

IN FOCUS

Graphic Art in the Arab World

May Muzaffar

The 1960s represent a foundational period for Arab graphic art, a form of artistic expression in which the statement is made, usually on paper, through an emphasis on lines, marks, or printed letters. During this decade, many art students from across the Arab world returned home after being educated abroad—in Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Poland, the United States, China, and elsewhere—and began teaching printmaking, engraving, etching, lithography, screenprinting, and other graphic mediums in schools and universities. Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq were among the leading countries in the region to establish graphic departments in art institutions. Many of these pioneering artists also participated in international graphic exhibitions, receiving awards and serving on juries. Beginning in 1978, international graphic workshops became part of the annual cultural season in the Moroccan seaside town of Asilah. In 1980, the Iraqi Cultural Centre in London organized the Third World Biennial of Graphic Art, with Chilean artist Roberto Matta presiding on the jury; a later iteration of the event was held in Baghdad. Some years later, in 1993, the Egyptian International Print Triennial was launched in Cairo.

Generally speaking, the best-known artists have worked in both painting and printmaking; a number of them have had a profound influence on subsequent generations. In Lebanon, for example, painters Shafic Abboud and Halim Jurdak were both active in graphic art during the second half of the twentieth century. Later generations have become still more enthusiastic, using more developed graphic techniques. Mohammad al Rawas, to name one, has been working and teaching printmaking combined with mixed media.

In Iraq, graphic art was initially promoted by the first Iraqi artist to specialize in printmaking, Rafa al-Nasiri. Trained in China and later in Lisbon, al-Nasiri created figurative woodcuts, and later abstract etchings, which incorporated Arabic lettering as an expressionist element, always maintaining a link between his prints and paintings. Dia al-Azzawi, a prolific colorist painter, is also renowned as a printer who embellishes his screenprints with Arabic texts. Suad al-Attar, known for her thematic symbols that draw on Mesopotamian and Arabic scripts alike, is another Iraqi artist who works in both mediums. Among other contemporary figures, Modhir Ahmed, a graduate of the Baghdad Institute of Fine Arts (and now based in Sweden), is recognized for introducing an innovative technique that uses nontoxic materials in the printmaking process.

In time, the practice of graphic art in the Arab world has become as diversified as it is innovative. In Egypt, Mariam Abdel Aleem, who taught printmaking at the College of Fine Arts at Alexandria University from the time of its establishment in 1958, rendered folkloric themes in precise and highly stylized etchings using aquatint and drypoint. Graphic art has maintained its popularity as a medium in Egypt today; one of the leading printmakers, Ahmed Nawar, explores linear details of geometric forms using multiple plates to produce a single print, working in both aquatint and drypoint. In Kuwait, graphic-art pioneer Munira al Kazi emerged in the mid 1960s as a brilliant printmaker who created colorful and meticulous lyrical compositions. From Syria, Marwan Kassab Bachi (who was based in Germany), Ghayas Akhras, Ziad Dalloul, and Youssef Abdelke are among



Rafa al-Nasiri in the graphic studio at the Institute of Fine Arts, Baghdad. 1983

those celebrated for their work. Mohammed Omer Khalil, a Sudanese artist based in New York since the 1970s, works as a painter and printmaker, creating large color, black-and-white, and photo-based etchings on a variety of surfaces. Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata has become internationally known for his bold, abstract color screenprints that combine Islamic and Western motifs.

In North Africa, Algerian Rachid Koraïchi draws on Islamic and traditional motifs, with an emphasis on Arabic script, which he inscribes throughout a range of mediums—ceramics, textiles, metalwork, and printmaking. Triki Gouider, a Tunisian printmaker, mixes techniques, including etching, drypoint, and aquatint, to produce a single innovative print. Mohamed Ben Meftah is an equally

influential Tunisian printmaker. In Morocco, graphic art has been popular since the 1960s through the work of leading artists such as Mohammed Melehi and Farid Belkahia. Since the late 1960s, Moroccan-Belgian artist Hachmi Azza has devoted his art to printmaking, mastering the interplay of light and shade in surrealist mezzotint compositions.

This list represents only a small selection of pioneers and contemporary graphic artists across generations. It is worth noting that the number of practicing printmakers in the Arab world is limited in comparison with that of painters. This may be attributed to several factors, including the need for a strong academic background, drawing skills, and the patience and strong will required to carry out the technical processing. Furthermore, throughout the 1960s and '70s, printmaking centers were rather limited in much of the Arab world. Nevertheless, many artists have discovered a great joy in this medium, in which spontaneity, intuition, and chance play key roles. Moreover, the graphic arts have offered Arab artists several privileges that painting and sculpture do not: the ability to produce multiple prints; the ease of transferring and exchanging paper works between different parts of the world; and the collective spirit of working together in a shared studio. These factors have helped to create artistic ties and offered Arab artists opportunities to venture into new international arenas.

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See Plate 44 for a 1969 graphic work by Mohammed Omer Khalil.