

Chapter 1 Introduction

The Bazars, or markets, are lofty stone edifices, in the form of a long gallery, for the most part very narrow, arched above, or else roofed with wood...In many of the old bazaars [the] shops are so confined as barely to leave room for the shopkeeper to display his wares, and for himself and one guest to fit conveniently. The buyers are obliged to remain standing on the outside; and, when opposite shops happen to be in full employment, it is not easy for a passenger to make his way through the crowd. Some of the modern bazaars are indeed wider, and the shops much more commodious, but all are gloomy. [Russell 1969 (1756): 20]

This passing remark on the great suqs (marketplaces)¹ of Aleppo, Syria was published in 1756 in a massive, two-volume record of 18th century Aleppine life compiled by Alexander Russell. Russell, a Scottish doctor, served as an employee of the British-run Levant Company, which dealt in importing goods to Europe from stops along the Silk Road. The years of Russell's appointment in Syria (1740-1753) fell in the midst of an especially important commercial period for Aleppo, a city whose prosperity and fame came from its long-standing position as a vital medieval thoroughfare with close commercial ties to Baghdad, Cairo, and, by way of Alexandretta, Europe (Marcus 1989). As a large city in the north of the country, Aleppo was also located close to the heart of the Ottoman Empire, and, during Russell's stay, it was shared by Arabic-speaking citizens and Ottoman denizens alike, giving it a cosmopolitan appeal. Though Russell's book is focused mostly on cataloguing local medicine and disease, several chapters address the daily customs and rituals of Aleppines. It is in one of these chapters that Russell remarks upon Aleppo's famous marketplaces. Though the next two centuries would bring the decline of the city's commercial fame, Russell saw Aleppo's suqs at a

¹ As he was writing from Ottoman-ruled Syria, Russell refers to Aleppo's marketplaces with the term *bazaar*, which, as he notes, is used in both Turkish and Farsi. I will use the Arabic word *suq* (pronounced *sūq*) in this dissertation to mean marketplace, and the Anglicized *suqs* (instead of the Arabic *aswaaq* or *swaaq*) to denote the plural. I provide a longer discussion of the differences between 'market' and 'marketplace' and on the multiple meanings of the word *suq* in Chapter 2.

time when their importance brought to the city a truly global mix of traders, artisans, merchants, and customers.²

Russell spends little more than a few pages describing Aleppo's marketplaces, but the passage quoted above touches upon a key question that has yet to be fully ethnographically explored: in the cramped spaces of Middle Eastern suqs, how do merchants market their goods?³ Though this question may seem simple enough, it is one that is surprisingly neglected in most studies of Middle Eastern suqs, and marketplace studies in general, be they historically, anthropologically, or economically oriented. In Syria, merchants use a range of tactics to market their merchandise to customers, and these tactics are just as reliant upon sense and sentiment, moral and social codes, religion, and aesthetics as they are upon economic logic. As such, Syrian suqs are anything but "gloomy," as Russell would have it; rather, they contain within them a range of personalized decoration and creative marketing practices aimed at grabbing hold of the eyes, ears, and, ultimately, wallets of customers.

My fieldwork was conducted in the suqs of Damascus, the present-day capital of Syria, which lies almost 200 miles to the south of Aleppo. In the busy and cramped spaces of the city's large marketplaces, merchants must enact a kind of visual and aural romance with their customers, wooing them with artistic displays of merchandise, shop decorations which use potent symbolic imagery, and creative auditory practices. This constellation of distinctively poetic selling practices is a function of what I call 'artful marketing' – ways of selling which are artful both in their decorative nature and in the cunning ways they influence customers.⁴ In most marketplace studies, emphasis is placed on the verbal acrobatics of selling, particularly on the nature of back-and-forth bargaining

² Russell and his half-brother Patrick (who later edited the second edition of his popular work in 1794) have been the focus of scholarly interest in the past decades due to their relatively anomalous relationship to the Middle East. They could both speak Arabic and Turkish fluently, and they participated in many of the daily rituals in Aleppo that other European travelers did not – bathing at the hamam, eating local food with Syrian friends, and conversing with Aleppines in Arabic. For an anthropological examination of the Russells, see Starkey 2002.

³ Throughout this dissertation, I use the terms 'vendor,' 'merchants,' 'peddlers,' and 'sellers,' all to refer to people who sell goods in and around Damascus' marketplaces. In general, I will use the word 'merchant' as an inclusive term for all sorts of sellers in the suqs; if I use other terms, then I am referring specifically to one type of seller over another. In most cases, I will also refer to merchants with male pronouns throughout these chapters, simply because the overwhelming majority of merchants in Damascus' suqs is men.

⁴ I am in part borrowing here from Michael Herzfeld's (2003) discussion of the link between artisan/craft and artifice/craftiness, which, he argues, has served to create a complex identity for artisans and craftspeople in Greece.

sessions between merchant and customer. I show here that the unspoken, non-verbal side to marketplace transactions is, in Damascus, just as important to how the marketplace is experienced and imagined.⁵

My dissertation takes as its starting point the same premise upon which, thirty years ago, Geertz based his famous ethnography of the suqs in the small Moroccan town of Sefrou. For Geertz, the ultimate force driving merchants and customers alike is the search for information. As he explains, “in the bazaar information is poor, scarce, maldistributed, inefficiently communicated, and intensely valued” (1978: 29). Merchants constantly search for information about their customers in order to gauge how much to charge, when to concede a price, and what kinds of commodities they should be stocking. For their part, customers scour the suqs for the best deal, the most desirable goods, and the best merchant with whom to work. This search for information creates a push-pull balance to the suq which informs every transaction, economic or social.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I am focusing on only one side of this equation: that of the information provided by merchants (and potentially used by customers). In Damascus, customers desire and need information not just about the market price of a commodity, but also about the quality of that commodity *and*, equally as important, about the ‘quality’ of the merchant selling that commodity – whether he is respectable, pious, a participating member of Syrian society and, above all, trustworthy.⁶ Indeed, these two things (merchant and product quality) cannot be separated because they are mutually constitutive. It is as rare to have a conniving, socially marginal merchant consistently selling high-quality goods as it is to have a trustworthy, respectable merchant consistently selling low-quality goods.⁷ As such, these things can never be divorced from one another – the high quality of goods reflects the high quality of the merchant selling them; the high quality of a merchant reflects the high quality of his goods.

⁵ Although, technically, the aural practices I examine use words and sounds, I will explain that they do so in a way that is quite different from the dialogically oriented verbal exchanges that take place between merchant and customer.

⁶ Of course, these qualities can be read differently by different customers, and might not even matter to some. But, as I explain below, this is somewhat beside the point. Regardless of their reception, merchants put forth particular clues about themselves, geared toward providing customers with important information.

⁷ I am speaking not about the quality of the person selling these goods, but rather their quality as a seller. I’m sure that Damascenes would agree that there are, of course, ‘good’ people selling bad merchandise, and ‘bad’ people selling good merchandise. But, in the marketplace, which is always full of strangers and first-time customers, merchants are usually judged upon their reputations as sellers rather than as people.

Before returning to this point, though, it is also important to consider the different forms that this information can take. Geertz posits that, in the Sefrou suq, information exchange operates primarily along the channels of language. Merchants and customers are constantly talking at the same time that they are deciphering others' words. As he puts it: "what goes on in the suq [is] mainly talk...In the suq, the flow of words and the flow of values are not two things; they are two aspects of the same thing" (Geertz 1979: 199). The verbal relay of information has also been the focus of other ethnographic studies of marketplaces, particularly Kapchan's (1996) fascinating study of market women's linguistic strategies in the Moroccan town of Beni Mellal, directly southeast of Sefrou (also, see Alexander 1987; Clark 1994; Siegel 1979). But in Damascus, to say that merchants market primarily through speech would be to paint an incomplete picture; indeed, they also rely heavily upon visual and aural practices to provide customers with information about themselves, their shops, and their products.⁸ In many cases, these non-verbal practices are even more effective than language in relaying such information because, as I explain in depth below, language does not have the same kind of truth-bearing properties that sight and audition do. Because language is closely associated with deceit and trickery, especially in a suq setting, information about the quality of the merchant and his products – and particularly the trustworthiness of both of these things – is best communicated *non-verbally* and *indirectly*. In other words, visual and aural practices which provide information about the 'quality' of a merchant and his merchandise gain their integrity as documentary 'evidence' specifically because they are unspoken. This is a point I will return to in the next section.

Merchants use these artful practices not just to communicate to customers, but also to distinguish themselves from other merchants. The individual differences in the content and form of these practices serve as a way for merchants to indicate their individuality. For most merchants, using such practices of distinction is a necessity in Damascus because one major factor. The vast majority of the businesses I examine here –

⁸ I am not arguing that the prevalence of visual and aural marketing tactics is unique to Damascus; indeed, from the photographs included in both Geertz's and Kapchan's works, it looks as if there are at least some visual tactics (signs, advertisements, merchandise displays) that merchants use. I cannot speak for the importance or use of such marketing practices in other places, but I would hazard a guess that they, like in Damascus, are tactical ways for merchants to non-verbally and more trustworthily get across important information.

ranging from individually-operated, mobile vending units to permanent, family-run stores – lack the financial means to make use of Western-style advertising media like billboards, newspapers, or television commercials. Though these forms of advertisement do exist and are slowly gaining in popularity in Syria, their high expense makes them available only to the larger, richer businesses in town.⁹ This means that most merchants in smaller suq stores must instead rely on the design of their store, the display of their merchandise, and forms of decorative and aural marketing to gain and maintain customers. These forms of “small media” (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994) stand in sharp contrast to the institutionalized mass advertising that dominates many other urban centers throughout the world. Indeed, as I will explain, it is the very material presence of these decorations, displays, and sounds that makes them work as more than simple advertisement.

In addition to (or perhaps, as I explain below, antithetical to) their representational work, these practices function as ‘decoration’ whose physical properties are meant to draw the eyes and ears of customers on a primarily sensory level.¹⁰ Most of the images, sounds, and displays I examine are dazzling to the senses in some way or another: many are large, loud, and colorful, with elaborate frames and embellishments; others are intricate, melodic, and materially intense. Many merchants draw attention to their merchandise with the addition of creative props like plastic swords, colorful tissue paper, paint, or stickers; others concentrate on the look of their shop itself as a way to draw customers, with decoration placed on walls, under glass-topped desks, and around doorways, or, in the case of vending units, with paint and stickers on empty surfaces; still others come up with new, louder, and more whimsical ways of acoustically calling attention to their products and themselves. As I explain in more detail below, these marketing practices must be showy in this way to operate in such a sensorally overwhelming place as the suq; as most Damascene suqs are places where hundreds of

⁹ Most of these larger businesses are parts of international chains, like Benetton and Magilla, both clothing stores aimed at young people, or The Four Seasons Hotel. Some, though, are also Syrian-run enterprises that cater to a richer, youthful, and more Western-oriented customer base, such as In House Coffee, a Syrian clone of Starbucks.

¹⁰ Indeed, that these practices exist and work as representation *and* decoration is, at first glance, quizzical. If they are merely decorative, then how can they be consumed as serious evidence as well? As I explain below, this ambiguity on which these practices turn in part fuels their efficacy in both realms.

merchants compete for customers in a cramped and hectic environment, focusing on capturing the attention of passers-by is a particularly effective business technique.

This dissertation is organized around three techniques of artful marketing in Damascus, all of which are used as both decoration and as representations of merchant and merchandise quality. These, to be certain, are not the only kinds of visual and aural marketing genres that merchants use, but they are among the most prominent. Separating these techniques into different categories is in part for organizational purposes, but, as I explain below, their separation also speaks to the fact that they are used by different types of merchants and in different marketing atmospheres – a point which I will elaborate upon below. Broadly, the three categories of artful marketing are as follows:

1. Familial and Political Imagery (Ch. 3). Merchants with permanent shops in established suqs often display memorial portraits of deceased family members (mostly former shop owners) along with portraits of the Syrian president, Bashar al-Asad, and other regional political leaders. Figure 1.1 shows a shoe merchant at the eastern end of Suq Medhat Pasha, an important suq in Damascus' Old City, standing in front of a black-and-white memorial image of his father, the previous owner of his shoe business. Although they are difficult to see, small stickers depicting former Syrian president Hafez al-Asad (Bashar's deceased father) are placed in the center of each display window. As I explain, political portraits exist in the same repertoire as familial images; the similarities in the ways in which they are displayed and referenced reflect that they are conceptualized in similar (but distinct) ways.¹¹ Familial and political portraits are often displayed in prominent positions in shops – usually high on walls and centrally positioned so that they easily stand out. Though some might argue that there exists a level of social coercion in the display of politicians, or that it is merely 'tradition' at work in the display of family portraits, the prominence with which they are showcased (and,

¹¹ Although sometimes these political portraits can act as memorial images as well, as many merchants display commemorative images of Bashar al-Asad's father Hafez and older brother Basil, both of whom are deceased. The Asad family has run the Syrian presidency since 1970, when Hafez al-Asad took control of the government in a bloodless coup. Hafez ruled as president of Syria until his death in 2000, upon which his second son, Bashar, took over as president. Basil al-Asad, the older brother of Bashar, was groomed as the presidential heir until his death in 1994 from a motorcycle accident. I discuss the various implications of displaying these different images in Chapter 3.

particularly, showcased *together*) reflects their deeper significance. These portraits are displayed not just for the sake of the merchant's own enjoyment or pride (or to appease government officials, in the case of political imagery), but because they also serve as usable signs for customers to form judgments about the 'quality' of the merchant. The display of images of deceased shop owners usually indicates that the merchant comes from a family of some repute or, perhaps most importantly, that the shop has been a family business for at least one generation. Displaying images of the president and other political leaders is a way for merchants to visually engage in politics – something which is, again, to a degree a mark of social standing – and to indicate that they are active, participating members of Syrian society. Different political portraits also give off different clues to customers about the political leanings and even sectarian differences of the merchant. As such, these images are 'evidence' of a merchant's trustworthiness, family origins, and political demeanor. As I explain below, providing information about these desirable qualities is also a way for merchants to implicate the quality of their



Figure 1.1. A shoe merchant with displays of familial and political imagery

merchandise. Because they are trustworthy, active members of society, it is likely that the quality of their merchandise will meet a certain standard as well.

2. *Religious Referents (Ch. 4)*. Merchants also use a range of religious images and sounds in their selling spaces (e.g., Fig. 1.2). Unlike political and familial imagery, which is used mostly by merchants with shops in permanent and respectable marketplaces, religious images and sounds are used in all types of marketing situations. Religious images (portraits of saints and imams; stickers, posters, and plaques depicting verses from the Qur'an; and other material expressions of local belief systems such as blue beads used to ward off the evil eye) are displayed in showy, eye-catching ways that stand out in the general sensory overload of the suq. Similarly, many merchants play Qur'anic CDs and tapes at loud volumes, particularly during the morning hours because, as they told me, it is best to start the day by listening to the words of God. These displays and sounds can also act as a moral compass for the customer, for whom such material expressions act as signs of the merchant's piety, which in turn is a good indication of his trustworthiness. As I explain, the sincerity with which a merchant uses such religious tactics is to a degree beside the point, as these religious referents inherently contain within them *barakat*, or religious blessings, which can act upon the surrounding space, people, and merchandise independent of the merchant's intentions. On a broader level, the display of these images and sounds reflects the current sociopolitical climate in Syria; as more and more Syrians are turning to conservative Islam as part of the broad Islamic revivalism sweeping the Middle East (and other parts of the Muslim world), the display of religious iconography, imagery, and text makes for an especially effective and logical selling method.

3. *Aesthetics and Poetics (Ch. 5)*. Finally, many sellers use artistic displays, decorations and poetic street calls to market their merchandise. These practices are perhaps the most viscerally attractive to the eyes and ears of passers-by, as they are constructed to be particularly showy, intricate, and materially intense. Rather than directly conveying evidence about the quality of the seller, these practices instead represent the quality of the goods being sold by highlighting their desirable features. In Figure 1.3, for example, the



Figure 1.2. A typical religious poster displayed in a produce shop. The image depicts a verse from the Qur'an in Arabic calligraphy, flanked by two girls in the act of praying.



Figure 1.3. A decorated strawberry display near Bab Touma

positive qualities of strawberries for sale – their redness, their glistening surface, their green leaves and unblemished surfaces (all signs of freshness and quality) – are emphasized by their artistic arrangement with prop flowers and red background cloth. Again, although this time working in an opposite direction, because such a display showcases the high quality of the merchandise, the merchant is indirectly viewed as ‘high quality’ as well – trustworthy, skillful, and caring about his merchandise. In this case, it is also the agentive qualities of the decorative ornaments used in these displays that transforms the quality of the merchandise in (or around) those displays. Because the strawberries are arranged in an organized, symmetrical, and intricate fashion, their perceived quality is increased. Color, symmetry, patterning, and the use of beautifying props all impact the perceived quality of the merchandise displayed – not just by highlighting that quality, but in some cases by producing it. This is especially so in a place where motifs based on symmetry, repetition, and intricacy have religious connotations and make up the backbone of Islamic art and architecture.

As I intimate in these descriptions, most of these material decorations and sounds do not just represent the quality of merchants and merchandise; they are also able to enhance and produce that quality. There is something within each of these material manifestations that makes them more than simple representations of piety, family connections, or skill, and it is this something which in turn makes the marketplace into something more than a site for mere economic transaction. All of these sounds, displays, and decorations are agentive in their own right, and it is this agency which causes them to act upon those things, spaces, and people surrounding them. With these artful displays, morality is forged; memory is stoked; visual pleasure is stimulated; and blessings are endowed – and all of these things serve to *produce* as well as reflect the trust, piety, morality, and quality of the merchants and merchandise they represent. The agentive properties of these artful practices is something I will return to in more detail below, but I first want to elaborate upon the idea of evidence in order to understand how these displays, decorations, and sounds are taken to be not just information, but *reliable* information.

Selling the Truth: Unspoken Evidence and Distinctive Marketing

Visual and Aural Representation: The Work of Evidence

To understand why these practices take a particularly non-verbal form, we must first look at them in the broader context of the marketplace. Marketplaces across the world have been described by a number of scholars as places where lies run rampant and truth is slippery, and where honesty and deceit come together with one another in almost every transaction (see, for example, Alexander and Alexander 1987; Clark 1994; Geertz 1979; Kapchan 1996; Keshavarzian 2007; Siegel 1969). Merchants are expected to lie in order to elevate their products and themselves, but they are also expected to base those lies on some foundation of truth – if they did not, then they would quickly sully their reputation and risk losing business. In most cases, then, “(v)endors pivot on the borders of prevarication and truth; they are both tricksters and anti-tricksters” (Kapchan 1996: 42). It is up to the customer to be savvy enough to untangle tricks from truth.

As I note above, most studies have focused on the spoken, verbal language of truth and lies in the marketplace. Kapchan’s study of a weekly, open-air suq in Beni Mellal, Morocco, for example, addresses the verbal tactics women use to sell herbs and medicine among other goods. For women sellers, most of whom are forced to work in the marketplace because of dire financial circumstances, verbal lies are a necessary means to making a living; at the same time, they must use a number of linguistic strategies, such as calling on God, to make their claims seem sincere. That the suq is seen as a place of transgression and lies makes even these religious invocations seem circumspect. In such a setting, truth is a hot commodity, and one that sellers must be adept at peddling if they are to gain and retain customers. As Kapchan explains:

the vendor’s profit increases to the extent that she can convince the client of her sincerity despite the ground of distrust in which her utterances are embedded...Forging relations of trust becomes a primary market strategy. The herbalist’s success depends on her power to persuade the audience of her sincerity. [1996: 47]

Sellers thus face the uphill battle of convincing customers of their honesty within a well-known locus of lies and distrust.

Such persuasive work is most obviously done in the back-and-forth exchange of bargaining, which has been the focus of many studies from marketplaces around the

world. In most bargaining transactions, merchants try to persuade customers of the high quality and low price of their goods, and customers attempt to refute the obvious lies and exaggerations to get a better product at a better price. To verbally substantiate their claims, some merchants, like market women in Morocco, invoke religious oaths, while others use familial language to create a sense of closeness (e.g., Khuri 1968), even if using these references does not automatically make a statement truthful. Again taking the example of Moroccan women sellers, religious oaths such as ‘By God...’ are, in theory, “a guarantee of sincerity, a proof against lies” (Kapchan 1996: 59). But, in the marketplace, they become something else altogether when they are used to substantiate a possible lie: “The irony here is that oaths are consciously used and are recognized as a selling strategy in the suq. Swearing by God to make a lie believable is common, as is the public acknowledgement that lies proliferate in the marketplace” (Kapchan 1996: 59). Because “[o]aths in the suq belong to two different orders – official truth and non-official lies – and may be read in either, or in both” (Kapchan 1996: 60), bargaining thus becomes an exercise in ambiguity – one can never tell if the merchant is using such language in its wider context as truth and sincerity, or in its narrower marketplace context as a marketing ploy. If, after a bargaining session, a deal is struck, the outcome is perhaps the only openly honest part of the interaction: “The only honesty demanded in the *pasar* [Javanese marketplace] is that the *bakul* [trader] provide the agreed quantity of goods and that the customer pay the agreed price” (Alexander and Alexander 1987: 44).¹²

As noted by several scholars, bargaining both reflects and adds to the excitement and danger of the marketplace, in part because of what is at stake for both merchant and customer. In every bargaining session, merchants risk losing a profit or being cast as poor salespeople; customers risk losing money and, perhaps even more importantly, losing face.¹³ Taking Siegel’s (1969) example of bargaining in Aceh, Keane explains: “given the

¹² Gell makes a similar point in his essay on an Indian marketplace: “The market cannot distort reality because it *is* reality...Markets are information exchanges, but they differ from ceremonies in that the information exchanged is verifiable and overwhelmingly true – the market price of tomatoes is only in dispute until a sale is made; once made, the price is indisputable” (2006a: 132).

¹³ Although, Khuri reminds us that, at least in Beirut, not all suq-goers will engage a merchant in bargaining, as it is a social statement to be able to pay whatever the merchant requests without any hesitation. Paying for an overpriced item symbolizes wealth and high social standing because “bargaining, like penny-pinching, does not go with prestige. The ability to pay appears to be honorific” (Khuri 1968: 700).

strong Muslim ideologies of the male participants, the fear in bargaining is not of accepting the wrong price, but of letting others trick one into succumbing to one's desires at the expense of one's faculties of reason. At risk is not financial but moral loss" (2008: 35). These risks come with shopping in Damascus, as well. Deciphering merchants' claims is not just an exciting game for customers, but also a potentially dangerous failure, in large part because of the risk of seeming naïve or weak. Whether or not, in Damascus, this is due to Muslim ideologies about reason is unclear, but it is evident from both hearing admonitions directed at others, as well as being admonished myself on a number of occasions, that it is of supreme social and moral importance to get the best deal.

To take examples from my own fieldwork experience, my purchase of merchandise from the suqs, be it a bag of lemons or an expensive gold necklace, almost always brought with it a questioning session from my landlady, Syrian friends, or even other merchants, involving such inquiries as, "Where did you buy this?" or "How much did you pay?," inevitably followed by proclamations of "You paid way too much," "You went to the wrong shop," or "The quality of this is no good." (To be fair, the conversation usually ended on a positive note, with a pat on the hand and an assurance of "I'll go with you next time.") These reprimands came after almost every purchase and seemed to be relatively independent of the deal I negotiated or the quality of the product I purchased. These kinds of interactions are a common theme for ethnographers working in the Middle East but, though for outsiders these conversations are partly playful and of no real consequence, they can be of a real embarrassment for local shoppers. The search for and correct interpretation of market information, then, is of great importance on a number of levels.

Many merchants – particularly those who own shops in more established suqs – must be careful not to lose face as well. In suqs where merchants have been in business for generations, and where the occupation of shop-owning is seen as a respectable trade, merchants must maintain a level of self-respect in front of customers and other merchants.¹⁴ Merchants will thus only go so far with the verbal tactics they use to make a sale; being too eager to vouch for the quality of the merchandise, or to make godly

¹⁴ As I address below, these rules of decorum are not quite the same for vendors, peddlers, and merchants who sell in socially marginal suqs, as they do not have the same level of honor and respect to maintain.

proclamations, or to verbally assert one's trustworthiness would be to base oneself and lose face. It is the case, then, that Damascene merchants must follow certain decorum in their customer interactions if they are to maintain their social status. In addition to not outwardly proclaiming their personal merits, merchants must also not directly, verbally address certain topics such as family origins, as Rabo explains is the case in the old suqs of Aleppo:

To boast of one's origin, or to lecture others about your descent... defeats the very purpose of 'having an *asl* [honorable origin]' and a name. Traders have to be careful. On the one hand they should talk warmly about their fathers, uncles, grandfathers and brothers, yet on the other hand they were living representatives of their descent-groups, and hence had to be careful not to be accused of self-aggrandizement. Origin, descent and family connections should be communicated subtly, or not at all. [2005: 80]

Verbally proclaiming one's piety, political leanings, morality, or skill would be similarly regarded as gauche for these merchants. In these cases, making a sale is not as important as safe-guarding one's dignity.¹⁵

Thus, in Damascus, the verbal tactics used to persuade customers of trustworthiness, respectability, and other desirable qualities can only go so far. This is where artful techniques come in to play: they have the ability to go beyond the point that words can and to visually and aurally convey that which must remain unspoken. Decorations, displays, and aural practices take the place of would-be important verbal exchanges in marketplace interactions. They speak for merchants in ways that words cannot. More than pieces of information a customer uses to navigate the suq, these visual and aural products work as pieces of material *evidence* of behalf of the merchant who creates them. Merchants know that they would get only so far if they were to simply verbally assert their respectability or trustworthiness to customers; these virtues are

¹⁵ This is a delicate balance, though, as customers must also be careful not to insult the honor or respect of a (respectable) merchant. Although most bargaining narratives have the merchant as the trickster and customer as the dupe, Clark notes that in West African marketplaces it can sometimes work in the opposite direction as well: "I saw hostile or derisive reactions to buyers or sellers who chose inappropriate styles of bargaining or tried to change non-negotiable aspects of the transaction, as if traders felt they were trying to trick them" (1994: 129). The parameters of respectable buying and selling in Damascus were something I personally discovered after making the mistake of questioning the prices of a shop selling bootleg DVDs in the Old City, and comparing them to the much cheaper prices of a DVD shop in Suq al Juma'a, a more downtrodden suq at the base of Mount Qasiyyoun, a good distance from the Old City. The merchant took great offense at my doing so, proclaiming that I should go back to Suq al-Juma'a if I wanted those prices. He ultimately refused to allow me to buy from him, even after I had apologized.

things that must instead be demonstrated by hard, material proof of one kind or another. Words are fleeting, empty, and often lack sincerity, whereas material representations are enduring and have the ability to show and document. Visual and aural practices are less fleeting than words, less ambiguous than words, and less suspect than words. They operate in a language all their own – the language of evidence, of demonstration, of visual and aural performance.

In part, this integrity comes from the connection between sight and truth. As Bloch notes, it is an almost universal phenomenon that sight is imagined to be more truthful than language. This is because, he explains:

via language, truth is vitiated by Machiavellian social intentionality. Sight, on the other hand...does not involve the dangerous imagined intentionality projected by the source of knowledge. What one sees has no intention to represent itself, falsely or otherwise; one may mistake what one sees but that's your fault, not, as in the case of linguistic dialogue, the result of the intention of the schemers with whom one is in a relationship. [Bloch 2008: S26]¹⁶

He continues,

It is not only that we find, again and again, an association between sight and truth, we also find this associated with the distrust of what one might call 'hearsay evidence,' for the reason that this may be vitiated by the treacherous intentionality which characterizes ordinary social life...Furthermore, this potential treacherousness is most often seen as the product of the capacity for language that makes lying possible. [Bloch 2008: S27]

Transposing this logic to the marketplace, where lies are assumed to play a large role in verbal transactions (and, in particular, bargaining), it thus makes sense that material decorations and displays would hold more representational worth than the spoken words of a merchant. This is in part because, as Bloch suggests, the customer has more of a say in how those material, visual cues are interpreted than he or she does in interpreting the words of a merchant, which are saddled with intentionality and probable deceit. Because displays, decorations, and poetic sounds lack the intentionality of language, they are more trustworthy as evidence. They cannot trick and dupe in the same

¹⁶ In Burekhardt's book of Arabic proverbs, published in 1875, one fascinating example substantiates this idea that the interpretation of the visual is in the hands of the viewer: "To thy eye, oh merchant (*'ala 'aynek, ya tajir*).” As Burekhardt explains, this means, roughly: "The whole is displayed before thee, therefore *open thy eyes*, for if thou art cheated in the business, it is now thy own fault" (1875: 133).

way that words can – indeed, the onus is on the customer to interpret them correctly. Showing, not just telling, allows customers to judge for themselves. [Importantly, this does not mean that these practices are necessarily truthful simply because they exist as evidence. Indeed, as Kapchan notes, “there is no transaction without some sincerity, but no profit in sincerity alone” (1996: 41). That a merchant makes a big show of displaying his religious piety does not necessarily mean that he is a religious man. Or a vendor who showcases his skills by building towering pyramids of his product may in fact be hiding some kind of support system underneath. These practices are, like verbal skills, also tricks of the trade. But, as I explain, because they are seen to have productive and active capabilities of their own – capabilities which exist independent of the merchant – they are thus, unlike language, more reliable.]

Another important key to the reliability of these practices is that, because they are unspoken, they solicit the customer *indirectly*. The visual and aural practices I discuss are not obviously directed at any one person in particular, and thus can be responded to, or not, depending on the desires of the customer. Displays and decorations rely upon the customer’s gaze rather than a verbal entreaty from the merchant, just as market calls and background noises do not require any kind of acknowledgement from any individual party. That they do not require a customer’s response means that they do not exist as obvious, outright solicitation. Instead of being directly propositioned by the merchants, customers have the personal choice of looking at, listening to, contemplating, and enjoying the images displayed and sounds emitted, and they can take solace in the fact that they are not actively being duped by false words and tricky verbal sales tactics. Visual and aural artful practices thus do not carry the outright intentions of the merchant in the same way that verbal interaction does.

Building on Bloch’s connection between vision and truth, I would also argue that, in the Damascus suqs, visual displays and decorations are deemed more truthful than words because they are durable and enduring, as opposed to words which are quick and fleeting. They work as documentary evidence because they can be contemplated or stared at, and because they remain *constant* – in most cases, they will be there tomorrow in more or less the same form. This is even the case with street vendors, who, although they must set up their merchandise displays every morning and disassemble them every night,

usually stick to the same design and arrangement on a day-to-day basis.¹⁷ Unlike with a merchant's direct, verbal engagement which usually requires some form of immediate answer, customers also have more time to mull over, contemplate, and interpret these artful practices. Though this most obviously is the case for visual displays, even the aural practices I discuss here hold these same qualities of constancy. Because they are repeated over and over by merchants in the same form – same words, same cadence, same melody, same volume – they thus hold durable properties as well. Most merchants who used street calls told me that they repeated the same phrase in the same way, every day; in some parts of the suq, it is typical for a merchant to make as many as twenty identical calls in a single minute. The repetitive, durable quality of calls is particularly evident in the pre-recorded cassette tapes I discuss in Chapter 5, in which the same calls are looped over and over in a constant stream. Unlike spoken words, then, these aural practices can be, like visual representations, absorbed and contemplated in a way that a verbal interaction cannot. Like visual practices, they are treated as material, documentary evidence.

The qualities of constancy and durability are ultimately derived from the material qualities of the practices I examine. The physical presence of photographs, posters, and displays, and their tactile, tangible nature, lie in stark contrast to the fleeting, intangible qualities of spoken words. Though the materiality of aural practices cannot be measured in the same way as those applied to images and decorations, there does exist a kind of materiality to the layers of sound which make up each vocal call, cassette tape, and rhythmic noise used to market goods. Each of these sounds is made of a composite of tones, melodies, rhythms, cadences, and volumes which gives each of them a unique texture of their own. The scratchiness of a caller's voice, or the sharp, metallic clang of a wrench against a metal oil can, a typical way of advertising *mazout*, or diesel oil, may be just as materially meaningful as the feel of a paper image or the material overload of dangling tchotchkes.

Finally, in a seemingly paradoxical twist, it is the case that visual and aural practices can serve as evidence *because* they are created to appear to be subtle and

¹⁷ Although, this does not mean that these kinds of displays and decorations are immutable; indeed, as I show throughout the coming chapters, aesthetic trends, changing politics, and other factors all influence the content and form of these practices over time. But on a day-to-day basis, these practices tend to retain a level of constancy.

superfluous, as background to more direct marketplace interactions. They function, on a base level, as decoration – something to make their shop spaces and merchandise prettier or more interesting. Many merchants also described the existence of these things as being there for their own pleasure. One fabric merchant explained why he displayed a photograph of his father in these simple terms: “My father died; I loved him and I put his picture up so I can see him.” Shrugging their shoulders, another group of three street vendors selling cooked broad beans (see Fig. 5.10) told me, “We’re just having fun/killing time (*mitsallah*) with this...It’s just a display (*model bas*).” These things can thus be interpreted as mere decoration and personal pleasure – and that’s what merchants often told me they were – *or* as important bits of information that may influence business outcomes. Indeed, they function as both at the same time. This is an important point, for part of the reason they are effective as business tactics is that they are not seen as solely business tactics. Surely, local customers know about and expect to encounter these kinds of self-representations when they go shopping, but the fact that they could be explained as mere decoration, or as mere whimsy, or simply there for the pleasure of the merchant, allows customers to feel as if they are not openly being propositioned, or even that they are being savvy shoppers in interpreting clues which may not be explicitly for them. They work because they’re understood and practiced as potential non-tricks. By remaining an unstated, visual and aural part of the shopping experience, images, displays, and sounds gain their integrity and advertising power precisely because they are (seemingly) innocuously part of the store’s décor, or a natural part of the sonic intensity of the suq. There is thus a power that can come from this ambiguity, from the seemingly mundane decorative nature of such techniques.

As such, because they work in this ambiguous way, many of the displays and decorations I photographed and market sounds I recorded carried with elements of whimsy and play, in way lightening the would-be gravity of their representational “work.” Colorful frames used on memorial images, embellishments added to artistic displays, odd and wacky street calls, interesting juxtapositions of symbolic imagery, and so forth, all serve to add a twist of levity, and to point to the whimsy of the merchant who created them. Indeed, the realm of the aural/visual opens up more space for merchants to be creatively playful with their marketing compared to verbal interaction, which takes

place within a relatively rigid framework. Although merchants' marketing practices provide crucial and serious information to those seeking it, it is also the case that the visual and aural are registers in which merchants have more freedom with their self-representations – where there are few rules and many possibilities, and where there aren't the same societal proscriptions as there are in verbal communication.

Distinction in the Marketplace

Besides providing evidence of trustworthiness, perhaps the most important quality of merchants and merchandise, artful practices can also serve as individualized, *distinctive* evidence for customers, conveying important bits of information like religious sect, political leanings, family histories, levels of piety, skills and intellect, and so forth. These are all qualities that customers can use to form their own judgments about which shops to patronize. Indeed, this decision making process is, for customers, a complex one. In the competitive economic environment of the suq, merchants must not only establish trust, but provide information about who they are and what they stand for.

In part, it is the physical design of the suq which necessitates such distinctive evidence. The layout of most Middle Eastern marketplaces, both old and new, groups together stores selling the same kinds of merchandise, so that there are separate suqs for fabric, gold, and spices, each of which contains dozens of near-identical businesses. This is especially the case in the Old City suqs where, as a remnant of early guild organization, most merchants are highly specialized to deal in one type of product – fabric, or nails, or copper, for example. As such, it is not uncommon to see a string of five or more shops selling more or less the same merchandise, a spatial organization that intensifies competition amongst neighboring merchants. Differences in decorations and selling practices allow the customer to more easily choose among shops and vending carts that often sell the same products at the same prices. In other words, these distinguishing practices can play large roles in the customer's choice of one merchant over the other. They allow customers to make informed decisions about which shop to patronize. Indeed, a large part of the importance of such practices (including aural practices) is their ability to communicate to buyers who the merchant is and what he and his business stand for. Although it is certainly the case that a range of uncontrollable factors influences the

customer's decision over which businesses to patronize – the advice of a friend, the location of a shop, the particular inclinations of the customer on that day, and so on – merchants do have control over how they visually and aurally present their businesses to customers. Decorations, displays, and other practices can thus go a long way in swaying the customer in one direction or another.

To illustrate this point, Figures 1.4 and 1.5 show the main interior walls of two neighboring clothing shops in Suq Medhat Pasha. Both shops sell near-identical versions of headdresses (*ghutrat*) and robes (*thawab*) commonly worn by Saudi Arabian men; as such, both rely mainly on a customer base of Saudi travelers, tourists, and businessmen. The size and layout of each shop, with glass doors, air conditioning, and wood paneling, are very similar and, in 2006, both shops seemed to be doing good business. Despite these similarities, one thing that quickly distinguishes the two shops from one another is the conglomerates of personalized displays showcased on the interior walls for all to see. From these, a customer could, with not much effort, derive meaning in order to make conclusions about the shop and its owners.

In the first shop (Fig. 1.4), two black and white photographs of the previous owner – one a plain memorial image (with his full name written in calligraphy below) and the other a larger photograph of the owner with a member of Saudi royalty – might signal that the shop is a family-run business which has been in operation for some decades, and therefore may be trustworthy and respectable. The connection between the previous merchant and Saudi royalty also indicates to customers that the shop has, at least in the past, enjoyed a connection with important Saudi figures – a point of possible importance to Saudi customers. Religious iconography – a plaque depicting a verse from the Qur'an written in elaborate calligraphy, and a smaller one in the bottom left corner with the words 'Allah' and 'Muhammad' – might similarly reflect a certain moral attunement of the merchant, suggesting that he is both pious and trustworthy. Finally, a modern clock and a small no smoking sign give off other clues about the merchant's particular inclinations and tastes.¹⁸

¹⁸ I rarely saw wall clocks displayed in less formal shops and kiosks in the suqs, perhaps in part because clocks are symbols of modern practices of time management. Shops that did display large wall clocks, then, did so in part to signal that they are important enough to take their scheduled obligations seriously, and that business operates in a timely manner. Similar clues can be gathered from the prominent display of



Figure 1.4. A Saudi clothing shop in Suq Medhat Pasha



Figure 1.5. A neighboring Saudi clothing shop in Suq Medhat Pasha

telephones (push-button versus rotary) and calendars. Maps also sometimes were displayed with other imagery; one merchant told wittily me that he liked to see a map of the world because “It lets me know where I am, where I have been, and where I am going.”

Figure 1.5 shows a similar *mélange* of symbolism, though with slightly different emphases. On the front of a shelving unit is a vertical display of four paintings of Saudi royalty, one with a smaller, old black and white photograph of Hafez al-Asad, the former president of Syria, and another decorated with a sticker decal of the *bismillah*, a common Islamic prayer. On the adjoining wall is a color photograph of a revered sheikh important to the merchant; an Islamic-themed calendar; a phone; and a wall clock. In this shop, with more of a visual emphasis on important Saudi figures and little reference to the merchant or his ancestry, one might conclude that the business is newer than the business in Figure 1.4, or perhaps that it is more closely tied to Saudi Arabia. A nod to the former president (rather than the current one, Bashar al-Asad, the son of Hafez) might also signal an allegiance to the more conservative politics of the former regime or, because of the spatial *mélange* of the two figures in the same frame, a desire to connect the Syrian leadership with the Saudi monarchy. Displays of religious symbolism are underplayed when compared to the other shop, which showcases more expensive, fancier religious symbols – a difference which may matter to a particularly pious customer.

As this comparative example illustrates, these symbols can quickly provide customers a wealth of information about the merchant, the shop, and the potential experience of buying from that business. Simply by peering into the interior of each shop, customers can use this visual information to help make their decision of which business to patronize.¹⁹ As such, these seemingly mundane forms of marketing serve as important modes of evidentiary distinction, and have the potential to play large roles in the financial trajectory of each business.

¹⁹ Since most of my research focused on marketing practices and merchants' explanations of those practices, I cannot speak as to how customers in Damascus regard such evidence, or how they actually made their decisions, or how they navigated the visual and aural landscape of *suqs*, save from my own perspective and from shopping with friends. Geertz suggests that Moroccan customers look specifically for deceit in merchants' verbal proclamations: "One searches for what may be wrong – a juggled measure, a product switch, a disguised cost – and for the false signals – an evasive response, an overready agreement, an excessive promise – that reveal its presence. In the message-saturated world of the bazaar, where everyone is trying to lead everyone else down the garden path, mistrust is an adaptive attitude and ethically a quite proper one. The credulous do not thrive" (1979: 208). But I think it is more likely that, in contrast, Damascene customers take a more optimistic approach to these aural/visual representations because they are regarded as bearers of truthful evidence.

Suq Topography and Required Evidence

By mapping the differences in marketing practices, a clear pattern emerges as to how, by whom, and where artful practices are used. Indeed, different types of material evidence are required from different sorts of sellers, and in different market settings: a vendor selling cheap bundles of *ful* (fava beans) from a blanket on the ground in an outdoor market is viewed differently from a merchant selling expensive fabrics in an air-conditioned shop in one of the permanent, covered suqs. The aural and visual marketing techniques sellers use reflect such differences. For established merchants with permanent shops in the larger and more respectable suqs, it is more common to see memorial images of family members/previous shop-owners, as well as political images of the Syrian president and other regional figures. With vendors who sell from the city streets, or sometimes in smaller shops in more socially ‘low’ marketplaces, it is more common to see a focus on artistic product displays which directly reference the products.²⁰ Transient peddlers and sellers in open-air marketplaces, because it is neither practical nor feasible for them to artfully arrange their merchandise into beautiful displays in a selling environment that involves the hustle and bustle of large crowds, tend instead to use street cries and other noises to market their goods. Like with vendors and socially low sellers, the focus of these cries is on the quality of the products themselves rather than on the seller. Thus, merchants in permanent suqs focus more on providing direct information about the quality of themselves and their businesses, while vendors and street sellers focus more on providing information about the quality of their products.

This difference exists in part because the permanent suqs are known to be historically and socially established places where respectability, reputation, and trustworthiness of the merchants are of key importance, while outdoor suqs and streets – and the merchants who sell in them – are known to specifically lack these qualities. Displaying images of one’s forefathers, then, is only appropriate in some marketplace contexts; it is a privilege, and one afforded only to those who are of high enough social standing to exhibit pride in their origins and family history. Merchants selling in open-air

²⁰ This is not to say that merchants in permanent, respectable shops do not care about the arrangement or look of their merchandise, or that they do not sometimes use vocal calls (though this is rarer); rather, it is simply the case that vendors use aesthetic displays and poetic calls with more consistency than established merchants.

markets and on the streets must thus focus more on the visual and aural displays of their products by default, as any kind of marketing of their own, personal trustworthiness would be out of the question and not taken seriously. Visual and aural marketing practices which rest upon religion fall somewhere in the middle, and are used by both merchants with permanent shops and those without. As I explain in Chapter 4, this is because religion – Islam in particular – is taken to be the domain of everyone. One does not have to have respectable origins to be a pious Muslim. Religion is, in a way, the great equalizer when it comes to merchants; all can visually and aurally proclaim themselves to be religious people, no matter if they are doing so from a shop in Suq al-Hamadiyya (arguably the most famous and respectable suq in Damascus' Old City) or from a vending cart in Suq al Haal (an open air, crowded, and socially 'low' market to the north of the Old City).

A key point here is that, although established merchants focus more on visually and aurally marketing themselves, while vendors and open-air sellers focus more on marketing their products, they are still always indirectly reflecting and producing the quality of both themselves and their products. Because the perceived quality of a merchant is always entangled with the perceived quality of his merchandise, merchants market their products by way of marketing themselves, and vendors market themselves by way of marketing their products. In both cases, quality is both reflected and produced in these marketing practices.

Agency and Affect in the Marketplace

As I note above, these practices can be said to both represent the quality of a merchant and his merchandise and at the same time produce and enhance that quality, in a circular, mimetic process. In my interviews with merchants, I was often told that the sounds, images, and decorations they use have the ability to enhance everything in the surrounding area. In most cases, they were able to do this because they contained within them some kind of agentic qualities which derived from their broader sociocultural meanings. For example, merchants often told me that they displayed religious referents such as words from the Qur'an, or images of Shi'i figures 'Ali and Hussein because they

contained within them *barakat*, or religious blessings and goodwill.²¹ The *barakat* which emanates from these religious referents has the ability to bless everything and everyone surrounding it, particularly when those things and people are engaged with the referent in some way, i.e., through touch, vision, and audition. A bolt of fabric positioned next to an Islamic verse is potentially of higher quality because of the *barakat* contained within that verse. As such, merchants often embedded religious images within their merchandise, or displayed them high on walls, or played Qur’anic recordings at particularly high volumes so that these blessings could more easily reach their surroundings.

In addition to enhancing the evidentiary qualities of merchants and merchandise, artful practices also all have the ability to produce particular feelings, thoughts, and dispositions in the people who encounter them. Returning to the agentive power of religious displays and sounds, a merchant’s description of his display of a Qur’anic verse indicates that the religious referent not only enhances the ‘quality’ (spirituality, piety, godliness) of the shop space, but can also cultivate these things in people:

When there’s a Qur’anic verse in the store, there won’t be demons – there will be income (*rizq*), and there will be work (*shughl*). In our houses, instead of putting up a scenic picture or a Picasso painting, we put up an Islamic verse. It’s better than putting up any other picture. The presence of the Qur’an brings spirituality (*ruhaniyya*) into the place. Whenever a person reads something from Qur’an or puts up more pictures, his belief will increase and if he begins to sin, something [in these images and words] will prevent him (*radiyyahu*) from doing so.

Because the Qur’an is taken to be the literal words of God, the physical manifestation of those words has the power to act upon people who read them or hear them (merchants and customers alike), and even to transform the space surrounding – it “brings spirituality into the place.” The mere presence of a religious referent is enough to prevent evil forces, both from an external influence (demons) and an internal one (sin), and also to increase spirituality in those who see, read, or are merely in the same space of that referent.

Religious imagery can even have the ability to increase monetary gain by encouraging work and income – here, the shop owner used the word *rizq* to denote an Islamic concept of the sustenance provided to everyone by God, as opposed to the word *raatib*, which

²¹ *Barakat* is the plural of *baraka* (blessing), and thus literally means ‘blessings.’ Because merchants used the word *barakat* in a broader manner to indicate everything from religious blessings to goodwill to even a kind of spiritual aura, I will also use it to mean more than just ‘blessings.’

simply means ‘salary.’ [*Rizq* is something commonly referenced by merchants as an explanation for how their businesses were doing; phrases such as *Allah birizq* or *al-rizq ala Allah* – God provides (income) – are uttered in order to not take personal credit for a thriving business or, in contrast, as assurance that a struggling business will recuperate.] These marketing practices thus have a greater, broader ability to transform – in other words, an agency of their own, independent of their use in the suqs.²² Similar abilities are said to reside in merchants’ other marketing practices as well, generating pleasure, delight, nostalgia, spiritual contemplation, and other such emotions and thoughts.

These explanations describe two different but interrelated agentive processes at work here: 1) artful marketing practices can potentially enhance the quality of the merchant and merchandise and 2) artful marketing practices can also potentially transform people in socially meaningful, oftentimes affective ways. This second process does not necessarily have anything to do with the shopping experience: a Qur’anic verse can prevent sin and cultivate belief outside of the marketplace as well. But that these affective, transformative abilities *can* operate within a commercial space is what is fascinating, as it makes the marketplace into more than a site for commercial activity. Customers can buy a pound of apples and be spiritually blessed at the same time.

Focusing on processes that create affect in the marketplace provides an alternative to studies of marketplaces that pinpoint economic logic as the key force driving marketplace transaction. Understanding marketplace interactions as controlled primarily by computation and calculation obscures the oftentimes economically illogical forces that shape these interactions. Although it is the case that these visual and aural practices exist as pieces of important (economically-driven) evidence, they also serve to produce and cultivate potentially transformative feelings and thoughts. In this vein, I will describe in the coming chapters both how marketing practices are used in different ways as forms of evidence, *and* how they are able to agentively transform the spaces, people, and things

²² In their explanations of such processes, merchants were careful to keep separate the benefit that might occur to customers, and the financial benefit that they themselves might incur. That is, any kind of financially beneficial product of displaying such agentive things was described as coming *directly* from those things, rather than from the customers being influenced by those things. Thus, a verse from the Qur’an will bless the shop and merchant, bringing financial benefit, and it will also bless the customers who view it, but these things are not explicitly related to one another. Articulating a directly causal relationship would be for merchants to admit that they were using religious referents only for financial gain – a claim that would put both their personal morality and their trustworthiness as merchants into question.

surrounding them. By focusing on the ‘agency’ of such practices, I am drawing upon a body of literature on the anthropology of art that stems from Alfred Gell’s 1998 thesis on the agentic qualities of certain artworks, in which Gell proposed that anthropologists move away from an ‘aesthetic,’ or beauty-centered, approach to art, toward a more open-ended theory that instead emphasizes the agentic and active nature of material objects.²³ Gell’s theory of the cognitive, physiological, and semiotic properties of art aims at explaining how art can agentively act upon viewers. Transposing Gell’s concept of object agency to the marketplace helps us to imagine visual and aural practices as not only static reflections of merchant and product ‘quality,’ but important and active things in their own right.

Artful marketing practices can work as agents because of their ability to tap into a shared social system of beliefs about vision and audition, morality, memory and kinship, and national pride. Merchants decorate their shops, arrange their merchandise, and aurally advertise their products according to local practices and understandings, which explains why artful practices are constantly shifting to accommodate new trends and movements. This local particularity also helps to explain why subtle regional and even intra-saq differences in marketing exist in Syria. This is a point that Gell also emphasizes: the agency of art can only make sense when it is understood to be produced within particular social circumstances to bring about particular social outcomes. To take perhaps his most famous example, in order to better understand how and why Trobriand canoe prows work as agentic art objects, for example, it is important to understand the various Trobriand worldviews associated with canoes, specific colors, forms of pattern, and the social significance of exchange.

In Damascus, what makes merchants’ artful techniques meaningful to customers is not only their design and symbolic significance, but also their intimate connection to their surrounding environment and their reference to local worldviews. It is in part from

²³ Gell had less of a problem with the idea of aesthetics than with theories that posited a unidirectional, causal link between aesthetics and social behavior. Perhaps his most searing critique of aesthetic-centered approaches to culture is of Coote’s 1992 essay on Nilotic oxen appraisal, in which Coote posits that inherent cultural predilections to “beauty” determine the ways in which Sudanese assign value to their cattle. Gell writes, “I find unsatisfactory the idea that any society can be said to just ‘have’ an aesthetic simply by virtue of having preferences that things should look one way rather than another. It always turns out that if people want things to look one way rather than another, it is for reasons which cannot be stated in terms just of how things look” (2006c: 231).

these socially-contingent circumstances that they derive their agentive powers and, in effect, ‘make sense’ to customers. In each of the cases I examine, there is something in the particular material qualities of these designs, decorations, and sounds which has the ability to act upon, influence, and persuade customers: aesthetic displays stoke ‘visual pleasure’; memorial portraits invoke familial nostalgia; religious images, by dint of their inherent nature, can bestow spiritual blessings (*barakat*) upon those who are near them, and so forth. Decorations, displays, and aural practices have the ability to not only reflect and represent, but also to act upon and produce the surrounding space, objects, and people who engage with them.

Fieldwork in Damascus’ Suqs: Evidence, Photography, and Language Barriers

The ethnographer becomes easily lost at first, and fieldwork in a market place is by no means easy. The difficulty consists in the chaos of the general picture, combined with the appalling simplicity of each concrete transaction...The triteness and finality of each individual act short-circuits any full development of problems, and in a way paralyzes observation. [Malinowski and de la Fuente 1985 (1957): 64]

Conducting fieldwork in Damascus’ suqs was indeed a difficult enterprise for me, in part, as Malinowski and de la Fuente suggest, because it was difficult to know where to begin. As I explain in Chapter 2, Middle Eastern marketplaces are renowned for their high levels of intensity – the throngs of crowds, the sensory stimulations, and, in many parts, the incessant burden of automobile traffic – and it is this intensity that can make them particularly demanding spaces, not only physically, but also mentally and emotionally. In such an environment, the artistry and poetics of marketing practices provide a welcome respite. During my daily walks through the meandering suqs of the city, I myself became lured by merchants’ selling techniques, and by the creativity, humor, and skill of the merchants who used them. Though I set out for Syria with the intention of studying merchants’ relationships to the commodities they dealt in, I quickly became far more fascinated by the intricacies of these local marketing practices. Eventually, I began to understand that this kind of local marketing worked on both an outward, sensory level, as well as on a deeper, moral and intellectual level that connected displays, decorations, and sounds directly to religious, political, and moral worldviews. Looking at selling practices in this double regard allowed me to also understand

‘marketing’ in a broader sense; selling worked not only by the direct marketing of particular merchandise, but it was also tied up in the decoration of stores, particular music selections, and the religious and political convictions of the merchants.

In taking as my dissertation subject something which is meant to substitute for verbal language, I faced a challenge in how I was to construct my method of inquiry. Direct questioning of these practices usually brought with it a brush-off in some form or another; I was often given the answer that such decorations, displays, and practices were there simply for the pleasure of the merchant, or because they were a product of Syrian ‘tradition’ (*taqliid*), or that they were simply a way to kill time, as noted above. After a while, though, I realized that these explanations were symptomatic of something else which was meant to remain unarticulated.

In a way, then, I faced an entirely different kind of language barrier from those faced by visitors to a foreign country (although I certainly endured my fair share of struggles with Arabic as well) in that it was difficult for me to capture merchants’ ‘deeper’ explanations of their marketing practices. To be sure, many ethnographers have detailed their struggles with eliciting explanations of everyday, taken-for-granted phenomena; it is in part the mark of a good ethnographer to be able to draw such information from their interlocutors. But in Damascus, it was not simply a matter of finding the right fieldwork tactic to get merchants to talk about their displays, decorations, and aural practices; rather, it was the nature of my subject as something which was created as an explicit counterpoint to verbal dialogue that led to merchants’ reticence. Because these things are meant to non-verbally represent important characteristics about merchants, it follows that merchants used few words to talk about them: these practices are deliberately unspoken and unexplained and, in a sense, for merchants to speak openly about these artful practices as sales tactics would be to give up the trick behind the trade. These practices spoke a language of their own, and I therefore had to treat them as such.

But this does not mean that I encountered silence all around. Indeed, in lieu of words, there exists a vibrant language of gestures, gazes, and material practices surrounding the images and sounds of merchants, and it is this gestural and material language that I used as my own kind of ‘evidence’ of the importance of these marketing

practices. It was clear from the constant attention merchants gave such practices that they remained a large part of merchants' daily imaginings. Displays and decorations were constantly being re-positioned; posters were moved and new photographs were pinned up; and, for vendors, displays needed to be set up and taken down on a daily basis (e.g., Figs. 1.6 and 1.7). It was also the case that aural marketing remained at the forefront of merchants' bodily gestures – cassette tapes of pre-recorded street calls needed to be switched from Side A to Side B (and oftentimes, because of shoddy equipment, also needed to be re-spooled and saved from ruin); CDs of Qur'anic recordings needed to be turned on, with volume adjusted; and street calls, of course, demanded the actual voices of merchants (or in the case of horns, loudspeakers, and hammers, all used as forms of aural marketing, they demanded repetitive hand gestures). As such, even if merchants lacked or suppressed a verbal language regarding these things, they certainly still maintained a constant bodily language in reference to them.

Such a bodily language might be regarded as what, in his work on Indian visual culture, Pinney (2001) has called 'corporetics,' a gestural, sensorial, and corporeal (non-verbal) language with which people relate to objects and materialities.²⁴ In Pinney's words, corporetics "leads us to an understanding of a different dimension of significance in which it is not the efflorescence of words around an object that gives it meaning but a bodily praxis, a poetry of the body, that helps give images what they want" (2001: 161). He continues, "Instead of exegesis, instead of an outpouring of language – there is a poetics of materiality and corporeality around the images" (Pinney 2001: 169). Merchants' corporetic movements became most apparent to me when I asked to photograph their decorations and displays (and, in some cases, to tape record their street cries). Photography elicited an outpouring of bodily gestures from merchants. Many posed with their displays and decorations and often either gestured with their eyes or a finger to the displays I was photographing, with some even physically touching the images on display while I photographed them (Figs. 1.8-1.10). In this sense, then, photography became a way for me to elicit and record the bodily evidence of Damascus' merchants. In the same way that corporetics can be used to understand the gestural and

²⁴ Pinney introduces this idea as a way to counter the "recurrent refrain in the analysis of popular art traditions [which] concerns the ways in which consumers of images are either unable or unwilling to speak about their form" (2001: 161).



Figure 1.6. A young merchant arranges an apricot display



Figure 1.7 A poster vendor repositions his merchandise



Figure 1.8. A toy merchant holds a genealogical chart of the prophet Muhammad



Figure 1.9. A fabric merchant with a decorative collage of symbols



Figure 1.10. An ice cream merchant adjusts his display as I take a picture

material languages surrounding Indian chromolithography and studio photography, we might also apply it to the visual and aural registers of the suqs of Damascus to understand how merchants (and customers) relate to these things on other, non-verbal levels.

As another indication of how they felt about their practices, it was also important to merchants that I photographed the best image I could get of their particular marketing techniques. Merchants would often tell me to wait a moment or two while they adjusted their decorations and displays before they would allow me to photograph them. Some dusted old photographs, others removed from the display odds and ends that they deemed superfluous or ugly, and vendors selling produce would often hastily re-adjust their displays to make them look, to their eyes, perfect. Before allowing me to take a photograph of his mobile popcorn machine, for example, the vendor insisted upon taking a few minutes to make a new batch of popcorn, even though he had plenty already made, so that I could photograph the popcorn popping out of the cooker – an image that he

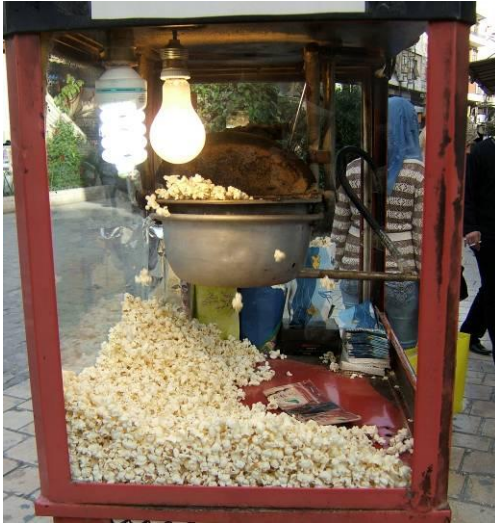


Figure 1.11. A photograph of a popcorn cooker at its best

deemed the best representation of his device (Fig. 1.11). In another example, when I was photographing a memorial painting of the father of the woodworker whose shop was downstairs from my apartment, his brother held up a wooden frame because it made the painting of his father “more beautiful” (*ahla*) and “stronger” (*a’wa*) (Fig. 1.12). In other cases, merchants told me from what angles to stand so that I could get the best photograph possible (in which case, I usually took both my own photos and those they requested), turning on extra lights and moving clutter in the process. Merchants also often wanted to immediately see the photograph I had just taken to make sure it was good enough by looking at the display screen of my digital camera (and in some cases, asking me to re-take the photograph from a different angle), and many also asked for copies of the photographs I took, especially if they were in them. Concern for my correct recording of marketing techniques also sometimes applied to aural marketing – when I asked merchants to elaborate upon their calls, many re-performed them just for me so that I could record them with my tape recorder properly.

Such attention to the content and form of my photographs suggests that, for merchants, photography exists as a type of documentary evidence itself. It was necessary that I *properly* photograph displays and decorations because I was materially documenting those things with my camera. The connection between photography and documentation is, of course, not a new one. But, if in Damascus, visual displays can



Figure 1.12. Framing a memorial image makes it “more beautiful” and “stronger”

function as documentary evidence themselves, then photographing them becomes a kind of re-documentation or double-documentation – a task which is important to get right.

I myself also relied on my photographs as a form of proof when I returned to Damascus in 2009, three years after my initial stay. Approaching merchants with photographs I had taken of them three years prior allowed me to prove with material documentation that I had indeed met them, talked with them, photographed their shop, and, above all, that I had formed some sort of past social connection to them. Showing these photographs allowed me to re-establish that social connection and thus gain quicker and easier access. In a similar way, I sometimes used photography as an interviewing tool. As noted above, I was often confronted with reticence when I asked merchants to elaborate on their practices, but showing photographs of other stores' decorative techniques tended to elicit commentary from merchants and any friends or relatives who happened to be in the shop that day. Some would comment upon the beauty of displays; others would argue over whose shop a memorial photograph belonged to; and many would start conversations about their own displays and decorations. Showing other photographs also tended to elicit "we" statements – 'We hang memorial photos because...' or 'We enjoy the beauty in such and such a way...' – that highlighted the communal, shared nature of such practices.

As a documentation device, photography also became another means of ethnographic note-taking for me. Halfway through my fieldwork in Damascus, I realized that I was taking just as many photographs as field notes, and that I perused, mulled over, and analyzed these images as frequently as I did what I had written in my notebook. Though photography obviously lacks the ability to elaborate upon and record theoretical analyses, it made up for this lack in its attention to detail and in its visceral, life-infused character. In my case, photography made particular sense because of the obvious visual nature of my subject. It allowed me to record the intricacies of spatial juxtaposition of family portraits, the colors and designs used in merchandise decoration, and the material intensity of many of these displays – things which would be difficult to record with only pen and paper (or computer). Keeping in mind its tendency to frame and limit, thus cutting out larger aspects of the story, photography was a way to record these complex details in a true-to-life way.

The vast majority of sellers whom I approached were receptive and welcoming of a photograph. Street vendors were sometimes more suspect of photography, in large part because of the illegality in which most of their enterprises operate. This was especially the case with women street vendors, who were already facing social stigma by selling in open-air suqs. Most parts of the suqs were readily available for me to photograph, although in the large, open-air marketplaces where foreigners rarely go, I faced more challenges. I especially felt uncomfortable photographing Suq al Haramiyya (the ‘Thieves Market’), where the majority of sellers there were hawking goods as a last-ditch effort to make a living; for them, selling was a burden rather than something to be proud of. What’s more, places like Suq al-Haramiyya were also almost always considered the domain of men; as a young, unaccompanied foreign woman, I did not belong (although I never faced outright harassment for being there), and taking too many photographs would have drawn too much attention to myself.

That photography was regarded as evidence for merchants also opened for me the question of how it fits into ethnography as a form of evidence. As several scholars have recently noted, the notion of what qualifies as ethnographic evidence, and how we might obtain it, is a slippery subject for anthropology (see, for example, two recent edited volumes: Chua, et al. 2008 and Engelke 2009), in part, as Engelke (2008) argues, because our methodological framework exists more in the amorphous realm of experience than in the solid, reliable realm of archives, documents, and statistics. As documentation of their experience and substantiation for analysis, most ethnographers rely heavily upon the words of their subjects in their written accounts; indeed, many would agree that *verbal* evidence, in the form of interviews, transcripts, and quotations, is the among the most valued kind of ethnographic proof. To be sure, this is all for good reason – adding the words of ethnographic subjects is a good way to ensure against a top-down and possibly ethnocentric analysis – but by relying so heavily upon words, the importance of other, nonverbal realms of ethnographic evidence, not only visual, but also aural, tactile, and even olfactory, is unduly pushed to the side.

This is not to suggest that photography does not play a role in most ethnographies; indeed, many include in them a range of photographs which are there to provide evidence for what is textually claimed, giving visual proof that the anthropologist was ‘there,’ and

that the phenomena being described are indeed real. But, despite their usefulness, photographs usually stand in awkward relationship to the text. As MacDougall notes, including photographs in ethnographic accounts is usually “a technique of supplementary documentation, and not a very interesting one at that” (2006: 232). Because they exist in the realm of the visual, they are taken to be something wholly separate from the dominant text.²⁵

In part, my decision to make this a particularly visual document was an easy one because my ethnographic subject was itself so visual in nature. Considering that artful practices were created in order to be looked at, it makes sense that I also should provide the reader with a way of looking at them. Photography is the natural way for me to do this. As such, I view my incorporation of (many) photographs into this dissertation not as a way simply to provide evidence for what I am writing, or as a kind of decorative embellishment in and of itself, but rather as a way to *visually* argue my points. I do not mean for the photographs to wholly substitute for analysis or data, and I do not have any hope that they will captivate the reader; rather, I believe they work best as both in conversation with the text, and as potentially providing something extra to that text. As is the case in the suqs of Damascus, the visual component of this dissertation provides important information that my textual words cannot fully articulate.

Chapter Outline

To arrive at a fuller understanding of how these marketing practices work, Chapter 2 is dedicated to explaining the range of spaces and people found in Damascus’ marketplaces. The sheer physical magnitude of these suqs, combined with their social, political, and economic importance, means that they are frequented on a daily basis by thousands of people. Organizing these spaces and people is a necessary step in understanding the intricacies of suq marketing practices. In this chapter, I also look at the different social, economic, and sensory topographies of some of the city’s major suqs,

²⁵ MacDougall suggests that this is in part because the realm of the visual provides *too* much information; photographs can be described, interpreted, and discussed without end: “One of the problems facing anthropology from the very beginning was that films and photographs did not explain or summarize matters – they expanded upon them almost without limit. If anything, they were too full of specific and unmediated information...to most anthropologists it was this very literalness that was disconcerting” (2006: 232).

focusing on the variable forms of movement and speed that characterize these sites. I argue that such a project is necessary in order to understand the visual and aural composition of artful marketing practices and the different forms of evidence which are required in different marketing atmospheres. These suq ‘topographies’ will allow for a better understanding of the variability and flexibility of Damascus’ marketplace systems.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 I examine different genres of artful marketing practices in Damascus’ suqs, as outlined above. In Chapter 3, I examine the use of political and family portraiture; Chapter 4 is devoted to merchants’ displays of religious imagery and sounds; and Chapter 5 looks at the realm of aesthetic displays and poetic calls. In part reflective of the central place of movement in the suqs of Damascus (see Chapter 2), these three chapters are organized around an outward movements of sorts, from the central, established suqs of the Old and New Cities, where mostly sociopolitical and religious displays are found, out to the open-air and socially marginal marketplaces and streets of the city, where mostly aesthetic and poetic displays and sounds are found. As merchants move from permanent shops the streets and outdoor markets, their marketing strategies must change. In all three of these chapters, I explain how such marketing practices work on three levels as a) physically attractive decoration and sound; b) (distinctive) evidence of merchant and merchandise quality; and c) agentive objects in their own right. I also include at the end of each a ‘coda’ which provides a case study of how these marketing techniques are constantly changing in relation to the urban environment which surrounds them. Chapter 6 concludes this dissertation with a discussion of how the artistic side of these marketing practices might fit into a larger frame of art and craftsmanship in Syria and beyond.

In all of these chapters, I am interested less in whether or not these marketing practices actually work to draw customers and improve sales than in how and why artful marketing practices are used by merchants to do. Although as a frequent customer in the Damascus suqs (and by oftentimes shopping with friends) I was able to get at least a personal perspective on how these techniques might influence the buying process, I spent the vast majority of my fieldwork talking with merchants rather than customers in an

attempt to understand why they used the artful techniques they did.²⁶ Throughout these chapters, then, I focus more on the intentions of the merchants in creating and using artful selling practices than on the effects of such practices on customers, and more on the actual techniques themselves than on their economic efficacy. Ultimately, these marketing practices are more than a means to an end; rather, they have the potential to both fuel and reflect larger sociocultural trends in Damascus: the changing religious landscape of the city; new aesthetic and visual trends; the infusion of kinship and politics with work; and debates over the merging of religion and technology.

²⁶ Thus, most points in this dissertation in which I refer to customers will be drawn either from my and my friends' experiences as customers, from very brief chats with customers I happened to come across, or simply from observing merchant-customer interactions in various suqs.

Chapter 2

Dis/Orientations and Suq Topographies

After the chaotic complexity of the market place is reduced to manageable documents, we can start the real theoretical task of digesting the evidence. [Malinowski and de la Fuente 1985 (1957): 65]

This chapter turns to the spaces and places of Damascus' suqs in an effort to understand why aural and visual practices take the shapes that they do. Although Malinowski and de la Fuente suggest quieting the "chaotic complexity" of the marketplace, I attempt to do the opposite in this chapter, as it is that very disordered energy in which artful marketing practices thrive. I argue that it is the specific nature of Damascus' suqs as sites where time and space interact differently that shapes the content and form of merchants' practices. Because most suqs are such busy, crowded, and chaotic spaces, merchants rely on the look of their visual and aural displays to quickly relay important information (or 'evidence') to passers-by. I also discuss the idea that suqs require a different kind of sensory attunement from their visitors, who must be able to treat these visual and aural realms as places for potentially important information. Because they are so prevalent and important, aural and visual practices suggest the predominance of other sensory registers – in particular, vision and sound – that are at work in marketplaces. I show that, by mapping a kind of sensory topography of some of Damascus' marketplaces, and by linking them to place-specific historical and social movements, we can better see how space and sensory experience are mutually constitutive.

Before tackling the sensory "chaos" of Damascus' suqs, though, I begin by placing them within a historical, geographical, and sociopolitical framework. To be sure, creating a survey (or any other "manageable document") of Damascus' suqs is no easy task. The city boasts hundreds of separate market areas that cater to many thousands of customers on a daily basis. The size and permanence of these marketplaces range broadly

from the sprawling, fixed suqs of the Old City, to newer, European-style shopping arcades in the New City, to transient, illegal markets set up throughout the city, many of which operate during the nighttime hours when the risk of being fined sharply declines.¹ Goods sold range from plastic imports sold in ten-lira (approximately 20-cent) shops to high-end designer clothing worth many hundreds of dollars, sold at the new Villa Moda boutique in the Old City.² Thousands of people – merchants, traders, vendors, customers, residents, tourists and passers-by – flow in and out of the suqs on a daily basis, and the boundaries, names, and of make-up of each market are constantly in flux.

Given the size and number of Damascus' marketplaces, I was not able to explore all of them; rather, during fieldwork I concentrated on those which were most populated, historical, and seemingly important to the social and economic life of Damascus. In many cases, I visited a suq because I was told to do so by an informant, or because I simply happened upon one as I walked around the city. Where I resided also influenced the frequency with which I visited certain suqs; in 2005-2006, I lived in the center of the Old City in the Qaimeriyya neighborhood and then moved to an apartment in the middle of the New City market area of Shalaan. During my return trip in 2009, I spent almost a month in residence at the Finnish Institute, which is located in the Old City near Bab Sharqi on the border of the Christian neighborhood and what was once the city's Jewish quarters. In all three of these locations, I necessarily had to walk through a suq in order to get to other parts of the city. Because of the bounded nature of the Old City, I was able to visit almost all of the suqs contained within, and performed mapping exercises in order to better understand how they spatially fit together with one another. In the New City, I visited most of the biggest and most important shopping areas which were centrally located.

¹ Like many colonial cities, Damascus is divided into the 'Old City,' a relatively small, contained residential and market area, where the original city began, and the 'New City,' which roughly refers to everything outside of the Old City's ancient walls, including medieval neighborhoods directly outside of the Old City and newer, 'modern' residential suburban areas built only in the past 75 years.

² Villa Moda opened its doors in 2008 in a second-storey shop positioned above fabric and spice stalls in the Medhat Pasha suq. With its Orientalist décor, luxury merchandise, and ever-present security guards positioned amongst spice merchants and produce vendors, it is a fascinating example of the capitalization on the old-world charm of the dilapidated Old City.

Orientations

Middle Eastern Suqs

To understand the placed nature of Damascus' suqs, it will first be useful to differentiate here *markets* as abstract economic institutions from *marketplaces* as spatially-located, historical institutions. In his examination of Tsukiji, the world-renowned fish marketplace of Tokyo, Bestor begins with this distinction, defining 'market' as "an abstract economic institution or process" (2004: 20) and 'marketplace' as

both a specific geographical place and a localized set of social institutions, transactions, social actors, organizations, products, trade practices, and cultural meanings motivated by a wide variety of factors including, but not limited to, 'purely economic' or 'market' forces. [2004: 20]

To be sure, the economic side of marketplaces can never be divorced from the social side; in the marketplace, they are often one and the same. But understanding the 'placed' nature of markets can help to get at their poetic, creative, and affective qualities, which is precisely part of my project here.

In Tokyo, explains Bestor, the fuzzy line between marketplace and market is reflected in the number of ambiguous terms in Japanese used to refer to the market/place as a whole, and even to individual market/places such as the fish market or fish quay. In Damascus, reference to the market/place is similarly ambiguous, as 'suq' can take either an abstract definition of 'market,' such as *suq al-sooda* ('the black market') or *suq al-hurra* ('the free market'), or it can refer to particular geographically-located marketplaces, such as Suq al-Hamadiyya, or Suq Medhat Pasha, both famous marketplaces located in the Old City of Damascus. The word 'suq' stems from the Arabic verb s-a-q, which, literally translated, means to drive or herd (Wehr 1994: 516), perhaps alluding to earlier days when specialized buildings in the suqs were used as lodging for traveling caravans. To refer to Damascus marketplaces with the singular word *suq* (a common gloss at least in English), however, is somewhat of a mistake, as most suqs in Middle Eastern urban centers are in fact giant systems of smaller marketplaces. There are several names to refer to different sections of the suq system in the Old City of Damascus, most of which give away their original intention and history, such as the Gold Suq (*Suq al-Thahab*) or the Wool Suq (*Suq al-Souf*). In the statement, "I'm going to the

suq” (*‘am bruh as-suq*), then, *suq* would refer generically to any number of actual markets. Only when specific names of suqs are given do more precise meanings emerge.

As Geertz begins his ethnography on the suqs of Sefrou, Morocco:

“Characterizing whole civilizations in terms of one or another of their leading institutions is a dubious procedure, but if one is going to indulge in it for the Middle East and North Africa, the bazaar is surely a prime candidate” (1979: 123). Indeed, in urban centers throughout the MENA region, suqs form a large part of the social, political, and economic heart of the city for its residents, most of whom are connected to the marketplace in one way or another – through family businesses, as customers, by sharing buildings with shops, and so forth.³ Most historical suqs are located in the Old City sections of town –the original foundations of the city with residential quarters, marketplaces, religious institutions, and the like, usually contained by fortified walls and gates (*babs*) which are sometimes locked at night. These suqs contain similar architectural and spatial features which separate them from other marketplaces throughout the world. Spatially, most historic Middle Eastern suqs are composed of a maze of small alleyways and dead ends, flanking long, narrow galleries, usually covered with high, vaulted ceilings, and with rows of shops on either side of a pedestrian pathway. Today, most suq roofs are made from sheets of corrugated iron, although some (such as the Aleppo suq) have kept their centuries-old roofs of intricately arranged stone and brick. The iron roofs of Suq al-Hamadiyya (and formerly of Suq Medhat Pasha) in Damascus are notoriously sprinkled with bullet holes created by firefights during the French Mandate.⁴ They remain today a symbol of Syrian pride and independence, and the dappled patterns on the suq floors formed by sunlight streaming through the holes is a daily reminder of their presence (Fig. 2.1).

³ It is also important to note that there exist large differences between temporary, rural suqs found throughout the countryside of the Middle East and the large, permanent suqs of Middle Eastern urban centers which have been so integral to the development of city life throughout the centuries. Open-air, daily marketplaces do very much exist in Damascus, and they may indeed mimic the rural suqs described by others, but almost all of them are still closely connected to the large, historic suq systems of the Old City – a connection which the rural markets usually do not enjoy.

⁴ To the chagrin of many, authorities replaced the bullet-strewn roof of Suq Medhat Pasha in 2008 when the suq was revamped for Damascus’ UNESCO year as ‘Capital of Arab Culture’ with a cleaner and newer version. Although some merchants I spoke with were happy that they and their products would no longer get wet when rain came through the holes, most mourned the loss of this shared symbol of Syrian resistance. The holes in the roof of Suq al Hamadiyya remain, however, despite a similar restoration in 2002.



Figure 2.1. Bullet holes in the roof of Suq Medhat Pasha. In 2006 they created patterns on the ground with early morning sunlight.

In most Middle Eastern cities, these large, historic suqs are by no means the only commercial areas frequented by shoppers. European-inspired arcades in the New City, sleepy residential markets, transitory street markets, and Western-style multi-storey malls are just as socially, culturally, and economically pertinent to the local worlds of the city's residents. But mentioning the word 'suq' to those residents will most likely conjure images of the grand, historic shopping areas in the Old City. In part, this is because many of the city's important sites still reside in the old sections of town, and because many people still live in the old neighborhoods which surround these famous market areas. In Damascus, for example, mosques, churches, Islamic schools (*madrasas*), and other religious institutions, are often located around and sometimes even in the old suqs, as a spatial testament to their symbolic importance. Spatially merging religious and commercial life was a common urban planning tactic for early Islamic architects and, in fact, the location of important mosques often dictated how the subsequent suqs were then

laid out around it, with the both symbolically and physically ‘cleaner’ trades (those with the least pollution, noise, and smell) located closest to the sacred grounds of the mosque, and the more polluted trades located physically and symbolically farther away. In Damascus, the eighth-century Omayyad mosque, by far the biggest and most important mosque in the Old City, is surrounded by gold merchants on the southern side, Islamic book and cassette tape vendors on the western side, jewelry and antique shops on the eastern side, and the tomb of the 12th century Muslim hero Salah ad-diin (Saladin) to the north – all proper, ‘clean’ trades worthy of their close proximity to the holy site.

In addition to their historical importance, suqs play a major sociopolitical role in the Middle East. In Damascus, friends accompany one another to the marketplace; families stroll through the vaulted halls of Suq al-Hamadiyya during hot summer nights; and merchants spend much of the day visiting friends, drinking tea, and gossiping. Despite their age, the meanings of urban suqs, of course, change over time to mirror (and sometimes fuel) the changing sociopolitical climate. For example, in Jiddah, Saudi Arabia, marketplaces have become a new site for expressions of youth culture. There, young men and women use the all-goes atmosphere of the marketplace to test the limits of Saudi society by using new modes of consumption to interact with one another in ways that some would deem socially unacceptable in other spheres: “More than commoditized zones for consumerism, these sites are where social networks and reputations are forged” (Wynn 1997: 30).⁵

Perhaps because of this social aspect, suqs are politically important as well, especially in Damascus, where the nexus of Old City suqs has become a symbol of sorts of Syria’s national identity; indeed, the Old City is one of the first tour sites for foreign dignitaries (during my fieldwork, I noticed that a handful of merchants displayed photographs of John Kerry’s visit to Damascus’ Old City suqs in January, 2005). It is also the case that many political movements are forged in the suq, such as the 2006 boycott of Danish products, which was sparked by a series of political cartoons in a Danish newspaper deemed offensive by many Muslims around the world. Merchants in

⁵ Interestingly, these practices also influence and are influenced by merchants’ display tactics in the suq: “Commercial establishments jockey for customers through strategies of commodity display and, more importantly, through the organization of space that facilitates interaction between men and women” (Wynn 1997: 31).

the suqs were among the first to hang signs declaring their allegiance to Islam, and their disdain for all things (and people) Danish. In addition to merchants hanging political signs in their private shops, the public spaces of the suq are also places where different groups (some governmental, some not) hang banners declaring allegiance to one political movement or another. In 2009, for example, there were many giant banners depicting a tripartite image of Syria's president Bashar al-Asad with Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Lebanese-based Shi'i group Hizballah, and Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, which hung from the ceilings of crowded Old City suqs (though, significantly, not in Suq al Hamadiyya or Suq Medhat Pasha, which are considered to be the most important suqs for tourism and therefore less appropriate for such political expressions). The public areas of the suqs similarly acted as a site for debates over public health issues; in response to sharp declines in poultry products in 2006 because of avian flu scares, governmental and merchant signs declaring the safety of poultry products were plastered all over suq walls (Fig. 2.2).



Figure 2.2. A provocative poster encouraging the consumption of poultry. The text next to the chicken proclaims, "It's edible!"

Placing Damascus' Markets

Damascus is a busy, sprawling city with a population upwards of one and a half million, and an ever-expanding suburban mass. As is the case with most Middle Eastern urban centers, the city is divided into the Old City and the New City, a layout which is in part a remnant from colonial urban planning. The Old City is usually defined as the quarters that originally constituted Damascus' fortified city; it is a study in layers, with medieval buildings placed on top of ancient Roman ruins, which are then covered by more modern structures. In part as a spatial layout meant to protect against outside threats, most of the Old City was constructed with small, labyrinthine pathways, inward-looking houses, and hidden alleyways.

Defining the boundaries of the Old City is a difficult task, though Damascenes usually refer to the Old City [*al-madina al-(q)adimeh* or 'Old Damascus,' *Sham al-(q)adimeh*] as the southeastern area of the city that was historically enclosed by high walls, gates, and protected by a citadel (see map, Fig. 2.3). Many of these walls and gates (*babs*) remain today, and they continue to demarcate neighborhoods within the Old City. The citadel remains as well, though in much-restored form, and currently houses faculty and students from Damascus University's Art School. Though the Old City has been modified to allow for cars on many of its streets, the majority of it has remained a maze of pedestrian-only alleyways that are flanked by traditional Arab houses whose interiors boast stunning mosaics, courtyards, and fountains.

For the most part, Old Damascus is known to its residents by its major landmarks, marketplaces, and natural features rather than street names, numbers, and set boundaries. This is especially the case when Damascenes refer to the city's commercial zones; especially in the Old City, where each *suq* may have three or four different names, and where boundaries are continuously in flux, places, including residences, are mostly imagined in relation to one another. For example, the house where I lived during the first six months of fieldwork had no number that I knew of; rather, I would refer to it as 'facing Café Al-Bal,' a famous coffee shop in the heart of the Qaimeriyya neighborhood.

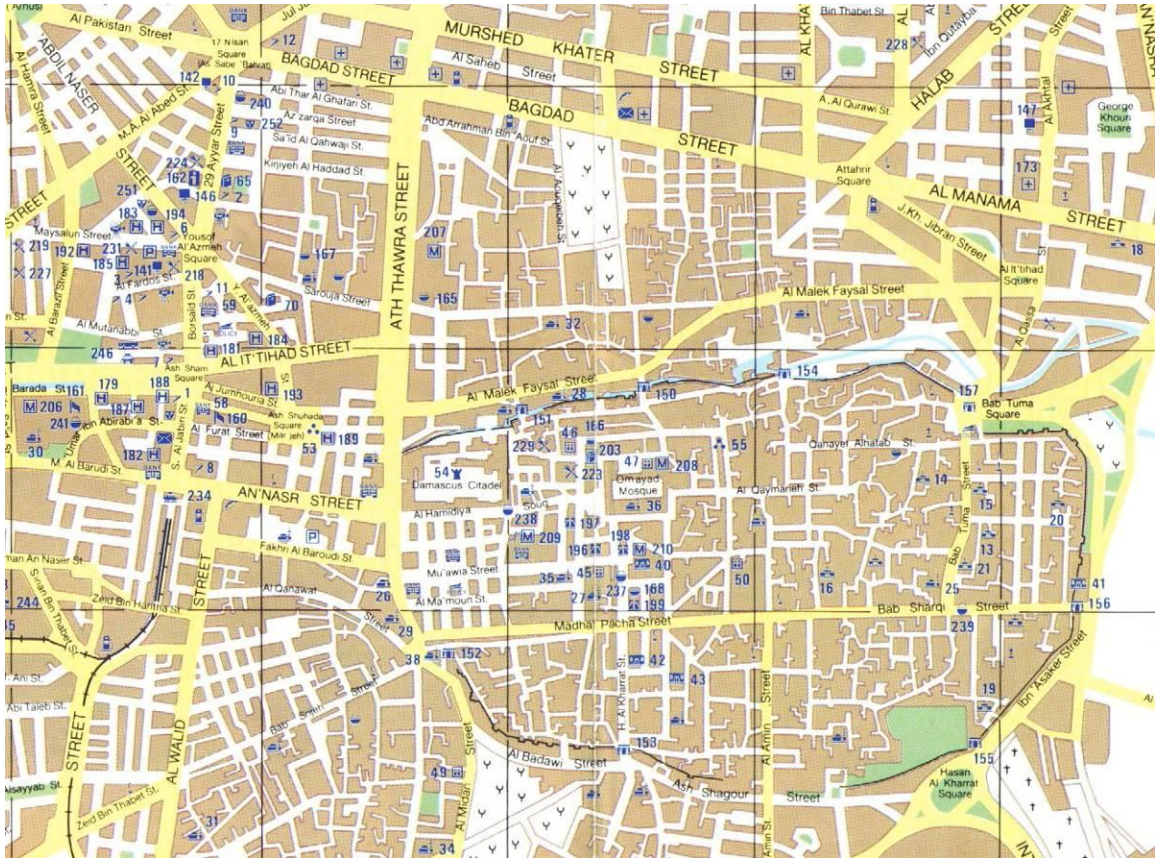


Figure 2.3. A map of the Old City (encircled in black)⁶

Similarly, individual shops in the suqs were mostly referred to by their placement next to others – i.e., ‘the produce man next to Abu Khalid’s antique shop,’ or ‘the fabric shop two doors down from Masjid al-Noor.’ As Marcus notes, 18th century Aleppines also imagined urban space in such a manner:

The townspeople moved in their city’s labyrinthine maze without the benefit of any street or guide signs, building numbers, or maps. They oriented themselves in terms of a well-known and commonly understood system of coordinates. Walls, gates, districts, streets, and landmarks helped them to locate places and to direct their way to them. Most of these physical and spatial elements had names that gave them recognizable identities and proved particularly useful as a set of collective guiding symbols because of their remarkable stability – some of them dated back to the early medieval period – and because they often contained useful locational clues. [1989: 288-289]

⁶ This map is taken from a larger map distributed by Syria’s Ministry of Tourism and reproduced from: http://www.syriatourism.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=My_eGallery&file=index&do=showgall&gid=263&offset=0&orderby=dateD, accessed November 21, 2009.

As with Aleppo centuries ago, the ancient foundations of Damascus' Old City still provide "locational clues" for Damascenes. This is particularly the case with the eight major *babs* (doors/gates) encircling the Old City, as well as the Omayyad and Sayyada Ruqayya mosques and the crumbling structure of the ancient citadel on the northwestern side.⁷

Transecting the residential quarters of the Old City is a number of loosely-bounded *suqs* that are visited daily by thousands of locals and tourists alike. The biggest and most famous of these is Suq al-Hamadiyya, an enormous, covered, pedestrian-only market built in the late 19th century on top of ancient Roman ruins, flanked by the dominating Omayyad Mosque on the western side and the busy al-Thawra (Revolution) Street on the east. In part because of its history, Suq al-Hamadiyya is one of the biggest tourist draws in Syria; one informant described it as Damascus' "*ramz min rmooz*," "symbol of symbols." Its iron-roof covered gallery is one of the longest in the world, and it serves as the main conduit for pedestrian traffic coming from the New City to the Omayyad Mosque, in the center of the Old City. Suq al-Hamadiyya holds hundreds of businesses that cater mostly to upper-class, conservative Syrians as well as tourists, and sell items such as gold, traditional dresses, headscarves and veils, and a range of wedding accouterments. Its fame and beauty means that it a popular spot for families to stroll at night, and its cooling roof, coupled with the number of famous ice cream shops scattered throughout, make it a welcome refuge in the intense summer heat.

Running parallel to Suq al-Hamadiyya, about three quarters of a mile to the south, is Suq Medhat Pasha, another long, covered market that, though not as dazzling as its counterpart, still does tremendous business, selling mostly fabric, textiles, and traditional men's clothing. Until 2008, Suq Medhat Pasha was not limited to pedestrians, so that cars, bicycles, horses, and people vied for space to move within the cramped quarters, but this changed in 2008, after a large revitalization effort taken on for Damascus' year-long UNESCO title of 'Capital of Arab Culture.' Another large, covered suq in this area is Suq al-Bzouriyah (the Seed Market), which connects Hamadiyya and Medhat Pasha at their eastern ends. Bzouriyah, specializing in spices, household equipment, and nuts and

⁷ Interestingly, as part of the reconstruction efforts of the government spurred by the UNESCO designation, street names, address numbers, and detailed maps have been prominently placed throughout the twists and turns of the Old City.

candy, is usually crammed with crowds of locals and tourists alike. Surrounding these three large suqs is a number of smaller, covered fabric, gold, produce and wholesale markets that cater mostly to local customers. Each of these smaller marketplaces has its own, individual name, though their boundaries seem to be different for different merchants. On the eastern side of the Old City is one more large (uncovered) market area, Bab Touma, which, because it is manned by mostly Christian merchants, is known to be a more liberal and hence youth-oriented area. (Indeed, most foreign students who come to study in Damascus end up living in Bab Touma).

Outside of the Old City walls sprawls the ever-growing mass of Damascus' 'New City,' a generic name used to refer to most parts of the city not housed within the ancient walls of the Old City, and particularly the central neighborhoods which were developed during the French Mandate period (1920-1943), such as Salahiyya, Shalaan, Mezze, and Abu Roumaneh (Fig. 2.4 shows the New City from a central spot, facing north).⁸ These neighborhoods, with their wide boulevards and public leisure zones such as parks and shopping areas, are typical of French colonial design, which as Khoury explains reflected a grander colonial project of preservation and development:

Although Damascus never attracted the large European-settler population which the cities of French North Africa did, French architects and planners were obviously influenced by French urban experiments in Morocco. Two approaches were followed. In the old city, the French made concerted efforts to preserve its ancient physical character and the 'supposed harmonies of a traditional way of life,' basically by leaving it alone. But, in the newer districts which were taking shape during the Mandate, they sought to establish a cultural synthesis between local tradition and modern urban form. [1987: 293]

This dual-development model created a "polarization of the 'modern' and 'traditional' city" (Thompson 2000: 177) – a division which remains today. Elites moved from their large courtyard houses in the Old City to new, 'modern' apartment buildings in the New City, while poorer families settled down and expanded in the Old City.⁹

⁸ In fact, the 'New City' is a bit of a misnomer, as many neighborhoods which lie outside of the old city walls were constructed as suburbs during the medieval period. (Khoury 1987: 289).

⁹ More recently, though, Damascus' elite has begun to pour money into the Old City in the form of boutique restaurants, shops, and restored courtyard houses, as heritage politics make the nostalgia for the dusty, disorganized Old City a symbol of modernity. (See Salamandra 2004 for a detailed study of this phenomenon). The frantic revamping of the Old City has pushed housing prices sky-high, causing a rapid exodus of middle-income residents, many of whose families have lived there for generations.



Figure 2.4. Partial view of the New City of Damascus

Although in the New City of Damascus there is not such a highly concentrated number of suqs in one location, certain neighborhoods are famous for their markets. Of these, I most frequently visited Qassaa, a wealthy Christian neighborhood to the north of Bab Touma with upscale clothing and accessories shops; Qazaazeen, a conservative neighborhood to the north of the Old City with a jumble of mostly small shops selling foodstuffs and mechanical equipment; Bab Sreijeh, a large and famous suq just west of the Old City; Suq al-Juma'a (the Friday Market), a bustling, long market street on the base of Mount Qasiyoon, the large mountain to the north of the city, where the hub of activity occurs around a famous mosque called Jami'a Sheikh Muhadeen, a popular pilgrimage site; and Shalaan and Salahiyya, two small, upper-class market streets parallel to one another in the city center which, as both neighborhoods sport nice parks, are popular spots for families and young couples to stroll in the evenings. I also spent a good deal of time in two large, open-air marketplaces, where itinerant sellers – a mix of men and women, many of whom are villagers from the countryside – sell a range of goods from sheets laid on the ground: Suq al-Haal, which lies directly outside of Old City walls and spills onto the busy Malik Faisal Street, and Suq al-Ameen, which lies outside the

southern walls of the Old City, connected to it by a busy street running from Suq Medhat Pasha.

In the New City, these shopping areas now must share their space with newly built luxury shopping malls and arcades, built to cater to the Damascus elite. The giant Four Seasons Hotel opened in a central New City location in the midst of my first trip to Syria; when I returned in 2009, it had expanded to include the Damascus Boulevard complex, a shopping arcade with high-end boutique shops and several eateries serving Western-style food with inflated prices. New, multi-story malls are also being built throughout the city, as a response to the consumer demand for Western brands and ‘modern’ shopping experiences. Interestingly, this demand has also created a flurry of construction in the Old City of boutique shops and expensive restaurants, whose social capital comes from the ‘authentic’ grittiness of the surrounding shops and kiosks.

Finally, periodic illegal markets are set up throughout the city, many operating at nighttime so as to avoid heavy fines from officials. Most of these markets are dedicated to the sale of clothing of all types, and they attract many bargain hunters with their low prices. The market in second-hand clothing, while illegal, continues to grow and thrive in Damascus. Vendors peddle used clothing (ranging from vast bundles of like-new items to a handful of dingy and torn clothes) from a range of well-known areas throughout the city, some even from mobile racks (Fig. 2.5). The sale of used clothing is illegal in Syria for a number of reasons:

[the government contends] the sale of second-hand clothing is a health risk. It also charges that groups of traders going about their business on Syrian streets gives the country a bad image, especially when it is trying to attract more tourists. Primarily, however, it contends that the trade threatens the security of the nation’s ready-to-wear clothing industry, a major economic pillar and source of much employment in Syria. [Fares 2008: 16]

Perhaps the most famous illegal market is Suq al Haramiyya, or the Thieves’ Suq, which, despite its illegality, enjoys a permanent, covered spot to the north of Suq al-Haal. Next to the other suqs surrounding it, it is not very big but still manages to be a site for congregation of merchants, customers, and brave tourists. Here, merchants spread out their wares on blankets on the ground, and hawk everything from electronics to used



Figure 2.5. Peddling second-hand clothing



Figure 2.6. A typical selection of items for sale in Suq al-Haramiyya

clothing to old DVDs (e.g., Fig. 2.6). Much of the merchandise is broken or incomplete, but it is offered for sale regardless.¹⁰

Sellers and Buyers

The continued historical importance of Syria's merchant class has meant that, at least in the Old City, shops are often kept in the same family for generations and generations.¹¹ Indeed, many merchants in Damascus' suqs can trace their business' lineages back a century, and a select few can even go back several hundreds of years. In Syria, Muslims make up 90 percent of the population (74 percent Sunni, 16 percent Shi'ia, Alawi, and Druze), while Christians and other groups make up ten percent.¹² Though I have found no statistics for occupational divisions among religious lines, it is my feeling that Christians make up a significant percentage of the merchant class. In stores in Bab Touma and Qassa'a, Christian religious imagery is common, and display windows are often decorated in correspondence to Christian holidays.

Merchants, on the whole, enjoy close relationships with one another, as many spend the vast majority of their days, six days a week (Saturday through Thursday for Muslims; Monday through Saturday for Christians), seeing one another, taking meals together, going to daily prayers together, and so forth. Even in the busiest of suqs, merchants always seemed to know one another, or at least know someone who knows. In 2009 I was always able to relocate merchants with whom I had spoken three years earlier by asking any merchant in the area, who inevitably pointed me in the right direction. Merchants who are not socially close with one another still tend to share a level of camaraderie and cooperation, particularly in matters regarding government officials and the ubiquitously dreaded secret police (*mukhabarrat*). In Aleppo, for example, Borneman noted,

¹⁰ See Elmessiri and Ryan 2001 for a poetic description of Cairo's Suq al-Imam al-Shafei, a 'thieves suq' located on the southern cemetery of the City of the Dead.

¹¹ In Arabic, merchants with permanent stores are usually referred to as 'traders' (*tujjar*), a designation which reflects their ancestors' historic role in cross-regional trade. Vendors and peddlers, on the other hand, are usually referred to as 'sellers' (*biyya*).

¹² Data taken from the CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>, accessed November 29, 2009. Syria's once-thriving Jewish population (a large percentage of which constituted the urban merchant class) is now all but gone after large-scale emigrations to Israel and beyond in the 1990s (see Zenner 2000).

Upon the rumor of an inspector's coming, merchants quickly shrink their stalls back to their legal size. For example, upon the rumor of an inspector in the area, a large burlap bag of mint leaves, another with pumpkin seeds, and two others filled with spices are moved into a neighbor's textile shop, which effectively blocks part of his door but frees the street. Several hours later, after much grumbling, the neighbor dumps the burlap bags back in the front of their owner's shop. Not a word is exchanged; this helping behavior is assumed. [2007: 112]

Though I never personally saw such exchanges in Damascus, I did witness similar incidents of merchant-vendor cooperation. Vendors are usually tolerated by nearby merchants, though because of the transitory, illegal nature of most vending ventures, merchants rarely form relationships with vendors as close as they do with other merchants. Still, merchants will assist vendors in avoiding fines from inspectors and police. On many occasions, I saw illegal vendors quickly moving their goods into a nearby shop at the slightest whisper that the police were coming in order to avoid steep fines. In one case, I saw a sock vendor who was selling his merchandise from a folding table set up in between two small clothing stores near Marjeh Square hastily shovel his socks into one of the stores in an attempt to avoid the coming police. After many of the surrounding merchants ran out to the sidewalk to spot the oncoming threat, it was discovered that, in fact, no policemen were coming after all. The sock vendor then endured several minutes of gentle teasing, the surrounding merchants asking him 'where are they?! (*weeyno?!*)' as he re-placed his table and merchandise in the same spot.¹³ Another pair of vendors selling undergarments from a large table set up in the pedestrian-only arcade in Salahiyya quickly and silently carried their whole table into a nearby alleyway when a high-ranking officer and his partner suddenly came into view. As soon as the officers passed by, the vendors brought out their table again and resumed business as usual.

Despite their illegality, vendors are a permanent force in the suqs of Damascus. Bicycles are among the most common vehicles used to vend goods, and I often marveled at how merchants adapted them in ingenious ways to fit the nature of their merchandise. Perhaps the most technologically advanced bicycle contraption I encountered was created

¹³ But permanent shops are not immune to the hassles of Syrian scare tactics. Those dealing in trades considered to be a threat to the regime in some way – Internet cafes in particular – are sometimes completely shut down by the government for superficial reasons. Other shops which do swift business with CDs, DVDs, and other forms of new media are closely monitored for their often pirated merchandise.

by Sadiq Badr, an older vendor of sunglasses who wheeled his merchandise along the main streets of Qassaa in the warmer months, and who also sometimes operated as a glasses repair man with the optometric tools and devices he kept with him. His bicycle included what one might expect for such a salesman – a large, vertical turning rack on which to display sunglasses, various mirrors for customers to contemplate their purchases, and various tools used for glasses repair – but it was also equipped with a large, homemade electrical box, used to power strategically-placed lights for nighttime sales (Fig. 2.7). This, Sadiq told me, gave him an edge over other vendors in the area, as he could work at night when the streets of Qassaa were filled with families and young people taking strolls. Sadiq explained to me that he regarded his bicycle as an entire shop of sorts, as it had everything else a permanent, fixed shop would: “Yes! It’s a whole store (*mahaal kamileh*). Even the lens specialist is present! [jokingly pointing to himself].” He continued:

This box is a whole store for selling and fixing glasses that is attached to the bicycle. For example, in the US you have whole stores that sell and fix glasses. Instead of having a store, I bring all of the utensils I own, including this electrical device, and I do the same thing they do by just using my bicycle! In my box I have electric power...it comes from a battery. The battery belongs to a car. And there’s a charger and a light bulb – it’s a closed electric cycle. So when a charger and battery and light bulb are connected together they create a closed electric circuit... I also have a machine that measures the intensity of lenses and vision.

As evidence of his pride in his bicycle-store, Sadiq had also affixed a large, shiny copper plaque on the back of the electrical box, which detailed his official vending permit. Sadiq had slyly gotten around expensive vending laws by filing for an inventor’s patent, which he was awarded for the ingenuity of his bicycle contraption. After a lengthy lecture on the merits of Syrian industry, independence from Western imports, and invention in general, he showed me the copper plate, which read:

BADR: Selling and fixing all kinds of glasses [this sentence is flanked by the words ‘sunglasses’ and ‘prescription’]. Design and invention by Sadiq Elias Badr. Certificate of ownership, patent number 2828, given to him Aug 12, 1997. This certificate was published in the official newspaper, 8th edition, in 1997.

Unlike Sadiq, most vendors do not bother to get vending licenses, mostly because of the expense and time involved in doing so. Those without licenses are often temporarily shut down by government officials and fined a nominal amount. For most vendors, however,



Figure 2.7. Sadiq Badr and his optometric ‘store’

this threat is not enough for them to go to the effort of procuring a license, nor does getting shut down stop them from setting up shop again a short time later.

The large population of transient vendors points to the dire economic circumstances in Damascus. Indeed, many sellers – especially those selling from open-air, temporary, and illegal marketplaces throughout the city – peddle goods out of sheer necessity and struggle to make a living doing so. Damascus also has a fairly high population of child vendors, some as young as four or five years old. These small sellers often congregate around the busy downtown district of the New City to sell candy bars, cigarettes, and other easy-to-carry products. Many carry their products in bags slung on their shoulders, though some do use small push-carts to carry larger merchandise (in which case, I never saw any that were decorated or artistically arranged, save for a handful of shoe shine boxes carried by young teenagers). These children are treated by officials like other vendors who sell without licenses; many must routinely bribe police, and some have even been taken into custody (Ferguson 2009).¹⁴

¹⁴ See Jurdak and Shahin (1999) for an account of child vendors in Beirut.

Struggling women must also resort to selling goods in Damascus' suqs to make a living; doing so is a mark of grave social circumstances, as mixing with men in the socially dirty and dangerous realm of the Damascus streets is a sign of low social repute. Many of these women are Bedouins from villages in the countryside surrounding Damascus, who travel into the city to sell their homegrown produce. Russian immigrants also make up a fairly large percentage of Damascus' women vendors; many sell contraband clothing from spots in the New City, and most do so isolated from Syrian sellers. Most Syrian women peddle their goods from blankets on the ground in the outdoor markets of Suq al-Ameen and Suq al-Haal, though I sometimes saw older Bedouin women selling cigarettes and small electronics – usually the purview of male sellers – from busy sidewalks in the New City. Though outdoor market sellers are usually quite loud with their marketing calls, I rarely heard women market their goods in this way, as doing so would call even more attention to the fact that they were operating in a mostly male domain. Interestingly, these gender norms do not carry over to the domain of upper-scale clothing and accessories shops. In such businesses, usually in the New City, many young women, both Muslim and Christian, work as shop clerks. Selling trendy clothing in newer shops is seen as quite different from working in the Old City.

Although merchants in Damascus' suqs are almost all men, women make up an ever-present force in the suqs as customers. Seeing that most merchants are male, interactions between customers and merchants can be fascinating studies in gender dynamics, particularly when the merchandise in question is of a seemingly taboo nature. Lingerie shops, for example, are often run by men, yet women of all sorts consistently frequent them, seemingly without embarrassment.¹⁵ Similarly, in their interactions with male merchants, women are expected to act in ways that seem inconsistent with their usual gender roles. In the neighborhood suqs of Cairo, for example, young, unmarried

¹⁵ In the recent, fascinating book *The Secret Life of Syrian Lingerie* (2008), Kevorkian, a long-time Damascus resident, notes, "Standing out is the paradox of fully veiled and burka-clad women shopping publicly for sexy, colorful, playful, naughty lingerie, displayed throughout the souk in windows and stalls and on sidewalks...Why would a veiled woman buy crotchless panties, underwear with zippers and feathers, or panties with cartoon birds and musical buttons?...Why would a society that shelters its women design and sell such explicit lingerie? Why do the women buy it?" (2008: 36). Though the answer is complex and varied, Halasa notes the ability of these commercial trends to tell us about larger social issues: "it is lingerie design that reveals an unexpected Syrian frankness and bawdy sense of humor toward sex. It feeds into prurient interests in both the East and the West about what lies beneath the veil, and also tells a unique story about fashion, dictatorship, and sex tourism" (2008: 13).

women are allowed and even expected to be aggressive, bossy, and pushy with their speech – something that would be wholly antithetical to their expected quietude in other, mixed-sex and public social situations (Ghannam 2002: 113).

Finally, tourists are becoming more and more of a presence in the suqs of Damascus, and new markets are cropping up to cater to their desires and needs. As Damascus' Old City suqs remain one of the top sites for tourists to visit, international tourism has affected the Syrian marketplaces considerably. In the past five years, tourism in Damascus has increased significantly, particularly among Muslim pilgrims from neighboring countries who come to pay respect to the many important religious sites in Syria. Between 2006 and 2009, I saw a large increase in Iranian (Shi'i) tourists visiting sites in the Old City – particularly the Omayyad Mosque and the small Sayyada Ruqayya mosque, which commemorates the daughter of Hussein, an important figure in Shi'i Islam.¹⁶ The development of religious tourism has a strong political component as well, as Pinto explains:

These shrines became the target of a joint political, economic, and symbolic investment of the Syrian and Iranian regimes, which, despite having very different approaches to religious identities and practices, had an interest in promoting pilgrimage as a religious dimension of their strategic alliance and their shared hostility toward the Baathist regime in Iraq. [2007:112]

In 2004, Syria began implementing its new phase of Iranian tourism development, “which aims to build new Shi'i shrines in all the places in the Syrian territory where Husayn's head was put down or lost some blood on its way from Karbala to Damascus” (Pinto 2007: 112).¹⁷

Western tourists have also increased in number in the past decade; from 2006 to 2009, I saw a major increase in the number of Europeans and Americans walking around the Old City, many in small groups or as families with young children, but many also in large tour groups from France, Germany, Denmark, and Japan. Much of this increase is due to the Syrian government's attempt to replace income from sharply declining oil revenue, and a concerted effort to make Syria more tourist-friendly. Boutique hotels and

¹⁶ Syria is so popular with Iranian pilgrims in part because of its proximity, cheapness, and safety (in comparison to Iraq, where Shi'i pilgrimage sites abound).

¹⁷ Hussein (or Husayn), the son of 'Ali and grandson of Muhammad, was martyred at the battle of Karbala in 680 and remains a figure of extreme importance to Shi'i Muslims.

restaurants in the Old City, for example, use the charm of historic courtyard houses to lure customers with their exotic appeal and safe comfort. Arab tourism is also on the rise. Rich Saudi tourists who escape the heat of their country for the (relative) temperate summers in Damascus can now do so in luxury at the Four Seasons Hotel which opened in 2006. One informant explained the difference between these two groups: “Arabs want to come to Damascus for vacation; foreigners prefer to look at what’s here.”

The Changing Damascus Suqs

As “the symbol of symbols” of Syria, the suqs of Old Damascus have steadily remained at the center of debates over the country’s heritage, although cultural preservation politics have in fact been part of the public debate in Old Damascus for many decades. During the French Mandate, for example, “French architects sought to preserve and contain the ‘traditional’ city within the old walls, a policy pursued in other colonial cities. They carefully restored old monuments like the 18th century ‘Azm Palace and routed automobile traffic away from the old quarters” (Thompson 2000: 178). Even earlier, the late 19th century Ottoman regime in Damascus spent much time and money fixing up the Old City suqs as a way to assert ideas of modernity based on European models. The famous Suq al-Hamadiyya was constructed during this time; the long gallery, neatly ordered shop spaces, and symmetrical designs were all meant to contrast with the backwards ‘chaos’ of the marketplace before it.

Over one hundred years later, officials overseeing the ‘restoration’ of Suq al-Hamadiyya in 2002 reused this very language of chaos and modernity to justify the project, in which exterior shop facades and signs were replaced with identical wooden shutters and calligraphic script. In fact, the project was officially touted by officials as a way to return the suq back to its rightful ‘Arab’ origins – a interesting choice, considering that the suq was originally an Ottoman version of 19th century European shopping design. As Totah explains, the main problem officials had with merchants’ practices was the seeming disorder and *fowda* (chaos) of the marketplace, which was seen as too ‘unmodern’ for its important representational work (2009: 59). The unevenness and heterogeneity of shop displays, signs, and other visual marketing practices was viewed by officials as a large part of the problem; after the reconstruction, merchants were

encouraged to display their goods in a neat, orderly manner. Focusing on the visual ‘look’ of the suq was one of the ways modernity could be visually enforced in the newly-rehabilitated suq (Totah 2009: 68). For officials in charge of the rehabilitation project, doing away with spatial *fowda* also encouraged merchants to behave and think in a more orderly manner – in essence, to create a new, modern working force with controlled self-discipline (Totah 2009).

Importantly, “The aim of these projects [was]...not only to provide a welcoming environment for tourists but to instill an appreciation of heritage among Syrians, which is part of the practice of modernity” (Totah 2009: 61). Heritage preservation began to be pursued in full by the Syrian government in the mid-1990s; the Old City suqs were a key ingredient to this new programming. Sites like the suqs become ‘stages’ of the nation’s modernity for the outside world (e.g. Shryock 2004). Interestingly, part of their staged appeal rests upon a certain amount of ‘authentic’ grittiness and danger; this helps to explain why the past five years have seen an exponential growth in boutique shops and luxury restaurants in the Old City, many of which are located in the heart of the suqs. As such, it is clear that Damascus’ Old City suqs represent many things to different people – they are at once chaotic, unmodern, and uncensored, but also, because of their status as sites of the nation’s heritage, revered sites of tradition which are seen as the country’s gateway to international connectivity.

In 2008, Suq Medhat Pasha, which runs parallel to the south of Suq al-Hamadiyya, underwent a similar rehabilitation project to commemorate Damascus’ title of ‘Capital of Arab Culture.’ This involved replacing the roof; providing each shop with matching wooden shutters and calligraphic signs; bulldozing the streets to better accommodate pedestrian traffic; and adding English-language maps and markers in several spots throughout the suqs. Interestingly, even though the objective of this reconstruction was to standardize the suqs by making them visually and physically uniform, merchants still found ways to individualize their shops, for example, by writing *bismillahs* above the calligraphy and by attaching stickers, flags, and hanging posters to the signs themselves.

Although many merchants with whom I spoke did concede that their shops looked nicer (*ahla*), they were dismayed at the carelessness of this construction, which was

apparently done with little regard to the historical integrity of the suq. In an opinion piece published in the English-language magazine *Syria Today*, for example, an art historian writes,

Authentic expressions of our history and culture are disappearing. Never mind that some of the oldest Roman structures in the world still *in situ* are in Damascus. Never mind that the Midhat Pasha's speckled roofs recalls the French occupation and the proud struggle for Arab autonomy. Is our heritage so cheap that it can be carelessly erased? In Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, ancient cities have been destroyed by foreign occupation. In Damascus, it is our own negligence and short-sightedness that has turned the ancient capital into what looks like a war zone. [Takieddine 2008]

Although, like Hamadiyya in 2002, the 2008 restoration of Medhat Pasha did not entail the restoration shop interiors, many merchants felt compelled to reorganize their shops to better match the uniform order of their exteriors (compare Figure 2.8, taken in



Figure 2.8. The newly restored Suq Medhat Pasha on a Friday

2009, with Figure 2.1, taken in 2005). In many cases, merchants whose shops I had previously visited in 2005-2006 had replaced their decorations with fewer, starker images, or sometimes even none at all. Some had mounted their old decorations in their warehouses and workspaces instead, where they would be less visible to the public. Still, key indications of merchant affiliations – a small sticker of Bashar al Asad, or a neatly-framed verse from the Qur’an – usually remained. Totah (2009) notes that a similar re-evaluation of shop interiors occurred during the Hamadiyya rehabilitation in 2002, when many merchants took the opportunity to gut their shops and install their version of ‘modern’ commercial practices – glass vitrines, track lighting, and air conditioning. As shops in Medhat Pasha and Bzouriyya tend to be lower-end than those in Hamadiyya, few merchants went to these lengths during the reconstruction of 2008.

Disorientations: Movement, Speed, and the Senses

“Bazaars realign our imaginative geography...” (Yang 1998: 16).

In many parts of the world, marketplaces are considered to be sites of disorienting chaos, where a cacophony of sounds, sights, smells, and tastes are condensed into a crowded, distinct social space. The sensorial (and potentially affective and mental) confusion derived from such chaos is in part what makes marketplaces so appealing to market-goers; as Alexander and Alexander note of the Javanese *pasar* (bazaar/marketplace), for example:

the *pasar* itself has the positive attribute of being noisy and crowded (*rame*). It is partly for this reason that the market is always thronged with people, many of whom have no intention of making a purchase. There is an air of excitement surrounding the *pasar* and traders do their best to entice their customers to surrender to it. [1987: 47]

This ‘air of excitement’ which often inhabits marketplaces is also what lures suq-goers in Damascus. Even though many residents might have daily interactions with sections of the marketplaces, the intensity of suq experience is difficult to find elsewhere in the city. It is also this carnivalesque nature of suqs which has long held the fascination of visitors, historians, and scholars, who often regarded them as the epitome of Orientalist allure, with their labyrinthine passages and bustling crowds. Many tourist guidebooks of the Middle East still wax poetic on the tendency of suqs to cause spatial and spiritual

disorientation; to many, this chaos is part of its non-Western exoticness. But, despite these narratives, locals as well imagine suqs as fun, exciting, and potentially dangerous places to visit. It is this nature that makes marketplaces a consistent draw for all.

This section frames the suq as a locus of movement, speed, and busyness in order to better understand the particular shapes artful marketing practices take. It also posits that, because there is so much movement and stimulation in such a physically cramped space, suqs require a different kind of sensory attunement from suq-goers. Although they are characterized by quickness and movement, suqs are also very *placed* institutions, in that their particular historical and social nature plays a big role in shaping the content and form of visual/aural practices merchants use. At the same time, suqs are not bounded, easily identifiable entities, but rather shift according to the daily ebb and flow of people and things. In a cyclical pattern, customers must also be able to shift their sensory attunements to fit the particular nature of each suq they move through. The visual and aural practices I examine in this dissertation are crafted purposefully for this kind of ambulatory, busy, and condensed experience.

“Every day we run! (Kil yom minraqd!)” and Other Suq Movements

In part, the chaotic nature of the suq emanates from the constant movement within market walls. To understand the place of movement in the suqs, one need only look to the main mode of experiencing it: walking. Not only people, but also automobiles, animals, sounds, smells, and, of course, merchandise is constantly circulating through suq passages, many of which are quite narrow and cramped. As noted above, the word ‘suq’ derives from the Arabic root verb s-a-q, which means literally “to drive, urge on, or herd” or, in its seventh form, “to drift; to be driven; to be carried away, be given over” (Wehr 1994: 516). These linguistic associations are telling, for it is indeed movement, and particularly the movement of ‘passing through,’ which characterizes the experience of going to the suq for most visitors. Architecturally, the construction of old, covered suqs, with long, narrow, and relatively straight passageways reflects their other purpose as conduits between major urban sites. Damascus’ famous Suq al-Hamadiyya, for example, was covered and cleaned up in the late Ottoman era in part to serve as an organized (and thus modern) pedestrian pathway between the busy Al-Thawra Street and arguably the



Figure 2.9. Walking through Suq al-Hamadiyya

most important religious site in the city, the ancient Omayyad Mosque. Walking through the suq remains the easiest and fastest way to get from the New City to the grand mosque (Fig. 2.9).

Walking through the suqs, though, does not only have to be to arrive at a final destination. Indeed, one of the main leisure activities during the hot summer nights in Damascus is to go walking through the city's market areas, where most shops stay open until midnight. Walking through the suqs of Damascus creates a flow of people, goods, and sounds which spatially unites separate suqs to one another. The connectedness of suq systems is also apparent from looking at their layout; they are designed to flow one into the other so that when one walks through one, he or she arrives at the next, which then connects to another, and so forth. Indeed, as de Certeau notes, people's movements help to form spaces. In particular, it is the footsteps that people leave behind in spaces – traces of their movements – which bind spaces together: "Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together... They are not localized; it is rather that they spatialize" (de Certeau 1984: 97).

Customers, though, are not the only ones who create movement in the suqs. Perhaps the most obvious proprietors of movement is that of the city's many street vendors, who peddle a vast array of products from donkeys, horses, carts, scooters, bicycles, and even their own bodies. These kinds of selling vehicles are as much a part of the everyday life of the suq as are more permanent, fixed shops; as such, they can be thought of as "moving storefronts" of sorts – miniaturized and mobile versions of the suqs' fixed spaces (as explained by Sadiq Badr above). Most of these moving storefronts rarely stay still; their constant movement is an example of the ever-shifting boundaries of the suq, which swells and shrinks according time of day, day of the week, and even season. While most customers move through suqs by passing through them, vendors tend to move more circularly. As such, peddlers and vendors participate in the literal circulation of commodities. Tracing the paths of these store-homes as they are shared by multiple vendors, and as they are bought, stored, maintained, and redecorated over time allows them to be understood in the same capacity that their owners do – not as mere platforms on which to display goods and services, but as meaningful objects with histories and "social lives" (Appadurai 1986) of their own.¹⁸

Speed is usually seen as a virtue in the suqs, perhaps because it is an indication of busyness and commercial activity. Although there exist small, sleepy conglomerates of shops throughout the city, the heart of Damascus' suqs are, without exception, those bustling, high-intensity places which are fraught with throngs of people, amplified noise, and sensory overload. Many of these are located in or directly surrounding the Old City, though people would agree that markets like Suq al-Jum'a, and more upscale shopping areas like Qassaa or Salahiyya are just as busy and bustling as Suq al-Hamadiyya or Suq al-Haal. Most suqs thus thrive on a fast-paced business ethic, with quick transactions which rely more on gestures and signals than on words. Customers are expected to know what they want and to not take too much time in deciding; merchants are expected to

¹⁸ This is not to suggest that most vendors are happy or proud to be peddling in the streets, which is typically regarded as a socially 'low' occupation – indeed, many vendors in business out of necessity alone. There seemed to be a difference in how vendors regarded their carts based on whether they owned them or not. Most vending carts – especially those used to sell seasonal produce – are rented and, although vendors are usually free to decorated them in tasteful ways, they do not necessarily express the same feelings about their carts as those vendors who own their vending vehicles.

quickly package the purchased merchandise and immediately provide change if needed.¹⁹ This is especially the case when the commodities for sale are of not great expense, and do not require mulling over, lengthy bargaining sessions accompanied by pots of sugary tea.

Customer speed also correlates to decisiveness and practicality, two characteristics which are emblematic of a savvy shopper. As explained by a wedding dress merchant in Aleppo, a shopper's success is also dependent upon outward displays of decisiveness and emotional uninvolvedness:

Some brides can make up their minds in 10 minutes; others stay two hours and still walk out with nothing. I have seen brides scour the suq for days by themselves, and when they finally find the dress they like, they bring the groom along and pretend they just found it in the first store they've looked in, to show him they are decisive and practical. They want to please him, and even if I know different, I play along. [Werner 2004]

Although window shopping is a common activity, an actual purchase should be done with confidence and conciseness. Merchants encourage this behavior by following



Figure 2.10. A peddler of feather dusters in the New City suq of Qassaa

¹⁹ In fact, to facilitate transactions, in some suqs there are even change vendors, who roam throughout the marketplace and provide change to merchants for a small fee (usually ten lira for every one hundred).

customers around their shops and waiting by their side as they make their decisions, although some merchants have become used to catering to Western tourists and know to stay back and give more time for the decision process.

Vendors' speed of movement varies widely. Some peddlers without carts hawk their merchandise while moving quite quickly (often too fast for me to follow them through the crowded suq) while others move slowly, sometimes because they are old, blind, or handicapped in some way. Those carrying their merchandise will often display it on their bodies in distinctive ways: belt vendors hold out their arms perpendicular to their bodies to display the belts, and vendors selling feather dusters swing them over their backs, giving them an almost ostrich-like appearance (Fig. 2.10). Vendors with horse-drawn carts or motorized vehicles tend to move faster than those on foot, although usually not as fast as regular automobile traffic. Most vending movement actually occurs in starts and fits – vendors move until they are signaled to stop by a customer, at which point they will stop just long enough to make the sale, although sometimes making one sale will attract even more customers. Illegal street vendors are the most adept at speedy movement, as they must be to avoid the daily hassles of the police.

It was this fast-paced environment which made my fieldwork different from what fieldwork is typically meant to be: a slow development of connections, friendships, and experiences over an extended period of time, usually concentrated in a small handful of places. Instead, my time in Damascus was marked by almost constant movement, in part because the suqs required it to be. Every day, I walked through the city's suqs to follow their shifting movements. I saw how, through the seasons, the markets expanded and contracted; how, at different times of the day, vendors moved to different spots; and how, on Fridays, the big, bustling markets of Hamadiyya and Medhat Pasha were quiet and shuttered for the Muslim day of rest. Sometimes, I moved so quickly that I was almost running – to follow vendors who moved quickly on their horse-drawn carts; to keep up with illegal peddlers who ran from the police; or to hurriedly follow the sounds of a seller's calls as he moved through the labyrinthine streets of the Old City. On one occasion, for example, I followed a pair of young men carrying a range of toys they were selling as they ran from police near the Citadel; as they were running, one yelled at the other, "Where should we go?!" When I caught up to them, I asked why they were

running. They responded, out of breath, “Every day we run! (*Kil yom minraqid!*), and told me that if they didn’t, they would have to pay a bribe of 100 liras (approximately two dollars), which they estimated was the total cost of their merchandise that day.

Sensing the Market: Seeing and Hearing (in) Damascus’ Suqs

Because visual and aural practices make up an important and decidedly unspoken side to marketplace interaction and transaction, they reflect the heightened importance of using the senses in the suq. Shoppers must be attuned to the visual and aural sides of the marketplace in order to make the best consumer decisions. To be sure, this is something that is not unique to the suqs of Damascus; most marketplaces around the world require a different kind of sensorial engagement from market-goers. For example, in their ethnography of Mexican marketplaces, Malinowski and de la Fuente note that “The habit of examining, touching, smelling, and even tasting is universal in the market” (1985: 189-190). To be a savvy shopper, one must develop a certain kind of sensorial expertise: eyes must be able to process an overload of visual information; vocal entreaties from merchants must be filtered for meaning; the nose must be able to pick out the most desirable products; and whole bodies must be held differently to protect oneself and to signal interest or feign disinterest.

Looking at merchants’ marketing techniques which stimulate, manipulate, and play with customers’ senses reveals Damascus’ marketplaces to be particularly sensorial spaces. By this I mean two things: first, that suq-goers are required to engage their senses in particular ways, creating a unique sort of sensorial *habitus* for themselves; and second, that this different sensory attention constitutes marketplaces as spaces with variable sensorial landscapes, or, as some have called them, ‘sensescapes’ (e.g. Howes 2006) of their own. Examining these different ‘sensescapes’ allows a more complex understanding of the suq as an important urban space consisting of multiple, entangled sensory layers.²⁰

Visual culture studies has long espoused the idea that different modes of seeing exist for different cultural settings. People not only look, they also gaze, stare, glance, and study with their vision. As one scholar aptly puts it, “Seeing is more than optics.

²⁰ Although it is certain that taste, smell, and other sensory perceptions frame marketplace experience, for the purposes of this dissertation I concentrate mainly on the visual and aural landscape of Damascus’ suqs.

And seeing is more than just seeing” (Morgan 2008: 238). How, then, do people “see” in the Damascus suqs? One way to examine this is to understand the development of people’s visual acuity to fit the marketplace setting. In a place as intensely visual as the suq, customers must absorb massive amounts of information with a quick glance; merchants must try to catch the eyes of passers-by to make a sale; and gestures of the eye and face must be read for hidden meanings by both parties. Even the act of making eye contact between merchant and customer – especially in the more crowded sections of the suq – can be read as an indication of interest.²¹ These movements of the eye are often accompanied by larger movements of the body, for example the turning of the head, the craning of the neck, or even the full stopping of the body – corporeal movements which help suq-goers more effectively ‘read’ subtler eye movements. All the same, these visual signals are part of a larger gestural, visual language in Syria and other parts of the Middle East, where quick facial movements are often used as shorthand to indicate yes or no: an exaggerated downward blink to mean yes, and a quick upward lift of the eyes and eyebrows to mean no. In a crowded and noisy place like the suq, merchants and customers often use this kind of shared gestural language to visually communicate with one another.

Sound, like vision, also has an important role to play in marketplace interactions. Similar to trends in visual culture studies, there has in recent years been a call by anthropologists for ethnography to become more attuned to the place of sound in people’s everyday sensory experiences – what Erlmann has called “the resurgence of the ear” (2004: 2) in academic scholarship. Studies have examined sound in both a social framework – that is, its place in constituting and shaping cultural trends – and in a phenomenological framework – understanding how the aural world can shape people’s relationship to the world around them. A preponderance of ‘sound studies’ exists in the field of Islamic studies, as authors examine how new aural technologies, specifically the production and circulation of cassette tapes, have played a major role in changing religious and national landscapes, or at least in spurring different cultural conceptions of listening and sound (e.g. Cooper 1999; Eisenlohr 2006; Hirschkind 2006; Miller 2005;

²¹ As I explain in Chapter 4, eyes are of particular symbolic importance in many Middle Eastern societies whose belief systems involve notions of the evil eye.

Schulz 2006). Devoting attention to such sound and listening practices allows scholars to chart the changing topographies of a society's "soundscapes."

Although it is more difficult to gauge customers' techniques of listening than their (often visible) visual habits, it is certainly the case that suq-goers must attune their ears differently to contend with the sonic onslaught confronting them when they enter the marketplace. Aural acuity is just as important as visual acuity in developing a kind of sensorial savvy; customers must be able not only to filter out various noises of the suq from one another – for example, separating the clanging of coppersmiths at work from the vocal calls of nearby apple vendors – but they also must be able to aurally match particular calls with particular merchants and products. Long-time residents and customers can easily do this, in large part due to the different sonic trademarks individuals and groups have cultivated for themselves.²²

From Hamadiyya to Haramiyya: A Walk through Damascus' Suqs

Though it is certainly the case that suq-goers sensorially 'read' suqs differently according to their different dispositions and perceptual abilities, it is also the case that different suqs require different things from both their merchants and customers. The identity of a suq is determined by historical, social, and economic trajectories which have shaped (and continue to shape) what they are today. As I touched on in the last chapter, these distinct suq 'identities' also give rise to distinctly different marketing tactics. The evidence required from an established merchant in Suq al-Hamadiyya, for example, is quite different from that required from a transient seller in one of the city's outdoor markets. As such, rather than generalize about the nature of 'Damascus suqs,' it is more useful to understand the particularities of the historical, social, and economic trajectories which converge to form each market area.

²² In Damascus, vocal marketing calls vary widely in cadence, melody, and words. Sellers of widely-used products – *mazout* (diesel fuel) or lottery tickets, for example – stick to similar rhymes and rhythms in their vocal calling so that all sellers of these products sound alike; while individual vendors selling more obscure items – a peddler of homemade brooms, for example – create their own, individual calls so that repeat customers can recognize them the second time around. In this latter case, these personalized calls are made to be purposefully poetic, whimsical, or odd in some manner in order for them to be more easily recognized. As such, vocal calls act as aural mnemonic devices of sorts, which customers can use to find what they need. To be a savvy shopper, then, one must learn to decipher this complex language of market calls in order to go to find the best product and buy from the best merchant.

A (appx. two-mile) walk through the marketing areas from the eastern end of Suq al-Hamadiyya, one of the most respected and established suqs in the city, to the northern end of Suq al Haramiyya, one of the most marginal and socially low suqs in the city, can provide a brief example in the different selling atmospheres one encounters in a relatively short distance (see map in Figure 2.11). As customers travel between these two commercial areas, they encounter different sounds, smells, and sights which require them to move, gesture, and comport their bodies differently to navigate each space; merchants must similarly adapt their marketing techniques to contend with the change in atmospheres in which they are selling.

The eastern entrance to Suq al-Hamadiyya is framed by the ancient entrance to the Roman Temple of Jupiter (letter **A** on the map; also Fig. 2.12). Just outside the frame of the photograph (behind the camera) is the Omayyad Mosque, arguably the most important religious site in the city. Although the open space between the mosque and the entrance to Hamadiyya is relatively carnivalesque in nature (with throngs of pilgrims, tourists, and tour guides; ambulatory vendors selling souvenirs; and, in the southwestern corner, an area devoted to pigeon feedings), an air of sacredness and piety dominates, with most activities aimed toward touring or worshipping in the mosque. The *athan* (call to prayer) from the Omayyad Mosque, considered to be one of the beautiful in the city, is immediately recognizable by its distinct format and melody. Five times a day, the call is blasted from loudspeakers set high on the minarets, punctuating the commercial activity in the surrounding areas with a number of minutes of aural worship.²³

Although it is almost always crowded and chaotic inside Suq al-Hamadiyya (letter **B**; also Fig. 2.13), it remains one of the most respectable shopping areas in the city. This is where tourists of all sorts inevitably flock and, as such, many merchants with shops here can speak a number of foreign languages. Most of these shops display memorial images of previous family members in an attempt to establish and maintain trust for their customers (see next chapter), as well as religious referents such as Qur'anic verses or

²³ Hirschkind (2006) explains that, in Egypt, these daily prayers which usually take about 5 minutes to announce, cause a temporary halt of commercial activity on behalf of merchants and customers, and cause a different kind of resetting of the senses and emotions – an unspoken, almost imperceptible repositioning of the body, mind, and heart of all pious listeners.

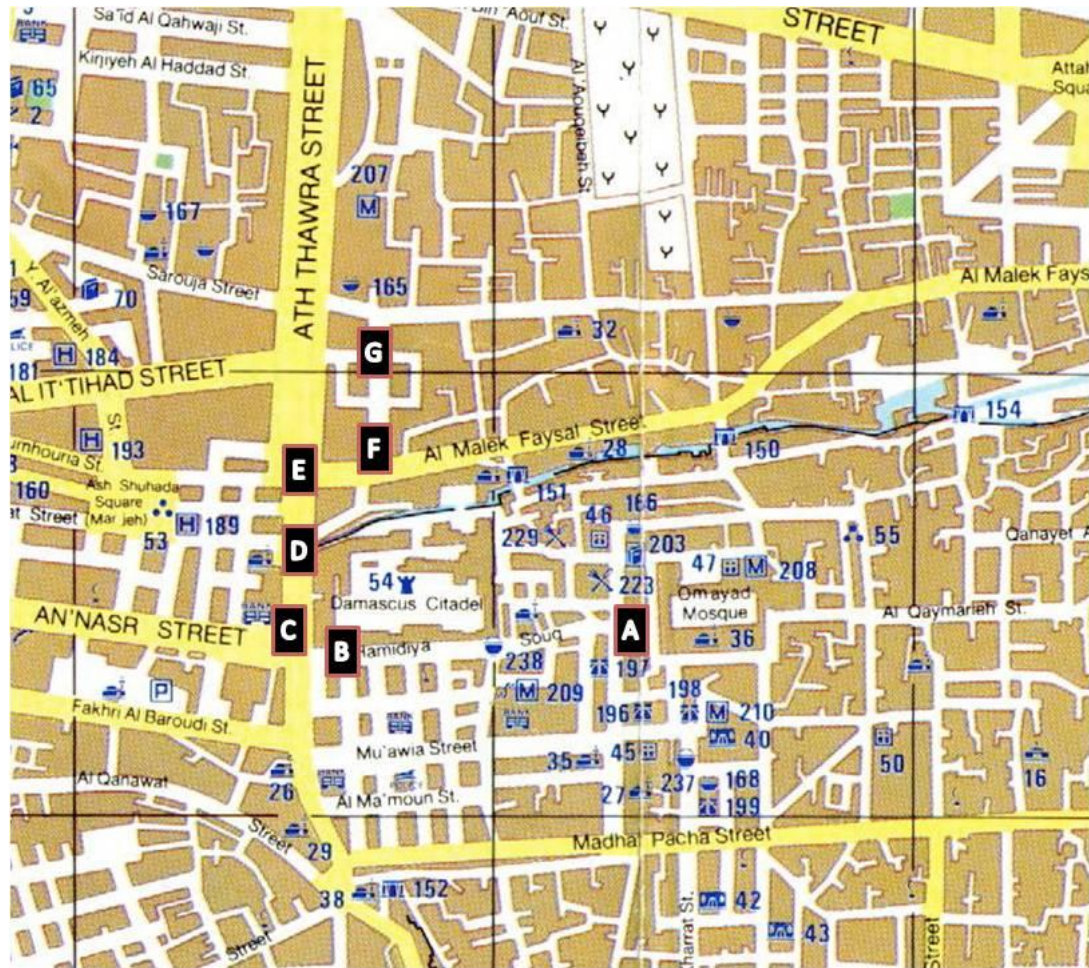


Figure 2.11. Detailed map showing ‘walk’ from Hamadiyya to Haramiyya²⁴

images of holy sites (see Chapter 4). Few shops arrange their products in a particularly beautiful way, or attend specifically to the look of their store spaces. Although some businesses have taken to positioning a merchant outside of their shops on a stool to directly proposition passers-by (and particularly tourists), I never heard any merchant making any vending calls about their products.

Just outside the western opening of Suq al-Hamadiyya lies Revolution Street (Sharia al-Thawra), one of the main thoroughfares of the city (letter C). Because of its busyness, there exists a long, high metal barrier between the road and the sidewalk to protect pedestrians. Walking north, Thawra Street is on the left and the tall, stone walls of

²⁴ This map is taken from a larger map distributed by Syria’s Ministry of Tourism and reproduced from: http://www.syriatourism.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=My_eGallery&file=index&do=showgall&gid=263&offset=0&orderby=dateD, accessed November 21, 2009. Note also that the Omayyad Mosque and Suq al Hamadiyya are labeled, but Suq al-Haal and Suq al Haramiyya are not – indications that they do not gel with an idealized version of Damascus.

the ancient citadel are on the right. There are no shops in this stretch of sidewalk, but one does encounter a wide array of sellers, some selling products directly from the sidewalk (Fig. 2.14), and others selling products which they carry as they walk around (Fig. 2.15). Photographers with old, handheld, large-format cameras also wander around this area, as the famous statue of Saladin makes for a popular photo opportunity. Because the narrowness of the sidewalk does not allow for the set-up of vending carts, these sellers must rely upon street calling to advertise their wares, although some are able to attract attention simply by setting up shop directly in the middle of the sidewalk, forcing pedestrians to contend with them in one way or another (e.g. Fig. 2.14).

As one walks further down this path, one encounters more and more vending units around the opening to the Citadel and the bridge over the Barada River (letter **D**). At this point, the metal barrier separating sidewalk from road ends, allowing more room for vending carts to set up shop. These vending carts are usually heavily adorned and beautified, sometimes with Islamic references, though never with any kind of reference to family origins. Instead, these sellers must attend to making their carts and their products look visually appealing in order to establish the trustworthiness of what they are selling. Fig. 2.16, for example, shows a vendor selling *loz akhdar* (green almonds) from a cart decked out with plastic flowers and foliage. For the most part, vendors do not display images of their family on their vending carts. From a practical standpoint, doing so would be unfeasible, as many vending units are co-owned with other vendors or rented from someone else and, because they are usually kept outside overnight, decoration needs to be more durable and weatherproof. Perhaps more importantly, though, vendors avoid decorating their carts with memorial images because of the social implications of doing so. In contrast to shop-owning, which is viewed as one of the most respectable kinds of work in the suq (e.g. Rabo 2005), vending is thought of as a lower, less dignified form of employment. It thus follows that for a vendor to participate in the same kinds of commemorative practices as merchants, with all of the accompanying feelings of respect and honor, would be a breach to this social code.

On the walk from this point to Malik Faisal Street, after passing a number of stalls selling cheap clothing on the right, one encounters, congregated around the heavily trafficked bridge which allows for the crossing of Revolution Street, a wide range of

vendors and peddlers, selling products of all sorts (letter **E**). On one occasion, I saw a young vendor selling a handful of bottles of shampoo from a small cardboard box he had put on the ground; another older man selling decorative 'gel balls' which expand when put in water; and two younger men selling sunglasses and hats next to one another. Because of the cramped nature of this area, many of these vendors market their wares with loud street cries extolling the virtues of their products, mainly their high quality and low price. These cries compete with the loud spiels and demonstrations made by vendors selling hot items. In Figure 2.17, for example, a crowd of men, women, and children congregates around a vendor demonstrating invisible ink, all the while talking non-stop.

The crowdedness and noise continues to escalate as one turns right onto Malik Faisel Street, which houses a handful of shops selling olives, dates, and other foodstuffs, mixed with a large array of produce vendors selling from baskets, barrels, and cardboard boxes set up on the street. Foot traffic from Suq Munakhaleen (the 'sieves' suq,' now selling nails and hardware) and Suq Sarouja (the 'saddler's suq,' selling leather goods for horses and vehicles) pours out onto this street as well, making it crowded, noisy, and chaotic. This chaos is doubled by the constant flow of automobile traffic down the street, whose constant honking and billowing of diesel fumes elevates the noise and grit to even higher levels. The produce market continues down Suq al-Haal (Cardamom Suq) which runs north at a perpendicular angle to Malik Faisel Street (letter **F**). Here, vendors sell from both sidewalks, as well as from a median that divides each side of the street from one another. Most set up their produce in large, haphazard piles on blankets from the ground (Fig. 2.18); others set up temporary 'stalls' with umbrellas overhead. Vendors selling on Malik Faisel Street and down Suq al-Haal, where they must compete with the non-stop horn-blaring of the trucks, busses, and cars that surround their stalls, use calls that are shorter and more to the point, with volume and rhythm being more important than wit or poetry (compared to the relatively relaxed Suq Bab Sreijeh and Suq al-Juma'a, where vendors are more poetic and melodic with their calls). Merchants with small kiosks selling meat, fish, and other foodstuffs also use street cries to attract customers; even though some of these merchants display memorial imagery in their shops, they must still play ball with the sensory atmosphere of the suq they are in. In this area, the noise is enhanced by a handful of 'ten-lira' (20-cent) shops, selling a wide range

of imported knickknacks for ten liras each, which in recent years have begun to play pre-recorded cassette tapes to advertise their goods (see Ch. 6). These are blasted at high volumes from boom boxes placed high, at the front of shops, their monotone and quick cries looped over and over again.

Towards the northern end of Suq al-Haal (letter **G**) vendors selling produce gives way to vendors selling second-hand clothing and other used items. Many only have a few items on any given day, and so they sit on the sidewalk with their goods in a pile next to them (Fig. 2.19), or wander around holding their items in their hands. Directly east of this area is the Thieves' Suq (Suq al-Haramiyya) which, as described above, is one of the most notorious markets of the city.

In a one to two mile stretch, then, one encounters the full gamut of selling atmospheres, from a respected, historic suq infused with sacred qualities, to a socially-low 'thieves' suq.' As this walk demonstrates, suqs take shape in accordance to both the people who frequent them and their surrounding environment. The particular social, geographical, and economic atmospheres of each suq plays a large role not only in what kinds of merchants sell what kinds of products, but also how they do that selling. In respectable, established suqs like Suq al-Hamadiyya, merchants focus attention on maintaining levels of their trust which, by virtue of selling from shops in this suq, they are already given. Along Revolution Street and into Suq al-Haal, merchants instead focus on providing evidence of the quality ('trust') of the goods they sell, by erecting visually pleasing displays, and with street calls and other auditory practices. Such social contingency is important to keep in mind when examining the variability of Damascus' market systems.



Figure 2.12. The eastern entrance to Suq al-Hamadiyya.



Figure 2.13. A view from inside Suq al-Hamadiyya, looking west to east



Figure 2.14. Selling vegetable knives along Revolution Street



Figure 2.15. Selling belts along Revolution Street, facing south



Figure 2.16. A vending cart around the Barada River, facing north



Figure 2.17. Crowds gather around a pedestrian bridge to listen to a spiel



Figure 2.18. The eastern side of Suq al-Haal, facing north



Figure 2.19. The northern end of Suq al-Haal. Suq al-Haramiyya lies straight ahead.

Chapter 3

Fathers and Presidents: Familial and Political Portraiture

In this chapter, I examine different types of familial and political portraits in an attempt to understand why they are so commonly displayed by merchants, and what they might help to accomplish in the selling process. As I note in Chapter 1, these images can be taken as useful (unspoken) ‘evidence’ of the trustworthiness of merchants and their merchandise both because of what they communicate about social standing – that the merchant is, at least on a basic level, a respectable and functioning member of Syrian society – and because of the agency they contain within them as photographic portraits. These images also convey to customers *distinctive* evidence about the merchant – for example, his political leanings, particular family origins, the age of his business, and so forth – all important pieces of information customers use in different ways to make their buying decisions. As I note, portraits of familial and political leaders are near ubiquitous in Damascus’ more established suqs, but they are rarely used by street vendors or in more marginal suq areas.

Family-based imagery usually takes the form of photographs of deceased shop owners.¹ Because shop-owning in Syria is such a familial and patriarchal enterprise, the vast majority of displayed portraits are of the deceased fathers, grandfathers, or uncles of the current owner. The display of these images underscores the vital importance of kinship, patriarchy, and family honor in the daily iterations of life in the Middle East, and they work as symbols of family origins and respect – important indications of trustworthiness. Merchants explained that they display these portraits as a form of respect to the contributions of their ancestors, and because displaying the photographs in prominent positions in their stores made it seem as if their ancestors were still there.

¹ Merchants without any prior family business connection will sometimes display photographs of (deceased and still living) family leaders in their shops, but most of the larger, more formal portraits are of deceased men who had a close connection to the business. I have also seen merchants hang small photographs of deceased young relatives as a form of tribute to them and also to cull *barakat*.

Merchants also visually communicate with customers through the display of political imagery, which almost always takes the form of official photographic portraits of the Syrian president, Bashar al-Asad. Though he is often displayed solo, merchants also hang images of him with his wife and three young children, or posing with his father, the former president Hafez al-Asad and his deceased brother, Basil al-Asad, who was once heir to the presidency. Images of Hassan Nasrallah, the head of the Lebanon-based Shi'i group Hizballah, are increasingly displayed by merchants as well, as are images of the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Damascus-based Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, and other regional leaders. In a country where the dictatorial leadership rules by way of "as-if" politics (Wedeen 1999), these images also serve the important purpose of appeasing government officials. But, I argue, they function as more than mere talismans: the display of these political images is, like family portraiture, also a way for merchants to communicate to customers their social standing as participating members of Syrian society – again, a sign of trustworthiness. They also serve as a means of distinction for merchants to relay their changing political leanings to customers and other suq-goers.²

Familial and political images work as representational evidence in large part because of what they symbolize – trustworthiness, family honor, long mercantile roots, good citizenship, and national pride. But this evidence is effective in part because of the particular agentive nature of photographic portraits. As photographs, sociopolitical images have the ability to capture the life-likeness of the subject; merchants often told me that displaying a photographic image of an ancestor or politician is almost like having the real person there. That these photographs are also portraits, usually with faces turned forward and eyes staring straight ahead, adds to their active, life-like nature; because of the front-facing gaze outward, they portray a look of constant attentiveness. It is thus the content and the form of sociopolitical images that makes them effective devices. I elaborate this point further in the final section of this chapter with a discussion of the constructs of 'watchfulness' and 'remembrance' usually introduced by merchants in my conversations with them.

² The ever-changing nature of these political displays was apparent after my second visit to Damascus in 2009, when there appeared to be many more images of the president and Hassan Nasrallah (and the two together) than ever before, in response to drastic sociopolitical changes in the intervening years, such as the 2006 'summer war' between Israel and Hizballah and the continuing influx of Iraqi refugees from the Iraq war.

Kinship and Family in the Marketplace

Since kinship holds a prominent place in Syrian social and political life, it makes sense that it would play a large role in marketplace interaction. The idiom of ‘family,’ as a shared social symbol, is manipulated by merchants as a tool to entice, flatter, and relate to customers (and, in some cases, other merchants). Cultivating a sense of kinship with customers is, simply, a good business practice, as it allows merchants to relate to their customers on a closer, more convivial level, usually making for smoother transactions. For example, fictive kinship names are used by many merchants to create familiarity with their customers; I often heard merchants addressing their customers as *ammo* (uncle), *ummi* (my mother), *akhwi* (my brother) and *ukhti* (my sister) as terms of endearment, and I, an obvious foreigner, was called *ukhti* by merchants on several occasions. This kind of verbal play works both for merchant-customer relationships that are already established and as a way for merchants to charm and please unknown passers-by in the hopes of making a sale. Similarly, merchants will make sure to ask after a customer’s family members – again, this is something I myself experienced in all types of shops – as a way to insert themselves into their customer’s social world. This is, of course, not a practice unique to merchants in Syria, but the lengths to which Damascene merchants go to establish a family-like connection to their customers highlights the importance of kinship in Syrian business transactions.

Looked at from the other direction, actual family connections among merchants also play a large role in how they and their businesses are regarded by customers. ‘Family’ is oftentimes wrapped up in feelings of honor and dignity, and thus bears largely on the reputation of the business. Businesses in the suq are more often than not family enterprises, passed down from one generation of sons to the next. The cultivation of hereditary lines starts early; sons begin working in their father’s store when they are quite young, gradually taking on more and more responsibility. From an early age, young men set to take over family businesses spend as much time as possible in the suq, getting to know neighboring merchants and learning how to deal with customers.³

³ Businesses are usually taken over by multiple sons (with usually preference going to the first-born son), and it is not uncommon to see neighboring shops run by brothers in the suq. Though daughters very rarely end up working in their father’s store, they can still be given rights to the family business through silent ownership (Rabo 2005).

Merchants also devote much time and effort to creating and maintaining a family name (*ism*) (Rabo 2005). Having a reputable *ism* among customers and other merchants is again wrapped up in feelings of family honor and dignity, and merchants know that a reputable name can provide feelings of trust and respect in customers. As such, the inheritance of a shop is a source of both pride and sometimes anxiety, as all merchants constantly face the very real possibility of their business failing, and thus the disintegration of the family *ism*.⁴ Keeping the business in family hands is, of course, also of economic advantage, as Rabo notes in her recent study of traders in the Aleppo souqs: “‘family’ is practised in different ways among my informants, but to have a family – i.e. to have sons – is an implicit goal in the souq. It is a symbol of market settlement and an instrument for gaining independence” (2005: 11).

Within this context, then, portraits of deceased patriarchs play a large role in maintaining the air of family reputation and kinship between merchants and customers. They allow merchants to display their family’s connection to the business: when customers see these portraits hanging in shops, they immediately know that the merchant’s family has been in the business for a while, and that, because of the respect conveyed by hanging such portraits, the merchant is, in theory, trustworthy. In this kind of visual interaction, portraits are a way to establish and maintain a shop’s family connections and all of the accompanying ideas of trust and good reputation, without the merchant ever having to ever utter a word. This is an important feat, for, as I discussed in Chapter 1, with expressed pride in one’s family origins oftentimes comes the danger of self-aggrandizement. This is where visual representations of these family roots, in the form of family portraits, can come in handy for merchants. Part of their power comes from their ability to visually (and thus subtly) communicate to customers that which cannot be openly, verbally discussed.⁵

⁴ See both Rabo 2005 and Borneman 2007. Upon my return trip in 2009, I was astonished at the number of shops which had gone out of business in just three years, especially in the Old City, where competition for the booming tourist market has become quite fierce.

⁵ As I explain below, this is also a positive feature of political imagery. Since Syrians are quite reluctant to openly discuss politics in public spaces, indicating political allegiance through visual signs which could be interpreted in a number of different ways is, in essence, a safer, more subtle way to communicate about politics.

Memorial Portraits in the Marketplace

Merchants commemorate the particular histories of their shops by hanging photographs depicting deceased fathers, grandfathers, uncles, or landlords who, at some point or another, enjoyed a close connection to their business. Most of these memorial portraits are studio shots, with neutral backgrounds and posed bodies. The older portraits are usually in black-and-white, and depict well-dressed men with austere facial expressions; newer portraits are in color, with more casually-dressed, relaxed subjects who sometimes even smile. For example, in Figure 3.1, the wall display in a hardware shop in Suq Manakhaleen in the Old City shows two portraits of the owner's ancestors – his father on the left and grandfather in the middle – as well as a framed, gold plaque depicting the Ka'aba, the holy 'black rock' in Mecca. The photograph of the father is done in color and depicts a relaxed, friendly pose with crossed arms, a half-smile, and a scenic background, while the photograph on the right is of a much more posed subject, more formal and serious.⁶ This is an interesting shift, as a more dour, serious subject is a



Figure 3.1. A wall display of memorial photography with a religious plaque

⁶ Note also the prominence of the gold watch on the figure on the left – a sign perhaps of wealth and modernity. Similar symbols such as cell phones and sunglasses are now commonly used in studio portraiture.

good indication of respectability and perhaps even trustworthiness – after all, a smile can denote trickery or deceit, or at least ambiguity about one’s real intentions. Photography, again, can act in some circumstances as a form of evidence. In Jordan, for example, photography can be used to document nobility: the seriousness with which Shryock’s (1997) informants attended to their photographic poses underscores the importance of this documentary form. Before having their photographs taken, “They insisted on wearing their best clothes, donning a pair of ‘scholarly’ glasses (sometimes my own), or placing a service of tea or a coffee thermos in front of them as a sign of hospitality” (Shryock 1997: 296). For these men, “cameras were meant to preserve images of propriety, solemnity, and power...Photographic representation is, for them, a context in which individuals should present their noblest, most public face” (Shryock 1997: 296). This is an important point, for, in Damascus, these familial images immediately become public documentation when they are placed in shops and seen by friends and strangers alike.

Digital photography is also changing the face of these memorial images.⁷ Portraits of ancestors are sometimes digitally manipulated to make the connection with the divine even more apparent, a shift which reflects the changing technoscape (Appadurai 1990) of Syria. In these manipulations, the subject is often set against iconic backgrounds such as pilgrimage sites or important mosques. Figure 3.2, for example, shows an image hung in a photocopy shop near Martyr’s Square in the New City. In it, a photograph of the previous store owner, now deceased, is superimposed over a photograph of the Ka’aba in Mecca, the endpoint of the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) which millions of Muslims undertake every year. The digital manipulation of the merchant’s headshot creates an effect which nicely blends the two photos together so that it is possible to see the worshippers and religious site beneath whilst looking at the portrait. This symbolic merging of the deceased with arguably the most important site of Islam is a direct way to visually and physically place the two realms within the same spatial moment. Doing so confers *barakat* on the deceased merchant himself as well as everything surrounding the image. Figure 3.3, hung in an ice cream shop, is a similar example in which a photograph of the deceased merchant overlies an image of the Ka’aba, taken from a different angle.

⁷ I will discuss digital photography in more depth in Chapter 4.

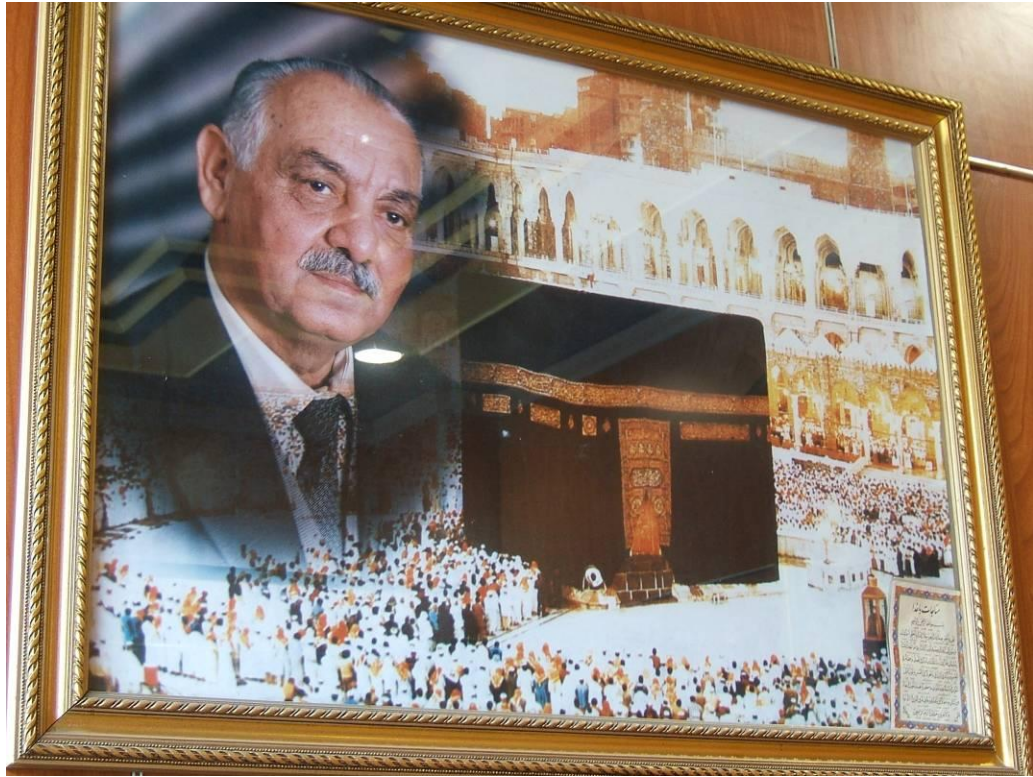


Figure 3.2. A digital memorial photograph on display in a photocopier shop



Figure 3.3. A digital memorial photograph on display in an ice cream shop

In this particular image, the hand-colored photograph of the merchant creates a more blocky and opaque effect which stands in contrast to Figure 3.2 – a reflection of different styles and techniques of digital manipulation. Affixed to the glass of the frame is the merchant’s old work permit – a symbol of *his* trustworthiness and honor as a *suq* merchant.

Many merchants also channel the *barakat* of memorial images by attaching religious text to the images.⁸ As with the digital images discussed above, the spatial merging of this religious text with the portraits of ancestors serves to heighten the blessings conferred upon the deceased as well as upon the shop. Many merchants reference the opening *sura* (chapter) of the Qur’an by writing the word “*al-Fatiha*” [“the opening (chapter)”] somewhere on the portrait (e.g., Fig. 3.4), or by tacking on a *bismillah*, the beginning words of this and every Qur’anic chapter (“In the name of God, the most gracious and compassionate...”) (e.g., Fig. 3.2, in the lower right corner). To do this, many simply write on the frame with dark marker, though some use tape or glue to affix more carefully-crafted calligraphic text. Since it is a wide Muslim practice to say the opening of the *Fatiha* or the words “God protect him/her” (*Allah yaharmu/yaharma*) when speaking about the dead, it makes sense that this translates into the realm of the visual memorial. Merchants explained that this is both a way to respect and honor the memory of the dead, and, by dint of its religious connection, a way to imbue the store, merchants, and customers with good will. In some cases, this reasoning is visually communicated by embedding ancestral images within merchandise, so that, somewhat in the manner of contagious magic, the merchandise itself is influenced by the *barakat* of the ancestors (e.g. Fig. 3.4).

Differences in types of images displayed might signify for customers important distinctions in the businesses they are choosing between. Older, black-and-white images might convey that the business has been in the same family for generations; digitally-manipulated prints might indicate a willingness to play with the tradition of such images.

⁸ Christian merchants do not decorate their displays of memorial portraits with such religious ornament, though I did see one or two portraits with crosses and hagiographic imagery surrounding them.



Figure 3.4. A memorial image nestled into a display of tea boxes for sale

Since some portraits also have the name of the deceased written on them, customers can also in theory know the name and thus family origins of the merchant – a clue which might be quite useful for some. This is the case with the photograph in Figure 3.4, which notes underneath the subject’s name, The Honorable Hajj Ahmad Ayaar, as well as the date of his death, the 12th of March, 1973. A close look at these clues provides crucial information both about the family of the merchant as well as the approximate age of his business. Any kinds of embellishments to the photograph – fancy frames, various religious texts, poems and the like – can also serve as potentially important distinctive information.

In addition to conveying this evidence of distinction, the practice of displaying memorial imagery can be interpreted as the trustworthiness of the merchant because of the significance attached to kinship and family origins. This is something that can be read both in the trustworthiness of the deceased ancestors (‘His ancestors were respectable men because they warrant memorializing and because they *look* respectable; therefore their descendents must be respectable as well’) and by the very action of displaying such imagery (‘This merchant cares enough about respecting his ancestors in this cherished

way; therefore, he must be trustworthy'). These photographs can also indicate that the shop has been in business for at least a generation – an important sign of trustworthiness in and of itself. Newer businesses are looked upon with more suspicion, as they don't have the family history or *ism* to establish this kind of trust. Ancestral photographs, then, give the customer assurance that the store is moral, trustworthy, and, because of its age, sells quality merchandise.

In my interviews with them, merchants were loath to express any of these connections outright. Most instead explained the display of these images as an expression of their love for their ancestors and as a way to cultivate and sustain memory of them (an honorable act in and of itself). Verbally articulating that they are also intended to convey respectability or trustworthiness to customers would be an ironic gesture, as it would diminish the efficacy of such a display. To say that these portraits are also meant for customers would be, in essence, to boast about one's origins – a way of saying 'Look at me! I have good ancestry!' – which, as I discussed in Chapter 1, would be the last thing a respectable person would do. As such, merchants *must* talk about their displays as simple gestures of respect and love rather than as outright sales tactics. To do otherwise would be to give away the trick of the trade.

Perhaps the best 'evidence' that these images are also intended for customers, though, is their physical placement in shops. If they were meant only for the merchant, they would more likely be placed on desks, or turned to face the direction of the merchant. Instead, most are hung in quite prominent, outward-facing positions in the shop, easily seen with just a glance from the outside. Many of the portraits are also placed directly behind the desk or counter space of the merchant so that, when one looks in at the shop or conducts any business with the owner, these ancestral images are always within the direct line of vision of the customer. Perhaps the most apparent example of this was with a memorial mural displayed high on the wall in a popular lunch spot at the western end of Suq Bab Sreijeh (Figure 3.5). This mural formed the visual focal point in the space, and was clearly intended to be viewed by both the proprietors and their customers. The spatial convergence of these two former owners serves in effect to double the trustworthiness of the shop. Customers can feel assured that, with such a large banner, the current owners must be taking their responsibilities seriously.



Figure 3.5. A memorial mural with religious text and an ocean view

Presidential Portraits

Visual Rule and “As If” Politics

In addition to familial photographs, merchants display a range of political imagery in their shops, both as symbols of trustworthiness and as signs of distinction. These shop images are part of a larger constellation of political images displayed throughout the city. As in many dictatorial regimes, this body of political imagery enforces a kind of civil obedience among citizens (e.g. Chelkowski and Dabashi 1999; Makiya 2004; Wedeen 1999). In shops, however, though the display of political imagery is in part insurance against raids, fines, and other forms of menacing behavior from city officials, the subtle differences in the images’ content and form can reflect the individual preferences of particular merchants. Unlike political imagery plastered throughout public places in the city (including parts of the suqs) by government officials, merchants choose what kinds of political imagery to display in their private businesses.

That they remain an unspoken part of the shop is for a good reason, as most Syrians share the concern that their words and actions are under constant surveillance by representatives of the Asad regime. Especially in public sites of gathering such as the marketplace, Damascenes are careful not to discuss politics with one another for fear that they will be caught by the dreaded *mukhabbarat*, Syria’s state-controlled secret police who have the authority to arrest almost anyone they desire. As one of the principle sites

for political action, the suq is known by all to be a particularly prominent spot for *mukhabbarat* to lurk. Much of this fear is entirely warranted, as men have been arrested for seemingly trivial offenses – making jokes about the Asads, criticizing the regime in blogs, or holding political conversations in public. In fact, Syria has been under much international pressure of late because of the exposed abuses of its Supreme State Security Court (SSSC), where many of these detainees are tried outside of Syria’s criminal justice system.⁹

There exists, then, a common feeling of public malaise when it comes to conducting open discussions of politics in Damascus. The ubiquitous visual displays of the president, which exist throughout the country in the form of large billboards, murals, and sculptural monuments, do much to maintain a feeling of constant watchfulness for Syrians. Many of these large representations are placed high on the top floors of buildings, or on giant billboards so that the president looks down upon his citizens with a larger-than-life gaze. This kind of visual reverence flourished under Hafez al-Asad’s rule, though many of the deceased president’s monuments and images remain throughout the country. Although Bashar al-Asad has commissioned far fewer permanent monuments to honor his regime than his father did, there is still a wealth of large portraits, banners, and billboards hung from government and residential buildings alike. Figure 3.6, for example, shows a large billboard outside the main western opening of Suq al-Hamadiyya with the words ‘God protects Syria’ under a waving Bashar al-Asad – a clear symbol of the connection between Syria’s political and economic realms. This slogan is a popular one for these types of political images; it was taken from a speech delivered by the president after international accusations that Syria was behind the 2005 assassination of Rafiq Hariri, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon. This billboard was later replaced with a similar image of Bashar waving, with the words ‘I believe in Syria’ written in both Arabic *and* English, aimed toward a slightly different audience.

These large billboards often change to reflect the particular political moment of the nation. For example, a popular image hung throughout Damascus in the midst of the UN investigation into the assassination of Hariri showed a slightly more ominous side of the president. Though his face was pleasantly smiling atop an outline of Syria, and

⁹ <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/02/24/syria-dissolve-state-security-court>, accessed July 7, 2009.

surrounded by waving hands, the words underneath sent a different message: “The president Bashar al-Asad and the Syrian people don’t bend except to God.” Unlike most of these political images, the text in this particular image was written in both Arabic and English, the message itself obviously intended for a wider international audience. In another example, after Asad’s reelection in 2007, billboards were plastered over the city showering the president with congratulations and praise. Figure 3.7 shows a large banner of a grinning Bashar al-Asad against the backdrop of Damascus University, with ‘one thousand congratulations’ (*elf mabrook*) scrawled across the top. This is a particularly fascinating image, as the background behind Asad’s figure showcases two more portraits of the president – one of a headshot situated between a Syrian and a Palestinian flag, and the other of a typical political portrait upon which is written ‘we’re all with you’ (*kulna ma’ak*). The inclusion of these portraits within a portrait reflects the importance and ubiquity of such imagery.

But it is not only the grand monuments and larger-than-life billboards which help to inculcate this sense of watchfulness for the Syrian public; it is also the imagery of a smaller scale which serves the purpose of generating public obedience. Just as religious imagery is so powerful in part because of its inscription into mundane, public spaces, the visual landscape of presidential portraits across the city of Damascus works by the images’ surprising ubiquity. In the suq and throughout the narrow passages of the Old City, smaller visual representations of the state can be found around almost every corner. Posters, painted portraits, stickers, car decals, and other sorts of visual media used to display the bodies of the Asad family demonstrate to Syrians that the Asads, like God, are everywhere with a watchful eye. Even old, tattered images left over from past decades are scattered throughout the city, in some cases even becoming part of the natural urban landscape. The fact that even the most hidden of back streets house some kind of visual representation of the government conveys to citizens that the watchful gaze of the regime is almost impossible to escape.

There exists such an exaggerated visual homage to the Asad regime in large part because of the constantly tenuous leadership position of the Asad family. The Asads,



Figure 3.6. A billboard in front of Suq al-Hamadiyya declaring ‘God Protects Syria’



Figure 3.7. A banner giving ‘One Thousand Congratulations’ to the president¹⁰

¹⁰ From <http://tarheeltravelers.blogspot.com/search/label/Sam>, accessed July 1, 2009.

who have been in power since 1970, are members of the ‘Alawi branch of Shi’i Islam, who today make up about 15 percent of Syria’s population.¹¹ ‘Alawis were historically viewed by both Sunnis and other Shi’a and even Druze with much suspicion for their mystical beliefs and practice, which were seen by most as heretical. In Syria, the ‘Alawis are a relatively newly privileged minority, who, before their rise to power in the early-mid-20th century, faced rampant discrimination and remained fairly segregated in small tribal communities in the central mountainous regions of Syria. It was not until the 1920s, when French mandate policies spurred migration to larger coastal cities, that ‘Alawis began to have meaningful contact with Syria’s Sunni majority. Though this new intermingling was often met with violence and discrimination, it was during this period that ‘Alawis were introduced to Syrian nationalist beliefs and began their socio-political ascent (Seale 1988).

That the Asads, as ‘Alawis, have been able to gain and maintain power in Syria for almost forty years has been the subject of much scholarly discussion. Hafez al-Asad was born in a small, mountainous village in central Syria, and became part of the ‘Alawi urban migration when he was sent to school in the coastal city of Latakia at age nine. Though Asad excelled in his studies and had his eyes set on a medical career, the financial circumstances of his poor, village-based family made this impossible. Instead, he joined Syria’s nascent post-independence army in 1951 and quickly rose in ranks, joining the growing Ba’athist party along the way (Seale 1988). In 1970, Asad, with the backing of the powerful Ba’ath party, assumed the presidency in a bloodless coup. He ruled until his death in 2000, which marked the start of his son Bashar’s reign. Though Bashar was officially elected, Syrians widely recognize that the presidency is more of a birth right than a democratic appointment. His most recent reelection was in May of 2007, when he secured another seven-year term with an overwhelming majority of the vote.¹²

¹¹ ‘Alawis are one of the main sects of Sevever Shi’ism, whose beliefs rest upon the succession of the Prophet’s descendents until the sixth imam. They are a minority within Shi’i Islam, which is mostly composed of Twelver Shi’a, who believe that the Prophet’s succession reaches the twelfth imam (Pinto 2007).

¹² During the weeks before his reelection, Damascus was apparently littered with posters and banners proclaiming Syrians’ love for their president. See <http://tarheeltravelers.blogspot.com/search/label/Sam>.

The ability of the Asads to maintain their power despite their 'Alawi heritage rests partly upon their staunchly secular platform, whose roots are in the socialist doctrine of Syria's Ba'ath party, as well as in a concerted effort on behalf of the Asads to downplay their religious difference. During his thirty-year reign, Hafez al-Asad constantly contrasted the safety of his secular government to the threat of the violent, Islamist group, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. After 1982, when the Syrian army quashed a Brotherhood uprising in the conservative city of Hama, killing between ten and 25 thousand people (most of whom were civilians), Islamist expressions in Syria were almost completely silenced for the next decade (Moubayed 2006). In the 1990s, when another wave of Islamic revival washed over Syria, Asad made some symbolic moves to appease his increasingly religious citizenry, such as loosening restrictions on religious-based media. Bashar al-Asad has also had to create new ways of dealing with Syria's quickly growing religious population; the Asad regime can no longer afford to rest upon a fully secular platform, but must instead cultivate itself as moderately Islamic.

It is partly because of the Asads' tenuous position that there exists an enforced obedience referred to by Wedeen (1999) as the 'Asad cult.' In her work on Syria under the rule of Hafez al-Asad, Wedeen explains that the presidential 'cult' rules by way of spectacles, signs, and other coercive measures meant to garner public participation and support. Though, as Wedeen explains, the majority of these symbolic manifestations always contain in them a subversive element, they work to generate a verbal, visual, and even corporeal rhetoric of obedience that is shared by Syrian citizens. Many of the visual symbols Wedeen references can be found throughout the country in murals, statues, and portraits depicting the president and his clan. Indeed, it is difficult to walk through the streets of Damascus without seeing some visual commemoration of the Asads. Imagery depicting the Bashar, Hafez, and Basil al-Asad, permeates public walls, kiosks, street signs, and, perhaps most of all, the marketplace.

Political Portraits in the Marketplace

In contrast to the state-sponsored visual imagery of the president displayed throughout the city, merchants choose, buy, and hang their own political images in their shops. They thus have a small say in personalizing their political portraits to reflect their

particular political leanings. As tangible symbols of the Asad cult, presidential images are an unspoken way for merchants to express their opinion of the regime and its unofficial statutes. By doing so, they also show that they recognize and are willing to pay homage to the shared system of symbolic obedience. Indeed, what matters to officials is not the true feelings of merchants towards the regime, but merely an outward show of support, no matter how superficial. Wedeen (1998) labels this a “politics of ‘as if’,” meaning that citizens are not required to believe in the regime’s rhetoric and fictions, but they are required to pretend and act *as if* they believe. It does not matter to officials that support for the regime is sincere; only that it exists on a public, material level. Displaying political imagery is a relatively quick and easy way for merchants to provide evidence of their superficial support.¹³

In the marketplace, these “as if” politics carried higher stakes during the more dictatorial reign of Hafez al-Asad, when merchants were pressured by officials and the omnipresent secret police to visually show their support of the regime by displaying presidential portraits on their walls. Much of the image display was done so in a more talismanic way, as merchants recognized that the mere image of the president would ward off government investigations, fines, or shop closings. (Wedeen 1999 notes the same rule of thumb for Damascus’ taxi drivers, who tack presidential decals on their bumpers and back windows in order to avoid traffic tickets.) Now, under the more liberal Bashar, merchants expressed to me that they felt less pressured to visually express their support.¹⁴ All the same, portraits of the president are displayed in almost every shop space, and line the passageways of the city’s suqs. Like familial portraits, most of these images are framed and displayed in prominent positions in the store so that passers-by can easily see them.

Despite the images’ role as ‘as if’ symbols, they are still physical decoration devices which merchants can use to creatively communicate particular traits about themselves and to differentiate their shops from their neighbors’. Most merchants choose

¹³ Although an important point in Wedeen’s work is that symbols and rhetoric aren’t merely *means* for enforcing power; they also hold that power within themselves. It follows, then, that displays of political homage in the suq are meaningful in and of themselves.

¹⁴ Interestingly, there was a persistent rumor amongst Damascenes that the younger Asad, in an effort to move away from the domineering image of his late father, expressed that he did not want commemorative images and statues of himself to be erected. This has not seemed to stop the abundance of murals, paintings, stickers, and other representations of him displayed throughout the city’s public spaces.

their images from a never-ending stock of officially-approved portraiture, which can be purchased from street vendors in particular parts of the city (see Figure 1.7). In various iterations, the president is shown in military fatigues, business suits, smiling, not smiling, with a Syrian flag behind him, or more casually riding his bicycle or posing with his wife and children. The different personalities of Asad depicted in the particular images merchants choose to display can also reflect subtle inclinations of the merchants themselves. For example, merchants who might take a more hard-lined stance in defense of Syria might opt for images of Asad looking tough in his military fatigues; others who envision Asad as a democratic leader intent on improving Syria's image in the eyes of the West might instead choose an image of the president in a business suit or meeting with various world leaders. Merchants who instead want to showcase the president as a down-to-earth family man rather than a stern militaristic leader usually display the popular portrait of Asad holding his squirming infant, posed with his wife and two sons, or of the president miming a bicycle ride with one of his children (e.g., Fig. 5.8). The size, layout, and color tones of these images make them seem like any typical family snapshot, and they stand in stark contrast to the more official presidential portraits.

Some stores forgo displaying images of Bashar al-Asad altogether in favor of portraits of his father and late brother, perhaps signaling a distrust of the new, more liberal regime. Indeed, some Syrians view Bashar as second best to his deceased brother Basil, who was considered to be more like his father and represented to many Syrians a more hardline, militaristic approach to Syrian politics. Basil al-Asad is often shown in military fatigues in these portraits or, because he was an accomplished equestrian, alongside horses in more of a memorial vein. Shops that display only small images of the president, or, in some cases, no images at all, signal a range of possible feelings for the regime, from simple indifference to outright defiance.

It is difficult to gauge the multiple meanings involved in the display of these portraits, in part because of people's reluctance to openly discuss politics or to make any criticism of the Asad regime. Most merchants told me that they displayed presidential imagery because they liked and respected their president, and they wanted to see him on a daily basis. Others told me that they displayed these images because they were proud to be Syrian. One merchant who owned an upscale dress shop in Suq Medhat Pasha proudly

and defiantly told me that he never has and never will hang a photograph of the president. And, though he was quick to say that Syria was a much more open place under Bashar al-Asad, he lamented the fact that most of his fellow merchants displayed pictures of the president “just to be like everyone else, and because they still feel afraid.”

Many merchants also hang images of other political leaders, particularly of Hasan Nasrallah, signaling that the merchant is almost certainly both a Shi’i and a supporter of Hizballah. One nut and candy merchant who displayed portraits of Nasrallah told me that he did so in order to draw Lebanese suq-goers by signaling that he agreed with the political views of Hizballah: “[We hang his picture] because we love him, because we want everybody to see him. Lebanese people like him a lot. When they come here and see him, they buy the goods.” Another owner of a small tourist shop said that he displayed photographs of Hasan Mashaal, the Damascus-based leader of Hamas: “I believe in Hamas’ issues. I love Khaled Mashaal because he’s a symbol of resistance (*rimz muqaawameh*). So we put his picture because of our admiration for him [his friend chimes in, ‘and because he is right (*ala haqq*)’].”

In some cases, the size of other political leaders’ images also mattered to merchants. One owner of a tractor parts store, for example, explained that his image of Nasrallah was good because it was smaller than the portraits of Bashar, Basil, and Hafez al-Asad which surrounded it, thus signaling the Syrian leaders would always retain power over all others (Fig. 3.8). Some merchants also pay attention to the spatial juxtaposition of these images; I was told on several occasions that an Asad portrait should be displayed physically above images of other politicians to spatially indicate that the Syrian regime eclipses all others. Other popular images show the president posing alongside Nasrallah, Ahmedinejad, and other regional leaders; in these images, it is also usually the case that Asad is set apart in some fashion – either by framing the image so that Asad appears larger, or by showing Asad standing over the others.

Like familial portraits, these political images can provide important information for customers about the trustworthiness of a business. The display of such imagery is a sign of respectability in and of itself, for it declares that the merchant is a functioning member of Syrian society – that he is involved in politics, and that he cares in one way or another about the regime. If the display of such images was merely a perfunctory practice



Figure 3.8. A wall display in a tractor parts shop. An image of Hassan Nasrallah (top left) is eclipsed by images of the Asads; on the right are Qur'anic posters

for merchants, a way to shield their businesses from the hassle of officials, then we would also see them being used by vendors, who because of their usual illegal status, are bothered, bribed, and fined on an almost daily basis by the police. Instead, with a few exceptions, they are almost never found on vending vehicles (and this is not just a matter of there being no room, as there exists a wide range of sizes, from the largest of banners to the tiniest of stickers, of images paying homage to the regime). Their restriction to shops indicates that they act to signify more than superficial allegiance to the regime. Since these portraits signify patriarchy, power, and, to some, respect, they are used as a kind of evidence, in a way similar to memorial images.

“A Gift from the Dead (*Hadia min al Mayyat*)”: Watchfulness and Memory

The efficacy of this type of visual evidence is derived in part from its nature as photographic portraiture. These photographs can both represent and produce the trust of the seller because they contain within them the ability to conjure the presence of the person depicted. This is in part because they are formed as portraits, which are particularly powerful because of their direct and simple compositional style. In most portraits hung by merchants, political and familial alike, the subject's head is shown as a close-up, usually cut off below the shoulders, and with the face and eyes staring facing

directly ahead. As Pinney (1997) notes, this is an important compositional component in Indian memorial photography, in which it is essential for the deceased's image to be a clearly visible face, with no shadowing effects or other superfluous embellishment. Making sure that the image is clear and in focus aids in the visual remembrance process, as viewers can immediately and without hesitation recognize the person depicted. This compositional style holds true for Damascene portraiture as well, as memorial images in merchants' shops almost always show a clearly focused close-up of a forward-facing face and eyes.

The fact that these portraits are photographic images is also meaningful. Photographs help to preserve what is perceived as an actual remnant of the person being photographed: "Unlike any other visual image, a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it. No painting or drawing, however naturalist, *belongs* to its subject in the way that a photograph does" (Berger 1980: 54). As physical remnants of the person depicted, photographic portraits help to maintain a visual and material connection between those subjects in the image (in this case, many of whom are no longer living) and those who are viewing them. The technology of photography is evidentiary in and of itself because of its ability to capture a moment in time and space. That they hold such evocative power within them and that they are able to quickly, visually communicate particular histories and memories makes photographs particularly effective at creating an this connection for customers. As such, these portraits have the ability to conjure the presence of the person depicted unlike any other medium.

With their life-like abilities, portraits can sometimes go beyond what other images can do. In particular, the notion of 'watchfulness' was frequently used by merchants to describe how these images are beneficial to their businesses. Usually perched on high walls, these images, or rather, the traces of people left inside of them, watch over the shop day and night. Images of ancestors watch to make sure that the shop remains honest and reputable, and images of political leaders watch over merchants and customers to make sure they remain obedient citizens. The direct gaze of the eyes in these images helps to solidify this visual activity – the outward-facing eyes are 'watching' merchants, customers, and shops. Displaying an image of a deceased ancestor says, in essence, that

that ancestor is still a part of that shop space and business, and presides over every business transaction within. This connection is made even clearer when the image is placed in the same field of vision as the living merchant. In Figure 3.9, for example, the image of a spice merchant's grandfather is the same line of vision as the merchant, a spatial merging which can serve as assurance that the young merchant is not working alone. Similarly, in Figure 3.10, a dry goods merchant poses in his corner store in the bustling New City market area of Shalaan with a simply framed memorial portrait of his father, taken in the 1980s. That the image is displayed directly behind the counter and cash register is not a coincidence, as it allows the presence of this ancestor to be involved in every transaction.



Figure 3.9. A spice merchant works under the gaze of his grandfather



Figure 3.10. A dry goods merchant poses with a memorial photograph of his father

Within this framework of watchfulness, merchants will even sometimes use these portraits as talismanic devices used to halt intruders in their paths.¹⁵ A vegetable seller on Medhat Pasha street, for example, constructed a collage of wallet-size photographs of other merchants and neighborhood regulars ripped from death notices posted along the street, or given to him by members of the deceased's family, to watch over his shop's merchandise day and night (Fig. 3.11). Though most of these men were not related to him, he explained that he displayed their images because it made him feel safer to do so, and because he thought it might bring luck to his business. The near seventy pairs of eyes acted upon his shop in ways other images could not. Stengs' examples of the active nature of portraits of Thai political figures posits a similar causal relationship; in one case, soon after a woman who hung a portrait of Thailand's beloved King Chulalongkorn

¹⁵ See Doris 2005 for the use of similar protective devices in Nigeria.



Figure 3.11. A collage of memorial photographs watches over a produce shop

in her family's restaurant, a robbery was averted when the king in the portrait came to life, "raised his hand from the portrait and with an enormous power knocked the gun out of the robber's hand" (Stengs 2008:167). Such action-packed imagery helps to explain the prevalence of symbolic images in many places throughout the world.

The presence of the deceased ancestor can also be brought forth by the act of remembrance, which figured front and center of merchants' explanations of this practice. Photographic portraits can serve to consistently spark the memory of the deceased for those viewing them, which in turn can make present that ancestor. This sentiment was echoed by a nut merchant who displayed a large photograph of his grandfather, the proprietor of his nut roasting business:

My grandfather used to be sitting here, and people knew him. Every time they see the picture they remember him. Every day they see him and they remember [my grandfather] Abu Fahid; God bless his soul, he died. He has been under the ground for 20 years. Whenever they see [his photograph] they remember him...It's as if he is sitting with us here.

In this explanation, the act of remembering – mentioned three times – is directly linked to the presence of the photographic portrait. Remembrance is a way of creating presence, and this is key to how these images function as trustworthy and effective evidence.

Another fabric merchant in the New City explained to me why he displayed enlarged, black-and-white photograph of his father on the wall above his desk:

This is in remembrance of him, the original owner of this place. He was the one who founded this place, and after him, his children came and took over this store. And when customers come in, they ask God to forgive his soul. It's remembrance. Every day we see the picture, and we remember him.

In this case, the memorial image serves as a visual catalyst to again and again reestablish the memory of his father on a daily basis.

In a similar example, a spice merchant in Suq Bzouriyya showed me the digital photograph displayed on his wall of his cousin, a younger man who had a share in the family business and who had died while in Saudi Arabia. The image, which was made in a Damascus photo studio, showed a digitally manipulated photograph of the cousin set against a backdrop of the Ka'aba – a composition which, as the merchant explained, helped to stimulate people's memories:

He died in Medina – he was returning to the airport and had a car accident and that's how he died. We made this picture so that people will read the first *sura* [chapter] of the Qur'an for him and his soul. This picture is also for *baraka*...when somebody sees his picture, they remember him and they read the *Fatiha*.

In this case, then, the memory of the cousin stimulated by his image is meant to lead people to perform pious acts (reading the Qur'an), which will in turn bring blessings and prayers on the deceased and, presumably, the family of the deceased (i.e., the merchant).

A younger merchant of a tourist shop, however, made it clear that he did not use such family portraits to induce blessings for him or his store. Instead, the black-and-white photographs he displayed of his father and grandfather were there to channel memories and to make him and other shop workers happy on a daily basis. When I asked him why he displayed photographs of his father and grandfather, he responded,

Because I love my grandfather; I love my father, so I display photographs of them so that I remember them every time I see their pictures. God bless them, they are both dead. This is like part of faithfulness/loyalty (*wafa'a*) to our ancestors (*al ajdad*)...No, no, no, there is no *barakat*. It's only for *thikra* (remembrance). We

live on this memory that is the picture (*mina'ish al sura ala thikra*). The people who say this is *barakat* are backwards. We consider ourselves to be an educated generation, so we don't believe in these myths.

Many also explicitly stated that the memorial portraits of their ancestors were as much for their customers as they were for themselves. Ahmad, who owned an olive oil store between Suq Medhat Pasha and Suq al-Saghrir, said that memorial photographs were “a gift from the dead (*hadi'a min al mayyat*),” a trace of physical essence left to fill the store and to make both merchant and customer feel good. The portrait he hung above his desk was of his grandfather, a well-known oil merchant in the suqs of Damascus (Figure 3.12, bottom center). In addition to decorating the photographic with religious text, Ahmad had affixed a neatly-written poem which he had composed himself in honor of his grandfather. He enjoyed talking about this family patriarch with his customers, many of whom remembered him as a good and important man. As a physical trace of his grandfather, the portrait imbued the shop with a sense of shared memory and nostalgia, and in doing so acted to bring merchant and customer closer together. Figure 3.13 shows even more closely this ability of photography to evoke the dead; in it, the photograph of deceased tombstone carver (the father of the shop owner), standing with his tombstone carvings, overlooks the merchandise for sale. The recursive nature of such a display serves to highlight the connection between death, memory, presence, and photography.



Figure 3.12. “A gift from the dead,” along with other imagery



Figure 3.13. “A gift from the dead.” A memorial photograph of a former tombstone carver, displayed in his son’s workshop

Merchants also emphasize the importance of remembering the deceased members of the Asad family, Hafez and Basil. At least half of the stores in the suq which display images of Bashar al-Asad also display images of the late president and/or his first-born son. One merchant explained to me that the continued display of images of Hafez al-Asad served as one way to keep his memory alive, and also to remind younger citizens who he was: “[Hafez] will be here forever and no one will ever forget him... Sometimes foreigners come and ask ‘Who’s that’? And there’s a new generation who doesn’t know him. But his picture is on our currency and he’s the history of Syria. Everyone loves him.” Interestingly, just as older family portraits hung on shop walls can indicate to customers the long heritage of the business, older portraits of Hafez al-Asad, many of which have become faded and dusty, act as a similar sort of ‘proof’ to the customer of that shop’s long history in the suq. Many merchants take care to display these images just as they would images of their deceased family members, sometimes writing ‘*al-Fatiha*’ on top of the Asad images, or decorating them with religious blessings. Even images of Bashar and living political leaders, though, help merchants ‘remember’ their president and nation on a daily basis. Merchants described this everyday reminder as a pleasurable

thing – that is, that they hung images of the president in their shop because they *enjoyed* looking at him on a daily basis. These portraits, though, could potentially work in the opposite direction, as the daily reminder brought forth by them could become a sort of chore for viewers, who are made to feel that they are always operating under the watchful eye of the regime.¹⁶ Presidential portraiture, then, might be in some cases a turn-off for customers who are sick of having to constantly pledge allegiance to the Asads.

Visual Connections: Family, Nation, and God

Though individual images depicting family and politics are, on their own, meaningful symbols that act to visually connect merchant and customer, it is when these images are combined into one spatial moment that the symbolic meanings are made even more potent. The display of these images close together on walls or even within the same framed space speaks to what Pinney calls the “idiom of proximal empowerment” (1997: 171). Just as in India positioning family photographs in the same frame with images of deities helps to symbolically fuse these two realms (as is also the case in the plastering of religious imagery and text onto familial memorial portraits in Damascus, as I explain in the next chapter), merchants’ combinations of family and politics creates a more powerful nexus of symbolic meanings. Perhaps the best example of this merging I saw was a giant poster hung from a downtown building in Damascus which declared “Three (things) in Our Hearts: God, Syria, and Asad” (*Thulath fi Qalubna: Allah, Suriyya wa al-Asad*). In such an image, religion, the nation, and the (national) patriarch are to be framed in public consciousness as joined within the same conceptual, emotional, and physical space.

The close juxtaposition of images of the merchants’ biological families with images of the merchants’ political and religious ‘families’ is a semiotically meaningful practice that illuminates the social importance of these realms in Syria. For many Syrians, political imagery retains a familial air; Hafez al-Asad was often called “father” in official political rhetoric, and, after ruling Syria for thirty years, many Syrians regarded him as the symbolic founding father of their modern nation-state. That this presidency was

¹⁶ Of course, this might also be the case for familial portraiture as well; some might be fed up with the continued dominance of some merchant families in the suq, or see such practices which so outwardly pay homage to patriarchal kinship structures as sexist, ageist, or ‘unmodern’ in some way.

passed on to Hafez's son serves to cement this idiom of kinship even further and, though Bashar is too young for most Syrians to explicitly be called the 'father' of Syria, he is certainly still given patriarchal status in much of the official visual rhetoric covering Damascus.¹⁷

Combining these three symbolic realms make sense in a region where the institutions of family and politics are ideally connected. Taking the case of Lebanon, Joseph proposes idea of 'patriarchal connectivity' – "the construction of selves with a relatively fluid sense of boundaries, predisposed towards the privileging of males and elders and embracing that system through kinship moralities" (1997: 86) – as a way to understand how male-centered connectedness operates in multiple realms of Lebanese society at once. As such, she underscores the importance of (male-oriented) kinship metaphors in connecting the government, non-government institutions (like the marketplace), and the domestic sphere. In fact, as Joseph notes, this linkage is an explicit goal of the Lebanese government, as it helps to bind Lebanese citizens to their leaders in a deeper way. A similar argument could be made for Syria, whose leadership has in several ways attempted to construct Syrian civil society as one giant family, led by Asad and God (who are sometimes portrayed as one and the same). When merchants juxtapose images relating to family, God, and nation, then, they reference the importance of these patriarchal connections in Syrian society. By viewing and recognizing these visual connections, customers and merchant also become part of this connected network.

In shop displays, merchants spatially merge family, politics, and religion as a way to visually and materially combine all three realms. Doing so creates an even more powerful visual punch for customers to consider. Most often, merchants juxtapose familial, political, and religious images directly next to one another on walls (Fig. 3.14) and under glass-top desks, but sometimes merchants will even display these images within the same framed space. Figure 3.15 shows a framed image, displayed on the wall of an ice cream shop, which depicts all of this imagery at once: in the center is a staged business shot of the owner amongst his confections; stuck to upper left part of the glass is an official presidential portrait; on the upper right is a photograph of a sheikh whose

¹⁷ For example, he is often shown in political images with children kissing his hands and cheeks, as if he is their cherished father.



Figure 3.14. A spatial merging of patriarchs. Hafez al-Asad (left) and grandfather (right).



Figure 3.15. An ice cream shop's visual mélange of family, nation, and God

teachings the owner follows, in the midst of prayer; and in the lower right is an old snapshot-like image of the president with his wife and first-born son. Such a spatial merging helps to symbolically fuse these three realms as one and the same and visually empowers each by doing so. Even more explicit is the display of genealogy charts and family trees next to images of family, political leaders, and religious iconography.

By displaying public (presidential) imagery in the comparatively private realm of a shop, and private (familial) imagery in the comparatively public realm of a shop, merchants necessarily re-work the typical uses of such imagery.¹⁸ The merging of private memories with a public viewing audience, much of which is made of strangers, helps merchants create a sense of kinship with their customers. To share memories of their loved ones is a way to turn their place of business into a private domain of sorts. This works similarly for presidential portraiture, but in a reversed way. Many of the ‘public’ portraits of the Asads are displayed in such a way that they become part of the same realm as family photographs. Many merchants will hang these portraits of the same size next to one another, in part signifying that the men depicted are important patriarchal figures in their lives. Interestingly, there is a fairly large circulation of ‘snapshot’ images of the president and his family which bring their images back to the domain of the private (Fig. 3.16). For instance, Figure 3.17 shows a typical display of photographic portraiture under outside the doors of a photography studio, used as an advertisement of sorts for the good service provided within. After looking at my photograph of this display on many different occasions, I suddenly realized that two snapshots on the top left of the display were in fact of Basil al-Asad and Hafez al-Asad. That they were displayed in the same size and same format as the other portraits on display makes them look as if they were simply two other photographic subjects, rather than the former patriarch of the country and his beloved son. Such a visual placement of these figures into the domain of the regular and everyday – they are displayed in the same way as ordinary Damascene

¹⁸ Taking inspiration from Susan Sontag, Berger (1980) also makes a distinction between photographs created for the private domain and those created for the public domain. He notes that those created for private viewing – family snapshots and the like – always keep with them their original context; those created for the public eye, however, are devoid of context and thus constantly change in interpretation and meaning.

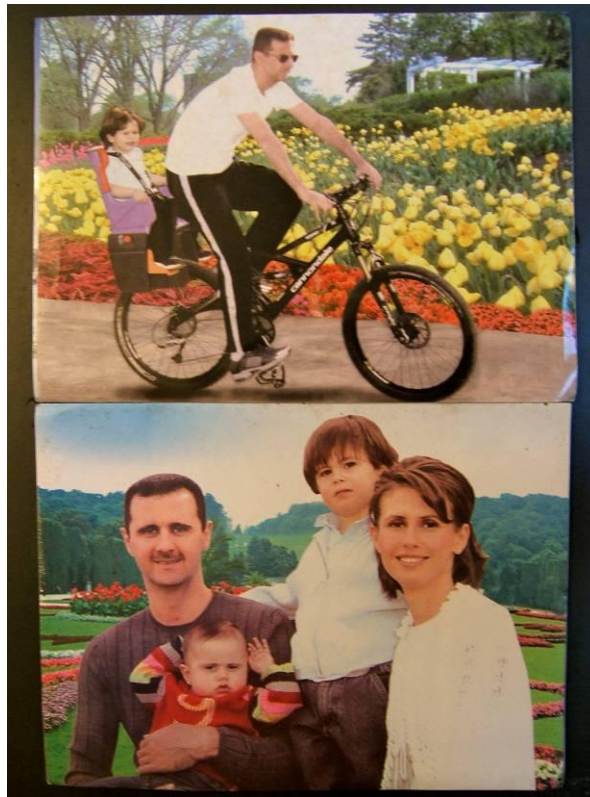


Figure 3.16. Family ‘snapshots’ of the Asads also circulate as official portraiture



Figure 3.17. A front display case of a photography studio. The portraits in the upper left corner are of Basil al-Asad and Hafez al-Asad

citizens – is a way to privatize these two very public figures.¹⁹

Coda: Self-Portraiture and Other New References

Though, as discussed above, many merchants in the Damascus suqs own businesses passed on from older generations, there are also many merchants in both the Old City and New City suqs who are new to the trade. In a country where a surge in economic liberalization in the past decade opened new pathways for novice entrepreneurs to open small businesses, visual traditions are changing to incorporate this new sector. Many newer merchants display photographs not of their ancestors but of themselves, their shops, and their merchandise. These images derive meaning from their mimicry of the photographic traditions discussed above, as they evoke the shared visual tradition of memorial portraiture with which all suq-goers are familiar.

In a small butchery near the Bab Touma gate, for example, one merchant displayed a picture of himself proudly standing in front of his store (Fig. 3.18 and 3.19). When I asked him why the picture was of himself rather than his forefathers, he responded rather indignantly, “*I’m the owner of the store!*” (*Ana sahib al-mahal!*). He took pride in the success of his shop, and wanted to display this visually through the medium of photographic display. Though his self-portrait is not as large and important looking as memorial images usually are, and though it is obviously not of a commemorative nature, it nonetheless is displayed in reference to these older photographic traditions. The colorful paper frame highlights the playfulness of the display, as I rarely saw frames as showy or as temporary on true memorial images. Another merchant who displayed on his store’s walls photographs of himself and his hand-crafted perfumes echoed these sentiments when he vaguely told me that there was not enough room on his walls to display ancestral imagery, while a candy merchant told me that, since his store was surrounded by six other candy stores, he displayed photographs of himself and his store so that his customers would “know that they were in the right place” even if he wasn’t there in person. Some merchants also show off

¹⁹ It could also be argued that the photographer did this as a way to make it look as if he had also taken the photographic portraits of the Asads – a way to perhaps elevate his reputation by means of (false) association.



Figure 3.18. A self-portrait on display in a butchery near Bab Touma



Figure 3.19. A close-up of the self-portrait



Figure 3.20. Hassan shows off a framed article about his shop

newspaper clippings about their businesses; Hassan, for example, hung at the very front of his small shop a framed newspaper article about the string of nut stores owned by him and his two sons along Medhat Pasha Street (Fig. 3.20). He affixed a newer photograph of his son's nut shop, which is next door to his, onto the glass frame for added emphasis.

Many merchants also display images of their shops and their merchandise as a sort of homage to their businesses. The famous Bakdash ice cream parlor in Suq al-Hamadiyya, for example, displayed framed, old black-and-white photographs of their shop and close-up shots of their own ice cream confections alongside photographs of family and religious and political imagery. The framing of their own creations reflects their desire to display pride in their work visually. Similarly, in a tailor's shop in Qassaa, an upscale Christian quarter of the New City, the tailor decorated his store with magazine cut-outs of models wearing European clothing next to images of political and religious figures. The piece which sat behind his desk in a glass display case was a large, framed collage whose main image was a cut-out image of a (European) man dressed in a suit and tie (Fig. 3.21). What makes this collage unique is that, upon closer inspection, the



Figure 3.21. A tailor's collage of self-references

jacket itself is formed from the fabric of the board beneath – an effect created by the tailor carefully cutting out the shape of the jacket from the image. Such a display serves to highlight the creativity of the tailor and his scissor and design skills – something particularly important to convey to his customer base. The image is surrounded by smaller photographs of family and friends (as well as an older photograph of the popular Lebanese singer Fairouz) stuck in the bottom of the frame, and a wallet-sized, framed photograph of the tailor himself attached to the top with a small evil eye talisman.

These self-references, then, are a new and different kind of distinctive evidence that elaborates, plays with, even subverts the dominant tradition of memorial photography. But because it still operates within this dominant pictorial tradition, it can be taken in a similar way as evidentiary material. Displaying self-references in this way helps merchants to create a sense of trustworthiness for themselves in a way that makes sense for their own circumstances.

Chapter 4

Merchants and Gods: Piety, Trust, and Moral Possibility

As one of the most prominent of public institutions in Damascus, the marketplace is an important site for the merging of religious identity and commerce. Merchants blend these two important realms in a number of ways, by selling religious commodities (Starrett 1995a), by using religious metaphors in customer interactions (Khuri 1968, Geertz 1979, Kapchan 1996), and by performing devotional practices (praying, reading the Qur'an, watching religious television) in their shops on a daily basis.¹ But many merchants also show these connections visually and aurally, by decorating their shops and vending vehicles with a magnificent range of religious iconography, text, and sound. Chromolithographs and photographs of religious figures (saints, the pope, imams, spiritual leaders and images of 'Ali and Hussein); religious text and genealogy charts of the Prophet and his descendants; posters, stickers and banners depicting holy sites; and Qur'anic recordings played in shops all serve as both evidentiary information and as transformative agents in Damascus' suqs.

This sort of religious backdrop influences commercial activity in a number of ways. On a basic level, the presence of religious imagery and sound signifies to customers that the merchant using such referents is (at least superficially) pious and therefore potentially a good business partner. But, on another level, these decorations and sounds also have the ability to produce that piety, as they are said to contain a spiritual, religious power within them (usually described as *barakat*, or blessings). This can be said to be true for images of saints, imams, and mosques, for text-based religious decoration, and for religious sound. Finally, these sorts of religious displays directly appeal to customers because of their ability to reflect the moral identity of the customers *themselves*. That is, customers can imagine themselves to be moral people because they visit stores filled with references to Islam or Christianity. Religious imagery, then, is

¹ I will be describing mostly religious displays in Muslim-owned shops, though many of the same concepts I discuss here could also apply to religious displays found in Christian-owned shops.

doubly reflective in the sense that it ‘works’ not only for merchants, but also for customers.

Placed within the context of the current social and political climate of Damascus, the use of religious imagery in shop display is even more profound. In Muslim-owned spaces, overt displays of religion in the workplace mirror a changing religious public in Syria as Sunni-organized Islamic revival movements continue to gain strength throughout the region, as Shi’i refugees pour into Damascus from Iraq, as religiously-oriented political groups like Hizballah and Hamas garner more support, and as religious tourism brings more and more Muslims to Syria.² This changing religious landscape is reflected in the suqs of Damascus, not only in the increase in religious commodities being sold, but also in the increase in the display of religious imagery and text in stores and on vending units. The strategic placement of these displays, then, is also a way for Muslim merchants to cater to their increasingly religious customer base.

Displays of Religion: Religious Imagery and Words

For merchants, decorating shop spaces and vending carts with religious imagery is a way to creatively express their own religious beliefs and, at the same time, advertise those beliefs to customers. In making their shops into religion-infused, moral spaces, merchants merge religion with the everyday acts of buying and selling. Because of certain historical and cultural proscriptions against the use of figures in Islamic art, most Sunni Islamic artistic expressions are decoration- or text-based, while, because of different historical trends, Shi’i (and Christian) decoration tends to make more use of figural imagery. In Sunni-owned shops, framed textiles or plaques depicting verses from the Qur’an are quite common, as are posters depicting the family tree of Muhammad and his descendants, photographs of holy sites, and stickers of Islamic phrases. Many Shi’i merchants, in addition to these decorations, display iconography depicting ‘Ali (Muhammad’s son-in-law, whom Shi’a believe to be the first in the line of the rightful

² The UNHCR estimates that over two million Iraqi refugees have fled to neighboring Jordan and Syria (mostly to Amman and Damascus), thus creating an enormous economic strain for these two countries. Although Syria officially closed its borders to Iraqi refugees in 2007, hundreds of Iraqis seeking shelter from violence brought by the war continue to enter Syria every day. This influx of mostly Shi’i Iraqis, in addition to the exponential rise in Shi’i pilgrims from Iran, Lebanon, and Turkey, is quickly changing the religious landscape of Damascus’ commercial areas.

imamate), Hussein (‘Ali’s son, whose martyrdom plays important roles in Shi’i rituals of worship), and the succession of the first imams. In addition to crosses and crucifixes, Christian store owners display plaques, paintings, and chromolithographs depicting Jesus, Mary, and various saints, as well as photographs of popes and other religious figures. The differences in these decorating trends create an easy heuristic for customers to tell Shi’i, Sunni, and Christian businesses apart from one another. Although most suq-goers do not patronize shops based solely on the religious identity of the merchant, the ability to discern the religious affiliation of different businesses is an important skill for customers to cultivate, especially in a place where religious affiliation is such a key part of one’s social identity.



Figure 4.1. Mahmoud sits in front of his religious display. The framed textile is embroidered with a verse from the Qur’an and decorated with photos of the Ka’aba

In Figure 4.1, a framed textile embroidered with one of the first verses of the Qur'an takes center stage in a small fabric store in Suq Medhat Pahsa. The merchant, Mahmoud Siddi, informed me that he likes to have the large textile behind him while he works so that he has a constant reminder of God (*thikir Allah*). Attached to the outside frame are black-and-white photographs of the Ka'aba, and a sign advertising the price of fabric. Below, Mahmoud hung a photograph of his family meeting with religious leaders. That these religious signs sit directly behind Mahmoud when he does business with customers is not coincidental. Like with familial portraits, this spatial merging serves to symbolically fuse the merchant with religious goodwill emanating from such religious displays. Such a positioning also forces customers to view both the merchant and the religious imagery at the same time, blending merchant and God in the same frame of reference. Such large, nicely-framed pieces like Mahmoud's are more expensive than stickers or posters, but merchants told me that the benefits of having such well-crafted images in their stores outweigh the costs.

Other merchants who perhaps cannot afford such expenses take a more modest approach by hanging posters of Islamic imagery instead. Such posters are quite easy to come by at specialty stores in the papergoods suq (al-Asrooniyya) or from poster merchants selling outdoors on the streets of the New City. Figure 4.2, for example, shows the display on the walls of an ice cream shop, run by the Qala'a family, on the eastern edge of Malik Faisal Street. The two large paper posters on top show the interior of the great mosque Masjid Nabawy in Medina, and an exterior shot of the same mosque, with the word 'Allah' radiating out of the center. These two posters are flanked by more expensive, framed plaques with the words Muhammad (on the left) and Allah (on the right). Below is a hodgepodge of photos and framed images depicting, among others, the family's spiritual leader; a decorative paper cut-out with Islamic verses, written in green, the signatory color of Islam; a small sticker of pilgrims worshipping at the Ka'aba in Mecca, next to a larger framed print of a mosque; various framed photographs of family members; a framed Syrian work permit; a requisite print of the president, Bashar al-Asad; a digitally-manipulated photograph of a deceased family member; and the ubiquitous turned-on television, decorated with two stickers of Fulla, the ever-popular 'Islamic



Figure 4.2. A wall display in an ice cream shop on Malik Faisel Street

Barbie’ (discussed more below). This veritable mish-mash of designs, sentiments, and visual imagery appeals to both merchant and customer alike; for the merchants, it serves as a proud declaration of their own histories and identities, and, for customers, it both pleases on a visceral level, and, more subtly, works as evidence of the shop’s trustworthiness and moral uprightness.

Homemade creations of Qur’anic references are also common, and merchants are quite creative in making these displays of religion gel with their own personal messages. In Figure 4.3, for example, Usama al Frawati, the owner of a small *keffiyah* (men’s checkered headdress) shop in Suq Medhat Pasha, shows me the large, framed image that is hung on the wall behind his desk. Inside the frame is a piece of black cloth upon which is sewn a sequined image of crossed swords and a palm tree under the sequined words ‘Allah’ and ‘Muhammad.’ The image of the crossed swords and palm (the coat of arms for Saudi Arabia) is a nod to his customer base, which tended mostly to be wealthy businessmen from the Gulf. What’s interesting about Usama’s image, however, is the exterior decoration he has affixed to what once was a relatively plain item. Around the edges of the frame, he taped images of mosques (two are the same image, one directly

above the other), verses from the Qur'an, and, on the upper left-hand corner, a small sticker with palm trees and the written names of Saudi Arabian cities, another obvious appeal to his customer base. In the middle of the top portion of the frame, Usama affixed a homemade 'No Smoking' sign, with stickers of Qur'anic verses and of children's television characters surrounding the handwritten text. The hodgepodge of referents on this one framed image is staggering and, like the example above, serves to indicate a wealth of information about the merchant and his store to his customers. Other religious posters and plaques [including one which depicts a phrase from the Qur'an popular among merchants: "And in heaven is your income" (*wa fi al sama'a rizqakum*)] are hung on the surrounding wall, but the framed sequined picture is obviously meant to sit as the center of attention. Like the text in Mahmoud's store, this image is hung directly behind Usama's desk.³



Figure 4.3. Usama's display of religious referents and a 'no smoking' sign

³ When I returned in 2009, both men had removed these images from their shops in favor of other decoration, due to the aesthetic overhaul of Suq Medhat Pasha in 2008 (discussed in Ch. 2). They had both moved these framed images to their warehouses, and replaced them with neater, more generic religious imagery. Mahmoud's was a fascinating study in re-photography; he had hung an enlarged memorial photograph of his deceased father, posing against the his framed Qur'anic cloth, thus merging both display practices into one frame. Though neither merchant was cajoled by officials into making these changes, they both sought to make their shops look more sophisticated in order to better match the new look of the suq.

Itinerant vendors also sometimes display religious referents on their vending carts, though their displays are constrained in part by the limited space available to them. Short verses or even single words or expressions often take the place of longer Qur'anic texts, and the effect is often a simple yet quite powerful visual reference to God. Figure 4.4 shows a *ful* (hot fava beans, often served with a lemon-garlic broth in the wintertime) cart decorated simply with the words 'Muhammad' and 'Allah.' The white paint against a brown background, and the simplicity of the decoration surrounding the words serve to highlight them even further. In Figure 4.5, a different approach is taken on a cart stacked with *loz akhdar* (green almonds, eaten as a refreshing springtime snack), which is covered with stickers referencing God, Muhammad, and commonly uttered religious expressions such as *Allahu akbar* (God is Great). Two giant, feminized eyes both reference the importance of eye symbolism in Islam, and also perhaps serve as an entertaining gesture for the cadre of young men who peddled from this particular cart. (I often saw these very eye stickers placed on busses, taxis, and cars, an anthropomorphic gesture that might give clues as to how vehicles are imagined and related to in Syria). Among the many religious stickers on this cart is one which declares "Ownership is for Allah" (*Al mulk lilallah*), which, again, because of its obvious applicability to commercial settings, is a popular Qur'anic saying used amongst merchants, even with a rental cart like this one. One informant suggested that this verse was used by the vendor to prevent envy – in his words, "you can't envy me because you can't envy God." Other than stickers and paint, vendors also use creative alternatives for writing words. A popcorn vendor, for example, used small, circular, red stickers to form the expression 'ya Rab' ('Oh, Lord') on one side, and 'ya Karim' ('Oh, Generous,' one of the 99 names of Allah) on the other side of his mobile popcorn cart; and produce vendors often use shiny, gold thumbtacks to spell out divine words such as 'Allah' or 'Muhammad' (see, for example, Figure 5.5). In such cases, merchants expressed to me that such tactics go even further than the typical sticker or paint, as customers are happy to see everyday objects being used to form sacred words.

Shi'i merchants, while they certainly also display text-based decoration, are apt to showcase chromolithographs depicting images of 'Ali, his son, Hussein, or images of the first imams. As discussed further below, 'Ali and Hussein are of extreme importance



Figure 4.4. A *ful* cart upon which is painted 'Allah' and 'Muhammad'



Figure 4.5. A *loz akhdar* cart with religious stickers and feminized eyes

to most practicing Shi'a: they not only play a large role in the founding tenets of Shi'i Islam, but they also are symbols that help to forge and maintain group identity, and to set Shi'a apart from Sunnis. This is especially important in a place like Syria, whose population is overwhelmingly Sunni. As Pinto explains, the consumption of such Shi'-specific commodities helps to reaffirm individually-tailored understandings of Shi'i identity in Syria:

(t)he possibility of the individual consumption of mass-produced objects with Shi'i symbolic and iconic references and their use in practices that are not fully defined by the collective rituals of the community have allowed the emergence of less hierarchical and more individualized forms of construction and affirmation of Shi'i identities. [2007: 121-122]

The personalized displays of Shi'i shop owners in Syria reflect this trend.

Finally, in a more preventative move, some stores owners also display trinkets depicting the hand of Fatima (*al-khamsa*), blue beads, and eyes, all of which are said to repel the evil eye ('*al ayn al hasood*,' literally 'the eye of envy'). Belief in the evil eye is a pan-Mediterranean (and pan-religious) phenomenon, but, in many Middle Eastern countries, evil eye imagery is also understood as a folk religious practice, informed by various interpretations of Islam. Though merchants told me that any material expression of religion helped to protect the store against harm, trinkets and images designed specially to ward off the evil eye are particularly effective apotropaic devices. Businesses display these in their stores to deter ill feelings from jealous competitors or unsatisfied customers, or to ensure that their machinery remains in good working order. In a shoe repair shop on Medhat Pasha Street, for example, blue beads and an evil eye charm hung off of the old Singer sewing machine used to sew shoe parts (Fig. 4.6). As the cobbler explained, "This is for the eye to protect me and my machine from envy (*hassad*). Some people come and envy me and my daily livelihood (*riza'i*)."⁴ In another example (Fig. 4.7), an itinerant seller of watermelons explained to me that he decorated his horse with blue beads and metal hands of Fatima (with '*masha'allah*' – God wills it – inscribed on the palm) in order to keep his horse healthy and "to make him grow fat." As this last

⁴ Elias reminds us, though, that "Apotropaic art is directed at the supernatural; even though human beings are held at fault for the misfortune of others through their envy or jealousy, they actually function as agents by which the evil-eye (*nazar*) is transmitted, not as its authors" (2005:51).



Figure 4.6. A cobbler's Singer sewing machine is protected by evil eye talismans

statement indicates, evil eye talismans can also be used to actively benefit the person (or animal) who uses them, not just to protect him. Vending is a difficult and competitive job; to ensure that his produce, cart, and horse would be protected from jealous eyes, he took the extra precautionary step. Of course, the ebullience of colors and patterns created by this evil eye paraphernalia is aesthetically pleasing in and of itself. Though itinerant vendors often use aural advertisement (sing-song calls; loud, recognizable horns; the jingling of horse bells, etc.) to announce their existence, the visual spectacle of the horse and cart can also help to solidify a sale.

But beads and paraphernalia of this sort are not the only way to protect merchandise; some merchants also use sacred words to ward off the evil eye. As Starrett notes, this is a common Egyptian practice as well, and can be found to exist on cars and busses, in homes, and other places where text is displayed: "God has promised to protect His word, and so will protect it wherever it is found" (1995a: 53). A peach vendor, for example, operating near Bab al-Saghrir ('The Little Gate') in the Old City, used the apotropaic formula *Ya Rab, Allah jiran min ayn al hasad* ('Oh God, protect me from the envious eye') on his old vending cart to protect it and his merchandise. Similarly, machines in workshops are often decorated with Qur'anic verses. 'Ali, a woodworker in



Figure 4.7. Apotropaic devices on a displayed on a horse used for watermelon vending



Figure 4.8. Blue beads and Qur'anic *ayat* displayed on a woodworking machine

Suq Medhat Pasha showed me a side of his machine (notably, the side facing the shop door) which he had covered with verses from the Qur'an and from which he hung a homemade talisman of blue beads (Fig. 4.8). Though the holy words were ripped in some places and covered with sawdust, they still performed an important protective function for the equipment. 'Ali happily informed me that his machinery had remained in perfect working order ever since he applied the decorations, about six years ago.

Though in these cases displaying evil eye paraphernalia is more for the merchant and his store than it is for the customer, it can also communicate to customers certain clues about the merchant. A merchant who protects his machinery and merchandise with evil eye talismans obviously cares for his business, an indication that he is more apt to provide quality products or services. Furthermore, because belief in the magic of the evil eye is considered to be more of a rural, folkloric tradition, merchants who display evil eye trinkets in their stores convey to their customers that they also identify with deeply engrained traditions that symbolize divergent forms of orthopraxy. As such, and especially since these magical beliefs are thought of by some to be more vernacular and uneducated, I rarely saw eye paraphernalia in the wealthier, more established stores that catered to a well-to-do clientele, except in those that were aimed at foreign customers who might delight in such vernacular expressions.

Listening to God: The Use of Qur'anic Recordings in Shops

In some parts of the suqs, as many as one in five shops plays recordings of the Qur'an in some capacity for more than an hour each morning.⁵ Much in the vein of Hirschkind's studies of the "ethics of listening" (2006) involved in the consumption of sermon cassettes in Egypt, merchants in Damascus explained to me that listening to readings of the Qur'an in their shops secured blessings for themselves and also sometimes their businesses. Like with the display of religious imagery, these recordings help to create a religious-moral space around the merchant, his merchandise, and his shopspace. In addition to listening to the recordings, the act of *playing* the recordings – turning on the radio or television; pressing the 'play' button on a stereo; tinkering with

⁵Although it is much rarer, vendors with the capacity and space to do so also sometimes play Qur'anic tapes and CDs from small stereos on their carts.

the volume, and so on – allows merchants to actively express to their neighbors and potential customers that they are pious Muslims with a particularly blessed business.

Merchants are especially prone to play Qur’anic readings during the morning hours, when shops are slowly opening and being set up; as many explained, listening to the Qur’an in the morning sets the tone for the day ahead – it is, as one merchant explained whilst miming the opening of a book with his hands, “the first opening of the shop (*awal fathat al-mahal*),” which plays on the word ‘fatiha,’ used to refer to the opening verse of the Qur’an. Other merchants explained that it allowed them to start the day in a positive way: “It’s good to wake up listening to/remembering Allah (*tishah ala thikr Allah*),” one fabric merchant told me in Suq Medhat Pasha. Another grocer told me, “it brings blessings if you start your day with the holy Qur’an.” It also seemed to be the case that listening to the Qur’an during the quietest and calmest part of the day, before the suqs really got going, may have allowed merchants some morning respite before the general chaos of the work day ensued. Merchants also tended to listen to the Qur’an as they performed other morning tasks – eating breakfast, setting up shop displays, and so forth.

Islamic cassette tapes and CDs (Qur’anic readings and recitations; famous sermons, and other such material) are widely available for purchase in many parts of Damascus. Most merchants whom I questioned bought them from specialty shops in the suq (many of which are located just outside of the main entrance to the Omayyad mosque) or from music vendors who wheel their merchandise around the suqs on carts equipped with boom boxes used for demonstration purposes. I also encountered one younger fabric merchant, presumably an apprentice or young relative, listening by himself to Qur’anic verses playing from his mobile phone, which he told me was a popular mode of listening for younger Syrians.

Merchants’ explanations for why they played recordings of the Qur’an varied from person to person, but they usually centered on the benefits derived from the act of listening. Hearing the words of God is said to bring blessings and joy to those who are actively listening. To increase these feelings among others, then, many merchants played their recordings at a very high volume so that the people surrounding them (other

merchants, vendors, customers, and passers-by) could hear as well.⁶ For example, a dry goods merchant in Suq Medhat Pasha explained,

Every day we [merchants] play different verses (*ayat*) by different readers (*muqra'a*) and we play only the Qur'an. Not every (merchant) around me has speakers; I have speakers and so they can hear it from me. They listen to it and they are moved by it (*matrubeen* – a transformative joy). We play it for an hour or so in the morning because it's a joy to be in the company of the Qur'an (*bstā'nisu bil Qur'an*). Listening to the Qur'an is calming (*sakiineh*) and assuring (*tama'nineh*).⁷ Do you know what this means?...If you love somebody, they assure you that everything will be okay and you are comfortable around them. In Islam, listening to the Qur'an is calming to people because we are listening to the words of God.

Although most merchants framed their listening practices in terms of these general benefits, others admitted more direct potential gains. One seller of women's hair accessories in Suq Asrooniyya told me, "I listen to the Qur'an so that my shop will be blessed (*minshan mahaal mitbaraak*)." Another perfume seller bluntly told me, "In the morning, listening to the Qur'an increases income (*rizq*)." A fabric merchant in Suq Medhat Pasha explained, "My day becomes more beautiful when I listen to the Qur'an... You become blessed and it brings about good deeds (*hassanaat*) and heavenly rewards (*thawab*)... Everything becomes easier. Whatever you ask from God, he gives you [gesturing to the shop and merchandise]." Like visual religious imagery which brings blessings by their mere presence, the actual words of the Qur'an also can positively influence one's business.

To explain why they were playing Qur'anic recordings, many merchants told me that this is simply what they do as Muslims. One fabric merchant explained, "We're Muslims. This is our instinct (*ghrarizitna*)"; another young vendor selling zippers in a small kiosk shrugged his shoulders and told me simply, "We listen to the Qur'an because we are Muslims." Another dry goods merchant said, "We're Muslims – this is how we are (*Ihna Muslmineen, heek*)⁸."

⁶ It is both hearing the words of God *and* the divinely-sanctioned ways in which they are recited (with very particular melodies, cadence, and so forth) that is important.

⁷ One of Hirschkind's (2006) informants also describes listening to the Qur'an with the term *sakiineh*: "Listening to the Quran or sermon tapes, it leads you to a state of relaxation or *sakina*. What does *sakina* mean? It means the calm one feels knowing that only God can determine when one will die..." (72).

⁸ *Heek* is a nebulous word that defies proper translation. It is usually used to mean "like this," in reference to something in particular, but it can sometimes stand alone to mean something like, "This is how it is."

Indeed, the act of Qur'anic listening plays a fundamental role in most Islamic traditions: "For most Muslims, in most times and places, the Qur'an has been an aural experience, something they hear rather than something they read" (McAuliffe 2003: 340). As such, the act of listening and hearing holy words has been framed as important practices for Muslims to engage in. In Egypt, listening to cassette sermons and other religious audio technologies is said to be a transformative act for Muslims (Hirschkind 2004, 2006). As Hirschkind explains,

Hearing...is not something one passively submits to but a particular kind of action itself. For this reason, what the divine message requires in this tradition is not so much a rhetor as a listener, one who can correctly hear what is already stated in its most perfect, inimitable, and untranslatable form. [2004: 134]

To hear and be transformed by the words of the Qur'an, though, one must listen in an active way and must be prepared to accept what one hears; in Egypt, this makes for heated debates over how one should listen – one what should be doing, thinking, and feeling as one listens to the words. To some, eating, driving, and performing other daily tasks distracts from getting the full experience when listening to the Qur'an and are thus not the ideal way to listen to holy words:

When listening together with others in a group, it was not uncommon that one person would criticize another for being insufficiently attentive to a sermon, slumping too far back in a chair, smoking during the audition, or failing to respond properly when the Prophet's name was pronounced. [Hirschkind 2006: 644]

In most of Damascus' suqs, the merchants with whom I spoke tended to be more relaxed about their listening practices, many of them performing tasks related to their businesses while listening at the same time.

Like in Egypt, merchants in Damascus emphasized that the act of listening is the primary way one is affected by the Qur'an. For example, one merchant with a towel and sheet shop in Suq Medhat Pasha cited "scientific studies from Europe" which proved the healing powers of Qur'anic listening. In one experiment, he told me, three different plants were placed in three different auditory conditions for a number of days – one with pop music, one with Qur'anic recitations, and the last with no audio stimulus. The plant 'listening' to the Qur'an, explained the merchant, thrived and grew taller than the other two plants. The experiment was repeated with patients in mental hospitals, with similar

results: the patients who listened to the Qur'an recovered faster and more markedly than the other two groups. To this merchant, such an experiment (whose objective validity was, to him, supported by its European roots) was proof of the healing power of listening to the Qur'an. Another merchant, a purveyor of perfumes in the New City, explained that listening to the Qur'an was also good for preventing human catastrophes, such as the swine flu, which was in full swing when I interviewed him in early May, 2009: In the Qur'an, he explained,

God forbade us from eating pork. Look what pork did to humans overseas! The Arab world has no such diseases from pigs. We listen/hear in the Qur'an that eating pork is *haram* (forbidden). God warned us about the meat of pigs, that it is *haram* and should not be eaten.

Similar religious arguments in Damascus existed for the Arab World's relative safeguard from avian flu, the peak of which was reached during my first stay in Syria from 2005-2006. [Since poultry is a popular food group in Syria, the argument instead centered around the importance of creating *halal* (religiously blessed) meat; another popular argument had to do with the particular migratory patterns of birds for that year, which were said to be divinely influenced so as to not infect the Arab World with the disease]. To many, then, listening to the Qur'an (and heeding its words) can be a healing and protective measure.

Some merchants with whom I talked debated whether television or cassette tapes were better modes for listening to the Qur'an. Most merchants professed that no mode was superior to another: "Television and CDs are all the same," said one merchant (listening to the Qur'an from his television set). Another explained the apparent benefits of television: "The merchants who don't have speakers watch the reading of the Qur'an on TV so that they can learn it by heart by reading [the accompanying words] on TV and listening at the same time." In such cases, then, television proved to be the better device because of its pedagogical possibilities. Others, though, declared that they preferred CDs, cassette tapes, and radios over television programs. These non-visual modes are easier to listen to (*ashaal lil istima'a*) because they are less distracting and therefore more directly transformative. Another merchant described to me the merits of the radio program to which he was listening:

That's the radio of Dar al-Fatwa (the House of Interpretations) in Beirut... This (radio program) is better than others because it includes the sayings of the Prophet (*hadeeth*), the Holy Qur'an (*Qu'ran al kareem*), the stories of the prophets (*qussas al anbia'*), and religious chantings (*anasheet deeneeya*).

None of the merchants I interviewed expressed any dismay over listening to the Qur'an with 'modern' technologies like televisions and compact discs, but many did frame their listening practices in contrast to other, popular listening practices in Syria, in particular the increasingly ubiquitous sounds of modern pop music, which is often blasted from shops and taxi cabs, and whose music videos are broadcast on screens in a significant number of restaurants throughout the city. An older owner of a nut shop who was listening to a recording from his television explained to me,

[Listening to the Qur'an] is better than listening to pop songs and noisy music. This is what our generation those older than us believe to be true. But it doesn't enter the brains of those who are 20 or 25 years old – they have no [religious] foundation (*ardiyyah*). I listen to the whole thing (*khitmi kamileh*), from eight in the morning until eight at night.

Listening to the Qur'an is thus framed in contrast to listening to popular music, much of which draws on themes many deem antithetical to a religious lifestyle.

Though the act of listening to these recordings was pinpointed as the most important and pivotal one for merchants, it is also important to consider what the act of playing these cassettes might perform as well. What kind of implication does the action of playing one of these recordings have for the merchant, and how might doing so influence business? Customers recognize that, when a Qur'anic reading is blasting out from the speakers of a shop, or is played in the background on a television, the merchant has made the conscious decision to place that reading on aural display. Such an act itself might serve as evidence of a merchant's religious convictions and be a possible indication of his trustworthiness.

Pious Evidence

Displaying religious imagery and playing religious recordings are quick and obvious ways for merchants to outwardly reflect to their customers their piety and distinctive religious beliefs. Vendors also make use of religious imagery and text, and sometimes even play Qur'anic recordings from their vending carts. Unlike the familial

and political imagery discussed in the previous chapter, vendors can freely and openly showcase their piety, as Islam is seen to be the purview of all Muslims, rich or poor, shop-owning or not. By using religious imagery and sounds, vendors can insert themselves into the moral worldview of all suq sellers. This is much like how, in Moroccan marketplaces, women vendors will use their position to assert common Muslim identities to male customers by uttering a statement usually designed for interactions only among men: “When the vendor asks her clients, ‘Aren’t we all Muslims?’ the interlocutor is obliged to say yes; but that yes also affirms the unity and rightful place of women in the public domain of the market” (Kapchan 1996: 65). In a similar way, vendors who display religious stickers or use religious speech and sound are affirming their rightful place in the marketplace; they, like their more respected, shop-owning counterparts, have as much of a right to be there.

Though customers will certainly buy from merchants from different religious backgrounds, it is most common for Christian customers to buy from Christian merchants and for Muslims to buy from Muslims, a large part of which is due to the fact that most Christian-operated stores are in mostly Christian residential neighborhoods (i.e. Qassaa or Bab Touma), and most Muslim-operated stores are in mostly Muslim residential neighborhoods (i.e. Qaymariyyah or Shalaan). Muslim patronization is also often contingent on sectarian affiliation: Shi’a are more likely to patronize Shi’a; Sufis are more likely to patronize Sufis, and so on. It may be the case that this is a factor of minorities wanting to support minority-owned businesses, or perhaps that customers feel more at home in co-religious stores. In the case of Sunni and Shi’i merchants and customers, religious affiliations also tend to fall along national lines, as a good part of Damascus’ Shi’i population consists of Iraqi and Lebanese immigrants and, more recently, refugees.

In any case, the images, texts, and sounds discussed above work to communicate to customers exactly what kind of merchant they are buying from. Hassan, a nut merchant along Medhat Pasha street, for example, explained that he displays a chromolithograph of ‘Ali and the succession of imams high on his shop wall for just this reason: so that his customers will know that he’s Shi’i. Considering that Hassan’s store was one of seven other nut stores within a two-block radius, this was an important business step to take.

His son ‘Ali ran the nut store directly adjacent to his. ‘Ali displayed a similar poster, as well as a sticker commemorating Hussein’s martyrdom (which, in a display of sectarian pride, declares “Hussein is from me and I am from Hussein; God loves he who loves Hussein”) pasted in the center of the scale used to weigh nut transactions, below which is a photograph of himself taped over a paper depicting a verse from the Qur’an. The self-referential device of a merchant displaying a photograph of himself is becoming a common display technique, especially among newer storeowners, as discussed in the previous chapter. That ‘Ali displayed his own photograph directly beneath a sticker referencing Hussein, and directly on top of a verse from the Qur’an is significant as well. Though some might balk at the placement of this photograph – literally covering words from the Qur’an – the placement serves to more closely and physically tie the merchant to the divine. ‘Ali, for his part, gave the same explanation as his father, albeit somewhat tongue-in-cheek, for why he displayed his own photograph: so that customers would know both that he was Shi’i, *and* so they would visually remember that they were buying from the best nut merchant in Suq Medhat Pasha.

Images of Nasrallah work in a similar fashion, as do images of popes, saints, and Jesus and Mary in Christian stores, all signifying to customers the religious affiliations of merchants. Displays of this sort are especially important in busy areas of the suqs, where stores rely heavily upon the business of strangers, rather than solely on a loyal customer base. This is also the case for vendors, who typically sell to passers-by in different areas of the city. But customers ‘read’ these displays not only to determine which religion or sect a merchant might belong, but also to decipher subtler clues about the merchants’ religious persuasions.⁹ Which Qur’anic verse, religious words, or godly imagery merchants choose to use for decoration reflect the individual preferences of the merchant.

This is not necessarily a unique concept; merchants and vendors across the globe use religious decorations in similar ways to visually identify themselves (and their businesses) as morally upstanding. In Washington, DC, for example, Sierra Leonean taxi drivers and hot dog vendors use Islamic stickers, posters, and tchotchkes of various sorts

⁹ This, of course, works in the reverse direction as well, as Khuri reminds us: “Shopkeepers in Beirut are extraordinarily perceptive of people’s accents, dress, cleanliness, names, and the way they correlate with specific backgrounds... The seller uses such key associations to link the commodity to the buyer’s background, in an effort to show him that other people of his status do consume the same goods by citing specific incidents” (1968: 701).

to express their own religious identity and, in the process of doing so, possibly gain customers: vendors and drivers “choose and utilize objects in order to make social statements about themselves, how they want others to see them and, ultimately, how they see others” (D’Alisera 2001: 99). A large part of this process is the potential of such imagery to convey to customers – whatever their own religious affiliations – that the merchant is morally upstanding. In describing the decorative trends of a Sierra Leonean hot dog vendor, Aminata, who decorated her cart in a particularly religious fashion, D’Alisera explains:

Through religious stickers Aminata constructs and controls her interactions with her customers. She feels that the Islamic motif of her decorations beckons the potential customer by engaging in what she believes is a familiar and important social norm, that is that the food she serves is ritually pure (Sabrett’s Kosher Hot Dogs), free of ‘devilish’ substances (*juju* things’), and served by a ‘good Muslim’ (pious) woman. This, she often told me, is the key to a successful business. [2001: 102]

In Washington, DC, this Muslim identity is somewhat of a generality; that is, vendors and drivers use such imagery to separate themselves from other, non-Muslim or non-religious sellers. But in Damascus, where the vast majority of sellers *and* buyers in the suqs are Muslim, these religious symbols also have the potential to ‘work’ for customers. Indeed, religious images and words don’t just reflect the merchant and his store; they also, perhaps even more importantly, ultimately reflect the religious piety of the customer. As such, there is a sort of double reflection of piety that is created by displays of religion. Religious customers are more likely to patronize stores or vending units with obvious displays of religion, both visual and aural, because they want to feel as if they are buying from a pious merchant, and also because *they themselves* are pious people by patronizing that store.¹⁰ A shop with a large image of Hussein, or a photograph of the Pope, or a loudly-playing recording of the Qur’an signals to the customer that the merchant is at least somewhat religious and therefore is more apt to be trustworthy in his sale tactics, that the space is potentially blessed with *barakat*, and that they, the

¹⁰ Hirschkind (2006) notes a similar effect with taxi cab drivers in Cairo who play popular cassette tape sermons as they work. Pious Muslims feel more comfortable when they get into taxis that are playing such tapes. There is a difference here, though, in that taxi riders experience moral feelings as an after-effect – that is, they become comfortable only after they’ve gotten in the cab and effectively bought the service – whereas customers in the suq are drawn to particular stores in advance because they can anticipate the store’s moral effect on them, even before they enter into any kind of monetary transaction with that store.

customers, might reap religious benefits when entering and buying from that store. It is not only the merchants' piety that is reflected in those images and sounds; it is also the piety of the patrons. Religious displays, then, are filled with moral possibility. They allow merchants to open a space of moral negotiation for their customers, and they subtly sets the tone for all interactions and business conducted within.

This idea of moral possibility – albeit of a different sort – is discussed by Doris (2005) in his work on Nigerian 'anti-aesthetics.' Doris examines the active power of *ààlè* objects – conglomerates of repurposed materials such as dried corncobs and old cloth used to ward off potential thieves by reflecting a particular (negative) quality, such as brokenness or bareness, in the would-be offender. As he explains:

(à)àlè...are warnings and must be seen in order to be effective, to be registered in the consciousness of potential thieves before they become actual thieves. The *ààlè* image bears moral weight – 'Do not steal from here, or this will happen to you.' Vision is fundamental in transporting that moral message" [Doris 2005: 26]

To see an *ààlè* object, then, means to be shown a glimpse of one's moral future, and the possibility of one's individualized moral recourse for intended harm. Religious imagery in Damascus' shops works in a similar, but opposite, way by giving customers the potential to feel morally blessed, pious, and good. In both cases, though, *purposeful* vision – seeing, contemplating, and interpreting – is the medium by which these moral feelings are enacted (as is purposeful audition in some suqs). Customers must thus be willing to actively receive the moral (visual) messages put forth by religious displays, much like how pious Muslims must actively listen to sermon cassette tapes in order to fully be transformed by their sacred nature (Hirschkind 2006). As I explain in the next section, this visual and aural mindfulness is an important feature of the agentic qualities of religious displays.

Always Remember God: Religious Aura and 'Visual *Dzikir*'

Religious Aura and Barakat

In a variety of religious traditions, images of deities, saints, and religious leaders are often looked at differently, thought about differently, and handled differently because they embody something other that transcends the material image. They contain within them a spiritual or sacred aura that distinguishes them from other kinds of mundane

imagery. Through their mere presence, religious imagery (including text) and sound have the ability to transform shops, kiosks, vending carts, and even streets into moral spaces. This is in part due to the spiritual aura (*barakat*) residing within such material expressions. This aura is partly what draws customers to such displays, as they not only want to be blessed themselves, but they also want to buy merchandise that has been blessed by the sacred imagery and sounds. Merchants understand this, and so often display religious imagery, text, and sound amongst their merchandise, thus imbuing what they're selling with good wishes, morality, and, in the end, quality. The *barakat* naturally exuded from such displays works to enhance the goodness of the merchandise, and, in the end, the merchant as well.

This process works by contagious magic of sorts: the religious inscription, image, or sound just needs to be close to merchandise for *barakat* to rub off on the goods. Religious imagery can bless even the most 'profane' of commodities, such as the cigarette cartons in Figure 4.9, which are paired with chromolithographs of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Two of the images show Jesus actually in the act of blessing; in these, his



Figure 4.9. Posters of divine figures preside over cartons of cigarettes in Bab Touma

bodily orientation – body turned forward, with eyes gazing directly ahead – gives the impression that he is conferring blessings outward onto those who look at him (or perhaps, even, the space and merchandise that surrounds him). In many religious images of Christian and Shi'i figures, the holy aura exuding from within is indicated in the image with rays of light. In such imagery, “[light] is a metaphor for truth, purity, revelation and knowledge” (Bille and Sorensen 2007: 272). In Damascus, Christian figures generally have halos surrounding their heads, while figures of ‘Ali and Hussein are often shown to be glowing or illuminated in some way, as are images of famous religious sites and mosques. Celestial light also sometimes frames images of the president and his family, again to give them an otherworldly, sacred aura. This prominence of light transfers to religious calligraphy as well. Many of the images merchants display of Qur’anic text or, simply, the words ‘Allah’ and ‘Muhammad’ are shown with rays of light emanating outwards, as in the case of the exterior of a sweet shop in Suq Sreijeh which showcases a glowing ‘Allah’ and the 99 names of God, set against a backdrop of praying pilgrims at Mecca (Fig. 4.10). God’s light is also used as a way to confer blessings onto people; as such, it is a common design feature used locally-produced digital portraiture (Fig. 4.11). Jain notes a similar practice used on Muslim imagery in India: “Apart from their highly elaborated use of calligraphy, these prints on Muslim themes often achieve their visual intensity through the important symbolic element of light (*noor*), which suffuses the images in the form of rays, sparkles, highlights, and glowing gems” (2007: 63).

This sacred aura which emanates from such images and texts is also transferred to the actual physical properties of the medium in which those religious referents are displayed – the paper of posters and stickers, the wood and plastic of plaques, the metal of charms, etc. This merging of content and form helps to explain why the arrangement of religious imagery with regard to other forms of decoration is dictated in part by the necessity of keeping direct references to God out of harm’s way. Most of this imagery is hung high on the walls, above any other mundane posters or photographs, so that they are both physically and figuratively ‘higher’ than all else. Displaying them high up also ensures that they maintain the greatest visibility for merchants and customers alike, and that all *barakat* they exude will bless the store in its entirety. Even merchants who sell religious imagery and text rather than using those things as personalized display were



Figure 4.10. An illuminated 'Allah' on the exterior of a sweet shop



Figure 4.11. A digital photograph showing celestial light shining down on its recipients

cognizant of its positioning.¹¹ For example, poster sellers who display their merchandise from horizontally-positioned hanging strings along the sidewalk are careful to remain vigilant about keeping religious imagery (and, in some cases, political imagery) physically above other posters of pop stars, babies, and nature scenes, and as far away from the ground as possible. As one poster merchant explained to me, “I arrange [my display] so that the artistic posters are down and the posters of political leaders and the Qur’an are up – it is *haram* [forbidden, sacrilegious] for these things to be down. Each picture has its place.” As such, there exists a religious quality to these material objects in all stages of their social lives – a reasoning which is more akin to Hindu images of deities which, even during their ‘social death,’ after they have been cast away as garbage, must be disposed of in a careful way (Pinney 1997: 111).

‘Visual Dzikir’ and Ways of Seeing God

The effects of religious imagery upon customers and merchants may go even further when there is a visual relationship formed between viewer and image. That is, when a viewer looks at these forms of religious imagery, he or she is drawn to that aura and transformed by it in some way or another. This is an important process that reveals that the act of ‘seeing’ forms an important affective and corporeal relationship between the seer and the seen.¹² This relationship is perhaps most commonly cited in the Hindu notion of *darshan*, the belief that, when images of deities are looked upon by a worshipper, that worshipper is at the same time seen by the god he or she is viewing. In most *darshanic* images, the eyes of the deity look directly outwards at the viewer so that a direct line of vision can be created between the two. Looking at religious imagery, then, fuses the worshipper with his/her god, and helps to create an embodied, physical connection through the medium of vision. To highlight this connection, mirrors are often

¹¹ This logic differs from that used in Cairo, where there is little attention paid to the positioning of religious merchandise for sale. As Starrett explains, this is so because commodities do not become sacred until they leave their commodity stage – i.e., until they are bought and consumed by customers: “(u)sing a different reading frame – a temporal and teleological one in which the presupposition of certain future events affects the meaning of a visual display – helps us to understand the peculiar carelessness with which religious commodities are displayed for sale” (1995a: 58).

¹² It could certainly be argued that this also applies to the realm of audition as well – that listening to the Qur’an, for example, establishes a relationship between hearer and heard – but here I concentrate mostly on the realm of vision.

displayed directly on top or behind iconographic imagery so that the worshipper can see him/herself seeing the deity *and* being seen by the deity (Pinney 2004). Though I am hesitant to make direct comparisons between *darshan* and forms of visual worship in Syria, the display of mirrors alongside Qur’anic verses and other religious material is indeed quite common in Damascus – not only in shops, but also in cars and homes. In shops, for example, I sometimes saw wall mirrors adorned with verses from the Qur’an and other holy words so that, when one looks at oneself, one also is looking at and reading the holy referents (and, in an infinite loop, looking at oneself looking at the words) (Fig. 4.12).

This double movement of seeing while being seen reflects the power derived from the *active* nature of some religious imagery. Drawing upon Gell’s ideas of agentic art,



Figure 4.12. A decorated mirror inside a meat shop. The words ‘Allah’ and ‘Muhammad’ are written on most of the beaded trinkets.

Pinney (2004) introduces the idea that, in India, certain images (especially of gods and spiritual leaders) “work” for their viewers – that they do, rather than merely show. Images of Hindu deities, often displayed on walls of Indian homes, are thought of as embodying godly essences that can be channeled through the image to the viewer. In these instances, the physical paper images are merely holding capsules for a range of feelings and powers. He writes, “villagers are not interested in what images ‘look like’, but only in what they can ‘do’—the nature and extent of the *barkat* [blessings] that they are capable of conducting” (Pinney 2004: 190). It is this idea of the *doing* nature of images and sounds that I want to extend to the realm of the marketplace, as allowing for a more active role for images helps to explain their powerful influence over certain people.

In the Damascus *suqs*, religious images and texts act upon the hearts and minds of those who see them and influence their deeds in a positive way – i.e., to prevent sin, as described by the merchant above – and stimulate particular emotions and thoughts within those who lay eyes upon such things. The content of Shi’i devotional imagery, for example, provokes moral feelings and emotions by means of its particular content. Images of ‘Ali and Hussein are so popular among Shi’i Muslims in large part because of the emotional roles these figures play in Shi’i devotional practices. Many accounts from around the Muslim world have described the public shows of emotion – crying, self-flagellation, ‘passion plays’ – that take place in the holy month of Muharram, and especially during the festivities of Ashura, when the martyrdom of Hussein is reenacted by both men and women [e.g., Fernea 1967 (Iraq); Hegland 1998 (Pakistan); Mottahedeh 1985 (Iran)]. Images of these figures, then, evoke transcendent emotion from Shi’a, and can thus ‘work’ for merchants to draw (Shi’i) customers.¹³ As Pinto explains,

The Shi’i veneration of the *ahl al-bayt* provides symbols and narratives that can be elaborated as ‘scenes,’ ‘gestures,’ or, building on a powerful religious concept, visual evocations of their ‘presence’ (*hadra*) in iconic objects, in order to give a Shi’i framework to particular forms of experience. [2007: 117]

Looking at images of these figures is a way for some Muslims to feel an emotional connection to their religion – a vivid, visual reminder of their own spirituality.

¹³ Pinto (2007) notes that displays of ‘Ali and Hussein posters are also sometimes employed by Damascus’ Sunni Sufi population in both their shops and homes, as they enjoy the visceral power of the images to elicit feelings of godliness.

Religious words and written expressions can bring forth similar reactions from viewers, especially when they are directly pulled from the Qur'an or related to the *hadith* (sayings based on the words and actions of the Prophet). In a (mostly Sunni) tradition in which figural representation is rarely used, words become direct lines to God, retaining the same connections to the divine that representational imagery does.¹⁴ Calligraphy has historically been a high art form throughout the Muslim Middle East; when paired with religious scripture (as it usually is), the writing and reading of words become sacred acts. As George notes, "(t)here is a long tradition in Islam in which *visualizing* Qur'anic verse is equivalent to glimpsing the divine" (2008:184). Islamic words can even 'act' to such an extent that folk remedies for illness sometimes involve drinking elixirs or eating food that have come into contact with holy words (Starrett 1995a: 57). In the marketplace setting, words can similarly act to protect and to bring luck, as with the writing on a small aluminum cooking pot used by a shop owner to store cash (Fig. 4.13). The power of calligraphic religious imagery lies both in the content of the words *and* in the visual look of the calligraphy itself. Referencing displays of Hebrew text in Jewish homes, Morgan suggests that we treat such conglomerates as

'imagetexts,' representations that are neither image nor text alone, but a synthesis that needs to be classified separately because it is experienced neither as merely text nor as merely image. These items...intermingle symbol, word, and image to create discrete objects that are more than the sum of their parts. [2006: 65]

Merchants, for their part, often told me that they displayed religious imagery as a "constant reminder of God." That is, it helped them, as well as their customers, to make a connection to God through the simple, physical act of seeing. This is an important point, as the Islamic principle of 'mindfulness of God,' or *thikir*, is a significant act of worship for Muslims. The word *thikir* (pronounced 'zikir' in the Syrian dialect) denotes the

¹⁴ The act of speaking religious words is also a sacred one, and merchants often insert religious words into their interactions with customers. Though religious expressions are part of everyday speech for most Muslims in Syria, especially *insha'allah* ('God willing'), *masha'allah* ('what God wills'), and *alhamdulillah* ('praise be to God'), merchants go out of their way to bring this speech to marketplace interactions. Doing so serves to bind customer and merchant into spiritual togetherness, much like images and written words do. For example, Gilesenan notes that, in the Lebanese suq, "(t)ransactions are marked by language in which reiterations of pious formulas and the swearing of religious oaths on the Quran and by the Prophet are an integral part" (1982: 177). Kapchan 1996 and Khuri 1968 note similar practices in Morocco and Lebanon.



Figure 4.13. A cooking pot, used to store daily earnings. The inscription reads, ‘Oh God, pray on the soul of our lord Muhammad; blessed be Allah’



Figure 4.14. A public water fountain outside of the Iranian consulate

remembrance of God¹⁵ and, though it is usually referenced as a particularly Sufi form of worship, it is a practice that is meant to be constantly undertaken by all Muslims as they navigate through daily life. Figure 4.14 shows a water fountain on the street outside of the Iranian consulate, with the words ‘(Always) Remember God’ written in both Arabic and English. The act of remembering is facilitated by such visual reminders of God placed throughout the city. In such an act, the processes of seeing and thinking (and feeling) are one and the same.¹⁶

This causal relationship between vision and (religious) remembrance is referred to by George (2008) as “visual *dzikir*.” Working in Indonesia, he explains that Islamic revival movements (especially Sufi ones) have made Islam-oriented visual art more popular than ever, and posits that part of this popularity has to do with the ability of this kind of art to elicit visual *dzikir* for Muslim viewers. Indonesian art which specifically references the divine through calligraphy, imagery, or other means enacts the practice of *thikir* among Muslim viewers. Though George uses this term to refer mainly to the work of a specific Indonesian painter, the metaphor of visual *thikir* is a good way to understand how and why religious imagery might agentively work in the Damascus suqs.

Islamic Landscapes and Fulla Dolls: The Changing Religious Market in Damascus

When Syria’s president Bashar al-Asad took office in 2000, he inherited a country that was undergoing a rapid change in religious outlook as part of Islamic revivalist movements that were sweeping the Middle East.¹⁷ In Syria, particularly in urban centers, more Muslims were praying in mosques, more women were covering their heads, and religious media – television programs, cassette tapes of sermons, religious music – was being consumed with greater enthusiasm. The secular platform of the Ba’th party is one

¹⁵ The word *thikir* (which derives from the root th-k-r, meaning ‘to remember’) can be translated in a number of different ways, the most common of which are ‘memory,’ ‘remembrance,’ or ‘mentioning.’ I also often heard the word *thikra* used to denote remembrance or memory, although usually not in a religious sense.

¹⁶ This concept is explained by an Egyptian playwright, quoted in Starrett: “Really, what [religious words] do is act as constant reminders to us. Having these things is *dhikr* (remembrance or devotion), because when you see them, you *read* them, and by reading them you’re doing *dhikr*. They are constant reminders of God’s presence” (1995a: 61).

¹⁷ Reasons for this increase in conservative Islamism are many and varied, though scholars have cited economic problems, unemployment, the Iraq war, and continuing Palestinian-Israeli violence as pushing this trend in Syria. (Landis, Jan 19 2005).

that has always been difficult to maintain, but this has especially been the case in recent years. Much of the tenuous nature of the Asad regime can be linked to the Asads' religious background. As members of the 'Alawi sect of Shi'i Islam, they are doubly religiously suspicious: they are both Shi'a running a Sunni-majority country, and members of a sect historically shrouded in secrecy and seen by many as heretical (see Chapter 3 for a lengthier discussion of this). In light of the growing popularity of Islamic revival movements in Syria, Asad has been forced to make a number of grand symbolic gestures to assure Syrians that the Ba'thist government can also be a religious one. In 2005, he gave an important public speech in which he declared his regime's allegiance to what he bluntly called "true Islam," a moderate form of Islam which stands in contrast to the radical Islam promoted by groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood – an organization that has always been a thorn in the side of the Asad regime.¹⁸ After this speech, many of the wives of senior regime officials began to wear the *hijab* (headscarf) in public (though, importantly, Bashar's wife, Asma al-Asad, pegged by Western media as "Syria's surprisingly modern first lady,"¹⁹ did not follow suit). The most profound institutional liberalization has been in mosques and schools, which were for decades tightly controlled by the Syrian government. Now, girls can wear headscarves in school, soldiers are allowed to openly pray during military service, and mosques are free to remain open in between prayer times (Moubayed 2006). In addition, new mosques are cropping up all over the city to accommodate an increasingly pious populus. In all, these changes reflect a fundamental shift in the philosophy of the ruling Ba'ath party: "Bashar Assad has incrementally abandoned the ruling Baath Party's longstanding secularizing mission and encouraged the growth of a moderate 'Islamist civil society' loyal to the state" (Moubayed 2006).

These new religious freedoms have led to a growing religious visual landscape in Damascus. The *bismillah* (the opening words of the Qur'an which read "In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate"), in addition to the commonly-uttered phrase *masha'Allah* ("God wills it"), or, simply the words 'Allah' and 'Muhammad,' are inscribed throughout the most seemingly mundane of places – painted on gas station

¹⁸ Perhaps the most notorious example of this is the 1982 clash between the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian military in Hama, where tens of thousands of mostly civilians were killed.

¹⁹ NBC Nightly News, May 9, 2008.



Figure 4.15. *Masha'Allah* ('God wills it') painted on a gas station wall. Beneath is a written advertisement for oil changing services



Figure 4.16. A painted image of the Ka'aba on a public wall in Salahiyya

walls (Fig. 4.15), on license plates, above doorways, on public walls. Likewise, miniature stickers depicting mosques, verses from the Qur'an, or the Ka'aba are stuck on public staircases, bridges, and bus seats. In back alleyways, graffiti artists hone their skills by spray painting 'Allah' or 'Muhammad'; and others create public religious art for everyday passers-by (Fig. 4.16).

This visual output is one way for religious Syrians to inject religion into everyday public spaces around them. Starrett notes the feedback effect inherent in such trends in Cairo: "the pervasiveness of Islamic messages in Egyptian public space is not only one result of the revival of religious interest in Egypt, but is one of its contributing factors as well. It has created a public demand for religious messages in public space" (1995b: 12). I would add that, in Damascus, it is the extemporaneous nature of these messages, in addition to their insertion into mundane, everyday life that makes them so powerful. That is, that these messages confront Damascus' residents in the city's nooks and crannies means that God is truly everywhere. Turning the corner and seeing the word 'God,' or entering a door with the *bismillah* written on the frame is another way for religious Muslims to practice everyday *thikir*. Unexpected displays of presidential support might act in a similar way, as discussed in the previous chapter.

In addition to the growing publicness of Syria's religious visual landscape, there has also been an increase in consumable religious commodities in Damascus' suqs. Religious trinkets, such as keychains, decals for car windows, pens, pillows, and stuffed hearts, all inscribed with holy words, are sold in mass quantities, many as souvenirs for Muslim pilgrims visiting Damascus' holy sites. Stalls selling Qur'ans and books on Islamic instruction are set up around popular mosques, and do excellent business with the crowds assembling for Friday prayers. As evidence of the increased use of *hijabs*, some merchants are displaying mannequins wearing the latest style. In an effort to portray 'modern' Muslim women, these figures are often seen wearing sunglasses, makeup, hats (on top of hijabs), and even in some cases holding risqué lingerie.²⁰ One of the more obvious manifestations of the merging of religion and commerce is the ever-popular Fulla doll – a Muslim version of Barbie who, in some forms, wears a headscarf and abbaya,

²⁰ See Halasa and Salam's *The Secret Life of Syrian Lingerie: Intimacy and Design* (2008) for an interesting study of the role of lingerie in Syrian economy and society.

and comes with mini prayer beads, prayer mats, and a pair of bright red, high-heeled boots. Fulla backpacks, stickers, chewing gum, sports gear, and sunglasses are consumed with great affection by young Syrian girls. Fulla was created by a Syrian businessman for NewBoy Industries, and her growing international popularity signals a shift in religious consumption in the Middle East. Just like the homemade ‘chador Barbie’ Meneley (2007) finds in a shop in Yemen, Fulla represents a merging of piety with new forms of religious consumption brought about by Islamist movements.²¹ This might help to explain the occasional Fulla sticker I saw in merchants’ displays (see Fig. 4.2, for example); she is yet one more example of (gendered) Muslim piety that might help to please certain customers.

The marked increase in religious tourism in Syria has also created a new market for pilgrimage goods, forming another outlet in which religious commoditization is occurring. As Pinto explains, “The experiential character of pilgrimage entices the demand for objects and images that can embody the memory of the emotions and sensations produced by the physical and symbolic activities connected to pilgrimage” (2007: 110). Around particular shrines, then, such as the Sayyada Ruqayya mosque in the middle of Damascus’ Old City, markets for religious commodities are springing up to cater to this increased demand. Vendors and shop owners sell a range of pilgrimage-related images and objects, from posters, books, and CDs to flags, toys, and religious body stamps used by Shi’i pilgrims on their hands and foreheads to corporeally commemorate their pilgrimage. Merchants in these areas have also adapted their selling techniques to account for Iranian Shi’i pilgrims, learning to call and advertise their goods to passing crowds in Farsi.

What this means is that, in Damascus, the public space of the marketplace has become a newfound site for the inscription of Islam; not only via the increase in sales of religious commodities, but also in the religious decoration of the walls, ceilings, and streets of the marketplace itself. Streamers with flags celebrating ‘Eid and Ramadan or simply of photos of holy Islamic sites are hung on heavily trafficked paths; posters adhered to walls announce religious meetings and lectures; and large banners written in

²¹ It is also the case, though, that the commoditization of religion has been the topic of debate in many corners of the Muslim world, including Syria, and has been criticized by many who argue that the increased production of religious commodities dilutes their inherent moral nature.

neon script proclaim religious slogans, all of which have made Damascus' suqs into contested sites of religious identity. These publicly-placed visual and material (and sometimes aural) religious symbols vie for the attention of suq-goers and merchants alike, and stimulate discussions about Syria's religious trajectory.

Coda: Digitizing God

Digital photography has opened up a new realm for explorations in the relationship between religion, representation, and the body. With computer programs, the possibilities for visually merging one's body with the divine are almost limitless; one can now be spatially merged with God in ways that were before impossible. In Figure 4.17, for example, an image of a baby is placed next to a large image of the word 'Allah,' under which is written "Do not forget remembrance (*thikir*)." The patterned background is made to look like rays of light emanating from the holy word (and possibly the baby as well), a commonly practiced visual technique, as noted above. In Figure 4.18, a doubled image of a young girl is placed against the backdrop of a large mosque nestled amidst mountains; in the upper right-hand corner is a faint image of two hands outstretched in prayer (possibly the girl's own hands, but probably a generic digital image), below which are the words 'ya Rab' ('oh, God'). The symbolic imagery of (divine) light is again used in this composite, as the hands in the upper right corner seem to be cradling the sun. If we again consider the inherent properties of divine images and words, such images provide a new realm not only for religious self-expression, but also for self-initiated religious blessing. Although I was not able to speak to the photographers of these particular images, it is probable that the parents of these two children chose such religious backgrounds not as a way to signify that their children are particularly pious Muslims, but as a way to confer religious blessings upon their children in one visually mediated, spatiotemporal moment. Hanging these images in their homes is a way for them, for their children, and for any houseguest to relive that moment every time they look at the photograph. In a sense, these photographs elicit a self-serving visual *thikir* unlike anything else.



Figure 4.17. A digital merging of a baby with God. From Nasser Studio.



Figure 4.18. A young girl is portrayed against a religious backdrop



Figure 4.19. A digital hajj photograph on display with memorial images of ancestors

Displaying such images in the privacy of one's home is one thing²², but what can such images do in the public realm of the suq? I briefly discussed the use of digital composites in memorial imagery above, but it is also the case that such religious digital photography is beginning to be used by living merchants as well. Digital photography has created a new way for merchants to document their own piety, particularly with the display of hajj photographs – digital images which are made in commemoration of one's completion of the hajj, one of the five requirements of Islam. In a small fruit stand in Suq Qazazeen, for example, the owner displayed a photo of himself standing with hands cupped together in prayer, digitally manipulated to look as if he is standing in front of large crowds of people surrounding the Ka'aba (Figure 4.19). The photograph is framed in simple gold, and is flanked by two black and white photographs of deceased family members. The hajj photograph serves as documentary evidence that the merchant is a pious, honorable man who takes his Islamic obligations seriously.²³ Although it is

²² Although, of course, these particular photographs lost that privacy when they were publicly displayed by the photography studios where they were created.

²³ The material commemoration of the hajj journey has a long tradition throughout the Muslim world. In Egypt, appointed artists recreate people's individual hajj journeys by painting the exteriors of houses (Parker and Neal 1995); in Dearborn, Michigan, Muslim Americans in Dearborn hang congratulatory banners on front porches (Howell 2000); and in Niger, Hausa women compose special songs which detail their individual hajj journeys (Cooper 1999). In Damascus, the technology of digital photography allows for new forms of these commemorative traditions to emerge.

digitally manipulated, it serves to inform customers that this merchant has indeed undertaken the hajj journey. Like the older memorial images surrounding the hajj photograph, but, in a brand new way, it works to frame the merchant as a trustworthy and reputable person with whom to do business.

Chapter 5

Aesthetics, Poetics, and Captivation

In the visual and sonic chaos of Damascus' marketplaces, sellers who cannot rely upon reputation alone must attend to marketing their products and services in eye- and ear-catching ways. The marketing practices I examine here belong almost exclusively to the domain of street vendors, peddlers, and sellers in open-air or marginal marketplaces. As I have previously touched upon, there are significant differences between these groups of people and merchants with permanent shops in established suqs. For vendors, peddlers, and marginal sellers, establishing themselves as trustworthy is too difficult of a proposition within the commercial realms they operate. 'Trust' is not as easily come by in the streets and open-air markets of the city, where anything goes and where sellers may be there one day and gone the next. As such, these merchants must instead focus their attention and energy on the 'quality' (or even 'trust') of their products for sale, a focus which in turn can implicate their own trustworthiness as sellers. Showcasing the quality of their products with aesthetically-pleasing displays, poetic calls, and decorated vending mobiles is a way that these sellers can both attract the eyes and ears of customers and provide them with useful, evidentiary information about their products for sale. As I show, the particular forms of display, decoration, and sound serve not only to reflect this quality, but also to enhance and produce it. Differences in these displays, decorations, and sounds also serve as distinctive evidence customers can use to make even more informed decisions, or even to repeat business at a later time.

First, I consider aesthetic display practices used mostly by stationary vendors in streets and sometimes by sellers with small shops. Arranging merchandise into aesthetically-pleasing formations is used by sellers as a way to both draw attention to their products and to enhance the perceived quality of those products. In these displays, certain design elements – in particular, symmetry, intricacy, and color contrast – work to perform both of these functions. Patterned displays of merchandise draw customers' eyes

toward them not only because of their maze-like qualities which “entrap” (Gell 2006b) the gaze of the viewer, but also because they reflect upon the quality of the merchandise itself. Products that are displayed in such a fashion are perceived by customers to be cleaner, fresher, more delicious, and, in general, more valuable.

In the second section, I look at street calls and other sounds which are meant to aurally call attention to the high quality of the merchandise being sold. These aural practices are another good example of the artistry, wit, and playfulness involved in many of these artful marketing techniques. Aural marketing is used particularly by vendors selling in open-air marketplaces and by roaming peddlers as an alternative to aesthetic displays, which would not be practical in the bustling open-air marketplaces or on a vending unit which is constantly in motion. Many of these sounds are, like the visual practices I describe, designed to captivate passers-by by means of their special poetic nature, hypnotic rhythms, or sheer volume. Pointing attention to the quality of goods in such a way allows merchants to provide vital information to their customers without directly verbally soliciting them. As I discuss in Chapter 1, this is an important component to these practices, as part of what makes them reliable as evidence is that they are not directed at any one person in particular.

Finally, I look at the artful decoration of vending mobiles as another way to draw the eyes of customers and also as a way to act upon the quality of that merchandise. In addition to artfully making their merchandise visually enticing, merchants devote time to making the space surrounding that merchandise into something that is aesthetically pleasing to their customers. This is particularly necessary to do for those vendors selling goods and services not easily arranged: nuts; popcorn; coffee and tea; shoe shining services, and so forth. Merchants use a range of visually pleasing devices, such as posters, stickers, paint, and a variety of knickknacks specifically devoted to enhancing the look of their space. They use such decorative features to express who they are creatively and to distinguish themselves from their neighbors. By decorating their business spaces in such a way, merchants create an artistic backdrop against which to position their merchandise for sale.

Aesthetics and Poetics

Symmetry and Other Ornamental Design in Merchandise Displays

Street vendors, and especially vendors selling food products, are particularly prone to creating colorful, intricate, and symmetrical displays of their merchandise. Since they rely heavily upon the business of passing strangers, vending displays must be as flashy and visually captivating as possible. Merchandise, then, is artfully arranged into eye-catching formations, such as the display of strawberries discussed in Chapter 1 (Fig. 1.3). What is interesting about these displays is that there is no prerequisite for the inherent ‘beauty’ of the merchandise displayed; all merchandise, even that which is considered to be ‘dirty’ or ‘ugly,’ can be made more attractive when arranged in a particular way. In Figures 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3, shoes, tobacco products, and even sheep offal can be made to look more dazzling and attractive because of the flashy ways in which they are displayed. In these examples, symmetry, repetition, and patterning are all created using the merchants’ commodities for sale.

In many of these displays, vendors also use ornamental props to embellish their products – for example, the striped cloth in the background of the shoe display, or the bunches of mint placed on the sheep parts in the photos below. Differently colored fruits, such as oranges, grapefruit, and tomatoes, are almost universally used as both structural support and as ornament in *loz akhdar* (green almond) displays, either in vertical stacks or on top of *loz akhdar* mounds (for example, Fig. 5.4). The shape and color of these fruits act as balancing, contrastive devices when juxtaposed next to the green, oval shaped almonds. Other props add to the balance of the display; many *loz akhdar* carts display as their centerpieces round, transparent vases filled with water, in which floats a range of colorful objects such as cloth, plastic flowers, or cut oranges. Many merchants told me simply that the purpose of this vase is to augment the ‘view’ (*al-manzar*), though I also saw that the water was sometimes used by merchants to periodically refresh their produce for sale (see below for more on the use of water in produce displays).

Ful (fava bean) vendors construct their displays in a similar fashion, though their creativity is more constrained by all of the accouterments that necessarily accompany the food they sell. In many regions of the Middle East, *ful* is a popular street food, often eaten



Figure 5.1. A nighttime display of shoes in Damascus' Old City



Figure 5.2. A tower of cigarette cartons displayed on a card table in Qassaa



Figure 5.3. Sheep offal arranged in a display in Suq Bab Sreijeh

hot and on the spot with a broth of lemon juice, garlic, salt, and other spices. The *ful* seller usually provides his customers with all of the additional eating accompaniments such as bowls, spoons, and various condiments. Because the main product itself, fava beans, sits in a large, covered metal container, these other accessories must instead serve as the focus of the display. Figure 5.5 shows a typical *ful* cart with symmetrical stacks of bowls and lemons, with regularly placed bowls of salt and *zaatar* (a spice mixture made of oregano and thyme) and tin bowls used to discard *ful* skins on the level beneath. As



Figure 5.4. A *loz akhdar* (green almond) display in the New City



Figure 5.5. A vending cart advertising *ful* for sale. The thumbtacks spell out 'Allah' and 'Muhammad' (right to left)

with the *loz akhdar* carts, symmetry, patterning, and color contrasts are key design features.

In all of these examples, the particular design tropes of symmetry, patterning, and repetition are used again and again for the basis of these displays. Why is this, and what can these tropes do in the selling process? Considering the central place ornamental decoration holds in the aesthetic ideologies of the Middle East, the meanings behind such decorative tropes have become a central question for scholars of Islamic art and architecture.¹ In part because of the relative paucity of art showcasing figural representation, ornamental motifs which rely heavily upon symmetry, patterning, repetition and the like have flourished in Islamic societies.² In place of figural representation there has emerged a rich tradition of epigraphic, vegetal, and geometric ornament unique to Islamic societies – so distinct that a particular subset of symmetrical, derivate patterning, the star motif, can be found only in Islamic art (Lee 1987). This decorative art flourished in religious settings, which helps to explain the prevalence of such ornamentation in mosques, holy tombs, religious textiles, and the like. But the use of such patterned design often spilled over into the secular realm of Islamic societies as well; in Damascus, for example, older public bathhouses, private residences, and city walls are still heavily decorated in this fashion.

The interpretation of Islamic motifs has been the subject of much scholarly debate. While recognizing that the meanings of ornament vary regionally and over time, many scholars have also noted that, in Islam, there exists a symbolic link between ornament and the divine. In particular, it is the arabesque, a symmetrical, geometrical, and rhythmic class of motifs, which some have argued to be “intimately linked and deeply rooted in religious and mystic concepts of the spiritual world of Islam” (Baer

¹ This is not necessarily unique to the Middle East, though. Cross-cultural studies have highlighted the importance of symmetry and similar ornamental motifs in different societies. Ethnographic examples range from the meanings behind the design of Native American carving (Boas 1955), Aboriginal Australian paintings (Morphy 1992), Polynesian barkcloth (Pule and Thomas 2005), and Polynesian tattooing (Gell 1993). Other books have taken on in-depth studies of ornament in general (Trilling 2003) and symmetry in particular (Washburn and Crowe 2004). The use of these design motifs seems to be nearly universal, and, though their meanings and interpretation vary widely, most studies have concluded that ornamental decoration does more than merely beautify or embellish that to which (or whom) it is applied.

² Though I am mainly referencing the design tropes of symmetry, color contrast, and patterning, Blair and Bloom (2006) outline ten main forms of ornament which are common in Islamic art and architecture (with the caveat that many other forms could be added to this list): color, repetition, symmetry, direction, juxtaposition, layering, framing, transferability, abstraction, and ambiguity.

1998: 5). The mathematical nature of symmetrical, repetitive motifs and the movement conveyed by the direction of the pattern are interpreted by some as meaning to reflect the perfection, precision, and infinite nature of God (e.g. Critchlow 1976). This divine connection helps to explain why ornament was historically used so liberally in religious forms (though it could also be argued that it was the historical presence of such design in Islamic contexts which caused such a connection to emerge). A worshipper's religious experience in a mosque, for example, is augmented by the profusion of such designs in the surrounding architecture. (In fact, during worship, the tropes of repetition, balance, and movement are not limited to the visual realm, but often extend to reading, oral performance, and bodily movement as well.)

It is within this context that the liberal use of such design tropes in marketplace display practices should be placed. Considering the ubiquity of these motifs in many Islamic societies, it makes sense that they would be echoed in other realms of everyday life like the marketplace. Though, of course, few of the displays of merchandise in the Damascus suqs are as visually complex or mathematically correct as, for example, the exquisite motifs decorating Damascus' famous Omayyad mosque, it is clear that they, in their own right, also fit into this larger religious and cosmological context. But I would argue that the concern should be not with what these displays' design elements metaphorically represent or *mean*, per se – indeed, I do not think that many merchants create their displays to be explicit symbols of something else, like the perfection of God or their love of Islamic art and architecture – but rather with what these design elements *do* to the products which constitute them. Rather than seeing these motifs as a language to be decoded, it is more productive to consider how they constitute certain things in the merchandise itself.

It is particularly useful to consider that merchants and customers often make a direct connection between the design features of merchandise displays and the quality of the merchandise displayed within them. Both agreed that products, and especially food products, can immediately be made cleaner, more appetizing, and of a higher quality if they are displayed in a manner which utilizes the ornamental tropes of symmetry, color contrast, repetition and the like. On numerous occasions, when showing my informants photographs of aesthetically-pleasing food displays, they commented on how delicious

the food looked, as well as its apparent cleanliness (*tanziiif*). One informant, when viewing an image of a large mound of cut parsley for sale, surrounded by a ring of alternating lemons and tomatoes all facing the same direction (Fig. 5.6), noted how green, fresh, and delicious the parsley looked, and even (half-jokingly) asked where this particular produce store was located so that he could purchase some himself. In this case, much of the perceived cleanliness of the parsley was connected to the orderliness and simplicity of the overall design of the display: the symmetrical, clean shape of the parsley mound, and the single ring of alternating fruit at the bottom. The props used in the display also had a large effect on my informant, who posited that the yellow lemons and red tomatoes augmented the look and promise of the parsley because of their alternating colors. The deep green of the parsley was brought out even further by the presence of these other, bright colors. The merchant who created this display explained it simply: “When the customers see this, they know that the parsley is good and delicious (*tayyib*).” Many merchants use props of contrastive devices in a similar way, in an attempt to make the connection between design and quality explicit to their customers. In the case of red tomatoes sitting atop green watermelons (Fig. 5.7), the merchant who created the display explained that customers would immediately perceive that the watermelons were as red inside as the tomatoes balancing on top of them – an indication of their superior quality. In this case, the ornamental element served to semiotically reference the look and quality of the main product.

Some merchants told me that it was this particular color combination of red/orange and green that was the best and most beautiful (*ahla*) in such displays. Indeed, color has the ability to fundamentally transform the overall look of things, especially when applied to particular decorative patterns. As Young notes, “(t)he structuring possibilities of colour in pattern applied to things and bodies are arresting, altering symmetries and spatial structures. Altering the colours of repetitive patterns also transforms their spatial orientation and adds ambiguity to symmetries” (2006: 181).³

³ Drawing on a range of ethnographic examples, Young has emphasized the need for anthropologists to materialize color – that is, to treat it as fundamental to the being of the colored object rather than as an inconsequential or symbolic quality: “...colours can be a compelling, exact and calculated medium for producing and reproducing power and for transmitting knowledge and an essential facet of knowledge systems. Further, colours have agency and can communicate and also effect complicated ideas and relationships instantaneously” (2006: 180).



Figure 5.6. Color juxtaposition in a chopped parsley display in Shalaan



Figure 5.7. Watermelons with tomato ornament in Suq Qazaazen



Figure 5.8. Large leaves cover fresh mulberries for sale in Bab Touma



Figure 5.9. Greenery and flower-themed bowls are displayed alongside mulberry juice

Importantly, color can have an effect not just on the viewer's vision, but also on other senses such as smell and touch (Young 2006:182). In the case of merchants' colorful displays of food, I would add that color can also affect people's perceptions of taste – the intensity of the green in the chopped parsley, or the vibrancy of the purple of pickled vegetables are all indications of their deliciousness. Symmetry and patterning in displays accomplish a similar outcome, as customers equate orderliness with cleanliness. By placing differently colored props in their displays, then, merchants are bringing out these associations for their customers.

Merchants also commonly use fresh fruits, flowers, and green leaves (both plastic and real) as props to emphasize the freshness of the produce being sold. Especially in the spring and summer months, when the intense heat of the sun tends to wilt everything in the city, using lush, green foliage produced the dual function of shading produce and signifying coolness and freshness. In Figure 5.8, for example, mulberries (*toot*) are covered with large, individual tree leaves, whose cooling function is augmented by the line of plastic leaf adornment on the bottom of the cart. Similarly, Figure 5.9 shows bottles of mulberry juice (*aseer toot*), displayed in buckets of cool water, and covered by overflowing, draped stems of vegetation. Decorative bowls continued this theme of vegetation, with an image of a flower in the middle and a printed English message, “Rouz [Rose] Love for You,” on top. This particular vendor sold his juice along the high-trafficked bridge outside of Bab Touma, where there is little protection from either the sun or the thick plumes of diesel exhaust billowing from passing cars. The leaves, then, indicate that his product is cool, fresh, and clean. Even permanent shops make use of the symbolic functions of vegetation; merchants display posters of green scenery and string up plastic garlands of flowers and leaves to beautify their shops and add an element of freshness to their products.

As the cleanliness and freshness of produce on sale is also associated with water, many vendors are careful to constantly keep their fruit and vegetables wet. Periodically sprinkling their goods with water allows produce to stay fresher (as is common practice in the produce sections of American grocery stores, for example) and adds visual appeal by making it glisten in the hot Syrian sun. To ensure that their produce stays wet during

the long hours of vending, vendors often keep a plastic liter bottle with them, sometimes with holes punctured in the lid or bottom to replicate a watering can of sorts, which they can fill with water from public fountains throughout the day. In 2009, I also noted that a number of merchants, usually selling green almonds and green plums (which were in season during my stay), had outfitted their carts with mini water fountains, usually placed on the cart behind the fruit for sale. The bubbling water served to enhance the visual (and aural) appeal of the display, and also served as a constant positive association of water with the fruit offered for sale. In a similar merging of aesthetic pleasure and merchandise quality, some merchants also use filled plastic water bottles as parts of their display, again as a way to play off the positive associations of water with food. Figure 5.10, for example, shows bags of *tirmos* (cooked broad beans) for sale. The display is comprised of a large pyramid of the beans, with small and large bags lined up in stacks and rows along the bottom, and topped with symmetrically positioned bottles of water. The water bottles in these sorts of displays are mainly there for aesthetic and associative purposes. Though customers can use them to rinse off their purchases, they are generally not meant for sale.

As these examples demonstrate, it is the look of the display which can influence customers' perception of the quality and very essence of the things *on* display. These



Figure 5.10. *Tirmos* (broad beans) for sale in the Salahiyya pedestrian suq

decorative devices need to be understood not just as eye candy for customers, or even as representing something like Islamic art history or divine spirituality. Rather, they work to agentively transform the goods that are part of them in fundamental ways. When merchants can actually pick out and purchase a piece of the aesthetically-pleasing formations, they are able to take home with them part of the cleanliness and deliciousness that those displays represent. This is something that works especially well for food, as a product which can be literally consumed and embodied. Merchants understand that this is what customers want and, thus, manipulate these ideologies to better their sales; indeed, some even disclosed that they were able to charge up to twice as much for their merchandise if they displayed it in a particularly aesthetically pleasing way. Clearly, giving attention to the visual aesthetics of display and decorations pays in more ways than one.

‘Fingers of the Baby!’ and Other Enchanting Street Calls

Similar to aesthetic displays, vendors’ street calls work simultaneously to advertise products and convey important information. They work within an established tradition of street calling in Syria, which has long held the fascination of locals and foreigners alike. In *Bab al Hara* (‘the Neighborhood Gate’), an immensely popular, Syrian-produced television series aired every year during Ramadan, street scenes of a 1930s Damascus prominently feature vendors and merchants, many of whom shout calls to advertise their goods. Paired with the costumes and exaggerated gestures of the merchants, the whimsical calls are meant to lend an authentic, local air to the show. Street calls from the Arab world have also historically been of great interest to Western travelers in Arab lands; the producers of *Bab al Hara* may well have drawn upon the number of European books devoted to the study of these street calls, many of which date to the mid-19th century and earlier. Taylor (1971) documents some of the poetic, riddle-like calls collected by these early travelers to Damascus: “At midnight on the ladder I gathered you!” and “Strengthen your blood!” for mulberries; or “In the moonlight she stretched; she is cold!” for cucumbers; or “Mother of two fires!” for roasted chickpeas. He goes on to describe a particular British fascination with such calls:

In Damascus, it was not merely the continuing presence of street hawkers which fascinated British travelers, nor was it just their costumes, exotic as they sometimes were. The real fascination lay in the lyrical and picturesque quality of the cries themselves... 'From under the dew I gathered them!' shouted the man selling plump black grapes 'Like a Bedouin, this dark one!' sang a man with a sack of earthy-brown truffles. The foreigners were enchanted. [Taylor 1971]

Though Taylor's speculation that street crying will be gone altogether by the end of the 1970s proved to be too pessimistic, it is the case that few sellers in present-day Damascus still use such poetic calls to announce their goods.⁴ But even if their calls do not contain the same whimsy and poetry of the past, merchants in Damascus still rely heavily upon the tradition of street calling to make a sale. During my stay in Damascus in the spring of 2009, I recorded a number of street cries and sounds of merchants, vendors, and peddlers which continued the tradition of calling that Taylor documents. Travelling peddlers and stationary vendors – sometimes with a permanent shop, but usually not – use street cries to both provide information about the products they are selling, and to attract customers with interesting cadence, rhyming words, and witty sayings. As is the case with forms of visual marketing, a driving force behind these cries is the desire for distinction. Vendors show great skill and creativity in developing cries that represent their individuality and serve to reflect upon their businesses, cultivating cries unique to themselves so that they could be easily recognizable to repeat customers. Since sellers who use calls are usually heard before they are seen, it is important for them to have a distinctive call that is instantly recognizable by the listening audience. This is of obvious importance in crowded market areas, where it may be more difficult to distinguish sellers from one another, but it is also a wise practice for vendors and peddlers who sell in residential neighborhoods, where a catchy, recognizable tune plays better to the ears of those who are not as fully engaged in marketing as they would be in a suq.

⁴ Taylor cites changing gender roles in Damascus as reason for the decline of street crying and peddling in general – since women no longer had to do their marketing from the privacy of their houses by lowering baskets down to passing peddlers, there was less of a need for peddlers to use individualized calls to announce their goods. From casual conversations with Damascenes, it does seem to be the case that fewer peddlers walk through residential areas than they did just a decade ago. But on a number of occasions, I did see house doors open and residents come out with money to catch a passing vendor whose call alerted them to his presence. Because peddlers usually stick to one residential neighborhood to market their goods, residents become familiar with their calls and can easily recognize who is passing by in the streets. This was backed up by one vendor selling garlic from a horse-drawn cart in a small neighborhood near Qanawaat, who told me, "They all know me here."

It is for this reason that most sellers rarely change the cries they utter on a daily basis; doing so might confuse repeat customers or stymie those trying to find them for a second time. As explained to me by Basil, a produce vendor in Suq Bab Sreijeh, “I shout, ‘tomatoes, eggplants, squash!’ – I’m calling for the customers to come. Do you understand how it works? I call ‘squash’, for example, when I see a customer walking by, to get their attention (*bilfit nazar*). [I shout] the same thing every day.” Here, *bilfit nazar* literally means ‘to draw sight,’ a poetic expression which underscores the link between oral and visual modes of artful marketing. Though the content of Basil’s cries may be simple and straightforward, the particular melody he chose, the tenor of his voice, and the rhythm in which he shouted the words were all his own, and served to distinguish his business from his neighbors’. For vendors selling products in outdoor markets, developing a signature call is as important as staking out the same spot every day; doing serves to both spatially and aurally place them in the marketplace for customers.

Depending upon where the calls are used, merchants emphasize volume, words, sounds, and melodies in different ways to fit the atmosphere in which they are selling: busy, outdoor markets have different sonic traditions than calmer, covered markets, which in turn have different sonic traditions from residential streets. Generally, the more crowded and noisy a marketing area is, the louder and more rhythmic the cries tend to be, with less of an emphasis on whimsical wordings; the quieter and more relaxed the marketing area, the more intricate and word-focused the calls tend to be, with less of an emphasis on high volume. To make better sense out the cries I collected, I have divided this section into two rough categories – words and sounds.

1. Words

Chosen carefully to provide information, offer imaginative musings, and extol the virtues of merchandise for sale, words are of obvious importance in merchants’ cries. Many calls directly addressed the superior qualities of the products being sold. Sometimes this involved simple repetitions of an expressive word that reflected the best quality of the product being sold such as “cold, cold, cold! (*barid, barid, barid!*)” to advertise iced mulberry juice sold in the summertime, or “sweet, sweet! (*helwe, helwe!*),” a common word used to advertise a range of fruits and other foodstuffs for which

sweetness is a positive attribute. Many merchants selling fresh produce and eggs repeated the word *baladi* to mean “natural” or “organic” – an indication of its superior quality. In some cases, claims about product quality were sometimes exaggerated for effect, such as with a *ful* merchant who confidently cried, “Natural lima beans, more delicious than meat! (*Ful baladi, atyaab min laham!*),” a declaration which, given the central importance of meat in Middle Eastern culinary traditions, was made half in jest.

Other cries are more instructive, offering suggestions to customers on how they could use the products being sold. A matchbox peddler who walked through Suq Bzouriyya called “Boxes of matches, 15 lira! For the baths and heating stoves, 15 lira! (*Krooz kabriit, khams w’ashreen lira! Lal hammam wa sobiaat bi khams w’ashreen lira!*).” A vendor of birdseed from Sharia Malik Faisel cried out, “Feed the bird with ten lira! (*Ta’am al taeer bi ashara lira!*),” while a vendor of long-stemmed garlic typically bought for drying, shouted as he drove a horse-drawn cart through residential streets, “Garlic for storage! (*Toom lilmooneh!*).”

Other merchants commonly appeal to customers with their cries, telling them to buy from them, or to come and get the best products in town. One young shoe merchant in Suq Bab Sreijeh yelled in a quick, rhythmic burst, “One hundred liras, women’s shoes, all sorts of gifts and colors and designs – one hundred liras! (*Miit lira, sahaati niswaan, jami’a al hadayya wa alwaan wal modeelaat, miit lira!*).” Other examples include a produce merchant selling onions in Suq Bab Sreijeh [“five for ten, whoever wants onions! (*khamsa bi ashara, lilli bido basal!*)”], a blind vendor selling candy bars in the New City who used a word twist with “come closer, oh kind one to the delicious things for five lira” (*arrib, ya taaiib a’taaiib bi khams liraat*),” and a rhyming call from an apricot vendor on Sharia Malik Faisel [“Indian apricots, come and get them! (*mushmush Hindi, taa’al andi!*)”]. The phrase ‘*ya’owd Allah*’ (‘God will compensate me’) was also sometimes used by merchants to appeal customers with low prices. For example, in the rhyming call used by a young vendor selling green almonds in Suq Asrooniyya, “75, God will compensate me, c’mon, c’moooon! (*Khamsa wa sabaen, ya’owd Allah, yella yellaaaaa!*),” the vendor is claiming that his price is so low that he will have to rely upon God instead of customers to make money. Like the cassette tapes and Qur’anic

recordings discussed in Chapter 4, inserting religion in such a way serves to bring the possibility of moral feeling to the transaction.

Mentioning the price of the products for sale is almost universal, as getting a good deal on merchandise is important to most customers. As such, merchants had a range of ways to announce their prices. Some simply inserted the number into the call at some point, as in the calls above; others constructed different manners in which to convey the same price, such as an apple vendor in the outdoor market along Sharia al-Ameen who yelled, “20 liras for apples! Five for 100 for apples! (*Ashreen lira a’tufaa! Khamse b’miia a’tufaa!*).” Still others simply repeated a price over and over again (“20 liras, 20 liras!”); as one informant explained, this was a trick sales tactic more than anything else: “One of the strategies they use is to just call the price to get you to look instead of saying what it is they’re selling.”

2. Sounds

In other cries, the sound of the call itself is just as important – and many times even more so – than its content. This point was brought home to me when I re-played various calls for both my Arabic tutors and some merchants. Many could not understand the exact words used by the merchants in some calls, but they were able to easily identify what products the merchants were selling – testament again to the important role that sound plays in such cries. As Uysal notes in his study of Turkish street cries, “usually the name of the article being sold is hardly intelligible. Each peddler has his own peculiar pronunciation of the name of his ware. People often gain familiarity with these cries, and can tell from these unintelligible noises that a particular seller is around” (1968: 198).⁵

To me, the most dramatic example of this was the cries of the *ka’ik* vendors, who peddled their goods through the smaller streets of the Old City (*ka’ik* is a term used to refer to a variety of cake-like breads). These vendors tended also to sell sweet and savory crepes alongside their main product, their cart usually being a modified bicycle, outfitted

⁵ In his 1938 study of Cairo street cries, Heyworth-Dunne notes a similar phenomenon: “As the hawker walks along, he sings out an expression or expressions, often in melodious tones, at other times in the most raucous way imaginable; the exact words are very often difficult to pick up, for even the natives themselves do not always know what the vendor is saying, although they know what he is selling from the traditional tune of his cry” (351). Indeed, even after being there for only one year, some calls became immediately recognizable to me even without understanding the particular words. I can only imagine how this kind of aural recognition might be second nature to those who hear the calls on a daily basis.

with a glass box where the *ka'ik*, hot crepes and various fillings (vegetables, salt, lemon, sugar, etc.) were kept warm. The cries of this vendor are uniquely his, though the same basic format and melody are kept by the vendors themselves. In a dramatic sweep from a guttural low to a sing-song high, with an exaggeratedly rolled 'r,' and a staccato pronunciation of '*ka'ik*,' he calls: "Fresh cakes! Date cakes! (*Tazaaaaaaaa ka'ik! Tamrrriiiyyo ka'ik!*)" Although many people who listened to my recording were immediately able to recognize what the vendor was selling, only one person was able to translate the words for me. (The one *ka'ik* vendor with whom I was able to speak confirmed that this was indeed what he was saying, and claimed that his call was over two hundred years old).

In many cases, the sounds and rhythms of the words themselves became more important than the particular melody of the call. The repetition of one or two-word phrases, followed by a five to ten second period of silence, forms a kind of rhythmic sound used by vendors to advertise their goods. The cries of the tissue seller, who carries big bags of plastic-wrapped tissues over his shoulders as he walks through the streets, are recognizably his, a sharp and monotonic call of "tissues, tissues, tissues (*mharrem, mharrem, mharrem*)."

Another example was an old man I saw selling eggs from a wicker basket in the crowded Suq al-Hamadiyya. His call of a three-phrased "natural eggs, natural eggs, natural eggs (*bayd baladi...*)," punctuated by a period of silence and then repeated, while not terribly loud or flashy, was monotonic and evenly rhythmic and, at least to my ears, catchy in its own way. Similar tactics included using the same word at the beginning and end of the call as a kind of flanking device [for example, "gifts, views, gifts (*hadaiya manazar hadaiya*)," used to sell decorative plastic gel balls], or the use of the same word as a rhythmic technique [for example, "Apples for a quarter, potatoes for a quarter, lemons for a quarter (*Tufah bil rubah, patata bil rubah, limon bil rubah*)," used to advertise produce sold for a kilo for 25 liras] or in the example of "Natural, natural, natural, oh fava beans! (*Baladi, baladi, baladi ya ful!*)"

Another good example came from a vendor selling potatoes from a horse-drawn cart along the eastern side of Suq Medhat Pasha. Cupping his hands on the sides of his mouth to make his voice travel farther, he yelled, "Salty potatoes, beautiful potatoes, 100 lira potatoes, c'mon potatoes! (*Maalha alpatata, ahla patata, miit lira alpatata, yella ya patata!*)" Announcing the

name of the product four times might also serve to lure customers unconsciously by rhythmic repetition.

In some parts of the suq, volume and simplicity were more important than melody or content. In Suq Sharia Malik Faisal, for example, dozens of merchants congregate to sell their products, some from parked vending carts, some from large, rubber baskets perched on empty crates, and others from sheets on the ground laden with their products. Since most of the pedestrian traffic is on the western end of the street, this area is where merchants tend to station themselves. In part due to the loud, cramped atmosphere, these merchants loudly shout simple, atonal cries to lure customers; though I noted that they try to punctuate their cries so that they are not yelling over one another, they often would inevitably shout at the same time, making for a veritable cacophony of cries in which only the loudest can be distinguished from the pack. In such a sonically crammed environment, merchants were forced to be cognizant of the cries around them so as not to yell the same words, or in the same rhythms and pitch. When I asked a date seller on Sharia Malik Faisal if it was he who was calling “Sweet, sweet! (*Helwe, helwe!*),” he pointed to a man selling stone fruit standing a couple of feet away, and said, “No, no...It’s that seller over there.” Vendors must know, then, are careful to not yell the same words as those surrounding them and, because they tend to set up shop in the same place every day, they become intimately familiar with each other’s calls.

Finally, non-verbal sounds are also associated with particular products, and serve to catch the ears of potential customers. Perhaps the most iconic comes from the *mazout* (heating oil) seller, who during the winter months rides on a highly decorated horse-drawn carriage filled with the oil, which is then pumped into residential units with a large, flexible hose attached on the side. The approach of the *mazout* seller can be heard from a distance because of the unbearably loud, hand-held horn he uses to announce his presence. The exact sounds of these horns differ from place to place, but the one used in the street below my second-story apartment – a kind of slow honking noise which alternated between two pitches, followed by a silent period of 15 seconds or so – was so distinct that I quickly became adept at distinguish it from others in the area. *Ghaz* (natural gas, used for stoves) vendors advertise their product in a similar manner, usually by banging a wrench or some heavy, metal object against the side of one of the gas vessels

loaded only a cart or pick-up truck. The clanging noise is, like the *mazout* horn, loud and unmistakable, especially when, in the majority of cases, the vendor makes a percussive rhythm with his clanging. *Ghaz* and *mazout* vendors do not usually bother to accompany these sounds with a verbal cry, although I did sometimes hear loud cries of “*mazooooooooot!*” or “*ghaaaaaaz!*” in between the horn blaring and wrench clanging.⁶ Other non-verbal marketing sounds included cart horses covered with bells, usually indicating some kind of produce for sale; the fast, rhythmic clinking of small tea glasses to market a drink vendor; and the ever-present sound of the car horn which, for service vehicles like taxis and busses, is played in a language of its own to communicate a range of different messages to potential customers.

Not unlike the aesthetic displays discussed above, these marketing calls serve both to attract attention by means of their sensorial stimulation and to provide customers with some kind of evidence about products for sale. Although they use words to convey information, because they are used in an indirect way, not directed at any one person, they are not as suspect as straight verbal propositions. Furthermore, as I touch on in Chapter 1, because they are *durable* and *constant* – the caller uses the same call all day long – they are reliable. A customer can stand in one place and listen to the same call for as long as he or she needs.

Though I hesitate to suggest that these calls have the abilities to transform merchandise in the same way aesthetic displays do, it is certainly the case that the profusion of poetic sound surrounding products for sale helps to elevate them from their status of mere commodities. Many of these calls are designed to help the customer see the possibilities of the products for sale that may not be immediately perceptible in their marketplace setting. When a merchant calls out that his ‘natural’ lima beans are more delicious than meat (*ful baladi, atiyab min laham*), this allows customers to imagine the

⁶ These verbal calls were usually only made by younger vendors who sometimes accompanied older ones on the cart (either as family members, apprentices, or both). It was my impression that, although vendors’ street cries have little social value in Damascus, they were still regarded as somewhat of an art form by those doing the crying and those listening. It thus held a kind of the appeal of relative novelty to those just starting out in the business, and to young people, both vendors and not. For example, I often heard groups of children giggling and imitating nearby street cries after hearing a nearby vendor make a call. For the most part, though, most adult Damascenes outwardly ignore the calls they hear in the marketplace and residential streets, acknowledging their presence only with a purchase of a product.

possibility that the beans are indeed that delicious – something that is imperceptible from their being sold from a big heap from a blanket on the dirty ground. As such, these calls have the important job of opening up an imaginative space for customers in places where the full potential of products is not readily apparent.

Artful Spaces

Finally, many vendors focus attention on the look of their vending mobiles, using paint, stickers, tassels, and a variety of knickknacks to form eye-catching decorative designs. For the most part, vending carts start out as blank canvases; many are produced in the same woodworking factory and thus share the same, basic carved diamond pattern on each of the three sides. It is up to individual vendors, then, to make these identical starting points into something that represents themselves and their businesses. Many vendors use paint to spruce up their carts, some showcasing their artistry with the creative designs they paint on the wood (e.g. Fig. 5.11). Others adorn these bases with decorative fringes and tassels, and many attach trinkets designed to ward off the evil eye (e.g. Fig. 5.12). Because carts are often rented for months at a time, vendors often artistically build upon the decorations which previous vendors had created. Carts thus become palimpsests of artistic expression, testaments to the complex circulation of artistic trends in the city.

Other vendors create their own vending carts from repurposed objects, such as bicycles, wheelbarrows, and motorbikes. Some of these vending carts are masterpieces in ingenuity, crafted to be the most efficient transportation of the vendor's specialty. The owner of a beverage-toting bicycle, for example, affixed large boxes on top of both the front and back wheels to hold his merchandise – boxes of tea and coffee in the front, and thermoses of the beverages (in different iterations of sweet, bitter, and semi-sweet) in the back (Fig. 5.13). A sack for his personal belongings hung down on the side. To save time, he was still able to ride the bicycle if needs be, though he told me that he most often pushed it around the suq to avoid spilling anything. To make his vending device stand out even more, he decorated it with laminated sheets of paper patterned with *kilim* designs along the middle bars and on the seat, and fabric tassels and fringes over almost every



Figure 5.11. A painted vending cart



Figure 5.12. A vending cart decorated with tassels and evil eye beads



Figure 5.13. A bicycle outfitted to vend coffee and tea in Suq al-Hamadiyya

other surface. The effect is immediate, as people are able to see him (and, when he uses his hand bell, hear him) coming from far away.⁷

Although some vendors own their own vending devices, many of the more generic carts and scooters are rented from local garages scattered around town. Vendors usually rent for four-month periods, which usually correspond to changes in produce sold, though I was told that a cart can sometimes be rented for as little as one month. Because of the secretive nature of these vending cart rental agencies (many of whom rent to illegal vendors), I was unable to visit one myself, but there seemed to be many around, as I was able to spot the same carts circulating in the same areas, even years apart. For example, although many of its decorations had fallen off or become ripped, in 2009 I recognized the same, ornately decorated cart on the market streets of Qassaa that I had photographed three years earlier (Fig. 5.14, compared to Fig. 4.5). The vendor of *loz akhdar* (a different one from three years prior) professed to have recently bought the cart outright and, although he first told me that he was not interested in fixing up the decorations, he sheepishly changed his story when his wife showed up and, upon seeing the photograph I had given him of the cart in its 2006 heyday, teased him about its

⁷ See Renne and Usman 1999 for a study of bicycle decoration in Nigeria.



Figure 5.14. The much-dilapidated, 2009 version of a cart I encountered in 2005

dilapidated state. In large part, its ragged appearance came from everyday wear and tear; because rented carts are usually locked up at night in discreet alleyways and side streets with chains and locks, and thus are constantly exposed to the elements (whereas owned carts are usually brought home at night with the vendor). In most cases, vendors who owned their own carts tended to take better care of them, as opposed to those who only rented them. It was not the case, though, that owned carts were necessarily more decorated than rented ones; indeed, many of the rented carts were a study in layered histories, with the decorations of several years of different vendors accumulating on them.

In another example, a roasted peanut vendor usually perched on a side street corner in the neighborhood of Qassaa used a vending cart which he, with the help of his brother, constructed himself to suit his own needs (Fig. 5.15). The body of the cart was made of thick sheets of copper, which he himself had carved with an intricate floral pattern. The roasting pipe was also made out of copper, around which he had wrapped a garland of plastic leaves and flowers for added visual effect. Behind the nut trough was a place where the vendor kept the paper cones used to hold customers' nuts, utensils used to push the nuts around the roasting chimney, and even a small ledge to hold his requisite cup of tea. That this vending cart was particularly house-like was not lost on one observer, who told me, "This is *akeed* (of course) his *bayt* (house)! It even has a chimney, and it surrounds him like a house!" Having such a visually interesting vending



Figure 5.15. A vendor of roasted peanuts with his hand-crafted cart

device, the vendor noted, drew more customers for him and allowed him to charge more money for his nuts. Other devices merchants used to vend their merchandise included bicycles for roasted chickpeas, horses bedecked with layers of fabric tassels and colorful beads, small, painted motorcarts used to sell watermelons, and intricately painted, horse-drawn carts from which to vend *mazout* (heating oil). All of these transportation devices are adapted to suit the individual needs of the vendors, who use them as decorative devices to make their products stand out even more.

For those with the space to do so, hanging posters is an easy way for vendors to personalize their vehicles. Many choose to display posters of generic imagery, with an emphasis on bucolic scenery, smiling babies, and kittens in various poses. These posters can be bought either in paper-goods shops in Suq al-Asrooniyya, a small network of streets on the northern edge of Suq al-Hamadiyya, where a range of postcards, small stickers, streamers, and posters with all sorts of imagery – political, religious, and generic – can be bought for less than 300 SP (about \$5.50), or from street vendors who set up shop near the main campus of Damascus University on and around Jisr al Asad (Asad Bridge). Posters sold in these venues cover a range of subject in addition to the generic imagery: pop singers such as George Wasoof and Nancy Ajram; actors from popular



Figure 5.16. A decorated popcorn cart in Salahyia, from 2006



Figure 5.17. A decorated popcorn cart in Salahyia, from 3 years later in 2009

television soap operas; European soccer stars; Qur'anic text and images of Mecca; and political portraits of the Asads and Hasan Nasrallah.

Figure 5.16, a popcorn vendor, for example, decorated three sides of his cart with posters depicting a baby, deer in a forest, and stickers of parrots and eagles. The use of bird imagery over the glass is particularly fascinating, as if the glass represented a sky, and the metal bottom represented the ground. A small sticker of the Fulla doll, the popular 'Muslim Barbie' who sometimes wears the *hijab* (see Ch. 4), adorned the upper right portion of the glass. Interestingly, when I returned to this spot in 2009, the popcorn vendors crowded along the pedestrian pathway had changed their decorations to be almost entirely of posters of babies, flanked by hand-written signs indicating the flavors of popcorn available (Fig. 5.17). One vendor told me that he put photos of babies on the cart in order to draw young children who are walking with their parents. When I returned a second time, the posters were indeed seeming to work in this manner, as a young boy, probably four years old, had pulled his mother over to the popcorn vendor to pore over the baby imagery for next couple of minutes. His mother ended up buying three bags of popcorn for him and his two older sisters.

Another prominent realm of marketplace decoration is that of shoe-shine boxes used for shoe shining services. Men (and sometimes boys) carrying shoe shine boxes stroll throughout all parts of the city of Damascus, though they tend to congregate in particular spots in the New City, for example, around Cham Palace, an old, luxury hotel in the center of town, and on all corners of Marjeh (Martyr's) Square, what one might consider to be the Times Square of Damascus. From what I can tell, most stay out of the Old City, as there is only limited sidewalk space in its narrow lanes and alleys to set up shop. Most shoe shiners are indeed Syrian, though in 2009 I also met a number of Turkish men who came to Damascus for more economic opportunities. Shoe shining is not a profession to be particularly proud of – it involves touching and working with other people's shoes, which are generally considered to be among the dirtiest of objects (for example, when they are placed on the ground, the soles of shoes – ultimately, their dirtiest parts – should never be facing upwards towards God). In Damascus, then, shoe shiners generally come from quite poor circumstances and only adopt their profession as a matter of necessity.



Figure 5.18. A simply painted shoe shine box



Figure 5.19. A shoe shine box decorated with colored pin tacks



Figure 5.20. A shoe shine box decorated with stickers, beads, and other trinkets



Figure 5.21. A shoe shine box decorated with magazine images and trinkets

But, regardless of this stigma, about half of the shoe shiners I encountered had decorated their shoe shine boxes (in Arabic, simply *sundooq*, meaning ‘boxes’) in fantastical ways, using paint, markers, beads, and a range of found objects to create colorful, personalized decorative pieces. Some kept their designs simple (Figs. 5.18 and 5.19), while others favored a more intricate look (Figs. 5.20 and 5.21), although, again, most consistently utilized symmetrical, patterned designs in one way or another. Many described this in terms of the pleasure both they and their customers derived from looking at the boxes, while others explained decoration as a device for catching the eyes of passers-by. As one shoe shiner put it, “I don’t need to run after customers with this; the customer will come to me instead.” Decorating his box, then, was a way to attract customers without basing himself by chasing after them for business.

Finally, products are not just enhanced not physically, with the addition of ornaments and props, or with the help of decorated spaces, but also semiotically, by association. This is especially evident with produce merchants who often hang large, colorful images of fruit and vegetables in their shop spaces. Figure 5.22, for example, shows a typical poster arrangement in a produce shop in Suq Qazaazeen: still lifes of fruit and vegetables line the upper circumference of the walls, and bright red strawberry wallpaper covers the rest of the wall space. The actual produce (and some jars of pickled vegetables) for sale is lined up relatively haphazardly against the wall; clearly, the imagery is meant in this case to do some sort of representational work. When I asked the merchant why he chose this imagery to decorate his walls, he retorted, “What else would I put on the walls?,” implying that it was only natural for him to display images of the products he was selling in such a way; indeed, images of kittens, babies, or mountain scenes (all popular poster imagery) would not be as relevant in his shop.

On a very basic level, this imagery signals in a clear, eye-catching way to passers-by that fruit and vegetables are sold in this shop – as such, it can be used as a pure advertising device to signify the type of product sold within. Visually, the posters and wallpaper also serve as a kind of doubling device – a way to mimetically extend and replicate the type of product sold within. In this way, these images extend the ‘fruitiness’ and ‘vegetableness’ of such shops by visually replicating the actual produce being sold. But, importantly, these images are not just of any arrangements of fruit and vegetables;



Figure 5.22. A produce stand with fruit posters and strawberry wallpaper



Figure 5.23. Posters portray an enhanced version of produce for sale



Figure 5.24. A shop with meat products for sale replicates them on their signage

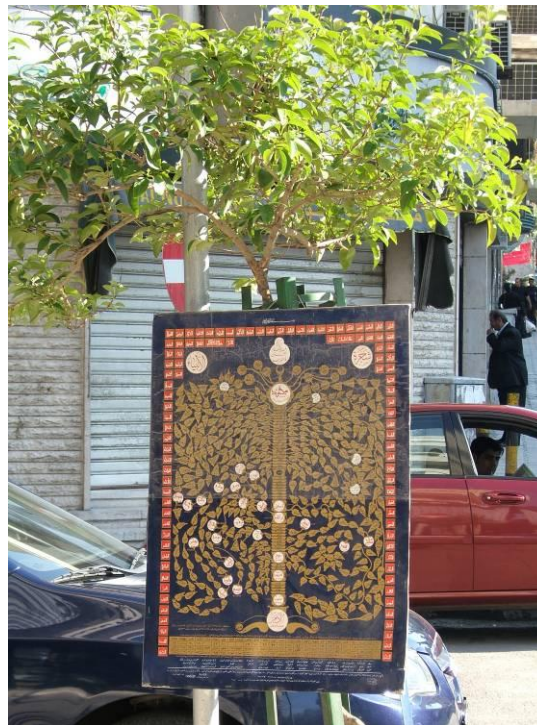


Figure 5.25. A family tree of the prophet Muhammad is displayed on a live tree

they rather are pristine, idealized images of those fruit and vegetables. They depict the category of the merchant's merchandise in its best, most attractive, and cleanest state. As such, they serve to replicate the *quality* of this produce by showcasing images which portray it in its best form – arranged beautifully, with bright colors and at the peak of ripeness.

Figure 5.23 shows a similar display of posters in a small produce kiosk in Suq al Juma'a; on the right is a typical still-life scene of fruit and vegetables (in fact, it is the same as one of the posters in Figure 5.22), and on the left is an image of a tropical beach scene. The poster on the right does the same thing as those discussed in the previous photograph, but with the poster of the tropical scene, the merchant had cleverly placed his pineapples for sale against this scenic backdrop, as a way to both reference and replicate their tropical origins. "Eat my pineapples, and you will be connected to this pristine beach," it seems to say. Merchants selling products other than produce (for which corresponding poster imagery is widely available) find other ways to create this mimetic advertisement of the best possible quality of their products for sale. In Figure 5.24, for example, a small shop selling prepared meat products has decorated their front signage with enlarged images of their creations; doing so provides a promise of good quality not only by representing that quality, but by replicating and enhancing it as well. And, finally, in a poetic gesture, a bookshop selling posters depicting the family tree of Muhammad and the *ahl al-bayt* is displayed hanging on a sapling outside of the front door (Fig. 5.25). The tree on the posterboard becomes extended, enhanced, and brought to life when it is melded with its living counterpart in such a way.

Representing Merchants, and 'The Eye Needs to Eat as Well'

As I have shown in these examples, it is both the attractiveness of aesthetic and poetic practices *and* their agentive, transformative qualities which makes them effective marketing devices. But there is one more thing at work here: it is also their ability to represent desirable qualities in the vendors who create them that renders them useful. Returning to Gell's theory of agentive work can elucidate this point further. Particularly important to Gell's formula is the concept of 'captivation,' a process used to describe the ability of particular art objects and performances to act upon and 'enchant' the viewer.

With captivation [or, in other variations, “entrapment” (2006b) or “enchantment” (1998)], art objects – especially those containing detailed, non-representational patterns – ‘trap’ viewers into a state of bewilderment. In highly patterned decorative art objects, this process is effected in two ways: it is both the viewer’s incomprehension of the virtuosity it takes to render such complex and maze-like visual patterning, which, in effect, forces the viewer to imagine the agency of the artist (and the art-piece) as somehow ‘magical,’ as well as a more physiological reaction to these patterns and details that causes a “mazy dance in which our eyes become readily lost” (Gell 1998: 76). Captivation, in the end, is a tool of persuasion that can be used by artists to elicit particular responses from viewers. In such a formula, the virtuosity, agency, and intentions of the artist are both mediated and constituted by the piece of art.

Gell provides several examples of the captivating power of art, ranging from apotropaic devices like knots and mazes to particular functional objects like nets and animal traps. Perhaps his most famous example, however, is that of carved canoe prows used in Trobriand circles of exchange, which are decorated with such intricate patterns that those who use them can stun their exchange partners into readily giving up coveted Kula goods. The prows work in this hypnotic way both because of their optical illusion-like qualities, produced by symmetry, maze-like patterns, and color contrasts, and because they are perceived to possess some sort of magical power that emanates from their dazzling features. To Gell, it is this latter characteristic that is the most important, as “(w)ithout the associated magical ideas, the dazzlingness of the board is neither here nor there” (2006b: 166). Because these sorts of objects resist the viewer’s full understanding, they are deemed to possess magical powers, which in turn give them enchanting capabilities.

When captivation of this sort occurs, posits Gell, the viewer establishes a particular relationship with the art itself: “[patterns] slow perception down, or even halt it, so that the decorated object is never fully possessed at all, but is always in the process of becoming possessed. This...sets up a biographical relation—an unfinished exchange—between the decorated index and the recipient” (1998: 81). This idea of object-human intimacy has been influential in the anthropological study of materiality, as it posits a new formula in which the object retains power and agency without being reduced to

fetish status. In Damascus, by creatively modifying their shops, vending carts, and merchandise, merchants also form a biographical and affective relationship with those spaces and things. As a Syrian friend of mine explained to me (in English),

There's a relationship between people and things. Things for us are not only materials. Sometimes they are something we can speak to and live in. And the place where I want to work...is part of my personality. I feel like it is my house or my home or my life...And this thing should have something special related to me. The point is...I want to see myself and my personality in outside things. I paint myself on my car or my walls, my shop, my house, my [vending] carriage.

Marketing practices, then, are in a way merchants' 'paintings' of their identities—a way to show to the outside world, and to their customers, who they are and what they stand for. Shops and vending units are thus more than sterile spaces used to sell merchandise; rather, they are parts of the merchants' lives and integral to their identities.

In Gell's framework, captivating art is not only an agent, however; it also can be thought of as a mediator between artist and viewer—an important point for the purposes of this dissertation. The magical powers thought to exist in certain decorative objects also emerge, posits Gell, by way of the otherworldly virtuosity of the artist. That is, when a viewer looks at an intricately decorated vessel, or a masterpiece of painting for that matter, he or she is captivated by it in large part because of the awe generated by the technical and creative genius of the artist. The viewer cannot ever imagine him/herself to have created such a wondrous piece of art, and thus is entranced by the ability of another human to have done so.

Giving importance to the 'virtuosity' of the maker allows us to consider how, in Damascus, aesthetic and poetic practices can work as representations of the vendors who use them. Sellers use artful marketing practices that, in many cases, showcase their virtuosity, their creativity, their wit, and their morality; customers are struck not only by the artful nature of these practices, but also by what they reflect about the merchant and his merchandise. Merchants thus use their artistic creativity as a captivating marvel for customers, who are often delighted at particularly whimsical, and artistic modes of decoration. Indeed, it is partly these skills which attract the customer to these displays; the more intricate, creative, or difficult the display, the more potential it has for attraction. What all of these aesthetic and poetic marketing practices have in common is that they

can serve as indexes of the abilities of the merchant who created them – his skill, creativity, and possibly even trustworthiness – in a way that hanging a picture of an ancestor or a poster of a Qur’anic verse can’t necessarily match. Creating a tall tower of merchandise takes more than a little ingenuity and engineering, just as decorating a vending cart relies on the creativity and artistic skills of the vendor. Even street calls are to a degree representative of the merchant’s skills; they require not only creativity in coming up with unique melodies, cadences, and wordings, but also stamina and strength in calling loudly and consistently throughout the day. If these vendors cannot secure a level of trustworthiness for themselves, they can instead provide ‘evidence’ of other positive virtues, mediated through their products and shop spaces. Creativity and handiness, then, are, in many parts of the suq, marketable skills for merchants to acquire.

I would add here that it is not necessarily bewilderment and incomprehension that customers face when they look at (or listen to) such practices (indeed, none is as particularly intricate or maze-like as Gell’s examples), but rather a kind of pleasure. Understanding the pleasing effects of these marketing techniques might also help to explain their appeal. For customers, the process of visual captivation can be a positive, pleasurable, and fulfilling one. This idea was echoed by several merchants who used the proverb, “The eye wants to eat as well” (*al-ayn bidha takl kamaan*), to explain their focus on the aesthetics of their displays and spaces. Such an expression beautifully gets at the active nature of seeing, and what these types of aesthetically-pleasing displays might accomplish for customers. Creative, whimsical, and skillful displays serve as food for the eyes, which want to actively ‘eat’—that is, to absorb, study, and truly see. It is only through such pleasurable viewing that the eye of the beholder can be nourished. Vendors thus use both the look of their displays and decorations *and* the attention drawn to their own creativity and skill to stoke ‘visual pleasure’ in their customers, ultimately in an attempt to make a sale.

As one might guess, the idea of visual pleasure can be found in other artistic realms as well. One particularly fascinating example of this comes from a verse, translated from Arabic, found woven into a textile fragment from fifteenth century Spain: “I exist for pleasure; Welcome! For pleasure am I; he who beholds me sees joy and well-being.” As Blair and Bloom explain:

This otherwise-unknown verse was probably composed for this very textile; it is written in the first person, as if the textile itself were speaking to the viewer. The verses are set between bands of exuberant geometric and vegetal ornament... With its repeated message, the catchy rhyming couplet would have mesmerized the viewer much as modern advertising on TV bombards us with slogans, images, and jingles. [2006: 27]

The authors also note that such first-person text can be found on a range of decorated functional objects from centuries ago, such as a doorknocker depicting a lion whose mouth roars forth religious blessings, again written in the first person, when the handle is raised. The effect is that, like the poetic textile, the object itself is actually speaking to those who view it. (Blair and Bloom 2006: 183).

These could be cast as quite literal examples of ‘agentive’ artworks in Gell’s proposed framework. They themselves proclaim their ability to bedazzle and please those who look at them, and, with the power of decorative text, actually convey requests and demands to the viewer. Viewing these enchanting objects is a pleasurable act – one is entreated to actually “see joy and well-being”; thus, while these objects do have a functional job to perform, they are at the same time meant for visual pleasure. It could even be argued that their aesthetic pleasure constitutes or enhances their functionality, just as, for example, the patterning and symmetry used in displays of certain food items enhances their quality and deliciousness. I would argue, then, that the act of visual captivation can take place on an explicitly conscious level when it involves pleasure at being drawn in by the art object (or aesthetic marketplace display) at hand. Indeed, in Damascus, it is partly the pleasure taken in viewing these aesthetic displays that makes them so appealing and captivating.

Interestingly, some shops are beginning to experiment with marketing self-references to their particular brands of aesthetic appeal. A good example of this comes from a pickle shop in Suq Bab Sreijeh, whose exterior sign showcases an image of their distinctive arrangement of checkered rows of differently colored and shaped pickled vegetables (Fig. 5.26). This self-reference underscores the importance that such aesthetics can have as a source of identity and pride for merchants. Clearly, the aesthetics of display has, in this case, become a visual marker for this particular store – something which they can claim is a representation of their own skill and creativity.



Figure 5.26. A pickle shop's signage references its signature design aesthetic

Coda: Homemade Cassette Tapes and Ten-Lira Shops

The tradition of street calling is, in many parts of the suqs, slowly changing to accommodate new technologies: now, some merchants use pre-recorded cassette tapes in place of their own voices to advertise their products to passers-by. These merchants record the cassette tapes themselves and then play them at the front of their stores in the hopes of drawing customers with their repetitive, rhythmic sounds. The content and form of these tapes vary according to the personal whims of the merchant who records them, though many merchants follow the same format of quickly announcing the products for sale and their prices, often interspersed with personalized expressions, religious invocations, and sometimes bits of popular music. The growing use of these tapes speaks to the changing soundscape of Damascus, and the constant co-mingling of old practices with new technologies.

Pre-recorded cassette tapes are almost exclusively used by purveyors of small-scale 'ten-lira' (approximately 20 cents) kiosks, which stock a large range of cheap

household goods, personal accessories, and various tchotchkes, all sold for ten liras (or in some cases, five or 15 liras) apiece. These shops are usually located on the sides of busy, open-air marketplaces like Suq al-Haal and around Marjeh Square, though I also found isolated examples in the covered suqs of Suq al-Juma'a and Suq Bab Sreijeh. (Once in a while, I also heard similar cassette tapes being blasted from slow-moving pick-up trucks loaded with boxes of tissues, onions, and other goods for sale.) The cassette tapes are usually recorded by one of the shops' (younger) merchants and follow a calling style of fast-paced price calls of '*ashara lirat!*' ('ten liras!'), in addition to specific references to the merchandise offered. These tapes are played during store hours on boom boxes or loudspeaker systems placed at the front of the shop, and are looped over and over to create a continuous audio advertisement for customers walking by. When the tape runs to the end, one of the merchants in the shop quickly moves to change it to side B.

When the tapes are played, merchants tend to put them at high volumes, with the boom boxes placed high and near the front of the shop, so that they will reach as many ears as possible. Ten-lira shops sometimes exist one right next to the other, with only subtle variations in merchandise. In these cases, each merchant plays his own recorded tape at as high a volume as possible in attempt to drown out his neighbors' tapes. Add to this the fact that most boom boxes are older models and do not have very good sound quality, and what often results is a mishmash of fuzzy recorded sound; indeed, the individual content of each tape can usually only be distinguished when one is in the confines of each kiosk.

The process of recording the tape is mostly a solitary one, and its end quality relies in large part on the technological skills and oratory abilities of the individual merchant recording it. One merchant in a large ten-lira kiosk on Sharia al-Haal (Cardamom Street) explained his individual recording process to me:

I went on the roof and I recorded this tape by myself so that no one would hear me and no one would see me, and so I wouldn't see anyone either. I took breaks from recording – I drank tea and smoked a cigarette to give my throat a break, and then I returned to recording. I recorded some music in between the advertisement segments so that it's not boring, and so that there is variation...I taught people how to do this (using a tape to call their merchandise)!

Others told me that they took their tapes to a makeshift recording studio to have an outsider create the continuously looped effect. In such cases, the content and form of the tapes was in part determined by the individual style of the recording technician.

Interestingly, this use of pre-recorded cassette tapes is a relatively new phenomenon, most merchants agreeing that they only started to catch on in the past five years or so. During my second trip to Damascus in 2009, I noticed a marked increase from 2005-2006 in the number of shops and kiosks using them. The content of the tapes had also become more varied and personalized, so that, like the personalized street cries discussed above, merchants were able to use them to market themselves at the same time as their products. Many of these merchants, however, also noted a practical use for the tapes, explaining that it was much less physically demanding to rely upon a tape rather than their own voices all day. When I asked one merchant of a ten-lira shop why the cassette was better than his own voice, he told me that he worked long hours, from seven in the morning until eleven at night, and that his voice would get tired if he had to call all day: “If I used my voice, I would need to constantly replace my own voicebox!” he said, grabbing his throat. Another merchant on Sharia Malik Faisel told me,

Instead of the person yelling, this is easier. Before you had to yell and scream so that people would know that you were here. It’s so that we won’t get tired...A storeowner plays something like this tape so that he doesn’t exhaust himself. When there is no sound, customers will walk by and not notice us, but when there is a recording of “ten liras, ten liras!” they will come.

Most tapes follow a similar format of announcing the price and products for sale, usually in a tenor and rhythm that mimics live street calling (i.e., with heightened volume, higher voices, fast rhythms, and, in general, high energy), though I sometimes also heard low, monotonous repetitions of the price and product, as if the merchant were simply speaking the words. Most of these price/product announcements are interspersed with a couple of seconds of silence before the sequence begins again. Some merchants creatively insert music into these pauses for more variety, and others use the space to make a religious reference. Though the content and format of these tapes does not vary too widely from shop to shop, it is easy to pick out which ones were made with more skill, attention, and general gusto.

In addition, most merchants intersperse religious invocations between the content portions of the tape, such as in the sequence, “Ten liras, Oh God, pray on the soul of our prophet Muhammad... Any piece for ten liras! Pray for the prophet, ten liras! Gifts and accessories, ten liras! (*Ashar lirat, Allahuma sullée ala saidna Muhammad... Ay quta b’ashara lirat! Sullée ala al nabi, ashara lirat! Hadiyya wa exceswaraat, ashar lirat!*).” Doing so serves to inject God and religion into the everyday act of buying and selling and, much like the visual display of religious paraphernalia in the marketplace, can thus sonically proclaim the piety of the merchant. But merchants also claimed that adding religious referents was beneficial to themselves as well. As a vendor who played one of these cassette tapes in Suq Sharia Malik Faisel explained to me, “(Saying) ‘pray on the Prophet (*sali ‘ala al-Nabi*)’ gives you heavenly rewards (*thawab*). When you add these phrases to the recording, you will gain rewards and people will know that everything is for the Prophet (*Rasool*).” In another example, a vendor in Bab Sreijeh told me, “We are Muslims, so we pray for Muhammad’s soul. God gives us income (*rizq*). [*A boy comes in to purchase a small notebook.*] You see? God gives me income now: ten liras!” Thus, verbally invoking religion benefits the merchant in two ways – by granting the merchant heavenly rewards for being a pious Muslim, and by attracting customers by outwardly showcasing, at least superficially, piety. This is not unlike visual decorations which reference religion in shops, in that they form a moral-religious space upon the utterance of the religious words.

But these kinds of religious utterances are different from the Qur’anic listening which I discuss in Chapter 4 in that they are inserted into everyday speech (in this case, commercial speech) instead of existing as something to attentively listen to separately from all other sound. Qur’anic recordings are usually only played in markets upscale enough to deserve their presence, such as Suq Medhat Pasha or Suq Hamadiyya in the Old City; it would not be appropriate, for example, to play a recording in Sharia Malik Faisel because the suq is so dirty, noisy, and chaotic – not the ideal circumstances under which to listen to the holy words of God. Uttering these words, though, is a different story, and doing so allows vendor to communicate to customer that he is pious and that his shop is blessed.

The use of prerecorded cassette tapes reflects the merging of older traditions of crying with newer technologies. It is not surprising, then, that most of the merchants who used such devices were young and interested in testing out new technological possibilities. Their increased variability also indicates that these merchants are becoming more comfortable with playing with this particular medium – the tapes are now more than merely a practical measure used to rest voices; rather, they have become a new medium upon which to assert ownership, creativity, and skill.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Broadly, this dissertation is about the poetics of everyday life – how artistry, creativity, sense and affect are interwoven into everyday experiences as mundane as buying a kilo of apples. It is, in this sense, also about the presence of aesthetic and poetic practices in places where they are least expected and, indeed, where they are seemingly antithetical to the nature of that place. In the marketplace, where the overarching activity is that of financial transaction, these artful practices stand apart because they are, in theory, superfluous to those transactions. But I have tried to show that, although Middle Eastern *suqs* are above all financial institutions, their economic import does not preclude art, politics, religion, kinship, and a wide array of other social phenomena from playing large and significant roles in their overall functioning. The unspoken, backgrounded realms of decoration and display can and often do form an integral part of merchants' selling practices, and the artful ways in which they are manipulated for profit can help shed light upon large social, cultural, and political issues affecting Syria today.

What follows is a brief revisiting of some of the main points I introduced in the previous chapters. Rather than serving as a summary of the previous chapters, I want to use this concluding section to connect the specificities of my work to some of the larger theoretical questions they elicit.

Artfulness: Work and Play

From a theoretical standpoint, I have centered my arguments on the notion of 'artful marketing' as a way to highlight both the art-like, aesthetically-pleasurable side to the selling practices of Damascene merchants *and* their use by these merchants as reliable tools of cunning and persuasion. The metaphor of artfulness performs the double duty of eliciting both of these meanings at once; as such, it is a fitting way to describe practices which *must* exist as both of these things at once in order to work as effective selling

devices. That is, the artful marketing tactics I examine exist as serious, evidentiary representations at the same time that they exist as pleasurable, whimsical, decorative devices. Merchants sometimes explained them as being constructed for customers, but more often their explanations centered on themselves and their own pleasure. As I pointed out earlier, it is this ambiguity which helps construct these practices as potential evidence; they are not necessarily sales tactics, and therefore are more reliable as representations. That merchants cast artful marketing practices in these doubly-articulated dual roles – as serious representation and background decoration, as for the customers and for themselves – means that, although they perform serious work, merchants are free to be more whimsical, creative, and playful with them. As such, these realms of the visual and aural can be thought of as ‘spaces of play’ – sites which open up an imaginative, artistic, and indeed ‘artful’ arena for merchants – and at the same time ‘places of work,’ important sites for the presentation of themselves, their merchandise, and their businesses to the outside world.

It is precisely this merging of ‘play’ with ‘work’ which makes artful marketing practices such a fascinating subject. The fact that by all counts the most important financial institution in the Middle East – the suq – can hold such a rich aesthetic and poetic tradition is of significant importance. And that many of these aesthetic and poetic practices are often so playful when they are also so important to the daily livelihood of the people who use them is also worth consideration. In Syria, where the vast majority of merchants struggle to make a daily living and where the average per capita income is just over twelve dollars a day,¹ one might expect to find the marketplace to be a place reserved for the bare-bones exchange of money and goods. Instead, suqs are filled with a dizzying array of creative, humorous, and affective practices which confront the suq-goer at every turn.

An overarching goal of this dissertation, then, has been to draw attention to the playful, whimsical, and overwhelmingly creative ways in which even the most serious of representational frameworks (in this case, those upon which financial reward and livelihood is dependent) can and often do exist. By using the word ‘play,’ I do not mean to downgrade the levity of artful practices into something less important than

¹ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>, accessed January 20, 2010

representational ‘work’; indeed, this playfulness performs a kind of ‘work’ as well – without it, these representational forms would not be as reliably evidentiary. But what I would like to propose is that anthropology be more attuned to the playful sides of their objects of inquiry – how whimsy, creativity, and artistry both inform and clash against the people, things, and places with which they are engaged. These are important questions to consider especially in places in which these playful sides are not so readily discussed, paid attention to, or dwelled upon as their more serious counterparts, as is the case in Damascus’ suqs. Indeed, as Gell has reminded us, “the distinction we make between ‘mere’ decoration and function is unwarranted; decoration is intrinsically functional, or else its presence would be inexplicable” (1998: 74). In Damascus’ suqs, the work of play in people’s places of work provides good evidence for this point.

Representation and Materiality

Another main point to this work has been to highlight the roles of sense and affect in the marketplace. That emotion and sensory experience play large role in consumption is not a phenomenon unique to Damascus; indeed, any brief look at the amount of money and time poured into crafting television commercials in the United States would indicate an extreme importance of these realms in the domain of advertising. Advertisers have long known the importance of stimulating various emotions, thoughts, and desires in their customers; Damascene merchants’ selling practices could be viewed as simply another iteration of this formula. But I have chosen to frame artful practices as marketing and selling rather than advertising, in large part due to their particular representative qualities. As I intimated in the Introduction, these practices stand apart from traditional advertising because of their material presence, and it is this material quality that places them in a distinct category of their own.

Whereas traditional forms of institutionalized, corporate advertising convey messages through an image, jingle, or commercial that *stands for* a product, in the suqs of Damascus, it is the materialities of the images, sounds, symbols, and sometimes even products *themselves* that matter. That is, these material things do not merely represent the qualities of the products or the merchant; rather, they themselves play an integral role in

constituting those qualities. It is this semiotic merging of content and form that makes these practices a different kind of representational medium for merchants.

To elaborate this point further, on a basic level, all of the practices I examine in this dissertation can and often do perform representational work, standing for merchants, products, and businesses through the mediums of vision and sound. But as representations, they are always materially present; merchants are represented through the paper images, framed photographs, merchandise displays, and even sounds which they produce. That representations are materially manifested is not a new concept, but what is interesting about the ways in which these representations work in Damascus' *suqs* is that they always exist within the same physical and temporal moment as the person (and business/merchandise) who is being represented. In this way, they are different from traditional forms of advertisement: the viewer looks at (or hears) the representation *and* that which is being represented at the same time and in the same space.² With a typical print or video advertisement, the product is advertised in a place and time different from its existence. A consumer relaxing at home first looks at a magazine advertisement for a car, for example, and then, at a later point in time (say, a week) and in a different place (say, a car dealership), the product is bought. In the *suqs* of Damascus, though, the 'advertisement' and product are spatially and temporally merged into one thing: there is (potentially) little lag time between viewing these displays and decorations and making a purchase. The advertisement is right there, in the shop, nestled amongst the products for sale.³ This recursively binds the representor and represented together: the material

² As such, these marketing practices all exist as singular, original representations. A print advertisement in a magazine is one of many others like it – they are all replicas of the original. In Damascus, these marketing techniques are original and singular: they exist only within a particular shop, at one particular time and place.

³ Even sounds can come to be fused with the products they are representing. Some calls and sounds – for example, the *mazout* horn or the *ka'ik* vendor – are so epitomic of particular products that they could be said to semiotically stand for the object they represent. The close association of sounds and cries with the products sold attests to the metonymic fusing of word, sound, and object. This is something that Uysal, in his study of Turkish street cries, notes as well. Listening to the early morning street cries from his room in Istanbul, he noted: "The first to appear was a *simit*- (roll) seller who walked by at exactly six o'clock with his cry 'Taze simit, gltlr qltr!' (Fresh rolls, *chitir chitir!*), which was as crisp and sweet as his rolls and of just the right intensity for that time of morning. Shortly after he disappeared into the narrow and labyrinthine cobbled streets of this old quarter of the ancient city, the *siitfi* (milkman) appeared, his milk cans loaded in a saddlebag on his horse. He was crying 'siituiiiiiiiiiiu!' to the accompaniment of the slow, heavy 'clop, clop' sound of his horse's hoofs on the cobbled streets" (Uysal 1968: 193).

representation semiotically points to the merchant and merchandise at the same time that the merchant and merchandise form, create, and give meaning to that representation.

But materiality itself can also be used as a kind of selling technique in its own right. The particularly hurried nature of most of the city's *suqs* encourages merchants to find ways to assert claims to trustworthiness and respectability while circumventing long conversations about their family origins, political beliefs, and religious convictions. Representations that are materially condensed allow customers to instantaneously make judgments about a particular merchant or stall without having to listen to a sales pitch or decipher textual advertisements: posters are plastered on top of one another; multiple photographs are shoved into the same frame; symbols of family, religion, and politics are merged; and different sounds are constantly layered on top of one another. These kinds of material condensations are, in part, what make these displays function properly as pieces of distinctive evidence. They take the shape they do because they are meant to be seen and heard within such a short time and small space.

In Damascus, this type of condensed materiality exists in other, non-market contexts as well, most apparently in the decoration of automobiles.⁴ The cabs of garbage trucks are perhaps the most fascinating example of this. Although most garbage trucks are now owned by the city, some private owners still work in particular areas. In 2006, I encountered several garbage trucks which, although they were plain and unadorned on their exteriors, were dens of material excess in the interior cabs. In one, Figure 6.1, the owner had placed layers of dangling plastic beads; stickers of all sorts; stuffed animals; fabric flowers; photographs; and political and religious paraphernalia on practically every surface of the interior. There was also a small television placed near the driver's side. When I asked the owner what the purpose of all of this was, his answer was fascinating: in addition to making his trucker prettier (*ahla*), the overload of things served to distract from the smell of the garbage truck by making the truck "clean" (*tanziiif*). The visual wonder which this excess of materiality served to stimulate served, in a way, to purify the dirtiness and smelliness of the truck. Mobile trashcan units were also sometimes dressed with materially-intense decoration. One sanitation worker close to my apartment in the

⁴ In fact, many studies have detailed different traditions of automobile decoration, particularly in Southeast Asia. Many of Syria's older cross-country busses are decorated fantastically as well, both inside and out, with religious text, stickers, paint, and baubles of all sorts.



Figure 6.1. Material excess in the cab of a garbage truck



Figure 6.2. A decorated mobile trash unit

Old City decorated his garbage cans with streamers, discarded CDs, and even stickers for the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (Fig. 6.2). When I tracked down the owner of this contraption, he said that he had treated it “like my car” (*mittel sayarti*) and simply transposed the decorative traditions of automobile ownership to his car-like vehicle. When I showed other sanitation workers my photograph of this decorated unit, they all knew who the owner was, and professed that the decorations were “beautiful” (*jameel*) and, again, served to keep the garbage cans, and thus potentially the worker himself, “clean.”

The link between excessive materiality and cleanliness is an interesting one, as it points to the ways in which materiality in and of itself, when it is concentrated and excited, can accomplish things without necessarily involving ‘meaning’ or even ‘representation.’ The sheer thingyness of the material decorations served to make the garbage trucks clean. It is thus also, to an extent, the materiality of the practices I examine which makes them *agentive* – their material presence gives them the potential to

act upon merchants, customers, and sometimes merchandise and shops in ways that a print or television advertisement could never do. All of the selling practices I examined here retained some ability to influence the minds, hearts, and bodies of the people linked to them, and they were able to do so separately from their representational work. It is in large part this quality that makes them such effective selling devices.

Art, Craft, and Changing Suq Traditions

With the rise of new technologies, Western methods of advertising are beginning to vie with more vernacular forms discussed in the body of this thesis, while at the same time a newfound interest in the ‘heritage’ and ‘traditions’ of the suq among upper-class Syrians, tourists, and the government, ensure the continuation of at least some of these unique advertising techniques. The commodification of Syria’s heritage and tradition has already worked its way into Damascus’ elite, who now pay big money for relics of Syria’s past, such as antique swords, musical instruments, and village “folk” clothing (c.f. Salamandra 2004) – objects which, until recently, were seen as embarrassing reminders of Syria’s provincialism. Indeed, as Syria slowly begins to attract more and more global travelers – be they tourists, diplomats, or businesspeople – the local selling practices in Damascus’ suqs will begin to become, along with so many other “traditions” in Syria, a consumable part of the global heritage industry.

As Salamandra notes, “Once an integral part of the elite’s everyday life, then a ‘no go’ zone of embarrassing backwardness, the Old City, with its storytellers and handicrafts, has become an ‘experience’ of local color” (2004: 36). As part of this experience, the Old City has seen a continuous, frenzied push for boutique hotels and expensive restaurants, in addition to the massive revamping of some of the larger shopping areas, as discussed in Chapter 2. Projects such as the ‘cleaning up’ of Suqs Medhat Pasha and Bzouriyya for the purposes of a UNESCO title highlight the state’s need to secure at least a superficial level of modernity. Although such efforts have helped to revitalize parts of the Old City by channeling money from elite classes and the ever-expanding tourist population, many have complained that the commodification of the Old City is changing it beyond recognition.

These changes, many of which are fueled by the state, are reflective of a bigger

scheme to assert a well-crafted version of modern Syria on an international stage. In particular, it is Syria's established history of artisanal production which the state has focused on as a channel through which to highlight an explicitly modern interest in its own heritage. Syria is renowned throughout the MENA region (and, indeed, throughout the world) for having a long and strong tradition of artisanal production. The trades of woodworking, glass blowing, silk and textile production, and metalwork that have made Syria a place famous for its craftsmanship. For centuries, Syria has held a monopoly on the superior quality of these products; now, although the level of craftsmanship has declined in recent decades, they remain an important and lucrative industry for tourists wanting to take home a piece of this artistry.

Indeed, artisanship has been crafted as a 'traditional' mode of Syrian life at the same time that it is used as a way to assert claims to modernity and nationalism. Take, for example, the illustrations on two greeting cards which, along with many more of a similar nature, I bought in a New City bookstore (Figs. 6.3 and 6.4). The first depicts an image of a woodworker, in the process of creating a decorated piece with inlaid mother-of-pearl which Syria has become so famous for. The script below reads in French, Arabic, and English: "The trained artisans (sic.) in-lays wood with mother of pearl, faithful to Arabic traditions. His creations in cupboards, tables and seats have conquered the world, bearers of the message of Arabic national art." The second image showcases a younger boy decorating a copper item, copper work being, like inlaid wood, a craft particularly salient in Syria⁵. On this card, the script reads: "The artist is strong in his faith in his country's greatness. He masters copper, engraves the eloquent verses, draws the arabesques and the sumptuous calligraphies, just as his forefathers did." In these short descriptions, Syrian artisanship is clearly cast as a necessary piece to national identity (or perhaps a pan-Arab identity).

Within these heritage politics, what exactly is the place of more vernacular, everyday artistic expressions such as merchants' artful marketing practices? I would assert that, although they do not enjoy a place in Syria's modern version of itself, artful marketing practices will remain part of the unspoken, unarticulated repertoire of suq

⁵ In fact, one of Damascus' most beloved marketplaces is the still-functioning Copper suq, Suq al-Nahhas, where copper-workers make gigantic copper cauldrons and trays in small workshops with below-ground fire pits.



Figure 6.3. “His creations in cupboards, tables and seats have conquered the world.”



Figure 6.4. “The artist is strong in his faith in his country’s greatness.”

practices. Indeed, it is important to note that, while the recent revamping of Suqs Medhat Pasha and Bzouriyya encouraged some merchants to adopt a more streamlined, ‘modern’ look for their shops, the older decorations and displays were not thrown out, but rather were relocated to off-site places like warehouses and factories, as was the case with the religious decorations of Mahmoud and Usama I discussed in Chapter 4. Even if they do not exist as part of Damascus’ official, outward representation of itself, they still exist as expressions of Syrianness behind closed doors. Their continued, though privatized, presence might also help to explain why they continue to form such a large part of Syrian-produced period dramas played during Ramadan such as the immensely popular show *Bab al Hara* (Neighborhood Gate). In such shows, most of which take place and are filmed in Damascus’ Old City, artistically-designed displays, images of ancestors, and religious imagery help to infuse the marketplace scenes with an air of tradition and nostalgia. In productions such as these shows which are created explicitly for an Arab audience, such practices are crucial parts of assertions of authenticity.

Reimagining the Suq

Finally, one of my larger goals here has been to underscore the particular nature of Middle Eastern suqs – not only as important social, cultural, and economic institutions, but also as distinct features in the urban landscape of many Middle Eastern cities. I have hesitated in this work to make firm proclamations about what the suq is and is not, in large part because suqs are so variable, not just across the MENA region but even within the space of a single city. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Damascene suqs can range from the grand shopping arcades of Suqs al-Hamadiyya and Medhat Pasha, to the loud and dusty street corners in Suq al-Haal where produce vendors set up shop every morning. That such different shopping areas can and often do exist within a small geographical radius is indicative of their wildly variable nature.

Add to this the fact that merchants can, and indeed often *must*, remain at the forefront of channeling new commodities, images, and desires into the city, and the suq becomes even more difficult to define. Indeed, in the three years between my first visit and 2006 and my second visit in 2009, the most unrecognizable parts of the city to me were the market areas. Not only had different commodities come into fashion, but entire

sections of the suqs where I had previously spent so much time looked, smelled, and sounded like entirely different places.

As spaces resisting definition, then, Damascene suqs might be better understood, as Wilson suggests of cities, as a phenomenon rather than simply a place:

Thinking of the city not merely as a location (or the materialization of a mapped conceptual space that already exists as ‘there’) but rather as a phenomenon will foreground from the outset the ways in which the city is not ontologically stable, but rather a differentially inhabited space -- spoken, touched, traversed, vacated, amplifying, concentrating -- variably punctuated by the ensemble of everyday activities, sonic and otherwise, that constitute the city as an ongoing event. [1995: 4]

Damascus’ suqs are indeed ‘ongoing events’ in that they are in constant flux, both physically and imaginatively. Not only do prices and commodities change on a daily basis, but so do the market’s physical boundaries, modes of interaction, and indeed visual and aural nature. Imagining the suq as not simply a firmly-placed locale, but one in which time, space, and people constantly converge in different ways to create different ‘events’ allows for a more accurate depiction of Syria’s marketplaces. In the end, in a time when the vast majority of academic studies of Syria have to do with either history or politics, I hope that this study will show a different side of contemporary Syrian society – one that, though it is intimately tied to themes of religion and politics, is also very much shaped by the artistic and entrepreneurial imaginings found throughout everyday Syrian life.

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