

The Arab Nude: The Artist as Awakener

On the Aesthetic Education of the Arab

The continuing interest of scholars and the public at large in the modernizing discourse of the *nahḍa* has been for the most part centered on the historical events or figures who contributed to this “renaissance,” or “awakening” (as the term has been most commonly translated) by means of literature, language, politics, media or the sciences. But in addition to the poets, writers, scientists, lawyers, journalists, clergy or politicians, there was another significant category of intellectuals, who proposed to forge a modern Arab identity¹ by other – pictorial – means. Fine artists from various Arab (see footnote 1) countries engaged in the project of modernization by launching art institutions, developing stylistic conventions, and inaugurating new genres and forms of fine arts. Egyptian, Syrian or Lebanese and Palestinian painters and sculptors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries — from Mahmoud Mukhtar and Muhammad Nagi in Khedivate Egypt to Moustapha Farrouk and Omar Onsi in French Mandate Lebanon – set out to effect an aesthetically grounded liberation from both Ottoman and European colonization. They regarded the fine arts as an efficient technology of modernization, even as a means for the creation of an independent state and modern citizen, an effective tool for the education of the masses in the spirit of modernity. Arab painters and sculptors in the Mandate-era Arab capitals were convinced that touching the souls of men and women with art and beauty could elevate their moral characters and transform them into truly modern subjects. Like the European Romantics a century earlier, they believed in the aesthetic education of mankind.

The Title

To address the question of the extent to which artists sought to contribute to the lofty causes of social change through specific art practices is the main purpose of this project. The continuity between the spirit of the *nahḍa* and the cultural and political situation in

¹ We realize that the term “Arab” is anachronistic – especially when applied to territories that were subject to multiple forms of colonialism, with overlapping and competing identitarian schemes, administrative, ethnic, and confessional politics – but we decided to use it nevertheless, not towards further obfuscating these contradictions and ambiguities but towards highlighting them.

the Middle East today is suggested above all through the title of this exhibition and conference organized at the American University of Beirut Art Galleries. The main title, “The Arab Nude,” resonates with another frequently encountered phrase in contemporary journalism—“The Arab Spring,” or earlier, “The Arab Awakening.” The latter has been used by politicians, scholars and journalists to discuss, question, predict or project issues that seem at times to fall squarely within the same limits, contradictions and binaries that preoccupied *nahḍa* intellectuals: tradition and modernity, secularism and religion, national unity and sectarianism, colonialism and national independence, along with a wide range of issues that touched upon the notions of gender, class, ethnicity. In organizing this exhibition and conference we hope to reconsider the application of some of these problematic concepts, which seem to be still hopelessly caught in the above dichotomies, and we shall attempt to do so from a particular art historical and anthropological perspective, and through a close examination of a particular genre of the fine arts: the Nude.

In recent years much has been made of graffiti and other forms of urban, public art at the scenes of the revolt, from Tunis to Egypt to Yemen. Often, however, the celebrations of these contemporary art forms assume a kind of aesthetic determinism, as if the works themselves contained whole political platforms or fully-formed meanings. What is sorely lacking from discussion of the art practices accompanying “The Arab Spring” is a historically grounded study of how artists envision their audiences in situations of public upheaval or how audiences make sense of the various new cultural, and artistic forms, and what types of artistic production and circulation advance or subvert the projects of reform, revolt or revolution. “The Arab Nude” offers a pre-history that is worth exploring in itself but that will also enhance our understanding of the roles that certain forms of art-making have played in Arab social change, both in the distant past and today.

The subtitle, “The Artist as Awakener” sets the historical frame of the exhibition, which is principally the first half of the twentieth century. Was the artist back then an awakener? How does an image of a naked body become Arab? How are Arabs made

Nude? How did people become professional artists with claims on their society as Arabs through the production of these pictures?

The exhibition specifically examines the way in which artists and intellectuals engaging in a double struggle against imperialism, Ottoman and European, resorted to an ideal form or to a pictorial device in order to concretize their visions of Arab modernity. For that generation, to be “Arab” was as much a matter of ambiguity and ambition as was the quest to be an artist, and in fact, both labels required leaps of imagination over local conditions and imperial plans. For this project we have consulted archival documents, photographs, books, political cartoons, advertisements, cinematography, and popular magazines from the day, but primarily painted and sculpted nudes produced in different parts of the Arab world from the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century. The exhibition examines what claims for identity, community, and political society were invested in the divesting of Arab bodies of their clothes. It documents the debates that met the genre of the Nude in exhibition halls and newspapers; it situates artistic practices in relation to ongoing, urgent discussions about the meaning of citizenship, urbanity, and internationalism carried out amid movements for women’s rights, pan-Arabism, and various nationalisms, as well as educational reform, militarization, scouting movement and nudist colonies. This was a period of great social, technological and political transformation that caught many Arab intellectuals in its historical vortex. It was also a time when new technologies, techniques and modes of representation worked their way into local cultures. While we are not espousing the role of awakener for artists, we use the subtitle to foreground social, political or cultural motivations for these artists to embrace and adopt the genre of the Nude in their artistic careers. Unlike much of the writing about “The Arab Spring,” we can ask: who exactly was asleep? And why was this type of awakening necessary?

The Exhibition

The Arab Nude: The Artist as Awakener conveys a number of different pictorial approaches to the genre of the Nude, as elaborated by several generations of Arab artists

from Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Algeria, and Lebanon. Some of these artists are regarded today as founders and pillars of fine arts traditions in their respective countries, or as truly “modern artists” in the sense of their personal and professional autonomy. Some have been entirely forgotten. The largest number of nudes displayed here are of Lebanese origin, due to issues of accessibility. While admittedly a regrettable weakness, the density of this collection allows us to observe the complexity of this genre in a specific social setting. Class, sexuality, gender, career ambitions, market practices, and political leanings all played into how artists took up the genre and how critics wrote about it. We hope the intricacies of the material from Mandate Lebanon will inspire similar scrutiny of work known to exist in other countries such as Egypt but under-represented here due to limited resources.

The visitor is invited to look at representations of naked bodies (including original works but also reproductions and photographic material) and to construct for themselves imaginary museums, by arranging and rearranging these nudes chronologically, stylistically, by country, by pedagogical affiliation in European ateliers, or by the names of the masters who trained subsequent generations of painters. From nudes made in the mid-19th century in Ottoman Syria by such locally trained practitioners as Kenaan Dib [Kan`an Dib] (1801-1882), one proceeds to the paintings and drawings of Daoud Corm [Da`ud Al-Qurum] (1852-1930) – an artist trained in Rome and celebrated in some Lebanese nationalist art histories as the country’s artist progenitor – and further into the twentieth century to the nudes of Khalil Saleeby [Khalil Al-Salibi] (1870-1928), Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), Marie Hadad (1884-1973), Youssef Hoyeck [Yusuf Al-Huwayyik] (1883-1962), Mahmud Mukhtar (1891-1934), Mohammed Racim [Muhammad Rasim] (1896-1975), Cesar Gemayel [Qaysar Al-Jumayyil] (1898-1958), Georges D. Corm [Georges Da`ud Al-Qurum] (1897-1971), Moustapha Farrouk [Mustafa Farrukh] (1901-1957), Omar Onsi [`Umar Al-Unsi] (1901-1969), Sophie Halaby (1905-1998), Abdel Wahab Addada [`Abd al-Wahhab `Adada] (b. 1915), and others. Most of these artists traveled north to colonial metropolises to learn their painterly skills, which they then redeployed back home, following the current of social transformation by opening artists’ studios and new state institutions, designing cultural policies that would address local

concerns, or negotiating and contributing to the formation of the first national art schools, museums and art societies. The Nude played a prominent role in their claims to professionalization, as we glimpse from the membership card Moustapha Farrouk designed in 1934 for the Society of Friends of the Arts, with its Venus de Milo sprouting from a painter's palette, set between Pigeon Rock and a Mediterranean minaret.

The Nude and Narrative of the “Awakening”

We start from the assumption that “rebirth” or “awakening” requires radical and deliberately new and even alien techniques of modernization. We can even call them techniques of consciousness, since research into Mandate Lebanese art production has shown that artists deployed the Nude towards creating new types of subjects who would see and experience their world and their social reality in generally different terms. In other words, they embraced the Nude genre as a culturing tool (using the Arabic term *tathqīf*, for disciplining or cultivating). We note that this term became common during this period and not earlier. To a large extent, *tathqīf* consisted of recategorizing norms for social interaction and self-scrutiny. While one crucial component of *tathqīf* was the repudiation of behaviours and desires habitually associated with the Arab “past,” such as male homosexuality, an equally important component was the cultivation of “modern,” “masculine” *heterosexual* eroticism, and a dutiful feminine compliance. Through local debates in the Arabophone press, and through artistic practices displayed at exhibitions from Beirut to Cairo, these components were mapped onto readers’ and viewers’ bodies and associated with temporal shifts. Critics and commentators spoke of *ḥadātha* (novelty) and *mu‘āṣara* (contemporaneity) to address the Nude genre, pointing to how it was deliberately new and alien, in both its material medium and its impact on makers and viewers.

The connection between the genre and these ideas about an Arab *nahḍa* is neither self-evident nor universal. It can be revealed only by returning the paintings to the social context of the Mandate era, and concurrently, by treating the social context as a product of the nudes and similar imaginative projects. The canvases of *nahḍa* artists provided occasions for experiencing the Nude as a geographically unconfined entity. They warped

local interactions with womanhood and with urban space. The Nude's palpable universality could emerge through the enrollment of viewers' bodies in a process of *tathqīf*. Ultimately, nudes from Mandate-era Arab artists' ateliers suggest that the famous "shock" of modernity, or "psychological dislocation," for colonial Arabs was sometimes cultivated, strategic, and productive, rather than imposed, inescapable, and destructive.

One of the main aims of this project is to dispel the myth that there were no nudes in the 19th or early 20th centuries in Mandate-era Arab capitals. We display a large and varied selection of nudes, made in different styles, media and techniques, as well as a wide array of documents, works of photography and cinema, and clippings from periodicals of the day. With all this material we invite the student of Arab culture and the general public to reflect upon the relation between the Nude and the problematic of modernization, and to entertain or question the validity of our theme: whether artists can or should be regarded as indexes and agents of modernity, or "awakeners," both in the past and today. How useful are the tropes of awakening and renaissance used by Western academia and media to examine historical processes of modernization and, more recently, to refer to cultural and political processes in the Middle East? Is the word "awakening," which implies a previous state of dormancy, appropriate or accurate enough for describing the political, social and cultural transformations in the Middle East?

The Art Historical Context

The curatorial and editorial framework proposed for *The Arab Nude* is aware of, and sensitive to, the major turning points in the Western art historical discourse of the Nude. This should not be regarded as unusual, given that most of the Arab painters and sculptors displayed in this exhibition and discussed in the conference encountered, studied, and absorbed Western artistic practices in the European academies *des beaux-arts*. In the curricula of the nineteenth-century art academies, the Nude was a prominent subject of study, given the key position occupied by genre or history-painting. The latter heavily relied on the Nude to compose Classical or Biblical scenes. The exhibition pays special attention to the academic Nude, showing some of the studies in charcoal or sanguine that most of the Arab artists brought home with them from Rome, Paris or Edinburgh. Upon their return they applied their studies of the Nude – both the "heroic"

masculine and the “gracious feminine” constructed under the voyeuristic gaze of the male artist – in genre painting series that responded to a range of local themes and motifs. They trained a plethora of younger artists, particularly women, some who remained amateurs but showed their work at their high schools and in the annual salons at the School of Arts and Crafts in Beirut, for example, and the Lebanese Parliament in the 1930s.

Within Western art historiography the Nude has had a long and convoluted history. The eighteenth-century classicist account of the Nude as manifestation of a free self and representation of ideal sovereign subjectivity, or beauty unconstrained by a world outside, as Winckelmann once saw it, has had a lasting impact on the art historical theories of the Nude well into the twentieth century. Mainstream art history and art connoisseurship have followed this paradigm, presenting the historical path of the Nude through the centuries as an odyssey that began on the shores of ancient Mediterranean cultures, in particular the classical Greek world and the democratic atmosphere of the Athenian polis. It was only later in the twentieth century that reformist art historians have revisited and engaged critically with the genre of the Nude, unveiling a range of hidden social contradictions and political conflicts. Over the past half-century the Nude has been scrutinized from the perspectives of gender, class, religion and language as scholars of various factions posed a slew of questions related to sexuality, to the role of the artist and the viewer, or revealing deeply embedded social and political contradictions. Feminist art history proposed to consider the female Nude as a technology of regulation and control over the woman. Linda Nochlin showed that the sexualization of the female model’s body became grounds for excluding women from the art academy and hence denying women’s ability to produce “great art”; Lynda Nead regarded the Nude as an instrument for containing and repressing femininity and female sexuality. Kenneth Clark’s dualistic distinction between nakedness and nudity (the “naked” referring to the embarrassed body deprived of clothes and the “nude” to the cultured and confident body “clothed in art”) has also come under close scrutiny from various political perspectives. Marxist art historians have revealed in the naked/nude opposition deeply-seated class contradictions, and T.J. Clark has examined the naked and the nude as markers of social positions and class identification.

The Arab Context

But what are the consequences of the development of the Western discourse on the Nude for the representation of nudity in the Arab world? What can we learn from the discourse of the Nude prior to independence, or around the time when this genre was only just making its way into local cultural milieus, long before critics had scrutinized the Nude from the perspective of post-WWII emancipatory politics? Kenneth Clark asserted in his canonical text of 1953 that the genre of the Nude simply could not occur to the non-Western mind; he thereby assumed for it a racial and ethnic identity. Yet unbeknownst to Clark, artists in this region had several decades of experience with the genre, and like in the West the Arab Nude was predicated on and driven by numerous contradictions and discrepancies centered around gender, sexuality, class or religion. We see it as our goal to encourage a discussion around these contradictions and how they manifest themselves in the nudes produced by Arab artists. This exhibition does not only show how the artists expanded the genre's itineraries and social relevance, but it also highlights points of tension, limitation and potential critique: above all, the conjoined figure of the male artist and the female model, the class positioning implicit in the naked/nude opposition, and various other conflicts informed by religious perspectives (or more often accusations of intolerance).

The exhibition comes to suggest at what social cost the Nude was developed and deployed as Arab: among these costs is the exclusion of women, the augmentation of social divisions and hierarchies, the institutionalization and professionalization of the art world, and, most disturbingly perhaps, the continued rebuffing or even denial of the genre and its role as a marker of modernity such that, “to this day” to quote one writer from 1929, people still believe the Nude could not have existed in the Arab World.² AUB has a special role to play in this exhibition. Moustapha Farrouk's monumental work *The Two Prisoners*, showing a nude odalisque contemplating her caged condition, was first displayed in AUB's West Hall in 1929, and Farrouk was an instructor of drawing at AUB for nearly a quarter of a century. Omar Onsi, whose exploration of ways of looking at the

² Kamal Al-Nafi "Ma`rad Farrukh fi al-jami`a al-amrikiyya" *Al-Ahwal*, June 1, 1929. Hani Farrukh Archives, Beirut.

nude graced the cover of the monumental retrospective show, *Lebanon: The Artist's View*, was a student at AUB (1918-1920) and illustrated student publications during that time. Saloua Raouda Choucair, whose work *Sculptor Destroys Classicism* documents her spurning of the genre in response – according to the legend – to a philosophy lecture by Charles Malek, was a librarian at AUB and part-time student here.

Various points and lines of tension run through the theme of the Nude in the Arab world. In the attached PDF publication *The Arab Nude: The Artist as Awakener*, Kirsten Scheid sets some of the subjects in relief, in the hope that this can be used as a point of departure to encourage further scholarship and exploration.

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