Volume 41, Number 4July/August 1990

Three From Jerusalem

Written by Anne Mullin Burnham
Photographed by Nik Wheeler
Additional photographs by Chad Evans Wyatt and Kazuo Murata

Art comes from the roots. Every artist begins, as poet Philip Booth tells us, when he or she "climbs up Eden's hill in his own back yard." Yet exile from that back yard, from its rich inspiration, can be valuable as well as painful: Exile can help an artist to see more clearly in memory what was too close for clarity in actual experience. Exile, and the lens of new surroundings, allows for the re-interpretation of the images of childhood and homeland. And exile can make new departures possible.

In exile in Paris, Marc Chagall recreated the rich tapestry of his Russian childhood in the expressive colors of the fauves. Picasso, years away from his Spanish birthplace, returned again and again to the theme of the bullfight and made the bull one of the most powerful images in 20th-century art. James Joyce had to leave the stultifying atmosphere of turn-of-the-century Dublin before he could immortalize it in *Ulysses* and begin a new literary era. Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov, in the acquired language of their exile, each wrote new pages in the story of English literature.

Even more than the rest of us, it seems, exile profoundly affects artists. How differently and how distinctly they can respond to its challenges is demonstrated by three painters, all of whom were born in Jerusalem, each of whom has resettled in a very different part of the world.

In a serene, light-filled apartment just off one of the busiest thoroughfares

of the 16th arrondissement of Paris, Jumana El Husseini recreates in her paintings the images of the Palestine of her girlhood. Paint brushes and palette knives are arranged like a still-life in a copper bowl on a contempoarary table, but large wooden mirrors inlaid with shell and delicate pieces of pink Syrian glass echo her Middle Eastern origins. In the courtyard outside, the sound of chirping Parisian birds triggers her memories of summers in Jericho and walks on the Mount of Olives.

El Husseini was reared in her grandfather's home, in the first house to be built outside the old walls of Jerusalem. For her, exile began unexpectedly: A 1947 Christmas visit to a married sister in Beirut was protracted by the outbreak of war, and her stay there lengthened until she married and had a family of her own. Separated from Jerusalem, she accepted Beirut as her home away from home.

A few chance art courses opened a new world for El Husseini. In art, she explains, she discovered a salve for the loss of her homeland. "I found Palestine again on canvas. I live my youth, my early days there - all the memories, the birds, the flowers, the butterflies, the greenery, the Dead Sea, the windows, the doors, the skies of Palestine. This is where I found myself."

Painting for herself initially, and then exhibiting in Beirut, El Husseini had her first international exhibition in London in 1965. Since then, her work has been shown throughout the Arab world, in Europe, the United States, and in Japan. Today, she is a well-established and successful professional whose paintings are in collections around the world.

Like turning the pages of an autobiography, El Husseini shows a visitor painting after painting, each one representing a step in her artistic and emotional odyssey, each one capturing aspects of the Palestine she still misses daily, still returns to daily in her imagination. "Palestine is my inspiration," she says, "whatever the happiness, the sadness, the strength, or the misery."

Her first paintings were in squares with wide, frame-like borders - "frames for memories," she called them. Inside the borders, like scenes glimpsed through a window, El Husseini, working directly on the surface, captured her personal memories: architectural elements from the house of Jerusalem, flowers, trees, minarets, and faces. Each element is realized with icon-like reverence; simplified forms combine with bright colors frozen in timeless, stylized settings. Traditional motifs assume a lyricism that evokes a mystical, almost mythical past.

A return trip to Jerusalem in 1967 prompted El Husseini to begin sketching the city directly, rather than relying for inspiration on her storehouse of memories. From that time on she took a sketch pad along wherever she went on her visits, recording old architectural details as new construction began to change the face of the cities, documenting the customs and the folklore. "I felt I was preserving a way of life that was threatened," she says.

From these sketches, her distinctive paintings of cities emerged: Jerusalem with its towering domes and minarets, Jericho with its mixture of wooden and mud houses and tropical vegetation, Jaffa's domes in a symbolic orange hue, Haifa's unique windows, the colored tiles of Madina or the old wood houses of Makkah.

Using palette knives and other implements, or applying paint directly from the tube and mixing in sand or other material, El Husseini developed textured surfaces in her paintings, the impasto creating three-dimensional effects often highlighted with gold leaf or silver. Sometimes, textured passages are juxtaposed with smooth, brushless areas for greater effect.

Some of the most beautiful and evocative city paintings are symphonies of white on white, where the texture and the gold leaf create subtle interplays of light and shadow. "Jerusalem" (1980) and other paintings in this series show her evolution from a busy, detailed style to simpler, more painterly renditions. The effect is to imbue the subjects with a serene,

spiritual quality that brings to mind Wordsworth's description of his poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility."

Although she says her code of symbolism is a personal one, El Husseini's iconography is never didactic and always subordinated to her painterly concerns. Horses, with their strength and homing instincts, are especially symbolic: "Wherever you put him, he goes back home; he smells the land." Butterflies are uncaged and free, like the birds of Jericho; a tiger in a cactus corral - the traditional way of containing Palestinian livestock - symbolizes proud spirits trapped and constrained; pomegranates are the wedding symbol of good luck and fertility.

Deeply sensitive to her environment and to political events in the Middle East, El Husseini has found that the quantum changes in her style are often triggered by current events. When the civil war broke out in Beirut in 1975, she was too upset to paint. For months, she embroidered instead, weaving family history and symbols into shawls in the rich jewel tones of traditional Palestinian costumes. The oak tree from her home in Jerusalem is there, almost 2000 years old, alongside cypresses, wheat, butterflies, flowers and traditional geometric designs. The embroideries, with their exquisitely rendered scripts of names and events in the borders, are portable, wearable records of a way of life that is gone.

When canvas and oil paint became hard to get, she switched to watercolors. Accidentally tearing the paper on which she was working one day, she repaired it with glue and in the process began to experiment with the use of both watercolor and oil - separated by a layer of glue - in the one painting. The glue gives the effect of a way of life preserved, museum-like, under glass.

In all El Husseini's paintings, color expresses a wide emotional range. Ironically, though, her newest work, in which she is exploring the possibilities of abstraction for the first time, is predominantly black. On closer inspection, however, variations of tone and amoebic shapes in

different colors are visible.

Again, the change of style was prompted by political events. "The revolt of the children made me drop everything and become completely abstract," she says. "The paintings are black, but I am in my happiest period. I feel there is a resurgence in everything I am doing now."

In the maelstrom of the Parisian art world, with its numerous galleries and blockbuster exhibitions, Jumana El Husseini charts a quiet, dedicated path in her commitment to her memories and her art. Like the small voices of the birds above the din of the traffic, she makes a strong, distinctive statement that reaches beyond personal emblems to a shared visual language.

In Washington, D.C., no one appears foreign or out of place. With well over 100 embassies and international organizations there, staffed by professionals from all over the world, it is easy to blend into the international community that gives the city a certain non-American air. And perhaps because Washington doesn't project an overwhelming character of its own, it is an easier place in which, as Kamal Boullata says, "to re-invent oneself."

"What brought me to Washington was my attachment to individual Americans whom I had met overseas, at a time when I was left without a country," Boullata explains. What keeps him in D.C. is that the city allows him "to be in it without expecting me to be of it, as I have stumbled to learn how to re-invent myself through my work, and as my work has continued to draw its inspiration, not from my immediate surroundings but from the language and culture I was born to."

As a young man and fledgling artist growing up in Jerusalem, Boullata says he was constantly looking westward, to the artistic traditions and heritage of Europe. Away from Jerusalem, he discovered Islamic art, much as Joyce discovered Dublin after he left the city. "This is something that

comes with the realization of one's cultural roots," he says. "In a place like America, one is almost forced to look to one's roots in order to stand where one stands."

Boullata's look backward has led him to an ongoing quest to create for the word - the most powerful Arabic art form and the repository of Arabic consciousness - a visual idiom that fuses content and form.

"Arab culture has always been related to words," he explains. "The word is the only portable tool of expression; nomadic people always express themselves best orally." In dealing with words, Boullata continues, "I am looking into how sound can be translated into sight, how words can be interpreted in visual form. For instance, there are sounds in holy words that are not found in other words - what are the possibilities of putting these sounds into forms?" Or of creating an "iconography which can overlap sound and color, with the purpose of making the function of art a contemplative process?"

While, for Boullata, this search developed in the West, its roots are in Islamic, Judaic and Christian sources: in the idea of divine revelation in words, and in the search to make the divine immanent. Viewed this way, the purpose of art assumes an almost sacred role. "I look on art as a monk would look on scripture," he says.

In silkscreened works like "Allah, al-Wahid, al-Majid, al-Wajid, al-Wadud" (God, the Unique, the Noble, the Finder, the Loving), "La Ana, Ilia Ana," (There Is No I But I), or "Fil Bid Kan al-Kalima," (In the Beginning was the Word), the point of inspiration is the text with its meaning and its outward, calligraphic form. Boullata conceptualizes the meaning and expresses it by taking elements of the script and abstracting them into flattened complex patterns, using a limited number of colors with wide tonal variations.

For a Westerner, even one with no knowledge of classical Arabic, these

images go beyond graphic design or the pleasure derived from color and form. For Arabs, they have a deeper resonance, suggesting in the same color and form the meaning and spirit of the original text. At once ancient and modern, they acknowledge the heritage of Islamic geometric surface design while at the same time suggesting artistic renderings of a computer microchip. The subtle gradations of color and the complexities of the composition in these silkscreens require much time and skill, the same kind of dedication and reverence for the text that inspired ancient Islamic miniatures or medieval European illuminated manuscripts.

Boullata's illustrations of books and poems are another example of how he interprets verbal imagery: not in pictures of particular incidents or characters but in figurative, visual metaphors. In "Al-Buraq," drawn for the poem "Ahmad Zaatar" by Mahmoud Darwish, the winged horse, traditionally represented with a human face, becomes a symbol of the Palestinian people, its body fragmented around the city of Jerusalem, its mane shattered into flames.

Increasingly, Boullata is spending more of his time writing and editing, expanding his bilateral relationship with text and drawing, with content and form. Lately he has been combining his talents in a series of posters for, and introductions to, exhibitions; last year he compiled and wrote the introduction of a book of children's paintings from the West Bank and Gaza, and assembled an exhibition called "It's Possible: 24 Israeli and Palestinian Artists Unite for Peace." He edited a book of Arabic poetry, his writings and translations were published in numerous periodicals, while his paintings and drawings have been exhibited in the Arab countries, in Europe, in Russia and in Japan.

Boullata does not find the tension between writing and painting an impediment to his creativity: As long as a project offers him the chance to "overlap meaning and intuition," he is where he wants to be. Arabs traditionally have two languages, he points out, and "I feel that writing is

my written language and painting is my spoken language."

Boullata's current work is a series of serigraphs based on the abstract forms that make up the Palestinian flag. "It will be called 'Homage to Four Colors,'" he says. "I want to explore the different tones of color to express the variability of specific forms, and communicate a new flourishing of a traditional form."

Once again, Boullata is re-inventing himself as he works to bring into being, in his art and writing, what Joyce called "the uncreated conscience of his race."

It is a long way, geographically and psychologically, from Vladimir Tamari's birthplace to his current home, from growing up in the hills of Ramallah to living amid the crowds of Tokyo, where he has been since 1970.

As an Arab and an artist, as well as inventor and scientist, Tamari makes his life, as he says, "on the edges of Japanese society, dreaming of Jerusalem while living in Tokyo." The separation from his homeland is compounded by living in an industrialized, Westernized city within an ancient Eastern culture, a dichotomy which makes him feel like "an exile within exile."

Japanese culture, however, is an ongoing lesson for Tamari in reconciling these opposites, in learning how to bring into harmony his inner life and the outside world - and how to express that fusion in his art. The serene gardens of Kyoto, for instance, are at once material and abstract and are, as he says, "at the borderline between art and reality."

Inventor, optical physicist and artist, Tamari straddles that border himself. Since childhood, he has used watercolors to capture the images of his homei-land, imbued with the emotional richness of his life there. At the same time he has continuously experimented with the technical problems of representing the three dimensions of reality on the two-dimensional

surface of paper.

His studies in physics at the American University in Beirut and at art school in London combined in attempts to invent a drawing instrument that would allow him to "draw in space."

Although his initial prototype was destroyed in the war in 1967, he began the project anew after he had settled in Japan. Eventually he perfected the 3DD ("three-dimensional drawing instrument"), which, with inexpensive and simple technology, produces the same kind of three-dimensional drawings that expensive computer-aided design programs do. With the 3DD, Tamari did many drawings of Japan and of Palestine, recreating, in effect, the spaces of his memories and his surroundings, bringing both into a new kind of reality.

Another of Tamari's inventions, the Perspector, makes accurate perspective drawings easy, without computers and without paper-size limitations. His optical investigations, including the problem of cancellation of diffraction in light waves, are in the tradition of Ibn al-Haytham, the medieval Arab scientist whose treatise *Optics* laid the groundwork for advances in the field made by Renaissance scientists in Europe.

Living suspended between two cultures, away from the artistic and academic mainstreams, allows Tamari an uncontaminated originality of thought and expression that he might not have had in the thick of a particular art movement or scientific group.

"In Japan I am living in isolation in an over-organized, almost aseptic, society, but somehow this works for me as an artist," he says. Although he worries that his remembered images of Jerusalem and Ramallah will fade with time and distance, time and distance have a salutary effect on them also. "In a way, I experience them anew," he continues. "They become cleansed, crystallized and idealized, and lose anything extraneous."

"Hidden Treasure" shows how Tamari in his paintings unconsciously transmutes images of Jerusalem. The soft, muted colors of the abstract forms are bordered by passages of white and centered by a patch of gold. The effect is reminiscent, he says, "of what one feels to see the glorious Dome of the Rock after walking in the shaded small streets of the Old City." Perhaps unconsciously too, the very composition of the painting suggests a map of the old city and its various quarters, all enclosed by the wall.

Jerusalem, however, is often an overt subject too. "Jerusalem Seen From the Far East" is based on a clear memory of the lights of the city, seen one evening on his way back from Jericho. "Here, the very distant twinkling city is perched on top of the brooding and voluptuous hills of the desert between Jerusalem and the river," he explains. "The hills and the sky are visible, and the miniature city is centered in the golden circle of the letter Q of al-Quds, which means 'The Holy One and is the Arabic name for Jerusalem." And of course, Tamari points out, the "Far East" of the title can be interpreted not only as Jericho, but also as Japan. The luminous, symphonic color scheme of paintings like this is, Tamari asserts, quite unconscious. Color is something he has never studied; for him it is primitive and instinctive and, he feels, must come from his childhood, from the bright colors and clear light of Palestine.

"Ya Allah," while divided into grids and circles and geometric forms, has through its color harmonies and infusion of light an overall unity with a patina-like atmosphere that Tamari feels is characteristic of the old city of Jerusalem. These abstracted and sublimated images, their forms defined by light and their airy sense of space, represent Tamari's love for a city that for him, growing up, encapsulated "a model of the world in all its humanity, sanity, beauty and suffering and joy.... I am," he says, "a living time capsule of Palestine."

This sense of containing memory may be why Tamari chooses to work in

watercolor, a medium that leaves its imprint on the paper and can't be painted over as oils or acrylics can.

And while Tamari has found ways to wash papers to remove the outward signs of earlier work, watercolors, he says, like the human mind, "keep the memory of what you first put on - and whatever that is, you work with it."

Dublin-born **Anne Mullin Burnham** *is special projects director of the International Poetry Forum and a free-lance writer specializing in the arts, travel and food.*

This article appeared on pages 14-21 of the July/August 1990 print edition of *Saudi Aramco World*.

See Also: ART, MODERN, BOULLATA, KAMAL, EL HUSSEINI, JUMANA, PERSONALITIES, PERSONALITIES—PROFILES, TAMARI, VLADIMIR

Check the Public Affairs Digital Image Archive for July/August 1990 images.