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SPECIAL FOCUS

IS THERE A CANON? ARTISTIC MODERNISMS ACROSS GEOGRAPHIES

Locating Modern Arab Art: Between the Global Art Market and Area Studies

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Abstract

This essay situates the publication of Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents *in the context of an expanding global interest in modern Arab art as well as the study of modern Arab art as an academic discipline. The essay first examines the implications of the cultivation of a new museum and gallery infrastructure for modern Arab art in the Arab Gulf. It then considers how the academic study of modern Arab art has faced institutional barriers, due largely to the overwhelming academic focus on Ancient Studies and Islamic art. Finally, it suggests that* Modern Arab Art in the Arab World *provides scholars with a comprehensive textual archive that calls for a historicized approach to theorizing the emergence of modernist aesthetics in Arab visual cultures.*

Keywords: Modern Arab Art, Primary Documents, Visual Culture, Art History, Middle Eastern Studies, Area Studies

The publication of *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (eds. Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, Nada Shabout) collects for the first time in one volume a comprehensive textual archive of the region's most influential artists, intellectuals, and artistic movements. Arranged chronologically, this assemblage of critical writings and reflections on modern art and visual culture traverses the span of a century, beginning in the early 1880s with the writings of prominent *Nahda* intellectuals such as May Ziadeh, Amin Rihani, Butrus al-Bustani, and Kahlil Gibran, and ending in the 1980s with the writings of artist collectives from Egypt and the UAE. From reflections on romanticism in art, to debates on art and

religion and the meaning of artistic freedom and socially committed art, to the manifestos of artistic collectives inaugurating new aesthetic movements in the Arab visual arts, including surrealism, modernism, *Hurufiyya*, and neo-realism, the volume documents – in English translation – the history of the region's modern visual arts traditions. This collaborative effort of documentation and translation is an invaluable addition to both the study of modern Arab artistic and visual traditions and to the history of "non-Western" modern art, a sub-discipline of art history that remains marginalized despite persistent calls from within the field to decolonize the discursive categories that have shaped the discipline.[1] The calls to decolonize art history have been extended to the Western museum, many established at the height of European empire, where vigorous and often contentious debates about the provenance and repatriation of plundered objects continue unresolved.[2] Within the field of Middle Eastern studies, research into modern Arab art and visual cultures has received far less attention than other humanities disciplines, namely, politics, religion, history, and literature; and even within the study of the visual cultures of the region, the fields of Ancient Studies and Islamic Art – both situated temporally in the pre-modern era – have overshadowed the aesthetics, history, and politics of the art of the modern era. I will consider some of the reasons for this below. However, the publication of this interdisciplinary volume intervenes at a critical moment, not only because it fills a vacuum in assembling primary documents of a long-neglected field of study, but because it comes at a time of increased interest in the modern visual cultures and art traditions of the Arab world.

Modern Arab Art in the Global Marketplace

Modern Arab art is increasingly the subject of global interest, from private collectors who purchase modern Arab art from auction houses, to curated exhibits in private galleries and prominent museums. In its last auction of modern Middle Eastern art in 2018, Sotheby's, which holds its auctions bi-annually, sold works by prominent artists from across the Arab world,

[1] The question of what it means to decolonize Art History remains an ongoing and unresolved discussion within the discipline, merging with the global turn in art history. See James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), Diana Newall, Emma Barker, Warren Carter, Cathleen Wren Christian, Renate Dohmen, eds., *Art and Its Global Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017) and Kavita Singh, "Colonial, International, Global: Connecting and Disconnecting Art Histories," *Art in Translation*, 9:1 (suppl, 2017): 34–47.

[2] See Louise Thyacott and Kostas Arvanitis, eds., *Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

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including Etel Adnan, Ramses Younan, Fouad Kamel, Shafic Abboud, and Dia al-Azzawi, among others. One painting of the Iraqi artist Mahmoud Sabri's "Janazat al-Shaheed" (*Funeral of the Martyr*) series, painted in 1961, sold for nearly $450,000, well above its estimated sale price, a pattern repeated with the sales of works by the artists listed above.[3] The reasons for modern Arab art "going global" in the private marketplace are complex, but the changing landscape of the display and consumption of modern Arab art is in significant measure linked to the rapid establishment of high-profile museums and galleries in the Arab Gulf, which has fundamentally redrawn the cultural map of the visual arts in the region. This new museum and private gallery infrastructure, which functions as a strategic investment by Gulf regimes to accumulate cultural capital, serves a variety of purposes for the Gulf monarchies, from the cultivation of new discourses of national identity to political legitimization through cultural and artistic collaborations with western museums, architects, and universities.[4] These collaborations, most notably the establishment of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, have conferred legitimacy to the projects and by extension the governments that have funded them. These national branding initiatives, which aim to project a self-confident Gulf cosmopolitanism, have been achieved through collaboration with western cultural and educational institutions and with the construction of iconic cultural sites by world renowned architects, wherein the architectural structures themselves create their own tourist industries.[5]

To be sure, this type of transnational economic and cultural collaboration, whereby cultural capital and legitimacy are accumulated through commissioning iconic architectural projects of cultural institutions by the

[3] See https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2018/20th-century-art-middle-east-l18226/lot.13.html?locale=en.

[4] For essays on the ways that this new focus on culture and the museum has been used to cultivate new notions of nationhood and citizenship in the Gulf, see Pamela Erskine-Loftus, Victoria Penziner Hightower, Mariam Ibrahim Al-Mulla, eds., *Representing the Nation: Heritage, Museums, National Narratives, and Identity in the Gulf States* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016). See also Karen Exell, *Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016) and Karen Exell and Karina Wakefield, eds., *Museums in Arabia: Transnational Practices and Regional Processes* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

[5] The term "architourism" has been used to describe this phenomenon. See Joan Ockman and Salomon Frausto, eds., *Architourism: Authentic, Escapist, Exotic, Spectacular* (New York: The Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture with Prestell, 2005). Examples of these iconic architectural sites in the Gulf include Jean Nouvel's National Museum of Qatar and the Louvre Abu Dhabi; Rem Koolhaas's Qatar National Library; Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (construction in progress); Norman Foster's Zayed National Museum (construction in progress); and Zaha Hadid's various projects, including the stalled Performing Arts Centre in Abu Dhabi.

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world's leading architects, is hardly new for the region. Iraq's mid-twentieth modernization drive involved a similar effort to recruit the giants of modernist architecture, including Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Josep Lluís Sert, among others, to design a modern capital city. Yet the new museum infrastructures in the Gulf inaugurate a shift in the cultural politics of museology and display in the region, from the traditional national museum – established during eras of nation-building to house and display national heritage – to the global museum, displaying collections of national, regional, and "world" art. This migration of cultural capital, from the historic cultural centers of the Arab world (Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad) to the Arab Gulf, has mirrored geopolitical and financial trends in the region; the globalization of modern Arab art is thus coterminous with the globalization of the Gulf economies and their increasing political, financial, and military influence. The private galleries and state museums in the Gulf enact the cultural logic of this increased influence, not only in how they work to accumulate cultural capital and situate themselves as part of a global museum infrastructure, but in the very ways they curate, market, and circulate modern Arab art for regional and global consumption. One of the most distinguishing aspects of this new infrastructure of modern Arab art is how it selectively collects, assembles, and curates de-historicized objects, e.g., paintings and mixed media art, through which to narrate a new pan-Arab visual canon that is fragmented and arbitrary yet intended to offer the viewer a coherent assemblage of the Arab world's visual identity.

Uprooted from their national origins, the collection of artworks on display in museums such as *Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art* (Doha) and private foundations such as *Barjeel* (Sharjah) perform a range of functions. On the one hand, the inclusion of museums and galleries in Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Sharjah in the fabric of global art tourism and the global art market integrates "peripheral" sites and artworks long neglected by a Eurocentric art industry into a transnational network of artistic exchange and consumption, presenting modern Arab art to new, primarily western, audiences.[6] But this integration of modern Arab art into the global art

[6] Despite the globalization of the art market and the emergence of increasingly globalized art and museum infrastructures in cities outside the traditional European art centers, such as Beijing, Istanbul, São Paolo, Mumbai, and Abu Dhabi, and despite what has been described as a more porous network of exchange between artistic center and periphery and circuits of exchange characteristic of a globalized, borderless art world where "works of art travel without friction," it remains that European art maintains its aesthetic autonomy and hegemony, financial and otherwise, over non-European traditions. See Olav Velthuis and Amanda Brandellero, "Introduction to Special Issue on Global Art Markets," *Poetics* 71 (December 2018): 1–6

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market via the Gulf raises a series of questions about the forces underlying its global circulation and consumption and the ways that canons of modern Arab art are constituted and institutionalized. Setting aside the colonial logic that continues to guide the collection, organization, and display of objects in European museums, wherein non-European modern art is represented as artistic curiosities and as derivative reproductions of European masterpieces, the question of how the transnational mobility of modern Arab art mediates and performs a pan-Arab artistic identity and history, despite its geographical home in the Gulf, raises questions about what Jessica Winegar has termed cultural sovereignty.[7] For if structural imbalances are constitutive of the global art market and its routes of circulation, these imbalances are replicated internally in the Middle East. The collections and exhibits of Gulf museums and galleries work to authorize the representation and performance of modern Arab art to a global cosmopolitan audience, assuming the right to represent and market Arab art, and they lay claim to the knowledge and expertise that bring together selected pieces of the region's modern art into new canons of consumption by local and global audiences.

Modern Arab Art: Between Area Studies and Global Art History

The expanding global presence and propagation of modern Arab art in the global marketplace and in new museum and gallery settings have emerged without an extensive academic archive guiding its elaboration or narrating its emergence. Scholarly production on modern Arab art and visual cultures – their histories, stylistic features, and formal attributes – has been fragmentary and piecemeal. Studies of modern Arab artistic traditions have tended to assess the biographies of "pioneering" individual (usually male) artists, narrowly explore the emergence of national art traditions, or chronicle the history of particular artistic movements, such as Egyptian surrealism.[8] There have been few comprehensive efforts to periodize and theorize the many aesthetic movements and expressions of modern Arab art across national boundaries or to approach the emergence of modern Arab art through a historically situated theoretical exploration

[7] Jessica Winegar, "Cultural Sovereignty in a Global Art Economy: Egyptian Cultural Policy and the New Western Interest in Art from the Middle East," *Cultural Anthropology* 21:2 (May 2006): 173–201.

[8] See Sam Bardaouil, *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

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of the role of art, visuality, and the image in modern Arab culture.[9] As the editors of *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* write in their introduction: "The visual works included in the canon of modern Arab art, as it has coalesced through national histories, largely reflect conventional narratives of authenticity. Often, the same selection of one or two individual works has been repeatedly reproduced, serving as stand-ins for entire careers and movements" resulting in a "cursory visual history" that is a result of a "limited number of public museums and other repositories compared with private holdings."[10] This observation is striking when we consider the sheer volume of modern art that Arab artists have produced in the last century, and it suggests that systemic and structural barriers have played a significant role in inhibiting the academic study of modern Arab art.

Historically, the "limited number of public museums" dedicated to displaying modern Arab art has been the result of the region's overwhelming emphasis on the display of the artifacts and objects of ancient and medieval civilizations. As many scholars have observed, modern nation-building involved the reclamation of the past to fashion modern states and modern selves.[11] But more than simply an accompaniment to nation-building projects and nationalist movements, the historical objects of the distant past came to dominate the imaginations of modernizing elites and new middle classes *and* academic research of the region's visual histories. The relatively anemic production of scholarly research in modern Arab art is, therefore, inextricably linked to the ways that Orientalist discourses and archaeologies of knowledge have overshadowed and effaced the modern visual cultures of the Middle East in favor of the visual heritage of the past. The academic disciplines of Ancient Studies and Islamic art, irrevocably entwined with the region's colonial history and its epistemologies, have dominated the study of the Middle East's visual traditions and the display of its material objects in museums, particularly in Europe and North America, but also in the

[9] There are notable exceptions to this observation. See, for example, Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007); Stephen Sheehi, *The Arab Imago: A Social History of Indigenous Photography 1860–1910* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013); and Octavian Esanu, ed., *Art, Awakening, and Modernity in the Middle East: The Arab Nude* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

[10] *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 21.

[11] See, for example, Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007) and Magnus Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

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Middle East itself, where museums of ancient civilizations have received more funding and attention for their capacity to draw tourists and their affirmation of the modern nation's civilizational longevity and continuity. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, European archaeological discoveries in the Near East, which coincided with European colonization of the region, were instrumental in the establishment of the national museum, which housed newly discovered artifacts of excavations conducted throughout the Middle East. The establishment of museums dedicated to Islamic art came later, but they too emerged through the discursive formation of an Orientalist field of study predicated on a totalizing religio-civilizational understanding of the region and its visual and artistic traditions. Both fields of study, and the politics of museology that emerged from them, are embedded in colonial projects and the discourses of knowledge that concomitantly emerged.

To illustrate precisely how modern Arab art has been situated academically, I would like to briefly examine the ways that its absence has been registered in the field of Islamic art. In recent years, prominent scholars in the field of Islamic art have interrogated the discursive boundaries of their discipline, arguing for a more malleable and inclusive field that foregrounds "diversity, hybridity, and intercultural exchange" and promotes "the historicisation of concepts of aesthetics, visuality, spatiality, and materiality."[12] Gülru Necipoğlu, for example, observes that much like the field of Western art, Islamic art is "an unwieldy subject with an unsatisfactory label that many have disowned without fashioning a better substitute."[13] Writing that "it is well worth preserving the field of Islamic art," Necipoğlu offers three steps that would address the criticisms aimed at the founding narratives of the field and their continued discursive presence.

> The first step is to start thinking of Islamic art as a multicultural "civilizational" category, just like Western art, instead of reifying it as the art of a religion or religious culture propagated by ethnologised peoples. The second step is to rethink the canon, and

[12] Gülru Necipoğlu, "The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches," *Journal of Art Historiography* 6:1 (June 2012): 1 https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/necipogludoc.pdf. Originally published in Benoît Junod, Stefan Weber, and Gerhard Wolf, eds., *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Saqi Books, 2012). See also Avinoam Shalem, "What do we mean when we say 'Islamic Art'? A plea for the critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam," *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (June 2012), https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/shalem.pdf.

[13] Ibid.

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> the third step is remapping the field through chronological structuring principles.[14]

Necipoğlu's vision for the field of Islamic art stresses expanding the purview of the discipline, conceiving it broadly in civilizational terms rather than narrowly as the product of religion or religious practice, an approach that, she argues, has had the effect of casting the Islamic world as timeless and has resulted in the production of ahistorical scholarship. For Necipoğlu, the expansion of the discipline's mandate is predicated on an increased attention to periodization, offering "four time zones" that "constitute a highly flexible matrix, with chronologically and geographically fluid boundaries."[15] The four time zones are delineated as follows: between ca. 650 and ca. 1050 (late antiquity and the early medieval period), ca. 1050 to ca. 1450 (medieval and late medieval periods), ca. 1450 to ca. 1800 (early modern era), and ca. 1800 to the present, a period that "encompasses the modern and contemporary periods. Precipitating the breakup of Islamic empires and the emergence of nation-states, this is an era of interrelated 'isms' such as colonialism, orientalism, Occidentalism, nationalism, revivalism, modernism, and postmodernism."[16] One immediately observes the absence of one central discursive structure of the modern – secularism, perhaps because it is seen as discordant to a field so wedded to a religio-civilizational approach and accustomed to a pre-modern temporal focus. These propositions aim to reform and reconstitute a field formed through Orientalist epistemologies that have, as Necipoğlu admits, ethnologized the region's visual cultures and produced a field historically limited in its capacity to grasp the diversity, mobility, and complexity of the material objects of the region. Necipoğlu's call to reform and reconstitute the field of Islamic art explicitly recognizes that modern and contemporary art have been categorically excluded, noting that most Islamic art textbooks end around ca. 1800.

Yet the proposal to expand the temporal boundaries of the field to include the modern era rests on retaining the epistemological category of 'civilizational' knowledge, a discursive structure rooted, particularly in the fields of ancient studies, Islamic art, and museology, in the modern European colonial project and its material and ideological conquest of the Islamic world. The problem I am identifying is not simply one of temporality or periodization, but of the disciplinary production of

[14] Ibid., 12.
[15] Ibid., 13.
[16] Ibid., 14

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knowledge itself. Just as the discipline of Islamic art was a field constituted through European Orientalism, the call to extend its purview to the modern/contemporary Middle East risks reproducing the very essentializing and restrictive category of the "Islamic" as a religio-civilizational rubric that subsumes the cultural practices of the modern period.[17] The important critique of the ways that secular forms of knowledge – their rationalism, Eurocentrism, and pretense to universality – structured the emergence of modern artistic forms and the practices of modern artists, many of whom were trained in Europe and viewed Islamic art through a civilizational hierarchy that positioned it beneath European art, suggests that the emergence of modern Arab art is situated in a radically different discursive space than Islamic art is. Indeed, the idea of temporally extending the discipline of Islamic art to the modern period points to the ways that approaching modern and contemporary artistic production in the Middle East as a distinct discipline in and of itself continue to lack institutional support at the academic level. In Art History departments, academic positions made available to scholars working in modern art tend to be advertised as "global art" positions that broadly seek non-European perspectives. Tenure-track positions in modern Middle Eastern art remain few and far between, if not non-existent.

Connecting the Textual and Visual

The Editors of *Modern Art in the Arab World* note that "A crucial contention in this anthology is that art writing in the Arab world may be recognized as *already inscribed* in a transregional imaginary that required many actors, and in a society created through ongoing interactions"(20). To engage this

[17] An illustration of the problematic consequences of the disciplinary trend to read the artistic forms produced in the modern Middle East through a broadly Islamic civilizational category can be found in Alex Dika Seggerman's *Modernism on the Nile: Art in Egypt Between the Islamic and the Contemporary* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019). Seggerman argues that "Islam" was constitutive of the formation of modern Egyptian art, beginning her book with a description of a painting by the Egyptian artist Mahmoud Said which features a naked peasant woman leaning against a boat, looking downward. Behind this central figure, peasant women gather water in jugs and "a small white mosque peeks through in the background" (1). For Seggerman, the presence of a mosque in a painting's background thus becomes emblematic of a broader trend characteristic of modern Egyptian art. Seggerman argues not only that the "Islamic" is constitutive of modern Egyptian art, but that this is representative of what she terms "non-doctrinal Islamic culture," which is described as the "everyday, embodied experience of being Muslim or living in a Muslim society" (13). Such a nebulous extrapolation, whereby the "everyday" experience of being Muslim becomes the basis of interpreting the cultural effects of a period with no discursive presence of an "Islamic" art tradition, has the effect of re-Orientalizing the Middle East and misreads the ways that artists adapted the local into new vocabularies of visuality.

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writing about modern art, ideas, things, and events is to consider the deterritorialized aspects of historic modernism, and not a separate tradition or an 'alternative' modernism.[18]

The above quote from the editors' introduction to *Modern Art in the Arab World* is a call to depart from thinking and writing about modern Arab art strictly through the lens of the nation-state or as a teleological narrative of "pioneering" artists who succeeded in blending local elements with the universal template of modern art established in Europe. Conceiving the emergence of modern Arab art through an already inscribed transnational imaginary requires scholars to historicize and then theorize the conditions of colonial modernity as singular, and its aesthetic corollary modernism, in a comparative way. For example, how might the emergence of modern Indian art and modern African art, both traditions encountering similar historical conditions and questions about the role of painting, and the nature of visual art itself, contribute to our understanding of modern Arab art? How does the concept of the transregional, formed through colonial networks and exchanges, mediate the material and discursive conditions that were manifested in the circulation of new visual styles, forms, and images, and to what effect? How might we then adjust our readings of aesthetic styles and forms, such as landscape paintings, that appear familiar and universal, and yet carry and communicate significations that are locally specific?

The constellation of factors I describe in this essay – on the one hand, a newly established museum and gallery infrastructure displaying modern Arab art in the Gulf, and on the other, modern Arab art's marginalization in academia in favor of the pre-modern focus of Ancient Studies and Islamic art – makes the publication of *Modern Art in the Arab World* a seminal text in the field of Middle Eastern Studies. One of the critically important aspects of the book is that it gathers and translates a collection of primary textual sources, establishing the most comprehensive archive of writings on modern Arab art, a body of writing from across the Arab world that will enable scholars from various disciplines – literature, anthropology, history – to integrate visual studies into their work. This textual history of modern Arab art and visual culture provides museum curators, as well, with the historical context that is currently absent or only superficially represented in many current exhibits and museums. The discipline of art history has universalized European aesthetic categories, such that non-Western art is consistently displayed through the

[18] *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 20.

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teleological frameworks established to theorize European art. Too often, the categories of aesthetic styles and forms in the visual arts – realism, expressionism, surrealism, cubism, modernism, abstraction – are applied unproblematically to non-Western art, including Arab art, to signify belated examples of forms mastered in Europe. This is no less true in literary studies, where, for example, most scholars have located the first iterations of the modernist Arabic novel to a series of novels published in the 1960s. These novels, including Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in the Sun* (1962), Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), and Naguib Mahfouz's *Miramar* (1967) have been canonized as the first modernist novels because they adopt the stylistic elements and techniques of modernist novels written in English, such as William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, first translated into Arabic in the early 1960s. More recently, scholars in the field of Arabic literary studies have interrogated these notions of form, arguing for an approach that, rather than seek to identify Arabic texts that correlate with European aesthetic forms, traces the evolution of textual form within the Arabic narrative tradition itself.[19]

Such an approach requires a historicization of the production of modernist literary forms through the dual structures of capitalism and colonialism, focusing on issues such as syncretism, mobility, translatability, and the local. Identifying modernist elements in a text, therefore, becomes less about tracing a genealogy of influence that is traced back to Europe and instead tracing how these new forms emerged through a convergence of factors, such as the presence of an existing Arabic narrative tradition, the emergence of social and political radicalism, and the material conditions associated with colonialism (urbanization, secularism, capitalism), all of which manifested in textual experiments that adopted and rerouted elements of modernism, often alongside forms such as realism. As Toral Gajarawala writes, "In the colonial world, literary aesthetics are compounded rather than teleological."[20] Our approach to form when theorizing modern Arab visual aesthetics might be similarly attentive to how questions of form in non-European settings are compounded rather than adhering to a teleological script made in Europe. This is not to say that aesthetic styles associated with European art are absent from Arab art, but that understanding their expression must be historically situated and attuned

[19] See Waïl Hassan, "Toward a Theory of the Arabic Novel," in *The Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions*, ed. Waïl Hassan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 19–47.

[20] Toral Gajarawala, *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 71.

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to the "already inscribed transnational imaginary" characteristic of the modern. For example, in her commentary on the uses and meanings of Arabic calligraphy, or *Huroufiyah*, as a visual element in modernist Arab art, Nada Shabout observes the competing understandings of this trend and its distorted reception in the art marketplace, both in the Middle East and globally.[21] Shabout notes that Western critics have popularized (and we might say exoticized) artistic expressions of *Huroufiyah*, seeing this particular form of abstraction as "having a relationship with traditional religious calligraphy" and forming a neo-Orientalist reading of the presence of the Arabic letter in modern Arab art as representing a "conventional signal of all Islamic cultures."[22] Shabout observes, however, that in a historicized reading of *Huroufiyah*,

> the letter functioned as both a unifier and a signifier of Arab identity, negotiating a new, secular consciousness and a means of reevaluating the relationship between self and other. As such, the Arabic letter was liberated from both its sacred connotations (as perceived through Islamic calligraphy and the Arabic language as the sacred language of the Qur'an) and its connectedness as a written script.[23]

This careful reading of cultural expression in Arab art challenges us to complicate our approach to what may appear to be a familiar visual form and to theorize how local stylistic elements from the past, and in this case how notions of the sacred, are routed through new discursive constructs, complicating what may appear to the casual observer or curator as an uncomplicated translation of the Islamic past to the modern present, or as a seamless adoption of Western abstraction in non-European art. With the publication of *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, we now have an extensive archive of the essays, manifestoes, personal letters, speeches, and recollections of the Arab world's most important artists and artistic movements. The collection of this critically important textual history now requires researchers to produce an archive of secondary scholarship that carefully analyzes and theorizes the many registers of modern Arab art in their multivalent complexity, connecting the textual with the visual.

[21] Nada Shabout, "Huroufiyah: The Arabic Letter as Visual Form," in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, 142–43.

[22] Ibid., 143

[23] Ibid., 142.

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