



Palestinian

art

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58 Kamal Boullata, *Self-portrait*, c. 1961, oil on canvas, size and whereabouts unknown.

inquisitive gaze and shadow-filled visage project an image of a 'typical' struggling artist. Boullata's hindsight memories of his Italian days are much brighter: 'Rome was cinema, Fellini, la dolce vita, freedom, love.' The education he received, both in and out of the Academy, was broad and liberating. At school he received a sound academic training, painting mostly from models. Every Tuesday, with Abdul Qader Arnaout, a Syrian artist of Albanian origin who became a close friend, Boullata roamed the streets of the Italian capital, exploring Renaissance and Baroque art and architecture and visiting galleries that exhibited contemporary art. At this point Boullata and Arnaout were both strongly attracted to the North African paintings of Paul Klee. At the café Signor Gino near the Piazza del Popolo, Boullata met many aspiring avant-garde artists and poets from North Africa, Iraq, Syria and other parts of the Arab world. He

also developed deep and intimate friendships with Brazilian and Japanese women, who introduced him to foreign cultures and to new experiences.

Following his Roman sojourn, Boullata returned to Jerusalem. In 1965 he began to teach art education at the Teacher's Training College in Ramallah. Soon he realized, however, that art education was not compatible with his ambitions as an artist, and he decided to give up teaching and to divide his time between Jerusalem and Beirut, where a thriving art movement and cultural scene were developing. Boullata later recalled:

Jerusalem was like my mother. One does not choose one's mother. In contrast, Beirut was like the lover that one chooses freely. During those years Lebanon's capital was the hub and meeting place for poets, artists and intellectuals coming from different regions of the Arab world. All in love with Beirut, they chose it as their favourite city of residence.

Boullata's compositions from the mid-1960s are very significant, especially because they diverged radically from mainstream Palestinian art. During this period, as noted earlier, Palestinian art was dominated by the figurative images made famous by Ismail Shammout. In fact, the same year that Boullata arrived in Beirut, Shammout was appointed as founder of the PLO's Art Education Department in the Lebanese capital. Other Palestinian artists working in more personal styles, such as Juliana Seraphim, were considered part of the Lebanese art movement. Both Seraphim's fantastic surreal images and Shammout's figurative

political icons were completely unrelated to the experimental art that Boullata was practising between 1965 and 1967.<sup>8</sup>

#### SEEKING HIS OWN EXPRESSION

After completing his studies, Boullata abandoned the academic exercises of his student days. In Beirut and Jerusalem he began intensive experiments with multimedia abstract compositions. Inspired by Alberto Burri, who, to use the artist's own words, 'liberated me', Boullata created fragmented and textured collages on heavy wooden panels.

Boullata's attraction to Burri's work was by no means arbitrary. It seems likely that Burri's compositions, which were expressive of his own experiences of war, strife and loss, must have communicated something meaningful to the young Palestinian artist. Alberto Burri (1915–1995) had been a doctor in the Italian army, serving in Africa during the Second World War. In 1943 he was captured by British forces and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Texas. There he began to paint on rough burlap bags and other materials that were available during the war years. Upon his return to Italy in 1946, Burri abandoned medicine to become a full-time artist. His *Sacchi* (sacks) series, begun in 1949, are collage constructions made of burlap bags, sewn together in a rough and expressive fashion. Jennifer Blessing has suggested that 'the patchwork surfaces of the *Sacchi* metaphorically signified living flesh violated during warfare – the stitching was linked to the artist's practice as a physician'. Blessing also related Burri's multimedia collages and assemblages to works by other post-war artists, who similarly used 'powerfully rendered gestures and accommodated chance occurrences to express the existential angst characteristic of the period'.<sup>9</sup> It seems likely that the patched and scarred surfaces of Burri's compositions and their expressive character resonated with Boullata, although the latter's work is often visually distinct and quite unlike Burri's.

Whereas Burri painted on burlap sacks, Boullata used wood panels as the foundation for his work. Rubbing, scratching and scorching the wood, he left rough signs of abuse and deterioration upon the panels. Trying to etch the passage of time into the material itself, he used various techniques that he remembered from childhood. Scorching the wood with fire was an antiquating method used by souvenir shop owners in Jerusalem, who tried to make modern icons seem old and thus more valuable. Boullata also rubbed the wood with lemon and sand, emulating his mother's manner of polishing brass and copper. Upon the scorched and battered wood panels, Boullata glued scraps