An Islamic Cosmos:
Artistic Engagements with Islamic Heritage in Iran and the Arab East, 1958-2018

by

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Notes to the Reader on Transliteration and Translation

Arabic and Persian

All translations from Arabic and Persian into English are mine except where otherwise noted.

The transliteration of Arabic words follows the Library of Congress system as described in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* with modifications. Glottal stops *'ayn* and *hamza* are preserved in most instances, with other diacritical marks removed to ease legibility. Persian words follow the Arabic transliteration system, but the slight variations in pronunciation are taken into consideration. Transliteration is not used for words commonly used in English, including Muhammad, Qur'an, and Karbala.

In order to facilitate the general readability of the text while also preserving sufficient accuracy for specialists to locate and consult archival and secondary sources, artist names appear in the main body of the text in their most commonly used transliteration rather than according to IJMES rules. For example, I opted to write Charles Hossein Zenderoudi as the artist's full (and preferred) transliterated name, rather than Charles Husayn Zindirudi. Likewise, the name of the artist Ali Jabri is not written with the *'ayn* diacritic mark, but the name of the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, ʿAli, is transliterated with the *'ayn*.

Following the new system proposed in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*: modern artists' flexible approach to titles of their works is taken into consideration. A single work of art might appear in the literature under several varying titles, while some debuted without any title at all (a practice for which artist Shakir Hasan

Al Said was notorious). Artwork titles have been included in English translation, with the Arabic title transliteration included whenever possible.

Other languages

All translations of French language materials cited herein are my own.

Abstract

This dissertation offers a study of contemporary artistic experiments with popular

religious images and folk traditions in the Islamic world. I explore how artists active in

Iran and the Arab world dealt with global art flows, including Surrealism, Socialist

Realism, and Abstraction, at a time when Islamic traditions were dissipating due to the

advent of colonial modernity and European interventions in the Middle East. I

demonstrate that contrary to prevailing wisdom, several prominent artists have steadily

mined Islamic artistic heritage to generate avant-garde artworks since 1958. Beginning

with the first chapter, I reassess the 1960s Iranian *Saqqakhaneh* or "Spiritual Pop Art"

movement by examining artist activities in the 1950s with popular prints and Shiʿi

Muslim votive traditions. I argue that these earlier artworks explicitly drew upon

religious folk arts and attest to subversive activities against the monarchy and its political

program of Western-style secular modernity. Expanding upon such modern mediations of

Shiʿi Islamic popular traditions, Chapter 2 explores experimental artmaking in 1960s Iraq

and demonstrate how several artists incorporated and transformed images of the Battle of

Karbala and Shiʿi folk rituals into their creative practices, especially following the 1963

Baʿath Party military coup. The third chapter continues exploring modern depictions of

Islamic heritage through the lens of Syrian artist Ali Jabri and his 1970s Neo-Realist

preservationist practice, including his curation of the Museum of Popular Traditions in

Jordan, where his exhibits of everyday devotional materials from the 19th and 20th-century

are still on display today. In Chapter 4, experimental practices with Islamic mysticism are examined through destructive processes in the paintings of Shakir Hasan Al Said and Hana Malallah. Drawing on her teacher Al Said's abstract methods of scorching and scratching the painting surface, Malallah produced large-scale abstract paintings out of burnt textile fragments, including burial shrouds during the first Gulf War (1990-1991), and introduced a new practice of artistic and bodily mediation via wartime destruction in Iraq. Looking to the future, Chapter 5 explores contemporary Middle Eastern art experiments with science fiction and futurism aesthetics to creatively imagine—and re-imagine—the past, present, and future of the Islamic world. Altogether, the dissertation project showcases the role of historic Islamic traditions as creative fuel in modern visual arts, and offers new methods and materials with which scholars can expand the scope and understanding of Islamic artistic heritage in modernity.

Introduction: An Islamic Cosmos

Soon after the inauguration of the first Tehran Biennale in April 1958, the Iranian

cultural magazine *Anahita* published an essay by the biennale's founder and organizer,

artist Marcos Grigorian (1925-2007) (**Figure 1**). In his article Grigorian makes a case for

the importance of a popular art form known as "coffeehouse" (*qahvakhana*) painting in

both the history and practice of contemporary Iranian art.[1] Featured at the top of the essay

is a portrait photograph of the artist embraced between two older painters, Hossein

Qollar-Aghasi (1902-1966) and Mohammad Modabber (c. 1905-1967) (**Figure 2**). These

two men were practitioners of the so-called coffeehouse style, or large-scale naïve works

of mythic and religious epics produced in oil paint on broad, portable canvases or

installed on building walls as ceramic tile or fresco works. Published as part of

Grigorian's efforts to collect, preserve, exhibit, and publicize a popular art form primarily

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[1] Like many artists in the midcentury Middle East, for "contemporary" Grigorian uses the word *mu'asirah*, meaning "contemporaneous" in Persian and Arabic. Artists across Iran and the Arab world considered their artworks as of the here and now, while working in an inherently transnational modernism and transformations of a globalizing world. This definition of contemporary art and modernist practices belies the narrative frame of belatedness often ascribed to twentieth-century artists working in non-western contexts. See Anneka Lenssen, *The Shape of Support: Painting and Politics in Syria's Twentieth Century* (PhD, MIT 2014), 16; Andreas Huyssen, "Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World," *New German Critique* 34 no. 1 (Winter 2007): 189-207.

associated with Iran's working and rural classes, the artist begins his essay by arguing

against relying on nameless artists of ancient architecture and historic art such as

manuscript paintings for modern art practices.[2] Instead, he points to the relevance of

coffeehouse artists in everyday life and religious experience for many Iranians, arguing to

readers: "we must decide whether or not this is our ancestral heritage (*mirath*)."[3] In

stating the importance of the living painters Qollar-Aghasi and Modabber as key nodes in

the historical genealogy and inheritance of twentieth-century Iranian artists, Grigorian

writes that these forgotten painters of a popular national art have "the same value as the

Italian artist Giotto and other metaphysical (*mitafizikal*) painters in today's world."[4]

      With Grigorian's publication, a number of strategies unfold. Freshly returned

from his international successes in Rome, where he studied at the Academia di Belle Arti,

won an international art prize, and was serving as an Iranian delegate and international

juror at the 1958 Venice Biennale, Grigorian carried the weight of experience and

accreditation in the international art world. His founding of a painting biennale in Iran,

with Italian jurors, was a pivotal moment for supporting the country's shift away from the

dominance of older academic art training towards avant-garde art experiments.[5] Yet at

this precise moment of bringing Iranian artists onto a newly created platform in the

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[2] This is likely a direct reference to the curriculum of the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Tehran. As inaugurated under its first director, the French archaeologists and architect André Godard, the program allotted half of its studio workshops to the study and practice of traditional Persian architectural forms. See Mina Marefat, "The Protagonists Who Shaped Modern Iran." In *Téhéran, capital bicentenaire*, eds. C. Adle and B. Hourcade (Paris and Tehran, 1992), 105-107.

[3] Marcos Grigorian, *Anahita* (Tehran: c. 1958-1959), unpaged.

[4] Ibid.

[5] In the 1940s a group of artists began to differentiate themselves from the dominant academic realism style associated with the Academy of Fine Arts (*Madrasah-yi sanayi'-i mustazrafah*) of Kamal al-Molk (1848-1940) for "new painting." These avant-garde activities included opening new exhibition infrastructures such as the first public art gallery, the Apadana Gallery Club, and producing periodicals including the Fighting Cock Art Society. See Alice Bombardier's discussion of these 1940s efforts in "L'essor d'une avant-garde picturale dans les années 1940 en Iran: premières galleries, associations et revues d'art," *Asia* 70, no. 4 (2016): 1159-1178.

globalizing art world, he simultaneously sought to elevate a folk painting practice into the repertoire of what was considered relevant and shared heritage for artmaking. His claims for Qollar-Aghasi and Modabber to both art historical and conceptual co-equivalence with formative artists in the Italian art tradition reveals a concerted effort to assert their image-making practice as not only fertile grounds for new experiments by young Iranian artists, but as an example of contemporary art in and of itself.[6]

Rather than presented as artisans of an extinct tradition, the two older painters are photographed in Grigorian's studio as fellow artists with shared interests in working within religious and epic art narratives stemming from nineteenth-century coffeehouse cultures (**Figure 3**). Rather than a temporal rupture between historic artmaking and contemporary practices, the photograph suggests camaraderie and kinship with Grigorian and older artists of a vernacular art form that draws upon Iran's ancient, Islamic, and recent Qajar-era pasts. The creative work of their painterly craft, as Grigorian argues, pivots between historical Iranian art prototypes and current contexts as much as any other working artist. However, they also manage to traverse complex historical engagements without formal training in any academic art institution either in Tehran or abroad. Both Hossein Qollar-Aghasi and Mohammad Modabber learned their painting and tilework practices at young ages from Qollar-Aghasi's father, the famous tilework designer Ali-Reza Qollar-Aghasi. Before joining Qollar-Aghasi and a group of coffeehouse painters, Modabber first made his living by acting in Shi'i Muslim religious plays known as

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[6] Grigorian's sense of the contemporary here aligns with Richard Meyer's argument for understanding contemporary art as a historic discourse and relational condition between two or more entities. In terms of temporal construction, the contemporary moment exists between the past and constantly shifting present. As such, Meyer notes the importance of examining "how the art of the past informs and reconfigures the contemporary moment." See Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013), 24.

taziyah performances, which supplied him with intimate knowledge of popular religious narratives throughout his artistic career. [7] The historical trajectory of Qollar-Aghasi and Modabber's art practice is thus a distinctly Iranian vernacular one, which produces symbolically resonant artworks directly within the dynamic matrix of everyday life and popular heritage in midcentury Iran.[8]

Concurrent with his published article, Grigorian had recently begun introducing art students at the newly founded Graphic Department at the Ministry of Fine Arts to Qollar-Aghasi, Modabber, and other artists' coffeehouse paintings and found images and materials associated with popular folk arts and religious visual traditions in late 1950s Iran. Not long after his teaching appointment, a number of artists including Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Siah Armajani, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, and others in and outside Grigorian's orbit were creating artworks using images and materials from coffeehouse art and other Shi'i Islamic heritage contexts. These new art experiments grew to such an extent that by the 1960s a group of artists were dubbed the "Spiritual Pop Art" movement, or the loosely affiliated *Saqqakhaneh* group, for their shared efforts in producing self-contained modernist paintings and metal sculptures drawn from votive material surface patterns found across Iran's many Shi'i Muslim religious shrines. While much has been written about the *Saqqakhaneh* movement as an example of Iranian modernism, far less scholarship has examined Grigorian's initiatory efforts in fomenting creative interest in a specific strain of Shi'i cultural heritage (and its existent

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[7] See Hadi Seyf, *"Coffee-House" Painting* (Tehran: Reza 'Abbasi Museum, 1990), 9.
[8] According to Hadi Seyf, early twentieth-century critics of coffeehouse paintings and the popular art movement referred to them as the "school of imagination" or "imaginists" for their creative work. See Seyf's *"Coffee-House" Painting* (Tehran: Reza 'Abbasi Museum, 1990), 8.

practitioners).[9] Likewise, the earliest painting and printmaking experiments of his

students and other young artists roaming around 1950s Tehran with coffeehouse

paintings of the historic Battle of Karbala, and other popular religious images prior to the

1960s, offer key and anticipatory instances of artists engaging with popular Islamic

heritage as new methods, materials, and images for artmaking.

Midcentury Iranian artists were not alone in their endeavors to experiment and

produce new creative imagery with Islamic heritage and its richly layered pasts. Artists

across the Arab world simultaneously sought knowledge of popular heritage and religious

practices in order to incorporate the richly layered symbolic cosmos of everyday life into

their works of art. That this was a transnational endeavor across state and ethnic borders

attests to the globalizing geographies of modernism, transnational Muslim practices, and

Islamic discursive traditions. Together, these contemporary art experiments installed in

complex and polyvalent ways new creative practices into the work of art in the twentieth-

to twenty-first century Middle East.[10] As this dissertation explores through an

examination of new artistic practices in Iran and the Arab East (the historic region known

as the *Mashriq* or "place of sunrise" of Iraq and Greater Syria) from the mid-twentieth-

century onwards, Islamic visual traditions were not relegated to a distant past nor did they

adhere to a uniform revival of premodern "classical" heritage as an authentic mode of

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[9] Notable exceptions include Hamid Keshmirshekan, "Neo-Traditionalism and Modern Iranian Painting: The Saqqa-khaneh school in the 1960s," *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 4 (2005): 607-630; Alice Bombardier, *Les pionniers de la nouvelle peinture en Iran: Oeuvres méconnues, activités novatrices et scandales au tournant des années 1940* (Berne: Peter Lang AG, Middle East, Social and Cultural Studies, 2017); Layla S. Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art: From Kamal-al-Molk to Zenderoudi." In *Iran Modern* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 45-65.
[10] A better term identifying the historically interconnected, cross-cultural circuits of this region is Western Asia or Southwest Asia. However, this geographic concept is fairly limited in use in favor of the geopolitical term "Middle East" that overlaps with the region historically associated with the "Fertile Crescent."

modernism. Instead, artists looked to and saw the historically rich symbolic materials in the world around them.[11] In charting their imaginative trajectories, I offer a different approach to artist engagements with Islamic expressions vis-à-vis how these creative experiments generate dynamic ways of engaging with the realities of the modern world at large.

Artists sought new ways to represent and respond to vernacular culture within the shifting arenas of everyday life in the centrifugal forces of a modernizing Middle East. In mobilizing Islamic heritage, they strove towards expanding possibilities of artmaking in historically Muslim regions and to carry the symbolic charge and refractory nature of these materials into new artistic contexts. As seen through several of the *as found* mixed media techniques of these prominent artists, they worked not only with the transnational modern art world, but with extant visual and material Islamic heritage as vehicles for creative worldmaking. Such explorations offered expanded possibilities for representations and references in artworks, often with collage and assemblage methods within the painted or printed picture frame. In their efforts to seek out, research, work with, and sometimes even preserve Islamic heritage, artists also provided for themselves and their audiences new artistic knowledge with which to reflect on past events and centuries-old visual traditions of the Islamic world while contending with its current conditions and future possibilities. By tracing several of these practices, this dissertation offers a historical narrative of contemporary art through a wide-ranging visual cosmos that involved new mediations of Islamic heritage.

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[11] Alex Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 2-3.

In the case studies under consideration here, I focus on one or more artists at the forefront of regional and international art developments. Beginning with the first chapter, Marcos Grigorian's vanguard preservationist efforts are reassessed through the famous Iranian *Saqqakhaneh* or "Spiritual Pop Art" movement and the preceding activities of Siah Armajani, Charles Zenderoudi, and other connected artists in the late 1950s. By examining these early engagements with popular prints and Shi'i Muslim votive traditions, these artworks can be understood as explicitly drawing upon religious folk images, in part to subvert broad cultural programs of state-sponsored Western-style secular modernity. Expanding upon such modern mediations of Shi'i Islamic popular traditions, in Chapter 2 explores experimental artmaking in 1960s Iraq and demonstrates how several artists incorporated and transformed images of the Battle of Karbala and Shi'i folk rituals into their creative practices, especially following the 1963 Ba'ath Party military coup. The third chapter continues by exploring contemporary depictions of Islamic heritage through the lens of Syrian artist Ali Jabri and his 1970s "New Realist" preservationist practice, including his curation of the Museum of Popular Traditions in Jordan, where his exhibits of everyday devotional materials from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are still on display today. In Chapter 4, I turn to examining contemporary practices with Islamic mysticism by exploring destructive processes in the artworks of Shakir Hassan Al Said and Hanaa Malallah. Drawing on her teacher Al Said's abstract methods of scorching and scratching the painting surface, Malallah produced large-scale abstract paintings out of burnt textile fragments, including burial shrouds during the first Gulf War (1990-1991); she also introduced a new practice of artistic and bodily mediation via wartime destruction in Iraq. Looking to the future, the

last chapter explores modern and contemporary art experiments with science fiction and futurism aesthetics to creatively imagine—and re-imagine—the past, present, and future of the Islamic world.

Through this constellation of loosely chronological artistic activities, the dissertation traces how artists transmit and transform historic Islamic materials via experimental art practices. I hone in on these particularly productive artistic episodes in order to explore how artists' engagements with Islamic heritage engendered new representational strategies of the world as it was undergoing seismic political and cultural shifts. Equally vital to understanding these creative endeavors is how these artists engaged with public output. These artists were involved in broader intellectual efforts to collect, exhibit, and publish research on heritage practices in order to validate their experiments and educate a public with which to share them. Many of the artists examined here served and continue to serve as teachers in some capacity to younger generations of artists. Some of them, including Grigorian and Jabri, played formative roles in institutional and museum developments in the region, while others like Nasiri and Al Said published books and scholarly articles that circulated artist-driven research on popular folk heritage into the narrative contours of their artworks. They sought information about these materials and practices to inform their own sense of belonging to historical cultures and to advance an understanding of inherited worlds of symbolic referents and forms.[12] In doing so, they inscribe their selective appropriation of modernist practices into the *longue durée* of Islamic history and art. Enriching their creative

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[12] As Nelson Goodman argues on the importance of knowing in artistic worldmaking: "if worlds are as much made as found, so also knowing is as much remaking as reporting… Recognizing patterns is very much a matter of inventing and imposing them. Comprehension and creation go on together." See Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), 22.

practices with a shared lineage of previous generations also lends artists and their

artworks an authoritative edge through knowing historical traditions as well as working

and even reworking them. With such public output and activities, these artists produced a

specific frame of Islamic heritage in their pursuit of new creative image worlds.

Similar endeavors bore fruit in South Asian modernist practices, as Iftikhar Dadi

has demonstrated.[13] Rather than attacking by and large nonexistent art institutions, avant-

garde Indian and Pakistani artists since the post-war period focused on creating

supportive frameworks and platforms to cultivate new imaginaries with discursive

Islamic traditions for their experimental practices. Such efforts "underscore the

powerfully affirmative potential of modernism in stimulating new imaginations" with

transnational Muslim pasts and presents.[14] Exploring the flexible frameworks of popular

heritage and traditions as actively constructed and shared by several artists in the Arab

world and Iran further contributes to these cross-cultural practices of Muslim imaginaries

in transnational modernism. Furthermore, by engaging artists and their practices with

materials *in situ* in the Middle East, as Anneka Lenssen argues in her study of midcentury

Syrian painting, "we can avoid the empty designations of 'modern' and 'innovative' that

are endemic to the now discredited but still pervasive Cold War model of cultural

competition" among cosmopolitan centers around the globe.[15] In navigating each of these

artist-driven engagements with popular and historical heritage as creative worldmaking,

the following chapters unfold new understandings of vernacular modernity in the Islamic

world.

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[13] See Dadi's *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
[14] Ibid, 20.
[15] Lenssen, *The Shape of Support: Painting and Politics in Syria's Twentieth Century* (PhD, MIT 2014), 17.

Islamic Heritage as Worldmaking

Heritage constitutes a broad spectrum of inherited traditions, objects, images, and culture. It also encompasses the range of contemporary activities, meanings, and selective appropriations that are catalyzed from the heritage realm.[16] As a concept in Arabic and Persian, the term "heritage" (*al-turath*) offers a specific understanding of active (or activating) history as one of inherited genealogy. This stands in slight opposition to the notion of "tradition." Whereas the English counterpart comes from the Latin term *trader*, "to deliver," as in conveying an entity across time and space, in Arabic the word *taqlid* ("tradition") literally means "imitation," in the sense of a child learning by imitating its parents.[17] Similar if slightly more negative definitions for tradition (also as *taqlid* or *sunnat*) can be translated in Persian as "imitation," "mimicry," and even "counterfeiting."[18] By contrast, the term "heritage" suggests an active handing off, or taking possession of history as inheritance, knowledge, or material remains.[19] "Heritage" also operates more like the French term *patrimoine* or cultural patrimony, as it implies ancestral inheritance and shared possession or benefits in its conceptual manifestation.

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[16] Emma Waterton and Steve Watson, "Heritage as a Focus of Research: Past, Present and New Directions." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1-17.

[17] James Cowan, *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, 1994), 919-920.

[18] Francis Joseph Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1892), 316.

[19] A related term for "inheritance" (*ars̱*) in Persian, loaned from the Arabic word *arth*, connotes acts of stirring up (as in dissent), or kindling a fire, implying a valiance of both excitement and danger in activating historic patrimony. See Steingass, 34, and Cowan, 15.

While in English-language art historical scholarship the notion of a living "tradition" or

"Islamic tradition" is more frequently deployed than "heritage" (with its now prevalent

neoliberal associations with globalized commodification, tourism, and economic value[20]),

in terms of contemporaneous intellectual frameworks for historical engagements, the

preferred term in many artists' statements, writings, and publications about both their art

and the found materials they explore is to a greater extent the word heritage, or *al-turath*

in Arabic and *mirath* in Persian.

Islamic heritage as a cultural category is a constructed and circulated designation

that offers diverse histories and shifting cultural presents. In terms of an ambiguous

designation, heritage provides artists a means of mobilizing the complex manifestations

of recent and more distant pasts through the visual and material contexts of the present.

Recent studies have shown Islamic heritage can sustain multiple viewpoints and temporal

realms, including vernacular and cosmopolitan heritages as well as religious practices.[21]

As such, it bypasses monolithic determinations of a temporally cohesive Islamic past or

an exclusionary, authoritative, and historically bound tradition. Popular heritage thereby

offers infinite possibilities for artists to construct visions of the past and present through

what is currently at play and relevant in everyday experiences and life contexts. Heritable

genealogies as actively constructed by artists can also make visible the logics behind

"particular positions and visions of the future."[22] Moreover, it fosters new imaginaries

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[20] For a discussion of UNESCO's globalizing initiatives with "heritage" from national to economic commodities, and "tradition" as cultural ritual, see Z.S. Strother, "Iconoclash: From 'Tradition' to 'Heritage' in Global Africa. *African Arts* 45, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 1, 4-6.
[21] For recent discussions and productive approaches to Islamic heritage, see Trinidad Rico, *The Making of Muslim Heritage: Muslim Pasts and Heritage Presents* (Singapore: Palgave Macmillan, 2017).
[22] Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 109-110.

and provides richly layered references and symbolic languages with which to negotiate and respond to political, economic, and cultural transformations of a modernizing Middle East. This dissertation therefore explores a wide variety of visual media throughout each chapter, in order to delineate how a particular selection of artists explicitly engaged with a number of diverse materials and representational strategies under the rubric of Islamic heritage.

With the ascent of decolonial movements and nation-state building across the region after the conclusion of World War II, heritage for artists in the Arab world and Iran became a pressing political project as well as a creative staging ground. The making of new nations also contributed to the urgency of heritage as a malleable source of identity, control, and meaning making in pursuit of demarcating unified and "authentically" modern national cultures. While artists often played key roles in nationalist heritage discourses, limiting the frame of their creative engagements to the precincts of nationalism discounts the transnational art developments at play, as well as the divergent interests and ever-changing situational practices with Islamic heritage in particular. Driven in part by a search for alternative genealogies to modernism than European historical lineages, these artists sought ways to mediate historic prototypes into present contexts as a vanguard strategy to lay claim to independent trajectories in globalizing art worlds.

Such sentiments were outlined in the manifesto by Jewad Selim (1921-1961) and Shakir Hassan Al Said (1925-2004) for the new Baghdad Group for Modern Art and read aloud by Al Said at their 1951 inaugural exhibition in Baghdad (**Figure 4**).[23] In tackling

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[23] For a study of artist Jewad Selim's activities with premodern Abbasid-era manuscript paintings, and the development of the Baghdad School for Modern Art, see Saleem Al-Bahloly, "History

the perceived gulf between a general "public" and artists on their quest for new visual

experiments, Al Said claimed:

> A new direction in the art of painting will resolve this problem as a contemporary
> awakening that picks up a path begun long ago: the first steps along this path were
> taken by the artists of the thirteenth century AD, and the new generation will find
> their ancestors' early efforts are still pointing the way forward, despite the
> darkness and the danger. The modern Iraqi artist is burdened with the weight of
> the culture of the age and the character of local civilization…May the heritage of
> the present times and our awareness of local character be our guides.[24]

In their written statements, we can see how both Shakir Hasan Al Said and Marcos

Grigorian articulate an artistic past immediately accessible in the present by way of

heritage, and an asserted ancestral lineage via paintings by previous artists in Islamic

history (whether temporally remote or closer linked).

For these and other artists included in this study, not only did Islamic heritage and

popular folk materials provide a pictorial alternative to prevalent representational modes

distinct to the cultural heritage of Western Europe. It also offered a formal and

conceptual genealogy different from that of European or American modernism, which in

turn allowed artists to lay claim to independence and creative freedom from Europe's art

historical legacy. These strategies of modernist differentiation through popular religious

heritage and artistic traditions, as scholars of interwar and postwar Japan have also

argued, ran a spectrum of reactions to globalizing modernity that share in commonality

across different areas of the world. "Such commonalties may include contestation

between tradition and modernity, search for cultural identity, validating their own native

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Regained: A Modern Artist in Baghdad Encounters a Lost Tradition of Painting," *Muqarnas* 35,
no. 1 (October 2018): 229–272.

[24] Shakir Hassan Al Said, "Bayan Jama'at Baghdad li-l-Fann al-Hadith al-Awwal," published in
Al-Adib 10, no. 7 (July 1951): 52. Translated from Arabic by Dina El Husseiny, republished in
Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents, ed. Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and
Nada Shabout (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 150-151.

culture" or even drawing from religious traditions as a palliative to cultural unmoorings

or estrangements in late capitalist modernity.[25]

Similar concerns of cultural patrimony undergirded Russian modernism at the

turn of the nineteenth-century. As Maria Taroutina's new study demonstrates, Russia's

Orthodox religious heritage also offered an alternative genealogy and cultural heritage to

that of Western Europe, as "the Byzantine visual tradition offered artists, beyond purely

pictorial affinities, new ontological, phenomenological, and philosophical possibilities for

refiguring the modern artwork."[26] Likewise, in historically Muslim regions, Islamic

heritage supplied an accessible residue of the past and all its accretions, through which

artists set about ordering their practices.[27] In doing so, they instilled the symbolic matter

of everyday life in the Islamic world into the worldmaking of art.

Engaging with varying accentuations of heritage in the present day, as Grigorian

and Al Said advocate, deliberately enacts a dynamic relationship with history in dialogue

with contemporary culture, rather than a static or one-sided engagement.[28] This

conceptualization by artists bypasses the common dismissal of historical Islamic artistic

traditions as inert, or denuded practices under the onset of European colonialism, power,

and influence. Indeed, institutionalizations of modernism as set forth in the late

nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ottoman Empire and encompassing Arab lands

"relegated both elite arts, like calligraphy and manuscript painting, and common arts, like

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[25] Hiroshi Nara, "Introduction: Inexorable Modernity." In *Inexorable Modernity: Japan's Grappling with Modernity in Arts*, ed. Hiroshi Nara (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 11.
[26] Maria Taroutina, *The Icon and the Square: Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 3.
[27] As David Lowenthal once wrote, "Such revelatory anachronisms may seem bizarre but are consistent with reality as experienced; any modern reader is similarly bound to invest historical scenes with his own knowledge and perspectives." See Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 410.
[28] Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* (2013), 33.

carpentry and ceramics, to a single 'traditional' sphere, considered either as 'folk' or 'Islamic' and recast as part of a past often received as static."[29] Such categorizations paralleled the process of art classifications between "traditional crafts" and "academic" European beaux-arts training in early twentieth-century Iran.[30] Yet by the late 1950s the salient possibilities of "traditional," "folk," and "Islamic" authenticity attracted many artists seeking to buck established genres and perceptions of modern art. Transfigured onto canvas, etchings, and increasingly mixed media techniques, this constellation of creative impulses with Islamic heritage and its popular practices unleashed a sustainable avant-garde for the visual arts of the Middle East.

Such a methodological approach to these artists' creative efforts also reveals their interests and complex understandings of Islamic heritage in terms of religious practice. For instance, in a 1983 journal entry of building sketches and note preparations for the opening of the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions, the artist Ali Jabri (1942-2002) wrote of pilgrimage architecture in Syria and Palestine: "…local needs and local aspirations created mosques and monuments…The Islamic inheritance of thousands of holy places which had maintained their attraction at the level of folk piety and therefore were sooner or later Islamicized" (**Figure 5**).[31] As artists sought to insert the vernacular and everyday into their artistic media and creative worldmakings, they sometimes encountered the very human devotional behaviors that generated historical arts and architecture of the Islamic world.

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[29] Wendy Shaw, *Ottoman Painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 2.
[30] See Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art" (2013), 50-52; Rudi Matthee, "Transforming Dangerous Nomads into Useful Artisans, Technicians, Agriculturalists: Education in the Reza Shah Period." In *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921-1941*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 128-151.
[31] Ali Jabri's 1983 Notebook, unpaged. Ali Jabri Heritage Foundation, Amman, Jordan.

Given that various Islamic reform movements since the 1970s have increasingly discouraged popular and mystical practices as a means of asserting orthodox authority, contemporary art engagements with Islamic heritage inevitably ran up against these prescriptive tensions.[32] Fears of losing the multivocal dimensions of religious heritage as well as the destruction of historical heritage in changing geopolitics of the day-to-day became another vital commitment for artists across the region. Writing about himself shortly before his death in 2002, Ali Jabri characterized his lifelong practice as one "most concerned with the heritage of the past as well as its contemporary expression…he endeavors to achieve the safeguarding and highlighting of traditional environments, urban or country."[33] By invoking a shared heritage across environments, populations, and implicit class circumstances, Jabri simultaneously situates his artistic world as one predicated on the dialectics of globalization and the real world dynamics of the avant-garde.[34]

The productive tensions between urban and rural, and elite and popular contexts, arose from artists' engagements with Islamic heritage and its discursive practices as much as it did in other progressive art movements and vernacular cultures in the history of transnational modernism. An interest and fascination with "the material substance of things"[35] was another driving force in artists' selective and explicit experiments with

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[32] For a discussion of ordering frameworks of popular and magical expressions in Islamic discourses of authority, see Travis Zadeh, "An Ingestible Scripture: Qur'anic Erasure and the Limits of 'Popular Religion." *Material Culture and Asian Religions: Text, Image, Object*, eds. Benjamin J. Fleming and Richard D. Mann (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 97-119.

[33] Quoted excerpt in Jack Persekian, *DisORIENTation* exhibition catalogue (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2003).

[34] Andrea Flores Khalil sets forth a similar argument towards contemporary art experiments with Islamic history in North Africa. See *The Arab Avant-Garde: Experiments in North African Art and Literature* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

[35] Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism* (2013), 3.

Islamic symbolic matter. Artists began introducing a slew of found materials and objects

into their drawings, paintings, and even prints, from Siah Armajani's haul and reuse of

paper scraps from the Southern Tehran bazaar, to Rafa Nasiri's carefully gathered, cut,

and preserved calligraphic cloth banners from late 1960s Muharram processions around

Baghdad and southern Iraq. By inserting religious iconography or folk symbols into the

work of art, these artworks engage with (and even contribute to) an Islamic cosmology of

the modern world. In a sense, as artists explored functional associations formerly imbued

in historical media of the Islamic world, they structured their new creative worlds with

their charismatic power and symbolic functions. These assembled artworks thus offer

artistic worldmaking with new techniques, materials, and images create a new cosmos by

citing and reconstituting a richly layered Islamic past.

In forging a historical narrative of contemporary art engagements with heritage in

the Islamic world, Thomas Crow's discussion of the "allegoresis" of imagined worlds in

1960s Pop art experiments with vernacular American motifs provides a critical

framework.[36] Citing the theorist Angus Fletcher, Crow explains how the procedures of

allegory, as interpretive or creative, appealed to American Pop artists through its ability

to conjure imagery and ordering of the world through its extant symbolic matter.[37] In

terms of a visual worldmaking or a symbolic cosmos, Crow deploys Fletcher's argument

for a "dual meaning of the Greek word *kosmos*, which can signify, in the usual way, the

totality of a human universe, but also stands for the vivid emblems by which the

components and inhabitants of such a world identify themselves within its heraldic

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[36] Thomas Crow, *The Long March of Pop: Art, Music, and Design 1930-1995* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 32-33.
[37] Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), 109-110.

order."[38] As it denotes a large-scale macrocosm and the small-scale microcosm, as well as the ordering of these powerful agents and images,[39] the concept and allegorical function of a visual cosmos encapsulates the plurality of devices and materials the artists in this dissertation explore in their creative worldmaking with vernacular heritage of the Islamic world. It also offers the sense of an expanding universe of images, where the process of discovery is encompassed within its assemblage, as the cosmos "has to expand with the expansion of knowledge itself."[40] Motivated by a constellation of interests, these prominent artists and their creative outputs contributed to broader research and understanding of popular images, symbols, and practices in a modernizing Middle East. By bringing their works and worldmaking together in this dissertation, I argue that in their search for effective ways to represent the vividness of everyday life they recognized and imagined an Islamic cosmos for the contemporary world.

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[38] Crow, *The Long March of Pop* (2014), 33.
[39] Fletcher, *Allegory* (1964), 113.
[40] Ibid, 144-145.

Chapter 1 Vernacular Modernity: Siah Armajani, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, and Shi'i Islamic "Pop" Art in Late 1950s Iran

Visual artists in late 1950s Iran were increasingly drawn to referencing and representing found folkloric and popular religious materials. They did so driven by various interests and through a variety of techniques and media, but their cumulative creative experiments with Iran's historical visual traditions all speak to a broad turn towards depicting richly layered symbols of everyday life in midcentury Iran. Much like their American Pop artist counterparts, young artists Siah Armajani (b. 1939) and Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (b. 1937) searched for new ways to integrate and expand upon the capabilities of the work of art to address the shifting realities of the world through its contemporaneous media. For artists in and around Marcos Grigorian's circles, including Zenderoudi, examples of traditional "coffeehouse" paintings and other popular folk arts had started to be exhibited and publicized, thereby supplying new latent images and symbolic materials for nascent contemporary art practices. At the same time, these activities ensured the preservation and recognition of coffeehouse paintings and other vernacular Iranian arts one of many essential inputs within multiple historical through-lines in contemporary Iranian art.

Several scholars and critics have characterized the coalescence of these artistic methods into the 1960s "Saqqakhaneh School" (*saqqakhana* is a traditional votive water fountain) as an elitist and royalist state-sponsored movement, one that abstracted popular Iranian heritage into mere decorative glossings on canvas bereft of historical or meaningful context.[41] Instead, by focusing on the earlier artworks of the late 1950s, the crucible in which contemporary experiments with Shi'i Islamic heritage first unfolded—before the state's recognition and appropriation—can be more fully explored and understood. In particular, these creative activities with found religious materials and folk arts across Tehran took place in the years immediately following the 1953 Iranian coup d'état and overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh (1882-1967), and subsequent increase in government suppression of political parties, clerical authorities, and Shi'i Muslim religious practices.[42] These efforts brought heightened attention to the power dynamics and visible practices of popular religion in everyday life, which were increasingly at odds with the desired image of Iranian modernity by the Pahlavi regime, as well as with consolidating definitions of Shi'ism as a source of political and sovereign power by clerical authorities (*'ulama'*).

Considered within this short historical moment, I contend one of the driving forces behind these early Shi'i Islamic heritage engagements was artists looking to

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[41] As art historian Abbas Daneshvari argues, "many saw the Saqqa-khaneh as a sign of a new national identity and as an avant-garde movement. Though rightly so, it was also a portent of the conservative and traditional changes to come. Like Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), the Saqqa-khaneh was admired by State agencies and the class whose destruction the art signaled." See "Seismic Shifts Across Political Zones." In *Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity*, Staci Gem Scheiwiller ed. (New York: Anthem Press, 2013), 106-107.

[42] For a historical overview of late 1950s Shi'i clerical opposition to Muhammad Reza Shah's government, and the marking of Shi'ism as an alternate national "sovereignty" to Pahlavi nationalism, see Aaron Vahid Sealy, *"In Their Place": Marking and Unmarking Shi'ism in Pahlavi Iran* (PhD, University of Michigan 2011), 279-355.

historical symbols and folk religious visual traditions as a symbolically-charged, tangible

life worlds through which to participate in and negotiate the complex politicizing

modernism of late 1950s Iran. Included in this circumstantial mix were the leftist

sensibilities of some artists, perhaps best exemplified by Siah Armajani and his well-

known affiliation with the Marxist Tudeh Party of Iran and former Prime Minister

Mossadegh's National Front, which eventually led to the artist leaving Iran and moving

permanently to the United States in 1960.[43] By examining Armajani and Zenderoudi's

earliest compositions in which they encountered, collected, and experimented with

vernacular materials, this chapter traces their different and concomitant artist trajectories

of creative worldmaking with Shi'i Islamic heritage in late 1950s Iranian modernism.

Modern Mediations: "Book," "Lock & Key"

In a 1957 watercolor composition by Siah Armajani in colored pencil on paper,

the Archangel Israfil blows his trumpet across the painting, signaling the Day of

Judgment has arrived (**Figure 1.1**). Above the angel are loosely swooping thick black

Persian calligraphic lines resembling a *basmala* scattered with red rhomboid points and

impressions from an engraved seal. Whereas the *basmala* or the Arabic phrase *bismallah

al-rahman al-rahim* ("In the Name of God, most Gracious, the most Merciful") is the

most common written and recited opening text in Islamic manuscripts, including the

beginning of each chapter (*surah*) in the Qur'an, here it is largely illegible. Stepping

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[43] Clare Davies and Victoria Sung eds., *Siah Armajani: Follow This Line* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2018), 10-15.

towards the center the figure straddles the lightly sketched folio-like rubrics framing

freely written Persian nastaʿliq script in black, blue, and red lines. At the bottom of the

two-column poetic text appears another angelic figure, plunged into a black cave-like

ovoid. The two figures appear as faithfully outlined and lightly colored models from

Persianate painting practices in early modern book arts. The angel Israfil appears almost

exactly as he does in premodern works such as in a manuscript of al-Qazwini's "The

Wonders of Creation and Oddities of Existence" (*ʿajaʾib al-mukhluqat*) from 15th-

century Egypt or Syria (**Figure 1.2**). As one of the four archangels and guardians, the

name of Israfil is often invoked in protective amulets and talismanic arts.[44] Israfil also

frequently appears in modern depictions of the Day of Judgment, particularly in Shiʿi

devotional contexts and religious paintings in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century

Iran. The presence of figural depictions in historic Islamic religious visual traditions

indicates Armajani's knowledge of historical manuscript and painting practices, as the

title of the work "Book" (*kitab*) indicates a purposeful invocation of the structures and

images common in Islamic book arts.

Israfil also appeared in a weekly news journal, *Sur-i Israfil* (The Trumpet Call of

Israfil), published in Tehran from 1907-8.[45] Known for its satirical content and criticism

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[44] Israfil appears in Islamic amulets and other apotropaic objects with the other archangels (Mikhaʾil, Gibraʾil, and ʿAzraʾil). See Venetia Porter ed., *Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 2011), 166; J. Ruska, et al., "Tilsma," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, P. Bearman et al., eds. Consulted online 21 November 2017 at: http://dx.doi.org /10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7553; Bess Allen Donaldson, *The Wild Rue: A Study of Muhammadan Magic and Folklore in Iran* (London: Luzad & Co., 1938), 75-78; 207.

[45] See Pardis Minucheher, "Sur-i Israfil in Exile: Modern Definitions of Monarchy," *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 3 (2009): 389-408; Arasteh, A. Reza, *Education and Social Awakening in Iran*, 101-2; Mangol Bayat, "The Passage of the Supplement," in *Iran's First Revolution: Shiʿism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1909* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 184-214.

of socioeconomics and the rule of the conservative clerics over modern religious practices and discourses, the newspaper's banner carried a lithograph print of Israfil that may have also inspired the artist Siah Armajani and his incipit image for producing a composite Israfil figure (**Figure 1.3**). These art historical references, however, are articulated in the painting as an assemblage of disparate visualizations of painting and calligraphy. Without contextual relationships between the figures and handwritten texts on the modern "book" page, the resulting work presents a distillation of the various parts of a traditional Islamic manuscript page. Armajani flexibly assembled the painting in a way that hints at historic objects and calligraphic frameworks but ultimately composes these forms as floating freely and overlapping in a new experimental configuration on the page. Thus, Armajani's 1957 painting mediates and repurposes older art archetypes in his work that suggests his creative freedom to observe, study, and ultimately wield Islamic artistic traditions in a modern artwork.

Yet closely reading Armajani's written script portrays another trajectory of Persian cultural production. Disjointed in shape and appearing hastily composed, the letters are faintly scratched onto the page and descending into the lower margins and even crammed outside the colored paper rubrics in the manner of a hurriedly finished school exam. From the top right of the page appears *kitab aval* or "first book" in a calligraphic box (*jadval*), indicating the painting is mimicking the organizational structure of numbered Persianate manuscripts, or is perhaps the first in a series. Beneath the undulating, thickly applied *basmala* line appears a one-word line of "*bism*" (in the name of) below, scratched onto the page in bright blue ink. The third line then begins with a large blotch of black and red wax with a hardened square seal impression contained

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within, and from which the calligraphic line "*bism masnad bina*" (in the name of our

throne) extends followed by "*bagh*" (garden) underneath. Accompanying these markings

are red rhomboids, or the diamond shaped-dots (*nuqta*) where a reed pen tip initially

touches onto the page, which constitute the basic building blocks of calligraphy in Arabic

and Persian script.[46]

For his handwriting in his contemporary production, Armajani makes this implicit

proportional system of writing visible and disordered. Instead of invisibly structuring his

letters, they are scattered around and grazing the edge of the inked words and letters.

These dots delineate the joins between letterforms and diacritic marks, while extending

upward in vertical stacks of six and nine marks alongside the extended letter *alif*.

Looking across this constellation of points while attempting to read Armajani's twisting

writing suggests the artist attempted to construct a visible structure for handwriting that

refuses to comply within the measures and rules of Persian calligraphy. As such,

Armajani's experimental practice with traditional calligraphic points and lines expands

the historical semiotic system into a chaotic rupture of red diamond points and black ink

streaks across the visual field. Additionally, these calligraphic mark makings are seen as

trace "pearls" of ordered knowledge and wisdom in Islamic calligraphic traditions.[47] In

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[46] As David Roxburgh concisely summarizes, "The rhombic points are the diamond-shaped dots left by the pen when pressed in a stationary mode against the paper and then released and lifted away." See Roxburgh "'The Eye is Favored for Seeing the Writing's Form': On the Sensuality and the Sensuous in Islamic Calligraphy," *Muqarnas* 25 (2008): 287. These points form a scaled proportional system between the dynamic points and lines composing each letter, and provide a horizontal structure stringing words together in a line. While serving as an armature of measurement, they are also seen as trace measurements of the calligrapher's movement across the compositional surface. See Roxburgh (2008): 294-295.

[47] In the corpus of wisdom on premodern Persian calligraphic practices, one key concept was the idea of writing containing ideas, as one calligrapher stated, "Handwriting is the necklace of wisdom. It serves to sort the pearls of wisdom, to bring its dispersed pieces into good order, to put its stray bits together, and to fix its setting (?)." Attributed to Ja'far b. Yahya (d. 803). See Franz Rosenthal, "Abu Ḥaiyan Al-Tawhidi on Penmanship," *Ars Islamica* 13 (1948): 12; Roxburgh

another historical aphorism, the rhomboid point on the paper sheet is compared to stars

illuminating the celestial heavens, as "The stars of wise sayings [shine] in the darkness of

ink."[48] Considered within this rich symbolic cosmos, Armajani's paper composition of

calligraphic points and lines manipulates the images and symbolic textures of premodern

manuscripts to activate new interpretations of historical materials. Within the artist's

hands, both the large-scale order and discrete signs of calligraphic orderings (like the

nuqta) are reorganized in a new creative world of familiar references juxtaposed in

unexpected ways.[49]

　　"Second Book" (*kitab duvam*) continues these calligraphic meanderings as the

next calligraphic cartouche extends down the second half of the page next to a line of

twine glued into the sealed wax residue down to another smeared black circle. Such

assemblage of the traces and impressions of book arts together with an insertion of string

as a found object suggests an artist exploring the potential visual and material

transposition of the artistic and physical trappings of an illustrated manuscript (including

the text block binding's threads) into the two-dimensional modernist canvas or paper

surface. Even the seal impressions in both wax and black ink stamped around the work's

heading mimic the authorial stamps often found in a manuscript colophon page or its

endpapers. Along with the drawn and pigmented angelic figures placed into the main text

frame, the overwhelming impression of "Book" is as if the artist took hold of a historic

illustrated manuscript page and shook its contents loose.

"'The Eye is Favored for Seeing the Writing's Form'" (2008): 279-280; Gruber and Dimmig,
Pearls of Wisdom exhibition catalogue (Ann Arbor, MI: Kelsey Museum Publication, 2014), 1.
[48] See Rosenthal, "Abu Ḥaiyan Al-Tawhidi on Penmanship," (1948): 17.
[49] Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Cornell University Press, 1964),
109-111.

Culminating this sense of disorder and jumbled out-of-placeness is the contents of the main block of handwriting, which contains a modern 1918 poem by "Isaac Siavash" (*Ishak siyavash*).[50] The poetic insertion contains slanted hemistiches about a bride and bridegroom's wedding note and indicates the artist's interest in early twentieth-century Persian poetry. This incorporation of modernist poetry into a painterly composition is similar to efforts by other prominent avant-garde painters in 1940s-1950s Iran, including Jalil Ziapour (1920-1999) who actively worked with and published modernist Iranian poetry in art publications and other productions.[51] Yet the specific insertion of a modern twentieth-century text in Armajani's "Book" work linguistically aligns a historic paper medium for communicating calligraphic and poetic writing into a symbolic visual field for modernist experimentation, exploration, and even destabilization of historical forms and visual systems.

Taking these moving parts of images, materials, and texts as a whole, Armajani's 1957 paper composition exemplifies the various image sources and artistic heritage circulating in late 1950s Tehran art schools and artistic circles. Armajani's works as a young art student beginning his training at the time reveal the artist's instruction and interest in historical Persianate art practices and distilling structural and visual languages, a representational strategy with which he had continued to create works across different

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[50] I have not yet been able to identify this writer or the source of the poem. Armajani's full name is Ismail Siavash Armajani, and so if the name is actually written *Ismael Siavash* this could be a nom de plume for the artist (although the date would place the painting and/or the poem before his birth).

[51] As Layla Diba notes in her essay from the 2013 *Iran Modern* exhibition catalogue, the poet Hushang Irani whose "*Jigh-i Banafsh* (Purple Scream) published in Jalil Ziapour's *Khurus-i Jangi* second series, number 2 (1330 h/1951) created heated controversy among the poems and intelligentsia." See Diba's "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art," *Iran Modern*, 65, fn. 119; and Abbas Daneshvari, "Seismic Shifts Across Political Zones." In *Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity*, Staci Gem Scheiwiller ed. (New York: Anthem Press, 2013), 104-105.

cultural contexts and media throughout his career.[52] His use of the forms of traditional

Islamic and Persian book arts and painted pages as potential bricolage for his

compositions suggest the free experimentation and creative interplay between historical

media and new contemporary art practices being introduced to Iran's urban art programs

by the late 1950s. What little has been written on these visual practices during this period

often surmises the era as a brief interlude before the more vibrant and established Iranian

art exhibitions and festivals of the 1960s and 1970s. Those decades are remembered

foremost for the expanding Tehran Biennial as a major national and regional showcase

for artists that simultaneously facilitated the rise and coalescence of the "Saqqakhaneh"

movement (especially with the 1962 Biennial exhibition), as well as for the founding and

opening of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in October 1977.[53]

The "Saqqakhaneh," or name for the public water fountains found across Iran's

devotional landscapes decorated with votive objects and icons of holy figures in Shi'i

Islam, was the name applied by art critic Karim Emami (1930-2005) to the modern

paintings, sculptures, and graphic works by contemporary Iranian artists who were

increasingly working with and representing popular arts associated with Shi'i Islam.[54]

Scholars and art critics have typically traced the beginnings of the "Saqqakhaneh

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[52] Siah Armajani left Iran in 1960, at the age of 22, to move to the United States and begin studying philosophy at Macalester College in Minnesota, where his uncle was also a professor of philosophy. Until the recent retrospective exhibition *Siah Armajani: Follow This Line* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (Sep-Dec 2018) and the Met Breuer (Feb-June 2019), he was most well known in the U.S. as a public sculpture artist engaged with vernacular American architectural history and civic participation. See the exhibition catalogue *Siah Armajani: Follow This Line*, eds. Clare Davies and Victoria Sung (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2018).

[53] On the history of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA) institution and exhibition practices, see Alisa Eimen, "Shaping and Portraying Identity at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (1977-2005)." In *Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity*, Staci Gem Scheiwiller ed. (New York: Anthem Press, 2013), 83-99.

[54] Kamran Diba, "Iran." In Wijdan Ali ed., *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World* (London and Amman: The Royal Society of Fine Arts, 1989): 152-153.

School," also known as the "Spiritual Pop Art" movement (as architect and art critic Kamran Diba [b. 1937] described it when he viewed the collective works[55]), to the works by Hossein Zenderoudi (b. 1937), Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937), Faramarz Pilaram (1937-1982), and others exhibited in the Third Tehran Biennial of 1962. However, earlier works like "Book" by a young eighteen-year-old Armajani further demonstrates, even more so than Marcos Grigorian's activities, that the onset of creative engagements and activities associated with Shi'i Islamic "Pop" art appeared earlier and less cohesively than the official historicizing narratives or state-sponsored apparatus around the 1960s Tehran Biennial exhibitions.[56]

Whereas Armajani's 1957 "Book" composition illustrates an awareness and versatility in assorted worlds of Persian literary arts (if not a slight undermining of their ordered practices), a 1958 Armajani paper work presents a different symbolic venue for the young artist's practices (**Figure 1.4**). More aged in appearance, and making use of collage technique in its material and visual assemblage, "Lock & Key" presents a work on paper mimicking a page of text with images of metal objects incorporated into the

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[55] See Kamran Diba, "Iran." In Wijdan Ali ed., *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World* (London and Amman: The Royal Society of Fine Arts, 1989): 152-153; Hamid Keshmirshekan, "Neo-Traditionalism and Modern Iranian Painting: The *Saqqakhaneh* School in the 1960s," *Iranian Studies* v. 38, no. 4 (2005), 628-629; Fereshteh Daftari, "*Another Modernism*," in *Picturing Iran: Art, Society & Revolution*, eds. Lynn Gumpert and Shiva Balaghi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 39-85; Maryam Ekhtiar, and Julia Rooney, "Artists of the Saqqakhana Movement (1950s-60s)," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000). Accessed 21 November 2017 at http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/saqq/hd_saqq.htm

[56] In 1961, a group of artists including Marcos Grigorian wrote a letter rebuking the biennial administration and royal court organizers for failing to continually support and sustain the event with regularity, and for failing to foster important connections between artists and the state in producing the art festival. Without a cohesive exhibition structure where contemporary artists were given more control, "art would remain a product of the past, the imperial and the periphery." Alisa Eimen, "Shaping and Portraying Identity at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (1977-2005)," 86-87. See also Ruyin Pakbaz, "Chronology." In *Pioneers of Iranian Modern Art: Parviz Tanavoli*, ed. Ruyin Pakbaz and Yaghoub Emdadian (Tehran: Iranian Institute for Promotion of Visual Arts, 2003), 28.

paper frame. Difficult to deduce as it twists up and around the red *jadval* rubric, the handwritten text in the upper right corner is another *bismala* that reads more clearly as "*bismallah al-rahman al-rahim*" than the inscription in "Book." Here, instead of visually and vocally opening a sacred book or other text, the phrase is partially submerged under smears of glossy red wax. Stamped impressions seal the fatty and malleable material onto the paper page, while red pigment traces a square lock into the middle of the right text rubric line. The metal object of a lock is denoted by the written labeling "*qufl va klid*" (lock and key) and directly to the right lock is its long black key. On the upper left corner of the topsy-turvy text field appears a human hand and forearm in chalky white pastel pigment and outlined in green pigment. These two signified objects in Armajani's painting are votive objects in Iran, and in Shi'i devotional practices and prayers especially.

Within the specific context of Iranian heritage, the metal lock has particular significance. A longstanding metal craft and artistic tradition from pre-Islamic civilization, in the modern popular culture of Iran "locks are thought to possess special powers to protect the user from harm or evil, and to assist in securing the fulfillment of certain wishes as well as in gaining happiness and good fortune."[57][58] The most common

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[57] John Wertime, "The Lock and the Locksmith in the Traditional Culture of Iran: A Short Survey," in *Locks from Iran: Pre-Islamic to Twentieth Century* eds. Tanavoli, Parviz, and John T. Wertime (Washington D.C.: The Parviz Tanavoli Collection and the Smithsonian Institution, 1976), 20.
[58] The metal craftsmen who produced the many different shapes and types of locks in Iran used to number in the hundreds in urban centers, but in the twentieth century they were displaced by industrialization and introduction of factory metalwork. See Wertime, "The Lock and the Locksmith in the Traditional Culture of Iran: A Short Survey," 16. For an overview of types and working mechanisms of historical Iranian locks, see ibid, 30-47; Hans E. Wulff, "Metalworking Crafts: Locksmith." In *The Traditional Crafts of Persia* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), 65-72; Tim Stanley, "Locks, padlocks, and tools." In Emilie Savage-Smith, ed. *Science, Tools, Magic. Part Two: Mundane Worlds* (London: The Nour Foundation, 1997), 356-281.

type of lock is the moveable lock, or padlock, which can commonly be used for ritual

practices, vows, and prayers.[59] The physical act of closing and opening a lock performs a

reminder of a vow or seal in different contexts, from protecting a pregnant woman to

binding a bride and groom together from the marriage contract to the wedding bed.[60]

They can be carried as talismanic objects (with inscriptions engraved into the steel or

silver body) and are often found clasped on chains or a supplicant's clothes, or attached at

pilgrimage sites or religious shrines.[61] Along with strips of torn cloth, locks are attached

to the metal grill (*zarih*) as part of the process of prayer and as a physical reminder of a

vow (**Figure 1.5**).[62]

     Besides Iran's cultural practices and devotional landscape, locks are also used

during 'Ashura, the tenth day of the holy month of Muharram when extensive public

mourning ceremonies commemorate the death of Imam Husayn, the Prophet

Muhammad's grandson, and his follows at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE). This pivotal

event in early Islamic history witnessed the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imam

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[59] Cloth strips and other types of ex-votos are also attached to Muharram metalwork standards, known as *'alam*, during mourning processions and public ceremonies. See Christiane Gruber, "*Nazr* Necessities: Votive Practices and Objects in Iranian Muharram Ceremonies." In Ittai Weinryb, ed., *Ex-Voto: Votive Offerings Across Cultures* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 259.

[60] The talismanic use of locks for marriage processes, and even for unlocking a young woman's potential love interest and appeal, echoes the romantic overtones of the 1957 "Book" painting's texts, and thus connects the overt romantic text in "Book" with the insinuated ritual subtexts of romance in "Lock & Key." For lock uses in love and marriage, see Wertime's discussion, 20-26. On early twentieth-century ritual practices with cloth to sew and bind together love in a new marriage, see Bess Allen Donaldson, *The Wild Rue: A Study of Muhammadan Magic and Folklore in Iran* (London: Luzad & Co., 1938), 48-54.

[61] The lock of a shrine or tomb is also believed to have protective power, and is touched as part of the ritual circumambulation of the site.

[62] On cloth supplicatory vows during Muharram ceremonies, see Ingvild Flaskerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism* (London: Continuum, 2010), 189-191. For examples of locks and metal grill doors of pilgrimage shrines, see James Allan, "Shi'ism and the Craft Industries," in *The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shi'ism: Iraq, Iran, and the Indian Sub-continent* (London: Azimuth Editions, 2012), 101-4.

Husayn, murdered along with his family and followers on the desert plains near the Euphrates riverbank. On the tenth day of battle, remembered as the day of ʿAshura during the month of Muharram, Husayn was slain and beheaded by the enemy soldier Shimr of the Umayyad army. During the nineteenth century, when Muharram processions became popularized and widespread in Iran and other Shiʿi majority regions, these events commonly included public flagellates performing ritual bodily mortification, locks were worn on human flesh (*gulf-zani* or "lock wearing") and also occasionally attached to the ʿalam (processional steel standard in the shape of a cypress tree that also represents the Prophet's family) and *nakhl* (lit. "date-palm tree"; a wood sculptural representation of Imam Husayn's funerary bier), as a way to partake in those objects' holiness and as a sign of blessing carried through the lamenting crowds.[63] Thus, the lock is not simply a utilitarian device or craft object, but a symbolically rich supplicatory vehicle and object stand-in for "binding" vows in Iranian Shiʿi devotional life and popular vernacular practices.

Likewise is the *panja*, or the single hand of Abu'l-Fazl ʿAbbas, the half-brother and standard-bearer of Imam Husayn, as painted in the left corner of "Lock & Key." During the tragic battle when the camp was besieged from the Euphrates water source next to Karbala, ʿAbbas attempted to fetch water only to have his right hand cut off by the enemy before he died, a physical act of sacrifice frequently wielded and symbolically reenacted in Shiʿi visual and material culture. Along with locks, "Saqqakhaneh" artists in

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[63] These large and richly decorated wooden cenotaphs are meant to represent the date-palm stretcher that carried the body of Imam Husayn to his burial ground near Karbala. See Jean Calmard, "The Consolidation of Safavid Shiʿism: Folklore and Popular Religion." In *Safavid Persia: History and Politics in Islamic Society*, ed. Charles Melville (London and New York: I.B. Tauris 1996), 155; Peter Chelkowski, "Popular Shiʿi mourning rituals," *Alserat* 12 (1986), 212-213.

the later 1960s studied and drew from the *panja* and the *panja-i panj tan* (emblem of the Five Holy Ones: the Prophet Muhammad, ʿAli, Hasan, Husayn, and Fatima) metalwork standards and symbolic five-fingered handprint symbols for their experimental compositions.[64] As seen in a photograph of a twentieth century *saqqakhana* votive shrine site in **Figure 1.5**, the carved metal standard in the shape of a human hand also carries votive meaning and physical transferal of prayers through a charged location along with modern locks and green (the symbolic color of Islam and the Prophet's family and descendants) ribbons and strings attached. Carved metal "hands" are also often carried as ʿ*alam* standards during Muharram, linking the religious use of the painted white and green hand with the painted image of the apotropaic lock and key.

Placing representational forms of both of these metal objects in his mixed media collage artwork suggests Armajani's purposeful solicitation of the material and ritual activities around Shiʿi popular arts. The placement of the red square lock over the edge of the text frame indicates the lock may not be a standalone moveable one, but an imbedded one in which the text frame is actually a door or seal to a shrine or other sacred space. Is Armajani here presenting an abstracted yet textually conveyed view of a *saqqakhana* shrine? The semiotic framing oscillates the image back into its material structure as above the hand of Abbas and another wax seal is written *hashiya* (or "margin,"

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[64] See Keshmirshekan, "Neo-Traditionalism and Modern Iranian Painting: The *Saqqakhaneh* School in the 1960s," *Iranian Studies* v. 38, no. 4 (2005), 614; Keshmirshekan, "SAQQĀ-ḴĀNA SCHOOL OF ART," *Encyclopædia Iranica,* online edition, 2009, 3. On the use of the five-fingered *panja* metalwork silhouettes in ʿ*alam* standards to represent the five family members of the Prophet Muhammad (*ahl al-bayt*, "the people of the house"), see James Allan, "Shiʿism and the Craft Industries," in *The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shiʿism: Iraq, Iran, and the Indian Sub-continent* (London: Azimuth Editions, 2012), 80-120; Parviz Tanavoli and Venetia Porter, "Parts of the Body in Shiʿa Islam." In *Faith and Transformation: Votive Offerings and Amulets from the Alexander Girard Collection*, ed. Doris Francis (Santa Fe: Museum of International Folk Art, 2007), 110-113.

"annotation," or "postscript") directly in the upper page margin, recalling the paper page's missive and potential for meaning-making accumulation. Presented here together, these painted devotional objects within the composition suggest a paper template for enmeshed representational signs and vehicles of communication in popular Iranian religious heritage and worlds of devotional practices.

Altogether, these two complex 1957-1958 artworks by Armajani suggests that this interest in historical forms—Shi'i votive objects in particular—fueled his contemporary experimentation and creative worldmaking well before the historically recognized and state-sponsored 1960s era of Iran's "Saqqakhaneh" movement. These and Armajani's other earliest works were transported to the United States hidden in the young artist's suitcase when he permanently left Iran in 1960 at the age of twenty-one, resulting in a time capsule of early artistic study and enterprise that largely remained in the artist's possession throughout his now 58-year career in the United States.[65] Yet Armajani's initiatory explorations of Shi'i devotional materials and everyday folk practices came about in a different circumstance than Marcos Grigorian's previously discussed engagement with Iranian coffeehouse paintings (and its still active practitioners). Armajani, who grew up in a Christian family, states he grew interested in Persian "miniatures" and "folk fairytales" during his training in private lessons and then at the University of Tehran.[66] An activist from his youth, Armajani was interested in Marxism before becoming a member of the National Front of Iran, one of the many political parties and trade unions suppressed and even banned by the Pahlavi monarchy after the U.K. and

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[65] Holland Cotter, "Siah Armajani: 1957-1964," *New York Times* (September 30, 2011), C28.
[66] Fereshteh Daftari, "Redefining Modernism." In *Iran Modern* (New York: Asia Society, 2013), 39

U.S. orchestrated 1953 coup d'état (or the 28 Mordad coup).[67] Indeed, it was these leftist

political affiliations that reportedly led him to see and begin engaging with popular

religious rituals. According to recent statements and interviews, Armajani first

encountered Shi'i Islamic heritage while working as a runner for the National Front.

Armajani shared these recollections in a pamphlet issued at his 2011 show "Siah

Armajani, 1957-1964," in New York:

> South Tehran was a universe all unto itself. The language of Iran is 'Farsi' which
> is closed, ambiguous, embedded with allegory and metaphor and mixed with
> political, religious, and social hints. The language of South Tehran is hasty and
> rushed sometimes leaving the syntax behind. Thousands of dispossessed, down-
> trodden and oppressed were strangers in their own city, as they had been made to
> feel diminished and insignificant. They were judged and condemned by others for
> the way they dressed, talked, walked and believed. On the way to South Tehran
> you passed by the main post office. Two or three 'scribers' would be seen sitting
> on the steps where people could hire them to write a personal letter to family,
> break a spell or write a special prayer for curing sickness.[68]

Some of these prayers on paper were inserted into the artist's other late 1950s-era mixed

media works, including in 1957 "Fairytale" (**Figure 1.6**). This collage work contains

three different paper prayer inscriptions, including one in the shape of a human body

outline with letters and numbers (*abjad*) inscribed inside its form.[69] In this and other

1950s collage works containing and showcasing these inscribed paper prayers and

talismanic systems, we can see the artist's interest in languages and forms of other

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[67] Ali Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 48.

[68] Artist statement, Meulensteen Gallery (New York: 2011). See also Hamed Yousefi, "Profane Illuminations: The Early Works." In *Follow This Line: Siah Armajani*, eds. Clare Davies and Victoria Sung (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2018): 67; Shiva Balaghi, "Language as Bridge in the Work of Siah Armajani," *Hyperallergic* (February 27, 2019). Accessed February 28, 2019 at https://hyperallergic.com/486380/languages-as-bridge-in-the-work-of-siah-armajani/.

[69] In Iran these paper amulets or talismans could include a mixture of Qu'ranic text and magical vocabulary and symbols. They were historically either handwritten or block printed (*tarsh*) and "were believed to keep their strength as long as the integrity of the inscription and the amulet itself were not compromised." See Emilie Savage-Smith, "Medieval Islamic Amulets, Talismans, and Magic." In *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, eds. Finbarr Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoğlu (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 543.

symbolic worlds beyond the historical Islamic artistic heritage or calligraphic practices. These contemporary works document 1950s-era popular religious heritage through their very material practice, in a parallel yet completely different engagement than Marcos Grigorian's activities with Iranian coffeehouse paintings and other vernacular arts.

While trained as a young artist in historical Islamic manuscript arts, Armajani increasingly sought to disrupt the formal rigidity of his instruction in "traditional Persian arts" by gathering materials from the less reified "fine art" world of southern Tehran, and exploring their worldmaking capabilities through assemblage and collage techniques. Armajani's activities during the late 1950s demonstrate those years as a period of critical creativity not only among Grigorian's direct spheres of influence, and raises interesting questions regarding the history of contemporary mediations of Shi'i popular arts. Such questions include what culturally and politically-specific contexts of late Pahlavi modernity in the 1950s—most especially after the 1953 coup—led to the interest and use of Shi'i devotional objects among contemporary artists (especially before the institutionalization and codification of these engagements under the aesthetic purview of state-sanctioned Iranian modernism)?[70] In the case of Armajani, his involvement with leftist political groups who were, by necessity, operating outside of official spaces and inside more liminal ones (like coffeehouses) led him to further explore and reference those spaces, materials, and entirely different world of images. Rather than participating as part of a unifying or homogeneous "national idiom" of the 1960s "Saqqakhaneh School," Armajani's mixed media experiments with Shi'i Islamic heritage preserves

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[70] As Bianca Devos and Christoph Werner state, this period remains widely neglected in cultural studies, in part due to its "pessimistic image of culture" from Reza Shah's rule to the early years of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah. See "Introduction," in *Culture and Cultural Politics Under Reza Shah: The Pahlavi State, New Bourgeoisie and the Creation of a Modern Society in Iran* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 1-2.

these assorted signs and, in doing so, reveals a symbolic cosmos of both historical "art" as well as contemporary "non-art" inscriptions drawn from unsettled popular politics and religious practices in midcentury Tehran. As such, his activities are distinct from those of Marcos Grigorian and his most famous student, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, whose 1950s engagements with the symbolically rich worlds of Shi'i Islamic heritage sparked

"Who Is This Husayn the World is Crazy About?"

Beyond Armajani's early ventures with Shi'i popular heritage through the young artist's leftist political commitments, another key factor in nascent avant-garde art engagements with Shi'i Islam in 1950s Iran was intellectual debates over the role of Islamic history in political modernity. In discussing the early activities of intellectuals like Ahmad Fardid (1909-1994), who became known most prominently as a public conservative intellectual and ideologue during and after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and subsequent Islamic Republic, Ali Mirsepassi argues that the political culture of the late 1950s and early 1960s, "tended to romanticize Shi'a values and what was called the Iranian way of life and cultural practices."[71] Reasons for this cultural turn in Iranian modernity range wide and numerous. Slowly shifting from the early optimism and enthusiasm in Iran toward Euro-American (and international) modernization and industrial technology in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, the political climate and events of the midcentury—namely the 1953 coup d'état and increasing

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[71] Ali Mirsepassi, *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought: The Life and Times of Ahmad Fardid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 50.

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oppression of Iran's political left—engendered negative attitudes towards Euro-American

modernity. Instead, mass discontent with the Pahlavi state and its selective articulations

of an ancient Persian past for imagining a secularizing nation,[72] intellectuals, writers, and

other cultural actors sought to articulate a new and potentially liberatory concept of

modernity.[73] Such political ideas aimed to construct national identity from other depths of

Persian cultural history and Shi'i Islamic discursive traditions, as potential radical source

material not indebted to Western political or historical models.[74] Exemplary of this

modern cultural critique of foreign embeddedness is the famous term *gharbzadeghi*, or

"Westoxification," which Ahmad Fardid credits himself with coining, and that writer,

ethnographer, sociologist, and art critic Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969) published in an

enormously popular and immediately banned book pamphlet in 1962.[75]

Along with such cultural discourses and dissident activities, after the 1953 coup

d'état when the government banned and heavily repressed leftist activism and political

figures associated with Mossadegh's National Front, some saw the revolutionary praxis

and apocalyptic ethos of Shi'i Islam as ripe for new political possibilities. The ritual

memorializing practices central to Shi'i Muslim identity and communities were

increasingly understood as politically charged and publically permissible ones under the

repressive Pahlavi regime (which tended to overlook religiously-tinged undertakings in

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[72] For a discussion of these historicizing nationalist efforts in architecture and urbanism, see Talinn Grigor, *Building Iran: Modernism, Architecture, and National Heritage under the Pahlavi Monarchs* (New York: Periscope Publishing, 2009).

[73] Farhang Rajaee, *Islamism and Modernism: The Changing Discourse in Iran* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 2007), 41.

[74] On this point Farhang Rajaee notes that ironically, "the Marxist paradigm contributed a great deal to the emergence of Islamist discourse by excluding other ways of thinking." See *Islamism and Modernism* (2007), 48-49.

[75] As Mirsepassi suggests, "the roots of *Gharbzadegi* are traced to a mid-nineteenth-century intellectual movement characterized by its embrace of secular ideas and Western-oriented political systems." See *Transnationalism in Iranian Political Thought*, 49-51.

favor of actively persecuting Marxists and other Iranian leftists). As actively imagined

and experienced through representational remembrance ceremonies, and drawing from

the widespread popular devotional imaginary of the tragedy of Imam Husayn and his

followers at the seventh-century Battle of Karbala in everyday Iranian life, the ideas,

images, and material practices of Shi'i Islam became vital fodder and often romanticized

in political and cultural spheres in mid-century Iran.[76] In this context of shifting politics

and Islamic discursive traditions, "Shi'i folk arts" (as they were often characterized), and

the devotional practices and traditional crafts associated with Shi'i Islam from the early

modern Safavid era, began to be documented, studied, and published by researchers,

writers, and, most especially, artists in the 1950s.[77] As discussed in the Introduction, the

foremost artist who began collecting and exhibiting popular art works and materials

associated with Shi'i Islam – and vernacular arts in Iran more broadly – was Marcos

Grigorian (**Figure 1.7**).

      As a visual artist, Grigorian is best known for his minimalist dirt and straw

paintings called "earthworks" he produced in the U.S. after he moved from Iran in the

1960s. Grigorian's prominent public activities in the late 1950s Iranian art scene—

namely his steering role in organizing the First Tehran Biennial in 1958—are summarily

cited in histories of Iranian modernism but rarely explored in-depth in the context of late

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[76] For more on Jalal Al-e Ahmad's increasing turn away from Iranian Marxist movements and
towards possibilities of new politics through "Muslim practices and social worlds," see Golnar
Nikpour, "Revolutionary Journeys, Revolutionary Practice: The Hajj Writings of Jalal Al-e
Ahmad and Malcolm X," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34, no 1
(2014): 67-85. Ali Mirsepassi also goes on to claim, "the ideological abuse of Iran's history [in
Reza Shah Pahlavi regime's articulations of national Iranian modernity] doubtless provoked some
intellectuals into overemphasizing Iran's religious-national Shi'a identity." See *Transnationalism
in Iranian Political Thought*, 55.
[77] For a historical overview of craft industries in Shi'i Islam practices, see James Allan, "Shi'ism
and the Craft Industries," in *The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shi'ism: Iraq, Iran, and the
Indian Sub-continent* (London: Azimuth Editions, 2012), 80-120.

1950s art experiments. After returning from his successful studies at the Accademia di Belle Artie in Rome, Grigorian opened the new Gallery Esthétique in 1954 and began organizing art exhibitions of older visual art practices.[78] Along with mounting the first exhibition of fellow Armenian Andre Sevruguin's photographs, Grigorian also organized one of the earliest exhibitions in Iran of "coffeehouse" (*qahvakhana*) paintings, or the mural and tile wall works as well as large portable canvas paintings associated with public storytelling in coffeehouses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century (**Figure 1.8**).[79] These large portable paintings or *parda* "rolled canvas" works (also known as *shama'il* or religious icons)[80] were the focus of much artistic interest for their figural representations of the events and stories around the Battle of Karbala.[81] Whereas Jalal Al-e Ahmad criticized the later iterations of the Tehran Biennial that Grigorian had founded as "an instrument of Western propaganda" in his famous 1962 pamphlet, Grigorian's other, non state-sponsored exhibitions intimate the artist's vested interest in exploring and publicizing vernacular artistic heritage and visual practices while

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[78] Marcos Grigorian's Gallery Esthétique (1954-9) was only the second gallery to open in Tehran, after the short-lived Apadana gallery. See Fereshteh Daftari, *Iran Modern*, 36-7.

[79] For additional discussions of Grigorian's 1950s curatorial activities, see Venetia Porter, "The Modern Art of the Middle East," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, 604. See Hengameh Fouladvand, "Marcos Grigorian," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (17 September 2012); Abbas Milani, *"Marcos Grigorian," Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979*, Vol. II (Syracuse, 2008), 1000; Ruyin Pakbaz, *The First Tehran International Drawing Exhibition* (Tehran: Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999); Marcos Grigorian, *Earthworks* (New York: Gorky Gallery, 1989).

[80] See Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad Ali, "Icon and Meditation: Between Popular Art and Sufism in Imami Shi'ism," in *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shi'i Islam*, ed. Pedram Khosronejad (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011) 25-45; Hadi Seif, *"Coffee-House" Painting*, (Tehran: Reza 'Abbasi Museum, 1990). For a general overview of these narrative paintings in the Qajar era, see Peter Chelkowski, "Narrative Painting and Painting Recitation in Qajar Iran," *Muqarnas* vol. 6 (1989), 98-111.

[81] As Ingvild Flaskerud notes, for artists like Muhammad Modabber, who often worked on commission either on canvas or directly on a wall, "the *qahva-khana* ("coffeehouse") often served as ateliers for *parda* painters, who painted for both the secular and religious traditions." See Flaskerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism* (London: Continuum, 2010), 87-88.

simultaneously facilitating Iranian artists' exposure and access to the globalizing

contemporary art world.

Grigorian's significant role in fomenting awareness and attention to the large-

scale folk and religious paintings of Mohammad Modabber and Qollar-Aghasi took place

through his curatorial work out of his Gallery Esthétique, as well as his position as the

head of the new Graphic Arts Department at the Ministry of Fine Arts, where he gave

many lectures on Modabber and Aghasi's paintings.[82] These efforts were in many ways a

vanguard act of heritage preservation and salvation against the state's urbanization

schemes. Before Grigorian began publishing and exhibiting their works, Qollar-Aqasi

and Modabbar's artistic livelihoods were actively under siege and all but forgotten in

Pahlavi-era Iran, in part because of their associations with the lower-classes and popular

devotional practices. But another factor in their paintings being excluded from the state's

"fine art" promotion or circulations was due to their performative nature in Iran's

heterogeneous publics.

Portable coffeehouse paintings were often produced within or installed in urban

spaces, where they mediated public engagement and response as narrated by oral

storytellers (*naghal*) in liminal public spheres outside the purview of the centralizing

Pahlavi nation-state.[83] Midcentury Iranian modernizing programs increasingly threatened

such spaces, especially those that privileged the middle to lower classes, as the

government came up with various reasons to destroy Iran's unfettered coffeehouse

cultures. While most people understood the true reasons for state authorities shutting

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[82] Daneshvari, "Seismic Shifts Across Political Zones in Contemporary Iranian Art" (2013), 106.
[83] Minoo Moallem, "Aestheticizing Religion: Sensorial Visuality and Coffeehouse Painting in Iran." In *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 297-320; *Popular Paintings and the Persian Legend*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Maison de l'Iraniaen and Group 7, n.d., c. 1970s).

down these informal community spaces, the official excuses provided ranged widely: "Sometimes they would say that the buildings were too old, other times they would say that the *naghals* were confusing people with their ambiguous discourse, other times they would point to the display of paintings on the walls as accumulating dust and against public hygiene…"[84] Despite—and perhaps due to—the state's encroachments, Grigorian and other artists grew interested in preserving and publicizing these vernacular painting practices while they were being threatened and reshaped by processes of modernization.

In the *Iranian Folk Arts* 1964 exhibition catalogue from the "Universal Galleries" space he established after moving to Minneapolis, Minnesota, Grigorian describes these paintings as "a living tradition, displaying a naiveté similar to Rousseau and the need to preserve the old ways."[85] Such a statement underscores Grigorian's perspective and preservationist impulse in collecting, commissioning, and exhibiting coffeehouse paintings and other vernacular heritage materials. To him, they demonstrate a history of Iranian painting of alternative training to official academic or modernist European art schools. A specific example of Grigorian's notion of this "naiveté" practice can be seen in a 1907 *parda* painting from the Reza ʿAbbasi Museum in Tehran (**Figure 1.9**). Signed by Muhammad Modabber, an artist Grigorian "championed and publicized" as one of the last masters of the coffeehouse "naïve" style,[86] the painting is composed of nine scenes of

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[84] Hadi Seyf, *Coffee House Painting* (Tehran: Cultural Heritage of Iran, 1990), 34. Translated by Minoo Moallem in "Aestheticizing Religion" (2014), 303.
[85] Quoted in Layla Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art: From Kamal-al-Molk to Zenderoudi, in *Iran Modern* (New York: Asia Society, 2013), 64, fn. 103. In a letter to the collector Abby Weed Grey, Grigorian writes of his intention to dedicate part of his Minnesota gallery to "Ghajar" art (i.e. coffeehouse paintings and other nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Iranian arts), "the most important art form succeeding miniature in Persia." Letter dated June 18, 1963, in 151: Series V: Subseries D: Grigorian, Marcos. Box 13, Folder 42, Abby Weed Grey Papers, New York University Archives.
[86] Hengameh Fouladvand, "Marcos Grigorian," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (September 17, 2012).

the Battle Karbala delineated by black outlines, with the death and headless body of

Imam Husayn in the central vignette.[87] The clockwise narrative momentum begins in the

central image at the top of the painting, and moves with the movement of Imam Husayn

and his half-brother 'Abbas as their caravan with the family's followers approach

Karbala, as 'Abbas attempts to break the siege and reach the Euphrates River, and is

subsequently caught, mutilated, and killed, concluded by Husayn's visceral decapitation

and public humiliation in the last, largest panel scene in the painting's center. Slight

shading and modeling, with clear foreshortening towards the desert horizon in each

painted scene, indicates the presence of stylized semi-perspectival forms as popularized

in print cultures and religious depictions of the nineteenth-century.[88]

During the Qajar dynastic era until the Constitutional Revolutionary period (1905-

11), photography and lithographic printing processes facilitated the popularization and

mediation of religious paintings outside the media confines of elite manuscript and large

canvas productions, as artists began to use photographic images and religious prints as

models for coalescing their own artistic expressions in the *parda* painting design.[89] While

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[87] See Mirjam Shatanawi, *Islam in the Tropenmuseum* (Arnhem: LM Publishers, 2015); Layla Diba, Laleh Bakhtiar, and Aydin Aghdaslou eds., *Religious Inspiration in Iranian Art* [*Hunar-i irani ba ilham as 'aqayid-i dini va mazhabi*] exhibition catalogue (Tehran: Negarestan Museum, 1978), 9-10; Hadi Seif, *"Coffee-House" Painting*, (Tehran: Reza 'Abbasi Museum, 1990).
[88] See David Roxburgh, "Painting after Photography in 19th-century Iran." In *Technologies of the Image: Art in 19th-Century Iran* (Harvard: Harvard University Museums, 2017), 107-130.
[89] As Farshid Emami explains, "Lithography was deeply implicated in established sociocultural practices and also penetrated new domains such as popular piety and the historical imagination, altering notions of myth, religion, and history in a fundamental way." Emami argues that "the lithographic image mediated not only between established and novel modes of image-making, but also between new notions of the past and the exigencies of the present, between elitist initiatives and popular beliefs and practices. It was simultaneously a primary artistic expression of a visual culture and a source of its transformation." See Emami, "The Lithographic Image and Its Audiences," in *Technologies of the Image: Art in 19th-Century Iran* (Harvard: Harvard University Museums, 2017), 76. For a broader overview and discussion of lithography in nineteenth century Iran, see Ulrich Marzolph, "The Pictorial Representation of Shi'i Themes in Lithographed Books of the Qajar Period," in *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and*

modern technologies played an important part in transporting historical Persian images into new media, these coffeehouse painters did not necessarily see themselves as working within these technologies of replication. They referred to their works as "*khiyal pardazi*" ("dream work") and "*tamsil-sazi*" ("image or portrait"), as they considered their paintings "based on imagination rather than on academic training, or workshop traditions…"[90] Similarly, Hadi Seif has noted that coffee-house painters were also known as "iconographers" whose images were carried around the country by "icon holders," further suggestive of the votive nature and meditative vehicle of *parda* paintings.[91] Thus, Grigorian's harvesting and display of these paintings from their context of early twentieth-century coffeehouse artistic productions tapped into the metaphysical world (and worldmaking capabilities) of Shi'i devotional images. His preservationist efforts facilitated the intersection of these dynamic popular works with contemporary art practices, and is also emblematic of the multiple image-making processes and media in Iran and Shi'i popular arts at the turn of the century.

Beyond the composite technologies used in producing popular Shi'i Islamic iconography, the visual narrative and format of *parda* paintings can also differ widely. From the sequential and distinctly contained episodic style in **Figure 1.9**, to the more fluid and amorphous horizontal format seen in **Figure 1.8**, position and scale are key representational strategies in Shi'i popular images, as **Figure 1.8** designates the importance and centrality of the figures and events can be indicated through size and

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Religious Devotion in Shi'i Islam, ed. Pedram Khosronejad (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011) 74-103; Ulrich Marzolph, *Narrative Illustration in Persian Lithographed Books* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).
[90] Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art," in *Iran Modern*, 52.
[91] Hadi Seif, *"Coffee-House" Painting*, (Tehran: Reza 'Abbasi Museum, 1990), 8.

placement within the roaming visual narrative.[92] This large horizontal *parda* format,

where figures from Karbala in varying sizes are painted across the canvas's entire surface

area leaving no unused narrative space whatsoever, is most closely connected with the

public recitation or oral storytelling known *parda-khani* (or "reciting from a curtain"),

where trained orators or *naghali* (storytellers) recount through different gestural cues and

voice registers the events and individuals at Karbala.[93] As a photograph from outside Haji

Ghani Mosque in 1950s Shiraz demonstrates, public performances with these large

painted depictions of Karbala still managed to continue in midcentury Iran (**Figure 1.10**).

These commemorative events took place in public spaces typically around mosques and

other traditional architectural spaces for communal activities. Overall, coffeehouse

paintings offered artists not just new symbolic image worlds, but were also suggestive of

popular performative contexts in everyday life, as well as subtle accommodations of

modern technologies in image making that were still appealing to broad Iranian

audiences.

Grigorian's interests in these large-scale paintings of mythic pasts and popular

depictions and experiences of the holiest event in Shi'i Islam can also largely be

understood as an attempt to stave off the disappearance of a distinct and culturally rich art

form. Not only were the coffeehouse painter's livelihoods under threat, but the very

production process of *parda* paintings and related religious folk arts was altered

drastically in the early twentieth century during Reza Shah Pahlavi's modernization

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[92] This foreground upsizing of the pious figure battling his enemy can also be seen in nineteenth century lithograph printed images, such as in the "Battle of Imam 'Ali and Marhba," by Mirza Hasan, from a page of *Tufan al-buka* (Deluge of Tears) by Mohammad Ibrahim b. Mohammad Baqir Jawhari, Iran, Tehran, 18258 (1275 H) reproduced in Farshid Emami, "The Lithographic Image and Its Audiences," in *Technologies of the Image* (2017), 58.

[93] See Amin Lashkari, and Mojde Kalantari, "*Pardeh Khani*: A Dramatic Form of Storytelling in Iran," *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol. 32, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 245-258.

agenda and industrialization reforms. As Layla Diba has noted, "Iranian merchants and craftsmen in the bazaar adopted European methods of mass production for the creation of local goods" as the modernizing markets became "the principal site for the production and consumption of large-scale paintings known as *qahvakhana* (coffeehouse paintings), notable for their depiction of religious subjects associated with Shi'ism, as well as of epic and everyday themes."[94] No longer sponsored by the royal elite as in the nineteenth-century, the bazaars and lower-class neighborhoods had become the main site of producing and disseminating coffeehouse paintings. Bazaars such as those in Tehran and Isfahan thus served as productive sites for the continued making and circulation of Shi'i devotional arts under Pahlavi sociopolitical changes, as these Shi'i cultural interlocutors found captive audiences and patrons in historic centers of socioeconomic circulation and trade.[95] Through these dynamic spaces and public performances, and Grigorian's public efforts, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi encountered and sought to incorporate this complex and richly layered artistic heritage into his new worldmaking practices, first in printmaking under Grigorian's tutelage, and then later in his painting practice.

Along with Armajani's artistic citations of the material matrix of the bazaars in southern Tehran, Zenderoudi has also recalled his experiences exploring the bazaars and even religious shrines, such as the holy shrine-tomb complex of Imam Reza in Mashhad, together with artist-friend Parviz Tanavoli at the turn of the 1960s.[96] They, too, gathered

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[94] Layla Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art: From Kamal-al-Molk to Zenderoudi, in *Iran Modern* (New York: Asia Society, 2013), 46.

[95] For more, see Bahram Ahmadi, "L'Enseignement universitaire de la peinture en iran: Problèmes et influences," dissertation (Université de Provence, 2012), 217-224; Layla Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art," 46.

[96] While Tanavoli is a vital artist in the 1960s Saqqakhaneh movement and contemporary Iranian art history and publications, he only began actively engaging with Shi'i Islamic heritage in 1960 after observing Zenderoudi's own early experiments. While his work does not fit within my

Shi'i heritage objects for research and study in their creative works by the 1962 Tehran

Biennial. Yet whereas Armajani reused certain historical and mediated devotional

materials and images directly into his collage compositions, Zenderoudi and Tanavoli did

not incorporate these "non art" popular religious materials directly into their 1960s

artworks in the form of collage techniques. Instead, they produced their "Saqqakhaneh

School" creative mediations with Shi'i Islamic heritage through new art materials and

representational practices, including painting, sculpture, and printmaking.[97] Within all

these abundant veins of artistic heritage recuperations and experiments that flourished in

the 1960s, Grigorian's initiatory position in 1956 as head of a new Graphic Arts

Department constitutes a stepping stone for Zenderoudi into these heritage engagements,

as it was his first introduction to the worldmaking capabilities of coffeehouse paintings as

a symbolically rich and popular vernacular art form.[98]

    One of Zenderoudi's earliest known works is a large-scale printed textile entitled,

"Who is This Husayn the World is Crazy About?" (*Iyn husayn kist ka dilha hama divana-*

i awst; the work is sometimes alternatively called "Who is this Husayn with whom

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specific focus on late 1950s activities with Islamic heritage, I hope to explore his work in future research. For a brief and critical summary of Zenderoudi and Tanavoli's later "aestheticizing" 1960s artistic practices, see Hamid Yousefi, "*ART + ART*: Avant-Garde in the Streets," *E-flux journal* no. 82 (May 2017), 8-12.

[97] As Zenderoudi has stated, "I took the inspiration from numbers, astrolabes, metal plates' prayer writing, etc. and came to know that these humble treasures of alleys and street, colored by all civilizations, are the origin and basic essence of Iranian civilization. [. . .] Those treasures existed before. They are only materials, objects, places or cultural values in need of one who can summarize them and add polished elements." Zenderoudi, artist statement, accessed November 21, 2017. Available at: www.zenderoudi.com/eng/inter/html.

[98] Hengameh Fouladvand, "Marcos Grigorian," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (2012). Zenderoudi has also reportedly been quoted as stating he discovered "ancient Iranian art having seen a [talismanic] shirt at the National Museum of Iran with prayers on it." See Yaghoub Emdadian, *Pioneers of Iranian Modern Painting: Charles-Hosesin Zenderoudi* (Tehran: Mahriz Publications, 2001), 33.

[98] Cited by Karim Emami, "SAQQĀ-KHĀNA SCHOOL OF ART," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (2009), 1.

everyone is madly in love?"[99]) (**Figure 1.11**). In many ways, this print encapsulates not

just Marcos Grigorian's public efforts with Shi'i devotional arts but many of these

confluences in late 1950s popular religious heritage engagements. Zenderoudi created the

linocut at some point during or after his brief training in printmaking under Grigorian,[100]

whose public advocacy for Shi'i Islamic heritage in the 1950s also coincided with the

opening of other new arts programs encouraging artists to explore traditional Iranian

historical and popular arts.[101] In his new graphic arts program, Grigorian taught his

students printmaking techniques, especially etching and linocut printing where a linoleum

sheet is carved in relief, rolled with black ink, and impressed onto a paper or textile

surface.[102]

In this textile work, produced in 1958 and first exhibited in 1960, Zenderoudi's

printed depiction of the scenes of Karbala reworks the archetypal narrative and figural

forms in *parda* paintings into a new black and white composition. The long beige sheet

carries imprints of the different scenes and narrative beats from popular depictions of the

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[99] Cited by Emami, "SAQQĀ-KHĀNA SCHOOL OF ART," 1. See Yaghoub Emdadian, *Pioneers of Iranian Modern Painting: Charles-Hosesin Zenderoudi* (Tehran: Mahriz Publications, 2001), 125; S. Tabrizi, "Payydayyis-i talar-i iran, tavallud-i maktab-i saqqa-khana," *Khulasa maqalat-i hamayis-i hunar-i modern-i iran* (Proceedings abstract of the conference on Modern Iranian Art) (Tehran: Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), 27.

[100] See Daftari, "Redefining Modernism," in *Iran Modern* (2013), 30; 37, as well as Fereshteh Daftari, "*Another Modernism*," in *Picturing Iran* (2002), 48; 67-68.

[101] Additional transformative art teachers include Akbar Tajvidi, who taught historical "Persian Painting" at the new College of Decorative Arts (1960-). The role of the College of Decorative Arts in fomenting interest in historic techniques and popular crafts in late 1950s Iranian modernism has yet to be explained or fully explored. See Keshmirshekan, "SAQQĀ-ḴHĀNA SCHOOL OF ART," (2009); Layla Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art." One of the first students to attend the College of Decorative Arts was Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, who joined in 1960 after first studying in Grigorian's printmaking class.

[102] According to the art teacher and writer Akbar Tadjvidi, artist Reza Banguiz also produced engraved prints of Karbala, as he states: "Parmi les artistes don't la production graphique mérite une attention particulière nous devons mentionner…Réza Banguiz pour ses gravures représentant les scenes de Kerbéla et les oiseaux légendaires." I have yet to find any copies or image reproductions of these engravings. See *L'Art En Iran Moderne*, 56.

Battle of Karbala. Juxtaposed together in varyingly sized vignettes separated by pale linen borders, Zenderoudi's carved relief is designed vertically rather than the more horizontally oriented, clockwise visual narrative of "coffeehouse" painted images. Enclosed by calligraphic bands texturized with short chiseled lines, the print's border appears like a wooden frame typical of certain mounted large-scale *parda* works. The image frame repeats the work's title, a poetic hemistich commonly found in Muharram commemorative events.[103] Zenderoudi thus used the linocut relief technique to create a skeuomorph denoting the physical frame for canvas paintings, engraining his new artwork into a historicizing material format for scenes of Karbala.[104] This simulated material citation echoes the print's self-referential title,[105] and thereby the artist's awareness of his self-insertion into an art historical tradition previously distinct and separate from that of previous practices in Iranian modernism.

Within the rectilinear vignettes themselves, Zenderoudi references visual models of the narrative events of Karbala that reimagines the episodic tragedy as a starkly contrasted emotional tumult in the manner of German Expressionism (of which Zenderoudi's teacher, Grigorian, was aware from his training at the academy in Rome). Famous scenes including Imam Husayn mourning the death of his son, and the Imam's own death, are apparent if graphically distorted in Zenderoudi's design.[106] The linocut print depicts these figures as exaggerated roughly shaped bodies contorted and twisting across the battlefield and other spaces from the narrative landscape. Attenuated, sharply

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[103] Fereshteh Daftari suggests the Safavid poet Mohtasham Kashani may be the author of the poem. See "Redefining Modernism," *Iran Modern*, 42, fn. 34.

[104] For a discussion of transpositions of historical models and visual signs in "Shia iconography" into contemporary religious images, see Flaskerud, *Visualizing Belief and Piety in Iranian Shiism* (2010), 234-238.

[105] As first noted by Daftari, "Redefining Modernism," *Iran Modern*, 31.

[106] Daftari identifies some of these scenes in "Redefining Modernism," 30-31.

hewn limbs and condensed flat patterns, textures, and background scenery recalls the

graphic quality (and violent imagery) of German Expressionist woodcuts in the early

twentieth century.[107] Yet Zenderoudi's treatment of Karbala is more chaotic, dense, and

flamboyantly textured, in contrast to the bold graphic imagery associated with the

German woodcut movement. For example, his depiction of Imam Husayn's son, 'Ali al-

Akbar, dying impaled on the battlefield at Husayn's knees, stresses the narrative

moment's distress as the young man's body is stretched out-of-proportion with spindly

legs crossing almost half the frame. Matching haloes printed in relief designate the son as

kin of his father, who raises his thin arms up towards the sky in despair, as thinly

delineated bodies appear printed onto the textile surface behind the Imam's figure.

Such emotive pathos through figurative distortion suggests another artistic

referential model in the central portrait panel's depiction of Imam Husayn. The isolated

solitary figure stands alone, squeezed in between two larger narrative episodes. The

singular portrait recalls the notion of the *parda* painters as "icon makers" directly to

mind, as Zenderoudi's engraved icon draws upon the molded works of Swiss sculptor

Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966), such as the bronze sculpture "Man Pointing" from 1947

(**Figure 1.12**). The elongated straight pose, one arm gesture, and outward pointing feet in

Giacometti's sculptured body suggests lanky reciprocity in Zenderoudi's stylized linocut

figures at Karbala.[108]

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[107] See Robin Reisenfeld's "Cultural Nationalism, Brücke and the German Woodcut: The
Formation of a Collective Identity," *Art History* v. 20 no. 2 (June 1997), 289-312. For examples
of different engraving techniques associated with German Expressionism, see the National
Gallery of Art's exhibition catalogue, "German Expressionist Prints," available at:
https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/Education/learning-resources/teaching-
packets/pdfs/German-Expressionist-Prints-tp.pdf.
[108] Zenderoudi also produced his own elongated and oversize sculptural form, of a composite
wood figure, titled "Bandar's Giant," with which he was photographed on Bandar Anzali Beach

Zenderoudi has attested to his interest in Giacometti's depictions of the human form, and even eventually met Giacometti and spoke with him in 1962 (after Zenderoudi moved to Paris in 1961).[109] Interestingly, Giacometti's sculptural work throughout much of his career was associated with decay and death, as his gaunt bodily forms often prompted discussions on aesthetic and physical experiences of asceticism.[110] The sense of unease these emaciated figures elicit are what possibly drew Zenderoudi to use them as new figural models with which to visually transpose and embody Imam Husayn's last tragic moments on earth. Depicted as thin, bereft, but standing tall, with his right arm held up in gesture, Imam Husayn in the center of Zenderoudi's printed relief image textile work thus compiles a nexus of new image-making techniques and references, including linocut printmaking and sculpture. Altogether, the work demonstrates Zenderoudi's initial strategies with popular devotional depictions of Karbala, and the young artist's selective references and carving skills (directly onto the linocut design, and inspired by Giacometti's sculptural forms) as innovative mediations that reimagine and channel Karbala's emotional energy with new artmaking techniques. Well before his later and more famous 1960s "Saqqakhaneh School" paintings, Zenderoudi's earliest experiment with Shi'i Islamic heritage demonstrates the dynamic worldmaking possibilities that Grigorian's public output and preservationist practice engendered.

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in 1954. See Ruyin Pakbaz, and Yaghoub Emdadian, eds., *Pioneers of Modern Iranian Art: Charles-Hossein Zenderoudi* (Tehran: Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art and Mahriz Publications, 2001), 35.

[109] See Myrna Ayad, and James Parry, "The Letter as a Sonata," *CANVAS* Magazine (Sept/Oct 2009). Reproduced on Zenderoudi artist website, available at: http://www.zenderoudi.com/english/publications.html.

[110] See Christopher Lane, "The Hunger for Death: Giacometti's Immanence and the Anorexic Body," *Discourse* 19, no. 3 (1997): 13-42.

As an art teacher, Grigorian's own printmaking practice also used art historical

and citational references embedded within the print matrix and engraved textures (**Figure

1.13**). Yet Grigorian's prints indicate less experimentally stylized and more

straightforward mediations of coffeehouse paintings. In an early surviving 1960 linocut

print on paper, Grigorian designed his composition of Gissiabanu killing the devil in

Iranian mythology "from the original painting of Iranian Master Qollar Aghassi," one of

Grigorian's championed coffeehouse painters.[111] While there is no evidence of

Giacometti's stylized figures in Grigorian's print,[112] the sharply conveyed poster

advertising an epic battle scene from the "Iranian Popular Art Collection" for the

Museum of Folk Art echoes several of the stylistic cues seen in Zenderoudi's earlier

linocut work. Grigorian's print offers bold flat shapes and roughly hewn edges, and

suggests some stylized aspects from his artistic etching hand in Zenderoudi's nascent

process of printmaking depiction. Much like Qollar Aghasi and Modabber's coffeehouse

paintings, Grigorian's poster presents mythic themes of supernatural battles and kingship

yet rendered in radiating horizontal lines from the print design matrix. English text

inserted below the printed image mentions the history of Armenians in sixteenth- and

seventeenth-century Isfahan as an important part of Iranian artistic heritage. Here,

Grigorian is citing his own Armenian Iranian heritage as an important part of the

historical development of Iranian popular arts from the early modern era. In a sense,

Grigorian use and citation of Qollar Aghasi and Modabber's artistic work demonstrated

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[111] See Abbas Daneshvari, "Seismic Shifts Across Political Zones in Contemporary Iranian Art: The Poetics of Knowledge, *Knowing* and Identity," in *Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representations of Iranian Identity*, Staci Gem Schweiwiller ed. (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2013), 106.

[112] However, Grigorian's most famous series, the *Holocaust* murals, from the 1950s do draw upon the visceral emotionality and exaggerated forms of both Giacometti and German Expressionism.

to his young art students how coffeehouse paintings could serve as a readily accessible historical genealogy and flexible artistic heritage.

Two other print works by Zenderoudi isolates specific scenes from the "Who is This Husayn the World is Crazy About?" linocut work, while demonstrating the multiples inherent in the medium and technology of printing practices. In a black ink print on sand-colored paper entitled "A View of Islam," the compartmentalized schematic narrative of popular *parda* paintings is condensed into just one scene (**Figure 1.14**). Drawn from the 1958 print's top right corner, the image presents the emotional and historic climax of the Battle of Karbala. Zenderoudi's depiction of the martyrial sacrifice of Imam Husayn alters and innovates on previous models, such as Mohammad Modabber's "The Tragedy of Karbala" 1907 *parda* painting (**Figure 1.9**), where the killing and decapitation of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson is only presented in its aftermath. Here in Zenderoudi's composition, the scene is represented at the battle's imminent loss, as the enemy Umayyad soldier Shimr ibn Ziljushan holds the blade to Imam Husayn's exposed throat. Set at the precipice of the martyrdom of Husayn, the closure of the battle, and the catalyst of Shi'i Muslim collective memorializing practices, Zenderoudi's intaglio print heightens the dramatic image and narrative beat by emphasizing the imam's isolation in the foreground as the army crowd carries his fellow martyrs' severed heads on spikes and even one limp, prostrated body in the background above the horizon line. Beneath Imam Husayn splayed out arm and legs on the ground, his defeated shield and now useless sword *zulfiqar* (or "dhu'l-fiqr," the famous split-blade, double pronged sword of his father, Imam 'Ali) identify his figure, underneath

whom is Zenderoudi's name is etched into the ink black earth framed by flowers printed

in relief.

While symbolic representations of Imam Husayn's martyrdom carry immense

import in the visual imaginary of Shi'i Islam, Zenderoudi's etching remits the Battle of

Karbala's tragic apotheosis into a view of a frozen climax, in which the moment of

martyrdom is eternally held off through simplified and stylized graphics incising. In

contrast, a more colorful and textured model of Imam Husayn's death can be found in a

1950s polychrome print (**Figure 1.15**). Heroically depicting Imam Husayn and his

followers throughout the narrative events at Karbala, the Adabiya bookstore's industrial

polychrome print reproduces a painting by Husayn Zaydi Latifi (also known as Seyyid

'Arab) and demonstrates the repurposing of industrial printing technologies for producing

scenes from "coffeehouse" paintings. As Farshid Emami notes, these popular modern

prints mediated between new pictorial technologies and earlier models of Shi'i devotional

representations, "but also between new notions of the past and the exigencies of the

present, between elitist initiatives and popular beliefs and practices. It was

simultaneously a primary artistic expression of a visual culture and a source of its

transformation."[113] Comparing modes of image making in the Adabiya shop's pious print

with Zenderoudi's graphic adaptation of the same scenes illustrates the concomitant

development and circulation of Shi'i visual culture – most especially representations of

the holy family of the Prophet – amongst both artists and popular graphic productions in

midcentury Iran.

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[113] See Farshid Emami, "The Lithographic Image and Its Audiences," in *Technologies of the Image: Art in 19th-Century Iran* (Harvard: Harvard University Museums, 2017), 73; 76.

Another reprint of a single scene from the larger 1958 linocut design transfers the artist's engraved image of Imam Husayn in black ink onto a silver foil surface (**Figure 1.16**). The prismatic print is also titled "A View of Islam," and speaks even more to Zenderoudi's developing interests in Shi'i Islamic devotional images. The artwork's metallic silver texture stamped with matte black ink augments the printed image with an optical experience of flickering light and movement across the print. The scene depicts Imam Husayn astride his horse (*zuljana*) and carrying his infant son, ʿAli Asghar, who hangs limp in his arms with an arrow shot through his small body from the enemy army. Other haloed incised bodies lay stricken across the battlefield foreground. In contrast to Zenderoudi's iteration, the Adabiya bookshop print's pastel lavender and beige tones offer a less dramatically heightened atmosphere, as Imam Husayn holds his dead infant child in one arm and greets with his other arm two cherub angels descending above him. Text insertions in the polychrome poster print reflect the poetic and oratory language of public performances of the Battle of Karbala (*ta'ziya*), which are typically direct and plainly structured verses.[114] Zenderoudi's print provides none of the calm solemnity exemplified in the popular religious poster; his worldmaking in the story of Karbala is one of pathos and extreme physical and emotional anguish. In the background, figures stand in a horizontal row near the upper edge of the silver sheet in a range of contorted and twisted poses. A few figures in the print are nude from the waist down, revealing their male genitalia amongst the visual cacophony of swirling shapes and incised graphic

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[114] See Peter Chelkowski, "Taʿziyeh: Indigenous Avant-Garde Theatre of Iran." In *Taʿziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 1-11; Mehdi Forough, "The Literary and Artistic Value of the 'Taʿzia' (Religious Play)" in *Vth International Congress of Iranian Art & Archaeology: Tehran – Isfahan – Shiraz, 11-18th April 1968*, Special Publication of the Ministry of Culture and Arts v. 2 (Tehran: Offset Press Inc.,1972), 83-89.

symbols that render the male parts almost mundane within the sacred tragedy. The absorbent details in Zenderoudi's "A View of Islam" are accentuated by the artist's choice of a prismatic silver surface, which is also perhaps suggestive of the "dream work" or symbolic worlds associated with Modabber and Qollar Aghasi's coffeehouse painting practices.

Comparing Zenderoudi's earliest work with popular religious posters of the Battle of Karbala indicates the artistic engagement and creative interplay with pre-existing models in Zenderoudi's printmaking practice, which multiplies the emotive aspects of popular Shi'i religious prints through his experimental graphic art. As artist engagements with Shi'i Islamic heritage during this pivotal late 1950s era demonstrate, creative interest in Iranian coffeehouse painting and popular arts interwoven with devotional practices, particularly in economically impoverished urban and rural areas, were key components in constituting new artistic practices in late 1950s Tehran. Furthermore, in at least one instance these contemporary artist experiments were displayed and analyzed alongside the devotional image counterparts, as Zenderoudi's incipit 1958 linocut textile print was reproduced in the 1978 "Religious Inspiration in Iranian Art" exhibition catalogue for Negarestan Museum.[115] The contemporary "Who is This Husayn the World is Crazy About?" artwork thus was displayed alongside its historical predecessors of popular coffeehouse paintings, as the museum's exhibition comprised Grigorian's donated collection of "coffeehouse" paintings and devotional Shi'i arts.[116]

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[115] Laleh Bakhtiar, "Religious Inspiration in the Expression of Art Forms," *Religious Inspiration in Iranian Art* (Tehran: Negarestan Museum, 1978), 22.
[116] Artist and active collector Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (b. 1924) also donated her personal collection of popular Shi'i religious paintings to the museum for the exhibition. See Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art," *Iran Modern*, 56.

Altogether, fears over a disappearing art form in the face of industrialized cultural production and nationalistic secular modernity helped drive these artistic experiments and mediations of folk arts. Another factor, as Thomas Crow suggests in his studies of vernacular cultures and modern art, may be the frequent tactic of avant-garde artists to often try to align themselves with marginalized people in urban societies, and "with the ways in which their contemporaries consumed and transformed the commercialized culture of the day."[117] Not only do the stories in *parda* paintings serve such notions of embattled people (i.e. Shiʻi Islam followers) but the story of Karbala and its memorialization as an eternally remembered battle between good and evil offers an even more dramatic way in which artists could tap into common visual experiences and the shifting politics of everyday life in late 1950s Iran. Print as a medium also served artistic aims to reach popular audiences and understanding, as print culture helped shape the popularization and circulation of much Shiʻi devotional imagery in nineteenth and twentieth century Iran. Grigorian and Zenderoudi's printmaking experiments effectively propel historical practices of Shiʻi folk arts into new representational and material modes in their contemporary artworks, while attesting to the visibility of epic myths and the Battle of Karbala as appropriate representational areas with which to articulate individual artistic worldmaking in midcentury Iran. Thus, in the specific cultural context of late 1950s Iran, creative interests coincided with the establishment of new arts programs emphasizing training in contemporary arts as well as the coalescence and publicizing of traditions of pious figures and Iranian folk arts.

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[117] Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), vii-viii.

Shi'i Islamic Pop Art?

In his introductory essay for the 1977 "Saqqakhaneh" retrospective exhibition,

Kamran Diba refers specifically to Zenderoudi's 1958 linocut print of the Battle of

Karbala as he reflects on the legacy of what he had initially designated the "Spiritual Pop

Art" movement in Iran,

> By looking at these Zenderoudi canvases, the viewer was reminded of Shi'ite shrines and assemblies. The atmosphere was one of Muharram mourning, of candles reflected in shiny brass bowls, of chants of "Ya Hossin" and "Blessed by the prophet." The atmosphere was a religious one, but not as lofty and grand as that of the Shah Mosque in Isfahan, nor as spacious and impersonal as that of the Sepahsalar Mosque in Tehran, but intimate and close at hand as that of the neighborhood Saqqakhaneh round the corner.[118]

In the catalogue's companion essay, Peter Lamborn Wilson continues this emphasis on

the everyday familiar and communal aspects of Shi'i material culture in Iran, describing

visits to *saqqakhana* water votive fountains as akin to "sharing of a 'world,' this

universal participation in a distinct and rich spiritual/cultural ethos" and one that "has

been missing from the West for centuries."[119] This sense of a shared experience without

artifice propagated the discourses around 1960s pop art artistic production in Iran. Yet the

earlier and largely overlooked works from the late 1950s shared similar sensibilities

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[118] Kamran Diba, "Saqqakhaneh School Revisited," in *Saqqakhaneh* exhibition catalogue (Tehran: Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977), 3-5.
[119] Wilson, Peter Lamborn, "The Saqqa-khaneh," in *Saqqakhaneh* exhibition catalogue (Tehran: Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977), unpaged.

while mediating devotional images and objects in creative ways that drew upon popular

votive materials into the works.

One painting reproduced in the 1977 "Saqqakhaneh" catalogue, and rarely

included in discussions of what became the height of the 1960s "Shi'i Pop Art" school, is

a 1957 oil painting on rolled canvas (or literal *parda*) by artist Jazeh Tabatabai, titled

"Horse and Arrow" (**Figure 1.17**). Tabatabai, who helped found the Iran Modern Art

Gallery in 1957,[120] depicts the aftermath of the seventh-century Battle of Karbala

intermingling with a contemporary water fountain shrine and votive display. In

Tabatabai's composition, a single white horse is kneeling on the earth in front of what

appears to be a small enclosed space with a long purple curtain forming the backdrop,

and calligraphic textile banners hanging from a hanging horizontal metal rod with

saffron-colored tassels.[121] The horse is shot through with arrows, as blood drips from its

puncture wounds. The injured white stallion is most likely a representation of *zuljana* or

the horse of Imam 'Ali and his son, Imam Husayn. Escaped from the battlefield, the horse

is a symbolic reference to the absence of Imam Husayn and his fellow martyrs at Karbala,

and is "an essential part of the Shi'i symbolic language. Referring to the martyrdom of

the beloved Third Imam, it plays a central role in the ritual processions of Muharram."[122]

Portrayed behind the horse in the votive site are two faithful figures partaking in

devotional practices, as the male figure in the forefront holds a bowl of water with a

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[120] See "Chronology of Historical and Art Events," *Iran Modern*, 235.

[121] The scene may also be a scene from a Muharram procession. For information on the material practices around 'Ashura in Shi'i communities, see Allan, James W., "Shi'ism and the Muharram Processions," in *The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shi'ism: Iraq, Iran, and the Indian Sub-continent* (London: Azimuth Editions, 2012), 121-138.

[122] Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, "The Horse of Imam Husayn: Notes on the Iconography of Shi'i Devotional Posters from Pakistan and India," in *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shi'i Islam*, ed. Pedram Khosronejad (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 192.

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symbolic *panja* metal carving, or hand representation of ʿAbbas and the holy family, to the horse to assuage its thirst.[123] Here in one of Tabatabai's earliest compositions, the artist chose to depict ritualized memorial practices and symbolic votive objects commemorating of the Battle of Karbala, rather than the historical models and pictorial vehicles of the narrative events themselves. His early painting thus offers yet another facet of contemporary art engagements with Shiʿi Islamic heritage percolating in the late 1950s alongside the diverse exploits of Siah Armajani, Marcos Grigorian, and Charles Hossein Zenderoudi.

Known for his satirical painting style that draws on Qajar era female portraits, as well as his later 1960s bird sculptures that include votive *panja* metal standards in his salvaged assemblies, in this composition Tabatabai mediates essential Shiʿi devotional traditions. The painting offers a trans-historical, eternalizing aesthetic view into these symbolic practices that developed in the centuries since Shiʿi Islam was proclaimed as the Safavid state religion and publically practiced in early modern Iran.[124] *Zuljana* plays a key role and audience cue in the *taʿziya* public performances and commemorative processions of Karbala.[125] These ceremonies often include a conversation between Zainab (Imam Husayn's sister) and Shahrbanu (his Sassanid wife) during Muharram performances of Karbala, as "this doleful conversation has led the audience to the height of anxious expectation, the horse of Husayn is seen without its rider coming out of the

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[123] For an overview of devotional depictions of *zuljana* (from the Arabic *dhuʾl-jina*), the faithful horse of Imam ʿAli and his son, Imam Husayn, see Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, "The Horse of Imam Husayn: Notes on the Iconography of Shiʿi Devotional Posters from Pakistan and India," in *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shiʿism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shiʿi Islam*, ed. Pedram Khosronejad (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011) 179-194.

[124] Kamran Diba, "Jazeh Tabatabai," in *Saqqakhaneh* exhibition catalogue (Tehran: Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977, unpaged.

[125] See Syed Husain Ali Jaffri, "Muharram Ceremonies in India." In *Taʿziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. Peter Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 224-225.

dusty wind and approaching the tents."[126] The white horse's entrance is the public

audience's cue that the battle has ended, as "by this symbolic procedure it is revealed that

the irrevocable disaster of the martyrdom of Husayn has terminated the conflict."[127] Here,

Tabatabai portrays this narrative beat and symbolic absence by depicting the white horse

in profile with its large almond eye knowingly gazing back at the viewer, suggesting an

immediacy and intimate understanding of what has transpired in front of the horse's own

eyes as sympathetic and anonymous mourners come to the injured animal's aid.

Yet is Tabatabai's painting an example of "Spiritual Pop Art?" Or, instead, do

these experimental artworks simply speak to the countless permutations of Shi'i Islamic

symbols and practices in the quotidian of life and ornamental objects across Iran? While

artists were certainly interested in playing with aspects of popular religion and the

metaphysical qualities of devotional images, I contend these late 1950s works are above

all indicative of expanding creative experiments in new art techniques and visual and

material configurations, as artists were exploring worldmaking possibilities and symbolic

orderings in popular religious heritage. Rather than contributing to expressions of piety or

vague "religious pop art," these nascent heritage engagements yielded new fertile

grounds for artmaking that was new, not beholden to previous academic or cultural

gatekeepers or the state elite, and focused on lower-class communities and their

overlooked visual arts. That these creative engagements showcased and contributed to

greater knowledge and preservation of these heterogeneous, less highbrow traditions and

devotional folk materials was part of the appeal.

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[126] Mehdi Forough, "The Literary and Artistic Value of the 'Ta'zia' (Religious Play)" in *Vth International Congress of Iranian Art & Archaeology: Tehran – Isfahan – Shiraz, 11-18ᵗʰ April 1968*, Special Publication of the Ministry of Culture and Arts v. 2 (Tehran: Offset Press Inc., 1972), 85.
[127] Ibid, 85.

For example, another mixed media work by Siah Armajani from the same year as

Tabatabai's contemporized painting of Shi'i votive activities demonstrates a similar

sensibility of artistic practice in exploring references to everyday materials, while trusting

the viewer to deduce the artwork's emblematic objects and inferred meaning (**Figure

1.18**). As discussed earlier in the chapter, before he left Iran Armajani often took actual

votive objects he gathered from popular religion practitioners in the southern Tehran

bazaars and assembled them into collage compositions. The 1957 collage work "Sofra

#1" depicts several votive images and calligraphic practices associated with Shi'i Islamic

popular heritage. Composed of several pieces of tea-colored fabric laid overlapping one

another into a composite rectangle cloth, the central focal point of the artwork is a

diagram with a circular calligraphic band enclosed by red square frame. Around the

frame four magic squares (*muraba'at-i alva-i a'dad*), either buttress or break into the four

sides of the central frame, and create a four-part numerical augury table setting.[128] These

magic squares of three (or three rows across and down the square grid) carry the

numerical sequence one through nine, and repeat the same sequence in all four squares.

In the upper left and right corners of the painting, two calligraphic roundels or circular

inscriptions are placed, while in the lower left and right corners are two painted images.

This assemblage of segmented images and depicted objects across the canvas allude to a

sofra, or the Persian term for a banquet cloth, and suggests Armajani's familiarity and

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[128] For a brief history of intellectual discourses and practices of magic squares and geomancy, see
Melvin-Koushki, Matthew, "Persianate Geomancy from Tūsī to the Millennium: A Preliminary
Survey," forthcoming article in *Occult Sciences in Premodern Islamic Cultures*, Nader El-Bizri
and Eva Orthmann, eds., (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2017); Michael W. Dols, "The Theory of
Magic in Healing," in *Magic and Divination in Early Islam* (Ashgate: 2004), 87-102; Cammann,
Schuyler, "Islamic and Indian Magic Squares. Part 1" *History of Religions* (Feb 1969), 181-209;
Schuyler Cammann, "Islamic and Indian Magic Squares. Part II," *History of Religions* 8, no. 4
(May 1969), 271-299.

interests in divination practices and texts, in addition to historical Persian manuscript arts or neighborhood *saqqakhana* shrine imagery.

While *sofra* generally refers to a tablecloth for a shared meal, it has particular significance as a communal dining practice often taking place during Muharram commemoration and mourning. In particular, a *sofra Abu'l-Fazl* (or tablecloth for ʿAbbas) is yet another commemorative reverberation and contemporary practice of Karbala, dedicated to Imam Husayn's cousin and brave standard bearer. "The actual event consists of a gathering held by women who have asked for a favor from the saint" ʿAbbas, and takes place in both public spaces and in the private home, where "a generous meal is prepared in his honor."[129] Imbibing certain types of food, herbs, and sweets is believed to impart therapeutic healing and good fortune (*baraka*) while partaking in a communal remembrance of ʿAbbas, the day of ʿAshura, and the legacy of the martyrs of Karbala during the week of mourning.[130]

Yet, in this contemporary mixed media representation of a *sofra*, Armajani's handwritten texts present the votive food, rather than pictorially representing the delectable offerings on the table spread. The central circular invocation repeats the word for onion, or *piyaz*, four times. The upper right calligraphic roundel features *ab ghush* or "juice" in the center and repeatedly invokes the beverage in the calligraphic circle, while delicious Persian yogurt and cucumber or *mast-u khiyar* is repeated continuously in a larger and more tightly condensed calligraphic roundel. In this textual word-and-edibles

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[129] Laleh Bakhtiar, "Religious Inspiration in the Expression of Art Forms," *Religious Inspiration in Iranian Art* (Tehran: Negarestan Museum, 1978), 18-19.
[130] See Gruber, "Nazr Necessities: Votive Practices and Objects in Iranian Muharram Ceremonies," 252; Kalinock, Sabine, "Supernatural intercession to Earthly Problems: *Sofreh* Rituals among Shiite Muslims and Zoroastrians in Iran," in *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 531-546.

interplay, Armajani's version of the Persian *sofra* votive meal presents a satirical twist on the apotropaic foods or *sofra-i nazri*.[131] In this sense then, artists like Tabatabai and Siah Armajani ventured into contemporary worldmaking by observing and explicitly referencing the votive rituals and popular practices that contribute to everyday Shi'i devotional life, whereas Grigorian and Zenderoudi focused on harnessing and transposing the historical pictorial representations that fueled Shi'i memorializing images and commemorative performances into new stylized printmaking techniques.

However, these late 1950s contemporary art engagements with popular religious practices and vernacular arts was not just a boy's club. The early heritage activities of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (b. 1924) contribute another vital trajectory in these expanding midcentury experiments with Shi'i Islamic heritage and new worldmaking possibilities. Known internationally for her "cosmic geometry" designs and mirror-mosaic sculptural works, Farmanfarmaian's late 1950s shift from abstraction to vernacular experiments is representative of the power and scope of Grigorian's vanguard heritage activities.[132] After living and studying overseas in New York's midcentury art world for nearly twelve years, Farmanfarmaian returned to Tehran in time to exhibit at least one work at the 1958 Tehran Biennial (which led to her work being included in the award winning Iran Pavilion at the 1958 Venice Biennale).[133] While many of the works

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[131] Gruber, "Nazr Necessities: Votive Practices and Objects in Iranian Muharram Ceremonies," 252-253.

[132] See Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and Zara Houshmand, *A Mirror Garden: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopft, 2007); Hans Ulrich Obrist and Karen Marta, eds., *Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Cosmic Geometry* (Bologna, Italy: Damiani Editore, 2011); Suzanne Cotter, *Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Infinite Possibility: Mirror Works and Drawings 1974-2014* (Porto, Portugal: Serralves, 2014).

[133] On her travels and early artistic experiences in 1950s New York, see Donna Stein, "Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: Empowered by American Art: An Artist's Journey," *Woman's Art Journal* 33, no. 1 (2012), 3-9.

in the inaugural biennale exhibited the academic realism style taught at the Kamal al-

Molk School, with still life paintings and pastoral landscapes constituting a majority of

artworks in the exhibition catalog, Farmanfarmaian's painting entitled "Abstract"

(*abstra*) is one of a handful of notable exceptions (**Figure 1.19**).[134] Her early interest and

training in abstract painting and monoprint are perhaps what drew her to spatial mirror-

work designs typically found across the interiors of popular devotional shrines sprinkled

across Iran's geographic landscape, including the Shah Chiragh Shrine in Shiraz that

Farmanfarmaian visited in 1963 with American artist friends Robert Morris and Marcia

Hafif.[135]

Yet Farmanfarmaian has also began attending Grigorian's lectures in 1957-1958

at the Ministry of Art and Culture to learn the history of Qollar Aghasi and Modabber's

coffeehouse paintings. She cited listening to Grigorian as instrumental to attuning her to

seeing the creative possibilities of popular heritage and religious arts across Iran's

historic and cultural landscapes.[136] The result of her attendance and participation in those

formative years of Iranian modernism was a new salvational heritage practice—one

centered on historical architecture, windows, doors, and other quotidian materials that

gave shape and physical space to everyday life.[137] Much like Zenderoudi's use of silver

foil in his "A View of Islam" print, Farmanfarmaian exploited the prismatic effects of

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[134] See Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art" (2013), 47-49; Marcos Grigorian, *The First Tehran Biennial* (*Biyannal-i tihran: dawra-i avval: hunar'ha-yi ziba-yi kishvar*), exhibition catalogue (Tehran: Ministry of Art, 1958).

[135] Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and Zara Houshmand, *A Mirror Garden: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopft, 2007), 186; Stein, "Monir Farmanfarmaian" (2012): 5; Stephanie Bailey, "Breaking Glass: Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian in Conversation with Stephanie Bailey," *Ibraaz* (April 22, 2013).

[136] Daneshvari, "Seismic Shifts Across Political Zones" (2013), 106.

[137] See Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and Zara Houshmand, *A Mirror Garden: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopft, 2007), 160-163.

silver-glass mirror surface in her work to heighten the viewing experience (**Figure 1.20**).

Rather than the tragic events of Karbala, she references everyday popular objects of

Persian poetry books bound in decorative vegetal and geometric metallic designs, and

even inserts a floral print design on one cover (as gardening flowers is her favorite

hobby). Besides drawing from the prismatic worldmaking capabilities of Iran's

decorative shrine arts, Farmanfarmaian also began collecting Qollar Aghasi and

Modabber's coffeehouse paintings soon after studying them with Grigorian. She

exhibited several of their works at the Iran-America Society in 1967 and subsequently

drew the attention of Queen Farah Diba (b. 1938), who subsequently organized an

exhibition of some of Farmanfarmaian's collected paintings at Maison de l'Iran in

Paris,[138] before then acquiring and placing the collection in the Negarestan Museum in

Tehran where many still survive today.[139] Thus by the end of the 1970s, and the

beginning of the events of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the vanguard efforts and

activities of these artists had resulted in the preservation and continued study of popular

Shi'i Islamic heritage and its vernacular art practices.

Conclusion: A Transnational Shi'i Heritage Movement

By 1962, nearly every single artist discussed in this chapter had left Iran and

moved to another country—namely France and the United States. While some like

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[138] See *Popular Paintings and the Persian Legend*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Maison de l'Iraniaen and Group 7, n.d., c. 1970s).

[139] See Layla Diba, Laleh Bakhtiar, and Aydin Aghdaslou eds., *Religious Inspiration in Iranian Art* [*Hunar-i irani ba ilham as 'aqayid-i dini va mazhabi*] exhibition catalogue (Tehran: Negarestan Museum, 1978)

Grigorian and Farmanfarmaian moved back and forth between New York and Tehran for many years, others like Zenderoudi and Armajani remained abroad permanently and became nationalized citizens in their new nations. Increasing political oppression of any and all dissent, and ongoing modernizing secular "reforms" of Muhammad Reza Shah and the Pahlavi state, created a difficult environment in which to operate or participate.[140] Late 1950s Iran was already hostile to artistic, intellectual, or political experiments and anti-establishment activities, as demonstrated by Armajani's hasty exit of the country to join his uncle in Minnesota. Curiously, one of the last popular Shi'i Islamic images Armajani engaged with before he fully adopted his new American vernacular language and public architectural practice almost predicts the 1979 Revolution, and its culmination of Iran's polarizing struggle between the authoritarian Pahlavi monarchy and the religious clerical establishment for an "authentic" national modernity (**Figure 1.21**).

Tucked away in one of Armajani's suitcase to the U.S. was a popular religious poster of Imam ʿAli he bought from the south Tehran bazaar. This colorful *shamaʾil* or popular devotional icon balances Imam ʿAli's central green turban with bright primary colors of red and pink flowers, golden yellow sunbeams, and a blue sky.[141] Scribbled over the figural portrait in black ink is Armajani's handwriting, which is all but illegible

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[140] For a brief overview of rising political dissent against the Pahlavi regime in late 1950s Iran, see Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981) 142-182; Ervand Abrahamian, "The Politics of Uneven Development." In *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 419-537; George Lenczowski, "Political Process and Institutions in Iran: The Second Pahlavi Kingship," in *Iran under the Pahlavis*, ed. George Lenczowski (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 433–75.

[141] See Maryam Ekhtiar, "Exploring Ahl al-Bayt Imagery in Qajar Iran (1785–1925)." In Fahmida Suleman, ed., *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shi'i Islam* (London: Azimuth Editions in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2015), 146–154; Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Icon and Meditation: Popular Art and Sufism in Imami Shi'ism." In Pedram Khosronejad, ed., *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shi'i Islam* (London and New York, 2012), 30.

save for the number "1963" scratched over the figure's forehead. That auspicious year

witnessed the annual public processions and commemorative rituals during the mourning

month of Muharram turn into protests denouncing the shah across both the entire country

and its socioeconomic divides. Protestors included religious clerics, teachers, students,

bazaar merchants, embattled leftists from the National Front and former Tudeh Party and,

perhaps most significantly, "a new figure in the opposition—Ayatallah Ruhallah

Khomeini."[142] The resulting massacres of hundreds if not thousands of Iranian citizens

left an indelible impact in everyone's memories over the next decade. Armajani marked

the tragic event by inscribing the historic date in a kinetic act across the popular

devotional poster's visage, almost like one of the written prayers he used to pick up in the

bazaar.

Ultimately, the rise of Shi'i Islam as a source of popular mobilization against

authoritarian rule, and eventual triumphant revolutionary force against the Pahlavi state,

seemed to emerge from the same vanguard impulses and amplifying interests in popular

religious heritage as contemporary Iranian art experiments with Shi'i Islamic symbols

and materials for new worldmaking possibilities. That the Pahlavi state elite managed in

the 1960s to appropriate and promote these artistic engagements as an authentic mode of

Iranian modernism of the "Saqqakhaneh School" did not lessen the powerful symbolic

worlds engendered by Shi'i Islamic practices in everyday life. Over in the neighboring

state (and Shi'i majority population) of Iraq, a similar yet completely different trajectory

of contemporary experiments with Shi'i Islamic heritage began to take shape in Iraq's

vibrant art scene during the 1960s, especially following the 1963 Ba'athist military coup.

Several artists turned to the Karbala paradigm and politicization of Shi'i Islam during the

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[142] Abrahamian (1982), 424.

mid to late 1960s in order to reckon with the changing realities of everyday life and politics. Artists across different media and artistic practices looked to popular Islamic images and practices to counter the secular nationalism of the Ba'athist regime after the 1963 and 1967 military coups against the socialist Iraqi Republic and Prime Minister ʿAbd al-Karim Qasim government. As seen in this chapter, and will be seen in the next, is the transnational ambit of mediations and experimental practices with Islamic artistic heritage and, in particular, Shiʿi devotional contexts and performances, in contemporary art.

Chapter 2 The Epic of Martyrs: Contemporary Art Experiments with Shiʻi Islamic Heritage in 1960s Iraq

While avant-garde artworks in midcentury Iran speak to new symbolic explorations and worldmaking experiments with Shiʻi Islamic practices, another vital genealogy of creative visual art projects with popular Islamic heritage—and especially Shiʻi Muslim popular religion— is midcentury Iraq.[143] Turning to the modern art world of 1960s Baghdad reveals a comparable yet distinct cultural context that elicited dynamic relationships with diverse histories of vernacular Islamic arts in new, transnational modern art techniques. Indeed, midcentury Baghdad was one of the most vibrantly active artistic and intellectual centers of the Arab world.[144] Given the strong historical traditions

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[143] On the well-known modernist engagements in the 1950s with premodern Arab paintings in a thirteenth-century *Maqamat al-Hariri* manuscript, now held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, see Saleem al-Bahloly, "History Regained: A Modern Artist in Baghdad Encounters a Lost Tradition of Painting," *Muqarnas* 35, no. 1 (2018): 229-272.

[144] See Zainab Bahrani and Nada Shabout, *Modernism and Iraq* (New York: Columbia University, 2009); Jabra Ibrahim Jjara, *Art in Iraq Today* (London: Embassy of the Republic of Iraq, 1961); Nizar Salim, *L'art contemporain en Iraq: Vol. 1 La peinture* (Lausanne: Sartec, 1977); Maysaloun Faraj, *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art* (London: Saqi Books, 2001); Magnus T. Bernhardsson, "Visions of Iraq: Modernizing the Past in 1950s Baghdad." In *Modernism and the Middle East: Architecture and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Sandy Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2011), 81-96; Wijdan Ali, "Iraq." In *Modern Islamic Art* (Gainesville, FL: University

of Shiʻi Islamic ritual practices, symbolic images and devotional materials, and memorializing ceremonies of the seventh-century Battle of Karbala across the Iraqi landscape, popular Islamic heritage facilitated the imaginative worlds and creative journeys of artists' experiments, as they explored new ways of referencing the changing material and symbolic matrix of everyday life.

Exploring contemporary art experiments with popular religious materials in 1960s Iraq, from the coalescence of an Iraqi vanguard driven by Islamic heritage engagements in the early 1960s, to artistic responses to the determinative 1968 Baʻath Party coup and increasing suppression of popular Shiʻi Muslim ritual practices (and their means of mobilizing dissent), presents different strategies of mediation and creative worldmaking than those we explored in late 1950s Iran. Specifically, the politicization of Shiʻi Islam practices under the new Baʻath Party governments in 1960s Iraq encouraged several artists to explore and wield Shiʻi symbolic materials and images in their artmaking. Such creative ventures across the popular Shiʻi Muslim imaginary speak not only to specific artist interests, but suggest some engagements with historical Islamic heritage were driven in part by radical political developments in popular religious practices. Thus, in contrast to how his leftist political activities and "gopher" messenger runs across southern Tehran led a young Siah Armajani to begin experimenting with popular religious materials, the Iraqi artists discussed in this chapter explicitly sought out Islamic materials in order to partake in and contribute to broader political radicalizations with Shiʻi Islamic practices that were emerging across the country.

Press of Florida, 1997), 45-55; Haytham Bahoor, "Baudelaire in Baghdad: Modernism, The Body, and Husayn Mardan's Poetics of the Self," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (2013): 313-329.

This chapter focuses on two different trajectories of artists who sought out and incorporated popular Shiʻi Islamic materials and image practices into their creative worldmaking in 1960s Iraq. Both graphic artist Rafa Nasiri (1940-2013) and painter Kadhim Haidar (1932-1985) arrived at their engagements with popular Islamic heritage through different experiences and interests. Yet their works during this politically tumultuous decade speak to how Iraqi artists increasingly looked to everyday popular rituals and symbolic practices as fodder for new creative experiments and worldviews in contemporary Iraq. Primarily, these Iraqi artistic experiments with Shiʻi Islamic heritage differ from those in late 1950s Iran, as artists explored the ongoing politicization of Shiʻi Islamic rituals and practices as popular modes of protest and dissent against the new nationalist Ba'athist governments.[145] Rather than assemble collage works with found votive materials, or stylized prints of historical "coffeehouse" religious paintings and votive images like Siah Armajani and Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Rafa Nasiri and Kadhim Haidar began explicitly experimenting with heightened public religious rituals during the holy month of Muharram after the 1963 Ba'athist coup against the Iraqi Republic and Prime Minister ʿAbd al-Karim Qasim.

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[145] For historical overviews of this pivotal era from the 1958 Iraq Revolution to the definitive 1968 coup that cemented the Arab Socialist Baʻath Party of Iraq as the ruling government (and the eventual rise to power of Saddam Husayn), see Majid Khadduri, *Republican Iraq: A Study in Iraqi Politics since the Revolution of 1958* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969); Amatzia Baram, ed., *Iraq Between Occupations: Perspectives from 1920 to the Present* (New York: Palgave Macmillan, 2010); Charles Tripp, "The Republic, 1958-68." In *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 148-192; Hanaa Batatu, "The Communists, the Baʻthists, and the Free Officers from the Fifties to the Present." In *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 709-1073; Sami Zubaida, "Community, Class and Minorities in Iraqi Politics." In *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, eds. Robert A. Fernea and Wm. Roger Louis (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1991), 197-210; Adeed Dawisha, "The Authoritarian Republic, 1958-1968." In *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 171-208; Samir al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989).

Beginning with his formative training in transnational modern printmaking abroad, I will first explore Rafa Nasiri's early explorations and experimentations in vernacular Arabic calligraphy through popular Shi'i Muslim religious prints, as he worked to stimulate a nascent graphic arts movement in Iraq. After tracing Nasiri's transnational journey from modernist printmaking to Shi'i votive found prints, focusing on Kadhim Haidar's specific painting practice and his 1965 "The Martyr's Epic" exhibition will broaden the scope of Shi'i Islamic art engagements in 1960s Iraq. Haidar's experiments with Shi'i Islamic heritage and Muharram rituals, especially after the 1963 Ba'athist military coup, will demonstrate how his experimental representations and expansive worldmaking within the symbolic cosmos of the Battle of Karbala inspired other artists in Iraq to actively begin exploring the transcendent capabilities of popular Shi'i Islamic signs and imagery. Overall, these artworks draw upon and participate in the changing imaginaries of everyday life and politics in 1960s Iraq.

From Transnational Modern to Popular Islam: Rafa Nasiri's Early Printmaking

Through his art engaging with both historic and modern printmaking practices, Rafa Nasiri became one of the most prominent artists in 1960s Iraq and the foremost leader of its nascent graphic arts movement.[146] His art training and exhibitions in

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[146] See May Muzaffar ed., *Rafa Nasiri: 50 Years of Printmaking* (London: Skira, 2012); *Rafa Nasiri: 50 Years of Painting & Printmaking*, exhibition catalogue (Amman: Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, November 11, 2013); Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and May Muzaffar, *Rafa Nasiri: Artist Books* (Milan, Italy: Skira, 2016); Rafa Nasiri, *Fann al-grafik al-mu'asir* (Contemporary Graphic Art) (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1997); Sonja

Baghdad, Beijing, Lisbon, and other art centers attested to the international circulation of prominent Arab artists in the midcentury art world. Yet his artistic practice and scholarship centered on issues specific to graphic arts in the history of the Arab world. He thus used his training with both East Asian and European printmaking cultures to assert the modern nation-state of Iraq's own preeminence in the history of graphic arts and calligraphy practices.

While working towards a locally centered history of graphic arts, for a brief period of time Nasiri produced art works that anchored his international modernist printmaking training with popular Shiʻi Islamic religious prints he gathered from rural shrines and public ceremonies. These mixed media print works reveal an artist experimenting with Arabic-script textiles gathered during holy months in Shiʻi Islam, as he explored ways of citing, imprinting, and forming the ligatures of Arabic letters and words into new compositions. As we have already seen in Iran, such work is representative of how midcentury artistic experiments shifted towards popular Islamic practices and everyday devotional life in the Middle East, as artists sought out these symbolically charged materials and images to generate new possibilities for creative worldmaking with the artwork. Nasiri's own printmaking work showcases an interest in Shiʻi popular expressions and prints in relation to their escalating visibility and subsequent suppression by the new Iraqi Baʻathist Party government. These 1960s works thus demonstrate how Rafa Nasiri marshaled historic block printing and devotional traditions to create new visual expressions of the seventh-century Battle of Karbala. Moreover, in traversing Chinese and European print histories and avant-garde

Mejcher-Atassi, "Contemporary Book Art in the Middle East: The Book as Document in Iraq," *Art History* 35, no. 4 (Sept. 2012): 816-839.

experiments in order to assert Arabic calligraphy's place in the history of printing, Nasiri

made a case through his research and art practice for the importance of print as an

engaged art form in Islamic history.

Born in 1940 in the small village of Tikrit, where his father was mayor, Rafa

Nasiri later wrote of his youth as regularly exposing him to popular veneration and

Islamic heritage in Iraq.[147] While most notably famous now as the birthplace of Saddam

Husayn, Tikrit was remembered historically as the site of a Shiʻi Muslim shrine and

popular pilgrimage site (**Figure 2.1**).[148] Nasiri recalls playing as a child at the tenth-

century Arbaʻin Wali shrine, or Tomb of the Forty Companions of the Prophet

Muhammad. In recollections of his youth, he recalled the scent of old incense rising from

the medieval shrine's cellar as he would sit and watch pilgrims come to visit. Nasiri

recalled playing as a child at the popular Islamic religious site:

> During my childhood, and owing to repeated visits to an Islamic archaeological
> site called The Tomb of the Forty, I became in a way connected to Islamic
> artifacts. This was a mosque with a burial chamber for forty of the Prophet's
> Companions who were martyred on the outskirts of our city Tikrit. We used to
> climb the plaster dome and walls of the shrine and play ball in its yard. The
> fragrance of incense that transfused from its cellar still haunts me every now and
> then.[149]

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[147] For an overview of historical Islamic shrines and popular pilgrimage arts in Iraq, see James W.
Allen "The Shiʻi Shrines of Iraq." In *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual
Expressions of Shiʻi Islam*, ed. Fahmida Suleman (London: Azimuth Editions in association
with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2015), 41-53.

[148] Historically Tikrit was also known for its "manufactures of woolen goods (*makdisi*)." See
"Takrit," in *First Encyclopaedia of Islam: 1913-1936*, eds. M. Th. Houtsma, A.J. Wensinck, L.R.
Gibb, et al, vol. 8 (E.J. Brill: Leiden, New York, Köln, reprint 1993), 632. In September 2014, the
Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) detonated explosives and destroyed the historic site of Al
Arbaʻin in Tikrit; they also destroyed Tikrit's seventh-century Green Church, one of the oldest
churches in the region. See "ISIS Destroying Iraq's Cultural Heritage: UNESCO CHIEF," *Al
Akhbar English* (November 2, 2014), accessed August 2017, available at:
http://www.globalresearch.ca/isis-destroying-iraqs-cultural-heritage-unesco-chief/5411481.

[149] May Muzaffar, *Rasam al-mashahid al-kawniya* (Painter of Cosmic Scenes) (Beirut: al-
Muʻasasa al-ʻArabiyya, 2012), 79.

Later in primary school he took drawing lessons and began sketching the tomb and other nearby historic sites; he then formally enrolled at the Institute of Fine Arts of Baghdad in 1956, where he graduated with a diploma in painting in 1959 (**Figure 2.2**). At the time the twenty-year-old art institute maintained just two departments of Sculpture and Painting. There, Nasiri trained with some of the foremost artists in Baghdad's 1950s modern art scene, including Faiq Hassan (1914-1992) and Salim (1919-1961), both trained in European academies during the 1940s.[150]

After graduating, Nasiri left Iraq on a government scholarship from the Iraqi Ministry of Education to study in China (**Figure 2.3**).[151] Nasiri attributed his choice for his continued artistic education to an art exhibition at the Chinese Embassy in the spring of 1959, where he viewed historic ceramics, watercolor paintings, and traditional woodcut prints,[152] and became determined to "specialize in a new form, which did not exist in Iraq at the time, namely graphic art, engraving, and printmaking."[153] Merely one year after the 1958 Iraq Revolution overthrew the British-backed King Faisal II and Hashemite monarchy, Nasiri's choice to undertake the journey from Baghdad to Beijing was enabled by the new Republic of Iraq's strong support from the Iraqi Communist Party. While the short-lived Iraqi Republic's political parties and socialist aspirations met

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[150] For a brief survey of the early art academies and institutions in 1950s Baghdad, see Silvia Naef, "Not Just for 'Art's Sake': Exhibiting Iraqi Art in the West After 2003," in *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political* Challenges, Jordi Tejel ed. et al (World Scientific Publishing Company, 2012) 476-478.
[151] Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, "Unfolding Narratives from Iraq: Rafa Nasiri's Book Art," in *Rafa Nasiri: Artist Books* (Milan, Italy: Skira, 2016), 40.
[152] Nasiri states that many of these prints were by the internationally renowned Qi Baishi (1864-1954); Nasiri later followed Baishi's work during his studies in Beijing. See "My Visual Resources: Place and Time between East and West," in *Rafa Nasiri: 50 Years of Printmaking*, exhibition catalog, ed. Vincenza Russo (Milan: Skira, 2013), 25.
[153] Rafa Nasiri, *Rihlati ila al-Sin* (My Journey to China) (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 2012), 54-56.

a violent end in the 1963 Ramadan Revolution, or Ba'ath military coup of Prime Minister 'Abd al-Karim Qasim, this brief political window allowed Nasiri and several other young artists to obtain funding to join arts programs in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and China.[154]

In Beijing, Nasiri's youthful interest in rural life and everyday piety developed more as he enrolled in the Department of Printmaking at the Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing under the mentorship of Li Hua[155]. Hua was a renowned woodcut artist, known for his socialist realism expressed in his engraved compositions through his strong technical skills and powerful emotive capabilities that drew from histories of woodcut printing in China along with modern German Expressionist prints.[156] Formed under Hua's tutelage in master printmaking, Nasiri's earliest printed works depicts rural landscape settings with figures engaged in work or leisure activities. These early landscape images represent local individuals and rural enjoyments, scenes that Anneka Lenssen characterizes as reflective of the positivist sensibilities of realism as taught in mid-century national academies worldwide. Nasiri's responsiveness to "the quotidian and the wholesome,"[157] such as in a watercolor woodblock print of an older woman walking with a smiling veiled girl against the rice paper background (**Figure 2.4**), attests to how

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[154] Rafa Nasiri, *Rahlati ila al-Sin* (My Journey to China) (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 2012), 54. Anneka Lenssen argues these artist and artwork exchanges between the Arab world and other nations encouraged an engaged political realism and universal solidarity across the Second and Third Worlds. See "Exchangeable Realism," in *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic 1945-1965* (exhibition catalog, Haus der Kunst, Munich), eds. Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes, (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2016), 431-2.

[155] "Li Hua 1907–1994." In *Encyclopedia of Modern China*, ed. David Pong, vol. 2. (Detroit: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2009), 463-464.

[156] Chang-Tai Hung, "Two Images of Socialism: Woodcuts in Chinese Communist Politics," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39, no. 1 (Jan. 1997): 38-39.

[157] Anneka Lenssen, "Exchangeable Realism." In *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic 1945-1965* (exhibition catalog, Haus der Kunst, Munich), eds. Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes, (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2016), 432.

China's own visual cues and socialist art currents played a foundational role in shaping the artist's instruction and viewpoint in the arts of figural printmaking. Of working with Li Hua, Nasiri stated: "During the early years …I was influenced by his woodcuts because of the simplicity of the technique he used and for its profound and powerful ability in expressing the human condition."[158]

Before departing East Asia, Nasiri held his first solo exhibition in Hong Kong's ITU Gallery in 1963. Works in the exhibition reveal that near the end of his studies in Beijing, Nasiri began substituting his realist scenes of Chinese country life with figural types and settings from Iraq. One print prominently displayed in the exhibition offers a thick lined female figure carrying a basket (**Figure 2.5**). Her body occupies nearly the entire composition, as her veiled head and floral dress converge with her upheld arm vertically and diagonally across the woodcut design. Nasiri exhibited this and other recent prints that demonstrated his flourishing technical prowess in global modern printmaking and interest in depicting emotive human figures and their intrinsic relationships to nature. The black ink woodcut print titled "My Mother" showcases these points as Nasiri recalls the contours in his mother's face (**Figure 2.6**). Time works its way into the printed surface, as Nasiri's densely cut thin lines delineate the deep folds and creases around the figure's eyes and chin. Both of these human depictions from 1963 suggest Nasiri's virtuosity in carving lines and shapes in varying degrees of control and countenance, from compressed, intimate realist details to larger and more graphic visual impact.

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[158] Rafa Nasiri, "My Visual Resources: Place and Time between East and West." In *Rafa Nasiri: 50 Years of Printmaking*, (exhibition catalog) ed. Vincenza Russo (Milan: Skira, 2013), 25.

Nasiri returned to Baghdad the same year as the 1963 Ba'athist military

overthrow of the government. The coup led to the persecution and mass executions of

thousands of Communist party supporters and other prominent leftists who fled

underground and into other political networks, including Iraq's majority Shi'i

communities.[159] During those months Nasiri took up a teaching position at the Institute of

Fine Arts and actively began training young artists in graphic arts. He continued his own

figural graphic work through illustrating culturally distinctive Iraqi types of both people

and places. Prints from this time mark Nasiri's continued interest in creating scenes with

individuals in the foreground while the sky joins water at the horizon in the backdrop.

While Baghdad has no shortage of watery views on the Tigris River, Nasiri chose instead

to travel through southern Iraq and depict the southern Tigris-Euphrates marshes (*al-

ahwar*) in his woodcuts. One iconic site from the marshes is the canoe, or *tarada*, as seen

rowing upstream along the reed-covered banks in the background of Nasiri's 1965

woodcut of an older male figure (**Figure 2.7**). In the print, the man's head is covered with

a white and black-checkered *kufiya* scarf (or *shimagh*) with a round black silk and goat

hair band ('*iqal*). Behind him, the marsh canoe appears as an upward curving arch in rich

black ink, suggestive of the naturally occurring bitumen coating or black oil pitch used to

make Iraqi river and marsh boats waterproof.[160]

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[159] For studies on American and British economic interests, and the role of their military and
intelligence services, in the success of the 1963 Ba'ath Party military coup against the Iraqi
Republic, see Weldon Matthews, "The Kennedy Administration, Counterinsurgency, and Iraq's
First Ba'thist Regime," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 4 (2011): 635-653;
Richard John Worrall, "'Coping with a Coup d'Etat': British Policy towards Post-Revolutionary
Iraq, 1958-1963," *Contemporary British History* 21, no. 2 (2007): 173-199.
[160] Iraqi marshland inhabitants are historically famous for their way of life and sustainable eco-
architecture constructions in southern Mesopotamia, which archaeological research has shown
were practiced in similar ways for nearly 5,000 years. See Edward Oschsenschlager, "Life on the
Edge of the Marshes," *Expedition* 40, no. 2 (1998): 33.

While Nasiri's use of the marshland canoes in his woodcut stemmed in part from his observational training in Beijing, his work also engaged with an ongoing artistic debate in Baghdad. Within art circles in both pre and post-Revolutionary Iraq, questions over the primacy of tradition raged as artists and critics sought to demarcate the shape of modern art in Iraq. Prominent art critic and painter Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1919 –1994) advocated for a specifically flexible and generative role of artistic tradition and popular heritage within art making.[161] He argued,

> However revolutionary Arab artists may be in concept and in aspiration, a spirit of tradition hangs on to them which they cannot, will not, shake off. However much they may subscribe to the view of "internationalism" or "cosmopolitanism" in modern art they will not give up the notion that their identity can only be shaped by rooting themselves in a tradition of their own, which helps to give a distinction to their work, marking them off as the creators and extenders of a national culture.[162]

In Jabra's worldview, the charisma and eternal returns of artistic heritage in Iraq and the greater Pan-Arab bloc could negate the homogenizing effects and encroaching cultural destruction by the British, United States, and other imperial world powers. Jabra was a member of the Baghdad Modern Art Group (*jama'at baghdad lil-fann al-hadith*), which he helped found along with Shakir Hasan Al Said and Nasiri's former painting teacher, Jewad Selim, in 1951.[163]

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[161] For more information on Jabra, see Nathanial Greenberg, "Political Modernism, Jabrā, and the Baghdad Modern Art Group," *Comparative Literature and Culture* 12, no. 2 (June 2010): 2-10; Nibras Al-Omar, "The Self-Translator as Cultural Mediator: In Memory of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra," *Asian Social Science* 8, no. 13 (2012): 211-19.

[162] Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *The Grassroots of Iraqi Art* (Jersey: Wasit Graphic and Publishing Limited, 1983), 12.

[163] See Shakir Hasan Al Said, "*Bayan jama'at baghdad li-l-fann al-hadith al-awal*," published in *Al-Adib* 10, no. 7 (July 1951): 52. Translated from Arabic by Dina El Husseiny, republished in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, ed. Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 150-151; Saleem Al-Bahloly, "History Regained: A Modern Artist in Baghdad Encounters a Lost Tradition of Painting," *Muqarnas* 35, no. 1 (October 2018): 229–272.

Selim often used the crescent half-moon in his compositions, extending a recognizable cultural sign into "a basic element through which he structured bodies, heads, and even palm trees in his compositions"[164] (**Figure 2.8**). Undoubtedly aware of Selim's use of arabesque shapes in his paintings, Nasiri incised the graphic stroke into his woodcuts perhaps as a means of bringing his international printmaking training from abroad more symbolically into the fold of Iraq's contemporary art currents.[165] He uses the canoe's sweeping shape by layering the thinly arched curves over the watery marshes in the "Al-Ahwar or Marsh Girl" (**Figure 2.9**). The print merges Nasiri's various technical styles: the girl stands facing the viewer as a tall column of varying dense black textures and patterns that contrast the more delicate and slightly abstracted design of the southern marsh landscape and its vernacular *mudhif* or reed and adobe architectural structures.

The arched crescent motif appears again in a poster Nasiri produced for his first solo exhibition at EA Gallery in Baghdad in May of 1966 (**Figure 2.10**). Repeating the half-moon, or canoe-like shape, Nasiri stacks the curved mark horizontally across the poster as rays descending from a red dot. In one view, the black-outlined red circle resembles the setting sun in Chinese woodcut prints, and the black lines represent its warm waves emanating across the poster page. Another view of these graphic shapes, inspired perhaps by Nasiri's own name, is a crescent arch with a dot above it symbolizing the Arabic letter *nun*, or "n." In this sense, Nasiri visualized a graphic simultaneity–

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[164] Nizar Salim, *Iraqi Contemporary Art: Vol. 1 Painting* (Lausanne: Sartec, 1977, 105-110; Nada Shabout, "On Abstraction and Symbolism: Jewad Selim." In *Forever Now: Five Anecdotes from the Permanent Collection* (Doha, Mathaf: the Arab Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 71-74; Silvia Naef, "Reexploring Islamic Art: Modern and Contemporary Creation in the Arab World and Its Relation to the Artistic Past," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 43 (Spring 2003),:168.
[165] For a different example from Syria of creative experiments with popular Islamic heritage through the forms and print disseminations of the arabesque, see Anneka Lenssen, "Adham Isma'il's Arabesque: The Making of Radical Painting in Syria," *Muqarnas,* 34, no. 1 (2017): 223-258.

between a popular rural image of marsh canoes and his teacher's trademark arabesque

motif in Iraqi modernism–and presented a new possibility for image making. The *nun* is

one of the most powerfully symbolic letters in Islam's scriptural history and its

associative popular practices.[166] Such interest in the intrinsic existence and value of

letters stems from an esoteric tradition of lettrism or "mystery letters" often associated

with Shi'i, Sufi, and other intellectual lineages in Islamic history.[167] Amongst premodern

and early modern Muslim philosophers and practitioners, the *nun* is most commonly

associated with the Pen of God, and the primordial inkwell, which first set forth the

Qu'ran and therefore all of cosmic creation.[168] Following this potent symbolism as it

appears in Nasiri's treatment of his exhibition poster print, the *nun* letter's shape and its

ability to harness the unseen forces between the divine cosmos and tangible human

experience is visualized in a simple yet forceful way: Nasiri's abstracted landscape as

composed from the *nun* as a rising sun composes the letter as depicting the visible world.

By distilling images associated with Iraqi modernist painting and Chinese woodcut

printing into an abstracted horizon, Nasiri's first calligraphic experiment reveals

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[166] See Annemarie Schimmel, "The Primordial Dot: Some Thoughts about Sufi Letter
Mysticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 350-356.
[167] For a broader overview of mystical practices with calligraphy in Islamic history, see
Annemarie Schimmel, "Calligraphy and Mysticism." In *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (New
York: New York University Press, 1984), 77-114. See also Noah Gardiner, "Stars and Saints: The
Esotericist Astrology of the Sufi Occultist Ahmad al-Būnī," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*
(Spring 2017), 39-65.
[168] The single dot (*nuqta*) above the letter's curved arch operates as the point of creation, and the
source of all astrological forces in the universe. See Annemarie Schimmel, "The Primordial Dot"
(1987): 353-354. This concept of a dot of ink as providing a cosmic metaphor for the ontological
status of (observable) existence stems from writings of the premodern Shi'i mystic Haidar-i
Amult (d. 1385). He suggested the nature of reality could be explained through calligraphic
writing, as "What really and concretely exists is nothing but ink. The 'existence' of the letters is
in truth no other than the 'existence' of the ink…" See Toshihiko Izutsu, "The Basic Structure of
Metaphysical Thinking in Islam." In Mehdi Mohaghegh and Hermann Landolt, *Collected Papers
on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism* (Tehran: Iranian Institute of McGill University, 1971), 65-
66.

compositional possibilities of the Arabic letter through contemporary techniques in transnational printmaking.

Nasiri's experimental work with Arabic script was driven in part by his study of Iraqi print practices. While certainly not the first artist to evoke historical traditions and popular symbolism of Arabic letters in modern art, Rafa Nasiri's techniques of artistic production and close observation of Arabic calligraphy and its material forms suggests a different artistic genealogy than that of the *hurufiyya* or letters movement of the 1970s, where artists composed calligraphic strokes into abstract expressionist paintings.[169] Instead, Nasiri's work with Arabic script was driven in part by his interest and study of vernacular Iraqi printing practices. While Iraq's historical urban centers, including Basra, Mosul and Baghdad, have significant histories of printing presses (especially satirical news journals) from the late nineteenth-century, Nasiri instead chose to engage with popular devotional engravings across different media, such as textiles, and metalwork votive objects such as handheld ʿalam standards (**Figure 2.11**). After returning from East Asia, Nasiri began collecting these popular devotional engravings across different media in popular Iraqi heritage. He paid particular attention to Shiʿi public rituals and memorialization practices as they grew increasingly in number and frequency during the

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[169] For a discussion of the polarizing developments in abstractive versus socialist realism techniques with historical Arabic letters and calligraphic forms in post-1967 War Arab modernism, see Anneka Lenssen, "The Plasticity of the Syrian Avant-Garde, 1964-1970," 56-58. See also Siba Aldabbagh, "Mysticism in the Works of Three Contemporary Middle Eastern Artists," *Contemporary Practices: Visual Arts from the Middle East* 9 (2013): 78-85, Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 61-144; Silvia Naef, "Reexploring Islamic Art: Modern and Contemporary Creation in the Arab World and Its Relation to the Artistic Past," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 43 (Spring 2003): 168; J.R. Osborn, "Narratives of Arabic Script: Calligraphic Design and Modern Spaces," *Design and Culture* 1, no. 3 (2009), 289-306; Shakir Hasan Al Said, *Ana al-nuqta fawqa faʾ al-harf: dirasat wa nusus fi al-fann wa-al-insaniyya* (Baghdad: Ministry of Culture and Information, 1998).

mid-1960s, partly in response to the new Ba'ath regime's violent repression of public

demonstrations and shows of dissent, while also a result of the politicization of Iraqi Shi'i

communities who were joined by many leftist and political activists after the 1963

coup.[170] Gathering objects from these and other religious processions and protests, Nasiri

created his own visual compendium of religious woodblock prints and calligraphic

engraving practices.

Following his first solo exhibition in Baghdad, Nasiri received a two-year

Gulbenkian fellowship at the Gravura printmaking studio in Lisbon, Portual, where he

abandoned his socialist realist practice and threw himself entirely into working with

Arabic calligraphy. While training in multi-color viscosity printing[171] and other new

graphic art techniques, Nasiri was also privy to European practices in abstraction,

including the work of Georges Mathieu (1921-2012), the French painter whose work in

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[170] See Rula Jurdi Abisaab and Malek Abisaab, ed., "The 'Shi'ite Communist,' the Clerical Movement, and the Islamists in Iraq." In *The Shi'ites of Lebanon: Modernism, Communists, and Hizbullah's Islamists* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 76-102; Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London: Saqi, 2003); Hanaa Batatu, "The Bolsheviks and the 'Ulama of the Holy Cities." In *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Landed and Commercial Classes and its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Offices* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 1141-1147; Amatzia Baram, "Two Roads to Revolutionary Shi'ite Fundamentalism in Iraq." In *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, ed. Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 531-588; Silvia Naef, "*Shi'i Shuyu'i* Or: How to Become A Communist in a Holy City." In *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture & Political History*, ed. Rainer Burnner and Werner Ende (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 255-267.
[171] This mixture of intaglio, relief, and kinetic liquid dispersal was invented by foremost Indian modernist printmaker Krishna Reddy at Stanley Hayer's *Atelier 17* workshop in Paris. Rafa Nasiri cites the important work of Stanley Hayter, the founding of *Atelier 17*, and Hayter's publication *New Ways of Gravure* (1949) in his book *Fann al-grafik al-mu'asir* (Contemporary Graphic Art) (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1997), 76. For a discussion on how the ink techniques in color viscosity etching emphasize the liquidity of graphic forms, and appeal to those working in abstract form and color, see Samella Lewis and Bob Biddle, "Printmaking," *The International Review of African American Art* 6, no. 4 (1985), 49-52. See also Liz Folman, "Stanley William Hayter and Viscosity Printing," *Art in Print* 2, no. 3 (2012): 22-24; Jaya Appasamy, *Krishna Reddy: Contemporary Indian Art Series* (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1974).

the European lyrical abstraction movement consisted of playing with pigment liquidity and performative calligraphic gestures of paint over the canvas surface.[172] Of his work, Nasiri wrote: "[Mathieu] used both Latin and Eastern characters in a completely free way, creating a magical world from the movement of the brush and oil colors in paintings," [173] which Nasiri claimed prompted him to further explore the transformative capabilities of Chinese and Arabic scripts.[174] During those two years of expanded graphic arts training and experimentation in Lisbon, Nasiri maintained his compositional interests in visual horizons and historic practices as he moved towards evoking more abstract worlds through calligraphy.

One of Nasiri's earliest works at Gravura from 1967 plays with constructing an image of varying tones, shapes, and lines (**Figure 2.12**). The lithography print casts black rectangular silhouettes stretched out across the edges of the printing stone's surface as tight thin lines extend vertically through the image, visually cueing a sense of tanning a leather hide. Swooping down from the right side of the page appears a *lam* or "l" Arabic letter. It curves left into what appears to be a mirrored *ha* or "h," from which the calligraphic line jets up and out of the frame. Above these overextended calligraphic strokes in the uppermost center of the print is a white square with calligraphic marks, including an arched canoe-shape with four dots hanging above it. Directly above the left corner of this frame is a single hanging *nun*. Collectively the composition presents

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[172] See "Mathieu, Georges (1921-2012) Frenchpainter," *A Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art, Third Ed.*, John Glaves-Smith and Ian Chilvers eds. (Oxford University Press: 2015); "Georges Mathieu," *Guggenheim Online.*

[173] Rafa Nasiri, "My Visual Resources: Place and Time between East and West," in *Rafa Nasiri: 50 Years of Printmaking*, (exhibition catalog) ed. Vincenza Russo (Milan: Skira, 2013), 26-27.

[174] May Muzaffar, "*Rafa al-Nasiri: al-nahr al-awal, al-gariba wa tahawulat al-aslob*," (Rafa al-Nasiri: The First River, Alienation and Stylistic Transformations). In *Al-fann al-hadith al-iraq: al-tawasil wa al-tamāyiz* (Modern Art in Iraq: Communication and Differentiation) (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 2015), 148-159.

different ways of drawing and shaping Arabic letters and shapes across a printing surface matrix.

The presence of the "n" letter in this print brings Nasiri's study of Arabic calligraphy into his growing interest in European lyrical abstraction. A 1968 etching is suggestive of Nasiri's embrace of new printmaking processes, as the black and blue inks pressed onto the paper create an image of organic Arabic forms composing a horizontal line (**Figure 2.13**). Above the washed blue waves of ink rising above and below the black horizon rises a circular smudge of red ink. Nasiri's 1966 woodcut poster image is thus echoed in the etched print's sense of an ethereal landscape, with an opaque dark black ink horizon below a blotchy red sun. Three smaller red dots, or Arabic diacritic marks, rest below a *waw* or "w" calligraphic letter descending from the image's horizon, suggesting an upside-down world beyond the visible horizon in which the illegible word may become readable.

In another etching from 1968, Nasiri stretches the referent capacities of Arabic script even further (**Figure 2.14**). On the right, circular dots and diamond rhomboids rest atop sweeping calligraphic strokes from right to left; the horizontal and vertical bands converge at a central *sin* or "s" double arch. Shooting up from the *sin* like a tall palm tree is a classical calligraphic flourish resembling a *shadda* or linguistic sign of emphasis. Faded shades of brown ink stain and silhouette the background, infusing a sense of earthly fecundity to the twisting and growing calligraphic shapes. Curving down next to these vegetal semiotic forms appears an *'ayn* or Arabic epiglottal sound, which contains many metaphysical associations including the essence of voice, primordial sound, and

representing the self in both pre-Islamic and Islamic Arabic.[175] Similar semiotic and

symbolic gestures appear in a blue and black atmospheric (and almost subterranean) print

also produced in the Gravura studio in 1968 (**Figure 2.15**). Here, Nasiri stretches the

lines, curves, and strokes of Arabic like architectural scaffolding across a richly tinted

cerulean blue as offers yet another way of creating an otherworldly landscape, one where

the sky or water meet.

In viewing all these budding calligraphic expressions from his time in Lisbon, a

key question emerges over whether Nasiri purposefully evoked philological content in his

abstractive compositions and explorations. Of his printmaking practice's use of Arabic

script, Nasiri wrote he used it "regardless of its linguistic connotation, to establish a kind

of formal identification between nature and man; as well as between place and time. It is

a sort of spiritual and mental exercise of the daily artistic creation of life."[176] In this

sense, while his insertion of standalone letters suggests an awareness of and purposeful

elicitation towards their powerful sacrality and cosmological significations in Islamic

history, Nasiri played with the structures and ligatures in Arabic calligraphy primarily as

malleable material. Rather than evoking the traditional frameworks of Islamic calligraphy

and its historic structures, Nasiri wielded and distorted Arabic letters to explore their

formal visual qualities and worldmaking capabilities.[177]

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[175] See Suzanne Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 178-179.

[176] Rafa Nasiri, "My Visual Resources: Place and Time between East and West." In *Rafa Nasiri: 50 Years of Printmaking*, exhibition catalog, ed. Vincenza Russo (Milan: Skira, 2013), 26-27.

[177] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), 7-16.

Always one for fortuitous timing, Nasiri returned from Lisbon to Baghdad in

1968 immediately after the definitive Ba'ath Party political coup.[178] This one, however,

cemented into power the authoritarian wing of the Iraqi Ba'ath party, of President Ahmad

al-Bakr and future president Saddam Husayn, and led to one of the most violent episodes

and enduring political legacies in Iraq's history. In response to these and other events,

Rafa Nasiri with his friend, artist Dia Azzawi, wrote a manifesto titled "Towards a New

Vision." Signed by five artists, the group sought to encourage new media practices and

organized their first New Vision group exhibition in 1969.[179] Following the manifesto

and resulting exhibitions, Nasiri produced several large painted wood panels as part of a

new series titled, "Colored Horizons" (**Figure 2.16**).[180] Without access to a printmaking

press at that time, purportedly due to government confiscations,[181] Nasiri dragged acrylic

paints across the wood grain to create similar tonal effects as his Portuguese etchings. A

red circle clipped by the surface edge sets across a watery blue horizon that meets thickly

applied black and red bands that compose the lower half of the composition. Lacquered

in the center of the dark red abstracted landscape is a cloth calligraphic segment from one

of Nasiri's stockpiled Shi'i Islamic religious banners.

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[178] After his experiences studying in Lisbon, Nasiri returned to Baghdad determined to encourage graphic arts and printmaking as a contemporary art practice—one as vital and historically rich as any other art form in Iraq. Nasiri would eventually found and chair the first Department of Graphic Arts at his alma mater, the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, in 1974. See Nasiri, *Fann al-grafik al-mu'asir* (Contemporary Graphic Art) (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1997).

[179] Dia al-Azzawi, et al, "Manifesto: Towards a New Vision." Translated in Anneka Lenssen, ed., *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 306-309).

[180] See Dia Azzawi, *Nahwa al-ru'iyya al-jadida* (A New Vision Group Manifesto), exhibition catalogue (Baghdad: 1969).

[181] Interview with Dia Azzawi, London, July 2017.

Printed onto the beige linen cloth in black ink is a calligraphic cartouche

surrounded by decorative cypress tree motifs and vegetal bands. The woodblock print

text reads, "*ya aba 'abd allah al-husayn al-mudhlum*," or "Oh! Dear oppressed Husayn,"

one of the most common sayings in Shi'i Islam repeated during 'Ashura, or the 10th day

during the holy month of Muharram when communities venerate the anniversary of Imam

Husayn's death. As discussed in Chapter 1, Husayn was the Prophet Muhammad's

grandson who along with his followers was killed at the Battle of Karbala in 680 A.D. on

the Euphrates riverbank about 100 kilometers south of Baghdad. Shi'i mourning practices

in Iraq likewise center on remembering and reliving that catastrophic event in early

Islamic history evolved over time into large processions (*mawakib*) and dramatic

reenactments, where calligraphic banners and other votive religious cloths are carried or

hung during the month of remembrance (**Figure 2.17**). The large flags, textile banners,

and other materials produced for and used during the public ceremonies offer a visualized

didactic catharsis as they invoke the names of Husayn and his fellow martyrs.[182][183]

In Iraq, where Shi'i remembrance practices carry particular historical weight,

printed calligraphic textiles like the one Nasiri harvested are often placed over water pots

to memorialize the martyrs' dying thirst as they were besieged in the seventh-century

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[182] See James W. Allen, "Shi'ism and the Muharram Processions." In *The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shi'ism: Iraq, Iran and the Indian Subcontinent* (London: Azimuth Editions, 2012), 121-138.

[183] The procession of 'Ashura calligraphic banners actually caused a famous episode in the history of the country's monarchy. King Faysal attended the 'Ashura ceremonies in Kadhimiyya in 1921, in a famous episode recounted by the Iraqi anthropologist 'Ali al-Wardi: "In the theatrical representation of the martyrdom of Hussein various banners are raised, and on this occasion the new Iraqi flag made its appearance among the banners. This was clearly not to the liking of some leading figures in the organization and Husry noticed that the national flag was carried next to the actor playing the villain of the piece, 'Umar ibn Sa'ad, leader of the Umayyad forces that had killed Hussein, rather than with the heroes and martyrs. The curses and insults uttered by the audience whenever this actor appeared were thus directed against the flag." See Sami Zubaidi, "The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 2 (May 2002): 212-213.

Mesopotamian desert.[184] The fact that the battle took place so close to the Euphrates

River adds pathos to remembrance narratives, as the riverside now serves as a ritual site

for pious purification near Imam Husayn's tomb in Karbala.[185] The insertion of these

popular religious cloths into Nasiri's 1969 work suggest his minimalist landscape of a

blood red sun setting over water is in fact a visual and mediated reference to the

Euphrates River. The textile thus serves as a physical and textual object stand-in, one that

intercedes as an abstracted representation of the Battle of Karbala itself. The painting's

distant horizon stretching across the landscape elicits a placeless, timeless sense of an

eternal cosmos. Such a symbolic sense of the universe is inherent in the "Karbala

Paradigm," or the worldview engendered through commemorations and ritualized Shi'i

mourning practices reenacting the past tragic battle that are "the essential medium by

which Shi'i self-definition (via the Karbala folk narrative) is transmitted."[186] The river's

reference and representation in Nasiri's fabric collage artwork at the 1969 exhibition is

also suggestive of its historic to present-day importance as a cultural modality for

expressing dissent against contemporary contexts. Altogether, the insertion of a popular

religious banner suggests the artist's gathering and remediation of Shi'i Muslim

vernacular printing practices transformed his stylized landscapes into present-day

depictions of the sun soaked earth of Karbala along the Euphrates riverbank, thereby

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[184] Pierre Jean-Marc, Edward Hutchinson, Hassan Abdulrazak, "The Shi'a Remembrance of Muharram: An Explanation of the Days of Ashura and Arba'een," *Military Review* 87, no. 2 (Mar/Apr. 2007): 64.

[185] Khalid A. Sindawi, "The Cult of the Euphrates and Its Significance among the Imāmī Shī'a," *Der Islam* 82, no. 2 (2004): 249-269.

[186] Ali J. Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25, no. 1 (2005), 88. See also David Pinault, "Shia Lamentation Rituals and Reinterpretations of the Doctrine of Intercession," *History of Religions* 38 (1999): 385-305.

extending the tradition and efficacy of popular print invocations into contemporary printmaking.

Through these symbolically charged printed calligraphic textiles, Nasiri's "Colored Horizons" series articulated ongoing experiences of social and political turmoil as engaged within a longer history of Arabic printing and its popular practices.[187] In the immediate aftermath of the 1968 coup, all 'Ashura and other public Shi'i ceremonies were banned. Community leaders of different political groups, such as the new communist-trained Islamic Da'wa party, were active organizers and participants in Shi'i rituals in 1960s Iraq, events they would often transform into protests against the Ba'athist party.[188] Such political impetus is engrained in Shi'i mythic narratives, which remonstrate against injustice and oppression as eternally symbolized by Husayn at Karbala. Nasiri's work with these ceremonial materials not only engaged with histories of popular print practices in Iraq, but also repurposed them towards national unrest. In the 1969 New Vision group, Nasiri and his colleagues argued that an artist must be a "warrior who refused to believe in the false."[189] As such, they have a moral responsibility to work towards creating a new vision of a politically just society.

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[187] See Dia Azzawi's published interview with Rafa Nasiri about the series in "Rafa al-Nasiri," *al-Mathaqaf al-'arabi* (Arab Intellectuals), in *Majala al-fikr al-'arabi al-taqdimi wa al-'adab al-jadid* 4, no. 3 (October 1971), 164-170.

[188] See Ranj Alaaldin, "The Islamic Da'wa Party and the Mobilization of Iraq's Shi'i Community, 1958-1965," *Middle East Journal* 717, no. 1 (2017): 45-65; Hanna Batatu, "Shi'i Organizations in Iraq: al-Da'wah al-Islamiyah and al-Mujahidin." In *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, ed. Juan Cole and Nikkie Keddie (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 179-200; Hanna Batatu, "Iraq's Underground Shi'i Movements," *MERIP* (1981), 1-4; Yusri Hazra, "The Rise of Politicized Shi'ite Religiosity and the Territorial State in Iraq and Lebanon, *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 4 (2010): 521-541.

[189] Dia al-Azzawi, et al, "Manifesto: Towards a New Vision." Translated in Anneka Lenssen, ed., *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 306-309. See also Dia Azzawi, *Nahwa al-ru'iyya al-jadida* (A New Vision Group Manifesto), exhibition catalogue (Baghdad: 1969); originally reprinted in Shakir Hasan Al Said,

The group also put forward an argument for their contemporary experiments with the past, and popular heritage more broadly. They argued against concepts of the past as a "dead object" for study. Instead, "the significance of the past is seen and renewed in light of the present. To consider the past as a fixed vision is but a ruse aimed at freezing contemporary experience in molds that history has already worn out. As such, the whole of national and human heritage becomes our tributary throughout our journey of change and innovation."[190] For Nasiri, this occasioned harnessing vernacular print materials and Shi'i Islamic imagery indicative of a shared spirit of communal piety that memorializes the sacrifice towards injustice of the Prophet's grandson and warriors at Karbala. By the end of the 1960s, his art memorialized newly forbidden expressions of sorrow assembled from local print materials, and ultimately opened up the metaphoric potential of Karbala and its popular depictions to create new visions and creative horizons for printmaking in Iraq.

While most of the New Visions group continued exhibiting and encouraging work with new media—particularly printmaking and poster arts—several artists were forced to leave Iraq after 1970, and Nasiri focused on teaching. Determined to demonstrate to his fellow artists that printmaking was as vital and historically rich an artistic practice as any other medium in Iraq, in 1974 Nasiri opened and chaired the country's first Printmaking Department. He also eventually wrote a history of graphic arts in Arabic.[191] In his textbook and other public educational outputs including scholarly articles on vernacular Islamic printing practices, Nasiri wrote a history of Arabic printing in Iraq as it also

al-Bayanat al-fanniyya fi al-'iraq (Baghdad: Wizarat al-l'Iam, Mudiriyyat al-thaqafa al-'amma, 1973), 31-35.
[190] Dia Azzawi, "Manifesto: Towards a New Vision" (2018), 309.
[191] Rafa Nasiri, Fann al-grafik al-mu'asir (Contemporary Graphic Art) (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, 1997

relates from ancient Mesopotamian seals to the popular religious banners of 'Ashura, writing:

> Ancient Iraqis were the first to know the art of printing in history; and practicing this art continued on and off along generations until we recognized another printing medium which was later applied in southern parts of Iraq, and in the holy cities such as Karbala for instance, where woodcut has been used to be imprinted on textiles for special religious occasions. These prints included poetic verses counting the epic of al-Husayn's martyrdom, which is usually printed in black and white with a length measuring more than ten meters."[192]

Nasiri ultimately sought to engage with popular Islamic heritage in order to assert Iraq's own presence and preeminence in the history of printing, while constructing an artistic lineage for his own internationally informed practice.

This genealogical and perhaps "vernacularizing" aim through popular religious heritage is what chiefly drove Nasiri to collect, showcase, and publicize printed calligraphic textiles and associative Shi'i Islamic practices through his printmaking activities. Yet his other artist contemporaries were also becoming interested in Shi'i visual culture and iconographies during those years, albeit different routes and for more immediate, politically pressing reasons. Two years after the 1963 Ba'athist Party military coup, the painter Kadhim Haider organized a large exhibition at the National Museum of Modern Art during Muharram, where he displayed his new paintings representing the Battle of Karbala through references to its popular rituals and devotional images in Iraq. These paintings demonstrate the constitutive creative interests in popular religious culture throughout the 1960s, as artists transported these images and materials and their latent historical and contemporary symbolism into new worldmaking practices and painterly possibilities in midcentury Iraq.

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[192] Rafa Nasiri, "Modern Iraqi Graphic Art" *Gilgamesh: A Journal of Modern Iraqi Arts,* trans. May Muzaffar, 1, no. 2 (Baghdad, 1986): 13-14.

Kadhim Haidar and *The Martyr's Epic*

In turning to Kadhim Haidar's painting practice at the turn of the 1960s, I want to explore the specific effects of the February 8th 1963 military coup as a driving force in contemporary art engagements with Shiʿi Islamic heritage. On that date, military leaders of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party successfully overthrew the Republic of Iraq and its Prime Minister ʿAbd al-Karim Qasim. Retroactively historicized as the Ramadan Revolution under later Presidents including Saddam Husayn, the violent 1963 coup led to mass executions of not just political leaders, but thousands of citizens and leftists including Iraqi Communist Party members and sympathizers. Historians describe this "reckoning of the Communists" as a relentless house-to-house hunt targeting merchants, journalists, guild members, students, and especially university faculty that led to no less than 5,000 deaths in just 48 hours.[193] While ensuing power struggles led to continued political upheaval over the next several years, the February 1963 coup and its catastrophic massacres left an indelible impact on public memory, civic life, and political expression in contemporary Iraq.

In response to the mass executions, artist Mahmoud Sabri (1927-2012) produced a painting depicting the visceral turmoil of the 1963 massacres (**Figure 2.18**). Titled "The Hero" (*al-batal*) the work portrays a man in white clothing staring out from the gallows as people both mourn and protest around his stoic figure highlighted against a fiery orange sunset. Sharp crystalline forms and dramatic shadings compose men and women

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[193] Hanaa Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, 985.

as if out of stained glass, as their dynamic gestures and stylized anatomies contrast with the steadfast heroic martyr. At his feet crouches another body in white clothes drenched with red blood. Where the head should be appears only the black void of the outstretched woman's dark robes. A small child consisting of only red toned pigments appears adjacent to the decapitated body. Altogether the painting suggests the eternal cycle of resistance will be reborn through the heroicized sacrifices of the political martyrs of 1963.

Created as a tribute to the artist's slain friend, the ICP secretary Husain Ahmad al-Radi, Mahmoud Sabri drew upon not just his artistic training in "Russian Austere" stylized realism at the Surikov Institute in Moscow, but on previous government executions of communists.[194] Before the 1958 Revolution propelled Iraq's communists into positions of government power, political organizers had faced persecution under the British-backed Hashemite monarchy. Several prominent communists were executed in 1949, a moment the historian Hanna Batatu recalls as when "communism became surrounded with the halo of martyrdom"[195] in Iraq. Many compared the 1963 massacres to the 1949 executions, a historical parallel emphasized in Sabri's painting through the symbolic white shrouds of the doomed political prisoners, as photographs from the 1949 execution reveal the executed communists were also dressed in plain white clothes.[196]

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[194] Suheyla Takish, "Mahmoud Sabri: The Hero," *Barjeel Art Foundation*, accessed January 20, 2019. Available at: https://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/collection/hero-mahmoud-sabri/. See also Omar Kholeif and Candy Stobbs, *Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015).
[195] Hanaa Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, 569.
[196] See Jabra's discussion of Mahmoud Sabri's work with social themes, protest, and anger, in Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *The Grass Roots of Iraqi Art* (St. Hellier, Jersey: Wasit Graphic and Pub., 1983), 35. On Sabri's manifesto regarding his later abstractive painting experiments with quantum physics from the 1970s onward, see Mahmoud Sabri, "Quantum Realism—An Art of Processes." Republished in *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, ed. Anneka

Sabri's visceral artwork suggests some of the emblematic artistic responses—particularly in the medium of painting—to the 1963 Ba'athist coup. As an exemplar, "The Hero" demonstrates how Iraqi artists mobilized transnational leftist iconographies and heroic imagery, including stylized figures associated with midcentury socialist realism, along with symbolic representations of martyrdom. Acts of martyrdom have diverse symbolic associations across Iraq's cultural and historic landscapes through the twentieth-century, but most especially within the religious practices and popular perceptions of Shi'i Islam. We can see the powerful utility of martyrdom transmitted through Shi'i Muslim cosmologies in a famous painting by Kadhim Haidar, one which offers a markedly different engagement with political and popular religious imagery along with concepts of martyrdom in midcentury Iraq.[197]

In "Death of a Man" (*masra' insan*), alternatively known as "The Struggle of the Hero,"[198] Haidar created a deadly battle scene (**Figure 2.19**).[199] Unlike Sabri's luminously prismatic realism, Kadhim's sketched human forms appear as two-

Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 347-350.

[197] For information on Kadhim Haidar's contemporary painting practices, see "Kadhim Haidar: Leader and Pioneer," *Asfar Magazine,* no. 4 (1986): 69-71; Nizar Salim, *L'art contemporain en Iraq: Vol. 1 La peinture* (Lausanne: Sartec, 1977), 78-81; Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *The Grass Roots of Iraqi Art* (St. Hellier, Jersey: Wasit Graphic and Pub., 1983), 31-33; Maureen Ali, "The Powerful Art of Kadhim Haider," *Ur* no 1 (1985), 34-36; Saleem al-Bahloly, "Kadhim Haidar," *Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World* (n.d.), accessed June 18, 2018. Available at: http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/bios/Pages/Kadhim-Haidar.aspx.

[198] This is the title Saleem al-Bahloly provides in his biographical entry on Haidar, but without providing a source or reference for this alternate title (primary, secondary, or otherwise). See "Kadhim Haidar," *Mathaf Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World* (n.d.), accessed June 18, 2018. Available at: http://www.encyclopedia.mathaf.org.qa/en/bios/Pages/Kadhim-Haidar.aspx

[199] See Dia Azzawi's discussion of this work in "Kadhim Haidar: Sirat al-fanan…sirat al-luha (Life of the artist…life of the painting)," *Nsus* Magazine (1994): 68. Haidar died in 1985 after a battle with cancer. Several cultural arts magazines reproduced this particular painting in commemoration of his life's work, such as "Kadhim Haidar: Pioneer," in *Asfar* no. 4 (1986), 70-71.

dimensional cutouts whose sinuous musculatures are visible through semi-transparent flesh. Across the whitewashed wood surface, black rectilinear shapes contour and define the central military action in the main field apart from the side flanks. The compressed pictorial space offers figures in differing scales, from the giant semi-nude man standing right of center to the uniform row of petite black robed and facially veiled figures assembled near an outcropping of white tents. The earthen-toned forms are delineated by thin white striations, almost like scratches across bodily limbs, as the natural wood fiber patterns peer through the painted image to invoke the undulating sands of a desert landscape. Along with the giant figure holding a double-pronged sword, the mythic reality of the painting is also conveyed by the bright yellow and orange anthropomorphized sun (known as the *khurshid khanum* or "Lady Sun" figure in popular Persianate arts) whose upside down visage stares out across the painting, as one long yellow ray extends down toward a bloody decapitated head.

Like Charles Hossein Zenderoudi's late 1950s print work experiments, Haidar's painting depicts the seventh-century Battle of Karbala by referencing and drawing upon its popular figural models and historical devotional images within Islamic heritage (**Figure 2.20**). Kadhim Haidar chose to represent this climatic moment immediately following Husayn's death by showing his head held aloft by the enemy Umayyad army's warrior Shimr—at whose feet lies the rest of the Imam's body. Thus, in the process of painting one of the most significant historic events in Islam for Muslims around the world, Haidar experimented with popular vernacular archetypes in order to rework the Battle of Karbala's longstanding artistic traditions into a redemptive narrative for the

presentist sacrifices of ordinary Iraqis during the tumultuous decades of the late 1950s-

1960s.

While studying painting and theater design at London's Central St. Martins,

Haidar grew interested in popular Iraqi street theater, especially religious processions and

ritual performances (*taʿziya*) that publicly reenact the events of Karbala during holy

months.[200] Yet for "Death of a Man" Haidar turned to historical and popular print art

prototypes to shape his revolutionary transformation of Karbala's sacred landscape. With

ascendant mass media technologies of the early to mid-twentieth-century, including

lithograph prints and posters, artists across the Middle East and Islamic world had

increasing exposure and access to historic Islamic visual traditions through new

reproductions and circulations of popular pious images.[201] In Chapter 1 I discussed one

such color-offset poster, titled "The Tragedy of Karbala" from 1940s Iran, that unfolds

the narrative events in multiple vignettes around a centralized desert battlefield that is

remarkably similar to Haidar's condensed modernist rendering (**see Chapter 1, Figure

1.15**).

Haidar's experimental reworking of popular depictions of Karbala raises a key

question in relation to contemporary art engagements with Islamic heritage under rising

authoritarian governments and political repression in the 1960s Arab world. While some

artists were certainly concerned with issues of folk and the vernacular in regional art

production, others were primarily responding to contemporary images and symbolic

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[200] On the structure of public Muharram rituals in Iraq, and pilgrimage processions around Najaf and Karbala during ʿAshura and Arbaʿin, see Faleh Jabar, *The Shiʿite Movement in Iraq*, (London: Saqi, 2003), 185-198. For general studies of *taʿziya* memorializing performances in Iran and other transnational Shiʿi communities, see Peter Chelkowski, ed., *Taʿziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1979).
[201] See Farshid Emami, "The Lithographic Image and Its Audiences." In *Technologies of the Image: Art in 19th-century Iran* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2018), 55-80.

worlds that exist within and comprise everyday life in midcentury Iraq. In one sense,

these developments also paralleled the rise of American vernacular forms in American

Pop art, as Thomas Crow has argued of these materials: "their style and instrumentation

of which would register today as folk, [but] at that moment they simply represented the

contemporary idioms of these regions."[202] Considered within the transnational interest in

experimenting with popular heritage of everyday life, Haidar's "Death of a Man"

painting illustrates how these engagements could serve the creative need for how best to

speak to a common, vernacular language through immediately recognizable imagery and

allegorical narratives. In this sense, these creative experiments with the popular symbolic

cosmos of Islamic religious images and materials provided artists like Haidar new ways

of imagining and worldmaking despite the diminishing symbolic resources available to

them under authoritarian, repressive regimes such as the Pan-Arab Baʿathist Party, and its

associations with the secular ruling elite Sunni classes of Iraq.

This now raises another question: who is this painting's hero? Looking back to

the giant male figure, we see him grasping the split-pointed sword of Husayn's father,

ʿAli, the fourth caliph and the first imam in Shiʿi Islam. Known as *zulfiqar*, or the

legendary two-edged weapon gifted from the Prophet Muhammad to ʿAli, the sword is a

popular talismanic image due to its purported magical properties as well as its status as an

object image stand-in for the heroic warrior Imam ʿAli.[203] However, rather than depict

ʿAli, Haidar painted a towering anonymous man in a white cloth whose stance and bare

chest recall heroic masculine imagery in popular protests, such as in ʿAbdul Qadir Al

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[202] Thomas Crow, *The Long March of Pop* (2016), 11.

[203] See Venetia Porter, Liana Saif, and Emilie Savage-Smith, "Medieval Islamic Amulets, Talismans, and Magic" in *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, eds. Finbarr Barry Flood and Gulru Necipoglu (2017), 646; Christiane Gruber, "Signs of the Hour: Eschatological Imagery in Islamic Book Arts," *Ars Orientalis* 44 (2014): 54.

Obaidi's tribute to Iraq's "July 14th Revolution" of 1958 (**Figure 2.21**). Against a sea of faceless demonstrators carrying signs and banners, an enormous male figure stands triumphantly in front of a prison cell with a dove in one hand and a truncated foot in the other. Having broken free of his shackles, the bare chested man raises up high a bodily trace of the sacrifices born by those who fought against tyranny while the dove—an idealist symbol in communist politics worldwide—offers the promise for a more just and peaceful future.

Like Sabri's "The Hero," Al Obaidi's painting encapsulates the progressive visual culture of the Iraqi Republican-era, with images of popular dissent, bodily sacrifice, and common participants of the new nation's women, laborers, and farmers. Yet with escalating political struggles of the Ba'athist Party against the Iraqi Communist Party, 1960s revolutionary and leftist political imagery became increasing affiliated with Shi'i Muslim iconography. While this shift speaks to artists' creative interests in popular Islamic heritage, it also aligns with the broader progressive and nationalist contexts of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries in the Islamic world, including South Asia and Indonesia, where the tragedy of Karbala became a medium through which reformists shaped and defined class consciousness efforts.[204] Indeed, even as Marxists and other social reformers fought against consolidated religion, they sought to use the visual language of Karbala as a present- and future-oriented worldview.[205] Most especially, leftists transformed Shi'i Muslim collective memorializing practices into "outlets for ideas of universal justice, resistance to colonial and postcolonial categories, and the

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[204] On this subject in South and Southeast Asia, see Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reviving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
[205] Faleh A. Jabr, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London: Saqi, 2003): 185.

building of transnational solidarities."[206] In Iraq, communist groups marshaled these so-called "Shiʻi leftist" sympathies through active sponsorship of Muharram ritual processions and patronage of other religious activities, political efforts that only increased following the violent 1963 military coup (**Figure 2.22**). With Kadhim Haidar's depiction of a heroic Iraqi figure carrying ʻAli's sword in the midst of the Battle of Karbala, we see how national political struggles in the specific context of 1960s Iraq attained extraordinary significance as they were projected through the mythologizing frameworks of Husayn and the martyrs at Karbala. Contemporary art engagements with popular Islamic heritage were not only concerned with artistic genealogies and symbolic references that expanded available resources for artistic production, but could also be used to address real world political concerns and representational dilemmas.

"Death of a Man" also demonstrates Haidar's early interest in the emotional resonances of Shiʻi Muslim rituals and popular mythology. After the 1963 mass persecution and executions of Iraq's leftists, the artist expanded his knowledge of Shiʻi traditions into a large-scale solo exhibition at the National Museum of Modern Art in 1965.[207] Entitled "The Martyr's Epic" (*Malhamat al-shahid*), the exhibition series of 32 paintings also makes reference to Shiʻi oratory traditions memorializing Karbala.[208] One exemplary work from the historic show reveals ten white horses alone on the desolate landscape against a blackened sky and blood red sun (**Figure 2.23**). Imam Husayn's

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[206] Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reviving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): 11.

[207] See also Saleem al-Bahloly, "The Persistence of the Image: *Dhakira Hurra* in Dia Azzawi's Drawings on the Massacre of Tel al-Zaatar" *ARTMargins* 2, no. 2 (2013): 71-97.

[208] Kaidhim Haidar was also a poet, and he composed poetry that drew from popular Shiʻi oratory modes for the exhibition and other venues. Twenty years later and in honor of Kadhim's legacy, fellow painter Dia Azzawi wrote an essay on the history and critical impact of Haidar's seminal 1965 exhibition in contemporary Iraqi art. See Azzawi, "*Kadhim Haidar: Sirat al-fanan…sirat al-luha*" (Kadhim Haidar: Life of the artist…Life of the canvas) *Nsus*, no. 1 (1994): 69.

famous white steed *zuljana* ("the white one") is one of the most powerful votive images

symbolizing the act of witnessing and remembering the martyrdom of Karbala.[209] Haidar

used the martyrs' riderless horses on the empty battlefield to attest to the bleak social

reality of post-1963 Iraq, while reminding viewers to remember and reflect on the many

absent martyrs in the country's present-day landscape.[210]

The bodies of martyrs from both seventh-century Karbala and modern Iraq

comingle in Haidar's exhibition series' abstracted figures, as in a painting entitled "Shimr

and the Martyr" (*Shimr wa al-shahid)* (**Figure 2.24**). In an iconoclastic subversion of the

battle scene, the canvas edge cuts off Shimr's head, leaving only the enemy figure's

lower body astride a paint smudged horse to face off with a white figure inside the close-

cut pictorial frame. While one can certainly absorb the skillful sense of color and

composition in the abstracted battlefield, Haidar's painterly and abstractive experiments

with Shi'i visual motifs serve another motive: to hide overt political content or criticism

of the Ba'athist regime (especially in the context of the 1965 exhibition in the wake of the

1963 massacres). The abstracted figures also recall the mutability of the Karbala

narrative, especially during ritual *ta'ziya* re-enactments when members of local

communities assume the roles of the story's martyrs and enemies and take part in the

liminal performance of the historic event. As such, Haidar's experimental reworkings of

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[209] As Jürgen Wasim Frembgen argues, the white horse *Zuljanah* is the most powerful symbol of the tragedy of Karbala as a witness to both the battle and martyrdom of Husayn. Additionally, "in the cultures of the Middle East the riderless horse is a metaphor expressing the dimension of loss in a society and, at the same time, the hope for a savior." "The Horse of Imam Husayn: Notes on the Iconography of Shi'i Devotional Posters from Pakistan and India." In *The Art and Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography and Religious Devotion in Shi'i Islam* (Leiden: I.B. Tauris), 180.
[210] As David Freedberg argues, the cognitive process of recognizing an image or, as in the case here, an *absent* martyrial image, brings that image to life. See Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 429-440.

Shi'i folkloric forms elide temporal distance and merge recent political narratives of revolutionary martyrs into a revitalized sacred landscape of Karbala.

After Kadhim Haidar's 1965 "The Martyr's Epic" exhibition, contemporary Iraqi artist explorations and worldmaking expansions of a Shi'i Muslim symbolic cosmos flourished. While Rafa Nasiri's printmaking experiments with vernacular calligraphic materials and religious banners materials speak to how artists could arrive at working with popular Islamic heritage through a number of creative journeys (even as far afield as Beijing or Lisbon), the impact of Haidar's experimental work has been attested to by several of his contemporaries, including artist Dia Azzawi (b. 1939 Baghdad). Azzawi himself was known for creative engagements with popular Iraqi cultural heritage.[211] But before Haidar's 1965 exhibition, Azzawi's interests had been primarily focused in ancient archaeological artifacts and pre-Islamic Mesopotamian heritage. However, less than one year after Haidar's solo exhibition was held, Azzawi produced "Folkloric Mythology," a painting playing with Shi'i votive forms including a green banner hanging off a metal *'alam* standard, and *zulfiqar* hanging off a riderless horse (**Figure 2.25**). The steed floats high above the telluric horizon against a whitewashed canvas, while an elongated black rectangle with gold architectural motifs may stand in for a popular Shi'i monument, such as the Imam Husayn Shrine in Karbala.[212]

In characterizing this new Islamic heritage direction for his own artistic practice, Dia Azzawi published several essays on the impact and evocative power of seeing

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[211] See Dia Azzawi, et al, *Dia Azzawi: From 1963 Until Tomorrow* (Doha: Mathaf, Arab Museum of Modern Art, 2017); Saleem al-Bahloly, "The Persistence of the Image: *Dhakira Hurra* in Dia Azzawi's Drawings on the Massacre of Tel al-Zaatar" *ARTMargins* 2, no. 2 (2013): 71-97.
[212] The elongated façade and flattened pictorial space suggests an intriguing similitude with premodern manuscript paintings of Shi'i Shrines. See Allen "The Shi'i Shrines of Iraq," (2015), 41; 49.

Kadhim Haidar's "The Martyr's Epic" painting exhibition. He recalled the event in a

1992 magazine article, retracing his steps inside the halls of the old (now demolished)

National Museum of Modern Art back in 1965:

> In the complicated political conditions that followed the bloody coup of 1963, there was a spiritual need for subjects of this sort, subjects that went beyond the common subjects of Bedouins, cafes, suqs and the other subjects taken up by artists of the 1950s. [Kadhim Haidar] tried to introduce something else into the artwork, forms taken from popular tradition and transferred to the structure of the canvas, forms charged with popular emotion [*al-wijdan al-shaʿbi*]…Kadhim's works incited the young artists to search for a new vision, sometimes in metaphysical depths and sometimes in epics.[213]

Through its popular traditions and devotional practices, Shiʿi Islamic heritage provided

artists a richly textured symbolic universe to explore and immerse their artmaking

techniques and experimental art materials. The epic allegory and symbolic signs

associated with the seventh-century Battle of Karbala proved especially malleable and

expansive for artists, as demonstrated by its powerful utility for Iraq's 1960s leftist

political activities (and with some likely overlap between the two groups).

Dia Azzawi went on to paint another riderless horse on a barren, dark gray

atmospheric realm in "The Martyr" (*al-shahid*), just one year before the definitive 1968

Baʿath Party political coup that sealed Iraq's governing fate for the next 37 years (**Figure

2.26**). Here, building block patterns of squares, triangles, and arcs structure different

geometric forms, while symbolic shapes like the *panja*, crescent moon, and thin red and

black flags comingle in the ghostly setting. Hovering over the blue painted horse is a

series of vertical shapes starting with a white circle, blue triangle, purple crescent, and

then a long red line leading up towards a round moon-like face are altogether suggestive

of an abstracted body composed from primary shapes. And in a 1969 painting, titled

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[213] Dia Azzawi, "*al-Sitinat: Izdihar al-w'ai al-tashkili*" (The Sixties: The Flourishing of an Artistic Conscious), *Faradis* 5, no. 4 (1992): 91.

"ʿAshura Day," Azzawi further abstracts symbolic images from Muharram mourning rites into an otherworldly, deep blue cosmos (**Figure 2.27**). Produced in 1969, the work depicts a swirling mass of iconic Shiʿi symbols, including the riderless *zuljana,* blatant and hidden *panja* hand emblems, and bright read writing floating amid other Arabic letters that reads "ʿAshura." This holiest day of Shiʿi mourning and commemoration became one of the most important realms for artistic experimentation as its symbolic realms were adopted and transformed into new configurations within the unstable political terrains of 1960s Iraq.

Rafa Nasiri's own experiments with calligraphic textile materials in his abstractive *Colored Horizons* series may have been driven by the same "Shiʿi leftist" activities that encouraged Kadhim Haidar to mount an entire painting exhibition referencing the Battle of Karbala. According to the political sociologist Faleh Jabar, in the wake of the bloody 1963 military coup, the Islamic Daʿwa Party began coordinating with student and faculty political organization activities into *mawakib husaynia* and other street processions around the University of Baghdad. As detached from the traditional religious communities and reworked into new academic contexts, these mourning processions were successfully organized in the form of political street demonstrations with calligraphic banners and slogans, and yielded Shiʿi-student solidarity on numerous occasions. In order to appeal to students and professors, these new *mawakib* adapted vernacular calligraphic banners to appeal to the urbane intelligentsia: "The verse these educated *mawakib* used was written in classical Arabic to lend the traditional commemoration a refined, sophisticated character."[214] Jabar witnessed these transformed Shiʿi Muslim rituals, as did Rafa Nasiri, who was teaching at the university at that time

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[214] See Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shiʿite Movement in Iraq* (London: Saqi, 2003), 140.

before receiving his fellowship to Portugal. Based on Jabar's description of the Daʿwa Party Muharram banners that closely corresponds to some of the artist's collection of popular calligraphic materials, Nasiri likely plucked his votive textiles from the midst of the 1960s student leftist-Shiʿi political processions (**Figure 2.28**).

Conclusion: Popular Traditions and an "Atmosphere of Religion"

Such experimental works address larger questions of why exactly artists began visually referencing and physically mediating popular religious materials into the work of art. Engaging with Islamic heritage provided artists like Rafa Nasiri not only creative fuel for self-expression and experimentation, but supplied them a pliable historical framework with which to channel a relevant cultural patrimony into the global landscape of modernism, in addition to the stakes of creative expression in 1960s Iraq. While these examples speak to the ever-broadening interests of artists across the Middle East in popular heritage and religious mythologies of the Islamic world, including transnational Shiʿi Islamic votive arts, the specifically leftist mobilizations and political activations of Shiʿi Muslim practices by the Iraqi Communist Party introduced heightened symbolic connotations to Iraqi artist experiments with Battle of Karbala rituals of remembrance.

Within the turbulent world of 1960s Iraq, these contemporary art experiments were not limited to the politically active Shiʿi Muslim spheres. Artists eagerly explored popular Islamic heritage writ large, including everyday devotional objects, protective invocations, and amuletic symbols. For example, the Kurdish artist Ismail al-Khaid

produced a painting entitled "The Atmosphere of Religion" (*ajwaʾ al-dinia*) in Baghdad in 1965 (**Figure 2.29**).[215] Composed on paper out of mixed media materials and paints, the work constructs an architectural façade out of vernacular architectural frames and built forms. Citing the quotidian materials found in old urban settings like bazaars and historic neighborhoods, the artwork also gestures toward the more intimate, personal signs of everyday piety.

Al-Khaid created the playful assemblage and architectural world building through protective symbols and rhythmic motifs, including crescent and arabesque shapes, the *panja*, and a *khamsa*, or the popular talisman of the hand with an eye drawn in the palm that is used to ward off the evil eye (*al-ʿayn*). Inscribed calligraphy below the *khamsa* is the rhymed apotropaic saying, "*al-hasud la yasud*" or "the envier will not overcome,"[216] while in the center cartouche reads the warning "Those who (constantly) observe other people will die (of worry)" (*min raqib al-nas mat huma*). Such creative worldmaking of an almost "ambient" sense of religion emphasizes the shared and mundanely commonplace aspects of everyday traditions and popular heritage materials in the Islamic world. By the 1970s, artistic interest in these quotidian symbolic landscapes, and the tones, textures, and atmospheres of popular religion, would prove enticing for artist's representational experiments and preservationist impulses. As explored next in Chapter 3, the conservation activities of Syrian artist Ali Jabri (1941-2002) demonstrates how budding interests in the quotidian materials of Muslim life would even drive him to

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[215] See "Ismail Al Khaid," *Barjeel Art Foundation* (December 2018), available at: https://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/artist/iraq/ismael-al-khaid/.
[216] See Keith E. Swartley ed., *Encountering the World of Islam* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 501.

curate an entire museum dedicated to the endeavor of accumulating, preserving, and

displaying popular Islamic traditions of the everyday.

Chapter 3 An Artist Curating Heritage: Ali Jabri and the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions

With the case of Syrian-Jordanian artist Ali Jabri (1942-2002), creative experiments with popular Islamic heritage begin to move from the artwork as a single, physical entity and enter into the realm of curatorial practice and museum objects display. Officially opened in 1972, the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions was the first public Jordanian museum to exhibit modern artifacts. With objects amassed from across the Levant, including Jordanian, Palestinian, Syrian, and Ottoman dress, jewelry, amulets, and devotional objects, the collection represents the lived practices of people from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. In making the museum, the founder Saʿadiya al-Tal (1920 - 1998) and her nephew, Ali Jabri, sought to preserve and promote regional cultural heritage beyond the claimed nationalist narratives of Jordan's ancient artifacts and archaeological remains, and into an expression of everyday material and religious life from the not-so-distant past. The museum thus transports visitors into the living cultural and religious traditions of the Levant, facilitated by the curation, design, and research of Jabri who formally joined as director in 1980.

Jabri's work in the museum offers an example of an artist engaging with popular traditions and heritage as the creative laboratory for modern art making.[217] Jabri was known as a "Neo-Realist" artist whose work was fueled by his desire to document and represent both past and present cultural heritage of the Arab world, mixing "ancient beauty and modern Warholian junk."[218] Such examples include collage paintings and sketchbook journal entries of 1970s Cairo's Islamic architectural heritage alongside scenes from everyday modern life in Egypt, or even representations of rural villages' talismanic and devotional practices in Jordan. He also worked with archaeological survey teams, drawing and painting landscapes of Jordan's ancient and medieval Islamic sites with archaeologists' contemporary pottery charts, measuring sticks, candy wrappers, and bags depicted *in situ*. Through these various engagements with historical surveys and popular traditions, Ali Jabri created and maintained his personal visual diaries and research journals primarily for himself, but continually developed relationships and artistic work with public output.

His creative engagement with the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions culminated these trajectories into one project, wherein he arranged historic artifacts and materials within carefully curated displays mimicking their preliminary quotidian

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[217] Recent studies on Middle East museologies have shifted away from previous research frameworks that emphasized Western-centric museum models, or the state and authoritative, nationalist heritage as straightforward museum building practices. Instead, as Virginie Rey argues, these regional museums projects should be understood as actively produced within local discourses, which evolved "into complex, multi-dimensional institutions which defy the rudimentary classification between West and non-West." See Rey, "The Journey of a Tunisian Ethnographic Museum," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 10, no. 1 (2015): 1-21. For a study of modernism and art museum developments in North Africa, see Katarzina Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

[218] Sousan Hammad, "Ali Jabri retrospective: a life recorded in Sketchbooks," *The Electronic intifada* (19 July 2009). Available at: https://electronicintifada.net/content/ali-jabri-retrospective-life-recorded-sketchbooks/8326.

environments. Jabri's work in the museum thus extended his documentary drive beyond

his paintings and visual diaries into the realm of museological worldmaking through his

extensive research on the historic objects and devotional materials contained in the

museum. His artistic hand is omnipresent in the small institution's galleries, from its

handwritten informational labels, carved shelves and wood-beamed ceiling mimicking

Bedouin desert tent interiors, evocatively designed displays, to even a few small drawings

carefully inserted into the museum didactics themselves. The museum thus operates as an

extension of Ali Jabri's lifelong practice to observe, document, and represent quotidian

Arab life in all its entanglements with surviving cultural and religious heritage under the

centrifugal forces of modernization.[219] Working with Jabri's personal artist sketchbooks,

research notes, and archival documents, along with the museum's own collection and

archive, this chapter closely examines Ali Jabri's work in the museum as a key and

unstudied instance of a contemporary Arab artist historicizing, preserving, and

disseminating historical Islamic traditions and popular heritage.

The Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions

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[219] On uneven neoliberal developments in Jordan, see Eliana Abu-Hamdi, "The Jordan Gate Towers of Amman: Surrendering Public Space to Build a Neoliberal Ruin," *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 5, no. 1 (2016): 73-101; Nabil I. Abu-Dayyeh, "Persisting Vision: Plans for a Modern Modern Arab capital, Amman, 1955-2002," *Planning Perspectives* 19, no. 1 (2004): 79-110; Rami Farouk Daher, "Tourism, Heritage, and Urban Transformations in Jordan and Lebanon: Emerging Actors and Global-Local Juxtapositions." In *Tourism in the Middle East: Continuity, Change and Transformation* (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2006): 263-307;Luna Khirfan and Bessma Momani, "(Re)branding Amman: A 'Lived' City's Values, Image, and Identity," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 9 (2012): 49-65; Mohamed Tarawneh and Abdel Hakim Al Husban, "Rural Poverty in Jordan: Assessment and Characterisation," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 6, no. 2 (2011): 94-107.

The Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions is nestled inside the ancient Roman theatre in the old downtown (*wast al-balad*) of Amman (**Figure 3.1**). Founded in 1971 and officially opened to the public in 1972, the museum's history is deeply entangled with the tumultuous national history of Jordan from its 1967 War with Israel to the Palestinian uprisings in 1970-1 (also known as Black September).[220] Initially proposed in the mid-1960s, it was first conceived as a "museum of popular arts" inside the old bazaar of East Jerusalem. Why plan the museum on the easternmost edge of the Jordan River valley's West Bank bordering with Israel, rather than any of Jordan's other historically significant sites? No doubt the projected location in Jerusalem aimed to foment the intimately bound and fragile cultural ties between Palestine and Jordan.[221] Inserting a museum of popular arts in the holy city as exclusively managed and accessible under the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan's patrimony would have furthered the country's nationalist claims to a protectorship over Palestinian realms, as well as to safeguarding cultural and religious heritage in the third holiest city in Islam. Indeed, the Hashemite monarchy stakes a large part of its legitimacy in Islam, as the royal family traces its dynastic roots to Sharif Hussein ibn Ali and the Hasanids of the Hijaz, who ruled over Mecca from the tenth-century until the House of Saud took control in 1924.[222]

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[220] Joseph A. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 240-247; Joseph Nevo, "September 1970 in Jordan: A Civil War?" *Civil Wars* 10, no. 3 (2008): 217-230; Ziv Rubinovitz, "Blue and White 'Black September': Israel's Role in the Jordan Crisis of 1970," *The International History Review* 32, no. 4 (2010): 687-706; Hassan A. Barari,"Four Decades after Black September: A Jordanian Perspective," *Civil Wars* 10, no. 3 (2008): 231-243.

[221] Elena Corbett, ed. *Competitive Archaeology in Jordan Narrating Identity from the Ottomans to the Hashemites* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 11.

[222] The family also traces its heritage to the Prophet Muhammad's whose great-grandfather, Hashim ibn Abd Manaf; relics of the prophet are displayed in the Hashemite History Museum in Jordan's state mosque, the King Hussein bin Talal Mosque. See Corbett, "Hashemite Antiquity and Modernity: Iconography in Neoliberal Jordan," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* (2011), 166. On the complicated genealogies of tribal and national identities in the nation-state of Jordan,

From its inception to eventual formation, the museum's *modus operandi* centered on preserving and promoting popular cultural practices, traditions, and objects in Jordan, Palestine, and interwoven cultural arenas of Levantine lands formerly under Ottoman rule.[223] A 1966 UNESCO proposal for the museum laid out its motives as emphasizing the intertwined popular traditions and everyday material culture of Jordanians, Syrians, Lebanese, and Iraqis in the *Suq al-Qattanin* (the Mamluk cotton-merchant market built in 1336-7 AD),[224] where traditional arts and hand crafts were to be celebrated in the historic architectural space they were still being sold (and thereby enhancing East Jerusalem's tourism trade).[225] As such, the museum would have brought forth research, collecting, preservation, and dissemination of several states' heritage traditions into a united ethnographic narrative; thus staking a claim for regional Arab cultural autonomy within and encompassing Jerusalem.

While aspects of these original designs do exist in the museum in its current iteration, it never came to fruition inside the *Suq al-Qattanin* as intended. Following heightened tensions and months of war games, in June of 1967 a six-day war began between Israel and Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, during which the Jordanian military lost control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem to Israel (**Figure 3.2**).[226] The war displaced over 300,000

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see Linda L. Layne, *Home and Homeland: The Dialogics of Tribal and National Identities in Jordan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[223] See Eugene L. Rogan, "Bringing the State Back: The Limits of Ottoman Rule in Jordan, 1840-1910." In *Village, Steppe and State: The Social Origins of Modern Jordan*, eds. Eugene L. Rogan and Tariq Tell (London and New York: British Academic Press, 1995), 32-57.

[224] See Tawfiq Da'adli, Hervé Barbé, "The Development of Suq al-Qattanin Quarter, Jerusalem," *Der Islam* 94, no. 1 (2017): 66-93.

[225] Written by Hazam Mahmoud al-Khaldi, director of the Jerusalem Library, and Mr. Hugues de Varine-Bohan, Director of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), August 11th, 1966. Jordan National Library, 1-4.

[226] Joseph A. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 233-234; 239.

Palestinians from the West Bank into Jordan, isolated East Jerusalem from Palestinian

and Jordanian political and cultural life,[227] and forcibly uprooted many academic research

and administrative centers from the now-annexed West Bank and into Amman (the

British Institute, the German Institute, and the American Center for Oriental Research

were all originally located in the West Bank).[228] The resulting upheaval changed the

nationalist discourse and political makeup of Jordan's identity both across the region and

inside its own borders, as the country had failed to defend Palestinian territories or

maintain the sacred city of Jerusalem, yet refused to give citizenship to many of its now

majority-population Palestinian residents.[229]

The war also disrupted Ali Jabri's life plans to finish his Ph.D. and move back to

the region (he was born in Jerusalem in 1942, but moved to Damascus soon after). After

he finished his studies in architecture at Stanford for his bachelor's degree, he was

accepted to Bristol University in 1965 for his graduate studies, where he eventually

completed a dissertation in August 1970 on the British art historian Horace Walpole.[230]

His studies were interrupted by his father Majddedine's death in 1967, and Jabri left

England to work, first teaching English at the American Community School of Kuwait

for nine months in 1967, and then at the American Embassy in Beirut until his aunt

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[227] Charles Tripp, "Symbolic Forms of Resistance: Art and Power," in *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 177.
[228] Irene Maffi, "The Emergence of Cultural Heritage in Jordan: The Itinerary of a Colonial Intervention" *Journal of Social Archaeology* (2014); Elena Corbett, *Competitive Archaeology in Jordan: Narrating Identity from the Ottomans to the Hashemites* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).
[229] For more on Jordan's population and growth of Palestinian-Jordanian residents, see Massad, *Colonial Effects* (2001), 233-234. See Also W. Hazbun, "Mapping the Landscape of the 'New Middle East': The Politics of Tourism Developent and the Peace Process in Jordan." In *Jordan in Transition 1990-2000*, ed. George Joffe (London: Hurst & Company, 2002), 330-345.
[230] Ghandour, *About This Man Called Ali* (2009), 98. I have communicated with librarians at the Department of Art History at Bristol University, and they have been unable locate any record of the dissertation thus far, although they have not catalogued dissertations prior to 1978.

Saʿadiya al-Tel agreed to start funding his university tuition.[231] During his studies and

subsequent work in London in the early 1970s he kept in close correspondence with

Saʿadiya, who was pursuing cultural events showcasing folk arts as director of the

Revival of Jordanian Folk Culture Club (*nadi ihia' al-turath al-shaʿbi al-urduni*)[232] and

eventually oversaw the establishment of the Museum of Popular Traditions. The museum

was constructed in a different historic site instead of Jerusalem's premodern Mamluk

arcade: inside downtown Amman's second-century B.C. ancient Roman theatre inside the

left *paradoi* or side entrances off of the ancient *scena*'s northern flank (**Figure 3.3**).[233]

At the time Saʿadiya was married to Wasfi al-Tal, a Jordanian politician known

for his strong stance against Nasserism, or the brand of Pan-Arab socialist nationalism

advocated by the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, and his pro-Hashemite "East

Bank Jordanian" rhetoric.[234] Wasfi was appointed for a third term as Prime Minister in

October 1971 in order to restore political control of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordanian

over Palestinian political factions in the West Bank. Despite attempts by the monarch,

King Hussein, to mitigate the swell of anger and frustration towards the government for

losing the Six-Day War and counterbalance through recognition the immense popularity

of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and other guerrilla fighter groups, the

Palestinian resistance movements rose up and attempted to challenge and overthrow the

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[231] Ghandour, *About This Man Called Ali* (2009), 97.

[232] Ahmad Ajaj describes the group as "a private organization formed by wealthy Jordanian women to collect traditional objects, costumes and jewelry and to display them in museums." See *The Historical Development of University Museums in Jordan (1962-2006): Objectives and Perspectives Case Studies of Archaeology Museums at the Jordan and Yarmouk Universities* (PhD Thesis, University of Leicester, December 2007), 69, fn. 277; Joseph A. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 250.

[233] The space had been the offices of the Jordan Department of Antiquities.

[234] See Joseph A. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 200-207; 237-250.

Hashemite regime in 1970, a civil war culminating for several weeks in the month of September with extensive unrest and military attacks.[235] Fighting took place across Jordan with the capital Amman experiencing some of the heaviest gunfire and highest number of civilian casualties during the Civil War. The clashes ultimately helped to alter and cement Jordan's national identity as one of "Jordanian-ness" exclusively,[236] with emphasis on Bedouin tribal identity, Islamic heritage, and Hashemite origins and legitimacy.[237]

As a direct result of his role in overseeing combat against Palestinian fighters, including the leftist *fidayin* (the "sacrificers") guerrillas[238] in 1970, four "Black September Organization" militants assassinated Wasfi al-Tal on November 28, 1971 in front of the Sheraton Cairo Hotel during an Arab League summit in Egypt. Saʿadiya was with him in Cairo when he was shot.[239] His death delayed the official opening of the new Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions from 1971 to 1972, and a newspaper

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[235] See Joseph Massad's discussion of the lead up to Jordan's Civil War in *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (2001), 240-250. See also Hussein Sirriyeh, "Jordan and the Legacies of the Civil War of 1970-71," *Civil War* (2000), 74-86; Ziv Rubinovitz, "Blue and White 'Black September': Israel's Role in the Jordan Crisis of 1970," *The International History Review* (December 2010), 687-706; Fruchter-Ronen, Iris, "Black September: The 1970-71 Events and Their Impact on the Formation of Jordanian National Identity, *Civil Wars* (2008): 244-260.

[236] In her discussion of the history of Jordanian museums, Carol Malt states that starting in the 1970s the Bedouin heritage and objects were promoted more in museological narratives and exhibited in museums increasingly in place of Palestinian identity. See Malt, *Women's Voices in Middle Eastern Museums: Case Studies in Jordan* (2001), 36.

[237] Iris Fruchter-Ronen, "Black September: The 1970-71 Events and Their Impact on the Formation of Jordanian National Identity, *Civil Wars* (July 2008), 252. Joseph Massad notes how sermons organized for army soldiers both during and especially after 1970 "were to include mention of the Hashemite heritage of 'Abdullah I [the Amir, then first King, of Transjordan], which links him to the progeny of the Prophet Muhammad himself." See *Colonial Effects* (2001), 211.

[238] See Joseph Nevo's discussion the Palestinian political leader George Habash's espousal of overthrowing the Hashemite monarchy in favor of a state founded on Marxist Leninist principles in "September 1970 in Jordan: A Civil War?" *Civil Wars* (July 2008), 224. The Palestinian *fedayeen* infamously raised red flags and even a portrait of Lenin from mosque minarets in Amman as commemorations of Lenin's birthday. See Massad, *Colonial Effects* (2001), 211.

[239] Ghandour, *About This Man Called Ali* (2009), 6.

announcement for his funerary wake is pasted inside the front cover of one of Ali Jabri's

journals after he became directing curator of the museum in 1980 (**Figure 3.4**).

Picturing the Modern Arab World

Ali Jabri's journals are an essential part of his artistic output. From as early as his

studies at Stanford in the 1960s up until his death, he often kept a visual record of his

day-to-day life.[240] He drew sketches of street scenes, architectural structures, random

vignettes he found interesting or amusing, and people. He often glued ticket stubs or

receipts from that day on the same page. Sometimes he wrote notes or poems or phone

numbers on the page, thereby supplying a textual interlay to the visual trace of his

everyday activities. For example, while living with his uncle Ihsan Jabri in Egypt from

December 1976 until 1978, he produced images blending figures with architectural

backdrops. In one page of his 1977 Cairo diary, the painting depicts a young man's face

in profile overlaid a corner of an architectural segment, most likely a corner of the

Mamluk-era Sultan Hasan Mosque Complex in Cairo, constructed 1356-1359 CE

(**Figure 3.5**).[241]

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[240] Ali purportedly destroyed most of his diaries and art works from the 1960s, including his time at Stanford. His journals from the 1970s largely center on his life in Bristol and London, later shifting to documenting Cairo when he moved in with his uncle Ihsan al-Jabri there from 1975-1978. These journals were the main focus of the journalist (and family friend) Amal Ghandour's biography on Ali Jabri and his family, *About this Man Called Ali: The Purple Life of an Arab Artist* (2009). Ali's journals from 1978 onward were produced in Jordan.
[241] Howyda N. Al-Harithy, "The Complex of Sultan Hasan in Cairo: Reading Between the Lines," *Muqarnas* 13 (1996): 68-79; Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mamluks: A History of the Architecture and its Culture* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 201-213; Abdallah Kahil, "The Architect/s of the Sultan Hasan Complex in Cairo," *Artibus Asiae* 66, no. 2, "Pearls

Using shades of warm russet orange and yellowish-green to highlight and accentuate the contours of both the man and the mosque, the image blurs anatomy with architecture through line and color. The work melds the human figure into the structure of the building, as the exterior wall crenellations and honeycomb *muqarnas* façade converge diagonally across the page into the man's dark brown bearded chin. While the man's deep amber skin and dark hair are more richly pigmented, his left ear is lightly shaded and fades away into the same light pale of the mosque's dome. Bright chartreuse yellow accents pick up the carved niches of medieval stonework and the figure's outer earlobes and jawline. The man's face is framed literally by a square black line and richly set off by the same citrus color filling the frame and accentuating the man's black hair, forehead, right eyebrow and nose bridge, along with the pupil of his almond-shaped eye. His body dissipates from the neck down into a few strokes of a dry magenta pastel that loosely construct a physical outline; the mosque's own structural anatomy likewise dissolves towards the bottom of the page. Altogether, the gestural and fleshy work suggests an innate bodily relationship between the city's inhabitants and its premodern Islamic architectural landscape.

Jabri's painting style has been described as a "neo-realist artist," or "New Realist."[242] He excelled in his drawing classes at Stanford, where a classmate from his 1962 Oil Painting and Life Drawing class remembers Jabri's long hours "creating and recreating figures on canvas…jewel tones, blues and greens among them" as he employed dynamic lines and "loose brushy background" in work that was "influenced by

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from the Water, Rubies from the Stone: Studies in Honor of Priscilla Soucek: Part I" (2006): 155-174.
[242] Lucretia Stewart, "Obituary: Ali Jabri, Artist who recorded a disappearing Jordan" *The Independent* (17 Dec 2002). Accessed 5 Oct 2016, 18.

the stage, drama, and a sense of the royal court" he studied in works by Spanish painters, such as Diego Velásquez and Francisco Goya.[243] His studies in architecture undoubtedly also played in a role in his structural sketches and painterly style. Fortunately, Jabri's self-portrait with his sketchbook, ink pen, and pastels survived his purge of earliest works from the 1960s and 1970s (**Figure 3.6**). In this self-portrait of a self-portrait, we see Jabri's artistic view of his body at work in his sketchbook with fountain ink pen in one hand and lit cigarette in the other. The bird's eye view over the artist's lap and crossed legs sprawl out on the floor, where his pastels, orange, glass bottle half-full of orange liquid, and some other draftsman miscellanea are arranged next to the artist's body. The thick, wiggly lines indicate a hand moving hurriedly over the page, a movement recorded in Jabri's rendering of his own hand depicting the same scene (his hand blocks the line of sight on the drawing inside the drawing where the artist's hand would again be depicted). Yellow pigmented strokes drag between the tangerine-shaded orange and glass bottle and the artist's otherwise uncolored trainers, visually cueing the viewer into an awareness of the artist's physical movements of the color pastel sticks across the image's page. Indeed, the dry pigments of the pastel sticks are used only to color themselves, the two orange and glass bottle still life's, and the artist's own hands in peachy beige. Such meta documentation of the artist at work presents a sense of Jabri's early hyperawareness of the act of creating as also a documentary act in and of itself.

This documentary nature of Jabri's artistic practice was put to great effect in the journals that survive from his two years in Cairo. Another scene depicts a man in a white

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[243] Amal Ghandour's correspondence with Ann Miller, March 12th and 14th, 2005, in *This Man Called Ali* (2009), 88. Ali's sister Diala kept a study by Ali of Velasquez's *Las Meninas* from his years at Stanford, in which she states he depicted the face of their mother, Hala Jabri. See *This Man Called Ali* (2009), 92.

juba, or long white robe garment associated with clerics, judges, professors, and religious

students, smoking *shisha* (a tobacco water pipe) against a backdrop of Cairo's cityscape

in yellowish blue and green hues (**Figure 3.7**). Across the bottom of the page in Arabic[244]

he wrote "Halamiyeh street/Samir at Haji Mahmoud's/Cairo August 21, 1977/Five

o'clock" in the same red used to color the pile of bricks behind the figure. Naming the

time and place of the sketch situates it as an observation of a leisure activity while

construction goes on in the background of one of Cairo's old quarters (the name of which

implies both a parasitic and papillary quality). The work thus represents the ongoing

urban development in post-Nasser Cairo, of which Ali Jabri sought to capture in all its

messy chaos:

> A sense of total isolation and frantic immersion in my art work…trekking daily to
> the scene of the crime, on funky taxis, brown drivers, Om Kalthoum, the
> photorealism of pullulating streets, the snatch of robes and draperies and
> headgears extraordinaries, all oblique-shot…surcharged immense multiplicity and
> the plunged envelopment in it all is *total*. A kind of descent into black states of
> soul, a despair in my exile (always exile) in the land where no possible
> relationship of clean reciprocity seems to happen – it's all 'how much?' or 'what
> can you provide?' or 'what is your status?'…We are kind of outer Mongolia
> pierced by a blurred noon-climax heat…[245]

Another journal sketch echoes this except of one of Jabri's letters to a friend, as the artist

wrote out a description of Cairo's heat as a "prolific, opulent" one, underneath his pastel

sketch of two wood cane chairs near a green table inside a steam bath, or a *hamam*,

wherein Jabri experienced "a shared tumescent moisture nurturing/~~among~~ crumbling

masonry/regrettable growth/and 10 million inhabitants!" (**Figure 3.8**).

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[244] Although he recalled growing up hearing Arabic in his youth, Ali was not fluent in Arabic
script, and he practiced reading and writing Arabic during his time in Cairo. See Ali express his
frustrations at his lack of fluency in "Interview: Ali Jabri – The Paint of Painters with Causes,"
Eastern Art Report (London: Centre for Near East, Asia, and Africa Research, 1989), 20.
[245] Quoted in Ali Jabri's letter to Antonia Gaunt, July-August, 1977, cited in Ghandour, *This Man
Called Ali* (2009), 114.

From these visual diary excerpts, it is clear Jabri attempted to articulate through both words and images his experience as an outsider lost in Cairo's centuries of layered histories, who nevertheless was witness to modernity's encroaching and irrevocable transformation of life in the city. His works continually submerged human subjects into the city's physical landscapes as if people and the buildings occupied the same plane of existence. In another example of one of his journal paintings, titled "Into the Night, Cairo," Jabri turns nighttime Cairo into a green inky-black jungle of neon yellow shop window lights illuminating ancient monuments (**Figure 3.9**). Situating what looks like a junk shop window in the foreground, Jabri drew a male mannequin bust turned towards the viewer from behind the glass and underneath a *basmala* ("In the Name of God, the most Gracious, the most Merciful") sign embossed in white on a dark red background. To the right of the page's central storefront vignette are three figures walking on the sidewalk alongside brown and yellow buildings. Unlike the richly shaded and clearly delineated chartreuse mannequin, the dark human figures are translucent as black-pigmented silhouettes washing away into the night sky. Towering over the scene on the page's left edge is an Egyptian obelisk that is rendered somewhere between an architectural and anatomical erection. The softly blurred outlines and pinkish underlay on the blueish-gray tower's trilateral peak suggest a skin like tumescence rather than marble or stone. Jabri's empathy towards and sensual expression of architectural heritage and history resulted in depictions that anthropomorphized the city's physical structures, while figural inhabitants often merged or even disappeared into the fabric of Cairo's urban landscapes. In one sense, then, Jabri represented the bustle and visceral experiences of

everyday modern life in Egypt as inseparable from its surviving historical Islamic architectural or religious heritage.

Altogether, Jabri's period in Cairo demonstrate his observation and study of the region's historic heritage interwoven with its modern material culture. In his February 11, 1977 diary entry he wrote:

> Feeling attenuated, radiant, somehow transfigured…great internal gulps of longing and identity as the breezes of Egypt in the evening caressed my face through the open window and it seemed that figures and architecture and details of town life and customs of the Islamic world composed one harmony of homage to itself.[246]

Jabri thus sought to picture the modern Islamic world without a cultural hierarchy between its natural environment, modern inhabitants, and traditional heritage; instead he wanted to express its all-encompassing experience. Such visual medleys of 1970s Egypt include another depiction of the Sultan Hasan Mosque-Madrasa (**Figure 3.10**). Rendered in a more opaque gouache of dark purple and indigo blue suggesting falling twilight on the complex, the sketchbook page includes notes in English and Arabic about his day, a red flag extending from some architectural fragment, and a small sketch of a car on a television in the upper left corner.

Besides his interest in recording everyday life in the modern Arab world, Jabri's particular study of Cairo's Islamic architectural monuments stemmed from his increasing interest in ancient Near Eastern and Islamic art history after he graduated from Bristol and moved to London in the early 1970s. He spent hours sketching objects and artifacts in the British Museum, in gallery "exhibitions of Assyrian artifacts and quick sketches of

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[246] Quoted in Ali Jabri's February 11, 1977 diary entry in Ghandour, *This Man Called Ali* (2009), 113.

King Ashurbanipal"[247] and also visited the Hayward Gallery's "Arts of Islam" exhibition in 1976. [248][249] His artistic practice drew from these observational engagements with museum collections, rendered within the private life-worlds of his diaries and realist worldmaking would soon facilitate his own curatorial work. During these early years in London and Cairo, Jabri also produced stand-alone paintings reflecting similar themes and painterly collages of historic and traditional images with modern ones. His journals thus operate in tandem with his work of single painting objects as a reflection of his documentary artistic practice, and shifting interests in art history and contemporary Islamic heritage.

Following his move from Egypt to Jordan in 1978, his work took new shape as he expanded his practice into the curatorial field and began to develop his artistic worldview through the lens of the museum, and cultural heritage more broadly in Jordan. Working directly with objects in a museum setting offered Jabri a setting to attenuate his artistic identity inside a museological world making. The museum displays and journals from his early years in the 1980s working in the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions demonstrate how he engaged with the objects, collection, and issues of popular heritage

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[247] Amal Ghandour noted these sketches in Ali's friend Ronnie Cohen's private collection, and a sketch of King Ashurbanipal in Ali's September 1971 diary. See *About This Man Called Ali* (2009), 106.

[248] See the published catalogue of the exhibition, *The Arts of Islam: Hayward Gallery, 8 April – 4 July 1976* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976). For a critical analysis of the problematic frameworks and hierarchical categories this exhibition and related events engendered in the fields of Islamic art history and modern art history of the Middle East and Islamic world, see Anneka Lenssen, "'Muslims to Take Over Institute for Contemporary Art': The 1976 World of Islam Festival," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 42, no. 1/2 (2008): 40-47.

[249] Ali Jabri's April-July 1976 diary. Cited by Ghandour in *About This Man Called Ali* (2009), 106.

as both a curator and an artist, and ultimately show how he envisioned and designed the museum as it still stands today.[250]

The Artist as Curator

The Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions by itself might not hold much interest to art historians – outside of a broader regional survey of national museum building or historic heritage objects – were it not for the direct involvement of Ali Jabri. Setting foot inside the museum transports the visitor into an ancient space repurposed to display a hodgepodge of modern costumes, textiles, jewelry, household tools, and other devotional handheld objects. Saʿadiya al-Tal acquired many of the objects in the museum with funds raised through the Revival of Jordanian Folk Culture Club, which she used to purchase items from private collections regionally and abroad. Since the 1970s, women like al-Tal were often involved in developing and working in museums in Jordan, as "museum work demanded high education levels" such as that of elite women like Saʿadiya al-Tal or Princess Wijdan Ali for the National Gallery of Fine Arts, who were also married to government officials or the Hashemite monarchy.[251] Carol Malt has argued that because museums were seen as appropriate work environments for upwardly mobile women

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[250] Since fieldwork and research for this chapter concluded, the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions has recently begun dismantling several of the displays and removed several of Ali Jabri's handwritten didactic texts, labels, and artifact sketches. The whereabouts of these curatorial materials are currently unknown.

[251] Carol Malt, "Women, Museums, and the Public Sphere," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* (Spring 2006), 123.

professionals, as well as upper class, elite women in Jordanian society, many of these institutions became "feminized" over the past forty years.[252]

The Department of Antiquities facilitated the museum's establishment inside the ancient theatre's interior and provided staff for the museum that was the first developed solely by the Jordanian government and not developed by foreign specialists for ancient archaeological heritage. As Ahmad Ajaj also notes, "this was the first semi-governmental Museum in Jordan with its own budget. It was managed by a committee including Mrs. al-Tal, the Director General of the department of Antiquities, and a representative each from the ministries of Culture and Finance."[253] Once the museum was established and opened to the public in 1972, Saʿadiya al-Tal purportedly "dangled it like a carrot to speed up Jabri's arrival in Amman, offering it as a meeting point between their shared ideals and artistic interests."[254]

Besides this family connection with the museum, the museum offered the artist a chance to research, contextualize, and work hands-on with artifacts and historic heritage from his own genealogical roots. Whereas in California, England, and even Egypt he had been a foreigner, Jordan offered him an opportunity to reclaim some sense of his own artistic heritage and Syrian-Jordanian identity:

> I have come to feel the possibility that the terrible sense of loss and isolation, adrift in the West, might find one answer in at least a partial contact with my origins…I would like to test its viability for myself…It is important to have at

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[252] Carol Malt, "Women, Museums, and the Public Sphere," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* (Spring 2006), 115-116. In Malt's interviews with several curators in the Arab world, one of the reasons cited for female museum personnel is that "museums are close to the reality of women. Women understand the aesthetics of objects." See Malt "Women, Museums, and the Public Sphere," 119.

[253] Ahmad M. Ajaj, *The Historical Development of University Museums in Jordan (1962-2006): Ojectives and Perspectives Case Studies of Archaeology Museums at the Jordan and Yarmouk Universities*, Ph.D. Thesis (University of Leicester, December 2007), 69.

[254] Amal Ghandour, *About This Man Called Ali* (2009), 148.

least a glimpse of what one sprang from, in order to make peace with one's own elemental composition.[255]

Jabri's attempts at reconciling these disparate pieces of self materialized in part through his work in the museum when he was appointed directing curator in 1980. While his relationship with his aunt was ever a contentious one, this 1980s era of the museum project was the closest they ever worked together as directors and curatorial practitioners on equal footing.[256] The museological framework and narratives encompassing the collection's popular art and religious artifacts offered Jabri a medium through which to channel his documentary-realist artistic practice.[257] By examining his notes, design schemes, and documentation of conservation and museology of Islamic artistic heritage (see **Figure 3.11**) and Arab popular traditions, Jabri's sketchbooks from his first few years in the museum reveal a research-oriented practice concerned with historicizing the museum's collection of artifacts in contextually relevant displays that emphasize the meanings and practices of material culture in the Levant through popular traditions and everyday life.[258]

Whereas scholarship on the history of artists as curators has centered on the art historical narrative of European modernism, Ali Jabri's practice as a curator was not one

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[255] Excerpt from a letter from Ali Jabri to his mother Hala, January 1, 1971, quoted in Ghandour *About this Man Called Ali* (2009), 101. Ali contrasted this sentiment in a later 1990 interview, stating "Unfortunately, perhaps, I don't want to get that far into the Arab world, to my genealogical origins." In response to the interview question "Do you feel that you *need* to get closer to your roots?" Ali went on to say: "Not really. But when I am caught between acute problems demanding urgent attention and my painting, it becomes slightly ridiculous to be producing very refined elitist works. One faces the question: what kind of art one should be producing in such a situation?" See "Interview: Ali Jabri – The Paint of Painters with Causes," *Eastern Art Report* (London: Centre for Near East, Asia, and Africa Research, 1989), 21.
[256] Several of Ali Jabri's diary entries in the 1970s-1980s address money issues and note the artist's reluctant dependency on his aunt Saʿadiya al-Tal for financial support. See Amal Ghandour, *About this Man Called Ali* (2009).
[257] James Putnam, *Art and Artifact: the Museum as Medium* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001).
[258] See Munir Kayyal, *Ya Sham: fi al-turath al-sha'bi al-dimashq* (Oh Syria: Popular Heritage in Damascus) (Damascus: 1984)

of selection so much as the research-process of curating popular heritage from the vantage point of an artist. The curatorial practice of artists is a growing discourse in art historical, anthropological, and museological studies.[259] Artistic "acts" of curation are intimately enmeshed in the history of art exhibitions, as artists took it upon themselves at different times to organize and exhibit their own works or works by other artists. For instance, Ben Thomas explored how sculptor Alfred Drury's loose and open arrangement of sculptural works emphasized an aesthetic effect of the objects, rather a formal historical context, through "conjuring up an evocative historical environment."[260] Recent studies of artists as curators have also centered on the ability of artists to wield the exhibition as a medium and discursive site in which to explore different sets of visual relationships and to turn the aesthetic gaze on "non-art" objects, particularly material from ethnographic collections or mass-produced commodities.[261]

These amalgamations of art works with visual and material culture juxtapose seemingly incongruent objects in order to destabilize cultural hierarchies and to elicit new responses, understandings, and resonances within the exhibition experience. While Jabri was certainly interested in conceptual practices and artistic ideas that subverted

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[259] See Celina Jeffery ed., *The Artist as Curator* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2015); Elena Filipovic, "When Exhibitions Become Form: A Brief History of the Artist as Curator," *Afterall* "Artist as Curator" Symposium, 2012; Sarah Pierce, "With Practicality comes a Practice: the Artist as Curator," *Visual Arts Ireland* (2017); Carl Heideken, "The Artist as Curator in a City Museum," *Museum International* (1995), 17-21; Paul O'Neill, "Curating as a Medium of Artistic Practice: The Convergence of Art and Curatorial Practice since the 1990s." In *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 87-130.
[260] See Thomas, "Alfred Drury: The Artist as Curator," *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 22 (2016): 1-13. Biennial exhibitions have also played a formative role in artist-driven curation and narratives of art history. See Gustavo Grandal Montero, "Biennalization? What Biennalization? The Documentation of Biennials and other Recurrent Exhibitions," *Art Libraries Journal* 31, no. 1 (2011): 13-23.
[261] See Nicola Levett's discsussion of the Scottish artist Eduardo Paolozzi's controversial curation of ethnographic objects in "Paolozzi's Lost Magic Kingdoms: The Metamorphosis of Ordinary Things," in *The Artist as Curator* (2015), 17-43.

normative views of high art with "low" or common culture, including the assemblage work of American artist Joseph Cornell (1903-1972),[262] his work as curator in the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions does not suggest avant-garde experimentation. Instead, rather than the experimental worldmaking and an expanding material and symbolic corpus for artworks of other prominent artists, including Siah Armajani, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Monir Farmanfarmaian, Rafa Nasiri, or Kadhim Haidar, Jabri's curatorial practice was first and foremost one of conservation and historical research. His artistic practice was geared towards creating a creative mimetic representation of everyday popular heritage across the historical Levant.

Jabri's "New Realist" curatorial focus becomes apparent in walking through the small and intimate museum space (**Figure 3.12**). The softly lit halls of the museum showcase lofty stands and glass display cases full of nineteenth and twentieth-century objects from Jordan's various rural and urban milieus. Housed in the main entrance foyer are traditional Arab women's dresses (*thub* or *shirsh*) draped over posed mannequins placed on wooden display stands.[263] The lightly painted stands fade into the ancient Roman stonewalls and bring the rich red and black fabrics to the fore, as each grouping delineates the decorative patterns and designs from specific regions and cities in the *Bilad*

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[262] Jabri mentions Joseph Cornell's work in some of his artist diaries, and created many collages and assemblage boxes as gifts for close friends in a similarly playful and poetic mode as Cornell. For a study of Joseph Cornell's engagement with astronomical scientific materials and celestial mapping as cosmic worldmaking, see Kirsten Hoving, *Joseph Cornell and Astronomy: A Case for the Stars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[263] See Shelagh Weir, *Palestinian Costume* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989); Violet Barbour, "Muslim Embroideries." In *Traditional Embroideries from the Holy Land and from Norway*, catalogue of fifth 'Craftsman and Designer' exhibition (Oxford: The British Council, 1954); Institut du Monde Arabe, *Memoire de Soie: Costumes et Parures de Palestine et de Jordanie: Catalogue de la Collection Widad Kamel Kawar* (Paris: Institute of the Arab World, 1988); Widad Kiwar, *Costumes Dyed by the Sun: Palestinian Arab National Costumes* (Tokyo, 1982); Walid Khalidi, *Before Their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians 1876-1948* (Washington D.C.: Institute for Palestinian Studies, 1984); A.M. Lutfiyya, *Baytin: A Jordanian Village* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966).

al-Sham (Greater Syria, also known as the Arab East or *Mashriq*).[264] Separate displays in

the chamber stage Bedouin life with nomadic tools for cooking, travel, and even

mannequins decorated in blue facial ink from Bedouin tattoo traditions. Recessed lighting

illuminates the space through sheets of linen draped over the ancient barrel vault ceiling.

One of the first noticeable and most engaging aspects of the museum is the

visitor's navigation between the immediately visible ancient past of the Roman theatre

and the palimpsestic layers of time inside the galleries themselves. Amassing objects like

workable tools from Bedouin camps or family heirlooms from nearby or other cities like

Salt or Irbid and placing them inside the museum collection severs the artifacts from the

outside world and at times still viable traditional contexts.[265] Yet doing so enhances a

sense of traversable history, as museum visitors freely proceed through the displays and

back outside into the sunbaked ancient structure and surrounding vehicular and

pedestrian traffic in downtown Amman. The felt quality of the museums spaces is thus a

combined result of the anachronic mixture of things on display within museums that

dwell and instill new purpose into local, historically fertile spaces, much like other early

museums in Amman.[266]

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[264] Shelagh Weir, *Palestinian Costume* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

[265] Peter Vergo, "The Reticent Object," in *The New Museology* (1989), 12-13.

[266] See Shatha Malhis and Fatima Al-Nammari, "Interaction between Internal Structure and Traditional Buildings: Analyzing the Heritage Museum of Abu-Jaber, Jordan" *International Journal of Architectural Research* 9, no. 2 (2015): 230-247. For overviews of Transjordan British Mandate architectural history and the museum projects of British architect Austen St. Barbe Harrison, who designed Amman's first museum (the Jordan Archaeological Museum) in 1951, see Ron Fuchs and Gilbert Herbert, "Representing Mandatory Palestine: Austen St. Barbe Harrison and the Representational Buildings of the British Mandate in Palestine, 1922-1937," *Architectural History* 43 (2000): 281-333; Ron Fuchs, "Public Works in the Holy Land: Government Building under the British Mandate in Palestine, 1917-1948." In *Twentieth-Century Architecture and Its Histories*, ed. Louise Campbell (London: Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, 2000), 275-307.

From the central room is the entrance into the main exhibition area spread across three connected rooms, where simple white metal and glass display stands and wall displays showcase the rest of the museum artifacts (**Figure 3.13**). The museum collection is largely comprised of textiles and objects Saʿadiya acquired, sometimes with Jabri's assistance, in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Europe.[267] Parallel to other regional ethnographic museum practices, the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions maps out a colonial-era taxonomy of handicrafts that treats objects "as expressions of collective identities, categorized in terms of gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs, residency and tribe."[268] Within the somber and carefully arranged spaces, one encounters Palestinian[269] and Jordanian clothing and textile arts, silver, beaded, and enameled Islamic talismanic jewelry and amulets, and even a brightly hand painted set of Ottoman Turkish shadow puppets.[270] In contrast to this glass-encased range of handcrafted *objets d'art*, to the right of the main anteroom are steps leading down into the museum's open-air ancient mosaics display (**Figure 3.14**). Descending into the long Roman barrel vaulted hall the visitor encounters easel-like stands of Byzantine mosaic fragments from the ancient Roman ruins at Jerash lining the stonewalls. The Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions thus traverses different eras of artistic heritage from ancient Roman mosaic works to mid-twentieth-century popular heritage.

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[267] Suhail Bisharat, "Museums, Collections and Collecting in the Arab World," *International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship* (1985), 281.

[268] See Virginie Rey's discussion of how similar North African museum typologies drew from French colonial categories, in "The Journey of a Tunisian Ethnographic Museum," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 10, no. 1 (2015): 4-5. I am grateful to Raymond Silverman for his comments on this section.

[269] The museum is one of the few in Jordan to highlight Palestinian objects of origin, rather than solely the Bedouin identity that is now prominently articulated in museum displays, including the new national Jordan Museum in Ras al-ʿAyn (opened in 2011).

[270] See Mary Stokrocki, "Turkish Shadow Puppets Yesterday and Today," *School Arts* 103, no. 7 (2004): 42-43.

One display case exemplifies these modern creations and starts to hint at Jabri's own curatorial design and taxonomy (**Figure 3.15**). In the display labeled "Folklore Decorations," the assembled artifacts are hung from the ceiling behind the glass barrier against a straw mat attached to the back wall. The Arabic and English calligraphy within the typewritten museum didactic lists the numbered objects, describing their material makeup and symbolic functions:

> 1. Storage bag: old Syrian silk decorated with star-shaped mirrors and varied materials held to be imbued with powers of protection: cowrie-shells and buttons as female emblems, with blue bead guardians. For a housewife's use in villages of Palestine and Jordan. 2. Beaded decoration: Geometric patterns topped with ostrich feathers; a wall-hanging for a bride's new home. Ramtha, North Jordan. 3. Cosmetic kit clad in imported cotton, containing three glass bottles for kohl, oil and perfume; with pearly beads, cotton fringes, coins of 1909. The fashion for mirrors started in the 30s. Film-star photo mounted on the back from the early 40s. 4. Silver amulet: On quatre-foil linked Aleppo chains, the ancient magic shapes of a triangle set with three beads, and a cylinder called "cucumber" in hollow filigree to carry a talismanic text. Hammered pendants in the forms of pomegranites (*sic*) and almonds. 5. Ornamental fan: tiny beads sewn in sunburst chevrons round a central mirror with cotton fringes; the crudely-incised wooden handle a last functional element from a tradition of wall-hung fans. North Jordan 6. The Cup of Fear: It was a prevalent belief that to drink a sip of water from this brass bowl, with pendants inscribed in holy formulae, of a common type sometimes ornately hung with beads, - brought back from pilgrimage to Mecca as a pious souvenir- would allay a person stricken with fright or shock… 7. Popular print: probably Damascus, of Buraq the divine horse with the head of an angel, Mecca to Jerusalem on the Night of the Ascension.[271]

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[271] Museum label didactic inside the "folklore decorations" display case, Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions (2016).

The cup and the print are now missing from the display case, but the rest of the objects are present as described.

Such panoply of images, materials, and potent objects arranged closely together demonstrates, in one respect, why Jabri did not need to introduce experimental juxtapositions or intrusive didactics into the museum to elucidate the richly symbolic power of these popular present-day artifacts. The mixture of Islamic religious traditions with elements of modern visual culture like a film-star photograph, or a Syrian print of al-Buraq, the Prophet Muhammad's flying steed.[272] Based on other published popular prints and poster depictions of al-Buraq and Muhammad on the *isra'* and *mi'raj* (or the Prophet's night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and subsequent ascension to heaven), the popular religious print was produced in c. 1940s-1950s Damascus or Cairo.[273] The (now missing) Islamic folk art poster demonstrates the continued transformation and adaptation of historical Islamic art archetypes via twentieth-century mass media technologies, while also showcasing the abiding artistic interests and worldmaking experiments with these images and materials across the region.[274] Arranged in a museum display case rather than an experimental painting or print work, the presence of the poster attests to Jabri's shared creative engagements in popular Islamic heritage as constituting

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[272] Christiane Gruber, "Al-Buraq," *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 3 (2012): 40-46. See also Yasmine Seale, "Out of Their Love They Made it: A Visual History of Buraq," *The Public Domain Review* (2016), available at: https://publicdomainreview.org/2016/09/21/out-of-their-love-they-made-it-a-visual-history-of-buraq/.

[273] One contemporaneous poster is the offset poster print "*Buraq al-nabawi*" or Buraq of the Prophet. This poster was printed in Cairo (Darb as-Sa'ada) and is now held at Harvard Fine Arts Library, Special Collections (olvwork733633). For similar popular posters, see Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, *Imageries Populaires en Islam* (Geneva: Georg, 1997). A 1940s Iranian color poster print of the Prophet Muhammad riding al-Buraq on the *mi'raj* is also held at Harvard Fine Arts Library, Special Collections. See the object reference: olvwork693286.

[274] See also Barry Flood, "Tracing Aura: The Relic Across Eras of its Technological Reproducibility," Ashkal Alwan Public Lecture (Beirut, April 2016).

symbolic worlds worth preserving and displaying. His work documenting these materials

and preserving their visuals in the museum's curation is a guiding force behind the

selection and aesthetic displays of popular heritage within a modernizing Middle East of

the 1970s.

Likewise, in contrast to the looming physical and historical distance through

which Jabri depicted Cairo's ancient and Islamic architectural heritage, the objects in the

Jordan museum are presented as intimate encounters with delicately handcrafted

implements. One example, in the Arab Coffee (*qahwa al-ʿarabi*) display, demonstrates an

artistic relationship between the museum label and object arrangements (**Figure 3.16**).

The bilingual label in English and Arabic contains a central ink drawing representing the

Arab coffee pots and tools inside the display case below. While the didactic informs the

museum visitor of the ceremonial Bedouin use of the central large Syrian brass coffeepot

(and of its patronage as a gift from a Jordanian tribe to Saʿadiya),[275] the artistic rendering

of the tableau serves to collapse the museological distance between the heritage display

and the visitor's bodily experience of the physical artifacts. Mieke Bal describes curating

as a visual discourse, one which involves "a mix of acts of framing and being framed,"

which ultimately elicit "affecting experiences."[276] By framing the display case with this

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[275] After the 1970-1971 civil war and "de-Palestinianization" of Jordan, "the new or renewed cultural heritage paradigms by which Jordan has sought to recast and present itself to audiences at home and abroad and attract tourists has focused heavily on notions of tribe and Bedouin, tribe and Bedouin within the context of heritage sites, and concepts of hospitality embedded in a 'tribal,' 'bedouin,' 'Arab,' and 'Jordanian' past." See Corbett, *Competitive Archaeology in Jordan* (2009), 197.

[276] Mieke Bal, "Curatorial Acts," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* (2012), 180-1.

subtle artistic intervention, Jabri's curatorial framework increases a sense of accessibility and affective sympathy towards the ethnographic collection of handheld objects.[277]

Other displays in the museum are also arranged in similar "material constellations"[278] of symbolically charged clusters of artifacts, grouped according to their cultural functions or thematic and physical likenesses. For jewelry cases, including the agate or semi-precious stone ('*aqiq*) display, the artifacts are grouped to showcase their symbolic and, in some examples, medicinal functions in nomadic cultural practices (**Figure 3.17**). Peering into the glass stand, one sees the strings of large reddish-brown stone spheres are arranged to frame silver necklace chains and talismanic carnelian pendants, or piled on top of each other in a small wood crate as though they were about to tumble out of the container like grapes. The label information explains Bedouin wore the gemstones "as healing agents for inflammation of desert-scanning eyes."[279] In his museum journals Jabri provides research citations for some of his information, including a reference to Taufik Canaan the Palestinian anthropologist who collected and published on amulets and talismanic practices throughout the modern Islamic world.[280] Engaging with Taufik Canaan's ethnographic scholarship on traditional Arabic medicine also

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[277] As James Putnam, the British Museum curator of contemporary art, suggests, "Artists selective criteria reveal the diversity of their individual interests, which help to break down the more formal standard classification system, and their frequent preoccupation with the self also works well in helping to deconstruct the impersonal nature of museum displays." See Putnam, *Art and Artifact: the Museum as Medium* (2009), 132.

[278] Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, "Curating the City: *Collectioneering* and the Affects of Display," *The Artist as Curator* (2015), 156.

[279] Museum label didactic inside the "agate" display case, Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions (2016).

[280] See Taufik Canaan, *Aberglaube und Volksmedizin im Lande der Bibel* (Superstition and Folk Medicine in the Holy Land), Abhanddlungen des Hamburgischen Kolonialinstitute (Hamburg 1914); Taufik Canaan, "The Decipherment of Arabic Talismans," *BERYTUS* (1937), 69-110; Taufik Canaan, "Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine," *The Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* (Jerusalem: Palestine Oriental Society, 1927), 1-88; Taufik Canaan, "Arabic Magic Bowls," *The Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* (Jerusalem: Palestine Oriental Society, 1936), 79-127.

brought Jabri into an engagement with the changing associations of these folkloric

practices to religious ones, and with broader discursive Islamic traditions.[281] As Ghada

Karmi explains, "many ancient superstitions had by the 1970s acquired more of a

religious guise and were increasingly explained and justified in terms of Islam, a

tendency which is in line with the recent Islamic revivalism in the Middle East."[282] As

such, Jabri's interest and preservation of traditional medicinal and apotropaic practices of

the Levant also captured these shifting understandings from "folk" to expanding

definitions of "religion" and "Islamic" during the 1970s.

Along with studying scholarship on regional folklore and religious practices, Jabri

also trained in museum studies abroad in European and American institutions in order to

work with contemporary curatorial developments and trends worldwide. He attended

curatorial training programs at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C., the Metropolitan

Museum of Art in New York, the Getty Institute in Los Angeles, and at Musée des Arts

et Traditions Populaires in Paris.[283][284] For his application to the Paris museum course in

1982, Jabri produced a proposal to the museum that includes several pages of drawings of

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[281] On traditional Arabic medicine and folklore practices, see Robert Blecher, "Desert Medicine, Ethnography, and the Colonial Encounter in Mandatory Syria." In N. Meouchy and P. Sluglett, *British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 249-268; Dwight F. Reynolds, *Arab Folklore: A Handbook* (Westport, CT: 2007); Ahmed Ragab, "Prophetic Traditions and Modern Medicine in the Middle East: Resurrection, Reinterpretation, Reconstruction," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 132, no. 4 (2012): 657-673; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Medicine of the Prophet*, trans. Penelope Johnstone (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1998). See also Warwick Anderson's critique of historical medicine studies, in "Where is the Postcolonial History of Medicine?" *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 72 (1998): 522-530.

[282] See Ghada Karmi's discussion of Canaan's research on traditional Arabic medicine, "The Colonisation of Traditional Arabic Medicine." In *Patients and Practitioners* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univeresity Press, 1985), 315-339.

[283] Ghandour, *About this Man Called Ali* (2009), 141; 150.

[284] While in Paris Ali also visited the Musée du Louvre's Islamic art galleries, as he wrote down the dynastic and civilizational labels for the collection's display of its Islamic art historical collection. Ali's 1983 journal, Ali Jabri Heritage Foundation (2016).

his display designs in the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions. Looking at one such composition reveals the same crate of stone fruits, as the agate jewelry display is depicted here in Jabri's ink sketch (**Figure 3.18**). Written below the image in the artist's French cursive labels the image as "Pierres médicales utilizes par les bédouins" (medical stones used by Bedouins). The accompanying image offers traditionally crafted daggers from Yemen and the Hijaz displayed on a turban cloth.[285]

These drawings from the museum course proposal reveal the artist's thoughtful and aesthetic design of the museum display cases as *scènes de genre,* or in situ scenography.[286] The staged displays offer a clear bird's eye view of the artifacts situated as if in a nomadic *wunderkammer* ("cabinet of curiosity"), indicating the use of his layered watercolor painting style to provide textural tones of realism to the museum's highly constructed visuals. Another page in the proposal suggests Jabri also drew inspiration for these designs from fieldwork in Jordan, and not just museum training courses (**Figure 3.19**). The page contains two photographs: one of a cluster of copper coffee pots and cups on a Syrian brocaded cloth, the other of ceramic kitchen pots on a straw tray. Looking at these photographed displays (which could be mimicking other museum ethnographic displays Jabri saw during his curatorial studies abroad), Jabri's drawings constitute a photorealist collage of popular heritage artifacts,[287] including the

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[285] "Poignards de Yemen et du Hijaz sur étoffe pour turban…" Ali Jabri's proposal to attend the museum training at the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires in Paris (1982), 20. Ali Jabri Heritage Foundation, Amman.

[286] Virginie Rey, "The Journey of a Tunisian Ethnographic Museum" (2015), 7.

[287] These collage renderings and other assemblage works he gave to friends suggest an affinity to Pop art particular practices. Amal Ghandour based on Ali's diaries wrote: "There is Joseph Cornell, of all people, and his assemblages. The influence of Max Ernst's series is there, so are the works – Medici Boy, Caliph of Baghdad, all titled and boxed in – Ali's penciled collage of Cornell's collages. Why did he hide these? Maybe Ali did not take them seriously. Maybe they

Arab coffee display image glimpsed earlier inside the museum label (**Figure 3.20**). Here, a version of the sketch composed in thicker, layered ink lines contrasts with the more neatly outlined of the headdresses (*wuqayat al-darahim, shatwa*, and *taqiya*) and face ornaments display case.[288]

Along with an intimate curatorial exhumation of and artistic engagement with the heritage artifacts in the museum's collection, Jabri's position as curator also enhanced his artistic standing in Amman's elite society. Becoming a curator of an ethnographic popular culture museum enabled him to "gain access to cultural capital denied" by conventions surrounding artists' status in society.[289] Besides elevating his status, the museum salary also freed Jabri from the demands of wealthy art patrons to concentrate on his own interests in contemporary life worlds of heritage and history. Indeed, Jabri's professed interest was not in producing works of art that could be bought or sold;[290] he often spoke of his belief in traditional heritage's vital role in modern life that was continually under threat of mass-consumerism and industrialization. Objects like the traditional medicinal materials contained in his carefully curated displays in the museum, including the apotropaic charms and talismans, were especially seen as disappearing from everyday practice, and becoming a lost craft tradition as Jordan's neoliberal economic policies brought more foreign imports and urban development into the country.[291] Ali

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were another proof of the painter that he was and did not want to be," *About this Man Called Ali* (2009), 171. To be expanded on in future revisions.

[288] For regional variations of these types of women's headwear and jewelry, see Weir, *Palestinian Costume* (1989), 159-190.

[289] Bruce Checefsky, "Erasure: Curator as Artist," in *The Artist as Curator*, ed. Celina Jeffery, (2015), 109.

[290] "Interview: Ali Jabri – The Paint of Painters with Causes," *Eastern Art Report* (London: Centre for Near East, Asia, and Africa Research, 1989), 20.

[291] For a discussion of this "market urbanism" and the "system of ruination" of neoliberal economic development in Jordan, see Eliana Abu-Hamdi, "Neoliberalism as a Site-Specific

Jabri's curatorial practice was thus one of conventional ethnographic museum design as an artistic intervention geared towards preserving (and protecting) cultural heritage under threat.[292] Additionally, as Amal Ghandour noted, it was conservation as an artistic profession "that would bring him closer to architecture, a profession that had eluded him"[293] since completing his studies at Stanford twenty years earlier.

Jabri also brought his architectural training directly into his installation plans for the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions (**Figure 3.21**). Across two pages in his 1983 journal, he traces a series of interior vaulted ceilings. Near the sketchbook's center crease appears a tall display stand beneath the domed arches. Written on the page are phrases, such as "local needs and local aspirations created mosques & monuments," and "The Islamic inheritance of thousands of holy places which had maintained their attraction at the level of folk piety and therefore were sooner Islamicized."[294] These comments suggest in his studies for the museum Jabri considered how the historic development of Islamic religious practices towards sacred sites were also entangled with popular traditions, stemming from ancient times up to the present day. Beneath this text he also inscribed: "Tremendous creative impulse in the organization of bazaars, complexes," which may refer to an old covered bazaar in Jordan, or perhaps even a historic one such as the Suq al-Qattanin in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, whether or not Jabri was aware of the museum's initial development plans inside the city's medieval vaulted bazaar, Jabri converted these architectural blueprints into the central room's installed display for an

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Process: The Aesthetics and Politics of Architecture in Amman, Jordan," *Cities* 60 (2017): 102-112.
[292] "Interview: Ali Jabri – The Paint of Painters with Causes," *Eastern Art Report* (London: Centre for Near East, Asia, and Africa Research, 1989), 20.
[293] Ghandour, *About this Man Called Ali* (2009), 160.
[294] Quoted in Ali Jabri's 1983 Notebook, Ali Jabri Heritage Foundation (2016).

Ottoman robe, as can be seen in another artist sketch of the gallery display plans (**Figure 3.22**), and viewed in a photograph of the final museum installation (**Figure 3.23**). The resulting room mimics the architectural drawing's archways while introducing flat, interlaced wood poles. This arching domed roof thus offers the artist's representation and creative response to vernacular Jordanian, Palestinian, and Levantine homes.[295] Such architectural scaffolding creates "an imagined ethnographic thickness"[296] in the museum space beyond the white square rooms or main gallery's ancient Roman stonewalls.

Altogether, Ali Jabri's curatorial work in the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions offers an example of an artist using the museological framework and historic artifacts as artistic media and representational practices of cultural heritage and artistic traditions. In composing the museum's curatorial and aesthetic framework, Jabri sought to construct naturalized and unobtrusive displays around the objects that gestured at their contextual setting while also evoking a historically dynamic and physically sensual experience. While the small and inconspicuous museum does not present a grand civilizational narrative in the mode of historic universal museums, it captures a slice of twentieth-century material heritage and cultural life in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. As Gretchen Buggeln suggests, "even a ramshackle local history museum might stir one's recognition of eternal truths."[297] Ali Jabri's creative engagement in researching and curating the small institution also gave him control to implement his own design and articulate the symbolic signs and everyday life worlds of popular heritage, in a public

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[295] See Ron Fuchs, "The Palestinian Arab House and the Islamic 'Primitive Hut,'" in *Muqarnas* 15 (1998): 157-177; Taufik Canaan, *The Palestinian Arab House: Its Architecture and Folklore* (Jerusalem: Syrian Orphanage Press, 1933).
[296] Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder." In *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (1991), 44.
[297] Buggeln, ""Museum Spaces and Experiences of Sacred Spaces," *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* (May 2015), 49.

setting with immediate access and educational outreach to a broad audience. His work with the museum also reveals how the artist went on to observe, document, and reference Islamic artistic heritage as creative models for his own artmaking experiments.

Conclusion: Everyday Islamic Heritage as Artistic Medium

Unpacking the richly layered visuals, materials, and textures of Ali Jabri's curatorial practice in the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions facilitates a deeper exploration and understanding of his artistic journal drawings and paintings. In particular, visual works that reference historical Islamic art objects offer a mediating transposition from the physical objects he studied in museum collections and handled directly as a curator in Jordan to his own "New Realist" painted representations. For example, an untitled mixed media work offers his study of two premodern Persianate ceramic slip-painted bowls (**Figure 3.24**). In the upper left portion of the page a ninth- to tenth-century Samarqand bowl is rendered in purple and brown pigments. Nestled to the right of the open conical container is an almost enclosed "money bowl" composed, according to Jabri's note, in a black slip silhouette under a clear turquoise glaze from twelfth-century Persia. These two historic examples of Seljuk pottery were perhaps sketched in the British Museum's Islamic Art Galleries when Jabri lived and worked in 1970s London, or in another museum collection during one of his curatorial training programs in the early 1980s.

Another composition suggests these comparative studies were examining formal visual concordances as much as documenting historic Islamic decorative techniques and images (**Figure 3.25**). Two more round pottery examples were sketched on the page, one with an "elegant modern shapes" from the thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Mamluk Egyptian era painted in brown slip, while the other is painted in brown and green slip from fifteenth-century Persia. Inside the center of each circular earthenware is an animal image: a rabbit in the Persian plate, and a fish inside the Mamluk bowl. While the comparison and contrast of the decorative patterns of these two medieval ceramics highlights their comparative production from two different Islamic civilizations, the sketchbook page also demonstrates Jabri's keen artistic observation of symbols and images moving through time and space in Islamic artistic traditions. In the niello (*mhabbar*) display case in the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions, Jabri's didactic notes the popular use of fish as amuletic or protectic charms in 1920s-1940s Transjordan (**Figure 3.26**). Tracing these resonances of Islamic representative practices and folk traditions in Ali Jabri's artistic work indicate he was an artist attuned to the presence of history through its layers of symbolic and material mediations.

One painting evokes these layers of time in its depiction of a traditional Islamic folk practice applied to modern usage. In the "Hand of Fatima" painting, Jabri depicted an evil eye (or *isabat al-ʿayn*) painted amulet, which appears almost to gaze back at the viewer (**Figure 3.27**). Produced in the rural village of Ma'an about 130 km south of Amman sometime after the artist had moved to Jordan in the 1980s, the gouache composition illustrates a popular Islamic tradition of using the *khamsa*, or "Hand of Fatima," as an amulet to ward off the evil eye (*al-ʿayn*) or the jealous glances of

neighbors.[298] Across the hand palm the pious invocation "*Ya Hafiz*" ("O Protector") is written underneath the amulet's blue-iris pupil—a color also used in blue beads in jewelry worn for symbolic safety against the evil eye. Jabri noticed during his visit to the village the protective talisman was placed in an unusual location: on the residents' newly acquired refrigerator. The home, he discovered, was the first in Ma'an to acquire the appliance and had taken appropriate measures to fend for it and the valuable, edible contents inside. Above the brownish-beige refrigerator three gas lamps sit next to three stacked fruit crates. Out of the left corner of the painting juts the bottom edge of a fluorescent light bulb, highlighting the contrast between pre-industrial and modern electrical interior lighting. Standing in front of such a stark juxtaposition between ancient apotropaic practices and modernizing technologies, the traditional and the state-of-the-art, the scene provided Jabri with a new creative opportunity: to depict Islamic folk practices through their shifting visual and material dimensions over the centuries as they converged with modernizing technologies.

The image is one in which spiritual and consumer worlds collide. Through these evocative materials Jabri generates a pictorial system in which to situate modernity's transformation of material and economic life with the endurance of what he described once as people's "hankering for that spiritual substance."[299] The amuletic image might have been cut out from a mass-produced poster and then pasted on the fridge. Thus, as far

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[298] For studies of cultural genealogies and uses of the evil eye, see Alan Dundes, *The Evil Eye: A Casebook* (1992); Leonard W. Moss and Stephen C. Cappannari, "*Mal'occhio, Ayin ha ra, Oculus Fascinus, Judenblick:* The Evil Eye Hovers Above," in *The Evil Eye*, Clarence Maloney, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 1-16; Brian Spooner, "The Evil Eye in the Middle East," in *The Evil Eye*, Clarence Maloney, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 76-84.

[299] "Interview: Ali Jabri – The Paint of Painters with Causes," *Eastern Art Report* (London: Centre for Near East, Asia, and Africa Research, 1989), 31.

as the artist painting the scene was concerned, despite the production of the talisman by

modern means in an artless, mechanical reproductive technology, the "aura" of the

ancient symbol and Islamic inscription is still transmitted through the painting.[300] Jabri's

representative act, as in much of his work, is a documentary one. Keith Moxey, in his

discussion of the power of photorealistic representation in paintings, argues "cognizance

of the artificial and constructed quality of the versions of the real offered us in pictorial

mimesis does not prevent us from being seduced by our senses."[301] By looking at the

"Hand of Fatima" on a refrigerator, the constructed nature of the image does not detract

from the symbolic draw of our eyes to those depicted in the painting. The surreal effect of

the assemblage only enhances the mediated experience of the popular folk practice

against an envious gaze.

Lastly, in another painting produced in Aqaba during the 1980s, Jabri depicted an

old traditional wooden boat floating in the ocean (**Figure 3.28**). The bow of the ship juts

diagonally across the muted watery waves towards the right edge of the painting, as the

viewer's eye is once again drawn to look at another turquoise-blue evil eye amuletic

image. Brushed onto the wooden hull, the painted talisman suggests safeguarded passage

for the small vessel across the blue sea. Depicting these popular traditions outside of the

Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions artifacts and out in the world of modern Islamic

visual culture indicate Jabri's continued interest in the existence of these cultural symbols

through their various appearances and materializations. The question becomes why did

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[300] For a critical discussion of the concept of aura transmission in Islamic visual practices, see
Barry Flood, "Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum," *The Art Bulletin* 84, no. 4 (2002):
652; Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in
Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 217-281.
[301] Keith Moxey, *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Durham and London: Duke University
Press, 2013), 133.

Ali Jabri continue to develop such an interest in not only painting historical Islamic heritage, but in its popular and more mundane manifestations of apotropaic signs? According to Amal Ghandour, "Ali was a superstitious man. He believed in the evil eye, in otherworldly forces in cahoots with happenstance, in the power of the *I-Ching*. It was easy to adopt the *Basmalah* as one more petition to God to light up the karma."[302] Thus, Jabri's creative worldmaking became increasing engaged with representing popular Islamic heritage as a lived practice in 1970s-1980s Jordan's less modernized landscapes, such as the rural village of Ma'an and traditional ways of seafaring life in Aqaba's marine harbors.

Ali Jabri's creative response and engagement with popular Islamic heritage reveals how curating as a mediating activity can be akin to artistic practice.[303] Curating as a medium of artistic practice enabled Jabri to use exhibition design and display as a way of crafting and presenting reality through the microcosmic signs of discrete artifacts and objects within the larger worldmaking of an aesthetic cosmos of Levantine heritage and traditions. Alongside the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions, Jabri's watercolor paintings and visual diaries also suggest a convergence of artmaking and public conservation efforts. The "Aqaba Boat" painting gains added context when situated with Jabri efforts and active lobbying of the Jordanian government to protect the natural shoreline and beach along the Red Sea. When asked in a rare interview how his art was socially engaged, he responded:

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[302] Ghandour, *About this Man Called Ali* (2009), 168.

[303] Within the broader transnational context of curatorial practice as mediated art performance, Paul O'Neil examines how the late 1960s began to witness shifting roles that solidified in the 1990s as a dissolution of categories between artistic and curatorial endeavors. See Paul O'Neill, "Curating as a Medium of Artistic Practice: The Convergence of Art and Curatorial Practice since the 1990s." In *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 87-130.

There is a dearth of people taking care of urgent issues such as conservation and environment. But you do wonder, 'Do I paint the palm shore in Aqaba, or do I set aside my painting and run after the committees that are arguing over environmental controls or over whether something should be demolished or not?' Art and society of course are inextricably linked, but you can't paint propaganda.[304]

Towards the end of his life, Jabri was increasingly critical of the Jordanian authorities preservationist approach (or lack there of) towards artistic and vernacular heritage of the Levant, or its precious natural landscapes being lost to continued neoliberal development and modernization projects. In painting pristine landscape views, documenting small domestic scenes of popular Islamic talismans, and creating an aesthetic atmosphere through a multitude of objects, Jabri sought to mediate the symbolic worlds of popular heritage with seemingly minimal artistic interference or mediated artifice.

Yet his selective framing of historical heritage materials and environments is in and of itself an artistic intervention. Together with the museum displays, the gouache and ink interlay on the paper pages of his diaries experiment with different arrangements and indexical relationships. For example, the close-cut pictorial frame of the "Aqaba Boat" forward hull accentuates the boat's popular apotropaic decorations, while the contiguous forms and subverted scale in the journal page painting of a young man and medieval mosque in sun soaked Cairo suggests the young Arab male and historic Sultan Hasan Mosque occupy the same spatial field. Jabri's mediating interpretation as both curator and artist emphasized a specific frame of Islamic heritage, much like previous artistic experiments in midcentury Iran and Iraq, with a stronger focus on conservation, and questions of how to represent symbolic worlds outside of the work of art within a pictorial frame. Another trajectory for concerns of representative worldmaking and

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[304] Quoted in "Interview: Ali Jabri – The Paint of Painters with Causes," *Eastern Art Report* (London: Centre for Near East, Asia, and Africa Research, 1989), 21.

processes of painting an Islamic symbolic realm is the previously mentioned co-founder of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, Shakir Hasan Al Said, and his student, the artist Hanaa Malallah (b. 1958). Both of these Iraqi artists also enriched their practices with issues of museum collections, destruction, and popular Islamic heritage, especially during periods of warfare and violence in Iraq from Saddam Husayn's regime in the 1980s to today.

Chapter 4 *Vivid Ruins*: Destruction as Process in the Paintings of Shakir Hasan Al Said and Hanaa Malallah in Postwar Iraq

On September 18th, 2017, a painting exhibition was staged in the rubble-filled

shell of a building in the recently liberated city of Mosul (**Figure 4.1**). Displayed in a

single row of wood easels under a collapsing roof were several brightly colored canvases

of stylized figures and landscapes. Held on Mosul's First Peace Festival, the exhibition

was a joint effort between Mosul University art students and the Ministry of Culture.[305] It

sought to demonstrate the survival and return of art, culture, and life in northern Iraq,

despite the short-lived Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's best efforts to obliterate the

cultural landscape's multivocal heritage and, instead, install a regime of control and

hyper-visual violence.[306] Yet amongst other artists there is contention over what art

should be produced, and how it should contend with destruction in contemporary Iraq

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[305] IWPR Iraq, "Mosul's First Peace Festival," *Institute for Peace and War Reporting* (October 4, 2017), accessed February 2018. Available at: https://iwpr.net/global-voices/mosuls-first-peace-festival.

[306] For an overview of the visual regime of images ISIS creates through its violence, see Christiane Gruber, "The Visual Culture of ISIS: Truculent Iconophilia as Antagonistic Co-Evolution." In *Nähe auf Distanz: Eigendynamik und mobilisierende Kraft politischer Bilder im Internet*, ed. Isabelle Busch, Uwe Fleckner, and Judith Walmann (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 113-142.

(**Figure 4.2**). This exhibition photo was shared by another painter, Ali Eyal, an Iraqi-born

visual artist currently in residence at Ashkal Alawan, the Lebanese Association for

Plastic Arts in Beirut, Lebanon. His Facebook post of the exhibition photograph states: "I

hope to rebuild this better than these ugly paintings."[307] For Eyal, the image of these new

artworks standing colorfully amidst the gray ruins of the Mosul School of Fine Arts does

not offer much hope for the future of rejuvenating Iraq's modern artistic legacy.

Such juxtapositions of contemporary art and ruins, or destruction, have become a

common visual topos in representations of contemporary art in Iraq. For example, *The*

Guardian described the Iraq pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale as "Iraq's art world

emerges from the ruins."[308] Such rhetoric circumscribes the country's history of artistic

practices solely to recent warfare and violent struggles, primarily the 2003 U.S. Invasion

and subsequent occupation, civil war, and formation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

(also known as ISIS). However, Iraq was a major participant in the Venice Biennale

through the Italian pavilion from the early 1950s until 1979, and the country's thirty-five-

year absence from the festival marked the rise of the Ba'athist Party's repressive regime

under Saddam Husayn to power.

Similarly, one of the most devastating losses during the initial days of the 2003

U.S. invasion was the bombing and near total annihilation of the Museum of Modern Art

in Baghdad. This foremost institution of modern art in the Arab world helped organize

the first international Arab Art Biennials (in Damascus in 1972 and Baghdad in 1973),

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[307] Ali Eyal's Facebook post of the Mosul painting exhibition photograph on September 14th,
2017.
[308] Charlotte Higgins, "Venice Biennale: Iraq's Art World Emerges from the Ruins," *The*
Guardian (May 29, 2013).

and attested to the cosmopolitan "golden years" of Iraqi modernism.[309] But rather than include the country's transnational modern art history within discussions of violence and destruction towards cultural heritage, modern and contemporary artworks are generally seen as less significant fatalities than ISIS's iconoclastic acts towards ancient sites and premodern historic artifacts. Additionally, in recent Euro-American frameworks and exhibitions of modern and contemporary art from Iraq, the mere existence of these works is construed "as a form of resistance to a situation of destruction and war"[310] rather than as participants in a complex transnational modernity and art historical legacy. While neglecting the loss of Iraq's modern artistic heritage as well as its ancient speaks to larger issues of Western value systems in global culture,[311] what is ultimately lost in this myopic perspective is understanding how artists have been engaging with the physical and ideological processes of destruction and violence for decades through diverse practices of artmaking.

Within the transnational circuit of contemporary art experiments with popular Islamic heritage, several artists including Siah Armajani and Rafa Nasiri have explored new material aspects of artmaking alongside broader conceptual dimensions of creative worldmaking in symbolic and metaphysical realms. Another generative practice with popular Islamic materials and discursive traditions has been the representational

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[309] Afif Bahnassi, "Authenticity in Art: Exposition, Definition, Methodology," *Cultures* 6 (1979): 65-82.

[310] As Silvia Naef notes, in the political discourse around the 2003 War and U.S. Occupation of Iraq, "empathy with the suffering of Iraqis prevails over other, art historical, considerations" for curators. See Naef, "Not Just 'For Art's Sake': Exhibiting Iraq Art in the West After 2003." In *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges*, eds. Jordi Tejel, et al. (World Scientific Publishing Company, 2012), 495.

[311] For a discussion of global media and museum institutions privileging ancient heritage over modern cultural life in the Middle East, or its inhabitants' dynamic relationships with the past, see Wendy M.K. Shaw, "Destroy Your Idols," *X-Tra: Contemporary Art Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 73-94.

possibilities of violence and destruction in art. For instance, in a different juxtaposition of art and a ruinous landscape, artist Hanaa Malallah (b. 1958) composed her work 2008 "My Country Map" with damaged materials to depict the geographic terrain of Iraq (**Figure 4.3**). Constructed from burnt linen fabric stitched into the canvas in overlapping irregular and jagged-edged shapes, Malallah arranges these charred remains into a prismatic and abstract image. The work presents a color spectrum produced by fire—from black ash to lightly singed beige—and creates a sense of dynamic movement and shifting textures across the different colors and textures of the canvas, while also signifying the arid and grayish-beige deserts around the country's fertile crescent.

One red cloth fragment reveals part of Baghdad's city bus map, while a faint green strip makes reference to the symbolic color of Islam, the green religious textiles carried and worn by Shi'i pilgrims, and the variety of green fabrics adorning the country's holy Islamic shrines and tombs. Within these multi-tonal fabrics (also suggestive of the colors in the Iraqi flag), the faint majuscule letters of national markers come into view, from the block lettering of Baghdad in the center right, Mosul in the upper left field, to the more wobbly etching of "the Gulf" in the bottom right corner of the canvas. From the map's larger label of "Iraq" we can see that the country's letters appear to have been traced into the work's surface through burning, as if written along the edge of a lit match. National borders and mapmaking of the modern Middle East drew from post-WWI colonial interests and endeavors and Malallah's map of Iraq hints at the violent legacy of such nation-state formations and, more specifically, the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement that took the three separate Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Mosul, and

Basra in the Gulf to create the new British Mandate of Iraq.[312] Fabricating her country's

map out of flames, Malallah suggests Iraq is a whole country borne out of a haphazard

assembly of charred and deteriorating parts.

Building on issues raised in this and other artworks, this chapter examines the

relationship between destruction and artmaking in the specific cultural context of modern

Iraq. Different eras of warfare, government-sponsored violence, destruction, and

multitudes of other tangible or intangible losses have detrimentally impacted the

sociopolitical life and cultural heritage of the country. Yet despite the difficulties,

censorship, and severe risks of creative freedom, artists during Ba'athist era Iraq and the

rise and fall of Saddam Husayn's dictatorship continued to actively produce and share

artworks that spoke to their lived experiences and rich artistic traditions and imaginaries.

Stimulated by artist and modernist pioneer Shakir Hasan Al Said's engagement with

transnational abstract painting practices in 1950s Paris, his 1973 artist manifesto "One

Dimension" drew its philosophy on Iraq's historic heritage along with his Sufi-inspired

practice to encourage his students, including the young painter Hanaa Malallah, to delve

into processes of artmaking beyond the pictorial surface. During the first Gulf War,

Malallah evolved her artistic practice into one that harvested and incorporated the

material effects of war directly into the art object; she calls this process her "Ruins

Technique." The evolution of her artistic practice demonstrates the shared lineage of

destruction as a process of abstract artmaking from Shakir Hasan Al Said's work,

including the conceptual frameworks and spiritual symbolism drawn from Islamic

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[312] See Sara Pursley's analysis of the history of Iraq's borders in "'Lines Drawn on an Empty Map': Iraq's Borders and the Legend of the Artificial State (Part 1)," *Jadaliyya* (2 June, 2015). Available at: http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32140/%60Lines-Drawn-on-an-Empty-Map%60-Iraq%E2%80%99s-Borders-and-the-Legend-of-the-Artificial-State-Part-1.

calligraphic traditions and popular religious heritage. Examining the painting practices of artists Shakir Hasan Al Said and Hanaa Malallah reveals a new contemporary art trajectory of creative worldmaking with Islamic heritage. Through their experiments with processes of destruction in artmaking, these artists rework popular Islamic traditions into a new symbolic cosmos of artistic abstraction.

The "One Dimension" (*al-Buʿad al-Wahid*) Manifesto

As a contemporary multimedia artist now based in London and Manama, Hanaa Malallah is most well know for her use of burning and other techniques dealing with destruction. When she began collecting materials found around the streets of Baghdad during the first Gulf War, Malallah turned to burnt fabrics, black soot, ash, random material scraps, and other traces of bombings. These materials provided Malallah new ways of creating and composing artworks that expanded her practice beyond the medium of oil canvas painting. Since the beginning of the first Gulf War, imposed international sanctions had limited Iraqi artists' access to the more traditional materials of oil pigments and pencils (and the country's artists were increasingly unable to travel internationally).[313] For Malallah, the experience of the war and subsequent U.S. bombing raids throughout the 1990s also drove her to abandon her painting and portrait studio practice to embrace the increasingly bombarded Baghdad instead as her worksite, with

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[313] Interview with Hanaa Malallah, July 11, 2017. See also Silvia Naef, "Not Just 'For Art's Sake': Exhibiting Iraq Art in the West After 2003" (2012), 475-500. For an overview on the history and impact of sanctions on populations (rather than the regime) of Iraq, see Tareq Y Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael "Whither Iraq? Beyond Saddam, Sanctions, and Occuption," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 46 no. 4-5 (2005), 613-616.

the city's ongoing destruction as so-called "raw material."[314] One of her early works

organized these materials drawn from the violent urban chaos into a grid plan of

blackened squares cascading down into drips of wet ash through plain cloth (**Figure 4.4**).

Inserted sporadically across the textile lattice frame are random circles, crosses, smears,

and solid squares in black and white paint, creating a jumbled set of marks and symbols

within the painting, foreshadowing her future experiments with methods of abstracted

images and objects. The work attempts to impose systematic order on the cascading wave

of black corrosive elements across the white linen surface, an effective visual metaphor

for the darkening of Baghdad's skies with bombs and other covert harbingers of death

and destruction over the city's beige urban landscape.[315]

    Malallah was not the first artist in twentieth-century Iraq to instigate artmaking

through destruction as a material or residual process. Her main instructor at the Institute

of Fine Arts was Shakir Hasan Al Said (1925-2004), who co-founded the Baghdad

Modern Art Group (*jamaʿat baghdad lil-fann al-hadith*) in 1951 and was one of the

country's foremost modernists and intellectuals who first began using cracks, scratches,

burning, and other destructive processes in his paintings.[316] Malallah worked with Shakir

Hasan Al Said throughout her training in painting in the 1970s, then subsequently in his

weekly workshops with both ancient Mesopotamian and historic Islamic artifacts in

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[314] Interview with Hanaa Malallah, April 7, 2018.

[315] Baghdad has often been depicted as a whitewashed urban oasis and modernist cityscape, most famously in the paintings of artist and founder of the Baghdad Modern Art Museum, Nouri al-Rawi. See *Noori al-Rawi* exhibition catalog (London: Iraqi Cultural Centre Gallery, 14 December 1977-13 January 1978) [Retrieved from the Modern Art Iraq Archive July 11, 2018], and "Nouri al-Rawi" *Barjeel Art Foundation* (Available at: http://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/artist/iraq/nouri-al-rawi/).

[316] See Nathaniel Greenberg, "Political Modernism, Jabra, and the Baghdad Modern Art Group," *CLC Web: Comparative Culture* 12, no. 2 (2010): 1-10.

Iraq's National Archaeological Museum's archives in the 1980s and 1990s.[317] She later

received a Ph.D. under his advising from the Fine Arts Department at the University of

Baghdad for her 2005 dissertation entitled "Logic Systems in Ancient Mesopotamian

Painting."[318]

Shakir Hasan Al Said held several key administrative positions in the Iraqi

Ministries of Culture and Arts, as well as the National Archaeological Museum (**Figure

4.5**). Through these various platforms and his own publications, he advocated across the

country's different cultural milieus for the 1950s Baghdad Modern Art Group's shared

philosophy of *istilham al-turath* or "Drawing Inspiration from Heritage."[319] Such an

artistic philosophy encouraged artists to partake in a dynamic relationship with ancient

and historic heritage, from Sumerian, Assyrian, Akkadian wall reliefs and artifacts, to

Abbasid-period manuscript paintings by the thirteenth-century artist Yahya ibn Mahmud

al-Wasiti (after whom the first "Al Wasiti" Arab art and literature festival on October 6,

1972 was named) (**Figure 4.6**).[320] On the cover of the 1972 "Al Wasiti" arts festival

publication, a painting by al-Wasiti appears in the upper half above a highly stylized,

modern calligraphic rendering of the title "Arab Plastic Arts" (*al-tashkili al-arabi*).

Altogether, these efforts by him and other leading modernists played a vital role in the

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[317] Hanaa Malallah also trained in printmaking at the new Department of Graphic Arts under artist Rafa Nasiri. Interview with artist, April 2018.

[318] As a testament to their close teacher-student relationship, Shakir Hasan Al Said left some of his personal letters and diaries with Hanaa Malallah, which she recently exhibited through Bahrain's Albareh Gallery at Art Dubai 2018 (March 21-24).

[319] Shakir Hasan Al Said, ed., *Hiwar al-fann al-tashkili* (The Dialogue of Plastic Arts) (Amman: 'Abd Al Hamid Shouman Foundation, Darat al Funun, 1995), 49-50.

[320] See Afif Bahnassi "Authenticity in Art: Exposition, Definition, Methodology," *Cultures*, vol. 6 (1979), 79; Saleem Al-Bahloly, "History Regained: A Modern Artist in Baghdad Encounters a Lost Tradition of Painting," *Muqarnas* 35 (2018), 229-272. For the 1972 art festival, the Palestinian-Iraqi writer and artist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra wrote a history of contemporary Iraqi art: *Iraqi Art Today*, Art Series no. 15 (Baghdad: Ministry of Information, Al Wasiti Festival, April 1972).

development of the country's artistic endeavors and community that became renowned

throughout the Middle East by the 1960s as at the forefront of modernist practices, Pan-

Arab cultural aesthetics, and avant-garde worldmaking techniques. Yet through his

writings and long artistic practice, Shakir Hasan continually searched for creative

methods that took his work's meaning and metaphysical experience deeper than the

pictorial surface of a visual artwork.

In 1973, Shakir Hasan Al Said wrote a new artist manifesto entitled "One

Dimension" (*al-buʿad al-wahid*) as a philosophy, theory, and methodology.[321] He then

organized an exhibition in Baghdad of the "One Dimension Group" showcasing Arab

artistic use and engagement with Arabic letters in their work, an event considered a

pivotal catalyst in the region for contemporary artistic practices with calligraphic scripts,

and the beginning of the Arab world's *hurufiya* ("letterism") movement of the 1970s

onward.[322] This manifesto and new artistic practice builds upon the conceptual ideas

Shakir Hasan Al Said first articulated and began to put forward publically in a 1966

manifesto (published in *al-Jumhuriya* newspaper in July 1966).[323] In the 1966 manifesto,

he writes that an artist's creative practice should be seen as a methodology for

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[321] For a complete English translation of this manifesto, see "The Philosophical, Technical, and Expressive Aspects of the One Dimension: Shakir Hassan Al Said" (1973). In *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 357-359.

[322] See Iftikhar Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi and Calligraphic Modernism in a Comparative Perspective," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 3 (Summer 2010), 559; Ulrike al-Khamis "An Historical Overview 1900s-1990s," in *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), 29; Rashad Selim, "Diaspora, Departure, and Remains," in *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), 52; Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Aesthetics: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997), 97-144; Shirbil Daghir, *Al-hurufiya al-arabiya: fann wa hawiya* (Arab Letterism: Art and Identity) (Beirut: Sharikat al-matbuʿat lil tawziʿ wa al-nashir, 1990).

[323] See "Manifesto: Shakir Hassan Al Said (1966)." In *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 252-255.

contemplating the universe and for "the exploration of truth in all its dimensions."[324] He

argues this truth can be found in contemplating reality as "a *vitalistic-cosmic*

phenomenon," or one in which the artist actively witnesses "the truth through the prism

of the cosmos, which includes the work of art."[325] As a new iteration of the Shakir Hasan

Al Said's evolving conceptual views towards artmaking, the 1973 "One Dimension"

manifesto continued to advocate for artmaking as a means to transcend a humanist or

subjective existence and move towards spatial and temporal worlds along a "cosmic

horizon."[326] Through an evolving relationship between the self and active contemplation

of the world, the "One Dimension" artist can find the true meaning of the cosmos by

mediating line and mass within the pictorial surface. He suggests "incorporating the letter

in art is then no longer anything but the cosmic stance of the contemplator, for it seeks to

expose the unity of two worlds that are simultaneously inhabited, namely, the 'linguistic'

world of thought and the 'plastic' world of sight."[327] Thus for Shakir Hasan Al Said, the

linear dimension of Arab writing provides the ultimate linguistic symbol and

metaphysical opening in the physical practice of artmaking.

　　With the "One Dimension" 1973 exhibition publication, Shakir Hasan Al Said

explores the markings and semiotics of historic to modern Arabic-script calligraphies,

reproducing examples of Kufic calligraphy in early Qur'ans to "popular" nineteenth- and

early twentieth-century mirror examples during the Ottoman Empire alongside modernist

abstract paintings by Chinese, American, and European artists, as well as paintings by the

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[324] "Manifesto: Shakir Hassan Al Said (1966)," (MoMA 2018), 253.
[325] "Manifesto: Shakir Hassan Al Said (1966)," (MoMA 2018), 254.
[326] "The Philosophical, Technical, and Expressive Aspects of the One Dimension: Shakir Hassan Al Said (1973)," (MoMA 2018), 357-358.
[327] "The Philosophical, Technical, and Expressive Aspects of the One Dimension: Shakir Hassan Al Said (1973)," (MoMA 2018), 358.

Iranian artist Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, and pioneering Syrian-Iraqi abstract painter Madiha ʿUmar.[328] Compiling a broad visual encyclopedia of different artistic writing practices suggests Shakir Hasan Al Said's familiarity with histories of Islamic calligraphy along with neighboring modernist movements in Iran and further afield. While this calligraphic compendium offers a transnational apercu scope into the artist's artistic worldview, his analysis and meditation on the nature of writing practices prompt the reader and viewer to see these and other visual examples through the lens of Islamic mysticism and the ultimate goal of absenting—and transcending—the artist's subjective presence within the artwork.

In the 1973 "One Dimension" published manifesto, Shakir Hasan Al Said emphasizes the concept of trace through writing, whether in traditional calligraphy, abstracted letters, graffiti, signs, or dots in the visual and spatial plane of the line (*khatt*).[329] While the trace in this sense includes the physical presence of medium, it is also considered a vehicle to bring multiple temporalities and spatial realms beyond the visual field into the art object. An example by Shakir Hasan Al Said includes writing like a graffito on an ancient wall that deteriorates with the wear and tear of time. By

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[328] Shakir Hasan Al Said includes examples by Madiha 'Umar in the exhibition publication. See "The Philosophical, Technical, and Expressive Aspects of the One Dimension" [*al-Jawanib al-filsafa al-tikniat wa al-taʿibiriat li'l-buʿid al-wahid*] (Baghdad: National Museum of Modern Art, March 1973). See also Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi, Laura Nader, and Etel Adnan, "Arab Women Artists: Forces of Change." In *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World* (Lafayette, CA: International Council for Women in the Arts, 1994), 12-37.

[329] See J. Sourdel-Thormine, Ali Alparslan, M. Abdullah Chaghatai and ed., "Khatt," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam: Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquiz, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (2012), accessed February 2, 2019. In terms of divinatory practices, the *khatt* is also "the line which the geomancer traces on the sand when, strictly speaking, he is practicing psammomancy," or the occult art of parsing markings in the sand. Also within Arab geomancy, or *al-khatt bi'l-raml*, the mark makings of line and dots constitute a complex astrological and mathematical practice (and art form). See T. Fahd, "Khatt," *Encyclopaedia of Islam: Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquiz, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (2012), accessed February 2, 2019. I am grateful to Alexander Knysh for this reference.

introducing symbolic registers of script and letters into his paintings, the artist sought to

evoke multiple layers of time and space into his two-dimensional canvases. Time in his

writings is a damaging process, with both visible and invisible effects, and the artist

sought to wield it through various methods to reveal fissures beneath the pictorial surface

of his compositions, thereby harnessing an underlying reality or eternal truth in the

painting's present and future existence.[330]

A 1980 monochromatic work entitled "Blackened Wall," or "Soot on the Wall"

(*sukham ala'l-jidar*) by Shakir Hasan Al Said offers a literal fissure in the pictorial

surface (**Figure 4.7**). In the artwork of painted white wood, a vertical crack runs from the

top of the composition like an inverse lightning bolt down through the black burnt traces

of a blowtorch across the center of the wood surface. Faint scratches in the very center of

the painting suggest scribbles or white markups as if the surface was a school chalkboard.

Near the center fulcrum of the painting is a carved "*waw*" or the Arabic letter "w," the

vowel "u," and the "and" connective word and sign that anchors the converging effects of

breakage and burning into a worldmaking of symbolic traces.[331] Besides the sign's

linguistic or aesthetic function, Sonja Mejcher-Atassi notes that the "*waw*" in Shakir

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[330] Within broad cross-cultural concepts of time in Islamic traditions, Gerhard Böwering has suggested that through the act of writing time can be understood as an eternal atomism. In this microcosmic worldview, "every instant and action in the process of writing is independent from every other; all stages of the process issue from God alone." See Gerhard Böwering, "The Concept of Time in Islam," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 141, no. 1 (1997): 60. See also Al Said, *Dirasat ta'amuliya* [Contemplative Studies] (Koln, Germany: Al-Kamel Verlag, 1997); Al Said, *Mabhath fi ma'na al-zaman al-makani* [Studies in Spatial Time] exhibition catalog (Amman, Jordan: Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, November-December 1992).

[331] On the calligraphy practice of single letter writing and repetition, known as *mufradat* exercises, see David Roxburgh, "'The Eye is Favored for Seeing the Writing's Form': On the Sensual and the Senuous in Islamic Calligraphy," *Muqarnas* 25 (2008): 284; Nabil F. Safwat, "Albums of *mufradat* exercises." In *The Art of the Pen: Calligraphy of the 14th to 20th Centuries* (London and Oxford: The Nour Foundation in association with Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1996), 12-31; Maryam Ekhtiar, "Practice Makes Perfect: The Art of Calligraphy Exericses (*Siyah Mashq*) in Iran," *Muqarnas* 23 (2006): 107-130.

Hasan Al Said's work drew upon Sufi calligraphic practices, in which the *waw* grapheme serves as shorthand for symbolizing the *Shahada*, or profession of Islamic faith.[332] While the rendering and mere presence of Arabic and its letters is considered a protective and divine vehicle in Islamic cultures, the specific use and study of isolated letters and their various combinations, visual structures, and potential mathematical sums also developed in Sufi contexts and intellectual discourses.[333] Indeed, Shakir Hasan Al Said's writings for the "One Dimension" exhibition and related activities recalls some of the language and concepts of famous Sufi scholars, including the Abbasid-era Persian mystic al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (858-922).[334] The Iraqi artist later included historic examples and his own ink drawn interpretations of alphanumerical systems (*abjad*) in subsequent publications.[335]

Thus, Shakir Hasan Al Said's interest in the historic practices and mystical religious traditions around Arabic script suggests some of the intellectual currents that drove his studies and interest in notions of absence, an invisible reality or truth within the art object, and annihilation. A different discursive source for the use of destructive processes of image making in the 1980 monochromatic work may stem from the artist's

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[332] Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, "Shakir Hassan Al Said" *Mathaf: Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World* (2017). In historical Sufi Islamic traditions, Annemarie Schimmel notes the *waw* "symbolizes the relation between God and creation. It is the favorite letter of Turkish calligraphers, who even invented a Prophetic tradition, "Trust in the *waw*'s." See Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 420.

[333] See Annemarie Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990), 84.

[334] Otherwise known in Persian and Turkish traditions as Mansur-i Hallaj. See L. Massignon and L. Gardet, "al-Halladj," *Encyclopaedia of Islam: Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquiz, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (2012).

[335] Shakir Hasan Al Said included several examples of magic squares and other mystical letter practices in his *Dirasat ta'amuliya* [Contemplative Studies], (Koln, Germany and Beirut: Al-Kamel Verlag, 1997). The "One Dimension" 1973 published text also includes a couple examples of mirror calligraphic works; see "The Philosophical, Technical, and Expressive Aspects of the One Dimension" [*al-Jawanib al-filsafa al-tikniat wa al-ta'ibiriat li'l-bu'id al-wahid*], 5-6.

familiarity with popular images of the Prophet Muhammad's *isra'* and *mi'raj* or the

"night journey" from Mecca to Jerusalem and his ascension to celestial heaven.[336]

Several artists in 1960s Iraq, including the painters Kadhim Haidar and Nouri al-Rawi,

depicted the mythical steed al-Buraq that carried the Prophet during his night journey and

ascension to heaven in their artworks.[337] Yet rarely if at all did modernist artists venture

to depict the Prophet as a figural presence. While it cannot yet be determined if Shakir

Hasan Al Said viewed artistic representations of the Prophet Muhammad in one of the

Prophet's many historic visual forms,[338] he did profess to an interest in the allegorical

journey of the Prophet's *mi'raj*. In a 2005 interview commemorating the Lebanese

collector and gallery owner Salih Barakat's retrospective exhibition of Shakir Hasan Al

Said's oeuvre one year after the artist's death, Barakat states that the artist developed a

conceptual framework based on the *mi'raj* in Islamic traditions as the closest a human

being ever came to approaching God. Barakat suggests that the use of strong vertical

lines or slashes in Shakir Hasan Al Said's paintings was the manifestation of the idea of

the *mi'raj* as, "it is a movement, a gesture that does not contradict the uniqueness of God

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[336] For some popular poster examples, see Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, *Imageries Populaires en Islam* (Geneva: Georg, 1997).

[337] For reproduction images of both artists' mid-1960s paintings of al-Buraq, see the cultural magazine *Arab Arts* (*Finun arabia*), vol. 1 (London: 1981), 32.

[338] During Shakir Hasan's studies and teachings in Paris (1955-1959), he went several times to the Bibliothèque nationale de France and viewed and closely examined the famous 1237 CE manuscript of *Maqamat* of al-Hariri copied and illustrated by Yahya al-Wasiti in present-day Iraq. He may have encountered other premodern Arab or Persian illustrated manuscripts in the collection, including ones containing representations of the Prophet Muhammad. For a discussion of the *nur Muhammad* and the different radiant representations of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic traditions, see Christiane Gruber, *The Timurid "Book of Ascension" (Mi'rajnama): A Study of Text and Image in a Pan-Asian Context* (Valencia: Patrimonio Ediciones in collaboration with the Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2008), 303-304

but rather suggests a direct one-dimensional conduit to God. And it is also, in a sense, a radical opening, a crucial breakthrough."[339]

Thinking back to the 1980 monochromatic wood work, the use of scorched burn marks and a vertical crack through the painting's center could be an evocation of this conduit, or "one dimensional" thru line to an eternal realm existing beneath the tangible, visible world. The symbolic meanings of these artistic practices in Shakir Hasan Al Said's and others' considerations of his work offer an interpretive matrix for the use of destructive processes in his paintings. Further understanding can also be found in Sufi concepts of the Prophet Muhammad as both a divine essence made of primordial light (or "*nur Muhammad*"), and as a contemplative conduit for annihilation (*fana'*) of the self.[340] Writers and artists in Islamic history often conceived of and depicted the Prophet Muhammad as existing between the corporeal realm and divine cosmos.[341] He was seen as the carrier of God's primordial light and emanatory source of all physical and spiritual life on earth, or as a numinous allegory of physical being. Artists conveyed such abstraction of the prophetic body using luminous motifs like flames, blazes, and halos in diverse image making practices in Islamic art history.

Considering how burning light was a common metaphor and intellectual discourse for representing the Prophet Muhammad on earth, Shakir Hasan Al Said's use of *literal*

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[339] Quoted in Wilson-Goldie, Kaelen, "Paying Tribute to an Iraqi Master before His Legacy Disappears," *The Daily Star Lebanon* (21 March, 2005), 2.

[340] In Sufi symbolic worldviews, the notion of *fana'* as an initial phase in which a person divesting their human attributes in order to receive Divine wisdom shares in the "worldly experience" of death. See Bronislav Ostranksy, "The Sufi Journey to the Next World: Sepulchral Symbolism of Muslim Mystics, Its Context and Interpretations," *Archiv Orientální* 83, no. 3 (2015): 484. See also Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Concept and Reality of Existence* (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1971), 39-40.

[341] Christiane Gruber, "Between Logos (Kalima) and Light (Nur): Representations of the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Painting," *Muqarnas* 26 (2009): 247.

burning and flames as processes of artistic production takes on potent symbolism in the 1980 artwork. Coupled with the artist's increasing spiritualism and devotion to Sufi religious practices after he returned to Iraq from France, his awareness of the Prophet Muhammad as a meditative vehicle for self-annihilation suggests the inversion of the artistic and conceptual prophetic motifs of light and fire into blackened scorch marks and a vertical crack were purposeful creative gestures across the wood surface. The artwork not only suggests the absence of the Prophet's body as he left the corporeal plane on the *mi'raj*. Rather than leave traces of his artistic authorship behind in the physical plane of the painting, Shakir Hasan inverted the additive pictorial painting process into one of annihilative techniques and material absences.

Another important conceptual flow in Shakir Hasan Al Said's "One Dimension" philosophy and artistic methods is the artist's engagement with global modernism in 1950s Paris. The chromatic balance and destructive processes in the 1980 monochromatic work evokes painting techniques by other midcentury abstract artists, including Lucio Fontana's slashed paintings, Alberto Burri's combustion techniques, Yves Klein's fire paintings, or the texturally rich and deteriorative wall compositions of Catalan artist Antoni Tàpies, to whom Shakir Hasan Al Said directly references in his writings.[342] Each of these artists shares a working concern with both the transcendent and the ephemeral dimensions of the work of art, or what Yve-Alain Bois describes as, "the material imprint

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[342] See Jaleh Mansoor, "Fontana's Atomic Age Abstraction: The Spatial Concepts and the Television Manifesto," *October* 124 (2008): 137-156; Anthony White, "Burning Man: Alberto Burri and Arte Povera," *Artforum* 54, no. 5 (2016); Yve-Alain Bois, "Klein's Relevance for Today," *October* 119 (2007): 75-93; Alex Potts, "New Realism and Pop Art." In *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics, and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 199-249; Renée Riese Hubert, "Antoni Tàpies Between History and Mysticism," *Dalhousie French Studies* 21 (1991): 101-111; Jonathan Mayhew, "Valente/Tàpies: The Poetics of Materiality," *Anales de la literatura española contemporánea* 22, no. 1/2 (1997): 91-201.

of a vital force too powerful to be seized, but also too diffuse to be represented or intellectually grasped."[343] Shakir Hasan studied in Paris on an Iraqi state art scholarship at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1955 to 1959, where along with ancient Sumerian artifacts in the Louvre galleries, he states he discovered European abstraction along the Seine's rows of modern art galleries. By sharing in such global experiments in abstract mark making, Shakir Hasan Al Said's "One Dimension" philosophy and artistic practices strongly resonates with concurrent trends among contemporary European abstract expressionists and other transnational conceptual artists. At the same time, the artist's manifesto and philosophical worldview brought popular Islamic practices and spiritual traditions into a dynamic relationship with these global art experiments.

For example, Fontana also explored spatiality through medium by slicing the skin of his canvases (**Figure 4.8**). Fontana slashed his burlap or cotton canvases and would then line their backside with black gauze to create an illusion of spatial depth. By doing so, he claimed to "escape symbolically, but also materially, from the prison of the flat surface."[344] Similarly, Antoni Tàpies employed processes of scratching and gouging his painting surfaces in order to invigorate the object's matter, or in other words, to make the materiality of the art object come alive beyond the image field. He distorted works with industrial materials, and used soil, rags, strings, and other informal art materials to build ambiguous surfaces he then subsequently gouged and hacked away as if revealing an primordial cryptic vocabulary, as well as to the passage of time and trauma on walls in

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[343] Yve-Alain Bois, "Klein's Relevance for Today," *October* 119 (2007): 88.
[344] Quoted in "Rip It, Burn It, Tear It, Cut It – The Art of Destruction" *Christie's* (London: 26 January, 2016).

his crumbling canvases.[345] Shakir Hasan Al Said credits encountering Tàpies' works in late 1950s Paris for his own practice of making paintings as aesthetic representations of decaying walls.

One such work entitled "Lines on a Wall" (1978) presents a composition that evokes the appearance of an old marked up wall, perhaps one standing somewhere in a historic Baghdad neighborhood (**Figure 4.9**).[346] Consisting of overlapping rectilinear layers of warm earth-toned textures, the painted wood surface suggests a two-dimensional flat image of vertical space. Shades of sandy beige, taupe, and honey yellow pigments are smeared or dripped around black etched lines, scratches, and the Arabic letter sign of "*waw*" again anchors the picture's central point while the Arabic word of *Allah* (God) is inserted slightly to the left.[347] The Arabic graffiti markings appear written with a black aerosol spray can, albeit visually recalling the burned scorch markings in the previous 1970s monochromatic work. Along with the systematically scratched out rectangle in the bottom register of the painting, other etchings into the paint include various crosshatches and line markings. These gestural marks introduce additional layers of temporality and space as they suggest the wear and tear of time on architectural facades, or even ancient wall carvings and markings. In the 1973 "One Dimension" manifesto, Shakir Hasan included as the publication's first image a photograph of "one of the oldest written tablets from the fourth-century B.C. from [the ancient temple of]

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[345] Renée Riese Hubert, "Antoni Tàpies Between History and Mysticism," *Dalhousie French Studies* 21 (1991): 101-111.

[346] Reproduced with English title only in Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art and the Metamorphosis of the Arab Letter* (PhD Thesis, The University of Texas at Arlington, 1999), 266.

[347] As the thirteenth-century Sufi Najmuddin Kubra once wrote, the *waw* is "the letter of connection between man and god." See Annemarie Schimmel, "Calligraphy and Mysticism." In *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990), 100.

Warka,"[348] also known as one of the Kish pictographic tablets from ancient Sumer now held at the Ashmolean Museum (**Figure 4.10**).[349] While serving as an example of the inception and earliest history of writing from 3100 B.C. in ancient Mesopotamia, the photograph also suggests how Shakir Hasan Al Said was visually thinking through the transnational art world's conceptual threads of cryptic symbols, graphemes, writing, and image making through abstract techniques within the specific history and nationalist framework of Iraqi archaeological heritage.[350] Hence while the graffiti scratches in Tàpies' wall paintings suggested the artist's universalist worldview along with rural Catalan dialects and popular vocabularies against the Fascist nationalism of Francoist Spain,[351] Shakir Hasan contextualized his own mark making through historic models in both ancient and Islamic writing traditions that blurred visual modes of word and image, as well as national and transnational modernist vocabularies.

Looking through the markings on the 1978 "Lines on a Wall" painting provides even clearer evidence of Shakir Hasan Al Said's incorporation of Sufi letterism and practices of wielding isolated letters or words for mystical meanings. In her research on calligraphic traditions in the history of Islamic cultures, Annemarie Schimmel examines both the Sufi spiritual discourses and the popular material practices around mysticism and writing, noting that new interpretations and applications of letters have continued through

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[348] See Shakir Hasan Al Said, "The Philosophical, Technical, and Expressive Aspects of the One Dimension," (1973), 3.
[349] See P.R.S. Morrey, *Kish Excavations 1923-1933* (London: Oxford University: 1978); Christopher Woods, "The Earliest Mesopotamian Writing," in *Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond* (Chicago: Oriental Institute Museum Publications, 2010), 33-50.
[350] See Kamyar Abdi, "From Pan-Arabism to Saddam Hussein's Cult of Personality," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 8, no. 1 (2008): 3-36.
[351] See Tobias Berneiser, "Graffiti and the Aesthetic Communication Over the Wall: Antoni Tàpies and Julio Cortazar in Intermedial Dialogue," *Zeitschrift fur Katalanistik* 26 (2013): 13-45.

the twentieth century.[352] Along with the latent prognostic powers of Arabic letter systems,

Schimmel writes on the mysterious incarnations of letters in terms of lived everyday

practices of amulets and seals in Islamic societies:

> Even seemingly meaningless, unconnected letters can convey some blessing, provided they have been written with the proper intention by a skilled amulet maker; and inscriptions on metalwork, which often consist of mere fragments of blessing formulas, may still bear the *baraka* of the full prayer.[353]

Shakir Hasan Al Said's interest in *abjad* and historic apotropaic uses of mixed letter

systems seen previously comes to bear again in examining how he used different

linguistic markings and traces. His painting practice not only resulted in visible letters

and markings through additive ink or paint pigments, but he also revealed the invisible

esoteric language and limitless potential manifestations underlying the artwork through

carving and etching marks into the painting's surface. Altogether, the abstracted letters,

or semiotic graphemes, provided a means to articulate ancient and Islamic artistic

traditions through contemporary art processes and materials. Through these worldmaking

experiments, the artist creatively engages with symbolic realms of Islamic traditions

through Arabic letters, which have been discursively produced and wielded as primordial

signifiers and manipulators of the cosmos over millennia.[354]

In terms of the specific presence of the black painted *Allah* in "Lines on a Wall,"

both the first and last letters of the Arabic word key the painting into mystical discourses

on Arabic writing. As Schimmel explains, the letter *alif* is the beginning of the word

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[352] See Annemarie Schimmel, "Calligraphy and Mysticism." In *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990), 77-114; Annemarie Schimmel, "The Primordial Dot: Some Thoughts about Sufi Letter Mysticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 350-356.
[353] Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (1990), 84.
[354] See Iftikhar Dadi, "Calligraphic Abstraction." In *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture,* eds. Finbarr Barry Flood, and Gülru Necipoğlu (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 1294-95.

Allah and carries mystical interpretations along with embodying "the Divine letter par excellence," according to the Persian mystic Mansur al-Hallaj, who Schimmel also notes understood the universe as stemming from the point of creation, or the "primordial dot," based on the calligraphic system's dot that constitutes both a semiotic and physical line.[355] The final *ha'* ("h") letter of *Allah* also carries a particularly important role in Sufi letterism. In Sufi meditative practices, "especially in the *dhikr* of the *shahada*, the name Allah is finally dissolved until only the *h* remains, which is also the sound of human breathing,"[356] or, perhaps alternatively in Shakir Hasan Al Said's graphic rendering, the soft exhale of an aerosol spray paint can.

Examining these different potential symbolic elements of visuality and formal processes in Shakir Hasan Al Said's work does not mean his abstractive modes should be interpreted exclusively through a Sufi Islamic (or any) religious register. Rather, the artist's adamant interest, study, and exercises in Sufi intellectual history and symbolic traditions should be incorporated into the broader framework of analyzing abstract art practices in the context of historic Islamic cultures, as well as in global practices of abstract modernism. During the postwar era and rise of global biennials and exhibitions, artists around the world explored similar interests and creative tactics in challenging the bi-dimensional surface of painting into a tri-dimensional object beyond the imagerial plane. Processes of destruction and material annihilation as modes of abstract painting were found not only in postwar Europe, but also in postwar Japan. For example, the Gutai

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[355] Schimmel explains further: "In Hallaj's system the point or dot is the primordial dot, which we have already encountered as the basis of creation, but it is also the dot in the calligraphic system of ibn Muqla, which was developed during Hallaj's lifetime." See *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (1990), 94.

[356] Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (1990), 99. See also Annemarie Schimmel, "The Primordial Dot: Some Thoughts about Sufi Letter Mysticism," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 350-356.

Art Association was formed in 1954 in Osaka, Japan, by painter Jiro Yoshihara, and the group was increasingly active in France during Shakir Hasan's residence as French critics including Michel Tapié championed and exhibited Gutai art works and performances in late 1950s Paris.[357] Artists affiliated with the Gutai group sought to explore new art forms combining performance, painting, and interactive environments. Perhaps most famously, the Gutai artist Saburo Murakami was deeply engaged with matter itself and attempted to unshackle it from symbolic meanings through a variety of practices, including jumping through his large paper canvases and thereby negating the artwork by leaving the material form permanently altered with his temporal bodily trace.[358]

After the "One Dimension" 1973 exhibition and published manifesto, Shakir Hasan Al Said continued to overtly demolish material in his artmaking, and he eventually began burning holes directly through the center of his compositions (**Figure 4.11**). Rendered in light gray and beige washes of mixed media and color washes over a thick cardboard sheet, an "untitled" painting produced in the 1980s appears almost as a counterpart or continuation in a series of the black scorched 1970 monochromatic painting. Now held at the Darat al Funun Center for Modern Arab Art in Amman, Jordan (where Shakir Hasan Al Said eventually resided and gave workshops and lectures during his last years), the work features a gaping hole as its central focal point. Faint dark gray

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[357] Michel Tapié also became a champion of artists from the forefront of Iran's *Saqqakhaneh* movement; most notably he befriended Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, who Tapié met in the 1960s and later organized exhibitions of his and other Iranian artists' paintings at Galerie Stadler in Paris, from 1971-1975. See Balaghi, "Iranian Visual Arts," in *Picturing Iran: Art, Society, and Revolution* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 28, fn24.

[358] As Marta Jecu argues, "Murakami's act is also a statement of preservation by freezing a sacrificial moment of loss that ultimately leads to transformation and renewal, thereby becoming a mode to integrate his art into a historical flow." See Jecu's "Relics as New Monuments: Destroyed Painting/Les peintures détruites, ou les reliques en tant que nouveaux monuments," *Esse Arts + Opinions* 76 (2012): 39.

washes of burn marks, and some peeled back scorched edges revealing orange and white particles of the corrugated fiberboard structure are the only remaining traces of the artist's blowtorch (or other fire source) used in the painting.

The burned hole encourages bodily engagement and physical movement around the artwork, as the painting is displayed encased in glass on a pedestal so as to encourage viewers to circle the object as they grasp its three-dimensional status. In the sense of bodily trace, transformation, and destruction of physical matter, the painting culminates ideas Shakir Hasan Al Said laid out in previous work, transcending the numinous dimensions of the Prophet Muhammad towards an everlasting frame of complete absence. Iraqi architect and sculptor Hikmat Mohammad Ali said Al Said "was ultimately concerned with creating a kind of nothingness in his work, a contemplative emptiness. His use of language stands not for meaning itself but as an accumulation of traces, the residue of his efforts."[359] The visualized void in the 1980s burned painting suggests an amalgamation of the artist's interests in the symbolic abstraction of the prophetic body on the *mi'raj*[360] and of the annihilation of the earthly self (*fana'*) which Sufis wish to attain in order to be closer to God. Lastly, for an artist who notoriously did not keep titles or dates of his works, and often tossed away drawings or other materials much to collectors' chagrin,[361] burning a gaping hole into the middle of his paintings also suggests a certain playfulness and unfettered approach in artmaking.

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[359] Hikmat Mohammad Ali, quoted in Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Paying Tribute to an Iraqi Master before His Legacy Disappears," *The Daily Star Lebanon* (March 21, 2005), 2-3.

[360] Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Always Struggle with the Object, Always Rewrite the World" *South As A State of Mind 9, Documenta 14,* no. 4 (2017). Available at: https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/55_always_struggle_with_the_object_always_rewrite_the_world

[361] Salih Barakat summarized Shakir Hasan Al Said's ascetic artistic reputation, stating: "He was a very famous person but he never acted as such…He was a Sufi man and he was a real

Through the subsequent published articulations and theoretical expansions on his "One Dimension" philosophy and artistic practice, Shakir Hasan Al Said continually argued in his writing for the importance of considering spatiality and temporality through the art object. Engaging with the volatile nature of physical materials in painting, including through gestural traces and destructive processes, can open up the artwork to infinite metaphoric potential and simultaneously collapse the time and space of visual artmaking into the continuous presence/absence of an underlying eternal dimension or invisible realm of existence.[362] A later iteration of Shakir Hasan Al Said's artistic philosophy appears in the 1992 publication for the artist's retrospective exhibition at the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, curated by the museum director, artist, and scholar Wijdan Ali.[363] Titling the publication "Studies in Spatial Time," he writes that an artist's work does not end with the pictorial surface, but must "penetrate it beyond (i.e. remove)" the surface, as all formal elements of art (color, tonality, perspective, movement, shape, etc.) can "be distilled to one dimension of the line"[364] and, by extension, the primordial dot of all physical creation. For the artist, the concept of the physical and visible line offered an artistic catalyst for all potential creativity and a path to abnegate the self by way of artmaking processes.

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minimalist in his life. He never cared to frame his paintings. He never cared to sell his paintings…He used to scratch a piece of paper and then throw it. If I had told him I wanted to put it in a frame he would have refused. He never had a respected art dealer." Quoted in Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Paying Tribute to an Iraqi Master before His Legacy Disappears," *The Daily Star* (March 21, 2005), 3.

[362] See Al Said, *Dirasat taʿamuliya* [Contemplative Studies], (Koln, Germany: Al-Kamel Verlag, 1997), 1-2.

[363] Shakir Hasan Al Said, *Mabhath fi maʿna al-zaman al-makani* [Studies in Spatial Time] exhibition catalog (Amman, Jordan: Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, November-December 1992).

[364] Shakir Hasan Al Said, *Mabhath fi maʿna al-zaman al-makani* [Studies in Spatial Time] (1992), 2-3.

The "Ruins Technique"

The complex ideas at play in Shakir Hasan Al Said's artistic and spiritual worldview overlap with those of other midcentury conceptual artists. Both postwar Europe and postwar Japanese abstract practices likely played a role in introducing the Iraqi painter to destructive processes as painting techniques in transnational abstraction, which he then in turn imparted to his students. One work by his student Hanaa Malallah overtly demonstrates the effect of his enormous influence on the contemporary Iraqi and broader Arab world's art community, and of the close relationship between the teacher and his art student (**Figure 4.12**). In her mixed media composition entitled "For Shaker Hasan Al Said," Hanaa Malallah uses scratching and breakage as techniques to create a large circular hole in the center of the wood structure. The work reveals techniques specific to the artist's material practice, including mixed media collage, the introduction of three-dimensional objects adhered onto the painting surface, and stitching. Hanaa Malallah engraved a series of numbers and dots into the painting's wood surface, using Islamic *abjad* systems to translate the letters of her name into its numerical equivalent. As a signature and personal code,[365] the numerical cipher renders the artist's identifying presence and physical mark into an abstracted one that introduces into the artwork

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[365] Hanaa Malallah created her signature in 2007 when she fled Iraq after receiving numerous death threats, and eventually had the code permanently tattooed in ink on her forearm in 2013. She states she considers the numerical code an artwork and her arm now as "a found object." See Hanaa Malallah, "Tattoo" photographic print of the numerical code in the artist's arm, *Hanaa Malallah* artist website (2013).

various historically esoteric interpretative practices such as astronomy, logic, mathematics, and divination. The sequential row of mixed media squares lining the work's upper edge hint at the artist's interest in languages, as part of a numbered measuring tape and lines of Arabic calligraphic writing on paper are inserted among other textured cutouts.

Altogether, the correspondences between burning, abstractive traces, patterns, signs, and mark makings in Shakir Hasan Al Said's "One Dimension" methodology and Hanaa Malallah's earliest to recent contemporary works demonstrates the artistic lineage of destruction and historically-charged artistic heritage in abstractive processes in contemporary Iraqi art. Turning now to Hanaa Malallah's own artistic practice, this section of explores how her training under Shakir Hasan Al Said in the late 1970s through 1980s provided the underlying conceptual framework and techniques in her artistic practice that was then transformed by her subsequent lived experiences of war and destruction in Baghdad from the first Gulf War (1990-1991) to today.

Malallah's own work with destruction as an artistic process stemmed from her studies at the Baghdad Institute of Fine Arts and close mentorship under Shakir Hasan Al Said (**Figure 4.13**). Beyond engaging with global art processes of destruction, his practice of distressing and disintegrating his artworks also developed from working closely with ancient Mesopotamia and Islamic artifacts in the National Museum of Iraq. By considering time itself as a destructive process, and seeing the ravages of the passage of time on historic artifacts and archaeological sites, he encouraged his students in their weekly meetings at the museum to observe, handle, and depict artifacts in their work as a means of maintaining a dynamic engagement with their own cultural heritage. The

mediation of historic artistic objects had also been a key discourse in the previous

Baghdad Modern Art Group of the 1950s, as Shakir Hasan Al Said's colleague and

fellow modernist Jewad Salim stated one of the group's objectives was to reestablish

continuity with historic artistic traditions, declaring: "'We will build that which was

destroyed in the realm of pictorial art in Iraq since the thirteenth-century school of Yahya

al-Wasiti and we will connect the chain that was broken when Baghdad fell to the hands

of the Mongols.'"[366] In engaging with the historical heritage and modern reproductions of

a 1237 CE illustrated manuscript copy of the *Maqamat al-Hariri* with paintings by Yahya

ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti,[367] Jewad Selim circumscribes the loss of a historic artistic lineage

to the destruction of Abbasid Baghdad and sought to insert modern Iraqi painters into a

revived art historical linkage to that past.[368] Within this light, destruction in the *longue*

durée of Baghdadi history has propelled modern and contemporary art practices in Iraq in

persistently productive ways.

A young painting student within this artistic environment, Malallah responded to

historic artifacts in the National Museum, as well as to everyday life in the museum

galleries. Originally training in the Department of Painting, she first worked in portrait

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[366] Quoted in Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997), 27. See a newly published alternate translation in "Manifesto: Baghdad Group for Modern Art (1951)." In *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 150-151.

[367] On this 1237 illustrated manuscript copy of a *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, copied and illustrated by Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti, and now held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. Arabe 5847, see David Roxburgh, "In Pursuit of Shadows: Al-Hariri's *Maqamat*" *Muqarnas* (2013), 171-212; Oleg Grabar, "Pictures or Commentaries: The Illustrations of the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri." In *The Illustrations of the Maqamat* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 187-204.

[368] As Saleem al-Bahloly has recently argued, Iraqi artists in the 1950s were oriented by "the historiography of rupture that resulted from the re-encounter with al-Wasiti's illustrations, of a tradition lost and a yawning gap that set the present off from the past." See Al-Bahloly, "History Regained: A Modern Artist in Baghdad Encounters a Lost Tradition of Painting," *Muqarnas* 35 (2018), 268.

painting to acquire various techniques of representation, as can be seen in one 1980s

portrait (**Figure 4.14**). Her pre-war painting "The Guard" produced in 1989 represents

one of the National Museum's guards alongside his charges of ancient Mesopotamian

sculptures. Depicted in highlighted fleshy skin tones, the guard appears in his three-piece

gray suit between partially rendered ancient sculptures, including a Lamassu. The

Assyrian protective deity is rendered in her painting as a bearded human-headed and

winged bull. The ancient human sculpture on the painting's left side is likewise depicted

in more broad, graphic strokes than the finely illuminated and detailed visage of the man.

The painting background presents two graphic elements of interest that presage Hanaa

Malallah's abstract work and Fine Art PhD focus on Mesopotamian graphic systems.

Black and white squares compose a central graphic series in the uppermost register

against a solid mass of gray paint strokes, while an alternating series of black and white

rectangles (visually reminiscent of an archaeological measuring rod) is inserted across the

guard and Lamassu statue in the painting's bottom right. As a portrait painting, the work

demonstrates keen attentiveness to the textures of bodily flesh, historic artifacts, and

visual modes that alternate between realism and abstraction.

Soon after she completed "The Guard," the first Gulf War began and Malallah's

work and interest in abstraction were propelled by exposure to warfare and destruction in

Iraq from 1990 onwards. Grappling with the impact of the war and its subsequent effects

on an entire generation of artists, Hanaa Malallah states, "Why does this generation, born

in this environment and from such a profoundly rich civilization so clearly prefer cryptic

symbolism to the representation of figural elements in their art?"[369] Such a symbolic and

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[369] Quoted in "Consciousness of Isolation," in *Contemporary Iraqi Art: Strokes of Genius*, ed. Maysaloun Faraj (London: Saqi Books, 2001), 65.

definitive turn towards abstractive modes and processes in Malallah's artistic practice can be seen in an "Untitled" painting produced after Operation Desert Storm in the second year of the war, when coalition bombing systematically decimated Iraq's civilian infrastructure (**Figure 4.15**).[370] In the canvas composition, crossing square grids with intersecting diagonal lines are sketched across the entire flat surface. Across the lower half of the painting two large holes burned partially through the painting's dimensions are surrounded by scorched edges and radiating blackened aureoles, as another burned oval appears filled with black tar. White, gray, orange, and black pigments are applied in mirrored diamond halves to the canvas's background grid, and filling some of the squares with small to larger dots. Through this painting we see traces of Shakir Hasan's abstract techniques, including interest in marks of lines and dots, abstractive systems, and burning processes.

Hanaa Malallah's abstract artistic practice was also infused with careful observation and close study of ancient Mesopotamian wall and fabric patterns.[371] The geometric grid patterning supporting the backdrop in this and other abstract paintings she produced in the 1990s is derived from Malallah's study (and eventual research focus for her Fine Arts PhD) of ancient Sumerian, Assyrian, and Akkadian graphic systems and decorative schemes. Specific diamond grid and rhombus patterns can be seen in many

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[370] On the sociopolitical ramifications and lasting detrimental effects of Saddam Husayn's invasion of Kuwait on Iraqi communities, see Tareq Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael "Whither Iraq? Beyond Saddam, Sanctions, and Occupation," *Third World Quarterly* 46 no. 4-5 (2005): 609-629. For an analysis of postwar destruction on visual culture and public spaces, see Mona Hadler, "Ephemerality and Creative Destruction in the Public Space." In *Destruction Rites: Ephemerality and Demolition in Postwar Visual Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 127-167.
[371] See Eleanor Guralnick, "Neo-Assyrian Patterned Fabrics," *Iraq* 66, *Nineveh: Papers of the 49th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale: Part One* (2004): 221-232.

examples of ancient Mesopotamian walls and architectural facades,[372] including the same

Warka Temple where inscribed tablets supplied Shakir Hasan with visual ideas for his

own practice. During the war, before she began exploring the demolished urban

landscapes of Baghdad as part of her work, Malallah created a temporary installation

project inside the National Museum of Iraq titled "Warka Temple" (**Figure 4.16**).

Displayed in part of the ancient Mesopotamian gallery, the artist's installation recreated

part of the destroyed Warka archeological site remade through grid patterns in colored

plaster and canvas. Reconstituting an ancient wall as a contemporary artwork suggests

her ongoing interest in historic artifacts and remediation through her artmaking processes.

After the war and ongoing international sanctions levied against Iraqi civilians

limited artistic supplies of pigments and canvas, Malallah turned to harvesting found

materials born out of the destruction and violence in the city (including ongoing missile

strikes and bombing campaigns throughout the 1990s). Thus, rather than use burning as a

material technique to alter the structure of two-dimensional painting and reveal its

intrinsic space, Malallah gathered materials as readymade objects already bearing the

marks of loss and destruction with which to construct artworks. Her 1992 collage work

entitled "Bus Tickets Saved During Sanctions" (**Figure 4.17**) offers strands of such

archival practices by visualizing life under the effects of sanctions through stamped

public transportation receipts. Solid black squares pasted onto the collage along with

other markings and a black hatch replicate graphic markings derived from ancient

Mesopotamian patterns. The work as a whole suggests creative ways in which artistic

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[372] For specific examples of Warka temple walls and architectural decorative patterns, see Anton
Moortgat, *The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia: The Classical Art of the Near East*, trans. J. Fillson
(Phaidon: London and New York, 1969), 16-19. I am grateful to Margaret Root for this reference.

worldmaking—even under restrictive sanctions—can generate new engagements with historical heritage through unexpected, everyday materials.

After Hanaa Malallah finally fled Iraq in 2007, moving first to Amman and then London, she again continued working with burning and similar destruction artmaking techniques but through a new constructive process (**Figure 4.18**). Once she left Iraq, she began manipulating fire herself to produce burnt textiles and oxidized materials for constructing her works. She describes this practice as her "Ruins Technique," of which she states:

> It is well known that the technical aspects of my practice include the burning, distressing and obliteration of material: I have terms this Ruins Technique. Clearly, this technique owes its existence to the lethal face of war. This does not mean that I am reproducing the idea of war. Instead, I am utilizing the intrinsically destructive process to engender the visceral experience of the reality of war irrespective of its geographic or political particular."[373]

Using fire and incineration as raw material, Malallah uses olive oil (one of Iraq's main exports before sanctions) or other flammable substances to burn plain white cloths with her bare hands.[374] She then sews, loosely stitches, or adheres the charred segments into soft sculptures or large sculptural canvas objects. Designating this process as one of ruination links her previous experiences with the aftermath of Baghdad's war bombings and urban devastation, and with Shakir Hasan's instilled emphasis on the mediation of ancient and religious heritage, to the clarity and distance gained from Iraq's wars and violence in her new London-based studio.

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[373] Hanaa Malallah, Christa Paula, and Mo Throp, *Hanaa Malallah: 5.50.1.1.40.1.30.1.30.30.5* (London: Struktur Design Ltd., 2018).

[374] Hanaa Malallah has received bodily injuries through her artistic practice of the "ruins technique." Along with singed fingertips, she eventually invested in a gas mask as she was suffering from hot smoke inhalation damage to her lungs. Interview with Hanaa Malallah, July 11, 2017.

One example of this process, titled "Illuminated Ruins," demonstrates how Malallah transfers modernist processes of destruction into a multidimensional and conceptual composite structure (**Figure 4.19**). Taking burnt fabric layers, and tightly rolling them into spools or cylinders, she presents a woven panel or ominous façade of alternating beige and blackened canvas. Each roll stitched into the composition hints at hidden knowledge contained in a moldering scroll, or the deteriorated surface of one of Malallah's highly regarded ancient Mesopotamian artifacts and wall panels unearthed from underground. Dangling threads between the textile fragments suggest the loose structural hold and vulnerability of the material assembly, while the coils of white string falling below the frame's edge could foreshadow its unraveling (or that of the fabric of Iraqi society). A fluorescent bulb placed in the center of the artwork radiates light across the scorched textures and introduces a separate form of continuous energy discharge into an accumulation of partially decayed materials. Finally, the light source contrasts with the combustive cloths as a dynamic continuum between fire and light, or the stubborn radiance of creation against the darkness of destruction.

This creative symbolism engendered through destructive practices is made even more explicit in a similar textile construction titled "A Moment of Light" (2015), where a glass prism alternatingly reflects the entire color spectrum of light and close-up looking reveals the contrasting surfaces and light reflectivity within the woven structure (**Figure 4.20**). Both works of burned textiles and mounted light sources indicate a new symbolic practice building upon the conceptual frameworks in Shakir Hasan Al Said's practice. With artistic processes of burning, trace making, mediation of historic artifacts and traditions, and abstract representational modes via the temporal and spatial grounds of the

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art object, these works produced through Hanaa Malallah's "Ruins Technique" share clear allegorical links to Shakir Hasan Al Said's "One Dimension" manifesto. Through her teacher's formative template, Malallah also brought her own specific experiences and spiritual worldview into her artistic practice. Sharing an awareness of materiality as an "avenue to the spiritual," Malallah has explained how her own religious upbringing influenced her visual interests, stating: "My childhood was spent in a Shiʻite social environment where the pictorial depiction of the passion play of Karbala and Imam Husayn martyrdom were the first images I saw, influencing me deeply."[375] The allegorical imagery and reenacts of the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD, where the Prophet Muhammad's grandson and his followers were killed near the Euphrates riverbank in modern-day southern Iraq, played a pivotal role in Malallah's continual use of black as symbolically-laden visual matter, whether culled from ancient Mesopotamian patterning or sepulchral imagery in Islamic cultural traditions. Blackened material produced by temporal decay or corporeal destruction thereby infuses formal readings of Malallah's conceptual worldmaking with specifically Iraqi Shiʻi visual culture and allegorical tradition. However, her processes of destruction in terms of challenging the iconicity of an abstract monochromatic artwork into a nonprecious and haptic object.[376]

In another example of Hanaa Malallah's "Ruins Technique," titled "Happened in the Dawn," renewed access to oil paints in the artist's London-based practice is put to illuminating effect as the pigments depict a sunrise horizon over a ghostly gray foreground (**Figure 4.21**). Referring to the fallout of an infamous early morning aerial

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[375] Quoted in *Contemporary Iraqi Art: Strokes of Genius* (London: Saqi Books, 2001) ed. Maysaloun Faraj, 66.

[376] Marta Jecu's "Relics as New Monuments: Destroyed Painting/Les peintures détruites, ou les reliques en tant que nouveaux monuments," (2012): 44.

attack during the 2003 U.S. Invasion of Iraq, the textile painting composition viscerally recreates a scene of physical annihilation through materials generated through the destructive material processes of combustion. Chaotic fragments of scorched taupe-colored linen are applied to the canvas in overlapping layers. Each charred edge or hole brings a textured depth or prismatic quality to the otherwise monochromatic plain cloth wall. Black soot is then outlined over the composed fabrics to suggest shapes and figural apparitions to the abstract surface. At least one of these black tracings seems to echo a ghostly image floating within the burnt landscape, as the specter of a visage appears out of scorched traces. Oftentimes the longer one looks at one of Malallah's contemporary "ruins" works, the more phantoms the viewer can find.

Along with directly referring to a devastating neighborhood bombing in the twilight hours of a dawn morning in April 2003, "Happened in the Dawn" also points to the funerary process in Muslim societies after such a fatal event. Wrapped up in the center of the canvas in stained (or aged) cloth with black thread is a small fabric bundle filled with twigs and bird bones, or remnants of once living earthly beings. Birds provide a frequent subject and allegorical symbol in Malallah's artistic practice (including her other paintings, drawings, and sculptural works). The hoopoe bird is one of the artist's especially common motifs due to its sacrality in Islamic religious and poetic traditions in representations of death and rebirth. Malallah collected similar ephemeral materials along with other found objects for her artworks before she left Baghdad, yet here the presence of once living flora and fauna transforms the fabric bundle into a miniature funerary shroud (*kafan*) used in mourning ceremonies for burying the dead in Islamic societies.

The soft sculpture thus encapsulates the vast scope of the dawn catastrophe into a single entombment.

Through the beige textiles of canvas, linen, or cotton, Malallah purposefully invokes the plain white cloth of burial shrouds used for the deceased in Islamic cultures. The endless need of these fabrics due to Iraqi civilian casualties in the first and second Gulf Wars may in fact be how she first arrived at the idea of working with textiles. Her series of works from 2014 titled "Shroud" makes explicit the material signification of bodily trace through her "Ruins Technique" of layering the canvas frame with burnt linen, in an additive and sculptural method somewhat reminiscent to encasing a human body in cloth (**Figure 4.22**). Specific funerary practices within Islamic traditions, which are in part retained from ancient Mesopotamian burial traditions, involve washing the body (*ghusl al-mayit*), shrouding the corpse (*takfin al-mayit*), supplicatory prayers (*du'a*), and burial (*ikram al-mayyit*), are all believed to help the deceased journey into the isthmus (*barzakh*) between the temporal realm and eternal afterlife, and is considered an important responsibility (*fard kifaya*) across Muslim communities.[377] Textile preferences for the burial shroud include clean, white, and scented cloth made of plain linen or silk, so that all who journey before God are equal.[378] While thread is not commonly used to stitch together the funerary wrapping, the body's toes are often bound together by a

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[377] Chaïma Ahaddour, Stef Van den Branden, and Bert Broeckaert, "Purification of Body and Soul for the Next Journey: Practices Surrounding Death and Dying Among Muslim Women" *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying* 76, no. 2 (2017): 172-173.

[378] See Gatrad, "Muslim Customs Surrounding Death, Bereavement, Postmortem Examinations, and Organ Transplants," *British Medical Journal* 309, no. 6953 (August 20-27, 1994): 500-501; Chaïma Ahaddour, Stef Van den Branden, and Bert Broeckaert, "Purification of Body and Soul for the Next Journey: Practices Surrounding Death and Dying Among Muslim Women" (2017): 174; Th. Bianquiz, "Kafan," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman, et al., (Brill Online: 2012); "Burial and Belonging," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 15, no. 1 (2015): 120-134.

thread. Here, in Hanaa Malallah's "Shroud," the cauterized textiles are arranged in

rectilinear segments, hinting at the systematic grids Malallah used in her earliest abstract

paintings, as though the indiscriminate turmoil of death can be contained through the

ritual stages of bereavement.

The sepulchral symbolism of Islamic mysticism also opens up the metaphorical

potential of Hanaa Malallah's "ruins technique" as artmaking.[379] In Sufi practices, death

is not an endpoint but only an advanced transformational point into a new mode of being

in the invisible next world. Such symbolism parallels portions of Shakir Hasan Al Said's

"One Dimension" philosophy of divesting the human self of material constraints in order

to obtain existence beyond the temporal (or pictorial) plane. And while the shroud does

not necessarily have allegorical content in Sufi intellectual history beyond referring to

death and burial, the grave itself "represents posthumous enlightenment, foreshadowing

eschatological retribution, corporeal resurrection, the doomsday and the hereafter"[380] of

an eternal realm. Significantly, bodies are not cremated in Islamic funerary traditions.

Malallah's incorporation of the burial shroud in her work creatively incorporates Sufi

transcendent worldviews through an everyday Muslim textile referent. Depositing

destroyed textiles and burning fluorescent lights into her contemporary constructions thus

suggests Malallah's intentional elicitation of Sufi Islamic allegories of mortality, burial,

and the intersection after death between two realms of "light and shadow."[381] Malallah's

artistic juncture of these sepulchral metaphors may carry especially potent symbolism in

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[379] For an extensive analysis of funereal symbolism in historic Sufi discourses, see Bronislav Ostransky, "The Sufi Journey to the Next World: Sepulchral Symbolism of Muslim Mystics, Its Context and Interpretations," *Archiv Orientální* 83, no. 3 (2015): 475-500.

[380] Bronislav Ostransky, "The Sufi Journey to the Next World: Sepulchral Symbolism of Muslim Mystics, Its Context and Interpretations," *ArOr* 83, no. 3 (2015): 489.

[381] Bronislav Ostransky, "The Sufi Journey to the Next World: Sepulchral Symbolism of Muslim Mystics, Its Context and Interpretations," *ArOr* 83, no. 3 (2015): 490.

the context of mass funerals necessitated by war and violent destruction in Iraqi society over the past thirty years.

Burial shrouds are not only significant in contemporary Muslim cultures, but represent a significant corpus in Islamic artistic heritage (**Figure 4.23**). Most famous within the art historical corpus are medieval *tiraz* textiles, or fabrics with inscribed or embroidered bands of benedictory or generic calligraphic Arabic text.[382] Predominantly produced by the Fatimid rulers in Cairo, and the Abbasid Empire in modern-day Iraq, the prized garments functioned as ceremonial gifts and were handed from rulers to their beneficiaries, and even traded between the rival Abbasid and Fatimid caliphates.[383] Valued for their luxury materials and protective inscriptions, which were believed to impart blessings (*baraka*) and aid in the deceased's journey to the afterworld, they were subsequently used as burial shrouds with the inscriptions laid over the face for maximum efficacy. Later these textile artifacts were discovered in such funerary contexts through early twentieth-century archaeological excavations, from which the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo and the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad enriched their historic collections.[384] These artifacts consequently contributed to the broad corpus of historic

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[382] Yedida Stillman, Paula Sanders, and Nasser Rabbat, "*Tirāz*," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman, et al, (Brill Online: 2012).

[383] See Jochen Sokoly, "Between Life and Death: The Funerary Context of Tiraz Textiles," *Islamische Textilkunst des Mittelalters: Aktuelle Probleme* (Riggisberg: Abegg-Stiftun, 1997): 71-78; Nancy Micklewright, *Tiraz* Fragments: Unanswered Questions about Medieval Islamic Textiles." In *Brocade of the Pen: The Art of Islamic Writing*, ed. Carol Garrett Fisher (East Lansing, Michigan: Kresge Art Museum, Michigan State University, 1991), 31-45; Paula Sanders, "Robes of Honor in Fatimid Egypt." In *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, ed. Stewart Gordon (Palgave, 2001), 225-239; Florence Day, "Dated Tirāz in the Collection of the University of Michigan," *Ars Islamica* 4 (1937): 420-447.

[384] See a photograph of one cemetery excavation in 1930s Cairo, in Jochen Sokoly, "Between Life and Death: The Funerary Context of Tiraz Textiles," 1997): 72.

artifacts and materials for Iraqi artists dynamically working with and responding to cultural and artistic heritage in their contemporary artmaking.[385]

Along with mediation of ancient Mesopotamian artifacts or contemporary funerary practices, the incorporation of burnt cloth into Hanaa Malallah's canvases constitutes another method of remediating medieval burial shrouds from the National Museum of Iraq's Islamic art collection into her contemporary textile artmaking. In a detail from one of the artist's "Shroud" textile works, an inserted found calligraphic inscription of yellow thread on green fabric resurrects the protective functions of historic inscriptions derived from *tiraz* textiles within a contemporary art context (**Figure 4.24**). As a calligraphic readymade in the burnt textile artwork, the green cloth fragment carries yellow embroidered calligraphy from the Qur'an.[386] The insertion echoes Rafa Nasiri's harvesting and insertions of 1960s Muharram block printed calligraphy banners in his mixed media experiments. Further instances of evoking sepulchral vestiges from inferred bodily traces of corpse decomposition exist in historic Abbasid or Fatimid-era textiles. One example can be seen in another medieval *tiraz* textile fragment, with the traces of two dark oval outlines in the cloths' right stained portion (**Figure 4.25**). As Jochen Sokoly has argued,

> The way many [medieval tiraz] fragments have decayed suggests contact with
> decomposed bodies. Large stained areas and areas where the textile structure has
> vanished suggest that the textiles were in contact with organic fluids resulting
> from human decomposition, which speeded up the textiles' decomposition
> process…Sometimes we may even be able to reconstruct the way a textile was
> wrapped around parts of the body from looking at the distribution of decomposed
> areas in the textile. Where, for example, little holes are alternating intact areas we

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[385] See Nada Shabout *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997), 28.

[386] The partial line of the embroidered calligraphy is an excerpt from Sura 5 of the Qu'ran, verse 55. See Ahmed Ali, *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 105.

may be dealing with a piece once wrapped around a head in which case the inscription may have been placed right over the eyes.[387]

The visceral traces of death, shrouding, and burial in medieval tiraz textiles and their apotropaic uses are thus mediated into the vivid worldmaking in Hanaa Malallah's burnt fabric traces. Overall, the material and immaterial bodily traces in historic textile artifacts are harnessed and deployed through the artist's "ruins technique" to help signify the tragic losses of life and cultural heritage in contemporary Iraq.[388] In one sense, Hanaa Malallah's practice deployed Shakir Hasan Al Said's conceptual groundwork in destructive processes of abstract modernist painting to engage with and, conversely, negate the material effects of cultural destruction through visualization and remediation of Islamic cultural heritage.

Hanaa Malallah is not the only artist actively recuperating Iraq's lost and destroyed artistic heritage through her contemporary practice. Since the devastation of many museums during the 2003 U.S. Invasion, including the National Museum of Iraq,[389] and the thousands of looted artifacts and artworks from ancient to modern times still missing, the preservation and remediation of historic objects and critical heritage remains

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[387] Jochen A. Sokoly, "Between Life and Death: The Funerary Context of Tiraz Textiles," 73-4.
[388] For an overview of the explicit targeting of cultural heritage sites and repositories during both the 2003 U.S. War and ongoing violence and destruction in contemporary Iraq, see Nabil al-Tikriti, Negligent Mnemocide and the Shattering of Iraqi Collective Memory." In *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned, and Academics Murdered*, eds. Raymond W. Baker, et al. (Pluto Press, 2009), 93-115; Eric Garcia, "The Destruction of a Cultural Heritage: With Reference to the Problems of Iraq," *New Library World* 108, no. 7/8 (2007): 354-369; Caitlin Hill, "Killing a Culture: The Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq and Syria under International Law," *International & Comparative Literature* 45 (2016): 191-220; Pamela Karimi and Nasser Rabbat, "The Demise and Afterlife of Artifacts," *Aggregate* (2016): 1-24; Geoff Emberling and Lucas Pieter Petit, eds., *Museums and the Ancient Middle East: Curatorial Practice and Audiences* (New York: Routledge, 2019).
[389] The U.S. military notoriously only stood guard outside the Ministry of Oil during the first few days of the invasion, until public Iraqi and international outcry of ongoing looting at the National Museum prompted U.S. forces to arrive and stand guard at the museum.

of utmost urgency to many artists.[390] After the infamous 2014 images of ISIS militants smashing ancient statues and drilling the eyes of a Lamassu in the Mosul Museum went viral, many artists created new works depicting and attempting to visually mitigate the iconoclastic act (**Figure 4.26**). Lebanese contemporary artist Abed Al Kadiri turned to the same historic al-Wasiti manuscripts paintings espoused by Iraqi artists Jewad Salim and Shakir Hasan Al Said, and rendered the premodern Abbasid chronicle's characters in large-scale oil and charcoal paintings, titled "*Al Maqama*," or also known as the "Mosul Compendium" or "Mosul Stories" (**Figure 4.27**). The large-scale, richly textured painting depicts colorful figures and scenes adapted from the thirteenth-century manuscript of al-Hariri's *Maqamat* by Yahya al-Wasiti, and rendered in contemporary oil paint and charcoal.[391] The historic Islamic pictorial heritage dominates the pictorial space across the painting, as figures ride camels across a grayscale background of charcoal sketched images depicting ISIS-sponsored acts of destruction. These juxtapositions between historic Islamic art heritage and contemporary visual culture, and wet oil paint and dry charcoal mediums, suggest the devastation of Mosul is only the most recent in Iraq's long and vibrant artistic history that continues to endure.

Destruction in Abed Al Kadiri's paintings thus becomes evidence of the temporary nature of iconoclastic violence in contrast to the infinite potential imaginary residing in artistic engagements with cultural heritage. As Wendy Bellion notes,

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[390] Zainab Bahrani states: "The museum of modern art in Baghdad has been destroyed, its collection looted. The strong Modernist and postcolonial tradition created by mid-twentieth-century artists at the end of British control and the declaration of the new state of Iraq is a history that has been erased from the archives of Iraq's past." See Bahrani, "Modernism and Iraq" in *Modernism and Iraq* (New York: Columbia University, 2009), 21.
[391] The visual and physical trace of the dry charcoal will fade and slowly disappear over time. Abed Al Kadiri elaborated on his intentional choice of working with the medium in an interview with the author, July 23, 2018.

destruction in terms of contemporary artmaking, "is an umbrella term for a diverse array of artistic tactics and techniques: smashing, slashing, wiping, and igniting, to name just a few. The art history of destruction is also a history of making (and, in the case of iconoclasm, of remaking things from the places and pieces left behind)."[392] The destruction of the ancient Lamassu in the Mosul Museum did not truly annihilate the sculptures. Instead, destruction "tends to reify the cultural significance of the things destroyed and to beget new iconographies and artistic genres."[393] As seen throughout this chapter, destruction can be a generative and productive process, and in the case of iconoclasm a destroyed physical object is dispersed into new materialities. For example, last year American-Iraqi artist Michael Rakowitz unveiled public commission in London's Trafalgar Square attests to the ability of art to transcend a temporal dimension of devastation. He recreated one of the Lamassu out of date syrup tin cans (another of Iraq's important natural resource and export like olive oil) (**Figure 4.28**). Likewise, Mahmoud Obaidi's 2015 recreation of a Lamassu and other ancient architectural artifacts in the back of a pickup truck demonstrates that the destroyed sculptures and cultural heritage of Iraq are truly on the move in contemporary art practices (**Figure 4.29**). Obaidi's artistic act of reconstituting the bull in steel eternalizes the ancient statue in contemporary structural material that can withstand the test of time, while simultaneously turning it into a commodity that can be picked up and hauled elsewhere.

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[392] Wendy Bellion, "Commentaries: Art and Destruction," *American Art* (Spring 2017): 3.
[393] Wendy Bellion, "Commentaries: Art and Destruction," (2017), 4.

Conclusion: The Future of Heritage Destruction

By exploring the creative worldmaking and Islamic heritage engagements in

Shakir Hasan Al Said and Hanaa Malallah's artistic practices, destructive art processes

emerge as both historically rich and generationally linked in contemporary Iraqi art.

Examining the cultural contexts and creative activities of these two artists demonstrates

the largely unexplored concepts of destruction and heritage as art historically and

contextually specific artmaking trajectories in contemporary Iraq, from the midcentury

art world to the present day. Both Hanaa Malallah and her teacher's paintings offer

prismatic and multidimensional abstractive worldmakings that engage in formal

conceptual art vocabularies while concurrently incorporating destructive processes into

artmaking.

Both artists also deploy these creative techniques in order to open the artwork into

different allegorical and symbolically rich traditions in Islamic history. While Shakir

Hasan Al Said was driven by his interest in Sufi intellectual traditions and conceptual

frameworks, Malallah's "Ruins Technique" artistic practice focuses more on the

symbolic representations of ancient, Islamic, and contemporary Iraqi heritage by

transposing those materials into her artworks. Her work transforms the decayed and

transient nature of ancient and historic artifacts into abstractive compositions. Through

her revitalization of historic artifacts and sepulchral symbolism, Malallah visualizes the

modern dialectic of warfare, violence, and destruction of artistic heritage through

material experiments and creative worldmaking in conceptually stimulating ways. Recent

experiments with science fiction imagery and future imaginings have also explored

destruction of Islamic cultural and religious heritage. These futuristic art practices address globalization and its transformations of contemporary landscapes into almost alien worlds of hyper industrialization and urbanization. As they traverse across time and space in the fifth chapter, these contemporary "Sci-Fi" artist engagements with popular Islamic heritage can wield historical symbolic matter to effectively imagine—and reimagine—a future Islamic cosmos.

Chapter 5 *Voyage to Tomorrow*: **Futuristic Imaginaries in Contemporary Arts and Islamic Heritage of the Middle East**

In the previous four chapters, I have traced modern and contemporary art engagements with Islamic traditions through popular folkloric and religious arts. Starting with contemporary artist engagements with popular Islamic heritage in late 1950s Iran and 1960s Iraq, midcentury artists contended with rising secular modernization policies and authoritarian repression. Certain artists, including Marcos Grigorian and Rafa Nasiri, maintained artistic research interests in researching and conserving vernacular folk art practices and traditions, as did later artists like Ali Jabri. Jabri's artifact mediation in his neo-realist preservationist practice in 1970s Amman speaks to artist concerns over the loss of multivocal popular religious traditions in increasingly sectarian nationalist identities and Islamist reform movements. Similar creative mediations of esoteric ritual practices appeared in the artworks of Shakir Hassan Al Said and Hanaa Malallah, as both artists engaged with Islamic mysticism as conceptual and material matrices to explore destruction as artmaking process. Inherent in all of these instances is a vitalized

engagement with images and materials from the past in order to contend with, negotiate, and convey the complex changes of everyday life in the twentieth-century Middle East.

Turning from historic engagements with the past to future imaginaries, this chapter examines modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art experiments with science fiction narratives and futuristic aesthetics. These otherworldly imaginings provide a mythologizing of the past and generate new understandings of the contemporary world and its possible futures. Through creative works generated from experiments with various aspects of science, technology, and cultural heritage in the Islamic world, artists survey the past for hidden or overlooked images, meanings, and materials in order to gesture towards new understandings of history that provide reconfigured signals for what the future may look like. As such, these modern and contemporary artworks metamorphose historically significant forms into futuristic aesthetics, utilize scientific and technological innovations, and provide another staging ground for creative mediations of Islamic heritage. By exploring these artworks through science fiction imaginings and futuristic aesthetics, this chapter pinpoints the multitude of ways artists engage with symbolic matter of the Islamic past in order to explore and venture into possible futures.

Speculative narratives, otherwise known as science fiction or the "literature of ideas,"[394] offer projected re-imaginings of human experience by depicting new or imaginary technologies, time and space travel, alien beings, and utopian or dystopian worlds. Besides literary works, science fiction imaginings offer artists visual tools to imagine—or reimagine—the world as it was, is, or will be. In science fiction history, the moon plays a formative role leading up to and during the international lunar space race,

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[394] See Pamela Sargent, *Women of Wonder: Science Fiction Stories by Women about Women* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974); Pamela Sargent, "A Sci-Fi Case History," *Science Fiction Studies* 24, no. 2 (1997): 256-261.

including in the Islamic world. Navigating the ways in which artists in the Middle East pivot between historic engagements to ventures into futuristic imagery with the moon and other cosmic symbolism demonstrates how Islamic visual traditions of the celestial heavens have served as a creative springboard into contemporary artmaking processes and image practices. Through technological innovations and scientific narratives, artist experiments with science fiction imaginings offer enriched understandings of the primacy of historic materials in shaping visual culture landscapes and even projecting future realities of the contemporary Middle East.[395]

The Cosmic *Nun*

With the advent of modernist art movements in different eras and transnational projects in the Islamic world, artists began to more freely experiment with the signs, symbols, and materials of Islamic heritage in modern artworks. Foremost among these is the crescent moon, which became an adaptable modernist shape in the abstractive paintings of artists including Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi (b. 1930) and Iraqi artist Jawad Selim (1921-1961). Readily recognizable in Islamic architectural and religious symbolism, the crescent arch offered mid-twentieth-century artists the opportunity to

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[395] As futurist and cultural critic Ziauddin Sardar notes, "The problems of contemporary Islamic society – the problems of gender, the problems of authoritarianism – all of these are explored very thoroughly in Arab sci-fi. But most importantly of all, it is Arabs reflecting on themselves." See Lydia Green, "Close Encounters of the Arab Kind," *BBC News* (9 Oct 2013): https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403002; Yasmin Khan, "Arab Science Fiction Shines Light on Current Middle East Themes," *The National* (10 Nov 2013): https://www.thenational.ae/arab-science-fiction-shines-light-on-current-middle-east-themes-1.296481

create artworks with specifically Islamic cultural resonances within a larger, global modern landscape.

For example, El-Salahi's painting "The Last Sound" (1964) inserts the lunar crescent among other celestial bodies and calligraphic signs as a way of depicting African Muslim mourning rites and concepts of a dying person's passage from the corporeal to celestial realm (**Figure 5.1**).[396] Born to a Muslim cleric, El-Salahi grew up exposed to Qur'anic calligraphic scripts and he maintained an artistic interest in popular Islamic motifs like the crescent and arabesque.[397] Given historic comparisons of the Arabic *nun*, or canoe-shaped "n" letter, to the crescent moon in Islamic poetic and calligraphic traditions, the appearance here of point-filled arching *nun* shapes comingling with astronomic spheres and vaulting archways suggests El Salahi harnessed multiple emblematic traditions of the crescent image and projected them into a cosmic imaginary. The moon, or celestial *nun*, in "The Last Sound" becomes both a visual and vocal vehicle in El Salahi's painting to transport viewers into an allegorical journey across life and death, and into a symbolic cosmos beyond the corporeal world.

As we have seen in his previous artistic engagements with the crescent, Jawad Selim composed the lunar image across his painted canvases and three-dimensional works as a primary graphic element for crafting images like palm trees, watermelon slices, and human faces out of the polyvalent historic sign.[398] For Selim's 1954 sculptural

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[396] Iftikhar Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi and Calligraphic Modernism in Comparative Perspective," *South Atlantic Quarterly* v. 106, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 555-557. See also Salah Hassan's discussion of El Salahi's 1963 painting "Funeral and a Crescent" along with "The Last Sound," in Hassan, "Ibrahim El Salahi," *Nka* (Fall/Winter 1998): 28-33.

[397] Hassan, "Ibrahim El Salahi," (1998): 31.

[398] For discussion of these "hilaliat" or crescent forms in Jawad Salim's oeuvre, see Nizar Salim, *Iraqi Contemporary Art: Vol. 1 Painting* (Lausanne, Switzerland: 1977): 105-110, and Nada

work "Motherhood," the clay form uses the crescent arc as a symbolic three-dimensional vessel for the conception and gestation of life (**Figure 5.2**).[399] A black-and-white photographic reproduction of "Motherhood" from a 1968 retrospective exhibition catalog presents the sculpture as though it simultaneously rests on and constitutes the surface of the moon, while enveloping the hanging spherical seed within its inner arc. Rendering it as a distant orbiting body, the 1968 catalog photograph captures the artwork's shadowy cratered surface and small dangling orb in a similar photographic angle to the world's first photograph of earth taken from vicinity of the moon by the 1966 NASA Lunar Orbiter 1 spacecraft. The photographic perspective even anticipates the "Earthrise" photograph taken by Apollo 8 astronaut Bill Anders at the end of 1968.[400]

Linking concepts of human creation to the semi-circular form, for "Motherhood" Selim turned to Iraqi cultural histories of the Fertile Crescent as one of propagation and growth. With the 1954 sculpture, wide-ranging allusions from ancient Mesopotamian fertility goddess sculptures to modernist ideologies of the "motherland" in nation-state building show that "the symbolism embodied in motherhood creates a link between the past, present, and future" of Iraq.[401] Selim's temporally infused crescent thus traverses time and space mobilized by its latent representational modes. The sphere, or star, floating from the arc's tip into the curving sculptural interior likewise carries the Arabic

Shabout, "On Abstraction and Symbolism: Jewad Selim," in *Forever Now: Five Anecdotes from the Permanent Collection* (Doha: Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, 2012): 71-74.

[399] "Jewad Selim at the National Museum of Modern Art," exhibition catalog (Baghdad: January 1968), 9. See also Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, *Jawad Saleem wa-Nusb al-Hurriyya* (Baghdad: Wizarat al-Iʻlam, 1974): 54.

[400] Otherwise known as "the most influential environment photograph ever taken." See Benjamin Lazier, "Earthrise; or, The Globalization of the World Picture," *The American Historical Review* (June 2011): 602-630.

[401] Nada Shabout, "On Abstraction and Symbolism: Jewad Selim," in *Forever Now: Five Anecdotes from the Permanent Collection* (Doha: Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, 2012): 73.

letter *nun* into another referential layer. Here, the *nun* pays tribute to Islamic lettrist thought, which posits that all letters of the Arabic alphabet include mystical dimensions.[402] In chapter 68 of the Qur'an, i.e., *Surat al-Qalam* (also known as *Surat al-Nun*), the holy text praises the letter *nun* at the same time as it invokes the generative pen of God. Over the centuries, the *nun* was thought to bear affinities with the primordial inkwell and progenitor point (*nuqta*) from God's cosmological pen, which created the entire universe and mankind. Selim's "Motherhood" and its celestial symbolism can thus be seen as lending a cosmic radiance and potent creator's mark to "Motherhood" and its cosmic, realized *nun*.

Besides the layered cultural aspects of the moon in Islamic history, the crescent also carries potent symbolism in diverse religious beliefs in Iraq, including the gnostic Mandaean faith where the moon and its crescent represent growth, fertility, and abundant vegetation.[403] Selim's interests in the nation-state of Iraq's religious folk heritage suggest the artist's moon visuals purposefully draw Iraqis' diverse popular practices into a single coalesced work of the lunar arch. Together, Selim and El Salahi's artworks educe celestial symbolism in transnational modernist forms in order to generate conceptually affective images of life and death, while voyaging towards cosmic imaginaries and future visual horizons of outer space.

Both these and other examples of modernist art experiments with the crescent moon and celestial *nun* point to the varied ways artists have transformed Islamic visual heritage through cosmic and mythic imaginings of Islamic traditions. Such reworkings of

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[402] See Annemarie Schimmel, "Calligraphy and Mysticism," in *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1984): 77-114.
[403] See E.S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran: Their Cults, Customs, Magic Legends, and Folklore* (Leiden: Brill, 1962): 230-231.

Islamic history and mythologies are not limited to artists residing in Middle Eastern

nation states. In his study of Black Muslim mythologies and science fiction narratives in

the United States, Yusuf Nuruddin argues: "The literature of science fiction with its

robots, mutated humans, spaceships, and aliens provided imaginative transcendence in a

language that was consistent with modernity"[404] along with all its hazards and

discontents. While studies of the expansive Afrofuturism movement and its cultural

aesthetics, vernacular futurologies, and political philosophies have addressed aspects of

Islam in African and diasporic communities, less has been written about the cosmic

possibilities in historically Muslim societies in the Middle East.[405] Yet contemporary

artist worldmaking with popular Islamic heritage can rework everyday materials to reveal

new symbolic realms, and journey into new cosmic imaginaries of the Middle East.

Voyage to Tomorrow

Known in Arabic as *al-khayal al-'ilmi* or "scientific imagination," the history of

science fiction is one of popular cultural practices and literary lineages with deep roots in

Islamic civilizations.[406] Fantasy tales and mythic narratives, such as stories in *One*

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[404] Yusuf Nuruddin, "Ancient Black Astronauts and Extraterrestrial Jihads: Islamic Science Fiction as Urban Mythology," *Socialism and Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2006): 133.

[405] As Kodwo Eshun argues, "Afrofuturism is by no means celebratory," as Nation of Islam eschatology combines "a racialized account of human origin with a catastrophic theory of time." These and other competing worldviews in futurist movements often stem from political moments. See Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 296-297.

[406] The Arabic translation of science fiction as the specific phrase *al-khayal al-'ilmi* points to the genre as one of both scientific and religious mystical knowledge. See Ian Campbell, "Arabic SF: Definitions and Origins," in *Arabic Science Fiction* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan,

Thousand and One Nights of imagined technologies and quests for lost civilizations, or

ʿ*ajaʾib* ("marvels") literature between the sixth and twelfth centuries, reverberate in

modern science fiction.[407] The thirteenth-century writer, astronomer, and physician

Zakariya al-Qazwini penned the famous cosmography ʿ*Ajaʾib al-makhluqat wa-gharaʾib*

al-mawjudat ("Marvelous Things of Creation and Wondrous Things of Existence") in

Abbasid-era Baghdad, as well as the proto-science-fiction tale *Awaj bin anfaq* about a

man who journeyed to earth from another faraway planet.[408] Some of these premodern

tales propagated into modernist writings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century

Middle East, particularly in Egyptian literary forms including radio broadcasts, theater,

and cultural arts magazines. Egyptian writer Youssef Ezeddin Eassa (1914-1999)

popularized science fiction radio broadcasts in the 1940s, and is considered a pioneering

voice in modern Arabic science fiction.[409] Another prominent Egyptian science fiction

writer, Mustafa Mahmud (1921-2009), produced several landmark novels including the

1965 novella *Al-Ankabut* ("The Spider"). This and other works helped inspire a new

generation of science fiction writers.

2018), 47, and Reuven Snir, "The Emergence of Science Fiction in Arabic Literature," *Islam: Zeitschrift fur Geschichte und Kultur des Islamischen Orients* (2000): 263.
[407] Katarína Kobzošová, "Traces of the *Thousand and One Nights* in Tawfiq al-Hakim's Works," *Asian and African Studies* (2014): 173-191; Muhammad Aurangzeb Ahmad, "This is the Muslim Tradition of Sci-Fi and Speculative Fiction," *Aeon* (27 June 2017): https://aeon.co/ideas/think-sci-fi-doesnt-belong-in-the-muslim-world-think-again.
[408] See Dominic Negrici, "Grinding Mankind's Hopes and Fears for Free: An Attempt to Reposition Science Fiction as a Cultural Vocation," *New Europe College Yearbook* (2013): 371; Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey, *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1998): 65.
[409] Bhargav Rani, "Science Fiction in the Arab World: Tawfiq al-Hakim's Voyage to Tomorrow" (Spring 2015): 2.

Yet the preeminent figure in modern Arabic science fiction is Egyptian playwright and writer Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987) (**Figure 5.3**).[410][411] While his most famous publication is the 1957 play *Voyage to Tomorrow* (*Rihlatun ilal-Ghad*) featuring interstellar time travel into a dystopian future, several of his other works center on narratives and perceptions of the moon in the modernist imaginary of the Middle East.[412] Following the 1969 NASA *Apollo 11* landing on the moon, and five subsequent U.S. manned-missions to the lunar surface (1969-1972), al-Hakim published several works dealing with the moon as an inhabited world. For instance, in his short story *Taqrir Qamari* ("Moon Account"), aliens on the moon observe humans on earth, while the play *Sha'ir ala al-Qamar* ("Poet on the Moon"), written in 1972, uses the lunar landscape as a metaphoric stage for critically assessing the role of art in society. Through science fiction narratives, Tawfiq al-Hakim and other writers conjured stories on the moon while critiquing various sociopolitical issues, including humanity's relationship to nature, religion, philosophy, authoritarianism, warfare, and the potential impacts and consequences of scientific advancements on the world's environments.

As al-Hakim and other twentieth-century Middle East science fiction authors reached towards such speculative heights and projected futures, modernist print publications commemorated their voyages across the cultural imagination with out-of-

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[410] Untitled engraved print author portrait of Tawfiq al-Hakim set in outer space with the planet Saturn, reproduced in *al-Qasr al-Mashur* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1972), page 161.

[411] See Richard Long, "Tawfiq Al-Hakim: Playwright of Egypt," (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1979); Pierre Cachia, "Idealism and Ideology: The Case of Tawfiq al-Hakim," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (1980): 225-235; William M. Hutchins, "The Theology of Tawfiq al-Hakim: An Exposition with Examples," *Muslim World* (1988): 243-279.

[412] Akhmedov Rafael Sharifovich, "*Voyage to Tomorrow*: Modern Arabic Science Fiction," *Arabic Language, Literature & Culture* (2018): 37-42.

this-world graphic designs and kitschy covers typical of science fiction pulp cover arts.[413]

English science fiction author Brian Aldiss describes these futuristic fantasy images as

intentionally dislocating, stating "it may look strange at first – it was designed to look

strange – yet the pictures in the magazines grew from the pictorial heritage of the past

and from the immediate cultural environment."[414] One example in the context of the

Middle East can be found in Syrian science fiction writer Talib 'Umran's (b. 1948) 1985

novel *Khalfa hajiz al-zaman* ("Beyond the Veil of Time"). The sci-fi book cover depicts

a futuristic silver spaceship with spindly, bent legs hovering in front of a sunset horizon

(**Figure 5.4**). Designed by Syrian artist Anwar al-Rahbi (b. 1957), the cover illustration

contrasts the romantic realism of a pastoral landscape with the otherworldliness of the

two main characters' spacecraft bound for the planet "Love Moon."[415] Moreover, for

'Umran's 1983 publication *Laysa fi al-qamar fuqara'* ("The Moon is Not Poor"), the

famous Syrian graphic designer Abdul-Qadir Arna'ut (1936-1992) created an understated

cover with the moon as a flat white circle in a blue color field dotted with five-point stars

(**Figure 5.5**). Both books use the moon and celestial heavens as a setting for futuristic

tales; they also offer two cover art possibilities for the otherwise uncharted history of

Middle Eastern science fiction illustrations.

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[413] Besides studies of "Techno-Orientalism" and sci-fi pulp fantasy images of the Middle East for Western audiences, research remains to be conducted on popular science fiction illustrations in Islamic art history. For surveys of American and British sci-fi illustrations, see Jacques Sadoul, *2000 A.D.: Illustrations from the Golden Age of Science Fiction Pulps* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1973); Anthony Frewin, *One Hundred Years of Science Fiction Illustrations 1840-1940* (London: Jupiter Books, 1974); Brian Aldiss, *Science Fiction Art: The Fantasies of SF* (New York: Bounty Books, 1975).

[414] Aldiss, *Science Fiction Art* (1975): 3.

[415] Ian Campbell discusses 'Umran's 1985 novel as one of the earliest instances of Arabic science fiction tropes merging with Sufi literary traditions, where a romantic relationship serves as a metaphor for mystical union with the divine. See *Arabic Science Fiction* (2018): 253-275.

Beyond literary arts, the exploratory nature of science fiction also filtered into modern political projects. After coming to power in 1956, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's (1918-1970) state-sponsored propaganda envisioned Pan-Arabism and socialist politics would enable Middle East nations to participate in the international space race and journey to the moon. In January 1958 the Cairo-based *Al-Hilal* ("The Crescent") cultural magazine produced a special issue on "The Moon Epoch" (*'Asr al-qamar*).[416] Included in the special lunar-themed publication was an article entitled, "Men of Letters Outdistanced the Scientists to the Planets" (*Udaba' sabaqu al-'ulama' ila al-kawakib*), featuring photographic portraits of H.G. Wells and Edmond Rostand, and fantasy illustrations of moon-bound spacecraft ("*safina*") (**Figure 5.6**).[417] Lebanese artist Marwa Arsanios (b. 1978) reproduced the 1958 magazine spread in her 2012 artist book "Words as Silence, Language as Rhymes," as part of her ongoing project with Nasserist-era *Al-Hilal* issues. In her archival work, Arsanios traverses through multiple temporalities to critique the failed promises in Egypt's state-sponsored modernist rhetoric of social progress and women's emancipation via technological advances. She scans, cuts, and reassembles *Al-Hilal* pages into new narrative arrangements, and reveals hidden possibilities from the midcentury Arab world.[418] By re-editing 1950s print media and

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[416] Founded in 1892, *Al-Hilal* magazine is considered the oldest continuously produced cultural and literary arts journal in the Arab world; after Nasser's nationalization of the Egyptian press, it became a state media platform.

[417] For similar examples of science fiction illustrations of spherical spacecraft and weapons, see Steven Eisler, *Space Wars: Worlds and Weapons* (London: Octopus Books, 1979).

[418] Nadine Atallah, "Modernism, Feminism and Science Fiction: *Words as Silence, Language as Rhymes* by Marwa Arsanios" *Asiatische Studien* (2016): 1219-1247.

ascendant Arab nationalist ideologies of space conquest, Arsanios documents a Middle

East nation-state's unfulfilled expansionist dreams to travel to the moon and stars.[419]

Another contemporary art experiment with the historiographic potential of the

science fiction imaginary is the multidisciplinary project *The Lebanese Rocket Society*.[420]

Created by Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas (b. 1969) and Khalil Joreige (b. 1969),

the documentary film and archival investigation examine the scientific research activities

of a student group in 1960s Lebanon who produced the first rockets of the Arab world to

travel to Low Earth Orbit.[421] Sparked by coming across a 1964 Lebanese postage stamp

of one of the Cedar Rockets (**Figure 5.7**), the documentary project gestures towards a

forgotten past, or what the artists term "the unrealized imaginary" between envisioned

versus actual conditions for rocket launches in contemporary Lebanon.[422] *The Lebanese*

Rocket Society returns to a time of transnational optimism for the future when anyone

could pursue their passion for knowledge to reach for the heavens, before the 1967 Arab-

Israeli Six-Day War dramatically shifted the lived and political realities of people in the

Middle East.

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[419] Fawz Kabra, "Accumulative Processes: Marwa Arsanios in Conversation with Fawz Kabra," *Ibraaz* 009 (28 May 2015): 1-11, accessed 22 Dec 2018, https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/164; "In Focus: Marwa Arsanios," *Frieze* no. 153 (6 Mar 2013), accessed 23 Dec 2018, https://frieze.com/article/focus-marwa-arsanios.

[420] As Hadijthomas states, "the project was not only Lebanese in spirit. The scientists involved were from Armenia, Iraq, Jordan, Jerusalem, Palestine, Syria…people from all over the region joined in to create a rocket." Quoted in Chantal Pontbriand, "Artists at Work: Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige," *Afterall* (12 Nov 2013): 8, accessed 22 Dec 2018, https://afterall.org/online/artists-at-work_joana-hadjithomas-and-khalil-joreige/.

[421] Richard Hooper, "Lebanon's Forgotten Space Programme," *BBC News* (14 Nov 2013), accessed 10 Dec 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24735423.

[422] Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, "On the Lebanese Rocket Society," *Contemporary Visual Art & Culture: Broadsheet* (2014): 28-32. Also see Chad Elias's discussion of *The Lebanese Rocket Society* as a science fiction mode in *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018): 171.

When NASA's *Apollo 11* mission landed on the moon on June 20, 1969, over five hundred million people around the world watched their televisions broadcast images of a newly expanded universe. Among them was Iranian-American artist Siah Armajani (b. 1938), who soon after unplugged his television, fastened a lock through the electric plug blades, and stenciled onto the General Electric glass screen: "THIS T.V. SET HAS WITNESSED THE APOLLO 11 MISSION." (**Figure 5.8**). In barring his television set from ever turning on again, Armajani turned the device into a readymade time capsule that commemorates the historic *Apollo 11* moon landing and its worldwide visual and audio transmissions.[423] At the same time, fastening a lock to the exterior shell of a memorial or sacred site also happens to be a traditional Iranian votive practice.[424] Armajani's reenactment with his T.V. set underscores the nature of the 1969 moon landing as a communally venerated event. Similarly, artists worldwide responded to photographs and texts of "MEN WALK ON THE MOON,"[425] words headlining the next day's special issue of *The New York Times*. Armajani chose to retrace the printed prose in the newspaper's broadsheets with ink over and over again in a kinetic act (**Figure 5.9**). He did so, propelled by his desire to inscribe his physical presence into the historical record of the world's new collective imaginary of space exploration.[426]

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[423] Clare Davies and Victoria Sung, *Siah Armajani: Follow This Line* (New York: Walker Art Center/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018): 74.

[424] See Parviz Tanavoli and John T. Wertime, *Locks from Iran: Pre-Islamic to Twentieth Century* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, 1976): 20-26.

[425] John Noble Wilford, "Men Walk On Moon," *The New York Times* (21 July 1969): 1.

[426] Other artists who creatively responded to the 1969 lunar landing include Andy Warhol (1928-1987), Japanese conceptual artist On Kawara (1932-2014), and Nancy Holt (1938-2014). See Kemy Lin, "The 1969 Lunar Landing: One Giant Leap for Art," *Hyperallergic* (27 May 2015), accessed 21 Dec 2018, https://hyperallergic.com/204172/the-1969-lunar-landing-one-giant-leap-for-art/.

Retrofuturism

Besides these artist explorations of 1960s visual archives, rockets, and spacecraft voyages, other examples of Middle Eastern art experiments with speculative imaginings reveal fantastic otherworldly landscapes irrupting out of the past. These futuristic image composites are created out of mixed mass media from earlier eras, a technique typical of the "retrofuturism" movement. Emerging in the 1970s-1980s during increasing technological disillusionment around the world, retrofuturism is characterized by a fascination with past visions of the unknown future. These retrospective views alternate between the past's optimism for sublime technological futures and contemporary tensions between the alienating and empowering effects of technology.[427] Merging historic styles in an anachronistic pastiche also lends a nostalgic patina to previous myths of the future, or reimaginings of utopian visions.

Artists in the Middle East equally share these concerns for the manifold and contradictory ways in which the past has envisioned our futures. In the process of making anachronistic past images of the future from the outlook of the present moment, Middle Eastern retrofuturist works generate a cultural imaginary reflective our ambivalences towards technology and all that it has historically wrought throughout the region, all while retaining a strange, haunting immediacy. Such an example of the uncanny past can be seen in the work of Saudi Arabian artist Ahmed Mater (b. 1979), including his 2015 wood slide viewer photographic series (**Figure 5.10**). These slide projections, or stereopticon-like lanterns, merge photographs of 1980s technology with painterly

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[427] See *Retrofuturism* (Iowa City: Photo Static Magazine, 1990).

landscapes of Saudi Arabian uninhabited environments. Through Mater's artistic

transposal, the dated appliances are dissolving into eerie desert landscapes, where the

sand reclaims what was at one time state-of-the-art equipment and symbols of modern

progress in the Arabian Peninsula. Retrofuturism practices thus supply a critical and even

retrograde conservative apparatus, as Sharon Sharp argues:

> Retrofuturism can function as a rhetoric in which the past and future become
> vehicles for working through problems of the present and for creating visions of
> how things might have been and might still be. Thus, retrofuturism can have
> progressive and regressive ideological implications.[428]

These retrofuturist artworks manifest images of sublime cosmic horizons through the

recent past, and reveal how historic heritage can transform artistic worldmaking into

voyages between the past and present towards the future.

One of the last artworks produced by Syrian artist Ali Jabri (1942-2002) is

suggestive of global technological futurism out of past iconic images. During the late

1990s, many years after he had left the Museum of Popular Traditions, Jabri continued

his creative work with as-found materials and images in his Amman apartment studio. In

his series of calendars produced with Aramex for his friends (c. 2000), Jabri created a set

of twelve collages from different news media and contemporary magazine clippings.[429]

The series' analogous color scheme transitions in each collage from colors of varying

intensity from teals, pinks, corals, and navy blue, to grayscale in the twelfth and final

collage "December" (**Figure 5.11**). The artwork's monochromatic coloring is

atmospherically suggestive of the month's gray and gloomy wintertime (especially in

Jordan).

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[428] Susan Sharp, "Nostalgia for the Future: Retrofuturism in Enterprise," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 4, no. 1 (2011): 26.
[429] I am grateful to Fadi Ghandour, the founder of Aramex, for this information. Interview with author, January 10th 2019.

Consisting of rectilinear strips placed vertically across a square paper sheet, the visual assemblage of various surveillance technologies, architectural sites, skyscrapers, and human and robotic figures is a pictorial mixture of globalizing technologies and media landscapes. Jabri works with anachronistic photographic juxtapositions as a relational technique in several creative ways. For instance, images of space technology and flight, such as a space shuttle or a patterned set of fighter aircraft silhouettes, provide visual context for satellite images of lights across the eastern seaboard of the United States, or geographic points onto a map of China, alongside aerial views of different cityscapes. These expansive aerial surveys of historic architectural sites and historic strata contrast with the limited technological views of the skies and space. In one sense, the collage offers a subtle counterpoint to the belief that advanced scientific technologies have progressed human civilizations beyond the limits of the past.

Variations on the human form across organic tissue and inorganic materials offer another appositional series in the collage's bottom right quarter. Likewise, the presence of random figural images, from Muslim pilgrims circumambulating the Ka'ba in Mecca, a photographic portrait of Saint Teresa of Calcutta (famously known as Mother Theresa), to a depiction of Santa Claus from one of the multinational Coca-Cola Company's corporate print ad campaigns, injects fragile corporeal temporalities into the retrofuturist bricolage. In the allover effect of the "December" photomontage, the insertion of a Santa Claus advertisement brings a touch of seasonal vintage warmth into the cold metallic shades of the futuristic skyscrapers, robots, and black and aerial surveillance

photographs.[430] Together this graphic assemblage of images from the recent past suggests Jabri's use of retrofuturism is an investigation of the transformative yet limited possibilities of science technologies. As the final month of the year, "December" may also have corresponded to the final month of the lunar Islamic calendar from that year, or the month of pilgrimage (*Dhu'l-hijja*) or *hajj* in the lunar Islamic calendar, as indicated by the picture of the Kaʻba under a separate photograph of the full moon. In this mix of preexisting visual icons, the retrofuturist sensibilities of past futuristic architecture and current space technologies create a sterile aesthetic feedback loop in which only the past experiences of global religious images inject some sense of humanity and mythic history.

The question of futurism in Islamic architecture, practices, and technologies is one also explored by Palestinian artist Wafa Hourani (b. 1979). Best known for his "Future Cities" and Qalandia series of miniature architectural light-box displays, Hourani deals with the social, political, and economic realities of everyday Palestinian life to create apocalyptic cityscapes of the future West Bank. Hourani has also begun recreating religious monuments in Islamic history. In his 2014 "Al Masjid Al Wahid – The One and the Lonely Mosque," Hourani reimagines the Kaʻba and parts of Islamic art historical architecture into a mosque of the future Middle East (**Figure 5.12**). The architectural maquette is pasted together from various mixed media, including miniature plastic figurines and trees, and photographs cut from books and magazines of decorative architectural designs and patterns from iconic Islamic structures all over the world. The handcrafted mockup contains a patterned walkway through a garden, an ablutions fountain adjacent to the colonnaded entrance façade, and a series of pasted together

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[430] On the transformation and diffusion of the religious symbolism of St. Nicholas into the modern image of Santa Claus, see E. Wilbur Bock, "The Transformation of Religious Symbols: A Case Study of St. Nicholas," *Social Compass* 9, no. 4 (1972): 537-548.

squares with a small dome adjacent to a larger, golden round vault with a crescent papier-mâché finial in the center of the work. Directly behind the gold dome rises a single minaret, while a tall black cuboid tower based on the historic Ka'ba building stands attached to the structure's front left corner. This multiplicity of architectural photographic referents position this miniature mosque in an imaginary space, located all over the Islamic architectural past, and somewhere in an imagined Islamic future.

Constructed out of paper sheets containing Ottoman Iznik ceramic tiles, carved botanical marbles of the Taj Mahal and Mughal South Asia, Moroccan *zillij* mosaic tilework, and other Islamic geometric and ornamental patterns throughout, the three-dimensional mosque maquette is a like an art historical pastiche of Islamic architectural heritage reassembled into a unified whole.[431] Even the richly tiled Safavid Persian dome of the Sheikh Lutfallah Mosque in Isfahan is mediated into paper miniature as the mosque's smaller dome. The larger shimmering gold dome is reminiscent of the seventh-century Dome of the Rock (*Qubbat al-Sakhrah*) monument in Jerusalem, as well as the historic Ottoman single-domed mosque plan that still survives in the former Ottoman Empire's territories of the Levant and Palestine. Hourani's title "Al-Masjid Al-Wahid" or "one mosque" is a word play on the concept of monotheism and the oneness of God (*al-tawhid*) in Islam, and suggests the sculptural space represents a single mosque in the

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[431] A recent architectural trend in the Persian Gulf is the "universal" mosque plan, such as the synthesized global design of Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, or the encyclopedic exterior arcades in Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Muscat, Oman. These large congregation mosques are constructed to display and educate daily worshippers and, primarily, foreign tourists on the historical overview of Islamic architecture practices. For a discussion of the issues between universalizing styles and preserving vernacular built heritage in the Gulf, see Joseph Hobbs, "Heritage in the Lived Environment of the United Arab Emirates and the Gulf Region, *Archnet-IJAR* 11, no. 2 (July 2017): 55-82; Kishwar Rizvi, ed., *The Transnational Mosque: Architecture and Historical Memory in the Contemporary Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

future open to all Muslims. In this sense, the artist's curated selection of Islamic

architectural designs cuts across the historic spectrum and sublimates cultural, national,

and sectarian divisions into one monument in which each distinct part is still visible and

providing structural support. Together the assembled unit of transnational religious

spaces offers a "retrofuturist" mosque based on historic Islamic architectural

achievements as the building blocks for an imagined future in the lands of Dar al-

Islam.[432]

     Within this potentially utopian vision of a blended mosque environment, the

elongated Ka'ba structure sticks out like a sore thumb (**Figure 5.13**). Reconstituted much

like the holiest building in Islam, Hourani's Ka'ba displays the site's architectural

features in photographic paper miniature. The black *kiswa*, i.e. the Ka'ba building's

annual black silk covering, is stretched around the tower as its bands of gold-embroidered

Qu'ranic verses wrap around the upper section, while the black stone (*al-hajar al-aswad*)

is placed on the left corner and the adjacent gold door entrance is correspondingly raised

slightly above the ground. Like a squat skyscraper, tomb tower, or perhaps a minimalist

cuboid rocket ship, Hourani's reworked Ka'ba poses many possible referents, yet it is its

physical proximity to the rest of the imagined mosque structure in "Al-Masjid Al-Wahid"

that is most provocative. One of the central tenets of Islam is for every able Muslim to

journey once in their life to Mecca during the *hajj* season and circumambulate (*tawaf*) the

Ka'ba seven times. By abutting a corner of his towering Ka'ba to the rest of the built

form, Hourani precludes the possibility of continuous circumambulation in his mosque of

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[432] Architectural replicas and mediated presences constitute several enduring practices in Islamic art history. For a discussion of architectural mobilities and micro-movements of Islamic monuments, see Christiane Gruber, "Islamic Architecture on the Move," *IJIA* 3, no. 2 (2014): 241-264.

the future. He suggests, in lieu of complete circulation, that future pilgrims will move back and forth from one side of the maquette to the other in the shape of a lunar crescent like the finial atop the gold dome.[433]

Altering the performance of the *hajj* is in part the artist's critical response to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's current administrative practices and economic policies in Mecca.[434] An extensive portion of historic tombs and archaeological sites around Islam's earliest cities has been destroyed by the Saudi Arabian government in its extensive architectural expansions around the Ka'ba.[435] Per its title, the maquette also exhibits a sense of loneliness, as only one plastic figurine approaches the artwork while its miniature muezzin's call to prayer plays from the single minaret. In explaining his thinking through "Al-Masjid Al-Wahid," Hourani states he imagined the mosque's emptiness as indicative of the empty spirituality of "political Islam" and the exported conservative religious media and consumerism of the contemporary Arabian Gulf. Hourani's reflections on the state of Mecca stem from his own experience of performing the *hajj* journey as a teenager with his family.[436] The complex, multivalent work thus investigates and speaks to a number of lived conditions in the Islamic world's religious

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[433] Interview with author, July 28th 2015.

[434] As Dustin Byrd summarizes, "Critics have dubbed this commercialization of sacred space the 'Las Vegas-ization' of Mecca, as the 'other-worldliness' of the sacred geography appears increasingly diminished in contrast to the secular and capitalist oriented culture." See Byrd, "Professing Islam in a Post-Secular Society" in *Islam in a Post-Secular Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2017): 21.

[435] The loss of religious heritage is viewed by many as a symptom of the Saudi monarchy's alliance with the extreme conservative Salafi version of Islam known as "Wahhabism," and as a continuing tradition since the nineteenth-century of the Wahhabi movement's destruction of Islamic architecture and conquest of Mecca.

[436] Interview with author, July 28th 2015.

systems and sociopolitical practices at the contemporary moment, as it mobilizes key strategies in critical futurism aesthetics.[437]

Inadvertently, Hourani's contemporary work mimics micro-architectural practices in Islamic devotional landscapes. "Al-Masjid Al-Wahid" distributes the sacred of several mosques and monuments, including the Dome of the Rock and the Ka'ba, by deterritorializing them and reconstituting the buildings through their recognizable parts.[438] Hourani even reanimates their presences in miniature through dynamic visual and audible performances, by illuminating the lightbox sculpture from within, and playing audio recordings of the call to prayer. Given the current limited mobility of many Palestinians living in the West Bank or Gaza, the presence of several micro-architectural monuments amalgamated into one mobile replica in Hourani's artist studio in effect brought these proxies directly into Palestine and made them metaphorically present to visitors who otherwise would rarely have access them.[439] By loosening the Ka'ba from its physical shell and historic geographical terrain, Hourani frees Islam's holiest monument from its contemporary context of Saudi Arabia's hypermodern expansions and relocates it into an imagined past Islamic heterotopia. Altogether, "Al-Masjid Al-Wahid" is an architectural model of a speculative Muslim future rooted in a past that is micro-mobilized both physically and visually into the contemporary West Bank.

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[437] For a discussion of how certain artists negotiate between a sense of recovering past in order to gain control over an uncertain future, see Sheyma Buali, "Anachronistic Ambitions: Imagining the Future, Assembling the Past," *Ibraaz* 007 (May 2014): 1-12, accessed 14 Oct 2014, https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/91.

[438] See Gruber, "Islamic Architecture on the Move" (2014): 245-246.

[439] For a written account of everyday life and artists' experiences in Ramallah by Wafa Hourani's brother, Khaled, see Hourani and T.Z. Toukan, "Ramallah," *Frieze* (1 Jan 2010), accessed 7 Jan 2019, https://frieze.com/article/ramallah.

Contemporary Syrian artist Ayham Jabr's (b. 1987) digital retrofuturist collages also assemble new pictorial possibilities out of iconic images of Islamic religious sites in Palestine. In a 2017 stellar visual tribute to Jerusalem Day, or International al-Quds Day, Syrian artist Ayham Jabr (b. 1987) digitally pasted a historic photographic image of the Dome of the Rock against an enormous rocky mountain range jutting up against the edge of Jerusalem's venerated Noble Sanctuary (*Haram al-sharif*) hilltop (**Figure 5.14**). Rising above the snow-capped mountain peaks is a vintage scientific illustration of the solar system, with the earth and its orbiting moon stationed in the third ring around the luminous sun. In the digital collage's lower right foreground appear two people turning towards the sublime horizon, inviting viewers into the interplanetary landscape while suggesting the internal contemplation of a symbolic world beyond the terrestrial horizon.[440] Taken from an old National Geographic travel photograph of pre-1967 Jerusalem, the image here captures a mid-twentieth-century Arab man wearing a red-and-white checkered keffiya (or *shemagh*) headscarf, and a woman wearing a silk hair scarf, as they both look towards the Dome of the Rock and the astronomic projection as a visual invitation to ponder the universal significance of the sacred site.

Jabr's "Jerusalem Day" digital collage interweaves three distinct photographic views of transcendent panoramas, from Islamic architectural shrine, sublime natural topographies, to a celestial vault as rendered through modern astronomy's diagrammatic

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[440] These figures are known as *repoussé* (French, "pushed back") or *Rückenfigur* (German, "figure from the back"). Examining the landscape in the science fiction imaginary, John Timberlake argues: "By counter-posing the anonymous individualized figure to the visual 'field' of the landscape, *Rückenfiguren* of contemporary science fiction qualitatively differ from those of an earlier age: no longer opening potential new horizons for humanity, but rather delineating the horizon of humanity's potential just as so-called 'archaeological horizons' define the epochal extent of vanished civilizations within the strata." See Timberlake, "Introduction," *Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2018): 19.

representations of the solar system. Through his assemblage practice with Sci-Fi fantasy books, old travel magazines, and his own documentary photographs of wartime Damascus, Jabr creates surreal landscapes as a means to "numb myself from all that madness"[441] in present-day Syria.[442] Jabr's phantasmagoric collage commemorates Jerusalem Day by reverting the contested city back to its pre-1967 Six-Day War status when peaceful coexistence for Palestinians living in Jerusalem still seemed viable. Hovering on the edge of the cosmos, this retrofuturist assemblage from vintage photographs of the recent past offers a temporal freedom from contemporary reality to reimagine the past, present, and even future of Middle Eastern terrains. By depicting a celestial horizon through both scientific imagery and retro-futurist collage techniques, Jabr manufactures a pictorial realm where sublime images of Jerusalem and its reimagined present and futures flow freely out of the past.

Time Travel

Cosmic time travel through historic practices also serves to illuminate hidden imaginaries in the artistic practice of Iranian-American artist Ala Ebtekar (b. 1978). In Ebtekar's work "Nightfall (After Asimov & Emerson)," pinpricks of white light dot blue washed prints of the night sky (**Figure 5.15**). Created from natural light of the moon and stars over northern California, these cyanotype prints use a photographic printing process

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[441] Interview with author, December 8th 2018.
[442] See Joan Grandjean, "Les collages Surréalistes d'Ayham Jabr," *ONORIENT* (22 March 2018), accessed 1 Dec 2018, http://onorient.com/collages-numeriques-surrealistes-ayham-jabr-24246-20180322

invented in 1842 by English astronomer John Herschel.[443] The photosensitive image

process uses two chemicals, ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide, which

develop when exposed to light into the distinctive dark blue dye (known as "Prussian

blue" or *Berliner blau*) often associated with scientific and technical drawings.[444] Rather

than reproduce multiples of a single design, Ebtekar's monochromatic cyan-blue prints

are time-lapse documents of visual and physical light in the changing night sky as it

rotates overhead.

These cyanotype exposures are made with printed pages from science fiction

writer Isaac Asimov's short story *Nightfall*. Written in 1941, the novella begins with a

quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson in *Nature* (1836): "If the stars should appear one night in

a thousand years, how would men believe and adore, and preserve for many generations

the remembrance of the city of God?"[445] Asimov developed the idea into a dystopian

story about a planet constantly illuminated by six suns that never experiences darkness—

other than a lunar eclipse once every 2,000 years. The sudden appearance of hundreds of

thousands of stars in the night sky, rather than provoking wonder, drives the planet's

inhabitants and scientists insane as they witness the vastness of the dark universe for the

very first time. Blooming across the novella's printed prose, Ebtekar's cyanotype

illuminations of stars and moonlight revitalize an antiquated scientific printing process

onto *Nightfall*'s pages to capture the visible spectrum of light in the night sky. These

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[443] Meaning "dark blue impression," cyanotype photographic print processes rely on exposure to ultraviolet radiation, whether from the sun or its reflective light on the moon. See Mike Ware, *Cyanotype: the History, Science and Art of Photographic Printing in Russian Blue* (London: Science Museum, 1999): 22-29.
[444] Mike Ware, "Prussian Blue: Artists' Pigment and Chemists' Sponge," *Journal of Chemical Education* 85, no. 5 (2008): 612-621.
[445] Isaac Asimov's paraphrased quotation, from Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Chapter I" in *Nature* (Boston & Cambridge: James Munroe & Co., 1849): 8.

blueprints telescope the infiniteness of space and its celestial bodies directly onto Asimov's handheld paper pages, echoing the contrast of insignificance in cosmic scale experienced by the novella's planet population. Likewise, Ebtekar uses the intimacy of reading as staging ground to explore ways of depicting the inner and outer worlds held within a book's transportive pages.

For his more recent processes with cyanotype prints, Ebtekar has used texts from premodern Persian literature. The artist states that these newer moon and starlight trace exposures onto historic Persianate Islamic texts serve as conduits to harness the visual (*dhaw*) and metaphysical (*nur*) aspects of light directly onto metaphysical writings of the universe by Persian mystics. These literary works include writings by Sufi poet Hafiz (1315-1390), Anadalusian Sufi philosopher Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240), and Persian illuminationist philosopher al-Suhrawardi (1154-1191), along with additional pages from works by Asimov and other science fiction writers.[446]

The artist's interests in intermingling contemporary sci-fi imaginings with premodern Islamic philosophical literature can be traced back to his earlier 2012 work, "Coelestis (After Hafiz)" (**Figure 5.16**). Named after a celestial atlas of constellations published in 1929, the artwork offers a stellar map of the future through the textual frameworks of the past.[447] Drawing upon everyday rituals around Hafiz's fourteenth-century poetic verses, Ebtekar opened, disassembled, and mounted pages from an 1867 CE lithograph printed volume of the *Divan-i Hafiz* to produce the mixed media assemblage.

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[446] Interview with author, December 8th 2018.
[447] Jyoti Kalsi, "A Vision of the Future," *Gulf News* (10 Feb 2012), accessed 13 Jan 2019, https://gulfnews.com/entertainment/arts-culture/a-vision-of-the-future-1.977286.

The word "coelestis" stems from the Latin *caelum* meaning "heavens" or "the sky," and is also suggestive of how seeing into the future, or divination through books, offers written insight from worlds of the unseen. The art of bibliomancy has been a popular tradition throughout Islamic history and is a continued practice in Muslim and Persian communities today. Besides the Qur'an, one of the most common texts for augury is Hafiz's collected poems (*divan*).[448] Ebtekar credits historic divination (*fal*) practices, as well as modern uses, for stirring his interest to create a contemporary *fal-i Hafiz*. One particular example the artist cites is an infamous prognostication that came to pass with the story of the Afghan poet Masood Khalil and his friend, the anti-Taliban resistance leader and political activist Ahmed Shah Massoud. Khalil recalled the predictive powers of opening a *Divan-i Hafiz* through a night of portent on September 8th, 2001, when he and Shah Massoud met and opened Hafiz's book to "see what happens in our future."[449] He read from the randomly opened page a verse forewarning the two friends would never again see each other. Infamously fulfilling the prophecy, the following day Massoud was assassinated by the Taliban.[450] For Khalil, and artist Ala Ebtekar, this violent event demonstrates the power and potentially dangers of engaging with Islamic divinatory traditions and attempting to see into the future.

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[448] See Christiane Gruber, "The 'Restored' Shi'i *mushaf* as Divine Guide? The Practice of *fāl-i Qur'ān* in the Safavid Period," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*13, no. 2 (2011): 32; Jan Schmidt, "Hafiz and Other Persian Authors in Ottoman Bibliomancy; The Extraordinary Case of Kefevī Hüseyn Efendi's *Rāznāme* (Late Sixteenth Century),' *Persia* 21 (2006-2007): 63-74; Hafiz, *Matn-i kamil-i fal-i Hafiz ba ma'ni* (Tehran: Arvand, 1383/2004).

[449] The page Khalil opened to reportedly read: "Tonight you two are together. Valuate, many nights go, many days disappear. You two will not be able to see each other again." Quoted in Ala Ebtekar, "Otherland Proposal," *Abraaz Capital Art Prize* (2012).

[450] Bindra Satinder, "Witness Recalls Assassination of Anti-Taliban Leader," *CNN World* (7 Oct 2001), accessed 14 Jan 2019, http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/10/06/bindra.focus.

By assembling found pages from a nineteenth-century *Divan-i Hafiz* into a large-scale artwork, Ebtekar offers the chance for a calligraphic Persian line to randomly strike a viewer's eye and foretell the future. Celestial heavens are invoked in "Coelestis (After Hafiz)" not only through the title, but also through the integration of Islamic manuscript illuminations across the openly displayed and pasted lithograph pages. Underscoring the artistic traditions of *falnama* ("book of divination") manuscripts, Ebtekar added a radiant overlay across the printed texts. Based on historic decorative designs in Islamic bookbinding and carpet weaving, he applies watercolor pigments, black ink, and gold floriated vines blooming around a starburst mandorla. The central medallion is awash in an ultramarine blue flecked with white radiances, which depict a field of stars lying beyond the painted portal. Conveying the transcendental potential of premodern Persian book arts, this illuminated cosmic gateway points to the historically rich cosmological works by Persian poets and philosophers, including Hafiz and the illuminationist mystic al-Suhrawardi, as mapping visions into the future.[451]

Such intimate worldmaking is a common thread in Ebtekar's artistic practice with "as found" texts, whether from Persian poetry or English science fiction fantasy novels, as his work encourages viewers to look closely at the transcendent structures of global literary practices. In another artwork, titled "The Shape of Things to Come" (2012), the artistic interplay between nostalgic sci-fi imaginings and sublime Persian artistic heritage offers a visual cosmos of infinite graphic possibilities (**Figure 5.17**). Using the backside of a found 1969 poster for H.G. Well's 1933 science fiction novel *The Shape of Things to Come*, the artist painted an image of an interstellar gateway using the

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[451] See Sara Raza, "Nostalgia for the Future: Ala Ebtekar in Conversation," *Ibraaz* 003 (29 May 2012), accessed 1 Apr 2014, https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/28.

same starburst mandorla design seen in "Coelestis (After Hafiz)." The retro graphic

design mirror-image shines through a light box into the artist's historically-inspired

Islamic decorative design brimming with nebula clouds and luminescent starry orbs. For

Ebtekar, this imagistic coupling speaks to a lack of futurism in the cultural context of

contemporary Iran. "There's a certain kind of nostalgia that's haunted Persians within

Iran and Persians in the diaspora," the artist explains, characterizing the sense of near and

distant history dominating extant Iranian society as a "state of always looking towards the

past…through this looking at the past, we've grown numb to envision[ing] a future."[452]

In this sense then, time travel to the future is consistently hindered by a continual

presence and referral to history. By reimagining time travel through science fiction and

historic Persian literary practices, Ebtekar's artworks move across time and space into

sublime imaginings contained – or even trapped – within the material and conceptual

matrices of the past.

Space Invaders of the Persian Gulf

Futuristic imaginings with historic Islamic heritage also provide exploratory

backdrops for contemporary art practices in the Persian Gulf. For a 2011 exhibition

honoring the fiftieth-anniversary of colonial independence in Kuwait, and twenty years

since the country's liberation from Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces, the Kuwaiti artist

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[452] Quoted in Jonathan Curiel, "Ala Ebtekar on Coming of Age in Iran, and Finding His Early Muse in Hip-Hop and Graffiti," *SF Weekly* (7 Jun 2013), accessed 16 Jan 2019, https://archives.sfweekly.com/exhibitionist/2013/06/07/artists-statement-ala-ebtekar-on-coming-of-age-in-iran-and-finding-his-early-muse-in-hip-hop-and-graffiti.

Monira Al Qadiri (b. 1983) roamed the desert countryside in search of inspiration. She

found it in what she initially thought were large naïve-style wall paintings across large

electric power generators (*muhawwil*).[453] Intrigued by the mural displays of bright,

pastel-colored Kuwaiti scenes and human figures in national dress, Al Qadiri was drawn

to the wall paintings only to learn the experimental iconographies were, in fact, state-

sponsored religious art. Commissioned by government religious charities, the public

murals convey visual and textual codes of morality and piety to nearby residents and

passersby.

Al Qadiri decided to recreate the wall paintings on a cube-shaped structure for

the exhibition. After recreating a giant generator, the artist projected onto its lucent

screen walls animated video showing hundreds of hand-painted images drawn from those

she scavenged across Kuwait's urban infrastructures (**Figure 5.18**). The resulting

"Muhawwil" ("Transformer") 2012 mixed media installation plays the animated images

interloped with audio music from a music genre the artist refers to as "Islamic Emotions,"

which includes the subgenres "Islamic Sighs" and "Melancholic Sighs."[454] These

atmospheric sounds intermingle with the now lifelike Islamic figural paintings as they

float through the semi-translucent cube in a dream-like dance. Gliding from scene to

scene of Kuwaiti cultural landscapes, the human figures never reveal their faces but the

women and men keep their visages hidden from viewers behind black cloaks (*abaya*) and

white headdress cloths (*gutra*). The lack of facial depictions speaks to the conservative

religious authorities responsible for the mural paintings, and only adds to the

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[453] For photograph examples of these public murals, see Amira Haroun, "Murals, Morals, Muhawwils," *REORIENT* (9 Feb 2014), accessed 10 Jan 2019, http://www.reorientmag.com/2014/02/monira-al-qadiri/.

[454] Haroun, "Murals, Morals, Muhawwils," (2014): 4. These audio excerpts can be heard in the artist's 2014 "Muhawwil" video installation, available at: https://vimeo.com/85593700.

otherworldliness of the installation experience. As the colorful images shift beyond the

veiled walls of the installation cube, their transformation from Kuwait's everyday

vernacular idioms into conceptual entities in an art gallery space demonstrates how artists

as well as conservative authorities are negotiating new dilemmas of representation in the

Persian Gulf's increasingly mass media saturated landscape.

Al Qadiri refers to the rectangular structure of the "Muhawwil" installation as

"Wahhabi Cubism," or an ongoing project through which she explores "the extremities of

the Salafi imagination."[455] Born in Senegal and raised in Kuwait, Al Qadiri's

contemporary practice engages with the culturally diverse religious heritage of the

Persian Gulf. Her work often addresses visual contradictions between the extremely

conservative Salafi cleric authorities in the Arabian Gulf States and state-sponsored

economic developments that have resulted in hypermodern infrastructures and

landscapes, as well as the disappearance of much of the Gulf's historic ways of life.

While her work touches on concepts of the Persian Gulf as a present-day dystopian future

made manifest, it is distinctly more engaged with popular Islamic heritage as an

exploratory means of creative worldmaking than the more critically rooted practices of

her sister, Fatima Al Qadiri, and Sophia al-Maria, who together first coined the "Gulf

Futurism" art movement.[456] Not to be compared with the philosophical and aesthetic

imaginaries of Afrofuturism, as Jussi Parika explains,

> Gulf Futurism functions to describe the already existing nexus of consumerism, a
> rewired eroticizing Orientalism of technological (Near/Middle/Far) East without
> the utopian potential of Afrofuturism: not a future to aspire towards (a people-to-
> come), but a future that was already prescribed, premediated and integrated as a

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[455] Haroun, "Murals, Morals, Muhawwils," (2014): 6.
[456] See Karen Orton, "The Desert of the Unreal," *Dazed Magazine* (9 Nov 2012), accessed 24 Dec 2018, http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/15040/1/the-desert-of-the-unreal.

temporal infrastructure.[457]

Or, as the artist-musician Fatima stated, "Gulf Futurism is really about this destruction and rebirth. We lost our architectural and cultural identity and had to start over. There's a secret, hidden history and then this horrifying, stark future."[458] Diverging from the playful absurdity and artificiality in Fatima and Sophia al-Maria's hypermodern Gulf Futurism aesthetics,[459] Al Qadiri's work makes visible the transcendent confluences between the Persian Gulf's contemporary economic technologies and some of its more conservative religious practices and related materials.

After moving to Japan on a Kuwaiti government scholarship at the age of 16, Monira Al Qadiri spent most of her young adult life completing her PhD in Intermedia Fine Arts at the University of Tokyo. It was in Japan that Al Qadiri first became interested in Islam and its expressive potentials through the work of Japanese scholar Toshihiko Izutsu, including his highly praised 1958 complete Japanese translation of the Qu'ran.[460] Upon reading Izutsu's 1991 study on *Islamic Culture*, Al Qadiri wrote: "everything in my life suddenly made sense. In my ten years living in Tokyo, it was by far the moment I felt most satisfied to have mastered Japanese."[461] Noting the irony of having to move to Japan in order to appreciate Islamic studies, Al Qadiri also reflected on Toshihiko Izutsu's analyses of "Wahhabism" or the official Sunni "unitarian" doctrine

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[457] Jussi Parika, "Middle East and Other Futurisms: Imaginary Temporalities in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture" *Culture, Theory and Critique* 59, no. 1 (2017): 46.

[458] Quoted in Orton, "The Desert of the Unreal," (2012).

[459] For discussion of "Sci-Fi Wahabi" and other Gulf Futurist projects by artist Sophia Al-Maria, see Amy Taubin, "Openings: Sophia Al-Maria," *Artforum* 55, no. 2 (Oct 2016): 252-255.

[460] See Hans Martin Krämer, "Pan-Asianism's Religious Undercurrents: The Reception of Islam and Translation of the Qur'an in Twentieth-Century Japan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 3 (2014): 619-640.

[461] See Monira Al Qadiri, "How Toshihiko Made Me Understand Islam," *Ibraaz* 008 (Feb 2015): 2, accessed 1 Mar 2015, https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/119.

adopted by Muhammad Ibn Saud (founder of modern-day Saudi Arabia) as edifying. She

interrogates claims by official religious authorities that this extreme expression of Sunni

Islam "is the natural and ubiquitous form of Sunni Islam that permeates the entire Islamic

world," while stressing that Wahhabism has penetrated much of the Arabian Gulf's

cultural heritage "far beyond the local populace's comprehension."[462] Al Qadiri uses

Izutsu's discussion of varying cosmological worldviews in Shi'i Islam and Sunni Islam to

also meditate on her own dual ancestral roots in both sects, and on different Muslim

funerary practices for her research project on the aesthetics of sadness.[463] When she

returned to Kuwait, she photographically documented the physically bifurcated

Sulaibikhat national cemetery in Kuwait, where the decorated Shi'i cemetery garden

contrasts starkly with the nameless Sunni burial landscape (**Figure 5.19**). Working

through such overt physical manifestations of divergent mourning traditions, Al Qadiri's

photo-essay visualizes opposing sectarian remembrance practices in the Persian Gulf as

well as the "violent separation between the spiritual manifestations of Islam."[464] Both Al

Qadiri's artistic practice and public output shows a clear attentiveness to the textured and

multivocal religious traditions of the Persian Gulf.

Her recent sculptural projects such as "Alien Technology" and "Spectrum 1"

speak to the fundamental shift in the Arabian Gulf region's cultural, economic, and

religious life after the discovery of crude oil. Indeed, it was the prospecting encounter in

1937 with the vast oil reserves around Dammam in Saudi Arabia that enabled the House

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[462] Al Qadiri, "How Toshihiko Made Me Understand Islam" (2015): 4.

[463] Because of her multiple religious backgrounds and cultural upbringings, including her fluency in Japanese, Al Qadiri sometimes refers to herself as "Sushi" or, to put it another way, half Sunni, half Shi'i. See Stephanie Bailey, "Openings: Monira Al Qadiri," *Artforum* 53, no. 9 (May 2015): 360.

[464] For Al Qadiri's photographs of the separate Shi'i and Sunni sides of Kuwait's Sulaibikhat Cemetary, see "How Toshihiko Made Me Understand Islam" (2015): 1-7.

of Saud (and other Gulf monarchies) to rise into considerable wealth and influence in the region. Such wealth enabled sponsorship of the Salafi reformist movement and its highly conservative interpretations of Sunni Islam.[465] By exploring the material and conceptual aspects of oil in her artistic practice, Al Qadiri addresses the naturally occurring liquid resource's transformational effects on Islamic heritage, the Persian Gulf, and the greater world at large.

For Dubai's 2014 "InVisible" public art works, curated by Amanda Abi Khalil and commissioned by The Arab Fund for Arts & Culture (AFAC), Al Qadiri constructed a large sculpture titled "Alien Technology" for installation in the Al Shindagha Heritage Village (**Figure 5.20**).[466] Consisting of three pronged sides around a central anchor, the fiberglass hexagonal structure's sides are coated in pearlescent paint in shades of vivid dark purple and turquoise, like bioluminescent marine life, or the luminous sheen of an oil slick. On top of the slanting prong edges are multi-layered floriated discs culminating in twelve-pointed stars. The geometrical petal arrays suggest both mathematical and biological symmetry within the strange appendages, as the polygon shapes also echo the twelve-pointed star tiles found in historic Islamic intricately patterned mosaic works.

The design of this giant, iridescent structure is taken from an oil well drill bit. Based on the petroleum industry's most commonly used rolling cutter bit, the tri-cone sculpture's floriated "teeth" are not just for decorative effect. The function of the prong's long teeth is to maximize surface space while gouging into the earth's crust in search of

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[465] For an overview of the rise of the House of Saud and "Wahhabi" Islam after the discovery of oil, see Abdullah Mohammad Sindi, "Britain and the Rise of Wahhabism and the House of Saudi, *Kan'an Bulletin* 4, no. 361 (16 Jan 2004): 1-9.
[466] Anna Seaman, "Giant Drill Bit Among Public Art Unveiled in Dubai's Heritage Area," *The National* (30 Nov 2014), accessed 14 Jan 2019, https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/giant-drill-bit-among-public-art-unveiled-in-dubai-s-heritage-area-1.335997.

crude oil. For the "InVisible" exhibition, artists were asked to produce works relating to concepts of concealment. The nacreous surface of Al Qadiri's "Alien Technology" makes visible what has become invisible with the rise of the oil industry: the Persian Gulf's forgotten pearling economy. Long before the presence of petroleum, or the invention of cultured pearls, the Gulf's main economic trade was pearl fishing. For centuries expert divers scavenged the ocean floor in search of naturally occurring nacre, and supplied the majority of the world's highly prized pearls. When twentieth-century exports of oil supplanted the export of pearls, an entire way of life was lost, including the historic sights and sounds of traditional pearling vessels and divers' songs calling their way home across Persian Gulf waters. Placing the sculpture in Dubai's Al Shindagha district near miniature pearl diving ships and preserved architectural landmarks situates the artwork's industrial materiality within the historic landscapes that it displaced (**Figure 5.21**). The all-pervasive petroleum economy facilitated the Gulf's boom growth with towering skyscrapers subsuming and overshadowing the region's former pearl economy-driven buildings. As such, the sculptural surface reflects and distorts images of these historic structures in the very liquid that displaced Dubai's architectural past. In revealing the disappearance of this seafaring world, Al Qadiri visualizes the Persian Gulf's largely invisible (and increasingly commercialized) past through the concealed nature of the oil industry, while simultaneously making visible the nature of oil's underwater extraction.

Like an extraterrestrial spacecraft that landed in the Arabian Desert, "Alien Technology" speaks to the radical, futuristic transformation of the Persian Gulf's traditional maritime pearling economy into the most powerful energy industry in the world. The large-scale oil drill bit emphasizes the otherworldly and organic-like

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appearance of this industrial tool that wielded massive impact beneath the earth's visible horizon. Such a distorted relationship of scale between the offshore drilling process's small drill bits to the monumentalized petroleum sculpture enhances its sense of otherworldliness. Discrepancies of scale are a recurrent element in the science fiction imaginary, as these transformative shifts introduce overtones of the uncanny or estrangement while rendering lived experience as fantastical.[467] Encountering this gigantic alien roaming craft increases not only the initial drill bit's size but also its power from another, subterranean world into a heritage urban landscape of the past.[468] The multiple temporalities present in the "Alien Technology" installation recall speculative imaginings in science fiction narratives, repurposed on a site where the adjacent past and unearthly present coincide.

In another example of Al Qadiri's engagements with the phenomenological aspects of oil and pearls, the 2016 "Spectrum" sculptural work uses similar industrial tools and materials to install a series of six drill bits (**Figure 5.22**). Produced in three-dimensional printed plastic, the works are molded after six different kinds of drill bits, including fixed cutter bits and other variations of cones and bearings.[469] Like fiberglass, the plastic molds monumentalize the oil drilling process through its very own materiality. Miniaturized and mobilized, the "Spectrum" series of sculptures frees the drill bits from their scaled relationship and physical constraints in underwater oil wells to infinite

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[467] Timberlake, *Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary* (2018): 25.
[468] Susan Stewart discusses how the giant offers an explanation for the environment containing the human body. Colossal size serves as an interface between our bodies and nature, as "our most fundamental relation to the gigantic is articulated in our [scaled] relation to landscape…" See *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993): 71.
[469] See "Drilling Bit Types and Drilling Bit Selections, *Drilling Formulas Blog* (2 Nov 2011), accessed 4 Dec 2018, http://www.drillingformulas.com/drilling-bit-types-and-drilling-bit-selections/.

possibilities of new arrangements and contexts.[470] Coating the sculptures in shimmering automotive paint also underscores contemporary petroleum products as visually resplendent but environmentally destructive. This manifestation contrasts with the analogously iridescent sheen of mother-of-pearls whose harvesting yields far less damaging impact on earth's ecosystems.

Al Qadiri tackles the similarly lustrous natures of liquid petroleum and iridescent nacre in "Spectrum," as she characterizes the optical phenomenon of both naturally occurring substances: "Pearls and oil share the same color scheme on opposite ends of the dichroic color spectrum. The exploitation of these two materials at various points in history has been fundamental to the cultural and economic life of the Arabian Gulf region."[471] From milky opalescence to oil's inky rainbow sheen, the polarizing prismatic effects visually bind together the Persian Gulf's two most iconic products. Appearing in multiples like shimmering sea creatures, or alien tentacles, "Spectrum" suggests the appearance of the oil industry and all its industrial trappings was an invasion from another world. Except this alien invasion came from fellow humans and led to the wholesale alteration of lives and landscapes across the Gulf.

Through her alien invaders formed out of liquid and material petroleum, Al Qadiri explores the mythic aspects of oil and how the fossil fuel has propelled technological progress and monumental devastation. Al Qadiri explored similar perceptions of modernity as inherently destructive in a 2014 digital photographic project "Mythbusters" (**Figure 5.23**). Through a series of digital collages, Al Qadiri explores

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[470] See Carl Knappett, "Meaning in Miniature: Semiotic Networks in Material Culture," in *Excavating the Mind: Cross-sections through Culture, Cognition, and Materiality* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2012): 92.

[471] Quoted in Al Qadiri, "Spectrum 1 & 2 (2016)" *Monira Al Qadiri: Projects* artist website (2017), accessed 10 Jan 2019, http://www.moniraalqadiri.com/projects.

recent sociopolitical theories regarding the Arabian Gulf museum boom since the end of

the 1990-1991 Gulf War, and the transformative legacy of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.[472]

The photograph's aerial viewpoint lends the futuristic images a veneer of historic

documentation, thereby collapsing temporalities of the first Gulf war bombings and

burning oil fields with the region's ambitious museum developments today, including the

Louvre Abu Dhabi, I.M. Pei's Museum of Islamic Art Qatar, or the still contentious

Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.[473]

In her reimagining of Japanese architect Tadao Ando's proposed Maritime

Museum in Abu Dhabi, Al Qadiri superimposes the imagined rectangular structure

floating on the watery ocean plane slightly offshore from a partially destroyed highway

bridge along a sandy coastline. The gapping bombed out bridge frames the seascape

horizon in a damaged parallel to the open and angled architectural form of the future

mega museum, whose futuristic shape is designed to echo a traditional Persian Gulf ship

sail billowing in the sea breeze. Other photographs in the series embed images of the new

Gulf State museums amidst explosions and smoke pillars, presenting these new cultural

heritage and contemporary art infrastructures as if they are already inflamed on funerary

pyres. Or, conversely, the images render these buildings as being erected into a dystopian

world of fire and smoke still burning from the no-longer-mythic past. Al Qadiri's

"Mythbusters" historic war landscapes ultimately offer fertile grounds for the growth of

the Persian Gulf's new and future creative spaces.

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[472] See other photographic works in Monira Al Qadiri, "Myth Busters," *Ibraaz* 007 (8 May 2014), accessed 15 Mar 2015, https://www.ibraaz.org/projects/74.

[473] On the recent history (and success) of the "Gulf Labor" movement and artist boycott of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and other projects on Saadiyat Island in the United Arab Emirates, see Doris Bittar, "Cultural Settlements: Gulf Labor and Global Solidarity," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 2014): 253-266.

Destruction of artistic heritage for explosive urban development is an ongoing concern among artists in the Arabian Gulf. One young Saudi artist recently began working with precarious historic structures and turning them into shimmering architectural installations. For the 2017 "Safar" exhibition in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, artist Abdullah Al-Othman (b. 1985) created a site-specific installation at an abandoned nineteenth-century women's shelter "*al-Khunji al-kabir*."[474] Located in the exhibition's second staging area "The Home" (*al-Manzil*) in Jeddah's historic downtown district (known as "Al Balad" or "Al Qadima"), the old building was largely forgotten and overlooked until Al-Othman took large sheets of aluminum foil and wrapped every inch of the structure in the shiny metal leaves (**Figure 5.24**). Calling the installation artwork "Suspended," Al-Othman describes his temporary site-specific work as dealing with notions of change across time and space:

> In "Suspended," I created an intervention in *Al-Khunji Al-Kabir* in the old city of Jeddah in order to instill a renewed notion of its remarkable architectural style. I have covered the entire building with tin foil in a symbolic gesture to its frozen state. Buildings and cities, like people, have their own histories and go through their own journeys. By wrapping up the entire building, I sought to make a statement about the absurdity of thinking that the cycle of change could ever be stopped. As the old saying goes, change is the only constant thing in life. As the sun will shine on the *Khunji* and its rays will be reflected from the tin foil in all directions, it will inspire new emotions and ideas in people.[475]

Using historic nineteenth-century Islamic architecture to instill new art experiences, the monumentally scaled sculpture altered the built form and visual experience in the Old City of Jeddah.

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[474] Kevin Jones, "Once Upon a Time in Jeddah…" *Art Review Asia* (Summer 2017), accessed 14 Jan 2019, https://artreview.com/opinion/ara_summer_2017_opinion_kevin_jones/.

[475] Quoted in "The Home/Al-Manzil," *Safar*, Jeddah 21,39 exhibition catalogue, eds. Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: The Saudi Arts Council, 2017): 133.

The exteriors of the two-story corner building were enhanced through an industrial, everyday domestic material. Similar in visual appearance to chrome plating, and other futuristic materials in science fiction imagery, including space suits, the thin metal sheets stand out in stark contrast to the historic Jeddah's natural built materials of coral stones and wooden roofs.[476] Aluminum foil's innate qualities, such as electrical conductivity, heat conduction, radiation shield, and reflectivity, all enliven the exterior walls of the old Saudi women's shelter as its building form is transformed from matte to reflective silver. Replacing the historic materials of nineteenth-century Islamic architecture, the clinging metal sheets radiate sunlight and moving images off the enveloped structure. Through Al-Othman's intervention, the entire structure suddenly beamed brightly in sunlight alongside the muted neighboring dwellings as the site began to mirror and visually respond to its surrounding environment. In one sense, the contemporary artwork's "invasion" of foil wrapping around the women's shelter parallels the ongoing process of new industrialized infrastructures being introduced into the old urban fabric of Jeddah.[477]

The use of aluminum foil introduced a fragile and temporal second skin to the *Al-Khunji* women's shelter (**Figure 5.25**). Unlike the sumptuous flow of vertical fabric folds in the artist duo Cristo and Jeanne-Claude's famous 1995 "Wrapped Reichstag" environmental installation in Berlin, Al-Othman's aluminum foil covering clings tightly

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[476] Tawfiq M. Abu-Ghazzeh, "The Future of Jeddah-Al Qademah: Conservation or Redevelopment – Saudi Arabia," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 228.
[477] Jeddah's massive urban redevelopment projects began in the mid-twentieth-century, with the destruction of the Old City Wall in 1947. See Mahbub Rashhid and Ahmed Ali A. Bindajam, "Space, Movement and Heritage Planning of the Historic Cities in Islamic Societies: Learning from the Old City of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia," *URBAN DESIGN International* 20, no. 2 (2015): 111.

like a silver membrane to the building's surface exterior.[478] Or, as one art critic described

Al-Othman's installation, the Christo-esque act "is both startling and serene: encasing the

200-year-old property in a flimsy metallic layer, which is slowly disintegrating, makes

temporality strikingly corporeal."[479] Neighborhood residents and exhibition visitors

experienced their bodies reflected off of the silvery architectural casing as they walked

around it through Jeddah's narrow, windy streets. Along with activating the overlooked

site in ways where viewers could better see and appreciate its formal design and

decorative motifs, the aluminum foil also makes visual reference to historic Islamic

architectural designs. Indeed, the application of prismatic, multidirectional reflective

aluminum foil onto the building surface area mimics the practice of architectural designs

with mosaics of mirror-work (*aina-kari*), like the interior of Shah Chiragh Shrine in

Shiraz that in 1963 captured Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's creative interest and

lifelong artistic pursuit.[480] Developed in Iran for architectural decorative techniques, the

small cut pieces of mirror are arranged in various geometric and floral patterns to create

effulgent and illuminating effects. While glass in early modern to nineteenth-century Iran

was a highly prized and valuable commodity, in contrast to aluminum foil today, both

materials create lustrous images through refracted light across shifting surfaces. Along

with Persian interior design techniques, the pliability and structural qualities of aluminum

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[478] For a discussion of Christo's "Wrapped Reichstag" 1995 installation in the context of German nationalism and international art practices, see Beatrice Hanssen, "Christo's Wrapped Reichstag: Globalized Art in a National Context," *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 73 no. 4 (1998): 350-367.

[479] Gareth Harris, "Jeddah 21, 39" *Frieze* (10 Feb 2017), accessed 13 Jan, 2019, https://frieze.com/article/jeddah-2139.

[480] Eleanor Sims, "ĀĪNA-KĀRĪ," Encyclopædia Iranica, vol I, fasc. 7 (15 Dec 1984): 692-694.

foil also parallel the tensile fabric architecture of mobile tent traditions in Islamic history.[481]

        With "Suspended" in 2017 Jeddah, and his latest site-specific iteration in Al-Khubar in 2018, Al-Othman shifts the labor of preserving Islamic architectural heritage from cultural discourses, government policies, or abstract concepts and into an explicit and sardonic act of temporary suspension. At the same time, he upends aluminum foil from its housewares status of food storage to one of "preservation" that simultaneously conceals and reveals historic façades. During the course of the "Safar" exhibition, time and wind wore away the foil coverings and eroded them in an echo of the continuing loss of Jeddah's historic heritage from urban development, or general decay through neglect. The slow peeling away of the women shelter's shimmering skin illustrates how visualizing processes of urban deterioration can raise awareness to the energy and ever-present flux of history. It also offers an evocative counterpoint to regional engagements with history like recent "heritage"-derived ultramodern infrastructures in the Persian Gulf, as exemplified by the mega museum projects explored in Monira Al Qadiri's "Mythbusters" photographic series. By highlighting features of the structure, and revealing essences of old architectural form through a futuristic luster, aluminum foil becomes an agent of transformation, preservation, and transmission for the beauty of the past. It mediates between pre-existing understandings of heritage, and shifting states of existence in Islamic societies between the past, present, and future.

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[481] Gruber, "Islamic Architecture on the Move" (2014): 252-256.

Conclusion: A Future Islamic Cosmos

Artist experiments with science fiction practices, otherworldly imaginings, and artistic heritage of the Islamic world offer new understandings of the primacy of historic materials in shaping contemporary visual landscapes and future possibilities. While these artworks suggest the tenacity and metamorphic capabilities of Islamic traditions, they more importantly demonstrate how artists navigate scientific advances and new cultural horizons. Working with the prospective potentialities in science fiction and futurism aesthetics enables artists to strategically unbind themselves from the art historical burden of situating their work "authentically" within Islamic heritage, and to instead freely imagine limitless possible pasts and futures while concurrently addressing issues of the here and now. Since 1958 Tehran, artists have likewise sought to incorporate popular Islamic symbolism and everyday materials into an expanding universe of images in transnational contemporary art.[482] Through these recent futuristic experiments, artists engaging with the refractory images and materials from historically Islamic societies can shift the artwork from references to the everyday to reveal (and perhaps even realize) future possibilities and symbolic worlds.

From the international space race and 1969 *Apollo 11* moon landing, to current accelerated hyper-visual developments and technological ambivalences exemplified in "Gulf Futurism" and other projects about the oil-rich Persian Gulf, artists of the Middle East continue to traverse new artmaking strategies in a world that is constantly changing

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[482] Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic* Mode (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), 144-145.

while simultaneously reverberating with symbolic matter from the past.[483] By traversing

an array of creative practices, these artistic engagements with science fiction imaginaries

act like vessels through time and space, revealing the sublime resonances between

persistent historic Islamic pasts and future cosmic imaginaries.

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[483] Roger Luckhurst describes technological ambivalence as one of the presiding spirits of science fiction engagement. See Luckhurst "Introduction," in *Science Fiction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005): 5.

Conclusion

With the establishment of the Tehran Biennial in 1958, artists working in Iran and the Arab East increasingly participated in transnational art movements at a time when historical Islamic art traditions were dissipating due to ongoing modernization and foreign interventions across the region. Driven in part by a search for alternative genealogies to modernism other than European historical lineages, artists increasingly sought ways to mediate historic prototypes into new art contexts. Such imaginative engagements reveal a vanguard strategy to lay claim to independent trajectories in a globalizing art world. This dissertation demonstrates how several prominent artists since the late 1950s have steadily experimented with Islamic heritage contexts to generate new visual languages and conceptual models. Some artists turned to mythic traditions, such as the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, while others explored popular religious heritage, including amuletic motifs or folk depictions of the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey, as fertile grounds for avant-garde experiments. As such, their artworks contribute material for the study of Islamic art history and global modernism while avoiding essentialist constructions of Islam, or the dogma of modern art as the prerogative of North Atlantic spheres. Instead, it situates creative art practices in the Islamic world within the broader contours of transnational modernism, Islamic heritage, and the uneven modernization process that transpired within historically Muslim societies since the mid-twentieth-century.

While these progressions have been the focus of recent studies in Islamic art history, scholars have emphasized issues of museum collecting practices, artifact exhibition and display, and the field's own historiography as incorporated within the larger Eurocentric paradigms of art-historical scholarship. Likewise, narratives framing modernism in the Middle East as either a historical "rupture" or "continuity" with Islamic tradition have proved productive, yet these historical models often reify Islamic art as rooted in a monolithic, pre-modern past. Rather than continuing along these lines, this dissertation traces formative artistic engagements with vernacular heritage of the Islamic world. Structured for the most part chronologically, each chapter focuses on one to two artists by examining and historically contextualizing their creative experiments in relation to relevant materials and other artworks. In bringing together a selection of these artists' works into critical discussion, this study begins to reveal how artistic experiments with symbolic languages and materials in everyday Islamic heritage can generate new creative worlds for artmaking.

Contending with varying accentuations of heritage in the present day, as these artists do, deliberately enacts a dynamic relationship with history in dialogue with contemporary culture, rather than a static or one-sided engagement.[484] This conceptualization bypasses the common dismissal of historical Islamic artistic traditions as inert, or denuded practices under the onset of European and American colonialism, power, and influence. Yet by the late 1950s the salient possibilities of charismatic "traditional," "folk," and "Islamic" materials attracted many artists seeking to buck established genres and perceptions of modern art. These materials also provided artists ways to incorporate new regimes of representation in modernization within contentions

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[484] Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* (2013), 33.

over cultural transformation and linkages to the past. Transfigured onto artworks through new methods, materials, and practices, this constellation of creative impulses with Islamic heritage and its popular practices unleashed a sustainable avant-garde for visual arts in a modernizing Middle East.

Likewise, in terms of a visual worldmaking or a symbolic cosmos, Argus Fletcher's argument for a "dual meaning of the Greek word *kosmos*" helps signify the totality of a human universe in which artists eagerly participate. A cosmos as a visual system also stands for the vivid emblems by which the inhabitants and components of the world identify themselves within its heraldic order."[485] As the concept and allegorical function of a visual cosmos denotes a large-scale macrocosm and the small-scale microcosm, as well as the ordering of these powerful agents and images,[486] it encapsulates the plurality of devices and materials with which artists can explore and participate in the world through creative efforts. It also offers the sense of an expanding universe of images, where the process of discovery is encompassed within its assemblage, as the cosmos "has to expand with the expansion of knowledge itself."[487] Motivated by a constellation of interests, these artists and their creative outputs contributed to broader research and understanding of popular images, symbols, practices, and changing ways of being in historically Muslim societies. As such, their search for effective ways to represent the vividness of everyday life realized and imagined a new Islamic cosmos for the contemporary world.

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[485] Crow, *The Long March of Pop* (2014), 33.
[486] Fletcher, *Allegory* (1964), 113.
[487] Ibid, 144-145.

Figures

Figure 1
Marcos Grigorian, The First Exhibition of Tehran Biennial (*Biyannal-i Tihran: dawra-i avval: hunar'ha-yi ziba-yi kishvar*), cover illustration (Tehran: General Administration of Fine Arts, Publications & Relations Dept., April, 1958), 1.

بیمایگانیکه نام خود را از بی‌نامی هنرمندان جسته‌اند
فقط به باستانی بودن و هنر قدیمی تکیه کردن کافی نیست ، باید بگوئیم
آیا ماشایستهٔ آنهمه میراث نیاکان خود هستیم یانه .

Figure 2
Marcos Grigorian, published essay and photographs in *Anahita* magazine, c. 1958-1959
Iran, unpaged.
Private collection.

Figure 3
Mohammad Modabber, The Tragedy of Karbala (*musibat karbala*), c. 1905 Iran
Oil painting on canvas
Reproduced in Hadi Seyf,*"Coffee-House" Painting* (Tehran: Reza 'Abbasi Museum,
1990), p. 107.

Figure 4
Jewad Selim with Shakir Hassan Al Said (seated) reading aloud the manifesto of the
Baghdad Group for Modern Art at the group's inaugural exhibition, 1951 Iraq.
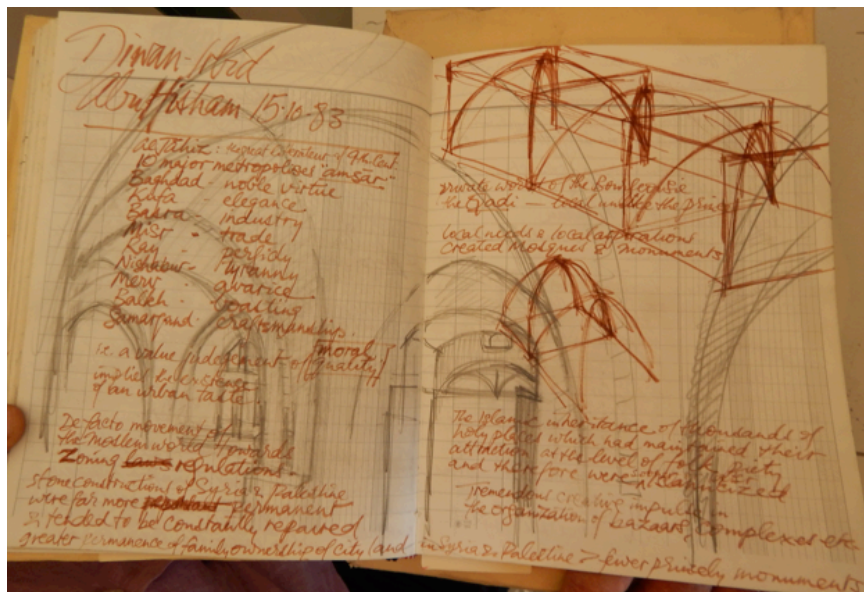
Figure 5
Notes and architectural vaulting sketches in Ali Jabri's 1983 Notebook, unpaged.
Ali Jabri Heritage Foundation, Amman.
Photograph by author, Amman, October 2016.

Figure 1.1
Siah Armajani, Book, 1957 Iran
Ink, watercolor, and colored pencil on paper (24 x 12½ in.)
Private Collection of Larry Marcus.
Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Grey Gallery.

Figure 1.2
The Angel Israfil blowing a trumpet on the Day of Judgment, from a manuscript of al-
Qazwini's *The Wonders of Creation* (*'aja'ib al-makhluqat*), late 14th – early 15th century
Egypt or Syria.
Opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on paper. Text describes Archangel Gabriel, whose
entry begins on this folio.
Courtesy of the British Museum 1963,0420,0.1.

Figure 1.3
Lithographic print of Archangel Israfil in weekly journal banner.
From the first issue of *Sur-e Israfil* (The Trumpet Call of Israfil) weekly periodical,
published in Tehran, May 30, 1907 – March 1909.
Source: Digital scan from University of Bonn: Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek, 2015.
Available at: http://digitale-sammlungen.ulb.uni-
bonn.de/ulbbnioa/periodical/pageview/4287074

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Siah Armajani, Lock & Key, 1958 Iran
Ink, watercolor, and wax seal on paper (14¾ x 9¼ in.)
Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Grey Gallery.

Figure 1.5
Photograph of votive locks and Hand of Abbas *panjah* brass standard attached to metal
grill of *saqqakhaneh* water fountain, 20th century Iran.
Source: https://www.cloob.com/photo/zabihmand/836811/175686

Figure 1.6
Siah Armajani, Fairytale, 1957 Iran
Ink, wax seal, collaged elements on paper
Private Collection. Courtesy of the artist and the Walker Art Center.
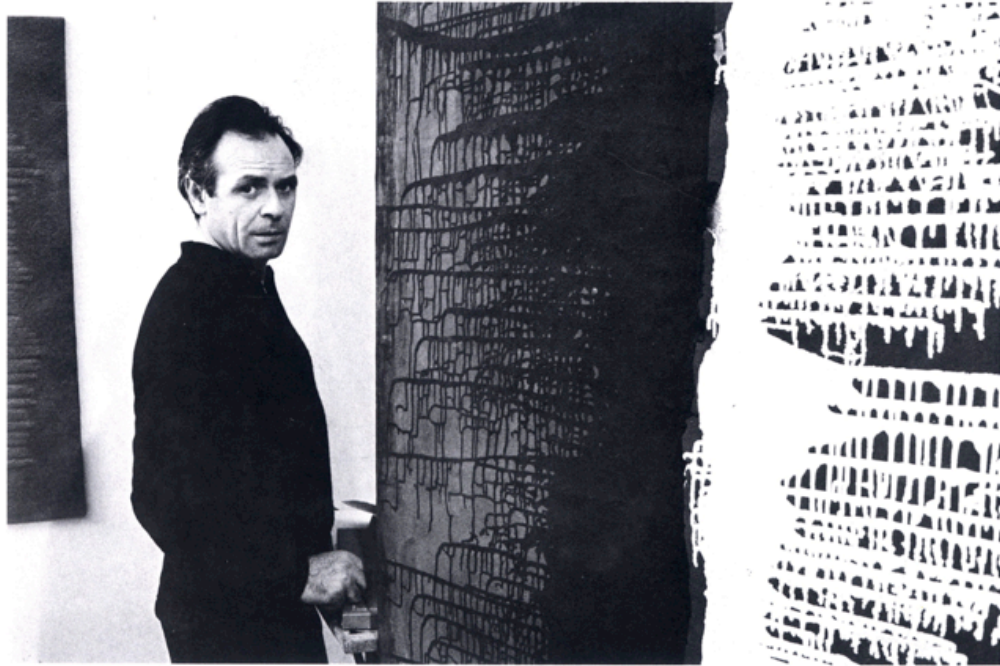
Figure 1.7
Photograph of Marcos Grigorian at his 14th St. Studio, 1962 New York City
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Figure 1.8
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Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum Amsterdam Collection 4170-3.

Figure 1.9
Mohammad Modabber, The Tragedy of Karbala (*musibat karbala*), c. 1905 Iran
Oil painting on canvas
Reproduced in Hadi Seyf,*"Coffee-House" Painting* (Tehran: Reza 'Abbasi Museum,
1990), p. 107.

Figure 1.10
Photograph of Pardeh-Khani story telling in front of a *pardeh* "coffeehouse" painting in
front of Haji Ghani Mosque, 1956 Iran
Source: http://www.iranpoliticsclub.net/history/Sammeh-Qod/index.htm
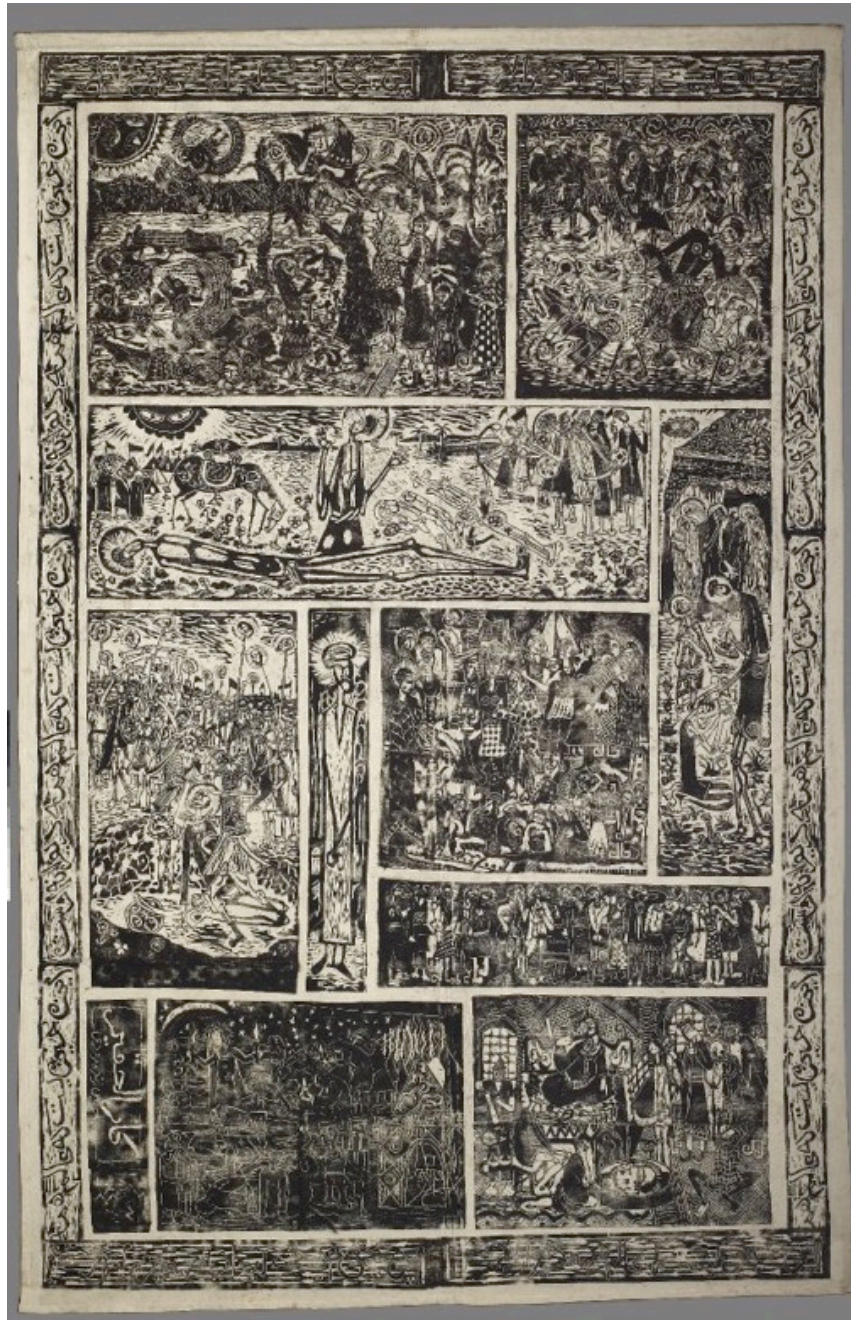
Figure 1.11
Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Who Is This Husayn Everybody Is Crazy About?, 1958 Iran
Black ink linocut on linen. First exhibited in 1960.
Courtesy of the British Museum.

Figure 1.12
Alberto Giacometti, Man Pointing, 1947 France
Molded bronze sculpture
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Figure 1.14
Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, A View of Islam, reprinted 1961 Iran
Black ink linocut on cloth.
Courtesy of the Grey Art Gallery, NYU Art Collection, G1975.40

Figure 1.15
Husayn Zaydi Latifi (Sayyid 'Arab), The Battle of Karbala, c. 1950 Iran
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Courtesy of Harvard Fine Arts Library, Special Collections. HOLLIS Number
olvwork693282.

Figure 1.16
Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, A View of Islam, reprinted 1961 Iran
Black ink linocut on silver foil (19 ½ x 17 7/8 in.)
Courtesy of the Grey Art Gallery, NYU Art Collection, G1975.39.

Figure 1.17
Javad Tabatabai, Horse and Arrow, 1957 Iran
Oil paint on rolled canvas
Image reproduced in *Saqqakhaneh* 1977 exhibition catalogue, unpaged.
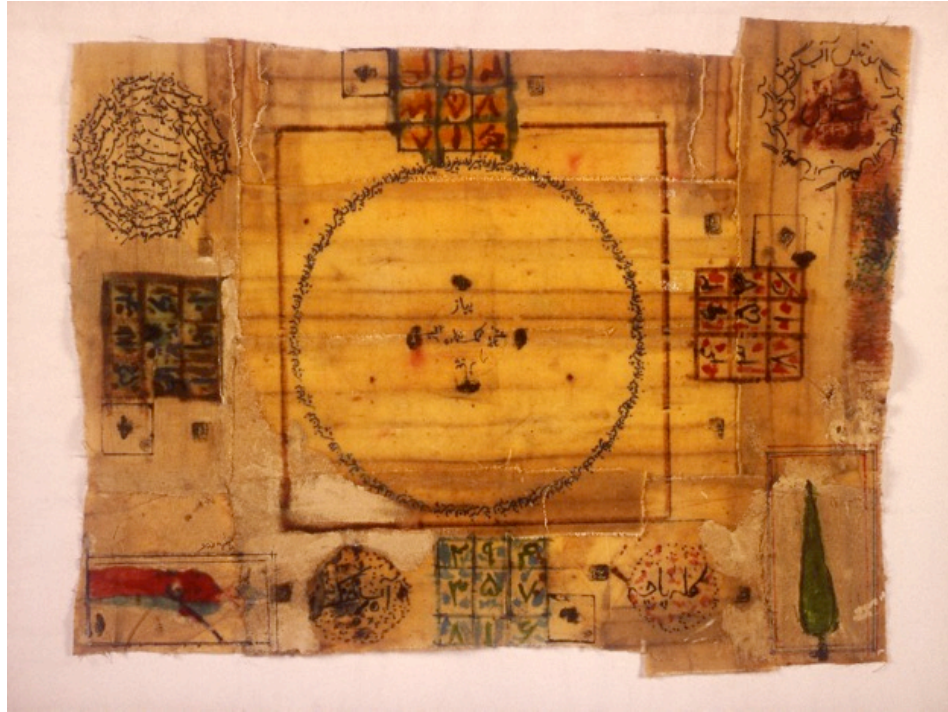
Figure 1.18
Siah Armajani, Sofra #1, 1957 Iran.
Ink, watercolor, wax seal on cloth (18½ x 29¼ in.)
Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Grey Gallery.
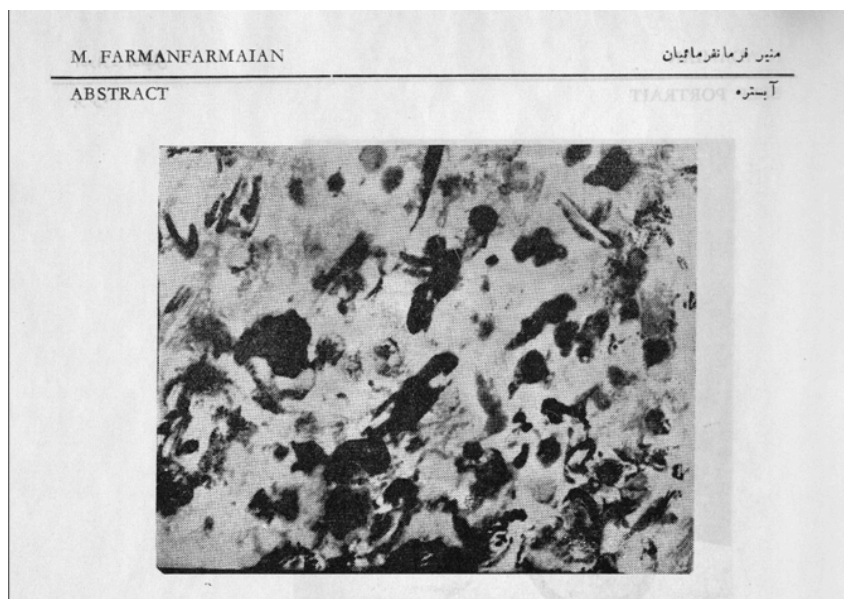
Figure 1.19
Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Abstract (*abstra*), c.1957-1958
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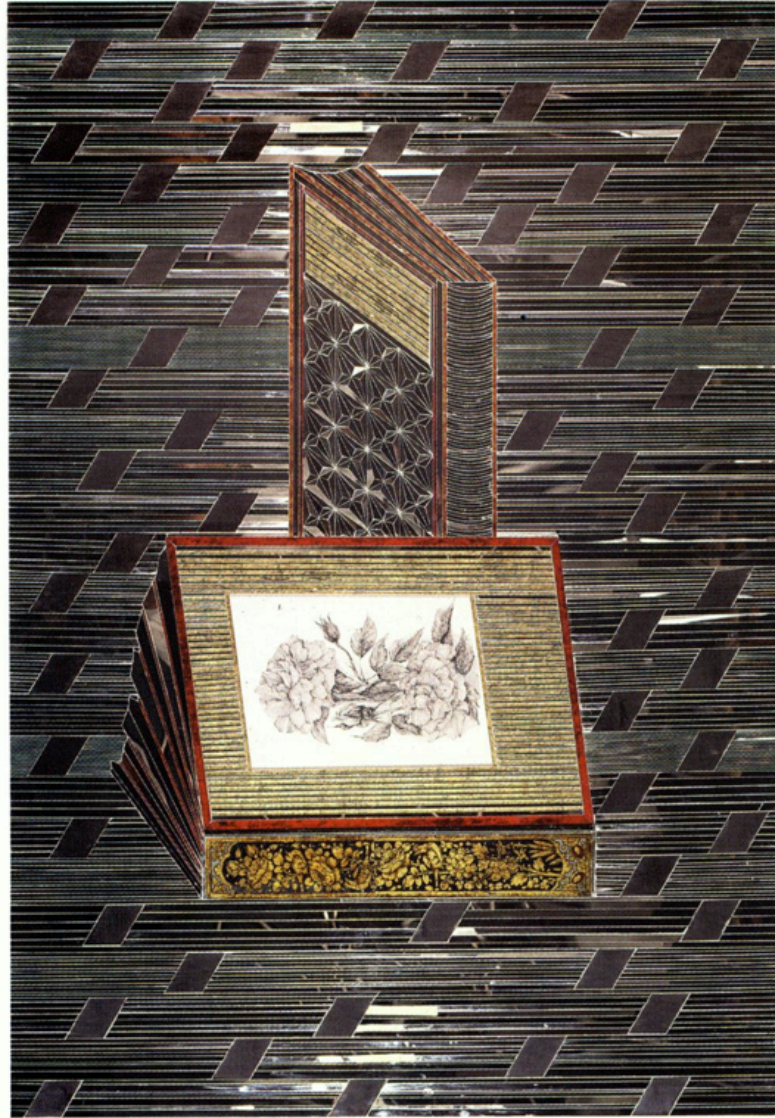
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Mirror, old and new reverse-glass painting and plaster on wood
Private collection, Tehran. Photo courtesy of the Third Line Gallery, Dubai.
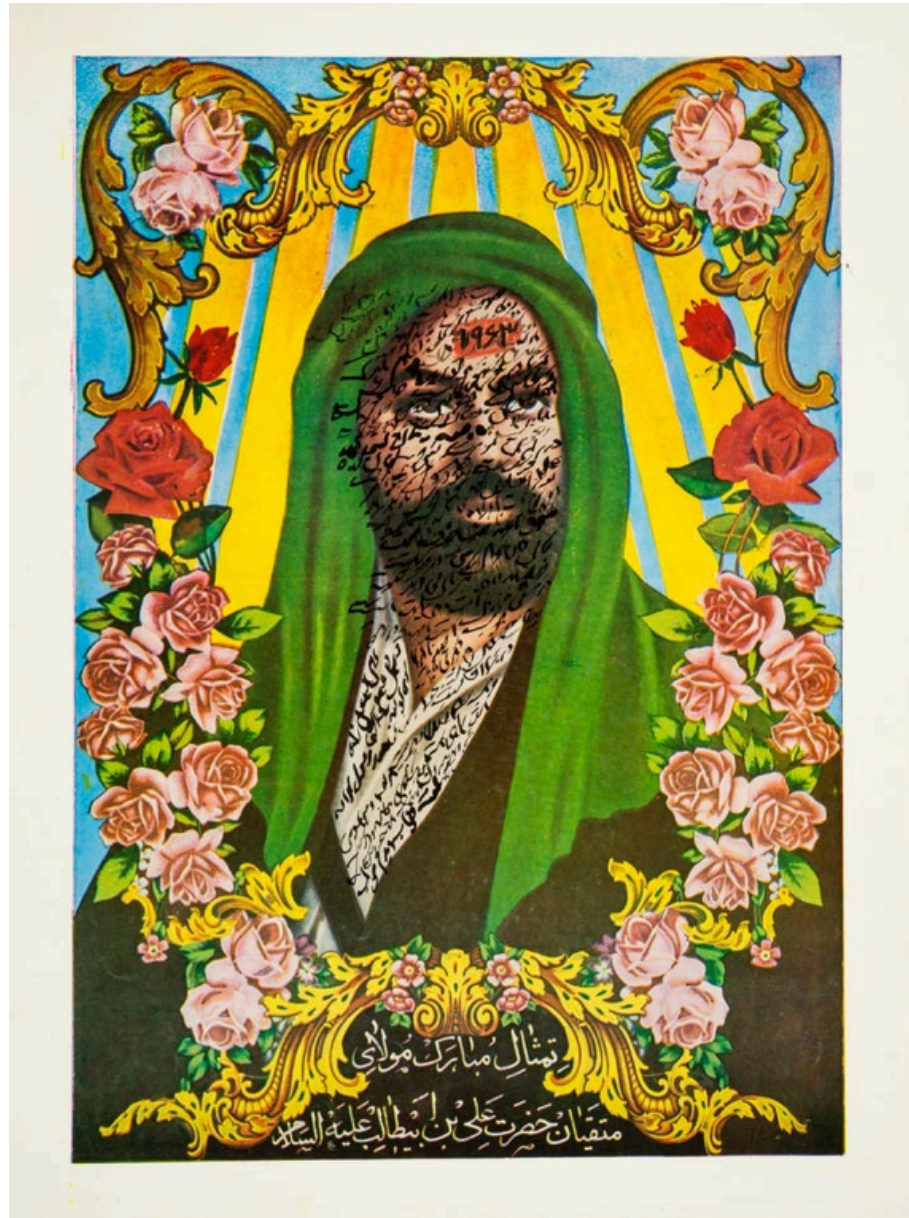
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Siah Armajani, Hazrat 'Ali, 1963 Iran
Poster print with black ink writing
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Figure 2.1
"Tikrit – al-Arba'in ['Moslem shrine of the Arba'in - 'the Forty' - stucco decoration']"
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Figure 2.2
Photograph of Rafa Nasiri in the Institute for Fine Arts in Baghdad, 1958
Courtesy of the Rafa Nasiri Archive, Amman

Figure 2.3
Photograph of Rafa Nasiri with a friend in front of the Academy of Fine Arts in Peking
(Beijing), 1961
Courtesy of the Rafa Nasiri Archive, Amman.

Figure 2.4
Rafa Nasiri, Untitled, 1962 Beijing
Woodcut on rice paper (40 x 56 cm)
Courtesy of the Rafa Nasiri Archive, Amman.

Figure 2.5
Rafa Nasiri, Untitled, 1963 Beijing
Woodcut on rice paper (40 x 56 cm)
Courtesy of the Rafa Nasiri Archive, Amman.
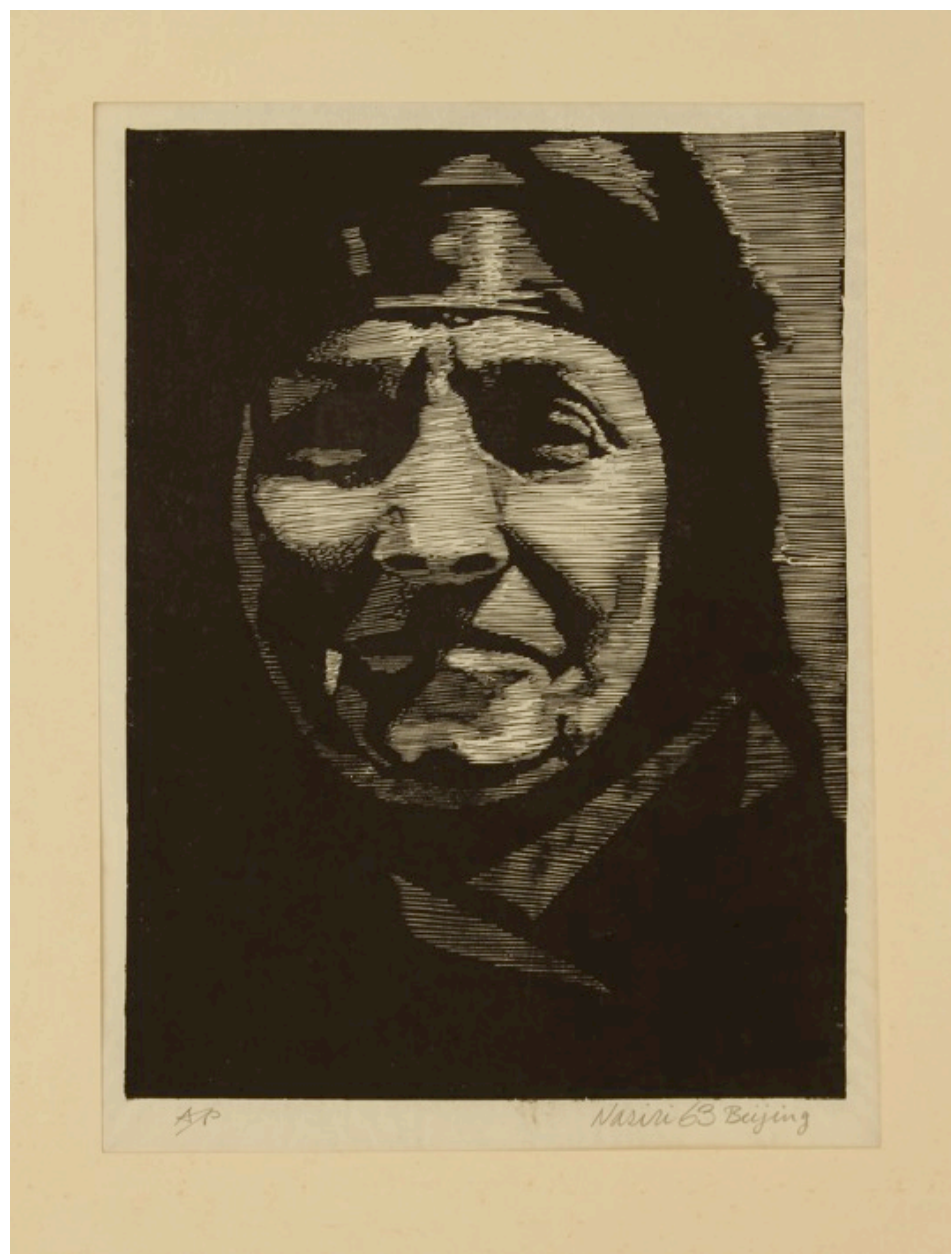
Figure 2.6
Rafa Nasiri, My Mother, 1963 Beijing
Woodcut on rice paper (35 x 25 cm)
Courtesy of the Rafa Nasiri Archive, Amman.
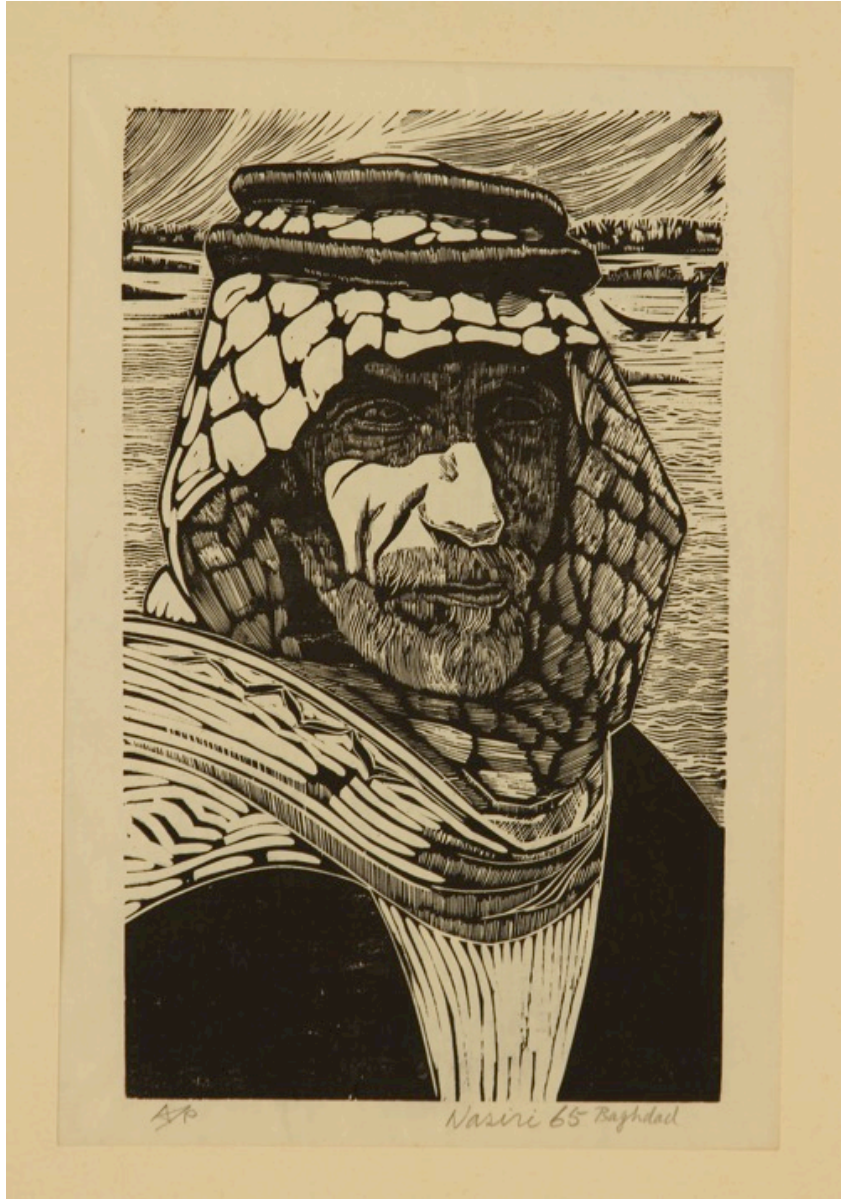
Figure 2.7
Rafa Nasiri, Image, 1965 Baghdad
Woodcut on rice paper (17 x 27 cm)
Courtesy of the Rafa Nasiri Archive, Amman
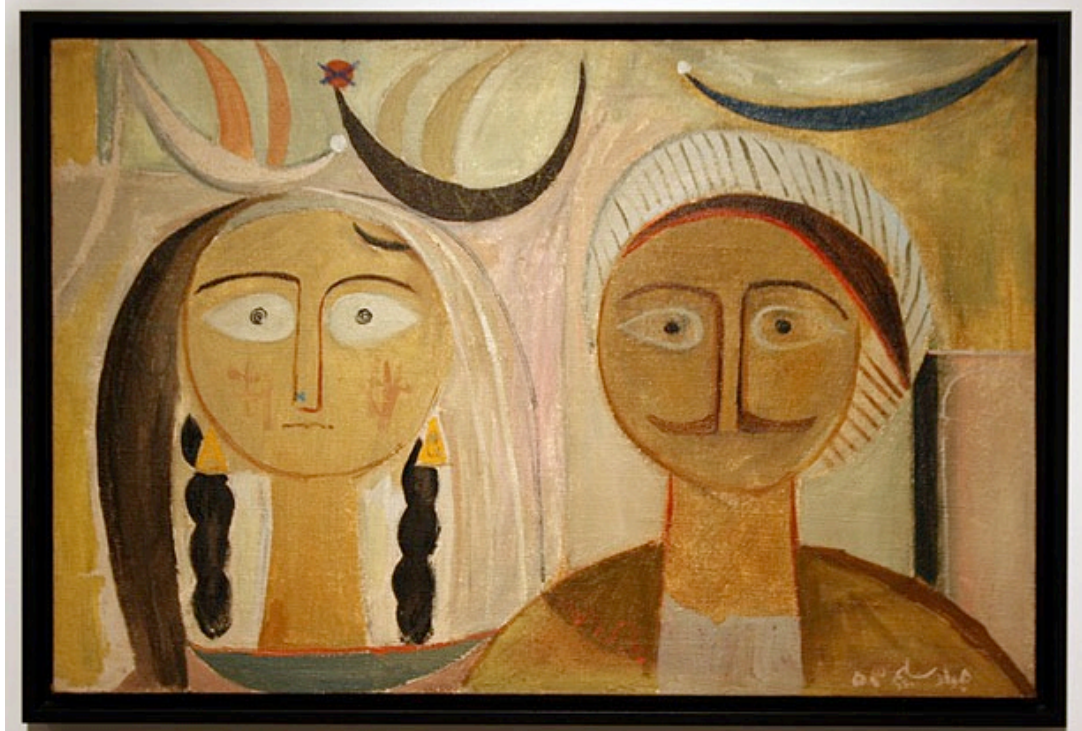
Figure 2.8
Jewad Selim, Young Man and Wife, 1953 Baghdad
Oil painting on canvas
Courtesy of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha.
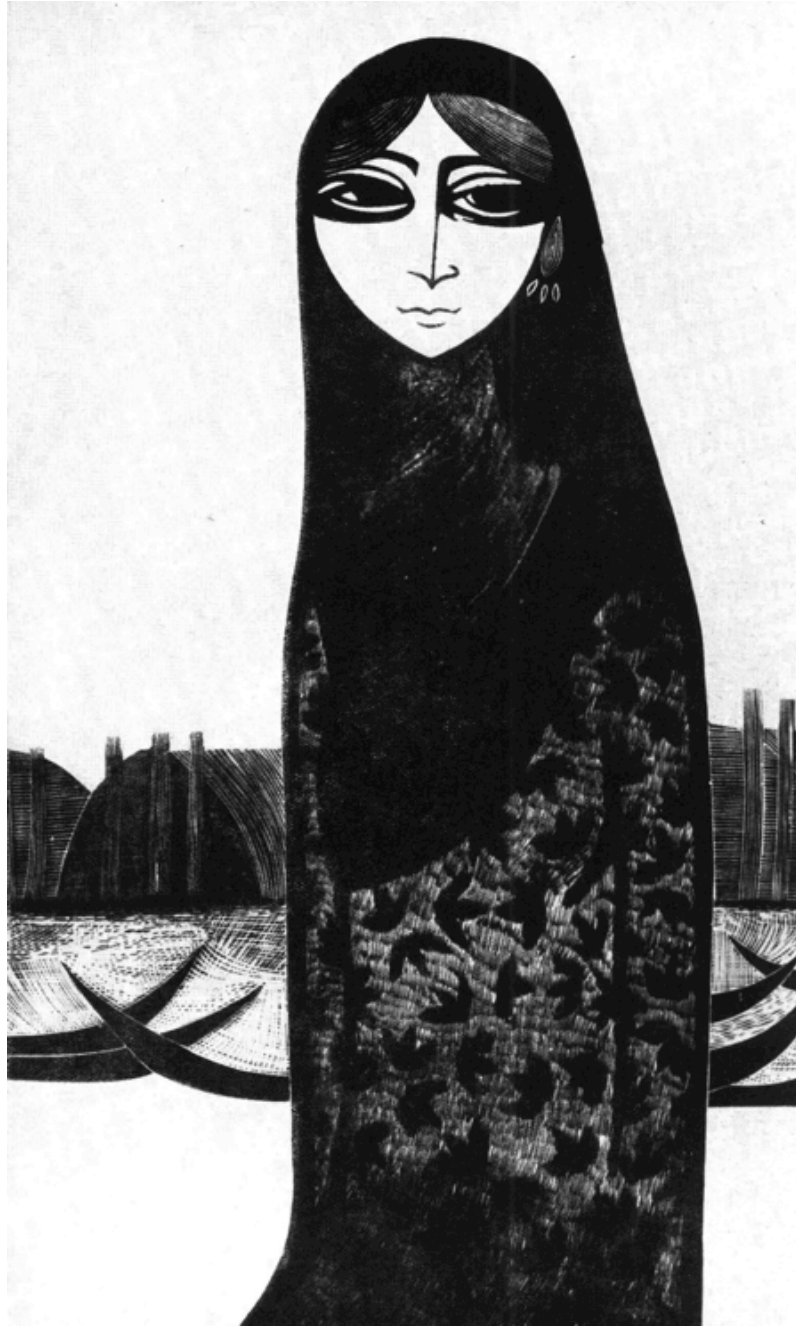
Figure 2.9
Rafa Nasiri, The Marshes (*al-ahwar*) Girl, 1965 Baghdad.
Woodcut (60 x 40 cm)
Courtesy of the Rafa Nasiri Archive, Amman.
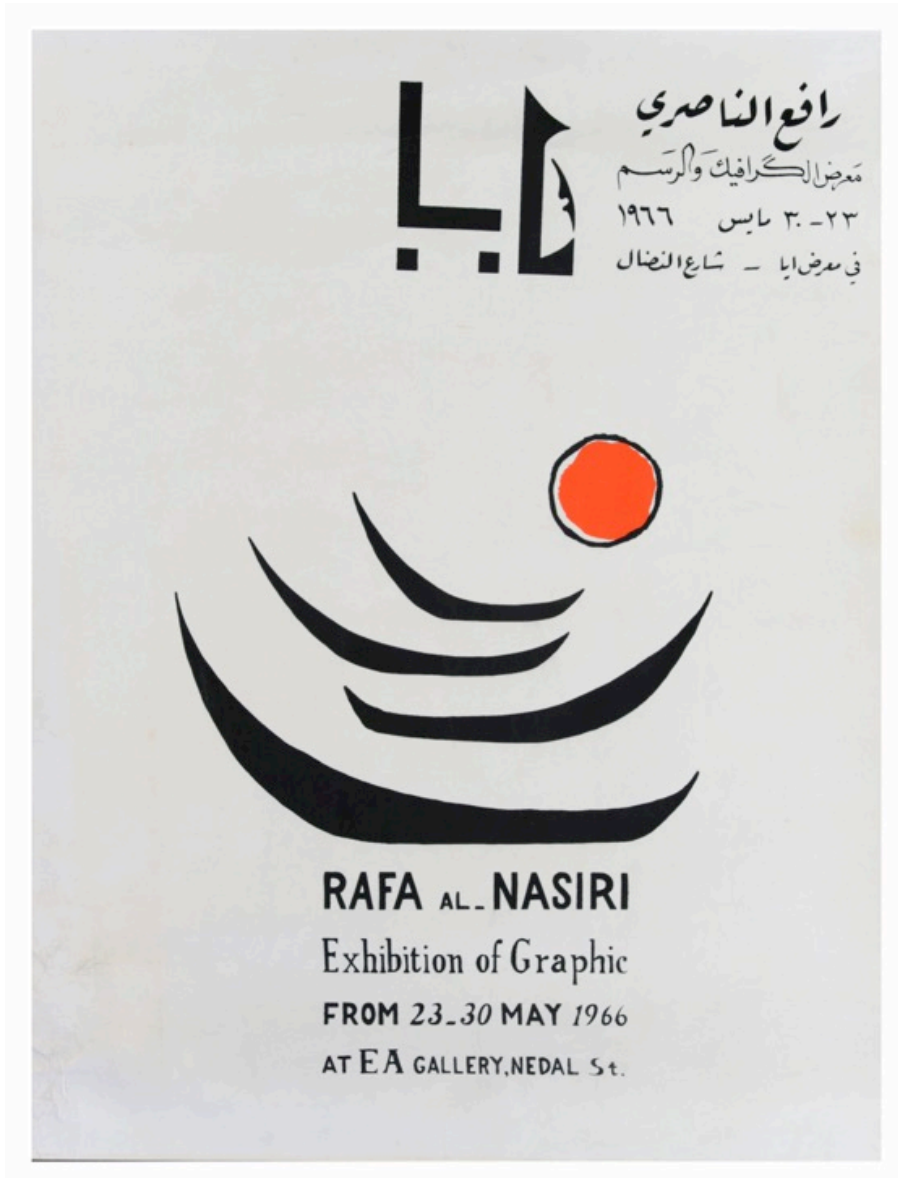
Figure 2.10
Rafa Nasiri, Exhibition of Graphic and Drawing Poster, 1966 Baghdad
Woodcut poster (42 x 22 cm)
Courtesy of the Rafa Nasiri Archive, Amman.

Figure 2.11
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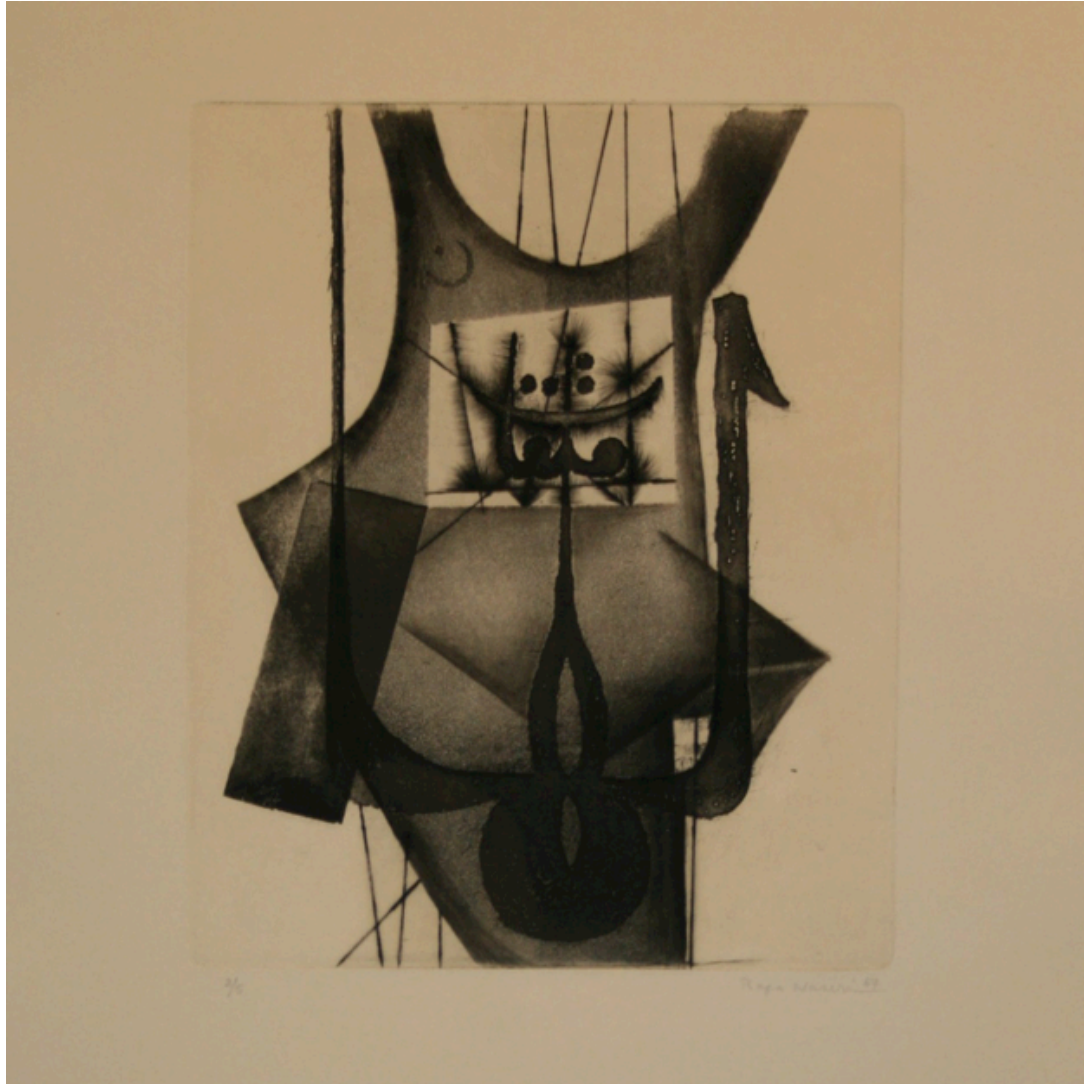
Figure 2.12
Rafa Nasiri, Untitled, 1967 Gravura, Lisbon.
Lithograph (24 x 19.5 cm)
Courtesy of the Rafa Nasiri Archive, Amman.

Figure 2.13
Rafa Nasiri, Image, 1968 Lisbon
Etching (30 x 25 cm)
Courtesy of the Rafa Nasiri Archive, Amman.

Figure 2.14
Rafa Nasiri, Image, 1968 Lisbon
Etching (30 x 25 cm)
Courtesy of the Rafa Nasiri Archive, Amman.

Figure 2.15
Rafa Nasiri, Image, 1968 Lisbon
Etching (30 x 25 cm)
Courtesy of the Rafa Nasiri Archive, Amman.

Figure 2.16
Rafa Nasiri, Untitled (*Colored Horizons*), 1969-1970 Baghdad
Acrylic paint and found Muharram textile on wood
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Photograph by author, Amman, March 2016.

Figure 2.17
Woodblock printed Shi'i Islamic calligraphic banner, c. 1960s Iraq
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Mahmoud Sabri, The Hero (*al-baṭal*), 1963 Moscow
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Courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

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Collection of the National Museum of Modern Art in Baghdad, on public display as of
Fall 2019
Courtesy of Ahmed Al-Naji.

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'Abbas al-Musari, The Battle of Karbala, 19th- to 20th-century Iran
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Courtesy of Harvard Fine Arts Library, HOLLIS olvwork671252.

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Abdul Qadir Al Obaidi, 14 July Revolution, 1958 Baghdad
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Courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

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Photograph of Iraqi Communist Party-sponsored mourning procession (*mawakib ʿaza*) in
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Figure 2.24
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Unknown private collection. Source: Bonhams auction catalogue, April 2017

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Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 2.27
Dia Azzawi, 'Ashura Day (*yawm al-'ashura*) 1969 Baghdad
Oil on canvas painting, displayed at the 1969 New Vision Group exhibition
Courtesy of the artist.
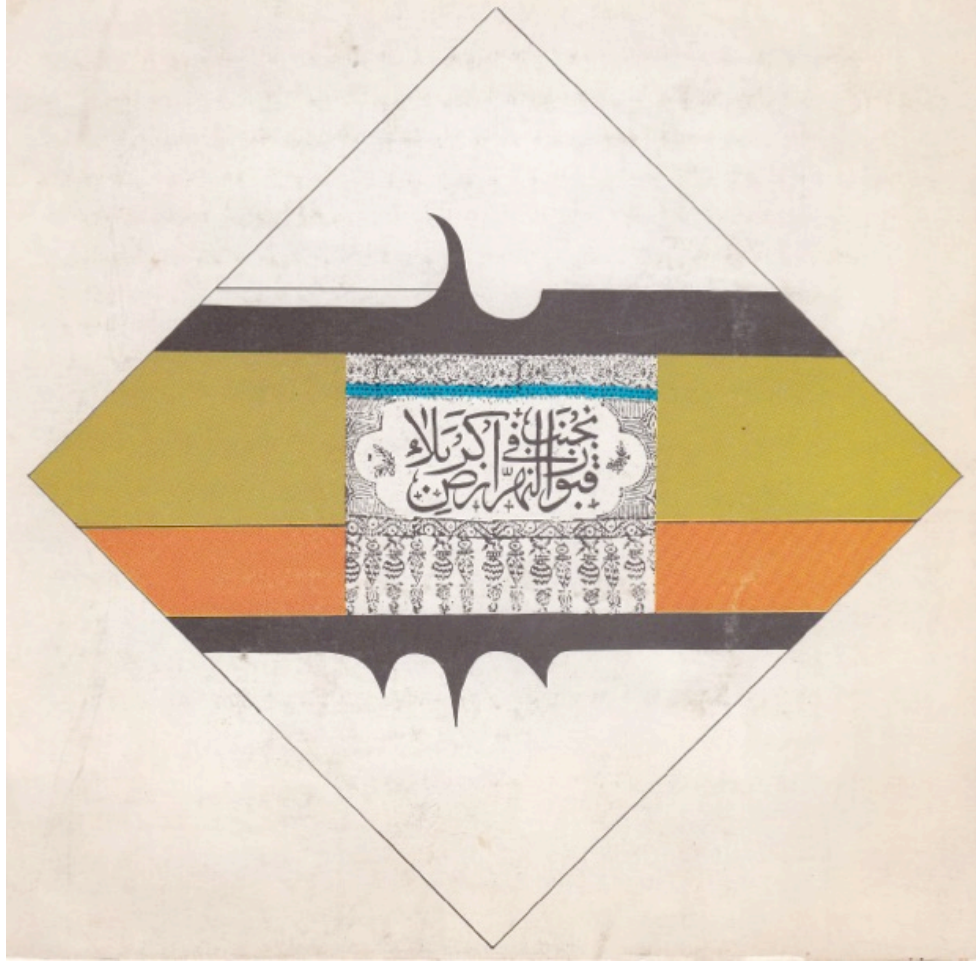
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Ismail al-Khaid, "The Atmosphere of Religion" (*'ajwa' al-dinia*), 1965 Baghdad
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Courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

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Entrance to the Museum of Popular Traditions, Amman, Jordan.
Photograph by author, June 2016

Figure 3.2
Map of 1967 War. BBC News, 4 June 2007

Figure 3.3
Ancient Roman theatre in downtown Amman, Jordan.
Photograph by author, Amman, April 2016.
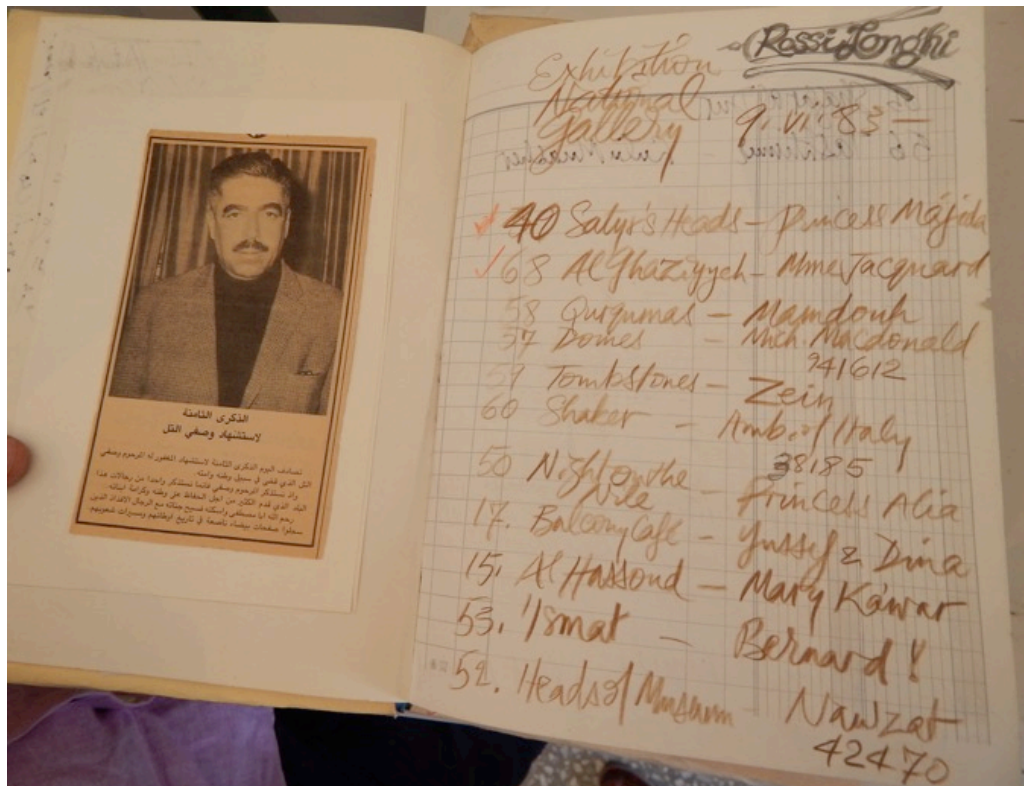
Figure 3.4
Wasfi al-Tal's newspaper obituary inside Ali Jabri's 1983 Notebook
Courtesy of the Ali Jabri Heritage Foundation, Amman
Photograph by author, Amman, October 2016.
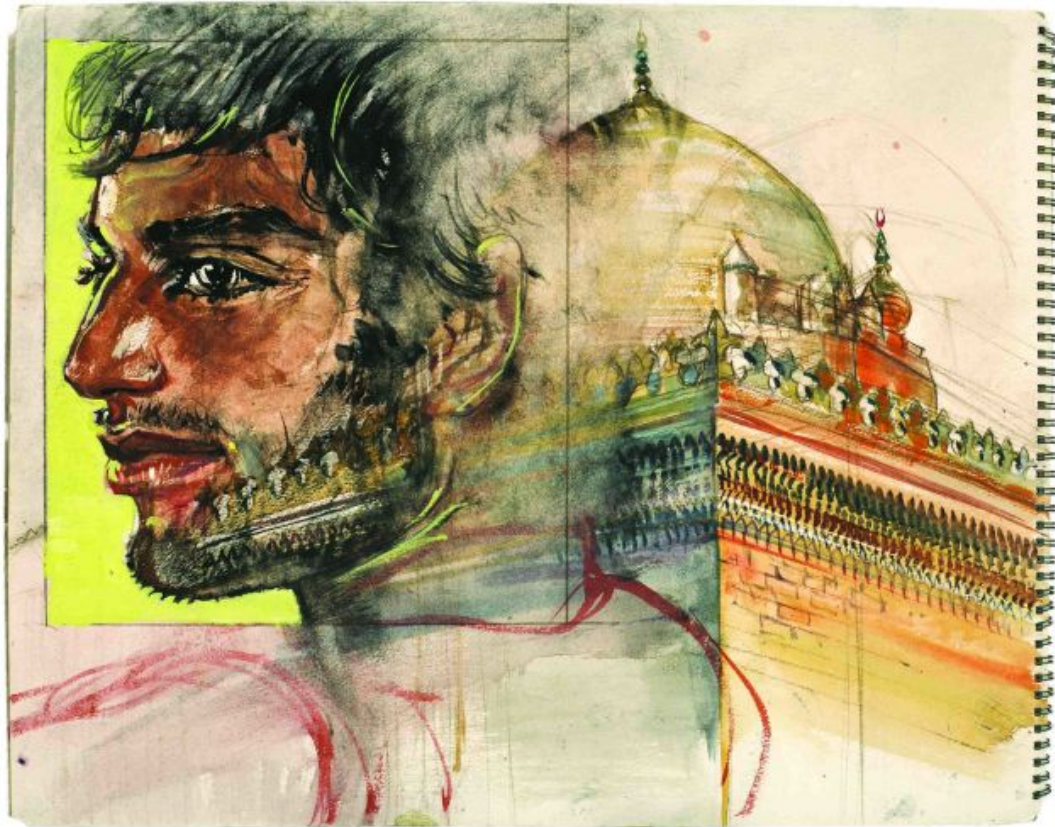
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Ali Jabri, Untitled journal page from 1977 Cairo diaries
Ink and gouache on paper
Courtesy of the Sharjah Art Foundation.

Figure 3.6
Ali Jabri "Self-Portrait" c. 1962-64 diaries.
Ink and gouache on paper sketch
Image reproduced in *About This Man Called Ali* (2009), p. 65
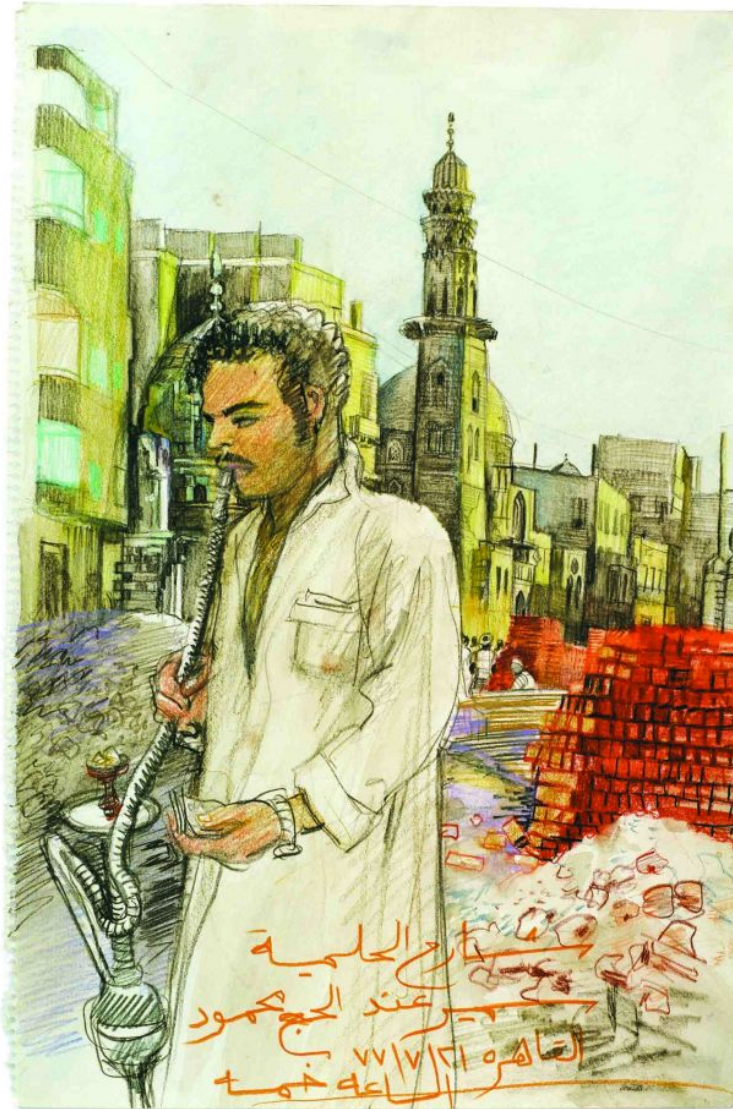
Figure 3.7
Ali Jabri, Untitled journal page from 1977 Cairo diaries
Ink and gouache on paper
Courtesy of the Sharjah Art Foundation.

Figure 3.8
Ali Jabri, Untitled journal page from 1977 Cairo diaries.
Ink and gouache on paper
Courtesy of the Sharjah Art Foundation.
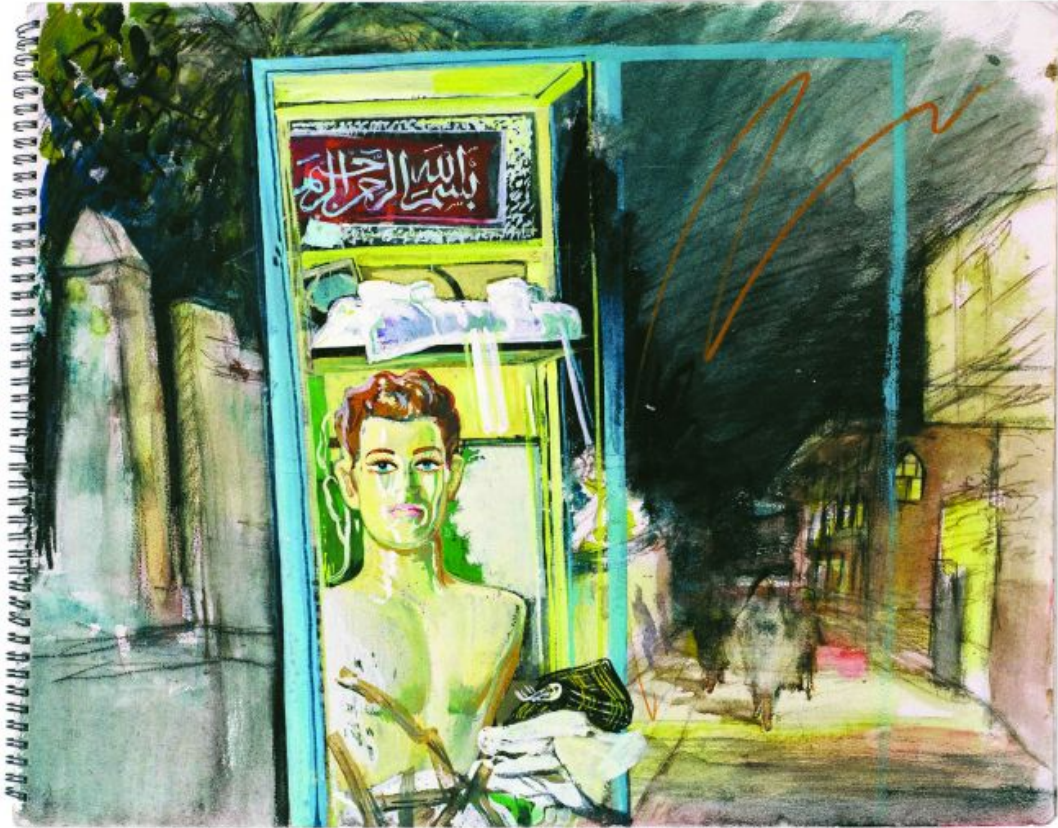
Figure 3.9
Ali Jabri, "Into the Night, Cairo," from 1977 Cairo diaries.
Courtesy of the Sharjah Art Foundation
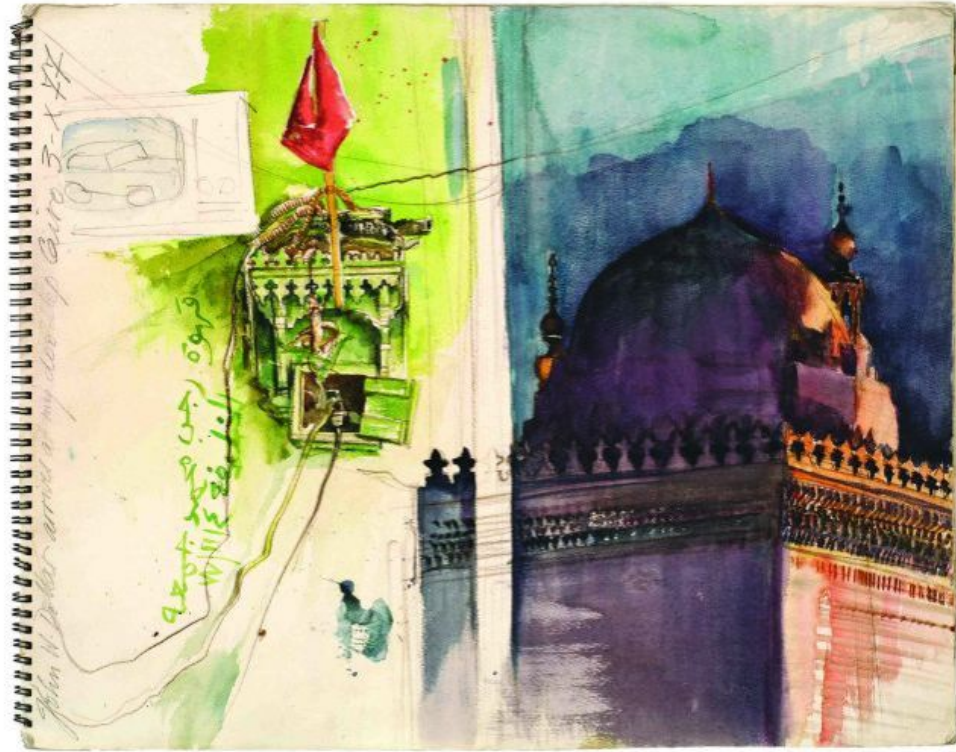
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Ali Jabri, Untitled journal page from 1977 Cairo diaries.
Courtesy of the Sharjah Art Foundation

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Newspaper clipping of Gilan Sami, "Museum lessons in Islamic art heritage," from the *Kuwait Times* (22 Nov 1983) in Ali Jabri's 1983 Jordan journal.
Photograph by author, Amman, November 2016

Figure 3.12
Main entrance costumes display in the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions.
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Figure 3.13
Ali Jabri designed display cases, labels, and stands in the Jordan Museum of Popular
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Figure 3.14
Ancient Roman mosaics display in the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions.
Photograph by author, Amman, July 2016

Figure 3.15
Ali Jabri, Folklore Decorations, display case and label design in the Jordan Museum of
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Photograph by author, Amman, July 2016

Figure 3.16
Ali Jabri, Arab Coffee, display case, didactic, and ink sketch in the Jordan Museum of
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Photograph by author, Amman, July 2016

Figure 3.17
Ali Jabri, Agate Jewelry, display case in the Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions,
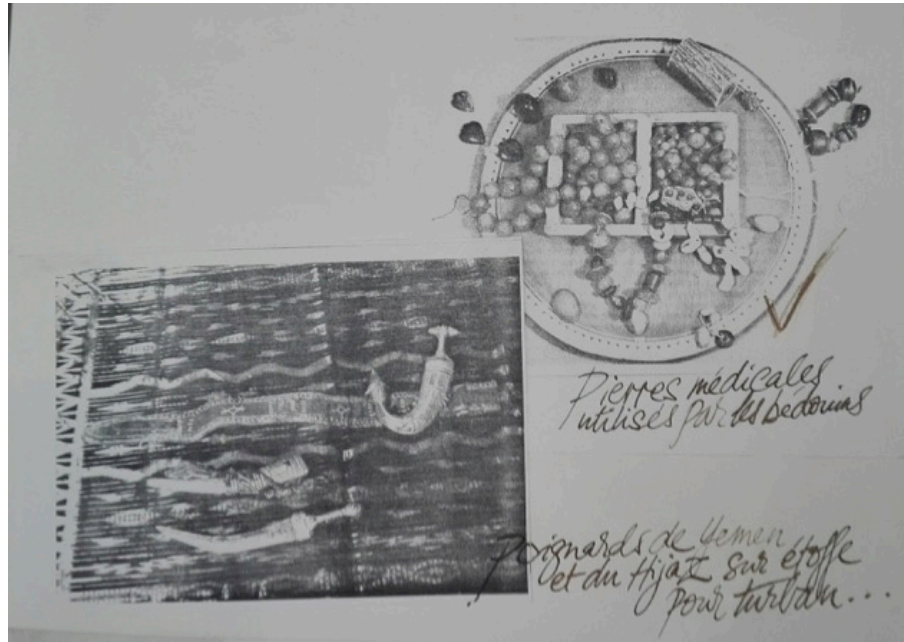Amman
Photograph by author, Amman, July 2016

Figure 3.18
Ali Jabri's proposal to attend the museum training at the Musée des Arts et Traditions
Populaires in Paris, 1982
Courtesy of the Ali Jabri Heritage Foundation, Amman
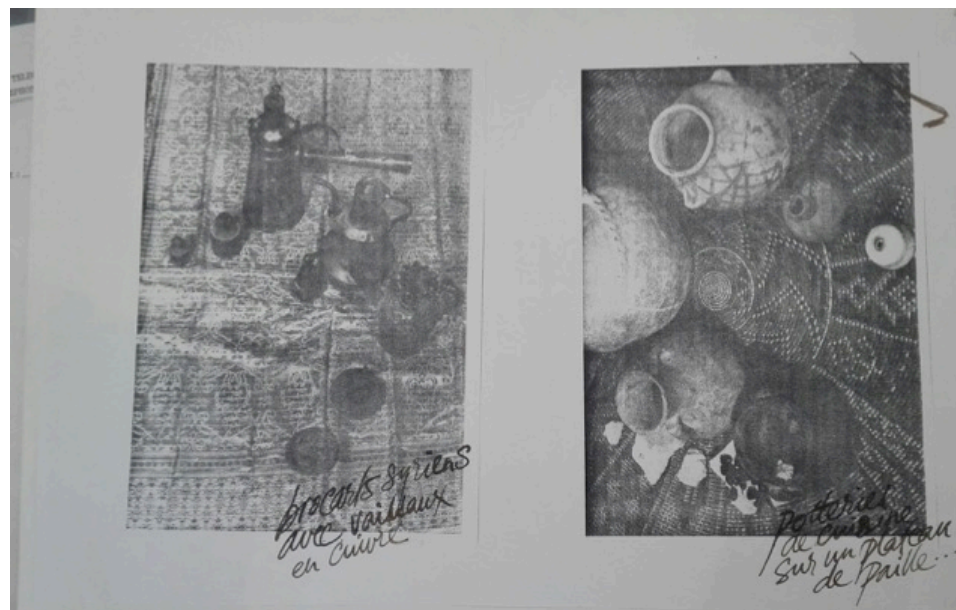Photograph by author, Amman, August 2016

Figure 3.19
Ali Jabri's proposal to attend the museum training at the Musée des Arts et Traditions
Populaires in Paris, 1982
Courtesy of the Ali Jabri Heritage Foundation, Amman
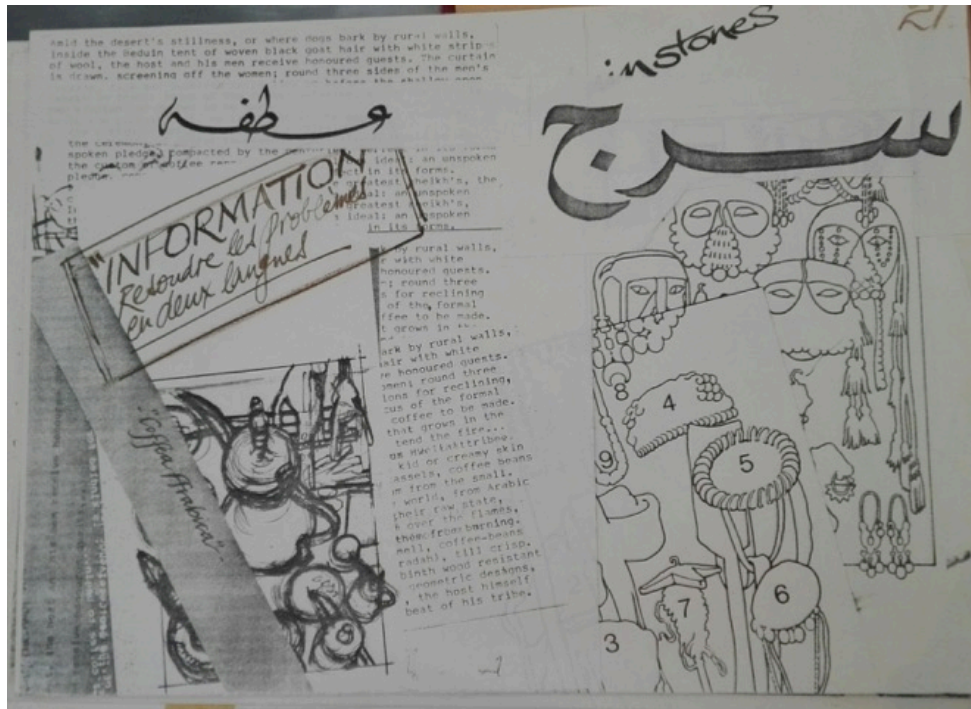Photograph by author, Amman, August 2016

Figure 3.20
Ali Jabri's proposal to attend the museum training at the Musée des Arts et Traditions
Populaires in Paris, 1982
Courtesy of the Ali Jabri Heritage Foundation, Amman
Photograph by author, Amman, August 2016

Figure 3.21
Notes and architectural vaulting sketches in Ali Jabri's 1983 Notebook
Courtesy of the Ali Jabri Heritage Foundation.
Photograph by author, Amman, October 2016

Figure 3.22
Jordan Museum of Popular Traditions design sketch in Ali Jabri's 1983 Notebook,
Ali Jabri Heritage Foundation
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Photograph by author, Amman, October 2016

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Ali Jabri, Untitled watercolor painting, c. 1970-1980
Ink and gouache on paper
Courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation.

Figure 3.25
Ali Jabri, Untitled watercolor painting, c. 1970
Ink and gouache on paper
Courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation.

Figure 3.26
Ali Jabri, Niello (*mhabar*) enamel display case, silver metalworks c. 1920-1940 Amman
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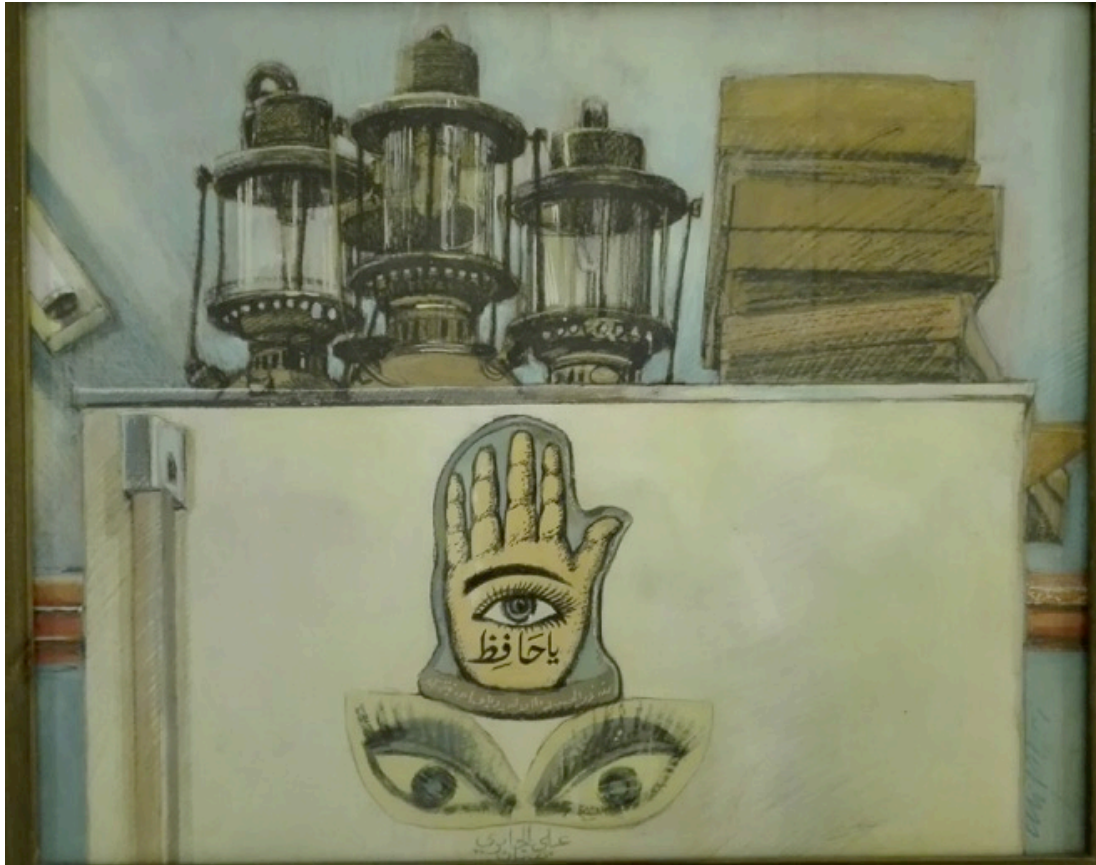Photograph by author, Amman, July 2016

Figure 3.27
Ali Jabri, Hand of Fatima watercolor painting c. 1980 Jordan
Ink, gouache, and collage materials on paper
Private collection of Widad Kawar, currently on exhibit in the museum Tiraz: Widad
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Photograph by author, Amman, June 2016

Figure 3.28
Ali Jabri, Aqaba Boat painting, c. 1970s-1980s
Ink and gouache on paper
Private collection, Beirut.
Reproduced in *About This Man Called Ali* (2009), p. 145

Figure 4.1
Saad Haad Rifai's photograph of a painting exhibition in a bombed out building, Mosul,
September 14, 2017
Courtesy of the photographer.

Figure 4.2
Artist Ali Eyal's Facebook post of the painting exhibition photograph in a bombed out building, Mosul
Source: Facebook Screenshot, September 14, 2017

Figure 4.3
Hanaa Malallah, My Country Map, 2008
Burned linen, mixed media, and thread on canvas
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.4
Hanaa Malallah, Untitled, 1990 Baghdad
Burned linen, ash, and paint on canvas
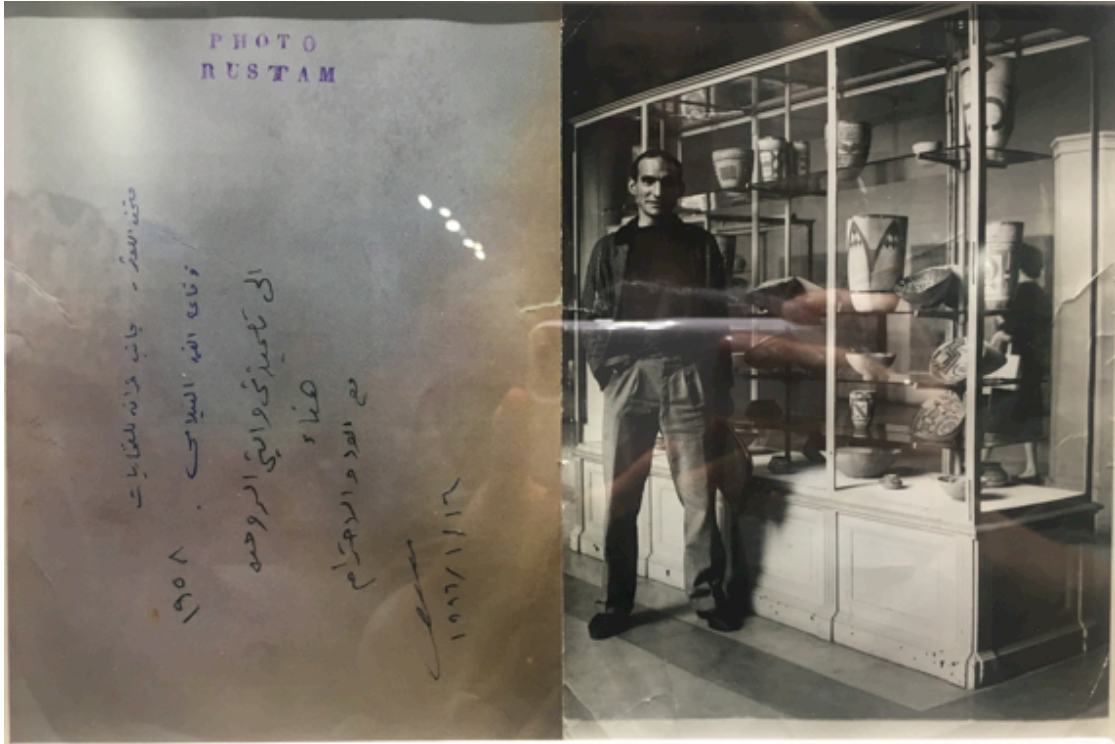Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.5
Photograph of Shakir Hasan Al Said in the Islamic Art Galleries at the National Museum
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Courtesy of Hanaa Malallah.

Figure 4.6
Cover design for the "Arab Plastic Arts" exhibition at *Al Wasiti Festival* (Baghdad:
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Courtesy of Dia Azzawi.

Figure 4.7
Shakir Hasan Al Said, "Soot on the Wall" (*sukham ala'l-jidar*), 1980 Baghdad
Oil paint, spray paint, and combustion effects on wood board
Private collection of Mrs. Monda Deeley and Dr. Quinton Deeley, London
Courtesy of Christie's and Olga Nefedova.

Figure 4.8
Lucio Fontana, Spatial Concept: Expectations, 1960
Slashed burlap canvas and gauze with black paint (39 ½ x 31 5/8")
Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 4.9
Shakir Hasan Al Said, Lines on a Wall, 1978 Baghdad
Oil paint, cracks, and scratches on wood (120 x 120 cm)
Courtesy of the Modern Art Iraqi Archive.

Figure 4.10
Photograph of the "Warka Temple" (Kish tablet) pictogram markings
Reproduced in Shakir Hasan Al Said, "The Philosophical, Technical, and Expressive
Aspects of the One Dimension" (Baghdad: National Museum of Modern Art, March
1973), p. 3.
Courtesy of the Modern Art Iraq Archive.

Figure 4.11
Shakir Hasan Al Said, Untitled, c. 1980s.
Mixed media and combustion on cardboard
Khalid Shoman Foundation Collection
Courtesy of the Darat al Funun Center for Modern Arab Art, Amman.

Figure 4.12
Hanaa Malallah, For Shakir Hasan Al Said, 2008
Mixed media on scratched and broken wood
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.13
Photograph of Hanaa Malallah with Shakir Hasan Al Said, 1991
Baghdad exhibition opening at the Saddam Arts Center (formerly the National Modern
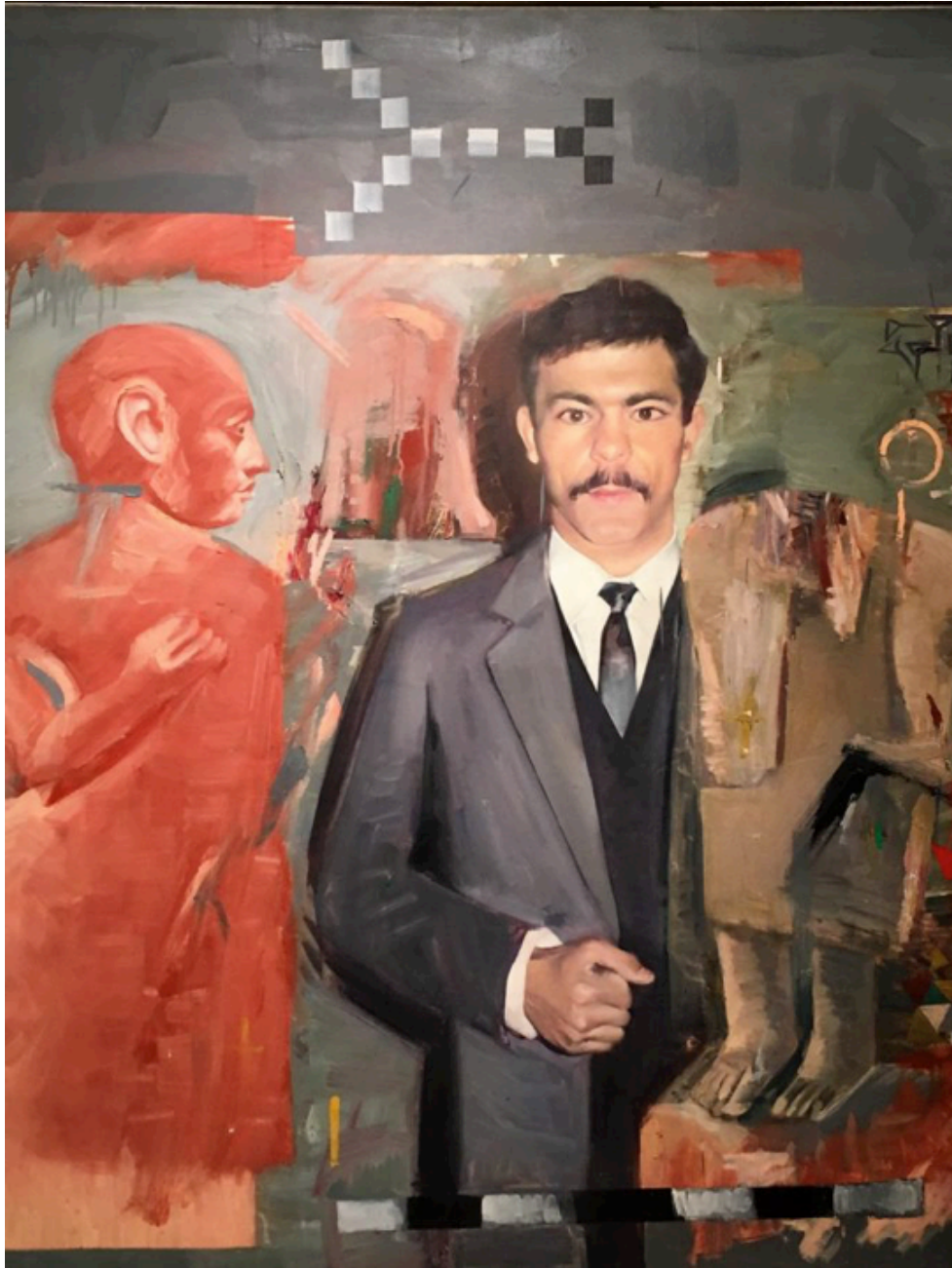Art Museum), Baghdad, Iraq.
Photo courtesy of Hanaa Malallah.

Figure 4.14
Hanaa Malallah, The Guard, 1989 Baghdad
Oil paint on canvas
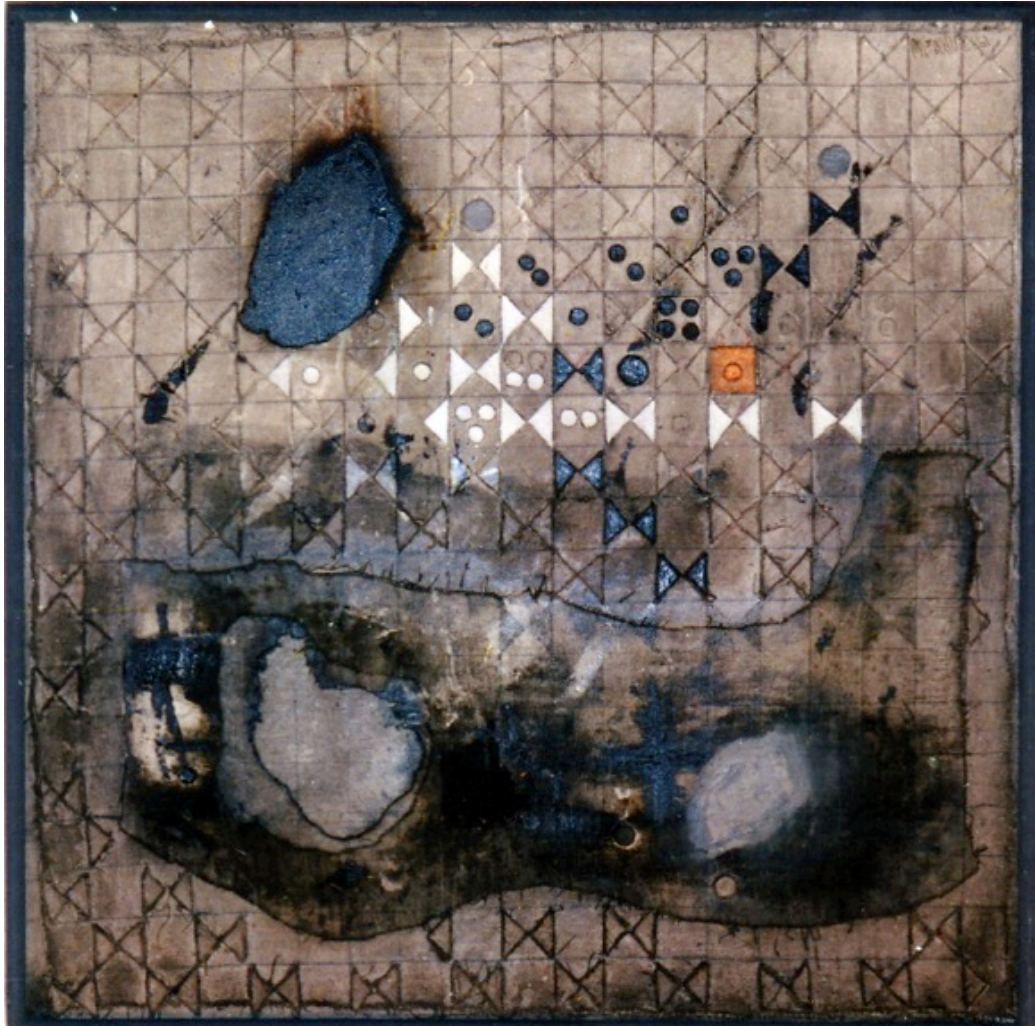Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.15
Hanaa Malallah, Untitled, c. 1991 Baghdad
Oil paint, ink, ash, and combustion on canvas
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.16
Hanaa Malallah, Warka Temple, 1990 Baghdad
Photograph of installation project displayed in the National Museum of Iraq.
Courtesy of the Modern Art Iraq Archive.

Figure 4.17
Hanaa Malallah, Bus Tickets Saved During Sanctions, 1992 Baghdad
Bus tickets and mixed materials on paper
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.18
Photograph of Hanaa Malallah burning linen cloth with Iraqi olive oil outside her South
London studio, 2017
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.19
Hanaa Malallah, Illuminated Ruins, 2011
Burned canvas, threads, and fluorescent light on canvas
Courtesy of the artist.

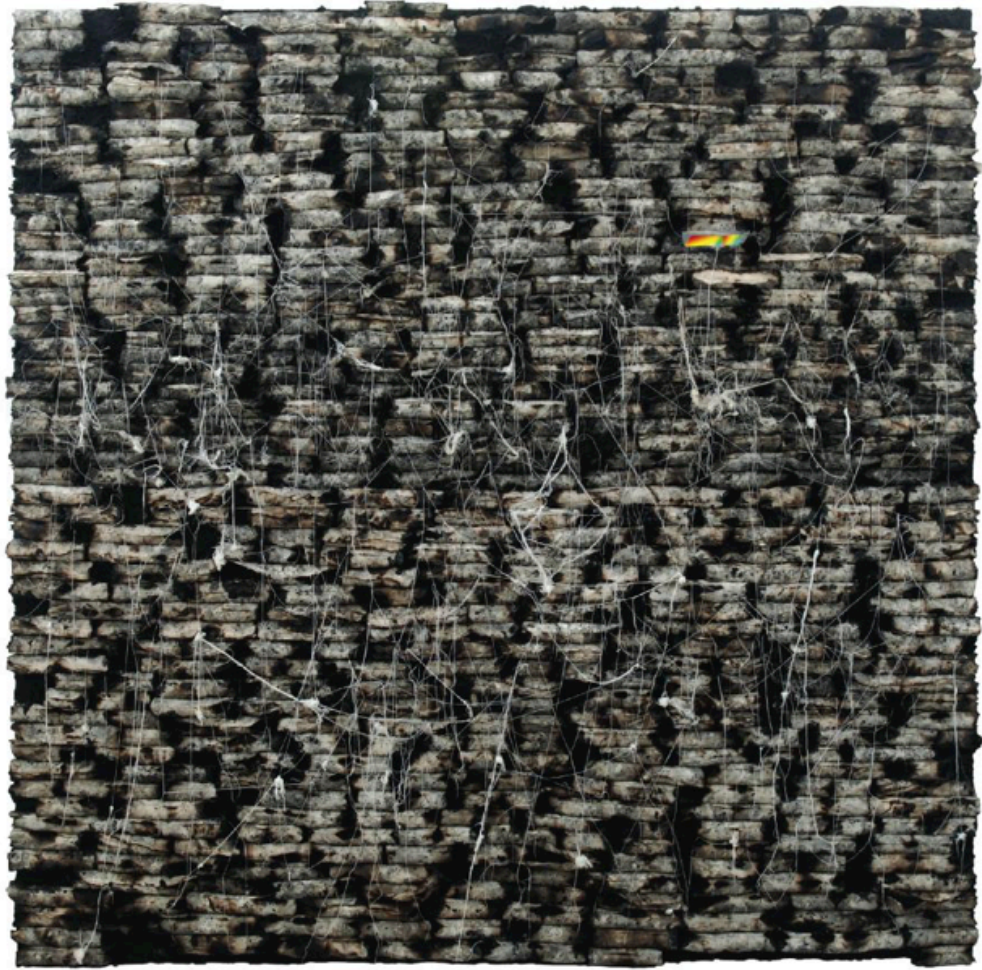**Figure 4.20**
Hanaa Malallah, A Moment of Light, 2015
Burned canvas, cotton thread, glass, and mild carbon steel on wood
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.21
Hanaa Malallah, Happened in the Dawn, 2011
Burned textiles, black soot, thread, and oil paint on canvas.
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.22
Hanaa Malallah, Shroud IV, 2014
Burned linen and mixed media on canvas
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.23
Medieval *tiraz* textiles made in Egypt, used as burial shroud (*kafan*) in Abbasid Iraq in
895 CE
Courtesy of the Victoria & Albert Museum, 257-1889

Figure 4.24
Hanaa Malallah, detail of Shroud I, 2010
Folded burnt textiles and mixed media on canvas
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.25
Tiraz textile, 10th-century Egypt, woven linen and silk with red thread embroidery
Courtesy of the British Museum, EA72264

Figure 4.26
Video still of Youtube video of an ISIS militant drilling the eyes of the Lamassu bull
sculpture, Mosul 2014.

Figure 4.27
Abed Al Kadiri, Al Maqama, 2014 Beirut
Oil paint and charcoal on canvas
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.28
Michael Rakowitz, The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist, April 2018, Trafalgar Square,
London
Date syrup cans and 3-D image
Courtesy of Mayor of London's Office

Figure 4.29
Mahmoud Obaidi, Ford 71, 2015
Bronze and steel
Courtesy of Sahir Ugur Eren.

Figure 5.1
Ibrahim El Salahi, The Last Sound, 1964
Oil on canvas (48" x 48" in.)
Photograph by Capital D Studio, courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.
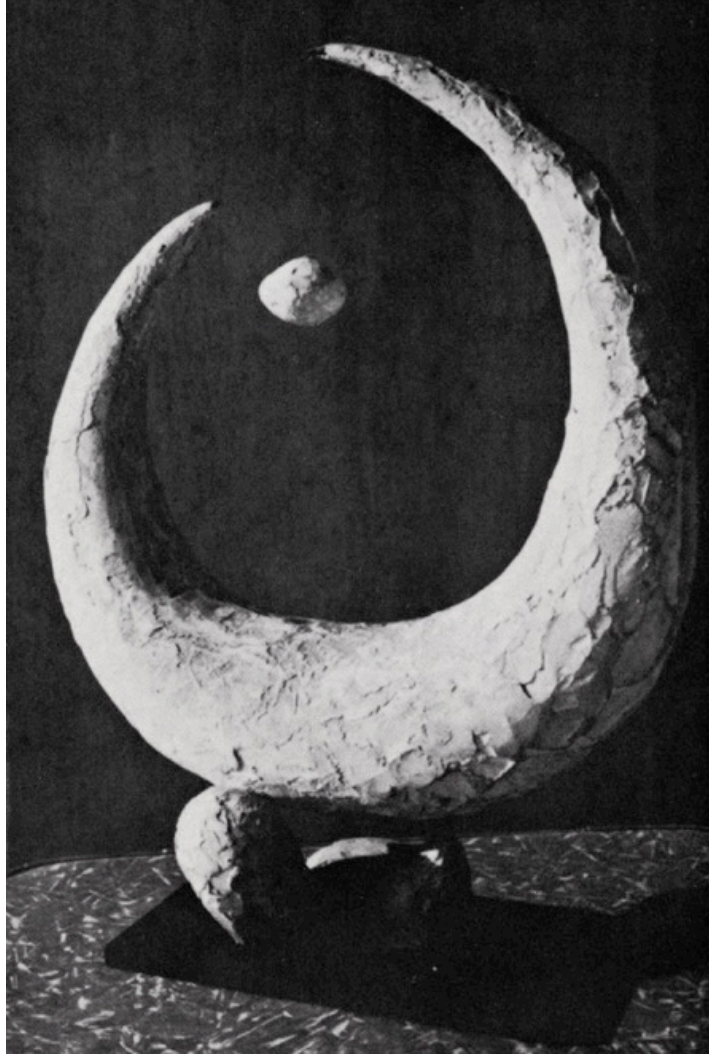
Figure 5.2
Jewad Selim, Motherhood, 1954
1968 photograph reproduction of sculpture in the "Jewad Selim" exhibition catalog,
National Museum of Modern Art, Baghdad, Iraq, January 23ʳᵈ-31ˢᵗ 1968, page 9.
8" x 6" in.
Photograph courtesy of Sally Bjork.

Figure 5.3
Engraved print portrait of Egyptian writer Tawfiq al-Hakim, 1972
Reproduced in *al-Qasr al-Mashur* ("The Enchanted Palace") by Taha Husayn and
Tawfiq al-Hakim (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1972), page 161.
6 ½" x 4" in.
Photograph courtesy of Sally Bjork.
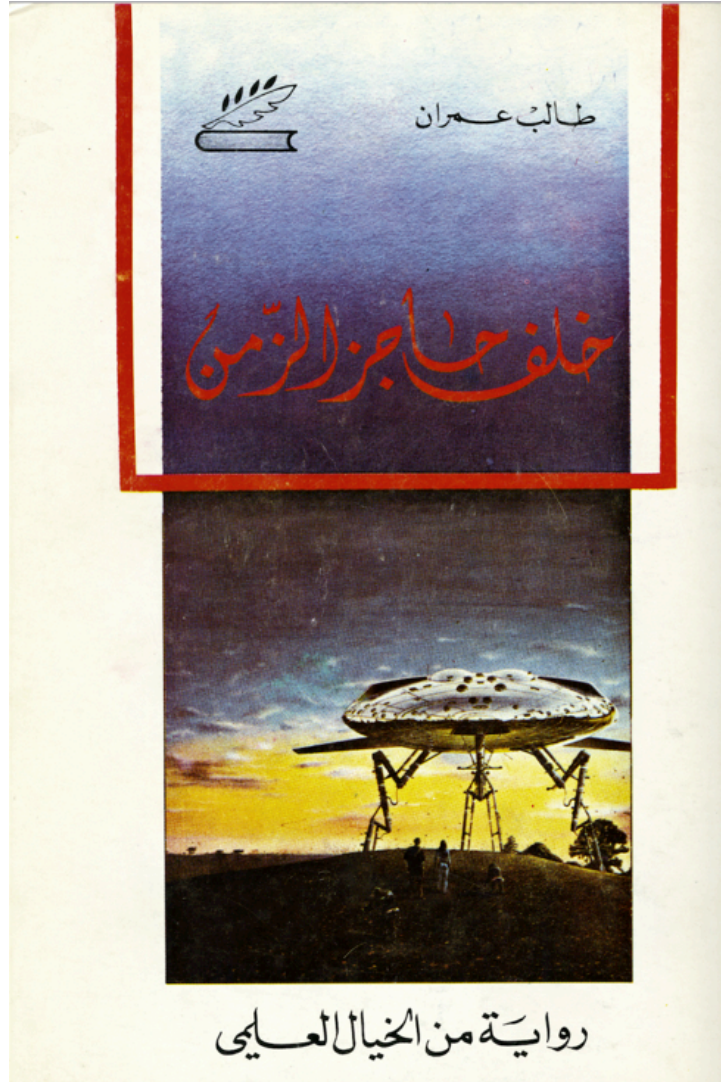
Figure 5.4
Cover illustration for Talib ‘Umran’s *Khalf Hajiz al-Zaman*
Designed by Anwar al-Rahbi (b. 1957, Deir al-Zour, Syria)
Damascus: Ittihad al-Kuttab al-Arab, 1985
Photograph courtesy of Sally Bjork.

Figure 5.5
Cover illustration for Talib 'Umran *Laysa fi al-Qamar Fuqara':Qisas*
Designed by Abdulkader Arnaout (1936-1992, Damascus)
Damascus: Ittihad al-Kuttab al-Arab, 1983
Photograph courtesy of Sally Bjork.

Figure 5.6
Marwa Arsanios, *Words as Silence, Language as Rhymes*, 2012
Reproduction of a double-page spread from the article "Men of Letters Outdistance the
Scientists to the Planets," *Al-Hilal*, January 1958.
Artist book, 10.6" x 7.5" in. (closed)
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5.7
1964 Lebanese Postage Stamp of Haigazian College's 1963 Cedar IV Rocket Launch
Reproduced in *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, 2012.

Figure 5.8
Siah Armajani, Moon Landing, 1969
Stenciled television, lock, and ink on five double-sided sheets of newspaper print
Photograph by Larry Marcus, 2018.
Courtesy of the artist and Walker Art Center.

Figure 5.9
Siah Armajani, Moon Landing, 1969
Stenciled television, lock, and ink on five double-sided sheets of newspaper print
Photograph by Larry Marcus, 2018.
Courtesy of the artist and Walker Art Center.

Figure 5.10
Ahmed Mater, Television, 2015
Wood slide viewer with glass slide, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5.11
Ali Jabri, December, from *Calendar Series*, 2000
One of twelve mixed media collages, produced for Aramex.
Courtesy of Fadi Ghandour.

Figure 5.12
Wafa Hourani, *Al Masjid Al Wahid* – The Only and the Lonely Mosque*, 2014
Mixed media architectural maquette assemblage with sound.
(22 2/5 x 39 2/5 x 31 ½ in.)
Photograph by author in the artist's studio, Ramallah, Palestine 2015.

Figure 5.13
Wafa Hourani, *Al Masjid Al Wahid* – The Only and the Lonely Mosque*, 2014
Mixed media architectural maquette assemblage with sound.
(22 2/5 x 39 2/5 x 31 ½ in.)
Photograph by author, Ramallah, Palestine 2015.

Figure 5.14
Ayham Jabr, Jerusalem Day, 2017
Digital collage
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5.15
Ala Ebtekar, *Nightfall (after Asimov & Emerson)*, 2017
Cyanotype exposed by starlight and moonlight on found book page of *Nightfall* by Isaac
Asimov, 1941
9" x 6" in.
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5.16
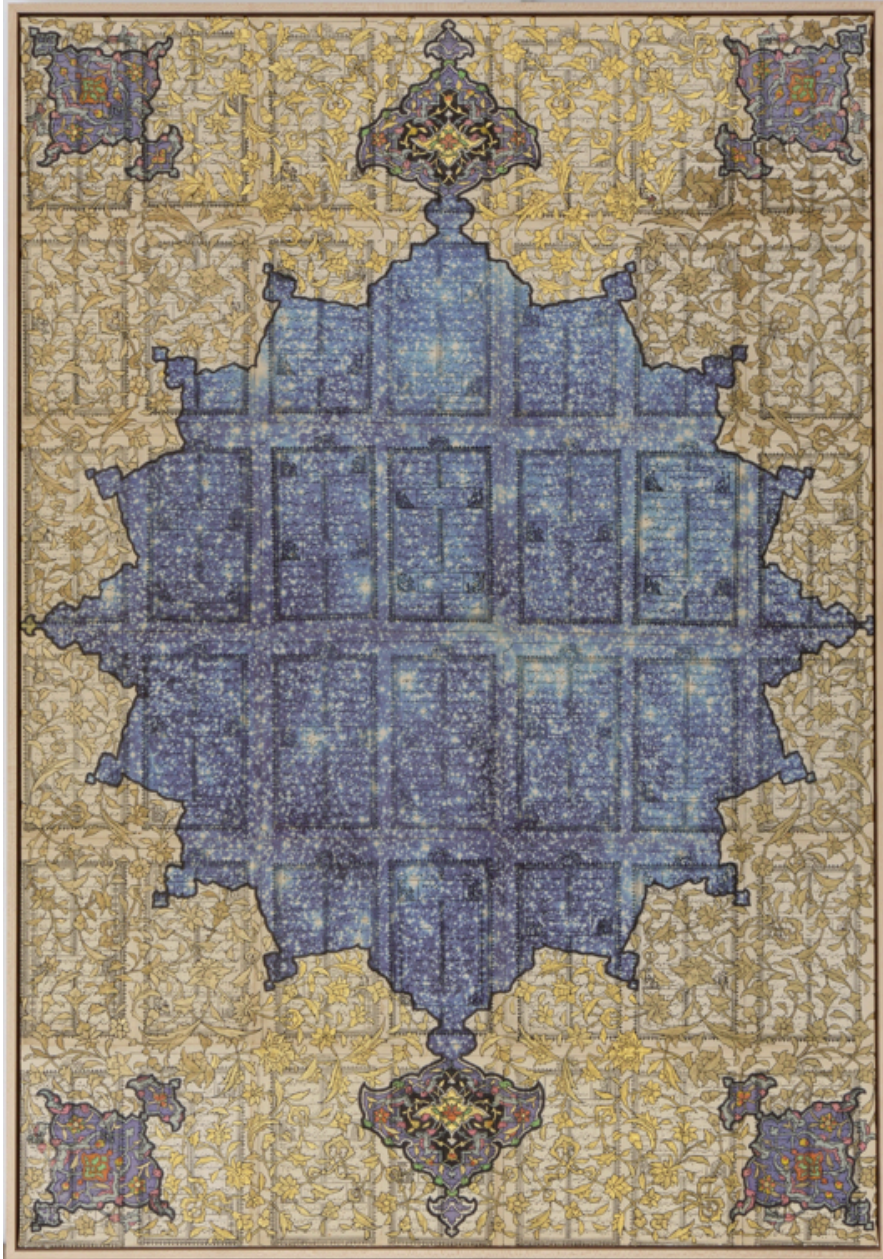Ala Ebtekar, *Coelestis (After Hafiz)*, 2012
Gold, ink, and opaque watercolor on book pages mounted on canvas
Divan of Hafiz, lithographed book printed in Lahore, 1867 CE
(34 x 48 in.) Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5.17
Ala Ebtekar, *The Shape of Things to Come*, 2012
Acrylic on archival pigment print on found H.G. Wells poster, light box. (Photograph of unlit artwork.)
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5.18
Monira Al Qadiri, *Muhawwil* ("Transformer"), 2014
4-channel video installation with wooden structure. (4 x 3 x 4 meters)
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5.19
Monira Al Qadiri, Prism, 2007.
Digital photograph of Sulaibikhat Cemetery, Jaafari (Shiʿite) Side.
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5.20
Monira Al Qadiri, Alien Technology, 2014
Fiberglass and automotive paint (3 x 3 x 2.5 meters)
Dubai, UAE.
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5.21
Monira Al Qadiri, Alien Technology, 2014
Fiberglass and automotive paint (3 x 3 x 2.5 meters)
Dubai, UAE.
Courtesy of the artist.
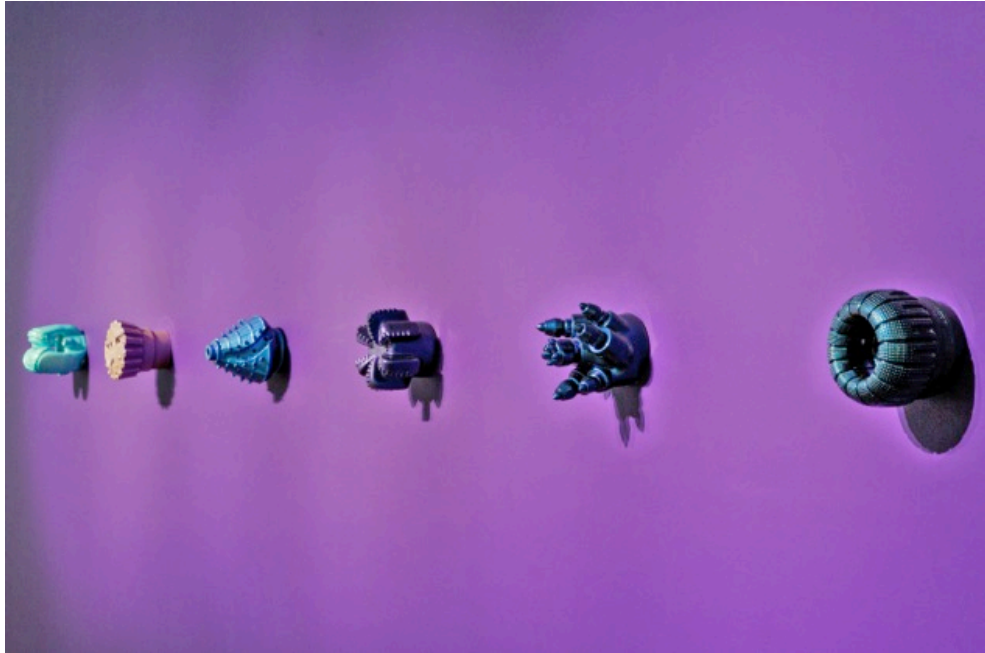
Figure 5.22
Monira Al Qadiri, Spectrum 1, 2016
Series of six 3D-printed sculptures in PLA plastic and automatic paint.
(20 x 20 x 20 cm).
Courtesy of the artist.
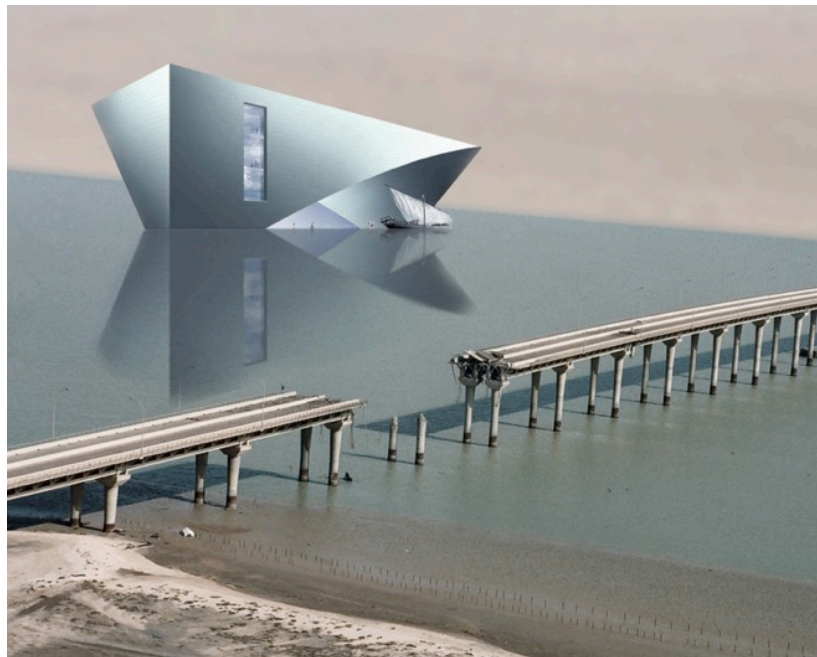
Figure 5.23
Monira Al Qadiri, Tadao Ando Maritime Museum, Abu Dhabi in Mythbusters II, 2014
Archival inkjet print on fine art paper, 40 x 50 cm
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.24
Abdullah al-Othman, Suspended, 2017
Aluminum foil sheets covering the nineteenth-century Al-Khunji Al-Kabir women's
center, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.
Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5.25
Abdullah al-Othman, Suspended, 2017
Aluminum foil sheets covering the nineteenth-century Al-Khunji Al-Kabir women's
center, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.
Courtesy of the artist.

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