


FEATURE / MALTA

# Picasso comes to Palestine

 by **Sandy Tolan**  
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**Picasso's Buste de Femme, at the International Academy of Art-Palestine, will be on display in Ramallah until July 20**

It seemed a ridiculous and impossible idea: Bringing a US \$7.1 million Picasso into occupied Palestine.

But the two-year odyssey of Picasso's "Buste de Femme", from the prominent Dutch Van Abbemuseum to the tiny International Academy of Art-Palestine in Ramallah, marks the first time a European masterpiece has been seen publicly in the West Bank. It will be on view until July 20.

The story of the journey of a single 105cm by 86cm Picasso goes far beyond the art itself: it's about protocols, "peace" agreements, ports and checkpoints. And it demonstrates how art can play a role in the nationalist vision of an occupied people struggling for some normality while forging the nascent institutions of a state.

"The idea started like a joke: I was asking, 'Why shouldn't a Picasso go to Palestine?'" said Khaled Hourani, artistic director of the Palestinian academy, founded in 2007 in a former gallery space that was once shut down by the Israeli army. "Why wouldn't Palestine be like any other country that Picasso would visit?"

Picasso was the academy's choice not only for his iconic status, but his political consciousness. "Picasso was engaged in politics, war, peace, and conflict," Hourani said. Yet *Buste de Femme* is "not like *Guernica*; it's a portrait of a woman."

Hourani and his students, who voted between three Picassos at the Van Abbemuseum, liked the idea of bringing something "normal".

"We acted like we were bringing Picasso normally, as if we were a state." Hourani understood that the project would "not only be about Picasso and the name; it will be about the journey and the way."

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Because of the occupation and inherent limitations on Palestinian sovereignty, what is ordinarily a straightforward loan from one museum to another suddenly took on a political, diplomatic and military character. Every step in the journey was tinged with Palestinian statelessness and the determination of a scrappy art academy to overcome the obstacles.

Among the first was insurance. Frequent clashes and Israeli incursions into West Bank cities represented inherent dangers to insurers. How could the masterpiece be protected? One insurance company wanted no part of it. But a second, Reaal of the Netherlands, agreed to consider it. They were more experienced with insuring tuna fish in the Sea of Malta, so they sent representative Ruud Ijmker for a visit.

### **Oslo accords and art**

Ijmker inspected the 1993 Oslo accords and their subsequent annexes, and determined there was no clear-cut understanding about how art could travel to the West Bank.

"It wasn't clear what was the jurisdiction and for whom," recalled Fatima AbdulKarim, Hourani's partner in bringing in the Picasso. "Oslo missed out on one of our basic fields of work: art and culture."

At one point, Hourani said, prospects became so bleak that "we were talking about needing a state first before we could bring the Picasso." But he reasoned: "If we have the state, we don't need the Picasso."

In the end, AbdulKarim said, the insurance man "erased" Oslo from his mind and simply decided he wanted his company to insure the painting. He began to focus on more concrete issues: door locks, checkpoints, road conditions, even speed bumps. After months of discussions, and a personal guarantee of safety from Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad, the company agreed to ensure the Picasso.

Next, how would it arrive to Palestine? In the Netherlands, museum officials seemed as expectant as their Palestinian counterparts.

"Our Picasso will be changed by its journey to Ramallah, it will take on extra meaning and the story will remain a part of the history of the painting from this moment on," said Charles Esche, director of the Van Abbemuseum. "It feels like we are constructing new

histories with such a project."

Shortly afterward, the 5kg Picasso was carefully eased into a climatized crate for the journey to Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. There, it was met by Samer Kawasmi, head of a Palestinian transport company, who had spent months talking with Israeli officials about the painting's journey.

"Everything is in the Israeli hands, nothing in Palestinian hands," he noted. "It is not a state until now. It is just an authority."

So Kawasmi had to rely on help from his Israeli counterparts. He says Yehuda Levy of the Israeli company Globus used his connections to smooth the journey. Courtesies were undoubtedly involved - Israel waived its customary deposit of 15 per cent of the value of the work - but for Hourani, such favours underscored the reality of occupier and occupied.

"What Samer is saying, that nice people help, and make things happen in two hours instead of two or three days - they make it more easy for him - for me this is not a problem."

But rather than showing how generous the Israelis are, Khaled argues, Picasso in Palestine "shows how bad the situation is around here, how ugly is the occupation".

### **Lessons from Picasso**

Palestinians have "no access to import and export things, they have to work with an Israeli company". And the fact that another Picasso sits just 20km away, in Jerusalem, out of the view of most Palestinians, is "part of what this Picasso is showing. It's not about the painting. It's about the circumstances. It's about the state. It's about freedom".

Kawasmi had arranged for the painting to be brought in through Qalandia checkpoint, rather than the Ofer crossing, where trucks sometimes wait for hours. Israelis cleared the Jerusalem side of the checkpoint, leaving Kawasmi and his precious cargo to pass through unimpeded, and head north toward their destination.

And so it was that on June 20, Pablo Picasso's "Buste de Femme," cradled in a 200kg wooden crate with the word "Palestine" stamped on its side, was lowered by crane onto the landing of the International Academy of Art-Palestine in Ramallah. For AbdulKarim, this was the moment the reality of the long journey began to sink in. "I started crying," she said.

"What should be normal is bringing a Picasso ... the thing that should stop is the occupation."

Khaled Hourani, artistic director of the Palestine Academy

At the opening four days later, throngs of international artists, diplomats, television crews and proud Palestinians, including Fayyad and other ministers, lined up to see the heavily guarded painting - two at a time so as not to adversely affect the room's humidity.

First in line, at Hourani's invitation: Sliman Mansour, the revered Palestinian artist who had helped found Gallery 79 in the very same building, three decades earlier, only to see it banned by the Israeli military. Artists at the time were arrested and forced

underground.

At the opening, some wondered aloud about the relevance of a Picasso when Palestine is not even a state yet. But to Hourani and AbdulKarim, that misses the point.

"What should be normal is bringing a Picasso," Hourani said. "The thing that should stop is the occupation."

AbdulKarim says the Picasso exhibit is "what Palestinian art will look like after occupation". The idea, she says, is driven by a post-occupation agenda for a sovereign Palestine.

"We are born to generations of defeat," she said. But "the discourse is changing. And we are no longer the generation of defeat". She is 27. "I would never have pictured that youth in Cairo would be picking up garbage from the street. But something lifted their spirit."

The lesson of Picasso in Palestine? AbdulKarim says it is simple: "There are possibilities in impossibilities."

**SOURCE: AL JAZEERA**

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