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Honour Ismail Shammout 1930-2006:Beloved Artist of Palestinian self-determination

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Leading Palestinian artist Ismail Shammout died this week at the age of seventy-six. With a career that spanned over fifty years, Ismail Shammout was one of the most influential Palestinian artists in the history of contemporary Arab painting. His presence will be greatly missed in the contemporary Arab art world.

Shammout's figurative paintings reflect the many aspects of the modern Palestinian narrative. From representations of al Nakba (the catastrophe), during which he himself was also expelled from his home in Lydda, Palestine, in 1948, to the political determination and perseverance of Palestinians, Shammout's subjects are often depicted in moments that mirrored his own life.

In 1950, while living in the Gaza refugee camp of Khan-Younes with his family, Shammout enrolled in the College of Fine Arts in Cairo. Three years later, he held his first exhibition in Gaza. This exhibition is recognized as initiating the liberation art movement of Palestine, a distinct school of contemporary Palestinian art that emerged alongside the self-determined political movement of the Palestinian people. (1)

With renowned Palestinian artist Tamam al Akhal, Shammout participated in the Palestine Exhibition of 1954 in Cairo, which was sponsored and inaugurated by then Egyptian president Jamal Abdul-Nasser and well received throughout the Arab world (later that year, he moved to Italy and joined the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome). (2) Shammout and al Akhal were married in 1959. Since then, their work has been exhibited together in countless venues worldwide. Their partnership has inspired several generations of artists with work that has remained dedicated to conveying the shared reality of Palestinians.

Several exhibitions Shammout organized and/or participated in during the 1950s distinguished his importance within Palestinian art. He is recognized as one of the first Palestinian artist's to exhibit in Palestine. In the 1960s, the amalgamation of Shammout's work and activism led him to hold several significant positions in arts organizations in the Arab world. In 1965, he joined the Palestinian Liberation Organization as the Director of Arts and National Culture. He later became the Secretary General of the Union of Palestinian Artists, with its seven branches in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Europe. (3) In 1969, he was elected Secretary General of the Union of Arab artists. Since the 1970s, Shammout exhibited throughout the Arab World, Europe and Asia.

Shammout's artistic career included several publications documenting and assessing the evolution of Palestinian art. His revered publication *Art in Palestine* (1989) has been instrumental in the development of art historical discourse pertaining to Palestinian art. The dual role of artist/art historian is one that has been adopted by several prominent contemporary Palestinian artists, such as Samia Halaby and Kamal Boullata, in an effort to establish the much-needed discourse surrounding the evolution of modern and contemporary Palestinian art. As a means of impacting the international art world and art history, Shammout, Halaby and Boullata (along with several of their peers) have forged a greater understanding of Palestinian art within a universal context by publishing works in both Arabic and English. This has allowed for an invaluable accessibility of Palestinian artists to the world.

In 1997, Shammout and al Akhal began, *Palestine: The Exodus and the Odyssey*, a series of mural-like paintings chronicling Palestinian history since 1948. After a fifty-year absence, he returned to Lydda with al Akhal, and was faced with the reality that his ancestral home was now occupied by Israeli settlers. Upon return to their home in Amman, Shammout and al Akhal were compelled to create a chronological visual representation of contemporary Palestinian history. Both artists worked vigorously until 2000 to create the nineteen-part series dedicated to the Palestinian people. The series is rendered in a monumental style of painting in which scenes and imagery overlaid in multidimensional compositional narratives. This aspect of the series demonstrates Shammout and al Akhal's deep admiration and understanding of the Mexican Muralist School, which has served as a model for countless contemporary Palestinian artists. (4)

Shammout's distinct style of painting employs recognizable symbols of Palestinian traditions and culture. These aspects are visible in the details of his compositions, appearing in everything from female figures dressed in traditional Palestinian embroidered dresses, to landscapes that depict villages and agricultural fields of his birthplace. His work has served not

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22 Dec 2017



(<http://imemc.org/article/tour-reveals-stunning-history-of-old-city-bethlehem-video/>)

Over 20 people, including Palestinian journalists, researchers and internationals, on Thursday, took tour in the Old City District of Bethlehem, to learn

Community Efforts to Develop Tourism in Palestine (VIDEO) (<http://imemc.org/article/community-participation-as-an-effort-to-develop-tourism-in-palestine-video/>)

20 Nov 2017



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Masar Ibrahim al Khalil has organized, for a group of journalists (Palestinians and internationals working in Palestine), in the presence of Ms. Rula Maayah, the

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Palestinian Recounts Brutal Israeli Dog Attack for two and a half hours.' (VIDEO) (<http://imemc.org/article/palestinian-recounts-brutal-israeli-dog-attack-i-blew-for-two-and-a-half-hours-19-feb-2018/>)

This is a long-standing policy used by Israeli occu

only to document the experiences of Palestinians before and after al Nakba, but also to support a sense of cultural and national pride among a people facing daily persecution and socioeconomic hardship in both occupied Palestine and in neighboring Arab countries. Throughout his artistic career, Shammout never wavered from his dedication to the Palestinian struggle.

For more information and to see images of Ismail Shammout's work visit: www.shammout.com

NOTES:

1. For more information on the art and artists of Palestinian liberation art see Samia Halaby's Liberation Art of Palestine: Palestinian Painting and Sculpture in the Second Half of 20th Century, 2001.
- 2.
3. Shammout, Ismail. 2005. Visit Palestine: A Voyage Through Contemporary Art (exhibition catalog)
4. Walls Gallery, Amman.
5. Interview with the artist, Beirut. 2003



« Reporter killed by Israeli air strike; Journalists claim Israel is targeting media (<http://imemc.org/article/20249/>)

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