nabaa, "ʿAndamā Tufjar al-ʿAlam bi-l-Alwān." Nabaa writes about a mixed legacy for the period, saying, "Even now I can not say for sure whether this period full of diversity was positive or negative in terms of my plastic experience, but it helped me to capture my breath and I recover my balance and go back to painting with a self that contained both intellectual and aesthetic concerns."

⁷⁴⁴ *Min al-Ard al-Muhtalla* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture, 1968). I have only ever seen some of the drawings for this book, which were hanging in the Damascus National Library's art and media room in 2010, but I expect that its collection of poems had been inspired by Ghassan Kanafani's groundbreaking 1966 study of the literature of resistance in Occupied Palestine, which introduced Mahmoud Darwish, Tawfiq Zayyad, and Samih al-Qassim. Here I need to acknowledge that, the Syrian state clearly did remain the primary sponsor of cultural production within the country's borders, but it could no longer present the idea of a developed and well-managed Syria as its sole end. Its organs also gave artistic representation to the *fidāʿī* as an embodiment of heroic character.

the proudly resistant forms and relationships of the poems and composing hatched line drawings in conversation with them (Fig. 5.33).⁷⁴⁵ The same images would continue to circulate in other formats as well, as fine art and as cinema. The Directorate subsequently sent the originals abroad as a “touring exhibition” in Europe⁷⁴⁶ And in 1970, the Syrian Cinema Organization sponsored *The Visit*, an experimental short documentary on the Palestinian movement directed by Kais al-Zubaidi, which incorporated Nabaa’s drawings into its mixed media montage of freeze frames, high contrast nighttime shots, and collage frames of the poetry of resistance with solarized documentary photographs of napalm attacks.⁷⁴⁷ Nabaa’s drawings of terrified Palestinian women and children were spliced into the film, where they acted as flashbacks to primal scenes of invasion.

As Nabaa generated art for these cultural projects of testimony and diffusion circa 1968, he was not seeking to merge art with life per se. Rather, he was seeking ways to assert artistic agency upon the intolerable condition, thereby revealing something about its reality while also conducting his own capacities in an exemplary manner. His critical writing in the same period used the term “expressive realism” to describe this new ideal of authentic, committed art.⁷⁴⁸ Expressive realism, as he contended in *al-Ba‘th* in September 1968, offered artists their only appropriately comprehensive means of responding to the events that had occurred to their

⁷⁴⁵ Munif, “Rihla ma‘ Nadhīr Nab‘a.”

⁷⁴⁶ *Nazeer Nab‘aa*, 20.

⁷⁴⁷ *Al-Ziyāra*, dir. Kais al-Zubaidi, 1970, 9 min., 32 sec. As of March 5, 2014, it was available to view online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGqGRogVaEk>.

⁷⁴⁸ Nabaa was not the only artist-critic who used this term circa 1968. Burhan Karkutli also discusses it as a “path” of response to the shock of the defeat. Burhan Karkutli, “Khamsa Ḥazīrān..wa-Taṭawwūr Fununinā al-Tashkīliyya,” *al-Ba‘th*, 6 Nov. 1968. Although I have not been able to pinpoint their common point of reference in using this term, it seems to me that it must have circulated via the transnational liberation networks. Karkutli had spent 1959-1961 in Morocco working as an illustrator for its resistance press, and, when he returned to Syria in 1968 to teach at the College of Fine Arts, he too was involved in illustration work for the Palestinian resistance.

national community.⁷⁴⁹ The new task, as he saw it, was to retain the raw feeling of the tragic experiences within their expression of reality, such that the realness of the work extended into the substrata of feeling that was independent of vision. The appearance of the specific term “expressive realism” here, which comes from Soviet cinematic terminologies, emanated from the political-cultural themes of the Third World liberation movements, as was widely promoted by the Organization of Solidarity of the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL). Established in Cuba in 1966 and operating as a worldwide federation of movements, entities, and individuals sympathetic to the anti-Imperialist struggle, the OSPAAAL from the start coordinated with Fatah (as well as other Arab liberation movements), promoting their struggle through posters and events.⁷⁵⁰ The references to expressive realism in *Tricontinental*, OSPAAAL’s theoretical-cultural publication, primarily appear in the context of discussions of a new cinematic praxis that would revolve around the psychological reality of images.⁷⁵¹ As a broad category, expressive realist cinema endeavored to work through the details of experienced truth to generate existential allegories, thereby going beyond mere represented phenomena and achieving a non-conditioned cinema of consciousness.⁷⁵²

Nabaa’s critical writings brought this revolutionary ambition to intensify the real into the realm of painting as well, with significant implications for the ideological status of artistic

⁷⁴⁹ Nazir Nabaa, “al-Fannān Huwa Wajh al-Wāqi‘ al-Ta‘bīri li-l-Mujtama‘,” *al-Ba‘th*, 16 Sept. 1968. The text was reprinted and translated into English in *Ahmad Nawash* (Amman: Darat al-Funūn, 2008), 6-9. I consulted both.

⁷⁵⁰ A collection of OSPAAAL posters may also be viewed on the PPPA website, including one issued immediately after the 1967 war in support of to the “Syrian revolution,” carrying the slogan “For the rights of the Arab peoples, for the rights of the people of Palestine; Against the aggression of Israel and the Yankee Imperialists toward the triumphant Syrian revolution.”

⁷⁵¹ The OSPAAAL began publishing its quarterly journal, *Tricontinental*, in August 1967. Each issue of the publication included a folded poster promoting solidarity with an anti-Imperialist movement.

⁷⁵² Concetta Carestia Greenfield, “New South American Cinema: From Neo-Realism to Expressive Realism,” *Latin American Literary Review* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1973): 111-123. Greenfield primarily discusses the expressive realist tactics of Brazil’s *Cinema Novo* movement and the Third World Cinema of Argentinean director Fernando Solanas. She cites Alan Casty’s definition of the broad expressive realist category in *The Dramatic Art of the Film* (New York, 1971), which Casty saw as including the Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini’s *8 ½* and the late films of Swedish director Ingmar Bergman.

creation in the discourse of revolutionary culture in Syria. He published one declaration of his nation's need for expressive realism in September 1968, as the introduction to his review of a painting exhibition by Palestinian-Jordanian artist Ahmad Nawash (1934—) at the Arab Cultural Center in Damascus.⁷⁵³ He opened the review with a statement of purpose: the artist must be the one to express reality for the society he lives in, and is therefore obligated to produce works that respond to the bitterness of actual reality. The events of June 5, 1967, he contended, occasioned new parameters for the work of art, pushing artists to turn to an expressionist reality in their literature, poetry, and form (*tashkīl*) that better fit the full range of their community's experience – joys and sorrows, victories as well as defeats.⁷⁵⁴ As he put it, they would have to express internal reality as fully as its external representation, capturing real, unformed emotions and unarticulated sensibilities as well as desire, hope and development as a truer embodiment of revolutionary resistance.⁷⁵⁵ For Nabaa, in other words, it had become necessary to reach beyond apparent reality into the real. Thus, his praise for Nawash's paintings – dystopic landscapes of wraith-like figures merging into dirtied grounds – focuses on the artist's purposeful direction of emotion through a masterfully amalgamated palette of humid and swampy grays, yellows, and dark blues (Fig. 5.34 and 5.35). Warning the reader that the paintings might at first appear "abstract" and therefore devoid of the national content of the realist and folkloric genre scenes, Nabaa argues that the colors and thickness of the textures in fact act as mobilizing agents in the audience. These properties prompt viewers to actually "feel the hot humidity coursing through the veins of

⁷⁵³ Nabaa, "al-Fannān Huwa Wajh al-Wāqī' al-Ta'birī li-l-Mujtama'," 8.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid. Tellingly, Nabaa does not use the term al-Naksa, but instead says "the latest events that occurred on the land of the Arab nation."

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid. Nabaa's discussion of truthfulness in art as containing everything without omission can again be compared with the 1969 manifesto of the New Vision group in Iraq, which described the artist as a warrior who "refused to believe in the false." Al-Bahloly, "The Persistence of the Image," 92.

the painting and the silent fear that moves about its parts.”⁷⁵⁶ Here, Nabaa’s reading of a rapprochement between formal choices and political imperatives leans on a model of direct emotive transfer. Strikingly, when he describes the work of the airless atmosphere of the canvas upon an audience, he sees it as a prefiguration of a guerrilla revolution fought on subterranean ground and sustained in the hearts of jungle fighters. In turn, it was the skillful directedness of the artist’s effort that would underpin this kind of efficacy as a work. In Nawash’s case, he and his family had been forced to flee their village of Ayn Karam in 1948, which meant that Nawash had to suppress his tortured emotions as a Palestinian so as to exert his mastery as an artist *qua* artist.⁷⁵⁷ This argument about the truthful power of expressive realism is instructive, for it subtly juggles the imperatives of competing types of artistic engagement: that which seeks aesthetic ends as a civilizational value unto itself, and that which seeks purpose in its immediate implementation.

As *al-Ba‘th* published Nabaa’s proposals for an activated antidote to artistic futility, Syria’s art scene was moving into yet another backlash against useless works. This time, ire would be directed against the “immaturity” of the first responses to June 5, 1967, which some had begun to see as bad art. With the emerging basis for a Syrian avant-garde art being a proof that the work had been formed by human labor, as was located within the strata of art’s essentially plasticity, even the works that had appeared in the exhibitions in 1967 came up for critique. When Nabaa projected his depth criteria backward onto those pieces, he saw works that were “bad, hasty, and immature.”⁷⁵⁸ Artist Ghassan al-Sibai (1939—) described how the jolt of June 5, 1967 had caught artists short, leaving them to make fumbling attempts to respond to the

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁷ For a more recent discussion of Nawash’s salutary maintenance of the “primacy of both form and content” in his work, see Abdul Kareem al Sayyed, “Half a Century of Commitment Art: Ahmad Nawash and his Dreamy Characters,” in *Nawash*, 84-89.

⁷⁵⁸ “Nadwat al-Ṭalī‘a,” 42.

defeat. As he recounted, whereas they had already been engaged in the natural and rewarding acquisition of an abstract language through exploratory formations of color and pure shapes, the *Naksa* had forced altogether new thoughts and experiences upon them, requiring means to express them that were not yet readily at hand.⁷⁵⁹ In this discussion, critic al-Sharif again provided the hardline position against which the artists could proclaim the need for sophistication and subtlety. It was he who spoke up to rebut Ismail's claim that the enforced division between abstraction and plasticity had provided their art movement with a false antinomy, doing so by linking Ismail's interest in effects back to precision of means, responding to the "True, but...why does the artist give up form (*shakl*) when he wants to express a social issue?" At the same roundtable, al-Moudarres spoke out in defense of the validity of non-representational painting as a pursuit (even though he rarely practiced it himself), also rejecting al-Sharif's suggestion that matters of content constituted the only valid artistic concern during extreme political "events," and asserting that complete abstraction actually comprised the most difficult type of expression of all as it represented the interface between the greatest rationality and the greatest non-verbal dumbness.⁷⁶⁰ He thus responded to al-Sharif's attempt to return "form" to its standard oppositional relationship with social responsibility with a flip riposte, answering the critic's rhetorical question with a blunt accusation: "because it is simpler." This final charge from al-Moudarres not only admitted to the problem of uninspired incompetence in the art scene after June 5, 1967, but it also drew a strict line of qualitative judgment by refusing to commend artists for abdicating from form, regardless of circumstance or good intention.

The late 1960s art scene, in other words, gave recognition to the essential plasticity of the work of art in ways that maintained an unstable division between form as an artistic category and

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid.

plastic formation as an avant-garde quality. Even as the country's artists were actively developing new narratives about recovery, commitment to national construction, and the role of artists within it, they continued to preserve the problems of plasticity as a privileged type of advanced artistic question. I have argued that the initiatives of the Syrian art school faculty in the mid-1960s and their close coverage in the nationalized press, laid a ground for these later debates. Those earlier debates around abstraction represent the most resolved precursor to these later disputations of the Syrian avant-garde, making them the most vulnerable to punitive disassembly. As the debates established La Regina's model of form-driven painterly composition as a transnational tactic of idealized construction, even while they also critiqued it, they drew sustenance from the state's ideological and monetary investments in technological training as a valid and universalized system of progress. Through these intellectual and political coordinates, the Syrian engagement with painterly abstraction had ratified the individual without also affirming the constitutive individualism of American-style Modernism or European *informel*. It was that particular notion of its advanced but never fully autonomous status that preserved it for the new liberation project, making it available as a humanistic resource in projects such as Nabaa's expressive realism.

The politicized stress that Syrian artists themselves placed on the importance of the difference between individualism and the preservation of individual human value, and on the centrality of human subjectivity, becomes particularly evident in Zayyat's evocative statements at the roundtable regarding the "return of human sources" in his paintings. When asked by a colleague about the reason behind his decision to reintroduce content in his paintings, Zayyat explained that, after June 5, 1967, he felt a need to have the voice of humans present in his

work.⁷⁶¹ This otherwise deadpan statement draws a quiet persuasive power from its appropriation of the oft-quoted statement that Pablo Picasso had made in defense of the right to paint with nonverbal plastic meaning, “Everyone wants to understand painting. Why not try to understand the songs of a bird?”⁷⁶² Zayyat’s answer pointedly revises the equivalent weight accorded to the assembly of possible voices that Picasso had invoked, restoring preeminence to humanly sensible speech over merely sensuous birdsong. When painters in Syria chose to move their paintings into a space of recognizable speech, their move not only required the refusal of the purely technical language of inhuman machinery (one type of abstraction) but also a step beyond the use of preverbal elements like line and color (another type of abstraction).

Picasso in fact frequently served as an interlocutor for the Syrian art scene of the 1960s. When *al-Ba‘th* devoted its feature to La Regina’s positions on the matter of progressive aesthetics in July of 1965, it illustrated the text not with La Regina’s own works, but rather with reproductions of four of Picasso’s protest paintings: *Guernica* (1937), *Massacre in Korea* (1951) and the massive murals *War and Peace* (1952), which Picasso had created as a partisan supporter of the Communist Party (Fig. 5.36). These reproductions of principled artistic dissent against the dehumanizing violence of imperial aggression related incidentally to the interview insofar as La Regina had praised Picasso and *Guernica* for their contributions to expressing the terror of war, and thus as authentic instances of socialist realism.⁷⁶³ But in their appearance in *al-Ba‘th* in 1965, they more fully stood as images of artistic response to recent ideological aggression against Third World peoples, and as pre-approved examples of expressive language and political content. Nabaa’s protest works make use of the Picasso paradigm of expressive realist history

⁷⁶¹ “Nadwat al-Ṭalī‘a,” 42.

⁷⁶² From Christian Zervos, “Conversation avec Picasso,” *Cahiers d’art* 7/10 (Paris 1935), 178. Al-Mouadarres had already mentioned this sentiment at the roundtable, as part of his defense of the difficulty and nobility of non-objective painting.

⁷⁶³ “Al-Fann al-Ishtirākī Ta‘bir Jamālī,” 6.

painting. When he captured the blind terror of a napalm attack in 1967, for example, he took the mythic Sumerian eyes that had appeared in the face of *The Model*, and made them pop open into the ovoid signs of all-seeing horror that Picasso had deployed in *Guernica*. To a certain extent, *Napalm* purports to serve the ‘documentary’ function of providing a visualization of an otherwise unwitnessed extermination of a civilian population. But its primary value to history, as Nabaa saw it, was as an affective image. By establishing a visceral identification between viewer-self and viewed-image, in which the burnt topography of skin is also the haptic surface of the canvas, it renders the wrenching betrayal of the moment “real,” and by arousing empathy in viewers, it acts as a censure to the world’s conscience.

Even after Nabaa had staked out his artistic commitment to achieving a heroic, total art through human labor within the strata of essential artistic form, his designs continued to engage with the Picasso precedent for historical testimony. In 1971, Fatah printed the poster seen in **Figure 5.37** for distribution to an English-speaking audience. The two-color design is Nabaa’s. It presents an image of terror in which seven naked bodies hang suspended in a startled, antagonistic conflict with an overprinted field of black ink signifying the exploitation and domination that the poster dubs the “bitter condition.” These bodies, which by their tensed fingers appear horrified and by their red ink contouring appear to be flayed, are updates on the figure of the innocent child that Picasso painted fleeing from the advancing imperial column in *Massacre in Korea* (**Fig. 5.38**). Nabaa’s appropriation respects Picasso’s keen sense of precedent and references to Goya’s *Third of May*, but it also, in the mode of appropriation, experiments with juxtapositions meant to enact rather than merely represent the cycle of violence and intimidation in colonial history. The direct propagandistic message of Nabaa’s poster is clear. The work alerts its viewers to the bitterness of the current situation, and invites them to

recognize the validity of the Fatah-lead struggle to change it. Nabaa closely attends to the bodies he depicts, preserving certain details as material for the eventual reversal of fortunes: heavy semicircular muscles of forearms and calves that indicate proud proletarian labor (an alteration to the white-gray fleshiness of Picasso's frightened child). But with this 1971 poster design, Nabaa was also developing a more experimental graphic identity for Fatah's cause, with the overprinted texture of ink acting as a second type of information in which plasticity is content. Made by imprinting a single textural field onto a plate, and suggesting napalm, a shroud, flayed skin, and other wartime elements without entirely resolving with the pictorial quality of the poster, this blackness embodies a protean condition. Here Nabaa makes new use of the fabric imprints that La Regina had popularized in Syria, using the transfer process to explore the links between avant-gardism and mechanized advance that concerned La Regina, Hammad, and their students as a metaphor of contemporary life. The resulting poster seems to revise the mode of visually representing that link. The bodies in the poster are images of human vulnerability that also contain heroic fortitude, thereby demonstrating the amalgamated emotions of the Palestinian freedom fighter. Nabaa has realized this same tension a second way by showing the plasticity of form, such that his black, textured surface noise embodies the tension between forming and being formed that lay at the heart of avant-garde experience.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have endeavored to recuperate some of the dynamic possibilities for future change that were alive in avant-garde painting in Syria in the 1960s. Nabaa's 1968 review of the revolutionary atmospheres of Ahmad Nawash's paintings offered one kind of narrative about a network of revolutionary effects through plasticity. His 1971 poster design can be interpreted as

another such experiment with plastic effects. Nabaa used the fragmented black surface of printed form to convey sensation to as-yet unnamed and unknown audiences, thus activating the poster as an endorsement of the rightness of a named and armed liberation movement. Extending across its surface plane, the purity of that black pigment as form once served to mark Nabaa's effort "art," meaning a category defined by innovation, technological advancement, and expertise. Now, however, it also stands as a sign of the plasticity of Syria's avant-garde and the fleeting promise of an actionable politics. The Syrian artists who located themselves at the forefront of a new cultural formation after June 5, 1967 did not understand form and content to be permanent antinomies. Instead, they saw form as an occasion to demonstrate mastery over internationally regulated formal techniques, such that the content of an artwork was its testimony to its own artistic discipline and humanist ethic.

In the annals of Euro-American modernist art, the date 1967 marks an end to the ambition to autonomy that characterizes Modernism proper, with instantaneity being replaced by the duration of the experience of minimalist art, or the more ephemeral forms of kinetic art, performance, and environmental works.⁷⁶⁴ In Syria, this date marks a different turn: toward expression and highly communicative symbolic content, concentrated in the presentness of form. A number of Syrian artists quickly aligned themselves with Palestinian resistance groups and contributed illustrations to anti-imperialist poster campaigns, producing work that was intended to be both mobile and affective. But when they did so, and in spite of their eagerness to confirm a rupture in the order of things, they never purged their critical frameworks of the conviction that abstraction offered a site of idealized construction. Syria's most radical artists still embraced the

⁷⁶⁴ In fact, Michael Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood," now seen as a last gasp of modernist aesthetics against an emerging tide of contemporaneity (as was then being realized in the literalist art object, which Fried saw as a dangerous reflection of the pervasive, theatrical mode of being of the moment), appeared in the June 1967 issue of the New York-based arts magazine *Artforum*.

plasticity of the fine arts as a site of restitution and an agent of counter-nihilism, and art writing by radically committed artists such as Nazir Nabaa referenced expansive notions like “our plastic life,” such that paintings offered a site of truly transformative newness and re-integration between self and world.⁷⁶⁵

⁷⁶⁵ Nabaa, “Ma‘raḡ al-Kharīf al-‘Ashir,” 6.

Chapter Five Figures



Fig. 5.1 Mahmoud Hammad, *Oh Camels of the Ogres*, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, 1964. Image from unpublished catalogue raisonné maintained by Lubna Hammad, Amman.



Fig. 5.2 Mahmoud Hammad, *Peace, Says a Merciful Lord*, oil on canvas, 128 x 100cm, 1965. Image from unpublished catalogue raisonné maintained by Lubna Hammad, Amman.



Fig. 5.3 Mahmoud Hammad, working in his studio on a painting he exhibited as *Arabic Writing* in the 1965 Spring Exhibition, Aleppo. Photograph from the collection of Lubna Hammad, Amman.



Fig. 5.4 Mahmoud Hammad, *Composition no. 14*, medium unknown, dimensions unknown, 1965. Source: "Wathā'iq al-Fann," *al-Ma'rifa* (August 1965), no page number.



Fig. 5.5 Jackson Pollock (Hans Namuth, 1950), labeled “Defense of Bourgeois Individualism (Painting or What).” Illustration to Tarek al-Sharif, “al-Fann fi Khidmat al-Sha‘b,” *al-Yanbu‘ al-Jadid*, 12 March 1965, 5.



Fig. 5.6 Nasir Shoura, untitled, oil on canvas, 91.5 x 50 cm, 1965. Exhibited in São Paulo Biennial (at that time with title Composition no. 1, no. 2, or no. 3). Sold at Christie’s International Modern and Contemporary Art, Sale 7370, Dubai, 1 February 2007.



Fig. 5.7 Still from newreel “Awwal Maʿhad li-l-Funūn al-Tashkīliyya fī Dimashq – al-Iqlīm al-Shamālī 1960.” al-Hayʾa al-ʿamma li-l-Istiʿlāmāt, Egypt, 15 February 1960.



Fig. 5.8 Still from televised operetta, *al-Jil al-Ṣāʿid* (*The Rising Generation*), dir. Muhammad Salam, 1960, 9 min. Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TthxIAirVSI>



Fig. 5.9 Photograph taken at the College Of Fine Arts, Damascus, 1965. Includes Elias Zayyat, Abdelqader Arnaout, Abdul Rauf al-Kassem, Mahmoud Jalal, and Nasir Shoura standing in front of an identified painting. Photograph from the collection of Lubna Hammad, Amman.



Fig. 5.10 Guido La Regina, *Dolesina*, medium unknown, dimensions unknown, 1962. Source: Eugenio Battisti, *Guido La Regina* (Rome: De Luca Publisher, 1962).

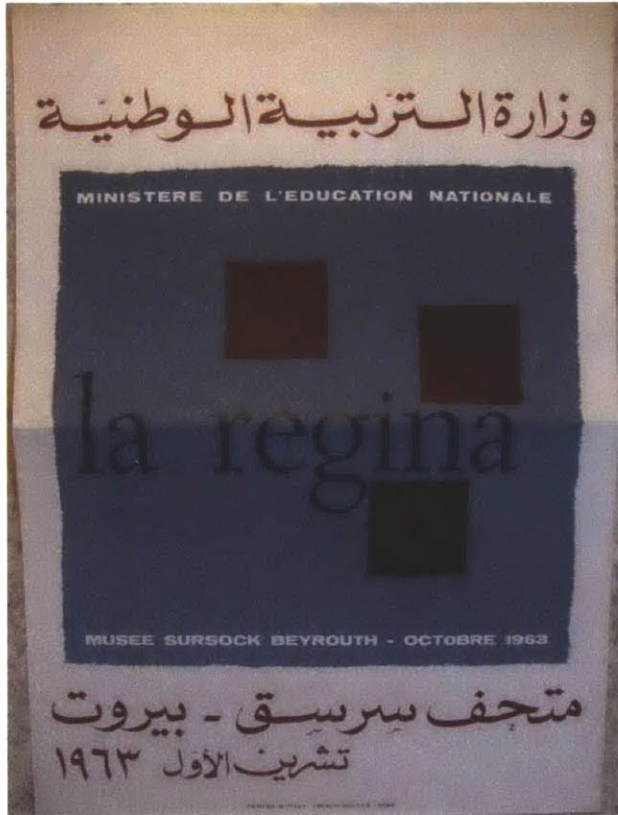


Fig. 5.11 Exhibition poster for La Regina, October 1963, Sursock Museum, Beirut.

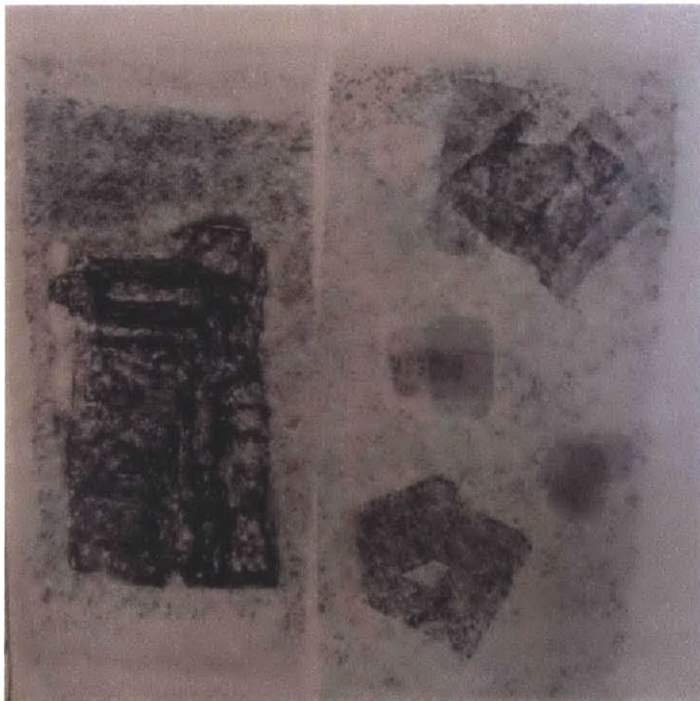


Fig. 5.12 Guido La Regina, *Journey to Zahle*, mixed media on canvas, 70 x 70 cm, 1963. Source: *Peintures Italiennes d'Aujourd'hui. Damas, 1964* (Rome: Istituto grafico tiberino di Stefano de Luca, 1964).



Fig. 5.13 Newspaper photographs of Asma Fayoumi, Ibtisam Muallem Sultan, Asaad Arabi in the College of Fine Arts.

Source: Unsigned article [Ghazi al-Khaldi], "Fi Kulliyat al-Funūn al-Jamīla," *al-Ba^{ath}*, 30 November 1965.



Fig. 5.14 Painting by Mahmoud Muhayri.



Fig. 5.15 Painting by Majib Dawoud.



Fig. 5.16 Asma Fayoumi, unknown title and dimensions, oil on canvas, 1965. Collection of the artist.

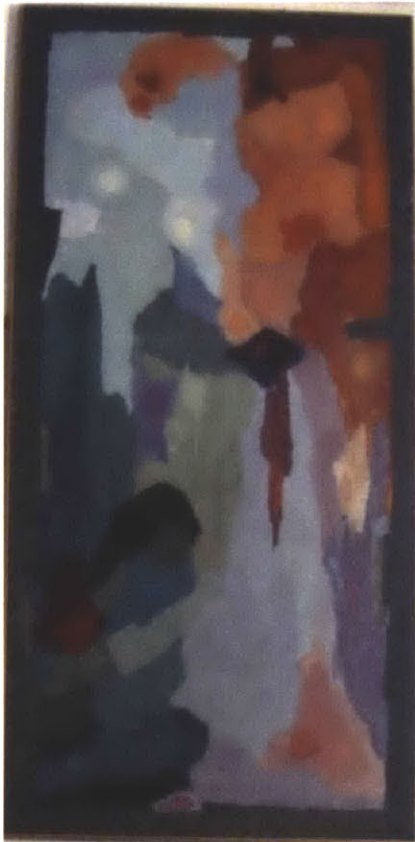


Fig. 5.17 Asma Fayoumi, unknown title and dimensions, oil on canvas, 1965. Collection of the artist.



Fig. 5.18 Nasir Shoura, *The Beautiful Flower*, 1959. Source: *Ma^craḡ al-Rabī^c li-l-Rasm wa-l-Naḡt* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture and National Orientation, 1959).

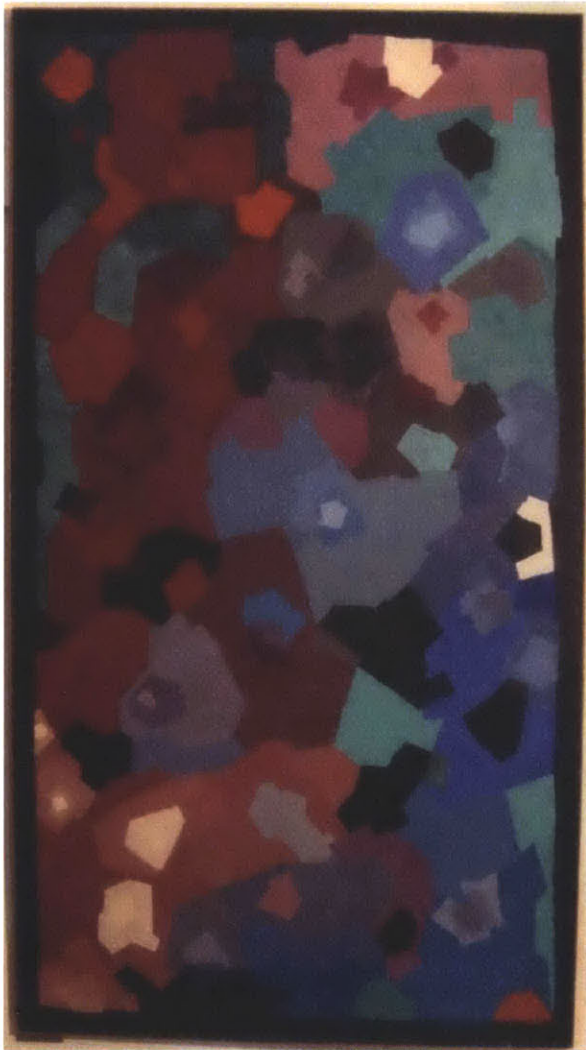


Fig. 5.19 Asma Fayoumi, unknown title and dimensions, oil on canvas, 1966?. Collection of the artist.

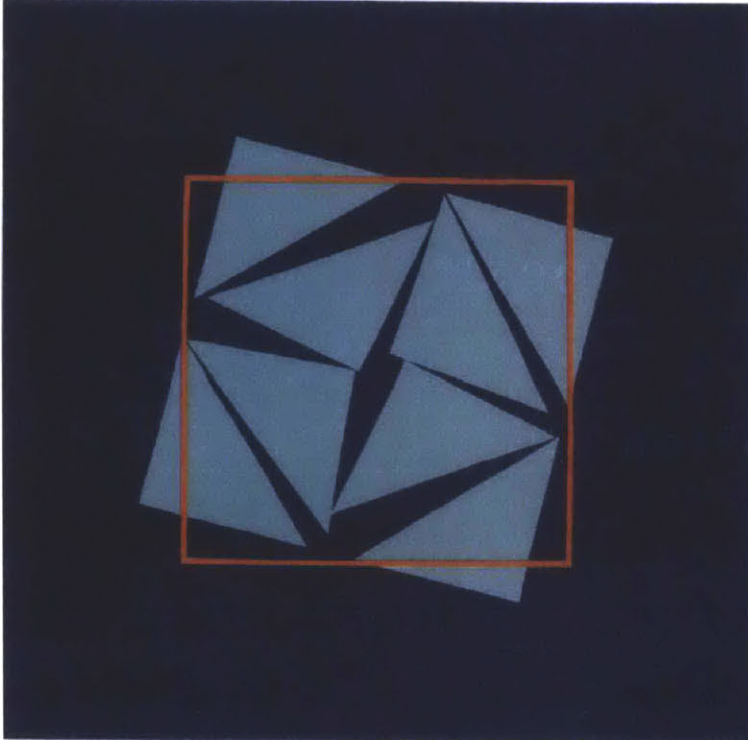


Fig. 5.20 Guido La Regina, *Work 027*, oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, 1966. Source: *Opere Inedite di Guido La Regina: 1961-1976* (Rome: Studio S, 1976).

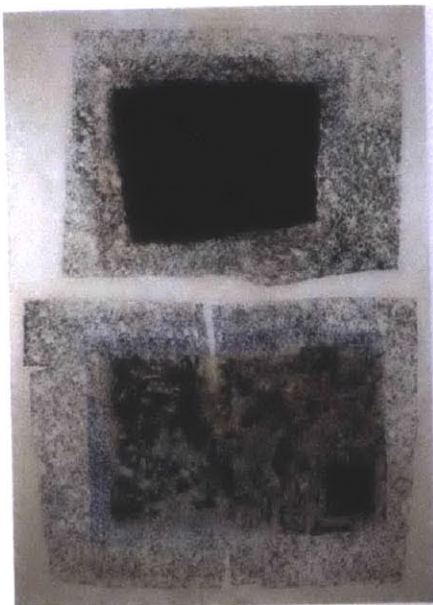


Fig. 5.21 Guido La Regina, *The Wall*, oil, powdered pigment, tissue, plaster, sawdust on canvas, 200 x 140 cm, 1962. Collection Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome.

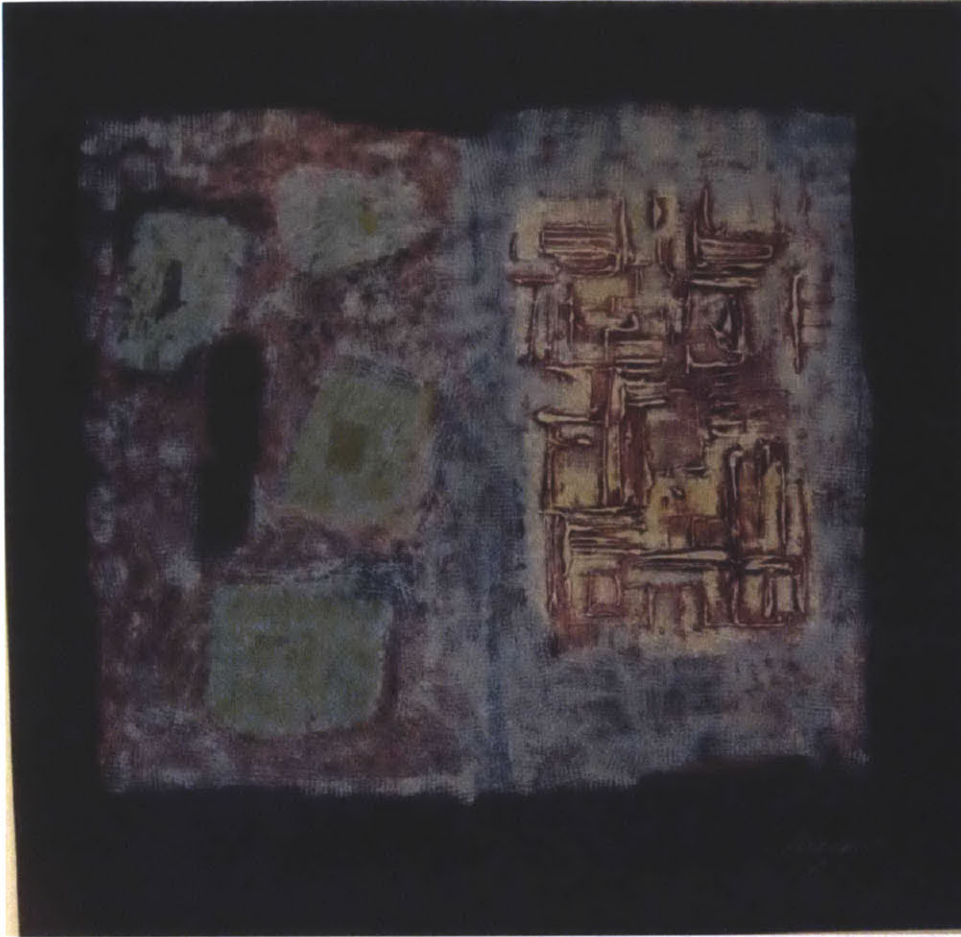


Fig. 5.22 Guido La Regina, *Astroni 34*, mixed media, 100 x 100 cm, 1963. Collection of the artist's family.



Fig. 5.23 Khaled al-Maz, *Construction Workers*, oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm, 1964. Source: Artist's personal website, www.khaledalmaz.com.



Fig. 5.24 Khaled al-Maz, *Composition*, oil on canvas, 100 x 70 cm, 1965. Source: Artist's personal website, www.khaledalmaz.com.

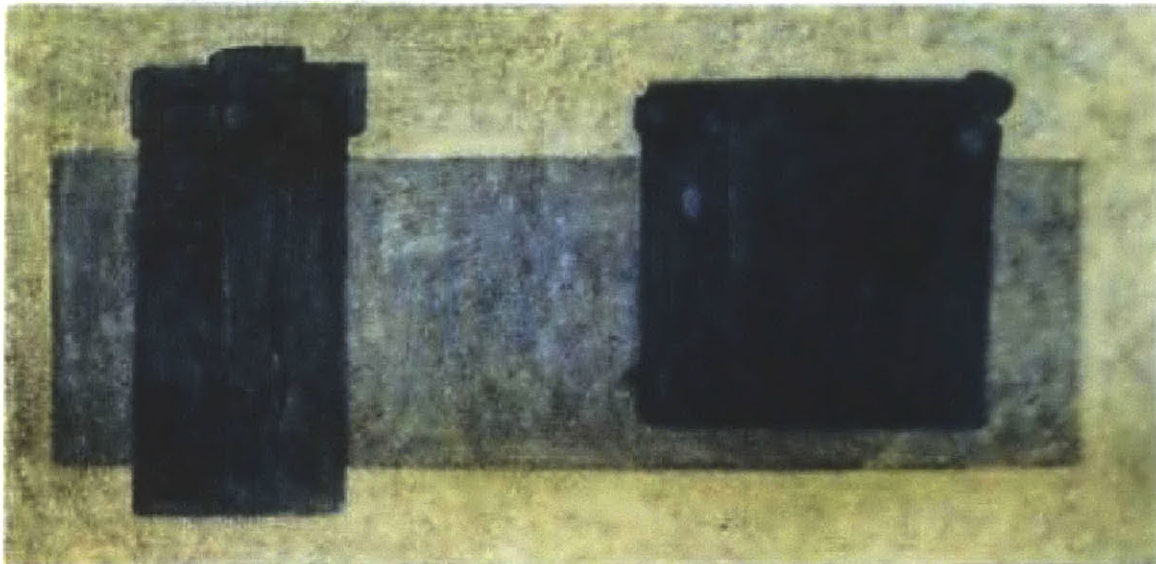


Fig. 5.25 Khaled al-Maz, *Composition*, oil on canvas, 120 x 60 cm, 1966. Source: Artist's personal website, www.khaledalmaz.com.



Fig. 5.26 Nasir Shoura, title unknown, oil on canvas, 46 x 61 cm, 1963. National Museum, Damascus.



Fig. 5.27 Nasir Shoura, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 110 x 75 cm, 1965. Sold at Christie's International Modern and Contemporary Art, Sale 7333, Dubai, 24 May 2006.

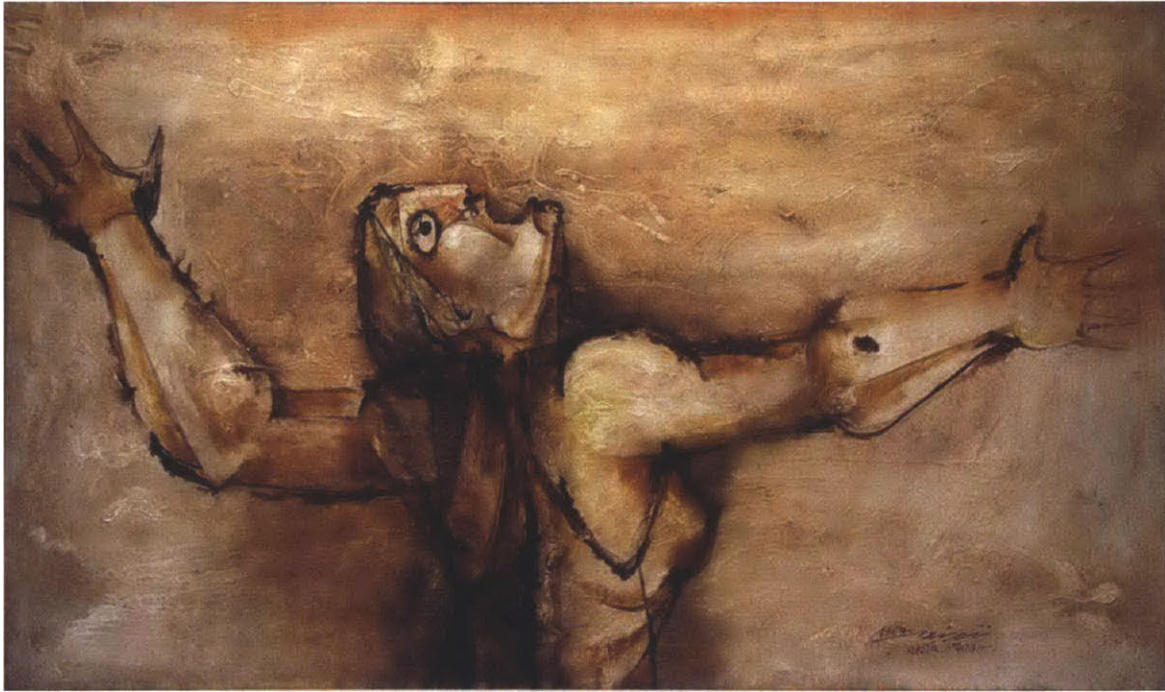


Fig. 5.28 Nazir Nabaa, *Napalm*, oil on canvas, 75 x 138 cm, 1967. Source: Ayyam Gallery, *The Samawi Collection: Curated Selections of Arab Art, Vol. 1* (Dubai: Ayyam Gallery, 2011).



Fig. 5.29 Newspaper photograph of art critic and administrator Afif Bahnassi explaining *Martyr*, a painting by artist Nazir Nabaa, to the Syrian Minister of Tourism and National Orientation. Source: "Ma'raḡ al-Kharīf," *al-Ba'th*, 17 November 1967, 3.



Fig. 5.30 Nazir Nabaa, *The Model*, unspecified medium, 117 x 117 cm, 1966. Source: Carreras Limited, *Carreras Craven 'A' Arab Art Exhibition* (Crawley, England: Beric Press, 1966).



Fig. 5.31 Nazir Nabaa, design from the first Fatah poster series, 1968. Source: Palestine Poster Project Archives./ Shafiq Radwan, *al-Mulṣaq al-Filasṭīnī: Mashākil al-Nasha'a wa-l-Taṭawwur* (Damascus: Fatah, 1992), 310-311.



Fig. 5.32 Nazir Nabaa, Fatah Sunrise poster design, 1968?⁷⁶⁶ Source: Palestine Poster Project Archives.

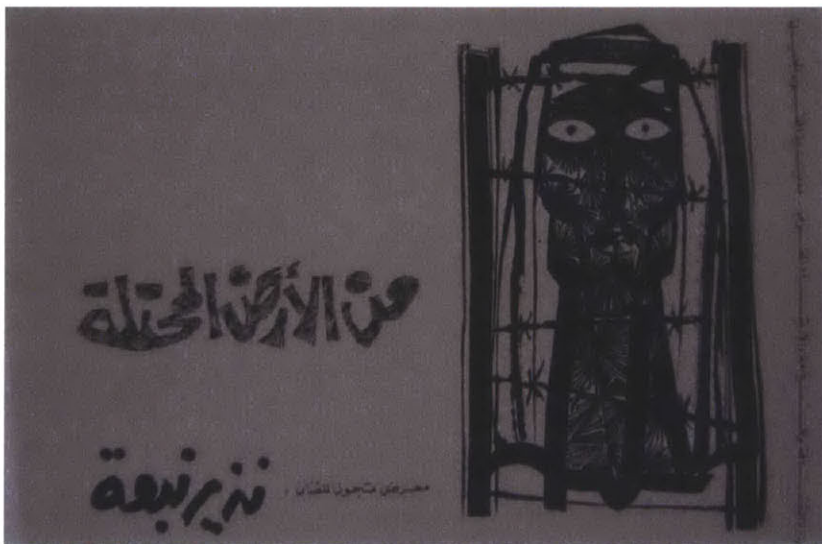


Fig. 5.33 Cover with illustration by Nazir Nabaa, *Min al-Ard al-Muhtalla (From an Occupied Land)* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture and National Orientation-Directorate of Plastic Arts, 1968). Source: in *Nazeer Nab'aa: An Eye on the World... An Eye on the Soul* (Damascus: Tajalliyat Gallery, 2009).

⁷⁶⁶ The precise dating for this image is difficult to confirm. In the PPPA online, this design is labeled as “circa 1971.” In *Nazeer Nab'aa: An Eye on the World... An Eye on the Soul* (Damascus: Tajalliyat Gallery, 2009), however, the same image is dated 1968.

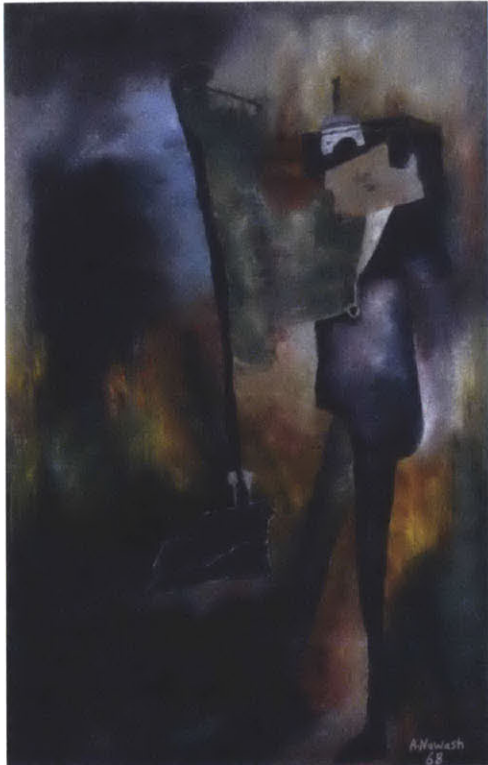


Fig. 5.34 Ahmad Nawash, *Jerusalem*, oil on canvas, unknown size, 1968. Artist's collection.

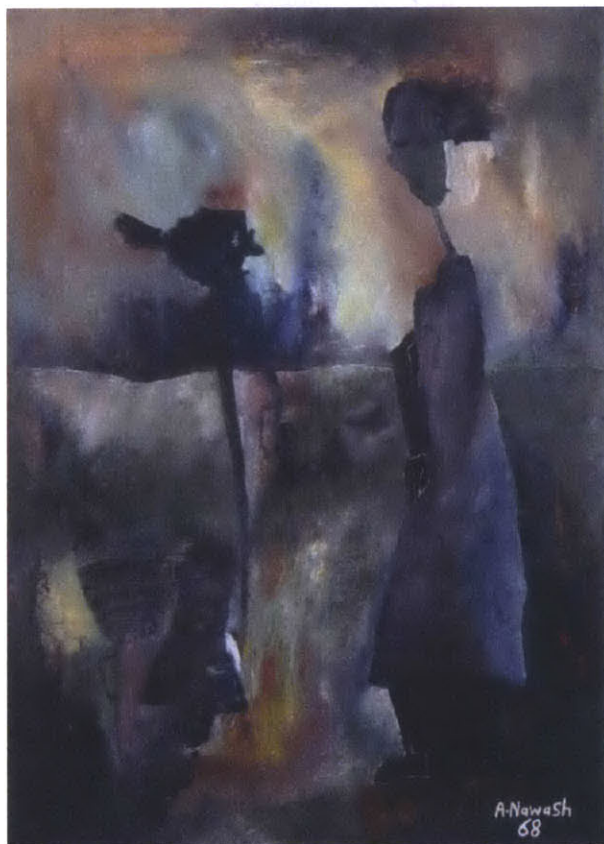


Fig. 5.35 Ahmad Nawash, *The Enemy Force*, oil on canvas, 89 x 54 cm, 1968. Artist's collection.



5.35 Page 6 of *al-Ba'ath* (7 July 1965), with unsigned article featuring Guido La Regina, “al-Fann al-Ishtirākī Ta‘bīr Jamālī li-Raf‘ al-Mustawā al-Fikrī wa-l-Dhawqī ladā al-Jamāhīr.”



Fig. 5.36 Nazir Nabaa, *The Bitter Condition*, poster produced by Fatah, 1971. Source: Palestine Poster Project Archives.

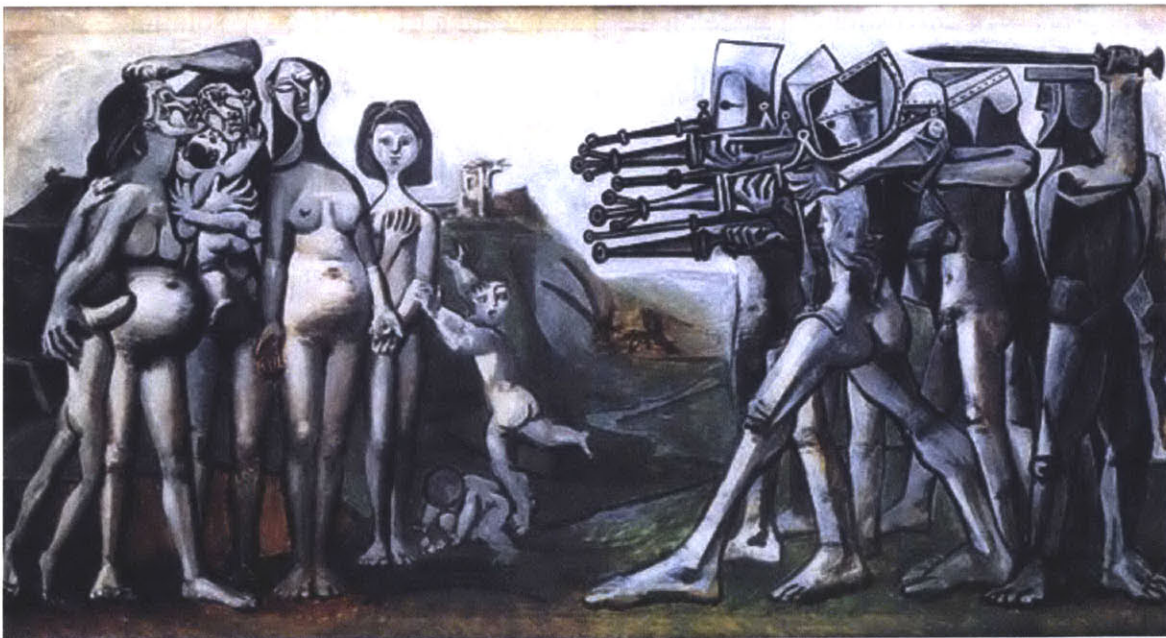


Fig. 5.37 Pablo Picasso, *Massacre in Korea*, oil on plywood, 110 x 210 cm, 1951. Collection Musée Picasso, Paris.

Coda

That transformative newness did not arrive. The official Syrian state historiography soon settled on a narrative for closing the 1960s and entering the 1970s. In August of 1970, Defense Minister Hafiz al-Asad launched his Corrective Movement and took over leadership of the state. Around the same time, Kashlan and others pushed a plan for a recognized artist's union, which would be mandatory for all graduates of the College of Fine Arts and would be the conduit for state commissions both formal (e.g. monuments) and informal (e.g. posters hastily drawn in support of al-Asad). In the same year, al-Khaldi published a catalog text for the special exhibition *Syrian Artists Witness the Aggression* that spun a resolution for the preceding anxieties over abstract form and its failure to reliably act as mirror or conscience. Outlining the shared journey of the country's artists from the first, spontaneous impulses to angry protest to their efforts to master and channel those energies into productive projects, he made abstraction a necessary but insufficient process of "digestion," a stage on the path toward a true "objective solution," what he described as an aesthetics of "our social and industrial ambition toward work, construction, and socialism."⁷⁶⁷ Moreover, as al-Khaldi explained, the Syrian art world had itself become organized into productive stages. With the College of Fine Arts continuing to graduate large numbers of artists, these graduates could be counted on to contribute "new and developed blood (*al-dam al-jadīd al-mutatawwir*)" to the collective rise of the Syrian art movement. As he noted, the youth (*shabāb*) had finally become a force at every exhibition and activity sponsored by the Ministry of Culture. The difficult explorations of the preceding attempts to constitute a truly new work at the surface of the canvas, and to bring audiences into new consciousness by means of

⁷⁶⁷ Al-Khaldi, "al-Fannānūn al-Sūriyūn Yashhadūna al-‘Adwān."

rhythm, “sign,” poetry, or empirical construction, would be mastered. Any new blood would be “developed,” honed in the institutions of the school, the ministries, and the union, to feed into the single, columnar advance of effort: work, construction, and socialism. Against this rigid structure of expectation, the preceding history of modern painting became a history of deferral.

In part, this dissertation has shown how other geographies and imaginaries were being produced at the level of the surface of the canvas and the level of new institutions for art. The intellectual history of painting in Syria is a story of organizational effort, of endless attempts to redraw lines of affiliation. I have proposed several ways to bracket what is a necessarily open archive of processes of reception, metabolization, critique, adaptation, and production of new painting and politics, thereby capturing the richly contingent detail of these modern projects. In the space of the youth-based political movement of the 1940s, I interrogated how an idea of national aesthetics could be mobilized to contest rather than support the state. By tracking the instrumental internationalisms the postwar art academy in Rome of the 1950s, I could recognize a notion of a joyful, collective, Eurasian Mediterranean that also gave home to anticolonial reversal. By focusing on the self-institutionalization of the missionary cultural project of the Sh^cir group at the start of the 1960s, I could examine how a notion of primordial Syrian sacrifice might also evade and undermine the state. And in the space of the College of Fine Arts for the whole of that decade, I examined how the most patriotic ideas about the Syrian Arab artwork could require artists to denude their work of any visible reference to place or time. Each one of these twists in relationship between painting and the political order is a impetus for a serious, decentered study of global modernism. The works of Ismail, al-Mouddarres, Hammad, and La Regina, in their plenitude and mystery as painted objects, can be read within an art world that was never fully contained by Cold War military blocs, nation building objectives, or blanket

policies of resistance. As I hope this dissertation has shown, the Syrian artist's tactic of resistance to the violence of arbitrary expressions of power – that of colonialism, nationalism, capitalist imperialism, or internal surveillance – was often to participate as fully in the world as possible.

At present, a war rages inside Syria seemingly without end. As if in a grotesque parody of al-Khaldi's 1970 description of youthful blood, its machinery continues to consume its constituents. It is hard to find words to respond to this war, or even to connect it to these earlier moments of critical participation in global modernism. If we read the earlier history of possibility that I have endeavored to tell against the sacrificial ground of Syria today, it takes on a quality of finality, of definitive and locked pastness. My sincere hope is that what feels locked will not always be so, however. I hope this study of painting and politics in Syria can in some small way help to keep vital histories alive, providing a usable past to a "new Syria" that will eventually be realized in new forms of participating in the world.

Appendix

List of key figures, institutions, and concepts, with summaries and Arabic equivalents

Underlining indicates a cross reference.

Note: I have striven to verify the biographical entries to the best of my ability, but some dates of exhibitions and degrees for artists and administrators may be off by a year or two. I found variations in dating between even those biographical summaries provided by the artists themselves.

A

Abdel Nasser, Gamal (1918-1970)

جمال عبد الناصر

President of Egypt from 1956 until 1970 whose vision of an ascendent Arab unity, which was to be bolstered by a version of socialist economic development and protected by a neutralist foreign policy, inspired audiences across the whole of the Arabic-speaking region. A member of the military since 1936, Abdel Nasser had played a leading role in the 1952 “Free Officers” coup d’état that overthrew the Egyptian monarchy and proclaimed a republic. Abdel Nasser is significant to this dissertation because his move to nationalize the Suez Canal, followed by withstanding a retaliatory invasion by France, UK, Israel, boosted his prestige in Syria such that his version of Arabism became most influential in the cultural sphere. This vision would culminate in 1958 with the creation of the United Arab Republic uniting Syria with Egypt, with Abdel Nasser as its president.

Abdul-Hak, Salim Adel (1913-1992)

سليم عادل عبد الحق

Syria’s Director-General of Antiquities, 1950-1966. Abdul-Hak had completed a degree in art history from the Insitute of the Louvre with diploma studies in art and archaeology and was a supporter of the modern fine arts.

Abu al-Saoud, Abdulwahab (1897-1951)

عبد الوهاب أبو السعود

One of Syria’s “pioneer” artists whose dedication to the practice facilitated later developments in Syrian modern art. A polymath interested in the fine arts as well as theatrical arts, his greatest influence came from his work as an arts instructor in the preparatory schools, where he encouraged students to make use of Arab motifs and Arab themes.

Abstract art (*al-fann al-tajrīdī*)

الفن التجريدي

A general term used to describe non-representational and non-illusionistic art. In European art criticism of the twentieth century, it usually described art made for its own expressive sake, without any intention to depict recognizable people, things, or places. Abstract art is thus typically seen as a relatively new advancement in the development of the painterly arts, as achieved when artists boldly rejected the social expectation that they produce illusions derived from the real world. In Syrian writing on advanced art, the notion of abstract art occupies a double place. In the 1960s, Syrian artists and critics recognized abstract art as the international norm for advanced art and sought to uphold that standard, many eschewing the illusionistic realism they had practiced in the 1950s. At the same time, figures such as Afif Bahnassi argued that the turn away from illusion was specific to Europe, and that the Arab-Islamic aesthetic tradition had always produced idealist, abstract art. Some claimed cultural primacy on these grounds, designating the modern Arab artist as the legitimate inheritor of a long, philosophically sound tradition of abstract art.

Accademia del Mediterraneo

An academic organization established in Palermo, Italy, in 1951 by Gianfranco Alliata di Montereale. The academy, which included academicians and artists from Syria in its list of participants, represents one of many attempts in postwar Italy to convene elites in consensual debate about matters of shared, transcultural concern so as to regain Italian influence in the Mediterranean Basin.

Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome

A tertiary art academy in Rome with origins in Accademia di San Luca of the sixteenth century. The institution was nationalized in 1870, with the Papal direction of the school replaced by state appointments. It is now a public university. It factors in this dissertation because, in the 1950s and 1960s, it trained an entire generation of art students from Arab countries and other newly independent states. I discuss these exchange programs in Chapter Three.

***Adab* (Literature)**

مجلة «أدب»

Cultural magazine devoted to “literature, thought and art in the Arab world,” launched by Yusuf al-Khal launched in Beirut in February 1962. A short-lived enterprise, it ceased publication in Summer 1964.

***Al-Adāb* (Belles Letres)**

مجلة «الأدب»

Prominent literary journal established in Beirut in 1953 with a pan-Arab circulation. The journal, which was edited by Suhayl Idress, took a leading role in promoting a literature of commitment. Its launching manifesto stated that literature is an intellectual activity directed to a noble end, requiring it to influence society just as much as it is influenced by society. In this, the journal took the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and his journal *Les Temps modernes* as a model. It is credited with popularizing existentialist ideas in the Arab world.

Note: In this dissertation, I use a macron to designate the long ‘a’ in *al-Adāb* so as to better distinguish it from *Adab*, the magazine published by Yusuf al-Khal, 1962-1964.

***Al-Adib* (The Author)**

مجلة «الأديب»

A monthly literary, cultural, and political journal based in Beirut, founded in 1942 by Albert Adib. Known for its support of new and modern literature, it had a wide readership in the Arab intellectual class. The journal continued publishing for more than forty years, until 1983.

Adonis (Pen name of Ali Ahmad Said Esber) (1930—)

أدونيس (علي أحمد سعيد إسبر)

Highly acclaimed poet, essayist, translator, and occasional fine artist originally from the village of Qassabin near Latakia, Syria. While still a teenager, he participated in modern literary movements in Syria, contributing to *al-Qithara* (as did Fateh al-Moudarres). In the early 1950s, he worked as a cultural editor for *al-Binā*² in Damascus, where his articles outlined an approach to Syrian aesthetics past and present emphasizing that Syrian genius lay in the self. In 1956, Adonis moved to Beirut and joined Yusuf al-Khal in directing the launch of *Shiʿr*. He has been living in Paris since 1985.

Aflaq, Michel (1910-1989)

ميشيل علق

A teacher, writer, and activist from Damascus who, along with Salah al-Din al-Bitar, co-founded the Arab Revitalization Movement (*Ḥarakat al-Ihyāʾ al-ʿArabī*) around 1941. Members of this group soon forged alliances with the Baʿth movement that had crystallized around Zaki al-Arsuzi. In 1946 the two formally incorporated as the Arab Baʿth Party, with Aflaq elected ‘dean’ of the party in April 1947. In 1952, the party further merged with the Arab Socialist Movement led by Akram al-Hawrani to become the Arab Socialist Baʿth Party. The efforts of Aflaq and his party to promote Arab nationalism as a basis for political action helped to realize the formation of the United Arab Republic in 1958.

لواء الإسكندرونة

Alexandretta, district of

A fertile port district and historic trade entrepôt located on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean at the Syrian-Turkey border. The region was sometimes called the “Sanjak of Alexandretta,” an Ottoman term referring to an administrative district, or its Arabic equivalent, “Liwāʾ Iskandaruna.” As discussed at length in Chapter Two, a dispute over its sovereignty broke out between Syria, Turkey, and France at the end of the 1930s on the eve of Syrian independence. This resulted in France turning the Alexandretta portion of the mandated territory of Syria over to Turkey in 1939, resulting in the internal displacement of a generation of politicized students in Syria, including Adham Ismail, his brother Sidqi and cousin Faiz, and other future leaders in the early Baʿth political movement. Once it came under Turkish administration it was renamed Hatay Province.

Alliata di Montereale, Giovanni Francesco (Gianfranco) (1921-1994)

A figure in Italian post-WWII politics elected to Parliament in 1952 as a member of the Monarchist Party. Alliata was a wealthy, landowning prince from Palermo, Sicily who features in this dissertation because he established the Accademia del Mediterraneo in Palermo in 1951 as a means to strengthen unity between nations in the Mediterranean, and through it hosted Syrian intellectuals and artists as participants in his neo-Mediterraneanist projects.

عبد العزيز علون

Alloun, Abdul Aziz (1934-2011)

Syrian art critic from the Aleppo area who moved to Damascus in the late 1950s and became one of the key promoters for the AMI. He also taught courses in aesthetics at the University of Damascus, among other appointed positions in the state’s cultural and educational sectors.

AMI / Şālat al-Fann al-Ḥadīth al-ʿAlamī

صالَة الفن الحديث العالمي

The Gallery of International Modern Art, here referred to as AMI (the acronym for the French name Art Moderne International, which it used in some of its publications). Opened in Damascus in 1960 by brothers Muhammad and Mahmoud Daadoush, it was the first private art gallery in Syria. The AMI served as a social hub for artistic and intellectual activity in the city while also endeavoring to cultivate attention from the diplomatic corps, collectors in Beirut, and gallerists in Europe. It launched the Damascus careers of a number of Syrian artists, including Fateh al-Moudarres and Louay Kayyali. The gallery closed in 1965. Mahmoud Daadoush briefly reopened it in a new location in 1968, then launched a new gallery, Ornina, in 1971.

Andalusia Symposium

ندوة الأندلس

An art and literary circle that briefly operated at the House of National Music in Damascus in the early 1940s. It is an antecedent to the Studio Veronese.

Antioch, or Antakya

أنطاكية

A city on the Orontes River located in what is now Turkey. It was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire and Byzantium, and was a key location in early Christianity. In the modern period, it served as the capital of the province of Alexandretta. It is important to this dissertation because it was the birthplace of Adham Ismail and his brothers, and also a center in the struggle for Arab self-determination in the 1930s. The Alexandretta branch of the League of National Action moved its headquarters to Antioch in 1937, where it recognized Zaki al-Arsuzi as the leader of its political activity.

الجمعية العربية للفنون الجميلة

Arab Association for the Fine Arts

A professional fine arts organization established in 1942 that grew out of the Studio Veronese. It was headed for a time by Said Tahsin and also included Adham Ismail, Mahmoud Jalal, Nasir Shoura, Mahmoud Hammad, Ali al-Arnaout, and Khaled al-Asali among its members. Its initiatives included opening a small painting school, developing industrial designs, reviving Kufic calligraphy forms, and technical book illustration. In 1944, it organized a large public exhibition of paintings at the French Laique School in Damascus.

القومية العربية

Arab nationalism

This broad term describes those emergent forms of nationalism in Arabic-speaking regions in the late nineteenth century that were based on recognition of shared Arab interests deriving from a common cultural and linguistic identity. These emerged as a critique of the governance of the Ottoman Empire, particularly the perceived shortcomings of its modernizing reforms. With the First World War and the ensuing dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the discourse about Arab common interests would undergo several transformations. In early 1920, with the creation of an independent kingdom in Syria under Faisal I, Arab nationalism briefly seemed to achieve territorial implementation, but this gain was overturned later that same year with the ratification of a French Mandate over Syria. Subsequently, indigenous elites mobilized Arab nationalist ideas in response to the French occupation and the concomitant loss of their privilege and interests, taking the lead in the independence struggle and focusing their Arab nationalist efforts on the restoration of formal sovereignty. After the end of the Second World War and the granting of independence to Arab nation-states, the political reality of Arab nationalism most frequently took the form of pan-Arab federation and cooperation schemes, as in the Arab League in Cairo (established 1945).

الحزب العربي الاشتراكي

Arab Socialist Party

Party emphasizing agrarian reform that Akram al-Hawrani founded in January 1950. Centered in Hama but with branches in other Syrian cities, it drew its membership from rural populations and the military ranks. In 1952 it merged with the Arab Resurrection Party led by Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar to become the Arab Socialist Resurrection Party, i.e. the Ba'ath Party.

Arabesque

A mode of linear surface design in which repeating lines bend and double back upon themselves following an internal formal logic. The term came into use in the practices of ornamentation of the European Renaissance, first describing the ornamental scrolling patterns thought to be reminiscent of Islamic designs. Eventually it came to designate a variety of meandering and twining patterns, in music as well as art. In the nineteenth century, comparative studies of ornamentation such as Alois Riegl's 1893 study *Stilfragen* again interpreted the characteristics of the arabesque – its translation of vegetal form into decoration and the infinite correspondence of its symmetries – as a distinctively Islamic form.

العروبة

Arabism

In this dissertation, I use the term “Arabism” to describe the conviction that an underlying cultural origin unites Arabic-speakers in a largely abstract solidarity that can coalesce apart from any existing state or its coercive forms of governing power. As I explore, the early Ba'ath movement, and particularly its leaders from among the *liwā'iyūn*, formulated a doctrine of Arabism that emphasized shared ways of being without tying them to specific political objectives. I am therefore distinguishing Arabism from Arab nationalism (see entry above).

Art informel

Term literally meaning unformed or aformal art. In 1952, French writer Michel Tapié began to use it to

describe the practices of expressive abstract painting based primarily on intuitive, spontaneous composition that were then emerging among European artists. The active and open approach that *informel* painters took to composition was often interpreted as an existential commentary in response to the despair and destruction of the Second World War. This interpretation drew support from Jean-Paul Sartre's appreciative writings on many *informel* artists. By 1956, the term *informel* had become omnipresent in European criticism to describe the European counterpart to Abstract Expressionism in the United States. By the end of the decade, the style was perceived to be an orthodoxy of global modernism, with adherents around the Mediterranean and beyond. Variant terms to describe such unformed painting include gestural painting, gesture painting, lyrical abstraction, *tachisme*, and the Italian *informale*.

Al-Arsuzi, Zaki (1899-1968)

زكي الأرسوزي

Intellectual from the territory of Alexandretta who espoused Arabism as the basis for just sovereignty. Al-Arsuzi participated in the establishment of the League of National Action in 1933 and then became a leader in the struggle to maintain Alexandretta's connection to Syria and resistance to Turkish irredentism. After the failure of that struggle in 1938, al-Arsuzi resettled in Damascus, where he mentored the members of the earliest Ba'ath movement, many of whom had also emigrated from Alexandretta.

Al-Asali, Khaled (1915-1990)

خالد العسلي

Syrian artist and designer from the prominent al-Asali family active during the Syrian struggle for independence. Khaled al-Asali was a frequent visitor to the Damascus artist group Studio Veronese and showed paintings in the 1944 exhibition organized by the Arab Association for the Fine Arts. In 1945 he designed the first emblem of Syria.

Avant-garde

A French term originally used to describe the advance guard in a military force, it came into new use in nineteenth-century French art criticism to describe the art at the forefront of both artistic and social-political development. By the mid-twentieth century, its meaning had become virtually synonymous with modern or new art. More politically-engaged commentators, by contrast, equated avant-garde art with the characteristic of progressivism and the critique of bourgeois power structures. In the Arab context, cultural magazines of the 1950s-1970s used the equivalent term *al-ṭalī'a* to designate a commitment to progressive left-wing action as the goal of national cultural production. The art promoted within this broader avant-garde project was understood to act in concert with other realms of the liberation struggle.

Awad, Elias (1922-1980s)

إلياس عوض

A Palestinian abstract artist resident in Beirut in 1963. Awad contributed articles and artwork to Yusuf al-Khal's publication Adab.

B

Bahnassi, Afif (1928—)

عفيف البهنسي

Syrian historian of art from Damascus. A longtime cultural administrator in the state apparatus, he held numerous positions in the Ministry of Culture and published dozens of books on art and archaeology. Bahnassi was the first director of the Directorate of Plastic Arts, holding the position from 1958-1971. In 1964, he earned his doctorate in art history from the Sorbonne with a thesis on the Arab influence on modern Western painting. His studies of Arab-Islamic pattern as templates for modern composition provided the intellectual basis for his office's promotion of abstract painting as an authentic national art.

Al-Ba'ath Newspaper (Resurrection)

A daily newspaper established in 1946 as the mouthpiece of the Ba'ath Party of Syria. It continues to publish and is one of the three official government newspapers in Syria.

حركة البعث العربي

Ba'ath political movement

In this dissertation, I use the term “movement” rather than party to describe the first decade of semi-underground Arabist activism and organizational work by members of what would become the Arab Resurrection Party, or Ba'ath Party. Adherents looked to Arabism to provide a unifying framework to achieve such goals as recuperating the integrated self, cultural coherence, shared resources, and territorial sovereignty – in sum, a resurrection of a liberating Arab polity that would be revolutionary in effect. The Ba'ath movement is considered one of the youth-oriented political movements that emerged as a force in Syrian politics in the 1930s and 1940s in opposition to the National Bloc and its policies, of which the Muslim Brotherhood, the Communist Party, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party are the main others. Its primary intellectual leaders included Zaki al-Arsuzi, Michel Aflaq, and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, each of whom focused on articulating an ideological vision rather than seeking government office.

حزب البعث العربي الاشتراكي

Ba'ath Party, full name Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party

This is the political party formed over 1945-1946 out of the multiple streams of the Ba'ath political movement. It began publishing its newspaper in 1946 and in April 1947 held its first party congress, which ratified a constitution, organizational structure, and the slogan “One nation, bearing an eternal message.” At that time, its name was the Arab Resurrection Party and Michel Aflaq was the head and Salah al-Din al-Bitar the secretary general. In 1952, it merged with Akram al-Hawrani's Arab Socialist Party to become the Arab Socialist Resurrection Party, a.k.a. the Ba'ath Party. This brought it a wider base and more effective organizational capacity, but also greater internal inconsistency in vision and goals. Broadly, it would emphasize the tripartite values of “unity, freedom, and socialism.” In the 1954 elections that followed the end of the Shishakli regime, the party won fifteen parliamentary seats, thereby entering a new phase of official participation in Syrian politics. In 1958, Aflaq and al-Bitar participated in petitioning Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser to create the United Arab Republic. After the demise of the UAR, a new generation of party members with military backgrounds, many of whom came together as a secret Military Committee circa 1960, took over party leadership and so thoroughly recreated the party that historians make a distinction between the “Old Ba'ath” and the “New Ba'ath.” Members of this second wave engineered the March 8, 1963 military coup d'état that brought the Ba'ath Party to power in Syria, and have determined the direction of the party ever since. It should be noted here that the Ba'ath Party had set up offices in other Arab countries as well, and would also come to power in Iraq via a coup d'état in 1963 (it then lost power the same year, regrouped, and returned via another coup d'état in 1968). In this dissertation, however, I am concerned solely with the Syrian branch of the party.

Beaulieu, Simone (1917-2006)

Canadian artist resident in Beirut, 1958-1964. Beaulieu was the wife of the Canadian ambassador to Lebanon. Having frequented the studios and salons of French modernist artists and thinkers during her time in Paris, 1945-1949, she hosted an important cultural salon in Beirut, which Fateh al-Mouardres attended from time to time.

Belloli, Carlo (1922-2003)

Italian poet and art critic who in the 1940s built on the legacy of Futurist typographic interests to pioneer Italian concrete poetry. In the 1950s, Belloli served as a consultant to Alliata and the Accademia del Mediterraneo on the project to inculcate a neo-Mediterranean aesthetic among artists in the countries of the Mediterranean Basin.

Bercoff, André (1940—)

French-Lebanese journalist, cultural critic, and writer who resided in Beirut in the 1960s, where he edited the newspaper *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 1960-1966.

***Al-Bina*^o (Construction)**

جريدة «البناء»

The Damascus daily newspaper of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), published in the early 1950s.

Al-Bitar, Salah al-Din (1912-1980)

صلاح الدين البيطار

A teacher, writer, and activist from Damascus who, along with Michel Aflaq, co-founded the Arab Revitalization Movement (*Ḥarakat al-Ihyā^o al-^oArabī*) around 1941. Once this movement formally united with the al-Ba^oth movement of al-Arsuzi to become the Arab Ba^oth Party, al-Bitar was elected secretary-general. Later, when the United Arab Republic was established in 1958, al-Bitar briefly served as Minister of Culture and National Orientation before resigning in late 1959 in protest over Egyptian dominance in policy and direction.

C

Canaan, Mounir (1919-1999)

منير كنعان

Egyptian artist and illustrator for the Cairo periodical press. In the 1940s, he produced numerous watercolor images of Egyptian daily life and rituals while also experimenting with fully abstract painting.

Center for Italian-Arab Relations (Centro per le Relazioni Italo-Arabe)

Center inaugurated in Rome on April 3, 1952 under the auspices of the Istituto per l'Oriente with the purpose of fostering relations between Italy and the Arab countries and coordinating the state, institutional, academic, and personal relationships that were expected to stem from the resumption and intensification of trade. It housed a club and library and organized outings and exhibition opportunities. It also performed a propaganda function for the Italian foreign ministry, publishing the bilingual publication *Levante/al-Mashriq* and facilitating radio programs for diffusion to Arabic-speaking listeners.

College of Fine Arts, Cairo

كلية الفنون الجميلة - القاهرة

School offering specialized artistic training first founded in Cairo in 1908 under the royal patronage of Prince Youssef Kamal. Its founding documents specified that faculty would be French and Italian and that it would educate its admitted students for free. The school was transferred to the Ministry of Education in 1910 and was subsequently run as a state institution, becoming the Higher School of Fine Arts in 1941 and the Royal College of Fine Arts in 1950. After the Free Officers' coup in Cairo overthrew the monarchy, it took the name College of Fine Arts for the first time. At present, it is a college within the University of Helwan, having been incorporated into the Helwan system in 1975.

College of Fine Arts, Damascus

كلية الفنون الجميلة - دمشق

Syria's first government-sponsored institution for tertiary artistic training. Opened in 1959 during the United Arab Republic, it began as an Institute of Plastic Arts operating with an Egyptian director. In 1960 it was transferred to the oversight of the Ministry of Education, which reclassified the school as a High Institute. It became a degree-granting faculty at the University of Damascus in 1963, offering specialization in painting, sculpture, engraving, décor, and architecture to growing ranks of students. Syrian artists who joined its faculty in its first decade include: Hammad, al-Moudarres, Shoura, Zayyat, and others.

Commitment (*iltizām*)

Action by intellectuals and artists in accordance with their recognition of a responsibility to their people, meaning the attempt to embed the cultural in political struggle and reject the so-called “ivory tower” model of creative work. The term became operative in the Arab intellectual milieu during the early years of national independence in Syria and Lebanon, in direct engagement with Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion of *littérature engagée*. Those who advocated for commitment in cultural production usually self-identified as progressive or leftwing in outlook. The publication *al-Adāb* in Beirut served to popularize the call for a literature of commitment as a national obligation, by which it meant a literature that “issues from Arab society and pours back into it.”

Communist Party, Syrian

The Communist Party of Syria, established as an independent entity in 1944, grew out of what had been the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon, which had been established around 1925 with encouragement from the Comintern. The head of the party in Syria was Khalid Bakdash, who held the position until his death in 1995 and generally followed a “Stalinist” orthodox line. The Syrian Communist Party was one of the multiple youth-oriented political parties that emerged as a force in national politics in the 1930s and 1940s in opposition to the National Bloc and its policies.

Concrete art (no direct Arabic equivalent)

A term used to describe abstract art that has been produced as an autonomous formal exercise, without reference to figurative or symbolic associations. The term comes from the *Art Concret* manifesto issued by artist Theo van Doesburg in Paris in 1931, which called for artists to exert control over the whole of the construction of the picture. Exponents of concrete art in the postwar period such as Max Bill described it as “pure creation.” In the Syrian context, the term “concrete art” itself was not used with particular frequency, but it remains important as a designation nonetheless because faculty at the College of Fine Arts in Damascus took an approach to abstract art the mid-1960s that fulfills the concrete rather than expressive model of non-figurative work. In Chapter Five, I suggest that this is partly the result of the arrival of Italian painter Guido La Regina, and the intellectual lineage of the abstract painting scene in Rome.

Congress for Cultural Freedom

One of a series of Cold War-era projects centering on artistic and cultural activities around the world that was funded by the American CIA. Established in 1951 using Marshall Plan monies, it was an anti-communist initiative intended to provide funding to organizations with a pro-Western liberal outlook worldwide. Its headquarters were in Paris. Through the Congress, many small cultural journals around the globe received funding, including *Hiwar*. Until the story of the CIA’s involvement in the Congress broke in 1967, many of the recipient organizations were unaware of the connection.

Coups d’état, Syrian

In this dissertation, I make frequent reference to sudden changes of government in the Syrian nation-state. An overview of the sequence of coups d’état taking place in Syria since its full independence in 1946 may be helpful. These include:

Three different coups in 1949, all largely precipitated by a combination of popular and parliamentary discontent over the ineffectiveness of Syrian military defense of Palestine in 1948. In March 1949 a group of military commanders led by Husni al-Za’im overthrew the elected government of Shukri al-Quwatli. That June, a junta of rival officers assassinated al-Za’im, bringing Sami al-Hinnawi (who had participated in the first coup) to power. And in December, their colleague Adib al-Shishakli led a group of junior officers in another coup, seizing power. Shishakli’s regime lasted several years, albeit by resort to severely repressive tactics.

In 1954, Shishakli was ousted by a coup instigated by a broad coalition of plotters from different parties, which restored civilian rule and allowed for relatively free elections and the return of al-Quwatli to the presidency.

The next coup in Syria took place on September 28, 1961, when a group of military officers acted on growing resentment of the United Arab Republic among merchants, landowners, and civilian politicians and orchestrated Syria's secession from that union.

On March 8, 1963, members of a secret military committee of Syria's Ba'ath Party carried out a coup to seize control of the state, ushering in party-military rule.

In February 1966, an internal military coup brought a faction of the "radical Ba'ath" to power, with Salah Jadid directing a new phase of massive redistributive programs.

Hafiz al-Asad, who was then Defense Minister, staged another internal party coup in November 1970, which he called the Corrective Movement (*al-Ḥaraka al-Taṣḥīhiyya*). His more pragmatic approach at first enjoyed relatively wide support from many sectors of society, but his rule was authoritarian. He retained power for three decades until his death in 2000, doing so in part by purging opponents and ruthlessly putting down opposition movements. When he died, he passed power on to his son Bashar.

D

Daadoush, Mahmoud (1934-2008)

محمود دعكوش

Syrian painter, sculptor, and gallerist from Damascus. He studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, 1956-1960. Upon returning, he joined his brother Muhammad Daadoush in establishing the gallery AMI in Damascus. An abstract painter who favored a casual, expressionist style, Daadoush continued to exhibit regularly in Italy throughout the 1960s.

Daadoush, Muhammad (unknown)

محمد دعكوش

Businessman and brother of Mahmoud Daadoush; founding proprietor of the Damascus art gallery AMI.

Dar Majallat Shi'ar

دار مجلة شعر

Commercially licensed printing house established in Lebanon in 1958 by Yusuf al-Khal and his brother Rafiq. Al-Khal published the journals *Shi'ar* and *Adab* as well as volumes of poetry under the Dar Majallat *Shi'ar* imprimatur. He also used it to register Gallery One when he and Helen al-Khal opened it in 1963.

De Lorey, Eustache (unknown; perhaps 1880s-early 1950s)

French diplomat and archaeologist and historian of Islamic art. After an early eclectic career that included a stint as a pianist in Tunis, he turned to archaeology. He was named the first director of the French Institute of Archaeology and Muslim Art in Damascus in October 1922 and served until 1930, when a scandal over the misuse of funds prompted his resignation.

Douaihy, Saliba (1915-1994)

صليبا الدويهي

Lebanese artist who studied at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, 1932-1936. Douaihy is significant to this dissertation because he participated in an art history lecture series at the Arab Cultural Club in Beirut, 1947-1948, where he delivered a lecture on the arabesque and its applications in art. The lecture was printed in *al-Adīb* and thereby circulated to intellectuals such as Adham Ismail.

Durra, Muhanna (1938—)

مهنا الدرّة

Jordanian artist and, eventually, diplomat. Durra studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome from

1952-1956 and trained in the atelier of Ferruccio Ferrazzi (with whom Adham Ismail also studied).

Duval, Jean Charles (1880-1963)

French Orientalist painter. In 1924, High Commissioner General Weygand appointed Duval as the first painter-pensioner at the French Institute of Archaeology and Islamic Art in Damascus.

E

Egyptian Academy in Rome (Accademia d'Egitto)

Egypt's overseas research center in Rome through which Egyptian artists secured their fellowship positions for advanced artistic study in Italy. Although first established in 1929 as the Royal Art Academy in Rome, it received an appointed director only in 1947. In 1952, after the Free Officers' coup in Cairo overthrew the monarchy, it was renamed the Egyptian Art Academy in Rome. Like the other foreign academies in Rome, the Egyptian academy served purposes other than the purely academic or technocratic. For example, its directors were also Embassy employees with diplomatic responsibilities.

Existentialism

الوجودية

A term describing philosophical inquiry into the nature of the human condition, particularly the matter of freedom and our capacity to reinvent our own meaning. Its most famous practitioner is Jean-Paul Sartre, whose ideas were embraced in a great variety of forums after the Second World War. This dissertation concerns two. Existentialism provided an important intellectual grounding for *informel* painting and its exponents. Also of relevance is the popularization of existentialism in *al-Adāb* in the 1950s, where it served to marginalize the old-guard intelligentsia. By the 1960s, Arab intellectuals saw existentialism as a way to connect with the global culture of resistance. It was embraced as a social and political doctrine that put the values of liberty and responsibility into the center of ethical behavior.

Expressive realism

الواقعية التعبيرية

Term that emerged in Syrian art writing in the late 1960s to designate a particular type of authentic, committed art that its exponents saw as based in individual agency and the assertion of the self on reality, thereby enhancing one's own human capacities while also revealing something about shared conditions. Nazir Nabaa contended in 1968 that expressive realism represented a more "comprehensive" means of responding to tragic events than a merely representational approach to the production of art. These convictions were bolstered by the political and cultural discourse of transnational liberation networks such as OSPAAAL that were active in the period, and which intersected with the propaganda efforts of the Palestinian resistance movement. The term itself seems to be adapted from the vocabulary of Soviet film theory.

F

Faisal I (1885-1933)

فؤاد بن حسين بن علي الهاشمي

Faisal bin Hussein bin Ali al-Hashimi was a member of the Hashemite family and became an Arab nationalist leader. During World War I, having already sussed out anti-Ottoman sentiment among Arab secret societies, he launched the 1916 Arab revolt. His troops also assisted the Allies, and at war's end he expected to be supported as head of the new Arab government. Nationalist delegates to a general congress in Damascus in March 1920 named him King of the Arab Kingdom in Syria (including Lebanon and Palestine), which seemed to auger a form of pan-Arab unity in the region. This was soon terminated when the French moved to secure their Mandate over Syria, however, and a French victory in July at the Battle of Maysaloun outside Damascus forced Faisal into exile. He would then be installed as King of Iraq, 1921-1933.

بشر فارس

Fares, Bishr (1906-1963)

Lebanese-Egyptian polymath intellectual, active as a historian, art historian and art critic, sociologist, folklorist, literary critic, and linguist. He was one of the first Arab historians to write about Islamic art. He studied in Paris, completing a doctorate in 1932 and participating in Orientalist conferences. In the 1940s, he edited the Egyptian literary journal *al-Muqtataf*. He also supported modern art movements, and in his writings on medieval illustrated manuscripts from Iraq and Syria drew parallels between their operative conceptualization of creativity and that of modern movements, including surrealism.

Fatah (full name: Palestinian National Liberation Movement) (حركة التحرير الوطني الفلسطيني)

A Palestinian resistance organization founded in 1958 in Kuwait by Palestinian exiles with the purpose of engaging in armed struggle to reclaim Palestine for the Arabs and to do so without waiting for the Arab states to take action on behalf of the Palestinians. In the mid-1960s, its military wing began to operate from Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan as a paramilitary force, staging guerrilla raids on Israeli targets. After the defeat of the Arab national armies in the June 5, 1967 war, Fatah and its *fidā'i* freedom fighters emerged as moral leaders in a revised struggle for liberation. In 1968, it assumed a leadership role in the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

حسين يوسف فوزي

Fawzi, Husayn Youssef (1906-?)

An Egyptian artist specializing in décor and ornament, he taught at the College of Fine Arts in Cairo during the 1930s and 1940s. He received a diploma from the School of Decorative Art in Paris in 1943. In 1949, he oversaw the creation of the Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Cairo. In 1957, he helped to set up the College of Fine Arts in Alexandria, and, during the United Arab Republic period, was sent to Syria to establish and direct the new College of Fine Arts in Damascus.

اسماء شومي

Fayoumi, Asma (1943—)

Syrian painter from Damascus. She was among the first class to graduate from the College of Fine Arts in Damascus in 1966 and studied in the atelier of Guido La Regina, a visiting Italian professor. She had a solo exhibition at AMI in 1966, where her large abstract paintings derived from the shapes of Syrian women peasants won critical acclaim.

Fechter, Rudolf (1912-1990)

Germany's ambassador in Damascus, 1960-1963. He collected Syrian art, purchasing works by Fateh al-Moudarres and others.

La Feluca gallery

Art gallery in Rome, Italy established in 1954 by Vittore and Derna Querèl. Operating from a location in the famous Via Margutta artists' district, it primarily serviced members of the international diplomatic community. Numerous Arab student-artists who were resident in Rome in the 1950s and 1960s exhibited at La Feluca, including Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar and Louay Kayyali. Its name, the "feluca," is a reference to the slang term for the bicorne hat in the formal dress of diplomats and academicians in Rome.

Femme Nouvelle

A French-language Egyptian journal published 1945-1953 and dedicated to the viewpoint of the new cosmopolitan woman. Its editor-in-chief was Doria Shafik and its founding patron was Princess Chevikar (first wife of King Fouad), who presided over a charitable organization of the same name. A luxury publication, *La Femme Nouvelle* devoted attention to the fashionable concerns of the aristocracy in Egypt while also giving voice to a nationalist aspiration to cultural distinction.

Fidā'ī

فدائي

Arabic term for a voluntary member of a commando fighting group willing to give his life for a cause, usually the cause of Palestinian liberation from Israel. The plural is *fidā'iyīn*.

French Institute of Archaeology and Islamic Art in Damascus (Institut Français d'Archéologie et d'Art Musulman à Damas)

An overseas research center in Damascus established in 1922 by the French Foreign Ministry, to be funded and directed through the Mandate High Commission. Its first director was Eustache de Lorey. Its objectives were to facilitate the research of French archaeologists and Orientalists and to revive indigenous arts by fostering their industrial applications. As part of that mission, it contained a School of Decorative Arts (École des Arts Décoratifs). In 1930, the Institute was redesigned as a primarily scholarly center with administrative applications, named l'Institut Français d'Études Arabes de Damas. At present, the Institute has become one of the branches of the Institut français du Proche-Orient (IFPO).

G

Gallery One

غاليري واحد

Legendary art gallery launched in Beirut in April 1963 by Yusuf al-Khal and Helen al-Khal and then run by Yusuf al-Khal until 1976. When Helen al-Khal launched the gallery, she outlined a commitment to keeping the art itself central to operations rather than ancillary social or economic concerns. Its exhibition program was pan-Arab in scope, and it helped make the careers of numerous artists from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere.

El-Gazzar, Abdel Hadi (1925-1965)

عبد الهادي الجزار

Egyptian artist. El-Gazzar grew up in Cairo's traditional Sayida Zainab quarter and was a member of the Contemporary Art Group established by Hussein Youssef Amin in the late 1940s. In that milieu, he mined folk life and folk traditions as a source of insight into the Egyptian popular consciousness. Like many of the Syrian painters, el-Gazzar received government fellowships to go to Italy to study painting at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome. He took his first in 1954-1955 and in 1958-1961 returned to Rome to study fresco and restoration. In 1955, La Feluca gallery presented a solo exhibition of el-Gazzar's modern folkloric work.

Gentilini, Franco (1909-1981)

Italian painter affiliated with the prewar "Scuola Romana" art movement. After the Second World War, he was a resident of the Via Margutta artists' quarter and contributed to group shows organized by Vittore Querèl. After 1955, Gentilini began to also teach at the Accademia di Belle Arti. Fateh al-Mouardres and Mamdouh Kashlan, among others, studied in his atelier.

Al-Ghannam, Nafiz (unknown; twentieth century)

نفاذ الغنم

Contributor to the Damascus-based cultural journal al-Thaqāfa in the 1930s. I have been unable to establish any other biographic details about al-Ghannam.

H

Hammad, Mahmoud (1923-1988)

محمود حماد

Syrian artist from Damascus. Hammad came of age during the Syrian struggle for independence and even as a teenager played an organizational role in Syrian fine arts. He started exhibiting in Damascus as early

as 1939, presided over the arts room of the House of National Music, and was a member of Studio Veronese. In 1952, he was granted a study fellowship to the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, finishing in 1956. After returning to Syria, he taught in rural schools, then joined the faculty of the new College of Fine Arts in Damascus in 1960. In the 1970s, he would become Dean, serving until 1981. Hammad is notable in Arab art history for being among the first artists to adopt the letter forms of the Arabic language as a compositional basis for paintings. In Chapter Five I discuss his experiments of the early 1960s, which deconstructed Arabic letters to produce semi-geometric abstract compositions.

Al-Hawrani, Akram (1912-1996)

لكرم الحوراني

Syrian politician from Hama, he was a key figure in the rising influence of the ideological political parties in Syria in the 1940s and agitated for agrarian reform and social justice. He was elected to parliament multiple times, the first time in 1943. In 1952, he joined his Arab Socialist Party to the Ba'ath Party to create the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party. Although he had initially been a close confidante to Adib al-Shishakli, al-Hawrani contributed to the downfall of the Shishakli presidency. After the establishment of the United Arab Republic in 1958, al-Hawrani was named Vice President before resigning in 1959 (along with other Ba'ath colleagues, including al-Bitar). Throughout the 1950s, al-Hawrani maintained a friendship with the Ismail brothers that was mediated by party activity.

Hiwar (Dialogue)

مجلة «حوار»

A monthly Arabic-language cultural magazine published in London, 1962-1967. Its editor was the Palestinian poet Tawfiq Sayigh, a friend and associate of many intellectuals in the *Shi'ar* circle. *Hiwar* was funded in large part through the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and it terminated publication once stories came out about the Congress's ties to the American C.I.A.

Husni, Ismail (1920-1980)

إسماعيل حسني

Syrian artist from Deir al-Zour. Husni was awarded a spot in the first Syrian study delegation to the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, earning a degree in décor in 1956.

Huyghe, René (1906-1997)

French art historian. He was chief curator of paintings and drawings at the Louvre, and, in the period following the Second World War, very involved in Unesco outreach programs in the fine arts.

I

Al-Ishtirakiyya (Socialism)

جريدة «الاشتراكية»

Newspaper affiliated with Akram al-Hawrani's Arab Socialist Party.

Ismail, Adham (1920-1963)

أدهم إسماعيل

Syrian artist from Antioch in the Alexandretta region of what is now Turkey. Ismail came of age during the period of the French Mandate in Syria, and as a teenager participated in the Arab nationalist movement that emerged in Alexandretta in support of Syrian independence and Arab unity, 1936-1938 (see Chapter Two). When it became clear that France would cede Alexandretta to Turkey, Ismail migrated south across the new Syrian border, eventually working in Damascus and Aleppo. In Damascus, he began to frequent the arts room of the House of National Music and Studio Veronese. He participated in the earliest national exhibitions, 1950 and 1951, and sought to develop a modern Arab style based on the arabesque line as a compositional device. In the same period, he actively contributed to the Arab unity and rejuvenation projects of the Ba'ath Party. In 1952, Ismail was granted a study fellowship to the

Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, finishing in 1956. After returning to Syria, he taught art in rural schools. When the United Arab Republic was created, he was named to an arts advisory position in the Ministry of Culture and National Orientation in Cairo, remaining there until 1961, then returning to teach and work in Damascus until his early death in December 1963. Along with his friend and colleague Mahmoud Hammad, Ismail is recognized as being among the first artists to adopt the letter forms of the Arabic language for use in contemporary paintings, having completed his first such studies in the late 1950s.

Ismail, Faiz (1923—)

فتز إسماعيل

The cousin of Adham Ismail, Faiz Ismail was born in Antioch and participated in the unsuccessful Arab nationalist struggle to maintain Alexandretta's connection to Syria. He would go on to participate in the early Ba^cth movement, including establishing Ba^cth student cells in Iraq over the period 1944-1950. In 1961, he established the Socialist Unionist Party, a Nasserist party.

Ismail, Sidqi (1924-1972)

سديقي إسماعيل

Syrian literary figure from Antioch, and a younger brother of Adham Ismail. Like his brother and cousin, Sidqi Ismail participated in the Arab nationalist struggle in Alexandretta. He would go on to play a leading role in the cultural activities of the early Ba^cth movement, and attended the 1947 conference that established it as a party. In the 1940s, Ismail studied philosophy at Damascus University and wrote for multiple publications associated with the Ba^cth movement, including *al-Minshar*, *al-Kalb*, and *al-Ba^cth*. In the 1960s he published a number of celebrated short stories and novels. In 1968, he was named secretary of the Higher Council for Art, Literature, and Social Sciences in Syria. He also participated in the creation of an Arab Writers' League in 1969.

Ismail, Naim (1930-1979)

نعيم إسماعيل

Syrian artist from Antioch, and a younger brother of Adham Ismail. Naim Ismail remained in Alexandretta after its annexation to Turkey, and studied fine arts in Istanbul (1949-1953). He settled in Damascus in 1955. Ismail drew on his studies of Eastern art forms such as mosaics and miniature painting to forge a painting style based on a flat, anti-illusionistic mode of representation. In the 1960s he showed regularly in private galleries and government venues. In 1970 he was named Director of Plastic Arts within the Ministry of Culture.

J

Jabasini, Adnan (unknown)

عدنان جباصيني

Syrian amateur artist and businessman, he owned the Damascus paint shop where members of the artist association Studio Veronese gathered for meetings.

Jabra, Jabra Ibrahim (1919-1994)

جبرا إبراهيم جبرا

Palestinian writer, painter, critic, and translator. Jabra grew up in Jerusalem and attended Cambridge University in the U.K. for university, studying English literature and criticism (B.A. 1943; M.A. 1948). After the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Jabra emigrated to Iraq. He was a leading figure in the Baghdad cultural scene and for decades provided a critical chronicle of Iraqi and Arab modern artists. Among other pan-Arab literary activities in the 1950s and 1960s, Jabra contributed to the Beirut-based publication *Shi^cr*. It was he who coined the term "Tammuzi" to describe the mythological interests of the leading group of poets who published in the journal.

Jarema, Józef (1900-1974)

Polish artist. In the 1920s he studied in Paris in the studio of Pierre Bonnard. Upon his return to Krakow, he gained notice as a post-Impressionist “Kapist” artist and also founded the experimental Crikot theater. During the Second World War, he joined the Second Polish Corps, which was stationed in the Middle East, 1943-44. As part of his work in the cultural office of the Corps, he organized an Exhibition of Polish Soldiers-Painters and visited Studio Veronese in Damascus. By 1944, he had settled in Rome, where he established the Art Club with Italian artist Enrico Prampolini, an international artist association dedicated to free artistic practice in all styles.

Al-Jundi (The Soldier)

مجلة «الجندي»

A general interest publication issued by the Syrian Armed Forces. It was established in 1946 and was known for its high production values and capacity for color printing.

June 5, 1967

See entry for *Naksa*

K

Kamal, Hassan (unknown)

حسن كمال

First curator of modern art section at the National Museum in Damascus. He completed fellowship study in Paris at the Institute of the Louvre and the Institute of Art and Archaeology, and upon his return in 1956 assumed the curatorship.

Kamel, Salah (1917-1993)

صلاح كمال

Egyptian artist and diplomat. He studied painting in Cairo at the School of Fine Arts, graduating in 1938. He then taught at the school, 1940-1947. In 1947, he was given an appointment in Italy as artistic secretary at the Egyptian Academy in Rome. In 1955, he was named Director and Egyptian Cultural Attaché, and served in these capacities until 1979.

Kashlan, Mamdouh (1929—)

ممدوح قشلان

Syrian artist from Damascus. Kashlan held a study fellowship to the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, 1953-1957. After returning to Syria, he taught art in the Daraa schools. With the creation of the United Arab Republic, he was named to an arts advisory position in the Ministry of Culture and National Orientation in Cairo. With the dissolution of the Union, he returned to Damascus. In 1967, he was named to an arts inspector position in the Ministry of Education. Throughout the 1970s he was a leader in the Syrian cultural apparatus, holding elected positions in the Syrian Artists Syndicate and participating in planning for pan-Arab cultural initiatives such as the 1974 Arab Biennial in Baghdad. Kashlan first developed a modified folk Cubist style in the late 1950s and has worked in that idiom ever since.

Kattinis, Julianos (1934—)

جوليان قطيني

Syrian artist of Greek origins. Kattinis grew up in Damascus and in the very early 1960s participated in the modern art scene at the AMI gallery as well as the gallery circuit in Beirut. He soon relocated to Italy, where he enrolled in the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, finishing in 1964 and contributing abstract works to the Syrian pavilion in that year's Venice Biennale. Kattinis has resided outside Syria for the rest of his career, primarily living and working in Italy.

لوي كيالي

Kayyali, Louay (1934-1978)

Syrian painter from Aleppo. He studied at the Accademia di Belli Arti in Rome, 1956-1961, where he became interested in fresco and other traditional techniques. After finishing, Kayyali settled in Damascus and joined the faculty at the new College of Fine Arts, frequently exhibiting locally as well as abroad. Kayyali's most admired paintings are simple portraits depicting individual laborers as "types" illustrating the tragic humanism of everyday life. From 1965 onward, he began to struggle with mental illness. In this later period, he turned to more overtly politicized themes, including a series of dramatic charcoal drawings of citizens under siege, which was sponsored by the Syrian government as a touring exhibition in support of the Arab liberation cause.

Kemal, Mustafa (Atatürk) (1881-1938)

Founder and first president of the republic of Turkey. Born in Thessaloniki (then Salonika), he attended the military academy in Istanbul. He fought in the First World War, fighting against the Allied assault at Gallipoli. In 1919, he launched a nationalist revolution in Anatolia in resistance against the peace settlement, eventually succeeding in forcing its revision. In 1921, Kemal established a provisional government in Ankara, and, when Turkey became a secular republic in 1923, he became its president. Under his single party regime, he launched a comprehensive program of social and political reform meant to modernize Turkey. Under his leadership, Turkey began to make claims to the Syrian region of Alexandretta in 1936, ultimately annexing it 1939.

هنا الخال

Al-Khal, Helen (1923-2009)

Lebanese artist, critic, and gallerist. Born to Lebanese parents and raised in the United States, she relocated to Beirut after meeting and marrying poet Yusuf al-Khal in 1946. Al-Khal opened what would become the legendary gallery Gallery One in 1963. The couple split up not long after, however, and she terminated her involvement with the gallery. From 1966-1974, she worked as the art critic for the English-language periodicals *The Daily Star* and *Monday Morning*. She also taught painting at the American University of Beirut.

يوسف الخال

Al-Khal, Yusuf (1917-1987)

Lebanese poet and intellectual born in Tripoli, Lebanon. Al-Khal earned a philosophy B.A. from the American University in Beirut, where he was exposed to the ideas of Antun Sa'adeh and joined the SSNP in the early 1940s. He made a living as a journalist and editor, including a stint in New York at the information office at the United Nations. At the start of 1957, al-Khal and Adonis launched the poetry magazine *Shi'r*. Al-Khal is particularly important to this dissertation because his various institutional initiatives in Beirut provided support to modern visual art. His Dar al-Majallat Shi'r also published the cultural journal Adab and housed the gallery initiative Gallery One.

غزالي الخالدي

Al-Khaldi, Ghazi (1935-2006)

Syrian artist and journalist from Damascus. As a teenager, he participated in local art exhibitions and promotions. He studied art at the College of Fine Arts in Cairo during the period of the United Arab Republic, finishing in 1962. Al-Khaldi went on to work in the Damascus cultural apparatus, first directing the Center of Applied Arts, then becoming an associate director of fine arts in the Ministry of Culture. He was active in the pan-Arab organizational activities of the 1970s and served as the Secretary of the General Union of Arab Artists.

محمد كميل الخطيب

Al-Khatib, Muhammad Kamil (1948—)

Syrian writer and critic born in Tartus. Al-Khatib is a member of the "sixties generation" of Syrian intellectuals who, in their formative years, embraced the ideological causes of Arab nationalism,

socialism, and Palestinian liberation. In 1978 he began working in the Ministry of Culture and would eventually take the head of its office of translation. He wrote his most acclaimed novels in a modified socialist realist style.

Khaznadar, Chérif (1940—)

شريف خزندار

French-Syrian intellectual and cultural administrator. Khaznadar was born in Aleppo, grew up in Damascus, and attended the American University in Beirut. In 1961, he began to write for *L'Orient Littéraire* in Beirut as a Syrian correspondent, often covering events and activities at the AMI. In 1962, he co-authored the experimental poetry diwan *The Eastern Moon* with Fateh al-Mouddarres. After finishing at AUB, Khaznadar worked briefly in the cultural sector in Damascus before relocating to Tunisia in 1965 to work in theater and develop international programming. He relocated to France in 1968, where he first worked in radio, then began directing the Maison de la Culture in Rennes in 1974, where he founded the Festival of Traditional Arts to safeguard and promote world culture. In 1982, he moved to Paris to establish the Maison des Cultures du Monde.

Kurché, Michel (1900-1973)

ميشيل كرشة

One of Syria's first professional painters, he studied at the *École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts* in Paris from 1923-1925 and practiced a modified Impressionist style of painting.

L

La Regina, Guido (1909-1995)

Italian artist born in Naples, and, after the conclusion of the Second World War, based in Rome. La Regina built a reputation as an abstract painter of note and was included in numerous exhibitions devoted to contemporary Italian painting. In 1964, the Sursock Museum in Beirut dedicated a large monographic exhibition to his work, and soon thereafter he was recruited to the College of Fine Arts in Damascus to head its painting department. La Regina served in the post from 1965-1967 and advocated for abstract painting as the only option for attaining a completely advanced form of artistry. With the outbreak of the June 5, 1967 war, he returned to Italy, where he continued to teach painting in the Italian academy system and exhibit abstract works.

League of National Action

عصبة العمل القومي

Political group established in Syria in a 1933 by a group of nearly fifty young nationalists who opposed the National Bloc for its perceived cooperation with the French. While emphasizing a broader, pan-regional vision of Arab independence and unity and seeking to establish branches in other countries, they organized various campaigns against French rule. The organization's local Alexandretta chapters played a major role in organizing the Arab community against Turkish claims to the region in the 1930s, including establishing scout troops and rallies.

Al-Liwā'iyūn

اللوائيون

Term used in Syria to refer to the displaced people who had left the district of Alexandretta because of its transfer to Turkey, 1938-1939. It is derived from *liwā'*, which is the Arabic term meaning district or banner that was used as the equivalent to the Ottoman administrative term Sanjak, i.e. *Liwā' Iskandaruna*.

M

Mandate, French over Syria

The Mandate system was a system of nonsettler colonial administration that the League of Nations established in 1920, ostensibly to provide tutelage to the former colonies and territories of the Ottoman and German Empires deemed to be inhabited by peoples “not yet able to stand by themselves” by the principle of self-determination. Syria, which was deemed a class “A” territory (meaning that it was sufficiently developed to be provisionally recognized as independent), was given to France. An umbrella French High Commission was created to oversee its everyday administrative operations. The Mandate was declared over in 1943, but it took until 1946 for France to withdraw its troops.

***Al-Ma'rifa* (Knowledge)**

مجلة «المعرفة»

A monthly cultural magazine published by the Syrian Ministry of Culture, established in 1962.

Mardam Bey, Haydar (1894-1981)

حيدر مردم بك

Syrian diplomat from the prominent Mardam Bey family. Haydar Mardam Bey earned a law degree in Paris, and, upon his return, participated in the nationalist movement against French rule. After holding several regional governor positions in Syria prior to national independence, in 1948 he joined the diplomatic corps. In 1951, he was appointed the Syrian ambassador to Rome. Later he became Syria's ambassador to Iraq.

Mardam Bey, Khalil (1895-1959)

خليل مردم بك

Syrian intellectual, poet, and nationalist leader. In 1925, he was named to the membership of the Arab Academy in Damascus. In 1929, he co-founded the literary journal *al-Thaqafa*. He wrote the Syrian national anthem in the 1930s and served in various native governmental posts during French Mandate rule in the 1940s. After independence he briefly served as Syria's Minister of Education (1949) and Foreign Affairs (1953). In 1954, he was named to an honorary Vice Presidency at the Accademia del Mediterraneo in Palermo, Italy.

Mattei, Enrico (1906-1962)

Italian public administrator and politician. After the Second World War, Mattei organized the national fuel trust ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi) and organized oil trade concessions with the newly independent nation-states in the Middle East. He was known for his opposition to the control by Anglo-American petroleum companies of the world's petroleum reserves, and offered higher percentages to oil-producing countries while voicing support for Arab liberation causes.

Al-Maz, Khaled (1938—)

خالد المز

Syrian artist from Latakia. Al-Maz studied painting at the College of Fine Arts in Cairo, graduating in 1964. Upon his return, he exhibited works in a socialist realist style, then briefly adopted a version of semi-geometric abstraction. Subsequently he developed a more subjective and romantic style of figurative painting.

Melehi, Mohammed (1936—)

محمد الملهي

Moroccan painter and graphic artist. Born in Asilah, he first studied art in Tétouan, then Seville and Madrid, then held a fellowship to the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome (1957-1960), followed by one year in Paris and then two years in New York on a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship before returning to Morocco in 1964. As a teacher at the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca, 1964-1969, he led a movement to eliminate colonial influence in Moroccan art and emphasized native compositional forms. In 1969, he

co-organized the first open-air group exhibition in Marrakech's Jamaa el-Fna Square, which was meant to activate art within wider popular audiences. Beginning in 1971, he edited the cultural magazine *Intégral* and participated in the establishment of the Moroccan Association of Plastic Arts. In 1978, Melehi and Mohamed Benaissa launched the Asilah Cultural Moussem, an annual summer festival.

Michelet, Georges C. (1873-?)

French beaux-arts painter who lived in the greater Syrian region during the French Mandate period and maintained a studio in Beirut. He completed numerous paintings of different Syrian cities and landscapes and in the process exposed a generation of Syrian artists to the technical process of oil painting. Syrian painter Sharif Orfali, for example, credits Michelet's visit to Hama as a key moment in his own artistic trajectory.

خالد معاذ

Moaz, Khaled (1909-1989)

Syrian artist and historian from Damascus. In the 1930s, he studied technical drawing through the art and archaeological programs at the French Institute of Archaeology and Islamic Art in Damascus. He went on to catalog and publish articles on the country's Arab and Islamic heritage. He also worked as an art teacher at the Damascus Teachers' College, taught the history of Islamic art at the College of Fine Arts in Damascus, and served as an Inspector of Antiquities at the National Museum. A lifelong supporter of the modern Syrian fine arts movements, he participated in founding the Syrian Association for Fine Arts in 1950 and hosted its meetings in his home.

فتاح المدرس

Al-Mouddarres, Fateh (1922-1999)

Syrian artist from Aleppo who is celebrated for his polymathic talent in painting, writing, and music. Al-Mouddarres is a primary subject in my Chapter Three and Chapter Four. His career began in the cultural circles of Aleppo in the 1940s, where he experimented with Surrealist modes of composition. In 1956, he was granted a four-year study fellowship at the Accademia di Belle Art in Rome, where he exhibited frequently and began to hone his signature repertoire of imagery drawn from the myths of ancient Syrian civilizations and religious icons. After finishing, al-Mouddarres settled in Damascus and joined the faculty at the new College of Fine Arts. In 1969, he was awarded a second study fellowship, this time to Paris. Always a prolific artist, he would paint and teach in Damascus for decades, where he served as a role model and mentor for emerging generations of Syrian artists. He also became involved in organizational bureaucracy, including serving as head of the Artists Syndicate, 1981-1991.

مجلة «المعلم العربي»

Al-Mu'allim al-'Arabi (The Arab Teacher)

Quarterly journal for teachers published by the Syrian Ministry of Education. It was established in 1947 and is patterned after France's *manuel general*, a biweekly magazine that aimed to help with the implementation of new legislation in a classroom. It is still being published and is distributed to readers through the Syrian school system.

عبد الرحمن منيف

Munif, Abdul Rahman (1933-2004)

Renowned Arab novelist born in Amman to a father from today's Saudi Arabia and a mother from Iraq. In 1952 he went to Baghdad to study law and there joined the Ba'ath Party. Expelled from Iraq before finishing his degree, he completed his law studies in Egypt, then traveled to Belgrade, Yugoslavia on a fellowship to study oil economics. Between 1964-1973, he worked in the Syrian oil ministry (although he resigned from the Party in 1965). He began writing after the June 5, 1967 defeat, and in 1973 moved to Beirut to work as a journalist. With the outbreak of civil war, he moved to Baghdad, then to Paris with the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, then to Damascus in 1986. Munif is important to this dissertation because of his friendships with a number of Syrian and Iraqi artists, including Nazir Nabaa, and frequently

commented on their work and lives.

Muslim Brotherhood

الإخوان المسلمون

Religious political organization founded in Egypt in 1928 emphasizing a dual platform of Islamic revival and reform and opposition to the British occupation. The Syrian branch was established in Damascus circa 1940 and it became one of the youth-oriented political parties that emerged as a force in pre-Independence Syrian politics in opposition to the National Bloc and its policies. It worked to inculcate anti-imperialist feeling in the populace, to spread Muslim education and ethics, and to combat ignorance and deprivation through education. Later, in the 1960s, members of the Muslim Brotherhood would oppose the radical secular socialism of the Ba^cth Party and its policies. By the 1970s, it was the most visible and active opponent of the regime of President Hafez al-Asad. In 1980, al-Asad declared any association with the Brotherhood to be punishable by death, which led to a bloody crackdown, including the now infamous razing of the city of Hama in 1982.

Muyassar, Orkhan (1911-1965)

أورخان ميصر

Syrian aesthete, poet, and critic born in Istanbul. He completed studies in literature and science in Aleppo, Beirut and Chicago and was fluent in Arabic, French, English, and Turkish. In the 1940s he hosted an important literary salon in Aleppo and was a proponent of a Surrealist approach to literary and artistic composition. In 1946, He published *Siryal*, an anthology of surreal poems and an introductory essay on the movement's key tenets. He and his critical positions were an important early influence for Fateh al-Mouardres and Adonis.

N

Nabaa, Nazir (1938—)

نذير نبعمة

Syrian painter from Damascus. He made his greatest contributions to Arab modern art in the 1960s and 1970s, when he contributed to the graphic identity of progressive political causes and the Palestinian liberation struggle. Nabaa joined the Syrian Communist Party in 1954 and in 1959 was briefly jailed for this affiliation. After his release, he traveled to Egypt on a fellowship to study painting at the College of Fine Arts in Cairo, there developing a heroic realist style around social and labor themes. After returning to Syria in 1964, Nabaa taught drawing in rural schools and worked with myth and folk life. Moving to Damascus in 1968, he worked as an illustrator and became involved in creative projects in support of political mobilization, including poster design, puppet theater, fine art painting, and art criticism (discussed in part in Chapter Five). Between 1971 and 1975, Nabaa studied in Paris, and, upon his return, joined the faculty of the College of Fine Arts in Damascus.

Nadwat al-Khamīs (or, khamīs majallat Shi^cr, or “al-khamīs”) (The Thursday meeting/ the Shi^cr Magazine Thursday/ “The Thursday”)

ندوة الخميس

The recurring Thursday night gatherings of poets that Shi^cr magazine hosted in Beirut as part of its mission to support advanced modern poetry. These *al-khamīs* meetings served to heighten the exclusivity of the participating group while simultaneously generating its public profile. After generating new intellectual and stylistic positions in their *khamīs* meetings, the group often submitted reports to al-Nahar or published notes in *Shi^cr*.

Al-Nahar (The Day)

جريدة «النهار»

Daily newspaper published in Lebanon, first established by Gebran Tuani in 1933.

النكسة

Naksa

Term meaning “setback,” it was used in Syrian journalism as a euphemism to describe Israel’s rapid and decisive victory over the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian militaries in the war fought during June 5-10, 1967. In fact the defeat was a devastating one for the Arab side. By the time of the ceasefire, Israel occupied the Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights, creating an estimated 300,000 Palestinian and 100,000 Syrian refugees.

جريدة «النصر»

Al-Nasr (Victory)

Newspaper founded in Damascus in 1943 by Wadih Sidawi. Its name is a commemorative reference to the Allied victories in Europe in the Second World War. The publication supported Shukri al-Quwatli. It closed in 1963.

الكتلة الوطنية

National Bloc

A coalition party of Syrian nationalist politicians, established in 1925 and primarily representing the autochthonous elites. Its opposed the French Mandate and demanded Syrian independence. The Bloc would dominate national politics until 1949, although the loss of Alexandretta in 1939 tarnished its moral authority. It produced the first Syrian president, Shukri al-Quwatli, who took office in 1943. It would maintain a majority in the government in spite of challenges from emerging opposition parties, but a coup led by Col. Husni al-Za’im in March 1949 removed al-Quwatli and the last National Bloc cabinet from office, effectively terminating the party.

الفن القومي

National art

This description emerged as a preferred category of fine art production in Syria’s state cultural apparatus in the 1960s. See Chapter Five. This emphasis on national art, as coincided with the coming to power of the Ba’th Party, reflected the multiple and sometimes competing priorities of the pan-Arab unity project, including the Egyptian-led effort to shore up the necessary material resources for Arab development and the more radical, anti-Imperial emphasis on resistance to Eurocentrism and its attendant cultural alienation.

احمد نعراش

Nawash, Ahmad (1934—)

Palestinian-Jordanian painter and printmaker born in Jerusalem. He completed a degree at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome in 1964. He later studied graphic arts and etching at the École des Beaux-Arts in Bordeaux (1970) and the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris (1975-77). His paintings express the Palestinian plight using child-like compositions of distorted human bodies on blank grounds.

Neo-Atlanticism

Term to describe Italian foreign policy during the period 1951-1959, which sought to strengthen Atlantic alliances and bolster international prestige by acting as a friendly mediator with the countries of the Oriental Mediterranean. The policy is significant to this dissertation because it gave political underpinning to the scores of study fellowships that the Italian foreign ministry extended to art students from Arab countries.

Neo-Mediterraneanism (*Neomediterranismo*)

A call issued by Italian cultural patrons in the 1950s for a programmatic return to an art based on light, color, pleasure, and emotiveness. Griancfranco Allia di Montereale sought to sponsor and disseminate it through his Accademia del Mediterraneo. Poet Carlo Belloli outlined their version of Neo-Mediterraneanism at a 1955 gathering of the academy, suggesting that the shared Mediterranean inheritance in Europe and Africa could provide an antidote to the existential anguish of the postwar

period.

Neutrality and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)

A policy of non-alignment in international relations and foreign policy adopted by a number of newly-recognized, formerly colonized states in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East in response to the Cold War. After the leaders of twenty-nine such states met in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955 at the instigation of five world leaders (President Nasser of Egypt, President Nkrumah of Ghana, Prime Minister Nehru of India, President Sukarno of Indonesia, and President Tito of Yugoslavia), the policy of non-alignment became a shared strategy for resistance to the coercive influence of the United States and the USSR. The Non-aligned Movement (NAM) would be officially launched in 1961, at a followup conference held in Belgrade, Yugoslavia.

Al-Nuqqad (The Critics)

جريدة «النقاد»

Weekly political literary newspaper established in 1949 in Damascus and operating until the 1960s. Fawzi Amin was its original publisher. Its editor was Said al-Jazairi, who was a regular at Café Havana.

O

Organization of Solidarity of the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL)

A federation of anti-Imperialist movements and entities created in Cuba in 1966 to coordinate material and moral support for revolutionary struggle. The OSPAAAL represents one outcome of the Cuban initiative to expand the already existing coordinative framework of the Afro-Asian Solidarity Organization into a Third World solidarity movement. It was launched in the wake of the Tricontinental Conference in Havana in January 1966, which had been attended by delegates from fronts, movements, and committees in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America (including delegates from Syria). From August 1967 onward, the OSPAAAL published the quarterly journal *Tricontinental*, which was instrumental for the diffusion of Third World liberation graphics and motifs.

L'Orient Littéraire (The Literary East)

The weekly cultural supplement of the Beirut Francophone daily *L'Orient*. Launched by Salah Stétié in 1955.

P

Pan-Arabism

Movement to form a political association of Arabs and Arab states on the principle that there is a naturalness and advantageousness to doing so. It was present in various forms in the Arab nationalist efforts at the start of the twentieth century, as well as in the ideological movements of the 1940s such as the Ba'ath political movement, but would only be institutionalized after the Second World War with the creation of the Arab League. In the 1950s, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser became the primary exponent of a popular version of pan-Arabism, which proposed to reactivate commonalities of language, history, and culture as a basis for a coordinated Arab defense against predatory power blocs. In this dissertation, I use the term pan-Arab to designate a vision of higher-level Arab solidarity that extends beyond and/or above the arbitrarily imposed borders of modern nation-states.

Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)

منظمة التحرير الفلسطينية

An umbrella political and military body uniting Palestinian Arab groups that opposed the Israeli occupation of what had been Palestine. It was created in 1964 at the suggestion of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who saw it as a way to better control Palestinian nationalist groups. After the June

1967 war, the PLO increased its influence over strategies for Palestinian liberation. Its leadership became dominated by Fatah and its strategy became that of armed struggle. In 1970, Jordan's King Hussein expelled the PLO from Jordan as part of a bloody military operation now known as Black September. It moved its headquarters to Lebanon to regroup, there establishing a complex structure of institutions and services. In 1974, the PLO received recognition from the Arab League as the sole political representative of the Palestinian people. That year it also secured observer status at the UN. The chairman of its Executive Committee from 1969 until 2004 was Yasser Arafat.

Plastic art

الفن التشكيلي

Term used in both Syrian art criticism and bureaucratic practice to designate the field of visual arts production as distinct from musical or theater arts. According to the 1973 charter of the Union of Arab Arts, the "plastic arts" consist of painting, sculpture, printmaking and graphics, and the allied arts of decoration, design, and other creative activities. The Arabic coinage for the adjectival term plastic, *tashkīlī*, is formed from the verbal noun of the causative verb "to form" and reflects the conviction that the act of formal creation is at the center of worthwhile artistic enterprise. In Chapter Five, I outline some of the different valences of the term and its encoding of a notion of actively creative artistry.

Q

Al-Qithara (The Harp)

مجلة «القيثارة»

Poetry and cultural journal published in Latakia, 1946-1947, by a group of intellectuals headed by lawyer Abdul Aziz Arnaout that called itself the "Group of New Poetry." The journal operated with the stated purpose of cultivating the joys of artistic creation and published work by Orkhan Muyasser, Yusuf al-Khal, Fateh al-Mouddarres, Adonis, and others.

Querèl, Vittore (unknown)

Italian journalist and gallerist based in Rome. During the 1930s he was a journalist and Fascist "moderate" who reported on developments in Palestine. In the postwar period he converted himself into an editor, gallerist, and publicist with a particular interest in Mediterranean initiatives and the Middle East. He founded La Feluca gallery in 1954 and ran it with his wife Derna.

Al-Quwatli, Shukri (1892-1967)

شكري القوتلي

Syrian politician and President of Syria (1943-1947, 1947-1949 and 1955-1958). He began his career in the Ottoman civil service, then in 1916 joined the anticolonialist movement. With the creation of the French Mandate government in 1920, he fled to Europe and agitated for the Syrian cause from exile. When the French declared a general amnesty in 1932, he returned to Syria and joined the National Bloc, working for Syrian independence through diplomatic channels and internal alliances (with occasional stints in prison and exile). In 1943, he nominated himself for President and in August was elected the first president of independent Syria. He succeeded in forcing the evacuation of the last of the French troops in 1946, then enacted an amendment that removed a one-term limit from the constitution, which allowed for his reelection in 1948. He was overthrown by a military coup in 1949, and went into exile in Egypt. In 1955 he returned to Syria to successfully run for the presidency on a pro-Egyptian platform. In 1958, with the creation of the United Arab Republic, he resigned his presidential post to become the "first citizen" of the new bipartite republic.

R

Ragon, Michel (1924—)

French writer, art critic and art historian. In 1945, he moved to Paris, where he began to publish books while working for proletarian causes. He became involved in the COBRA group in 1949 and edited some of its journal editions. When the bilingual English-French journal *Cimaise* was launched in 1952, he began to regularly contribute. In the 1960s he was the president of the Union of Art Critics (AICA). He factors in this dissertation because he visited Beirut and other Mediterranean cities in 1961 to survey the work of vanguard painters and published his findings in *Cimaise*.

Rizk, Abdel Kader (1912-1978)

عبد القادر رزق

Egyptian sculptor and arts administrator. After graduating from the School of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1933, he traveled to the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, finishing in 1937, and then completed further studies in Paris. In 1939, he became an instructor at the Cairo School of Fine Arts, where he established the free studies sculpture section. In 1950 he was appointed to the directorship of the Egyptian Academy in Rome, and held the post until 1955, after which time he was appointed to posts in the Fine Arts Directorate within the Egyptian Ministry of Culture.

S

Sa'adeh, Antun (1904-1949)

أنطون سعد

Syrian philosopher, writer, and politician who founded the Syrian Social Nationalist Party in 1932. Born in Dhour el Choueir in what is now Lebanon, he emigrated to the United States at the end of 1919 and then settled in Brazil in 1921, where his father was working as a journalist for the Arabic-language press. In Brazil, he founded a short-lived secret society dedicated to a vision of greater Syrian unity. In 1930, he returned to what had become Lebanon and worked as a journalist while teaching German at the American University of Beirut. There he founded the SSNP, again initially as a secret society. In 1938, he returned to Brazil to wait out the Second World War, then returned to Beirut in 1947 to renew his agitation for a united Syria and to grow his party. In 1949, after he declared a rebellion against the Lebanese government, he was forced to flee the country, only to be apprehended when he sought support from the Syrian government and returned to Lebanon, where he was tried for treason and executed by a firing squad.

Sawt al-'Arab (Voice of the Arabs)

جريدة «صوت العرب»

Newspaper established in Damascus, Syria in the mid-1950s and in publication until 1963. Its editor was Nasreddine al-Bahra. Not to be confused with the Egyptian radio station Voice of the Arabs.

Al-Sawt al-'Arabi (The Arab Voice)

مجلة «الصوت العربي»

Arabic-language magazine published by Italy's Office of Foreign Broadcasts, 1953-1959. It was distributed abroad to accompany its Arabic-language radio programming.

School of Modern Arab Arts (École des Arts Arabes Modernes)

The school established by the French Mandate High Commission in 1926 as a reorganization of the School of Decorative Arts at the French Institute of Archaeology and Islamic Art. It was dedicated to preserving and promoting commercial applications for Damascene craft in the modern market, which included establishing a catalog of types of replicable Arab pattern. A relatively short-lived initiative, it was reorganized several times and then closed permanently in 1930 after a scandal over the misuse of its funding.

درية شفيق

Shafik, Doria (1908-1975)

Egyptian journalist, poet, and feminist. She studied philosophy in Paris on an Egyptian fellowship that she won at age nineteen. In 1945 she became the founding editor of two women's journals: *La Femme Nouvelle* and *Bint al-Nil*, and in 1948 she founded the Daughters of the Nile Union as a platform for agitating for suffrage while also promoting literacy and economic opportunity for lower-class women. Shafik published numerous writings in French and Arabic and lectured throughout the world. In 1957, she was black-listed from public life after she started a hunger strike to protest the dictatorial quality of the Nasserist regime.

يوسف شقرا

Shaqra, Youssef (Born in the mid-1920s, exact dates unknown)

Syrian cultural administrator. A childhood friend of Adham Ismail in Antioch, Shaqra participated in the unsuccessful Arab nationalist struggle to maintain Alexandretta's connection to Syria, then crossed into Syria, where he was an early adherent in the Ba'ath movement. During the United Arab Republic, he served as secretary general of the Syrian regional office of the Ministry of Culture and National Orientation. In the 1970s he would serve as the Syrian ambassador to China.

طارق الشريف

Al-Sharif, Tarek (1935-2013)

Syrian art critic and arts administrator. Al-Sharif studied philosophy at the University of Damascus, graduating in 1958. Progressive and nationalist in outlook, he started a career in the Syrian Ministry of Culture in 1960, and in 1963 became the head of arts training programs at what became named the Adham Ismail Center for Plastic Arts. Al-Sharif soon became a fixture of artistic journalism in the nationalized press. He is significant to this dissertation because of his staunch ideological opposition to abstract art in the 1960s. In 1972 he published his first book of critical studies, titled *'Ishrūn Fannānān fī Sūriyā* (*Ten Artists in Syria*).

مجلة «شعر»

Shi'r (*Poetry*)

The legendary poetry journal launched by poets Yusuf al-Khal and Adonis from Beirut in January 1957. They conceived of it as a serious literary publication dedicated to the writing and reading of modern Arabic poetry, and cultivated a close-knit group of poet colleagues as a de fact editorial board. Al-Khal was the journal's publisher and editor and issued *Shi'r* on a near quarterly basis for eight years, 1957-1964. *Shi'r* then reappeared in a modified format between 1967-1970, but with significant changes to format and scope.

أديب الشيشكلي

Shishakli, Adib (1909-1964)

Syrian military leader from Hama and President of Syria, 1953-54. Shishakli studied at the Military Academy of Damascus and served in the French Army during the period of Mandate rule. He was briefly a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and in 1949 he joined a group of other officers with SSNP ties to engineer a coup against President Husni al-Za'im (who had taken power in a military coup earlier that year). In December of 1949, he launched another coup so as to block a union with Iraq and ruled the country for two years under the shadow Presidency of Fawzi Selu. In this period, he dissolved political parties and banned newspapers. In mid-1953 he staged an election to make himself President outright. He was overthrown in a February 1954 coup and fled to Brazil.

صبحي شعيب

Shouaib, Subhi (1909-1974)

Syrian artist from Damascus. He attended the Teachers' College there in the early 1930s, then taught in the town of Salamiyyah. In 1933, he found employment teaching art education in secondary schools in Homs and Hama. In 1936 he settled in Homs. Shouaib won the first prize for painting in the first national

exhibition in Syria in 1950. In 1962, he took the directorship of the newly-established center for plastic arts in Homs.

Shoura, Nasir (1920-1992)

نصير شوري

Syrian artist from Damascus. His early artistic training included study with Michel Kurché and Abdulwahab Abu al-Saoud, followed by membership in Studio Veronese. In the late 1940s, he traveled to Cairo to study painting at the College of Fine Arts. After his return, he taught art in secondary schools. Once the Damascus College of Fine Arts was established in 1960, he joined its painting faculty and taught there for the next three decades, retiring in 1990. Shoura maintained a private studio in Abu Rummaneh that also served as a hub for artist gatherings and conversations. I discuss his work in Chapter Five because, under the influence of a rising enthusiasm for abstract painting in the College of Fine Arts in the mid-1960s, he briefly pursued a purely abstract mode of composition before abandoning it in 1967.

Al-Sibai, Ghassan (1939—)

غسان السباعي

Syrian artist from Homs. Sibai studied painting in Egypt at the College of Fine Arts in Alexandria. Later he furthered his studies at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, finishing in 1974. He taught in the printmaking section at the College of Fine Arts in Damascus.

Socialist realism

الواقعية الاشتراكية

Term to describe art made following the premise that art should provide a faithful and objective reflection of life so as to appeal to ordinary workers and be inspiring in spirit. It was the officially decreed artistic doctrine in Soviet Russia from 1932 onwards (albeit within a looser interpretation after Stalin's death in 1953), and was followed in other Communist countries as well. In practice it often entailed hewing to stylistic strictures of realism and glorifying the state. Although it was never designated as an official style in any Arab country, it was relatively widely adopted in Abdel Nasser's Egypt. During the United Arab Republic, heroic representations of laborers and peasants were common fare in student projects at the Cairo College of Fine Arts, including those of Nabaa, al-Khaldi, and al-Maz.

Stétie, Salah (1929—)

صلاح ستيتية

Lebanese writer, poet, critic, and diplomat. Stétie studied in Paris in the 1950s, becoming friends with French literary figures and publishing books of his own. In 1955, he founded L'Orient Littéraire in Beirut and edited it until 1961, when he was named Lebanon's cultural advisor to Western Europe.

Studio Veronese

مرسم فيرونيز

The first recorded club in Syria devoted exclusively to painting, established in Damascus in 1941. Its members included Mahmoud Hammad, Adham Ismail, Adnan Jabasini, Nasir Shoura, Salah al-Nashef, Rashad Qusaibati, Mahmoud Jalal, and others. The group met in a hardware store owned by Jabasini in the well-to-do Salihya quarter to paint and debate artistic issues. They also hosted visiting painters, both Arab and foreign.

Surrealism

A twentieth-century avant-garde movement in literature and art which sought to tap the unconscious mind for its creative potential, developing techniques of automatic composition to do so. Launched from Paris in 1924 by André Breton, the movement grew out of symbolism and Dada and was strongly influenced by Sigmund Freud's writing on the psyche. During its Parisian heyday, it offered a radical alternative to the rational formal approach of Cubism. In other parts of the world, artists also began to apply related ideas about anti-rational creative practices, sometimes in concert with Breton's surrealist networks and

sometimes toward entirely different ends. A group of self-declared Surrealists banded together in Egypt in the late 1930s, issuing manifestoes in support of full artistic freedom without the interference of either governments or social anxieties. In Syria, discourse about surrealism as a practice would emerge later, in the post-WWII period. One important strand emanated from Orkhan Muyassar in Aleppo, who advocated its use to achieve pure and unmediated creation in text and image. Later, Afif Bahnassi would synthesize disparate pieces of critical interpretation of Islamic and folk practice, including works by Eustache de Lorey, Bishr Fares, and Georges Henein, to propose that “Arab surrealism” reflected an understanding of the essential unity of the world rather than an anxiety about its modern condition.

Sursock Museum

متحف سرسوق

An art museum in Lebanon created in 1961 when Nicolas Sursock bequeathed his private nineteenth-century villa to the Lebanese state for that purpose. It was the site of Lebanon’s annual Autumn Salon, founded in 1961, and hosted traveling art exhibitions secured through diplomatic ties.

Syria

The territory of modern Syria encompasses a variety of natural terrains, including the Mediterranean plain between Turkey and Lebanon (housing the port cities of Latakia and Tartus), fertile highlands extending from its inland capital of Damascus to the southern border with Jordan, an extensive central plain called the Hawran (housing the cities of Homs, Hama, and Aleppo), a fertile Euphrates River valley (including al-Raqqqa and Deir al-Zour), and an eastern plateau bounded by Iraq (including al-Hasaka and al-Qamishli). Prior to the 1919-21 treaties that concluded the First World War and established new territorial boundaries for governmental sovereignty, the general region of greater Syria – often called *Bilad al-Sham* in Arabic – was understood to be larger, encompassing Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and the southern regions of Turkey, including Alexandretta.

Syrian Social Nationalist Party

الحزب السوري القومي الاجتماعي

Political party aiming to unite the greater, pan-Syrian nation, launched by Antun Sa’adeh in Lebanon in 1932. In French, it is called the Parti Populaire Syrien. At first, it took the format of a secret society. In its party form, it stressed discipline, struggle, and service, while offering a vision of a united Syria encompassing the whole of the Fertile Crescent and Cyprus and opposing Arab unity. It was one of the main new style of youth-oriented political parties that emerged as a force in Syrian politics in the 1940s and successfully channeled discontent with French rule and general frustration into party loyalty. A number of literary figures, including Yusuf al-Khal, Orkhan Muyassar and Adonis, were at different points in their careers aligned with Sa’adeh’s ideas about the distinctiveness of the Syrian character and the guiding, beacon-like role of intellectuals in society. In the 1950s, the adversarial relationship between the SSNP and Arab nationalists turned violent, and in 1961, the party would be banned in Lebanon and Syria.

T

Tahsin, Said (1904-1985)

سعيد تحسين

Syrian artist from Damascus. Largely self-taught, Tahsin nevertheless found work in arts education. From 1934-1941 he taught art at the Teachers’ College in Baghdad. After returning to Syria, he was an active member of the emerging artistic clubs. He helped to establish the Arab Association for the Fine Arts and in 1942 served as its president. A major proponent of Arab unity, he moved to Cairo in 1962 and remained there for the rest of his life.

Tajhiz

التجهيز

Preparatory school or college following a modern curriculum, run by the state government.

تموز

Tammuz

The Babylonian name for the god who served as a personification of the seasonal cycle of the death and rebirth of vegetation. According to the comparative mythological studies of James Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, which tracked the motif of the dying god across multiple traditions in Mesopotamia and elsewhere, there are analogical similarities between Tammuz, the Greek god Adonis, the Egyptian god Osiris, and the Phrygian god Attis, making the Christian story of the resurrection of the Messiah a continuation of these earlier, pagan myths. As I detail in Chapter Four, the notion of a Syrian ur-myth expressing belief in the constitutively cyclical relationship between life and death gained literary currency among the modern poets associated with the journal *Shi'r*. Critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra translated the relevant portions of *The Golden Bough* into Arabic in 1957 and in 1958 coined the epithet “Tammuzi poets” to describe the group’s interest in figurations of resurrection.

توفيق طارق

Tariq, Tawfiq (1875-1940)

One of the first recognized Syrian fine art oil painters. Born in Damascus, he received his first artistic training at the Ottoman military academy in Istanbul, followed by supplemental training in art and architecture in Paris around the turn of the century. During the French Mandate in Syria, he worked for the engineering office doing architectural surveys and restoration. He also taught painting privately to interested pupils.

مجلة «الثقافة»

Al-Thaqafa (Culture)

A monthly cultural magazine founded in Damascus in 1933 by Khalil Mardam Bey, Jamil Saliba, Kazim Daghestani, and Kamel Ayyad. From prominent families, members of the group would go on to hold government posts in education and letters during the first decades of Syrian independence. Their publication had a modernizing and socially engaged viewpoint and published opinion articles by Arab thinkers and writers as well as translations of pieces by Western authors.

Third World liberation movement

A conception of an interlinked, worldwide national liberation movement. The use of a concept of Third World solidarity as a basis for imagining a united liberation struggle came to prominence in the 1950s and 1960s (although the term “Third World” itself is usually traced to the late 1940s), and was forcefully outlined at the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana. The Conference statement ratified the universal importance of the shared struggle by the “oppressed peoples of the world” for the principles of self-determination, sovereignty, and independence, and against imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism. This version of the Third Worldist movement – espousing a radical and explicitly socialist vision of liberation – supplanted the earlier version of Afro-Asian solidarity in non-alignment that a first generation of national leaders had articulated at Bandung. It also differed from the orthodox Marxist emphases on the international workers struggle in that it saw the historical link between national liberation movements worldwide to be central to revolutionary politics.

تراث

Turāth

An Arabic term meaning heritage and understood as an inheritance of time-honored forms and models. When invoked in the context of intellectual debate over the status of Arab modernity, *turāth* is opposed to an aspiration to the universalist model of modernization achieved by means of shared techniques and products. By contrast, *turāth* was thought to provide contemporary writers and artists with material for fully authentic creation. It emerged in greatest force in the debates that accompanied processes of decolonization in the Arab world, when many thinkers called on artists to reclaim a patrimonial lineage for their work. These calls grew louder after the embarrassing defeat of the Arab forces in the 1967 war

with Israel, when many sought to forge a more comprehensive plan for national self-actualization.

U

Unesco

Acronym for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Established in 1946, it was intended to promote international cooperation in the fields of education, science, and culture. In its first decade, the leadership of Unesco prioritized educational exchanges, the provision of technical assistance and training, and conferences and synoptic reports as a way to fulfill its mandate. Syria has been a member state since November 1946, and many Syrian artists and arts administrators received opportunities for travel and training from Unesco programs. See my Chapter Three in particular.

United Arab Republic (UAR)

الجمهورية العربية المتحدة

Short-lived presidential republic uniting Syria and Egypt under Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, ratified by a plebiscite in both countries on February 1958 and lasting until September 28, 1961, when it was dissolved by a military coup in Damascus. Its creation seemed to represent a major step toward resisting Western political hegemony as well as ratifying shared national cultural feeling and interests. In the implementation of the UAR, however, Nasser retained full control of the structures of power, which ultimately elicited broad resentment in Syria. As early as 1959, several Ba'ath Party politicians who had initially supported the union resigned from their government posts, albeit not artist Adham Ismail. Tensions continued to grow, and, in 1961, a small group of Syrian military officers staged a coup in Damascus, which reestablished Syria as an independent state.

V

Via Margutta

A street in Rome near the Piazza del Popolo that had become known as a bohemian artists' quarter. In the postwar 1950s, it became a famous social hub for artists, filmmakers, and the paparazzi. In the same period, after a successful 1953 campaign by its residents led by Vittore Querèl, the street was designated as a special cultural zone. The neighborhood around Via Margutta contained numerous galleries frequented by Arab art students and diplomats, chief among them La Feluca gallery, and the Italian promotional literature distributed in Arab countries made frequent references to it.

Z

Zayyat, Elias (1935—)

إلياس الزيات

Syrian painter from Damascus. He first learned painting as a teenager in the studio of Michel Kurché, followed by fellowship study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Sofia, Bulgaria (1956-1960) and a final year at the College of Fine Arts in Cairo. Upon his return to Syria, Zayyat took an assistant teaching position at the new College of Fine Arts in Damascus, where he worked with faculty colleagues to overhaul and update the curriculum to an international standard. Zayyat's best known work employs imagery derived from icon painting and often makes use of allegory to express the social, economic, and political plight of Syrian citizens.

al-Zubaidi, Kais (late 1940s?—)

كيس الزبيدي

Iraqi-born filmmaker and researcher. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, al-Zubaidi worked in Lebanon and Syria, where made a number of stylistically adventurous short films dedicated to the Palestinian liberation movement with the sponsorship of the Syrian Cinema Organization and the PLO film unit in Beirut.

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A note about my use of newspapers and other serials: This dissertation was researched and written with the aid of large collections of press clippings in the NM-D Modern, supplemented by similar clippings in the GNAM in Rome, and private collections of artists and critics. In some cases, it was therefore impossible to confirm page numbers or precise dates for the clippings. In such cases, I have transcribed as complete an entry as possible and added a note stating the location of the document.

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