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Palestinian Art Proclaims a People's Identity in the Conflict With Israel

Salah Bisar / 24 May 2021

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Many prominent Palestinian artists have asserted their cultural identity in works that focus on Al-Aqsa Mosque as a national emblem and center of the Arab-Israeli struggle. Above, "Life Prevails," by Ismail Shammout (Photos courtesy of Salah Bisar).

"When political identity is under threat, culture becomes a resistance tool in the face of attempts to obliterate, annihilate and exclude. Resistance is a form of memory in exchange for forgetting. A stateless person would consider writing or art a home to dwell in."

Thus says one of the most immortal quotes by the late Palestinian academic Edward Said.

Similarly, under the ongoing Israeli occupation since 1948, Palestinian creative people have sought to build a counter narrative to the Israeli one regarding the nature of the conflict, and this Palestinian creativity has turned into the most important embodiment of this alternative homeland.

Thus, the writings of Ghassan Kanafani, Mahmoud Darwish and Emile Habibi were a great portfolio of the Palestinian memory. Palestinian art also played a role in documenting the stages of the conflict and rooting the identity to face the arrogance of the occupier's power.

Artists as Resistance Symbols

Ismail Shammout is one of the symbols of the Post-Nakba Palestinian art, who contributed to its development and moved it from realism to expressionism and from simplicity to complex compositions.

Art critics believe that Shammout's works have become graphic epics that convey images from his people's daily life and elevate them to depict the suffering of the experience of displacement and the

dream of returning to the homeland.



Over more than half a century, Palestinian art has created distinctive color systems and moved from realism to abstract summarization, and from direct expression to symbolism until its symbols and elements became a sign of the Palestinian identity and struggle, both at present and in history.

In Shammout's famous painting "Life Prevails," he depicted three women in white scarves with three gestures, one of them carrying fiery red flowers dominating a crowd of people, among whom there are a bride and groom as a symbol of victory and return. The painting's background is occupied by many architectural monuments of historic Jerusalem.

Kamal Boullata's works reflected the magic of the Palestinian space, characterized by shorthand, summarization, and the employment of the richness of arabesque elements and repetition of arc geometries.

Continuing the same path, Kamal Boullata's works reflected the magic of the Palestinian space, characterized by shorthand, summarization, and the employment of the richness of arabesque elements and repetition of arc geometries, mixing all this in whispering bright orange schemes with touches of calm blue and gray.

Boullata's symbolic painting "She and Al-Quds" gives an indication of his creative experience, in which a woman stands out, united with the place, to represent the secret of survival, eternity and continuity.

Suhad Zuaiter, another Palestinian artist, bet on abstract art and played on the formation of scrolls, swirls and elements of people with eyes depicting Al-Aqsa Mosque as a dazzling symbol among fingers, highlighting the vibrating arteries within.

The works of Jumana El-Husseini, a Jerusalem-born artist, highlight the city's religious and heritage landmarks in the space of her paintings to such an extent that art critics said: "Jumana is an icon of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is an icon of Jumana."

Her works embody and reshape the city in an aesthetic and expressive touch that surpassed reality and approached a dream-like magical world; all manifested in color formations and geometric rhythm characterized by harmony and balance.

In her career, El-Husseini visited the Japanese city of Hiroshima and examined its tragedy. In a famous painting, she linked the Japanese city's tragedy, which was afflicted by the nuclear bomb, and the Arab city of Jerusalem afflicted by the Israeli occupation.

In the painting's forefront appears a ruined Japanese building, with a red snake emerging from it, heading towards Al-Aqsa in the painting's far background, in an attempt of the artist to confirm that terrorism history repeats itself.

Art in the Face of Conflict

Among the newer generation's artists, Sliman Mansour's works stand out in their symbolic expressionism, indicating another area in the Palestinian artist's consciousness and interaction with the events. Mansour made Al-Aqsa a heritage symbol that represents the soul, image and identity, in a painting titled "Camel of Hardships" that embodies the Palestinian symbol. It shows an elderly porter carrying Al-Aqsa and its surroundings bound to his shoulders, which reveals the oneness with time and the emotional attachment to the sacred.

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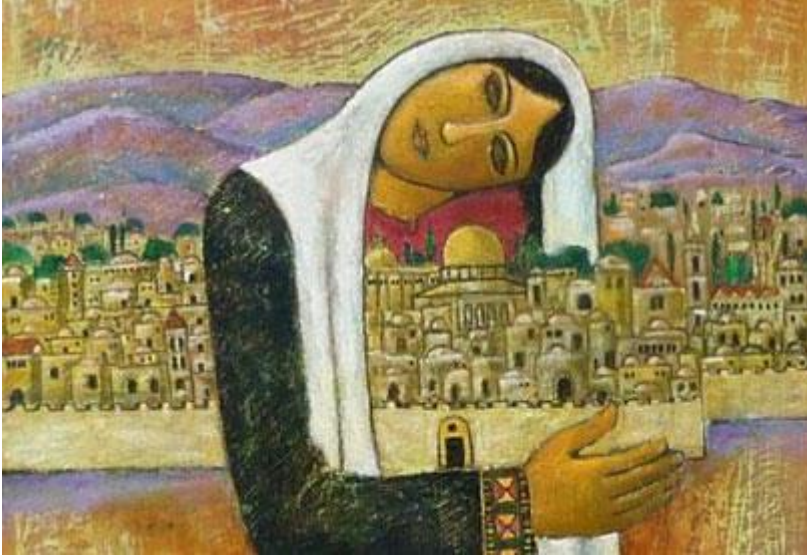
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Mansour reproduced the same painting in a later version that added some elements, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Gallery: Palestinian Art



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At another stage, Mansour continues his efforts to deal with the Palestinian symbol. In his work “Al-Aqsa Is in Our Hands,” he portrayed a woman in Palestinian dress and a white headscarf in the center of the painting, holding Al-Aqsa in her hands. In the background appear the features of Jerusalem through the decorative repetition of the Palestinian dresses, with the predominance of brown colors to suggest the extension of time.

Taysir Sharaf's art experience also stands out, thanks to his paintings' wager on the strength of architectural elements that combine summarization and personification. In one of his works, he blends Palestinian women and historical architecture, so the woman in the foreground appears unified with these reduced surfaces, and is dominated by shades of red, blue, white and yellow.

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Art critics believe that Sharaf's painting “Al-Aqsa and Al-Hurufiyya” represents the pinnacle of his work in this field, for it embodies Jerusalem whose center is occupied by Al-Aqsa Mosque with its well-known decorations and gates. In the painting's foreground, the artist shows a universe of letters and words scattered in grace and vitality.

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Nabil Anani's "Mother's Embrace" is one of the most prominent Palestinian works that poses an expressive uniqueness between symbolism and realism.

On the other hand, Nabil Anani's works represent a different layout and rhythm in Palestinian art, which are characterized by lyrical surfaces, overflowing with a geometric rhythm that mixes people, trees, homes, and peace doves to whom a Palestinian aspires to seek refuge from the harshness of war and displacement. In his works, the Palestinian woman shines bright in her national Palestinian dress embroidered with distinctive motifs.

Anani's "Mother's Embrace" is one of the most prominent Palestinian works that poses an expressive uniqueness between symbolism and realism, in which he depicted a woman in a white scarf and a dress studded with people and an olive branch, standing with a gesture and a bow in the head, embracing Al-Aqsa Mosque and the old historic houses.

Salah Bisar is an Egyptian artist and critic, and the author of several books about art.

More Reading

To read more about Palestinian identity as reflected in art and culture, see the following articles from Al-Fanar Media:

"The Artist Jumana Manna Preserves Palestinian Heritage Through Film, Music, and Seeds"

"Oral History, Which Records Once-Silenced Voices, Gains Ground in the Arab World"

"An Art Exhibition Without Art"

"Samia Halaby: An Artist at Once Palestinian and Universal"

"A Circus School Celebrates Palestinian Identity"

"The Palestinian Museum Hosts Its First Exhibit"



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