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Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics by Nada M. Shabout (review)

Allison Connolly

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NADA M. SHABOUT, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007). Pp. 208. \$22.50 paper. ISBN 9780813061269.

REVIEWED BY ALLISON CONNOLLY, Associate Professor of French and Humanities, Centre College, Danville, KY, email: allison.connolly@centre.edu



In the West, the concept of Arab art remains nebulous, and the work of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Arab artists is virtually unknown. Nada M. Shabout's monograph makes a groundbreaking contribution to scholarship on art by acknowledging, defining, documenting, and explaining modern Arab art and the development of its aesthetics since the colonial period.

Shabout is professor of art history and the coordinator of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Institute (CAMCSI) at the University of North Texas. She has curated several exhibitions and was a Fulbright Senior Scholar in Jordan in 2008. She possesses extensive knowledge of Arab and Western cultures that allows her to put the two in dialogue with one another. In *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, Shabout painstakingly describes the evolution of artistic movements in the Arab world in the twentieth century. In doing so, she uncovers the influence of Western art and philosophy on modern Arab art all the while tracing the interconnected nature of Arab and Islamic art.

The volume advances two arguments: first, that European influence during the Ottoman Empire prompted a shift from Islamic to Arabic aesthetics. Second, Shabout contends that "there is a correlation between the development of new forms of art and Arabs' understanding of the concept of modernity, as well as an interrelation between the development of the modern artistic process and that of politics" (10). She argues that the roots of modern Arab art do not lie in Islamic manuscript illumination or calligraphy, but rather in the contemporary lives of artists in the Arab world. Modern Arab art thus encompasses heterogeneous regions and viewpoints.

Modern Arab Art is divided into three parts. There is a preface, an introduction, and a conclusion. Included in the volume are forty black-and-white figures, as well as thirty-two color plates. These visuals add a vitality to the argument. The images enable the reader to gain an initial comprehension of the images that Shabout analyzes. A small reproduction, even in color, will never create the experience of being face-to-face with a work of art, but they serve as a point of entry to the works and allow for a more immediate appreciation of the author's analysis.

The preface underlines the complex plurality of Arab identities: "The sociopolitical developments of the last twenty years and the reversion to localized identities have enhanced the cultural variations within the concept of 'Arab,' albeit without denying their unifying elements" (xiv). Shabout proposes that we interpret Arab art in this vein of multiplicity, "embracing a variety of styles and life experiences" (xiv).

Titled *The Polemics of Modern Arab Art*, the introduction pointedly unknots the terms "Islamic art" and "Arabic art," which are often used interchangeably. "The majority of Western art historians tend to ignore its [Arab plastic arts'] existence. The handful who notice it would nevertheless still consider modern and contemporary Arab art as nothing but a linear continuation of the admittedly better known Islamic art" (1). The historical association between the spread of Islam and the Arabic language have led to the conflation of Islamic art and Arabic art in the West. Shabout distinguishes between the two, defining "Arab art" as "that art produced by those who consider themselves part of the Arab world, which consists of twenty-four states spanning the Near East and North Africa and embracing many ethnic groups and sects" (3). The Arab world exists within the Islamic world, but since most Muslims reside outside the Arab world, the term "Islamic art" is not an accurate or sufficient label for the artistic production of those twenty-four states.

The second half of the introduction provides a brief historical overview of Islamic and Christian encounters since the Middle Ages, highlighting the age of colonialism and the development of Orientalism as two elements that dramatically impacted Arab societies. "While colonial rule actively contributed to restructuring Arab societies, Orientalism aided in transmitting Western ideals and directing modern Arab convictions" (7). Shabout refers to a "triangular relationship" (8) between Islam, Arab, and the West that opened new spaces for growth of Arab cultures and nurtured the development of

an Arab aesthetic distinct from that of the Islamic aesthetic. She references a “pluralization of experiences arising from Islam, ethnos, language, and the West” (8) that inform Arab aesthetics.

Part 1, “Background and Definitions,” delves into the Arab-Islam-West triangle introduced in the preceding pages, meticulously laying out the progression of Arab plastic arts in the twentieth century. On the first page Shabout asserts, “Ultimately the key to understanding modern Arab art is modern Arab cultures” (13). In the pages that follow, she provides a remarkable synthesis of the twentieth-century art movements in several countries, including Algeria, Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Sudan, and Morocco. Given the nature of the study, in-depth analysis of any one culture or its artistic production would not be possible. The brilliance of the chapter lies in Shabout’s deft presentation of connected, yet diverse, artistic cultures likely unknown to her reader. She presents broad overviews of the progression of the plastic arts in various Arab countries and then illustrates those cultures through presentation of a local artist. For example, she mentions that the first art school in the Arab world was founded in Egypt in 1908 and then features the work of Mahmoud Mukhtar, a leading artist who studied in that school (21–22). The reader benefits from the historical contextualization of Arab art and the brief commentaries on works of several artists working in the Arab world in the twentieth century.

The author describes three stages embraced by Arab artists: “the learning stage” (23), “the self-discovery stage” (23), and the “search-for-identity stage” (25). During the learning stage, at the beginning of the century, students were being introduced to and getting to know Western art (23), very often by Western instructors, in Western languages, in newly founded art schools. Shabout perceives this stage as necessary, “to gain confidence and to master the Western formal means of expression” (23), yet she notes that in the new context, artists experienced a rupture between past and present. In the self-discovery stage, artists experimented with subjects in an effort to connect with a wider public (23), and in the search-for-identity stage, artists sought to “define a national (local or regional) artistic identity,” as well as to carve a place for themselves in the international art scene (25).

Through naming and elaborating on several art schools, art groups, and twentieth-century Arab artists, Shabout cracks open the world of modern Arab art for Western academics. Her analyses demonstrate the uniqueness of art schools and art groups that operated across the Arab world. She describes Beirut as “a bridge between East

and West," due to contact with the Medici court in the seventeenth century (19). The Baghdad Modern Art Group was the first to "succeed in developing a local style" (27), and Sudan's Old Khartoum School shied away from adopting Western traditions, aiming to "assimilate African cultural traditions, Islamic visual tradition, and local customs through modern indigenous concepts" (30). The reader thus comes to understand that loosely connected or divergent visions of artistic creation formed in the Arab world throughout the twentieth century. Shabout explains, "most Arab artists and movements of the 1950s and 1960s operated on a local level and were isolated from one another" (30), and that the first meeting of Arab artists was held in 1971. The Union of Arab Plastic Artists was soon formed and held its first meeting in 1973 (30). Finally, she concludes the chapter in mentioning that many private art centers were opened in the 1990s, to "facilitate interaction among Arab artists and to increase exposure to world art" (31).

In part 2, "Modern Arab Aesthetics," Shabout outlines the intricacies of modern Arab aesthetics. Having moved away from traditional Islamic ideals of art and integrated imposed Western ones, artists began to "search for an art that could better represent their identities and national consciousness" (36). She continues, "Since the rules that governed their lives had changed from religious to secular, they freely adopted what they needed to suit their new vision of the world" (36). This new vision came with the freedom to represent images (37), the notion of individuality in artistic creations (39), and exposition of works in museums and galleries, which served to separate fine arts from crafts (39).

In distinguishing their artistic expression from both Islamic and Western aesthetics, Arab artists have struggled to define "Arabness" (40). In a search for authenticity, many have employed the word *asala*, "derived from the word *asl*, meaning 'root'" (41). Shabout points to several definitions of the term *asala*, including "a vision, attitude, and production situated in the past and consequently opposed to modernity" (41) or "genuine, true, original" (41). She concludes that in the context of modern Arab art, "*asala* is a reflection of individual creativity—an act of renewal, the unique style that affects a person's intellectual and materialistic creative output" (42). Accordingly, the reference to "oneself" or "one's country" becomes the "major premise governing modern Arab aesthetics" (45), one that creates tension for Arab artists (48–49). Given the role of individuality in Arab aesthetics, Shabout affirms that the arts of different Arab cultures "cannot find

unity" (43). Rather, these arts are comprised of "a plurality of styles and experiences" (43), in line with the tendencies of contemporary art.

One of the enlightening parts of the chapter is Shabout's discussion bemoaning the dearth of professional art critics working in the Arab world. "The lack of objective art criticism further contributed to the conflict between tradition and modernity" (46). The author attributes some of this shortfall to the fact that "aesthetics, 'the science of beauty,' as an academic or cultural field has no place in the Arab world" (47). Furthermore, she states that in order to become known outside their countries, Arab artists must participate in international exhibitions or settle in the West.

The final section of part 2 deals with the struggles of Arab artists given that "political reality requires art to parallel or remain subordinate to it" (50) and that art can be used by governments for propaganda (50). Shabout wisely presents two "case studies" – that of Palestine and that of Iraq – which illustrate contrasting uses of art in each society. Whereas Palestinian art was considered a "weapon of defiance" (51) and a "means of raising national consciousness" (51) in the context of Israeli occupation, Iraqi art was used as a tool of the state (55) and as "personal propaganda for Saddam [Hussein]" (57).

Parts 1 and 2 of *Modern Arab Art* put forth the theoretical structure of Shabout's discourse on modern Arab aesthetics, providing social, historical, and artistic context from the broad Arab world. They form a solid and convincing foundation, equipping the reader with the knowledge to examine the works in part 3, "The Arabic Letter in Art." Comprised of two chapters, part 3 examines the manners in which artists have incorporated the Arabic letter in their works in the modern and contemporary periods. Especially useful for a Western reader, Shabout first shares history pertaining to Arabic script, its development, and its connection to Islam: "Most important, Islam metamorphosed written Arabic into a sacred script" (62). She describes the importance of attaining technical perfection in calligraphy before being able to create "visual music" (66). In the Muslim experience, writing could be both functional and spiritual (69).

Yet, at the beginning of the twentieth century, "the Arabic script lost its sacredness" (70) and later began to reappear in the visual arts, but in new forms, as artists experimented with its "deep symbolic potential" (74). Shabout cites Jamil Hamoudi and Madiha Omar as the first artists to use the Arab letter in modern Arab art (71). Over the decades, other Arab artists followed, including Wajih Nahle, Ahmad

Moustafa, and Ali Omar Ermes, among others. The author carefully explains each artist's use of Arabic script, illustrated with a black-and-white image. Key to the chapter is Shabout's discussion of *hurufiyah*, "the term by which all experiments with the Arabic letter in Arab art were commonly known" (75). Currently a controversial concept, she unravels the debates that have surrounded *hurufiyah* over the decades, also presenting alternative approaches, including Abdelkebir Khatibi and Mohammed Sijelmassi's book *The Splendour of Islamic Calligraphy* (78), Wijdan Ali's "Calligraphic School of Art" (76-77, 78-90) and Shirbil Daghir's personal philosophy of *hurufiyah* (90-91). Rather than subscribe to the term *hurufiyah* as a catchall for all experimentations with the Arabic letter, Shabout proposes that critics divide the works into two groups: "In the first the letter is merely one component of the work, which involves different types of creativity. . . . In the second the letter is the work" (95).

An admirable aspect of the chapter is the mention of modern Western artists who experimented with letters: Braque (71), Klee, and Kandinsky (74). By weaving these artists into the discussion, the author reinforces the concept of the Arab-Islam-West triangle established in the introduction and perhaps helps her Western readers more firmly ground themselves in her discourse on modern Arabic art.

The second chapter of part 3 and the final one of the volume studies contemporary experiments with the Arabic letter by Iraqi artists Shakir Hassan Al Said and Dia al-Azzawi. More than any of the other chapters, this one is appropriate for scholars of visual studies, due to its in-depth discussion of multiple works that are reproduced in both the black-and-white figures and the color plates.

Shabout sheds light on Al Said's "spiritual and intellectual" (120) understanding of art informed by contemplative Sufism and Western existentialist philosophy. She maintains that for Al Said, the essence of art is contemplation (121). Al-Azzawi's interest in archaeology drives his creative production: "From the outset of his career Al-Azzawi was faced with the challenge of connecting two worlds: the ancient culture of his country, which he was discovering through his studies of archaeology, and the modern world of art" (122). He creates "visual poetic books" that ask the reader to consider word, color, and arrangement (135). The chapter is the culmination of a monograph that makes a convincing case for modern Arab art, then offers experimentation with Arab letters as a way to access this art.

Her conclusion reiterates the book's arguments for connected, yet diverse manifestations of modern Arab art coming from the many cultures of the Arab world. She ends the volume with a charge to produce scholarship on other forms of modern Arab art, including "sculpture, photography, film, and the performing arts" (154) and to reexamine "the relationship between artist and society in each Arab country" (154).

The above commentaries attest to the polyvalent possibilities of Nada Shabout's *Modern Arab Art*. This monograph speaks to multiple academic audiences—art historians, scholars of Arab studies, postcolonial studies, and even literary scholars seeking to deepen their knowledge of Arab cultures through visual studies. Parts 1 and 2 are most accessible to a wide academic audience, and part 3 most useful to scholars in visual studies. The endnotes, grouped at the back of the volume, are profoundly helpful to the reader. These notes supplement the text with valuable information on both Eastern and Western philosophy, literature, and the plastic arts. Like the rest of the monograph, they reveal Shabout's firm grounding in the artistic and intellectual traditions of multiple cultures.

Given that *Modern Arab Art* appeals to so many academic fields, it would be helpful if the term "modern" was more clearly defined. For the purposes of the study, does "modern" Arab art roughly begin with the colonial period? With the end of colonialism? Post World War II? How are we to differentiate between "modern" and "contemporary" Arab art? On another note, even though approximately one-half of the study is dedicated to experimentations with the Arab letter by contemporary artists, this fascinating scholarship is overshadowed by Shabout's discourse on modern Arab art. This is likely due to the title of *Modern Arab Art*, but it is a shame that her work on Arab script takes a back seat to her development of a discourse on modern Arab art.

These critiques are minor, and the reach of this monograph is impressive. *Modern Arab Art* has been cited dozens of times since its 2007 publication. Shabout's examination of art from the Arab world has informed scholars writing on topics as varied as Yemini artists, Iranian typography, and cultural journalism.¹ The sheer number of citations and the great variety of subjects attest to the volume's applicability across disciplines. Moreover, in recent years, Shabout has continued to investigate Arab art. In 2009 she coedited a volume titled *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century* (Thames & Hudson) and in 2018 she coedited a volume titled *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (Duke University Press). Her monograph has clearly proven

to be an impactful and foundational contribution to the study of Arab art.

NOTES

¹ See Anahi Alviso-Marino, "Impact of Transnational Experiences: The Case of Yemeni Artists in the Soviet Union," *Arabian Humanities*, no. 1 (April 2013), <http://journals.openedition.org/cy/2229>; Roshanak Keyghobadi, "Written Spaces: Interpreting Contemporary Iranian Typography through the Works of Three Iranian Artists" (EdD diss., Columbia University, 2012); and Ahmed Morsi, "Intermediality and Cultural Journalism," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 37 (2017): 288–312.